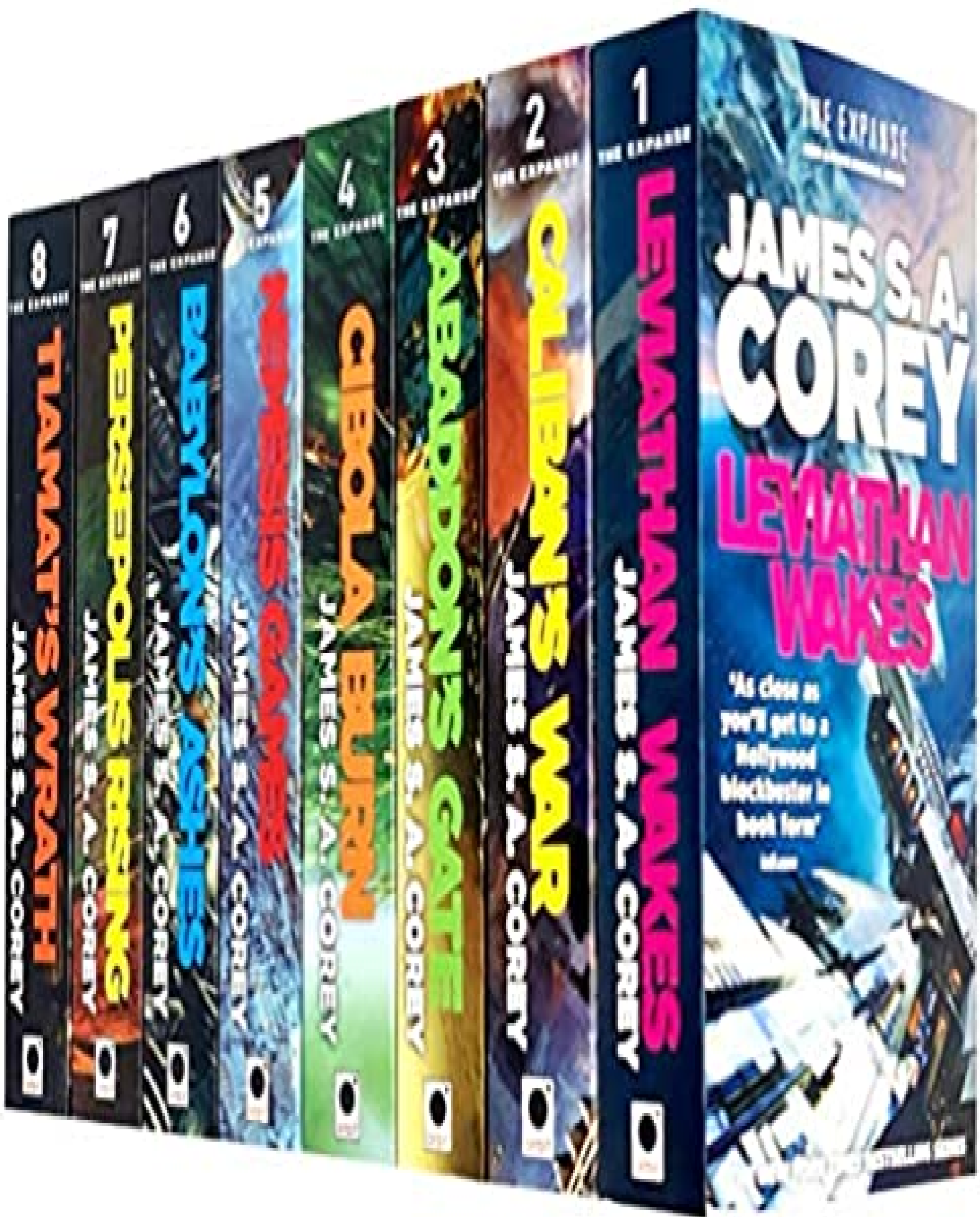




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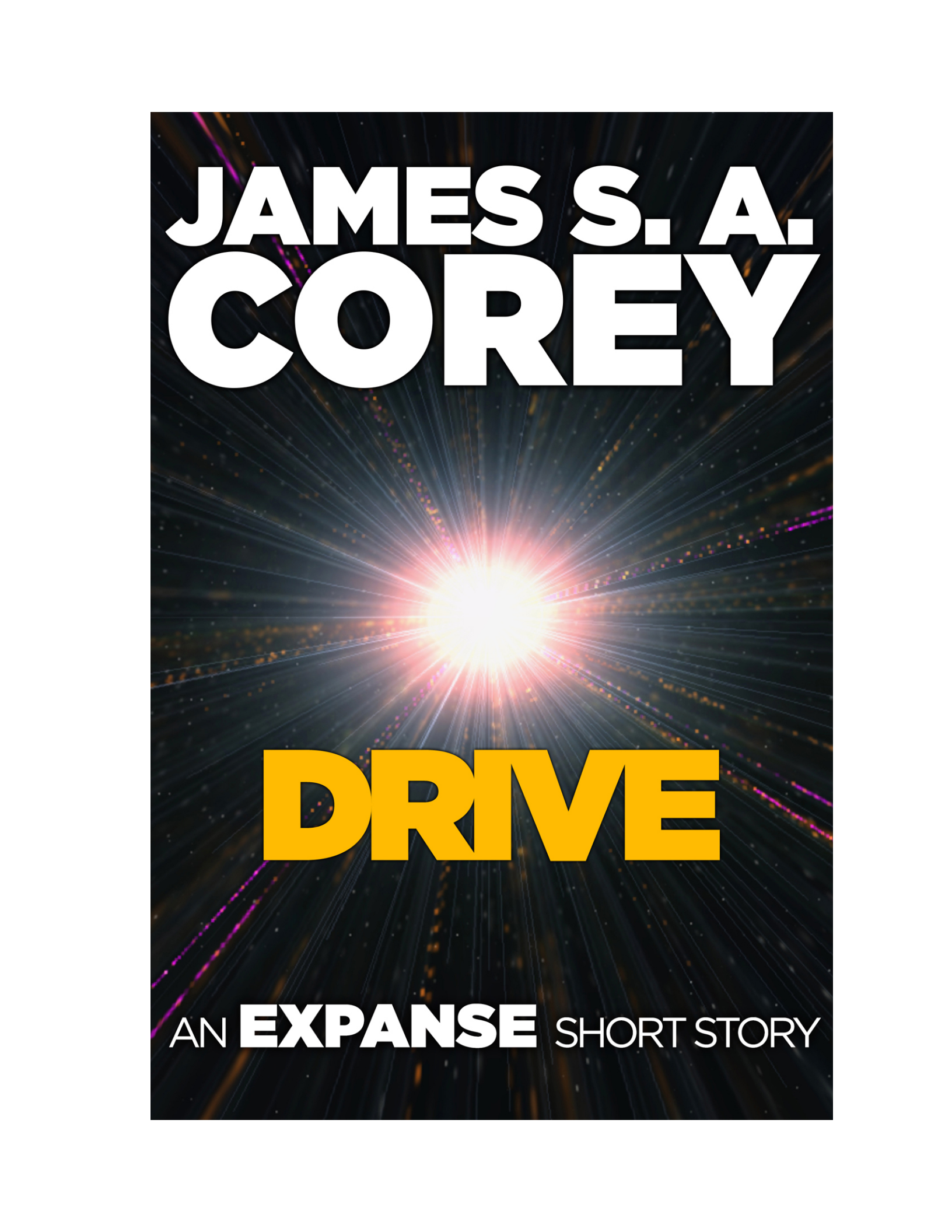
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THE EXPANSE

TIAMAT'S WRATH

JAMES S.A. COREY





**JAMES S. A.
COREY**

DRIVE

AN **EXPANSE** SHORT STORY

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Drive

An Expanse Short Story

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Drive

Acceleration throws Solomon back into the captain's chair, then presses his chest like a weight. His right hand lands on his belly, his left falls onto the upholstery beside his ear. His ankles press back against the leg rests. The shock is a blow, an assault. His brain is the product of millions of years of primate evolution, and it isn't prepared for this. It decides that he's being attacked, and then that he's falling, and then that he's had some kind of terrible dream. The yacht isn't the product of evolution. Its alarms trigger in a strictly informational way. By the way, we're accelerating at four gravities. Five. Six. Seven. More than seven. In the exterior camera feed, Phobos darts past, and then there is only the star field, as seemingly unchanging as a still image.

It takes almost a full minute to understand what's happened, then he tries to grin. His laboring heart labors a little harder with elation.

The interior of the yacht is cream and orange. The control panel is a simple touchscreen model, old enough that the surface has started going gray at the corners. It's not pretty, but it is functional. Solid. An alert pops up that the water recycler has gone off-line. Solomon's not surprised—he's outside the design specs—and he starts guessing where exactly the system failed. His guess, given that all the thrust is along the primary axis of the ship, is the reservoir back-flow valve, but he's looking forward to checking it when the run is finished. He tries to move his hand, but the weight of it astounds him. A human hand weighs something like three hundred grams. At seven g, that's still only a little over two thousand. He should still be able to move it. He pushes his arm toward the control panel, muscles trembling. He wonders how much above seven he's going. Since the sensors are pegged, he'll have to figure it out when the run is over. How long the burn lasted and whatever his final velocity winds up being. Simple

math. Kids could do it. He's not worried. He reaches for the control panel, really pushing it this time, and something wet and painful happens in his elbow.

Oops, he thinks. He wants to grit his teeth, but that's no more effective than grinning had been. This is going to be embarrassing. If he can't shut off the drive, he'll have to wait until the fuel runs out and then call for help. That might be problematic. Depending on how fast he's accelerating, the rescue ship's burn will have to be a very long one compared with his own. Maybe twice as long. They may need some sort of long-range craft to come get him. The fuel supply readout is a small number on the lower left side of the panel, green against black. It's hard to focus on it. Acceleration is pressing his eyeballs out of their right shape. High tech astigmatism. He squints. The yacht is built for long burns, and he started with the ejection tanks at ninety percent. The readout now shows the burn at ten minutes. The fuel supply ticks down to eighty-nine point six. That can't be right.

Two minutes later, it drops to point five. Two and a half minutes later, point four. That puts the burn at over thirty-seven hours and the final velocity at something just under five percent of c .

Solomon starts getting nervous.



He met her ten years before. The research center at Dhanbad Nova was one of the largest on Mars. Three generations after the first colonists dug into the rock and soil of humanity's second home, progress had pushed the envelope of human science, understanding, and culture so far that the underground city could support five bars, even if one of them was the alcohol-free honky-tonk where the Jainists and born-again Christians hung out. The other four sold alcohol and food that was exactly the same as the stuff they sold at the commissary, only with piped-in music and a wall monitor with an entertainment feed from Earth playing on it all hours of the day and night. Solomon and his cadre met up at this one two or three times a week when the work load at the center wasn't too heavy.

Usually the group was some assortment of the same dozen people.

Today it was Tori and Raj from the water reclamation project. Voltaire whose real name was Edith. Julio and Carl and Malik who all worked together on anti-cancer therapies. And Solomon. Mars, they said, was the biggest small town in the solar system. There was almost never anyone new.

There was someone new. She sat beside Malik, had dark hair and a patient expression. Her face was a little too sharp to be classically beautiful, and the hair on her forearms was dark. She had the kind of genetics that developed a little mustache problem when she hit about thirty-five. Solomon didn't believe in love at first sight, but as soon as he sat down at the table, he was profoundly aware that he hadn't brushed his hair very effectively that morning and he was wearing the shirt with the sleeves a little too long.

"Mars is America," Tori said, waving his beer expansively. "It's exactly the same."

"It's not America," Malik said.

"Not like it was at the end. Like the beginning. Look at how long it took to travel from Europe to North America in the 1500s. Two months. How long to get here from Earth? Four. Longer if the orbits are right."

"Which is the first way in which it's not like America," Malik said, dryly.

"It's within an order of magnitude," Tori said. "My point is that politically speaking, distance is measured in time. We're months away from Earth. They're still thinking about us like we're some kind of lost colony. Like we answer to them. How many people here, just at this table have had directives from someone who's never been outside a gravity well but still felt like they should tell us where our research should go?"

Tori raised his own hand, and Raj followed suit. Voltaire. Carl. Reluctantly, Malik. Tori's grin was smug.

"Who's doing the real science in the system?" Tori said. "That's us. Our ships are newer and better. Our environmental science is at least a decade ahead of anything they've got on Earth. Last year, we hit self-sustaining."

"I don't believe that," Voltaire said. The new one still hadn't spoken, but Solomon watched her attention shift to each new speaker. He watched her listen.

"Even if there are a few things we still need from Earth, we can trade for

them. Shit, give us a few years and we'll be mining them out of the Belt," Tori said, backing away from his last point and making a new, equally unlikely assertion at the same time. "It's not like I'm saying we should cut off all diplomatic relations."

"No," Malik said. "You're saying we should declare political independence."

"Damn skippy, I am," Tori said. "Because distance is measured in time."

"And coherence is measured in beer," Voltaire said, the cadence of her voice matching Tori's perfectly. The new woman smiled at the mimicry.

"Even if we decided that all we had to lose was our chains," Malik said, "why would we bother? We are already *de facto* our own government. Pointing out the fact is only going to stir up trouble."

"Do you really think Earth hasn't noticed?" Tori said. "You think the kids back at the labs on Luna and Sao Paulo aren't looking up at the sky and saying *That little red dot is kicking our asses*? They're jealous and they're scared and they should be. It's all I'm saying. If we do our own thing, the earliest they could do something about it still gives us months of lead time. England lost its colonies because you can't maintain control with a sixty-day latency, much less a hundred and twenty."

"Well," said Voltaire drily, "that and the French."

"And good damn thing, too," Tori said as if she hadn't spoken. "Because who was it that came in when the Nazis started knocking on England's door? Am I right?"

"Um," Solomon said, "no, actually. You just made the other point. We're really the Germans."

And because he spoke, the new woman's gaze turned to him. He felt his throat go tight and sipped his beer to try to loosen up. If he spoke now, his voice would crack like he was fourteen again. Voltaire put her elbows on the table, cradled her chin in her dark hands, and hoisted her eyebrows. Her expression could have had *This should be good* as the caption.

"Okay," Malik said, abandoning his disagreement with Tori. "I'll bite. In what ways are we like a murderous bunch of fascists?"

"By-by how we'd fight," Solomon said. "Germany had all the best science, just like us. They had the best tech. They had rockets. No one had rockets, but they did. Nazi tanks could destroy allied tanks at something like five to one. They had the best attack submarines, drone missiles, early

jet aircraft. They were just that much better. Better designed, better manufactured. They were elegant and they were smart.”

“Apart from the whole racial cleansing genocide thing,” Julio said.

“Apart from that,” Solomon agreed. “But they lost. They had all the best tech, just like we do. And they lost.”

“Because they were psychopathic and insane,” Julio said.

“No,” Solomon said. “I mean, they were, but there have been a lot of fascist psychopaths that *didn’t* lose wars. They lost because even though one of their tanks was worth five of the other guy’s, America could build ten. The industrial base was huge, and if the design wasn’t as good, who cared? Earth has that industrial base. They have people. It could take them months, maybe years, to get here, but when they did, it would be in numbers we couldn’t handle. Being technically advanced is great, but we’re still just building better ones of the stuff that came before. If you want to overcome the kind of demographic advantage Earth has, you’ll need something paradigm-shiftingly new.”

Voltaire raised her hand. “I nominate *paradigm-shiftingly* as the adverb of the night.”

“Seconded,” Julio said. Solomon felt the blush creeping up his neck.

“All in favor?” There was a small chorus. “The ayes have it,” Voltaire said. “Someone buy this man another drink.”

The conversation moved on, the way it always did. Politics and history gave way to art and fine-structure engineering. The great debate of the night was over whether artificial muscles worked better with the nanotubules in sheets or bundles, with both sides descending in the end to name-calling. Most of it was good-natured, and what wasn’t pretended to be, which was almost the same. The wall monitor switched over to an all-music feed out of a little community on Syria Planum, the wailing and brass of rai juxtaposed with classical European strings. It was some of Solomon’s favorite music because it was dense and intellectually complicated and he wasn’t expected to dance to it. He wound up spending half the night sitting beside Carl talking about ejection efficiency systems and trying not to stare at the new woman. When she moved from Malik’s side to sit next to Voltaire, his heart leaped—maybe she wasn’t here with Malik—and then sank—maybe she was a lesbian. He felt like he’d dropped a decade off his life and was suddenly stuck in the hormonal torture chamber of the lower university. He

made up his mind to forget that the new woman existed. If she was new to the research center, there would be time to find out who she was and plan a way to speak with her that didn't make him look desperate and lonely. And if she wasn't, then she wouldn't be here. And even so, he kept looking for her, just to keep track.

Raj was the first one to leave, the same as always. He was on development, which meant he had all the same burden of technical work plus steering committee meetings. If, someday, the terraforming project actually took hold, it would have Raj's intellectual DNA. Julio and Carl left next, arm in arm with Carl resting his head on Julio's shoulder the way he did when they were both a little drunk and amorous. With only Malik, Voltaire, and Tori left, avoiding the new woman was harder. Solomon got up to leave once, but then stopped at the head and wandered back in without entirely meaning to. As soon as the new woman left, he told himself. When she was gone, he could go. But if he saw who she left with, then he'd know who to ask about her. Or, if she left with Voltaire, not to ask. It was just data collection. That was all. When the monitor changed to the early morning newsfeed, he had to admit he was bullshitting. He waved his goodnights for real this time, pushed his hands into his pockets, and headed out to the main corridor.

Between the engineering problems in building a robust dome and Mars' absolute lack of a functioning magnetosphere, all the habitats were deep underground. The main corridor's hallways had ceilings four meters high and LEDs that changed their warmth and intensity with the time of day, but Solomon still had the occasional atavistic longing for sky. For a sense of openness and possibility, and maybe for not living his whole life buried.

Her voice came from behind him. "So, hey."

She walked with a comfortable rolling gait. Her smile looked warm and maybe a little tentative. Outside of the dimness of the bar, he could see the lighter streaks in her hair.

"Ah. Hey."

"We never really got around to meeting in there," she said, holding out her hand. "Caitlin Esquibel."

Solomon took her hand, shaking it once like they were at the center. "Solomon Epstein."

"Solomon Epstein?" she said, walking forward. Somehow they were

walking side by side now. Together. “So what’s a nice Jewish boy like you doing on a planet like this?”

If he hadn’t still been a little drunk, he’d just have laughed it off.

“Trying to get the courage to meet you, mostly,” he said.

“Sort of noticed that.”

“Hope it was adorable.”

“It was better than your friend Malik always finding reasons to touch my arm. Anyway. I’m working resource management for Kwikowski Mutual Interest Group. Just came in from Luna a month ago. That thing you were saying about Mars and Earth and America. That was interesting.”

“Thank you,” Solomon said. “I’m an engine engineer for Masstech.”

“Engine engineer,” she said. “Seems like it ought to be redundant.”

“I always thought thrust specialist sounded dirty,” he said. “How long are you staying on Mars?”

“Until I leave. Open contract. You?”

“Oh, I was born here,” he said. “I expect I’ll die here too.”

She glanced up his long, thin frame once, her smile mocking. Of course she’d known he was born there. No way to hide it. His words felt like a weak brag now.

“A company man,” she said, letting it be a joke between them.

“A Martian.”

The cart kiosk had half a dozen of the cramped electric devices ready to rent. Solomon pulled out his card and waved it in a figure eight until the reader got good signal and the first cart in line clicked from amber to green. He pulled it out before he realized he really didn’t want to get in.

“Do you—” Solomon began, then cleared his throat and tried again. “Would you like to come home with me?”

He could see the *Sure, why not* forming in her brain stem. He could follow it along the short arcing path to her lips. It was close enough to pull at his blood like a moon. And he watched it turn aside at the last moment. When she shook her head, it wasn’t a refusal so much as her trying to clear her mind. But she smiled. She did smile.

“Moving a little fast there, Sol.”



Speed isn't the problem. Unless he runs into something, velocity is just velocity; he could be weightless going almost the speed of light. It's the delta vee that's hurting him. The acceleration. The change. Every second, he's going sixty-eight meters per second faster than he was the second before. Or more. Maybe more.

Only the acceleration isn't the problem either. Ships have had the power to burn at fifteen or even twenty g since the early chemical rockets. The power is always there. It's the efficiency necessary to maintain a burn that was missing. Thrust to weight when most of your weight is propellant to give you thrust. And bodies can accelerate at over twenty g for a fraction of a second. It's the sustain that's killing him. It's going for hours.

There are emergency shutoffs. If the reactor starts to overheat or the magnetic bottle gets unstable, the drive will shut down. There are all kinds of shutoffs for all kinds of emergencies, but nothing's going wrong. Everything's running perfectly. That's the problem. That's what's killing him.

There is also a manual cutoff on the control panel. The icon is a big red button. A panic button. If he could touch it, he'd be fine. But he can't. All the joy is gone now. Instead of elation, there's only panic and the growing, grinding pain. If he can just reach the controls. Or if something, anything, could just go *wrong*.

Nothing is going wrong. He is struggling to breathe, gasping the way the safety instructors taught him to. He tenses his legs and arms, trying to force the blood through his arteries and veins. If he passes out, he won't come back, and there is darkness growing at the edges of his vision. If he can't find a way out, he will die here. In this chair with his hands pinned against him and his hair pulling back his scalp. His hand terminal in his pocket feels like someone driving a dull knife into his hip. He tries to remember how much mass a hand terminal has. He can't. He fights to breathe.

His hand terminal. If he can reach it, if he can pull it out, maybe he can signal to Caitlin. Maybe she can make a remote connection and shut the engines down. The hand laying across his belly presses hard into his viscera, but it's only centimeters from his pocket. He pushes until his bones creak, and his wrists shift. The friction of skin against skin tears a little hole in his belly and the blood that comes out races back toward the seat like it was afraid of something, but he does move.

He pushes again. A little closer. The blood is a lubricant. The friction is less. His hand moves farther. It takes minutes. His fingernails touch the hardened plastic. He can do this.

Power and efficiency, he thinks, and a moment's pleasure passes through him despite everything. He's done it. The magic pair.

The tendons in his fingers ache, but he pulls the cloth of his pocket aside. He can feel the hand terminal begin to slip free of his pocket, but he can't lift his head to see it.



Three years after he met her, Caitlin showed up at the door to his hole at three in the morning, crying, frightened, and sober. It wasn't the sort of thing Solomon expected from her, and he'd spent a fair amount of time in her company. They'd become lovers almost seven months after they'd met. He called it that. *Becoming lovers* wasn't the kind of thing Caitlin said. With her, it was always something crude and a little raunchy. That was who she was. He thought it was a kind of emotional protection that she was never exactly sincere. It was a way to control fear and deny anxieties. And really as long as she still wanted to come share his bed some nights, he was fine with that. And if she hadn't wanted to anymore, he'd have been disappointed, but he still would have been fine with it. He liked the way she smirked at the world. The confidence she carried herself with, especially when she was faking it. He liked, all in all, who she was. That made everything easier.

Twice, her contract had ticked past its automatic renewal dates without her exercising the option to leave. When he'd taken a position with the functional magnetics workgroup, one of the issues he'd considered was whether the extra time he took with it would alienate her. Neither of them had made any sexual or romantic connections with other people at the center. Everyone treated them as if they were each other's tacit property, and so even though they'd never made any explicit promises, Solomon would have called them *de facto* monogamists. Certainly he would have felt hurt and betrayed if she'd been sleeping with someone else, and assumed

she'd feel the same about him.

But sex and companionship, as pleasant as they were, didn't mean a great deal of vulnerability. So he was surprised.

"Did you hear?" she asked. Her voice was ragged and low. Fresh tears ran down her cheeks, and her mouth pulled in and down at the corners.

"I don't think so," Solomon said, standing back to let her past. His hole was a standard design: a small multipurpose room at the front with enough resources to cook simple meals, a quarter-sized wall monitor, and space for three or four people to sit. Behind it was the bedroom. Behind that, a storage closet and a bathroom. On Mars, the joke went, a man's hole was his castle where values of castle approached dorm room. She sat heavily on one of the benches, and wrapped her arms around herself. Solomon closed the door. He didn't know whether to talk to her or hold her or both. He started with holding her. Her tears had a smell to them; salt and damp and skin. She wept into his shoulder until curiosity and distress drove him past the consolation of being her soft monkey. "So. Did I hear what, exactly?"

She coughed out a phlegmy laugh.

"The United Nations," she said. "They invoked the breakaway province rule. Their ships have already done their acceleration burns. Forty of them. They're already ballistic."

"Oh," he said, and she started weeping again.

"It's those fucking secessionists. Ever since they published their manifesto, people have been acting like they're serious. Like they aren't a bunch of short-sighted assholes who're in it for the attention. Now they've started a war. They're really going to do it, Sol. They're going to drop rocks on us until we're just a carbon layer ten atoms thick."

"They won't do that. They won't do that," he said, and immediately regretted repeating himself. It made him sound like he was trying to talk himself into it. "Every time the breakaway province rule's been invoked, it's been because the UN wanted to grab resources. If they break all our infrastructure, they can't get the resources. They're just trying to scare us."

Caitlin raised one hand like a schoolgirl asking to be recognized. "Working. Scared now."

"And it isn't about the secessionists, even if that's what they're claiming," Solomon said. He felt himself warming up now. He wasn't repeating sentences. "It's about Earth running out of lithium and

molybdenum. Even with the landfill mines, they need more than they've got. We have access to raw ore. That's all it is. It's all about money, Cait. They aren't going to start dropping rocks. Besides, if they do that to us, we'll do that to them. We've got better ships."

"Eighteen of them," she said. "They've got forty coasting toward us right now, and just as many playing defense."

"But if they miss one," he said, and didn't finish the thought.

She swallowed, wiped her cheeks with the palm of her hands. He leaned across the room and plucked a towel out of the dispenser for her.

"Do you actually know any of that?" she said. "Or are you just talking a good game to calm me down?"

"Do I have to answer that?"

She sighed, collapsing into him.

"It'll be weeks," he said. "Minimum. Probably months."

"So. If you had four months to live, what would you do?"

"Crawl into bed with you and not come out."

She reached over and kissed him. There was a violence in her that unnerved him. No, that wasn't right. Not violence. Sincerity.

"C'mon," she said.

He woke with his hand terminal buzzing in alarm and only vaguely aware he'd been hearing the sound for a while. Caitlin was curled up against him, her eyes still closed, her mouth open and calm. She looked young like that. Relaxed. He shut off the alarm as he checked the time. On one hand, he was egregiously late for his shift. On the other, another hour wouldn't be particularly more egregious. There were two messages from his team lead queued. Caitlin muttered and stretched. The motion pulled the sheet away from her body. He put the hand terminal down, pushed his hand under his pillow and went back to sleep.

The next time he woke, she was sitting up, looking at him. The softness had left her face again, but she was still beautiful. He smiled up at her and reached out to weave his fingers with hers.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

"Oh, please."

"No, really. Will you marry me?"

"Why? Because we're about to get into a war that'll kill us and everyone we know and there's nothing we can do to affect it one way or the other?"

Quick, let's do something permanent before the permanence is all mined out."

"Sure. Will you marry me?"

"Of course I will, Sol."

The ceremony was a small one. Voltaire was Caitlin's maid of honor. Raj was Solomon's best man. The priest was a Methodist whose childhood had been spent in the Punjab, but now spoke with the faux-Texan drawl of the Mariner Valley. There were several chapels in the research center, and this one was actually quite lovely. Everything, even the altar, had been carved from the native stone and then covered with a clear sealant that left it looking wet and rich and vibrant. Lines of white and black ran through the red stone, and flecks of crystalline brightness. The air was thick with the scent of lilacs that Voltaire had bought by the armful from the greenhouses.

As they stood together, exchanging the formulaic vows, Solomon thought Caitlin's face had the same calm that it did when she was sleeping. Or maybe he was just projecting. When he put the ring on her finger, he felt something shift in his breast and he was utterly and irrationally happy in a way he didn't remember ever having been before. The UN fleet was still three weeks away. Even at the worst, they wouldn't die for almost a month. It made him wish they'd done it all earlier. The first night he'd seen her, for instance. Or that they'd met when they were younger. In the pictures they sent to her parents, he looked like he was about to burst into song. He hated the images, but Caitlin loved them, so he loved them too. They took their honeymoon in the hotel right there in Dhanbad Nova, drying themselves with towels and washing with soaps that had been made in the image of luxury on Earth. He'd bathed twice as much while they were there, almost feeling the heat of the water and the softness of his robe as magic, as if by being decadent he could pass for a Terran.

And, by coincidence, it worked. Whatever negotiations had been going on behind the scenes paid off. The UN ships flipped for their deceleration burn early and burned twice as long. They were on their way home. He was watching the announcer on the newsfeed tracking the orbital mechanics of the voyage out and back. He tried to imagine what it was like for the marines in those ships. Out almost all the way to the new world, and then back without ever having seen it. Over half a year of their lives gone in an act of political theater. Caitlin sat on the edge of the bed, leaning in toward

the monitor, not taking her eyes from it. Drinking it in.

Sitting behind her, his back pressing against the headboard, Solomon felt a ghost of unease pass through him, cold and unwelcome.

"I guess permanent just got a lot longer," he said, trying to make a joke out of it.

"Mm-hm," she agreed.

"Sort of changes things."

"Mm-hm."

He scratched at the back of his hand even though it didn't itch. The dry sound of fingernails against skin was drowned in the announcer's voice so that he felt it more than heard it. Caitlin ran a hand through her hair, her fingers disappearing in the black and then re-emerging.

"So," he said. "Do you want a divorce?"

"No."

"Because I know you were thinking that the rest of your life was going to be kind of a short run. And if... if this wasn't what you would have picked. Anyway, I'd understand it."

Caitlin looked at him over her shoulder. The light of the monitor shone on her cheek, her eye, her hair like she was made of colored glass.

"You are adorable, and you are my husband, and I love you and trust you like I never have anyone in my life. I wouldn't trade this for anything but more of this. Why? Do you want out?"

"No. Just being polite. No, not that. Insecure all of a sudden."

"Stop it. And anyway, it hasn't changed. Earth is still running out of lithium and molybdenum and all sorts of industrial minerals. We still have them. They turned back this time, but they're still coming, and they'll keep on coming."

"Unless they find some way to do what they need to do with other metals. Or find another source. Things change all the time. Something could make the whole question irrelevant."

"Could," she agreed. "That's what peace is, right? Postponing the conflict until the thing you were fighting over doesn't matter."

On the screen, the UN ships burned, arcs of flame flaring behind them as they went back where they came from.



The hand terminal eases a little farther out of his pocket, and he's fairly sure it's going to leave a track of bruise as wide as the case. He doesn't care. He tries to remember if he left the voice activation on, and either he didn't or his throat is too deformed by the thrust gravity for his voice to be recognizable. It has to be done by hand. He can't relax or he'll lose consciousness, but it's getting harder and harder to remember that. Intellectually he knows that the blood is being pressed to the back of his body, pooling in the back part of his cerebellum and flooding his kidneys. He hasn't done enough medical work to know what that means, but it can't be good. The hand terminal comes almost all the way out. It's in his hand now.

The ship shudders once, and a notification pops up on the screen. It's amber-colored, and there's some text with it, but he can't make it out. His eyes won't focus. If it were red, it would have triggered a shut down. He waits for a few seconds, hoping that whatever it is gets worse, but it doesn't. The yacht's solid. Well-designed and well-built. He turns his attention back to the hand terminal.

Caitlin will be at the hole now. She'll be starting dinner and listening to the newsfeed for information about the shipyards crisis. If he can put in a connection request, she'll get it. He has the sudden, powerful fear that she'll think he sat on his terminal. That she'll say his name a few times, then laugh it off and drop the connection. He'll have to make noise when she accepts. Even if actual speech is too hard, he has to let her know there's something wrong. He's thumbed in connection requests without looking at his terminal thousands of times, but everything feels different now, and his muscle memory isn't helping him. The weight of the terminal is overwhelming. Everything in his hand aches like he's been hit with a hammer. His belly hurts. The worst headache he can imagine blooms. Nothing about this experience is fun except the knowledge that he's succeeded. Even as he struggles to make the terminal respond, he's also thinking what the drive means practically. With efficiency like this, ships can be under thrust all through a voyage. Acceleration thrust to the halfway

point, then cut the engines, flip, and decelerate the rest of the trip. Even a relatively gentle one third g will mean not only getting wherever they are headed much faster, but there won't be any of the problems of long-term weightlessness. He tries to figure how long the transit to Earth will take, but he can't. He has to pay attention to the terminal.

Something in the topology of his gut shifts, changing the angle the terminal is sitting. It starts to slip, and he doesn't have strength or speed to catch it. It reaches his side, falls the centimeters to the chair. He tries to move his left arm from where it's pinned beside his ear, but it won't move.

It won't move at all. It won't even tense up with effort.

Oh, he thinks, I'm having a stroke.



They had been married for six years when Solomon took the money he'd saved from his performances and efficiency bonuses and bought himself a yacht. It wasn't a large ship; the living space in it was smaller than his first hole. It was almost five years old, and was going to require a month in the orbital shipyard docks before very much longer. The interior color scheme—cream and orange—wasn't to his tastes. It had been sitting in dry dock for eight and a half months since its previous owner—a junior vice president of a Luna-based conglomerate—had died. His family on Luna didn't have any plans to come to Mars, and the bother of retrieving it across the months-deep void made it easier for them to price it low and sell. For most people on Mars, a boat like that was an ostentatious status symbol and nothing more. There was no settled moon or inhabited L5 station to travel between. The trip to Earth in it would have been neither comfortable nor particularly safe. It could go around in orbit. It could run out into the vacuum near Mars, and then come back. That was about it, and the pointlessness of the exercise helped drive down the price ever farther. As a statement of wealth, it said its owner had had too much. As a means of transport, it was like having a race car that could never leave its track.

For Solomon, it was the perfect test vehicle.

The yacht had been designed around an engine he knew, and the build

code was one he'd helped to write. When he looked at the technical and maintenance history, he could see every control array, every air recycling vent and cover. Before he'd even set foot on it, he knew it as well as he knew anything. Some parts of the exhaust system were things he'd designed himself a decade before. And, since he held the title to it, half a year's worth of red tape would simply go away if he wanted to use it to test some new refinements to the engines. That idea alone could make him cackle with delight. No more permissions committees. No more hard capital liability reports. Just the boat, its reactor, a couple EVA suits and a set of industrial waldoes he'd had since he was in school. In previous eras, a scientist might have a garage PCR machine or a shed in the back of the house with beehives or disassembled engines or half-built prototypes of inventions that would change the world if they could just be made to work. Solomon had his yacht, and getting it was the most self-indulgent, delightful, important thing he'd done since the day he'd asked Caitlin to marry him.

And yet, even as the fertile garden of his mind sent up a thousand different green shoots of ideas and projects, tests and tweaks and adjustments, he found himself dreading the part where he told his wife what he'd done. And when the time came, his unease was justified.

"Oh, Sol. Oh, baby."

"I didn't spend my salary on it," he said. "It was all bonus money. And it was only mine. I didn't use ours."

Caitlin was sitting on the bench in their multipurpose room, tapping her mouth with the tips of her fingers the way she did when she was thinking hard. The system was playing a gentle ambient music that was all soft percussion and strings loud enough to cover the hiss of the air recyclers but not so much as to overwhelm the conversation. As with almost all the new buildings on Mars, it was larger, better appointed, and deeper underground.

"So what I just heard you say is you can spend as much money out of the account as you want without talking to me if the total you pull is less than whatever you've made in bonuses. Is that what you meant?"

"No," he said, though it was pretty close. "I'm saying that it wasn't money we were counting on. All our obligations are covered. We're not going to try to buy food and have the accounts come up empty. We're not going to have to work extra hours or take on side jobs."

“All right.”

“And this is important work. The design I have for the magnetic coil exhaust can really increase drive efficiency, if I can get—”

“All *right*,” she said.

He leaned against the door frame. The strings rose in a delicate arpeggio.

“You’re angry.”

“No, sweetie. I’m not angry,” she said gently. “Angry is yelling. This is resentful, and it’s because you’re cutting me out from the fun parts. Really, I look at you, and see the happiness and the excitement, and I want to be part of that. I want to jump up and down and wave my arms and talk about how great it all is. But that money was our safety net. You’re ignoring the fact that you spent our safety net, and if we *both* ignore it, the first time something unexpected comes up, we’re screwed. I love our life, so now I have to be the one who cares and disapproves and doesn’t get to be excited. You’re making me the grown-up. I don’t want to be the grown-up. I want us both to be grown-ups, so that when we do something like this, we both get to be kids.”

She looked up at him and shrugged. Her face was harder than it was when they met. There were threads of white in the darkness of her hair. When she smiled, he felt the hardness in his chest erode away.

“I may... have gotten a little carried away. I saw it was there and we could afford it.”

“And you zoomed ahead without thinking about all of what it would mean. Because you’re Solomon Epstein, and you are the smartest, most rigorous and methodical man who ever made every single important choice in his life by impulse.” If there hadn’t been warmth and laughter in her voice, it would have sounded like a condemnation. Instead it sounded like love.

“I’m cute, though,” he said.

“You’re adorable. And I want to hear all about your new whatever it is you’re going to try. Only first tell me that you’ll try to think about the future next time?”

“I will.”

They spent the evening with him talking about power and efficiency, ejection mass and velocity multipliers. And when that was done, they talked

about building a responsible retirement plan and making sure their wills were up to date. It felt like an apology, and he hoped that they'd be able to do it again when she understood how much maintenance on the yacht was going to cost. It was a fight for another day.

The days, he spent working as usual with the team at the propulsion group. The nights, he sat on the monitors back at their hole and designed his own things. Caitlin started a program over the network with a group in Londres Nova discussing how companies like Kwikowski could intervene in the destabilizing spiral of threat and avoidance that Earth and Mars seemed locked in. Whenever he heard her talking to the others—about propaganda and divergent moral codes and any number of other plausible-sounding vaguenesses—she brought up lithium, molybdenum. Now tungsten too. All the other things were interesting, important, informative, and profound. But unless they could figure out the ore rights issues, they could address everything else and still not solve the problem. He was always proud of her when she said that. A liberal arts background was a hard thing to overcome, but she was doing great.

Eventually, the time came to test his idea and plans. He made the long journey to the shipyards on the new public transport system: evacuated tubes drilled through the rock and lined with electromagnetic rails like a slow, underpowered gauss gun. It was cramped and uncomfortable, but it was fast. He got to his yacht an hour before the sun set at the nearby Martian horizon. He finished the last-minute tweaks to the prototype he'd fabricated, ran the diagnostic sequences twice, and took the ship up beyond the thin atmosphere. Once he reached high orbit, he floated for a while, enjoying the novelty of null g. He brewed himself a bulb of fresh tea, strapped himself into the captain's chair, and ran his fingertip across the old touchscreen monitor.

If he was right, the additions he'd made would increase efficiency by almost sixteen percent above baseline. When the numbers came back, he hadn't been right. Efficiency had *dropped* by four and a half. He landed back at the shipyards and rode the transit tube home, muttering darkly to himself the whole way.

The United Nations issued a statement that all future Martian ships would be contracted through the Bush shipyards on Earth. The local government didn't even comment on it; they just kept on with the scheduled

builds and negotiated for new ones after that. The United Nations ordered that all shipyards on Mars shut down until an inspection team could be sent out there. Seven months to get the team together, and almost six months in transit because of the relative distances of the two planets in their orbits around the sun. Sol was a little nervous when he heard that. If they closed the shipyards, it might mean grounding his test yacht. He didn't need to concern himself. The shipyards all stayed open. The rumors of war started up again, and Solomon tried to ignore them. Tried to tell himself that this time would be no different than the one before or the one before that.

Raj, to everyone's surprise, resigned from development, rented a cheap hole up near the surface, and started selling hand-made ceramic art. He said he'd never been happier. Voltaire got a divorce and wanted all the old crew to come out to the bars with her. There were eight of them now, but pretty much nobody went. Julio and Carl had a baby together and stopped socializing with anyone. Tori went in on a little chemical safety consultancy that pretended to serve any business with a Martian charter, but actually got all their business from the terraforming projects. Malik died from an unresponsive spinal cancer. Life struggled on, winning and failing. Solomon's experimental drives got to where they were almost as good as the unmodified ship. Then a little bit better.

A year almost to the day after he'd bought it, Solomon rode out to the yacht with a new design. If he was right, it would increase efficiency by almost four and a half percent above baseline. He was in the engine room installing it when his hand terminal chimed. It was Caitlin. He accepted the request.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Did we decide to take that long weekend next month?" she asked. "I know we talked about it, but I don't think we made a decision."

"We didn't, but I'd better not. The team's a little behind."

"Overtime behind?"

"No. Just keep-showing-up behind."

"All right. Then I may plan something with Maggie Chu."

"You have my blessing. I'll be home as soon as this is done."

"All right," she said, and dropped the connection. He tested the housings, did an extra weld where the coil would suffer the most stress, and headed back up for the captain's chair. The yacht rose through the thin

atmosphere and into high orbit. Solomon ran the diagnostics again, making sure before he started that everything looked good. For almost half an hour, he floated in his chair, held in place by his straps.

As he started the burn sequence, he remembered that the team was going to be in Londres Nova the weekend he'd been thinking about taking off with Caitlin. He wondered whether she'd put her plans with Maggie Chu in place, or if there was still time to change things. He started the burn.

Acceleration threw Solomon back into the captain's chair, then pressed his chest like a weight. His right hand landed on his belly, his left fell onto the upholstery beside his ear. His ankles pressed back against the leg rests.



The ship sings a low dirge, throaty and passionate and sad like the songs his father used to sing at temple. He understands now that he's going to die here. He's going too fast and too far for help to reach him. For a while—months or years—his little yacht will mark the farthest out of Earth's gravity well a manned ship has ever gone. They'll find the design specs at the hole. Caitlin is smart. She'll know to sell the design. She'll have enough money to eat beef every meal for the rest of her life. He's taken good care of her, anyway, if not himself.

If he had control, he could reach the asteroid belt. He could go to the Jovian system and be the first person to walk on Europa and Ganymede. He isn't going to, though. That's going to be someone else. But when they get there, they will be carried by his drive.

And the war! If distance is measured in time, Mars just got very, very close to Earth while Earth is still very distant from Mars. That kind of asymmetry changes everything. He wonders how they'll negotiate that. What they'll do. All the lithium and molybdenum and tungsten anyone could want is within reach of mining companies now. They can go to the asteroid belt and the moons of Saturn and Jupiter. The thing that kept Earth and Mars from ever reaching a lasting peace isn't going to matter anymore.

The pain in his head and his spine is getting worse. It's hard to remember to tense his legs and arms, to help his failing heart move the

blood. He almost blacks out again, but he's not sure if it's the stroke or the thrust gravity. He's pretty sure driving blood pressure higher while having a stroke is considered poor form.

The ship's dirge shifts a little, and now it's literally singing in his father's voice, Hebrew syllables whose meaning Solomon has forgotten if he ever knew. Aural hallucinations, then. That's interesting.

He's sorry that he won't be able to see Caitlin one more time. To tell her goodbye and that he loves her. He's sorry he won't get to see the consequences of his drive. Even through the screaming pain, a calmness and euphoria start to wash over him. It's always been like this, he thinks. From when Moses saw the promised land that he could never enter, people have been on their deathbeds just wanting to see what happens next. He wonders if that's what makes the promised land holy: that you can see it but you can't quite reach it. The grass is always greener on the other side of personal extinction. It sounds like something Malik would say. Something Caitlin would laugh at.

The next few years—decades even—are going to be fascinating, and it will be because of him. He closes his eyes. He wishes he could be there to see it all happen.

Solomon relaxes, and the expanse folds itself around him like a lover.

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JAMES S. A. COREY is the pen name of Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. In addition to writing the novels and short stories of The Expanse, they wrote and produced the television series of the same name. Daniel lives with his family in the American southwest. Ty will tell you where he lives when and if he wants you to come over.

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*For Jayné and Kat, who encourage me
to daydream about spaceships*

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Prologue: Julie

The *Scopuli* had been taken eight days ago, and Julie Mao was finally ready to be shot.

It had taken all eight days trapped in a storage locker for her to get to that point. For the first two she'd remained motionless, sure that the armored men who'd put her there had been serious. For the first hours, the ship she'd been taken aboard wasn't under thrust, so she floated in the locker, using gentle touches to keep herself from bumping into the walls or the atmosphere suit she shared the space with. When the ship began to move, thrust giving her weight, she'd stood silently until her legs cramped, then sat down slowly into a fetal position. She'd peed in her jumpsuit, not caring about the warm itchy wetness, or the smell, worrying only that she might slip and fall in the wet spot it left on the floor. She couldn't make noise. They'd shoot her.

On the third day, thirst had forced her into action. The noise of the ship was all around her. The faint subsonic rumble of the reactor and drive. The constant hiss and thud of hydraulics and steel bolts as the pressure doors between decks opened and closed. The clump of heavy boots walking on metal decking. She waited until all the noise she could hear sounded distant, then pulled the environment suit off its hooks and onto the locker floor. Listening for any approaching sound, she slowly disassembled the suit and took out the water supply. It was old and stale; the suit obviously hadn't been used or serviced in ages. But she hadn't had a sip in days, and the warm loamy water in the suit's reservoir bag was the best thing she had ever tasted. She had to work hard not to gulp it down and make herself vomit.

When the urge to urinate returned, she pulled the catheter bag out of the suit and relieved herself into it. She sat on the floor, now cushioned by the padded suit and almost comfortable, and wondered who her captors were—Coalition Navy, pirates, something worse. Sometimes she slept.



On day four, isolation, hunger, boredom, and the diminishing number of places to store her piss finally pushed her to make contact with them. She'd heard muffled cries of pain. Somewhere nearby, her shipmates were being beaten or tortured. If she got the attention of the kidnappers, maybe they would just take her to the others. That was okay. Beatings, she could handle. It seemed like a small price to pay if it meant seeing people again.

The locker sat beside the inner airlock door. During flight, that usually wasn't a high-traffic area, though she didn't know anything about the layout of this particular ship. She thought about what to say, how to present herself. When she finally heard someone moving toward her, she just tried to yell that she wanted out. The dry rasp that came out of her throat surprised her. She swallowed, working her tongue to try to create some saliva, and tried again. Another faint rattle in the throat.

The people were right outside her locker door. A voice was talking quietly. Julie had pulled back a fist to bang on the door when she heard what it was saying.

No. Please no. Please don't.

Dave. Her ship's mechanic. Dave, who collected clips from old cartoons and knew a million jokes, begging in a small broken voice.

No, please no, please don't, he said.

Hydraulics and locking bolts clicked as the inner airlock door opened. A meaty thud as something was thrown inside. Another click as the airlock closed. A hiss of evacuating air.

When the airlock cycle had finished, the people outside her door walked away. She didn't bang to get their attention.



They'd scrubbed the ship. Detainment by the inner planet navies was a bad scenario, but they'd all trained on how to deal with it. Sensitive OPA data was scrubbed and overwritten with innocuous-looking logs with false time stamps. Anything too sensitive to trust to a computer, the captain destroyed. When the attackers came aboard, they could play innocent.

It hadn't mattered.

There weren't the questions about cargo or permits. The invaders had come in like they owned the place, and Captain Darren had rolled over like a dog. Everyone else—Mike, Dave, Wan Li—they'd all just thrown up their hands and gone along quietly. The pirates or slavers or whatever they were had dragged them off the little transport ship that had been her home, and down a docking tube without even minimal environment suits. The tube's thin layer of Mylar was the only thing between them and hard nothing; hope it didn't rip; goodbye lungs if it did.

Julie had gone along too, but then the bastards had tried to lay their hands on her, strip her clothes off.

Five years of low-gravity jiu jitsu training and them in a confined space with no gravity. She'd done a lot of damage. She'd almost started to think she might win when from nowhere a gauntleted fist smashed into her face. Things got fuzzy after that. Then the locker, and *Shoot her if she makes a noise*. Four days of not making noise while they beat her friends down below and then threw one of them out an airlock.

After six days, everything went quiet.

Shifting between bouts of consciousness and fragmented dreams, she was only vaguely aware as the sounds of walking, talking, and pressure doors and the subsonic rumble of the reactor and the drive faded away a little at a time. When the drive stopped, so did gravity, and Julie woke from a dream of racing her old pinnacle to find herself floating while her muscles screamed in protest and then slowly relaxed.

She pulled herself to the door and pressed her ear to the cold metal. Panic shot through her until she caught the quiet sound of the air recyclers. The ship still had power and air, but the drive wasn't on and no one was opening a door or walking or talking. Maybe it was a crew meeting. Or a party on another deck. Or everyone was in engineering, fixing a serious problem.

She spent a day listening and waiting.

By day seven, her last sip of water was gone. No one on the ship had moved within range of her hearing for twenty-four hours. She sucked on a plastic tab she'd ripped off the environment suit until she worked up some saliva; then she started yelling. She yelled herself hoarse.

No one came.

By day eight, she was ready to be shot. She'd been out of water for two days, and her waste bag had been full for four. She put her shoulders against the back wall of the locker and planted her hands against the side walls. Then she kicked out with both legs as hard as she could. The cramps that followed the first kick almost made her pass out. She screamed instead.

Stupid girl, she told herself. She was dehydrated. Eight days without activity was more than enough to start atrophy. At least she should have stretched out.

She massaged her stiff muscles until the knots were gone, then stretched, focusing her mind like she was back in dojo. When she was in control of her body, she kicked again. And again. And again, until light started to show through the edges of the locker. And again, until the door was so bent that the three hinges and the locking bolt were the only points of contact between it and the frame.

And one last time, so that it bent far enough that the bolt was no longer seated in the hasp and the door swung free.

Julie shot from the locker, hands half raised and ready to look either threatening or terrified, depending on which seemed more useful.

There was no one on the whole deck: the airlock, the suit storage room where she'd spent the last eight days, a half dozen other storage rooms. All empty. She plucked a magnetized pipe wrench of suitable size for skull cracking out of an EVA kit, then went down the crew ladder to the deck below.

And then the one below that, and then the one below that. Personnel cabins in crisp, almost military order. Commissary, where there were signs of a struggle. Medical bay, empty. Torpedo bay. No one. The comm station was unmanned, powered down, and locked. The few sensor logs that still streamed showed no sign of the *Scopuli*. A new dread knotted her gut. Deck after deck and room after room empty of life. Something had happened. A radiation leak. Poison in the air. Something that had forced an evacuation. She wondered if she'd be able to fly the ship by herself.

But if they'd evacuated, she'd have heard them going out the airlock, wouldn't she?

She reached the final deck hatch, the one that led into engineering, and stopped when the hatch didn't open automatically. A red light on the lock panel showed that the room had been sealed from the inside. She thought again about radiation and major failures. But if either of those was the case, why lock the door from the inside? And she had passed wall panel after wall panel. None of them had been flashing warnings of any kind. No, not radiation, something else.

There was more disruption here. Blood. Tools and containers in disarray. Whatever had happened, it had happened here. No, it had started here. And it had ended behind that locked door.

It took two hours with a torch and prying tools from the machine shop to cut through the hatch to engineering. With the hydraulics compromised, she had to crank it open by hand. A gust of warm wet air blew out, carrying a hospital scent without the antiseptic. A coppery, nauseating smell. The torture chamber, then. Her friends would be inside, beaten or cut to pieces. Julie hefted her wrench and prepared to bust open at least one head before they killed her. She floated down.

The engineering deck was huge, vaulted like a cathedral. The fusion reactor dominated the central space. Something was wrong with it. Where she expected to see readouts, shielding, and monitors, a layer of something like mud seemed to flow over the reactor core. Slowly, Julie floated toward it, one hand still on the ladder. The strange smell became overpowering.

The mud caked around the reactor had structure to it like nothing she'd seen before. Tubes ran through it like veins or airways. Parts of it pulsed. Not mud, then.

Flesh.

An outcropping of the thing shifted toward her. Compared to the whole, it seemed no larger than a toe, a little finger. It was Captain Darren's head.

"Help me," it said.

Chapter One: Holden

A hundred and fifty years before, when the parochial disagreements between Earth and Mars had been on the verge of war, the Belt had been a far horizon of tremendous mineral wealth beyond viable economic reach, and the outer planets had been beyond even the most unrealistic corporate dream. Then Solomon Epstein had built his little modified fusion drive, popped it on the back of his three-man yacht, and turned it on. With a good scope, you could still see his ship going at a marginal percentage of the speed of light, heading out into the big empty. The best, longest funeral in the history of mankind. Fortunately, he'd left the plans on his home computer. The Epstein Drive hadn't given humanity the stars, but it had delivered the planets.

Three-quarters of a kilometer long, a quarter of a kilometer wide—roughly shaped like a fire hydrant—and mostly empty space inside, the *Canterbury* was a retooled colony transport. Once, it had been packed with people, supplies, schematics, machines, environment bubbles, and hope. Just under twenty million people lived on the moons of Saturn now. The *Canterbury* had hauled nearly a million of their ancestors there. Forty-five million on the moons of Jupiter. One moon of Uranus sported five thousand, the farthest outpost of human civilization, at least until the Mormons finished their generation ship and headed for the stars and freedom from procreation restrictions.

And then there was the Belt.

If you asked OPA recruiters when they were drunk and feeling expansive, they might say there were a hundred million in the Belt. Ask an inner planet census taker, it was nearer to fifty million. Any way you looked, the population was huge and needed a lot of water.

So now the *Canterbury* and her dozens of sister ships in the Pur'n'Kleen Water Company made the loop from Saturn's generous rings to the Belt and back hauling glaciers, and would until the ships aged into salvage wrecks.

Jim Holden saw some poetry in that.

"Holden?"

He turned back to the hangar deck. Chief Engineer Naomi Nagata towered over him. She stood almost two full meters tall, her mop of curly hair tied back into a black tail, her expression halfway between amusement and annoyance. She had the Belter habit of shrugging with her hands instead of her shoulders.

"Holden, are you listening, or just staring out the window?"

"There was a problem," Holden said. "And because you're really, really good, you can fix it even though you don't have enough money or supplies."

Naomi laughed.

"So you weren't listening," she said.

"Not really, no."

"Well, you got the basics right anyhow. *Knight's* landing gear isn't going to be good in atmosphere until I can get the seals replaced. That going to be a problem?"

"I'll ask the old man," Holden said. "But when's the last time we used the shuttle in atmosphere?"

"Never, but regs say we need at least one atmo-capable shuttle."

“Hey, Boss!” Amos Burton, Naomi’s earthborn assistant, yelled from across the bay. He waved one meaty arm in their general direction. He meant Naomi. Amos might be on Captain McDowell’s ship; Holden might be executive officer; but in Amos Burton’s world, only Naomi was boss.

“What’s the matter?” Naomi shouted back.

“Bad cable. Can you hold this little fucker in place while I get the spare?”

Naomi looked at Holden, *Are we done here?* in her eyes. He snapped a sarcastic salute and she snorted, shaking her head as she walked away, her frame long and thin in her greasy coveralls.

Seven years in Earth’s navy, five years working in space with civilians, and he’d never gotten used to the long, thin, improbable bones of Belters. A childhood spent in gravity shaped the way he saw things forever.

At the central lift, Holden held his finger briefly over the button for the navigation deck, tempted by the prospect of Ade Tukunbo—her smile, her voice, the patchouli-and-vanilla scent she used in her hair—but pressed the button for the infirmary instead. Duty before pleasure.

Shed Garvey, the medical tech, was hunched over his lab table, debriding the stump of Cameron Paj’s left arm, when Holden walked in. A month earlier, Paj had gotten his elbow pinned by a thirty-ton block of ice moving at five millimeters a second. It wasn’t an uncommon injury among people with the dangerous job of cutting and moving zero-g icebergs, and Paj was taking the whole thing with the fatalism of a professional. Holden leaned over Shed’s shoulder to watch as the tech plucked one of the medical maggots out of dead tissue.

“What’s the word?” Holden asked.

“It’s looking pretty good, sir,” Paj said. “I’ve still got a few nerves. Shed’s been tellin’ me about how the prosthetic is gonna hook up to it.”

“Assuming we can keep the necrosis under control,” the medic said, “and make sure Paj doesn’t heal up too much before we get to Ceres. I checked the policy, and Paj here’s been signed on long enough to get one with force feedback, pressure and temperature sensors, fine-motor software. The whole package. It’ll be almost as good as the real thing. The inner planets have a new biogel that regrows the limb, but that isn’t covered in our medical plan.”

“Fuck the Inners, and fuck their magic Jell-O. I’d rather have a good Belter-built fake than anything those bastards grow in a lab. Just wearing their fancy arm probably turns you into an asshole,” Paj said. Then he added, “Oh, uh, no offense, XO.”

“None taken. Just glad we’re going to get you fixed up,” Holden said.

“Tell him the other bit,” Paj said with a wicked grin. Shed blushed.

“I’ve, ah, heard from other guys who’ve gotten them,” Shed said, not meeting Holden’s eyes. “Apparently there’s a period while you’re still building identification with the prosthetic when whacking off feels just like getting a hand job.”

Holden let the comment hang in the air for a second while Shed’s ears turned crimson.

“Good to know,” Holden said. “And the necrosis?”

“There’s some infection,” Shed said. “The maggots are keeping it under control, and the inflammation’s actually a good thing in this context, so we’re not fighting too hard unless it starts to spread.”

“Is he going to be ready for the next run?” Holden asked.

For the first time, Paj frowned.

“Shit yes, I’ll be ready. I’m always ready. This is what I *do*, sir.”

“Probably,” Shed said. “Depending on how the bond takes. If not this one, the one after.”

“Fuck that,” Paj said. “I can buck ice one-handed better than half the skags you’ve got on this bitch.”

“Again,” Holden said, suppressing a grin, “good to know. Carry on.”

Paj snorted. Shed plucked another maggot free. Holden went back to the lift, and this time he didn’t hesitate.

The navigation station of the *Canterbury* didn't dress to impress. The great wall-sized displays Holden had imagined when he'd first volunteered for the navy did exist on capital ships but, even there, more as an artifact of design than need. Ade sat at a pair of screens only slightly larger than a hand terminal, graphs of the efficiency and output of the *Canterbury's* reactor and engine updating in the corners, raw logs spooling on the right as the systems reported in. She wore thick headphones that covered her ears, the faint thump of the bass line barely escaping. If the *Canterbury* sensed an anomaly, it would alert her. If a system errored, it would alert her. If Captain McDowell left the command and control deck, it would alert her so she could turn the music off and look busy when he arrived. Her petty hedonism was only one of a thousand things that made Ade attractive to Holden. He walked up behind her, pulled the headphones gently away from her ears, and said, "Hey."

Ade smiled, tapped her screen, and dropped the headphones to rest around her long slim neck like technical jewelry.

"Executive Officer James Holden," she said with an exaggerated formality made even more acute by her thick Nigerian accent. "And what can I do for you?"

"You know, it's funny you should ask that," he said. "I was just thinking how pleasant it would be to have someone come back to my cabin when third shift takes over. Have a little romantic dinner of the same crap they're serving in the galley. Listen to some music."

"Drink a little wine," she said. "Break a little protocol. Pretty to think about, but I'm not up for sex tonight."

"I wasn't talking about sex. A little food. Conversation."

"I was talking about sex," she said.

Holden knelt beside her chair. In the one-third g of their current thrust, it was perfectly comfortable. Ade's smile softened. The log spool chimed; she glanced at it, tapped a release, and turned back to him.

"Ade, I like you. I mean, I really enjoy your company," he said. "I don't understand why we can't spend some time together with our clothes on."

"Holden. Sweetie. Stop it, okay?"

"Stop what?"

"Stop trying to turn me into your girlfriend. You're a nice guy. You've got a cute butt, and you're fun in the sack. Doesn't mean we're engaged."

Holden rocked back on his heels, feeling himself frown.

"Ade. For this to work for me, it needs to be more than that."

"But it isn't," she said, taking his hand. "It's okay that it isn't. You're the XO here, and I'm a short-timer. Another run, maybe two, and I'm gone."

"I'm not chained to this ship either."

Her laughter was equal parts warmth and disbelief.

"How long have you been on the *Cant*?"

"Five years."

"You're not going anywhere," she said. "You're comfortable here."

"Comfortable?" he said. "The *Cant's* a century-old ice hauler. You can find a shittier flying job, but you have to try really hard. Everyone here is either wildly under-qualified or seriously screwed things up at their last gig."

"And you're comfortable here." Her eyes were less kind now. She bit her lip, looked down at the screen, looked up.

"I didn't deserve that," he said.

"You didn't," she agreed. "Look, I told you I wasn't in the mood tonight. I'm feeling cranky. I need a good night's sleep. I'll be nicer tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"I'll even make you dinner. Apology accepted?"

He slipped forward, pressed his lips to hers. She kissed back, politely at first and then with more warmth. Her fingers cupped his neck for a moment, then pulled him away.

"You're entirely too good at that. You should go now," she said. "On duty and all."

"Okay," he said, and didn't turn to go.

"Jim," she said, and the shipwide comm system clicked on.

"Holden to the bridge," Captain McDowell said, his voice compressed and echoing. Holden replied with something obscene. Ade laughed. He swooped in, kissed her cheek, and headed back for the central lift, quietly hoping that Captain McDowell suffered boils and public humiliation for his lousy timing.

The bridge was hardly larger than Holden's quarters and smaller by half than the galley. Except for the slightly oversized captain's display, required by Captain McDowell's failing eyesight and general distrust of corrective surgery, it could have been an accounting firm's back room. The air smelled of cleaning astringent and someone's overly strong yerba maté tea. McDowell shifted in his seat as Holden approached. Then the captain leaned back, pointing over his shoulder at the communications station.

"Becca!" McDowell snapped. "Tell him."

Rebecca Byers, the comm officer on duty, could have been bred from a shark and a hatchet. Black eyes, sharp features, lips so thin they might as well not have existed. The story on board was that she'd taken the job to escape prosecution for killing an ex-husband. Holden liked her.

"Emergency signal," she said. "Picked it up two hours ago. The transponder verification just bounced back from *Callisto*. It's real."

"Ah," Holden said. And then: "Shit. Are we the closest?"

"Only ship in a few million clicks."

"Well. That figures," Holden said.

Becca turned her gaze to the captain. McDowell cracked his knuckles and stared at his display. The light from the screen gave him an odd greenish cast.

"It's next to a charted non-Belt asteroid," McDowell said.

"Really?" Holden said in disbelief. "Did they run into it? There's nothing else out here for millions of kilometers."

"Maybe they pulled over because someone had to go potty. All we have is that some knucklehead is out there, blasting an emergency signal, and we're the closest. Assuming..."

The law of the solar system was unequivocal. In an environment as hostile to life as space, the aid and goodwill of your fellow humans wasn't optional. The emergency signal, just by existing, obligated the nearest ship to stop and render aid—which didn't mean the law was universally followed.

The *Canterbury* was fully loaded. Well over a million tons of ice had been gently accelerated for the past month. Just like the little glacier that had crushed Paj's arm, it was going to be hard to slow down. The temptation to have an unexplained comm failure, erase the logs, and let the great god Darwin have his way was always there.

But if McDowell had really intended that, he wouldn't have called Holden up. Or made the suggestion where the crew could hear him. Holden understood the dance. The captain was going to be the one who would have blown it off except for Holden. The grunts would respect the captain for not wanting to cut into the ship's profit. They'd respect Holden for insisting that they follow the rule. No matter what happened, the captain and Holden would both be hated for what they were required by law and mere human decency to do.

"We have to stop," Holden said. Then, gamely: "There may be salvage."

McDowell tapped his screen. Ade's voice came from the console, as low and warm as if she'd been in the room.

"Captain?"

"I need numbers on stopping this crate," he said.

“Sir?”

“How hard is it going to be to put us alongside CA-2216862?”

“We’re stopping at an asteroid?”

“I’ll tell you when you’ve followed my order, Navigator Tukunbo.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. Holden heard a series of clicks. “If we flip the ship right now and burn like hell for most of two days, I can get us within fifty thousand kilometers, sir.”

“Can you define ‘burn like hell’?” McDowell said.

“We’ll need everyone in crash couches.”

“Of course we will,” McDowell sighed, and scratched his scruffy beard. “And shifting ice is only going to do a couple million bucks’ worth of banging up the hull, if we’re lucky. I’m getting old for this, Holden. I really am.”

“Yes, sir. You are. And I’ve always liked your chair,” Holden said. McDowell scowled and made an obscene gesture. Rebecca snorted in laughter. McDowell turned to her.

“Send a message to the beacon that we’re on our way. And let Ceres know we’re going to be late. Holden, where does the *Knight* stand?”

“No flying in atmosphere until we get some parts, but she’ll do fine for fifty thousand clicks in vacuum.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Naomi said it. That makes it true.”

McDowell rose, unfolding to almost two and a quarter meters and thinner than a teenager back on Earth. Between his age and never having lived in a gravity well, the coming burn was likely to be hell on the old man. Holden felt a pang of sympathy that he would never embarrass McDowell by expressing.

“Here’s the thing, Jim,” McDowell said, his voice quiet enough that only Holden could hear him. “We’re required to stop and make an attempt, but we don’t have to go out of our way, if you see what I mean.”

“We’ll already have stopped,” Holden said, and McDowell patted at the air with his wide, spidery hands. One of the many Belter gestures that had evolved to be visible when wearing an environment suit.

“I can’t avoid that,” he said. “But if you see anything out there that seems off, don’t play hero again. Just pack up the toys and come home.”

“And leave it for the next ship that comes through?”

“And keep yourself safe,” McDowell said. “Order. Understood?”

“Understood,” Holden said.

As the shipwide comm system clicked to life and McDowell began explaining the situation to the crew, Holden imagined he could hear a chorus of groans coming up through the decks. He went over to Rebecca.

“Okay,” he said, “what have we got on the broken ship?”

“Light freighter. Martian registry. Shows Eros as home port. Calls itself *Scopuli*...”

Chapter Two: Miller

Detective Miller sat back on the foam-core chair, smiling gentle encouragement while he scrambled to make sense of the girl's story.

"And then it was all pow! Room full up with bladeboys howling and humping shank," the girl said, waving a hand. "Look like a dance number, 'cept that Bomie's got this look he didn't know nothing never and ever amen. You know, que?"

Havelock, standing by the door, blinked twice. The squat man's face twitched with impatience. It was why Havelock was never going to make senior detective. And why he sucked at poker.

Miller was very good at poker.

"I totally," Miller said. His voice had taken on the twang of an inner level resident. He waved his hand in the same lazy arc the girl used. "Bomie, he didn't see. Forgotten arm."

"Forgotten fucking arm, yeah," the girl said as if Miller had spoken a line of gospel. Miller nodded, and the girl nodded back like they were two birds doing a mating dance.

The rent hole was three cream-and-black-fleck-painted rooms—bathroom, kitchen, living room. The struts of a pull-down sleeping loft in the living room had been broken and repaired so many times they didn't retract anymore. This near the center of Ceres' spin, that wasn't from gravity so much as mass in motion. The air smelled beery with old protein yeast and mushrooms. Local food, so whoever had bounced the girl hard enough to break her bed hadn't paid enough for dinner. Or maybe they did, and the girl had chosen to spend it on heroin or malta or MCK.

Her business, either way.

"Follow que?" Miller asked.

"Bomie vacuate like losing air," the girl said with a chuckle. "Bang-head hops, kennis tu?"

"Ken," Miller said.

"Now, all new bladeboys. Overhead. I'm out."

"And Bomie?"

The girl's eyes made a slow track up Miller, shoes to knees to porkpie hat. Miller chuckled. He gave the chair a light push, sloping up to his feet in the low gravity.

"He shows, and I asked, que si?" Miller said.

"Como no?" the girl said. *Why not?*

The tunnel outside was white where it wasn't grimy. Ten meters wide, and gently sloping up in both directions. The white LED lights didn't pretend to mimic sunlight. About half a kilometer down, someone had rammed into the wall so hard the native rock showed through, and it still hadn't been repaired. Maybe it wouldn't be. This was the deep dig, way up near the center of spin. Tourists never came here.

Havelock led the way to their cart, bouncing too high with every step. He didn't come up to the low gravity levels very often, and it made him awkward. Miller had lived on Ceres his whole life, and truth to tell, the Coriolis effect up this high could make him a little unsteady sometimes too.

"So," Havelock said as he punched in their destination code, "did you have fun?"

"Don't know what you mean," Miller said.

The electrical motors hummed to life, and the cart lurched forward into the tunnel, squishy foam tires faintly squeaking.

“Having your outworld conversation in front of the Earth guy?” Havelock said. “I couldn’t follow even half of that.”

“That wasn’t Belters keeping the Earth guy out,” Miller said. “That was poor folks keeping the educated guy out. And it was kind of fun, now you mention it.”

Havelock laughed. He could take being teased and keep on moving. It was what made him good at team sports: soccer, basketball, politics.

Miller wasn’t much good at those.

Ceres, the port city of the Belt and the outer planets, boasted two hundred fifty kilometers in diameter, tens of thousands of kilometers of tunnels in layer on layer on layer. Spinning it up to 0.3 g had taken the best minds at Tycho Manufacturing half a generation, and they were still pretty smug about it. Now Ceres had more than six million permanent residents, and as many as a thousand ships docking in any given day meant upping the population to as high as seven million.

Platinum, iron, and titanium from the Belt. Water from Saturn, vegetables and beef from the big mirror-fed greenhouses on Ganymede and Europa, organics from Earth and Mars. Power cells from Io, Helium-3 from the refineries on Rhea and Iapetus. A river of wealth and power unrivaled in human history came through Ceres. Where there was commerce on that level, there was also crime. Where there was crime, there were security forces to keep it in check. Men like Miller and Havelock, whose business it was to track the electric carts up the wide ramps, feel the false gravity of spin fall away beneath them, and ask low-rent glitz whores about what happened the night Bomie Chatterjee stopped collecting protection money for the Golden Bough Society.

The primary station house for Star Helix Security, police force and military garrison for the Ceres Station, was on the third level from the asteroid’s skin, two kilometers square and dug into the rock so high Miller could walk from his desk up five levels without ever leaving the offices. Havelock turned in the cart while Miller went to his cubicle, downloaded the recording of their interview with the girl, and reran it. He was halfway through when his partner lumbered up behind him.

“Learn anything?” Havelock asked.

“Not much,” Miller said. “Bomie got jumped by a bunch of unaffiliated local thugs. Sometimes a low-level guy like Bomie will hire people to pretend to attack him so he can heroically fight them off. Ups his reputation. That’s what she meant when she called it a dance number. The guys that went after him were that caliber, only instead of turning into a ninja badass, Bomie ran away and hasn’t come back.”

“And now?”

“And now nothing,” Miller said. “That’s what I don’t get. Someone took out a Golden Bough purse boy, and there’s no payback. I mean, okay, Bomie’s a bottom-feeder, but...”

“But once they start eating the little guys, there’s less money coming up to the big guys,” Havelock said. “So why hasn’t the Golden Bough meted out some gangster justice?”

“I don’t like this,” Miller said.

Havelock laughed. “Belters,” he said. “One thing goes weird and you think the whole ecosystem’s crashing. If the Golden Bough’s too weak to keep its claims, that’s a good thing. They’re the bad guys, remember?”

“Yeah, well,” Miller said. “Say what you will about organized crime, at least it’s organized.”

Havelock sat on the small plastic chair beside Miller’s desk and craned to watch the playback.

“Okay,” Havelock said. “What the hell is the ‘forgotten arm’?”

“Boxing term,” Miller said. “It’s the hit you didn’t see coming.”

The computer chimed and Captain Shaddid’s voice came from the speakers.

“Miller? Are you there?”

“Mmm,” Havelock said. “Bad omen.”

“What?” the captain asked, her voice sharp. She had never quite overcome her prejudice against Havelock’s inner planet origins. Miller held up a hand to silence his partner.

"Here, Captain. What can I do for you?"

"Meet me in my office, please."

"On my way," he said.

Miller stood, and Havelock slid into his chair. They didn't speak. Both of them knew that Captain Shaddid would have called them in together if she'd wanted Havelock to be there. Another reason the man would never make senior detective. Miller left him alone with the playback, trying to parse the fine points of class and station, origin and race. Lifetime's work, that.

Captain Shaddid's office was decorated in a soft, feminine style. Real cloth tapestries hung from the walls, and the scent of coffee and cinnamon came from an insert in her air filter that cost about a tenth of what the real foodstuffs would have. She wore her uniform casually, her hair down around her shoulders in violation of corporate regulations. If Miller had ever been called upon to describe her, the phrase *deceptive coloration* would have figured in. She nodded to a chair, and he sat.

"What have you found?" she asked, but her gaze was on the wall behind him. This wasn't a pop quiz; she was just making conversation.

"Golden Bough's looking the same as Sohiro's crew and the Loca Greiga. Still on station, but... distracted, I guess I'd call it. They're letting little things slide. Fewer thugs on the ground, less enforcement. I've got half a dozen mid-level guys who've gone dark."

He'd caught her attention.

"Killed?" she asked. "An OPA advance?"

An advance by the Outer Planets Alliance was the constant bogeyman of Ceres security. Living in the tradition of Al Capone and Hamas, the IRA and the Red Martials, the OPA was beloved by the people it helped and feared by the ones who got in its way. Part social movement, part wannabe nation, and part terrorist network, it totally lacked an institutional conscience. Captain Shaddid might not like Havelock because he was from down a gravity well, but she'd work with him. The OPA would have put him in an airlock. People like Miller would only rate getting a bullet in the skull, and a nice plastic one at that. Nothing that might get shrapnel in the ductwork.

"I don't think so," he said. "It doesn't smell like a war. It's... Honestly, sir, I don't know what the hell it is. The numbers are great. Protection's down, unlicensed gambling's down. Cooper and Hariri shut down the underage whorehouse up on six, and as far as anyone can tell, it hasn't started up again. There's a little more action by independents, but that aside, it's all looking great. It just smells funny."

She nodded, but her gaze was back on the wall. He'd lost her interest as quickly as he'd gotten it.

"Well, put it aside," she said. "I have something. New contract. Just you. Not Havelock."

Miller crossed his arms.

"New contract," he said slowly. "Meaning?"

"Meaning Star Helix Security has accepted a contract for services separate from the Ceres security assignment, and in my role as site manager for the corporation, I'm assigning you to it."

"I'm fired?" he said.

Captain Shaddid looked pained.

"It's additional duty," she said. "You'll still have the Ceres assignments you have now. It's just that, in addition... Look, Miller, I think this is as shitty as you do. I'm not pulling you off station. I'm not taking you off the main contract. This is a favor someone down on Earth is doing for a shareholder."

"We're doing favors for shareholders now?" Miller asked.

"You are, yes," Captain Shaddid said. The softness was gone; the conciliatory tone was gone. Her eyes were dark as wet stone.

"Right, then," Miller said. "I guess I am."

Captain Shaddid held up her hand terminal. Miller fumbled at his side, pulled out his own, and accepted the narrow-beam transfer. Whatever this was, Shaddid was keeping it off the common network. A new file tree, labeled JMAO, appeared on his readout.

"It's a little-lost-daughter case," Captain Shaddid said. "Ariadne and Jules-Pierre Mao." The names rang a bell. Miller pressed his fingertips onto the screen of his hand terminal. "Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile?" he asked. "The one."

Miller whistled low.

Maokwik might not have been one of the top ten corporations in the Belt, but it was certainly in the upper fifty. Originally, it had been a legal firm involved in the epic failure of the Venusian cloud cities. They'd used the money from that decades-long lawsuit to diversify and expand, mostly into interplanetary transport. Now the corporate station was independent, floating between the Belt and the inner planets with the regal majesty of an ocean liner on ancient seas. The simple fact that Miller knew that much about them meant they had enough money to buy and sell men like him on open exchange.

He'd just been bought.

"They're Luna-based," Captain Shaddid said. "All the rights and privileges of Earth citizenship. But they do a lot of shipping business out here."

"And they misplaced a daughter?"

"Black sheep," the captain said. "Went off to college, got involved with a group called the Far Horizons Foundation. Student activists."

"OPA front," Miller said.

"Associated," Shaddid corrected him. Miller let it pass, but a flicker of curiosity troubled him. He wondered which side Captain Shaddid would be on if the OPA attacked. "The family put it down to a phase. They've got two older children with controlling interest, so if Julie wanted to bounce around vacuum calling herself a freedom fighter, there was no real harm."

"But now they want her found," Miller said.

"They do."

"What changed?"

"They didn't see fit to share that information."

"Right."

"Last records show she was employed on Tycho Station but maintained an apartment here. I've found her partition on the network and locked it down. The password is in your files."

"Okay," Miller said. "What's my contract?"

"Find Julie Mao, detain her, and ship her home."

"A kidnap job, then," he said.

"Yes."

Miller stared down at his hand terminal, flicking the files open without particularly looking at them. A strange knot had tied itself in his guts. He'd been working Ceres security for thirty years, and he hadn't started with many illusions in place. The joke was that Ceres didn't have laws—it had police. His hands weren't any cleaner than Captain Shaddid's. Sometimes people fell out airlocks. Sometimes evidence vanished from the lockers. It wasn't so much that it was right or wrong as that it was justified. You spent your life in a stone bubble with your food, your water, your *air* shipped in from places so distant you could barely find them with a telescope, and a certain moral flexibility was necessary. But he'd never had to take a kidnap job before.

"Problem, Detective?" Captain Shaddid asked.

"No, sir," he said. "I'll take care of it."

"Don't spend too much time on it," she said.

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

Captain Shaddid's hard eyes softened, like she was putting on a mask. She smiled.

"Everything going well with your partner?"

"Havelock's all right," Miller said. "Having him around makes people like me better by contrast. That's nice."

Her smile's only change was to become half a degree more genuine. Nothing like a little shared racism to build ties with the boss. Miller nodded respectfully and headed out.



His hole was on the eighth level, off a residential tunnel a hundred meters wide with fifty meters of carefully cultivated green park running down the center. The main corridor's vaulted ceiling was lit by recessed lights and painted a blue that Havelock assured him matched the Earth's summer sky. Living on the surface of a planet, mass sucking at every bone and muscle, and nothing but gravity to keep your air close, seemed like a fast path to crazy. The blue was nice, though.

Some people followed Captain Shaddid's lead by perfuming their air. Not always with coffee and cinnamon scents, of course. Havelock's hole smelled of baking bread. Others opted for floral scents or semipheromones. Candace, Miller's ex-wife, had preferred something called EarthLily, which had always made him think of the waste recycling levels. These days, he left it at the vaguely astringent smell of the station itself. Recycled air that had passed through a million lungs. Water from the tap so clean it could be used for lab work, but it had been piss and shit and tears and blood and would be again. The circle of life on Ceres was so small you could see the curve. He liked it that way.

He poured a glass of moss whiskey, a native Ceres liquor made from engineered yeast, then took off his shoes and settled onto the foam bed. He could still see Candace's disapproving scowl and hear her sigh. He shrugged apology to her memory and turned back to work.

Juliette Andromeda Mao. He read through her work history, her academic records. Talented pinnacle pilot. There was a picture of her at eighteen in a tailored vac suit with the helmet off: pretty girl with a thin, lunar citizen's frame and long black hair. She was grinning like the universe had given her a kiss. The linked text said she'd won first place in something called the Parrish/Dorn 500K. He searched briefly. Some kind of race only really rich people could afford to fly in. Her pinnacle—the *Razorback*—had beaten the previous record and held it for two years.

Miller sipped his whiskey and wondered what had happened to the girl with enough wealth and power to own a private ship that would bring her here. It was a long way from competing in expensive space races to being hog-tied and sent home in a pod. Or maybe it wasn't.

"Poor little rich girl," Miller said to the screen. "Sucks to be you, I guess."

He closed the files and drank quietly and seriously, staring at the blank ceiling above him. The chair where Candace used to sit and ask him about his day stood empty, but he could see her there anyway. Now that she wasn't here to make him talk, it was easier to respect the impulse. She'd been lonely. He could see that now. In his imagination, she rolled her eyes.

An hour later, his blood warm with drink, he heated up a bowl of real rice and fake beans—yeast and fungus could mimic anything if you had enough whiskey first—opened the door of his hole, and ate dinner looking out at the traffic gently curving by. The second shift streamed into the tube stations and then out of them. The kids who lived two holes down—a girl of eight and her brother of four—met their father with hugs, squeals, mutual accusations, and tears. The blue ceiling glowed in its reflected light, unchanging, static, reassuring. A sparrow fluttered down the tunnel, hovering in a way that Havelock assured him they couldn't on Earth. Miller threw it a fake bean.

He tried to think about the Mao girl, but in truth he didn't much care. Something was happening to the organized crime families of Ceres, and it made him jumpy as hell.

This thing with Julie Mao? It was a sideshow.

Chapter Three: Holden

After nearly two full days in high gravity, Holden's knees and back and neck ached. And his head. Hell, his feet. He walked in the crew hatch of the *Knight* just as Naomi was climbing up the ladder from its cargo bay. She smiled and gave him a thumbs-up.

"The salvage mech is locked down," she said. "Reactor is warming up. We're ready to fly."

"Good."

"We got a pilot yet?" she asked.

"Alex Kamal is on the ready rotation today, so he's our man. I kind of wish Valka had been up. He's not the pilot Alex is, but he's quieter, and my head hurts."

"I like Alex. He's ebullient," Naomi said.

"I don't know what *ebullient* means, but if it means Alex, it makes me tired."

Holden started up the ladder to ops and the cockpit. In the shiny black surface of a deactivated wall panel, Naomi's reflection smirked at his back. He couldn't understand how Belters, thin as pencils, bounced back from high g so quickly. Decades of practice and selective breeding, he assumed.

In ops, Holden strapped into the command console, the crash couch material silently conforming to his body. At the half g Ade put them on for the final approach, the foam felt good. He let a small groan slip out. The switches, plastic and metal made to withstand hard g and hundreds of years, clicked sharply. The *Knight* responded with an array of glowing diagnostic indicators and a near-subliminal hum.

A few minutes later, Holden glanced over to see Alex Kamal's thinning black hair appear, followed by his round cheerful face, a deep brown that years of shipboard life couldn't pale. Martian-raised, Alex had a frame that was thicker than a Belter's. He was slender compared to Holden, and even so, his flight suit stretched tight against his spreading waistline. Alex had flown in the Martian navy, but he'd clearly given up on the military-style fitness routine.

"Howdy, XO," he drawled. The old west affectation common to everyone from the Mariner Valley annoyed Holden. There hadn't been a cowboy on Earth in a hundred years, and Mars didn't have a blade of grass that wasn't under a dome, or a horse that wasn't in a zoo. Mariner Valley had been settled by East Indians, Chinese, and a small contingent of Texans. Apparently, the drawl was viral. They all had it now. "How's the old warhorse today?"

"Smooth so far. We need a flight plan. Ade will be bringing us to relative stop in"—he checked the time readout—"forty, so work fast. I want to get out, get it done, and get the *Cant* back on course to Ceres before she starts rusting."

"Roger that," Alex said, climbing up to the *Knight*'s cockpit.

Holden's headset clicked; then Naomi's voice said, "Amos and Shed are aboard. We're all ready down here."

"Thanks. Just waiting on flight numbers from Alex and we'll be ready to go."

The crew was the minimum necessary: Holden as command, Alex to get them there and back, Shed in case there were survivors to treat, Naomi and Amos for salvage if there weren't.

It wasn't long before Alex called down, "Okay, Boss. It'll be about a four-hour trip flyin' teakettle. Total mass use at about thirty percent, but we've got a full tank. Total mission time: eleven

hours.”

“Copy that. Thanks, Alex,” Holden said.

Flying teakettle was naval slang for flying on the maneuvering thrusters that used superheated steam for reaction mass. The *Knight*’s fusion torch would be dangerous to use this close to the *Canterbury* and wasteful on such a short trip. Torches were pre-Epstein fusion drives and far less efficient.

“Calling for permission to leave the barn,” Holden said, and clicked from internal comm to the link with the *Canterbury*’s bridge. “Holden here. *Knight* is ready to fly.”

“Okay, Jim, go ahead,” McDowell said. “Ade’s bringing her to a stop now. You kids be careful out there. That shuttle is expensive and I’ve always sort of had a thing for Naomi.”

“Roger that, Captain,” Holden said. Back on the internal comm, he buzzed Alex. “Go ahead and take us out.”

Holden leaned back in his chair and listened to the creaks of the *Canterbury*’s final maneuvers, the steel and ceramics as loud and ominous as the wood planks of a sailing ship. Or an Earther’s joints after high g. For a moment, Holden felt sympathy for the ship.

They weren’t really stopping, of course. Nothing in space ever actually stopped; it only came into a matching orbit with some other object. They were now following CA-2216862 on its merry millennium-long trip around the sun.

Ade sent them the green light, and Holden emptied out the hangar bay air and popped the doors. Alex took them out of the dock on white cones of superheated steam.

They went to find the *Scopuli*.



CA-2216862 was a rock a half kilometer across that had wandered away from the Belt and been yanked around by Jupiter’s enormous gravity. It had eventually found its own slow orbit around the sun in the vast expanse between Jupiter and the Belt, territory empty even for space.

The sight of the *Scopuli* resting gently against the asteroid’s side, held in place by the rock’s tiny gravity, gave Holden a chill. Even if it was flying blind, every instrument dead, its odds of hitting such an object by chance were infinitesimally low. It was a half-kilometer-wide roadblock on a highway millions of kilometers in diameter. It hadn’t arrived there by accident. He scratched the hairs standing up on the back of his neck.

“Alex, hold us at two klicks out,” Holden said. “Naomi, what can you tell me about that ship?”

“Hull configuration matches the registry information. It’s definitely the *Scopuli*. She’s not radiating in the electromagnetic or infrared. Just that little distress beacon. Looks like the reactor’s shut down. Must have been manual and not damage, because we aren’t getting any radiation leakage either,” Naomi said.

Holden looked at the pictures they were getting from the *Knight*’s scopes, as well as the image the *Knight* created by bouncing a laser off the *Scopuli*’s hull. “What about that thing that looks like a hole in the side?”

“Uh,” Naomi said. “Ladar says it’s a hole in the side.”

Holden frowned. “Okay, let’s stay here for a minute and recheck the neighborhood. Anything on the scope, Naomi?”

“Nope. And the big array on the *Cant* can spot a kid throwing rocks on Luna. Becca says there’s nobody within twenty million klicks right now,” Naomi said.

Holden tapped out a complicated rhythm on the arm of his chair and drifted up in the straps. He felt hot, and reached over to aim the closest air-circulation nozzle at his face. His scalp tingled with evaporating sweat.

If you see anything out there that seems off, don’t play hero again. Just pack up the toys and come home. Those were his orders. He looked at the image of the *Scopuli*, the hole in its side.

“Okay,” he said. “Alex, take us in to a quarter klick, and hold station there. We’ll ride to the surface on the mech. Oh, and keep the torch warmed up and ready. If something nasty is hiding in that ship, I want to be able to run away as fast as I can and melt anything behind us into slag while I do it. Roger?”

“Got it, Boss. *Knight*’s in run-like-a-bunny mode till you say otherwise,” Alex replied.

Holden looked over the command console one more time, searching for the flashing red warning light that would give him permission to go back to the *Cant*. Everything remained a soft green. He popped open his buckles and shoved himself out of the chair. A push on the wall with one foot sent him over to the ladder, and he descended headfirst with gentle touches on the rungs.

In the crew area, Naomi, Amos, and Shed were still strapped into their crash couches. Holden caught the ladder and swung around so that his crew didn’t look upside down. They started undoing their restraints.

“Okay, here’s the situation. The *Scopuli* got holed, and someone left it floating next to this rock. No one is on the scopes, so maybe that means it happened a while ago and they left. Naomi, you’ll be driving the salvage mech, and the three of us will tether on and catch a ride down to the wreck. Shed, you stay with the mech unless we find an injured person, which seems unlikely. Amos and I will go into the ship through that hole and poke around. If we find anything even remotely booby trap-like, we will come back to the mech, Naomi will fly us back to the *Knight*, and we will run away. Any questions?”

Amos raised one beefy hand. “Maybe we oughta be armed, XO. Case there’s piratey types still lurking aboard.”

Holden laughed. “Well, if there are, then their ride left without them. But if it makes you feel more comfortable, go ahead and bring a gun.”

If the big, burly Earther mechanic was carrying a gun, it would make *him* feel better too, but better not to say it. Let them think the guy in charge felt confident.

Holden used his officer’s key to open the weapon locker, and Amos took a high-caliber automatic that fired self-propelled rounds, recoilless and designed for use in zero g. Old-fashioned slug throwers were more reliable, but in null gravity they were also maneuvering thrusters. A traditional handgun would impart enough thrust to achieve escape velocity from a rock the size of CA-2216862.

The crew drifted down to the cargo bay, where the egg-shaped, spider-legged open cage of Naomi’s mech waited. Each of the four legs had a manipulator claw at the end and a variety of cutting and welding tools built into it. The back pair could grip on to a ship’s hull or other structure for leverage, and the front two could be used to make repairs or chop salvage into portable pieces.

“Hats on,” Holden said, and the crew helped each other put on and secure their helmets. Everyone checked their own suit and then someone else’s. When the cargo doors opened, it would be too late to make sure they were buttoned up right.

While Naomi climbed into her mech, Amos, Holden, and Shed secured their suit tethers to the cockpit’s metal cage. Naomi checked the mech and then hit the switch to cycle the cargo bay’s atmosphere and open the doors. Sound inside Holden’s suit faded to just the hiss of air and the faint static of the radio. The air had a slight medicine smell.

Naomi went first, taking the mech down toward the asteroid’s surface on small jets of compressed nitrogen, the crew trailing her on three-meter-long tethers. As they flew, Holden looked back up at the *Knight*: a blocky gray wedge with a drive cone stuck on the wider end. Like everything else humans built for space travel, it was designed to be efficient, not pretty. That always made Holden a little sad. There should be room for aesthetics, even out here.

The *Knight* seemed to drift away from him, getting smaller and smaller, while he didn’t move. The illusion vanished when he turned around to look at the asteroid and felt they were hurtling toward it. He opened a channel to Naomi, but she was humming to herself as she flew, which meant she, at least, wasn’t worried. He didn’t say anything, but he left the channel open to listen to her hum.

Up close, the *Scopuli* didn't look all that bad. Other than the gaping hole in its flank, it didn't have any damage. It clearly hadn't hit the asteroid; it had just been left close enough that the microgravity had slowly reeled it in. As they approached, he snapped pictures with his suit helmet and transmitted them to the *Canterbury*.

Naomi brought them to a stop, hovering three meters above the hole in the *Scopuli*'s side. Amos whistled across the general suit channel.

"That wasn't a torpedo did this, XO. This was a breaching charge. See how the metal's bent in all around the edges? That's shaped charges stuck right on her hull," Amos said.

In addition to being a fine mechanic, Amos was the one who used explosive surgery to crack open the icebergs floating around Saturn and turn them into more manageable chunks. Another reason to have him on the *Knight*.

"So," Holden said, "our friends here on the *Scopuli* stop, let someone climb onto their hull and plant a breaching charge, and then crack them open and let all the air out. Does that make sense to anyone?"

"Nope," Naomi said. "It doesn't. Still want to go inside?"

If you see anything out there that seems off, don't play hero again. Just pack up the toys and come home.

But what could he have expected? Of course the *Scopuli* wasn't up and running. Of course something had gone wrong. *Off* would have been not seeing anything strange.

"Amos," Holden said, "keep that gun out, just in case. Naomi, can you make us a bigger hole? And be careful. If anything looks wrong, back us off."

Naomi brought the mech in closer, nitrogen blasts no more than a white breath on a cold night. The mech's welding torch blazed to life, red hot, then white, then blue. In silence, the mech's arms unfurled—an insectile movement—and Naomi started cutting. Holden and Amos dropped to the ship's surface, clamping on with magnetic boots. He could feel the vibration in his feet when Naomi pulled a length of hull free. A moment later the torch turned off, and Naomi blasted the fresh edges of the hole with the mech's fire-suppression gear to cool them. Holden gave Amos the thumbs-up and dropped himself very slowly into the *Scopuli*.

The breaching charge had been placed almost exactly amidships, blasting a hole into the galley. When Holden landed and his boots grabbed on to the galley wall, he could feel flash-frozen bits of food crunch under them. There were no bodies in sight.

"Come on in, Amos. No crew visible yet," Holden called over the suit comm.

He moved off to the side and a moment later Amos dropped in, gun clutched in his right hand and a powerful light in his left. The white beam played across the walls of the destroyed galley.

"Which way first, XO?" Amos asked.

Holden tapped on his thigh with one hand and thought. "Engineering. I want to know why the reactor's off-line."

They took the crew ladder, climbing along it toward the aft of the ship. All the pressure doors between decks were open, which was a bad sign. They should all be closed by default, and certainly if the atmosphere-loss alarm had sounded. If they were open, that meant there were no decks with atmosphere left in the ship. Which meant no survivors. Not a surprise, but it still felt like a defeat. They passed through the small ship quickly, pausing in the machine shop. Expensive engine parts and tools were still in place.

"Guess it wasn't robbery," Amos said.

Holden didn't say, *Then what was it?* but the question hung between them anyway.

The engine room was neat as a pin, cold, and dead. Holden waited while Amos looked it over, spending at least ten minutes just floating around the reactor.

"Someone went through the shutdown procedures," Amos said. "The reactor wasn't killed by the blast, it was turned off afterward. No damage that I can see. Don't make sense. If everyone is dead from the attack, who shut it down? And if it's pirates, why not take the ship? She'll still fly."

“And before they turned off the power, they went through and opened every interior pressure door on the ship. Emptied out the air. I guess they wanted to make sure no one was hiding,” Holden said. “Okay, let’s head back up to ops and see if we can crack the computer core. Maybe it can tell us what happened.”

They floated back toward the bow along the crew ladder, and up to the ops deck. It too was undamaged and empty. The lack of bodies was starting to bother Holden more than the presence of them would have. He floated over to the main computer console and hit a few keys to see if it might still be running on backup power. It wasn’t.

“Amos, start cutting the core out. We’ll take it with us. I’m going to check comms, see if I can find that beacon.”

Amos moved to the computer and started taking out tools and sticking them to the bulkhead next to it. He began a profanity-laced mumble as he worked. It wasn’t nearly as charming as Naomi’s humming, so Holden turned off his link to Amos while he moved to the communications console. It was as dead as the rest of the ship. He found the ship’s beacon.

No one had activated it. Something else had called them. Holden moved back, frowning.

He looked through the space, searching for something out of place. There, on the deck beneath the comm operator’s console. A small black box not connected to anything else.

His heart took a long pause between beats. He called out to Amos, “Does that look like a bomb to you?”

Amos ignored him. Holden turned his radio link back on.

“Amos, does that look like a bomb to you?” He pointed at the box on the deck.

Amos left his work on the computer and floated over to look, then, in a move that made Holden’s throat close, grabbed the box off the deck and held it up.

“Nope. It’s a transmitter. See?” He held it up in front of Holden’s helmet. “It’s just got a battery taped to it. What’s it doing there?”

“It’s the beacon we followed. Jesus. The ship’s beacon never even turned on. Someone made a fake one out of that transmitter and hooked it up to a battery,” Holden said quietly, still fighting his panic.

“Why would they do that, XO? That don’t make no kinda sense.”

“It would if there’s something about this transmitter that’s different from standard,” Holden said.

“Like?”

“Like if it had a second signal triggered to go when someone found it,” Holden said, then switched to the general suit channel. “Okay, boys and girls, we’ve found something weird, and we’re out of here. Everyone back to the *Knight*, and be very careful when you—”

His radio crackled to life on the outside channel, McDowell’s voice filling his helmet. “Jim? We may have a problem out here.”

Chapter Four: Miller

Miller was halfway through his evening meal when the system in his hole chirped. He glanced at the sending code. The Blue Frog. It was a port bar catering to the constant extra million noncitizens of Ceres that advertised itself as a near-exact replica of a famous Earth bar in Mumbai, only with licensed prostitutes and legal drugs. Miller took another forkful of fungal beans and vat-grown rice and debated whether to accept connection.

Should have seen this one coming, he thought.

“What?” he asked.

A screen popped open. Hasini, the assistant manager, was a dark-skinned man with eyes the color of ice. The near smirk on his face was the result of nerve damage. Miller had done him a favor when Hasini had had the poor judgment to take pity on an unlicensed prostitute. Since then, security detective and portside barman had traded favors. The unofficial, gray economics of civilization.

“Your partner’s here again,” Hasini said over the pulse and wail of bhangra music. “I think he’s having a bad night. Should I keep serving him?”

“Yeah,” Miller said. “Keep him happy for... Give me twenty minutes.”

“He doesn’t want to be kept happy. He very much wants a reason to get unhappy.”

“Make it hard to find. I’ll be there.”

Hasini nodded, smirking his damaged smirk, and dropped the connection. Miller looked at his half-eaten meal, sighed, and shoved the remains into the recycling bin. He pulled on a clean shirt, then hesitated. The Blue Frog was always warmer than he liked, and he hated wearing a jacket. Instead, he put a compact plastic pistol in his ankle holster. Not as fast a draw, but if it got that far, he was screwed anyway.

Ceres at night was indistinguishable from Ceres in the daytime. There had been a move, back when the station first opened, to dim and brighten the lights through the traditional human twenty-four-hour cycle, mimicking the spin of Earth. The affectation had lasted four months before the council killed it.

On duty, Miller would have taken an electric cart down the wide tunnels and down to the port levels. He was tempted even though he was off duty, but a deep-seated superstition stopped him. If he took the cart, he was going as a cop, and the tubes ran just fine. Miller walked to the nearest station, checked the status, and sat on the low stone bench. A man about Miller’s age and a girl no more than three came in a minute later and sat across from him. The girl’s talk was as fast and meaningless as a leaking seal, and her father responded with grunts and nods at more or less appropriate moments.

Miller and the new man nodded to each other. The girl tugged at her father’s sleeve, demanding his attention. Miller looked at her—dark eyes, pale hair, smooth skin. She was already too tall to be mistaken for an Earth child, her limbs longer and thinner. Her skin had the pink flush of Belter babies, which came with the pharmaceutical cocktail that assured that their muscles and bones would grow strong. Miller saw the father notice his attention. Miller smiled and nodded toward the kid.

“How old?” he asked.

“Two and a half,” the father said.

“Good age.”

The father shrugged, but he smiled.

“Kids?” he asked.

“No,” Miller said. “But I’ve got a divorce about that old.”

They chuckled together as if it was funny. In his imagination, Candace crossed her arms and looked away. The soft oil-and-ozone-scented breeze announced the tube’s arrival. Miller let father and child go first, then chose a different compartment.

The tube cars were round, built to fit into the evacuated passages. There were no windows. The only view would have been stone humming by three centimeters from the car. Instead, broad screens advertised entertainment feeds or commented on inner planet political scandals or offered the chance to gamble away a week’s pay at casinos so wonderful that your life would seem richer for the experience. Miller let the bright, empty colors dance and ignored their content. Mentally, he was holding up his problem, turning it one way and then the other, not even looking for an answer.

It was a simple mental exercise. Look at the facts without judgment: Havelock was an Earther. Havelock was in a portside bar again and looking for a fight. Havelock was his partner. Statement after statement, fact after fact, facet after facet. He didn’t try to put them in order or make some kind of narrative out of them; that would all come later. Now it was enough to wash the day’s cases out of his head and get ready for the immediate situation. By the time the tube reached his station, he felt centered. Like he was walking on his whole foot, was how he’d described it, back when he had anyone to describe it to.

The Blue Frog was crowded, the barn-heat of bodies adding to the fake-Mumbai temperature and artificial air pollution. Lights glittered and flashed in seizure-inducing display. Tables curved and undulated, the backlight making them seem darker than merely black. Music moved through the air with a physical presence, each beat a little concussion. Hasini, standing in a clot of steroid-enhanced bouncers and underdressed serving girls, caught Miller’s eyes and nodded toward the back. Miller didn’t acknowledge anything; he just turned and made his way through the crowd.

Port bars were always volatile. Miller was careful not to bump into anyone if he could help it. When he had to choose, he’d run into Belters before inner planet types, women before men. His face was a constant mild apology.

Havelock was sitting alone, with one thick hand wrapping a fluted glass. When Miller sat down beside him, Havelock turned toward him, ready to take offense, nostrils flared and eyes wide. Then the surprise registered. Then something like sullen shame.

“Miller,” he said. In the tunnels outside, he would have been shouting. Here, it was barely enough to carry as far as Miller’s chair. “What’re you doing here?”

“Nothing much to do at the hole,” Miller said. “Thought I’d come pick a fight.”

“Good night for it,” Havelock said.

It was true. Even in the bars that catered to inner planet types, the mix was rarely better than one Earther or Martian in ten. Squinting out at the crowd, Miller saw that the short, stocky men and women were nearer a third.

“Ship come in?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“EMCN?” he asked. The Earth-Mars Coalition Navy often passed through Ceres on its way to Saturn, Jupiter, and the stations of the Belt, but Miller hadn’t been paying enough attention to the relative position of the planets to know where the orbits all stood. Havelock shook his head.

“Corporate security rotating out of Eros,” he said. “Protogen, I think.” A serving girl appeared at Miller’s side, tattoos gliding over her skin, her teeth glowing in the black light. Miller took the drink she offered him, though he hadn’t ordered. Soda water.

“You know,” Miller said, leaning close enough to Havelock that even his normal conversational voice would reach the man, “it doesn’t matter how many of their asses you kick. Shaddid’s still not going to like you.”

Havelock snapped to stare at Miller, the anger in his eyes barely covering the shame and hurt.

“It’s true,” Miller said.

Havelock rose lurching to his feet and headed for the door. He was trying to stomp, but in the Ceres spin gravity and his inebriated state, he misjudged. It looked like he was hopping. Miller, glass in hand, slid through the crowd in Havelock's wake, calming with a smile and a shrug the affronted faces that his partner left behind him.

The common tunnels down near the port had a layer of grime and grease to them that air scrubbers and astringent cleaners could never quite master. Havelock walked out, shoulders hunched, mouth tight, rage radiating from him like heat. But the doors of the Blue Frog closed behind them, the seal cutting off the music like someone hitting mute. The worst of the danger had passed.

"I'm not drunk," Havelock said, his voice too loud.

"Didn't say you were."

"And you," Havelock said, turning and stabbing an accusing finger at Miller's chest. "You are not my nanny."

"Also true."

They walked together for maybe a quarter of a kilometer. The bright LED signs beckoned. Brothels and shooting galleries, coffee bars and poetry clubs, casinos and show fights. The air smelled like piss and old food. Havelock began to slow, his shoulders coming down from around his ears.

"I worked homicide in Terrytown," Havelock said. "I did three years vice at L-5. Do you have any idea what that was like? They were shipping kids out of there, and I'm one of three guys that stopped it. I'm a good cop."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm damn good."

"You are."

They walked past a noodle bar. A coffin hotel. A public terminal, its displays running a free newsfeed: COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS PLAGUE PHOEBE SCIENCE STATION. NEW ANDREAS K GAME NETS 6 BILLION DOLLARS IN 4 HOURS. NO DEAL IN MARS, BELT TITANIUM CONTRACT. The screens glowed in Havelock's eyes, but he was staring past them.

"I'm a damn good cop," he said again. Then, a moment later: "So what the hell?"

"It's not about you," Miller said. "People look at you, they don't see Dmitri Havelock, good cop. They see Earth."

"That's crap. I was eight years in the orbitals and on Mars before I ever shipped out here. I worked on Earth maybe six months total."

"Earth. Mars. They're not that different," Miller said.

"Try telling that to a Martian," Havelock said with a bitter laugh. "They'll kick your ass for you."

"I didn't mean... Look, I'm sure there are all kinds of differences. Earth hates Mars for having a better fleet. Mars hates Earth for having a bigger one. Maybe soccer's better in full g; maybe it's worse. I don't know. I'm just saying anyone this far out from the sun? They don't care. From this distance, you can cover Earth and Mars with one thumb. And..."

"And I don't belong," Havelock said.

The door of the noodle bar behind them opened and four Belters in gray-green uniforms came out. One of them wore the split circle of the OPA on his sleeve. Miller tensed, but the Belters didn't come toward them, and Havelock didn't notice them. Near miss.

"I knew," Havelock said. "When I took the Star Helix contract, I knew I'd have to work to fit in. I thought it'd be the same as anywhere, you know? You go, you get your chops busted for a while. Then, when they see you can take it, they treat you like one of the team. It's not like that here."

"It's not," Miller said.

Havelock shook his head, spat, and stared at the fluted glass in his hand.

"I think we just stole some glasses from the Blue Frog," Havelock said.

"We're also in a public corridor with unsealed alcohol," Miller said. "Well, you are, anyway. Mine's soda water."

Havelock chuckled, but there was despair in the sound. When Havelock spoke again, his voice was only rueful.

"You think I'm coming down here, picking fights with people from the inner planets so that Shaddid and Ramachandra and all the rest of them will think better of me."

"It occurred to me."

"You're wrong," Havelock said.

"Okay," Miller said. He knew he wasn't.

Havelock raised his fluted glass. "Take these back?" he asked.

"How about Distinguished Hyacinth?" Miller countered. "I'll buy."

The Distinguished Hyacinth Lounge was up three levels, far enough that foot traffic from the port levels was minimal. And it was a cop bar. Mostly Star Helix Security, but some of the minor corporate forces—Protogen, Pinkwater, Al Abbiq—hung out there too. Miller was more than half certain that his partner's latest breakdown had been averted, but if he was wrong, better to keep it in the family.

The décor was pure Belt—old-style ships' folding tables and chairs set into the wall and ceiling as if the gravity might shut off at any moment. Snake plant and devil's ivy—staples of first-generation air recycling—decorated the wall and freestanding columns. The music was soft enough to talk over, loud enough to keep private conversations private. The first owner, Javier Liu, was a structural engineer from Tycho who'd come out during the big spin and liked Ceres enough to stay. His grandchildren ran it now. Javier the Third was standing behind the bar, talking with half of the vice and exploitation team. Miller led the way to a back table, nodding to the men and women he knew as he passed. While he'd been careful and diplomatic at the Blue Frog, he chose a bluff masculinity here. It was just as much a pose.

"So," Havelock said as Javier's daughter Kate—a fourth generation for the same bar—left the table, Blue Frog glasses on her tray, "what is this supersecret private investigation Shaddid put you on? Or is the lowly Earther not supposed to know?"

"Is that what got to you?" Miller asked. "It's nothing. Some shareholders misplaced their daughter and want me to track her down, ship her home. It's a bullshit case."

"Sounds more like their backyard," Havelock said, nodding toward the V and E crowd.

"Kid's not a minor," Miller said. "It's a kidnap job."

"And you're good with that?"

Miller sat back. The ivy above them waved. Havelock waited, and Miller had the uncomfortable sense that a table had just been turned.

"It's my job," Miller said.

"Yeah, but we're talking about an adult here, right? It's not like she couldn't go back home if she wanted to be there. But instead her parents get security to take her home whether she wants to go or not. That's not law enforcement anymore. It's not even station security. It's just dysfunctional families playing power games."

Miller remembered the thin girl beside her racing pinnacle. Her broad smile.

"I told you it was a bullshit case," Miller said.

Kate Liu returned to the table with a local beer and a glass of whiskey on her tray. Miller was glad for the distraction. The beer was his. Light and rich and just the faintest bit bitter. An ecology based on yeasts and fermentation meant subtle brews.

Havelock was nursing his whiskey. Miller took it as a sign that he was giving up on his bender. Nothing like being around the boys from the office to take the charm out of losing control.

"Hey, Miller! Havelock!" a familiar voice said. Yevgeny Cobb from homicide. Miller waved him over, and the conversation turned to homicide's bragging about the resolution of a particularly ugly

case. Three months' work figuring out where the toxins came from ending with the corpse's wife awarded the full insurance settlement and a gray-market whore deported back to Eros.

By the end of the night, Havelock was laughing and trading jokes along with the rest of them. If there was occasionally a narrowed glance or a subtle dig, he took it in stride.

Miller was on his way up to the bar for another round when his terminal chimed. And then, slowly throughout the bar, fifty other chimes sounded. Miller felt his belly knot as he and every other security agent in the place pulled out their terminals.

Captain Shaddid was on the broadcast screen. Her eyes were bleary and filled with banked rage; she was the very picture of a woman of power wakened early from sleep.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said. "Whatever you're doing, drop it and go to your stations for emergency orders. We have a situation.

"Ten minutes ago, an unencrypted, signed message came in from the rough direction of Saturn. We haven't confirmed it as true, but the signature matches the keys on record. I've put a hold on it, but we can assume some asshole's going to put it on the network, and the shit should hit the fan about five minutes after that. If you're in earshot of a civilian, turn off now. For the rest of you, here's what we're up against."

Shaddid moved to one side, tapping her system interface. The screen went black. A moment later a man's face and shoulders appeared. He was in an orange vacuum suit with the helmet off. An Earther, maybe in his early thirties. Pale skin, blue eyes, dark short-cropped hair. Even before the man opened his mouth, Miller saw the signs of shock and rage in his eyes and the way he held his head forward.

"My name," the man said, "is James Holden."

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Chapter Five: Holden

Ten minutes at two g, and Holden's head was already starting to ache. But McDowell had called them home at all haste. The *Canterbury* was warming up its massive drive. Holden didn't want to miss his ride.



"Jim? We may have a problem out here."

"Talk to me."

"Becca found something, and it is sufficiently weird to make my balls creep up. We're getting the hell out of here."



"Alex, how long?" Holden asked for the third time in ten minutes.

"We're over an hour out. Want to go on the juice?" Alex said.

Going on the juice was pilot-speak for a high-g burn that would knock an unmedicated human unconscious. *The juice* was the cocktail of drugs the pilot's chair would inject into him to keep him conscious, alert, and hopefully stroke-free when his body weighed five hundred kilos. Holden had used the juice on multiple occasions in the navy, and coming down afterward was unpleasant.

"Not unless we have to," he said.



"What kind of weird?"

"Becca, link him up. Jim, I want you seeing what we're seeing."



Holden tongued a painkiller tab from his suit's helmet and reran Becca's sensor feed for the fifth time. The spot in space lay about two hundred thousand kilometers from the *Canterbury*. As the *Cant* had scanned it, the readout showed a fluctuation, the gray-black false color gradually developing a warm border. It was a small temperature climb, less than two degrees. Holden was amazed Becca had even spotted it. He reminded himself to give her a glowing review the next time she was up for promotion.



"Where did that come from?" Holden asked.

"No idea. It's just a spot faintly warmer than the background," Becca said. "I'd say it was a cloud of gas, because we get no radar return from it, but there aren't supposed to be any gas clouds out here. I mean, where would it come from?"

"Jim, any chance the Scopuli killed the ship that killed it? Could it be a vapor cloud from a destroyed ship?" McDowell asked.

"I don't think so, sir. The Scopuli is totally unarmed. The hole in her side came from breaching charges, not torpedo fire, so I don't think they even fought back. It might be where the Scopuli vented, but..."

"Or maybe not. Come back to the barn, Jim. Do it now."



"Naomi, what slowly gets hotter that gives no radar or ladar return when you scan it? Wild-ass guess here," Holden said.

"Hmmm..." Naomi said, giving herself time to think. "Anything that was absorbing the energy from the sensor package wouldn't give a return. But it might get hotter when it shed the absorbed energy."

The infrared monitor on the sensor console next to Holden's chair flared like the sun. Alex swore loudly over the general comm.

"Are you seein' that?" he said.

Holden ignored him and opened a channel to McDowell.

"Captain, we just got a massive IR spike," Holden said.

For long seconds, there was no reply. When McDowell came on the channel, his voice was tight. Holden had never heard the old man sound afraid before.

"Jim, a ship just appeared in that warm spot. It's radiating heat like a bastard," McDowell said. "Where the hell did that thing come from?"

Holden started to answer but then heard Becca's voice coming faintly through the captain's headset. "No idea, sir. But it's smaller than its heat signature. Radar shows frigate-sized," she said.

"With what?" McDowell said. "Invisibility? Magical wormhole teleportation?"

"Sir," Holden said, "Naomi was speculating that the heat we picked up might have come from energy-absorbing materials. Stealth materials. Which means that ship was hiding on purpose. Which means its intentions are not good."

As if in answer, six new objects appeared on his radar, glowing yellow icons appearing and immediately shifting to orange as the system marked their acceleration. On the *Canterbury*, Becca yelled out, "Fast movers! We have six new high-speed contacts on a collision course!"

"Jesus H. Christ on a pogo stick, did that ship just fire a spread of torpedoes at us?" McDowell said. "They're trying to slap us down?"

"Yes, sir," Becca said.

"Time to contact."

"Just under eight minutes, sir," she replied.

McDowell cursed under his breath.

"We've got pirates, Jim."

"What do you need from us?" Holden said, trying to sound calm and professional.

"I need you to get off the radio and let my crew work. You're an hour out at best. The torpedoes are eight minutes. McDowell out," the captain said, his comm clicking off and leaving Holden listening to the faint hiss of static.

The general comm exploded with voices, Alex demanding to go on the juice and race the torpedoes to the *Cant*, Naomi chattering about missile-jamming strategies, Amos cursing at the stealth ship and questioning the parenting of its crew. Shed was the only quiet one.

"Everyone, shut up!" Holden yelled into his headset. The ship fell into shocked silence. "Alex, plot the fastest course to the *Cant* that won't kill us. Let me know when you have it. Naomi, set up a three-way channel with Becca, you, and me. We'll help however we can. Amos, keep cussing but turn your mic off."

He waited. The clock ticked toward impact.

"Link is up," Naomi said. Holden could hear two distinct sets of background noise over the comm channel.

"Becca, this is Jim. I've got Naomi on this channel too. Tell us what we can do to help. Naomi was talking about jamming techniques?"

"I'm doing everything I know to do," Becca said, her voice astonishingly calm. "They're painting us with a targeting laser. I'm broadcasting garbage to scramble it, but they've got really, really good shit. If we were any closer, that targeting laser would be burning a hole in our hull."

"What about physical chaff?" Naomi asked. "Can you drop snow?"

While Naomi and Becca talked, Jim opened a private channel to Ade. "Hey, this is Jim. I have Alex working on a fast-burn solution so we can get there before..."

"Before the missiles turn us into a flying brick? Good idea. Taken by pirates isn't something you want to miss," Ade said. He could hear the fear behind the mocking tone.

"Ade, please, I want to say something—"

"Jim, what do you think?" Naomi said on the other channel.

Holden cursed. To cover, he said, "Uh, about which thing?"

"Using the *Knight* to try and draw those missiles," Naomi said.

"Can we do that?" he asked.

"Maybe. Were you listening at all?"

"Ah... something happened here, drew my attention for a minute. Tell me again," Holden said.

"We try to match the frequency of the light scatter coming off the *Cant* and broadcast it with our comm array. Maybe the torpedoes will think we're the target instead," Naomi said like she was speaking to a child.

"And then they come blow us up?"

"I'm thinking we run away while pulling the torpedoes toward us. Then, when we get them far enough past the *Cant*, we kill the comm array and try to hide behind the asteroid," Naomi said.

"Won't work," Holden said with a sigh. "They follow the targeting laser's scatter for general guidance, but they also take telescope shots of the target on acquisition. They'll take one look at us and know we aren't their target."

"Isn't it worth a shot?"

"Even if we manage it, torpedoes designed to disable the *Cant* would make us into a greasy stretch of vacuum."

"All right," Naomi said. "What else have we got?"

"Nothing. Very smart boys in the naval labs have already thought of everything we are going to think of in the next eight minutes," Holden said. Saying it out loud meant admitting it to himself.

"Then what are we doing here, Jim?" Naomi asked.

"Seven minutes," Becca said, her voice still eerily calm.

"Let's get there. Maybe we can get some people off the ship after it's hit. Help with damage control," Holden said. "Alex, got that plot figured out?"

"Roger that, XO. Bleeding-g burn-and-flip laid in. Angled approach course so our torch won't burn a hole in the *Cant*. Time to rock and roll?" Alex replied.

"Yeah. Naomi, get your people strapped in for high g," Holden said, then opened up a channel to Captain McDowell. "Captain, we're coming in hot. Try to survive, and we'll have the *Knight* on station for pickup or to help with damage control."

"Roger," McDowell said, and killed the line.

Holden opened up his channel to Ade again. “Ade, we’re going to burn hard, so I won’t be talking, but leave this channel open for me, okay? Tell me what’s happening. Hell, hum. Humming is nice. I just really need to hear you’re all right.”

“Okay, Jim,” Ade said. She didn’t hum but she left the channel open. He could hear her breathing.

Alex began the countdown over the general comm. Holden checked the straps on his crash couch and palmed the button that started the juice. A dozen needles stuck into his back through membranes in his suit. His heart shuddered and chemical bands of iron gripped his brain. His spine went dead cold, and his face flushed like a radiation burn. He pounded a fist into the arm of the crash couch. He hated this part, but the next one was worse. On the general comm, Alex whooped as the drugs hit his system. Belowdecks, the others were getting the drugs that kept them from dying but kept them sedated through the worst of it.

Alex said, “One,” and Holden weighed five hundred kilos. The nerves at the back of his eye sockets screamed at the massive load of his eyeballs. His testicles crushed themselves against his thighs. He concentrated on not swallowing his tongue. Around him, the ship creaked and groaned. There was a disconcerting bang from belowdecks, but nothing on his panel went red. The *Knight’s* torch drive could deliver a lot of thrust, but at the cost of a prodigious fuel-burn rate. But if they could save the *Cant*, it wouldn’t matter.

Over the blood pounding in his ears, Holden could hear Ade’s gentle breathing and the click of her keyboard. He wished he could just go to sleep to that sound, but the juice was singing and burning in his blood. He was more awake than he’d ever been.

“Yes, sir,” Ade said over the comm.

It took Holden a second to realize she was talking to McDowell. He turned up the volume to hear what the captain was saying.

“—the mains online, full power.”

“We’re fully loaded, sir. If we try to burn that hard, we’ll tear the drive right off the mounts,” Ade replied. McDowell must have asked her to fire up the Epstein.

“Mr. Tukunbo,” McDowell said, “we have... four minutes. If you break it, I won’t bill you.”

“Yes, sir. Bringing mains online. Setting for maximum burn,” Ade said, and in the background Holden could hear the high-g warning Klaxon. There was a louder clicking as Ade strapped herself in.

“Mains online in three... two... one... execute,” Ade said.

The *Canterbury* groaned so loud Holden had to turn the comm volume down. It moaned and shrieked like a banshee for several seconds, and then there was a shattering crash. He pulled up the exterior visual, fighting against the g-induced blackout at the edge of his vision. The *Canterbury* was in one piece.

“Ade, what the hell was that?” McDowell said, his speech slurred.

“The drive tearing a strut. Mains are off-line, sir,” Ade replied, not saying *Exactly like I said would happen*.

“What did that buy us?” McDowell asked.

“Not much. The torpedoes are now at over forty clicks a second and accelerating. We’re down to maneuvering thrusters,” Ade said.

“Shit,” McDowell said.

“They’re going to hit us, sir,” Ade said.

“Jim,” McDowell said, his voice suddenly loud over the direct channel he’d opened. “We’re going down, and there’s no way around it. Click twice to acknowledge.”

Jim clicked his radio twice.

“Okay, so, now we need to think about surviving after the hit. If they’re looking to cripple us before boarding, they’ll take out our drive and our comm array. Becca’s been broadcasting an SOS

ever since the torpedoes were fired, but I'd like you to keep yelling if we stop. If they know you're out there, they are less likely to toss everyone out an airlock. Witnesses, you know," McDowell said.

Jim clicked twice again.

"Turn around, Jim. Hide behind that asteroid. Call for help. Order."

Jim clicked twice, then signaled all-stop to Alex. In an instant, the giant sitting on his chest disappeared, replaced by weightlessness. The sudden transition would have made him throw up if his veins hadn't been coursing with antinausea drugs.

"What's up?" Alex said.

"New job," Holden said, teeth chattering from the juice. "We're calling for help and negotiating a release of prisoners once the bad guys have the *Cant*. Burn back to that asteroid, since it's the closest we can get to cover."

"Roger that, Boss," Alex said. He added in a lower voice, "I'd kill for a couple of tubes or a nice keel-mounted rail gun right now."

"I hear you."

"Wake up the kids downstairs?"

"Let them sleep."

"Roger that," Alex said, then clicked off.

Before the heavy g started up again, Holden turned on the *Knight's* SOS. The channel to Ade was still open, and now that McDowell was off the line, he could hear her breathing again. He turned the volume all the way up and lay back in the straps, waiting to be crushed. Alex didn't disappoint him.

"One minute," Ade said, her voice loud enough to distort through his helmet's speakers. Holden didn't turn the volume down. Her voice was admirably calm as she called out the impact countdown.

"Thirty seconds."

Holden wanted desperately to talk, to say something comforting, to make ludicrous and untrue assertions of love. The giant standing on his chest just laughed with the deep rumble of their fusion torch.

"Ten seconds."

"Get ready to kill the reactor and play dead after the torpedoes hit. If we're not a threat, they won't hit us again," McDowell said.

"Five," Ade said.

"Four."

"Three."

"Two."

"One."

The *Canterbury* shuddered and the monitor went white. Ade took one sharp intake of breath, which cut off as the radio broke up. The static squeal almost ruptured Holden's eardrums. He chinned the volume down and clicked his radio at Alex.

The thrust suddenly dropped to a tolerable two g and all the ship's sensors flared into overload. A brilliant light poured through the small airlock porthole.

"Report, Alex, report! What happened?" Holden yelled.

"My God. They nuked her. They nuked the *Cant*," Alex said, his voice low and dazed.

"What's her status? Give me a report on the *Canterbury*! I have zero sensors down here. Everything's just gone white!"

There was a long pause; then Alex said, "I have zero sensors up here too, Boss. But I can give you a status on the *Cant*. I can see her."

"See her? From here?"

"Yeah. She's a cloud of vapor the size of Olympus Mons. She's gone, Boss. She's gone."

That can't be right, Holden's mind protested. That doesn't happen. Pirates don't nuke water haulers. No one wins. No one gets paid. And if you just want to murder fifty people, walking into a

restaurant with a machine gun is a *lot* easier.

He wanted to shout it, scream at Alex that he was wrong. But he had to keep it together. *I'm the old man now.*

"All right. New mission, Alex. Now we're witnesses to murder. Get us back to that asteroid. I'll start compiling a broadcast. Wake everyone up. They need to know," Holden said. "I'm rebooting the sensor package."

He methodically shut down the sensors and their software, waited two minutes, then slowly brought them back online. His hands were shaking. He was nauseated. His body felt like he was operating his flesh from a distance, and he didn't know how much was the juice and how much was shock.

The sensors came back up. Like any other ship that flew the space lanes, the *Knight* was hardened against radiation. You couldn't get anywhere near Jupiter's massive radiation belt unless you were. But Holden doubted the ship's designers had half a dozen nuclear weapons going off nearby in mind when they'd created the specs. They'd gotten lucky. Vacuum might protect them from an electromagnetic pulse, but the blast radiation could still have fried every sensor the ship had.

Once the array came back up, he scanned the space where the *Canterbury* had been. There was nothing larger than a softball. He switched over to the ship that killed it, which was flying off sunward at a leisurely one g. Heat bloomed in Holden's chest.

He wasn't scared. Aneurysm-inducing rage made his temples pound and his fists squeeze until his tendons hurt. He flipped on the comms and aimed a tightbeam at the retreating ship.

"This message is to whoever ordered the destruction of the *Canterbury*, the civilian ice freighter that you just blew into gas. You don't get to just fly away, you murderous son of a bitch. I don't care what your reasons are, but you just killed fifty friends of mine. You need to know who they were. I am sending to you the name and photograph of everyone who just died in that ship. Take a good look at what you did. Think about that while I work on finding out who you are."

He closed the voice channel, pulled up the *Canterbury*'s personnel files, and began transmitting the crew dossiers to the other ship.

"What are you doing?" asked Naomi from behind him, not from his helmet speakers.

She was standing there with her helmet off. Sweat plastered her thick black hair to her head and neck. Her face was unreadable. Holden took off his helmet.

"I'm showing them the *Canterbury* was a real place where real people lived. People with names and families," he said, the juice making his voice less steady than he would have liked. "If there's something resembling a human being giving the orders on that ship, I hope it haunts him right up to the day they put him in the recycler for murder."

"I don't think they appreciate it," Naomi said, pointing at the panel behind him.

The enemy ship was now painting them with its targeting laser. Holden held his breath. No torpedoes launched, and after a few seconds, the stealth ship turned off its laser and the engine flared as it scooted off at high g. He heard Naomi let out a shuddering breath.

"So the *Canterbury*'s gone?" Naomi asked.

Holden nodded.

"Fuck me sideways," said Amos.

Amos and Shed stood together at the crew ladder. Amos' face was mottled red and white, and his big hands clenched and unclenched. Shed collapsed to his knees, slamming against the deck in the heavy two-g thrust. He didn't cry. He just looked at Holden and said, "Cameron's never going to get that arm, I guess," then buried his head in his hands and shook.

"Slow down, Alex. No need to run now," Holden said into the comm. The ship slowly dropped to one g.

"What now, Captain?" Naomi said, looking at him hard. *You're in charge now. Act like it.*

"Blowing them out of the sky would be my first choice, but since we don't have the weapons... follow them. Keep our eyes on them until we know where they're going. Expose them to everyone,"

Holden replied.

"Fuckin' A," said Amos loudly.

"Amos," Naomi said over her shoulder, "take Shed below and get him into a couch. If you need to, give him something to put him to sleep."

"You got it, Boss." Amos put a thick arm around Shed's waist and took him below.

When he was gone, Naomi turned back to Holden.

"No, sir. We are *not* chasing that ship. We are going to call for help, and then go wherever the help tells us to go."

"I—" Holden started.

"Yes, you're in charge. That makes me XO, and it's the XO's job to tell the captain when he's being an idiot. You're being an idiot, sir. You already tried to goad them into killing us with that broadcast. Now you want to chase them? And what will you do if they let you catch them? Broadcast another emotional plea?" Naomi said, moving closer to him. "You are going to get the remaining four members of your crew to safety. And that's all. When we're safe, you can go on your crusade. Sir."

Holden unbuckled the straps on his couch and stood up. The juice was starting to burn out, leaving his body spent and sickened. Naomi lifted her chin and didn't back up.

"Glad you're with me, Naomi," he said. "Go see to the crew. McDowell gave me one last order."

Naomi looked him over critically; he could see her distrust. He didn't defend himself; he just waited until she was done. She nodded at him once and climbed down the ladder to the deck below.

Once she was gone, he worked methodically, putting together a broadcast package that included all the sensor data from the *Canterbury* and the *Knight*. Alex climbed down from the cockpit and sat down heavily in the next chair.

"You know, Captain, I've been thinkin'," he said. His voice had the same post-juice shakes as Holden's own.

Holden bit back his irritation at the interruption and said, "What about?"

"That stealth ship."

Holden turned away from his work.

"Tell me."

"So, I don't know any pirates that have shit like that."

"Go on."

"In fact, the only time I've seen tech like that was back when I was in the navy," Alex said. "We were working on ships with energy-absorbing skins and internal heat sinks. More of a strategic weapon than a tactical one. You can't hide an active drive, but if you can get into position and shut the drive down, store all your waste heat internally, you can hide yourself pretty good. Add in the energy-absorbing skin, and radar, ladar, and passive sensors don't pick you up. Plus, pretty tough to get nuclear torpedoes outside of the military."

"You're saying the Martian navy did this?"

Alex took a long shuddering breath.

"If we had it, you know the Earthers were workin' on it too," he said.

They looked at each other across the narrow space, the implications heavier than a ten-g burn. Holden pulled the transmitter and battery they'd recovered from the *Scopuli* out of the thigh pocket of his suit. He started pulling it apart, looking for a stamp or an insignia. Alex watched, quiet for once. The transmitter was generic; it could have come from the radio room of any ship in the solar system. The battery was a nondescript gray block. Alex reached out and Holden handed it to him. Alex pried off the gray plastic cover and flipped the metal battery around in his hands. Without saying a word, he held the bottom up to Holden's face. Stamped in the black metal on the bottom of the battery was a serial number that began with the letters *MCRN*.

Martian Congressional Republic Navy.



The radio was set to broadcast on full power. The data package was ready to transmit. Holden stood in front of the camera, leaning a little forward.

“My name is James Holden,” he said, “and my ship, the *Canterbury*, was just destroyed by a warship with stealth technology and what appear to be parts stamped with Martian navy serial numbers. Data stream to follow.”

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Chapter Six: Miller

The cart sped through the tunnel, siren masking the whine of motors. Behind them, they left curious civilians and the scent of overheated bearings. Miller leaned forward in his seat, willing the cart to go faster. They were three levels and maybe four kilometers from the station house.

“Okay,” Havelock said. “I’m sorry, but I’m missing something here.”

“What?” Miller said. He meant *What are you yammering about?* Havelock took it as *What are you missing?*

“A water hauler millions of clicks from here got vaporized. Why are we going to full alert? Our cisterns will last months without even going on rationing. There are a lot of other haulers out there. Why is this a crisis?”

Miller turned and looked at his partner straight on. The small, stocky build. The thick bones from a childhood in full g. Just like the asshole in the transmission. They didn’t understand. If Havelock had been in this James Holden’s place, he might have done the same stupid, irresponsible, idiotic bullshit. For the space of a breath, they weren’t security anymore. They weren’t partners. They were a Belter and an Earther. Miller looked away before Havelock could see the change in his eyes.

“That prick Holden? The one in the broadcast?” Miller said. “He just declared war on Mars for us.”

The cart swerved and bobbed, its internal computer adjusting for some virtual hiccup in the traffic flow half a kilometer ahead. Havelock shifted, grabbing for the support strut. They hit a ramp up to the next level, civilians on foot making a path for them.

“You grew up where the water’s maybe dirty, but it falls out of the sky for you,” Miller said. “The air’s filthy, but it’s not going away if your door seals fail. It’s not like that out here.”

“But we’re not on the hauler. We don’t need the ice. We aren’t under threat,” Havelock said.

Miller sighed, rubbing his eyes with thumb and knuckle until ghosts of false color bloomed.

“When I was homicide,” Miller said, “there was this guy. Property management specialist working a contract out of Luna. Someone burned half his skin off and dropped him out an airlock. Turned out he was responsible for maintenance on sixty holes up on level thirty. Lousy neighborhood. He’d been cutting corners. Hadn’t replaced the air filters in three months. There was mold growing in three of the units. And you know what we found after that?”

“What?” Havelock asked.

“Not a goddamn thing, because we stopped looking. Some people need to die, and he was one. And the next guy that took the job cleaned the ducting and swapped the filters on schedule. That’s what it’s like in the Belt. Anyone who came out here and didn’t put environmental systems above everything else died young. All us still out here are the ones that cared.”

“Selective effect?” Havelock said. “You’re seriously arguing in favor of selective effect? I never thought I’d hear that shit coming out of you.”

“What’s that?”

“Racist propaganda bullshit,” Havelock said. “It’s the one that says the difference in environment has changed the Belters so much that instead of just being a bunch of skinny obsessive-compulsives, they aren’t really human anymore.”

"I'm not saying that," Miller said, suspecting that it was exactly what he was saying. "It's just that Belters don't take the long view when you screw with basic resources. That water was future air, propellant mass, and potables for us. We have no sense of humor about that shit."

The cart hit a ramp of metalwork grate. The lower level fell away below them. Havelock was silent.

"This Holden guy didn't say it was Mars. Just that they found a Martian battery. You think people are going to... declare war?" Havelock said. "Just on the basis of this one guy's pictures of a battery?"

"The ones that wait to get the whole story aren't our problem."

At least not tonight, he thought. *Once the whole story gets out, we'll see where we stand.*

The station house was somewhere between one-half and three-quarters full. Security men stood in clumps, nodding to each other, eyes narrow and jaws tight. One of the vice cops laughed at something, his amusement loud, forced, smelling of fear. Miller saw the change in Havelock as they walked across the common area to their desks. Havelock had been able to put Miller's reaction down to one man's being oversensitive. A whole room, though. A whole station house. By the time they reached their chairs, Havelock's eyes were wide.

Captain Shaddid came in. The bleary look was gone. Her hair was pulled back, her uniform crisp and professional, her voice as calm as a surgeon in a battlefield hospital. She stepped up on the first desk she came to, improvising a pulpit.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said. "You've seen the transmission. Any questions?"

"Who let that fucking Earther near a radio?" someone shouted. Miller saw Havelock laugh along with the crowd, but it didn't reach his eyes. Shaddid scowled and the crowd quieted.

"Here's the situation," she said. "No way we can control this information. It was broadcast everywhere. We have five sites on the internal network that have been mirroring it, and we have to assume it's public knowledge starting ten minutes ago. Our job now is to keep the rioting to a minimum and ensure station integrity around the port. Station houses fifty and two thirteen are helping on it too. The port authority has released all the ships with inner planet registry. That doesn't mean they're all gone. They still have to round up their crews. But it does mean they're going."

"The government offices?" Miller said, loud enough to carry.

"Not our problem, thank God," Shaddid said. "They have infrastructure in place. Blast doors are already down and sealed. They've broken off from the main environmental systems, so we aren't even breathing their air right now."

"Well, that's a relief," Yevgeny said from the cluster of homicide detectives.

"Now the bad news," Shaddid said. Miller heard the silence of a hundred and fifty cops holding their breath. "We've got eighty known OPA agents on the station. They're all employed and legal, and you know this is the kind of thing they've been waiting for. We have an order from the governor that we're not going to do any proactive detention. No one gets arrested until they do something."

Angry voices rose in chorus.

"Who does he think he is?" someone called from the back. Shaddid snapped at the comment like a shark.

"The governor is the one who contracted with us to keep this station in working order," Shaddid said. "We'll follow his directives."

In his peripheral vision, Miller saw Havelock nod. He wondered what the governor thought of the question of Belter independence. Maybe the OPA weren't the only ones who'd been waiting for something like this to happen. Shaddid went on, outlining the security response they were permitted. Miller listened with half an ear, so lost in speculating on the politics behind the situation he almost missed it when Shaddid called his name.

"Miller will take the second team to the port level and cover sectors thirteen through twenty-four. Kasagawa, team three, twenty-five through thirty-six, and so on. That's twenty men apiece, except for Miller."

"I can make it with nineteen," Miller said, then quietly to Havelock, "You're sitting this one out, partner. Having an Earther with a gun out there isn't going to make things better."

"Yeah," Havelock said. "Saw that coming."

"Okay," Shaddid said. "You all know the drill. Let's move."

Miller rounded up his riot squad. All the faces were familiar, all men and women he'd worked with over his years in security. He organized them in his mind with a nearly automatic efficiency. Brown and Gelbfish both had SWAT experience, so they would lead the wings if it came to crowd control. Aberforth had three write-ups for excessive violence since her kid had been busted for drug running on Ganymede, so she was second string. She could work out her anger-management issues another time. Around the station house, he heard the other squad commanders making similar decisions.

"Okay," Miller said. "Let's suit up."

They moved away in a group, heading for the equipment bay. Miller paused. Havelock remained leaning against his desk, arms folded, eyes locked on the middle distance. Miller was torn between sympathy for the man and impatience. It was hard being on the team but not on the team. On the other hand, what the hell had he expected, taking a contract in the Belt? Havelock looked up, meeting Miller's gaze. They nodded to each other. Miller was the first to turn away.

The equipment bay was part warehouse, part bank vault, designed by someone more concerned with conserving space than getting things out efficiently. The lights—recessed white LEDs—gave the gray walls a sterile cast. Bare stone echoed every voice and footfall. Banks of ammunition and firearms, evidence bags and test panels, spare servers and replacement uniforms lined the walls and filled most of the interior space. The riot gear was in a side room, in gray steel lockers with high-security electronic locks. The standard outfit consisted of high-impact plastic shields, electric batons, shin guards, bullet-resistant chest and thigh armor, and helmets with reinforced face guards—all of it designed to make a handful of station security into an intimidating, inhuman force.

Miller keyed in his access code. The seals released; the lockers opened.

"Well," Miller said conversationally. "Fuck me."

The lockers were empty, gray coffins with the corpses all gone. Across the room, he heard one of the other squads shouting in outrage. Miller systematically opened every riot control locker he could get to. All of them were the same. Shaddid appeared at his side, her face pale with rage.

"What's plan B?" Miller asked.

Shaddid spat on the floor, then closed her eyes. They shifted under her lids like she was dreaming. Two long breaths later, they opened.

"Check the SWAT lockers. There should be enough in there to outfit two people in each squad."

"Snipers?" Miller said.

"You have a better idea, Detective?" Shaddid said, leaning on the last word.

Miller raised his hands in surrender. Riot gear was meant to intimidate and control. SWAT gear was made to kill with the greatest efficiency possible. Seemed their mandate had just changed.



On any given day, a thousand ships might be docked on Ceres Station, and activity there rarely slowed and never stopped. Each sector could accommodate twenty ships, the traffic of humanity and cargo, transport vans, mesocranes, and industrial forklifts, and his squad was responsible for twenty sectors.

The air stank of refrigerant and oil. The gravity was slightly above 0.3 g, station spin alone lending the place a sense of oppression and danger. Miller didn't like the port. Having vacuum so close under his feet made him nervous. Passing the dockworkers and transport crews, he didn't know whether to scowl or smile. He was here to scare people into behaving and also to reassure them that

everything was under control. After the first three sectors, he settled on the smile. It was the kind of lie he was better at.

They had just reached the junction of sectors nineteen and twenty when they heard screaming. Miller pulled his hand terminal out of his pocket, connected to the central surveillance network, and called up the security camera array. It took a few seconds to find it: a mob of fifty or sixty civilians stretching almost all the way across the tunnel, traffic blocked on both sides. There were weapons being waved over heads. Knives, clubs. At least two pistols. Fists pumped in the air. And at the center of the crowd, a huge shirtless man was beating someone to death.

"Showtime," Miller said, waving his squad forward at a run.

He was still a hundred meters from the turn that would take them to the clot of human violence when he saw the shirtless man knock his victim to the ground, then stomp on her neck. The head twisted sideways at an angle that didn't leave any question. Miller slowed his team to a brisk walk. Arresting the murderer while surrounded by a crowd of his friends would be tough enough without being winded.

There was blood in the water now. Miller could sense it. The mob was going to turn out. To the station, to the ships. If the people started joining the chaos... what path would it be likely to take? There was a brothel one level up from there and half a kilometer anti-spinward that catered to inner planet types. The tariff inspector for sector twenty-one was married to a girl from Luna and had bragged about it maybe once too often.

There were too many targets, Miller thought even as he motioned his snipers to spread out. He was trying to reason with a fire. Stop it here, and no one else got killed.

In his imagination, Candace crossed her arms and said, *What's plan B?*

The outer edge of the mob raised the alarm well before Miller reached it. The surge of bodies and threats shifted. Miller tipped back his hat. Men, women. Dark skin, pale, golden brown, and all with the long, thin build of Belters, all with the square-mouthed angry gape of chimpanzees at war.

"Let me take a couple of them down, sir," Gelbfish said from his terminal. "Put the fear of God into them."

"We'll get there," Miller said, smiling at the angry mob. "We'll get there."

The face he expected floated to the front. Shirtless. The big man, blood covering his hands and splattered on his cheek. The seed crystal of the riot.

"That one?" Gelbfish asked, and Miller knew that a tiny infrared dot was painting Shirtless' forehead even as he glowered at Miller and the uniforms behind him.

"No," Miller said. "That'll only set the rest of them off."

"So what do we do?" Brown said.

It was a hell of a question.

"Sir," Gelbfish said. "The big fucker's got an OPA tattoo on his left shoulder."

"Well," Miller said, "if you do have to shoot him, start there."

He stepped forward, tying his terminal into the local system, overriding the alert. When he spoke, his voice boomed from the overhead speakers.

"This is Detective Miller. Unless you all want to be locked up as accessories to murder, I suggest you disperse now." Muting the microphone in his terminal, he said to Shirtless, "Not you, big fella. Move a muscle and we shoot you."

Someone in the crowd threw a wrench, the silver metal arcing low through the air toward Miller's head. He almost stepped out of the way, but the handle caught him across the ear. His head filled with the deep sound of bells, and the wet of blood tracked down his neck.

"Hold fire," Miller shouted. "Hold your fire."

The crowd laughed, as if he'd been talking to them. Idiots. Shirtless, emboldened, strode forward. The steroids had distended his thighs so badly that he waddled. Miller turned the mic on his terminal back on. If the crowd was watching them face each other down, they weren't breaking things. It wasn't spreading. Not yet.

“So. Friend. You only kick helpless people to death, or can anybody join in?” Miller asked, his voice conversational but echoing out of the dock speakers like a pronouncement from God.

“The fuck you barking, Earth dog?” Shirtless said.

“Earth?” Miller said, chuckling. “I look like I grew up in a gravity well to you? I was born on this rock.”

“Inners kibble you, bitch,” Shirtless said. “You they dog.”

“You think?”

“Fuckin’ dui,” Shirtless said. *Fucking true*. He flexed his pectorals. Miller suppressed the urge to laugh.

“So killing that poor bastard was for the good of the station?” Miller said. “The good of the Belt? Don’t be a chump, kid. They’re playing you. They want you to act like a bunch of stupid riotboys so they have a reason to shut this place down.”

“*Schrauben sie sie weibchen*,” Shirtless said in Belter-inflected gutter German, leaning forward. *Okay, second time I’ve been called a bitch*, Miller thought.

“Kneecap him,” Miller said. Shirtless’ legs blew out in twin sprays of crimson and he went down howling. Miller walked past his writhing body, stepping toward the mob.

“You’re taking your orders from this *pendejo*?” he said. “Listen to me, we all know what’s coming. We know dance starting, now, like pow, right? They fucked tu agua, and we all know the answer. Out an airlock, no?”

He could see it in their faces: the sudden fear of the snipers, then the confusion. He pressed on, not giving them time to think. He switched back to the lower-level lingo, the language of education, authority.

“You know what Mars wants? They want you, doing this. They want this piece of shit here to make sure that everyone looks at Belters and thinks we’re a bunch of psychopaths who tear up their own station. They want to tell themselves we’re just like them. Well, we aren’t. We’re Belters, and we take care of our own.”

He picked a man at the edge of the mob. Not as pumped as Shirtless, but big. He had an OPA split circle on his arm.

“You,” Miller said. “You want to fight for the Belt?”

“Dui,” the man said.

“I bet you do. He did too,” Miller said, jerking a thumb back at Shirtless. “But now he’s a cripple, and he’s going down for murder. So we’ve already lost one. You see? They’re turning us against each other. Can’t let them do that. Every one of you I have to arrest or cripple or kill, that’s one less we have when the day comes. And it’s coming. But it’s not now. You understand?”

The OPA man scowled. The mob drew back from him, making space. Miller could feel it like a current against him. It was shifting.

“Day’s coming, hombre,” the OPA man said. “You know your side?”

The tone was a threat, but there was no power behind it. Miller took a slow breath. It was over.

“Always the side of the angels,” he said. “Why don’t you all go back to work? Show’s over here, and we’ve all got plenty that needs doing.”

Momentum broken, the mob fell apart. First one and two peeling off from the edges, and then the whole knot untying itself at once. Five minutes after Miller had arrived, the only signs that anything had happened were Shirtless mewling in a pool of his own blood, the wound on Miller’s ear, and the body of the woman fifty good citizens had stood by and watched be beaten to death. She was short and wearing the flight suit of a Martian freight line.

Only one dead. Makes it a good night, Miller thought sourly.

He went to the fallen man. The OPA tattoo was smeared red. Miller knelt.

“Friend,” he said. “You are under arrest for the murder of that lady over there, whoever the hell she is. You are not required to participate in questioning without the presence of an attorney or union

representative, and if you so much as look at me wrong, I'll space you. Do we understand each other?"

From the look in the man's eyes, Miller knew they did.

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Chapter Seven: Holden

Holden could drink coffee at half a g. Actually sit and hold a mug under his nose and let the aroma drift up. Sip it slowly and not burn his tongue. Drinking coffee was one of the activities that didn't make the transition to microgravity well, but at half a g, it was fine.

So he sat and tried very hard to think about coffee and gravity in the silence of the *Knight's* tiny galley. Even the normally talkative Alex was quiet. Amos had set his big handgun on the table and was staring at it with frightening concentration. Shed was asleep. Naomi was sitting across the room, drinking tea and keeping one eye on the wall panel next to her. She'd routed ops to it.

As long as he kept his mind on his coffee, he didn't have to think about Ade giving one last gasp of fear and then turning into a glowing vapor.

Alex ruined it by speaking.

"At some point, we need to decide where we're goin'," he said.

Holden nodded, took a sip of his coffee, and closed his eyes. His muscles vibrated like plucked strings, and his peripheral vision was dappled with points of imaginary light. The first twinges of the post-juice crash were starting, and it was going to be a bad one. He wanted to enjoy these last few moments before the pain hit.

"He's right, Jim," Naomi said. "We can't just fly in a big circle at half a g forever."

Holden didn't open his eyes. The darkness behind his lids was bright and active and mildly nauseating.

"We aren't waiting forever," he said. "We're waiting fifty minutes for Saturn Station to call me back and tell me what to do with their ship. The *Knight* is still P and K property. We're still employees. You wanted me to call for help, I called for help. Now we are waiting to see what that looks like."

"Shouldn't we start flying toward Saturn Station, then, Boss?" Amos asked, directing his question at Naomi.

Alex snorted.

"Not on the *Knight's* engine. Even if we had the fuel for that trip, which we don't, I don't want to sit in this can for the next three months," he said. "Naw, if we're goin' somewhere, it's gotta be the Belt or Jupiter. We're as close to exactly between 'em as you can get."

"I vote we continue on to Ceres," Naomi said. "P and K has offices there. We don't know anyone in the Jupiter complex."

Without opening his eyes, Holden shook his head.

"No, we wait for them to call us back."

Naomi made an exasperated sound. It was funny, he thought, how you could make someone's voice out from the smallest sounds. A cough or a sigh. Or the little gasp right before she died.

Holden sat up and opened his eyes. He placed his coffee mug on the table carefully, with hands that were starting to palsy.

"I don't want to fly sunward to Ceres, because that's the direction the torpedo ship went, and your point about chasing them is well taken, Naomi. I don't want to fly out to Jupiter, because we only have the fuel for one trip, and once we fly that direction for a while, we're locked in. We are

sitting here and drinking coffee because I need to make a decision, and P and K gets a say in that decision. So we wait for them to answer, and then I decide.”

Holden got up slowly, carefully, and began moving toward the crew ladder. “I’m going to crash for a few minutes, let the worst of the shakes wear off. If P and K calls, let me know.”



Holden popped sedative tabs—thin, bitter pills with an aftertaste like bread mold—but he didn’t sleep. Over and over, McDowell placed a hand on his arm and called him Jim. Becca laughed and cursed like a sailor. Cameron bragged about his prowess on the ice.

Ade gasped.

Holden had flown the Ceres-to-Saturn circuit on the *Canterbury* nine times. Two round-trips a year, for almost five years. Most of the crew had been there the entire time. Flying on the *Cant* might be the bottom of the barrel, but that meant there was nowhere else to go. People stayed, made the ship their home. After the near-constant duty transfers of the navy, he appreciated stability. Made it his home too. McDowell said something he couldn’t quite make out. The *Cant* groaned like she was under a hard burn.

Ade smiled and winked at him.

The worst leg cramp in history hit every muscle in his body at once. Holden bit down hard on his rubber mouth guard, screaming. The pain brought an oblivion that was almost a relief. His mind shut off, drowned out by the needs of his body. Fortunately or not, the drugs started to kick in. His muscles unknotted. His nerves stopped screaming, and consciousness returned like a reluctant schoolboy. His jaw ached as he pulled out the guard. He’d worn toothmarks in the rubber.

In the dim blue cabin light, he thought about the kind of man who followed an order to kill a civilian ship.

He’d done some things in the navy that had kept him awake nights. He’d followed some orders he vehemently disagreed with. But to lock on to a civilian ship with fifty people aboard and press the button that launched six nuclear weapons? He would have refused. If his commanding officer had insisted, he’d have declared it an illegal order and demanded that the executive officer take control of the ship and arrest the captain. They’d have had to shoot him to get him away from the weapon post.

He’d known the sort of people who would have followed the order, though. He told himself that they were sociopaths and animals, no better than pirates who’d board your ship, strip your engine, and take your air. That they weren’t human.

But even as he nursed his hatred, drug-hazed rage offering its nihilistic comforts, he couldn’t believe they were idiots. The itch at the back of his head was still *Why? What does anyone gain from killing an ice hauler? Who gets paid? Someone always gets paid.*

I’m going to find you. I’m going to find you and end you. But before I do, I am going to make you explain.

The second wave of pharmaceuticals exploded in his bloodstream. He was hot and limp, his veins filled with syrup. Just before the tabs finally knocked him out, Ade smiled and winked.

And blew away like dust.



The comm beeped at him. Naomi’s voice said, “Jim, the P and K response finally came in. Want me to send it down there?”

Holden struggled to make sense of the words. Blinkered. Something was wrong with his bunk. With the ship. Slowly, he remembered.

“Jim?”

"No," he said. "I want to watch it up in ops with you. How long was I out?"

"Three hours," she said.

"Jesus. They took their sweet time getting back to us, didn't they?"

Holden rolled out of his couch and wiped off the crust that held his eyelashes together. He'd been weeping in his sleep. He told himself it was from the juice crash. The deep ache in his chest was only stressed cartilage.

What were you doing for three hours before you called us back? he wondered.

Naomi waited for him at the comm station, a man's face frozen mid-word on the screen in front of her. He seemed familiar.

"That isn't the operations manager."

"Nope. It's the P and K legal counsel on Saturn Station. The one who gave that speech after the crackdown on supply pilfering?" Naomi said. " 'Stealing from us is stealing from you.' That one."

"Lawyer," Holden said with a grimace. "This is going to be bad news, then."

Naomi restarted the message. The lawyer sprang into motion.

"James Holden, this is Wallace Fitz calling from Saturn Station. We've received your request for help, and your report of the incident. We've also received your broadcast accusing Mars of destroying the *Canterbury*. This was, to say the least, ill advised. The Martian representative on Saturn Station was in my office not five minutes after your broadcast was received, and the MCR is quite upset by what they view as unfounded accusations of piracy by their government.

"To further investigate this matter, and to aid in discovering the true wrongdoers, if any, the MCRN is dispatching one of their ships from the Jupiter system to pick you up. The MCRN *Donnager* is the name of this vessel. Your orders from P and K are as follows: You will fly at best possible speed to the Jupiter system. You will cooperate fully with instructions given you by the MCRN *Donnager*, or by any officer of the Martian Congressional Republic Navy. You will assist the MCRN in their investigation into the destruction of the *Canterbury*. You will *refrain* from any further broadcasting except to us or the *Donnager*.

"If you fail to follow these instructions from the company and from the government of Mars, your contract with P and K will be terminated, and you will be considered in illegal possession of a P and K shuttle craft. We will then prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law.

"Wallace Fitz out."

Holden frowned at the monitor, then shook his head.

"I never said Mars did it."

"You sort of did," Naomi replied.

"I didn't say anything that wasn't entirely factual and backed up by the data I transmitted, and I engaged in no speculation about those facts."

"So," Naomi said. "What do we do?"



"No fucking way," Amos said. "No *fucking* way."

The galley was a small space. The five of them filled it uncomfortably. The gray laminate walls showed whorls of bright scrapes where mold had grown once and been cleaned off with microwaves and steel wool. Shed sat with his back against the wall, Naomi across the table. Alex stood in the doorway. Amos had started pacing along the back—two fast paces, then a turn—before the lawyer had finished his first sentence.

"I'm not happy about it either. But that's the word from the home office," Holden said, pointing at the galley's display screen. "Didn't mean to get you guys in trouble."

"No problem, Holden. I still think you did the right thing," Shed replied, running one hand through his limp blond hair. "So what do you think the Martians will do with us?"

"I'm thinking pull our fucking toes off until Holden goes back on the radio and says it wasn't them," Amos said. "What in the holy hell is this? They attacked us, and now we're supposed to cooperate? They killed the captain!"

"Amos," Holden said.

"Sorry, Holden. Captain," Amos said. "But Jesus *wept*. We're getting fucked here and not the nice way. We're not gonna do this, are we?"

"I don't want to disappear into some Martian prison ship forever," Holden said. "The way I see it, we have two options. Either we go along with this, which is basically throwing ourselves on their mercy. Or we run, try to make it to the Belt and hide."

"I'm voting for the Belt," Naomi said, her arms crossed. Amos raised a hand, seconding the motion. Shed slowly raised his own.

Alex shook his head.

"I know the *Donnager*," he said. "She's not some rock hopper. She's the flagship for the MCRN's Jupiter fleet. Battleship. Quarter million tons of bad news. You ever serve on a ship that size?"

"No. I wasn't on anything bigger than a destroyer," Holden replied.

"I served on the *Bandon*, with the home fleet. We can't go anywhere that a ship like that can't find us. She's got four main engines, each one bigger than our whole ship. She's designed for long periods at high g with every sailor on board juiced to the gills. We can't run, sir, and even if we did, her sensor package could track a golf ball and hit it with a torpedo from half the solar system away."

"Oh, fuck that, sir," Amos said, standing up. "These Martian needle dicks blew up the *Cant*! I say run. At least make it hard for them."

Naomi put one hand on Amos' forearm, and the big mechanic paused, shook his head, and sat down. The galley was silent. Holden wondered if McDowell had ever had to make a call like this, and what the old man would have done.

"Jim, this is your decision," she said, but her eyes were hard. *No, what you are going to do is get the remaining four members of your crew to safety. And that's all.*

Holden nodded and tapped his fingers against his lips.

"P and K doesn't have our back on this one. We probably can't get away, but I don't want to disappear either," Holden said. And then: "I think we go, but we don't go quietly. Why don't we go disobey the spirit of an order?"



Naomi finished working on the comm panel, her hair now floating around her like a black cloud in the zero g.

"Okay, Jim, I'm dumping every watt into the comm array. They'll be getting this loud and clear all the way out to Titania," she said.

Holden reached up to run one hand through his sweat-plastered hair. In the null gravity, that just made it stick straight out in every direction. He zipped up his flight suit and pressed the record button.

"This is James Holden, formerly of the *Canterbury*, now on the shuttle *Knight*. We are cooperating with an investigation into who destroyed the *Canterbury* and, as part of that cooperation, are agreeing to be taken aboard your ship, the MCRN *Donnager*. We hope that this cooperation means that we will not be held prisoner or harmed. Any such action would only serve to reinforce the idea that the *Canterbury* was destroyed by a Martian vessel. James Holden out."

Holden leaned back. "Naomi, send that out broadband."

"That's a dirty trick, Boss," said Alex. "Pretty hard to disappear us now."

"I believe in the ideal of the transparent society, Mr. Kamal," said Holden. Alex grinned, pushed off, and floated down the gangway. Naomi tapped the comm panel, making a small, satisfied sound

in the back of her throat.

“Naomi,” Holden said. She turned, her hair waving lazily, like they were both drowning. “If this goes badly, I need you... I need you to...”

“Throw you to the wolves,” she said. “Blame everything on you and get the others back to Saturn Station safely.”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “Don’t play the hero.”

She let the words hang in the air until the last of the irony leached out of them.

“Hadn’t crossed my mind, sir,” she said.



“*Knight*, this is Captain Theresa Yao of the MCRN *Donnager*,” said the severe-looking woman on the comm screen. “Message received. Please refrain from further general broadcasts. My navigator will be sending course information shortly. Follow that course exactly. Yao out.”

Alex laughed.

“I think you pissed her off,” he said. “Got the course info. They’ll be picking us up in thirteen days. Give her time to really stew on it.”

“Thirteen days before I’m clapped in irons and have needles shoved under my fingernails,” Holden sighed, leaning back in his couch. “Well, best begin our flight toward imprisonment and torture. You may lock in the transmitted course, Mr. Kamal.”

“Roger that, Cap—Huh,” said Alex.

“A problem?”

“Well, the *Knight* just did her pre-burn sweep for collision objects,” Alex said. “And we have six Belt objects on an intercept course.”

“Belt objects?”

“Fast contacts with no transponder signal,” Alex replied. “Ships, but flyin’ dark. They’ll catch us just about two days before the *Donnager* does.”

Holden pulled up the display. Six small signatures, yellow-orange shifting toward red. Heavy burn.

“Well,” Holden said to the screen. “And who the hell are *you*?”

Chapter Eight: Miller

Aggression against the Belt is what Earth and Mars survive on. Our weakness is their strength,” the masked woman said from Miller’s terminal screen. The split circle of the OPA draped behind her, like something painted on a sheet. “Don’t be afraid of them. Their only power is your fear.”

“Well, that and a hundred or so gunships,” Havelock said.

“From what I hear,” Miller said, “if you clap your hands and say you believe, they can’t shoot you.”

“Have to try that sometime.”

“We must rise up!” the woman said, her voice growing shrill. “We have to take our destiny before it is taken from us! Remember the *Canterbury*!”

Miller shut the viewer down and leaned back in his chair. The station was at its change-of-shift surge, voices raised one over the other as the previous round of cops brought the incoming ones up to speed. The smell of fresh coffee competed with cigarette smoke.

“There’s maybe a dozen like her,” Havelock said, nodding toward the dead terminal screen. “She’s my favorite, though. There’re times I swear she’s actually foaming at the mouth.”

“How many more files?” Miller asked, and his partner shrugged.

“Two, three hundred,” Havelock said, and took a drag on his cigarette. He’d started smoking again. “Every few hours, there’s a new one. They aren’t coming from one place. Sometimes they’re broadcast on the radio. Sometimes the files show up on public partitions. Orlan found some guys at a portside bar passing out those little VR squids like they were pamphlets.”

“She bust them?”

“No,” Havelock said as if it was no big deal.

A week had passed since James Holden, self-appointed martyr, had proudly announced that he and his crew were going to go talk to someone from the Martian navy instead of just slinging shit and implications. The footage of the *Canterbury*’s death was everywhere, debates raging over every frame. The log files that documented the incident were perfectly legitimate, or they were obviously doctored. The torpedoes that had slaughtered the hauler were nukes or standard pirate fare that breached the drive by mistake, or it was all artifice lifted from old stock footage to cover up what had really killed the *Cant*.

The riots had lasted for three days on and off, like a fire hot enough to reignite every time the air pumped back in. The administrative offices reopened under heavy security, but they reopened. The ports fell behind, but they were catching up. The shirtless bastard who Miller had ordered shot was in the Star Helix detainment infirmary, getting new knees, filling out protests against Miller, and preparing for his murder trial.

Six hundred cubic meters of nitrogen had gone missing from a warehouse in sector fifteen. An unlicensed whore had been beaten up and locked in a storage unit; as soon as she was done giving evidence about her attackers, she’d be arrested. They’d caught the kids who’d been breaking the surveillance cameras on level sixteen. Superficially, everything was business as usual.

Only superficially.

When Miller had started working homicide, one of the things that had struck him was the surreal calm of the victims’ families. People who had just lost wives, husbands, children, and lovers. People

whose lives had just been branded by violence. More often than not, they were calmly offering drinks and answering questions, making the detectives feel welcome. A civilian coming in unaware might have mistaken them for whole. It was only in the careful way they held themselves and the extra quarter second it took their eyes to focus that Miller could see how deep the damage was.

Ceres Station was holding itself carefully. Its eyes were taking a quarter second longer to focus. Middle-class people—storekeepers, maintenance workers, computer techs—were avoiding him on the tube the way petty criminals did. Conversations died when Miller came near. In the station, the sense of being under siege was growing. A month earlier, Miller and Havelock, Cobb and Richter, and the rest had been the steadying hand of the law. Now they were employees of an Earth-based security contractor.

The difference was subtle, but it was deep. It made him want to stand taller, to show with his body that he was a Belter. That he belonged there. It made him want to win people's good opinion back. Let by a bunch of guys passing out virtual reality propaganda with a warning, maybe.

It wasn't a smart impulse.

"What've we got on the board?" Miller asked.

"Two burglaries that look like that same ring," Havelock said. "That domestic dispute from last week still needs the report closed up. There was a pretty good assault over by Nakanesh Import Consortium, but Shaddid was talking to Dyson and Patel about that, so it's probably spoken for already."

"So you want..."

Havelock looked up and out to cover the fact that he was looking away. It was something he'd been doing more often since things had gone to shit.

"We've really got to get the reports done," Havelock said. "Not just the domestic. There're four or five folders that are only still open because they need to be crossed and dotted."

"Yeah," Miller said.

Since the riots, he'd watched everyone in a bar get served before Havelock. He'd seen how the other cops from Shaddid down went out of their way to reassure Miller that *he* was one of the good guys, a tacit apology for saddling him with an Earther. And he'd seen Havelock see it too.

It made Miller want to protect the man, to let Havelock spend his days in the safety of paperwork and station house coffee. Help the man pretend that he wasn't hated for the gravity he'd grown up in.

That wasn't a smart impulse either.

"What about your bullshit case?" Havelock asked.

"What?"

Havelock held up a folder. The Julie Mao case. The kidnap job. The sideshow. Miller nodded and rubbed his eyes. Someone at the front of the station house yelped. Someone else laughed.

"Yeah, no," Miller said. "Haven't touched it."

Havelock grinned and held it out to him. Miller accepted the file, flipped it open. The eighteen-year-old grinned out at him with perfect teeth.

"I don't want to saddle you with all the desk driving," Miller said.

"Hey, you're not the one that kept me off that one. That was Shaddid's call. And anyway... it's just paperwork. Never killed anyone. You feel guilty about it, you can buy me a beer after work."

Miller tapped the case against the corner of his desk, the small impacts settling the contents against the folder's spine.

"Right," he said. "I'll go do some follow-up on the bullshit. I'll be back by lunch, write something up to keep the boss happy."

"I'll be here," Havelock said. Then, as Miller rose: "Hey. Look. I didn't want to say anything until I was sure, but I also don't want you to hear it someplace else..."

"Put in for a transfer?" Miller said.

"Yeah. Talked to some of those Protogen contractors that passed through. They say their Ganymede office is looking for a new lead investigator. And I thought..." Havelock shrugged.

“It’s a good move,” Miller said.

“Just want to go someplace with a sky, even if you look at it through domes,” Havelock said, and all the bluff masculinity of police work couldn’t keep the wistfulness out of his voice.

“It’s a good move,” Miller said again.



Juliette Andromeda Mao’s hole was in the ninth level of a fourteen-tiered tunnel near the port. The great inverted V was almost half a kilometer wide at the top, and no more than a standard tube width at the bottom, the retrofit of one of a dozen reaction mass chambers from the years before the asteroid had been given its false gravity. Now thousands of cheap holes burrowed into the walls, hundreds on each level, heading straight back like shotgun shacks. Kids played on the terraced streets, shrieking and laughing at nothing. Someone at the bottom was flying a kite in the constant gentle spin breeze, the bright Mylar diamond swerving and bucking in the microturbulence. Miller checked his terminal against the numbers painted on the wall. *5151-I*. Home sweet home to the poor little rich girl.

He keyed his override, and the dirty green door popped its seals and let him pass.

The hole canted up into the body of the station. Three small rooms: general living space at the front, then a bedroom hardly larger than the cot it contained, then a stall with shower, toilet, and half sink all within elbow distance. It was a standard design. He’d seen it a thousand times.

Miller stood for a minute, not looking at anything in particular, listening to the reassuring hiss of air cycling through ductwork. He reserved judgment, waiting as the back of his head built an impression of the place and, through it, of the girl who’d lived there.

Spartan was the wrong word. The place was simple, yes. The only decorations were a small framed watercolor of a slightly abstracted woman’s face over the table in the front room and a cluster of playing-card-sized plaques over the cot in the bedroom. He leaned close to read the small script. A formal award granting Julie Mao—not Juliette—purple belt status by the Ceres Center for Jiu Jitsu. Another stepping her up to brown belt. They were two years apart. Tough school, then. He put his fingers on the empty space on the wall where one for black could go. There was none of the affectation—no stylized throwing stars or imitation swords. Just a small acknowledgment that Julie Mao had done what she had done. He gave her points for that.

The drawers had two changes of clothes, one of heavy canvas and denim and one of blue linen with a silk scarf. One for work, one for play. It was less than Miller owned, and he was hardly a clotheshorse.

With her socks and underwear was a wide armband with the split circle of the OPA. Not a surprise, for a girl who’d turned her back on wealth and privilege to live in a dump like this. The refrigerator had two takeaway boxes filled with spoiled food and a bottle of local beer.

Miller hesitated, then took the beer. He sat at the table and pulled up the hole’s built-in terminal. True to Shaddid’s word, Julie’s partition opened to Miller’s password.

The custom background was a racing pinnace. The interface was customized in small, legible iconography. Communication, entertainment, work, personal. *Elegant*. That was the word. Not Spartan, but elegant.

He paged quickly through her professional files, letting his mind take in an overview, just as he had with the whole living space. There would be time for rigor, and a first impression was usually more useful than an encyclopedia. She had training videos on several different light transport craft. Some political archives, but nothing that raised a flag. A scanned volume of poetry by some of the first settlers in the Belt.

He shifted to her personal correspondence. It was all kept as neat and controlled as a Belter’s. All incoming messages were filtered to subfolders. Work, Personal, Broadcast, Shopping. He popped open Broadcast. Two or three hundred political newsfeeds, discussion group digests, bulletins and

announcements. A few had been viewed here and there, but nothing with any sort of religious observation. Julie was the kind of woman who would sacrifice for a cause, but not the kind who'd take joy in reading the propaganda. Miller filed that away.

Shopping was a long tracking of simple merchant messages. Some receipts, some announcements, some requests for goods and services. A cancellation for a Belt-based singles circle caught his eye. Miller re-sorted for related correspondence. Julie had signed up for the "low g, low pressure" dating service in February of the previous year and canceled in June without having used it.

The Personal folder was more diverse. At a rough guess there were sixty or seventy subfolders broken down by name. Some were people—Sascha Lloyd-Navarro, Ehren Michaels. Others were private notations—Sparring Circle, OPA.

Bullshit Guilt Trips.

"Well, this could be interesting," he said to the empty hole.

Fifty messages dating back five years, all marked as originating at the Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile stations in the Belt and on Luna. Unlike the political tracts, all but one had been opened.

Miller took a pull from the beer and considered the most recent two messages. The most recent, still unread, was from JPM. Jules-Pierre Mao, at a guess. The one immediately before it showed three drafted replies, none of them sent. It was from Ariadne. The mother.

There was always an element of voyeurism in being a detective. It was legal for him to be here, poking through the private life of a woman he'd never met. It was part of his legitimate investigation to know that she was lonely, that the only toiletries in her bathroom were her own. That she was proud. No one would have any complaints to make, or at least any that carried repercussions for his job, if he read every private message on her partition. Drinking her beer was the most ethically suspect thing he'd done since he'd come in.

And still he hesitated for a few seconds before opening the second-to-last message.

The screen shifted. On better equipment, it would have been indistinguishable from ink on paper, but Julie's cheap system shuddered at the thinnest lines and leaked a soft glow at the left edge. The handwriting was delicate and legible, either done with a calligraphic software good enough to vary letter shape and line width, or else handwritten.

Sweetheart:

I hope everything's going well for you. I wish you would write to me on your own sometimes. I feel like I have to put in a request in triplicate just to hear how my own daughter is doing. I know this adventure of yours is all about freedom and self-reliance, but surely there's still room in there to be considerate.

I wanted to get in touch with you especially because your father is going through one of his consolidation phases again, and we're thinking of selling the Razorback. I know it was important to you once, but I suppose we've all given up on your racing again. It's just racking up storage fees now, and there's no call to be sentimental.

It was signed with the flowing initials AM.

Miller considered the words. Somehow he'd expected the parental extortions of the very rich to be more subtle. *If you don't do as we say, we'll get rid of your toys. If you don't write. If you don't come home. If you don't love us.*

Miller opened the first incomplete draft.

Mother, if that's what you call yourself:

Thank you so much for dropping yet another turd onto my day. I can't believe how selfish and petty and crude you are. I can't believe you sleep at night or that you ever

thought I could

Miller skimmed the rest. The tone seemed consistent. The second draft reply was dated two days later. He skipped to it.

Mom:

I'm sorry we've been so estranged these last few years. I know it's been hard for you and for Daddy. I hope you can see that the decisions I've made were never meant to hurt either of you.

About the Razorback, I wish you'd reconsider. She's my first boat, and I

It stopped there. Miller leaned back.

"Steady on, kid," he said to the imaginary Julie, then opened the last draft.

Ariadne:

Do what you have to.

Julie

Miller laughed and raised his bottle to the screen in toast. They'd known how to hit her where it hurt, and Julie had taken the blow. If he ever caught her and shipped her back, it was going to be a bad day for both of them. All of them.

He finished the beer, dropped the bottle into the recycling chute, and opened the last message. He more than half dreaded learning the final fate of the *Razorback*, but it was his job to know as much as he could.

Julie:

This is not a joke. This is not one of your mother's drama fits. I have solid information that the Belt is about to be a very unsafe place. Whatever differences we have we can work out later.

FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY COME HOME NOW.

Miller frowned. The air recycler hummed. Outside, the local kids whistled high and loud. He tapped the screen, closing the last Bullshit Guilt Trip message, then opened it again.

It had been sent from Luna, two weeks before James Holden and the *Canterbury* raised the specter of war between Mars and the Belt.

This sideshow was getting interesting.

Chapter Nine: Holden

The ships are still not responding,” Naomi said, punching a key sequence on the comm panel.

“I didn’t think they would. But I want to show the *Donnager* that we’re worried about being followed. It’s all covering our asses at this point,” Holden said.

Naomi’s spine popped as she stretched. Holden pulled a protein bar out of the box in his lap and threw it at her.

“Eat.”

She peeled the wrapping off while Amos clambered up the ladder and threw himself into the couch next to her. His coverall was so filthy it shined. Just as with the others, three days on the cramped shuttle hadn’t helped his personal hygiene. Holden reached up and scratched his own greasy hair with distaste. The *Knight* was too small for showers, and the zero-g sinks were too small to stick your head in. Amos had solved the hair-washing problem by shaving all of his off. Now he just had a ring of stubble around his bald spot. Somehow, Naomi’s hair stayed shiny and mostly oil free. Holden wondered how she did that.

“Toss me some chow, XO,” Amos said.

“Captain,” Naomi corrected.

Holden threw a protein bar at him too. Amos snatched it from the air, then considered the long, thin package with distaste.

“Goddamn, Boss, I’d give my left nut for food that didn’t look like a dildo,” Amos said, then tapped his food against Naomi’s in mock toast.

“Tell me about our water,” Holden said.

“Well, I’ve been crawling around between hulls all day. I’ve tightened everything that can be tightened, and slapped epoxy on anything that can’t, so we aren’t dripping anywhere.”

“It’ll still be right down to the wire, Jim,” Naomi said. “The *Knight*’s recycling systems are crap. She was never intended to process five people’s worth of waste back into potables for two weeks.”

“Down to the wire, I can handle. We’ll just learn to live with each other’s stink. I was worried about ‘nowhere near enough.’ ”

“Speaking of which, I’m gonna head to my rack and spray on some more deodorant,” Amos said. “After all day crawling in the ship’s guts, my stink’s even keeping me awake tonight.”

Amos swallowed the last of his food and smacked his lips with mock relish, then climbed out of his couch and headed down the crew ladder. Holden took a bite of his own bar. It tasted like greased cardboard.

“What’s Shed up to?” he asked. “He’s been pretty quiet.”

Naomi, frowning, put her half-eaten bar down on the comm panel.

“I wanted to talk to you about that. He’s not doing well, Jim. Out of all of us, he’s having the hardest time with... what’s happened. You and Alex were both navy men. They train you to deal with losing shipmates. Amos has been flying so long this is actually the *third* ship that’s gone down under him, if you can believe that.”

“And you are made entirely of cast iron and titanium,” Holden said, only pretending to joke.

“Not entirely. Eighty, ninety percent. Tops,” Naomi said with a half smile. “Seriously, though. I think you should talk to him.”

“And say what? I’m no psychiatrist. The navy version of this speech involves duty and honorable sacrifice and avenging fallen comrades. Doesn’t work as well when your friends have been murdered for no apparent reason and there’s essentially no chance you can do anything about it.”

“I didn’t say you had to fix him. I said you needed to talk to him.”

Holden got up from his couch with a salute.

“Yes, sir,” he said. At the ladder he paused. “Again, thank you, Naomi. I’d really—”

“I know. Go be the captain,” she said, turning back to her panel and calling up the ship ops screen. “I’ll keep waving at the neighbors.”



Holden found Shed in the *Knight*’s tiny sick bay. Really more a sick closet. Other than a reinforced cot, the cabinets of supplies, and a half dozen pieces of wall-mounted equipment, there was just enough room for one stool stuck to the floor on magnetic feet. Shed was sitting on it.

“Hey, buddy, mind if I come in?” Holden asked. *Did I actually say “Hey, buddy”?*

Shed shrugged and pulled up an inventory screen on the wall panel, opening various drawers and staring at the contents. Pretending he’d been in the middle of something.

“Look, Shed. This thing with the *Canterbury* has really hit everyone hard, and you’ve—” Holden said. Shed turned, holding up a white squeeze tube.

“Three percent acetic acid solution. Didn’t realize we had this out here. The *Cant*’s run out, and I’ve got three people with GW who could really use it. Why’d they put it on the *Knight*, I wonder,” Shed said.

“GW?” was all Holden could think to reply.

“Genital warts. Acetic acid solution is the treatment for any visible warts. Burns ’em off. Hurts like hell, but it does the job. No reason to keep it on the shuttle. Medical inventory is always so messed up.”

Holden opened his mouth to speak, found nothing to say, and closed it again.

“We’ve got acetic acid cream,” Shed said, his voice increasingly shrill, “but no elemcet for pain. Which do you think you’d need more on a rescue shuttle? If we’d found anyone on that wreck with a bad case of GW, we’d have been set. A broken bone? You’re out of luck. Just suck it up.”

“Look, Shed,” Holden said, trying to break in.

“Oh, and look at this. No coagulant booster. What the hell? Hey, no chance anyone on a rescue mission could, you know, start *bleeding*. Catch a case of red bumps on your crank, sure, but bleeding? No way! I mean, we’ve got four cases of syphilis on the *Cant* right now. One of the oldest diseases in the book, and we still can’t get rid of it. I tell those guys, ‘The hookers on Saturn Station are banging every ice bucker on the circuit, so put the glove on,’ but do they listen? No. So here we are with syphilis and not enough ciprofloxacin.”

Holden felt his jaw slide forward. He gripped the side of the hatch and leaned into the room.

“Everyone on the *Cant* is dead,” Holden said, making each word clear and strong and brutal. “Everyone is dead. No one needs the antibiotics. No one needs wart cream.”

Shed stopped talking, and all the air went out of him like he’d been gut punched. He closed the drawers in the supply cabinet and turned off the inventory screen with small precise movements.

“I know,” he said in a quiet voice. “I’m not stupid. I just need some time.”

“We all do. But we’re stuck in this tiny can together. I’ll be honest, I came down here because Naomi is worried about you, but now that I’m here, you’re freaking me the hell out. That’s okay, because I’m the captain now and it’s my job. But I can’t have you freaking Alex or Amos out. We’re ten days from being grabbed by a Martian battleship, and that’s scary enough without the doctor falling apart.”

“I’m not a doctor, I’m just a tech,” Shed said, his voice very small.

"You're *our* doctor, okay? To the four of us here with you on this ship, you're our doctor. If Alex starts having post-traumatic stress episodes and needs meds to keep it together, he'll come to you. If you're down here jabbering about warts, he'll turn around and go back up to the cockpit and just do a really bad job of flying. You want to cry? Do it with all of us. We'll sit together in the galley and get drunk and cry like babies, but we'll do it together where it's safe. No more hiding down here."

Shed nodded.

"Can we do that?" he said.

"Do what?" Holden asked.

"Get drunk and cry like babies?"

"Hell yes. That is officially on the schedule for tonight. Report to the galley at twenty hundred hours, Mr. Garvey. Bring a cup."

Shed started to reply when the general comm clicked on and Naomi said, "Jim, come back up to ops."

Holden gripped Shed's shoulder for a moment, then left.

In ops, Naomi had the comm screen up again and was speaking to Alex in low tones. The pilot was shaking his head and frowning. A map glowed on her screen.

"What's up?" Holden asked.

"We're getting a tightbeam, Jim. It locked on and started transmitting just a couple minutes ago," Naomi replied.

"From the *Donnager*?" The Martian battleship was the only thing he could think of that might be inside laser communications range.

"No. From the Belt," Naomi said. "And not from Ceres, or Eros, or Pallas either. None of the big stations."

She pointed at a small dot on her display.

"It's coming from here."

"That's empty space," Holden said.

"Nope. Alex checked. It's the site of a big construction project Tycho is working on. Not a lot of detail on it, but radar returns are pretty strong."

"Something out there has a comm array that'll put a dot the size of your anus on us from over three AU away," Alex said.

"Okay, wow, that's impressive. What is our anus-sized dot saying?" Holden asked.

"You'll never believe this," Naomi said, and turned on the playback.

A dark-skinned man with the heavy facial bones of an Earther appeared on the screen. His hair was graying, and his neck was ropy with old muscle. He smiled and said, "Hello, James Holden. My name is Fred Johnson."

Holden hit the pause button.

"This guy looks familiar. Search the ship's database for that name," he said.

Naomi didn't move; she just stared at him with a puzzled look on her face.

"What?" he said.

"That's *Frederick Johnson*," she said.

"Okay."

"Colonel Frederick Lucius Johnson."

The pause might have been a second; it might have been an hour.

"Jesus," was all Holden could think to say.

The man on the screen had once been among the most decorated officers in the UN military, and ended up one of its most embarrassing failures. To Belters, he was the Earther Sheriff of Nottingham who'd turned into Robin Hood. To Earth, he was the hero who'd fallen from grace.

Fred Johnson started his rise to fame with a series of high-profile captures of Belt pirates during one of the periods of tension between Earth and Mars that seemed to ramp up every few decades and then fade away again. Whenever the system's two superpowers rattled their sabers at each other,

crime in the Belt rose. Colonel Johnson—Captain Johnson at the time—and his small wing of three missile frigates destroyed a dozen pirate ships and two major bases in a two-year span. By the time the Coalition had stopped bickering, piracy was actually *down* in the Belt, and Fred Johnson was the name on everyone’s lips. He was promoted and given command over the Coalition marine division tasked with policing the Belt, where he continued to serve with distinction.

Until Anderson Station.

A tiny shipping depot almost on the opposite side of the Belt from the major port Ceres, most people, including most Belters, would not have been able to find Anderson Station on a map. Its only importance was as a minor distribution station for water and air in one of the sparsest stretches of the Belt. Fewer than a million Belters got their air from Anderson.

Gustav Marconi, a career Coalition bureaucrat on the station, decided to implement a 3-percent handling surcharge on shipments passing through the station in hopes of raising the bottom line. Less than 5 percent of the Belters buying their air from Anderson were living bottle to mouth, so just under fifty thousand Belters might have to spend one day of each month not breathing. Only a small percentage of those fifty thousand lacked the leeway in their recycling systems to cover this minor shortfall. Of those, only a small portion felt that armed revolt was the correct course.

Which was why of the million affected, only 170 armed Belters came to the station, took over, and threw Marconi out an airlock. They demanded a government guarantee that no further handling surcharges would be added to the price of air and water coming through the station.

The Coalition sent Colonel Johnson.

During the Massacre of Anderson Station, the Belters kept the station cameras rolling, broadcasting to the solar system the entire time. Everyone watched as Coalition marines fought a long, gruesome corridor-to-corridor battle against men with nothing to lose and no reason to surrender. The Coalition won—it was a foregone conclusion—but it took three days of broadcast slaughter. The iconic image of the video was not one of the fighting, but the last image the station cameras caught before they were cut off: Colonel Johnson in station ops, surrounded by the corpses of the Belters who’d made their last stand there, surveying the carnage with a flat stare and hands limp at his sides.

The UN tried to keep Colonel Johnson’s resignation quiet, but he was too much a public figure. The video of the battle dominated the nets for weeks, only displaced when the former Colonel Johnson made a public statement apologizing for the massacre and announcing that the relationship between the Belt and the inner planets was untenable and heading toward ever greater tragedy.

Then he vanished. He was almost forgotten, a footnote in the history of human carnage, until the Pallas colony revolt four years later. This time refinery metalworkers kicked the Coalition governor off station. Instead of a tiny way station with 170 rebels, it was a major Belt rock with more than 150,000 people on it. When the Coalition ordered in the marines, everyone expected a bloodbath.

Colonel Johnson came out of nowhere and talked the metalworkers down; he talked the Coalition commanders into holding back the marines until the station could be handed over peacefully. He spent more than a year negotiating with the Coalition governor to improve working conditions in the refineries. And suddenly, the Butcher of Anderson Station was a Belt hero and an icon.

An icon who was beaming private messages to the *Knight*.

Holden hit the play button, and *that* Fred Johnson said, “Mr. Holden, I think you’re being played. Let me say straight out that I am speaking to you as an official representative of the Outer Planets Alliance. I don’t know what you’ve heard, but we aren’t all a bunch of cowboys itching for a chance to shoot our way to freedom. I’ve spent the last ten years working to make life for the Belters better without *anyone* getting shot. I believe in this idea so deeply that I gave up my Earth citizenship when I came out here.

“I tell you that so you’ll know how invested I am. I may be the one person in the solar system who wants war the least, and my voice is loud in OPA councils.

"You may have heard some of the broadcasts beating on the war drums and calling for revenge against Mars for what happened to your ship. I've talked to every OPA cell leader I know, and no one's claiming responsibility.

"Someone is working very hard to start a war. If it's Mars, then when you get on that ship, you'll never say another word in public that isn't fed to you by Martian handlers. I don't want to think it is Mars. I can't see how they would get anything out of a war. So my hope is that even after the *Donnager* picks you up, you can still be a player in what follows.

"I am sending you a keyword. Next time you broadcast publicly, use the word *ubiquitous* within the first sentence of the broadcast to signal that you're not being coerced. Don't use it, and I'll assume you are. Either way, I want you to know you have allies in the Belt.

"I don't know who or what you were before, but your voice matters now. If you want to use that voice to make things better, I will do anything I can to help you do it. If you get free, contact me at the address that follows. I think maybe you and I have a lot to talk about.

"Johnson out."



The crew sat in the galley drinking a bottle of ersatz tequila Amos had scrounged from somewhere. Shed was politely sipping from a small cup of it and trying to hide his grimace each time. Alex and Amos drank like sailors: a finger full in the bottom of the cup, tossed back all at once. Alex had a habit of saying "Hooboy!" after each shot. Amos just used a different profanity each time. He was up to his eleventh shot and so far had not repeated himself.

Holden stared at Naomi. She swirled the tequila in her cup and stared back. He found himself wondering what sort of genetic mashup had produced her features. Definitely some African and South American in there. Her last name hinted at Japanese ancestry, which was only barely visible, as a slight epicanthic fold. She'd never be conventionally pretty, but from the right angle she was actually fairly striking.

Shit, I'm drunker than I thought.

To cover, he said, "So..."

"So Colonel Johnson is calling you now. Quite the important man you've become, sir," Naomi replied.

Amos put down his cup with exaggerated care.

"Been meaning to ask about that, sir. Any chance we might take up his offer of help and just head back to the Belt?" he said. "Don't know about you, but with the Martian battleship in front, and the half dozen mystery ships behind, it's starting to feel pretty fuckin' crowded out here."

Alex snorted. "Are you kidding? If we flipped now, we'd be just about stopped by the time the *Donnager* caught up to us. She's burnin' the furniture to catch us before the Belter ships do. If we start headin' their direction, the *Donnie* might take that as a sign we've switched teams, frag the whole lot of us."

"I agree with Mr. Kamal," Holden said. "We've picked our course and we're going to see it through. I won't be losing Fred's contact information anytime soon. Speaking of which, have you deleted his message yet, Naomi?"

"Yes, sir. Scrubbed it from the ship's memory with steel wool. The Martians will never know he talked to us."

Holden nodded and unzipped his jumpsuit a little further. The galley was starting to feel very hot with five drunk people in it. Naomi raised an eyebrow at his days-old T-shirt. Embarrassed, he zipped back up.

"Those ships don't make any sense to me, Boss," Alex said. "A half dozen ships flyin' kamikaze missions with nukes strapped to their hulls *might* make a dent in a battlewagon like the *Donnie*, but not much else would. She opens up with her point defense network and rail guns, she can create a no-

fly zone a thousand clicks across. They could be killin' those six ships with torpedoes already, 'cept I think they're as confused about who they are as we are."

"They'll know they can't catch us before the *Donnager* picks us up," Holden said. "And they can't take her in a fight. So I don't know what they're up to."

Amos poured the last of the tequila into everyone's cups and held his up in a toast.

"I guess we'll fucking find out."

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Chapter Ten: Miller

Captain Shaddid tapped the tip of her middle finger against her thumb when she started getting annoyed. It was a small sound, soft as a cat's paws, but ever since Miller first noticed her habit, it had seemed louder. Quiet as it was, it could fill her office.

"Miller," she said, smiling as if she meant it. "We're all on edge these days. These have been hard, hard times."

"Yes, sir," Miller said, lowering his head like a fullback determined to muscle his way through all defenders, "but I think this is important enough to deserve closer—"

"It's a favor for a shareholder," Shaddid said. "Her father got jumpy. There's no reason to think he meant Mars blasting the *Canterbury*. Tariffs are going up again. There was a mine blowout on one of the Red Moon operations. Eros is having trouble with their yeast farm. We don't go through a day without something happening in the Belt that would make a daddy scared for his precious little flower."

"Yes, sir, but the timing—"

Her fingers upped tempo. Miller bit his lips. The cause was lost.

"Don't go chasing conspiracies," Shaddid said. "We've got a full board of crimes we know are real. Politics, war, system-wide cabals of inner planet bad guys searching for ways to screw us over? Not our mandate. Just get me a report that says you're looking, I'll send it back up the line, and we can get back to our jobs."

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir."

Shaddid nodded and turned back to her terminal. Miller plucked his hat from the corner of her desk and headed out. One of the station house air filters had gone bad over the weekend, and the replacement gave the rooms a reassuring smell of new plastic and ozone. Miller sat at his desk, fingers laced behind his head, and stared at the light fixture above him. The knot that had tied itself in his gut hadn't loosened up. That was too bad.

"Not so good, then?" Havelock asked.

"Could have gone better."

"She pull the job?"

Miller shook his head. "No, it's still mine. She just wants me to do it half-assed."

"Could be worse. At least you get to find out what happened. And if you maybe spend a little time after hours digging into it just for practice, you know?"

"Yeah," Miller said. "Practice."

Their desks were unnaturally clean, his and Havelock's both. The barrier of paperwork Havelock had created between himself and the station had eroded away, and Miller could tell from his partner's eyes and the way his hands moved that the cop in Havelock wanted to get back into the tunnels. He couldn't tell if it was to prove himself before his transfer went through, or just to break a few heads. Maybe those were two ways of saying the same thing.

Just don't get yourself killed before you get out of here, Miller thought. Aloud, he said, "What have we got?"

“Hardware shop. Sector eight, third level in,” Havelock said. “Extortion complaint.”

Miller sat for a moment, considering his own reluctance as if it belonged to someone else. It was like Shaddid had given a dog just one bite of fresh meat, then pointed it back toward kibble. The temptation to blow off the hardware shop bloomed, and for a moment he almost gave in. Then he sighed, swung his feet down to the decking, and stood.

“All right, then,” he said. “Let’s go make the station safe for commerce.”

“Words to live by,” Havelock said, checking his gun. He’d been doing that a lot more recently.

The shop was an entertainment franchise. Clean white fixtures offering up custom rigs for interactive environments: battle simulations, exploration games, sex. A woman’s voice ululated on the sound system, somewhere between an Islamic call to prayer and orgasm with a drumbeat. Half the titles were in Hindi with Chinese and Spanish translations. The other half were English with Hindi as the second language. The clerk was hardly more than a boy. Sixteen, seventeen years old with a weedy black beard he wore like a badge.

“Can I help you?” the boy said, eyeing Havelock with disdain just short of contempt. Havelock pulled his ID, making sure the kid got a good long look at his gun when he did it.

“We’d like to talk to”—Miller glanced at the complaint form on his terminal screen—“Asher Kamamatsu. He here?”

The manager was a fat man, for a Belter. Taller than Havelock, the man carried fat around his belly and thick muscles through the shoulders, arms, and neck. If Miller squinted, he could see the seventeen-year-old boy he had been under the layers of time and disappointment, and it looked a lot like the clerk out front. The office was almost too small for the three of them and stacked with boxes of pornographic software.

“You catch them?” the manager said.

“No,” Miller said. “Still trying to figure out who they are.”

“Dammit, I already told you. There’s pictures of them off the store camera. I gave you his fucking name.”

Miller looked at his terminal. The suspect was named Mateo Judd, a dockworker with an unspectacular criminal record.

“You think it’s just him, then,” Miller said. “All right. We’ll just go pick him up, throw him in the can. No reason for us to find out who he’s working for. Probably no one who’ll take it wrong, anyway. My experience with these protection rackets, the purse boys get replaced whenever one goes down. But since you’re sure this guy’s the *whole* problem...”

The manager’s sour expression told Miller he’d made his point. Havelock, leaning against a stack of boxes marked **СИРОТЛИВЫЕ ДЕВУШКИ**, smiled.

“Why don’t you tell me what he wanted,” Miller said.

“I already told the last cop,” the manager said.

“Tell me.”

“He was selling us a private insurance plan. Hundred a month, same as the last guy.”

“Last guy?” Havelock said. “So this happened before?”

“Sure,” the manager said. “Everyone has to pay some, you know. Price of doing business.”

Miller closed his terminal, frowning. “Philosophical. But if it’s the price of doing business, what’re we here for?”

“Because I thought you... you people had this shit under control. Ever since we stopped paying the Loca, I’ve been able to turn a decent profit. Now it’s all starting up again.”

“Hold on,” Miller said. “You’re telling me the Loca Greiga stopped charging protection?”

“Sure. Not just here. Half of the guys I know in the Bough just stopped showing up. We figured the cops had actually done something for once. Now we’ve got these new bastards, and it’s the same damn thing all over again.”

A crawling feeling made its way up Miller’s neck. He looked up at Havelock, who shook his head. He hadn’t heard of it either. The Golden Bough Society, Sohiro’s crew, the Loca Greiga. All the

organized crime on Ceres suffering the same ecological collapse, and now someone new moving into the evacuated niche. Might be opportunism. Might be something else. He almost didn't want to ask the next questions. Havelock was going to think he was paranoid.

"How long has it been since the old guys called on you for protection?" Miller asked.

"I don't know. Long time."

"Before or after Mars killed that water hauler?"

The manager folded his thick arms; his eyes narrowed.

"Before," he said. "Maybe a month or two. S'that got to do with anything?"

"Just trying to get the time scale right," Miller said. "The new guy. Mateo. He tell you who was backing his new insurance plan?"

"That's your job, figuring it. Right?"

The manager's expression had closed down so hard Miller imagined he could hear the click. Yes, Asher Kamamatsu knew who was shaking him down. He had balls enough to squeak about it but not to point the finger.

Interesting.

"Well, thanks for that," Miller said, standing up. "We'll let you know what we find."

"Glad you're on the case," the manager said, matching sarcasm for sarcasm.

In the exterior tunnel, Miller stopped. The neighborhood was at the friction point between sleazy and respectable. White marks showed where graffiti had been painted over. Men on bicycles swerved and weaved, foam wheels humming on the polished stone. Miller walked slowly, his eyes on the ceiling high above them until he found the security camera. He pulled up his terminal, navigated to the logs that matched the camera code, and cross-referenced the time code from the store's still frames. For a moment, he thumbed the controls, speeding people back and forth. And there was Mateo, coming out of the shop. A smug grin deformed the man's face. Miller froze the image and enhanced it. Havelock, watching over his shoulder, whistled low.

The split circle of the OPA was perfectly clear on the thug's armband—the same kind of armband he'd found in Julie Mao's hole.

What kind of company have you been keeping, kid? Miller thought. *You're better than this. You have to know you're better than this.*

"Hey, partner," he said aloud. "Think you can write up the report on that interview? I've got something I'd like to do. Might not be too smart to have you there. No offense."

Havelock's eyebrows crawled toward his hairline.

"You're going to question the OPA?"

"Shake some trees, is all," Miller said.



Miller would have thought that just being a security contractor in a known OPA-convivial bar would be enough to get him noticed. In the event, half the faces he recognized in the dim light of John Rock Gentlemen's Club were normal citizens. More than one of those were Star Helix, just like him, when they were on duty. The music was pure Belter, soft chimes accompanied by zither and guitar with lyrics in half a dozen languages. He was on his fourth beer, two hours past the end of his shift, and on the edge of giving up his plan as a losing scheme when a tall, thin man sat down at the bar next to him. Acne-pocked cheeks gave a sense of damage to a face that otherwise seemed on the verge of laughter. It wasn't the first OPA armband he'd seen that night, but it was worn with an air of defiance and authority. Miller nodded.

"I heard you've been asking about the OPA," the man said. "Interested in joining up?"

Miller smiled and lifted his glass, an intentionally noncommittal gesture.

"You who I'd talk to if I did?" he asked, his tone light.

"Might be able to help."

"Maybe you could tell me about a couple other things, then," he said, taking out his terminal and putting it on the fake bamboo bar with an audible click. Mateo Judd's picture glowed on the screen. The OPA man frowned, turning the screen to see it better.

"I'm a realist," Miller said. "When Chucky Snails was running protection, I wasn't above talking to his men. When the Hand took over and then the Golden Bough Society after them. My job isn't to stop people from bending the rules, it's to keep Ceres stable. You understand what I'm saying?"

"I can't say I do," the pock-marked man said. His accent made him sound more educated than Miller had expected. "Who is this man?"

"His name's Mateo Judd. He's been starting a protection business in sector eight. Says it's backed by the OPA."

"People say things, Detective. It is Detective, isn't it? But you were discussing realism."

"If the OPA's making a move on the Ceres black economy, it's going to be better all around if we can talk to each other. Communicate."

The man chuckled and pushed the terminal back. The bartender paced by, a question in his eyes that wasn't asking if they needed anything. It wasn't meant for Miller.

"I had heard that there was a certain level of corruption in Star Helix," the man said. "I admit I'm impressed by your straightforward manner. I'll clarify. The OPA isn't a criminal organization."

"Really? My mistake. I figured from the way it killed a lot of people..."

"You're baiting me. We defend ourselves against people who are perpetrating economic terrorism against the Belt. Earthers. Martians. We are in the business of protecting Belters," the man said. "Even you, Detective."

"Economic terrorism?" Miller said. "That seems a little overheated."

"You think so? The inner planets look on us as their labor force. They tax us. They direct what we do. They enforce their laws and ignore ours in the name of stability. In the last year, they've doubled the tariffs to Titania. Five thousand people on an ice ball orbiting Neptune, months from anywhere. The sun's just a bright star to them. Do you think they're in a position to get redress? They've blocked any Belter freighters from taking Europa contracts. They charge us twice as much to dock at Ganymede. The science station on Phoebe? We aren't even allowed to *orbit* it. There isn't a Belter in the place. Whatever they do there, we won't find out until they sell the technology back to us, ten years from now."

Miller sipped his beer and nodded toward his terminal.

"So this one isn't yours?"

"No. He isn't."

Miller nodded and put the terminal back in his pocket. Oddly, he believed the man. He didn't hold himself like a thug. The bravado wasn't there. The sense of trying to impress the world. No, this man was certain and amused and, underneath it all, profoundly tired. Miller had known soldiers like that, but not criminals.

"One other thing," Miller said. "I'm looking for someone."

"Another investigation?"

"Not exactly, no. Juliette Andromeda Mao. Goes by Julie."

"Should I know the name?"

"She's OPA," Miller said with a shrug.

"Do you know everyone in Star Helix?" the man said, and when Miller didn't answer, he added, "We are considerably larger than your corporation."

"Fair point," Miller said. "But if you could keep an ear out, I'd appreciate it."

"I don't know that you're in a position to expect favors."

"No harm asking."

The pock-faced man chuckled, put a hand on Miller's shoulder.

"Don't come back here, Detective," he said, and walked away into the crowd.

Miller took another drink of his beer, frowning. An uncomfortable feeling of having made the wrong step fidgeted in the back of his mind. He'd been sure that the OPA was making a move on Ceres, capitalizing on the death of the water hauler and the Belt's uptick in fear and hatred of the inner planets. But how did that fit with Julie Mao's father and his suspiciously well-timed anxiety? Or the disappearance of Ceres Station's supply of usual suspects in the first place? Thinking about it was like watching a video that was just out of focus. The sense of it was almost there, but only almost.

"Too many dots," Miller said. "Not enough lines."

"Excuse me?" the bartender said.

"Nothing," Miller said, pushing the half-empty bottle across the bar. "Thanks."

In his hole, Miller turned on some music. The lyrical chants that Candace had liked, back when they were young and, if not hopeful, at least more joyful in their fatalism. He set the lights to half power, hoping that if he relaxed, if for just a few minutes he let go of the gnawing sense that he had missed some critical detail, the missing piece might arrive on its own.

He'd half expected Candace to appear in his mind, sighing and looking crossly at him the way she had in life. Instead, he found himself talking with Julie Mao. In the half sleep of alcohol and exhaustion, he imagined her sitting at Havelock's desk. She was the wrong age, younger than the real woman would be. She was the age of the smiling kid in her picture. The girl who had raced in the *Razorback* and won. He had the sense of asking her questions, and her answers had the power of revelation. Everything made sense. Not only the change in the Golden Bough Society and her own abduction case, but Havelock's transfer, the dead ice hauler, Miller's own life and work. He dreamed of Julie Mao laughing, and he woke up late, with a headache.

Havelock was waiting at his desk. His broad, short Earther face seemed strangely alien, but Miller tried to shake it off.

"You look like crap," Havelock said. "Busy night?"

"Just getting old and drinking cheap beer," Miller said.

One of the vice squad shouted something angry about her files being locked again, and a computer tech scuttled across the station house like a nervous cockroach. Havelock leaned closer, his expression grave.

"Seriously, Miller," Havelock said. "We're still partners, and... honest to God, I think you may be the only friend I've got on this rock. You can trust me. If there's anything you want to tell me, I'm good."

"That's great," Miller said. "But I don't know what you're talking about. Last night was a bust."

"No OPA?"

"Sure, OPA. Anymore, you swing a dead cat in this station, you'll hit three OPA guys. Just no good information."

Havelock leaned back, lips pressed thin and bloodless. Miller's shrug asked a question, and the Earther nodded toward the board. A new homicide topped the list. At three in the morning, while Miller had been having inchoate dream conversations, someone had opened Mateo Judd's hole and fired a shotgun cartridge full of ballistic gel into his left eye.

"Well," Miller said, "called that one wrong."

"Which one?" Havelock said.

"OPA's not moving in on the criminals," Miller said. "They're moving in on the cops."

Chapter Eleven: Holden

The *Donnager* was ugly.

Holden had seen pictures and videos of the old oceangoing navies of Earth, and even in the age of steel, there had always been something beautiful about them. Long and sleek, they had the appearance of something leaning into the wind, a creature barely held on the leash. The *Donnager* had none of that. Like all long-flight spacecraft, it was built in the “office tower” configuration: each deck one floor of the building, ladders or elevators running down the axis. Constant thrust took the place of gravity.

But the *Donnager* actually *looked* like an office building on its side. Square and blocky, with small bulbous projections in seemingly random places. At nearly five hundred meters long, it was the size of a 130-story building. Alex had said it was 250,000 tons dry weight, and it looked heavier. Holden reflected, not for the first time, on how so much of the human sense of aesthetics had been formed in a time when sleek objects cut through the air. The *Donnager* would never move through anything thicker than interstellar gas, so curves and angles were a waste of space. The result was ugly.

It was also intimidating. As Holden watched from his seat next to Alex in the cockpit of the *Knight*, the massive battleship matched course with them, looming close and then seeming to stop above them. A docking bay opened, breaking up the *Donnager*’s flat black belly with a square of dim red light. The *Knight* beeped insistently, reminding him of the targeting lasers painting their hull. Holden looked for the point defense cannons aimed at him. He couldn’t find them.

When Alex spoke, Holden jumped.

“Roger that, *Donnager*,” the pilot said. “We’ve got steering lock. I’m killing thrust.”

The last shreds of weight vanished. Both ships were still moving at hundreds of kilometers a minute, but their matched courses felt like stillness.

“Got docking permission, Cap. Take her in?”

“It seems late to make a run for it, Mr. Kamal,” Holden said. He imagined Alex making a mistake that the *Donnager* interpreted as threatening, and the point defense cannons throwing a couple hundred thousand Teflon-coated chunks of steel through them.

“Go slowly, Alex,” he said.

“They say one of those can kill a planet,” Naomi said over the comm. She was at the ops station a deck below.

“Anyone can kill a planet from orbit,” Holden replied. “You don’t even need bombs. Just push anvils out the airlock. That thing out there could kill... Shit. Anything.”

Tiny touches shifted them as the maneuvering rockets fired. Holden knew that Alex was guiding them in, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that the *Donnager* was swallowing them.



Docking took nearly an hour. Once the *Knight* was inside the bay, a massive manipulator arm grabbed *her* and put it down in an empty section of the deck. Clamps grabbed the ship, the *Knight*’s hull reverberating with a metallic bang that reminded Holden of a brig cell’s maglocks.

The Martians ran a docking tube from one wall and mated up to the *Knight's* airlock. Holden gathered the crew at the inner door.

"No guns, no knives, no anything that might look like a weapon," he said. "They'll probably be okay with hand terminals, but keep them turned off just in case. If they ask for it, hand it over without complaint. Our survival here may rest on them thinking we're very compliant."

"Yeah," Amos said. "Fuckers killed McDowell, but we have to act nice..."

Alex started to respond, but Holden cut him off.

"Alex, you did twenty flying with the MCRN. Anything else we should know?"

"Same stuff you said, Boss," Alex replied. "Yes sir, no sir, and snap to when given an order. The enlisted guys will be okay, but the officers get the sense of humor trained out of 'em."

Holden looked at his tiny crew, hoping he hadn't killed them all by bringing them here. He cycled open the lock, and they drifted down the short docking tube in the zero g. When they reached the airlock at the end—flat gray composites and immaculately clean—everyone pushed down to the floor. Their magnetic boots grabbed on. The airlock closed and hissed at them for several seconds before opening into a larger room with about a dozen people standing in it. Holden recognized Captain Theresa Yao. There were several others in naval officers' dress, who were part of her staff; one man in an enlisted uniform with a look of thinly veiled impatience; and six marines in heavy combat armor, carrying assault rifles. The rifles were pointed at him, so Holden put up his hands.

"We're not armed," he said, smiling and trying to look harmless.

The rifles didn't waver, but Captain Yao stepped forward.

"Welcome aboard the *Donnager*," she said. "Chief, check them."

The enlisted man clumped toward them and quickly and professionally patted them all down. He gave the thumbs-up to one of the marines. The rifles went down, and Holden worked hard not to sigh with relief.

"What now, Captain?" Holden asked, keeping his voice light.

Yao looked Holden over critically for several seconds before answering. Her hair was pulled tightly back, the few strands of gray making straight lines. In person, he could see the softening of age at her jaw and the corners of her eyes. Her stony expression had the same quiet arrogance that all the naval captains he'd known shared. He wondered what she saw, looking at him. He resisted the urge to straighten his greasy hair.

"Chief Gunderson will take you down to your rooms and get you settled in," she replied.

"Someone will be along shortly to debrief you."

Chief Gunderson started to lead them from the room when Yao spoke again, her voice suddenly hard.

"Mr. Holden, if you know anything about the six ships that are following you, speak now," she said. "We gave them a two-hour deadline to change course about an hour ago. So far they haven't. In one hour I'm going to order a torpedo launch. If they're friends of yours, you could save them a great deal of pain."

Holden shook his head emphatically.

"All I know is they came out of the Belt when you started out to meet us, Captain," Holden said. "They haven't talked to us. Our best guess is they're concerned citizens of the Belt coming to watch what happens."

Yao nodded. If she found the thought of witnesses disconcerting, it didn't show.

"Take them below, Chief," she said, then turned away.

Chief Gunderson gave a soft whistle and pointed at one of the two doors. Holden's crew followed him out, the marines bringing up the rear. As they moved through the *Donnager*, Holden took his first really up-close look at a Martian capital ship. He'd never served on a battleship in the UN Navy, and he'd stepped foot on them maybe three times in seven years, always in dock, and usually for a party. Every inch of the *Donnager* was just a little sharper than any UN vessel he'd served on. *Mars really does build them better than we do.*

"Goddamn, XO, they sure do keep their shit squeaky clean," Amos said behind him.

"Ain't much to do on a long flight for most of the crew, Amos," Alex said. "So when you aren't doin' somethin' else, you clean."

"See, that's why I work haulers," Amos said. "Clean decks or get drunk and screw, and I've got a preference."

As they walked through a maze of corridors, the ship started a slight vibration, and gravity slowly reappeared. They were under thrust. Holden used his heels to touch his boots' slide controls, turning the magnets off.

They saw almost no one, and the few they did see moved fast and said little, barely sparing them a glance. With six ships closing on them, everyone would be at their duty stations. When Captain Yao had said she'd fire her torpedoes in an hour, there hadn't been a hint of threat in her voice. It was just a flat statement of fact. For most of the young sailors on this ship, it would probably be the first time they'd ever been in a live combat situation—if it came to that. Holden didn't believe it would.

He wondered what to make of the fact that Yao was prepared to take out a handful of Belt ships just because they were running quiet and close. It didn't suggest that they'd hesitate to kill a water hauler, like the *Cant*, if they thought there was reason to.

Gunderson brought them to a stop in front of a hatch with *OQ117* printed on it. He slid a card through the lock and gestured everyone inside.

"Better than I'd expected," Shed said, sounding impressed.

The compartment was large by ship standards. It had six high-g couches and a small table with four chairs stuck to the deck with magnetic feet. An open door in one bulkhead showed a smaller compartment with a toilet and sink. Gunderson and the marine lieutenant followed the crew inside.

"This is your rack for the time being," the chief said. "There's a comm panel on the wall. Two of Lieutenant Kelly's people will be stationed outside. Buzz them and they'll send for anything you need."

"How about some chow?" Amos said.

"We'll have some sent up. You are to remain here until called for," Gunderson said. "Lieutenant Kelly, you have anything to add, sir?"

The marine lieutenant looked them over.

"The men outside are there for your protection, but they will react unpleasantly if you make any trouble," he said. "You read me?"

"Loud and clear, Lieutenant," Holden said. "Don't worry. My people will be the easiest houseguests you've ever had."

Kelly nodded at Holden with what seemed like genuine gratitude. He was a professional doing an unpleasant job. Holden sympathized. Also, he'd known enough marines to know how unpleasant it could get if they felt challenged.

Gunderson said, "Can you take Mr. Holden here to his appointment on your way out, El Tee? I'd like to get these folks squared away."

Kelly nodded and took Holden's elbow.

"Come with me, sir," he said.

"Where am I going, Lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant Lopez asked to see you as soon as you landed. I'm taking you to him."

Shed looked nervously from the marine to Holden and back. Naomi nodded. They'd all see each other again, Holden told himself. He even thought it was likely to be true.

Kelly led Holden at a brisk pace through the ship. His rifle was no longer at the ready but hanging from his shoulder loosely. Either he'd decided Holden wasn't going to cause trouble, or that he could take him down easily if he did.

"Can I ask who Lieutenant Lopez is?"

"He's the guy who asked to see you," Kelly said.

Kelly stopped at a plain gray door, rapped once, then took Holden inside a small compartment with a table and two uncomfortable-looking chairs. A dark-haired man was setting up a recorder. He waved one hand vaguely in the direction of a chair. Holden sat. The chair was even less comfortable than it looked.

"You can go, Mr. Kelly," the man Holden assumed was Lopez said. Kelly left and closed the door.

When Lopez had finished, he sat down across the table from Holden and reached out one hand. Holden shook it.

"I'm Lieutenant Lopez. Kelly probably told you that. I work for naval intelligence, which he almost certainly didn't tell you. My job isn't secret, but they train jarheads to be tight-lipped."

Lopez reached into his pocket, took out a small packet of white lozenges, and popped one into his mouth. He didn't offer one to Holden. Lopez's pupils contracted to tiny points as he sucked the lozenge. Focus drugs. He'd be watching every tic of Holden's face during questioning. Tough to lie to.

"First Lieutenant James R. Holden, of Montana," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes, sir," Holden said anyway.

"Seven years in the UNN, last posting on the destroyer *Zhang Fei*."

"That's me."

"Your file says you were busted out for assaulting a superior officer," Lopez said. "That's pretty cliché, Holden. You punched the old man? Seriously?"

"No. I missed. Broke my hand on a bulkhead."

"How'd that happen?"

"He was quicker than I expected," Holden replied.

"Why'd you try?"

"I was projecting my self-loathing onto him. It's just a stroke of luck that I actually wound up hurting the right person," Holden said.

"Sounds like you've thought about it some since then," Lopez said, his pinprick pupils never moving from Holden's face. "Therapy?"

"Lots of time to think on the *Canterbury*," Holden replied.

Lopez ignored the obvious opening and said, "What did you come up with, during all that thinking?"

"The Coalition has been stepping on the necks of the people out here for over a hundred years now. I didn't like being the boot."

"An OPA sympathizer, then?" Lopez said, his expression not changing at all.

"No. I didn't switch sides. I stopped playing. I didn't renounce my citizenship. I like Montana. I'm out here because I like flying, and only a Belter rust trap like the *Canterbury* will hire me."

Lopez smiled for the first time. "You're an exceedingly honest man, Mr. Holden."

"Yes."

"Why did you claim that a Martian military vessel destroyed your ship?"

"I didn't. I explained all that in the broadcast. It had technology only available to inner planet fleets, and I found a piece of MCRN hardware in the device that tricked us into stopping."

"We'll want to see that."

"You're welcome to it."

"Your file says you were the only child of a family co-op," Lopez said, acting as though they'd never stopped talking about Holden's past.

"Yes, five fathers, three mothers."

"So many parents for only one child," Lopez said, slowly unwrapping another lozenge. The Martians had lots of space for traditional families.

"The tax break for eight adults only having one child allowed them to own twenty-two acres of decent farmland. There are over thirty billion people on Earth. Twenty-two acres is a national park,"

Holden said. "Also, the DNA mix is legit. They aren't parents in name only."

"How did they decide who carried you?"

"Mother Elise had the widest hips."

Lopez popped the second lozenge into his mouth and sucked on it a few moments. Before he could speak again, the deck shook. The video recorder jiggled on its arm.

"Torpedo launches?" Holden said. "Guess those Belt ships didn't change course."

"Any thoughts about that, Mr. Holden?"

"Just that you seem pretty willing to kill Belt ships."

"You've put us in a position where we can't afford to seem weak. After your accusations, there are a lot of people who don't think much of us."

Holden shrugged. If the man was watching for guilt or remorse from Holden, he was out of luck. The Belt ships had known what they were going toward. They hadn't turned away. But still, something bothered him.

"They might hate your living guts," Holden said. "But it's hard to find enough suicidal people to crew six ships. Maybe they think they can outrun torpedoes."

Lopez didn't move, his whole body preternaturally still with the focus drugs pouring through him.

"We—" Lopez began, and the general quarters Klaxon sounded. It was deafening in the small metal compartment.

"Holy shit, did they shoot *back*?" Holden asked.

Lopez shook himself, like a man waking up from a daydream. He got up and hit the comm button by the door. A marine came through seconds later.

"Take Mr. Holden back to his quarters," Lopez said, then left the room at a run.

The marine gestured at the corridor with the barrel of his rifle. His expression was hard.

It's all fun and games till someone shoots back, Holden thought.



Naomi patted the empty couch next to her and smiled.

"Did they put slivers under your fingernails?" she asked.

"No, actually, he was surprisingly human for a naval intelligence wonk," Holden replied. "Of course, he was just getting warmed up. Have you guys heard anything about the other ships?"

Alex said, "Nope. But that alarm means they're takin' them seriously all of a sudden."

"It's insane," Shed said quietly. "Flying around in these metal bubbles, and then trying to poke holes in each other. You ever seen what long-term decompression and cold exposure does? Breaks all the capillaries in your eyes and skin. Tissue damage to the lungs can cause massive pneumonia followed by emphysema-like scarring. I mean, if you don't just die."

"Well, that's awful fucking cheerful, Doc. Thanks for that," Amos said.

The ship suddenly vibrated in a syncopated but ultra-high-speed rhythm. Alex looked at Holden, his eyes wide.

"That's the point defense network openin' up. That means incoming torpedoes," he said. "Better strap in tight, kids. The ship might start doin' some violent maneuvering."

Everyone but Holden was already belted into the couches. He fastened his restraints too.

"This sucks. All the real action is happenin' thousands of clicks from here, and we got no instruments to look at," Alex said. "We won't know if somethin' slipped through the flack screen till it rips the hull open."

"Boy, everybody is just a fucking pile of fun right now," Amos said loudly.

Shed's eyes were wide, his face too pale. Holden shook his head.

"Not going to happen," he said. "This thing is unkillable. Whoever those ships are, they can put on a good show, but that's it."

“All respect, Captain,” Naomi said. “But whoever those ships are, they should be dead already, and they aren’t.”

The distant noises of faraway combat kept up. The occasional rumble of a torpedo firing. The near-constant vibration of the high-speed point defense guns. Holden didn’t realize he’d fallen asleep until he was jerked awake by an earsplitting roar. Amos and Alex were yelling. Shed was screaming.

“What happened?” Holden yelled over the noise.

“We’re hit, Cap!” Alex said. “That was a torpedo hit!”

The gravity suddenly dropped away. The *Donnager* had stopped its engines. Or they’d been destroyed.

Amos was still yelling, “Shit shit shit,” over everything. But at least Shed had stopped screaming. He was staring wide eyed out of his couch, his face white. Holden unbuckled his straps and pushed off toward the comm panel.

“Jim!” Naomi called out. “What are you doing?”

“We need to find out what’s going on,” Holden said over his shoulder.

When he reached the bulkhead by the hatch, he punched the comm panel call button. There was no reply. He hit it again, then started pounding on the hatch. No one came.

“Where are our damn marines?” he said.

The lights dimmed, came back up. Then again, and again, in a slow cadence.

“Gauss turrets firing. Shit. It’s CQB,” Alex said in awe.

In the history of the Coalition, no capital ship had ever gotten into a close-quarters battle. But here they were, firing the ship’s big cannons, which meant that the range was sufficiently short that a nonguided weapon was viable. Hundreds or even dozens of kilometers, not thousands. Somehow the Belt ships had survived *Donnager*’s torpedo barrage.

“Anyone else think this is desperate fucking queer?” Amos asked, a touch of panic in his voice.

The *Donnager* began to ring like a gong struck over and over again by a massive hammer. Return fire.

The gauss round that killed Shed didn’t even make a noise. Like a magic trick, two perfectly round holes appeared on either side of the room in a line that intersected Shed’s couch. One moment, the medic was there; the next, his head was gone from the Adam’s apple up. Arterial blood pumped out in a red cloud, pulled into two thin lines, and whirled to the holes in the walls of the room as the air rushed out.

Chapter Twelve: Miller

For thirty years, Miller had worked security. Violence and death were familiar companions to him. Men, women. Animals. Kids. Once he'd held a woman's hand while she bled to death. He'd killed two people, could still see them die if he closed his eyes and thought about it. If anyone had asked him, he'd have said there wasn't much left that would shake him.

But he'd never watched a war start before.

The Distinguished Hyacinth Lounge was in the shift-change rush. Men and women in security uniforms—mostly from Star Helix, but a few smaller companies too—were either drinking their after-work liquor and winding down or making trips to the breakfast buffet for coffee, textured fungi in sugar sauce, sausage with meat maybe one part in a thousand. Miller chewed the sausage and watched the display monitor on the wall. A Star Helix external relations head looked sincerely out, his demeanor radiating calm and certainty as he explained how everything was going to hell.

"Preliminary scans suggest that the explosion was the result of a failed attempt to connect a nuclear device to the docking station. Officials from the Martian government have referred to the incident only as an 'alleged terrorist action' and refused comment pending further investigation."

"Another one," Havelock said from behind him. "You know, eventually, one of those assholes is going to get it right."

Miller turned in his seat, then nodded to the chair beside him. Havelock sat.

"That'll be an interesting day," Miller said. "I was about to call you."

"Yeah, sorry," his partner said. "I was up kind of late."

"Any word on the transfer?"

"No," Havelock said. "Figure my paperwork's hung on a desk someplace in Olympus. What about you? Any word on your special-project girl?"

"Not yet," Miller said. "Look, the reason I wanted to meet up before we went in... I need to take a couple days, try to run down some leads on Julie. With all this other shit going on, Shaddid doesn't want me doing much more than phoning this one in."

"But you're ignoring that," Havelock said. It wasn't a question.

"I've got a feeling about this one."

"So how can I help?"

"I need you to cover for me."

"How am I going to do that?" Havelock asked. "It's not like I can tell them you're sick. They've got access to your medical records same as everyone else's."

"Tell 'em I've been getting drunk a lot," Miller said. "That Candace came by. She's my ex-wife."

Havelock chewed his sausage, brow furrowed. The Earther shook his head slowly—not a refusal, but the prelude to a question. Miller waited.

"You're telling me you'd rather have the boss think you're missing work because you're on a dysfunctional, heartbroken bender than that you're doing the work she assigned you? I don't get it."

Miller licked his lips and leaned forward, elbows on the smooth off-white table. Someone had scratched a design into the plastic. A split circle. And this was a cop bar.

"I don't know what I'm looking at," Miller said. "There's a bunch of things that belong together somehow, and I'm not sure yet what it is. Until I know more, I need to stay low. A guy has a fling

with his ex, hits the bottle for a few days? That's not going to light up anyone's panels."

Havelock shook his head again, this time in mild disbelief. If he'd been a Belter, he'd have made the gesture with his hands, so you could see it when he had an environment suit on. Another of the hundred small ways someone who hadn't grown up on the Belt betrayed himself. The wall monitor cut to the image of a blond woman in a severe uniform. The external relations head was talking about the Martian navy's tactical response and whether the OPA was behind the increased vandalism. That was what he called fumbling an overloaded fusion reactor while setting up a ship-killing booby trap: vandalism.

"That shit just doesn't follow," Havelock said, and for a moment Miller didn't know if he meant the Belter guerrilla actions, the Martian response, or the favor he'd asked. "Seriously. Where's Earth? All this shit's going on, and we don't hear a damn thing from them."

"Why would we?" Miller asked. "It's Mars and the Belt going at it."

"When was the last time Earth let anything major happen without them in the middle of it?" Havelock said, then sighed. "Okay. You're too drunk to come in. Your love life's a mess. I'm trying to cover for you."

"Just for a couple days."

"Make sure you get back before someone decides it's the perfect chance for a random shooting to take out the Earther cop."

"I'll do that," Miller said, rising from the table. "You watch your back."

"Don't need to tell me twice," Havelock said.



The Ceres Center for Jiu Jitsu was down near the port, where the spin gravity was strongest. The hole was a converted storage space from before the big spin. A cylinder flattened where flooring had been set in about a third of the way from the bottom. Racks bearing various lengths of staffs, bamboo swords, and dull plastic practice knives hung from the vaulted ceiling. The polished stone echoed with the grunting of men working a line of resistance machines and the soft thud of a woman at the back punishing a heavy bag. Three students stood on the central mat, speaking in low voices.

Pictures filled the front wall on either side of the door. Soldiers in uniform. Security agents for half a dozen Belter corporations. Not many inner planet types, but a few. Plaques commemorating placements in competitions. A page of small type outlining the history of the studio.

One of the students shouted and collapsed, carrying one of the others to the mat with her. The one still standing applauded and helped them back up. Miller searched through the wall of pictures, hoping to find Julie.

"Can I help you?"

The man was half a head shorter than Miller and easily twice as broad. It should have made him look like an Earther, but everything else about him said Belt. He wore pale sweats that made his skin seem even darker. His smile was curious and as serene as a well-fed predator. Miller nodded.

"Detective Miller," he said. "I'm with station security. There's one of your students I wanted to get some background on."

"This is an official investigation?" the man asked.

"Yeah," Miller said. "I'm afraid it is."

"Then you'll have a warrant."

Miller smiled. The man smiled back.

"We don't give out any information on our students without a warrant," he said. "Studio policy."

"I respect that," Miller said. "No, I really do. It's just that... parts of this particular investigation are maybe a little more official than others. The girl's not in trouble. She didn't do anything. But she has family on Luna who want her found."

"A kidnap job," the man said, folding his arms. The serene face had gone cool without any apparent movement.

"Only the official part," Miller said. "I can get a warrant, and we can do the whole thing through channels. But then I have to tell my boss. The more she knows, the less room I have to move."

The man didn't react. His stillness was unnerving. Miller struggled not to fidget. The woman working the heavy bag at the far end of the studio went through a flurry of strikes, shouting out with each one.

"Who?" the man asked.

"Julie Mao," Miller said. He could have said he was looking for the Buddha's mother for all the reaction he got. "I think she's in trouble."

"Why do you care if she is?"

"I don't know the answer to that one," Miller said. "I just do. If you don't want to help me, then you don't."

"And you'll go get your warrant. Do this through channels."

Miller took off his hat, rubbed a long, thin hand across his head, and put the hat back in place.

"Probably not," he said.

"Let me see your ID," the man said. Miller pulled up his terminal and let the man confirm who he was. The man handed it back and pointed to a small door behind the heavy bags. Miller did as he was told.

The office was cramped. A small laminate desk with a soft sphere behind it in lieu of a chair. Two stools that looked like they'd come out of a bar. A filing cabinet with a small fabricator that stank of ozone and oil that was probably where the plaques and certificates were made.

"Why does the family want her?" the man asked, lowering himself onto the sphere. It acted like a chair but required constant balance. A place to rest without actually resting.

"They think she's in harm's way. At least, that's what they're saying, and I don't have reason to disbelieve them yet."

"What kind of harm?"

"Don't know," Miller said. "I know she was on station. I know she shipped out for Tycho, and after that, I've got nothing."

"Her family want her back on their station?"

The man knew who her family was. Miller filed the information away without missing a beat.

"I don't think so," Miller said. "The last message she got from them routed through Luna."

"Down the well." The way he said it made it sound like a disease.

"I'm looking for anyone who knows who she was shipping with. If she's on a run, where she was going and when she was planning to get there. If she's in range of a tightbeam."

"I don't know any of that," the man said.

"You know anyone I should ask?"

There was a pause.

"Maybe. I'll find what I can for you."

"Anything else you can tell me about her?"

"She started at the studio five years ago. She was... angry when she first came. Undisciplined."

"She got better," Miller said. "Brown belt, right?"

The man's eyebrows rose.

"I'm a cop," Miller said. "I find things out."

"She improved," her teacher said. "She'd been attacked. Just after she came to the Belt. She was seeing that it didn't happen twice."

"Attacked," Miller said, parsing the man's tone of voice. "Raped?"

"I didn't ask. She trained hard, even when she was off station. You can tell when people let it slide. They come back weaker. She never did."

"Tough girl," Miller said. "Good for her. Did she have friends? People she sparred with?"

“A few. No lovers that I know of, since that’s the next question.”

“That’s strange. Girl like that.”

“Like what, Detective?”

“Pretty girl,” Miller said. “Competent. Smart. Dedicated. Who wouldn’t want to be with someone like that?”

“Perhaps she hadn’t met the right person.”

Something in the way he said it hinted at amusement. Miller shrugged, uncomfortable in his skin.

“What kind of work did she do?” he asked.

“Light freighter. I don’t know of any particular cargo. I had the impression that she shipped wherever there was a need.”

“Not a regular route, then?”

“That was my impression.”

“Whose ships did she work? One particular freighter, or whatever came to hand? A particular company?”

“I’ll find what I can for you,” the man said.

“Courier for the OPA?”

“I’ll find out,” the man said, “what I can.”



The news that afternoon was all about Phoebe. The science station there—the one that Belters weren’t allowed even to dock at—had been hit. The official report stated that half the inhabitants of the base were dead, the other half missing. No one had claimed responsibility yet, but the common wisdom was that some Belter group—maybe the OPA, maybe someone else—had finally managed an act of “vandalism” with a body count. Miller sat in his hole, watching the broadcast feed and drinking.

It was all going to hell. The pirate casts from the OPA calling for war. The burgeoning guerrilla actions. All of it. The time was coming that Mars wasn’t going to ignore them anymore. And when Mars took action, it wouldn’t matter if Earth followed suit. It would be the first real war in the Belt. The catastrophe was coming, and neither side seemed to understand how vulnerable they were. And there was nothing—not one single goddamned thing—that he could do to stop it. He couldn’t even slow it down.

Julie Mao grinned at him from the still frame, her pinnace behind her. Attacked, the man had said. There was nothing about it in her record. Might have been a mugging. Might have been something worse. Miller had known a lot of victims, and he put them into three categories. First there were the ones who pretended nothing had happened, or that whatever it was didn’t really matter. That was well over half the people he talked to. Then there were the professionals, people who took their victimization as permission to act out any way they saw fit. That ate most of the rest.

Maybe 5 percent, maybe less, were the ones who sucked it up, learned the lesson, and moved on. The Julies. The good ones.

His door chimed three hours after his official shift was over. Miller stood up, less steady on his feet than he’d expected. He counted the bottles on the table. There were more than he’d thought. He hesitated for a moment, torn between answering the door and throwing the bottles into the recycler. The door chimed again. He went to open it. If it was someone from the station, they expected him to be drunk, anyway. No reason to disappoint.

The face was familiar. Acne-pocked, controlled. The OPA armband from the bar. The one who’d had Mateo Judd killed.

The cop.

“Evening,” Miller said.

"Detective Miller," the pocked man said. "I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot. I was hoping we could try again."

"Right."

"May I come in?"

"I try not to take strange men home," Miller said. "I don't even know your name."

"Anderson Dawes," the pocked man said. "I'm the Ceres liaison for the Outer Planets Alliance. I think we can help each other. May I come in?"

Miller stood back, and the pocked man—Dawes—stepped inside. Dawes took in the hole for the space of two slow breaths, then sat as if the bottles and the stink of old beer were nothing to comment on. Silently cursing himself and willing a sobriety he didn't feel, Miller sat across from him.

"I need a favor from you," Dawes said. "I'm willing to pay for it. Not money, of course. Information."

"What do you want?" Miller asked.

"Stop looking for Juliette Mao."

"No sale."

"I'm trying to keep the peace, Detective," Dawes said. "You should hear me out."

Miller leaned forward, elbows on the table. Mr. Serene Jiu Jitsu Instructor was working for the OPA? The timing of Dawes' visit seemed to be saying so. Miller filed that possibility away but said nothing.

"Mao worked for us," Dawes said. "But you'd guessed that."

"More or less. You know where she is?"

"We don't. We are looking for her. And we need to be the ones to find her. Not you."

Miller shook his head. There was a response, the right thing to say. It was rattling in the back of his head, and if he just didn't feel quite so fuzzy...

"You're one of *them*, Detective. You may have lived your whole life out here, but your salary is paid by an inner planet corporation. No, wait. I don't blame you. I understand how it is. They were hiring and you needed the work. But... we're walking on a bubble right now. The *Canterbury*. The fringe elements in the Belt calling for war."

"Phoebe Station."

"Yes, they'll blame us for that too. Add a Luna corporation's prodigal daughter..."

"You think something's happened to her?"

"She was on the *Scopuli*," Dawes said, and when Miller didn't immediately respond, he added, "The freighter that Mars used as bait when they killed the *Canterbury*."

Miller thought about that for a long moment, then whistled low.

"We don't know what happened," Dawes said. "Until we do, I can't have you stirring up the water. It's muddy enough now."

"And what information are you offering?" Miller asked. "That's the trade, right?"

"I'll tell you what we find. After we find her," Dawes said. Miller chuckled, and the OPA man went on. "It's a generous offer, considering who you are. Employee of Earth. Partner of an Earther. Some people would think that was enough to make you the enemy too."

"But not you," Miller said.

"I think we've got the same basic goals, you and I. Stability. Safety. Strange times make for strange alliances."

"Two questions."

Dawes spread his arms, welcoming them.

"Who took the riot gear?" Miller asked.

"Riot gear?"

"Before the *Canterbury* died, someone took our riot gear. Maybe they wanted to arm soldiers for crowd control. Maybe they didn't want our crowds controlled. Who took it? Why?"

"It wasn't us," Dawes said.

"That's not an answer. Try this one. What happened to the Golden Bough Society?"

Dawes looked blank.

"Loca Greiga?" Miller asked. "Sohiro?"

Dawes opened his mouth, closed it. Miller dropped his beer bottle into the recycler.

"Nothing personal, friend," he said, "but your investigative techniques aren't impressing me.

What makes you think you can find her?"

"It's not a fair test," Dawes said. "Give me a few days, I'll get answers for you."

"Talk to me then. I'll try not to start an all-out war while you do, but I'm not letting go of Julie.

You can go now."

Dawes rose. He looked sour.

"You're making a mistake," he said.

"Won't be my first."

After the man left, Miller sat at his table. He'd been stupid. Worse, he'd been self-indulgent.

Drinking himself into a stupor instead of doing the work. Instead of finding Julie. But he knew more now. The *Scopuli*. The *Canterbury*. More lines between the dots.

He cleaned away his bottles, took a shower, and pulled up his terminal, searching what there was about Julie's ship. After an hour, a new thought occurred to him, a small fear that grew the more he looked at it. Near midnight, he put a call through to Havelock's hole.

His partner took two full minutes to answer. When he did, his image was wild-haired and bleary-eyed.

"Miller?"

"Havelock. You have any vacation time saved up?"

"A little."

"Sick leave?"

"Sure," Havelock said.

"Take it," Miller said. "Take it now. Get off station. Someplace safe if you can find it. Someplace they're not going to start killing Earthers for shits and giggles if things go pear-shaped."

"I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"I had a little visit with an OPA agent tonight. He was trying to talk me into dropping my kidnap job. I think... I think he's nervous. I think he's scared."

Havelock was silent for a moment while the words filtered into his sleep-drunk mind.

"Jesus," he said. "What scares the OPA?"

Chapter Thirteen: Holden

Holden froze, watching the blood pump from Shed's neck, then whip away like smoke into an exhaust fan. The sounds of combat began to fade as the air was sucked out of the room. His ears throbbed and then hurt like someone had put ice picks in them. As he fought with his couch restraints, he glanced over at Alex. The pilot was yelling something, but it didn't carry through the thin air. Naomi and Amos had gotten out of their couches already, kicked off, and were flying across the room to the two holes. Amos had a plastic dinner tray in one hand. Naomi, a white three-ring binder. Holden stared at them for the half second it took to understand what they were doing. The world narrowed, his peripheral vision all stars and darkness.

By the time he'd gotten free, Amos and Naomi had already covered the holes with their makeshift patches. The room was filled with a high-pitched whistle as the air tried to force its way out through the imperfect seals. Holden's sight began to return as the air pressure started to rise. He was panting hard, gasping for breath. Someone slowly turned the room's volume knob back up and Naomi's yells for help became audible.

"Jim, open the emergency locker!" she screamed.

She was pointing at a small red-and-yellow panel on the bulkhead near his crash couch. Years of shipboard training made a path through the anoxia and depressurization, and he yanked the tab on the locker's seal and pulled the door open. Inside were a white first aid kit marked with the ancient red-cross symbol, half a dozen oxygen masks, and a sealed bag of hardened plastic disks attached to a glue gun. The emergency-seal kit. He snatched it.

"Just the gun," Naomi yelled at him. He wasn't sure if her voice sounded distant because of the thin air or because the pressure drop had blown his eardrums.

Holden yanked the gun free from the bag of patches and threw it at her. She ran a bead of instant sealing glue around the edge of her three-ring binder. She tossed the gun to Amos, who caught it with an effortless backhand motion and put a seal around his dinner tray. The whistling stopped, replaced by the hiss of the atmosphere system as it labored to bring the pressure back up to normal. Fifteen seconds.

Everyone looked at Shed. Without the vacuum, his blood was pouring out into a floating red sphere just above his neck, like a hideous cartoon replacement for his head.

"Jesus Christ, Boss," Amos said, looking away from Shed to Naomi. He snapped his teeth closed with an audible click and shook his head. "What..."

"Gauss round," Alex said. "Those ships have rail guns."

"*Belt* ships with *rail* guns?" Amos said. "Did they get a fucking navy and no one told me?"

"Jim, the hallway outside and the cabin on the other side are both in vacuum," Naomi said. "The ship's compromised."

Holden started to respond, then caught a good look at the binder Naomi had glued over the breach. The white cover was stamped with black letters that read MCRN EMERGENCY PROCEDURES. He had to suppress a laugh that would almost certainly go manic on him.

"Jim," Naomi said, her voice worried.

"I'm okay, Naomi," Holden replied, then took a deep breath. "How long do those patches hold?"

Naomi shrugged with her hands, then started pulling her hair behind her head and tying it up with a red elastic band.

"Longer than the air will last. If everything around us is in vacuum, that means the cabin's running on emergency bottles. No recycling. I don't know how much each room has, but it won't be more than a couple hours."

"Kinda makes you wish we'd worn our fucking suits, don't it?" Amos asked.

"Wouldn't have mattered," Alex said. "We'd come over here in our enviro suits, they'd just have taken 'em away."

"Could have tried," Amos said.

"Well, if you'd like to go back in time and do it over, be my guest, partner."

Naomi sharply said, "Hey," but then nothing more.

No one was talking about Shed. They were working hard not to look at the body. Holden cleared his throat to get everyone's attention, then floated to Shed's couch, drawing their eyes with him. He paused a moment, letting everyone get a good look at the decapitated body, then pulled a blanket from the storage drawer beneath the couch and strapped it down over Shed's body with the couch's restraints.

"Shed's been killed. We're in deep peril. Arguing won't extend our lives one second," Holden said, looking at each member of his crew in turn. "What will?"

No one spoke. Holden turned to Naomi first.

"Naomi, what will keep us alive longer that we can do right now?" he asked.

"I'll see if I can find the emergency air. The room's built for six, and there're only... there are four of us. I might be able to turn the flow down and stretch it longer."

"Good. Thank you. Alex?"

"If there's anyone other than us, they'll be lookin' for survivors. I'll start poundin' on the bulkhead. They won't hear it in the vacuum, but if there're cabins with air, the sound'll travel down the metal."

"Good plan. I refuse to believe we're the only ones left on this ship," Holden said, then turned to Amos. "Amos?"

"Lemme check on that comm panel. Might be able to get the bridge or damage control or... shit, *something*," Amos replied.

"Thanks. I'd love to let someone know we're still here," Holden said.

People moved off to work while Holden floated in the air next to Shed. Naomi began yanking access panels off the bulkheads. Alex, hands pressed against a couch for leverage, lay on the deck and began to kick the bulkhead with his boots. The room vibrated slightly with each booming kick. Amos pulled a multi-tool out of his pocket and began taking the comm panel apart.

When Holden was sure everyone was busy, he put one hand on Shed's shoulder, just below the blanket's spreading red stain.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the body. His eyes burned and he pressed them into the back of his thumbs.

The comm unit was hanging out of the bulkhead on wires when it buzzed once, loudly. Amos yelped and pushed off hard enough to fly across the room. Holden caught him, wrenching his shoulder by trying to arrest the momentum of 120 kilos of Earther mechanic. The comm buzzed again. Holden let Amos go and floated to it. A yellow LED glowed next to the unit's white button. Holden pressed the button. The comm crackled to life with Lieutenant Kelly's voice.

"Move away from the hatch, we're coming in," he said.

"Grab something!" Holden yelled to the crew, then grabbed a couch restraint and wrapped it around his hand and forearm.

When the hatch opened, Holden expected all the air to rush out. Instead, there was a loud crack and the pressure dropped slightly for a second. Outside in the corridor, thick sheets of plastic had been sealed to the walls, creating an ad hoc airlock. The walls of the new chamber bowed out

dangerously with the air pressure, but they held. Inside the newly created lock, Lieutenant Kelly and three of his marines wore heavy vacuum-rated armor and carried enough weaponry to fight several minor wars.

The marines moved quickly into the room, weapons ready, and then sealed the hatch behind them. One of them tossed a large bag at Holden.

"Five vac suits. Get them on," Kelly said. His eyes moved to the bloody blanket covering Shed, then to the two improvised patches. "Casualty?"

"Our medic, Shed Garvey," Holden replied.

"Yeah. What the fuck?" Amos said loudly. "Who's out there shooting the shit out of your fancy boat?"

Naomi and Alex said nothing but started pulling the suits from the bag and handing them out.

"I don't know," Kelly said. "But we're leaving right now. I've been ordered to get you off this ship in an escape craft. We've got less than ten minutes to make it to the hangar bay, take possession of a ship, and get out of this combat area. Dress fast."

Holden put on his suit, the implications of their evacuation racing through his mind.

"Lieutenant, is the ship coming apart?" he asked.

"Not yet. But we're being boarded."

"Then why are we leaving?"

"We're losing."

Kelly didn't tap his foot while waiting for them to seal into their suits; Holden guessed this was only because the marines had their magnetic boots turned on. As soon as everyone had given the thumbs-up, Kelly did a quick radio check on each suit, then headed back into the corridor. With eight people in it, four of them in powered armor, the mini-airlock was tight. Kelly pulled a heavy knife from a sheath on his chest and slashed the plastic barrier open in one quick movement. The hatch behind them slammed shut, and the air in the corridor vanished in a soundless ripple of plastic flaps. Kelly charged into the corridor with the crew scrambling to keep up.

"We are moving with all speed to the keel elevator banks," Kelly said through the radio link. "They're locked down because of the boarding alarm, but I can get the doors open on one and we'll float down the shaft to the hangar bay. Everything is on the double. If you see boarders, do not stop. Keep moving at all times. We'll handle the hostiles. Roger that?"

"Roger, Lieutenant," Holden gasped out. "Why board you?"

"The command information center," Alex said. "It's the holy grail. Codes, deployments, computer cores, the works. Takin' a flagship's CIC is a strategist's wet dream."

"Cut the chatter," Kelly said. Holden ignored him.

"That means they'll blow the core rather than let that happen, right?"

"Yep," Alex replied. "Standard ops for boarders. Marines hold the bridge, CIC, and engineering. If any of the three is breached, the other two flip the switch. The ship turns into a star for a few seconds."

"Standard ops," Kelly growled. "Those are my friends."

"Sorry, El Tee," Alex replied. "I served on the *Bandon*. Don't mean to make light."

They turned a corner and the elevator bank came into view. All eight elevators were closed and sealed. The heavy pressure doors had slammed shut when the ship was holed.

"Gomez, run the bypass," Kelly said. "Mole, Dookie, watch those corridors."

Two of the marines spread out, watching the hallways through their gun sights. The third moved to one of the elevator doors and started doing something complicated to the controls. Holden motioned his crew to the wall, out of the firing lines. The deck vibrated slightly from time to time beneath his feet. The enemy ships wouldn't still be firing, not with their boarders inside. It must be small-arms fire and light explosives. But as they stood there in the perfect quiet of vacuum, everything that was happening took on a distant and surreal feeling. Holden recognized that his mind wasn't working the way it should be. Trauma reaction. The destruction of the *Canterbury*, the deaths

of Ade and McDowell. And now someone had killed Shed in his bunk. It was too much; he couldn't process it. He felt the scene around him grow more and more distant.

Holden looked behind him at Naomi, Alex, and Amos. His crew. They stared back, faces ashen and ghostly in the green light of their suit displays. Gomez pumped his fist in triumph as the outer pressure door slid open, revealing the elevator doors. Kelly gestured to his men.

The one called Mole turned around and started to walk to the elevator when his face disintegrated in a spray of pebble-shaped bits of armored glass and blood. His armored torso and the corridor bulkhead beside him bloomed in a hundred small detonations and puffs of smoke. His body jerked and swayed, attached to the floor by magnetic boots.

Holden's sense of unreality washed away in adrenaline. The fire spraying across the wall and Mole's body was high-explosive rounds from a rapid-fire weapon. The comm channel filled with yelling from the marines and Holden's own crew. To Holden's left, Gomez yanked the elevator doors open using the augmented strength of his powered armor, exposing the empty shaft behind them.

"Inside!" Kelly shouted. "Everybody inside!"

Holden held back, pushing Naomi in, and then Alex. The last marine—the one Kelly had called Dookie—fired his rifle on full auto at some target around the corner from Holden. When the weapon ran dry, the marine dropped to one knee and ejected the clip in the same motion. Almost faster than Holden could follow, he pulled a new magazine from his harness and slapped it into his weapon. He was firing again less than two seconds after he'd run out.

Naomi yelled at Holden to get into the elevator shaft, and then a viselike hand grabbed his shoulder, yanked him off his magnetic grip on the floor, and hurled him through the open elevator doors.

"Get killed when I'm not babysitting," Lieutenant Kelly barked.

They shoved off the walls of the elevator shaft and flew down the long tunnel toward the aft of the ship. Holden kept looking back at the open door, receding into the distance behind them.

"Dookie isn't following us," he said.

"He's covering our exit," Kelly replied.

"So we better get away," Gomez added. "Make it mean something."

Kelly, at the head of the group, grabbed at a rung on the wall of the shaft and came to a jerking stop. Everyone else followed suit.

"Here's our exit. Gomez, go check it out," Kelly said. "Holden, here's the plan. We'll be taking one of the corvettes from the hangar bay."

That made sense to Holden. The corvette class was a light frigate. A fleet escort vessel, it was the smallest naval ship equipped with an Epstein drive. It would be fast enough to travel anywhere in the system and outrun most threats. Its secondary role was as a torpedo bomber, so it would also have teeth. Holden nodded inside his helmet at Kelly, then gestured for him to continue. Kelly waited until Gomez had finished opening the elevator doors and gone into the hangar bay.

"Okay, I've got the key card and activation code to get us inside and the ship fired up. I'll be heading straight for it, so all of you stick right on my ass. Make sure your boot mags are off. We're going to push off the wall and fly to it, so aim straight or you miss your ride. Everyone with me?"

Affirmative replies all around.

"Outstanding. Gomez, what's it look like out there?"

"Trouble, El Tee. Half a dozen boarders looking over the ships in the hangar. Powered armor, zero-g maneuvering packs, and heavy weapons. Loaded for bear," Gomez whispered back. People always whispered when they were hiding. Wrapped in a space suit and surrounded by vacuum, Gomez could have been lighting fireworks inside his armor and no one would have heard it, but he whispered.

"We run for the ship and shoot our way through," Kelly said. "Gomez, I'm bringing the civvies in ten seconds. You're covering fire. Shoot and displace. Try and make them think you're a small platoon."

“You callin’ me small, sir?” Gomez said. “Six dead assholes coming up.”

Holden, Amos, Alex, and Naomi followed Kelly out of the elevator shaft and into the hangar bay and stopped behind a stack of military-green crates. Holden peeked over them, spotting the boarders immediately. They were in two groups of three near the *Knight*, one group walking on top of it and the other on the deck below it. Their armor was flat black. Holden hadn’t seen the design before.

Kelly pointed at them and looked at Holden. Holden nodded back. Kelly pointed across the hangar at a squat black frigate about twenty-five meters away, halfway between them and the *Knight*. He held up his left hand and began counting down from five on his fingers. At two, the room strobed like a disco: Gomez opening fire from a position ten meters from their own. The first barrage hit two of the boarders on top of the *Knight* and hurled them spinning off. A heartbeat later, a second burst was fired five meters from where Holden had seen the first. He would have sworn it was two different men.

Kelly folded up the last finger on his hand, planted his feet on the wall, and pushed off toward their corvette. Holden waited for Alex, Amos, and Naomi, then shoved off last. By the time he was in motion, Gomez was firing from a new location. One of the boarders on the deck pointed a large weapon toward the muzzle flash from Gomez’s gun. Gomez and the crate he’d been taking cover behind disappeared in fire and shrapnel.

They were halfway to the ship and Holden was starting to think they might make it when a line of smoke crossed the room and intersected with Kelly, and the lieutenant disappeared in a flash of light.

Chapter Fourteen: Miller

The *Xinglong* died stupid. Afterward, everyone knew she was one of thousands of small-time rock-hopping prospector ships. The Belt was lousy with them: five-or six-family operations that had scraped together enough for a down payment and set up operations. When it happened, they'd been three payments behind, and their bank—Consolidated Holdings and Investments—had put a lien on the ship. Which, common wisdom had it, was why they had disabled her transponder. Just honest folks with a rust bucket to call their own trying to keep flying.

If you were going to make a poster of the Belter's dream, it would have been the *Xinglong*.

The *Scipio Africanus*, a patrol destroyer, was due to head back down toward Mars at the end of its two-year tour of the Belt. They both headed for a captured cometary body a few hundred thousand kilometers from Chiron to top off their water.

When the prospecting ship first came in range, the *Scipio* saw a fast-moving ship running dark and headed more or less in their direction. The official Martian press releases all said that the *Scipio* had tried repeatedly to hail her. The OPA pirate casts all said it was crap and that no listening station in the Belt had heard anything like that. Everyone agreed that the *Scipio* had opened its point defense cannons and turned the prospecting ship into glowing slag.

The reaction had been as predictable as elementary physics. The Martians were diverting another couple dozen ships to help "maintain order." The OPA's shriller talking heads called for open war, and fewer and fewer of the independent sites and casts were disagreeing with them. The great, implacable clockwork of war ticked one step closer to open fighting.

And someone on Ceres had put a Martian-born citizen named Enrique Dos Santos through eight or nine hours of torture and nailed the remains to a wall near sector eleven's water reclamation works. They identified him by the terminal that had been left on the floor along with the man's wedding ring and a thin faux-leather wallet with his credit access data and thirty thousand Europa-script new yen. The dead Martian had been affixed to the wall with a single-charge prospector's spike. Five hours afterward, the air recyclers were still laboring to get the acid smell out. The forensics team had taken their samples. They were about ready to cut the poor bastard down.

It always surprised Miller how peaceful dead people looked. However godawful the circumstances, the slack calm that came at the end looked like sleep. It made him wonder if when his turn came, he'd actually feel that last relaxation.

"Surveillance cameras?" he said.

"Been out for three days," his new partner said. "Kids busted 'em."

Octavia Muss was originally from crimes against persons, back before Star Helix split violence up into smaller specialties. From there, she'd been on the rape squad. Then a couple of months of crimes against children. If the woman still had a soul, it had been pressed thin enough to see through. Her eyes never registered anything more than mild surprise.

"We know which kids?"

"Some punks from upstairs," she said. "Booked, fined, released into the wild."

"We should round 'em back up," Miller said. "It'd be interesting to know whether someone paid them to take out these particular cameras."

"I'd bet against it."

"Then whoever did this had to know that these cameras were busted."

"Someone in maintenance?"

"Or a cop."

Muss smacked her lips and shrugged. She'd come from three generations in the Belt. She had family on ships like the one the *Scipio* had killed. The skin and bone and gristle hanging in front of them were no surprise to her. You dropped a hammer under thrust, and it fell to the deck. Your government slaughtered six families of ethnic Chinese prospectors, someone pinned you to the living rock of Ceres with a three-foot titanium alloy spike. Same same.

"There's going to be consequences," Miller said, meaning *This isn't a corpse, it's a billboard. It's a call to war.*

"There ain't," Muss said. *The war is here anyway, banner or no.*

"Yeah," Miller said. "You're right. There ain't."

"You want to do next of kin? I'll go take a look at outlying video. They didn't burn his fingers off here in the corridor, so they had to haul him in from somewhere."

"Yeah," Miller said. "I've got a sympathy form letter I can fire off. Wife?"

"Don't know," she said. "Haven't looked."

Back at the station house, Miller sat alone at his desk. Muss already had her own desk, two cubicles over and customized the way she liked it. Havelock's desk was empty and cleaned twice over, as if the custodial services had wanted the smell of Earth off their good Belter chair. Miller pulled up the dead man's file, found the next of kin. Jun-Yee Dos Santos, working on Ganymede. Married six years. No kids. Well, there was something to be glad of, at least. If you were going to die, at least you shouldn't leave a mark.

He navigated to the form letter, dropped in the new widow's name and contact address. *Dear Mrs. Dos Santos, I am very sorry to have to tell you blah blah blah. Your [he spun through the menu] husband was a valued and respected member of the Ceres community, and I assure you that everything possible will be done to see that her [Miller toggled that] his killer or killers will be brought to answer for this. Yours...*

It was inhuman. It was impersonal and cold and as empty as vacuum. The hunk of flesh on that corridor wall had been a real man with passions and fears, just like anyone else. Miller wanted to wonder what it said about him that he could ignore that fact so easily, but the truth was he knew. He sent the message and tried not to dwell on the pain it was about to cause.

The board was thick. The incident count was twice what it should have been. *This is what it looks like*, he thought. No riots. No hole-by-hole military action or marines in the corridors. Just a lot of unsolved homicides.

Then he corrected himself: *This is what it looks like so far.*

It didn't make his next task any easier.

Shaddid was in her office.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"I need to make some requisitions for interrogation transcripts," he said. "But it's a little irregular. I was thinking it might be better if it came through you."

Shaddid sat back in her chair.

"I'll look at it," she said. "What are we trying to get?"

Miller nodded, as if by signaling yes himself, he could get her to say the same.

"Jim Holden. The Earther from the *Canterbury*. Mars should be picking his people up around now, and I need to petition for the debriefing transcripts."

"You have a case that goes back to the *Canterbury*?"

"Yeah," he said. "Seems like I do."

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me now."

"It's the side job. Julie Mao. I've been looking into it..."

"I saw your report."

“So you know she’s associated with the OPA. From what I’ve found, it looks like she was on a freighter that was doing courier runs for them.”

“You have proof of that?”

“I have an OPA guy that said as much.”

“On the record?”

“No,” Miller said. “It was informal.”

“And it tied into the Martian navy killing the *Canterbury* how?”

“She was on the *Scopuli*,” Miller said. “It was used as bait to stop the *Canterbury*. The thing is, you look at the broadcasts Holden makes, he talks about finding it with a Mars Navy beacon and no crew.”

“And you think there’s something in there that’ll help you?”

“Won’t know until I see it,” Miller said. “But if Julie wasn’t on that freighter, then someone had to take her off.”

Shaddid’s smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“And you would like to ask the Martian navy to please hand over whatever they got from Holden.”

“If he saw something on that boat, something that’ll give us an idea what happened to Julie and the other—”

“You aren’t thinking this through,” Shaddid said. “The Mars Navy killed the *Canterbury*. They did it to provoke a reaction from the Belt so they’d have an excuse to roll in and take us over. The only reason they’re ‘debriefing’ the survivors is so that no one could get to the poor bastards first. Holden and his crew are either dead or getting their minds cored out by Martian interrogation specialists right now.”

“We can’t be sure...”

“And even if I could get a full record of what they said as each toenail got ripped off, it would do you exactly no good, Miller. The Martian navy isn’t going to ask about the *Scopuli*. They know good and well what happened to the crew. They planted the *Scopuli*.”

“Is that Star Helix’s official stand?” Miller asked. The words were barely out of his mouth before he saw they’d been a mistake. Shaddid’s face closed down like a light going out. Now that he’d said it, he saw the implied threat he’d just made.

“I’m just pointing out the source reliability issue,” Shaddid said. “You don’t go to the suspect and ask where they think you should look next. And the Juliette Mao retrieval isn’t your first priority.”

“I’m not saying it is,” Miller said, chagrined to hear the defensiveness in his voice.

“We have a board out there that’s full and getting fuller. Our first priorities are safety and continuity of services. If what you’re doing isn’t directly related to that, there are better things for you to be doing.”

“This war—”

“Isn’t our job,” Shaddid said. “Our job is Ceres. Get me a final report on Juliette Mao. I’ll send it through channels. We’ve done what we could.”

“I don’t think—”

“I do,” Shaddid said. “We’ve done what we could. Now stop being a pussy, get your ass out there, and catch bad guys. Detective.”

“Yes, Captain,” Miller said.

Muss was sitting at Miller’s desk when he got back to it, a cup in her hand that was either strong tea or weak coffee. She nodded toward his desktop monitor. On it, three Belters—two men and one woman—were coming out of a warehouse door, an orange plastic shipping container carried between them. Miller raised his eyebrows.

“Employed by an independent gas-hauling company. Nitrogen, oxygen. Basic atmospherics. Nothing exotic. Looks like they had the poor bastard in one of the company warehouses. I’ve sent

forensics over to see if we can get any blood splatters for confirmation.”

“Good work,” Miller said.

Muss shrugged. *Adequate work*, she seemed to say.

“Where are the perps?” Miller asked.

“Shipped out yesterday,” she said. “Flight plan logs them as headed for Io.”

“Io?”

“Earth-Mars Coalition central,” Muss said. “Want to put any money on whether they actually show up there?”

“Sure,” Miller said. “I’ll lay you fifty that they don’t.”

Muss actually laughed.

“I’ve put them on the alert system,” she said. “Anyplace they land, the locals will have a heads-up and a tracking number for the Dos Santos thing.”

“So case closed,” Miller said.

“Chalk another one up for the good guys,” Muss agreed.

The rest of the day was hectic. Three assaults, two of them overtly political and one domestic. Muss and Miller cleared all three from the board before the end of shift. There would be more by tomorrow.

After he clocked out, Miller stopped at a food cart near one of the tube stations for a bowl of vat rice and textured protein that approximated teriyaki chicken. All around him on the tube, normal citizens of Ceres read their newsfeeds and listened to music. A young couple half a car up from him leaned close to each other, murmuring and giggling. They might have been sixteen. Seventeen. He saw the boy’s wrist snake up under the girl’s shirt. She didn’t protest. An old woman directly across from Miller slept, her head lolling against the wall of the car, her snores almost delicate.

These people were what it was all about, Miller told himself. Normal people living small lives in a bubble of rock surrounded by hard vacuum. If they let the station turn into a riot zone, let order fail, all these lives would get turned into kibble like a kitten in a meat grinder. Making sure it didn’t happen was for people like him, Muss, even Shaddid.

So, a small voice said in the back of his mind, *why isn’t it your job to stop Mars from dropping a nuke and cracking Ceres like an egg? What’s the bigger threat to that guy standing over there, a few unlicensed whores or a Belt at war with Mars?*

What was the harm that could come from knowing what happened to the *Scopuli*?

But of course he knew the answer to that. He couldn’t judge how dangerous the truth was until he knew it—which was itself a fine reason to keep going.

The OPA man, Anderson Dawes, was sitting on a cloth folding chair outside Miller’s hole, reading a book. It was a real book—onionskin pages bound in what might have been actual leather. Miller had seen pictures of them before; the idea of that much weight for a single megabyte of data struck him as decadent.

“Detective.”

“Mr. Dawes.”

“I was hoping we could talk.”

Miller was glad, as they went inside together, that he’d cleaned up a little. All the beer bottles had gone to the recycler. The tables and cabinets were dusted. The cushions on the chairs had all been mended or replaced. As Dawes took his seat, Miller realized he’d done the housework in anticipation of this meeting. He hadn’t realized it until now.

Dawes put his book on the table, dug in his jacket pocket, and slid a thin black filmdrive across the table. Miller picked it up.

“What am I going to see on this?” he asked.

“Nothing you can’t confirm in the records,” Dawes answered.

“Anything fabricated?”

“Yes,” Dawes said. His grin did nothing to improve his appearance. “But not by us. You asked about the police riot gear. It was signed for by a Sergeant Pauline Trikoloski for transfer to special services unit twenty-three.”

“Special services twenty-three?”

“Yes,” Dawes said. “It doesn’t exist. Nor does Trikoloski. The equipment was all boxed up, signed for, and delivered to a dock. The freighter in the berth at the time was registered to the Corporação do Gato Preto.”

“Black Cat?”

“You know them?”

“Import-export, same as everyone else,” Miller said with a shrug. “We investigated them as a possible front for the Loca Greiga. Never tied them down, though.”

“You were right.”

“You prove it?”

“Not my job,” Dawes said. “But this might interest you. Automated docking logs for the ship when she left here and when she arrived on Ganymede. She’s three tons lighter, not even counting reaction mass consumption. And the transit time is longer than the orbital mechanics projections.”

“Someone met her,” Miller said. “Transferred the gear to another ship.”

“There’s your answer,” Dawes said. “Both of them. The riot gear was taken off the station by local organized crime. There aren’t records to support it, but I think it’s safe to assume that they also shipped out the personnel to use that gear.”

“Where to?”

Dawes lifted his hands. Miller nodded. They were off station. Case closed. Another one for the good guys.

Damn.

“I’ve kept my part of our bargain,” Dawes said. “You asked for information. I’ve gotten it. Now, are you going to keep your end?”

“Drop the Mao investigation,” Miller said. It wasn’t a question, and Dawes didn’t act as if it were. Miller leaned back in his chair.

Juliette Andromeda Mao. Inner system heiress turned OPA courier. Pinnacle racer. Brown belt, aiming for black.

“Sure, what the hell,” he said. “It’s not like I would have shipped her back home if I’d found her.”

“No?”

Miller shifted his hands in a gesture that meant *Of course not*.

“She’s a good kid,” Miller said. “How would you feel if you were all grown up and Mommy could still pull you back home by your ear? It was a bullshit job from the start.”

Dawes smiled again. This time it actually did help a little.

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Detective. And I won’t forget the rest of our agreement. When we find her, I *will* tell you. You’ve got my word on it.”

“I appreciate that,” Miller said.

There was a moment of silence. Miller couldn’t decide if it was companionable or awkward. Maybe there was room for both. Dawes rose, put out his hand. Miller shook it. Dawes left. Two cops working for different sides. Maybe they had something in common.

Didn’t mean Miller was uncomfortable lying to the man.

He opened his terminal’s encryption program, routed it to his communication suite, and started talking into the camera.

“We haven’t met, sir, but I hope you’ll find a few minutes to help me out. I’m Detective Miller with Star Helix Security. I’m on the Ceres security contract, and I’ve been tasked with finding your daughter. I’ve got a couple questions.”

Chapter Fifteen: Holden

Holden grabbed for Naomi. He struggled to orient himself as the two of them spun across the bay with nothing to push off of and nothing to arrest their flight. They were in the middle of the room with no cover.

The blast had hurled Kelly five meters through the air and into the side of a packing crate, where he was floating now, one magnetic boot connected to the side of the container, the other struggling to connect with the deck. Amos had been blown down, and lay flat on the floor, his lower leg stuck out at an impossible angle. Alex crouched at his side.

Holden craned his neck, looking toward the attackers. There was the boarder with the grenade launcher who had blasted Kelly, lining up on them for the killing shot. *We're dead*, Holden thought. Naomi made an obscene gesture.

The man with the grenade launcher shuddered and dissolved in a spray of blood and small detonations.

"Get to the ship!" Gomez screamed from the radio. His voice was grating and high, half shrieking pain and half battle ecstasy.

Holden pulled the tether line off Naomi's suit.

"What are you...?" she began.

"Trust me," he said, then put his feet into her stomach and shoved off, hard. He hit the deck while she spun toward the ceiling. He kicked on his boot mags and then yanked the tether to pull her down to him.

The room strobed with sustained machine gun fire. Holden said, "Stay low," and ran as quickly as his magnetic boots would allow toward Alex and Amos. The mechanic moved his limbs feebly, so he was still alive. Holden realized he still had the end of Naomi's tether in his hand, so he clipped it on to a loop on his suit. No more getting separated.

Holden lifted Amos off the deck, then checked the inertia. The mechanic grunted and muttered something obscene. Holden attached Amos' tether to his suit too. He'd carry the whole crew if that was what it took. Without saying a word, Alex clipped his tether to Holden and gave him a weary thumbs-up.

"That was... I mean, *fuck*," Alex said.

"Yeah," Holden said.

"Jim," Naomi said. "Look!"

Holden followed her gaze. Kelly was staggering toward them. His armor was visibly crushed on the left side of his torso, and hydraulic fluid leaked from his suit into a trail of droplets floating behind him, but he was moving—toward the frigate.

"Okay," Holden said. "Let's go."

The five of them moved as a group to the ship, the air around them filled with pieces of packing crates blown apart by the ongoing battle. A wasp stung Holden's arm, and his suit's head-up display informed him that it had sealed a minor breach. He felt something warm trickle down his bicep.

Gomez shouted like a madman over the radio as he dashed around the outer edge of the bay, firing wildly. The return fire was constant. Holden saw the marine hit again and again, small explosions and ablative clouds coming off his suit until Holden could hardly believe that there could

be anything inside it still living. But Gomez kept the enemy's attention, and Holden and the crew were able to limp up to the half cover of the corvette's airlock.

Kelly pulled a small metal card from a pocket on his armor. A swipe of the card opened the outer door, and Holden pulled Amos' floating body inside. Naomi, Alex, and the wounded marine came in after, staring at each other in shocked disbelief as the airlock cycled and the inner doors opened.

"I can't believe we..." Alex said; then his voice trailed off.

"Talk about it later," Kelly barked. "Alex Kamal, you served on MCRN ships. Can you fly this thing?"

"Sure, El Tee," Alex replied, then visibly straightened. "Why me?"

"Our other pilot's outside getting killed. Take this," Kelly said, handing him the metal card. "The rest of you, get strapped in. We've lost a lot of time."

Up close, the damage to Kelly's armor was even more apparent. He had to have severe injuries to his chest. And not all the liquid coming out of the suit was hydraulic fluid. There was definitely blood as well.

"Let me help you," Holden said, reaching for him.

"Don't touch me," Kelly said, with an anger that took Holden by surprise. "You get strapped in, and you shut the fuck up. Now."

Holden didn't argue. He unhooked the tethers from his suit and helped Naomi maneuver Amos to the crash couches and strap him in. Kelly stayed on the deck above, but his voice came over the ship's comm.

"Mr. Kamal, are we ready to fly?" he said.

"Roger that, El Tee. The reactor was already hot when we got here."

"The *Tachi* was the ready standby. That's why we're taking her. Now go. As soon as we clear the hangar, full throttle."

"Roger," Alex said.

Gravity returned in tiny bursts at random directions as Alex lifted the ship off the deck and spun it toward the hangar door. Holden finished putting on his straps and checked to see that Naomi and Amos were squared away. The mechanic was moaning and holding on to the edge of the couch with a death grip.

"You still with us, Amos?" Holden said.

"Fan-fucking-tastic, Cap."

"Oh shit, I can see Gomez," Alex said over the comm. "He's down. Aw, you goddammed bastards! They're shootin' him while he's down! Son of a bitch!"

The ship stopped moving, and Alex said in a quiet voice, "Suck on this, asshole."

The ship vibrated for half a second, then paused before continuing toward the lock.

"Point defense cannons?" Holden asked.

"Summary roadside justice," Alex grunted back.

Holden was imagining what several hundred rounds of Teflon-coated tungsten steel going five thousand meters per second would do to human bodies when Alex threw down the throttle and a roomful of elephants swan dived onto his chest.



Holden woke in zero g. His eye sockets and testicles ached, so they'd been at high thrust for a while. The wall terminal next to him said it had been almost half an hour. Naomi was moving in her couch, but Amos was unconscious, and blood was coming out of a hole in his suit at an alarming rate.

"Naomi, check Amos," Holden croaked, his throat aching with the effort. "Alex, report."

"The *Donnie* went up behind us, Cap. Guess the marines didn't hold. She's gone," Alex said in a subdued voice.

"The six attacking ships?"

"I haven't seen any sign of them since the explosion. I'd guess they're toast."

Holden nodded to himself. Summary roadside justice, indeed. Boarding a ship was one of the riskiest maneuvers in naval combat. It was basically a race between the boarders rushing to the engine room and the collective will of those who had their fingers on the self-destruct button. After even one look at Captain Yao, Holden could have told them who'd lose *that* race.

Still. Someone had thought it was worth the risk.

Holden pulled his straps off and floated over to Amos. Naomi had opened an emergency kit and was cutting the mechanic's suit off with a pair of heavy scissors. The hole had been punched out by a jagged end of Amos' broken tibia when the suit had pushed against it at twelve g.

When she'd finished cutting the suit away, Naomi blanched at the mass of blood and gore that Amos' lower leg had turned into.

"What do we do?" Holden asked.

Naomi just stared at him, then barked out a harsh laugh.

"I have no idea," she said.

"But you—" Holden started. She talked right over him.

"If he were made of metal, I'd just hammer him straight and then weld everything into place," she said.

"I—"

"But he *isn't* made out of ship parts," she continued, her voice rising into a yell, "so why are you asking *me* what to do?"

Holden held up his hands in a placating gesture.

"Okay, got it. Let's just stop the bleeding for now, all right?"

"If Alex gets killed, are you going to ask me to fly the ship too?"

Holden started to answer and then stopped. She was right. Whenever he didn't know what to do, he handed off to Naomi. He'd been doing it for years. She was smart, capable, usually unflappable. She'd become a crutch, and she'd been through all the same trauma he had. If he didn't start paying attention, he'd break her, and he needed not to do that.

"You're right. I'll take care of Amos," he said. "You go up and check on Kelly. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Naomi stared at him until her breathing slowed, then said, "Okay," and headed to the crew ladder.

Holden sprayed Amos' leg with coagulant booster and wrapped it in gauze from the first aid kit. Then he called up the ship's database on the wall terminal and did a search on compound fractures. He was reading it with growing dismay when Naomi called.

"Kelly's dead," she said, her voice flat.

Holden's stomach dropped, and he gave himself three breaths to get the panic out of his voice.

"Okay. I'll need your help setting this bone. Come on back down. Alex? Give me half a g of thrust while we work on Amos."

"Any particular direction, Cap?" Alex asked.

"I don't care, just give me half a g and stay off the radio till I say so."

Naomi dropped back down the ladder well as the gravity started to come up.

"It looks like every rib on the left side of Kelly's body was broken," she said. "Thrust g probably punctured all his organs."

"He had to know that was going to happen," Holden said.

"Yeah."

It was easy to make fun of the marines when they weren't listening. In Holden's navy days, making fun of jarheads was as natural as cussing. But four marines had died getting him off the *Donnager*, and three of them had made a conscious decision to do so. Holden promised himself that he'd never make fun of them again.

"We need to pull the bone straight before we set it. Hold him still, and I'll pull on his foot. Let me know when the bone has retracted and lined up again."

Naomi started to protest.

"I know you're not a doctor. Just best guess," Holden said.

It was one of the most horrible things Holden had ever done. Amos woke up screaming during the procedure. He had to pull the leg out twice, because the first time the bones didn't line up, and when he let go, the jagged end of the tibia popped back out the hole in a spray of blood. Fortunately, Amos passed out after that and they were able to make the second attempt without the screaming. It seemed to work. Holden sprayed the wound down with antiseptics and coagulants. He stapled the hole closed and slapped a growth-stimulating bandage over it, then finished up with a quick-form air-cast and an antibiotic patch on the mechanic's thigh.

Afterward he collapsed onto the deck and gave in to the shakes. Naomi climbed into her couch and sobbed. It was the first time Holden had ever seen her cry.



Holden, Alex, and Naomi floated in a loose triangle around the crash couch where Lieutenant Kelly's body lay. Below, Amos was in a heavily sedated sleep. The *Tachi* drifted through space toward no particular destination. For the first time in a long time, no one followed.

Holden knew the other two were waiting for him. Waiting to hear how he was going to save them. They looked at him expectantly. He tried to appear calm and thoughtful. Inside, he panicked. He had no idea where to go. No idea what to do. Ever since they'd found the *Scopuli*, everywhere that should have been safe had turned into a death trap. The *Canterbury*, the *Donnager*. Holden was terrified of going *anywhere*, for fear that it would be blown up moments later.

Do something, a mentor of a decade earlier said to his young officers. *It doesn't have to be right, it just has to be something.*

"Someone is going to investigate what happened to the *Donnager*," Holden said. "Martian ships are speeding to that spot as we speak. They'll already know the *Tachi* got away, because our transponder is blabbing our survival to the solar system at large."

"No it ain't," Alex said.

"Explain that, Mr. Kamal."

"This is a torpedo bomber. You think they want a nice transponder signal to lock on to when they're makin' runs on an enemy capital ship? Naw, there's a handy switch up in the cockpit that says 'transponder off.' I flipped it before we flew out. We're just another moving object out of a million like us."

Holden was silent for two long breaths.

"Alex, that may be the single greatest thing anyone has ever done, in the history of the universe," he said.

"But we can't land, Jim," Naomi said. "One, no port is going to let a ship with no transponder signal anywhere near them, and two, as soon as they make us out visually, the fact that we're a Martian warship will be hard to hide."

"Yep, that's the downside," Alex agreed.

"Fred Johnson," Holden said, "gave us the network address to get in touch with him. I'm thinking that the OPA might be the one group that would let us land our stolen Martian warship somewhere."

"It ain't stolen," Alex said. "It's legitimate salvage now."

"Yeah, you make that argument to the MCRN if they catch us, but let's try and make sure they don't."

"So, we just wait here till Colonel Johnson gets back to us?" Alex asked.

“No, I wait. You two prep Lieutenant Kelly for burial. Alex, you were MCRN. You know the traditions. Do it with full honors and record it in the log. He died to get us off that ship, and we’re going to accord him every respect. As soon as we land anywhere, we’ll bounce the full record to MCRN command so they can do it officially.”

Alex nodded. “We’ll do it right, sir.”



Fred Johnson replied to his message so fast that Holden wondered if he’d been sitting at his terminal waiting for it. Johnson’s message consisted only of coordinates and the word *tightbeam*. Holden aimed the laser array at the specified location—it was the same one Fred had beamed his first message from—then turned on his mic and said, “Fred?”

The coordinates given were more than eleven light-minutes away. Holden prepared to wait twenty-two minutes for his answer. Just to have something to do, he fed the location up to the cockpit and told Alex to fly in that direction at one g as soon as they’d finished with Lieutenant Kelly.

Twenty minutes later the thrust came up and Naomi climbed the ladder. She’d stripped off her vacuum suit and was wearing a red Martian jumpsuit that was half a foot too short for her and three times too big around. Her hair and face looked clean.

“This ship has a head with a shower. Can we keep it?” she said.

“How’d it go?”

“We took care of him. There’s a decent-sized cargo bay down by engineering. We put him there until we can find some way to send him home. I turned off the environment in there, so he’ll stay preserved.”

She held out her hand and dropped a small black cube into his lap.

“That was in a pocket under his armor,” she said.

Holden held up the object. It looked like some sort of data-storage device.

“Can you find out what’s on it?” he asked.

“Sure. Give me some time.”

“And Amos?”

“Blood pressure’s steady,” Naomi said. “That’s got to be a good thing.”

The comm console beeped at them, and Holden started the playback.

“Jim, news of the *Donnager* has just started hitting the net. I admit I am extremely surprised to be hearing from you,” said Fred’s voice. “What can I do for you?”

Holden paused a moment while he mentally prepared his response. Fred’s suspicion was palpable, but he’d sent Holden a keyword to use for exactly that reason.

“Fred. While our enemies have become *ubiquitous*, our list of friends has grown kind of short. In fact, you’re pretty much it. I am in a stolen—”

Alex cleared his throat.

“A *salvaged* MCRN gunboat,” Holden went on. “I need a way to hide that fact. I need somewhere to go where they won’t just shoot me down for showing up. Help me do that.”

It was half an hour before the reply came.

“I’ve attached a datafile on a subchannel,” Fred said. “It’s got your new transponder code and directions on how to install it. The code will check out in all the registries. It’s legitimate. It’s also got coordinates that will get you to a safe harbor. I’ll meet you there. We have a lot to talk about.”

“New transponder code?” Naomi said. “How does the OPA get new transponder codes?”

“Hack the Earth-Mars Coalition’s security protocols or get a mole in the registry office,” Holden said. “Either way, I think we’re playing in the big league now.”

Chapter Sixteen: Miller

Miller watched the feed from Mars along with the rest of the station. The podium was draped in black, which was a bad sign. The single star and thirty stripes of the Martian Congressional Republic hung in the background not once, but eight times. That was worse.

“This cannot happen without careful planning,” the Martian president said. “The information they sought to steal would have compromised Martian fleet security in a profound and fundamental way. They failed, but at the price of two thousand and eighty-six Martian lives. This aggression is something the Belt has been preparing for years at the least.”

The Belt, Miller noticed. Not the OPA—the Belt.

“In the week since first news of that attack, we have seen thirty incursions into the security radius of Martian ships and bases, including Pallas Station. If those refineries were to be lost, the economy of Mars could suffer irreversible damage. In the face of an armed, organized guerrilla force, we have no choice but to enforce a military cordon on the stations, bases, and ships of the Belt. Congress has delivered new orders to all naval elements not presently involved in active Coalition duty, and it is our hope that our brothers and sisters of Earth will approve joint Coalition maneuvers with the greatest possible speed.

“The new mandate of the Martian navy is to secure the safety of all honest citizens, to dismantle the infrastructures of evil presently hiding in the Belt, and bring to justice those responsible for these attacks. I am pleased to say that our initial actions have resulted in the destruction of eighteen illegal warships and—”

Miller turned off the feed. That was it, then. The secret war was out of the closet. Papa Mao had been right to want Julie out, but it was too late. His darling daughter was going to have to take her chances, just like everyone else.

At the very least, it was going to mean curfews and personnel tracking all through Ceres Station. Officially, the station was neutral. The OPA didn’t own it or anything else. And Star Helix was an Earth corporation, not under contractual or treaty obligation to Mars. At best, Mars and the OPA would keep their fight outside the station. At worst, there would more riots on Ceres. More death.

No, that wasn’t true. At worst, Mars or the OPA would make a statement by throwing a rock or a handful of nuclear warheads at the station. Or by blowing a fusion drive on a docked ship. If things got out of hand, it would mean six or seven million dead people and the end of everything Miller had ever known.

Odd that it should feel almost like relief.

For weeks, Miller had known. Everyone had known. But it hadn’t actually happened, so every conversation, every joke, every chance interaction and semi-anonymous nod and polite moment of light banter on the tube had seemed like an evasion. He couldn’t fix the cancer of war, couldn’t even slow down the spread, but at least he could admit it was happening. He stretched, ate his last bite of fungal curds, drank the dregs of something not entirely unlike coffee, and headed out to keep peace in wartime.

Muss greeted him with a vague nod when he got to the station house. The board was filled with cases—crimes to be investigated, documented, and dismissed. Twice as many entries as the day before.

"Bad night," Miller said.

"Could be worse," Muss said.

"Yeah?"

"Star Helix could be a Mars corporation. As long as Earth stays neutral, we don't have to actually be the Gestapo."

"And how long you figure that'll last?"

"What time is it?" she asked. "Tell you what, though. When it does come down, I need to make a stop up toward the core. There was this one guy back when I was rape squad we could never quite nail."

"Why wait?" Miller asked. "We could go up, put a bullet in him, be back by lunch."

"Yeah, but you know how it is," she said. "Trying to stay professional. Anyway, if we did that, we'd have to investigate it, and there's no room on the board."

Miller sat at his desk. It was just shoptalk. The kind of over-the-top deadpan you did when your day was filled with underage whores and tainted drugs. And still, there was a tension in the station. It was in the way people laughed, the way they held themselves. There were more holsters visible than usual, as if by showing their weapons they might be made safe.

"You think it's the OPA?" Muss asked. Her voice was lower now.

"That killed the *Donnager*, you mean? Who else could? Plus which, they're taking credit for it."

"Some of them are. From what I heard, there's more than one OPA these days. The old-school guys don't know a goddamn thing about any of this. All shitting their pants and trying to track down the pirate casts that are claiming credit."

"So they can do what?" Miller asked. "You can shut down every loudmouth caster in the Belt, it won't change a thing."

"If there's a schism in the OPA, though..." Muss looked at the board.

If there was a schism within the OPA, the board as they saw it now was nothing. Miller had lived through two major gang wars. First when the Loca Greiga displaced and destroyed the Aryan Flyers, and then when the Golden Bough split. The OPA was bigger, and meaner, and more professional than any of them. That would be civil war in the Belt.

"Might not happen," Miller said.

Shaddid stepped out of her office, her gaze sweeping the station house. Conversations dimmed. Shaddid caught Miller's eye. She made a sharp gesture. *Get in the office.*

"Busted," Muss said.

In the office, Anderson Dawes sat at ease on one of the chairs. Miller felt his body twitch as that information fell into place. Mars and the Belt in open, armed conflict. The OPA's face on Ceres sitting with the captain of the security force.

So that's how it is, he thought.

"You're working the Mao job," Shaddid said as she took her seat. Miller hadn't been offered the option of sitting, so he clasped his hands behind him.

"You assigned it to me," he said.

"And I told you it wasn't a priority," she said.

"I disagreed," Miller said.

Dawes smiled. It was a surprisingly warm expression, especially compared to Shaddid's.

"Detective Miller," Dawes said. "You don't understand what's happening here. We are sitting on a pressure vessel, and you keep swinging a pickax at it. You need to stop that."

"You're off the Mao case," Shaddid said. "Do you understand that? I am officially removing you from that investigation as of right now. Any further investigation you do, I will have you disciplined for working outside your caseload and misappropriating Star Helix resources. You will return any material on the case to me. You will wipe any data you have in your personal partition. And you'll do it before the end of shift."

Miller's brain spun, but he kept his face impassive. She was taking Julie away. He wasn't going to let her. That was a given. But it wasn't the first issue.

"I have some inquiries in process..." he began.

"No, you don't," Shaddid said. "Your little letter to the parents was a breach of policy. Any contact with the shareholders should have come through me."

"You're telling me it didn't go out," Miller said. Meaning *You've been monitoring me.*

"It did not," Shaddid said. *Yes, I have. What are you going to do about it?*

And there wasn't anything he could do.

"And the transcripts of the James Holden interrogation?" Miller said. "Did those get out before..."

Before the *Donnager* was destroyed, taking with it the only living witnesses to the *Scopuli* and plunging the system into war? Miller knew the question sounded like a whine. Shaddid's jaw tensed. He wouldn't have been surprised to hear teeth cracking. Dawes broke the silence.

"I think we can make this a little easier," he said. "Detective, if I'm hearing you right, you think we're burying the issue. We aren't. But it's not in anyone's interests that Star Helix be the one to find the answers you're looking for. Think about it. You may be a Belter, but you're working for an Earth corporation. Right now, Earth is the only major power without an oar in the water. The only one who can possibly negotiate with all sides."

"And so why wouldn't they want to know the truth?" Miller said.

"That isn't the problem," Dawes said. "The problem is that Star Helix and Earth can't appear to be involved one way or the other. Their hands need to stay clean. And this issue leads outside your contract. Juliette Mao isn't on Ceres, and maybe there was a time you could have jumped a ship to wherever you found her and done the abduction. Extradition. Extraction. Whatever you want to call it. But that time has passed. Star Helix is Ceres, part of Ganymede, and a few dozen warehouse asteroids. If you leave that, you're going into enemy territory."

"But the OPA isn't," Miller said.

"We have the resources to do this right," Dawes said with a nod. "Mao is one of ours. The *Scopuli* was one of ours."

"And the *Scopuli* was the bait that killed the *Canterbury*," Miller said. "And the *Canterbury* was the bait that killed the *Donnager*. So why exactly would anyone be better off having you be the only ones looking into something you might have done?"

"You think we nuked the *Canterbury*," Dawes said. "The OPA, with its state-of-the-art Martian warships?"

"It got the *Donnager* out where it could be attacked. As long as it was with the fleet, it couldn't have been boarded."

Dawes looked sour.

"Conspiracy theories, Mr. Miller," he said. "If we had cloaked Martian warships, we wouldn't be losing."

"You had enough to kill the *Donnager* with just six ships."

"No. We didn't. Our version of blowing up the *Donnager* is a whole bunch of tramp prospectors loaded with nukes going on a suicide mission. We have many, many resources. What happened to the *Donnager* wasn't part of them."

The silence was broken only by the hum of the air recycler. Miller crossed his arms.

"But... I don't understand," he said. "If the OPA didn't start this, who did?"

"That is what Juliette Mao and the crew of the *Scopuli* can tell us," Shaddid said. "Those are the stakes, Miller. Who and why and please Christ some idea of how to stop it."

"And you don't want to find them?" Miller said.

"I don't want *you* to," Dawes said. "Not when someone else can do it better."

Miller shook his head. It was going too far, and he knew it. On the other hand, sometimes going too far could tell you something too.

"I'm not sold," he said.

"You don't have to be *sold*," Shaddid said. "This isn't a negotiation. We aren't bringing you in to ask you for a goddamn favor. I am your boss. I am telling you. Do you know those words? Telling. You."

"We have Holden," Dawes said.

"What?" Miller said at the same time Shaddid said, "You're not supposed to talk about that."

Dawes raised an arm toward Shaddid in the Belt's physical idiom of telling someone to be quiet. To Miller's surprise, she did as the OPA man said.

"We have Holden. He and his crew didn't die, and they are or are about to be in OPA custody. Do you understand what I'm saying, Detective? Do you see my point? I can do this investigation because I have the resources to do it. *You* can't even find out what happened to your own riot gear."

It was a slap. Miller looked at his shoes. He'd broken his word to Dawes about dropping the case, and the man hadn't brought it up until now. He had to give the OPA operative points for that. Added to that, if Dawes really did have James Holden, there was no chance of Miller's getting access to the interrogation.

When Shaddid spoke, her voice was surprisingly gentle.

"There were three murders yesterday. Eight warehouses got broken into, probably by the same bunch of people. We've got six people in hospital wards around the station with their nerves falling apart from a bad batch of bathtub pseudoheroin. The whole station's jumpy," she said. "There's a lot of good you can do out there, Miller. Go catch some bad guys."

"Sure, Captain," Miller said. "You bet."

Muss leaned against his desk, waiting for him. Her arms were crossed, her eyes as bored looking at him as they had been looking at the corpse of Dos Santos pinned to the corridor wall.

"New asshole?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"It'll grow closed. Give it time. I got us one of the murders. Mid-level accountant for Naobi-Shears got his head blown off outside a bar. It looked fun."

Miller pulled up his hand terminal and took in the basics. His heart wasn't in it.

"Hey, Muss," he said. "I got a question."

"Fire away."

"You've got a case you don't want solved. What do you do?"

His new partner frowned, tilted her head, and shrugged.

"I hand it to a fish," she said. "There was a guy back in crimes against children. If we knew the perp was one of our informants, we'd always give it to him. None of our guys ever got in trouble."

"Yeah," Miller said.

"For that matter, I need someone to take the shitty partner, I do the same thing," Muss went on. "You know. Someone no one else wants to work with? Got bad breath or a shitty personality or whatever, but he needs a partner. So I pick the guy who maybe he used to be good, but then he got a divorce. Started hitting the bottle. Guy still thinks he's a hotshot. Acts like it. Only his numbers aren't better than anyone else's. Give him the shit cases. The shit partner."

Miller closed his eyes. His stomach felt uneasy.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"To get assigned to you?" Muss said. "One of the seniors made the moves on me and I shot him down."

"So you got stuck."

"Pretty much. Come on, Miller. You aren't stupid," Muss said. "You had to know."

He'd had to know that he was the station house joke. The guy who used to be good. The one who'd lost it.

No, actually he hadn't known that. He opened his eyes. Muss didn't look happy or sad, pleased at his pain or particularly distressed by it. It was just work to her. The dead, the wounded, the injured.

She didn't care. Not caring was how she got through the day.

"Maybe you shouldn't have turned him down," Miller said.

"Ah, you're not that bad," Muss said. "And he had back hair. I hate back hair."

"Glad to hear it," Miller said. "Let's go make some justice."



"You're drunk," the asshole said.

"'M a cop," Miller said, stabbing the air with his finger. "Don't fuck with me."

"I know you're a cop. You've been coming to my bar for three years. It's me. Hasini. And you're drunk, my friend. Seriously, dangerously drunk."

Miller looked around him. He was indeed at the Blue Frog. He didn't remember having come here, and yet here he was. And the asshole was Hasini after all.

"I..." Miller began, then lost his train of thought.

"Come on," Hasini said, looping an arm around him. "It's not that far. I'll get you home."

"What time is it?" Miller asked.

"Late."

The word had a depth to it. *Late*. It was late. All the chances to make things right had somehow passed him. The system was at war, and no one was even sure why. Miller himself was turning fifty years old the next June. It was late. Late to start again. Late to realize how many years he'd spent running down the wrong road. Hasini steered him toward an electric cart the bar kept for occasions like this one. The smell of hot grease came out of the kitchen.

"Hold on," Miller said.

"You going to puke?" Hasini asked.

Miller considered for a moment. No, it was too late to puke. He stumbled forward. Hasini laid him back in the cart and engaged the motors, and with a whine they steered out into the corridor. The lights high above them were dimmed. The cart vibrated as they passed intersection after intersection. Or maybe it didn't. Maybe that was just his body.

"I thought I was good," he said. "You know, all this time, I thought I was at least good."

"You do fine," Hasini said. "You've just got a shitty job."

"That I was good at."

"You do fine," Hasini repeated, as if saying it would make it true.

Miller lay on the bed of the cart. The formed plastic arch of the wheel well dug into his side. It ached, but moving was too much effort. Thinking was too much effort. He'd made it through his day, Muss at his side. He'd turned in the data and materials on Julie. He had nothing worth going back to his hole for, and no place else to be.

The lights shifted into and out of his field of view. He wondered if that was what it would be like to look at stars. He'd never looked up at a sky. The thought inspired a certain vertigo. A sense of terror of the infinite that was almost pleasant.

"There anyone who can take care of you?" Hasini said when they reached Miller's hole.

"I'll be fine. I just... I had a bad day."

"Julie," Hasini said, nodding.

"How do you know about Julie?" Miller asked.

"You've been talking about her all night," Hasini said. "She's a girl you fell for, right?"

Frowning, Miller kept a hand on the cart. Julie. He'd been talking about Julie. That was what this was about. Not his job. Not his reputation. They'd taken away Julie. The special case. The one that mattered.

"You're in love with her," Hasini said.

"Yeah, sort of," Miller said, something like revelation forcing its way through the alcohol. "I think I am."

“Too bad for you,” Hasini said.

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Chapter Seventeen: Holden

The *Tachi*'s galley had a full kitchen and a table with room for twelve. It also had a full-size coffeepot that could brew forty cups of coffee in less than five minutes whether the ship was in zero g or under a five-g burn. Holden said a silent prayer of thanks for bloated military budgets and pressed the brew button. He had to restrain himself from stroking the stainless steel cover while it made gentle percolating noises.

The aroma of coffee began to fill the air, competing with the baking-bread smell of whatever Alex had put in the oven. Amos was thumping around the table in his new cast, laying out plastic plates and actual honest-to-god metal silverware. In a bowl Naomi was mixing something that had the garlic scent of good hummus. Watching the crew work at these domestic tasks, Holden had a sense of peace and safety deep enough to leave him light-headed.

They'd been on the run for weeks now, pursued the entire time by one mysterious ship or another. For the first time since the *Canterbury* was destroyed, no one knew where they were. No one was demanding anything of them. As far as the solar system was concerned, they were a few casualties out of thousands on the *Donnager*. A brief vision of Shed's head disappearing like a grisly magic trick reminded him that at least one of his crew was a casualty. And still, it felt so good to once again be master of his own destiny that even regret couldn't entirely rob him of it.

A timer rang, and Alex pulled out a tray covered with thin, flat bread. He began cutting it into slices, onto which Naomi slathered a paste that did in fact look like hummus. Amos put them on the plates around the table. Holden drew fresh coffee into mugs that had the ship's name on the side. He passed them around. There was an awkward moment when everyone stared at the neatly set table without moving, as if afraid to destroy the perfection of the scene.

Amos solved this by saying, "I'm hungry as a fucking bear," and then sitting down with a thump. "Somebody pass me that pepper, wouldja?"

For several minutes, no one spoke; they only ate. Holden took a small bite of the flat bread and hummus, the strong flavors making him dizzy after weeks of tasteless protein bars. Then he was stuffing it into his mouth so fast it made his salivary glands flare with exquisite agony. He looked around the table, embarrassed, but everyone else was eating just as fast, so he gave up on propriety and concentrated on food. When he'd finished off the last scraps from his plate, he leaned back with a sigh, hoping to make the contentment last as long as possible. Alex sipped coffee with his eyes closed. Amos ate the last bits of the hummus right out of the serving bowl with his spoon. Naomi gave Holden a sleepy look through half-lidded eyes that was suddenly sexy as hell. Holden quashed that thought and raised his mug.

"To Kelly's marines. Heroes to the last, may they rest in peace," he said.

"To the marines," everyone at the table echoed, then clinked mugs and drank.

Alex raised his mug and said, "To Shed."

"Yeah, to Shed, and to the assholes who killed him roasting in hell," Amos said in a quiet voice.

"Right beside the fucker who killed the *Cant*."

The mood at the table got somber. Holden felt the peaceful moment slipping away as quietly as it had come.

"So," he said. "Tell me about our new ship. Alex?"

“She’s a beaut, Cap. I ran her at twelve g for most of half an hour when we left the *Donnie*, and she purred like a kitten the whole time. The pilot’s chair is comfy too.”

Holden nodded.

“Amos? Get a chance to look at her engine room yet?” he asked.

“Yep. Clean as a whistle. This is going to be a boring gig for a grease monkey like me,” the mechanic replied.

“Boring would be nice,” Holden said. “Naomi? What do you think?”

She smiled. “I love it. It’s got the nicest showers I’ve ever seen on a ship this size. Plus, there’s a truly amazing medical bay with a computerized expert system that knows how to fix broken marines. We should have found it rather than fix Amos on our own.”

Amos thumped his cast with one knuckle.

“You guys did a good job, Boss.”

Holden looked around at his clean crew and ran a hand through his own hair, not pulling it away covered in grease for the first time in weeks.

“Yeah, a shower and not having to fix broken legs sounds good. Anything else?”

Naomi tilted her head back, her eyes moving as though she was running through a mental checklist.

“We’ve got a full tank of water, the injectors have enough fuel pellets to run the reactor for about thirty years, and the galley is fully stocked. You’ll have to tie me up if you plan to give her back to the navy. I love her.”

“She is a cunning little boat,” Holden said with a smile. “Have a chance to look at the weapons?”

“Two tubes and twenty long-range torpedoes with high-yield plasma warheads,” Naomi said.

“Or at least that’s what the manifest says. They load those from the outside, so I can’t physically verify without climbing around on the hull.”

“The weapons panel is sayin’ the same thing, Cap,” Alex said. “And full loads in all the point defense cannons. You know, except...”

Except the burst you fired into the men who killed Gomez.

“Oh, and, Captain, when we put Kelly in the cargo hold, I found a big crate with the letters *MAP* on the side. According to the manifest, it stands for ‘Mobile Assault Package.’ Apparently navy-speak for a big box of guns,” Naomi said.

“Yeah,” Alex said. “It’s full kit for eight marines.”

“Okay,” Holden said. “So with the fleet-quality Epstein, we’ve got legs. And if you guys are right about the weapons load out, we’ve also got teeth. The next question is what do we do with it? I’m inclined to take Colonel Johnson’s offer of refuge. Any thoughts?”

“I’m all for that, Captain,” Amos said. “I always did think the Belters were getting the short end of the stick. I’ll go be a revolutionary for a while, I guess.”

“Earthman’s burden, Amos?” Naomi asked with a grin.

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“Nothing, just teasing,” she said. “I know you like our side because you just want to steal our women.”

Amos grinned back, suddenly in on the joke.

“Well, you ladies do have the legs that go *all* the way up,” he said.

“Okay, enough,” Holden said, raising his hand. “So, two votes for Fred. Anyone else?”

Naomi raised her hand.

“I vote for Fred,” she said.

“Alex? What do you think?” Holden asked.

The Martian pilot leaned back in his chair and scratched his head.

“I got nowhere in particular to be, so I’ll stick with you guys, I guess,” he said. “But I hope this don’t turn into another round of bein’ told what to do.”

“It won’t,” Holden replied. “I have a ship with guns on it now, and the next time someone orders me to do something, I’m using them.”



After dinner, Holden took a long, slow tour of his new ship. He opened every door, looked in every closet, turned on every panel, and read every readout. He stood in engineering next to the fusion reactor and closed his eyes, getting used to the almost subliminal vibration she made. If something ever went wrong with it, he wanted to feel it in his bones before any warning ever sounded. He stopped and touched all the tools in the well-stocked machine shop, and he climbed up to the personnel deck and wandered through the crew cabins until he found one he liked, and messed up the bed to show it was taken. He found a bunch of jumpsuits in what looked like his size, then moved them to the closet in his new room. He took a second shower and let the hot water massage knots in his back that were three weeks old. As he wandered back to his cabin, he trailed his fingers along the wall, feeling the soft give of the fire-retardant foam and anti-spalling webbing over the top of the armored steel bulkheads. When he arrived at his cabin, Alex and Amos were both getting settled into theirs.

“Which cabin did Naomi take?” he asked.

Amos shrugged. “She’s still up in ops, fiddling with something.”

Holden decided to put off sleep for a while and rode the keel ladder-lift—*we have a lift!*—up to the operations deck. Naomi was sitting on the floor, an open bulkhead panel in front of her and what looked like a hundred small parts and wires laid out around her in precise patterns. She was staring at something inside the open compartment.

“Hey, Naomi, you should really get some sleep. What are you working on?”

She gestured vaguely at the compartment.

“Transponder,” she said.

Holden moved over and sat down on the floor next to her.

“Tell me how to help.”

She handed him her hand terminal; Fred’s instructions for changing the transponder signal were open on the screen.

“It’s ready to go. I’ve got the console hooked up to the transponder’s data port just like he says. I’ve got the computer program set up to run the override he describes. The new transponder code and ship registry data are ready to be entered. I put in the new name. Did Fred pick it?”

“No, that was me.”

“Oh. All right, then. But...” Her voice trailed off, and she waved at the transponder again.

“What’s the problem?” Holden asked.

“Jim, they make these things *not* to be fiddled with. The civilian version of this device fuses itself into a solid lump of silicon if it thinks it’s being tampered with. Who knows what the military version of the fail-safe is? Drop the magnetic bottle in the reactor? Turn us into a supernova?”

Naomi turned to look at him.

“I’ve got it all set up and ready to go, but now I don’t think we should throw the switch,” she said. “We don’t know the consequences of failure.”

Holden got up off the floor and moved over to the computer console. A program Naomi had named Trans01 was waiting to be run. He hesitated for one second, then pressed the button to execute. The ship failed to vaporize.

“I guess Fred wants us alive, then,” he said.

Naomi slumped down with a noisy, extended exhale.

“See, this is why I can’t ever be in command,” she said.

“Don’t like making tough calls with incomplete information?”

“More I’m not suicidally irresponsible,” she replied, and began slowly reassembling the transponder housing.

Holden punched the comm system on the wall. “Well, crew, welcome aboard the gas freighter *Rocinante*.”

“What does that name even mean?” Naomi said after he let go of the comm button.

“It means we need to go find some windmills,” Holden said over his shoulder as he headed to the lift.



Tycho Manufacturing and Engineering Concern was one of the first major corporations to move into the Belt. In the early days of expansion, Tycho engineers and a fleet of ships had captured a small comet and parked it in stable orbit as a water resupply point decades before ships like the *Canterbury* began bringing ice in from the nearly limitless fields in Saturn’s rings. It had been the most complex, difficult feat of mass-scale engineering humanity had ever accomplished until the next thing they did.

As an encore, Tycho had built the massive reaction drives into the rock of Ceres and Eros and spent more than a decade teaching the asteroids to spin. They had been slated to create a network of high-atmosphere floating cities above Venus before the development rights fell into a labyrinth of lawsuits now entering its eighth decade. There was some discussion of space elevators for Mars and Earth, but nothing solid had come of it yet. If you had an impossible engineering job that needed to be done in the Belt, and you could afford it, you hired Tycho.

Tycho Station, the Belt headquarters of the company, was a massive ring station built around a sphere half a kilometer across, with more than sixty-five million cubic meters of manufacturing and storage space inside. The two counter-rotating habitation rings that circled the sphere had enough space for fifteen thousand workers and their families. The top of the manufacturing sphere was festooned with half a dozen massive construction waldoes that looked like they could rip a heavy freighter in half. The bottom of the sphere had a bulbous projection fifty meters across, which housed a capital-ship-class fusion reactor and drive system, making Tycho Station the largest mobile construction platform in the solar system. Each compartment within the massive rings was built on a swivel system that allowed the chambers to reorient to thrust gravity when the rings stopped spinning and the station flew to its next work location.

Holden knew all this, and his first sight of the station still took his breath away. It wasn’t just the size of it. It was the idea that four generations of the smartest people in the solar system had been living and working here as they helped drag humanity into the outer planets almost through sheer force of will.

Amos said, “It looks like a big bug.”

Holden started to protest, but it did resemble some kind of giant spider: fat bulbous body and all its legs sprouting from the top of its head.

Alex said, “Forget the station, look at *that* monster.”

The vessel it was constructing dwarfed the station. Ladar returns told Holden the ship was just over two kilometers long and half a kilometer wide. Round and stubby, it looked like a cigarette butt made of steel. Framework girders exposed internal compartments and machinery at various stages of construction, but the engines looked complete, and the hull had been assembled over the bow. The name *Nauvoo* was painted in massive white letters across it.

“So the Mormons are going to ride that thing all the way to Tau Ceti, huh?” Amos asked, following it up with a long whistle. “Ballsy bastards. No guarantee there’s even a planet worth a damn on the other end of that hundred-year trip.”

“They seem pretty sure,” Holden replied. “And you don’t make the money to build a ship like that by being stupid. I, for one, wish them nothing but luck.”

“They’ll get the stars,” Naomi said. “How can you not envy them that?”

“Their great-grandkids’ll get maybe *a* star if they don’t all starve to death orbiting a rock they can’t use,” Amos said. “Let’s not get grandiose here.”

He pointed at the impressively large comm array jutting from the *Nauvoo*’s flank.

“Want to bet that’s what threw our anus-sized tightbeam message?” Amos said.

Alex nodded. “If you want to send private messages home from a couple light-years away, you need serious beam coherence. They probably had the volume turned down to avoid cuttin’ a hole in us.”

Holden got up from the copilot’s couch and pushed past Amos.

“Alex, see if they’ll let us land.”



Landing was surprisingly easy. The station control directed them to a docking port on the side of the sphere and stayed on the line, guiding them in, until Alex had married the docking tube to the airlock door. The tower control never pointed out that they had a lot of armaments for a transport and no tanks for carrying compressed gas. She got them docked, then wished them a pleasant day.

Holden put on his atmosphere suit and made a quick trip to the cargo bay, then met the others just inside the *Rocinante*’s inner airlock door with a large duffel.

“Put your suits on, that’s now standard ops for this crew anytime we go someplace new. And take one of these,” he said, pulling handguns and cartridge magazines from the bag. “Hide it in a pocket or your bag if you like, but I will be wearing mine openly.”

Naomi frowned at him.

“Seems a bit... confrontational, doesn’t it?”

“I’m tired of being kicked around,” Holden said. “The *Roci*’s a good start toward independence, and I’m taking a little piece of her with me. Call it a good luck charm.”

“Fuckin’ A,” said Amos, and strapped one of the guns to his thigh.

Alex stuffed his into the pocket of his flight suit. Naomi wrinkled her nose and waved off the last gun. Holden put it back into his duffel, led the crew into the *Rocinante*’s airlock, and cycled it. An older, dark-skinned man with a heavy build waited for them on the other side. As they came in, he smiled.

“Welcome to Tycho Station,” said the Butcher of Anderson Station. “Call me Fred.”

Chapter Eighteen: Miller

The death of the *Donnager* hit Ceres like a hammer striking a gong. Newsfeeds clogged themselves with high-power telescopic footage of the battle, most if not all of it faked. The Belt chatter swam with speculation about a secret OPA fleet. The six ships that had taken down the Martian flagship were hailed as heroes and martyrs. Slogans like *We did it once and we can do it again* and *Drop some rocks* cropped up even in apparently innocuous settings.

The *Canterbury* had stripped away the complacency of the Belt, but the *Donnager* had done something worse. It had taken away the fear. The Belters had gotten a sudden, decisive, and unexpected win. Anything seemed possible, and the hope seduced them.

It would have scared Miller more if he'd been sober.

Miller's alarm had been going off for the past ten minutes. The grating buzz took on subtones and overtones when he listened to it long enough. A constant rising tone, fluttering percussion throbbing under it, even soft music hiding underneath the blare. Illusions. Aural hallucinations. The voice of the whirlwind.

The previous night's bottle of fungal faux bourbon sat on the bedside table where a carafe of water usually waited. It still had a couple fingers at the bottom. Miller considered the soft brown of the liquid, thought about how it would feel on his tongue.

The beautiful thing about losing your illusions, he thought, was that you got to stop pretending. All the years he'd told himself that he was respected, that he was good at his job, that all his sacrifices had been made for a reason fell away and left him with the clear, unmuddied knowledge that he was a functional alcoholic who had pared away everything good in his own life to make room for anesthetic. Shaddid thought he was a joke. Muss thought he was the price she paid not to sleep with someone she didn't like. The only one who might have any respect for him at all was Havelock, an Earther. It was peaceful, in its way. He could stop making the effort to keep up appearances. If he stayed in bed listening to the alarm drone, he was just living up to expectations. No shame in that.

And still there was work to be done. He reached over and turned off the alarm. Just before it cut off, he heard a voice in it, soft but insistent. A woman's voice. He didn't know what she'd been saying. But since she was just in his head, she'd get another chance later.

He levered himself out of bed, sucked down some painkillers and rehydration goo, stalked to the shower, and burned a day and a half's ration of hot water just standing there, watching his legs get pink. He dressed in his last set of clean clothes. Breakfast was a bar of pressed yeast and grape sweetener. He dropped the bourbon from the bedside table into the recycler without finishing it, just to prove to himself that he still could.

Muss was waiting at the desk. She looked up when he sat.

"Still waiting for the labs on the rape up on eighteen," she said. "They promised them by lunch."

"We'll see," Miller said.

"I've got a possible witness. Girl who was with the vic earlier in the evening. Her deposition said she left before anything happened, but the security cameras aren't backing her up."

"Want me in the questioning?" Miller asked.

"Not yet. But if I need some theater, I'll pull you in."

"Fair enough."

Miller didn't watch her walk away. After a long moment staring at nothing, he pulled up his disk partition, reviewed what still needed doing, and started cleaning the place up.

As he worked, his mind replayed for the millionth time the slow, humiliating interview with Shaddid and Dawes. *We have Holden*, Dawes said. *You can't even find out what happened to your own riot gear*. Miller poked at the words like a tongue at the gap of a missing tooth. It rang true. Again.

Still, it might have been bullshit. It might have been a story concocted just to make him feel small. There wasn't any proof, after all, that Holden and his crew had survived. What proof could there be? The *Donnager* was gone, and all its logs along with it. There would have to have been a ship that made it out. Either a rescue vessel or one of the Martian escort ships. There was no way a ship could have gotten out and not been the singular darling of every newsfeed and pirate cast since. You couldn't keep something like that quiet.

Or sure you could. It just wouldn't be easy. He squinted at the empty air of the station house. Now. How *would* you cover up a surviving ship?

Miller pulled up a cheap navigation plotter he'd bought five years before—transit times had figured in a smuggling case—and plotted the date and position of the *Donnager's* demise. Anything running under non-Epstein thrust would still have been out there, and Martian warships would have either picked it up or blasted it into background radiation by now. So if Dawes wasn't just handing him bullshit, that meant an Epstein drive. He ran a couple quick calculations. With a good drive, someone could have made Ceres in just less than a month. Call it three weeks to be safe.

He looked at the data for almost ten minutes, but the next step didn't come to him, so he stepped away, got some coffee, and pulled up the interview he and Muss had done with a Belter ground-crew grunt. The man's face was long and cadaverous and subtly cruel. The recorder hadn't had a good fix on him, so the picture kept bouncing around. Muss asked the man what he'd seen, and Miller leaned forward to read the transcribed answers, checking for incorrectly recognized words. Thirty seconds later, the grunt said *clip whore* and the transcript read *clipper*. Miller corrected it, but the back of his mind kept churning.

Probably eight or nine hundred ships came into Ceres in a given day. Call it a thousand to be safe. Give it a couple days on either side of the three-week mark, that was only four thousand entries. Pain in the ass, sure, but not impossible. Ganymede would be the other real bitch. With its agriculture, there would be hundreds of transports a day there. Still, it wouldn't double the workload. Eros. Tycho. Pallas. How many ships docked on Pallas every day?

He'd missed almost two minutes of the recording. He started again, forcing himself to pay attention this time, and half an hour later, he gave up.

The ten busiest ports with two days to either side of an estimated arrival of an Epstein-drive ship that originated when and where the *Donnager* died totaled twenty-eight thousand docking records, more or less. But he could cut that down to seventeen thousand if he excluded stations and ports explicitly run by Martian military and research stations with all or nearly all inner planet inhabitants. So how long would it take him to check all the porting records by hand, pretending for a minute that he was stupid enough to do it? Call it 118 days—if he didn't eat or sleep. Just working ten-hour days, doing nothing else, he could almost get through it in less than a year. A little less.

Except no. Because there were ways to narrow it. He was only looking for Epstein drive ships. Most of the traffic at any of the ports would be local. Torch drive ships flown by prospectors and short-hop couriers. The economics of spaceflight made relatively few and relatively large ships the right answer for long flights. So take it down by, conservatively, three-quarters, and he was back in the close-to-four-thousand range again. Still hundreds of hours of work, but if he could think of some other filter that would just feed him the likely suspects... For instance, if the ship couldn't have filed a flight plan before the *Donnager* got killed.

The request interface for the port logs was ancient, uncomfortable, and subtly different from Eros to Ganymede to Pallas and on and on. Miller tacked the information requests on to seven

different cases, including a month-old cold case on which he was only a consultant. Port logs were public and open, so he didn't particularly need his detective status to hide his actions. With any luck Shaddid's monitoring of him wouldn't extend to low-level, public-record poking around. And even if it did, he might get the replies before she caught on.

Never knew if you had any luck left unless you pushed it. Besides, there wasn't a lot to lose.

When the connection from the lab opened on his terminal, he almost jumped. The technician was a gray-haired woman with an unnaturally young face.

"Miller? Muss with you?"

"Nope," Miller said. "She's got an interrogation."

He was pretty sure that was what she'd said. The tech shrugged.

"Well, her system's not answering. I wanted to tell you we got a match off the rape you sent us. It wasn't the boyfriend. Her boss did it."

Miller nodded. "You put in for the warrant?" he asked.

"Yep," she said. "It's already in the file."

Miller pulled it up: STAR HELIX ON BEHALF OF CERES STATION AUTHORIZES AND MANDATES THE DETENTION OF IMMANUEL CORVUS DOWD PENDING ADJUDICATION OF SECURITY INCIDENT CCS-4949231. The judge's digital signature was listed in green. He felt a slow smile on his lips.

"Thanks," he said.

On the way out of the station, one of the vice squads asked him where he was headed. He said lunch.

The Arranha Accountancy Group had their offices in the nice part of the governmental quarter in sector seven. It wasn't Miller's usual stomping grounds, but the warrant was good on the whole station. Miller went to the secretary at the front desk—a good-looking Belter with a starburst pattern embroidered on his vest—and explained that he needed to speak with Immanuel Corvus Dowd. The secretary's deep-brown skin took on an ashy tone. Miller stood back, not blocking the exit, but keeping close.

Twenty minutes later, an older man in a good suit came through the front door, stopped in front of Miller, and looked him up and down.

"Detective Miller?" the man said.

"You'd be Dowd's lawyer," Miller said cheerfully.

"I am, and I would like to—"

"Really," Miller said. "We should do this now."

The office was clean and spare with light blue walls that lit themselves from within. Dowd sat at the table. He was young enough that he still looked arrogant, but old enough to be scared. Miller nodded to him.

"You're Immanuel Corvus Dowd?" he said.

"Before you continue, Detective," the lawyer said, "my client is involved with very high-level negotiations. His client base includes some of the most important people in the war effort. Before you make any accusations, you should be aware that I can and will have everything you've done reviewed, and if there is one mistake, you will be held responsible."

"Mr. Dowd," Miller said. "What I am about to do to you is literally the only bright spot in my day. If you could see your way clear to resisting arrest, I'd really appreciate it."

"Harry?" Dowd said, looking to his lawyer. His voice cracked a little.

The lawyer shook his head.

Back at the police cart, Miller took a long moment. Dowd, handcuffed in the back, where everyone walking by could see him, was silent. Miller pulled up his hand terminal, noted the time of arrest, the objections of the lawyer, and a few other minor comments. A young woman in professional dress of cream-colored linen hesitated at the door of the accountancy. Miller didn't recognize her; she was no one involved with the rape case, or at least not the one he was working. Her face had the expressionless calm of a fighter. He turned, craning his neck to look at Dowd,

humiliated and not looking back. The woman shifted her gaze to Miller. She nodded once. *Thank you.*

He nodded back. *Just doing my job.*

She went through the door.

Two hours later, Miller finished the last of the paperwork and sent Dowd off to the cells.

Three and a half hours later, the first of his docking log requests came in.

Five hours later, the government of Ceres collapsed.



Despite being full, the station house was silent. Detectives and junior investigators, patrolmen and desk workers, the high and the low, they all gathered before Shaddid. She stood at her podium, her hair pulled back tight. She wore her Star Helix uniform, but the insignia had been removed. Her voice was shaky.

“You’ve all heard this by now, but starting now, it’s official. The United Nations, responding to requests from Mars, is withdrawing from its oversight and... protection of Ceres Station. This is a peaceful transition. This is not a coup. I’m going to say that again. This isn’t a coup. Earth is pulling out of here, we aren’t pushing.”

“That’s bullshit, sir,” someone shouted. Shaddid raised her hand.

“There’s a lot of loose talk,” Shaddid said. “I don’t want to hear any of it from you. The governor’s going to make the formal announcement at the start of the next shift, and we’ll get more details then. Until we hear otherwise, the Star Helix contract is still in place. A provisional government is being formed with members drawn from local business and union representation. We are still the law on Ceres, and I expect you to behave appropriately. You will all be here for your shifts. You will be here on time. You will act professionally and within the scope of standard practice.”

Miller looked over at Muss. His partner’s hair was still unkempt from the pillow. It was pushing midnight for them both.

“Any questions?” Shaddid said in a voice that implied there ought not be.

Who’s going to pay Star Helix? Miller thought. What laws are we enforcing? What does Earth know that makes walking away from the biggest port in the Belt the smart move?

Who’s going to negotiate your peace treaty now?

Muss, seeing Miller’s gaze, smiled.

“Guess we’re hosed,” Miller said.

“Had to happen,” Muss agreed. “I better go. Got a stop to make.”

“Up at the core?”

Muss didn’t answer, because she didn’t have to. Ceres didn’t have laws. It had police. Miller headed back to his hole. The station hummed, the stone beneath him vibrating from the countless docking clamps and reactor cores, tubes and recyclers and pneumatics. The stone was alive, and he’d forgotten the small signs that proved it. Six million people lived here, breathed this air. Fewer than in a middle-sized city on Earth. He wondered if they were expendable.

Had it really gone so far that the inner planets would be willing to lose a major station? It seemed like it had if Earth was abandoning Ceres. The OPA would step in, whether it wanted to or not. The power vacuum was too great. Then Mars would call it an OPA coup. Then... Then what? Board it and put it under martial law? That was the good answer. Nuke it into dust? He couldn’t quite bring himself to believe that either. There was just too much money involved. Docking fees alone would fuel a small national economy. And Shaddid and Dawes—much as he hated it—were right. Ceres under Earth contract had been the best hope for a negotiated peace.

Was there someone on Earth who didn’t *want* that peace? Someone or something powerful enough to move the glacial bureaucracy of the United Nations to take action?

“What am I looking at, Julie?” he said to the empty air. “What did you see out there that’s worth Mars and the Belt killing each other?”

The station hummed to itself, a quiet, constant sound too soft for him to hear the voices within it.



Muss didn’t come to work in the morning, but there was a message on his system telling him she’d be in late. “Cleanup” was her only explanation.

To look at it, nothing about the station house had changed. The same people coming to the same place to do the same thing. No, that wasn’t true. The energy was high. People were smiling, laughing, clowning around. It was a manic high, panic pressed through a cheesecloth mask of normalcy. It wasn’t going to last.

They were all that separated Ceres from anarchy. They were the law, and the difference between the survival of six million people and some mad bastard forcing open all the airlocks or poisoning the recyclers rested on maybe thirty thousand people. People like him. Maybe he should have rallied, risen to the occasion like the rest of them. The truth was the thought made him tired.

Shaddid marched by and tapped him on the shoulder. He sighed, rose from his chair, and followed her. Dawes was in her office again, looking shaken and sleep deprived. Miller nodded to him. Shaddid crossed her arms, her eyes softer and less accusing than he’d become used to.

“This is going to be tough,” she said. “We’re facing something harder than anything we’ve had to do before. I need a team I can trust with my life. Extraordinary circumstances. You understand that?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I got it. I’ll stop drinking, get myself together.”

“Miller. You’re not a bad person at heart. There was a time you were a pretty good cop. But I don’t trust you, and we don’t have time to start over,” Shaddid said, her voice as near to gentle as he had ever heard it. “You’re fired.”

Chapter Nineteen: Holden

Fred stood alone, hand outstretched, a warm and open smile on his broad face. There were no guards with assault rifles behind him. Holden shook Fred's hand and then started laughing. Fred smiled and looked confused but let Holden keep a grip on his hand, waiting for Holden to explain what was so funny.

"I'm sorry, but you have no idea how pleasant this is," Holden said. "This is *literally* the first time in over a month that I've gotten off a ship without it blowing up behind me."

Fred laughed with him now, an honest laugh that seemed to originate somewhere in his belly.

After a moment the man said, "You're quite safe here. We are the most protected station in the outer planets."

"Because you're OPA?" Holden asked.

Fred shook his head.

"No. We make campaign contributions to Earth and Mars politicians in amounts that would make a Hilton blush," he said. "If anyone blows us up, half the UN assembly and all of the Martian Congress will be howling for blood. It's the problem with politics. Your enemies are often your allies. And vice versa."

Fred gestured to a doorway behind him and motioned for everyone to follow. The ride was short, but halfway through, gravity reappeared, shifting in a disorienting swoop. Holden stumbled. Fred looked chagrined.

"I'm sorry. I should have warned you about that. The central hub's null g. Moving into the ring's rotational gravity can be awkward the first time."

"I'm fine," Holden said. Naomi's brief smile might only have been his imagination.

A moment later the elevator door opened onto a wide carpeted corridor with walls of pale green. It had the reassuring smell of air scrubbers and fresh carpet glue. Holden wouldn't have been surprised to find they were piping "new space station" scent into the air. The doors that led off the corridor were made of faux wood distinguishable from the real thing only because nobody had that much money. Of all his crew, Holden was almost certainly the only one who had grown up in a house with real wooden furniture and fixtures. Amos had grown up in Baltimore. They hadn't seen a tree there in more than a century.

Holden pulled off his helmet and turned around to tell his crew to do the same, but theirs were already off. Amos looked up and down the corridor and whistled.

"Nice digs, Fred," he said.

"Follow me, I'll get you settled in," Fred replied, leading them down the corridor. As he walked, he spoke. "Tycho Station has undergone a number of refurbishments over the last hundred years, as you might guess, but the basics haven't changed much. It was a brilliant design to begin with; Malthus Tycho was an engineering genius. His grandson, Bredon, runs the company now. He isn't on station at the moment. Down the well at Luna negotiating the next big deal."

Holden said, "Seems like you have a lot on your plate already, with that monster parked outside. And, you know, a war going on."

A group of people in jumpsuits of various colors walked past, talking animatedly. The corridor was so wide that no one had to give way. Fred gestured at them as they went by.

"First shift's just ending, so this is rush hour," he said. "It's actually time to start drumming up new work. The *Nauvoo* is almost done. They'll be loading colonists on her in six months. Always have to have the next project lined up. The Tycho spends eleven million UN dollars every day she's in operation, whether we make money that day or not. It's a big nut to cover. And the war... well, we're hoping that's temporary."

"And now you're taking in refugees. That won't help," Holden said.

Fred just laughed and said, "Four more people won't put us in the poorhouse anytime soon."

Holden stopped, forcing the others to pull up short behind him. It was several steps before Fred noticed, then turned around with a confused look.

"You're dodging," Holden said. "Other than a couple billion dollars' worth of stolen Martian warship, we haven't got anything of value. Everyone thinks we're dead. Any access of our accounts ruins that, and I just don't live in a universe where Daddy Warbucks swoops in and makes everything okay out of the goodness of his heart. So either tell us why you're taking the risk of putting us up, or we go get back on our ship and try our hand at piracy."

"Scourge of the Martian merchant fleet, they'll call us," Amos growled from somewhere behind him. He sounded pleased.

Fred held up his hands. There was a hardness in his eyes, but also an amused respect.

"Nothing underhanded, you have my word," he said. "You're armed, and station security will allow you to carry guns whenever you like. That alone should reassure you that I'm not planning foul play. But let me get you settled in before we do much more talking, okay?"

Holden didn't move. Another group of returning workers was going by in the corridor, and they watched the scene curiously as they passed. Someone from the knot of people called out, "Everything okay, Fred?"

Fred nodded and waved them by impatiently. "Let's get out of the corridor at least."

"We aren't unpacking until we get some answers," Holden replied.

"Fine. We're almost there," Fred said, and then led them off again at a somewhat faster pace. He stopped at a small inset in the corridor wall with two doors in it. Opening one with the swipe of a card, he led the four of them into a large residential suite with a roomy living space and lots of seating.

"Bathroom is that door back there on the left. The bedroom is the one on the right. There's even a small kitchen space over here," Fred said, pointing to each thing as he spoke.

Holden sat down in a large brown faux-leather recliner and leaned it back. A remote control was in a pocket of the armrest. He assumed it controlled the impressively large screen that took up most of one wall. Naomi and Amos sat on a couch that matched his chair, and Alex draped himself over a loveseat in a nice contrasting cream color.

"Comfortable?" Fred asked, pulling a chair away from the six-seat dining area and sitting down across from Holden.

"It's all right," Holden said defensively. "My ship has a really nice coffeemaker."

"I suppose bribes won't work. You are all comfortable, though? We have two suites set aside for you, both this basic layout, though the other suite has two rooms. I wasn't sure of the, ah, sleeping arrangements..." Fred trailed off uncomfortably.

"Don't worry, Boss, you can bunk with me," Amos said with a wink at Naomi.

Naomi just smiled faintly.

"Okay, Fred, we're off the street," she said. "Now answer the captain's questions."

Fred nodded, then stood up and cleared his throat. He seemed to review something. When he spoke, the conversational facade was gone. His voice carried a grim authority.

"War between the Belt and Mars is suicide. Even if every rock hopper in the Belt were armed, we still couldn't compete with the Martian navy. We might kill a few with tricks and suicide runs. Mars might feel forced to nuke one of our stations to prove a point. But we can strap chemical

rockets onto a couple hundred rocks the size of bunk beds and rain Armageddon down on Martian dome cities.”

Fred paused, as if looking for words, then sat back down on his chair.

“All of the war drums ignore that. It’s the elephant in the room. Anyone who doesn’t live on a spaceship is structurally vulnerable. Tycho, Eros, Pallas, Ceres. Stations can’t evade incoming missiles. And with all of the enemy’s citizens living at the bottom of huge gravity wells, we don’t even have to aim particularly well. Einstein was right. We will be fighting the next war with rocks. But the Belt has rocks that will turn the surface of Mars into a molten sea.

“Right now everyone is still playing nice, and only shooting at ships. Very gentlemanly. But sooner or later, one side or the other will be pressed to do something desperate.”

Holden leaned forward, the slick surface of his environment suit making an embarrassing squeak on the leather textured chair. No one laughed.

“I agree. What does that have to do with us?” he asked.

“Too much blood has already been shed,” Fred said.

Shed.

Holden winced at the bleak, unintentional pun but said nothing.

“The *Canterbury*,” Fred continued. “The *Donnager*. People aren’t just going to forget about those ships, and those thousands of innocent people.”

“Seems like you just crossed off the only two options, Chief,” Alex said. “No war, no peace.”

“There’s a third alternative. Civilized society has another way of dealing with things like this,” Fred said. “A criminal trial.”

Amos’ snort shook the air. Holden had to fight not to smile himself.

“Are you fucking serious?” Amos asked. “And how do you put a goddamn Martian stealth ship on trial? Do we go question all the stealth ships about their whereabouts, double-check their alibis?”

Fred held up a hand.

“Stop thinking of the *Canterbury*’s destruction as an act of war,” he said. “It was a crime. Right now, people are overreacting, but once the situation sinks in, heads will cool. People on both sides will see where this road goes and look for another way out. There is a window where the saner elements can investigate events, negotiate jurisdiction, and assign blame to some party or parties that both sides can agree to. A trial. It’s the only outcome that doesn’t involve millions of deaths and the collapse of human infrastructure.”

Holden shrugged, a gesture barely visible in his heavy environment suit.

“So it goes to a trial. You still aren’t answering my question.”

Fred pointed at Holden, then at each of the crew in turn.

“You’re the ace in the hole. You four people are the only eyewitnesses to the destruction of *both* ships. When the trial comes, I need you and your depositions. I have influence already through our political contacts, but you can buy me a seat at the table. It will be a whole new set of treaties between the Belt and the inner planets. We can do in months what I’d dreamed of doing in decades.”

“And you want to use our value as witnesses to force your way into the process so you can make those treaties look the way you want them to,” Holden said.

“Yes. And I’m willing to give you protection, shelter, and run of my station for as long as it takes to get there.”

Holden took a long, deep breath, got up, and started unzipping his suit.

“Yeah, okay. That’s just self-serving enough I believe it,” he said. “Let’s get settled in.”



Naomi was singing karaoke. Just thinking about it made Holden’s head spin. Naomi. Karaoke. Even considering everything that had happened to them over the past month, Naomi up onstage with a mic in one hand and some sort of fuchsia martini in the other, screaming out an angry Belt-punk anthem

by the Moldy Filters, was the strangest thing he'd ever seen. She finished to scattered applause and a few catcalls, then staggered off the stage and collapsed across from him in the booth.

She held up her drink, sloshing a good half of it onto the table, then threw the other half back all at once.

"Whadja think?" Naomi asked, waving at the bartender for another.

"It was terrible," Holden replied.

"No, really."

"It was truly one of the most awful renditions of one of the most awful songs I've ever heard."

Naomi shook her head, blowing an exasperated raspberry at him. Her dark hair fell across her face and, when the bartender brought her a second brightly colored martini, foiled all her attempts at drinking. She finally grabbed her hair and held it above her head in a clump while she drank.

"You don't get it," she said. "It's *supposed* to be awful. That's the point."

"Then it was the best version of that song I've ever heard," Holden said.

"Damn straight." Naomi looked around the bar. "Where're Amos and Alex?"

"Amos found what I'm pretty sure was the most expensive hooker I've ever seen. Alex is in the back playing darts. He made some claims about the superiority of Martian darts players. I assume they're going to kill him and throw him out an airlock."

A second singer was onstage, crooning out some sort of Vietnamese power ballad. Naomi watched the singer for a while, sipping her drink, then said, "Maybe we should go save him."

"Which one?"

"Alex. Why would Amos need saving?"

"Because I'm pretty sure he told the expensive hooker he was on Fred's expense account."

"Let's mount a rescue mission; we can save them both," Naomi said, then drank the rest of her cocktail. "I need more rescue fuel, though."

She started waving at the bartender again, but Holden reached out and grabbed her hand and held it on the table.

"Maybe we should take a breather instead," he said.

A flush of anger as intense as it was brief lit her face. She pulled back her hand.

"You take a breather. I've just had two ships and a bunch of friends shot out from underneath me, and spent three weeks of dead time flying to get here. So, no. I'm getting another drink, and then doing another set. The crowd loves me," Naomi said.

"What about our rescue mission?"

"Lost cause. Amos will be murdered by space hookers, but at least he'll die the way he lived."

Naomi pushed her way up from the table, grabbed her martini off the bar, and headed toward the karaoke stage. Holden watched her go, then finished off the scotch he'd been nursing for the past two hours and got up.

For a moment there, he'd had a vision of the two of them staggering back to the room together, then falling into bed. He'd have hated himself in the morning for taking advantage, but he'd still have done it. Naomi was looking at him from the stage, and he realized he'd been staring. He gave a little wave, then headed out the door with only ghosts—Ade, Captain McDowell, Gomez and Kelly and Shed—to keep him company.



The suite was comfortable and huge and depressing. He'd lain on the bed less than five minutes before he was up and out the door again. He walked the corridor for half an hour, finding the big intersections that led to other parts of the ring. He found an electronics store and a teahouse and what on closer inspection turned out to be a very expensive brothel. He declined the video menu of services the desk clerk offered and wandered out again, wondering if Amos was somewhere inside.

He was halfway down a corridor he hadn't seen before when a small knot of teenage girls passed him. Their faces looked no older than fourteen, but they were already as tall as he was. They got quiet as he walked by, then burst out laughing when he was behind them, and hurried away. Tycho was a city, and he suddenly felt very much like a foreigner, unsure of where to go or what to do.

It was no surprise to him when he looked up from his wanderings and discovered he'd come to the elevator to the docking area. He punched the button and climbed inside, remembering to turn on his boot mags just in time to avoid being flung off his feet when the gravity twisted sideways and vanished.

Even though he'd only had possession of the ship for three weeks, climbing back onto the *Rocinante* felt like going home. Using gentle touches on the keel ladder, he made his way up to the cockpit. He pulled himself into the copilot's couch, strapped in, and closed his eyes.

The ship was silent. With the reactor off-line, and no one aboard, nothing was moving at all. The flexible docking tube that connected the *Roci* to the station transmitted very little vibration to the ship. Holden could close his eyes and drift in the straps and disconnect from everything around him.

It would have been peaceful except that every time he'd closed his eyes for the past month, the fading ghost lights behind his eyelids had been Ade winking and blowing away like dust. The voice at the back of his head was McDowell's as he tried to save his ship right up to the very last second. He wondered if he'd have them for the rest of his life, coming out to haunt him every time he found a moment of quiet.

He remembered the old-timers from his navy days. Grizzled lifers who could soundly sleep while two meters away their shipmates played a raucous game of poker or watched the vids with the volume all the way up. Back then he'd assumed it was just learned behavior, the body adapting so it could get enough rest in an environment that never really had downtime. Now he wondered if those vets found the constant noise preferable. A way to keep their lost shipmates away. They probably went home after their twenty and never slept again. He opened his eyes and watched a small green telltale blink on the pilot's console.

It was the only light in the room, and it illuminated nothing. But its slow fade in and out was somehow comforting. A quiet heartbeat for the ship.

He told himself that Fred was right; a trial was the right thing to hope for. But he wanted that stealth ship in Alex's gun sights. He wanted that unknown crew to live through the terrifying moment when all the countermeasures have failed, the torpedoes are seconds from impact, and absolutely nothing can stop them.

He wanted them to have that same last gasp of fear he'd heard through Ade's mic.

For a time, he displaced the ghosts in his head with violent vengeance fantasies. When they stopped working, he floated down to the personnel deck, strapped into his cot, and tried to sleep. The *Rocinante* sang him a lullaby of air recyclers and silence.

Chapter Twenty: Miller

Miller sat at an open café, the tunnel wide above him. Grass grew tall and pale in the public commons, and the ceiling glowed full-spectrum white. Ceres Station had come unmoored. Orbital mechanics and inertia kept it physically where it had always been, but the stories about it had changed. The point defenses were the same. The tensile strength of the port blast doors was the same. The ephemeral shield of political status was all they'd lost, and it was everything.

Miller leaned forward and sipped his coffee.

There were children playing on the commons. He thought of them as children, though he remembered thinking of himself as an adult at that age. Fifteen, sixteen years old. They wore OPA armbands. The boys spoke in loud, angry voices about tyranny and freedom. The girls watched the boys strut. The ancient, animal story, the same whether it was on a spinning rock surrounded by hard vacuum or the stamp-sized chimpanzee preserves on Earth. Even in the Belt, youth brought invulnerability, immortality, the unshakable conviction that for you, things would be different. The laws of physics would cut you a break, the missiles would never hit, the air would never hiss out into nothing. Maybe for other people—the patched-together fighting ships of the OPA, the water haulers, the Martian gunships, the *Scopuli*, the *Canterbury*, the *Donnager*, the hundred other ships that had died in small actions since the system had turned itself into a battlefield—but not you. And when youth was lucky enough to survive its optimism, all Miller had left was a little fear, a little envy, and the overwhelming sense of life's fragility. But he had three month's worth of company script in his account and a lot of free time, and the coffee wasn't bad.

"You need anything, sir?" the waiter asked. He didn't look any older than the kids on the grass. Miller shook his head.

Five days had passed since Star Helix pulled its contract. The governor of Ceres was gone, smuggled out on a transport before the news had gone wide. The Outer Planets Alliance had announced the inclusion of Ceres among official OPA-held real estate, and no one had said otherwise. Miller had spent the first day of his unemployment drunk, but his bender had an oddly pro forma feel. He'd descended into the bottle because it was familiar, because it was what you did when you'd lost the career that defined you.

The second day, he'd gotten through the hangover. The third, he'd gotten bored. All through the station, security forces were making the kind of display he'd expected, preemptive peacekeeping. The few political rallies and protests ended fast and hard, and the citizens of Ceres didn't much care. Their eyes were on their monitors, on the war. A few locals with busted heads getting thrown into prison without charges were beneath notice. And Miller was personally responsible for none of it.

The fourth day, he'd checked his terminal and discovered that 80 percent of his docking log requests had come through before Shaddid had shut his access down. Over a thousand entries, any one of which could be the only remaining lead to Julie Mao. So far, no Martian nukes were on their way to crack Ceres. No demands of surrender. No boarding forces. It could all change in a moment, but until it did, Miller was drinking coffee and auditing ship records, about one every fifteen minutes. Miller figured that if Holden was the last ship in the log, he'd find him in about six weeks.

The *Adrianopole*, a third-gen prospector, had docked at Pallas within the arrival window. Miller checked the open registration, frustrated again at how little information was there compared to the

security databases. Owned by Strego Anthony Abramowitz. Eight citations for substandard maintenance, banned from Eros and Ceres as a danger to the port. An idiot and an accident waiting to happen, but the flight plan seemed legitimate, and the history of the ship was deep enough not to smell new-minted. Miller deleted the entry.

The *Badass Motherfucker*, a freight hauler doing a triangle between Luna, Ganymede, and the Belt. Owned by MYOFB Corporation out of Luna. A query to the public bases at Ganymede showed it had left the port there at the listed time and just hadn't bothered to file a flight plan. Miller tapped the screen with a fingernail. Not exactly how he'd fly under the radar. Anyone with authority would roust that ship just for the joy of doing it. He deleted the entry.

His terminal chimed. An incoming message. Miller flipped over to it. One of the girls on the commons shrieked and the others laughed. A sparrow flew past, its wings humming in the constant recycler-driven breeze.

Havelock looked better than when he'd been on Ceres. Happier. The dark circles were gone from his eyes, and the shape of his face had subtly softened, as if the need to prove himself in the Belt had changed his bones and now he was falling back into his natural form.

"Miller!" the recording said. "I heard about Earth cutting Ceres just before I got your message. Bad luck. I'm sorry to hear Shaddid fired you. Between the two of us, she's a pompous idiot. The rumor I've heard is Earth is doing everything it can to stay out of the war, including giving up any station that it's expecting to be a point of contention. You know how it is. You've got a pit bull on one side of you and a rottweiler on the other, first thing you do is drop your steak."

Miller chuckled.

"I've signed on with Protogen security, big-company private army bullshit. But the pay is worth putting up with their delusions of grandeur. The contract's supposed to be on Ganymede, but with the crap going on right now, who knows how it'll really play out? Turns out Protogen's got a training base in the Belt. I'd never heard about it, but it's supposed to be quite the gymnasium. I know they're hiring on, and I'd be happy to put in a word for you. Just let me know, and I'll get you together with the induction recruiter, get you off that damned rock."

Havelock smiled.

"Take care of yourself, partner," the Earther said. "Keep in touch."

Protogen. Pinkwater. Al Abbiq. Small corporate security forces that the big transorbital companies used as private armies and mercenary forces to rent out as needed. AnnanSec had the Pallas security contract, and had for years, but it was Mars-based. The OPA was probably hiring, but probably not him.

It had been years since he'd tried to find work. He'd assumed that particular struggle was behind him, that he was going to die working the Ceres Station security contract. Now that events had thrown him out, everything had an odd floating feeling. Like the gap between getting hit and feeling the pain. He needed to find another job. He needed to do more than send a couple messages out to his old partners. There were employment firms. There were bars on Ceres that would hire an ex-cop for a bouncer. There were gray markets that would take anyone capable of giving them a veneer of legality.

The last thing that made sense was to sit around, ogling girls in the park and chasing down leads on a case that he hadn't been meant to follow up on in the first place.

The *Dagon* had come into Ceres just a little ahead of the arrival window. Owned by the Glapion Collective, who were, he was pretty sure, an OPA front. That made it a good fit. Except the flight plan had been put in just a few hours after the *Donnager* blew, and the exit record from Io looked solid. Miller shifted it into a file he was keeping for ships that earned a second look.

The *Rocinante*, owned by Silencieux Courant Holdings out of Luna, was a gas hauler that had landed at Tycho just hours before the end of the arrival window. Silencieux Courant was a medium-sized corporate entity with no obvious ties to the OPA, and the flight plan from Pallas was plausible. Miller put his fingertip over the delete key, then paused. He sat back.

Why was a gas hauler going between Pallas and Tycho? Both stations were gas *consumers*. Flying from consumer to consumer without hitting a supply in the middle was a good way to not cover your docking fees. He put in a request for the flight plan that had taken the *Rocinante* to Pallas from wherever it had been before, then sat back to wait. If the records were cached in the Ceres servers, the request shouldn't take more than a minute or two. The notification bar estimated an hour and a half, so that meant the request was getting forwarded to the docking systems at Pallas. It hadn't been in the local backup.

Miller stroked his chin; five days of stubble had almost reached the beginning of a beard. He felt a smile starting. He did a definition search on *Rocinante*. Literally meaning "no longer a workhorse," its first entry was as the name of Don Quixote's horse.

"That you, Holden?" Miller said to the screen. "You out tilting at windmills?"

"Sir?" the waiter said, but Miller waved him away.

There were hundreds of entries still to be looked at and dozens at least in his second-look folder. Miller ignored them, staring at the entry from Tycho as if by sheer force of will he could make more information appear on the screen. Then, slowly, he pulled up the message from Havelock, hit the respond key, and looked into the tiny black pinprick of the terminal's camera.

"Hey, partner," he said. "Thanks for the offer. I may take you up on it, but I've got some kinks I need to work out before I jump. You know how it is. If you can do me a favor, though... I need to keep track of a ship, and I've only got the public databases to work from, plus which Ceres may be at war with Mars by now. Who knows, you know? Anyway, if you can put a level one watch on any flight plans for her, drop me a note if anything comes up... I'd buy you a drink sometime."

He paused. There had to be something more to say.

"Take care of yourself, partner."

He reviewed the message. On-screen, he looked tired, the smile a little fake, the voice a little higher than it sounded in his head. But it said what it needed to say. He sent it.

This was what he'd been reduced to. Access gone, service gun confiscated—though he still had a couple of drops in his hole—money running out. He had to play the angles, call in favors for things that should have been routine, outthink the system for any scrap. He'd been a cop, and they'd turned him into a mouse. *Still*, he thought, sitting back in the chair. *Pretty good work for a mouse.*

The sound of detonation came from spinward, then voices raised in anger. The kids on the commons stopped their games of touch-me touch-you and stared. Miller stood up. There was smoke, but he couldn't see flames. The breeze picked up as the station air cleaners raised the flow to suck away particulates so the sensors didn't think there was a risk of fanning a fire. Three gunshots rang out in fast succession, and the voices came together in a rough chant. Miller couldn't make words out of it, but the rhythm told him all he needed to know. Not a disaster, not a fire, not a breach. Just a riot.

The kids were walking toward the commotion. Miller caught one by the elbow. She couldn't have been more than sixteen, her eyes near black, her face a perfect heart shape.

"Don't go over there," he said. "Get your friends together and walk the other way."

The girl looked at him, his hand on her arm, the distant commotion.

"You can't help," he said.

She pulled her arm free.

"Gotta try, yeah?" she said. "Podría intentar, you know." *You could too.*

"Just did," Miller said as he put his terminal in its case and walked away. Behind him, the sounds of the riot grew. But he figured the police could take care of it.



Over the next fourteen hours, the system net reported five riots on the station, some minor structural damage. Someone he'd never heard of announced a tri-phase curfew; people out of their holes more than two hours before or after their work shifts would be subject to arrest. Whoever was running the

show now thought they could lock down six million people and create stability and peace. He wondered what Shaddid thought about that.

Outside Ceres, things were getting worse. The deep astronomy labs on Triton had been occupied by a band of prospectors sympathetic to the OPA. They'd turned the array in-system and had been broadcasting the location of every Martian ship in the system along with high-definition images of the surface of Mars, down to the topless sunbathers in the dome parks. The story was that a volley of nukes was on its way to the station, and the array would be bright dust within a week. Earth's imitation of a snail was picking up the pace as Earth-and Luna-based companies pulled back down the gravity well. Not all of them, not even half, but enough to send the Terran message: *Count us out*. Mars appealed for solidarity; the Belt appealed for justice or, more often, told the birthplace of humanity to go fuck itself.

It wasn't out of control yet, but it was ramping up. Another few incidents and it wouldn't matter how it had started. It wouldn't matter what the stakes were. Mars knew the Belt couldn't win, and the Belt knew it had nothing to lose. It was a recipe for death on a scale humanity had never seen.

And, like Ceres, there wasn't much Miller could do about that either. But he could find James Holden, find out what had happened to the *Scopuli*, follow the leads back to Julie Mao. He was a detective. It was what he did.

As he packed up his hole, throwing out the collected detritus that grew over decades like a crust, he talked to her. He tried to explain why he'd given up everything to find her. After his discovery of the *Rocinante*, he could hardly avoid the word *quixotic*.

His imaginary Julie laughed or was touched. She thought he was a sad, pathetic little man, since just tracking her down was the nearest to a purpose in life he could find. She dressed him down as being a tool of her parents. She wept and put her arms around him. She sat with him in some almost unimaginable observation lounge and watched the stars.

He fit everything he had into a shoulder bag. Two changes of clothes, his papers, his hand terminal. A picture of Candace from back in better days. All the hard copy of Julie's case he'd made before Shaddid wiped his partition, including three pictures of Julie. He thought that everything he'd lived through should have added up to more, and then changed his mind. It was probably about right.

He spent one last day ignoring the curfew, making his rounds of the station, saying goodbye to the few people he felt he might miss or might miss him. To his surprise, Muss, who he found at a tense and uncomfortable police bar, actually teared up and hugged him until his ribs ached from it.

He booked passage on a transport to Tycho. His bunk ran him a quarter of his remaining funds. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that he had to find Julie pretty damn quick or find a job to support him through the investigation. But it hadn't happened yet, and the universe wasn't stable enough anymore to make long-range planning more than a sour joke.

As if to prove the point, his terminal chimed as he was in the line to board the transport.

"Hey, partner," Havelock said. "That favor you needed? I got a bite. Your package just put in a flight plan for Eros. I'm sending the public-access data attached. I'd get you the good stuff, but these Protogen guys are tight. I mentioned you to the recruiter and she seemed interested. So let me know, right? Talk to you soon."

Eros.

Great.

Miller nodded at the woman behind him, stepped out of line, and walked to the kiosk. By the time a screen was open, they were calling final boarding for the Tycho transport. Miller turned in his ticket, got a nominal refund, and spent a third of what he still had in his account for a ticket to Eros. Still, it could have been worse. He could have been on the way before he got word. He had to start thinking about it as good luck, not bad.

The passage confirmation came through with a chime like a gently struck triangle.

"I hope I'm right about this," he said to Julie. "If Holden's not there, I'm gonna feel pretty stupid."

In his mind, she smiled ruefully.
Life is risk, she said.

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Chapter Twenty-One: Holden

Ships were small. Space was always at a premium, and even on a monster like the *Donnager*, the corridors and compartments were cramped and uncomfortable. On the *Rocinante*, the only rooms where Holden could spread out his arms without touching two walls were the galley and the cargo bay. No one who flew for a living was claustrophobic, but even the most hardened Belt prospector could recognize the rising tension of being ship-bound. It was the ancient stress response of the trapped animal, the subconscious knowledge that there was literally nowhere to go that you couldn't see from where you were already standing. Getting off the ship at port was a sudden and sometimes giddy release of tension.

It often took the form of a drinking game.

Like all professional sailors, Holden had sometimes ended long flights by drinking himself into a stupor. More than once he'd wandered into a brothel and left only when they threw him out with an emptied account, a sore groin, and a prostate as dry as the Sahara desert. So when Amos staggered into his room after three days on station, Holden knew exactly what the big mechanic felt like.

Holden and Alex were sharing the couch and watching a newsfeed. Two talking heads were discussing the Belter actions with words like *criminal*, *terrorist*, and *sabotage*. The Martians were "peacekeepers." It was a Martian news channel. Amos snorted and collapsed on the couch. Holden muted the screen.

"Having a good shore leave, sailor?" Holden asked with a grin.

"I'll never drink again," Amos groaned.

"Naomi's comin' over with some chow she got at that sushi place," Alex said. "Nice raw fish wrapped in fake seaweed."

Amos groaned again.

"That's not nice, Alex," Holden said. "Let the man's liver die in peace."

The door to the suite slid open again, and Naomi came in carrying a tall stack of white boxes.

"Food's here," she said.

Alex opened all the boxes and started handing around small disposable plates.

"Every time it's your turn to get food, you get salmon rolls. It shows a lack of imagination," Holden said as he began putting food on his plate.

"I like salmon," Naomi replied.

The room got quiet as people ate; the only sounds were the clack of plastic chopsticks and the wet squish of things being dipped in wasabi and soy. When the food was gone, Holden wiped his eyes, made runny by the heat in his sinuses, and leaned his chair all the way back. Amos used one of his chopsticks to scratch under the cast on his leg.

"You guys did a pretty good job setting this," he said. "It's the thing on my body that hurts the least right now."

Naomi grabbed the remote off Holden's armrest and turned the volume back on. She began spooling through the different feeds. Alex closed his eyes and slid down on the loveseat, lacing his fingers across his belly and sighing contentedly. Holden felt a sudden and irrational annoyance at his crew for being so comfortable.

"Everyone had enough of sucking on Fred's teat yet?" he said. "I know I have."

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Amos said, shaking his head. “I’m just getting started.”

“I mean,” Holden said, “how long are we going to hang around on Tycho, drinking and whoring and eating sushi on Fred’s expense account?”

“As long as I can?” Alex said.

“You have a better plan, then,” Naomi said.

“I don’t have a plan, but I want to get back in the game. We were full of righteous anger and dreams of vengeance when we got here, and a couple of blowjobs and hangovers later, it’s like nothing ever happened.”

“Uh, vengeance kinda requires someone to avenge upon, Cap,” Alex said. “Case you ain’t noticed, we’re lackin’ in that department.”

“That ship is still out there, somewhere. The people who ordered it to shoot are, too,” Holden said.

“So,” Alex replied slowly, “we take off and start flyin’ in a spiral until we run into it?”

Naomi laughed and threw a soy packet at him.

“I don’t know what we do,” Holden said, “but sitting here while the people who killed our ship keep doing whatever it is *they’re* doing is making me nuts.”

“We’ve been here three days,” Naomi said. “We deserve some comfortable beds and decent food and a chance to blow off steam. Don’t try to make us feel bad for taking it.”

“Besides, Fred said we’ll get those bastards at the trial,” Amos said.

“If there’s a trial,” Holden replied. “*If*. It won’t happen for months, or maybe even years. And even then, Fred’s looking at those treaties. Amnesty might be another bargaining chip, right?”

“You were quick enough to agree to his terms, Jim,” Naomi said. “Changed your mind?”

“If Fred wants depositions in exchange for letting us patch up and rest, the price was cheap. That doesn’t mean I think a trial will fix everything, or that I want to be sidelined until it happens.”

He gestured at the faux-leather couch and huge wall screen around them.

“Besides, this can be a prison. It’s a nice one, but as long as Fred controls the purse strings, he owns us. Make no mistake.”

Naomi’s brow crinkled; her eyes grew serious.

“What’s the option, sir?” she asked. “Leave?”

Holden folded his arms, his mind turning over everything he’d said as if he was hearing it for the first time. Saying things out loud actually made them clearer.

“I’m thinking we look for work,” he said. “We’ve got a good ship. More importantly, we have a sneaky ship. It’s fast. We can run without a transponder if we need to. Lots of people will need things moved from place to place with a war on. Gives us something to do while we wait for Fred’s trial, and a way to put money in our pockets so we can get off the dole. And, as we fly from place to place, we can keep our ears and eyes open. Never know what we’ll find. And seriously, how long can you three stand to be station rats?”

There was a moment’s silence.

“I could station rat for another... week?” Amos said.

“It ain’t a bad idea, Cap,” Alex said with a nod.

“It’s your decision, Captain,” Naomi said. “I’ll stick with you, and I like the idea of getting my own money again. But I hope you’re not in a hurry. I could really use a few more days off.”

Holden clapped his hands and jumped to his feet.

“Nope,” he said. “Having a plan makes all the difference. Downtime’s easier to enjoy when I know it’ll end.”

Alex and Amos got up together and headed for the door. Alex had won a few dollars playing darts, and now he and Amos were in the process of turning it into even more money at the card tables.

“Don’t wait up, Boss,” Amos said to Naomi. “I’m feeling lucky today.”

They left, and Holden went to the small kitchen nook to make coffee. Naomi followed him in.

"One other thing," she said.

Holden tore open the sealed coffee packet, the strong odor filling the room.

"Shoot," he said.

"Fred is taking care of all the arrangements for Kelly's body. He'll hold it here in state until we go public with our survival. Then he'll ship it back to Mars."

Holden filled the coffeemaker with water from the tap and started the machine. It made soft gurgling sounds.

"Good. Lieutenant Kelly deserves all the respect and dignity we can give him."

"It got me thinking about that data cube he had. I haven't been able to hack it. It's some kind of military über-encryption that makes my head hurt. So..."

"Just say it," Holden said with a frown.

"I want to give it to Fred. I know it's a risk. We have no idea what's on it, and for all his charm and hospitality, Fred's still OPA. But he was also high-ranking UN military. And he's got a serious brain trust here on the station. He might be able to open it up."

Holden thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Okay, let me sit with that. I want to know what Yao was trying to get off the ship, but—"

"Yeah."

They shared a companionable silence as the coffee brewed. When it was finished, Holden poured two mugs and handed one to Naomi.

"Captain," she said, then paused. "Jim. I've been a pain-in-the-ass XO so far. I've been stressed out and scared shitless about eighty percent of the time."

"You do an amazing job of hiding that fact," Holden replied.

Naomi nodded the compliment away.

"Anyway, I've been pushy about some things that I probably shouldn't have been."

"Not a big deal."

"Okay, let me finish," she said. "I want you to know I think you've done a great job of keeping us alive. You keep us focused on the problems we can solve instead of feeling sorry for ourselves. You keep everyone in orbit around you. Not everyone can do that, I couldn't do it, and we've needed that stability."

Holden felt a glow of pride. He hadn't expected it, and he didn't trust it, but it felt good all the same.

"Thank you," Holden said.

"I can't speak for Amos and Alex, but I plan to stick it out. You're not just the captain because McDowell is dead. You're *our* captain, as far as I'm concerned. Just so you know."

She looked down, blushing as if she'd just confessed something. Maybe she had.

"I'll try not to blow it," he said.

"I'd appreciate that, sir."



Fred Johnson's office was like its occupant: big, intimidating, and overflowing with things that needed to be done. The room was easily two and a half square meters, making it larger than any single compartment on the *Rocinante*. His desk was made of actual wood, looked at least a hundred years old, and smelled of lemon oil. Holden sat in a chair that was just a little lower than Fred's, and looked at the mounds of file folders and papers covering every flat surface.

Fred had sent for him and then spent the first ten minutes after he'd arrived speaking on the phone. Whatever he was talking about, it sounded technical. Holden assumed it was related to the giant generation ship outside. It didn't bother him to be ignored for a few minutes, since the wall behind Fred was entirely covered by a bleedingly high-definition screen pretending to be a window.

It was showing a spectacular view of the *Nauvoo* moving past as the station spun. Fred spoiled the scene by putting the phone down.

"Sorry about that," he said. "The atmosphere processing system has been a nightmare from day one. When you're going a hundred plus years on only the air you can bring with you, the loss tolerances are... stricter than usual. Sometimes it's difficult to impress the importance of fine details on the contractors."

"I was enjoying the view," Holden said, gesturing at the screen.

"I'm starting to wonder if we'll be able to get it done on schedule."

"Why?"

Fred sighed and leaned his chair back with a squeak.

"It's the war between Mars and the Belt."

"Material shortages, then?"

"Not just that. Pirate casts claiming to speak for the OPA are working into a frenzy. Belt prospectors with homemade torpedo launchers are firing on Martian warships. They get wiped out in response, but every now and then one of those torpedoes hits and kills a few Martians."

"Which means Mars starts shooting first."

Fred nodded and then got up and started pacing the room.

"And then even honest citizens on legitimate business start getting worried about going out of the house," he said. "We've had over a dozen late shipments so far this month, and I'm worried it will stop being delays and start being cancellations."

"You know, I've been thinking about the same thing," Holden said.

Fred acted as though he hadn't heard.

"I've been on that bridge," Fred said. "Unidentified ship coming on you, and a decision to make? No one wants to press the button. I've watched a ship get bigger and bigger on the scope while my finger was on the trigger. I remember begging them to stop."

Holden said nothing. He'd seen it too. There was nothing to say. Fred let silence hang in the air for a moment, then shook his head and straightened up.

"I need to ask you a favor," Fred said.

"You can always ask, Fred. You've paid for that much," Holden replied.

"I need to borrow your ship."

"The *Roci*?" Holden said. "Why?"

"I need to have something picked up and delivered here, and I need a ship that can stay quiet and run past Martian picket ships if it needs to."

"The *Rocinante* is definitely the right ship, then, but that didn't answer my question. Why?"

Fred turned his back to Holden and looked at the view screen. The nose of the *Nauvoo* was just vanishing from sight. The view turned to the flat, star-speckled black of forever.

"I need to pick someone up on Eros," he said. "Someone important. I've got people who can do it, but the only ships we've got are light freighters and a couple of small shuttles. Nothing that can make the trip quickly enough or have a hope of running away if trouble starts."

"Does this person have a name? I mean, you keep saying you don't want to fight, but the other unique thing about my ship is that it's the only one here with guns. I'm sure the OPA has a whole list of things they'd like blown up."

"You don't trust me."

"Nope."

Fred turned back around and gripped the back of his chair. His knuckles were white. Holden wondered if he'd gone too far.

"Look," Holden said, "you talk a good game about peace and trials and all that. You disavow the pirate casts. You have a nice station filled with nice people. I have every reason to believe you are what you say you are. But we've been here three days, and the first time you tell me about your plans, you ask to borrow my ship for a secret mission. Sorry. If I'm part of this, I get full access; no

secrets. Even if I knew for a fact, which I don't, that you had nothing but good intentions, I still wouldn't go along with the cloak-and-dagger bullshit."

Fred stared at him for a few seconds, then came around his chair and sat down. Holden found he was tapping his fingers on his thigh nervously and forced himself to stop. Fred's eyes flicked down at Holden's hand and then back up. He continued to stare.

Holden cleared his throat.

"Look, you're the big dog here. Even if I didn't know who you used to be, you'd scare the shit out of me, so don't feel the need to prove it. But no matter how scared I am, I'm not backing down on this."

Fred's hoped-for laughter didn't come. Holden tried to swallow without gulping.

"I bet every captain you ever flew under thought you were a gigantic pain in the ass," Fred said finally.

"I believe my record reflects that," Holden said, trying to hide his relief.

"I need to fly to Eros and find a man named Lionel Polanski, and then bring him back to Tycho."

"That's only a week out if we push," Holden said, doing the math in his head.

"The fact that Lionel doesn't actually exist complicates the mission."

"Yeah, okay. Now I'm confused," Holden agreed.

"You wanted in?" Fred said, the words taking on a quiet ferocity. "Now you're in. Lionel Polanski exists only on paper, and owns things that Mr. Tycho doesn't want to own. Including a courier ship called the *Scopuli*."

Holden leaned forward in his chair, his face intense.

"You now have my undivided attention," he said.

"The nonexistent owner of the *Scopuli* checked into a flophouse on one of the shit levels of Eros. We only just got the message. We have to work on the assumption that whoever got the room knows our operations intimately, needs help, and can't ask for it openly."

"We can leave in an hour," Holden said breathlessly.

Fred held up his hands in a gesture that was surprisingly Belter for an Earth man.

"When," Fred asked, "did this turn into *you* leaving?"

"I won't loan my ship, but I'll definitely rent it out. My crew and I were talking about getting jobs, actually. Hire us. Deduct whatever's fair for services you've already rendered."

"No," Fred said. "I need *you*."

"You don't," Holden replied. "You need our depositions. And we're not going to sit here waiting a year or two for sanity to reign. We'll all do video depositions, sign whatever affidavits you want us to as to their authenticity, but we're leaving to find work one way or the other. You might as well make use of it."

"No," Fred said. "You're too valuable to take risks with your lives."

"What if I throw in the data cube the captain of the *Donnager* was trying to liberate?"

The silence was back, but it had a different feel to it.

"Look," Holden said, pressing on. "You need a ship like the *Roci*. I've got one. You need a crew for her. I've got that too. And you're as hungry to know what's on that cube as I am."

"I don't like the risk."

"Your other option is to throw us in the brig and commandeer the ship. There's some risks in that too."

Fred laughed. Holden felt himself relax.

"You'll still have the same problem that brought you here," Fred said. "Your ship looks like a gunship, no matter what its transponder is saying."

Holden jumped up and grabbed a piece of paper from Fred's desk. He started writing on it with a pen snatched from a decorative pen set.

"I've been thinking about that. You've got full manufacturing facilities here. And we're supposed to be a light gas freighter. So," he said as he sketched a rough outline of the ship, "we weld

on a bunch of empty compressed-gas storage tanks in two bands around the hull. Use them to hide the tubes. Repaint the whole thing. Weld on a few projections to break up the hull profile and hide us from ship-recognition software. It'll look like shit and screw up the aerodynamics, but we won't be near atmo anytime soon. It'll look exactly like what it is: something a bunch of Belters slapped together in a hurry."

He handed the paper to Fred. Fred began laughing in earnest, either at the terrible drawing or at the absurdity of the whole thing.

"You could give a pirate a hell of a surprise," he said. "If I do this, you and your crew will record my depositions and hire on as an independent contractor for errands like the Eros run and appear on my behalf when the peace negotiations start."

"Yes."

"I want the right to outbid anyone else who tries to hire you. No contracts without my counteroffer."

Holden held out his hand, and Fred shook it.

"Nice doing business with you, Fred."

As Holden left the office, Fred was already on the comm with his machine-shop people. Holden pulled out his portable terminal and called up Naomi.

"Yeah," she said.

"Pack up the kids, we're going to Eros."

Chapter Twenty-Two: Miller

The people-mover to Eros was small, cheap, and overcrowded. The air recyclers had the plastic-and-resin smell of long-life industrial models that Miller associated with warehouses and fuel depots. The lights were cheap LEDs tinted a false pink that was supposed to flatter the complexion but instead made everyone look like undercooked beef. There were no cabins, only row after row of formed laminate seating and two long walls with five-stacks of bunks that the passengers could hot-swap. Miller had never been on a cheapjack transport before, but he knew how they worked. If there was a fight, the ship's crew would pump riot gas into the cabin, knock everyone out, and put anyone who'd been in the scuffle under restraint. It was a draconian system, but it did tend to keep passengers polite. The bar was always open and the drinks were cheap. Not long ago Miller would have found that enticing.

Instead, he sat on one of the long seats, his hand terminal open. Julie's case file—what he had reconstructed of it—glowed before him. The picture of her, proud and smiling, in front of the *Razorback*, the dates and records, her jiu jitsu training. It seemed like very little, considering how large the woman had grown in his life.

A small newsfeed crawled down the terminal's left side. The war between Mars and the Belt escalated, incident after incident, but the secession of Ceres Station was the top news. Earth was taken to task by Martian commentators for failing to stand united with its fellow inner planet, or at least for not handing over the Ceres security contract to Mars. The scattershot reaction of the Belt ran the gamut from pleasure at seeing Earth's influence fall back down the gravity well, to strident near-panic at the loss of Ceres' neutrality, to conspiracy theories that Earth was fomenting the war for its own ends.

Miller reserved judgment.

"I always think of pews."

Miller looked over. The man sitting next to him was about Miller's age; the fringe of gray hair, the soft belly. The man's smile told Miller the guy was a missionary, out in the vacuum saving souls. Or maybe it was the name tag and Bible.

"The seats, I mean," the missionary said. "They always make me think of going to church, the way they're all lined up, row after row. Only instead of a pulpit, we have bunk beds."

"Our Lady of Sleeping Through It," Miller said, knowing he was getting drawn into conversation but unable to stop himself. The missionary laughed.

"Something like that," he said. "Do you attend church?"

"Haven't in years," Miller said. "I was a Methodist when I was anything. What flavor are you selling?"

The missionary lifted his hands in a gesture of harmlessness that went back to the African plains of the Pleistocene. *I have no weapon; I seek no fight.*

"I'm just going back to Eros from a conference on Luna," he said. "My proselytizing days are long behind me."

"I didn't think those ever ended," Miller said.

"They don't. Not officially. But after a few decades, you come to a place where you realize that there's really no difference between trying and not trying. I still travel. I still talk to people."

Sometimes we talk about Jesus Christ. Sometimes we talk about cooking. If someone is ready to accept Christ, it doesn't take much effort on my part to help them. If they aren't, no amount of hectoring them does any good. So why try?"

"Do people talk about the war?" Miller asked.

"Often," the missionary said.

"Anyone make sense of it?"

"No. I don't believe war ever does. It's a madness that's in our nature. Sometimes it recurs; sometimes it subsides."

"Sounds like a disease."

"The herpes simplex of the species?" the missionary said with a laugh. "I suppose there are worse ways to think of it. I'm afraid that as long as we're human, it will be with us."

Miller looked over at the wide, moon-round face.

"As long as we're human?" he said.

"Some of us believe that we shall all eventually become angels," the missionary said.

"Not the Methodists."

"Even them, eventually," the man said, "but they probably won't go first. And what brings you to Our Lady of Sleeping Through It?"

Miller sighed, sitting back against the unyielding chair. Two rows down, a young woman shouted at two boys to stop jumping on the seats and was ignored. A man behind them coughed. Miller took a long breath and let it out slowly.

"I was a cop on Ceres," he said.

"Ah. The change of contract."

"That," Miller said.

"Taking up work on Eros, then?"

"More looking up an old friend," Miller said. Then, to his own surprise, he went on. "I was born on Ceres. Lived there my whole life. This is the... fifth? Yeah, fifth time I've been off station."

"Do you plan to go back?"

"No," Miller said. He sounded more certain than he'd known. "No, I think that part of my life is pretty much over."

"That must be painful," the missionary said.

Miller paused, letting the comment settle. The man was right; it should have been painful. Everything he'd ever had was gone. His job, his community. He wasn't even a cop anymore, his checked-in-luggage handgun notwithstanding. He would never eat at the little East Indian cart at the edge of sector nine again. The receptionist at the station would never nod her greeting to him as he headed in for his desk again. No more nights at the bar with the other cops, no more off-color stories about busts gone weird, no more kids flying kites in the high tunnels. He probed himself like a doctor searching for inflammation. Did it hurt here? Did he feel the loss there?

He didn't. There was only a sense of relief so profound it approached giddiness.

"I'm sorry," the missionary said, confused. "Did I say something funny?"



Eros supported a population of one and a half million, a little more than Ceres had in visitors at any given time. Roughly the shape of a potato, it had been much more difficult to spin up, and its surface velocity was considerably higher than Ceres' for the same internal g. The old shipyards protruded from the asteroid, great spiderwebs of steel and carbon mesh studded with warning lights and sensor arrays to wave off any ships that might come in too tight. The internal caverns of Eros had been the birthplace of the Belt. From raw ore to smelting furnace to annealing platform and then into the spines of water haulers and gas harvesters and prospecting ships. Eros had been a port of call in the

first generation of humanity's expansion. From there, the sun itself was only a bright star among billions.

The economics of the Belt had moved on. Ceres Station had spun up with newer docks, more industrial backing, more people. The commerce of shipping moved to Ceres, while Eros remained a center of ship manufacture and repair. The results were as predictable as physics. On Ceres, a longer time in dock meant lost money, and the berth fee structure reflected that. On Eros, a ship might wait for weeks or months without impeding the flow of traffic. If a crew wanted a place to relax, to stretch, to get away from one another for a while, Eros was the port of call. And with the lower docking fees, Eros Station found other ways to soak money from its visitors: Casinos. Brothels. Shooting galleries. Vice in all its commercial forms found a home in Eros, its local economy blooming like a fungus fed by the desires of Belters.

A happy accident of orbital mechanics put Miller there half a day ahead of the *Rocinante*. He walked through the cheap casinos, the opioid bars and sex clubs, the show fight areas where men or women pretended to beat one another senseless for the pleasure of the crowds. Miller imagined Julie walking with him, her sly smile matching his own as he read the great animated displays. RANDOLPH MAK, HOLDER OF THE BELT FREEFIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP FOR SIX YEARS, AGAINST MARTIAN KIVRIN CARMICHAEL IN A FIGHT TO THE DEATH!

Surely not fixed, Julie said drily in his mind.

Wonder which one's going to win, he thought, and imagined her laughing.

He'd stopped at a noodle cart, two new yens' worth of egg noodles in black sauce steaming in their cone, when a hand clapped on his shoulder.

"Detective Miller," a familiar voice said. "I think you're outside your jurisdiction."

"Why, Inspector Sematimba," Miller said. "As I live and breathe. You give a girl the shakes, sneaking up like that."

Sematimba laughed. He was a tall man, even among Belters, with the darkest skin Miller had ever seen. Years before, Sematimba and Miller had coordinated on a particularly ugly case. A smuggler with a cargo of designer euphorics had broken with his supplier. Three people on Ceres had been caught in the crossfire, and the smuggler had shipped out for Eros. The traditional competitiveness and insularity of the stations' respective security forces had almost let the perp slip away. Only Miller and Sematimba had been willing to coordinate outside the corporate channels.

"What brings you," Sematimba said, leaning against a thin steel railing and gesturing at the tunnel, "to the navel of the Belt, the glory and power that is Eros?"

"Following up on a lead," Miller said.

"There's nothing good here," Sematimba said. "Ever since Protogen pulled out, things have been going from bad to worse."

Miller sucked up a noodle.

"Who's the new contract?" he asked.

"CPM," Sematimba said.

"Never heard of them."

"*Carne Por la Machina*," Sematimba said, and pulled a face: exaggerated bluff masculinity. He thumped his breast and growled, then let the imitation go and shook his head. "New corporation out of Luna. Mostly Belters on the ground. Make themselves out to be all hard core, but they're mostly amateurs. All bluster, no balls. Protogen was inner planets, and that was a problem, but they were serious as hell. They broke heads, but they kept the peace. These new assholes? Most corrupt bunch of thugs I've ever worked for. I don't think the board of governors is going to renew when the contract's up. I didn't say that, but it's true."

"I've got an old partner signed up with Protogen," Miller said.

"They're not bad," Sematimba said. "Almost wish I'd picked them in the divorce, you know?"

"Why didn't you?" Miller asked.

"You know how it is. I'm from here."

"Yeah," Miller said.

"So. You didn't know who was running the playhouse? You aren't here looking for work."

"Nope," Miller said. "I'm on sabbatical. Doing some travel for myself these days."

"You've got money for that?"

"Not really. But I don't mind going on the cheap. For a while, you know. You heard anything about a Juliette Mao? Goes by Julie?"

Sematimba shook his head.

"Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile," Miller said. "Came up the well and went native. OPA. It was an abduction case."

"Was?"

Miller leaned back. His imagined Julie raised her eyebrows.

"It's changed a little since I got it," Miller said. "May be connected to something. Kind of big."

"How big are we talking about?" Sematimba said. All trace of jocularity had vanished from his expression. He was all cop now. Anyone but Miller would have found the man's empty, almost angry face intimidating.

"The war," Miller said. Sematimba folded his arms.

"Bad joke," he said.

"Not joking."

"I consider us friends, old man," Sematimba said. "But I don't want any trouble around here. Things are unsettled as it stands."

"I'll try to stay low-profile."

Sematimba nodded. Down the tunnel, an alarm blared. Only security, not the earsplitting ditone of an environmental alert. Sematimba looked down the tunnel as if squinting would let him see through the press of people, bicycles, and food carts.

"I'd better go look," he said with an air of resignation. "Probably some of my fellow officers of the peace breaking windows for the fun of it."

"Great to be part of a team like that," Miller said.

"How would you know?" Sematimba said with a smile. "If you need something..."

"Likewise," Miller said, and watched the cop wade into the sea of chaos and humanity. He was a large man, but something about the passing crowd's universal deafness to the alarm's blare made him seem smaller. *A stone in the ocean*, the phrase went. One star among millions.

Miller checked the time, then pulled up the public docking records. The *Rocinante* showed as on schedule. The docking berth was listed. Miller sucked down the last of his noodles, tossed the foam cone with the thin smear of black sauce into a public recycler, found the nearest men's room, and when he was done there, trotted toward the casino level.

The architecture of Eros had changed since its birth. Where once it had been like Ceres—webworked tunnels leading along the path of widest connection—Eros had learned from the flow of money: All paths led to the casino level. If you wanted to go anywhere, you passed through the wide whale belly of lights and displays. Poker, blackjack, roulette, tall fish tanks filled with prize trout to be caught and gutted, mechanical slots, electronic slots, cricket races, craps, rigged tests of skill. Flashing lights, dancing neon clowns, and video screen advertisements blasted the eyes. Loud artificial laughter and merry whistles and bells assured you that you were having the time of your life. All while the smell of thousands of people packed into too small a space competed with the scent of heavily spiced vat-grown meat being hawked from carts rolling down the corridor. Greed and casino design had turned Eros into an architectural cattle run.

Which was exactly what Miller needed.

The tube station that arrived from the port had six wide doors, which emptied to the casino floor. Miller accepted a drink from a tired-looking woman in a G-string and bared breasts and found a screen to stand at that afforded him a view of all six doors. The crew of the *Rocinante* had no choice

but to come through one of those. He checked his hand terminal. The docking logs showed the ship had arrived ten minutes earlier. Miller pretended to sip his drink and settled in to wait.

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Holden

The casino level of Eros was an all-out assault on the senses. Holden hated it.

"I love this place," Amos said, grinning.

Holden pushed his way through a knot of drunk middle-aged gamblers, who were laughing and yelling, to a small open space near a row of pay-by-the-minute wall terminals.

"Amos," he said, "we'll be going to a less touristy level, so watch our backs. The flophouse we're looking for is in a rough neighborhood."

Amos nodded. "Gotcha, Cap."

While Naomi, Alex, and Amos blocked him from view, Holden reached behind his back to adjust the pistol that pulled uncomfortably on his waistband. The cops on Eros were pretty uptight about people walking around with guns, but there was no way he was going to "Lionel Polanski" unarmed. Amos and Alex were both carrying too, though Amos kept his in the right pocket of his jacket and his hand never left it. Only Naomi flatly refused to carry a gun.

Holden led the group toward the nearest escalators, with Amos, casting the occasional glance behind, in the rear. The casinos of Eros stretched for three seemingly endless levels, and even though they moved as quickly as possible, it took half an hour to get away from the noise and crowds. The first level above was a residential neighborhood and disorientingly quiet and neat after the casino's chaos and noise. Holden sat down on the edge of a planter with a nice array of ferns in it and caught his breath.

"I'm with you, Captain. Five minutes in that place gives me a headache," Naomi said, and sat down next to him.

"You kidding me?" Amos said. "I wish we had more time. Alex and I took almost a grand off those fish at the Tycho card tables. We'd probably walk out of here fucking millionaires."

"You know it," Alex said, and punched the big mechanic on the shoulder.

"Well, if this Polanski thing turns out to be nothing, you have my permission to go make us a million dollars at the card tables. I'll wait for you on the ship," Holden said.

The tube system ended at the first casino level and didn't start again until the level they were on. You could choose not to spend your money at the tables, but they made sure you were punished for doing so. Once the crew had climbed into a car and started the ride to Lionel's hotel, Amos sat down next to Holden.

"Somebody's following us, Cap," he said conversationally. "Wasn't sure till he climbed on a couple cars down. Behind us all through the casinos too."

Holden sighed and put his face in his hands.

"Okay, what's he look like?" he said.

"Belter. Fifties, or maybe forties with a lot of mileage. White shirt and dark pants. Goofy hat."

"Cop?"

"Oh yeah. But no holster I can see," Amos said.

"All right. Keep an eye on him, but no need to get too worried. Nothing we're doing here is illegal," Holden said.

"You mean, other than arriving in our stolen Martian warship, sir?" Naomi asked.

“You mean our *perfectly legitimate* gas freighter that all the paperwork and registry data says is *perfectly legitimate*?” Holden replied with a thin smile. “Yeah, well, if they’d seen through that, they would have stopped us at the dock, not followed us around.”

An advertising screen on the wall displayed a stunning view of multicolored clouds rippling with flashes of lightning, and encouraged Holden to take a trip to the amazing dome resorts on Titan. He’d never been to Titan. Suddenly he wanted to go there very much. A few weeks of sleeping late, eating in fine restaurants, and lying on a hammock, watching Titan’s colorful atmosphere storm above him sounded like heaven. Hell, as long as he was fantasizing, he threw in Naomi walking over to his hammock with a couple of fruity-looking drinks in her hands.

She ruined it by talking.

“This is our stop,” she said.

“Amos, watch our friend, see if he gets off the train with us,” Holden said as he got up and headed to the door.

After they got off and walked a dozen steps down the corridor, Amos whispered, “Yep,” at his back. *Shit*. Well, definitely a tail, but there wasn’t really any reason not to go ahead and check up on Lionel. Fred hadn’t asked them to do anything *with* whoever was pretending to be the *Scopuli*’s owner. They couldn’t very well be arrested for knocking on a door. Holden whistled a loud and jaunty tune as he walked, to let his crew and whoever was following them know he wasn’t worried about a thing.

He stopped when he saw the flophouse.

It was dark and dingy and exactly the sort of place where people got mugged or worse. Broken lights created dark corners, and there wasn’t a tourist in sight. He turned to give Alex and Amos meaningful looks, and Amos shifted his hand in his pocket. Alex reached under his coat.

The lobby was mostly empty space, with a pair of couches at one end next to a table covered with magazines. A sleepy-looking older woman sat reading one. Elevators were recessed into the wall at the far end, next to a door marked STAIRS. In the middle was the check-in desk, where, in lieu of a human clerk, a touch screen terminal let guests pay for their rooms.

Holden stopped next to the desk and turned around to look at the woman sitting on the couch. Graying hair, but good features and an athletic build. In a flophouse like this, that probably meant a prostitute reaching the end of her shelf life. She pointedly ignored his stare.

“Is our tail still with us?” Holden asked in a quiet voice.

“Stopped outside somewhere. Probably just watching the door now,” Amos replied.

Holden nodded and hit the inquiry button on the check-in screen. A simple menu would let him send a message to Lionel Polanski’s room, but Holden exited the system. They knew Lionel was still checked in, and Fred had given them the room number. If it was someone playing games, no reason to give him a heads-up before Holden knocked on the door.

“Okay, he’s still here, so let’s—” Holden said, and then stopped when he saw the woman from the couch standing right behind Alex. He hadn’t heard or seen her approach.

“You need to come with me,” she said in a hard voice. “Walk to the stairwell slowly, stay at least three meters ahead of me the entire time. Do it now.”

“Are you a cop?” Holden asked, not moving.

“I’m the person with the gun,” she said, a small weapon appearing like magic in her right hand. She pointed it at Alex’s head. “So do what I say.”

Her weapon was small and plastic and had some kind of battery pack. Amos pulled his heavy slug thrower out and aimed it at her face.

“Mine’s bigger,” he said.

“Amos, don’t—” was all Naomi had time to say before the stairwell door burst open and half a dozen men and women armed with compact automatic weapons came into the room, yelling at them to drop their guns.

Holden started to put his hands up when one of them opened fire, the weapon coughing out rounds so fast it sounded like someone ripping construction paper; it was impossible to hear the separate shots. Amos threw himself to the floor. A line of bullet holes stitched across the chest of the woman with the taser, and she fell backward with a soft, final sound.

Holden grabbed Naomi by one hand and dragged her behind the check-in desk. Someone in the other group was yelling, "Cease fire! Cease fire!" but Amos was already shooting back from his position, prone on the floor. A yelp of pain and a curse told Holden he'd probably hit someone. Amos rolled sideways to the desk, just in time to avoid a hail of slugs that tore up the floor and wall and made the desk shudder.

Holden reached for his gun, but the front sight caught in his waistband. He yanked it out, tearing his underwear, then crawled on his knees to the edge of the desk and looked out. Alex was lying on the floor on the other side of one of the couches, gun drawn and face white. As Holden looked, a burst of gunfire hit the couch, blowing stuffing into the air and making a line of holes in the back of the couch not more than twenty centimeters above Alex's head. The pilot reached his pistol around the corner of the couch and blindly fired off half a dozen shots, yelling at the same time.

"Fucking assholes!" Amos yelled, then rolled out and fired a couple more shots and rolled back before the return fire started.

"Where are they?" Holden yelled at him.

"Two are down, the rest in the stairwell!" Amos yelled back over the sound of return fire.

Out of nowhere a burst of rounds bounced off the floor past Holden's knee. "Shit, someone's flanking us!" Amos cried out, then moved farther behind the desk and away from the shots.

Holden crawled to the other side of the desk and peeked out. Someone was moving low and fast toward the hotel entrance. Holden leaned out and took a couple shots at him, but three guns opened up from the stairwell doorway and forced him back behind the desk.

"Alex, someone's moving to the entrance!" Holden screamed at the top of his lungs, hoping the pilot might be able to get off a shot before they were all chopped to pieces by crossfire.

A pistol barked three times by the entrance. Holden risked a look. Their tail with the goofy hat crouched by the door, a gun in his hand, the machine gun-toting flanker lying still at his feet. Instead of looking at them, the tail was pointing his gun toward the stairwell.

"No one shoot the guy with the hat!" Holden yelled, then moved back to the edge of the desk.

Amos put his back to the desk and popped the magazine from his gun. As he fumbled around in his pocket for another, he said, "Guy is probably a cop."

"Extra especially do *not* shoot any cops," Holden said, then fired a few shots at the stairwell door.

Naomi, who'd spent the entire gunfight so far on the floor with her arms over her head, said, "They might all be cops."

Holden squeezed off a few more shots and shook his head.

"Cops don't carry small, easily concealable machine guns and ambush people from stairwells. We call those death squads," he said, though most of his words were drowned out by a barrage of gunfire from the stairwell. Afterward came a few seconds of silence.

Holden leaned back out in time to see the door swing shut.

"I think they're bugging out," he said, keeping his gun trained on the door anyway. "Must have another exit somewhere. Amos, keep your eye on that door. If it opens, start shooting." He patted Naomi on the shoulder. "Stay down."

Holden rose from behind the now ruined check-in kiosk. The desk facade had splintered and the underlying stone showed through. Holden held his gun barrel-up, his hands open. The man in the hat stood, considering the corpse at his feet, then looked up as Holden came near.

"Thanks. My name is Jim Holden. You are?"

The man didn't speak for a second. When he did, his voice was calm. Almost weary. "Cops will be here soon. I need to make a call or we're all going to jail."

“Aren’t you the cops?” Holden asked.

The other man laughed; it was a bitter, short sound, but with some real humor behind it. Apparently Holden had said something funny.

“Nope. Name’s Miller.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four: Miller

Miller looked at the dead man—the man he'd just killed—and tried to feel something. There was the trailing adrenaline rush still ramping up his heartbeat. There was a sense of surprise that came from walking into an unexpected firefight. Past that, though, his mind had already fallen into the long habit of analysis. One plant in the main room so Holden and his crew wouldn't see anything too threatening. A bunch of trigger-happy yahoos in the stairwell to back her up. *That* had gone well.

It was a slapdash effort. The ambush had been set by people who either didn't know what they were doing or didn't have the time or resources to do it right. If it hadn't been improvised, Holden and his three buddies would have been taken or killed. And him along with them.

The four survivors of the *Canterbury* stood in the remains of the firefight like rookies at their first bust. Miller felt his mind shift back half a step as he watched everything without watching anything in particular. Holden was smaller than he'd expected from the video feeds. It shouldn't have been surprising; he was an Earther. The man had the kind of face that was bad at hiding things.

"Thanks. My name is Jim Holden. You are?"

Miller thought of six different answers and turned them all aside. One of the others—a big man, solid, with a bare scalp—was pacing out the room, his eyes unfocused the same way Miller's were. Of Holden's four, that was the only guy who'd seen serious gunplay before.

"Cops will be here soon," Miller said. "I need to make a call or we're all going to jail."

The other man—thinner, taller, East Indian by the look of him—had been hiding behind a couch. He was sitting on his haunches now, his eyes wide and panicky. Holden had some of the same look, but he was doing a better job of keeping control. The burdens, Miller thought, of leadership.

"Aren't you the cops?"

Miller laughed.

"Nope," he said. "Name's Miller."

"Okay," the woman said. "Those people just tried to kill us. Why did they do that?"

Holden took a half step toward her voice even before he turned to look at her. Her face was flushed, full lips pressed thin and pale. Her features showed a far-flung racial mix that was unusual even in the melting pot of the Belt. Her hands weren't shaking. The big one had the most experience, but Miller put the woman down as having the best instincts.

"Yeah," Miller said. "I noticed."

He pulled out his hand terminal and opened a link to Sematimba. The cop accepted a few seconds later.

"Semi," Miller said. "I'm really sorry about this, but you know how I was going to stay low-profile?"

"Yes?" the local cop said, drawing the word out to three syllables.

"Didn't work out. I was heading to a meeting with a friend..."

"A meeting with a friend," Sematimba echoed. Miller could imagine the man's crossed arms even though they didn't show in the frame.

"And I happened to see a bunch of tourists in the wrong place at the wrong time. It got out of hand."

"Where are you?" Sematimba asked. Miller gave him the station level and address. There was a long pause while Sematimba consulted with some internal communication software that would have been part of Miller's tool set once. The man's sigh was percussive. "I don't see anything. Were there shots fired?"

Miller looked at the chaos and ruin around them. About a thousand different alerts should have gone out with the first weapon fired. Security should have been swarming toward them.

"A few," he said.

"Strange," Sematimba said. "Stay put. I'll be there."

"Will do," Miller said, and dropped the connection.

"Okay," Holden said. "Who was that?"

"The real cops," Miller said. "They'll be here soon. It'll be fine."

I think it'll be fine. It occurred to him that he was treating the situation like he was still on the inside, a part of the machine. That wasn't true anymore, and pretending it was might have consequences.

"He was following us," the woman said to Holden. And then, to Miller, she said, "You were following us."

"I was," Miller said. He didn't think he sounded rueful, but the big guy shook his head.

"It was the hat," the big one said. "Stood out some."

Miller swept off his porkpie and considered it. Of course the big one had been the one to make him. The other three were competent amateurs, and Miller knew that Holden had done some time in the UN Navy. But Miller gave it better than even money that the big one's background check would be interesting reading.

"Why were you following us?" Holden asked. "I mean, I appreciate the part where you shot the people who were shooting at us, but I'd still like to know that first part."

"I wanted to talk to you," Miller said. "I'm looking for someone."

There was a pause. Holden smiled.

"Anyone in particular?" he asked.

"A crew member of the *Scopuli*," Miller said.

"The *Scopuli*?" Holden said. He started to glance at the woman and stopped himself. There was something there. The *Scopuli* meant something to him beyond what Miller had seen on the news.

"There was nobody on her when we got there," the woman said.

"Holy shit," the shaky one behind the couch said. It was the first thing he'd said since the firefight ended, and he repeated it five or six more times in quick succession.

"What about you?" Miller asked. "*Donnager* blew you to Tycho, and now here. What's that about?"

"How did you know that?" Holden said.

"It's my job," Miller said. "Well, it used to be."

The answer didn't appear to satisfy the Earther. The big guy had fallen in behind Holden, his face a friendly cipher: No trouble, unless there was trouble, and then maybe a whole lot of trouble. Miller nodded, half to the big guy, half to himself.

"I had a contact in the OPA who told me you didn't die on the *Donnager*," Miller said.

"They just *told* you that?" the woman asked, banked outrage in her voice.

"He was making a point at the time," Miller said. "Anyway, he said it, and I took it from there. And in about ten minutes, I'm going to make sure Eros security doesn't throw all of you in a hole, and me with you. So if there's anything at all you want to tell me—like what you're doing here, for instance—this would be the right time."

The silence was broken only by the sound of recyclers laboring to clear the smoke and particulate dust of gunfire. The shaky one stood. Something about the way he held himself looked military. Ex-something, Miller assumed, but not a ground pounder. Navy, maybe; Martian at a guess. He had the vocal twang some of them affected.

“Ah, fuck it, Cap’n,” the big one said. “He shot the flank guy for us. He may be an asshole, but he’s okay by me.”

“Thank you, Amos,” Holden said. Miller filed that. The big one was Amos. Holden put his hands behind his back, returning his gun to his waistband.

“We’re here to look for someone too,” he said. “Probably someone from the *Scopuli*. We were just double-checking the room when everyone decided to start shooting at us.”

“Here?” Miller said. Something like emotion trickled into his veins. Not hope, but dread. “Someone off the *Scopuli* is in this flop right now?”

“We think so,” Holden said.

Miller looked out the flophouse lobby’s front doors. A small, curious crowd had started to gather in the tunnel. Crossed arms, nervous glances. He knew how they felt. Sematimba and his police were on the way. The gunmen who’d attacked Holden and his crew weren’t mounting another attack, but that didn’t mean they were gone. There might be another wave. They could have fallen back to a better position to wait for Holden to advance.

But what if Julie was here right now? How could he come this far and stop in the lobby? To his surprise, he still had his gun drawn. That was unprofessional. He should have holstered it. The only other one still drawn was the Martian’s. Miller shook his head. Sloppy. He needed to stop that.

Still, he had more than half a magazine left in the pistol.

“What room?” he asked.



The flophouse corridors were thin and cramped. The walls had the impervious gloss of warehouse paint, and the carpet was carbon-silicate weave that would wear out more slowly than bare stone. Miller and Holden went first, then the woman and the Martian—Naomi and Alex, their names were—then Amos, trailing and looking back over his shoulder. Miller wondered if anyone but he and Amos understood how they were keeping the others safe. Holden seemed to know and be irritated by it; he kept edging ahead.

The doors of the rooms were identical fiberglass laminates, thin enough to be churned out by the thousands. Miller had kicked in a hundred like them in his career. A few here and there were decorated by longtime residents—with a painting of improbably red flowers, a whiteboard with a string where a pen had once been attached, a cheap reproduction of an obscene cartoon acting out its punch line in a dimly glowing infinite loop.

Tactically, it was a nightmare. If the ambushing forces stepped out of doors in front of and behind them, all five could be slaughtered in seconds. But no slugs flew, and the only door that opened disgorged an emaciated, long-bearded man with imperfect eyes and a slack mouth. Miller nodded at the man as they passed, and he nodded back, possibly more surprised by someone’s acknowledging his presence than by the drawn pistols. Holden stopped.

“This is it,” he murmured. “This is the room.”

Miller nodded. The others came up in a clump, Amos casually hanging back, his eyes on the corridor retreating behind them. Miller considered the door. It would be easy to kick in. One strong blow just above the latch mechanism. Then he could go in low and to the left, Amos high and to the right. He wished Havelock were there. Tactics were simpler for people who’d trained together. He motioned Amos to come up close.

Holden knocked on the door.

“What are you...?” Miller whispered fiercely, but Holden ignored him.

“Hello?” Holden called. “Anyone there?”

Miller tensed. Nothing happened. No voice, no gunfire. Nothing. Holden seemed perfectly at ease with the risk he’d just taken. From the expression on Naomi’s face, Miller took it this wasn’t the first time he’d done things this way.

"You want that open?" Amos said.

"Kinda do," Miller said at the same moment Holden said, "Yeah, kick it down."

Amos looked from one to the other, not moving until Holden nodded at him. Then Amos shifted past them, kicked the door open in one blow, and staggered back, cussing.

"You okay?" Miller asked.

The big man nodded once through a pale grimace.

"Yeah, busted my leg a while back. Cast just came off. Keep forgetting about that," he said.

Miller turned back to the room. Inside, it was as black as a cave. No lights came on, not even the dim glow of monitors and sensory devices. Miller stepped in, pistol drawn. Holden was close behind him. The floor made the crunching sound of gravel under their feet, and there was an odd astringent smell that Miller associated with broken screens. Behind it was another smell, much less pleasant. He chose not to think about that one.

"Hello?" Miller said. "Anyone here?"

"Turn on the lights," Naomi said from behind them. Miller heard Holden patting the wall panel, but no light came up.

"They're not working," Holden said.

The dim spill from the corridor gave almost nothing. Miller kept his gun steady in his right hand, ready to empty it toward muzzle flash if anyone opened fire from the darkness. With his left, he took out his hand terminal, thumbed on the backlight, and opened a blank white writing tablet. The room came into monochrome. Beside him, Holden did the same.

A thin bed pressed against one wall, a narrow tray beside it. The bedding was knotted like the remnant of a bad night's sleep. A closet stood open, empty. The hulking form of an empty vacuum suit lay on the floor like a mannequin with a misplaced head. An old entertainment console hung on the wall across from the cot, its screen shattered by half a dozen blows. The wall was dimpled where blows intended to break the LED sconces had missed. Another hand terminal added its glow, and another. Hints of color started to come into the room—the cheap gold of the walls, the green of the blankets and sheet. Under the cot, something glimmered. An older-model hand terminal. Miller crouched as the others stepped in.

"Shit," Amos said.

"Okay," Holden said. "Nobody touches anything. Period. Nothing." It was the most sensible thing Miller had heard the man say.

"Someone put up a bitch of a fight," Amos muttered.

"No," Miller said. It had been vandalism, maybe. It hadn't been a struggle. He pulled a thin-film evidence bag out of his pocket and turned it inside out over his hand like a glove before picking up the terminal, flipping the plastic over it, and setting off the sealing charge.

"Is that... blood?" Naomi asked, pointing to the cheap foam mattress. Wet streaks pooled on the sheet and pillow, not more than a fingers' width, but dark. Too dark even for blood.

"No," Miller said, shoving the terminal into his pocket.

The fluid marked a thin path toward the bathroom. Miller raised a hand, pushing the others back as he crept toward the half-open door. Inside the bathroom, the nasty background smell was much stronger. Something deep, organic, and intimate. Manure in a hothouse, or the aftermath of sex, or a slaughterhouse. All of them. The toilet was brushed steel, the same model they used in prisons. The sink matched. The LED above it and the one in the ceiling had both been destroyed. In the light of his terminal, like the glow of a single candle, black tendrils reached from the shower stall toward the ruined lights, bent and branching like skeletal leaves.

In the shower stall, Juliette Andromeda Mao lay dead.

Her eyes were closed, and that was a mercy. She'd cut her hair differently since she'd taken the pictures Miller had seen, and it changed the shape of her face, but she was unmistakable. She was nude, and barely human. Coils of complex growth spilled from her mouth, ears, and vulva. Her ribs and spine had grown spurs like knives that stretched pale skin, ready to cut themselves free of her.

Tubes stretched from her back and throat, crawling up the walls behind her. A deep brown slush had leaked from her, filling the shower pan almost three centimeters high. He sat silently, willing the thing before him not to be true, trying to force himself awake.

What did they do to you? he thought. *Oh, kid. What did they do?*

"Ohmygod," Naomi said behind him.

"Don't touch anything," he said. "Get out of the room. Into the hall. Do it now."

The light in the next room faded as the hand terminals retreated. The twisting shadows momentarily gave her body the illusion of movement. Miller waited, but no breath lifted the bent rib cage. No flicker touched her eyelids. There was nothing. He rose, carefully checking his cuffs and shoes, and walked out to the corridor.

They'd all seen it. He could tell from the expressions, they'd all seen. And they didn't know any better than he did what it was. Gently, he pulled the splintered door closed and waited for Sematimba. It wasn't long.

Five men in police riot armor with shotguns made their way down the hall. Miller walked forward to meet them, his posture better than a badge. He could see them relax. Sematimba came up behind them.

"Miller?" he said. "The hell is this? I thought you said you were staying put."

"I didn't leave," he said. "Those are the civilians back there. The dead guys downstairs jumped them in the lobby."

"Why?" Sematimba demanded.

"Who knows?" Miller said. "Roll them for spare change. That's not the problem."

Sematimba's eyebrows rose. "I've got four corpses down there, and they're not the problem."

Miller nodded down the corridor.

"Fifth one's up here," he said. "It's the girl I was looking for."

Sematimba's expression softened. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Nah," Miller said. He couldn't accept sympathy. He couldn't accept comfort. A gentle touch would shatter him, so he stayed hard instead. "But you're going to want the coroner on this one."

"It's bad, then?"

"You've got no idea," Miller said. "Listen, Semi. I'm in over my head here. Seriously. Those boys down there with the guns? If they weren't hooked in with your security force, there would have been alarms as soon as the first shot was fired. You know this was a setup. They were waiting for these four. And the squat fella with the dark hair? That's James Holden. He's not even supposed to be alive."

"Holden that started the war?" Sematimba said.

"That's the one," Miller said. "This is deep. Drowning deep. And you know what they say about going in after a drowning man, right?"

Sematimba looked down the corridor. He nodded.

"Let me help you," Sematimba said, but Miller shook his head.

"I'm too far gone. Forget me. What happened was you got a call. You found the place. You don't know me, you don't know them, you've got no clue what happened. Or you come along and drown with me. Your pick."

"You don't leave the station without telling me?"

"Okay," Miller said.

"I can live with that," Sematimba said. Then, a moment later: "That's really Holden?"

"Call the coroner," Miller said. "Trust me."

Chapter Twenty-Five: Holden

Miller gestured at Holden and headed for the elevator without waiting to see if he was following. The presumption irritated him, but he went anyway.

“So,” Holden said, “we were just in a gunfight where we killed at least three people, and now we’re just leaving? No getting questioned or giving a statement? How exactly does that happen?” Holden asked.

“Professional courtesy,” Miller said, and Holden couldn’t tell if he was joking.

The elevator door opened with a muffled ding, and Holden and the others followed Miller inside. Naomi was closest to the panel, so she reached out to press the lobby button, but her hand was shaking so badly that she had to stop and clench it into a fist. After a deep breath, she reached out a now steady finger and pressed the button.

“This is bullshit. Being an ex-cop doesn’t give you a license to get in gunfights,” Holden said to Miller’s back.

Miller didn’t move, but he seemed to shrink a little bit. His sigh was heavy and unforced. His skin seemed grayer than before.

“Sematimba knows the score. Half the job is knowing when to look the other way. Besides, I promised we wouldn’t leave the station without letting him know.”

“Fuck that,” Amos said. “You don’t make promises for us, pal.”

The elevator came to a stop and opened onto the bloody scene of the gunfight. A dozen cops were in the room. Miller nodded at them and they nodded back. He led the crew out of the lobby to the corridor, then turned around.

“We can work that out later,” Miller said. “Right now, let’s get someplace we can talk.”

Holden agreed with a shrug. “Okay, but you’re paying.”

Miller headed off down the corridor toward the tube station.

As they followed, Naomi put a hand on Holden’s arm and slowed him down a bit so that Miller could get ahead. When he was far enough away, she said, “He knew her.”

“Who knew who?”

“He,” Naomi said, nodding at Miller, “knew her.” She jerked her head back toward the crime scene behind them.

“How do you know?” Holden said.

“He wasn’t expecting to find her there, but he knew who she was. Seeing her like that was a shock.”

“Huh, I didn’t get that at all. He’s seemed like Mr. Cool all through this.”

“No, they were friends or something. He’s having trouble dealing with it, so maybe don’t push him too hard,” she said. “We might need him.”



The hotel room Miller got was only slightly better than the one they’d found the body in. Alex immediately headed for the bathroom and locked the door. The sound of water running in the sink wasn’t quite loud enough to cover the pilot’s retching.

Holden plopped down on the small bed's dingy comforter, forcing Miller to take the room's one uncomfortable-looking chair. Naomi sat next to Holden on the bed, but Amos stayed on his feet, prowling around the room like a nervous animal.

"So, talk," Holden said to Miller.

"Let's wait for the rest of the gang to finish up," Miller replied with a nod toward the bathroom. Alex came out a few moments later, his face still white, but now freshly washed.

"Are you all right, Alex?" Naomi asked in a soft voice.

"Five by five, XO," Alex said, then sat down on the floor and put his head in his hands.

Holden stared at Miller and waited. The older man sat and played with his hat for a minute, then tossed it onto the cheap plastic desk that cantilevered out from the wall.

"You knew Julie was in that room. How?" Miller said.

"We didn't even know her name was Julie," Holden replied. "We just knew that it was someone from the *Scopuli*."

"You should tell me how you knew that," Miller said, a frightening intensity in his eyes.

Holden paused a moment. Miller had killed someone who had been trying to kill them, and that certainly helped make the case that he was a friend, but Holden wasn't about to sell out Fred and his group on a hunch. He hesitated, then went halfway.

"The fictional owner of the *Scopuli* had checked into that flophouse," he said. "It made sense that it was a member of the crew raising a flag."

Miller nodded. "Who told you?" he said.

"I'm not comfortable telling you that. We believed the information was accurate," Holden replied. "The *Scopuli* was the bait that someone used to kill the *Canterbury*. We thought someone from the *Scopuli* might know why everyone keeps trying to kill us."

Miller said, "Shit," and then leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

"You've been looking for Julie. You'd hoped we were looking for her too. That we knew something," Naomi said, not making it a question.

"Yeah," Miller said.

It was Holden's turn to ask why.

"Parents sent a contract to Ceres looking for her to be sent home. It was my case," Miller said.

"So you work for Ceres security?"

"Not anymore."

"So what are you doing here?" Holden asked.

"Her family was connected to something," Miller replied. "I just naturally hate a mystery."

"And how did you know it was bigger than just a missing girl?"

Talking to Miller felt like digging through granite with a rubber chisel. Miller grinned humorlessly.

"They fired me for looking too hard."

Holden consciously decided not to be annoyed by Miller's non-answer. "So let's talk about the death squad in the hotel."

"Yeah, seriously, what the fuck?" Amos said, finally pausing in his pacing. Alex took his head out of his hands and looked up with interest for the first time. Even Naomi leaned forward on the edge of the bed.

"No idea," Miller replied. "But someone knew you were coming."

"Yeah, thanks for the brilliant police work," Amos said with a snort. "No way we woulda figured that out on our own."

Holden ignored him. "But they didn't know why, or they would have already gone up to Julie's room and gotten whatever they wanted."

"Does that mean Fred's been compromised?" Naomi said.

"Fred?" Miller asked.

“Or maybe someone figured out the Polanski thing too, but didn’t have a room number,” Holden said.

“But why come out guns blazing like that?” Amos said. “Doesn’t make any sense to shoot us.”

“That was a mistake,” Miller said. “I saw it happen. Amos here drew his gun. Somebody overreacted. They were yelling cease-fire right up until you folks started shooting back.”

Holden began ticking off points on his fingers.

“So someone finds out we’re headed to Eros, and that it is related to the *Scopuli*. They even know the hotel, but not the room.”

“They don’t know it’s Lionel Polanski either,” Naomi said. “They could have looked it up at the desk, just like we did.”

“Right. So they wait for us to show, and have a squad of gunmen ready to take us in. But that goes to shit and it turns into a gunfight in the lobby. They absolutely *don’t* see you coming, Detective, so they aren’t omniscient.”

“Right,” Miller said. “The whole thing screams last minute. Grab you guys and find out what you’re looking for. If they’d had more time, they could have just searched the hotel. Might have taken two or three days, but it could have been done. They didn’t, so that means grabbing you was easier.”

Holden nodded. “Yes,” he said. “But that means that they already had teams here. Those didn’t seem like locals to me.”

Miller paused, looking disconcerted.

“Now you say it, me either,” he agreed.

“So whoever it is, they already have teams of gunmen on Eros, and they can redeploy them to come at a moment’s notice to pick us up,” Holden said.

“And enough pull with security that they could have a fireproof and nobody came,” Miller said. “Police didn’t know anything was happening until I called them.”

Holden cocked his head to one side, then said, “Shit, we really need to get out of here.”

“Wait a minute,” Alex said loudly. “Just wait a goddamn minute here. How come no one is talkin’ about the *mutant horror show* in that room? Was I the only one that saw that?”

“Yeah, Jesus, what was that all about?” Amos said quietly.

Miller reached into his coat pocket and took out the evidence bag with Julie’s hand terminal in it.

“Any of you guys a techie?” he asked. “Maybe we could find out.”

“I could probably hack it,” Naomi said. “But there’s no way I’m touching that thing until we know what did that to her and that it isn’t catching. I’m not pushing my luck by handling anything she’s touched.”

“You don’t have to touch it. Keep the bag sealed. Just use it right through the plastic. The touch screen should still work.”

Naomi paused for a second, then reached out and took the bag.

“Okay, give me a minute,” she said, then set to work on it.

Miller leaned back in his chair again, letting out another heavy sigh.

“So,” Holden said. “Did you know Julie before this? Naomi seems to think finding her dead like that really knocked you for a loop.”

Miller shook his head slowly. “You get a case like that, you look into whoever it is. You know, personal stuff. Read their e-mail. Talk to the people they know. You get a picture.”

Miller stopped talking and rubbed his eyes with his thumbs. Holden didn’t push him, but he started talking again anyway.

“Julie was a good kid,” Miller said as if he were confessing something. “She flew a mean racing ship. I just... I wanted to get her back alive.”

“It’s got a password,” Naomi said, holding up the terminal. “I could hack the hardware, but I’d have to open the case.”

Miller reached out and said, “Let me give it a try.”

Naomi handed the terminal to him, and he tapped a few characters on the screen and handed it back.

“Razorback,” Naomi said. “What’s that?”

“It’s a sled,” Miller replied.

“Is he talking to us?” Amos said, pointing his chin at Miller. “‘Cause there’s no one else here, but I swear half the time I don’t know what the fuck he’s on about.”

“Sorry,” Miller said. “I’ve been working more or less solo. Makes for bad habits.”

Naomi shrugged and went back to work with Holden and Miller now looking over her shoulders.

“She’s got a lot of stuff on here,” Naomi said. “Where to start?”

Miller pointed at a text file simply labeled NOTES sitting on the terminal’s desktop.

“Start there,” he said. “She’s a fanatic about putting things in the right folders. If she left that on the desktop, it means she wasn’t sure where it went.”

Naomi tapped on the document to open it up. It expanded into a loosely organized collection of text that read like someone’s diary.

First off, get your shit together. Panic doesn’t help. It never helps. Deep breaths, figure this out, make the right moves. Fear is the mind-killer. Ha. Geek.

Shuttle Pros:

No reactor, just batteries. V. low radiation.

Supplies for eight

Lots of reaction mass

Shuttle Cons:

No Epstein, no torch

Comm not just disabled, but physically removed (feeling a little paranoid about leaks, guys?)

*Closest transit is Eros. Is that where we were going? Maybe go someplace else? On just teakettle, this is gonna be a **slow** boat. Another transit adds seven more weeks. Eros, then.*

I’ve got the Phoebe bug, no way around it. Not sure how, but that brown shit was everywhere. It’s anaerobic, must have touched some. Doesn’t matter how, just work the problem.

I just slept for THREE WEEKS. Didn’t even get up to pee. What does that?

I’m so fucked.

Things you need to remember:

** BA834024112*

** Radiation kills. No reactor on this shuttle, but keep the lights off. Keep the e-suit on. Video asshat said this thing eats radiation. Don't feed it.*

** Send up a flag. Get some help. You work for the smartest people in the system. They'll figure something out.*

** Stay away from people. Don't spread the bug. Not coughing up the brown goo yet. No idea when that starts.*

** Keep away from bad guys—as if you know who they are. Fine. So keep away from everyone. Incognito is my name. Hmm. Polanski?*

Damn. I can feel it. I'm hot all the time, and I'm starving. Don't eat. Don't feed it. Feed a cold, starve a flu? Other way around? Eros is a day out, and then help is on the way. Keep fighting.

Safe on Eros. Sent up the flag. Hope the home office is watching. Head hurts. Something's happening on my back. Lump over my kidneys. Darren turned into goo. Am I going to be a suit full of jelly?

Sick now. Things coming out of my back and leaking that brown stuff everywhere. Have to take the suit off. If you read this, don't let anyone touch the brown stuff. Burn me. I'm burning up.

Naomi put the terminal down, but no one spoke for a moment. Finally, Holden said, “Phoebe bug. Anyone have an idea?”

“There was a science station on Phoebe,” Miller said. “Inner planets place, no Belters allowed. It got hit. Lots of dead people, but...”

“She talks about being on a shuttle,” Naomi said. “The *Scopuli* didn't have a shuttle.”

“There had to be another ship,” Alex said. “Maybe she got the shuttle off it.”

“Right,” Holden said. “They got on another ship, they got infected with this Phoebe bug, and the rest of the crew... I don't know. Dies?”

“She gets out, not realizing she's infected till she's on the shuttle,” Naomi continued. “She comes here, she sends up the flag to Fred, and she dies in that hotel room of the infection.”

“Not, however, turned to goo,” Holden said. “Just really badly... I don't know. Those tubes and bone spurs. What kind of disease does that?”

The question hung in the air. Again no one spoke. Holden knew they were all thinking the same thing. They hadn't touched anything in the flophouse room. Did that mean they were safe from it? Or did they have the Phoebe bug, whatever the hell it was? But she'd said anaerobic. Holden was pretty sure that meant you couldn't get it by breathing it in the air. *Pretty* sure...

“Where do we go from here, Jim?” Naomi asked.

“How about Venus?” Holden said, his voice higher and tighter than he'd expected. “Nothing interesting happening on Venus.”

“Seriously,” Naomi said.

“Okay. Seriously, I think Miller there lets his cop friend know the story, and then we get the hell off of this rock. It's got to be a bioweapon, right? Someone steals it off a Martian science lab, seeds this shit in a dome, a month later every human being in the city is dead.”

Amos interrupted with a grunt.

“There's some holes in that, Cap'n,” Amos said. “Like what the fuck does that have to do with taking down the *Cant* and the *Donnager*?”

Holden looked Naomi in the eye and said, "We have a place to look now, don't we?"

"Yeah, we do," she said. "BA834024112. That's a rock designation."

"What do you think is out there?" Alex asked.

"If I was a betting man, I'd say it's whatever ship she stole that shuttle from," Holden replied.

"Makes sense," Naomi said. "Every rock in the Belt is mapped. You want to hide something, put it in a stable orbit next to one and you can always find it later."

Miller turned toward Holden, his face even more drawn.

"If you're going there, I want in," he said.

"Why?" Holden asked. "No offense, but you found your girl. Your job's over, right?"

Miller looked at him, his lips a thin line.

"Different case," Miller said. "Now it's about who killed her."

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Chapter Twenty-Six: Miller

Your police friend put a lockdown order on my ship,” Holden said. He sounded outraged.

Around them, the hotel restaurant was busy. Last shift’s prostitutes mixed with the next shift’s tourists and businessmen at the cheap pink-lit buffet. The pilot and the big guy—Alex and Amos—were vying for the last bagel. Naomi sat at Holden’s side, her arms crossed, a cup of bad coffee cooling before her.

“We did kill some people,” Miller said gently.

“I thought you got us out of that with your secret police handshake,” Holden said. “So why’s my ship in lockdown?”

“You remember when Sematimba said we shouldn’t leave the station without telling him?” Miller said.

“I remember you making some kind of deal,” Holden said. “I don’t remember agreeing to it.”

“Look, he’s going to keep us here until he’s sure he won’t get fired for letting us go. Once he knows his ass is covered, the lock goes down. So let’s talk about the part where I rent a berth on your ship.”

Jim Holden and his XO exchanged a glance, one of those tiny human burst communications that said more than words could have. Miller didn’t know either of them well enough to decode all of it, but he guessed they were skeptical.

They had reason to be. Miller had checked his credit balance before he’d called them. He had enough left for another night in the hotel or a good dinner, but not both. He was spending it on a cheap breakfast that Holden and his crew didn’t need and probably wouldn’t enjoy, buying goodwill.

“I need to make very, very sure I understand what you’re saying,” Holden said as the big one—Amos—returned and sat at his other side holding the bagel. “Are you saying that unless I let you on my ship, your friend is going to keep us here? Because that’s blackmail.”

“Extortion,” Amos said.

“What?” Holden said.

“It’s not blackmail,” Naomi said. “That would be if he threatened to expose information we didn’t want known. If it’s just a threat, that’s extortion.”

“And it’s not what I’m talking about,” Miller said. “Freedom of the station while the investigation rolls? That’s no trouble. Leaving jurisdiction’s another thing. I can’t hold you here any more than I can cut you loose. I’m just looking for a ride when you go.”

“Why?” Holden said.

“Because you’re going to Julie’s asteroid,” Miller said.

“I’m willing to bet there’s no port there,” Holden said. “Did you plan on going anyplace after that?”

“I’m kind of low on solid plans. Haven’t had one yet that actually happened.”

“I hear that,” Amos said. “We’ve been fucked eighteen different ways since we got into this.”

Holden folded his hands on the table, one finger tapping a complicated rhythm on the wood-textured concrete top. It wasn’t a good sign.

“You seem like a... well, like an angry, bitter old man, actually. But I’ve been working water haulers for the past five years. That just means you’d fit in.”

“But,” Miller said, and let the word hang there.

“But I’ve been shot at a lot recently, and the machine guns yesterday were the least lethal thing I’ve had to deal with,” Holden said. “I’m not letting anyone on my ship that I wouldn’t trust with my life, and I don’t actually know you.”

“I can get the money,” Miller said, his belly sinking. “If it’s money, I can cover it.”

“It’s not about negotiating a price,” Holden said.

“Get the money?” Naomi said, her eyes narrowing. “ ‘Get the money,’ as in you don’t have it now?”

“I’m a little short,” Miller said. “It’s temporary.”

“You have an income?” Naomi said.

“More like a strategy,” Miller said. “There’s some independent rackets down on the docks. There always are at any port. Side games. Fights. Things like that. Most of them, the fix is in. It’s how you bribe cops without actually bribing cops.”

“That’s your plan?” Holden said, incredulity in his voice. “Go collect some police bribes?”

Across the restaurant, a prostitute in a red nightgown yawned prodigiously; the john across the table from her frowned.

“No,” Miller said reluctantly. “I play the side bets. A cop goes in, I make a side bet that he’s going to win. I know who the cops are mostly. The house, they know because they’re bribing them. The side bets are with fish looking to feel edgy because they’re playing unlicensed.”

Even as he said it, Miller knew how weak it sounded. Alex, the pilot, came and sat beside Miller. His coffee smelled bright and acidic.

“What’s the deal?” Alex asked.

“There isn’t one,” Holden said. “There wasn’t one before and there still isn’t.”

“It works better than you’d think,” Miller said gamely, and four hand terminals chimed at once. Holden and Naomi exchanged another, less complicit glance and pulled up their terminals. Amos and Alex already had theirs up. Miller caught the red-and-green border that meant either a priority message or an early Christmas card. There was a moment’s silence as they all read something; then Amos whistled low.

“Stage three?” Naomi said.

“Can’t say as I like the sound of that,” Alex said.

“You mind if I ask?” Miller said.

Holden slid his terminal across the table. The message was plaintext, encoded from Tycho.

CAUGHT MOLE IN TYCHO COMM STATION. YOUR PRESENCE AND
DESTINATION LEAKED TO UNKNOWN PERSONS ON EROS. BE CAREFUL.

“Little late on that,” Miller said.

“Keep reading,” Holden said.

MOLE’S ENCRYPTION CODE ALLOWED INTERCEPT OF SUBSIGNAL
BROADCAST FROM EROS FIVE HOURS AGO.

INTERCEPTED MESSAGE FOLLOWS:

HOLDEN ESCAPED BUT PAYLOAD SAMPLE RECOVERED. REPEAT: SAMPLE
RECOVERED. PROCEEDING TO STAGE THREE.

“Any idea what that means?” Holden asked.

"I don't," Miller said, pushing the terminal back. "Except... if the payload sample is Julie's body."

"Which I think we can assume it is," Holden said.

Miller tapped his fingertips on the tabletop, unconsciously copying Holden's rhythm, his mind working through the combinations.

"This thing," Miller said. "The bioweapon or whatever. They were shipping it here. So now it's here. Okay. There's no reason to take out Eros. It's not particularly important to the war when you hold it up to Ceres or Ganymede or the shipyard at Callisto. And if you wanted it dead, there're easier ways. Blow a big fusion bomb on the surface, and crack it like an egg."

"It's not a military base, but it is a shipping hub," Naomi said. "And, unlike Ceres, it's not under OPA control."

"They're shipping her out, then," Holden said. "They're taking their sample out to infect whatever their original target was, and once they're off the station, there's no way we're going to stop it."

Miller shook his head. Something about the chain of logic felt wrong. He was missing something. His imaginary Julie appeared across the room, but her eyes were dark, black filaments pouring down her cheeks like tears.

What am I looking at here, Julie? he thought. *I'm seeing something here, but I don't know what it is.*

The vibration was a slight, small thing, less than a transport tube's braking stutter. A few plates rattled; the coffee in Naomi's cup danced in a series of concentric circles. Everyone in the hotel went silent with the sudden shared dread of thousands of people made aware of their fragility in the same moment.

"Oh-kay," Amos said. "The fuck was that?" and the emergency Klaxons started blaring.

"Or possibly stage three is something else," Miller said over the noise.



The public-address system was muddy by its nature. The same voice spoke from consoles and speakers that might have been as close as a meter from each other or as far out as earshot would take them. It made every word reverberate, a false echo. Because of that, the voice of the emergency broadcast system enunciated very carefully, each word bitten off separately.

"Attention, please. Eros Station is in emergency lockdown. Proceed immediately to the casino level for radiological safety confinement. Cooperate with all emergency personnel. Attention, please. Eros station is in emergency lockdown..."

And on in a loop that would continue, if no one coded in the override, until every man, woman, child, animal, and insect on the station had been reduced to dust and humidity. It was the nightmare scenario, and Miller did what a lifetime on pressurized rocks had trained him to do. He was up from the table, in the corridor, and heading down toward the wider passages, already clogged with bodies. Holden and his crew were on his heels.

"That was an explosion," Alex said. "Ship drive at the least. Maybe a nuke."

"They are going to kill the station," Holden said. There was a kind of awe in his voice. "I never thought I'd miss the part where they just blew up the ships I was on. But now it's stations."

"They didn't crack it," Miller said.

"You're sure of that?" Naomi asked.

"I can hear you talking," Miller said. "That tells me there's air."

"There are airlocks," Holden said. "If the station got holed and the locks closed down..."

A woman pushed hard against Miller's shoulder, forcing her way forward. If they weren't damn careful, there was going to be a stampede. This was too much fear and not enough space. It hadn't

happened yet, but the impatient movement of the crowd, vibrating like molecules in water just shy of boiling, made Miller very uncomfortable.

"This isn't a ship," Miller said. "It's a station. This is rock we're on. Anything big enough to get to the parts of the station with atmosphere would crack the place like an egg. A great big pressurized egg."

The crowd was stopped, the tunnel full. They were going to need crowd control, and they were going to need it fast. For the first time since he'd left Ceres, Miller wished he had a badge. Someone pushed into Amos' side, then backed away through the press when the big guy growled.

"Besides," Miller said, "it's a rad hazard. You don't need air loss to kill everyone in the station. Just burn a few quadrillion spare neutrons through the place at C, and there won't be any trouble with the oxygen supply."

"Cheerful fucker," Amos said.

"They build stations inside of rocks for a reason," Naomi said. "Not so easy to force radiation through this many meters of rock."

"I spent a month in a rad shelter once," Alex said as they pushed through the thickening crowd. "Ship I was on had magnetic containment drop. Automatic cutoffs failed, and the reactor kept runnin' for almost a second. Melted the engine room. Killed five of the crew on the next deck up before they knew we had a problem, and it took them three days to carve the bodies free of the melted decking for burial. The rest of us wound up eighteen to a shelter for thirty-six days while a tug flew to get us."

"Sounds great," Holden said.

"End of it, six of 'em got married, and the rest of us never spoke to each other again," Alex said.

Ahead of them, someone shouted. It wasn't in alarm or even anger, really. Frustration. Fear. Exactly the things Miller didn't want to hear.

"That may not be our big problem," Miller said, but before he could explain, a new voice cut in, drowning out the emergency-response loop.

"Okay, everybody! We're Eros security, *que no?* We got an emergency, so you do what we tell you and nobody gets hurt."

About time, Miller thought.

"So here's the rule," the new voice said. "Next asshole who pushes anyone, I'm going to shoot them. Move in an orderly fashion. First priority: orderly. Second priority is *move!* Go, go, go!"

At first nothing happened. The knot of human bodies was tied too tightly for even the most heavy-handed crowd control to free quickly, but a minute later, Miller saw some heads far ahead of him in the tunnel start to shift, then move away. The air in the tunnel was thickening and the hot plastic smell of overloaded recyclers reached him just as the clot came free. Miller's breath started coming easier.

"Do they have hard shelters?" a woman behind them asked her companion, and then was swept away by the currents. Naomi plucked Miller's sleeve.

"Do they?" she asked.

"They should, yes," Miller said. "Enough for maybe a quarter million, and essential personnel and medical crews would get first crack at them."

"And everyone else?" Amos said.

"If they survive the event," Holden said, "station personnel will save as many people as they can."

"Ah," Amos said. Then: "Well, fuck that. We're going for the *Roci*, right?"

"Oh, hell yes," Holden said.

Ahead of them, the fast-shuffling crowd in their tunnel was merging with another flow of people from a lower level. Five thick-necked men in riot gear were waving people on. Two of them were pointing guns at the crowd. Miller was more than half tempted to go up and slap the little idiots. Pointing guns at people was a lousy way to avoid panic. One of the security men was also far too

wide for his gear, the Velcro fasteners at his belly reaching out for each other like lovers at the moment of separation.

Miller looked down at the floor and slowed his steps, the back of his mind suddenly and powerfully busy. One of the cops swung his gun out over the crowd. Another one—the fat guy—laughed and said something in Korean.

What had Sematimba said about the new security force? All bluster, no balls. A new corporation out of Luna. Belters on the ground. Corrupt.

The name. They'd had a name. CPM. *Carne Por la Machina*. Meat for the machine. One of the gun-wielding cops lowered his weapon, swept off his helmet, and scratched violently behind one ear. He had wild black hair, a tattooed neck, and a scar that went from one eyelid down almost to the joint of his jaw.

Miller knew him. A year and a half ago, he'd arrested him for assault and racketeering. And the equipment—armor, batons, riot guns—also looked hauntingly familiar. Dawes had been wrong. Miller had been able to find his own missing equipment after all.

Whatever this was, it had been going on a long time before the *Canterbury* had picked up a distress call from the *Scopuli*. A long time before Julie had vanished. And putting a bunch of Ceres Station thugs in charge of Eros crowd control using stolen Ceres Station equipment had been part of the plan. The third phase.

Ah, he thought. *Well. That can't be good.*

Miller slid to the side, letting as many bodies as he plausibly could fill the space between him and the gunmen dressed as police.

"Get down to the casino level," one of the gunmen shouted over the crowd. "We'll get you into the radiation shelters from there, but you've got to get to the casino level!"

Holden and his crew hadn't noticed anything odd. They were talking among themselves, strategizing about how to get to their ship and what to do once they got there, speculating about who might have attacked the station and where Julie Mao's twisted, infected corpse might be headed. Miller fought the impulse to interrupt them. He needed to stay calm, to think things through. They couldn't attract attention. He needed the right moment.

The corridor turned and widened. The press of bodies lightened a little bit. Miller waited for a dead zone in the crowd control, a space where none of the fake security men could see them. He took Holden by the elbow.

"Don't go," he said.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Holden

What do you mean, don't go?" Holden asked, yanking his elbow out of Miller's grasp. "Somebody just nuked the station. This has escalated beyond our capacity to respond. If we can't get to the *Roci*, we're doing whatever they tell us to until we can."

Miller took a step back and put up his hands; he was clearly doing his best to look nonthreatening, which just pissed Holden off even more. Behind him, the riot cops were motioning the people milling in the corridors toward the casinos. The air echoed with the electronically amplified voices of the police directing the crowds and the buzz of anxious citizens. Over it all, the public-address system told everyone to remain calm and cooperate with emergency personnel.

"See that bruiser over there in the police riot gear?" Miller said. "His name is Gabby Smalls. He supervises a chunk of the Golden Bough protection racket on Ceres. He also runs a little dust on the side, and I suspect he's tossed more than a few people out airlocks."

Holden looked at the guy. Wide shoulders, thick gut. Now that Miller pointed him out, there was something about him that didn't seem right for a cop.

"I don't get it," Holden said.

"A couple months ago, when you started a bunch of riots by saying Mars blew up your water hauler, we found out—"

"I never said—"

"—*found out* that most of the police riot gear on Ceres was missing. A few months before that, a bunch of our underworld muscle went missing. I just found out where both of them are."

Miller pointed at the riot-gear-equipped Gabby Smalls.

"I wouldn't go wherever he's sending people," he said. "I really wouldn't."

A thin stream of people bumped past.

"Then where?" Naomi asked.

"Yeah, I mean, if the choice is radiation or mobsters, I gotta go with the mobsters," Alex said, nodding emphatically at Naomi.

Miller pulled out his hand terminal and held it up so everyone could see the screen.

"I've got no radiation warnings," he said. "Whatever happened outside isn't a danger on this level. Not right now. So let's just calm down and make the smart move."

Holden turned his back on Miller and motioned to Naomi. He pulled her aside and said in a quiet voice, "I still think we go back to the ship and get out of here. Take our chances getting past these mobsters."

"If there's no radiation danger, then I agree," she said with a nod.

"I disagree," Miller said, not even pretending he hadn't been eavesdropping. "To do that we have to walk through three levels of casino filled with riot gear and thugs. They're going to tell us to get in one of those casinos for our own protection. When we don't, they'll beat us unconscious and throw us in anyway. For our own protection."

Another crowd of people poured out of a branch corridor, heading for the reassuring presence of the police and the bright casino lights. Holden found it difficult not to be swept along with the crowd. A man with two enormous suitcases bumped into Naomi, almost knocking her down. Holden grabbed her hand.

"What's the alternative?" he asked Miller.

Miller glanced up and down the corridor, seeming to measure the flow of people. He nodded at a yellow-and-black-striped hatch down a small maintenance corridor.

"That one," he said. "It's marked HIGH VOLTAGE, so the guys sweeping for stragglers won't bother with it. It's not the kind of place citizens hide."

"Can you get that door open quickly?" Holden said, looking at Amos.

"Can I break it?"

"If you need to."

"Then sure," Amos said, and began pushing his way through the crowd toward the maintenance hatch. At the door, he pulled out his multi-tool and popped off the cheap plastic housing for the card reader. After he twisted a couple of wires together, the hatch slid open with a hydraulic hiss.

"Ta-da," Amos said. "The reader won't work anymore, so anyone who wants in comes in."

"Let's worry about that if it happens," Miller replied, then led them into the dimly lit passageway beyond.

The service corridor was filled with electrical cable held together with plastic ties. It stretched through the dim red light for thirty or forty feet before falling into gloom. The light came from LEDs mounted on the metal bracing that sprouted from the wall every five feet or so to hold the cable up. Naomi had to duck to enter, her frame about four centimeters too tall for the ceiling. She put her back to the wall and slid down onto her haunches.

"You'd think they'd make the maintenance corridors tall enough for Belters to work in," she said irritably.

Holden touched the wall almost reverently, tracing a corridor identification number carved right into the stone.

"The Belters who built this place weren't tall," he said. "These are some of the main power lines. This tunnel goes back to the first Belt colony. The people who carved it grew up in gravity."

Miller, who also had to duck his head, sat on the floor with a grunt and popping knees.

"History lesson later," he said. "Let's figure a way off this rock."

Amos, studying the bundles of cable intently, said over his shoulder, "If you see a frayed spot, don't touch it. This thick fucker right here is a couple million volts. That'd melt your shit down real good."

Alex sat down next to Naomi, grimacing when his butt hit the cold stone floor.

"You know," he said, "if they decide to seal up the station, they might pump all the air outta these maintenance corridors."

"I get it," Holden said loudly. "It's a shitty and uncomfortable hiding spot. You have my permission to now shut up about that."

He squatted down across the corridor from Miller and said, "Okay, Detective. Now what?"

"Now," Miller said, "we wait for the sweep to pass us by, and get behind it, try to get to the docks. The folks in the shelters are easy to avoid. Shelters are up deep. Trick's going to be getting through the casino levels."

"Can't we just use these maintenance passages to move around?" Alex asked.

Amos shook his head. "Not without a map, we won't. You get lost in here, you're in trouble," he said.

Ignoring them, Holden said, "Okay, so we wait for everyone to move to the radiation shelters and then we leave."

Miller nodded at him, and then the two men sat staring at each other for a moment. The air between them seemed to thicken, the silence taking on a meaning of its own. Miller shrugged like his jacket itched.

"Why do you think a bunch of Ceres mobsters are moving everyone to radiation shelters when there's no actual radiation danger?" Holden finally said. "And why are the Eros cops letting them?"

"Good questions," Miller said.

"If they were using these yahoos, it helps explain why their attempted kidnapping at the hotel went so poorly. They don't seem like pros."

"Nope," Miller said. "That's not their usual area of expertise."

"Would you two be quiet?" Naomi said.

For almost a minute they were.

"It'd be really stupid," Holden said, "to go take a look at what's going on, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. Whatever's going on at those shelters, you know that's where all the guards and patrols will be," Miller said.

"Yeah," Holden said.

"Captain," Naomi said, a warning in her voice.

"Still," Holden said, talking to Miller, "you hate a mystery."

"I do at that," Miller replied with a nod and a faint smile. "And you, my friend, are a damn busybody."

"It's been said."

"Goddamn it," Naomi said quietly.

"What is it, Boss?" Amos asked.

"These two just broke our getaway plan," Naomi replied. Then she said to Holden, "You guys are going to be very bad for each other and, by extension, us."

"No," Holden replied. "You aren't coming along. You stay here with Amos and Alex. Give us"—he looked at his terminal—"three hours to go look and come back. If we aren't here—"

"We leave you to the gangsters and the three of us get jobs on Tycho and live happily ever after," Naomi said.

"Yeah," Holden said with a grin. "Don't be a hero."

"Wouldn't even consider it, sir."



Holden crouched in the shadows outside the maintenance hatch and watched as Ceres mobsters dressed in police riot gear led the citizens of Eros away in small groups. The PA system continued to declare the possibility of radiological danger and exhorted the citizens and guests of Eros to cooperate fully with emergency personnel. Holden had selected a group to follow and was getting ready to move when Miller placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Wait," Miller said. "I want to make a call."

He quickly dialed up a number on his hand terminal, and after a few moments, a flat gray *Network Not Available* message appeared.

"Phone is down?" Holden asked.

"That's the first thing I'd do, too," Miller replied.

"I see," Holden said even though he really didn't.

"Well, I guess it's just you and me," Miller said, then took the magazine out of his gun and began reloading it with cartridges he pulled out of his coat pocket.

Even though he'd had enough of gunfights to last him the rest of his life, Holden took out his gun and checked the magazine as well. He'd replaced it after the shoot-out in the hotel, and it was full. He racked it and put it back in the waistband of his pants. Miller, he noticed, kept his out, holding it close to his thigh, where his coat mostly covered it.

It wasn't difficult following the groups up through the station toward the inner sections where the radiation shelters were. As long as they kept moving in the same direction as the crowds, no one gave them a second look. Holden made a mental note of the many corridor intersections where men in riot gear stood guard. It would be much tougher coming back down.

When the group they were following eventually stopped outside a large metal door marked with the ancient radiation symbol, Holden and Miller slipped off to the side and hid behind a large planter

filled with ferns and a couple of stunted trees. Holden watched the fake riot cops order everyone into the shelter and then seal the door behind them with the swipe of a card. All but one of them left, the remaining one standing guard outside the door.

Miller whispered, "Let's ask him to let us in."

"Follow my lead," Holden replied, then stood up and began walking toward the guard.

"Hey, shithead, you supposed to be in a shelter or in the casino, so get the fuck back to your group," the guard said, his hand on the butt of his gun.

Holden held up his hands placatingly, smiled, and kept walking. "Hey, I lost my group. Got mixed up somehow. I'm not from here, you know," he said.

The guard pointed down the corridor with the stun baton in his left hand.

"Go that way till you hit the ramps down," he said.

Miller seemed to appear out of nowhere in the dimly lit corridor, his gun already out and pointed at the guard's head. He thumbed off the safety with an audible click.

"How about we just join the group already inside?" he said. "Open it up."

The guard looked at Miller out of the corners of his eyes, not turning his head at all. His hands went up, and he dropped the baton.

"You don't want to do that, man," the fake cop said.

"I kind of think he does," Holden said. "You should do what he says. He's not a very nice person."

Miller pushed the barrel of his gun against the guard's head and said, "You know what we used to call a 'no-brainer' back at the station house? It's when a shot to the head actually blows the entire brain out of someone's skull. It usually happens when a gun is pressed to the victim's head right about here. The gas's got nowhere to go. Pops the brain right out through the exit wound."

"They said not to open these up once they'd been sealed, man," the guard said, speaking so fast he ran all the words together. "They were pretty serious about that."

"This is the last time I ask," Miller said. "Next time I just use the card I took off your body."

Holden turned the guard around to face the door and pulled the handgun out of the man's belt holster. He hoped all Miller's threats were just threats. He suspected they weren't.

"Just open the door, and we'll let you go, I promise," Holden said to the guard.

The guard nodded and moved up to the door, then slid his card through it and punched in a number on the keypad. The heavy blast door slid open. Beyond it, the room was even darker than the corridor outside. A few emergency LEDs glowed a sullen red. In the faint illumination, Holden could see dozens... *hundreds* of bodies scattered across the floor, unmoving.

"Are they dead?" Holden asked.

"I don't know nothing about—" the guard said, but Miller cut him off.

"You go in first," Miller said, and pushed the guard forward.

"Hold on," Holden said. "I don't think it's a good idea to just charge in here."

Three things happened at once. The guard took four steps forward and then collapsed on the floor. Miller sneezed once, loudly, and then started to sway drunkenly. And both Holden's and Miller's hand terminals began an angry electric buzzing.

Miller staggered back and said, "The door..."

Holden hit the button and the door slid shut again.

"Gas," Miller said, then coughed. "There's gas in there."

While the ex-cop leaned against the corridor wall and coughed, Holden took out his terminal to shut off the buzzing. But the alarm flashing on its screen wasn't an air-contamination alert. It was the venerable three wedge shapes pointing inward. Radiation. As he watched, the symbol, which should have been white, shifted through an angry orange color to dark red.

Miller was looking at his too, his expression unreadable.

"We've been dosed," Holden said.

"I've never actually seen the detector activate," Miller said, his voice rough and faint after his coughing fit. "What does it mean when the thing is red?"

"It means we'll be bleeding from our rectums in about six hours," Holden said. "We have to get to the ship. It'll have the meds we need."

"What," Miller said, "the *fuck*... is going on?"

Holden grabbed Miller by the arm and led him back down the corridor toward the ramps. Holden's skin felt warm and itchy. He didn't know if it was radiation burn or psychosomatic. With the amount of radiation he'd just taken, it was a good thing he had sperm tucked away in Montana and on Europa.

Thinking that made his balls itch.

"They nuke the station," Holden said. "Hell, maybe they just *pretend* to nuke it. Then they drag everyone down here and toss them into radiation shelters that are only radioactive on the inside. Gas them to keep them quiet."

"There are easier ways to kill people," Miller said, his breathing coming in ragged gasps as they ran down the corridor.

"So it has to be more than that," Holden said. "The bug, right? The one that killed that girl. It... fed on radiation."

"Incubators," Miller said, nodding in agreement.

They arrived at one of the ramps to the lower levels, but a group of citizens led by two fake riot cops were coming up. Holden grabbed Miller and pulled him to one side, where they could hide in the shadow of a closed noodle shop.

"So they infected them, right?" Holden said in a whisper, waiting for the group to pass. "Maybe fake radiation meds with the bug in it. Maybe that brown goo just spread around on the floor. Then whatever was in the girl, Julie—"

He stopped when Miller walked away from him straight at the group that had just come up the ramp.

"Officer," said Miller to one of the fake cops.

They both stopped, and one of them said, "You supposed to be—"

Miller shot him in the throat, right below his helmet's faceplate. Then he swiveled smoothly and shot the other guard in the inside of the thigh, just below the groin. When the man fell backward, yelling in pain, Miller walked up and shot him again, this time in the neck.

A couple of the citizens started screaming. Miller pointed his gun at them and they got quiet.

"Go down a level or two and find someplace to hide," he said. "Do not cooperate with these men, even though they're dressed like police. They do not have your best interests at heart. Go."

The citizens hesitated, then ran. Miller took a few cartridges out of his pocket and began replacing the three he'd fired. Holden started to speak, but Miller cut him off.

"Take the throat shot if you can. Most people, the faceplate and chest armor don't quite cover that gap. If the neck is covered, then shoot the inside of the thigh. Very thin armor there. Mobility issue. Takes most people down in one shot."

Holden nodded, as though that all made sense.

"Okay," Holden said. "Say, let's get back to the ship before we bleed to death, right? No more shooting people if we can help it." His voice sounded calmer than he felt.

Miller slapped the magazine back into his gun and chambered a round.

"I'm guessing there's a lot more people need to be shot before this is over," he said. "But sure. First things first."

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Miller

The first time Miller killed anyone was in his third year working security. He'd been twenty-two, just married, talking about having kids. As the new guy on the contract, he'd gotten the shit jobs: patrolling levels so high the Coriolis made him seasick, taking domestic disturbance calls in holes no wider than a storage bin, standing guard on the drunk tank to keep predators from raping the unconscious. The normal hazing. He'd known to expect it. He'd thought he could take it.

The call had been from an illegal restaurant almost at the mass center. At less than a tenth of a g, gravity had been little more than a suggestion, and his inner ear had been confused and angered by the change in spin. If he thought about it, he could still remember the sound of raised voices, too fast and slurred for words. The smell of bathtub cheese. The thin haze of smoke from the cheap electric griddle.

It had happened fast. The perp had come out of the hole with a gun in one hand, dragging a woman by the hair with the other. Miller's partner, a ten-year veteran named Carson, had shouted out the warning. The perp had turned, swinging the gun out at arm's length like a stuntman in a video.

All through training, the instructors had said that you couldn't know what you'd do until the moment came. Killing another human being was hard. Some people couldn't. The perp's gun came around; the gunman dropped the woman and shouted. It turned out that, for Miller at least, it wasn't all that hard.

Afterward, he'd been through mandatory counseling. He'd cried. He'd suffered the nightmares and the shakes and all the things that cops suffered quietly and didn't talk about. But even then, it seemed to be happening at a distance, like he'd gotten too drunk and was watching himself throw up. It was just a physical reaction. It would pass.

The important thing was he knew the answer to the question. Yes, if he needed to, he could take a life.

It wasn't until now, walking through the corridors of Eros, that he'd taken joy in it. Even taking down the poor bastard in that first firefight had felt like the sad necessity of work. Pleasure in killing hadn't come until after Julie, and it wasn't really pleasure as much as a brief cessation of pain.

He held the gun low. Holden started down the ramp, and Miller followed, letting the Earther take point. Holden walked faster than he did and with the uncommented athleticism of someone who lived in a wide variety of gravities. Miller had the feeling he'd made Holden nervous, and he regretted that a little. He hadn't intended to, and he really needed to get aboard Holden's ship if he was going to find Julie's secrets.

Or, for that matter, not die of radiation sickness in the next few hours. That seemed a finer point than it probably was.

"Okay," Holden said at the bottom of the ramp. "We need to get back down, and there are a lot of guards between us and Naomi that are going to be really confused by two guys walking the wrong direction."

"That's a problem," Miller agreed.

"Any thoughts?"

Miller frowned and considered the flooring. The Eros floors were different than Ceres'. Laminate with flecks of gold.

“Tubes aren’t going to be running,” he said. “If they are, it’ll be in lockdown mode, where it only stops at the holding pen down in the casino. So that’s out.”

“Maintenance corridor again?”

“If we can find one that goes between levels,” Miller said. “Might be a little tricky, but it seems like a better bet than shooting our way past a couple dozen assholes in armor. How long have we got before your friend takes off?”

Holden looked at his hand terminal. The radiation alarm was still deep red. Miller wondered how long those took to reset.

“A little more than two hours,” Holden said. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Let’s see what we can find,” Miller said.

The corridors nearest the radiation shelters—the death traps, the incubators—had been emptied. Wide passages built to accommodate the ancient construction equipment that had carved Eros into a human habitation were eerie with only Holden’s and Miller’s footsteps and the hum of the air recyclers. Miller hadn’t noticed when the emergency announcements had stopped, but the absence of them now seemed ominous.

If it had been Ceres, he would have known where to go, where everything led, how to move gracefully from one stage to another. On Eros, all he had was an educated guess. That wasn’t so bad.

But he could tell it was taking too long, and worse than that—they weren’t talking about it; neither one spoke—they were walking more slowly than normal. It wasn’t up to the threshold of consciousness, but Miller knew that both of their bodies were starting to feel the radiation damage. It wasn’t going to get better.

“Okay,” Holden said. “Somewhere around here there has to be a maintenance shaft.”

“Could also try the tube station,” Miller said. “The cars run in vacuum, but there might be some service tunnels running parallel.”

“Don’t you think they’d have shut those down as part of the big roundup?”

“Probably,” Miller said.

“Hey! You two! What the fuck you think you’re doing up here?”

Miller looked back over his shoulder. Two men in riot gear were waving at them menacingly. Holden said something sharp under his breath. Miller narrowed his eyes.

The thing was these men were amateurs. The beginning of an idea moved in the back of Miller’s mind as he watched the two approach. Killing them and taking their gear wouldn’t work. There was nothing like scorch marks and blood to make it clear something had happened. But...

“Miller,” Holden said, a warning in his voice.

“Yeah,” Miller said. “I know.”

“I said what the fuck are you two doing here?” one of the security men said. “The station’s on lockdown. Everyone goes down to the casino level or up to the radiation shelters.”

“We were just looking for a way to... ah... get down to the casino level,” Holden said, smiling and being nonthreatening. “We’re not from around here, and—”

The closer of the two guards jabbed the butt of his rifle neatly into Holden’s leg. The Earther staggered, and Miller shot the guard just below the faceplate, then turned to the one still standing, mouth agape.

“You’re Mikey Ko, right?” Miller said.

The man’s face went even paler, but he nodded. Holden groaned and stood.

“Detective Miller,” Miller said. “Busted you on Ceres about four years ago. You got a little happy in a bar. Tappan’s, I think? Hit a girl with a pool cue?”

“Oh, hey,” the man said with a frightened smile. “Yeah, I remember you. How you been doing?”

“Good and bad,” Miller said. “You know how it is. Give the Earther your gun.”

Ko looked from Miller to Holden and back, licking his lips and judging his chances. Miller shook his head.

“Seriously,” Miller said. “Give him the gun.”

“Sure, yeah. No problem.”

This was the kind of man who’d killed Julie, Miller thought. Stupid. Shortsighted. A man born with a sense for raw opportunity where his soul should have been. Miller’s mental Julie shook her head in disgust and sorrow, and Miller found himself wondering if she meant the thug now handing his rifle to Holden or himself. Maybe both.

“What’s the deal here, Mikey?” Miller asked.

“What do you mean?” the guard said, playing stupid, like they were in an interrogation cell. Stalling for time. Walking through the old script of cop and criminal as if it still made sense. As if everything hadn’t changed. Miller was surprised by a tightness in his throat. He didn’t know what it was there for.

“The job,” he said. “What’s the job?”

“I don’t know—”

“Hey,” Miller said gently. “I just killed your buddy.”

“And that’s his third today,” Holden said. “I saw him.”

Miller could see it in the man’s eyes: the cunning, the shift, the move from one strategy to another. It was old and familiar and as predictable as water moving down.

“Hey,” Ko said, “it’s just a job. They told us about a year ago how we were making a big move, right? But no one knows what it is. So a few months back, they start moving guys over. Training us up like we were cops, you know?”

“Who was training you?” Miller said.

“The last guys. The ones who were working the contract before us,” Ko said.

“Protagon?”

“Something like that, yeah,” he said. “Then they took off, and we took over. Just muscle, you know. Some smuggling.”

“Smuggling what?”

“All kinds of shit,” Ko said. He was starting to feel safe, and it showed in the way he held himself and the way he spoke. “Surveillance equipment, communication arrays, serious-as-fuck servers with their own little gel software wonks already built in. Scientific equipment too. Stuff for checking the water and the air and shit. And these ancient remote-access robots like you’d use in a vacuum dig. All sorts of shit.”

“Where was it going to?” Holden asked.

“Here,” Ko said, gesturing to the air, the stone, the station. “It’s all here. They were like months installing it all. And then for weeks, nothing.”

“What do you mean, nothing?” Miller asked.

“Nothing nothing. All this buildup and then we sat around with our thumbs up our butts.”

Something had gone wrong. The Phoebe bug hadn’t made its rendezvous, but then Julie had come, Miller thought, and the game had turned back on. He saw her again as if he were in her apartment. The long, spreading tendrils of whatever the hell it was, the bone spurs pressing out against her skin, the black froth of filament pouring from her eyes.

“The pay’s good, though,” Ko said philosophically. “And it was kind of nice taking some time off.”

Miller nodded in agreement, leaned close, tucking the barrel of his gun through the interleaving of armor at Ko’s belly, and shot him.

“What the fuck!” Holden said as Miller put his gun into his jacket pocket.

“What did you think was going to happen?” Miller said, squatting down beside the gut-shot man. “It’s not like he was going to let us go.”

“Yeah, okay,” Holden said. “But...”

“Help me get him up,” Miller said, hooking an arm behind Ko’s shoulder. Ko shrieked when Miller lifted him.

“What?”

"Get his other side," Miller said. "Man needs medical attention, right?"

"Um. Yes," Holden said.

"So get his other side."

It wasn't as far back to the radiation shelters as Miller had expected, which had its good points and its bad ones. On the upside, Ko was still alive and screaming. The chances were better that he'd be lucid, which wasn't what Miller had intended. But as they came near the first group of guards, Ko's babbling seemed scattered enough to work.

"Hey!" Miller shouted. "Some help over here!"

At the head of the ramp, four of the guards looked at one another and then started moving toward them, curiosity winning out over basic operating procedures. Holden was breathing hard. Miller was too. Ko wasn't that heavy. It was a bad sign.

"What the hell is this?" one of the guards said.

"There's a bunch of people holed up back there," Miller said. "Resistance. I thought you people swept this level."

"That wasn't our job," the guy said. "We're just making sure the groups from the casino get to the shelters."

"Well, someone screwed up," Miller snapped. "You have transport?"

The guards looked at each other again.

"We can call for one," a guy at the back said.

"Never mind," Miller said. "You boys go find the shooters."

"Wait a minute," the first guy said. "Exactly who the hell are you?"

"The installers from Protogen," Holden said. "We're replacing the sensors that failed. This guy was supposed to help us."

"I didn't hear about that," the leader said.

Miller dug a finger under Ko's armor and squeezed. Ko shrieked and tried to writhe away from him.

"Talk to your boss about it on your own time," Miller said. "Come on. Let's get this asshole to a medic."

"Hold on!" the first guard said, and Miller sighed. Four of them. If he dropped Ko and jumped for cover... but there wasn't much cover. And who the hell knew what Holden would do?

"Where are the shooters?" the guard asked. Miller kept himself from smiling.

"There's a hole about a quarter klick anti-spinward," Miller said. "The other one's body's still there. You can't miss it."

Miller turned down the ramp. Behind him, the guards were talking among themselves, debating what to do, who to call, who to send.

"You're completely insane," Holden said over Ko's semiconscious weeping.

Maybe he was right.



When, Miller wondered, does someone stop being human? There had to be a moment, some decision that you made, and before it, you were one person, and after it, someone else. Walking down through the levels of Eros, Ko's bleeding body slung between him and Holden, Miller reflected. He was probably dying of radiation damage. He was lying his way past half a dozen men who were only letting him by because they were used to people being scared of them and he wasn't. He had killed three people in the last two hours. Four if he counted Ko. Probably safer to say four, then.

The analytical part of his mind, the small, still voice he had cultivated for years, watched him move and replayed all his decisions. Everything he'd done had made perfect sense at the time. Shooting Ko. Shooting the other three. Leaving the safety of the crew's hideout to investigate the evacuation. Emotionally, it had all been obvious at the time. It was only when he considered it from

outside that it seemed dangerous. If he'd seen it in someone else—Muss, Havelock, Sematimba—he wouldn't have taken more than a minute to realize they'd gone off the rails. Since it was him, he had taken longer to notice. But Holden was right. Somewhere along the line, he'd lost himself.

He wanted to think it had been finding Julie, seeing what had happened to her body, knowing he hadn't been able to save her, but that was only because it seemed like the sentimental moment. The truth was his decisions before then—leaving Ceres to go on a wild hunt for Julie, drinking himself out of a career, remaining a cop for even a day after that first kill all those years earlier—none of them seemed to make sense, viewed objectively. He'd lost a marriage to a woman he'd loved once. He'd lived hip deep in the worst humanity had to offer. He'd learned firsthand that he was capable of killing another human being. And nowhere along the line could he say that there, at that moment, he had been a sane, whole man, and that afterward, he hadn't.

Maybe it was a cumulative process, like smoking cigarettes. One didn't do much. Five didn't do much more. Every emotion he'd shut down, every human contact he'd spurned, every love and friendship and moment of compassion from which he'd turned had taken him a degree away from himself. Until now, he'd been able to kill men with impunity. To face his impending death with a denial that let him make plans and take action.

In his mind, Julie Mao tilted her head, listening to his thoughts. In his mind, she held him, her body against his in a way that was more comforting than erotic. Consoling. Forgiving.

This was why he had searched for her. Julie had become the part of him that was capable of human feeling. The symbol of what he could have been if he hadn't been this. There was no reason to think his imagined Julie had anything in common with the real woman. Meeting her would have been a disappointment for them both.

He had to believe that, the same way he'd had to believe everything that had cut him off from love before.

Holden stopped, the body—corpse now—of Ko tugging Miller back to himself.

"What?" Miller said.

Holden nodded at the access panel in front of them. Miller looked at it, uncomprehending, and then recognized it. They'd made it. They were back at the hideout.

"Are you all right?" Holden said.

"Yeah," Miller said. "Just woolgathering. Sorry."

He dropped Ko, and the thug slid to the floor with a sad thud. Miller's arm had fallen asleep. He shook it, but the tingling didn't go away. A wave of vertigo and nausea passed through him. *Symptoms*, he thought.

"How'd we do for time?" Miller asked.

"We're a little past deadline. Five minutes. It'll be fine," Holden said, and slid the door open.

The space beyond, where Naomi and Alex and Amos had been, was empty.

"Fuck me," Holden said.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Holden

Fuck me,” Holden said. And a moment later: “They left us.”

No. *She* had left *him*. Naomi had said she would, but confronted with the reality of it, Holden realized that he hadn’t really believed her. But here it was—the proof. The empty space where she used to be. His heart hammered and his throat tightened, breath coming in gasps. The sick feeling in his gut was either despair or his colon sloughing off its lining. He was going to die sitting outside a cheap hotel on Eros because Naomi had done exactly what she’d said she would. What he himself had ordered her to do. His resentment refused to listen to reason.

“We’re dead,” he said, and sat down on the edge of a fern-filled planter.

“How long do we have?” Miller asked, looking up and down the corridor while he fidgeted with his gun.

“No idea,” Holden replied, gesturing vaguely at his terminal’s flashing red radiation symbol.

“Hours before we really start to feel it, I think, but I don’t know. God, I wish Shed was still here.”

“Shed?”

“Friend of mine,” Holden said, not feeling up to elaborating. “Good med tech.”

“Call her,” Miller said.

Holden looked at his terminal and tapped the screen a few times.

“Network’s still down,” he said.

“All right,” Miller said. “Let’s go to your ship. See if it’s still in dock.”

“They’ll be gone. Naomi’s keeping the crew alive. She warned me, but I—”

“So let’s go anyway,” Miller said. He was shifting from one foot to the other and looking down the corridor as he spoke.

“Miller,” Holden said, then stopped. Miller was clearly on edge, and he’d shot four people. Holden was increasingly frightened of the former cop. As if reading his mind, Miller stepped close, the two-meter man towering over him where he sat. Miller smiled ruefully, his eyes unnervingly gentle. Holden would almost have preferred they be threatening.

“Way I see it, there’s three ways this can go,” Miller said. “One, we find your ship still in dock, get the meds we need, and maybe we live. Two, we try to get to the ship, and along the way we run into a bunch of mafia thugs. Die gloriously in a hail of bullets. Three, we sit here and leak out of our eyes and assholes.”

Holden said nothing; he just stared up at the cop and frowned.

“I’m liking the first two better than the last one,” Miller said. His voice made it sound like an apology. “How about you come with?”

Holden laughed before he could catch himself, but Miller didn’t look like he was taking offense.

“Sure,” Holden said. “I just needed to feel sorry for myself for a minute. Let’s go get killed by the mafia.”

He said it with much more bravado than he felt. The truth was he didn’t want to die. Even during his time in the navy, the idea of dying in the line of duty had always seemed distant and unreal. *His* ship would never be destroyed, and if it was, *he* would make it to the escape shuttle. The universe without him in it didn’t make any sense at all. He’d taken risks; he’d seen other people die. Even people he loved. Now, for the first time, his own death was a real thing.

He looked at the cop. He'd known the man less than a day, didn't trust him, and wasn't sure he much liked him. And this was who he'd die with. Holden shuddered and stood up, pulling his gun out of his waistband. Under the panic and fear, there was a deep feeling of calm. He hoped it would last.

"After you," Holden said. "If we make it, remind me to call my mothers."



The casinos were a powder keg waiting for a match. If the evacuation sweeps had been even moderately successful, there were probably a million or more people crammed into three levels of the station. Hard-looking men in riot gear moved through the crowds, telling everyone to stay put until they were taken to the radiation shelters, keeping the crowd frightened. Every now and then, a small group of citizens would be led away. Knowing where they were going made Holden's stomach burn. He wanted to yell out that the cops were fake, that they were killing people. But a riot with this many people in such a confined space would be a meat grinder. Maybe that was inevitable but he wasn't going to be the one to start it.

Someone else did.

Holden could hear raised voices, the angry rumble of the mob, followed by the electronically amplified voice of someone in a riot helmet yelling for people to get back. And then a gunshot, a brief pause, then a fusillade. People screamed. The entire crowd around Holden and Miller surged in two opposing directions, some of the people rushing toward the sound of the conflict, but many more of them running away from it. Holden spun in the current of bodies; Miller reached out and grabbed the back of his shirt, gripping it in his fist and yelling for Holden to stay close.

About a dozen meters down the corridor, in a coffee shop seating area separated by a waist-high black iron fence, one of the mafia thugs had been cut off from his group by a dozen citizens. Gun drawn, he was backing up and yelling at them to move aside. They kept advancing, their faces wild with the drunken frenzy of mob violence.

The mafia thug fired once, and one small body staggered forward, then fell to the ground at the thug's feet. Holden couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl, but they couldn't be more than thirteen or fourteen years old. The thug moved forward, looking down at the small thin figure at his feet, and pointed his gun at them again.

It was too much.

Holden found himself running down the corridor toward the thug, gun drawn and screaming for people to get out of the way. When he was about seven meters away, the crowd split apart enough for him to begin firing. Half his shots went wild, hitting the coffee shop counter and walls, one round blowing a stack of ceramic plates into the air. But a few of them hit the thug, staggering him back.

Holden vaulted the waist-high metal fence and came to a sliding halt about three meters from the fake cop and his victim. Holden's gun fired one last time and then the slide locked in the open position to let him know it was empty.

The thug didn't fall down. He straightened up, looked down at his torso, and then looked up and pointed his gun at Holden's face. Holden had time to count the three bullets that were smashed against the heavy chest armor of the thug's riot gear. *Die gloriously in a hail of bullets*, he thought.

The thug said, "Stupid mother fu—" and his head snapped back in a spray of red. He slumped to the floor.

"Gap at the neck, remember?" Miller said from behind him. "Chest armor's too thick for a pistol."

Suddenly dizzy, Holden bent over at the waist, gasping for air. He tasted lemon at the back of his throat and swallowed twice to stop himself from throwing up. He was afraid it would be full of blood and stomach lining. He didn't need to see that.

"Thanks," he gasped out, turning his head toward Miller.

Miller just nodded vaguely in his direction, then walked over to the guard and nudged him with one foot. Holden stood up and looked around the corridor, waiting for the inevitable wave of vengeful mafia enforcers to come crashing down on them. He didn't see any. He and Miller were standing in a quiet island of calm in the midst of Armageddon. All around them, tendrils of violence were whipping into high gear. People were running in every direction; the mafia goons were yelling in booming amplified voices and punctuating the threats with periodic gunfire. But there were only hundreds of them, and there were many thousands of angry and panicked civilians. Miller gestured at the chaos.

"This is what happens," he said. "Give a bunch of yahoos the equipment, and they think they know what they're doing."

Holden crouched beside the fallen child. It was a boy, maybe thirteen, with Asian features and dark hair. His chest had a gaping wound in it, blood trickling out instead of gushing. He didn't have a pulse that Holden could find. Holden picked him up anyway, looking around for someplace to take him.

"He's dead," Miller said as he replaced the cartridge he'd fired.

"Go to hell. We don't know. If we can get him to the ship, maybe..."

Miller shook his head, a sad but distant expression on his face as he looked at the child in Holden's arms.

"He took high-caliber round to the center of mass," Miller said. "He's gone."



"Fuck me," Holden said.

"You keep saying that."

A bright neon sign flashed above the corridor that led out of the casino levels and onto the ramps down to the docks. THANK YOU FOR PLAYING, it read. And YOU'RE ALWAYS A WINNER ON EROS. Below it, two ranks of men in heavy combat armor blocked the way. They might have given up on crowd control in the casinos, but they weren't letting anyone go.

Holden and Miller crouched behind an overturned coffee cart a hundred meters from the soldiers. As they watched, a dozen or so people made a dash toward the guards and were summarily mowed down by machine gun fire, then fell to the deck beside those who had tried before.

"I count thirty-four of them," Miller said. "How many can you handle?"

Holden spun to look at him in surprise, but Miller's face told him the former cop was joking.

"Kidding aside, how *do* we get past that?" Holden said.

"Thirty men with machine guns and a clear line of sight. No cover to speak of for the last twenty meters or so," Miller said. "We don't get past that."

Chapter Thirty: Miller

They sat on the floor with their backs to a bank of pachinko machines no one was playing, watching the ebb and flow of the violence around them like it was a soccer game. Miller's hat was perched on his bent knee. He felt the vibration against his back when one of the displays cycled through its dupe-call. The lights glittered and glowed. Holden, beside him, was breathing hard, like he'd run a race. Out beyond them, like something from Hieronymus Bosch, the casino levels of Eros prepared for death.

The riot's momentum had spent itself for now. Men and women gathered together in small groups. Guards strode through, threatening and scattering any bunch that got too large or unruly. Something was burning fast enough that the air scrubbers couldn't get out the smell of melting plastic. The bhangra Muzak mixed with weeping and screaming and wails of despair. Some idiot was shouting at one of the so-called cops: he was a lawyer; he was getting all of this on video; whoever was responsible was going to be in big trouble. Miller watched a bunch of people start to gather around the confrontation. The guy in the riot gear listened, nodded, and shot the lawyer once in the kneecap. The crowd dispersed except for one woman, the lawyer's wife or girlfriend, bent down over him screaming. And in the privacy of Miller's skull, everything slowly fell apart.

He was aware of having two different minds. One was the Miller he was used to, familiar with. The one who was thinking about what was going to happen when he got out, what the next step would be in connecting the dots between Phoebe Station, Ceres, Eros, and Juliette Mao, how to work the case. That version of him was scanning the crowd the way he might have watched the line at a crime scene, waiting for some detail, some change to catch his attention. Send him in the right direction to solve the mystery. It was the shortsighted, idiotic part of him that couldn't conceive of his own personal extinction, and it thought surely, *surely* there was going to be an after.

The other Miller was different. Quieter. Sad, maybe, but at peace. He'd read a poem many years before called "The Death-Self," and he hadn't understood the term until now. A knot at the middle of his psyche was untying. All the energy he'd put into holding things together—Ceres, his marriage, his career, himself—was coming free. He'd shot and killed more men in the past day than in his whole career as a cop. He'd started—only started—to realize that he'd actually fallen in love with the object of his search after he knew for certain that he'd lost her. He'd seen unequivocally that the chaos he'd dedicated his life to holding at bay was stronger and wider and more powerful than he would ever be. No compromise he could make would be enough. His death-self was unfolding in him, and the dark blooming took no effort. It was a relief, a relaxation, a long, slow exhale after decades of holding it in.

He was in ruins, but it was okay, because he was dying.

"Hey," Holden said. His voice was stronger than Miller had expected it might be.

"Yeah?"

"Did you ever watch *Misko and Marisko* when you were a kid?"

Miller frowned. "The kids' show?" he asked.

"The one with the five dinosaurs and the evil guy in the big pink hat," Holden said, then starting humming a bright, boppy tune. Miller closed his eyes and then started singing along. The music had

had words once. Now it was only a series of rises and falls, runs up and down a major scale, with every dissonance resolved in the note that followed.

"Guess I must have," Miller said when they reached the end.

"I loved that show. I must have been eight or nine last time I saw it," Holden said. "Funny how that stuff stays with you."

"Yeah," Miller said. He coughed, turned his head, and spat out something red. "How are you holding together?"

"I think I'm okay," Holden said. Then, a moment later, he added, "As long as I don't stand up."

"Nauseated?"

"Yeah, some."

"Me too."

"What is this?" Holden asked. "I mean, what the hell is this all about? Why are they *doing* this?"

It was a fair question. Slaughtering Eros—slaughtering any station in the Belt—was a pretty easy job. Anyone with first-year orbital mechanics skills could find a way to sling a rock big enough and fast enough to crack the station open. With the effort Protogen had put in, they could have killed the air supply or drugged it or whatever the hell they wanted to do. This wasn't a murder. This wasn't even a genocide.

And then there was all the observation equipment. Cameras, communications arrays, air and water sensors. There were only two reasons for that kind of shit. Either the mad bastards at Protogen got off on watching people die, or...

"They don't know," Miller said.

"What?"

He turned to look at Holden. The first Miller, the detective, the optimist, the one who needed to know, was driving now. His death-self didn't fight, because of course it didn't. It didn't fight anything. Miller raised his hand, like he was giving a lecture to a rookie.

"They don't know what it's about, or... you know, at least they don't know what's going to happen. This isn't even built like a torture chamber. It's all being watched, right? Water and air sensors. It's a petri dish. They don't know what that shit that killed Julie does, and this is how they're finding out."

Holden frowned.

"Don't they have laboratories? Places where you could maybe put that crap on some animals or something? Because as experimental design goes, this seems a little messed up."

"Maybe they need a really big sample size," Miller said. "Or maybe it's not about the people. Maybe it's about what happens to the station."

"There's a cheery thought," Holden said.

The Julie Mao in Miller's mind brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes. She was frowning, looking thoughtful, interested, concerned. It all had to make sense. It was like one of those basic orbital mechanics problems where every hitch and veer seemed random until all the variables slipped into place. What had been inexplicable became inevitable. Julie smiled at him. Julie as she had been. As he imagined she had been. The Miller who hadn't resigned himself to death smiled back. And then she was gone, his mind shifting to the noise from the pachinko machines and the low, demonic wailing of the crowds.

Another group—twenty men hunkered low, like linebackers—made a rush toward the mercenaries guarding the opening to the port. The gunmen mowed them down.

"If we had enough people," Holden said after the sound of machine guns fell away, "we could make it. They couldn't kill all of us."

"That's what the patrol goons are for," Miller said. "Make sure no one can organize a big enough push. Keep stirring the pot."

"But if it was a mob, I mean a really big mob, it could..."

"Maybe," Miller agreed. Something in his chest clicked in a way it hadn't a minute before. He took a slow, deep breath, and the click happened again. He could feel it deep in his left lung.

"At least Naomi got away," Holden said.

"That is good."

"She's amazing. She'd never put Amos and Alex in danger if she could help it. I mean, she's serious. Professional. Strong, you know? I mean, she's really, really..."

"Pretty, too," Miller said. "Great hair. Love the eyes."

"No, that wasn't what I meant," Holden said.

"You don't think she's a good-looking woman?"

"She's my XO," Holden said. "She's... you know..."

"Off-limits."

Holden sighed.

"She got away, didn't she?" Holden asked.

"Almost for sure."

They were silent. One of the linebackers coughed, stood up, and limped back into the casino, trailing blood from a hole in his ribs. The bhangra gave way to an afropop medley with a low, sultry voice singing in languages Miller didn't know.

"She'd wait for us," Holden said. "Don't you think she'd wait for us?"

"Almost for sure," Miller's death-self said, not particularly caring if it was a lie. He thought about it for a long moment, then turned to face Holden again. "Hey. Just so you know it? I'm not exactly at my best right now."

"Okay."

"All right."

The glowing orange lockdown lights on the tube station across the level clicked to green. Miller sat forward, interested. His back felt sticky, but it was probably just sweat. Other people had noticed the change too. Like a current in a water tank, the attention of the nearby crowds shifted from the mercenaries blocking the way to the port to the brushed-steel doors of the tube station.

The doors opened, and the first zombies appeared. Men and women, their eyes glassy and their muscles slack, stumbled out through the open doors. Miller had seen a documentary feed about hemorrhagic fevers as part of his training on Ceres Station. Their movements were the same: listless, driven, autonomic. Like rabid dogs whose minds had already been given over to their disease.

"Hey," Miller said, his hand on Holden's shoulder. "Hey, it's happening."

An older man in a pair of emergency services scrubs approached the shambling newcomers. His hands were out before him, as if he could corral them by simple force of will. The first zombie in the pack turned empty eyes toward him and vomited up a spray of very familiar brown goo.

"Look," Holden said.

"I saw."

"No, *look!*"

All down the casino level, tube station lights were going off lockdown. Doors were opening. The people were pulsing toward the open tubes and the implicit, empty promise of escape, and away from the dead men and women walking out from them.

"Vomit zombies," Miller said.

"From the rad shelters," Holden said. "The thing, the organism. It goes faster in radiation, right? That's why what's-her-name was so freaky about the lights and the vac suit."

"Her name's Julie. And yeah. Those incubators were for this. Right here," Miller said, and sighed. He thought about standing up. "Well. We may not die of radiation poisoning after all."

"Why not just pump that shit into the air?" Holden asked.

"Anaerobic, remember?" Miller said. "Too much oxygen kills 'em."

The vomit-covered emergency medicine guy was still trying to treat the shambling zombies like they were patients. Like they were still humans. There were smears of the brown goo on people's

clothes, on the walls. The tube doors opened again, and Miller saw half a dozen people dodge into a tube car coated in brown. The mob churned, unsure what to do, the group mind stretched past its breaking point.

A riot cop jumped forward and started spraying down the zombies with gunfire. The entrance and exit wounds spilled out fine loops of black filament, and the zombies went down. Miller chuckled even before he knew what was funny. Holden looked at him.

"They didn't know," Miller said. "The bully boys in riot gear? They aren't gonna get pulled out. Meat for the machine, just like the rest of us."

Holden made a small approving sound. Miller nodded, but something was niggling at the back of his mind. The thugs from Ceres in their stolen armor were being sacrificed. That didn't mean everyone was. He leaned forward.

The archway leading to the port was still manned. Mercenary fighters in formation, guns at the ready. If anything, they looked more disciplined now than they had before. Miller watched as the guy in the back with extra insignia on his armor barked into a mic.

Miller had thought hope was dead. He'd thought all his chances had been played, and then, like a bitch, it all hauled itself up out of the grave.

"Get up," Miller said.

"What?"

"Get up. They're going to pull back."

"Who?"

Miller nodded at the mercenaries.

"They knew," he said. "Look at them. They aren't freaking out. They aren't confused. They were waiting for this."

"And you think that means they'll fall back?"

"They aren't going to be hanging out. Stand up."

Almost as if he'd been giving the order to himself, Miller groaned and creaked to his feet. His knees and spine ached badly. The click in his lung was getting worse. His belly made a soft, complicated noise that would have been concerning under different circumstances. As soon as he started moving, he could feel how far the damage had gone, his skin not yet in pain but in the soft presentiment of it, like the gap between a serious burn and the blisters that followed. If he lived, it was going to hurt.

If he lived, *everything* was going to hurt.

His death-self tugged at him. The sense of release, of relief, of *rest* felt like something precious being lost. Even while the chattering, busy, machinelike mind kept grinding, grinding, grinding forward, the soft, bruised center of Miller's soul urged him to pause, sit back down, let the problems go away.

"What are we looking for?" Holden said. He'd stood up. A blood vessel in the man's left eye had given way, the white of the sclera turning a bright, meaty red.

What are we looking for? the death-self echoed.

"They're going to fall back," Miller said, answering the first question. "We follow. Just outside the range so whoever's going last doesn't feel like he has to shoot us."

"Isn't everyone going to do the same thing? I mean, once they're gone, isn't everyone in this place going to head in for the port?"

"I expect so," Miller said. "So let's try to slip in ahead of the rush. Look. There."

It wasn't much. Just a change in the mercenaries' stance, a shift in their collective center of gravity. Miller coughed. It hurt more than it should have.

What are we looking for? his death-self asked again, its voice more insistent. *An answer? Justice? Another chance for the universe to kick us in the balls? What is through that archway that there isn't a faster, cleaner, less painful version of in the barrel of our gun?*

The mercenary captain took a casual step back and strode down the exterior corridor and out of sight. Where he had been, Julie Mao sat, watching him go. She looked at Miller. She waved him on.

"Not yet," he said.

"When?" Holden said, his voice surprising Miller. Julie in his head flickered out, and he was back in the real world.

"It's coming," Miller said.

He should warn the guy. It was only fair. You got into a bad place, and at the very least, you owed your partner the courtesy of letting him know. Miller cleared his throat. That hurt too.

It's possible I may start hallucinating or become suicidal. You might have to shoot me.

Holden glanced over at him. The pachinko machines lit them blue and green and shrieked in artificial delight.

"What?" Holden said.

"Nothing. Getting my balance," Miller said.

Behind them, a woman shouted. Miller glanced back to see her pushing a vomit zombie away, a slick of brown goo already covering the live woman. At the archway, the mercenaries quietly stepped back and started down the corridor.

"Come on," Miller said.

He and Holden walked toward the archway, Miller pulling his hat on. Loud voices, screams, the low, liquid sound of people being violently ill. The air scrubbers were failing, the air taking on a deep, pungent odor like beef broth and acid. Miller felt like there was a stone in his shoe, but he was almost certain if he looked, there would be only a point of redness where his skin was starting to break down.

No one shot at them. No one told them to stop.

At the archway, Miller led Holden against the wall, then ducked his head around the corner. A quarter second was all it took to know the long, wide corridor was empty. The mercs were done here and leaving Eros to its fate. The window was open. The way was clear.

Last chance, he thought, and he meant both the last chance to live and the last one to die.

"Miller?"

"Yeah," he said. "It looks good. Come on. Before everyone gets the idea."

Chapter Thirty-One: Holden

Something was moving in Holden's gut. He ignored it and kept his eyes on Miller's back. The lanky detective barreled down the corridor toward the port, stopping occasionally at junctions to peek around the corner and look for trouble. Miller had become a machine. All Holden could do was try to keep up.

Always the same distance ahead were the mercenaries who'd been guarding the exit from the casino. When they moved, Miller moved. When they slowed down, he slowed. They were clearing a path to the port, but if they thought that any of the citizens were getting too close, they'd probably open fire. They were definitely shooting anyone they ran into along the way. They'd already shot two people who'd run at them. Both had been vomiting brown goo. *Where the hell did those vomit zombies come from so fast?*

"Where the hell did those vomit zombies come from so fast?" he said to Miller's back.

The detective shrugged with his left hand, his right still clutching his pistol.

"I don't think enough of that crap came out of Julie to infect the whole station," he replied without slowing down. "I'm guessing they were the first batch. The ones they incubated to get enough goo to infect the shelters with."

That made sense. And when the controlled portion of the experiment went to shit, you just turned them loose on the populace. By the time people figured out what was going on, half of them were infected already. Then it was just a matter of time.

They paused briefly at a corridor intersection, watching as the leader of the merc group stopped a hundred meters ahead and talked on his radio for a minute. Holden was gasping and trying to catch his breath when the group started up again, and Miller moved to follow. He reached out and grabbed the detective's belt and let Miller drag him along. Where did the skinny Belter keep this reserve of energy?

The detective stopped. His expression was blank.

"They're arguing," Miller said.

"Huh?"

"The leader of that group and some of the men. Arguing about something," Miller replied.

"So?" Holden asked, then coughed something wet into his hand. He wiped it off on the back of his pants, not looking to see if it was blood. *Please don't let it be blood.*

Miller shrugged with his hand again.

"I don't think everyone's on the same team here," he said.

The merc group turned down another corridor, and Miller followed, yanking Holden along behind him. These were the outer levels, filled with warehouse space and ship repair and resupply depots. They didn't see a lot of foot traffic at the best of times. Now the corridor echoed like a mausoleum with their footsteps. Up ahead, the merc group turned again, and before Miller and Holden could reach the junction, a lone figure wandered into view.

He didn't appear to be armed, so Miller moved toward him cautiously, impatiently reaching behind himself and pulling Holden's hand off his belt. Once he was free, Miller held up his left hand in an unmistakably cop-like gesture.

"This is a dangerous place to be wandering around, sir," he said.

The man was now less than fifteen meters ahead of them and began moving toward them at a lurch. He was dressed for a party in a cheap tuxedo with a frilly shirt and sparkly red bow tie. He was wearing one shiny black shoe, the other foot covered with only a red sock. Brown vomit trickled from the corners of his mouth and stained the front of his white shirt.

"Shit," Miller said, and brought up his gun.

Holden grabbed his arm and yanked it back down.

"He's innocent in this," Holden said, the sight of the injured and infected man making his eyes burn. "He's innocent."

"He's still coming," Miller said.

"So walk faster," Holden said. "And if you shoot anyone else and I haven't given you permission to, you don't get a ride on my ship. Got me?"

"Trust me," Miller said. "Dying is the best thing that could happen to that guy today. You're not doing him any favors."

"You don't get to decide that," Holden replied, his tone edging into real anger.

Miller started to reply, but Holden held up one hand and cut him off.

"You want on the *Roci*? I'm the boss, then. No questions, no bullshit."

Miller's smirk turned into a smile. "Yes, sir," he said. "Our mercs are getting ahead of us." He pointed down the corridor.

Miller nodded and moved off again at his steady, machinelike pace. Holden didn't turn around, but he could hear the man Miller had almost shot crying in the corridor behind him for a long time. To cover up the sound, which probably existed only in his head once they'd made a couple more turns in the corridor, he began humming the theme to *Misko and Marisko* again.

Mother Elise, who'd been the one to stay home with him when he was very young, had always brought him something to eat while he watched, and then sat by him with her hand on his head, playing with his hair. She'd laughed at the dinosaur antics even harder than he had. One Halloween she'd made him a big pink hat to wear so that he could be the evil Count Mungo. Why had that guy been trying to capture the dinosaurs, anyway? It had never really been clear. Maybe he just liked dinosaurs. One time he'd used a shrink ray and—

Holden slammed into Miller's back. The detective had stopped suddenly and now moved quickly to one side of the corridor, crouching low to keep himself in the shadows. Holden followed suit. About thirty meters ahead, the mercenary group had gotten much bigger and had split into two factions.

"Yep," Miller said. "Whole lot of people having really bad days today."

Holden nodded and wiped something wet off his face. It was blood. He didn't think he'd hit Miller's back hard enough to bloody his nose, and he had a suspicion it wasn't going to stop on its own. Mucous membranes getting fragile. Wasn't that part of radiation burning? He tore strips off his shirt and stuffed them up his nostrils while he watched the scene at the end of the corridor.

There were two clear groups, and they did seem to be engaged in some sort of heated argument. Normally, that would have been fine. Holden didn't care about the social lives of mercenaries. But these mercenaries numbered by this time close to a hundred, were heavily armed, and blocked the corridor that led to his ship. That made their argument worth watching.

"Not everyone from Protogen left, I think," Miller said quietly, pointing at one of the two groups. "Those guys on the right don't look like the home team."

Holden looked at the group and nodded. They were definitely the more professional-looking soldiers. Their armor fit well. The other group looked like it was largely made up of guys dressed in police riot gear, with only a few men in combat armor.

"Want to guess what the argument is about?" Miller asked.

"Hey, can we have a ride too?" Holden said mockingly with a Ceres accent. "Uh, no, we need you guys to stay here and, uh, keep an eye on things, which we promise will be totally safe and absolutely not involve you turning into vomit zombies."

He actually got a chuckle from Miller and then the corridor erupted in a barrage of gunfire. Both sides of the discussion were firing automatic weapons at each other from point-blank range. The noise was deafening. Men screamed and flew apart, spraying the corridor and each other with blood and body parts. Holden dropped flat to the floor but continued watching the firefight.

After the initial barrage, the survivors from both groups began falling back in opposite directions, still firing as they moved. The floor at the corridor junction was littered with bodies. Holden estimated that twenty or more men had died in that first second of the fight. The sounds of gunfire grew more distant as the two groups fired at each other down the corridor.

In the middle of the junction, one of the bodies on the floor suddenly stirred and raised its head. Even before the wounded man could get to his feet, a bullet hole appeared in the middle of his face shield and he dropped back to the floor with limp finality.

"Where's your ship?" Miller asked.

"The lift is at the end of this corridor," Holden replied.

Miller spat what looked like bloody phlegm on the floor.

"And the corridor that crosses it is now a war zone, with armed camps sniping at each other from both sides," he said. "I guess we could try just running through it."

"Is there another option?" Holden asked.

Miller looked at his terminal.

"We're fifty-three minutes past the deadline Naomi set," he said. "How much more time do you want to waste?"

"Look, I was never particularly good at math," Holden said. "But I'd guess there are as many as forty guys in either direction down that other corridor. A corridor which is a good three, maybe three and a half meters wide. Which means that we give eighty guys three meters worth of shots at us. Even dumb luck means we get hit a lot and then die. Let's think of a plan B."

As if to underline his argument, another fusillade broke out in the cross corridor, gouging chunks out of the rubbery wall insulation and chewing up the bodies lying on the floor.

"They're still withdrawing," Miller said. "Those shots came from farther away. I guess we can just wait them out. I mean, if we can."

The rags Holden had stuffed up his nose hadn't stopped the bleeding; they had just dammed it up. He could feel a steady trickle down the back of his throat that made his stomach heave with nausea. Miller was right. They were getting down to the last of their ability to wait anyone out at this point.

"Goddamn, I wish we could call and see if Naomi is even there," Holden said, looking at the flashing *Network Not Available* on his terminal.

"Shhh," Miller whispered, putting one finger on his lips. He pointed back down the corridor in the direction they'd come, and now Holden could hear heavy footsteps approaching.

"Late guests to the party," Miller said, and Holden nodded. The two men swiveled around, pointing their guns down the corridor and waiting.

A group of four men in police riot armor rounded the corner. They didn't have their guns out, and two of them had their helmets off. Apparently they hadn't heard about the new hostilities. Holden waited for Miller to fire and, when he didn't, turned to look at him. Miller was staring back.

"I didn't dress real warm," Miller said, almost apologetically. It took Holden half a second to understand what he meant.

Holden gave him permission by shooting first. He targeted one of the mafia thugs without a helmet and shot him in the face, then continued firing at the group until his gun's slide locked open when the magazine was empty. Miller had begun firing a split second after Holden's first shot and also fired until his gun was empty. When it was over, all four thugs were lying facedown in the corridor. Holden let out a long breath that turned into a sigh, and sat down on the floor.

Miller walked to the fallen men and nudged each one in turn with his foot as he replaced the magazine in his gun. Holden didn't bother reloading his. He was done with gunfights. He put the

empty pistol in his pocket and got up to join the cop. He bent down and began unbuckling the least damaged armor he could find. Miller raised an eyebrow but didn't move to help.

"We're making a run for it," Holden said, swallowing back the vomit-and-blood taste in his throat as he pulled the chest and back armor free of the first man. "But maybe if we wear this stuff, it will help."

"Might," Miller said with a nod, then knelt down to help strip a second man.

Holden put on the dead man's armor, working hard to believe that the pink trail down the back was absolutely not part of the man's brain. Undoing the straps was exhausting. His fingers felt numb and awkward. He picked up the thigh armor, then put it down again. He'd rather run fast. Miller had finished buckling his on too and picked up one of the undamaged helmets. Holden found one with just a dent in it and slipped it onto his head. It felt greasy inside, and he was glad he had no sense of smell. He suspected that its previous occupant hadn't bathed often.

Miller fiddled with the side of his helmet until the radio came on. The cop's voice was echoed a split second later over the helmet's tinny speakers as he said, "Hey, we're coming out into the corridor! Don't shoot! We're coming to join up!"

Thumbing off the mic, he turned to Holden and said, "Well, maybe one side won't be shooting at us now."

They moved back down the corridor and stopped ten meters from the intersection. Holden counted down from three and then took off at the best run he could manage. It was dishearteningly slow; his legs felt like they were filled with lead. Like he was running in a pool of water. Like he was in a nightmare. He could hear Miller just behind him, his shoes slapping on the concrete floor, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Then he heard only the sound of gunfire. He couldn't tell if Miller's plan had worked. Couldn't tell which direction the gunfire was coming from. It was constant and deafening and started the instant he entered the cross corridor. When he was three meters from the other side, he lowered his head and jumped forward. In Eros' light gravity, he seemed to fly, and he was nearly to the other side when a burst of bullets caught him in the armor over his ribs and slammed him into the corridor wall with a spine-jarring crack. He dragged himself the rest of the way as bullets continued to hit all around his legs, one of them passing through the meaty part of his calf.

Miller tripped over him, flying a few feet farther down the hall and then collapsing in a heap. Holden crawled to his side.

"Still alive?"

Miller nodded. "Got shot. Arm's broke. Keep moving," he gasped out.

Holden climbed to his feet, his left leg feeling like it was on fire as the muscle in his calf clenched around his gaping wound. He pulled Miller up and then leaned on him as they limped toward the elevator. Miller's left arm was dangling boneless at his side, and blood was pouring off his hand.

Holden punched the button to call the lift, and he and Miller leaned on each other while they waited. He hummed the *Misko and Marisko* theme to himself, and after a few seconds, Miller started too.

Holden punched the button for the *Rocinante's* berth and waited for the elevator to stop at a blank gray airlock door with no ship beyond it. That would be when he finally had permission to lie down on the floor and die. He looked forward to that moment when his exertions could end with a relief that would have surprised him if he'd still been capable of surprise. Miller let go of him and slid down the lift wall, leaving a blood trail on the shiny metal and ending in a pile on the floor. The man's eyes were closed. He could almost have been sleeping. Holden watched the detective's chest rise and fall in ragged, painful breaths that grew smoother and more shallow.

Holden envied him, but he had to see that closed airlock door before he could lie down. He began to feel faintly angry with the elevator for taking so long.

It stopped, lift doors sliding open with a cheerful ding.

Amos stood in the airlock on the other side, an assault rifle in each hand and two belts of magazines for the rifles slung on his shoulders. He looked Holden up and down once, then glanced over to Miller and back again.

“Jesus, Captain, you look like shit.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two: Miller

Miller's mind reassembled slowly and with several false starts. In his dreams, he was fitting a puzzle together as the pieces kept changing shape, and each time, just as he was on the verge of slipping the whole mechanism together, the dream began again. The first thing he became aware of was the ache at the small of his back, then the heaviness of his arms and legs, then the nausea. The nearer he came to consciousness, the more he tried to postpone it. Imaginary fingers tried to complete the puzzle, and before he could make it all fit, his eyes opened.

He couldn't move his head. Something was in his neck: a thick bundle of black tubes reaching out of him and up past the limits of his vision. He tried to lift his arms, to push the invading, vampiric thing away, but he couldn't.

It got me, he thought with a thrill of fear. I'm infected.

The woman appeared from his left. He was surprised she wasn't Julie. Deep brown skin, dark eyes with just a hint of an epicanthic fold. She smiled at him. Black hair draped down the side of her face.

Down. There was a *down*. There was gravity. They were under thrust. That seemed very important, but he didn't know why.

"Hey, Detective," Naomi said. "Welcome back."

Where am I? he tried to say. His throat felt solid. Crowded like too many people in a tube station.

"Don't try to get up or talk or anything," she said. "You've been under for about thirty-six hours. Good news is we have a sick bay with a military-grade expert system and supplies for fifteen Martian soldiers. I think we burned half of what we've got on you and the captain."

The captain. Holden. That was right. They'd been in a fight. There had been a corridor and people shooting. And someone had been sick. He remembered a woman, covered in brown vomit, with vacant eyes, but he didn't know whether it was part of a nightmare.

Naomi was still talking. Something about full plasma flushes and cell damage. He tried to lift a hand, to reach out to her, but a strap restrained him. The ache in his back was his kidneys, and he wondered what exactly was getting filtered out of his blood. Miller closed his eyes, asleep before he could decide whether to rest.

No dreams troubled him this time. He roused again when something deep in his throat shifted, pulled at his larynx, and retreated. Without opening his eyes, he rolled to his side, coughed, puked, and rolled back.

When he woke, he was breathing on his own. His throat felt sore and abused, but his hands weren't tied down. Drainage tubes ran out of his belly and side, and there was a catheter the size of a pencil coming out his penis. Nothing particularly hurt, so he had to assume he was on pretty nearly all the narcotics there were. His clothes were gone, his modesty preserved only by a thin paper gown and a cast that held his left arm stony and immovable. Someone had put his hat on the next bed over.

The sick bay, now that he could see it, looked like a ward on a high-production entertainment feed. It wasn't a hospital; it was the matte-black-and-silver idea of what a hospital was supposed to be. The monitors hung suspended in the air on complex armatures, reporting his blood pressure, nucleic acid concentrations, oxygenation, fluid balance. There were two separate countdowns

running, one to the next round of autophagics, the other for pain medication. And across the aisle, at another station, Holden's statistics looked more or less the same.

Holden looked like a ghost. His skin was pale and his sclera were red with a hundred little hemorrhages. His face was puffy from steroids.

"Hey," Miller said.

Holden lifted a hand, waving gently.

"We made it," Miller said. His voice sounded like it had been dragged down an alley by its ankles.

"Yeah," Holden said.

"That was ugly."

"Yeah."

Miller nodded. That had taken all the energy he had. He lay back down and fell, if not asleep, at least unconscious. Just before his mind flickered back into forgetfulness, he smiled. He'd made it. He was on Holden's ship. And they were going to find whatever Julie had left behind for them.

Voices woke him.

"Maybe you shouldn't, then."

It was the woman. Naomi. Part of Miller cursed her for disturbing him, but there was a buzz in her voice—not fear or anger, but close enough to be interesting. He didn't move, didn't even swim all the way back to awareness. But he listened.

"I need to," Holden said. He sounded phlegmy, like someone who needed to cough. "What happened on Eros... it's put a lot of things in perspective. I've been holding something back."

"Captain—"

"No, hear me out. When I was in there thinking that all I was going to have left was half an hour of rigged pachinko games and then death... when that happened, I knew what my regrets were. You know? I felt all the things that I wished I'd done and never had the courage for. Now that I know, I can't just ignore it. I can't pretend it isn't there."

"Captain," Naomi said again, and the buzz in her voice was stronger.

Don't say it, you poor bastard, Miller thought.

"I'm in love with you, Naomi," Holden said.

The pause lasted no longer than a heartbeat.

"No, sir," she said. "You aren't."

"I am. I know what you're thinking. I've been through this big traumatic experience and I'm doing the whole thing where I want to affirm life and make connections, and maybe some of that's part of it. But you have to believe that I know what I feel. And when I was down there, I knew that the thing that I wanted the most was to get back to you."

"Captain. How long have we served together?"

"What? I don't know exactly..."

"Ballpark estimate."

"Eight and a half runs makes it almost five years," Holden said. Miller could hear the confusion in his voice.

"All right. And in that time, how many of the crew did you share bunks with?"

"Does it matter?"

"Only a little."

"A few."

"More than a dozen?"

"No," he said, but he didn't sound sure.

"Let's call it ten," Naomi said.

"Okay. But this is different. I'm not talking about having a little shipboard romance to pass the time. Ever since—"

Miller imagined the woman holding up her hand or taking Holden's or maybe just glaring at him. Something to stop the flow of words.

"And do you know when I fell for you, sir?"

Sorrow. That was what the strain in her voice was. Sorrow. Disappointment. Regret.

"When... when you..."

"I can tell you the day," Naomi said. "You were about seven weeks into that first run. I was still smarting that some Earther had come in from out of the ecliptic and taken my XO job. I didn't like you much right at the start. You were too charming, too pretty, and too damn comfortable in my chair. But there was a poker game in the engine room. You and me and those two Luna boys out of engineering and Kamala Trask. You remember Trask?"

"She was the comm tech. The one who was..."

"Built like a refrigerator? Face like a bulldog puppy?"

"I remember her."

"She had the biggest crush on you. Used to cry herself to sleep at night all through that run. She wasn't in that game because she cared about poker. She just wanted to breathe some of your air, and everyone knew it. Even you. And all that night, I watched you and her, and you never once led her along. You never gave her any reason to think she had a chance with you. And you still treated her with respect. That was the first time I thought you might be a decent XO, and it was the first time I wished that I could be the girl in your bunk at shift's end."

"Because of Trask?"

"That and you've got a great ass, sir. My point is we flew together for four years and more. And I would have come along with you any day of that if you'd asked me."

"I didn't know," Holden said. He sounded a little strangled.

"You didn't ask. You always had your sights set someplace else. And, honestly, I think Belter women just put you off. Until the *Cant*... Until it was just the five of us. I've seen you looking at me. I know exactly what those looks mean, because I spent four years on the other side of them. But I only got your attention when I was the only female on board, and that's not good enough for me."

"I don't know—"

"No, sir, you don't. That's my point. I've watched you seduce a lot of women, and I know how you do it. You get fixed on her, you get excited by her. Then you convince yourself that the two of you have some kind of special connection, and by the time you believe it, she usually thinks it's true too. And then you sleep together for a while, and the connection gets a little faded. One or the other of you says something like *professional* or *appropriate boundaries* or starts worrying what the crew will think, and the whole thing slides away. Afterwards they still like you. All of them. You do it all so well they don't even feel like they get to hate you for it."

"That's not true."

"It is. And until you figure out that you don't have to love everyone you bed down with, I'm never going to know whether you love me or just want to bed down. And I won't sleep with you until you know which it is. The smart money isn't on love."

"I was just—"

"If you want to sleep with me," Naomi said, "be honest. Respect me enough for that. Okay?"

Miller coughed. He hadn't meant to, hadn't even been aware he was going to. His belly went tight, his throat clamped down, and he coughed wet and deep. Once he started, it was hard to stop. He sat up, eyes watering from the effort. Holden was lying back on his bed. Naomi sat on the next bed over, smiling like there had been nothing to overhear. Holden's monitors showed an elevated heart rate and blood pressure. Miller could only hope the poor bastard hadn't gotten an erection with the catheter still in.

"Hey, Detective," Naomi said. "How're you feeling?"

Miller nodded.

"I've felt worse," he said. Then, a moment later: "No. I haven't. But I'm all right. How bad was it?"

"You're both dead," Naomi said. "Seriously, we had to override the triage filters on both of you more than once. The expert system kept clicking you over into hospice care and shooting you full of morphine."

She said it lightly, but he believed her. He tried to sit up. His body still felt terribly heavy, but he didn't know if it was from weakness or the ship thrust. Holden was quiet, jaw clamped tight. Miller pretended not to notice.

"Long-term estimates?"

"You're both going to need to be checked for new cancers every month for the rest of your lives. The captain has a new implant where his thyroid used to be, since his real one was pretty much cooked down. We had to take out about a foot and a half of your small bowel that wouldn't stop bleeding. You're both going to bruise easy for a while, and if you wanted kids, I hope you have some sperm in a bank someplace, because all your little soldiers have two heads now."

Miller chuckled. His monitors blinked into alarm mode and then back out.

"You sound like you trained as a med tech," he said.

"Nope. Engineer. But I've been reading the printouts every day, so I've got the lingo down. I wish Shed was still here," she said, and sounded sad for the first time.

That was the second time someone had mentioned Shed. There was a story there, but Miller let it drop.

"Hair going to fall out?" he asked.

"Maybe," Naomi said. "The system shot you full of the drugs that are supposed to stop that, but if the follicles die, they die."

"Well. Good thing I've still got my hat. What about Eros?"

Naomi's false light tone failed her.

"It's dead," Holden said from his bed, turning to look at Miller. "I think we were the last ship out. The station isn't answering calls, and all the automatic systems have it in a quarantine lockdown."

"Rescue ships?" Miller asked, and coughed again. His throat was still sore.

"Not going to happen," Naomi said. "There were a million and a half people on station. No one has the resources to put into that kind of rescue op."

"After all," Holden said, "there's a war on."



The ship system dimmed the lights for night. Miller lay on his bed. The expert system had shifted his treatment regimen into a new phase, and for the past three hours, he'd alternated between spiking fevers and teeth-chattering chills. His teeth and the nail beds of his fingers and toes ached. Sleep wasn't an option, so he lay in the gloom and tried to pull himself together.

He wondered what his old partners would have made of his behavior on Eros. Havelock. Muss. He tried to imagine them in his place. He'd killed people, and he'd done it cold. Eros had been a kill box, and when the people in charge of the law wanted you dead, the law didn't apply anymore. And some of the dead assholes had been the ones who'd killed Julie.

So. Revenge killing. Was he really down to revenge killing? That was a sad thought. He tried to imagine Julie sitting beside him the way Naomi had with Holden. It was like she'd been waiting for the invitation. Julie Mao, who he'd never really known. She raised a hand in greeting.

And what about us? he asked her as he looked into her dark, unreal eyes. *Do I love you, or do I just want to love you so bad I can't tell the difference?*

"Hey, Miller," Holden said, and Julie vanished. "You awake?"

"Yeah. Can't sleep."

"Me either."

They were silent for a moment. The expert system hummed. Miller's left arm itched under its cast as the tissue went through another round of forced regrowth.

"You doing okay?" Miller asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Holden said sharply.

"You killed that guy," Miller said. "Back on the station. You shot him. I mean, I know you shot at guys before that. Back at the hotel. But right at the end there, you actually hit somebody in the face."

"Yeah. I did."

"You good with that?"

"Sure," Holden said, too quickly.

The air recyclers hummed, and the blood pressure cuff on Miller's good arm squeezed him like a hand. Holden didn't speak, but when Miller squinted, he could see the elevated blood pressure and the uptick in brain activity.

"They always made us take time off," Miller said.

"What?"

"When we shot someone. Whether they died or not, they always made us take a leave of absence. Turn in our weapon. Go talk to the headshrinker."

"Bureaucrats," Holden said.

"They had a point," Miller said. "Shooting someone does something to you. Killing someone... that's even worse. Doesn't matter that they had it coming or you didn't have a choice. Or maybe a little difference. But it doesn't take it away."

"Seems like you got over it, though."

"Maybe," Miller said. "Look. All that I said back there about how you kill someone? About how leaving them alive wasn't doing them any favors? I'm sorry that happened."

"You think you were wrong?"

"I wasn't. But I'm still sorry it happened."

"Okay."

"Jesus. Look, I'm saying it's good that it bothers you. It's good that you can't stop seeing it or hearing it. That part where it haunts you some? That's the way it's supposed to be."

Holden was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was gray as stone.

"I've killed people before, you know. But they were blips in a radar track. I—"

"It's not the same, is it?" Miller said.

"No, it isn't," Holden replied. "Does this go away?"

Sometimes, Miller thought.

"No," he said. "Not if you've still got a soul."

"Okay. Thanks."

"One other thing?"

"Yeah?"

"I know it's none of my business, but I really wouldn't let her put you off. So you don't understand sex and love and women. Just means you were born with a cock. And this girl? Naomi? She seems like she's worth putting a little effort into it. You know?"

"Yeah," Holden said. Then: "Can we never talk about that again?"

"Sure."

The ship creaked and gravity shifted a degree to Miller's right. Course correction. Nothing interesting. Miller closed his eyes and tried to will himself to sleep. His mind was full of dead men and Julie and love and sex. There was something Holden had said about the war that was important, but he couldn't make the pieces fit. They kept changing. Miller sighed, shifted his weight so that he blocked one of his drainage tubes and had to shift back to stop the alarm.

When the blood pressure cuff fired off again, it was Julie holding him, pulling herself so close her lips brushed his ear. His eyes opened, his mind seeing both the imaginary girl and the monitors that she would have blocked if she'd really been there.

I love you too, she said, and I will take care of you.

He smiled at seeing the numbers change as his heart raced.

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Chapter Thirty-Three: Holden

For five more days, Holden and Miller lay on their backs in sick bay while the solar system burned down around them. The reports of Eros' death ran from massive ecological collapse brought about by war-related supply shortages, to covert Martian attack, to secret Belt bioweapon laboratory accident. Analysis from the inner planets had it that the OPA and terrorists like them had finally shown how dangerous they could be to innocent civilian populations. The Belt blamed Mars, or the maintenance crews of Eros, or the OPA for not stopping it.

And then a group of Martian frigates blockaded Pallas, a revolt on Ganymede ended in sixteen dead, and the new government of Ceres announced that all ships with Martian registry docked on station were being commandeered. The threats and accusations, all set to the constant human background noise of war drums, moved on. Eros had been a tragedy and a crime, but it was finished, and there were new dangers popping up in every corner of human space.

Holden turned off his newsfeed, fidgeted in his bunk, and tried to wake Miller up by staring at him. It didn't work. The massive radiation exposure had failed to give him superpowers. Miller began to snore.

Holden sat up, testing the gravity. Less than a quarter g. Alex wasn't in a hurry, then. Naomi was giving him and Miller time to heal before they arrived at Julie's magical mystery asteroid.

Shit.

Naomi.

The last few times she'd come into sick bay had been awkward. She never brought the subject of his failed romantic gesture back up, but he could feel a barrier between them now that filled him with regret. And every time she left the room, Miller would look away from him and sigh, which just made it worse.

But he couldn't avoid her forever, no matter how much he felt like an idiot. He swung his feet off the edge of the bed and pressed down on the floor. His legs felt weak but not rubbery. The soles of his feet hurt, but quite a bit less than nearly everything else on his body. He stood up, one hand still on the bed, and tested his balance. He wobbled but remained upright. Two steps reassured him that walking was possible in the light gravity. The IV tugged at his arm. He was down to just one bag of something a faint blue. He had no idea what it was, but after Naomi's description of how close to death he'd come, he figured it must be important. He pulled it off the wall hook and held it in his left hand. The room smelled like antiseptic and diarrhea. He was happy to be leaving.

"Where you going?" Miller asked, his voice groggy.

"Out." Holden had the sudden, visceral memory of being fifteen.

"Okay," Miller said, then rolled onto his side.

The sick bay hatch was four meters from the central ladder, and Holden covered the ground with a slow, careful shuffle, his paper booties making a whispery scuffing sound on the fabric-covered metal floor. The ladder itself defeated him. Even though ops was only one deck up, the three-meter climb might as well have been a thousand. He pressed the button to call the lift, and a few seconds later, the floor hatch slid open and the lift climbed through with an electric whine. Holden tried to hop on but managed only a sort of slow-motion fall that ended with his clutching the ladder and

kneeling on the lift platform. He stopped the lift, pulled himself upright, and started it again, then rode it up to the next deck in what he hoped was a less beaten and more captain-like pose.

"Jesus, Captain, you *still* look like shit," Amos said as the lift came to a stop. The mechanic was sprawled across two chairs at the sensor stations and munching on what looked like a strip of leather.

"You keep saying that."

"Keeps bein' true."

"Amos, don't you have work to do?" Naomi said. She was sitting at one of the computer stations, watching something flash by on the screen. She didn't look up when Holden came onto the deck. That was a bad sign.

"Nope. Most boring ship I ever worked, Boss. She don't break, she don't leak, she don't even have an annoying rattle to tighten down," Amos replied as he sucked down the last of his snack and smacked his lips.

"There's always mopping," Naomi said, then tapped out something on the screen in front of her. Amos looked from her to Holden and back again.

"Oh, that reminds me. I better get down to the engine room and look at that... thing I've been meaning to look at," Amos said, and jumped to his feet. "'Scuse me, Cap."

He squeezed past Holden, hopped on the lift, and rode it sternward. The deck hatch closed behind him.

"Hey," Holden said to Naomi once Amos was gone.

"Hey," she said without turning around. That wasn't good either. When she'd sent Amos away, he'd hoped she wanted to talk. It didn't look like it. Holden sighed and shuffled over to the chair next to her. He collapsed into it, his legs tingling like he'd run a kilometer instead of just walking twenty-odd steps. Naomi had left her hair down, and it hid her face from him. Holden wanted to brush it back but was afraid she'd snap his elbow with Belter kung fu if he tried.

"Look, Naomi," he started, but she ignored him and hit a button on her panel. He stopped when Fred's face appeared on the display in front of her.

"Is that Fred?" he said, because he couldn't think of anything even more idiotic to say.

"You should see this. Got it from Tycho a couple hours ago on the tightbeam after I sent them an update on our status."

Naomi tapped the play button and Fred's face sprang to life.

"Naomi, sounds like you guys have had a tough time of it. The air's full of chatter on the station shutdown, and the supposed nuclear explosion. No one knows what to make of it. Keep us informed. In the meantime, we managed to hack open that data cube you left here. I don't think it'll help much, though. Looks like a bunch of sensor data from the *Donnager*, mostly EM stuff. We've tried looking for hidden messages, but my smartest people can't find anything. I'm passing the data along to you. Let me know if you find anything. Tycho out."

The screen went blank.

"What does the data look like?" Holden asked.

"It's just what the man said," Naomi said. "EM sensor data from the *Donnager* during the pursuit by the six ships, and the battle itself. I've dug through raw stuff, looking for anything hidden inside, but for the life of me, I can't find a thing. I've even had the *Roci* digging through the data for the last couple hours, looking for patterns. She has really good software for that sort of thing. But so far, nothing."

She tapped on the screen again and the raw data began spooling past faster than Holden could follow. In a small window inside the larger screen, the *Rocinante's* pattern-recognition software worked to find meaning. Holden watched it for a minute, but his eyes quickly unfocused.

"Lieutenant Kelly died for this data," he said. "He left the ship while his mates were still fighting. Marines don't do that unless it matters."

Naomi shrugged and pointed at the screen with resignation.

"That's what was on his cube," she said. "Maybe there's something steganographic, but I don't have another dataset to compare it to."

Holden began tapping on his thigh, his pain and romantic failures momentarily forgotten.

"So let's say that this data is all that it is. There's nothing hidden. What would this information mean to the Martian navy?"

Naomi leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes in thought, one finger twisting and untwisting a curl of hair by her temple.

"It's mostly EM data, so lots of engine-signature stuff. Drive radiation is the best way to keep track of other ships. So that tells you where which ships were during the fight. Tactical data?"

"Maybe," Holden said. "Would that be important enough to send Kelly out with?"

Naomi took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Me either."

Something tapped at the edge of his conscious mind, asking to be let in.

"What was that thing with Amos all about?" he said.

"Amos?"

"Him showing up at the airlock with two guns when we arrived," he said.

"There was some trouble on our trip back to the ship."

"Trouble for who?" Holden asked. Naomi actually smiled at that.

"Some bad men didn't want us to hack the lockdown on the *Roci*. Amos talked it over with them. You didn't think it was because we were *waiting* for you, did you, sir?"

Was there a smile in her voice? A hint of coyness? Flirtation? He stopped himself from grinning.

"What did the *Roci* say about the data when you ran it?" Holden asked.

"Here," Naomi replied, and hit something on her panel. The screen began displaying long lists of data in text. "Lots of EM and light spectrum stuff, some leakage from damaged—"

Holden yelped. Naomi looked up at him.

"I'm such an idiot," Holden said.

"Granted. Elaborate?"

Holden touched the screen and began scrolling up and down through the data. He tapped one long list of numbers and letters and leaned back with a grin.

"There, that's it," he said.

"That's what?"

"Hull structure isn't the only recognition metric. It's the most accurate, but it's also got the shortest range and"—he gestured around him at the *Rocinante*—"is the easiest to fool. The next best method is drive signature. Can't mask your radiation and heat patterns. And they're easy to spot even from really far away."

Holden turned on the screen next to his chair and pulled up the ship's friend/foe database, then linked it to the data on Naomi's screen.

"That's what this message is, Naomi. It's telling Mars who killed the *Donnager* by showing them what the drive signature was."

"Then why not just say, 'So-and-so killed us,' in a nice easy-to-read text file?" Naomi asked, a skeptical frown on her face.

Holden leaned forward and paused, opened his mouth, then closed it and sat back again with a sigh.

"I don't know."

A hatch banged open with a hydraulic whine; then Naomi looked past Holden to the ladder and said, "Miller's coming up."

Holden turned to watch the detective finish the slow climb up from the sick bay deck. He looked like a plucked chicken, pink-gray skin stippled with gooseflesh. His paper gown went poorly with the hat.

"Uh, there's a lift," Holden said.

"Wish I'd known that," Miller replied, then dragged himself up onto the ops deck with a gasp. "We there yet?"

"Trying to figure out a mystery," Holden said.

"I hate mysteries," Miller said, then hauled himself to his feet and made his way to a chair.

"Then solve this one for us. You find out who murdered someone. You can't arrest them yourself, so you send the information to your partner. But instead of just sending the perp's name, you send your partner all the clues. Why?"

Miller coughed and scratched his chin. His eyes were fixed on something, like he was reading a screen Holden couldn't see.

"Because I don't trust myself. I want my partner to arrive at the same conclusion I did, without my biasing him. I give him the dots, see what it looks like when he connects 'em."

"Especially if guessing wrong has consequences," Naomi said.

"You don't like to screw up a murder charge," Miller said with a nod. "Looks unprofessional."

Holden's panel beeped at him.

"Shit, I know why they were careful," he said after reading his screen. "The *Roci* thinks those were standard light-cruiser engines built by the Bush Shipyards."

"They were Earth ships?" Naomi said. "But they weren't flying any colors, and... Son of a bitch!"

It was the first time Holden had ever heard her yell, and he understood. If UNN black ops ships had killed the *Donnager*, then that meant Earth was behind the whole thing. Maybe even killing the *Canterbury* in the first place. It would mean that Martian warships were killing Belters for no reason. Belters like Naomi.

Holden leaned forward and called up the comm display, then tapped out a general broadcast. Miller caught his breath.

"That button you just pressed doesn't do what I think it does, does it?" he said.

"I finished Kelly's mission for him," Holden said.

"I have no idea who the fuck Kelly is," Miller said, "but please tell me that his mission wasn't broadcasting that data to the solar system at large."

"People need to know what's going on," Holden said.

"Yes, they do, but maybe we should actually know what the hell is going on before we tell them," Miller replied, all the weariness gone from his voice. "How gullible *are* you?"

"Hey," Holden said, but Miller got louder.

"You found a Martian battery, right? So you told everyone in the solar system about it and started the single largest war in human history. Only turns out the Martians maybe weren't the ones that left it there. Then, a bunch of mystery ships kill the *Donnager*, which Mars blames on the Belt, only, dammit, the Belt didn't even know it was *capable* of killing a Martian battle cruiser."

Holden opened his mouth, but Miller grabbed a bulb of coffee Amos had left behind on the console and threw it at his head.

"Let me finish! And now you find some data that implicates Earth. First thing you do is blab it to the universe, so that Mars *and* the Belt drag Earth into this thing, making the largest war of all time even bigger. Are you seeing a pattern here?"

"Yes," Naomi said.

"So what do you think's going to happen?" Miller said. "This is how these people work! They made the *Canterbury* look like Mars. It wasn't. They made the *Donnager* look like the Belt. It wasn't. Now it looks like the whole damn thing's Earth? Follow the pattern. It probably isn't! You never, *never* put that kind of accusation out there until you know the score. You look. You listen. You're quiet, ferchrissakes, and when you know, *then* you can make your case."

The detective sat back, clearly exhausted. He was sweating. The deck was silent.

"You done?" Holden said.

Miller nodded, breathing heavily. "Think I might have strained something."

"I haven't accused anyone of doing anything," Holden said. "I'm not building a case. I just put the data out there. Now it's not a secret. They're doing something on Eros. They don't want it interrupted. With Mars and the Belt shooting at each other, everyone with the resources to help is busy elsewhere."

"And you just dragged Earth into it," Miller said.

"Maybe," Holden said. "But the killers *did* use ships that were built, at least in part, at Earth's orbital shipyards. Maybe someone will look into that. And *that's* the point. If everyone knows everything, nothing stays secret."

"Yeah, well," Miller said. Holden ignored him.

"Eventually, someone'll figure out the big picture. This kind of thing requires secrecy to function, so exposing all the secrets hurts them in the end. It's the only way this really, permanently stops."

Miller sighed, nodded to himself, took off his hat, and scratched his scalp.

"I was just going to put 'em out an airlock," Miller said.



BA834024112 wasn't much of an asteroid. Barely thirty meters across, it had long ago been surveyed and found completely devoid of useful or valuable minerals. It existed in the registry only to warn ships not to run into it. Julie had left it tethered to wealth measured in the billions when she flew her small shuttle to Eros.

Up close, the ship that had killed the *Scopuli* and stolen its crew looked like a shark. It was long and lean and utterly black, almost impossible to see against the backdrop of space with the naked eye. Its radar-deflecting curves gave it an aerodynamic look almost always lacking in space-going vessels. It made Holden's skin crawl, but it was beautiful.

"Motherfucker," Amos said under his breath as the crew clustered in the cockpit of the *Rocinante* to look at it.

"The *Roci* doesn't even see it, Cap," Alex said. "I'm pourin' ladar into it, and all we see is a slightly warmer spot on the asteroid."

"Like Becca saw just before the *Cant* died," Naomi said.

"Her shuttle's been launched, so I'm guessin' this is the right stealth ship someone left tied to a rock," Alex added. "Case there's more than one."

Holden tapped his fingers on the back of Alex's chair for a moment as he floated over the pilot's head.

"It's probably full of vomit zombies," Holden finally said.

"Want to go see?" said Miller.

"Oh yeah," Holden said.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Miller

The environment suit was better than Miller was used to. He'd only done a couple walks outside during his years on Ceres, and the Star Helix equipment had been old back then: thick corrugated joints, separable air-supply unit, gloves that left his hands thirty degrees colder than the rest of his body. The *Rocinante's* suits were military and recent, no bulkier than standard riot gear, with integrated life support that could probably keep fingers warm after a hand got shot off. Miller floated, one hand on a strap in the airlock, and flexed his fingers, watching the sharkskin pattern of the knuckle joints.

It didn't feel like enough.

"All right, Alex," Holden said. "We're in place. Have the *Roci* knock for us."

A deep, rumbling vibration shook them. Naomi put a hand against the airlock's curved wall to steady herself. Amos shifted forward to take point, a reactionless automatic rifle in his hands. When he bent his neck, Miller could hear the vertebrae cracking through his radio. It was the only way he could have heard it; they were already in vacuum.

"Okay, Captain," Alex said. "I've got a seal. The standard security override isn't working, so give me a second... to..."

"Problem?" Holden said.

"Got it. I've got it. We have a connection," Alex said. Then, a moment later: "Ah. It doesn't look like there's much to breathe over there."

"Anything?" Holden asked.

"Nope. Hard vacuum," Alex said. "Both her lock doors are open."

"All right, folks," Holden said, "keep an eye on your air supply. Let's go."

Miller took a long breath. The external airlock went from soft red to soft green. Holden slid it open, and Amos launched forward, the captain just behind him. Miller gestured to Naomi with a nod. *Ladies first.*

The connecting gantry was reinforced, ready to deflect enemy lasers or slow down slugs. Amos landed on the other ship as the hatch to the *Rocinante* closed behind them. Miller had a moment's vertigo, the ship before them suddenly clicking from *ahead* to *down* in his perception, as if they were falling into something.

"You all right?" Naomi asked.

Miller nodded, and Amos passed into the other ship's hatch. One by one, they went in.

The ship was dead. The lights coming off their environment suits played over the soft, almost streamlined curves of the bulkheads, the cushioned walls, the gray suit lockers. One locker was bent out of shape, like someone or something had forced its way out from within. Amos pushed off slow. Under normal circumstances, hard vacuum would have been assurance enough that nothing was about to jump out at them. Right now, Miller figured it was only even money.

"Whole place is shut down," Holden said.

"Might be backups in the engine room," Amos said.

"So the ass end of the ship from here," Holden said.

"Pretty much."

"Let's be careful," Holden said.

"I'm heading up to ops," Naomi said. "If there's anything running off battery, I can—"

"No, you aren't," Holden said. "We aren't splitting up the group until we know what we're looking at. Stay together."

Amos moved down, sinking into the darkness. Holden pushed off after him. Miller followed. He couldn't tell from Naomi's body language whether she was annoyed or relieved.

The galley was empty, but signs of struggle showed here and there. A chair with a bent leg. A long, jagged scratch down the wall where something sharp had flaked the paint. Two bullet holes set high along one bulkhead where a shot had gone wide. Miller put a hand out, grabbed one of the tables, and swung slowly.

"Miller?" Holden said. "Are you coming?"

"Look at this," Miller said.

The dark spill was the color of amber, flaky and shining like glass in his flashlight beam. Holden hovered closer.

"Zombie vomit?" Holden said.

"Think so."

"Well. I guess we're on the right ship. For some value of right."

The crew quarters hung silent and empty. They went through each of them, but there were no personal markings—no terminals, no pictures, no clues to the names of the men and women who had lived and breathed and presumably died on the ship. Even the captain's cabin was indicated only by a slightly larger bunk and the face of a locked safe.

There was a massive central compartment as high and wide as the hull of the *Rocinante*, the darkness dominated by twelve huge cylinders encrusted with narrow catwalks and scaffolds. Miller saw Naomi's expression harden.

"What are they?" Miller asked.

"Torpedo tubes," she said.

"Torpedo tubes?" he said. "Jesus *Christ*, how many are they packing? A million?"

"Twelve," she said. "Just twelve."

"Capital-ship busters," Amos said. "Built to pretty much kill whatever you're aiming at with the first shot."

"Something like the *Donnager*?" Miller asked.

Holden looked back at him, the glow of his heads-up display lighting his features.

"Or the *Canterbury*," he said.

The four of them passed between the wide black tubes in silence.

In the machine and fabrication shops, the signs of violence were more pronounced. There was blood on the floor and walls, along with wide swaths of the glassy gold resin that had once been vomit. A uniform lay in a ball. The cloth had been wadded and soaked in something before the cold of space had frozen it. Habits formed from years of walking through crime scenes put a dozen small things in place: the pattern of scratches on the floor and lift doors, the spatter of blood and vomit, the footprints. They all told the story.

"They're in engineering," Miller said.

"Who?" Holden said.

"The crew. Whoever was on the ship. All except that one," he said, gesturing at half a footprint that led toward the lift. "You see how her footprints are over the top of everything else. And there, where she stepped in that blood, it was already dry. Flaked instead of smearing."

"How you know it was a girl?" Holden asked.

"Because it was Julie," Miller said.

"Well, whoever's in there, they've been sucking vacuum for a long time," Amos said. "Want to go see?"

No one said yes, but they all floated forward. The hatch stood open. If the darkness beyond it seemed more solid, more ominous, more *personal* than the rest of the dead ship had, it was only

Miller's imagination playing tricks. He hesitated, trying to summon up the image of Julie, but she wouldn't come.

Floating into the engineering deck was like swimming into a cave. Miller saw the other flashlights playing over walls and panels, looking for live controls, or else controls that could come alive. He aimed his own beam into the body of the room, the dark swallowing it.

"We got batteries, Cap'n," Amos said. "And... looks like the reactor got shut down. Intentional."

"Think you can get it back up?"

"Want to run some diagnostics," Amos said. "There could be a reason they shut it off, and I don't want to find out the hard way."

"Good point."

"But I can at least get us... some... come *on*, you bastard."

All around the deck, blue-white lights flared up. The sudden brilliance blinded Miller for a half second. His vision returned with a sense of growing confusion. Naomi gasped, and Holden yelped. Something in the back of Miller's own mind started to shriek, and he forced it into silence. It was just a crime scene. They were only bodies.

Except they weren't.

The reactor stood before him, quiescent and dead. All around it, a layer of human flesh. He could pick out arms, hands with fingers splayed so wide they hurt to look at. The long snake of a spine curved, ribs fanning out like the legs of some perverse insect. He tried to make what he was seeing make sense. He'd seen men eviscerated before. He knew that the long, ropy swirl to the left of the thing were intestines. He could see where the small bowel widened to become a colon. The familiar shape of a skull looked out at him.

But then, among the familiar anatomy of death and dismemberment, there were other things: nautilus spirals, wide swaths of soft black filament, a pale expanse of something that might have been skin cut by a dozen gill-like vents, a half-formed limb that looked equally like an insect and a fetus without being either one. The frozen, dead flesh surrounded the reactor like the skin of an orange. The crew of the stealth ship. Maybe of the *Scopuli* as well.

All but Julie.

"Yeah," Amos said. "This could take a little longer than I was thinking, Cap."

"It's okay," Holden said. His voice on the radio sounded shaky. "You don't have to."

"It's no trouble. As long as none of *that* freaky shit broke the containment, reactor should boot up just fine."

"You don't mind being around... it?" Holden said.

"Honest, Cap'n, I'm not thinking about it. Give me twenty minutes, I'll tell you if we got power or if we have to patch a line over from the *Roci*."

"Okay," Holden said. And then again, his voice more solid: "Okay, but don't touch any of that."

"Wasn't going to," Amos said.

They floated back out through the hatch, Holden and Naomi and Miller coming last.

"Is that..." Naomi said, then coughed and started again. "Is that what's happening on Eros?"

"Probably," Miller said.

"Amos," Holden said. "Do you have enough battery power to light up the computers?"

There was a pause. Miller took a deep breath, the plastic-and-ozone scent of the suit's air system filling his nose.

"I think so," Amos said dubiously. "But if we can get the reactor up first..."

"Bring up the computers."

"You're the captain, Cap'n," Amos said. "Have it to you in five."

In silence, they floated up—back—to the airlock, and past it to the operations deck. Miller hung back, watching the way Holden's trajectory kept him near Naomi and then away from her.

Protective and head-shy both, Miller thought. Bad combination.

Julie was waiting in the airlock. Not at first, of course. Miller slid back into the space, his mind churning through everything he'd seen, just like it was a case. A normal case. His gaze drifted toward the broken locker. There was no suit in it. For a moment, he was back on Eros, in the apartment where Julie had died. There had been an environment suit there. And then Julie was there with him, pushing her way out of the locker.

What were you doing there? he thought.

"No brig," he said.

"What?" Holden said.

"I just noticed," Miller said. "Ship's got no brig. They aren't built to carry prisoners."

Holden made a low agreeing grunt.

"Makes you wonder what they were planning to do with the crew of the *Scopuli*," Naomi said. The tone of her voice meant she didn't wonder at all.

"I don't think they were," Miller said slowly. "This whole thing... they were improvising."

"Improvising?" Naomi said.

"Ship was carrying an infectious something or other without enough containment to contain it. Taking on prisoners without a brig to hold 'em in. They were making this up as they went along."

"Or they had to hurry," Holden said. "Something happened that made them hurry. But what they did on Eros must have taken months to arrange. Maybe years. So maybe something happened at the last minute?"

"Be interesting to know what," Miller said.

Compared to the rest of the ship, the ops deck looked peaceful. Normal. The computers had finished their diagnostics, screens glowing placidly. Naomi went to one, holding the back of the chair with one hand so the gentle touch of her fingers against the screen wouldn't push her backward.

"I'll do what I can here," she said. "You can check the bridge."

There was a pause that carried weight.

"I'll be fine," Naomi said.

"All right. I know you'll... I... C'mon, Miller."

Miller let the captain float ahead into the bridge. The screens there were spooling through diagnostics so standard Miller recognized them. It was a wider space than he'd imagined, with five stations with crash couches customized for other people's bodies. Holden strapped in at one. Miller took a slow turn around the deck. Nothing seemed out of place here—no blood, no broken chairs or torn padding. When it happened, the fight had been down near the reactor. He wasn't sure yet what that meant. He sat at what, under a standard layout, would have been the security station, and opened a private channel to Holden.

"Anything you're looking for in particular?"

"Briefings. Overviews," Holden said shortly. "Whatever's useful. You?"

"See if I can get into the internal monitors."

"Hoping to find...?"

"What Julie found," Miller said.

The security assumed that anyone sitting at the console had access to the low-level feeds. It still took half an hour to parse the command structure and query interface. Once Miller had that down, it wasn't hard. The time stamp on the log listed the feed as the day the *Scopuli* had gone missing. The security camera in the airlock bay showed the crew—Belters, most of them—being escorted in. Their captors were in armor, with faceplates lowered. Miller wondered if they'd meant to keep their identities secret. That would almost have suggested they were planning to keep the crew alive. Or maybe they were just wary of some last-minute resistance. The crew of the *Scopuli* weren't wearing environment suits or armor. A couple of them weren't even wearing uniforms.

But Julie was.

It was strange, watching her move. With a sense of dislocation, Miller realized that he'd never actually seen her in motion. All the pictures he'd had in his file back on Ceres had been stills. Now

here she was, floating with her chosen compatriots, her hair back out of her eyes, her jaw clamped. She looked very small surrounded by her crew and the men in armor. The little rich girl who'd turned her back on wealth and status to be with the downtrodden Belt. The girl who'd told her mother to sell the *Razorback*—the ship she'd loved—rather than give in to emotional blackmail. In motion, she looked a little different from the imaginary version he'd built of her—the way she pulled her shoulders back, the habit of reaching her toes toward the floor even in null g—but the basic image was the same. He felt like he was filling in blanks with the new details rather than reimagining the woman.

The guards said something—the security feed's audio was playing to vacuum—and the *Scopuli* crew looked aghast. Then, hesitantly, the captain started taking his uniform off. They were stripping the prisoners. Miller shook his head.

“Bad plan.”

“What?” Holden said.

“Nothing. Sorry.”

Julie wasn't moving. One of the guards moved toward her, his legs braced on the wall. Julie, who'd lived through being raped, maybe, or something as bad. Who'd studied jiu jitsu to feel safe afterward. Maybe they thought she was just being modest. Maybe they were afraid she was hiding a weapon under her clothes. Either way, they tried to force the point. One of the guards pushed her, and she latched on to his arm like her life depended on it. Miller winced when he saw the man's elbow bend the wrong way, but he also smiled.

That's my girl, he thought. Give 'em hell.

And she did. For almost forty seconds, the airlock bay was a battleground. Even some of the cowed *Scopuli* crew tried to join in. But then Julie didn't see a thick-shouldered man launch from behind her. Miller felt it when the gauntleted hand hammered Julie's temple. She wasn't out, but she was groggy. The men with guns stripped her with a cold efficiency, and when there were no weapons or comm devices, they handed her a jumpsuit and shoved her in a locker. The others, they led down into the ship. Miller matched time stamps and switched feeds.

The prisoners were taken to the galley, then bound to the tables. One of the guards spent a minute or so talking, but with his faceplate down, the only clues Miller had to the content of the sermon were the reactions of the crew—wide-eyed disbelief, confusion, outrage, and fear. The guard could have been saying anything.

Miller started skipping. A few hours, then a few more. The ship was under thrust, the prisoners actually sitting at the tables instead of floating near them. He flipped to other parts of the ship. Julie's locker was still closed. If he hadn't known better, he'd have assumed she was dead.

He skipped ahead.

One hundred and thirty-two hours later, the crew of the *Scopuli* grew a pair. Miller saw it in their bodies even before the violence started. He'd seen holding cells rise up before, and the prisoners had the same sullen-but-excited look. The feed showed the stretch of wall where he'd seen the bullet holes. They weren't there yet. They would be. A man came into the picture with a tray of food rations.

Here it comes, Miller thought.

The fight was short and brutal. The prisoners didn't stand a chance. Miller watched as they hauled one of them—a sandy-haired man—to the airlock and spaced him. The others were put in heavy restraints. Some wept. Some screamed. Miller skipped ahead.

It had to be in there someplace. The moment when it—whatever it was—got loose. But either it had happened in some unmonitored crew quarters or it had been there from the beginning. Almost exactly one hundred and sixty hours after Julie had gone into the locker, a man in a white jumper, eyes glassy and stance unsure, lurched out of the crew quarters and vomited on one of the guards.

“Fuck!” Amos shouted.

Miller was out of his chair before he knew what had happened. Holden was up too.

“Amos?” Holden said. “Talk to me.”

“Hold on,” Amos said. “Yeah, it’s okay, Cap’n. It’s just these fuckers stripped off a bunch of the reactor shielding. We’ve got her up, but I sucked down a few more rads than I’d have picked.”

“Get back to the *Roci*,” Holden said. Miller steadied himself against a wall, pushing back down toward the control stations.

“No offense, sir, but it ain’t like I’m about to start pissing blood or anything fun like that,” Amos said. “I got surprised more than anything. I start feeling itchy, I’ll head back over, but I can get some atmosphere for us by working out of the machine shop if you give me a few more minutes.”

Miller watched Holden’s face as the man struggled. He could make it an order; he could leave it be.

“Okay, Amos. But you start getting light-headed or anything—I mean *anything*—and you get over to the sick bay.”

“Aye, aye,” Amos said.

“Alex, keep an eye on Amos’ biomed feed from over there. Give us a heads-up if you see a problem,” Holden said on the general channel.

“Roger,” came Alex’s lazy drawl.

“You finding anything?” Holden asked Miller on their private channel.

“Nothing unexpected,” Miller said. “You?”

“Yeah, actually. Take a look.”

Miller pushed himself to the screen Holden had been working. Holden pulled himself back into the station and started pulling up feeds.

“I was thinking that someone had to go last,” Holden said. “I mean, there had to be someone who was the least sick when whatever it was got loose. So I went through the directory to see what activity was going on before the system went dead.”

“And?”

“There’s a whole bunch of activity that looks like it happened a couple days before the system shutdown, and then nothing for two solid days. And then a little spike. A lot of accessed files and system diagnostics. Then someone hacked the override codes to blow atmosphere.”

“It was Julie, then.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Holden said. “But one of the feeds she accessed was… Shit, where is it? It was right… Oh. Here. Watch this.”

The screen blinked, controls dropping to standby, and a high-res emblem, green and gold, came up. The corporate logo of Protogen, with a slogan Miller hadn’t seen before. *First. Fastest. Furthest.*

“What’s the time stamp on the file?” Miller asked.

“The original was created about two years ago,” Holden said. “This copy was burned eight months ago.”

The emblem faded, and a pleasant-faced man sitting at a desk took its place. He had dark hair, with just a scattering of gray at the temples, and lips that seemed used to smiling. He nodded at the camera. The smile didn’t reach his eyes, which were as empty as a shark’s.

Sociopath, Miller thought.

The man’s lips began moving soundlessly. Holden said, “Shit,” and hit a switch to have the audio transmitted to their suits. He rewound the video feed and started it over.

“Mr. Dresden,” the man said. “I would like to thank you and the members of the board for taking the time to review this information. Your support, both financial and otherwise, has been absolutely essential to the incredible discoveries we’ve seen on this project. While my team has been point man, as it were, Protogen’s tireless commitment to the advancement of science has made our work possible.

“Gentlemen, I will be frank. The Phoebe protomolecule has exceeded all our expectations. I believe it represents a genuinely game-changing technological breakthrough. I know that these kinds of corporate presentations are prone to hyperbole. Please understand that I have thought about this

carefully and chosen my words: Protogen can become the most important and powerful entity in the history of the human race. But it will require initiative, ambition, and bold action.”

“He’s talking about killing people,” Miller said.

“You’ve seen this already?” Holden said.

Miller shook his head. The feed changed. The man faded out, and an animation took his place. A graphic representation of the solar system. Orbits marked in wide swaths of color showed the plane of the ecliptic. The virtual camera swirled out from the inner planets, where Mr. Dresden and board members presumably were, and out toward the gas giants.

“For those of you on the board unfamiliar with the project, eight years ago, the first manned landing was made on Phoebe,” the sociopath said.

The animation zoomed in toward Saturn, rings and planet flying past in a triumph of graphic design over accuracy.

“A small ice moon, the assumption was that Phoebe would eventually be mined for water, much like the rings themselves. The Martian government commissioned a scientific survey more out of a sense of bureaucratic completeness than from expectation of economic gain. Core samples were taken, and when silicate anomalies raised flags, Protogen was approached as cosponsor of a long-term research facility.”

The moon itself—Phoebe—filled the frame, turning slowly to show all sides like a prostitute at a cheap brothel. It was a crater-marked lump, indistinguishable from a thousand other asteroids and planetesimals Miller had seen.

“Given Phoebe’s extra-ecliptical orbit,” the sociopath went on, “one theory has been that it was a body that originated in the Kuiper belt and had been captured by Saturn when it happened to pass through the solar system. The existence of complex silicon structures within the interior ice, along with suggestions of impact-resistant structures within the architecture of the body itself, have forced us to reevaluate this.

“Using analyses proprietary to Protogen and not yet shared with the Martian team, we have determined beyond any credible doubt that what you are seeing now is not a naturally formed planetesimal, but a weapon. Specifically, a weapon designed to carry its payload through the depths of interplanetary space and deliver it safely onto Earth two and one third billion years ago, when life itself was in its earliest stages. And the payload, gentlemen, is this.”

The display clicked to a graphic that Miller couldn’t quite parse. It looked like the medical text of a virus, but with wide, looping structures that were at once beautiful and improbable.

“The protomolecule first caught our interest for its ability to maintain its primary structure in a wide variety of conditions through secondary and tertiary changes. It also showed an affinity for carbon and silicon structures. Its activity suggested it was not in itself a living thing, but a set of free-floating instructions designed to adapt to and guide other replicating systems. Animal experiments suggest that its effects are not exclusive to simple replicators, but are, in fact, scalable.”

“Animal tests,” Miller said. “What, they dumped it on a cat?”

“The initial implication of this,” the sociopath went on, “is that a larger biosphere exists, of which our solar system is only a part, and that the protomolecule is an artifact of that environment. That alone, I think you must agree, would revolutionize human understanding of the universe. Let me assure you, it’s small beer. If accidents of orbital mechanics had not captured Phoebe, life as we know it would not presently exist. But something else would. The earliest cellular life on Earth would have been hijacked. Reprogrammed along lines contained within the structure of the protomolecule.”

The sociopath reappeared. For the first time, smile lines appeared around his eyes, like a parody of themselves. Miller felt a visceral hatred growing in his gut and knew himself well enough to recognize it for what it was. Fear.

“Protogen is in a position to take sole possession of not only the first technology of genuinely extraterrestrial origin, but also a prefabricated mechanism for the manipulation of living systems and the first clues as to the nature of the larger—I will call it *galactic*—biosphere. Directed by human

hands, the applications of this are limitless. I believe that the opportunity now facing not only us but life itself is as profound and transformative as anything that has ever happened. And, further, the control of this technology will represent the base of all political and economic power from now on.

"I urge you to consider the technical details I have outlined in the attached. Moving quickly to understand the programming, mechanism, and intent of the protomolecule, as well as its direct application to human beings, will mark the difference between a Protogen-led future and being left behind. I urge immediate and decisive action to take exclusive control of the protomolecule and move forward with large-scale testing.

"Thank you for your time and attention."

The sociopath smiled again, and the corporate logo reappeared. *First. Fastest. Furthest.* Miller's heart was racing.

"Okay. All right," he said. And then: "Fuck *me*."

"Protogen, protomolecule," Holden said. "They had no idea what it does, but they slapped their label on it like they'd made it. They found an alien weapon, and all they could think to do was *brand* it."

"There's reason to think these boys are pretty impressed with themselves," Miller replied with a nod.

"Now, I'm not a scientist or anything," Holden said, "but it seems to me like taking an *alien supervirus* and dropping it into a space station would be a bad idea."

"It's been two years," Miller said. "They've been doing tests. They've been... I don't know what the hell they've been doing. But Eros is what they decided on. And everyone knows what happened on Eros. The other side did it. No research and recovery ships because they're all fighting each other or guarding something. The war? It's a distraction."

"And Protogen is doing... what?"

"Seeing what their toy does when you take it out for a spin is my guess," Miller said.

They were silent for a long moment. Holden spoke first.

"So you take a company that seems to be lacking an institutional conscience, that has enough government research contracts to almost be a privately run branch of the military. How far will they go for the holy grail?"

"First, fastest, furthest," Miller replied.

"Yeah."

"Guys," Naomi said, "you should come down here. I think I've got something."

Chapter Thirty-Five: Holden

I've found the comm logs," Naomi said as Holden and Miller drifted into the room behind her.

Holden put a hand on her shoulder, pulled it back, and hated that he'd pulled back. A week earlier she'd have been fine with a simple gesture of affection like that, and he wouldn't have been afraid of her reaction. He regretted the new distance between them only slightly less than he would have regretted not saying anything at all. He wanted to tell her that.

Instead, he said, "Find anything good?"

She tapped the screen and pulled up the log.

"They were hard-core about comm discipline," she said, pointing at the long list of dates and times. "Nothing ever went out on radio, everything was tightbeam. And everything was doublespeak, lots of obvious code phrases."

Miller's mouth moved inside his helmet. Holden tapped on his face shield. Miller rolled his eyes in disgust and then chinned the comm link to the general channel.

"Sorry. Don't spend a lot of time in suits," he said. "What've we got that's good?"

"Not much. But the last communication was in plain English," she said, then tapped the last line on the list.

THOTH STATION

CREW DEGENERATING. PROJECTING 100% CASUALTIES. MATERIALS
SECURED. STABILIZING COURSE AND SPEED. VECTOR DATA TO FOLLOW.
EXTREME CONTAMINATION HAZARD FOR ENTRY TEAMS.

CPT. HIGGINS

Holden read it several times, imagining Captain Higgins watching the infection spread through his crew, helpless to stop it. His people vomiting all over in a vacuum-sealed metal box, even one molecule of the substance on your skin a virtual death sentence. Black filament-covered tendrils erupting from their eyes and mouths. And then that... soup that covered the reactor. He let himself shudder, grateful that Miller wouldn't see it through the atmosphere suit.

"So this Higgins fella realizes his crew is turning into vomit zombies and sends a last message to his bosses, right?" Miller said, breaking into Holden's reverie. "What's this stuff about vector data?"

"He knew they'd all be dead, so he was letting his people know how to catch the ship," Holden replied.

"But they didn't, because it's here, because Julie took control and flew it somewhere else," Miller said. "Which means they're looking for it, right?"

Holden ignored that and put his hand back on Naomi's shoulder with what he hoped was companionable casualness.

"We have tightbeam messages and the vector info," he said. "Are they all going to the same place?"

“Sort of,” she said, nodding with her right hand. “Not the same place, but all to what appear to be points in the Belt. But based on the changes in direction and the times they were sent, to one point in the Belt that is moving around, and not in a stable orbit either.”

“A ship, then?”

Naomi gave another nod.

“Probably,” she said. “I’ve been playing with the locations, and I can’t find anything in the registry that looks likely. No stations or inhabited rocks. A ship would make sense. But—”

Holden waited for Naomi to finish, but Miller leaned forward impatiently.

“But what?” he said.

“But how did they know where it would be?” she replied. “I have no incoming comms in the log. If a ship was moving around randomly in the Belt, how’d they know where to send these messages?”

Holden squeezed her shoulder, lightly enough that she probably didn’t even feel it in the heavy environment suit, then pushed off and allowed himself to drift toward the ceiling.

“So it’s not random,” he said. “They had some sort of map of where this thing would be at the time they sent the laser comms. Could be one of their stealth ships.”

Naomi turned around in her chair to look up at him.

“Could be a station,” she said.

“It’s the lab,” Miller broke in. “They’re running an experiment on Eros, they need the white coats nearby.”

“Naomi,” Holden said. “ ‘Materials secured.’ There’s a safe in the captain’s quarters that’s still locked down. Think you can get it open?”

Naomi gave a one-handed shrug.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe. Amos could probably blast it open with some of the explosives we found in that big box of weapons.”

Holden laughed.

“Well,” he said. “Since it’s probably full of little vials of nasty alien viruses, I’m going to nix the blasting option.”

Naomi shut down the comm log and pulled up a general ship’s systems menu.

“I can look around and see if the computer has access to the safe,” she said. “Try to open it that way. It might take some time.”

“Do what you can,” Holden said. “We’ll get out of your hair.”

Holden pushed himself off the ceiling and over to the ops compartment hatch, then pulled himself through, into the corridor beyond. A few moments later, Miller followed. The detective planted his feet on the deck with magnetic boots, then stared at Holden, waiting.

Holden floated down to the deck next to him.

“What do you think?” Holden asked. “Protogen being the whole thing? Or is this another one where it looks like them, so it isn’t?”

Miller was silent for the space of two long breaths.

“This one smells like the real thing,” Miller said. He sounded almost grudging.

Amos pulled himself up the crew ladder from below, dragging a large metal case behind him.

“Hey, Cap’n,” he said. “I found a whole case of fuel pellets for the reactor in the machine shop. We’ll probably want to take these with us.”

“Good work,” Holden said, holding up one hand to let Miller know to wait. “Go ahead and take those across. Also, I need you to work up a plan for scuttling this ship.”

“Wait, what?” Amos said. “This thing is worth a *jillion* bucks, Captain. Stealth missile ship? The OPA would sell their grandmothers for this thing. And six of those tubes still have fish in them. Capital-ship busters. You could slag a small moon with those. Forget their grannies, the OPA would pimp their daughters for that gear. Why the fuck would we blow it up?”

Holden stared at him in disbelief.

“Did you forget what’s in the engine room?” he asked.

“Hell, Cap,” Amos snorted. “That shit is all frozen. Couple hours with a torch and I can chop it up and chuck it out the airlock. Good to go.”

The mental image of Amos hacking the melted bodies of the ship’s former crew apart with a plasma torch and then cheerfully hurling the chunks out an airlock tipped Holden over the edge into full-fledged nausea. The big mechanic’s ability just to ignore anything that he didn’t want to notice probably came in handy while he was crawling around in tight and greasy engine compartments. His ability to shrug off the horrible mutilation of several dozen people threatened to change Holden’s disgust into anger.

“Forgetting the mess,” he said, “and the very real possibility of infection by what *made* that mess, there is also the fact that someone is desperately searching for this very expensive and very stealthy ship, and so far *Alex can’t find the ship that’s looking.*”

He stopped talking and nodded at Amos while the mechanic mulled that over. He could see Amos’ broad face working as he put it together in his head. *Found a stealth ship. Other people looking for stealth ship. We can’t see the other people looking for it.*

Shit.

Amos’ face went pale.

“Right,” he said. “I’ll set the reactor up to slag her.” He looked down at the time on his suit’s forearm display. “Shit, we’ve been here too long. Better get the lead out.”

“Better had,” Miller agreed.



Naomi was good. *Very* good. Holden had discovered this when he’d signed on with the *Canterbury*, and over the course of years, he’d added it to his list of facts, along with *space is cold* and *the direction of gravity is down*. When something stopped working on the water hauler, he’d tell Naomi to fix it, and then never think of it again. Sometimes she’d claim not to be able to fix something, but it was always a negotiating tactic. A short conversation would lead to a request for spare parts or an additional crewman hired on at the next port, and that would be that. There was no problem that involved electronics or spaceship parts she couldn’t solve.

“I can’t open the safe,” she said.

She floated next to the safe in the captain’s quarters, one foot resting lightly on his bunk to stabilize herself as she gestured. Holden stood on the floor with his boot mags on. Miller was in the hatchway to the corridor.

“What would you need?” Holden asked.

“If you won’t let me blast it or cut it, I can’t open it.”

Holden shook his head, but Naomi either didn’t see it or ignored him.

“The safe is designed to open when a very specific pattern of magnetic fields is played across that metal plate on the front,” she said. “Someone has a key designed to do that, but that key isn’t on this ship.”

“It’s at that station,” Miller said. “He wouldn’t send it there if they couldn’t open it.”

Holden stared at the wall safe for a moment, his fingers tapping on the bulkhead beside it.

“What’re the chances cutting it sets off a booby trap?” he said.

“Fucking excellent, Cap,” Amos said. He was listening in from the torpedo bay as he hacked the small fusion reactor that powered one of the six remaining torpedoes to go critical. Working on the ship’s main reactor was too dangerous with the shielding stripped off.

“Naomi, I really want that safe and the research notes and samples it contains,” Holden said.

“You don’t know that’s what’s in there,” Miller said, then laughed. “No, of course that’s what’s in there. But it won’t help us if we get blown up or, worse, if some piece of goo-coated shrapnel makes a hole in our nice suits.”

"I'm taking it," Holden replied, then pulled a piece of chalk from his suit's pocket and drew a line around the safe on the bulkhead. "Naomi, cut a small hole in the bulkhead and see if there's anything that would stop us from just cutting the whole damned thing out and taking it with us."

"We'd have to take out half the wall."

"Okay."

Naomi frowned, then shrugged, then smiled and nodded with one hand.

"All right, then," she said. "Thinking of taking it to Fred's people?"

Miller laughed again, a dry humorless rasp that made Holden uneasy. The detective had been watching the video of Julie Mao's fight with her captors over and over again while they'd waited on Naomi and Amos to finish their work. It gave Holden the disquieting feeling that Miller was storing the footage in his head. Fuel for something he planned to do later.

"Mars would give you your lives back in exchange for this," Miller said. "I hear Mars is nice if you're rich."

"Fuck rich," Amos said with a grunt as he worked on something below. "They'd build statues of us."

"We have an agreement with Fred to let him outbid any other contracts we take," Holden said.

"Of course, this isn't really a contract per se..."

Naomi smiled and winked at Holden.

"So what is it, sir?" she said, her voice faintly mocking. "OPA heroes? Martian billionaires? Start your own biotech firm? What are we doing here?"

Holden pushed away from the safe and kicked out toward the airlock and the cutting torch that waited there with their other tools.

"I don't know yet," he said. "But it sure feels nice to have choices again."



Amos pushed the button again. No new stars flared in the dark. The radiation and infrared sensors remained quiet.

"There's supposed to be an explosion, right?" Holden asked.

"Fuck, yes," Amos said, then pushed the button on the black box in his hand a third time. "This isn't an exact science or anything. Those missile drives are as simple as it gets. Just a reactor with one wall missing. Can't exactly predict..."

"It isn't rocket science," Holden said with a laugh.

"What?" Amos asked, ready to be angry if he was being mocked.

"You know, 'it isn't rocket science,'" Holden said. "Like 'it isn't hard.' You're a rocket scientist, Amos. For real. You work on fusion reactors and starship drives for a living. Couple hundred years ago, people would have been lining up to give you their children for what you know."

"What the fu—" Amos started, but stopped when a new sun flared outside the cockpit window, then faded quickly. "See? Fucking told you it would work."

"Never doubted it," Holden said, then slapped Amos on one meaty shoulder and headed aft down the crew ladder.

"What the fuck was that about?" Amos asked no one in particular as Holden drifted away.

He headed through the ops deck. Naomi's chair was empty. He'd ordered her to get some sleep. Strapped down to loops inset in the deck was the stealth ship's safe. It looked bigger cut out of the wall. Black and imposingly solid. The kind of container in which one kept the end of the solar system.

Holden floated over to it and quietly said, "Open sesame."

The safe ignored him, but the deck hatch opened and Miller pulled himself up into the compartment. His environment suit had been traded in for a stale-smelling blue jumpsuit and his

ever-present hat. There was something about the look on his face that made Holden uncomfortable. Even more so than the detective usually made him.

“Hey,” Holden said.

Miller just nodded and pulled himself over to one of the workstations, then buckled in to one of the chairs.

“We decided on a destination yet?” he asked.

“No. I’m having Alex run the numbers on a couple of possibilities, but I haven’t made up my mind.”

“Been watching the news at all?” the detective asked.

Holden shook his head, then moved over to a chair on the other side of the compartment. Something in Miller’s face was chilling his blood.

“No,” he said. “What happened?”

“You don’t hedge, Holden. I admire that about you, I guess.”

“Just tell me,” Holden said.

“No, I mean it. A lot of people claim to believe in things. ‘Family is most important,’ but they’ll screw a fifty-dollar hooker on payday. ‘Country first,’ but they cheat on their taxes. Not you, though. You say everyone should know everything, and by God, you put your money where your mouth is.”

Miller waited for him to say something, but Holden didn’t know what. This speech had the feel of something the detective had prepared ahead of time. Might as well let him finish it.

“So Mars finds out that maybe Earth’s been building ships on the side, ones with no flag on them. Some of them might have killed a Martian flagship. I bet Mars calls up to check. I mean, it’s the Earth-Mars Coalition Navy, one big happy hegemony. Been policing the solar system together for almost a hundred years. Commanding officers are practically sleeping together. So it must be a mistake, right?”

“Okay,” Holden said, waiting.

“So Mars calls,” Miller said. “I mean, I don’t know for sure, but I bet that’s how it starts. A call from some bigwig on Mars to some bigwig on Earth.”

“Seems reasonable,” Holden said.

“What d’you think Earth says back?”

“I don’t know.”

Miller reached over and flipped on one of the screens, then pulled up a file with his name on it, date stamped from less than an hour before. A recording of video from a Martian news source, showing the night sky through a Martian dome. Streaks and flashes fill the sky. The ticker across the bottom of the feed says that Earth ships in orbit around Mars suddenly and without warning fired on their Martian counterparts. The streaks in the sky are missiles. The flashes are ships dying.

And then a massive white flare turns the Martian night into day for a few seconds, and the crawl says that the Deimos deep radar station has been destroyed.

Holden sat and watched the video display the end of the solar system in vivid color and with expert commentary. He kept waiting for the streaks of light to begin descending on the planet itself, for the domes to fly apart in nuclear fire, but it seemed someone had kept some measure of restraint, and the battle remained in the sky.

It couldn’t stay that way forever.

“You’re telling me that I did this,” Holden said. “That if I hadn’t broadcast that data, those ships would still be alive. Those people.”

“That, yeah. And that if the bad guys wanted to keep people from watching Eros, it just worked.”

Chapter Thirty-Six: Miller

The war stories flowed in. Miller watched the feeds five at a time, subscreens crowding the face of his terminal. Mars was shocked, amazed, reeling. The war between Mars and the Belt—the biggest, most dangerous conflict in the history of mankind—was suddenly a sideshow. The reactions of the talking heads of Earth security forces ran the gamut from calm, rational discussion of preemptive defense to foaming-at-the-mouth denunciations of Mars as a pack of baby-raping animals. The attack on Deimos had turned the moon into a slowly spreading ring of gravel in the moon's old orbit, a smudge on the Martian sky, and with that, the game had changed again.

Miller watched for ten hours as the attack became the blockade. The Martian navy, spread throughout the system, was turning home under heavy burn. The OPA feeds were calling it a victory, and maybe someone thought that was true. The pictures came through from the ships, from the sensor arrays. Dead warships, their sides ripped open by high-energy explosions, spinning out into their irregular orbital graves. Medical bays like the *Roci's* filled with boys and girls half his age bleeding, burning, dying. Each cycle, new footage came in, new details of death and carnage. And each time some new clip appeared, he sat forward, hand on his mouth, waiting for the word to come. The one event that would signal the end of it all.

But it hadn't come yet, and every hour that didn't bring it gave another sliver of hope that maybe, *maybe* it wasn't going to happen.

"Hey," Amos said. "You slept at all?"

Miller looked up, his neck stiff. Red creases of his pillow still on his cheek and forehead, the mechanic stood in the open doorway of Miller's cabin.

"What?" Miller said. Then: "Yeah, no. I've been... watching."

"Anyone drop a rock?"

"Not yet. It's all still orbital or higher."

"What kind of half-assed apocalypse are they running down there?" Amos said.

"Give 'em a break. It's their first."

The mechanic shook his broad head, but Miller could see the relief under the feigned disgust. As long as the domes were still standing on Mars, as long as the critical biosphere of Earth wasn't in direct threat, humanity wasn't dead. Miller had to wonder what they were hoping for out in the Belt, whether they'd managed to talk themselves into believing that the rough ecological pockets of the asteroids would sustain life indefinitely.

"You want a beer?" Amos asked.

"You're having beer for breakfast?"

"Figure it's dinner for you," Amos said.

The man was right. Miller needed sleep. He hadn't managed more than a catnap since they'd scuttled the stealth ship, and that had been plagued by strange dreams. He yawned at the thought of yawning, but the tension in his gut said he was more likely to spend the day watching newsfeeds than resting.

"It's probably breakfast again," Miller said.

"Want some beer for breakfast?" Amos asked.

"Sure."

Walking through the *Rocinante* felt surreal. The quiet hum of the air recyclers, the softness of the air. The journey out to Julie's ship was a haze of pain medication and sickness. The time on Eros before that was a nightmare that wouldn't fade. To walk through the spare, functional corridors, thrust gravity holding him gently to the floor, with very little chance of anyone trying to kill him felt suspicious. When he imagined Julie walking with him, it wasn't so bad.

As he ate, his terminal chimed, the automatic reminder for another blood flush. He stood, adjusted his hat, and headed off to let the needles and pressure injectors do their worst. The captain was already there and hooked into a station when Miller arrived.

Holden looked like he'd slept, but not well. There weren't the bruise-dark marks under his eyes that Miller had, but his shoulders were tense, his brow on the edge of furrowed. Miller wondered whether he'd been a little too hard on the guy. *I told you so* could be an important message, but the burden of innocent death, of the chaos of a failing civilization might also be too much for one man to carry.

Or maybe he was still mooning over Naomi.

Holden raised the hand that wasn't encased in medical equipment.

"Morning," Miller said.

"Hey."

"Decided where we're going yet?"

"Not yet."

"Getting harder and harder to get to Mars," Miller said, easing himself into the familiar embrace of the medical station. "If that's what you're aiming for, you'd better do it soon."

"While there's still a Mars, you mean?"

"For instance," Miller agreed.

The needles snaked out on gently articulated armatures. Miller looked at the ceiling, trying not to tense up as the lines forced their way into his veins. There was a moment's stinging, then a low, dull ache, and then numbness. The display above him announced the state of his body to doctors who were watching young soldiers die miles above Olympus Mons.

"Do you think they'd stop?" Holden asked. "I mean, Earth has got to be doing this because Protogen owns some generals or senators or something, right? It's all because they want to be the only ones who have this thing. If Mars has it too, Protogen doesn't have a reason to fight."

Miller blinked. Before he could pick his answer—*They'd try to annihilate Mars completely, or It's gone too far for that, or Exactly how naive are you, Captain?*—Holden went on.

"Screw it. We've got the datafiles. I'm going to broadcast them."

Miller's reply was as easy as reflex.

"No, you aren't."

Holden propped himself up, storm clouds in his expression.

"I appreciate that you might have a reasonable difference of opinion," he said, "but this is still my ship. You're a passenger."

"True," Miller said. "But you have a hard time shooting people, and you are going to have to shoot me before you send that thing out."

"I'm *what?*"

The new blood flowed into Miller's system like a tickle of ice water crawling toward his heart. The medical monitors shifted to a new pattern, counting up the anomalous cells as they hit its filters.

"You are going to have to shoot me," Miller said, slowly this time. "Twice now you've had the choice of whether or not to break the solar system, and both times you've screwed it up. I don't want to see you strike out."

"I think you may have an exaggerated idea of how much influence the second-in-command of a long-distance water hauler actually has. Yes, there's a war. And yes, I was there when it started up. But the Belt has hated the inner planets since a long time before the *Cant* was attacked."

"You've got the inner planets divided up too," Miller said.

Holden tilted his head.

"Earth has always hated Mars," Holden said like he was reporting that water was wet. "When I was in the navy, we ran projections for this. Battle plans if Earth and Mars ever really got into it. Earth loses. Unless they hit first, hit hard, and don't let up, Earth just plain loses."

Maybe it was distance. Maybe it was a failure of imagination. Miller had never seen the inner planets as divided.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"They're the colony, but they have all the best toys and everyone knows it," Holden said. "Everything that's happening out there right now has been building up for a hundred years. If it hadn't been there to start with, this couldn't have happened."

"That's your defense? 'Not my powder keg; I just brought the match'?"

"I'm not making a defense," Holden said. His blood pressure and heart rate were spiking.

"We've been through this," Miller said. "So let me just ask, why is it you think this time will be different?"

The needles in Miller's arm seemed to heat up almost to the point of being painful. He wondered if that was normal, if every blood flush he had was going to feel the same way.

"This time is different," Holden said. "All the crap that's going on out there is what happens when you have imperfect information. Mars and the Belt wouldn't have been going after each other in the first place if they'd known what we know now. Earth and Mars wouldn't be shooting each other if everyone knew the fight was being engineered. The problem isn't that people know too much, it's that they don't know enough."

Something hissed and Miller felt a wave of chemical relaxation swim through him. He resented it, but there was no calling the drugs back.

"You can't just throw information at people," Miller said. "You have to know what it *means*. What it's going to *do*. There was a case back on Ceres. Little girl got killed. For the first eighteen hours, we were all sure Daddy did it. He was a felon. A drunk. He was the last one who saw her breathing. All the classic signs. Hour nineteen, we get a tip. Turned out Daddy owed a lot of money to one of the local syndicates. All of a sudden, things are more complicated. We have more suspects. Do you think if I'd been broadcasting everything I knew, Daddy would still have been alive when the tip came? Or would someone have put it all together and done the obvious thing?"

Miller's medical station chimed. Another new cancer. He ignored it. Holden's cycle was just finishing, the redness of his cheeks speaking as much to the fresh, healthy blood in his body as to his emotional state.

"That's the same ethos they have," Holden said.

"Who?"

"Protogen. You may be on different sides, but you're playing the same game. If everyone said what they knew, none of this would have happened. If the first lab tech on Phoebe who saw something weird had gotten on his system and said, 'Hey, everyone! Look, this is weird,' none of this would have happened."

"Yeah," Miller said, "because telling everyone there's an alien virus that wants to kill them all is a great way to maintain calm and order."

"Miller," Holden said. "I don't mean to panic you, but there's an alien virus. And it wants to kill everyone."

Miller shook his head and smiled like Holden had said something funny. "So look, maybe I can't point a gun at you and make you do the right thing. But lemme ask you something. Okay?"

"Fine," Holden said. Miller leaned back. The drugs were making his eyelids heavy.

"What happens?" Miller said.

There was a long pause. Another chime from the medical system. Another rush of cold through Miller's abused veins.

“What happens?” Holden repeated. It occurred to Miller he could have been more specific. He forced his eyes open again.

“You broadcast everything we’ve got. What happens?”

“The war stops. People go after Protogen.”

“There’s some holes in that, but let it go. What happens after that?”

Holden was quiet for a few heartbeats.

“People start going after the Phoebe bug,” he said.

“They start experimenting. They start fighting for it. If that little bastard’s as valuable as Protogen thinks, you can’t stop the war. All you can do now is change it.”

Holden frowned, angry lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes. Miller watched a little piece of the man’s idealism die and was sorry that it gave him joy.

“So what happens if we get to Mars?” Miller went on, his voice low. “We trade out the protomolecule for more money than any of us have ever seen. Or maybe they just shoot you. Mars just wins against Earth. And the Belt. Or you go to the OPA, who are the best hope the Belt has of independence, and they’re a bunch of crazy zealots, half of ’em thinking we can actually sustain out there without Earth. And trust me, they’ll probably shoot you too. Or you just tell everyone everything and pretend that however it comes down, you kept your hands clean.”

“There’s a right thing to do,” Holden said.

“You don’t have a right thing, friend,” Miller said. “You’ve got a whole plateful of maybe a little less wrong.”

Holden’s blood flush finished. The captain pulled the needles out of his arm and let the thin metallic tentacles retract. As he rolled down his sleeve, the frown softened.

“People have a right to know what’s going on,” Holden said. “Your argument boils down to you not thinking people are smart enough to figure out the right way to use it.”

“Has anyone used anything you’ve broadcast as something besides an excuse to shoot someone they already didn’t like? Giving them a new reason won’t stop them killing each other,” Miller said. “You started these wars, Captain. Doesn’t mean you can stop them. But you have to try.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Holden said. The distress in his voice could have been anger. It could have been prayer.

Something in Miller’s belly shifted, some inflamed organ calming enough to slip back into place. He hadn’t been aware he’d felt wrong until he suddenly felt right again.

“You ask yourself *what happens*,” Miller said. “Ask yourself what Naomi’d do.”

Holden barked out a laugh. “Is that how you make your decisions?”

Miller let his eyes close. Juliette Mao was there, sitting on the couch at her old apartment on Ceres. Fighting the crew of the stealth ship to a standstill. Burst open by the alien virus on the floor of her shower stall.

“Something like it,” Miller said.



The report from Ceres, a break from the usual competing press releases, came that night. The governing council of the OPA announced that a ring of Martian spies had been rooted out. The video feed showed the bodies floating out an industrial airlock in what looked like the old docks in sector six. At a distance, the victims seemed almost peaceful. The feed cut to the head of security. Captain Shaddid looked older. Harder.

“We regret the necessity of this action,” she said to everyone everywhere. “But in the cause of freedom, there can be no compromise.”

That’s what it’s come to, Miller thought, rubbing a hand across his chin. *Pogroms after all. Cut off just a hundred more heads, just a thousand more heads, just ten thousand more heads, and then we’ll be free.*

A soft alert sounded, and a moment later, gravity shifted a few degrees to Miller's left. Course change. Holden had made a decision.

He found the captain sitting alone and staring at a monitor in ops. The glow lit his face from below, casting shadows up into his eyes. The captain looked older too.

"You make the broadcast?" Miller asked.

"Nope. We're just one ship. We tell everyone what this thing is and that we've got it, we'll be dead before Protogen."

"Probably true," Miller said, sitting at an empty station with a grunt. The gimbaled seat shifted silently. "We're going someplace."

"I don't trust them with it," Holden said. "I don't trust any of them with that safe."

"Probably smart."

"I'm going to Tycho Station. There's someone there I... trust."

"Trust?"

"Don't actively distrust."

"Naomi think it's the right thing?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask her. But I think so."

"Close enough," Miller said.

Holden looked up from the monitor for the first time.

"You know the right thing?" Holden said.

"Yeah."

"What is it?"

"Throw that safe into a long collision course with the sun and find a way to make sure no one ever, ever goes to Eros or Phoebe again," Miller said. "Pretend none of this ever happened."

"So why aren't we doing that?"

Miller nodded slowly. "How do you throw away the holy grail?"

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Holden

Alex had the *Rocinante* running at three-quarters of a g for two hours while the crew prepared and ate dinner. He would run it back up to three when the break was over, but in the meantime, Holden enjoyed standing on his own two legs at something not too far off from Earth gravity. It was a little heavy for Naomi and Miller, but neither of them complained. They both understood the need for haste.

Once the gravity had dropped from the crush of high acceleration, the whole crew quietly gathered in the galley and started making dinner. Naomi blended together fake eggs and fake cheese. Amos cooked tomato paste and the last of their fresh mushrooms into a red sauce that actually smelled like the real thing. Alex, who had the duty watch, had forwarded ship ops down to a panel in the galley and sat at a table next to it, spreading the fake cheese paste and red sauce onto flat noodles in hopes that the end result would approximate lasagna. Holden had oven duty and had spent the lasagna prep time baking frozen lumps of dough into bread. The smell in the galley was not entirely unlike actual food.

Miller had followed the crew into the galley but seemed uncomfortable asking for something to do. Instead, he set the table and then sat down at it and watched. He wasn't exactly avoiding Holden's eyes, but he wasn't going out of his way to catch his attention. By unspoken mutual agreement, no one had any of the news channels on. Holden was sure everyone would rush back to check the current state of the war as soon as dinner was over, but for now they all worked in companionable silence.

When the prep was done, Holden switched off bread duty and on to moving lasagna-filled cookware into and out of the oven. Naomi sat down next to Alex and began a quiet conversation with him about something she'd seen on the ops screen. Holden split his time between watching her and watching the lasagna. She laughed at something Alex said and unconsciously twisted one finger into her hair. Holden felt his belly tighten a notch.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Miller staring at him. When he looked, the detective had turned away, a hint of a smile on his face. Naomi laughed again. She had one hand on Alex's arm, and the pilot was blushing and talking as fast as his silly Martian drawl would let him. They looked like friends. That both made Holden happy and filled him with jealousy. He wondered if Naomi would ever be his friend again.

She caught him looking and gave him a conspiratorial wink that probably would have made a lot of sense if he'd been able to hear what Alex was saying. He smiled and winked back, grateful just to be included in the moment. A sizzling sound from inside the oven called his attention back. The lasagna was beginning to bubble and run over the sides of the dishes.

He pulled on his oven mitts and opened the door.

"Soup's on," he said, pulling the first of the dishes and putting it on the table.

"That's mighty ugly-looking soup," Amos said.

"Uh, yeah," Holden said. "It's just something Mother Tamara used to say when she'd finished cooking. Not sure where it comes from."

"One of your *three* mothers did the cooking? How traditional," Naomi said with a smirk.

"Well, she split it pretty evenly with Caesar, one of my fathers."

Naomi smiled at him, a genuine smile now.

"It sounds really nice," she said. "Big family like that."

"Yeah, it really was," he replied, a vision in his head of nuclear fire tearing apart the Montana farmhouse he'd grown up in, his family blowing into ash. If it happened, he was sure Miller would be there to let him know it was his fault. He wasn't sure he'd be able to argue anymore.

As they ate, Holden felt a slow release of tension in the room. Amos belched loudly, then reacted to the chorus of protests by doing it again even more loudly. Alex retold the joke that had made Naomi laugh. Even Miller got into the mood and told a long and increasingly improbable story about hunting down a black market cheese operation that ended in a gunfight with nine naked Australians in an illegal brothel. By the finish of the story, Naomi was laughing so hard she'd drooled on her shirt, and Amos kept repeating "No fucking way!" like a mantra.

The story was amusing enough, and the detective's dry delivery suited it well, but Holden only half listened. He watched his crew, saw the tension falling from their faces and shoulders. He and Amos were both from Earth, though if he had to guess, he'd say Amos had forgotten about his home world the first time he'd shipped out. Alex was from Mars and clearly still loved it. One bad mistake on either side and both planets might be radioactive rubble by the end of dinner. But right now they were just friends having a meal together. It was right. It was what Holden had to keep fighting for.

"I actually remember that cheese shortage," Naomi said once Miller had stopped talking. "Belt-wide. That was your fault?"

"Yeah, well, if they'd only been sneaking cheese past the government auditors, we wouldn't have had a problem," Miller said. "But they had this habit of shooting the other cheese smugglers. Makes the cops notice. Bad business."

"Over fucking *cheese*?" Amos said, tossing his fork onto his plate with a clack. "Are you serious? I mean, drugs or gambling or something. But cheese?"

"Gambling's legal, most places," Miller said. "And a chemistry class dropout can cook up just about any drug you like in his bathroom. No way to control supply."

"Real cheese comes from Earth, or Mars," Naomi added. "And after they tack on shipping costs and the Coalition's fifty percent in taxes, it costs more than fuel pellets."

"We wound up with one hundred and thirty kilos of Vermont Cheddar in the evidence lockup," Miller said. "Street value that would have probably bought someone their own ship. It had disappeared by the end of the day. We wrote it up as lost to spoilage. No one said a word, as long as everyone went home with a brick."

The detective leaned back in his chair with a distant look on his face.

"My God, that was good cheese," he said with a smile.

"Yeah, well, this fake stuff does taste like shit," Amos said, then added in a hurry, "No offense, Boss, you did a real good job whipping it up. But that's still weird to me, fighting over cheese."

"It's why they killed Eros," Naomi said.

Miller nodded but said nothing.

"How do you figure that?" Amos said.

"How long have you been flying?" Naomi asked.

"I dunno," Amos replied, his lips compressing as he did the mental math. "Twenty-five years, maybe?"

"Fly with a lot of Belters, right?"

"Yeah," Amos said. "Can't get better shipmates than Belters. 'Cept me, of course."

"You've flown with us for twenty-five years, you like us, you've learned the patois. I bet you can order a beer and a hooker on any station in the Belt. Heck, if you were a little taller and a lot skinnier, you could pass for one of us by now."

Amos smiled, taking it as a compliment.

"But you still don't get us," Naomi said. "Not really. No one who grew up with free air ever will. And that's why they can kill a million and a half of us to figure out what their bug really does."

“Hey now,” Alex interjected. “You serious ’bout that? You think the inners and outers see themselves as that different?”

“Of course they do,” Miller said. “We’re too tall, too skinny, our heads look too big, and our joints too knobby.”

Holden noticed Naomi glancing across the table at him, a speculative look on her face. *I like your head*, Holden thought at her, but the radiation hadn’t given him telepathy either, because her expression didn’t change.

“We’ve practically got our own language now,” Miller said. “Ever see an Earther try to get directions in the deep dig?”

“ ‘Tu run spin, pow, Schlauch tu way acima and ido,’ ” Naomi said with a heavy Belter accent.

“Go spinward to the tube station, which will take you back to the docks,” Amos said. “The fuck’s so hard about that?”

“I had a partner wouldn’t have known that after two years on Ceres,” Miller said. “And Havelock wasn’t stupid. He just wasn’t... *from* there.”

Holden listened to them talk and pushed cold pasta around on his plate with a chunk of bread.

“Okay, we get it,” he said. “You’re weird. But to kill a million and a half people over some skeletal differences and slang...”

“People have been getting tossed into ovens for less than that ever since they invented ovens,” Miller said. “If it makes you feel better, most of us think you’re squat and microcephalic.”

Alex shook his head.

“Don’t make a lick of sense to me, turnin’ that bug loose, even if you hated every single human on Eros personally. Who knows what that thing’ll do?”

Naomi walked to the galley sink and washed her hands, the running water drawing everyone’s attention.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” she said, then turned around, wiping her hands on a towel. “The point of it, I mean.”

Miller started to speak, but Holden hushed him with a quick gesture and waited for Naomi to continue.

“So,” she said. “I’ve been thinking of it as a computing problem. If the virus or nanomachine or protomolecule or whatever was designed, it has a purpose, right?”

“Definitely,” Holden said.

“And it seems like it’s trying to do something—something complex. It doesn’t make sense to go to all that trouble just to kill people. Those changes it makes look intentional, just... not complete, to me.”

“I can see that,” Holden said. Alex and Amos nodded along with him but stayed quiet.

“So maybe the issue is that the protomolecule isn’t smart enough yet. You can compress a lot of data down pretty small, but unless it’s a quantum computer, processing takes space. The easiest way to get that processing in tiny machines is through distribution. Maybe the protomolecule isn’t finishing its job because it just isn’t smart enough to. Yet.”

“Not enough of them,” Alex said.

“Right,” Naomi said, dropping the towel into a bin under the sink. “So you give them a lot of biomass to work with, and see what it is they are ultimately made to do.”

“According to that guy in the video, they were made to hijack life on Earth and wipe us out,” Miller said.

“And that,” Holden said, “is why Eros is perfect. Lots of biomass in a vacuum-sealed test tube. And if it gets out of hand, there’s already a war going on. A lot of ships and missiles can be used for nuking Eros into glass if the threat seems real. Nothing to make us forget our differences like a new player butting in.”

“Wow,” Amos said. “That is really, really fucked up.”

“Okay. But even though that’s probably what’s happened,” Holden said, “I still can’t believe that there are enough evil people all in one place to do it. This isn’t a one-man operation. This is the work of dozens, maybe hundreds, of very smart people. Does Protogen just go around recruiting every potential Stalin and Jack the Ripper it runs across?”

“I’ll make sure to ask Mr. Dresden,” Miller said, an unreadable expression on his face, “when we finally meet.”



Tycho’s habitat rings spun serenely around the bloated zero-g factory globe in the center. The massive construction waldoes that sprouted from the top were maneuvering an enormous piece of hull plating onto the side of the *Nauvoo*. Looking at the station on the ops screens while Alex finished up docking procedures, Holden felt something like relief. So far, Tycho was the one place no one had tried to shoot them, or blow them up, or vomit goo on them, and that practically made it home.

Holden looked at the research safe clamped securely to the deck and hoped that he hadn’t just killed everyone on the station by bringing it there.

As if on cue, Miller pulled himself through the deck hatch and drifted over to the safe. He gave Holden a meaningful look.

“Don’t say it. I’m already thinking it,” Holden said.

Miller shrugged and drifted over to the ops station.

“Big,” he said, nodding at the *Nauvoo*, on Holden’s screen.

“Generation ship,” Holden said. “Something like that will give us the stars.”

“Or a lonely death on a long trip to nowhere,” Miller replied.

“You know,” Holden said, “some species’ version of the great galactic adventure is shooting virus-filled bullets at their neighbors. I think ours is pretty damn noble in comparison.”

Miller seemed to consider that, nodded, and watched Tycho Station swell on the monitor as Alex brought them closer. The detective kept one hand on the console, making the micro adjustments necessary to remain still even as the pilot’s maneuvers threw unexpected bursts of gravity at them from every direction. Holden was strapped into his chair. Even concentrating, he couldn’t handle zero g and intermittent thrust half that well. His brain just couldn’t be trained out of the twenty-odd years he’d spent with gravity as a constant.

Naomi was right. It would be so easy to see Belters as alien. Hell, if you gave them time to develop some really efficient implantable oxygen storage and recycling and kept trimming the environment suits down to the minimum necessary for heat, you might wind up with Belters who spent more time outside their ships and stations than in.

Maybe that was why they were taxed to subsistence level. The bird was out of the cage, but you couldn’t let it stretch its wings too far or it might forget it belonged to you.

“You trust this Fred?” Miller asked.

“Sort of,” Holden said. “He treated us well last time, when everyone else wanted us dead or locked up.”

Miller grunted, as if that proved nothing.

“He’s OPA, right?”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “But I think maybe the real OPA. Not the cowboys who want to shoot it out with the inners. And not those nuts on the radio calling for war. Fred’s a politician.”

“What about the ones keeping Ceres in line?”

“I don’t know,” Holden said. “I don’t know about them. But Fred’s the best shot we have. Least wrong.”

“Fair enough,” Miller said. “We won’t find a political solution to Protogen, you know.”

“Yeah,” Holden said, then began unbuckling his harness as the *Roci* slid into its berth with a series of metallic bangs. “But Fred isn’t *just* a politician.”



Fred sat behind his large wooden desk, reading the notes Holden had written about Eros, the search for Julie, and the discovery of the stealth ship. Miller sat across from him, watching Fred like an entomologist might watch a new species of bug, guessing if it was likely to sting. Holden was a little farther away on Fred’s right, trying not to keep looking at the clock on his hand terminal. On the huge screen behind the desk, the *Nauvoo* drifted by like the metal bones of some dead and decaying leviathan. Holden could see the tiny spots of brilliant blue light where workers used welding torches on the hull and frame. To occupy himself, he started counting them.

He’d reached forty-three when a small shuttle appeared in his field of view, a load of steel beams clutched in a pair of heavy manipulator arms, and flew toward the half-built generation ship. The shuttle shrank to a point no larger than the tip of a pen before it stopped. The *Nauvoo* suddenly shifted in Holden’s mind from a large ship relatively nearby, to a gigantic ship farther away. It gave him a short rush of vertigo.

His hand terminal beeped at almost the same instant that Miller’s did. He didn’t even look at it; he just tapped the face to shut it up. He knew this routine by now. He pulled out a small bottle, took out two blue pills, and swallowed them dry. He could hear Miller pouring pills out of his bottle as well. The ship’s expert medical system dispensed them for him every week with a warning that failing to take them on schedule would lead to horrific death. He took them. He would for the rest of his life. Missing a few would just mean that wasn’t very long.

Fred finished reading and threw his hand terminal down on the desk, then rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands for several seconds. To Holden, he looked older than the last time they’d seen each other.

“I have to tell you, Jim, I have no idea what to make of this,” he finally said.

Miller looked at Holden and mouthed, *Jim*, at him with a question on his face. Holden ignored him.

“Did you read Naomi’s addition at the end?” Holden asked.

“The bit with the networked nanobugs for increased processing power?”

“Yeah, that bit,” Holden said. “It makes sense, Fred.”

Fred laughed without humor, then stabbed one finger at his terminal.

“That,” he said. “That only makes sense to a psychopath. No one sane could do that. No matter what they thought they might get out of it.”

Miller cleared his throat.

“You have something to add, Mr. Muller?” Fred asked.

“Miller,” the detective replied. “Yes. First—and all respect here—don’t kid yourself. Genocide’s old-school. Second, the facts aren’t in question. Protogen infected Eros Station with a lethal alien disease, and they’re recording the results. Why doesn’t matter. We need to stop them.”

“And,” Holden said, “we think we can track down where their observation station is.”

Fred leaned back in his chair, the fake leather and metal frame creaking under his weight even in the one-third g.

“Stop them how?” he asked. Fred knew. He just wanted to hear them say it out loud. Miller played along.

“I’d say we fly to their station and shoot them.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Fred asked.

“There are a lot of OPA hotheads looking to shoot it out with Earth and Mars,” Holden said. “We give them some real bad guys to shoot at instead.”

Fred nodded in a way that didn’t mean he agreed to anything.

“And your sample? The captain’s safe?” Fred said.

“That’s mine,” Holden said. “No negotiation on that.”

Fred laughed again, though there was some humor in it this time. Miller blinked in surprise and then stifled a grin.

“Why would I agree to that?” Fred asked.

Holden lifted his chin and smiled.

“What if I told you that I’ve hidden the safe on a planetesimal booby-trapped with enough plutonium to break anyone who touches it into their component atoms even if they could find it?” he said.

Fred stared at him for a moment, then said, “But you didn’t.”

“Well, no,” Holden said. “But I could tell you I did.”

“You are too honest,” Fred said.

“And you can’t trust anyone with something this big. You already know what I’m going to do with it. That’s why, until we can agree on something better, you’re leaving it with me.”

Fred nodded.

“Yes,” he said, “I guess I am.”

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Chapter Thirty-Eight: Miller

The observation deck looked out over the *Nauvoo* as the behemoth slowly came together. Miller sat on the edge of a soft couch, his fingers laced over his knee, his gaze on the immense vista of the construction. After his time on Holden's ship and, before that, in Eros, with its old-style closed architecture, a view so wide seemed artificial. The deck itself was wider than the *Rocinante* and decorated with soft ferns and sculpted ivies. The air recyclers were eerily quiet, and even though the spin gravity was nearly the same as Ceres', the Coriolis felt subtly wrong.

He'd lived in the Belt his whole life, and he'd never been anywhere that was designed so carefully for the tasteful display of wealth and power. It was pleasant as long as he didn't think about it too much.

He wasn't the only one drawn to the open spaces of Tycho. A few dozen station workers sat in groups or walked through together. An hour before, Amos and Alex had gone by, deep in their own conversation, so he wasn't entirely surprised when, standing up and walking back toward the docks, he saw Naomi sitting by herself with a bowl of food cooling on a tray at her side. Her gaze was fixed on her hand terminal.

"Hey," he said.

Naomi looked up, recognized him, and smiled distractedly.

"Hey," she said.

Miller nodded toward the hand terminal and shrugged a question.

"Comm data from that ship," she said. It was always *that ship*, Miller noticed. The same way people would call a particularly godawful crime scene *that place*. "It's all tightbeam, so I thought it wouldn't be so hard to triangulate. But..."

"Not so much?"

Naomi lifted her eyebrows and sighed.

"I've been plotting orbits," she said. "But nothing's fitting. There could be relay drones, though. Moving targets the ship system was calibrated for that would send the message on to the actual station. Or another drone, and then the station, or who knows?"

"Any data coming off Eros?"

"I assume so," Naomi said, "but I don't know that it would be any easier to make sense of than this."

"Can't your OPA friends do something?" Miller asked. "They've got more processing power than one of these handhelds. Probably have a better activity map of the Belt too."

"Probably," she said.

He couldn't tell if she didn't trust this Fred that Holden had given them over to, or just needed to feel like the investigation was still hers. He considered telling her to back off it for a while, to let the others carry it, but he didn't see he had the moral authority to make that one stick.

"What?" Naomi said, an uncertain smile on her lips.

Miller blinked.

"You were laughing a little," Naomi said. "I don't think I've ever seen you laugh before. I mean, not when something was funny."

"I was just thinking about something a partner of mine told me about letting cases go when you got pulled from them."

"What did he say?"

"That it's like taking half a shit," Miller said.

"Had a way with words, that one."

"He was all right for an Earther," Miller said, and something tickled at the back of his mind. Then, a moment later: "Ah, Jesus. I may have something."



Havelock met him in an encrypted drop site that lived on a server cluster on Ganymede. The latency kept them from anything like real-time conversation. It was more like dropping notes, but it did the trick. The waiting made Miller anxious. He sat with his terminal set to refresh every three seconds.

"Would you like anything else?" the woman asked. "Another bourbon?"

"That'd be great," Miller said, and checked to see if Havelock had replied yet. He hadn't.

Like the observation deck, the bar looked out on the *Nauvoo*, though from a slightly different angle. The great ship looked foreshortened, and arcs of energy lit it where a layer of ceramic was annealing. A bunch of religious zealots were going to load themselves into that massive ship, that small self-sustaining world, and launch themselves into the darkness between the stars. Generations would live and die in it, and if they were mind-bendingly lucky enough to find a planet worth living on the end of the journey, the people who came out of it would never have known Earth or Mars or the Belt. They'd be aliens already. And if whatever had made the protomolecule was out there to greet them, then what?

Would they all die like Julie had?

There was life out there. They had proof of it now. And the proof came in the shape of a weapon, so what did that tell him? Except that maybe the Mormons deserved a little warning about what they were signing their great-grandkids up for.

He laughed to himself when he realized that was exactly what Holden would say.

The bourbon arrived at the same moment his hand terminal chimed. The video file had a layered encryption that took almost a minute to unpack. That alone was a good sign.

The file opened, and Havelock grinned out from the screen. He was in better shape than he'd been on Ceres, and it showed in the shape of his jaw. His skin was darker, but Miller didn't know if it was purely cosmetic or if his old partner had been basking in false sunlight for the joy of it. It didn't matter. It made the Earther look rich and fit.

"Hey, buddy," Havelock said. "Good to hear from you. After what happened with Shaddid and the OPA, I was afraid we were going to be on different sides now. I'm glad you got out of there before the shit hit the fan.

"Yeah, I'm still with Protogen, and I've got to tell you, these guys are kind of scary. I mean, I've worked contract security before, and I'm pretty clear when someone's hard-core. These guys aren't cops. They're troops. You know what I mean?"

"Officially, I don't know dick about a Belt station, but you know how it is. I'm from Earth. There are a lot of these guys who gave me shit about Ceres. Working with the vacuum-heads. That kind of thing. But the way things are here, it's better to be on the good side of the bad guys. It's just that kind of job."

There was an apology in his expression. Miller understood. Working in some corporations was like going to prison. You adopted the views of the people around you. A Belter might get hired on, but he'd never belong. Like Ceres, just pointed the other way. If Havelock had made friends with a set of inner planet mercs who spent their off nights curb-stomping Belters outside bars, then he had.

But making friends didn't mean he was one of them.

“So. Off the record, yeah, there’s a black ops station in the Belt. I hadn’t heard it called Thoth, but it could be. Some sort of very scary deep research and development lab. Heavy science crew, but not a huge place. I think *discreet* would be the word. Lots of automated defenses, but not a big ground crew.

“I don’t need to tell you that leaking the coordinates would get my ass killed out here. So wipe the file when you’re done, and let’s not talk again for a long, long time.”

The datafile was small. Three lines of plaintext orbital notation. Miller put it into his hand terminal and killed the file off the Ganymede server. The bourbon still sat beside his hand, and he drank it off neat. The warmth in his chest might have been the alcohol or it might have been victory.

He turned on the hand terminal’s camera.

“Thanks. I owe you one. Here’s part of the payment. What happened on Eros? Protogen was part of it, and it’s big. If you get the chance to drop your contract with them, do it. And if they try to rotate you out to that black ops station, don’t go.”

Miller frowned. The sad truth was that Havelock was probably the last real partner he’d had. The only one who’d looked on him as an equal. As the kind of detective Miller had imagined himself to be.

“Take care of yourself, partner,” he said, then ended the file, encrypted it, shipped it out. He had the bone-deep feeling he wasn’t ever going to talk to Havelock again.

He put through a connection request to Holden. The screen filled with the captain’s open, charming, vaguely naive face.

“Miller,” Holden said. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Great. But I need to talk to your Fred guy. Can you arrange that?”

Holden frowned and nodded at the same time.

“Sure. What’s going on?”

“I know where Thoth Station is,” Miller said.

“You know what?”

Miller nodded.

“Where the hell did you get that?”

Miller grinned. “If I gave you that information and it got out, a good man would get killed,” he said. “You see how that works?”



It struck Miller as he, Holden, and Naomi waited for Fred that he knew an awful lot of inner planet types fighting against the inner planets. Or at least not for them. Fred, supposedly a high-ranking OPA member. Havelock. Three-quarters of the crew of the *Rocinante*. Juliette Mao.

It wasn’t what he would have expected. But maybe that was shortsighted. He was seeing the thing the way Shaddid and Protogen did. There were two sides fighting—that was true enough—but they weren’t the inner planets versus the Belters. They were the people who thought it was a good idea to kill people who looked or acted differently against the people who didn’t.

Or maybe that was a crap analysis too. Because given the chance to put the scientist from the Protogen pitch, the board of directors, and whoever this Dresden piece of shit was into an airlock, Miller knew he’d agonize about it for maybe half a second after he blew them all into vacuum. Didn’t put him on the side of angels.

“Mr. Miller. What can I do for you?”

Fred. The Earther OPA. He wore a blue button-down shirt and a nice pair of slacks. He could have been an architect or a mid-level administrator for any number of good, respectable corporations. Miller tried to imagine him coordinating a battle.

“You can convince me that you’ve really got what it takes to kill the Protogen station,” Miller said. “Then I’ll tell you where it is.”

Fred's eyebrows rose a millimeter.

"Come into my office," Fred said.

Miller went. Holden and Naomi followed. When the doors closed behind them, Fred was the first to speak.

"I'm not sure exactly what you want from me. I'm not in the habit of making my battle plans public knowledge."

"We're talking about storming a station," Miller said. "Something with damn good defenses and maybe more ships like the one that killed the *Canterbury*. No disrespect intended, but that's a pretty tall order for a bunch of amateurs like the OPA."

"Ah, Miller?" Holden said. Miller held up a hand, cutting him off.

"I can give you the directions to Thoth Station," Miller said. "But if I do that and it turns out you haven't got the punch to see this through, then a lot of people die and nothing gets resolved. I'm not up for that."

Fred cocked his head, like a dog hearing an unfamiliar sound. Naomi and Holden shared a glance that Miller couldn't parse.

"This is a war," Miller said, warming to the subject. "I've worked with the OPA before, and frankly you folks are a lot better at little guerrilla bullshit than at coordinating anything real. Half of the people who claim to speak for you are crackpots who happened to have a radio nearby. I see you've got a lot of money. I see you've got a nice office. What I don't see—what I need to see—is that you've got what it takes to bring these bastards down. Taking out a station isn't a game. I don't care how many simulations you've run. This is real now. If I'm going to help you, I need to know you can handle it."

There was a long silence.

"Miller?" Naomi said. "You know who Fred is, right?"

"The Tycho mouthpiece for the OPA," Miller said. "That doesn't draw a whole lot of water with me."

"He's Fred *Johnson*," Holden said.

Fred's eyebrows rose another millimeter. Miller frowned and crossed his arms.

"Colonel Frederick Lucius Johnson," Naomi said, clarifying.

Miller blinked. "The Butcher of Anderson Station?" he said.

"The same," Fred said. "I have been talking with the central council of the OPA. I have a cargo ship with more than enough troops to secure the station. Air support is a state-of-the-art Martian torpedo bomber."

"The *Roci*?" Miller said.

"The *Rocinante*," Fred agreed. "And while you may not believe it, I actually know what I'm doing."

Miller looked at his feet, then up toward Holden.

"That Fred Johnson?" he said.

"I thought you knew," Holden said.

"Well. Don't I feel like the flaming idiot," Miller said.

"It'll pass," Fred said. "Was there anything else you wanted to demand?"

"No," Miller said. And then: "Yes. I want to be part of the ground assault. When we take that station crew, I want to be there."

"Are you sure?" Fred said. " 'Taking out a station isn't a game.' What makes you think you have what it takes?"

Miller shrugged.

"One thing it takes is the coordinates," Miller said. "I have got those."

Fred laughed. "Mr. Miller. If you'd like to go down to this station and have whatever's waiting for us down there try to kill you along with the rest of us, I won't stand in your way."

"Thanks," Miller said. He pulled up his hand terminal and sent the plaintext coordinates to Fred. "There you go. My source is solid, but he's not working from firsthand data. We should confirm before we commit."

"I'm not an amateur," Colonel Fred Johnson said, looking at the file. Miller nodded, adjusted his hat, and walked out. Naomi and Holden flanked him. When they reached the wide, clean public hallway, Miller looked to his right, catching Holden's eyes.

"Really, I thought you knew," Holden said.



Eight days later, the message came. The cargo ship *Guy Molinari* had arrived, full up with OPA soldiers. Havelock's coordinates had been verified. Something was sure as hell out there, and it appeared to be collecting the tightbeamed data from Eros. If Miller wanted to be part of this, the time had come to move out.

He sat in his quarters in the *Rocinante* for what was likely the last time. He realized with a little twinge, equal parts surprise and sorrow, that he was going to miss the place. Holden, for all his faults and Miller's complaints, was a decent guy. In over his head and only half aware of the fact, but Miller could think of more than one person who fit that bill. He was going to miss Alex's odd, affected drawl and Amos' casual obscenity. He was going to wonder if and how Naomi ever worked things out with her captain.

Leaving was a reminder of things he'd already known: that he didn't know what would come next, that he didn't have much money, and that while he was sure he could get back from Thoth Station, where and how he went from there was going to be improvisation. Maybe there would be another ship he could sign on with. Maybe he'd have to take a contract and save up some money to cover his new medical expenses.

He checked the magazine in his gun. Packed his spare clothes into the small, battered pack he'd taken on the transport from Ceres. Everything he owned still fit in it.

He turned off the lights and made his way down the short corridor toward the ladder-lift. Holden was in the galley, twitching nervously. The dread of the coming battle was already showing in the corners of the man's eyes.

"Well," Miller said. "Here we go, eh?"

"Yep," Holden said.

"It's been a hell of a ride," Miller said. "Can't say it's all been pleasant, but..."

"Yeah."

"Tell the others I said goodbye," Miller said.

"Will do," Holden said. Then, as Miller moved past him toward the lift: "So assuming we all actually live through this, where should we meet up?"

Miller turned.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Yeah, I know. Look, I trust Fred or I wouldn't have come here. I think he's honorable, and he'll do the right thing by us. That doesn't mean I trust the whole OPA. After we get this thing done, I want the whole crew together. Just in case we need to get out in a hurry."

Something painful happened under Miller's sternum. Not a sharp pain, just a sudden ache. His throat felt thick. He coughed to clear it.

"As soon as we get the place secure, I'll get in touch," Miller said.

"Okay, but don't take too long. If Thoth Station has a whorehouse left standing, I'm going to need help prying Amos out of it."

Miller opened his mouth, closed it, and tried again.

"Aye, aye, Captain," he said, forcing a lightness into his voice.

"Be careful," Holden said.

Miller left, pausing in the passageway between ship and station until he was sure he'd stopped weeping, and then making his way to the cargo ship and the assault.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine: Holden

The *Rocinante* hurtled through space like a dead thing, tumbling in all three axes. With the reactor shut down and all the cabin air vented, it radiated neither heat nor electromagnetic noise. If it weren't for its speeding toward Thoth Station significantly faster than a rifle shot, the ship would be indistinguishable from the rocks in the Belt. Nearly half a million kilometers behind it, the *Guy Molinari* screamed the *Roci*'s innocence to anyone who would listen, and fired its engines in a long slow deceleration.

With the radio off, Holden couldn't hear what they were saying, but he'd helped write the warning, so it echoed in his head anyway. *Warning! Accidental detonation on the cargo ship Guy Molinari has broken large cargo container free. Warning to all ships in its path: Container is traveling at high speed and without independent control. Warning!*

There had been some discussion about not broadcasting at all. Because Thoth was a black station, they'd be using only passive sensors. Scanning every direction with radar or ladar would light them up like a Christmas tree. It was possible that with its reactor off, the *Rocinante* could sneak up on the station without being noticed. But Fred had decided that if they were somehow spotted, it would be suspicious enough to probably warrant an immediate counterattack. So instead of playing it quiet, they'd decided to play it loud and count on confusion to help them.

With luck the Thoth Station security systems would scan them and see that they were in fact a big chunk of metal flying on an unchanging vector and lacking apparent life support, and ignore them just long enough to let them get close. From far away, the stations' defense systems might be too much for the *Roci*. But up close, the maneuverable little ship could dart around the station and cut it to pieces. All their cover story needed to do was buy them time while the station's security team tried to figure out what was going on.

Fred, and by extension everyone in the assault, was betting that the station wouldn't fire until they were absolutely certain they were under attack. Protogen had gone to a lot of trouble to hide their research lab in the Belt. As soon as they launched their first missile, their anonymity was lost forever. With the war going on, monitors would pick up the fusion torch trails and wonder what was up. Firing a weapon would be Thoth Station's last resort.

In theory.

Sitting alone inside the tiny bubble of air contained in his helmet, Holden knew that if they were wrong, he'd never even realize it. The *Roci* was flying blind. All radio contact was down. Alex had a mechanical timepiece with a glow-in-the-dark face, and a to-the-second schedule memorized. They couldn't beat Thoth at high-tech, so they were flying as low-tech as you could get. If they'd missed their guess and the station fired on them, the *Roci* would be vaporized without warning. Holden had once dated a Buddhist who said that death was merely a different state of being, and people only feared the unknown that lay behind that transition. Death without warning was preferable, as it removed all fear.

He felt he now had the counterargument.

To keep his mind busy, he ran through the plan again. When they were practically close enough to spit on Thoth Station, Alex would fire up the reactor and do a braking maneuver at nearly ten g's. The *Guy Molinari* would begin spraying radio static and laser clutter at the station to confuse its

targeting package for the few moments the *Roci* would need to come around on an attack vector. The *Roci* would engage the station's defenses, disabling anything that could hurt the *Molinari*, while the cargo ship moved in to breach the station's hull and drop off her assault troops.

There were any number of things wrong with this plan.

If the station decided to fire early, just in case, the *Roci* could die before the fight even started. If the station's targeting system could cut the *Molinari*'s static and laser clutter, they might begin firing while the *Roci* was still getting into position. And even if all that worked perfectly, there was still the assault team, cutting their way into the station and fighting corridor to corridor to the nerve center to take control. Even the inner planets' best marines were terrified of breaching actions, and for good reason. Moving through unfamiliar metal hallways without cover while the enemy ambushed you at every intersection was a good way to get a lot of people killed. In training simulations back in the Earth navy, Holden had never seen the marines do better than 60 percent casualties. And these weren't inner planet marines with years of training and state-of-the-art equipment. They were OPA cowboys with whatever gear they could scrape together at the last minute.

But even that wasn't what really worried Holden.

What really worried him was the large, slightly-warmer-than-space area just a few dozen meters above Thoth Station. The *Molinari* had spotted it and warned them before cutting them loose. Having seen the stealth ships before, no one on the *Roci* doubted that this was another one.

Fighting the station would be bad enough, even up close, where most of the station's advantages were lost. But Holden didn't look forward to dodging torpedo fire from a missile frigate at the same time. Alex had assured him that if they could get in close enough to the station, they could keep the frigate from firing at them for fear of damaging Thoth, and that the *Roci*'s greater maneuverability would make it more than a match for the larger and more heavily armed ship. The stealth frigates were a strategic weapon, he'd said, not a tactical one. Holden hadn't said, *Then why do they have one here?*

Holden moved to glance down at his wrist, then snorted with frustration in the pitch black of the ops deck. His suit was powered down, chronometers and lights both. The only system on in his suit was air circulation, and that was strictly mechanical. If something got fouled up with it, no little warning lights would come on; he'd just choke and die.

He glanced around the dark room and said, "Come on, how much longer?"

As if in answer, lights began flickering on through the cabin. There was a burst of static in his helmet; then Alex's drawling voice said, "Internal comms online."

Holden began flipping switches to bring the rest of the systems back up.

"Reactor," he said.

"Two minutes," Amos replied from the engine room.

"Main computer."

"Thirty seconds to reboot," Naomi said, and waved at him from across the ops deck. The lights had come up enough for them to see each other.

"Weps?"

Alex laughed with something like genuine glee over the comm.

"Weapons are coming online," he said. "As soon as Naomi gives me back the targeting comp, we'll be cocked, locked, and ready to rock."

Hearing everyone check in after the long and silent darkness of their approach reassured him. Being able to look across the room and see Naomi working at her tasks eased a dread he hadn't even realized he'd been feeling.

"Targeting should be up now," Naomi said.

"Roger that," Alex replied. "Scopes are up. Radar, up. Ladar, up—Shit, Naomi, you seeing this?"

"I see it," Naomi said. "Captain, getting engine signatures from the stealth ship. They're powering up too."

"We expected that," Holden said. "Everyone stay on task."

"One minute," Amos said.

Holden turned on his console and pulled up his tactical display. In the scope, Thoth Station turned in a lazy circle while the slightly warm spot above it got hot enough to resolve a rough hull outline.

"Alex, that doesn't look like the last frigate," Holden said. "Does the *Roci* recognize it yet?"

"Not yet, Cap, but she's workin' on it."

"Thirty seconds," Amos said.

"Getting ladar searches from the station," Naomi said. "Broadcasting chatter."

Holden watched on his screen as Naomi tried to match the wavelength the station was using to target them, and began spraying the station with their own laser comm array to confuse the returns.

"Fifteen seconds," Amos said.

"Okay, buckle up, kids," Alex said. "Here comes the juice."

Even before Alex had finished saying it, Holden felt a dozen pinpricks as his chair pumped him full of drugs to keep him alive during the coming deceleration. His skin went tight and hot, and his balls crawled up into his belly. Alex seemed to be speaking in slow motion.

"Five... four... three... two..."

He never said *one*. Instead, a thousand kilos sat on Holden's chest and rumbled like a laughing giant as the *Roci*'s engine slammed on the brakes at ten g's. Holden thought he could actually feel his lungs scraping the inside of his rib cage as his chest did its best to collapse. But the chair pulled him into a soft gel-filled embrace, and the drugs kept his heart beating and his brain processing. He didn't black out. If the high-g maneuvering killed him, he'd be wide awake and lucid for the entire thing.

His helmet filled with the sound of gurgling and labored breathing, only some of which was his own. Amos managed part of a curse before his jaw was clamped shut. Holden couldn't hear the *Roci* shuddering with the strain of her course change, but he could feel it through the seat. She was tough. Tougher than any of them. They'd be long dead before the ship pulled enough g's to hurt itself.

When relief came, it came so suddenly that Holden almost vomited. The drugs in his system stopped that too. He took a deep breath and the cartilage of his sternum clicked painfully back into place.

"Check in," he muttered. His jaw hurt.

"Comm array targeted," Alex replied immediately. Thoth Station's comm and targeting array was the first item on their target priority list.

"All green," Amos said from below.

"Sir," Naomi said, a warning in her voice.

"Shit, I see it," Alex said.

Holden told his console to mirror Naomi's so he could see what she was looking at. On her screen, the *Roci* had figured out why it couldn't identify the stealth ship.

There were two ships, not one large and ungainly missile frigate that they could dance around and cut to pieces at close range. No, that would have been too easy. These were two much smaller ships parked close together to trick enemy sensors. And now they were both firing their engines and splitting up.

Okay, Holden thought. *New plan.*

"Alex, get their attention," he said. "Can't let them go after the *Molinari*."

"Roger," Alex replied. "One away."

Holden felt the *Roci* shudder as Alex fired a torpedo at one of the two ships. The smaller ships were rapidly changing speed and vector, and the torpedo had been fired hastily and from a bad angle. It wouldn't score a hit, but the *Roci* would be on everyone's scope as a threat now. So that was good.

Both of the smaller ships darted away in opposite directions at full burn, spraying chaff and laser chatter behind them as they went. The torpedo wobbled in its trajectory and then limped away in a random direction.

"Naomi, Alex, any idea what we're facing here?" Holden asked.

"*Roci* still doesn't recognize them, sir," Naomi said.

"New hull design," Alex said over her. "But they're flyin' like fast interceptors. Guessin' a torpedo or two on the belly, and a keel-mounted rail gun."

Faster and more maneuverable than the *Roci*, but they'd be able to fire in only one direction.

"Alex, come around to—" Holden's order was cut short when the *Rocinante* shuddered and jumped sideways, hurling him into the side of his restraints with rib-bruising force.

"We're hit!" Amos and Alex yelled at the same time.

"Station shot us with some sort of heavy gauss cannon," Naomi said.

"Damage," Holden said.

"Went clean through us, Cap," Amos said. "Galley and the machine shop. Got yellows on the board, but nothing that'll kill us."

Nothing that'll kill us sounded good, but Holden felt a pang for his coffeemaker.

"Alex," Holden said. "Forget the little ships, kill that comm array."

"Roger," Alex replied, and the *Roci* lurched sideways as Alex changed course to begin his torpedo run on the station.

"Naomi, as soon as the first one of those fighters comes around on his attack run, give him the comm laser in the face, full strength, and start dropping chaff."

"Yes, sir," she replied. Maybe the laser would be enough to screw up his targeting system for a few seconds.

"Station's openin' up with the PDCs," Alex said. "This'll get a mite bumpy."

Holden switched from mirroring Naomi's screen to watching Alex's. His panel filled with thousands of rapidly moving balls of light and Thoth Station rotating in the background. The *Roci*'s threat computer was outlining the incoming point defense cannon fire with bright light on Alex's HUD. It was moving impossibly fast, but at least with the system doing a bright overlay on each round, the pilot could see where the fire was coming from and which direction it was traveling. Alex reacted to this threat information with consummate skill, maneuvering away from the PDCs' direction of fire in quick, almost random movements that forced the automated targeting of the point defense cannons to adjust constantly.

To Holden, it looked like a game. Incredibly fast blobs of light flew up from the space station in chains, like long and thin pearl necklaces. The ship moved restlessly, finding the gaps between the threads and dodging away to a new gap before the strands could react and touch her. But Holden knew that each blob of light represented a chunk of Teflon-coated tungsten steel with a depleted uranium heart, going thousands of meters per second. If Alex lost the game, they'd know it when the *Rocinante* was cut to pieces.

Holden almost jumped out of his skin when Amos spoke. "Shit, Cap, got a leak somewhere. Three port maneuvering thrusters are losing water pressure. Going to patch it."

"Copy, Amos. Go fast," Holden said.

"You hang on down there, Amos," Naomi said.

Amos just snorted.

On his console, Holden watched as Thoth Station grew larger on the scope. Somewhere behind them, the two fighters were probably coming about. The thought made the back of Holden's head itch, but he tried to keep focus. The *Roci* didn't have enough torpedoes for Alex to fire shot after shot at the station from far off and hope one made it through the point defense fire. Alex had to bring them in so close that the cannons couldn't shoot the torpedo down.

A blue highlight appeared on the HUD surrounding a portion of the station's central hub. The highlighted portion expanded into a smaller subscreen. Holden could make out the dishes and antennas that made up the comm and targeting array.

"One away," Alex said, and the *Roci* vibrated as her second torpedo was fired.

Holden shook violently in his restraints and then slapped back into his chair as Alex took the *Roci* through a series of sudden maneuvers and then slammed down the throttle to evade the last of

the PDC fire. Holden watched his screen as the red dot of their missile streaked toward the station and struck the comm array. A flash blanked out his screen for a second and then faded. Almost immediately the PDC fire stopped.

“Good sh—” Holden was cut off by Naomi yelling, “Bogey one has fired! Two fast movers!”

Holden flipped back to her screen and saw the threat system tracking both fighters and two smaller and much faster objects moving toward the *Roci* on an intercept course.

“Alex!” Holden said.

“Got it, Chief. Going defensive.”

Holden slammed back into his chair again as Alex poured on the speed. The steady rumble of the engine seemed to stutter, and Holden realized he was feeling the constant fire of their own PDCs as they tried to shoot down the pursuing missiles.

“Well, fuck,” Amos said almost conversationally.

“Where are you?” Holden asked, then flipped his screen to Amos’ suit camera. The mechanic was in a dimly illuminated crawl space filled with conduit and piping. That meant he was between the inner and outer hulls. In front of him, a section of damaged pipe looked like snapped bones. A cutting torch floated nearby. The ship bounced violently, banging the mechanic around in the tight space. Alex whooped over the comm.

“Missiles did not impact!” he said.

“Tell Alex to stop jerking her around,” Amos said. “Makes it hard to hang on to my tools.”

“Amos, get back to your crash couch!” Naomi said.

“Sorry, Boss,” Amos replied with a grunt as he yanked one end of the broken pipe free. “If I don’t fix this and we lose pressure, Alex won’t be able to turn to starboard anymore. Bet that’ll fuck us up good.”

“Keep working, Amos,” Holden said over Naomi’s protests. “But hang on. This is going to get worse.”

Amos said, “Roger that.”

Holden switched back to Alex’s HUD display.

“Holden,” Naomi said. There was fear in her voice. “Amos is going to get—”

“He’s doing his job. Do yours. Alex, we have to take these two out before the *Molinari* gets here. Get me an intercept on one of them and let’s kick its ass.”

“Roger that, Cap,” Alex said. “Going after bogey two. Could use some help with bogey one.”

“Bogey one is Naomi’s priority,” Holden said. “Do what you can to keep it off of our backside while we kill his friend.”

“Roger,” Naomi said in a tight voice.

Holden switched back to Amos’ helmet camera, but the mechanic seemed to be doing fine. He was cutting the damaged pipe free with his torch, and a length of replacement pipe floated nearby.

“Strap that pipe down, Amos,” Holden said.

“All respect, Captain,” Amos said, “but safety standards can kiss my ass. I’m getting this done fast and getting outta here.”

Holden hesitated. If Alex had to make a course correction, the floating pipe could turn into a projectile massive enough to kill Amos or break the *Roci*. *It’s Amos*, he told himself. *He knows what he’s doing*.

Holden flipped to Naomi’s screen as she poured everything the comm system had at the small interceptor, trying to blind it with light and radio static. Then he went back to his tactical display. The *Roci* and bogey two flew toward each other at suicidal speeds. As soon as they passed the point where incoming torpedo fire couldn’t be avoided, bogey two launched both his missiles. Alex flagged the two fast movers for the PDCs and kept up his intercept course but didn’t launch missiles.

“Alex, why aren’t we shooting?” Holden said.

“Gonna shoot his torpedoes down, then get in close and let the PDCs chew him up,” the pilot replied.

“Why?”

“We’ve only got so many torpedoes and no resupply. No call to waste ’em on these munchkins.”

The incoming torpedoes arced forward on Holden’s display, and he felt the *Roci*’s PDCs firing to shoot them down.

“Alex,” he said. “We didn’t pay for this ship. Feel free to use it up. If I get killed so you can save ammo, I am going to put a reprimand in your permanent file.”

“Well, you put it that way...” Alex said. Then: “One away.”

The red dot of their torpedo streaked off toward bogey two. The incoming missiles got closer and closer, and then one disappeared from the display.

Alex said, “Shit,” in a flat voice, and then the *Rocinante* slammed sideways hard enough that Holden broke his nose on the inside of his helmet. Yellow emergency lights began rotating on all the bulkheads, though with the ship evacuated of air, Holden mercifully couldn’t hear the Klaxons that were trying to sound throughout it. His tactical display flickered, went out, and then came back after a second. When it came back up, all three torpedoes, as well as bogey two, were gone. Bogey one continued to bear down on them from astern.

“Damage!” Holden yelled, hoping the comm was still up.

“Major damage to the outer hull,” Naomi replied. “Four maneuvering thrusters gone. One PDC nonresponsive. We’ve also lost O2 storage, and the crew airlock looks like it’s slag.”

“Why are we alive?” Holden asked while he flipped through the damage report and then over to Amos’ suit camera.

“The fish didn’t hit us,” Alex said. “The PDC got it, but it was close. Warhead detonated and sprayed us down pretty good.”

It didn’t look like Amos was moving. Holden yelled, “Amos! Report!”

“Yeah, yeah, still here, Captain. Just hanging on in case we get knocked around like that again. I think I busted a rib on one of the hull braces, but I’m strapped down. Good fucking thing I didn’t waste time with that pipe, though.”

Holden didn’t take time to answer. He flipped back to his tactical display and watched the rapidly approaching bogey one. It had already fired its torpedoes, but at close range it could still cut them apart with its cannon.

“Alex, can you get us turned around and get a firing solution on that fighter?” he said.

“Working on it. Don’t have much maneuverability,” Alex replied, and the *Roci* began rotating with a series of lurches.

Holden switched to a telescope and zoomed in on the approaching fighter. Up close, the muzzle of its cannon looked as big around as a corridor on Ceres, and it appeared to be aimed directly at him.

“Alex,” he said.

“Working on it, Chief, but the *Roci*’s hurtin’.”

The enemy ship’s cannon flared open, preparing to fire.

“Alex, kill it. Kill it *kill it kill it*.”

“One away,” the pilot said, and the *Rocinante* shuddered.

Holden’s console threw him out of the scope view and back to the tactical view automatically. The *Roci*’s torpedo flew toward the fighter at almost the same instant that the fighter opened up with its cannon. The display showed the incoming rounds as small red dots moving too fast to follow.

“Incom—” he shouted, and the *Rocinante* came apart around him.



Holden came to.

The inside of the ship was filled with flying debris and bits of superheated metal shavings that looked like slow-motion showers of sparks. With no air, they bounced off walls and then floated, slowly cooling, like lazy fireflies. He had a vague memory of one corner of a wall-mounted monitor

detaching and bouncing off three bulkheads in the world's most elaborate billiards shot, then hitting him right below the sternum. He looked down, and the little chunk of monitor was floating a few centimeters in front of him, but there was no hole in his suit. His guts hurt.

The ops console chair next to Naomi had a hole in it; green gel slowly leaked into small balls that floated away in the zero g. Holden looked at the hole in the chair, and the matching hole in the bulkhead across the room, and realized that the round must have passed within centimeters of Naomi's leg. A shudder swept through him, leaving him nauseated in its wake.

"What the fuck was that?" Amos asked quietly. "And how about we don't do it anymore?"

"Alex?" Holden said.

"Still here, Cap," the pilot replied, his voice eerily calm.

"My panel's dead," Holden said. "Did we kill that son of a bitch?"

"Yeah, Cap, he's dead. About half a dozen of his rounds actually hit the *Roci*. Looks like they went through us from bow to stern. That anti-spalling webbing on the bulkheads really keeps the shrapnel down, doesn't it?"

Alex's voice had started shaking. He meant *We should all be dead*.

"Open a channel to Fred, Naomi," Holden said.

She didn't move.

"Naomi?"

"Right. Fred," she said, then tapped on her screen.

Holden's helmet was filled with static for a second, then with Fred's voice.

"*Guy Molinari* here. Glad you guys are still alive."

"Roger that. Begin your run. Let us know when we can limp over to one of the station's docks."

"Roger," Fred replied. "We'll find you a nice place to land. Fred out."

Holden pulled the quick release on his chair's restraints and floated toward the ceiling, his body limp.

Okay, Miller. Your turn.

Chapter Forty: Miller

Oi, Pampaw,” the kid in the crash couch to Miller’s right said. “Popped seal, you and bang, hey?”

The kid’s combat armor was gray-green, articulated pressure seals at the joints and stripes across the front plates where a knife or flechette round had scraped the finish. Behind the face mask, the kid could have been fifteen. His hand gestures spoke of a childhood spent in vacuum suits, and his speech was pure Belt creole.

“Yeah,” Miller said, raising his arm. “Saw some action recently. I’ll be fine.”

“Fine’s fine as fine,” the kid said. “But you hold to the foca, and neto can pass the air out to you, hey?”

No one on Mars or Earth would have the first clue what you’re saying, Miller thought. Shit, half the people on Ceres would be embarrassed by an accent that thick. No wonder they don’t mind killing you.

“Sounds good to me,” Miller said. “You go first, and I’ll try to keep anyone from shooting you in the back.”

The kid grinned. Miller had seen thousands like him. Boys in the throes of adolescence, working through the normal teenage drive to take risks and impress girls, but at the same time they lived in the Belt, where one bad call meant dead. He’d seen thousands. He’d arrested hundreds. He’d watched a few dozen picked up in hazmat bags.

He leaned forward to look down the long rows of close-packed gimbaled crash couches that lined the gut of the *Guy Molinari*. Miller’s rough estimate put the count at between ninety and a hundred of them. So by dinner, chances were good he’d have seen a couple dozen more die.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Diogo.”

“Miller,” he said, and gave the kid his hand to shake. The high-quality Martian battle armor Miller had taken from the *Rocinante* let his fingers flex a lot more than the kid’s.

The truth was Miller was in no shape for the assault. He was still getting occasional waves of inexplicable nausea, and his arm ached whenever the medication level in his blood started thinning out. But he knew his way around a gun, and he probably knew more about corridor-to-corridor fighting than nine-tenths of the OPA rock jumpers and ore hogs like Diogo who were about to go in. It would have to be good enough.

The ship’s address system clicked once.

“This is Fred. We’ve had word from air support, and we’re green for breach in ten minutes. Final checks start now, people.”

Miller sat back in his couch. The clicking and chattering of a hundred suits of armor, a hundred sidearms, a hundred assault weapons filled the air. He’d been over his own enough times now; he didn’t feel the urge to do it again.

In a few minutes, the burn would come. The cocktail of high-g drugs was kept on the ragged edge, since they’d be going straight from the couches into a firefight. No point having your assault force more doped than necessary.

Julie sat on the wall beside him, her hair swirling around her like she was underwater. He imagined the dappled light flashing across her face. Portrait of the young pinnacle racer as a mermaid.

She smiled at the idea, and Miller smiled back. She would have been here, he knew. Along with Diogo and Fred and all the other OPA militia, patriots of the vacuum, she'd have been in a crash couch, wearing borrowed armor, heading into the station to get herself killed for the greater good. Miller knew he wouldn't have. Not before her. So in a sense, he'd taken her place. He'd become her.

They made it, Julie said, or maybe only thought. If the ground attack was going forward, it meant the *Rocinante* had survived—at least long enough to knock out the defenses. Miller nodded, acknowledging her and letting himself feel a moment's pleasure at the idea, and then thrust gravity pushed him into his couch so hard that his consciousness flickered, and the hold around him dimmed. He felt it when the braking burn came, all the crash couches spinning to face the new up. Needles dug into Miller's flesh. Something deep and loud happened, the *Guy Molinari* ringing like a gigantic bell. The breaching charge. The world pulled hard to the left, the couch swinging for the last time as the assault ship matched the station's spin.

Someone was shouting at him. "Go go go!" Miller lifted his assault rifle, tapped the sidearm strapped to his thigh, and joined the press of bodies making for the exit. He missed his hat.

The service corridor they'd cut into was narrow and dim. The schematics the Tycho engineers had worked up suggested they wouldn't see any real resistance until they got into the manned parts of the station. That had been a bad guess. Miller staggered in with the other OPA soldiers in time to see an automatic defense laser cut the first rank in half.

"Team three! Gas it!" Fred snapped in all their ears, and half a dozen blooms of thick white anti-laser smoke burst into the close air. The next time a defense laser fired, the walls flashed with mad iridescence, and the smoke of burning plastic filled the air, but no one died. Miller pressed forward and up a red metal ramp. A welding charge flared, and a service door swung open.

The corridors of Thoth Station were wide and roomy, with long swaths of ivy grown in carefully tended spirals, niches every few feet with tastefully lit bonsai. Soft light the pure white of sunlight made the place feel like a spa or a rich man's private residence. The floors were carpet.

The HUD in his armor flickered, marking the path the assault was meant to take. Miller's heart stepped up to a fast, constant flutter, but his mind seemed to grow perfectly still. At the first intersection, a riot barrier was manned by a dozen men in Protogen security uniforms. The OPA troops hung back, using the curve of the ceiling as cover. What suppressing fire there was came in kneecap low.

The grenades were perfectly round, not even a hole where the pin had been pulled. They didn't roll as well on the soft industrial carpet as they would have on stone or tiling, so one of the three went off before it reached the barrier. The concussion was like being hit in the ears with a hammer; the narrow, sealed corridors channeled the blast back at them almost as much as at the enemy. But the riot barrier shattered, and the Protogen security men fell back.

As they all rushed forward, Miller heard his new, temporary compatriots whooping with the first taste of victory. The sound was muffled, as if they were a long way away. Maybe his earpieces hadn't dampened the blast as much as they were supposed to. Making the rest of the assault with blown eardrums wouldn't be easy.

But then Fred came on, and his voice was clear enough.

"Do not advance! Hold back!"

It was almost enough. The OPA ground force hesitated, Fred's orders pulling at them like a leash. These weren't troops. They weren't even cops. They were a Belter irregular militia; discipline and respect for authority weren't natural to them. They slowed. They got careful. So rounding the corner, they didn't walk into the trap.

The next corridor was long and straight, leading—the HUD suggested—to a service ramp up toward the control center. It looked empty, but a third of the way to the curve horizon, the carpeting started to fly apart in ragged tufts. One of the boys beside Miller grunted and went down.

"They are using low-shrapnel rounds and bouncing them off the curve," Fred said into all their ears at once. "Bank-shot ricochet. Stay low, and do exactly as I say."

The calm in the Earther's voice had more effect than his shouting had. Miller thought he might have been imagining it, but there also seemed to be a deeper tone. A certainty. The Butcher of Anderson Station doing what he did best, leading his troops against the tactics and strategies he'd helped create back when he'd been the enemy.

Slowly, the OPA forces moved forward, up one level, and then the next, then the next. The air grew hazy with smoke and ablated paneling. The wide corridors opened into broad plazas and squares, as airy as prison yards, with the Protogen forces in the guard towers. The side corridors were locked down, local security trying to channel them into situations where they could be caught in crossfire.

It didn't work. The OPA forced open the doors, taking cover in display-rich rooms, something between lecture halls and manufacturing complexes. Twice, unarmored civilians, still at their work despite the ongoing assault, attacked them when they entered. The OPA boys mowed them down. Part of Miller's mind—the part that was still a cop and not a soldier—twitched at that. They were civilians. Killing them was, at the very least, bad form. But then Julie whispered in the back of his mind, *No one here is innocent*, and he had to agree.

The operations center was a third of the way up the station's slight gravity well, defended better than anything they had seen so far. Miller and five others, directed by the all-knowing voice of Fred, took cover in a narrow service corridor, keeping a steady suppressing fire up the main corridor toward ops, and making sure no Protogen counterattack would go unanswered. Miller checked his assault weapon and was surprised to see how much ammunition was left.

"Oi, Pampaw," the kid next to him said, and Miller smiled, recognizing Diogo's voice behind the face mask. "Day's the day, passa?"

"I've seen worse," Miller agreed, then paused. He tried to scratch his injured elbow, but the armor plates kept anything satisfying from happening.

"Beccas tu?" Diogo asked.

"No, I'm fine. It's just... this place. I don't get it. It looks like a spa, and it's built like a prison."

The boy's hands shifted in query. Miller shook his fist in response, thinking through the ideas as he spoke.

"It's all long sight lines and locked-down side passages," Miller said. "If I was going to build a place like this, I'd—"

The air sang, and Diogo went down, his head snapping back as he fell. Miller yelped and wheeled. Behind them in the side corridor, two figures in Protogen security uniform dove for cover. Something hissed through the air by Miller's left ear. Something else bounced off the breastplate of his fancy Martian armor like a hammer blow. He didn't think about raising his assault weapon; it was just there, coughing out return fire like an extension of his will. The other three OPA soldiers turned to help.

"Get back," Miller barked. "Keep your fucking eyes on the main corridor! I'm on this."

Stupid, Miller told himself, *stupid to let them get behind us. Stupid to stop and talk in the middle of a firefight*. He should have known better, and now, because he'd lost focus, the boy was...

Laughing?

Diogo sat up, lifted his own assault weapon, and peppered the side corridor with rounds. He got unsteadily to his feet, then whooped like a child who'd just gotten off a thrill ride. A wide streak of white goo stretched from his collarbone up across the right side of his face mask. Behind it, Diogo was grinning. Miller shook his head.

"What the hell are they using crowd suppression rounds for?" he said to himself as much as the boy. "They think this is a riot?"

"Forward teams," Fred said in Miller's ear, "get ready. We're moving in five. Four. Three. Two. Go!"

We don't know what we're getting into here, Miller thought as he joined the sprint down the corridor, pressing toward the assault's final target. A wide ramp led up to a set of blast doors done in

wood-grain veneer. Something detonated behind them, but Miller kept his head low and didn't look back. The press of bodies jostling in their ragtag armor grew thicker, and Miller stumbled on something soft. A body in Protogen uniform.

"Give us some room!" a woman at the front shouted. Miller pushed toward her, cutting through the crowd of OPA soldiers with his shoulder and elbow. The woman shouted again as he reached her.

"What's the problem?" Miller shouted.

"I can't cut through this bitch with all these dick-lickers pushing me," she said, lifting a cutting torch already glowing white at the edge. Miller nodded and slid his assault rifle into the sling on his back. He grabbed two of the nearest shoulders, shook the men until they noticed him, and then locked his elbows with theirs.

"Just need to give the techs some room," Miller said, and together they waded into their own men, pushing them back. *How many battles, all through history, fell apart at moments like this?* he wondered. *The victory all but delivered until allied forces started tripping over each other.* The welder popped to life behind him, the heat pressing at his back like a hand even in armor.

At the edge of the crowd, automatic weapons gurgled and choked.

"How's it going back there?" Miller shouted over his shoulder.

The woman didn't answer. Hours seemed to pass, though it couldn't have been more than five minutes. The haze of hot metal and aerosolized plastic filled the air.

The welding torch turned off with a pop. Over his shoulder, Miller saw the bulkhead sag and shift. The tech placed a card-thin jack into the gap between plates, activated it, and stood back. The station around them groaned as a new set of pressures and strains reshaped the metal. The bulkhead opened.

"Come on," Miller shouted, then tucked his head and moved through the new passageway, up a carpeted ramp, and into the ops center. A dozen men and women looked up from their stations, eyes wide with fear.

"You're under arrest!" Miller shouted as the OPA soldiers boiled in around him. "Well, no you're not, but... shit. Put your hands up and back away from the controls!"

One of the men—tall as a Belter, but built solid as a man in full gravity—sighed. He wore a good suit, linen and raw silk, without the lines and folds that spoke of computer tailoring.

"Do what they say," the linen suit said. He sounded peeved, but not frightened.

Miller's eyes narrowed.

"Mr. Dresden?"

The suit raised a carefully shaped eyebrow, paused, and nodded.

"Been looking for you," Miller said.



Fred walked into the ops center like he belonged there. With a tighter set of the shoulders and a degree's shift of the spine, the master engineer of Tycho Station was gone, and the general was in his place. He looked over the ops center, sucking in every detail with a flicker of his eyes, then nodded at one of the senior OPA techs.

"All locked down, sir," the tech said. "The station's yours."

Miller had almost never been present to witness another man's moment of absolution. It was such a rare thing, and so utterly private that it approached the spiritual. Decades ago, this man—
younger, fitter, not as much gray in his hair—had taken a space station, wading up to his knees in the gore and death of Belters, and Miller saw the barely perceptible relaxation in his jaw, the opening of his chest that meant that burden had lifted. Maybe it wasn't gone, but it was near enough. It was more than most people managed in a lifetime.

He wondered what it would feel like if he ever got the chance.

"Miller?" Fred said. "I hear you've got someone we'd like to talk to."

Dresden unfolded from his chair, ignoring the sidearms and assault weapons as if such things didn't apply to him.

"Colonel Johnson," Dresden said. "I should have expected that a man of your caliber would be behind all this. My name is Dresden."

He handed Fred a matte black business card. Fred took it as if by reflex but didn't look at it.

"You're the one responsible for this?"

Dresden gave him a chilly smile and looked around before he answered.

"I'd say you're responsible for at least part of it," Dresden said. "You've just killed quite a few people who were simply doing their jobs. But maybe we can dispense with the moral finger-pointing and get down to what actually matters?"

Fred's smile reached all the way to his eyes.

"And what exactly would that be?"

"Negotiating terms," Dresden replied. "You are a man of experience. You understand that your victory here puts you in an untenable position. Protogen is one of the most powerful corporations on Earth. The OPA has attacked it, and the longer you try to hold it, the worse the reprisals will be."

"Is that so?"

"Of course it is," Dresden said, waving Fred's tone away with a dismissing hand. Miller shook his head. The man genuinely didn't understand what was going on. "You've taken your hostages. Well, here we are. We can wait until Earth sends a few dozen battleships and negotiate while you look down the barrels, or we can end this now."

"You're asking me... how much money I want to take my people and just leave," Fred said.

"If money's what you want," Dresden said with a shrug. "Weapons. Ordinance. Medical supplies. Whatever it is you need to prosecute your little war and get this over with quickly."

"I know what you did on Eros," Fred said quietly.

Dresden chuckled. The sound made Miller's flesh crawl.

"Mr. Johnson," Dresden said. "*Nobody* knows what we did on Eros. And every minute I have to spend playing games with you is one I can't use more productively elsewhere. I will swear this: You are in the best bargaining position right now that you will ever have. There is no incentive for you to draw this out."

"And you're offering?"

Dresden spread his hands. "Anything you like and amnesty besides. As long as it gets you out of here and lets us return to our work. We both win."

Fred laughed. It was mirthless.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "You'll give me all the kingdoms of the Earth if I just bow down and do one act of worship for you?"

Dresden cocked his head. "I don't know the reference."

Chapter Forty-One: Holden

The *Rocinante* docked with Thoth Station on the last gasps from her maneuvering thrusters. Holden felt the station's docking clamps grab the hull with a thud, and then gravity returned at a low one-third g. The close detonation of a plasma warhead had torn off the outer door of the crew airlock and flooded the chamber with superheated gas, effectively welding it shut. That meant they'd be using the cargo airlock at the stern of the ship and spacewalking over to the station.

That was fine; they were still in their suits. The *Roci* had more holes now than the air cycling system could keep up with, and their shipboard O2 supply had been vented into space by the same explosion that killed the airlock.

Alex dropped from the cockpit, face hidden by his helmet, his belly unmistakable even in his atmosphere suit. Naomi finished locking her station and powering down the ship, then joined Alex, and the three of them climbed down the crew ladder to the ship's aft. Amos was waiting there, buckling an EVA pack onto his suit and charging it with compressed nitrogen from a storage tank. The mechanic had assured Holden that the EVA maneuvering pack had enough thrust to overcome the station's spin and get them back up to an airlock.

No one spoke. Holden had expected banter. He'd expected to want to banter. But the damaged *Roci* seemed to call for silence. Maybe awe.

Holden leaned against the cargo bay bulkhead and closed his eyes. The only sounds he could hear were the steady hiss of his air supply and the faint static of the comm. He could smell nothing through his broken and blood-clogged nose, and his mouth was filled with a coppery taste. But even so, he couldn't keep a smile off his face.

They'd won. They'd flown right up to Protogen, taken everything the evil bastards could throw at them, and bloodied *their* noses. Even now OPA soldiers were storming their station, shooting the people who'd helped kill Eros.

Holden decided that he was okay with not feeling any remorse for them. The moral complexity of the situation had grown past his ability to process it, so he just relaxed in the warm glow of victory instead.

The comm chirped and Amos said, "Ready to move."

Holden nodded, remembered he was still in his atmosphere suit, and said, "Okay. Hook on, everyone."

He, Alex, and Naomi pulled tethers from their suits and clamped them to Amos' broad waist. Amos cycled the cargo airlock and flew out the door on puffs of gas. They were immediately hurled away from the ship by station spin, but Amos quickly got them under control and flew back up toward Thoth's emergency airlock.

As Amos flew them past the *Roci*, Holden studied the outside of the ship and tried to catalog repair requirements. There were a dozen holes in both her bow and aft that corresponded to holes all along the inside of the ship. The gauss cannon rounds the interceptor had fired probably hadn't even slowed appreciably on their path through the *Roci*. The crew was just lucky none of them had found the reactor and punched a hole in it.

There was also a huge dent in the false superstructure that made the ship look like a compressed gas freighter. Holden knew it would match an equally ugly wound in the armored outer hull. The

damage hadn't extended to the inner hull, or the ship would have cracked in two.

With the damage to the airlock, and the total loss of their oxygen storage tanks and recycling systems, there would be millions of dollars in damage and weeks in dry dock, assuming they could make it to a dry dock somewhere.

Maybe the *Molinari* could give them a tow.

Amos flashed the EVA pack's yellow warning lights three times, and the station's emergency airlock door cycled open. He flew them inside, where four Belters in combat armor waited.

As soon as the airlock finished cycling, Holden pulled his helmet off and touched his nose. It felt twice its normal size and throbbed with every heartbeat.

Naomi reached out and held his face still, her thumbs on either side of his nose, her touch surprisingly gentle. She turned his head from side to side, examining the injury, then let go.

"It'll be crooked without some cosmetic surgery," she said. "But you were too pretty before anyway. It'll give your face character."

Holden felt a slow grin coming on, but before he could reply, one of the OPA troops started talking.

"Watched the fight, hermano. You guys really kicked some ass."

"Thanks," said Alex. "How's it goin' in here?"

The soldier with the most stars on his OPA insignia said, "Less resistance than expected, but the Protogen security's been fighting for every foot of real estate. Even some of the eggheads have been coming at us. We've had to shoot a few."

He pointed at the inner airlock door.

"Fred's heading up to ops. Wants you people up there, pronto."

"Lead the way," Holden replied, his nose turning it into *lee da way*.



"How's that leg, Cap?" Amos asked as they walked along the station corridor. Holden realized he'd forgotten about the limp his gunshot to the calf had left him.

"Doesn't hurt, but the muscle doesn't flex as much," he replied. "Yours?"

Amos grinned and glanced down at the leg that still limped from the fracture he'd suffered on the *Donnager* months earlier.

"No biggie," he said. "The ones that don't kill you don't count."

Holden started to reply, then stopped when the group rounded a corner into a slaughterhouse. They were clearly coming up behind the assault team, because now the corridor floor was littered with bodies, the walls with bullet holes and scorch marks. To his relief, Holden saw a lot more bodies in Protogen security armor than in OPA gear. But there were enough dead Belters on the floor to make his stomach twist. When he passed a dead man in a lab coat, he had to stop himself from spitting on the floor. The security guys had maybe made a bad decision in going to work for the wrong team, but the scientists on this station had killed a million and a half people just to see what would happen. They couldn't be dead enough for Holden's comfort.

Something tugged at him, and he paused. Lying next to the dead scientist was what looked like a kitchen knife.

"Huh," Holden said. "He didn't come at you guys with that, did he?"

"Yeah, crazy, no?" said one of their escorts. "I heard of bringing a knife to a gunfight, but..."

"Ops is up ahead," said the ranking trooper. "General's waiting."



Holden entered the station's ops center and saw Fred, Miller, a bunch of OPA troops, and one stranger in an expensive-looking suit. A line of technicians and operations staff in Protogen uniform had their wrists cuffed and were being led away. The room was covered deck to ceiling in screens and monitors, most of which were spooling text data too fast to read.

"Let me get this straight," Fred was saying. "You'll give me all the kingdoms of the Earth if I just bow down and do one act of worship for you?"

"I don't know the reference," the stranger said.

Whatever else they were about to say stopped when Miller noticed Holden and tapped Fred on the shoulder. Holden could swear that the detective gave him a warm smile, though on his dour face it was hard to tell.

"Jim," Fred said, then gestured for him to come closer. He was reading a matte black business card. "Meet Antony Dresden, executive VP of bio research for Protogen, and the architect of the Eros project."

The asshole in the suit actually reached out like he was going to shake hands. Holden ignored him.

"Fred," he said. "Casualties?"

"Shockingly low."

"Half their security had non-lethals," Miller said. "Riot control. Sticky rounds. Like that."

Holden nodded and then shook his head and frowned.

"I saw a lot of Protogen security bodies out there in the corridor. Why have so many guys and then give them weapons that can't repel boarders?"

"Good question," Miller agreed.

Dresden chuckled.

"This is what I mean, Mr. Johnson," Dresden said. He turned to Holden. "Jim? Well then, Jim. The fact that you don't understand this station's security needs tells me that you have no idea what you've become involved with. And I think you know that as well as I do. As I was saying to Fred here—"

"Antony, you need to shut the fuck up," Holden said, surprised by the sudden flush of anger. Dresden looked disappointed.

The bastard had no right to be comfortable. Condescending. Holden wanted the man terrified, begging for his life, not sneering behind his cultured accent.

"Amos, if he talks to me again without being told to, break his jaw."

"My pleasure, Captain," Amos said, and took half a step forward.

Dresden smirked at the ham-fisted threat but kept his mouth shut.

"What do we know?" Holden asked, aiming the question at Fred.

"We know the Eros data is coming here, and we know this piece of shit is in charge. We'll know more once we've taken the place apart."

Holden turned to look at Dresden again, taking in the blue blood European good looks, the gym-sculpted physique, the expensive haircut. Even now, surrounded by men with guns, Dresden managed to look like he was in charge. Holden could imagine him glancing down at his watch and wondering how much more of his expensive time this boarding party was going to take.

Holden said, "I need to ask him something."

Fred nodded. "You earned it."

"Why?" Holden asked. "I want to know why."

Dresden's smile was almost pitying, and he stuck his hands into his pockets as casually as a man talking sports at a dockside bar.

" 'Why' is a very big question," Dresden said. "Because God wanted it that way? Or perhaps you want to narrow it for me."

"Why Eros?"

"Well, Jim—"

"You can call me Captain Holden. I'm the guy that found your lost ship, so I've seen the video from Phoebe. I know what the protomolecule is."

"Really!" Dresden said, his smile becoming half a degree more genuine. "I have you to thank for turning the viral agent over to us on Eros. Losing the *Anubis* was going to put our timeline back months. Finding the infected body already there on the station was a godsend."

I knew it. I fucking knew it, Holden thought. Out loud, he said, "Why?"

"You know what the agent is," Dresden said, at a loss for the first time since Holden had come into the room. "I don't know what more I can tell you. This is the most important thing to ever happen to the human race. It's simultaneously proof that we are not alone in the universe, and our ticket out of the limitations that bind us to our little bubbles of rock and air."

"You aren't answering me," Holden said, hating the way his broken nose made his voice slightly comical when he wanted to be threatening. "I want to know *why* you killed a million and a half people."

Fred cleared his throat, but he didn't interrupt. Dresden looked from Holden to the colonel and back again.

"I *am* answering, Captain. A million and a half people is small potatoes. What we're working with here is bigger than that," Dresden said, then moved over to a chair and sat down, pulling up his pants leg as he crossed his knees, so as not to stretch the fabric. "Are you familiar with Genghis Khan?"

"What?" Holden and Fred said at almost the same instant. Miller only stared at Dresden with a blank expression, tapping the barrel of his pistol against his own armored thigh.

"Genghis Khan. There are some historians who claim that Genghis Khan killed or displaced one quarter of the total human population of Earth during his conquest," Dresden said. "He did that in pursuit of an empire that would begin falling apart as soon as he died. In today's scale, that would mean killing nearly ten billion people in order to affect a generation. A generation and a half. Eros isn't even a rounding error by comparison."

"You really don't care," Fred said, his voice quiet.

"And unlike Khan, we aren't doing it to build a brief empire. I know what you think. That we're trying to aggrandize ourselves. Grab power."

"You don't want to?" Holden said.

"Of course we do." Dresden's voice was cutting. "But you're thinking too small. Building humanity's greatest empire is like building the world's largest anthill. Insignificant. There is a civilization out there that built the protomolecule and hurled it at us over two billion years ago. They were *already* gods at that point. What have they become since then? With another two billion years to advance?"

With a growing dread, Holden listened to Dresden speak. This speech had the air of something spoken before. Perhaps many times. And it had worked. It had convinced powerful people. It was why Protogen had stealth ships from the Earth shipyards and seemingly limitless behind-the-scenes support.

"We have a terrifying amount of catching up to do, gentlemen," Dresden was saying. "But fortunately we have the tool of our enemy to use in doing it."

"Catching up?" a soldier to Holden's left said. Dresden nodded at the man and smiled.

"The protomolecule can alter the host organism at the molecular level; it can create genetic change on the fly. Not just DNA, but any stable replicator. But it is only a machine. It doesn't think. It follows instructions. If we learn how to alter that programming, then we become the architects of that change."

Holden interrupted. "If it was supposed to wipe out life on Earth and replace it with whatever the protomolecule's creators wanted, why turn it loose?"

"Excellent question," Dresden said, holding up one finger like a college professor about to deliver a lecture. "The protomolecule doesn't come with a user's manual. In fact, we've never before

been able to actually watch it carry out its program. The molecule requires significant mass before it develops enough processing power to fulfill its directives. Whatever they are.”

Dresden pointed at the screens covered with data around them.

“We are going to watch it at work. See what it intends to do. How it goes about doing it. And, hopefully, learn how to change that program in the process.”

“You could do that with a vat of bacteria,” Holden said.

“I’m not interested in remaking bacteria,” Dresden said.

“You’re fucking insane,” Amos said, and took another step toward Dresden. Holden put a hand on the big mechanic’s shoulder.

“So,” Holden said. “You figure out how the bug works, and then what?”

“Then *everything*. Belters who can work outside a ship without wearing a suit. Humans capable of sleeping for hundreds of years at a time flying colony ships to the stars. No longer being bound to the millions of years of evolution inside one atmosphere of pressure at one g, slaves to oxygen and water. We decide what we want to be, and we reprogram ourselves to be that. That’s what the protomolecule gives us.”

Dresden had stood back up as he’d delivered this speech, his face shining with the zeal of a prophet.

“What we are doing is the best and only hope of humanity’s survival. When we go out there, we will be facing *gods*.”

“And if we don’t go out?” Fred asked. He sounded thoughtful.

“They’ve already fired a doomsday weapon at us once,” Dresden said.

The room was silent for a moment. Holden felt his certainty slip. He hated everything about Dresden’s argument, but he couldn’t quite see his way past it. He knew in his bones that something about it was dead wrong, but he couldn’t find the words.

Naomi’s voice startled him.

“Did it convince them?” she asked.

“Excuse me?” Dresden said.

“The scientists. The technicians. Everyone you needed to make it happen. They actually had to do this. They had to watch the video of people dying all over Eros. They had to design those radioactive murder chambers. So unless you managed to round up every serial killer in the solar system and send them through a postgraduate program, how did you do this?”

“We modified our science team to remove ethical restraints.”

Half a dozen clues clicked into place in Holden’s head.

“Sociopaths,” he said. “You turned them into sociopaths.”

“High-functioning sociopaths,” Dresden said with a nod. He seemed pleased to explain it. “And extremely curious ones. As long as we kept them supplied with interesting problems to solve and unlimited resources, they remained quite content.”

“And a big security team armed with riot control rounds for when they aren’t,” Fred said.

“Yes, there are occasional issues,” Dresden said. He looked around, the slightest frown creasing his forehead. “I know. You think it’s monstrous, but I am saving the human *race*. I am giving humanity the *stars*. You disapprove? Fine. Let me ask you this. Can you save Eros? Right now.”

“No,” Fred said, “but we can—”

“Waste the data,” Dresden said. “You can make certain that every man, woman, and child who died on Eros died for nothing.”

The room was silent. Fred was frowning, his arms crossed. Holden understood the struggle going on in the man’s mind. Everything Dresden said was repulsive and eerie and rang too much of the truth.

“Or,” Dresden said, “we can negotiate a price, you can go on your way, and I can—”

“Okay. That’s enough,” Miller said, speaking for the first time since Dresden had begun his pitch. Holden glanced over at the detective. His flat expression had gone stony. He wasn’t tapping the

barrel of his pistol against his leg.
Oh, shit.

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Chapter Forty-Two: Miller

Dresden didn't see it coming. Even as Miller raised the pistol, the man's eyes didn't register a threat. All he saw was Miller with an object in his hand that happened to be a gun. A dog would have known to be scared, but not Dresden.

"Miller!" Holden shouted from a great distance. "Don't!"

Pulling the trigger was simple. A soft click, the bounce of metal against his glove-cushioned palm, and then again two more times. Dresden's head snapped back, blooming red. Blood spattered a wide screen, obscuring the data stream. Miller stepped close, fired two more rounds into Dresden's chest, considered for a moment, then holstered the pistol.

The room was silent. The OPA soldiers were all looking at each other or at Miller, surprised, even after the press of the assault, by the sudden violence. Naomi and Amos were looking at Holden, and the captain was staring at the corpse. Holden's injured face was set as a mask; fury, outrage, maybe even despair. Miller understood that. Doing the obvious thing still wasn't natural for Holden. There had been a time when it hadn't come so easily for Miller either.

Only Fred didn't flinch or look nervous. The colonel didn't smile or frown, and he didn't look away.

"What the fuck was that?" Holden said through his blood-plugged nose. "You shot him in cold blood!"

"Yeah," Miller said.

Holden shook his head. "What about a trial? What about justice? You just decide, and that's the way it goes?"

"I'm a cop," Miller said, surprised by the apology in his voice.

"Are you even human anymore?"

"All right, gentlemen!" Fred said, his voice booming out in the quiet. "Show's over. Let's get back to work. I want the decryption team in here. We've got prisoners to evacuate and a station to strip down."

Holden looked from Fred to Miller to the still-dying Dresden. His jaw was set with rage.

"Hey, Miller," Holden said.

"Yeah?" Miller said softly. He knew what was coming.

"Find your own ride home," the captain of the *Rocinante* said, then spun and stalked out of the room, his crew following. Miller watched them walk away. Regret tapped gently at his heart, but there was nothing to be done about it. The broken bulkhead seemed to swallow them. Miller turned to Fred.

"Hitch a lift?"

"You're wearing our colors," Fred said. "We'll get you as far as Tycho."

"I appreciate that," Miller said. Then, a moment later: "You know it had to be done."

Fred didn't reply. There wasn't anything to say.



Thoth Station was injured, but not dead. Not yet. Word of the sociopathic crew spread fast, and the OPA forces took the warning to heart. The occupation and control phase of the attack lasted forty hours instead of the twenty that it would have taken with normal prisoners. With humans. Miller did what he could with prisoner control.

The OPA kids were well intentioned, but most of them had never worked with captive populations before. They didn't know how to cuff someone at the wrist and elbow so that the perp couldn't get his hands out in front to strangle them. They didn't know how to restrain someone with a length of cord around the neck so that the prisoner couldn't choke himself to death, by accident or intentionally. Half of them didn't even know how to pat someone down. Miller knew all of it like a game he'd played since childhood. In five hours, he found twenty hidden blades on the science crew alone. He hardly had to think about it.

A second wave of transport ships arrived: personnel haulers that looked ready to spill their air out into the vacuum if you spat on them, salvage trawlers already dismantling the shielding and superstructure of the station, supply ships boxing and packing the precious equipment and looting the pharmacies and food banks. By the time news of the assault reached Earth, the station would be stripped to a skeleton and its people hidden away in unlicensed prison cells throughout the Belt.

Protogen would know sooner, of course. They had outposts much closer than the inner planets. There was a calculus of response time and possible gain. The mathematics of piracy and war. Miller knew it, but he didn't let it worry him. Those were decisions for Fred and his attachés to make. Miller had taken more than enough initiative for one day.

Posthuman.

It was a word that came up in the media every five or six years, and it meant different things every time. Neural regrowth hormone? Posthuman. Sex robots with inbuilt pseudo intelligence? Posthuman. Self-optimizing network routing? Posthuman. It was a word from advertising copy, breathless and empty, and all he'd ever thought it really meant was that the people using it had a limited imagination about what exactly humans were capable of.

Now, as he escorted a dozen captives in Protogen uniforms to a docked transport heading God-knew-where, the word was taking on new meaning.

Are you even human anymore?

All *posthuman* meant, literally speaking, was what you were when you weren't human anymore. Protomolecule aside, Protogen aside, Dresden and his Mengele-as-Genghis-Khan self-righteous fantasies aside, Miller thought that maybe he'd been ahead of the curve all along. Maybe he'd been posthuman for years.

The min-max point came forty hours later, and it was time to go. The OPA had skeletonized the station, and it was time to get out before anyone came along with vengeance in mind. Miller sat in a crash couch, his blood dancing with spent amphetamines and his mind slipping into and out of exhaustion psychosis. The thrust gravity was like a pillow over his face. He was vaguely aware that he was weeping. It didn't mean anything.

In Miller's haze, Dresden was talking again, pouring out promises and lies, half-truths and visions. Miller could see the words themselves like a dark smoke, coalescing into the spilling black filament of the protomolecule. The threads of it were reaching toward Holden, Amos, Naomi. He tried to find his gun, to stop it, to do the obvious thing. His despairing shout woke him, and he remembered he'd already won.

Julie sat beside him, her hand cool against his forehead. Her smile was gentle, understanding. Forgiving.

Sleep, she said, and his mind fell into the deep black.



"Oi, Pampaw," Diogo said. "Acima and out, sabez?"

It was Miller's tenth morning back on Tycho, his seventh hot-bunking in Diogo's closet-sized apartment. He could tell from the buzz in the boy's voice it would have to be one of the last. Fish and company start to smell after three days. He rolled off the thin bed, ran fingers through his hair, and nodded. Diogo stripped down and crawled into the bed without speaking. He stank of liquor and cheap tub-grown marijuana.

Miller's terminal told him that the second shift had ended two hours before, the third shift halfway into its morning. He gathered his things in his suitcase, turned off the lights on Diogo's already snoring form, and trundled out to the public showers to spend a few of his remaining credits trying to look less homeless.

The pleasant surprise of his return to Tycho Station was the boost of money in his account. The OPA, meaning Fred Johnson, had paid him for his time on Thoth. He hadn't asked for it, and there was part of him that wanted to turn the payment down. If there had been an alternative, he might have. Since there wasn't, he tried to stretch the funds out as far as they would go and appreciate the irony. He and Captain Shaddid were on the same payroll after all.

For the first few days after his return to Tycho, Miller had expected to see the attack on Thoth in the newsfeeds. EARTH CORPORATION LOSES RESEARCH STATION TO CRAZED BELTERS, or some such. He should have been finding a job or a place to sleep that wasn't charity. He meant to. But the hours seemed to dissolve as he sat in the bar or the lounges, watching the screens for just a few more minutes.

The Martian navy had suffered a series of harassing attacks by Belters. A half ton of super-accelerated gravel had forced two of their battleships to change course. A slowdown in water harvesting on Saturn's rings was either an illegal work stoppage, and therefore treasonous, or the natural response to increased security needs. Two Earth-owned mining operations had been attacked by either Mars or the OPA. Four hundred people were dead. Earth's blockade of Mars was entering its third month. A coalition of scientists and terraforming specialists were screaming that the cascading processes were in danger, and that while the war would be over in a year or two, the loss of supplies would set the terraforming effort back generations. Everyone blamed everyone else for Eros. Thoth Station didn't exist.

It would, though.

With most of the Martian navy still in the outer planets, Earth's siege was a brittle thing. Time was getting short. Either the Martians would go home and try facing down the somewhat older, somewhat slower, but more numerous ships of Earth, or they'd go straight for the planet itself. Earth was still the source of a thousand things that couldn't be grown elsewhere, but if someone got happy or cocksure or desperate, it wouldn't take much to start dropping rocks down the gravity wells.

All of it as a distraction.

There was an old joke. Miller didn't remember where he'd heard it. Girl's at her own father's funeral, meets this really cute guy. They talk, hit it off, but he leaves before she can get his number. Girl doesn't know how to track the guy down.

So a week later, she kills her mom.

Big laugh.

It was the logic of Protogen, of Dresden, of Thoth. *Here is the problem*, they said to themselves, *and there is the solution*. That it was drowned in innocent blood was as trivial as the font the reports were printed in. They had disconnected themselves from humanity. Shut off the cell clusters in their brains that made life besides their own sacred. Or valuable. Or worth saving. All it had cost them was every human connection.

Funny how familiar that sounded.

The guy who walked into the bar and nodded to Miller was one of Diogo's friends. Twenty years old or maybe a little south of that. A veteran of Thoth Station, just like Miller. He didn't remember the kid's name, but he'd seen him around often enough to know that the way he held himself was

different than usual. Tight-wound. Miller tapped the mute on his terminal's newsfeed and made his way over.

"Hey," he said, and the kid looked up sharply. The face was tense, but a softer, intentional ease tried to mask it. It was just Diogo's old grandpa. The one, everyone on Thoth knew, who'd killed the biggest dick in the universe. It won Miller some points, so the kid smiled and nodded to the stool beside him.

"All pretty fucked up, isn't it?" Miller said.

"You don't know the half," the kid said. He had a clipped accent. Belter by his height, but educated. Technician, probably. The kid tabbed in a drink order, and the bar offered up a glass of clear fluid so volatile Miller could watch it evaporate. The kid drank it down with a gulp.

"Doesn't work," Miller said.

The kid looked over. Miller shrugged.

"They say drinking helps, but it doesn't," Miller said.

"No?"

"Nope. Sex sometimes, if you've got a girl who'll talk to you after. Or target practice. Working out, sometimes. Liquor doesn't make you feel better. Just makes you not so worried about feeling bad."

The kid laughed and shook his head. He was on the edge of talking, so Miller sat back and let the quiet do his work for him. He figured the kid had killed someone, probably on Thoth, and it was sneaking up on him. But instead of telling the story, the kid took Miller's terminal, keyed in a few local codes, and handed it back. A huge menu of feeds appeared—video, audio, air pressure and content, radiological. It took Miller half a second to understand what he was seeing. They'd cracked the encryption on the Eros feeds.

He was looking at the protomolecule in action. He was seeing Juliette Andromeda Mao's corpse writ large. For a moment, his imagined Julie flickered beside him.

"If you ever wonder if you did the right thing shooting that guy," the kid said, "look at that."

Miller opened a feed. A long corridor, wide enough for twenty people to walk abreast. The flooring was wet and undulating like the surface of a canal. Something small rolled awkwardly through the mush. When Miller zoomed in, it was a human torso—rib cage, spine, trailing lengths of what used to be intestines and were now the long black threads of the protomolecule—pushing itself along on the stump of an arm. There was no head. The feed output bar showed there was sound, and Miller undid the mute. The high, mindless piping reminded him of mentally ill children singing to themselves.

"It's all like that," the kid said. "Whole station's crawling with... shit like that."

"What's it doing?"

"Building something," the kid said, and shuddered. "I thought you should see it."

"Yeah?" Miller said, his gaze nailed to the screen. "What did I ever do to you?"

The kid laughed.

"Everyone thinks you're a hero for killing that guy," the kid said. "Everyone thinks we should push every last prisoner we took off that station out an airlock."

Probably should, Miller thought, *if we can't make them human again*. He switched the feed. The casino level where he and Holden had been, or else a section very like it. A webwork of something like bones linked ceiling and roof. Black sluglike things a yard long slithered up and between them. The sound was a hushing, like the recordings he'd heard of surf against a beach. He switched again. The port, with bulkheads closed and encrusted with huge nautilus spirals that seemed to shift while he watched them.

"Everyone thinks you're a fucking hero," the kid said, and this time, it bit a little. Miller shook his head.

"Nah," he said. "Just a guy who used to be a cop."



Why should going into a firefight, charging into an enemy station filled with people and automatic systems built to kill you, seem less frightening than talking to people who you shipped with for weeks?

And still.

It was third shift, and the bar at the observation platform was set to imitate night. The air was scented with something smoky that wasn't smoke. A piano and bass dueled lazily with each other while a man's voice lamented in Arabic. Dim lights glowed at the bases of the tables, casting soft shadows up across faces and bodies, emphasizing the customers' legs and bellies and breasts. The shipyards beyond the windows were busy as always. If he went close, he could pick out the *Rocinante*, still recovering from its wounds. Not dead, and being made stronger.

Amos and Naomi were at a table in a corner. No sign of Alex. No sign of Holden. That made it easier. Not easy, but closer. He made his way toward them. Naomi saw him first, and Miller read the discomfort in her expression, covered over as quickly as it appeared. Amos turned to see what she'd been reacting to, and the corners of his mouth and eyes didn't shift into a frown or a smile. Miller scratched his arm even though it didn't itch.

"Hey," he said. "Buy you folks a round?"

The silence lasted a beat longer than it should have, and then Naomi forced a smile.

"Sure. Just one. We've got... that thing. For the captain."

"Oh yeah," Amos said, lying even more awkwardly than Naomi had, making his awareness of the fact part of the message. "The thing. That's important."

Miller sat, lifted a hand for the waiter to see, and, when the man nodded, leaned forward with his elbows on the table. It was the seated version of a fighter's crouch, bent forward with his arms protecting the soft places in his neck and belly. It was the way a man stood when he expected injury.

The waiter came, and then beers all around. Miller paid for them with the OPA's money and took a sip.

"How's the ship?" he asked at last.

"Coming together," Naomi said. "They really banged the hell out of her."

"She'll still fly," Amos said. "She's one tough bitch."

"That's good. When—" Miller said, then tripped on his words and had to start again. "When are you folks shipping out?"

"Whenever the captain says," Amos said with a shrug. "We're airtight now, so could go tomorrow, if he's got someplace he wants to be."

"And if Fred lets us," Naomi said, and then grimaced like she wished she'd kept silent.

"That an issue?" Miller asked. "Is the OPA leaning on Holden?"

"It's just something I was thinking about," Naomi said. "It's nothing. Look, thanks for the drink, Miller. But I really think we'd better be going."

Miller took a long breath and let it out slow.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay."

"You head out," Amos said to Naomi. "I'll catch up."

Naomi shot a confused look at the big man, but Amos only gave back a smile. It could have meant anything.

"Okay," Naomi said. "But don't be long, okay? The thing."

"For the captain," Amos said. "No worries."

Naomi rose and walked away. Her effort not to look back over her shoulder was visible. Miller looked at Amos. The lights gave the mechanic a slightly demonic appearance.

"Naomi's a good person," Amos said. "I like her, you know? Like my kid sister, only smart and I'd do her if she let me. You know?"

"Yeah," Miller said. "I like her too."

"She's not like us," Amos said, and the warmth and humor were gone.

"That's why I like her," Miller said. It was the right thing to say. Amos nodded.

"So here's the thing. As far as the captain goes, you're dipped in shit right now."

The scrim of bubbles where his beer touched the glass glowed white in the dim light. Miller gave the glass a quarter turn, watching them closely.

"Because I killed someone who needed it?" Miller asked. The bitterness in his voice wasn't surprising, but it was deeper than he'd intended. Amos didn't hear it or else didn't care.

"Because you've got a habit of that," Amos said. "Cap'n's not like that. Killing people without talking it over first makes him jumpy. You did a lot of it on Eros, but... you know."

"Yeah," Miller said.

"Thoth Station wasn't Eros. Next place we go won't be Eros either. Holden doesn't want you around."

"And the rest of you?" Miller asked.

"We don't want you around either," Amos said. His voice wasn't hard or gentle. He was talking about the gauge of a machine part. He was talking about anything. The words hit Miller in the belly, just where he'd expected it. He couldn't have blocked them.

"Here's the thing," Amos went on. "You and me, we're a lot the same. Been around. I know what I am, and my moral compass? I'll tell you, it's fucked. A few things fell different when I was a kid. I could have been those ass-bandits on Thoth. I know that. Captain couldn't have been. It's not in him. He's as close to righteous as anyone out here gets. And when he says you're out, that's just the way it is, because the way I figure it, he's probably right. Sure as hell has a better chance than I do."

"Okay," Miller said.

"Yeah," Amos said. He finished his beer. Then he finished Naomi's. And then he walked away, leaving Miller to himself and his empty gut. Outside, the *Nauvoo* fanned a glittering array of sensors, testing something or else just preening. Miller waited.

Beside him, Julie Mao leaned on the table, just where Amos had been.

So, she said. *Looks like it's just you and me now.*

"Looks like," he said.

Chapter Forty-Three: Holden

A Tycho worker in blue coveralls and a welding mask sealed up the hole in one of the galley bulkheads. Holden watched with his hand shielding his eyes from the harsh blue glare of the torch. When the plate steel was secured in place, the welder flipped her mask up to check the bead. She had blue eyes and a small mouth in a heart-shaped pixie face and a mop of red hair pulled into a bun. Her name was Sam, and she was the team leader on the *Rocinante* repair project. Amos had been chasing her for two weeks now with no success. Holden was glad, because the pixie had turned out to be one of the best mechanics he'd ever met, and he'd hate for her to focus on anything other than his ship.

"It's perfect," he said to her as she ran one gloved hand over the cooling metal.

"It's okay," she said with a shrug. "We'll grind this down smooth enough, paint it nice, then you'll never even know your ship had a boo-boo." She had a surprisingly deep voice that contrasted with her looks and her habit of using mockingly childlike phrases. Holden guessed that her appearance combined with her chosen profession had led to a lot of people underestimating her in the past. He didn't want to make that mistake.

"You've done amazing work, Sam," he said. He guessed Sam was short for something, but he'd never asked and she'd never volunteered. "I keep telling Fred how happy we are to have you in charge of this job."

"Maybe I'll get a gold star in my next report card," she said while she put her torch away and stood up. Holden tried to think of something to say to that and failed.

"Sorry," she said, turning to face him. "I appreciate your praise to the boss. And to be honest, it's been a lot of fun working on your little girl. She's quite a ship. The beating she took would have blown anything we own into scrap."

"It was a close thing, even for us," Holden replied.

Sam nodded, then began putting the rest of her gear away. As she worked, Naomi climbed down the crew ladder from the upper decks, her gray coveralls hung with electrician's tools.

"How are things up there?" Holden asked.

"Ninety percent," Naomi said as she crossed the galley to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of juice. "Give or take." She took out a second bottle and tossed it to Sam, who caught it one-handed.

"Naomi," Sam said, raising the bottle in mock toast before downing half of it in one swallow.

"Sammy," Naomi said in return with a grin.

The two of them had hit it off right away, and now Naomi was spending a lot of her off time with Sam and her Tycho crowd. Holden hated to admit it, but he missed being the only social circle Naomi had. When he did admit it to himself, like now, it made him feel like a creep.

"Golgo comp in rec, tonight?" Sam said after she'd gulped down the last of her drink.

"Think those C7 chumps are tired of getting their asses handed to them?" Naomi said in return. To Holden, it sounded like they were speaking in code.

"We can throw the first one," Sam said. "Get 'em hooked tight before we drop the hammer and wipe their roll."

"Sounds good to me," Naomi said, then tossed her empty bottle into the recycling bin and started back up the ladder. "See you at eight, then." She tossed a little wave at Holden. "Later, Captain."

Holden said, "How much longer, do you think?" to Sam's back as she finished with her tools.

Sam shrugged. "Couple days, maybe, to get her to perfect. She could probably fly now, if you're not worried about nonessentials and cosmetics."

"Thanks, again," Holden said, holding out his hand to Sam as she turned around. She shook it once, her palm heavily calloused and her grip firm. "And I hope you mop the floor with those chumps from C7."

She gave him a predatory grin.

"It's not even in doubt."



Through Fred Johnson, the OPA had provided the crew with living quarters on the station during the renovation of the *Roci*, and over the past few weeks, Holden's cabin had almost come to feel like home. Tycho had money, and they seemed to spend a lot of it on their employees. Holden had three rooms to himself, including a bath and a kitchen nook off the public space. On most stations, you'd have to be the governor to have that kind of luxury. Holden had the impression it was fairly standard for management on Tycho.

He tossed his grimy jumpsuit into the laundry bin and started a pot of coffee before jumping into his private shower. A shower every night after work: another almost unthinkable luxury. It would be easy to get distracted. To start thinking of this period of ship repair and quiet home life as normalcy, not interlude. Holden couldn't let that happen.

Earth's assault on Mars filled the newsfeeds. The domes of Mars still stood, but two showers of meteors had pocked the wide slopes of Olympus Mons. Earth claimed that it was debris from Deimos, Mars that it was an intentional threat and provocation. Martian ships from the gas giants were burning hard for the inner planets. Every day, every hour brought the moment closer when Earth would have to commit to annihilating Mars or backing away. The OPA's rhetoric seemed built to ensure that whoever won would kill them next. Holden had just helped Fred with what Earth would see as the largest act of piracy in the history of the Belt.

And a million and a half people were dying right now on Eros. Holden thought of the video feed he'd seen of what was happening to the people on the station, and shuddered even in the heat of the shower.

Oh, and aliens. Aliens that had tried to take over the Earth two billion years ago, and failed because Saturn got in the way. *Can't forget the aliens*. His brain still hadn't figured out a way to process that, so it kept trying to pretend it didn't exist.

Holden grabbed a towel and turned on the wall screen in his living room while he dried off. The air was filled with the competing scents of coffee, humidity from the shower, and the faintly grassy and floral scent Tycho pumped into all the residences. Holden tried the news, but it was speculation about the war without any new information. He changed to a competition show with incomprehensible rules and psychotically giddy contestants. He flipped through a few feeds that he could tell were comedies, because the actors paused and nodded where they expected the laughs to be.

When his jaw started aching, he realized he was gritting his teeth. He turned off the screen and threw the remote onto his bed in the next room. He wrapped the towel around his waist, then poured a mug of coffee and collapsed onto the couch just in time for his door to chime.

"What?" he yelled at the top of his lungs. No one replied. Good insulation on Tycho. He went to the door, arranging his towel for maximum modesty along the way, and yanked it open.

It was Miller. He was dressed in a rumpled gray suit he'd probably brought from Ceres, and was fumbling around with that stupid hat.

"Holden, hey—" he started, but Holden cut him off.

"What the hell do you want?" Holden said. "And are you *really* standing outside my door with your hat in your hands?"

Miller smiled, then put the hat back on his head. "You know, I always wondered what that meant."

"Now you know," Holden replied.

"You got a minute?" Miller said.

Holden waited a moment, staring up at the lanky detective. He quickly gave up. He probably outweighed Miller by twenty kilos, but it was impossible to be intimidating when the person you were staring down was a foot taller than you.

"Okay, come in," he said, then headed for his bedroom. "Let me get dressed. There's coffee."

Holden didn't wait for a reply; he just closed the bedroom door and sat on the bed. He and Miller hadn't exchanged more than a dozen words since returning to Tycho. He knew they couldn't leave it at that, as much as he might like to. He owed Miller at least the conversation where he told him to get lost.

He put on a pair of warm cotton pants and a pullover, ran one hand through his damp hair, and went back out to the living room. Miller was sitting on his couch holding a steaming mug.

"Good coffee," the detective said.

"So, let's hear it," Holden replied, sitting in a chair across from him.

Miller took a sip of his coffee and said, "Well—"

"I mean, this is the conversation where you tell me how you were right to shoot an unarmed man in the face, and how I'm just too naive to see it. Right?"

"Actually—"

"I fucking told you," Holden said, surprised to feel the heat rise in his cheeks. "No more of that judge, jury, and executioner shit or you could find your own ride, and you did it anyway."

"Yes."

The simple affirmative took Holden off guard.

"Why?"

Miller took another sip of his coffee, then set the mug down. He reached up and took off his hat, tossed it onto the couch next to him, then leaned back.

"He was going to get away with it."

"Excuse me?" Holden replied. "Did you miss the part where he confessed to everything?"

"That wasn't a confession. That was a boast. He was untouchable, and he knew it. Too much money. Too much power."

"That's bullshit. No one gets to kill a million and a half people and get away with it."

"People get away with things all the time. Guilty as hell, but something gets in the way. Evidence. Politics. I had a partner for a while, name of Muss. When Earth pulled out of Ceres—"

"Stop," Holden said. "I don't care. I don't want to hear any more of your stories about how being a cop makes you wiser and deeper and able to face the truth about humanity. As far as I can tell, all it did was break you. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Dresden and his Protogen buddies thought they could choose who lives and who dies. That sound familiar? And don't tell me it's different this time, because everyone says that, every time. And it's not."

"Wasn't revenge," Miller said, a little too hotly.

"Oh really? This wasn't about the girl in the hotel? Julie Mao?"

"Catching him was. Killing him..."

Miller sighed and nodded to himself, then got up and opened the door. He stopped in the doorway and turned around, real pain on his face.

"He was talking us into it," Miller said. "All that about getting the stars and protecting ourselves from whatever shot that thing at Earth? I was starting to think maybe he should get away with it. Maybe things were just too big for right and wrong. I'm not saying he convinced me. But he made me think maybe, you know? Just maybe."

"And for that, you shot him."

"I did."

Holden sighed, then leaned against the wall next to the open door, his arms crossed.

"Amos calls you righteous," Miller said. "You know that?"

"Amos thinks he's a bad guy because he's done some things he's ashamed of," Holden said. "He doesn't always trust himself, but the fact that he cares tells me he *isn't* a bad guy."

"Yeah—" Miller started, but Holden cut him off.

"He looks at his soul, sees the stains, and wants to be clean," he said. "But you? You just shrug."

"Dresden was—"

"This isn't about Dresden. It's about you," Holden said. "I can't trust you around the people I care about."

Holden stared at Miller, waiting for him to reply, but the cop just nodded sadly, then put his hat on and walked away down the gently curving corridor. He didn't turn around.

Holden went back inside and tried to relax, but he felt jumpy and nervous. He would never have gotten off Eros without Miller's help. There was no question about it: Tossing him out on his ear felt wrong. Incomplete.

The truth was Miller made his scalp crawl every time they were in the same room. The cop was like an unpredictable dog that might lick your hand or take a bite out of your leg.

Holden thought about calling Fred and warning him. He called Naomi instead.

"Hey," she answered on the second chime. Holden could hear a bar's frantic, alcohol-fueled merriment in the background.

"Naomi," he said, then paused, trying to think of some excuse to have called. When he couldn't think of one, he said, "Miller was just here."

"Yeah, he cornered Amos and me a while back. What did he want?"

"I don't know," Holden said with a sigh. "Say goodbye, maybe."

"What are you doing?" Naomi asked. "Want to meet up?"

"Yes. Yes I do."



Holden didn't recognize the bar at first, but after ordering a scotch from a professionally friendly waiter, he realized it was the same place he'd watched Naomi sing karaoke to a Belter punk song what seemed like centuries before. She wandered in and plopped down across from him in the booth just as his drink showed up. The waiter gave her a questioning smile.

"Gah, no," she said quickly, waving her hands at him. "I've had plenty tonight. Just some water, thanks."

As the waiter bustled away, Holden said, "How did your, uh... What exactly is Golgo, anyway? And how did it go?"

"Game they play here," Naomi said, then took a glass of water from their returning waiter and drank half of it in one gulp. "Like a cross between darts and soccer. Never seen it before, but I seem to be good at it. We won."

"Great," Holden said. "Thanks for coming. I know it's late, but this Miller thing freaked me out a bit."

"He wants you to absolve him, I think."

"Because I'm 'righteous,' " Holden said with a sarcastic laugh.

"You are," Naomi said with no irony. "I mean, it's a loaded term, but you're as close to it as anyone I've ever known."

"I've fucked everything up," Holden blurted out before he could stop himself. "Everyone who's tried to help us, or that we've tried to help, has died spectacularly. This whole fucking war. And

Captain McDowell and Becca and Ade. And Shed—” He had to stop and swallow a sudden lump in his throat.

Naomi just nodded, then reached across the table and took his hand in hers.

“I need a win, Naomi,” he continued. “I need to do something that makes a difference. Fate or Karma or God or whatever dropped me in the middle of this thing, and I need to know I’m making a difference.”

Naomi smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

“You’re cute when you’re being noble,” she said. “But you need to stare off into the distance more.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I am. Want to come home with me?”

“I—” Holden started, then stopped and stared at her, looking for the joke. Naomi was still smiling at him, nothing in her eyes but warmth and a touch of mischief. While he watched, one curly lock of hair fell over her eye, and she pushed it up without looking away from him. “Wait, what? I thought you’d—”

“I said don’t tell me you love me to get me into bed,” she said. “But I also said I’d have gone to your cabin anytime you asked over the last four years. I didn’t think I was being subtle, and I’m sort of tired of waiting.”

Holden leaned back in the booth and tried to remember to breathe. Naomi’s grin changed to pure mischief now, and one eyebrow went up.

“You okay, sailor?” she asked.

“I thought you were avoiding me,” he said once he was capable of speech. “Is this your way of giving me a win?”

“Don’t be insulting,” she said, though there was no hint of anger in her voice. “But I’ve waited weeks for you to get your nerve up, and the ship’s almost done. That means you’ll probably volunteer us for something really stupid and this time our luck will run out.”

“Well—” he said.

“If that happens without us at least giving this a try *once*, I will be very unhappy about it.”

“Naomi, I—”

“It’s simple, Jim,” she said, reaching out for his hand and pulling him back toward her. She leaned across the table between them until their faces were almost touching. “It’s a yes or no question.”

“Yes.”

Chapter Forty-Four: Miller

Miller sat by himself, staring out the wide observation windows without seeing the view. The fungal-culture whiskey on the low black table beside him remained at the same level in the glass as when he'd bought it. It wasn't really a drink. It was permission to sit. There had always been a handful of drifters, even on Ceres. Men and women whose luck had run out. No place to go, no one to ask favors of. No connection to the vast net of humanity. He'd always felt a kind of sympathy for them, his spiritual kindred.

Now he was part of that disconnected tribe in earnest.

Something bright happened on the skin of the great generation ship—a welding array firing off some intricate network of subtle connection, maybe. Past the *Nauvoo*, nestled in the constant hive-like activity of Tycho Station, was a half-degree arc of the *Rocinante*, like a home he'd once had. He knew the story of Moses seeing a promised land he would never enter. Miller wondered how the old prophet would have felt if he'd been ushered in for a moment—a day, a week, a year—and then dropped back out in the desert. Kinder never to leave the wastelands. Safer.

Beside him, Juliette Mao watched him from the corner of his mind carved out for her.

I was supposed to save you, he thought. *I was supposed to find you. Find the truth.*

And didn't you?

He smiled at her, and she smiled back, as world-weary and tired as he was. Because of course he had. He'd found her, he'd found who killed her, and Holden was right. He'd taken revenge. All that he'd promised himself, he'd done. Only it hadn't saved him.

"Can I get you anything?"

For half a second, Miller thought Julie had said it. The serving girl had opened her mouth to ask him again before he shook his head. She couldn't. And even if she had been able to, he couldn't afford it.

You knew it couldn't last, Julie said. *Holden. His crew. You knew you didn't really belong there. You belong with me.*

A sudden shot of adrenaline revved his tired heart. He looked around for her, but Julie was gone. His own privately generated fight-or-flight reaction didn't have room for daydream hallucinations. And still. *You belong with me.*

He wondered how many people he'd known who had taken that path. Cops had a tradition of eating their guns that went back to long before humanity had lifted itself up the gravity well. Here he was, without a home, without a friend, with more blood on his hands from the past month than from his whole career before it. The in-house shrink on Ceres called it suicidal ideation in his yearly presentation to the security teams. Something to watch out for, like genital lice or high cholesterol. Not a big deal if you were careful.

So he'd be careful. For a while. See where it went.

He stood, hesitated for three heartbeats, then scooped up his bourbon and drank it in a gulp. Liquid courage, they called it, and it seemed to do the trick. He pulled up his terminal, put in a connect request, and tried to compose himself. He wasn't there yet. And if he was going to live, he needed a job.



“Sabez nichts, Pampaw,” Diogo said. The kid was wearing a meshwork shirt and pants cut in a fashion as youthful as it was ugly, and in his previous life, Miller would probably have written him off as too young to know anything useful. Now Miller waited. If anything could wring a prospect out of Diogo, it would be the promise of Miller getting a hole of his own. The silence dragged. Miller forced himself not to speak for fear of begging.

“Well...” Diogo said warily. “Well. There’s one hombre might could. Just arm and eye.”

“Security guard work’s fine with me,” Miller said. “Anything that pays the bills.”

“Il conversa á do. Hear what’s said.”

“I appreciate anything you can do,” Miller replied, then gestured at the bed. “You mind if I...?”

“Mi cama es su cama,” Diogo said. Miller lay down.

Diogo stepped into the small shower, and the sound of water against flesh drowned out the air cyclers. Even on board ship, Miller hadn’t lived in physical circumstances this intimate with anyone since his marriage. Still, he wouldn’t have gone as far as to call Diogo a friend.

Opportunity was thinner on Tycho than he’d hoped, and he didn’t have much by way of references. The few people who knew him weren’t likely to speak on his behalf. But surely there’d be something. All he needed was a way to remake himself, to start over and be someone different from who he’d been.

Assuming, of course, that Earth or Mars—whichever one came out on top of the war—didn’t then wipe the OPA and all the stations loyal to it out of the sky. And that the protomolecule didn’t escape Eros and slaughter a planet. Or a station. Or him. He had a moment’s chill, recalling that there was still a sample of the thing on board the *Roci*. If something happened with it, Holden and Naomi, Alex and Amos might all join Julie long before Miller did.

He told himself that wasn’t his problem anymore. Still, he hoped they’d be all right. He wanted them to be well, even if he wasn’t.

“Oi, Pampaw,” Diogo said as the door to the public hall slid open. “You hear that Eros started talking?”

Miller lifted himself to one elbow.

“Sí,” Diogo said. “Whatever that shit is, it started broadcasting. There’s even words and shit. I’ve got a feed. You want a listen?”

No, Miller thought. *No, I have seen those corridors. What’s happened to those people almost happened to me. I don’t want anything to do with that abomination.*

“Sure,” he said.

Diogo scooped up his own hand terminal and keyed in something. Miller’s terminal chimed that it had received the new feed route.

“Chicá perdída in ops been mixing a bunch of it to bhangra,” Diogo said, making a shifting dance move with his hips. “Hard-core, eh?”

Diogo and the other OPA irregulars had breached a high-value research station, faced down one of the most powerful and evil corporations in a history of power and evil. And now they were making music from the screams of the dying. Of the dead. They were dancing to it in the low-rent clubs. *What it must be like*, Miller thought, *to be young and soulless.*

But no. That wasn’t fair. Diogo was a good kid. He was just naive. The universe would take care of that, given a little time.

“Hard-core,” Miller said. Diogo grinned.

The feed sat in queue, waiting. Miller turned out the lights, letting the little bed bear him up against the press of spin. He didn’t want to hear. He didn’t want to know. He had to.

At first, the sound was nothing—electric squeals and a wildly fluting static. Then, maybe somewhere deep in the back of it, music. A chorus of violas churning away together in a long, distant crescendo. And then, as clear as if someone were speaking into a microphone, a voice.

“Rabbits and hamsters. Ecologically unstabilizing and round and blue as moonbeams. August.”

It almost certainly wasn't a real person. The computer systems on Eros could generate any number of perfectly convincing dialects and voices. Men's, women's, children's. And how many millions of hours of data could there be on the computers and storage dumps all through the station?

Another electronic flutter, like finches looped back against themselves. A new voice—feminine and soft this time—with a throbbing pulse behind it.

“Patient complains of rapid heartbeat and night sweats. Symptom onset reported as three months previous, but with a history...”

The voice faded, and the throbbing rose. Like an old man with Swiss cheese holes in his brain, the complex system that had been Eros was dying, changing, losing its mind. And because Protogen had wired it all for sound, Miller could listen to the station fail.

“I didn't tell him, I didn't tell him, I didn't tell him. The sunrise. I've never seen the sunrise.”

Miller closed his eyes and slid down toward sleep, serenaded by Eros. As consciousness faded, he imagined a body in the bed beside him, warm and alive and breathing slowly in time with the rise and fall of the static.



The manager was a thin man, weedy, with hair combed high above his brow like a wave that never crashed. The office hunched close around them, humming at odd moments when the infrastructure—water, air, energy—of Tycho impinged on it. A business built between ducts, improvisational and cheap. The lowest of the low.

“I'm sorry,” the manager said. Miller felt his gut tighten and sink. Of all the humiliations the universe had in store for him, this one he hadn't foreseen. It made him angry.

“You think I can't handle it?” he asked, keeping his voice soft.

“It's not that,” the weedy man said. “It's... Look, between us, we're looking for a thumb, you know? Someone's idiot kid brother could guard this warehouse. You've got all this experience. What do we need with riot control protocols? Or investigative procedure? I mean, come on. This gig doesn't even come with a gun.”

“I don't care,” Miller said. “I need something.”

The weedy man sighed and gave the exaggerated shrug of a Belter.

“You need something else,” he said.

Miller tried not to laugh, afraid it would sound like despair. He stared at the cheap plastic wall behind the manager until the guy started to get uncomfortable. It was a trap. He was too experienced to start over. He knew too much, so there was no going back and doing fresh beginnings.

“All right,” he said at last, and the manager across the desk from him let out a breath, then had the good grace to look embarrassed.

“Can I just ask,” the weedy man said. “Why did you leave your old job?”

“Ceres changed hands,” Miller said, putting on his hat. “I wasn't on the new team. That was all.”

“Ceres?”

The manager looked confused, which in turn confused Miller. He glanced down at his own hand terminal. There was his work history, just the way he'd presented it. The manager couldn't have missed it.

“That's where I was,” Miller said.

“For the police thing. But I meant the last job. I mean, I've been around, I understand not putting OPA work on your resume, but you have to figure we all know that you were part of the thing... you know, with the station. And all.”

“You think I was working for the OPA,” Miller said.

The weedy man blinked.

“You were,” he said.

Which, after all, was true.



Nothing had changed in Fred Johnson's office, and everything had. The furnishings, the smell of the air, the sense of its existing somewhere between a boardroom and a command and control center. The generation ship outside the window might have been half a percent closer to completion, but that wasn't it. The stakes of the game had shifted, and what had been a war was something else now. Something bigger. It shone in Fred's eyes and tightened his shoulders.

"We could use a man with your skills," Fred agreed. "It's always the small-scale things that trip you up. How to frisk someone. That kind of thing. Tycho security can handle themselves, but once we're off our station and shooting our way into someone else's, not as much."

"Is that something you're looking to do more of?" Miller said, trying to make it a casual joke. Fred didn't answer. For a moment, Julie stood at the general's side. Miller saw the pair of them reflected in the screens, the man pensive, the ghost amused. Maybe Miller had gotten it wrong from the start, and the divide between the Belt and the inner planets was something besides politics and resource management. He knew as well as anyone that the Belt offered a harder, more dangerous life than Mars or Earth provided. And yet it called these people—the best people—out of humanity's gravity wells to cast themselves into the darkness.

The impulse to explore, to stretch, to leave home. To go as far as possible out into the universe. And now that Protogen and Eros offered the chance to become gods, to re-create humanity into beings that could go beyond merely human hopes and dreams, it occurred to Miller how hard it would be for men like Fred to turn that temptation away.

"You killed Dresden," Fred said. "That's a problem."

"It needed to happen."

"I'm not sure it did," Fred replied, but his voice was careful. Testing. Miller smiled, a little sadly.

"That's why it needed to happen," he said.

The small, coughing laugh told Miller that Fred understood him. When the general turned back to consider him again, his gaze was steady.

"When it comes to the negotiating table, someone's going to have to answer for it. You killed a defenseless man."

"I did," Miller said.

"When the time comes, I will hand-feed you to the wolves as the first chip I offer. I won't protect you."

"Wouldn't ask you to protect me," Miller said.

"Even if it meant being a Belter ex-cop in an Earth-side prison?"

It was a euphemism, and they both knew it. *You belong with me*, Julie said. And so what did it matter, really, how he got there?

"I've got no regrets," he said, and half a breath later was shocked to discover it was almost true. "If there's a judge out there who wants to ask me about something, I'll answer. I'm looking for a job here, not protection."

Fred sat in his chair, eyes narrow and thoughtful. Miller leaned forward in his seat.

"You've got me in a hard position," Fred said. "You're saying all the right things. But I have a hard time trusting that you'd follow through. Keeping you on the books would be risky. It could undermine my position in the peace negotiations."

"It's a risk," Miller said. "But I've been on Eros and Thoth Station. I flew on the *Rocinante* with Holden and his crew. When it comes to analysis of the protomolecule and how we got into this mess, there isn't anyone in a better position to give you information. You can argue I knew too much. That I was too valuable to let go."

"Or too dangerous."

“Sure. Or that.”

They were silent for a moment. On the *Nauvoo*, a bank of lights glittered in a gold-and-green test pattern and then went dark.

“Security consultant,” Fred said. “Independent. I won’t give you a rank.”

I’m too dirty for the OPA, Miller thought with a glow of amusement.

“If it comes with my own bunk, I’ll take it,” he said. It was only until the war was over. After that, he was meat for the machine. That was fine. Fred leaned back. His chair hissed softly into its new configuration.

“All right,” Fred said. “Here’s your first job. Give me your analysis. What’s my biggest problem?”

“Containment,” Miller said.

“You think I can’t keep the information about Thoth Station and the protomolecule quiet?”

“Of course you can’t,” Miller said. “For one thing, too many people already know. For another thing, one of them’s Holden, and if he hasn’t already broadcast the whole thing on every empty frequency, he will soon. And besides that, you can’t make a peace deal without explaining what the hell’s going on. Sooner or later, it has to come out.”

“And what do you advise?”

For a moment, Miller was back in the darkness, listening to the gibbers of the dying station. The voices of the dead calling to him from across the vacuum.

“Defend Eros,” he said. “All sides are going to want samples of the protomolecule. Locking down access is going to be the only way you get yourself a seat at that table.”

Fred chuckled.

“Nice thought,” he said. “But how do you propose we defend something the size of Eros Station if Earth and Mars bring their navies to bear?”

It was a good point. Miller felt a tug of sorrow. Even though Julie Mao—his Julie—was dead and gone, it felt like disloyalty to say it.

“Then you have to get rid of it,” he said.

“And how would I do that?” Fred said. “Even if we studded the thing with nukes, how would we be sure that no little scrap of the thing would make its way to a colony or down a well? Blowing that thing up would be like blowing dandelion fluff into the breeze.”

Miller had never seen a dandelion, but he saw the problem. Even the smallest portion of the goo filling Eros might be enough to start the whole evil experiment over again. And the goo thrived on radiation; simply cooking the station might hurry the thing along its occult path rather than end it. To be sure that the protomolecule on Eros never spread, they’d need to break everything on the station down to its constituent atoms...

“Oh,” Miller said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. You’re not going to like this.”

“Try me.”

“Okay. You asked. You drive Eros into the sun.”

“Into the sun,” Fred said. “Do you have any idea how much mass we’re talking about here?”

Miller nodded to the wide, clear expanse of window, to the construction yards beyond it. To the *Nauvoo*.

“Big engines on that thing,” Miller said. “Get some fast ships out to the station, make sure no one can get in before you get there. Run the *Nauvoo* into Eros Station. Knock it sunward.”

Fred’s gaze turned inward as he planned, calculated.

“Got to make sure no one gets into it until it hits corona. That’ll be hard, but Earth and Mars are both just as interested in keeping the other guy from having it as in getting it themselves.”

I’m sorry I couldn’t do better, Julie, he thought. *But it’ll be a hell of a funeral.*

Fred's breath grew slow and deep, his gaze flickering as if he were reading something in the air that only he could see. Miller didn't interrupt, even when the silence got heavy. It was almost a minute later that Fred let out a short, percussive breath.

"The Mormons are going to be pissed," he said.

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Chapter Forty-Five: Holden

Naomi talked in her sleep. It was one of a dozen things Holden hadn't known about her before tonight. Even though they'd slept in crash couches a few feet apart on many occasions, he'd never heard it. Now, with her face against his bare chest, he could feel her lips move and the soft, punctuated exhalations of her words. He couldn't hear what she was saying.

She also had a scar on her back, just above her left buttock. It was three inches long and had the uneven edges and rippling that came from a tear rather than a slice. Naomi would never get herself knifed in a bar fight, so it had to have come on the job. Maybe she had been climbing through tight spaces in the engine room when the ship maneuvered unexpectedly. A competent plastic surgeon could have made it invisible in one visit. That she hadn't bothered and clearly didn't care was another thing he had learned about her tonight.

She stopped murmuring and smacked her lips a few times, then said, "Thirsty."

Holden slid out from under her and headed for the kitchen, knowing that this was the obsequiousness that always accompanied a new lover. For the next couple of weeks, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from fulfilling every whim Naomi might have. It was a behavior some men carried at the genetic level, their DNA wanting to make sure that first time wasn't just a fluke.

Her room was laid out differently than his, and the unfamiliarity made him clumsy in the dark. He fumbled around for a few minutes in her small kitchen nook, looking for a glass. By the time he found it, filled it, and headed back into the bedroom, Naomi was sitting up in bed. The sheet lay pooled on her lap. The sight of her half nude in the dimly lit room gave him an embarrassingly sudden erection.

Naomi panned her gaze up his body, pausing at his midsection, then at the water glass, and said, "Is that for me?"

Holden didn't know which thing she was asking about, so he just said, "Yes."



"You asleep?"

Naomi's face was on his belly, her breathing slow and deep, but to his surprise she said, "No."

"Can we talk?"

Naomi rolled off him and pulled herself up until her face lay next to his on the pillow. Her hair fell across her eyes, and Holden reached out and brushed it away in a move that felt so intimate and proprietary that he had to swallow a lump in his throat.

"Are you about to get serious on me?" she asked, her eyes half lidded.

"Yeah, I am," he said, and kissed her forehead.

"My last lover was over a year ago," she said. "I'm a serial monogamist, so as far as I'm concerned, this is an exclusive-rights deal until one of us decides it isn't. As long as I get advance warning that you've decided to end the deal, there won't be any hard feelings. I'm open to the idea of it being more than just sex, but in my experience that will happen on its own if it's going to. I have eggs in storage on Europa and Luna, if that matters to you."

She rolled up onto her elbow, her face hovering over his.

“Did I cover all the bases?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “But I agree to the conditions.”

She flopped onto her back, letting out a long contented sigh.

“Good.”

Holden wanted to hold her, but he felt too hot and sticky with sweat, so he just reached down and held her hand instead. He wanted to tell her that this meant something, that it was already more than sex for him, but all the words he tried out in his head came off sounding phony or maudlin.

“Thank you,” he said instead, but she was already snoring quietly.



They had sex again in the morning. After a long night with too little sleep, it wound up being far more effort than release for Holden, but there was a pleasure in that too, as if less than mind-blowing sex somehow meant something different and funnier and gentler than what they’d already done together. Afterward, Holden went to the kitchen and made coffee, then brought it back to bed on a tray. They drank it without talking, some of the shyness they’d avoided the night before coming now in the artificial morning of the room’s LEDs.

Naomi put her empty coffee cup down and touched the badly healed lump in his recently broken nose.

“Is it hideous?” Holden asked.

“No,” she said. “You were too perfect before. It makes you seem more substantial.”

Holden laughed. “That sounds like a word you use to describe a fat man or a history professor.”

Naomi smiled and touched his chest lightly with her fingertips. It wasn’t an attempt to arouse, just the exploration that came when satiation had removed sex from the equation. Holden tried to remember the last time the cold sanity following sex had been this comfortable, but maybe that had been never. He was making plans to spend the remainder of the day in Naomi’s bed, running through a mental list of restaurants on the station that delivered, when his terminal began buzzing on the nightstand.

“God dammit,” he said.

“You don’t have to answer,” Naomi replied, and moved her explorations to his belly.

“You’ve been paying attention the last couple months, right?” Holden said. “Unless it’s a wrong number, then it’s probably some end-of-the-solar-system-type shit and we have five minutes to evacuate the station.”

Naomi kissed his ribs, which simultaneously tickled him and caused him to question his assumptions about his own refractory period.

“That’s not funny,” she said.

Holden sighed and picked up the terminal off the table. Fred’s name flashed as it buzzed again.

“It’s Fred,” he said.

Naomi stopped kissing him and sat up.

“Yeah, then it’s probably not good news.”

Holden tapped on the screen to accept the call and said, “Fred.”

“Jim. Come see me as soon as you get a chance. It’s important.”

“Okay,” Holden replied. “Be there in half an hour.”

He ended the call and tossed his hand terminal across the room onto the pile of clothes he’d left at the foot of the bed.

“Going to shower, then go see what Fred wants,” he said, pulling off the sheet and getting up.

“Should I come, too?” Naomi asked.

“Are you kidding? I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

“Don’t get creepy on me,” Naomi replied, but she was smiling when she said it.



The first unpleasant surprise was Miller sitting in Fred's office when they arrived. Holden nodded at the man once, then said to Fred, "We're here. What's up?"

Fred gestured for them to sit, and when they had, he said, "We've been discussing what to do about Eros."

Holden shrugged. "Okay. What about it?"

"Miller thinks that someone will try to land there and recover some samples of the protomolecule."

"I have no trouble believing that someone will be that stupid," Holden said with a nod.

Fred stood up and tapped something on his desk. The screens that normally showed a view of the *Nauvoo* construction outside suddenly switched to a 2-D map of the solar system, tiny lights of different colors marking fleet positions. An angry swarm of green dots surrounded Mars. Holden assumed that meant the greens were Earth ships. There were a lot of red and yellow dots in the Belt and outer planets. Red was probably Mars, then.

"Nice map," Holden said. "Accurate?"

"Reasonably," Fred said. With a few quick taps on his desk, he zoomed in on one portion of the Belt. A potato-shaped lump labeled EROS filled the middle of the screen. Two tiny green dots inched toward it from several meters away.

"That is the Earth science vessel *Charles Lyell* moving toward Eros at full burn. She's accompanied by what we think is a Phantom-class escort ship."

"The *Roci*'s Earth navy cousin," Holden said.

"Well, the Phantom class is an older model, and largely relegated to rear-echelon assignments, but still more than a match for anything the OPA can quickly field," Fred replied.

"Exactly the sort of ship that would be escorting science ships around, though," Holden said. "How'd they get out there so quick? And why just the two of them?"

Fred backed the map up until it was a distant view of the entire solar system again.

"Dumb luck. The *Lyell* was returning to Earth from doing non-Belt asteroid mapping when it diverted course toward Eros. It was close; no one else was. Earth must have seen a chance to grab a sample while everyone else was figuring out what to do."

Holden looked over at Naomi, but her face was unreadable. Miller was staring at him like an entomologist trying to figure out exactly where the pin went.

"So they know, then?" Holden said. "About Protogen and Eros?"

"We assume so," Fred said.

"You want us to chase them away? I mean, I think we can, but that will only work until Earth can reroute a few more ships to back them up. We won't be able to buy much time."

Fred smiled.

"We won't need much," he said. "We have a plan."

Holden nodded, waiting to hear it, but Fred sat down and leaned back in his chair. Miller stood up and changed the view on the screen to a close-up of the surface of Eros.

Now we get to find out why Fred is keeping this jackal around, Holden thought, but said nothing. Miller pointed at the picture of Eros.

"Eros is an old station. Lots of redundancy. Lot of holes in her skin, mostly small maintenance airlocks," the former detective said. "The big docks are in five main clusters around the station. We're looking at sending six supply freighters to Eros, along with the *Rocinante*. The *Roci* keeps the science vessel from landing, and the freighters secure themselves to the station, one at each docking cluster."

"You're sending people in?" Holden said.

"Not in," Miller replied. "Just on. Surface work. Anyway, the sixth freighter evacuates the crews once the others are docked. Each abandoned freighter will have a couple dozen high-yield fusion

warheads wired to the ship's proximity detectors. Anything tries to land at the docks, and there's a few-hundred-megaton fusion explosion. It should be enough to take out the approaching ship, but even if it doesn't, the docks will be too slagged to land at."

Naomi cleared her throat. "Uh, the UN and Mars both have bomb squads. They'll figure out how to get past your booby traps."

"Given enough time," Fred agreed.

Miller continued as though he hadn't been interrupted.

"The bombs are just a second line of deterrence. *Rocinante* first, bombs second. We're trying to buy Fred's people enough time to prep the *Nauvoo*."

"The *Nauvoo*?" Holden said, and half a breath later, Naomi whistled low. Miller nodded to her almost as if he were accepting applause.

"The *Nauvoo*'s launching in a long parabolic course, building up speed. It'll hit Eros at a velocity and angle calculated to knock Eros toward the sun. Set off the bombs too. Between the impact energy and the fusion warheads, we figure the surface of Eros'll be hot and radioactive enough to cook anything that tries to land until it's too damn late," Miller finished, then sat back down. He looked up as if he was waiting for reactions.

"This was your idea?" Holden asked Miller.

"*Nauvoo* part was. But we didn't know about the *Lyell* when we first talked about it. The booby trap thing's kind of improvised. I think it'll work, though. Buy us enough time."

"I agree," Holden said. "We need to keep Eros out of anyone's hands, and I can't think of a better way to do it. We're in. We'll shoo the science ship away while you do your work."

Fred leaned forward in his chair with a creak and said, "I knew you'd be on board. Miller was more skeptical."

"Throwing a million people into the sun seemed like something you might balk at," the detective said with a humorless grin.

"There's nothing human left on that station. What's your part in all of this? You armchair quarterbacking now?"

It came out nastier than he'd intended, but Miller didn't appear offended.

"I'll be coordinating security."

"Security? Why will they need security?"

Miller smiled. All his smiles looked like he was hearing a good joke at a funeral.

"In case something crawls out of an airlock, tries to thumb a ride," he said.

Holden frowned. "I don't like to think those things can get around in vacuum. I don't like that idea at all."

"Once we bring the surface temp of Eros up to a nice balmy ten thousand degrees, I'm thinking it won't matter much," Miller replied. "Until then, best be safe."

Holden found himself wishing he shared the detective's confidence.

"What are the odds the impact and detonations just break Eros into a million pieces and scatter them all over the solar system?" Naomi asked.

"Fred's got some of his best engineers calculating everything to the last decimal to make sure that doesn't happen," Miller replied. "Tycho helped build Eros in the first place. They've got the blueprints."

"So," said Fred. "Let's deal with the last bit of business."

Holden waited.

"You still have the protomolecule," Fred said.

Holden nodded again. "And?"

"And," replied Fred. "And the last time we sent you out, your ship was almost wrecked. Once Eros has been nuked, it will be the only confirmed sample around, outside of what might still be on Phoebe. I can't find any reason to let you keep it. I want it to remain here on Tycho when you go."

Holden stood up, shaking his head.

"I like you, Fred, but I'm not handing that stuff over to anyone who might see it as a bargaining chip."

"I don't think you have a lot of—" Fred started, but Holden held up a finger and cut him off. While Fred stared at him in surprise, he grabbed his terminal and opened the crew channel.

"Alex, Amos, either of you on the ship?"

"I'm here," Amos said a second later. "Finishing up some—"

"Lock it down," Holden said over him. "Right now. Seal it up. If I don't call you in an hour, or if anyone other than me tries to board, leave the dock and fly away from Tycho at best possible speed. Direction is your choice. Shoot your way free if you have to. Read me?"

"Loud and clear, Cap," Amos said. If Holden had asked him to get a cup of coffee, Amos would have sounded exactly the same.

Fred was still staring at him incredulously.

"Don't force this issue, Fred," Holden said.

"If you think you can threaten me, you're mistaken," Fred said, his voice flat and frightening. Miller laughed.

"Something funny?" Fred said.

"That wasn't a threat," Miller replied.

"No? What would you call it?"

"An accurate report of the world," Miller said. He stretched slowly as he talked. "If it was Alex on board, he might think the captain was trying to intimidate someone, maybe back down at the last minute. Amos, though? Amos will absolutely shoot his way free, even if it means he goes down with the ship."

Fred scowled, and Miller shook his head.

"It's not a bluff," Miller said. "Don't call it."

Fred's eyes narrowed, and Holden wondered if he'd finally gone too far with the man. He certainly wouldn't be the first person Fred Johnson had ordered shot. And he had Miller standing right next to him. The unbalanced detective would probably shoot him at the first hint someone thought it was a good idea. It shook Holden's confidence in Fred that Miller was even here.

Which made it a little more surprising when Miller saved him.

"Look," the detective said. "Fact is, Holden is the best person to carry that shit around until you decide what to do with it."

"Talk me into it," Fred said, his voice still tight with anger.

"Once Eros goes up, he and the *Roci* are going to have their asses hanging in the breeze. Someone might be angry enough to nuke him just on general principles."

"And how does that make the sample safer with him?" Fred asked, but Holden had understood Miller's point.

"They might be less inclined to blow me up if I let them know that I've got the sample and all the Protogen notes," he said.

"Won't make the sample safer," Miller said. "But it makes the mission more likely to work. And that's the point, right? Also, he's an idealist," Miller continued. "Offer Holden his weight in gold and he'll just be offended you tried to bribe him."

Naomi laughed. Miller glanced at her, a small shared smile at the corner of his mouth, then turned back to Fred.

"Are you saying he can be trusted and I can't?" Fred said.

"I was thinking more about the crew," Miller said. "Holden's got a small bunch, and they do what he says. They think he's righteous, so they are too."

"My people follow me," Fred said.

Miller's grin was weary and unassailable.

"There's a lot of people in the OPA," he said.

"The stakes are too high," Fred said.

“You’re kind of in the wrong career for safe,” Miller said. “I’m not saying it’s a great plan. Just you won’t get a better one.”

Fred’s slitted eyes glittered with equal parts frustration and rage. His jaw worked silently for a moment before he spoke.

“Captain Holden? I’m disappointed with your lack of trust after all I’ve done for you and yours.”

“If the human race still exists a month from now, I’ll apologize,” Holden said.

“Get your crew out to Eros before I change my mind.”

Holden rose, nodded to Fred, and left. Naomi walked at his side.

“Wow, that was close,” she said under her breath.

Once they’d left the office, Holden said, “I think Fred was half a second from ordering Miller to shoot me.”

“Miller’s on our side. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

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Chapter Forty-Six: Miller

Miller had known when he'd taken Holden's side against his new boss that there were going to be consequences. His position with Fred and the OPA was tenuous to start with, and pointing out that Holden and his crew were not only more dedicated but also more trustworthy than Fred's people wasn't the thing you did when you were kissing up. That it was the truth only made it worse.

He'd expected some kind of payback. He would have been naive not to.

"Rise up, O men of God, in one united throng," the resisters sang. *"Bring in the days of brotherhood, and end the night of wrong..."*

Miller took off his hat and ran fingers through his thinning hair. It wasn't going to be a good day.

The interior of the *Nauvoo* showed more patchwork and process than its hull suggested. Two kilometers long, its designers had built it as more than a huge ship. The great levels stacked one atop the other; alloy girders worked organically with what would have been pastoral meadows. The structure echoed the greatest cathedrals of Earth and Mars, rising up through empty air and giving both thrust-gravity stability and glory to God. It was still metal bones and woven agricultural substrate, but Miller could see where it was all heading.

A generation ship was a statement of overarching ambition and utter faith. The Mormons had known that. They'd embraced it. They'd constructed a ship that was prayer and piety and celebration all at the same time. The *Nauvoo* would be the greatest temple mankind had ever built. It would shepherd its crew through the uncrossable gulfs of interstellar space, humanity's best hope of reaching the stars.

Or it would have been, if not for him.

"You want us to gas them, Pampaw?" Diogo asked.

Miller considered the resisters. At a guess, there might have been two hundred of them strung in linked chains across the access paths and engineering ducts. Transport lifts and industrial walkways stood idle, their displays dark, their batteries shorted.

"Yeah, probably should," Miller sighed.

The security team—his security team—numbered fewer than three dozen. Men and women more unified by the OPA-issued armbands than by their training, experience, loyalties, or politics. If the Mormons had chosen violence, it would have been a bloodbath. If they'd put on environment suits, the protest would have lasted hours. Days, possibly. Instead, Diogo gave the signal, and three minutes later, four small comets arced out into the null-g space, wavering on their tails of NNLP-alpha and tetrahydrocannabinol.

It was the kindest, gentlest riot control device in the arsenal. Any of the protesters with compromised lungs could still be in trouble, but within half an hour, all of them would be relaxed into near stupor and high as a kite. NNLPa and THC wasn't a combination Miller had ever used on Ceres. If they'd tried to stock it, it would have been stolen for office parties. He tried to take some comfort in the thought. As if it would make up for the lifetimes of dreams and labor he was taking away.

Beside him, Diogo laughed.

It took them three hours to make the primary sweep of the ship, and another five to hunt down all the stowaways huddled in ducts and secure rooms, waiting to make their presence known at the last

minute and sabotage the mission. As those were hauled weeping off the ship, Miller wondered whether he'd just saved their lives. If all he'd done with his life was keep Fred Johnson from deciding whether to let a handful of innocent people die with the *Nauvoo*, or risk keeping Eros around for the inner planets, that wasn't so bad.

As soon as Miller gave the word, the OPA tech team moved into action, reengaging the waldoes and transports, fixing the hundred small acts of sabotage that would have kept the *Nauvoo*'s engines from firing, clearing out equipment they wanted to save. Miller watched industrial lifts big enough to house a family of five shift crate after crate, moving out things that had only recently been moved in. The docks were as busy as Ceres at mid-shift. Miller half expected to see his old cohorts wandering among the stevedores and lift tubes, keeping what passed for the peace.

In the quiet moments, he set his hand terminal to the Eros feed. Back when he'd been a kid, there had been a performance artist making the rounds—Jila Sorormaya, her name was. As he recalled, she'd intentionally corrupted data-storage devices and then put the data stream through her music kit. She'd gotten into trouble when some of the proprietary code of the storage device software got incorporated into her music and posted. Miller hadn't been a sophisticate. He'd figured another nutcase artist had to get a real job, and the universe could only be a better place.

Listening to the Eros feed—Radio Free Eros, he called it—he thought maybe he'd been a little rough on old Jila. The squeaks and cross-chatter, the flow of empty noise punctuated by voices, were eerie and compelling. Just like the broken data stream, it was the music of corruption.

... *asciugare il pus e che possano sentirsi meglio...*

... *ja minä nousivat kuolleista ja halventaa kohtalo pakottaa minut ja siskoni...*

... *do what you have to...*

He'd listened to the feed for hours, picking out voices. Once, the whole thing had fluttered, cutting in and out like a piece of equipment on the edge of failure. Only after it had resumed did Miller wonder if the stutters of quiet had been Morse code. He leaned against the bulkhead, the overwhelming mass of the *Nauvoo* towering above him. The ship only half born and already marked for sacrifice. Julie sat beside him, looking up. Her hair floated around her face; her eyes never stopped smiling. Whatever trick of the imagination had kept his own internal Juliette Andromeda Mao from coming back to him as her corpse, he thanked it.

It would have been something, wouldn't it? she said. *Flying through vacuum without a suit. Sleeping for a hundred years and waking up in the light of a different sun.*

"I didn't shoot that fucker fast enough," Miller said aloud.

He could have given us the stars.

A new voice broke in. A human voice shaking with rage.

"Antichrist!"

Miller blinked, returning to reality, and thumbed off the Eros feed. A prisoner transport wound its lazy way through the dock, a dozen Mormon technicians bound to its restraint poles. One was a young man with a pocked face and hatred in his eyes. He was staring at Miller.

"You're the Antichrist, you vile excuse for a human! God knows you! He'll *remember* you!"

Miller tipped his hat as the prisoners ambled by.

"Stars are better off without us," he said, but too softly for anyone but Julie to hear.



A dozen tugs flew before the *Nauvoo*, the web of nanotubule tethers invisible at this distance. All Miller saw was the great behemoth, as much a part of Tycho Station as the bulkheads and air, shift in its bed, shrug, and begin to move. The tugs' drive flares lit the interior space of the station, flickering in their perfectly choreographed duties like Christmas lights, and a nearly subliminal shudder passed through the deep steel bones of Tycho. In eight hours, the *Nauvoo* would be far enough out that the

great engines could be brought online without endangering the station with their exhaust plume. It might be more than two weeks after that before it reached Eros.

Miller would beat it there by eighty hours.

“Oi, Pampaw,” Diogo said. “Done-done?”

“Yeah,” Miller said with a sigh. “I’m ready. Let’s get everyone together.”

The boy grinned. In the hours since the commandeering of the *Nauvoo*, Diogo had added bright red plastic decorations to three of his front teeth. It was apparently deeply meaningful in the youth culture of Tycho Station, and signified prowess, possibly sexual. Miller felt a moment’s relief that he wasn’t hot-bunking at the boy’s place anymore.

Now that he was running security ops for the OPA, the irregular nature of the group was clearer to him than ever. There had been a time when he’d thought the OPA might be something that could take on Earth or Mars when it came to a real war. Certainly, they had more money and resources than he’d thought. They had Fred Johnson. They had Ceres now, for as long as they could hold it. They’d taken on Thoth Station and won.

And yet the same kids he’d gone on the assault with had been working crowd control at the *Nauvoo*, and more than half of them would be on the demolitions ship when it left for Eros. It was the thing that Havelock would never understand. For that matter, it was the thing Holden would never understand. Maybe no one who had lived with the certainty and support of a natural atmosphere would ever completely accept the power and fragility of a society based in doing what needed doing, in becoming fast and flexible, the way the OPA had. In becoming articulated.

If Fred couldn’t build himself a peace treaty, the OPA would never win against the discipline and unity of an inner planet navy. But they would also never lose. War without end.

Well, what was history if not that?

And how would having the stars change anything?

As he walked to his apartment, he opened a channel request on his hand terminal. Fred Johnson appeared, looking tired but alert.

“Miller,” he said.

“We’re getting ready to ship out if the ordinance is ready.”

“It’s loading now,” Fred replied. “Enough fissionable material to keep the surface of Eros unapproachable for years. Be careful with it. If one of your boys goes down for a smoke in the wrong place, we aren’t going to be able to replace the mines. Not in time.”

Not *you’ll all be dead*. The weapons were precious, not the people.

“Yeah, I’ll watch it,” Miller said.

“The *Rocinante*’s already on its way.”

That wasn’t something Miller needed to know, so there was some other reason Fred had mentioned it. His carefully neutral tone made it something like an accusation. The only controlled sample of protomolecule had left Fred’s sphere of influence.

“We’ll get out there to meet her in plenty of time to keep anybody off of Eros,” Miller said. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

On the tiny screen, it was hard to tell how genuine Fred’s smile was.

“I hope your friends are really up for this,” he said.

Miller felt something odd. A little hollowness just below his breastbone.

“They aren’t my friends,” he said, keeping his tone of voice light.

“No?”

“I don’t exactly have friends. It’s more I’ve got a lot of people I used to work with,” he said.

“You put a lot of faith in Holden,” Fred said, making it almost a question. A challenge, at least. Miller smiled, knowing that Fred would be just as unsure if his was genuine.

“Not faith. Judgment,” he said.

Fred coughed out a laugh.

“And that’s why you don’t have friends, friend.”

“Part of it,” Miller said.

There was nothing more to say. Miller dropped the connection. He was almost at his hole, anyway.

It was nothing much. An anonymous cube on the station with even less personality to it than his place back on Ceres. He sat on his bunk, checked his terminal for the status of the demolitions ship. He knew that he should just go up to the docks. Diogo and the others were assembling, and while it wasn't likely that the drug haze of the pre-mission parties would allow them all to arrive on time, it was at least possible. He didn't even have that excuse.

Julie sat in the space behind his eyes. Her legs were folded under her. She was beautiful. She'd been like Fred and Holden and Havelock. Someone born in a gravity well who came to the Belt by choice. She'd died for her choice. She'd come looking for help and killed Eros by doing it. If she'd stayed there, on that ghost ship...

She tilted her head, her hair swinging against the spin gravity. There was a question in her eyes. She was right, of course. It would have slowed things down, maybe. It wouldn't have stopped them. Protogen and Dresden would have found her eventually. Would have found it. Or gone back and dug up a fresh sample. Nothing would have stopped them.

And he knew—knew the way he knew he was himself—that Julie wasn't like the others. That she'd understood the Belt and Belters, and the need to push on. If not for the stars, at least close to them. The luxury available to her was something Miller had never experienced, and never would. But she'd turned away. She'd come out here, and stayed even when they were going to sell her racing pinnacle. Her childhood. Her pride.

That was why he loved her.

When Miller reached the dock, it was clear something had happened. It was in the way the dockworkers held themselves and the looks half amusement and half pleasure, on their faces. Miller signed in and crawled through the awkward Ojino-Gouch-style airlock, seventy years out of date and hardly larger than a torpedo tube, into the cramped crew area of the *Talbot Leeds*. The ship looked like it had been welded together from two smaller ships, without particular concern for design. The acceleration couches were stacked three deep. The air smelled of old sweat and hot metal. Someone had been smoking marijuana recently enough that the filters hadn't cleared it out yet. Diogo was there along with a half dozen others. They all wore different uniforms, but they also all had the OPA armband.

“Oi, Pampaw! Kept top bunk á dir.”

“Thanks,” Miller said. “I appreciate that.”

Thirteen days. He was going to spend thirteen days sharing this tiny space with the demolitions crew. Thirteen days pressed into these couches, with megatons of fission mines in the ship's hold. And yet the others were all smiling. Miller hauled himself up to the acceleration couch Diogo had saved for him, and pointed to the others with his chin.

“Someone have a birthday?”

Diogo gave an elaborate shrug.

“Why's everyone in such a good fucking mood?” Miller said, more sharply than he'd intended. Diogo took no offense. He smiled his great red-and-white teeth.

“Audi-nichts?”

“No, I haven't heard, or I wouldn't be asking,” Miller said.

“Mars did the right thing,” Diogo said. “Got the feed off Eros, put two and two, and—”

The boy slammed a fist into his open palm. Miller tried to parse what he was saying. They'd attacked Eros? They'd taken on Protogen?

Ah. *Protogen. Protogen and Mars*. Miller nodded. “The Phoebe science station,” he said. “Mars quarantined it.”

“Fuck that, Pampaw. *Autoclaved* it, them. Moon is gone. Dropped enough nukes on it to split it subatomic.”

They better have, Miller thought. It wasn't a big moon. If Mars had really destroyed it and there was any protomolecule left on a hunk of ejecta...

"Tu sabes?" Diogo said. "They're on our side now. They get it. Mars-OPA alliance."

"You don't really think that," Miller said.

"Nah," Diogo said, just as pleased with himself in admitting that the hope was fragile at best and probably false. "But don't hurt to dream, que no?"

"You don't think?" Miller said, and lay back.

The acceleration gel was too stiff to conform to his body at the dock's one-third g, but it wasn't uncomfortable. He checked the news on his hand terminal, and indeed someone in the Martian navy had made a judgment call. It was a lot of ordinance to use, especially in the middle of a shooting war, but they'd expended it. Saturn had one fewer moon, one more tiny, unformed, filamentous ring—if there was even enough matter left from the detonations to form that. It looked to Miller's unpracticed eye as if the explosions had been designed to drop debris into the protective and crushing gravity of the gas giant.

It was foolish to think it meant the Martian government wouldn't want samples of the protomolecule. It was naive to pretend that any organization of that size and complexity was univocal about anything, much less something as dangerous and transforming as this.

But still.

Perhaps it was enough just knowing that someone on the other side of the political and military divide had seen the same evidence they had seen and drawn the same conclusions. Maybe it left room for hope. He switched his hand terminal back to the Eros feed. A strong throbbing sound danced below a cascade of noise. Voices rose and fell and rose again. Data streams spewed into one another, and the pattern-recognition servers burned every spare cycle making something from the resultant mess. Julie took his hand, the dream so convincing he could almost pretend he felt it.

You belong with me, she said.

As soon as it's over, he thought. It was true he kept pushing back the end point of the case. First find Julie, then avenge her, and now destroy the project that had claimed her life. But after that was accomplished, he could let go.

He just had this one last thing he needed to do.

Twenty minutes later, the Klaxon sounded. Thirty minutes later, the engines kicked on, pressing him into the acceleration gel at a joint-crushing high-g burn for thirteen days, with one-g breaks for biological function every four hours. And when they were done, the half-trained jack-of-all-trades crew would be handling nuclear mines capable of annihilating them if they screwed it up.

But at least Julie would be there. Not really, but still.

It didn't hurt to dream.

Chapter Forty-Seven: Holden

Even the wet cellulose taste of reconstituted artificial scrambled eggs was not enough to ruin Holden's warm, self-satisfied glow. He shoveled the faux eggs into his mouth, trying not to grin. Sitting at his left around the galley table, Amos ate with lip-smacking enthusiasm. To Holden's right, Alex pushed the limp eggs around on his plate with a piece of equally fake toast. Across the table, Naomi sipped a cup of tea and looked at him from under her hair. He stifled the urge to wink at her.

They'd talked about how to break the news to the crew but hadn't come to any consensus. Holden hated to hide anything. Keeping it secret made it seem dirty or shameful. His parents had raised him to believe that sex was something you did in private not because it was embarrassing, but because it was intimate. With five fathers and three mothers, the sleeping arrangements were always complex at his house, but the discussions about who was bedding with whom were never hidden from him. It left him with a strong aversion to hiding his own activities.

Naomi, on the other hand, thought they shouldn't do anything to upset the fragile equilibrium they'd found, and Holden trusted her instincts. She had an insight into group dynamics that he often lacked. So, for now, he was following her lead.

Besides, it would have felt like boasting, and that would have been rude.

Keeping his voice neutral and professional, he said, "Naomi, can you pass the pepper?"

Amos' head snapped up, and he dropped his fork on the table with a loud clatter.

"Holy shit, you guys are doing it!"

"Um," Holden said. "What?"

"Something's been screwy ever since we got back on the *Roci*, but I couldn't figure. But that's *it*! You guys are finally playing hide the weasel."

Holden blinked twice at the big mechanic, unsure of what to say. He glanced at Naomi for support, but her head was down, and her hair completely covered her face. Her shoulders were shaking in silent laughter.

"Jesus, Cap," Amos said, a grin on his wide face. "It fucking took you long enough. If she'd been throwing herself at me like that, I'd have been neck deep in that shit."

"Uh," Alex said, looking shocked enough that it was clear he hadn't shared Amos' insights. "Wow."

Naomi stopped laughing and wiped tears away from the corners of her eyes.

"Busted," she said.

"Look. Guys, it's important that you know this doesn't affect our—" Holden said, but Amos cut him off with a snort.

"Hey, Alex," Amos said.

"Yo," Alex replied.

"XO boning the captain going to make you a really shitty pilot?"

"Don't believe it will," Alex said with a grin, exaggerating his drawl.

"And, oddly enough, I don't feel the need to be a lousy mechanic."

Holden tried again. "I think it's important that—"

"Cap'n?" Amos continued, ignoring him. "Consider that no one gives a fuck, it won't stop us from doing our jobs, and just enjoy it, since we'll probably all be dead in a few days anyway."

Naomi started laughing again.

"Fine," she said. "I mean, everyone knows I'm only doing it to get a promotion. Oh, wait, right. Already the second-in-command. Hey, can I be captain now?"

"No," Holden said, laughing. "It's a shit job. I'd never ask you to do it."

Naomi grinned and shrugged. *See? I'm not always right.* Holden glanced at Alex, who was looking at him with genuine affection, clearly happy about the idea of him and Naomi together. Everything seemed right.



Eros spun like a potato-shaped top, its thick skin of rock hiding the horrors inside. Alex brought them in close to do a thorough scan of the station. The asteroid swelled on Holden's screen until it looked close enough to touch. At the other ops station, Naomi swept the surface with ladar, looking for anything that might pose a danger to the Tycho freighter crews, still a few days behind. On Holden's tactical display, the UNN science ship continued to flare in a braking maneuver toward Eros, its escort right beside it.

"Still not talking, huh?" Holden asked.

Naomi shook her head, then tapped on her screen and sent the comm's monitoring information to his workstation.

"Nope," she said. "But they see us. They've been bouncing radar off of us for a couple hours now."

Holden tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair and thought about the choices. It was possible that the hull modifications Tycho had made to the *Roci* were fooling the Earth corvette's recognition software. They might just ignore the *Roci*, thinking she was a Belter gas runner that happened to be hanging around. But the *Roci* was running without a transponder, which made her illegal no matter what hull configuration she was showing. That the corvette wasn't trying to warn off a ship that was running dark made him nervous. The Belt and the inner planets were in a shooting war. A Belter ship with no identification was hanging around Eros while two Earth ships flew toward it. No way any captain with half a brain would just ignore them.

The corvette's silence meant something else.

"Naomi, I have a feeling that corvette is going to try and blow us up," Holden said with a sigh.

"It's what I'd do," she replied.

Holden tapped one last complicated rhythm on his chair, then put his headset on.

"All right, I guess I make the first overture, then," he said.

Not wishing to make their conversation public, Holden targeted the Earther corvette with the *Rocinante's* laser array and signaled a generic linkup request. After a few seconds, the *link established* light went green, and his earplugs began to hiss with faint background static. Holden waited, but the UN ship offered no greeting. They wanted him to speak first.

He flicked off his mic, switching to the shipwide comm.

"Alex, get us moving. One g for now. If I can't bluff this guy, it'll be a shooting match. Be ready to open her up."

"Roger," drawled Alex. "Goin' on the juice, just in case."

Holden glanced over at Naomi's station, but she'd already switched to her tactical screen and had the *Roci* plotting firing solutions and jamming tactics on the two approaching ships. Naomi had been in only one battle, but she was reacting now like a seasoned veteran. He smiled at her back, then turned around before she had time to realize he was staring.

"Amos?" he said.

"Locked down and shipshape down here, Cap. The *Roci's* pawing at the turf. Let's go kick some ass."

Let's hope we don't have to, Holden thought.

He turned his mic back on.

"This is Captain James Holden of the *Rocinante*, calling the captain of the approaching United Nations Navy corvette, call sign unknown. Please respond."

There was a static-filled pause, followed by "*Rocinante*. Leave our flight path immediately. If you do not begin moving away from Eros at best possible speed, you will be fired upon."

The voice was young. An aging corvette with the tedious task of following an asteroid-mapping ship around wouldn't be a much sought after command. The captain was probably a lieutenant without patrons or prospects. He'd be inexperienced, but he might see a confrontation as an opportunity to prove himself to his superiors. And that made the next few moments treacherous to navigate.

"Sorry," said Holden. "Still don't know your call sign, or your name. But I can't do what you want. In fact, I can't let anyone land on Eros. I'm going to need you to stop approaching the station."

"*Rocinante*, I don't think you—"

Holden took control of the *Roci*'s targeting system and began painting the approaching corvette with its targeting laser.

"Let me explain what's happening here," he said. "Right now, you're looking at your sensors, and you're seeing what looks like a thrown-together gas freighter that's giving your ship-recognition software fits. And all of a sudden, meaning *right now*, it's painting you with a state-of-the-art target-acquisition system."

"We don't—"

"Don't lie. I know that's what's happening. So here's the deal. Despite how it looks, my ship is newer, faster, tougher, and better armed than yours. The only way for me to really prove that is to open fire, and I'm hoping not to do that."

"Are you threatening me, *Rocinante*?" the young voice on Holden's headset said, its tone hitting just the right notes of arrogance and disbelief.

"You? No," said Holden. "I'm threatening the big, fat, slow-moving, and unarmed ship you're supposed to be protecting. You keep flying toward Eros, and I will unload everything I've got at it. I guarantee we will blow that flying science lab out of the sky. Now, it's possible you might get us while we do it, but by then your mission is screwed anyway, right?"

The line went silent again, only the hiss of background radiation letting him know his headset hadn't died.

When his answer came, it came on the shipwide comms.

Alex said, "They're stoppin', Captain. They just started hard brakin'. Tracking says they'll be relative stopped about two million clicks out. Want me to keep flyin' toward 'em?"

"No, bring us back to our stationary position over Eros," Holden replied.

"Roger that."

"Naomi," Holden said, spinning his chair around to face her. "Are they doing anything else?"

"Not that I can see through the clutter of their exhaust. But they could be tightbeaming messages the other direction and we'd never know," she said.

Holden flipped the shipwide comm off. He scratched his head for a minute, then unbuckled his restraints.

"Well, we stopped them for now. I'm going to hit the head and then grab a drink. Want anything?"



"He's not wrong, you know," Naomi said later that night.

Holden was floating in zero g on the ops deck, his station a few feet away. He'd turned down the deck lights, and the cabin was as dim as a moonlit night. Alex and Amos were sleeping two decks below. They might as well have been a million light-years away. Naomi was floating near her own

station, two meters away, her hair unbound and drifting around her like a black cloud. The panel behind her lit her face in profile: the long forehead, flat nose, large lips. He could tell that her eyes were closed. He felt like they were the only two people in the universe.

"Who's not wrong?" he said, just to be saying something.

"Miller," she replied as though it were obvious.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Naomi laughed, then swatted with one hand to rotate her body and face him in the air. Her eyes were open now, though with the panel lights behind her, they were visible only as black pools in her face.

"I've been thinking about Miller," she said. "I treated him badly on Tycho. Ignored him because you were angry. I owed him better than that."

"Why?"

"He saved your life on Eros."

Holden snorted, but she kept going anyway.

"When you were in the navy," she finally said, "what were you supposed to do when someone went crazy on the ship? Started doing things that endangered everyone?"

Thinking they were talking about Miller, Holden said, "You restrain him and remove him as a danger to the ship and crew. But Fred didn't—"

Naomi cut him off.

"What if it's wartime?" she said. "The middle of a battle?"

"If he can't be easily restrained, the chief of the watch has an obligation to protect the ship and crew by whatever means necessary."

"Even shooting him?"

"If that's the only way to do it," Holden replied. "Sure. But it would only be in the most pressing circumstances."

Naomi nodded with her hand, sending her body slowly twisting the other way. She stopped her motion with one unconscious gesture. Holden was pretty good in zero g, but he'd never be that good.

"The Belt is a network," Naomi said. "It's like one big distributed ship. We have nodes that make air, or water, or power, or structural materials. Those nodes may be separated by millions of kilometers of space, but that doesn't make them any less interconnected."

"I see where this is going," Holden said with a sigh. "Dresden was a madman on the ship, Miller shot him to protect the rest of us. He gave me that speech back on Tycho. Didn't buy it then either."

"Why?"

"Because," Holden said. "Dresden wasn't an immediate threat. He was just an evil little man in an expensive suit. He didn't have a gun in his hand, or his finger on a bomb trigger. And I will never trust a man who believes he has the right to unilaterally execute people."

Holden put his foot against the bulkhead and tapped off just hard enough to float a few feet closer to Naomi, close enough to see her eyes, read her reaction to him.

"If that science ship starts flying toward Eros again, I will throw every torpedo we have at it, and tell myself I was protecting the rest of the solar system from what's on Eros. But I won't just start shooting at it now, on the idea that it *might* decide to head to Eros again, because that's murder. What Miller did was murder."

Naomi smiled at him, then grabbed his flight suit and pulled him close enough for a kiss.

"You might be the best person I know. But you're totally uncompromising on what you think is right, and that's what you hate about Miller."

"I do?"

"Yes," she said. "He's totally uncompromising too, but he has different ideas on how things work. You hate that. To Miller, Dresden was an active threat to the ship. Every second he stayed alive endangered everyone else around him. To Miller, it was self-defense."

"But he's wrong. The man was helpless."

“The man talked the UN Navy into giving his company state-of-the-art ships,” she said. “He talked his company into murdering a million and a half people. Everything Miller said about why the protomolecule is better off with us was just as true about Dresden. How long is he in an OPA lockup before he finds the jailer who can be bought?”

“He was a prisoner,” Holden said, feeling the argument slipping away from him.

“He was a monster with power, access, and allies who would have paid any price to keep his science project going,” Naomi said. “And I’m telling you as a Belter, Miller wasn’t wrong.”

Holden didn’t answer; he just continued to float next to Naomi, keeping himself in her orbit. Was he angrier about the killing of Dresden or about Miller’s making a decision that disagreed with him?

And Miller had known. When Holden had told him to find his own ride back to Tycho, he’d seen it in the detective’s sad basset hound face. Miller had known it was coming, and had made no attempt to fight or argue. That meant that Miller had made his choice fully cognizant of the cost and ready to pay it. That meant something. Holden wasn’t sure exactly what, but something.

A red telltale began flashing on the wall, and Naomi’s panel woke up and began throwing data onto the screen. She pulled herself down to it using the back of her chair, then tapped out several quick commands.

“Shit,” she said.

“What is it?”

“The corvette or science ship must have called for help,” Naomi said, pointing at her screen.

“We’ve got ships on their way from all over the system.”

“How many are coming?” Holden asked, trying to get a better look at her screen.

Naomi made a small sound in the back of her throat, halfway between a chuckle and a cough.

“At a guess? All of them.”

Chapter Forty-Eight: Miller

You are, and you aren't," the Eros feed said through a semi-random drumming of static. "You are, and you aren't. You are, and you aren't."

The little ship shuddered and bumped. From a crash couch, one of the OPA techs called out a string of obscenities remarkable more for inventiveness than actual rancor. Miller closed his eyes, trying to keep the micro-g adjustments of their nonstandard docking from nauseating him. After days of joint-aching acceleration and an equally bruising braking routine, the small shifts and movements felt arbitrary and strange.

"You are, are, are, are, *are, are, are...*"

He'd spent some time listening to the newsfeeds. Three days after they'd left Tycho, the news of Protogen's involvement with Eros broke. Amazingly, Holden hadn't been the one to do it. Since then, the corporation had gone from total denial, to blaming a rogue subcontractor, to claiming immunity under an Earth defense secrets statute. It didn't sound good for them. Earth's blockade of Mars was still in place, but attention had shifted to the power struggle within Earth, and the Martian navy had slowed its burn, giving the Earth forces a little more breathing room before any permanent decisions had to be made. It looked like they'd postponed Armageddon for a few weeks, anyway. Miller found he could take a certain joy in that. It also left him tired.

More often, he listened to the voice of Eros. Sometimes he watched the video feeds too, but usually, he just listened. Over the hours and days, he began to hear, if not patterns, at least common structures. Some of the voices spooling out of the dying station were consistent—broadcasters and entertainers who were overrepresented in the audio files archives, he guessed. There seemed to be some specific tendencies in, for want of a better term, the music of it too. Hours of random, fluting static and snatched bits of phrases would give way, and Eros would latch on to some word or phrase, fixating on it with greater and greater intensity until it broke apart and the randomness poured back in.

"...are, are, are, ARE, ARE, ARE..."

Aren't, Miller thought, and the ship suddenly shoved itself up, leaving Miller's stomach about half a foot from where it had been. A series of loud clanks followed, and then the brief wail of a Klaxon.

"Dieu! Dieu!" someone shouted. "Bombs son vamen roja! Going to fry it! Fry us toda!"

There was the usual polite chuckle that the same joke had occasioned over the course of the trip, and the boy who'd made it—a pimply Belter no more than fifteen years old—grinned with pleasure at his own wit. If he didn't stop that shit, someone was going to beat him with a crowbar before they got back to Tycho. But Miller figured that someone wasn't him.

A massive jolt forward pushed him hard into the couch, and then gravity was back, the familiar 0.3 g. Maybe a little more. Except that with the airlocks pointing toward ship's down, the pilot had to grapple the spinning skin of Eros' belly first. The spin gravity made what had been the ceiling the new floor; the lowest rank of couches was now the top; and while they rigged the fusion bombs to the docks, they were all going to have to climb up onto a cold, dark rock that was trying to fling them off into the vacuum.

Such were the joys of sabotage.

Miller suited up. After the military-grade suits of the *Rocinante*, the OPA's motley assortment of equipment felt like third-hand clothes. His suit smelled of someone else's body, and the Mylar faceplate had a deformation where it had cracked and been repaired. He didn't like thinking about what had happened to the poor bastard who'd been wearing it. The magnetic boots had a thick layer of corroded plastic and old mud between the plates and a triggering mechanism so old that Miller could feel it click on and off even before he moved his foot. He had the image of the suit locking on to Eros and never letting go.

The thought made him smile. *You belong with me*, his own private Julie had said. It was true, and now that he was here, he felt perfectly certain that he wasn't going to leave. He'd been a cop for too long, and the idea of trying to reconnect to humanity again filled him with the presentiment of exhaustion. He was here to do the last part of his job. And then he was done.

"Oi! Pampaw!"

"I'm coming," Miller said. "Hold your damn horses. It's not like the station's going anywhere."

"A rainbow is a circle you can't see. Can't see. Can't see," Eros said in a child's singsong voice. Miller turned down the volume of his feed.

The rocky surface of the station had no particular purchase for the suits and control waldoes. Two other ships had made polar landings where there was no spin gravity to fight against, but the Coriolis would leave everyone with a subliminal nausea. Miller's team had to keep to the exposed metal plates of the dock, clinging like flies looking down into the starlit abyss.

Engineering the placement of the fusion bombs wasn't trivial work. If the bombs didn't pump enough energy into the station, the surface might cool enough to give someone another chance to put a science team on it before the penumbra of the sun swallowed it and whatever parts of the *Nauvoo* were still clinging to it. Even with the best minds of Tycho, there was still the chance that the detonations wouldn't sync up. If the pressure waves traveling through the rock amplified in ways they hadn't anticipated, the station could crack open like an egg, spreading the protomolecule through the wide, empty track of the solar system like scattering a handful of dust. But the difference between success and disaster might be literally a question of meters.

Miller crawled up the airlock and out to the station surface. The first wave of technicians were setting up resonance seismographs, the glow of the work lights and readouts the brightest thing in the universe. Miller set his boots on a wide swath of a ceramic steel alloy and let the spin stretch the kinks out of his back. After days in the acceleration couch, the freedom felt euphoric. One of the techs raised her hands, the physical Belter idiom that called for attention. Miller upped the suit volume.

"... insectes rampant sur ma peau..."

With a stab of impatience, he switched from the Eros feed to the team channel.

"Got to move," a woman's voice said. "Too much splashback here. We have to get to the other side of the docks."

"These go on for almost two kilometers," Miller said.

"Is," she agreed. "We can unmoor and move the ship under power or we can tow it. We've got enough lead line."

"Which one's fastest? We don't have a lot of spare time here."

"Towing."

"Tow it, then," Miller said.

Slowly, the ship rose, twenty small, crawling transport drones clinging to leads like they were hauling a great metallic zeppelin. The ship was going to stay with him, here on the station, strapped to the rock like a sacrifice to the gods. Miller walked with the crew as they crossed the wide, closed bay doors. The only sounds were the tapping of his soles as the electromagnets jolted onto the surface and then a tick when they let go again. The only smells were of his own body and the fresh plastic of the air recycler. The metal under his feet shone like someone had cleaned it. Any dust or pebbles had been hurled away long ago.

They worked fast to place the ship, arm the bombs, and fit the security codes, everyone tacitly aware of the great missile that had been the *Nauvoo* speeding toward them.

If another ship came down and tried to disarm the trap, the ship would send synchronizing signals to all the other OPA bomb ships studding the moon's surface. Three seconds later, the surface of Eros would be scrubbed clean. The spare air and supplies were loaded off the ship, bundled together and ready for reclamation. No reason to waste the resources.

Nothing horrific crawled out of an airlock and tried to attack the crew, which made Miller's presence during the mission entirely superfluous. Or maybe not. Maybe it was just a ride.

When everything was done that could be, Miller sent the all clear, relayed through the now-dead ship's system. The return transport appeared slowly, a dot of light that grew gradually brighter and then spread, the null-g boarding web strung out like scaffolding. At the new ship's word, Miller's team turned off their boots and fired simple maneuvering thrusters either from their suits or, if the suits were too old, from shared ablative evacuation shells. Miller watched them drop away.

"Call va and roll, Pampaw," Diogo said from someplace. Miller wasn't sure which of them he was at this distance. "This tube don't sit."

"I'm not coming," Miller said.

"Sa que?"

"I decided. I'm staying here."

There was a moment of silence. Miller had been waiting for this. He had the security codes. If he needed to crawl back into the shell of their old ship and lock the door behind him, he could. But he didn't want to. He'd prepared his arguments: He would only be going back to Tycho as a political pawn for Fred Johnson's negotiations; he was tired and old in a way that years didn't describe; he'd already died on Eros once, and he wanted to be here to finish it. He'd earned that much. Diogo and the others owed it to him.

He waited for the boy to react, to try to talk him out of it.

"All correct, then," Diogo said. "Buona morte."

"Buona morte," Miller said, and shut off his radio. The universe was silent. The stars below him shifted slowly but perceptibly as the station he hung from spun. One of those lights was the *Rocinante*. Two others were the ships Holden had been sent out to stall. Miller couldn't pick them out. Julie floated beside him, her dark hair floating in the vacuum, the stars shining through her. She looked peaceful.

If you had it to do again, she said. If you could do it all over from the beginning?

"I wouldn't," he said.

He watched the OPA transport ship start up its engines, glowing gold and white, and pull away until it was a star again. A small one. And then lost. Miller turned and considered the dark, empty moonscape and the permanent night.

He just needed to be with her for another few hours, and they would both be safe. They would *all* be safe. It was enough. Miller found himself smiling and weeping, the tears tracking up from his eyes and into his hair.

It's going to be fine, Julie said.

"I know," Miller said.

He stood silently for almost an hour, then turned and made his slow, precarious way back to the sacrificed ship, down the airlock, and into the dim belly. There was enough residual atmosphere that he didn't need to sleep in his suit. He stripped naked, chose an acceleration couch, and curled up on the hard blue gel. Not twenty meters away, five fusion devices powerful enough to outshine the sun waited for a signal. Above him, everything that had once been human in Eros Station changed and re-formed, pouring from one shape to another like Hieronymus Bosch made real. And still almost a day away, the *Nauvoo*, the hammer of God, hurtled toward him.

Miller set his suit to play some old pop tunes he'd enjoyed when he was young and let himself be sung to sleep. When he dreamed, he dreamed he'd found a tunnel at the back of his old hole on

Ceres that meant he would at last, at *last*, be free.



His last breakfast was a hard kibble bar and a handful of chocolate scrounged from a forgotten survival pack. He ate it with tepid recycled water that tasted of iron and rot. The signals from Eros were almost drowned by the oscillating frequencies blasting out from the station above him, but Miller made out enough to know where things stood.

Holden had won, much as Miller had expected him to. The OPA was responding to a thousand angry accusations from Earth and Mars and, in the true and permanent style, factions within the OPA itself. It was too late. The *Nauvoo* was due in hours now. The end was coming.

Miller put on his suit for the last time, turned out the lights, and crawled back up the airlock. For a long moment, the exterior release didn't respond, the safety lights glowing red, and he had a stab of fear that he would spend his last moments there, trapped in a tube like a torpedo ready to fire. But he cycled the lock's power, and it opened.

The Eros feed was wordless now, with only a soft murmuring like water over stone. Miller walked out across the wide mouth of the docking bays. The sky above him turned, and the *Nauvoo* rose from the horizon like the sun. His splayed hand held at full arm's length wasn't big enough to cover the glow of its engines. He hung by his boots, watching the ship approach. The phantom Julie watched with him.

If he'd done the math right, the *Nauvoo*'s impact site would be at the center of Eros' major axis. Miller would be able to see it when it happened, and the giddy excitement in his chest reminded him of being young. It would be a show. Oh, it would be something to see. He considered recording it. His suit would be able to make a simple visual file and stream the data out in real time. But no. This was his moment. His and Julie's. The rest of humanity could guess what it had been like if they cared.

The massive glow of the *Nauvoo* filled a quarter of the sky now, and the full circle of it was free of the horizon. The Eros feed's soft murmur shifted to something more clearly synthetic: a rising, spiraling sound that reminded him for no particular reason of the green sweeping radar screens of ancient films. There were voices at the back of it, but he couldn't make out the words or even the language.

The great torch of the *Nauvoo* was a full half of the sky, the stars around it blotted out by the light of full burn. Miller's suit chirped a radiation warning and he shut it off.

A manned *Nauvoo* would never have sustained a burn like that; even in the best couch, the thrust gravity would have pulped bones. He tried to guess how fast the ship would be going when it hit.

Fast enough. That was all that mattered. Fast enough.

There, in the center of the fiery bloom, Miller saw a dark spot, no more than the dot of a pencil's tip. The ship itself. He took a deep breath. When he closed his eyes, the light pressed red through his lids. When he opened them again, the *Nauvoo* had length. Shape. It was a needle, an arrow, a missile. A fist rising from the depths. For the first time in memory, Miller felt awe.

Eros shouted.

"DON'T YOU *FUCKING* TOUCH ME!"

Slowly, the bloom of engine fire changed from a circle to an oval to a great feathery plume, the *Nauvoo* itself showing silver in rough profile. Miller gaped.

The *Nauvoo* had missed. It had turned. It was right now, right *now*, speeding past Eros and not into it. But he hadn't seen any kind of maneuvering rockets fire. And how would you turn something that big, moving that quickly, so abruptly that it would veer off between one breath and the next without also tearing the ship apart? The acceleration g alone...

Miller looked at the stars as if there was some answer written in them. And to his surprise, there was. The sweep of the Milky Way, the infinite scattering of stars were still there. But the angles had

changed. The rotation of Eros had shifted. Its relation to the plane of the ecliptic.

For the *Nauvoo* to change course at the last minute without falling apart would have been impossible. And so it hadn't happened. Eros was roughly six hundred cubic kilometers. Before Protogen, it had housed the second-largest active port in the Belt.

And without so much as overcoming the grip of Miller's magnetic boots, Eros Station had dodged.

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Chapter Forty-Nine: Holden

Holy shit,” said Amos in a flat voice.

“Jim,” Naomi said to Holden’s back, but he waved her off and opened a channel to Alex in the cockpit.

“Alex, did we just see what my sensors say we saw?”

“Yeah, Cap,” the pilot replied. “Radar and scopes are both sayin’ Eros jumped two hundred clicks spinward in a little less than a minute.”

“Holy shit,” Amos repeated in exactly the same emotionless tone. The metallic bang of deck hatches opening and closing echoed through the ship, signaling Amos’ approach up the crew ladder.

Holden shook off the flush of irritation he felt at Amos’ leaving his post. He’d deal with that later. He needed to be sure that the *Rocinante* and her crew hadn’t just experienced a group hallucination.

“Naomi, give me comms,” he said.

Naomi turned around in her chair to face him, her face ashen.

“How can you be so calm?” she asked.

“Panic won’t help. We need to know what’s going on before we can plan intelligently. Please transfer the comms to me.”

“Holy shit,” Amos said as he climbed into the ops deck. The deck hatch shut with a punctuating bang.

“I don’t remember ordering you to leave your post, sailor,” Holden said.

“Plan intelligently,” Naomi said like they were words in a foreign language that she almost understood. “Plan intelligently.”

Amos threw himself at a chair hard enough that the cushioning gel grabbed him and kept him from bouncing off.

“Eros is really fucking big,” Amos said.

“Plan intelligently,” Naomi repeated, speaking to herself now.

“I mean, *really* fucking big,” Amos said. “Do you know how much energy it took to spin that rock up? I mean, it took *years* to do that shit.”

Holden put his headset on to drown Amos and Naomi out, and called up Alex again.

“Alex, is Eros still changing velocity?”

“No, Cap. Just sitting there like a rock.”

“Okay,” Holden said. “Amos and Naomi are vapor locked. How are you doing?”

“Not taking my hands off the stick while that bastard is anywhere in my space, that’s for damn sure.”

Thank God for military training, Holden thought.

“Good, keep us at a constant distance of five thousand clicks until I say otherwise. Let me know if it moves again, even an inch.”

“Roger that, Cap,” said Alex.

Holden took off his headset and turned to face the rest of the crew. Amos was looking at the ceiling, ticking points off with his fingers, his eyes unfocused.

“—don’t really remember the mass of Eros off the top of my head...” he was saying to no one in particular.

“About seven thousand trillion kilos,” Naomi replied. “Give or take. And the heat signature’s up about two degrees.”

“*Jesus*,” the mechanic said. “I can’t do that math in my head. That much mass coming up two degrees like that?”

“A lot,” Holden said. “So let’s move on—”

“About ten exajoules,” Naomi said. “That’s just off the top of my head, but I’m not off by an order of magnitude or anything.”

Amos whistled.

“Ten exajoules is like, what, a two-gigaton fusion bomb?”

“It’s about a hundred kilos converted directly to energy,” Naomi said. Her voice began to steady. “Which, of course, we couldn’t do. But at least whatever they did wasn’t magic.”

Holden’s mind grabbed on to her words with an almost physical sensation. Naomi was, in fact, about the smartest person he knew. She had just spoken directly to the half-articulated fear he’d been harboring since Eros had jumped sideways: that this was magic, that the protomolecule didn’t have to obey the laws of physics. Because if that was true, humans didn’t stand a chance.

“Explain,” he said.

“Well,” she replied, tapping on her keypad. “Heating Eros up didn’t move it. So I assume that means it was waste heat from whatever it was they actually did.”

“And that means?”

“That entropy still exists. That they can’t convert mass to energy with perfect efficiency. That their machines or processes or whatever they use to move seven thousand trillion kilos of rock wastes some energy. About a two-gigaton bomb’s worth of it.”

“Ah.”

“You couldn’t move Eros two hundred kilometers with a two-gigaton bomb,” Amos said with a snort.

“No, you couldn’t,” Naomi replied. “This is just the leftovers. Heat by-product. Their efficiency is still off the charts, but it isn’t perfect. Which means the laws of physics still hold. Which means it isn’t magic.”

“Might as well be,” Amos said.

Naomi looked at Holden.

“So, we—” he started when Alex interrupted over the shipwide comm.

“Cap, Eros is movin’ again.”

“Follow it, get me a course and speed as soon as you can,” Holden said, turning back to his console. “Amos, get back down to engineering. If you leave it again without a direct order, I’ll have the XO beat you to death with a pipe wrench.”

The only reply was the hiss of the deck hatch opening and the bang as it closed behind the descending mechanic.

“Alex,” Holden said, staring at the data stream the *Rocinante* was feeding him about Eros. “Tell me something.”

“Sunward is all we know for sure,” Alex replied, his voice still calm and professional. When Holden had been in the military, he’d been officer track right from the start. He’d never been to military pilot school, but he knew that years of training had compartmentalized Alex’s brain into two halves: piloting problems and, secondarily, everything else. Matching Eros and getting a course for it was the former. Extra-solar space aliens trying to destroy humanity wasn’t a piloting issue and could be safely ignored until he left the cockpit. He might have a nervous breakdown afterward, but until then, Alex would keep doing his job.

“Drop back to fifty thousand clicks and maintain a constant distance,” Holden told him.

“Huh,” said Alex. “Maintainin’ a constant distance might be tough, Cap. Eros just disappeared off the radar.”

Holden felt his throat go tight.

“Say again?”

“Eros just disappeared off the radar,” Alex was saying, but Holden was already punching up the sensor suite to check for himself. His telescopes showed the rock still moving on its new course toward the sun. Thermal imaging showed it as slightly warmer than space. The weird feed of voices and madness that had been leaking out of the station was still detectable, if faint. But radar said there was nothing there.

Magic, a small voice at the back of his mind said again.

No, not magic. Humans had stealth ships too. It was just a matter of absorbing the radar’s energy rather than reflecting it. But suddenly, keeping the asteroid in visual range became all the more important. Eros had shown that it could move fast and maneuver wildly, and it was now invisible to radar. It was entirely possible that a mountain-sized rock could disappear completely.

Gravity began to pile up as the *Roci* chased Eros toward the sun.

“Naomi?”

She looked up at him. The fear was still in her eyes, but she was holding it together. For now.

“Jim?”

“The comm? Could you...?”

The chagrin on her face was the most reassuring thing he’d seen in hours. She shifted control to his station, and he opened a connection request.

“UNN corvette, this is the *Rocinante*, please respond.”

“Go ahead, *Rocinante*,” the other ship said after half a minute of static.

“Calling to confirm our sensor data,” Holden said, then transmitted the data regarding Eros’ movement. “You guys seeing the same thing?”

Another delay, this one longer.

“Roger that, *Rocinante*.”

“I know we were just about to shoot each other and all, but I think we’re a little past that now,” Holden said. “Anyway, we’re chasing the rock. If we lose sight of it, we might never find it again. Want to come with? Might be nice to have some backup if it decides to shoot at us or something.”

Another delay, this one almost two minutes long; then a different voice came on the line. Older, female, and totally lacking the arrogance and anger of the young male voice he’d been dealing with so far.

“*Rocinante*, this is Captain McBride of the UNN Escort Vessel *Ravi*.” *Ah*, thought Holden. *I’ve been talking to the first officer all along. The captain finally took the horn. That might be a good sign.* “I’ve sent word to fleet command, but it’s a twenty-three minute lag right now, and that rock’s putting on speed. You have a plan?”

“Not really, *Ravi*. Just follow and gather intel until we find an opportunity to do something that makes a difference. But if you came along, maybe none of your people will shoot at us accidentally while we figure it out.”

There was a long pause. Holden knew that the captain of the *Ravi* was weighing the chance that he was telling the truth against the threat he’d made against their science vessel. What if he was in on whatever was happening? He’d be wondering the same thing in their position.

“Look,” he said. “I’ve told you my name. James Holden. I served as a lieutenant in the UNN. My records should be on file. It’ll show a dishonorable discharge, but they’ll also show that my family lives in Montana. I don’t want that rock to hit Earth any more than you do.”

The silence on the other end continued for another few minutes.

“Captain,” she said, “I believe my superiors would want me to keep an eye on you. We’ll be coming along for the ride while the brains figure this out.”

Holden let out a long, noisy exhale.

“Thanks for that, McBride. Keep trying to get your people on the line. I’m going to make a few calls myself. Two corvettes are not going to fix this problem.”

“Roger that,” the *Ravi* replied, then killed the connection.

“I’ve opened a connection with Tycho,” Naomi said.

Holden leaned back in his chair, the mounting gravity of their acceleration pressing against him. A watery lump was gathering low in his gut, the loose knot telling him that he had no idea what he was doing, that all the best plans had failed, and that the end was near. The brief hope he’d felt was already starting to slip away.

How can you be so calm?

I think I’m watching the end of the human race, Holden thought. *I’m calling Fred so that it isn’t my fault when no one has an idea how to stop it. Of course I’m not calm.*

I’m just spreading the guilt.



“How fast?” Fred Johnson asked incredulously.

“Four g’s now and climbing,” Holden replied, his voice thick as his throat compressed. “Oh, and it’s invisible to radar now.”

“*Four g.* Do you know how heavy Eros is?”

“There’s, uh, been some discussion,” Holden said, only the acceleration keeping his impatience from showing in his voice. “The question is, now what? The *Nauvoo* missed. Our plans are shot to shit.”

There was another perceptible increase in pressure as Alex sped the ship up to keep up with Eros. A little while longer and speech wouldn’t be possible.

“It’s definitely headed for Earth?” Fred asked.

“Alex and Naomi are ninety percent or so. Hard to be totally accurate when we can only use visual data. But I trust them. I’d go to where there are thirty billion new hosts too.”

Thirty billion new hosts. Eight of whom were his parents. He imagined Father Tom as a bundle of tubes oozing brown goo. Mother Elise as a rib cage dragging itself across the floor with one skeletal arm. And with that much biomass, what could it do then? Move Earth? Turn out the sun?

“Have to warn them,” Holden said, trying not to strangle on his own tongue as he spoke.

“You don’t think they know?”

“They see a threat. They may not see the end of all native life in the solar system,” Holden said. “You wanted a reason to sit at the table? How about this one: Come together or die.”

Fred was quiet for a moment. Background radiation spoke to Holden in mystic whispers full of dire portents while he waited. *Newcomer*, it said. *Hang around for fourteen billion years or so. See what I’ve seen. Then all this nonsense won’t seem so important.*

“I’ll see what I can do,” Fred said, interrupting the universe’s lecture on transience. “In the meantime, what are you going to do?”

Get outrun by a rock and then watch the cradle of humanity die.

“I’m open to suggestions,” Holden said.

“Maybe you could detonate some of the surface nukes the demo team put down. Deflect Eros’ course. Buy us time.”

“They’re on proximity fuses. Can’t set them off,” Holden said, the last word turning into a yelp as his chair stabbed him in a dozen different places and injected him full of fire. Alex had hit them with the juice, which meant Eros was still speeding up, and he was worried they’d all black out. How fast was it going to go? Even on the juice they couldn’t sustain prolonged acceleration past seven or eight g without serious risk. If Eros kept this rate of increase up, it would outrun them.

“You can remote detonate,” Fred said. “Miller will have the codes. Have the demo team calculate which ones to set off for maximum effect.”

“Roger that,” Holden said. “I’ll give Miller a call.”

“I’ll work on the inners,” Fred said, using the Belter slang without a hint of self-consciousness.

“See what I can do.”

Holden broke the connection, then linked up to Miller’s ship.

“Yo,” said whoever was manning the radio there.

“This is Holden, on the *Rocinante*. Give me Miller.”

“Uh...” said the voice. “Okay.”

There was a click, then static, then Miller saying hello with a faint echo. Still wearing his helmet, then.

“Miller, this is Holden. We need to talk about what just happened.”

“Eros moved.”

Miller sounded strange, his voice distant, as though he was only barely paying attention to the conversation. Holden felt a flush of irritation but tamped it back down. He needed Miller right now, whether he wanted to or not.

“Look,” he said. “I’ve talked to Fred and he wants us to coordinate with your demo guys. You’ve got remote codes. If we set off all of them on one side, we can deflect its course. Get your techs on the line, and we’ll work it out.”

“Huh, yeah, that sounds like a good idea. I’ll send the codes along,” said Miller, his voice no longer distant, but holding back a laugh. Like a man about to tell the punch line of a really good joke.

“But I can’t really help you with the techs.”

“Shit, Miller, you pissed those people off, too?”

Miller did laugh now, a free, soft sound that someone who wasn’t piling on g could afford. If there was a punch line, Holden had missed it.

“Yeah,” Miller said. “Probably. But that’s not why I can’t get them for you. I’m not on the ship with them.”

“What?”

“I’m still on Eros.”

Chapter Fifty: Miller

What do you mean you're on Eros?" Holden said.

"Pretty much that," Miller said, covering his growing sense of shame with a casual tone of voice. "Hanging upside down outside the tertiary docks, where we moored one of the ships. Feel like a freaking bat."

"But—"

"Funny thing, too. I didn't feel it when the thing moved. You'd think accelerating like that, it would have thrown me off or squashed me flat, one or the other. But there was nothing."

"Okay, hold on. We're coming to get you."

"Holden," Miller said. "Just stop it, all right?"

The silence didn't last more than a dozen seconds, but it carried a wealth of meaning. *It's not safe to bring the Rocinante to Eros, and I came here to die, and Don't make this harder than it is.*

"Yeah, I just..." Holden said. And then: "Okay. Let me... let me coordinate with the technicians. I'll... Jesus. I'll let you know what they say."

"One thing, though," Miller said. "You're talking about deflecting this sonofabitch? Just keep in mind it's not a rock anymore. It's a ship."

"Right," Holden said. And a moment later: "Okay."

The connection dropped with a tick. Miller checked his oxygen supply. Three hours in-suit, but he could head back to his little ship and refill it well before that. So Eros was moving, was it? He still didn't feel it, but watching the curved surface of the asteroid, he could see micro-asteroids, all coming from the same direction, bouncing off. If the station kept accelerating, they'd start coming more often, more powerfully. He'd need to stay in the ship.

He turned his hand terminal back to the Eros feed. The station beneath him was chirping and muttering, long slow vowel sounds radiating out from it like recorded whale song. After the angry words and static, the voice of Eros sounded peaceful. He wondered what kind of music Diogo's friends would be making out of this. Slow dancing didn't seem like their style. An annoying itch settled in the small of his back, and he shifted in his suit, trying to rub it away. Almost without his noticing it, he grinned. And then laughed. A wave of euphoria passed into him.

There was alien life in the universe, and he was riding on it like a tick on a dog. Eros Station had moved of its own free will and by mechanisms he couldn't begin to imagine. He didn't know how many years it had been since he'd been overwhelmed by awe. He'd forgotten the feeling. He raised his arms to his sides, reaching out as if he could embrace the endless dark vacuum below him.

Then, with a sigh, he turned back toward the ship.

Back in the protective shell, he took off the vac suit and hooked the air supply to the recyclers to charge up. With only one person to care for, even low-level life support would have it ready to go within the hour. The ship batteries were still almost fully charged. His hand terminal chimed twice, reminding him that it was once again time for the anti-cancer meds. The ones he'd earned the last time he'd been on Eros. The ones he'd be on for the rest of his life. Good joke.

The fusion bombs were in the ship's cargo hold: gray square boxes about half again as long as they were tall, like bricks in a mortar of pink adhesive foam. It took Miller twenty minutes of searching through storage lockers to find a can of solvent that still had charge in it. The thin spray

from it smelled like ozone and oil, and the stiff pink foam melted under it. Miller squatted beside the bombs and ate a ration bar that tasted convincingly like apples. Julie sat beside him, her head resting weightlessly on his shoulder.

There had been a few times that Miller had flirted with faith. Most had been when he was young and trying out everything. Then when he was older, wiser, more worn, and in the crushing pain of the divorce. He understood the longing for a greater being, a huge and compassionate intelligence that could see everything from a perspective that dissolved the pettiness and evil and made everything all right. He still felt that longing. He just couldn't convince himself it was true.

And still, maybe there was something like a plan. Maybe the universe had put him in the right place at the right time to do the thing that no one else would do. Maybe all the pain and suffering he'd been through, all the disappointments and soul-crushing years wallowing through the worst that humanity had to offer up, had been meant to bring him here, to this moment, when he was ready to die if it bought humanity a little time.

It would be pretty to think so, Julie said in his mind.

"It would," he agreed with a sigh. At the sound of his voice, the vision of her vanished, just another daydream.

The bombs were heavier than he'd remembered. Under a full g, he wouldn't have been able to move them. At only one-third, it was a struggle, but possible. An agonizing centimeter at a time, he dragged one of them onto a handcart and hauled it to the airlock. Eros, above him, sang to itself.

He had to rest before he tackled the hard work. The airlock was thin enough that only the bomb or he could fit through at a time. He climbed on top of it to get out the outer airlock door, then had to lift the bomb out with straps he rigged from cargo netting. And once out, it had to be tethered to the ship with magnetic clamps to keep Eros' spin from slinging it out into the void. After he'd pulled it out and strapped it to the cart, he stopped to rest for half an hour.

There were more impacts now, a rough sign that Eros was indeed accelerating. Each one a rifle shot, capable of bouncing clean through him or the ship behind him if bad luck sent it in the right direction. But the odds were low of one of the occasional rocks lining up a killing shot with his tiny antlike figure crawling across the surface. Once Eros cleared the Belt, they'd stop, anyway. Was Eros leaving the Belt? He realized he had no idea where Eros was going. He'd assumed it was Earth. Holden would know by now, probably.

His shoulders ached a little from his efforts, but not badly. He worried that he'd overloaded the cart. Its wheels were stronger than his mag boots, but they could still be overcome. The asteroid above him lurched once, a new and unsettling motion that didn't repeat. His hand terminal cut off the Eros feed, alerting him that he had an incoming connection. He looked at it, shrugged, and let the call come through.

"Naomi," he said before she could speak. "How've you been doing?"

"Hey," she said.

The silence between them stretched.

"You talked to Holden, then?"

"I did," she said. "He's still talking about ways to get you off that thing."

"He's a good guy," Miller said. "Talk him out of it for me, okay?"

The silence hung long enough that Miller started to get uncomfortable.

"What are you doing there?" she asked. As if there were an answer for that. As if all his life could be summarized in answer to one simple question. He danced around what she meant and replied only to what she'd said.

"Well, I've got a nuclear bomb strapped to a cargo wagon. I'm hauling it over to the access hatch and taking it into the station."

"Miller—"

"The thing is, we were treating this like a rock. Now everyone knows that's a little simplistic, but it's going to take people time to adjust. Navies are still going to be thinking of this thing like a

billiard ball when it's really a rat."

He was talking too fast. The words spilling out of him in a rush. If he didn't give her room, she wouldn't talk. He wouldn't have to hear what she had to say. He wouldn't have to keep her from talking him down.

"It's going to have structure. Engines or control centers. Something. If I truck this thing inside, get it close to whatever coordinates the thing, I can break it. Turn it back into a billiard ball. Even if it's just for a little while, that gives the rest of you a chance."

"I figured," she said. "It makes sense. It's the right thing to do."

Miller chuckled. A particularly solid impact tocked against the ship beneath him, the vibration of it jarring his bones. Gas started venting out of the new hole. The station was moving faster.

"Yeah," he said. "Well."

"I was talking to Amos," she said. "You need a dead man's switch. So that if something happens, the bomb still goes off. If you have the access codes...?"

"I do."

"Good. I've got a routine you can put on your hand terminal. You'll need to keep your finger on the select button. If you go away for five seconds, it sends the go signal. If you want, I can upload it to you."

"So I have to wander around the station with my finger mashed on a button?"

Naomi's tone made it an apology. "They might take you out with a head shot. Or wrestle you down. The longer the gap, the more chance for the protomolecule to disable the bomb before it goes off. If you need more, I can reprogram it."

Miller looked at the bomb resting on its cart just outside the ship's airlock. Its readouts all glowed green and gold. His sigh briefly fogged the inside of his helmet.

"Yeah, no. Five is good. Upload the routine. Am I going to need to tweak it, or is there a simple place I can put the arm-and-fire string?"

"There's a setup section," Naomi said. "It prompts you."

The hand terminal chirped, announcing the new file. Miller accepted it, ran it. It was easy as keying in a door code. Somehow he felt that arming fusion bombs to detonate around him should have been more difficult.

"Got it," he said. "We're good to go. I mean, I still have to move this bastard, but other than that. How fast am I accelerating on this thing, anyway?"

"Eventually it will be faster than the *Roci* can go. Four g and ramping up with no sign of easing off the throttle."

"Can't feel it at all," he said.

"I'm sorry about before," Naomi said.

"It was a bad situation. We did what we had to do. Same as always."

"Same as always," she echoed.

They didn't speak for a few seconds.

"Thanks for the trigger," Miller said. "Tell Amos I appreciate it."

He cut the connection before she could answer. Long goodbyes weren't anyone's strong suit. The bomb rested in the handcart, magnetic clamps in place and a wide woven-steel belt around the whole mess. He moved slowly across the metallic surface of the port docks. If the cart lost its grip on Eros, he wouldn't be strong enough to hold it back. Of course, if one of the increasingly frequent strikes hit him, it would be a lot like getting shot, so waiting around wasn't a good solve either. He put both dangers out of his mind and did the work. For ten nervous minutes, his suit smelled of overheating plastic. All the diagnostics showed within the error bars, and by the time the recyclers cleared it, his air supply still looked good. Another little mystery he wasn't going to solve.

The abyss above him shone with unflickering stars. One of the dots of light was Earth. He didn't know which one.

The service hatch had been tucked in a natural outcropping of stone, the raw-ferrous cart track like a ribbon of silver in the darkness. Grunting, Miller hauled the cart and the bomb and his own exhausted body up around the curve, and spin gravity once again pressed down on his feet instead of stretching his knees and spine. Light-headed, he keyed in the codes until the hatch opened.

Eros lay before him, darker than the empty sky.

He ran the hand terminal connection through the suit, calling Holden for what he expected was the last time.

"Miller," Holden said almost immediately.

"I'm heading in now," he said.

"Wait. Look, there's a way we might be able to get an automated cart. If the *Roci*—"

"Yeah, but you know how it is. I'm already here. And we don't know how fast this sonofabitch can go. We've got a problem we need to fix. This is how we do it."

Holden's hope had been weak, anyway. Pro forma. A gesture and, Miller thought, maybe even heartfelt. Trying to save everyone, right to the last.

"I understand," Holden finally said.

"Okay. So once I've broken whatever the hell I find in there...?"

"We're working on ways to annihilate the station."

"Good. I'd hate to go through the trouble for nothing."

"Is there... Is there anything you want me to do? After?"

"Nah," Miller said, and then Julie was at his side, her hair floating around her like they were underwater. She glowed in more starlight than was actually there. "Wait. Yes. A couple things. Julie's parents. They run Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile. They knew the war was going to start before it did. They've got to have links to Protogen. Make sure they don't get away with it. And if you see them, tell them I'm sorry I didn't find her in time."

"Right," Holden said.

Miller squatted in the darkness. Was there anything else? Shouldn't there be more? A message to Havelock, maybe? Or Muss. Or Diogo and his OPA friends? But then there would have to be something to say.

"Okay," Miller said. "That's it, then. It was good working with you."

"I'm sorry it came down this way," Holden said. It wasn't an apology for what he'd done or said, for what he'd chosen and refused.

"Yeah," Miller said. "But what can you do, right?"

It was as close to goodbye as either of them could get. Miller shut the connection, brought up the script Naomi had sent him, and enabled it. While he was at it, he turned the Eros feed back on.

A soft hushing sound, like fingernails scratching down an endless sheet of paper. He turned on the cart's lights, the dark entrance of Eros brightening to industrial gray, shadows scattering to the corners. His imagined Julie stood in the glare like it was a spotlight, the glow illuminating her and all the structures behind her at the same time, the remnant of a long dream, almost over.

He took off the brakes, pushed, and went inside Eros for the last time.

Chapter Fifty-One: Holden

Holden knew that humans could tolerate extremely high g-forces over short durations. With proper safety systems, professional daredevils had sustained impacts in excess of twenty-five g's and survived. The human body deformed naturally, absorbed energy in soft tissues, and diffused impacts across larger areas.

He also knew that the problem with extended exposure to high g was that the constant pressure on the circulatory system would begin exposing weaknesses. Have a weak spot in an artery that could turn into an aneurysm in forty years? A few hours at seven g might just pop it open now. Capillaries in the eyes started to leak. The eye itself deformed, sometimes causing permanent damage. And then there were the hollow spaces, like the lungs and digestive tract. You piled on enough gravity, and they collapsed.

And while combat ships might maneuver at very high g for short durations, every moment spent under thrust multiplied the danger.

Eros didn't need to shoot anything at them. It could just keep speeding up until their bodies exploded under the pressure. His console was showing five g, but even as he watched, it shifted to six. They couldn't keep this up. Eros was going to get away. There was nothing he could do about it.

But he still didn't order Alex to stop accelerating.

As if Naomi were reading his mind, WE CAN'T KEEP THIS UP popped up on his console, her user ID in front of the text.

FRED'S WORKING ON IT. THEY MIGHT NEED US TO BE WITHIN RANGE OF EROS WHEN THEY COME UP WITH A PLAN, he replied. Even moving his fingers the millimeters necessary to use the controls built into his chair for exactly this reason was painfully difficult.

WITHIN RANGE FOR WHAT? Naomi typed.

Holden didn't answer. He had no idea. His blood was burning with drugs to keep him awake and alert even while his body was being crushed. The drugs had the contradictory effect of making his brain run at double speed while not allowing him to actually think. But Fred would come up with something. Lots of smart people were thinking about it.

And Miller.

Miller was lugging a fusion bomb through Eros right now. When your enemy had the tech advantage, you came at him as low-tech as you could get. Maybe one sad detective pulling a nuclear weapon on a wagon would slip through their defenses. Naomi had said they weren't magic. Maybe Miller could make it and give them the opening they needed.

Either way, Holden had to be there, even if it was just to see.

FRED, Naomi typed to him.

Holden opened the connection. Fred looked to him like a man suppressing a grin.

"Holden," he said. "How are you guys holding up?"

SIX G'S. SPIT IT OUT.

"Right. So it turns out that the UN cops have been ripping Protogen's network apart, looking for clues as to what the hell's been going on. Guess who showed up as public enemy number one for the Protogen bigwigs? Yours truly. Suddenly all is forgiven, and Earth welcomes me back into her warm embrace. The enemy of my enemy thinks I am a righteous bastard."

GOODY. MY SPLEEN IS COLLAPSING. HURRY UP.

"The idea of Eros crashing into Earth is bad enough. Extinction-level event, even if it's just a rock. But the UN people have been watching the Eros feeds, and it's scaring the shit out of them."
AND.

"Earth is preparing to launch her entire ground-based nuclear arsenal. *Thousands* of nukes. They're going to vaporize that rock. The navy will intercept what's left after the initial attack and sterilize that entire area of space with constant nuclear bombardment. I know it's a risk, but it's what we have."

Holden resisted the urge to shake his head. He didn't want to wind up with one cheek stuck to the chair permanently.

EROS DODGED THE NAUVOO. IT'S GOING SIX G'S RIGHT NOW, AND ACCORDING TO NAOMI, MILLER FEELS NO ACCELERATION. WHATEVER IT'S DOING, IT DOESN'T HAVE THE SAME INERTIAL LIMITATIONS WE HAVE. WHAT'S TO STOP IT FROM JUST DODGING AGAIN? AT THESE SPEEDS, THE MISSILES WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO TURN AROUND AND CATCH IT. AND WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TARGETING ON? EROS DOESN'T REFLECT RADAR ANYMORE.

"That's where you come in. We need you to try bouncing a laser off of it. We can use the *Rocinante's* targeting system to guide the missiles in."

I HATE TO BREAK IT TO YOU, BUT WE'LL BE OUT OF THIS GAME LONG BEFORE THOSE MISSILES SHOW. WE CAN'T KEEP UP. WE CAN'T GUIDE THE MISSILES IN FOR YOU. AND ONCE WE LOSE VISUAL, NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO TRACK WHERE EROS IS.

"You might have to put it on autopilot," Fred said.

Meaning *You might all have to die in the seats you're in right now.*

I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO DIE A MARTYR AND ALL, BUT WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THE ROCI CAN BEAT THIS THING ON ITS OWN? I'M NOT KILLING MY CREW BECAUSE YOU CAN'T COME UP WITH A GOOD PLAN.

Fred leaned toward the screen, his eyes narrowing. For the first time, Fred's mask slipped and Holden saw the fear and helplessness behind it.

"Look, I know what I'm asking, but you know the stakes. This is what we have. I didn't call you to hear how it won't work. Either help or give up. Right now devil's advocate is just another name for asshole."

I'm crushing myself to death, probably doing permanent damage, just because I wouldn't give up, you bastard. So sorry I didn't sign my crew up to die the minute you said to do it.

Having to type everything out had the advantage of restraining emotional outbursts. Instead of ripping into Fred for questioning his commitment, Holden just typed LET ME THINK ABOUT IT and cut the connection.

The optical tracking system watching Eros flashed a warning to him that the asteroid was increasing speed again. The giant sitting on his chest added a few pounds as Alex pushed the *Rocinante* to keep up. A flashing red indicator informed Holden that because of the duration they'd spent at the current acceleration, he could expect as much as 12 percent of the crew to stroke out. It would go up. Enough time, and it would reach 100 percent. He tried to remember the *Roci's* maximum theoretical acceleration. Alex had already flown it at twelve g briefly when they'd left the *Donnager*. The actual limit was one of those trivial numbers, a way to brag about something your ship would never really do. Fifteen g, was it? Twenty?

Miller hadn't felt any acceleration at all. How fast could you go if you didn't even *feel* it?

Almost without realizing he was going to do it, Holden activated the master engine cutoff switch. Within seconds he was in free fall, wracked with coughs as his organs tried to find their original resting places inside his body. When Holden had recovered enough to take one really deep breath, his first in hours, Alex came on the comm.

"Cap, did you kill the engines?" the pilot said.

"Yeah, that was me. We're done. Eros is getting away no matter what we do. We were just prolonging the inevitable, and risking some crew deaths in the process."

Naomi turned her chair and gave him a sad little smile. She was sporting a black eye from the acceleration.

"We did our best," she said.

Holden shoved out of his chair hard enough that he bruised his forearms on the ceiling, then shoved off hard again and pinned his back to a bulkhead by grabbing on to a fire extinguisher mount. Naomi was watching him from across the deck, her mouth a comical O of surprise. He knew he probably looked ridiculous, like a petulant child throwing a tantrum, but he couldn't stop himself. He broke free of his grip on the fire extinguisher and floated into the middle of the deck. He hadn't known he'd been pounding on the bulkhead with his other fist. Now that he did, his hand hurt.

"God dammit," he said. "Just God dammit."

"We—" Naomi started, but he cut her off.

"We did our best? What the hell does that matter?" Holden felt a red haze in his mind, and not all of it was from the drugs. "I did my best to help the *Canterbury*, too. I tried to do the right thing when I let us be taken by the *Donnager*. Did my good intentions mean jack shit?"

Naomi's expression went flat. Now her eyelids dropped, and she stared at him from narrow slits. Her lips pressed together until they were almost white. *They wanted me to kill you*, Holden thought. *They wanted me to kill my crew just in case Eros can't break fifteen g, and I couldn't do it.* The guilt and rage and sorrow played against each other, turning into something thin and unfamiliar. He couldn't put a name to the feeling.

"You're the last person I'd expect to hear self-pity from," she said, her voice tight. "Where's the captain who's always asking, 'What can we do right now to make things better?'"

Holden gestured around himself helplessly. "Show me which button to push to stop everyone on Earth from being killed, I'll push it."

Just as long as it doesn't kill you.

Naomi unbuckled her harness and floated toward the crew ladder.

"I'm going below to check on Amos," she said, then opened the deck hatch. She paused. "I'm your operations officer, Holden. Monitoring communication lines is part of the job. I know what Fred wanted."

Holden blinked, and Naomi pulled herself out of sight. The hatch slammed behind her with a bang that couldn't have been any harder than normal but felt like it was anyway.

Holden called up to the cockpit and told Alex to take a break and get some coffee. The pilot stopped on his way through the deck, looking like he wanted to talk, but Holden just waved him on. Alex shrugged and left.

The watery feeling in his gut had taken root and bloomed into a full-fledged, limb-shaking panic. Some vicious, vindictive, self-flagellating part of his mind insisted on running nonstop movies of Eros hurtling toward Earth. It would come screaming down out of the sky like every religion's vision of apocalypse made real, fire and earthquakes and pestilential rain sweeping the land. But each time Eros hit the Earth in his mind, it was the explosion of the *Canterbury* he saw. A shockingly sudden white light, and then nothing but the sound of ice pebbles rattling across his hull like gentle hail.

Mars would survive, for a while. Pockets of the Belt would hold out even longer, probably. They had a culture of making do, surviving on scraps, living on the bleeding edge of their resources. But in the end, without Earth, everything would eventually die. Humans had been out of the gravity well a long time. Long enough to have developed the technology to cut that umbilical cord, but they'd just never bothered to do it. Stagnant. Humanity, for all its desire to fling itself into every livable pocket it could reach, had become stagnant. Satisfied to fly around in ships built half a century before, using technology that hadn't changed in longer than that.

Earth had been so focused on her own problems that she'd ignored her far-flung children, except when asking for her share of their labors. Mars had bent her entire population to the task of remaking the planet, changing its red face to green. Trying to make a new Earth to end their reliance on the old.

And the Belt had become the slums of the solar system. Everyone too busy trying to survive to spend any time creating something new.

We found the protomolecule at exactly the right time for it to do the most damage to us, Holden thought.

It had looked like a shortcut. A way to avoid having to do any of the work, to just jump straight to godhood. And it had been so long since anything was a real threat to humanity outside of itself that no one was even smart enough to be scared. Dresden had said it himself: The things that had made the protomolecule, loaded it into Phoebe, and shot it at the Earth were already godlike back when humanity's ancestors thought photosynthesis and the flagellum were cutting-edge. But he'd taken their ancient engine of destruction and turned the key anyway, because when you got right down to it, humans were still just curious monkeys. They still had to poke everything they found with a stick to see what it did.

The red haze in Holden's vision had taken on a strange strobing pattern. It took him a moment to realize that a red telltale on his panel was flashing, letting him know that the *Ravi* was calling. He kicked off a nearby crash couch, floated back to his station, and opened the link.

"*Rocinante* here, *Ravi*, go ahead."

"Holden, why are we stopped?" McBride asked.

"Because we weren't going to keep up anyway, and the danger of crew casualties was getting too high," he replied. It sounded weak even to him. Cowardly. McBride didn't seem to notice.

"Roger. I'm going to get new orders. Will let you know if anything changes."

Holden killed the connection and stared blankly at the console. The visual tracking system was doing its very best to keep Eros in sight. The *Roci* was a good ship. State of the art. And since Alex had tagged the asteroid as a threat, the computer would do everything in its power to keep track of it. But Eros was a fast-moving, low-albedo object that didn't reflect radar. It could move unpredictably and at high speed. It was just a matter of time before they lost track of it, especially if it wanted to be lost track of.

Next to the tracking information on his console, a small data window opened to inform him that the *Ravi* had turned on its transponder. It was standard practice even for military ships to keep them on when there was no apparent threat or need for stealth. The radio man on the little UNN corvette must have flipped it back on out of habit.

And now the *Roci* registered it as a known vessel and threw it onto the threat display with a gently pulsing green dot and a name tag. Holden looked at it blankly for a long moment. He felt his eyes go wide.

"*Shit*," Holden said, then opened the shipwide comm. "Naomi, I need you in ops."

"I think I'd rather stay down here for a bit," she replied.

Holden hit the battle station's alert button on his console. The deck lights shifted to red and a Klaxon sounded three times.

"XO Nagata to ops," he said. Let her chew him out later. He'd have it coming. But right now he didn't have any time to waste.

Naomi was on the ops deck in less than a minute. Holden had already buckled back into his crash couch and was pulling up the comm logs. Naomi pushed over to her chair and belted in as well. She gave him an inquiring look—*Are we going to die after all?*—but said nothing. If he said so, she would. He felt a spike of equal parts admiration for and impatience with her. He found what he was looking for in the logs before speaking.

"Okay," he said. "We've had radio contact with Miller after Eros dropped off of radar. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right," she said. "But his suit isn't powerful enough to transmit through the shell of Eros out to much distance, so one of the moored ships is boosting the signal for him."

"Which means that whatever Eros is doing to kill the radar isn't killing all radio transmissions from outside."

"That seems right," Naomi said, a growing curiosity in her voice.

"And you still have the control codes for the five OPA freighters on the surface, right?"

"Yes, sir." And then a moment later: "Oh, *shit*."

"Okay," Holden said, turning in his chair to face Naomi with a grin. "Why do the *Roci* and every other naval ship in the system have a switch to turn off their transponders?"

"So the enemy can't get a missile lock on the transponder signal and blow them up," she said, sharing his grin now.

Holden spun his chair back around and began opening a comm channel to Tycho Station.

"XO, would you be so kind as to use the control codes Miller gave you to turn those five OPA freighters back on and fire up their transponders? Unless our visitor on Eros can outrun radio waves, I think we've gotten around the acceleration problem."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Naomi replied. Even looking the other way, Holden could hear the smile in her voice, and it melted the last of the ice in his gut. They had a plan. They were going to make a difference.

"Call coming in from the *Ravi*," Naomi said. "You want it before I turn the transponders on?"

"Hell yes."

The line clicked.

"Captain Holden. We've got our new orders. Seems we're going to be chasing that thing a little further."

McBride sounded almost like someone who hadn't just been sent to her death. Stoic.

"You might want to hold off on that for a couple minutes," Holden said. "We have an alternative."

As Naomi activated the transponders on the five OPA freighters Miller had left moored to the surface of Eros, Holden laid out the plan to McBride and then, on a separate line, Fred. By the time Fred had gotten back to him with an enthusiastic approval of the plan from both him and the UN Naval command, the five freighters were pinging away, telling the solar system where they were. An hour after that, the largest swarm of interplanetary nuclear weapons in the history of humanity had been fired and were winging their way toward Eros.

We're going to win, Holden thought as he watched the missiles take flight like a swarm of angry red dots on his threat display. *We're going to beat this thing*. And what was more, his crew was going to see the end of it. No one else had to die.

Except...

"Miller's calling," Naomi said. "Probably noticed we turned his ships back on."

Holden had a wrenching feeling in his stomach. Miller would be there, on Eros, when those missiles arrived. Not everyone would get to celebrate the coming victory.

"Hey. Miller. How you doing?" he said, not quite able to keep the funereal tone out of his voice.

Miller's voice was choppy, and half drowned by static, but not so garbled that Holden couldn't hear the tone in it and know that he was about to take a piss all over their parade.

"Holden," Miller said. "We have a problem."

Chapter Fifty-Two: Miller

One. Two. Three.

Miller pushed down on the hand terminal, resetting the trigger again. The double doors in front of him had once been one of thousands of quietly automated mechanisms. They had run reliably in their subtle magnetic tracks, maybe for years. Now something black with the texture of tree bark grew like creepers around their sides, deforming the metal. Past them lay the port corridors, the warehouses, the casino. Everything that had been Eros Station and was now the vanguard of an invading alien intelligence. But to reach it, Miller had to pry open a stuck door. In less than five seconds. While wearing an environment suit.

He put the hand terminal down again and reached quickly for the thin crack where the two doors met. One. Two. The door shifted a centimeter, flakes of black matter sifting down. Three.

Four.

He grabbed the hand terminal again, resetting the trigger.

This shit just wasn't going to work.

Miller sat on the ground beside the cart. The Eros feed whispered and muttered, apparently unaware of the tiny invader scratching at the station's skin. Miller took a long, deep breath. Door didn't move. He had to get past it.

Naomi wasn't going to like this.

With his one free hand, Miller loosened the woven metal strap around the bomb until it could rock back and forth a little. Carefully, slowly, he lifted the corner of it. Then, watching the status readouts, he wedged the hand terminal under it, the metal corner digging hard into the touch screen over the enter button. The trigger stayed green. If the station shook or shifted, he'd still have five seconds to get to it.

Good enough.

Braced with both hands, Miller tugged at the doors. More of the black crust fell away as he levered the doors open far enough to see through. The corridor beyond was nearly round; the dark growth had filled in the corners until the passage looked like a huge desiccated blood vessel. The only lights were his suit's headlights and a million tiny luminescent dots that swirled in the air like blue fireflies. When the Eros feed pulsed, growing momentarily louder, the fireflies dimmed and then returned. The environment suit reported breathable air with higher than expected concentrations of argon, ozone, and benzene.

One of the luminescent dots floated past him, swirling on currents he couldn't feel. Miller ignored it, pushing at the doors, widening the gap centimeter by centimeter. He could put in an arm to feel the crust. It seemed solid enough to support the cart. That was a godsend. If it had been thigh-high alien mud, he would have had to find some other way to carry the bomb. It was going to be bad enough hauling the cart up to the rounded surface.

No rest for the wicked, Julie Mao said in his mind. *No peace for the good*.

He went back to work.

By the time he'd shoved the doors wide enough to get through, he was sweating. His arms and back ached. The dark crust had started growing down the corridor, tendrils shooting out toward the

airlock, keeping to the edges, where walls met floor or ceiling. The blue glow had colonized the air. Eros was heading out the corridor as quickly as he was heading in. Faster, maybe.

Miller hauled the cart up with both hands, watching the hand terminal closely. The bomb rocked, but not so much it lost its grip on the trigger. Once he was safely in the corridor, he took the terminal back.

One. Two.

The heavy bomb casing had carved a little divot in the touch pad, but it still worked. Miller took the cart handle and leaned forward, the uneven, organic surface beneath him translated into the rough tug and flutter of the cart's vibration.

He'd died here once. He'd been poisoned. Shot. These halls, or ones much like them, had been his battleground. His and Holden's. They were unrecognizable now.

He passed through a wide, nearly empty space. The crust had thinned here, the metal walls of the warehouse showing through in places. One LED still glowed in the ceiling, the cool white light spilling onto the darkness.

The path led him to the casino level, the architecture of commerce still bringing visitors to the same spot. The alien bark was nearly gone, but the space had been transformed. Pachinko machines stood in their rows, half melted or exploded or, like a few, still glittering and asking for the financial information that would unlock the gaudy lights and festive, celebratory sound effects. The card tables were still visible under mushroom caps of clear glutinous gel. Lining the walls and cathedral-high ceilings, black ribs rippled with hairlike threads that glowed at the tips without offering any illumination.

Something screamed, the sound muffled by Miller's suit. The broadcast feed of the station sounded louder and richer now that he was under its skin. He had the sudden, transporting memory of being a child and watching a video feed of a boy who'd been swallowed by a monstrous whale.

Something gray and the size of Miller's two fists together flew by almost too fast to see. It hadn't been a bird. Something scuttled behind an overturned vending machine. He realized what was missing. There had been a million and a half people on Eros, and a large percentage of them had been here, on the casino level, when their own personal apocalypse came. But there were no bodies. Or, no. That wasn't true. The black crust, the millions of dark rills above him with their soft, oceanic glow. Those were the corpses of Eros, re-created. Human flesh, remade. A suit alarm told him he was starting to hyperventilate. Darkness started to creep in at the edge of his vision.

Miller sank to his knees.

Don't pass out, you son of a bitch, he told himself. *Don't pass out, or if you do, at least land so your weight's on the damned trigger.*

Julie put her hand on his. He could almost feel it, and it steadied him. She was right. They were only bodies. Just dead people. Victims. Just another slab of recycled meat, same as every unlicensed whore he'd seen stabbed to death in the cheap hotels on Ceres. Same as all the suicides who'd thrown themselves out of airlocks. Okay, the protomolecule had mutilated the flesh in weird ways. Didn't change what it was. Didn't change what he was.

"When you're a cop," he told Julie, repeating something he'd told every rookie he'd been partnered with in his career, "you don't have the luxury of feeling things. You have to do the job."

So do the job, she said gently.

He nodded. He stood. *Do the job.*

As if in response, the sound in his suit changed, the Eros feed fluting up through a hundred different frequencies before exploding in a harsh flood of what he thought was Hindi. Human voices. *Till human voices wake us,* he thought, without quite being able to recall where the phrase came from.

Somewhere in the station, there was going to be... something. A control mechanism or a power supply or whatever the protomolecule was using instead of an engine. He didn't know what it would

look like or how it would be defended. He didn't have any idea how it worked, apart from the assumption that if he blew it up, it wouldn't keep going very well.

So we go back, he told Julie. *We go back to what we do know.*

The thing that was growing inside Eros, using the stone skin of the asteroid as its own unarticulated exoskeleton, hadn't cut off the ports. It hadn't moved the interior walls or re-created the chambers and passages of the casino level. So the station's layout should be pretty near what it had always been. Okay.

Whatever it used to drive the station through space, it was using a shitload of energy. Okay.

So find the hot spot. With his free hand, he checked the environment suit. Ambient temperature was twenty-seven degrees: hot but far from unbearable. He walked briskly back toward the port corridor. The temperature dropped by less than a hundredth of a degree, but it did drop. All right, then. He could go to each of the corridors, find which one was hottest, and follow it. When he found a place in the station that was, say, three or four degrees hotter than the rest, that would be the place. He'd roll the cart up beside it, let up his thumb, and count to five.

No problem.

When he got back to the cart, something golden with the soft look of heather was growing around the wheels. Miller scraped it off as best he could, but one of the wheels had still developed a squeak. Nothing to be done about that.

With one hand hauling the cart and the other mashing down on his hand terminal's dead-man's-switch, Miller headed up, deeper into the station.



"She's mine," mindless Eros said. It had been stuck on the phrase for the better part of an hour.

"She's *mine*. She's... *mine*."

"Fine," Miller muttered. "You can have her."

His shoulder ached. The squeak in the cart's wheel had grown worse, the whine of it cutting through the souls-of-the-damned madness of the Eros feed. His thumb was starting to tingle from the constant, relentless pressure of not annihilating himself quite yet. With each level he rose, the spin gravity grew lighter and the Coriolis a little more noticeable. It wasn't quite the same as on Ceres, but it was close and felt like coming home. He found himself looking forward to when the job was done. He imagined himself back in his hole, a six-pack of beer, some music on the speakers that had an actual composer instead of the wild, empty-minded glossolalia of the dead station. Maybe some light jazz.

Who ever thought the idea of light jazz would be appealing?

"Catch me if you can, cocksuckers," Eros said. "I am gone and gone and gone. Gone and gone and gone."

The inner levels of the station were both more familiar and stranger. Away from the mass grave of the casino level, more of Eros' old life showed through. Tube stops still glowed, announcing line errors and counseling patience. Air recyclers hummed. The floors were relatively clean and clear. The sense of near normalcy made the changes stand out eerily. Dark fronds coated the walls with swirling nautilus patterns. Flakes of the stuff drifted down from above, whirling in the spin gravity like soot. Eros still had spin gravity but didn't have gravity from the massive acceleration it was under. Miller chose not to try to figure that out.

A flock of softball-sized spiderlike things crawled through the corridor, leaving a slick sheen of glowing slime behind them. It wasn't until he paused to knock one off the cart that he recognized them as severed hands, the trailing wrist bones charred black and remade. Part of his mind was screaming, but it was a distant one and easy to ignore.

He had to respect the protomolecule. For something that had been expecting prokaryotic anaerobes, it was doing a bang-up job of making do. He paused to check his suit's sensor array. The

temperature had risen half a degree since he'd left the casino and a tenth of a degree since he'd entered this particular main hall. The background radiation was also climbing, his poor abused flesh sucking in more rads. The concentration of benzene was going down, and his suit was picking up more exotic aromatic molecules—tetracene, anthracene, naphthalene—with behavior sufficiently strange to confuse the sensors. So it was the right direction. He leaned forward, the cart resisting his pull like a bored kid. As he recalled, the structural layout was roughly like Ceres', and he knew Ceres like he knew his name. One more level up—maybe two—there would be a confluence of services from the lower, high-g levels and the supply and energy systems that did better at lower gravity. It seemed as likely a place to grow a command and control center as any. As good a location for a brain.

"Gone and gone and gone," Eros said. "And gone."

It was funny, he thought, how the ruins of the past shaped everything that came after. It seemed to work on all levels; one of the truths of the universe. Back in the ancient days, when humanity still lived entirely down a well, the paths laid down by Roman legions had become asphalt and later ferroconcrete without ever changing a curve or a turn. On Ceres, Eros, Tycho, the bore of the standard corridor had been determined by mining tools built to accommodate the trucks and lifts of Earth, which had in turn been designed to go down tracks wide enough for a mule cart's axle.

And now the alien—the thing from out in the vast dark—was growing along the corridors, ducts, tube routes, and water pipes laid out by a handful of ambitious primates. He wondered what it would have been like if the protomolecule hadn't been captured by Saturn, had actually found its way into the soup of primordial Earth. No fusion reactors, no navigation drives, no complex flesh to appropriate. What would it have done differently if it hadn't had to build around some other evolution's design choices?

Miller, Julie said. Keep moving.

He blinked. He was standing in the empty passageway at the base of an access ramp. He didn't know how long he'd been lost in his own mind.

Years, maybe.

He blew out a long breath and started up the ramp. The corridors above him were reading as considerably hotter than ambient. Almost three degrees. He was getting close. There was no light, though. He took his tingling, half-numbed thumb off the select button, turned on the hand terminal's little utility LED, and got back to the dead man's switch just before the count of four.

"Gone and gone and... and... and and and *and*."

The Eros feed squealed, a chorus of voices chattering in Russian and Hindi clamoring over the old singular voice and being drowned out in turn by a deep creaking howl. Whale song, maybe. Miller's suit mentioned politely that he had half an hour of oxygen left. He shut the alarm down.

The transfer station was overgrown. Pale fronds swarmed along the corridors and twisted into ropes. Recognizable insects—flies, cockroaches, water spiders—crawled along the thick white cables in purposeful waves. Tendrils of something that looked like articulated bile swept back and forth, leaving a film of scurrying larvae. They were as much victim of the protomolecule as the human population. Poor bastards.

"You can't take the razor back," Eros said, and its voice sounded almost triumphant. "You can't take the razor back. She is gone and gone and gone."

The temperature was climbing faster now. It took him a few minutes to decide that spinward might be slightly warmer. He hauled the cart. He could feel the squeaking, a tiny, rattling tremor in the bones of his hand. Between the mass of the bomb and the failing wheel bearings, his shoulders were starting to really ache. Good thing he wasn't going to have to haul this damn thing back down.

Julie was waiting for him in the darkness; the thin beam from his hand terminal cut through her. Her hair floated, spin gravity having, after all, no effect on phantoms of the mind. Her expression was grave.

How does it know? she asked.

Miller paused. Every now and then, all through his career, some daydreamed witness would say something, use some phrase, laugh at the wrong thing, and he'd know that the back of his mind had a new angle on the case.

This was that moment.

"You can't take the razor back," Eros crowed.

The comet that took the protomolecule into the solar system in the first place was a dead drop, not a ship, Julie said, her dark lips never moving. It was just ballistic. Any ice bullet with the protomolecule in deep freeze. It was aimed at Earth, but it missed and got grabbed by Saturn instead. The payload didn't steer it. Didn't drive it. Didn't navigate.

"It didn't need to," Miller said.

It's navigating now. It's going to Earth. How does it know to go to Earth? Where did that information come from? It's talking. Where did that grammar come from?

Who is the voice of Eros?

Miller closed his eyes. His suit mentioned that he only had twenty minutes of air.

"You can't take the *Razorback*! She is gone and gone and gone!"

"Oh fuck," Miller said. "Oh *Jesus*."

He let go of the cart, turning back toward the ramp and the light and the wide station corridors. Everything was shaking, the station itself trembling like someone on the edge of hypothermia. Only of course it wasn't. The only one shaking was him. It was all in the voice of Eros. It had been there all the time. He should have known.

Maybe he had.

The protomolecule didn't know English or Hindi or Russian or any of the languages it had been spouting. All of that had been in the minds and softwares of Eros' dead, coded in the neurons and grammar programs that the protomolecule had eaten. Eaten, but not destroyed. It had kept the information and languages and complex cognitive structures, building itself on them like asphalt over the roads the legions built.

The dead of Eros weren't dead. Juliette Andromeda Mao was alive.

He was grinning so hard his cheeks ached. With one gloved hand, he tried the connection. The signal was too weak. He couldn't get through. He told his uplink on the surface ship to crank up the power, got a connection.

Holden's voice came over the link.

"Hey. Miller. How you doing?"

The words were soft, apologetic. A hospice worker being gentle to the dying. An incandescent spark of annoyance lit his mind, but he kept his voice steady.

"Holden," he said. "We have a problem."

Chapter Fifty-Three: Holden

Actually, we've sort of figured out how to solve the problem," Holden replied.

"I don't think so. I'm linking you to my suit's med data," Miller said.

A few seconds later, four columns of numbers popped up in a small window on Holden's console. It all looked fairly normal, though there were subtleties that only a med-tech, like Shed, would be able to interpret correctly.

"Okay," Holden said. "That's great. You're getting a little irradiated, but other than that—" Miller cut him off.

"Am I suffering from hypoxia?" he said.

The data from his suit showed 87 mmHg, comfortably above baseline.

"No," Holden said.

"Anything that would make a guy hallucinate or get demented? Alcohol, opiates. Something like that?"

"Not that I can see," Holden said, growing impatient. "What's this about? Are you seeing things?"

"Just the usual," Miller replied. "I wanted to get that shit out the way, because I know what you're going to say next."

He stopped talking, and the radio hissed and popped in Holden's ear. When Miller spoke again after several seconds of silence, his voice had taken on a different tone. It wasn't quite pleading, but close enough to make Holden shift uncomfortably in his seat.

"She's alive."

There was only one *she* in Miller's universe. Julie Mao. "Uh, okay. Not sure how to respond to that."

"You'll have to take my word that I'm not having a nervous breakdown or psychotic episode or anything like that. But Julie's in here. She's driving Eros."

Holden looked at the suit's medical data again, but it kept reporting normal readings, all the numbers except for radiation comfortably in the green. His blood chemistry didn't even look like he was particularly stressed for a guy carrying a fusion bomb to his own funeral.

"Miller, Julie's dead. We both saw the body. We saw what the protomolecule... did to it."

"We saw her body, sure. We just assumed she was dead because of the damage—"

"She didn't have a *heartbeat*," Holden said. "No brain activity, no metabolism. That's pretty much the definition of *dead*."

"How do we know what dead looks like to the protomolecule?"

"We—" Holden started, then stopped. "We don't, I guess. But no heartbeat, that's a pretty good start."

Miller laughed.

"We've both seen the feeds, Holden. Those rib cages equipped with one arm that drag themselves around, think they have a heartbeat? This shit hasn't been playing by our rules since day one, you expect it to start now?"

Holden smiled to himself. Miller was right.

"Okay, so what makes you think Julie isn't just a rib cage and a mass of tentacles?"

"She might be, but it's not her body I'm talking about," Miller said. "*She's* in here. Her mind. It's like she's flying her old racing pinnace. The *Razorback*. She's been babbling about it on the radio for hours now, and I just didn't put it together. But now that I have, it's pretty goddamn clear."

"Why is she headed toward Earth?"

"I don't know," Miller said. He sounded excited, interested. More alive than Holden had ever heard him. "Maybe the protomolecule wants to get there and it's messing with her. Julie wasn't the first person to get infected, but she's the first one that survived long enough to get somewhere. Maybe she's the seed crystal and everything that the protomolecule's doing is built on her. I don't know that, but I can find out. I just need to find her. Talk to her."

"You need to get that bomb to wherever the controls are and set it off."

"I can't do that," Miller said. Because of course he couldn't.

It doesn't matter, Holden thought. *In a little less than thirty hours, you're both radioactive dust.*

"All right. Can you find your girl in less than"—Holden had the *Roci* do a revised time of impact for the incoming missiles—"twenty-seven hours?"

"Why? What happens in twenty-seven hours?"

"Earth fired her entire interplanetary nuclear arsenal at Eros a few hours ago. We just turned the transponders on in the five freighters you parked on the surface. The missiles are targeting them. The *Roci* is guessing twenty-seven hours to impact based on the current acceleration curve. The Martian and UN navies are on their way to sterilize the area after detonation. Make sure nothing survives or slips the net."

"Jesus."

"Yeah," Holden said with a sigh. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I've had a lot going on, and it sort of slipped my mind."

There was another long silence on the line.

"You can stop them," Miller said. "Shut down the transponders."

Holden spun his chair around to face Naomi. Her face had the same *what did he just say?* look that he knew was on his own. She pulled the suit's medical data over to her console, then called up the *Roci's* medical expert system and began running a full medical diagnostic. The implication was clear. She thought something was wrong with Miller that wasn't immediately apparent from the data they were getting. If the protomolecule had infected him, used him as a last-ditch misdirection...

"Not a chance, Miller. This is our last shot. If we blow this one, Eros can orbit the Earth, spraying brown goo all over it. No way we take that risk."

"Look," Miller said, his tone alternating between the earlier pleading and a growing frustration. "*Julie is in here*. If I can find her, a way to talk to her, I can stop this without the nukes."

"What, ask the protomolecule to pretty please not infect the Earth, when that was what it was designed to do? Appeal to its better nature?"

Miller paused for a moment before speaking again.

"Look, Holden, I think I know what's going on here. This thing was intended to infect single-celled organisms. The most basic forms of life, right?"

Holden shrugged, then remembered there was no video feed and said, "Okay."

"That didn't work, but it's a smart bastard. Adaptive. It got into a human host, a complex multicelled organism. Aerobic. Huge brain. Nothing like what it was built for. It's been improvising ever since. That mess on the stealth ship? That was its first try. We saw what it was doing with Julie in that Eros bathroom. It was learning how to work with us."

"Where are you going with this?" Holden said. There was no time pressure yet, with the missiles still more than a day away, but he couldn't quite keep the impatience out of his voice.

"All I'm saying is Eros now isn't what the protomolecule's designers planned on. It's their original plan laid over the top of billions of years of our evolution. And when you improvise, you use what you've got. You use what works. Julie's the template. Her brain, her emotions are all over this

thing. She sees this run to Earth as a race, and she's crowing about winning. Laughing at you because you can't keep up."

"Wait," Holden said.

"She's not attacking Earth, she's going home. For all we know, she's not heading for Earth at all. Luna, maybe. She grew up there. The protomolecule piggybacked on her structure, her brain. And so she infected it as much as it infected her. If I can make her understand what's really going on, then maybe I can negotiate with her."

"How do you know that?"

"Call it a hunch," Miller said. "I'm good with hunches."

Holden whistled, the entire situation doing a flip-flop in his head. The new perspective was dizzying.

"But the protomolecule still wants to obey its program," Holden said. "And we have no idea what that is."

"I can damn sure tell you it isn't wiping humans out. The things that shot Phoebe at us two billion years ago didn't know what the hell humans were. Whatever it wants to do needed biomass, and it's got that now."

Holden couldn't stop himself from snorting at that.

"So, what? They don't mean us any harm? Seriously? You think if we explain that we'd rather not have it land on Earth, then it will just agree and go somewhere else?"

"Not it," Miller said. "Her."

Naomi looked up at Holden, shaking her head. She wasn't seeing anything organic wrong with Miller either.

"I've been working this case for, shit, almost a year," Miller said. "I've climbed into her life, read her mail, met her friends. I know her. She's about as independent as a person can be, and she loves us."

"Us?" Holden asked.

"People. She loves humans. She gave up being the little rich girl and joined the OPA. She backed the Belt because it was the right thing to do. No way she kills us if she knows that's what's happening. I just need to find a way to explain. I can do this. Give me a chance."

Holden ran a hand through his hair, grimacing at the accumulating grease. A day or two at high g was not conducive to regular showering.

"Can't do it," Holden said. "Stakes are too high. We're going ahead with the plan. I'm sorry."

"She'll beat you," Miller said.

"What?"

"Okay, maybe she won't. You've got a shitload of firepower. But the protomolecule's figured out how to get around inertia. And Julie? She's a fighter, Holden. If you take her on, my money's on her."

Holden had seen the video of Julie fighting off her attackers on board the stealth ship. She'd been methodical and ruthless in her own defense. She'd fought without giving quarter. He'd seen the wildness in her eyes when she felt trapped and threatened. Only her attackers' combat armor had kept her from doing a lot more damage before they took her down.

Holden felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up at the idea of Eros actually fighting. So far it had been content to run from their clumsy attacks. What happened when it went to war?

"You could find her," Holden said, "and use the bomb."

"If I can't get through to her," Miller said, "that's my deal. I'll find her. I'll talk to her. If I can't get through, I'll take her out, and you can turn Eros into a cinder. I'm fine with that. But you have to give me time to try it my way first."

Holden looked at Naomi looking back at him. Her face was pale. He wanted to see the answer in her expression, to know what he should do based on what she thought. He didn't. It was his call.

"Do you need more than twenty-seven hours?" Holden finally asked.

He heard Miller exhale loudly. There was gratitude in his voice that was, in its own way, worse than the pleading had been.

"I don't know. There are a couple thousand kilometers of tunnels down here, and none of the transit systems work. I have to walk everywhere pulling this damn wagon. Not to mention the fact that I don't really know what I'm even looking for. But give me a little time, I'll figure it."

"And you know that if this doesn't work, you'll have to kill her. Yourself and Julie?"

"I know."

Holden had the *Roci* calculate how long it would take Eros to reach the Earth at the current rate of acceleration. The missiles from Earth were covering the distance a lot faster than Eros was. The IPBMs were just overpowered Epstein drives with nuclear bombs riding up front. Their acceleration limits were the functional limits of the Epstein drive itself. If the missiles didn't arrive, it would still take nearly a week for Eros to get to Earth, even if it kept a constant rate of acceleration.

There was some flexibility in there.

"Hold on, let me work something out here," Holden said to Miller, then muted the connection. "Naomi, the missiles are flying in a straight line toward Eros, and the *Roci* thinks they'll intercept it in about twenty-seven hours, give or take. How much time do we buy if we turn that straight line into a curve? How much of a curve can we do and still give the missiles a chance to catch Eros before it gets too close?"

Naomi tipped her head to one side, looking at him suspiciously through narrowed eyes.

"What are you about to do?" she said.

"Maybe give Miller a chance to head off the first interspecies war."

"You trust *Miller*?" she said with surprising vehemence. "You think he's insane. You threw him off the ship because you thought he was a psychopath and a killer, and now you're going to let him speak for humanity to an alien God-thing that wants to rip us to shreds?"

Holden had to suppress a smile. Telling an angry woman how attractive her anger made her would make it stop being cute very quickly. And besides that, he needed it to make sense to her. That was how he'd know if he was right.

"You told me once that Miller was right, even when I thought he was wrong."

"I didn't make it a blanket statement," Naomi said, spacing her words out like she was speaking to an idiot child. "I said he was right to shoot Dresden. That doesn't mean Miller's *stable*. He's in the process of committing suicide, Jim. He's fixated on this dead girl. I can't even begin to imagine what might be going through his head right now."

"Agreed. But he's there, on the scene, and he's got a keen eye for observation and just plain figuring shit out. This guy tracked us to Eros based on the ship name we picked. That's pretty damned impressive. He'd never even met me, and he knew me well enough from researching me to know I'd like naming my ship after Don Quixote's horse."

Naomi laughed. "Really? Is that where that comes from?"

"So when he says that he knows Julie, I believe him."

Naomi started to say something, then paused.

"You think she'll beat the nukes?" Naomi said, more softly.

"He thinks she can. And he thinks he can talk her into not killing us all. I have to give him that chance. I owe it to him."

"Even if it means killing Earth?"

"No," Holden said. "Not that much."

Naomi paused again. Her anger faded.

"So delay the impact, not abort," Naomi said.

"Buy him some time. How much can we get?"

Naomi frowned, looking at the readouts. He could almost see the options clicking through her mind. She smiled, her fierceness gone now, replaced by the mischievous look she got when she knew she was being really clever.

“As much as you want.”



“You want to do what?” Fred asked.

“Pull the nukes off course for a while to buy Miller some time, but not so much that we can’t still use them to destroy Eros if we need to,” Holden said.

“It’s simple,” Naomi added. “I’m sending you detailed instructions.”

“Give me the overview,” Fred said.

“Earth has targeted their missiles on the five freighter transponders on Eros,” Naomi said, pulling her plan up as an overlay on the comm video. “You have ships and stations all over the Belt. You use the transponder reconfiguring program you gave us way back when, and you keep shifting those transponder codes to ships or stations along these vectors to pull the missiles into a long arc that eventually wraps back around to Eros.”

Fred shook his head.

“Won’t work. The minute UNN Command sees we’re doing it, they’ll just tell the missiles to stop following those particular codes, and they’ll try to figure out some other way to target Eros,” he said. “And they’ll also be really pissed at us.”

“Yeah, they’re going to be pissed all right,” Holden said. “But they’re not going to get their missiles back. Just before you start leading the missiles off course, we’re going to launch a massive hacking attempt from multiple locations on the missiles.”

“So they’ll assume an enemy is trying to trick them, and shut down mid-flight reprogramming,” Fred said.

“Yep,” Holden replied. “We’ll tell them we’re going to trick them so they stop listening, and once they’re not listening, we’ll trick them.”

Fred shook his head again, this time giving Holden the vaguely frightened look of a man who wanted to back slowly out of the room.

“There is no way in hell I am going along with this,” he said. “Miller isn’t going to work some magical deal with the aliens. We’re going to wind up nuking Eros no matter what. Why delay the inevitable?”

“Because,” Holden said. “I’m starting to think it might be less dangerous this way. If we use the missiles without taking out Eros’ command center... brain... whatever, we don’t know if it’ll work, but I’m pretty sure our chances go down. Miller’s the only one who can do that. And these are his terms.”

Fred said something obscene.

“If Miller doesn’t manage to talk to it, he’ll take it out. I do trust him for that,” Holden said.

“Come on, Fred, you know these missile designs as well as I do. Better. They put enough fuel pellets in those drives to fly around the solar system twice. We aren’t losing anything by giving Miller a little more time.”

Fred shook his head a third time. Holden saw his face go hard. He wasn’t going to buy it. Before he could say no, Holden said, “Remember that box with the protomolecule samples, and all the lab notes? Want to know what my price is for it?”

“You,” Fred said slowly, drawing it out, “are out of your God damn mind.”

“Want to buy it or what?” Holden replied. “You want the magic ticket to a seat at the table? You know my price now. Give Miller his chance, and the sample’s yours.”



"I'd be curious to know how you talked them into it," Miller said. "I was thinking I was probably screwed."

"Doesn't matter," Holden said. "We bought you your time. Go find the girl and save humanity. We'll be waiting to hear back." *And ready to nuke you into dust if we don't* remained unsaid. There was no need.

"I've been thinking about where to go, if I can talk to her," Miller said. He had the already lost hopefulness of a man with a lottery ticket. "I mean, she's got to park this thing somewhere."

If we live. If I can save her. If the miracle is true.

Holden shrugged, even though no one could see it.

"Give her Venus," he said. "It's an awful place."

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Chapter Fifty-Four: Miller

I don't and I don't," the voice of Eros muttered. Juliette Mao, talking in her sleep. "I don't and I don't and I don't..."

"Come on," Miller said. "Come *on*, you sonofabitch. *Be* here."

The medical bays were lush and overgrown, black spirals with filaments of bronze and steel climbing the walls, encrusting the examination tables, feeding on the supplies of narcotics, steroids, and antibiotics spilling out of the broken supply cabinets. Miller dug through the clutter with one hand, his suit alarm chiming. His air had the sour taste that came from being through the recyclers too many times. His thumb, still mashed on the dead man's switch, tingled when it wasn't shooting with pain.

He brushed the almost fungal growth off a storage box that wasn't broken yet, found the latch. Four medical gas cylinders: two red, one green, one blue. He looked at the seal. The protomolecule hadn't gotten them yet. Red for anesthetic. Blue nitrogen. He picked up the green. The sterile shield on the delivery nipple was in place. He took a deep sighing breath of dying air. Another few hours. He put down his hand terminal (*one... two...*), popped the seal (*three...*), fed the nipple into his suit's intake (*four...*), and put a finger on the hand terminal. He stood, feeling the cool of the oxygen tank in his hand while his suit revised his life span. Ten minutes, an hour, four hours. The medical cylinder's pressure hit equality with the suit's, and he popped it off. Four more hours. He'd won himself four more hours.

It was the third time he'd managed an emergency resupply since he'd talked to Holden. The first had been at a fire-suppression station, the second at a backup recycling unit. If he went back down to the port, there would probably be some uncompromised oxygen in some of the supply closets and docked ships. If he went all the way back to the surface, the OPA ships would have plenty.

But there wasn't time for that. He wasn't looking for air; he was looking for Juliette. He let himself stretch. The kinks in his neck and back were threatening to turn into cramps. The CO₂ levels in the suit were still on the high side of acceptable, even with the new oxygen coming into the mix. The suit needed maintenance and a new filter. It'd have to wait. Behind him, the bomb in its cart kept its own counsel.

He had to find her. Somewhere in the maze of corridors and rooms, the dead city, Juliette Mao was driving them back to Earth. He'd tracked four hot spots. Three had been decent candidates for his original plan of vast nuclear immolation: hubs of wire and black alien filament tangling into huge organic-looking nodes. The fourth had been a cheap lab reactor churning on its way to meltdown. It had taken him fifteen minutes to get the emergency shutdown going, and he probably shouldn't have wasted the time. But wherever he went, no Julie. Even the Julie of his imagination was gone, as if the ghost had no place now that he knew the real woman was still alive. He missed having her around, even if she'd only been a vision.

A wave went through the medical bays, all the alien growth rising and falling like iron filings with a magnet passed beneath them. Miller's heart sped up, adrenaline leaking into his blood, but it didn't happen again.

He had to find her. He had to find her soon. He could feel exhaustion grinding at him, little teeth chewing at the back of his mind. He already wasn't thinking as clearly as he should. Back on Ceres,

he'd have gone back to his hole, slept for a day, and come back to the problem whole. Not an option here.

Full circle. He'd come full circle. Once, in a different life, he'd taken on the task of finding her; then, when he'd failed, there'd been taking vengeance. And now he had the chance to find her again, to save her. And if he couldn't, he was still pulling a cheap, squeaky-wheeled wagon behind him that would do for revenge.

Miller shook his head. He was having too many moments like this, getting lost in his own thoughts. He took a fresh grip on the cart full of fusion bomb, leaned forward, and headed out. The station around him creaked the way he imagined an old sailing ship might have, timbers bent by waves of salt water and the great tidal tug-of-war between earth and moon. Here, it was stone, and Miller couldn't guess what forces were acting on it. Hopefully nothing that would interfere with the signal between his hand terminal and his cargo. He didn't want to be reduced to his component atoms unintentionally.

It was getting more and more clear that he couldn't cover the whole station. He'd known that from the start. If Julie had gotten herself someplace obscure—hidden in some niche or hole like a dying cat—he wouldn't find her. He'd become a gambler, betting against all hope on drawing the inside straight. The voice of Eros shifted, different voices now, singing something in Hindi. A child's round, Eros harmonizing with itself in a growing richness of voices. Now that he knew to listen for it, he heard Julie's voice threading its way among the others. Maybe it had always been there. His frustration verged on physical pain. She was so close, but he couldn't quite reach her.

He pulled himself back into the main corridor complex. The hospital bays had been a good place to look for her too. Plausible. Fruitless. He'd looked at the two mercantile bio-labs. Nothing. He'd tried the morgue, the police holding tanks. He'd even gone through the evidence room, bin after plastic bin of contraband drugs and confiscated weapons scattered on the floor like oak leaves in one of the grand parks. It had all meant something once. Each one had been part of a small human drama, waiting to be brought out into the light, part of a trial or at least a hearing. Some small practice for judgment day, postponed now forever. All points were moot.

Something silver flew above him, faster than a bird, and then another, and then a flock, streaming by overhead. Light glittered off the living metal, bright as fish scales. Miller watched the alien molecule improvising in the space above him.

You can't stop here, Holden said. *You have to stop running and get on the right road.*

Miller looked over his shoulder. The captain stood, real and not, where his inner Julie would have been.

Well, that's interesting, Miller thought.

"I know," he said. "It's just... I don't know where she went. And... well, look around. Big place, you know?"

You can stop her or I will, his imaginary Holden said.

"If I just knew where she went," Miller said.

She didn't, Holden said. *She never went.*

Miller turned to look at him. The swarm of silver roiled overhead, chittering like insects or a badly tuned drive. The captain looked tired. Miller's imagination had put a surprising swath of blood at the corner of the man's mouth. And then it wasn't Holden anymore; it was Havelock. The other Earther. His old partner. And then it was Muss, her eyes as dead as his own.

Julie didn't go anyplace. Miller had seen her in the hotel room, back when he still hadn't believed that anything but a bad smell could rise from the grave. Back before. She'd been taken away in a body bag. And then taken somewhere else. The Protogen scientists had recovered her, harvested the protomolecule, and spread Julie's remade flesh through the station like bees pollinating a field of wildflowers. They'd given her the station, but before they'd done it, they'd put her someplace they thought they would be safe.

Safe room. Until they were ready to distribute the thing, they'd want to contain it. To pretend it could be contained. It wasn't likely they'd have gone to the trouble of cleaning up after they'd gotten what they needed. It wasn't as if anyone else was going to be around to use the space, so chances were good she was still there. That narrowed things.

There would be isolation wards in the hospital, but Protogen wouldn't have been likely to use facilities where non-Protogen doctors and nurses might wonder what was happening. Unnecessary risk.

All right.

They could have set up in one of the manufacturing plants down by the port. There were plenty of places there that required all-waldo work. But again, it would have been at the risk of being discovered or questioned before the trap was ready to spring.

It's a drug house, Muss said in his mind. You want privacy, you want control. Extracting the bug from the dead girl and extracting the good shit from the poppy seeds might have different chemistry, but it's still crime.

"Good point," Miller said. "And near the casino level... No, that's not right. The casino was the second stage. The first was the radiation scare. They put a bunch of people in the radiation shelters and cooked them to get the protomolecule good and happy, then *they* infected the casino level."

So where would you put a drug kitchen that was close to the rad shelters? Muss asked.

The roiling silver stream overhead veered left and then right, pouring through the air. Tiny curls of metal began to rain down, drawing thin trails of smoke behind them as they did.

"If I had the access? The backup environment controls. It's an emergency facility. No foot traffic unless someone's running inventory. It's got all the equipment for isolation built in already. Wouldn't be hard."

And since Protogen ran Eros security even before they put the disposable thugs in place, they'd be able to arrange it, Muss said, and she smiled joylessly. *See? I knew you could think that through.*

For less than a second, Muss was gone and Julie Mao—his Julie—was in her place. She was smiling and beautiful. Radiant. Her hair floated around her as if she were swimming in zero g. And then she was gone. His suit alarm warned him about an increasingly corrosive environment.

"Hang tight," he said to the burning air. "I'll be right there."



It was just less than thirty-three hours from the moment he'd realized that Juliette Andromeda Mao wasn't dead to the one when he cycled down the emergency seals and pulled his cart into Eros' backup environmental control facility. The clean, simple lines and error-reducing design of the place still showed under the outgrowth of the protomolecule. Barely. Knots of dark filament and nautilus spirals softened the corners of wall and floor and ceiling. Loops hung from the ceiling like Spanish moss. The familiar LED lights still shone under the soft growth, but more illumination came from the swarm of faint blue dots glowing in the air. His first step onto the floor sank him into a thick carpet up the ankle; the bomb cart would have to stay outside. His suit reported a wild mix of exotic gases and aromatic molecules, but all he smelled was himself.

All the interior rooms had been remade. Transformed. He walked through the wastewater treatment control areas like a scuba diver in a grotto. The blue lights swirled around him as he passed, a few dozen adhering to his suit and glittering there. He almost didn't brush them off the helmet's faceplate, thinking they would smear like dead fireflies, but they only swirled back up into the air. The air recycling monitors still danced and glowed, the thousand alarms and incident reports silhouetting the latticework of protomolecule that covered the screens. Water was flowing somewhere close by.

She was in a hazmat analysis node, lying on a bed of the dark thread that spilled out from her spine until it was indistinguishable from a massive fairy-tale cushion of her own flowing hair. Tiny

points of blue light glittered on her face, her arms, her breasts. The bone spurs that had been pressing out of her skin had grown into sweeping, almost architectural connections with the lushness around her. Her legs were gone, lost in the tangle of dark alien webs; she reminded Miller of a mermaid who had traded her fins for a space station. Her eyes were closed, but he could see them shifting and dancing under the lids. And she was breathing.

Miller stood beside her. She didn't have quite the same face as his imagined Julie. The real woman was wider through the jaw, and her nose wasn't as straight as he remembered it. He didn't notice that he was weeping until he tried to wipe the tears away, batting his helmet with a gloved hand. He had to make do with blinking hard until his sight cleared.

All this time. All this way. And here was what he'd come for.

"Julie," he said, putting his free hand on her shoulder. "Hey. Julie. Wake up. I need you to wake up now."

He had his suit's medical supplies. If he needed to, he could dose her with adrenaline or amphetamines. Instead, he rocked her gently, like he had Candace on a sleepy Sunday morning, back when she'd still been his wife, back in some distant, near-forgotten lifetime. Julie frowned, opened her mouth, closed it.

"Julie. You need to wake up now."

She moaned and lifted an ineffectual arm to push him away.

"Come back to me," he said. "You need to come back now."

Her eyes opened. They weren't human anymore—the sclera etched with swirls of red and black, the iris the same luminous blue as the fireflies. Not human, but still Julie. Her lips moved soundlessly. And then:

"Where am I?"

"Eros Station," Miller said. "The place isn't what it used to be. Not even *where* it used to be, but..."

He pressed the bed of filament with his hand, judging it, and then rested his hip at her side like he was sitting on her bed. His body felt achingly tired and also lighter than it should. Not like low gravity. The unreal buoyancy had nothing to do with the weary flesh.

Julie tried to talk again, struggled, stopped, tried again.

"Who are you?"

"Yeah, we haven't officially met, have we? My name's Miller. I used to be a detective for Star Helix Security back on Ceres. Your parents contracted with us, only it was really more a friends-in-high-places thing. I was supposed to track you down, grab you, ship you back down the well."

"Kidnap job?" she said. Her voice was stronger. Her gaze seemed more focused.

"Pretty standard," Miller said, then sighed. "I kind of cocked it up, though."

Her eyes fluttered closed, but she kept talking.

"Something happened to me."

"Yeah. It did."

"I'm scared."

"No, no, no. Don't be scared. It's all right. In an ass-backward kind of way, but it's all right. Look, right now the whole station is heading back for Earth. Really fast."

"I dreamed I was racing. I was going home."

"Yeah, we need to stop that."

Her eyes opened again. She looked lost, anguished, alone. A tear streaked down from the corner of her eye, glowing blue.

"Give me your hand," Miller said. "No, really, I need you to hold something for me."

She lifted her hand slowly, seaweed in a soft current. He took his hand terminal, settled it in her palm, pressed her thumb to the dead man's switch.

"Just hold that there. Don't let it up."

"What is it?" she asked.

“Long story, just don’t let up.”

His suit alarms shrieked at him when he undid his helmet seals. He turned them off. The air was strange: acetate and cumin and a deep, powerful musk that made him think of hibernating animals. Julie watched him as he stripped off his gloves. Right then, the protomolecule was latching on to him, burrowing into his skin and eyes, getting ready to do to him what it had done to everyone on Eros. He didn’t care. He took the hand terminal back and then laced his fingers through hers.

“You’re driving this bus, Julie,” he said. “Do you know that? I mean, can you tell?”

Her fingers were cool in his, but not cold.

“I can feel... something,” she said. “I’m hungry? Not hungry, but... I want something. I want to go back to Earth.”

“We can’t do that. I need you to change course,” Miller replied. What had Holden said? *Give her Venus*. “Head for Venus instead.”

“That’s not what it wants,” she said.

“It’s what we’ve got on offer,” Miller said. Then, a moment later: “We can’t go home. We need to go to Venus.”

She was quiet for a long moment.

“You’re a fighter, Julie. You’ve never let anyone call your shots for you. Don’t start now. If we go to Earth—”

“It’ll eat them too. The same way it ate me.”

“Yeah.”

She looked up at him.

“Yeah,” he said again. “Like that.”

“What happens on Venus?”

“We die maybe. I don’t know. But we don’t take a lot of people with us, and we make sure no one gets a hold of this crap,” he said, gesturing at the grotto around them. “And if we don’t die, then... well, that’ll be interesting.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“You can. The thing that’s doing all this? You’re smarter than it is. You’re in control. Take us to Venus.”

The fireflies swirled around them, the blue light pulsing slightly: bright and dim, bright and dim. Miller saw it in her face when she made the decision. All around them, the lights went bright, the grotto flooding in soft blue, and then dimmed back to where they had been before. Miller felt something catch at the back of his neck like the first warning of a sore throat. He wondered if he’d have time to deactivate the bomb. And then he looked at Julie. Juliette Andromeda Mao. OPA pilot. Heir to the Mao-Kwikowski corporate throne. The seed crystal of a future beyond anything he’d ever dreamed. He’d have plenty of time.

“I’m afraid,” she said.

“Don’t be,” he said.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen,” she said.

“No one ever does. And, look, you don’t have to do this alone,” he said.

“I can feel something in the back of my mind. It wants something I don’t understand. It’s so big.”

Reflexively, he kissed the back of her hand. There was an ache starting deep in his belly. A sense of illness. A moment’s nausea. The first pangs of his transformation into Eros.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We’re gonna be fine.”

Chapter Fifty-Five: Holden

Holden dreamed.

He'd been a lucid dreamer most of his life, so when he found himself sitting in his parents' kitchen in the old house in Montana, talking to Naomi, he knew. He couldn't quite understand what she was saying, but she kept pushing her hair out of her eyes as she munched cookies and drank tea. And while he found that he wasn't ever able to pick a cookie up and take a bite out of it, he could smell them, and the memory of Mother Elise's chocolate chip oatmeal cookies was a very good one.

It was a good dream.

The kitchen strobed red once, and something changed. Holden felt the wrongness of it, felt the dream slipping from warm memory into nightmare. He tried to say something to Naomi but couldn't form the words. The room strobed red again, but she didn't seem to notice. He got up and went to the kitchen window and looked out. When the room strobed a third time, he saw what was causing it. Meteors were falling out of the sky, leaving behind them fiery trails the color of blood. He somehow knew they were chunks of Eros as it crashed through the atmosphere. Miller had failed. The nuclear attack had failed.

Julie had come home.

He turned around to tell Naomi to run, but black tendrils had burst through the floor and wrapped her up, pierced her body in multiple places. They poured from her mouth and eyes.

Holden tried to run to her, to help her, but he couldn't move, and when he looked down, he saw that the tendrils had come up and grabbed him too. One wrapped around his waist and held him. Another pressed into his mouth.

He woke with a yell in a dark room that was strobing with red light. Something was holding him around the waist. In a panic he began clawing at it, threatening to tear a fingernail loose on his left hand, before his rational mind reminded him where he was. On the ops deck, in his chair, belted down in zero g.

He popped his finger into his mouth, trying to soothe the abused fingertip he'd damaged on one of the chair buckles, and took a few deep breaths through his nose. The deck was empty. Naomi was asleep down in her cabin. Alex and Amos were off duty and presumably sleeping too. They'd spent almost two days without rest during the high-g chase of Eros. Holden had ordered everyone to get some shut-eye and had volunteered to take first watch.

And then had promptly fallen asleep. Not good.

The room flashed red again. Holden shook his head to clear the last of the sleep away, and refocused his attention on his console. A red warning light pulsed, and he tapped the screen to open up the menu. It was his threat panel. Someone was hitting them with a targeting laser.

He opened up the threat display and turned on the active sensors. The only ship within millions of kilometers was the *Ravi*, and it was the ship that was targeting them. According to the automatic logs, it had just started a few seconds earlier.

He reached out to activate the comm and call the *Ravi* as his incoming-message light flickered on. He opened the connection, and a second later, McBride's voice said, "*Rocinante*, cease maneuvering, open your outer airlock door, and prepare to be boarded."

Holden frowned at his console. Was that a weird joke?

"McBride, this is Holden. Uh, what?"

Her reply was in a clipped tone that was not encouraging.

"Holden, open your outer airlock and prepare for boarding. If I see a single defensive system wake up, I will fire on your ship. Is that understood?"

"No," he said, not quite able to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "It's not understood. And I'm not going to let you board me. What the hell is going on?"

"I've been ordered by UNN Command to take control of your vessel. You're charged with interfering with UNN military operations, unlawfully commandeering UNN military assets, and a list of other crimes I'm not going to bother reading right now. If you do not surrender immediately, we will be forced to fire on you."

"Oh," said Holden. The UNN had discovered that their missiles were changing course, had attempted to reprogram them, and had discovered that the missiles weren't listening.

They were upset.

"McBride," Holden said after a moment. "Boarding us won't do any good. We can't give you those missiles back. And it's unnecessary, anyway. They're just taking a little detour."

McBride's laugh sounded more like the sharp bark of an angry dog just before it bit.

"Detour?" she said. "You handed three thousand five hundred and seventy-three high-yield thermonuclear interplanetary ballistic missiles over to a traitor and accused war criminal!"

It took Holden a minute.

"You mean *Fred*? I think traitor is a bit harsh—"

McBride cut in.

"Deactivate the false transponders leading our missiles away from Eros, and reactivate the transponders on the surface, or we will fire on your ship. You have ten minutes to comply."

The connection dropped with a click. Holden looked at the console with something between disbelief and outrage, then shrugged and hit the battle stations alarm. Deck lights came on all over the ship in an angry red. The warning Klaxon sounded three times. In less than two minutes, Alex rushed up the ladder to the cockpit, and half a minute behind him, Naomi threw herself into her ops station.

Alex spoke first.

"The *Ravi* is four hundred kilometers away," he said. "Ladar says her tube is open, and she's got us locked."

Clearly enunciating his words, Holden said, "Do not—I repeat, do not—open our tubes or attempt to get a target lock on the *Ravi* at this time. Just keep a close eye on her, and prepare to go defensive if she looks like she's firing. Let's not do anything to provoke her."

"Shall I begin jamming?" Naomi said from behind him.

"No, that would look aggressive. But prep a countermeasures package and have your finger on the ready button," Holden said. "Amos, you in engineering?"

"Roger that, Cap. Ready to go down here."

"Bring the reactor up to one hundred percent and pull control of the point defense cannons to your console down there. If they shoot at us at this range, Alex won't have time to fly and shoot back. You see a red dot on the threat console, you open up with the PDCs immediately. Copy?"

"Roger that," Amos said.

Holden blew a long breath through his teeth, then opened the channel to the *Ravi* again.

"McBride, this is Holden. We are not surrendering, we are not going to let you board us, and we aren't going to comply with your demands. Where do we go from here?"

"Holden," McBride said. "Your reactor is coming up. Are you getting ready to fight with us?"

"No, just getting ready to try and survive. Why, are we fighting?"

Another short harsh laugh.

"Holden," McBride said. "Why do I get the feeling you aren't taking this seriously?"

"Oh, I absolutely am," Holden replied. "I don't want you to kill me, and believe it or not, I have no desire to kill you. The nukes are on a little detour, but this isn't something we need to go down in flames over. I can't give you what you want, and I'm not interested in spending the next thirty years in a military prison. You gain nothing by shooting us, and I will fight back if it comes to that."

McBride cut the channel.

"Captain," Alex said. "The *Ravi* is startin' to maneuver. She's spraying clutter. I think she's gettin' ready to make an attack run."

Shit. Holden had been so sure he could talk her out of it.

"Okay, go defensive. Naomi, start your countermeasures. Amos? Got your finger on that button?"

"Ready," Amos replied.

"Don't hit it until you see a missile launch. Don't want to force their hand."

Sudden crushing g's hit Holden, stuffing him into his chair. Alex had started maneuvering.

"At this distance, maybe I can out-turn her. Keep her from bein' able to take a shot," the pilot said.

"Do it, and open the tubes."

"Roger," Alex said, his professional pilot's calm not quite able to keep the excitement about a possible battle out of his voice.

"I've broken the targeting lock," Naomi said. "Their laser array is not nearly as good as the *Roci*'s. I'm just drowning it in clutter."

"Hooray for bloated Martian defense budgets," Holden replied.

The ship jerked suddenly through a series of wild maneuvers.

"Damn," Alex said, his voice strained by the g-force of the sharp turns. "The *Ravi* just opened up on us with her PDCs."

Holden checked his threat display and saw the long glowing pearl strands of incoming rounds displayed there. The shots were falling well behind them. The *Roci* reported the distance between the ships as 370 kilometers—pretty long range for computer targeting systems to hit a wildly maneuvering ship with a ballistic shot from another wildly maneuvering ship.

"Return fire?" Amos yelled into the comm.

"No!" Holden yelled back. "If she wanted us dead, she'd be throwing torpedoes. Don't give her a reason to want us dead."

"Cap, we're out-turnin' her," Alex said. "The *Roci*'s just too fast. We'll have a firing solution in less than a minute."

"Roger," Holden said.

"Do I take the shot?" Alex asked, his silly Martian cowboy accent fading as his tension rose.

"No."

"Their targeting laser just shut off," Naomi said.

"Which means they've given up trying to cut our jamming," Holden replied, "and have just switched their missiles over to radar tracking."

"Not as accurate," Naomi said hopefully.

"A corvette like that carries at least a dozen fish. They only need to hit us with one to make us dead. And at this range..."

A gentle sound came from his threat console, letting him know that the *Roci* had calculated a firing solution to the *Ravi*.

"I've got tone!" Alex yelled. "Fire?"

"No!" Holden said. He knew that inside the *Ravi*, they were getting the loud warning buzz of an enemy lock. *Stop*, Holden willed them. *Please don't make me kill you.*

"Uh," Alex said in a low voice. "Huh."

Behind Holden, at almost the same moment, Naomi said, "Jim?"

Before he could ask, Alex came back on the general comm.

"Hey, Captain, Eros just came back."

"What?" Holden said, a brief image of the asteroid sneaking up like a cartoon villain on the two circling warships popping into his head.

"Yeah," Alex said. "Eros. It just popped back up on radar. Whatever it was doing to block our sensors, it just stopped doing it."

"What's it doing?" Holden said. "Get me a course."

Naomi pulled the tracking information to her console and began working on it, but Alex was done a few seconds sooner.

"Yeah," he said. "Good guess. It's changing course. Still heading sunward, but deflecting away from the Earth vector it was on."

"If it keeps this course and speed," Naomi chimed in, "I'd say it was heading toward Venus."

"Wow," said Holden. "That was a joke."

"Good joke," Naomi said.

"Well, someone tell McBride she doesn't need to shoot us now."

"Hey," Alex said, his voice thoughtful. "If we made those nukes stop listening, that means we can't shut 'em down, right? Wonder where Fred's going to drop those."

"Hell if I know," Amos said. "Just disarmed Earth, though. That's gotta be fucking embarrassing."

"Unintended consequences," Naomi sighed. "Always with the unintended consequences."



Eros crashing into Venus was the most widely broadcast and recorded event in history. By the time the asteroid reached the sun's second planet, several hundred ships had taken up orbits there. Military vessels tried to keep the civilian ships away, but it was no use. They were just outnumbered. The video of Eros' descent was captured by military gun cameras, civilian ship telescopes, and the observatories on two planets and five moons.

Holden wished he could have been there to see it up close, but Eros had picked up speed after it had turned, almost as though the asteroid were impatient for the journey to end now that the destination was in sight. He and the crew sat in the galley of the *Rocinante* and watched it on the broadcast newsfeeds. Amos had dug up yet another bottle of faux tequila from somewhere and was liberally splashing it into coffee cups. Alex had them flying toward Tycho at a gentle one-third g. No need to hurry now.

It was all over but the fireworks.

Holden reached out, took Naomi's hand, and held it tightly as the asteroid entered Venus orbit and then seemed to stop. He felt like he could feel the entire human race holding their breath. No one knew what Eros—no, what *Julie*—would do now. No one had spoken to Miller after the last time Holden had, and he wasn't answering his hand terminal. No one knew for sure what had happened on the asteroid.

When the end came, it was beautiful.

In orbit around Venus, Eros came apart like a puzzle box. The giant asteroid split into a dozen chunks, stringing out around the equator of the planet in a long necklace. Then those dozen pieces split into a dozen more, and then a dozen after that, a glittering fractal seed cloud spreading out across the entire surface of the planet, disappearing into the thick cloud layer that usually hid Venus from view.

"Wow," Amos said, his voice almost reverent.

"That was gorgeous," Naomi said. "Vaguely unsettling, but gorgeous."

"They won't stay there forever," Holden said.

Alex tossed off the last of the tequila in his glass, then refilled it from the bottle.

"What d'ya mean, Cap?" he asked.

“Well, I’m just guessing. But I doubt the things that built the protomolecule just wanted to store it here. This was part of a bigger plan. We saved the Earth, Mars, the Belt. Question is, what happens now?”

Naomi and Alex exchanged glances. Amos pursed his lips. On-screen, Venus glittered as arcs of lightning danced all across the planet.

“Cap,” Amos said. “You are seriously harshing my buzz.”

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Epilogue: Fred

Frederick Lucius Johnson. Former colonel in Earth's armed forces, Butcher of Anderson Station. Thoth Station now too. Unelected prime minister of the OPA. He had faced his own mortality a dozen times, lost friends to violence and politics and betrayal. He'd lived through four assassination attempts, only two of which were on any record. He'd killed a pistol-wielding attacker using only a table knife. He'd given the orders that had ended hundreds of lives, and stood by his decisions.

And yet public speaking still made him nervous as hell. It didn't make sense, but there it was.

Ladies and gentlemen, we stand at a crossroads—

"General Sebastian will be at the reception," his personal secretary said. "Remember not to ask after her husband."

"Why? I didn't kill him, did I?"

"No, sir. He's having a very public affair, and the general's a bit touchy about it."

"So she might *want* me to kill him."

"You can make the offer, sir."

The "greenroom" was actually done in red and ochre, with a black leather couch, a mirrored wall, and a table laid out with hydroponic strawberries and carefully mineralized drinking water. The head of Ceres security, a dour-faced woman named Shaddid, had escorted him from the dock to the conference facilities three hours earlier. Since then, he'd been pacing—three steps in one direction, turn, three steps back—like the captain of an ancient ship of the line on his quarterdeck.

Elsewhere in the station, the representatives of the formerly warring factions were in rooms of their own, with secretaries of their own. Most of them hated Fred, which wasn't particularly a problem. Most of them feared him too. Not because of his standing in the OPA, of course. Because of the protomolecule.

The political rift between Earth and Mars was probably irreparable; the Earth forces loyal to Protogen had engineered a betrayal too deep for apologies, and too many lives had been lost on both sides for the coming peace to look anything like it had been before. The naive among the OPA thought this was a good thing: an opportunity to play one planet against the other. Fred knew better. Unless all three forces—Earth, Mars, and the Belt—could reach a real peace, they would inevitably fall back into a real war.

Now if only Earth or Mars thought of the Belt as something more than an annoyance to be squashed after their true enemy was humiliated... But in truth, anti-Mars sentiment on Earth was higher now than it had been during the shooting war, and Martian elections were only four months away. A significant shift in the Martian polity could ease the tensions or make things immeasurably worse. Both sides had to see the big picture.

Fred stopped before a mirror, adjusted his tunic for the hundredth time, and grimaced.

"When did I turn into a damned marriage counselor?" he said.

"We aren't still talking about General Sebastian, are we, sir?"

"No. Forget I said anything. What else do I need to know?"

"There's a possibility that Blue Mars will try to disrupt your presentation. Hecklers and signs, not guns. Captain Shaddid has several Blues in custody, but some may have slipped past her."

"All right."

"You have interviews scheduled with two political narrowcasts and a news source based on Europa. The Europa interviewer is likely to ask about Anderson Station."

"All right. Anything new from Venus?"

"Something's happening down there," his secretary said.

"It's not dead, then."

"Apparently not, sir."

"Great," he said bitterly.

Ladies and gentlemen, we stand at a crossroads. On one hand there is the very real threat of mutual annihilation, and on the other—

And on the other, there's the bogeyman of Venus, getting ready to crawl up out of its well and slaughter you all in your sleep. I have the live sample, which is your best, if not only, hope of divining what its intentions and capabilities are, and which I have hidden so that you can't just march over and take it from me. It's the only reason any of you are listening to me in the first place. So how about a little respect here?

His secretary's terminal chirped, and she consulted it briefly.

"It's Captain Holden, sir."

"Do I have to?"

"It would be best if he felt he was part of the effort, sir. He has a track record of amateur press releases."

"Fine. Bring him in."

The weeks that had passed since Eros Station had come apart in the thick skies of Venus had been good to Holden, but prolonged high-g dives like the one the *Rocinante* had sustained chasing Eros had long-lasting effects. The burst blood vessels in the man's sclera had healed; the pressure bruising was gone from around his eyes and the back of his neck. Only a little hesitation in the way he walked spoke of the deep joint pain, cartilage still on its way back to its natural form. Acceleration swagger, they'd called it, back when Fred had been a different man.

"Hey," Holden said. "You're looking pretty. Did you see the latest feed from Venus? Two-kilometer-high crystal towers. What do you think that is?"

"Your fault?" Fred suggested, keeping the tone friendly. "You could have told Miller to drive it into the sun."

"Yes, because two-kilometer-high crystal towers coming out of the sun wouldn't be creepy at all," Holden said. "Are those strawberries?"

"Have some," Fred said. He hadn't been able to eat anything since that morning.

"So," Holden said around a mouthful of fruit, "are they really going to sue me over this?"

"Unilaterally giving away all mineral and development rights to an entire planet on an open radio channel?"

"Yeah," Holden said.

"I would guess the people who actually owned those rights are probably going to sue you," Fred said. "If they ever figure out who they are."

"Could you give me a hand with that?" Holden asked.

"I'll be a character witness," Fred said. "I don't actually make the law."

"Then what exactly *are* you all doing here? Couldn't there be some kind of amnesty? We retrieved the protomolecule, tracked down Julie Mao on Eros, broke Protogen, and saved Earth."

"*You* saved Earth?"

"We helped," Holden said, but his voice had a more somber tone. Miller's death still bothered the captain. Fred knew how that felt. "It was a joint effort."

Fred's personal secretary cleared her throat and glanced toward the door. They'd need to go soon.

"I'll do what I can," Fred said. "I've got a lot of other things on the plate, but I'll do what I can."

"And Mars can't have the *Roci* back," Holden said. "Right of salvage says that's my ship now."

"They aren't going to see it that way, but I will do what I can."

"You keep saying that."

"It keeps being all I can do."

"And you'll tell them about him, right?" Holden said. "Miller. He deserves the credit."

"The Belter who went back into Eros of his own free will in order to save Earth? You're damn right I'm going to tell them about him."

"Not 'the Belter.' Him. Josephus Aloisus Miller."

Holden had stopped eating the free strawberries. Fred crossed his arms.

"You've been reading up," Fred said.

"Yeah. Well. I didn't know him all that well."

"Neither did anybody else," Fred said, and then softened a little. "I know it's hard, but we don't need a real man with a complex life. We need a symbol of the Belt. An icon."

"Sir," the secretary said. "We really do need to go now."

"That's what got us here," Holden said. "Icons. Symbols. People without names. All of those Protogen scientists were thinking about biomass and populations. Not Mary who worked in supply and raised flowers in her spare time. None of them killed *her*."

"You think they wouldn't have?"

"I think if they were going to, they owed it to her to know her name. All their names. And you owe it to Miller not to make him into something he wasn't."

Fred laughed. He couldn't help it.

"Captain," he said, "if you're saying that I should amend my address to the peace conference so that it wasn't a noble Belter sacrificing himself to save the Earth—if you're suggesting that I say something like 'We happened to have a suicidal ex-cop on-site' instead—you understand this process less than I thought you did. Miller's sacrifice is a tool, and I'm going to use it."

"Even if it makes him faceless," Holden said. "Even if it makes him something he never was?"

"Especially if it makes him something he never was," Fred said. "Do you remember what he was like?"

Holden frowned and then something flickered in his eyes. Amusement. Memory.

"He was kind of a pain in the ass, wasn't he?" Holden said.

"That man could take a visitation from God with thirty underdressed angels announcing that sex was okay after all and make it seem vaguely depressing."

"He was a good man," Holden said.

"He wasn't," Fred said. "But he did his job. And now I've got to go do mine."

"Give 'em hell," Holden said. "And amnesty. Keep talking up the amnesty."

Fred walked down the curving hallway, his secretary close behind him. The conference halls had been designed for smaller things. Petty ones. Hydroponics scientists getting away from their husbands and wives and children to get drunk and talk about raising bean sprouts. Miners coming together to lecture each other about waste minimization and tailings disposal. High school band competitions. And instead, these work carpets and brushed-stone walls were going to have to bear the fulcrum of history. It was Holden's fault that the shabby, small surroundings reminded him of the dead detective. They hadn't before.

The delegations were seated across the aisle from each other. The generals and political appointees and general secretaries of Earth and Mars, the two great powers together at his invitation to Ceres, to the Belt. Territory made neutral because neither side took it seriously enough to be concerned about their demands.

All of history had brought them here, to this moment, and now, in the next few minutes, Fred's job was to change that trajectory. The fear was gone. Smiling, he stepped up to the speaker's dais, the podium.

The pulpit.

There was a scattering of polite applause. A few smiles, and a few frowns. Fred grinned. He wasn't a man anymore. He was a symbol, an icon. A narrative about himself and about the forces at play in the solar system.

And for a moment, he was tempted. In that hesitation between drawing breath and speaking, part of him wondered what would happen if he shed the patterns of history and spoke about himself as a man, about the Joe Miller who he'd known briefly, about the responsibility they all shared to tear down the images they held of one another and find the genuine, flawed, conflicted people they actually were.

It would have been a noble way to fail.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "We stand at a crossroads. On one hand, there is the very real threat of mutual annihilation. On the other..."

He paused for effect.

"On the other, the stars."

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Acknowledgments

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meet the author

JAMES S. A. COREY is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck, George R. R. Martin's assistant. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Find out more about this series at www.the-expanse.com.

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interview

Leviathan Wakes is the first book in a series called The Expanse. What kind of story are you telling in this series?

There's a lot of science fiction that talks about the near future. There's a lot about great galaxy-spanning empires of the distant future. But there's not much that talks about the part in between. The Expanse is playing on that bridge. Whatever drives us off Earth to the rest of the solar system or from there to the stars, the problems we have are the ones we bring with us. What I want to do is write good old-fashioned space opera centered around human stories, but with an increasingly large backdrop.

It seems like Leviathan Wakes is a science fiction book, but it borrows from a lot of other genres as well, including horror and noir. Did you intend to blend those genres? What kind of book do you feel this is?

It's definitely science fiction of the old-school space opera variety. That's the story I wanted to tell. But half of the story was a detective story, and as soon as Detective Miller hit the page, he told me in a loud voice that he was a classic noir character. It was in his voice and the way he talked about things, you know? As for the horror feel, that's just the way I roll. I've never written anything in my life that didn't at least blur the line into horror. If I wrote greeting cards, they'd probably have a squick factor.

Leviathan Wakes has two protagonists with very different worldviews, which are often in conflict. Can you describe those views and why you chose that particular conflict?

You know how they say science fiction is about the future you're writing about, but it's also about the time you're writing in? Holden and Miller have got two different views on the ethical use of information. That's very much a current argument. Holden's my holy fool. He's an idealist, a man who faces things with this very optimistic view of humanity. He believes that if you give people all of the information, they'll do the right thing with it, because people are naturally good. Miller is a cynic and a nihilist. He looks at the dissemination of information as a game you play. He doesn't have faith in anyone else's moral judgment. Control of information is how you get people to do what you want, and he doesn't trust anyone else to make that call. I picked those two characters because they're both right, and they're both wrong. By having them in the same story, I can have them talk to each other. And that central disagreement is sort of underneath everything else that happens.

Leviathan Wakes has a gritty and realistic feel. How much research did you do on the technology side of things, and how important was it to you that they be realistic and accurate?

Okay, so what you're really asking me there is if this is hard science fiction. The answer is an emphatic no. I have nothing but respect for well-written hard science fiction, and I wanted

everything in the book to be plausible enough that it doesn't get in the way. But the rigorous how-to with the math shown? It's not that story. This is working man's science fiction. It's like in *Alien*, we meet the crew of the *Nostromo* doing their jobs in this very blue-collar environment. They're truckers, right? Why is there a room in the *Nostromo* where water leaks down off of chains suspended from the ceiling? Because it looks cool and makes the world feel a little messy. It gives you the feel of the world. Ridley Scott doesn't explain why that room exists, and when most people watch the film, it never even occurs to them to ask. What kind of drive does the *Nostromo* use? I bet no one walked out of the film asking that question. I wanted to tell a story about humans living and working in a well-populated solar system. I wanted to convey a feeling of what that would be like, and then tell a story about the people who live there.

So how does the Epstein drive work?

Very well. Efficiently.

In your acknowledgments you thank the New Mexico Critical Mass writers group. What effect did having that workshop environment have on your work?

Well, Critical Mass is a lot more than a workshop or critical group. It's more like a writer's mafia. Just about anything you might need, someone in the group can get it for you. Walter Jon Williams, who wrote the brilliant Dread Empire's Fall space opera series, was there to give important tips about writing in that genre. S. M. Stirling and Victor Milan write some of the best action in the business, and there was a lot of action for them to critique. Ian Tregillis is an actual astrophysicist and made himself available for technical questions. Melinda Snodgrass is pretty much the Yoda of letting you know when you've wandered too far away from your plot. And the entire group, including Emily Mah, Terry England, and George R. R. Martin, was there to read and critique the early drafts of the book, and a lot of changes were made based on their advice.

You've worked with George R. R. Martin a lot in the past. What kind of advice did he have for this project?

Yes, I've done a number of projects with him in one incarnation or another. In this case, he was mostly just encouraging. He likes old-fashioned space opera, and he followed my progress on the book with great interest. He was also the first to read the final version. He was very complimentary. He said at one point that it was the best book about vomit zombies he'd ever read. That was nice.

Where do you see the Expanse series going from here?

Well, I'm contracted with Orbit for at least two more books. They are titled *Caliban's War* and *Dandelion Sky*. I hope to keep exploring the idea of human expansion into the solar system and beyond, and balancing the very real threats that the galaxy poses for the fledgling human diaspora against the threats that those same humans will bring with them. For up-to-date information on what I'm up to and where the project is headed, people can visit www.the-expanse.com and get the latest.

introducing

If you enjoyed
LEVIATHAN WAKES,
look out for

CALIBAN'S WAR

Book Two of The Expanse

by James S. A. Corey

“Snoopy’s out again,” Private Hillman said. “I think his CO must be pissed at him.”

Gunnery Sergeant Roberta Draper of the Martian Marine Corps upped the magnification on her armor’s head-up display and looked in the direction Hillman was pointing. Twenty-five hundred meters away, a squad of four United Nations marines were tromping around their outpost, backlit by the giant greenhouse dome they were guarding. A greenhouse dome identical in nearly all respects to the dome that was behind her.

One of the four UN marines had black smudges on the sides of his helmet that looked like beagle ears.

“Yep, that’s Snoopy,” Bobbie said. “Been on every patrol detail so far today. Wonder what he did.”

Guard duty around the greenhouses on Ganymede meant doing what you could to keep your mind occupied. Including speculating on the lives of the marines on the other side.

The other side. Eighteen months before, there hadn’t been sides. The inner planets had all been one big, happy, slightly dysfunctional family. Then the Eros incident, and now the two superpowers were dividing up the solar system between them, and the one moon neither side was willing to give up was Ganymede, breadbasket of the Jovian system.

As the only moon with any magnetosphere, it was the only place where dome-grown crops stood a chance in Jupiter’s harsh radiation belt, and even there, the domes and habitats had to be shielded to protect civilians from the eight rems a day burning off Jupiter and onto the moon’s surface.

Bobbie’s armor had been designed to let a soldier walk through a nuclear bomb crater an hour after the blast. It also worked well at keeping Jupiter from frying Martian marines.

Behind the Earth soldiers on patrol, their dome glowed in a shaft of weak sunlight captured by enormous orbital mirrors. Even with the mirrors, most terrestrial plants would have died, starved of sunlight. Only the heavily modified versions the Ganymede scientists cranked out could hope to survive in the trickle of light the mirrors fed them.

“Be sunset soon,” Bobbie said, still watching the Earth marines outside their little guard hut, knowing they were watching her too. In addition to Snoopy, she spotted the one they called Stumpy because he or she couldn’t be much more than a meter and a half tall. She wondered what their nickname for her was. Maybe Big Red. Her armor still had the Martian surface camouflage on it. She hadn’t been on Ganymede long enough to get it resurfaced with mottled gray and white.

One by one, over the course of five minutes, the orbital mirrors winked out as Ganymede passed behind Jupiter for a few hours. The glow from the greenhouse behind her changed to actinic blue as the artificial lights came on. While the overall light level didn't go down much, the shadows shifted in strange and subtle ways. Above, the sun—not even a disk from here as much as the brightest star—flashed as it passed behind Jupiter's limb, and for a moment the planet's faint ring system was visible.

"They're going back in," Corporal Travis said. "Snoop's bringing up the rear. Poor guy. Can we bail too?"

Bobbie looked around at the featureless dirty ice of Ganymede. Even in her high-tech armor she could feel the moon's chill.

"Nope."

Her squad grumbled but fell in line as she led them on a slow low-gravity shuffle around the dome. In addition to Hillman and Travis, she had a green private named Gourab on this patrol. And even though he'd been in the marines all of about a minute and a half, he grumbled just as loud as the other two in his Mariner Valley drawl.

She couldn't blame them. It was make-work. Something for the Martian soldiers on Ganymede to do to keep them busy. If Earth decided it needed Ganymede all to itself, four grunts walking around the greenhouse dome wouldn't stop them. With dozens of Earth and Mars warships in a tense standoff in orbit, if hostilities broke out, the ground pounders would probably find out only when the surface bombardment began.

To her left, the dome rose to almost half a kilometer: triangular glass panels separated by gleaming copper-colored struts that turned the entire structure into a massive Faraday cage. Bobbie had never been inside one of the greenhouse domes. She'd been sent out from Mars as part of a huge surge in troops to the outer planets and had been walking patrols on the surface almost since day one. Ganymede to her was a spaceport, a small marine base, and the even smaller guard outpost she currently called home.

As they shuffled around the dome, Bobbie watched the unremarkable landscape. Ganymede didn't change much without a catastrophic event. The surface was mostly silicate rock and water ice a few degrees warmer than space. The atmosphere was oxygen so thin it could pass as an industrial vacuum. Ganymede didn't weather. It changed when rocks fell on it from space, or when warm water from the liquid core forced itself onto the surface and created short-lived lakes. Neither thing happened all that often. At home on Mars, wind and dust changed the landscape hourly. Here, she was walking through the footsteps of the day before and the day before and the day before. And if she never came back, those footprints would outlive her. Privately, she thought it was sort of creepy.

A rhythmic squeaking started to cut through the normally smooth hiss and thump sounds her powered armor made. She usually kept the suit's HUD minimized. It got so crowded with information that a marine knew everything except what was actually in front of her. Now she pulled it up, using blinks and eye movements to page over to the suit's diagnostic screen. A yellow telltale warned her that the suit's left knee actuator was low on hydraulic fluid. Must be a leak somewhere, but a slow one, because the suit couldn't find it.

"Hey, guys, hold up a minute," Bobbie said. "Hilly, you have any extra hydraulic fluid in your pack?"

"Yep," said Hillman, already pulling it out.

"Give my left knee a squirt, would you?"

While Hillman crouched in front of her, working on her suit, Gourab and Travis began an argument that seemed to be about sports. Bobbie tuned it out.

"This suit is ancient," Hillman said. "You really oughta upgrade. This sort of thing is just going to happen more and more often, you know."

"Yeah, I should," Bobbie said. But the truth was that was easier said than done. Bobbie was not the right shape to fit into one of the standard suits, and the marines made her jump through a series of

flaming hoops every time she requisitioned a new custom one. At two meters tall, she was only a bit above average height for a Martian male, but thanks in part to her Polynesian ancestry, she weighed in at more than 140 kilos at one g. It wasn't fat, but her muscles seemed to get bigger every time she even walked through a weight room, and as a marine, she trained all the time.

The suit she had now was the first one in twelve years of active duty that actually seemed to fit well. And even though it was beginning to show its age, it was just easier to try to keep it running than beg and plead for a new one.

Hillman was just starting to put his tools away when Bobbie's radio crackled to life.

"Outpost four to stickman. Come in, stickman."

"Roger four," Bobbie replied. "This is stickman one. Go ahead."

"Stickman one, where are you guys? You're half an hour late and some shit is going down over here."

"Sorry four, some equipment trouble here," Bobbie said, wondering what sort of shit might be going down, but not enough to ask about it over an open frequency.

"Return to the outpost immediately. We have shots fired at the UN outpost. We're going into lockdown."

It took Bobbie a moment to parse that. She could see her men staring at her, their faces a mix of puzzlement and fear.

"Uh, the Earth guys are shooting at you?" she finally asked.

"Not yet, but they're shooting. Get your asses back here."

Hillman jumped to his feet. Bobbie flexed her knee once and got greens on her diagnostic. She gave Hilly a nod of thanks, then said, "Double-time it back to the outpost. Go."



Bobbie and her squad were still half a kilometer from the outpost when the general alert went out. Her suit's HUD came up on its own, switching to combat mode. The sensor package went to work looking for hostiles and linked up to one of the satellites for a top-down view. She felt the click as the gun built into the suit's right arm switched to free-fire mode.

A thousand alarms would be sounding if an orbital bombardment had begun, but she couldn't help looking up at the sky anyway. No flashes or missile trails. Nothing but Jupiter's bulk.

Bobbie took off for the outpost at a dead run. Her squad followed without a word. A person trained in the use of a strength-augmenting suit running in low gravity could cover a lot of ground quickly. The outpost came into view around the curve of the dome in just a few seconds, and a few seconds after that, the cause of the alarm.

UN marines were charging at the Martian outpost. The yearlong cold war was going hot. Somewhere deep behind the cool mental habits of training and discipline, she was surprised. She hadn't really thought this day would come.

The rest of her platoon were out of the outpost and arranged in a firing line facing the UN position. Someone had driven *Yojimbo* out onto the line, and the four-meter-tall combat mech towered over the other marines, looking like a headless giant in power armor, his massive cannon moving slowly as it tracked the incoming Earth troops. The UN soldiers were covering the 2,500 meters between the two outposts at full speed.

Why isn't anyone talking? she wondered. The silence coming from her platoon was eerie.

And then, just as her squad got to the firing line, her suit squealed a jamming warning at her. The top-down vanished as she lost contact with the satellite. Her team's life signs and equipment status reports went dead as her link to their suits was cut off. The faint static of the open comm channel disappeared, leaving an even more unsettling silence.

She used hand motions to place her team at the right flank, then moved up the line to find Lieutenant Givens, her CO. She spotted his suit right at the center of the line, almost directly under

Yojimbo. She ran up and placed her helmet against his.

“What the fuck is going on, El Tee?” she shouted.

He gave her an irritated look and yelled, “Your guess is as good as mine. We can’t tell them to back off because of the jamming, and visual warnings are being ignored. Before the radio cut out, I got authorization to fire if they come within half a click of our position.”

Bobbie had a couple hundred more questions, but the UN troops would cross the five-hundred-meter mark in just a few more seconds, so she ran back to anchor the right flank with her squad. Along the way, she had her suit count the incoming forces and mark them all as hostiles. The suit reported seven targets. Less than a third of the UN troops at their outpost.

This makes no sense.

She had her suit draw a line on the HUD at the five-hundred-meter mark. She didn’t tell her boys that was the free-fire zone. She didn’t need to. They’d open fire when she did without needing to know why.

The UN soldiers had crossed the one-kilometer mark, still without firing a shot. They were coming in a scattered formation, with six out front in a ragged line, and a seventh bringing up the rear about seventy meters behind. Her suit HUD selected the figure on the far left of the enemy line as her target, picking the one closest to her by default. Something itched at the back of her brain and she overrode the suit and selected the target at the rear and told it to magnify.

The small figure suddenly enlarged in her targeting reticule. She felt a chill move down her back and magnified again.

The figure chasing the six UN marines wasn’t wearing a suit. Nor was it, properly speaking, human. Its skin was covered in chitinous plates, like large black scales. Its head was a massive horror, easily twice as large as it should be and covered in strange protruding growths.

But most disturbing of all were its hands. Far too large for its body, and too long for their width, they were a childhood-nightmare version of hands. The hands of the troll under the bed or the witch sneaking in through the window. They flexed and grasped at nothing with a constant manic energy.

The Earth forces weren’t attacking. They were retreating.

“Shoot the thing chasing them,” Bobbie yelled to no one.

Before the UN soldiers could cross the half kilometer that would cause the Martians to open fire, the thing caught them.

“Oh, holy shit,” Bobbie whispered. “Holy *shit*.”

It grabbed one UN marine in its huge hands and tore the man in half like paper. Titanium and ceramic armor tore as easily as the flesh inside, spilling broken bits of technology and wet human viscera indiscriminately onto the ice. The remaining five soldiers ran even harder, but the monster chasing them barely slowed as it killed.

“Shoot it shoot it shoot it,” Bobbie screamed and opened fire. Bobbie’s training and the technology of her combat suit combined to make her an extremely efficient killing machine. As soon as her finger pulled the trigger on her suit’s gun, a stream of two-millimeter armor-piercing rounds streaked out at the creature at a thousand meters per second. In just under one second, she fired nearly fifty rounds at it. It was a relatively slow-moving human-sized target, running in a straight line. Her targeting computer could do ballistic corrections that would let her hit a softball-sized object moving at supersonic speeds. Every bullet she fired at the monster hit.

It didn’t matter.

The rounds went through it, probably not slowing appreciably before they exited. Each exit wound sprouted a spray of black filaments that fell onto the snow instead of blood. It was like shooting water. The wounds closed almost faster than they were created; the only sign the thing had even been hit was the trail of black fibers in its wake.

And then it caught a second UN marine. Instead of tearing him to pieces like it had the last one, it spun and hurled the fully armored Earther—probably massing more than five hundred kilos total—

toward Bobbie. Her HUD tracked the UN soldier on his upward arc and helpfully informed her that the monster had thrown him not *toward* her, but *at* her. In a very flat trajectory. Which meant fast.

She dove to the side as quickly as her suit would let her. The hapless UN marine swiped Hillman, who'd been standing next to her, and then both of them were gone, bouncing down the ice at lethal speeds.

By the time she turned back to the monster, it had killed two more UN soldiers.

The entire Martian line opened fire on it, including *Yojimbo's* big cannon. The two remaining Earth soldiers diverged and ran at angles away from the thing, trying to give their Martian counterparts an open firing lane. The creature was hit hundreds, thousands of times. It stitched itself back together while remaining at a full run, never more than slowing when one of *Yojimbo's* cannon shots detonated nearby.

Bobbie, back on her feet, joined in the barrage but it didn't make any difference. The creature slammed into the Martian line, killing two marines faster than the eye could follow. *Yojimbo* slid to one side, far more nimble than a machine of its size should be. Bobbie thought Sa'id must be driving it. He swore he could make the big mech dance the tango when he wanted to. It didn't matter. Even before Sa'id could bring the mech's cannon around for a point-blank shot, the creature ran right up its side, gripped the pilot hatch, and tore the door off its hinges. Sa'id was snatched from his cockpit harness and hurled sixty meters straight up.

The other marines had begun to fall back, firing as they went. Without radio, there was no way to coordinate the retreat. Bobbie found herself running toward the dome with the rest. The small and distant part of her mind that wasn't panicking knew that the dome's glass and metal would offer no protection against something that could tear an armored man in half and rip a nine-ton mech to pieces. That part of her mind recognized the futility in attempting to override her terror.

By the time she found the external door to the dome, there was only one other marine left with her. Gourab. Up close, she could see his face through the armored glass of his helmet. He was screaming something at her she couldn't hear. She started to lean forward to touch helmets with him when he shoved her backward onto the ice. He was hammering on the door controls with one metal fist, trying to smash his way in in his mindless panic, when the creature caught him and peeled the helmet off his suit. Gourab stood for one moment, face in vacuum, eyes blinking and mouth open in a soundless scream; then the creature tore off his head as easily as it had his helmet.

It turned and looked at Bobbie, still flat on her back.

Up close, she could see that it had bright blue eyes. A glowing, electric blue. They were beautiful. She raised her gun and held down the trigger for half a second before she realized she'd run out of ammo long before. The creature looked at her gun with what she would have sworn was curiosity, then looked into her eyes and cocked its head to one side.

This is it, she thought. *This is how I go out, and I'm not going to know what did it, or why.* Dying she could handle. Dying without any answers seemed terribly cruel.

The creature took one step toward her, then stopped and shuddered. A new pair of limbs burst out of its midsection and writhed in the air like tentacles. Its head, already grotesque, seemed to swell up. The blue eyes flashed as bright as the lights in the domes.

And then it exploded in a ball of fire that hurled her away across the ice and slammed her into a low ridge hard enough for the impact-absorbing gel in her suit to go rigid, freezing her in place.

She lay on her back, fading toward unconsciousness. The night sky above her began to flash with light. The ships in orbit, shooting.

Cease fire, she thought, pressing the thought out into the blackness. *They were retreating. Cease fire.* Her radio was still out. She couldn't tell anyone that the UN marines hadn't been attacking.

Or that something else had.

BOOKS BY JAMES S. A. COREY

THE EXPANSE

Leviathan Wakes

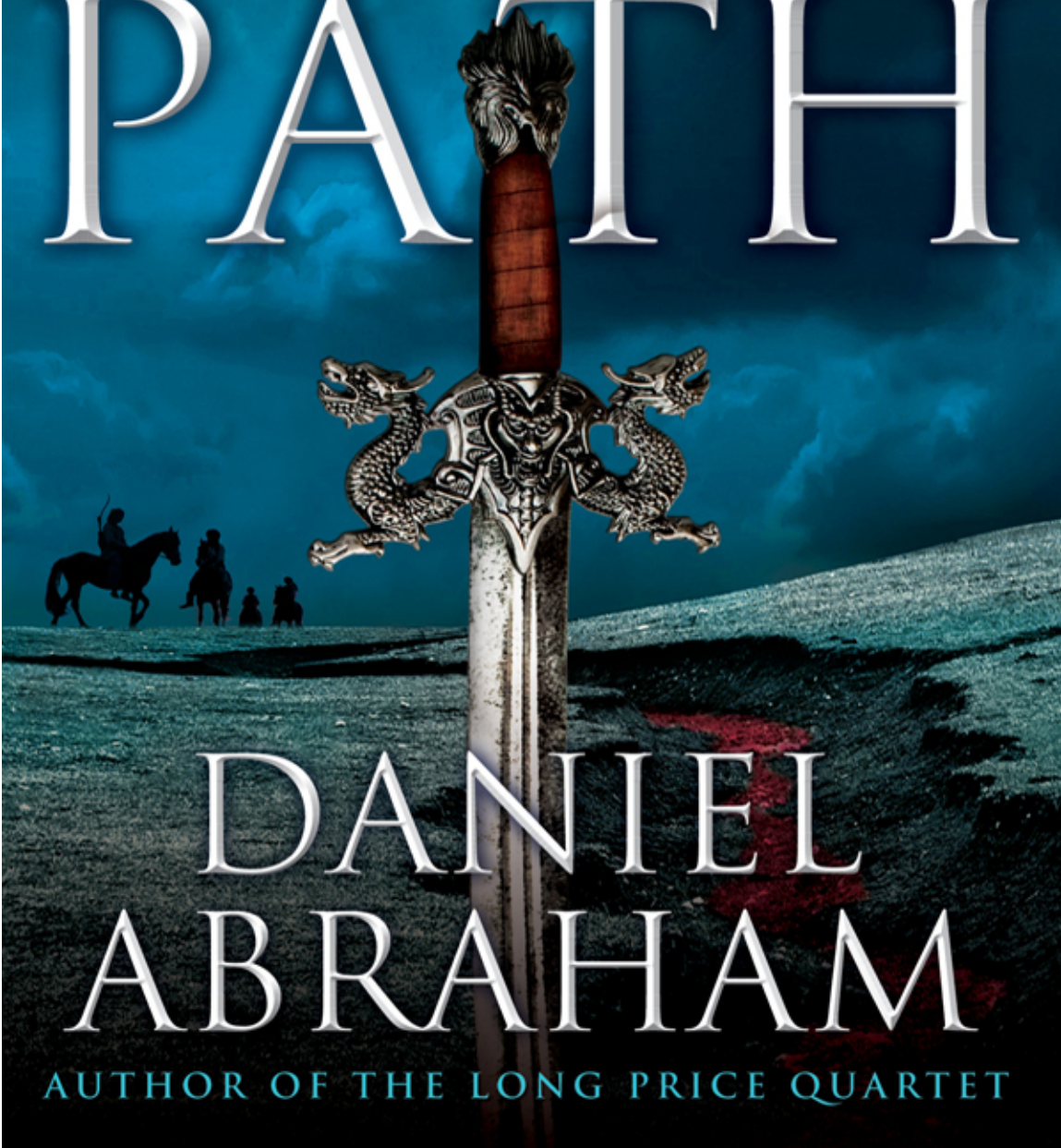
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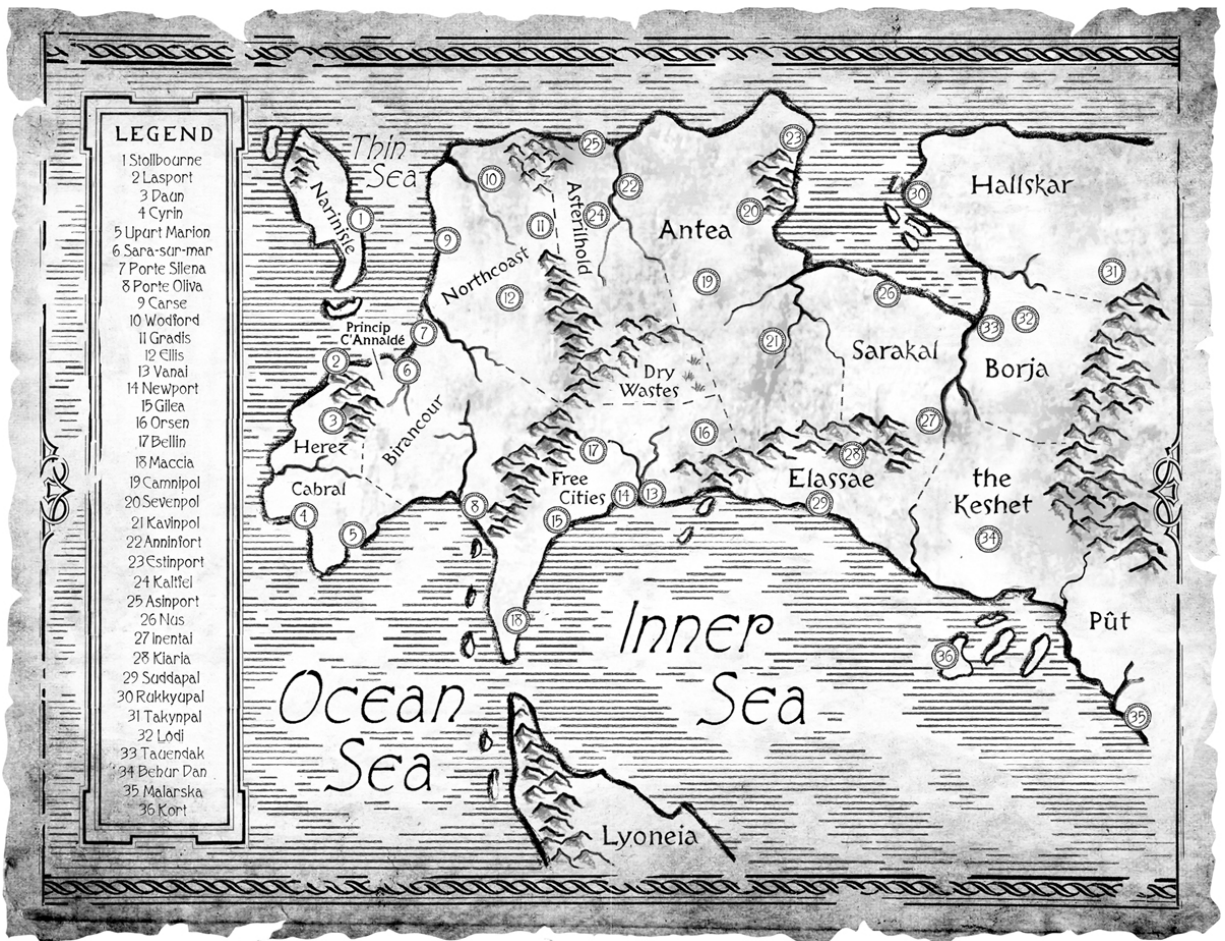


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Prologue

The Apostate

The apostate pressed himself into the shadows of the rock and prayed to nothing in particular that the things riding mules in the pass below him would not look up. His hands ached, the muscles of his legs and back shuddered with exhaustion. The thin cloth of his ceremonial robes fluttered against him in the cold, dust-scented wind. He took the risk of looking down toward the trail.

The five mules had stopped, but the priests hadn't dismounted. Their robes were heavier, warmer. The ancient swords strapped across their backs caught the morning light and glittered a venomous green. Dragon-forged, those blades. They meant death to anyone whose skin they broke. In time, the poison would kill even the men who wielded them. All the more reason, the apostate thought, that his former brothers would kill him quickly and go home. No one wanted to carry those blades for long; they came out only in dire emergency or deadly anger.

Well. At least it was flattering to be taken seriously.

The priest leading the hunting party rose up in his saddle, squinting into the light. The apostate recognized the voice.

"Come out, my son," the high priest shouted. "There is no escape."

The apostate's belly sank. He shifted his weight, preparing to walk down. He stopped himself. *Probably*, he told himself. *There is probably no escape. But perhaps there is.*

On the trail, the dark-robed figures shifted, turned, consulted among themselves. He couldn't hear their words. He waited, his body growing stiffer and colder. Like a corpse that hadn't had the grace to die. Half a day seemed to pass while the hunters below him conferred, though the sun barely changed its angle in the bare blue sky. And then, between one breath and the next, the mules moved forward again.

He didn't dare move for fear of setting a pebble rolling down the steep cliffs. He tried not to grin. Slowly, the things that had once been men rode their mules down the trail to the end of the valley, and then followed the wide bend to the south. When the last of them slipped out of sight, he stood, hands on his hips, and marveled. He still lived. They had not known where to find him after all.

Despite everything he'd been taught, everything he had until recently believed, the gifts of the spider goddess did not show the truth. It gave her servants something, yes, but not *truth*. More and more, it seemed his whole life had sprung from a webwork of plausible lies. He should have felt lost. Devastated. Instead, it was like he'd walked from a tomb into the free air. He found himself grinning.

The climb up the remaining western slope bruised him. His sandals slipped. He struggled for finger- and toeholds. But as the sun reached its height, he reached the ridge. To the west, mountain followed mountain, and great billowing clouds towered above them, thunderstorms a soft veil of grey. But in the farthest passes, he saw the land level. Flatten. Distance made the plains grey-blue, and the wind on the mountain's peak cut at his skin like claws. Lightning flashed on the horizon. As if in answer, a hawk shrieked.

It would take weeks alone and on foot. He had no food, and worse, no water. He'd slept the last five nights in caves and under bushes. His former brothers and friends—the men he had known and loved his whole life—were combing the trails and villages, intent on his death. Mountain lions and dire wolves hunted in the heights.

He ran a hand through his thick, wiry hair, sighed, and began the downward climb. He would probably die before he reached the Keshet and a city large enough to lose himself in.

But only *probably*.

In the last light of the falling sun, he found a stony overhang near a thin, muddy stream. He sacrificed a length of the strap from his right sandal to fashion a crude fire bow, and as the cruel chill came down from the sky, he squatted next to the high ring of stones that hid his small fire. The dry scrub burned hot and with little smoke, but quickly. He fell into a rhythm of feeding small twig after small twig into the flame, never letting it grow large enough to illuminate his shelter to those hunting and never letting it die. The warmth didn't seem to reach past his elbows.

Far off, something shrieked. He tried to ignore it. His body ached with exhaustion and spent effort, but his mind, freed now from the constant distraction of his journey, gained a dangerous speed. In the darkness, his memory sharpened. The sense of freedom and possibility gave way to loss, loneliness, and dislocation. Those, he believed, were more likely to kill him than a hunting cat.

He had been born in hills much like these. Passed his youth playing games of sword and whip using branches and woven bark. Had he ever felt the ambition to join the ranks of the monks in their great hidden temple? He must have, though from the biting cold of his poor stone shelter, it was hard to imagine it. He could remember looking up with awe at the high wall of stone. At the rock-carved sentries from all the thirteen races of humanity worn by wind and rain until all of them—Cinnae and Tralgu, Southling and Firstblood, Timzinae and Yemmu and Drowned—wore the same blank faces and clubbed fists. Indistinguishable. Only the wide wings and dagger teeth of the dragon arching above them all were still clear. And worked into the huge iron gate, black letters spelled out words in a language no one in the village knew.

When he became a novice, he learned what it said. BOUND IS NOT BROKEN. He had believed once that he knew what it meant.

The breeze shifted, raising the embers like fireflies. A bit of ash stung his eye, and he rubbed at it with the back of his hand. His blood shifted, currents in his body responding to something that was not him. The goddess, he'd thought. He had gone to the great gate with the other boys of his village. He had offered himself up—life and body—and in return...

In return the mysteries had been revealed. First, it had only been knowledge: letters enough to read the holy books, numbers enough to keep the temple's records. He had read the stories of the Dragon Empire and its fall. Of the spider goddess coming to bring justice to the world.

Deception, they said, had no power over her.

He'd tested it, of course. He believed them, and still he had tested. He would lie to the priests, just to see whether it could be done. He'd chosen things that only he could know: his father's clan name, his sister's favorite meals, his own dreams. The priests had whipped him when he spoke false, they had spared him when he was truthful, and they were never, *never* wrong. His certainty had grown. His faith. When the high priest had chosen him to rise to novice, he'd been certain that great things awaited him, because the priests had told him that they did.

After the nightmare of his initiation was over, he'd felt the power of the spider goddess in his own blood. The first time he'd felt someone lie, it had been like discovering a new sense. The first time he had spoken with the voice of the goddess, he'd felt his words commanding belief as if they had been made from fire.

And now he had fallen from grace, and none of it might be true. There might be no such place as the Keshet. He believed there was, so much so that he had risked his life on flight to it. But he had never been there. The marks on the maps could be lies. For that matter, there might have been no dragons, no empire, no great war. He had never seen the ocean; there might be no such thing. He knew only what he himself had seen and heard and felt.

He knew *nothing*.

On violent impulse, he sank his teeth into the flesh of his palm. His blood welled up, and he cupped it. In the faint firelight, it looked nearly black. Black, with small, darker knots. One of the knots unfurled tiny legs. The spider crawled mindlessly around the cup of his hand. Another one joined it. He watched them: the agents of the goddess in whom he no longer believed. Carefully, slowly, he tipped his hand over the small flame. One of the spiders fell into it, hair-thin legs shriveling instantly.

“Well,” he said. “You can die. I know *that*.”

The mountains seemed to go on forever, each crest a new threat, each valley thick with danger. He skirted the small villages, venturing close only to steal a drink from the stone cisterns. He ate lizards and the tiny flesh-colored nuts of scrub pine. He avoided the places where wide, clawed paws marked paths in the dirt. One night, he found a circle of standing pillars with a small chamber beneath them that seemed to offer shelter and a place to recover his strength, but his sleep there had been troubled by dreams so violent and alien that he pushed on instead.

He lost weight, the woven leather of his belt hanging low around his waist. His sandals’ soles thinned, and his fire bow wore out quickly. Time lost its meaning. Day followed day followed day. Every morning he thought, *This will probably be the last day of my life. Only probably.*

The *probably* was always enough. And then, late one morning, he pulled himself to the top of a boulder-strewn hill, and there wasn’t another to follow it. The wide western plains spread out before him, a river shining in its cloak of green grass and trees. The view was deceptive. He guessed it would still be two days on foot before he reached it. Still, he sat on a wide, rough stone, looked out over the world, and let himself weep until almost midday.

As he came nearer to the river, he felt a new anxiety start to gnaw at his belly. On the day, weeks ago, when he had slipped over the temple’s wall and fled, the idea of disappearing into a city had been a distant concern. Now he saw the smoke of a hundred cookfires rising from the trees. The marks of wild animals were scarce. Twice, he saw men riding huge horses in the distance. The dusty rags of his robe, the ruins of his sandals, and the reek of his own unwashed skin reminded him that this was as difficult and as dangerous as anything he’d done to now. How would the men and women of the Keshet greet a wild man from the mountains? Would they cut him down out of hand?

He circled the city by the river, astounded at the sheer size of the place. He had never seen anything so large. The long wooden buildings with their thatched roofs could have held a thousand people. The roads were paved in stone. He kept to the underbrush like a thief, watching.

It was the sight of a Yemmu woman that gave him courage. That and his hunger. At the fringe of the city, where the last of the houses sat between road and river, she labored in her garden. She was half again as tall as he was, and broad as a bull across the shoulders. Her tusks rose from her jaw until she seemed in danger of piercing her own cheeks if she laughed. Her breasts hung high above a peasant girdle not so different from the ones his own mother and sister had worn, only with three times the cloth and leather.

She was the first person he had ever seen who wasn’t a Firstblood. The first real evidence that the thirteen races of humanity truly existed. Hiding behind the bushes, peeking at her as she leaned in the soft earth and plucked weeds between gigantic fingers, he felt something like wonder.

He stepped forward before he could talk himself back into cowardice. Her wide head rose sharply, her nostrils flaring. He raised a hand, almost in apology.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I’m... I’m in trouble. And I was hoping you might help me.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed to slits. She lowered her stance like a hunting cat preparing for battle. It occurred to him that it might have been wiser to discover if she spoke his language before he’d approached her.

“I’ve come from the mountains,” he said, hearing the desperation in his own voice. And hearing something else besides. The inaudible thrumming of his blood. The gift of the spider goddess commanding the woman to believe him.

"We don't trade with Firstbloods," the Yemmu woman growled. "Not from those twice-shat mountains anyway. Get away from here, and take your men with you."

"I don't have any men," he said. The things in his blood roused themselves, excited to be used. The woman shifted her head as his stolen magic convinced her. "I'm alone. And unarmed. I've been walking for... weeks. I can work if you'd like. For a little food and a warm place to sleep. Just for the night."

"Alone and unarmed. Through the mountains?"

"Yes."

She snorted, and he had the sense he was being evaluated. Judged.

"You're an idiot," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I am. Friendly, though. Harmless."

It was a very long moment before she laughed.

She set him to hauling river water to her cistern while she finished her gardening. The bucket was fashioned for Yemmu hands, and he could only fill it half full before it became too heavy to lift. But he struggled manfully from the little house to the rough wooden platform and then back again. He was careful not to scrape himself, or at least not so badly as to draw blood. His welcome was uncertain enough without the spiders to explain.

At sunset, she made a place for him at her table. The fire in the pit seemed extravagant, and he had to remind himself that the things that had been his brothers weren't here, scanning for signs of him. She scooped a bowl of stew from the pot above the fire. It had the rich, deep, complex flavor of a constant pot; the stewpot never leaving the fire, and new hanks of meat and vegetables thrown in as they came to hand. Some of the bits of dark flesh swimming in the greasy broth might have been cooking since before he'd left the temple. It was the best meal he'd ever had.

"My man's at the caravanserai," she said. "One of the princes s'posed to be coming in, and they'll be hungry. Took all the pigs with. Sell 'em all if we're lucky. Get enough silver to see us through storm season."

He listened to her voice and also the stirring in his blood. The last part had been a lie. She *didn't* believe that the silver would last. He wondered if it worried her, and if there was some way he could see she had what she needed. He would try, at least. Before he left.

"What about you, you poor shit?" she asked, her voice soft and warm. "Whose sheep did you fuck that you're begging work from me?"

The apostate chuckled. The warm food in his belly, the fire at his side, and the knowledge that a pallet of straw and a thin wool blanket were waiting for him outside conspired to relax his shoulders and his belly. The Yemmu woman's huge gold-flecked eyes stayed on him. He shrugged.

"I discovered that believing something doesn't make it true," he said carefully. "There were things I'd accepted, that I believed to my bones, and I was... wrong."

"Misled?" she asked.

"Misled," he agreed, and then paused. "Or perhaps not. Not intentionally. No matter how wrong you are, it's not a lie if you believe it."

The Yemmu woman whistled—an impressive feat, considering her tusks—and flapped her hands in mock admiration.

"High philosophy from the water grunt," she said. "Next you'll be preaching and asking tithes."

"Not me," he said, laughing with her.

She took a long slurp from her own bowl. The fire crackled. Something—rats, perhaps, or insects—rattled in the thatch overhead.

"Fell out with a woman, did you?" she asked.

"A goddess," he said.

"Yeah. Always seems like that, dunit?" she said, staring into the fire. "Some new love comes on like there's something different about 'em. Like God himself talks whenever their lips flap. And then..."

She snorted again, part amusement, part bitterness.

“And what all went wrong with your goddess?” she asked.

The apostate lifted a scrap of something that might have been a potato to his mouth, chewed the soft flesh, the gritty skin. He struggled to put words to thoughts that had never been spoken aloud. His voice trembled.

“She is going to eat the world.”

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Captain Marcus Wester

Marcus rubbed his chin with a callused palm.

“Yardem?”

“Sir?” rumbled the Tralgu looming at his side.

“The day you throw me in a ditch and take command of the company?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It wouldn’t be today, would it?”

The Tralgu crossed his thick arms and flicked a jingling ear.

“No, sir,” he said at last. “Not today.”

“Pity.”

The public gaol of Vanai had once been a menagerie. In ancient days, the dragons themselves had stalked the wide square and bathed in the great fountain at its center. At the perimeter, a deep pit, and then great cages rising three stories high. The dragon’s jade façades were carved with figures of the beasts that had once paced behind the iron bars: lions, gryphons, great six-headed serpents, wolves, bears, great birds with breasts like women.

Between them, pillars in the shapes of the thirteen races of mankind: tall-eared Tralgu, chitinous Timzinae, tusked Yemmu, and on and on. The Dartinae even had small braziers hidden in its eyeholes to mimic the glow of their gaze, though no one lit them anymore. The figures were unworn by time and rain, marred only by the black, weeping streaks where the bars had rusted away—nothing eroded dragon’s jade and nothing broke it. But the animals themselves were gone, and in their place, people.

Sullen or angry or bored, the guests of Vanai’s justice were displayed in their shame for ridicule and identification while they waited for the sentence of the appointed magistrate. Good, upstanding citizens could parade through the square where few bronze pennies would buy offal from a stand, usually wrapped in a sling of rags. Boys would make a show of showering loose shit, dead rats, and rotting vegetables over the prisoners. A few tearful wives and husbands would bring cheese and butter to throw across the void, but even if the gift reached the intended hand, there was no peace in prison. As they watched from the low wall at the pit’s edge, Marcus saw one such lucky man—a Kurtadam with clicking beads in his close, otter-smooth pelt—being beaten for his round of white bread while a pack of Firstblood boys laughed and pointed at him and called out, *Clicker, clicker, ass-licker* and other racial insults.

In the lowest row of cells, seven men sat. Most had the build and scars of soldiers, but one kept himself apart, thin legs stuck between the bars, heels swinging over the pit. The six soldiers had been Marcus’s men. The other, the company cunning man. They belonged to the prince now.

“We’re being watched,” the Tralgu said.

“I know.”

The cunning man raised an arm in a rueful wave. Marcus responded with a false smile and a less polite gesture. His former cunning man looked away.

“Not him, sir. The other one.”

Marcus shifted his attention away from the cages. It only took a moment to see the man Yardem meant. Not far from the wide space where the street spilled into the square, a young man in the gilt armor of the prince’s guard slouched at ease. A tug at his memory brought Marcus the man’s name.

“Well, God smiles,” Marcus said sourly.

The guard, seeing himself noticed, gave a rough salute and walked toward them. He was thick-faced and soft about the shoulders. The smell of bathhouse cedar oil came off him like he'd been dipped in it. Marcus shrugged the way he did before a fight.

"Captain Wester," the guard said with a nod. And then, "And Yardem Hane. Still following the captain, are you?"

"Sergeant Dossen, isn't it?" Marcus said.

"Tertian Dossen now. The prince keeps to the old titles. Those your men?"

"Who, those?" Marcus asked with feigned innocence. "Worked with lots of men, one time and another. Shouldn't be surprised if I knew men in every gaol in the Free Cities."

"That bunch there. We herded them up last night for being drunk and causing trouble."

"Men will do that."

"You don't know anything about it?"

"I wouldn't want to say anything that might get back to the magistrate," Marcus said. "He might not take it the way I meant."

Dossen spat into the wide air of the ditch.

"I can respect you wanting to keep them out of trouble, Captain. But it wouldn't make a difference. War's coming, and the prince needs men. That lot has training. Experience. They'll be impressed into the army. Might even get ranks."

Marcus felt the anger growing, the warmth in his chest and belly, the sense he had grown an inch taller. Like all things that felt good, he distrusted it.

"You sound like there's something you want to say."

Dossen smiled like a river snake.

"You've still got a reputation. Captain Wester, hero of Gradis and Wodford. The prince would notice that. You could take a fair commission."

"Princes, barons, dukes. They're all just little kings," Marcus said, a degree more hotly than he'd intended. "I don't work for kings."

"You will for this one," Dossen said.

Yardem scratched his belly and yawned. It was a signal that reminded Marcus to keep his temper. Marcus took his hand off the pommel of his blade.

"Dossen, old friend," Marcus said, "a good half of this city's defense is hired men. I've seen Karol Dannian and his boys. Merrisan Koke. Your prince will lose all of them if the word gets out that he's impressing professional soldiers who are under contract—"

Dossen's jaw actually dropped in astonishment.

"You aren't under contract," he said.

"I am," Marcus said. "We're guard on a caravan for Carse up in Northcoast. Already paid."

The guard looked across the gap at the incarcerated men, the dejected cunning man, and the rust-streaked jade. A pigeon landed on the carved foot of a gryphon, shook its pearl-grey tailfeathers, and shat on the cunning man's knee. An old man behind them brayed out a laugh.

"You don't have any men," Dossen said. "Those are your caravan guards right there. You and the dog-boy can't guard a 'van by yourselves. The papers call for eight sword-and-bows and a company cunning man."

"Didn't know you'd read our contract," Yardem said. "And don't call me dog-boy."

Dossen pressed his lips together, eyes narrow and annoyed. His armor clinked when he shrugged, too thin a sound for the metal to be much more than show.

"Yes, I saw it."

"But I'm sure it had nothing to do with those particular men getting rounded up," Marcus said.

"You'd best come along, Captain. The city of Vanai needs you."

"The caravan leaves in three days," Marcus said. "And I leave with it. Under contract."

Dossen didn't move, but his face flushed red. Marcus suspected that a member of the prince's guard wasn't used to being refused.

"You think you're above men like me?" Dossen said. "You think you can dictate terms and the world's going to listen? Wake up, Wester. You're a long way from the fields of Ellis."

Yardem grunted like he'd taken a body blow and shook his massive head.

"I wouldn't have mentioned Ellis," he said, his voice a low rumble.

Dossen looked up at the Tralgu with contempt, then at Marcus, and then, nervously, away.

"Didn't mean disrespect to your family, Captain," he said.

"Walk away," Marcus said. "Do it now."

Dossen stepped back. Just out of thrusting range, he paused.

"Three days until the 'van leaves," he said.

The rest was clear. *Fail to meet the terms of the contract, and answer to the prince. Like it or no.* Marcus didn't answer. Dossen turned and strode into the square.

"That's a problem," Yardem said.

"It is."

"We need men, sir."

"We do."

"Any thoughts on where we find them?"

"No."

Marcus took one more despairing look at the men who had once been his, shook his head, and left the menagerie behind.

The city of Vanai had once been a seaport at the mouth of the river Taneish, but centuries of silt had slowly pressed the river mouth away until now it lay a full morning's ride to the south. Canals and waterways laced the city, and flatboats still came there on the way to and from the smaller, younger city of Newport carrying grain and wool, silver and timber from the countries to the north.

Like all the Free Cities, Vanai had a history of conflict. It had been a republic led by a lottery-chosen council, the private holding of a monarch, the ally or enemy of Birancour or the Severed Throne depending on which way the wind blew. It had been a center of religion, and of revolt against religion. Every incarnation had left its mark upon the white wood buildings, the greasy canals, the narrow streets and open squares.

Here, ancient gates still hung at rest, prepared to protect the halls of the Common Council though the last councilmen were all generations dead. There, a noble bronze statue showed the wise and solemn countenance of a robed and mitred bishop streaked with verdigris and pigeon shit. The streets had signs in wood and stone from a thousand years of history, so that a single alley might be called by a dozen names. Iron gates marked the twenty tiny political districts, allowing the prince to remake the pathways through the city at his whim, protection against riots and conspiracy.

But even more than the architecture, Vanai wore its past in the character of its people.

Timzinae and Firstblood were most common, but glow-eyed, hairless Dartinae, the reed-thin, snow-pale Cinnae, and bronze-scaled Jasuru all had districts within the city's wide white walls. Time and experience had given them all a sophisticated, cynical edge. Walking through the narrow streets beside rich green canals, Marcus could see all the small signs of it. Firstblood merchants, loyalists to the prince, offered the soldiers discounts on goods that had been marked higher for the purpose. The beer houses and physicians, tanners and cobblers and professionals of every sort prepared fresh signs in Imperial Antean script so that business could go on unabated after the war was lost. Old Timzinae men, their dark scales greying and cracked, sat cross-legged at quayside tables talking about the last revolution when the prince's father had taken power from the republic. Their granddaughters walked in groups wearing thin white skirts of an almost imperial cut, black-scaled legs showing through the cloth like shadows.

Yes, some soldiers would die. Yes, some buildings would burn. Some women would be raped. Some fortunes would be lost. It was an evil that the city would weather, as it had before, and no one expected the disaster would come to them in particular. The soul of the city could be summarized with a shrug.

In a green-grass common, a weathered theatrical cart had dropped its side, the shallow stage hanging with dirty yellow ribbons. The small crowd standing before it looked curious and skeptical in equal measure. As Marcus walked past, an old man stepped out from behind the ribbons. His hair stood high on his head, and his beard jutted.

“Stop!” the man cried in a deep and resonant voice. “Stop now, and come near! Hear the tale of Aleren Mankiller and the Sword of the Dragons! Or if you are faint of heart, move on. For our tale is one of grand adventure. Love, war, betrayal, and vengeance shall spill out now, upon these poor boards, and I warn you...”

The actor’s voice seemed to drop to a whisper, though it still carried as clearly as the shouting.

“... not all that are good end well. Not all that are evil are punished. Come close, my friends, and know that in our tale as in the world, *anything* may happen.”

Marcus didn’t realize he’d stopped walking until Yarden spoke.

“He’s good.”

“Is, isn’t he?”

“Watch for a bit, sir?”

Marcus didn’t answer, but like the rest of the small crowd stepped closer. The play was a standard enough tale. An ancient prophecy, an evil rising from the depths of hell, and a relic of the Dragon Empire destined for the hand of the hero. The woman who played the maiden fair was perhaps a bit too old, and the man who spoke the hero’s part a little too soft. But the lines were well delivered, and the troupe was professionally rehearsed. Marcus picked out a long-haired woman and a stick-thin youth in the crowd who laughed at all the right times and put down hecklers: spare players planted in the audience. But each time the actor who had called the introduction came onstage, Marcus lost his train of thought.

The old man played Orcus the Demon King with such a sense of evil and pathos that it was easy to forget it was all for show. When Aleren Mankiller swung the Dragon Sword and blood gouted down the Demon King’s chest, Marcus had to stop himself from reaching for his blade.

In the end, and despite the actor’s warnings, the good triumphed, the evil were vanquished, and the players took their bows. Marcus was startled by the applause; the crowd had doubled without his noticing. Even Yarden was thumping his plate-wide palms together and grinning. Marcus dug a silver coin out of the pouch hung under his shirt and tossed it onto the boards. It landed with a hard tap, and a moment later Orcus the Demon King was smiling and bowing in a small rain shower of money. He thanked them for their generosity and their kindness with such warmth that even walking away, Marcus found himself thinking of people as generous and kind.

The early autumn sun was lowering, the pale city glowing gold. The audience unwound itself from around the stage, breaking off in groups of two and three to walk across the sward. Marcus sat on a stone bench under a yellow-leaved oak and watched as the actors reassembled their cart. A pack of Firstblood children descended upon the players, laughing, and were chased away with grins. Marcus leaned back and considered the darkening sky through the tree’s boughs.

“You have a plan,” Yarden said.

“Do I?”

“Yes, sir.”

It had been a fine little play. Not a huge cast. Aleren Mankiller and his companion. The maiden fair. Orcus the Demon King. The one man who’d taken all the small business as villager or demon or nobleman, depending on his hat. Five people for a full play’s work. And the two leading the crowd...

Seven people.

“Ah,” Marcus said. “So I do.”

Seven people sat at the wide round table drinking beer and eating cheese and sausage paid from Marcus’s diminishing funds. The two from the crowd were the thin boy Mikel and the long-haired woman Cary. The youth who’d played the hero was Sandr, the elderly maiden fair was Opal, the

hero's companion was Hornet, and the jack-of-all-roles was Smit. Yardem sat with them, a wide, gentle smile on his face, like a mother hound surrounded by puppies.

Marcus sat apart at a smaller table with Orcus the Demon King.

"And I," Orcus said, "am called Kitap rol Keshmet, among other things. Most often, Master Kit."

"I'm not going to remember all those names," Marcus said.

"We'll remind you. I don't think anyone is likely to take offense," Master Kit said, "especially if you keep buying the drinks."

"Fair point."

"Which brings us to the question, doesn't it, Captain? I can't think you've brought us all here out of your overflowing love of the stage?"

"No."

Master Kit raised his eyebrows in an unspoken question. Off the stage and out of makeup, he was an interesting-looking man. He had a long face and steel-grey hair. The deep olive tone of his skin reminded Marcus of the Firstblood men who lived in the deserts across the Inner Sea, and his eyes were so dark, Marcus suspected there might be Southling blood in his heritage somewhere not too far back.

"The prince wants to press me into his army," Marcus said.

"I understand that," Master Kit said. "We lost two of our company that way. Sandr's our understudy. He's been getting up before the sun reciting lines."

"I'd rather not work for the prince," Marcus said. "And as long as I have a legitimate contract, the issue won't arise."

"The issue?"

"Refusing a press gang ends you up on the field or in a grave. And I'm not going in the field for Vanai."

Master Kit frowned, great brows curving in like caterpillars.

"I hope you'll forgive me, Captain. Did you just tell me this is a matter of life and death for you?"

"Yes."

"You seem very calm about that."

"It's not the first time."

The actor leaned back in his chair, fingers laced over his flat belly. He looked thoughtful and sober, but also interested. Marcus took a swig of the beer. It tasted of yeast and molasses.

"I don't think I can hide both of you," Master Kit said. "You, perhaps. We have ways of making a man not seem himself, but a Tralgu this far west? If the prince knows to look for you, I'm afraid keeping with your friend is like hanging a flag on you. We'd be caught."

"I don't want to join your troupe," Marcus said.

"No?" Master Kit said. "Then what are we talking about?"

At the other table, the long-haired woman stood on her chair, struck a noble pose, and began declaiming the Rite of St. Ancian in a comic lisp. The others all laughed, except Yardem, who smiled amusedly and flicked his ears. Cary. Her name was Cary.

"I want your troupe to join me. There's a caravan to Carse."

"We call ourselves a traveling company," Master Kit said. "I think Carse is a good venue, and we haven't been there in years. But I don't see how putting us in your 'van helps you."

"The prince took my men. I need you to replace them. I want you to act as guards."

"You're serious."

"I am."

Master Kit laughed and shook his head.

"We aren't fighters," he said. "All that onstage is dance and show. Faced with a real soldier, I doubt we would acquit ourselves very well."

"I don't need you to *be* guards," Marcus said. "I need you to *act* as them. Raiders aren't stupid. They calculate their chances just the way anyone would. Caravans fall because they don't have enough bodies in armor or they're carrying something that makes it worth the risk. If we put your people in leather and bows, no one is going to know whether they can use them. And the cargo we're hauling isn't worth a fight."

"No?"

"Tin and iron. Undyed wool. Some leatherwork," Marcus said. "A man in the Old Quarter called Master Will put together an association of merchants to send out their goods as near the battle as they can and hope the fighting's over before payment comes. It's small and low-risk. If I were a raider, I wouldn't look at it twice."

"And the pay is good?"

"Very good," Marcus said.

Master Kit crossed his arms, frowning.

"Well, it's decent," Marcus said. "For what it is. And it will get your people out of harm's way. Even soft little gentlemen's wars like this spill some blood, and you have women in your troupe."

"I think Cary and Opal can look after themselves," Master Kit said.

"Not if the city's sacked. Princes and empires don't care if a few actors get raped and killed. People like you are beneath their notice, and the foot soldiers know that."

The actor looked at the larger table. Several conversations seemed to be going on simultaneously, some of the actors taking part in all of them. The older man's gaze softened.

"I believe you, Captain."

They sat in silence for a moment, only the roar of the fire in the grate, other voices raised in conversation, and the chill evening wind rattling the doors and windows. The chimney draw was poor, and it belched occasional puffs of smoke into the rooms. The actor shook his head.

"May I ask you something?" Master Kit said.

"Go ahead."

"I know your reputation. And I have the sense that you are a man with experience. Well bruised by the world. Guarding small caravans in the Free Cities seems to me an odd place to find you."

"That's not a question," Marcus said.

"Why are you doing this?"

Marcus shrugged.

"Too stubborn to die," he said, trying to make it sound like a joke.

Master Kit's smile would have been pitying if it hadn't carried some hidden suffering of its own.

"I believe that too, Captain. Well. You need nine soldiers to protect the last caravan from free Vanai?"

"Eight," Marcus said. "Eight soldiers and a cunning man."

Master Kit looked up at the soot-darkened ceiling.

"I have always wanted to play a cunning man," he said.

Sir Geder Palliako Heir of the Viscount of Rivenhalm

If Geder Palliako hadn't been thinking about his translation, he would have saved himself. The book in question was a speculative essay on the Drowned by a semi-discredited philosopher from Princip C'Annaldé. Geder had found it in a scriptorium in Camnipol, and, preparing for the long march south to the Free Cities, he had left out a spare pair of boots to make room for it. The dialect was ancient and obscure. The leather binding wasn't original. Its pages were almost brown with age, and the ink was faint.

He loved it.

The waxed cloth of his tent was cheaper than good field leathers, but it kept the worst of the cold at bay. His legs and back ached from riding. His inner thighs were chafed, and he had untied his vest to give his belly some room. His father had the same build. The family curse, he called it. Geder had an hour, perhaps, before he had to sleep, and he was spending it on a folding stool, hunched close over his book, piecing out each word and phrase.

Unlike the animals of the field, humanity need not resort to an abstract, mythological God to discover its reason for being. With the exception of the unmodified, bestial Firstblood, each race of humanity is the artifact of some purpose. The eastern races—Yemmu, Tralgu, Jasuru—were clearly fashioned as beasts of war; the Raushadam as objects of amusement and entertainment, the Timzinae—youngest of the races—as a race of beekeepers or some such light use, the Cinnae, myself included, as the conscious lens of wisdom and philosophy, and so on.

But what of the Drowned? Alone of the races of humanity, the Drowned show design without purpose. Common opinion places these, our lesser siblings, as akin to plants or the slow-moving beasts of the western continents. Their occasional gatherings in tidepools indicate more about the ocean's currents than anything of human will. Some romantics suggest that the Drowned are themselves working on some deep, dragon-inspired plan that continues to unfold even after the death of its planners. A romantic thought, and one which must be forgiven.

Instead, I think it is clear, the Drowned are the clearest example of humanity as artistic expression, and as such—

Or would *aesthetic intention* be more accurate than *artistic expression*? Geder rubbed his eyes. It was late. Too late. Tomorrow was another long ride to the south with another day of the same following it. If God was kind, they'd reach the border in a week, spend a day or at worst two choosing the field of battle, a day to crush the local forces, and he could be in a real bed, eating real food, and drinking wine that didn't taste of the skin it had been carried in. If he could only make it that far.

Geder put the book aside. He combed his hair, pleased by the absence of lice. He washed his face and hands, then laced up his vest for the short trek to the latrines as a last stop before bed. Outside his tent, his squire—another gift from his father—slept curled in a ball after the Dartinae fashion, eyes glowing a dull red behind their lids. Beyond him, the army lay on the countryside like a moving city.

Cookfires dotted the nearby hills and filled the air with the smell of lentils. The carts were gathered in the center of the camp, and the mules, horses, and slaves were all in separate corrals beside them. A cold wind blew from the north. It was a good sign. No rain. The moon had crawled halfway up the sky, its crescent offering the idea of light more than actual illumination, so Geder made his way to the latrine carefully.

The essay kept turning itself in his mind. He wished there was someone on the march with whom he could discuss the matter, but speculative essay wasn't considered a manly art. Poetry. Riding. Archery. Swordplay. Even history, if it was done with sufficiently apt turns of phrase. But speculative essay was a guilty pleasure, best hidden from his companions. They laughed at him enough for the size of his belly. No need to give them more stones for their slings. But if not *aesthetic intention*... was the Cinnae author *really* saying that the Drowned were only brought into existence because they made the shoreline pretty?

The latrine was empty, a small cloth tent with two rough planks spanning a pit. Geder took down his hose, his mind still turning on the fine points of the book. He noticed the sweet smell under the reek of shit, but didn't put importance on it. He sat his bare ass on the planks, sighed, and wondered a moment too late why the latrine smelled of sawdust.

The planks gave way, and Geder shrieked as he tipped backwards and down into the foul-smelling swamp of turds and piss. One of the planks bounced against the side of the pit and gouged his arm. The force of his landing blew the breath out of him. He lay stunned in the stinking darkness, his jacket and hose soaking up the sewer wetness and the cold.

Laughter came from above him. And then light.

Four lanterns shed their hoods, glowing in the sky above him. The light hid the faces of the men who held them, but the voices were clear enough. His so-called friends and companions of the sword. Jorey Kalliam, son of the Baron of Osterling Fells. Sir Gospey Allintot. Sodai Carvenallin, secretary to the High Marshal. And, worst of all, Sir Alan Klin, captain of the company, Geder's immediate superior, and the man to whom he would have reported the poor behavior of his fellows. Geder stood up, his head and shoulders peeking above the pit while the other men howled their mirth.

"Very funny," Geder said, holding shit-stained hands up to them. "Now help me out of this."

Jorey took him by the arm and hauled him up. He had to give the man some credit for not shying away from the mess they'd tipped him into. Geder's hose hung at his knees, soaked and filthy. He stood in the lantern light considering whether to put them back on or go naked from the waist down. With a sigh, he pulled up the hose.

"You were our last hope," Klin said, pounding Geder's shoulder. There were tears of hilarity running down his cheeks. "Everyone else noticed something wrong. Well, except Sodai, but he was too skinny to break the boards."

"Well, it was an excellent joke," Geder said sourly. "Now I'm going to go find something clean to—"

"Ah, no," Sodai said in his nasal, high-town accent. "Please, my friend. Don't spoil the night. It was a jest! Take it as it was meant."

"It's truth," Klin said, putting an arm around Geder's shoulder. "You must let us apologize. Come, my friends! To the tents!"

The four men stumbled off through the darkness, hauling Geder along with them. Of the four, only Jorey seemed genuinely sympathetic, and then only in his silence.

All through his childhood, Geder had imagined what it would be to serve the king, to ride on campaign, to prove his cleverness and his strength in arms. He read stories of the great warriors of old, heard his father's wine-soaked anecdotes about the friendship and camaraderie of the sword.

Reality disappointed.

The captain's tent was heavy leather strung on iron frames. Inside, it was more luxurious than Geder's home. Silk hung from the ceiling, and a great fire roared in the pit, smoke channeled up and out by a hanging chimney of finely wrought chain and blackened leather. The heat was like walking

into the worst of summer, but at least there was a bath drawn, and Geder didn't shiver as he pulled off his soiled clothes. The others shed the gloves and jackets that had been contaminated by touching Geder, and a Timzinae slave boy took it all away.

"We, my friends, are the pride and hope of Antea," Klin said as he filled a deep flagon with wine.

"To King Simeon!" Gospey said.

Klin pressed the flagon into Geder's hand and stood with the wineskin in his own.

"To Kingdom and Empire," he said. "And confusion to the upstart in Vanai!"

The others rose. Geder stood in his bath, water running down him, because to stay seated would have been a petty treason. It was the first toast of many. Sir Alan Klin was many things, but stingy with his wine wasn't one. And if Geder had the sense that his flagon was always a little more filled than the other men's, it was surely only a sign of the captain's contrition, an apology for the evening's prank.

Sodai declaimed his latest sonnet, a bawdy tribute to one of the more popular road whores who followed the campaign. Klin topped the performance by extemporizing a speech on the manly virtues of strength at arms, cultured arts, and sexual prowess. Jorey and Gospey pounded out a merry song on drum and reed organ, their voices harmonizing beautifully. When the turn came to Geder, he rose from the tepid bath, recited an explicit rhyme, and did the little jig that went with it. It was something his father had taught him once when they were deep in their cups, and Geder had never shared it outside the family. It wasn't until he finished, the other men helpless in their laughter, that it occurred to him how very drunk he must be to have repeated it here. He smiled to hide the sudden stab of anxiety. Had he just become complicit in his own humiliation? The smile goaded them on to new hilarity, until Klin, breathless, pounded the floor and gestured that Geder should sit.

There was cheese and sausage, more wine, flatbread and pickles, more wine. They talked about things that Geder could hardly follow at the time, much less recall later. At some point, he found himself going on with a drowsy gravity about the Drowned as artistic expression, or possibly aesthetic intention.

He woke in his own waxed-cloth tent, cold and aching and without memory of coming back to it. The thin, unkind light of the coming dawn pressed in through the cloth. A breeze whistled. Geder pulled his blanket up around his head like a fishwife's kerchief and willed himself back to sleep for just a few minutes more. The lingering tendrils of dream teased his mind, but the blare of the assembly call ended all hope of rest. Geder struggled up, put on a fresh uniform, and pulled back his hair. His guts were in riot. His head was in a debate between pain and illness. If he vomited inside the tent, no one would see it, but his squire would have to clean it up before they struck down for the day's ride. If he went outside, he'd almost certainly be seen. He wondered how much he'd drunk the night before. The second assembly call came. No time for it now. He gritted his teeth and set out once again for the captain's tent.

The company stood in order, Kalliam, Allintot, and two dozen other knights, many of them already in chain and show plate. Behind each, their sergeants and men-at-arms arranged in five ranks deep. Geder Palliako tried to stand straight and true, knowing that the men behind him were judging their chances of glory and survival by his competence. Just as his depended on the captain, and above him Lord Ternigan, the High Marshal who commanded the whole of the army.

Sir Alan Klin stepped out of his tent. In the cool light of morning, he looked like the perfect warrior. His pale hair was drawn back. His uniform was a black so deep it seemed like a sheet cut from midnight. His broad shoulders and jutting chin were a memorial statue brought to life. Two camp slaves brought a speaking dais and set it at the man's feet. The captain stepped up.

"Men," he said. "Yesterday, Lord Ternigan sent new orders. Vanai has entered into alliance with Maccia. Our reports are that six hundred sword-and-bows are on the march to reinforce Vanai even as we speak."

The captain paused to let that sink in, and Geder frowned. Maccia was an odd sort of ally for Vanai. The two cities had been at each other's throats over the spice and tobacco trades for more than a generation. Vanai was built of wood, he'd read, mostly *because* Maccia controlled the quarries while timber floated down the river from the north. But perhaps there was something more going on than he knew.

"These reinforcements will not save Vanai," Alan said. "Especially because when they arrive, they shall find us in control of the city."

Geder felt his frown deepen, and a sense of sick foreboding rise in his gut. It was perhaps five days by water from Maccia to Vanai, and they were at least a week from the border. To reach Vanai before the reinforcements meant...

"Today, we begin a hard march," Alan said. "We will sleep in our saddles. We will eat while we walk. And in four days' time, we will take Vanai by surprise and show her what the power of the Severed Throne means! To the King!"

"To the King!" Geder said in chorus with the others, raising his hand in salute even as he tried not to weep.

They had known. Last night, they had known. Already, Geder could feel the ache growing in his spine and his thighs. The throbbing in his head redoubled. As the formation broke, Jorey Kalliam met his eyes and then looked away.

Here was the prank. Being tipped into the sludge of the latrine had only been the start. After that, insist on the buffoon accepting apology. Get him in warm water. Fill him full of wine. Make him dance. The memory of reciting his father's dirty rhymes and dancing the little jig came back like a knife in his back. And all so that they could announce the forced march while fat idiot Palliako tried not to puke himself at formation. They'd taken his last night of sleep, and for days they would have the pleasure of watching him suffer.

The camaraderie of the sword. The brotherhood of the campaign. Warm, meaningless words. It was no different here than back home. The strong mocked the weak. The handsome pitied the plain. Everywhere and always, the powerful chose who was in favor and who could be made light of. Geder turned and stalked back to his tent. His squire had the slaves ready to strike it. He ignored them and walked into his last moment's privacy before the battle that was still days away. He reached for his book.

It wasn't where he'd left it.

A chill that had nothing to do with autumn ran down his spine.

He'd been drunk when he came back. He might have moved it. He might have tried to read it before he slept. Geder searched his cot, then under his cot. He looked through his uniforms and the wood and leather chest that held all his other things. The book wasn't there. He found himself breathing faster. His face felt hot, but whether it was shame or anger, he couldn't let himself think. He stepped out of his tent, and the slaves jumped to attention. The rest of the camp was already being loaded onto wagons and mules. There wasn't time. Geder nodded to his Dartinae squire, and the slaves got to work putting his things in order. Geder walked across the camp again, his steps slowed by fear. But he had to have his book back.

The captain's tent was already struck, the leather unfastened from the frames, the frames broken down and stowed. The bare patch of earth where Geder had capered last night was like a thing from a children's story, a fairy castle that vanished with the dawn. Except that Sir Alan Klin was there, his leather riding cloak hanging from his shoulders and his sword of office at his hip. The master of provender, a half-Yemmu mountain of a man, was taking orders from the captain. Geder's rank technically gave him the right to interrupt, but he didn't. He waited.

"Palliako," Klin said. The warmth of the previous night was gone.

"My lord," Geder said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but when I woke up this morning... after last night..."

"Spit it out, man."

"I had a book, sir."

Sir Alan Klin closed his noble, long-lashed eyes.

"I thought we'd finished with that."

"We did, sir? So you know the book? I showed it to you?"

The captain opened his eyes, glancing about at the ordered chaos of the breaking camp. Geder felt like a boy bothering a harried tutor.

"Speculative essay," Klin said. "Palliako, really? Speculative essay?"

"More for the exercise in translation," Geder lied, suddenly ashamed of his true enthusiasm.

"It was... courageous of you to admit the vice," Klin said. "And I think you made the right decision in destroying it."

Geder's heart knocked against his ribs.

"Destroying it, sir?"

Alan looked at him, surprise on his face. Or possibly mock surprise.

"We burned it last night," the captain said. "The two of us together, just after I took you back to your tent. Don't you remember?"

Geder didn't know whether the man was lying or not. The night was a blur. He remembered so little. Was it possible that, lost in his cups, he had forsworn his little failure of sophistication and permitted it to be set to fire? Or was Sir Alan Klin, his captain and commander, lying to his face? Neither seemed plausible, but one or the other had to be true. And to admit not knowing was to confess that he couldn't hold his wine and prove again that he was the joke of the company.

"I'm sorry, sir," Geder said. "I must have been a little muddled. I understand now."

"Be careful with that."

"It won't happen again."

Geder saluted, and then, before Klin could respond, stalked off to his mount. It was a gelding grey, the best his family could afford. He lifted himself to the saddle and yanked the reins. The horse turned sharply, surprised by his violence, and Geder felt a stab of regret through his rage. It wasn't the animal's fault. He promised himself to give the beast a length of sugarcane when they stopped. If they stopped. If this twice-damned campaign didn't drag on to the end of all days and the return of the dragons.

They took to the road, the army moving at the deliberate pace of men who knew the walk wouldn't end. The hard march began, rank following rank down the wide, dragon's jade road. Geder sat high in his saddle, holding his spine straight and proud out of sheer will and anger. He had been humiliated before. Likely he would be humiliated again. But Sir Alan Klin had burned his book. As the morning sun rose, the heat drawing cloaks from shoulders, the glorious leaves of autumn glowing around them, Geder realized that he had already sworn his oath of vengeance. And he'd done it standing before his new and mortal enemy.

It won't happen again, he'd said.

And it wouldn't.

Cithrin Bel Sarcour Ward of the Medean Bank

Cithrin's only vivid memory of her parents was being told of their deaths. Before that, there were only wisps, less than ghosts, of the people themselves. Her father was a warm embrace in the rain and the smell of tobacco. Her mother was the taste of honey on bread and the thin, graceful hand of a Cinnae woman stroking Cithrin's leg. She didn't know their faces or the sounds of their voices, but she remembered losing them.

She had been four years old. Her nursery had been painted in white and plum. She'd been sitting by the window, drinking tea with a stuffed Tralgu made of brown sacking and stuffed with dried beans. She'd been straightening its ears when her Nanné came in, face even paler than usual, and announced that the plague had taken master and mistress, and Cithrin was to prepare herself to leave. She would be living somewhere else now.

She hadn't understood. Death was something negotiable to her then, like whether or not to wear a particular ribbon in her hair, or how much sweet oats to eat in the morning. Cithrin hadn't cried so much as felt annoyance with the change of plan.

It was only later, in her new, darker rooms above the banking house, that she realized it didn't matter how loud she screamed or how violently she wept. Her parents would never come to her because, being dead, they didn't care anymore.

You worry too much," Besel said.

He reclined, splayed out, looking utterly comfortable on the worn wooden steps. He looked comfortable anywhere. His twenty-one summers made him four years older than Cithrin, and he had dark, curly hair and a broad face that seemed designed for smiling. His shoulders were as thick as a laborer's, but his hands were soft. His tunic, like her own dress, was dyed the red and brown of the bank. It looked better on him. Cithrin knew he had half a dozen lovers, and she was secretly jealous of every one of them.

They were sitting on a wooden bench above the Arched Square, looking down at the bustle and clutter of the weekly fresh market, hundreds of tightly packed stalls of bright cloth and thin sticks growing out from the buildings at the square's edge like new growth on an old tree. The grand canal of Vanai lapped at the quay on their right, the green water busy with narrow boats and pole barges. The market buzzed with the voices of the fishmongers and butchers, farmers and herbmén, all hawking their late summer harvest.

Most were Firstblood and black-chitined Timzinae, but here and there Cithrin caught sight of the pale, slight body of a full-blooded Cinnae, the wide head and mobile, houndlike ears of a Tralgu, the thick, waddling gait of a Yemmu. Growing up in Vanai, Cithrin had seen at least one example of nearly every race of mankind. Once, she had even seen one of the Drowned in a canal, staring up at her with sorrowful black eyes.

"I don't understand how the bank can side with Imperial Antea," she said.

"We're not siding with them," Besel said.

"We're not siding with the prince. This is a war."

Besel laughed. He had a good laugh. Cithrin felt a moment's anger, and then immediately forgave him when he touched her hand.

"This is a theater piece," he said. "A bunch of men are going to meet on a field outside the city, wave sticks and swords at each other, tumble about enough to satisfy honor, and then we'll open the gates to the Antean army and let them run things for a few years."

"But the prince—"

"Exiled. Or imprisoned, but probably exiled. This goes on all the time. A baroness in Gilea marries a prince in Asterilhold, and King Simeon decides Antea needs a counterbalance in the Free Cities. So he finds a reason to declare war on Vanai."

Cithrin frowned. Besel seemed so amused, so unconcerned. By his light, her fear seemed naïve. Foolish. She dug in her heels.

"I've read about wars. The history tutor doesn't make it sound like that at all."

"Maybe real wars are different," Besel said with a shrug. "If Antea ever marches on Birancour or the Keshet, I'll pull all wagers. But this? It's less than a spring storm, little bird."

A woman's voice called Besel's name. A merchant's daughter wearing a deep brown bodice and full skirts of undyed linen. Besel rose from Cithrin's side.

"My work's before me," he said with a glimmer in his eye. "You should get back to the house before old Cam starts getting anxious. But seriously, trust Magister Imaniel. He's been doing this longer than any of us, and he knows what he's about."

Cithrin nodded, then watched as Besel took the steps two at a time, down to the dark-haired girl. He bowed before her, and she curtsied, but it all looked false to Cithrin. Formality used as foreplay. Likely Besel didn't think Cithrin knew what foreplay was. She watched sourly as he took the woman by the elbow and led her away into the pale streets and bridges of the city. Cithrin plucked at her sleeves, wishing—not for the first time—that the Medean bank had adopted colors that flattered her more. Something green, for instance.

If her parents had both been Firstblood or Cinnae, she might have had family to take her in. Instead, her father's titles in Birancour had been reclaimed by the queen and awarded to someone else. Her mother's clan in Princip C'Annaldé had politely declined to take a half-blood child.

If not for the bank, she would have been turned into the streets and alleys of Vanai. But her father had placed a part of his gold with Magister Imaniel, and as inheritor, Cithrin became the bank's ward until she was old enough to press her bloodied thumb to contracts of her own. Two more summers, it would be. She would see her nineteenth solstice, become a woman of property, and move, she supposed, out of the little apartments near the Grand Square where the Vanai branch of the Medean bank did its business.

Assuming, of course, that the invading army left the city standing.

Walking through the fresh market, she saw no other particular signs of fear on the faces around her. So perhaps Besel was right. God knew the man seemed sure of himself. But then, he always did.

She let herself wonder whether Besel would see her differently when she wasn't the bank's little girl any longer. She paused at a stall where a Firstblood woman sold perfumes, oils, and colored hair-cloths. A mirror hung on a rough wood post, inviting the customers to admire themselves. Cithrin considered herself for a moment, lifting her chin the way women with real families might.

"Oh, you poor thing," the woman said. "You've been sick, haven't you? Need something for your lips?"

Cithrin shook her head, stepping back. The woman snatched her by the sleeve.

"Don't run off. I'm not afraid. Half my clients are here because they've been unwell. We can wash that pale right off you, dear."

"I haven't," Cithrin said, finding her voice.

"Haven't?" the woman said, steering her toward a stool at the stall's inner corner. The scent of roses and turned earth made the air almost too thick to breathe.

"I'm not sick," she said. "My mother's Cinnae. It's... it's normal."

The woman cast a pitying look at her. It was true. Cithrin had neither the delicate, spun-glass beauty of her mother's people nor the solid, warm, earthy charms of a Firstblood girl. She was in

between. The white mule, the other children had called her. Neither one thing nor the other.

"Well, all the more, then," the woman said consolingly. "Just sit you down, and we'll see what we can do."

In the end, Cithrin bought a jar of lip rouge just so she could leave the stall.

You could just let him have a bit," Cam said. "He is the prince. It isn't as if you won't know where to find him."

Magister Imaniel looked up from his plate, his expression pleasant and unreadable. The candlelight reflected in his eyes. He was a small man with leathery skin and thin hair who could seem meek as a kitten when he wished, or become a demon of cold and rage. In all her years, Cithrin had never decided which was the mask. His voice now was mild as his eyes.

"Cithrin?" he said. "Why won't I lend money to the prince?"

"Because if he doesn't want to pay you back, you can't make him."

Magister Imaniel shrugged at Cam. "You see? The girl knows. It's bank policy never to lend to people who consider it beneath their dignity to repay. Besides which, who's to say we have the coin to spare?"

Cam shook her head in feigned despair and reached across the table for the salt cellar. Magister Imaniel took another bite of his lamb.

"Why doesn't he go to his barons and dukes, borrow from them?" Magister Imaniel asked.

"He can't," Cithrin said.

"Why not?"

"Oh, leave the poor girl alone for once," Cam said. "Can't we have a single conversation without it turning into a test?"

"We have all their gold," Cithrin said. "It's all here."

"Oh dear," Magister Imaniel said, his eyes widening in false shock. "Is that so?"

"They've been coming for months. We've sold letters of exchange to half the high families in the city. For gold at first, but jewels or silk or tobacco... anything worth the trade."

"You're sure of that?"

Cithrin rolled her eyes.

"Everyone's sure of that," she said. "It's all anyone talks about at the yard. The nobles are all swimming away like rats off a burning barge, and the banks are robbing them blind while they do it. When the letters of credit get to Carse or Kiaria or Stollbourne, they aren't going to get back half of what they paid for them."

"It is a buyer's market, that's true," Magister Imaniel said with an air of satisfaction. "But inventory becomes an issue."

After dinner, Cithrin went up to her room and opened her windows to watch the mist rise from the canals. The air stank of the autumn linseed oil painted onto the wood buildings and bridges against the coming snow and rain. And beneath that, the rich green bloom of algae in the canals. She imagined sometimes that all the great houses were ships floating down a great river, the canals all connected in a single vast flow too deep for her to see.

At the end of the street, one of the iron gates had come loose from its stays, creaking back and forth in the breeze. Cithrin shivered, closed the shutters, changed for bed, and blew out her candle.

Shouts woke her. And then a lead-tipped club banging on the door.

She threw open the shutters and leaned out. The mist had cleared enough that the street was plain before her. A dozen men in the livery of the prince, five of them holding pitch-reeking torches, crowded the door. Their voices were loud and merry and cruel. One looked up, his dark eyes catching hers. The soldier broke into a grin. Cithrin, not knowing what was happening, smiled back uneasily and retreated. Her blood felt cold even before she heard the voices—Magister Imaniel sounding wary, the guard captain laughing, and then Cam's heartbroken cry.

Cithrin ran down the stairway, the dim light of a distant lantern making the corridors a paler shade of black. Part of her knew that running toward the front door was lunacy, that she should be running the other direction. But she'd heard Cam's voice, and she had to know.

The guards were already gone when she reached the door. Magister Imaniel stood perfectly still, a lantern of tin and glass glowing in his hand. His face was expressionless. Cam knelt beside him, her wide fist pressed against her mouth. And Besel—perfect Besel, beautiful Besel—lay on the stone floor, bloody but no longer bleeding. Cithrin felt a shriek growing in the back of her throat, but she couldn't make a sound.

"Get me a cunning man," Magister Imaniel said.

"It's too late," Cam said, her throat thick with tears.

"I didn't ask. Get me a cunning man. Cithrin, come here. Help me carry him in."

There was no hope, but they did as they were told. Cam pulled on a wool cloak and hurried off into the gloom. Cithrin took Besel's heels, Magister Imaniel his shoulders. Together, they hauled the body into the dining room and laid him on the wide wooden table. There were cuts on Besel's face and hands. A deep gouge ran from his wrist almost to his elbow, the sleeve torn by the blade's passage. He didn't breathe. He didn't bleed. He looked as peaceful as a man asleep.

The cunning man came, rubbed powders into Besel's empty eyes, pressed palms to his silent chest, called the spirits and the angels. Besel took one long, ragged breath, but the magic wasn't enough. Magister Imaniel paid the cunning man three thick silver coins and sent him on his way. Cam lit a fire in the grate, the flames giving Besel the eerie illusion of motion.

Magister Imaniel stood at the head of the table, looking down. Cithrin stepped forward and took Besel's cold and stiffening hand. She wanted badly to cry, but she couldn't. Fear and pain and terrible disbelief raged in her and found no escape. When she looked up, Magister Imaniel's gaze was on her.

Cam spoke. "We should have given it over. Let the prince take what he wants. It's only money."

"Bring me his clothes," Magister Imaniel said. "A clean shirt. And that red jacket he disliked."

His eyes were moving now, darting as if reading words written in the air. Cam and Cithrin exchanged a glance. Cithrin's first, mad thought was that he wanted to wash and dress the body for burial.

"Cam?" Magister Imaniel said. "Did you hear me? Go!"

The old woman heaved herself up from the hearth and trundled quickly into the depths of house. Magister Imaniel turned to Cithrin. His cheeks were flushed, but she couldn't say if it was rage or shame or something deeper.

"Can you steer a cart?" he asked. "Drive a small team? Two mules."

"I don't know," Cithrin said. "Maybe."

"Strip," he said.

She blinked.

"Strip," he said. "Your night clothes. Take them off. I need to see what were working with."

Uncertainly, Cithrin lifted her hands to the stays at her shoulders, undid the knots, and let the cloth fall to the floor. The cold air raised gooseflesh on her skin. Magister Imaniel made small noises in the back of his throat as he walked around her, making some evaluation she couldn't fathom. The corpse of Besel made no move. She felt the echo of shame. It occurred to her that she had never been naked in front of a man before.

Cam's eyes went wide when she returned, her mouth making a little O of surprise. And then, less than a heartbeat later, her expression went hard as stone.

"No," Cam said.

"Give me the shirt," Magister Imaniel said.

Cam did nothing. He walked over and lifted Besel's shirt and jacket from her. She didn't stop him. Without speaking, he dropped the shirt over Cithrin's head. The cloth was soft and warm, and smelled of the dead man's skin. The hem dropped down low enough to restore some measure of

modesty. Magister Imaniel stood back, and a bleak pleasure appeared at the corners of his eyes. He tossed Cithrin the jacket and nodded that she should put it on.

"We'll need some needlework done," he said, "but it's possible."

"You mustn't do this, sir," Cam said. "She's just a girl."

Magister Imaniel ignored her, stepping close again to pull Cithrin's hair back from her face. He tapped his fingers together as if trying to remember something, bent to the fire grate, and rubbed his thumb through the soot. He smudged Cithrin's cheeks and chin. She smelled old smoke.

"We'll need something better, but..." he said, clearly speaking only to himself. "Now... what is your name?"

"Cithrin?" she said.

Magister Imaniel barked out a laugh.

"What kind of name is that for a fine strapping boy like yourself? Tag. Your name is Tag. Say that."

"My name is Tag," she said.

Magister Imaniel's face twisted in scorn. "You talk like a girl, Tag."

"My name is Tag," Cithrin said, roughening her voice and mumbling.

"Fair," he said. "Only fair. But we'll work on it."

"You can't do this," Cam said.

Magister Imaniel smiled. It didn't reach his eyes.

"The prince has crossed a line," he said. "The policy of the bank is clear. He gets nothing."

"You *are* the policy of the bank," Cam said.

"And I am *clear*. Tag, my boy? A week from now, you are going to go to Master Will, down in the Old Quarter. He's going to hire you to drive a cart in a caravan bound for Northcoast. Undyed wool cloth he's moving to keep from losing it in the war."

Cithrin didn't nod or shake her head. The world was spinning a little, and everything had the sense of being part of a terrible dream.

"When you reach Carse," Magister Imaniel continued, "you take the cart to the holding company. I'll give you a map and directions. And a letter that will explain everything."

"It's weeks on the road!" Cam shouted. "Months, if there's snow in the pass."

Magister Imaniel turned, rage lighting his eyes. His voice was low and cold.

"What would you have me do? Keep her here? She's no safer in our beds than passing for a carter in a caravan. And I will *not* simply accept the loss."

"I don't understand," Cithrin said. Her voice sounded distant in her ears, as if she were shouting over surf.

"The prince's men are watching us," Magister Imaniel said. "I must assume they're watching anyone in the bank's employ. And, I expect, the bank's ward, Cithrin the half-Cinnae. Tag the Carter, on the other hand..."

"The carter?" Cithrin said, echoing him more than thinking thoughts of her own.

"The cart's false," Cam said, her voice thick with despair. "Besel was set to take it. Smuggle out all the money we can."

"The gold?" Cithrin said. "You want *me* to take the gold to Carse?"

"Some, yes," Magister Imaniel said. "But gold's heavy. We're better sending gems and jewelry. They're worth more. Spices. Tobacco leaf. Silk. Things light enough they'll pack tight and won't break the axles. And the account books. The real ones. As for the coins and ingots... well, I'll think of something."

He smiled like the mask of a smile. Besel's corpse seemed to shift its shoulders in the flickering light. A draught of cold air rubbed against her bare thighs, and the knot in her belly tightened until she tasted vomit in the back of her mouth.

"You can do this thing, my dear," Magister Imaniel said. "I have faith in you."

"Thank you," she said, swallowing.

Cithrin walked through the streets of Vanai, her stomach in knots. The false mustache was the sort of thin, weedy thing a callow boy might cultivate and be proud of. Her clothes were a mix of Besel's shirts and jackets resewn in the privacy of the bank and whatever cheap, mended rags could be scrounged. They hadn't dared to buy anything new. Her hair was tea-stained to an almost colorless brown and combed forward to obscure her face. She walked with the wider gait Magister Imaniel had taught her, a knot of uncomfortable cloth held tight against her sex to remind her that she was supposed to have a cock.

She felt worse than foolish. She felt like a mummer in clown face and comic shoes. She felt like the most obvious fraud in the city, or the world. And every time she closed her eyes, Besel's corpse waited for her. Every voice that called out started her heart skipping faster. She waited for the knife, the arrow, the lead-tipped cudgel. But the streets of Vanai didn't notice her.

Everywhere, the final preparations for the war were being made. Merchants nailed their windows closed. Wagons clogged the streets as families who had chosen not to flee to the countryside changed their minds and left and others that had gone changed their minds and returned. Criers in the service of the prince announced the improbable thousand men on the march now from their new allies, and the old Timzinae men by the quayside laughed and said they'd all be better off Antean than married to Maccia. Press gangs scattered people before them like wolves snapping at hens. And in the Old Quarter, the tall, dark, richly carved doors of Master Will's shop were flung wide. The street was jammed with carts and wagons, mules and horses and oxen. The caravan was forming in the square, and Cithrin made her way through the press of the crowd toward the wide, leather-capped form of Master Will.

"Sir," she said in a soft, low voice. Master Will didn't answer, and so uncertainly she tugged at his sleeve.

"What?" the old man said.

"My name's Tag, sir. I've come to drive Magister Imaniel's cart."

Master Will's eyes went wide for a moment and he glanced around to see if they'd been heard. Cithrin cursed silently. Not Magister Imaniel's cart. The bank didn't have a cart. She was driving the wool cart. It was her first mistake. Master Will coughed and took her by the shoulder.

"You're late, boy. I thought you might not come."

"Sorry, sir."

"For God's sake, child, try not to talk."

He led her quickly through the press to a deep, narrow cart. The weathered wood planks looked sturdy enough, and a canvas tarp over the top would keep the rain off the bolts of tight-packed grey cloth. The axles were thick iron, and the wheels bound with steel. It looked to Cithrin like obviously more of a wagon than mere cloth would need. The two mules in harness hardly seemed enough to pull a thing that big. Surely, *surely* they could all see through the sham. The prince's guards hardly needed to glance at her to understand everything. Her gut tightened harder, and she thanked the angels she hadn't been able to eat that morning. She didn't know how well her false whiskers would survive vomiting. Master Will leaned close to her, his lips brushing against her ear.

"The first two layers are wool," he said. "Everything beneath that's in sealed boxes and casks. If the tarp fails and things get wet, just let them stew."

"The books—" she muttered.

"The books are in enough sheepskin and wax you could drive this bastard into the sea. Don't worry about them. Don't think about what you're hauling. And do not under any circumstances dig down and have a look."

She felt a passing annoyance. Did he think she was stupid?

"You can sleep on top," Master Will continued. "No one will think it odd. Do what the caravan master says, keep the mules healthy and fed, and keep to yourself as much as you can."

"Yes, sir," she said.

“Right, then,” the old man said. He stood back and clapped her on the shoulder. His smile was forced and mirthless. “Good luck.”

He turned and walked back toward his shop. Cithrin had the powerful urge to call after him. This couldn’t be all there was. There must be something else she was supposed to do, some preparation or advice she should have. She swallowed, hunched forward, then walked around the cart. The mules met her eyes incuriously. They, at least, weren’t frightened.

“I’m Tag,” she said into their long, soft ears. And then, whispering, “I’m really Cithrin.” She wished she knew their names.

She didn’t catch sight of the soldiers until she’d climbed up to the driver’s bench. Men and women in hard leather, swords at their sides. They were Firstblood, apart from one Tralgu with rings in his ears and a huge bow slung on his shoulder. The captain of the troop, the Tralgu, and an older man in long robes and tightly knotted hair were talking animatedly with the Timzinae caravan master. Cithrin gripped the reins, her knuckles aching and bloodless. The captain nodded toward her, and the caravan master shrugged. She watched in horror as the three soldiers came toward her. She had to run. She was going to be killed.

“Boy!” the captain said, his pale eyes on her. He was a hard-faced man younger than Magister Imaniel and older than Besel. He wore his sandy hair too short for Antean style, too long for the Free Cities. He leaned forward, his eyebrows rising. “Boy? You hear me?”

Cithrin nodded.

“You aren’t dim, are you? I didn’t sign on to guard boys who are likely to wander off on their own.”

“No,” Cithrin croaked. She coughed, careful to keep her voice husky and low. “No, sir.”

“Right, then,” the captain said. “You’re driving this cart?”

Cithrin nodded.

“Well. Good. You’re the last to come, so you missed the introductions before. I’ll keep it brief. I’m Captain Wester. This is Yarden. He’s my second. And that’s our cunning man, Master Kit. We’re guard on this ’van, and I’d be obliged if you did whatever we said, whenever we said it. We’ll get you through safe to Carse.”

Cithrin nodded again. The captain mirrored her, clearly not yet convinced she wasn’t dim.

“Right,” he said, turning away. “Let’s get going.”

“Anything you say, sir,” the Tralgu said in a deep, gravelly voice.

The captain and the Tralgu turned and walked back toward the caravan master, their voices quickly lost in the cacophony of the street. The cunning man, Master Kit, stepped closer. He was older, his hair more grey than black. His face was long and olive-complected. His smile was surprisingly warm.

“Are you all right, son?” he asked.

“Nervous,” Cithrin said.

“First time driving on a ’van?”

Cithrin nodded. She felt like an idiot, nodding all the time like a mute in the streets. The cunning man’s smile was reassuring and gentle as a priest’s.

“I suspect you’ll find the boredom’s the worst thing. After the third day seeing just the cart in front of you, the view may get a bit dull.”

Cithrin smiled and almost meant it.

“What’s your name?” the cunning man asked.

“Tag,” she said.

He blinked, and she thought his smile lost a degree of warmth. She bent her head forward, her hair almost covering her eyes, and her heart began to race. Master Kit only sneezed and shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was still comforting as soft flannel.

“Welcome to the ’van, Tag.”

She nodded again, and the cunning man walked away. Her heart slowed to a more human pace. She swallowed, shut her eyes, and willed her shoulders and neck to relax. She hadn't been found out. It would be fine.

The wagons started out within the hour, a great wide feed wagon lumbering along at the head, then a covered wagon that clanked loud enough Cithrin could hear it from her perch three back. The Timzinae caravan master rode back and forth on a huge white mare, tapping wagons and drivers and beasts with a long, flexible rod, half stick and half whip. When he came to her, she shook the reins and called out to the mules the way Besel had taught her back when he'd been alive and smiling and flirting with the poor ward of the bank. The mules started forward, and the caravan master shouted at her angrily.

"Not so fast, boy! You're not in a damned race here!"

"Sorry," Cithrin said, pulling back. One of the mules snorted and looked back at her. She had a hard time not imagining annoyance in the slant of its ears. She moved them forward again more slowly. The caravan master shook his head and cantered back to the next wagon. Cithrin held the reins in a fierce grip, but there was nothing she had to do. The mules knew their work, following the cart before them. Slowly, with many shouts and imprecations, the caravan took form. They moved from the wide streets of the Old Quarter, past the canals that led down to the river, across the Patron's Bridge, the prince's palace high above them.

Vanai, the city of her childhood, slipped past her. There was the road that led to the market where Cam had bought her honey bread for her birthday. Here, the stall where an apprentice cobbler had stolen a kiss from her and been whipped by Magister Imaniel for his trouble. She'd forgotten that until now. They passed the tutor's house where she'd gone to study numbers and letters when she was just a girl. Somewhere in the city were the graves of her mother and father. She had never visited the corpses, and she regretted it now.

When she came back, she told herself. When the war was over and the world safe, she'd come back and see where her family was buried.

Too soon, the city wall loomed up before them, pale stone as high as two men standing. The gate was open, but the traffic on the road slowed them. The mules seemed to expect it and stood patiently as the caravan master rode to the front to clear the way, whipping at whatever was in the 'van's path. High on the tower gate, a man stood in the bright armor of the prince's guard. For a sickening moment, Cithrin thought it was the same grinning face that had looked up at her the night Besel died. When the guard called out, it was to the captain.

"You're a coward, Wester!"

Cithrin caught her breath, shocked by the casual insult.

"Die of the pox, Dossen," the captain sang back, grinning, so perhaps the two were friends. The idea made her like Captain Wester less. The prince's guard didn't stop them, at least. The carts rolled and bumped and creaked their way out of the city and onto the road where they left the stone cobbles for the wide green of dragon's jade. Carse lay far to the north and west, but the road here tracked south, echoing the distant curve of the sea. A few other carts passed, traveling in toward the city. The low hills were covered with trees in the glory of their autumn leaves; red and yellow and gold. When the sun struck them at the proper angle, it looked like fire. Cithrin hunched on her bench, her legs growing colder, her hands stiff.

Over the long, slow miles her anxiety faded, lulled by the rumble and rocking of the cart. She could almost forget who she was, what was behind her, and what was in the cart with her. As long as the world was her, the mules, the cart before and the trees beside, it was almost like being alone. The sun tracked lower, shining into her eyes until she was as good as blind. The caravan master's call slowed the carts, then stopped them. The Timzinae rode down the line of carts as he had in Vanai, pointing each of them to a place in a low, open field. The camp. Cithrin's place, thankfully, was near the road where she didn't need to do anything fancy. She turned the mules, brought the cart where she'd been told, and then climbed down to the earth. She unhitched the mules and led them to a creek

where they stuck their heads down to the water and kept them there so long she started to grow nervous. Would a mule drink enough to make itself sick? Should she try to stop them? But the other animals were doing the same. She watched what the other carters did and tried not to stand out.

Night came quickly and cold. By the time she'd fed her animals, scrubbed them, and set them in the 'van's makeshift corral, a mist had risen. The caravan master had set up a fire, and the smell of smoke and grilling fish brought Cithrin's stomach suddenly and painfully to life. She joined the carters laughing and talking in the line for food. She kept her head bowed, her eyes downcast. When anyone tried to bring her into the conversation, she grunted or spoke in monosyllables. The 'van's cook was a short Timzinae woman so fat the chitin of her scales seemed ready to pop free of her sausage-shaped arms. When Cithrin reached the front of the line, the cook handed her a tin plate with a thin strip of pale trout-flesh, a heaping spoonful of beans, and a crust of brown bread. Cithrin nodded in a mime of gratitude and went to sit at the fire. The damp soaked her leggings and jacket, but she didn't dare move in nearer to the warmth. Better to keep to the back.

As they ate, the caravan master pulled a low stool out from his own cart and stood on it, reading from a holy book by the light of the fire. Cithrin listened with only half her attention. Magister Imaniel was a religious too, or else thought it wise to appear so. Cithrin had heard the scriptures many times without ever finding God and angels particularly moving.

Quietly, she put down plate and knife and went out to the creek. How to visit the latrine without giving herself away had been a haunting fear, and Magister Imaniel's dismissive answers—*All men squat to shit*—hadn't reassured her. Alone in the mist and darkness, leggings around her ankles and codpiece stuffing in hand, she felt relief not only in her flesh. Once. She'd gotten away with it once. Now if she could only keep the charade up for the weeks to Carse.

Coming back to the fire, she saw a man sitting beside her plate. One of the guards, but thankfully not the captain or his Tralgu second. Cithrin took her seat again and the guard nodded to her and smiled. She hoped he wouldn't talk.

"Quite the talker, our 'van master," the guard said. "He projects well. Would have made a good actor, except there aren't many good Timzinae roles. Orman in the Fire Cycle, but that's about it."

Cithrin nodded and took a bite of cold beans.

"Sandr," the guard said. "That's me. My name's Sandr."

"Tag," Cithrin said, hoping that between mumbling and her full mouth, she'd sound enough like a man.

"Good meetin' you, Tag," Sandr said. He shifted in the darkness, hauling out a leather skin. "Drink?"

Cithrin shrugged the way she imagined a carter might, and Sandr grinned and popped the stopper free. Cithrin had drunk wine in temple and during festival meals, but always with water, and never very much. The liquid that poured into her mouth now was a different thing. It bit at the softest parts of her lips and tongue, slid down her throat, and left her feeling as if she'd been cleaned. The warmth that spread through her chest was like a blush.

"Good, isn't it?" Sandr said. "I borrowed it from Master Kit. He won't mind."

Cithrin took another drink then reluctantly handed it back. Sandr drank as the caravan master reached the end of his reading, and half a dozen voices rose up in the closing rite. The moon seemed soft, the mist scattering its light. To her surprise, the wine was untying the knot in her stomach. Not much, but enough that she could feel it. The warmth in her chest was in her belly now too. She wondered how much of the skin she'd have to down to bring the feeling to her shoulders and neck.

She couldn't be stupid, though. She couldn't get herself drunk. Someone shouted out Sandr's name and the guard leapt to his feet. He didn't pick up the skin.

"Over here, sir," Sandr said, walking in toward the fire. Wester and his Tralgu were gathering up their soldiers. Cithrin looked out into the grey and shifting darkness, in toward the fire, and then carefully, casually scooped up the wineskin, tucking it into her jacket.

She walked back to her cart, avoiding the others as she went. Someone was singing, and another voice lifted to join the song. A night bird called out. Cithrin clambered up. Dew was forming on the wool cloth, tiny droplets catching the glow of the moon. She wondered whether she ought to lower the tarp, but it was dark, and she didn't particularly want to. Instead, she snuggled into among the bolts, snuck the wineskin out of her jacket, and had just one more drink. A small one and only one. She had to be careful.

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Dawson Kalliam Baron of Osterling Fells

The sword's arc changed at the last second, the steel blade angling up toward his face. Had Dawson been as young as his opponent, the move would have had its intended effect: he would have flinched back from it, turned, and left himself open. But he had been dueling for too many years. He shifted his own blade an inch to the side and pushed the unexpected thrust a hair's breadth wide of its mark.

Feldin Maas, Baron of Ebbinbaugh and Dawson's opponent in this little battle as in everything, spat on the ground and grinned.

The original slight had been a small one. Despite Dawson having a greater landholding, Maas had demanded to be served before him at the king's court three days before on the strength of having been named Warden the Southern Reach. Dawson had explained Maas's mistake. Maas had made an insult of his concession. The pair of them had come near blows there in the great hall. And so the question was to be resolved here, in the fashion of old.

The dueling yard was a dry, dusty ground long enough for jousting and narrow enough for a meeting like this one: short blades and dueling leathers. To one side, the great walls and towers of the Kingspire rose up, taller than trees. To the other, the Division a thousand feet deep that split the city and gave the Severed Throne its name.

They disengaged and resumed the slow, tense circling. Dawson's right arm was so tired it felt as if it was burning, but the tip of his sword didn't waver. It was a point of pride that after thirty years on the field of honor, he was still as strong as the first day he'd stepped in. The younger man's blade was slightly less steady, his form apparently more careless. It was a physical lie, and Dawson knew better than to believe it.

Their leather-soled boots hushed against the earth. Feldin thrust. Dawson parried, counterthrust, and now Feldin stepped back. The grin was less certain, but Dawson didn't let himself feel pleasure. Not until the bastard wore a Kalliam scar. Feldin Maas swung low and hard, twisting the blade fast from the wrist. Dawson parried, feinted to the right and attacked to the left. His form was perfect, but his enemy had already shifted away. They were both too experienced on the battlefield for the old tricks to carry much effect.

Something unexpected was called for.

In a true battle, Dawson's thrust would have been suicidal. It left him open, off balance, overextended. It was artless, and so it had the effect he'd intended. Feldin leaped back, but too slowly. The resistance of metal cutting skin translated through Dawson's blade.

"Blood!" Dawson called.

In the space of a heartbeat, Dawson saw Feldin's expression go from surprise to rage, from rage to calculation, and from calculation to a cool, ironic mask. For an instant, he still prepared a counterattack. There would be no parrying it. Young Feldin was tempted, Dawson realized. Honor, witnesses, and rule of law aside, Feldin Maas had been tempted to kill him. It made the victory taste all that much better. Feldin stepped back, put his hand to his ribs, and lifted bloodied fingers. The physicians ran forward to assess the damage. Dawson sheathed his sword.

"Well played, old man," Feldin said as they stripped off his shirt. "Using my honor as your armor? That was almost a compliment. You wagered your life on my gentle instincts."

"More your fear of breaking form."

A dangerous glint came to the younger man's eyes.

"Here, we've just finished one duel," the chief physician said. "Let's not have another."

Dawson drew his dagger in salute. Feldin pushed the servants aside and drew his own. The blood pouring down his side was a good sign. This newest scar would be deep. Dawson sheathed his dagger, turned, and left the dueling ground behind him, his honor intact.

Camnipol. The divided city, and seat of the Severed Throne.

From the time of dragons, it had been the seat of Firstblood power in the world. In the dim, burned ages after the great war had brought the former lords of the world low and freed the slave races, Camnipol had been the beacon of light. Black and gold and proud upon her hill, the city had called home the scattered Firstblood. Fortunes might have waxed and waned through the centuries, but the city stood eternal, split by the Division and held by the might of the Kingspire, now the home of King Simeon and the boy prince Aster.

The Silver Bridge spanned the Division from the Kingspire to the noble quarter that topped the western face. The ancient stone rested on a span of dragon's jade no thicker than a hand's width, and permanent as the sun or the sea. Dawson rode in a small horse-drawn carriage, eschewing the newer tradition of being pulled by slaves. The wheels rattled and flocks of pigeons flogged the air below him. He leaned out his window, looking down through the strata of ruins and stone that made the Division's walls. He'd heard it said that the lowest of the ancient buildings, down in the huge midden at the great canyon's base, were older than the dragons themselves. Camnipol, the eternal city. His city, at the heart of his nation and his race. Apart from his family, Dawson loved nothing better.

And then he had crossed the great span of air, and the driver turned into his narrow private square. His mansion rose up, its clean, sweeping lines elegant free of the gaudy filigree with which upstarts like Feldin Maas, Alan Klin, and Curtin Issandrian tarted up their homes. His home was classic and elegant, and it looked out over the void to the Kingspire and the wide plain beyond it, the noblest house in the city, barring perhaps Lord Bannien of Estinford's estate.

His servants brought out the steps, and Dawson waved away the offered hands as he always did. It was their duty to offer, and his dignity required that he refuse. The ritual was the important thing. The door slave, an old Tralgu with light brown skin and silver hair at the tips of his ears, stood by the entryway. A silver chain bound him to the black marble column.

"Welcome home, my lord," the slave said. "A letter has come from your son."

"Which son?"

"Jorey, my lord."

Dawson felt a twist in his gut. Had it been from one of his other children, he could have read the news with unalloyed pleasure, but a letter from Jorey was a letter from the loathed Vanai campaign. With trepidation, he held out his hand. The door slave turned his head toward the door.

"Your lady wife has it, my lord."

The interior of the mansion was dark tapestry and bright crystal. His dogs bounded down the stairway yipping with excitement; five wolfhounds with shining grey fur and teeth of ivory. Dawson scratched their ears, patted their sides, and walked back to the solarium and his wife.

The glass room was a consolation he gave his Clara. It spoiled the lines of the building on the north side, but she could cultivate the pansies and violets that grew in the hills of Osterling. The reminder of home made her more nearly content during the seasons in Camnipol, and she kept the house smelling of violets all through the winter. She sat now in a deep chair, a small desk at her side, the tables of dark blooms arrayed around her like soldiers on parade. She looked up at the sound of his steps and smiled.

Clara had always been perfect. If the years had taken some of the rose from her cheeks, if her black hair was shot with white, he could still see the girl she had been. There had been rarer beauties and sharper poets when Dawson's father had chosen the womb that would carry his grandchildren. But instead he had picked Clara, and it had taken Dawson no time at all to appreciate the wisdom of that choice. She was good at heart. She might have been a paragon in all other things, but if she had not been good, those other virtues would have turned to ash. Dawson leaned down, kissing her lips as

he always did. It was a ritual like refusing the footman's help and scratching the hounds' ears. It gave life meaning.

"We've heard from Jorey?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "He's fine. He's having a wonderful time in the field. His captain is Adria Klin's boy Alan. He says they're getting along quite nicely."

Dawson leaned against a flower table, arms crossed. The twinge in his belly grew worse. Klin. Another of Feldin Maas's cabal. It had been like a bone in the throat when the king had placed Jorey under the man, and it still brought a little taste of anger thinking of it.

"Oh, and he says he's serving with Geder Palliako, but that can't be right, can it? Isn't that the strange little pudgy man with the enthusiasm for maps and comic rhyme?"

"You're thinking of Lerer Palliako. Geder's his son."

"Oh," Clara said with a wave of her hand. "That makes much more sense, because I couldn't see him going out in the field again at his age. I think we're all well beyond that. And then Jorey also wrote a long passage about horses and plums that's clearly some sort of coded message for you that I couldn't make head or tail of."

After a moment's rooting through the folds of her dress, she held out the folded paper.

"Did you win your little fight?" she asked.

"I did."

"And did that awful man apologize?"

"Better than that, dear. He lost."

Jorey's script dotted the pages like well-regulated bird scratches, neat and sloppy at the same time. Dawson skimmed through the opening paragraphs. A few bluff comments about the rigors of the march, an arch comment about Alan Klin that Clara had either not seen or chosen to misunderstand, a brief passage about the Palliako boy who was apparently something of the company joke. And then the important part. He read it carefully, parsing each phrase, picking out the words he and his son had chosen to represent certain key players and strategems. *There aren't any windfall plums this year.* Meaning Sir Klin was not the client of Lord Ternigan. Klin took his orders because Lord Ternigan was marshal of the army and not through any particular political alliance. That was useful information to know. *My own horse is in real danger of developing a limp on his right side.* Horse, not mount. Limp, not lameness. Right side, not left. So Klin's company was favored to remain in conquered Vanai, and Klin himself the likely temporary governor. Ternigan wasn't planning to take rule of the city on himself. All the more important, then, that the army stall.

Only *stall*, of course. Not *fail*. Never fail. Everything would be in place, if Ternigan's forces could just withhold victory for a season. That difference between postponement and failure kept his private negotiations with Maccia from crossing the line into treason. As long as the conquest of Vanai was delayed until the spring season, there would be time to get Klin recalled to the court and Jorey put in his place. Governing Vanai would be Jorey's first step up within the court, and it would take some prestige away from Maas and Klin and their type.

Dawson had worked through the most obscure channels he could, had sent letters to agents in Stollbourne who sent letters to merchants in Birancour who had business in Maccia. Discretion was critical, but he had managed it. Six hundred soldiers would reinforce the free city of Vanai until such time as it was convenient that they not. In spring, they would retreat, Vanai would fall, and by summer Dawson would be drinking with King Simeon and laughing together at his cleverness.

"My lord?"

The servant stood in the solarium's doorway, bowing his apology. Dawson folded the letter and handed it back to Clara.

"What is it?"

"A visitor, sir. Baron Maas and his wife."

Dawson snorted, but Clara stood and adjusted her sleeves. Her face took on an almost serene calm, and she smiled at him.

"Now love," she said. "You've had your play at war. Don't begrudge us our play at peace."

Objections sprang to mind like dogs after a fox: dueling wasn't a game, it was honor; Maas had earned the scar and the humiliation that went with it; receiving him now was empty etiquette, and on and on. Clara hoisted an eyebrow and canted her head to the side. All his bluster drained away. He laughed.

"My love," he said, "you civilize me."

"Oh not that, surely," she said. "Now come along and say something pleasant."

The receiving room swam in tapestry. Clothwork images of the Last Battle with the dragon's wings worked in silver thread and Drakis Stormcrow in gold. Sunlight spilled through a wide window of colored glass worked in the heraldic gryphon-and-axe of Kalliam. The furnishings were among the most elegant in the house. Feldin Maas stood by the door as if at attention. His dark-haired, sharp-faced wife flowed forward as Dawson and Clara entered the room.

"Cousin!" she said, taking Clara's hands. "I am so happy to see you."

"Yes, Phelia," Clara said. "I'm sorry that we only ever seem to visit one another when our boys have been misbehaving."

"Osterling," Feldin Maas said, using Dawson's more formal title.

"Ebbinbaugh," Dawson replied, bowing. Feldin returned the bow with a stiffness that said the pain of his new cut still bothered him.

"Oh stop it, both of you," Clara said at the same moment Feldin's wife said, "Sit down and have some wine."

The men did as they were told. After a few minutes of chatter, Feldin leaned over, speaking low.

"I hadn't heard whether you were joining the king's tourney."

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I?"

"I thought you might be leaving some glory for your sons, old friend," Feldin said. "That's all. No offense intended. I don't think I can afford much more of your offense. At least not until I've healed."

"Perhaps next time we should duel with words. Insulting couplets at ten paces."

"Oh, blades will be fine. Your couplets do permanent damage. People still call Sir Lauren the Rabbit Knight because of you."

"Me? No. I could never have done it without his teeth and that ridiculous helmet of his. I know they were supposed to be wings, but by God they looked like ears to me," Dawson said and took a drink. "You acquitted yourself well today, my boy. Not as well as I did, but you're a fighter and no doubt."

Clara rewarded him with a smile. She was right; it wasn't so hard being magnanimous. There was even a kind of warmth in it. The wine was rich, and the servants brought in a plate of dry cheese and pickled sausages. Clara and her cousin gossiped and touched each other's arms and hands at every chance, like children flirting. It was much the same thing, he supposed. First insult, then violence, and reassurance afterward. It was women like theirs who kept the kingdom from bursting apart in a war of ego and manliness.

"We are lucky men," Dawson said, "to have wives like these."

Feldin Maas startled, considered the two women deep in conversation about the difficulty of maintaining households in Camnipol and their family holdings both, and gave a rough half-smile.

"I suppose we are," he said. "How long are you staying in Camnipol?"

"Until the tourney, and then another week or two. I want to get home again before the snows."

"Yes. Nothing like the Kingspire in winter for catching every breath of wind off the plain. It's like his majesty had a sailmaker for an architect. I've heard the king's thinking of touring the reaches just so he can spend some time in a warm house."

"It's the hunting," Dawson said. "Ever since we were boys, he's loved the winter hunts in the reaches."

"Still, he's getting old for it, don't you think?"

“No. I don’t.”

“I bow to your opinion,” Feldin said, but his smile was thin and smug. Dawson felt a tug of anger, and Clara must have seen it. Part of peacekeeping, it appeared, was to know how to stop playing at friends before the illusion faded. She called for the servants, gathered a gift of violets for her cousin, and they walked together to the entry hall to say their farewells. Just before he turned away, Feldin Maas frowned and raised a finger.

“I forget, my lord. Do you have family in the Free Cities?”

“No,” Dawson said. “Well, I think Clara has some obscure relations in Gilea.”

“Through marriage,” Clara said. “Not blood.”

“Nothing in Maccia, then. That’s good,” Feldin Maas said.

Dawson’s spine stiffened.

“Maccia? No,” he said. “Why? What’s in Maccia.”

“Apparently the Grand Doge there has decided to throw in with Vanai against his majesty. ‘Unity in the face of aggression’ or some such.”

Feldin knew about Vanai’s reinforcements. And if he knew, so did Sir Alan Klin. Did they know whose influence had brought Vanai its new allies, or did they only suspect? They must at least suspect, or Feldin wouldn’t have brought it up. Dawson smiled the way he hoped he would have if he’d had no stake in the matter.

“Unity among the Free Cities? That seems unlikely,” he said. “Probably just rumor.”

“Yes,” Feldin Maas said. “Yes, I’m sure you’re right.”

The dog-faced, small-cocked, hypocrite bastard son of a weasel and a whore bowed and escorted his wife from the house. When Dawson didn’t move, Clara took his hand.

“Are you well, dear? You look pained.”

“Excuse me,” he said.

Once in his library, he locked the doors, lit the candles, and pulled his maps from their shelves. He’d marked the paths from Maccia to Vanai and the roads the army was sure to take. He measured and made his calculations, fury rising like waves whipped by a storm. He’d been betrayed. Somewhere along the chain of communications, somebody had said something, and his plans had been tipped to the ground. He had overreached, and it left him exposed. He’d been outplayed. By Feldin Maas. One of the dogs whined and scratched at the door until Dawson unlocked it and let it in.

The dog climbed onto the couch, wrapping its haunches in close and looking up at Dawson with anxious eyes. The Baron of Osterling Fells sank down beside the beast and scratched its ears. The dog whined again, pressing its head up into Dawson’s palm. A moment later, Clara appeared in the doorway, her arms folded, her eyes as anxious as the hound’s.

“Something’s gone wrong?”

“A bit, yes.”

“Does it put Jorey in danger?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Does it put us in danger?”

Dawson didn’t reply because the answer was yes, and he couldn’t bring himself to lie.

Geder

Amist lay on the valley, white in the morning sun. The banners of the houses of Antea hung limp and damp, their colors darkened and greyed by the thick air. The world smelled of trampled mud and the cold. Geder's horse shook its head and grunted. He reached forward a gauntleted hand and patted the beast's shoulder.

His armor had been his father's once, the bright steel of the plate dimmed a little now where the smith had bent it to more nearly fit Geder's back. The straps pinched even through the brigandine. The march had been a long, weary foretaste of hell. The pace had never been fast, but it was relentless. From that first hungover morning, he had ridden and walked for four days without more than two short hours' rest at a time. In the night, he draped a blanket across his shoulders and shivered against the cold. During the day, he sweated. The army passed down the wide green dragon's road, the tramp of feet against the jade becoming first an annoyance, then a music, then an odd species of silence, before cycling around to annoyance again. With only one horse, he had to spend a fair part of each day walking. A richer man would have brought two or three, even four mounts on the campaign. And plate that hadn't seen decades of use before he was born. And a tent that kept out the cold. And, just perhaps, a little respect and dignity.

The other titled nobles rode in groups or with their personal retinue. Geder shared their place at the head of the column, but significantly at the rear of the grouping. The supply carts came just behind him, and the infantry and camp followers behind them, though there weren't many camp followers these days. It said something when a march was too much trouble to be worth a whore's time.

The order to stop had come last evening an hour before sunset. Geder's squire had erected his little tent, brought a tin plate of lentils and cheese, and curled up into a small Dartinae ball just outside Geder's tent flap. Geder had crawled onto his cot, pressed his eyes shut, and prayed for sleep. His dreams had all been about marching. With the first light of dawn, the new order had come: prepare.

All through his boyhood, he had imagined this day. His first real battle. He'd imagined the wind of the charge, the heat and speed of the horse beneath him, the fierce cries of battle in his throat. He hadn't thought about the numbing hours sitting in the saddle, his armor cooling against him, while the infantry formed, shifted, and re-formed. The noble line of knights, sword and lance at the ready, was a clump of men laughing, trading dirty jokes, and complaining that the food was either sparse or spoiled. It felt less like the noble proving ground of war than the ninth day of an eight-day hunt. Geder's spine was a single burning ache from his ass to the base of his skull. His thighs were chapped raw, his jaw popped every time he yawned, and his mouth tasted like sour cheese. His squire stood by his side, Geder's battle lance in his hands, shield slung across his back, and a wary expression on his hairless face.

"Palliako!"

Geder shifted. Sir Alan Klin rode a huge black charger, the steel of its barding all enameled red. The man's armor glittered with dew and the silver worked into a dragon's wing design. He could have stepped out of an ancient war rhyme.

"My lord?" Geder said.

"You're with the charge on the west. The scouts report it as the mercenary forces Vanai's bought, so it should be the easiest fighting."

Geder frowned. That seemed wrong, but fatigue made it hard to think through. Mercenaries were professional fighters and veterans to a man. And that was where the fighting would be *easy*? Klin read his expression, leaned to the side, and spat.

"They aren't protecting their homes and wives," Klin said. "Just follow where Kalliam goes and try not to knock your horse into anyone. Knees get broken that way."

"I know that."

Klin's pale eyebrows rose.

"I mean... I mean I'll be careful, my lord."

Klin made a clicking sound, and his beautiful charger shook its head and turned. Geder's squire looked up at him. If there was any amusement in the Dartinae's glowing eyes, it was well hidden.

"Come on," Geder said. "Let's get in place."

The hell of it was, what Klin said might be true. Perhaps he was sending Geder and the youngest Sir Kalliam into the easiest part of the coming battle. A charge, a few sword strokes to one side and another, and the paid forces call surrender before anyone got too badly hurt. It would be a mark of Klin's ability if he could have all his knights alive, and increase his own glory by keeping the fiercest fights for himself. Anything to impress Lord Ternigan and stand out from the marshal's other captains. Or perhaps Klin wanted Geder to die in the battle. Geder thought he might be ready to die if it meant not riding anymore.

Jorey Kalliam sat high on his saddle, speaking to his bannerman. His plate was simple steel, unadorned and elegant. Six other knights were with him, their squires all close and ready. Kalliam nodded solemnly to Geder and he returned the salute.

"Come close," he called. "All of you. To me."

The knights shifted their mounts in. Sir Makiyos of Ainsbaugh. Sozlu Veren and his twin brother Sesil. Darius Sokak, the Count of Hiren. Fallon Broot, Baron of Suderling Heights, and his son Daved. All in all, a pretty sad bunch. He could see from their own expressions that they'd drawn similar conclusions from his arrival.

"The valley narrows about half a league from here," Kalliam said. "The Vanai are there, and they're entrenched. The scouts are saying the banners here on the western edge belong to a mercenary company under a Captain Karol Dannian."

"How many men's he got?"

"Two hundred, but mostly sword-and-bows," Kalliam said.

"Brilliant," Fallon Broot said, stroking the mustache that drooped down past his weak chin.

"That should leave enough for all of us to have our turn."

Geder couldn't tell if it was meant as a joke.

"Our work," Kalliam said, "is to hold tight to the edge of the valley. The main thrust will be on the eastern end where Vanai's forces are thickest. Lord Ternigan has all his own knights and half of ours. All we need is to be sure no one flanks them. Sir Klin is giving us three dozen bows and twice as many swords. I've sent the bows ahead. At the signal, they'll start the attack and try to draw out their cavalry. When we hear the charge, we'll go in with the swords following."

"Why are they here?" Geder asked. "I mean, if I were them, I'd try to be behind a wall someplace. Make it a siege."

"Can't hire mercenaries for a siege," one of the Sir Verens said, contempt for the question dripping from his words. "They take contract for a season, and Vanai can't raise money to renew."

"The city's less than an hour's ride from here," Kalliam said, "and there's no place more defensible until you reach it. If they hope to keep us from reaching Vanai, this is the first defense and the last."

A distant horn sang. Two rising notes and one falling. Geder's heart started beating a little faster. Kalliam smiled, but his eyes were cold.

"My lords," Kalliam said. "I believe that's the first call. If you have any last business, it's too late for it now."

The mist hadn't vanished, but enough had burned off that the landscape was clear before them. To Geder's unpracticed eye, it looked like any of the other small valleys they'd passed on their way through the low, rolling hills north of the Free Cities. The enemy was a dark, crawling line like ants from a hill. The other knights' squires began the final preparation, strapping shield to arms, handing up the steel-tipped lances. Geder suffered the same. The Dartinae finished with him, then nodded and prepared his own arms for the battle; light leather and a long, wicked knife. And not half a league away, some other squire or low soldier was cleaning another knife just as wicked to push through Geder's throat if the chance came. The horn sang again. Not the charge, but the warning of it.

"Good luck, my lord," his squire said. Geder nodded awkwardly in his helm, turned his mount to follow the others, and started down toward the battle. His little gelding whickered nervously. The ants grew larger, and the enemy banners grew clear. He saw where Kalliam's archers were set, hiding behind blinds of wood and leather. Kalliam raised his shield, and the knights stopped. Geder tried to twist back, to see the swordsmen behind them, but his armor forbade it. He squeezed his eyes closed. It was just like a tourney. Joust first, then a little melee. Even a rich mercenary company wasn't likely to have many heavy cavalry. He'd be fine. He needed to piss.

The horns blew the martial doubled note of the charge. Kalliam and the other men shouted and spurred their mounts. Geder did the same, and the tired old gelding that had carried him for days and weeks became a beast made of wind. He felt himself shouting, but the world was a single roar. The archers' blinds flickered by him and were gone, and then the enemy was there; not knights or heavy cavalry, but pikemen bringing their great spears to bear. Sir Makiyos barreled into the line, smashing it, and Geder angled his own attack to take advantage of the chaos.

A horse was screaming. Geder's lance struck a pikeman, the blow wrenching his shoulder, and then he was past the line and into the melee. He dropped his lance, drew his sword, and started hewing away at whatever came close. To his right, one of the Veren twins was being pulled from his horse by half a dozen mercenary swordsmen. Geder yanked his mount toward the falling knight, but then his own swordsmen appeared, pouring through the broken line. He saw his squire loping along, head low and knife at the ready, but there were no men in plate to knock over and let his Dartinae finish. The mass of fighting men pushed to the south. Geder turned again, ready to find someone, but the mercenaries seemed reluctant to press the attack.

He didn't see where the bolt came from. One moment, he was scanning the battle for a likely target, the next a small tree had taken root in his leg, the thick black wood punching through the plate and into the meat of his thigh. Geder dropped his sword and screamed, scrabbling at the bolt in agony. Something hit his shield hard enough to push him back. A drumbeat rolled from the south, low and deep as thunder. The gelding shifted unexpectedly, and Geder felt himself starting to slide out of his saddle. The hand that steadied him was Jorey Kalliam's.

"Where did you come from?" Geder asked.

Kalliam didn't answer. There was blood on the man's face and spattered across his shield, but he didn't seem injured. His eyes were fixed on the battle, or something beyond it, and his expression was carved from ice. Trying to put aside his pain, Geder followed the boy's gaze. There, dancing above the fray, new banners were flying. The five blue circles of Maccia.

"Never mind you," Geder squeaked. "Where did *they* come from?"

"Can you ride?"

Geder looked down. His gelding's pale side was red with blood, and the flow coming from the bolt in his leg looked wide as a river. A wave of dizziness made him clutch at his saddle. Men could die of leg wounds like that. He was sure he'd heard of men dying from leg wounds. Was he about to die, then?

"Palliako!"

He looked up. The world seemed to swim a little. Jorey Kalliam glanced from the line of battle now surging back toward them to Geder's face.

"I'm hurt," Geder said.

"You are a knight of the empire," Kalliam said, and the power in his voice wasn't anger. "Can you ride, sir?"

Geder felt some part of the other man's strength come into him. The world steadied and Geder steadied with it.

"I can... I can ride."

"Then go. Find Lord Ternigan. Tell him the Maccian banners are flying on the west end of the line. Tell him we need help."

"I will," he said and picked up his reins. Kalliam's mount shifted toward the fight, snorting, but the young knight paused.

"Palliakio! Go directly to Lord Ternigan. *Directly.*"

"Sir?"

"Not to Klin."

Their eyes met for a moment, and an understanding passed between them. Kalliam didn't trust their captain any more than he did. Relief and gratitude surged in Geder's heart, and then surprise at the feelings.

"I understand," he said. "I'll bring help."

Kalliam nodded, turned, and charged for the melee. Geder spurred his horse, riding east across the field. He struggled to unstrap his shield, gauntleted fingers and jouncing horse making the leather and buckles unwieldy. He managed to free his arm at last, and leaned forward, urging the beast faster. An hour ago, the valley had been grass and autumn wildflowers. Now it was churned mud and the roar of brawling men.

Geder squinted. The mist was gone now, but the wet banners were still darkened and clinging to their poles. He had to find the gold and crimson of House Ternigan. He had to do it now. All around him, men lay in the muck, dead or wounded. The screams of soldiers and horses cut through the air. But the banner of the king's marshal was nowhere.

Geder shouted curses, shifting his gaze one way then the other. He felt cold. His bleeding leg was heavy, blood soaking his brigandine as quickly as the strength left his flesh. Every minute that passed made it less likely Kalliam and the others would survive, and his vision was starting to dance gold and darkness around the edges. He tried to stand higher in his stirrups, but his injured leg couldn't support him. He drove his horse forward. There were the banners of Flor and Rivercourt, Masonhalm and Klin...

Klin. There, not fifty yards from where he sat, the banner of Sir Alan Klin flew wet and limp over a knot of fighting men. And there among them, the huge black warhorse with its red barding. Geder felt a tug. If it was a mistake, if Klin hadn't *meant* to send them to the slaughter, then help was there. Right there. But if it had been his intention, and Geder went to him now, Kalliam and the others were dead. He rode on. His leg was numb. His mouth was dry. There, the banners of Estinford, Corenhall, Dannick.

Ternigan.

He spurred his horse and the gelding leapt forward, running toward the knot of battle that swirled around the banner. He cursed Ternigan for leading the charge instead of hanging back to direct the battle from the rear. He cursed Sir Alan Klin for sending him and Kalliam into the enemy's trap. He cursed himself for having taken off his shield, and for having been wounded, and for not moving fast. An enemy swordsman lurched up out of the muck, and Geder rode him down. He smelled pine smoke. Something, somewhere was burning. The gelding was shaking under him, exhausted, trembling. He apologized silently to the beast and put spurs to it again.

He barreled into the fighting men like a stone thrown through a window. Swordsmen scattered around him, as many of them Antean as Vanai. Ten feet from the bannerman, Lord Ternigan stood high in his saddle, his sword shining in his hand, and soldiers five men deep keeping the enemy from reaching him.

"Lord Ternigan!" Geder shouted. "Ternigan!"

The roar of battle drowned him out. The marshal moved forward, in toward the line where the battle was thickest. A deep crimson rage rolled over Geder's vision. Kalliam and the others were fighting, dying, for this man. The least the bastard could do was pay some attention. He pushed his shuddering mount forward, pressing through the marshal's guard by raw determination. The battlefield narrowed to the one lord on his mount. The edges of Geder's vision contracted, like he was riding through a tunnel that led to the world. When he came within three yards, he shouted again.

"Maccia, my Lord Ternigan. Maccia's come on the west end, and they're killing us!"

This time, the marshal heard. His head snapped toward Geder, the high, noble forehead furrowed. Geder waved his arms and pointed to the west. *Don't look at me. Look at Maccia.*

"Who are you, sir?" Lord Ternigan said. His voice was as deep as a drum and echoed a bit. The world around it seemed quieter than it should have.

"Sir Geder Palliako. Jorey Kalliam's sent me. West end's not just mercenaries, my lord. Maccia's there. Can't hold them back. Kalliam... Kalliam sent me. You have to help him."

Ternigan shouted something over his shoulder, and the horns blared again, close by and powerful as being slapped in the jaw. Geder opened his eyes again, surprised to find that he'd closed them. People were moving around him. Knights rode past him, streaming toward the west. At least he thought that was west. Lord Ternigan was beside him, holding him hard by one elbow.

"Can you fight, sir?" the Marshal of the Kingdom of Antea asked him from a long way away.

"I can," Geder said, turning in his saddle. Slick with blood, his foot slipped free of the stirrup. Churned mud rose up, but the world went black before it reached him.

Marcus

For the midday meal, the caravan stopped at a clearing with a wide, slow brook. The thin boy, Mikel his name was, sat on the fallen log at Yadem's side. Like the Tralgu, he wore his leathers open at the throat. They both leaned forward over their plates of beans and sausage. The boy's shoulders were set as if bound by muscle they didn't possess and his movements had a slow, deliberate power that his frame didn't justify. Yadem tilted his head down a degree to look at Mikel. With the same gravity, the boy tilted his head up.

"Captain," Yadem said, his ears pressed back. "Make him stop."

Marcus, cross-legged on the ground, fought back a smile. "Stop what?"

"He's been doing this for days, sir."

"Acting like a soldier, you mean?"

"Acting like *me*," Yadem said.

Mikel made a low noise in his throat. Marcus had to cough to cover his laugh.

"We hired these people to act as guards," Marcus said. "They're acting as guards. Only natural they'd look to us for the details."

Yadem grunted and turned to face the boy. When the boy met his gaze, the Tralgu deliberately flicked an ear.

The forest around them now was oak and ash, the trees taller than ten men. A scrub fire had come through within the last few years, scorching the bark and burning down the underbrush without ever reaching the wide canopy above. Marcus could imagine smoke rising up through green summer leaves. Now the roadside litter was damp, the fallen leaves black with mold and on their way to becoming soil for the next year's weeds. Only the leaves on the road itself were dry. At the eastern end of the clearing, a wide-eyed stone Southling king in battle array and a six-pointed crown was half entombed in an oak. The old bark had swallowed half of the solemn face, roots tilted the wide stone pediment a degree. Vines draped the stone shoulders. Marcus didn't know what the marker had been meant to commemorate.

For almost a week, the caravan had been making good progress. The road was well traveled, local farmers keeping it for the most part clean, but there had still been whole leagues where their way was covered in newly fallen leaves. The rustling of horses' hooves and the crackle of the cart wheels had been loud enough to drown out conversation. The 'van master wasn't bad for a religious. For the most part, Marcus could ignore the scriptures read over the evening meals. If the Timzinae happened to pick something particularly hard to listen to—sermons on family or children or the assurances that God was just or anything that touched too closely on what had happened to his wife and daughter—Marcus ate quickly and took a long private walk out ahead on the road. He called it scouting, and the 'van master didn't take offense. Other travelers had joined with the 'van and parted company again without more than a look from Yadem or himself to keep the peace. Except that they weren't yet a quarter of the way to the pass that marked the edge of Birancour, the job was going better than expected.

Marcus chewed his last bite of sausage slowly. The dozen carts filled half the clearing, horses and mules with feedbags over their heads or else being led to and from the brook to drink. The carters knew their business for the most part. The old man driving the tin ore was a little deaf and the boy with the high cart of wool cloth was either new to the trade or an idiot or both, but they were the

worst. And his acting troupe had worked out magnificently. If he looked at the trees, not considering the people at all, he could still pick out the guards in the sides of his vision, just by their swagger.

By the side of the road, the long-haired woman, Cary, stood with her arms crossed and a huge horn-and-sinew bow slung across her back. Likely she couldn't have drawn the damn thing, but she wore it like the companion of years. Sandr, the young lead, walked among the carts, head high and brow furrowed. He'd been telling stories to the carters about how he'd broken a foot jousting in an Antean tourney, and had become so familiar with the tale he'd adopted a barely noticable limp to go with it. And then there, sitting with the 'van master's fat wife, was his cunning man, Master Kit, without whom Yardem would even now be failing to keep Vanai from falling. Without whom Marcus would have been jailed or killed.

The 'van master's whistle brought Marcus back to himself, and he squinted up into the thin patch of high, white cloud that showed through the canopy above them. Time was harder to judge in the shadows of a forest, but he guessed the meal had run long. Well, his contract was to get them all into Carse safely. On schedule wasn't his problem. Marcus cleaned his plate with a crust of bread and pulled himself up to standing.

"Rear or fore?" Yardem asked.

"I'll take fore," Marcus said.

The Tralgu nodded and lumbered toward the iron merchant's wagon that brought up the rear of the 'van. It would be the last to leave. Marcus checked his blade and his armor with the same care he did before going into battle—an old habit—and went to the 'van master's tall, broad feed wagon. He climbed up beside the master's wife and settled in for the afternoon's trek. The Timzinae woman nodded to him and blinked her clear inner eyelids.

"That was a fine meal, ma'am," Marcus said.

"You're kind to say so, Captain."

Their conversation complete, she shouted at her horses, flicking her whip lightly at shoulder and haunch to direct them. The wagon lurched forward up onto the road, and then to the west. As they passed into the deep shadows again, Marcus wondered whether Vanai had fallen yet, and if not, how many more days the free city had left. Not many. Another problem not his own.

The rotation was a simple one. Rear and fore were Yardem or Marcus. Master Kit drove his own cart in the center of the 'van with the gaudy colors of the theater draped in cloth. The others rode three on either side of the carts, keeping their eyes on the trees. If anyone saw something suspicious, they'd call out, and Yardem or Marcus would go and look. In a week, the only call they'd had was when Smit, the jack-of-all-roles, had spooked himself with stories about bands of feral Dartinae assassins. Marcus let his eyes narrow, his back rest against the hard wood of the driver's rig. The world smelled of rotting leaves and coming weather, but he couldn't decide yet if it would be rain or snow.

The road made a tight turn at the base of a densely wooded hill. A tree had fallen across the road, its base still white where the axe had cut it. Marcus felt his body tense almost before he knew why.

"Call the stop," he said.

Even before the Timzinae woman could ask why, Smit, Sandr, and Opal all shouted. Marcus turned, scrambling to the top of the wagon. There shouldn't have been bandits. They didn't have anything worth taking. The 'van master's white mare was racing up the side of the carts toward the front. He saw four figures in leather and light chain step out from the trees, bows at the ready. They had hoods covering them, but from the width of their build, Marcus guessed Jasuru or Kurtadam. Four in plain sight could mean the bandits were bluffing. Or that there were a dozen more still in the trees.

At least they hadn't announced themselves with an arrow.

"Hail!" a raspy voice called from the road ahead. "Who speaks for you?"

Four men on horses had appeared in front of the fallen oak. Three were either poorly groomed Cinnae or badly underfed Firstbloods riding nags, but the one in front rode a grey stallion with good

lines and real strength in his legs. He also had a steel breastplate and chainmail. His bow was horn, his sword was curved in the southern style, and his face had the broad, thick-boned jaw and bronze scales of a Jasuru.

The Timzinae caravan master pulled his mare up in front of the supply wagon's team.

"I speak for this 'van," he shouted. "What is the meaning of this?"

Marcus shrugged his shoulders to loosen them. Eight men they could see. Half of those mounted. He had eight men, and six of them on horse. It was a damn small advantage, and if it came to blows, they wouldn't last five long breaths together. He hoped the Timzinae wasn't going to press the bandits too hard.

"I am Lord Knightly Tierentois," the bandit captain said loud enough to carry. "You are traveling in my road, and I have come to collect my due tribute."

Marcus slipped back down to the driver's rig, the impulse to roll his eyes warring with the tightness in his belly. The horseman might be a fake and a blowhard, but he had blades and bows.

"These are dragon's roads," the 'van master shouted. "And you're a half-wit, jumped-up thief in stolen armor. Birancour doesn't have any Jasuru knights."

Well, that wasn't as politic as Marcus had hoped. The bandit captain's laughter was hearty and false. Marcus put his hand on the pommel of his sword and tried to think of a way out of this that left the fewest people dead. If the actors charged the bowmen at the sides of the 'van, they might spook them into running. Leaving only four men on horse for him. Yadem appeared at his side, silent as a shadow. The Tralgu's bow was in his hand. So two horesmen each. Unless there were more in the trees.

"The day you mutiny and take the company?" Marcus murmured.

"Not today, sir."

The caravan master was shouting now, and the false knight's face was taking the green-bronze cast that spoke of rage among the Jasuru. Marcus slipped off the wagon and walked forward. The men on horse didn't seem to notice him until he was almost even with the 'van master's mare.

"How much do you want?" Marcus said.

Timzinae and Jasuru both shifted to stare down at him with equal anger.

"Pardon my interrupting your fine and spirited debate, but how much do you want?"

"You should show me some respect, boy," the Jasuru said.

"How much do you want, *my lord*," Marcus said. "Because if you'll look at the 'van here, we don't have much. Unless his lordship and his lordship's noble compatriots are willing to accept tribute in tin ore and iron, there may not be a great deal we can offer."

"Don't speak for me," the Timzinae hissed.

"Don't get us killed," Marcus said, equally softly.

"And who are you, Firstblood?" the Jasuru said.

"Marcus Wester. I'm guard captain of this 'van."

The laughter this time was less forced, and the men on the other horses joined in. The Jasuru shook his broad head and grinned. His tongue was black, and his teeth needle sharp.

"You're Marcus Wester?"

"I am."

"Ah. And I suppose that one back there is Lord Harton returned from the dead. Tell you what, I'll be Drakis Stormcrow."

"No less likely than Lord Knightly Whatever-it-was," the 'van master said.

Marcus ignored him. "You've heard of me, then."

"I was at Wodford, and I am about done being insulted," the Jasuru said. "All your coin. All your food. Half your women. The rest of you can crawl back to Vanai."

"Eat shit," the 'van master said.

The Jasuru reached for his sword, and a new voice boomed out behind them.

"We. Shall. Pass."

Master Kit stood on the top of the feed wagon. The black and purple robes of Orcus the Demon King draped from him like shadows made solid, and he held a staff with a skull on its end. When the actor spoke again, his voice carried to them all as if it came from the dim air.

"My protection is on these men. You cannot harm them."

"What the sweet hell is this?" the Jasuru said, but his voice had taken a worried tone.

"You cannot harm us," Master Kit said. "Your arrows will stray from us. Your swords will not break our skins. You have no power here."

Marcus turned back to the Jasuru. Confusion and anxiety twisted the bandit's face.

"This is shit," one of the three behind him said, but his voice lacked conviction.

"Who is that?" the Jasuru said.

"My cunning man," Marcus said.

"*Hear me*," Master Kit shouted, and the forest itself seemed to go quiet. "The trees are our allies and the shadow of oak protects us. You cannot harm us, boy. And we *shall* pass."

A chill ran up Marcus's spine. He could see that Orcus the Demon King was having much the same effect on the bandits. He felt a small, tentative hope. The Jasuru pulled his bow from its sling and nocked a vicious-looking arrow.

"Say that again, you bastard!" the bandit captain shouted.

Even in the dimness, Marcus saw Master Kit smile. The actor raised his arms, the dark folds of the costume seeming to twist on their own accord, just as they'd done during the play in Vanai. It was something to do with uneven stitching, but with Master Kit's sepulchral voice and defiant posture, the effect was unsettling. Master Kit spoke again, slow and clear and utterly confident.

"You cannot harm me. Your arrow will miss its mark."

The Jasuru scowled and drew back the string. The horn bow creaked.

Well, Marcus thought, *it was worth the try*. And then, a second later: *God damn. He is going to miss*.

The arrow sped through the gloom. Master Kit didn't flinch as the shaft flew past his ear. The Jasuru licked his lips with a wide, black tongue. His gaze shifted from Marcus to Master Kit and back. There was real fear in his eyes now.

"And for what it carries, I really *am* Marcus Wester."

The silence lasted four long breaths together, before the Jasuru turned his horse to the side and raised his arm. "There's nothing here, boys," the bandit shouted. "These little turds aren't worth the effort."

The horsemen sprang away into the forest. Marcus stood in the road, listening to their hoofbeats fade and realizing that he wasn't going to die today after all. He clasped his hands behind him to keep them from trembling and looked up at the 'van master. The Timzinae was shaking too. At least Marcus wasn't the only one. He stepped to the side of the road, leaning to see that the bowmen at the treeline had also vanished.

Yardem walked to him. "That was odd," the Tralgu said.

"Was," Marcus said. "Don't suppose we have a winch? We're going to have to move that tree."

That night, the 'van master's wife cooked meat. Not sausage, not salt pork, but a fresh-killed lamb the 'van master bought from a farm at the forest's edge. The meat was dark and rich, seasoned with raisins and a sharp-tasting yellow sauce. The carters and drivers and most of Marcus's guard sat around a roaring bonfire at the side of the road. All except the wool-hauler, Tag, who never seemed to eat with anybody. And sitting at a separate fire away from all the others, Marcus ate with Master Kit.

"It's how I've made my living since... well, not since before *you* were born, I suppose," the actor said. "I stand before people, usually on a wagon, and I convince them of things. I tell them that I am a fallen king or a shipwrecked sailor on an unknown shore. I presume they know it isn't truth, but I see my work as making them believe even when they know better."

“What you did back there, then?” Marcus said. “Talking the bastard with the bow out of his confidence? It wasn’t magic?”

“I think talking a man into believing in his own failure is close enough to magic. Don’t you?”

“I don’t really, no.”

“Well, then perhaps we disagree on the point. More wine?”

Marcus took the proffered skin and squirted the bright-tasting wine into his mouth. In the light of the two fires—the small one at their knees, the large one fifteen yards away—shadows clung to the old actor’s cheeks and in the hollows of his eyes.

“Captain. If it’s any comfort to you, I’ll swear this. I can be very convincing, and I can tell when someone is trying to convince me. That is all the magic I possess.”

“Cut thumbs on it?” Marcus said, and Master Kit laughed.

“I’d rather not. If I get blood on the costumes, it’s hard to get out. But what about you? What exactly did *you* intend, facing the man down like that?”

Marcus shrugged.

“I didn’t intend anything. Not in particular,” he said. “Only I thought the ’van master was going about it badly.”

“Would you have fought?” Master Kit asked. “If it had come to swords and arrows?”

“Of course,” Marcus said. “Probably not for very long, given the odds, but I’d have fought. Yardem too, and I hope your people along with us. It’s what they pay us for.”

“Even though you knew we couldn’t win?”

“Yes.”

Master Kit nodded. Marcus thought a smile was lurking at the corners of the actor’s lips, but in the flickering light he couldn’t be sure. It might have been something else.

“I want to start drilling your people,” Marcus said. “An hour before we ride in the morning, and an hour after we stop. We can’t do much, but they ought to know more about a sword than which end to hold it by.”

“I think that’s wise,” Master Kit said.

Marcus looked up at the sky. The stars glowed like snowfall, and the moon, newly risen, sent long, pale shadows across black ground. The forest was behind them, but the air still smelled like weather. Rain, Marcus decided. Most likely it would be rain. Master Kit was chewing his lamb, his eyes on the little fire and his expression distant.

“Don’t worry. Today was the worst of it,” Marcus said. “We’ve got our excitement behind us.”

Master Kit didn’t look at him, making his polite smile to the flames instead. For a moment, Marcus thought the old man wasn’t going to speak. When he did, his voice was low and abstracted.

“Probably,” Master Kit said.

Geder

Geder had imagined Vanai would be more like Camnipol or Estinport: a great city of stone and jade. The close-built wooden structures and wide canals felt both smaller than he'd expected and larger. Even the Grand Square of the conquered city was small compared to the wide commons of Camnipol, and the richest sections of Vanai were as thick with humanity as the better slums at home. Camnipol was a city. Vanai was a child's scrapwood playhouse that had spread. It was beautiful in its way, strange and foreign and improbable. He wasn't sure yet whether he liked it.

He limped down the rain-darkened streets of occupied Vanai, leaning on the blackwood-and-silver walking stick with every step. Lord Ternigan's address was to begin soon, and while his wound would forgive his absence, Geder had missed too much already. The prospect of going home to regale his father with stories of how he'd collapsed in the battle and spent the two-day sack with a cunning man tending his leg was bad enough.

The canal on the eastern edge of the modest Grand Square was choked with fallen leaves, gold and red and yellow remaking the surface of the dark water. As Geder watched, a turtle rose from below, its black head sticking out of the water. A single bright red leaf adhered to its shell. The turtle made its stately way past what looked at first like a log, but was in fact a corpse wearing the drenched colors of the former prince: a soldier of Vanai hauled in a cart from the battlefield and dropped in the canal as a message to the locals. Other bodies hung from the trees in the parks and along the colonnades. They lay on the stairs of the palaces and the markets and the square of the public gaol where the former prince now ate and shat and shivered before his subjects. The smell of rotting flesh was only kept in check by the cool weather.

Once the prince entered exile, the dead would be gathered up and burned. They had been men once. Now they were political sculpture.

"Palliako!"

Geder looked up. From halfway across the Grand Square, Jorey Kalliam scowled and waved him on. Geder turned away from turtle and corpse, limping manfully across the pavement. The nobles of Antea stood in martial array, waiting only for the few stragglers like himself. Before them, on the bare ground, sat what high officials of the city had been spared. Timzinae merchants and guildsmen, Firstblood artisans and pragmatic noblemen. They wore their own clothing—much of it with a notably imperial cut—and held themselves more like the polite attendees of a religious function than the debased and the conquered. Sodai Carvenallin, the secretary to Lord Ternigan, stood alone on the stone platform they all faced and looked forward with folded arms. Geder hadn't seen the man to speak to since the night they'd gotten drunk together. The night Klin had burned his book. Geder shook the memory away and took his place.

He tried not to notice the new finery around him, but it was impossible. Sir Gospey Allintot's cloak was closed with a brooch of worked silver and brilliant ruby. Sozlu Veren had his sword sheathed in a scabbard of dragon's jade and yellowed ivory that could have been made a thousand years before. A chain of gold looped around Jorey Kalliam's neck that looked to be more than a month's rent from all the holdings of Rivenhalm. Their clothes were freshly laundered, their boots shone even in the grey overcast light. The warrior aristocrats of Antea wore their conquest proudly. Geder looked down at his little walking stick. It was the nearest thing he had to spoils of war, and he tried to be proud of it.

“Quite a day,” Geder said, nodding toward the low grey clouds. “It was snowing for a bit this morning. Glad we aren’t marching in this. Though I suppose we will be soon, eh? Taking tribute to the king.”

Jorey Kalliam made a low, affirming sound in his throat but didn’t meet Geder’s eyes.

“My leg’s doing well. All laudable pus,” Geder said. “But you heard about Count Hiren? Cut to the arm went septic. He died last night when they tried to amputate. Damn shame. He was a good man.”

“He was,” Jorey agreed.

Geder tried to follow the man’s gaze, but Jorey seemed focused on nothing. Or, no. His eyes moved restlessly, searching for something. Geder searched too, uncertain what he was looking for.

“Something wrong?” Geder asked, his voice low.

“Klin’s not here.”

Geder looked through the crowd, his attention more focused now. There were gaps in the form, men killed or injured or called away on the Lord Marshal’s business. Kalliam was correct. Sir Alan Klin should have stood at the head of the group, the men under his command arrayed behind him. Instead, Sir Gospey Allintot had the place, his chin held high.

“Ill, maybe?” Geder said. Jorey chuckled as if it had been a joke.

The drums announced the Lord Marshal. The collected nobility of Antea lifted their hands in salute, and Lord Ternigan let them remain there for a moment before he returned the gesture. Between them, the powerful men of Vanai accepted their ritual humiliation with polite silence. Jorey grunted, his expression sour. He wasn’t searching any longer. Geder followed his gaze, and found Klin standing at the rear of the platform beside the Lord Marshal’s secretary. Klin wore a silk tunic and hose of somber red and a black-dyed woolen cloak. The cut spoke less of blades and battle than governance.

Geder felt his belly drop. “Are we staying here?” he asked quietly. Jorey Kalliam didn’t answer.

“Lords of Antea,” Ternigan said, his voice echoing through the square not quite so loudly as it might have. The Lord Marshal appeared to be coming down with a cold. “I thank you all in the name of King Simeon. Through your valor, the empire has been made again secure. It is my decision that we return now to Camnipol with the tribute which Vanai owes the throne. It’s late in the season, and the march is a long one, I’d rather we didn’t spend all week getting our boots on. I have asked Sir Alan Klin to remain as Protector of Vanai until such time as King Simeon names a permanent governor. All of you who followed him in battle will follow him in this as well.”

His orders given, Ternigan nodded to himself and turned his attention to the men seated on the pavement. As he retold the history of Antean claims upon Vanai, justified the occupation in terms of wars and agreements made six hundred years before between dynastic lines and independent parliaments long since dissolved, Geder’s mind stumbled through what had just happened to him.

There would be no return to Camnipol for him, not this season. Possibly not for years. He looked around at the close-built wooden buildings with their steep-pitched roofs crowding the narrow streets, the grand canal where barges and boats made their way through the city and back out to the river, the low grey sky. This wasn’t an exotic adventure any longer. This was where he would live. A thousand half-formed plans for his return to Camnipol, to Rivenhalm, to his father’s hearth fell apart before him.

Ternigan stepped back from the platform’s edge, took a sealed letter from his secretary, and presented it to Alan Klin, Protector of Vanai. Klin stepped forward, opened the letter, and read his charge from the Lord Marshal aloud. Geder shook his head. The despair that grew with every phrase showed him how deeply he’d been anticipating the campaign’s end and his freedom from Alan Klin.

The ache in Geder’s leg throbbed as Klin assured the men of Vanai that he would treat all races with equanimity, that loyalty to Antea would be rewarded and treachery punished swiftly and terribly. The glory of King Simeon in particular and Antea in the large took up the better part of an hour. Even the others in Geder’s cohort were growing restless by the end. Then Klin thanked the Lord Marshal

for his service and formally accepted this new charge. His salute was met with a rousing cheer, the men pleased as much that the ceremony had ended as with anything Klin had said. The citizens of Vanai rose to their feet, shaking limbs gone numb and talking among themselves like merchants at a fresh market.

Geder saw mixed reactions among the men of the empire. Some envied Klin and his men their new role. Sir Gospey Allintot was grinning so widely, he seemed to glow. Jorey Kalliam walked away with a thoughtful expression, and Geder struggled to keep up with him.

“We’re exiled,” Geder said when they were away from the greater mass of their companions. “We won the battle, and in return they exiled us just as sure as the damned prince of the city.”

Jorey looked at him with annoyance and pity. “Klin’s been aiming for this from the start,” he said. “This was always what he hoped for.”

“Why?” Geder asked.

“There’s power in being the king’s voice,” Jorey said. “Even in Vanai. And if Klin makes himself useful, when the time comes to trade the city away again, he’ll have a place at that table as well. Excuse me. I have to write to my father.”

“Yes,” Geder said. “I should tell my family too. I don’t know what I’ll say.”

Jorey’s laughter was low and bitter.

“Tell them you didn’t miss the sack after all.”

If there was any question of who among Alan Klin’s men were favored, it was answered when Lord Ternigan left the gates of the city. Klin’s new secretary, the son of an important Timzinae merchant, took Geder from his bed in the infirmary to his new home: three small rooms in a minor palace that had been storage and still smelled of rat piss. Still, there was a small hearth, and the winds didn’t blow through the walls the way they had in his tent.

Each day brought Geder a new order from Lord Klin. A channel gate that was to be locked and disabled, a marketplace in which each of the merchants was to pay for an Antean permit to continue their businesses, a loyalist of the deposed prince to be taken to the jail cells as an example to others. It might be common soldiers who announced the demands and enforced their execution, but a nobleman’s presence was required; a face to show that the aristocracy of Antea was present and involved with the business of its new city. And given the tasks assigned him, Geder suspected that he’d be the most hated man in Vanai before the winter passed.

Closing a popular brothel? Geder led the force. Turning the widow and children of a loyalist out of their hovel? Geder. Arresting a prominent member of the local merchant class?

“May I ask the charge?” said Magister Imaniel of the Medean bank in Vanai.

“I’m sorry,” Geder said. “I’m ordered to bring you before the Lord Protector, willing or no.”

“Ordered,” the small man said sourly. “And parading me through the street in chains?”

“Part of my instructions. I’m sorry.”

The house of the Medean bank in Vanai was in a side street, and little larger than a well-to-do family’s home. Even so, it seemed somehow bare. Only the small, sun-worn magister and a single well-fed woman wringing her hands in the doorway. Magister Imaniel rose from the table, considered the soldiers standing behind Geder, and then adjusted his tunic.

“I don’t imagine you know when I’ll be able to return to my work,” he said.

“I’m not told,” Geder said.

“You can’t do this,” the woman said. “We’ve done nothing against you.”

“Cam,” the banker said sharply. “Don’t. This is only business, I’m sure. Tell anyone that asks there’s been a mistake, and I’m speaking with the very noble Lord Protector to correct it.”

The woman—Cam—bit her lips and looked away. Magister Imaniel walked quietly to stand before Geder and bowed.

“I don’t suppose we can overlook the chains?” he asked. “My work depends to a great wise on reputation, and...”

"I'm very sorry," Geder said, "but Lord Klin gave—"

"Orders," the banker said. "I understand. Let's be done with this, then."

A crowd had gathered on the street, word of Geder's appearance at the house traveling, it seemed, faster than the birds could fly. Geder walked in the middle of his guardsmen, the prisoner in his clinking iron just behind him. When he looked back, the man's leathery face was a mask of amusement and indulgence. Geder couldn't say if the man's fearlessness was an act or genuine. All along their route past the canals and down the streets, faces turned to see the banker in chains. Geder marched, his walking stick tapping resolutely against the streets. He kept his expression sober, to hide the fact that he didn't know why he was doing the things he did. He had no doubt that by morning the whole city would know he had taken the man in. That it was clearly Klin's intention didn't reassure him.

Sir Alan Klin met them in the wide chamber that had once been the prince's audience hall. All signs of the former government were gone or else covered over by the Antean banners of King Simeon and House Klin. The air smelled of smoke, rain, and wet dogs. Sir Alan rose, smiling, from his table.

"Magister Imaniel of the Medean bank?"

"The same, Lord Protector," the banker said with a smile and a bow. His voice was amiable. Geder might almost have thought Klin hadn't just humiliated the man in front of the city. "It appears I may have given your lordship some offense. I must, of course, apologize. If I might know the nature of my trespass, I will, of course, guard against it in the future."

Klin waved a hand casually.

"Not at all, sir," he said. "Only I spoke with your former prince before he left in exile. He said that you had refused to fund his campaign."

"It seemed unlikely that he would repay the debt," Magister Imaniel said.

"I understand," Klin said.

Geder looked from one to the other. The tone of the conversation was so calm, so nearly collegial, it confused him. And yet there was a hardness in Klin's eyes that—along with the chains still around the banker's wrists and ankles—made everything he said a threat. Klin walked slowly back to the table where the remains of his midday meal were still sitting on a silver plate.

"I have been looking over the reports of the sack," Klin said. "I saw that the tribute to King Simeon taken from your establishment... Well, it seems surprisingly light."

"My former prince may have an exaggerated opinion of my resources," Magister Imaniel said.

Klin smiled. "Is it buried, or have you smuggled it out?"

"I don't know what you mean, my lord," Magister Imaniel said.

"You wouldn't object to my factor auditing your books, then?"

"Of course not. We are pleased that Antea has taken the authority that rightly belonged to it, and look forward to doing business in a more friendly and ordered city."

"And access to your house?"

"Of course."

Klin nodded. "You understand that I will have to hold you until I find the truth of all this? Whatever money your bank holds here is now subject to Antean review."

"I expected as much," Magister Imaniel said, "but I trust you won't take offense that I had hoped for better."

"It's a fallen world. We do what we must," Klin said, and then to the captain of the guard at Geder's left, "Take him to the public gaol. Put him on the lower level, where everyone can see him. If anyone tries to talk with him, take note of what they say and detain them."

Geder watched as the small man was led away. He wasn't sure whether he was intended to follow along or not. But Klin wasn't glaring at him, so perhaps he'd been meant to stay after all.

"Did you follow that, Palliako?" Klin asked when the banker and guards had gone.

"The bank had less money than expected?" Geder said.

Klin laughed in a way that left Geder unsure whether he was being mocked.

"Oh, it's there," he said. "Somewhere. And from what the prince said, there was quite a bit of it. Enough to pay the mercenary forces to outlast a siege. Enough to buy the Maccian forces twice over. Maybe more than that."

"But he kept it from his prince," Geder said.

"Not out of loyalty to us," Klin said. "Bankers answer to no throne. But if they drowned the money, someone will have helped cart it to a canal. If it's buried, someone held the spade. If it's smuggled, someone arranged it. And when that person sees the head of the bank in gaol, they may panic and try to buy their way free."

"Ah," Geder said.

"You're the man associated with the arrest, so you'll need to be available these next few days," Klin said. "Approachable. And whatever you hear, you bring to me."

"Of course, sir."

"Excellent," Klin said. The silence between them stretched, and Geder realized that he'd been dismissed.

He walked back out to the square, found a stone bench under a black-barked tree almost bare of its leaves, and sat. His leg ached, but there was no coolness on his thigh where fresh blood or pus had leaked. Across the street, a group of youths—Firstblood and Timzinae mixing together as if the races were at perfect ease—pretended not to watch him. A flock of crows conversed among themselves in the branches of the trees and then rose like winged smoke into the air. Geder tapped his walking stick against the pavement, the little shock against his fingers oddly reassuring.

For the next few days, he was bait on a hook. He understood that. Perhaps the banker's conspirators would take the chance to buy themselves the good opinion of Antea. Or perhaps they'd stay quiet. Or, quite possibly, they'd arrange an accident for the man most associated with the problem. Klin had put him in danger without so much as making the threat he was under explicit.

And still, it was a handful of days that Geder could make his way through the streets and markets and call it Klin's order. His squire had brought him rumor of a bookseller in the southern quarter. He could make his way there at last. And if he had to go armed and under guard, at least he could go.

For two days Geder wandered the streets and cafés and beer halls of Vanai, but carefully. In church, with the voices of the choir spiraling in the wide air above him, he was still careful not to let anyone sit too near him in the pew. At the fresh market, he picked through the half-rotten volumes in a bookseller's cart, but with a soldier at his back. Then on the third day, a carter named Olfreed came to his rooms with talk of a caravan organized by a well-known ally of the Medean bank called Master Will.

For the first time, Geder heard the name Marcus Wester.

Cithrin

Distracted by the rigors of her disguise and the wealth hidden in her cart, Cithrin had not been careful.

“What were you *thinking*, boy?” the caravan master demanded. Cithrin looked at his feet, her cheeks burning and her throat thick with shame. The red dust of the caravanserai’s yard caked their boots, and fallen leaves rimed with frost littered the ground.

“I’m sorry,” she said, the cold turning her words white.

“They’re mules,” the caravan master said. “They need caring for. How long has this been going on?”

“A few days,” she said, her lips hardly moving.

“Speak up, boy! How long?”

“A few days,” she said.

A pause.

“All right. The feed cart can get by with three on the team. You tie the sick one to a tree out there, and I’ll bring you one to take its place.”

“But if we leave him, he’ll die,” Cithrin said.

“That’s the thought, yes.”

“But it’s not his fault. You can’t just leave him to die all by himself.”

“All right. I’ll bring you a knife, and you can bleed him out.”

Cithrin’s outraged silence was eloquence enough. The caravan master’s clear interior eyelids slid closed and open again, blinking without looking away from her.

“If you’d rather drop out of the ’van, you’re welcome,” he said. “We’re going too slow already. I’m not going to stop everything because you can’t keep your team. You let me know what you decide.”

“I won’t leave him,” she said, surprised by her own words. Horrified that she meant them. She couldn’t drop out of the ’van.

“He’s a *mule*.”

“I won’t leave him.” The words felt better that time.

“Then you’re an idiot.”

The caravan master turned, spat, and walked away. Cithrin watched him as he stalked back to the stone walls and thin-thatched roof of the shelter. When it became clear he wasn’t coming back, she went back to the stable. The larger of her mules stood in his stall, his head lowered. His breath was thick and ragged. Cithrin stepped in beside him, her hand stroking his thick, wiry coat. The mule raised his head, flicked an ear, and sagged down again.

She tried to picture herself tying the animal to a tree and leaving him there for sickness and snow to kill. She tried to imagine slitting his warm, fuzzy throat. How would she get the money to Carse now?

“I’m sorry,” Cithrin said. “I’m not really a carter. I didn’t know.”

She’d thought at first that the slowness of her cart was her own fault, that the gap that opened in the afternoons between her and the cart before hers meant she wasn’t pushing the team when she should, or that some fine point of negotiating turns was beyond her. It was only when the larger mule had coughed—a wet, phlegmy sound—that she realized he was ill. Magister Imaniel had kept a religious household, but Cithrin prayed that the animal would recover on his own.

He hadn't.

The caravanserai—a ruin barely maintained by those who passed through it—was on the side of a wide, sloping hill, the first foothill of the high, snow-peaked mountain range that marked the end of the Free Cities and the beginning of Birancour. Even now, distance-blued peaks rose from the horizon. The pass through them marked the shortest path between Vanai and Carse.

Carse. The word itself had taken on almost religious significance for her. Carse, the great city of Northcoast overlooking the peaceful sea. The home of white towers above chalk cliffs, of the Council of Eventide, of the Grave of Dragons. The seat of the Medean bank, and the end of her career as a smuggler and refugee. She had never been there, but her longing for it was like wanting to go home.

She could go alone. She'd have to. Only she didn't know the way. Or how to nurse a sick mule back to health. Or what she'd do if another bandit crew stepped out of the forest. The mule heaved in a huge breath and then coughed: deep, wet, and rasping. Cithrin stepped forward and rubbed his wide, soft ears.

"We can find a way," she said as much to herself as the animal. "It'll be all right."

"Probably, it will," a man's voice said.

The cunning man, Master Kit, stood at the stable door, the woman called Opal at his side. Cithrin moved half a step in toward her mule, her arm around its sloping neck as if to protect it. Or be protected by it. An anxious thrill quickened her breath.

"This is the poor thing, then?" Opal said, pushing past the cunning man. "Tired-looking, ain't he?"

Cithrin nodded, looking down to avoid their eyes. Opal slipped into the stall, walked around the mule once, pausing to press her ear to the beast's side. Then, singing a low song in words Cithrin didn't recognize, she knelt before its head and gently pried open its lips.

"Opal takes care of our team, when we have one," Master Kit said. "I've come to put my trust in her when it comes to things with hooves."

Cithrin nodded, torn between a rush of gratitude and discomfort at being so close to the guardsmen. Opal rose and sniffed carefully at the mule's ears.

"Tag, is it?" she said, and Cithrin nodded. "Well, Tag, can you tell me if the old boy was listing to one side? Did you have to correct him?"

Cithrin tried to remember, then shook her head no.

"That's something," Opal said, and then over her shoulder to Master Kit, "I don't think it's in his ears, so that's for the best. He's wheezing, but he doesn't have water in his lungs. At a guess, keep him warm a couple of days, he'll stand true as sticks. Needs more blankets, though."

"Two days," Master Kit said. "I would be surprised if Captain Wester were comfortable with that."

The mule's labored breath and the murmur of the morning breeze through the boughs roughened the silence. Cithrin felt the knot in her belly tightening into something like nausea.

"One fewer guard won't make any damn difference," Opal said. "I'll stay with Tag, and when the old boy's well enough, we'll catch you up. Won't be more than a day or two, and one cart with a good team moves faster than a full 'van."

The cunning man crossed his arms, considering. Cithrin felt a rush of hope.

"Can you do that?" Master Kit asked her. His eyes were gentle, his voice as soft as old flannel.

"I can, sir," Cithrin said, keeping her voice low and masculine. The cunning man nodded.

"I don't suppose there's any harm in suggesting it," he said. "But perhaps you would allow *me* to approach them, Tag?"

She nodded, and the old man smiled. He turned and walked back toward the quarters, leaving Cithrin, Opal, and the animals to themselves.

The relief took the edge off her fear. And perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing, in its way. With Opal dressing in her leathers and Cithrin disguised as a man, they weren't likely to arouse suspicion.

It would be a few days away from the greater company, so she would only have to avoid discovery by Opal. And their supposedly different sexes would give a plausible excuse for privacy.

And yet the fear didn't entirely fade. It came, she told herself, from knowing more than the people around her. She could almost hear Magister Imaniel now, sitting at the evening meal with Cam and Besel, dissecting exactly how a merchant or prelate had behaved differently than expected, and what it implied that they had. Cithrin knew that Tag the Carter carried enough wealth to buy a small army, but no one else did. The risk of lagging behind the body of the 'van was no more than she would have faced if she'd truly carried a load of undyed wool. Her chances only seemed worse because she knew the stakes of the bet were high. She was undiscovered. No one was searching for her or what she carried, the mule would be made well, and she wouldn't face a journey to Carse by herself. Everything would be fine.

"First time out?" Opal said.

Cithrin glanced at her and nodded.

"Well, don't let it worry you, dear," the guard said. "We take care of our own."

It didn't occur to Cithrin for hours to wonder exactly why a mercenary guard would include a semi-competent carter in *our own*, and by then the plan was set and the caravan with Captain Wester and Master Kit was gone down the road to the mountains and to Carse.

They passed the day in caring for the sick beast: warming the stable, rubbing down the mule, forcing an odd concoction that smelled of tar and licorice into its mouth. By nightfall, the mule held its head higher and its cough seemed less violent. That night, Cithrin and Opal slept in the stables, wrapped in thin blankets. An ancient iron brazier between them threw off enough heat to keep the room from freezing, but only just. In the darkness outside, something shrieked once and then not again. Cithrin closed her eyes, resting her head on one arm, and willed herself to sleep. She envied Opal's slow, even breath. Her own body tensed and shivered, her mind jumped from one fear to another, conjuring a hundred possible disasters. The bandits who had attacked the 'van before might arrive in the night, rape and murder them both, and make off with the bank's money. Opal might discover her secret and, mad with avarice, slit her throat. The mule might relapse and leave her stranded in the autumn cold.

When a low, grey dawn finally came, Cithrin hadn't slept. Her head ached, and her back felt as if someone had beaten her with a hammer. Opal, humming to herself, rebuilt the fire, boiled a pan of water with a sprinkling of leaves in it, and checked on their patient. When Cithrin joined her, the mule felt cooler to the touch, his eyes looked brighter, his head stood at its more usual angle. In the next stall, the other mule cleared her throat and grumbled.

"Is she getting sick too?" Cithrin asked. The very idea made her want to weep.

"She may, but she hasn't yet," Opal said. "Probably just jealous that the old boy here's getting all the attention."

"Should we go, then? I mean, is it safe to get back to the 'van?"

"This afternoon, maybe," Opal said. "Better that he have his strength back. Start him with a half day's work."

"But—"

"We've been this way before. We'll catch them up before they go over the pass. They'll stop at Bellin, send up scouts."

Cithrin knew the name, but she couldn't place it. Opal glanced over at her.

"Bellin," Opal said. "Trading town just before the pass. You really don't know much about hauling in a caravan, do you?"

"No," Cithrin said, both sullen and embarrassed at being sullen.

"Bellin's not much, but they're friendly to travelers. Master Kit took us there for a month once. New people coming through the road every few days, no one staying long. It was like being a traveling company without the traveling."

A breath of cold wind stirred the straw. In the brazier, the coals brightened and the thin flame danced. Cithrin's mind felt slow and sodden with fatigue. What would a guard company do with a month of passing traders and merchants and missionaries? Protect them inside the town walls where they needed it the least?

"I should go," Cithrin said. "Check the... check the cart."

"Make sure it hasn't gone anywhere," Opal said, as if she was agreeing.

In practice, being only with Opal was better than being with the full 'van. With just one person to keep track of, Cithrin could find moments to let her guard down, be herself instead of Tag. When the time came and they harnessed the mules, it wasn't all that different from being alone. Opal did most of the talking, and that was for the most part about how to manage the team. Cithrin knew that Tag should have been bored by the lectures, but she drank them in. In the first half day, she learned a hundred things she'd been doing wrong. When they bedded down that night in a wide meadow beside the road, she was a better carter than she'd been in all the long weeks since Vanai.

She wanted to thank the guard for all she'd done, but she was afraid that if she started she might not stop. Gratitude would become friendship, and friendship confession, and then her secrets would be spilled. So instead she made sure that Opal got the best food and the softer place to sleep.

In the darkness, the two of them lay on the soft wool. The moon and stars were gone, wrapped in clouds, and the darkness was absolute. Cithrin's mind skittered and shifted, thin with exhaustion. And still, sleep was slow to come. In the middle of the night, she felt Opal's body pressing next to her own and woke up in a panic, afraid that the guard was attacking her or seducing her or both, but she was only cold and half asleep. She spent the rest of the night drawn by the warmth of Opal's body and trying to hold herself apart for fear of compromising her disguise.

In the dark, the weeks between her and Carse seemed eternal. She imagined that she could feel the casks and boxes hidden just beneath her. The books and ledgers, silk and tobacco leaf and spice. Gems and jewelry. The weight of responsibility and fear was like someone pressing on her chest. When, just before dawn, she finally slept deeply enough to dream, she found herself at the edge of a cliff, trying to keep a hundred stumbling babies from pitching into the abyss.

She woke with a cry, and she woke to snow.

Wide, fat flakes dropped from the sky, grey against the white of clouds. The trees caught it, the bark seeming to turn black by contrast. The dragon's jade of the road was gone, their path marked only by a clear space between the trunks. The horizon had been erased. Opal was already fixing the mules in their harness.

"Can we really go in this?" Cithrin asked, forgetting to deepen her voice.

"Better had. Unless you'd prefer to settle here."

"It's safe, though?"

"Safer than the option," Opal said. "Help me with this buckle. My hand's half frozen."

Cithrin clambered down from the cart and did as she was told. Before long, they were forging ahead. The wide iron cartwheels became caked with wet snow and the mules began to steam. Without discussion, Opal had taken the reins and the whip. Cithrin huddled beside her, miserable. Opal squinted into the weather and shook her head.

"The good news is there won't be bandits."

"Really? And what's the bad?" Cithrin said bitterly.

Opal looked over at her, eyes wide with surprise and delight. Cithrin realized it was the closest thing to a joke she'd made since the caravan left Vanai. She blushed, and the guard beside her laughed.

Bellin had only half a dozen buildings. The rest of the town crouched inside a wide cliff, doorways and windows carved into the grey stone thousands of years before by inhuman hands. Soot stained the wall where chimneys slanted out into the world. Snow clung to huge runes carved into the mountainside, a script Cithrin had never seen before. The peaks themselves were invisible apart from

a sense of looming darkness within the storm. The familiar carts of the 'van were black dots against the white, horses and carters already sheltered within the rock. She helped Opal set their cart in place, unhitch the mules, and guide them safely into the stable where the 'van's other animals were already tucked away.

The guards were there, sitting around a banked smith's furnace, Mikel and Hornet, Master Kit and Smit. Sandr grinned at them both as they came in, and the Tralgu second in command lifted a wide hand without turning from his conversation with the long-haired woman, Cary. Opal's pleasure at seeing them almost made Cithrin happy too.

"There must be something," Cary said, and Cithrin could tell it wasn't the first time she'd said it.

"There's not," Yardem rumbled. "Women are smaller and weaker. There's no weapon that can make that an advantage."

"What are we talking about?" Opal asked, sitting by the open furnace. Cithrin sat on the bench at her side, only realizing afterward that it was the same position they'd held on the cart. Master Kit chuckled and shook his head.

"I think Cary would prefer to train with weapons that better exploit her natural abilities," Master Kit said.

"Like being small and weak," Sandr said. Without looking over, Cary flicked a clod of earth at his head.

"Short bow," Cary said.

"Takes power to pull back a bow," Yardem said. He seemed on the edge of apology. "With a sling and stone, it matters less, but it still matters. A spear has better reach, but takes more muscle. A blade needs less strength, but calls for more reach. A strong, big woman's better than a small, weak man, but there's no such thing as a woman's natural weapon." The Tralgu shrugged expansively.

"There has to be *something*," Cary said.

"There doesn't," Yardem said.

"Sex," Sandr suggested with a grin. Cary threw another clod at his head.

"How are your mules, Tag?" Master Kit asked.

"Better," Cithrin said. "Much better. Thanks to Opal."

"It was nothing," Opal said.

"I'm pleased it worked out," Master Kit said. "I was beginning to worry that we'd leave you behind."

"Wouldn't have happened," a voice said from behind them.

Cithrin twisted in her seat, and her chest went tight with anxiety. Captain Wester stalked into the room. Snow caked his wide leather cloak and matted his hair. His face was so bright, it looked like the cold had slapped him. He walked to the heat, scowling.

"Welcome back, sir," the Tralgu said. The captain didn't so much as nod.

"I take it the scouting went poorly, then," Master Kit said.

"No worse than expected," Marcus Wester said. "The 'van master's breaking it to the others right now. There's no getting through that pass. Not now, not for months."

"*What?*" Cithrin said, her voice sharp and unexpected. She tried to swallow the word as soon as she'd said it, but the captain took no particular notice of her.

"Snow came early, we took too long, and we didn't get lucky," he said. "We'll get some warehouse space for the goods and bunks for the rest of us. Not much room, so it'll be close quarters. We'll make for Carse in the spring."

Spring. The word hit Cithrin in the gut. She looked at the flames dancing in the furnace, felt a trickle of snowmelt tracing its way down her spine. Despairing laughter bubbled at the back of her throat. If she let it out, it would turn to tears, and it wouldn't stop. A season spent in disguise. Moving everything in her cart to a warehouse and back without being discovered. Months to Carse instead of weeks.

I can't do this, she thought.

Marcus

Nightfall came early. Only half of the carts had been emptied, and the caravan master was all but chewing his own wrists over it. Marcus didn't think it would be a problem. The storm had come from the west, and the mountains would squeeze the worst of the snow out. They might be tunneling up from the roofs in Birancour, but Bellin was in the rain shadow. They'd be fine. At least when it came to snow.

Yardem had arranged a separate barracks for the so-called guards. Two small rooms with a shared fire grate, but in the town proper, tucked snugly in the living rock. Carved swirls and whorls caught the firelight, and the walls seemed to breathe and dance. Marcus pulled off the soaked leather of his boots and leaned back, groaning. The others were about him, lounging and talking and negotiating for the best sleeping spaces. The ease the actors took in close company wasn't all that different from real sword-and-bows, and the jokes were better. Even Yardem seemed half relaxed, and that wasn't a common thing.

Still, Marcus's work wasn't done.

"Meeting," he said. "Our job's changed now. Best that we talk that through, not find ourselves surprised later."

The chatter stilled. Master Kit sat beside the fire, his wiry grey hair standing like smoke gone still.

"I don't see how the 'van can afford this," the actor said. "Even with small quarters, it's going to cost having us kept and fed for a full season."

"Likely they'll lose money," Marcus said. "But that's the caravan master's problem, not ours. We aren't here to see a profit turned. Just everyone kept safe. On the road, that means bandits. Holed up for a winter, that means no one gets stir crazy or starts sleeping with someone, makes someone else jealous, or gets in mind to cheat too much at cards."

Smit, the jack-of-all-roles, pulled a long face. "Are we playing guards or nursemaids?" the man said.

"We're doing whatever gets the 'van to Carse safe," Marcus said. "We'll protect them from ourselves if we have to."

"Mmm. Good line," Cary, the thin woman, said. "*Protect them from ourselves if we have to.*"

Marcus narrowed his eyes, frowning.

"They're writing a new play," Master Kit said. "A comic piece about an acting troupe hired to pretend they're caravan guards."

Yardem grunted and flicked an ear. Maybe annoyance, maybe amusement. Likely both. Marcus chose to ignore it.

"We've got a dozen and a half carters," Marcus said. "Add the 'van master and his wife. You've traveled with these people for weeks. You've watched them. You know them. What problems are we going to have?"

"The man hauling the tin ore," Smit said. "He's been spoiling for a fight since those raiders. He's not going to last a season without one unless someone starts sharing his bed or puts him down hard."

"I'd thought the same," Marcus said, allowing himself a moment's pleasure. The actors were much more perceptive than his usual men. Given the circumstances, that would help. "What else?"

"The quarter-Dartinae," Opal, the older leading woman, said. "He's been avoiding the 'van master's sermons almost as much as you have, Captain. A constant diet of scripture isn't going to sit

well with him.”

“The girl in the false whiskers,” Mikel, the thin boy, said. “She’s looking mightily fragile.”

“Oh, yes. *Her*,” Cary said.

“And God knows what she’s really hauling,” Opal said, her tone all agreement. “Gets jumpy as a cat whenever anyone gets too near her cart. Won’t talk about it either.”

Marcus raised a hand, commanding silence.

“*Who?*” he said.

“The girl in the false whiskers,” Master Kit said. “The one that calls herself Tag.”

Marcus looked at Yardem. The Tralgu’s expression mirrored his own blank surprise. Marcus lifted an eyebrow. *Did you know?* Yardem shook his head once, earrings jingling. *No.*

And God knows what she’s really hauling.

“With me, Yardem,” Marcus said, pulling his boots back on.

“Yes, sir,” the Tralgu rumbled.

The carters and and ’van master were in a separate network of rooms and tunnels. Marcus went through the smoke-hazed halls and common rooms, Yardem looming at his side. The other guards or actors, or whatever they were, trailed along behind like children playing follow-me-follow-you. With every room that Tag wasn’t in, Marcus felt the hair on the back of his neck rising. His mind ran back over everything that had happened on the road, every time he’d spoken to the boy, everything that the ’van master had said about him. There was very little. Almost nothing. Always, the boy had kept himself—and, more the point, his cart—to himself.

The last of the rented rooms looked out over the dark and snow-carpeted hills. Behind him, Marcus heard the high, excited voices of the carters asking what was happening. The chill, wet air smelled as much of rain as snow. Lightning sketched the horizon.

“He’s not here, sir.”

“I see that.”

“She can’t have gone,” Opal said from behind them. “Girl hardly knew how to steer the cart without something in front for the mules to follow.”

“The cart,” Marcus said, walking out into the gloom.

The carts that hadn’t been unloaded were near the low stone warehouses. Half a foot of snow covered them, making them all seem taller than they truly were. Marcus stalked among them. Behind him, someone lit torches, the fires hissing in the still-falling snow. Marcus’s shadow shuddered and danced on the wool cart. The snow on its bench was hardly an inch thick. Marcus hooked a foot on the iron loop beside the wheel and hauled himself up. Once atop it, he pulled back the tarp. Tag lay curled in a ball like a cat. Now that the words had been said, Marcus could see where the whiskers were unevenly placed, the dye in the hair patchy. What had been an underfed, half-dim Firstblood boy resolved into a girl with Cinnae blood.

“Wh-what—” the girl began, and Marcus grabbed her shoulder and pulled her to her feet. Her lips were blue from the cold.

“Yardem?”

“Here, sir,” the Tralgu said from the cart’s side.

“Catch,” Marcus said and shoved her over. The girl yelped as she fell, and then Yardem had her in a headlock. Her cries were wild and Yardem grunted once as a lucky blow struck. Marcus ignored the struggle. The wool was damp and stank of mildew. He lifted up bolt after bolt, letting them drop to the ground. The girl’s cries became sharper, and then quiet. Marcus’s hand found something hard.

“Pass me a torch,” he called.

Instead, Master Kit scrambled up beside him. The old man’s face expression said nothing. In the torchlight, Marcus pulled up the box. Blackwood with an iron fastener and hard leather hinges. Marcus drew his dagger and slashed at the hinges until there was enough play to let him push the blade between lid and box.

“Be careful,” Master Kit said as Marcus bore down on the knife.

“Late for that,” Marcus said, and the lock gave with a snap. The box hung open, limp and broken. Inside, a thousand bits of cut glass glittered and shone. No. Not glass. Gems. Garnets and rubies, emeralds and diamonds and pearls. The box was full to the brim with them. Marcus looked down into the hole he had left in the wool and snow. There were more boxes like it. Dozens of them.

He looked at Master Kit. The old man’s eyes were wide with shock.

“All right,” Marcus said shortly, letting the box fall closed. “Come on.”

On the ground, the other guards were clustered around Yardem and the girl. Yardem still held the girl in his wide arms, ready to choke her asleep. Tears were flowing down her cheeks. The set of her jaw was all defiance and grief. Marcus pinched off a bit of the whiskers from her cheek, rubbed them between his fingers, and let them drop to the ground. Beside the Tralgu’s bulk, she seemed barely more than a child. Her eyes met Marcus’s, and he saw the plea there. Something dangerous shifted in his chest. Not rage, not indignation. Not even sorrow. Memory so vibrant and bright it was painful. He told himself to turn away.

“Please,” the girl said.

“Kit,” he said. “Take her inside. Our quarters. She doesn’t talk to anyone, not even the ’van master.”

“As you say, Captain,” Master Kit said. Yardem loosened his grip and stood a half step back. His eyes were locked on the girl, ready to incapacitate her again if she attacked. Master Kit held out a hand to her. “Come along, my dear. You’re among friends.”

The girl hesitated, her gaze jumping from Marcus to Yardem to Master Kit and back again. Tears filled her eyes, but she didn’t sob. He’d known another girl once who’d cried the same way. Marcus pushed the thought aside. Master Kit led her away. The others, as if by habit, followed the master actor and left the soldiers to themselves.

“The cart,” Marcus said.

“No one comes near it, sir,” Yardem said.

Marcus squinted up into the falling snow. “How old do you think she is?”

“Part Cinnae. Makes it hard to tell,” Yardem rumbled. “Sixteen summers. Seventeen.”

“That was my thought too.”

“Same age Merian would have been.”

“Near that.”

Marcus turned back toward the cliff. Light glimmered in the stone-carved windows, and the ancient, snow-filled script carved into the cliffside above shone deep grey against the black.

“Sir?”

Marcus looked back. The Tralgu was already sitting on the cart’s bench and wrapping the wool around himself in the style of Pût nomads to keep his body warm and his sword arm free.

“Don’t let what happened at Ellis affect your judgment. She’s not your daughter.”

The emotion in Marcus’s chest shifted uneasily, like a babe troubled in its sleep.

“No one is,” he said and walked into the darkness.

A cup of warm cider, Master Kit’s sympathetic ear, and half an hour got the full tale. The Medean bank, the original carter’s death, the desperate smuggler’s run to Carse. The girl wept through half of it. She’d left the only home she’d known and the nearest she had to family. Marcus listened to it all with arms crossed, the scowl etching into his face. What caught him were the small things about her—the way her voice grew stronger when she talked about letters of exchange and the problem of capital transport, the habit she had of pushing her hair out of her eyes even when it wasn’t there, the protective angle of her shoulders and her neck. Tag the Carter had been beneath his notice. Cithrin bel Sarcour, amateur smuggler, was a different matter.

When she was done, Marcus left her with the actors, took Master Kit by the elbow, and steered him out through the thin stone corridors that laced the stones of Bellin. The darkness was broken by candles at each turning; enough light to see where they were going, if not the individual steps that would get there. But walking slowly fit Marcus’s needs at the moment.

"You knew about this?" Marcus said.

"I knew the girl was traveling in disguise."

"You never mentioned it."

"I didn't think it was odd. In my experience, people take on roles and put them off again quite often. Consider my own position with the caravan."

Marcus took a long, slow breath.

"All right," he said. "I'll have to take this to the 'van master. We can't stay here."

"No offense meant, Captain, but why not? It seems to me that the caravan's mission remains what it was before. Now that we know the situation, perhaps we could help the girl maintain her illusion. We could hide her cargo until spring, and carry on as if nothing were different."

"Doesn't work that way."

"What doesn't work that way, Captain?" Master Kit asked. Marcus paused at a sharp turn. The single candle gave the carved lines of the wall the aspect of life and awareness. In the dim light, the actor's face was dull gold and blackness.

"*World* doesn't work that way," Marcus said. "You never have that much money without blood coming out of it. Eventually one of us would get greedy. And even if we didn't, there's someone looking for that cart."

"But how would they find it, if they didn't also know to look for us?" Master Kit asked. Marcus noted that the man hadn't argued against the dangers of greed and betrayal.

"At a guess? They'd hear stories about a 'van being guarded by the hero of Gradis and Wodford. And with a cunning man who can turn aside arrows and command the power of the trees."

The chagrin on the actor's face told Marcus that his point was clear.

"This isn't what I hired you on for," Marcus said, "but I need you to stay with me."

Master Kit pursed his lips, hesitated for a long moment, then turned and walked farther into the darkness between candles, heading toward the 'van master's lodging. Marcus followed him. For almost a minute, their footsteps were the only sounds.

"What are your plans?" Master Kit said, his voice cautious. Marcus nodded to himself. At least it hadn't been *no*.

"Go south," Marcus said. "West is snowbound, east is back toward whoever follows us. North is the Dry Wastes in winter. We let it be known we're taking the goods to Maccia or Gilea, trying to sell at the markets there instead of wait for Carse. Move off east, then cut south."

"I don't know of any roads going south until—"

"Not roads. We have to get off the dragon's roads and take farm tracks and local paths down to the Inner Sea. There's a pass along the coast hardly ever freezes. Put us into Birancour in four weeks if it stays cold. Five, if it thaws enough to get muddy. They don't take well to armed bands crossing the border, so anyone following us might be turned back. Another week and we're in Porte Oliva. It's a big enough city to disappear into for the winter. Or if the roads are decent, we can push on for Northcoast and Carse."

"It seems like the long way around," Master Kit said. The hallway opened out into a wider chamber where several passages came together and an oil lamp hung from a worked iron bracket, and Master Kit stopped in the light, turning to face him. The man's face was gentle and sober. "I wonder whether you've considered the other option?"

"Don't see there is one."

"We could all visit the cart, fill our pockets and purses, and vanish like the dew. Anything left, we could put in a warehouse as someone else's problem."

"That might be the wise thing," Marcus said. "But it's not the job. We keep the 'van safe until it gets where it's going."

Marcus could see the skepticism in the actor's long face, and the grim amusement. It was, Marcus knew, the moment that would decide all the rest. If the actor refused, there weren't many options left.

Master Kit shrugged.

"Then I suppose we should tell the 'van master that his plans have changed."

The caravan left just before midday under low, grey skies. Marcus rode fore. His head still ached from a night of dreams as familiar as they were vicious. Blood and fire. The dying screams of a woman and a child who were both twelve years' dust now. The smell of burning hair. It had been years since he'd woken calling for his wife and daughter. For Alys and Merian. He'd hoped the nightmares had passed forever, but clearly they had returned, at least for the time.

He'd lived through them before. He could again.

The 'van master sat at his side, their white-plumed breaths falling in and out of time. Crows watched them from snow-caked trees, shifting their wings like old men. The snow was wet, but not more than a foot thick on the road. It would be worse once they turned off the dragon's roads.

"Can't believe we're doing this," the 'van master said for the hundredth time. "They didn't even tell me."

"They didn't think of you as a smuggler," Marcus said.

"Thought of me as a dupe."

"Me too," Marcus said. And then to the Timzinae's outraged look, "No, *they* also thought *I* was a dupe. Not that *I* also thought *you* were."

The 'van master sank into a bitter silence. The cliffs of Bellin faded behind them. It promised to be a miserable winter. When they stopped for the night, putting up tents in the fast-fading twilight, Marcus walked through the camp with Yardem at his side. Conversations paused when they came near. Smiles grew false and unconvincing. Resentment soaked the caravan like oil on a wick. He'd have to be sure nothing happened to light it. It was no worse than he'd expected. When he came to his own tent, she was waiting for him.

Tag the Carter was gone, vanished from the world as if he'd never been. The actors had helped her wash the worst of the dye from her hair, and without the lichenous whiskers her face seemed almost unnaturally clean. Youth and her Cinnae blood conspired to make her coltish, but a few years would change her into a woman.

"Captain Wester," she said, then swallowed nervously. "I didn't get to say how much I appreciate this."

"It's what I do," Marcus said.

"All the same, it's more than I could have asked, and... Thank you."

"You aren't safe yet," Marcus said, more sharply than he'd meant. "Save your gratitude until you are."

The girl flushed, her cheeks like rose petals on snow. She half bowed, turned, and walked away, footsteps crunching in the snow. Marcus watched her go, shook his head, and spat. Yardem, still at his side, cleared his throat.

"This girl's not my daughter," Marcus said.

"She's not, sir."

"She doesn't deserve my protection more than any other man or woman in this 'van."

"She doesn't, sir."

Marcus squinted up into the clouds.

"I'm in trouble here," he said.

"Yes, sir," Yardem said. "You are."

Dawson

The King's Hunt pressed through the thick-falling snow, the calling of the hounds made fainter and eerie by the grey. Dawson Kalliam leaned in toward his horse's steaming neck, feeling the great animal launch itself into the air. He saw the icy ditch as a blur beneath them, and then it was gone, and the impact of their landing gave way again to the wind-swift chase. Behind him, half a dozen voices rose, but not the king's. Dawson ignored them. To his left, a grey horse with red leather hunter's barding loomed out of the snow. Feldin Maas. Others rode close behind, nothing more than snow-drowned shadows. Dawson leaned closer to his mount, digging heels into its flanks, urging it faster.

The hart had run long and hard, nearly outwitting the hunstmen and their dogs twice. But Dawson had ridden the hills of Osterling Fells in all weather since he was a boy, and he knew the traps of them. The hart had turned down a blind canyon, and it would not return from it. The kill, of course, would be King Simeon's. The race now was to be the first to reach their prey.

The lower branches of a pine stood startling green against the void, marking where the hart had passed. Dawson turned, feeling Feldin Maas and the others crowding close behind him. Someone was shouting. The howls and yaps of the hounds grew louder. He set his teeth, willing himself forward.

Something surged on his right. Not the grey. A white horse without barding. Its rider had no helmet or cap, and the long red-gold hair announced Curtin Issandrian as clearly as a pennant. Dawson dug his heels again, and his horse leapt forward. Too fast. He felt the drumming, pounding rhythm of the gallop roughen and the horse struggled to keep its feet. The white surged forward, passing him, and a moment later the grey with Feldin Maas was at his shoulder.

If the hart had gone another thousand yards, Dawson might have retaken the position of honor, but the doomed beast stood at bay in a clearing too near. Two dogs lay dead at its feet, and the huntsmen held back the rest of the pack with their voices and short whips. A point had broken off the hart's rack, and blood marked its side. Its left hind leg was blood-soaked where an overeager hound had ripped off its dewclaw, and its patchy winter coat gave it the aspect of a traveler at the end of a journey. It turned toward them, breath white and exhausted, as Curtin Issandrian pulled to a stop, Dawson and Feldin Maas just behind him.

"Well played, Issandrian," Dawson said bitterly.

"It's a beautiful thing, isn't it?" the victor said, ignoring him. Dawson had to admit the hart had an air of real nobility to it. Exhausted, beaten, and facing death, there was no sense of fear from it. Resignation, perhaps. Hatred, certainly. Issandrian drew his sword and saluted the beast, and it lowered its head as if in acknowledgment. The second group of riders pelted into the clearing, six together each with the sigils of their houses. The hounds leaped and barked, the huntsmen shouted and cursed.

And then the king.

King Simeon rode into the clearing on a huge black charger, the black leather reins braided with scarlet and gold. Prince Aster rode a pony at his father's side, the child's spine straight with pride and his armor still a little too large for his frame. His personal master of the hunt rode behind and behind him: a huge Jasuru in green-gold armor that matched his scales. King Simeon himself wore dark leathers studded with silver and a black helm that hid the beginnings of jowls and his skewed nose.

Dawson had been on hunts with him since they had both been boys younger than Maas and Issandrian, and he could see the weariness in the king's spine, even if no one else could. The rest of the hunting party rode behind him, the casual hunters more interested in gossip and a clean day's ride than the sport of it. The banners of all the great houses were present, the court of Camnipol come to a clearing in Osterling Fells.

The Jasuru huntsman lifted a spear from his back and held it out to King Simeon. In the king's hands, it seemed longer. The Jasuru huntsman called, and the dogs surged forward, leaping at the hart. Distracting it. King Simeon set the spear, spurred his mount, and charged. At the impact, the hart staggered back, the spear's point deep in its neck. As it fell, Dawson had the visceral sense that the beast was surprised more than pained. Death, however clearly foretold, still came unexpectedly. King Simeon's arm was as strong as ever, his eyes as keen. The hart died fast and without the need for an arrow's grace. When the huntsmen called back the hounds and lifted fists to confirm that the beast was dead, a cheer rose from the noblemen, Dawson's voice among them.

"So who took honors?" King Simeon asked as his huntsman went about unmaking the hart. "Issandrian? Or was it you, Kalliam?"

"It was so near at the end," Issandrian said, "I would say the baron and I arrived together."

Feldin Maas dropped down from his horse with a smirk and went to examine the killed dogs.

"Not true," Dawson said. "Issandrian arrived a good length ahead of me. The honors go to him." *And I will not carry a debt to you, even something as small as that,* he thought but did not say.

"Issandrian will have the horns, then," King Simeon said, and then, shouting, "Issandrian!"

The others raised fists and swords, grinning in the snowfall, and called out the victor's name. The feast would come the next day, the venison cooked at Dawson's own hearth, and Issandrian given the place of honor. The thought was like a knot in his throat.

"Are you all right?" the king said, softly enough that the words would not carry.

"Fine, Highness," Dawson said. "I'm fine."

An hour later, as they rode back to the house, Feldin Maas trotted alongside him. Since Vanai's fall and the defeat of the Maccian reinforcements, Dawson had pretended that the news from the Free Cities meant nothing particular to him, but the charade chafed.

"Lord Kalliam," Maas said. "Something for you."

He tossed a twig to Dawson. No, not a twig. A bit of broken horn, red with the dog's blood.

"Small honor's better than none, eh?" Maas said with a grin, then chucked to his mount and moved forward.

"Small honor," Dawson said bitterly and under his breath, the words white as fog.

As they rode back to the holding, the snowfall turned from deep, feathery flakes to mere specks, and the mountains to the east reappeared as the low clouds thinned and broke. The scent of smoke touched the air, and the spiraling towers of Osterling Fells stood in the south. The stone—granite and dragon's jade—glowed with sunlight, and the garlands that hung from the battlements left the impression that the buildings themselves had come to welcome the moment's brightness.

As host, Dawson was to oversee the preparation of the hart. It meant little more than standing in the kitchens for half an hour looking jolly, and still his soul rebelled. He couldn't bring himself to descend into the chaos of servants and dogs. He stalked to the wide stone stairs beside the ovens and stood on the landing that overlooked the preparation tables. Along the wall, pies and loaves of bread cooled, and an ancient woman pressed peacock feathers into a pork loaf that had been sculpted to resemble the bird and candied until it shone like glass. The smell of baked raisins and chicken filled the hot air. The huntsmen arrived with the carcass, and four young men fell to preparing the meat, rubbing salt, mint leaves, and butter into the flesh, carving out the glands and veins that the unmaking had left in. Dawson scowled and watched. The beast had been noble once, and watching it now—

"Husband?"

Clara, behind him, wore the pleasant expression she adopted in the early stages of exhaustion. Her eyes glittered, and the dimples that framed her mouth dug just a fraction deeper than usual. No

one would know who hadn't spent a lifetime looking at her. He resented the court for putting that look in her eyes.

"Wife," he said.

"If we might?" she said, taking half a step toward the back hall. Annoyance tightened his mouth. Not with her, but with whatever domestic catastrophe required him now. He nodded curtly and followed her back toward the shadows and relative privacy. Before he left the landing a new voice stopped him.

"Sir! You've dropped this, my lord."

One of the huntsmen stood at the stair. A young man, wide-chinned and open-faced, wearing Kalliam livery. He held out the bit of broken, blood-darkened horn. A servant, calling Baron Kalliam back like a child for a lost bauble.

Dawson felt his face darken, his hands clench.

"What is your name," he said, and the huntsman went pale at the sound of his voice

"Vincen, sir. Vincen Coe."

"You are no man of mine, Vincen Coe. Get your things and leave my house by nightfall."

"M-my lord?"

"Do you want to be whipped in the bargain, boy?" Dawson shouted. The kitchen below them went silent, all eyes turning to them, and then quickly away.

"No, my lord," the huntsman said.

Dawson turned and stalked into the gloom of the corridor, Clara at his side. She didn't rebuke him. In the shadows of the stair, she leaned in speaking quietly and almost into his ear.

"Simeon asked for a warm bath when he came in, and instead of kicking everyone else out of the blue rooms, I had the janitor prepare Andr's house. The one by the eastern wing? It's a more pleasant space anyway, and it has those clever little pipes to keep the water hot."

"That's fine," Dawson said.

"I've left orders that no one else be let in except you, of course. Because I knew that you wanted a moment with him."

"I can't intrude on the king's bath," Dawson said.

"Of course you can, dear. Only tell him I didn't remember to warn you. I was very careful to mention that it was the place you've always preferred after a hunt, so it won't be at all implausible. Unless, of course, he asks the servants and they say you actually use the blue rooms. But prying like that would be rude, and Simeon's never struck me that way, has he you?"

Dawson felt a weight he'd only been half aware of lift from him.

"What did I do to deserve a wife as perfect as you?"

"It was luck," she said, a faint smile penetrating her polite façade. "Now go before he finishes his bath. I'll tend to that poor puppy of a huntsman you just kicked. They really should know better than to approach you when you're in a temper."

Andr's house sat within the walls of the holding proper, tucked beside the chapel hall and otherwise apart from the main buildings. The Cinnae poet whose name it bore had lived in it when Osterling Fells had been the seat of a king with a penchant for the art of lesser races, and Antea only the name of a minor line of noblemen half a day's ride to the north. None of Andr's poems had survived the centuries. The only marks that she had left on the world were a small house that bore her name and a carving in the stone doorway—DRACANI SANT DRACAS—whose meaning was itself forgotten.

King Simeon lay in a bath of worked bronze shaped into a wide Dartinae hand, the long fingers turned back to the palm and dribbling steaming hot water from channels just beneath the claws. A stone bowl of soap rested in a shelf on the thumb. A window of stained glass turned the warm air green and gold. The body servants stood at the back wall with soft cloths to dry the king and black swords to defend him. The king looked up as Dawson stepped into the room.

"Forgive me, sire," Dawson said. "I hadn't known you were here."

"It's nothing, old friend," Simeon said, gesturing to the body servants. "I knew I was intruding on your private haunts. Sit. Enjoy the heat, and I'll make way for you as soon as I have feeling back in my toes."

"Thank you, sire," Dawson said as the servants brought a stool for him. "As it happens, I was hoping to discuss a matter with you in private. About Vanai. There's something it would be best you hear from me."

King Simeon sat up, and for a moment, they weren't lord and subject noble, but Simeon and Dawson again. Two boys of blood and rank, full of their own pride and dignity. Dawson's disdain for the Vanai campaign and outrage at his own son being set to serve under Alan Klin were well-known matters. Still, Dawson rehashed them, building up his anger and self-righteousness to a speed that would carry him through his confession. Simeon listened and the body servants ignored everything with equal care. Dawson watched the old, familiar face as it passed from curiosity to surprise to disappointment and settled at the end in a species of amused despair.

"You have to stop playing games like that with Issandrian's cabal," the king of Imperial Antea said, leaning back in his bath. "And still, I wish to God it had worked. Would have saved me half a world of trouble. You've heard about the Edford Charter?"

"The what?"

"Edford Charter. It's a piece of parchment a priest found in the deepest library of Sevenpol that names the head of a farmer's council under King Durren the White. There's a petition in the north to name a new farmer's council on the strength of it. Any landholder with enough crops to pay in would have a voice in court."

"You can't be serious," Dawson said. "Are they going to drive mules through the palaces? Keep goats in the Kingspire gardens?"

"Don't suggest it to them," the king said, reaching for the bowl of soap.

"It's a gambit," Dawson said. "They'll never do it."

"You don't understand how split the court is, old friend. Issandrian is well loved by the lowborn. If they gain power, he gains with them. And now with Klin as his purse in Vanai, I don't see that I have a great deal of leverage."

"You can't mean—"

"No, there can't be a farmer's council. But there's peace to be made. At midsummer, I'm sending Aster to be Issandrian's ward."

The great bronze fingertips dripped. A passing cloud dimmed the light. King Simeon sat quietly lathering his arms, expressionless as the implications unfolded themselves between them.

"He'd be regent," Dawson said, his voice thick and strangled. "If you died before Aster came of age, Issandrian would be regent."

"Not a sure thing, but he'd have a claim to it."

"He's going to have you killed. This is treason."

"This is politics," Simeon said. "I had hoped Ternigan would keep the city for himself, but the old bastard's independent-minded. He knows Issandrian's cabal is on the rise. Now he's done them a favor without quite throwing himself in their camp. I'll have to woo him. They'll have to woo him. He'll be sitting in Kavinpol getting kissed on both cheeks."

"Curtin Issandrian will *kill* you, Simeon."

The king lay back, dark water running up his arms and darkening his hair. A scum of soap floated and spun on the water.

"He won't. As long as he has my son, he can call my tunes without the bother of sitting on a throne."

"Then break him," Dawson said. "I'll help you. We can build a cabal of our own. There are men who haven't forgotten the old ways. They're *hungry* for this. We can rally them."

"We can, yes, but to what end?"

“Simeon. Old friend. This is the moment. Antea needs a true king now. You have it in you to be that man. Don’t send your boy to Issandrian.”

“The time’s not right. Issandrian’s on the rise, and opposing him now will only add to the strife. Better to wait until he stumbles. My work now is to see that we don’t follow the dragon’s path along the way. If I can give Aster the kingdom without a civil war, it will be legacy enough.”

“Even if it’s not the true Antea?” Dawson said, an ache gathering behind his eyes. “What honor is there in a kingdom that’s lost its heritage to these preening, self-important children?”

“If you’d said it before Ternigan handed him Vanai, I might have agreed. But where’s the honor in fighting a battle you can’t win?”

Dawson looked at his hands. Age had thickened his knuckles and cold chapped his skin. The smell of soap mocked his nose. His boyhood friend, his lord and king, sighed and grunted, shifting in his bath like an old man. Somewhere in Osterling Fells, Curtin Issandrian and Feldin Maas were drinking his wine, toasting each other. Laughing. Dawson’s cheeks ached, and he forced himself to relax his jaw.

Where’s the honor in fighting a battle you can’t win? hung in the air between them. When he could keep the disappointment out of his voice, Dawson spoke.

“Where else would it be, my lord?”

Cithrin

The dragon's roads behind them, the world turned to snow and mud. The cart beneath her lurched through ruts and holes, the mules before her strained and slipped, and the wheels grumbled and spat through the churn the carts ahead of her had left. Cithrin sat, reins in her numbed fingers, her breath making ghosts, and watched the low hills give way to plains, the forests thin and snow-sheeted scrub and brambles take their place. In springtime, the land surrounding the Free Cities might be green and alive, but now it seemed empty and eternal.

They passed a field with stacks of rotting hay that testified to some farmer's tragedy. A vineyard where row after row or trellis supported black, dead-looking woody vines. Now and again, a snow hare would bound along, almost too far away to see. Or a deer would stray near until one of the carters or the guards shot an arrow toward it in hope of fresh venison. From what she could tell, they never hit.

Mostly it was cold. And the days were still getting shorter.

The caravan master stopped them for the night at an abandoned mill. Cithrin pulled her cart to a stop beside the ice sheet of the pond, unhooked her mud-spattered mules, and rubbed them clean as they ate. The sun hung low and bloody in the west. Opal came to check on her, and the woman's mild eyes seemed pleased by what she saw.

"We'll make an honest carter of you yet, my dear," she said.

Cithrin's smile hurt her cold-burned cheeks. "A carter, maybe," she said. "Honest is another question."

The older woman's eyebrows rose. "More humor," Opal said. "The world may stop turning. Are you coming to the meal?"

"I don't think so," Cithrin said, looking at one of the mules' hoofs. The small sore she'd seen the day before was still there, but hadn't gotten worse. "I don't like being with them."

"Them?"

"The others. I don't think they like me. If it wasn't for me, they'd all be in Bellin sitting around a fire grate. And the captain..."

"Wester? Yes, he is a bit of a bear, isn't he? I still don't know quite what to make of him myself," Opal said, her voice dry and speculative and on the edge of flirtation. "Still, I'm sure he wouldn't bite unless you asked him."

"All the same," Cithrin said. "I think I'll stay with the cart."

"I'll bring you a plate, then."

"Thank you," Cithrin said. "And Opal?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

The guard smiled and dropped a small, ironic curtsey. Cithrin watched her walk back toward the mill house. Someone was lighting a fire in there, thin smoke rising from the stone chimney. Around her, the snow glowed gold and then red, and then between one moment and the next, grey. Cithrin laid blankets on her mules and lit a small fire of her own. Opal returned with a plate of stewed greens and wheat cakes, then went back to the voices and music. Cithrin stood to follow her and then sat back down.

As she ate, the stars came out. Snow made the pale blue light of a three-quarter moon seem brighter than it should have been. The cold grew, and Cithrin huddled closer to her small fire. The

chill seeped in, pressing on her. Narrowing her. Later, when the captain and the Tralgu had gone out scouting and the others had gone to sleep, she'd sneak into the mill house and find a corner to curl up in. At breakfast, she'd avoid the stares and curiosity of the other carters and come back to her mules as quickly as she could. Daylight was scarce, and the caravan master didn't leave much time for idle banter. These long, dark, cold hours between work's end and sleep were the worst part of her day. She passed them by retreating into her mind.

She might begin by singing herself songs or recalling plays and performances she'd gone to as part of the bank. Before long, though, she found herself returning to Magister Imaniel and his constant dinner-table testing. The difference between a gift given for a consideration and a formal loan, the paradox of two parties following reason and yet coming to a solution to no one's advantage, the strategies of a single contract and the strategies of a contract that is continually renewed. The puzzles were the playthings of her childhood, and she came to them now for comfort and solace.

She found herself estimating the worth of the caravan as a whole, how much they might have gained in Carse and how much more or less they would have to offer in Porte Oliva to make the two journeys balance. She thought about Bellin, and whether taxation on passage or on boarding would make the township richer. At what point it would make as much sense to abandon the carts as to keep on. Whether Magister Imaniel had been wise to invest in a brewery and also insure it against fire. In the absence of real information, it was no more than a game, but it was the game that she knew best.

Banking, Magister Imaniel said, wasn't about gold and silver. It was about who knew something no one else did, about who could be trusted and who not, about seeming one thing and being another. With the questions she asked herself, she could conjure him and Cam and Besel. She could see their faces again, hear their laughter, and sink into another time and place. One where she was loved. Or no, not truly. But at least where she belonged.

Even as the night around her grew colder, the knot in her belly loosened. Her tight-curved body grew softer and more at ease. She fed larger sticks into the fire, watching the flames first dim under the weight of the wood, and then brighten as it caught. The heat touched her face and hands, and the wool wrapped around her kept the worst of the night at bay.

What would happen, she wondered, if a bank offered a greater loan to those who'd repaid an old one before the set time? The borrowers would gain more gold by the arrangement, and the bank would see its profits more quickly. *And yet*, Magister Imaniel said in her mind, *if everyone benefits, you've overlooked something*. There was some consequence that she was missing...

"Cithrin."

She looked up. Sandr, half crouched, scuttled from the shadows between the carts. One of the mules lifted his head, snorted a great plume of white breath, and went back to his rest. As Sandr sat, she heard an odd clanking of metal and the telltale sloshing of wine in a skin.

"You didn't," she said, and Sandr grinned.

"Master Kit won't mind. He stocked up again as soon as we reached Bellin, getting ready for the winter. Only now he's got to haul it through the back end of the world. We'll be doing him a favor, lightening the load."

"You are going to get in so much trouble," she said.

"Never happen."

He opened the skin with a gloved hand and held it out to her. The smell of the fumes warmed her almost before the wine. Rich and strong and soft, it washed her mouth and tongue, flowed down her throat. The warmth of it lit her like she'd swallowed a candle. There was no sweetness to it, but something deeper.

"God," she said.

"It's good, isn't it?" Sandr said.

She grinned and took another long drink. Then another. The warmth spread into her belly and started pressing out toward her arms and legs. Reluctantly, she passed it back.

"That's not all," he said. "I've got something for you."

He pulled a canvas bag out from beneath his cloak. The cloth reeked of dust and rot, and something in it shifted and clanked as he put it on the snow. His eyes sparkled in the moonlight.

"They were in the back storeroom. And a bunch of other things. Smit found them really, but I thought of you and I traded him."

Sandr pulled out a cracked leather boot laced with string. A complication of rusted metal clung to the sole, dark and dingy except for a knifelike blade running the length that shone bright and new-sharpened.

"Ever skated?" Sandr asked.

Cithrin shook her head. Sandr pulled two pairs of boots out of the sack, the ancient leather grey in the dim light. She took another long drink of the wine.

"They're too big," he said, "but I put some sand inside. Sand's good because it shifts to fit the shape of your foot. Cloth just bunches up. Here, try them."

I don't want to, Cithrin thought, but Sandr had her foot in his hand, stripping off her boot, and he was so pleased with himself. The skate was cold and the bent leather bit into the top of her foot, but Sandr pulled the string laces tight and started on her other foot.

"I learned how in Asterilhold," Sandr said. "Two... no, God, three years ago. I'd just joined the troop and Master Kit had us in Kaltfel for the winter. So cold your spit froze before it hit the ground, and the nights went on forever. But there's a lake in the middle of the city, and the whole time we were there, you could cross it anywhere. There's a winter city they build on the ice every year. Houses and taverns and all. Like a real town."

"Really?" she said.

"It was brilliant. There. I think that's done it. Let me get mine on."

She took another mouthful of the fortified wine, and it pressed its heat out toward her fingers and toes. Somehow, they'd already gone through half the skin. She felt it in her cheeks. And the fumes made her head feel muzzy and bright. Sandr struggled and grunted, the knife-shoe of the skates creaking and rattling. It seemed impossible that anything so awkward would actually work until he had the last strap in place, half walked and half wobbled to the pond, and then pressed himself out onto the ice. Between one breath and the next, he became grace made flesh. His legs scissored and shifted, the blades hissing as they scored the ice. His body shifted and swooped as he slid across the pond and then back, his arms graceful as a dancer's.

"They're not bad," he called. "Come on. You try."

Another drink of wine, and then one more for luck, and Cithrin maneuvered herself out. Cold air bit at her, but only with dull teeth. Her ankles shifted as she fought to make sense of this new way of balancing. She tried to push off the way Sandr did, and fell hard on the ice. Sandr laughed his delight.

"It's hard the first time," he said, hissing to her side. "Give me your hand. I'll show you."

Within minutes, her knees were bent, her arms widespread, and her feet chopping at the ice. But she didn't fall.

"Don't try to walk," Sandr said. "Push with one foot, glide on the other."

"Easy for you," she said. "You know what you're doing."

"This time. I was worse than you when I started."

"Flatterer."

"Maybe you're worth flattering. No, like that. That's it. *That's it!*"

Cithrin's body caught the trick, and she found herself gliding. Not quite as gracefully and certainly as Sandr, but closer. The ice sped under her, white and grey and black in the moonlight. The night tasted like the fortified wine and moved like a river flowing around her. Sandr whooped and took her hand, and together they raced the length of the mill pond, the grooves of their skates tracing white lines in the dim.

From the banks, one of the mules commented with a grunt and flick of his haunch. The wind of Cithrin's passage whuffed in her ears. She felt herself grinning and spinning. The knot in her belly was a memory, a dream, a thing that happened to another person. She fell twice more, but it only

seemed funny. The ice was cloud and sky, and she had learned how to fly. It creaked and groaned under her weight, and Sandr clapped his hands as she made an elaborate and awkward curtsy in the center of the pond.

"Race me," he shouted. "There and back."

Like an arrow from a bow, Sandr sped for the far bank, and Cithrin followed him. Her legs ached, and her heart beat like a boulder rolling down a hill, her numb face made itself a mask. Sandr reached the edge of the ice, pushed off from the snow, and sped past her, going back toward her cart. Cithrin turned too, pushing faster, harder. In the middle of the pond, the ice darkened and complained, but then she was over it, almost at Sandr's back, skating beside him, past him. Almost past him.

Her skate slammed into the snow and the dead, winter-killed reeds. The moon-blued ground rose up and hit her so hard she couldn't breathe. Sandr lay beside her, his eyes wide, his cheeks as red as if she'd pinched them. The look of surprise and concern on his face was so comic that, when she could, Cithrin started laughing.

Sandr's laughter twinned with hers, and he threw a handful of snow in the air, the flakes drifting down around them like dandelion fluff. And then he rolled to her, resting his weight against her side. His lips were on hers.

Oh, she thought. And then, half a breath later, she tried kissing him back.

It wasn't as awkward as she'd expected it to be. His arms shifted around her, his body entirely on hers now, pressing her into the snow that didn't seem cold at all. His hand fumbled at her jacket, and then the thick wool sweater. His fingers found her skin. She felt herself arching up, pressing herself into the touch almost as if she were watching it be done. She heard her breath grow ragged.

"Cithrin," Sandr said. "You need to... You need to know..."

"Don't," she said.

He stopped, pulling back. His hand retreated from her breasts. Contrition narrowed his face. She felt a flare of impatience.

"Don't *talk*, I mean," she said.

She'd always known about sex in a general way. Cam had talked about it in dour, stern, and warning tones. She'd seen the mummers in the spring carnival dancing through the torchlit streets in masks and nothing more. Perhaps there should have been no mystery. And still, as she undid her belt and pushed down the rough pants, she wondered whether this was what Besel had done with all those other girls. All the ones that weren't her. Had it been like this for them? She'd heard it hurt the first time. She wondered what that would feel like. Sandr's bare flanks shone nearly as pale as the snow. Concentration possessed him as he tried to pry off his skates without rising up.

I hope it's all right that I don't love him, she thought.

A roar came out of nowhere, deep and violent and sudden. Sandr rose up into the air, his weight gone, his eyes round in surprise. Cithrin grabbed for her waistband. Her first thought was that a monstrous bird had come down from the sky and plucked him away.

Captain Wester threw Sandr out onto the ice, where he landed awkward and skidding. The captain's sword hissed out of its scabbard, and he moved toward Sandr, cursing in three languages. Cithrin rose to her knees, tugging at her clothing. Sandr stumbled back, his still-erect penis bobbing comically, and slipped.

"I wasn't forcing her," Sandr squeaked. "I wasn't forcing."

"Do I care?" Wester shouted, pointing with his sword at the wineskin half covered by snow. "You get her stupid drunk to get her knees apart, and you want a good-conduct medal?"

"I'm not drunk," Cithrin said, realizing that she likely was. Wester ignored her.

"Touch her again, son, and I cut something off you. Best pray it's a finger."

Sandr opened his mouth, but only a high whine came out.

"Stop it!" Cithrin shouted. "Leave him alone!"

Wester turned to her, rage in his eyes. Taller than she was, twice as broad, and with naked steel in his hand, he made the small, still part of her mind tell her to be quiet. Wine and embarrassment and anger washed her forward.

“Who are you to tell him what he can and can’t?” she said. “Who are you to tell *me*?”

“I am the man who’s saving your life. And you will do as I say,” Wester shouted, but she thought there was a new confusion in his eyes. “I won’t have you turning into a whore.”

The word bit. Cithrin balled her fists until her knuckles ached. Blood lit her cheeks and roared in her ears. When she spoke, she shrieked.

“I wasn’t going to *charge him*!”

Wester looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. The confusion deepened, knitting his brow, and something like amusement plucked at his mouth. And then—inexplicably—anguish.

“Captain,” a new voice growled, and the Tralgu loomed out of the darkness.

“Not a good time, Yardem,” Wester said.

“Took that from the shouting, sir. There’s soldiers.”

Wester changed between one heartbeat and the next. His face cleared, his body pulled back a degree. Their confrontation evaporated, and Cithrin felt herself unnerved by the sudden shift. It seemed unfair that the captain had abandoned their conflict with things still unsettled.

“Where?” Wester asked.

“Camped over the ridge to the east,” the Tralgu said. “Two dozen. Antean banner, Vanai tents.”

“Well, God smiled,” Wester said. “Any chance their scouts overlooked us?”

“None.”

“Did they see you?”

“No.”

Cithrin’s rage collapsed as the words fought through the wine fumes and trailing remnants of anger. Wester was already pacing the length of her cart. He considered Sandr still wobbling on his skates, the half-buried wineskin, the pond with the white scoring of blade tracks still on the ice.

“Sandr,” he said. “Get Master Kit.”

“Yes, sir,” Sandr said and awkwardly scampered off toward the mill house.

Wester sheathed his sword absentmindedly. His eyes shifted across the landscape, searching for something. Cithrin waited, her heart in her throat. They couldn’t run. Against two dozen, they couldn’t fight. Any goodwill she might have expected from Wester was certainly gone now.

The seconds stretched by endlessly. Wester took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“We’ll need a broom,” he said.

Geder

The bitterly cold predawn breeze murmured through the walls of Geder's tent and set the flame on his oil lamp dancing. He leaned closer, then cursed softly and turned up the wick. The flame brightened and then smoked. He backed it down slowly until the smoke disappeared. In the brighter light, the pale ink grew, if not clear, at least legible. He stuck his hands into his armpits for warmth and leaned in closer.

And so it came that in these final days, the three great factions entered into a war of both blood and terrible cunning such that measureless stone ships flew through the skies with great iron thorns that slaughtered dragons as they flew and also deep pods found manners to hide themselves from their enemies until they should be forgotten that they might attack an unprotected enemy and also swords envenomed to slay both master and slave. The mighty silver-scaled Morade, maddest and mightiest of the warring clutch-mates, fashioned a tool more devious than the world had known, and in the high mountains south of Haakapel (which, Geder thought, would be Hallskar now) and east of Sammer (which Geder was almost certain was the fifth-polis name for the Keshet), he forged the Righteous Servant to whom none could lie nor no one could long disbelieve, and its sigil was of cardinal and intercardinal showing the eight directions of the world in which no falsehood could hide, and in this great Morade found his subtlest power.

He rubbed his eyes. The thick, yellowed pages of the book smelled of dust and mold and the odd sweet binder's glue that no one had used in half a thousand years. When he'd found it in the deep shadows of a rag-and-bone shop in Vanai, it delighted him. As he struggled through his translation, his enthusiasm waned.

The author claimed to have copied and translated a much older scroll, long since lost, that dated back to the first generations after the fall of the Dragon Empire. That was, for the first part, a framing device for speculative essay so trite and overdone that Geder's heart sank when he read it. In the second part, it meant that everything else in the essay was presented as legitimate history, which he found less interesting. And finally, the author had embraced long sentences and complex grammar in an attempt to make the text feel authentic, and it made every page an endurance test. By the time Geder reached the verbs, he had to turn back and remind himself what they were talking about.

If he'd been back in Vanai, he would have put the work aside. But Sir Alan Klin, Protector of Vanai, had heard of the caravan smuggling out the secret wealth of the city and made its recovery his first priority. This meant sending his favorites along the dragon's roads to Carse, and every man's status after that took his search party farther and farther from the likely hunting grounds until Jorey Kalliam was left with the Dry Wastes, Fallon Broot on the sea road to Ellassae, and Geder Palliako leading two dozen half-mutinous Timzinae soldiers through the icy mud of the southernmost of the Free Cities.

In their weeks on the farmer's tracks and game trails, they'd found three caravans. Small affairs hardly more than three carts each, and all of them tracking winter goods between local cities and towns. In between, days of mud and nights of nagging cold wore on Geder. And as poor a companion

as his essay on the powers of dragons to unmake lies might be, it outshone the soldiers. At the end of the day, he curled into his bed, sleeping while the others drank and sang and cursed the snow. In the mornings, he rose with the cook, reading and translating and pretending that he was anywhere besides here.

A discreet scratch came at the door, and his squire stepped in along with the Timzinae who acted as his second. The squire carried a tray with a shaped-bone bowl of stewed oats with raisins and an earthenware bottle of hot, dark, oily water that pretended to be coffee. The Timzinae made a formal salute. Geder closed the book as the squire laid his food out before him.

“What are the scouts saying?” Geder asked.

“The carts haven’t moved,” his second said. “They aren’t more than two hours’ march.”

“Well, no hurry then,” Geder said with more cheer than he felt. “Tell the men we’ll break camp after we eat and have this done with by midday.”

“And after?”

“South and west,” Geder said around a mouthful of oats. “That’s where the road goes.”

The second nodded and saluted again, turned on his heel, and left. Geder had the feeling that there was contempt in the movement, but he might only have been seeing what he expected to see. As he ate, the seams of his tent began to grow more distinct. Voices rose, men calling to each other, horses complaining, the chopping sound of planks coming down from the cooking platform. Outside, the sky moved from darkness to grey to a blue-and-white daybreak more light than warmth. By the time the weak sun had taken the worst chill from the air, Geder was mounted, and his men ready to march. According to the scouts, the newly sighted caravan was at least a decent size.

Still, Geder didn’t have any real hope for more than another disappointing search and sullen locals until he saw the Tralgu.

It was sitting on the outermost cart, its ears pricked forward with an interest that didn’t show in the rest of its face. Wester’s second was supposed to be a Tralgu. Geder swept his eyes over the carts huddled around the old mill, counting under his breath. Information was always sketchy, memory unreliable, and carts in a rough group could be hard to count, but it was near enough to what they’d been searching for that Geder’s heart began to beat a little faster.

A Timzinae in a thick wool robe walked down the road toward them. Geder motioned, and his six archers fanned out on the road behind him. The Tralgu sat forward and flicked an ear.

“You’re master of this ’van?” Geder asked.

“I am,” the Timzinae said. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I am Lord Geder Palliako of Rivenhalm and representative of King Simeon and Imperial Antea,” Geder said. “Where are you coming from?”

“Maccia. Going back there too. Bellin’s snowed over.”

Geder stared down at the black eyes. The nictitating membranes slid closed and open again, blinking without blinking. Geder wasn’t sure if it was a lie. It was possible, of course, that there was more than one ’van in the Free Cities with a Tralgu guard. This might still be a false alarm.

“You’ve stopped here?”

“Axle came loose on one of the carts. Only just got it strapped back in place. What’s this all about?”

“Who’s your guard captain?” Geder asked.

The ’van master, turned, spat, and pointed to a man leaning against one of the carts. A Firstblood with a blank, friendly face and an air of restrained violence. Wheat-colored hair touched by grey. Broad across the shoulder. It might have been Marcus Wester. It might have been a thousand other men.

“What’s his name?”

“Tag,” the ’van master said.

One of the soldiers in the road behind him spoke, his voice too low for Geder to make out the words. Another replied. He felt a blush crawling up his neck. Either the man was lying to him or he

wasn't, and every moment that Geder hesitated, he felt more like a fool.

"Get your guards out onto the road," he said. "Put the carters with their carts."

"And why would I do that?"

Someone chuckled. Geder's embarrassment turned to rage.

"Because if you don't, I'll have you killed," he shouted. "And because you had the temerity to question me, I'll have every weapon and piece of armor in a pile on the road ten paces from your guardsmen. And if I find so much as a work knife overlooked, I'll leave your corpse for the crows."

The nictitating membrane slid open and closed. The caravan master turned around and trudged back toward the carts. Geder motioned his second closer.

"Send men around the sides. If anyone tries to sneak away, bring them back alive if you can. Dead if you have to. We're searching this place down to the pegs and nails."

"The mill house too?" the second asked.

"Everything," Geder said.

The Timzinae nodded and moved back, calling to his men. Geder watched the carts, anger and embarrassment giving way to anxiety. The captain and the caravan master exchanged a few words, and the captain looked up. He frowned at Geder, shrugged, and turned away. If there was going to be resistance, it would come now and it would come hard. Geder shifted in his saddle, the still-healing wound in his leg aching in anticipation. Movement came from the mill house, from every cart. How many soldiers would they have? If the full wealth of the Medean bank was sitting in those carts, every carter would be a swordsman or an archer. Geder's scalp began to crawl. If they had bowmen hidden in those carts, he'd be sprouting arrows. Fear shifted in his belly like he'd eaten bad fish. Trying to seem casual, he turned his horse and trotted to the rear of their formation.

To judge by the expressions of the soldiers, he hadn't fooled anybody.

The first of the guards lumbered out from the carts, half a dozen swords in her arms like firewood. She dropped them on the ground where Geder had ordered. Then a thin boy hardly old enough to be a soldier with two unstrung bows and a backload of quivers. Slowly, the unpromising parade went on, the sad pile of arms and armor growing until ten guards and a wild-haired cunning man marched out to the road in wool and cotton, counted ten paces from the heap, and stood in the clear, hugging themselves against the cold.

"Move in," Geder said.

The soldiers walked forward, blades drawn. The carters stood by their carts and smiled or frowned or looked around in confusion. Geder rode a slow turn around the little encampment. The sound of the search seemed to follow him—voices fierce and querulous, wood clacking, metal clanging against metal. He watched as his men pulled ingots of pig iron out of a cart and dropped them to the ground. One man scratched at the metal to be sure it was only what it seemed, then spat and turned back to the search.

Midday came and went. A chill wind picked up, setting the snow to skitter and swirl around their ankles. The soldiers unloaded each cart, looked under them, examined the horse and mules, and began going through the mill house. Geder got off his horse at the edge of the mill pond and looked at the bare carts, the frigid carters, the ineffectual sun in the watery sky. One of the carters—a sickly-looking girl with pale hair and skin—crouched by bolts of fallen wool and pretended not to watch Geder. He knew what she saw. A puffed-up nobleman bullying her and her friends. He wanted to go to her, to explain that it wasn't like that. That *he* wasn't like that.

Instead, he turned away. The shifting dust of snow moved over the ice like ripples on water. Geder walked along the edge, trying not to feel the girl's gaze on him. Some idiot had been skating. White marks showed where blades had cut across the thin ice. Lucky they didn't break through. He'd read an essay once outlining the time it took each of the thirteen races to die in icy water. Well, twelve, really. The Drowned weren't...

Geder stopped almost before he knew what stopped him. On the edge of the pond, a long, low drift of snow swept out onto the ice. The white blade marks vanished into it, and then out of it again

as if the skater had passed directly through the little drift. Or it hadn't been there until after the skater had passed. Geder walked closer. The snow itself looked odd. It didn't have the ice-crust he expected, and it was smooth as broom-swept sand. Geder looked up. The guards were on the far side of the caravan. His own soldiers grouped at the mouth of the mill house. He walked around the curious snow.

Deep scores and marks marred the surface of the ice. Poking out just at ankle height, something black and square. He squatted, brushing the snow away. A box, half drowned in recently cut ice and then covered over. And others beside it, all of them crusted over with thin ice and hidden by the carefully arranged snowdrift. He looked up. The girl carter was standing now, craning her neck to see him, her hands knotted at her belly. Geder took out his knife and forced the latch. Topaz, jade, emerald, pearl, gold and silver filigree as delicate as frost. Geder pulled back like the gems had stung him, and then, as he understood what he was seeing, felt a sunrise in his chest, relief and pleasure rushing through him, unknitting his muscles and bringing a grin to his face.

He'd done it. He'd found the missing caravan and the hidden wealth of Vanai. No more of Geder Palliako, the expendable idiot. No more apologizing for what he liked to read or the roundness of his belly. Oh, no. His name would be carried back to Camnipol and King Simeon on a carriage of gold by horses with rubies on their reins. He would be the talk of the court, praised and honored and celebrated in the highest circles of the kingdom.

Except, of course, that he wouldn't. The name that would be celebrated in Camnipol was Alan Klin's.

Alan Klin, who'd humiliated him. Who'd burned his book.

Geder took a long, deep breath, let it out slowly, and closed the lid. A moment later, he opened it again, dug two double handfuls of gems out, and poured them down his shirt. The lovely little stones gathered around his belly where his belt cinched tight. He closed his jacket to cover the lumps, lowered the lid again, and scraped the snow back over it. As he stood, a wide, black joy filled him and made his first pleasure seem weak. When he walked back to the carts, he didn't need to remind himself to hold his head high. The girl watched him approach. Geder grinned at her like he was greeting an old friend or a lover. An accomplice. Briefly, he lifted a single finger to his lips. *Don't tell.*

The girl's eyes went wide. Half a breath later she nodded, only once. *I won't.* He could have kissed her.

When he found his second, the Timzinae had finished leading the common soldiers through the mill house. Geder noticed that the conversation among the soldiers stopped when he walked in the room, but this time it didn't bother him. The interior of the house smelled of mold and smoke, and the signs of the caravan's night in the shelter marked the stones of the flooring. A broom leaned against the far wall. Its head was wet, and a thin puddle of water darkened the stones beneath it. Geder pointedly ignored it.

"What have you found?" he asked.

"Nothing, my lord," the second said.

"We're wasting time here," Geder said. "Gather the men. We should move on."

The second looked around. One of the soldiers—a young Timzinae with black scales that shone like he'd polished them—shrugged.

"My lord, we haven't turned the basement. If you'd like—"

"Do you really think there's a point to it?" Geder asked. When the second didn't reply at once: "Honestly."

"Honestly, no."

"Then let's get the men together and go."

The caravan master, sitting on a stool, made a rough impatient noise in the back of his throat. Geder turned to him.

"On behalf of empire and king, I apologize for this inconvenience," he said with a bow.

“Think nothing of it,” the ’van master said sourly.

Outside, the soldiers fell into position as they had every time before. Geder lifted himself to his own saddle carefully. His belt held. The gems and jewels dug at his skin, pinching a little at his sides. None fell out. The caravan guards watched with well-feigned lack of interest as Geder drew his sword in salute, turned his horse, and moved forward at a gentle walk. With every step they took away from the caravan, he felt his spine relax. The sun, already sliding down toward the horizon, half blinded him, and he craned his neck, counting the soldiers behind him to make sure no one had doubled back or been left behind. None had.

At the top of the ridge, Geder paused. His second came to his side.

“We can make camp at the same place as last night, my lord,” he said. “Strike out south and west in the morning.”

Geder shook his head. “East,” he said.

“Lord?”

“Let’s go east,” Geder said. “Gilea’s not far, and we can spend a few days someplace warm before we go back to Vanai.”

“We’re going back?” the second asked, his voice carefully neutral.

“May as well,” Geder said, struggling against his smile. “We aren’t going to find anything.”

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Dawson

Winter business.

The words themselves reeked of desperation. From the longest night to first thaw, noblemen took to their estates or they followed the King's Hunt. They took stock of what sort of men their sons were becoming, reacquainted themselves with wives and mistresses, looked over the tax revenue from their holdings. To the highborn, winter meant domesticity and the work of the hearth. Much as he loved Camnipol, passing through the wind-chilled, smoke-stinking streets put Dawson in the company of professional courtiers, merchants, and other men of uncertain status. But his cause was just, and so he bore the insult to his dignity.

Nor was he the only one to suffer it.

"I don't understand why you hate Issandrian so deeply," said Canl Daskellin, Baron of Watermarch, Protector of Northport, and His Majesty's Special Ambassador to Northcoast. "He's entirely too pretty and full of himself, it's true, but if you take being self-impressed and ambitious as sinning, you won't find any saints in this court."

Dawson sat back in his chair. Around them, the Fraternity of the Great Bear seemed almost empty. Seats and cushions upholstered in raw silk or Cabral damask sat empty. Black iron braziers squatted in rooms built to be cool in midsummer. The servant girls, so often hard-pressed to tend the needs of the fraternity members, haunted the shadows and doorways, waiting for a sign that something might be wanted. At summer's height, there might be a hundred men of the best breeding in the empire drinking and smoking and conducting affairs of court in these grand and comfortable rooms. Now, if Dawson spoke too loud, it echoed.

"It isn't the man," Dawson said. "It's the philosophy behind him. Maas and Klin are no better, but Issandrian holds their leashes."

"Philosophical differences hardly seem to justify... What? Conspiracy?"

"Philosophy always becomes action. Issandrian and Maas and the others are willing to play to the lowest kind of man in order to gain power."

"You mean the farmer's council."

"That's one place," Dawson said. "But if they are willing to champion rabble, how long is it before the rabble choose to champion themselves? Already we have restrictions on slavery, on bed servants, on land service. All of that within our lifetimes. And all from men like Issandrian, courting favor from laborers and merchants and whores."

Canl Daskellin gave out a low grunt. Between the thin winter light silhouetting him and the almost Lyoneian darkness of his skin, Dawson could hardly make out his expression. Still, he hadn't disagreed. And if he hadn't had concerns of his own, he wouldn't have come.

"It's time for the true spirit of Antea to put things right," Dawson said. "These hounds think they run the hunt. They must be broken, and if we wait until Prince Aster is living under Issandrian's roof..."

The silence finished his thought more eloquently than any words could. Daskellin shifted forward in his chair, muttering something obscene under his breath.

"You're sure the king intends to take that step?"

"I heard it from his own mouth," Dawson said. "Simeon is a good man, and he could be a good king too, but not without our loyalty. He's waiting for his chance to put Issandrian in his place. And I am going to provide that chance."

Soft voices came from the passage beyond, and then faded again. From the street, the clacking of steel-shod hooves. Canl drew a small clay pipe from his jacket and lifted his hand. A servant girl scurried over with a taper. With the first fragrant blue cloud of smoke, she retreated. Dawson waited.

"How?" Daskellin asked. His voice had taken on the firmness of an interrogator. Dawson smiled. The battle was half won.

"Deny Issandrian his strength," Dawson said. "Recall Alan Klin from Vanai. Alienate Issandrian from the farmers. Shatter his circle."

"Meaning Maas and Klin."

"To start, but he has other adherents as well. But that isn't enough. They gained influence because the men who understand what noble blood means are divided."

Daskellin took a long draw on his pipe, the ember glowing bright and then fading as he exhaled.

"And thus your conspiracy," he said.

"Loyalty to the king is no conspiracy," Dawson said. "It's what we should have been doing all along. But we slept, and the dogs snuck in. And, Canl, you *know* that."

Daskellin tapped the clay stem against his teeth. His eyes narrowed.

"Whatever it is," Dawson said, "say it."

"Loyalty to King Simeon is one thing. Becoming the tool of House Kalliam is something else. I am... *disturbed* by the changes Issandrian and his cabal are suggesting. But trading one man of ambition for another is no solution."

"You want me to show I'm not Issandrian?"

"I do."

"What proof do you want?"

"If I help to recall Klin from Vanai, you cannot profit from it. Everyone's quite aware that your son is under Klin's command there. Jorey Kalliam cannot take the protectorship of Vanai."

Dawson blinked, opened his mouth, closed it again.

"Canl," he began, but Daskellin's eyes narrowed. Dawson took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When he spoke, his voice was harder than he'd meant it to be. "I swear before God and the throne of Antea that my son Jorey will not take protectorship of Vanai when Alan Klin is called home. Further, I swear that no one of my house will take profit from Vanai. Now, will you swear the same, old friend?"

"Me?"

"You have a cousin in the city, I think? I'm sure you wouldn't want to give the impression that your own support of the throne is merely self-serving?"

Daskellin's laughter boomed and rolled, a deep sound and warm enough to push back the teeth of winter, if only for a moment.

"God wept, Kalliam. You'll make altruists of us all."

"Will you swear?" Kalliam said. "Will you make common cause with the men who are loyal to King Simeon and to put the restoration of tradition ahead of your own glory?"

"True servants to the throne," Daskellin said, half amused.

"Yes," Dawson said. There was no room for lightness in his voice. He was hard as stone, his intentions fashioned from steel. "True servants to the throne."

Daskellin sobered.

"You *mean* this," he said.

"I do," Dawson said.

The dark eyes flickered over Dawson's face, as if trying to penetrate a disguise. And then as it had with half a dozen men before him—men whom Dawson had chosen because he knew they were as hungry for it as he himself was—pride bloomed in the dark face. Pride and determination and a sense of becoming part of something greater and good.

"Then yes," Daskellin said softly, "I will."

The Division was the most obvious of the partitions within the city, but it was far from the only one. On both sides of the bridges, nobility held to their mansions and squares while the lesser people lived in smaller, narrower ways. Living north of the Kestrel Square meant you were of high stature. Having your stables by the southern gate meant you had good blood, but a squandered fortune. The city was complex in ways that only her citizens could know. The streets were not the only dimension in which class could be measured. The poorest and most desperate tunneled down to coax new life out of the ruins of previous ages on which the modern city was built, living in darkness and squalor, but saving them at least from the indignities of winter.

Ice and snow turned the dark cobbles white. Carts went slowly, and mules carefully. Horses walked haltingly for fear of slipping, breaking a leg, and being slaughtered on the street where they fell. The Camnipol winter stole even the dignity of a waiting carriage, but the meeting with Daskellin had left Dawson so pleased with himself that he barely minded. He let the servant girl belt on his overcoat of dark leather with silverwork seams and bloodstone hooks, put on the broad-brimmed hat that matched it, and marched himself out into the streets toward his home and Clara.

He'd spent his boyhood in Camnipol, following his father through the rituals of power during the day and then drinking, singing, and carousing with the other highborn boys through the nights. Even now, decades later, the snow-caked stone held memories under it. He passed the thin alley where Eliayzer Breiniako had run naked after losing a bet with him the night they'd both turned fourteen. Then the wide turning that led to the streets where all the Timzinae and Jasuru made their homes: the quarter of bugs and pennies. He passed under Morade's Arch, where the last, mad Dragon Emperor had died in his clutch-mate's talons; the arc of the dragon's jade rose up almost as high as the Kingspire itself and so thin and finely worked it seemed any wind would tip it over. He passed the Chancel of Sorrial, with its soot-blackened southern wall. The cathouse where his father had taken him on his tenth birthday and bought him his first night with a woman.

The single white cloud of the sky glowed beneficently on the city, dispelling shadows. A baker's cart coming back from the market square dropped a crate of almonds, and a dozen children seemed to appear from no place, grabbing at the nuts before the carter could stop them. On the western wall, he could look down over the great plains of Antea like God looking down on the world. The wind through the streets bit and rasped on his lips and cheeks. It was the perfect city. Everything had happened here, from the fall of dragons, to the elevation of the White Prophet, to the slave riots that had brought House Antea to refound a Firstblood empire in the city that dragons built. The stones stood witness to centuries, to ages.

And now, perhaps for the first time, Dawson was taking his place in the city that he loved. He had begun the work for which Camnipol would remember him. Dawson Kalliam, Baron of Osterling Fells, who purified the court and guarded Antea on the right and proper path. Kalliam, who gathered the defenders of righteousness. Who destroyed the agents of chaos and change.

The Undying City invited him to get drunk on his memories and the vision of a future bent to his will—a future where Curtin Issandrian and Feldin Maas were left to scuttle through filthy snow on winter business instead of him—and Dawson succumbed. If there were any warning signs before the attack, he missed them entirely.

The road curved, following the shape of the promontory's edge, and in the triangular park where two wide streets became one, three men in dark wool overcoats and leggings stood together in deep conversation. Their breath came out white as feathers, white as the sky. Dawson strode toward them, expecting them to give way before a Baron of the Court. Hard eyes met his. The men didn't move.

Annoyance intruded on Dawson's reverie, then the thought that they might not recognize his rank and station. The nearest of the men opened his coat and drew a wide, curved knife. The others moved to flank. Dawson barked out a short laugh of disdain and disbelief, and the knife man rushed him. Dawson danced back, trying to draw his own sword. Even before he had his blade clear of the scabbard the thug on his left struck his elbow with a weighted club. Dawson's hand went numb and

his sword fell silently to the icy ground. The knife man swung, his blade slicing through the leather overcoat and into the flesh of Dawson's chest. Dawson yelled and jumped back.

It was the farthest thing from a duel. There was no beauty in the men's movements or style, no sense of honor. Not even the grace of formal training. The knife man held his blade like a butcher, and his partners with their clubs penned Dawson in as if he might turn and flee, squealing like a frightened sow. Dawson drew himself to his full height, pressing fingers to the torn coat. The fingers of his gloves came away bloody.

"You have just made your last mistake," Dawson said. "You have no idea who you're facing."

The knife man smiled.

"Think I do, m'lord," he said, and struck again. The blade would have sunk deep into Dawson's belly if decades of training hadn't pulled him back and to the side. The club man on the left swung hard, catching him on the shoulder. As Dawson sank to his knees, it occurred to him for the first time that these were not simple street toughs looking for a few coins. It was a trap, and it was meant for him.

The club man on his right danced back and forward and back on the balls of his feet, weapon raised high and ready to come down with a skull-shattering blow. Dawson raised his arm, and the attacker vanished with a grunt. The assassins turned. A new man in grey hunter's wool rolled on the cobbles, locked in the club man's violent embrace. When they broke, the new man leapt up. His clothes were soaked in red, as was the short sword in his hand. The thug didn't rise.

"Lord Kalliam," the new man shouted, and tossed his blade. Dawson watched it arc through the air, blood and steel. Time seemed to slow. The grip was dark leather, well used. The blade itself had a blood channel running down its center. Dawson reached out, plucking the sword from the air. The remaining club man swung at him, and, still on his knees, Dawson parried the attack.

The fallen attacker groaned, lifted himself with one hand, then slipped back into the spreading pool of red.

Dawson rose. The two assassins glanced at each other, and Dawson read the fear in them. True, he was hurt and his rescuer now unarmed. True, the numbers were merely even. And still, to go so suddenly from three men and a victim to an almost equal battle shook their confidence. The club man took a step back, half turning as if he might flee. Dawson felt his lips curl. These men were cowards.

He swung his borrowed sword fast, low, and hard. The man danced back, parrying awkwardly. To Dawson's right, the knife man shouted and leapt for Dawson's unarmed ally. The pain of Dawson's wounds faded, the chill of his own blood freezing on his chest brought a feral grin to his mouth. The club man fell back a step, and Dawson pressed in, his knees bent, his weight low, his body balanced and ready. When the weighted club made its next swing, Dawson pushed inside its arc, taking the blow on his ribs as he thrust the blade forward. The club man's breath went out of him in a white, feathery rush. There was armor under that overcoat. The assassin wasn't dead, but he was staggered. Dawson turned, brought a heel down on the man's instep, swung the pommel of his sword in a short, hard jab at his face. The unmistakable crunch of breaking cartilage transferred itself to Dawson's wrist.

The assassin bent low and rushed him, trying to bowl him over by main force. Dawson slid back, his boots finding little purchase on the icy street. The thug weighed more than him, and he was counting on that to save him in the grapple. He had misjudged Dawson's character.

Dawson dropped the sword, grabbed the thug's dark hair in his left hand, not to pull the man's head away but to steady it. He drove his thumb deep in the man's eye socket, bending at the knuckle. Something soft and terrible happened, and the man shrieked high and pained and frightened. Dawson pushed him away, and the man stumbled to his knees, hands pressed to his ruined eye and shattered nose.

The knife man and Dawson's rescuer were circling one another. The rescuer's arms were spread and weaponless. A cut on his left arm bled, scattering droplets of scarlet on the white ice and black cobbles. A crowd was gathering on the street. Men, women, children with eyes wide and hungry

taking in the violence without daring to intervene. Dawson kicked the mewling club man to the pavement and pulled the strap of his club from around his wrist. The knife man's glance spoke panic, and Dawson drew the weighted club whirring through the air, testing its balance and weight.

The knife man bolted, dark boots throwing bits of snow up behind him as he pelted away. The crowd parted, letting the thug escape rather than risk a swing of his little blade. Peasants, commoners, and serfs making way for one of their own. He wanted to feel some outrage that the simple citizens of Camnipol would allow the man to flee, but he didn't. Cowardice and the safety of the herd was the nature of the lowborn. He could as well blame sheep for bleating.

The first assassin to fall lay perfectly still, the blood around him steaming. The second club man was growing quiet too, slipping into shock. Dawson's rescuer squatted on bent ankles, considering his wounded arm. He was young, thick arms and shoulders and rough, knife-cropped hair. The shape of his face was familiar.

"It seems I owe you my thanks," Dawson said. To his surprise, he was out of breath.

The new man shook his head.

"I should have come sooner, my lord," the young man said. "I stayed too far back."

"Too far back?" Dawson said. "You've been tracking me?"

The man nodded and would not meet his eyes.

"Why is that?" Dawson asked.

"Your lady wife, my lord," the man said. "She took me into service after you turned me out. She tasked me with keeping you safe, sir. I'm afraid I've done a poor job."

Of course. The huntsman from the kitchens who'd returned the bit of horn soaked in dog's blood and insult. Vincen Coe, the name had been. He'd never asked Clara what she'd done to see to the boy, but of course she couldn't simply reinstate him over her husband's express words. And certainly it would be beneath him to say he'd been unjust with the boy.

"You're mistaken," Dawson said.

"Lord?"

"I've never seen you before, and I wouldn't have turned a man of your courage and talent out of my service."

"Yes... I mean, no, my lord."

"That's settled, then. Come along with me, we'll get these little scratches daubed."

Coe stood.

"My sword, my lord?"

"Yes. We may have need of that," Dawson said, gesturing to where it lay, grimed with blood and snow and soot. "It seems I'm frightening all the right men."

Marcus

Fire and blood. Merian shrieked her pain and fear and indignation as only a child could blend them. Her eyes were fixed on him, her arms reaching out. Marcus fought his paralysis, forced his arms to reach for her, and in moving them, woke himself.

The screams of the dead lingered in the cool air as he lifted himself up, still expecting in his half-dream to see the wheat fields and high, stately windmills of Ellis. Instead, the wide star-crowded sky of Birancour arched above him, the looming darkness of the mountains behind him to the east without even the suggestion of dawn. The burning smell of memory gave way to the sweet, astringent scent of ice lily and the distant presentiment of salt that was the sea.

He lay back in his bedroll and waited for the dream to fade. By long habit, he attended to his body. The constricting tightness in his throat eased first, then in his chest. The gut-punch ache in his belly faded slowly and vanished. Soon there was only the permanent hollow beneath his ribs, and he knew it was safe to stand.

They were battle scars. Some men lost a leg or a hand. Some men lost their eyes. Marcus had lost a family. And just as old soldiers knew when rain was coming from the ache of healed bones, he suffered now. It didn't mean anything. It was just his own private bad weather, and like bad weather, it would pass. It was only for the moment that the dreams were getting worse.

The caravan slept, carters and mules both, in the deep night. The watch fire glittered on the hillside above him, no brighter than a star, but orange instead of blue. Marcus made his way toward it. The dry grass hushed against his boots and field mice skittered away. Yardem Hane sat silhouetted by the small fire, back turned to keep the light from blunting his eyes. Beside him sat a less familiar form. Marcus moved close enough to make out their words.

"The *shape* of a soul?" Master Kit asked. "I think I don't understand what you mean."

"Just that. A soul has a shape," Yardem said. His wide hands patted the air in front of him. "And fate is formed by it. Whatever the world delivers to you, the shape of your soul determines what you do with it, and the actions you take make your destiny."

Marcus turned his foot, scraping the ground loud enough to announce himself.

"Morning, Captain," Yardem said without turning to look.

"You filling our cunning man's head with your superstitious hairwash?"

"I am, sir."

"Be careful, Kit," Marcus said, walking into the dim circle of light. "Yardem used to be a priest, you know."

Master Kit's eyebrows rose and he looked his question from Marcus to Yardem. The Tralgu shrugged eloquently.

"Ended poorly," Yardem said.

"It's not a faith I'd heard of before," Master Kit said. "I have to say I find the ideas fascinating. What shape is your own soul?"

"I've never seen my soul," Yardem said.

Marcus sat. The warmth of the fire touched his back. High above them, a falling star streaked from east to west, fading almost before Marcus saw it. The silence felt suddenly awkward.

"Go ahead," Marcus said. "Tell him if you want to."

"Tell me what?" Master Kit asked.

"I have seen the captain's. I was at Wodford the day of the battle. The captain rode by, taking count of the troop, and... I saw it."

"And what shape was it?" Master Kit asked

"A circle standing on its edge," Yardem said.

"What did you take that to mean?"

"That he rises when brought low and falls when placed high," Yardem said.

"He needed magical visions to see that," Marcus said. "Most people just take it as given."

"But always?" Master Kit said. "Surely if God wanted to change the shape of a man's soul—"

"I've never seen God," Yardem said.

"But you believe in him," Master Kit said.

"I'm reserving judgment," Yardem said. Master Kit considered that.

"And what about you, Captain?" he asked. "Stories are you were a pious man once."

"I choose not to believe in any gods as an act of charity," Marcus said.

"Charity toward whom?"

"Toward the gods. Seems rude to think they couldn't make a world better than this," Marcus said. "Do we have any food left?"

The dawn crept in softly, the outline of the mountains to the east growing clearer against the stars, then the few finger-thin clouds began to glow pink and gold and light seemed to come from nowhere, to rise up from the earth like a mist. The carts changed from near-invisible hulks to wood and iron. Pot metal clanked from across the camp as the caravan master's wife began cooking the morning's mash of stewed grain and honeyed pork. The landscape changed from endless featureless darkness to hills and trees, scrub and stream. Yardem ran the guards through their morning drills while Marcus walked through the camp and pretended there was no cart in the caravan he cared about more than another.

The girl, Cithrin, followed the same routine as the others. She cared for her mules, she ate her food, she scraped the mud out of her axle holes. If she needed help, she asked Opal or Master Kit. Never the caravan master, never Marcus himself. But never Sandr either, and the boy had been avoiding her like his life depended on it, so that was for the best. Marcus watched her without being obvious. She'd gotten better since they'd left Vanai. Since they'd left Bellin, for that. But there were dark pouches under her eyes and the awkwardness of exhaustion in her movements.

Marcus found the caravan master squatting beside the lead cart, a wide scroll of inked parchment on the dirt before him: a map of south Birancour probably centuries out of date, but it would still show where the dragon's roads were. His wife, breakfast duties finished, was putting their team in harness.

"Day," the caravan master said. "Day and a half at most, and we'll get onto a real road again."

"That's good."

"Another three, and we'll be in Porte Oliva. You've been there before?"

"A time or two," Marcus said. "It's a good winter port. Doesn't get too cold. The queen's governor isn't too heavy a tax hand."

"We'll stop there, then."

"Roads should be clear to Carse by early spring," Marcus said.

"Not for me," the caravan master said, folding the map. "We reach Porte Oliva, and we're done. The 'van stops there."

Marcus frowned and crossed his arms.

"There are some problems with that," he said. "The job is to see all this to Carse."

"Your job is to protect the caravan," the Timzinae said. "Mine is to say where it goes and when it stops. Porte Oliva has a market. Road trade to Cabral and Herez, not to mention the rest of the cities in Birancour. Ships to Lyoniea, and the blue-water trade to Far Syramys. The cargo I was contracted to haul will sell well enough there."

"The cargo you were contracted for," Marcus repeated, turning the words over like they tasted wrong.

"Is there something else I should care about?" The caravan master's chin jutted forward. "You're worried I might inconvenience the smuggler?"

"Last I heard, the Medean bank doesn't trade in Birancour," Marcus said. "You'll be sitting that girl on a pile of money high as a tree with nothing to protect her. Might as well hang a sign on her neck."

The 'van master tossed his folded map on the seat of his cart and began hauling himself up beside it. His wife blinked a silent apology to Marcus and looked away.

"*That girl* and her drinking and smuggling and sinning with your guardsmen can watch out for herself," the 'van master said. "We were blind lucky with that Antean bastard. There's no reason to expect we'll be as fortunate next time."

And there will be a next time, he didn't say. He didn't need to.

"If you take my advice," the 'van master went on, "you'll take your fee, turn your horse, and ride away from that girl until she's less than a memory. People like that are only trouble."

Marcus bristled.

"What kind of people do you mean?"

"Bankers," the 'van master said, and spat.

Porte Oliva nestled on a land spur that pressed out into a wide, shallow bay. Even at low tide, the sea protected her on three sides. Reefs and sandbars made the approach from the ocean dangerous enough that local boatmen could earn their living guiding ships from the deep ocean safely into port and then out again. In the thousand years since its foundation, the city had never been taken by force, though twice it had been seduced. The dragon's road led to it, the green pathway curving up over hills long since washed away, so that the carts traveled across the tops of wide-sloping arches as the ground dropped away beneath them.

As they drew nearer the city, the road became more crowded. Where Vanai had been rich with the black-chitined Timzinae, the crowd here showed the pale, ethereal faces of Cinnae and the oily, short, bead-adorned fur of Kurtadam in greater numbers even than Firstblood. The press of carts and bodies thickened, and Marcus started to see swordsmen in with copper torcs and the green and gold of Birancour. Queensmen. The guardians of the city, though the queen herself kept to the greater cities of Sara-su-mar and Porte Silena in the north. Marcus watched the caravan master approach one of the older queensmen, lean forward as if to speak above the chirr and murmur of the crowd. A few coins traded hands, and without any obvious change, the carts soon found themselves moving faster than before, passing the foot traffic and hand barrows. Marcus knew they had reached the Porte Oliva proper when the beggars and mendicants appeared.

Please, my lord, I have a child.

My husband is a sailor. His ship is three months late, and there's no money for food.

God tells us to be generous.

Marcus paced alongside the carts, ignoring the words and gestures, watching for the thieves and cutpurses who always lived in crowds like these. The other guards followed his example, and likely knew more about sleight of hand than he did. It was odd how well suited the players were to every part of guarding a 'van besides the actual guard duty. He reached the last cart and turned to start for the front again. Three carts ahead, Master Kit leaned down and pressed a coin into an old man's hand.

"Don't encourage them," Marcus called. "They're all liars."

"Not all, Captain," Kit called back with a grin. "Only most."

He passed the wool cart where the smuggler girl, still in her rough carter's clothes, drove her team. Put beside the full-blood Cinnae on the road, it was easier to see her as something besides a frail Firstblood girl. Her hair wasn't as fine as theirs, her features were thicker, her skin had more

color, but the resemblance was there. She noticed him watching her, and tried out a smile. He ignored her with the same studied intention as the beggars, and for similar reasons. Riding on, the sense of anticipation and dread sat in his gut. The conversation would come, and it would be today, and the wise thing—the right thing, the thing that would let his nightmares fade again—was to refuse the girl. At the lead cart, Yardem met his gaze impassively.

Once, centuries before, the city had ended at the great stone embattlements. Now the towering white stone walls were in the middle of a busy market quarter. Fishmongers shouted out their catch on the north side of the arched tunnel that led to the inner city, and after they passed through, indistinguishable men and women called out the same fish. The architecture of war slept in the middle of a living community like a great hunting cat torpid from the kill. Beyond it, the dragon's road widened and stopped at a huge open square.

The crowd pressed here as thick as they had on the road. A great marble temple high as five men standing one atop the other loomed on the eastern end, the governor's palace of red brick and colored glass on the west. God's voice and the law's arm, twin powers of the throne. And between them, scattered through the square, wooden platforms rose with prisoners suffering their punishments. A Kurtadam man with rheumy eyes and severed hands held a sign between his stumps announcing himself a thief. A Firstblood woman smeared in shit and offal sat under the carved wooden symbol of a procuress. Three Cinnae men hung dead from a gallows, flies darkening the soft flesh around their eyes; a murderer, a rapist, and a child-user respectively. Together, the platforms served as a short, effective introduction to the local laws.

The caravan master left them standing for the better part of an hour as he vanished into the governor's palace, returning with small stone figures on leather thongs to place on the carts as proof the road taxes had been paid. With a shout, he led them down a side road of hard, pale brick to the yard.

Journey's end. Marcus made his way to the front cart. The caravan master had a cloth sack waiting for him. It jingled when he held it out.

"You can count it," the Timzinae said.

"That's fine," Marcus said.

The 'van master's brows lifted, then he shrugged.

"Suit yourself. But don't come later saying it was short."

"Won't."

"All right, then."

Marcus nodded and turned away. He took out his share and Yardem's, then despite what he'd said, he counted the rest. It was all there.

The players were at their own cart, still wearing their armor and swords. The road had changed them and it hadn't. They were harder now, and each of them could handle a sword like a soldier. On the other hand, they laughed and joked now as much as they had in the tavern in Vanai. Sandr and Smit were competing now to see who could hold a handstand longest. Cary, Opal, and Mikel traded quips and barbs as they saw to their mules. Master Kit sat on the cart's high bench, watching over it all like a benevolent saint from the old stories. Marcus went to him.

"It appears we've managed the trick, then," Master Kit said. "I hadn't expected it to be quite so eventful."

"Make a fine comedy," Marcus said,

"I think the world is often like that."

"Like what?"

"Comic, but only at the right distance."

"Likely true," Marcus said as he handed the money to Master Kit. "What are you going to do now?"

"I suspect Porte Oliva's as good a venue as any, and suppose we'll try our luck at our original trade. After a bit of a rest, maybe. There's a long tradition of puppeteers here, and I'm hoping we

might be able to recruit a new actor or two with those skills.”

“It was good working with you,” Marcus said. “Went better than I expected, considering. I expect I’ll see you about the city. We’ll stay until thaw.”

“Thank you for not emasculating Sandr. I still hope to make a decent leading man of him one day.”

“Luck with that,” Marcus said.

“Take care of yourself, Captain Wester,” Master Kit said. “I find you a fascinating man.”

And that was over as well. To his left, the caravan master was passing to each cart in turn, taking signatures and inventories. Yardem appeared at Marcus’s side.

“We’ll need men,” the Tralgu said.

“And a cunning man. But there’s not a war on here. We’ll find some.”

The Tralgu flicked a jingling ear.

“Are you going to let the girl hire us, sir?”

Marcus took a deep breath. The city smelled of horse shit, fish, and brine. Haze left the sky more white than blue. He exhaled slowly.

“No,” he said.

They stood together. The ’van master reached her cart. Cithrin stood before him like a prisoner before a magistrate, spine straight, eyes ahead of her. Alone in a city she didn’t know, without protector or path.

“We could leave now,” Yardem said.

Marcus shook his head.

“She deserves to hear it.”

The ’van master moved on. Marcus looked to the Tralgu, the girl, spat, and went to her. *Do it*, he told himself, *and get the worst behind and on to the next thing*. The girl looked up as he came, her eyes unfocused and glassy with exhaustion, her skin even paler than usual. And yet she lifted her chin a degree.

“Captain,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Yardem and I. We can’t work for you.”

“All right,” she said. For all her reaction, he might have told her the sun rose in the morning.

“My advice, take as much as you can carry, leave the rest, and take ship out to Lyoniea or Far Syramis. Start over.”

The ’van master whistled. The first cart pulled away. The caravan officially ended. The carts around them began to shift and squeak, each bound for its own market, its own quarter. Even the players were moving off now, Sandr and Smit walking with the mules to clear the way. Cithrin bel Sarcour, orphan and ward of the Medean bank, novice smuggler, almost woman, looked at him with tired eyes.

“Good luck,” he said, and walked away.

The salt quarter of Porte Oliva was, as Master Kit had said, inhabited by puppets. Street performers seemed to be at every other corner, crouched behind or within boxes, hectoring the passersby in the voices of their dolls. Some were the standard race humor of PennyPenny the violent Jurasu and the clever Timzinae Roaches. Some were political like the idiot King Ardelhumblemub with his oversized crown. Some, Stannin Aftellin the perpetually lustful Firstblood in his traditional love triangle with a phlegmatic Dartinae and a manipulative Cinnae, were bawdy and racial and political all together.

Many more were more local. Marcus was pausing for a moment by a performance about a filthy butcher who smoked his meat with burning shit and ground maggots into his sausage when a Cinnae woman in the crowd started yelling at the puppeteer for taking gold from a rival butcher. At another, four queensmen with swords and copper torcs watched a story about plums and a fairy princess with

scowls that suggested the allegory, whatever it was, might put the performer on the wrong side of the law.

The public house they stopped at had a courtyard that overlooked the seawall. The sun was sliding down the western sky, setting the white stucco walls glowing gold. The water of the bay was pale blue, the sea beyond an indigo so deep it was almost black. The smell of brine and roasting chicken wrestled with the incense smoke from a wandering priest. Sailors of several races, thick-shouldered and loud-throated all of them, sat at the wide tables under the bright embroidered canopies. Braziers burned between every table, bringing the memory of summer to the winter-chill air. Marcus sat and caught the serving girl's eye. She nodded a promise, and he leaned back in his chair.

"We'll need work."

"Yes, sir," Yardem said.

"And a new crew. A real one this time."

"Yes, sir."

"But there will be warehouses. Come the spring, caravans going inland."

"There will, sir."

"Any thoughts, then?"

The serving girl—a Kurtadam with the soft, pale pelt of an adolescent and gold and silver beads all down her sides—brought mugs of hot cider to them and hurried off before Marcus could pay her. Yardem lifted one. In his hands, it looked small. He drank slowly, his brow furrowed and his ears tucked back. Behind him, the sun glowed bright enough to hurt.

"What it is?" Marcus said.

"The smuggler girl, sir. Cithrin."

Marcus laughed, but he felt the anger behind it. From the shift in Yardem's shoulders, the Tralgu heard it too.

"You think it would be wise to put us between that cart and whoever wants to take it from her?"

"It wouldn't be," Yardem said.

"Then what's there to talk about? Job's done. Time to move forward."

"Yes, sir," Yardem said and took another sip. Marcus waited for him to speak. He didn't. One of the sailors—a Firstblood with close-cropped black hair and the slushy accent of Lyoneia—started singing a dirty song about the mating habits of Southlings. The large black eyes of that race often got them called *eyeholes*, which lent itself to certain rhymes. Marcus felt his jaw clench. He leaned forward, putting himself in Yardem's sight.

"You have something to say?"

Yardem sighed.

"If she were less like Meriam, you'd have stayed," Yardem said.

The dirty song went to a new verse, speculating on the sex life of Dartinae and Cinnae. Or glow-worms and maggots, as the lyrics put it. Marcus shot an annoyed glance at the singer. The tightness in his jaw was spreading down his neck and between his shoulder blades. Yardem put down his cider.

"If it had been a man driving that cart," Yardem said. "Or an older woman. Someone who looked less like Alys or wasn't the age Meriam would have been, you would have taken contract from them."

Marcus coughed out a laugh. The singer took a breath, preparing to launch into another verse. Marcus stood.

"You! Enough of that. There's grown men here trying to think."

The sailor's face clouded.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"The man telling you that's enough," Marcus said.

The sailor sneered, then blinked at something in Marcus's expression, flushed red, and sat down, his back toward Marcus and Yardem. Marcus turned back to his second.

“That cart is going to pull blades and blood to it, and we both know it,” Marcus said softly. “That much wealth in one place is a call to murder. Now you’re telling me that standing in front of it’s the right thing?”

“No, sir. Damned foolish, sir,” Yardem said. “Only you’d have done it.”

Marcus shook his head. In his memory, Meriam reached out from the flames. He took her dying body in his arms. He could smell the burning hair, the skin. He felt her relax against him and remembered thinking that she was saved, that she was safe, and then realizing what the softness in her joints really meant. He didn’t know anymore if it was the true memory of the events or his dreams.

Cithrin bel Sarcour. He pictured her cart. Pictured the middle-aged Firstblood tin hauler in her place. Or the ’van master and his wife. Or Master Kit and Opal. Anyone besides the girl herself.

He rubbed his eyes until false colors bloomed in front of him. The sea murmured. The sharp apple smell of his cider cut through the cold air. The anger in his chest collapsed, nothing more than paper armor after all, and he said something obscene.

“Should I go find her, sir?”

“We better had,” Marcus said, dropping the coins for their drinks on the table. “Before she does something dangerous.”

Geder

Geder might have found it more difficult to hide his subterfuge if his failure hadn't been assumed from the start. Instead, he and his half-loyal soldiers limped back into the city, gave their thin reports, and were dismissed. Geder returned to the weak stream of his duties; enforcing taxes, arresting loyalists, and generally harassing the people of Vanai in the name of Alan Klin.

"I can't pay this," the old Timzinae said, looking up from the taxation order. "The prince had us all pay twice over before the war, and now you want as much as he did."

"It isn't me," Geder said.

"I don't see anyone else in here."

The shop squatted in a dark street. Scraps of leather lay here and there. A brass tailor's dummy wrapped in soft black hide that still smelled slightly of the tanner's yard loomed near the oilcloth window. As armor, leather that thin would be useless. Barely better than cloth, and probably worse than good quilting. As court costume, on the other hand, it would look quite impressive.

"You want it?" the Timzinae asked.

"Sorry, what?"

"The cloak. Commissioned by the Master of Canals, then he vanished in the night just before"—he held up the taxation notice in his black-scaled hand—"our *liberation* by the noble empire. It's not done, and I've got enough of that dye lot left I could recut it to fit you."

Geder licked his lips. He couldn't. Someone would ask where he'd gotten it, and he'd have to explain. Or lie. If he said he'd bought it on the cheap, maybe while he was on the southern roads or from one of the little caravans they'd searched...

"Could you really recut it?"

The Timzinae's smile was a marvel of cynicism.

"Could you misplace this?" he asked, nodding at the paper.

For a moment, Geder felt the echo of his pleasure riding away from the smugglers, gems and jewels hidden in his shirt. One lost tax notice. At worst it would keep Klin's coffers a little more sparse, his reports back to Camnipol a little less promising. It would keep the leatherman in his shop for another season; if the man had asked, Geder would probably have "lost" the notice even without the promise of a good cloak.

Besides which, compared to what he'd already done, the twenty silver coins lost to Klin were like a raindrop in the ocean.

"Putting an honest man out of work can't be to anyone's benefit," Geder said. "I'm sure we can work this through."

"Stand up on that stool, then," the Timzinae said. "I'll make sure the drape's best for your frame."

Winter was dry season in Vanai. The walls of the canals showed high-water marks feet above the thin ice and sluggish, dark flow. Fallen leaves skittered along the bases of walls, and trees stood bare and dead in the gardens and arbors. The icicles that hung from the wooden eaves of the houses grew thinner by the day, and new snow didn't come. The nights were bitter, the days merely cold. The city waited for the thaw, the melt, the rush of freshwater and life that came from a spring still months away. Everything was dead or sleeping. Geder walked through the street bouncing on his toes a little, his guardsmen following behind.

When he'd first returned, Geder had locked his doors, taken out the cloth pouch that he'd bought in Gilea, and spread the gems and jewels on his bed. Glittering in the dim light, they'd posed a problem. He had enough available wealth now to make his day-to-day life in Vanai more comfortable, but not as coin. He could sell them, of course, but giving them to gem merchants within the city risked someone recognizing a stone or a piece of metalwork. And if Klin or one of his favorites noticed that Geder had suddenly more coin than he should, nothing good could follow.

He'd answered the problem by sending his squire out to exchange only the most innocuous stones—three round garnets and a diamond in undistinguished silver. The purse of coins had silver and bronze, copper, and two thin rounds of gold frail enough to bend with his fingers. For his lifestyle, it was a fortune, and he carried a portion of it now in his satchel along with a book, ready for his last errand of the day.

The academy looked over a narrow square. In its greater days, it had been a center for the children of the lower nobility and the higher merchant class to hire tutors or commission speeches. The carved oaken archway that led into its great hall was marked with the names of the scholars and priests who had given lectures there over the century and a half since its founding. Within, the air smelled of wax and sandalwood, and sunlight filtered through high horizontal windows, catching motes of dust suspended in the air. Somewhere nearby, a man recited poetry in a deep, resonant voice. He breathed the air of the place.

Footsteps padded up behind him. The clerk was a thin Southling man, his huge dark eyes dominating his face. His body spoke of deference and fear.

"May I help you, my lord? There isn't a problem?"

"I wanted to find a researcher," Geder said. "My squire was told this was the place to come."

The Southling blinked his huge black eyes.

"I... That is, my lord..." The clerk shook himself. "*Really?*"

"Yes," Geder said.

"You haven't come to arrest someone? Or levy fines?"

"No."

"Well. Just a moment, my lord," the Southling said. "Let me find someone that might be of use. If you'll come with me?"

In the side chamber, Geder sat on a wooden bench worn smooth by decades of use. The recitation of poems went on, the voice fainter now, the words made unintelligible. Geder loosened his belt, shifting in his seat. He had the almost physical memory of waiting for his own tutors, and pushed back the irrational anxiety that he might not be able to answer the scholar's questions. The door slid open, and a Firstblood man sidled in. Geder popped to his feet.

"Good afternoon. My name is Geder Palliako."

"You're known in the city, Lord Palliako," the man said. "Tamask said something about wanting a researcher?"

"Yes," Geder said, taking the book from his side and holding it out. "I've been translating this book, only it's not very well presented. I want someone to find more like it, but different."

The scholar took the book gently, as if it were a colorful but unknown insect, and opened the pages. Geder fidgeted.

"It's about the fall of the Dragon Empire," he said. "It's couched as history, but I'm more interested in speculative essay?"

The sound of ancient pages hushing against each other competed with the distant voice and the murmur of a breeze outside the windows. The scholar leaned close to the book, frowning.

"What are you proposing, Lord Palliako?"

"I'll pay for any books you can find on the period. If they can be bought outright, I'll pay a reward. If they have to be copied, I can commission a scribe, but that means a smaller payment for the researcher. I'm looking particularly for considerations of the fall of the dragons, and especially there's a passage in there about something called the Righteous Servant? I'd like more about that."

"May I ask why, lord?"

Geder opened his mouth, then closed it. He'd never had anyone to talk with about the question, never had to explain himself.

"It's about... truth. And deceit. And I thought it was interesting," he said gamely.

"Would you also be interested in rhetorics on the subject? Asinia Secundus wrote a fine examination of the nature of truth during the Second Alfin Occupation."

"That's philosophy? I'll look at it, but I'd really rather it was an essay."

"You mentioned that. Speculative essay," the scholar said, the faintest sigh in his voice.

"Is that a problem?" Geder asked.

"Not at all, my lord," the scholar said with a forced smile. "We would be honored to help."

My contention is this: given the lack of primary documents from that time, our best practice is to examine those who later claimed the mantle of the Dragon Empire, and by considering their actions infer the nature of the examples they followed. The best example of this is the enigmatic Siege of Aastapal. Direct examination of the ruins there has failed to determine whether the destruction of the city was accomplished by the assaulting forces of the great dragon Morade or, more controversially, the occupying forces of his brother and clutch-mate, Inys.

Faced with this dearth of direct evidence, we may turn to better-known histories. As late as a thousand years after, we have the great Jasuru general Marras Toca in the fourth Holy Cleansing campaign. Also the Anthypatos of Lynnic, Hararrsin fifth of the name, at the battle of Ashen Dan. Also Queen Errathiánpados at the siege of Kázhamor. In each of these cases, a wartime commander claiming lineage with the last Dragon Emperor has chosen to destroy a city as a means of denying it to the enemy. If, as I will try to prove, this was done in conscious imitation of the last great war of dragons, it implies that the destruction of Aastapal was done by Inys as a tactical gambit to keep it from Morade's control rather than the generally accepted scenario.

Geder cocked his head. The argument seemed weak. For one thing, he'd never heard of two of the three examples. And then, out of all the battles and wars and sieges since the fall of dragons, he'd think you could pick instances of any strategy or decision you wanted. The case could be made just as well in the other direction by drawing different leaders, different battles. And God knew every third tyrant claimed some sort of lineage from the dragons.

And still, all specifics aside, it was a fascinating thought. When something can't be known, when the particulars are lost forever, to look at the events that followed from it, that echoed it, and trace backwards toward the truth. Like seeing the ripples in a pond and knowing where the stone fell in. He looked up at his little room, excited. His writing desk still had a bit of ink in the well, but he'd put his pen somewhere. He laid the book open and scurried to the stack of firewood near the grate, picked up a fallen splinter, and went back to his table quickly. Rough wood dipped into the darkness, and Geder carefully marked the margin of the book. *Looking at ripples to know where the stone fell.*

He sat back, pleased. Now if there was just some discussion of the Righteous Servant...

"Lord Palliako," his squire said from the doorway. "Lord Klin banquet?"

Geder sighed, nodded, and tossed the blackened splinter into the fire. His thumb and forefinger were stained. He washed his hands in the basin, his mind only half involved in his task. The squire helped him into his formal tunic and new black leather cloak and almost led him to the door and out to the street beyond.

At home in Camnipol, the one great event of the winter was the anniversary of King Simeon's ascension. Whatever favored noble family the king chose might spend half its year's income on one

night, the court descending upon it like crows on a battlefield. Geder had been twice, and the richness of the food and drink had left him vaguely ill both times.

In Vanai, Sir Alan Klin echoed the event with a great banquet and an enforced public celebration.

Festive lanterns hung along the narrow streets casting strange shadows. Musicians played flutes and beat drums as reedy Timzinae voices rose and fell in song. A thick-faced woman rolled a barrel along the street, wood thundering on the cobbles.

Geder passed local men and women dressed in their finest, all wearing mildly amused expressions. The chill air left all the Firstblood faces rosy and noses running. Doors stood open all along the street, light blazing within, to invite passersby in, but without the flags and fireshows of Antea. Last year, none of these men and women had known or cared when King Simeon had taken his crown. If the soldiers of Antea went home, the date would be forgotten again as quickly and as cynically as it had been adopted. The whole enterprise struck Geder as the empty shell of a real celebration. Tin passing itself for silver.

At the palace of the former prince, Klin had appropriated a long audience chamber for the nobility of Antea to celebrate. Here, warm air pressed at the mouth and nose. Traditional Antean foods crowded the tables—venison in mint, trout paste on twice-baked toast, sausage links boiled in wine. The press of voices was like a storm, shouted conversations echoing against the great bronze-colored arches above them. Competing singers wandered between the tables cadging spare coins from the Antean revelers. An old servant with the red-and-grey armband of Klin's household led Geder to one of the smallest tables, far from the great fireplace where half a tree burned and popped. Geder kept his cloak. So far from the fire, it was cold.

Geder allowed a slave girl to give him a plate of food and a wide, cut-crystal glass of yeasty-smelling dark beer. In the midst of the revel, he ate by himself, mulling over questions of truth and deception, war and history. The high table—Alan Klin, Gospey Allintot, and half a dozen of the others of Klin's favorites—was a ship on the horizon to him. He didn't notice Daved Broot being ushered to his table until the boy plopped down on a bench.

"Palliako," the younger Broot said with a nod.

"Hello," Geder said.

"Good cloak. New?"

"Recent anyway."

"Suits you."

Their conversation completed, Broot took a plate and began a campaign of systematically eating as much food as possible. He seemed to take no joy in it, but Geder felt a whisper of admiration for the boy's determination. Minutes later, when Jorey Kalliam and Sir Afend Tilliakin—two more of Klin's least favored—came to the table together, Broot had already called for a second plate.

"How does your father read the situation?" Tilliakin said as the pair took their seats.

Jorey Kalliam shook his head.

"I don't think we can draw any conclusions," he said, lifting a plate of venison and a flagon of wine out of a servant's waiting hands. "Not yet."

"Still, that little banker Imaniel won't be going free anytime soon. Lord Klin must be chewing his own guts that he didn't find that caravan, eh?"

All thought of dragons, ripples, and eating prowess fell away from Geder. He took a long drink of beer, hiding behind the glass, and tried to think how to ask what the pair were talking about without seeming obvious. Before he could come up with something clever, Broot spoke up.

"You talking about the letter from Ternigan?"

"Jorey Kalliam's father is seeing the whole thing from back home, but I can't pry details out with a crowbar."

Geder cleared his throat.

"Ternigan wrote a letter?" he said, his voice higher and more strained than he'd meant it to be. Tilliakin laughed.

“Half a book, the way I heard it,” he said. “The war chests Klin’s been sending home were a little light for some people’s tastes. Ternigan wants to know why. The way I heard it, he’s sending in one of his men to look over Klin’s books, see if he’s been taking more than his share.”

“That’s not happening,” Jorey said. “At least it isn’t happening yet.”

Broot’s eyebrows rose.

“So you *have* heard something,” Tilliakin said. “I knew you were holding out.”

Jorey smiled ruefully.

“I don’t know anything certain. Father said that there’s been some concern at court that the Vanai campaign hasn’t done as well for the crown as expected. It’s all grumbling in the court so far. The king hasn’t said anything against the way Klin’s managed things.”

“Hasn’t said anything *for* him either, though, has he?” Tilliakin asked.

“No,” Jorey said. “No, he hasn’t.”

“Ternigan won’t recall him,” Broot said around a mouthful of sausage. “They’d both look bad.”

“If he does, though, he’ll do it quick. Be interesting to know who he’d put in his place, wouldn’t it?” Tilliakin said, staring pointedly at Jorey.

Geder looked back and forth between the men, his mind bounding on ahead of him like a dog that has slipped its leash. Klin’s steady stream of taxation demands suddenly took on more significance. Perhaps he wasn’t only finding unpleasant tasks to occupy Geder’s days. Those coins might be going back to Camnipol in place of the ones lost when the caravan vanished away. Klin buying back the court’s good opinion.

The thought was too sweet to trust. Because if it was true, if *he* had put Sir Alan Klin in the bad graces of the king...

“I think Jorey would make a fine prince for Vanai,” Geder said.

“God’s wounds, Palliako!” Broot said. “Don’t say that kind of thing where people can hear you!”

“Sorry,” Geder said. “I only meant—”

A roar came from the high table. Half a dozen jugglers dressed in fool’s costumes were tossing knives back and forth through the air, blades catching the firelight. The occupants of the high table had shifted, making room for the show, and Geder could see Alan Klin clearly now. Through the flurry of knives, he imagined there was an uneasiness about the man’s shoulders. A false cheerfulness in his smiles and laughter. A haunted look to the bright eyes. And if it was true, then he—Geder Palliako—had put them there. And what was more, Klin would never know. Never follow back the ripples.

Geder laughed and clapped and pretended he was watching the performance.

Cithrin

After the night skating on the mill pond and the throat-closing fear of the day that came after, her nights took on a pattern. First, bone-deep exhaustion. Then, after she curled into the wool, a glorious hour of rest before her eyes popped open, her mind racing, her heart tight and nervous. Some nights, she would see the doughy Antean nobleman finding the hidden chests again, only this time he shouted out, and his soldiers came. Her mind spun through nightmare images of what had almost been. Sandr killed. Opal slaughtered. Master Kit riddled with arrows, his blood bright on the snow. Marcus Wester handing her over to the soldiers in exchange for the caravan's safe passage. And then what the soldiers might have done to her. That it hadn't happened gave the fear an almost spiritual power, as if her near escape had incurred a debt whose payment might be heavier than she could bear.

She fought back with memories of Magister Imaniel, the bank, the balances of trade and insurance, intrigue and subtle design that reminded her of home. It didn't bring rest, but it made the cold, dark, wakeful hours bearable, letting her pretend the world followed rules and could be tamed. Then the eastern sky would brighten, and the exhaustion would fall over her like a worked-metal coat, and she'd force herself up, out, and through another impossible day. By the time they reached Porte Oliva, she was living half in a waking dream. Small red animals shifted and danced in the corner of her vision, and the most improbable ideas—she had to swallow all the books to keep them safe, Master Kit could grow wings but didn't want anyone to know, Cary secretly planned to kill her in a jealous rage over Sandr—took on a plausibility they hadn't earned.

Everything she knew of Porte Oliva, she knew at second hand. She knew it sat at Birancour's southern edge and survived on what trade from the east didn't stop at the Free Cities and what from the west made the extra journey to avoid the pirates haunting Cabral. The greatest part of its wealth came as a wayport between Lyoneia and Narinisle. Magister Imaniel had called it everybody's second choice, but he'd said it as if that might not be such a bad role to play. She'd imagined it as a city of rough edges and local prides.

Her arrival itself had been uncanny. She remembered driving her team along hilly, snow-blown roads, and then a Kurtadam boy, sleek as an otter, trotted alongside her cart, his hand outstretched, asking her for coins, and a forest of buildings had sprouted around her. Porte Oliva was the first real city she'd seen apart from Vanai, stone where Vanai was wood, salt where Vanai was freshwater. Her first impressions of it were a blur of narrow streets with high white arches, the smells of shit and sea salt, the voices of full-blooded Cinnae chattering like finches. She thought they'd passed through a tunnel in a great wall, like the old stories of dead men passing from one life to another, but it was just as likely she'd dreamed it.

She remembered nothing about how she'd hired Marcus Wester and his second as her personal guard. Not even why she'd thought it was a good idea.

The captain padded across the stone floor. From the cot against the wall, Yardem Hane snored. Cithrin let herself swim up from her nap and survey the dank little rooms again for the hundredth time. A small fire in the grate muttered, casting red-and-orange shadows on the far wall and belching pine smoke into the air. The window was scraped parchment, and it dirtied what sunlight it let in. The boxes—contents of the cart she'd carried so carefully from Vanai—were stacked along the walls like any cheap warehouse. Only the most valuable of the cart's contents had been put in the sunken iron strongbox. Hardly a tenth of what they carried would fit. Cithrin sat up. Her body felt bruised, but her head was almost clear.

“Morning,” Marcus Wester said, nodding politely.

“How long was I asleep?” she asked.

“Half the morning. It’s not midday yet.”

“Is there any food?”

“Some sausage from last night,” he said, nodding toward the small door of warped wood that led to the only other room.

Cithrin rose. For years in her life, half a morning’s sleep would have been barely enough to see her through to evening. Now it felt like a luxury. The back room had neither door nor window, so Cithrin lit a thumb-sized stub of candle and carried it back with her. The books, soul and memory of the Vanai bank, hunkered on a wooden palette. A rough oak table supported a carafe of water and a length of greyish sausage. The overwhelming stink came from a tin chamberpot in the corner. Cithrin relieved herself, throwing a double handful of ashes in before putting the lid back in place. She cut a length of sausage and leaned against the table, chewing it. Apple and garlic seasoned the meat. It wasn’t nearly as bad as she’d expected.

For almost two weeks, her life had been this. Marcus watched the day, Yardem the night. They ventured outside as little as possible. The only privacy was in the smaller room, and the only light came from the dim window, the fire grate, and a few candles. The supplies were bought with the captain’s money. What he’d earned selling the wool, cart, and mules was in a small leather purse by the door to the street. They’d taken less money for the mules than they could have gotten, but Cithrin thought the Firstblood woman who’d taken them in the end would treat them best.

She missed the mules.

Her hair felt greasy and lank. Her only clothes were the ones she’d been given when she became Tag the Carter. She finished the sausage and walked back out.

“I need clothes,” she said. “I’m not wearing this until spring.”

“All right,” the captain said. “Only don’t go far until you know the streets. And don’t call attention to yourself. The fewer people realize we’re here, the safer we are.”

It was what he said every time, as if she would have forgotten since the day before. The Tralgu shifted in his sleep and sighed. She took the purse, tucked it in her pocket, and opened the door. The daylight was like a flood.

“Cithrin!”

She turned back. The captain was squatting by the fire, stirring the ashes with a blade, but his eyes were on her and full of concern.

“Be careful out there,” he said.

“I know the stakes,” she said, and stepped into the street.

The salt district was a maze. Buildings two stories high leaned over streets so narrow people couldn’t pass without touching. The curve of the land shaped everything, making it impossible to see very far in any direction, and intersections that seemed to promise a wider path were as likely to end blind. Voices of men and women, Kurtadam, Cinnae, and Firstblood, filled the air. If a man shouted at his wife in this district, the echoes would carry the melody of his anger even as it washed away his individual words.

Children lurked in the windows and doorways, feral as cats. A few days’ warm weather had melted the filthy snow and left black puddles lurking in the corners, covered with thin skins of ice. There might have been a thousand paths in and out, but Cithrin knew one, and she kept to it. A few minutes’ walk and there was a five-way intersection with one pathway leading northeast. A wider swath of white-hazed sky glowed above it, and Cithrin followed it toward the market, the docks, and the flow of money that kept Porte Oliva alive.

The Grand Market wasn’t an open square, but a network of covered walks. The rough cobbles of the street gave way to pale tiles. The archways sloped up like hands in folded prayer, great pale windows spilling light down between the stone and iron fingers. Men and women sang and played flutes. Puppeteers played through their little dramas, changed slightly to include a local merchant or

political figure in the story. Servants from the great houses and palaces pushed along, enormous wicker baskets on their heads, to supply the dinners of the powerful. The small independent moneylenders—small fish compared to the leviathan of the Medean bank—set up their green felt boards and beam balances. Travelers and sailors came up from the docks to admire the chaos. Merchants called out their wares: bread and fish and meat, cloth and spice and spiritual guidance and never two days in the same configuration.

Every morning before the first light of dawn, merchants lined up at great kiosks waiting for the queensmen to arrive, escorting ornate iron chests from the governor's palace. Each merchant paid a fee and drew a ticket from the chest saying which of the thousands of alcoves and intersections would be theirs for the day. No moneylender, butcher, baker, or farmer could rely on making his fortune by holding a particular space. Or so it would be if the system weren't rigged. Cithrin had only been twice, but she doubted anything so carefully designed to give the appearance of fairness could keep from corruption.

She bought herself a burlap pocket of fire-warmed raisins and honey nuts, preparing herself for the search, but it wasn't long before she found the dressmaker she'd been hoping for, and only five alcoves from where she'd seen him last. The proprietor was a full-blood Cinnae man, thin and tall and pale, with rings on every finger and teeth that looked as if they'd been filed sharp. He had five tables arranged in a half circle with a sixth in the middle with his best wares on display. Cithrin paused, looking up at three dresses as if she were only passing time. The Cinnae stood at the side, shouting at a Firstblood woman who had her arms crossed and her face set in an almost godlike scowl. A crate lay between them, the pale wood soaked dark.

"Look! Look what the water's done to the dye!" the merchant said.

"I didn't drop them off the boat," the woman said.

"Neither did I."

"You signed papers for ten dresses. Here's ten dresses."

"I signed for ten dresses I could sell!"

Cithrin stepped closer. From what she could see, the dresses were simply cut. The seawater had run the dyes, yellow into blue into pale pink, and stippled all with spots of white like a handful of scattered sand. The Cinnae shot a look at her, annoyance narrowing his eyes.

"You need something?"

"A dress," Cithrin said around a mouthful of raisins. The merchant looked at her skeptically. Cithrin took her purse from her pocket and opened it. The silver caught the sunlight, and the merchant shrugged.

"Let me show you what we have," he said, turning away from the still-fuming Firstblood woman. From the center table, he took the first dress. Blue and white with embroidered sleeves, it seemed to breathe lavender petals. The merchant smoothed the cloth.

"This is our finest piece," he said. "Expensive, yes, but worth every coin. For a hundred and twenty silver, you won't find a better garment anywhere in the market. And that includes recutting it for your frame, of course."

Cithrin shook her head.

"That's not the one you sell," she said.

The merchant, replacing the dress on its stand, paused. Her phrase had struck him.

"You don't sell that one," Cithrin repeated. "It's not there to be sold. It's to make the next one seem reasonable. You offer the rose-colored one next? If you're starting at a hundred and twenty, you'll price it at... What? Eighty?"

"Eighty-five," the Cinnae said sourly.

"Which is too much," Cithrin said. "But I'll give you forty-five. That covers your cost and gives you a little profit."

"Forty-five?"

"It's a fair price," Cithrin said, taking another handful of raisins.

The merchant's jaw hung open an inch. The Firstblood woman beside the crate chuckled. Cithrin felt a sudden warmth in her belly, a release like the first drink of strong wine. She smiled, and for the first time in days, it came easily.

"If you give it to me for forty," Cithrin said, nodding at the ruined dresses, "I'll help you turn a profit on those."

The merchant stepped back, his arms crossed in front of him. Cithrin feared she'd overplayed him until he spoke.

"How would you propose that?" he said. His words had a touch of amusement.

"Forty," she said.

"Convince me."

Cithrin walked back to the crate and rifled through the dresses. They were all the same design. Cheap cloth with tin hooks and thread eyes, a bit of embroidery at the sleeve and collar.

"Where do you see the fewest goods from?" she asked. "Hallskar?"

"We don't see much from there," the merchant agreed.

"So switch out these hooks for silver," Cithrin said. "And put glass beads here at the collars. Three or four, but bright. Something to catch the eye."

"Why would I waste good silver and beads on trash like this?"

"You wouldn't," Cithrin said. "That's the point. If they have silver and beads, they must not be trash. Call them... I don't know. Hallskari salt dyes. New process, very rare. No other dresses like them in the Grand Market. Start them at two hundred silver, drop down to one hundred thirty."

"Why would anyone agree to pay that?"

"Why wouldn't they? When it's a new thing, no one knows its fair price. If nobody knows better, you can do anything."

The merchant shook his head, but it wasn't refusal. The Firstblood woman's eyebrows crawled toward her hairline. Cithrin dug out a honeyed nut. The roar and echo of voices around them was as good as silence. Cithrin waited for the space of four breaths as the merchant wrestled in his mind.

"If only one person in the whole Grand Market believed it," Cithrin said, "you'd cover the cost of all ten dresses. Hooks, beads, and everything. If *two* people did..."

The merchant was quiet for two breaths more.

"You know entirely too much about dresses," he said.

I don't know anything about dresses, she thought. The merchant barked out a laugh. He reached for the rose dress and tossed it at Cithrin in mock disgust.

"Forty," he said to her, then turned to the Firstblood woman. "Do you see this? Look at this face. That is a truly dangerous woman."

"I believe you," the Firstblood said as Cithrin, grinning, counted out coins.

An hour later, she was walking down the half-open ways of the Grand Market, her dress folded in a tight, rose-colored bundle under one arm, and the world around her a bright, benign place. The dress would need altering to make it fit her body, but that was a minor point. More than any object she'd gained, she enjoyed the idea of being *a truly dangerous woman*.

The sun had only just begun its slide into the west. Cithrin took herself toward the public baths, thinking of an hour's time in warm water and steam. Maybe even a few coins spent on a balm to drive away the fleas and lice that travel and her new, tiny rooms had given her. The baths sat at the northern edge of a wide public square. Pillars rose into the air, tall as trees, though whatever shelter they'd supported had been gone long enough that the rain had worn channels in the supports. Patches of brown, winter-killed grass lay like carpets in the open spaces, and twig-fingered bushes caught dead leaves and scraps of cloth. Cithrin walked past a cart selling hot soup and a weedy Kurtadam with a pair of marionettes dancing at his feet beside a beggar's bowl with a few bronze coins. Across the square, a troupe of players had changed their cart to a stage, edging out a pair of disgruntled puppeteers. Pigeons wheeled overhead. A group of Cinnae women walked together, pale and thin and lovely, their dresses flowing around their bodies like seaweed in the tide, and their voices all accents

and music. Cithrin wanted to watch them, but without being seen. She'd never known a full-blooded Cinnae well. And yet her mother had been one, would have looked in place as part of just such a group.

The women turned up the wide steps that led to the baths, and Cithrin had started to follow when a familiar voice caught her up short.

"Stop!"

She turned.

"Stop now, and come near. Hear the tale of Aleren Mankiller and the Sword of Dragons! Or if you are faint of heart, move on."

On the players' stage, an older man strode across the planks, his voice ringing through the square. His beard jutted out, and his hair had been combed high. He wore gaudy theatrical robes, and his voice rang and slithered among the great pillars. There was no mistaking Master Kit, the cunning man. Cithrin walked toward the stage, wondering whether she was dreaming. Half a dozen other citizens of Porte Oliva had paused, drawn in by the patter, and the crowd itself drew a crowd. Cithrin stood on a patch of dead grass, amazed. Opal stepped out wearing a robe that made her seem ten years younger. Then Smit, wearing a simple laborer's cap and speaking in a broad Northcoast accent. Then Hornet in gilt armor, and behind him, striding onto the boards as if he owned the world and everything in it, Sandr. Cithrin laughed with delight, and other hands joined in her clapping. Mikel and Cary, both in among the crowd, nodded to her. Catching Cary's gaze, Cithrin pantomimed a drawing a sword and then gestured at the stage. *I thought you were soldiers, and you were this?* Cary shifted her head coyly and dropped a tiny curtsy before returning to the work of cheering Aleren Mankiller and hissing Orcus the Demon King.

The winter square was too cold. By the end of the first act, Cithrin's ears ached and her nose ran. She wrapped her arms around herself, huddling into her clothes, but nothing could have pulled her away. The story unfolded like a spring flower blooming, the caravan guards she'd known for months becoming actors before her, the actors becoming the parts they played until in the end Aleren Mankiller thrust the poisoned sword into the belly of Orcus, Sandr and Master Kit half-forgotten echoes of men she used to know. The applause from the crowd was thin but heartfelt, and Cithrin dug out a few coins of her own to add to the shower dancing on the boards.

As the actors broke down the stage, Opal, Mikel, and Smit came out to grin at her and trade stories. Yes, they'd been actors from the start. They'd only played at being guards. Cary recited the opening of the comic piece they were making to commemorate the adventure. Cithrin told them—quietly so as not be overheard—about her rooms with Marcus and Yardem, and Opal made lewd jokes until Smit started to blush and they all lost track of themselves in laughing.

Sandr stood near the cart, frowning furiously and pointedly not looking at them all. Cithrin excused herself from the others and went to him, thinking that he might have been hurt that she was talking to the others and not to him.

"Imagine this," she said. "You never told me."

"Suppose not," Sandr said. He didn't meet her eyes.

"I didn't know," she said. "You were brilliant."

"Thank you."

Master Kit called from the far side of the cart, and Sandr hauled on a thick rope, pulling the stage up to lean against the cart's frame. Sandr tied off the rope, flickered his eyes to Cithrin and away, and nodded.

"I'm not done working. I need to go."

Cithrin stepped back, the pleasure in her heart going hollow.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to—"

"S'allright," Sandr said. "I just..."

Shaking his head, he walked away, ducking under a spar that Smit was bringing down to pack. Cithrin walked back into the square. The milk-colored sky seemed less benign than before. She

didn't know whether to approach the players again or walk away, whether she was welcome here or an intrusion. She found herself suddenly aware of her tattered clothes and slept-on hair.

"It isn't you," a woman's voice said. Cary had looped around behind her. Cary, who'd demanded that Yardem tell her which weapon gave a woman advantage. Cary, who'd slung a bow over her shoulder and looked like a veteran of a dozen wars. Cary, who Cithrin didn't actually know.

"What isn't me?" she said.

"Sandr," Cary said, nodding toward a place down the square. "He's the new leading man. Leading men are always pigs for the first few years."

Sandr stood there, smiling. Three girls in rough clothes stood around him. One touched his arm, her fingers flickering on him like a butterfly unsure whether it was safe to land. Cithrin watched him smile at the girl, watched him glance down at her breasts.

"All I'm saying is, it's nothing to do with you," Cary said.

"I don't care," Cithrin said. "It's not as if I cared about him. But I didn't know that... I mean, I thought..."

"We all think that, the first few times," Cary said. "For what it draws, I'm sorry, and I promise I'll put sand in his beer in your name."

Cithrin forced herself to laugh. She didn't know when the knot had come back into her stomach, but it was there now.

"Nothing on my account," she said. "He's just what he is."

"Wise words, sister mine," Cary said. "Do you want to come out with us? We're trying another show outside the governor's palace at dusk."

"No," Cithrin said, too sharply. She tried again. "No, I was just going to the baths and then back to my rooms. Before the captain gets nervous."

"Luck with that. I think he was born nervous. Or watchful, at least," Cary said. "It was good seeing you."

Cithrin turned and walked up the broad steps. Steam billowed out of the bathhouse doors. Voices in argument and in song. Cithrin turned aside, walking past it all. Her jaw hurt, and she made herself unclench it. Part of her wanted to turn back, to go see who Sandr was talking with, whether he'd look her way. Maybe if...

Grit in the chilly air made her eyes water, and she wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. On the way home, she stopped at a public house and drank a mug of the same kind of fortified wine Sandr had brought her that day by the mill pond.

It didn't taste as good.

All well?" Captain Wester snapped as she came in. "You were gone a long time."

"Fine," she said shortly. "Everything's fine."

Dawson

Dawson Kalliam found Kavinpol ugly. The city squatted with one leg on either side of the river Uder, its buildings stuccoed a scabrous red-grey. The local food founded itself on onions and fish pulled from the same water into which the sewers emptied. Too many cycles of freeze and thaw cracked the streets, leaving pools of half-frozen mud to break the leg of an unwary horse. And in the center of it all, Lord Ternigan's estate with hunting grounds walled away from the city like a glorified lawn garden. In any other year, Dawson would have stayed on his estate with Clara and whichever of his sons chose to winter there rather than follow the hunt here.

This winter, though, the hunt had taken on a different meaning. Ternigan's tame deer and hand-raised quail weren't the prize Dawson tracked. And private audiences with the king were much easier to arrange when it was the king who wanted them.

"God *damn* it, Kalliam. I'm trying to keep peace, and you're killing people in the streets?"

The ceiling of the king's chamber vaulted up into the soot-muddied dimness above them. Great windows looked out over the city, boasts made of glass and iron. Overstated and gaudy, the architecture spoke of glory and power, and what it said was: *You may have these or comfort, but not both.*

Dawson looked at his childhood friend. The months of winter had etched a frown into the corners of his mouth and left grey at his temples like the first frost. Or perhaps the signs of age and weakness had always been there, and Dawson hadn't been willing to see them until now. The jewel-studded robes that Simeon wore—even the crown itself—looked less like the raiments of power and greatness than they had in the autumn. Instead, they were the empty form of it, like a dry pitcher waiting to be filled. Dawson knew the response that Simeon and etiquette expected. *Forgive me, sire.*

"Nobler blood's spilled in Camnipol every time someone slaughters a pig," Dawson said. "They were Issandrian's thugs."

"You have proof of that?"

"Of course I can't prove it, but we both know they were. His or Maas's, it hardly matters. And you wouldn't be pulling my leash if you believed they were street toughs with poor aim."

The pause weighted the air. Simeon rose. His boots scraped against the stone floor. Around them, the chamber's tapestries shifted, and the king's guard kept their silent watch. Dawson wished they could be truly alone. The guards were servants, but they were also men.

"Your Majesty," Dawson said, "I think you fail to understand the loyalty all around you. My own included. I have spent the season having private conversations with the highest-born men in Antea, and there is a wide support for you against Issandrian and his pack."

"Issandrian and his pack are also my subjects," Simeon said. "I can make the argument that feeding unrest is in itself acting against me."

"We are acting *for* you, Simeon. The men I have spoken with are united in *your* name. I only wish you were with us."

"If I start declaring war on parts of the nobility only because they happen to be in ascendance at the moment—"

"Is that what you've heard me say? Simeon, I have spent months cajoling and promising everyone I could find with any influence on Ternigan. He is ready to pull Klin from Vanai. All he needs is a signal from you."

"If I take sides in this, it will end in blood."

“And if you don’t the kingdom will have unending peace and light? You know better than that.”

“The dragons—”

“The dragons didn’t fall because there was a war. There was a war because there wasn’t a leader. A family needs a father, and a kingdom needs a king. It is your duty to lead, and if you fail in that, the day will come when they follow someone else. *Then* we will be on the dragon’s path.”

Simeon shook his head. The firelight reflected in his eyes. Outside, a cold wind whirled, smelling of winter. Snow like a fall of ashes whirled past the windows.

“A family needs a father,” the king said, as if the words were funny and bitter both. “When Eleora died, I promised her I’d take care of our son. Not the prince, our son.”

“Aster is the prince,” Dawson said.

“If he weren’t, he would still be my son. You have children. You understand.”

“I have three sons and a daughter. Barriath captains a ship under Lord Skestinin, Vicarian is studying for the priesthood, and Jorey’s in Vanai. Elisia married Lord Annerin’s eldest son three years ago, and I’ve barely heard of her since. And none of them, Simeon, have made me *timid*,” Dawson said. And then, more softly, “What happened to you?”

Simeon laughed.

“I became king. It’s all well and good when we were playing at it in the yards and on the battlefields, but then Father died. It wasn’t play anymore. Issandrian’s cabal isn’t my only problem. Hallskar’s begun harboring raiders again. Northcoast’s aiming for another war of succession and Asterilhold’s backing both sides. The tax revenues from Estinford aren’t what they should be, so someone’s either stealing them or the farms are starting to fail. And in a few years, Aster’s to step up and run it all.”

“Not so few,” Dawson said. “We’re not young, but we’ve got life in us yet. And you know the answer to this as well as I do. Find men you trust, and then trust them.”

“Meaning you and your cabal instead of Issandrian and his?” the king asked dryly.

“Yes. Meaning that.”

“I’d rather you backed away. Let Issandrian’s movement collapse from within.”

“It won’t.”

King Simeon looked up, and his eyes might have held anger or amusement or despair. Dawson sank deliberately to his knee, a man giving obeisance to his king. The angle of his chin and his shoulders made it a challenge. *Here is my loyalty. Deserve it.*

“You should go, old friend,” the king said. “I need to rest before the feast. I need to think.”

Dawson rose, bowed silently, and left for his own rooms. Lord Ternigan’s estate sprawled. It had been built over the course of centuries by uncountable designers, each it seemed with his own conflicting vision. The result was a labyrinth. Every courtyard and square opened in some unexpected way, hallways angled and turned to avoid obstacles long since unmade. There was no better invitation for a quiet knife from the shadows.

He let the king’s servant put him into his coat, drape the thick black wool cloak across his shoulders, and bow before stepping out into the white wind. Vincen Coe stepped behind him. Dawson didn’t speak to the man, and the hunter offered no report. With only the creak of leather and their snow-muffled footsteps, they crossed the courtyard, passed through a series of overhung walkways, and across a wide, flat bridge where the wind threatened to whip them away like sparrows in a storm. There were warmer paths, but they were better peopled, and so more dangerous. If Issandrian and Maas wanted to strike at Dawson, they’d have to work for it.

The hospitality that Ternigan had offered House Kalliam included a private house that had once belonged to a king’s favored concubine. The stonework had a vulgar sensuality, the gardens before it—no doubt lush in spring—were now hardly more than a collection of twigs and dead scrub. But it was defensible, and Dawson appreciated it for that. He shrugged off his cloak and his bodyguard at the door and entered the warm, dark inner rooms to the smell of mint tea and the sound of a woman weeping.

For a horrible moment, he thought the voice was Clara's, but the years had trained him to pick her sounds out from any others, and these sobs were not hers. Quietly, he tracked the weeping and, as he drew nearer, Clara's soothing voice to a sitting chamber where the long-dead concubine had once taken her ease. Now Clara sat there on a low divan, her cousin Phelia—Baroness of Ebbinbaugh and wife of the hated Feldin Maas—sitting on the floor before her, her head resting in Clara's lap. Dawson met his wife's gaze, and Clara shook her head without a pause in her soft litany of comfort. Dawson stepped back. He went to the private study to smoke his pipe, drink whiskey, and work on a poem he'd started composing until Clara came, an hour later, and dropped herself unceremoniously into his lap.

"Poor Phelia," she sighed.

"Domestic trouble?" Dawson asked, stroking his wife's hair. She plucked the pipe from his mouth and drew a deep lungful herself.

"It seems my husband is making her husband terribly unhappy," she said.

"Her husband is trying to kill yours."

"I know, but it hardly seems polite to point it out when the poor thing's broken down in front of me. Besides which, you're winning, aren't you? I can hardly see her asking mercy if the warm winds were blowing on Ebbinbaugh."

"Asking mercy was she?"

"Not in so many words," Clara said, relinquishing Dawson's lap but not his pipe. "But she wouldn't, would she? Terribly rude, and I'm fairly certain Feldin didn't know she'd come, so don't start figuring her into all your calculations and intrigues. Sometimes a frightened woman is only a frightened woman."

"And still, I don't plan to make her days any better," Dawson said. Clara shrugged and looked away. When he spoke next his tone was less playful. "I'm sorry about it. For you and for her. If that helps."

For a long moment, Clara was silent, sipping smoke from his pipe. In the dim light, she looked younger than she was.

"Our worlds are growing apart, husband," Clara said. "Yours and mine. Your little wars, my peaces. War is winning out."

"There's a time for war," Dawson said.

"I suppose," she said. "I... suppose. Still, remember that wars end. Try to be sure that there's something worth having at the other end. Not all your enemies are your enemies."

"That's nonsense, love."

"No it isn't," she said. "It's just not how you see the world. Phelia's no part of whatever you and Feldin hate in each other any more than I am. But she's at stake, as am I and our children. Phelia is your enemy because she has to be, not because she chose it. And when the end comes, remember that a great number of the people on the other side have lost a great deal and didn't pick the fight."

"Would you have me stop?" he asked.

Clara laughed, a deep, purring sound. The smoke rose from her mouth, curling in the candlelight.

"Shall I ask the sun not to set while I'm at it?"

"For you, I would," Dawson said.

"For me, you would try, and you'd batter yourself to nothing in the attempt," she said. "No, do what you think needs doing. And think about how you would want Feldin to treat me, if he won."

Dawson bowed his head. Around them, the beams and stones settled in the winter cold, popping and muttering to themselves. When he looked up again, her gaze was on him.

"I will try," he said. "And if I forget...?"

"I'll remind you, love," Clara said. "It's what I do."

The feast that night began an hour before sunset and was to last until all the candles had burned themselves out. Lord Ternigan sat at the high table with his wife and brother. Simeon sat at the far

end, Aster beside him in red velvet and cloth-of-gold looking embarrassed whenever Lady Ternigan spoke to him. The rider who'd taken top honors in the hunt—the half-Jasuru son of a noble family from Sarakal who was traveling in Antea for God knew what reason—joined them, nodding at everything and contributing nothing.

The best tapestries of Ternigan's collection hung on the walls, beeswax candles burned in holders of sculpted crystal, and the dogs that lurked around the tables wore cloths on their backs in the colors of every noble house in Antea as a bit of levity to brighten the night. Dawson sat at the second table, near enough to hear what was said, and at the far end of the table with only five people between them, Feldin Maas. Ternigan once again evenhandedly marking that his allegiance was negotiable as a whore's virtue. Phelia Maas sat her husband's side stealing watery glances at Dawson. He ate his soup. It had too much salt, not enough lemon, and the fish still had bones in it.

"Lovely soup," Clara said. "I remember my aunt—not your mother, Phelia, dear, Aunt Estrir who married that awful fop from Birancour—saying that the best thing for river fish is lemon zest."

"I remember her," Phelia said, clutching at the connection almost desperately. "She came back for my wedding, and she affected that terrible accent."

Clara laughed, and for a moment things might almost have been at ease.

Behind Dawson, King Simeon cleared his throat. Dawson couldn't say what about the sound caught him, but the hair on the back of his neck rose. From the pinched, bloodless lips and the wineglass trapped halfway between table and mouth, it was clear Feldin Maas had heard it too.

"All of this is tribute from your man in Vanai?" Simeon asked with a forced casualness.

"No, Majesty. Most has been in my family for years."

"Ah, good. That squares better with what I'd heard about Klin and his taxes. For a moment, I thought you'd been holding out on me."

Maas's face went pale. He lowered the wineglass to the table. Dawson took a bite of fish and decided that perhaps Clara was right. The lemon did add something to it. King Simeon had just joked that Klin's gifts from the conquered city wouldn't be enough to decorate a feast. The tone was light, the only response was laughter, and Sir Alan Klin would be back in Antea by the thaw.

"I hope you'll excuse me," Dawson said. "Nature."

"We understand," Feldin Maas said, biting the words. "Every bladder gets weak with age."

Dawson spread his hands in a gesture that could be read as an acknowledgment of the jest or as a provocation. *Do your worst, little man. Do your worst.*

By the time Dawson reached the edge of the feasting hall, Coe was silently walking behind him. In the wide stone hallway that led to the private retiring rooms, Dawson stopped and Coe stopped with him. It wasn't long before Canl Daskellin, Baron of Watermarch, appeared, silhouetted by the light from the feast.

"Well," Daskellin said.

"Yes," Dawson said.

"Come with me," Daskellin said. Together the two men walked to a private retiring room. Coe didn't remain behind, but he gave a greater distance between himself and his betters. Dawson wondered what would happen if he ordered Coe away. On one hand, the huntsman could hardly refuse. On the other, strictly speaking, Coe answered to Clara. Awkward position for the man. Dawson's mischievous spirit was tempted to try it and see which way the huntsman jumped, but Canl Daskellin spoke and brought his mind back to other matters.

"I've managed to catch Ternigan's ear. His loyalty's with us."

"Until the tide turns," Dawson said.

"Yes, and so we need to act quickly. I believe we can call the candidate for Klin's replacement. But..."

"I know."

"I've spoken with our friends in Camnipol. Count Hiren would have been the consensus choice if he'd lived."

“Issandrian’s cousin? What did they like about him,” Dawson said.

“Estranged cousin,” Daskellin said. “But dead cousin in any case. His greatest strength was that he had no love for Issandrian and no direct ties to any of us.”

Dawson spat.

“How is it we’ve come so quickly to the place where we don’t want to seat one of our enemies or one of our own.”

“It’s the danger of conspiracy,” Daskellin said. “Breeds a certain distrust.”

Dawson crossed his arms. In his heart, he wanted his son Jorey in the prince’s chair. He could rely on his own blood in a way that mere politics could never attain. Which was, of course, why he’d sworn against it. Vanai had to be denied to Issandrian. But it couldn’t be taken by any single member of Dawson’s still-fresh alliance without threatening its fracture. Dawson had foreseen the problem. He had his proposal ready.

“Hear me out, Canl. Vanai was always a small piece in this,” Dawson said carefully.

“True.”

“With Klin gone, Issandrian’s lost the tribute, but the city is still his project. Maas agitated for taking it. Klin fought for it, and even controlled the city until now. If we don’t put someone in power who is identified with us, it will remain Issandrian’s in the general opinion.”

“But who of ours can we put in?”

“No one,” Dawson said, “that’s what I mean. We can’t take it from Issandrian in the mind of the court. But now we can control what it says about him. What if the governance of the city were to become a catastrophe? Lose the city to incompetence, and Issandrian’s reputation suffers along with it.”

Daskellin stopped. Between the dimness of the light spilling from the feast chamber and the darkness of the man’s complexion, Dawson couldn’t read his expression. He pressed on.

“My youngest son is there,” Dawson said. “He’s been sending reports. Lerer Palliako’s son is in Vanai. Geder, his name is. Klin’s been using him to do the unpopular work. No one likes or respects him.”

“Why not? Is he dim?”

“Worse than dim, one of those men who *only* knows what he’s read in books. He’s the kind that reads an account of a sailing voyage and thinks he’s a captain.”

“And you want Ternigan to name Geder Palliako in Klin’s place?”

“If half of what I’ve heard is true,” Dawson said with a smile, “there’s no one better suited to lose Vanai.”

Marcus

Night in the salt district of Porte Oliva wasn't quiet. Even in the deep night when no moon lit the street, there were sounds. Voices lifted in song or anger, the scuttling and complaints of feral cats. And, in the rooms he and Yardem had hired, the slow, regular breath of the girl, sleeping at last. Marcus had come to know the difference between the way she inhaled when she was sleeping and when she was only willing herself to. It was an intimacy he never spoke of.

Yardem squatted on the floor by the glowing embers of the fire, ears forward, eyes focused on nothing. Marcus had seen the Tralgu sit through whole nights like that; motionless, waiting, aware without insisting upon awareness. Yardem never fell asleep on watch, and he never struggled to rest when he was off duty. Marcus, blanket-wrapped and sleepless, envied him that.

The cold of winter was still on the city, but it wouldn't be many more weeks before the sea lanes opened. A ship from Porte Oliva to Carse would be faster than going overland through Birancour. And as long as he could keep it from captain and crew what exactly they were hauling—

The scraping sound was soft, there and gone again in an eyeblink. Leather sole against stone. Yardem sat up a degree straighter. He looked over at Marcus, then pointed once toward the opaque parchment window, and then at the door. Marcus nodded and rolled slowly off the cot, careful not to let the canvas creak beneath him. He took a slow step toward the window as Yardem shifted toward the door. When Marcus drew his knife, he kept his left thumb against the steel to keep it from singing when it cleared the scabbard. Cithrin snored delicately behind him.

Whoever they were, they'd done this before. The door burst open at the same instant a man leaped through the parchment window. Marcus kicked low, his boot slamming against the man's knee. While the man struggled to regain his balance, Marcus slit his throat, and two more men poured in after him. They had daggers. Swords would have been awkward in so small a space. Marcus had hoped they'd have swords.

Yardem grunted the way he did when he lifted something too heavy, and an unfamiliar voice cried out in pain. The knife man on Marcus's left made a flurry of short swings designed to catch his eye and force him back while the one on the right shifted to flank him. They were thickly built, but not massive. Firstblood or Jasuru rather than Yemmu or Haavirkin. Marcus ignored the false attack, feinting instead to keep the man on his right from getting around him. The first man took the opening and slid his blade in. Marcus felt the pain bloom on his ribs, but he ignored it. Behind him, a bone snapped, but no one screamed.

"We surrender," Marcus said, and slid forward, his ankle hooking behind the rightmost attacker's leg. When he brought his knife out, the man instinctively stepped back, stumbling. Marcus sank his blade in the man's groin, but the effort left him open again. The remaining attacker, having drawn blood once, swooped in for the kill. Marcus twisted, the enemy blade skittering across his shoulder. Marcus dropped his own knife and took a grip on the other man's elbow, but the attacker moved in close, bending Marcus back with a combination of weight and leverage. The hot breath stank of beer and fish. The embers glittered on scaled skin and evil, pointed teeth. Jasuru, then. Marcus felt the tip of the Jasuru's blade prick his belly. Another push and the knife would open him like a trout.

"Yardem?" Marcus grunted.

"Sir?" Yardem said, and then, "Oh. Sorry."

A dagger sprouted from the Jasuru's left eye, the blood sheeting down from the wound, black in the monochrome dimness. The attacker pressed forward even as he died, but Marcus felt the strength

leave the man and stepped back to let the body fall.

Three men lay by the torn window, dead or bleeding dry. Another lay motionless on the floor, one arm sprawled into the fire grate and starting to burn, and the last slumped against the wall at Yardem's feet, head at an improbable angle. Five men. Strong and experienced. This, Marcus thought, was very, very bad.

"What's the matter?" Cithrin asked groggily. "Did something happen?"

"Outside," Yardem said, and Marcus heard it too. Retreating footsteps.

"Stay here," Marcus said, and bolted out the ruined window.

The night-black streets blinded him, but he loped forward, committing to each stride and hoping that his foot didn't come down on any icy puddle or unexpected step. Ahead of him, the footsteps slapped against cobbles. Something large and animal hissed as Marcus flew past. His lungs burned, and the blood on his shoulder and side chilled him. The fleeing footsteps skittered, lost balance, and pelted off toward the left. He was getting closer.

The street opened onto a wider square, and there, by starlight, Marcus caught sight of the fleeing figure. It was small and wrapped in a dark cloak with a hood that covered head and hair. The disguise was pointless. By the time he'd seen the fleeing woman take two steps, he knew her as well as if he'd seen her face.

"Opal!" he shouted. "You should stop."

The actress hesitated and then pressed on, pretending she hadn't been recognized. Marcus cursed, gritted his teeth, and kept running. The dark city ignored them. Opal shifted through streets and alleys, trying desperately to confuse or exhaust him. Marcus ignored his wounds and kept after her, one foot in front of the other, until by a wide cistern, Opal stopped, knelt, and put her head in her hands. Her chest was working like a bellows. Marcus tottered up beside her and sat. They were both wheezing like old men. Her pale hair caught the starlight.

"Not," Opal said between gasps. "Not what it looks like. You have to believe me."

"No," Marcus said. "I don't."

"I didn't know," Master Kit said. "I should have, but I didn't."

Marcus's former cunning man was still in a striped wool sleeping shift and a close-fit nightcap. That and the fact that he'd been dead asleep in the back of the troupe's wagon when Marcus reached him argued for his innocence. Master Kitap rol Keshmet wasn't the picture of a man preparing to escape with his stolen gold. It was what Marcus had bet on.

The rooms they sat in now had been rented from a brewer. Most of the year, they warehoused the oats and malt of that trade, and the air was still thick with the smell of them. The table was three lengths of plank set across two piles of old brick, and the stools Marcus, Kit, and the disgraced Opal sat on were less than a milkmaid might use. In the flickering light of Master Kit's single candle, Opal's eyes had disappeared in pools of shadow. Her argument that it was all a misunderstanding, that she'd been there to protect Cithrin, vanished like the morning dew as soon as Master Kit had come into the room, and all that was left was her sullen silence.

"You mean to say she came to this herself and no one else in the company had a suspicion," Marcus said.

Master Kit sighed.

"I've traveled with Opal as long as I have with... well, anyone. I think she knows me, and I would guess well enough to know how to deceive me. Captain, if she had even lied about this, I'd have known."

"Leave him be, Wester," Opal said. "This wasn't his. It was mine."

It was the first confession she'd made. Marcus took no pleasure in it.

"But I don't understand why," Master Kit said. He wasn't talking to Marcus any longer. "I'd thought Cithrin was a favorite of yours."

“How many more years do I have?” Opal asked. Her voice was sharp as aged cheese. “You’re already thinking of Cary for Lady Kaunitar roles. Another five years, and I’ll be strictly witch-and-grandmother, and then the day will come when you and the others leave some shit-stinking village in Ellassae and I don’t.”

“Opal,” Master Kit began, but the woman raised a palm to stop him.

“I know how this goes. I’ve been a player since I was younger than Sandr is now. I’ve seen it happen. Made a kind of peace with it, really. But then the banker’s girl appeared out of the air, and...” Opal shrugged, and it was an actor’s movement made of weariness and resignation.

Weariness and resignation, Marcus thought, but not regret.

“All right,” Marcus said. “Next problem.”

Master Kit turned back toward him. There were tears in the man’s eyes, but otherwise his expression was calm.

“I have five corpses,” Marcus said. “Maybe three hours to first light. If I go to the queensmen, I have to explain what happened, and what we’ve got in those boxes that’s worth killing over. Any hope of keeping quiet’s gone then. Add to that, we’ll have to move just in case any of Opal’s friends have friends of their own. We’ve sold the cart. You still have one.”

The cut in his shoulder had gone an uncomfortable sort of numb, but the scratch across his ribs tore open each time he took a deep breath. He knew that this was the point at which Master Kit might balk. Marcus had hoped he could avoid a long negotiation. He watched Master Kit’s dark eyes as the man weighed his unpleasant options.

“I feel the company owes you something, Captain Wester,” he said at last. “What would you have me do?”

An hour later, they were back in the small rooms of the salt quarter. The dead man had been pulled from the grate, and a new fire stoked. Hornet and Smit were somberly pasting lengths of cloth over the rips in the parchment while Cary, Sandr, and Mikel looked at the bodies piled like cordwood against the wall. Master Kit sat on an overturned handcart, his expression grim. Cithrin sat on the cot, her legs drawn up to her chest, her eyes empty. She didn’t look at Opal, and Opal didn’t look back. The room, small to begin with, felt dangerously crowded.

“There’s an opening in the eastern seawall, not far from baker’s row,” Master Kit said, thoughtfully. “I don’t remember much cover, nor any way to explain being there, but I think I could find it again.”

“Even in the dark?” Marcus asked.

“Yes. And if there’s no reason for us to be there, I think there’s little reason for anyone else either.”

“They look peaceful,” Mikel said. “I didn’t think they’d look peaceful.”

“All dead men are at peace,” Marcus said. “That’s what makes them dead. We’ve got five of these bastards to get rid of. We don’t have much time. How far is this place?”

“We’ll be seen,” Cithrin said. “They’ll find us. Ten people carrying five bodies? How does that...?”

The girl shook her head and looked down. Her face was paler even than usual. The others were quiet. If things had gone otherwise, there would only have been three bodies, and hers among them. Marcus could see the knowledge etching the girl’s soul, but he didn’t have time now to fix that, or any idea how he would have.

“Master Kit?” Cary said thoughtfully. “What about the festival scene in Andricore’s Folly?”

“You can’t be serious,” he said.

“I think I am,” Cary said. She turned to Yardem. “Can you carry one by yourself? Over your shoulder?”

The Tralgu crossed his arms, frowning deeply, but nodded. Master Kit’s face was still pale, but he rose and turned the handcart back onto its wheels, considering it. By contrast, Cary’s face was flushing rose.

“Yardem takes one,” she said. “Smit and Hornet can take the small one there. Sandr and Cithrin, the poor fellow with the beard. That puts two on the handcart. Mikel can steady them, and you and the captain haul. Then Opal and I take torches and—”

“Not Opal,” Master Kit said. “She stays with us.”

“I’ll take Cithrin, then,” Cary said, hardly missing a breath. “Opal can help Sandr.”

“You’ll take Cithrin where, exactly?” Marcus said, his voice low.

“To make sure no one is looking at *you*,” Cary said, and she stepped over to the cot, lowering herself beside Cithrin’s slight frame. The dark-haired woman put an arm across Cithrin’s shoulders and smiled at her gently. “Come on, sister mine. Are you ready to be brave?”

Cithrin blinked back tears.

“Kit?” Marcus said.

“Andricore’s Folly. It’s a comedy from a poet in Cabral,” Master Kit said. “The city prince dies in a brothel, and they have to smuggle his body back into his wife’s bed before she wakes.”

“And they manage it how?”

“It’s a comedy,” Master Kit said, shrugging. “Help me with this cart, won’t you?”

There were no torches, but two small tin lanterns in the back room came near enough. With a few pins and Cary’s direction, their dresses had grown short in the skirt, and half undone at the neck and back. Their hair hung in loose curls, threatening to fall at any moment, like the ruins of some more respectable arrangement. Cary rouged Cithrin’s lips and cheeks and the swell of her breast, and in the darkness of the night the pair seemed carved out of sunlight and the promise of sex.

“Count three hundred,” Master Kit said to Cary. “Then follow. If I give the sign...”

“We’ll start singing,” Cary said, and then, to Cithrin, “Shoulders back, sister mine. We’re here to be seen.”

“Yardem?” Marcus said as the Tralgu hefted a dead man.

“Sir?”

“The day you throw me in a ditch and take the company?”

“I am the company, sir.”

“Fair point.”

They slipped into the darkness. The cold was bitter, and Marcus’s breath fogged before him. The cobbles seemed made from ice, and the smell of death came from the cart, low and coppery and familiar as his own name. At his side, Master Kit pulled, the man’s breath coming fast as panting. The living carried the dead through the black streets, guided by starlight and memory. Drying blood caked Marcus’s side, plucking at his wounds with every step. He pressed himself forward. It seemed like a slow eternity, pain in his fingers giving way to numbness, and then pain again. Behind him, he heard Cary’s voice suddenly rise in bawdy song, and then, like a river reed playing harmony to a trumpet, Cithrin’s voice with hers. He looked over his shoulder. A block behind them, their lanterns held high above them, two scantily dressed women faced a patrol of queensmen. Marcus stopped, the handcart slowing as he dropped from the lead.

“Captain,” Master Kit whispered urgently.

“This is idiocy,” Marcus said. “This isn’t your comedy, and that street’s not a stage. Those are men with swords and power. Putting women in front of them and hoping for the best is—”

“What we’ve done, Captain,” Master Kit said. “It’s what we’ve done, and this is why. You should pull the cart now.”

In the light of the lanterns, Cary twirled once, laughing. One of the queensmen draped a cloak over Cithrin’s shoulders. Marcus realized he’d drawn his knife without knowing it. *They can’t be trusted*, Marcus thought, looking at the guardians of civil peace in their cloaks of green and gold. *You can’t trust them*.

“Captain?” Yardem asked.

“Go. Keep going,” Marcus said and forced himself to turn away.

The break in the seawall was on the far eastern edge of the city. A stone walkway white with snow and gull droppings and black with ice and night looked out over an invisible ocean. Gulls nested in cracks in the walls around them and on the cliffs below. And there, a single crack, no wider than a doorway where the city had constructed a siege weapon long since turned to rust to defend it against an enemy as dead as the bodies Marcus hauled.

They moved quickly and in silence. Yardem strode to the edge and lofted the corpse from his shoulder and into the grey predawn mist. Then Smit and Hornet, like men helping a drunken companion over the threshold. Then, together, the handcart with its human cargo. And last, Sandr and Opal, the woman limping under the weight of her burden, came to the edge. The last of the knife men vanished. There was no splash. Only the hush of the wind, the complaints of the birds, and faraway muttering of the surf.

"Yardem," Marcus said. "Get back to the rooms. I'll find Cithrin."

"Yes, sir," the Tralgu said, and vanished into the gloom.

"We'll need money to pay their fines," Smit said. "Can we afford that?"

"Seems wrong to charge them for public lewdness," Sandr said. "Most places you have to pay extra for it."

"I think we can do what we must," Master Kit said shortly. "You all go back to the cart. I believe the captain and I have some last business. Opal, please stay with us."

The players stood for a moment and then walked slowly away. Marcus listened to their footsteps fade. Sandr said something, and Smit replied darkly. Marcus couldn't make out the words. Master Kit and Opal stood, deeper black in the gloom all around. Marcus wished he could see their faces, and was also glad that he couldn't.

"I can't take her to the queensmen," Marcus said.

"I know," Master Kit said.

"I didn't tell anyone else," Opal said. "The only people who know about the banker girl's fortune are the ones who knew before."

"Unless one of your swimming friends down there told someone," Marcus said.

"Unless that," Opal admitted.

"It seems to me there are only two choices here, Captain. You won't appeal to the city's justice. Either Opal walks free, or she doesn't."

"That's truth," Marcus said.

"I would very much like you to let her walk away," Master Kit said. "She's already lost her place with me, and we've helped protect your work here. You're hurt, but Yardem Hane isn't. Or Cithrin. I won't say there's no harm done, but I hope there's room for mercy."

"Thank you, Kit," Opal said.

Marcus squinted up. The eastern sky had begun to show the first faint lightening of dawn. The stars in the great arch above him still glittered and shone, but the faintest of them had vanished. More would go out in the next few minutes. He'd been told that, in truth, the stars were always there, only during the day you couldn't see them. He'd heard the same thing said about the souls of the dead. He didn't believe that either.

"I'd need to know she wouldn't come after us again," he said.

"I swear it," Opal said, jumping at his words. "I swear to all the gods that I won't make another try."

Master Kit made a sudden, pained sound, as if someone had struck him. Marcus took a step toward him, but when the man spoke, his voice was clear and strong and unutterably sad.

"Oh, my poor, dear Opal."

"Kit," she said, and there was an intimacy in the way she formed the word that made Marcus reassess everything he thought he knew about the two and their past.

"She's lying, Captain," Master Kit said. "I wish that she wasn't, but you have my word that she is. If she leaves here now, it's with the intention to come back."

“Well, then,” Marcus said. “That’s a problem.”

The shadow that was Opal turned and tried to bolt, but Marcus stepped in front of her. She clawed at his eyes and made an inept try to knee his groin.

“Please. He’s wrong. Kit’s wrong. *Please* let me go.”

The desperation in her voice, the *fear*, made him want to step aside. He was a soldier and a mercenary, not the kind of feral thug who killed women for the joy of it. He moved half a step back, but then remembered Cithrin again, sitting on the cot with her legs drawn to her knees, facing the swords of the patrol with awkward song. He’d promised to protect her if he could. Not only when it was pleasant.

He knew what had to happen next.

“I’m sorry about this,” Marcus said.

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Geder

Geder had known, of course, that Klin's favorites had been given the better accommodations, and that men like himself had taken the leavings. The scale of the insult, however, hadn't been clear. He sat on a low divan upholstered in silk. High windows spilled light over the floors like God upending a milk jug. Incense touched the air with vanilla and patchai. The goldwork and gems that glowed over the fire grate hadn't been wrenched apart in the sack. Even before the soldiers of Antea had taken the streets below, it had been understood that the prince's house was sacrosanct. Not because it was the prince's, but because it was Ternigan's. And then Klin's. And now, unthinkable, his own.

"My Lord Protector?"

Geder jumped to his feet as if he'd been caught touching something he shouldn't. The chief of household was an old Timzinae slave, his dark scales greying and cracked. He wore the grey and blue of House Palliako now, or as close to them as could be scrounged.

"Your secretaries await, sir," the Timzinae said.

"Yes," Geder said, plucking at the black leather cloak he'd brought from his old rooms. "Yes, of course. Take me there."

The orders had come three days before. The Lord Marshal had called Alan Klin back to Camnipol, to the despair of some, the delight of others, and the surprise of no one. The astonishing development was who Ternigan had chosen as his replacement until such time as King Simeon named a permanent governor. Geder had read the order ten times at least, checked the seal and signature, and then read it again. Sir Geder Palliako, son of Viscount of Rivenhalm Lerer Palliako, was now Protector of Vanai. He had the order still, folded in a pouch at his belt like a religious relic: mysterious and awesome and entirely unsafe.

His first thought after the first wave of raw disbelief had passed was that Klin had discovered Geder's betrayal, and that this was his revenge. As he stepped into the meeting chamber, Klin's appointees peopling every seat except the one on the dais at the front reserved for himself, Geder had the suspicion again. His belly sloshed and he felt his hands trembling. His blood felt weak as water as he took the two steps up and lowered himself uncomfortably into the presentation seat. Once, the room had been a chapel, and the icons of gods in whom Geder didn't believe surrounded him. Unsympathetic eyes gazed up at him, expressions blank at best, openly contemptuous at worst. A handful of seats were empty. Loyalists of House Klin who had chosen to resign commission and return with him to Antea rather than submit to the new order. Geder wished he could have gone with them.

"Lords," Geder said. He sounded like someone was strangling him. He coughed, cleared his throat, and began again. "My lords, you will have read by now the orders of Lord Marshal Ternigan. I am, of course, honored and as surprised as I'm sure all of you are as well."

He chuckled. No one else made a sound. Geder swallowed.

"It's important that the city not suffer from a sense of unease during this change. I would like each of you to continue on with the directions and orders given by Lord Klin so that the... ah... change that we are—"

"You mean the policies that have him pulled back to Ternigan?" The questioner was Alberith Maas, eldest son of Estrian Maas and nephew of Klin's close ally Feldin.

"Excuse me?"

"The orders," the young man said. "They're the same ones that put Lord Klin in the crown's poor grace, and you want us to keep to them?"

"For now," Geder said, "yes."

"A bold decision, my Lord Protector."

Someone sniggered. Geder felt a rush of shame, and then anger. His jaw tightened.

"When I order a change, Lord Maas, I'll see that you know of it," he said. "We will all have to work to raise Vanai up from its present disorder."

So don't cross me, or I'll put you in charge of cleaning weeds out of the canals, Geder thought, but didn't say. The young man rolled his eyes but kept silent. Geder took a deep breath, letting the air curl slowly out through his nostrils. His enemies sat before him, looking up. Men of greater experience, with greater political connections, and who had not been given the power that Geder now held. For the most part they would be polite. They would say the right things, though often in the wrong tone of voice. In private, they would shake their heads and laugh at him.

Humiliation fueled his rage.

"Alan Klin was a failure." It was nothing he'd meant to say, and he threw the words out like a slap across the jowls. "The Lord Marshal gave him Vanai, and Klin pissed it away. And each of *you* were part of that failure. I know you are going to leave here and share your jokes and roll your eyes and tell yourselves it's all a terrible mistake."

He leaned forward now. The heat in his cheeks felt like courage.

"But, my very good lords, let me make this clear. *I* am the one Lord Ternigan chose. *I* am the one he picked to turn Vanai from an embarrassment into a jewel in King Simeon's crown. And I intend to do so. If you would rather make light of me and of the duty we are given, say it now, take your things, and crawl back to Camnipol on your bellies. But stand off *my path!*"

He was shouting now. The fear was gone, the humiliation with it. He didn't remember standing, but he was on his feet now, his finger pointing a general accusation at the group. Their eyes were wide, their brows risen. He could see unease in the angle of their shoulders and the way they held their hands.

Good, he thought. *Let them wonder who and what Geder Palliako is.*

"If Lord Klin has left pressing business, I'll hear it now. Otherwise, I will have reports from each of you by tomorrow on the state of the city in general, your particular responsibilities within it, and how you propose to do better."

There was silence for the space of four heartbeats together. Geder let himself feel a trickle of pleasure.

"Lord Palliako?" a man said from the back. "There's the grain taxes?"

"What about them?"

"Lord Klin was entertaining a proposal to change them, sir. But he didn't give a decision before he left. You see, fresh grain coming in from the countryside is taxed at two silver to the bushel, but sold from storage in the city runs two and a half. The local granaries appealed."

"Put them all at two and a half," Geder said.

"Yes, Lord Protector," the man said.

"What else?"

There was nothing more. Geder stalked from the room quickly, before the heat of his temper could fully cool. When the brief certainty of anger passed, it passed completely. By the time he returned to his drawing room—*his* drawing room—he was shaking from head to foot. He sat by the window, looking out on the main square of the city, and tried to guess whether he was on the verge of laughter or tears. Below him, dry leaves skittered. The canal lay bare and dry, a team of slaves of several races hauling armfuls of weeds and filth out of it. A handful of Firstblood girls ran across the square, screaming in their play. He told himself that they were his now. Slaves, girls, leaves. All of it. It frightened him.

“Geder Palliako, Lord Protector of Vanai,” he said to the empty air, hoping that by speaking the words they would become plausible. It didn’t work. He tried to imagine what Lord Ternigan had intended when he’d chosen him. Nothing made sense. He took the letter out again, unfolded it, read each word, each phrase, searching for something to reassure him. There was nothing there.

“My Lord Protector,” the old Timzinae said. Geder jumped less this time. “Lord Kalliam has come, as you asked.”

“Bring him in,” Geder said. The old servant hesitated, as if on the verge of pointing out a breach of etiquette, but turned away after only a bow. Geder wondered if meeting in the private drawing room was supposed to be reserved for special occasions. He’d have to find a book on Vanai court etiquette. Next time he spoke to his hired scholars, he’d mention it.

Jorey Kalliam stepped into the room. He was in his best uniform, and bowed before Geder formally. Either Jorey was also exhausted and apprehensive, or else Geder was seeing all the world as a mirror. The Timzinae wheeled a cart in behind him laden with small shell dishes of pistachios and candied pears. Once the servant had poured them both crystal mugs of cool water, he retreated. The discreet click of the door latch left them alone.

“My Lord Protector wished to see me?” Jorey said.

Geder tried out a smile.

“Who’d have guessed it, eh? Me, Lord Protector of Vanai.”

“I think we all would have put long odds,” Jorey said.

“Yes. Yes, it’s why I wanted to speak with you in particular,” Geder said. “Your father’s active in court, isn’t he? And you write to him. You said that you write to him?”

“I do, my lord,” Jorey said. His spine was stiff, his eyes set straight ahead.

“Yes, that’s good. I was wondering if... that’s to say, ah, do you know why?”

“Why what, my lord?”

“Why me?” Geder said, and his voice had a thin violin-string of whine at the back that embarrassed him.

Jorey Kalliam, son of Dawson Kalliam, opened his mouth, closed it, and frowned. The lines at his mouth and brow made him seem older. Geder took a small handful of pistachios from their dish, cracking the shells open and eating the soft, salty meat within less from hunger than for something to do with his hands.

“You put me in an awkward position, my lord.”

“Geder. Please, call me Geder. And I’ll call you Jorey. If that’s all right. I think you’re the nearest thing to a friend I have in this city.”

Jorey took a long breath, and as he let it hiss out between his teeth, his eyes softened.

“God help you,” Jorey said. “I think I am.”

“Then can you tell me what’s happening at court that Ternigan would put *me* here? I don’t have a patron at court. It’s my first campaign. I just don’t understand it. And I hoped you might.”

Jorey gestured to a chair, and Geder realized after a moment that he was asking permission to sit. Geder waved him on and sat across from him, hands clasped between his knees. Jorey’s eyes shifted as if he were reading something from the air. Geder ate another nut.

“Of course, I don’t know Ternigan’s mind,” he said. “But I know things at home are unsettled. Klin is allied with Curtin Issandrian, and Issandrian’s been championing some changes that haven’t all gone over well. He’s made enemies.”

“Is that why Ternigan called him back?”

“It’s likely part, but if Issandrian’s power at court is starting to waver, Ternigan might want someone who wasn’t affiliated with him. You said you don’t have a patron at court. That might be the reason he chose you. Because House Palliako hasn’t taken a side.”

Geder had read of any number of situations like it. The White Powder Wars, when Cabral had played host to exiles from Birancour and Herez both. Koort Ncachi, the fourth Regos of Borja, who

was supposed to have had a court so corrupt he named a random farmer as regent. Considered at that angle, Geder saw a way that his new position could be made explicable. And still...

"Well," he said with an awkward grin, "I suppose I should be grateful my father doesn't go to court, then. I'm sorry, though, that yours does. I really thought Ternigan might give the city to you."

Jorey Kalliam turned his face to the window. His brows were furrowed. In the grate, the fire murmured its secrets to itself, and in the square, a thousand pigeons rose as if they were part of a single body and whirled through the white winter sky.

"It wouldn't have been a favor," Jorey said at last. "Court games aren't fair, Palliako. They don't judge men by their worth, and they aren't about what's just. Guilty men can hold power their whole lives and be wept for when they pass. Innocent men can be spent like coins because it's convenient. You don't have to have sinned for them to ruin you. If your destruction is useful to them, you'll be destroyed. This, all of this? It isn't your fault."

"I understand," Geder said.

"I don't think you do."

"I know I didn't earn this," Geder said. "Raw luck's given me this chance, and now it's my work to deserve it. I didn't think Lord Ternigan put me over the city because he respected me. I'm convenient. That's fine. Now I can make him respect me. I can steer Vanai. I can *make* it work."

"Can you?" Jorey said.

"I can try," Geder said. "I'm sure my father's been bragging about this to everyone he can find. House Palliako hasn't taken a new title since my grandfather was Warden of Lakes. I know it's something my father wanted, and with me here now..."

"This isn't fair," Jorey said.

"It's not," Geder said. "But I swear I'll do what I can to make it up to you."

"Make it up to *me*?" Jorey said, as if Geder had suddenly dropped in from some other conversation.

Geder rose, took the two water mugs from the tray, and put one in Jorey's hand. With all the seriousness he could muster, he raised his glass.

"Vanai is mine," Geder said, and this time it sounded almost true. "And if there is anything within it that would do you the honor you deserve, I'll find it. This city should have been yours, and we both know it. But since it's dropped in my lap instead, I swear here, between the two of us, that I won't forget that it was luck."

The expression on Jorey Kalliam's face might have been pity or horror or raw disbelief.

"I need you beside me," Geder said. "I need allies. And on behalf of Vanai and House Palliako, I would be honored if you were one of them. You're a valiant man, Jorey Kalliam, and one whose judgment I trust. Will you stand with me?"

The silence left Geder apprehensive. He held his glass determinedly aloft and quietly prayed Jorey would return the salute.

"Did you practice that?" Jorey asked at last.

"A bit, yes," Geder said.

Jorey rose to his feet and raised his own glass. The water splashed and slid down his knuckles.

"Geder, I will do what I can," he said. "It may not be much, and God's witness, I don't see how this ends well, but I'll do what I can to make things right for you."

"Good enough," Geder said, and drank his water through a grin.

The rest of the day was as much a test of endurance as a parade of honors. The afternoon began with a congratulatory feast presented by the representatives of the major guilds of Vanai, two dozen men and women each pressing for his attention and favor. After that, he held audiences with a representative from Newport who was angling to make changes in the overland shipping charges, but over the course of a long, contentious hour wouldn't make it precisely clear what the changes were. Then, at Geder's request, the chief taxation auditor reviewed all of Klin's previous reports to Lord Ternigan and the crown. Geder had expected that meeting to be little more than a summation of how

much gold had been sent north, but it ended up going twice as long as he'd intended with discussions of the difference between high- and low-function tariffs and "presentation on account" against "presentation in earnest" that left him feeling like he'd been reading something in a language that he hadn't yet mastered.

At the day's end, he retired to the bed chamber that had once belonged to the prince of Vanai. It could have fit Geder's previous accommodations in a corner and left room for two more like it. The windows looked out over a garden of leafless oaks and snowbound flowerbeds. In spring, it would be like having a private forest. Geder's new bed was warmed by an ingenious network of pipes that led to and from a great fire grate, the pump driven by the rising air. The contraption burbled to itself, sometimes directly beneath Geder, as if the feather mattresses had eaten something that disagreed with them. Geder lay in the dim, firelit room for almost an hour after the last servant had been dismissed. Though he was exhausted, sleep would not come. When he rose, it was with the delicious sense of doing something he ought not do, clear in the knowledge that he would get away with it.

He lit three candles from the fire, blackening the wax a bit with the smoke, and set them beside his bed. Then from the small cache of his own things brought here by his squire, he plucked the creaking binding of the book he'd most recently bought. He'd read it through already, and marked the section that he found most interesting so that he could find it easily.

Legends of the Righteous Servant, also called Sinir Kushku in the language of the ancient Pût, place it as the final and greatest weapon of Morade, though the degree to which this is simple confabulation with the dragon's network of spies and the curiously insightful nature of his final madness remains unclear.

Geder put his finger over the words, fighting to remember what he knew of the languages of the east.

Sinir Kushku.

The End of All Doubt.

Cithrin

I'm saying there is evil in the world," Master Kit said, hefting the box on his hip, "and *doubt* is the weapon that guards against it."

Yardem took the box from the old actor's hands and lifted it to the top of the pile.

"But if you doubt everything," the Tralgu said, "how can anything be justified?"

"Tentatively. And subject to later examination. It seems to me the better question is whether there's any virtue in committing to a permanent and unexamined certainty. I don't believe we can say that."

Captain Wester made a noise in the back of his throat like a dog preparing for the attack. Cithrin felt herself start to cringe back, but didn't let her body follow the impulse through.

"We can say," the captain said, "that wasting good air on the question won't get the work done any faster."

"Sorry, sir," the Tralgu said.

Master Kit nodded his apology and went back down the thin wooden stairs to the street. Sandr and Hornet, coming up with a box of gems between them, flattened themselves to the wall to let him pass. Cithrin shifted, giving them room enough to pass the new box to Yardem, and Yardem enough to find a place for it in the new rooms. A cold, damp breeze and the smell of fresh horse droppings wafted through the open windows along with the daylight. Cithrin thought it seemed like springtime.

"Was he a priest as a boy?" Marcus said, pointing down the stairway with his chin. "He starts talking about faith and doubt and the nature of truth, it's like we're back in the 'van getting a sermon with every meal."

"What he says makes sense," Yardem said.

"To you," Marcus replied.

"Suppose he might have been a priest. It's Master Kit," Hornet said with a shrug. "If he told us he'd walked up the mountainside and drank beer with the moon, I'd probably believe it. We've got two more boxes the size of that one, and then all those wax blocks."

"Wax?" Marcus asked.

"The books," Cithrin said, but the words came out as a croak. She coughed and began again. "The books and ledgers. They're sealed against the damp."

Which is a good thing, she thought, *since we sank them in a mill pond*. Immediately, she imagined a crack in the sealing wax. Pages and pages of smeared ink and rotting paper hidden by the protecting wraps. What if the books were ruined? What would she tell Magister Imaniel then? What would she tell the bankers in Carse?

"Well, bring them up," Marcus said. "We'll find a place for them somewhere."

Hornet nodded, but Sandr was already going down the stairs. He hadn't even looked at her. She told herself it didn't bother her.

Cithrin was very aware that the new rooms didn't entirely meet with Captain Wester's approval. Unlike the place in the salt quarter, these were on the second story with woodplank floors that reported any motion to the floor below in a language of creaks and pops. The shop on the first floor was a gambler's stall, which meant any number of people of any status might come and go throughout the day. But the lock at the base of the stair was sturdy, surrounding streets less prone to the drunken and the lost, and the windows without balcony or simple access. Additionally, there was

an alley window out which the pisspot could be emptied, and the change of location had landed her five doors down from a taproom where they could buy food and beer.

Cary and Mikel came up next. Cary was grinning.

"Boy on the street asked us what we were hauling," Cary said.

Cithrin could see the tension in Captain Wester's face as he walked to the window and peered out.

"What did you tell him?"

"Paste jewels for the First Thaw celebrations," Cary said. "Opened one of the boxes for him, too. You should have seen it. He looked so *disappointed*."

Cary laughed, not seeing the anger on Captain Wester's face. Or perhaps seeing it and not caring. During the days when they'd looked for new rooms and prepared to shift the smuggled wealth of Vanai to its new hiding place, Opal had only been mentioned once when Smit had joked that she'd found a way to keep from having to do any of the hard work. Nobody had laughed.

Cithrin still had to fight herself to believe that it had happened. That Opal had meant to slaughter her and take the money was hard enough to comprehend. That Captain Wester had killed her for it was worse. Of course the others were angry. Of course they resented the captain. And Yardem. And her. They had to. And here they were, hauling boxes and making jokes. Cithrin found that she trusted them—each and every one of them—not because they were trustworthy, but because she wanted them to be.

She'd made the mistake with Opal, and she was watching herself make it again. That knowledge alone twisted her badly enough she hadn't slept or eaten well since the night she'd woken up with five dead men around her.

Master Kit came up the stairs, a double armful of wrapped books before him. Then Sandr and Hornet with the last of the boxes. With everything from the cart, there wasn't much room left for them all. Sandr was trapped standing beside her. When he saw her looking at him, he blushed and nodded the bird-fast twitch he might use to greet someone in the street.

"I believe this is the last of it," Master Kit said as Yardem lifted the books from him.

"Thank you for this," Cithrin said. "All of you."

"It's the least we could," Smit said. "We're only sorry it happened this way."

"Yes, well," Cithrin said. She couldn't meet his eyes.

"Why don't the rest of you go on," Master Kit said. "I'll try to catch up in a bit."

The actors nodded and left. Cithrin heard their voices through the window as their cart pulled away. Captain Wester stalked around the room as if his restlessness and impatience would make the floorboards quieter and more certain. Yardem stretched out on the cot nestled between piles of boxes and closed his eyes, resting before the night came. Master Kit rose and held a hand out to her.

"Cithrin," he said, "I was hoping we might walk together."

She looked from the old actor's hand to Captain Wester and back.

"Where?" she said.

"I didn't have anyplace particularly in mind," Master Kit said. "I thought the walking might be enough."

"All right," Cithrin said, and let him help her to her feet.

Outside, the street traffic shifted like water; broad and slow in the wide square to the east, faster in the narrow channel of the street. A Cinnae man stood outside the gambler's stall, calling to the men and women walking past. Great fortune could be theirs. Luck favored the brave. They could soften the loss of business by wagering against themselves. Odds offered on any fair wager. He sounded bored.

Horse-drawn carts labored through the press, and a team of Timzinae walked behind them with flat-bladed shovels, picking up their droppings. Half a dozen children screamed and chased each other, splashing through puddles of mud and grime and worse. A laundry cart rattled by, pulled by a Firstblood girl no older than Cithrin, but with lines of hardship already forming in the angles of her

mouth. Master Kit strode forth and Cithrin let him lead, unsure whether she was walking behind him or at his side.

The street opened into a square Cithrin hadn't seen before. A huge church loomed to the east. Voices raised in song wove through the chill air, praising God and working through harmonic puzzles as if the two pursuits were one. Master Kit paused when she did, listening with her. The smile on his face softened into something touched with sorrow.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" he said.

"What is?" Cithrin asked.

He leaned against a stone wall and gestured out. The square, the song, the sky above them.

"I suppose I meant the world. For all the tragedy and pain, I do, at least, find it beautiful."

Cithrin felt her lips press tight. She wanted to apologize for what had happened to Opal, but that would only put Master Kit in a position where he had to apologize again, and she didn't want to do that. Words and thoughts banged against each other, none of them quite right for the moment.

"What will you do now?" she said.

Kit took a deep breath and let it out slowly before turning away from the song.

"I expect we'll stay here for the time being. I don't think Cary's quite ready to take on the full burden of Opal's roles, but by the end of the summer, with some rehearsal and serious work, I expect she will be. Between the armies of Vanai and now Opal, the company's a bit thinner than I like. I hope we'll be able to recruit a few good people. I've found port cities often collect itinerant actors."

Cithrin nodded. Kit waited for her to speak, and when she didn't, went on.

"Besides which, I find myself rather fascinated by your Captain Wester."

"He's not *my* Captain Wester," Cithrin said. "He's made it perfectly clear that he's his own Captain Wester."

"Has he, then? I stand corrected," Master Kit said. The church song swelled, what could have been a hundred voices rising and falling, throbbing against each other until it seemed like some other voice threatened to speak through them. God whispering. It seemed to pull Master Kit's attention, but when he spoke he hadn't lost the conversation's thread. "I believe the dragons left a legacy in this world that is... destructive. Corrosive by nature, and doomed to cause pain. Unchecked, it will eat the world. Wester is one of the few people I've met who I thought might stand against it."

"Because he's so stubborn?" Cithrin asked, trying to make it a joke.

"Yes, because of that," Master Kit said. "And, I suppose, the shape of his soul."

"He was a general in Northcoast a long time ago," Cithrin said. "Something happened to his wife, I think."

"He led Prince Springmere's army in the succession. There were battles against the armies of Lady Tracian that should have been lost, but Captain Wester won them."

"Wodford and Gradis," Cithrin said. "But people also talk about... Ellis?"

"Yes. The fields of Ellis. They say it was the worst battle in the war, that no one wanted it and no one could back down. The story is he was so important that the prince grew afraid that another of the pretenders might seduce his loyalty. Convince him to change sides. Springmere had his family killed and his rival implicated. The captain's wife and daughter died in front of him, and badly even as these things go."

"Oh," Cithrin said. "What happened to Springmere? I know he lost the succession, but..."

"Our friend Marcus found out what had really happened, took his revenge, and then dropped out of history. I think most people assumed he died. In my experience, the worst thing that can happen to a man in that position is that he live long enough to see how little vengeance leaves after it. I don't think he has many illusions left to him, which is why he's..." Master Kit shook himself. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wander off like that. Getting old, I think. I had wanted to say again that I'm sorry for what happened, and I am deeply committed to seeing that it not happen again."

"Thank you," she said.

"I would also like to offer whatever help I can in seeing you safely to Carse. I feel we owe you more than a day's free labor. A bit odd, I know, but I think pretending to be soldiers for so long left us all with a bit of the camaraderie of the sword."

Cithrin nodded, but she felt her brow furrow even before she knew quite why. The church song sank in a final, conclusive cadence, and silence seemed to flow into the world like a wave. Seagulls looped through the high air, yellow beaks and steady, unflapping wings.

"Why do you apologize for everything you say?" she asked.

Master Kit turned to her, bushy eyebrows hoisted.

"I wasn't aware that I did," he said.

"You just did it again," Cithrin said. "You never say anything straight out. It's all *I believe* this or *I've found* that. You never say, *The sun rises in the morning*. It's always, *I think the sun rises in the morning*. It's like you're trying not to promise anything."

Master Kit went sober. His dark eyes considered her. Cithrin felt a chill run down her spine, but it wasn't fear. It was like being on the edge of finding something that she'd only guessed was there. Master Kit rubbed a palm across his chin. The sound was soft and intimate and utterly mundane.

"I'm surprised you noticed that," he said, then smiled at having done it again. "I have a talent for being believed, and I've found it to be problematic. I suppose I've adopted habits to soften the effect, and so I try not to assert things unless I'm certain of them. Absolutely certain, I mean. I'm often surprised by how little I'm absolutely certain of."

"That's an odd choice," Cithrin said.

"And it encourages me to take myself lightly," Master Kit said. "I find a certain value in lightness."

"I wish I could," she said. The despair in her voice surprised her, and then she was weeping.

The actor blinked, his arms shifting uncertainly, and Cithrin stood in the open street embarrassed by her own sobbing, but powerless to stop. Master Kit wrapped an arm around her and led her forward to the steps of the church. His cloak was cheap wool, rough and still smelling of lanolin. He draped it over her shoulders. She leaned forward, her head on her knees. She felt the fear and the sorrow, but only at a distance. But the landslide had begun, and there was nothing she could do now but let it go. Master Kit placed his hand on her back, just between her shoulder blades, and rubbed gently, like a man soothing a baby. After a while, the sobs grew less violent. The tears dried. Cithrin eventually found her voice.

"I can't do this," she said. How many thousand times had she told herself that since the day Besel died? But always to herself. This was the first time she'd said the words aloud to anyone. They tasted sour. "I can't do this."

Master Kit took his arm back, but still shared his rough, cheap cloak. A few of the people walking by stared, but most ignored them. The old actor's skin smelled like a spice shop. Cithrin wanted to curl up there on the cold stone steps, sleep, and never wake up.

"You can," Master Kit said.

"No, I—"

"Cithrin, stop. Listen to my voice," Master Kit said.

Cithrin turned. He looked older than she remembered him, and it took a moment to realize it was because he wasn't smiling, even in the corner of his eyes. There were pouches under his eyes. His jowls sagged, and the stubble of his beard was more white than black. Cithrin waited.

"You can do this," he said. "No, just listen to me. You can do this."

"You mean you think that I can," she said. "Or you expect that I will."

"No. I meant what I said. *You can do this*."

Something in the back of Cithrin's mind shifted. Something in her blood altered, like the surface of a pond rippling when a fish has passed too close beneath it. The overwhelming sorrow was still there, the fear that she would fail, the sense of being at the mercy of a wild and violent world. None

of it went away. Only with it, there was something else. Hardly brighter than a firefly in the darkness of her mind, there was a new thought: *Perhaps*.

Cithrin rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands and shook her head. The sun had shifted farther and faster than she'd expected. She didn't know how long ago they'd left the new rooms.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"I felt I owed it to you," Master Kit said. He seemed tired.

"Should we go back?"

"If you're ready, I think we should."

Evening came later than Cithrin expected, another sign that winter was beginning to lose its grip. Yardem Hane sat on the floor, his huge legs crossed, and ate rice and fish from a plate. Captain Wester paced.

"If we pick the wrong ship," the captain said, "they'll murder us, throw our bodies to the sharks, and spend the rest of their lives living high in some port in Far Syramys or Lyoneia. But we'd only have the customs house here and the one in Carse to go past. On the road, we might have to weather half a dozen tax collectors."

Cithrin looked at her own plate of fish, her belly too knotted to eat. Every word Wester said made it worse.

"We could backtrack," Yardem said. "Go to the Free Cities, and north from there. Or back to Vanai, for that."

"Without a caravan to hide in?" Marcus said.

The Tralgu shrugged, conceding the point. Behind the constant motion of the captain's legs, the wax-sealed books of the Vanai bank glowed in the candlelight. Cithrin's anxiety circled back to them, images of cracked seal and rotting leather spines dancing through her head like a nightmare that wouldn't fade.

"We could buy a fishing boat," Yardem said. "Sail it ourselves. Hug the coast."

"Fighting off pirates with our forceful personalities?" Marcus said. "Cabral is half rotten with free ships stealing the trade they can, and King Sephan isn't about to stop them."

"No good options," Yardem said.

"None. And weeks still before we can take the bad ones," Marcus said.

Cithrin put her plate on the ground and walked past Captain Wester. She took the topmost of the books, looked around the dim, gold-lit room, and found the short blade Yardem had used to carve cheese at midday. The blade was shining clean.

"What are you doing?" Marcus asked.

"I can't choose the right ship," Cithrin said, "or the right path, or a caravan to hide in. But I can see that the books aren't wet, so I'm doing that."

"We'll just have to seal them again," Marcus said, and Cithrin ignored him. The wax was as thick as her thumb, and came off in stubborn chunks. A layer of cloth beneath it gave way to a softer inner layer of wax, and then parchment wrapping. The book hidden inside it all could have been fresh from Magister Imaniel's desk. Cithrin opened it, and the pages hissed against each other. The familiar marks of Magister Imaniel's handwriting were like a memory from childhood, and Cithrin almost wept again seeing them. Her fingers traced sums and notations, balances, transactions, details of contract and return rate. Magister Imaniel's signature and the brown, cracked blood of his thumb. She let them wash over her, familiar and foreign at the same time. Here was the deposit the bank had taken from the bakers' guild, and there in blue ink, a record of the payments made as recompense, month by month, for the years they'd held the money. She turned the page. Here was the record of loss on shipping insurance from the year that the storms had come up from Lyoneia later than ever before. The sums shocked her. She hadn't guessed that the loss had been so profound. She closed the book, took her blade, and found another. Marcus and Yardem were still talking, but they could have been in another city for all it mattered to her.

The next book was older, and she followed the history of the bank in it, from the letters of foundation that began it through the years of transactions, almost until the day she'd left. The history of Vanai written in numbers and ciphered notes. And there, in red, a small notation of Cithrin bel Sarcour accepted as ward of the Medean bank until she reached legal age and took over the balance of her parents' deposits, less the costs of keeping her. There were as many words spent on a grain shipment or investment in a brewery. The death of her parents, the beginning of the only life she'd known, all on a single line.

She got another book.

Marcus stopped talking, ate his dinner, and curled up on the cot. The half moon rose. Cithrin traced the history of the bank like she was reading old letters sent from home. Wax and cloth and parchment mounded around her like wrapping paper. Growing in the back of her mind, almost forgotten in the fascination of old ink and dusty paper, was a sense of possibility. Not confidence—not yet—but its precursor.

It was only when Yardem woke her by taking the leather-bound book from her hand that she realized that—for the first time since Opal—she'd slept dreamless through the night.

Dawson

Rough, plank-board ladders and improvised stairways lined the sides of the Division, clinging to the ancient ruins like lichen to a stone. High above, the great bridges spanned the gap with stone and steel and dragon's jade: Silver Bridge, Autumn Bridge, Stone Bridge, and almost lost in the haze the Prisoner's Span hung with cages and straps. Lower, where the sides came close enough, rope lines swung and rotted in the air. Between them the history of the city lay bare, each stratum showing an age and empire on which the one above had been founded.

Dawson, wrapped in a simple brown cloak, could have passed for a scavenger from the midden at the Division's base or a smuggler making his way to the obscure underground passages that laced Camnipol's foundation. Vincen Coe might have been his conspirator or his son. The morning frost kept their footsteps slow. The smell of the rising air was nauseating—sewage, horse manure, rotting food, the bodies of animals and of men barely better than animals.

Dawson found the archway. Ancient, flaking stone shaped in classic form, an inscription eroded to illegibility but not yet washed away. Within, the darkness was absolute.

"I don't like this, my lord," the huntsman said.

"You don't need to," Dawson said, and walked proudly into the gloom.

Winter's hand still pressed on Camnipol, but its power was breaking. The underground was alive with tiny sounds: the chitter of the first insects of the coming spring, the sharp trickle of thaw streams, and the soft breath of the land itself preparing to wake itself again into green spring. It would be weeks yet, and then it would seem to come overnight. It occurred to Dawson as he paused in a wide, vaulted tile of an abandoned bathing chamber, how many things followed that same pattern. The seemingly endless stasis followed by a few small signs, and then sudden catastrophic change. He pulled the letter from his pocket and leaned back toward Coe to read it again in the torchlight. Canl Daskellin had written that one of the doorways would be marked with a square. Dawson squinted into the darkness. Perhaps Daskellin had a younger man's eyes...

"Here, my lord," Coe said, and Dawson grunted. Now that it was pointed out, the mark was clear enough. Dawson walked down the short, sloping hall that turned into a stairway.

"No guards yet," Dawson said.

"There are, sir," Coe said. "We've passed three. Two archers and one manning a deadfall."

"Well hidden, then."

"Yes, my lord."

"You don't sound reassured."

The huntsman didn't answer. The hall met a huge stone, its surface polished and glazed so well that the torchlight seemed to double. Dawson followed his shadow around a slow curve until an answering light appeared. Dragon's jade carved into unbreakable pillars held up a low ceiling. A dozen candles filled the dusty air with soft light. And there, sitting in a carved round, was Canl Daskellin with Dawson's old acquaintance Odderd Faskellan on his left and a pale Firstblood man Dawson didn't recognize on his right.

"Dawson!" Canl said. "I was beginning to worry."

"No need," Dawson said, waving Vincen Coe back toward the shadows. "I'm only pleased I was in the city. I'd hoped to spend part of the year in Osterling Fells."

"Next year," Odderd said. "God willing, we'll all be back to normal next year. Though with this latest news..."

"There's news, then?" Dawson said.

Canl Daskellin gestured to the seat across from him, and Dawson lowered himself into it. The pale man smiled politely.

"I don't think we know each other," Dawson said to the smile.

"Dawson Kalliam, Baron of Osterling Fells," Daskellin said with a grin of his own. "May I introduce the solution to our problems. This is Paerin Clark."

"The pleasure is mine, Baron Osterling," the pale man said. His voice had the slushy accent of Northcoast. Dawson felt the small hairs on his arm rise. The man had no title. He wasn't Antean. And yet he was here.

"What's the news," Dawson said. "And how does our new friend here enter into it?"

"He's married to the youngest daughter of Komme Medean," Odderd said. "He lives in Northcoast. Carse."

"I wasn't aware we had business with the Medean bank," Dawson said.

"Issandrian knows what we've been doing," Daskellin said. "Not only Vanai. The men we placed to stir trouble with the farmers, the move to strip Feldin Maas of his southern holdings. Everything."

Dawson waved the words away as if they were gnats. He was more concerned that this banker appeared to know it all as well. Issandrian would have discovered their traps and schemes eventually.

"He's petitioned King Simeon to sponsor games," Odderd said. "Issandrian and Klin and Maas, and half a dozen more besides. They're putting up the coin for it. Cleaning out the stadium. Hiring show fighters and horesemen. Borjan long archers. Cunning men. It's supposed to be a celebration for Prince Aster."

"It's a fighting force inside the walls of Camnipol," Canl Daskellin said.

"It's a bluff a child could see through," Dawson said. "If it came to insurrection, Issandrian would lose. He doesn't have the men or the money to back a war."

"Ah," the banker said.

Dawson lifted his chin like a forest animal scenting smoke. Canl Daskellin took a handful of folded paper from the seat beside him and held them out to Dawson. The paper was cheap, the handwriting plain and unadorned. Copies, then, of some more prestigious correspondence. Dawson squinted. The dim light set the words swimming, but with a little concentration he could make them out clearly enough. *I send the best wishes to you and your family* and so on. *Our mutual great-aunt, Ekarina Sakiallin, Baroness of the noble lands of Sirinae...*

"Sirinae," Dawson said. "That's in Asterilhold."

"Our friend Feldin Maas has family in the court," Odderd said. "Part of making peace after the Treaty of Astersan was a fashion for strategic marriages. It's three generations back now, but the ties are still there. Maas has been sending letters to a dozen of his cousins that we know of. There may be others we didn't intercept."

"They've gone mad," Dawson said. "If they think they can bring in Asterilhold against King Simeon—"

"That isn't the story," the banker said. His voice was cool and dry as fresh paper, and Dawson was instinctively repulsed by it. "Maas has been telling of a conservative conspiracy of hidebound old men within the court pressuring King Simeon. He describes men who are willing to ally themselves with enemies of Antea for their own political gain."

"Idiocy."

"He suggests," the banker said, "that Maccia may have been invited to defend Vanai by someone who opposed Alan Klin, and he makes a plausible case. And so, in the face of others seeking foreign help to influence the throne, Maas has no option but to appeal for the aid of Asterilhold in defending the honor and legitimate rule of King Simeon and safeguarding the person and health of Prince Aster."

"We're the ones defending Simeon!" Dawson shouted.

"As you say," the banker said.

Canl Daskellin leaned forward. His eyes were bright.

"Things are starting, Dawson. If Issandrian's cabal has gotten the backing of Asterilhold to put an armed force in Camnipol—and, by God, I think they have—they aren't coming for Simeon. They're aiming at us."

"They've already tried to kill you once," Odderd said. "These men have no sense of bounds or honor. We can't afford to treat them as if they were gentlemen. We have to beat them to the blow."

Dawson lifted his hands, commanding silence. Anger and mistrust filled his head like bees. He pointed to the banker.

"What's Northcoast's interest in this?" he asked. Meaning, *Why are you here?* Daskellin frowned at his tone of voice, but the banker seemed to take no offense.

"I couldn't say. Lord Daskellin is Special Ambassador to Northcoast. I'm sure he would be in a better position to sound out the more influential opinions."

"But your bank's in Carse," Dawson said. It was almost an accusation.

"The holding company is, and we have a branch there," the banker said. "But all our branches account independently."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dawson said.

"We aren't a company exclusively married to the interests of Northcoast," the banker said. "We have a close relationship with people in many courts—even Antea now that Vanai is under your protection—and a strong interest in peace throughout the northern kingdoms. Unfortunately, we have some very strict policies about lending in situations like this—"

"I wouldn't take your money if you left it in a sock on my doorstep."

"Kalliam!" Canl Daskellin said, but the banker continued on as if nothing had been said.

"—but in the cause of peace and stability, we would be pleased to act as intermediary if we were of use. As disinterested third parties, we might be able to approach people that you noble gentlemen found awkward."

"We don't need help."

"I understand," the banker said.

"Don't be an idiot," Daskellin said. "The Medean bank has branches in Narinisle and Herez. Ellassae. If this comes to blades in the street, we'll need—"

"We shouldn't be talking about this," Dawson said. "We have guests."

The banker smiled and gave a brief nod. Dawson wished that etiquette allowed him to challenge a man of no status to a duel. The banker was nothing more than a trumped-up merchant. He should have been beneath Dawson's notice, but something about the man's studied placidity invited the drawing of blood. Canl Daskellin's brows were nearly a single knot, and Odderd was shifting his gaze between the others like a mouse at a catfight.

"I have known Paerin Clark and his family for years," Daskellin said, his voice tight and controlled. "I have absolute faith in his discretion."

"How sweet for you," Dawson said. "I met him today."

"Please, my lords," the banker said. "I came to make my position clear. I have done so. If Lord Kalliam should have a change of heart, the Medean bank's offer stands. If not, then surely no harm's done."

"We'll continue this another time," Dawson said, rising to his feet.

"Oh yes. We will," Daskellin said. Odderd said nothing, but the banker rose and bowed to Dawson as he left. Vincen Coe fell in behind him without a word. Dawson stalked up, following the winding paths that led through the roots of Camnipol.

When at length they reached the street, his legs ached and his rage had faded. Coe doused the torch in a snowbank, the pitch leaving a filthy smear on the white. Dawson had chosen to walk rather than take his carriage in part to show any of Issandrian's hired thugs that he didn't fear them, but also in the name of discretion. Leaving his own team sitting on the Division's edge waiting his

reemergence from the underworld was as good as hanging a banner. Not that discretion seemed the first response from his cohorts. What had Daskellin been thinking?

And still, when he reached his mansion, his face numbed by the chill wind, he was so preoccupied that he didn't notice that a carriage not his own waited by the stables. The old Tralgu door slave flicked his ears nervously as Dawson approached.

"Welcome home, my lord," the slave said, his silver chain clinking as he made a bow. "A visitor arrived an hour ago, my lord."

"Who?" Dawson said.

"Curtin Issandrian, my lord."

Dawson's heart went tight, his blood suddenly singing through his veins. The cold of the day and the frustration of the meeting fell away. He glanced at Vincen Coe, and the huntsman's expression mirrored his own shock.

"You let him *in*?"

The Tralgu slave bowed his head, an icon of fear and distress.

"The lady insisted, my lord."

Dawson drew his sword and took the front steps three at a time. If Issandrian had laid hands on Clara, this would be the shortest and bloodiest revolution in the history of the world. Dawson would burn Issandrian's bones in the square and piss on the fire. As he reached the atrium of the house, Coe was at his side.

"Find Clara," Dawson said. "Take her to her rooms, and kill anyone who comes in if they aren't of the household."

Coe nodded once and vanished into the hallways, swift and silent as a breeze. Dawson strode quietly through his own house, sword in hand. He rounded one corner to the gasp of a maid, her eyes wide at sight of the weapon and her master. His dogs found him when he entered the solarium and followed behind him, whining and growling.

He found Issandrian in the western sitting room, gazing into the fire grate. The man's unfashionably long hair spilled out over his shoulders like a lion's mane, the red-gold of it taking color from the flames. Issandrian noticed the sword and lifted his eyebrows, but made no other move.

"Where is my wife?" Dawson asked, and behind him his dogs growled.

"I couldn't say," Issandrian said. "I haven't seen her since she brought me here to await your return."

Dawson narrowed his eyes, his senses straining for some sign of duplicity. Issandrian glanced at the dogs baring their teeth, then up at Dawson. There was no fear in his expression.

"I can wait here a bit longer if you'd like to speak with her first."

"What do you want here?"

"The good of the kingdom," Issandrian said. "We're men of the world, Lord Kalliam. We both know where the path we're on leads."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Everyone says it. It's Issandrian's cabal against Kalliam's, with King Simeon flapping in between depending on which way the wind blows."

"No one talks about his majesty that way to me."

"May I stand, Lord Kalliam? Or does your honor call for you to set your dogs on an unarmed man?"

The weariness in Issandrian's voice gave Dawson pause. He sheathed his sword and gestured once to the dogs. They cringed back, quieting. Issandrian stood. He was a taller man than Dawson had remembered. Confident, at ease, and more regal than King Simeon. God help them all.

"May we at least talk of truce?" he asked.

"If you have something to say, say it," Dawson said.

"Very well. The world is changing, Lord Kalliam. Not just here. Hallskar is on the edge of calling their king down from his throne and electing a new one. Sarakal and Ellassae have both given

concessions to merchants and farmers. The power of nobility for its own sake is passing, and for Antea to be a part of the coming age, we must change as well.”

“I’ve heard that song. I didn’t like the tune.”

“It doesn’t matter whether we like it or not. It’s happening. And we can act on it or else try to fence out the tide.”

“So your farmer’s council has all been a selfless action for the benefit of the crown, has it? Your own aggrandizement has nothing to do with it? Pull the other one, boy. It has bells on it.”

“I can make it yours,” Issandrian said. “If I gave sponsorship over the farmer’s council to you, would you take it?”

Dawson shook his head.

“Why not?” Issandrian asked.

Dawson turned and pointed to the dogs sitting nervously behind him.

“Look at them, Issandrian. They’re good animals, yes? Excellent in their ways. I’ve cared for each of them since they were pups. I see them fed. I give them shelter. Sometimes I let them rest on my couch and keep my feet warm. Should I dress them in my clothes and give them seats at my table?”

“Men aren’t dogs,” Issandrian said, crossing his arms.

“Of course they are. Three years ago a man working my land stole into his neighbor’s house in the night, killed his neighbor, raped the wife, and beat the children. Now, would you have had me give the bastard a place on the judge’s bench? A voice in his own punishment? Or should I nail his hands and cock to a log and throw him in the river?”

“That isn’t the same thing.”

“It is. Men, women, dogs, and kings. We all have our places. My place is in court, following the voice and law of the throne. A farmer’s place is on a farm. If you tell a pig keeper he deserves a chair in court, you put the order of society itself in question, including my right to pass judgment on his actions. And once we’ve lost that, Lord Issandrian, we’ve lost everything.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Issandrian said.

“You tried to have me killed in the street,” Dawson said. “I don’t have any concern to spare for what you think.”

Issandrian pressed a palm to his eyes and nodded. He looked pained.

“That was Maas. It may not matter to you, but I didn’t hear of it until it happened.”

“I don’t care.”

The two men went quiet. In the grate, the fire murmured. The dogs shifted, uneasy but unsure what they were expected to do.

“Is there no way to bridge this?” Issandrian asked, but the hardness of his voice meant he knew the answer.

“Surrender your plans and intentions. Scatter your cabal. Give me Feldin Maas’s head on a pike and his lands to my sons.”

“No, then,” Issandrian said with a smile.

“No.”

“Will your honor permit me safe passage out of your house?”

“My honor requires it,” Dawson said. “Unless you touched my wife.”

“I came to talk,” Issandrian said. “I never meant her harm.”

Dawson stepped to the far side of the room and snapped his fingers, calling the dogs out of his enemy’s path. Issandrian paused in the doorway.

“Believe what you will, I am loyal to the crown.”

“And yet you’re making friends in Asterilhold.”

“And you’re talking with Northcoast,” he said, and then he was gone.

Dawson sat down. The leader of his pack came whining and pressing her head into his hand. He scratched her ears absently. When he was certain he’d given the man time enough to leave the house,

he rose and walked to Clara's private rooms. She sat on the edge of her daybed, her hands knotted on her lap. Her eyes were wide and her face pale. Everything about her spoke of fear and tension.

"Where's Coe?" he said. "I sent him to—"

Clara raised an arm, gesturing behind him. Coe stood in the shadow behind the open door. The huntsman had a bared sword in one hand, a vicious curved dagger in the other. If Dawson had been an attacker, he'd never have known what killed him.

"Well done," he said. In the dimness, it was hard to tell whether Coe blushed. Dawson nodded to the doorway, and closed it behind the huntsman when he was gone.

"I am so sorry, dear," Clara said. "The footman brought word that Lord Issandrian was here, and I didn't even think. I just had them make him comfortable. I couldn't imagine leaving him to sit on the step like a delivery boy, and I thought if he needed to speak to you, then perhaps it would be best if he did. I never thought that he might have designs..."

"He didn't," Dawson said. "Not this time. If he comes back, though, don't let him in. Or any of Maas's people."

"I have to see Phelia if she comes. I can't simply pretend she doesn't exist."

"Not even her, love. After it's over. Not now."

Clara wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. The gesture was unladylike, unplanned, and broke Dawson's heart a little. He squeezed her knee, trying to impart some comfort.

"Has it gotten worse, then?" she asked.

"Issandrian's gathering soldiers. Cunning men. It may come to blood."

Clara took a long breath, the air curling slowly out her nostrils.

"Very well, then."

"Everyone claims to have Simeon's best interests, but God help us if someone should arrive who has the boldness to actually lead. Asterilhold and Northcoast are lining up to buy both sides, and either one would be as happy to see their puppet on the Severed Throne," Dawson said. He coughed. "We have to win this while it's still our war."

Geder

A riot?" Geder said, his heart sinking. "Why's there a riot?"

"People are going hungry, Lord Protector," Sir Gospey Allintot said. "The farmers have been taking all their grain to Newport."

Geder pressed a hand to his chin, determined to keep Sir Allintot from seeing that he was trembling. He'd been told, of course, something about farmers and grain shipments, but in the thousand different things that administering the city required, it hadn't stood out. Now angry voices roared one against the other until it sounded like a bonfire in the square beyond his windows. Someone was plotting against Vanai, an enemy out of the shadows weakening the fabric of the city. Maccia, perhaps, preparing to retake the city before Antea could solidify its claims. Or the exiled prince gathering allies throughout the countryside. Geder's thoughts whirled and skittered ahead of themselves, dry leaves driven by wind.

"Who's behind it?" he asked, forcing himself to sound calm.

Sir Allintot cleared his throat.

"I believe it's in reaction to your increasing the grain import tax, my lord," Allintot said. "The farmers make more coin for their grain, even though it means traveling farther, because the Newport tax rates are lower."

"So in order to make more money, they'll let Vanai starve?" Geder said. "That won't stand. We can send men out. Intercept the grain and bring it here."

Sir Allintot cleared his throat again. Either the man was getting sick, or he was struggling to hide laughter.

"All respect, my lord," Allintot said. "Even if we put all other things equal, riots are rarely solved by taking troops away from the city. Perhaps my lord might consider reducing the taxes to their previous level. Or, given the gravity of the city's supplies, slightly lower."

"And reduce the amount we have for the crown?" Geder said.

"Again, all respect, my lord. As long as no grain comes to Vanai, no grain taxes do either. The payments are already short of your stated marks."

The shouts from the square swelled. Geder jumped up from his seat and stalked to the window.

"God damn it. Why can't they be *quiet*?"

They swarmed at the steps leading up to the palace. Two or three hundred people, waving fists and stones and sticks. Two dozen men in Antean armor held firm, blades at the front, bows at the rear. Geder saw Jorey Kalliam pacing among the soldiers. The mob surged forward a few steps, then fell back.

"I'll talk to them," Geder said.

"My lord?"

"Tell them I'm coming out," Geder said. "I'll explain the problem, and tell them that I'll fix it."

"As you wish, my lord," Sir Allintot said, and bowed before he left the room.

Geder had the servants bring the black cloak he'd taken in lieu of taxes. The creak and smell of the leather left him feeling more confident, and the cut really was quite good. It occurred to him, as he descended the wide, polished wood stairs and walked across the wide hall, that he wore the cloak much the way he'd have worn a mask. Because it was well made and impressive, he hid in it, hoping people would see it and not him.

At his nod, two nervous Timzinae servant girls pulled the doors open, and Geder walked out. The soldiers guarding the palace doors seemed more exposed, now that he was standing behind them instead of looking down from above. The mob seemed larger. The crowd saw him, caught its breath, and screamed. Sticks and fists pumped in the air. Hundreds of faces looked up at him, mouths square and teeth showing. Geder swallowed and walked forward.

"What are you doing?" Jorey Kalliam said.

"It's all right," Geder said, and raised his hands, commanding silence. "Listen! Listen to me!"

The first stone seemed like a cunning man's trick. A dark spot against the sky, smaller than a bird, it rose from the back of the mob and seemed to hang in the air, motionless. It was only in the last few feet that the illusion broke and it sped toward Geder's face. The impact knocked him back, the world going quiet and distant for a moment, the daylight growing dusky at the edges of his vision. Then the air itself was roaring, the crowd surging forward. The voice that rose over the chaos was Jorey Kalliam's.

"Loose bows! Hold position!"

An arrow passed over Geder from the square, loose fletching buzzing. It struck the wall of the palace and shattered. Someone took his elbow and pulled him up the stairs. The left side of his face tingled, and he tasted blood.

"Get inside, and stay there," Jorey shouted. "Don't go near the windows."

"I won't," Geder said, and another stone sang past him. He hunched forward, running for the safety of walls around him. As soon as he was through the doors, the slaves closed them and dropped a wooden bar across a set of interior braces. Geder sat on the stairs, arms around his knees, as the shouts from the square became screams. Something loud happened, and a woman's voice rose in a shriek. He found he was rocking back and forth and made himself stop. His squire appeared at his side, a damp cloth in hand, to wash the blood off Geder's face.

After what seemed hours and was likely only minutes, the sounds of violence faded. When the silence had gone long enough, he gestured to the slaves. The doors were unbarred, and Geder peeked out. Only Antean soldiers stood in the square now. Five bodies lay at the foot of the palace stairs, their blood obscenely bright in the midday sun. The archers still held their places, arrow at the ready, but not yet drawn. Jorey Kalliam stood in the center of the square, half a dozen swordsmen about him. Geder could hear the snap and rhythm of his syllables without making out individual words. Geder turned away and walked back up to his private rooms. Someone had managed to loft a stone high enough to shatter one of the windows. The shards glittered in the sunlight.

It wasn't how things were supposed to go. He had been given the chance to make his name, and he was failing. He didn't even understand how he was failing, only that decisions he made spawned two more problems that were each twice as bad as the first. He knew that the soldiers didn't respect him. That the citizens of the city despised him. He knew too little to run a city with the complexity of Vanai by himself, and he didn't have enough allies to do it for him. He wanted Ternigan to call him home the way he had Klin. Being called to account—even to be condemned—would be better than staying here.

Except, of course, that he could already see the disappointment in his father's expression. Could already hear the falsely bluff consoling words. *You did your best, my boy. I'm still proud of you.* In his imagination, his father tried to protect Geder from the shame of failure. Anything would be better than that. Death at the hands of an angry rabble would be better. Geder's own humiliations ached, but he could endure them. To watch his father humiliated as well would be too much. There had to be a way. There *had* to.

A servant girl came in with a brush and dustpan and cleared away the broken glass. Geder barely looked at her. The air that seeped in through the broken pane was chilly, but he didn't call for anyone to repair the window. He had his leather cloak on. He was warm enough. And if he wasn't, it hardly mattered.

The light shifted along the wall, reddening as the sun completed its arc. A Firstblood man came in, hesitated, and then remade the fire in the grate. Geder's legs ached, but he didn't move. The same man returned a short time later with a sheet of leather that he tied over the broken window. The room grew darker.

It was unfair that Ternigan wouldn't pay the price of this. He was the one who'd put Geder in command without the guidance or loyal men to back him. If anyone deserved to be shamed over the state of things in Vanai it was the Lord Marshal. But of course, that would never happen. Because if Ternigan deserved blame for putting his faith in Geder, then King Simeon would deserve blame for naming Ternigan to command. No, the blame would be Geder's to eat, and Geder's alone.

Still, he couldn't imagine what Ternigan had been thinking. Everyone had been dumbfounded by the appointment. Even Geder himself had needed Jorey Kalliam's insight to find a plausible reason for the elevation. No one had thought the choice wise. The only two who'd had any faith in it at all were Geder and Lord Ternigan. They were the only two men who'd thought it possible, and even then...

Or perhaps not. What if *no one* had thought it possible? Not even from the start.

"Oh," Geder said to the empty room.

When he turned, his knees buckled. He had stood unmoving for too long. He limped to the couch nearest the fire, his mind turned the problem over of its own accord. How many times had he heard it said that Vanai was a small piece played in a much larger game? And he hadn't understood until now.

First point: as much as it stung to admit, Geder was in no sense equipped to manage the city.

Second point: Ternigan had put him in control of it.

Third: Ternigan was not a fool.

Therefore Ternigan—for whatever reasons and by whatever conflict of loyalties—*wanted* Vanai to fall into chaos. Geder was an acceptable sacrifice.

When he smiled, his injured lip split again. When he laughed, it bled.

Your Majesty, the letter began, *in my role as Protector of Vanai, I have been forced to conclude that the political environment within the greater court makes long-term control of the city impossible.*

Geder ran his eyes down the page again. He'd written half a dozen versions of the thing in the course of the night. Some had been angry screeds, others abject apologies. The form he'd finally adopted was modeled closely on a letter sent by Marras Toca to the king of Hallskar several centuries earlier. The full text was reproduced in one of his books, and the rhetoric of it was both moving and understated. Geder had changed enough to clear his conscience of any taint of plagiarism, and still the structure of the thing shone through. Geder sewed the letter, marked the exterior page, and pressed his seal of office into the purple wax. The essay with Marras Toca's letter rested on the table, and Geder paged through it again, his heart lighter than it had been in weeks. He found the passage he was looking for, and paused to underline the critical phrase.

... the destruction of Aastapal was done by Inys as a tactical gambit to keep it from Morade's control...

The notation in his own handwriting caught his eye. *Looking at ripples to know where the stone fell.*

Oh yes. Once he'd gone back to Camnipol, there would be time for that. Alan Klin might not realize that he'd lost his protectorate by betrayal. Geder, on the other hand, was perfectly aware of it, and he cast his grudges in iron. He would understand Ternigan's decision and all that lay behind it. But that would come later.

The night had been a trial. The long dark hours had been filled with his mind's constant drumbeat of how he had been used. How he had been created as a failure, and what the price of it would be. He had wept and he had raged. He'd read his books and the reports of his men and the history of Vanai. Briefly, he'd even slept.

"My lord," his squire said. "You called for me?"

"Yes," Geder said, rising to his feet. "There are three things. First, take this letter and find the fastest rider we have. I want this in Camnipol as soon as it can be accomplished."

"Yes, my lord."

"Second, take that purse there. You know the scholar I've been working with? Buy all the books he has. Then bring them back here and pack them with my things. We'll be leaving Vanai, and I'll have them with me."

"Leaving, my lord?"

"Third, send word to my secretaries. I will meet with them in an hour. Any man who comes late, I'll have whipped. Tell them so. Whipped and salt poured on the wounds."

"Y-yes, my lord."

Geder smiled, and it hurt less now. His squire bobbed a quick bow and scurried out. Yawning and stretching, Geder left his rooms in the palace of the prince of Vanai for the last time. His step was light, his mood undiminished by a night without rest. The air smelled of the subtle promise of spring, and the thin light of morning spilled across the stones where the rioters had been the day before. At the far end of the square, some daring local had hung an effigy of Geder. The dummy had an immense belly, a black cloak that mirrored his, and an expression on the dried gourd of a head that was a masterwork of idiocy. A sign hung around the thing's neck: FEED US OR FREE US. Geder nodded at his other self, a brief and uncharitable salute.

His men sat in the same seats where he'd first addressed them. Many looked tousled from sleep. Jorey Kalliam was among them, his brow set in furrows. Gospey Allintot stood at the rear, his arms crossed and his chin held high. He likely thought he was going to be called to account for the previous day's riot. Geder stepped to the front of the former chapel. He didn't sit.

"My lords," he said sharply. "I apologize for the hour, but I thank you for coming. As Lord Protector, it is my duty and privilege to command you all in this, our final day in the city of Vanai."

He stood for a moment, letting the words sink in. Eyes brightened. Confusion softened the frowns and loosened the necks. Geder nodded.

"By nightfall, you will have your men outside the city gates and prepared for the march to Camnipol," Geder said. "I understand food is somewhat scarce, so be sure that gets packed before we pile on any last looting. This isn't a sack."

"Then what it is?" Alberith Maas said.

"Don't interrupt me again, Maas. I'm still in charge here. Sir Allintot, if you would be so good as to see that the canals are shut? We'll leave those beds dry, I think. And the street gates will need to be shut."

"Which street gates?"

"The iron ones at the street mouths," Geder said.

"Yes, sir. I know them. I meant which of them did you want shut."

"All of them. Lord Kalliam, I would have you guard the city gates. No one comes into the city, and no one besides ourselves leaves it. It is very important that no one escape."

"We're leaving?" Maas said.

"I have been forced to conclude," Geder said, "that the political environment within the greater court makes long-term control of the city impossible. You've all seen Sir Klin's best efforts, and what they came to. I've read the histories of Vanai. Do you all know how many times it's been Antean? Seven. The longest was for ten years during the reign of Queen Esteya the Third. The shortest was three days during the Interregnum. In every case, the city had been given away by treaty or sacrificed in pursuit of some other goal. Which is to say, Vanai has been lost to politics. Given the situation in Camnipol, we are in the path to do so again."

"What does *he* know about the situation in Camnipol?" someone muttered loud enough for Geder to hear, but not so loudly he couldn't pretend otherwise.

"My duty as Protector of Vanai is not to the city itself, but to Antea. If I thought our continued presence here would benefit the crown, I would stay, and so would all of you. But if the history books

show anything, it's that this city has cost good and noble men their lifeblood with no lasting advantage to the Severed Throne, no matter who was seated there at the time. In my role as assigned me by Lord Ternigan in the name of King Simeon, I have determined that Vanai cannot be profitably held. I've written as much to King Simeon. The courier with my justification of these orders is already on the dragon's roads for Camnipol."

"So we just walk away home?" Maas said. There was outrage in his voice. "We hand it over to whichever of our enemies happens by?"

"Of course not," Geder said. "We burn it."

Vanai died at sundown.

If the people had known, if they had understood the threat, the little riot in the square before the palace would have been nothing. But despite the emptying of the canals, the wood and coal and oil spread through the streets and squares, and the arming of the gates, they couldn't imagine that they faced anything more than retaliation for a stone thrown at Geder's head. Likely some rioters would be caught and burned. They wouldn't be the first public executions that Vanai had seen. It was only when the Anteans marched through the gates that the city understood what was happening, and by then it was too late.

History had turned against Vanai. It was a city of narrow streets, of timber waterproofed with oils, of gates at every street mouth. It was smug, and certain that no lasting harm could come to it because none had before. It was the small piece in a much larger game.

Geder sat on a small dais that Sir Alan Klin had left behind. The seat was a leather sling, and a bit narrow for him, but more comfortable than his own field chair. The highest-ranked of his staff stood around him.

He'd rehearsed this moment in his mind. Once it was done, he would stand up, announce that he deemed Vanai no longer in need of protection, and give the order to march. It would be like something from the old epics. Around him, the officers fidgeted, glancing at him as if they weren't sure he really meant to go through with it.

A hundred yards before him, the gates of Vanai closed, glowing gold from the setting sun. Geder rose to his feet.

"Block the gates," he said.

The order went out, seeming to echo and grow as it passed from caller to caller. The sound would soon reach the southern gates as well. The engineers had been waiting, and they sprang into action. It took less than a minute for the great gates to be disabled. It wouldn't have been long work to force them open, but still longer than Vanai had remaining.

"Loose the fire arrows," Geder said, almost conversationally.

The order went out. Twenty archers lit their arrows and lifted their bows, the streaks of flame little more than fireflies in the light. Then again, and twice more. All around the city, archers wearing his colors would be doing the same as the order reached them. Geder sat down. In his imagination, it had all happened at once, but the sun slipped down below the horizon, the golden world fading to grey, and no particular sign of fire came. Geder was wondering whether he should have the archers try again when he saw the first trail of smoke rise. As he watched, it spread, but slowly. This might take longer than he'd thought.

The smoke thickened, and when the breeze turned toward him it was close and greasy. An answering tower of smoke rose in the south, the blackness rising so high in the air that it caught the last light of the sun, flaring red for a moment, and then dark again. Geder shifted in his seat. It was getting cold, but he didn't want to call for his jacket. He hadn't slept since the night before last, and he could feel the fatigue tugging at him. He forced himself to sit upright.

For a long time, nothing seemed to happen. Some smoke. The sound of distant voices. Geder didn't think that the fire, once started, could be easily put out, but perhaps. The smoke spread, widening its grasp on the night city. And then, as if coming to itself, fire claimed the city.

The screaming began, voices shrieking and wailing. He'd expected to hear something, of course, but he'd thought it would be like the riot that had disturbed him—God, had it only been the day before? This was a different beast. There was no anger in the sound, only hundreds of voices of raw animal panic. Geder saw movement from his own troops. Someone had slipped out of the city, and the swordsmen of Antea, true to their orders, hunted the refugees down. Geder touched his lip, worrying at the cut. He reminded himself of the effigy hung in the square. They'd started this. It wasn't his fault they were dying now.

Smoke billowed up from the streets now, lit from beneath and blocking out the moon. Flames crawled up the buildings nearest the wall and leapt up, leaving the city below and burning in the free air. Another sound, low and steady as an army on the march, came. Geder felt the ground shudder, and looked around for a landslide or an attack. For a moment, he imagined it was some last dragon, hidden under Vanai and disturbed into waking. But it was only the voice of the fire.

The gates shuddered, warping from the heat. A group of figures appeared on the wall, men and women trying to flee. In a moment as clear and sudden as a lightning strike, one in particular was silhouetted by the flames. Geder could tell that she was a woman, but not what race she was. She waved her arms, trying to communicate something. He had the sudden, powerful urge to send someone to her, to save her, but already she was gone. Some tendril of flame reached the near-empty granaries, and the stirred grain dust detonated like a thunderclap. Smoke rose whirling, a vortex of darkness that dwarfed the city. The wind that pushed past him was the draw of the flames. The roar was too loud to speak over.

Geder sat, eyes wide, as bits of ash rained down around him. The heat of the dying city pressed against his face like the desert sun. He'd imagined himself sitting there, watching until it was done. He hadn't understood that Vanai would burn for days.

He hadn't understood *anything*.

"Let's go," he said. No one heard him. "It's enough! Let's go!"

The order went out, and the army of Antea pulled back from the furnace. Geder abandoned the thought of his grand rhetorical gesture. Nothing he could say would measure up to the conflagration. He went back to his tent, wondering if they were camped too close. What if the fire broke through the walls? What if it came for him?

He waved his squire away and curled up on the cot. He was too tired to move, and the nightmare howl of the flames wouldn't stop. He stared at the top of his tent, seeing the small figure waving her arms and dying. Geder pressed his hand to his mouth, biting at the skin until it bled, trying to make the noise go away.

The smoke of ten thousand people rose into the sky.

CITHRIN

Word of the destruction of Vanai washed over Porte Oliva. In the Grand Market and at the port, in the taprooms and the wayhouses and the steps that led to the brick-and-glass labyrinth that was the governor's palace, detail piled upon detail as reports came in by ship and horse and raw speculation. The city had burned for three days. The Antean forces had barred the gate and slaughtered anyone who tried to escape. The canals had been drained so that there would be no water to slow the fire. The Anteans had poured barrels of lamp oil in the streets before they left. The heat had shattered stones. The smoke had carried the smell of burning as far as Maccia and turned the sunsets red. Charred bodies were still clogging the weirs at Newport.

Cithrin grabbed at each rumor like one of the ever-present beggars watching for dropped coins. At first, she hadn't believed it. Cities didn't die overnight. The streets and canals she'd known all her life couldn't become ruins just because someone said it, even if the man speaking was an Antean general. It was ridiculous. But with every retelling, every new voice that said the same things, her incredulity faded. Even if they were all only echoing one another, the weight of their combined belief pulled her along.

Vanai was dead.

"Are you all right?" Sandr asked.

Cithrin leaned forward, her legs swinging from the side of the actors' cart like a child sitting on too high a stool. Around them, the midday crowd shuffled. She watched a reed-thin Cinnae boy thread himself through the press of bodies, following the colorless thatch of his hair. The smell of the sea brine made the air feel cooler than it was. She didn't know how to answer, but she tried.

"I don't know. I think so. It's hard to live in the middle of all this," she said, nodding at the press of humanity around them, "and really feel the deaths. I mean, I know that Magister Imaniel is gone. And Cam must be too. All the boys who played in the streets are dead, and that makes me sad sometimes. But when I start thinking that it's *all* gone—the fresh market and the palaces and the flat barges and all of it—it gets... I don't know. Abstract?"

"That's a good word for it," Sandr said, nodding as if he knew what she meant.

"Nobody knows me now. I've lived my whole life in Vanai. It felt like everyone knew who I was. *What* I was. And now that they're all gone, there's nothing holding me to that anymore. Captain Wester, Yardem Hane, you, and Master Kit's company. You are the people in the world who know me best."

"It's hard," Sandr said, taking her hand.

No, that's the only good part, she thought. When nobody knows what you are, you can be anything.

"Sandr!" Master Kit called. "It's time."

"Yes, sir," Sandr said, jumping to his feet. He looked down at Cithrin and smiled gently, much the way he did when he took the stage. "You'll be here when it's done?"

Cithrin nodded. It wasn't as if she had someplace else to be. Besides which, Sandr's sudden change of heart was interesting. She assumed that some more attractive girl had refused him, and he'd fallen back to court her while his confidence healed. He believed, after their moments beside the mill pond, that she was an easy conquest. Cithrin wondered whether she was. More than that, she wondered whether she'd like to be. She slipped off the cart and into the crowd.

Mikel was already there, halfheartedly pretending to be a local. He caught her eyes and grinned. She nodded back, then turned to watch Smit and Hornet lower the stage. When the chains had caught, Master Kit strode out onto the boards. He wasn't wearing his Orcus the Demon King robes anymore. With Opal gone, the story of Aleren Mankiller and the Sword of the Dragons had been set aside. Instead, a shimmering blue cape flowed from the shoulders of a matching tunic. Bright yellow ribbon gartered green hose, and the most ridiculous shoes seen by human eyes bobbled around his toes.

"Hell-lo!" Master Kit cried in comic falsetto. "I said, hello there! Yes, you, in that wonderful hat. Why don't you stop for a while. God knows you've nothing better to do. And you, there at the back. Come closer, you might see something you like. What? You might. And—"

Master Kit stopped, his face a mask of shock. Cithrin felt a thrill of fear, half turning to follow his gaze.

"Oh, not you, dear," Master Kit went on in the same false voice, his hand fluttering like a sparrow. "You keep right on going."

The crowd laughed. Cithrin and Mikel were meant to lead them, but there were already half a dozen others who had stopped to watch. The Bride's Curse was a comedic sex play with half a dozen costume changes that could be performed with only one woman. Master Kit had changed the traditional lines to match with the specifics of Porte Oliva: the rhymes appealing to the king had all been remade for a queen, and instead of the evil landlord being disguised as a Yemmu with a false shoulder and mouth tusks, Smit jumped onto the stage in a bead-woven sheep pelt as the world's least convincing Kurtadam. Cithrin laughed and clapped, not leading the crowd so much as adding to its flow.

When the end came and the players took their bows amid a modest shower of coin, she was almost surprised to find herself returned to her own life. Hiding in Porte Oliva, waiting for the next thieves to attack in the night.

And Vanai dead.

Sandr came out from the cart wiping the paint from his face with a damp rag. The smears at his eyes and mouth made him look younger than he was. Or perhaps they made him seem his age, when he usually passed himself as a worn coin.

"Went well," he said through a grin.

"It did," Cithrin agreed.

"Buy you that meal now, if you'd like," he said. Over his shoulder, Cithrin caught a glimpse of Cary scowling at them from the cart and imagined what she would see. Sandr, the leading man. Cithrin, the naïve second-choice girl. Or perhaps Sandr, member of the troupe, and Cithrin, the reason Opal was gone. The pinched lips and furrowed brow could have been disapproval of her or of Sandr. Cithrin didn't know which it was.

Find out, Magister Imaniel said from her memory or else his grave.

Cithrin lifted a hand only as high as her waist, barely a wave. Cary returned it, and then pointed at Sandr and tilted her head. *Really?* If she'd been angry about Opal, at most she would have smiled and waved. Surprised by relief, Cithrin shrugged. Cary rolled her eyes and went back into the cart.

"What?" Sandr said, looking over his shoulder. "Did I miss something?"

"Just Cary," Cithrin said. "You said something about a meal?"

The taproom nearest her rooms served plates of chicken and pickled carrots that they claimed went well with the dark beer. Sandr paid five extra coins for the privilege of a private table with a single bench, kept apart from the commons by a draped cloth too humble to be called a curtain. He slid onto the bench at her side, with a tankard of black beer and a wide mug of fortified wine for her. His leg settled easily beside hers, as if the touch were perfectly normal. Cithrin considered shifting to leave a few inches between them. Instead, she drank a generous mouthful of the wine, enjoying the bite of it. Sandr smiled and sipped at his own beer.

This was, she realized, a negotiation. He wanted to do some of the things he'd just finished mocking in the sex play, and he in turn was willing to offer up food and alcohol, attention and

sympathy. And, whether he knew it or not, experience. Implicit exchange was something Magister Imaniel had talked about several times, and always with disdain. He'd liked the precision of measuring coin. Here, in the warmth of the taproom, the tastes of salted meat and fortified wine warming her blood, Cithrin wasn't sure she agreed. Surely imprecision had its place.

"I'm sorry about Vanai," Sandr said, using the same gambit he'd tried before the play.

Now what was the effect of saying that? Reminding her how badly she needed reassurance and the feeling of connection, she supposed. Making the things he offered seem valuable. Still, he'd made that point earlier. Stating it again was a mistake. Maybe if he'd interspersed it with other tactics. He could devalue her side of the exchange. If, for instance he'd criticized her dress or the cut of her hair, making it clear that lying down at her side wasn't likely worth so much. The danger there being that she might take offense and end the negotiation. Or pretend offense as a way of forcing him to raise his offer.

"Cithrin?" he said, and she shook herself.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My mind was elsewhere."

"The beer's good. Have you been here before?"

"I've meant to," she said. "Something's always come up."

"Want some?"

"All right," she said.

She'd expected him to pass his tankard to her, but instead he lifted his arm, calling over the server, and bought a tankard just for her. It was complex and thick, the alcohol lurking in a rich play of flavors. It didn't have the astringent cleanness of the fortified wine. How had Captain Wester put it? *Get her stupid drunk to get her knees apart*. Something like that.

It occurred to her that Sandr wasn't a man with a wide variety of strategies.

"I don't remember my parents," Cithrin said. "The bank raised me, bought my clothes and tutors."

"You must have loved them," Sandr said, playing the part of the consoler with his voice and pressing his thigh against hers with just a bit more fervor. Still, Cithrin considered the question.

Had she loved Magister Imaniel? She supposed so. She'd certainly loved Cam and wanted Besel. She'd wept for them all when the first news came. But she wasn't weeping now. The grief was still with her, but there was something else beside it. A terrible sense of possibility.

"I suppose I must," she said.

He took her hand, as if in sympathy. His brow furrowed and he leaned toward her.

"I'm so sorry, Cithrin," he said, and to her amazement, tears came to her eyes. That couldn't be right.

Sandr leaned forward, dabbing gently at her eyes with the cuff of his sleeve. Washing away the tears he had called forth. The stab of resentment at the little hypocrisy clarified many questions.

"Captain Wester!" she gasped, and Sandr dropped her hand like it had bit him. He glanced out from behind the almost-curtain.

"Where?" he said.

"He just stepped into the other room," Cithrin said. "Go, Sandr. Before he sees you!"

Sandr swallowed, nodded once, and slipped off the bench, heading for the alley door. Cithrin watched him go, then reached over and pulled his tankard to her as well. The chicken did go well with it after all. As she drank, her mind wandered. She wasn't angry at Sandr, but she couldn't bring herself to respect him. On another night, she might have let his scene play out, if only to see where it led. But it was increasingly clear that Master Kit intended to remain in Porte Oliva for some time. Since she wasn't sure when or how she'd depart the city, making that kind of connection was sure to complicate things. And then what if she got pregnant? Everything would fall apart then. Easier to stay out than to get out later. Still, she did wonder what it would have been like. Her mind shifted back to the mill pond, the snow against her skin, the weight of the boy upon her.

She finished the second beer and went back to the fortified wine. Alcohol was supposed to soften the mind, but she didn't feel soft at all. Or at least not in a way that left her unaware. She was more relaxed, certainly. The ever-present knot in her gut was looser, and she felt more at home in her skin. But her thinking was as clear as ever. Maybe clearer. She had the sense of huge thoughts shifting just beneath her awareness, her mind comparing and scheming with a speed and elegance that she couldn't quite keep up with herself. She ate some of the pickled carrots, finished the wine, and got another tankard of the beer.

When she stepped out the door, the sun had already set. Porte Oliva lounged in the grey twilight. Lanterns flickered and glowed. Men and women scurried through the streets, anxious to get home before twilight had entirely faded. The air was cold but not bitter. This wasn't a mild winter evening so much as a chilly springtime. She let herself drift down the street, her mind plucking at thoughts, turning them over, and dropping them again. How old Sandr seemed on the stage, and how young off it. The emptiness in her heart that was the death of Magister Imaniel and Cam, the almost vertiginous need to fill it, and her almost clinical detachment from her pain. The impending trip to Carse, smuggling wealth she hadn't stolen. The books of the bank records, sums and ciphers tracing history from the foundational document to the last rush of fleeing aristocracy. Opal's betrayal and Captain Wester's loyalty. She remembered something Master Kit had said about the shape of Wester's soul, and wondered what shape her own soul might take.

A Cinnae woman hurried past, her robes wrapped with pink-and-orange gauze, her face pale as the moon. A dog barked from the shadowed mouth of an alleyway. Three Kurtadam men walked past her, beads clicking and jingling in their pelts, said something she didn't understand, and then laughed together. She ignored them. The glow of her own windows shone just up ahead. If anyone were to attack her now, she'd only have to call out and Captain Wester and Yardem Hane would come. It was a pleasant thought, and enough to make her feel safe whether she was or not.

She pulled herself up the stairs to the steady creaking of Captain Wester's pacing footsteps. She opened the door to his scowl.

"You've been out for quite a while," he said.

Cithrin shrugged.

"How much have you been drinking?"

Cithrin walked over to the cot and sat beside the Tralgu. Yardem smelled like open fields and damp dogs. She repressed the urge to scratch his wide back. Captain Wester was still looking at her, waiting for an answer.

"I don't recall exactly," she said. "I wasn't paying for most of it."

Wester hoisted an eyebrow.

"The thaw's almost come. We have to make a decision," she said, her words precise and unslurred.

"That's true," the captain said, crossing his arms. The failing daylight from the windows softened the lines of his scowl and the grey at his temples. He looked young. Cithrin remembered that Opal had found the man attractive and wondered whether she did. She'd lived with him for weeks. Months, counting the time on the road. She wondered for the first time whether his mouth would taste like Sandr's, then pulled her mind back to the moment, more than half repulsed by her own musings.

"No matter how we try to reach Carse," she said, "the danger is that someone will kill us and take the money."

"Old news," Captain Wester said.

"So we need to take the money ourselves," she said, understanding as she said it what she'd been considering all night. "We need to use it."

"Probably the wisest thing we could do," the captain said. "Take what we can carry and vanish."

"No," she said. "I mean take all of it."

The Tralgu at her side flicked a jingling ear. Captain Wester licked his lips and looked down.

“If we took all of it, we’d be in the same situation we are now,” he said. “We’d still have to hide the money or protect it. Only we’d have your friends in Carse after our heads. That’s not an improvement. We can talk about this when you’re sober,” he said.

“No, listen to me. We’ve been acting like smugglers. We aren’t. You’ve always said we can’t keep this much money quiet and we can’t keep it safe. Opal proved that. So we shouldn’t keep it quiet.”

Wester and Yardem exchanged a silent glance, and the captain sighed. Cithrin stood and walked across to the unsealed books. Her feet were perfectly steady. Her hands didn’t waver as she pulled out the black leather binding. She opened to the first pages and handed them to the captain.

“Documents of foundation,” she said. “We write up a copy of our own, but for Porte Oliva instead of Vanai. We’ve got a hundred documents with Magister Imaniel’s signature and thumb. We can pick some minor contract and use it to forge letters of foundation. File the documents with the governor, pay the fees and bribes, and then I can invest all of this.”

“Invest it,” the captain said as if she’d said *eat it*.

“The silk and tobacco and spices I can place on consignment. Even if they’re stolen from the merchants, the bank would be paid. We can do the same with the jewelry or sell it outright for funds, and then make loans. Or buy into local businesses. We’ll have to hold back some portion. Five hundredths, perhaps? But with the name of the Medean bank behind me, I could turn over nine-tenths of what we have in this room into papers of absolutely no value to anyone else before the trade ships come from Narinisle. What was left wouldn’t be too tempting to guard.”

“You are very, very drunk,” Wester said. “The way you steal is you take something and then you leave.”

“I’m not stealing it. I’m keeping it safe,” Cithrin said. “This is how banks work. You never keep all the money there to be stolen by whoever finds a way to break your strongbox. You put it out into the world. If you take a loss or someone steals your working funds, you still have all your incomes and agreements. You can recover. And if it all goes wrong, what? We get thrown in prison?”

“Prison is bad,” Yardem rumbled.

“Not as bad as killed and dropped in the sea,” Cithrin said. “If you do what I say, the chances of keeping the money go up and the consequences of failure go down.”

“You want,” Captain Wester said, his voice tight, “to take a great deal of money that isn’t yours and start your own branch of the bank that you’re stealing the money *from*? They’ll come for you.”

“Of course they will,” Cithrin said. “And when they do, I’ll have what’s theirs and more besides. If I’ve done it right.”

Cithrin saw the disbelief in his face wavering on the border between amusement and outrage. She stamped her foot.

“Listen to me,” she said. “Listen to my voice, Captain. *I can do this.*”

Marcus

Be careful,” Marcus said.

“I am being careful, sir.”

“Well, be more careful.”

Seven previous attempts lay on the floor between them: contracts and agreements between dead men over burned wealth, meaningless now. But, as Cithrin had said, each of them bore the signature and bloody thumbprint of Magister Imaniel of Vanai. The trick was to dip the parchment into the wax so that it covered the name and thumb, but nothing else. Then the page could be set in a wash of salt and rendered oil to loosen the ink. After a day in the bath, they could use a scrivener’s stone to scrape away the ink, then a wash of urine to bleach away any remaining marks. In the end, they would have a blank page, ready to take whatever carefully practiced words Cithrin put on it, already signed and endorsed by the former head of the bank. A man, the story would have it, who foresaw the coming death of his city at Antean hands and concocted a scheme to refound his branch in Porte Oliva with Cithrin as his agent.

Provided they could put the wax in the right spot. Marcus leaned forward, fingers reaching toward the side of the document.

“If you just—”

“Sir?”

“Yardem?”

The Tralgu’s ears sloped backward, set so close to his head that the earrings rested on his scalp.

“Go over there, sir.”

“But I—”

“Go.”

Marcus tapped at the air just before the parchment, grunted, and turned away. The boxes in the small rooms above the gambler’s stall had been shifted and rearranged, making what had been one small room into two tiny ones. Outside, a warm spring wind hissed, rattling the shutters and making the world in general seem uneasy and restless. It had been a long time since Marcus had broken the thaw in a southern port, and the rich salt-stink of the bay reminded him of yesterday’s fish. Cithrin sat on a stool, dressed in her carter’s rough, with Cary squeezed in close beside her. Master Kit stood a few steps away, his arms crossed over his chest.

“That was better,” Master Kit said, “but I think you’ve gone a little too far in the other direction. I don’t want you to seem burdened. Instead of thinking of weight, imagine how you would move in a heavy wool cloak.”

Cary put her hand to Cithrin’s back.

“You’re too tight here,” Cary said. “Relax that and put the tension up *here*.”

Cithrin frowned, tiny half moons appearing at the corners of her mouth.

“Like your breasts were too heavy,” Cary said.

“Oh,” Cithrin said, brightening. “Right.”

She rose from her stool, took a step toward Master Kit, turned, and sat back down. Marcus couldn’t have said what had changed in the way the girl moved, only that it was different. Older. Master Kit and Cary smiled at each other.

“Progress,” Master Kit said. “Unquestionable progress.”

“I think we’re ready to walk down to the square,” Cary said.

“With my blessing,” Master Kit said, stepping back until he was almost pressed to Marcus’s belly. The two women made their way across the thin strip of floor to the head of the stairway, hand in hand.

“Lower in the hips,” Master Kit said. “Sink into them. Don’t walk from your ankles.”

The creak of boards descended until the pair were out in the street and gone. The wind gusted up the stairway, and the door at the bottom slammed shut. Marcus blew out his breath and sat on the newly vacant stool.

“I think she’s quite good,” Master Kit said. “Not much natural sense of her own body, but no particular fear of it either, and I find that’s half the work.”

“That’s good,” Marcus said.

“It seems the cuts on her thumbs are scarring nicely. I expect she’ll have a good callus when that’s through. Like she’s been signing contracts for years. Did you put lye in the wounds?”

“Ash and honey,” Marcus said. “Just as good, and it doesn’t tend to go septic.”

“Fair point. I thought that calling her three-quarters Cinnae was a good choice. If she’s nearer full-blood, the Firstblood thickness may read more as years than parentage.”

“I’ve always thought Cinnae look to be about twelve anyway,” Marcus said. “Terrible in a fight. No weight behind the blows.”

Master Kit leaned a shoulder against the wall. His dark eyes flitted across Marcus as if the actor were reading a book.

“And how are you, Captain?”

“I hate this,” Marcus said. “I hate this plan. I hate that we’re forging documents. I hate that Cithrin pulled you and yours into it. There’s nothing about the entire scheme I don’t hate.”

“And yet it seems you’ve chosen to come along.”

“I don’t have a better idea,” Marcus said. “Except fill our pockets and walk away. That’s still got some charm.”

“So why don’t you do that? The boxes are here. I’d say you’ve more than earned your pay.”

Marcus let out a mirthless chuckle and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. From the far side of the room, Yarden made a satisfied grunt. The wax dip had worked this time.

“There are going to be consequences,” Marcus said. “She can’t just say it’s all hers now and make it true. It’s like walking into Cabral and casually announcing that you’re the new mayor of Upurt Marion, and all the port taxes go to you now. And what’s it going to upset? We don’t know. By the end of the season, every trading house and royal court is going to have a theory of what exactly Komme Medean is signaling by investing in Porte Oliva. It’s going to mean something about the relationship of Birancour and Cabral, and whether the freight from Qart-hadath is landing here or there. Why isn’t there a branch here already? Is it because the queen warned them off? We might be violating half a dozen treaties and agreements right now, and we wouldn’t know it.”

“I agree with all of that,” Master Kit said. “The risk seems real.”

“We’re about to be the bold, unexpected move on the part of a bank with a great deal of money and influence, and don’t think for a moment that they’ll appreciate our putting our hand to the tiller.”

“And that’s why you dislike the plan?”

“Yes,” Marcus said.

Master Kit looked down. The wind stilled, then gusted again, pressing against the little rooms and stirring the air.

“Why do you dislike this plan, Captain?” the actor said.

He felt a stab of annoyance, and then the cool, almost sick feeling of the right answer swimming into his mind. He scratched his leg, feeling the tooth of the cloth against his fingertips. His hands seemed older than they should. When he thought of them, they still looked like they had when he’d first been on campaign. Strong, smooth, capable. Now there was as much scar to them as skin. The nail of his right thumb had been cut half off once, and it hadn’t grown back quite right. The knuckles were larger than they had been. The calluses had more yellow to them. He turned them over,

considering his palms as well. If he looked closely, he could still make out the dots of white where a dog had bitten him once, a lifetime ago.

"She knows the risks, but she doesn't understand them," Marcus said. "I can say everything to her I just said to you, and she'll answer me back. Argument for argument. She'll say the regained capital justifies the decision. That the holding company isn't liable for her, nor are the other branches, so anything they make back is a step above where they were when the money was simply lost."

"And yet," Master Kit said.

"I know how to protect her from thugs and raiders. I know how to fight pirates. I don't know how to protect her from herself, and hand to God, that girl is the worst danger she'll ever face."

"It can be hard, can't it? Losing control," Master Kit said.

"I don't control her," Marcus said.

"I think you do, but I'm open to being proven wrong. What are three decisions she's made before this? In the time you've known her, I mean."

Yardem Hane loomed up behind the actor, wiping oil from his fingers onto a bit of grey cloth. For a moment, Marcus thought it might offer distraction, but the Tralgu's passive expression told him that he'd come to listen to the conversation, not to end it.

"She got that dress of hers," Marcus said. "And she chose to go to your performances."

"Two, then?" Master Kit said.

"She picked the fish for dinner," Marcus said.

"And how would you compare that with other contracts you've had?" Master Kit asked. "I don't believe you have thought of Cithrin as your employer so much as the little girl who'd swum out near the riptide. Has she paid you?"

"She hasn't," the Tralgu rumbled.

"You can stay out of this," Marcus said. "She couldn't. She didn't have any money of her own. All of this belongs to someone."

"And now," Master Kit said, "it seems she might be able to offer gold. And make decisions of greater weight than whether to have fish or poultry. Or what dress to buy. If this scheme of hers works, she'll be choosing where to live, how and whether to protect herself, and all the other thousand things that come with her trade. And I suspect you'll be here as well, at her side and protecting her. But only as her hired captain."

"Which isn't what I've been doing all along?" Marcus said.

"Which isn't what you've been doing," Master Kit said. "If you had been, you'd have asked Cithrin before you killed Opal."

"She'd have told me not to."

"And I think that's why you didn't ask. And why you dread the time when you have to ask, and you have to defer to her judgment even if you think she's wrong."

"She's a little girl," Marcus said.

"All women were little girls once," Master Kit said. "Cithrin. Cary. The queen of Birancour. Even Opal."

Marcus said something obscene under his breath. Outside in the street, the gambler's man called out. Great fortune could be theirs. Odds offered on any fair wager.

"I am sorry about Opal," Marcus said.

"I know you are," Master Kit said. "I am too. I knew her for a very long time, and I enjoyed her company for more than half of that. But she was who she was, and she made her choices."

"You were her lover, weren't you?" Marcus said.

"Not recently."

"And she was a part of your company. She traveled with you. She was one of your people."

"She was."

"And you let me kill her," Marcus said.

"I did," Master Kit said. "I believe there is a dignity in consequences, Captain. I think there's a kind of truth in them, and I try to cultivate a profound respect for truth."

"Meaning this is Cithrin's mistake to make."

"If that's what you heard me say."

Yardem flicked an ear, his earrings jingling against each other. Marcus knew what the Tralgu was thinking. *She's not your daughter.* Marcus set his foot against the wall of boxes. The wealth of a city that didn't exist anymore. The gems and trinkets, silk and spices traded to let the lucky escape the flames. All of it together wouldn't buy back one of the dead. Not even for a day.

So what was the point of it?

"Her plan isn't bad," Marcus said. "But I have the right to hate it."

"I can respect that position," Master Kit said with a grin. "Shall we prepare the oil bath for the future foundational documents of the Medean bank in Porte Oliva before the women come back?"

Marcus sighed and rose.

When the morning came, Marcus walked beside her. The mornings were still cold, but not so much that he could see his breath. Men and women of the three predominant races of the city passed one another as if the differences in their eyes and builds and pelts were of no particular concern. The morning mist drifted through the great square, greying the dragon's jade pavement. The condemned of the city shivered in the cold where all could see. Two Firstblood men hung as murderers. A Cinnae woman sat in the stocks with chains around her ankles as a recalcitrant debtor. A Kurtadam man hung by his knees and barely able to draw breath. Smuggling. Marcus could feel Cithrin pause. He wondered what the penalty would be for what they were about to do. It seemed unlikely to have precedent in the judges' tables.

The wide copper-and-oak doors of the governor's palace were already open, a stream of humanity pouring in and out from the center of authority. Cithrin lifted her chin. Smit had painted her face before they left. Faint, greyish lines around her eyes. Rose-grey blush coloring her cheeks. She wore a black dress that flattered her hips, but the way a matron might be flattered. Not a girl fresh from her father's home. She could have been thirty. She could have been fifteen. She could have been anything.

"Come with me," she said.

"Don't walk from your ankles," he said, and she slowed, taking the brickwork steps one at a time.

Within the palaces, the sunlight filtered through great walls of colored glass. Red and green and gold spilled across the floors, the twinned stairways. It mottled the skins of the people walking through, leaving Marcus with the sense of being in some enchanted grotto from a children's song, where all the fish had been changed to minor political officials. Cithrin took a long, shuddering breath. For a moment, he thought she would leave. Turn on her heel, flee, and leave the whole mad folly behind. Instead, she stepped forward and put a hand on the arm of a passing Kurtadam woman.

"Forgive me," Cithrin said. "Where would I find the Prefect of Trades?"

"Up the stairs, ma'am," the Kurtadam said with a soft southland lisp. "He'll be a Cinnae like yourself. Green felt table, ma'am."

"My thanks," Cithrin said, and turned toward the stairs. The Kurtadam woman's gaze stayed on Marcus, and he nodded as they passed. As a bodyguard, he felt out of place. There were a few queensmen here, scattered among the crowd, but no other private guards that he could see. He wondered if the real Medean bank would have brought him along or left him outside.

At the top of the stair, Cithrin paused, and he did as well. The prefectures were set haphazardly about the room like a huge child had taken up the tables and scattered them. There were no aisles, no rows. Each table stood at an angle to the ones around it, and if there was a system to the chaos, Marcus couldn't see it. Cithrin nodded to herself, gestured that he should stay close, and waded into the mess. A third of the way across, she came to a table covered with green felt where a Cinnae man

in a brown tunic sat paging through stacks of parchment. A small weighing scale perched beside him, a row of weights behind it like soldiers at attention.

"Help you?" he said.

"I've come to submit letters of foundation," Cithrin said. Marcus felt his heart speeding up, like the moments before a battle. He crossed his arms and scowled.

"What class of trade, ma'am?"

"Banking," Cithrin said, as if she were doing something perfectly normal. The Prefect of Trades looked up as if seeing her for the first time.

"If you mean a gambling house—"

"No," Cithrin said. "A branch house. The holding company is in Carse. I have the papers, if you'd like."

She held them out. Marcus was certain he caught a whiff of old urine, that the section of the page that the wax had protected showed three shades darker than the rest. The prefect would laugh, call the queensmen, end the game here before it began.

The Cinnae man took the parchment as if it were spun glass. He frowned, his gaze skipping over the words. He stopped and looked up at Cithrin. His pale face flushed.

"The... the *Medean* bank?" he said. Marcus saw the conversations around them shudder and stop. More eyes were turning their way. The prefect swallowed. "Will this be a restricted license or free?"

"I believe the letter calls for free," Cithrin said.

"So it does. So it does. A full and unencumbered branch of the Medean bank."

"Is that a problem?"

"No," the man said, and fumbled, reading for her name on the papers. "No, Mistress bel Sarcour, only I hadn't been told to expect it. If the governor knew, he'd have been here."

"Not called for," Cithrin said. "Would I pay the fees to you?"

"Yes," the prefect said. "Yes, that would be fine. Let me just..."

For what felt like a day and likely took less than half an hour, Cithrin fenced with the bureaucrat. Payment was delivered from the bank, assayed, accepted, and receipts issued. The man scribbled a note on a sheet of pink onionskin, pressed an inked signet on the page, signed, and had Cithrin put her name over his signature. Then he offered her a small silver blade. As if she had done it a thousand times before Cithrin cut her thumb and pressed her print onto the page. The prefect did likewise.

And it was done. Cithrin took the onionskin, folded it, and slipped it in the purse that hung from her belt. Marcus followed her back down the stairs and out to the square. The sun had burned off the mist now, and the sounds of human traffic were the same low roar he'd become accustomed to.

"We're a bank," Cithrin said.

Marcus nodded. He would have felt better if there had been someone to fight. Or at least threaten. The anxiety of what they'd just done wanted some release. Cithrin took a handful of coins from her purse and held them out to him.

"Here," she said. "That's to hire on more guards. Now that it's my money, we might as well spend it. I'm thinking a dozen men, but use your best judgment. We'll want day and night guards, and then a few to accompany goods when we transfer them. I didn't haul these silks all the way from the Free Cities to have some back-alley thief take them now. I've got my eye on a couple of places the bank might operate from that give a better impression than squatting over a gambling shop."

Marcus looked at the coins. They were the first she'd ever paid him, and so what she'd just said was her first true order. The warmth in his chest was as surprising as it was powerful.

However it unfurled from this, whatever the consequences, the girl had done what damn few would have had the nerve for. This from the half-idiot carter boy he'd met in Vanai last autumn.

He was proud of her.

"Is there a problem?" Cithrin asked, real concern in her voice.

“No, ma’am,” Marcus said.

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Dawson

Issandrian's parade began at the edge of the city, snaked through the low market, then north along the broad king's road, past the gates of the Kingspire, and then east to the stadium. The broad streets teemed with the subjects of King Simeon, sworn loyalists of the Severed Throne, all standing on their toes to catch a glimpse of the slave races arrived to turn Antea into the puppet of Asterilhold. The roar of the assembled voices was like the surf, and the smell of their bodies threatened to overwhelm the gentle scents of springtime. Some follower of Issandrian's cabal had paid the rabble to carry banners and signs celebrating the games and Prince Aster. From where Dawson sat, he saw one—beautiful blue-dyed cloth with the prince's name in letters of silver—held aloft on poles, but with the wrong side up. It was Issandrian's revolt in a nutshell: the words of nobility hefted by men who couldn't read them.

The noble houses had their viewing platforms set in order and position according to the status of each family's blood. The place each man stood told where he put his allegiance. The state of the court as a whole could be read in a glance, and it wasn't a pleasant sight. Banner colors from a dozen houses fluttered about king and prince, and more of them belonged to Issandrian's cabal than not. Even Feldin Maas's grey and green. King Simeon sat high above it all, dressed in velvet and black mink, and managed to smile despite what was before him.

A column of Jasuru archers marched through the streets, the bronze scales of their skins oiled and glittering like metal in the sun. They carried the stripped-hide banners of Borja. Dawson made a rough count. Two dozen, say. He noted it down as the archers paused before the royal stand and saluted King Simeon and his son. Prince Aster returned the gesture with the same wide grin that he had each company before and would each one still to come.

"Issandrian's a cruel bastard," Dawson said. "If you've come to steal the boy's place, you should have the dignity not to put ribbons on it."

"For God's sake, Kalliam, don't say that sort of thing where people might hear you," Odderd Faskellan said. Behind them, Canl Daskellin chuckled.

On the road, five Yemmu lumbered. Their jaw tusks were dyed improbable colors of green and blue, and they towered over the watching crowd of Firstbloods. They didn't seem to have armor or weapons apart from the freakish size of their race. The five stopped before the king and made their salute. Prince Aster returned it, and one of the Yemmu men lifted his voice in a rolling, barbaric call. The others joined in, one voice layering over the other until the sounds seemed to braid. A soft breeze tugged at Dawson's cloak, and the trees that lined the street bobbed and shuddered. The air called in from all directions. The voices deepened, and the Yemmu at the center of the pack lifted a great, meaty fist. They were whipped by the tiny whirlwind.

Cunning men, then. Dawson made a note.

"Do you think the blow will come before the games commence?" Daskellin asked as if wondering aloud about the chance of rain.

"There doesn't have to be a blow, does there?" Odderd asked.

"More likely during," Dawson said. "But anything's possible."

"Reconsider Paerin Clark's offer," Daskellin said.

"I will not," Dawson said.

"We have to. Or aren't you seeing the same display I am? If we're standing against this, we need allies. And, frankly, gold. Do you have a way to get them? Because as it happens, I *do*."

A troop of swordsmen marched past. Fifty of them, all in the bright-burnished armor of Ellassae, and evenly divided between black-scaled Timzinae and wide-eyed Southling. Cockroaches and night-cats. Races created in slavery to serve their dragon masters, marching into the center of Firstblood power.

"If we can't win as Anteans, we deserve to lose," Dawson said.

The shocked silence behind him meant he'd gone too far. He noted the swordsmen.

"I began this because I believed you were right, old friend," Daskellin said. "I didn't say I'd crawl into your grave."

"Something—" Odderd began, but Dawson ignored him.

"If we win this by putting ourselves out to bid, we're no better than Maas or Issandrian or Klin. So yes, Canl, I will go to my grave for Antea. And with one loyalty. Not so many hundredths to the throne and so many on a green table in Northcoast."

Daskellin's face went still as coal.

"You're talking out of fear," he said, "and so I'll excuse—"

"Both of you, shut up!" Odderd snapped. "Something's happening."

Dawson followed the man's gaze. On the royal platform, an older woman in the colors of the Kingspire bent her knee before King Simeon. A youth was at her side, leather-armored and still dusty from the road. Prince Aster was looking at his father, the parade forgotten. King Simeon's mouth moved, and even at distance, Dawson recognized shock in his expression.

"Who's the boy?" Canl Daskellin said, almost to himself. "Who brought him news?"

Footsteps came from the wooden stairs behind them, and Vincen Coe appeared. The huntsman bowed to the two other men, but his eyes were on Dawson.

"Your lady wife sent me, lord. You're needed at home."

"What's happened?" Dawson said.

"Your son's returned," Coe said. "There's news from Vanai."

He *what?*" Dawson said.

"He burned it," Jorey said, leaning forward on the bench and scratching a dog between its ears. "Poured oil in the streets, closed the gates, and burned it down."

The year that had passed since Dawson had seen his youngest son had changed the boy. Sitting in the sunroom, Jorey looked more than a year older. His cheekbones had the thin look that came with time on campaign, and the smile that had always lurked just behind whatever expression he wore was gone. Exhaustion pulled at the boy's shoulders, and he smelled of horse sweat and unwashed soldier. It struck Dawson like a detail from a dream that Jorey and Coe could have passed for cousins. Dawson rose and the floor tilted oddly beneath him. He walked to the windows and looked out at the gardens. Snow still haunted the shadows, and the first press of green was softening the bark of the trees. At the back, cherry trees bloomed white and pink.

Geder Palliako burned Vanai.

"He didn't even have us loot it," Jorey said. "There wasn't time, really. He sent out a courier the day before. I've killed horses trying to beat him here."

"You nearly did," Dawson heard himself say.

"Does he know that you were the one who put Geder in place?"

It took Dawson almost a breath to understand the question, and by then his mind was on to questions of its own.

"Why did Palliako do it?" Dawson said. "Was he trying to undermine me?"

Jorey was silent for a long moment, looking into the dumb, bright eyes of the dog before him as if they were in some private conversation. When at last he spoke, his words were tentative.

"I don't think so," Jorey said. "Things were going poorly. He made some bad decisions, and they were bearing fruit. He knew that no one took him seriously."

"He put one of the Free Cities to the torch because he was embarrassed?"

“Humiliated,” Jorey said. “Because he was humiliated. And because it’s different when it isn’t before you.”

One of the dogs groaned long and soft. A bluebird fluttered onto a branch, peered in at the two men, and flew off again. Dawson put his fingers to the cold pane of the sunroom’s glass, the heat of his flesh fogging the glass. His mind darted one way and then another. The stream of show fighters and mercenaries coming to Camnipol, paid by Issandrian with coin borrowed from Asterilhold. The bland, implacable expression of Paerin Clark, banker of Northcoast. Canl Daskellin’s anger. And now, the burned city.

Too many things were moving, all in different directions.

“This changes everything,” he said.

“He was different afterward,” Jorey said as if his father hadn’t spoken. “He was always apart from the rest of us, but before it was that he was a buffoon. Everyone laughed at him. They mocked him to his face, and more than half the time he didn’t even notice it. But after, no one laughed anymore. Not even him.”

The boy’s eyes were toward the window, but he was seeing something else. Something distant, but more real than the room, the glass, the spring trees in the garden. There was pain in that emptiness, and it was one he recognized. Dawson put aside the chaos. His son needed him, and so however much it howled for his attention, the world would wait.

Dawson sat. Jorey looked at him, and then away.

“Tell me,” Dawson said.

Jorey smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He shook his head.

“I’ve been to war,” Dawson said. “I’ve seen men die. What you’re carrying now, I’ve carried as well, and it will haunt you as long as you hold it. So tell me.”

“You didn’t do what we’ve done, Father.”

“I’ve killed men.”

“We killed *children*,” Jorey said. “We killed women. Old men who had nothing more to do with the campaign than to live in Vanai. And we killed them. We took away the water and lit them on fire. When they tried to come over the walls, we cut them down.”

His voice was trembling now, his eyes horror-wide but tearless.

“We did an evil thing, Father.”

“What did you think war is?” Dawson said. “We’re men, Jorey. Not boys swinging sticks at each other and pronouncing the evil wizard’s defeat. We do what duty and honor demand, and often what we do is terrible. I was hardly older than you are now for the siege of Anninfort. We starved them. It wasn’t fire, but it was a slow, painful death for thousands. And the weak die first. Children. Old men. The plague in the city? We put it there. Lord Ergillian sent riders out to find the sick from all around the countryside, and who we found, we named emissary and sent into the city. They were killed, but not before the illness spread. Every day, women came to the gates with babies in their arms, begging us to take their children from them. Usually we ignored them. Sometimes we took the babes and killed them there, just out of their mother’s reach.”

Jorey’s face had gone pale. Dawson leaned forward, his hand on the boy’s knee as he had since the child had been old enough to sit. Dawson felt a moment’s sorrow that that thin-limbed boy was gone, and this moment—this conversation so like one he had had with his own father once—was part of that child’s passage out of the world. The child had to go and make way for the man. It gave meaning to the loss, and made it bearable. That was the most Dawson could offer.

“Anninfort rebelled against the throne,” he said, “and so it had to fall. And in order that it fall, it had to know despair. The ones they brought were on the edge of starvation. They wouldn’t have lived. If the children we killed—the children *I* killed—brought the end a week sooner than it would have come otherwise, then I did the right thing. And I suffered then as you are suffering now.”

“I didn’t know that,” Jorey said.

"I didn't tell you. Men don't put their burdens on their children. I didn't tell your mother. It isn't hers to bear. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Vanai was different. There was no need for it."

Dawson opened his mouth to say something—hopefully something wise and comforting—but he felt the thoughts come into place with an almost physical click. Vanai. Issandrian. The armed mercenaries riding to Camnipol under the thin claim of honoring Prince Aster. The occupying force returning from the south, Geder Palliako at its head.

"Ah," Dawson said.

"Father?"

"Where is Palliako? Is he here?"

"No. With the men. A week behind me, perhaps?"

"Too far. We need him back sooner than that."

Dawson was on his feet again. He threw open the door, shouting for Coe. The huntsman might have been waiting for him. The first instructions were simple enough: find the others. Not only Canl Daskellin, but all the half dozen men who'd thrown their lots with him. Time was short, and victory uncertain. Coe didn't question, only saluted and vanished. When he turned back, Jorey looked bewildered.

Dawson raised his hand, stopping the questions before they came.

"I need one last favor of you before you rest, my boy. I'm sorry to ask, but I believe the fate of the throne rests on it."

"Anything."

"Bring me Geder Palliako. And quickly."

"I will."

"And Jorey? Vanai's death may have saved us."

Hardly an hour passed before Dawson's guests arrived. In addition to Odderd and Daskellin, the Earl of Rivermarch and Baron Nurring came. The others weren't at home, and Coe had gone back out searching for them. This, however, was enough. Five men, all commanding the loyalty of high families and strategic lands, sat or stood or, in Canl Daskellin's case, paced restlessly around the back wall. They still wore the brocade and embroidered hats they'd sported at Issandrian's parade. Clara had brought in two servant girls bearing a tray of water flavored with cucumbers and rounds of twice-baked cheeses that still stood untouched by the wall.

In the time between the courier's arrival at Simeon's side and now, a dozen rumors had already spread. Dawson could see the uncertainty on the faces before him, and he could feel it on the breeze. His own sense of urgency was like a live thing crawling on his back. If this were to be done, it had to be done quickly, before the court had time to decide what the news meant. Before Simeon had the time.

Like a priest before his congregation, Dawson lifted his hands.

"The slaughter of—" he began, then stopped. "The *sacrifice* of Vanai has come like a torch in our darkest hour. And the salvation of the Severed Throne is at hand."

The silence was profound.

"You've lost your mind," Daskellin said.

"Let him talk," the Earl of Rivermarch said. Dawson nodded his gratitude.

"Consider this. Geder Palliako is known to have been at odds with Sir Alan Klin, one of Issandrian's closest allies, almost from the beginning. He managed to supplant Klin as protector of Vanai—"

"*He* managed?" Daskellin said.

"—and rather than use his position to gain wealth or play court politics, he made a decision. A brave and principled decision."

“Geder Palliako,” Daskellin said, running a hand through his hair, “is a buffoon we lifted up in order to embarrass Issandrian by making the occupation of Vanai a bog. He’s an untried youth whose entire military experience has been taking an arrow in the leg and falling off his horse. Now he also appears to be a bloodthirsty tyrant in the mix. By tonight, Issandrian will have a dozen men who’ll swear that his appointment was our doing, and it’s almost certain that one of those will be Lord Ternigan. We won’t be able to deny it.”

Dawson could see the unease in the eyes of the other men, the slope of their shoulders, the angles at which they held their heads. If he answered rage with rage, it would end here with the two of them snapping at each other like pit dogs and the confidence of the cabal broken. Dawson smiled, and Daskellin spat into the ashes of the fire grate.

“Deny it?” Dawson said. “I’ll sit at Palliako’s side and be proud. Or did all of you see some different parade than I saw today? Has it not occurred to anyone else that several hundred loyal Anteans under Palliako’s command are marching to Camnipol as we speak?”

“I don’t understand,” Odderd said.

“Here is what we say,” Dawson said. “When Palliako discovered that Issandrian was bringing an armed force into Camnipol, he chose to bring his troops to the defense of the throne. Rather than abandon Vanai to our enemies, he took action that would show the steel of his intent. He didn’t scrape the city of every last bit of silver. He didn’t trade it away for concessions on tariffs. He burned it like a warrior of old. Like the dragons. What other man in all of Antea is so fierce and pure of intention? Who else would have done what he did?”

“But the king gave permission to hold these games. And this army coming to save us? Half of the men are Issandrian’s, and the others disdain Palliako at best,” Daskellin said. “This is a fairy story.”

“They don’t disdain him. They *fear* him. And if we all say it loud enough and often enough Issandrian will fear him too,” Dawson said. “And since our lives may depend on it, I’d suggest we all practice in chorus.”

“So this is what desperation looks like,” Daskellin said. Dawson ignored him.

“If Issandrian moves against us, it will show that Palliako was justified. If he doesn’t, it will be because Palliako cowed him. Either way, Issandrian loses some part of his grip on the king. And we do it without selling ourselves to Northcoast and the Medean bank. This is a windfall, my lords. We’d be idiots to turn it away. But we must go tell our version of it now. Today. When the court goes to bed tonight, it’s our story they have to whisper to their pillows. Wait until opinion is set, and it will be a hundred times harder to change.”

“And if Issandrian turns his plot against this Palliako boy?” Barron Nurring said.

“Then the blade meant for your belly may be stuck in his instead,” Dawson said. “Now. Tell me you wouldn’t prefer that.”

Geder

Geder's thighs were chapped and weeping. His back ached. The spring breeze that blew down from the heights smelled of snow and ice. Around him, the remnants of the Vanai campaign rode or marched. They sang no songs, and no one spoke to Geder apart from the bare necessary business of moving the few hundred men, carts, and horses the last few days' journey. Even in his tiny rooms in Vanai with only his lamp-eyed squire for company and Alan Klin's worst duties to fill his day, Geder hadn't felt the full power of being isolated within a crowd.

He could feel the attention of the men on him, the condemnation. No one said a word, of course. Not one among them all stood up and told Geder to his face that he was a monster. That what he'd done was worse than crime. There wasn't any need, because of course Geder knew. In all the long days and cold nights since he'd turned back to the north and home, the roar of the flames hadn't left his ears. His dreams had all been of men and women silhouetted against the fire. He'd been ordered to protect Vanai, and instead he'd done this. If King Simeon ordered him cut down on the throne room floor, it would only be justice.

He had tried to distract himself with his books, but even the legends of the Righteous Servant couldn't pull him away from the constant, gnawing question: what would the king's judgment be? On his best days, Geder imagined King Simeon stepping down from the Severed Throne itself to put a royal hand on Geder's weeping eyes and absolving him. On his worst, the king sent him back to Vanai to be staked to the ground among the dead and eaten by the same crows that had gorged themselves on their bodies.

Between those extremes, Geder's mind found room for a nearly infinite variety of bleak imaginings. And as the mountains and valleys grew familiar, the dragon's road shifting between hills that he'd known a hundred times before, Geder found that each new scenario of his death and humiliation left him with a grim hope. Would he be set afire himself? That would be just. Would he be put in a public gaol and pelted with shit and dead animals? It would be what he deserved. Anything—*anything*—would be better than this grinding and silent regret.

The great promontory on which Camnipol sat appeared at the horizon, the dark stone blued by air and distance. The Kingspire itself was hardly more than a sliver of light. A lone horseman could make the ride in a couple of days. The full company might need as long as five. The king's cunning men could probably see them already. Geder's gaze kept drifting up to the great city, caught by longing and dread. With every mile, the fear grew stronger and the other traffic upon the road thicker.

The farmlands surrounding the capital city were among the best in the world, dark soil irrigated by the river and still rich from battles fought there a thousand years before. Even in the starving season just after the thaw, the land smelled of growth and the promise of food. Goatherds drove their flocks down the dragon's road from the low winter pastures toward the mountains in the west. Farmers led oxen to the fields ripe for tilling and planting. Tax collectors rode with their petty entourages of sword-and-bows, scraping what could be had of the small towns before their rent contracts expired. It was a rare thing to see a lone man on a good horse, and so Geder knew that the grey stallion coming south was meant for him. It was only when the horse drew up and he saw the rider was Jorey Kalliam that his anxiety broke and his breath came easily.

He turned his own mount off the dragon's jade and into the roadside muck, letting the column move forward without him. Jorey pulled his horse so close that the beasts could have slapped each

other's faces with their tails, and Geder's knee nearly touched Jorey's saddle. Exhaustion greyed Jorey's face, but his eyes were bright and sharp as a hunting bird.

"What's the news?" Geder asked.

"You need to come ahead," Jorey said. "Quickly."

"The king?" Geder asked and Jorey shook his head.

"My father," he said. "He wants you there as soon as you can."

Geder licked his lips and looked up at the carts passing slowly by them. Some of the carters and swordsmen pretended not to notice the two of them, others stared openly. Ever since they'd left the corpse of Vanai, Camnipol was the goal he'd held before him, an end to his struggles. Now that the time had arrived, he wanted to delay it just a little more.

"I don't think it would be wise," Geder said. "There's no one to leave in command, and if I'm —"

"Give it to Broot," Jorey said. "He's not particularly bright, but he's competent enough to lead a column down a road. Just tell him to make camp outside the eastern gate and wait for word. *Don't* let him order the disband."

"It's... There's morale to think of," Geder said. "I don't want the men to feel I've abandoned them."

Jorey's expression was eloquent. Geder hung his head, the blush glowing from his cheeks.

"I'll find Broot," he said.

"And bring your best clothes," Jorey said.

While he gave Broot the instructions Jorey had given him, Geder also changed for a bay gelding who had been at rest trot for the morning. When Geder left his first command behind, it was on a young, fast horse with Jorey Kalliam at his side. The city was much too far to make at a gallop, but Geder couldn't help himself. For a few minutes, he let the animal beneath him press itself against the wind, glorying in the illusion of freedom if not the fact.

They stopped for camp at a black-roofed shack where a muddy path met the dragon's road, both of them too exhausted to do more than see to their horses. Geder collapsed into a dreamless sleep and woke in the morning to find Jorey cinching the girth on the gelding. They had taken to the road almost before Geder had cleared the grogginess from his head.

Before them, Camnipol rose.

The approach from the south was the steepest, the green band of dragon's jade tracing its way up the stone of the promontory like a bit of child's ribbon dropped to the ground. Time and weather had eaten away the stone itself, leaving stretches of a hundred feet or more where the road curved out into the empty air with nothing but caution to hold travelers to the path. The biting spring wind didn't come from any of the four points of the compass, but only down from the city or up from the plain below. The caves and shacks that clung to the face of the stone often needed rough wooden bridges to reach the road itself. The constant ache in Geder's legs distracted him, and the bulk of stone and rough brush obscured his view, so that until they were nearly at the last turn he didn't notice the Kingspire growing larger, the walls of the city gaining bulk. Instead, the great, shining arches and grand towers seemed to appear from nothing, a city built of dreams.

The southern gate was narrow, hardly more than a slit in the high grey stone with doors of worked bronze and dragon's jade that slid aside to allow passage. Just outside the doors, a dozen men in enameled plate sat on warhorses with barding that matched their riders.

As Geder and Jorey drew near, the men drew their swords. The blades flashed in the afternoon sun, and Geder's heart thudded in his chest like a fox in a trap. Here was the moment he'd been anticipating and dreading. Jorey nodded him forward with a smile that Geder couldn't quite interpret. It didn't matter. Geder swallowed his fear and rode trembling to his surrender wishing he'd remembered to put on his good leather cloak.

A single figure strode out of the shadows where the road passed through the wall. Though he wasn't mounted, the man commanded the attention of all those assembled. He was Firstblood, and

older. His temples were grey, his face sharp and intelligent. The way he held himself gave the impression of being taller than the horsemen. Geder encouraged his gelding forward. Up close, there was no mistaking Jorey's father. Their eyes were the same shape, and the set of their jaws. He looked down at Dawson Kalliam.

"Sir Palliako," the elder Kalliam said.

Geder nodded.

"It is my honor to welcome you to the Undying City," Dawson Kalliam said. And then, sharply, "Honors!"

The horsemen lifted their swords in salute. Geder squinted at them. He'd never seen someone of noble blood called to the king's justice, but this wasn't how he'd expected it to be. From nowhere, voices rose together in a long, celebratory cry. And strangest of all, snowflakes began skirling down from the broad blue sky.

No. Not snowflakes. Flower petals. Geder looked up, and from at the top of the walls, hundreds of people looked back. Geder lifted an uncertain hand, and the crowd above him roared.

"Coe will see to your mount," Dawson said. "We have a litter waiting."

It took a moment to understand, but then Geder slid to the ground, letting Jorey's father lead him into the twilight break between the city walls. He didn't think to ask who Coe might be.

The litter was ornate, bearing the crest and colors of House Kalliam, but with a blaze of cloth on either side in the grey and blue of Palliako. It had two velvet-upholstered chairs facing each other, and eight Tralgu squatted by the poles. Dawson took the seat that faced backward. Geder pushed a lock of greasy hair back from his eyes. His legs were trembling from the ride. The arrow slits and murder holes all through the city wall were crowded with smiling eyes.

"I don't understand," Geder said.

"A few of my friends and I have sponsored your revel. They're traditional for a leader returning from military victory."

Geder turned around slowly. Something heavy seemed to have taken root in his belly, and the high stone rising above him tilted a little, like a young tree in a high wind. His mouth was dry.

"Victory?" he said.

"The sacrifice of Vanai," Dawson said. "Bold and commanding. It was a braver decision than this kingdom has seen in a generation, and there are those of us who would see that fierceness return to Antea."

In Geder's mind, a woman crawled up over the walls of the dead city, flames leaping behind the darkness of her body. In his memory, she fell. The roar of the flames filled his ears again as if it had followed him, and his vision narrowed. That was a *victory*? Wide Tralgu hands took his shoulder and guided him into his seat. He stared dumbly at Dawson as the litter shifted under them, and they rose.

The southern gate opened into a rough square. Geder had been there before, and knew what the chaos of beggars, merchants, and guards, oxen and carts and feral dogs looked like. This was like walking into the Camnipol dreamed by a boy who had only heard its glories described. Three hundred people at the least stood behind another honor guard, waving banners of House Palliako. A platform stood to the right with men in embroidered cloaks and cloth-of-gold tunics. There was the Baron of Watermarch. Beside him, a young man in the colors of House Skestinin. Not the lord himself, but perhaps his eldest son. Perhaps half a dozen more whom Geder's reeling mind half recognized before the litter moved on. And then, at the end, his head held high and tears streaming down his cheeks, Geder saw his father's face, and he saw the pride in it.

The crowd followed, cheering and tossing handfuls of flowers and paper-wrapped candies. The sound of them overwhelmed any hope of conversation, so he could only stare at Lord Kalliam in amazement.

At a meeting of half a dozen streets, the litter hesitated. Near the Kingspire, the buildings grew three and four stories high and people hung out of every window, watching him pass. A girl high and

to his left pitched out a fistful of bright-colored ribbon, the threads dancing in the air as they fell. Geder waved to her, and something veritiginous and sweet washed through him.

Despite what he'd done, he was a hero. *Because* of what he'd done. It was more than relief; it was reprieve, forgiveness, and absolution. He lifted his arms, drinking in the adulation like a starving man. If it was a dream, he'd rather die than wake from it.

"It was a difficult decision," Geder said, leaning across the table and talking loud. "To raze a city like that is a terrible thing. I didn't choose that path lightly."

"Absolutely not," the second son of the Baron of Nurring said, hardly slurring his words at all. "But that's the point, isn't it? Where's the valor in doing the easy thing? There isn't any. But to face the dilemma. Take action."

"Definitive action," Geder said.

"Exactly," the boy replied. "Definitive action."

The revel grounds connected to Dawson Kalliam's mansion. It wasn't as grand as the ballrooms and gardens on an actual holding, but it was near. And to have so much room inside the walls of the Undying City said more than three times the space in the countryside. Candles glowed up and down the high-domed walls, and blown glass lanterns hung from threads too thin to see in the dusk. Wall-wide doors opened to fresh gardens that still smelled of turned earth and early flowers. The feast and dance had run their course. Half a dozen highborn men had taken to the dais to proclaim the virtues of Geder's actions in the Free Cities.

There had been none of the weakness, timidity, and corruption that had poisoned the generals of Antea for too long now, they said. Geder Palliako had shown his mettle not only to the Free Cities, not only to the world. He had shown it to his own countrymen. Through his actions, he had reminded them all what purity could accomplish. Even the king had sent a messenger with a written notice recognizing Geder's return to Camnipol.

The applause had been intoxicating. The respect and admiration of men who hadn't so much as nodded to him in any of his times at court. Then the dance. Geder generally avoided that particular court pastime, but Dawson Kalliam's wife Clara had insisted that that he accompany her around the garden yard at least once, and by the time he'd made the circuit, he felt almost surefooted. He'd made another few rounds with a few younger, unattached women before his thighs and ankles began to protest sharply enough to stop him. Jorey had brought his leather cloak, and as the day cooled toward night and the wine and beer flowed a bit more freely, Geder was glad of it.

"The mark of a real leader," Geder said, and then lost the thread. "The mark of a leader..."

"I hope you'll excuse me," his father said. "Geder, my boy?"

Geder rose to his feet and his drinking companion nodded his respect and turned away, his steps generally steady.

"It's getting late for an old man," Lerer Palliako said, "but I couldn't go without seeing you. You have exceeded anything I could have hoped. I haven't seen people talking about our family in terms like this since... Well, ever, I suppose."

"Let me go with you," Geder said.

"No no no. It's your night. Enjoy it."

"I'd enjoy talking with you," Geder said, and his father's eyes softened.

"Well, then."

Together, Geder and his father found Lady Kalliam and offered their profound thanks. Somehow the conversation turned until they were accepting her kind words, and they left with the feeling that the night had been an intimate affair with old friends they'd rarely seen. She insisted that they take the litter that had carried Geder through the streets earlier. Walking through the darkened streets wasn't safe, and even if it had been, it wouldn't do. Jorey appeared as they were about to take their last leave and offered Geder his hand. Geder almost wept, taking it.

As the Tralgu slaves hauled them through the night-dark streets, Geder looked at the stars scattered across the sky. Away from the gleeful crowd, the elation of relief cooled a degree. He was surprised to find that some part of the dread was still there, not sharp anymore, not strong, but present. Not even fear, but the as yet unbroken habit of fear.

His father cleared his throat.

"You're on the rise, my boy. You're very much on the rise."

"I don't know about that," Geder said.

"Oh, no. No, I heard those men tonight. You've caught the court at a delicate time. You're in very real danger of becoming a symbol of something." His father's intonation was merry, but there was something in the way he held his shoulders that made Geder think of a man bracing for a blow.

"I'm not a court pigeon," Geder said. "I'll be pleased to come home and work through some of the books that I found down there. You'd like some of them. I've started a translation of an essay about the last dragons that claims to date from only a few hundred years after Morade fell. You'd like it."

"I'm sure I would," Lerer said.

The Tralgu in the lead grunted expressively and the litter spun elegantly around a tight turn, dipping just a degree to counterbalance the shift.

"I saw Sir Klin didn't attend tonight," Lerer said.

"I wouldn't have expected him," Geder said. For a moment, he was on a frozen mill pond again, discovering the fortune that would have saved Klin's protectorate. "I imagine he's feeling a bit chagrined after all. Vanai was his, and he got called back on a leash. It must embarrass him, seeing me greeted with all this."

"It must. Indeed it must. Lord Ternigan didn't come either."

"He may have been called for elsewhere," Geder said.

"That's it. I'm sure that's it."

In the dark streets, a dog yapped and complained. The breeze that felt cool in the crowded ballrooms and gardens was chill now.

"Court events usually don't have everyone appear," Geder said. "I wasn't even expecting this much."

"Of course not. And it was quite a thing, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

They lapsed into silence. Geder's back ached. Between riding and dancing, he expected to feel half crippled in the morning.

"Geder?"

Geder grunted.

"Be careful with these men. They aren't always what they seem. Even when they take your side, it's best to spare an eye for them."

"I will," Geder said.

"And don't forget who you are. Whoever they want you to be, don't forget who you really are."

"I won't."

"Good," Lerer Palliako said. He was hardly more than a shadow against a shadow, except that the starlight caught his eyes. "That's my good boy."

Marcus

Marcus leaned low, arms to his sides. The pommel of the blackwood sword in his hand was slick with sweat. The Firstblood boy shifting on the far side of the pit wore a pair of fighter's trousers and a serious expression. Marcus waited. The boy licked his lips and hefted his sword.

"No hurry," Marcus said.

The air of the gymnasium was hot, close, and damp. The grunts and shouts of the other fighters struggled over the rush of water in the pipes that fed baths. At least a dozen men stood around the edges of the pit. Most were Kurtadam or Firstblood, though a pair of Timzinae held themselves a little apart. And Yardem Hane, panting and sweat-soaked. No Cinnae had come.

Marcus saw the boy's weight shift, committing to the attack. The boy held his sword to the side, eastern-style, so he had some training. Marcus blocked, chalk dust rising from the blackwood blade, and moved to the boy's left. The boy turned, and Marcus brought his sword down overhand. The boy blocked so aggressively that both swords bounced back. Marcus shifted the blade to his left hand and struck again, low this time, watching the boy's stance.

Avoiding both of Marcus's blows emboldened him. The boy took a firmer grip, fainted clumsily to the right, and darted left. Marcus blocked the attack casually, pulling his blade through the thick air to slap hard across the boy's chest. Marcus watched his opponent stumble back. The chalked practice sword left a line from the boy's lowest rib up to his collarbone.

"Who's next?" he called.

"That's the last, sir," Yardem said.

"Thank you, Captain Wester, sir," the boy said. The skin where Marcus had struck was red and rising. He felt a passing chagrin. He hadn't meant to hurt him.

"Thank you, son. You did well," Marcus said, and the boy grinned.

Marcus put his hands on the side of the pit and pulled himself up. He ached from shoulder to foot, and the pain felt good. Yardem tossed him a wad of the threadbare cloth, and Marcus wiped the sweat off his face and neck. This was the third collection of men they'd tried as new additions to the company. As with the others, it had been a mixed lot. Some had come because they were desperate and had no skills apart from a willingness to cause pain. Others because, by doing it, they could say they'd been in the pit against Marcus Wester. And a few—no more than a handful—because it was the work they knew and they happened to be at loose ends when Marcus had put out his call.

One of the latter was a stout Kurtadam with a gray-gold pelt and a Cabral accent. Marcus met Yardem's gaze and pointed his chin toward the candidate. Yardem nodded once.

"You," Marcus said. "What was your name again, friend?"

"Ahariel," the Kurtadam said. "Ahariel Akkabrian."

"You know how to fight. What put you in Porte Oliva?"

"Took contract with a company out of Narinisle. Mostly garrison work, but the commander started bunking with the footmen. Got to be about gossip and hurt feelings, I had to get out. I was thinking of the Free Cities. Figure they'll be jumpy for years with what happened to Vanai and all. But I heard you were looking."

"It won't be garrison work," Marcus said.

The Kurtadam shrugged.

"I figured you have your pick of work. Wodford and Gradis and all. If it was good enough to hold you, it'd be enough for a sword-and-bow like me."

"You're an optimist," Marcus said. "But we'd be pleased to have you if the terms suffice."

"Wouldn't waste your time if they didn't," Ahariel said.

"Report in the morning, then. We'll put you on the duty roster."

Ahariel saluted, turned, and walked away.

"I like him," Marcus said. "Doesn't talk much."

"Fit right in, sir," Yarden said.

"Feels good, having a real company again."

"Does."

Marcus dropped the scrap of cloth onto the edge of the pit.

"Is it time?" he asked.

"We should go soon," Yarden said.

The early summer streets of Porte Oliva were hot and crowded. Beggars haunted the corners, and the press of bodies in the streets seemed to add as much heat as the wide, golden coastal sun. The air smelled of the ocean, of honey and hot oil and cumin. The clothes also changed. No jackets, no cloaks. Cinnae men and women strode through the street in diaphanous robes that made their thin bodies seem to shift and bend like shadows or spirits. The Kurtadam shaved themselves until there was hardly enough fur to tie beads onto and wore loincloths and halters barely sufficient to protect the most basic modesty. It was the Firstblood, though, that kept Marcus's attention. Men and women split out of their winter cocoons into bright colors, green and yellow and pink. Tunics were cut down the sides to let air and covert glances skid across bare skin. Every day had the feeling of festival about it.

Marcus didn't like it.

It reminded him too much of a time when he'd been young and unable to distinguish lust from affection, and memories of that time always led to the times that came after. Meeting a blue-eyed girl named Alys, wooing her with brave tales and pale flowers. The nights of longing, and then one moonlit night at the end of springtime, a shared apple, a kiss beside a waterfall, and the end of longing. His perfect woman. In a just world, she'd be with him still.

Meriam would have been old enough now to suffer the same stirrings and confusions of the flesh, and he would have been as powerless to force wisdom upon her as his father had been with him. But no. By now she'd have been old enough to have married young and imprudently. Another season, and Marcus might have been tickling a grandson under the chin. Being reminded of all those un-lived moments was what he disliked about the city. But it was also what he disliked about the world. So long as there was work that needed doing, he could put it all aside.

The question of where to put the permanent home of the new bank had been easily solved when Cithrin spoke to the daughter of the gambler whose stall they slept above. She'd been hoping to talk her father into leaving the trade for years, and had very nearly succeeded. The lower floor was wide enough to support a small barracks, and the basement had an iron strongbox set in stone and countersunk deep into the earth. And so now, where the gambler's stall had once been, the Medean bank of Porte Oliva now lived in modest elegance. The day that the old gambler had signed the contracts, Cithrin announced the change by having the walls repainted in the brightest white she could find. Where the caller had stood, chanting his litany of wagers and odds, a wide tin pot filled with black soil had the thin green stalks and broad sloping leaves of half a dozen tulips still only threatening to bloom.

"Straight to her?" Yarden asked, gesturing at the private stair that led to the rooms that were now exclusively Cithrin's. Marcus shook his head.

"When we're ready to go," he said.

Once, the thick wooden door had opened onto a common area with a high counter on one end. The counter was gone now, and the chalk marks on the slate weren't offered odds, but the names of Marcus's new guards and their duty rotations. All four were waiting now where the gambler's clients had been, looking out the narrow, barred windows and making crude jokes about the people passing

by on the street. When Marcus entered, the laughter stopped, and the new guards—two Firstblood men, a Kurtadam woman, and a Timzinae boy Marcus had taken on a hunch—stood to attention. He'd need more. Overhead, the boards creaked where Cithrin was pacing.

"Bag ready?"

"Yes, Captain Wester, sir," the Kurtadam woman said.

Marcus nodded at her, his mind suddenly an embarrassing blank. She had broad shoulders and hips, and arms as thick as her legs. Her pelt was a glossy black, darker even than the Timzinae boy's scales. And her name was... Edir? Edem?

"Enen," Yardem said. "You carry the coin. Barth and Corisen Mout take forward and back. Captain and I will take flanks."

"And me?" the Timzinae boy asked. The nictitating membranes of his eyes opened and closed in a fast nervous tic. He was easy enough. Whatever his name was, everyone called him Roach.

"You'll stay here and wake the others if anything interesting happens," Marcus said. Roach deflated a bit, so Marcus went on. "If anyone's going to make a play for the strongbox, they'll do it when most of us are away. Keep the door barred, and your ears sharp. You're going to be in more danger than we are."

Roach saluted sharply. Enen stifled a smile. The two Firstblood men went to the weapons chest and started arraying the most vicious weapons that the queensmen would let them carry through the streets. Marcus turned and went back out toward the private stairway, Yardem at his side.

"I'm never going to remember all these names," Marcus said.

"You always say that, sir."

"I do?"

"Yes."

"Hm. Good to know."

The rooms that had seemed so small and cramped when it had been just him, Yardem, Cithrin, and the piled wealth of Vanai had become a respectable private residence for the new head of the Medean bank. It was little more than a room in the back with her bed and desk and a meeting room at the front with a small privacy closet to the side, but Cithrin had put together a hundred small touches that transformed it: fine strips of cloth that hung over the windows, a small religious icon nestled in a corner, the short lacquered table presently covered with old shipping records and copied bills of lading. Taken together, they gave the impression of the home of a woman twice her age. It was as much a costume as anything Master Kit and his players sported, and one that Cithrin wore well.

"I need someone from the Port Registry who'll talk to me," Cithrin said instead of hello. "The trade ships from Narinisle should be coming, and I need to know better how that works. It looks like half the trade in the city happens when those ships come in."

"I'll see what I can find," Yardem said.

"Where to today?" Marcus asked.

"A brewer's just outside the wall," Cithrin said. "I met her at the taproom. Her guild's letting her replace her vats, but she doesn't have the coin to afford it."

"So we're loaning it to her."

"Actually, she's not permitted to accept loans at interest," Cithrin said, pulling a light beaded shawl across her shoulders and arranging it the way Master Kit had taught her. "Guild rules. But she is permitted to take money from business partners. So we're buying part of her business."

"Ah," Marcus said.

"If she comes short, we're in a position to take her shop in hand. If I cultivate a relationship with a cooper and a few taphouses, I can arrange the kind of mutual support that makes everyone very happy for a very long time."

"Long time," Marcus said, tasting the words.

"And anyway, breweries are always good investments," Cithrin said. "Magister Imaniel always said so. There's never going to be an off market for ale."

Cithrin looked around the room, pursed her lips, and nodded more to herself than to them. Together, they walked back down the stairway, Cithrin stopping to secure the door behind them. In the street, a half dozen children were playing a game that involved kicking an old wineskin and screaming. Cithrin turned toward the entrance, almost bumping against a Kurtadam man. Marcus silently added the construction of an interior door to his list of things that ought to be done. Having to walk outside to go from one set of rooms to the other had been pleasant enough when they were hiding. Now it was just an unnecessary risk.

The Firstblood men, Corisen Mout and Barth, were laughing with each other but sobered as the three of them came in. Enen was ready, a small leather bag strapped across her shoulders, her hands free and ready. She wore a curved dagger and a weighted baton on her hips. When they walked out to the street, the six of them fell into an easy formation. Despite the close, crowded streets, their path was always clear, the citizens of Porte Oliva standing aside to let them pass. Curious gazes followed them, but only a few especially bold beggars attempted the approach, and they tried for Cithrin. No one came near Enen and her burden of coin. They moved north, through the great wall, and to the spillover buildings of the city beyond it. The press of bodies was more than Marcus liked. The smells of sewer and sweat were thicker here, the streets both more crowded and wider than behind the wall in Porte Oliva's center.

The brewer's, when they reached it, was a two-story shop built around a narrow courtyard with its own well. Wide doors stood open to the yard, the vats and barrels squatting in the yeast-stinking shadows. The brewer, a Cinnae woman so thick about the body and face she could almost have passed for Firstblood, came out to meet them, grinning like they were family.

"Magistra Cithrin! Come in, come in!"

Marcus watched as Cithrin and the brewer kissed one another's cheeks. He nodded to Enen, and she shrugged off the bag of coins and presented it to the girl as if Cithrin were what she appeared to be. None of the new guards thought the bank was anything different than it claimed. There was no reason that they should.

Cithrin took the bag and gestured to Marcus that he and the others should stay in the yard. He nodded once, and Cithrin and the brewer took one another by the hand and walked into the dim recesses of the brewery, talking like old friends. A Cinnae boy no older than Roach came out wearing a thin leather apron and bearing mugs of fresh ale. It was sweeter than Marcus liked, but with an almost bready aftertaste that he could learn to enjoy. Marcus let the three new guards settle themselves on the stone wall of the well before he met Yardem's eyes and glanced across the yard. The Tralgu drank down his ale, belched, and ambled along at Marcus's side.

"Decent ale," Marcus said.

"Is."

"What do you think of this scheme of hers?"

Yardem's ears flicked back, then forward again, considering. Marcus knew that just by asking he'd changed the Tralgu's answer. What Yardem thought about a scheme that Marcus hadn't questioned was a different thing.

"Seems to be working," Yardem said. "Still more jewelry than I'd like in the basement, but we've got enough swords to scare off stray knives. I don't know much about it, but it seems she's likely to earn back the money she's spending or near to it."

"So that when the big men from Carse swoop down here, they'll find it all more or less intact," Marcus said. "She can hand it over to them, wash her hands, and there's no harm done."

"That's the plan," Yardem said carefully.

"Do you see her handing it back to them?"

Yardem stretched his long, thick arms, turning to look at the open brewery as if he were bored and it was in the way. Marcus waited in silence, hoping that the Tralgu would disagree and expecting that he wouldn't.

"She's going to try to keep it," Yardem said.

“She doesn’t know she’s thinking about it, but yes,” Marcus said. “She’s good at this. Maybe very good. And she’s not the kind of girl who stops when she likes something too much.”

Yardem nodded slowly.

“How’s she going to do it?” he asked.

Marcus sipped his ale, washing his mouth with it, then spat it onto the courtyard stones. A dozen pigeons lifted off from the rooftop, spinning across the wide blue overhead.

“I don’t understand half of what she’s doing now,” he said. “Do you?”

“No.”

“I don’t know what she’ll try. Likely she doesn’t either. But when she sees it, she’s going to reach for it. Whether it’s a good idea or not.”

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Geder

The days that followed Geder's return to Camnipol flowed around him like river water around a stone. Gatherings at the houses of the highest families in Antea filled his days, celebrations for his own victory in Vanai and for the coming anniversary of Prince Aster's naming took the nights. Almost the day after his unexpected revel, he began seeing black leather cloaks the image of his own appearing among the brightly dyed fashions of the court. Men who had never bothered to cultivate a connection to House Palliako had begun calling on him. If his father seemed put off by the attention, that was understandable. Changes that came suddenly could feel catastrophic even when they were changes for the better.

The only things that would have made the ripening spring better would have been rooms within the city itself instead of night after night of heading out before the city gates closed and sleeping in his campaign tent and for the nightmares to stop.

"I don't understand why I shouldn't order the disband," Geder said, spreading a spoonful of apple butter over his morning bread. "If I don't do it soon, Lord Ternigan's sure to."

"He doesn't dare," Carl Daskellin, Baron of Watermarch, said. "Not until all the foreign swords and bows are safely out of Camnipol."

"It's a disgrace," Marrisin Oesteroth, Earl of Magrifell, said, nodding. "Armed rabble in the streets of Camnipol. And hardly even a Firstblood among them. I don't know what Curtin Issandrian was thinking, bringing the slave races. Next he'll be honoring Prince Aster with pigs and monkeys."

Around them, the lesser gardens of House Daskellin glowed in the late morning sun. The golden blossoms of daffodils nodded in the breeze. To the east, the reconstructed stadium loomed, stories tall and painted white and red. The games for the prince were to start the next day, but the preliminary spectacles had been running for days—bear baiting, show fights, archery competition. And with them, a growing tension that reminded Geder of the still, heavy heat of the clear summer day before a storm night.

"Did you smell those Yemmu cunning men?" Odderd Faskellan, Viscount of Escheric and Warden of the White Tower, asked with a snort. "The stink coming off them made my eyes water from the platform. And the Southlings."

The plain-faced man at Geder's side—Paerin Clark, he was called, and with no other title given—drank from his cup as if to hide his expression, but the others around them nodded and grunted their agreement and disapproval.

"They fuck their own sisters," Marrisin Oesteroth said and took a drink of cider. "It's not their fault that they do. Dragons made them that way. Keep their bloodlines true, just like hunting dogs."

"Really?" Geder asked. "I read an essay that said that was a myth started by the Idikki Fellowship after the second expulsion. Like Tralgu eating babies, or Dartinae poisoning wells."

"You're assuming Tralgu don't eat babies," Marrisin Oesteroth said with a laugh, and the others joined in. Including Geder.

The conversation turned to other matters of court: the increasing unrest in Sarakal, the foundering movement to create a farmer's council, rumors of a second war of succession in Northcoast. Geder listened more than he spoke, but when he did, the men seemed to listen to him. That alone was as intoxicating as the cider. When the last of the food was carried away by the servants, Geder took his leave. There would be another gathering like this tomorrow, and another the day after that. And an informal ball that night, scheduled opposite a feast for King Simeon hosted by

Sir Feldin Maas. Geder knew because Alberith Maas had asked grudging permission to attend the feast. Geder had allowed it. The court might be divided, but he assumed it always was. Given the number and quality of people at the gatherings he'd attended, he felt fairly sure that the half that had lifted him up into their number was both larger and more powerful. He could afford to be magnanimous.

The sun shone in the late morning sky, the warmth soaking into Geder's cloak and leaving his body feeling soft and comfortable. He strolled through the black-cobbled streets, feeling almost as sure of himself as he had during his first days in Vanai. The lowborn man with a long dirty beard saw him coming and scuttled out of his way. A young woman with a beautiful tea-and-milk complexion smiled at him from her slave-drawn carriage. Geder smiled back and watched her turn to watch him as she was borne away. His jaw ached pleasantly from grinning.

The eastern gate of the city was wider than the southern, built beneath a great archway of worked stone that reached almost as high as the Kingspire itself. Horses' hooves and carriage wheels clattered against the voices of small merchants. The air stank of manure, animals soiling the streets as quickly as prisoners of the petty court could scrape it up. Callers walked under rough wooden signs, announcing whatever news they were paid to repeat: a particular butcher had been soaking his meat in water and selling it by weight, an outbreak of the pox had been traced to a brothel in tanner's row, a boy had been lost and a reward posted for his return. It was the gossip of any great city, and Geder enjoyed the sound of it without paying attention to the meaning of the words. Every syllable had been paid for, and it was safe to assume most were lies. Geder paused at a stand where a crag-faced Tralgu with a missing leg sold treats of candied lavender and honey stones. When Geder tossed him a coin, the scowling Tralgu caught it overhand, snatching it out of the air.

Outside the walls of Camnipol, the northern plains spread out to the horizon, the green of grass and scrub, but treeless. Anything big enough to burn as firewood had been stripped off the land generations before. What hills there were rose in gentle swells like waves on a calm sea. The camp was scattered just to the east in the shadow of the city. At Jorey Kalliam's suggestion, Geder had given orders to keep it in order as a military group rather than letting the casual disorder of being home run its course. Despite sitting at Camnipol's side, the camp had its perimeter, its sentries, its cookfires, and its acting commander. Fallon Broot, Baron of Suderling Heights, rolled toward him as he reentered the camp.

"What news?" Broot asked. "Word yet from Ternigan?"

"Not yet," Geder said.

"All respect to the man, but there won't be a good seat left in the stadium if he waits much longer."

"We could appeal to King Simeon," Geder said.

"Or you could give the order yourself," Broot said, his deep-drooping mustache twitching.

"Wouldn't presume," Geder said.

Broot laughed once, almost a bark.

"Camp's yours, then. I'll retire, get a bit of rest. Maas is putting on a feast tonight, and it's my turn for leave."

"There's also an informal ball," Geder said with as much nonchalance as he could muster.

"No one wants to see me dance," Broot said. As he walked away, Geder wondered which event the tea-and-milk girl would attend.

In his tent, his squire had cleaned away all the remnants of sleep, but left his books and the tools of translation where they were. Geder sat down at his field desk, picked up the cracked leather of the multiform essay he'd been wrestling with, and searched through the delicate, ancient pages until he found where he'd left off.

It was the discovery of these weapons in the Sinir mountains that allowed the allied forces of Hallskar and Sarakal to limit the interference of Borja, and eventually reclaim the lands

ceded under the agreements five generations before. Despite this, there has been no concerted effort, either among the elected Hallskari kings or the traditional families of Sarakal, to explore further caches. The commonly held explanation for this unimaginable oversight was a superstitious fear of something within the valley. The unnamed scribe of Atian Abbey suggests that this might have been a pod of hibernating dragons placed by Drakis Stormcrow or the Dragon Morade's righteous servant, but it seems most likely that it was instead that the plague season that followed the end of the Borjan expansion made all such exploration impossible, and the mountains themselves limited any expedition to the summer months, and foot traffic. This alone should justify a longer and more systematic examination of the footwear of ancient Hallskar, which I shall undertake in my next section.

Sinir mountains. *Sinir*. The word seemed very familiar, but he couldn't quite recall where he'd seen it before. It was recently, though. It was something to do with the Righteous Servant, though. He was sure of that.

The legend that had begun as a pet project had grown to be something more interesting. In the dark hours of the morning after his dreams woke him, Geder would sit with his books, marking each reference and considering the finer points of his translations until the voice of the fire faded from his mind and he could sleep again.

His understanding of the weapon was far from clear, except that it had played a part in the final war of the dragons and involved a magic that separated truth and lies definitively. There were two comments about corruption or infection of blood, but what exactly that meant wasn't clear. It might have been a reference to the rites and spells that Morade had worked in order to bring the Righteous Servant into being, or a description of its function, or a story put out by those who opposed Morade and who had outlived their enemy.

The location associated with the weapon's use was unquestionably in the eastern mountains and wastes that bordered Hallskar, Borja, the Keshet, and Pût. Granted, that left a huge swath of land, much of it near impenetrable. But by dating the references and consulting where the national and tribal borders had shifted through the ages, Geder thought he might be able to make a case as to the particular range associated with it. So, for instance, one book placed the Righteous Servant as east of the Keshet, but using an antiquated name. Another called it east of Borja, using a slightly more recent term. By comparing how the border between the two had changed in the intervening centuries, Geder could speculate a range no larger than four days' ride from north to south. And now if there were a range within that called Indische, he might be able to put a finger on it.

For the first time in his life, he'd begun the outline of a speculative essay of his own on the subject. It seemed unlikely that the section on ancient Hallskari footwear was likely to be useful, but he wouldn't know until he tried it, so with a deep sigh, Geder leaned on his elbows and began reading. The text wasn't particularly well written, but he still found himself being drawn into the subject. The change in toe bridges as a guide to the racial makeup of the royal court was actually fascinating, given that at least six centuries of historical records had been systematically wiped out during the reign of Thiriskii-adan. The suggestion that there had been a period where Hallskar was ruled by the lamp-eyed Dartinae rather than Haavirkin was enough to raise Geder's eyebrows. He found himself so caught up in the text that he didn't notice the shouting until his squire burst into the tent.

"My lord," the old Dartinae said. "In the city. Something's happened."

Geder looked up, and for a moment his mind kept along its track, judging what his squire might have looked like in the regal leather and gold of Hallskar. The din of voices and crashing metal worked its way into his awareness, and fear hit his blood like winter. Geder leapt up from his desk and ran out of the tent. His imagination already had smoke rising from the walls of Camnipol, the fire of Vanai already roaring his name. Daved Broot, son of Fallon, was running across the plain. Blood soaked his tunic scarlet.

“Someone help that man!” Geder screamed, his voice high and tight. “He’s hurt! Someone help him!”

But men were already streaming toward the wounded boy. Geder looked around, trying to find the battle. There was no smoke. No fire. But men were screaming, and nearby. Six men had reached Daved Broot, linked hands under him, and were carrying him back into camp, their arms as a gurney. Geder hurried to meet them. When the wounded man saw him, he reached out.

“Lord Palliako!”

“I’m here,” Geder said. The bearers paused.

“The gladiators. They’re taking the gate.”

“What?”

“The gladiators from the stadium. They’re at the gate. They’re trying to close it.”

It’s a riot, Geder thought. It’s a riot in the streets of Camnipol.

And then, a moment later: *No. A coup.*

“Get him to the cunning man,” Geder ordered the bearers. “And then get your blades. Call the formation! Formation!”

First in confusion, and then in disbelief and fear, the camp came to order. Geder’s squire scurried up with sword and armor in hand. Geder took the blade, then gave it back and reached for the armor.

“No time for that,” Fallon Broot said, appearing at his side. The man’s face was a storm cloud. “If they close the gates, we’ll be useless. Speed now, safety in hell.”

Geder swallowed. His knees were actually shaking. He heard himself calling the attack as if someone else were doing it, and then, sword in hand, he and Broot and a dozen of the veterans of Vanai were running across the grass field toward the eastern gate. Geder’s black leather cloak flapped about him like bat’s wings. His sword felt heavy and awkward, and when he reached the gates his breath was short and painful. And under the great eastern arch of the city, the gates were beginning to close.

“To me!” Geder shouted, and pushed himself forward. “Vanai to me!”

He and his men burst through the narrowing space between the gates like a handful of dried peas thrown against a window, first the fastest, then one or two more together, and then all of them in a lump. The square Geder had strolled through not two hours before was changed past recognition. Where there had been carts and carriages, bodies lay in the street. From the overturned table of honey stones and candied lavender, a line of Jasuru archers stood, their scales glittering gold. They loosed arrows, and the man to Geder’s left fell down screaming.

“Attack!” Geder shrilled. “Stop them! Attack!”

Geder’s men charged, heads down and voices raised. The archers fell back, and from the right, a group of Yemmu in banded steel and leather with huge two-handed swords lumbered toward them. With jaw tusks painted the color of blood, they were like something out of a nightmare. One raised his wide head and howled. There were words in the cry. Geder turned toward the retreating archers, then the advancing swordsmen, and back again.

A wide blade a yard long whirled toward him, and he danced back. The Yemmu was almost half again as tall as a Firstblood man, wide as a cart across the shoulders. Geder lifted his own blade in both hands, and the Yemmu grinned. With a groan, the Yemmu pulled his sword through the air, forcing Geder back again. To the left, a huge blade caught a gap in the armor of one of the Vanai men, spraying hot blood across Geder’s chest and face. Somewhere behind him, someone shrieked.

Geder’s opponent lifted his sword, preparing to bring it down like an axe. Geder raised his own blade, knowing as he did that he couldn’t even deflect the coming blow. Someone ran by him, slamming into the Yemmu soldier and making him stumble.

“Now, Geder!” Jorey shouted. “Cut him!”

Geder scuttled forward, swinging with his blade. The cut wasn’t deep, but it got through the leather armor. The Yemmu shouted, and Jorey jumped back. Geder swung again. He was trying for the thing’s belly where the armor was thin to let it twist, but the blow went low, dropping toward the

thing's thigh. The Yemmu put out its huge grey hand and shoved Geder back, but Jorey Kalliam's blade cut down, drawing a gout of blood from its wrist. It howled, dropping its sword and grabbing at the wound to stanch the flow. Geder rushed in, hewing two, three, four, times at the Yemmu fighter's knee like he was trying to cut down a sapling.

The Yemmu stumbled and fell, lifting its arms in surrender. Geder spun around.

The gates had stopped, neither fully open nor closed, and more of the Vanai soldiers were pouring through the gap. The Jasuru archers were nowhere to be seen, and four of the Yemmu had fallen, with half a dozen more locked in battle against a rising tide of Antean swords. Jorey Kalliam was bent over, breathing hard. Blood trickled from his mouth and stained his teeth, but he was smiling.

"Didn't know what they were starting when they crossed us," Jorey said through a foam of his own blood and saliva. Geder grinned.

* * *

Well," Lerer Palliako said, leaning against the parapet of his balcony. "Well, well, well."

"They actually took the southern gate," Geder said. "Closed it and jammed the mechanism. We still can't open it."

Geder shrugged. The twilight was fading and stars coming out. The feasts and balls were all canceled by order of the throne. Blades and blood in the streets of Camnipol had the king's guard patrolling the streets. King Simeon himself had gathered a select group of nobles in the Kingspire, and set a dusk-to-dawn curfew that meant anyone found in the darkened streets would be slaughtered without question or warning. The houses were being closed and barred, and a fire watch set on the walls of the city. The stadium that had been remade to house Prince Aster's celebratory games instead had a dozen gladiators hung from makeshift gallows. Twice that number had been bound and dropped off bridges, their bodies unburied at the bottom of the Division.

The city's shock and fear seemed to change the air itself. Everything seemed fragile, poised at some great catastrophe. Geder knew he should have been frightened too, but he was exhilarated. An armed revolt in the capital city, and he'd put it down. If he'd been celebrated for the burning of Vanai, he could hardly imagine the glory that would rain down on him now. He was half drunk with the idea of it.

"I also hear Lord Ternigan has ordered the disband," his father said.

"The men were all desperate to defend their houses and families. If Lord Ternigan hadn't, I likely would have."

His father shook his head and sighed. From the window, they could see the Kingspire at the city's edge, towering above Camnipol and therefore the world. Lights glittered in the windows like stars or the cookfires of an army. Lerer Palliako cracked his knuckles.

"Bad times," he said. "Very bad times."

"It won't go on," Geder said. "This ends it. There aren't any more of the gladiators, and if there are, they'll be hunted down. The city's saved."

"There's whoever suborned them," his father said. "Whoever arranged the attack. And the names I can put on that list are too powerful to die on a rope. I never spent time at court when I was a young man. I never made the connections and alliances. I wonder now if I should have. But it's too late, I suppose."

"Father," Geder said, but Lerer coughed and held up a hand.

"The disband's been called, son. You can go anywhere you'd like. Do anything. It might be wise if you were out of Camnipol for a time. Until this is all settled out."

Unease cut through Geder's euphoria for the first time since the fighting stopped. He looked around the night-soaked buildings and streets. Surely his father was jumping at shadows. There was nothing to be afraid of. They'd won. The coup had been stopped.

This coup. This time.

“I suppose there’s no harm in going home now,” Geder said. “I have an essay I’m thinking about that I think you’d find interesting. I’m tracking geographic references by time and comparing them with contemporary maps to—”

“Not Rivenhalm,” Lerer said.

Geder’s words trailed off.

“You should leave Antea,” his father said. “You’re too much a part of politics we don’t fully understand. First Vanai, and now this? For the season at least, you should go where they can’t reach you. Take a few servants. I’ll give you the money. You can find someplace quiet and out of the way. By autumn, perhaps, we’ll know better where things stand.”

“All right,” Geder said. He felt very small.

“And son? Don’t tell anybody where you’re going.”

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Dawson

Simeon paced before them all. The king's face was a mixture of hesitance and determination that Dawson had seen on hunting dogs unsure of how to get down a slope, aware that once they began there would be no stopping. Whatever counsel his old friend had taken in the long night, it hadn't been with him. On the other hand, he was certain it hadn't been with Curtin Issandrian either.

The audience chamber they sat in now wasn't the usual. There were no tapestries or soft velvet cushions, the walls were bare brick. There were no rugs or cushions to support the bent knees of Simeon's subjects. The king's guard stood along the walls with swords and armor that could not be mistaken for merely decorative. Prince Aster sat on a silver throne behind his father. It was clear the boy had been crying.

Curtin Issandrian knelt across the aisle from Dawson, his face drawn and pale. Alan Klin was at his side. Canl Daskellin and Feldin Maas had both managed to avoid attention. Odderd Faskellin was dead of an arrow to the throat, and his killer already feeding the gallows flies. Geder Palliako, by all rights the hero of the hour for holding the southern gate, had already left the city. Dawson was alone.

Behind and above the three of them, the viewing galleries were packed. Every man of nobility sat on low, uncomfortable stools behind the length of woven rope that pretended to separate them from the formal audience. The women stood in the upper gallery, including, somewhere amid the press, Clara. The highest gallery was customarily reserved for the most honored lowborn subjects of the king and ambassadors from foreign courts. Today, it stood empty.

The king stopped pacing, and Dawson didn't lift his head.

"This ends today," Simeon said, his voice ringing out to the farthest corners of the chamber. "It ends now."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Dawson said, his voice carefully humble. A moment later, Issandrian and Klin echoed him.

"Antea will not follow the dragon's path while I sit on the Severed Throne," Simeon went on. "These petty intrigues and political games will *not* bring confusion and strife to the empire at the heart of the world. I swear my life to it, and as your lord, I expect and demand the same of each of you."

This time when Dawson said, *Yes, Your Majesty*, Issandrian's cabal spoke with him.

"Noble blood has been spilled on the streets of Camnipol. Foreign swords have been drawn on our streets," the king went on. "It no longer matters whether the motives behind it were pure. There must be a reckoning."

In the corner of his vision, Dawson thought he saw Alan Klin grow even more ashen.

"Do you have any statements before I pass judgment?" the king asked. "Lord Kalliam?"

"No, Your Majesty," Dawson said. "I abide in loyalty to you and to the Severed Throne."

"Lord Issandrian?"

"Your Majesty," Curtin Issandrian said. His voice was shaking. "I wish to draw only two things to your attention. First, I beg that you consider that the violence yesterday may not have been the intention or plan of any man present. But if Your Majesty is adamant that punishment must be meted out, I ask that you spare my compatriot. The games for Prince Aster were my project, and mine alone. I would not have innocent men suffer simply because they know me."

It was a pretty speech, Dawson thought. But ill-advised.

“My Lord Issandrian forgets that this is not the first violence that your disagreements with House Kalliam have spawned. If you would like to offer yourself up to be made an example of, I will consider it, but don’t think that anyone will find safety behind your skirts.”

“Majesty,” Issandrian said.

In the silence that followed, Dawson closed his eyes. His leg ached where his weight ground bone and skin into the stone floor, but he wouldn’t shift. Fidgeting would be beneath the dignity of the occasion.

“Dawson Kalliam, Baron of Osterling Fells,” King Simeon said. “I am doubling the duties owed by your holdings for the next five years. You are to absent yourself from the court and Camnipol for not less than half a year, nor are you permitted to raise soldiers or hire mercenaries without the express permission of the throne.”

Dawson didn’t speak, but deepened his bow. His heart was beating faster now, and he was careful not to show his anxiety.

“Curtin Issandrian, Baron of Corsa,” the king went on. “I reclaim all lands previously held by you south of the river Andriann, and dismiss you from your positions as Warden of Estinport and Protector of the East. I am doubling the duties owed by your holdings for the next five years, and you are to absent yourself from the court and Camnipol for not less than half a year, nor are you permitted to raise soldiers or mercenaries without the express permission of the throne.”

Dawson closed his eyes. He had to force himself not to shake his head. The disappointment sank in his belly like he’d swallowed a stone. The judgment against Klin would necessarily be equal or less. And indeed, King Simeon sent him into the same exile, increased his obligations, and stripped him of minor titles. Feldin Maas, wherever he was hiding, escaped without even that much.

When he called them to stand, Dawson looked up at his old friend. His king. Simeon’s face was flushed, his breath fast, his face still set in a furious scowl. Behind him, Price Aster’s chin was lifted as if in defiance. For a moment, Simeon looked into Dawson’s eyes. If there was a flicker in the king’s apparent outrage, it was the only acknowledgment Dawson would get. The king’s guard stood aside, and Simeon strode out, Aster following, and the galleries burst into a thunderous clamor of voices. Dawson looked across the aisle to where Issandrian and Klin huddled in conversation of their own. Klin looked stunned. Issandrian seemed sad, and Dawson wondered whether it was for the same reason he was.

“Lord Kalliam, sir?”

The captain of the king’s guard was a tall man, broad across the shoulders, with a pug face and apologetic, watery eyes. Dawson nodded to him.

“I’ll have to ask you to be outside the gates by sundown, my lord,” the man said.

“Is my household bound?”

“No, my lord. They can stay if they please.”

Dawson scratched at his aching knee. The captain stood for a moment in silent respect, then moved to Issandrian’s cabal to deliver, Dawson assumed, the same warning. He turned and walked out. The outer hall was black marble and worked silver. The midday sun glared through tall, unshuttered windows. Clara was there already, waiting for him with Vincen Coe behind her like her shadow. Jorey appeared at the hallway’s end walking toward them quickly. His boots rang on the stone floor.

“I thought that went quite well,” Clara said.

Dawson shook his head once.

“It was a travesty, dear,” he said. “It was the end of the empire.”

The carriage awaited them on the street, the team of horses snorting and impatient, as if the animals felt the changes in the city itself. A hundred others like it crowded the narrow streets, waiting for the assembled nobility of Antea to trickle out from the Kingspire. All of them made way for House Kalliam. A swift return to his home was the traditional last respect given an exile.

The rough cobbles rattled the carriage wheels. No one tried to speak. Dawson watched out the side window as the Kingspire vanished around a corner. They passed through the great square and into the streets of the city. Pigeons rose in great flocks, circled, and returned to earth. Then the Silver Bridge, and the great drop of the Division. Smoke rose from the forges and ovens.

A day ago, noble blood had spilled in these streets. Today, it looked the same as it always had, except to the few like himself who knew better.

At his private mansion, the servants brought out the steps as they always did. Dawson waved away the offered hands. The old Tralgu door servant greeted him solemnly. Within, the servants of the household were preparing the house. Tapestries were being taken down, furnishings draped against dust. His houndsman already had the dogs in their traveling cages; the animals whimpered their confusion and distress. Dawson knelt by them, pressing his hand against the bars to let the dogs smell him and lick at his fingers.

"I can stay on," Jorey said.

"Do that," Dawson said. "I won't have time to put everything to rights before I leave."

"Some of the servants have to stay, dear," Clara said. "The gardens won't survive without the gardeners to look after them. And the fountain in the rose court still needs repair."

In the cage, the dog looked up at Dawson. Its huge brown eyes were soft and frightened. He reached through a finger and stroked its muzzle. A jaw strong enough to sever a fox's spine with a bite leaned gently into him.

"Do what's best, Clara," he said. "I trust you."

"Lord Kalliam?"

Vincen Coe gave a huntsman's salute. Dawson brought himself to nod.

"Lord Daskellin's come, my lord," Coe said. "He's in the western sitting room."

Dawson drew himself to his feet. The dog whined as he walked away from it. There was nothing he could do. He had no more comfort to offer. In the sitting room, Canl Daskellin stood at the window, his hands clasped behind his back like a general overseeing the field of battle. His pipe smoke was sweet enough to cloy.

"Canl," Dawson said. "If there's anything you want of me, it had best be something quick. I don't have time for a hand at cards."

"I came to offer my sympathies and congratulations."

"Congratulations? For what?"

"We've won," Daskellin said, turning away from the window and striding into the room. "You played your hand brilliantly. You lured Issandrian into a thrust he couldn't follow through, then cut his conspiracy down. Now he's in disgrace. His inner circle is exiled. Stripped of lands and titles. There's no saying who will take Prince Aster as ward, but it won't be any of them. There won't be a farmer's council in our lifetimes. I'm sorry it came at a price to you, but I swear that your name will be praised as a hero while you're gone."

"What good's winning battles when the war's lost?" Dawson said. "Did you actually come here to celebrate, Daskellin? Or is this how you gloat?"

"Gloat?"

"Odderf Daskellin was a rabbit and a coward, but he had high blood. He *died* yesterday. In Camnipol, and by foreign hands. That hasn't happened in centuries. And how did Simeon reply? Increased taxes. Petty exile. A few minor lands and titles shuffled about."

Daskellin leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. Grey smoke spilled from his lips and nostrils.

"What would you have had him do?"

"Slaughter them all himself. Bind them, take sword in hand, and take their heads with his own hand," Dawson said.

"It sounds like you're missing Palliako already," Canl said dryly. Dawson ignored him.

“An armed company in the streets? It’s treason against the throne, and to answer it with less than death is one step short of open surrender. He made himself a mask of fierceness, and all it did was point out how frightened he is. You should have seen it. Simeon strutting and raging and calling for an ending. It was like watching a shepherd boy trying to shout down wolves.”

“Frightened? Of whom?”

“The power backing Issandrian. He’s afraid of Asterilhold,” Dawson said, and then pointed an accusing finger at Daskellin himself. “And he’s afraid of Northcoast.”

The imitation of a smile bent Daskellin’s lips and he took his pipe from his mouth.

“I am not Northcoast, old friend,” he said. “And if consideration of the reactions of the other courts and kingdoms brought King Simeon to a place of greater mercy, that’s wisdom on his part.”

“That’s permission for every landholder in the kingdom to spread his loyalty as widely as he can,” Dawson said. “As long as answering to a duchess in Asterilhold or a bank in Northcoast makes us safer than standing by Antea, Simeon won’t have a court of his own. He wants to keep the kingdom off the dragon’s path so badly that he’s walking down it.”

Daskellin knelt by the fire grate, knocking the bowl of his pipe against the soot-stained brick. A rain of ashes fell from it.

“We disagree,” he said, “but there can be room for a little differences between allies. You’re right, of course, that even with Issandrian’s cabal hobbled, the danger to the kingdom hasn’t entirely passed. Whether you believe me or not, I’d thought to reassure you that I would keep working during your exile.”

“By selling us to the Medean bank?”

“By seeing that King Simeon has the support and loyalty he needs.”

“Spoken like a diplomat,” Dawson said.

Daskellin bristled, and then as Dawson watched, gathered his temper in. He tucked his pipe into his belt and stood. The smell of old smoke still hung in the room.

“It’s a dark day for you,” Canl said, “so I’m going to take that for what you said and ignore what you meant by it. Whatever you think, I didn’t come to gloat.”

The two stood for a moment, the silence between them stretching. Canl Daskellin made a rueful half-smile, then walked out, putting a hand on Dawson’s shoulder as he passed. Dawson listened to the footsteps draw away, drowning in the noise of his household being uprooted. He stood a moment longer, looking out the window without seeing the early summer trees beyond it. Without hearing the birds or the servants or the whining of dogs.

He turned away.

Dawson left in a single open carriage. He sat on the forward seat, looking back toward the city, Clara sat at his side. Vincen Coe on the bench beside the teamster. Carts with his belongings would come more slowly, but they would come. The path to Osterling Fells would carry them over the dragon’s roads for half a day, and the dragon’s jade under their wheels was smoother than the streets of Camnipol.

“There isn’t any chance of coming upon them, is there?” Clara asked.

“Who?”

“One of them,” Clara said. “Lord Issandrian or Lord Klin. Or Lord Maas. It would be entirely too awkward, I think. I mean really, what does one say? I can’t see inviting them to share a meal, but it would be rude not to. Do you think we should tell the driver to keep distance if he sees another carriage? If we can pretend not to have realized who they are, we can all keep to form. Unless it’s Maas. Phelia must be in ruins over this.”

Despite everything, Dawson smiled. He took his wife’s hand in his. Her fingers were thicker than when he’d first known her. His own, rougher. Time had changed them both in some ways, and in some ways left them untouched. From the first day of their marriage, before even, he’d known she saw a different world than he did. It was part of what he loved in her.

"I'm sure we won't," he said. "Issandrian and Klin won't be taking this road, and there's no reason for Maas to leave court. Not now."

Clara sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"My poor man," she said.

He craned his neck a bit, kissing the hair just above her ear, then put his arm around her shoulders.

"It won't be so bad," he said, trying to sound as if he believed it. "I missed the winter in Osterling Fells. This can make up for it. We'll summer at home, run back to Camnipol for the closing of court, and then turn back for the winter."

"Can we?" Clara said. "We could stay through the winter if you'd rather. We don't have to make two trips."

"No, love," he said. "It's not just to see the autumn pageant. I'll want to see how things have played in court before winter anyway. It only seems like I'm indulging you. I'm really a selfish boor."

Clara chuckled. A few miles later, she began snoring gently. Coe, noticing, handed down a wool blanket in silence, and Dawson covered Clara without rousing her. The sun sank behind them, reddening. Shadows spilled across the landscape, and the trilling, shrill birds of evening announced themselves.

Dawson was leaving the field of battle, but the fight would go on without him. Issandrian, Maas, Klin. They weren't killed, nor had they acted alone. Maas and his allies in court would do everything in their power to see their names raised again to respectability. Daskellin would doubtless take the helm of Dawson's own group, or at least that part of it that could stomach the bland little banker from Northcoast. Simeon would dance between the blades and tell himself there was a place at the middle where everything could balance, that peace could be kept if he only never made a stand.

A weak king might survive if he had a loyal court, but in casting Dawson out, Simeon had exiled the only man who had truly championed him. Nothing good could come now. The court was being led through an idiot's dance, made up of men with their own agendas. Shortsighted, self-serving idiots.

It would take a miracle to redeem King Simeon now. The best hope of the kingdom was that Prince Aster be sent as ward of a family that could show him what kingship was better than the king himself. Dawson indulged himself for a moment in the fantasy of taking the prince under his own wing and teaching him what Simeon could not. Clara murmured in her sleep, pulling the blanket more tightly around her.

The sun dipped down to the horizon, the walls and towers of Camnipol obscured by the power of its fire. For a moment, Dawson imagined the light came from a great conflagration. Not the sunset, but Camnipol burning. It had the weight of prophecy.

Shortsighted, self-serving idiots. A burning city.

Dawson wondered, almost idly, where Geder Palliako had gotten to.

Cithrin

Coffee houses had always had a place in the business of business. In the cold ports of Stollbourne and Rukkyupal, merchants and sea captains hunched over the tiled tables and warmed mittened hands with steaming cups as they watched the winter sun set at midday. Beside the wide, moonlit waters of the Miwaji, the nomadic Southling pods sipped cups of something hardly thinner than mud and declaimed poetry between haggling over fortunes in silver and spice. All through the world that the dragons had left behind, trade and coffee went together.

Or at least that was the way Magister Imaniel had told it. Cithrin had never been outside Vanai, and the bank there had been its own small building. Still, when the time came, Cithrin chose a small café with a private back room and rough wooden tables on the street. It was across the square from the Grand Market, so she would be near the rough-and-tumble of the city's trade without having to do her business in one of the shifting stalls. The owner of the café—Maestro Asanpur—was an ancient Cinnae man with one milky eye and a touch at making fresh coffee that bordered on magical. He had been very happy to accept a bit of rent that gave Cithrin rights to the privacy of his back room. If the day was cloudy, she could sit in the common room, sip her coffee, and listen to gossip. If the sun came out, she could take one of the white-painted street tables and watch the traffic through the Grand Market.

Ideally, Maestro Asanpur's café would become known as a center of banking and business in the city. The better it was known, the more people would come to it, and with them more news and gossip and speculation. Cithrin knew that her own presence was a good beginning, but she likely didn't have enough time to let things take their course. Sooner rather than later, the legitimate Medean bank would come to investigate their new branch, and when that happened, she wanted it to be wildly prosperous.

Which, in the short term, meant a little harmless dishonesty.

Cithrin saw the reaction to Cary's arrival before she saw the woman herself. Gazes shifted through the square like wind passing over a field of grass, then away, and then, more covertly, back again. Cithrin drank her coffee and pretended not to notice as the mysterious woman walked across the square toward the great kiosks where the queensmen who administered the Grand Market stood. Cary had chosen the longest approach possible, and it gave Cithrin time to admire the costume. The cut was Elassean, but the silk wrapping and the beaded veil spoke of Lyoneia. The jewels that adorned her came from Cithrin's own stock, and would have sold for enough to buy the café twice over. Taken together, the design spoke of all the trade of the Inner Sea with an authenticity that came from Master Kit's travels there. It wasn't a look often seen in Birancour, and the combination of exoticism and wealth drew attention better than a song. Horner and Smit walked behind her in boiled leather with the swagger they'd learned on the caravan, indistinguishable from real fighters.

Cary reached the kiosk and spoke with one of the queensmen. They were much too far to hear, but the queensman's posture was clear enough. He gestured across the square toward Cithrin and the café. Cary bowed her thanks and turned, taking the walk slowly. When she came close enough to speak with, Cithrin rose.

"Enough?" Cary asked.

"Perfect," Cithrin said. "Come this way."

She led the actors through the common room, the wooden floors creaking under their weight. The interior of the café was a series of small rooms set off by low archways. The windows had

carved wooden shutters that scented the breeze with cedar. A young Kurtadam girl sat in the back gently playing a bottle harp, the soft notes murmuring through the air. In one of the rooms, an old Firstblood man talking animatedly with a wide-eyed Southling stopped to stare at Cary and her guards. Cithrin caught Maestro Asanpur's eye and held up two fingers. The old man nodded and set to grinding the beans for two small cups. Cithrin meant for anyone paying attention to know that the exotically dressed woman was someone the Medean bank honored. They moved on to the privacy of her hired room.

"So this is all?" Smit said after the door closed behind them, groaning on its leather hinge. "I thought there'd be more to it."

Cithrin sat at the small table. There was enough room for the others, but rather than sit, Hornet went to the thin window, peering out through the blue-and-gold glass to the alley beyond. As Cary started plucking off the borrowed jewelry, Cithrin pulled the iron lockbox out from under her chair, sliding it on a small red carpet to keep from scarring the floor.

"I don't need very much here," Cithrin said. "A record book, a little spare coin. It's not as if I'll be handing out large sums every day."

"Wasn't that the point, though?" Cary said, handing across a bracelet studded with emeralds and garnets. "To get rid of all that stuff?"

"Not by handing it out like candy," Cithrin said. "There are only so many good investments to make in a city. It takes effort finding which ones are worth having. This is where I talk with people. Negotiate agreements, sign contracts. It's all arranged here, but I don't want to have all the guards standing around intimidating people."

"Why not?" Hornet said. "I would."

"Better to put them at ease, I expect," Cary said, and a soft knock came at the door. Smit opened it to Maestro Asanpur carrying a tray with two small bone-colored cups. Cithrin unlocked the iron box. As Maestro Asanpur presented the coffee to Cary, Cithrin folded the jewelry into soft cloth and put it into the box beside the red leather record book and her purse of small coin. The lock was crude but solid, the key reassuringly heavy on its leather necklace. Cithrin tucked the key away. Cary sipped the coffee and made a small, appreciative sound.

"Another advantage of the site," Cithrin said.

"We can't stay," Hornet said. "Master Kit's bent on having the Tragedy of Four Winds ready to put on before the trade ships from Narinisle come."

"Are you going to try to sponsor one?" Cary asked.

"A ship or a tragedy?" Cithrin asked dryly.

"Either one."

"Neither," she said.

In truth, the trade ships from Narinisle had been very much on Cithrin's mind.

The great wealth in the world lay in the patterns of commerce. The Keshet and Pût might have olive trees and wine enough for every city in the world, but no mines there produced gold and the iron was in rough, roadless terrain and difficult to reach. Lyoneia grew fabulous woods and spices, but struggled to grow enough grain to feed its people. Far Syramys with its silks and dyes, magic and tobacco, promised the rarest goods in the world, but the blue-water trade to reach them was so uncertain that more fortunes were lost than made in going there. Everywhere, there was imbalance, and the surest path to profit was to be between something valuable and someone who valued it.

On land, that meant control of the dragon's roads. No merely human assembly of stone and mortar could match the permanence of dragon's jade. All the great cities grew where they did because of the arrangements of paths made when humanity was a single race and the masters of the world flew on great scaled wings. Dragons themselves had rarely if ever lowered themselves to travel the roads. They were the servants' stairs of the fallen empire, and they determined the flow of money for all land trade.

The trackless sea, however, could be remade.

Each autumn, ships in the south loaded themselves with wheat and oil, wine and pepper and sugar, and, paid with gold adventurous or desperate enough, made the trek to the north. Northcoast, Hallskar, Asterilhold, and even the northern coast of Antea would buy the goods, often for less than the same items that had traveled overland. The trade ships might take on some cargo in those ports—salt cod from Hallskar, iron and steel from Asterilhold and Northcoast—but most would take their money and hurry to the open ports of Narinisle to wait for the blue-water trade from Far Syramys. This was the great gamble.

Accidents of wind and current made the island nation of Narinisle the easiest end port for ships from Far Syramys, and if a trade ship could exchange its cargo and money for a load freshly arrived from those distant lands, an investor might triple her money. If not, she risked seeing her trade ship return from Narinisle with only what could be bought from the local markets, making a much smaller profit, assuming prices went with her. Or the ship could be lost to pirates, or it might sink and everything either lost entirely or ransomed back at exorbitant rates and glacial slowness from the Drowned.

And when the ships returned to their southern ports and the fortunes of those who had sponsored them rose or fell, the sponsorship of this fleet of gold and spice that sailed together without alliance and answered to no single flag reshuffled. A house that had placed its wager on a single ship and did well might make enough to hire half a dozen the next year. Someone whose ship had been lost would scramble to find ways to survive in their new, lessened circumstances. If they had been wise and insured their investment, they might gain back enough to try again by appealing to someone like Cithrin.

The ships would already have left Narinisle. Soon, the seven that had set out the year before from Porte Oliva would return, and not long after that, someone would come to her and ask that the bank insure them to sponsor a ship for the next year's work. Without knowing which captains were best, without knowing which families were best positioned to buy a good outgoing cargo, she would be left with little better than instinct. If she took all those who came to ask, she'd be sure to take too many bad risks. If she took no one, there would be no chance for her bank to prosper and nothing to show the holding company when they came. This was the species of risk that her life was built on now.

Betting on pit dogs seemed more certain.

"A few insurance contracts, maybe," Cithrin said, as much to herself as to Cary and the others. "Part sponsorship in a few years, if things go well."

"Insurance. Sponsorship. What's the difference?" Smit asked.

Cithrin shook her head. It was like he'd asked the difference between an apple and a fish; she didn't know where to start.

"Cithrin forgets that we didn't all grow up in a counting house," Cary said and drank down the last of her coffee. "But we should go."

"Let me know when the new play's ready," Cithrin said. "I'd like to watch it."

"See?" Smit said. "I told you we'd have a patron."

They left through the alley, transformed from mysterious woman of business and her guards back to seafront players. Cithrin watched them go through her thin window, the glass distorting them as they went. A patron. It was true she wouldn't be able to go and lead the crowd with Cary and Mikel anymore. She probably wouldn't be able to go out to a taproom with Sandr. Cithrin bel Sarcour, head of the Medean bank of Porte Oliva, drinking with a common actor? It would be terrible for the bank's reputation and her own.

The loneliness that came with the thought had little to do with Sandr.

When, an hour later, Captain Wester arrived, Cithrin was out on the street, sitting at the same table where Cary had found her. He nodded his greeting and sat across from her. The sunlight brought out the grey in his hair, but it also brightened his eyes. He handed a sheet of parchment

across to her. She looked over the words and figures, nodding to herself as she did. The receipt looked fine.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"No problems," he said. "The tobacco's at the seller's stall. He argued over a few of the leaves, but I told him he either took all of it or none."

"He shouldn't have done that," Cithrin said. "He should be negotiating with me."

"I may have mentioned something like that. He accepted the delivery. The pepper and cardamom goes out tomorrow. Yardem and a couple of the new men will take that."

"A start," Cithrin said.

"Any word from Carse?" Marcus asked. The question sounded almost casual.

"I've sent a dispatch," Cithrin said. "I used Magister Imaniel's old cipher, and a slow courier, but I expect they'll have it by now."

"And you said what?"

"That the branch had placed its letters of foundation and was beginning trade as Magister Imaniel and I had planned," Cithrin said.

"Not telling them the truth of it, then."

"Letters go astray. Couriers take extra payment to unsew and copy them. I don't expect anyone to intercept it, but if they do, it will look exactly like what it's supposed to be."

Marcus nodded slowly, squinting up into the sun.

"Any reason you picked a *slow* courier?"

"I want time to put things in order before they come," she said.

"I see. There's something we should—"

A deeper shadow than the cloud's fell over the table. Lost in her conversation, she hadn't seen the man approach, and so now he seemed to have sprouted out of the pavement. Taller than Captain Wester, but not so tall as Yardem Hane, he wore a wool tunic and leggings, a blue-dyed cloak several layers thick against the spring cold, and a bronze chain of office. For the most part his features were Firstblood, but slight and fair enough that he might have had a grandfather among the Cinnae.

"Forgive me," he said, his voice scrupulously polite. "Am I addressing Cithrin bel Sarcour?"

"You are," Cithrin said.

"Governor Siden sent me," the man said.

Fear punched the breath out of her. They'd discovered the forgery. They were sending the guard. She cleared her throat and smiled.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"Not at all," the messenger said, and produced a small letter, the smooth paper neatly folded and the sides sewn and sealed. "But he did suggest I wait in the event that you wished to reply."

Cithrin held the paper, uncertain where to look—it, the man, the captain. After what seemed entirely too long, she shook herself.

"If you'll let Maestro Asanpur know you've come on my business, he'll see you in comfort."

"You are very kind, Magistra."

Cithrin waited until the man disappeared into the café before she pulled the thread. It cut through the paper with a rattle. Trembling a little, she pressed the opened page onto the table. The script was beautifully shaped, the work of a professional scribe. *To Magistra Cithrin bel Sarcour, voice and agent of the Medean bank in Porte Oliva, I, Idderrigo Bellind Siden, Prime Governor of Porte Oliva by special commission of Her Royal Highness* and on and on and on. Her fingertips slid down the page. *I request your private attention as a voice of trade and a citizen of Porte Oliva concerning certain matters central to the health and vigor of the city* and on and on and on. And then, near the bottom of the first page, she stopped.

The solicitation and arrangement of joint civic security as concerns the safe conduct of maritime trade in the coming year...

"Good God," she said.

“What is it?” Captain Wester said. His voice was low and steady. He sounded ready for her to say they had to kill the messenger and flee the city. Cithrin swallowed to loosen her throat.

“If I am reading this correctly,” she said, “the governor is asking us to propose a joint venture with the city to escort the trade ships from Narinisle.”

“Ah,” Wester said. And then, “You know I don’t understand what you just said, yes?”

“He’s putting together a fleet. Fighting ships to see the traders safely up and back. And he’s looking for someone with the purse to fund it.”

“Meaning us?”

“No,” she said, her mind running through the implications with an eerie and cool precision. “He’ll want several parties to make proposals, but he’s inviting us into the fight. He’s asking the Medean bank to make a proposal to underwrite a single-city fleet.”

The captain grunted as if he understood. Cithrin was already miles ahead of him and running fast. If Porte Oliva could make itself a more attractive port than the Free Cities, more ships would contract from here. Insurance rates would drop, as the trade seemed less risky. That would hurt anyone who had been trading on insurance alone. And Maccia would hate it, and Cabral would take it poorly if the escort went that far. She wondered what the chances were of direct retaliation against the escort ships.

“Is that the kind of thing we’d be likely to do?” Wester asked from some other part of the world.

“If we took the commission and did the thing well, we’d have connections all through the south and a thumb on the Inner Sea. We’d have something to give the holding company more valuable than a cartload of gold,” Cithrin said. “They *couldn’t* object to what we’ve done.”

“So it is something we might take on, then.”

The knot in Cithrin’s belly was still there, but something about it changed. She found herself smiling. Grinning.

“Win this,” she said, holding up the pages, “and we win *everything*.”

The meeting at the governor’s palace pretended to be nothing. A half dozen men and women sat in a garden courtyard. Queensmen poured out scented water and spiced wine. The governor was a small man, thick-bellied and balding. He treated all his guests with grace and kindness, and as such was practically useless as a guide to who among the assemblage were important. She had hoped to follow his cues, paying attention to the people with whom he spent the most time. Instead, she was left to wonder.

There was an older Kurtadam man, his pelt graying across the face, throat, and back, who represented a chartered collaboration of the shipwrights’ guild and two local merchant houses. A Cinnae man with slightly too much rouge on his cheeks turned out to be the owner of a mercenary company large enough to rent itself to kings. Sitting alone under the spreading fronds of a palm tree, a Tralgu woman drank water and ate shrimp, listening to everything said with a concentration that left Cithrin unnerved. All of them had agendas and histories, interests and weaknesses. Magister Imaniel would have been able to glance across the room and draw conclusions. Or at least educated guesses. Cithrin, on the other hand, was still a year too young to claim her inheritance. The wine was excellent. The conversation friendly and convivial. She felt like she was swimming in a warm ocean, waiting for something to come up from the depths, take her by the leg, and draw her down to the cold.

It didn’t help untie her knots that everyone seemed to view her with curiosity. The voice and agent of the Medean bank, newly arrived in the city, and throwing off everyone’s plans. None of them, Cithrin told herself, had expected her to be a player in this game. She was badly behind in understanding the politics at play in the courtyard with its brightly colored finches and sun-warmed flagstones, but she had mysteries of her own. The longer she remained a cipher to them, the more she could make sense of the game. She handed her empty glass to one of the queensmen and took another. Wine kept the fear at bay.

“Magistra bel Sarcour,” the governor said, appearing at her elbow. “You were in Vanai, yes? Before the Antean aggression.”

“Just before,” Cithrin said.

“Lucky you got out,” the Tralgu woman said. Her voice was as low as Yarden Hane’s, but it didn’t have the same warmth.

“I am,” Cithrin said, keeping her tone neutral and polite.

“What do you make of the fate of the city?” the governor asked. Cithrin had anticipated the question, and she had her answer at the ready.

“Antea has a long history of military interference in the Free Cities,” Cithrin said. “Magister Imaniel and I were expecting the occupation a season earlier than it came. That the Anteans didn’t intend to hold the city was only clear in the last few weeks before they arrived.”

“You think they always intended to destroy Vanai?” a man behind the governor said. He had the features of a Firstblood, but golden skin with a roughness to it that reminded Cithrin of a Jasuru. His eyes were a shocking green. His name was Qahuar Em, and he spoke for a group part trading association and part nomadic tribe from the north reaches of Lyoneia. From his appearance, she guessed he was half Jasuru, though Cithrin hadn’t known that was possible.

“We had a strong suspicion,” she said to him.

“But why would the Severed Throne do such a thing?” the governor asked.

“Because they’re a bloodthirsty bunch of unmodified northern savages,” the Tralgu woman said. “Barely better than monkeys.”

“The story I’d heard was that the burning was unexpected, even by King Simeon,” the Cinnae mercenary said. “The local commander took the action as some sort of political theater piece.”

“Doesn’t argue against my monkeys-with-swords thesis,” the Tralgu woman said, and the governor chuckled.

“I’m not surprised that there’s more than one interpretation,” Cithrin said. “Still, you’ll forgive me if I’m pleased that I followed the information that we had.”

“I heard that Komme Medean was moving his interests to the north, and Antea in particular,” the graying Kurtadam said. “Damned odd seeing him take an aggressive position in the south.”

Cithrin felt a flutter of concern. If the bank were involving itself in the northern countries—Antea, Asterilhold, Northcoast, Hallskar, and Sarakal—she might well have stepped on toes by founding a branch at the far end of the continent. It wasn’t something she was ready to address, so the conversation had to be moved away from the issue and quickly. She smiled the way she imagined Magister Imaniel might have.

“Is there really such a thing as purely northern interests?” she asked. “Narinisle is in the north, and it seems to concern all of us.”

The air in the courtyard seemed to still. She’d pulled the hidden meaning of all their banter and laid it on the table. She wondered whether she’d just been rude, so she smiled and sipped her wine, acting as if it had been intentional. Qahuar the half-Jasuru smiled at her, nodding as if she’d won a point in a game.

“Narinisle may be in the north,” the graying Kurtadam said, “but the problems are all in the south, aren’t they? King Sephan and his unofficial pirate fleet.”

“I agree,” the Cinnae mercenary captain said. “The only way that trade can be made safe is if Cabral agrees that it is. And that can’t be done on the water alone.”

The Tralgu woman grunted and put down the shrimp that she’d been eating.

“You aren’t going to go on about putting a land force together to protect ships again, are you?” she said. “Porte Oliva starts a land war with Cabral, and the queen’ll burn us down as an apology to King Sephan faster than the Anteans lit Vanai. We’re a city, not a kingdom.”

“Done right, you don’t have to use it,” the Cinnae said, bristling. “And it isn’t an invasion force. But the escort that protects trade ships needs to be able to put swords onto land. The pirate problem can’t be solved if they can run into a cove someplace and declare themselves safe.”

Cithrin sat on a high stool, cocked her head, and listened as the façade of politeness began to crack. Like an artist putting a mosaic together one chip at time, she began to make out the shape of divisions and arguments in the group around her.

The chartered collaboration between the shipwrights and the merchant houses was pressing for a limited escort restricted in its range to within a few days' sail from Porte Oliva. Protect the neighborhood, their argument went, and the trade ships will come of their own accord. It would cost less, and so the offsetting tariffs could be small. Listening to the Cinnae man and Tralgu woman press, Cithrin was fairly certain the merchant houses in question traded in insurance. The limited escort still left a great territory of water unsafe, the chance of piracy and loss high, and so the return on insurance wouldn't go down.

The Cinnae man, on the other hand, was a militarist, because what he brought to the table was a military force. If the others could be made to agree that only a massive force of arms—and especially the sword-and-bows of a mercenary company—would ensure that piracy end, he would be in the best position to provide it. Naturally, none of the others agreed.

The Tralgu woman's argument centered on a treaty between Birancour and Herez that Cithrin didn't recognize. She would need to find a copy to understand how it applied, but simply knowing what she didn't know felt like a little victory.

As the wrangle went on, her smiles felt less and less forced. Her mind danced through each phrase her enemies used, drew connections, set up speculations that she would research once the evening was done. The governor kindly, gently kept the tone from escalating to blows, but stopped short of making peace. This was what he'd brought them here for. This was how he worked. Cithrin held that information as well.

After her third glass of wine, she felt certain enough to put her own argument out.

"Forgive me," she said, "but it seems that we've all become somewhat fixed on piracy as the only problem. But there are other things that can happen to a trade ship. If I understand correctly, three ships were lost in a storm five years ago."

"No," the Tralgu woman snapped.

"Those sank off Northcoast," the Kurtadam said. "They never got as far as Narinisle."

"And yet the investment in them was just as lost," Cithrin said. "Is the question we're considering how to protect trade? Or is it only how to make pirates a lesser risk than storms? It seems to me that an escort ship should be able to answer any number of crises."

"You can't have an escort that follows the ships everywhere and answers every problem," the Cinnae man said.

"The initial cost would be high," Cithrin said, as if that were the objection he'd raised. "It would require a commitment from Porte Oliva long enough to ensure a reasonable expectation of return. And likely some understanding with ports in the north."

She said it all as if it were idle speculation; a chat among friends. They all knew what she'd just said.

The Medean bank would protect trade ships from Porte Oliva as far as they wished to go and all the way home again. She had enough money that she could pour gold into the project and not see a return for years. And the bank, with its holding company in Carse, had connections throughout the northern countries. If it was a grander vision than she'd meant to bring to the table, that was fine. The others could compare how many soldiers they had, how cheaply they could do something small, how treaties and trade agreements could be brought to bear. Cithrin could say, *I am the biggest dog in this pit. I can do what you cannot.*

She liked the feel of it.

The courtyard was silent for a moment, then as the Kurtadam drew in an angry breath, the half-Jasuru with the green eyes spoke.

"She's right," he said.

Qahuar Em was sitting at the governor's side. In the light that spilled down from the saturated blue sky, his skin had taken an almost bronze tone, like a statue brought to life. When he smiled, she saw that his teeth, white as a Firstblood's, had the hint of Jasuru points to them.

"You're joking," the Kurtadam said, sounding deflated.

"You could do it by halves," he said, his gaze shifting to the Kurtadam for a moment before shifting back to Cithrin. "But what would stop Daun from doing the same? Or Upurt Marion? Newport or Maccia? You could make Porte Oliva a little bit safer, and be more popular as a place to trade for a few years while other cities followed your example. Or you could move decisively, dominate trade in the region, and capture the trade route for a generation. It just depends what your goals are, I suppose."

Cithrin found herself smiling at him even as it occurred to her that he'd spoken even less than she had. She'd need to watch him, she thought. And as if he'd read her mind, he grinned.

The conversation went on for another hour, but the wind had shifted. The Kurtadam restricted himself to petulant asides, the mercenary reframed the military aspect as part of a wider strategy, and the Tralgu lapsed back into silence. The undercurrent of anger and suspicion was palpable, and the governor seemed quite pleased with the entire proceeding. When Cithrin left, her beaded shawl wrapped around her shoulders, it was hard to remember to step like a woman twice her age. She wanted to walk from the ankle.

She waited on the steps looking out across the square toward the great marble temple, pretending a piety she didn't feel. The sun sank lower in the west, shining into the temple's face and making the stone glow. The moon, already risen, hung in the cloudless indigo of the sky, a half circle of white and a half of darkness. Between the beauty of city and heaven and the perhaps slightly too much wine she'd drunk, she nearly missed her quarry when he walked by.

"Excuse me," she said.

The half-Jasuru turned, looking back over his shoulder as if he didn't know her.

"You're called Qahuar?" she said.

He corrected her pronunciation gently. Standing on the step below hers, their heads were even.

"I wanted to thank you for supporting me in there," she said.

He grinned. His face was broader than it had seemed in the courtyard. His skin less rough, his eyes softer. It struck her that he was roughly the age she pretended to be.

"I was going to say the same of you," he said. "Between us, I think we'll shake loose the smaller players. I admit, I hadn't been expecting to compete against the Medean bank."

"I hadn't expected to be competing at all," she said. "Still, it's flattering of the governor to think of me."

"He's using you to get better terms from me," Qahuar said. And then, seeing her reaction, "I don't mind. If it goes poorly, he'll be using me to get better terms from you. One doesn't reach his position by being sentimental."

"Still," Cithrin said.

"Still," Qahuar said, as if agreeing.

They stood silently for a moment. His expression shifted, as if seeing her for the first time. As if she confused him. No. Not confused. Intrigued. The angle of his smile changed, and Cithrin felt a warmth in her own expression. She found herself particularly pleased that the man was her rival.

"You've made the game more interesting, Magistra. I hope to see you again soon."

"I think you should," Cithrin said.

Geder

In the rolling flint hills where Sarakal gave way in no clearly marked fashion to the Keshet, the term *prince* had a different meaning than Geder was accustomed to. A man might call himself a prince if he controlled a certain amount of land, or commanded a force of soldiers, or had been son or nephew to a prince. Even race had little impact. The princes of the Keshet might be Yemmu or Tralgu or Jasuru, and there was apparently no formal barrier to other races, though in practice no others were.

Firstblood were especially absent from the wide, arid plains, and Geder found that his small group—himself, his squire, and four men of his father’s service—quickly became an object of curiosity in the towns and villages east of Sarakal. The Firstblood prince, they called him, and when Geder tried to correct them, confusion followed. Translating his rank into the terms of the Keshet was a pointless and probably impossible task, and so when the traveling court of Prince Kupe rol Behur extended Geder its hospitality, he found it easiest to pretend he was more or less an equal to the gold-scaled Jasuru lord.

“I don’t understand, Prince Geder. You’ve left your land and your people searching for something, but you don’t know what or where it is. You have no claim to it, nor any idea whether claim could be made. What profit do you hope to make?”

“Well, it isn’t that kind of project,” Geder said, reaching for another of the small, dark sausages from their communal plate.

When Geder had seen the dust plume from the traveling court rising above the horizon like smoke from a great fire, he’d expected it to be like being on campaign. He’d imagined the tents to be something like the kind he’d slept in to and from Vanai, that he slept in now in his quiet exile. He had misunderstood. He hadn’t ridden into a camp—not even a grand and luxurious one. It was a township of wood-framed buildings with a temple dedicated to a twinned god Geder hadn’t heard of and a square for the prince’s feast. Weeds and scrub in the streets showed that it had not been there the day before. Geder assumed it wouldn’t be there tomorrow. Like something from a legend, it was a city that existed for a single night, and then vanished with the dew. Torches smoked and fluttered in the breeze. The stars glowed down. The summer heat rose from the ground, radiating up into the sky.

Geder popped the sausage into his mouth. It tasted salty and rich, with an almost occult aftertaste of sugar and smoke. He’d never eaten anything like it before, and if it had been made of lizard eyes and bird feet, he’d have eaten them anyway. They tasted that good. Of the sixteen communal plates that the slaves carried around the table, this was his favorite. Although the green leaves with red spots and oil was a close second.

“I’m not looking,” he said through his full mouth, “for something that will get me gold.”

“Honor, then.”

Geder smiled ruefully.

“Speculative essay isn’t something that gives a man great honor. At least not among my people. No, I’m going because I’ve heard about a thing that existed a long time ago, and I wanted to see what I could find out about it. Write down what I’ve learned and what I suspect, so that someday someone can read it and add what they know.”

And, he thought, stay away from the turmoil in Camnipol and find a corner at the farthest edge of the world where the trouble’s least likely to reach me.

“And then?”

Geder shrugged.

"That's all," he said. "What more would there be?"

The Jasuru prince frowned, drank from a mug either cast in the shape of a massive skull or else made from one, and then grinned, pointing a long worked-silver talon at him.

"You're a holy man," the prince said.

"No. God no. Not me."

"A cunning man, then. A philosopher."

Geder was about to protest this too, but then caught himself.

"Maybe a philosopher," he said.

"A man, his mount, and the horizon. I should have seen it. This project is a spiritual matter."

The prince lifted his massive arm, barked something that sounded like an order. The hundred men and women at the long tables—knights or only sword-and-bows, Geder couldn't be sure—raised a shout, laughing and sneering and pushing one another. A few long moments later, a pair of guards appeared at the edge of the square, each with an iron chain in his hand. The chains led back into the darkness, slack in a way that left Geder thinking they were mostly ceremonial.

The woman who came into the light at the end of the chains looked ancient. The broadness of her forehead and the swirling black designs on her skin marked her as a Haavirkin even before she lifted her long, three-fingered hand in salute. Geder had met Haavirkin before when the elected king of Hallskar sent ambassadors to court, but he'd never seen one as old or with the same sense of utter dignity.

The guards walked before the woman as she approached the prince. Geder couldn't tell from the noise of the crowd whether they were mocking her or celebrating her presence. Her eyes swept over Geder, sizing him up.

"This is my seer," the prince said to him. And then to the woman, "This man is our guest. His travels the Keshet on a spiritual matter."

"He does," the woman agreed.

The prince grinned like she'd given him a present. He put his hand on Geder's arm in an oddly intimate gesture.

"She is yours for tonight," the prince said. Geder frowned. He hoped that this wasn't a question of having a bed servant, though he had heard stories about that kind of thing from old stories about the Keshet. He coughed and tried to think of a way clear, but the seer only lifted her hand. Another servant hurried forward with a wooden stool, and the Haavirkin sat on it, staring at Geder's face.

"Hello," Geder said to her, his voice uncertain.

"I know you," she said, then turned and spat on the ground. "When I was a girl, I had a dream about you."

"Um," Geder said. "Really?"

"She is very good," the prince said. "Very wise."

"My uncle had an illness," the seer said, "only it had no signs. No fever, no weakness, nothing, so there was nothing we knew to cure."

"But then how can you say he was sick?"

"It was a dream," the seer said patiently. "He ate bitter herbs to cure himself, and afterward the water he drank tasted sweet. But there wasn't anything in it but water. The sweet was in him, and it wasn't sweet really. Only that it wasn't bitter. It didn't have the power to cure anything."

The seer took his hand, her long fingers exploring the joints of his fingers as if she were searching for something. She lifted his palm to her nose and sniffed at it. Geder's skin crawled, and he tried to pull away.

"You will see her thrice," she said, "and you will be different people each time. And each time, she will give you what you want. You have already seen her once."

The seer lifted her eyebrows, as if to say, *Do you understand?*

That was supposed to be about me? Geder thought.

"Thank you," Geder said, and she nodded as much to herself as to anyone else. The dancing torchlight made the black marks on her skin seem to shift with a motion of their own.

"That's all?" the Jasuru prince said.

"That is all that I have for him," the seer said mildly. She rose to her feet, the chains leading from her neck jingling. "You and I will speak, but later."

She made her obeisance, turned, and walked back out through the low scrub and dust, the wooden tables of Keshet warriors and shadows. The chain bearers followed her as if she were leading them. The silence was broken only by the sound of the chain and the mutter of fire from the torches. Geder thought he saw surprise, even shock, on the faces of the knights, but he didn't understand it. Something had just happened, but he couldn't say what.

The prince scratched at the scales along his jaw and neck like a Firstblood stroking a beard. He grinned, sharp dark teeth like a wall.

"Eat! Sing!" he called, and the knights' voices and clamor rose again as they had before. Geder took another sausage and wondered what he'd just missed.

The feast left Geder's stomach unsettled. He lay in his tent listening to the soft summer wind moving through the desert, and failing to will himself to sleep. He heard his squire's soft snores, smelled the fine Keshet dust that seemed to get into everything, and tasted the spiced meats from the feast, the pleasure of them long since gone. Moonlight pressed in at the edges of the tent, turning the darkness silver. He felt restless and torpid at the same time.

The sweet was in him, and it wasn't sweet really. Only that it wasn't bitter. It didn't have the power to cure anything.

Of all the seer's ramblings, those were the words that gnawed at him, as troubling as the spices. It seemed to him now that the Haavirkin woman had been talking about Vanai and Camnipol. If he thought about it, he could still feel the scar healing in his leg where the bolt had struck him. In exactly the same way, the smallest shift of his attention could remind him of the black knot in his chest that had bent him down on the long ride back from Vanai. He couldn't quite recall the shape of his dead mother's face, but the silhouette of the woman against the flames towering above Vanai was as clear to him as the tent around him now. Clearer.

The celebrations and revels that had greeted him in Camnipol should have washed that away, and for a time they had. But not forever. It had been sweet—he'd thought at the time that it was—but maybe it hadn't been. Certainly it had felt glorious when it was going on. He'd risen in the court. He'd saved the city from the mercenary insurrection. And yet here he was, in exile again, fleeing from political games he didn't understand. And as unpleasant as the unease in his belly might be, it was still better than the nightmares of fire.

In truth, what had happened in Vanai wasn't his fault. He had been used. The lost sleep, the constant dread, even the suspicion that during all his revels and celebrations Alan Klin and his friends had been laughing down their sleeves at him. They were the scars he bore.

He turned the thought over in his mind. The court games that soaked the Kingspire and Camnipol weren't anything he'd ever chosen to put himself into. The relief he'd felt coming back from Vanai to adulation and approval were hollow to him now, and at the same time, he wanted it back. It had let him forget the voice of the flames for a little while. But like the Haavirkin seer's dreamed water, the sweetness hadn't been sweet, just relief from the bitterness. And it hadn't cured anything.

If he only understood what had happened, if he could see through the games and the players, he'd know who was really to blame. And who his own friends really were.

He shifted to his side, pulling his blankets with him. They smelled of dust and sweat. The night was too warm to justify them, but he found the cloth comforting. He sighed and his belly gumbled. The Haavirkin seer had been right in her way. Maybe she was as wise at the prince said. Geder

considered finding her in the morning, asking her more questions. Even if it were all superstition and nonsense, it would give him something to think about in the long, isolated nights in the desert.

He didn't notice that he was falling asleep until he woke. Sunlight glowed the fresh yellow of wildflowers, and the brief dew made the world smell cooler than it was. He pulled on his hose and a tunic. It was rougher wear than he'd had last night, but he wasn't going to a princely feast. And after all, this was the Keshet. Standards were likely different. The wooden buildings still stood, and Geder marched out toward them, his gaze shifting, looking for the sentries. He didn't see them.

He didn't see anyone.

When he reached the structures, the great open square where he'd dined less than a day before, they were deserted. When he called out, no one answered. It would have been like a children's song where they'd all been ghosts, except he could follow the footprints and smell the horse droppings and see the not-quite-dead coals still lurking white and red in the firepit. The horses were gone, the men and women, but the wagons remained. The heavy winches that the prince's servants used to construct their sudden towns were still where they had been. He even found the long chains that the seer had worn, wrapped around a bronze spool and dropped in the dust.

He went back to his own camp, where his squire was just putting down a meal of stewed oats and watered cider. Geder sat at his field table, looking at the tin bowl, then up at the abandoned camp.

"They left in the middle of the night," Geder said. "Took what they could carry without making noise and slipped away in the darkness."

"Perhaps the prince was robbed and murdered by his men," his squire said. "Things like that happen in the Keshet."

"Lucky we weren't caught up in it," Geder said. His oats were honey-sweet. His cider had a bite to it, despite the water. His squire stood quietly by while Geder ate and the other servants struck camp. The sun was hardly two handspans above the horizon when Geder finished. He wanted to be away, back on his own path, and the eerily silent camp left well behind.

He did wonder, though, what else the Haavirkin had seen, and what she had told her prince after the foreign guest had left.

Marcus

I would prefer to give it to Magistra bel Sarcour directly,” the man said. “No disrespect, sir, but my contracts don’t have your thumb on them.”

He was a smallish man, the top of his head coming no higher than Marcus’s shoulder, and his clothes smelled like his shop: sandalwood, pepper, cumin, and fennel. His face was narrow as a fox, and his smile looked practiced. The lower rooms of the Medean bank of Porte Oliva had Marcus, Yardem, Ahariel the stout Kurtadam, and the ever-present Roach. The weight of their blades alone was likely as much as the spicer, and yet the man’s disdain for them radiated like heat from a fire.

“But since she isn’t here,” Marcus said, “I’m what you’ve got to work with.”

The spicer’s eyebrows rose and his tiny little lips pressed thin. Yardem coughed, and Marcus felt a stab of chagrin. The Tralgu was right.

“However,” Marcus went on, “if you’ll accept our hospitality for a few minutes, sir, I’ll do my best to find her.”

“That’s better,” the man said. “Perhaps a cup of tea while I wait?”

I could kill you with my hands, Marcus thought, and it was enough to evoke the smile that etiquette called for.

“Roach?” Marcus said. “If you could see our guest is comfortable?”

“Yes, Captain,” the little Timzinae said, jumping up. “If you’ll come this way, sir?”

Marcus stepped out the door and onto the street, Yardem following him as close as a shadow. The evening sun was still high in the western sky. The pot of tulips in front of the bank was in full, brilliant bloom, the flowers sporting bright red petals veined with white.

“You take the Grand Market,” Yardem said, “I’ll check the taproom.”

Marcus shook his head and spat on the paving stones.

“If you’d rather find her, I can go to the Grand Market,” Yardem said.

“Stay here,” Marcus said. “I’ll be right back.”

Marcus walked down the street. Sweat pooled between his shoulder blades and down his spine. A yellow-faced dog looked up at him from the shadow of an alleyway, panting and too hot to bark. The streets were emptier now than they would be after sunset, the light driving people to shelter more effectively than darkness. Even the voices of the beggars and street sellers seemed overcooked and limp.

The taproom was cool by comparison. The candles were unlit to keep from adding even that little extra heat to the darkness, and so despite the brightness of the street, the tables of the common room were dim. Marcus squinted, willing his eyes sharper. There were a dozen people there of several races, but none of them was her. From the back, Cithrin laughed. Marcus threaded his way across the common room, following the familiar tones of her voice to the draped cloth that kept the private tables private.

“... would have the effect of rewarding the most reliable debtors.”

“Only until they start becoming unreliable,” a man’s voice said speaking more softly. “Your system encourages debtors to extend, and if that goes on long enough, you change good risks to bad.”

“Magistra,” Marcus said. “If you have a moment?”

Cithrin pulled aside the cloth. As Marcus had expected, the half-Jasuru man was with her. Qahuar Em. The competition. A plate of cheese and pickled carrots sat on the table between them

alongside a wine bottle well on its way to empty. Cithrin's dress of embroidered linen flattered her figure, and her hair, which had been pulled back, was spilling in casual disarray down her shoulder.

"Captain?"

Marcus nodded toward the alley door. Profound annoyance flashed across Cithrin's face.

"I could step out," Qahuar Em offered.

"No. I'll be right back," Cithrin said. Marcus followed her out. The alley stank of spoiled food and piss. Cithrin folded her arms.

"The spicer's come with the commissions for the week," Marcus said. "He won't give over to anyone but you."

Cithrin's frown drew lines at the corners of her mouth and between her brow. Her fingers tapped gently against her arms.

"He wants to talk about something else," she said.

"And not with your hired swords," Marcus said. "That's my assumption."

The girl nodded, attention shifting inward.

It was moments like this, when she forgot herself, that she changed. The false maturity that Master Kit and the players had trained her into was convincing, but it wasn't Cithrin. And the giddy young woman who shifted between overconfidence and insecurity wasn't her either. With her face smooth, her mind moving in its own silence, she gave a hint of the woman that was in her. The woman she was becoming. Marcus looked away from her, down the alley, and told himself that by doing it he was giving her privacy.

"I should see him," Cithrin said. "He's at the house?"

"Roach and Yadem are with him."

"I should hurry, then," she said, humor warming the words.

"I can give Qahuar your regrets—"

"No, tell him I'll be right back. I don't want him to leave without me."

Marcus hesitated, then nodded. Cithrin walked off down the alleyway, careful where she stepped, until she reached the corner, turned into the street, and disappeared. Marcus stood in the reeking shadows for a long moment, then ducked back inside. The half-Jasuru was still sitting at the table, chewing a pickled carrot and looking thoughtful. At a guess, the man was a few years younger than Marcus, though the Jasuru blood made it hard to be sure. The vesitigial scales of his skin and the vibrant green eyes reminded Marcus of a lizard.

"The magistra's called away for a few minutes. Small business," Marcus said. "She said she'd be right back."

"Of course," Qahuar Em said, then gestured toward the seat where Cithrin had been. "Would you like to wait with me, Captain Wester?"

The wise choice would be to walk away. Marcus nodded his thanks and sat.

"You're the actual Marcus Wester?" the man asked, motioning to the servant boy for a mug of ale.

"Someone had to be," Marcus said.

"I'm honored. I hope you don't mind my saying, I'm surprised to see a man of your fame doing guard work, even for the Medean bank."

"I'm well enough known among a certain group of people," Marcus said. "Just walking down the streets, I could be anyone."

"Still, after Wodford and Gradis, I'd have thought you could command any price you asked as the head of a mercenary company."

"I don't work for kings," Marcus said as the servant boy set the mug onto the table before him. "It narrows my options. Since we're on good terms, you and I...?"

Qahuar nodded him on.

"I didn't know you could mix Firstblood and Jasuru," Marcus said. "You're the first I've seen."

The man spread his hands. *And yet here I am.*

"We're more common in Lyoneia. And there's some work people would rather give a man who has no family."

"Ah," Marcus said. "You're a mule, then? No children."

"My blessing and my curse."

"I knew some men like that in the north. You get it with Cinnae and Dartinae mixes too. Knew some men who just claimed it too. Made them more popular with the women. Safe."

"There are consolations," Qahuar said, smiling.

Marcus imagined himself reaching across the table and breaking the man's neck. It would be difficult. Jasuru were strong bastards, and fast besides. He took a long drink of his ale. It tasted of the brewery Cithrin had bought into. Clearly she'd arranged a deal with the taphouse. Qahuar cocked his head, smiling politely with his sharp-tipped teeth.

She's half your age, Marcus thought. *She's still a child*. But he couldn't say that either.

"How are you finding life in Porte Oliva?" Marcus said instead.

"I like it here. I miss being with my clan, but if I can bring them work... Well, it's worth the price."

"Must be an impressive clan to go against the Medean bank. Not many would do that."

"I think of it more as the Medean bank going against us. It'll be a good fight. Magistra Cithrin is an impressive woman."

"I've always thought so," Marcus said.

"Have you worked with her for a long time?"

"We met in Vanai," Marcus said. "Came out here with her."

"She's a good employer?"

"I've got no complaints."

"There was talk about you, you know. A simple branch bank, even one with a holding company like the Medean, with Marcus Wester guarding their house? People have read that as a sign that Magistra Cithrin favors a broader, more military strategy."

"What do you think?" Marcus asked, keeping voice neutral.

"What do I think?" Qahuar said, leaning back against the wall. His brow was furrowed as if he were considering his own thoughts for the first time. He lifted a finger. "I think you have chosen this work because you aren't interested in fielding a private army. And so I think the magistra isn't either."

"Interesting thought."

"You're a valuable man, Captain Wester. Many people know it."

Marcus laughed.

"Are you trying to bribe me?" he asked. "You are, aren't you? You're asking whether I can be bought?"

"Can you?" Qahuar Em asked without the slightest hint of shame in his voice.

"There's not enough gold in the world," Marcus said.

"I understand and respect that. But you understand that my duty to my clan required me to ask."

Marcus finished the last of his ale in a gulp and stood up.

"We have any more business, sir?"

Qahuar shook his head.

"Truly, I am honored to have met you, Captain Wester. I respect you and I respect your employer."

"Good to know," Marcus said, and then walked back out through the common room to wait for Cithrin on the street, and the heat be damned. When she came, hurrying down the street like a girl her own age, Marcus stepped out. Sweat beaded her skin and smudged the paints that she'd put to her eyes and lips.

"It's taken care of," Cithrin said. "It's good you came for me. That man's a pretentious ass, but he's going to be very useful."

"Your suitor in there tried to bribe me," Marcus said.

Cithrin paused, and he could see the chagrin in her eyes for less than a heartbeat, and then the mask fell back in place. She became neither the girl nor the woman-still-to-be but the false sophisticate that Master Kit had fashioned. It was the Cithrin that Marcus liked least.

"Of course he did," she said. "I wouldn't have expected any less. Captain, I may not be returning to the house tonight. If I'm not there in the morning, don't be alarmed. I'll send word."

She might as well have thrown a brick at his head. *He's your enemy* and *I forbid you to sleep with that man* and *Please don't do this* crowded each other out. All he could manage was a nod. Cithrin must have seen something of it in his eyes, because she put her hand on his arm and squeezed gently before she went back inside.

Marcus walked back down the street toward the house, then stopped, turned, and headed for the port instead. The sun, lazily down toward the horizon, pressed on his right cheek like a hand. Near the port, the traffic on the streets thickened. Someone had started putting up streamers of thread, the knots hung from windows and trees, the trailing ends blowing in the breeze like the tentacles of a jellyfish. The street puppeteers were staking out corners and public squares, sitting at them even when they weren't performing. The ships from Narinisle might not arrive for weeks, but the celebration was already being prepared.

The smell of the port itself was brine and fish guts. Marcus threaded his way past sailors and longshoremen, beggars and queensmen, to the wide square just past the final dock. Two taphouses and a public bath pressed for attention at the edges of the square, bright cloth banners and bored-looking women in too little cloth. At the farthest edge, a crowd stood enthralled around a theater cart. Master Kit wore a flowing robe of scarlet and gold and a wire-worked crown. He held Sandr's unmoving body in his arms, a thin trickle of red-tinted water dripping down the boy's flank.

"How? How have I let this be? Oh Errison, Errison my son! My only son!" Master Kit called out, his voice breaking carefully so that all the words were still clear, and then slipped gracefully into verse. "I swear, dear boy, and heed this call! By dragon's blood and bones of God, Alysor house shall fall!"

Kit froze then, and a moment later, applause rang out. Marcus shifted forward through the crowd as Cary and Smit took the stage, Smit in a mockup of steel armor made from felt and tin and Cary in a tight black dress that had clearly been cut for Opal. Marcus watched through the long final act as the ancient rivalry between noble houses slaughtered first the guilty and then the innocent, mothers killing their daughters, fathers falling to poisons meant for their sons, and the world in general crashing in until at last Master Kit stood alone, all the other players lying at his feet, and wept. By the time the company rose, grinning to take their bows and gather the coins thrown to them, Marcus's mind was almost back in order.

As the company broke down the stage, Marcus walked to the back. Master Kit had changed back to his more customary clothes and was leaning against the seawall and wiping his face with a soft cloth. He smiled when he saw Marcus.

"Captain! Good to see you. What did you think of the show?"

"Convinced me," he said.

"I'm glad to hear it. Horner! Watch the line there. No, the one you're standing on!"

Horner danced to the side, and Master Kit shook his head.

"Some days I'm amazed that boy hasn't broken his leg getting up from his bedroll," Kit said.

"Cary's getting better."

"I think she's more comfortable now. By the end of the season I expect she'll have all Opal's old roles in place. I'm still hoping to find a girl to replace Cary, though. I can put Smit in fancy dress and high voice, but I'm afraid it gives the tragic scenes a somewhat lighter tone."

"Any luck?"

"Some," Kit said. "I've talked with a couple of girls who might be good. One's more talented, but she lies. I find that being a good companion on the road is more important than being a good

player on the stage. Theater craft is something I think I can teach. How to be a decent person seems to be a harder thing.”

Marcus sat, his back to the wall. In the west, the sun had fallen behind the roofs, but the clouds overhead still glowed gold and orange. Kit took a last swipe at his eyes and tucked the cloth into his belt.

“There’s a tavern just the other side of the wall,” Master Kit said. “We’re staying in the back free of charge every night we play one of the comedies. We’re on our way back there now, if you’d care to join us.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Master Kit folded his arms. Concern showed in his eyes.

“Captain? All’s well with the bank, I hope? Everything I’ve heard suggests that our girl is doing quite well.”

“People keep bringing her money,” Marcus said.

“That’s what we’d hoped for, isn’t it?”

“Is.”

“And yet?”

Marcus squinted toward the bathhouse. Two Kurtadam men were shouting at each other, gesticulating toward the house, their words running over each other. A gangly Tralgu girl ambled by, watching them.

“I need a favor,” Marcus said.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’d like you to tell me again how this is her mistake to make. And that I shouldn’t be trying to strap padding to every sharp edge she runs at.”

“Ah,” Master Kit said.

“She’s playing at higher stakes than she knows,” Marcus said, “and against people who have decades of experience. And...”

“And?”

Marcus ran his hand through his hair.

“She’s wrapped herself in it. She doesn’t have any idea how much of herself she’s putting into this scheme. When it falls out from under her... I want to stop it now. Before she gets hurt.”

“I hear you saying that you want to protect her.”

“I don’t,” Marcus said. And then a moment later, “I do. And I have a poor record protecting women. So I want you to tell me that I shouldn’t be trying to.”

“Why not take this to Yardem? He knows you better than I do, I expect.”

“I know what he’s going to say. I even know the tone of voice he’s going to say it in. No point going through those motions.”

“But you think you’d believe me?”

“You’re persuasive.”

Master Kit chuckled and squatted down beside him. Cary shouted, and the actor hauled the stage up on its hinges, the wooden planks transforming from floorboards to the side of a tall cart. Sandr went to harness the mules. The salt breeze stilled for a moment, then shifted, cool against Marcus’s cheek. The clouds greyed, losing the sunlight. It wouldn’t be long before the taverns and brothels and bathhouses all hung out their colored lanterns, trying to draw coins and customers the way they drew moths. The queensmen would be out. And Cithrin. Marcus tried not to think what Cithrin would be doing.

Slowly, he laid out everything to the actor. Cithrin’s business plans, her ambitions for the bank and the escort fleet, her courting a relationship with her half-Jasuru rival. Master Kit listened carefully, and when Marcus ran out of words, he pursed his lips and looked up at the darkening sky.

“I’ll say this, Captain, because it’s true. I believe that Cithrin has all the tools and talents she needs to make this work. If she pays attention, uses her best judgment, and gets only a little bit lucky,

she can do this.”

“*Can* is a lovely thing. Do you think she *will*?”

Master Kit was silent for four long breaths together. When he spoke, his tone was melancholy.

“Probably not.”

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Cithrin

Cithrin lay in the darkness. Qahuar lay beside her, the slow deep rhythm of his breath barely audible under the chorus of crickets singing outside the window. The bedding beneath her, around her, was softer than skin and still damp with sweat.

She'd thought that the first time was supposed to hurt, but it hadn't. She wondered how many of the other things she'd heard about sex were wrong. If she'd been raised by a mother, there might have been someone to ask. Still, for someone who hadn't had any clear idea what she was doing, the experiment seemed to have been a success. Qahuar had been drunk enough to abandon his discretion, and she'd followed his lead. A few kisses, a few caresses, and then he'd lifted off her dress, laid her back on his bed, and she'd had to do very little from there. The business of thrusting and grunting had been intimate and absurd, but she found herself thinking of him a bit more fondly afterward. Perhaps the bond that sex made grew from that combination of shared indulgence and indignity.

Still, she was pleased that he was asleep. She was sober now, and between the excitement of the evening and her present sobriety, she had no illusions that rest would come to her. If he'd been awake, trying to maintain a conversation or play the host, it would only have been awkward. Better that he should snore and embrace his pillow and leave her free to think.

If the spring shipping had gone quickly, if the blue-water trade was a bit early, if a hundred things that neither she nor anyone in the city had any way of knowing had happened, the first ships from Narinisle might arrive tomorrow. Or it might be weeks, as much as a month, before the traders knew what their fortunes were. The reports of the captains would carry the last information she needed—the activity of the pirates, the state of the northern ports, the possibility of civil war in Northcoast or of further military action from Antea. The governor would be expecting her proposal shortly after that.

She imagined the auditor arriving. Maybe Komme Medean himself. She would greet him with a smile and lead him up to her rooms. Or perhaps it would be at the café. That would be even better. The milk-eyed Maestro Asanpur would lead him back into the private room, and she would rise from her table to greet him. She'd have the books ready, the accounting made. She imagined him as an old man with fierce eyes and wide hands.

He would look over her statements, her contracts, and his expression would soften. The confusion and rage would wash away, leaving admiration behind. Had she really done so well with the bank's money? Had she really saved it all, and more besides? In the darkness, she practiced raising her eyebrow just so.

"It was nothing," she said, softly but aloud.

She would take the box from beneath her chair with her annual report and her contribution to the holding company. He would look it over, nodding. And then, when everything had been made whole, only then would she bring out the agreement with the governor of Porte Oliva, and hand over the keys to the southern trade. She imagined his hands trembling as he saw the brilliance of all she'd done. A half-breed girl with no parents, and she had managed this. *But only*, she'd say, *only if my branch is accepted*.

"The Porte Oliva bank is *mine*," she said, and then in the low, rough voice of her imaginary auditor, "Of course, Magistra."

She grinned. It was a pretty thought. And truly, why not? She'd been the one who kept the wealth of Vanai from being captured by the city's prince or the Anteans. She'd been the one to

protect it. Once she'd proven that she could manage the bank, why wouldn't the holding company leave her in place? She'd have earned her bank and the life that went with it. The auditor would see that. Komme Medean would see it. She could do this.

Some tiny, invisible insect crawled over her hand and she brushed it away. Her rival and lover muttered something, shifting. She smiled at his sleeping back, the rough texture of his skin. She would be almost sorry to beat him out. But only almost.

As if from a previous life, Yarden Hane's landslide of a voice spoke in her memory. *There's no such thing as a woman's natural weapon.* She saw now that it wasn't true.

When she slipped out of bed, he didn't stir. In the darkness, her clothes were lost somewhere in a tangle on the brickwork floor. She didn't want to risk waking him, so when she found the tunic he'd tossed aside, she pulled it over her head. It reached as far as her thighs. Close enough. She trotted to the corner of the room, her fingers brushing the floor until she found it: a leather thong and brass key that Qahuar Em always wore next to his skin.

Well. Almost always.

The bricks were cool against the soles of her feet, and the sound of her footsteps was as near to silence as made no distinction. The compound was near the port, the rooms small and close, but arrayed around a small courtyard garden. The four servants were full-blooded Jasuru, and of them, only the door slave stayed in his place through the night. Qahuar Em might be the voice of a great Lyoneian clan, but space was expensive in Porte Oliva, and having a more lavish home than the local nobles was a kind of boasting that would serve him poorly. Cithrin turned a corner in the darkness and counted three doors on her left. The third was oak bound in iron. She found the keyhole and carefully put the stolen key in. When she turned it, the clack of the mechanism sounded as loud as a shout. Her heart raced, but no one raised the alarm. She opened the door and slipped into Qahuar's private office.

The shutters were closed and barred, but once she'd undone them, the light of the quarter moon was enough to make out the general shapes of things. There was a writing desk. A strongbox bolted to the floor. A latticework holder, filled with scrolls and folded letters. A hooded lantern with rings of carved flint and worked steel on a string. Cithrin struck sparks to the wick, then quickly closed and barred the shutters. What had been shadows and silhouettes sprang to life in shades of dim orange and grey. The strongbox was locked, and the key to the office wouldn't fit it. The writing desk was bare apart from a thumb-sized bottle of green ink and a metal stylus. She went to the scrolls and letters, moving quickly, methodically from one to the next, being sure to keep each stack in order and put them back precisely as they were.

She was aware of the anxiety pressing at her gut and the rapid beat of her heart, and she pushed it all aside. She would let herself feel again later, when there was time. A letter from the governor thanking Qahuar for his gift. The chocolate had been exquisite, and the governor's wife especially extended her gratitude. Cithrin put the letter back. An unfurled scroll listed the names and relationships of several dozen people, none of whom meant anything to her. She put it back.

Outside the shuttered window, a salt thrush sang. Cithrin ran her fingers through her hair. Something in this had to be of use. Somewhere in the papers, Qahuar would have said something that told something of what his offer to the governor would be. She reached for another letter, and her arm brushed the lantern. Glass and metal shifted, teetered, and she grabbed it. A second more and it would have fallen. Shattered. Lit the room on fire. Cithrin put it carefully in the middle of the writing desk and went back to her search with trembling hands.

Hours seemed to pass before she found it. A long scroll of fine cotton. The lines of cipher were spaced widely enough that Qahuar had been able to write the message beneath them. Cithrin ran her fingertips along his words. It had been written by an elder of the clan, and it was everything Cithrin had hoped to discover. They could commit fifteen ships to the effort. Each would be manned with a full crew of two dozen sailors. She kept on reading, her fingers making a soft hushing against the cloth. In compensation, they would ask sixteen hundredths of every transaction in each port for ships

accompanied and protected, or nineteen if they asked the clan to guarantee. The elder estimated the initial outlay at two thousand silver, with a profit to the clan of five hundred in a season. The agreement would have to be for a full decade.

Magister Imaniel had often talked about the tools of memory. Ink was best, but writing the figures down and sneaking them out of the house was a risk she didn't have to take. Fifteen ships of two dozen men.

"At the age of fifteen, she'd had two dozen men," Cithrin said to herself.

Sixteen hundredths without guarantee, or nineteen with. So the guarantee was worth three.

"Sixteen for the company, and three more for love."

Two thousand to begin, with an estimated profit of five hundred each year of a ten-year agreement.

"She gave two thousand kisses, took five hundred back, and died alone ten years after that."

There were more details in the scroll—the specifications of the ships, the names of individual captains, the routes the trade would be encouraged to take—and she read as much of it as she could, but at the base, she had what she needed.

She put the scroll back where it had been, then put the lantern in its place and blew the flame out. Used to the light as she'd become, the darkness seemed absolute. The smell of spent wick was acrid and sharp. She closed her eyes and, tracing fingers along the wall, found her way to the door. She slipped into the corridor, turned the lock, and, almost skipping, went back to Qahuar's sleeping chamber. She put the key in the corner where she'd found it, stripped off the tunic, and slipped quickly back into bed.

Qahuar murmured and reached out an arm to drape over her belly.

"You're cold," he said, the words thick.

"I'll be warm soon," she said, and felt his smile as much as she saw it. He nuzzled against her, and she tried to let herself relax into him. She closed her eyes and repeated her rhyme in the privacy of her mind.

At the age of fifteen, she'd had two dozen men, sixteen for company and three more for love. She gave two thousand kisses, took five hundred back, and died alone ten years after that.

"Well, you look exhausted," Captain Wester said, leaning against the wall beside the pot of tulips where the old gambler's caller used to stand. "I was starting to think we'd have to put together a raiding party, take you back by force."

"I told you I wouldn't be back," Cithrin said, walking past him toward her private entrance. He followed her as if she'd invited him.

"You're supposed to be meeting with that woman from the needlemakers' guild at midday. She's likely on her way to that coffee house right now. Unless you're planing to wear that same dress—"

"I can't see her," Cithrin said, walking up the stairs. She heard his footsteps falter, then hurry to catch up. When he spoke, his voice was careful and polite. It sounded like he was talking from half a mile away.

"Do you want to give her a reason?"

"Send someone. Tell her I'm ill."

"All right."

Cithrin sat down on her divan, scowling up at the man. His arms were crossed over his chest, his mouth pinched. He wasn't really much older than Qahuar Em. Cithrin pulled off one of her shoes and massaged her foot. The sole was filthy. Her dress hung from her as if the cloth itself was exhausted and sweating.

"I didn't sleep," she said. "I can't help her anyway."

"If you say so," Wester said, nodding curtly. He turned to leave, and her sudden rush of distress flooded her. She hadn't known how badly she didn't want to be alone.

"Did everything go well while I was gone?" she said, her voice tripping out of her.

Wester stopped at the head of the stairs.

"Went fine," he said.

"Are you angry with me, Captain?"

"No," he said. "I'm going to go tell the needlemakers' woman that you're too ill to see her. I take it we'll send her a note when you're feeling better?"

Cithrin pulled off her other shoe and nodded. Wester went down the stairs. The door clacked closed behind him. Cithrin lay back. The night had been everything she'd hoped, but the first blue light of dawn had left her exhausted. Her body felt limp and shaky the way it had all those nights with the caravan when sleep had escaped her. She'd convinced herself that those days were over, but she'd been wrong. And now, say it or not, Wester was angry, and she was surprised how much his disapproval stung.

She thought of calling him back, of explaining that she'd allowed herself to be seduced for a reason. That going to Qahuar Em's bed had only been a ploy. The more she rehearsed the words, the worse they sounded. Voices rose up from the floor beneath her. The guards that Wester had hired. From the sound, they were playing at dice. Her spine ached. Someone below her shouted in dismay, and others groaned along in sympathy. She closed her eyes, hoping that being back in her own rooms would relax her enough that she could rest. Instead, her mind jumped and hopped, faster and faster, like a ball rolling down an infinite hill.

Fifteen ships could be split into three equal groups of five or else five of three, so perhaps Qahuar's clan was expecting the merchant ships to divide into three major ports—likely Carse, Lasport, and Asinport. But what if they were expecting the trade to go on past Asterilhold to Antea or Sarakal or Hallskar? Two dozen men in a single ship wasn't a small thing, but would Lyoniean sailors do well in the colder waters of the north? Could she argue, with her ties to Carse, that she'd be able to provide ships more experienced in the native waters? And if she made the argument, would it be true?

And why had Opal betrayed her? And why had God let Magister Imaniel die? And Cam? And her parents? And did Sandr still want her? Would Cary still be her friend? Did Master Kit still approve of who and what she was? What did other people do when they had no friends and their lovers were their enemies? There had to be some better way to do things.

The tears welled up in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. She didn't feel sad. She barely felt anything at all besides tired and annoyed with herself. She was suffering some sort of little fit, and she could wait until it passed. The dice game shifted, and two men's voices caught up a tune, coming together and apart.

Cithrin forced herself to sitting. Then standing. Then she stripped off last night's clothes and put on a simple skirt and blouse. She tied back her hair until she saw the little bite marks that Qahuar had left on her neck and let her hair back down. She filled the little basin by her bedside, washed her face. The paints Cary had left were there, and Cithrin considered remaking Magistra Cithrin of the Medean bank. She decided against it—she had little enough energy as it was—and went downstairs.

When she opened the door, the company went quiet. The two Firstblood men looked at each other and then away. The paler of them was blushing visibly. The Kurtadam man nodded.

"Sorry about that, Magistra," he said. "Didn't think you were here."

Cithrin waved the concern away.

"Yardem?" she said.

"In the back room, Magistra," the Kurtadam said.

Cithrin walked past the guards to the rear, then through into the darkness. Yardem Hane lay on a long, low cot, fingers laced over his belly. His eyes were closed, his ears folded and soft. Cithrin was just about to turn around, putting the conversation off for another time, when he spoke.

"Help you, ma'am?"

"Um. Yes. Yardem," she said. "You know the captain as well as anybody."

"That's true," the Tralgu said, his eyes still closed and his voice calm.

"I think I may have upset him," she said.

"You wouldn't be the first, ma'am. If it gets to be a problem, the captain will tell you."

"All right."

"Anything else, ma'am?"

The Tralgu didn't move apart from the ride and fall of his chest.

"I slept with a man, and now I'm going to betray him," she said, and her voice sounded as grey and hard as slate. "I have to do it to keep my bank, but I think I feel guilty about it."

Yardem opened one soft black eye.

"I forgive you," the Tralgu said.

Cithrin nodded. She shut the door behind her when she left, then walked back out the street and up her private stair. The voices below her were quiet now, aware that the owner of the house might hear them. She sat at her writing desk, took out the books, and began drafting the proposal that would beat out Qahuar Em.

Geder

Geder couldn't say exactly when they left the dragon's road. At first, it was only that wind and weather had heaped dirt and desert hardpack over the path, even as it passed through a few of the sprawling caravanserais that passed for cities in the Keshet. Then the last of the great meeting places fell away behind him, and the jade of the roadway became rarer, the brown of the earth and yellow-grey of desert grass more common. Then the path was only visible as a stretch where the scrub and weeds were smaller, their roots blocked inches from the surface.

And then it was gone, and Geder was riding through the mountains and valleys at the eastern edge of the world. The trees were thin and twisting, with thick, almost ropey bark that seemed designed to imitate stone. At night, tiny lizards with bright yellow tails skittered across the ground and through the tents. Morning often found one or more dead in the horses' feed sacks. Water became scarce enough that every muddy wisp of a creek meant his five servants would fill everything that would hold moisture, and even so Geder often saw their supply fall to less than half. Every night, he heard the servants talking about bandits and unclean spirits that haunted the empty places in the world. Even though no new dangers appeared, he slept poorly.

Geder had spent most of his life within the limits of Antea. Travel had meant the journey from Rivenhalm to Camnipol, or along the king's winter hunt to Kavinpol, Sevenpol, Estinport. He'd been Kaltfel, royal city of Asterilhold, once as a boy to watch an obscure relation be married. And he had gone on campaign to Vanai under Lord Ternigan, and then Sir Alan Klin. He'd never imagined himself traveling alone or nearly so in lands so barren and cut off that the local villagers had never heard of Antea or the Severed Throne. But when he came to a stand of shacks clumped around a thin, hungry-looking lake, the wary men who came out to meet him shook their heads and shrugged.

He could as well have told them he'd come from the stars or the deep lands under the earth. It would have meant as much, and possibly more. The mountains' inhabitants were Firstblood, but of a uniform olive complexion with dark eyes and thick wiry hair that made them seem like members of a single extended family. Some few knew the civilized languages well enough to trade with the outposts, but for the greater part they spoke in a local patois that Geder could almost put together from some of the ancient books he'd read. He felt he'd ridden into the dim past.

"Sinir," Geder said. "Are these the Sinir mountains?"

The young man looked over his shoulder at the dozen men who had come from the village and licked his lips.

"Not here," the man said. "East."

On the one hand, everyone he met in the empty, ragged mountains seemed to recognize the word, to know what he meant when he asked. On the other, the Sinir mountains had been just a bit to the east for almost two weeks now, retreating before him like a mirage. The thin, dusty paths snaked through the valleys or along the sides of steep, rocky slopes. They were little more than deer trails, and more than once Geder had found himself wondering if he'd left behind all human habitation, only to find another small, desperate village around the next turning.

"Can you show me?" Geder asked. "Can one of your men take me there? I'll pay you with copper."

Not that copper would have any effect on these people. Coins meant nothing here more than small, particularly bright stones would have done. His black leather cloak would have more use out here, but he didn't want to part with it, and besides, no one he'd met since he left the Keshet for the

unmarked lands had shown the slightest interest in his offers. He asked out of habit. Because he had always asked before. He had no real hope that they would accept the bargain.

“Why do you want to go there?” the young man asked.

“I’m looking for something,” Geder said. “An old place. Very old. It has to do with the dragons.”

The man licked his lips again, hesitated, and nodded.

“I know the place you mean,” he said. “Stay here tonight, and I can take you in the morning.”

“Really?”

“You want the old temple, yes? Where the holy men live?”

Geder leaned back. It was the first he had heard about a temple or priests, and his heart sped up. There were stories and references in several of the essays on the fall of the Dragon Empire that talked about pods of sleeping dragons lulled into a permanent sleep and hidden in the far corners of the world. This might be a hidden pod of books, scrolls, legends, and tradition. If he could convince the local priest class to let him read the books, or buy copies... He tried to think what he had to offer for trade.

“Prince?”

“What?” Geder said. “Oh, yes. Yes, the old temple. That’s where I’d like to go. Do we have to wait for morning? We could go now.”

“Morning, sir,” the young man said. “You stay with us tonight.”

The village boasted two dozen wooden shacks clustered together in a stand of ash. Perhaps a hundred people lived in the dry, quiet squalor. In the high air above them, hawks called and glided, spiraling up toward the sun. Geder had his squire put his tent beside the lakeshore just outside the radius of the village with each of the servants set to keep watch for a part of the night. Not that five servants would be enough to defend him if the locals turned ugly, but if a little warning was the most he could get, he’d take that.

At sunset, an old woman came to his camp with a bowl of mashed roots with bits of cooked meat in it. He thanked her, gave her a few of his remaining copper coins, and then buried the food without eating a bite. The heat of the day poured up out of the ground, and the chill night air came off the water. Geder lay on his cot, his mind perfectly awake and restless. The long, slow dread waiting for sleep had become the hardest part of his day. The poor food, the mind-killing monotony of the trail, the profound loneliness all grated on him, yes, but in the quiet moments between lying down in the darkness and actual forgetfulness, all the things he was running from seemed to catch up with him.

He imagined what might have happened back in Camnipol. The conspiracy behind the attempted coup might have been rooted out, hung in the streets. That would have been the best hope. Or maybe another wave of hired swords had come and slaughtered half the court. He wondered whether Jorey Kalliam’s father had given him the same advice that Geder had taken. What part of the world would Jorey have gone to, if he were avoiding the upheaval?

Geder imagined coming home to a kingdom utterly changed. What if Asterilhold had paid the mercenaries as the first strike of a comprehensive invasion? When Geder turned toward home, there might be no Antea, no Severed Throne, no Rivenhalm. His father might be dead even now.

Or Klin and his men might have come into favor again. Geder pictured himself riding through the eastern gate only to find guards at the ready to arrest him and throw him into the public gaol. He stood on a platform, looking out over a sea of seared, burned faces—Vanai, killed at his order—before he realized that he was finally slipping down into dream.

In the morning, the dreams faded and his servants brought him a double handful of dried apples and a tin cup of water. Half a dozen men had congregated at a trailhead. A low cart squatted beside them, loaded with baskets of dried beans and three freshly slaughtered goats. Offerings, apparently, for the temple. The oldest of the men clapped his hands fast and loud, and the others grabbed thick ropes, pulling the cart across the thin dirt. Geder followed on horseback, the only man in the company riding.

The trail they followed snaked through the hills, clinging to the sides of crevasses and cliffs. The stone itself changed, becoming more jagged and sharp, as if centuries of erosion had failed to soften it. Geder found himself speculating about the relationship of the landscape to the dragon's roads. Could the same endurance also have been given to the broken land here? Was this what marked the Sinir mountains from those around them?

The shapes of some stones was peculiarly organic. There were soft, almost graceful curves, and places where the stones seemed to fit together, articulated like bones. In one meadow they passed through, a collection of curved terraces was marked by borders of a pale, porous rock that matched neither the arid desert stones Geder had become used to nor the new, uneven geography. The effect was as if a giant had died there, leaving its ribs in a jumble on the land. Geder looked up and saw the skull.

The broad forehead alone was as long as his horse. He could have crouched inside the empty eye sockets. The muzzle disappeared into the earth, as if the fallen dragon were drinking from the land itself, and five blade-long teeth still clung to the jaw. Centuries of fierce sunlight had bleached the bone, but wind, sand, and rain hadn't worn it down. Geder pulled his mount to a halt, gaping. The villagers kept hauling their cart, talking to each other, trading a skin of water among them. Geder dismounted and walked to the skull. He hesitated, reached out a hand, and touched the sun-warmed dragon bone. The corpse had lain here for thousands of years. Since before humanity had begun its history.

"Prince?" the young man from the village called. "Come! Come!"

Trembling, Geder lifted himself back into the saddle and trotted along.

The sun hadn't shifted more than a hand's span when the group made a final turn around a high stand of scattered boulders each as large as a sailing ship, and the temple came into view. Carved into the stone of the mountain, the dark holes of doorways and windows stared out into the landscape. Geder had the brief sensation of being stared at by a single, huge insectile eye. A wall as tall as the defenses of Camnipol marked the end of the trail. Huge, towering statues of what had once been human figures were set into the stone along the wall like sentries, their features eroded into knobs and stumps, and a huge spread-winged dragon towered above them all. Great banners shifted in the breeze, one at each of the thirteen statues. Each was a field of a different color—blue, green, yellow, orange, red, brown, black, through thirteen distinct shades—with a pale circle in the center cut by four lines into eight sections.

Its sigil was of cardinal and intercardinal showing the eight directions of the world in which no falsehood could hide. The sign of the Righteous Servant. Tears leapt to Geder's eyes, and something like relief flooded him. Triumph, perhaps. This was the place. He'd found it.

They drew nearer, and the longer it took, the more Geder understood the breathtaking scale of the place. A huge iron gate hung at the front of the wall, imposing and forbidding. Above it, in a brutal script, were the words *Khinir Kicgnam Bat*, each letter as tall as a man. Geder squinted up at them, struggling to make his translation while still half drunk with wonder.

Bound is not broken.

The villagers brought their cart to a stop still fifty yards from the great iron doors. Geder saw now that a section within the door itself was set with a complex of swirling gears. The interlocked teeth clanked once, shifted, and the section of iron parted like a curtain. Six men walked out toward them. They had the same general features as the villagers, though with more roundness to their cheeks and oil sleeking their hair. They wore black robes tied with lengths of chain at the waist and sandals that wrapped their ankles. The men of the village knelt. Geder bowed, but didn't dismount. His horse shifted uneasily beneath him.

The priests looked at one another, then turned to the young man who had led the group.

"Who is this?" the eldest of the priests asked.

"A stranger," the young man said. "He came asking after the Sinir. We brought him to you, the way the Kleron told us."

Geder urged his horse closer. The grandness of the place had made the beast skittish, but he held the reins tightly. The eldest priest stepped toward him.

"Who are you?" the monk asked.

"Geder Palliako, son of the Viscount Palliako of Rivenhalm."

"I don't know this place."

"I'm a subject of King Simeon of Antea," Geder said. And then when the priest stayed silent, "Antea's a very important kingdom. Empire, really. Center of Firstblood culture and power."

"Why have you come here?"

"Well," Geder said, "that's a long story. I was in Vanai. That's one of the Free Cities, or, really it was. It's gone now. But I found some books, and they were talking about this... Ah... They called it the Righteous Servant or the Sinir Kushku, and it was supposed to have been designed by the dragon Morade during the fall of the empire, and I thought that if I could use the different descriptions of where it was compared with the times when the accounts were made I might be able to... find it."

The priest frowned up at him.

"Have you heard of the Righteous Servant?" Geder asked. "By any chance?"

He wondered what he would do if the man said no. He couldn't bring himself to ride back out. Not after seeing this.

"We are the servants of the Servant," the man said. His voice was rich with pride and certainty.

"That's excellent. That's just what I'd hoped! May I..." Geder's words tumbled over themselves, and he had to stop, cough, and collect himself. "I was hoping, if you have archives... Or if I could speak with you. Find out more."

"You will wait here," the priest said.

Geder nodded, but the man had already turned away. The priests were pulling the cart in through the gap in the iron gate, the village men retrieving another much like it. As Geder watched, the priests vanished into their temple, and the other men, waving at him and smiling, went away down the trail, returning to their homes. Geder stayed where he was, caught between the desire to see the temple behind the wall and the fear of being left alone and unable to find his way back through the mountains. The gears in the gate ground themselves closed. The rope-drawn cart vanished around the stones. Geder sat on his horse, trying not to look at the five servants he'd dragged across the known world and into this emptiness. In the distance, a hawk shrieked.

"Should we set up camp, my lord?" his squire asked.

Night fell. Geder sat in his tent, the walls murmuring to themselves in the breeze. At his little desk, by the light of a single candle, he read the books he'd already read ten times over, his eyes taking in the words without the meanings.

The sense of disappointment, of rejection, of rage were slowly building in his belly with the growing certainty that they weren't going to come out. He'd been left to sit on the doorstep like a beggar until he took the hint and limped away. Back to Camnipol, back to Antea, back to all of the things he'd come from.

He was at his journey's end. He couldn't even pretend a reason to push onward. He had crossed two nations, mountains, deserts, only to be snubbed at the end. He turned a page, not knowing what had been on it, and not particularly caring. He imagined himself at home, telling the tale. The Jasuru seer, the dragon bones, the mysterious hidden temple. *And then*, they would say. *What then, Lord Palliako?*

And he would lie. He would tell about the degenerate priests and their pathetic, empty cult. He'd write essays detailing whatever perversions came to mind, and ascribe all of them to the temple. If it hadn't been for him, for Geder Palliako, the place would have been utterly lost to history. If they saw fit to treat him this way, he could see that they were remembered any way he saw fit.

And the priests would neither know nor care, so where was the pleasure in that? The morning would come, he would have the tent loaded, and he'd begin the trip back. Perhaps he could find a

merchant in one of the cities of the Keshet who would accept a letter of credit and buy some decent provisions. Or stop at the village and tell them the priests had instructed them to give him their goats. That would be almost worth doing.

“My lord! My lord Palliako!”

Geder was out of the tent almost before he heard the words. This squire was pointing at the dark iron gate. The small side door was still closed, but a deeper shadow had formed between the two massive panels, a line of darkness.

A man came out, walking toward them. Then two more, with blades strapped to their backs. Geder waved his and his servants hurried to light the torches. The first man was huge, broad across hips and shoulders. His hair was gone, and the expanse of his scalp glowed in the moonlight. In the torchlight, his robe looked black, though in truth it could have been any dark color. The guards behind him wore the same robes as the priests had before, but of finer cloth, and undrawn swords with hilts and scabbards of iridescent green.

“Are you Prince Palliako who has come to learn of Sinir Kushku?” the large man asked. Though he spoke softly, his voice had the weight of thunder behind it. Geder felt his blood shift in his veins at the sound.

“I am.”

“What do you offer in return?”

I don't have anything, Geder thought. A cart, some servants. Most of my silver was spent on the way here, and what do you have to buy with it anyway? It isn't as if any of you were going to the market fair...

“News?” Geder said. “I can give you reports about the world. Since you're so... remote.”

“And do you mean the goddess harm?”

“Not at all,” Geder said, surprised by the question. None of the books he'd read had mentioned a goddess.

The big man paused, his attention turning inward for a moment. He nodded.

“Come with me, then, Prince, and let us speak of your world.”

Dawson

Summer in Osterling Fells. Dawson rose with the sun and spent his days riding through his lands, tending to the work that his winter business and the intrigues of the spring had left undone. The canals that fed the southern fields needed to be remade. One of the villages in the west had burned late in the spring, and Dawson saw to the rebuilding. Two men had been found trapping deer in his forest, and he attended the hanging. Where he went, his landbound subjects offered him honor, and he accepted it as his due.

Along the roads, the grass grew higher. The trees spread their broad leaves, shimmering green and silver in the breezes and sunlight. Two days from east to west, four from north to south, with mountain tracks to hunt, his own bed to sleep in, and a bowl of perfect blue skies above him. Dawson Kalliam could hardly imagine a more luxurious prison to waste his weeks in while the kingdom crumbled.

The holding itself buzzed with activity. The men and women of the holding were no more accustomed to the presence of the lord during the long days of summer than they were to his absence during the winter months not taken up by the King's Hunt. Dawson felt the weight of their consideration. Everyone knew that he had been exiled for the season, and no doubt the servants' quarters and the stables were alive with stories, speculation, and gossip.

Resenting that made as much sense as being angry at crickets for singing. They were low, small people. They understood nothing that wasn't put on the table before them. Dawson had no reason to treat their opinions of the greater world with more regard than he would a raindrop or a twig on a tree.

Canl Daskellin, on the other hand, he had expected better of.

"Another letter, dear?" Clara asked as he paced the length of the long gallery.

"He's telling me nothing. Listen to this," Dawson said, shaking the pages. He found the passage. *"His majesty remains in poor health. His physicians suspect the weight of the mercenary riot is weighing on him, but expect he will be much improved by the winter. Or this. Lord Maas has been most aggressive in his defense of Lord Issandrian's good character, and is making the most of having escaped censure.* It's all like this. Provocations and hints."

Clara put down her needlework. The heat of the afternoon left a beading of sweat across her brow and upper lip, and a lock of her hair had come free of its dressing. Her dress was thin summer cloth that did little to hide the shape of her body, softer than a young woman's and more at ease with itself. In the golden light spilling through the windows, she looked beautiful.

"What did you expect, love?" she asked. "Direct talk, plainly stated?"

"He might as well not have written," Dawson said.

"You know that isn't true, love," Clara said. "Even if Canl isn't giving you all the details of the court, the fact that he's corresponding means something. You can always judge a person by who they write to. Have you heard from Jorey?"

Dawson sat on the divan across from her. At the far end of the gallery, a servant girl stepped through the doorway, saw the lord and lady in the room, and backed out again.

"I had a letter from him ten days ago," Dawson said. "He says everyone in court is walking quietly and speaking low. Nobody thinks this is over. Simeon was due to name Prince Aster's ward at his naming day, but he's postponed it three times now."

"Why would he do that?" Clara asked.

"The same reason he exiled *me* for Issandrian's treasons," Dawson said. "If he favors us, he's afraid they will take up arms. If he favors them, then we'll do it. And with Canl calling the tunes, I can't say he's wrong to think it."

"I could go and ask Phelia," Clara said. "Her husband's been put in roughly the same position as Canl, hasn't he? And Phelia and I haven't seen each other in ages. It would be good to talk with her again."

"Absolutely not. Send you into Camnipol alone? To Feldin Maas? It wouldn't be safe. I forbid it."

"I wouldn't be alone. Jorey would be there, and I'd take Vincen Coe to keep me safe."

"No."

"Dawson. Love," Clara said, and her voice had taken on a hardness he rarely heard from her. "I let you stop me when there were foreign mercenaries in the streets, but that's passed. And if someone doesn't reach out, the breach will never be healed. Simeon can't do it, poor bear, because it isn't something that can be commanded. You and Feldin can't because you're men and you don't know how. The way this happens is you draw your swords, and we talk about who wore the most fetching dress at the ball until you put them back in their scabbards. Just because you don't feel comfortable with it doesn't mean it's difficult."

"We've gone past that now," Dawson said.

Clara lifted an eyebrow. The silence lasted three heartbeats. Four.

"You need to raise your army, then, don't you?" she said.

"It's forbidden. Part of my season of exile."

"Well, then," Clara said, picking her needlework back up. "I'll write to Phelia this evening and let her know I'd be open to an invitation."

"Clara—"

"You're quite right. I wouldn't dream of going without escort. Would you like to speak with Vincen Coe, or shall I?"

The anger that leapt up in Dawson surprised him. He rose to his feet, throwing the pages of Canl Daskellin's letter to the floor. He badly wanted to take some book or bauble or chair and throw it out the gallery window and into the courtyard. Clara's eyes were on her work, the thin glimmer of the needle piercing the cloth and drawing through, piercing and drawing. Her mouth was set.

"Simeon is my king too," she said. "Yours isn't the only noble blood in this house."

"I'll talk to him," Dawson muttered, forcing the words out through a narrowed throat.

"I'm sorry, dear. What did you say?"

"Coe. I'll talk to Coe. But if he doesn't go with you, you aren't going."

Clara smiled.

"Send my maid to me when you go, dear. I'll have her fetch my pen."

The huntsman's quarters were outside the great granite-and-jade walls of the holding. A long, low building, the roof's thatching laced down by long ropes of woven leather and weighted by the skulls and bones of fallen prey. The courtyard had weeds growing at the sides where the boots of men didn't trample them down and baled hay targets for the archers to practice against. The air stank of dog shit from the adjoining kennels, and a huge shade tree arched above the building's side, snowy with midsummer blooms.

Voices led Dawson to the back of the building. Five of his huntsmen stood or sat around the table of an ancient stump, raw cheese and fresh bread on the wood. They were young men, stripped to their hose in the heat. Dawson felt a moment's deep nostalgia. Once he'd been much like them. Strong, sure of his body, and able to lose himself in the joys of a warm day. And when he had been, Simeon had been at his side. The years had robbed them both.

One caught sight of him and leapt to his feet in salute. The others quickly followed. Vincen Coe was in the back, his left eye swollen and dark. Dawson strode over to them, ignoring all but the wounded man.

“Coe,” he said. “With me.”

“My lord,” the huntsman said, and hurried to Dawson’s side. Dawson walked fast down the wide track that led from the holding down toward the pond to the north. The shadows of the spiraling towers striped the land.

“What happened to you?” Dawson said. “You look like you tried to catch a rock with your eyelids.”

“Nothing of importance, lord.”

“Tell me.”

“We drank a bit too much last night, lord. One of the new boys got a bit merry and... made a suggestion I found offensive. He repeated it, and I found myself moved to correct him.”

“He called you a catamite?”

“No, my lord.”

“What, then?”

In spring, before the start of the court season, the pond was clear as water from a stream. In autumn, after Dawson’s return from court, it could be as dark as tea. He’d rarely seen it in the height of summer, the green of the water building on the reflections of the trees to make something almost emerald. Half a dozen ducks made their way across the water, their wakes spreading out behind them. Dawson stood at the edge where the grass had the dampness of mud beneath it. Vincen Coe’s uncomfortable silence became more interesting with every passing breath.

“I could ask the others,” Dawson said. “They’ll tell me if you won’t.”

Vincen looked out over water to the distant mountains.

“He impugned the honor of Lady Kalliam, my lord. And made some speculations that...”

“Ah,” Dawson said. Sour rage haunted the back of his mouth. “Is he still here?”

“No, my lord. His brothers carried him back to his village last night.”

“Carried him?”

“I didn’t leave him in fit state to walk, sir.”

Dawson chuckled. Flies danced across the water before him.

“She’s going back to Camnipol,” Dawson said. “She has the idea that she can make peace with Maas.”

The young huntsman nodded once, but didn’t speak.

“Say it,” Dawson said.

“With permission, sir. That’s not wise. It’s hardest drawing blood the first time, and that’s already happened. It only gets easier.”

“I know it, but she’s determined.”

“Send me instead.”

“I’m sending you in addition,” Dawson said. “Jorey’s still in the city. He can give you a better picture of where things stand. You protected me when this all started. I need you to protect her now.”

The two men stood together. Voices came from behind them. The kennel master shouting to his apprentice. The laughter of the huntsmen. It all seemed to come from another world. One not so far in the past when things had been better and safer and still right.

“Nothing will hurt her, my lord,” Vincen Coe said. “Not while I live.”

Three days after Clara left, riding off in the open carriage that had brought them with Vincen Coe riding close behind, the unwelcome guest arrived.

The heat of the day had driven Dawson out of the holding proper and into the winter garden. Out of its season, it looked plain. The flowers that would offer up blooms of gold and vermillion in the falling days of the year looked like tough green weeds now. Three of his dogs lay panting in the heat, dark eyes closed and pink tongues lolling out. The glasshouse stood open. Closed, it would have been hotter than an oven. The garden slept, waiting for its time, and when that time came, it would transform itself.

By then, Clara would have returned. He had spent time away from her, of course. He had court business and the hunt. She had her circle and the management of the household. And yet when she left him behind, the solitude was harder to bear gracefully. He woke in the mornings wondering where she was. He lay down at night wishing she would walk in through the dressing room door, alive with news and insight and simple inane gossip. Between the two moments, he tried not to think of her, or of Feldin Maas, or the possibility of her being used somehow against him.

“Lord Kalliam.”

The servant was a young Dartinae girl, new to his service. Her eyes burned in the manner of her race.

“What is it?”

“A man’s come asking audience, my lord. Paerin Clark, sir.”

“Don’t know him,” Dawson said, but half a breath later, he did. The pale banker, agent of Northcoast, and seducer of Canl Daskellin. Dawson stood. At his feet, the dogs sat up, looking from him to the servant girl and back while they whined softly. “Is he alone?”

The girl’s eyes widened, suddenly anxious.

“He has a retinue, my lord. A driver and footmen. And I think his private man.”

“Where is he now?”

“In the lesser hall, my lord.”

“Tell him I’ll see him in a moment,” Dawson said. “Bring him ale and bread, put his men in the servants’ hall, and then get me my guard.”

The pale man looked up when the doors of the lesser hall swung open and stood when Dawson entered. That Dawson had four swordsmen in hunting leathers behind him didn’t so much as raise the man’s eyebrows. The bread on the plate before him had a single bite taken from it, the pewter ale tankard might not have been touched.

“Baron Osterling,” the banker said with a bow. “Thank you for seeing me. I apologize for arriving unannounced.”

“Are you running Canl Daskellin’s errands now, or he running yours?”

“I’m running his. The situation in the court is delicate. He wanted you informed, but he doesn’t trust couriers and some things he wouldn’t want written in his hand regardless.”

“And so he sends the puppet master of Northcoast?”

The banker paused. The faintest touch of color came to his skin, and the polite smile he always wore.

“My lord, without giving offense, there are one or two points it might be best if we clarified. I am a subject of Northcoast, but I am not a member of its court, and I am not here at the bidding of my king. I represent the Medean bank and only the Medean bank.”

“A spy without a kingdom, then. So much the worse.”

“I apologize, my lord,” the banker said. “I see I am not welcome. Please forgive the trespass.”

Paerin Clark bowed deeply and started toward the door, taking the court and Camnipol with him. *Just because you don’t feel comfortable with it doesn’t mean it’s difficult*, Clara said in his memory.

“Wait,” Dawson said, and took a deep breath. “Who’s wearing the prettiest dress at the twice-damned ball?”

“Excuse me?”

“You came for a reason,” Dawson said. “Don’t be such a coward you abandon it the first time someone barks at you. Sit. Tell me what you have to tell.”

Paerin Clark came and sat. His eyes seemed darker now, his face as blank as a man at cards.

“It isn’t you,” Dawson said, sitting across the table and ripping off a crust of the bread. “Not as a man. It’s what you are.”

“I’m the man Komme Medean sends when there’s a problem,” Paerin Clark said. “No more, no less.”

“You’re an agent of chaos,” Dawson said, softly, trying to pull the sting from the words. “You’re a man who makes poor men rich and rich men poor. Rank and order mean nothing to men like you, and they mean everything to men like me. It isn’t you I disdain. It’s only what you are.”

The banker laced his fingers across his knee.

“Will you hear my news, my lord? Despite what you think I am?”

“I will.”

For the better part of an hour, the banker spoke in a low voice, detailing the slow landslide that was happening in Camnipol. As Dawson had suspected, Simeon’s unwillingness to commit his son as the ward of any house came from the fear of making waves. The respect for his kingship was failing on all sides. Daskellin and his remaining allies offered what support they could, but even within the ranks of the faithful, unease was growing. Issandrian and Klin remained in exile, but Feldin Maas was everywhere in the city. It seemed as if the man never slept, and wherever he went, the story he told was the same: the attack of the show fighters had been rigged to throw disgrace on Curtin Issandrian in order that the prince not be sent to his house. The implication was that the convenient appearance of the soldiers from Vanai had been part of a great theater piece.

“Arranged by me,” Dawson said.

“Not you alone, but yes.”

“Lies, beginning to end,” Dawson said.

“Not everyone believes it. But some do.”

Dawson rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. Outside, the day was leaning toward night, the sunlight reddening. It was all as he suspected. And Clara was riding into the center of it. The hope she’d offered before she’d left had sounded risky at the time. After this report, it seemed merely naïve. He would have given his hand to have had the banker come a week earlier. Now it was too late. He could as well wish a thrown rock back into his hand.

“Simeon?” Dawson asked. “Is he well?”

“The hard times wear on him,” Paerin Clark said. “And, I think, on his son.”

“I think it isn’t death that kills us,” Dawson said. “I think it’s fear. And Asterilhold?”

“My sources tell me that Maas is in contact with several important men in the court there. There have been loans of gold, and promises of support.”

“He’s raising an army.”

“He is.”

“And Canl?”

“He’s trying to, yes.”

“How long before it comes down to the field?”

“No one can know that, my lord. If you’re careful and lucky, maybe never.”

“I can’t think that’s true,” Dawson said. “We have Asterilhold on one hand and you on the other.”

“No, my lord,” the banker said, “you don’t. We both know I came hoping for advantage, but an Antean civil war won’t profit us. If it does come to pass, we won’t take a side. I’ve done what I can here. I won’t be going back to Camnipol.”

Dawson sat up straighter. The banker was smiling now, and it looked suspiciously like pity.

“You’ve abandoned Daskellin? Now?”

“This is one of the great kingdoms of the world,” Paerin Clark said, “but my employer plays his games on larger boards than that. I wish you the best of luck, but Antea is yours to lose. Not mine. I’m traveling south.”

“South? What’s more important than this in the south?”

“There’s an irregularity that needs my attention in Porte Oliva.”

Cithrin

Cithrin stood at the top of the seawall, the city spread out behind her and the vast blue of sea and sky ahead. At the edge where the pale, shallow water of the bay turned to deep blue, five ships stood. The towering masts were trees rising from the water. The furled sails thickened the spars. The small, shallow boats of the fishing fleet were rushing into port or else out of the traffic as dozens of guide boats raced out, fighting to be the first to reach the ships and take the honor of guiding them in.

The trade ships from Narinisle had arrived. Five ships, arriving together and flying the banners of Birancour and Porte Oliva. When they had left, there had been seven. The other two might have become separated by storm or choice or scattered in an attack. They might arrive the next day or the next week or never. On the docks below her, merchants waited in agonies of hope and fear, waiting for the ships to come near enough to identify. And then, once the ships were in their berths, the fortunate among the sponsors would board, compare contracts and bills of lading, and discover whether profits were assured. The unfortunate would wait on the docks or in the port taprooms, digging at the sailors for news.

And then, once the captains of the ships had answered their sponsors, once the laborers had begun the long business of hauling the goods from ship to warehouse, once the frenzy of trade and goods and the exchange of coin had passed over Porte Oliva like a wind across the water, it would be time to begin the preparation for the next year's journey. Shipyards would make repairs. The new sponsors would offer contracts and terms to the captains. And Idderrigo Bellind Siden, Prime Governor of Porte Oliva, would consult with the captains and the masters of the guilds, and graciously accept the proposals to change this from one port city among many to the center of trade for a generation to come.

And in her hand, written in green ink on paper as smooth as poured cream, was the letter that forbade her from being part of any of it. She opened it now and considered it again. It was ciphered, of course, but she had spent long enough with Magister Imaniel's books and papers that she could read it as clearly as if it had been in a normal script.

Magistra Cithrin bel Sarcour, you are to cease all negotiation and trade in our name immediately. Paerin Clark, a senior auditor and representative of the holding company, will attend you as soon as can be arranged. Until that time, no further contracts, deposits, or loans are to be made or accepted. This is unconditional.

It was signed by Komme Medean himself, the old man's script jagged and shaking from gout. She had shown it to no one. In the eight days since it had come, she'd wrestled with the order. It was the first she'd ever had from the holding company, and precisely what she'd expected. The auditor would come, just as she'd planned at the start. He would recover the bank's funds, lost from Vanai. All her daydreams of keeping the bank alive, or steering it the way the guide boats were now preparing to lead the trade ships to safety, would end. She would be herself again. Not Tag the Carter, not a smuggler hiding in the shadows, and not Magistra Cithrin. Only without Besel and Cam and Magister Imaniel. Without Vanai.

And so, with respect, she preferred not to.

With a soft breath too slight to call itself a sigh, she ripped the page. Then again, and again, and again. When the pieces were as small as individual numbers and symbols of the cipher, she threw them over the edge of the seawall and watched them spin and flutter.

On the water, the guide boats were crowded around the trade ships. She imagined the voices of the men shouting up to the captains, the captains shouting back. As she watched, the first of the ships began the short, final leg of its annual journey. She turned away and walked back to her bank. The front door stood open to the breeze. As she walked through, Roach jumped to his feet as if she'd caught him doing something. Behind him, Yadem stretched and yawned hugely.

"Where have you been?" Captain Wester said.

"Watching the trade ships arrive, just the same as everyone else in the city," she said. She felt unaccountably light. Almost giddy.

"Well, your coffee brewer sent three people on from the café so far this morning asking after you. They came looking here."

"What did you tell them?"

"That you were busy, but I expected you'd be back in the café after midday," Wester said. "Was I lying?"

"You? Never," she said, and laughed at the suspicion on his face.

Despite the heat, Cithrin wore a dark blue dress with full sleeves and a high collar to the meeting at the governor's palace. Her hair was tucked into a soft cap and pinned in place with a silver-and-lapis hairpin that was from the last of the jewelry she had hauled from Vanai. It would have been more appropriate for a cool day in autumn and left a trickle of sweat running down her back, but the thought of something more revealing in front of Qahuar Em seemed uncomfortable. And of course wearing the necklace or brooch that he'd given her would have been inappropriate.

When he greeted her in the passageway outside the private rooms, his bow was formal. Only the angle of his smile and the merriment in his dark eyes gave a hint of their nights together. He wore a sand-colored tunic with black enameled buttons to the neck, and she found herself aware of the shape of his body beneath it. She wondered, now that they weren't to be rivals any longer, what would become of the attachment. The servant, a pale-haired Cinnae woman, bowed as they went through the doorway.

A single dark-stained table dominated the room, a bank of windows behind it looking out into the branches of a tree. The shifting branches gave the room a sense of shadow and cool that it didn't deserve. The Cinnae mercenary rose to his feet as Cithrin stepped into the room and sat again when she did. The Tralgu woman and the representative of the local merchant houses didn't attend.

"Good year," the Cinnae man said. "Have you been down to the ships, Magistra?"

"I haven't had the opportunity," Cithrin said. "My schedule's been remarkably full."

"You should make the time. There were boxes of the most fascinating baubles this year. Little globes of colored glass that chime when you rub them. Quite lovely. I bought three for my granddaughter."

"I hope the world has been treating you gently, sir," Qahuar Em said. His voice was almost sharp. *Why would he be angry?* she wondered.

"Quite well," the Cinnae said, ignoring the tone. "Quite excellently well, thank you."

The private door slid open and the governor stepped in. His round face was sweat-sheened, but cheerful. When they began to rise, he waved them back to their seats.

"No need for ceremony," he said, easing himself into his own chair. "Can I offer any of you something to drink?"

Qahuar Em shook his head, the Cinnae mercenary doing the same half a moment later as if he'd been waiting to see what Qahuar would do. Cithrin's belly tightened in warning. Something was going on that she didn't understand.

"Thank you both for coming," the governor said. "I very much appreciate the work you have all done, and your dedication to Porte Oliva, to me, and to the queen. I am excited to have such excellent minds turning toward the welfare of the city. This is always the most difficult part, isn't it? Making the decision?"

His wistful sigh said he was enjoying himself. Cithrin answered with a tight smile. Qahuar wasn't meeting her eyes.

"I have been over the proposals very carefully," the governor said. "Either of them would have been, I think, an excellent pathway to the prosperity of the city. But I think the flexibility of the five-year contract offered by the gentlemen here present would better serve than the eight that the Medean bank requires."

Cithrin felt her breath leave her. Despite the heat, something cold settled into her throat and breast. Qahuar Em hadn't been offering five years. It had been ten.

"Eight years is a very long time," the Cinnae mercenary said, nodding slowly. His grave expression was a poor mask for his pleasure.

"Between that and the somewhat higher annual fees," the governor said, "I am very sorry to turn away your proposal, Magistra Cithrin."

"I quite understand," Cithrin said as if someone else were speaking. "Now that it's settled, might I enquire what rates Master Em offered?"

"Oh, it's a partnership," the Cinnae said. "Not just his clan, you know. We're in this together, he and I."

"I can't think that there's need to go into the details," Qahuar Em said, still not looking at her. His attempts to spare her more humiliation were worse than the mercenary's gloating.

"It isn't as though it won't be known," the governor said. "Out of courtesy and respect, Magistra, the fees asked were ten hundredths without guarantee or fourteen with."

The wrong numbers. They were the wrong numbers. It was supposed to be sixteen and nineteen, not ten and fourteen. The offer she'd found in his office had been a trap, and she had fallen into it.

"Thank you, my Lord Governor," Cithrin said with a nod. "The holding company will very much appreciate your candor."

"There will be no acrimony, I hope," the governor said. "The Medean bank is new to our city, but very much honored."

"None at all," Cithrin said. Given the hollowness in her chest, she was surprised the words didn't echo. This couldn't be happening. "Thank you very much for the courtesy of meeting with me. But I assume you gentlemen have details to discuss."

They all rose when she did, the governor taking her hand in his greasy fingers and pressing it to his lips. She kept her smile amused and world-wise in defeat, a mask of who she wished she had been. She bowed to the Cinnae mercenary and then to Qahuar Em. The emptiness in her shifted, and something painful bloomed in its place.

She walked carefully from the room, down the stairs, and out through the entrance hall to the square beyond. The sky was an opalescent white, the breeze hot as breath against her cheek. The sweat dampened her armpits, her back, her legs. She stood for a few minutes, confused and stunned. She wasn't supposed to be here. She needed to get back inside. There were details she needed to work out, contracts to be signed and witnessed. There was the great project to be done. She wasn't supposed to be out here. She should be inside.

The first sob was like retching: sudden, reflexive, and violent. *Not here*, she thought. *Oh, God, if it's going to happen, don't let it happen here where the whole damned city can watch.* Long, fast strides, her thighs pulling against the fabric of her dress to gain every inch. She reached the maze of streets. She found an alleyway, followed its turns and windings to a shadowed corner, and squatted there on the filthy paving stones. She couldn't stop the sobs now, so she pressed her arm against her mouth to keep them quiet.

She'd lost. All of her expectations, all of her plans, and she'd lost. They'd given her contract to someone else, and left her a stupid, ugly half-breed slut crying herself dry in an alley. How had she thought she could win? How could she ever have believed?

When the worst had passed, she stood again. She wiped the tears and snot on her sleeve, wiped the grime off her dress, and began the walk to her rooms. Humiliation rose on her shoulders and

whispered in her ear. How much did Qahuar tell his partners? Did he brag about getting her legs apart? That old Cinnae mercenary had likely had every part of her flesh described to him before she'd walked into the room. Qahuar had known everything she'd done before she did it, planned it. Had his servants been warned not to interfere with her late-night invasion of his office? Had they been watching from the shadows, laughing at the idiot girl who thought herself clever?

At the bank, she heard the voices of the guards—Marcus and Yardem and the new Kurtadam woman—through the door, neither angry nor laughing. The tulips bobbed in the breeze, their petals broken and splayed, the red turning black at the base. She wanted to go in, but her hand would not reach for the latch. She stood for what seemed like hours, willing herself to go in to the nearest thing she had to friends or family or love. Her employees. She wanted Yardem Hane to come out and find her. For Cary to come walking down the street. For Opal to rise from her ocean grave and choke her to death where she stood.

Cithrin went upstairs. She stripped off her dress and sat on the bed in her shift. Her sweat wouldn't dry, wouldn't cool her.

She'd lost. Even now, it didn't make sense. She couldn't quite bring herself to believe it. She'd lost. The weeping was gone now. The pain was gone, though she had the sense that it was only resting, sleeping like a hunting cat after a kill. It would be back. For the moment, she felt nothing. She felt dead.

She'd lost. And the auditor was coming.

The sun traced its arc through the high air. Cithrin sat. The sounds of the street changed, the heat-dazed traffic of the day slowly giving way to the brighter, more energetic voices of evening. She needed to piss, but she put it off. Impossible to think there was any moisture left in her after soaking in sweat and tears. And still, her body performed its functions whether she approved or not. When the urging became too much to ignore, she found her night pot and used it. Once she was in motion, it was easier to move. She pulled off her shift, leaving it puddled on the floor, and found a light, embroidered dress, more attractive because it was already in her hands. She pulled it on, walked down the stairs and out into the street without bothering to lock the door behind her.

The taproom had all the shutters open, the sea breeze passing through it. No candles or lanterns were lit to keep even that slight additional heat away, so the rooms were dim despite the sunlight. The servant girl was one she recognized, thick-faced with night-black hair down to her shoulder blades. A tiny dog pranced nervously around the girl's ankles. Cithrin walked toward the back table, her table. Someone was there, half hidden by the rough cloth.

Qahuar Em.

Cithrin forced herself to walk forward. She sat across from him. A loose shutter clapped against its frame twice and went quiet. The man's expression was mild and rueful. A half-empty tankard of ale rested on the table.

"Good evening."

She didn't answer. He clicked his tongue against his teeth.

"I was hoping I might offer you a meal, a bottle of wine. An apology. It was unkind of the governor to bring you in that way."

"I don't want anything from you," she said.

"Cithrin—"

"I don't want sight or sound of you ever again for as long as I live," she said, each word cool and sharp and deliberate. "And if you come near me, I will ask my captain of guard to kill you. And he'd do it."

Qahuar's expression hardened.

"I see. I admit I am disappointed, Magistra. I'd thought better of you."

"*You'd thought better of me?*"

"Yes. I hadn't imagined you the sort of woman to throw tantrums. But clearly I've misjudged. I would remind you that you were the one who put yourself in my bed. You are the one who crept

through my halls. It's mean and small of you to blame me for anticipating it."

You don't know what this was, Cithrin thought. You don't know what it meant for me. They're going to take away my bank.

Qahuar stood and placed three small coins on the table to pay the taproom. The light caught the roughness of his bronze skin, making him look older. This summer was her eighteenth solstice. It was his thirty-fifth.

"We're traders, Magistra," he said. "I very much apologize that the delivery of the news was unpleasant, but I cannot be sorry that I can take this agreement to my clan elders. I hope you have a more pleasant evening."

He pushed back the bench, wood rasping against the stone floor, and stepped around her.

"Qahuar," she said sharply.

He paused. She gathered herself. The words were cast in lead, almost too heavy to pull up her throat.

"I'm sorry I betrayed you," she said. "Tried to betray you."

"Don't be," he said. "It's the game we play."

Some time later, the taproom's servant came, took up the coins, and cleared away Qahuar Em's drink. Cithrin looked up at her.

"Your usual?"

Cithrin shook her head. Everything from her throat down to her belly felt solid as stone. She lifted her hand, surprised to find her soft cap still there. She pulled it off, let down her hair, and held the silver-and-lapis pin up. It seemed almost to glow with its own light in the gloom. The servant girl blinked at it.

"That's very beautiful," she said.

"Take it," Cithrin said. "Bring me what you think it's worth."

"Magistra?"

"Fortified wine. Farmer's beer. I don't care. Just bring it."

Geder

The high priest—Basrahip or possibly *the* Basrahip, it was hard to tell—leaned back on his leather-and-iron stool. His thick, powerful fingers rubbed at his forehead. Around them, the candles flickered and hissed, their smoke filling the room with the smell of burning fat. Geder licked his lips.

“My first tutor was a Tralgu,” he said.

Basrahip pursed his lips, considered Geder, and shook his wide head. *No*. Geder swallowed his delight and tried again.

“I learned to swim at the seashore.”

The broad head shook slowly. *No*.

“I had a favorite dog when I was young. A hunting beast named Mo.”

The high priest’s smile was beatific. His teeth seemed almost unnaturally wide. He pointed a thick finger at Geder’s chest.

“Yes,” he said.

Geder clapped his hands and laughed. It wasn’t the first time the high priest had made the demonstration, but it was always a source of amazement. No matter what the lie, no matter what voice Geder told it in, how he held his body or changed the pitch of his voice, the huge man knew which words were false and which true. He never guessed incorrectly.

“And it’s really a goddess that lets you do this?” Geder said. “Because I never came across a reference to that. The Righteous Servant was supposed to have been something Morade created, like the thirteen races and the dragon’s roads.”

“No. We were here before the dragons. When the great web was strung and the stars hung upon it, the goddess was present. The Sinir Kushku is her gift to the faithful. When the great collapse came, the dragons were fearful of her power. They fought against each other, each wishing the friendship and patronage of the Sinir Kushku for himself. The great Morade pretended an alliance, but the goddess knew when treachery came into his heart. She guided us here, where we might be safe, far from the world and its struggles, to wait until the time came for our return.”

“This is totally unlike any account I ever read,” Geder said.

“Do you doubt me?” Basrahip asked, his voice low and gentle and with the strange throbbing that seemed to inflect all his speech.

“Not at all,” Geder said. “I’m amazed! A whole era before the dragons? It’s something no one has written about. Not that I’ve ever seen.”

Outside the small stone room, the stars glittered in the sky and the crescent moon lit the cascade of stones. In the darkness, Geder could almost imagine the great stone dragon above the temple wall moving, turning its head. The odd green crickets that infested the temple sang in shuddering chorus. Geder wrapped his arms around his legs, grinning.

“I cannot tell you how pleased I am that I found this place,” Geder said.

“You are an honored man of a great nation,” the high priest said. “I am pleased that you have come so far to find our humble temple.”

Geder waved the comment away, embarrassed. It had taken the better part of a day to explain that, while he was nobility, *prince* was a particular title where he came from, and couldn’t be applied so widely. He’d spent most of his life being called *lord* and *my lord*, and even though it meant the same thing, *honored man of a great nation* left him self-conscious.

Basrahip rose and stretched as, in the distance, a harsh voice screeched out the call to night prayer. Gerder expected Basrahip to make his excuses and hurry out to lead the priests in their rituals. Instead, he paused in the doorway, candles casting shadows over his eyes.

"Tell me, Lord Geder. What was it you most hoped to find here?"

"Well, I wanted to see if I could find the Sinir mountains and some source material about the Righteous Servant for a speculative essay I'm drafting up."

"This is what you *most* hoped to find?"

"Yes," Geder said. "It is."

"And now that you have found it, it will be enough?"

"Of course," Geder said.

The big man's gaze locked on him, and Geder felt a blush rising in his neck and cheeks. Basrahip waited for what seemed half a day, then shook his head.

"No," he said gently. "No, there is something else."

The days since Geder's arrival at the temple had been astounding and rich and unnerving as a dream. For two full days from morning until nightfall, he had stood in the great court between the temple itself and the gated wall. A dozen pale-robed priests with long hair and full beards sat around him as he drew maps and tried to summarize centuries of history. Often when they asked questions of him, he had to admit his ignorance. How had the borders of Asterilhold and Northcoast been set? Who claimed the islands south of Birancour and west of Lyoneia? Why were the Firstblood centered in Antea, the Cinnae in Princip C'Annaldé, and the Timzinae in Ellassae when Tralgu and Dartinae had no particular homeland? Why were the Timzinae called *bugs*, the Kurtadam *clickers*, and the Jasuru *pennies*? What names were the Firstblood known by, and by whom were they hated?

They seemed particularly intrigued by the Timzinae. Geder prided himself on knowing a great deal. Having his limits exposed was humbling, but the thirst the olive-skinned men had for every scrap of information made it bearable. Every story and anecdote he gave them, they were fascinated by.

He found himself telling them his own past. His life as a boy in Rivenhalm. His father and the court in Camnipol. The Vanai campaign and how it ended and the mercenary attack on Camnipol, traveling the Keshet.

When the sun grew too hot to bear, the priests brought out a huge half-tent of stretched leather and wide wooden beams that shaded Geder and rose behind him like a gigantic hand. They hauled out wide-mouthed ceramic pots of damp sand that kept the buried gourds of water cool. Geder chewed lengths of dried goat meat spiced with salt and cinnamon, talking until his throat was hoarse. They stopped as the sun slid behind the peaks, answering the harsh, barking call. Geder's servants made camp for him there and slept on the ground beside him. And then, on the third day when he was certain his voice would fail him, Basrahip—the Basrahip—came to him and motioned that he should follow. The huge man led him up stone stairways worked smooth as glass by generations of leather-shod feet, through the wide passage as much cave mouth as corridor.

He had expected carved stone, but Geder didn't see any sign that the halls had been touched by hammer and chisel. They might have grown this way, as if the mountains had known they would be home to these men. Lanterns of paper and parchment sat in alcoves and spilled their light over the floors and across the curved ceilings. The air smelled rich with something Geder couldn't quite identify, part manure and part spice. The air was so hot it stifled. He trotted through the twists and turns until the passage widened and the high priest stepped aside.

The great chamber was taller than twenty men standing one atop the other. The ceiling was lost in darkness more profound than night. And towering above them, the carved statue of a huge spider covered in beaten gold and lit by a hundred torches. Fifty men at least knelt at its base, all of them turned toward Geder, their hands folded on their shoulders. Geder stood, his mouth slack. No king in the world could boast a grander spectacle.

"The goddess," Basrahip had said, and his voice had echoed through the space, filling it. "Mistress of truth and unbroken ruler of the world. We are blessed by her presence."

Geder barely noticed when the huge man's hand touched his shoulder and began to press him gently but implacably down. When he knelt, it seemed like the obvious thing to do.

After that, he was taken to new quarters within the temple walls. Many of the doors and windows he'd seen when he first came went no deeper than a single room, or at most two, the priests' cells clinging to the side of the mountain. Geder's squire brought him a basin to bathe in, his books, and the small traveling desk, and lit his lantern. He lay in the darkness that night, a thin wool blanket around him, and sleep a day's ride away. He was too excited to sleep. His only disappointment was that the temple had no library.

On the fourth morning, Basrahip came again, and their conversation began, and it had continued every day since.

"I don't understand why you stay hidden."

"Don't you?" Basrahip said.

They were walking down the thin brick-paved path that led to the temple's well.

"The Righteous Servant," Geder said. "It's something that you all have. If you were in the world, you could tell whenever a merchant was lying about his costs. Or when your men were unfaithful. And life in court. God, what you could do there."

"And that is why we stay hidden," Basrahip said. "When we have involved ourselves in the affairs of the world, we have seen the rewards of it. Blades and fire. Those who have not been touched by the goddess live lives of deceit. For them, to hear our voices is to die as the people they were. Her enemies are many, and ruthless."

Geder kicked at a pebble, sending it skittering down ahead of them. The sunlight pressed down on his face and shoulders.

"But you are going to go back out," Geder said. "You said that you were waiting for the time to go back out."

"We will," the high priest said. They reached the edge of the well, a stone-lined hole in the earth with a rope tied to the stake sunk deep beside it. "When we are forgotten."

"That could be any time in the last century," Geder said, but the high priest went on as if he hadn't spoken.

"When the wounds of the old war are healed and we can walk the world without fear, She will send us a sign. She will sort clean from unclean, and end the age of lies."

Basrahip squatted, taking the rope in his hands and hauling, hand over hand, until it came up wet. The bucket had been copper once, given over now to verdigris. Basrahip tipped it up to his lips and drank, rivulets falling from the corner of his mouth. Geder shifted uncomfortably beside him. The high priest put the bucket down and wiped the back of his hand across his lips.

"Are you troubled, Lord?"

"I'm... It's nothing."

The wide smile was cool. The dark eyes considered him.

"Listen to me, Lord Palliako. Listen to my voice. You can trust me."

"I'm only... Could I have a drink of that water too?"

Basrahip lifted the bucket up to him. Geder took it in both hands, drinking slowly. The water was cool and tasted of stone and metal. He handed it back, and Basrahip held it out over the blackness for a moment before he let it drop. The rope slithered as it sped back down. The splash was louder than Geder had expected.

"You can trust me," the high priest said again.

"I know," Geder said.

"You can tell me. Nothing bad will come of it."

"Tell you what? I mean, I'm not sure what you're saying."

"Yes you are," the man said, and started back toward the temple. Geder trotted to keep up. "Why did you come looking for the Sinir Kushku? What was it that drew you here?"

"You mean..."

"Through the ages, other men have found us here. Stumbled upon us. You came *seeking*. What was it that led you here?"

Two of the younger priests passed them, heading toward the well. Geder cracked his knuckles and frowned. He tried to remember what had started him. When was the first time he'd heard the legend? But perhaps that in itself didn't matter.

"Everywhere I turn," he said, the words coming slowly, "it seems like things are lies. I don't know who my friends are, not really. I don't know who gave me Vanai. Or who in Camnipol would want me killed. Everything in court seems like a game, and I'm the only one who doesn't know the rules."

"You are not a man of deceit."

"No. I am. I have been. I've lied and hidden things. I know how easy it is."

Basrahip stopped, leaning against a boulder. The wide face was impassive. Almost serene. Geder crossed his arms. A stirring of anger warmed his chest.

"I've been a token in everyone else's game," Geder said. "My whole life, I've been the one they tricked into sitting on sawn boards over the shit hole. I've been the one they laughed at. They burned my book. Alan Klin burned my *book*."

"Did that bring you here?"

"Yes. No. I mean, when I was a boy, I used to tell myself stories like the old histories. Where I led an army into a doomed battle and won. Or saved the queen. Or went to the underworld and pulled my mother back from the dead. And every time I've gone into the world, it's disappointed me. Do you know what that's like?"

"I do," the high priest said. "You didn't come here to write an essay, Lord Geder. You came here to find us. To find me."

Geder felt his mouth in a grim, hard scowl.

"I did," he said. "Because I want to know the truth. Because I am sick to death of wondering. All the lies and deceptions and games that everyone plays around me? I want to be the one man who can cut it away and find the truth. And so I heard about the end of all doubt."

"Would knowing alone be enough? Would it bring you peace?"

"It would," Geder said.

Basrahip paused, listening. A fly whined around them, landed on the big man's wide head to drink his sweat, and flew away again.

"It wouldn't," Basrahip said, hauling himself back to his feet. "That isn't what you want. But you are coming closer, Lord Geder. Much closer."

I heard them talking," one of his servants whispered. "They're going to kill us all in our sleep."

Geder sat in the darkness of his cell. The whispers were supposed to be quiet enough to escape him. If he'd been back in his cot, they would have. Instead, he'd slipped out and padded across the dark floor on silent feet. His back was to the wall beside the doorway, his servants not seven feet away.

"Stop talking shit," his squire said. "You're just scaring yourself."

"I'm not," the first voice said again, higher and tighter this time. "You think they want people knowing where they are? You think they're at the ass end of the world because they want company?"

A third voice said something, but he couldn't make out the words.

"And let them," the first voice said. "What I heard, he burned down Vanai just because he could, and laughed while he did it."

"Keep talking about his lordship that way and it won't be these sand monkeys in priest robes that kill you," his squire's voice said. "I'll face down a hundred false gods before I cross him."

Geder hugged his knees closer. He expected to feel hurt, but the pain didn't come. Or anger. He rose to his feet, walking without any attempt to be quiet. He heard the silence of the servants outside his door, but he didn't care about them. Not what they thought, not what they were, not if they lived. He found his tunic and a pair of leggings and pulled them on in the darkness. He didn't bother trying to get the stays all tied. Modesty was preserved, and that was enough. Basrahip wouldn't mind.

When he walked out into the starlit dark, his servants were pretending to sleep. He stepped over them, walking the narrow path along the mountainside, the dirt cooling his feet and the stones biting them. In the first cell he reached where a monk slept, he shook the man awake.

"Take me to Basrahip," he said.

The high priest slept deeper in the temple. His rooms were dark, the pallet he slept on hardly big enough to accommodate him. The monk who'd brought Geder set down his candle and backed out of the room bowing. Basrahip tucked one massive leg under himself and sat up. He seemed perfectly alert. Geder cleared his throat.

"I've been thinking. About what you asked. I want to master the court. I want the men who used me to suffer," he said. "I want them to beg my forgiveness. I want them humiliated where the world can point at them and pity them and laugh."

The high priest didn't move, and then, slowly, he grinned. He lifted a massive finger and pointed it at Geder.

"Yes. Yes, that is what you want. And tell me this, my friend. My brother. Would that be enough?"

"It'll do for a start."

The high priest threw his head back and howled with laughter. As he grinned, his teeth shone white as ivory in the candlelight. He stood, wrapping his blanket around him, and Geder found himself grinning too. Saying the words, having them understood, was like taking a stone off his chest.

"I had hoped, Lord Geder," the high priest said. "From the moment I saw you—an honored man from a great kingdom—I *hoped* that this was the time. That you would be the sign the goddess sent, and you are. Brother Geder, you are. You have found your truth, and if you will honor it, so shall I."

"Honor it?"

"Camnipol. Your great city at the heart of your empire. Pledge her a temple there, a first temple in a new age free from lies and doubt. I will return with you myself, and through me..."

The huge man held out his hands, palms up. With the candle on the floor, it was as if he were offering handfuls of shadow. Geder couldn't stop grinning. He felt light and uncomplicated and alive in a way he hadn't since he'd scooped gems from frozen boxes half a year before.

"Through me," the high priest said, "she will give you what you want."

Clara Annalie Kalliam Baroness of Osterling Fells

My lady,” the Tralgu door slave said, bowing.

“Good morning, Andrash,” Clara said, stretching the kinks out of her back. “I can’t begin to tell you how good it is to be back in the city. I do love the holding in its own right, but it simply wasn’t built for the summer sun. Vincen will be... You remember Vincen? He’ll be seeing to the things we brought, if you could find someone to help him?”

“Yes, my lady. Your sons are, I believe, in the summer garden.”

“Sons?”

“Captain Barriath arrived some days ago,” the slave said.

“Jorey and Barriath in the same house. Well, *that* can’t have been pleasant.”

The door slave smiled.

“It is good to have you back, my lady.”

Clara patted the old man’s arm as she left the heat and warmth of their private square for the dim and cool of the mansion proper. She saw at once how things had slipped. The flowers in the hall vases were wilted. The floor had a layer of grit blown in by the wind and not yet washed away. The air was close and stuffy the way it got when the windows had stayed shut for too many days in a row. Jorey had been much too amiable with the house staff. Or else he was growing to be as oblivious as his dear father. Either way, something would have to be done.

She heard the boys’ voices before she reached the garden. Jorey’s voice was higher, shriller, more demanding. Barriath tended to spit his arguments as if they tasted bad. From the time Jorey had had words, the two had been like fire and rain to each other, but they were devoted to one another. Clara had had much the same relationship with her own sister. *No one can harm her but me, and I shall destroy her.* Love was so often like that.

At the steps down into the summer garden, she paused.

“Because it’s *simplicistic*, that’s why,” Jorey said. “There’s a hundred things happening, and they all tie into each other. Now that there isn’t going to be a farmer’s council, are we facing another grain revolt? If Northcoast’s really on the edge of another round of succession wars, will Asterilhold be distracted from us? Are the new Hallskari ship designs going to mean more piracy in Estinport and less in Tauendak? You can’t take everything like that and press it down into one thing. The world’s more complex than that.”

“There are fewer choices than you believe, brother,” Barriath said. “You won’t find someone against the farmers and supporting Asterilhold. If you want one, you take the other. No family will forbid mixing races and also trade with Borja. The king isn’t like a sculptor with a fresh stone, able to make whatever he sees fit. He’s like a man walking into a sculptor’s yard picking from what’s already there.”

“And you think the prince is the only way he can show his favor?”

“The only one that matters,” Barriath said. “If his majesty gave every favor and grant he has to Daskellin, and sent Aster to be the ward of Maas, he’d still be saying that in the long term, the kingdom will be shaped by Maas’s vision. That’s why Issandrian—”

“But if the king—”

The two voices intertwined, neither boy listening to other, and the threads of their arguments tangled into a single ugly knot. Clara stepped out into the garden and put her hands on her hips in feigned accusation.

"If this is how you greet your poor mother, I should have fostered you both with wolves," she said.

Her boys both grinned and came to embrace her. They were men now, strong-armed and smelling of musk and hair oil. It seemed like only the week before that she'd been able to take them in her arms. Then they started in again, talking over each other, only now the melee of words seemed to center on her and why she was there rather than the politics of the court. Clara beamed at them both and stepped down into the lush green and pale blooms of the summer garden. The fountain, at least, had been maintained, water splashing down the front of a contemplative if underdressed cast bronze Cinnae woman. Clara sat at the fountain's lip and began pulling off her traveling jacket.

"Your father, poor thing, is gnawing his foot off back at home, and as a favor to him and myself, I have come to keep up some semblance of normalcy. This idiotic bickering has cost me the better part of the season already, and I simply must see dear Phelia."

Jorey leaned against an ivied wall. Arms crossed and scowling, he looked like the image of his father. Barriath sat beside her and laughed.

"I have missed you. No other woman would call the first armed conflict on the streets of Camnipol in five generations idiotic bickering," he said.

"I am just as sorry as anyone about what happened to dear Lord Faskellin," Clara said, sharply. "But I defy you to call it anything besides idiotic."

"Peace, Mother, peace," Barriath said. "You're quite right, of course. It's only that no one else puts it that way."

"Well, I can't think why they don't," Clara said.

"Does Father know you're going to call on Maas?" Jorey asked.

"He does, and before you start, I am to be guarded the whole time, so please don't bother with the monster stories of Lord Maas and all the terrible thing he's like to do to me."

Her two boys looked at one another.

"Mother," Jorey began, and she cut him off with a wave of her hand. She turned pointedly to her eldest son.

"I assume you've taken leave from the fleet, Barriath dear. How is poor Lord Skestinin and that painted shrew he had the poor judgment to marry?"

The streets of the city were full and busy. Carriage wheels clattered over the cobblestones. In the market, butchers sold meat and bakers, bread. Petty criminals scooped shit out of the alleys and off the pavement, guarded by swordsmen wearing the king's colors if not precisely his livery. The cherry trees that lined the streets sported green fruit with real threats of red. Workmen hung out over the Division, repairing and maintaining the very bridges from which they were suspended. She had not thought it possible that a city could look as it had in better times, sound as it had, smell as it had, and still be bent double under the weight of fear. She had been wrong.

It showed in small things. Merchants too quick to laugh, altercations over precedence and right of way, and the stony expression common to everyone in the city when they thought no one was watching. Even the horses smelled something, their huge, liquid eyes a fraction too wide and their gait just barely skittish.

She'd chosen to take a sedan chair open on the sides with four bearers and Vincen Coe walking beside it. Something had happened to the poor man's eye just before they'd left Osterling Fells, and the bruise had started to seep yellow and green down his cheek. He wore boiled leather studded with steel and both sword and dagger. It was more than a huntsman would sport, and with the recent injury, he looked quite thuggish.

The mansion of Feldin Maas shared a private courtyard with House Issandrian. Both gates were of the same gaudy ironwork, the houses themselves painted and adorned in such rich profusion they seemed designed by a cake maker gone mad. Curtin Issandrian, of course, was exiled just as her Dawson was, and he had taken all his family and servants with him. Her uncle Mylus had suffered a

blow to the head when he was young and spent his life with half his face slack and empty. The square reminded Clara of him, all bustle and action on the left and empty as death on the right.

Phelia stood at the top of the front steps. Her dress was purple velvet with silver thread all along the sleeves and collar. It should have been beautiful on her. Clara gave her shawl to the footman and went up to Phelia. Her cousin took her hands and smiled tightly.

"Oh, Clara," Phelia said. "I can't say how much I've missed you. This has been the most awful year. Please, come in."

Clara nodded to the door slave. It wasn't the Dartinae woman she was used to seeing, but a severe-looking Jasuru man. He didn't nod back. She stepped into the relative cool of the Maas front hall.

"Hey! Stop, you!"

Clara turned, surprised to be addressed in so curt a fashion, only to see that the comment had been directed at Vincen Coe. The Jasuru man was on his feet, his palm against Vincen's chest. The huntsman had gone unnaturally still.

"He's with me," Clara said.

"No one goes in armed," the door slave growled.

"You can wait here, Vincen."

"All respect, my lady," the huntsman said, his gaze still fastened to the Jasuru, "but no."

Clara put a hand to her cheek. Phelia had gone pale, her hands flitting one way and another like birds.

"Leave your blades, then," Clara said. And then to her cousin, "I assume we can rely on the rules of hospitality?"

"Of course," Phelia said. "Yes, of course. Of course you can."

Vincen Coe stood silent for a moment. Clara had to agree that Phelia would have been more convincing if she hadn't said it three times over. Vincen's hands went to his belt, undid the clasp, and handed it with sword and dagger still sheathed to the door slave. The Jasuru took it and nodded him through.

"I believe you've lost weight since I saw you last," Clara said, walking at Phelia's side. "Are you feeling well?"

Her answering smile was so brittle it cracked at the sides.

"It's been so hard. Ever since the king sent away Curtin and Alan—and you, of course. Ever since then, it's all been so hard. Feldin hardly sleeps anymore. I wish all this had never happened."

"Men," Clara said, patting Phelia's arm. The woman shied away, and then, as if realizing she ought not, permitted the touch with a nod. "Dawson's been beside himself. Really, you'd think the world was ending from the way he chews at every scrap of gossip."

"I love the king and God knows I'm loyal to the throne," Phelia said, "but Simeon's handled this all so badly, hasn't he? A brawl goes out of hand, and he sends people into exile? It only makes everyone feel there's something terrible happening. There doesn't have to be."

She turned up a wide flight of well-polished black stairs. Clara followed her. From the end of the hall they were leaving, Clara heard men's voices raised in argument but couldn't make out the words. One of the voices was Feldin Maas, but while the other seemed familiar, she couldn't put a name to it. She caught Vincen Coe's eye and nodded him down the hall.

Go find what you can.

He shook his head once. *No.*

Clara lifted her eyebrows, but by then they'd reached the landing. Phelia ushered them into the wide sitting room.

"You can wait here," Clara said at the doorway.

"If you wish, my lady," Vincen Coe said, and turned to stand with his back to the wall like a guard at his duty and didn't show the vaguest hint of going back down the stairs to investigate. It was all quite vexing.

The sitting room had been redone in shades of red and gold since the last time Clara had seen it, but it still had the low divan by the window that she preferred. And, like a good hostess, Phelia had a pipe prepared for her. Clara plucked up the bone and hardwood bowl and tamped a bit of tobacco into it.

"I don't know what to do any longer," Phelia said, sitting on the divan. She was leaning forward with her hands clasped between her knees like a child. "I tell myself things aren't so terribly bad, but then I wake up in the dark of the night and I can't get back to sleep. Feldin's never there. He comes to bed with me, but as soon as I'm asleep he goes back to his letters and his meetings."

"These are hard times," Clara said. She lit the pipe from a thin silver candle set there for the purpose and drew in the smoke.

"Curtin was going to take the prince on as his ward, you know. But now that he's gone, everyone's been scrambling. I think... I think Feldin may be named. I may be helping to raise a prince." Phelia giggled. "Can you imagine me raising a prince?"

"Aster's a boy," Clara said. "I've had three of them. One doesn't raise boys so much as try to keep fragile things out of their reach."

"Men aren't any different," Phelia said. "They never think about what might break."

Clara sucked on the stem of the pipe and blew out a cloud of sweet grey smoke before she spoke.

"That is the issue, isn't it? We have a problem, and it's spilled over from our court into Northcoast and Asterilhold. Sarakal and Hallskar are likely taking notice as well."

"I know it."

"Well then, dear," Clara said, keeping her voice light, "how shall we solve it?"

"I don't know why it's all such a concern. There were ages when Asterilhold, Antea, and Northcoast all answered to the High Kings. Everyone's intermarried with everyone else. We're practically a single kingdom already. When you think about it."

"That is so utterly true," Clara said, sitting beside her cousin. Phelia was plucking at her dress with her fingertips now, picking away threads and lint that weren't there.

"I just don't see why there should be any fuss about swords and bows and such. Nobody can possibly want that, can they? What would fighting gain anyone? It isn't as if we aren't already practically one kingdom."

"Yes, but as long as there's one throne in Camnipol and another in Kaltfel, they'll rattle their swords at one another," Clara said. "It's what they do, isn't it?"

Phelia started. Her eyes were wider than they should have been, and her hands gripped her knees until the blood was all gone from her knuckles. Now *that* was interesting. Clara cleared her throat and went on, pretending not to notice.

"The problem is how to give everyone a way to keep their honor intact without asking very much of them. I know Dawson won't bring himself to see reason unless we can find a path to it that doesn't involve stooping under something. I assume your Feldin's very much the same."

"But he's won. Feldin feels he's won, and if the prince does come to live with us..."

Clara waited.

"You know I admire Dawson," Phelia said. "He's always been so staunch. Even when he was being rude to Feldin, it was more from the way Dawson lives in the world as he would like it to be. I never thought it was out of anger or spite."

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to call my darling husband a man without spite, but I take your meaning, yes."

Phelia giggled nervously. Her shoulders were hunched like someone braced against a blow.

"Did you hear that Rania Hiren's pregnant?" Phelia asked. Clara debated for less than a heartbeat, and decided to let her cousin change the subject.

"Not again. How many times is this?"

"Eight, if you count the live births. There were three stillborn."

"I'm amazed she has the stamina," Clara said. "And her husband must be a man of some quality. Rania's the dearest soul under the sky, but after the twins, she did start to look a bit like a mop's head. It isn't her fault, of course. It's just her skin."

"I have the same sort, though," Phelia said. "I dread to think what I'll look like after my first child."

"You're young, dear. I'm sure you'll be able to get your figure back. I suppose it's rude for me to ask how work has been on that particular project?"

Phelia blushed, but she also relaxed. Bed gossip and the intricacies of the female flesh might be indelicate, but they were safer than politics and the rumors of war. Throughout the hour, Clara let them talk of nothing in particular, always leaving opportunities for Phelia to return them to the topic of their husbands and the threat hanging over the city like smoke from a fire. At no point did Phelia take the opportunities offered her. That said quite a bit in itself.

When the time came to take her leave, Clara found Vincen Coe precisely where he had been, scowling at the empty air. As they walked down the stairs, Phelia took Clara's arm, leaning into her with each step; the visit seemed to have calmed her as much as it had uneased Clara herself. At the door, Vincen reclaimed his blades from the Jasuru as Clara embraced Phelia in farewell. Her bearers brought the sedan chair to the ready, and Clara took her shawl back from the footman. It wasn't until she was out of the private square that the last of the tobacco ran out and Clara realized she'd accidentally stolen Phelia's pipe. She knocked the bowl clean on the side opposite from Vincen so as to keep the ashes from falling on him.

"You were eavesdropping, I assume?" she said, loudly enough to carry over the noise of the street.

"Not at all, my lady."

"Oh please, Vincen," she said. "I'm not dim. How much did you hear?"

A few moments later, the huntsman shrugged.

"Almost all, my lady. She spoke a bit softly when she was discussing her fertility problems, and you were laughing at the comments about Lord Sonnen's mistress."

"You heard the first part, then. About my husband and hers?"

"I did."

"Why do you suppose she would be concerned about Asterilhold and Antea sharing a common history? Being 'practically one kingdom'?"

"At a guess, my lady, because she expects they may be again."

He glanced at her, and his expression—guarded, calm, grim—told her that they were in agreement. Whatever the intricacies of blood and marriage, precedent and politics, Antea and Asterilhold could never be united while Simeon and Aster lived. And Phelia, never meaning to say it, thought unification possible. Even likely. And Aster was quite likely going to be living under her roof.

It seemed to follow that Feldin Maas and his foreign backers intended to kill Prince Aster.

"Well," Clara said with a sigh. "So much for making peace."

Cithrin

Wind rattled the shutters and hissed at the windows. The morning sun was too bright to bear. By simply existing, the world made Cithrin want to vomit. She rolled over on her bed, pressing her hand to her throat. She didn't want to stand up, and she certainly wasn't walking to the Grand Market. The attempt alone would kill her.

There was a vague uneasiness muttering at the back of her mind, a reason that staying here would be a problem. She was supposed to go to the café because...

Because...

Cithrin said something obscene, then, without opening her eyes, repeated it slowly, drawing out the sounds. She was supposed to meet with a representative of the tanner's guild to talk about insuring their trade when the ships went back out. It wouldn't be long now. Days, perhaps. Not more than two weeks. Then the thrice-damned ships would go out, traveling up the coast while the season still held. They'd make their stops in the north, make what trades they could, and then hunker down for the winter, waiting for the ships from Far Syramys to reach the great island of Narinisle and begin the whole blighted thing over again. And so it would go, on and on and on until the end of all things, whether Cithrin got out of bed or not.

She sat up. Her rooms were in disarray around her. Bottles and empty wineskins crowded the floor. Another gust pushed against the windows, and she felt the air around her press in and then out. It was nauseating. She stood up slowly and walked across to look for a dress to put on that didn't stink of sweat. Sometime during the night, it appeared she'd knocked against the night pot, because a puddle of cold piss was well on its way to staining the floorboards. The only clothes that didn't look filthy were the trousers and rough shirt she'd worn as Tag the Carter. For what she had to do, they'd suffice. There were still half a dozen silver coins in her purse, and she shoved them into Tag's pocket.

By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, she felt more nearly human. She stepped out into the street for a moment, then back in through the bank's front door.

"Roach," she said, and the little Timzinae jumped to attention.

"Magistra Cithrin," he said. "Captain Wester and Yardem just left to collect payment from the brewer just north of the wall and the two butchers in the salt quarter. Barth and Corisen Mout went with them. Enen's asleep in the back because she drew night watch, and Ahariel is going to get some sausages and come back."

"I need you to run an errand for me," Cithrin said. "Go to the café and let the man from the tanner's guild know I won't be there. Tell him I'm unwell."

The boy's nictitating membranes clicked over his eyes nervously.

"Captain Wester said I should stay here," Roach said. "Enen's asleep, and he wanted someone awake in case—"

"I'll stay down here until someone gets back," Cithrin said. "I may feel like slow death, but I can still raise a shout if it's called for."

Roach still looked uncertain. Cithrin felt a stab of annoyance.

"I pay Wester," she said. "I pay you too, for that. Now go."

"Y-yes, Magistra."

The boy darted out to the street. Cithrin stood in the doorway for a long moment, watching the dark legs scissor and stretch as he ran. Far down the street, he dodged a cart loaded with fresh-caught fish, turned the corner, and vanished. Cithrin counted slowly to twelve, giving him time to reappear.

When he didn't, she walked out into the street and pulled the door shut behind her. The wind was against her and kicking up bits of dust and straw, but she squinted her way to the taproom.

"Good morning, Magistra," the keeper said as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. "Back already?"

"Seems I am," she said, fishing the silver coins back out of her pocket. "I'll take what this buys."

The keeper took the coins, lifting and dropping his hand as he estimated their weight.

"Your boys know how to go through wine," he said.

"They don't drink it," she said, grinning. "It's all for me."

The man laughed. It was a new kind of lie she'd only just discovered, telling the bleak truth lightly and letting everyone around her mistake it for a joke. *They don't drink it; it's all for me. Come winter, I'm as likely to be in the stocks as free. Nothing I do matters.*

He came back with two dark bottles of wine and a small tun of beer. Cithrin tucked the tun under her arm, took a bottle in either hand, and waited as he opened the door for her. Now the wind was at her back, pushing her on like it wanted her to get back home. The sky was blue above her with a skin of white clouds high in the air, but it smelled like rain. Porte Oliva autumns had a reputation for rough weather, and summer was in its last days now. A little cloudburst now and again hardly seemed worth complaining about.

She didn't go back into the main rooms, heading for her own door instead. Maneuvering up the stairs was hard with the tun still under her arm. She hit the corner of the wall at the top with her elbow. The impact was enough to leave her fingers tingling, but she didn't drop the bottle.

She'd forgotten about the puddle of piss, but she was feeling well enough now to open her window and pour the night pot's contents into the alley. She swabbed up the rest with a dirty shift, then threw that out the window too. She'd eaten a link of gristly sausage and a heel of black bread the day before. She knew she ought to be hungry, but she wasn't. She pulled off her carter's boots, pulled open the first of the wine bottles, and lay back on her bed, her back against the little headboard.

The wine was sweeter than she was used to, but she could feel the bite of it. Her stomach rebelled for a moment, twisting like a fish on a fire, and she slowed down to sips until it calmed. Her head throbbed once, the beginning of an ache. The wind paused, leaving her in silence. She heard the voices of the two Kurtadam guards rising from below her.

The woman—Enen—laughed. Warmth and calm slid into Cithrin's blood. She took one last, long drink straight from the bottle's neck, turned, and set the wine on the floor. The darkness behind her eyes was comfortable and deep. The roar of the wind kicking back up seemed to come from a great distance, and her mind, such as it was, sparked and slipped. Connections came together in unlikely, unrepeatable ways.

She had the sense that Magister Imaniel had left her something for Captain Wester. She thought that it had to do with the canal traffic in Vanai connecting to the docks in Porte Oliva, and also with herbs and spices packed in snow. Without drawing a line between awake and dozing or dozing and asleep, Cithrin's consciousness faded to darkness. Time stopped, started when she became vaguely aware of angry voices, very far away, and stopped again.

"Get up."

Cithrin forced her eyes open. Captain Wester stood in the doorway, his arms crossed. The light was dim, the city in twilight and cloud.

"Get out of bed," he said. "Do it now."

"Go away," she said.

"I told you to get out of that God damned *bed*!"

Cithrin pushed up on one arm. The room shifted, unsteady.

"And do what?" she said.

"You've missed five meetings," Marcus said. "People are going to start talking, and when they do, you're done. So stand up and do what needs doing."

Cithrin stared at him, her mouth slack with disbelief and a rising anger.

"Nothing needs doing," she said. "It's done. I'm done. I had my chance, and I lost it."

"I met Qahuar Em. He's not worth pouting over. Now you—"

"Qahuar? Who cares about Qahuar?" Cithrin said, sitting up. She didn't remember spilling wine on her tunic, but it tugged where dried wine had adhered to her skin. "It was the contract. I tried for it, and I lost. I had the world by the hair, and I lost. I failed."

"You failed?"

Cithrin spread her arms, gesturing at the rooms, the city, the world. Pointing out the obvious. Wester stepped closer. In the dim light, his eyes seemed bright as river stones, his mouth as hard as iron.

"Did you watch your wife and daughter burn to death in front of you? *Because* of you?" he asked. When she didn't answer, he nodded. "So it could have been worse. You aren't dead. There's work that needs doing. Get up and do it."

"I'm not permitted. I had a letter from Komme Medean that I'm not allowed to trade in his name."

"So instead you curled up in a mewling ball in his name? I'm sure he'll be thrilled. Get out of bed."

Cithrin lay down, pulling her pillow to her chest. It smelled foul, but she held it anyway.

"I don't take orders from you, *Captain*," she said, making the last word an insult. "You take money from me, so you do what I tell you. Now go away."

"I won't let you throw away everything you've worked for."

"I *worked* to keep the bank's money safe, and I've done it. So you're right. I win. Now go away."

"You want to keep it."

"Stones want to fly," she said. "They don't have wings."

"Find a way," he said, almost gently.

It was too much. Cithrin shouted wordless rage, sat up, and threw the pillow at him as hard as she could. She didn't want to cry anymore, and here she was, crying.

"I told you to get out!" she screamed. "No one wants you here! I am canceling your contract. Take your wages and your men and lock the door behind you."

Wester took a step back. Cithrin's chest went hollow, and she tried to swallow back the words. He bent down, picked up her pillow between thumb and finger, and lobbed it back to her. It landed on the bed at her side with a soft sound like someone being punched in the stomach. He nudged one of the empty wineskins with the toe of his boot and took a long, deep breath.

"Remember that I tried to talk you back to your senses," he said.

He turned. He walked away.

She had anticipated the pain, braced herself for it, so it wasn't the anguish of knowing he would leave her that surprised. The surprise was that even knowing, even being ready for it, the despair could still swamp her. It felt like something had died halfway between her throat and her heart, and was curled there inside her body, rotting. She heard him walking down the stairs, each step quieter than the one before. Cithrin snatched up her filthy pillow and screamed into it. It felt like days, just screaming, her body shaking from hunger and exhaustion and the poison of wine, beer, and ale. The muscles in her back and belly were threatening to cramp, but she could no more stop screaming and weeping than she could choose not to breathe.

There were voices below her. Marcus Wester and Yardem Hane. She heard Yardem rumble something that she recognized from its cadence as *Yes, sir* though the syllables before and after it were a confusion. Then a smaller, higher voice. Roach, perhaps.

They'd all go. All of them.

It didn't matter.

Nothing mattered. Her parents were dead so long ago she didn't remember them. Magister Imaniel and Cam and Besel, all dead. The city of her childhood was burned and broken. And the bank, the one thing she had ever made for herself, would be taken from her as soon as the auditor arrived. She couldn't bring herself to think that a few guards leaving early could matter.

But it did.

Slowly, very slowly, the storm within her stilled. It was full dark now, and tiny raindrops tapped against the window like fingernails. She reached for the wine bottle beside the bed and was surprised to find it empty. But there was still the other bottle. And the tun of beer. She would be all right. She only needed to get her strength back. A few more minutes were all she needed.

She hadn't quite roused herself when the footsteps came. First the steady tramp at the base of the stairway, and then, before it even reached the top, heavier thudding. Something hit the wall of the house, and Yadem grunted. There was a wet sound that might have been rain pouring off the roof, but seemed nearer than that. A light glowed. A lantern in Wester's hand. And behind him, Yadem Hane and the two Kurtadam guards struggling with a copper basin easily four feet long.

"We should have brought it first and filled it later," Enen said, her voice straining.

"We'll know next time," Marcus said.

Through her doorway, she saw the three guards put down the basin. It was as tall as Marcus's knee and it sloshed.

"What are you doing?" Cithrin asked, her voice smaller and weaker than she'd expected it to be.

Ignoring her, Yadem handed a round stone jar to the captain and started lighting the candles and lamps in the main room. The two Kurtadam saluted and went back down the stairs. Cithrin sat up, steadying herself with one hand. Marcus walked toward her, and before she could stop him, he grabbed her by the hair and dragged her off the bed. Her knees hit the floor with a thud and a stab of pain.

"What are you *doing*?" she shouted.

"I tried talking first," Wester said, and pushed her into the basin. The water was warm. "Take those rags off or else I will."

"I am not going to—"

In the growing light of the candles, his expression was hard and implacable.

"I've seen girls before. I'm not going to be shocked. I've got soap here," he said, pressing the stone jar into her hand. "And be sure to wash your hair. It's greasy enough to catch fire."

Cithrin looked at the jar. It was heavier than she'd expected, with a tight-fit lid. She didn't know the last time she'd washed herself. When he spoke again, his voice was resigned.

"Either you do it, or I will."

"Don't watch," she said, and as she did, she realized that she was agreeing to a contract whose terms she didn't yet know. All she felt was relief that they hadn't left her.

Marcus made an impatient sound, but turned to face the stairway. Yadem coughed discreetly and stepped into the bedroom. Cithrin pulled off the carter's clothes and knelt in the basin. The air felt cold against her skin. A carved wood bowl floated beside her, and she used it to rinse herself. She hadn't realized how filthy she'd felt until she didn't anymore.

A familiar voice came from the stairway.

"Is she there?" Cary asked.

"She is," Marcus said. "Just toss it up for now."

The actor grunted, and Marcus moved forward, catching a bundle of rope and cloth out of the air.

"We'll be downstairs," Cary said, and Cithrin's street door opened and closed. Marcus untied the rope and passed a length of soft flannel out behind him. Cithrin took the towel from his hand.

"Got a clean dress here too," he said. "You say when you're decent."

Cithrin stepped out of the bath shivering and dried herself quickly. The water in the basin was dark, a scum of suds floating on the top. Shrugging on the dress, she recognized it as one of Cary's. The cloth smelled of face paints and dust.

"I'm decent," she said.

Yadem came out of her bedroom. He'd fashioned her blanket into a sack and filled it with empty wineskins and bottles. The tun and her remaining bottle were in with the dead. She reached

out, ready to tell him to leave those, that she wasn't done with them. The Tralgu cocked an ear, his earring jingling. She let him pass.

"I've got food coming," Marcus said. "You have all the bank's records in here?"

"There's a transaction ledger at the café," she said. "And copies of a few of the contracts."

"I'll send someone. I am posting a guard at the foot of the stairs and under that window. No drink stronger than coffee comes in. You stay in here until you figure out what we're going to do to keep your bank for you."

"There isn't anything," she said. "I've been forbidden from any more negotiation or trade."

"And God knows we wouldn't want to break any rules," Marcus said. "Whatever you need, you say the words. Everyone gets a good self-pitying drunk now and again, but it's over. You stay sober and you do what needs doing. Understood?"

Cithrin stepped in close and kissed him. His lips were still and uncertain, the stubble around them rough. He was the third man she'd ever kissed. Sandr and Qahuar and Captain Wester. He stepped back.

"My daughter wasn't much younger than you."

"Would you have done this to her?" she asked, gesturing at the basin.

"I'd have done anything for her," he said. And then, "I'll have the bath taken away, Magistra. Do you want us to get some coffee since we have to get the books from the café anyway?"

"It will be closed by now. It's night."

"I'll have an exception made."

"Then yes."

He nodded and went back down the stairway. Cithrin sat at her little desk. The sound of rain above her mixed with the voices below. There was nothing to be done, of course. All the best efforts and intentions in the world couldn't change a single number inked in her ledgers. She looked anyway. Yadem and the two Kurtadam came and hauled the basin away again. Roach appeared with a bowl of fish-and-cream soup that tasted of black pepper and the sea. A mug of beer would have gone with it perfectly, but she knew better than to ask. Water was good enough for now.

Her mind felt fragile, a thing that might fall apart at any little jostle, but she tried to imagine herself as the auditor from Carse. What would he see when he looked at all this? She went through the initial listing of inventory that she'd made. Silk, tobacco, gems, jewels, spices, silver, and gold. The pudgy Antean at the mill pond had stolen some, and her estimate of the loss was included, the numbers in black strokes against the cream-colored paper. So there was the beginning. Now to what she'd done with it.

Turning the pages had a sense of nostalgia. The dry hiss of the paper, and here was another artifact of the golden age that had just passed. The contract and receipt from when she'd bought the rooms from the gambler. The onionskin permit and seal that had marked the opening of the bank. She traced her fingertips over it. It hadn't been a full season since she'd begun. It seemed more than that. It seemed a lifetime. Then the agreements of consignment from the spicer and the cloth merchants. Her valuation, theirs, and the final income from sale. The jewelry had always been the problem. She found herself wondering if there might have been a better way to be rid of it than the one she'd chosen. Maybe if she'd waited until the ships from Narinisle had come in. Or placed them on consignment with a trading house with a heavy export trade. Then she wouldn't have been flooding her own market. Well, next time.

Distant thunder rolled softly through the steady tapping of rain. Roach, soaked to his scales, brought up the lockbox from the café, a huge earthenware mug of coffee, and a note from Maestro Asanpur hoping that she would feel better soon and saying that the café felt too large without her in it. It was almost enough to reduce her to tears again, but that would have confused the Timzinae boy, so she forced herself to keep composure.

The best trade she'd worked had been the horizontal semi-monopoly with the brewer, cooper, and taphouses. Each person in the chain of production was in business with the bank, and so as soon

as the grain and water arrived at the brewery, every trade benefited her, and put her in the position to guarantee business to the next link. If she could make arrangements with a few farmers for dedicated access to their grain crops, it would be a locked-in gold-producing mechanism.

But that would be for the next person, whoever they were. Cithrin sipped at her coffee. It had been a good thought, though, and well performed. In a year, when the remnants of her parents' investment in the bank came to her, she would have to see if there was some much smaller version of the same plan. It would be painful, she thought, going from Magistra Cithrin bel Sarcour to the bank's ward again for that last year. But once she reached her naming day, and could enter into business for herself...

The skin on her arm puckered, the fine hairs standing up. Her neck prickled. A feeling of cold fire lit her spine. She closed the books she'd written, shoved them aside, and went back to the older ones, written by other hands now dead. The records of Vanai. The small red-inked notation that marked her arrival at the bank. She closed the book with trembling hands.

Captain Wester had been right.

There was a way.

Dawson

I won't hear it," King Simeon said. The months hadn't been kind to him. His skin was greyer than it had been, his lips an unhealthy blue. Sweat beaded his brow though the room wasn't particularly warm. "God, Dawson. Listen to yourself. You're back from exile for one day—one—and already you're back at it."

"If Clara's right and Maas is plotting against Aster's life—"

Simeon slapped his palm to the table. The meeting chamber echoed with it, and the silence that followed was broken only by the songs of finches and the babbling of the fountain outside the windows. The guards around the back wall remained impassive as always, their armor the black and gold of the city, their swords sheathed at their hips. Dawson wondered what they would have said, had they been asked. Someone must be able to talk sense to Simeon, though it clearly wasn't him.

"If I'd listened to your advice," the king said, "Issandrian would be leading a popular revolt against me right now. Instead, he was here yesterday, bending his knee, asking my forgiveness and swearing on his life that the mercenary riot wasn't his plan or doing."

"If it wasn't his, it was someone's," Dawson said.

"I am your king, Baron Osterling. I am perfectly capable of guiding this kingdom safely."

"Simeon, you are my friend," Dawson said softly. "I know how you sound when you're frightened to your bones. Can you put it off until next year?"

"Put what off?"

"Fostering your son. Naming his protector. The closing of the court is three weeks from now. Only say that the events of the season have distracted you from the decision. Take time."

Simeon rose. He walked like an old man. Outside the window the leaves were still green, but less so than they had been. The summer was dying, and someday very soon the green would fade, red and gold taking the field. Beautiful colors, but still death.

"Maas has no reason to wish Aster ill," Simeon said.

"He's in contact with Asterilhold. He's working with them—"

"You worked with Maccia to reinforce Vanai. Lord Daskellin danced with Northcoast. Lord Tremontair is keeping assignations with the ambassador from Borja, and Lord Arminnin spent more time in Hallskar than Antea last year. Shall I slaughter every nobleman with connections outside the kingdom? You wouldn't live." Simeon's breath was fast and shallow. He leaned against the windowsill, steadying himself. "My father died when he was a year younger than I am now."

"I remember."

"Maas has allies. Everyone who loved Issandrian and Klin turned to him when they left."

"Mine turned to Daskellin."

"You don't have allies, Dawson. You have enemies and admirers. You couldn't even keep Palliako's boy near you when he was the hero of the day. Lerer sent him off to the edge of the world rather than let him take another revel from you. Enemies and admirers."

"Which are you, Majesty?"

"Both. Have been since you flirted that Cinnae girl away from me at the tourney when we were twelve."

Dawson chuckled. The king's smile was almost abashed, and then he was laughing too. Simeon came back and collapsed into his chair.

"I know you don't approve," he said. "But trust me that I'm doing the best I can. There are just so many things to balance, and I'm so tired. I am unbearably tired."

"At least don't give Aster to Maas. I don't care if he is the most influential man at court just now. Find someone else."

"Thank you for your advice, old friend."

"Simeon—"

"No. Thank you. That's all."

In the antechamber, the servants gave Dawson back his sword and dagger. It seemed years since Simeon had insisted on the old formality of coming to private audience unarmed. This was how far they had all fallen. Dawson was still adjusting the buckle when he stepped outside. The air was warm, the sun heavy in the sky, but the breeze had an edge to it. The soft, pressing air of summer was gone. The seasons were changing again. Dawson turned away the footman's assisting hand and climbed into his carriage.

"My lord?" the driver asked.

"The Great Bear," Dawson said.

The whip cracked, and the carriage lurched off, leaving the blocky towers and martial gates of the Kingspire behind. He let himself lean back into the seat, the jolts and knocks sending jabs of pain up his spine. First the journey back from Osterling Fells and then the better half of the day waiting for his majesty to clear an audience for him had worn him down more than it once would have.

When he'd been a young man, he'd ridden from Osterling Fells to Camnipol, stopping only to trade horses, arrived just before the queen's ball, and spent the whole evening until the dawn dancing. Mostly with Clara. It seemed like a story he'd heard told of someone else, except that he could still see the dress she'd worn and smell the perfume at the nape of her neck. He turned the memory aside before his wife's younger incarnation aroused him. He wanted to walk upright when he reached the club, and while he was old, he wasn't dead.

The Fraternity of the Great Bear rose up, its façade the black stone and gold leaf of the Undying City. Coaches and carriages were thick in the street, drivers pushing to position themselves where their particular masters would walk the fewest steps from carriage to door. The air stank of the fresh horse droppings being ground to paste under a hundred hooves. Dawson toyed with the idea of getting out here and walking in just to escape, but it was beneath his station, so he made do with abusing the driver for his slowness and incompetence. By the time the footmen of the club hurried out with a step for him, he almost felt better.

Within, the club was a fabric woven from pipe smoke, heat, and music ignored in favor of conversation. Dawson gave his jacket to a servant girl who bowed and scurried away. When he entered the great hall, half a dozen men turned toward him, applauding his return with varying degrees of pleasure and sarcasm. Enemies and admirers. Dawson cut a bow that could be read as acknowledgment or insult depending on who it was given to, scooped up a cut crystal glass of fortified wine, and stalked to the smaller halls on the left.

A wide, round table sat in the center of one hall, a dozen men around it, many of them talking at once. In among the press of bodies and wit, Issandrian's long hair and Sir Klin's artless face. Issandrian caught sight of him and stood. He nodded to Dawson rather than bow. It might only have been a trick of the light, but the man seemed lessened. As if his exile had actually humbled him. The others at his table began to grow quiet, becoming aware that something was happening around them even if they were too dim to know what. Dawson drew his dagger in a duelist's salute, and Issandrian smiled in what might have been approval.

At the back of the hall were private meeting rooms, and the least of these was hardly larger than a carriage itself. The dark leather couches ate what little light the candles gave. Daskellin sat in a corner where he could see whoever entered. His back was to the wall, and his sword was undrawn, but near his hand.

“Well,” Dawson said, lowering himself to the couch opposite, “I see you’ve squandered everything we had in my absence.”

“Pleasure to see you too,” Canl Daskellin said.

“How do we go from successfully defending Camnipol from foreign blades to riding behind Feldin Maas? Can you answer that?”

“Do you want the long answer or the short?”

“Will the long be less annoying?”

Daskellin leaned forward.

“Maas has backing, and we don’t. I had it. Or I thought I did. Then a balance sheet changed or some such, and Clark lit out for Birancour.”

“It’s what you deserve for working with bankers.”

“It won’t happen again,” Daskellin said darkly.

It was as close to an apology as Dawson expected to get. He let the matter slide. Instead, he drained his glass, leaned to the door, and rapped against it until a serving girl appeared to refresh his glass.

“Where do we stand, then?” Dawson asked when she’d gone.

Daskellin shook his head, breath hissing out through his teeth.

“If it comes to the field, we can hold our own. There are enough landholders who still hate Asterilhold that it’s easy enough to rally them.”

“If Aster dies before he takes the throne?”

“Then we fervently pray his majesty’s royal scepter’s still in working order, because a new male heir is the best hope we have. I’ve had my genealogist look through the blood archives, and Simeon has a cousin in Asterilhold with a legitimate claim.”

“Legitimate?” Dawson asked, leaning forward.

“I’m afraid so, and you can’t guess this. He’s a supporter of the principle of a farmer’s council. We lose the quarter of our support with more sense than guts. The others rally around Oyer Verennin or possibly Umansin Tor, both of whom can also make a claim. Asterilhold backs its man with the help of the group Maas and Issandrian have gathered, we fight a civil war, and we lose.”

Daskellin clapped his hands once. The candle above him sputtered. In the halls of the club, a serving girl shouted and a man laughed. Dawson’s fortified wine tasted more bitter than it had when he started it, and he put the glass down.

“Could this have been the scheme all along?” Dawson asked. “Was Maas using Issandrian and Klin and all that hairwash about a farmer’s council just for this? We may have been aiming at the wrong target all this time.”

“Possibly,” Daskellin said. “Or it might have been a chance he saw and decided to take. We’d have to ask Feldin, and I suspect he might not tell us the truth.”

Dawson tapped the lip of his glass with a finger, the crystal chiming softly.

“We can’t let Aster die,” Dawson said.

“Everything dies. Men, cities, empires. Everything,” Daskellin said. “The timing’s the question.”

Dawson took his dinner with the family in the informal dining hall. Roast pork with apple, honeyed squash, and fresh bread with whole cloves of garlic baked into it. A cream linen cloth on the table. Ceramic dishes from Far Syramys and polished silver utensils. It could as well have been ashes served on scrap iron.

“Geder Palliako’s come back,” Jorey said.

“Really?” Clara said. “I don’t remember where he’d gone. Not to the south, certainly, with so many people having friends and family in Vanai. You can’t expect a decent reception when you’ve killed a person’s cousin or some such. Wouldn’t be realistic. Was he in Hallskar?”

“The Keshet,” Jorey said around a mouthful of apple. “Came back with a pet cunning man.”

"That's nice for him," Clara said. She rang for the serving girl, and then, frowning, "We don't need to throw another revel for him, do we?"

"No," Dawson said.

He knew, of course, what they were doing. Jorey bringing up odd, trivial subjects. Clara burbling on about them and turning everything into a question for him to answer. It was the strategy they always used in dark times to lift him up out of himself. Tonight, the burden was too heavy.

He'd considered killing Maas. It would be difficult, of course. A direct assault was impossible. In the first place, it was expected and so would be guarded against. In the second, failure meant an even greater sympathy for Maas in the court. The idea of challenging him to a duel and then allowing things to go wrong appealed to him. He and Maas had been on the dueling grounds often enough that it wouldn't be an obvious convenience, and men slipped all the time. Blades went deeper than intended. He had to ignore the fact that Feldin was younger, stronger, and had lost their last duel only because Dawson was cleverer. The idea was still sweet.

"Fact is," Barriath said as the serving girl came in, "this boat is sinking, and we're bailing it out with a sieve."

"Meaning what?" Jorey said.

"Simeon's my king and I'll put my life down at his word, the same as anyone," Barriath said, "but he's barely his own master anymore. Father stopped the Edford Charter madness, and now we're looking at plots from Asterilhold. If we stop that, there will be another crisis after it, and another after that one."

"I don't think that's appropriate talk for the dinner table, dear," Clara said, accepting a fresh glass of watered wine from the servant.

"Ah, let him talk," Dawson said. "It's what we're all thinking about anyway."

"At least wait until the help is gone," Clara said. "Or who knows what they'll think of us in the small quarters."

The servant girl left blushing. Clara watched the door close after her, then nodded to her eldest son.

"Antea needs a king," Barriath said. "Instead it's got a kindly uncle. I hate to be the one to bring the bad news, but it's all through the navy. If it weren't for Lord Skestinin encouraging the captains to lay on the lash and drop troublemakers for the fish, we'd have had a mutiny by now. At least one."

"I can't believe that," Clara said. "Mutiny's such a rude, shortsighted thing. I'm certain that our men in the king's navy wouldn't stoop so low."

Barriath laughed.

"Mother, if you want truly inappropriate dinner conversation, I can tell you something about how low sailing men stoop."

"But Simeon is the king and Aster's still a boy," Jorey said. It was, Dawson thought, a brave attempt to keep the subject from veering again. "You can't expect them to be different people than they are."

"I agree with you, my boy," Dawson said. "I wish I didn't."

"Best thing," Barriath said, "would be for Simeon to find a protector with a spine to watch over Aster, and then abdicate. A regency could last eight or ten years, and by the time Aster took the crown, the kingdom would be in order."

Jorey snorted his derision, and Barriath's face went hard.

"Spare me," Jorey said. "A regent who could solve all the kingdom's conflicts in a decade wouldn't be likely to give up his regency. He'd be king."

"You're right," Barriath said. "And that would be just terrible, would it?"

"That's starting to sound awfully like the people we're working against, brother."

"If you two are going to start fighting, you can leave the table now," Clara said. Barriath and Jorey looked at their plates, muttering variations on *I'm sorry, Mother*. Clara nodded to herself. "That's better. Besides, it's a waste of effort to argue about the problems you don't have at the

expense of the ones you do. We simply have to convince Simeon that poor Feldin really has gotten himself in too deep with those terrible Asterilhold people.”

“It isn’t as easy as that,” Dawson said.

“Certainly it is,” Clara said. “He’s certain to have letters, isn’t he? That’s what Phelia said. That he was always off at his meetings and letters.”

“I don’t think he’ll be writing to his foreign friends with detailed accounts of treason, Mother,” Barriath said. “*Dear Lord Such-and-so, glad to hear you’ll help me slaughter the prince.*”

“He wouldn’t have to say it, though. Not outright,” Jorey said. “If there was evidence he was corresponding with this cousin who’d lay claim to the throne, it might be enough.”

“You can always judge people by who they write to,” Clara said with satisfaction. “There’s the inconvenience of actually getting the letters, of course, but Phelia was so desperately pleased to see me last time, I can’t think it will be particularly difficult to arrange another invitation. Not that one can rely on that, of course, which is why I’ve sponsored that needlework master to come show us his stitching patterns. Embroidery seems simple just to look at, but the more complex work can be quite boggling. Which reminds me, Dawson dear, I’m going to require the back hall with the good light tomorrow. There will be about five of us, because after all it seemed a bit obvious to only bring Phelia. That won’t be a problem, will it?”

“What?” Dawson said.

“The back hall with the good light,” Clara said, turning her head to him and raising her eyebrows without actually looking up from cutting her meat. “Because really needlework can’t be done in gloom. It—”

“You’re cultivating Phelia Maas?”

“She lives with Feldin,” Clara said. “And with the close of court coming so soon, waiting seems unwise, don’t you think?”

There was a glitter in her eye and a dangerous angle at the corner of her mouth. Dawson found himself quite certain that his wife was enjoying herself. He found his mind dashing to keep up with hers. If Phelia could be convinced to allow access to the house for a few men...

“What are you doing, Mother?” Barriath asked.

“Saving the kingdom, dear,” she said. “Eat your squash. Don’t just move it around on the plate and pretend you’ve done anything. That never worked when you were a boy, I can’t imagine why you still try it.”

“He won’t believe us,” Dawson said. “After all the objections I’ve raised, Maas will claim forgery. But it might be enough to sway Simeon from giving Aster over.”

“More swaying from the king?” Barriath said. “Is that really what we need? Move him to decisive action, or stay back.”

“Someone else could take them,” Jorey said. “Someone who isn’t particularly allied with us or Maas.”

“What about the Palliako boy?” Clara said. “I know he seems a bit frivolous, but he and Jorey are on good terms and it isn’t as though he were part of your inner circle.”

Dawson ate a bite of pork, chewing slowly to give himself time to think. In truth, the meat wasn’t bad. Salt and sweet and something like pepper heat under it all. Quite good, in fact. He felt the smile spreading across his lips, becoming aware that it had been some time since he’d smiled.

“I don’t know about that,” Jorey said, but Dawson waved the words away.

“Palliako was useful ending the Vanai campaign. And he was here to stop the mercenary riot. He’s been an apt tool before,” Dawson said. “I can’t think why this time would be different.”

Geder

The banner spread out over the table, vermillion cloth flowing down to puddle on the floor. The dark eightfold sigil in the pale center had bent onto itself, so Geder leaned in and plucked it straight. Lerer stroked his chin, walking first close and then back and close again before stopping at his son's shoulder.

"Among my people, this is the standard of your race," Basrahip said. "The color is for the blood from which all races of mankind came."

"And the compass rose in the middle there?" Lerer asked.

"That is the symbol of the goddess," Basrahip said.

Lerer grunted. He walked forward again, touching the cloth with careful fingertips. Geder felt his own fingers twitch toward it, mirroring his father. Basrahip had told him how the priests harvested spider silk and learned to dye it. The banner represented the work of ten lifetimes, and running his hands over it had been like touching the wind.

"And you wanted to hang this at... ah... Rivenhalm?"

"No," Geder said. "No, I was thinking it would be at the temple here in Camnipol."

"Oh. That's right," Lerer said. "The temple."

The road home from the hidden temple of the Sinir mountains had been a thousand times more pleasant than the journey out. At the end of each day, Basrahip would sit at the fire with him, listening to whatever anecdotes and tales Geder could remember, laughing at the funny ones, becoming pensive at the tragic. Even the servants, initially unable to hide their discomfort at the high priest's company, calmed well before they reached the border between the Keshet and Sarakal. Somewhat to Geder's surprise, Basrahip knew the rough track of their journey. The priest had explained that though the human world had remade itself, collapsed, and begun again countless times since the temple of the spider goddess had withdrawn from the world, the dragon's roads hadn't changed. He might not know where one country bordered another or even the path of a river as those things changed over time. The roads were eternal.

When they'd stopped in Inentai to rest the horses and reequip themselves, Basrahip had wandered the streets like a child, his mouth open in astonishment at every new building. It occurred to Geder at the time that in some fashion, he and the priest were not so dissimilar. Basrahip had lived a life with tales of the world, but never the world itself. Geder's life had been much the same, only his personal, private temple had been built with books and carved out from his duties and obligations. And still, in comparison, Geder was a man of the world. He had seen Kurtadam and Timzinae, Cinnae and Tralgu. Basrahip had known only Firstblood, and in fact only those who looked like himself and the villagers nearest the temple. Seeing a Firstblood with dark skin or pale hair was as much a revelation to the priest as a new race.

Watching him move first tentatively and then with greater and greater sureness through the streets and roads, Geder had some vague understanding of what his own father had meant by the joy of watching a child discover the world. Geder had found himself noticing the things he'd overlooked and taken for granted only because they astounded his new friend and ally. When, at the trailing edge of summer, they reached Camnipol again, Geder was almost sorry to see the journey's end.

Add to which, his father seemed oddly uncomfortable with his discoveries.

"I don't suppose you've picked a site for this new temple? Lost goddess and all."

"I was thinking someplace close to the Kingspire," Geder said. "There's the old weavers' guild hall. It's been empty for years. I'm sure they'd like someone to take it off their hands."

Lerer grunted noncommittally. Basrahip began to refold the temple banner. Lerer nodded to the priest, put a hand on Geder's elbow, and steered him gently out to the corridor, walking casually. Geder hardly noticed that his father was separating him from Basrahip. The dark stone ate the daylight, and the servants found themselves suddenly needed elsewhere.

"That essay," his father said. "You're still working on it?"

"No, not really. It's outgrown itself. It was supposed to be about finding a likely area to be associated with Morade and the fall of the Dragon Empire. Now I've got the goddess and the history of the temple and everything. I've barely started making sense of it all. No point writing any more until I know what I'm writing about, eh? What about you? Is there any fresh news?"

"I was looking forward to that essay," Lerer said, half to himself. When he looked up, he forced a smile. "I'm sure there's fresh news every day, but so far I've been able to keep from hearing any of it. These bastards and their court games. I could live until the dragons come back and I still wouldn't forgive what they did to you in Vanai."

The word tightened Geder's stomach. The lines at the corners of Lerer's mouth were sorrow and anger etched in skin. Geder had the surreal urge to reach out his thumb and rub them smooth again.

"Nothing bad happened in Vanai," Geder said. "I mean, yes, it burned. That wasn't good. But it wasn't as bad as it's made out. It's all right, I mean. In the end."

Lerer's gaze shifted from one of Geder's eyes to the other, looking into him. Geder swallowed. He couldn't think why his heart would be beating faster.

"In the end. As you say," Lerer said. He clapped his hand on Geder's shoulder. "It's good you're back."

"I'm glad to be here," Geder said, too quickly.

With a quiet cough to announce himself, the house steward stepped into the corridor.

"Forgive me, my lords, but Jorey Kalliam has arrived asking after Sir Geder."

"Oh!" Geder said. "He hasn't seen Basrahip yet. Where is he? You didn't leave him in the courtyard, did you?"

Lerer's hand dropped from Geder's shoulder. Geder had the sense that he'd somehow said the wrong thing.

"His lordship is in the front room," the steward said.

Jorey rose from the chair by the window as he came in. The season in the city had put some flesh back into the man's face. Geder smiled, and the two of them stood looking at each other. Geder read his own uncertainty—should they clasp hands? embrace? make formal greeting?—in Jorey's expression. When Geder laughed, Jorey, smiling sheepishly, did too.

"I see you're back from the wild places," Jorey said. "The travel agrees with you."

"Does it? I think I just about wept when I could sleep in a real bed again. Going on campaign may be a string of discomfort and indignity, but at least I never worried about being killed by bandits."

"There are worse things than a good, honest bandit. You were missed here," Jorey said. "You heard what happened?"

"Exile all around," Geder said, trying to affect a jaded tone. "I don't know that I could have helped. I barely had any part except when we held the gate from closing."

"That was the best part to have in the whole mess," Jorey said.

"Probably so."

"Well."

The silence was awkward. Jorey sat again, and Geder walked forward. The front room, like all of the Palliako rooms in Camnipol, was small. The chairs were worked leather that time had stiffened and cracked, and the smell of dust never left the place. The sounds of hooves against stone and drivers berating one another came from the street. Jorey bit his lip.

"I'm here to ask a favor," he said, and it sounded like a confession.

"We took Vanai together. We burned it together. We saved Camnipol," Geder said. "You don't have to ask favors of me. Just tell me what you need me to do."

"That's intended to make this easier, isn't it? All right. My father believes he's discovered a plot against Prince Aster."

Geder crossed his arms.

"Does the king know?"

"The king is choosing not to know. And that's where you come in. I think we can get evidence. Letters. But I'm afraid that if I take them to King Simeon, he'll think they're forged. I need someone else. Someone he trusts, or at least doesn't distrust."

"Of course," Geder said. "Absolutely. Who is the traitor?"

"Baron of Ebbinbaugh," Jorey said. "Feldin Maas."

"Alan Klin's ally?"

"And Curtin Issandrian's, for that, yes. Maas's wife is my mother's cousin, which God knows doesn't sound like much of a toehold, but it's what we have to work with. She—the wife, I mean. Not my mother. She seems to know more than she's saying. There's no question she's frightened. My mother has her at a needlework master's knee as we speak in hopes of winning her confidence."

"But she hasn't confessed anything? Told you for certain what's going on?"

"No, we're still well in the realm of suspicions and fears. There's no proof. But—"

Geder put up his hand, palm out.

"I have someone you should meet," he said.

The last time Geder had been to the Kalliam mansion, it had been dressed for a revel in his honor. Without the flowers and streamers and crepe, the austerity and grandeur of the architecture came through. The servants in their livery had the rigid stance of a private guard. The glass in the windows sported no dust. The women's voices that came from the back hall sounded genteel and proper, even without any individual word being audible. Basrahip sat on a stool in the corner. His broad shoulders and vaguely amused expression made him seem like a child revisiting a playhouse he'd outgrown. The austere cut and rough, colorless cloth of his robes marked him as not belonging to the court.

Jorey was sitting at a writing desk, fidgeting with pen and ink without actually writing anything. Geder paced behind a long damask-upholstered couch and wished he liked pipes. The occasion seemed to call for the gravity of smoke.

The choir of feminine voices grew louder, and the hard tapping of formal shoes came from the doorway, louder and then softer as they passed. They hadn't come in. Geder moved toward the door, but Jorey waved him back.

"Mother will be seeing the others out," he said. "She'll be back in a moment."

Geder nodded, and true to Jorey's word, the footsteps returned, the voices reduced to a duet. When the women stepped into the room, Jorey rose to his feet. Basrahip followed suit a moment later. Geder had danced with the Baroness of Osterling Fells at his revel, but between the months and the whirl of drink and confusion that time had been, he wouldn't have recognized her. He could see how her own features had influenced Jorey's, especially around the eyes. Surprise touched her expression and vanished again, less than the flutter of a moth's wing. Behind her, a sickly-looking woman with a pinched face and dark eyes had to be Phelia Maas.

"Oh, excuse me," Clara Kalliam said. "I didn't mean to intrude, dear."

"Not at all, Mother. We were hoping you'd join us. You remember Geder Palliako?"

"How could I forget the man who held the eastern gate? I haven't seen you at court this season, sir, but I understand you've been traveling. An expedition of some sort? Let me introduce my cousin Phelia."

The dark-eyed woman came into the room and held her hand out to Geder. Her smile spoke of relief, as if she'd been dreading something that she thought she'd now avoided. Geder made his bow

and saw Lady Kalliam's eyebrows rise as she noticed the priest in the corner.

"Ladies," Jorey said. "This is Basrahip. He's a holy man Geder brought back from the Keshet."

"Really?" Lady Kalliam said. "I hadn't known you were collecting priests."

"It came as a surprise to me too," Geder said. "But please, won't you ladies sit?"

According to his plan, Geder sat Phelia Maas on the couch with her back toward Basrahip and then took his own place across from her. Jorey resumed his place at the writing desk, and his mother took a chair near that happily didn't block Geder's view of the priest.

"Maas," Geder said, as if recalling something. In truth, he'd planned precisely what to say. "I had an Alberith Maas serving under me in Vanai. A relation of yours?"

"Nephew," Phelia said. "My husband's nephew. Alberith has mentioned you often since his return."

"You're the Baroness of Ebbinbaugh, then?" Geder asked. "Sir Klin was my commander in the Vanai campaign. He and your husband are friends, yes?"

"Oh yes," Phelia said with a smile. "Sir Klin is a dear, close friend of Feldin's."

Behind her, Basrahip gazed into the middle distance, his face impassive as if listening intently to something only he could hear. He shook his head once. *No*.

"There was a falling-out, though, wasn't there? I'm sure I heard something like that," Geder said, pretending a casual knowledge he didn't have. The woman's face went still, except for her eyes, which clicked from Geder to Lady Kalliam and back. There was fear in the way she held her hands and the corners of her mouth. Geder felt a slow, pleasant warmth growing in his chest. It was going to work. At his side, Jorey's mother considered him with interest.

"I'm sure you misunderstood," Phelia said. "Alan and Feldin are on excellent terms."

No.

"I always liked Sir Klin," Geder said for the simple pleasure of being able to lie to a woman who couldn't lie to him. "I felt terrible when I heard he'd been blamed for the riot. Your husband didn't suffer for that, I hope."

"No, no, thank you. We were very fortunate."

Yes.

"Sir Palliako," Lady Kalliam said, "to what do we owe the pleasure of your company today?"

Geder looked at Jorey, then at Lady Kalliam. He'd meant to ask a few innocuous questions, get what insight he could, uncover what could be uncovered. He'd meant to move slowly. The way the woman held herself tighter and tighter, the fragility of her smile, and the scent of fear that came from her like the sweet from roses argued against. He couldn't scare her so badly she left, but he could scare her badly. He smiled at Lady Kalliam.

"Well, the truth is I was hoping for an introduction to Baroness Ebbinbaugh here. I had some questions for her. I haven't spent all the season traveling," he said pleasantly. "I've been looking into the riot. Its roots. And its aftermath."

The color had gone from Phelia Maas's face. Her breath was fast and shallow, like a hand-caught sparrow about to die from fright.

"I can't imagine what there is to look into," she said, her voice thready and faint.

Geder found it was easier to smile kindly when he didn't mean it. Outside, a wind chime was singing to itself in random, idiot percussion. Jorey and his mother had both gone perfectly still. Geder laced his fingers over his knee.

"I know everything, Lady Maas," he said. "The prince. The riot. The Vanai campaign. The woman."

"What woman?" she breathed.

He didn't have the first idea what woman, but no doubt there was some woman involved somewhere. It didn't matter.

"Say anything," he said. "Pick any detail. Even things you don't imagine anyone else could know, and I'll tell you if they're true."

“Feldin isn’t involved in any of it,” she said. Geder didn’t even need to look at Basrahip.

“That isn’t true, Lady Maas. I know you’re frightened, but I’m here to help you and your family. I can do that. But I need to know I can trust you. You see? Tell me the truth. It doesn’t matter, because it’s all things I know already. Tell me how it started. Just that.”

“It was the ambassador from Asterilhold,” she said. “He came to Feldin a year ago.”

No.

“You’re lying to me, Baroness,” Geder said, very gently. “Try again.”

Phelia Maas shuddered. She seemed like a thing made of spun sugar, almost too delicate to support her own weight. She opened her mouth, closed it, swallowed.

“There was a man. He was going to be part of the farmer’s council.”

Yes.

“Yes. I know who you mean. Can you tell me his name?”

“Ucter Anninbaugh.”

No.

“That wasn’t his name. Can you tell me his name?”

“Ellis Newport.”

No.

“I can help you, Baroness. I may be the only man in Camnipol who can. Tell me his name.”

Her dead eyes met his.

“Torsen. Torsen Aestilmont.”

Yes.

“There,” Geder said. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Do you understand now that you and your husband have no secrets from me?”

The woman nodded once. Her chin began to spasm, her cheeks flushed, and a heartbeat later she was bawling like a child. Jorey’s mother swooped to her side, putting an arm around her. Geder sat, watching. His heart was beating quickly, but his limbs were loose and relaxed. When he had denied Alan Klin the secret wealth of Vanai, he’d felt excited. Glee. When he’d come to the decision to burn Vanai, he’d felt righteous anger. Maybe even satisfaction. But he wasn’t sure that ever in his life before now—before this moment—he’d felt sated.

He rose and walked over to Jorey. The man’s eyes were wide. Impressed almost past the point of believing. Geder spread his hands. *You see?*

“How did you do that?” Jorey whispered. “How did you know?” There was awe in his voice.

Basrahip was fewer than three paces away. The bull-huge head was still bowed. The thick fingers bent around each other, hand clasping hand. Phelia Maas’s sobs were like a storm on the sea, and the murmured lullaby of promises and comfort from Lady Kalliam had barely thrown any oil on that water. Geder went to lean so close his lips brushed the huge man’s ear.

“I will build all the temples you want, forever.”

Basrahip smiled.

Clara

On one hand, they had seriously misunderstood who and what Geder Palliako was. But on the other, he appeared to be on their side. For the time being, at least.

Still, Clara's heart ached for Phelia.

The bedroom was darkened, heavy curtains pushing the daylight away. Phelia lay on her back, the salt tracks of dried tears marking the corners of her eyes. Clara sat beside her, stroking her shoulders and arms the way physicians did when someone had taken a blow to the head or received shocking news. When Phelia spoke, the hysteria was gone. There was no more room for pretending that things could end well, and Clara could hear in the woman's voice that losing that hope had been a relief.

"Will he really keep Feldin safe?" Phelia asked. "If I give him the letters, will Palliako really see that Simeon doesn't kill him?"

"That's certainly what he said," Clara said.

"Do you trust him?"

"I barely know him, dear."

They lapsed again into silence.

"If the king already knows anyway," Phelia said. "If he only wants to see who in the court of Asterilhold was involved... I mean, with all that Palliako already knew, Aster was never in any real danger. Not really."

"That's one way to see it."

For the better part of an hour, Geder Palliako had coaxed Phelia into admitting everything. Feldin's complicity in the mercenary riot, his connections in Asterilhold, his alliances within the groups fighting for a farmer's council. Any one would stand as treason. Together, Clara didn't see room for mercy. Which wasn't what Phelia needed to hear now.

"How did it all get so out of hand?" Phelia asked the darkness. She sighed. It was a small, hard sound. "Tell him I will. I'll take him to Feldin's private study. I have a key, but there will be a guard. And he has to swear that it will only be exile."

"All right."

Phelia took Clara's hand, holding it like it was the only thing that kept her from falling down a cliff.

"You won't make me go alone, will you? You'll come with me?"

There was nothing Clara wanted less. Phelia's eyes glittered in the twilight of the room.

"Of course, dear," she said. "Of course I'll come."

In the smoking room, Clara found the men waiting with such anxiety she imagined herself as a midwife come to deliver news of a birth. Dawson stopped his pacing as she walked in. Geder and Jorey looked up from a game of cards they were only half playing. Only the quiet priest seemed unconcerned, but then she supposed unnatural serenity was part of his work. Even Vincen Coe was there, brooding in the shadows the way he so often did. The air was close and hot, like every sip had already been breathed once before.

"She's agreed to take Lord Palliako to the letters," Clara said, "but only if he swears Simeon won't have Feldin executed and if I'm with her when they go."

"Absolutely not," Dawson said.

“She will lose her nerve, husband,” Clara said. “You know what she’s like. I’ll take Vincen with me, and we’ll be fine. The four of us—”

“Five,” Geder said, “with Basrahip.”

“I’m going too,” Jorey said.

“Of course you aren’t, dear,” Clara said. “Feldin only allows me because I’m a woman and he finds me feckless and charming. Vincen’s a servant. Lord Palliako and...”

“Basrahip,” the priest said.

“Yes, that. Phelia was here for the needlework and had an example she wanted to show me, so I went home with her. Along the way, we bumped into Lord Palliako and his friend and Phelia invited them along so we could hear stories of his summer travels. Perfectly innocent.”

“I don’t see why I couldn’t be part of that,” Jorey said. “Or Barriath.”

“Because you are your father’s sons, and I am only his wife. You have a great deal to learn about the place of women. Now, I suggest we do this before Phelia has a change of heart, poor thing.”

Walking out to the carriage, Clara felt proud of Phelia. The way she held herself. The polite nod she gave to Dawson as they pulled away. The autumn sun was already near the horizon, the flame seeming to dance on the rooftops as the driver threaded his way through the streets. The city seemed clearer than usual, the sounds of wheels and voices sharper and more real than she was used to. The buildings they passed had rich textures in the stone of the walls. They passed a young Tralgu pushing a cart piled high with grapes, and Clara felt she could have counted each individual fruit. She felt as if she’d woken up twice without going to sleep in the middle. She wondered if it was how soldiers felt on the morning of a battle. It seemed likely.

Geder Palliako smiled at everything. She still thought of him as the pale, pudgy boy who’d ridden off to war in her son’s company. In truth, his travels had left him leaner and darkened by the sun. And more than that, his eyes had changed. Even when he’d returned from the city he’d killed, there had been a shyness to him. It wasn’t there any longer, and she thought he looked less handsome for the loss. She found herself wondering what he had really been doing all those weeks he pretended to have been in the Keshet. When his priest caught her staring, he smiled. She turned away.

The private courtyard wasn’t half dead any longer. As many lanterns and candles were glowing in the windows of Curtin Issandrian’s mansion as in Feldin Maas’s. The carriage jolted to a stop and a footman ran out with a step for them. Phelia first, and then herself. Geder Palliako, the only man of blood. Vincen Coe and the priest paused, unsure for a moment, and then the priest smiled and waved the huntsman on.

The door slave was a different man, Firstblood this time, but so thick with muscle he might have been the priest’s twin. Vincen and Geder turned over their swords and daggers. The priest had no weapons.

“The baron wanted to see you when you came,” the door slave said. “He’s in the rear hall.”

No honorifics, no *my lady*. He might have been speaking to anyone for all the respect in his tone. Clara wondered what sort of men Maas had been taking into service, and then instantly answered her own question. Mercenaries. Fighters. Sword-and-bows. The sort of men who kill for pay. And she was going into the enemy camp. Stepping over the threshold, she faltered. Phelia looked at her, alarmed. Clara shook her head and bulled on. She refused to accept support and comfort from someone in her cousin’s position. It would be rude.

In silence, Phelia led them down the wide corridor toward the room where she’d received Clara the last time she’d been. Fresh-cut flowers and garlands of autumn vine left the air smelling rich. The candlelight softened the corners and warmed the colors of the tapestries and the carpeted runner. Geder coughed. A nervous little sound.

At the base of the stair, Phelia turned right, and they all followed her. A short hallway that jogged at the end. Fewer candles were lit here. The shadows thickened and pressed in against them. At the far end of the hall, a thin servant’s staircase rose up and a wider set of doors stood closed. They wouldn’t have to go so far.

“Who’s that?” a man’s voice said.

In a recess, a man in hunting leather stood up from where he’d been sitting. The guard.

“My husband sent for me,” Phelia said. “They said he was in his private office.”

“He ain’t,” the guard said. “Who’re these?”

“The people my husband asked me to bring,” Phelia said tartly. Clara could hear the fear in her voice, the despair. She felt a surge of pride for the woman’s courage.

“He is here,” the priest said. His voice had an odd, unpleasant throbbing quality. “You’ve made a mistake. He’s in the room behind you.”

“No one in there, I’m telling you.”

“Listen. Listen. You’ve made a mistake,” the priest said again. “He’s in the room behind you. Knock on the door and he’ll answer.”

From the look on the guard’s face, Clara was fairly sure anyone beside the lady of the household would have already been knocked to the ground and reinforcements shouted for. Instead, the man turned to knock on the oaken door and Vincen Coe stepped up behind him, wrapping an arm across the guard’s neck and lifting him. The man choked and kicked, his hand clawing at Vincen’s arm. Clara closed her eyes, and the sounds alone were worse than the sight. After entirely too long, the guard went slack. Vincen lowered the body to the floor and stood with the guard’s drawn sword in his hand. Phelia drew a key from her sleeve, fitted it to the lock, and a moment later they were in Feldin Maas’s private study.

Vincen brought a candle in from the hallway, and by its light he found and lit the lamps. The room slowly grew lighter, taken by a dark, sullen sort of dawn. Shelves of dark wood and a thin writing desk with a brass inkwell and a white fluff of a feather quill. It was a larger space than Clara had expected. There were no windows, and a lattice of dark and light against one wall led her to think the room had once been used to store bottles. Phelia walked to the shelves like she was walking in her sleep. From amid the clutter of scrolls and codices, she took a simple wooden box, its top fastened with a hook and hinged with leather. She held it out to Geder Palliako.

“They’re ciphered,” she said. “I don’t know the code.”

Geder took the box, grinning like a boy with an unexpected present. As soon as it left her hand, Phelia closed in on herself, as if her bones had gone soft and smaller.

“Thank you, dear,” Clara said. “It was the only way. You know it was the only way.”

Her shrug was painful to watch.

“I don’t know how it came this far,” she said. “I truly don’t. If I could have—”

The roar was inhuman. Anger and wildfire and murder made sound. Clara screamed even before she knew what it was.

“*What in hell is this?*”

Feldin Maas stood in the doorway, a bare blade in his hand. His face was flushed almost purple with rage. Two more men stood behind him, blocked from entering. *If he closes that door, Clara thought, we’re trapped. And if we’re trapped, we’re dead.*

“No, Feldin,” Phelia said, walking forward. “It’s the right thing. It’s what we have to do. Lord Palliako’s promised mercy. He knew everything anyway.”

“You brought them here? *You betrayed me?*”

“I—”

Maas’s sword reached out swift and sudden as a lightning strike. Clara, behind her cousin, didn’t see the blade strike home, but she heard it. She saw the horrible play over Feldin Maas’s face: surprise, horror, grief, rage. Even before the blood, Clara knew the woman was dead.

Vincen Coe boiled past her, shouting and swinging his stolen blade like a scythe in a meadow. Maas fell back into the hallway from the sheer animal force of the attack. For a moment, the doorway was clear. Geder Palliako stood over the fallen woman, his jaw slack and his face pale. Clara pushed him, moving him toward the door.

“Go!” she shouted. “Before they seal us in!”

Geder and the priest hurried out. The sound of blade against blade almost made Clara pause. *I'll surrender*, she thought. They wouldn't harm a woman. It was an idiot's thought. A reflex. Against all instinct, she ran out toward the fighting.

If the corridor had been wider, Feldin and his two guards would already have gotten around Vincen and cut him down. Instead, the huntsman swung hard and fast, his blade filling the space, holding them at bay. Sweat was pouring down his face, and his breath was fast. Feldin waited with a duelist's eyes, looking for an opportunity.

"Run!" Vincen shouted. "I'll win you what time I can!"

Geder Palliako needed no more urging. He turned, sprinting down the hall toward the staircase and double doors. She caught a glimpse of the wooden box still in his hand. She took four steps after him, but turned back. The priest moved just behind her, retreating from the fight, but not fleeing. Vincen's shoulders worked like a laborer's.

"Oh," she heard herself say. "Oh, not this. Not this."

Feldin's blade swung high and hard, batting Vincen's swing aside. The guard to Feldin's left thrust past him, and Vincen grunted, leaping back. There was blood on the guard's blade. Vincen's blood, spilling on the floor.

"You can't win," the priest said, his voice loud and throbbing. Clara looked up at him, tears in her eyes, but he smiled and shook his huge head. "Lord Maas, listen to my voice. Listen to me. You cannot win."

"I will see your guts," Maas shouted.

"You won't. Everything you love is already gone. Everything you hoped for is already lost. You can't win. The fight is over. You've lost everything already. You have no reason to fight."

Feldin surged forward, but even Clara could see the change in his stance. His swing was more tentative, his weight on his back foot, as if reluctant to engage the fight he had just been winning. Vincen drew back, limping badly. His leathers were red and wet. Feldin didn't step forward.

"You saw her die, Lord Maas," the priest said. "You saw her fall. She has gone, and you can't bring her back. Listen to my voice. *Listen* to me. The fight's lost. Nothing you can do here matters. You can feel that. That thickness in your throat. You feel it. You know what it means. You cannot win. You cannot win. You cannot win."

One of the guards moved forward, his blade before him, but his gaze kept cutting back to Feldin. Feldin, whose eyes were caught on nothing. Vincen started to close with the man, but Clara rushed forward, put her hand on his arm, pulled him back.

"You can feel the despair in your belly, can't you? You feel it," the priest said. His voice was sorrowful, as if he regretted every word. Each syllable throbbed and echoed within itself. "You feel it in your heart. You're drowning in it, and it will never end. There is no hope. Not now. Not ever. You cannot win, Lord Maas. You *cannot* win. There is nothing for you. You've lost it all, and you know it."

"Lord Maas?" his guard said.

The point of Feldin's blade lowered to the floor like he was drawing a vertical line in the empty air. In the candlelight, it was hard to see, but she thought there were tears on his mask-empty face. The guards looked at each other, confused and unnerved. Feldin dropped his sword to the ground, turned, and walked away down the corridor. Clara trembled. The huge priest put one hand on her shoulder, one on Vincen Coe's.

"We should leave before he changes his opinion," the priest said.

They backed down the hallway, leaving a track of blood. The guards took a few uncertain steps toward them, then back toward their retreating lord. They reminded Clara of nothing more than hunting dogs given two conflicting commands. When they reached the double doors, Vincen stumbled. The priest lifted him up, slinging him over a shoulder. It took them minutes to find a door that led out, what seemed half the night to negotiate the darkened gardens and reach the edge of Maas's estate. A thick hedge marked the border, and the priest knelt by it, rolling Vincen Coe's body

to the ground. There were voices in the night. Shouting and calling. Searching, Clara thought, for them.

“Under here,” he said. “Watch over him. I’ll bring a cart.”

Clara knelt, pushing herself in through the twigs and leaves. The hedge had little space beneath it, but there was some. Vincen Coe dragged himself in after her, digging his elbows into the litter of dead leaves and old dirt. His face was ashen, and everything from his belly down was wet and slick. In the darkness, the blood wasn’t red, but black. She pulled him in close to her as best she could without proper leverage. She had the sudden visceral memory of being thirteen, hiding in her father’s gardens while one of her uncles dashed about pretending he didn’t know where she was. She shook her head. The memory was too innocent for the moment.

Vincen rolled onto his back with a groan.

“How bad is it?” she whispered.

“Unpleasant,” Vincen said.

“If Maas uses his dogs, we’re as good as found.”

Vincen shook his head, the leaves under him making the softest crackling sound.

“By now, I’m sure everything on the estate stinks of me,” he said. “Take them till morning to find which blood’s freshest.”

“Still feeling well enough to joke, I see.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Clara struggled to rise, squinting through the leaves. There was more shouting now. And, unless she was mistaken, the crash of swordplay. She felt sure she heard Jorey’s voice raised in command. In the close confines of their shelter, she felt the huntsman’s fast, shallow breath as much as heard it.

“Be strong a bit longer,” she said. “Just a bit longer.”

When he reached his hand to her, she thought it might be the last gesture of a dying man, but his fingers curled around the back of her neck, drawing her toward him with a definite strength. His lips were rough against hers, surprising and intimate and strong. Clara was shocked, but then gave a little internal shrug. The young man might be dead in the next few minutes, so really where was the harm?

When he released her, his head dropping the inch back to the ground, Clara wiped her mouth with the back of a well-soiled hand. Her lips felt pleasantly bruised, her mind by turns scandalized, flattered, and amused.

“You forget yourself,” she said reprovingly.

“I do, my lady,” the huntsman said. “With you, I often do.”

His eyes fluttered closed. His breath remained painful and quick, and Clara lay in the darkness, willing it to continue until she heard voices she knew as her own household, and started shouting for help.

Marcus

Qahuar Em scratched his chin, his head tilted at a considering angle. Marcus kept his expression bland. The table they sat across was polished oak with a burned-in knotwork pattern. It didn't have the green banker's felt that Cithrin used. Marcus had expected that it would, but perhaps the customs were different in Lyoneia. The tiny box that sat on the table was black iron with a lid that hinged on the side and the image of a dragon on the front. If there was some significance to the design she had chosen, he didn't know it.

"I'm sorry," Qahuar Em said. "This is confusing."

"Nothing odd about it," Marcus said. "Banks and merchant houses hold items of interest for each other all the time, I'm told."

"When they're closely allied, and one has people in a city where the other doesn't," Qahuar said. "Neither of those applies here."

"Strange circumstances."

"Which you aren't going to explain to me."

"I'm not," Marcus agreed.

Qahuar reached over and picked up the little box, cupping it easily in one palm. The lid opened with a clank, uncovering a brass key shorter than a finger bone. Marcus scratched his ear and waited for the man to speak.

"Why do I think this is going to be connected to something disagreeable and embarrassing?"

Qahuar asked, making it clear from his tone that an answer would be welcome but wasn't expected.

"I'm authorized to sign a statement that it's here at the request of Magistra bel Sarcour," Marcus said. "Press the key into wax and I'll put my thumb across it so there's no question we're talking about the same one. Anything you like."

The box closed again. The near-scaled fingertips tapped the oak with a sound like the first hard drops of a thunderstorm.

"I'm prepared to take no for an answer," Marcus said.

"The magistra and I didn't part on the best of terms," Qahuar said, pronouncing his words carefully. "She sent you rather than come herself. I find it hard to believe she's come to trust me."

"There's ways you can trust an enemy you can't always trust a friend. An enemy's never going to betray your trust."

"I think she would say I'd betrayed hers, and I can argue she did mine."

"Proves my point. You two were being friendly back then," Marcus said with a smile they both knew he didn't mean.

A soft knock came at the meeting room door. A full Jasuru woman in robes of grey and scarlet nodded to both men.

"The men from the shipyard, sir."

Qahuar nodded, and the woman retreated, closing the door behind her with a soft click.

"Going well, that?" Marcus asked.

"Well enough. It will take a year at least to have everything in order, but time moves both ways. Actions can have effects long before they themselves happen."

"Angry letters from the king of Cabral, for example?"

"Sometimes I wish I'd lost," Qahuar said. And then, "For more reasons than one. Captain, we're men well acquainted the world. I think we understand each other. Would you answer a question?"

"You won't mind if I lie?"

"Not at all. You're a man whose name is known all through the west. At the head of a private army, you could command any price you ask, but you're working guard captain for a branch bank. You aren't open to bribery. And—forgive me—you don't like me very much."

"None of that's a question."

"Are you in love with her?"

"I've loved a lot of people, and the word hasn't meant the same thing twice," Marcus said. "The job is to protect her, and I'm going to do the job this time."

"This time?"

Marcus shrugged and kept quiet. The bastard had gotten him to say more than he meant already. Marcus had to give it; Qahuar was good at what he did. The half-Jasuru stood up, his lips pursed. Slowly, deliberately, he put the box in the pouch at his belt.

"I hope I'm not going to regret this," he said.

"I expect it won't matter to you one way or the other," Marcus said. "For what it's worth, though, I appreciate your taking it on."

"You know it's not as a favor to you?"

"Do."

Qahuar Em held out a broad hand. Marcus rose to his feet and took it. It was an effort not to squeeze a little hard, just to show he could. The man's bright green eyes looked amused. And maybe something sadder as well.

"She's a lucky woman," Qahuar said.

God, let's hope so, Marcus thought but didn't say.

Autumn had come to Porte Oliva overnight. Trees that had been lush and full were dropping leaves that were still green in the center. The sunset winds were loud with their skittering. The bay had turned the color of tea, and stank at midday like a compost heap. The queensmen patrolling the twilight streets wore overcoats of wool and green caps that covered their ears. Marcus walked the narrow streets near the port, feeling the first bite of night's chill, and decided maybe he liked the city after all.

He found Master Kit and the others in a torchlit courtyard between a taphouse and an inn. Smit and Hornet were still putting the last adjustments on the stage supports while Master Kit barked instructions to them, not even in costume yet. A young woman was pacing behind them. She was fair-haired with large eyes that left Marcus thinking of babies and a tight-bound dress that showed her figure. Her hands were knotted before her, fingers wrestling one another like fighters in a melee.

Marcus walked over to Master Kit. Instead of saying hello, he nodded to the woman.

"New one?"

"Yes," the old actor said. "I have hope for this one."

"Had hope for the last one too."

"Fair enough. I have expectations of this one," Master Kit said. "Calls herself Charlit Soon, and I find she rehearses wonderfully. Tonight we'll see how she does with an audience. If she stays through tomorrow, I think I've found my full company."

"And she's what? Twelve years old?"

"Cinnae blood some generations back," Master Kit said. "Or that's the story, anyway. She believes it, and it may even be true."

"But you don't believe it?"

"I withhold judgment."

As if she'd heard them, the new actor glanced over at them and then away. Sandr jumped out the back of the cart and waved to Marcus. Either his fear had faded or he was a decent actor. Marcus waved back. Mikel, thin and weedy as ever, came out from the taphouse with a bucket of sawdust, Cary following behind with a broom.

"I heard rumor you might be leaving Porte Oliva."

"It's one possibility," Master Kit said. "We've played here almost an entire theatrical season. I think cities can get full on plays. Show too many, and I believe people become complacent. I don't want what we do to lose its magic. I was thinking of taking the company up to the queen's court at Sara-su-mar."

"Before the winter, or after?"

"I'll know more after Charlit's been onstage for a few nights," Master Kit said. "But probably before. When the ships leave for Narinisle."

"Well, do what's right, but I'll be sorry to see you go."

"I take it you're staying for the foreseeable future?" Kit said. Mikel began spreading the sawdust on the flagstone paving of the courtyard to soak up the damp, Cary sweeping along behind him. It seemed like an odd thing to do. The yard was only going to fill up with mud and piss and rain again.

"I can count the foreseeable future in days," Marcus said. "Weeks at best."

"You'd be welcome to travel with us," Master Kit said. "Yardem and Cithrin too. I think we all miss being caravan guards, just a little. It wasn't a role we'd ever had before, and I don't expect we will again."

"Master Kit?" Sandr called from behind the cart. "One of the swords is missing."

"I believe it's with Smit's bandit robe."

"It isn't."

Master Kit sighed, and Marcus clapped him on the shoulder and left him to his work.

Lantern flames and barn heat made the interior of the taproom warmer than the streets. The scent of roasting pork and beer competed with the less pleasant smell of close-packed bodies. Marcus kept one hand on his coins as he walked through the press. With so many distractions and people in so small a space, he'd have been shocked if there wasn't at least one cutpurse looking for a little luck. He saw Yardem first, sitting at a back table, then as he got closer, Enen and Roach, Cithrin and... Barth. That was his name. The Firstbloods were Corisen Mout and Barth, and Corisen Mout had the bad front tooth. Feeling unaccountably pleased with himself, Marcus sat at the table.

Cithrin raised her eyebrows, asking.

"It's done," Marcus said. "You? Things went well with the governor?"

"Fine," Cithrin said. "Paid the fee, left the box."

"The receipt?"

"Burned it," Cithrin said. "There won't be a trail back. As long as the governor doesn't get curious and force the lock, we're as ready as we're likely to get."

A servant hurried over, put a tankard of ale on the table in front of Marcus, and reached to take Cithrin's away. She stopped him, and he nodded his bow and darted away.

"What are the chances that the governor's baser instincts will get the better of him?" Marcus asked instead of *How much have you drunk?* If she were in danger of losing herself, Yardem would have stopped her. Maybe already had.

"Life is risk," she said as Roach, sitting beside her, sipped ale from his own tankard.

"Yardem was just telling us about the shapes of people's souls," Barth said. "Did you know your soul's a circle?"

Marcus shot a pained look at Yardem. The flick of an ear was the closest he got to an apology.

"Don't listen to anything he says, Barth. He's religious. It makes him nervous when things are going well."

"Wasn't aware they were going well, sir," Yardem said dryly.

Over the next hour, Marcus drank his tankard of ale, ate a plate of roast pork with a black sauce hot enough to bring tears to his eyes, and listened to the talk around the table. Barth kept on Yardem about souls and destiny, but Enen and Roach and Cithrin chewed on more practical matters: how many payments would be coming to the bank proper and how many to the room at the café, how to assure that no one attacked whoever carried the café payments across the city, whether to make arrangements with the queensmen to help enforce their private contracts. All the business and

consideration of a bank's owner to her people. Cithrin spoke like a woman sure of her fate, and Marcus admired her for that.

The banging of a stick on a tin pan interrupted them.

"Show's to start!" Mikel's voice threaded through the noise of the taproom. "Come and watch the show! Show's to start!"

Marcus dropped a few coins on the table, rose, and, half joking, offered Cithrin his hand.

"Shall we?" he asked.

She accepted his support with a mocking formality.

"It's what we've come here for," she said. Marcus led her and the members of his new company out to the pleasant cool of the courtyard to watch his old one. The crowd was good. Easily fifty people, and more likely to stop as they went in or out. When Master Kit strode out on the boards, his wiry hair pulled back and a sword strapped to his hip, a few people applauded, Marcus among them. Sandr came out a moment later, pretending to pick his teeth with a blunted dagger.

"You, Pintin, have been my second in command these many years," Master Kit said, thrusting out his chin in parody of heroism. "From the moments of my highest glory and the depths of my despair, you have followed me. Now once again the hounds of war are loosed, and we must fly before them. The armies of dark Sarakal descend upon the city tomorrow."

"Best we get out tonight, then," Sandr said. The crowd chuckled.

"Indeed, ours is not to stand and fight the doomed fight. The city surely shall fall, and before it does, Lady Daneillin—last of her house and gentlest beauty of Ellassae—must be taken safe away. That is our great work, Pintin. Our company is to fly this night with the great lady in our charge."

"Yeah, problem with that," Sandr said in his Pintin voice. "The men were on the city wall seeing who could piss the farthest. Seems the magistrate thought it was raining. They're all in the city gaol." Master Kit paused. The self-importance in his jaw melted.

"*What?*" he shrieked in comic falsetto. More people laughed. They were warming to it.

Marcus leaned toward Yardem Hane.

"I'm not like that, though," he said. "All that high dramatic talk and sucking my gut in. That's not what I'm like."

"Not at all, sir," Yardem said.

Two days later, Cithrin sat across the café table from him. A light rain pattered outside the open doors and windows, the stones at the entrance of the Grand Market darkened almost black. Behind him, two Kurtadam men were talking about the latest news from Northcoast. Another war of succession seemed almost certain. Marcus told himself he didn't care, and for the most part that was true. The world smelled of coffee and raindrops.

"If we have the free coin, I'm thinking about sponsoring one of the Narinisle ships next year," Cithrin said.

Marcus nodded.

"There's going to be uncertainty about the new fleet idea. Especially at first. If it's a success, even just for the first couple of years, it's going to increase the traffic through Porte Oliva. That could be a very good thing for us, so long as we're in position. Known to everyone. Trusted."

"All that assuming," Marcus said.

Cithrin swallowed. She'd lost weight in the last weeks, and her skin, while always pale, was growing pallid. It was odd to him that none of the men who came asking her patronage for a loan or offering to deposit their wealth with her for a discreet return appeared to notice that the anxiety was eating her. She wasn't sleeping enough. But she wasn't drinking herself to sleep either. That counted as strength enough for him.

"All that assuming," she agreed. And then, "Do you ever wish we'd run? Filled our pockets and just... gone?"

"Ask me again once the auditor's left," Marcus said.

She nodded. The ancient, half-blind Cinnae man limped in from the back. The rain seemed to have no good effect on his hips. Cithrin raised her empty cup, and Maestro Asanpur nodded with a knowing smile and turned back around.

"Magister Imaniel always said that waiting was the hardest thing," she said. "That the easiest way to lose was to get impatient. Do something for the sake of doing something and not because it's right. That always sounded obvious when he said it. He and Cam were the nearest thing I had to parents. I was with the bank almost as soon as I could walk. He knew everything about money and risk and how to appear one way when you're actually something else."

"He'd have made a good general, sounds like," Marcus said.

"No," she said. "I don't know. Maybe. He didn't like soldiers, though. He didn't like war. I remember he used to say that there are two ways to meet the world. You go out with a blade in your hand or else with a purse."

"Really? And here I thought there was money to be made from war."

"There is," Cithrin said. "But only if you're standing in exactly the right place. In the larger sense, there's always more lost in the fight than there is won. The way he said things, it sounded like we were all that kept the swords in their scabbards. War or trade. Dagger and coin. Those were the two kinds of people."

"Sounds like you miss him."

Cithrin nodded, then shrugged, then nodded again.

"I do, but not the way I thought I would. I thought it would all be about wanting to ask him what he knew, but most times when I think of him, it's just that it would be nice to hear his voice. And I don't even think of him as often as I'd expected."

"You've changed since you saw him," Marcus said. "That's one of the things Yardem used to tell me that actually made sense. He said that you don't go through grief like it was a chore to be done. You can't push and get finished quicker. The best you can do is change the way you always do, and the time comes when you aren't the same person who was in pain."

"And did that work for you?"

"Hasn't yet," Marcus said.

Maestro Asanpur returned with a fresh cup in his trembling hand. He placed it before Cithrin with a faint clink of fine ceramic. She blew across the surface of it, scattering the steam with her breath. When she sipped it, her smile lit the old Cinnae's face.

"Thank you, Maestro," she said.

"Thank *you*, Magistra," he said, and limped forward to close the shutters against the chill.

The patter of the raindrops grew heavier, the splashes like little detonations of white against the grey. She was right. Waiting for battle was the hardest part. Unless you got a dagger in your gut during the battle. Then that was hardest. Or you got through just fine and saw your men dead around you. Then that was.

Yardem appeared at the far side of the square, a darker shadow in a world made from them. He didn't run, didn't even hurry. Marcus watched the Tralgu endure his way past the queensmen and the market. With each step, he seemed to grow more solid. More real. He ducked his head as he came in the door.

"Sir."

"All right," Marcus said, his throat and chest tight. "All right."

Cithrin stood up. She looked calm. It would have taken living with her for the better part of a year to see the fear in her eyes and the angle of her chin.

"The auditor's come, then?" she said.

Yardem flicked his ears and nodded.

"He has, ma'am."

Cithrin

Paerin Clark.

Sometime during her years in Vanai, she must have heard the name. The syllables had a familiarity without detail, like a name from history or myth. Drakis Stormcrow. The Risen Guard. Aesa, Princess of Swords.

Paerin Clark.

Cithrin plucked at her skirt, keeping the lines of it neat and straight. Her heart pounded against her ribs like a trapped bird. Her belly was a solid knot that veered between cramping and nausea. She wanted something to drink. Something powerful that would loosen her muscles, calm her, give her courage. Instead she held herself the way Master Kit had taught her, her shoulders low and back, her spine loose, and prayed that she looked like a woman in full possession of her powers instead of a half-grown girl in her mother's clothes.

The mild-looking man sat at her desk, in her rooms, with his legs crossed and his fingers laced across his knee. His hairline was receding. His shoulders were narrow. He could have been anybody. He could have been no one. His notebook lay open on the table, a steel pen across it, but he didn't write notes. Not even ciphered ones. He asked his questions gently, and smiled when she spoke. His Northcoast accent was soft at the corners. Where other men's words hissed, his shushed.

"Magister Imaniel had no part in this, then?"

"No, none," Cithrin said. "The intention was solely that we should take the bank's Vanai assets to Carse. As far as Magister Imaniel knew, we were doing just that. If the snows hadn't come early to the pass at Bellin, we would have followed that plan."

"And the decision to divert to the south?"

"That was Captain Wester's."

"Tell me more about that."

No voices came from below them. Captain Wester and the guards were gone, sent out of the house by Clark. A dozen sword-and-bows that he'd brought with him had taken their place. The silence seemed wrong. Eerie. The rain pattered against the windows like a thousand tiny fingers poking at her, and the thunder muttered ominously in the distance. Cithrin recounted everything she could in the detail she could manage. Being intercepted by the Antean forces, smuggling the cart into Porte Oliva, hiding in the salt quarter.

"And only Captain Wester and his Tralgu were acting as guard at this point?"

"I don't know that I'd call Yardem 'his Tralgu.' "

"They were the only two guards?"

"Yes," Cithrin said.

"Thank you."

She told about the attack by Opal, about Marcus's fears of leaving the city and his fears of staying. She was careful, when she described forging the documents, to keep her tone calm and matter-of-fact. Magister Imaniel had always said that appearing guilty gave them the impression there was something to feel guilty for. When she admitted to filing false papers with the governor of Porte Oliva, the auditor didn't comment or even change expression. Once she was past the history of founding her false branch of the bank and began to outline her investments, loans, consignments, and commissions, she felt herself starting to relax.

She talked for the greater part of the evening. Her voice grew hoarse, and her back began to ache from sitting too long in one position. If Paerin suffered the same, he didn't show it.

"How much did Captin Wester advise you on these strategies?"

"He didn't," Cithrin said. "He didn't try, and I didn't ask him to."

"Why not?"

"He's not a banker. I gave him a budget that I thought was appropriate for the protection of the gold we kept here and for the moving of any substantial amounts within the city, but that's all."

"I see. Well. Thank you, Mistress bel Sarcour. That was the most interesting story I've heard in some time. I assume all the books and records are here?"

"Yes," she said. "I've also taken a room at a café by the Grand Market, but all of those records have been brought here."

"Excellent."

"I would also like to make a suggestion? If I may."

Paerin Clark raised his eyebrows. Cithrin took a deep breath.

"Due to circumstances," she said, "I have been identified closely with the bank here in the city. With the branch being so recently established, I think it wouldn't be in anybody's interest to change that. Once you've completed your audit, I hope you'll consider keeping me on as the public face of the branch."

Clark took up his pen and closed the still-unmarked notebook.

"I think you have misunderstood the situation," he said. "This... let's call it misadventure... has embarrassed the Medean bank in general and Komme Medean in particular. It has disrupted negotiations in Herez and Northcoast, and taken resources, myself included, away from some profoundly important situations. From what you've told me, I expect you've been taken in by a mercenary captain for reasons I haven't fathomed yet. But I am very, very good at what I do. If there's anything here you haven't told me, I will find it. I'm going to spend as long as it takes to review every transaction you've made. I already have three men going through the city asking about your activity. If there's anything that's not in these books, I'll find that too. And public gaol in Porte Oliva is far from the worst thing that can happen from here."

"Now, before I get started, I have one last question. I will ask you this only once. If you tell me the truth, I am in a position to see you're treated mercifully. If you lie, I can make your life unbearable. You understand?"

She should have been frightened. That was what Clark intended, certainly. Instead, an odd peace flowed into her. He was bullying her. He was condescending to her. He was underestimating her. And so her last reservations were laid to rest. The man was an ass, and anything she did to him would be justified.

"I understand," she said. She saw him hesitate, hearing something in her voice he hadn't expected. She smiled. "What was your question?"

"What aren't you telling me?" he asked

That I'm going to beat you, Cithrin thought. *That I am going to win.*

"If you have any questions, Master Clark, I am at your disposal," Cithrin said. "But my numbers balance."

For the next week, she lived in exile, sitting in the café or walking through the city streets during the days, sleeping at night at an inn not far from her bank. The auditor called upon her daily with lists of questions and clarifications: Why was the rate of interest specified in this contract, but not in another? Why was a particular sum withdrawn from the bank's reserves, and when would it be returned? Why was this loan accepted when another apparently of greater merit was refused? Cithrin sat in her rooms—*hers*, dammit—and allowed herself to be subjected to the examination. She knew every answer, and after a few days, it became something of a game to watch Clark try to catch her out. He was smart, and he knew his business. She even found herself respecting him. He had been doing this work since Cithrin was a hardly more than a child.

But then, so had she.

The ships left for Narinisle. They carried pressed oil, wine, cotton cloth, and the dreams and hopes of the merchant houses of Porte Oliva. But they didn't carry any agreements of capital from the Medean bank in Porte Oliva, because the audit was still progressing. Next year, maybe.

Cithrin stood on the seawall and watched the ships depart, towed out past the dangers of the bay, and then sails rising up and filling like spring flowers in bloom. She stood silently until they faded into the grey between sea and sky, and then she watched the haze. Seagulls called and turned in the wide air, complaining or celebrating. At her side, Captain Wester crossed his arms.

"Another one came to the café this morning," he said. "Your brewer lady and her son."

"What did you tell them?"

"Yardem talked with them. He said the same as the others. The audit's normal for a new branch, and please to go along with whatever the man asks. She wasn't happy. Wanted to talk with you. Didn't like it when he said that the two of you comparing notes would only make the auditor's job harder. Accused Yardem of accusing her of something."

"I'm sorry about that," Cithrin said. "I'd stop this all if I could."

"I know."

Cithrin pulled her cloak closer around her and turned away from the limitless sea back toward the city. Her city. She wasn't sure when it had become hers.

"With luck, we'll be back to normal before long."

He fell in at her side. She couldn't say if she matched his stride or if he matched hers.

"You still have the option of walking away," he said. "I can go get the key back. You can reclaim the box from the governor's palace. It wouldn't be so bad. Carse is a decent enough city. Even if there is trouble with the succession, you'd be safe there. No one tries to put Carse under siege. Give it a year, take your money. You could do anything."

"I couldn't do this," Cithrin said.

"Fair point."

They walked down long, whitewashed steps and along the wall toward the salt quarter. Somewhere along the way, they passed the spot where Opal had died, but she didn't recognize it and she didn't ask. A small wire-haired dog trotted by, yipped at them, and sped away when Marcus pretended to reach down for a rock to throw.

"Notice you haven't been drinking," he said.

I would drown a small child for a bottle of wine, Cithrin thought, but I am going to need my wits, and there won't be any warning.

"I don't miss it," she said.

"You haven't been sleeping."

"Don't miss that either."

The inn that had become their home while the bank itself remained under occupation sat at the corner of two of the larger of Porte Oliva's narrow streets. Its white walls and wooden roof looked cold under the low clouds. As they came near, a man stepped out of the doorway. She saw Marcus become alert without changing his stride. She felt a low burning in her throat.

The man came toward them. One of Paerin Clark's guards.

"He wants to see me?" Cithrin asked.

"Same as always, miss," the guard said. "I think he's finished up."

Cithrin took a deep breath. The time had come.

"May I bring the captain along?"

"Don't see why not."

The walk back to the bank was short, but Cithrin felt every step of it. It occurred to her that the dress she was wearing was the first she'd bought when she came to Porte Oliva, the one she'd

invented Hallskari salt dyes for in exchange for a five-coin reduction. The dress of a truly dangerous woman. She tried to take it as a good omen.

A Kurtadam boy walked by selling paper funnels with honeyed almonds, and Cithrin stopped to buy one. She popped two in her mouth, gave one to Marcus. Paerin's guard waited, and she tipped the paper toward him. Smiling, he took two. So he was willing to accept gifts from her. That meant he was either a cold bastard to the bone, or the news from the auditor was good. No, she thought, it meant the guard *believed* it was good.

For twenty days, she had been denied her room. Walking back up the stairs, she was prepared to choke down outrage, but when she reached the top, everything was precisely as it had been. Paerin Clark might have been a ghost for all the trace he left of himself.

The man sat at her desk. He was writing now, the illegible symbols of cipher coming from the nib of his pen without need of a code book. He nodded to Cithrin and then to Marcus, finished the line of script, and turned to them.

"Mistress bel Sarcour," he said. "I had one last question for you. I hope you don't mind."

His tone had changed markedly. She could hear the respect in it. That was fair. She'd earned it.

"Of course."

"I'm fairly sure I've guessed the answer, but there's a sum placed aside in the most recent books. Six hundred twelve weight of silver?"

"The quarter's profit for the holding company," she said.

"Yes," the auditor said. "That's what I thought. Please, have a seat both of you."

Marcus gave her the stool, choosing to stand behind her.

"I have to say, I am impressed with all this. Magister Imaniel trained you very, very well. We have, of course, suffered some loss. But in the main, the contracts you've made seem sound. The city fleet project was, I think, ill-advised, but since they refused your offer we don't have to concern ourselves with that."

Cithrin wondered what it was about the fleet that the auditor found problematic, but he was still speaking.

"I am making my report to the holding company now. My primary finding is that what you have done here was honestly intended to be in the interests of the bank as a whole. We are, unfortunately, obligated to a length of contract in Porte Oliva that doesn't match what we'd like, but I know you were doing the best you could. And while some aspects of your behavior were certainly outside the law, I see no advantage to seeking any legal redress."

"He means we got away with it?" Marcus asked.

"He does," Cithrin said.

"Good to know."

Paerin tapped his fingertips against the top of the desk, the deep lines of a frown marking his high forehead.

"I don't want to be forward, and I can't, of course, make any guarantees," he said, "but there may be a position for a woman with your talents in Carse. I would need to discuss it with Komme Medean and some of the other directors. But if you would like to make a career as a banker, I think you could find a start there."

You still have the option of walking away, Marcus had said less than hour earlier. She still did. It was time to burn that hope.

"I would prefer to have a start here," Cithrin said. "Have you considered my proposal?"

Paerin Clark looked at her blankly. Then, embarrassed for her, he nodded.

"Yes, that. No. We will be putting a recognized member of the bank in charge of the branch until it can be dissolved. Keeping you in your present position isn't possible."

Marcus chuckled.

"Does it make me a bad man that I was hoping he would say that?" he asked.

Cithrin ignored him. When she spoke, she sat straight and looked the auditor in the eye.

“You’ve overlooked something, sir. There’s a record book from Vanai that isn’t among these. It’s an old one, though. It doesn’t touch directly on your audit.”

Paerin Clark shifted his chair to face her. He crossed his arms over his chest.

“It is the book that records my status as ward of the bank,” Cithrin said. “It shows my legal age, and the date upon which I can begin to sign legally binding contracts. That would be next summer.”

“I don’t see how that—”

Cithrin gestured to the books, the piles of paper and parchment, the entire mechanism of her bank.

“None of these contracts is legal,” she said. “I am not legally permitted to enter into any agreement. I’m ten months too young.”

Paerin Clark’s expression was the same bland smile he’d worn the first day he’d come. It might only have been her imagination that he was a shade paler. Cithrin swallowed to loosen the knot in her throat.

“If the information in that book becomes public,” she said, “the bank will have to resort to direct appeal to the governor to either enforce the contracts anyway or reclaim the sums that were given out. I’ve met the governor, and I think that he is unlikely to take money away from his citizens to give to a bank that’s in a hurry to abandon his city.”

“And the book in question is where?” Paerin Clark asked.

“In a strongbox deposited with the governor under my name privately and separately from the bank. And the key to the box is in the keeping of a man with no incentive to see the bank succeed here. If I tell him what it unlocks, you can burn all these papers to light your cookfires.”

“You’re bluffing. If this comes out, you’re guilty of forgery, theft. Misrepresentation. You’ll be in gaol for the rest of your life, and all we’ll lose is money.”

“I can get her out of here,” Marcus said. “A city’s complement of queensmen half incapacitated from laughing at you? I can get her out of Birancour and in a decent house by midwinter.”

“We are the Medean bank,” Paerin Clark said. “You can’t outrun us.”

“I’m Marcus Wester. I’ve killed kings, and I’m lousy at bluffing. Threaten her again, and—”

“Stop it, both of you,” Cithrin said. “Here’s my offer. Keep the branch as it is, but install a notary from the holding company. We say it’s to help with the workload. I’m the face and voice, but the notary oversees all the agreements.”

“And when I refuse?”

She wanted a drink. She wanted a warm bed and man’s arms around her. She wanted to know for certain that she was doing the right thing.

“I burn this branch to the ground,” she said.

The world balanced on the edge of a blade. The auditor closed his eyes, leaned back in his chair. *Ah well*, Cithrin thought. *Life as a fugitive wasn’t so bad last winter. At least this time I can wear my own clothes.* Paerin Clark opened his eyes.

“You sign nothing,” he said. “All agreements are signed by the notary and the notary alone. Negotiations don’t happen without the notary present. If you’re overruled, you accept it. Control rests with the holding company. You’re a figurehead. Nothing more.”

“I can live with that,” she said. And also, unspoken: *Until I can change it, I can live with that.*

“And you return the missing book with evidence of your age to me. Before I leave the city.”

“No,” Marcus said. “She gives you that, she’s got no purchase. You could go back on everything, and she’d have nothing.”

“She’ll have to trust me.”

Cithrin swallowed. She wanted to vomit. She wanted to sing.

She nodded. Paerin Clark was still for a long moment, then he picked up the papers he’d been writing, sighed, and ripped them into small squares.

“It seems I have a somewhat different report to write,” he said, smiling wryly. “Congratulations on your new bank, Magistra.”

Geder

The funeral rites of Phelia Maas were somewhat overshadowed by the execution of her husband. Geder, given the choice, had opted for the execution, as had the majority of the great names at court. King Simeon's throne sat on a raised dais. Aster sat beside him in a smaller chair of the same design. King and prince both wore black ermine. Then there was the broad expanse of the chamber, Feldin Maas kneeling in its center. His ankles and wrists were bound with wire, and even from the gallery behind the woven rope, Geder could see the bruises on the man's legs and the long black scabs across his back. Ten executioners stood in a rough circle around the prisoner. Their masks were steel and made to look like snarling animals, and their blades were dull and rusted.

A single drum beat out its dry call. It was the only sound apart from some idiot whispering at the back the crowd. Geder tried to ignore the people and focus on the spectacle. Even though he'd arrived late, the assembled nobles had made room for him, so he had an excellent view just at the edge of the gallery. Dawson Kalliam and his two sons stood next to him. Geder was wearing his black leather cloak from Vanai, but the cut of it was all wrong now. His body had changed shape over the summer, and it hung loose on him. He wished he'd thought to get it recut. Everyone who wasn't watching Feldin Maas die seemed to be looking at him.

King Simeon, gray in the face and severe, lifted his arm. The drum went silent. The mass of people in all three levels of the gallery took in their breath. Even the idiot at the back stopped talking. "You have the courtesy of a final statement, traitor," the king said.

Feldin Maas shook his head slowly. No.

The king's arm fell. The executioners moved in, each man sinking the point of his blade hard into the man's flesh. Geder had been led to believe that the blades were fairly dull, and the force each of the killers used reinforced the idea. Maas cried out once, but only once. When the executioners stood back, he lay in a spreading pool of blood, the ten blades sticking out of his body. The assembly around him let its breath out with a sound like wind through trees.

King Simeon stood. Behind him, Prince Aster looked like a statue of himself carved from pale stone. Geder wondered what it would be like for a boy just past his ninth naming day to know that a grown man had been plotting to kill him and then watch the man die brutally.

"This is the right and proper fate of all who swear false loyalty to the Severed Throne," he said. "Let all who stand witness to this justice carry forth the word that all traitors to Antea will suffer and all will die."

The applause and shouts of approval burst forth all around. Geder joined in, and Dawson Kalliam leaned close to him, shouting to be heard.

"This is yours too, Palliako."

It was a kinder way of putting it than he'd used before the ceremony started. Then he'd said, *You've given Simeon a spine at last.*

The drum began again, and king and prince turned and walked out in solemn procession. Servants dressed in red came to carry out the body. Maas was to be displayed, swords still in place, for seventeen days. What was left after that would be thrown into the Division with the kitchen scraps and sewage, and anyone who tried to pull it out for a more respectful burial would be hung. Somewhere behind Geder, hidden by the nobles of Antea, the doors opened. With the king gone and the ceremony finished, conversation rose to a deafening roar. Geder couldn't make out what anyone

was saying over the noise of everyone else, so he just followed the subtle movement of the crowd and made his way out.

In the great halls of the Kingspire, the nobility of Antea broke into a hundred small groups. Dispersed, the din of the talk was less deafening if not particularly more comprehensible. He saw people pretending not to look at him, and he had some idea what they were saying: *Palliako claims he was wandering the Keshet, but he came back knowing all about the plot on Prince Aster and burning Vanai was all part of his plan and I told you his bringing loyal soldiers back just before the mercenaries tried to take the city was no coincidence.* He walked through the hall slowly, bathing in it.

“Sir Palliako. A word.”

Curtin Issandrian and Alan Klin walked up to him looking like bookends in the library of the damned. Geder smiled. Curtin Issandrian put out his hand.

“I’ve come to thank you, sir. I owe you a great debt.”

“You do?” Geder asked, leaving the man’s hand floating in the air between them.

“If it weren’t for you, I would still be in alliance with a secret traitor to the crown,” Issandrian said. “Feldin Maas was a friend, and I let that friendship blind me to his nature. Today has been a terrible day for me, but it has been necessary. And I thank you for it.”

Geder wished Basrahip had been there, just to know if Issandrian were what he pretended to be. Another time, though. There were months and years still to come when he and his Righteous Servant could ferret out every secret in the court. A little magnanimity now wouldn’t hurt anyone. He took Issandrian’s hand.

“You’re a good man, Geder Palliako,” Issandrian said, speaking just loudly enough to be overheard. “Antea is fortunate to have you.”

“Thank you, Lord Issandrian,” Geder said, matching him. “It is a strong man who can admit he was misguided. I respect you for it.”

They dropped hands, and Alan Klin came forward, his own hand extended. Geder grinned and took it, pulling the man close.

“Sir Klin!” he said, grinning. “It’s been too long.”

“It has. It truly has.”

“Do you remember that night on the march to Vanai when I got drunk and burned that essay I showed you?”

“Yes. Yes, I do,” Klin said, laughing as if they were sharing a nostalgic moment.

Geder laughed too, and then let the amusement drain from his face.

“So do I.”

He dropped Klin’s hand, turned, and walked away feeling like the ground itself was rising to meet his footsteps. Outside, the day was blue skies and chill winter wind. His father stood near the steps that led down to the carriages, watching the chaos of horses, wood, and wheels. He held a pipe in his hand, but there seemed to be no fire in it.

“So did the political process come to its logical end?” Lerer asked.

“Didn’t you watch?”

“I’m too old for blood sports. If the thing needs doing, then do it, but don’t make a theater piece out of it.”

“But the king has to make an example, doesn’t he? He’s trying to keep Asterilhold from interfering with us,” Geder said. He felt hurt that his father hadn’t watched Maas die. “They were going to *kill* Prince Aster.”

“I suppose,” Lerer said. “Still. I’ll be damned pleased to be home, get the stink of Camnipol off my skin. We’ve been away from Rivenhalm too long.”

If we are to understand the freedom of humanity, we must first understand its enslavement. The root of all races—even the Firstblood—exists in the reign of dragons, and the end of

that reign must by necessity mark the beginning of a peculiarly human history. It is not an exaggeration to say that the last breath of the last dragon was the first moment of the age of humanity in all its variety. But like all freedom, it was bounded and defined by that which came before. Our knowledge of the Dragon Empire is imperfect at best, but I contend that the discovery of the cave-palaces beneath Takynpal gives us our best view into what I have chosen to call the Age of Formation.

Geder flipped ahead, rereading pages he had translated before. The paper was brown with age, and fragile. He disliked handling it for fear that the pages would crack and flake away in his fingertips, but he needed to get as close to the original texts as he could. It seemed to him that there had to be something—some word or phrase that could have been translated in more than one way—that would mention the existence and history of the goddess.

The door of his sitting room swung open and Basrahip came in. He still wore his robes from the temple in the mountains, but he'd accepted a pair of leather-soled boots for walking on the cobbled streets of Camnipol. Among the rich red tapestries and soft upholstered chairs of the Palliako room in Camnipol, he looked entirely out of place. A desert weed in an arrangement of roses. He smiled at Geder and bowed.

"Been walking again?" Geder said.

"I knew tales of the great cities of the world, but nothing I had imagined could be so grand and so corrupt," the priest said. "A child not more than seven summers old lied to me. And for no reason."

"What did he say?"

The huge priest lumbered to a chair just across from Geder and lowered himself into it, the wood creaking under him as he spoke.

"That he could tell my future for three copper coins. He knew it was untrue. A child."

"He was a beggar," Geder said. "Of course they're trying to cheat you. They need the money for food. I think you should be careful where you walk, though. There are parts of the city that aren't safe. Especially after dark."

"You live in an age of darkness, my friend. But this city will be beautiful beyond measure when it is pure."

"Have you been to the temple?"

"I have," Basrahip said. "It is a beautiful building. I am looking forward to the day when I can make it my own."

"The paperwork shouldn't take long. Before the close of court, certainly, and that's less than a week now. But there's not much to do in Camnipol over the winter months."

"I have tasks enough."

"So I've been reading," Geder said, "and there's something bothering me."

"Yes?"

"The goddess is eternal. She was there at the birth of the dragons. She was there all through the Dragon Empire, but the only references I see to the Righteous Servant or the Sinir Kushku come at the very end, during the final war. And then they talk about it as if Morade created it, the way Asteril made the Timzinae or Vailoth made the Drowned. I just don't understand how that can be right."

"Perhaps then it cannot," the priest said. "You should put less trust in written words, my friend. They are the stone eggs of lies. Here. I will show you. Read something from your book there."

Geder flipped the pages, fingertips shifting across the words until he found a passage that was easily rendered.

"It was the fourth century of the Dragon Vailoth's rule when these policies changed."

"Is that true?" the priest asked him. "Is it untrue? Do you mean what you say? No, old friend. It's neither. Your voice carries nothing. They are only words you repeat emptily. To write a thing down is to kill it. Only in the living voice can the truth be known. My brothers and I have listened to one

another, passing the voice of the goddess down from generation to generation, and with every new speaking from the start, we have known what we heard to be true. These books you have? They are ink on paper. Objects. Soulless. You would be wiser not to put your faith in them.”

“Oh,” Geder said. “That’s... I’d never looked at things that way. Does that—?”

“Geder?”

Lerer Palliako stood in the doorway. His tunic was the blue and gray of House Palliako, formally cut with silver buttons on the sleeve. His hand clutched the doorway, as if he needed it to keep himself steady.

“What’s the matter, Father?”

“We have a visitor. You should come with me.”

Geder rose to his feet, alarm tightening his skin. Basrahip looked from the doorway to Geder and back.

“Stay here,” Geder said. “I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

Lerer walked in silence through the halls. The servants, usually buzzing through the rooms like bees in a meadow, were gone. At the door to the private meeting chamber, he stopped. For a moment, Geder thought he would speak, but instead he shook his head, opened the door, and stepped in.

The private chamber had been designed for comfort. Candles glowed from polished silver sconces, doubling their light and filling the room with the scents of honey and heat. A fire grate sat unlit and soot-blackened in its corner. Light spilled from the western window, and the pale silk chairs caught it, seeming almost to glow. A boy in a grey tunic looked up at him solemnly, and Geder felt he should have recognized the face. On the far wall, a huge painting the size of a standing man showed a green-scaled dragon towering above figures representing the thirteen races of man. And looking up at the painting, King Simeon.

The king turned.

Lerer bowed and said, “Your Majesty.” Geder bowed a moment later, quickly and with the sense of trying to catch up. The boy was the prince. Prince Aster and King Simeon.

“I am pleased to meet you at last, Geder Palliako,” the king said. Geder took the use of his given name as permission to stand.

“I... Um, thank you. It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Majesty.”

“You are aware that tradition calls for the prince to be taken in by a house of the highest reputation and nobility. A family that will swear to protect him should the need arise.”

“Ah,” Geder said. “Yes?”

“I have come to ask you to fill this role.”

“My father, you mean? Our house?”

“It’s not me he wants,” Lerer said. “It’s you.”

“I... I don’t know how to raise a boy. All respect, Your Majesty. I wouldn’t have the first idea what to do.”

“Keep him safe,” the king said. His voice didn’t sound commanding. It didn’t sound formal. It sounded like a man on the edge of begging or prayer. “Just keep him safe.”

“Right now everyone in court loves you or fears you, my boy,” Lerer said. “Half of them are saying you’re the first hero Antea’s seen in a generation, and the other half won’t mention you for fear of drawing your attention. I’m not sure it’s a good reason to take the title of protector.”

“I’m not doing it,” Geder said. “I’m no one’s protector. It’d be you, Father. You’re the Viscount of Rivenhalm.”

“But you are the Baron of Ebbinbaugh,” King Simeon said.

“Ebbinbaugh?” Geder said.

“Someone has to take Maas’s holdings,” Lerer said. “Seems that’s you.”

“Well,” Geder said, a grin spreading across his lips. “*Well*.”

Prince Aster rose and walked to Geder. He wasn’t a large boy. Geder had always thought he was taller. He had the gray eyes and serious face of the dead queen, but his father’s jaw.

"I owe you my life, Lord Palliako," the boy said. The cadence of his voice made the phrases sound rehearsed. "I would be pleased to have you as my protector, and swear that I should do honor to you as your ward."

"Do you want to?" Geder asked. The boy's formal expression faltered. Tears appeared, glistening in his eyes.

"They say I can't stay with Da anymore," he said.

Geder felt himself starting to tear up as well.

"I lost my mother when I was young too," he said. "Maybe I could be like an uncle? Or an older brother."

"I don't have any brothers," Aster said.

"See? Neither do I," Geder said. Aster tried to smile. "We'd probably need to visit your father a lot, though. And mine. God, am I going to have my own holding? Father, I'm going to have my own holding."

"You will," Lerer said. "I think his majesty didn't want to be the only one in the room losing a son."

Geder barely heard him. This morning, he'd been a hero. Now he had a barony of his own and a place in court that men fought and sometimes died to get. Sir Alan Klin would soil himself when he heard that he'd made an enemy of Prince Aster's protector.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I accept this duty and honor, and I'll make sure Aster's kept safe. I swear it."

The king was weeping, tears streaking down his cheeks, but his voice didn't waver when he spoke.

"I put my trust in you, Lord Palliako. I will... I will make the announcement at the close of court. I'll see you're seated appropriately for your new station. This is a brighter day for the kingdom. And I thank you for that."

Geder bowed. He wanted to run out in the streets, capering and singing. He wanted to go brag to all of his friends, starting with Jorey Kalliam and...

"Can I borrow the prince?" Geder asked. "Just for a few minutes? There's someone I want him to meet."

In the sitting room, Basrahip had moved to Geder's chair. The huge hands turned the pages slowly, the broad face twisted with disdain. Geder cleared his throat. The priest looked up, his eyes shifting from Geder to the prince standing at his side.

"Basrahip, high priest of the goddess, may I introduce my new ward Prince Aster. Prince Aster, this is Basrahip."

The prince walked forward, stopped the appropriate distance away, and bowed his small head. He looked like a kitten greeting a bull.

"I am very pleased to meet you, sir," the prince said.

Basrahip smiled.

"No," he said, softly. "You aren't. But give it time, young prince. Give it time."

[extras](#)



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meet the author



Kyle Zimmerman

DANIEL ABRAHAM is the author of the critically acclaimed Long Price Quartet. He has been nominated for the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards, and won the International Horror Guild award. He also writes as MLN Hanover and (with Ty Franck) James S. A. Corey. He lives in New Mexico. Find out more about the author at www.danielabraham.com.

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interview

The Dragon's Path marks the beginning of a new epic fantasy project for you. What was the impulse behind this project, and how was it different from the other books you've written?

Actually, that's kind of a hard question. The impulse behind a project isn't something I can really describe. You know, apart from saying that it seemed nifty. But I can talk about the approach. That was very different from what I've done before.

How so?

Well, the last epic fantasy—or second world fantasy or however we want to talk about it—was my first big book, essentially. I wanted to do something different and novel, no pun intended. And I wanted to learn how to write book-length fiction. I'd done a lot of short stories, and I felt pretty comfortable with that length, but novels were a different beast.

That's interesting. We should get back to that, but tell me a little about the novelty. What do you mean by that?

I mean, I wanted to do something that people hadn't seen before. I wanted an epic fantasy without much violence. I wanted to tell a few people's stories over the span of their whole lives. I wanted to set it someplace that wasn't a medieval Europe analogue. I wanted to write something that was different. And I did, and I'm proud of it. But part of what I learned is that different is easy in a way I hadn't expected. And I started getting interested in something else. I started thinking about how to take elements that are maybe more familiar and remake them. That's not quite right. I don't mean take out hoary old tropes and shine them up. I mean, go to what makes epic fantasy epic fantasy—find the genre's strength—and really engage with it.

How did you go about that?

Well, back in 2007 I arranged a conversation. A friend of mine has a place just outside Santa Fe with a really nice living room that looks out over the desert, and she let me have kind of a party there. I called it my symposium. We had George R. R. Martin and S. M. Stirling and Walter Jon Williams and Melinda Snodgrass and a few others—a lot of the local folks—and basically we sat around all day talking about what epic fantasy is and does. Where it gets its juice. I have something like four or five hours of recordings from that. I took what we said there and I turned it over in my head until I really understood what my opinions were. And that was the start of *The Dagger and the Coin*.

That sounds like a fascinating day. Was there a consensus? Did everyone there have more or less the same opinion on the subject?

Not exactly, no. But there were points that were pretty widely agreed on. Epic fantasy has a lot to do with nostalgia. There's that sense of looking back at a golden age, and a lot of the time with a sense of loss. Tolkien came up a lot. Pretty much everything since *The Lord of the Rings* has been written in imitation of or reaction against *The Lord of the Rings*. But it also has to do with how the story relates to nature, and whether the world is essentially benign.

The biggest thing that I took away from it, though, is that epic fantasy—and maybe this is true for all literature—but epic fantasy is a conversation. Without Tolkien, you don't have Terry Brooks, but you also don't have Stephen Donaldson. Without Donaldson and the rise of the

antihero in fantasy, you probably don't have *A Song of Ice and Fire*. In a way, that gave me permission.

Permission for what, exactly?

Permission to react, I guess. Permission to be part of a greater body of literature than just what I'm doing right here. That sounds pretentious, doesn't it? How about this: it gave me permission to take the things I love best and use them. So, for instance, I have a real fascination with medieval banking. There's a book called *Medici Money* by Tim Parks I've read a half dozen times. So I grabbed that. And I thought about Dorothy Dunnnett's House of Niccolo books and George's Ice and Fire books and all the adventure stories I grew up with. By talking about the things that unify the genre, I sort of loosened up about celebrating them. I thought about what it felt like to read David Eddings when I was fourteen, and get back to the things that would do that for me at forty. If that makes sense.

You were talking before about writing novels as being different than short fiction. You've written a lot of short stories in your career. How do they differ from the longer work?

Well, the short stories tend to be weirder than the books. They're very different forms. There are stories that just pop in thirty pages that would lay there like yesterday's fish at three hundred. I'd say I probably do more experimental, difficult-to-categorize short stories and then use the books to apply what I learned there.

You have a long history, I understand, of working in writers' workshops. You attended Clarion West in 1998. You are a frequent participant at the Rio Hondo workshop in Taos. You were in a critique group in New Mexico for almost a decade. How much do you think that kind of experience helps writers?

For as much time as I've put in them and as much benefit as I've gotten from them, I'm actually still a little leery about them. If you get a good one, it's invaluable. I have no doubt at all that I came out of Clarion West and Rio Hondo and the local crit group better than when I went in. But there's the ones you didn't talk about too. I took a bunch of creative writing classes in college that I don't think did much. I was in a couple groups before that weren't much use, and were really probably counterproductive. A workshop depends on the people in it. Good people are great. Lousy people are perhaps less great, right?

introducing

If you enjoyed
THE DRAGON'S PATH,
look out for

THE KING'S BLOOD

Book Two of The Dagger and the Coin
by Daniel Abraham

CAPTAIN MARCUS WESTER

Sometime, centuries before, someone had built a low wall along the top of the rise. In the moonlight, the scattered rocks reminded Marcus of knucklebones. He knelt, one hand on the dew-slick grass. In the cove below him, three ships rested at anchor. Shallow-bottomed with paired masts. Faster and more maneuverable than the round-bellied trade ships that they hunted. One showed a mark on the side where she'd been struck not too many weeks before, the new timber of the patch bright and unweathered.

On the sand, a cookfire still burned, its orange glow the only warmth in the early autumn night. From where they stood, Marcus counted a dozen structures—more than tents, less than huts—scattered just above the tide line. A well-established camp, then. That was good. A half dozen stretched-leather boats rested near the water.

Yardem Hane grunted softly and pointed a wide hand to the east. A tree a hundred feet or so from the water towered up toward the sky. A glimmer, moonlight on metal, less than a third of the way to its tip showed where the sentry perched. Marcus pointed out at the ships. High in the rigging of the one nearest the shore, another dark figure.

Yardem held up two fingers, wide brows rising in question. *Two watchers?*

Marcus shook his head, holding up a third finger. *One more.*

The pair sat still in the shadows made darker by the spray of fallen stone. The moon shifted slowly in its arc. The movement was subtle. A single branch on the distant tree that moved in the breeze more slowly. Marcus pointed. Yardem flicked an ear silently; he wore no earrings when they were scouting. Marcus looked over the cove one last time, cataloging it as best he could. They faded back down the rise, into the shadows. They walked north, and then west. They didn't speak until they'd traveled twice as far as their low voices would carry.

"How many do you make out?" Marcus asked.

Yardem spat thoughtfully.

"Not more than seventy, sir," he said.

"That's my count too."

The path was hardly more than a deer trail. Thin spaces in the trees. It wouldn't be many weeks before the freshly dried leaves of autumn fell, but tonight their steps were muffled by well-rotted litter and a summer's soft moss. The moon was no more than a scattering of pale dapples in the darkness under the leaves.

"We could go back to Porte Oliva," Yardem said. "Raise a hundred men. Maybe a ship."

"That's possible."

In the brush, a small animal skittered, fleeing before them as if they were a fire.

"The one farthest from shore was riding lower than the others," Marcus said.

"Was."

"We come in with a ship, they'll see us. It'll be empty water by the time we're there."

Yardem was quiet apart from a small grunt when his head bumped against a low branch. Marcus kept his eyes on the darkness, not really seeing. His legs shifted and moved easily. His mind gnawed at the puzzle.

"If they see us coming on land," he said, "they haul out boats and wave to us from the sea. We trap them on land in a fair fight with the men we have now, they have numbers and territory on us. We wait to get more sword-and-bows, and they may have moved on."

"Difficult, sir."

"Ideas?"

"Hire on for an honest war."

Marcus chuckled.

His soldiers were camped dark, but the sound of their voices and the smells of their food traveled in the darkness. He had fifty men of several races—otter-pelted Kurtadae, black-chitined Timzinae, Firstblood. Even half a dozen bronze-scaled Jasuru hired on at the last minute when their contract as house guards fell through. It made for more tension in the camp, but the usual racial slurs were absent. They were Kurtadae and Timzinae and Jasuru, not *clickers* and *roaches* and *pennies*. And no one said a bad word about the Firstblood when one of them would decide who dug the latrines.

And, to the point, the mixture gave Marcus options.

Aharel Akkabrian had been one of the first guards when the Porte Oliva branch of the Medean bank had been a high-stakes gamble with all odds against. His pelt was half a shade greyer now, especially around his mouth and back, but the beads woven into it were silver instead of glass. He sat up on his cot as Marcus ducked into the tent. His eyes were bleary with sleep, but his voice was crisp.

"Captain Wester, sir. Yardem."

"Sorry to wake you," Yardem said.

"Aharel," Marcus said. "How long could you swim in the sea?"

"Me, you mean, sir? Or someone like me?"

"Kurtadae."

"Long as you'd like."

"No boasting. It's past summer. The water's cold. How long?"

Aharel yawned deeply and shook his head, setting the beads to clicking.

"The dragons built us for water, Captain. The only people who can swim longer and colder than we can are the Drowned, and they can't fight for shit."

Marcus closed his eyes, seeing the moonlit cove again. The ships at anchor, the shelters, the hide boats. The coals of the fire glowing. He had eleven Kurtadae, Aharel included. If he sent them into the water, that left a bit over thirty left. Against twice that number. Marcus bit his lip and looked up at his second in command. In the light of the single candle, Yardem looked placid. Marcus cleared his throat.

"The day you throw me in a ditch and take control of the company?"

"Not today, sir," Yardem said.

"Afraid you'd say that. Only one thing to do then. Aharel? You're going to need some knives."

Marcus rode to the west, shield slung on his back and sword at his side. The sun rose behind him, pushing his shadow out ahead like a gigantic version of himself. To his left, the sea was bright as beaten gold. The sentry tree was just in sight. The poor bastard on duty would be squinting into the brightness. The danger, of course, being that he wouldn't look at all. If Marcus managed an actual

surprise attack, they were doomed. He had the uncomfortable sense that God's sense of humor went along lines very much like that.

"Spread out," he called back down the line. "Broken file. We want to look bigger than we are."

The call came back, voice after voice repeating the call. Timing was going to matter a great deal. The land looked different in the sunlight. The cove wasn't as distant as it had seemed in the night. Marcus sat high in his saddle.

"Come on," he murmured. "See us. Look over here and see us. We're right *here*."

A shiver along a wide branch. The leaves bent back light brighter than gold. A horn blared.

"That was it," Yardem rumbled.

"Was," Marcus said. He pictured the little shelters, the sailors scuttling for their belongings, for their boats. He counted ten silent breaths then pulled his shield to the front and drew his sword.

"Sound the charge," he said. "Let's get this done."

When they rounded the bend that led into the cove, a ragged volley of arrows met them. Marcus shouted, and his soldiers picked up the call. From the far end of the strip of sand, ten archers stood ground, loosing arrows and preparing to jump into the last hide boat and take to the safety of the water, the ships, and the sea. The other boats were already away, rowing fast toward the ships and loaded with enough men to defeat Marcus's force.

The first was a dozen yards from shore and already sinking.

In the bright water, hidden by the glare of the sun, nearly a dozen Kurtadae with long knives put new holes in the boats.

Marcus pulled up, waving to his own archers to take the shoreline while the Jasuru charged the enemy and their boat, howling like mad animals. A few figures appeared on the ships, staring out at the spectacle on shore and in the tidepool. The first boat vanished. The second was staying more nearly afloat as the men in it bailed frantically with helmets and hands. They weren't rowing, though. It wouldn't get them any farther.

Marcus lifted his hand and his archers raised bows.

"Surrender now and you won't be harmed!" he shouted over the surf. "Or flee and be killed. Your choice."

In the surf, one of the sailors started kicking for the ships. Marcus pointed at him with his sword. It took three volleys before he stopped. As if on cue, the black bobbing heads of Ahariel and the other Kurtadae appeared in a rough line between the sinking boats and the ships. As Marcus watched, the swimming Kurtadae lifted their knives above the water, like the ocean growing teeth.

"Leave your weapons in the water," Marcus called. "Let's end this gently."

They emerged from the waves, sullen and bedraggled. Marcus's soldiers took them one by one, bound them, and left them sitting under guard.

"Fifty-eight," Yardem said.

"There's a few still on the ships," Marcus said. "And there's the one we poked full of arrows."

"Fifty-nine, then."

"Still outnumbered. Badly outnumbered," Marcus said. And then, "We can exaggerate when we take it to the taphouse."

A young Firstblood man walked out of the sea. His beard was braided in the style of Carbal. His eyes were bright green, his face thin and sharp. His silk robe clung to his body, making his potbelly impossible to hide. Marcus kicked his horse and trotted up to him. He looked like a kitten that fell in a creek.

"Macero Rinál?"

The pirate captain looked up at Marcus with contempt that was as good as acknowledgment.

"I've been looking for you," Marcus said.

The man said something obscene.

Marcus had his tent set up at the top of the rise. The stretched leather clung to the frames and kept the wind out, if not the flies. Macero Rinál sat on a cushion wrapped in a wool blanket and

stinking of brine. Marcus sat at his field desk with a plate of sausage and bread. Below them, as if on a stage, Marcus's forces were involved with the long process of unloading the surrendered ship, hauling the cargo to land, and loading it onto wagons.

"You picked the wrong ship," Marcus said.

"You picked the wrong man," Rinál said. He had a smaller voice than Marcus had expected.

"Five weeks ago, a ship called the *Stormcrow* was coming west from Maccia in the Free Cities heading for Porte Oliva in Birancour. It didn't make it. Waylaid, the captain said. Is this sounding familiar?"

"I am the cousin of Prince Esteban of Carbal. You and your magistrates have no power over me," Rinál said, lifting his chin as he spoke. "I invoke the Treaty of Carcedon."

Marcus took a bite of sausage and chewed slowly. When he spoke, he drew the syllables out.

"Captain Rinál? Look at me. Do I seem like a magistrate's blade?"

The chin didn't descend, but a flicker of uncertainty came to the young man's eyes.

"I work for the Medean bank in Porte Oliva. My employers insured the *Stormcrow*. When you took the crates off that ship, you weren't stealing from the sailors who were carrying them. You weren't even stealing from the merchants who owned them. You were stealing from us."

The pirate's face went grey. The leather flap opened with a rustle and Yardem came in. His earrings were back in place.

"News?" Marcus said.

"The cargo here matches the manifests," Yardem said. He was scowling, playing to the dangerous reputation of the Tralgu. Marcus assumed it amused him. "We're in the right place, sir."

"Carry on."

Yardem nodded and left. Marcus took another bite of sausage.

"My cousin," Rinál said. "King Sephan—"

"My name's Marcus Wester."

Rinál's eyes grew wide and he sank back on the cushion.

"You've heard of me," Marcus said. "So you know that the appeal-to-noble-blood strategy may not be your best choice. Your mother was a minor priestess who got drunk with a monarch's exiled uncle. That's your protection. Me? I've killed kings."

"*Kings?*"

"Well, just the one, but you take the point."

Rinál tried to speak, swallowed to loosen his throat, and then tried again.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to reclaim our property, or as much of it as you have left. I don't expect it'll make up the losses, but it's a beginning."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"You mean if I don't take you to justice? I'm going to come to an understanding with you."

A cry rose up from the beach below them. Dozens of voices raised in alarm. Marcus nodded to the captive, and together they walked out into the light. On the bright water below them, the ship farthest from the shore was afire. A plume of white smoke rose from it, and thin red snake-tongues licked at the mast, visible even from here. Rinál cried out, and as if in answer a roll of sudden black smoke bellied out from the flame.

"Don't worry," Marcus said. "We're only burning one of them."

"I'll see you dead," Rinál said, but there was no power in his voice. Marcus put a hand on the man's shoulder and steered him back into the shade of the tent.

"If I kill you or if I burn all your ships," Marcus said, "then by this time next year, there's just going to be another bunch like yours in the cove. The bank's investments are just as much at risk. Nothing changes, and I have to come back here and have this same talk with someone else."

"You've burned her. You burned my ship."

“Try to stay with me,” Marcus said, lowering Rinál back to the ground. The pirate put his head in his hands. Marcus took the two steps to his field desk and took out the paper Cithrin had prepared for him. He’d meant to drop it haughtily at the pirate’s feet, but the man seemed so shaken he tucked it into his lap instead.

“That’s a list of the ships we insure out of Porte Oliva. If I have to find you again, offering yourself to the magistrate is the best thing that could happen.”

The breeze shifted and the smell of burning pitch filled the tent and spoiled the taste of the sausages. The leather walls chuffed like tiny sails. Rinál opened the papers.

“If the ship’s not listed here...”

“Then it’s no business of mine.”

“I’m not the only ships on these waters,” he said. “If someone else...”

“You should discourage them.”

The color was starting to come back to Rinál’s cheeks. The shock had begun to fade and the old righteousness return, but it was tempered now. The voices coming up from the water were brighter now, laughing. Those would be Marcus’s soldiers. A wagon creaked. It was time to move on.

“You’ll travel with us as far as Cemmis township,” Marcus said. “That’s not too far to walk back from before your people get sick from thirst.”

“You think you’re such a big man, no one can take you down,” the pirate said. “You think you’re better than me. You’re no different.”

Marcus leaned against the field desk, looking down at the pirate. In truth, Rinál was a young man. For all his bluster and taking on airs, he was the same sort who tripped drunk men in taprooms and groped women in the street. He was a badly behaved child who, instead of growing to manhood, found a few ships and took his bullying out in the world where it could turn him a profit.

A dozen replies came to Marcus. *When you’ve watched your family die, say that again and Grow up, boy, while you still have the chance* and *Yes, I’m better than you; my ship isn’t burning.*

“We’ll leave soon,” he said. “I have guards posted. Don’t try to go without us.”

Outside, the little two-masted ship roared in flame. Black smoke billowed from her, carrying sparks and embers up to wheeling birds. Marcus walked down the rise to where the carts were lining up, prepared to head back home. One of his younger Kurtadae was in the medical wagon, his arm being shaved and bound. Beneath the pelt, his skin looked just like a Firstblood’s.

Three of the enemy sailors were laid out under tarps. The rest, bound in ranks with arms bent back, were sullen and angry. Marcus’s men were grinning and trading jokes. It was like the aftermath of a battle, only this time there’d hardly been any bloodshed. The wet sand was smooth and even where the waves washed their footprints away. The mules, ignoring the smell of flames and the banter of soldiers, pulled wagons filled with silks and worked brass back toward the road. The smells of salt and smoke mixed.

Marcus felt the first tug of darkness at the back of his mind. The aftermath of any fight—great battle or taproom dance—always had that touch of bleakness. The brightness and immediacy of the fight gave way, and the world and all its history poured back in. It was worse when he lost, but even in victory, the darkness was there. He put it aside. There was real work to be done.

Yardem stood by the head wagon, a Cinnae boy on a lathered horse at his side. A messenger. As he approached, the boy dropped down and led his mount away to be cared for.

“Where do we stand?” Marcus asked.

“Ready to start back, sir. But might be best if I led the column. The magistra wants you back at the house as soon as you can get there.”

“What’s happened?”

Yardem shrugged eloquently.

“An honest war,” he said.

Entr'acte

The Apostate

The apostate groaned, rolling over on his thin mattress. The first bare light of dawn outlined the stable door, and in his blood, the spiders shuddered and danced, agitated as they had been for weeks now. In the twenty years he had traveled the world, the taint in his blood had never troubled him as much as these last weeks. Around him, the others still slept, their deep and regular breath reassuring as a thick wool blanket. The stables were warm, or warmer at least than sleeping in the cart would have been. He wouldn't have to break a skin of ice off the water bucket before he drank. When he sat up, his spine ached. Maybe from the coming winter, maybe from the years weighing down his shoulders, maybe from the restlessness of the creatures that lived in his skin.

One of the horses snorted in its stall, shifting uneasily. From the shadows, there was a tiny gasp. He went still, straining to hear.

"I won't finish," a familiar voice whispered. "I swear I won't finish."

The apostate closed his eyes. It never changed. All through the world, likely all through the ages and epochs of humanity, some things simply never changed. He swallowed, readying his voice. When he spoke, the words carried through the stables and out into the yard.

"Sandr! If you get that girl pregnant, I will be sorely tempted to tie off your cock with a length of wire, and I swear it will not improve your performance."

The voice that had gasped squeaked in alarm, and Sandr rushed into the dim light, pulling at his tunic to cover himself.

"There's no one here, Master Kit," the boy lied. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Which performance do you mean?" Smit asked in a sleepy voice. "Seems to me that if you're talking about stagecraft, tying yourself down might be a decent exercise in concentration."

"Help him play a hunchback," Cary said through a yawn.

"There's no one here," Sandr said again. "You're all imagining things."

The scrape of a board at the stable's back marked the girl's escape, whoever she was. The apostate rose to sitting. Horner lit a lantern, the warm light chasing away the darkness. With groans and complaints, the company came to life. As they always did. Charlit Soon, the new actress, was looking daggers at Sandr. Yet another irritation the apostate would have to soothe. He wondered, and not for the first time, how anyone without the spiders could keep an acting company together for any length of time. But perhaps they couldn't.

"Up," he said. "I'm sure there's work to be done that will make us more money than lying here in the dark. Up, you mad, beautiful bastards, and let us once more take the hearts and dreams of Porte Oliva by storm."

"Yes, Mother," Cary said, rolled over, and fell back to sleep.

The first time he'd met Marcus Wester, the apostate had given him a private name: the man without hopes. In the last year, the despair had faded a bit, but sometimes Wester would still make his little jokes—*I'm too stubborn to die* or *You don't need love when there's laundry to wash*—and the people around him would chuckle. Only the apostate knew how deeply the man meant what he said.

It was what made the mercenary captain interesting.

The taproom near the bank had the advantage in these cold months of keeping food and a warm fire. Cary and Charlit Soon would set up in the common room some nights, singing songs from the lighter comic operas and making between them enough to feed the whole company for three days.

"Always best to keep your political assassinations discreet," Wester said. "Really, that was where I went wrong. Well, it's not the first place I went wrong."

"One of the places, sir," Yardem Hane said.

"Will it keep Northcoast from violence, do you think?"

"They poisoned a man so he'd vomit himself to death," Marcus said. "That's violence. But with his claim disposed, I don't see any swords taking the field, no. So that's good for the Narinisle trade. And apparently Antea's decided not to descend into civil war either."

"I didn't know they were on the dragon's path," the apostate said, taking a sip of his ale. During winter, they kept it in the alley under guard, so it was as cold as the rooms were warm.

"Didn't either. This new notary gets reports from everywhere, though. It's one of the advantages of being part of a bank where the bank people know about you. Anyway, it seems the only thing that kept the court in Camnipol from turning on each other like a pack of starving dogs was a religious zealot from the Keshet."

"Really?"

"Well," Wester said, "he's a real Antean noble, but apparently he spent time in the Keshet and came back with a bad case of the faith. Exposed some sort of plot, turned the court on its ears, and built a temple just down the street from the Kingspire to celebrate."

"There's nothing sinister about building temples, sir," Yardem said. "People do it all the time."

"Not in celebration," Wester said. "People go to God when they've got trouble. Things are well, there's not much point sucking after the divine."

Yardem flicked a jingling ear and leaned toward the apostate.

"He says these things to annoy me."

"Always works."

"It does, sir," the Tralgu lied.

"And the Goddess of Round Pies seems especially dim."

"Round pies?" the apostate asked.

"The cult's got a symbol. Big red banner with a white bit in the middle, and what looks like eight bits of pie all stuck together."

"Eight points on a compass," Yardem said.

No, the apostate thought, dread pouring into him like dark water. No, the eight legs of a spider.

"You all right, Kit?" Wester asked. "You're looking pale."

"Fine," the apostate said. "Just fine."

But in his mind there was a single thought:

It's begun.

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Any errors and infelicities are entirely my own.

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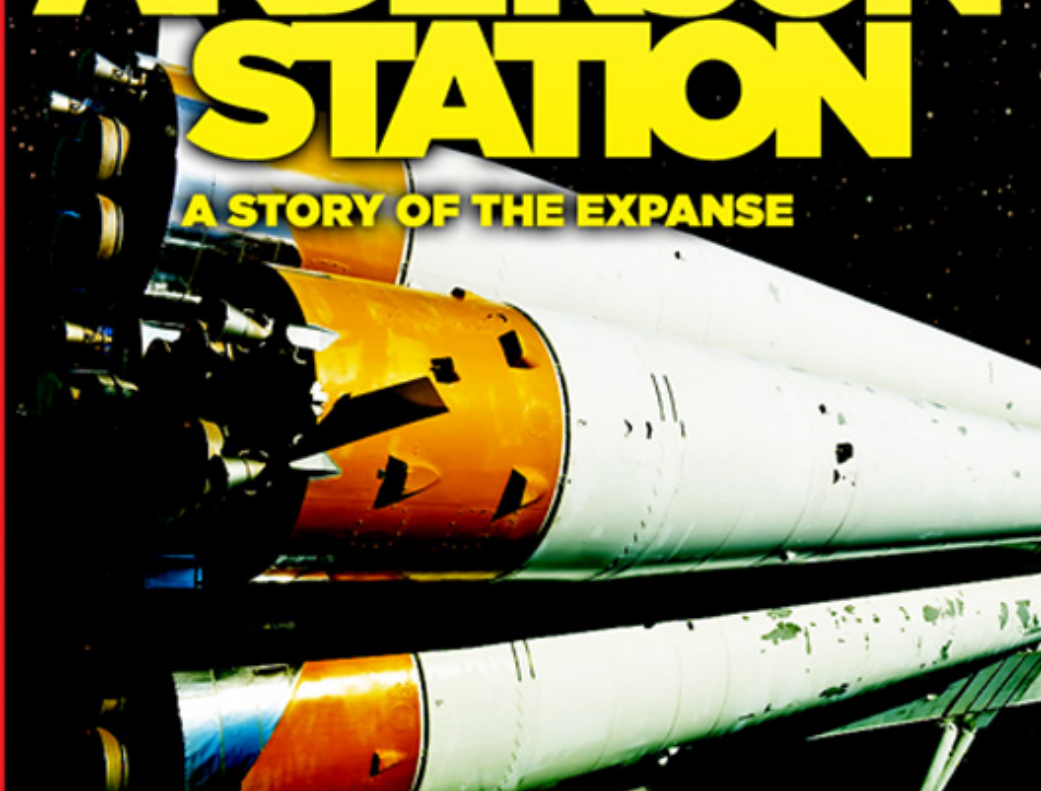
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JAMES S. A. COREY

THE BUTCHER OF ANDERSON STATION

A STORY OF THE EXPANSE



The Butcher of Anderson Station

A Story of The Expanse

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The Butcher of Anderson Station

When Fred was a kid back on Earth, maybe five or six years old, he'd seen a weed growing in the darkness of his uncle's cellar. The plant had been pale and thin but twice as tall as the ones out in the side yard, deformed by reaching for the sunlight. The man behind the bar looked just like that: too tall, too pale, too hungry for something he'd never had and never would. Belters were all like that.

The music in the bar mixed Punjabi rhythms with a high-voiced woman rapping in the polyglot mess of languages that made up Belter Creole. The battered pachinko machine in the back rang and skittered. Hashish smoke sweetened the air. Fred leaned back on a bar stool meant for someone ten centimeters taller than he was and smiled gently.

"Is there a fucking problem?" he asked.

The bartender could have been Chinese or Korean or a mix of the two. Which meant his family had probably come up in one of the first waves. Five generations of grubbing for air, packing extended families into surveying ships with seven bunks, looking back at a sun that was hardly more than the brightest star. It was hard to think of any of them as human anymore.

"No problems, *jefe*," the bartender said, but didn't move. In the mirror behind the bar, Fred saw the door slide open. Four Belters slouched in. One had an armband with the split circle of the Outer Planets Alliance. Fred saw them see him. He saw one of them recognize him. The little trickle of adrenaline in his blood was automatic and pleasant.

"Then how about you serve me my drink?"

The barkeep didn't move for a time, and then he did. Whiskey poured differently in spin gravity, but not so much that Fred could tell quite what was wrong about it. The Coriolis of Ceres Station shouldn't have been enough to change the angle, not this close to the asteroid surface. Maybe it was just that it fell slowly. The bartender slid the glass across to him.

"On the house," the man said, then a half beat of silence. "Colonel."

Fred met his gaze. Neither spoke. Fred drank the liquor neat. It burned and left a taste at the back of his tongue like old mushrooms and bread

mold.

“You have anything that isn’t fermented fungus?” Fred asked.

“Als u aprecie no, koai sa sa?” a voice said from behind him. *If you don’t like it, why are you here?*

Fred twisted in his seat. One of the four-pack who had just come in was glaring at him. He was broad-shouldered for a Belter. Mech driver, maybe. Or maybe he just spent a lot of time in the gym. Some of them did that, using machines and weights and expensive drug cocktails to give them what gravity never would.

Why are you here? Decent question.

“I like whiskey that used to be some kind of grain. You want to suck fungus, don’t let me stop you.”

The mech driver shifted in his seat. Fred thought he was going to get up, but instead the man shrugged and looked aside. His friends glanced at each other. The one with the armband had his hand terminal out and was tapping on the screen rapidly.

“I’ve got some bourbon came from Ganymede,” the bartender said. “Cost you.”

“Not enough to stop me,” Fred said, turning back. “Bring the bottle.”

The bartender bent down. His hand shuffled under the bar. There was probably a gun down there. Fred could almost picture it. Something designed to first intimidate, and if that failed, to put a man down. A shotgun, maybe, hack-sawed down for close range. Fred waited, but the man’s hand came up with a bottle. He put it on the bar. Fred felt a quick rush of relief and disappointment.

“Clean glass,” Fred said.

“So I think to myself,” the bartender said, reaching back toward the glassware by the mirror, “you’re here for something. The Butcher of Anderson Station in a Belter bar.”

“I just want a drink,” Fred said.

“No one just wants a drink,” the bartender replied.

“I’m exceptional.”

The bartender grinned.

“You are,” he said, then bent low, his head almost level with Fred’s. “Look at me, Colonel.”

Fred unscrewed the cap from the bottle and poured two fingers into the new glass. He put the cap back. The bartender didn’t move. Fred met the

pale brown eyes. He was about to say something, not even sure what it was besides cutting, belittling, and mean. In the mirror, something moved. Men, behind him.

Fred had a moment to brace himself for the knife or the bullet or the blow that didn't come before a black bag dropped over his head.

* * *

Three years before, everything had been different.

"*Dagmar* in the pipe, ninety seconds to contact, all green."

"Roger that, *Dagmar*. I show you go for breach in ninety—"

Fred chinned down the volume on the pilot's band, reducing their exchanges to faint background music with lyrics about positionals and vectors. Ninety seconds before the breaching team went in.

An eternity to wait.

Fred let out a long exhale that fogged the inside of his helmet for a second before it cleared. He tried to stretch, but the crash couch wouldn't let him extend his limbs fully in any direction. The command console showed eighty-three seconds to contact with Anderson Station. Breathing and stretching had burned only seven seconds.

He switched his display to the *Dagmar*'s forward airlock. She was a Marine landing craft, built to lock on to a ship or station and cut a hole, and the display showed two hundred marines strapped to vertical crash cages, weapons locked into quick release clamps next to them. The airlock was designed to iris open once the breaching charges had made an opening and the exterior seals were latched on.

It was hard to tell when they were all in vacuum-rated combat armor, but the marines looked calm. They'd been trained on Luna until maneuvering in light or null gravity and vacuum was second nature. They were put in cramped ships until advancing down claustrophobic metal corridors with blind corners at every intersection didn't scare them. They were told that marines doing a full breaching action assault could expect as high as 60 percent casualties until that number stopped meaning anything.

Fred looked over his people in their cages and imagined six out of ten of them not coming back.

The readout said thirty seconds.

Fred switched his console to radar. Two large blips flanking the *Dagmar*. Her sister ships, each with two hundred marines of their own. Beyond them, the small, fast-moving escort ships. Ahead, growing closer by the second, the massive rotating ring of Anderson Station.

Everyone was in place, his troops were ready to go, diplomacy had failed and it was time to do his job. He opened the command channel to his squad leaders, ten variations on background static suddenly piping into his helmet.

“All squads, ten seconds to breach. Sound off.”

Ten voices responded with the affirmative.

“Good hunting,” Fred said, then pulled up his tactical display. The layout of Anderson Station appeared in a misleadingly crisp 2-D floor plan. No way to know how much fortifying the Belters might have done when they took over the station.

His soldiers showed up as six hundred green dots, hovering just outside the station.

“Breach, now! Now! Now!” the *Dagmar*’s pilot yelled into the comms. The ship shuddered as the airlock claws sank into the metal of the station itself, a metallic shriek that Fred felt right through his padded chair. Gravity returned in a sideways lurch as the station began carrying the breaching ships along on its 0.3 g rotation. A series of high-pitched bangs sounded as the breaching charges went off.

Above his tactical display, ten smaller screens flickered on, his squad leaders activating their suits’ helmet cameras. The marines poured through the three new holes in Anderson’s skin. Fred flipped to the tactical floor plan, his fingers tapping against it.

“All squads establish beachhead and fallback position in Corridor L, from Junction 34 to Junction 38,” Fred said into the comm, surprised as always by how calm his voice sounded during a battle.

Green dots moved through the corridors marked on his display. Sometimes new red dots appeared when a marine’s HUD detected return fire and marked the individual as a threat. The red dots never lasted long. Every now and then a green dot shifted to yellow. A soldier down, their armored suits detecting the injuries or death that rendered them combat ineffective.

Combat ineffective. Such a nice euphemism for one of his kids bleeding out on a piece-of-shit station at the ass end of the Belt. Sixty percent

expected casualties. Four green dots for every six yellow, and each one of them his.

He watched the assault play out like a high-tech game, moving his pieces, reacting to threats with new orders, keeping score by tracking how many green dots stayed green.

Three red dots appeared. Four green dots stopped advancing and took cover. Fred sent four more green dots into a side passage, moving them into a flanking position. The red dots disappeared. The green dots moved again. It was tempting to get lost in the flow of it, to forget what all the glowing symbols on the screen actually meant.

The squad leader for his point team broke his reverie by calling him on the command channel.

“Overwatch, this is squad one actual.”

Fred shifted his attention to the helmetcam view from squad one’s leader. A makeshift barricade squatted at the other end of a long, gently sloping corridor. His tactical display marked a dozen or more hostiles defending it. As Fred watched, a small object hurtled over the barricade and detonated like a grenade just a few yards from his squad leader’s position.

“Overwatch here, I read you, squad one actual,” Fred replied.

“Heavily fortified position blocking access to the main corridor. Could clear it with heavy weapons, but there would be significant structural damage, and possible loss of life support in this section.”

Fred glanced at the tactical map, noting the proximity of several key life support and power nodes to the barricade’s position. *That’s why they set up there. Because they think we won’t.*

“Roger that, squad one,” Fred replied, looking for an alternate route. There didn’t seem to be one. The Belters were smart.

“Overwatch, interrogative. Use heavy weapons to clear the barricade, or clear by advancing?”

Blow up a big chunk of the station’s life support, killing who knows how many civilians hiding in their rooms, or send his men in and let them soak up their 60 percent casualties to take the position.

Fuck that. The Belters had made their decision. Let them live with the consequences.

“Squad one actual, you are authorized for heavy weapons use to clear this obstruction. Overwatch out.”

A few seconds later, the barricade vanished in a flash of light and a cloud of smoke. Seconds after that, his people were on the move again.

Three hours and twenty-three yellow dots later, the call came. “Overwatch, this is squad one actual. The command center is taken. The station is ours. Repeat, the station is ours.”

* * *

His arms, tied behind him, ached. Bound at the ankles, he could either lay on his side or lever himself up to his knees. He couldn’t straighten his legs to stand. He chose kneeling.

The darkness of the sack over his head was absolute, but judging from the spin gravity, he was somewhere near the station’s outer skin. An airlock, then. He’d hear the hiss and pop as the inner door sealed. Then either the slow exhalation of evacuated air or, if they were looking to blow him out into space, the cough of the security override. He ran his feet across the floor, trying to find the seams. Would it slide open, or was it one of the old hinged designs?

The sound that came wasn’t mechanical. Somewhere to his left, a woman cleared her throat. A few seconds later, a door opened, then closed. It had the soft sound of a pressure seal, but that didn’t mean much on station. Most doors were airtight. Footsteps approached him. Five people. Maybe six. The woman with the tickle in her throat wasn’t one of them.

“Colonel? I’m going to take that sack off now.”

Fred nodded.

Light returned to the world.

The room was cheap flooring and raw stone. Conduits and ducts ran across the ceiling and walls, and a squat metal desk sat unused in one corner. A service tunnel. The lights were harsh. He recognized the four men from the bar. Another man had joined them. Thin, young, with a case of acne that deserved medical attention. Fred craned his neck to see the woman. She stood at attention, a fifty-year-old fléchette rifle in her hands, and the split-circle armband of the OPA on her bicep.

None of them were wearing masks. When the new man spoke, his voice wasn’t modified. They didn’t care whether Fred could identify them.

“Colonel Frederick Lucius Johnson. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. My name is Anderson Dawes. I work for the OPA.”

“Anderson, eh?” Fred said, and the man shrugged.

“My parents named me after the Anderson-Hyosung Cooperative Industries Group. I think I got off pretty light, all things considered.”

“So what? Anderson Station was like a brother to you?”

“Namesake. Call me Dawes, if it’s more comfortable.”

“Fuck yourself, Dawes.”

Dawes nodded, knelt down facing Fred.

“*Chi-chey au?*” one of the men from the bar asked.

“*Etchye*h,” Dawes said, and the men walked away. Dawes waited until the door closed behind them before he went on. “You’ve been spending a lot of time in Belter bars, Colonel. Someone might think you were looking for something.”

“Dawes?”

“Fred?”

“I’ve been through better interrogation training than you’ll ever see. You want to build rapport? Go for it. Talk for a while, take my shackles off, start telling me that you can save me if I just tell you what I know. And then I’ll rip your eyes out and skull-fuck you. You understand?”

“I do,” Dawes said, not missing a beat. “So tell me, Fred. What happened to you on Anderson Station?”

* * *

Once the skirmishers had finished sweeping the corridors for stragglers, a detachment of marines escorted Fred into the conquered station. He paused at the fallback position they’d set up just outside the airlock doors. Marines were beginning to return there from other assignments. They were hopped-up on adrenaline and twitchy with post-combat fear. Fred let them see him. He put his hands on their shoulders and told them they’d done a good job.

Some of them came back on stretchers. Yellow dots made flesh. The corpsmen hurried among them, plugging their hand terminals into ports in the downed soldiers’ combat armor, reading the diagnostics, then assigning their place in line for surgery based on the severity of their wounds. Sometimes they tapped a button on their terminal and one of Fred’s yellow dots shifted to black. His command software flagged the fatality and sent a message to the appropriate squad leader and company commander to write a letter to the family. His own task list received a matching entry.

It was all very clean, very organized. Centuries of warfare in the electronic age had distilled it to this. Fred put his hand on the arm of a young woman whose suit was reporting severe spinal injuries, and squeezed. She gave him a thumbs-up that felt like a punch to the solar plexus.

“Sir?”

Fred looked up and found his first lieutenant standing at attention. “Are we ready?”

“Yes, sir. Might be a straggler or two, but we control the corridors from here to Ops.”

“Take me there,” Fred said.

They covered the ground it had taken his marines hours to win in just a few minutes. The post-combat cleanup teams were still in the breaching ships, waiting for the all clear. Scattered along the corridors lay the bodies of the fallen enemy. Fred looked them over. Other than a noticeable lack of OPA insignias, they were pretty much what he would have expected. Long, thin men and women blasted open by explosives, or repeatedly punctured by small-arms fire. Most were armed, but a few weren’t.

They rounded a corner into the main corridor and then came to the barricade he’d ordered destroyed. Over a dozen bodies lay around it. Some wore makeshift armor, but most were in simple environment suits. The concussion rocket his marines had used to clear the corridor had burst them like overripe grapes. Fred’s vacuum-rated armor protected him from the smell of viscera, but it reported it to him as a slight increase in atmospheric methane levels. The stench of death reduced to a data point.

A small pile of weapons and makeshift explosives lay nearby.

“That’s what they were armed with?” Fred asked.

His escort nodded.

“Pretty light stuff, sir. Civilian grade. Most of it wouldn’t even make a dent in our armor.”

Fred bent over and picked up a homemade grenade.

“They threw bombs at you to keep you from getting close enough to realize their guns wouldn’t work.”

The lieutenant laughed. “And made us frag the lot of them. If we’d known they were packing peashooters, we could have just walked up and tased them.”

Fred shook his head and put the grenade back down.

“Get a demolitions team to come clear these explosives before this homemade shit goes off and kills someone.”

He looked at the nearby life support node that had been wrecked by their concussion rocket. *Enough bystanders have died today.* Fred called up the station status report his cyberops team was updating by the minute. They showed a total loss of life support in the section he was in, and in two neighboring sections. Just over eleven hundred people with no air and no power. Every door he could see might have a family behind it who’d gasped out their last breaths banging to get out because a bunch of idiot Belters had built their barricades where they did. And because he’d chosen to destroy it.

While his lieutenant called for a bomb-disposal unit, Fred walked toward the command center. Along the way he saw a few more Belter corpses. They’d tried to hold the corridor even after his people had blown up the first barricade, hiding behind makeshift barriers and throwing their bathtub-brewed explosives. Buying time, but for what? The final result had never been in doubt. They’d been undermanned and grossly underequipped. The only reason his soldiers had taken three hours was that Fred had insisted on moving cautiously. Looking at the unarmored bodies on the floor, he realized they could have had men in the command center in half that time.

They had to have known it too, these people spread across the floor around him. *The idiots made us kill them.*

His lieutenant caught up with him just as he was entering the command center. Corpses filled the room, easily twenty of them. While most of them wore some form of environment suit or another, one man in the center of the room wore only a cheap blue jumpsuit with a mining company logo on the shoulder. He’d been shot dozens of times. A small-caliber pistol was glued to one hand with his own blood.

“The leader, we think,” his escort said. “He was doing some kind of broadcast. The others fought to the last man to buy him time. We tried to take him alive, but he pulled that little gun out of his pocket, and...”

Fred looked at the carnage around him and felt a disquieting sensation in his belly. It lasted only a moment, and then was replaced by a white-hot anger. If he’d been alone, he would have gone to the dead man in the cheap blue jumpsuit and kicked him. Instead, Fred gritted his teeth.

“What the fuck was wrong with you people?” he demanded of the dead.

“Sir?” his lieutenant said, looking at the comms station. “Looks like he was trying to broadcast right up to the last minute.”

“Let me see it,” Fred said.

* * *

“What happened on Anderson Station was that I did my duty,” Fred said.

“Your duty,” Dawes echoed. He didn’t make it a question. He didn’t mock it. He just repeated the words.

“Yes.”

“Following orders, then,” Dawes said.

“Don’t even try it, asshole. That Nuremberg crap won’t work on me. I followed orders in that I was instructed by my superior officers to retake the station from the terrorist forces occupying it. I judged that order to be legal and appropriate, and everything that came after was my responsibility. I took the station, and I did so while trying to minimize, first, loss of life to my people and, second, damage to the station.”

Dawes looked at him. Tiny frown lines competed with his acne. Something in the ductwork clacked, hissed, then clacked again, and stopped.

“You were told to do something. You did it,” Dawes said. “How is that not following orders?”

“I gave the orders,” Fred said. “And I did what I did because I judged it to be right.”

“Okay.”

“You’re trying to give me wiggle room. Let me say that the Belters who died on Anderson died because the guy above me made a call. That’s shit.”

“And why would I be doing that?” Dawes asked. He was good. He seemed genuinely curious.

“Build rapport.”

Dawes nodded, then frowned and looked pained.

“And then we’re back to the skull-fucking?” Dawes asked with a grimace. Before he could stop himself, Fred laughed.

“This isn’t what I’m here for, Colonel,” Dawes went on, “and I don’t want to get sidetracked, but doesn’t that go the other way too? You didn’t fire a shot. You didn’t touch a trigger or key in a launch code. You gave orders, but your soldiers judged them to be just and legal.”

“Because they were,” Fred said. “My people did the right thing.”

“Because you told them to,” Dawes said. “They were following your orders.”

“Yes.”

“Your responsibility.”

“Yes.”

The woman with the antique rifle coughed again. Dawes lowered himself to the cheap flooring, sitting with legs crossed. Even then, he was half a head taller than Fred. His skin was pale where it wasn't red. Between the zits and the gawky-elongated build, Dawes looked like a teenager. Except around the eyes.

“And the terrorists,” Dawes said.

“What?”

“The men who took the station. You think it was their responsibility too, yes?”

“Yes,” Fred said.

Dawes took a long breath, letting the air curl out slowly from between his teeth.

“You're aware, Colonel, that the assault on Anderson is one of the best documented military actions in history. The security cameras broadcast everything. I've spent months playing those streams. I can tell you things about the assault you don't even know.”

“If you say so.”

“When the barricade blew, eleven people died in the blast. Three more stopped breathing in the next two minutes, and the last two survived until your people came.”

“We didn't kill the injured.”

“You killed one when he tried to bring his pistol up. The other one had a collapsed lung and choked on her own blood before your medics looked at her.”

“You want an apology?”

Dawes's smile was cooler now.

“I want you to understand that I know every action that was taken on the station. Every order. Every shot fired, and from what gun. I know everything about that assault, and so does half the Belt. You're famous out here.”

“You’re the one who asked what happened,” Fred said, shrugging as best he could with bound, numb arms.

“No, Colonel. I asked what happened to *you*.”

* * *

General Jasira’s private office was decorated like somebody’s idea of a British gentleman’s club. The furniture was all dark oak and darker leather. The heavy desk smelled like lemons and tung oil. The pen set and globe of Earth on top of it were both made of brass. The bookshelves were filled with real paper books and other souvenirs from a long lifetime of constant travel. There wasn’t an electronic device more complex than a lamp anywhere in sight. If it weren’t for the 0.17 lunar gravity, there would be no way to know it wasn’t an office in London in the early twentieth century.

The general was waiting for him to speak first, so Fred swirled the scotch in his glass instead, enjoying the sound the ice made and the harsh smell of the liquor. He drained it in one swallow, then set it back on the desktop in front of him, an invitation to be refilled.

As Jasira put another two fingers into it, he finally gave up on waiting. He said, “I imagine you’ve had some time to review the video the terrorists transmitted from Anderson.”

Fred nodded. He’d guessed this was the reason for the after-hours invitation. He tried another sip of scotch, but it had taken on a sour taste, and he put it back down.

“Yes, sir, I have. We were jamming radio all the way in, as per protocol, but we didn’t detect that little tightbeam relay they’d left—”

“Fred,” Jasira interjected with a laugh. “This isn’t an inquisition. You aren’t here to apologize. You did *good*, Colonel.”

Fred frowned, picked his glass up, then put it back down without taking a drink.

“Then to be frank, sir, I wonder what I *am* here for.”

Jasira leaned back in his chair.

“A couple of little things. I saw your request for an investigation into the negotiation team’s work. The declassification of the negotiation transcripts. That surprised me.”

As he spoke, Jasira rolled his shoulders, though in the moon’s fractional gravity they could hardly be tense. He must have spent a lot of time

dirtside, and the habits died slow.

“Sir,” Fred said, speaking slowly and picking his words carefully, “because of the relay, the public has already seen the battle footage. We can’t put that genie back in the bottle. But no one seems to want to talk about the tightbeam they sent to us at the end there. We—”

“And how will this information change anything? You did your job, soldier. The negotiation team did theirs. End of story.”

“As it stands, sir, the people who took Anderson look like they’re insane, and we look like executioners,” Fred said, then stopped when he realized his voice was getting loud. Quieting down, he said, “There was some kind of mistake. That second message makes it clear that they thought they’d surrendered. A lot of people died over that miscommunication.”

Jasira smiled, but there was no humor in it.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You barely lost anybody,” the general said. “Anyway, the request’s denied. We have no reason to do any investigation on this matter. The battle footage is out, and as it stands that works in our favor. The simpler the message is, the more people will understand it: Take one of our stations, and we take it back. Hard. We can only confuse the issue by turning it political.”

“Sir,” Fred said, all warmth gone from his voice. “I killed 173 armed insurgents and over a thousand civilians in this action. You owe it to those people—you owe it to *me*—to show we did the right thing. What if we can avoid this happening next time?”

“There isn’t going to be a next time,” the general said. “You’re the one who saw to that.”

“Sir, you’re making it seem very much like this wasn’t a mistake at all. Who gave the order to ignore their surrender and send me in? Was it you?”

Jasira shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. You did what we needed you to do. We won’t forget that.”

Fred looked at his hands. He rose to his feet, a little too quickly, bouncing in the low g, and snapped a sharp salute. Jasira poured himself another glass of scotch and drank it off, leaving Fred standing as he did.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

Jasira gave him a long, resigned look.

“They’re giving you the Medal of Freedom.”

Fred’s arm turned limp, and his salute collapsed under its own weight.

“What?” was all he could manage to say.

“I’m going back down the well. I’m too old to suck vacuum anymore. They’ll pin you with the UN Marines highest honor, then shortly thereafter give you your first star. You’ll have a seat here at OPCOM before the year is out. Try to look happy about it.”

* * *

The silence stretched. Fred focused hard on nothing about ten feet in front of him. Dawes watched him for almost a full minute, then gave up.

“All right. Why don’t I start, then?” Dawes said. “Here’s what happened. You were sleeping with one of the marines. Keeping it quiet because you were the commander, and that’s a no-no, right? So you’re very careful taking the station. You keep your casualties low, but you don’t get lucky and your lover dies.”

Fred kept his face stony and still. Dawes leaned back, resting on one long, thin arm like he was lounging under a tree in some sunlit park.

“You can’t get the usual psychological support,” Dawes went on, “because that would mean exposing the relationship, and you’re still ashamed of it. You have a little breakdown. You end up knocking around OPA bars hoping someone’ll kill you.”

Fred didn’t respond. His legs were past numb now and starting to hurt. Dawes grinned. He seemed to be enjoying this.

“No?” the OPA man said. “Don’t like that one? All right. How about this? Before you joined up with the Marines, you were a troubled kid. Did all kinds of bad things. Wild. Joining up is what straightened you out. Made you into the staunch, upright, legal, and appropriate guy you are today. But then the Anderson Station broadcast comes out. A bunch of people from your past see the feed and someone recognizes you. You come back a hero, but there’s a sting in it. You’re being blackmailed for...mmm. How about rape? Or, no. Drug trafficking. You used to cook tabs of grace in your dorm room, sell it at the clubs. Now it’s come back to haunt you, and you have a little breakdown. And you end up knocking around OPA bars hoping someone’ll kill you.”

Dawes waved a hand in front of Fred’s eyes.

“Still with me, Colonel? Don’t like that one either? All right. Maybe you’ve got a sister who came up the well, and you lost track of her—”

“Why don’t you save your fucking air,” Fred growled. “Whatever you’re here for, do it and be done.”

“Because *why* matters, Colonel. *Why* always matters. Whatever your story is, I know how it ends. It ends with you, here, talking to me. That’s the easy part, and I think you’re here looking for easy.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

The woman with the rifle said something. Either her Belter patois was too accented and fast or it was some OPA verbal code because Fred couldn’t even cut the flow of syllables into individual words. Dawes nodded, took his hand terminal out of a pocket and keyed something in. Fred leaned forward, trying to get the blood flow back into his legs. Dawes put the hand terminal away.

“You changed, Colonel. The way you behave changed after Anderson Station. Before that, you were just another inner planets asshole who didn’t give a shit whether the Belt lived or died. You stuck to your bases and your stage-managed outreach programs and the station levels where the security gets paid by Earth taxes. And now, you’re not.

“I’ve lived in the Belt my whole life. I’ve known a lot of men who wanted to die. They act just like you. Women don’t. I haven’t figured that out yet, but the men? Even if they do take a walk outside or swallow a gun, there’s always this part before. Taking risks. Hoping the universe will do it for them. Make it easy. And the Belt’s an unforgiving environment. You want to die, getting sloppy’s usually enough.”

“I don’t give a shit what you think,” Fred said. “I don’t give a shit what you want, or who you know. And your popular psychology horseshit? Yeah, you can drink it with milk. I have nothing to justify to you. I did my job, and I’m not ashamed of any decision I made. With the same information, I’d do the same thing again.”

“*With the same information,*” Dawes said, latching on to the phrase hard. “You found something out, then?”

“Fuck off, Dawes.”

“What was it, Colonel? What kind of information turns the Butcher of Anderson Station into a suicide? What makes him into a coward?”

* * *

The hundred and seventy Belters occupying Anderson Station hadn't taken offensive action yet. Fred watched the station in false-color IR.

"Priority flash traffic from OPCOM, sir, cross-checked and verified," the intel officer on his monitor said. "Eyes only. Sending it to you now."

There was only one line of text.

AUTHORIZATION TO RETAKE STATION GRANTED.

And that was that. Thirty-seven hours of negotiation was over. Outer Planets Command was tired of waiting, and they were unleashing the dogs.

Fred called up the company major and said, "Put them in their racks. We're go for assault. Set the countdown timer to one hour."

"Roger that, sir," the major said with more glee than Fred was comfortable seeing.

One hour until they went into the station. Fred called up the negotiation team on the command ship.

"Psych ops here," said Captain Santiago, the team commander.

"Captain, this is Colonel Johnson. We've been given authorization to retake the station. My people go in in an hour. Do we have anything left to try? A Hail Mary pass? Have you warned them about the assault?"

There was no reason for secrecy. There would be no way to hide three Marine assault craft on breaching maneuvers.

The silence from the other end stretched out, and Fred was almost at the point of checking to see if the line was still open when the reply came.

"Colonel, are you double-checking my work here, sir?"

Fred counted to ten slowly.

"No, Captain. But I'm about to send six hundred marines into the station. In addition to the 170 hostiles, there are over ten thousand civilians. Many or all of them could die before the day's out. I just want to make sure we've exhausted every other possibility before we commit to—"

"Sir, I've got my orders just like you do. We did what we could, but Psych Ops is standing down now. Your turn."

"Am I the only one that sees that this doesn't make any sense?" Fred said. "They claim they took the station because of a three percent cargo transfer fee? I mean, they already threw the administrator who implemented it out the damned airlock. There is literally nothing left for them to win by forcing a fight."

The only answer was static.

“Let me talk to them,” Fred said. “Maybe if they hear it from a different voice, they’ll understand—”

“Sir,” Santiago cut in. “I am not authorized to do that. You want to argue about it? Call General Jasira back at OPCOM. Santiago out.”

* * *

Fred launched himself at Dawes, pushing out with numbed legs, and Dawes scuttled back. Fred landed on the deck hard. The world grayed out for a second, and he tasted blood. He struggled forward, trying to get at Dawes’s feet with his teeth if that was the best he could manage. He saw the Belter up to the knees, stepping back. Fred twisted. Something in his left shoulder made a sick crunching sound, and a sharp pain shot up his neck. Then the woman stepped forward.

He looked up into the triangular barrel of the fléchette rifle, and then past it to the woman’s eyes. They were the blue of oceans seen from orbit. There was no pity in them. Her thumb was on the safety. Her finger on the trigger. A little pressure, and the rifle would send a hundred spikes of steel thinner than needles through his brain. And she wanted to. It was in the set of her shoulders and the angles of her face how much she wanted to end him.

“The problem with you,” Dawes said, his voice calm and conversational as if they were sitting in a bar somewhere sharing a beer, “and I don’t mean this as a criticism of you in particular. It’s true of anybody who didn’t grow up in the Belt. The problem with you is that you are wasteful.”

“I’m not a fucking coward,” Fred said through his rapidly swelling lip.

“Of course you are. You’re smart, you’re healthy. Maybe a few hundred people out of forty billion have your combination of talent and training. And you’re trying to waste that very valuable resource. You’re like the guy who delays replacing his airlock seals when they start to leak. You think it’s just a little bit. It doesn’t matter. You’re one guy. You get killed, no big loss.”

He heard Dawes walking behind him, but his gaze was still on the rifle. Dawes grabbed Fred’s collar and hauled him back to kneeling.

“When I was growing up, my dad used to beat the crap out of me if I spat someplace other than the reclamation duct because we needed the

water. We don't waste things out here, Colonel. We can't afford to. You understand that, though. Don't you?"

Slowly, Fred nodded. Blood was seeping down his chin even though Dawes and the woman hadn't laid an angry hand on him. He'd done this to himself.

"When I was about fifteen, I killed my sister," Dawes said. "I didn't mean to. We were on this rock about a week from Eros Station. We were going out of the ship to get some survey probes that got stuck in the slurry. I was supposed to check her suit seals, but I was in a mood. I was fifteen, you know? So I did a half-assed job of it. We went outside, and everything seemed fine until she twisted sideways to pull up a rock spur. I heard it on the comm link, and it just sounded like a pop. We had the old Ukrainian-style suits. Solid as stone unless something broke, and then it all failed at once."

Dawes shrugged.

"You're a fucking piece of shit, then, aren't you?" Fred said, and Dawes grinned.

"Felt like that, yeah. Still do sometimes. I understand why someone could want to die after a thing like that."

"So why not kill yourself?" Fred asked, then spat a dark red clot on the deck at his feet.

"I've got three more sisters," Dawes said. "Someone's got to check their seals."

Fred shook his head. His shoulder vibrated with sudden pain.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Builds rapport," Dawes said. "How's it working?"

Fred laughed before he knew he was going to. Dawes gestured, and the woman put up the rifle, walking back to her doorway.

"So. Colonel," Dawes said. "What information did you get on Anderson Station that you ended up here talking to a sad sack of shit like me?"

Fred took a long breath.

"There was a message sent to us as we went in," he said. "A message I didn't see until it was too late."

* * *

"Let me see it," Fred said.

“There are a couple things here,” the lieutenant said. “Got a partial that was never sent. And one that looks like it’s being sent to the command ship on infinite repeat. Also, a running feed that looks like a straight dump of the security cameras.”

“Do the unsent partial first.”

The video started, and the man in the mining jumpsuit stared out of the screen. For Fred, there was a surreal quality to watching a man alive and speaking while his corpse lay cooling on the floor behind him.

I could have told him this would happen.

The dead man said, “Citizens of the solar system, my name is Marama Brown. I’m a freelance mining technician for Anderson-Hyosung Cooperative Industries Group. I, and some like-minded individuals, have taken control of the company resupply station.”

Fred hit pause and turned to his lieutenant. He had a sinking feeling in his gut. The dead man had expected this to get out. Even though he had to know they were jamming, he’d expected the message to be heard.

“Where was that security camera feed going?” Fred asked.

“I’ll check on that right now, sir,” the lieutenant replied, and called up the electronic warfare people back on the *Dagmar*. Fred tuned their conversation out, and hit play again.

“I believe—we all believe that this action is justified by what has been done here. A man named Gustav Marconi, the station administrator, recently implemented a three percent surcharge on supply transfers. I know that doesn’t sound like much to some of you, but most of us are living on the ragged edge out here. Prospectors, wildcat miners...you strike it rich or you starve. That’s the game. But now a bunch of us are going to have to buy three percent less supplies because it just got that much more expensive. You can eat a bit less food. You can drink a little less water. You can fly a little slower and stretch your fuel, maybe. You run life support at bare minimums. But—”

“Sir?” said the lieutenant, and Fred paused the playback. “Sir, the transmission, at least some of it, got out. They’d left a tightbeam receiver and broadcast transmitter anchored to a rock just outside our jamming range. We missed it. But the e-war geeks have triangulated its location and are sending a Phantom to frag it.”

Too late, Fred thought, and hit the play button again.

“—what if you’re already running at the bare minimum? How about every year, you just don’t breathe for three days? That would about cover it. Or you don’t drink any water for three days. Or you don’t eat for three days when you’re already on the brink of starvation. When there’s nothing left to cut back on, how do you make it up then?”

Marama turned away from the camera for a second, and when he turned back he was holding his hand terminal. He held it up to the screen. It was displaying the picture of a little girl. She was wearing a powder-blue jumpsuit that had “Hinekiri” hand stitched on the breast, and grinning with small crooked teeth.

“This is my little girl, my Kiri. She’s four. She has what the medics call ‘hypoxic brain injury.’ She was born a little prematurely, and instead of the high oxygen environment she should have had, she was in my prospecting ship where the air is a little thinner than the Everest base camps back on Earth. We didn’t even know anything was wrong until we realized she wasn’t developing normally.”

He turned away from the camera and put the terminal down.

“And she’s not the only one. Developmental problems arising from low oxygen and malnutrition are becoming more and more common. When this was explained to Mr. Marconi, his reply was, ‘Work harder and you can afford the increase.’ We complained to the Anderson-Hyosung head offices, but no one listened. We complained to the Outer Planets Governing Board on Luna.

“This isn’t... We didn’t start out intending to take over the station. It all just sort of happened,” the man said. For a moment, his voice seemed to waver. As Fred watched, the man forced himself back into calm. “We want everyone to know that, other than Mr. Marconi, whose crimes would have led directly to the deaths of thousands of Belters, no one has been harmed in our taking of the station. We don’t want anyone else to get hurt. We’re not violent people, but we have been pushed so far that there is nowhere left to retreat to. We’ve been in discussions with a UN military negotiator for almost two days now. In a short time, we will be surrendering the station to them. We’ll send this message out prior to handing the station over to make sure our story is heard. I hope no one ever feels like they have to do something like this again. I hope, after all of this, that people can begin talking about what’s happening out here.”

The video ended. Fred queued up the tightbeam that had been sent to the negotiation team during the assault.

Marama Brown again, this time holding a pistol, his face twisted with fear.

“Why are the Marines attacking?” he said in a panicked screech. “We just needed some time! We’re surrendering!”

The message immediately repeated. Fred stopped it and turned it off.

“Sir.”

Fred took a long breath to fight back the vague nausea he suddenly felt.

“Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

“Phantom reports a clean hit. The relay is toast. But, uh...”

“Spit it out, soldier.”

“It was no longer broadcasting. Whatever they sent, they were done sending it.”

Fred pulled up the comm logs, and confirmed what he’d already suspected: Marama Brown had never gotten to send his manifesto. Fred had been ordered in, and Marama had been busy trying to stay alive. But his last tightbeam to Psych Ops had gotten through just fine. They’d known.

“Sir?” the lieutenant said.

“Doesn’t matter. Call up the cyber wonks and have them strip the computer core. I’ll go find the liaison officer and start the civilian aid phase.”

His lieutenant chuckled.

“Here, kiddies,” the lieutenant said. “We blew the shit out of your station, have some free MREs and UN Marine sticker books.”

Fred didn’t laugh.

* * *

“You had to have known that they were desperate out there,” Dawes said.

“Of course I did,” Fred said. “It was in all the reports. Hell, it was on the news feeds. Increased overhead. People struggling for the basics. You hear it all the time. Turn on a feed now, you’ll hear it again.”

The blood had stopped flowing from Fred’s mouth, but the inside of his lip tasted raw. His shoulder was settling into a low, radiating ache. There was a dark circle of blood on the decking in front of him.

“But this time it was different?” Dawes said. He didn’t sound sarcastic or angry. Just curious.

Fred shifted. His legs were dead lumps of meat. He couldn’t feel anything. If someone put a knife into his thigh, it would have been like watching it happen to someone else.

“That man had a crippled baby girl,” Fred said. “I killed him.”

“The UN would just have sent someone else,” Dawes said.

“I still killed him.”

“You didn’t pull the trigger.”

“I killed him because he wanted her to have enough air to breathe,” Fred said. “I killed her daddy while he was trying to surrender, and they gave me a medal for doing it. So there you go. That’s what happened on Anderson Station. What are you going to do about it?”

Dawes shook his head.

“That’s too easy. You’ve killed lots of daddies. What made this one different?”

Fred started to speak, stopped, tried again.

“They used me. They made it about sending messages to everyone that you don’t fuck with Earth, because look at the shit we’ll do just because you spaced an administrator on a nowhere station. They made me the poster boy for disproportional response. They made me a butcher.”

Saying the words was painful, but there was a strange relief too. Dawes was staring at him, his face unreadable. Fred couldn’t meet his eyes.

Dawes nodded, seeming to come to a decision, then put a hand in his pocket and took out a utility knife. When he opened it, the blade was old and scored. Fred took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was ready. Dawes walked behind him. A fast pull across the neck, and Fred could bleed out in four minutes. A stab in the kidney could take hours. Cut the cords that were tying his arms, and it could take years.

Dawes cut the cords.

“This wasn’t a trial,” Fred said. “You’re not here to pass some kind of judgment on me.”

“I wasn’t expecting to,” Dawes said. “I mean, if it really had been just that you’d been boning one of your marines, I’d have dropped you out an airlock, wasteful or no. But I was pretty sure I was right.”

“So what happens now?”

Dawes shifted Fred forward. The pins-and-needles feeling was starting in his hands. Dawes cut the binding on his legs.

"If you want the easy way out, you go kill yourself on your own damn time and stop setting the OPA up to take the blame for it. I've got enough bad press without slaughtering the hero of Anderson Station."

"And otherwise?"

Dawes sat back on his haunches and closed the blade with one hand.

"I don't waste resources, Colonel. If you want to die, it will do that girl and her father absolutely no good. If you want to make it up to her and all the people like her, I could use your expertise. You're a rare resource. You've got knowledge and training, and as the man who is famous throughout the whole system for killing Belters, you're in a position to be our strongest advocate. All it means is walking away from everything you know and love. The life you built for yourself. The admiration of everyone who looks up to you. All the things you'd have lost anyway."

"This was a recruitment, then."

Dawes stood up, sliding the knife into his pocket. His smile reached his eyes this time.

"You tell me," Dawes said. Then, to the woman, "*Recanos ai postar. Asi geendig.*"

"Aais," she said, shouldering the rifle like a professional.

The pair walked out together, leaving Fred on the deck, massaging the agony out of his legs as the feeling started to return.

Meet the Author

James S. A. Corey is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Find out more about this series at www.the-expanse.com.

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LEVIATHAN WAKES

BOOK 1 OF THE THE EXPANSE
by James S. A. Corey

Prologue: Julie

The *Scopuli* had been taken eight days ago, and Julie Mao was finally ready to be shot.

It had taken all eight days trapped in a storage locker for her to get to that point. For the first two she'd remained motionless, sure that the armored men who'd put her there had been serious. For the first hours, the ship she'd been taken aboard wasn't under thrust, so she floated in the locker, using gentle touches to keep herself from bumping into the walls or the atmosphere suit she shared the space with. When the ship began to move, thrust giving her weight, she'd stood silently until her legs cramped, then sat down slowly into a fetal position. She'd peed in her jumpsuit, not caring about the warm itchy wetness, or the smell, worrying only that she might slip and fall in the wet spot it left on the floor. She couldn't make noise. They'd shoot her.

On the third day, thirst had forced her into action. The noise of the ship was all around her. The faint subsonic rumble of the reactor and drive. The constant hiss and thud of hydraulics and steel bolts as the pressure doors between decks opened and closed. The clump of heavy boots walking on metal decking. She waited until all the noise she could hear sounded distant, then pulled the environment suit off its hooks and onto the locker floor. Listening for any approaching sound, she slowly disassembled the suit and took out the water supply. It was old and stale; the suit obviously hadn't been used or serviced in ages. But she hadn't had a sip in days, and the warm loamy water in the suit's reservoir bag was the best thing she had

ever tasted. She had to work hard not to gulp it down and make herself vomit.

When the urge to urinate returned, she pulled the catheter bag out of the suit and relieved herself into it. She sat on the floor, now cushioned by the padded suit and almost comfortable, and wondered who her captors were—Coalition Navy, pirates, something worse. Sometimes she slept.

* * *

On day four, isolation, hunger, boredom, and the diminishing number of places to store her piss finally pushed her to make contact with them. She'd heard muffled cries of pain. Somewhere nearby, her shipmates were being beaten or tortured. If she got the attention of the kidnappers, maybe they would just take her to the others. That was okay. Beatings, she could handle. It seemed like a small price to pay if it meant seeing people again.

The locker sat beside the inner airlock door. During flight, that usually wasn't a high-traffic area, though she didn't know anything about the layout of this particular ship. She thought about what to say, how to present herself. When she finally heard someone moving toward her, she just tried to yell that she wanted out. The dry rasp that came out of her throat surprised her. She swallowed, working her tongue to try to create some saliva, and tried again. Another faint rattle in the throat.

The people were right outside her locker door. A voice was talking quietly. Julie had pulled back a fist to bang on the door when she heard what it was saying.

No. Please no. Please don't.

Dave. Her ship's mechanic. Dave, who collected clips from old cartoons and knew a million jokes, begging in a small broken voice.

No, please no, please don't, he said.

Hydraulics and locking bolts clicked as the inner airlock door opened. A meaty thud as something was thrown inside. Another click as the airlock closed. A hiss of evacuating air.

When the airlock cycle had finished, the people outside her door walked away. She didn't bang to get their attention.

* * *

They'd scrubbed the ship. Detainment by the inner planet navies was a bad scenario, but they'd all trained on how to deal with it. Sensitive OPA data was scrubbed and overwritten with innocuous-looking logs with false time stamps. Anything too sensitive to trust to a computer, the captain destroyed. When the attackers came aboard, they could play innocent.

It hadn't mattered.

There weren't the questions about cargo or permits. The invaders had come in like they owned the place, and Captain Darren had rolled over like a dog. Everyone else—Mike, Dave, Wan Li—they'd all just thrown up their hands and gone along quietly. The pirates or slavers or whatever they were had dragged them off the little transport ship that had been her home, and down a docking tube without even minimal environment suits. The tube's thin layer of Mylar was the only thing between them and hard nothing: hope it didn't rip; goodbye lungs if it did.

Julie had gone along too, but then the bastards had tried to lay their hands on her, strip her clothes off.

Five years of low-gravity jiu jitsu training and them in a confined space with no gravity. She'd done a lot of damage. She'd almost started to think she might win when from nowhere a gauntleted fist smashed into her face. Things got fuzzy after that. Then the locker, and *Shoot her if she makes a noise*. Four days of not making noise while they beat her friends down below and then threw one of them out an airlock.

After six days, everything went quiet.

Shifting between bouts of consciousness and fragmented dreams, she was only vaguely aware as the sounds of walking, talking, and pressure doors and the subsonic rumble of the reactor and the drive faded away a little at a time. When the drive stopped, so did gravity, and Julie woke from a dream of racing her old pinnacle to find herself floating while her muscles screamed in protest and then slowly relaxed.

She pulled herself to the door and pressed her ear to the cold metal. Panic shot through her until she caught the quiet sound of the air recyclers. The ship still had power and air, but the drive wasn't on and no one was opening a door or walking or talking. Maybe it was a crew meeting. Or a party on another deck. Or everyone was in engineering, fixing a serious problem.

She spent a day listening and waiting.

By day seven, her last sip of water was gone. No one on the ship had moved within range of her hearing for twenty-four hours. She sucked on a plastic tab she'd ripped off the environment suit until she worked up some saliva; then she started yelling. She yelled herself hoarse.

No one came.

By day eight, she was ready to be shot. She'd been out of water for two days, and her waste bag had been full for four. She put her shoulders against the back wall of the locker and planted her hands against the side walls. Then she kicked out with both legs as hard as she could. The cramps that followed the first kick almost made her pass out. She screamed instead.

Stupid girl, she told herself. She was dehydrated. Eight days without activity was more than enough to start atrophy. At least she should have stretched out.

She massaged her stiff muscles until the knots were gone, then stretched, focusing her mind like she was back in dojo. When she was in control of her body, she kicked again. And again. And again, until light started to show through the edges of the locker. And again, until the door was so bent that the three hinges and the locking bolt were the only points of contact between it and the frame.

And one last time, so that it bent far enough that the bolt was no longer seated in the hasp and the door swung free.

Julie shot from the locker, hands half raised and ready to look either threatening or terrified, depending on which seemed more useful.

There was no one on the whole deck: the airlock, the suit storage room where she'd spent the last eight days, a half dozen other storage rooms. All empty. She plucked a magnetized pipe wrench of suitable size for skull cracking out of an EVA kit, then went down the crew ladder to the deck below.

And then the one below that, and then the one below that. Personnel cabins in crisp, almost military order. Commissary, where there were signs of a struggle. Medical bay, empty. Torpedo bay. No one. The comm station was unmanned, powered down, and locked. The few sensor logs that still streamed showed no sign of the *Scopuli*. A new dread knotted her gut. Deck after deck and room after room empty of life. Something had happened. A radiation leak. Poison in the air. Something that had forced an evacuation. She wondered if she'd be able to fly the ship by herself.

But if they'd evacuated, she'd have heard them going out the airlock, wouldn't she?

She reached the final deck hatch, the one that led into engineering, and stopped when the hatch didn't open automatically. A red light on the lock panel showed that the room had been sealed from the inside. She thought again about radiation and major failures. But if either of those was the case, why lock the door from the inside? And she had passed wall panel after wall panel. None of them had been flashing warnings of any kind. No, not radiation, something else.

There was more disruption here. Blood. Tools and containers in disarray. Whatever had happened, it had happened here. No, it had started here. And it had ended behind that locked door.

It took two hours with a torch and prying tools from the machine shop to cut through the hatch to engineering. With the hydraulics compromised, she had to crank it open by hand. A gust of warm wet air blew out, carrying a hospital scent without the antiseptic. A coppery, nauseating smell. The torture chamber, then. Her friends would be inside, beaten or cut to pieces. Julie hefted her wrench and prepared to bust open at least one head before they killed her. She floated down.

The engineering deck was huge, vaulted like a cathedral. The fusion reactor dominated the central space. Something was wrong with it. Where she expected to see readouts, shielding, and monitors, a layer of something like mud seemed to flow over the reactor core. Slowly, Julie floated toward it, one hand still on the ladder. The strange smell became overpowering.

The mud caked around the reactor had structure to it like nothing she'd seen before. Tubes ran through it like veins or airways. Parts of it pulsed. Not mud, then.

Flesh.

An outcropping of the thing shifted toward her. Compared to the whole, it seemed no larger than a toe, a little finger. It was Captain Darren's head.

"Help me," it said.

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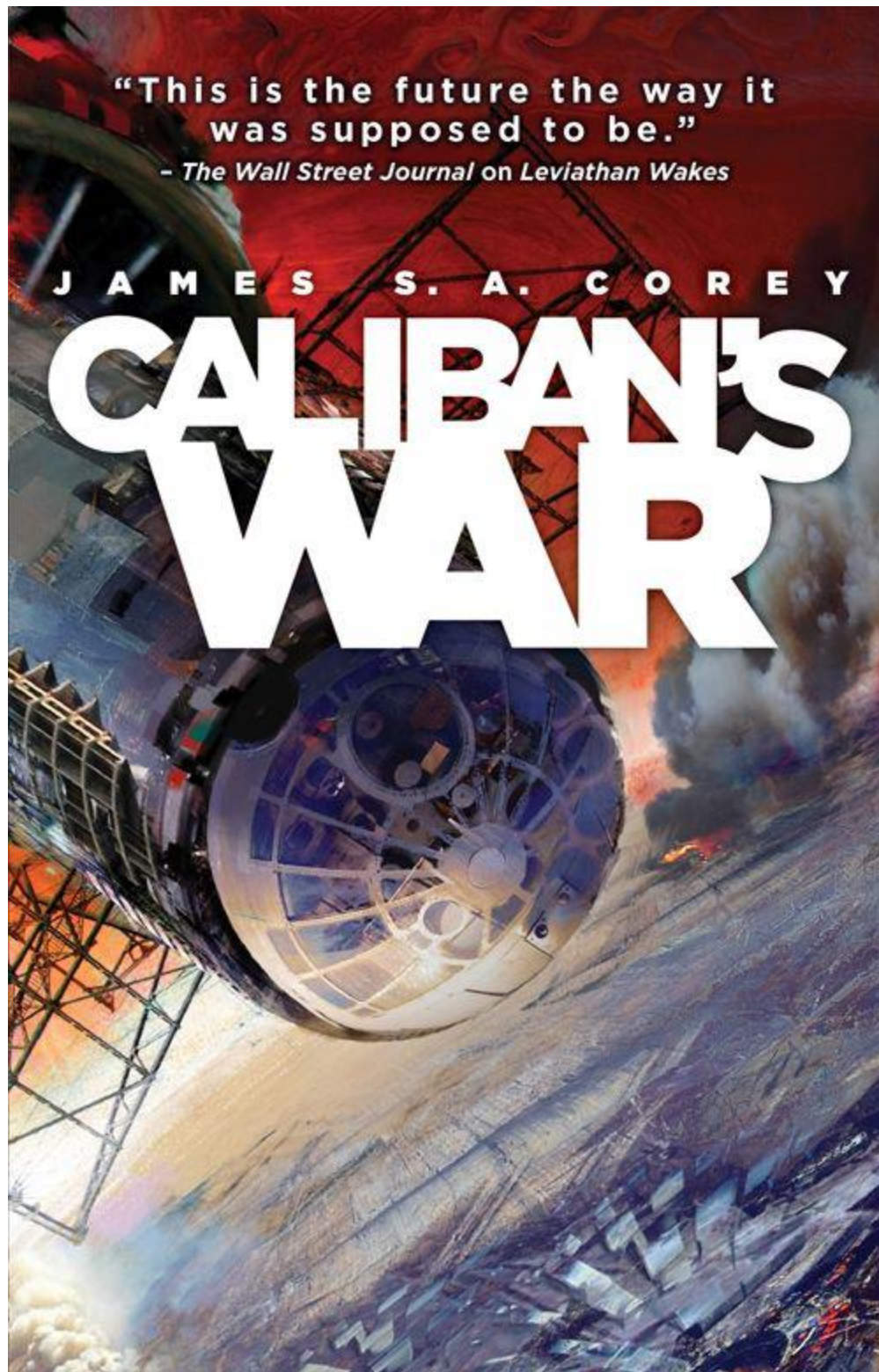
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Caliban's War

by James S.A. Corey
Book 2 of The Expanse

The Expanse

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Short Stories

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Dedication

To Bester and Clarke, who got us here

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Prologue

Mei

“Mei?” Miss Carrie said. “Please put your painting work away now. Your mother is here.”

It took her a few seconds to understand what the teacher was saying, not because Mei didn’t know the words—she was four now, and not a toddler anymore—but because they didn’t fit with the world as she knew it. Her mother couldn’t come get her. Mommy had left Ganymede and gone to live on Ceres Station, because, as her daddy put it, she needed some mommy-alone-time. Then, her heart starting to race, Mei thought, *She came back.*

“Mommy?”

From where Mei sat at her scaled-down easel, Miss Carrie’s knee blocked her view of the coatroom door. Mei’s hands were sticky with finger paints, red and blue and green swirling on her palms. She shifted forward and grabbed for Miss Carrie’s leg as much to move it as to help her stand up.

“Mei!” Miss Carrie shouted.

Mei looked at the smear of paint on Miss Carrie’s pants and the controlled anger on the woman’s broad, dark face.

“I’m sorry, Miss Carrie.”

“It’s okay,” the teacher said in a tight voice that meant it wasn’t, really, but Mei wasn’t going to be punished. “Please go wash your hands and then come put away your painting work. I’ll get this down and you can give it to your mother. It is a doggie?”

“It’s a space monster.”

“It’s a very nice space monster. Now go wash your hands, please, sweetheart.”

Mei nodded, turned, and ran for the bathroom, her smock flapping around her like a rag caught in an air duct.

“And don’t touch the wall!”

“I’m sorry, Miss Carrie.”

“It’s okay. Just clean it off after you’ve washed your hands.”

She turned the water on full blast, the colors and swirls rushing off her skin. She went through the motions of drying her hands without caring whether she was dripping water or not. It felt like gravity had shifted, pulling her toward the doorway and the anteroom instead of down toward the ground. The other children watched, excited because she was excited, as Mei scrubbed the finger marks mostly off the wall and slammed the paint pots back into their box and the box onto its shelf. She pulled the smock up over her head rather than wait for Miss Carrie to help her, and stuffed it into the recycling bin.

In the anteroom, Miss Carrie was standing with two other grown-ups, neither of them Mommy. One was a woman Mei didn’t know, space monster painting held gently in her hand and a polite smile on her face. The other was Doctor Strickland.

“No, she’s been very good about getting to the toilet,” Miss Carrie was saying. “There are accidents now and then, of course.”

“Of course,” the woman said.

“Mei!” Doctor Strickland said, bending down so that he was hardly taller than she was. “How is my favorite girl?”

“Where’s—” she began, but before she could say *Mommy*, Doctor Strickland scooped her up into his arms. He was bigger than Daddy, and he smelled like salt. He tipped her backward, tickling her sides, and she laughed hard enough that she couldn’t talk anymore.

“Thank you so much,” the woman said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Miss Carrie said, shaking the woman’s hand. “We really love having Mei in the classroom.”

Doctor Strickland kept tickling Mei until the door to the Montessori cycled closed behind them. Then Mei caught her breath.

“Where’s Mommy?”

“She’s waiting for us,” Doctor Strickland said. “We’re taking you to her right now.”

The newer hallways of Ganymede were wide and lush and the air recyclers barely ran. The knife-thin blades of areca palm fronds spilled up and out from dozens of hydroponic planters. The broad yellow-green striated leaves

of devil's ivy spilled down the walls. The dark green primitive leaves of Mother-in-Law's Tongue thrust up beneath them both. Full-spectrum LEDs glowed white-gold. Daddy said it was just what sunlight looked like on Earth, and Mei pictured that planet as a huge complicated network of plants and hallways with the sun running in lines above them in a bright blue ceiling-sky, and you could climb over the walls and end up anywhere.

Mei leaned her head on Doctor Strickland's shoulder, looking over his back and naming each plant as they passed. *Sansevieria trifasciata*. *Epipremnum aureum*. Getting the names right always made Daddy grin. When she did it by herself, it made her body feel calmer.

"More?" the woman asked. She was pretty, but Mei didn't like her voice.

"No," Doctor Strickland said. "Mei here is the last one."

"*Chysalidocarpus lutescens*," Mei said.

"All right," the woman said, and then again, more softly: "All right."

The closer to the surface they got, the narrower the corridors became. The older hallways seemed dirtier even though there really wasn't any dirt on them. It was just that they were more used up. The quarters and labs near the surface were where Mei's grandparents had lived when they'd come to Ganymede. Back then, there hadn't been anything deeper. The air up there smelled funny, and the recyclers always had to run, humming and thumping.

The grown-ups didn't talk to each other, but every now and then Doctor Strickland would remember Mei was there and ask her questions: What was her favorite cartoon on the station feed? Who was her best friend in school? What kinds of food did she eat for lunch that day? Mei expected him to start asking the other questions, the ones he always asked next, and she had her answers ready.

Does your throat feel scratchy? No.

Did you wake up sweaty? No.

Was there any blood in your poop this week? No.

Did you get your medicine both times every day? Yes.

But this time, Doctor Strickland didn't ask any of that. The corridors they went down got older and thinner until the woman had to walk behind them so that the men coming the other direction could pass. The woman still had Mei's painting in her hand, rolled up in a tube so the paper wouldn't get wrinkles.

Doctor Strickland stopped at an unmarked door, shifted Mei to his other hip, and took his hand terminal out of his pants pocket. He keyed something into a program Mei had never seen before, and the door cycled open, seals making a rough popping sound like something out of an old movie. The hallway they walked into was full of junk and old metal boxes.

“This isn’t the hospital,” Mei said.

“This is a special hospital,” Doctor Strickland said. “I don’t think you’ve ever been here, have you?”

It didn’t look like a hospital to Mei. It looked like one of the abandoned tubes that Daddy talked about sometimes. Leftover spaces from when Ganymede had first been built that no one used anymore except as storage. This one had a kind of airlock at the end, though, and when they passed through it, things looked a little more like a hospital. They were cleaner, anyway, and there was the smell of ozone, like in the decontamination cells.

“Mei! Hi, Mei!”

It was one of the big boys. Sandro. He was almost five. Mei waved at him as Doctor Strickland walked past. Mei felt better knowing the big boys were here too. If they were, then it was probably okay, even if the woman walking with Doctor Strickland wasn’t her mommy. Which reminded her...

“Where’s Mommy?”

“We’re going to go see Mommy in just a few minutes,” Doctor Strickland said. “We just have a couple more little things we need to do first.”

“No,” Mei said. “I don’t want that.”

He carried her into a room that looked a little like an examination room, only there weren’t any cartoon lions on the walls, and the tables weren’t shaped like grinning hippos. Doctor Strickland put her onto a steel examination table and rubbed her head. Mei crossed her arms and scowled.

“I want Mommy,” Mei said, and made the same impatient grunt that Daddy would.

“Well, you just wait right here, and I’ll see what I can do about that,” Doctor Strickland said with a smile. “Umea?”

“I think we’re good to go. Check with ops, load up, and let’s release it.”

“I’ll go let them know. You stay here.”

The woman nodded, and Doctor Strickland walked back out the door. The woman looked down at her, the pretty face not smiling at all. Mei didn't like her.

"I want my painting," Mei said. "That's not for you. That's for Mommy."

The woman looked at the painting in her hand as if she'd forgotten it was there. She unrolled it.

"It's Mommy's space monster," Mei said. This time, the woman smiled. She held out the painting, and Mei snatched it away. She made some wrinkles in the paper when she did, but she didn't care. She crossed her arms again and scowled and grunted.

"You like space monsters, kid?" the woman asked.

"I want my mommy."

The woman stepped close. She smelled like fake flowers and her fingers were skinny. She lifted Mei down to the floor.

"C'mon, kid," she said. "I'll show you something."

The woman walked away and for a moment Mei hesitated. She didn't like the woman, but she liked being alone even less. She followed. The woman walked down a short hallway, punched a key-code into a big metal door, like an old-fashioned airlock, and walked through when the door swung open. Mei followed her. The new room was cold. Mei didn't like it. There wasn't an examination table here, just a big glass box like they kept fish in at the aquarium, only it was dry inside, and the thing sitting there wasn't a fish. The woman motioned Mei closer and, when Mei came near, knocked sharply on the glass.

The thing inside looked up at the sound. It was a man, but he was naked and his skin didn't look like skin. His eyes glowed blue like there was a fire in his head. And something was wrong with his hands.

He reached toward the glass, and Mei started screaming.

Chapter One

Bobbie

“Snoopy’s out again,” Private Hillman said. “I think his CO must be pissed at him.”

Gunnery Sergeant Roberta Draper of the Martian Marine Corps upped the magnification on her armor’s heads-up display and looked in the direction Hillman was pointing. Twenty-five hundred meters away, a squad of four United Nations Marines were tromping around their outpost, backlit by the giant greenhouse dome they were guarding. A greenhouse dome identical in nearly all respects to the dome her own squad was currently guarding.

One of the four UN Marines had black smudges on the sides of his helmet that looked like beagle ears.

“Yep, that’s Snoopy,” Bobbie said. “Been on every patrol detail so far today. Wonder what he did.”

Guard duty around the greenhouses on Ganymede meant doing what you could to keep your mind occupied. Including speculating on the lives of the Marines on the other side.

The other side. Eighteen months before, there hadn’t been sides. The inner planets had all been one big, happy, slightly dysfunctional family. Then Eros, and now the two superpowers were dividing up the solar system between them, and the one moon neither side was willing to give up was Ganymede, breadbasket of the Jovian system.

As the only moon with any magnetosphere, it was the only place where dome-grown crops stood a chance in Jupiter’s harsh radiation belt, and even then the domes and habitats still had to be shielded to protect civilians from the eight rems a day burning off Jupiter and onto the moon’s surface.

Bobbie’s armor had been designed to let a soldier walk through a nuclear bomb crater minutes after the blast. It also worked well at keeping Jupiter from frying Martian Marines.

Behind the Earth soldiers on patrol, their dome glowed in a shaft of weak sunlight captured by enormous orbital mirrors. Even with the mirrors, most terrestrial plants would have died, starved of sunlight. Only the heavily modified versions the Ganymede scientists cranked out could hope to survive in the trickle of light the mirrors fed them.

“Be sunset soon,” Bobbie said, still watching the Earth Marines outside their little guard hut, knowing they were watching her too. In addition to Snoopy, she spotted the one they called Stumpy because he or she couldn’t be much over a meter and a quarter tall. She wondered what their nickname for her was. Maybe Big Red. Her armor still had the Martian surface camouflage on it. She hadn’t been on Ganymede long enough to get it resurfaced with mottled gray and white.

One by one over the course of five minutes, the orbital mirrors winked out as Ganymede passed behind Jupiter for a few hours. The glow from the greenhouse behind her changed to actinic blue as the artificial lights came on. While the overall light level didn’t go down much, the shadows shifted in strange and subtle ways. Above, the sun—not even a disk from here as much as the brightest star—flashed as it passed behind Jupiter’s limb, and for a moment the planet’s faint ring system was visible.

“They’re going back in,” Corporal Travis said. “Snoop’s bringing up the rear. Poor guy. Can we bail too?”

Bobbie looked around at the featureless dirty ice of Ganymede. Even in her high-tech armor she could feel the moon’s chill.

“Nope.”

Her squad grumbled but fell in line as she led them on a slow low-gravity shuffle around the dome. In addition to Hillman and Travis, she had a green private named Gourab on this particular patrol. And even though he’d been in the Marines all of about a minute and a half, he grumbled just as loud as the other two in his Mariner Valley drawl.

She couldn’t blame them. It was make-work. Something for the Martian soldiers on Ganymede to do to keep them busy. If Earth decided it needed Ganymede all to itself, four grunts walking around the greenhouse dome wouldn’t stop them. With dozens of Earth and Mars warships in a tense standoff in orbit, if hostilities broke out the ground pounders would probably find out only when the surface bombardment began.

To her left, the dome rose to almost half a kilometer: triangular glass panels separated by gleaming copper-colored struts that turned the entire

structure into a massive Faraday cage. Bobbie had never been inside one of the greenhouse domes. She'd been sent out from Mars as part of a surge in troops to the outer planets and had been walking patrols on the surface almost since day one. Ganymede to her was a spaceport, a small Marine base, and the even smaller guard outpost she currently called home.

As they shuffled around the dome, Bobbie watched the unremarkable landscape. Ganymede didn't change much without a catastrophic event. The surface was mostly silicate rock and water ice a few degrees warmer than space. The atmosphere was oxygen so thin it could pass as an industrial vacuum. Ganymede didn't erode or weather. It changed when rocks fell on it from space, or when warm water from the liquid core forced itself onto the surface and created short-lived lakes. Neither thing happened all that often. At home on Mars, wind and dust changed the landscape hourly. Here, she was walking through the footsteps of the day before and the day before and the day before. And if she never came back, those footprints would outlive her. Privately, she thought it was sort of creepy.

A rhythmic squeaking started to cut through the normally smooth hiss and thump sounds her powered armor made. She usually kept the suit's HUD minimized. It got so crowded with information that a marine knew everything except what was actually in front of her. Now she pulled it up, using blinks and eye movements to page over to the suit diagnostic screen. A yellow telltale warned her that the suit's left knee actuator was low on hydraulic fluid. Must be a leak somewhere, but a slow one, because the suit couldn't find it.

"Hey, guys, hold up a minute," Bobbie said. "Hilly, you have any extra hydraulic fluid in your pack?"

"Yep," said Hillman, already pulling it out.

"Give my left knee a squirt, would you?"

While Hillman crouched in front of her, working on her suit, Gourab and Travis began an argument that seemed to be about sports. Bobbie tuned it out.

"This suit is ancient," Hillman said. "You really oughta upgrade. This sort of thing is just going to happen more and more often, you know."

"Yeah, I should," Bobbie said. But the truth was that was easier said than done. Bobbie was not the right shape to fit into one of the standard suits, and the Marines made her jump through a series of flaming hoops every time she requisitioned a new custom one. At a bit over two meters

tall, she was only slightly above average height for a Martian male, but thanks in part to her Polynesian ancestry, she weighed in at over a hundred kilos at one g. None of it was fat, but her muscles seemed to get bigger every time she even walked through a weight room. As a marine, she trained all the time.

The suit she had now was the first one in twelve years of active duty that actually fit well. And even though it was beginning to show its age, it was just easier to try to keep it running than beg and plead for a new one.

Hillman was starting to put his tools away when Bobbie's radio crackled to life.

"Outpost four to stickman. Come in, stickman."

"Roger four," Bobbie replied. "This is stickman one. Go ahead."

"Stickman one, where are you guys? You're half an hour late and some shit is going down over here."

"Sorry, four, equipment trouble," Bobbie said, wondering what sort of shit might be going down, but not enough to ask about it over an open frequency.

"Return to the outpost immediately. We have shots fired at the UN outpost. We're going into lockdown."

It took Bobbie a moment to parse that. She could see her men staring at her, their faces a mix of puzzlement and fear.

"Uh, the Earth guys are shooting at you?" she finally asked.

"Not yet, but they're shooting. Get your asses back here."

Hillman pushed to his feet. Bobbie flexed her knee once and got greens on her diagnostic. She gave Hilly a nod of thanks, then said, "Double-time it back to the outpost. Go."

Bobbie and her squad were still half a kilometer from the outpost when the general alert went out. Her suit's HUD came up on its own, switching to combat mode. The sensor package went to work looking for hostiles and linked up to one of the satellites for a top-down view. She felt the click as the gun built into the suit's right arm switched to free-fire mode.

A thousand alarms would be sounding if an orbital bombardment had begun, but she couldn't help looking up at the sky anyway. No flashes or missile trails. Nothing but Jupiter's bulk.

Bobbie took off for the outpost in a long, loping run. Her squad followed without a word. A person trained in the use of a strength-augmenting suit running in low gravity could cover a lot of ground quickly. The outpost came into view around the curve of the dome in just a few seconds, and a few seconds after that, the cause of the alarm.

UN Marines were charging the Martian outpost. The yearlong cold war was going hot. Somewhere deep behind the cool mental habits of training and discipline, she was surprised. She hadn't really thought this day would come.

The rest of her platoon were out of the outpost and arranged in a firing line facing the UN position. Someone had driven *Yojimbo* out onto the line, and the four-meter-tall combat mech towered over the other marines, looking like a headless giant in power armor, its massive cannon moving slowly as it tracked the incoming Earth troops. The UN soldiers were covering the 2,500 meters between the two outposts at a dead run.

Why isn't anyone talking? she wondered. The silence coming from her platoon was eerie.

And then, just as her squad got to the firing line, her suit squealed a jamming warning at her. The top-down vanished as she lost contact with the satellite. Her team's life signs and equipment status reports went dead as her link to their suits was cut off. The faint static of the open comm channel disappeared, leaving an even more unsettling silence.

She used hand motions to place her team at the right flank, then moved up the line to find Lieutenant Givens, her CO. She spotted his suit right at the center of the line, standing almost directly under *Yojimbo*. She ran up and placed her helmet against his.

"What the fuck is going on, El Tee?" she shouted.

He gave her an irritated look and yelled, "Your guess is as good as mine. We can't tell them to back off because of the jamming, and visual warnings are being ignored. Before the radio cut out, I got authorization to fire if they come within half a klick of our position."

Bobbie had a couple hundred more questions, but the UN troops would cross the five-hundred-meter mark in just a few more seconds, so she ran back to anchor the right flank with her squad. Along the way, she had her suit count the incoming forces and mark them all as hostiles. The suit reported seven targets. Less than a third of the UN troops at their outpost.

This makes no sense.

She had her suit draw a line on the HUD at the five-hundred-meter mark. She didn't tell her boys that was the free-fire zone. She didn't need to. They'd open fire when she did without needing to know why.

The UN soldiers had crossed the one-kilometer mark, still without firing a shot. They were coming in a scattered formation, with six out front in a ragged line and a seventh bringing up the rear about seventy meters behind. Her suit HUD selected the figure on the far left of the enemy line as her target, picking the one closest to her by default. Something itched at the back of her brain, and she overrode the suit and selected the target at the rear and told it to magnify.

The small figure suddenly enlarged in her targeting reticule. She felt a chill move down her back, and magnified again.

The figure chasing the six UN Marines wasn't wearing an environment suit. Nor was it, properly speaking, human. Its skin was covered in chitinous plates, like large black scales. Its head was a massive horror, easily twice as large as it should have been and covered in strange protruding growths.

But most disturbing of all were its hands. Far too large for its body, and too long for their width, they were a childhood nightmare version of hands. The hands of the troll under the bed or the witch sneaking in through the window. They flexed and grasped at nothing with a constant manic energy.

The Earth forces weren't attacking. They were retreating.

"Shoot the thing chasing them," Bobbie yelled to no one.

Before the UN soldiers could cross the half-kilometer line that would cause the Martians to open fire, the thing caught them.

"Oh, holy shit," Bobbie whispered. "Holy *shit*."

It grabbed one UN Marine in its huge hands and tore him in half like paper. Titanium-and-ceramic armor ripped as easily as the flesh inside, spilling broken bits of technology and wet human viscera indiscriminately onto the ice. The remaining five soldiers ran even harder, but the monster chasing them barely slowed as it killed.

"Shoot it shoot it shoot it," Bobbie yelled, and opened fire. Her training and the technology of her combat suit combined to make her an extremely efficient killing machine. As soon as her finger pulled the trigger on her suit's gun, a stream of two-millimeter armor-piercing rounds streaked out at the creature at more than a thousand meters per second. In

just under a second she'd fired fifty rounds at it. The creature was a relatively slow-moving human-sized target, running in a straight line. Her targeting computer could do ballistic corrections that would let her hit a softball-sized object moving at supersonic speeds. Every bullet she fired at the monster hit.

It didn't matter.

The rounds went through it, probably not slowing appreciably before they exited. Each exit wound sprouted a spray of black filaments that fell onto the snow instead of blood. It was like shooting water. The wounds closed almost faster than they were created; the only sign the thing had even been hit was the trail of black fibers in its wake.

And then it caught a second UN Marine. Instead of tearing him to pieces like it had the last one, it spun and hurled the fully armored Earther—probably massing more than five hundred kilos total—toward Bobbie. Her HUD tracked the UN soldier on his upward arc and helpfully informed her that the monster had thrown him not *toward* her but *at* her. In a very flat trajectory. Which meant fast.

She dove to the side as quickly as her bulky suit would let her. The hapless UN Marine swiped Hillman, who'd been standing next to her, and then both of them were gone, bouncing down the ice at lethal speeds.

By the time she'd turned back to the monster, it had killed two more UN soldiers.

The entire Martian line opened fire on it, including *Yojimbo's* big cannon. The two remaining Earth soldiers diverged and ran at angles away from the thing, trying to give their Martian counterparts an open firing lane. The creature was hit hundreds, thousands of times. It stitched itself back together while remaining at a full run, never more than slowing when one of *Yojimbo's* cannon shots detonated nearby.

Bobbie, back on her feet, joined in the barrage of fire but it didn't make any difference. The creature slammed into the Martian line, killing two marines faster than the eye could follow. *Yojimbo* slid to one side, far more nimble than a machine of its size should be. Bobbie thought Sa'id must be driving it. He bragged he could make the big mech dance the tango when he wanted to. That didn't matter either. Even before Sa'id could bring the mech's cannon around for a point-blank shot, the creature ran right up its side, gripped the pilot hatch, and tore the door off its hinges. Sa'id was snatched from his cockpit harness and hurled sixty meters straight up.

The other marines had begun to fall back, firing as they went. Without radio, there was no way to coordinate the retreat. Bobbie found herself running toward the dome with the rest. The small and distant part of her mind that wasn't panicking knew that the dome's glass and metal would offer no protection against something that could tear an armored man in half or rip a nine-ton mech to pieces. That part of her mind recognized the futility in attempting to override her terror.

By the time she found the external door into the dome, there was only one other marine left with her. Gourab. Up close, she could see his face through the armored glass of his helmet. He screamed something at her she couldn't hear. She started to lean forward to touch helmets with him when he shoved her backward onto the ice. He was hammering on the door controls with one metal fist, trying to smash his way in, when the creature caught him and peeled the helmet off his suit with one casual swipe. Gourab stood for a moment, face in vacuum, eyes blinking and mouth open in a soundless scream; then the creature tore off his head as easily as it had his helmet.

It turned and looked at Bobbie, still flat on her back.

Up close, she could see that it had bright blue eyes. A glowing, electric blue. They were beautiful. She raised her gun and held down the trigger for half a second before she realized she'd run out of ammo long before. The creature looked at her gun with what she would have sworn was curiosity, then looked into her eyes and cocked its head to one side.

This is it, she thought. This is how I go out, and I'm not going to know what did it, or why. Dying she could handle. Dying without any answers seemed terribly cruel.

The creature took one step toward her, then stopped and shuddered. A new pair of limbs burst out of its midsection and writhed in the air like tentacles. Its head, already grotesque, seemed to swell up. The blue eyes flashed as bright as the lights in the domes.

And then it exploded in a ball of fire that hurled her away across the ice and slammed her into a low ridge hard enough for the impact-absorbing gel in her suit to go rigid, freezing her in place.

She lay on her back, fading toward unconsciousness. The night sky above her began to flash with light. The ships in orbit, shooting each other.

Cease fire, she thought, pressing it out into the blackness. They were retreating. Cease fire. Her radio was still out, her suit dead. She couldn't

tell anyone that the UN Marines hadn't been attacking.
Or that something else had.

Chapter Two

Holden

The coffeemaker was broken again.

Again.

Jim Holden clicked the red brew button in and out several more times, knowing it wouldn't matter, but helpless to stop himself. The massive and gleaming coffeemaker, designed to brew enough to keep a Martian naval crew happy, refused to make a single cup. Or even a noise. It wasn't just refusing to brew; it was refusing to *try*. Holden closed his eyes against the caffeine headache that threatened in his temples and hit the button on the nearest wall panel to open the shipwide comm.

"Amos," he said.

The comm wasn't working.

Feeling increasingly ridiculous, he pushed the button for the 1MC channel several more times. Nothing. He opened his eyes and saw that all the lights on the panel were out. Then he turned around and saw that the lights on the refrigerator and the ovens were out. It wasn't just the coffeemaker; the entire galley was in open revolt. Holden looked at the ship name, *Rocinante*, newly stenciled onto the galley wall, and said, "Baby, why do you hurt me when I love you so much?"

He pulled out his hand terminal and called Naomi.

After several moments, she finally answered, "Uh, hello?"

"The galley doesn't work, where's Amos?"

A pause. "You called me from the galley? While we are on the same ship? The wall panel just one step too far away?"

"The wall panel in the galley doesn't work either. When I said, 'The galley doesn't work,' it wasn't clever hyperbole. It literally means that not one thing in the galley works. I called you because you carry your terminal and Amos almost never does. And also because he never tells me what he's working on, but he always tells you. So, where is Amos?"

Naomi laughed. It was a lovely sound, and it never failed to put a smile on Holden's face. "He told me he was going to be doing some

rewiring.”

“Do you have power up there? Are we hurtling out of control and you guys were trying to figure out how to break the news to me?”

Holden could hear tapping from Naomi’s end. She hummed to herself as she worked.

“Nope,” she said. “Only area without power seems to be the galley. Also, Alex says we’re less than an hour from fighting with space pirates. Want to come up to ops and fight pirates?”

“I can’t fight pirates without coffee. I’m going to find Amos,” Holden said, then hung up and put his terminal back in his pocket.

Holden moved to the ladder that ran down the keel of the ship, and called up the lift. The fleeing pirate ship could only sustain about 1 g for extended flight, so Holden’s pilot, Alex Kamal, had them flying at 1.3 g to intercept. Anything over 1 g made the ladder dangerous to use.

A few seconds later, the deck hatch clanged open, and the lift whined to a stop at his feet. He stepped on and tapped the button for the engineering deck. The lift began its slow crawl down the shaft, deck hatches opening at its approach, then slamming shut once he had passed.

Amos Burton was in the machine shop, one deck above engineering. He had a complex-looking device half disassembled on the workbench in front of him and was working on it with a solder gun. He wore a gray jumpsuit several sizes too small for him, which strained to contain his broad shoulders when he moved, the old ship name *Tachi* still embroidered on the back.

Holden stopped the lift and said, “Amos, the galley doesn’t work.”

Amos waved one thick arm in an impatient gesture without stopping his work. Holden waited. After another couple seconds of soldering, Amos finally put down the tool and turned around.

“Yep, it doesn’t work because I got this little fucker yanked out of it,” he said, pointing at the device he’d been soldering.

“Can you put it back?”

“Nope, at least not yet. Not done working on it.”

Holden sighed. “Is it important that we disable the galley to fix this thing just before confronting a bloodthirsty band of space pirates? Because my head is really starting to ache, and I’d love to get a cup of coffee before, you know, doing battle.”

“Yep, it was important,” Amos said. “Should I explain why? Or you want to take my word for it?”

Holden nodded. While he didn’t miss much about his days in the Earth Navy, he did find that he occasionally got nostalgic for the absolute respect for the chain of command. On the *Rocinante* the title “captain” was much more nebulously defined. Rewiring things was Amos’ job, and he would resist the idea that he had to inform Holden anytime he was doing it.

Holden let it drop.

“Okay,” he said. “But I wish you’d warned me ahead of time. I’m going to be cranky without my coffee.”

Amos grinned at him and pushed his cap back on his mostly bald head.

“Shit, Cap, I can cover you on that,” he said, then reached back and grabbed a massive metal thermos off the bench. “I made some emergency supplies before I shut the galley down.”

“Amos, I apologize for all the mean things I was thinking about you just now.”

Amos waved it off and turned back to his work. “Take it. I already had a cup.”

Holden climbed back onto the lift and rode it up to the operations deck, the thermos clutched in both hands like a life preserver.

Naomi was seated at the sensor and communications panel, tracking their progress in pursuit of the fleeing pirates. Holden could see at a glance that they were much closer than the last estimate he’d received. He strapped himself into the combat operations couch. He opened a nearby cabinet and, guessing they might be at low g or in free fall in the near future, pulled out a drinking bulb for his coffee.

As he filled it from the thermos’s nipple, he said, “We’re closing awful fast. What’s up?”

“Pirate ship has slowed down quite a bit from its initial one g acceleration. They dropped to half a g for a couple minutes, then stopped accelerating altogether a minute ago. The computer tracked some fluctuations in drive output just before they slowed, so I think we chased them too hard.”

“They broke their ship?”

“They broke their ship.”

Holden took a long drink out of the bulb, scalding his tongue in the process and not caring.

“How long to intercept now?”

“Five minutes, tops. Alex was waiting to do the final decel burn until you were up here and belted in.”

Holden tapped the comm panel’s 1MC button and said, “Amos, buckle up. Five minutes to badguys.” Then he switched to the cockpit channel and said, “Alex, what’s the word?”

“I do believe they broke their ship,” Alex replied in his Martian Mariner Valley drawl.

“That seems to be the consensus,” Holden said.

“Makes runnin’ away a bit harder.”

The Mariner Valley had originally been settled by Chinese, East Indians, and Texans. Alex had the dark complexion and jet-black hair of an East Indian. Coming as he did from Earth, Holden always found it strangely disconcerting when an exaggerated Texas drawl came from someone his brain said should be speaking with Punjabi accents.

“And it makes our day easier,” Holden replied, warming up the combat ops panel. “Bring us to relative stop at ten thousand klicks. I’m going to paint them with the targeting laser and turn on the point defense cannons. Open the outer doors to the tubes, too. No reason not to look as threatening as possible.”

“Roger that, boss,” Alex replied.

Naomi swiveled in her chair and gave Holden a grin. “Fighting space pirates. Very romantic.”

Holden couldn’t help smiling back. Even wearing a Martian naval officer’s jumpsuit that was three sizes too short and five sizes too big around for her long and thin Belter frame, she looked beautiful to him. Her long and curly black hair was pulled into an unruly tail behind her head. Her features were a striking mix of Asian, South American, and African that was unusual even in the melting pot of the Belt. He glanced at his brown-haired Montana farm boy reflection in a darkened panel and felt very generic by comparison.

“You know how much I like anything that gets you to say the word ‘romantic,’” he said. “But I’m afraid I lack your enthusiasm. We started out saving the solar system from a horrific alien menace. Now this?”

Holden had only known one cop well, and him briefly. During the massive and unpleasant series of clusterfucks that now went under the shorthand “the Eros incident,” Holden had teamed up for a time with a thin,

gray, broken man called Miller. By the time they'd met, Miller had already walked away from his official job to obsessively follow a missing persons case.

They'd never precisely been friends, but they'd managed to stop the human race from being wiped out by a corporation's self-induced sociopathy and a recovered alien weapon that everyone in human history had mistaken for a moon of Saturn. By that standard, at least, the partnership had been a success.

Holden had been a naval officer for six years. He'd seen people die, but only from the vantage of a radar screen. On Eros, he'd seen thousands of people die, up close and in horrific ways. He'd killed a couple of them himself. The radiation dose he'd received there meant he had to take constant medications to stop the cancers that kept blooming in his tissues. He'd still gotten off lighter than Miller.

Because of Miller, the alien infection had landed on Venus instead of Earth. But that hadn't killed it. Whatever the alien's hijacked, confused programming was, it was still going on under that planet's thick cloud cover, and no one had so far been able to offer any scientific conclusions more compelling than *Hmm. Weird.*

Saving humanity had cost the old, tired Belter detective his life.

Saving humanity had turned Holden into an employee of the Outer Planets Alliance tracking down pirates. Even on the bad days, he had to think he'd gotten the better end of that deal.

"Thirty seconds to intercept," Alex said.

Holden pulled his mind back to the present and called down to engineering. "You all strapped in down there, Amos?"

"Roger, Cap. Ready to go. Try not to get my girl all shot up."

"No one's shooting anyone today," Holden said after he shut the comm link off. Naomi heard him and raised an eyebrow in question. "Naomi, give me comms. I want to call our friends out there."

A second later, the comm controls appeared on his panel. He aimed a tightbeam at the pirate ship and waited for the link light to go green. When it did, he said, "Undesignated light freighter, this is Captain James Holden of the Outer Planets Alliance missile frigate *Rocinante*. Please respond."

His headset was silent except for the faint static of background radiation.

“Look, guys, let’s not play games. I know you know who I am. I also know that five days ago, you attacked the food freighter *Somnambulist*, disabled its engines, and stole six thousand kilos of protein and all of their air. Which is pretty much all I need to know about you.”

More staticky silence.

“So here’s the deal. I’m tired of following you, and I’m not going to let you stall me while you fix your broken ship and then lead me on another merry chase. If you don’t signal your full and complete surrender in the next sixty seconds, I am going to fire a pair of torpedoes with high-yield plasma warheads and melt your ship into glowing slag. Then I’m going to fly back home and sleep really well tonight.”

The static was finally broken by a boy who sounded way too young to have already decided on a life of piracy.

“You can’t do that. The OPA isn’t a real government. You can’t legally do shit to me, so back the fuck off,” the voice said, sounding like it was on the verge of a pubescent squeak the entire time.

“Seriously? That’s the best you’ve got?” Holden replied. “Look, forget the debate about legality and what constitutes actual governmental authority for a minute. Look at the ladar returns you’re getting from my ship. While you are in a cobbled-together light freighter that someone welded a homemade gauss cannon onto, I’m in a state-of-the-art Martian torpedo bomber with enough firepower to slag a small moon.”

The voice on the other end didn’t reply.

“Guys, even if you don’t recognize me as the appropriate legal authority, can we at least agree that I can blow you up anytime I want to?”

The comm remained silent.

Holden sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. In spite of the caffeine, his headache was refusing to go away. Leaving the channel open to the pirate ship, he opened another channel to the cockpit.

“Alex, put a short burst from the forward point defense cannons through that freighter. Aim for midships.”

“Wait!” yelled the kid on the other ship. “We surrender! Jesus *Christ!*”

Holden stretched out in the zero g, enjoying it after the days of acceleration, and grinned to himself. *No one gets shot today* indeed.

“Naomi, tell our new friends how to give remote control of their ship to you, and let’s take them back to Tycho Station for the OPA tribunals to

figure out. Alex, once they have their engines back up, plot us a return trip at a nice comfortable half g. I'll be down in sick bay trying to find aspirin."

Holden unbuckled his crash couch harness and pushed off to the deck ladder. Along the way, his hand terminal started beeping. It was Fred Johnson, the nominal leader of the OPA and their personal patron on the Tycho corporation's manufacturing station, which was also now doubling as the de facto OPA headquarters.

"Yo, Fred, caught our naughty pirates. Bringing them back for trial."

Fred's large dark face crinkled into a grin. "That's a switch. Got tired of blowing them up?"

"Nope, just finally found some who believed me when I said I would."

Fred's grin turned into a frown. "Listen, Jim, that's not why I called. I need you back at Tycho on the double. Something's happening on Ganymede..."

Chapter Three

Prax

Praxidike Meng stood in the doorway of the staging barn, looking out at the fields of softly waving leaves so utterly green they were almost black, and panicked. The dome arched above him, darker than it should have been. Power to the grow lights had been cut, and the mirrors... He couldn't think about the mirrors.

The flickers of fighting ships looked like glitches on a cheap screen, colors and movements that shouldn't have been there. The sign that something was very wrong. He licked his lips. There had to be a way. There had to be some way to save them.

"Prax," Doris said. "We have to go. Now."

The cutting edge of low-resource agricultural botany, the *Glycine kenon*, a type of soybean so heavily modified it was an entirely new species, represented the last eight years of his life. They were the reason his parents still hadn't seen their only granddaughter in the flesh. They, and a few other things, had ended his marriage. He could see the eight subtly different strains of engineered chloroplasts in the fields, each one trying to spin out the most protein per photon. His hands were trembling. He was going to vomit.

"We have maybe five more minutes to impact," Doris said. "We have to evacuate."

"I don't see it," Prax said.

"It's coming fast enough, by the time you see it, you won't see it. Everyone else has already gone. We're the last ones. Now get in the lift."

The great orbital mirrors had always been his allies, shining down on his fields like a hundred pale suns. He couldn't believe that they'd betray him. It was an insane thought. The mirror plummeting toward the surface of Ganymede—toward his greenhouse, his soybeans, his life's work—hadn't chosen anything. It was a victim of cause and effect, the same as everything else.

“I’m about to leave,” Doris said. “If you’re here in four minutes, you’ll die.”

“Wait,” Prax said. He ran out into the dome. At the edge of the nearest field, he fell to his knees and dug into the rich black soil. The smell of it was like a good patchouli. He pushed his fingers in as deep as he could, cupping a root ball. The small, fragile plant came up in his hands.

Doris was in the industrial lift, ready to descend into the caves and tunnels of the station. Prax sprinted for her. With the plant to save, the dome suddenly felt horribly dangerous. He threw himself through the door and Doris pressed the control display. The wide metal room of the lift lurched, shifted, and began its descent. Normally, it would have carried heavy equipment: the tiller, the tractor, the tons of humus taken from the station recycling processors. Now it was only the three of them: Prax sitting cross-legged on the floor, the soybean seedling nodding in his lap, Doris chewing her lower lip and watching her hand terminal. The lift felt too big.

“The mirror could miss,” Prax said.

“It could. But it’s thirteen hundred tons of glass and metal. The shock wave will be fairly large.”

“The dome might hold.”

“No,” she said, and Prax stopped talking to her.

The cart hummed and clanked, falling deeper under the surface ice, sliding into the network of tunnels that made up the bulk of the station. The air smelled like heating elements and industrial lubricant. Even now, he couldn’t believe they’d done it. He couldn’t believe the military bastards had actually started shooting each other. No one, anywhere, could really be that shortsighted. Except that it seemed they could.

In the months since the Earth-Mars alliance had shattered, he’d gone from constant and gnawing fear to cautious hope to complacency. Every day that the United Nations and the Martians hadn’t started something had been another bit of evidence that they wouldn’t. He’d let himself think that everything was more stable than it looked. Even if things got bad and there was a shooting war, it wouldn’t be here. Ganymede was where the food came from. With its magnetosphere, it was the safest place for pregnant women to gestate, claiming the lowest incidence of birth defects and stillbirth in the outer planets. It was the center of everything that made human expansion into the solar system possible. Their work was as

precious as it was fragile, and the people in charge would never let the war come here.

Doris said something obscene. Prax looked up at her. She ran a hand through her thin white hair, turned, and spat.

“Lost connectivity,” she said, holding up the hand terminal. “Whole network’s locked down.”

“By who?”

“Station security. United Nations. Mars. How would I know?”

“But if they—”

The concussion was like a giant fist coming down on the cart’s roof. The emergency brakes kicked in with a bone-shaking clang. The lights went out, darkness swallowing them for two hummingbird-fast heartbeats. Four battery-powered emergency LEDs popped on, then off again as the cart’s power came back. The critical failure diagnostics started to run: motors humming, lifts clicking, the tracking interface spooling through checksums like an athlete stretching before a run. Prax stood up and walked to the control panel. The shaft sensors reported minimal atmospheric pressure and falling. He felt a shudder as containment doors closed somewhere above them and the exterior pressure started to rise. The air in the shaft had been blown out into space before the emergency systems could lock down. His dome was compromised.

His dome was gone.

He put his hand to his mouth, not realizing he was smearing soil across his chin until he’d already done it. Part of his mind was skittering over the things that needed to be done to save the project—contact his project manager at RMD-Southern, refile the supplemental grant applications, get the data backups to rebuild the viral insertion samples—while another part had gone still and eerily calm. The sense of being two men—one bent on desperate measures, the other already in the numb of mourning—felt like the last weeks of his marriage.

Doris turned to him, a weary amusement plucking at her wide lips. She put out her hand.

“It was a pleasure working with you, Dr. Meng.”

The cart shuddered as the emergency brakes retracted. Another impact came from much farther off. A mirror or a ship falling. Soldiers shelling each other on the surface. Maybe even fighting deeper in the station. There was no way to know. He shook her hand.

“Dr. Bourne,” he said. “It has been an honor.”

They took a long, silent moment at the graveside of their previous lives. Doris sighed.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Mei’s day care was deep in the body of the moon, but the tube station was only a few hundred yards from the cart’s loading dock, and the express trip down to her was no more than ten minutes. Or would have been if they were running. In three decades of living on Ganymede, Prax had never even noticed that the tube stations had security doors.

The four soldiers standing in front of the closed station wore thick plated armor painted in shifting camouflage lines the same shades of beige and steel as the corridor. They carried intimidatingly large assault rifles and scowled at the crowd of a dozen or more pressing in around them.

“I am on the transportation board,” a tall, thin, dark-skinned woman was saying, punctuating each word by tapping her finger on one soldier’s chest plate. “If you don’t let us past, then you’re in trouble. Serious trouble.”

“How long is it going to be down?” a man asked. “I need to get home. How long is it going to be down?”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the soldier on the left shouted. She had a powerful voice. It cut through the rumble and murmur of the crowd like a teacher speaking to restless schoolchildren. “This settlement is in security lockdown. Until the military action is resolved, there is no movement between levels except by official personnel.”

“Whose side are you on?” someone shouted. “Are you Martians? Whose side are you on?”

“In the meantime,” the soldier went on, ignoring the question, “we are going to ask you all to be patient. As soon as it’s safe to travel, the tube system will be opened. Until that time, we’re going to ask you to remain calm for your own safety.”

Prax didn’t know he was going to speak until he heard his own voice. He sounded whiny.

“My daughter’s in the eighth level. Her school’s down there.”

“Every level is in lockdown, sir,” the soldier said. “She’ll be just fine. You just have to be patient.”

The dark-skinned woman from the transportation board crossed her arms. Prax saw two men abandon the press, walking back down the narrow, dirty hall, talking to each other. In the old tunnels this far up, the air smelled of recyclers—plastic and heat and artificial scents. And now also of fear.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the soldier shouted. “For your own safety, you need to remain calm and stay where you are until the military situation has been resolved.”

“What exactly is the military situation?” a woman at Prax’s elbow said, her voice making the words a demand.

“It’s rapidly evolving,” the soldier said. Prax thought there was a dangerous buzz in her voice. She was as scared as anyone. Only she had a gun. So this wasn’t going to work. He had to find something else. His one remaining *Glycine kenon* still in his hand, Prax walked away from the tube station.

He’d been eight years old when his father had transferred from the high-population centers of Europa to help build a research lab on Ganymede. The construction had taken ten years, during which Prax had gone through a rocky adolescence. When his parents had packed up to move the family to a new contract on an asteroid in eccentric orbit near Neptune, Prax had stayed behind. He’d gotten a botany internship thinking that he could use it to grow illicit, untaxed marijuana only to discover that every third botany intern had come in with the same plan. The four years he’d spent trying to find a forgotten closet or an abandoned tunnel that wasn’t already occupied by an illegal hydroponics experiment left him with a good sense of the tunnel architecture.

He walked through the old, narrow hallways of the first-generation construction. Men and women sat along the walls or in the bars and restaurants, their faces blank or angry or frightened. The display screens were set on old entertainment loops of music or theater or abstract art instead of the usual newsfeeds. No hand terminals chimed with incoming messages.

By the central-air ducts, he found what he’d been looking for. The maintenance transport always had a few old electric scooters lying around. No one used them anymore. Because Prax was a senior researcher, his hand terminal would let him through the rusting chain-link fencing. He found one

scooter with a sidecar and half a charge still in the batteries. It had been seven years since he'd been on a scooter. He put the *Glycine kenon* in the sidecar, ran through the diagnostic sequence, and wheeled himself out to the hall.

The first three ramps had soldiers just like the ones he'd seen at the tube station. Prax didn't bother stopping. At the fourth, a supply tunnel that led from the surface warehouses down toward the reactors, there was nobody. He paused, the scooter silent beneath him. There was a bright acid smell in the air that he couldn't quite place. Slowly, other details registered. The scorch marks at the wall panel, a smear of something dark along the floor. He heard a distant popping sound that it took three or four long breaths to recognize as gunfire.

Rapidly evolving apparently meant fighting in the tunnels. The image of Mei's classroom stippled with bullet holes and soaked in children's blood popped into his mind, as vivid as something he was remembering instead of imagining. The panic he'd felt in the dome came down on him again, but a hundred times worse.

"She's fine," he told the plant beside him. "They wouldn't have a firefight in a day care. There're kids there."

The green-black leaves were already starting to wilt. They wouldn't have a war around children. Or food supplies. Or fragile agricultural domes. His hands were trembling again, but not so badly he couldn't steer.

The first explosion came just as he was heading down the ramp from seven to level eight along the side of one of the cathedral-huge unfinished caverns where the raw ice of the moon had been left to weep and refreeze, something between a massive green space and a work of art. There was a flash, then a concussion, and the scooter was fishtailing. The wall loomed up fast, and Prax wrenched his leg out of the way before the impact. Above him, he heard voices shouting. Combat troops would be in armor, talking through their radios. At least, he thought they would. The people screaming up there had to be just people. A second explosion gouged the cavern wall, a section of blue-white ice the size of a tractor calving off the roof and falling slowly and inexorably down to the floor, grinding into it. Prax

scrambled to keep the scooter upright. His heart felt like it was trying to break out of his rib cage.

On the upper edge of the curving ramp, he saw figures in armor. He didn't know if they were UN or Mars. One of them turned toward him, lifting a rifle. Prax gunned the scooter, sliding fast down the ramp. The chatter of automatic weapons and the smell of smoke and steam melt followed him.

The school's doors were closed. He didn't know if that was ominous or hopeful. He brought the wobbling scooter to a halt, jumped off. His legs felt weak and unsteady. He meant to knock gently on the steel drop door, but his first try split the skin over his knuckle.

"Open up! My daughter's in there!" He sounded like a madman, but someone inside heard him or saw him on the security monitor. The articulated steel plates of the door shuddered and began to rise. Prax dropped to the ground and scrambled through.

He hadn't met the new teacher, Miss Carrie, more than a few times, when dropping Mei off or picking her up. She couldn't have been more than twenty years old and was Belter-tall and thin. He didn't remember her face being so gray.

The schoolroom was intact, though. The children were in a circle, singing a song about an ant traveling through the solar system, with rhymes for all the major asteroid bodies. There was no blood, no bullet holes, but the smell of burning plastic was seeping through the vents. He had to get Mei someplace safe. He wasn't sure where that would be. He looked at the circle of children, trying to pick out her face, her hair.

"Mei's not here, sir," Miss Carrie said, her voice tight and breathy at the same time. "Her mother got her this morning."

"This morning?" Prax said, but his mind fastened on *her mother*. What was Nicola doing on Ganymede? He'd had a message from her two days earlier about the child support judgment; she *couldn't* have gotten from Ceres to Ganymede in two days...

"Just after snack," the teacher said.

"You mean she was evacuated. Someone came and evacuated Mei."

Another explosion came, shaking the ice. One of the children made a high, frightened sound. The teacher looked from him to the children, then back. When she spoke again, her voice was lower.

“Her mother came just after snack. She took Mei with her. She hasn’t been here all day.”

Prax pulled up his hand terminal. The connection was still dead, but his wallpaper was a picture from Mei’s first birthday, back when things were still good. Lifetimes ago. He held up the picture and pointed at Nicola, laughing and dangling the doughy, delighted bundle that had been Mei.

“Her?” Prax said. “*She* was here?”

The confusion in the teacher’s face answered him. There’d been a mistake. Someone—a new nanny or a social worker or something—had come to pick up a kid and gotten the wrong one.

“She was on the computer,” the teacher said. “She was in the system. It *showed* her.”

The lights flickered. The smell of smoke was getting stronger, and the air recyclers were humming loudly, popping and crackling as they struggled to suck out the volatile particulates. A boy whose name Prax should have known whimpered, and the teacher reflexively tried to turn toward him. Prax took her elbow and wrenched her back.

“No, you made a mistake,” he said. “Who did you give Mei to?”

“The system said it was her mother! She had identification. It cleared her.”

A stutter of muted gunfire came from the hallway. Someone was screaming outside, and then the kids started to shriek. The teacher pulled her arm away. Something banged against the drop door.

“She was about thirty. Dark hair, dark eyes. She had a doctor with her, she was in the system, and Mei didn’t make any kind of fuss about it.”

“Did they take her medicine?” he asked. “Did they take her *medicine*?”

“No. I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

Without meaning to, Prax shook the woman. Only once, but hard. If Mei didn’t have her medicine, she’d already missed her midday dose. She might make it as long as morning before her immune system started shutting down.

“Show me,” Prax said. “Show me the picture. The woman who took her.”

“I can’t! The system’s down!” the teacher shouted. “They’re killing people in the hallway!”

The circle of children dissolved, screams riding on the backs of screams. The teacher was crying, her hands pressed to her face. Her skin had an almost blue cast to it. He could feel the raw animal panic leaping through his brain. The calm that fell on him didn't take away from it.

"Is there an evacuation tunnel?" he asked.

"They told us to stay here," the teacher said.

"I'm telling you to evacuate," Prax said, but what he thought was *I have to find Mei*.

Chapter Four

Bobbie

Consciousness returned as an angry buzzing noise and pain. Bobbie blinked once, trying to clear her head, trying to see where she was. Her vision was maddeningly blurry. The buzzing sound resolved into an alarm from her suit. Colored lights flashed in her face as the suit's HUD sent her data she couldn't read. It was in the middle of rebooting and alarms were coming on one by one. She tried to move her arms and found that although weak, she wasn't paralyzed or frozen in place. The impact gel in her suit had returned to a liquid state.

Something moved across the window of faint light that was her helmet's face shield. A head, bobbing in and out of view. Then a click as someone plugged a hardline into her suit's external port. A corpsman, then, downloading her injury data.

A voice, male and young, in her suit's internal speakers said, "Gotcha, Gunny. We gotcha. Gonna be okay. Gonna be all right. Just hang in there."

He hadn't quite finished saying *there* when she blacked out again.

She woke bouncing down a long white tunnel on a stretcher. She wasn't wearing her suit anymore. Bobbie was afraid that the battlefield med-techs hadn't wasted time taking her out of it the normal way, that they'd just hit the override that blew all the seams and joints apart. It was a fast way to get a wounded soldier out of four hundred kilos of armored exoskeleton, but the suit was destroyed in the process. Bobbie felt a pang of remorse for the loss of her faithful old suit.

A moment later, she remembered that her entire platoon had been ripped to pieces before her eyes, and her sadness about the lost suit seemed trivial and demeaning.

A hard bump on the stretcher sent a jolt of lightning up her spine and hurled her back into darkness.

“Sergeant Draper,” a voice said.

Bobbie tried to open her eyes and found it impossible to do. Each eyelid weighed a thousand kilos, and even the attempt left her exhausted. So she tried to answer the voice and was surprised and a little ashamed of the drunken mumble that came out instead.

“She’s conscious, but just barely,” the voice said. It was a deep, mellow male voice. It seemed filled with warmth and concern. Bobbie hoped that the voice would keep talking until she fell back asleep.

A second voice, female and sharp, replied, “Let her rest. Trying to bring her fully awake right now is dangerous.”

The kind voice said, “I don’t care if it kills her, Doctor. I need to speak to this soldier, and I need to do it now. So you give her whatever you need to give her to make that happen.”

Bobbie smiled to herself, not parsing the words the nice voice said, just the kindly, warm tone. It was good to have someone like that to take care of you. She started to fall back asleep, the coming blackness a welcome friend.

White fire shot up Bobbie’s spine, and she sat bolt upright in bed, as awake as she’d ever been. It felt like going on the juice, the chemical cocktail they gave sailors to keep them conscious and alert during high-g maneuvers. Bobbie opened her eyes and then slammed them shut again when the room’s bright white light nearly burned them out of her sockets.

“Turn off the lights,” she mumbled, the words coming out of her dry throat in a whisper.

The red light seeping in through her closed eyelids dimmed, but when she tried to open them again, it was still too bright. Someone took her hand and held it while a cup was put into it.

“Can you hold that?” the nice voice said.

Bobbie didn’t answer; she just brought the cup to her mouth and drank the water in two greedy swallows.

“More,” she said, this time in something resembling her old voice.

She heard the sounds of someone scooting a chair and then footsteps away from her on a tile floor. Her brief look at the room had told her she

was in a hospital. She could hear the electric hum of medical machines nearby, and the smells of antiseptic and urine competed for dominance. Disheartened, she realized she was the source of the urine smell. A faucet ran for a moment, and then the footsteps came toward her. The cup was put back into her hand. She sipped at it this time, letting the water stay in her mouth awhile before swallowing. It was cool and delicious.

When she was finished, the voice asked, "More?"

She shook her head.

"Maybe later," she said. Then, after a moment: "Am I blind?"

"No. You've been given a combination of focus drugs and powerful amphetamines. Which means your eyes are fully dilated. Sorry, I didn't think to lower the lights before you woke up."

The voice was still filled with kindness and warmth. Bobbie wanted to see the face behind that voice, so she risked squinting through one eye. The light didn't burn into her like it had before, but it was still uncomfortable. The owner of the nice voice turned out to be a very tall, thin man in a naval intelligence uniform. His face was narrow and tight, the skull beneath it pressing to get out. He gave her a frightening smile that didn't extend past a slight upturn at the corners of his mouth.

"Gunnery Sergeant Roberta W. Draper, 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force," he said, his voice so at odds with his appearance that Bobbie felt like she was watching a movie dubbed from a foreign language.

After several seconds, he still hadn't continued, so Bobbie said, "Yes, sir," then glanced at his bars and added, "Captain."

She could open both eyes now without pain, but a strange tingling sensation was moving up her limbs, making them feel numb and shaky at the same time. She resisted an urge to fidget.

"Sergeant Draper, my name is Captain Thorsson, and I am here to debrief you. We've lost your entire platoon. There's been a two-day pitched battle between the United Nations and Martian Congressional Republic forces on Ganymede. Which, at most recent tally, has resulted in over five billion MCR dollars of infrastructure damage, and the deaths of nearly three thousand military and civilian personnel."

He paused again, staring at her through narrowed eyes that glittered like a snake's. Not sure what response he was looking for, Bobbie just said, "Yes, sir."

“Sergeant Draper, why did your platoon fire on and destroy the UN military outpost at dome fourteen?”

This question was so nonsensical that Bobbie’s mind spent several seconds trying to figure out what it really meant.

“Who ordered you to commence firing, and why?”

Of course he couldn’t be asking why her people had started the fight. Didn’t he know about the monster?

“Don’t you know about the monster?”

Captain Thorsson didn’t move, but the corners of his mouth dropped into a frown, and his forehead bunched up over his nose.

“Monster,” he said, none of the warmth gone from his voice.

“Sir, some kind of monster... mutant... something attacked the UN outpost. The UN troops were running to us to escape it. We didn’t fire on them. This... this whatever it was killed them, and then it killed us,” she said, nauseated and pausing to swallow at the lemony taste in her mouth. “I mean, everyone but me.”

Thorsson frowned for a moment, then reached into one pocket and took out a small digital recorder. He turned it off, then set it on a tray next to Bobbie’s bed.

“Sergeant, I’m going to give you a second chance. Up to now, your record has been exemplary. You are a fine marine. One of our best. Would you like to start over?”

He picked up the recorder and placed a finger on the delete button while giving her a knowing look.

“You think I’m lying?” she said. The itchy feeling in her limbs resolved itself into a very real urge to reach out and snap the smug bastard’s arm off at the elbow. “We all shot at it. There will be gun camera footage from the entire platoon of this thing killing UN soldiers and then attacking us. Sir.”

Thorsson shook his hatchet-shaped head at her, narrowing his eyes until they almost disappeared.

“We have no transmissions from the platoon for the entire fight, and no uploaded data—”

“They were jamming,” Bobbie interrupted. “I lost my radio link when I got close to the monster too.”

Thorsson continued as though she had not spoken. “And all of the local hardware was lost when an orbital mirror array fell onto the dome.

You were outside of the impact area, but the shock wave threw you nearly another quarter of a kilometer. It took us some time to find you.”

All of the local hardware was lost. Such a sterile way of putting it. Everyone in Bobbie’s platoon blown into shrapnel and vapor when a couple thousand tons of mirror fell out of orbit onto them. A monitor started sounding a low, chiming alert, but no one else paid it any attention, so she didn’t either.

“My suit, sir. I shot at it too. My video will still be there.”

“Yes,” Thorsson said. “We’ve examined your suit’s video log. It’s nothing but static.”

This is like a bad horror movie, she thought. The heroine who sees the monster, but no one will believe her. She imagined the second act, in which she was court-martialed in disgrace, and only got her redemption in the third act, when the monster showed up again and killed everyone who didn’t believe—

“Wait!” she said. “What decompression did you use? My suit is an older model. It uses the version 5.1 video compression. Tell the tech that, and have them try it again.”

Thorsson stared at her for a few moments, then pulled out his hand terminal and called someone.

“Have Sergeant Draper’s combat suit brought up to her room. Send a tech with video gear with it.”

He put the terminal away and then gave Bobbie another of those frightening smiles.

“Sergeant, I admit that I am extremely curious about what you want me to see. If this is still a ruse of some kind, you’ve only bought yourself a few more moments.”

Bobbie didn’t reply, but her reaction to Thorsson’s attitude had finally shifted from frightened through angry to annoyed. She pushed herself up in the narrow hospital bed and turned sideways, sitting on the edge and tossing the blanket to the side. With her size, her physical presence up close usually either frightened men or turned them on. Either way it made them uncomfortable. She leaned toward Thorsson a bit and was rewarded when he pushed his chair back an equal amount.

She could tell from his disgusted expression that he immediately knew what she’d done, and he looked away from her smile.

The door to the room opened and a pair of Navy techs wheeled in her suit on a rack. It was intact. They hadn't wrecked it taking her out. She felt a lump come up in her throat, and swallowed it back down. She wasn't going to show even a moment's weakness in front of this Thorsson clown.

The clown pointed at the senior of the two techs and said, "You. What's your name?"

The young tech snapped off a salute and said, "Petty Officer Electrician's Mate Singh, sir."

"Mr. Singh, Sergeant Draper here is claiming that her suit has a different video compression than the new suits, and that's why you were unable to read her video data. Is this correct?"

Singh slapped himself on the forehead with his palm.

"Shit. Yeah," he said. "I didn't think—This is the old Mark III Goliath suit. When they started making the Mark IV, they completely rewrote the firmware. Totally different video storage system. Wow, I feel pretty stupid —"

"Yes," interrupted Thorsson. "Do whatever you need to do to display the video stored on that suit. The sooner you do, the less time I will have to dwell on the delays caused by incompetence."

Singh, to his credit, did not reply. He immediately plugged the suit into a monitor and began working. Bobbie examined her suit. It had a lot of scratches and dings but appeared otherwise undamaged. She felt a strong urge to go put it on and then tell Thorsson where he could stick his attitude.

A new set of shakes moved up her arms and legs. Something fluttered in her neck like the heartbeat of a small animal. She reached up and touched it. It was her pulse. She started to say something, but the tech was pumping his fist and high-fiving his assistant.

"Got it, sir," Singh said, then began the playback.

Bobbie tried to watch, but the picture kept getting fuzzy. She reached for Thorsson's arm to get his attention, but missed somehow and just kept tipping forward.

Here we go again, she thought, and there was a brief moment of free fall before the blackness.

“God dammit,” the sharp voice said. “I goddamn well told you this would happen. This soldier has suffered internal injuries and a nasty concussion. You can’t just pump her full of speed and then interrogate her. It’s irresponsible. It’s fucking criminal!”

Bobbie opened her eyes. She was back in bed. Thorsson sat in the chair by her side. A stocky blond woman in hospital scrubs stood at the foot of her bed, her face flushed and furious. When she saw Bobbie was awake, she moved to her side and took her hand.

“Sergeant Draper, don’t try to move. You took a fall and aggravated some of your injuries. We’ve got you stabilized, but you need to rest now.”

The doctor looked up at Thorsson as she said it, her face placing exclamation marks after every sentence. Bobbie nodded at her, which made her head feel like a bowl of water being carried in shifting gravity. That it didn’t hurt probably meant they’d shot her full of every pain medication they had.

“Sergeant Draper’s assistance was crucial,” Thorsson said, not a hint of apology in his lovely voice. “Because of it, she may have just saved us from an all-out shooting war with Earth. Risking one’s own life so others don’t have to is pretty much the definition of Roberta’s job.”

“Don’t call me Roberta,” Bobbie mumbled.

“Gunny,” Thorsson said. “I’m sorry about what happened to your team. But mostly I’m sorry for not believing you. Thank you for responding with professionalism. We avoided a serious mistake because of it.”

“Just thought you were an asshole,” Bobbie said.

“That’s my job, soldier.”

Thorsson stood up. “Get some rest. We’re shipping you out as soon as you’re well enough for the trip.”

“Shipping me out? Back to Mars?”

Thorsson didn’t answer. He nodded to the doctor, then left. The doctor pushed a button on one of the machines near Bobbie’s bed, and something cool shot into her arm. The lights went out.

Gelatin. Why do hospitals always serve gelatin?

Bobbie desultorily poked her spork at the quivering mound of green on her plate. She was finally feeling good enough to really eat, and the soft and see-through foods they kept bringing her were growing more unsatisfying. Even the high-protein, high-carbohydrate slop they cranked out on most Navy ships sounded good right then. Or a thick mushroom steak covered in gravy with a side of couscous...

The door to her room slid open and her doctor, who she now knew was named Trisha Pichon but who insisted that everyone call her Dr. Trish, came in along with Captain Thorsson and a new man she didn't know. Thorsson gave her his creepy smile, but Bobbie had learned that it was just the way the man's face worked. He seemed to lack the muscles necessary for normal smiling. The new man wore a Marine chaplain's uniform of indeterminate religious affiliation.

Dr. Trish spoke first.

"Good news, Bobbie. We're turning you loose tomorrow. How do you feel?"

"Fine. Hungry," Bobbie said, then gave her gelatin another stab.

"We'll see about getting you some real food, then," Dr. Trish said, then smiled and left the room.

Thorsson pointed at the chaplain. "This is Captain Martens. He'll be coming with us on our trip. I'll leave you two to get acquainted."

Thorsson left before Bobbie could respond, and Martens plopped himself down in the chair next to her bed. He stuck out his hand, and she shook it.

"Hello, Sergeant," he said. "I—"

"When I marked my 2790 form as 'none' for religious faith, I was serious about that," Bobbie said, cutting him off.

Martens smiled, apparently not offended by her interruption or her agnosticism.

"I'm not here in a religious capacity, Sergeant. I'm also a trained grief counselor, and since you witnessed the death of every person in your unit, and were almost killed yourself, Captain Thorsson and your doctor agree that you might need me."

Bobbie started to make a dismissive reply, which was cut off by the lump in her chest. She hid her discomfort by taking a long drink of water, then said, "I'm fine. Thanks for coming by."

Martens leaned back in the chair, his smile never wavering.

“If you were really all right after what you’ve been through, it would be a sign that something was wrong. And you’re about to be thrown into a situation with a lot of emotional and intellectual pressure. Once we get to Earth, you won’t have the luxury of having an emotional breakdown or post-traumatic stress responses. We have a lot of work to—”

“Earth?” Bobbie pounced on the word. “Waitamminute. Why am I going to *Earth*?”

Chapter Five

Avasarala

Chrisjen Avasarala, assistant to the undersecretary of executive administration, sat near the end of the table. Her sari was orange, the only splash of color in the otherwise military blue-and-gray of the meeting. The seven others with seats at the table were the heads of their respective branches of the United Nations military forces, all of them men. She knew their names, their career paths and psychological profiles, pay rates and political alliances and who they were sleeping with. Against the back wall, personal assistants and staff pages stood in uncomfortable stillness, like the shy teenagers at a dance. Avasarala snuck a pistachio out of her purse, cracked the shell discreetly, and popped the salted nut into her mouth.

“Any meeting with Martian command is going to have to wait until after the situation on Ganymede is stabilized. Official diplomatic talks before then are only going to make it seem like we’ve accepted the new status quo.” That was Admiral Nguyen, youngest of the men present. Hawkish. Impressed with himself in the way that successful young men tended to be.

General Adiki-Sandoval nodded his bull-wide head.

“Agreed. It’s not just Mars we need to think about here. If we start looking weak to the Outer Planets Alliance, you can count on a spike in terrorist activity.”

Mikel Agee, from the diplomatic corps, leaned back on his chair and licked his lips anxiously. His slicked-back hair and pinched face made him look like an anthropomorphic rat.

“Gentlemen, I have to disagree—”

“Of course you do,” General Nettleford said dryly. Agee ignored him.

“Meeting with Mars at this point is a necessary first step. If we start throwing around preconditions and obstacles, not only is this process going to take longer, but the chances for renewed hostilities go up. If we can take the pressure off, blow off some steam—”

Admiral Nguyen nodded, his face expressionless. When he spoke, his tone was conversational.

“You guys over at Dip have any metaphors more recent than the steam engine?”

Avasarala chuckled with the others. She didn’t think much of Agee either.

“Mars has already escalated,” General Nettleford said. “Seems to me our best move at this point is to pull the Seventh back from Ceres Station. Get them burning. Put a ticking clock on the wall, then see if the Martians want to stand back on Ganymede.”

“Are you talking about moving them to the Jovian system?” Nguyen asked. “Or are you taking them in toward Mars?”

“Taking something in toward Earth looks a lot like taking it in toward Mars,” Nettleford said.

Avasarala cleared her throat.

“Do you have anything new on the initial attacker?” she asked.

“The tech guys are working on it,” Nettleford said. “But that makes my point. If Mars is testing out new technologies on Ganymede, we can’t afford to let them control the tempo. We have to get a threat of our own on the board.”

“It was the protomolecule, though?” Agee asked. “I mean, it was whatever was on Eros when it went down?”

“Working on that,” Nettleford said again, biting at the words a little. “There are some gross similarities, but there’s some basic differences too. It didn’t spread the way it did on Eros. Ganymede isn’t changing the way the population of Eros did. From the satellite imagery we’ve got, it looks like it went to Martian territory and either self-destructed or was disposed of by their side. If it’s related to Eros at all, it’s been refined.”

“So Mars got a sample and weaponized it,” Admiral Souther said. He didn’t talk much. Avasarala always forgot how high his voice was.

“One possibility,” Nettleford said. “One very strong possibility.”

“Look,” Nguyen said with a self-satisfied little smile, like a child who knew he was going to get his way. “I know we’ve taken first strike off the table here, but we need to talk about what the limits are on immediate response. If this was a dry run for something bigger, waiting may be as good as walking out an airlock.”

“We should take the meeting with Mars,” Avasarala said.

The room went quiet. Nguyen's face darkened.

"Is that..." he said, but never finished the sentence. Avasarala watched the men look at each other. She took another pistachio from her purse, ate the meat, and tucked the shells away. Agee tried not to look pleased. She really did need to find out who had pulled strings to have him represent the diplomatic corps. He was a terrible choice.

"Security's going to be a problem," Nettleford said. "We're not letting any of their ships inside our effective defense perimeter."

"Well, we can't have it on their terms. If we're going to do this, we want them here, where we control the ground."

"Park them a safe distance away, and have our transports pick them up?"

"They'll never agree to that."

"So let's find out what they will agree to."

Avasarala quietly stood up and headed for the door. Her personal assistant—a European boy named Soren Cottwald—detached himself from the back wall and followed her. The generals pretended not to notice her exit, or maybe they were so wrapped up in the new set of problems she'd handed them, they really didn't. Either way, she was sure they were as pleased to have her out as she was to leave.

The hallways of the United Nations complex in the Hague were clean and wide, the décor a soft style that made everything look like a museum diorama of Portuguese colonies in the 1940s. She paused at an organics recycling unit and started digging the shells out of her bag.

"What's next?" she asked.

"Debriefing with Mr. Errinwright."

"After that?"

"Meeston Gravis about the Afghanistan problem."

"Cancel it."

"What should I tell him?"

Avasarala dusted her hands over the waste container, then turned, walking briskly toward the central commons and the elevators.

"Fuck him," she said. "Tell him the Afghanis have been resisting external rule since before my ancestors were kicking out the British. As soon as I figure out how to change that, I'll let him know."

"Yes, ma'am."

“I also need an updated summary paper on Venus. The latest. And I don’t have time to get another PhD to read it, so if it’s not in clear, concise language, fire the sonofabitch and get someone who knows how to write.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The elevator that rose from the common lobby and meeting rooms up to the offices glittered like spun diamond set in steel and was big enough to seat dinner for four. It recognized them as they stepped in, and began its careful rise through the levels. Outside the windows of the common areas, the Binnenhof seemed to sink and the huge anthill of buildings that was the Hague spread out under a perfect blue sky. It was springtime, and the snow that had touched the city since December was finally gone. The pigeons swirled up from the streets far below. There were thirty billion people on the planet, but they would never crowd out the pigeons.

“They’re all fucking men,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Soren said.

“The generals. They’re all fucking men.”

“I thought Souther was the only—”

“I don’t mean that they all fuck men. I mean they’re all men, the fuckers. How long has it been since a woman was in charge of the armed forces? Not since I came here. So instead, we wind up with another example of what happens to policy when there’s too much testosterone in the room. That reminds me: Get in touch with Annette Rabbir in infrastructure. I don’t trust Nguyen. If traffic starts going up between him and anyone in the general assembly, I want to know it.”

Soren cleared his throat.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Did you just instruct me to spy on Admiral Nguyen?”

“No, I just asked for a comprehensive audit of all network traffic, and I don’t give a fuck about any results besides Nguyen’s office.”

“Of course. My mistake.”

The elevator rose past the windows, past the view of the city, and into the dark shaft of the private-office levels. Avasarala cracked her knuckles.

“Just in case, though,” she said, “do it on your own initiative.”

“Yes, ma’am. That was my thought too.”

To those who knew Avasarala only by reputation, her office was deceptively unassuming. It was on the east side of the building, where the lower-ranked officials usually started out. She had a window looking out

over the city, but not a corner. The video screen that took up most of the southern wall was left off when it wasn't in active use, leaving it matte black. The other walls were scuffed bamboo paneling. The carpet was industrially short and patterned to hide stains. The only decorations were a small shrine with a clay sculpture of the Gautama Buddha beside the desk, and a cut crystal vase with the flowers that her husband, Arjun, sent every Thursday. The place smelled like fresh blooms and old pipe smoke, though Avasarala had never smoked there and didn't know anyone who had. She walked to the window. Beneath her, the city spread out in vast concrete and ancient stone.

In the darkening sky, Venus burned.

In the twelve years she had been at this desk, in this room, everything had changed. The alliance between Earth and its upstart brother had been an eternal, unshakable thing once. The Belt had been an annoyance and a haven for tiny cells of renegades and troublemakers as likely to die of a ship malfunction as to be called to justice. Humanity had been alone in the universe.

And then the secret discovery that Phoebe, idiosyncratic moon of Saturn, had been an alien weapon, launched at earth when life here was hardly more than an interesting idea wrapped in a lipid bilayer. How could anything be the same after that?

And yet it was. Yes, Earth and Mars were still unsure whether they were permanent allies or deadly enemies. Yes, the OPA, Hezbollah of the vacuum, was on its way to being a real political force in the outer planets. Yes, the thing that had been meant to reshape the primitive biosphere of Earth had instead ridden a rogue asteroid down into the clouds of Venus and started doing no one knew what.

But the spring still came. The election cycle still rose and fell. The evening star still lit the indigo heavens, outshining even the greatest cities of Earth.

Other days, she found that reassuring.

"Mr. Errinwright," Soren said.

Avasarala turned to the dead screen on her wall as it came to life. Sadavir Errinwright was darker skinned than she was, his face round and soft. It would have been in place anywhere in the Punjab, but his voice affected the cool, analytic amusement of Britain. He wore a dark suit and a smart, narrow tie. Wherever he was, it was bright daylight behind him. The

link kept fluttering, trying to balance the bright with the dark, leaving him a shadow in a government office or else a man haloed by light.

“Your meeting went well, I hope?”

“It was fine,” she said. “We’re moving ahead with the Martian summit. They’re working out the security arrangements now.”

“That was the consensus?”

“Once I told them it was, yes. The Martians are sending their top men to a meeting with officials of the United Nations to personally deliver their apology and discuss how to normalize relations and return Ganymede to blah blah blah. Yes?”

Errinwright scratched his chin.

“I’m not sure that’s how our opposites on Mars see it,” he said.

“Then they can protest. We’ll send out dueling press releases and threaten to cancel the meeting right up to the last minute. High drama is wonderful. It’s better than wonderful; it’s distracting. Just don’t let the bobble-head talk about Venus or Eros.”

His flinch was almost subliminal.

“Please, can we not refer to the secretary-general as ‘the bobble-head’?”

“Why not? He knows I do. I say it to his face, and he doesn’t mind.”

“He thinks you’re joking.”

“That’s because he’s a fucking bobble-head. Don’t let him talk about Venus.”

“And the footage?”

It was a fair question. Whatever had made its attack on Ganymede, it had started in the area held by the United Nations. If the back-channel chatter was to be trusted—and it wasn’t—Mars had a lone marine’s suit camera. Avasarala had seven minutes of high-definition video from forty different cameras of the thing slaughtering the best people Earth had standing for it. Even if the Martians could be convinced to keep it quiet, this was going to be hard to bury.

“Give me until the meeting,” Avasarala said. “Let me see what they say and how they say it. Then I’ll know what to do. If it’s a Martian weapon, they’ll show it by what they bring to the table.”

“I see,” Errinwright said slowly. Meaning he didn’t.

“Sir, with all respect,” she said, “for the time being, this needs to be something between Earth and Mars.”

“High drama between the two major military forces in the system is what we want? How exactly do you see that?”

“I got an alert from Michael-Jon de Uturbé about increased activity on Venus at the *same time* the shooting started on Ganymede. It wasn’t a big spike, but it was there. And Venus getting restless just when something happens that looks a damn lot like the protomolecule showed up on Ganymede? That’s a problem.”

She let that sink in for a moment before she went on. Errinwright’s eyes shifted, like he was reading in the air. It was something he did when he was thinking hard.

“Saber rattling we’ve done before,” she said. “We’ve survived it. It’s a known quantity. I have a binder with nine hundred pages of analysis and contingency plans for conflict with Mars, including fourteen different scenarios about what we do if they develop an unexpected new technology. The binder for what we do if something comes up from Venus? It’s three pages long, and it begins *Step One: Find God.*”

Errinwright looked sober. She could hear Soren behind her, a different and more anxious silence than he usually carried. She’d laid her fear out on the table.

“Three options,” she said softly. “One: Mars made it. That’s just war. We can handle that. Two: Someone else made it. Unpleasant and dangerous, but solvable. Three: It made itself. And we don’t have anything.”

“You’re going to put more pages in your thin binder?” Errinwright said. He sounded flippant. He wasn’t.

“No, sir. I’m going to find out which of the three we’re looking at. If it’s one of the first two, I’ll solve the problem.”

“And if the third?”

“Retire,” she said. “Let you put some other idiot in charge.”

Errinwright had known her long enough to hear the joke in her voice. He smiled and tugged absently at his tie. It was a tell of his. He was as anxious as she was. No one who didn’t know him would have seen it.

“That’s a tightrope. We can’t let the conflict on Ganymede become too heated.”

“I’ll keep it a sideshow,” Avasarala said. “No one starts a war unless I say they can.”

“You mean unless the secretary-general issues the executive decision and the general assembly casts an affirming vote.”

“And I’ll tell him when he can do that,” she said. “But you can give him the news. Hearing it from an old grandma like me makes his dick shrink.”

“Well, we can’t have that, certainly. Let me know what you find. I’ll speak with the speech-writing staff and make certain that the text of his announcement doesn’t color outside the lines.”

“And anyone who leaks the video of the attack answers to me,” she said.

“Anyone who leaks it is guilty of treason and will be tried before a legitimate tribunal and sent to the Lunar Penal Colony for life.”

“Close enough.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Chrisjen. We’re in difficult times. The fewer surprises, the better.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. The link died. The screen went dark. She could see herself in it as a smudge of orange topped by the gray of her hair. Soren was a blur of khaki and white.

“You need more work?”

“No, ma’am.”

“So get the fuck out.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She heard his footsteps retreating behind her.

“Soren!”

“Ma’am?”

“Get me a list of everyone who testified at the Eros incident hearings. And run what they said in testimony past the neuro-psych analysts if it hasn’t already been.”

“Would you like the transcripts?”

“Yes, that too.”

“I’ll have them to you as soon as possible.”

The door closed behind him, and Avasarala sank into her chair. Her feet hurt, and the presentiment of a headache that had haunted her since morning was stepping forward, clearing its throat. The Buddha smiled serenely, and she chuckled at him, as if sharing a private joke. She wanted to go home, to sit on her porch and listen to Arjun practice his piano.

And instead...

She used her hand terminal rather than the office system to call Arjun. It was a superstitious urge that made her want to keep them separate, even

in ways as small as this. He picked up the connection at once. His face was angular, the close-cut beard almost entirely white now. The merriness in his eyes was always there, even when he wept. Just looking at him, she felt something in her breast relax.

"I'm going to be late coming home," she said, immediately regretting the matter-of-fact tone. Arjun nodded.

"I am shocked beyond words," he said. Even the man's sarcasm was gentle. "The mask is heavy today?"

The mask, he called it. As if the person she was when she faced the world was the false one, and the one who spoke to him or played painting games with her granddaughters was authentic. She thought he was wrong, but the fiction was so comforting she had always played along.

"Today, very heavy. What are you doing now, love?"

"Reading Kukurri's thesis draft. It needs work."

"Are you in your office?"

"Yes."

"You should go to the garden," she said.

"Because that's where you want to be? We can go together when you're home."

She sighed.

"I may be very late," she said.

"Wake me, and we can go then."

She touched the screen, and he grinned as if he'd felt the caress. She cut the connection. By long habit, they didn't tell each other goodbye. It was one of a thousand small personal idioms that grew from decades of marriage.

Avasarala turned to her desk system, pulling up the tactical analysis of the battle on Ganymede, the intelligence profiles of the major military figures within Mars, and the master schedule for the meeting, already half filled in by the generals in the time since her conference. She took a pistachio from her purse, cracked its shell, and let the raw information wash over her, her mind dancing through it. In the window behind her, other stars struggled through the light pollution of the Hague, but Venus was still the brightest.

Chapter Six

Holden

Holden was dreaming of long twisting corridors filled with half-human horrors when a loud buzzing woke him to a pitch-black cabin. He struggled for a moment with the unfamiliar straps on the bunk before he unbuckled and floated free in the microgravity. The wall panel buzzed again. Holden pushed off the bed to it and hit the button to bring the cabin lights up. The cabin was tiny. A seventy-year-old crash couch above a personal storage locker crammed up against one bulkhead, a toilet and sink built into a corner, and across from the bunk, a wall panel with the name *Somnambulist* etched above it.

The panel buzzed a third time. This time Holden hit the reply button and said, “Where are we, Naomi?”

“Final braking for high orbit. You’re not going to believe this, but they’re making us queue up.”

“Queue up, as in get in line?”

“Yep,” Naomi said. “I think they’re boarding all the ships that are landing on Ganymede.”

Shit.

“Shit. Which side is it?”

“Does it matter?”

“Well,” Holden said. “Earth wants me for stealing a couple thousand of their nuclear missiles and handing them over to the OPA. Mars just wants me for stealing one of their ships. I assume those carry different penalties.”

Naomi laughed. “They’d lock you up for eternity either way.”

“Call me pedantic, then.”

“The group we’re in line for look like UN ships, but a Martian frigate is parked right next to them, watching the proceedings.”

Holden gave a private prayer of thanks for letting Fred Johnson back on Tycho talk him into taking the recently repaired *Somnambulist* to Ganymede rather than try to land in the *Rocinante*. The freighter was the least suspicious ship in the OPA fleet right now. Far less likely to draw

unwanted attention than their stolen Martian warship. They'd left the *Roci* parked a million kilometers away from Jupiter in a spot no one was likely to look. Alex had the ship shut down except for air recycling and passive sensors and was probably huddled in his cabin with a space heater and a lot of blankets, waiting for their call.

"Okay, I'm on my way up. Send a tightbeam to Alex and let him know the situation. If we get arrested, he's to take the *Roci* back to Tycho."

Holden opened the locker under the bunk and pulled out a badly fitting green jumpsuit with *Somnambulist* stenciled on the back and the name Philips on the front pocket. According to the ship's records, provided by the tech wizards back at Tycho, he was crewman first class Walter Philips, engineer and general tool pusher on the food freighter *Somnambulist*. He was also third-in-command out of a crew of three. Given his reputation in the solar system, it was thought best that Holden not have a job on the ship that would require him to speak to anyone in authority.

He washed up in his tiny sink—no actual free-flowing water, but a system of moist towels and soaped pads—scratching unhappily at the scraggly beard he'd been growing as part of his disguise. He'd never tried to grow one before, and was disappointed to discover that his facial hair grew in patches of varying length and curl. Amos had grown a beard as well in an act of solidarity and now had a lush lion's mane, which he was considering keeping because it looked so good.

Holden slid the used towel into its cycling chamber and pushed off toward the compartment hatch and up the crew ladder to the operations deck.

Not that it was much of an ops deck. The *Somnambulist* was nearly a hundred years old and definitely at the end of her life cycle. If they hadn't needed a throwaway ship for this mission, Fred's people would probably have just scrapped the old girl out. Her recent run-in with pirates had left her half dead to begin with. But she'd spent the last twenty years of her life flying the Ganymede-to-Ceres food run, and she'd show up in the registry as a regular visitor to the Jovian moon, a ship that might plausibly arrive with relief supplies. Fred thought that with her regular arrivals at Ganymede, she might just get waved past any customs or blockades without a look.

That, it seemed, had been optimistic.

Naomi was belted into one of the operations stations when Holden arrived. She wore a green jumpsuit similar to his, though the name on her pocket read *Estancia*. She gave him a smile, then waved him over to look at her screen.

“That’s the group of ships that are checking everyone out before they land.”

“Damn,” Holden said, zooming the telescopic image in to get a better look at the hulls and identifying marks. “Definitely UN ships.” Something small moved across the image from one of the UN ships to the heavy freighter that was currently at the front of the line. “And that looks like a boarding skiff.”

“Well, good thing you haven’t groomed in a month,” Naomi said, tugging at a lock of his hair. “With that bush on your head and that awful beard, your own mothers wouldn’t recognize you.”

“I’m hoping they haven’t recruited my mothers,” Holden said, trying to match her lightness of tone. “I’ll warn Amos that they’re coming.”

Holden, Naomi, and Amos waited in the short locker-filled hallway just outside the inner airlock door for the boarding party to finish cycling the ’lock. Naomi looked tall and stern in her freshly washed captain’s uniform and magnetic boots. Captain Estancia had skippered the *Somnambulist* for ten years before the pirate attack that took her life. Holden thought Naomi made a suitably regal replacement.

Behind her, Amos wore a jumpsuit with a chief engineer’s patch and a bored scowl. Even in the microgravity of their current orbit around Ganymede, he seemed to be slouching. Holden did his best to emulate his stance and his half-angry expression.

The airlock finished cycling, and the inner doors slid open. Six marines in combat armor and a junior lieutenant in an environment suit clanked out on mag boots. The lieutenant quickly looked over the crew and checked them against something on his hand terminal. He looked as bored as Amos did. Holden guessed that this poor junior officer had been stuck with the shit duty of boarding ships all day and was probably in as big a hurry to be done as they were to leave.

“Rowena Estancia, captain and majority owner of the Ceres-registered freighter *Weeping Somnambulist*.”

He didn’t make it a question, but Naomi replied, “Yes, sir.”

“I like the name,” the lieutenant said without looking up from his terminal.

“Sir?”

“The ship name. It’s unusual. I swear, if I board one more ship named after someone’s kid or the girl they left behind after that magical weekend on Titan, I’m going to start fining people for general lack of creativity.”

Holden felt a tension begin at the base of his spine and creep up toward his scalp. This lieutenant might be bored with his job, but he was smart and perceptive, and he was letting them know it up front.

“Well, this one is named after the tearful three months I spent on Titan after he left me,” Naomi said with a grin. “Probably a good thing in the long term. I was going to name her after my goldfish.”

The lieutenant’s head snapped up in surprise; then he began laughing. “Thanks, Captain. That’s the first laugh today. Everyone else is scared shitless of us, and these six slabs of meat”—he gestured at the marines behind him—“have had their senses of humor chemically removed.”

Holden shot a look to Amos. *Is he flirting with her? I think he’s flirting with her.* Amos’ scowl could have meant anything.

The lieutenant tapped something on his terminal and said, “Protein, supplements, water purifiers, and antibiotics. Can I take a quick look?”

“Yes, sir,” Naomi said, gesturing toward the hatch. “Right this way.”

She left, the UN officer and two of the marines in tow. The other four settled into alert-guard poses next to the airlock. Amos elbowed Holden to get his attention, then said, “How you boys doing today?”

The marines ignored him.

“I was saying to my buddy here, I was saying, ‘I bet those fancy tin suits those boys wear bind up something awful in the crotch.’”

Holden closed his eyes and started sending psychic messages to Amos to shut up. It didn’t work.

“I mean, all that fancy high-tech gear strapped on everywhere, and the one thing they don’t allow for is scratching your balls. Or, God forbid, you get outta alignment and gotta give the works a shift to create some space.”

Holden opened his eyes. The marines were all looking at Amos now, but they hadn’t moved or spoken. Holden shifted to the back corner of the

room and tried to press himself into it. No one even glanced in his direction.

“So,” Amos continued, his voice full of companionable good cheer. “I got this theory, and I was hoping you boys could help me out.”

The closest marine took a half step forward, but that was all.

“My theory is,” Amos said, “that to avoid that whole problem, they just go ahead and cut off all those parts that might get caught up in your suit. And it has the added benefit of reducing your temptation to diddle each other during those long cold nights on the ship.”

The marine took another step, and Amos immediately took one of his own to close the distance. With his nose so close to the marine’s armored faceplate that his breath fogged the glass, Amos said, “So be straight with me, Joe. The outside of those suits, that’s anatomically correct, ain’t it?”

There was a long, tense silence that was finally broken when someone cleared his throat at the hatch, and the lieutenant came into the corridor. “There a problem here?”

Amos smiled and stepped back.

“Nope. Just getting to know the fine men and women my tax dollars help pay for.”

“Sergeant?” the lieutenant said.

The marine stepped back.

“No, sir. No problem.”

The lieutenant turned around and shook Naomi’s hand.

“Captain Estancia, it has been a pleasure. Our people will be radioing you with landing clearance shortly. I’m sure the people of Ganymede will be grateful for the supplies you’re bringing.”

“Happy to help,” Naomi said, and gave the young officer a brilliant smile.

When the UN troops had cycled back through the airlock and flown away in their skiff, Naomi let out a long breath and began massaging her cheeks.

“If I had to smile one second longer, my face was going to crack apart.”

Holden grabbed Amos by the sleeve.

“What. The. Fuck,” he said through gritted teeth, “was *that* all about?”

“What?” Naomi said.

“Amos here did just about everything he could to piss the marines off while you were gone. I’m surprised they didn’t shoot him, and then me half

a second later.”

Amos glanced down at Holden’s hand, still gripping his arm, but made no move to pull free.

“Cap, you’re a good guy, but you’d be a shitty smuggler.”

“What?” Naomi said again.

“The captain here was so nervous even I started to think he was up to something. So I kept the marines’ attention until you got back,” Amos said. “Oh, and they can’t shoot you unless you actually touch them or draw a weapon. You were a UN Navy boy. You should remember the rules.”

“So...” Holden started.

“So,” Amos interrupted. “If the lieutenant asks them about us, they’ll have a story to tell about the asshole engineer who got in their faces, and not the nervous guy with the patchy beard who kept trying to hide in the corner.”

“Shit,” Holden said.

“You’re a good captain, and you can have my back in a fight anytime. But you’re a crap criminal. You just don’t know how to act like anyone but yourself.”

“Wanna be captain again?” Naomi said. “That job sucks.”

“Ganymede tower, this is *Somnambulist* repeating our request for a pad assignment,” Naomi said. “We’ve been cleared by the UN patrols, and you’ve had us holding in low orbit for three hours now.”

Naomi flicked off her mic and added, “Asshole.”

The voice that replied was different from the one they’d been requesting landing clearance from for the last few hours. This one was older and less annoyed.

“Sorry, *Somnambulist*, we’ll get you into the pattern as soon as possible. But we’ve had launches nonstop for the last ten hours, and we still have a dozen ships to get off of the ground before we start letting people land.”

Holden turned on his mic and said, “We talking to the supervisor now?”

“Yep. Senior supervisor Sam Snelling if you’re making notes for a complaint. That’s Snelling with two *Ls*.”

“No, no,” Holden replied. “Not a complaint. We’ve been watching the outgoing ships flying by. Are these refugee ships? With the tonnage we’ve seen lifting off, it looks like half the moon is leaving.”

“Nope. We do have a few charters and commercial liners taking people off, but most of the ships leaving right now are food freighters.”

“Food freighters?”

“We ship almost a hundred thousand kilos of food a *day*, and the fighting trapped a lot of those shipments on the surface. Now that the blockade is letting people through, they’re on their way out to make their deliveries.”

“Wait,” Holden said. “I’m waiting to land with relief food supplies for people starving on Ganymede, and you’re launching a hundred thousand kilos of food *off the moon*?”

“Closer to half a million, what with the backup,” Sam said. “But we don’t own this food. Most of the food production on Ganymede is owned by corporations that aren’t headquartered here. Lot of money tied up in these shipments. Every day it sat on the ground here, people were losing a fortune.”

“I...” Holden started, then after a pause said, “*Somnambulist* out.”

Holden turned his chair around to face Naomi. Her expression was closed in a way that meant she was as angry as he was.

Amos, lounging near the engineering console and eating an apple he’d stolen from their relief supplies, said, “This surprises you why, Captain?”

An hour later, they got permission to land.

Seen from low orbit and their descent path, the surface of Ganymede didn’t look much different than it ever had. Even at its best, the Jovian moon was a wasteland of gray silicate rock and slightly less gray water ice, the entire thing pocked with craters and flash-frozen lakes. It had looked like a battlefield long before humanity’s ancestors crawled up onto dry land for the first time.

But humans, with their great creativity and industriousness in the domain of destruction, had found ways to make their mark. Holden spotted the almost skeletal remains of a destroyer stretched across the landscape at the end of a long black scar. The shock wave of its impact had flattened

smaller domes as far as ten kilometers away. Tiny rescue ships flitted about its corpse, looking less for survivors than for bits of information or technology that had survived the crash and couldn't be allowed to fall into enemy hands.

The worst damage visible was the complete loss of one of the enormous greenhouse domes. The agricultural domes were gigantic structures of steel and glass with hectares of carefully cultivated soil and meticulously bred and tended crops beneath them. To see one crushed beneath the twisted metal of what looked like a fallen mirror array was shocking and demoralizing. The domes fed the outer planets with their specially bred crops. The most advanced agricultural science in history happened inside them. And the orbiting mirrors were marvels of engineering that helped make it possible. Slamming one into the other, and leaving both lying in ruins, struck Holden as being as stupidly shortsighted as shutting in your water supply to deny your enemy a drink.

By the time the *Somnambulist* had set her creaking bones to rest on their assigned landing pad, Holden had lost all patience with human stupidity.

So, of course, it came out to meet him.

The customs inspector was waiting for them when they stepped out of the airlock. He was a stick-thin man with a handsome face and an egg-shaped bald head. He was accompanied by two men in nondescript security guard uniforms with Tasers in holsters at their belts.

"Hello, my name is Mr. Vedas. I am the customs inspector for port eleven, pads A14 through A22. Your manifest, please."

Naomi, once again playing captain, stepped forward and said, "The manifest was transmitted to your office prior to landing. I on't—"

Holden saw that Vedas wasn't holding an official cargo-inspection terminal, nor were the guards with him wearing Ganymede Port Authority uniforms. He got the tingling premonition of a bad con job about to be played out. He moved up and waved Naomi off.

"Captain, I'll take care of this."

Customs inspector Vedas looked him up and down and said, "And you are?"

"You can call me Mr. Not-putting-up-with-your-bullshit."

Vedas scowled, and the two security guards shuffled closer. Holden smiled at them, then reached behind his back and under his coat and pulled

out a large pistol. He held it at the side of his leg, pointed at the ground, but they stepped back anyway. Vedas blanched.

“I know this shakedown,” Holden said. “You ask to look at our manifest; then you tell us which items we have *mistakenly* included on it. And while we are retransmitting to your office with our newly amended manifest, you and your goons take the plum items and sell them on what I’m guessing is a thriving black market for food and medicine.”

“I am a legally vested administrator of Ganymede Station,” Vedas squeaked. “You think you can bully me with your gun? I’ll have port security arrest you and impound your entire ship if you think—”

“No, I’m not going to bully you,” Holden said. “But I have had it right up to here with idiots profiting from misery, and I’m going to make myself feel better by having my big friend Amos here beat you senseless for trying to steal food and medicine from refugees.”

“Ain’t bullying so much as stress relief,” Amos said amiably.

Holden nodded at Amos.

“How angry does it make you that this guy wants to steal from refugees, Amos?”

“Pretty fucking angry, Captain.”

Holden patted his pistol against his thigh.

“The gun is just to make sure ‘port security’ there doesn’t interfere until Amos has fully worked out his anger issues.”

Mr. Vedas, customs inspector for port eleven, pads A14 through A22, turned and ran as though his life depended on it, with his rent-a-cops in hot pursuit.

“You enjoyed that,” Naomi said. Her expression was odd and evaluating, her voice in the no-man’s-land between accusing and not.

Holden holstered his gun.

“Let’s go find out what the hell happened here.”

Chapter Seven

Prax

The security center was on the third layer down from the surface. The finished walls and independent power supply seemed like luxury items compared with the raw ice of other places on the station, but really they were important signals. The way some plants advertised their poisons by bright foliage, the security center advertised its impregnability. It wasn't enough that it was impossible to tunnel through the ice and sneak a friend or a lover out of the holding cells. Everyone had to *know* that it was impossible—know just by looking—or else someone would try it.

In all his years on Ganymede, Prax had been there only once before, and then as a witness. As a man there to help the law, not to ask help from it. He'd been back twelve times in the last week, waiting in the long, desperate line, fidgeting and struggling with the almost overpowering sense that he needed to be somewhere else doing something, even if he didn't know what exactly it was.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Meng," the woman at the public information counter said from behind her inch-thick wire-laced window. She looked tired. More than tired, more than exhausted even. Shell-shocked. Dead. "Nothing today either."

"Is there anyone I can talk to? There has to be a way to—"

"I'm sorry," she said, and her eyes looked past him to the next desperate, frightened, unbathed person that she wouldn't be able to help. Prax walked out, teeth grinding in impotent rage. The line was two hours long; men and women and children stood or leaned or sat. Some were weeping. A young woman with red-rimmed eyes smoked a marijuana cigarette, the smell of burning leaves over the stink of close-packed bodies, the smoke curling up past the NO SMOKING sign on the wall. No one protested. All of them had the haunted look of refugees, even the ones who'd been born here.

In the days since the official fighting had stopped, the Martian and Earth militaries had retreated back behind their lines. The breadbasket of

the outer planets found itself reduced to a wasteland between them, and the collected intelligence of the station was bent to a single task: getting away.

The ports had started out under lockdown by two military forces in conflict, but they'd soon left the surface for the safety of their ships, and the depth of panic and fear in the station could no longer be contained. The few passenger ships that were permitted out were packed with people trying to get anywhere else. The fares for passage were bankrupting people who'd worked for years in some of the highest-paying material science positions outside Earth. The poorer people were left sneaking out in freight drones or tiny yachts or even space suits strapped onto modified frames and fired off toward Europa in hopes of rescue. Panic drove them from risk to risk until they wound up somewhere else or in the grave. Near the security stations, near the ports, even near the abandoned military cordons set up by Mars and the UN, the corridors were thick with people scrambling for anything they could tell themselves was safety.

Prax wished he was with them.

Instead, his world had fallen into a kind of rhythm. He woke at his rooms, because he always went home at night so that he would be there if Mei came back. He ate whatever he could find. The last two days, there hadn't been anything left in his personal storage, but a few of the ornamental plants in the parkways were edible. He wasn't really hungry anyway.

Then he checked the body drops.

The hospital had maintained a scrolling video feed of the recovered dead to help in identification for the first week. Since then, he'd had to go look at the actual bodies. He was looking for a child, so he didn't have to go through the vast majority of the dead, but the ones he did see haunted him. Twice he'd found a corpse sufficiently mutilated that it might have been Mei, but the first had a stork-bite birthmark at the back of her neck and the other's toenails were the wrong shape. Those dead girls were someone else's tragedies.

Once he'd assured himself that Mei wasn't among the lists of the dead, he went hunting. The first night she'd been gone, he'd taken out his hand terminal and made a list. People to contact who had official power: security, her doctors, the warring armies. People to contact who might have information: the other parents at her school, the other parents in his medical support group, her mother. Favorite places to check: her best friend's home,

the common-space parks she liked best, the sweet shop with the lime sherbet she always asked for. Places someone might go to buy a stolen child for sex: a list of bars and brothels off a cached copy of the station directory. The updated directory would be on the system, but it was still locked down. Every day, he crossed as many off the list as he could, and when they were all gone, he started over.

From a list, they'd become a schedule. Security every other day, alternating with whoever would talk to him from the Martian forces or the UN on the other days. The parks in the morning after the body checks. Mei's best friend and her family had made it out, so there was nothing to check there. The sweet shop had been burned out in a riot. Finding her doctors was the hardest. Dr. Astrigan, her pediatrician, had made all the right concerned noises and promised him that she would call him if she heard anything and then, when he checked again three days later, didn't remember having spoken to him. The surgeon who'd helped drain the abscesses along her spine when she'd first been diagnosed hadn't seen her. Dr. Strickland from the support and maintenance group was missing. Nurse Abuakár was dead.

The other families from the group had their own tragedies to work through. Mei wasn't the only child missing. Katoa Merton. Gabby Solyuz. Sandro Ventisiete. He'd seen the fear and desperation that shrieked in the back of his head mirrored in the faces of the other parents. It made those visits harder than looking at bodies. It made the fear hard to forget.

He did it anyway.

Basia Merton—KatoaDaddy, Mei called him—was a thick-necked man who always smelled of peppermint. His wife was pencil thin with a nervous twitch of a smile. Their home was six chambers near the water-management complex five levels down from the surface, decorated in spun silk and bamboo. When Basia opened the door, he didn't smile or say hello; he only turned and walked in, leaving the way open. Prax followed him.

At the table, Basia poured Prax a glass of miraculously unspoiled milk. It was the fifth time Prax had come since Mei had gone missing.

"No sign, then?" Basia said. It wasn't really a question.

"No news," Prax said. "So there's that, at least."

From the back of the house, a young girl's voice rose in outrage, matched by a younger boy's. Basia didn't even turn to look.

"Nothing here either. I'm sorry."

The milk tasted wonderful, smooth and rich and soft. Prax could almost feel the calories and nutrients being sucked in through the membranes in his mouth. It occurred to him that he might technically be starving.

“There’s still hope,” Prax said.

Basia blew out his breath like the words had been a punch in the gut. His lips were pressed thin and he was staring at the table. The shouting voices in the back resolved into a low boyish wail.

“We’re leaving,” Basia said. “My cousin works on Luna for Magellan Biotech. They’re sending relief ships, and when they put off the medical supplies, there’s going to be room for us. It’s all arranged.”

Prax put down the glass of milk. The chambers around them seemed to go quiet, but he knew that was an illusion. A strange pressure bloomed in his throat, down into his chest. His face felt waxy. He had the sudden physical memory of his wife announcing that she’d filed for divorce. Betrayed. He felt betrayed.

“...after that, another few days,” Basia was saying. He’d been talking, but Prax hadn’t heard him.

“But what about Katoa?” Prax managed to say around the thickness in his throat. “He’s here somewhere.”

Basia’s gaze flickered up and then away, fast as a bird’s wing.

“He’s not. He’s gone, brother. Boy had a swamp where his immune system should’ve been. You know that. Without his medicine, he used to start feeling really sick in three, maybe four days. I have to take care of the two kids I still got.”

Prax nodded, his body responding without him. He felt like a flywheel had come loose somewhere in the back of his head. The grain of the bamboo table seemed unnaturally sharp. The smell of ice melt. The taste of milk going sour on his tongue.

“You can’t know that,” he said, trying to keep his voice soft. He didn’t do a great job.

“I pretty much can.”

“Whoever... whoever took Mei and Katoa, they aren’t useful to them dead. They knew. They had to know that they’d need medicine. And so it only makes sense that they’d take them somewhere they could get it.”

“No one took them, brother. They got lost. Something happened.”

“Mei’s teacher said—”

“Mei’s teacher was scared crazy. Her whole world was making sure toddlers don’t spit in each other’s mouths too much, and there’s a shooting war outside her room. Who the hell knows what she saw?”

“She said Mei’s mother and a *doctor*. She said a doctor—”

“And come on, man. Not useful if they’re dead? This station is ass deep in dead people, and I don’t see anyone getting *useful*. It’s a war. Fuckers started a war.” There were tears in his wide, dark eyes now, and sorrow in his voice. But there was no fight. “People die in a war. Kids die. You gotta... ah shit. You got to keep moving.”

“You don’t know,” Prax said. “You don’t know that they’re dead, and until you know, you’re abandoning them.”

Basia looked down at the floor. There was a flush rising under the man’s skin. He shook his head, the corners of his mouth twitching down.

“You can’t go,” Prax said. “You have to stay and look for him.”

“Don’t,” Basia said. “And I mean *do not* shout at me in my own home.”

“These are our kids, and you don’t get to walk away from them! What kind of father are you? I *mean*, *Jesus*...”

Basia was leaning forward now, hunched over the table. Behind him, a girl on the edge of womanhood looked in from the hallway, her eyes wide. Prax felt a deep certainty rising in him.

“You’re going to stay,” he said.

The silence lasted three heartbeats. Four. Five.

“It’s arranged,” Basia said.

Prax hit him. He didn’t plan it, didn’t intend it. His arm rolled through the shoulder, balled fist shooting out of its own accord. His knuckles sank into the flesh of Basia’s cheek, snapping his head to the side and rocking him back. The big man boiled across the room at him. The first blow hit just below Prax’s collarbone, pushing him back, the next one was to his ribs, and the one after that. Prax felt his chair slide out from under him, and he was falling slowly in the low g but unable to get his feet beneath him. Prax swung wild, kicked out. He felt his foot connect with something, but he couldn’t tell if it was the table or Basia.

He hit the floor, and Basia’s foot came down on his solar plexus. The world went bright, shimmering, and painful. Somewhere a long way away, a woman was shouting. He couldn’t make out the words. And then, slowly, he could.

He's not right. He lost a baby too. He's not right.

Prax rolled over, forced himself up to his knees. There was blood on his chin he was pretty sure came from him. No one else there was bleeding. Basia stood by the table, hands in fists, nostrils flared, breath fast. The daughter stood in front of him, interposed between her enraged father and Prax. All he could really see of her was her ass and her ponytail and her hands, flat out at her father in the universal gesture for *stop*. She was saving his life.

"You'd be better off gone, brother," Basia said.

"Okay," Prax said.

He got to his feet slowly and stumbled to the door, still not quite breathing right. He let himself out.

The secret of closed-system botanical collapse was this: *It's not the thing that breaks you need to watch out for. It's the cascade.* The first time he'd lost a whole crop of *G. kenon*, it had been from a fungus that didn't hurt soybeans at all. The spores had probably come in with a shipment of ladybugs. The fungus took hold in the hydroponic system, merrily taking up nutrients that weren't meant for it and altering the pH. That weakened the bacteria Prax had been using to fix nitrogen to the point that they were vulnerable to a phage that wouldn't have been able to take them out otherwise. The nitrogen balance of the system got out of whack. By the time the bacteria recovered to their initial population, the soybeans were yellow, limp, and past repair.

That was the metaphor he used when he thought about Mei and her immune system. The problem was tiny, really. A mutant allele produced a protein that folded left instead of right. A few base pairs' difference. But that protein catalyzed a critical step in signal transduction to the T cells. She could have all the parts of an immune system standing ready to fight off a pathogen, but without twice-daily doses of an artificial catalyzing agent, the alarm would never sound. Myers-Skelton Premature Immunosenescence they called it, and the preliminary studies still hadn't even been able to tell if it was more common outside the well of Earth because of an unknown low-g effect or just the high radiation levels increasing mutations rates generally. It didn't matter. However she'd gotten there, Mei had developed

a massive spinal infection when she was four months old. If they'd been anywhere else in the outer planets, she'd have died of it. But everyone came to Ganymede to gestate, so the child health research all happened there. When Dr. Strickland saw her, he knew what he was looking at, and he held back the cascade.

Prax walked down the corridors toward home. His jaw was swelling. He didn't remember being hit in the jaw, but it was swelling, and it hurt. His ribs had a sharp pain on the left that hurt if he breathed in too deep, so he kept his breath shallow. He stopped at one of the parks, scrounging a few leaves for dinner. He paused at a large stand of *Epipremnum aureum*. The wide spade-shaped leaves looked wrong. They were still green, but thicker, and with a golden undertone. Someone had put distilled water in the hydroponic supply instead of the mineral-rich solution long-stability hydroponics needed. They could get away with it for another week. Maybe two. Then the air-recycling plants would start to die, and by the time that happened, the cascade would be too far gone to stop. And if they couldn't get the right water to the plants, he couldn't imagine they'd be able to set all the mechanical air recyclers going. Someone was going to have to do something about that.

Someone else.

In his rooms, his one small *G. kenon* held its fronds up to the light. Without any particular conscious thought, he put his finger in the soil, testing it. The rich scent of well-balanced soil was like incense. It was doing pretty well, all things considered. He glanced at the time stamp on his hand terminal. Three hours had passed since he'd come home. His jaw had gone past aching into a kind of constantly rediscovered pain.

Without her medicine, the normal flora of her digestive system would start overgrowing. The bacteria that normally lived benignly in her mouth and throat would rise against her. After two weeks, maybe she wouldn't be dead. But even in the best case, she'd be so sick that bringing her back would be problematic.

It was a war. Kids died in wars. It was a cascade. He coughed, and the pain was immense and it was still better than thinking. He needed to go. To get out. Ganymede was dying around him. He wasn't going to do Mei any good. She was gone. His baby girl was gone.

Crying hurt worse than coughing.

He didn't sleep so much as lose consciousness. When he woke, his jaw was swollen badly enough that it clicked when he opened his mouth too wide. His ribs felt a degree better. He sat on the edge of his bed, head in his hands.

He'd go to the port. He'd go to Basia and apologize and ask to go along. Get out of the Jovian system entirely. Go someplace and start over without his past. Without his failed marriage and shattered work. Without Mei.

He switched to a slightly less dirty shirt. Swabbed his armpits with a damp cloth. Combed his hair back. He'd failed. It was pointless. He had to come to terms with the loss and move on. And maybe someday he would.

He checked his hand terminal. That day was checking the Martian body drop, walking the parks, checking with Dr. Astrigan, and then a list of five brothels he hadn't been to, where he could ask after the illicit pleasures of pedophilia, hopefully without being gutted by some right-thinking, civic-minded thug. Thugs had children too. Some probably loved them. With a sigh, he keyed in a new entry: MINERALIZE PARK WATER. He'd need to find someone with physical plant access codes. Maybe security could help with that at least.

And maybe, somewhere along the way, he'd find Mei.

There was still hope.

Chapter Eight

Bobbie

The *Harman Dae-Jung* was a *Donnager-class* dreadnought, half a kilometer in length, and a quarter million tons dry weight. Her interior docking bay was large enough to hold four frigate-class escort ships and a variety of lighter shuttles and repair craft. Currently, it held only two ships: the large and almost opulent shuttle that had ferried the Martian ambassadors and state officials up for the flight to Earth, and the smaller and more functional Navy shuttle Bobbie had ridden up from Ganymede.

Bobbie was using the empty space to jog.

The *Dae-Jung's* captain was being pressured by the diplomats to get them to Earth as quickly as possible, so the ship was running at a near-constant one g acceleration. While this made most of the Martian civilians uncomfortable, it suited Bobbie just fine. The corps trained at high g all the time and did lengthy endurance drills at one g at least once a month. No one ever said it was to prepare for the possibility of having to fight a ground war on Earth. No one had to.

Her recent tour on Ganymede hadn't allowed her to get in any high-g exercise, and the long trip to Earth seemed like an excellent opportunity to get back into shape. The last thing she wanted was to appear weak to the natives.

"Anything you can do I can do better," she sang to herself in a breathless falsetto as she ran. "I can do anything better than you."

She gave her wristwatch a quick glance. Two hours. At her current leisurely pace, that meant twelve miles. Push for twenty? How many people on Earth regularly ran for twenty miles? Martian propaganda would have her believe that half of the people on Earth didn't even have jobs. They just lived off the government dole and spent their meager allowances on drugs and stim parlors. But probably *some* of them could run for twenty miles. She'd bet Snoopy and his gang of Earther marines could have run twenty miles, the way they were running from—

“Anything you can do I can do better,” she sang, then concentrated on nothing but the sound of her shoes slapping on the metal deck.

She didn’t see the yeoman enter the docking bay, so when he called out to her, she twisted in surprise and tripped over her own feet, catching herself with her left hand just before she would have dashed her brains out on the deck. She felt something pop in her wrist, and her right knee bounced painfully off the floor as she rolled to absorb the impact.

She lay on her back for a few moments, moving her wrist and knee to see if there was any serious damage. Both hurt, but neither had any grating sensation in it. Nothing broken, then. Barely out of the hospital and already looking for ways to bang herself up again. The yeoman ran up to her and dropped into a crouch at her side.

“Jesus, Gunny, you took a hell of a spill!” the Navy boy said. “A *hell* of a spill!”

He touched her right knee where the bruise was already starting to darken the bare skin below her jogging shorts, then seemed to realize what he was doing and yanked his hand back.

“Sergeant Draper, your presence is requested at a meeting in conference room G at fourteen fifty hours,” he said, squeaking a little as he rattled off his message. “How come you don’t carry your terminal with you? They’ve had trouble tracking you down.”

Bobbie pushed herself back up to her feet, gingerly testing her knee to see if it would hold her weight.

“You just answered your own question, kid.”

Bobbie arrived at the conference room five minutes early, her red-and-khaki service uniform sharply pressed and marred only by the white wrist brace the company medic had given her for what turned out to be a minor sprain. A marine in full battle dress and armed with an assault rifle opened the door for her and gave her a smile as she went by. It was a nice smile, full of even white teeth, below almond-shaped eyes so dark they were almost black.

Bobbie smiled back and glanced at the name on his suit. Corporal Matsuke. Never knew who you’d run into in the galley or the weight room. It didn’t hurt to make a friend or two.

She was pulled the rest of the way into the room by someone calling her name.

“Sergeant Draper,” Captain Thorsson repeated, gesturing impatiently toward a chair at the long conference table.

“Sir,” Bobbie said, and snapped off a salute before taking the seat. She was surprised by how few people were in the room. Just Thorsson from the intelligence corps and two civilians she hadn’t met.

“Gunny, we’re going over some of the details in your report; we’d appreciate your input.”

Bobbie waited a moment to be introduced to the two civilians in the room, but when it became clear Thorsson wasn’t going to do it, she just said, “Yes, sir. Whatever I can do to help.”

The first civilian, a severe-looking redheaded woman in a very expensive suit, said, “We’re trying to create a better timeline of the events leading up to the attack. Can you show us on this map where you and your fire team were when you received the radio message to return to the outpost?”

Bobbie showed them, then went step by step through the events of that day. Looking at the map they’d brought, she saw for the first time how far she’d been flung across the ice by the impact of the orbital mirror. It looked like it had been a matter of centimeters between that and being smashed into dust like the rest of her platoon...

“Sergeant,” Thorsson said, his tone of voice letting her know he’d said it a couple of times before.

“Sir, sorry, looking at these photos sent me woolgathering. It won’t happen again.”

Thorsson nodded, but with a strange expression Bobbie couldn’t read.

“What we’re trying to pinpoint is precisely where the Anomaly was inserted prior to the attack,” the other civilian, a chubby man with thinning brown hair, said.

The Anomaly they called it now. You could hear them capitalize the word when they said it. *Anomaly*, like something that just happens. A strange random event. It was because everyone was still afraid to call it what it really was. The Weapon.

“So,” the chubby guy said, “based on how long you had radio contact, and information regarding loss of radio signal from other installations

around that area, we are able to pinpoint the source of the jamming signal as the Anomaly itself.”

“Wait,” Bobbie said, shaking her head. “What? The monster *can’t* have jammed our radios. It had no tech. It wasn’t even wearing a damned *space suit* to breathe! How could it be carrying jamming equipment?”

Thorsson patted her hand paternally, a move that irritated Bobbie more than it calmed her.

“The data doesn’t lie, Sergeant. The zone of radio blackout moved. And always at its center was the... thing. The Anomaly,” Thorsson said, then turned away from her to speak to the chubby guy and the redhead.

Bobbie sat back, feeling the energy move away from her in the room, like she was the one person at the dance without a date. But since Thorsson hadn’t dismissed her, she couldn’t just leave.

Redhead said, “Based on our radio loss data, that puts insertion here”—she pointed at something on the map—“and the path to the UN outpost is along this ridge.”

“What’s in that location?” Thorsson said with a frown.

Chubby pulled up a different map and pored over it for a few seconds.

“Looks like some old service tunnels for the dome’s hydro plant. This says they haven’t been used in decades.”

“So,” Thorsson said. “The kind of tunnels one might use to transport something dangerous that needs to be kept secret.”

“Yes,” Redhead said, “maybe they were delivering it to that Marine outpost and it got loose. The marines cut and ran when they saw it was out of control.”

Bobbie gave a dismissive laugh before she could stop herself.

“You have something to add, Sergeant Draper?” Thorsson said.

Thorsson was looking at her with his enigmatic smile, but Bobbie had worked with him long enough now to know that what he hated most was bullshit. If you spoke up, he wanted to make sure you actually had something useful to say. The two civilians were looking at her with surprise, as though she were a cockroach that had suddenly stood up on two legs and started speaking.

She shook her head.

“When I was a boot, you know what my drill sergeant said was the second most dangerous thing in the solar system, after a Martian Marine?”

The civvies continued to stare at her, but Thorsson nodded and mouthed the words along with her as she next spoke.

“A UN Marine.”

Chubby and Redhead shared a look and Redhead rolled her eyes for him. But Thorsson said, “So you don’t think the UN soldiers were running from something that got out of their control.”

“Not a fucking chance, sir.”

“Then give us your take on it.”

“That UN outpost was staffed by a full platoon of Marines. Same strength as our outpost. When they finally started running, there were six left. Six. They fought almost to the last man. When they ran to us, they weren’t trying to disengage. They were coming so we could help them *continue* the fight.”

Chubby picked a leather satchel up off the floor and started rummaging in it. Redhead watched, as though what he was doing was far more interesting than anything Bobbie had to say.

“If this were some secret UN thing that those Marines were tasked to deliver or protect, they wouldn’t have come. They’d have died doing it rather than abandon their mission. That’s what we would have done.”

“Thank you,” Thorsson said.

“I mean, it wasn’t even our fight, and we fought to the last marine to stop that thing. You think the UN Marines would do less?”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Thorsson said again, louder. “I tend to agree, but we have to explore all possibilities. Your comments are noted.”

Chubby finally found what he was looking for. A small plastic box of mints. He took one out, then held the box out to Redhead to take one. The sickly sweet smell of spearmint filled the air. Around a mouthful of mint, Chubby said, “Yes, thank you, Sergeant. I think we can proceed here without taking up more of your time.”

Bobbie stood up, snapped another salute at Thorsson, and left the room. Her heart was going fast. Her jaw ached where she was grinding her teeth.

Civvies didn’t get it. No one did.

When Captain Martens came into the cargo bay, Bobbie had just finished disassembling the gun housing on her combat suit's right arm. She removed the three-barrel Gatling gun from its mount and placed it on the floor next to the two dozen other parts she'd already stripped off. Next to them sat a can of gun cleaner and a bottle of lubricant, along with the various rods and brushes she'd use to clean the parts.

Martens waited until she had the gun on the cleaning mat, then sat down on the floor next to her. She attached a wire brush to the end of one of the cleaning rods, dipped it in the cleaner, and began running the brush through the gun, one barrel at a time. Martens watched.

After a few minutes, she replaced the brush with a small cloth and swabbed the remaining cleanser out of the barrels. Then a fresh cloth soaked in gun lubricant to oil them. When she was applying lube to the complex mesh of gears that composed the Gatling mechanism and ammo feed system, Martens finally spoke.

"You know," he said, "Thorsson is naval intelligence right from the start. Straight into officer training, top of his class at the academy, and first posting at fleet command. He's never done anything but *be* an intelligence wonk. The last time he fired a gun was his six weeks as a boot, twenty years ago. He's never led a fire team. Or served in a combat platoon."

"That," Bobbie said, putting down her lubricant then standing up to put the gun back together, "is a fascinating story. I really appreciate you sharing it."

"So," Martens continued, not missing a beat. "How fucked up do you have to be before Thorsson starts asking me if maybe you aren't a little shell-shocked?"

Bobbie dropped the wrench she was holding, but caught it with her other hand before it could hit the deck.

"Is this an official visit? Because if not, you can f—"

"Me now? I'm not a wonk," Martens said. "I'm a marine. Ten years as an enlisted man before I was offered OCS. Got dual degrees in psychology and theology."

The end of Bobbie's nose itched, and she scratched it without thinking. The sudden smell of gun oil let her know that she'd just rubbed lubricant all over her face. Martens glanced at it but didn't stop talking. She tried to drown him out by putting the gun together as noisily as possible.

“I’ve done combat drills, CQB training, war games,” he said, speaking a little louder. “Did you know I was a boot at the same camp where your father was first sergeant? Sergeant Major Draper is a great man. He was like a god to us boots.”

Bobbie’s head snapped up and her eyes narrowed. Something about this headshrinker acting like he knew her father felt dirty.

“It’s true. And if he were here right now, he’d be telling you to listen to me.”

“Fuck you,” Bobbie said. She imagined her father wincing at the use of obscenity to hide her fear. “You don’t know shit.”

“I know that when a gunnery sergeant with your level of training and combat readiness almost gets taken out by a yeoman still at the tail end of puberty, something is goddamned wrong.”

Bobbie threw the wrench at the ground, knocking over the gun oil, which began to spread across her mat like a bloodstain.

“I fucking fell down! We were at a full g, and I just... I fell down.”

“And in the meeting today? Yelling at two civilian intelligence analysts about how Marines would rather die than fail?”

“I didn’t yell,” Bobbie said, not sure if that was the truth. Her memories of the meeting had become confused once she was out of the room.

“How many times have you fired that gun since you cleaned it yesterday?”

“What?” Bobbie said, feeling nauseated and not sure why.

“For that matter, how many times had you fired it since you cleaned it the day before that? Or the one before that?”

“Stop it,” Bobbie said, waving one hand limply at Martens and looking for a place to sit back down.

“Have you fired that gun even once since you’ve come on board the *Dae-Jung*? Because I can tell you that you’ve cleaned it every single day you’ve been on board, and several times you’ve cleaned it twice in one day.”

“No, I—” Bobbie said, finally sitting down with a thump on an ammo canister. She had no memory of having cleaned the gun before that day. “I didn’t know that.”

“This is post-traumatic stress disorder, Bobbie. It’s not a weakness or some kind of moral failure. It’s what happens when you live through

something terrible. Right now you're not able to process what happened to you and your men on Ganymede, and you're acting irrationally because of it," Martens said, then moved over to crouch in front of her. She was afraid for a moment that he'd try to take her hand, because if he did, she'd hit him.

He didn't.

"You're ashamed," he said, "but there's nothing to be ashamed of. You're trained to be tough, competent, ready for anything. They taught you that if you just do your job and remember your training, you can deal with any threat. Most of all, they taught you that the most important people in the world are the ones standing next to you on the firing line."

Something twitched in her cheek just under her eye, and Bobbie rubbed at the spot hard enough to make stars explode in her vision.

"Then you ran into something that your training couldn't prepare you for, and against which you had no defense. And you lost your teammates and friends."

Bobbie started to reply and realized she'd been holding her breath, so instead of speaking, she exhaled explosively. Martens didn't stop talking.

"We need you, Roberta. We need you back. I haven't been where you are, but I know a lot of people who have, and I know how to help you. If you let me. If you talk to me. I can't take it away. I can't cure you. But I can make it better."

"Don't call me Roberta," Bobbie said so quietly that she could barely hear herself.

She took a few short breaths, trying to clear her head, trying not to hyperventilate. The scents of the cargo bay washed over her. The smell of rubber and metal from her suit. The acrid, competing scents of gun oil and hydraulic fluid, old and aged right into the metal no matter how many times the Navy boys swabbed the decks. The thought of thousands of sailors and marines passing through this same space, working on their equipment and cleaning these same bulkheads, brought her back to herself.

She moved over to her reassembled gun and picked it up off the mat before the spreading pool of gun oil could touch it.

"No, Captain, talking to you is not what's going to get me better."

"Then what, Sergeant?"

"That thing that killed my friends, and started this war? Somebody put that thing on Ganymede," she said, and seated the gun in its housing with a sharp metallic click. She gave the triple barrels a spin with her hand, and

they turned with the fast oily hiss of high-quality bearings. “I’m going to find out who. And I’m going to kill them.”

Chapter Nine

Avasarala

The report was more than three pages long, but Soren had managed to find someone with the balls to admit it when he didn't know everything. Strange things were happening on Venus, stranger than Avasarala had known or guessed. A network of filaments had nearly encased the planet in a pattern of fifty-kilometer-wide hexagons, and apart from the fact that they seemed to carry superheated water and electrical currents, no one knew what they were. The gravity of the planet had increased by 3 percent. Paired whirlwinds of benzene and complex hydrocarbons were sweeping the impact craters like synchronized swimmers where the remains of Eros Station had smashed into the planetary surface. The best scientific minds of the system were staring at the data with their jaws slack, and the reason no one was panicking yet was that no one could agree on what they should panic about.

On one hand, the Venusian metamorphosis was the most powerful scientific tool ever. Whatever happened did so in plain sight of everyone. There were no nondisclosure agreements or anti-competition treaties to be concerned with. Anyone with a scanner sensitive enough could look down through the clouds of sulfuric acid and see what was going on today. Analyses were confidential, follow-up studies were proprietary, but the raw data was orbiting the sun for anyone to see.

Only, so far, it was like a bunch of lizards watching the World Cup. Politely put, they weren't sure what they were looking at.

But the data was clear. The attack on Ganymede and the spike in the energy expended on Venus had come at exactly the same time. And no one knew why.

"Well, that's worth shit," she said.

Avasarala closed down her hand terminal and looked out the window. Around them the commissary murmured softly, like the best kind of restaurant, only without the ugly necessity of paying for anything. The tables were real wood and arranged carefully so that everyone had a view

and no one could be overheard unless they wanted to be. It was raining that day. Even if the raindrops hadn't been pelting the windows, blurring city and sky, she'd have known by the smell. Her lunch—cold sag aloo and something that was supposed to be tandoori chicken—sat on the table, untouched. Soren was still sitting across from her, his expression polite and alert as a Labrador retriever's.

"There's no data showing a launch," Soren said. "Whatever's on Venus would have to have gotten out to Ganymede, and there's no sign of that at all."

"Whatever's on Venus thinks inertia's optional and gravity isn't a constant. We don't know what a launch would look like. As far as we know, they could walk to Jupiter."

The boy's nod conceded the point.

"Where do we stand on Mars?"

"They've agreed to meet here. They've got ships on the way with the diplomatic delegation, including their witness."

"The marine? Draper?"

"Yes, ma'am. Admiral Nguyen is in charge of the escort."

"He's playing nice?"

"So far."

"All right, where do we go from here?" Avasarala asked.

"Jules-Pierre Mao's waiting in your office, ma'am."

"Run him down for me. Anything you think's important."

Soren blinked. Lightning lit the clouds from within.

"I sent the briefing..."

She felt a stab of annoyance that was half embarrassment. She'd forgotten that the background on the man was in her queue. There were thirty other documents there too, and she'd slept poorly the night before, troubled by dreams in which Arjun had died unexpectedly. She'd had widowhood nightmares since her son had died in a skiing accident, her mind conflating the only two men she'd ever loved.

She'd meant to review the information before breakfast. She'd forgotten. But she wasn't going to admit it to some European brat just because he was smart, competent, and did everything she said.

"I know what's in the briefing. I know *everything*," she said, standing up. "This is a fucking test. I'm asking what *you* think is important about him."

She walked away, moving toward the carved oak doors with a deliberate speed that made Soren scramble a little to keep up.

“He’s the corporate controlling interest of Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile,” Soren said, his voice low enough to carry to her and then die. “Before the incident, they were one of Protogen’s major suppliers. The medical equipment, the radiation rooms, the surveillance and encryption infrastructure. Almost everything Protogen put on Eros or used to construct their shadow station came from a Mao-Kwik warehouse and on a Mao-Kwik freighter.”

“And he’s still breathing free air because...?” she said, pushing through the doors and into the hallway beyond.

“No evidence that Mao-Kwik knew what the equipment was for,” Soren said. “After Protogen was exposed, Mao-Kwik was one of the first to turn over information to the investigation committee. If they—and by ‘they,’ I mean ‘he’—hadn’t turned over a terabyte of confidential correspondence, Gutmansdottir and Kolp might never have been implicated.”

A silver-haired man with a broad Andean nose walking the other way in the hall looked up from his hand terminal and nodded to her as they drew near.

“Victor,” she said. “I’m sorry about Annette.”

“The doctors say she’ll be fine,” the Andean said. “I’ll tell her you asked.”

“Tell her I said to get the hell out of bed before her husband starts getting dirty ideas,” she said, and the Andean laughed as they passed. Then, to Soren: “Was he cutting a deal? Cooperation for clemency?”

“That was one interpretation, but most people assumed it was personal vengeance for what happened to his daughter.”

“She was on Eros,” Avasarala said.

“She was Eros,” Soren said as they stepped into the elevator. “She was the initial infection. The scientists think the protomolecule was building itself using her brain and body as a template.”

The elevator doors closed, the car already aware of who she was and where she was going. It dropped smoothly as her eyebrows rose.

“So when they started negotiating with that thing—”

“They were talking to what was left of Jules-Pierre Mao’s daughter,” Soren said. “I mean, they think they were.”

Avasarala whistled low.

“Did I pass the test, ma’am?” Soren asked, keeping his face empty and impassive except for a small twinkle in the corners of his eyes that said he knew she’d been bullshitting him. Despite herself, she grinned.

“No one likes a smart-ass,” she said. The elevator stopped; the doors slid open.

Jules-Pierre Mao sat at her desk, radiating a sense of calm with the faintest hint of amusement. Avasarala’s eyes flickered over him, taking in the details: well-tailored silk suit that straddled the line between beige and gray, receding hairline unmodified by medical therapies, startling blue eyes that he had probably been born with. He wore his age like a statement that fighting the ravages of time and mortality was beneath his notice. Twenty years earlier, he’d just have been devastatingly handsome. Now he was that and dignified too, and her first, animal impulse was that she wanted to like him.

“Mr. Mao,” she said, nodding to him. “Sorry to make you wait.”

“I’ve worked with government before,” he said. He had a European accent that would have melted butter. “I understand the constraints. What can I do for you, Assistant Undersecretary?”

Avasarala lowered herself into her chair. The Buddha smiled beatifically from his place by the wall. The rain sheeted down the window, shadows giving the near-subliminal impression that Mao was weeping. She steepled her fingers.

“You want some tea?”

“No, thank you,” Mao said.

“Soren! Go get me some tea.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the boy said.

“Soren.”

“Ma’am?”

“Don’t hurry.”

“Of course not, ma’am.”

The door closed behind him. Mao’s smile looked weary.

“Should I have brought my attorneys?”

“Those rat fuckers? No,” she said, “the trials are all done with. I’m not here to reopen any of the legal wrangling. I’ve got real work to do.”

“I can respect that,” Mao said.

“I have a problem,” Avasarala said. “And I don’t know what it is.”

“And you think I do?”

“It’s possible. I’ve been through a lot of hearings about one damn thing and another. Most of the time they’re exercises in ass covering. If the unvarnished truth ever came out at one, it would be because someone screwed up.”

The bright blue eyes narrowed. The smile grew less warm.

“You think my executives and I were less than forthcoming? I put powerful men in prison for you, Assistant Undersecretary. I burned bridges.”

Distant thunder mumbled and complained. The rain redoubled its angry tapping at the pane. Avasarala crossed her arms.

“You did. But that doesn’t make you an idiot. There are still things you say under oath and things you dance around. This room isn’t monitored. This is off the record. I need to know anything you can tell me about the protomolecule that didn’t come out in the hearings.”

The silence between them stretched. She watched his face, his body, looking for signs, but the man was unreadable. He’d been doing this too long, and he was too good at it. A professional.

“Things get lost,” Avasarala said. “There was one time during the finance crisis that we found a whole auditing division that no one remembered. Because that’s how you do it. You take part of a problem and you put it somewhere, get some people working on it, and then you get another part of the problem and get other people working on that. And pretty soon you have seven, eight, a hundred different little boxes with work going on, and no one talking to anyone because it would break security protocol.”

“And you think...?”

“We killed Protogen, and you helped. I’m asking whether you know of any little boxes lying around somewhere. And I’m very much hoping you say yes.”

“Is this from the secretary-general or Errinwright?”

“No. Just me.”

“I’ve already said everything I know,” he said.

“I don’t believe that.”

The mask of his persona slipped. It lasted less than a second, nothing more than a shift in the angle of his spine and a hardness in his jaw, here and gone again. It was anger. That was interesting.

“They killed my daughter,” he said softly. “Even if I’d had something to hide, I wouldn’t have.”

“How did it come to be your girl?” Avasarala asked. “Did they target her? Was somebody using her against you?”

“It was bad luck. She was out in the deep orbits, trying to prove something. She was young and rebellious and stupid. We were trying to get her to come home but... she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Something tickled at the back of Avasarala’s mind. A hunch. An impulse. She went with it.

“Have you heard from her since it happened?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Since Eros Station crashed into Venus, have you heard from her?”

It was interesting watching him pretend to be angry now. It was almost like the real thing. She couldn’t have said what about it was inauthentic. The intelligence in his eyes, maybe. The sense that he was more present than he had been before. Real rage swept people away. This was rage as a gambit.

“My Julie is dead,” he said, his voice shaking theatrically. “She died when that bastard alien thing went down to Venus. She died saving the Earth.”

Avasarala countered soft. She lowered her voice, let her face take on a concerned, grandmotherly expression. If he was going to play the injured man, she could play the mother.

“Something lived,” she said. “Something survived that impact, and everybody knows that it did. I have reason to think that it didn’t stay there. If some part of your daughter made it through that change, she might have reached out to you. Tried to contact you. Or her mother.”

“There is nothing I want more than to have my little girl back,” Mao said. “But she’s gone.”

Avasarala nodded.

“All right,” she said.

“Is there anything else?”

Again, the false anger. She ran her tongue against the back of her teeth, thinking. There was something here, something beneath the surface. She didn’t know what she was looking at with Mao.

“You know about Ganymede?” she said.

“Fighting broke out,” he said.

“Maybe more than that,” she said. “The thing that killed your daughter is still out there. It was on Ganymede. I’m going to find out how and why.”

He rocked back. Was the shock real?

“I’ll help if I can,” he said, his voice small.

“Start with this. Is there anything you didn’t say during the hearings? A business partner you chose not to mention. A backup program or auxiliary staff you outfitted. If it wasn’t legal, I don’t care. I can get you amnesty for just about anything, but I need to hear it now. Right now.”

“Amnesty?” he said as if she’d been joking.

“If you tell me now, yes.”

“If I had it, I would give it to you,” he said. “I’ve said everything I know.”

“All right, then. I’m sorry to have taken your time. And... I’m sorry to open old wounds. I lost a son. Charanpal was fifteen. Skiing accident.”

“I’m sorry,” Mao said.

“If you find out something more, bring it to me,” she said.

“I will,” he said, rising from his seat. She let him get almost to the doorway before she spoke again.

“Jules?”

Turning to glance over his shoulder, he looked like a still frame from a film.

“If I find out that you knew something and you didn’t tell me, I won’t take it well,” she said. “I’m not someone you want to fuck with.”

“If I didn’t know that when I came in, I do now,” Mao said. It was as good a parting line as any. The door closed behind him. Avasarala sighed, leaning back in her chair. She shifted to look at the Buddha.

“Fat lot of help you were, you smug bastard,” she said. The statue, being only a statue, didn’t reply. She thumbed down the lights and let the gray of the storm fill the room. Something about Mao didn’t sit well with her.

It might only have been the practiced control of a high-level corporate negotiator, but she had the sense of being cut out of the loop. Excluded. That was interesting too. She wondered if he would try to counter her, maybe go over her head. It would be worth telling Errinwright to expect an angry call.

She wondered. It was a stretch to believe there was anything human down on Venus. The protomolecule, as well as anyone understood it, had

been designed to hijack primitive life and remake it into something else. But if... *If* the complexity of a human mind had been too much for it to totally control, and the girl had in some sense survived the descent, *if* she'd reached out to her daddy...

Avasarala reached for her hand terminal and opened a connection to Soren.

"Ma'am?"

"When I said don't hurry, I didn't mean you should take the whole fucking day off. My tea?"

"Coming, ma'am. I got sidetracked. I have a report for you that might be interesting."

"Less interesting if the tea's cold," she said, and dropped the channel.

Putting any kind of real surveillance on Mao would probably be impossible. Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile would have its own communications arrays, its own encryption schemes, and several rival companies at least as well funded as the United Nations already bent on ferreting out corporate secrets. But there might be other ways to track communications coming off Venus and going to Mao-Kwik installations. Or messages going down that well.

Soren came in carrying a tray with a cast-iron teapot and an earthenware cup with no handle. He didn't comment on the darkness, but walked carefully to her desk, set down the tray, poured out a smoky, dark cupful of still-steaming tea, and put his hand terminal on the desk beside it.

"You could just send me a fucking copy," Avasarala said.

"More dramatic this way, ma'am," Soren said. "Presentation is everything."

She snorted and pointedly picked up the cup, blowing across the dark surface before she looked at the terminal. The date stamp at the lower right showed it as coming from outside Ganymede seven hours earlier and the identification code of the associated report. The man in the picture had the stocky bones of an Earther, unkempt dark hair, and a peculiar brand of boyish good looks. Avasarala frowned at the image as she sipped her tea.

"What happened to his face?" she asked.

"The reporting officer suggested the beard was intended as a disguise."

She snorted.

"Well, thank God he didn't put on a pair of glasses, we might never have figured it out. What the fuck is James Holden doing on Ganymede?"

“It’s a relief ship. Not the *Rocinante*.”

“We have confirmation on that? You know those OPA bastards can fake registration codes.”

“The reporting officer did a visual inspection of the interior layout and checked the record when he got back. Also, the crew didn’t include Holden’s usual pilot, so we assume they’ve got it parked-and-dark somewhere in tightbeam range,” Soren said. He paused. “There is a standing detain-on-sight for Holden.”

Avasarala turned the lights back on. The windows became dark mirrors again; the storm was pressed back outside.

“Tell me we didn’t enforce it,” Avasarala said.

“We didn’t enforce it,” Soren said. “We have a surveillance detail on him and his team, but the situation on the station isn’t conducive to a close watch. Plus which, it doesn’t look like Mars knows he’s there yet, so we’re trying to keep that to ourselves.”

“Good that someone out there knows how to run an intelligence operation. Any idea what he’s doing?”

“So far, it looks a lot like a relief effort,” Soren said with a shrug. “We haven’t seen him meeting with anybody of special interest. He’s asking questions. Almost got into a fight with some opportunists who’ve been shaking down relief ships, but the other guys backed down. It’s early, though.”

Avasarala took another sip of tea. She had to give it to the boy; he could brew a fine pot of tea. Or he knew someone who could, which was just as good. If Holden was there, that meant the OPA was interested in the situation on Ganymede. And that they didn’t have someone already on the ground to report to them.

Wanting the intelligence didn’t in itself mean much. Even if it had been just a bunch of idiot ground-pounders getting trigger-happy, Ganymede was a critical station for the Jovian system and the Belt. The OPA would want their own eyes on the scene. But to send Holden, the only survivor of Eros Station, seemed more than coincidental.

“They don’t know what it is,” she said aloud.

“Ma’am?”

“They smuggled in someone with experience in the protomolecule for a reason. They’re trying to figure out what the hell’s going on. Which means they don’t know. Which means...” She sighed. “Which means it

wasn't them. Which is a fucking pity, since they've got the only live sample we know about."

"What would you like the surveillance team to do?"

"Surveillance," she snapped. "Watch him, see who he talks to and what he does. Daily reports back if it's boring, real-time updates if it runs hot."

"Yes, ma'am. Do you want him brought in?"

"Pull him and his people in when they try to leave Ganymede. Otherwise stay out of their way and try not to get noticed. Holden's an idiot, but he's not stupid. If he realizes he's being watched, he'll start broadcasting pictures of all our Ganymede sources or something. Do not underestimate his capacity to fuck things up."

"Anything else?"

Another flash of lightning. Another roll of thunder. Another storm among trillions of storms that had assaulted the Earth since back in the beginning, when something had first tried to end all life on the planet. Something that was on Venus right now. And spreading.

"Find a way for me to get a message to Fred Johnson without Nguyen or the Martians finding out," she said. "We may need to do some back-channel negotiation."

Chapter Ten

Prax

“Pas kirrup es I’m to this,” the boy sitting on the cot said. “Pinche *salad*, sa-sa? Ten thousand, once was.”

He couldn’t have been more than twenty. Young enough, technically, to be his son, just as Mei could have been the boy’s daughter. Colt-thin from adolescent growth and a life in low g, his thinness was improbable to begin with. And he’d been starving besides.

“I can write you a promissory note if you want,” Prax said.

The boy grinned and made a rude gesture.

From his professional work, Prax knew that the inner planets thought of Belter slang as a statement about location. He knew from living as a food botanist on Ganymede that it was also about class. He had grown up with tutors in accent-free Chinese and English. He’d spoken with men and women from everywhere in the system. From the way someone said *allopolyploidy*, he could tell if they came from the universities around Beijing or Brazil, if they’d grown up in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains or Olympus Mons or in the corridors of Ceres. He’d grown up in microgravity himself, but Belt patois was as foreign to him as to anyone fresh up the well. If the boy had wanted to speak past him, it would have been effortless. But Prax was a paying customer, and he knew the boy was making an effort to dial it back.

The programming keyboard was twice as large as a standard hand terminal, the plastic worn by use and time. A progress bar was slowly filling along the side, notations in simplified Chinese cycling with each movement.

The hole was a cheap one near the surface of the moon. No more than ten feet wide, four rough rooms inched into the ice from a public corridor hardly wider or better lit. The old plastic walls glittered and wept with condensation. They were in the room farthest from the corridor, the boy on his cot and Prax standing hunched in the doorway.

“No promise for the full record,” the boy said. “What is, is, sabé?”

“Anything you can get would be great.”

The boy nodded once. Prax didn't know his name. It wasn't the sort of thing to ask. The days it had taken to track down someone willing to break through the security system had been a long dance between his own ignorance of Ganymede Station's gray economy and the increasing desperation and hunger in even the most corrupt quarters. A month before, the boy might have been skimming commercial data to resell or hold hostage for easily laundered private credit. Today he was looking for Mei in exchange for enough leafy greens to make a small meal. Agricultural barter, the oldest economy in humanity's record, had come to Ganymede.

“Authcopy's gone,” the boy said. “Sucked into servers, buried ass deep.”

“So if you can't break the security servers—”

“Don't have to. Camera got memory, memory got cache. Since the lockdown, it's just filling and filling. No one watching.”

“You're kidding,” Prax said. “The two biggest armies in the system are staring each other down, and they're not watching the security cameras?”

“Watching each other. No one half-humps for us.”

The progress bar filled completely and chimed. The boy pulled open a list of identifying codes and started paging through them, muttering to himself. From the front room, a baby complained weakly. It sounded hungry. Of course it did.

“Your kid?”

The boy shook his head.

“Collateral,” he said, and tapped twice on a code. A new window opened. A wide hall. A door half melted and forced open. Scorch marks on the walls and, worse, a puddle of water. There shouldn't be free water. The environmental controls were getting further and further away from their safe levels. The boy looked up at Prax. “C'est la?”

“Yes,” Prax said. “That's it.”

The boy nodded and hunched back over his console.

“I need it before the attack. Before the mirror came down,” Prax said.

“Hokay, boss. Waybacking. Tod á frames con null delta. Only see when something happens, que si?”

“Fine. That's fine.”

Prax moved forward, leaning to look over the boy's shoulder. The image jittered without anything on the screen changing except the puddle,

slowly getting smaller. They were going backward through time, through the days and weeks. Toward the moment when it had all fallen apart.

Medics appeared in the screen, appearing to walk backward in the inverted world as they brought a dead body to lay beside the door. Then another draped over it. The two corpses lay motionless; then one moved, pawing gently at the wall, then more strongly until, in an eyeblink, he staggered to his feet and was gone.

“There should be a girl. I’m looking for who brought out a four-year-old girl.”

“Sa day care, no? Should be a thousand of them.”

“I only care about the one.”

The second corpse sat up and then stood, clutching her belly. A man stepped into the frame, a gun in his hand, healing her by sucking the bullet from her guts. They argued, grew calm, parted peaceably. Prax knew he was seeing it all in reverse, but his sleep-and-calorie-starved brain kept trying to make the images into a narrative. A group of soldiers crawled backward out of the ruined door, like a breech birth, then huddled, backed away in a rush. A flash of light, and the door had made itself whole, thermite charges clinging to it like fruit until a soldier in a Martian uniform rushed forward to collect them safely. Their technological harvest complete, the soldiers all backed rapidly away, leaving a scooter behind them, leaning against the wall.

And then the door slid open, and Prax saw himself back out. He looked younger. He beat on the door, hands popping off the surface in staccato bursts, then leapt awkwardly onto the scooter and vanished backward.

The door went quiet. Motionless. He held his breath. Walking backward, a woman carrying a five-year-old boy on her hip went to the door, vanished within, and then reappeared. Prax had to remind himself that the woman hadn’t been dropping her son off, but retrieving him. Two figures backed down the corridor.

No. Three.

“Stop. That’s it,” Prax said, his heart banging against his ribs. “That’s her.”

The boy waited until all three figures were caught in the camera’s eye, stepping out into the corridor. Mei’s face was petulant; even in the low resolution of the security camera, he knew the expression. And the man holding her...

Relief warred with outrage in his chest, and relief won. It was Dr. Strickland. She'd gone with Dr. Strickland, who knew about her condition, about the medicine, about all the things that needed to be done to keep Mei alive. He sank to his knees, his eyes closed and weeping. If he'd taken her, she wasn't dead. His daughter wasn't dead.

Unless, a thin demonic thought whispered in his brain, Strickland was too.

The woman was a stranger. Dark-haired with features that reminded Prax of the Russian botanists he'd worked with. She was holding a roll of paper in her hand. Her smile might have been one of amusement or impatience. He didn't know.

"Can you follow them?" he asked. "See where they went?"

The boy looked at him, lips curled.

"For salad? No. Box of chicken and atche sauce."

"I don't have any chicken."

"Then you got what you got," the boy said with a shrug. His eyes had gone dead as marbles. Prax wanted to hit him, wanted to choke him until he dug the images out of the dying computers. But it was a fair bet the boy had a gun or something worse, and unlike Prax, he likely knew how to use it.

"Please," Prax said.

"Got your favor, you. No epressa mé, si?"

Humiliation rose in the back of his throat, and he swallowed it down.

"Chicken," he said.

"Si."

Prax opened his satchel and put a double handful of leaves, orange peppers, and snow onions on the cot. The boy snatched up a half of it and stuffed it into his mouth, eyes narrowing in animal pleasure.

"I'll do what I can," Prax said.

He couldn't do anything.

The only edible protein still on the station was either coming in a slow trickle from the relief supplies or walking around on two feet. People had started trying Prax's strategy, grazing off the plants in the parks and hydroponics. They hadn't bothered with the homework, though. Inedibles were eaten all the same, degrading the air-scrubbing functions and throwing

the balance of the station's ecosystem further off. One thing was leading to another, and chicken couldn't be had, or anything that might substitute for it. And even if there was, he didn't have time to solve that problem.

In his own home, the lights were dim and wouldn't go bright. The soybean plant had stopped growing but didn't fade, which was an interesting datapoint, or would have been.

Sometime during the day, an automated system had clicked into a conservation routine, limiting energy use. In the big picture, it might be a good sign. Or it might be the fever break just before the catastrophe. It didn't change what he had to do.

As a boy, he'd entered the schools young, shipping up with his family to the sunless reaches of space, chasing a dream of work and prosperity. He hadn't taken the change well. Headaches and anxiety attacks and constant, bone-deep fatigue had haunted those first years when he needed to impress his tutors, be tracked as bright and promising. His father hadn't let him rest. *The window is open until the window is closed*, he'd say, and then push Prax to do a little more, to find a way to think when he was too tired or sick or in pain to think. He'd learned to make lists, notes, outlines.

By capturing his fleeting thoughts, he could drag himself to clarity like a mountain climber inching toward a summit. Now, in the artificial twilight, he made lists. The names of all the children he could remember from Mei's therapy group. He knew there were twenty, but he could only remember sixteen. His mind wandered. He put the image of Strickland and the mystery woman on his hand terminal, staring at it. The confusion of hope and anger swirled in him until it faded. He felt like he was falling asleep, but his pulse was racing. He tried to remember if tachycardia was a symptom of starvation.

For a moment, he came to himself, clear and lucid in a way he only then realized he hadn't been in days. He was starting to crash. His own personal cascade was getting ahead of him, and he wouldn't be able to keep up his investigation much longer without rest. Without protein. He was already half zombie.

He had to get help. His gaze drifted to the list of children's names. He had to get help, but first he'd check, just check. He'd go to... go to...

He closed his eyes, frowned. He knew the answer. He knew that he knew. The security station. He'd go there and ask about each of them. He opened his eyes, writing *security station* down under the list, capturing the

thought. Then *UN outreach station. Mars outreach*. All the places he'd been before, day after day, only now with new questions. It would be easy. And then, when he knew, there was something else he was supposed to do. It took a minute to figure out what it was, and then he wrote it at the bottom of the page.

Get help.

"They're all gone," Prax said, his breath ghosting white in the cold. "They're all his patients, and they're all gone. Sixteen out of sixteen. Do you know the probability of that? It's not random."

The security man hadn't shaved in days. A long, angry ice burn reddened his cheek and neck, the wound fresh and untreated. His face must have touched an uninsulated piece of Ganymede. He was lucky to still have skin. He wore a thick coat and gloves. There was frost on the desk.

"I appreciate the information, sir, and I'll see it gets out to the relief stations—"

"No, you don't understand, he took them. They're sick, and he took them."

"Maybe he was trying to keep them safe," the security man said. His voice was a gray rag, limp and weary. There was a problem with that. Prax knew there was a problem with that, but he couldn't remember what it was. The security man reached out, gently moving him aside, and nodded to the woman behind him. Prax found himself staring at her like he was drunk.

"I want to report a murder," she said, her voice shaking.

The security man nodded, neither surprise nor disbelief in his eyes. Prax remembered.

"He took them first," he said. "He took them before the attack happened."

"Three men broke into my apartment," the woman said. "They... My brother was with me and he tried to stop them."

"When did this happen, ma'am?"

"Before the attack," Prax said.

"A couple hours ago," the woman said. "Fourth level. Blue sector. Apartment 1453."

“Okay, ma’am. I’m going to take you over to a desk here. I need you to fill out a report.”

“My brother’s dead. They shot him.”

“And I’m very sorry about that, ma’am. I need you to fill out a report so we can catch the men who did this.”

Prax watched them walk away. He turned back to the line of the traumatized and desperate waiting their turns to beg for help, for justice, for law. A flash of anger lit him, then flickered. He needed help, but there wasn’t any to be had here. He and Mei were a pebble in space. They didn’t signify.

The security man was back, talking to a tall pretty woman about something horrible. Prax hadn’t noticed the man returning, hadn’t heard the beginning of the woman’s tale. He was starting to lose time. That wasn’t good.

The small sane part of his brain whispered that if he died, no one would look for Mei. She’d be lost. It whispered that he needed food, that he’d needed it for days. That he didn’t have very much time left.

“I have to go to the relief center,” he said aloud. The woman and the security man didn’t seem to hear. “Thanks anyway.”

Now that he had started to notice his own condition, Prax was astonished and alarmed. His gait was a shuffle; his arms were weak and ached badly, though he couldn’t remember having done anything to earn the pain. He hadn’t lifted anything heavy or gone climbing. He hadn’t done his daily exercise routine any time that he could remember. He didn’t remember the last time he’d eaten. He remembered the shudder of the falling mirror, the death of his dome, like it was something that had happened in a previous lifetime. No wonder he was falling apart.

The corridors by the relief center were packed like a slaughterhouse. Men and women, many of them who looked stronger and healthier than he was, pushed against each other, making even the widest spaces feel narrow. The closer he got to the port, the more light-headed he felt. The air was almost warm here, the barn-hot of bodies. It stank of keytone-acrid breath. Saint’s breath, his mother called it. The smell of protein breakdown, of bodies eating their own muscles to survive. He wondered how many people in the crowd knew what that scent was.

People were yelling. Shoving. The crowd around him surged back and forth the way he imagined waves might press against a beach.

“Then open the doors and let us look!” a woman shouted, far ahead of him.

Oh, Prax thought. This is a food riot.

He pushed for the edges, trying to get out. Trying to get away. Ahead of him, people were shouting. Behind him, they pushed. Banks of LEDs in the ceiling glowed white and gold. The walls were industrial gray. He put a hand out. He’d gotten to a wall. Somewhere, the dam burst, and the crowd flowed suddenly forward, the collective movement threatening to pull him swirling away into the flow. He kept a hand on the wall. The crowd thinned, and Prax staggered forward. The loading bay doors stood open. Beside them Prax saw a familiar face but couldn’t place it. Someone from the lab, maybe? The man was thick-boned and muscular. An Earther. Maybe someone he’d seen in his travels through the failing station. Had he seen the man grubbing for food? But no, he looked too well fed. There was no gauntness to his cheeks. He was like a friend and also a stranger. Someone Prax knew and also didn’t. Like the secretary-general or a famous actor.

Prax knew he was staring, but he couldn’t stop. He knew that face. He *knew* it. It had to do with the war.

Prax had a sudden flashbulb memory. He was in his apartment, holding Mei in his arms, trying to calm her. She was barely a year old, not walking, the doctors still tinkering to find the right pharmaceutical cocktail to keep her alive. Over her colic wail, the news streams were a constant alarmed chatter. A man’s face played over and over.

My name is James Holden and my ship, the Canterbury, was just destroyed by a warship with stealth technology and what appear to be parts stamped with Martian Navy serial numbers.

That was him. That was why he recognized the face and felt that he’d never seen it before. Prax felt a tug from somewhere near the center of his chest and found himself stepping forward. He paused. Beyond the loading doors, someone whooped. Prax took out his hand terminal, looked at his list. Sixteen names, sixteen children gone. And at the bottom of the page, in simple block characters: *Get help.*

Prax turned toward the man who’d started wars and saved planets, suddenly shy and uncertain.

“Get help,” he said, and walked forward.

Chapter Eleven

Holden

Santichai and Melissa Supitayaporn were a pair of eighty-year-old earthborn missionaries from the Church of Humanity Ascendant, a religion that eschewed supernaturalism in all forms, and whose theology boiled down to *Humans can be better than they are, so let's do that*. They also ran the relief depot headquarters with the ruthless efficiency of natural-born dictators. Minutes after arriving, Holden had been thoroughly dressed down by Santichai, a frail wisp of a man with thinning white hair, about his altercation with customs officials at the port. After several minutes of trying to explain himself, only to be shouted down by the tiny missionary, he finally just gave up and apologized.

“Don’t make our situation here any more precarious,” Santichai repeated, apparently mollified by the apology but needing to drive this point home. He shook a sticklike brown finger in Holden’s face.

“Got it,” Holden said, holding up his hands in surrender. The rest of his crew had vanished at Santichai’s first angry outburst, leaving Holden to deal with the man alone. He spotted Naomi across the large open warehouse space of the relief depot, talking calmly to Melissa, Santichai’s hopefully less volatile wife. Holden couldn’t hear any shouting, though with the voices of several dozen people and the grinding gears and engine whine and reverse alerts of three lift trucks, Melissa could have been flinging grenades at Naomi and he probably wouldn’t have heard it.

Looking for an opportunity to escape, Holden pointed at Naomi across the room and said, “Excuse me, I—”

Santichai cut him off with a curt wave of one hand that sent his loose orange robes swirling. Holden found himself unable to disobey the tiny man.

“This,” Santichai said, pointing in the direction of the crates being brought in from the *Somnambulist*, “is not enough.”

“I—”

“The OPA promised us twenty-two thousand kilos of protein and supplements by last week. This is less than twelve thousand kilos,” Santichai said, punctuating his statement with a sharp poke at Holden’s bicep.

“I’m not in charge of—”

“Why would they promise us things they have no intention of delivering? Promise twelve thousand if that is what you have. Do *not* promise twenty-two thousand and then deliver twelve,” he said, accompanied by more poking.

“I agree,” Holden said, backing out of poke range with his hands up. “I totally agree. I’ll call my contact on Tycho Station immediately to find out where the rest of the promised supplies are. I’m sure they’re on the way.”

Santichai shrugged in another swirl of orange.

“See that you do,” he said, then steamed off toward one of the lift trucks. “You! *You!* Do you see the sign that says ‘medicine’? Why are you putting things that are not medicine in that place?”

Holden used this distraction to make good his escape, and jogged over to Naomi and Melissa. Naomi had a form open on her terminal and was completing some paperwork while Melissa watched.

Holden glanced around the warehouse space while Naomi worked. The *Somnambulist* was just one of almost twenty relief ships that had landed in the last twenty-four hours, and the massive room was quickly filling up with crates of supplies. The chill air smelled of dust and ozone and hot oil from the lift trucks, but under it there was a vaguely unpleasant smell of decay, like rotting vegetation. As he watched, Santichai darted across the warehouse floor, shouting instructions to a pair of workers carrying a heavy crate.

“Your husband is something else, ma’am,” Holden said to Melissa.

Melissa was both taller and heavier than her tiny husband, but she had the same shapeless cloud of thinning white hair he had. She also had bright blue eyes that nearly disappeared in her face when she smiled. As she was doing now.

“I’ve never met anyone else in my life who cared more about other people’s welfare, and less about their feelings,” she said. “But at least he’ll make sure everyone is well fed before he tells them all the many things they did wrong.”

“I think that does it,” Naomi said, hitting the key to send the filled-out form to Melissa’s terminal, a charmingly outdated model she pulled out of a pocket in her robe when it chimed receipt.

“Mrs. Supitayaporn,” Holden said.

“Melissa.”

“Melissa, how long have you and your husband been on Ganymede?”

“Almost,” she said, tapping her finger against her chin and staring off into the distance, “ten years? Can it be that long? It must be, because Dru had just had her baby, and he—”

“I’m wondering because the one thing no one outside of Ganymede seems to know is how this”—Holden gestured around him—“all got started.”

“The station?”

“The crisis.”

“Well, the UN and Martian soldiers started shooting at each other; then we started seeing system failures—”

“Yes,” Holden said, cutting in again. “I understand that. But *why*? Not one shot during the entire year that Earth and Mars have jointly held this moon. We had a war before the whole Eros thing, and they didn’t bring it here. Then all at once everyone everywhere is shooting? What kicked that off?”

Melissa looked puzzled, another expression that made her eyes almost disappear in a mass of wrinkles.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’d assumed they were shooting each other everywhere in the system. We don’t get much news right now.”

“No,” Holden said. “It’s just here, and it was just for a couple of days. And then it stopped, with no explanation.”

“That is odd,” Melissa said, “but I don’t know that it matters. Whatever happened, it doesn’t change what we need to do now.”

“I suppose not,” Holden agreed.

Melissa smiled, embraced him warmly, then went off to check someone else’s paperwork.

Naomi hooked her arm through Holden’s, and they started toward the warehouse exit into the rest of the station, dodging crates of supplies and aid workers as they went.

“How can they have had a whole battle here,” she said, “and no one knows why?”

“They know,” Holden said. “*Someone* knows.”

The station looked worse on the ground than from space. The vital, oxygen-producing plants that lined the corridor walls were turning an unhealthy shade of yellow. Many corridors didn’t have lights, and the automatic pressure doors had been hand cranked and then wedged open; if one area of the station suddenly lost pressure, many adjoining sections would as well. The few people they ran into either avoided their eyes or stared at them with open hostility. Holden found himself wishing he were wearing his gun openly, rather than in a concealed holster at the small of his back.

“Who’s our contact?” Naomi asked quietly.

“Hmmm?”

“I assume Fred has people here,” she replied under her breath as she smiled and nodded at a passing group of men. All of them openly carried weapons, though most were of the stabbing and clubbing variety. They stared back at her with speculative looks on their faces. Holden moved his hand under his coat and toward his gun, but the men moved on, only giving them a few backward glances before they turned a corner and disappeared from view.

“He didn’t arrange for us to meet someone?” Naomi finished in a normal voice.

“He gave me some names. But communication with this moon has been so spotty he wasn’t able to—”

Holden was cut off by a loud bang from another part of the port. The explosion was followed by a roar that gradually resolved into people shouting. The few people in the corridor with them began to run, some toward the noise, but most away from it.

“Should we...” Naomi said, looking at the people running toward the commotion.

“We’re here to see what’s going on,” Holden replied. “So let’s go see.”

They quickly became lost in the twisting corridors of Ganymede’s port, but it didn’t matter as long as they kept moving toward the noise and along with the growing wave of people running in the same direction. A tall, stocky

man with spiked red hair ran alongside them for a while. He was carrying a length of black metal pipe in each hand. He grinned at Naomi and tried to hand her one. She waved it off.

“‘Bout fookin’ time,” he yelled in an accent Holden couldn’t place. He held his extra club out to Holden when Naomi didn’t take it.

“What is?” Holden asked, taking the club.

“Fookin’ bastahds flingin’ the victuals up, and the prols jus gotta shove, wut? Well, fook that, ya mudder-humpin’ spunk guzzlas!”

Spiky Redhead howled and waved his club in the air, then took off at a faster run and disappeared into the crowd. Naomi laughed and howled at his back as he ran. When Holden shot her a look, she just smiled and said, “It’s infectious.”

A final bend in the corridor brought them to another large warehouse space, looking almost identical to the one ruled over by the Supitayaporns, except that this room was filled with a mob of angry people pushing toward the loading dock. The doors to the dock were closed, and a small group of port security officers were trying to hold the mob back. When Holden arrived, the crowd was still cowed by the security officers’ Tasers and shock prods, but from the rising tension and anger in the air, he could tell that wouldn’t last long.

Just behind the front line of rent-a-cops, with their nonlethal deterrents, stood a small clump of men in dark suits and sensible shoes. They carried shotguns with the air of men who were just waiting for someone to give them permission.

That would be the corporate security, then.

Looking over the room, Holden felt the scene snap into place. Beyond that closed loading bay door was one of the few remaining corporate freighters loaded down with the last food being stripped from Ganymede.

And this crowd was hungry.

Holden remembered trying to escape a casino on Eros when it went into security lockdown. Remembered angry crowds facing down men with guns. Remembered the screams and the smells of blood and cordite. Before he knew he’d made a decision, he found himself pushing his way to the front of the crowd. Naomi followed, murmuring apologies in his wake. She grabbed his arm and stopped him for a moment.

“Are you about to do something really stupid?” she asked.

“I’m about to keep these people from being shot for the crime of being hungry,” he said, wincing at the self-righteous tone even as he said it.

“Don’t,” Naomi said, letting him go, “pull your gun on anyone.”

“They have guns.”

“Guns plural. You have gun singular, which is why you will keep yours in your holster, or you’ll do this by yourself.”

That’s the only way you ever do anything. By yourself. It was the kind of thing Detective Miller would have said. For him, it had been true. That was a strong enough argument against doing it that way.

“Okay.” Holden nodded, then resumed pushing his way to the front. By the time he reached it, two people had become the focus of the conflict. A gray-haired port security man wearing a white patch with the word *supervisor* printed on it and a tall, thin dark-skinned woman who could pass for Naomi’s mother were yelling at each other while their respective groups looked on, shouting agreements and insults.

“Just open the damn door and let us look!” yelled the woman in a tone that let Holden know this was something she was repeating again and again.

“You won’t get anything by yelling at me,” the gray-haired supervisor yelled back. Beside him, his fellow security guards held their shock sticks in white-knuckled grips and the corporate boys held their shotguns in a loose cradle that Holden found far more threatening.

The woman stopped shouting when Holden pushed his way up to the supervisor, and stared at him instead.

“Who...?” she said.

Holden climbed up onto the loading dock next to the supervisor. The other guards waved their shock prods around a little, but no one jabbed him. The corporate thugs just narrowed their eyes and shifted their stances a bit. Holden knew that their confusion about who he was would only last so long, and when they finally got past it, he was probably going to get uncomfortably intimate with one of those cattle prods, if not just blasted in the face with a shotgun. Before that could happen, he thrust his hand out to the supervisor and said in a loud voice that would carry to the crowd, “Hi there, I’m Walter Philips, an OPA rep out of Tycho Station, and here as personal representative of Colonel Frederick Johnson.”

The supervisor shook his hand like a man in a daze. The corporate gorillas shifted again and held their guns more firmly.

“Mr. Philips,” the supervisor said. “The OPA has no authority...”

Holden ignored him and turned to the woman he'd been shouting at.

"Ma'am, what's all the fuss?"

"That ship," she said, pointing at the door, "has almost ten thousand kilos of beans and rice on it, enough to feed the whole station for a week!"

The crowd murmured agreement at her back and shuffled forward a step or two.

"Is that true?" Holden asked the supervisor.

"As I said," the man replied, holding up his hands and making pushing motions at the crowd as though he could drive them back through sheer force of will, "we are not allowed to discuss the cargo manifests of privately owned—"

"Then open the doors and let us look!" the woman shouted again. While she yelled and the crowd picked up her chant—*let us look, let us look*—Holden took the security supervisor by the elbow and pulled his head close.

"In about thirty seconds, that mob is going to tear you and your men to pieces trying to get into that ship," he said. "I think you should let them have it before this turns violent."

"Violent!" The man gave a humorless laugh. "It's already violent. The only reason the ship isn't long gone is because one of them set off a bomb and blew up the docking-clamp release mechanism. If they try to take the ship, we'll—"

"They will not take the ship," said a gravelly voice, and a heavy hand came down on Holden's shoulder. When he turned around, one of the corporate goons was standing behind him. "This ship is Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile property."

Holden pushed the man's hand off his shoulder.

"A dozen guys with Tasers and shotguns isn't going to stop them," he said, pointing out at the chanting mob.

"Mr."—the goon looked him up and down once—"Philips. I don't give a drippy shit what you or the OPA thinks about anything, and especially not my chances of doing my job. So why don't you fuck off before the shooting starts?"

Well, he'd tried. Holden smiled at the man and began to reach for the holster at the small of his back. He wished that Amos were here, but he hadn't seen him since they had gotten off the ship. Before he reached the pistol, his hand was enveloped by long slender fingers and squeezed tightly.

“How about this,” Naomi said, suddenly at Holden’s side. “How about we skip past the posturing and I just tell you how this is actually going to work?”

Both Holden and the goon turned to look at Naomi in surprise. She held up one finger in a *wait a minute* gesture and pulled out her hand terminal. She called someone and turned on the external speaker.

“Amos,” she said, still holding her finger up.

“Yep,” came the reply.

“A ship is trying to leave from port 11, pad B9. It’s full of food we could really use here. If it makes it off the ground, do we have an OPA gunship close enough to intercept?”

There was a long pause; then, with a chuckle, Amos said, “You know we do, boss. Who’m I actually saying this to?”

“Call that ship and have them disable the freighter. Then have an OPA team secure it, strip it of everything, and scuttle it.”

Amos just said, “You got it.”

Naomi closed up the terminal and put it back into her pocket.

“Don’t test us, boy,” she said to the goon, a hint of steel in her voice. “Not one word of that was empty threat. Either you give these people the cargo, or we’ll take the whole damned ship. Your choice.”

The goon stared at her for a moment, then motioned to his team and walked away. Port security followed, and Holden and Naomi had to dodge out of the way of the crowd rushing up the dock and to the loading bay doors.

When they were out of danger of being trampled, Holden said, “That was pretty cool.”

“Getting shot standing up for justice probably seemed very heroic to you,” she said, the steel not quite gone from her voice. “But I want to keep you around, so stop being an idiot.”

“Smart play, threatening the ship,” Holden said.

“You were acting like that asshole Detective Miller, so I just acted like you used to. What I said was the kind of thing you say when you’re not in a hurry to wave your gun around.”

“I wasn’t acting like Miller,” he said, the accusation stinging, because it was true.

“You weren’t acting like you.”

Holden shrugged, noticing only afterward that it was another imitation of Miller. Naomi looked down at the captain's patches on the shoulder of her *Somnambulist* jumpsuit. "Maybe I should keep these..."

A small, unkempt-looking man with salt-and-pepper hair, Chinese features, and a week's growth of beard walked up to them and nodded nervously. He was literally wringing his hands, a gesture Holden had been pretty sure only little old ladies in ancient cinema made.

He gave them another small nod and said, "You are James Holden? Captain James Holden? From the OPA?"

Holden and Naomi glanced at each other. Holden tugged at his patchy beard. "Is this actually helping at all? Be honest."

"Captain Holden, my name is Prax, Praxidike Meng. I'm a botanist."

Holden shook the man's hand.

"Nice to meet you, Prax. I'm afraid we have to—"

"You have to help me," Prax said. Holden could see that the man had been through a rough couple of months. His clothes hung off him like a starving man's, and his face was covered with yellowing bruises from a fairly recent beating.

"Sure, if you'll see the Supitayaporns at the aid station, tell them I said —"

"No!" Prax shouted. "I don't need that. I need you to *help* me!"

Holden shot a glance at Naomi. She shrugged. *Your call.*

"Okay," Holden said. "What's the problem?"

Chapter Twelve

Avasarala

“A small house is a deeper kind of luxury,” her husband said. “To live in a space entirely our own, to remember the simple pleasures of baking bread and washing our own dishes. This is what your friends in high places forget. It makes them less human.”

He was sitting at the kitchen table, leaning back in a chair of bamboo laminate that had been distressed until it looked like stained walnut. The scars from his cancer surgery were two pale lines in the darkness of his throat, barely visible under the powdering of white stubble. His forehead was broader than when she’d married him, his hair thinner. The Sunday morning sun spilled across the table, glowing.

“That’s crap,” she said. “Just because you pretend to live like a dirt farmer doesn’t make Errinwright or Lus or any of the others less human. There’s smaller houses than this with six families living in them, and the people in those are a hundred times closer to animals than anyone I work with.”

“You really think that?”

“Of course I do. Otherwise why would I go to work in the morning? If someone doesn’t get those half-feral bastards out of the slums, who are you university types going to teach?”

“An excellent point,” Arjun said.

“What makes them less human is they don’t fucking meditate. A small house isn’t a luxury,” she said, then paused. “A small house and a lot of money, maybe.”

Arjun grinned at her. He had always had the most beautiful smile. She found herself smiling back at him, even though part of her wanted to be cross. Outside, Kiki and Suri shrieked, their small half-naked bodies bolting across the grass. Their nurse trotted along a half second behind them, her hand to her side like she was easing a stitch.

“A big yard is a luxury,” Avasarala said.

“It is.”

Suri burst in the back door, her hand covered in loose black soil and a wide grin on her face. Her footsteps left crumbling dark marks on the carpet.

“Nani! Nani! Look what I found!”

Avasarala shifted in her chair. In her granddaughter’s palm, an earthworm was shifting the pink and brown rings of its body, wet as the soil that dripped from Suri’s fingers. Avasarala made her face into a mask of wonder and delight.

“That’s wonderful, Suri. Come back outside and show your nani where you found that.”

The yard smelled like cut grass and fresh soil. The gardener—a thin man hardly older than her own son would have been—knelt in the back, pulling weeds by hand. Suri pelted out toward him, and Avasarala moved along after her at a stroll. When she came near, the gardener nodded, but there was no space for conversation. Suri was pointing and gesturing and retelling the grand adventure of finding a common worm in the mud as if it were a thing of epics. Kiki appeared at Avasarala’s side, quietly taking her hand. She loved her little Suri, but privately—or if not that, then only to Arjun—she thought Kiki was the smarter of her grandchildren. Quiet, but the girl’s black eyes were bright, and she could mimic anyone she heard. Kiki didn’t miss much.

“Darling wife,” Arjun called from the back door. “There’s someone to talk with you.”

“Where?”

“The house system,” Arjun said. “She says your terminal’s not answering.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Avasarala said.

“It’s Gloria Tannenbaum.”

Avasarala reluctantly handed Kiki’s hand over to the nurse, kissed Suri’s head, and went back toward the house. Arjun held the door open for her. His expression was apologetic.

“These cunts are digging into my grandma time,” she said.

“The price of power,” Arjun replied with a solemnity that was amused and serious at the same time.

Avasarala opened the connection on the system in her private office. There was a click and a moment’s dislocation while the privacy screens

came up, and then Gloria Tannenbaum's thin, eye-browless face appeared on her screen.

"Gloria! I'm sorry. I had my terminal down with the children over."

"Not a problem," the woman said with a clean, brittle smile that was as close as she came to a genuine emotion. "Probably for the best anyway. Always assume those are being monitored more closely than civilian lines."

Avasarala lowered herself into her chair. The leather breathed out gently under her weight.

"I hope things are all right with you and Etsepan?"

"Fine," Gloria said.

"Good, good. Now why the fuck are you calling me?"

"I was talking to a friend of mine whose wife is stationed on the *Mikhaylov*. From what he says, it's being pulled off patrol. Going deep."

Avasarala frowned. The *Mikhaylov* was part of a small convoy monitoring the traffic between the deep stations orbiting at the far edge of the Belt.

"Going deep where?"

"I asked around," Gloria said. "Ganymede."

"Nguyen?"

"Yes."

"Your friend has loose lips," Avasarala said.

"I never tell him anything true," Gloria said. "I thought you should know."

"I owe you," Avasarala said. Gloria nodded once, the movement sharp as a crow's, and dropped the connection. Avasarala sat in silence for a long moment, fingers pressed to her lips, mind following the chains of implication like a brook flowing over stones. Nguyen was sending more ships to Ganymede, and he was doing it quietly.

The *why quietly* part was simple. If he'd done it openly, she would have stopped him. Nguyen was young and he was ambitious, but he wasn't stupid. He was drawing conclusions of his own, and somehow he'd gotten to the idea that sending more forces into the open sore that was Ganymede Station would make things better.

"Oh, Nani!" Kiki called. From the lilt of her voice, Avasarala knew there was mischief afoot. She hefted herself up from the desk and headed for the door.

"In here, Kiki," she said, stepping out into the kitchen.

The water balloon hit her in the shoulder without bursting, bobbed down to the floor, and popped at her feet, turning the stone tiles around her dark. Avasarala looked up, rage-faced. Kiki stood in the doorway leading to the yard, caught between fear and delight.

“Did you just make a mess in my house?” Avasarala asked.

Pale-faced, the girl nodded.

“Do you know what happens to bad children who make a mess in their nani’s house?”

“Do they get tickled?”

“They get *tickled!*” Avasarala said, and bolted for her. Of course Kiki got away. She was a child of eight. The only time the girl’s joints ached, it was from growing too fast. And of course, eventually she let her nani catch her and tickle her until she screamed. By the time Ashanti and her husband came to gather up their children for the flight back to Novgorod, Avasarala had grass stains on her sari and her hair was standing off her scalp in all directions, like the cartoon image of her lightning-struck self.

She hugged the children twice before they left, sneaking bits of chocolate to them each time, then kissed her daughter, nodded to her son-in-law, and waved to them all from her doorway. The security team followed their car. No one so closely related to her was safe from kidnapping. It was just another fact of life.

Her shower was long, using a lavish volume of water almost too hot for comfort. She’d always liked her baths to approach scalding, ever since she was a girl. If her skin didn’t tingle and throb a little when she toweled off, she’d done it wrong.

Arjun was on the bed, reading seriously from his hand terminal. She walked to her closet, threw the wet towel into the hamper, and shrugged into a cotton-weave robe.

“He thinks they did it,” she said.

“Who did what?” Arjun asked.

“Nguyen. He’s thinking that the Martians are behind the thing. That there’s going to be a second attack on Ganymede. He knows the Martians aren’t moving their fleet there, and he’s still reinforcing. He doesn’t care if it fucks the peace talks, because he thinks they’re crap anyway. Nothing to lose. Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, I am. Nguyen thinks it was Mars. He’s building a fleet to respond. You see?”

“Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“As a rule? No. But Maxwell Asinnian-Koh just posted a paper about post-lyricism that’s going to get him no end of hate mail.”

Avasarala chuckled.

“You live in your own world, dear one.”

“I do,” Arjun agreed, running his thumb across the hand terminal’s screen. He looked up. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“I love you for it. Stay here. Read about post-lyricism.”

“What are you going to do?”

“The same thing as always. Try to keep civilization from blowing up while the children are in it.”

When she’d been young, her mother had tried to teach her knitting. The skill hadn’t taken, but there were other lessons that had. Once, the skein of yarn had gotten knotted badly, and Avasarala’s frustrated yanking had only made things progressively worse. Her mother had taken the tight-bound clump from her, but instead of fixing it herself and handing it back, her mother sat cross-legged on the floor beside her and spoke aloud about how to solve the knot. She’d been gentle, deliberate, and patient, looking for places where she could work more slack into the system until, seemingly all at once, the yarn spilled free.

There were ten ships in the list, ranging from an ancient transport past due for the scrap heap to a pair of frigates captained by people whose names she’d heard. It wasn’t a huge force, but it was enough to be provocative. Gently, deliberately, patiently, Avasarala started plucking it apart.

The transport was first, because it was easiest. She’d been cultivating the boys in maintenance and safety for years. It took four hours for someone with the schematics and logs to find a bolt that hadn’t been replaced on schedule, and less than half an hour after that to issue the mandatory recall. The *Wu Tsao*—better armed of the frigates—was captained by Golla Ishigawa-Marx. His service record was solid, workmanlike reading. He was competent, unimaginative, and loyal. Three conversations had him promoted to the head of the construction oversight committee, where he probably wouldn’t do any harm. The full command

crew of the *Wu Tsao* was requested to come back to Earth to be present when they pinned a ribbon on him. The second frigate was harder, but she found a way. And by then the convoy was small enough that the medical and support ship was a higher rating than the remaining convoy justified.

The knot unspooled in her fingers. The three ships she couldn't pry loose were old and underpowered. If it came to a fight, they wouldn't be significant. And because of that, the Martians would only take offense if they were looking for an excuse.

She didn't think they would. And if she was wrong, that would be interesting too.

"Won't Admiral Nguyen see through all this?" Errinwright asked. He was in a hotel room somewhere on the other side of the planet. It was night behind him, and his dress shirt was unbuttoned at the top.

"Let him," Avasarala said. "What's he going to do? Go crying to his mama that I took his toys away? If he can't play with the big kids, he shouldn't be a fucking admiral."

Errinwright smiled and cracked his knuckles. He looked tired.

"The ships that will get there?"

"The *Bernadette Koe*, the *Aristophanes*, and the *Feodorovna*, sir."

"Those, yes. What are you going to tell the Martians about them?"

"Nothing if they don't bring it up," Avasarala said. "If they do, I can dismiss them. A minor medical support ship, a transport, and an itty-bitty gunship to keep off pirates. I mean, it's not like we're sending a couple of cruisers. So fuck them."

"You'll say it more gently, I hope?"

"Of course I will, sir. I'm not stupid."

"And Venus?"

She took a long breath, letting the air hiss out between her teeth.

"It's the damn bogeyman," she said. "I'm getting daily reports, but we don't know what we're looking at. The network it built across the planetary surface is finished, and now it's breaking down, but there are structures coming up in a complex radial symmetry. Only it's not along the axis of rotation. It's on the plane of ecliptic. So whatever's down there, it's orienting itself with the whole solar system in mind. And the spectrographic analysis is showing an uptick in lanthanum oxide and gold."

"I don't know what that means."

“Neither does anyone else, but the brains are thinking it may be a set of very high-temperature superconductors. They’re trying to replicate the crystal structures in the labs, and they’ve found some things they don’t understand. Turns out, the thing down there’s a better physical chemist than we are. No fucking surprise there.”

“Any link to Ganymede?”

“Just the one,” Avasarala said. “Otherwise nothing. Or at least not directly.”

“What do you mean, not directly?”

Avasarala frowned and looked away. The Buddha looked back.

“Did you know that the number of religious suicide cults has doubled since Eros?” she said. “I didn’t until I got the report. The bond initiative to rebuild the water reclamation center at Cairo almost failed last year because a millennialist group said we wouldn’t need it.”

Errinwright sat forward. His eyes were narrow.

“You think there’s a connection?”

“I don’t think there’s a bunch of pod people sneaking up from Venus,” she said, “but...I’ve been thinking about what it’s done to us. The whole solar system. Them and us and the Belters. It’s not healthy having God sleeping right there where we can all watch him dream. It scares the shit out of us. It scares the shit out of *me*. And so we all look away and go about things as if the universe were the same as when we were young, but we know better. We’re all acting like we’re sane, but...”

She shook her head.

“Humanity’s always lived with the inexplicable,” Errinwright said. His voice was hard. She was making him uncomfortable. Well, she was making herself uncomfortable too.

“The inexplicable didn’t used to eat planets,” she said. “Even if the thing on Ganymede didn’t come up off Venus on its own, it’s pretty damn clear that it’s related. And *if* we did it—”

“If we built that, it’s because we found a new technology, and we’re using it,” Errinwright said. “Flint spear to gunpowder to nuclear warheads, it’s what we do, Chrisjen. Let me worry about that. You keep your eye on Venus and don’t let the Martian situation get out of control.”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“Everything’s going to be fine.”

And, looking at the dead screen where her superior had been, Avasarala decided that maybe he even thought it was true. Avasarala wasn't sure any longer. Something was bothering her, and she didn't yet know what it was. It only lurked there, just underneath her conscious mind, like a splinter in a fingertip. She opened the captured video from the UN outpost on Ganymede, went through the mandatory security check, and watched the Marines die again.

Kiki and Suri were going to grow up in a world where this had happened, where Venus had always been the colony of something utterly foreign, uncommunicative, and implacable. The fear that carried would be normal to them, something they didn't think about any more than they did their own breath. On her screen, a man no older than Soren emptied an assault rifle clip into the attacker. The enhanced images showed the dozens of impacts cutting through the thing, the trails of filament coming out its back like streamers. The soldier died again. At least it had been quick for him. She paused the image. Her fingertip traced the outline of the attacker.

"Who are you?" she asked the screen. "What do you *want*?"

She was missing something. It happened often enough that she knew the feeling, but that didn't help. It would come when it came. All she could do until it did was keep scratching where it itched. She shut down the files, waiting for the security protocols to make sure she hadn't copied anything, then signed out and turned to the window.

She found that she was thinking about the next time. What information they'd be able to get the next time. What kind of patterns she'd be able to glean from the next time. The next attack, the next slaughter. It was already perfectly clear in her mind that what had happened on Ganymede was going to happen again, sooner or later. Genies didn't get put back into bottles, and from the moment the protomolecule had been set loose on the civilian population of Eros just to see what it would do, civilization had changed. Changed so fast and so powerfully that they were still playing catch-up.

Playing catch-up.

There was something there. Something in the words, like a lyric from a song she almost remembered. She ground her teeth and stood up, pacing the length of her window. She hated this part. Hated it.

Her office door opened. When she turned to look at Soren, he flinched back. Avasarala took her scowl down a couple of notches. It wasn't fair to scare the poor bunny. He was probably just the intern who'd pulled the

short straw and gotten stuck with the cranky old woman. And in a way, she liked him.

“Yes?” she said.

“I thought you’d want to know that Admiral Nguyen sent a note of protest to Mr. Errinwright. Interference in his field of command. He didn’t copy the secretary-general.”

Avasarala smiled. If she couldn’t unlock all the mysteries of the universe, she could at least keep the boys in line. And if he wasn’t appealing to the bobble-head, then it was just pouting. Nothing was going to come of it.

“Good to know. And the Martians?”

“They’re here, ma’am.”

She sighed, plucked at her sari, and lifted her chin.

“Let’s go stop the war, then,” she said.

Chapter Thirteen

Holden

Amos, who'd finally turned up a few hours after the food riot carrying a case of beer and saying he'd done some "recon," was now carrying a small case of canned food. The label claimed it was "chicken food products." Holden hoped that the hacker Prax was leading them to would see the offering as at least being in the spirit of his requested payment.

Prax led the way with the manic speed of someone who had one last thing to do before he died, and could feel the end close on his heels. Holden suspected this wasn't far from the truth. The small botanist certainly looked like he'd been burning himself up.

They'd taken him aboard the *Somnambulist* while they'd gathered the supplies they'd need, and Holden had forced the man to eat a meal and take a shower. Prax had begun stripping while Holden was still showing him how to use the ship's head, as if waiting for privacy would waste precious time. The sight of the man's ravaged body had shocked him. All the while, the botanist spoke only of Mei, of his need to find her. Holden realized that he'd never in his life needed anything as badly as this man needed to see his daughter again.

To his surprise, it made him sad.

Prax had been robbed of everything, had all his fat boiled away; he'd been rendered down to the bare minimum of humanity. All he had left was his need to find his little girl, and Holden envied him for it.

When Holden had been dying and trapped in the hell of Eros Station, he had discovered that he needed to see Naomi one last time. Or barring that, to see that she was safe. It was why he hadn't died there. That and having Miller at his side with a second gun. And that connection, even now that he and Naomi were lovers, was a pale shadow compared to the thing driving Prax. It left Holden feeling like he'd lost something important without realizing it.

While Prax had showered, Holden had gone up the ladder to ops, where Naomi had been working to hack her way into Ganymede's crippled

security system, pulled her out of her chair, and held her for a few moments. She stiffened with surprise for a second, then relaxed into his embrace. “Hi,” she whispered in his ear. It might be a pale shadow, but it was what he had right now, and it was pretty damn good.

Prax paused at an intersection, his hands tapping at his thighs as if he were hurrying himself along. Naomi was back on the ship, monitoring their progress through locators they all carried and with the remnants of the station’s security cameras.

At Holden’s back, Amos cleared his throat and said in a voice low enough that Prax wouldn’t hear, “If we lose this guy, I don’t like our chances of finding our way back too quick.”

Holden nodded. Amos was right.

Even at the best of times, Ganymede was a maze of identical gray corridors and occasional parklike caverns. And the station certainly wasn’t at her best now. Most of the public information kiosks were dark, malfunctioning, or outright destroyed. The pubnet was unreliable at best. And the local citizens moved like scavengers over the corpse of their once-great moon, alternately terrified and threatening. He and Amos were both openly wearing firearms, and Amos had mastered a sort of constant glower that made people automatically put him onto their “not to be fucked with” list. Not for the first time, Holden wondered what sort of life Amos had been leading prior to his signing up for a tour on the *Canterbury*, the old water hauler they’d served together on.

Prax came to a sudden halt in front of a door that looked like a hundred other doors they’d already passed, set into the wall of a gray corridor that looked like every other gray corridor.

“This is it. He’s in here.”

Before Holden could respond, Prax was hammering on the door. Holden took a step back and to the side, giving himself a clear view of the doorway past Prax. Amos stepped to the other side, tucking the case of chicken under his left arm and hooking his right thumb into his waistband just in front of the holster. A year of patrolling the Belt, cleaning up the worst jackals that the governmental vacuum had left behind, had instilled some automatic habits in his crew. Holden appreciated them, but he wasn’t

sure he liked them. Working security certainly hadn't made Miller's life any better.

The door was yanked open by a scrawny and shirtless teenager with a big knife in his other hand.

"The fuck—" he started, then stopped when he saw Holden and Amos flanking Prax. He glanced at their guns and said, "Oh."

"I've brought you chicken," Prax replied, pointing back at the case Amos carried. "I need to see the rest of the camera footage."

"Coulda got that for you," Naomi said in Holden's ear, "given enough time."

"It's the 'enough time' part that's a problem," Holden subvocalized back at her. "But that's definitely plan B."

The skinny teen shrugged and opened the door the rest of the way, gesturing for Prax to enter. Holden followed, with Amos bringing up the rear.

"So," the kid said. "Show it, sabé?"

Amos put down the case on a filthy table and removed a single can from the box. He held it up where the kid could see it.

"Sauce?" the kid said.

"How about a second can instead?" Holden replied, moving over to the kid and smiling up at him agreeably. "So go get the rest of the footage, and we'll get out of your hair. Sound good?"

The kid lifted his chin and pushed Holden an arm's length back.

"Don't push up on me, macho."

"My apologies," Holden said, his smile never wavering. "Now go get the damned video footage you promised my friend here."

"Maybe no," the kid said. He flapped one hand at Holden. "Adinerado, si no? Quizas you got more than chicken to pay. Maybe a lot."

"Let me get this straight," Holden replied. "Are you shaking us down? Because that would be—"

A meaty hand came down on his shoulder, cutting him off.

"I got this one, Cap," Amos said, stepping between Holden and the kid. He held one of the chicken cans in his hand, and he was tossing it lightly and catching it.

"That guy," Amos said, pointing at Prax with his left hand while continuing to toss the chicken with his right, "got his baby girl snatched. He

just wants to know where she is. He's willing to pay the agreed-upon price for that information."

The kid shrugged and started to speak, but Amos held up a finger to his lips and shushed him.

"And now, when that price is ready to be paid," Amos said, his tone friendly and conversational, "you want to shake him down because you know he's desperate. He'll give anything to get his girl back. This is a fat payday, right?"

The kid shrugged again. "Que no—"

Amos smashed the can of chicken food product into the kid's face so fast that for a moment Holden couldn't figure out why the hacker was suddenly lying on the ground, blood gushing from his nose. Amos settled one knee onto his chest, pinning him to the floor. The can of chicken went up and then pistoned down into the kid's face again with a sharp crack. He started to howl, but Amos clamped his left hand over the boy's mouth.

"You piece of shit," Amos yelled, all the friendliness gone from his voice, leaving just a ragged animal rage that Holden had never heard there before. "You gonna hold a baby girl hostage for more fucking *chicken*?"

Amos smashed the can into the hacker's ear, which immediately bloomed red. His hand came away from the kid's mouth, and the boy started yelling for help. Amos raised the can of chicken one more time, but Holden grabbed his arm and pulled him up off the gibbering kid.

"Enough," he said, holding on to Amos and hoping the big man didn't decide to clobber him with the can instead. Amos had always been the kind of guy who got into bar fights because he enjoyed them.

This was something different.

"Enough," Holden said again, and then held on until Amos stopped struggling. "He can't help us if you bash his brains out."

The kid scooted backward across the floor and had his shoulders up against the wall. He nodded as Holden spoke, and held his bleeding nose between his finger and thumb.

"That right?" Amos said. "You going to help?"

The kid nodded again and scrambled to his feet, still pressed against the wall.

"I'll go with him," Holden said, patting Amos on the shoulder. "Why don't you stay here and take a breather."

Before Amos could answer, Holden pointed at the terrified hacker.

“Better get to work.”

“There,” Prax said when the video of Mei’s abduction came up again. “That’s Mei. That man is her doctor, Dr. Strickland. That woman, I don’t know her. But Mei’s teacher said that she came up in their records as Mei’s mother. With a picture and authorization to pick her up. Security is very good at the school. They’d never let a child go without that.”

“Find where they went,” Holden said to the hacker. To Prax he said, “Why her doctor?”

“Mei is...” Prax started, then stopped and started over. “Mei has a rare genetic disease that disables her immune system without regular treatments. Dr. Strickland knows this. Sixteen other kids with her disorder are missing too. He could keep them... he could keep Mei alive.”

“You getting this, Naomi?”

“Yep, riding the hacker’s trail through security. We won’t need him again.”

“Good,” Holden said. “Because I’m pretty sure this bridge is thoroughly burned once we walk out the door.”

“We always have more chicken,” Naomi said with a chuckle.

“Amos made sure the kid’s next request will be for plastic surgery.”

“Ouch,” she replied. “He okay?”

Holden knew she meant Amos. “Yeah. But... is there something I don’t know about him that would make this problematic? Because he’s really—”

“Aqui,” the hacker said, pointing at his screen.

Holden watched as Dr. Strickland carried Mei down an older-looking corridor, the dark-haired woman in tow. They came to a door that looked like an ancient pressure hatch. Strickland did something at the panel next to it, and the three of them went inside.

“No eyes past this,” the hacker said, almost flinching as if in expectation of being punished for the failings of the Ganymede security system.

“Naomi, where does that go?” Holden said, patting the air to let the hacker know he wasn’t to blame.

“Looks like an old part of the original dig,” she said, her words punctuated by pauses as she worked her console. “Zoned for utility storage. Shouldn’t be anything beyond that door but dust and ice.”

“Can you get us there?” Holden asked.

Naomi and Prax both said, “Yes,” at the same time.

“Then that’s where we’re going.”

He gestured for Prax and the hacker to lead the way back out to the front room, then followed them. Amos was sitting at the table, spinning one of the chicken cans on its edge like a thick coin. In the light gravity of the moon, it seemed like it would keep spinning forever. His expression was distant and unreadable.

“You did the job,” Holden said to the hacker, who was staring at Amos, his face twitching from fear to rage and back again. “So you’ll get paid. We aren’t going to stiff you.”

Before the kid could reply, Amos stood up and picked up the case of canned chicken. He turned it over and dumped all the remaining cans on the floor, where a few rolled away to various corners of the small room.

“Keep the change, asshole,” he said, then threw the empty box into the tiny kitchen nook.

“And with that,” Holden said, “we’ll take our leave.”

After Amos and Prax had gone out the door, Holden backed out, keeping a watchful eye on the hacker to make sure there were no misguided attempts at revenge. He shouldn’t have worried. The minute Amos was out the door, the kid just started picking up the chicken cans and stacking them on the table.

As he backed out and closed the door behind him, Naomi said, “You know what it means, don’t you?”

“Which thing?” he replied, then said to Amos, “Back to the ship.”

“Prax said all the kids with Mei’s particular disorder were missing,” Naomi continued. “And her doctor is the one who took her out of school.”

“So we can probably assume he, or people working with him, took the others,” Holden agreed.

Amos and Prax were walking together up the corridor, the big man still wearing his distant look. Prax put a hand on his arm, and Holden heard him whisper, “Thank you.” Amos just shrugged.

“Why would he want those kids?” Naomi asked.

“The better question to me is, how did he know to take them just hours before the shooting started?”

“Yeah,” Naomi said, her voice quiet. “Yeah, how did he know that?”

“Because he’s the reason why things went pear-shaped,” Holden replied, saying out loud what they were both thinking.

“If he’s got all of those kids, and he or the people he’s with were able to start a shooting war between Mars and Earth to cover up the snatch...”

“Starts to feel like a strategy we’ve seen before, doesn’t it? We need to know what’s on the other side of that door.”

“One of two things,” Naomi said. “Nothing, because after the snatch they got the hell off this moon...”

“Or,” Holden continued, “a whole lot of guys with guns.”

“Yeah.”

The galley of the *Somnambulist* was quiet as Prax and Holden’s crew watched the video again. Naomi had pieced together all the security footage of Mei’s abduction into a single long loop. They watched as her doctor carried her through various corridors, up a lift, and finally to the door of the abandoned parts of the station. After the third viewing, Holden gestured for Naomi to turn it off.

“What do we know?” he said, his fingers drumming on the table.

“The kid’s not scared. She’s not fighting to get away,” Amos said.

“She’s known Dr. Strickland all her life,” Prax replied. “He would be almost like family to her.”

“Which means they bought him,” Naomi said. “Or this plan has been going on for...”

“Four years,” Prax said.

“Four years,” Naomi repeated. “Which is a hell of a long con to run unless the stakes are huge.”

“Is it kidnapping? If they want a ransom payment...”

“Doesn’t wash. A couple hours after Mei disappears into that hatch,” Holden said, pointing at the image frozen on Naomi’s screen, “Earth and Mars are shooting each other. Somebody’s going to a lot of trouble to grab sixteen sick kids and hide the fact they did it.”

“If Protogen wasn’t toast,” Amos said, “I’d say this is exactly the kind of shit they’d pull.”

“And whoever it is has significant tech resources too,” Naomi said. “They were able to hack the school’s system even before the Ganymede netsec was collapsing from the battle, and insert that woman’s records into Mei’s file without any trace of tampering.”

“Some of the kids in her school had very rich or powerful parents,” Prax said. “Their security would have to be top notch.”

Holden drummed out a last rhythm on the tabletop with both hands, then said, “Which all leads us back to the big question. What’s waiting for us on the other side of that door?”

“Corporate goons,” Amos said.

“Nothing,” Naomi said.

“Mei,” Prax said quietly. “It might be Mei.”

“We need to be prepared for all three possibilities: violence, gathering clues, or rescuing a kid. So let’s put together a plan. Naomi, I want a terminal with a radio link that I can plug into whatever network we find on the other side, and give you a doorway in.”

“Yep,” Naomi said, already getting up from the table and heading toward the keel ladder.

“Prax, you need to come up with a way for Mei to trust us if we find her, and give us details on any complications her illness might cause during a rescue. How quickly do we need to get her back here for her meds? Things like that.”

“Okay,” Prax said, pulling out his terminal and making notes.

“Amos?”

“Yeah, Cap?”

“That leaves violence to us. Let’s tool up.”

The smile began and ended at the corners of Amos’ eyes.

“Fuck yeah.”

Chapter Fourteen

Prax

Prax didn't understand how near he was to collapse until he ate. Canned chicken with some kind of spicy chutney, soft no-crumb crackers of the type usually used in zero-g environments, a tall glass of beer. He wolfed it down, his body suddenly ravenous and unstoppable.

After he finished vomiting, the woman who seemed to take care of all the small practical matters on the ship—he knew her name was Naomi, but he kept wanting to call her Cassandra, because she looked like an intern by that name he'd worked with three years earlier—switched him to a thin protein broth that his atrophied gut could actually handle. Over the course of hours, his mind started coming back. It felt like waking up over and over without falling asleep in between; sitting in the hold of Holden's ship, he'd find himself noticing the shift in his cognition, how much more clearly he could think and how good it felt to come back to himself. And then a few minutes later, some set of sugar-deprived ganglia would struggle back to function, and it would all happen again.

And with every step back toward real consciousness, he felt the drive growing, pushing him toward the door that Strickland and Mei had gone through.

"Doctor, huh?" the big one—Amos—said.

"I got my degree here. The university's really good. Lots of grant money. Or... now I suppose there used to be."

"I was never much for formal education myself."

The relief ship's mess hall was tiny and scarred by age. The woven carbon filament walls had cracks in the enameling, and the tabletop was pitted from years, maybe decades, of use. The lighting was a thin spectrum shifted toward pink that would have killed any plants living under it in about three days. Amos had a canvas sack filled with formed plastic boxes of different sizes, each of which seemed to have a firearm of some kind inside. He had unrolled a square of red felt and disassembled a huge matte-black pistol on it. The delicate metal parts looked like sculpture. Amos

dipped a cotton swab into a bright blue cleaning solution and rubbed it gently on a silver mechanism attached to a black metal tube, polishing metal plates that were already bright as a mirror.

Prax found his hands moving toward the disassembled pieces, willing them to come together. To be already cleaned and polished and remade. Amos pretended not to notice in a way that meant he was very much aware.

"I don't know why they would have taken her," Prax said. "Dr. Strickland has always been great with her. He never... I mean, he'd never hurt her. I don't think he'd hurt her."

"Yeah, probably not," Amos said. He dipped the swab into the cleaning fluid again and started on a metal rod with a spring wrapped around it.

"I really need to get there," Prax said. He didn't say, *Every minute here is a minute that they could be hurting Mei. That she could be dying or getting shipped offworld*. He tried to keep his words from sounding like a whine or a demand, but they seemed to come out as both.

"Getting ready's the shitty part," Amos said, as if agreeing to something. "You want to get right out into it right the fuck now. Get it over with."

"Well, yes," Prax said.

"I get that," Amos said. "It's no fun, but you've got to get through it. Going in without your gear ready, you might as well not go. Plus which the girl's been gone for how long now?"

"Since the fighting. Since the mirror came down."

"Chances of another hour making much difference are pretty small, right?"

"But—"

"Yeah," Amos said with a sigh. "I know. This is the tough part. Not as bad as waiting for us to get back, though. That's gonna suck even worse."

Amos put down the swab and started fitting the long black spring back over the spindle of bright metal. The alcohol fumes of the cleaning solution stung Prax's eyes.

"I'm waiting for *you*," Prax said.

"Yeah, I know," Amos said. "And I'll make sure we're real quick about it. The captain's a real good guy, but he can get kind of distracted sometimes. I'll keep him on point. No trouble."

“No,” Prax said, “I don’t mean I’m waiting for you when you go to that door. I mean I’m waiting for you *right now*. I’m waiting to go there with you.”

Amos slid the spring and spindle into the shell of the gun, twisting it gently with his fingertips. Prax didn’t know when he’d risen to his feet.

“How many gunfights have you been in?” Amos asked. His voice was low and wide and gentle. “Because I’ve been in... shit. This’ll be eleven for me. Maybe twelve, if you count the one time when the guy got up again as a different fight. Point is, if you want your little girl safe, you don’t want her in a tunnel with a guy firing a gun who doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

As if in punctuation, Amos slid the gun together. The metal clacked.

“I’ll be fine,” Prax said, but his legs were trembling, just standing up. Amos held up the gun.

“This ready to fire?” Amos asked.

“Sorry?”

“If you pick this gun up right now, point it at a bad guy, pull the trigger, does it go bang? You just watched me put it together. Dangerous or safe?”

Prax opened his mouth, then closed it. An ache just behind his sternum grew a notch worse. Amos started to put the gun down.

“Safe,” Prax said.

“You sure about that, Doc?”

“You didn’t put any bullets in it. It’s safe.”

“You’re *sure*?”

“Yes.”

Amos frowned at the gun.

“Well, yeah, that’s right,” he said. “But you’re still not going.”

Voices came from the narrow hallway from the airlock. Jim Holden’s voice wasn’t what Prax had thought it would be. He’d expected him to be serious, grave. Instead, even during the times like now, when the distress clipped his vowels short and tightened his voice, there was a lightness to him. The woman’s voice—*Naomi*, not Cassandra—wasn’t deeper, but it was darker.

“Those are the numbers,” she said.

“They’re wrong,” Holden said, ducking into the mess. “They’ve got to be wrong. It doesn’t make sense.”

“What’s the word, Cap’n?” Amos asked.

“Security’s not going to be any use,” Holden said. “The locals are stretched too thin trying to keep the place from straight-out catastrophe.”

“Which is why maybe we shouldn’t be going in with guns drawn,” Naomi said.

“Please, can we not have that conversation again right now?”

Her mouth hardened and Amos pointedly looked at the gun, polishing the parts that already shone. Prax had the sense of walking in on a much longer conversation.

“This guy who grabs a gun first and talks later...” Naomi said. “You didn’t used to be him. You *aren’t* him.”

“Well, I need to be him today,” Holden said in a voice that closed the subject. The silence was uncomfortable.

“What’s wrong with the numbers?” Prax asked. Holden looked at him, confused. “You said there was something wrong with the numbers.”

“They’re saying that the death rate’s going up. But that’s got to be wrong. The fighting was... what? One day? Day and a half? Why would things be getting worse now?”

“No,” Prax said. “That’s right. It’s the cascade. It’ll get worse.”

“What’s the cascade?” Naomi asked. Amos slid the pistol into its box and hauled out a longer case. A shotgun maybe. His gaze was on Prax, waiting.

“It’s the basic obstacle of artificial ecosystems. In a normal evolutionary environment, there’s enough diversity to cushion the system when something catastrophic happens. That’s nature. Catastrophic things happen all the time. But nothing we can build has the depth. One thing goes wrong, and there’s only a few compensatory pathways that can step in. They get overstressed. Fall out of balance. When the next one fails, there are even fewer paths, and then they’re more stressed. It’s a simple complex system. That’s the technical name for it. Because it’s simple, it’s prone to cascades, and because it’s complex, you can’t predict what’s going to fail. Or how. It’s computationally impossible.”

Holden leaned against the wall, his arms folded. It was still odd, seeing him in person. He looked the same as he had on the screens, and he also didn’t.

“Ganymede Station,” Holden said, “is the most important food supply and agricultural center outside Earth and Mars. It can’t just collapse. They wouldn’t let it. People come here to have their babies, for God’s sake.”

Prax tilted his head. A day before, he wouldn't have been able to explain this. For one thing, he wouldn't have had the blood sugar to fuel thought. For another, he wouldn't have had anyone to say it to. It was good to be able to think again, even if it was only so he could explain how bad things had become.

"Ganymede's dead," Prax said. "The tunnels will probably survive, but the environmental and social structures are already broken. Even if we could somehow get the environmental systems back in place—and really, we can't without a lot of work—how many people are going to stay here now? How many would be going to jail? Something's going to fill the niche, but it won't be what was here before."

"Because of the cascade," Holden said.

"Yes," Prax said. "That's what I was trying to say before. To Amos. It's all going to fall apart. The relief effort's going to make the fall a little more graceful, maybe. But it's too late. It's too late, and since Mei's out there, and we don't know what's going to break, I have to go with you."

"Prax," Cassandra said. *No. Naomi.* Maybe his brain wasn't really up to full power even now.

"Strickland and that woman, even if they think they can keep her safe, they can't. You see? Even if they're not hurting her, even if they're not, everything around them is going to fall apart. What if they run out of air? What if they don't understand what's happening?"

"I know this is hard," Holden said. "But shouting about it won't help."

"I'm not shouting. I'm not shouting. I'm just telling you that they took my little girl away, and I need to go and get her. I need to be there when you open that door. Even if she's not there. Even if she's dead, I need to be the one who finds her."

The sound was crisp and professional and oddly beautiful: a magazine slipping into a pistol. Prax hadn't seen Amos take it back out of its box, but the dark metal was in the man's huge hand. Dwarfed by his fingers. While he watched, Amos chambered a round. Then he took the gun by its barrel, careful to keep it pointing at the wall, and held it out.

"But I thought..." Prax said. "You said I wasn't..."

Amos stretched his arms out another half inch. The gesture was unmistakable. *Take it.* Prax took it. It was heavier than it looked.

"Um. Amos?" Holden said. "Did you just give him a loaded gun?"

“Doc needs to go, Cap’n,” Amos said with a shrug. “So I’m thinking he should probably go.”

Prax saw the look that passed between Holden and Naomi.

“We might want to talk about that decision-making process, Amos,” Naomi said, shaping the words carefully.

“You betcha,” Amos said. “Soon as we get back.”

Prax had been walking through the station for weeks as a native, a local. A refugee with nowhere to flee. He’d gotten used to how the hallways looked, how people’s eyes slid over him in case he’d try to lay his burdens on them. Now that Prax was fed and armed and part of a group, the station had become a different place. People’s eyes still slid across them, but the fear was different, and hunger fought against it. Holden and Amos didn’t have the gray of malnutrition or the haunted look around their eyes of seeing everything they thought was immutable collapse. Naomi was back at the ship, hacked into the local security network and ready to coordinate the three of them in case they got split up.

For the first time perhaps in his life, Prax felt like an outsider. He looked at his hometown and saw what Holden would see: a huge hallway with paints and dyes worked into the ice up high on the wall; the lower half, where people might accidentally touch it, covered in thick insulation. Ganymede’s raw ice would strip the flesh from bone with even the briefest contact. The hallway was too dark now, the floodlights beginning to fail. A wide corridor Prax had walked through every day he was at school was a dim chamber filled with the sounds of dripping water as the climate regulation failed. The plants that weren’t dead were dying, and the air was getting the stale taste at the back of his throat that meant the emergency recyclers would be coming on soon. Should be coming on soon. Had better.

Holden was right, though. The thin-faced, desperate people they passed had been food scientists and soil technicians, gas exchange experts and agricultural support staff. If Ganymede Station died, the cascade wouldn’t stop here. Once the last load of food lifted off, the Belt, the Jovian system, and the myriad long-term bases in their own orbits around the sun would have to find a different way to get vitamins and micronutrients for their kids. Prax started wondering whether the bases on the far planets

would be able to sustain themselves. If they had full hydroponics rigs and yeast farms and nothing went wrong...

It was a distraction. It was grasping anything other than the fear of what would be waiting behind that door. He embraced it.

“Hold up! All y’all.”

The voice was low and rough and wet, like the man’s vocal cords had been taken out and dragged through mud. He stood in the center of the ice tunnels intersecting before them, military-police body armor two sizes too small straining to keep his bulk in. His accent and build said he was Martian.

Amos and Holden paused, turned, looking everywhere but at the man before them. Prax followed their gazes. Other men lurked, half hidden, around them. The sudden panic tasted like copper.

“I make six,” Holden said.

“What about the guy with the gray pants?” Amos asked.

“Okay, maybe seven. He’s been with us since we left the ship, though. He might be something else.”

“Six is still more than three,” Naomi said in their ears. “You want me to send backup?”

“Hot damn. We’ve got backup?” Amos asked. “Gonna have Supitayaporn come down and talk ’em all to death?”

“We can take them,” Prax said, reaching for the pistol in his pocket. “We can’t let anyone—”

Amos’ wide hand closed over his own, keeping the gun in his pocket and out of sight.

“These aren’t the ones you shoot,” Amos said. “These are the ones you talk to.”

Holden stepped toward the Martian. The ease with which he held himself made the assault rifle on his shoulder seem almost innocuous. Even the expensive body armor he wore didn’t seem at odds with his casual smile.

“Hey,” Holden said. “There a problem, sir?”

“Might be,” the Martian drawled. “Might not. That’s your call.”

“I’ll take *not*,” Holden said. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, we’ll be on—”

“Slow down,” the Martian said, sidling forward. His face was vaguely like someone Prax had seen before on the tube and never particularly remarked. “You’re not from around here.”

“I am,” Prax said. “I’m Dr. Praxidike Meng. Chief botanist on the RMD-Southern soy farm project. Who are you?”

“Let the cap’n do this,” Amos said.

“But—”

“He’s pretty good at it.”

“I’m thinking you’re part of the relief work,” the Martian said. “Long way from the docks. Looks like you lost your way. Maybe you need an escort back to where it’s safe.”

Holden shifted his weight. The assault rifle just happened to slide forward a few inches, not at all provocatively.

“I don’t know,” Holden said. “We’re pretty well protected. I think we can probably take care of ourselves. What kind of fee are you... um, escorts asking?”

“Well now. I count three of you. Call it a hundred in Martian scrip. Five, local.”

“How about you follow us down, and I arrange passage for all of you off this ice ball?”

The Martian’s jaw dropped.

“That’s not funny,” he said, but the mask of power and confidence had slipped. Prax had seen the hunger and desperation behind it.

“I’m going to an old tunnel system,” Holden said. “Someone abducted a bunch of kids right before everything went to hell. They took them there. Doc’s kid was one of the ones that got snatched. We’re going to get her back and politely ask how they knew all this was coming down. Might be resistance. I could use a few people who know what end of the gun points forward.”

“You’re fucking with me,” the Martian said. From the corner of his eye, Prax saw one of the others step forward. A thin woman in cheap protective weave.

“We’re OPA,” Amos said, then nodded at Holden. “He’s James Holden of the *Rocinante*.”

“Holy shit,” the Martian said. “You are. You’re Holden.”

“It’s the beard,” Holden said.

“My name’s Wendell. Used to work for Pinkwater Security before the bastards took off, left us here. Way I figure, that voids the contract. You want to pick up some professional firepower, you ain’t gonna find better than us.”

“How many you got?”

“Six, counting me.”

Holden looked over at Amos. Prax felt Amos shrug as much as saw it. The other man they’d been talking about was unrelated after all.

“All right,” Holden said. “We tried to talk to local security, but they didn’t give us the time of day. Follow me, back us up, and I give you my word you’ll get off Ganymede.”

Wendell grinned. He’d had one of his incisors dyed red with a small black-and-white design on it.

“Anything you say, boss,” he said. Then, lifting his gun: “Form up! We got us a new contract, people. Let’s get it done!”

The whoops came from all around them. Prax found the thin woman beside him, grinning and shaking his hand like she was running for office. Prax blinked and smiled back, and Amos put his hand on Prax’s shoulder.

“See? Told you. Now let’s get moving.”

The hallway was darker than it had seemed in the video. The ice had thin melt channels, like pale veins, but the frost covering them was fresh. The door looked like any other of a hundred they’d passed on the way in. Prax swallowed. His stomach ached. He wanted to scream for Mei, to call her name and hear her call back.

“Okay,” Naomi said in his ear. “I’ve got the lock disabled. Whenever you guys are ready.”

“No time like the present,” Holden said. “Open it up.”

The seal around the door hissed.

The door opened.

Chapter Fifteen

Bobbie

Three hours into the first big meeting between the Martian and UN diplomats and they'd only just got past introducing everyone and on to reading the agenda. A squat Earther in a charcoal-gray suit that probably cost more than Bobbie's recon armor droned on about Section 14, Subsection D, Items 1-11, in which they would discuss the effect of past hostilities on commodity pricing pursuant to existing trade agreements. Bobbie looked around, noticed that everyone else at the long oak table was staring with rapt attention at the agenda reader, and stifled the truly epic yawn that was struggling to get out.

She distracted herself by trying to figure out who people were. They'd all been introduced by name and title at some point, but that didn't mean much. Everyone here was an assistant secretary, or undersecretary, or director of something. There were even a few generals, but Bobbie knew enough about how politics worked to know that the military people in the room would be the least important. The people with real power would be the quiet ones with unassuming titles. There were several of those, including a moonfaced man with a skinny tie who'd been introduced as the secretary of something or other. Sitting next to him was someone's grandmother in a bright sari, a splash of yellow in the middle of all the dark brown and dark blue and charcoal gray. She sat and munched pistachios and wore an enigmatic half smile. Bobbie entertained herself for a few minutes by trying to guess if Moonface or Grandma was the boss.

She considered pouring a glass of water from one of the crystal decanters evenly distributed across the table. She wasn't thirsty, but turning her glass over, pouring water into it, and drinking it would burn a minute, maybe two. She glanced down the table and noticed that no one else was drinking the water. Maybe everyone was waiting for someone else to be first.

"Let's take a short break," charcoal-suit man said. "Ten minutes, then we can move on to Section fifteen of the agenda."

People got up and began dispersing toward restrooms and smoking areas. Grandma carried her handbag to a recycling chute and dumped pistachio shells into it. Moonface pulled out his terminal and called someone.

“Jesus,” Bobbie said, rubbing her eyes with her palms until she saw stars.

“Problem, Sergeant?” Thorsson said, leaning back in his chair and grinning. “The gravity wearing on you?”

“No,” Bobbie said. Then, “Well, yes, but mostly I’m ready to jab a stylus into my eye, just for a change of pace.”

Thorsson nodded and patted her hand, a move he was using more often now. It hadn’t gotten any less irritating and paternalistic, but now Bobbie was worried that it might mean Thorsson was working up to hitting on her. That would be an uncomfortable moment.

She pulled her hand away and leaned toward Thorsson until he turned and looked her in the eye.

“Why,” she whispered, “is no one talking about the goddamned monster? Isn’t that why I’m—why we’re here?”

“You have to understand how these things work,” Thorsson said, turning away from her and fiddling with his terminal. “Politics moves slow because the stakes are very high, and no one wants to be the person that screwed it up.”

He put his terminal down and gave her a wink. “Careers are at stake here.”

“Careers...”

Thorsson just nodded and tapped on his terminal some more.

Careers?

For a moment, she was on her back, staring up into the star-filled void above Ganymede. Her men were dead or dying. Her suit radio dead, her armor a frozen coffin. She saw the thing’s face. Without a suit in the radiation and hard vacuum, the red snowfall of flash-frozen blood around its claws. And no one at this table wanted to talk about it because it might affect their careers?

To hell with that.

When the meeting’s attendees had shuffled back into the room and taken their places around the table, Bobbie raised her hand. She felt faintly ridiculous, like a fifth-grade student in a room full of adults, but she had no

idea what the actual protocol for asking a question was. The agenda reader shot her one annoyed glance, then ignored her. Thorsson reached under the table and sharply squeezed her leg.

She kept her hand up.

“Excuse me?” she said.

People around the table took turns giving her increasingly unfriendly looks and then pointedly turning away. Thorsson upped the pressure on her leg until she’d had enough of him and grabbed his wrist with her other hand. She squeezed until the bones creaked and he snatched his hand away with a surprised gasp. He turned his chair to look at her, his eyes wide and his mouth a flat, lipless line.

Yellow-sari placed a hand on the agenda reader’s arm, and he instantly stopped talking. *Okay, that one is the boss*, Bobbie decided.

“I, for one,” Grandma said, smiling a mild apology at the room, “would like to hear what Sergeant Draper has to say.”

She remembers my name, Bobbie thought. *That’s interesting.*

“Sergeant?” Grandma said.

Bobbie, unsure of what to do, stood up.

“I’m just wondering why no one is talking about the monster.”

Grandma’s enigmatic smile returned. No one spoke. The silence slid adrenaline into Bobbie’s blood. She felt her legs starting to tremble. More than anything in the world, she wanted to sit down, to make them all forget her and look away.

She scowled and locked her knees.

“You know,” Bobbie said, her voice rising, but she was unable to stop it. “The monster that killed fifty soldiers on Ganymede? The reason we’re all here?”

The room was silent. Thorsson stared at her like she had lost her mind. Maybe she had. Grandma tugged once at her yellow sari and smiled encouragement.

“I mean,” Bobbie said, holding up the agenda, “I’m sure trade agreements and water rights and who gets to screw who on the second Thursday after the winter solstice is all *very* important!”

She stopped to suck in a long breath, the gravity and her tirade seeming to have robbed her of air. She could see it in their eyes. She could see that if she just stopped now, she’d be an odd thing that happened and

everyone could go back to work and quickly forget her. She could see her career not crashing off a cliff in flames.

She discovered that she didn't care.

"But," she said, throwing the agenda across the table, where a surprised man in a brown suit dodged it as though its touch might infect him with whatever Bobbie had, "*what about the fucking monster?*"

Before she could continue, Thorsson popped up from his seat.

"Excuse me for a moment, ladies and gentlemen. Sergeant Draper is suffering from some post-combat-related stress and needs attention."

He grabbed her elbow and drove her from the room, a rising wave of murmurs pushing at their backs. Thorsson stopped in the conference room's lobby and waited for the door to shut behind him.

"You," Thorsson said, shoving her toward a chair. Normally the skinny intelligence officer couldn't have pushed her anywhere, but all the strength seemed to have run out of her legs, and she collapsed into the seat.

"You," he repeated. Then, to someone on his terminal, he said, "Get down here, now."

"You," he said a third time, pointing at Bobbie, then paced back and forth in front of her chair.

A few minutes later, Captain Martens came trotting into the conference room lobby. He pulled up short when he saw Bobbie slouched in her chair and Thorsson's angry face.

"What—" he started, but Thorsson cut him off.

"This is *your* fault," he said to Martens, then spun to face Bobbie. "And you, Sergeant, have just proven that it was a monumental mistake to bring you along. Any benefit that might have been gained from having the only eyewitness has now been squandered by your... your *idiotic* tirade."

"She—" Martens tried again, but Thorsson poked a finger into his chest and said, "You said you could control her."

Martens gave Thorsson a sad smile.

"No, I never said that. I said I could help her given enough time."

"Doesn't matter," Thorsson said, waving a hand at them. "You're both on the next ship to Mars, where you can explain yourselves to a disciplinary board. Now get out of my sight."

He spun on his heel and slipped back into the conference room, opening the door only wide enough for his narrow body to squeeze through.

Martens sat down in the chair next to Bobbie and let out a long breath.

“So,” he said. “What’s up?”

“Did I just destroy my career?” she asked.

“Maybe. How do you feel?”

“I feel...” she said, realizing how badly she did want to talk with Martens, and becoming angered by the impulse. “I feel like I need some air.”

Before Martens could protest, Bobbie stood up and headed for the elevators.

The UN complex was a city in its own right. Just finding a way out took her the better part of an hour. Along the way, she moved through the chaos and energy of government like a ghost. People hurried past her in the long corridors, talking energetically in clumps or on their hand terminals. Bobbie had never been to Olympia, where the Martian congressional building was located. She’d caught a few minutes of congressional sessions on the government broadcast when an issue she cared about was being discussed, but compared to the activity here at the UN, it was pretty low-key. The people in this building complex governed thirty billion citizens and hundreds of millions of colonists. By comparison, Mars’ four billion suddenly seemed like a backwater.

On Mars, it was a generally accepted fact that Earth was a civilization in decay. Lazy, coddled citizens who lived on the government dole. Fat, corrupt politicians who enriched themselves at the expense of the colonies. A degrading infrastructure that spent close to 30 percent of its total output on recycling systems to keep the population from drowning in its own filth. On Mars, there was virtually no unemployment. The entire population was engaged either directly or indirectly in the greatest engineering feat in human history: the terraforming of a planet. It gave everyone a sense of purpose, a shared vision of the future. Nothing like the Earthers, who lived only for their next government payout and their next visit to the drugstore or entertainment malls.

Or at least, that was the story. Suddenly Bobbie wasn’t so sure.

Repeated visits to the various information kiosks scattered through the complex eventually got her to an exit door. A bored guard nodded to her as she passed by, and then she was outside.

Outside. Without a suit.

Five seconds later she was clawing at the door, which she now realized was an exit only, trying to get back in. The guard took pity on her and pushed the door open. She ran back inside and collapsed on a nearby settee, gasping and hyperventilating.

“First time?” the guard asked with a smile.

Bobbie found herself unable to speak, but nodded.

“Mars or Luna?”

“Mars,” she said once her breathing had slowed.

“Yeah, I knew it. Domes, you know. People who’ve been in domes just panic a bit. Belters lose their shit. And I mean completely. We wind up shipping them home drugged up to keep them from screaming.”

“Yeah,” Bobbie said, happy to let the guard ramble while she collected herself. “No kidding.”

“They bring you in when it was dark outside?”

“Yeah.”

“They do that for offworlders. Helps with the agoraphobia.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll hold the door open a bit for you. In case you need to come back in again.”

The assumption that she’d give it a second try instantly won Bobbie over, and she actually looked at the guard for the first time. Earther short, but with beautiful skin so dark it was almost blue. He had a compact, athletic frame and lovely gray eyes. He was smiling at her without a trace of mockery.

“Thank you,” she said. “Bobbie. Bobbie Draper.”

“Chuck,” he replied. “Look at the ground, then slowly look to the horizon. Whatever you do, don’t look straight up.”

“I think I got it this time, Chuck, but thanks.”

Chuck gave her uniform a quick glance and said, “Semper fi, Gunny.”

“Oohrah,” Bobbie replied with a grin.

On her second trip outside, she did as Chuck had recommended and looked down at the ground for a few moments. This helped reduce the feeling of massive sensory overload. But only a little. A thousand scents hit her nose, competing for dominance. The rich aroma of plants and soil she would expect in a garden dome. The oil and hot metal from a fabrication lab. The ozone of electric motors. All of them hit her at once, layered on top

of each other and mixed with scents too exotic to name. And the sounds were a constant cacophony. People talking, construction machinery, electric cars, a transorbital shuttle lifting off, all at once and all the time. It was no wonder it had caused a panic. Just two senses' worth of data threatened to overwhelm her. Add that impossibly blue sky that stretched on forever...

Bobbie stood outside, eyes closed, breathing until she heard Chuck let the door close behind her. Now she was committed. Turning around and asking Chuck to let her back in would be admitting defeat. He'd clearly done some time in the UNMC, and she wasn't going to look weak in front of the competition. Hell no.

When her ears and nose had gotten more accustomed to the barrage of inputs, she opened her eyes again, looking down at the concrete of the walkway. Slowly, she lifted them till the horizon was in view. Ahead of her lay long sidewalks passing through meticulously tended green space. Beyond it in the distance was a gray wall that must have stood ten meters high, with guard towers regularly spaced on it. The UN complex had a surprising amount of security. She wondered if she'd be able to get out.

She needn't have worried. As she approached the guarded gate to the outside world, the security system queried her terminal, which assured it of her VIP status. A camera above the guard post scanned her face, compared it to the picture on file, and verified her identity while she was still twenty meters from the gate. When she reached the exit, the guard snapped her a sharp salute and asked if she'd need a ride.

"No, just going for a walk," she said.

The guard smiled and wished her a good day. She began walking down the street leading away from the UN complex, then turned around to see two armed security personnel following her at a discreet distance. She shrugged and walked on. Somebody would probably lose their job if a VIP like her got lost or hurt.

Once Bobbie was outside the UN compound, her agoraphobia lessened. Buildings rose around her like walls of steel and glass, moving the dizzying skyline far enough up that she no longer saw it. Small electric cars whizzed down the streets, trailing a high-pitched whine and the scent of ozone.

And people were *everywhere*.

Bobbie had gone to a couple of games at Armstrong Stadium on Mars, to watch the Red Devils play. The stadium had seats for twenty thousand

fans. Because the Devils were usually at the bottom of the standings, it generally held less than half that. That relatively modest number was the greatest number of humans Bobbie had ever seen in one place at one time. There were billions of people on Mars, but there weren't a lot of open spaces for them to gather. Standing at an intersection, looking down two streets that seemed to stretch into infinity, Bobbie was sure she saw more than the average attendance of a Red Devils game just walking on the sidewalks. She tried to imagine how many people were in the buildings that rose to vertigo-inducing heights in every direction around her, and couldn't. Millions of people, probably in just the buildings and streets she could see.

And if Martian propaganda was right, most of the people she could see right now didn't have jobs. She tried to imagine that, not having any particular place you had to be on any given day.

What the Earthers had discovered is that when people have nothing else to do, they have babies. For a brief period in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the population had looked like it might shrink rather than continue to grow. As more and more women went into higher education, and from there to jobs, the average family size grew smaller.

A few decades of massive employment shrinkage ended that.

Or, again, that was what she'd been taught in school. Only here on Earth, where food grew on its own, where air was just a by-product of random untended plants, where resources lay thick on the ground, could a person actually choose not to do anything at all. There was enough extra created by those who felt the need to work that the surplus could feed the rest. A world no longer of the haves and the have-nots, but of the engaged and the apathetic.

Bobbie found herself standing next to a street-level coffee shop and took a seat.

"Can I get you anything?" a smiling young woman with brightly dyed blue hair asked.

"What's good?"

"We make the best soy-milk tea, if you like that."

"Sure," Bobbie said, not sure what soy-milk tea was, but liking those two things separately enough to take a chance.

The blue-haired girl bustled away and chatted with an equally young man behind the bar while he made the tea. Bobbie looked around her, noticing that everyone she saw working was about the same age.

When the tea arrived, she said, “Hey, do you mind if I ask you something?”

The girl shrugged, her smile an invitation.

“Is everyone who works here the same age?”

“Well,” she said. “Pretty close. Gotta collect your pre-university credits, right?”

“I’m not from here,” Bobbie said. “Explain that.”

Blue seemed actually to see her for the first time, looking over her uniform and its various insignias.

“Oh, wow, Mars, right? I want to go there.”

“Yeah, it’s great. So tell me about the credits thing.”

“They don’t have that on Mars?” she asked, puzzled. “Okay, so, if you apply to a university, you have to have at least a year of work credits. To make sure you like working. You know, so they don’t waste classroom space on people who will just go on basic afterward.”

“Basic?”

“You know, basic support.”

“I think I understand,” Bobbie said. “Basic support is the money you live on if you don’t work?”

“Not money, you know, just basic. Gotta work to have money.”

“Thanks,” Bobbie said, then sipped her milk tea as Blue trotted to another table. The tea was delicious. She had to admit, it made a sad kind of sense to do some early winnowing before spending the resources to educate people. Bobbie told her terminal to pay the bill, and it flashed a total at her after calculating the exchange rate. She added a nice tip for the blue-haired girl who wanted more from life than basic support.

Bobbie wondered if Mars would become like this after the terraforming. If Martians didn’t have to fight every day to make enough resources to survive, would they turn into this? A culture where you could actually *choose* if you wanted to contribute? The work hours and collective intelligence of fifteen billion humans just tossed away as acceptable losses for the system. It made Bobbie sad to think of. All that effort to get to a point where they could live like this. Sending their kids to work at a coffee shop to see if they were up to contributing. Letting them live the rest of their lives on *basic* if they weren’t.

But one thing was for sure: All that running and exercising the Martian Marines did at one full gravity was bullshit. There was no way Mars could

ever beat Earth on the ground. You could drop every Martian soldier, fully armed, into just one Earth city and the citizens would overwhelm them using rocks and sticks.

Deep in the grip of pathos, she suddenly felt a massive weight lift that she hadn't even realized she'd been carrying. Thorsson and his bullshit didn't matter. The pissing contest with Earth didn't matter. Making Mars into another Earth didn't matter, not if this was where it was headed.

All that mattered was finding out who'd put that thing on Ganymede.

She tossed off the last of her tea and thought, *I'll need a ride.*

Chapter Sixteen

Holden

Beyond the door lay a long hallway that looked, to Holden, exactly the same as every other hallway on Ganymede: ice walls with moisture-resistant and insulated structural plates and inset conduit, rubberized walking surface, full-spectrum LEDs to mimic sunlight slanting down from the blue skies of Earth. They could have been anywhere.

“We’re sure this is right, Naomi?”

“That’s the one we saw Mei go through in the hacker’s footage,” she replied.

“Okay,” he said, then dropped to one knee and motioned for his ad hoc army to do the same. When everyone was in a rough circle around him, he said, “Our overwatch, Naomi, has intel on the layout of these tunnels, but not much else. We have no idea where the bad guys are, or even if they’re still here.”

Prax started to object, but Amos quieted him with a heavy hand on his back.

“So we could conceivably leave a lot of intersections at our back. I don’t like that.”

“Yeah,” said Wendell, the Pinkwater leader. “I don’t like that much either.”

“So we’re going to leave a lookout at each intersection until we know where we’re going,” Holden replied, then said, “Naomi, put all their hand terminals on our channel. Guys, put in your ear-buds. Comm discipline is don’t speak unless I ask a direct question, or someone is about to die.”

“Roger,” said Wendell, echoed by the rest of his team.

“Once we know what we’re looking at, I’ll call all the lookouts up to our position if needed. If not, they’re our way out of here if we’re in over our heads.”

Nods all around.

“Outstanding. Amos is point. Wendell, you cover our asses. Everyone else, string out at one-meter intervals,” Holden said, then tapped on

Wendell's breastplate. "We do this thing clean, and I'll talk to my OPA people about putting a few credits in your accounts in addition to getting you offworld."

"Righteous," the thin woman with the cheap armor said, and then racked a round in her machine pistol.

"Okay, let's go. Amos, Naomi's map says fifty meters to another pressure door, then some warehouse space."

Amos nodded, then shouldered his weapon, a heavy automatic shotgun with a thick magazine. He had several more magazines and a number of grenades dangling from his Martian armor's harness. The metal clicked a little as he walked. Amos headed off down the hallway at a fast walk. Holden gave a quick glance behind, gratified to see the Pinkwater people keeping up the pace and the spacing. They might look half starved, but they knew what they were doing.

"Cap, there's a tunnel coming off to the right just before the pressure door," Amos said, stopping and dropping to one knee to cover the unexpected corridor.

It didn't appear on the map. That meant that new tunnels had been dug *after* the station specs had last been updated. Modifications like that meant he had even less information than he'd thought. It wasn't a good thing.

"Okay," Holden said, pointing at the thin woman with the machine pistol. "You are?"

"Paula," she said.

"Paula, this is your intersection. Try not to shoot anyone that doesn't shoot at you first, but do *not* let anyone past you for any reason."

"Solid copy on that," Paula said, and took up a position looking down the side corridor with her weapon at the ready.

Amos pulled a grenade off his harness and handed it to her.

"Just in case shit goes down," he said. Paula nodded, settled her back against the wall. Amos, taking point, moved toward the pressure door.

"Naomi," Holden said, looking over the door and locking mechanism. "Pressure door, uh, 223-B6. Pop it."

"Got it," she said. A few seconds later, Holden heard the bolts retract.

"Ten meters to the next mapped intersection," he said, then looked at the Pinkwater people and picked one gruff-looking older man at random. "That's your intersection when we get there."

The man nodded, and Holden gestured at Amos. The mechanic took hold of the hatch with his right hand and began counting down from five with his left. Holden took up a position facing the door, his assault rifle at the ready.

When Amos hit one, Holden took a deep breath, and he burst through the door as Amos yanked it open a split second later.

Nothing.

Just another ten meters of corridor, dimly lit by the few LEDs that hadn't failed in the decades since its last use. Years of micro-frost melt had built a texture over the surface of the walls like dripping spiderwebs. It looked delicate, but it was mineralized as hard as stone. It reminded Holden of a graveyard.

Amos began advancing to the intersection and the next hatch, his gun aimed down the hallway. Holden followed him, his rifle tracking right as he kept it aimed at the side passage, the reflex to cover every possible ingress point to their position having become automatic over the last year.

His year as a cop.

Naomi had said this wasn't him. He'd left the Navy without seeing live combat outside pirate hunting from the comfort of a warship's operations deck. He'd worked for years on the *Canterbury*, hauling ice from Saturn to the Belt without ever having to worry about something more violent than drunken ice buckers fighting out their boredom. He'd been the peacemaker, the one who always found the way to keep things cool. When tempers flared, he'd keep it calm or keep it funny or just sit for a shift and listen to someone rave and rant whatever it was out of their system.

This new person he'd become reached for his gun first and talked second. Maybe she was right. How many ships had he slagged in the year since Eros? A dozen? More? He comforted himself with the thought that they were all very bad people. The worst kind of carrion eaters, using the chaos of war and the retreat of the Coalition Navy as an opportunity to pillage. The kind of people who'd strip all the expensive parts off your engine, steal your spare air, and leave you adrift to suffocate. Every one of their ships he'd shot down had probably saved dozens of innocent ships, hundreds of lives. But doing it had taken something from him that he occasionally felt the lack of.

Occasions like when Naomi had said, *This isn't you*.

If they tracked down the secret base where Mei had been taken, there was a good chance they'd have to fight to get her back. Holden found himself hoping it would bother him, if for no other reason than to prove that it still could.

"Cap? You okay?"

Amos was staring at him.

"Yeah," Holden said, "I just need a different job."

"Might not be the best moment for a career change, Cap."

"Fair point," Holden said, and pointed to the older Pinkwater man he'd singled out before. "This is your intersection. Same instructions. Hold it unless I call you."

The older guy shrugged and nodded, then turned to Amos. "Don't I get a grenade too?"

"Nah," Amos said, "Paula's cuter than you." He counted down from five, and Holden went through the door, same as last time.

He'd been ready for another featureless gray corridor, but on the other side there was a wide-open space, with a few tables and dusty equipment scattered haphazardly around the room. A massive 3-D copier emptied of resin and partially disassembled, a few light industrial waldoes, the kind of complex automated supply cabinet that usually lurked under desks in scientific labs or medical bays. The mineralized webwork was on the walls but not the boxes or equipment. A glass-walled cube two meters to a side sat off in one corner. One of the tables had a small bundle of sheets or tarps piled on it. Across the room another hatch stood closed.

Holden pointed to the abandoned equipment and said to Wendell, "See if you can find a network access point. If you can, plug this into it." He handed Naomi's hastily rigged network bridge to him.

Amos sent two of the remaining Pinkwater people up to the next hatch to cover it, then came back to Holden and gestured with his gun toward the glass box.

"Big enough for a couple kids," he said. "Think that's where they kept 'em?"

"Maybe," Holden said, moving over to examine it. "Prax, can you—" Holden stopped when he realized the botanist had gone over to the tables and was standing next to the bundle of rags. With Prax standing next to the bundle, Holden's perspective shifted and suddenly it didn't look like a pile of rags at all. It looked very much like a small body under a sheet.

Prax was staring at it, his hand darting toward it and then pulling back. He was shaking all over.

"This... this is..." he said to no one in particular, his hand moving out and back again.

Holden looked at Amos, then gestured at Prax with his eyes. The big mechanic moved over to him and put a hand on his arm.

"How's about you let us take a look at that, okay?"

Holden let Amos guide Prax a few steps away from the table before he moved over to it. When he lifted the sheet to look under, Prax made a sharp noise like the intake of breath before a scream. Holden shifted his body to block Prax's view.

A small boy lay on the table. He was skinny, with a mop of unruly black hair and dark skin. His clothes were bright: yellow pants and a green shirt with a cartoon crocodile and daisies. It wasn't immediately clear what had killed him.

Holden heard a commotion and turned around to see Prax, red-faced and struggling to get past Amos to the table. The mechanic was restraining him with one arm in a grip that was halfway between a wrestling hold and an embrace.

"It's not her," Holden said. "It's a kid, but it's not her. A boy. Four, maybe five years old."

When Amos heard that, he let the struggling Prax go. The botanist rushed to the table, flipping the sheet over and giving one quick cry.

"That's Katoa," Prax said. "I know him. His father..."

"It's not Mei," Holden repeated, putting a hand on Prax's shoulder. "We need to keep looking."

Prax shrugged his hand off.

"It's not Mei," Holden said again.

"But Strickland was here," Prax said. "He was their doctor. I thought if he was with them, they'd be..."

Holden said nothing. He was thinking the same thing. If one of the kids was dead, they could all be.

"I thought that meant they'd keep them alive," Prax said. "But they let Katoa die. They just let him die and they put him under this sheet. Basia, I'm so sorry..."

Holden grabbed Prax and spun him around. The way he imagined a cop would.

“That,” he said, pointing at the small body on the table, “is not Mei. Do you want to find her? Then we need to keep moving.”

Prax’s eyes were filled with tears and his shoulders shook in silent sobs, but he nodded and walked away from the table. Amos watched him carefully. The mechanic’s expression was unreadable. The thought came unbidden: *I hope bringing Prax was a good idea.*

Across the room, Wendell whistled and waved a hand. He pointed at Naomi’s network access rig plugged into a port in the wall and gave the thumbs-up.

“Naomi, you in?” Holden said while he pulled the sheet back up to cover the dead boy.

“Yep, I’m in,” she said, her tone distracted as she worked with the incoming data. “Traffic in this node is encrypted. Got the *Somnambulist* started on it, but she’s not nearly as smart as the *Roci*. This could take a while.”

“Keep trying,” Holden replied, and signaled to Amos. “But if there’s traffic on the network, someone’s still here.”

“If you wait a minute,” Naomi said, “I might be able to give you the security cameras and a more up-to-date floor plan.”

“Feed us what you can, when you can, but we’re not waiting.”

Amos ambled over to Holden and tapped the visor of his helmet. Prax was standing alone by the glass cube, staring into it like there was something to see. Holden expected Amos to say something about the man, but Amos surprised him.

“Been paying attention to the temperature, Cap?”

“Yeah,” Holden replied. “Every time I check it says ‘cold as hell.’”

“I was just over by the door,” Amos continued. “It went up about half a degree.”

Holden thought about that for a moment, double-checking it on his own HUD and tapping his fingers on his thigh.

“There’s climate in the next room. They’re heating it.”

“Seems likely,” Amos said, shifting the big auto-shotgun into both hands and thumbing off the safety.

Holden motioned the remaining Pinkwater people over to them.

“It looks like we’ve come to the inhabited portion of this base. Amos and I go in first. You three”—Holden pointed at the three Pinkwater people who weren’t Wendell—“follow and cover our flanks. Wendell, you cover

our asses and make sure we can get back out in a hurry if things go bad. Prax—”

Holden stopped, looking around for the botanist. He had quietly slipped over to the door into the next room. He'd taken the handgun Amos had given him out of his pocket. As Holden watched, he reached out and opened the door, then walked deliberately through.

“Fuck me,” Amos said conversationally.

“Shit,” Holden said. Then, “Go, go, go,” as he rushed toward the now open door.

Just before he got to the hatch, he heard Prax say, “Nobody move,” in a loud but quavering voice.

Holden burst through into the room on the other side, going right while Amos came through just behind him and went left. Prax stood a few feet past the door, the large black handgun looking improbable in his pale, shaking hand. The area itself looked a lot like the one they'd just left, except that this one had a small crowd of people in it. Armed people. Holden tried to take in everything that could be used as cover. A half dozen large gray packing crates with scientific equipment in various states of disassembly in them squatted around the room. Someone's hand terminal was propped up on a bench and blaring dance music. On one of the crates sat several open boxes of pizza with most of the slices missing, several of which were still clutched in people's hands. He tried to count them. Four. Eight. An even dozen, all of them wide about the eye and glancing around, thinking about what to do.

It looked to Holden very much like a room full of people packing up to move, taking a short lunch break. Except that the people in this room all had holsters at their sides, and they had left the corpse of a small child to rot in the next room over.

“Nobody! Move!” Prax repeated, this time with more force.

“You should listen to him,” Holden added, moving the barrel of his assault rifle in a slow scan across the room. To drive the point home, Amos sidled up to the nearest worker and casually slammed the butt of his auto-shotgun into the man's ribs, dropping him to the floor like a bag of wet sand. Holden heard the tramping of his Pinkwater people rushing into the room behind him and taking up cover positions.

“Wendell,” Holden said, not lowering his rifle. “Please disarm these people for me.”

“No,” said a stern-faced woman with a slice of pizza in her hand. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Excuse me?” Holden said.

“No,” the woman repeated, taking another bite of her pizza. Around a mouthful of food, she said, “There are only seven of you. There are twelve of us just in this room alone. And there are a lot more behind us that will come running at the first gunshot. So, no, you don’t get to disarm us.”

She smiled a greasy smile at Holden, then took another bite. Holden could smell the cheese-and-pepperoni smell of good pizza over the top of Ganymede’s ever-present odor of ice and the scent of his own sweat. It made his stomach give an ill-timed rumble. Prax pointed his handgun at the woman, though his hand was now shaking so badly that she probably didn’t feel particularly threatened.

Amos gave him a sidelong glance as if to ask, *What now, chief?*

In Holden’s mind, the room shifted into a tactical problem with an almost physical click. The eleven potential combatants who were still standing were in three clusters. None of them were wearing visible armor. Amos would almost certainly drop the group of four to the far left of the room in a single burst from his auto-shotgun. Holden was pretty sure he could take down the three directly in front of him. That left four for the Pinkwater people to handle. Best not to count on Prax for any of it.

He finished the split-second tally of potential casualties, and almost of its own volition, his thumb clicked the assault rifle to full auto.

This is not you.

Shit.

“We don’t have to do this,” he said, instead of opening fire. “No one has to die here today. We’re looking for a little girl. Help us find her, and everyone walks away from this.”

Holden could see the arrogance and bravado in the woman’s face for the mask it was. Behind that, there was worry as she weighed the casualties her team would suffer against the risks of talking it out and seeing where that went. Holden gave her a smile and a nod to help her decide. *Talk to me. We’re all rational people here.*

Except that not all of them were.

“Where’s Mei?” Prax yelled, poking the gun at her as if his gesture would be somehow translated through the air. “Tell me where Mei is!”

“I—” she started to reply, but Prax screamed out, “Where’s my little girl!” and cocked his gun.

As if in slow motion, Holden saw eleven hands dart down to the holsters at their belts.

Shit.

Chapter Seventeen

Prax

In the cinema and games that formed the basis of Prax's understanding of how people of violence interacted, the cocking of a gun was less a threat than a kind of punctuation mark. A security agent questioning someone might begin with threats and slaps, but when he cocked his gun, that meant it was time to take him seriously. It wasn't something Prax had considered any more carefully than which urinal to use when he wasn't the only one in the men's room or how to step on and off a transport tube. It was the untaught etiquette of received wisdom. You yelled, you threatened, you cocked your gun, and then people talked.

"Where's my little girl!" he yelled.

He cocked his pistol.

The reaction was almost immediate: a sharp, stuttering report like a high-pressure valve failing, but much louder. He danced back, almost dropping the pistol. Had he fired it by mistake? But no, his finger hadn't touched the trigger. The air smelled sharp, acidic. The woman with the pizza was gone. No, not gone. She was on the ground. Something terrible had happened to her jaw. As he watched, her ruined mouth moved, as though she was trying to speak. Prax could hear only a high-pitched squeal. He wondered if his eardrums had ruptured. The woman with the destroyed jaw took a long, shuddering breath and then didn't take another. With a sense of detachment, he noticed that she'd drawn her pistol. It was still clutched in her hand. He wasn't sure when she'd done that. The handset playing dance music transitioned to a different song that only faintly made it past the ringing in his ears.

"I didn't shoot her," he said. His voice sounded like he was in partial vacuum, the air too thin to support the energy of sound waves. But he could breathe. He wondered again if the gunfire had ruptured his eardrums. He looked around. Everyone was gone. He was alone in the room. Or no, they were behind cover. It occurred to him that he should probably be behind cover too. Only nobody was firing and he wasn't sure where to go.

Holden's voice seemed to come from far away.

"Amos?"

"Yeah, Cap?"

"Would you please take his gun away now?"

"I'm on it."

Amos rose from behind one of the boxes nearest the wall. His Martian armor had a long pale streak across the chest and two white circles just below the ribs. Amos limped toward him.

"Sorry, Doc," he said. "Givin' it to you was my bad call. Maybe next time, right?"

Prax looked at the big man's open hand, then carefully put the gun in it.

"Wendell?" Holden said. Prax still wasn't sure where he was, but he sounded closer. That was probably just Prax's hearing coming back. The acrid smell in the air changed to something more coppery. It made him think of compost heaps gone sour: warm and organic and unsettling.

"One down," Wendell said.

"We'll get a medic," Holden said.

"Nice thought, but no point," Wendell said. "Finish the mission. We got most of them, but two or three made it through the door. They'll raise an alarm."

One of the Pinkwater soldiers stood up. Blood was running down his left arm. Another lay on the floor, half of his head simply gone. Holden appeared. He was massaging his right elbow, and the armor showed a new scar at his left temple.

"What happened?" Prax asked.

"You started a gunfight," Holden said. "Okay, let's move ahead before they can set up defenses."

Prax started noticing other bodies. Men and women who had been eating pizza and listening to music. They'd had pistols, but Holden's people carried automatic shotguns and assault rifles and some had military-looking armor. The difference in outcome hadn't been subtle.

"Amos, take point," Holden said, and the big man moved through the doorway and into the unknown. Prax moved to follow, and the head of the Pinkwater people took his elbow.

"Why don't you stay with me, professor," he said.

"Yes. I'll... all right."

On the other side of the door, the nature of the rooms changed. They were still clearly in the old tunnels of Ganymede. The walls still had their webwork of mineralized frost, the lighting was still old-fashioned LED housings, and the gray walls showed where ice had melted and refrozen during some climate system glitch years or decades before. But walking through that doorway was walking from the land of the dead into something living. The air was warmer, and it smelled of bodies and fresh soil and the subtle, sharp scent of phenol disinfectant. The wide hall they entered could have been the common room in any of a dozen labs where Prax had worked. Three metal office doors were closed along the far wall and a rolling metal freight gateway hung open ahead of them. Amos and Holden went to the three closed doors, Amos kicking each in turn. When the third flew open, Holden shouted something, but the words were lost in the bark of a pistol and Amos' return shotgun fire.

The two remaining Pinkwater soldiers who weren't Wendell scuttled forward, pressing their backs to the wall on either side of the freight gateway. Prax started toward them, but Wendell put a restraining hand on his shoulder. The man on the left side of the door ducked his head into the doorway and then out again. A bullet gouged a streak in the wall where it missed him.

"What can you give me?" Holden asked, and for a moment Prax thought he was talking to them. Holden's eyes were hard, and the scowl seemed etched into his skin. Then Naomi said something to make him smile, and he only looked tired and sad. "All right. We've got a partial floor plan. Through there, we've got an open room. It drops down about two meters, with exits to our ten o'clock and one o'clock. It's built like a pit, so if they're setting up defense here, we've got the high ground."

"Makes it a damned stupid place to set up a defense, then," Wendell said.

Gunfire chattered, three small holes appearing in the metal of the freight gateway. The people on the other side were nervous.

"And yet the evidence suggests..." Holden said.

"You want to talk to 'em, Cap?" Amos said. "Or do we head straight for the obvious thing?"

The question meant something more than Prax understood; he could tell that much. Holden started to say something, hesitated, and then nodded toward the doorway.

“Let’s get this done,” he said.

Holden and Amos jogged toward the gateway, Prax and Wendell close behind. Someone was shouting orders in the room beyond. Prax made out the words *payload* and *evac*, his heart going tight. *Evac*. They couldn’t let anyone leave until they found Mei.

“I counted seven,” one of the Pinkwater soldiers said. “Could be more.”

“Any kids?” Amos asked.

“Didn’t see any.”

“We should probably look again,” Amos said, and leaned out the door. Prax caught his breath, expecting to see the man’s head dissolve in a rain of bullets, but Amos was already pulling back when the first shots started.

“What are we working with?” Holden asked.

“More’n seven,” Amos said. “They’re using this as a choke point, but the fella’s right. Either they don’t know what they’re doing, or there’s something in there they can’t pull back from.”

“So either panicking amateurs or something critical to defend,” Holden said.

A metal canister the size of a fist rolled through the gateway, clanking. Amos picked the grenade up casually and tossed it back through the doorway. The detonation lit the room, the report louder than anything Prax had ever heard before. The ringing in his ears redoubled.

“Could be both,” Amos shouted conversationally from very far away.

In the next room, something shattered. People were screaming. Prax imagined technicians like the ones from the previous room shredded by shrapnel from their own grenade. One of the Pinkwater soldiers leaned out, peering into the haze of smoke. An assault rifle blatted, and he pulled back, clutching his belly. Blood poured between his fingers. Wendell pushed past Prax, kneeling by his fallen soldier.

“Sorry, sir,” the Pinkwater man said. “Got careless. Leave me here and I’ll guard the rear as long as I can.”

“Captain Holden,” Wendell said. “If we’re going to do something, we’re better off doing it soon.”

The screaming in the other room got louder. Someone was roaring inhumanly. Prax wondered if they’d had livestock in there. The bellowing sounded almost like an injured bull. He had to fight the urge to put his hands over his ears. Something loud happened. Holden nodded.

“Amos. Soften them up, then let’s head in.”

“Aye, aye, Cap,” Amos said, putting down his shotgun. He took two grenades of his own, pulled the pink plastic strip-pins, rolled the live grenades through the gateway, and scooped his gun back up. The doubled detonation was deeper than the first one had been, but not as loud. Even before the echo faded, Amos, Holden, Wendell, and the one remaining soldier ducked through the gateway, weapons blazing.

Prax hesitated. He was unarmed. The enemy was just beyond the threshold. He could stay here and tend to the gut-shot man. But the image that wouldn’t leave him was Katoa’s still body. The dead boy wasn’t more than a hundred meters away. And Mei...

Keeping his head down, Prax scuttled through the doorway. Holden and Wendell were to his right, Amos and the other soldier to his left. All four were crouched, weapons at the ready. Smoke stung Prax’s eyes and nostrils, and the air recyclers groaned in protest, fighting to clear the air.

“Well now,” Amos said, “that’s fucking queer.”

The room was built on two levels: an upper catwalk a meter and a half wide, and a lower floor two meters below it. A wide passage led away at ten o’clock on the lower level, and a door on the upper level stood open at one o’clock. The pit below them was chaos. Blood soaked the walls and had sprayed up to stipple the ceiling. Bodies lay on the ground below them. A thin steam rose from the gore.

They had been using equipment for cover. Prax recognized a microcentrifuge smashed almost out of its casing. Inch-thick slivers of ice or glass glittered among the carnage. A nitrogen bath was tipped on its side, the alarm indicator showing it had locked down. A massive blot array—easily two hundred kilos—lay at an improbable angle, a child’s toy thrown aside in the ecstasy of play.

“What the hell kind of ordnance are you packing?” Wendell asked, his voice awed. From the wide passage at ten o’clock came shrieks and the sound of gunfire.

“I don’t think this was us,” Holden said. “Come on. Double-time it.”

They dropped down to the killing floor. A glass cube like the one they’d seen before stood in shattered glory. Blood made the floor slick underfoot. A hand still wrapping a pistol lay in the corner. Prax looked away. Mei was here. He couldn’t lose focus. Couldn’t be sick.

He kept going on.

Holden and Amos led the way toward the sound of fighting. Prax trotted along behind them. When he tried to hold back, let Wendell and his compatriot go first, the Pinkwater men gently pushed him forward. They were guarding the rear, Prax realized. In case someone came up from behind. He should have thought of that.

The passageway opened out, broad but low. Industrial loading mechs, amber indicators showing idle, stood beside pallets of foam-coated supply boxes. Amos and Holden moved down the hall with a practiced efficiency that left Prax winded. But with every turn they reached, every door they opened, he found himself willing them to go faster. She was here, and they had to find her. Before she got hurt. Before something happened. And with every body they found, the sick feeling that something had already happened sank deeper in his gut.

They moved forward quickly. Too quickly. When they reached the end of the line—an airlock four meters high and at least seven across—Prax couldn't imagine that there was anyone behind it. Amos let his automatic shotgun hang at his side as he tapped at the airlock controls. Holden squinted up at the ceiling as if something might be written there. The ground trembled and set the hidden base creaking.

“Was that a launch?” Holden said. “That was a launch!”

“Yeah,” Amos said. “Looks like they’ve got a landing pad out there. Monitors aren’t showing anything else on it, though. Whatever that was, it was the last train outta here.”

Prax heard someone shouting. It took him only a second to realize it was him. Like he was watching his body move without him, he dashed to the sealed metal doors, pounding them with his clenched fists. She was there. She was just out there, on the ship lifting away from Ganymede. He could feel her like she had a rope tied to his heart and every moment pulled it out of him a little more.

He blacked out for a second. Or maybe longer. When he came back to himself, he was slung over Amos’ wide shoulder, the armor biting into his belly. He pushed up to see the airlock receding slowly behind them.

“Put me down,” Prax said.

“Can’t do it,” Amos replied. “Cap says—”

The stuttering of assault rifle fire came, and Amos dropped Prax to the ground and squatted over him, shotgun at the ready.

“What the fuck, Cap?” Amos said.

Prax glanced up in time to see the Pinkwater soldier cut down, blood spraying out of his back. Wendell was on the ground, returning fire around a sharp corner.

“Missed someone,” Holden said. “Or else they called in their friends.”

“Don’t shoot them,” Prax said. “What if it’s Mei! What if they have her with them?”

“They don’t, Doc,” Amos said. “Stay down.”

Holden was shouting, words rolling out of him too fast to follow. Prax didn’t know if he was talking to Amos or Wendell or Naomi back on the ship or him. It could have been any of them. All of them. Four men came around the corner, weapons in hand. They wore the same coveralls that all the others had worn. One had long black hair and a goatee. Another was a woman with skin the color of buttercream. The two in the middle could have been brothers—the same close-cut brown hair, the same long noses.

From somewhere to Prax’s right, the shotgun spoke twice. All four fell back. It was like something out of a prank comedy. Eight legs, swept at once. Four people Prax didn’t know, had never met, just fell down. They just fell down. He knew they were never getting back up.

“Wendell?” Holden said. “Report?”

“Caudel’s dead,” Wendell said. He didn’t sound sad about it. He didn’t sound like anything. “I think I broke my wrist. Anyone know where they came from?”

“Nope,” Holden said. “Let’s not assume they were alone, though.”

They retraced their steps, back through the long, wide passages. Past bodies of men and women they hadn’t killed, but who were dead now anyway. Prax didn’t try to keep from weeping. There was no point. If he could keep his legs moving, one foot in front of the other, it was enough.

They reached the bloodied pit after a few minutes or an hour or a week. Prax couldn’t tell, and all options seemed equally plausible. The ruptured bodies stank, the spilled blood thickening to a black currant jelly, the opened viscera freeing colonies of bacteria usually held in check by the gut. On the catwalk, a woman stood. What was her name? Paula. That was it.

“Why aren’t you at your post?” Wendell snapped when he saw her.

“Guthrie called for backup. Said he was gut-shot and about to pass out. I brought him some adrenaline and speed.”

“Good call,” Wendell said.

“Uchi and Caudel?”

“Didn’t make it,” Wendell said.

The woman nodded, but Prax saw something pass over her. Everyone here was losing someone. His tragedy was just one among dozens. Hundreds. Thousands. By the time the cascade had run all the way out, maybe millions. When death grew that large, it stopped meaning anything. He leaned against the nitrogen bath, his head in his hands. He’d been so close. So close...

“We have to find that ship,” he said.

“We have to drop back ten and punt,” Holden said. “We came here looking for a missing kid. Now we’ve got a covert scientific station halfway to being packed up and shipped out. And a secret landing pad. And whatever third player was fighting with these people while we were.”

“Third player?” Paula asked.

Wendell gestured to the carnage.

“Not us,” he said.

“We don’t know what we’re looking at,” Holden said. “And until we do, we need to back off.”

“We can’t stop,” Prax said. “I can’t stop. Mei is—”

“Probably dead,” Wendell said. “The girl’s probably dead. And if she’s not, she’s alive someplace besides Ganymede.”

“I’m sorry,” Holden said.

“The dead boy,” Prax said. “Katoa. His father took the family off Ganymede as soon as he could. Got them someplace safe. Someplace else.”

“Wise move,” Holden said.

Prax looked to Amos for support, but the big man was poking through the wreckage, pointedly not taking either side.

“The boy was alive,” Prax said. “Basia said he knew the boy was dead and he packed up and he left, and when he got on that transport? His boy was here. In this lab. And he was alive. So don’t tell me Mei’s probably dead.”

They were all silent for a moment.

“Just don’t,” Prax said.

“Cap?” Amos said.

“Just a minute,” Holden said. “Prax, I’m not going to say that I know what you’re going through, but I have people I love too. I can’t tell you

what to do, but let me ask you—*ask* you—to look at what kind of strategy is going to be best for you. And for Mei.”

“Cap,” Amos said. “Seriously, you should look at this.”

Amos stood by the shattered glass cube. His shotgun hung forgotten in his hand. Holden walked up to the man’s side, following his gaze to the ruined container. Prax pushed away from the nitrogen bath and joined them. There, clinging to the walls of glass that still stood, was a network of fine black filament. Prax couldn’t tell if it was an artificial polymer or a natural substance. Some kind of web. It had a fascinating structure, though. He reached out to touch it and Holden grabbed his wrist, pulling him back so hard it hurt.

When Holden spoke, his words were measured and calm, which only made the panic behind them more terrifying.

“Naomi, prep the ship. We have to get off this moon. We have to do it right now.”

Chapter Eighteen

Avasarala

“What do you think?” the secretary-general asked from the upper left pane of the display. On the upper right, Errinwright leaned forward a centimeter, ready to jump in if she lost her temper.

“You’ve read the briefing, sir,” Avasarala said sweetly.

The secretary-general waved his hand in a lazy circle. He was in his early sixties and wore the decades with the elfin charm of a man untroubled by weighty thoughts. The years Avasarala had spent building herself from the treasurer of the Workers Provident Fund to the district governor of the Maharshta-Karnataka-Goa Communal Interest Zone, he’d spent as a political prisoner at a minimum-security facility in the recently reconstructed Andean cloud forest. The slow, grinding wheels of power had lifted him to celebrity, and his ability to appear to be listening lent him an air of gravity without the inconvenience of an opinion of his own. Had a man been engineered from birth to be the ideal governmental figurehead, he still wouldn’t have achieved the perfection that was Secretary-General Esteban Sorrento-Gillis.

“Political briefs never capture the really important things,” the bobble-head said. “Tell me what you think.”

I think you haven’t read the fucking briefs, Avasarala thought. *Not that I can really complain.* She cleared her throat.

“It’s all sparring and no fight, sir,” Avasarala said. “The players are top level. Michel Undawe, Carson Santiseverin, Ko Shu. They brought enough military to show that it’s not just the elected monkeys. But so far, the only one who’s said anything interesting is a marine they brought in to be a flower arrangement. Otherwise, we’re all waiting for someone else to say something telling.”

“And what about”—the secretary-general paused and lowered his voice—“the *alternative hypothesis*?”

“There’s activity on Venus,” Avasarala said. “We still don’t know what any of it means. There was a massive upwelling of elemental iron in the

northern hemisphere that lasted fourteen hours. There has also been a series of volcanic eruptions. Since the planet doesn't have any tectonic motion, we're assuming the protomolecule is doing something in the mantle, but we can't tell what. The brains put together a statistical model that shows the approximate energy output expected for the changes we've seen. It suggests that the overall level of activity is rising about three hundred percent per year over that last eighteen months."

The secretary-general nodded, his expression grave. It was almost as if he'd understood any part of what she'd said. Errinwright coughed.

"Do we have any evidence that ties the activity on Venus to the events on Ganymede?" he asked.

"We do," Avasarala said. "An anomalous energy spike at the same time as the Ganymede attack. But it's only one datapoint. It might have been coincidence."

A woman's voice came from the secretary-general's feed, and he nodded.

"I'm afraid I'm called to duty," he said. "You're doing fine work, Avasarala. Damn fine work."

"I can't tell you what that means coming from you, sir," she said with a smile. "You'd fire me."

Half a beat later, the secretary-general barked out a laugh and wagged his finger at the screen before the green connection-ended message took his place. Errinwright sat back, his palms pressed to his temples. Avasarala picked up her cup of tea and sipped it with her eyebrows lifted and her gaze on the camera, inviting him to say something. The tea wasn't quite down to tepid.

"All right," Errinwright said. "You win."

"We're impeaching him?"

He actually chuckled. Wherever he was, it was dark outside his windows, so he was on the same side of the planet that she was. That they were both in night gave the meeting a sense of closeness and intimacy that had more to do with her own exhaustion than anything else.

"What do you need to resolve the Venus situation?" he asked.

"Resolve?"

"Poor choice of words," he said. "From the beginning of this, you've had your eye on Venus. Keeping things calm with the Martians. Reining in Nguyen."

“Noticed that, did you?”

“These talks are stalled, and I’m not going to waste you on babysitting a deadlock. We need clarity, and we need it a month ago. Ask for the resources you need, Chrisjen, and either rule Venus out or get us proof. I’m giving you a blank check.”

“Retirement at last,” she said, laughing. To her surprise, Errinwright took it seriously.

“If you want, but Venus first. This is the most important question either of us has ever asked. I’m trusting you.”

“I’ll see to it,” she said. Errinwright nodded and dropped the connection.

She leaned forward on her desk, fingertips pressed to her lips. Something had happened. Something had *changed*. Either Errinwright had read enough about Venus to get his own set of the heebie-jeebies, or someone wanted her off the Martian negotiation. Someone with enough pull to get Errinwright to kick her upstairs. Did Nguyen have patrons that powerful?

Yes, it gave her what she wanted. After all she’d said—and meant when she’d said it—she couldn’t refuse the project, but the success had a bitter aftertaste. Perhaps she was reading too much into it. God knew she hadn’t been getting enough sleep, and fatigue left her paranoid. She checked the time. Ten o’clock p.m. She wouldn’t make it back to Arjun that night. Another morning in the depressing VIP quarters, drinking the weak coffee and pretending to care what the latest ambassador from the Pashwiri Autonomous Zone thought about dance music.

Screw it, she thought, I need a drink.

The Dasihari Lounge catered to the full range in the complex organism that was the United Nations. At the bar, young pages and clerks leaned into the light, laughing too loud and pretending to be more important than they were. It was a mating dance only slightly more dignified than presenting like a mandrill, but endearing in its own fashion. Roberta Draper, the Martian Marine who’d shat on the table that morning, was among them, a pint glass dwarfed by her hand and an amused expression on her face.

Soren would probably be there, if not that night, another time. Avasarala's son would probably have been among them if things had gone differently.

In the center of the room, there were tables with built-in terminals to pipe in encrypted information from a thousand different sources. Privacy baffles kept even the waitstaff from glimpsing over the shoulders of the middle-range administrators drinking their dinners while they worked. And in the back were dark wooden tables in booths that recognized her before she sat down. If anyone below a certain status walked too close, a discreet young man with perfect hair would sweep up and see them to a different table, elsewhere, with less important people.

Avasarala sipped her gin and tonic while the threads of implication wove and reweave themselves. Nguyen couldn't have enough influence to put Errinwright against her. Could the Martians have asked that she be removed? She tried to remember who she'd been rude to and how, but no good suspect came to mind. And if they had, what was she going to do about it?

Well, if she couldn't be party to the Martian negotiations in an official capacity, she could still have contacts on an informal basis. Avasarala started chuckling even before she knew quite why. She picked up her glass, tapped the table to let it know it was permitted to let someone else sit there, and made her way across the bar. The music was soft arpeggios in a hypermodern tonal scale, which managed to sound soothing despite itself. The air smelled of perfume too expensive to be applied tastelessly. As she neared the bar, she saw conversations pause, glances pass between one young fount of ambition and another. *The old lady*, she imagined them saying. *What's she doing here?*

She sat down next to Draper. The big woman looked over at her. There was a light of recognition in her eyes that boded well. She might not know who Avasarala was, but she'd guessed what she was. Smart, then. Perceptive. And fucking hell, the woman was enormous. Not fat either, just... *big*.

"Buy you a drink, Sergeant?" Avasarala asked.

"I've had a few too many already," she said. And a moment later: "All right."

Avasarala lifted an eyebrow, and the bartender quietly gave the marine another glass of whatever she'd been having before.

"You made quite an impression today," Avasarala said.

“I did,” Draper said. She seemed serenely unconcerned about it. “Thorsson’s going to ship me out. I’m done here. May just be *done*.”

“That’s fair. You’ve accomplished what they wanted from you anyway.”

Draper looked down at her. Polynesian blood, Avasarala guessed. Maybe Samoan. Someplace that evolution had made humans like mountain ranges. Her eyes were narrowed, and there was a heat to them. An anger.

“I haven’t done shit.”

“You were here. That’s all they needed from you.”

“What’s the point?”

“They want to convince me that the monster wasn’t theirs. One argument they’ve made is that their own soldiers—meaning you—didn’t know about it. By bringing you, they’re showing that they aren’t afraid to bring you. That’s all they need. You could sit around with your thumb up your ass and argue about the offside rule all day. It would be just as good for them. You’re a showpiece.”

The marine took it in, then raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t think I like that,” she said.

“Yes, well,” Avasarala said, “Thorsson’s a cunt, but if you stop working with politicians just for that, you won’t have any friends.”

The marine chuckled. Then she laughed. Then, seeing Avasarala’s gaze on her own, she sobered.

“That thing that killed your friends?” Avasarala said while the marine was looking her in the eye. “It wasn’t one of mine.”

Draper’s inhalation was sharp. It was like Avasarala had touched a wound. Which made sense, because she had. Draper’s jaw worked for a second.

“It wasn’t one of ours either.”

“Well. At least we’ve got that settled.”

“It won’t do any good, though. They won’t do anything. They won’t talk about anything. They don’t care. You know that? They don’t care what happened as long as they all protect their careers and make sure the balance of power isn’t tilted the wrong way. None of them fucking *care* what that thing was or where it came from.”

The bar around them wasn’t silent, but it was quieter. The mating dance was now only the second most interesting thing happening at the bar.

“I care,” Avasarala said. “As a matter of fact, I’ve just been given a very great deal of latitude in finding out what that thing was.”

It wasn’t entirely true. She’d been given a huge budget to implicate or rule out Venus. But it was close, and it was the right frame for what she wanted.

“Really?” Draper said. “So what are you going to do?”

“First thing, I’m going to hire you. I need a liaison with the Martian military. That should be you. Can you handle it?”

No one at the bar was talking to anybody now. The room might have been empty. The only sounds were the soft music and Draper’s laughter. An older man wearing clove-and-cinnamon cologne walked by, drawn by the quiet spectacle without knowing what it was.

“I’m a Martian Marine,” Draper said. “Martian. You’re UN. Earth. We aren’t even citizens of the same planet. You can’t hire me.”

“My name’s Chrisjen Avasarala. Ask around.”

They were silent for a moment.

“I’m Bobbie,” Draper said.

“Nice to meet you, Bobbie. Come work for me.”

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course,” Avasarala said, and had her terminal send Bobbie her private number. “So long as when you’re done thinking, you come work for me.”

At the VIP apartments, Avasarala tuned the system to the kind of music Arjun might be listening to just then. If he wasn’t already asleep. She fought back the urge to call him. It was late already, and she was just drunk enough to get maudlin. Sobbing into her hand terminal about how much she loved her husband wasn’t something she longed to make a habit of. She pulled off her sari and took a long, hot shower. She didn’t drink alcohol often. Usually she didn’t like how it dulled her mind. That night it seemed to loosen her up, give her brain the little extra jazz it needed to see connections.

Draper kept her connected to Mars, even if not to the day-by-day slog of the negotiations. That was a good start. There would be other connections too. Foster, in data services, could be brought in. She’d need to

start routing more work through him. Build a relationship. It wouldn't do to march in and insist on being his new best friend just because he happened to be managing the encryption requests for Nguyen. A few no-strings-attached cupcakes first. Then the hook. Who else could she—

Her hand terminal chimed a priority alert. She turned off the water and grabbed a bathrobe, wrapping herself tightly and double-knotting the stay before she accepted the connection. She was years past flashing someone over a hand terminal, no matter how much she'd drunk. The connection came from someone in priority surveillance. The image that flashed up was a middle-aged man with ill-advised mutton-chop whiskers.

"Ameer! You mad dog. What have you done that they make you work so late?"

"Moved to Atlanta, miss," the analyst said with a toothy grin. He was the only one who ever called her miss. She hadn't spoken to him in three years. "I've just come back from lunch. I had an unscheduled report flagged for you. Contact immediately. I tried your assistant, but he didn't answer."

"He's young. He still sleeps sometimes. It's a weakness. Stand by while I set privacy."

The moment of friendly banter was over. Avasarala leaned forward, tapping her hand terminal twice to add a layer of encryption. The red icon went green.

"Go ahead," she said.

"It's from Ganymede, miss. You have a standing order on James Holden."

"Yes?"

"He's on the move. He made an apparent rendezvous with a local scientist. Praxidike Meng."

"What's Meng?"

In Atlanta, Ameer transitioned smoothly to a different file. "Botanist, miss. Emigrated to Ganymede with his family when he was a child. Schooled there. Specializes in partial-pressure low-light soybean strains. Divorced, one child. No known connections to the OPA or any established political party."

"Go ahead."

"Holden, Meng, and Burton have left their ship. They're armed, and they've made contact with a small group of private-security types. Pinkwater."

“How many?”

“The on-site analyst doesn’t say, miss. A small force. Should I query?”

“What lag are we at?”

Ameer’s brown-black eyes flickered.

“Forty-one minutes, eight seconds, miss.”

“Hold the query. If I have anything else, I can send them together.”

“The on-site analyst reports that Holden negotiated with the private security, either a last-minute renegotiation or else the whole meeting was extemporaneous. It appears they reached some agreement. The full group proceeded to an unused corridor complex and forced entry.”

“A what?”

“Disused access door, miss.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? How big is it? Where is it?”

“Should I query?”

“You should go to Ganymede and kick this sorry excuse for an on-site analyst in the balls. Add a clarification request.”

“Yes, miss,” Ameer said with the ghost of a smile. Then, suddenly, he frowned. “An update. One moment.”

So the OPA had something on Ganymede. Maybe something they’d put there, maybe something they’d found. Either way, this mysterious door made things a degree more interesting. While Ameer read through and digested the new update, Avasarala scratched the back of her hand and reevaluated her position. She’d thought Holden was there as an observer. Forward intelligence. That might be wrong. If he’d gone to meet with this Praxidike Meng, this utterly under-the-radar botanist, the OPA might already know quite a bit about Bobbie Draper’s monster. Add the fact that Holden’s boss had the only known sample of the protomolecule, and a narrative about the Ganymede collapse began to take shape.

There were holes in it, though. If the OPA had been playing with the protomolecule, there had been no sign of it. And Fred Johnson’s psychological profile didn’t match with terrorist attacks. Johnson was old-school, and the monster attack was decidedly new.

“There’s been a firefight, miss. Holden and his people have met armed resistance. They’ve set a perimeter. The on-site analyst can’t approach.”

“Resistance? I thought this was supposed to be unused. Who the fuck are they shooting at?”

“Shall I query?”

“God *damn* it!”

Forty light-minutes away, something important was going on, and she was here, in a bedroom that wasn't hers, trying to make sense of it by pressing her ear to the wall. The frustration was a physical sensation. It felt like being crushed.

Forty minutes out. Forty minutes back. Whatever she said, whatever order she gave, it would get there almost an hour and a half behind what was clearly a rapidly changing situation.

“Pull him in,” she said. “Holden, Burton. Their Pinkwater friends. And this mysterious botanist. Bring them all in. Now.”

Ameer in Atlanta paused.

“If they're in a firefight, miss...”

“Then send in the dogs, break up the fight, and take them in. We're past surveillance. Get it done.”

“Yes, miss.”

“Contact me as soon as it's done.”

“Yes, miss.”

She watched Ameer's face as he framed the order, confirmed it, sent it out. She could practically imagine the screen, the strokes of his fingers. She willed him to go faster, to press her intent out past the speed of light and get the damn thing done.

“Order's out. As soon as I hear from the on-site analyst, I'll reach you.”

“I'll be here. If I don't take the connection, try again until I wake up.”

She dropped the link and sat back. Her brain felt like a swarm of bees. James Holden had changed the game again. The boy had a talent for that, but that in itself made him a known quantity. This other one, this Meng, had come from her blind side. The man might be a mole or a volunteer or a stalking goat sent to lead the OPA into a trap. She considered turning off the light, trying to sleep, then abandoned it as a bad bet.

Instead, she set up a connection with the UN's intelligence research database. It was an hour and a half at earliest before she'd hear anything more. In the meantime, she wanted to know who Praxidike Meng was and why he mattered.

Chapter Nineteen

Holden

“Naomi, prep the ship. We have to get off this moon. We have to do it *right now*.”

All around Holden, the black filaments spread, a dark spider’s web with him at the center. He was on Eros again. He was seeing thousands of bodies turning into something else. He thought he’d made it off, but Eros just kept coming. He and Miller had gotten out, but it got Miller anyway.

Now it was back for him.

“What’s the matter, Jim?” Naomi said from the distance of the suit radio. “Jim?”

“Prep the ship!”

“It’s the stuff,” Amos said. He was talking to Naomi. “Like from Eros.”

“Jesus, they...” Holden managed to gasp out before the fear welled up in his mind, robbing him of speech. His heart banged against his ribs like it wanted out, and he had to check the oxygen levels on his HUD. It felt like there wasn’t enough air in the room.

Out of the corner of his eye, something appeared to scuttle up the wall like a disembodied hand, leaving a trail of brown slime in its wake. When Holden spun and pointed his assault rifle at it, it resolved into a bloodstain below a discolored patch of ice.

Amos moved toward him, a worried look on his broad face. Holden waved him off, then set the butt of his rifle on the ground and leaned on a nearby crate to catch his breath.

“We should probably move out,” Wendell said. He and Paula were helping hold up the man who’d been gut-shot. The injured man was having trouble breathing. A small red bubble of blood had formed in his left nostril, and it inflated and deflated with each ragged gasp the man took.

“Jim?” Naomi said in his ear, her voice soft. “Jim, I saw it through Amos’ suitcam, and I know what it means. I’m getting the ship ready. That encrypted local traffic? It’s dropped way off. I think everyone’s gone.”

“Everyone’s gone,” Holden echoed.

The diminished remains of his Pinkwater team were staring at him, the concern on their faces shifting to fear, his own terror infecting them even though they had no idea what the filament meant. They wanted him to do something, and he knew he had to, but he couldn’t quite think what it was. The black web filled his head with flashing images, running too quickly to make sense, like video played at high speed: Julie Mao in her shower, the black threads surrounding her, her body twisted into a nightmare; bodies scattered across the floor of a radiation chamber; the zombielike infected staggering off the trams in Eros, vomiting brown bile on everyone around them, even a drop of the goo a death sentence; video captures of the horror show Eros had become; a torso stripped to a rib cage and one arm dragging itself through the protomolecule landscape on some unknowable mission.

“Cap,” Amos said, then moved over to touch Holden’s arm. Holden yanked away, almost falling over in the process.

He swallowed the thick lemony-flavored saliva building up in his throat and said, “Okay. I’m here. Let’s go. Naomi. Call Alex. We need the *Roci*.”

Naomi didn’t answer for a moment, then said, “What about the block —”

“Right fucking now, Naomi!” Holden yelled. “Right fucking now! Call Alex right now!”

She didn’t reply, but the gut-shot man took one final ragged breath and then collapsed, nearly dragging the wounded Wendell to the floor with him.

“We have to go,” Holden said to Wendell, meaning *We can’t help him. If we stay, we all die*. Wendell nodded but went to one knee and began taking the man’s light armor off, not understanding. Amos pulled the emergency medkit off his harness and dropped down next to Wendell to begin working on the wounded man while Paula watched, her face pale.

“Have to go,” Holden said again, wanting to grab Amos and shake him until he understood. “Amos, stop, we have to go right now. Eros—”

“Cap,” Amos interrupted, “all due respect, but this ain’t Eros.” He took a syringe from the medkit and gave the downed man an injection. “No radiation rooms, no zombies puking goo. Just that broken box, a whole lotta dead guys, and these black threads. We don’t know *what* the fuck it is, but it ain’t Eros. And we ain’t leaving this guy behind.”

The small rational part of Holden's mind knew Amos was right. And more than that, the person Holden wanted to believe he still was would never consider leaving even a complete stranger behind, much less a guy who'd taken a wound for him. He forced himself to take three deep, slow breaths. Prax knelt by Amos' side, holding the medkit.

"Naomi," Holden said, meaning to apologize for yelling at her.

"Alex is on his way," she replied, her voice tight but not accusing. "He's a few hours out. Running the blockade won't be easy, but he thinks he's got an angle. Where is he putting down?"

Holden found himself answering before he realized he'd made the decision. "Tell him to land in the *Somnambulist's* berth. I'm giving her to someone. Meet us outside the airlock when we get there."

He pulled the mag-key for the *Somnambulist* out of a pocket on his harness and tossed it to Wendell. "This will get you on the ship you're taking. Consider it a down payment for services rendered."

Wendell nodded and tucked the key away, then went back to his injured man. The man appeared to be breathing.

"Can he be carried?" Holden asked Amos, proud of how steady his voice sounded again, trying not to think about the fact that he would have left the man to die a minute before.

"No choice, Cap."

"Then somebody pick him up," Holden said. "No, not you, Amos. I need you back on point."

"I got him," Wendell said. "I can't shoot for shit with this hand busted."

"Prax. Help him," Holden said. "We're getting the hell out of here."

They moved as quickly as injured people could back through the base. Back past the men and women they'd killed getting in and, more frighteningly, the ones they hadn't. Back past Katoa's small, still corpse. Prax's gaze drifted toward the body, but Holden grabbed his jacket and shoved him toward the hatch.

"It's still not Mei," he said. "Slow us down and I leave you."

The threat made him feel like an ass the moment it left his lips, but it wasn't idle. Finding the scientist's lost little girl had stopped being the priority the instant they found the black filaments. And as long as he was being honest with himself, leaving the scientist behind would mean not being there when they found his daughter twisted into a monster by the

protomolecule, brown goo leaking from orifices she hadn't been born with, the black threads crawling from her mouth and eyes.

The older Pinkwater man who'd been covering their exit rushed over to help carry the injured man without being asked. Prax handed the wounded man off to him without a word and then slid in place behind Paula as she scanned the hallways ahead with her machine pistol.

Corridors that had seemed boring on the trip in took on a sinister feel on the way back out. The frosted texture that had reminded Holden of spiderwebs when he'd come in now looked like the veins of some living thing. Their pulsing had to be caused by adrenaline making his eyes twitch.

Eight rem's burning off Jupiter onto the surface of Ganymede. Even with the magnetosphere, eight rem's a day. How quickly would the protomolecule grow here, with Jupiter endlessly supplying the energy? Eros had become something frighteningly powerful once the protomolecule had taken hold. Something that could accelerate at incredible speeds without inertia. Something that could, if the reports were right, change the very atmosphere and chemical composition of Venus. And that was with just over a million human hosts and a thousand trillion tons of rocky mass to work with at the beginning.

Ganymede had ten times as many humans and many orders of magnitude more mass than Eros. What could the ancient alien weapon do with such bounty?

Amos threw open the last hatch to the shadow base, and the crew was back in the higher-traffic tunnels of Ganymede. Holden didn't see anyone acting infected. No mindless zombies staggering through the corridors. No brown vomit coating the walls and floor, filled with the alien virus looking for a host. No Protogen hired thugs shepherding people into the kill zone.

Protogen is gone.

An itch at the back of his mind that Holden hadn't even been aware of pushed its way to the front. Protogen was gone. Holden had helped bring them down. He'd been in the room when the architect of the Eros experiment died. The Martian fleet had nuked Phoebe into a thin gas that was sucked into Saturn's massive gravity. Eros had crashed into the acidic and autoclave-hot atmosphere of Venus, where no human ships could go. Holden himself had taken Protogen's only sample of the protomolecule away from them.

So who had brought the protomolecule to Ganymede?

He'd given the sample to Fred Johnson as leverage to be used in the peace talks. The Outer Planets Alliance had gotten a lot of concessions in the chaos that followed the brief inner planets war. But not everything they'd wanted. The inner planets fleets in orbit around Ganymede were proof of that.

Fred had the only sample of the protomolecule left in the solar system. Because Holden had given it to him.

"It was Fred," he said out loud without realizing it.

"What was Fred?" Naomi asked.

"This. What's happening here. He did this."

"No," Naomi said.

"To drive the inner planets out, to test some kind of super-weapon, something. But he did this."

"No," Naomi said again. "We don't know that."

The air in the corridor grew smoky, the nauseating scent of burning hair and flesh choking off Holden's reply. Amos held up a hand to halt the group, and the Pinkwater people stopped and took up defensive positions. Amos moved up the corridor to the junction and looked off to his left for several moments.

"Something bad happened here," he finally said. "I've got half a dozen dead, more than that celebrating."

"Are they armed?" Holden asked.

"Oh yeah."

The Holden who would have tried to talk his way by them, the Holden who Naomi liked and wanted back, barely put up a struggle when he said, "Get us past them."

Amos leaned out around the corner and fired off a long burst from his auto-shotgun.

"Go," he said when the echoes of the gunshots had faded away.

The Pinkwater people picked up their wounded and hurried up the corridor and beyond the battle; Prax jogged along close behind, head down and thin arms pumping. Holden followed, a glance showing him dead bodies on fire at the center of a wide hallway. Burning them had to be a message. It wasn't quite bad enough yet for them to be eating each other. Was it?

There were a few bodies lying outside the fire, bleeding out on the corrugated metal floors. Holden couldn't tell if they were Amos'

handiwork. The old Holden would have asked. The new one didn't.

"Naomi," he said, wanting to hear her voice.

"I'm here."

"We're seeing trouble out here."

"Is it..." He heard the dread in her voice.

"No. Not the protomolecule. But the locals may be bad enough. Seal up the 'locks," Holden told her, the words coming to him without thought. "Warm up the reactor. If something happens to us, leave and rendezvous with Alex. Don't go to Tycho."

"Jim," she said, "I—"

"Don't go to Tycho. Fred did this. Don't go back to him."

"No," she said. Her new mantra.

"If we aren't there in half an hour, go. That's an order, XO."

At least she would get away, Holden told himself. No matter what happened on Ganymede, at least Naomi would make it out alive. A vision of the nightmare Julie, dead in her shower, but with Naomi's face flashed in his mind. He didn't expect the little yelp of grief that escaped him. Amos turned and looked back at him, but Holden waved him on without a word.

Fred had done this.

And if Fred had, then Holden had too.

Holden had spent a year playing enforcer to Fred's politician. He'd hunted ships and killed them for Fred's grand OPA government experiment. He'd changed the man he'd been into the man he was now, because some part of him believed in Fred's dream of the liberated and self-governed outer planets.

And Fred had secretly been planning... this.

Holden thought of all the things he'd put off so that he could help Fred build his new solar system order. He'd never taken Naomi to meet his family back on Earth. Not that Naomi herself could have ever gone to Earth. But he could have flown his family up to Luna to meet her. Father Tom would have resisted. He hated travel. But Holden had no doubt that in the end he would have gotten them all to come meet her once he explained how important she'd become to him.

And meeting Prax, seeing his need to find his daughter, made Holden realize how badly he wanted to know what that was like. To experience that sort of hunger for the presence of another human being. To present another generation to his parents. To show them that all the effort and energy they

had put into him had paid off. That he was passing it along. He wanted, almost more than he'd wanted anything before, to see the looks on their faces when he showed them a child. His child. Naomi's child.

Fred had taken that from him, first by wasting his time as the OPA's leg breaker, and now by this betrayal. Holden swore to himself that if he made it off Ganymede, Fred would pay for all of it.

Amos halted the group again, and Holden noticed that they were back at the port. He shook himself out of his reverie. He didn't remember how they'd gotten there.

"Looks clear," Amos said.

"Naomi," Holden said, "what does it look like around the ship?"

"Looks clear here," she said. "But Alex is worried that—"

Her voice was cut off by an electronic squeal.

"Naomi? Naomi!" Holden yelled, but there was no response. To Amos he said, "Go, double-time it to the ship!"

Amos and the Pinkwater people ran toward the docks as quickly as their injured bodies and the unconscious teammate would let them. Holden brought up the rear, shouldering his assault rifle and flicking off the safety as he ran.

They ran through the twisting corridors of the port sector, Amos scattering pedestrians with loud shouts and the unspoken threat of his shotgun. An old woman in a hijab scurried away before them like a leaf driven before a storm. She was dead already. If the protomolecule was loose, everyone Holden passed was dead already. Santichai and Melissa Supitayaporn and all the people they'd come to Ganymede to save. The rioters and killers who'd been normal citizens of the station before their social ecosystem collapsed. If the protomolecule was loose, all of them were as good as dead.

So why hadn't it happened?

Holden pushed the thought aside. Later—if there was a later—he could worry about it. Someone shouted at Amos, and Amos fired his shotgun into the ceiling once. If port security still existed outside of the vultures trying to take a cut of every incoming shipment, they didn't try to stop them.

The outer airlock door of the *Somnambulist* was closed when they reached it.

"Naomi, you there?" Holden asked, fumbling in his pockets for the swipe card. She didn't reply, and it took him a moment to remember he'd

given the card to Wendell. “Wendell, open the door for us.”

The Pinkwater leader didn’t reply.

“Wendell—” Holden started, then stopped when he saw that Wendell was staring, wide-eyed, at something behind him. Holden turned to look and saw five men—Earthers, all of them—in plain gray armor without insignias. All were armed with large bore weapons.

No, Holden thought, and brought his gun up and across them in a full auto sweep. Three of the five men dropped, their armor blooming red. The new Holden rejoiced; the old was quiet. It didn’t matter who these men were. Station security or inner planet military or just leftover mercenaries from the now destroyed shadow base, he’d kill them all before he let them stop him from getting his crew off this infected moon.

He never saw who fired the shot that took his leg out from under him. One second he was standing, emptying the magazine of his assault rifle into the gray-armored fire-team, and the next a sledgehammer blow hit the armor on his right thigh, knocking him off his feet. As he fell, he saw the two remaining gray-armored soldiers go down as Amos’ auto-shotgun unloaded in a single long roar.

Holden rolled to his side, looking to see if anyone else was hurt, and saw that the five on his side had been only half of the enemy team. The Pinkwater people were raising their hands and dropping their weapons as five more gray-armored soldiers came down the corridor from behind.

Amos never saw them. He dropped the expended magazine from his auto-shotgun and was pulling a new one off his harness when one of the mercenaries aimed a large weapon at the back of his head and pulled the trigger. Amos’ helmet flew off and he was slapped forward onto the corrugated-metal decking with a wet crunch. Blood splashed across the floor where he hit it.

Holden tried to get a new magazine into his assault rifle, but his hands wouldn’t cooperate and before he could reload his gun, one of the soldiers had crossed the distance and kicked the rifle away from him.

Holden had time to see the still standing members of his Pinkwater team disappear into black bags before one came down over his own head and plunged him into darkness.

Chapter Twenty

Bobbie

The Martian delegation had been given a suite of offices in the UN building for their own use. The furniture was all real wood; the paintings on the walls were originals and not prints. The carpet smelled new. Bobbie thought that either everyone in the UN campus lived like a king, or they were just going out of their way to impress the Martians.

Thorsson had called her a few hours after she'd left her run-in with Avasarala at the bar, and had demanded that she meet with him the next day. Now she waited in the lobby of their temporary office suite, sitting in a bergère-style chair with green velvet cushions and a cherry wood frame that would have cost her two years' salary on Mars. A screen set into the wall across from her played a news channel with the sound muted. It turned the program into a confusing and occasionally macabre slide show of images: two talking heads sitting at a desk in a blue room, a large building on fire, a woman walking down a long white hallway while gesturing animatedly to both sides, a UN battleship parked at an orbital station with severe damage scarring its flank, a red-faced man talking directly into the camera against the backdrop of a flag Bobbie didn't recognize.

It all meant something and nothing at the same time. A few hours before, this would have frustrated Bobbie. She would have felt compelled to go find the remote and turn the sound up, to add context to the information being thrown at her.

Now she just let the images flow around her like canal water past a rock.

A young man she'd seen a few times on the *Dae-Jung* but had never actually met hurried through the lobby, tapping furiously on his terminal. When he was halfway across the room, he said, "He's ready for you."

It took Bobbie a moment to realize the young man had been talking to her. Apparently her stock had fallen far enough that she no longer warranted face-to-face delivery of information. More meaningless data. More water flowing past her. She pushed herself to her feet with a grunt. Her hours-long

walk at one g the previous day had taken more out of her than she'd realized.

She was vaguely surprised to find that Thorsson's office was one of the smallest in the suite. That meant that either he didn't care about the unspoken status conferred through office size, or he was actually the least important member of the delegation to still rate a private workspace. She felt no compulsion to figure out which. Thorsson did not react to her arrival, his head bent over his desk terminal. Bobbie didn't care about being ignored, or about the lesson he was trying to teach her with it. The size of the office meant that Thorsson had no chair for guests, and the ache in her legs was sufficiently distracting.

"I may have overreacted earlier," he finally said.

"Oh?" Bobbie replied, thinking about where she might find more of that soy-milk tea.

Thorsson looked up at her. His face was trying its mummified-remains version of a warm smile. "Let me be clear. There's no doubt that you damaged our credibility with your outburst. But, as Martens points out, that is largely my fault for not fully understanding the extent of your trauma."

"Ah," Bobbie said. There was a framed photograph on the wall behind Thorsson of a city with a tall metal structure in the foreground. It looked like an archaic rocket gantry. The caption read PARIS.

"So instead of sending you home, I will be keeping you on staff here. You'll be given an opportunity to repair the damage you've done."

"Why," Bobbie said, looking Thorsson in the eye for the first time since coming in, "am I here?"

Thorsson's hint of a smile disappeared and was replaced by an equally understated frown. "Excuse me?"

"Why am I here?" she repeated, thinking past the disciplinary board. Thinking of how hard it would be to get reassigned to Ganymede if Thorsson didn't send her back to Mars. If he didn't, would she be allowed to resign? Just leave the corps and buy her own ticket? The thought of no longer being a marine made her sad. The first really strong feeling she'd had in a while.

"Why are you—" Thorsson started, but Bobbie cut him off.

"Not to talk about the monster, apparently. Honestly, if I'm just here as a showpiece, I think I'd rather be sent home. I have some things I could be doing..."

“You,” Thorsson said, his voice getting tighter, “are here to do exactly what I say for you to do, and exactly when I say it. Is that understood, soldier?”

“Yeah,” Bobbie said, feeling the water slide past her. She was a stone. It moved her not at all. “I have to go now.”

She turned and walked away, Thorsson not managing to get a last word out before she left. As she moved through the suite toward the exit, she saw Martens pouring powdered creamer into a cup of coffee in the small kitchen area. He spotted her at the same time.

“Bobbie,” he said. He’d gotten a lot more familiar with her over the last few days. Normally, she’d have assumed it was a buildup to romantic or sexual overtures. With Martens, she was pretty sure it was just another tool in his “how to fix broken marines” tool kit.

“Captain,” she said. She stopped. She felt the front door tugging at her with a sort of psychic gravity, but Martens had never been anything but good to her. And she had a strange premonition that she was never going to see any of these people again. She held out her hand to him, and when he took it, she said, “I’m leaving. You won’t have to waste your time with me anymore.”

He smiled his sad smile at her. “In spite of the fact that I don’t actually feel like I’ve accomplished anything, I don’t feel like I wasted my time. Do we part friends?”

“I—” she started, then had to stop and swallow a lump in her throat. “I hope this didn’t wreck your career or anything.”

“I’m not worried about it,” he said to her back. She was already walking out the door. She didn’t turn around.

In the hallway Bobbie pulled out her terminal and called the number Avasarala had given her. It immediately went to voice mail.

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll take that job.”

There was something liberating and terrifying about the first day on a new job. In any new assignment, Bobbie had always had the unsettling feeling that she was in over her head, that she wouldn’t know how to do any of the things they would ask her to do, that she would dress wrong or say the wrong thing, or that everyone would hate her. But no matter how strong that

feeling was, it was overshadowed by the sense that with a new job came the chance to totally recreate herself in whatever image she chose, that—at least for a little while—her options were infinite.

Even waiting for Avasarala finally to notice her couldn't fully dampen that feeling.

Standing in Avasarala's office reinforced Bobbie's impression that the Martian suite was intended to impress. The deputy secretary was important enough to get Bobbie transferred out of Thorsson's command and into a liaison role for the UN with a single phone call. And yet her office had cheap carpet that smelled unpleasantly of stale tobacco smoke. Her desk was old and scuffed. No cherrywood chairs here. The only things that looked lovingly tended in the room were the fresh flowers and the Buddha shrine.

Avasarala radiated weariness. There were dark circles under her eyes that hadn't been there during their official meetings and hadn't been visible in the dim lights of the bar where she'd made her offer. Sitting behind her giant desk in a bright blue sari, she looked very small, like a child pretending to be a grown-up. Only the gray hair and crow's-feet ruined the illusion. Bobbie suddenly pictured her instead as a cranky doll, complaining as children moved her arms and legs and forced her to go to tea parties with stuffed animals. The thought made her cheeks ache from restraining the grin.

Avasarala tapped at a terminal on her desk and grunted with irritation. *No more tea for you, gramma dolly, you've had enough*, Bobbie thought, then stifled a laugh. "Soren, you've moved my fucking files again. I can't find a goddamned thing anymore."

The stiff young man who'd brought Bobbie into the office and then sort of melted into the background cleared his throat. It made Bobbie jump. He was closer behind her than she'd realized.

"Ma'am, you asked me to move a few of the—"

"Yes, yes," Avasarala interrupted, tapping harder on the terminal's screen, as if that would make the device understand what she wanted. Something about that made Bobbie think of people who started talking louder when trying to communicate with someone who spoke a different language.

"Okay, there they are," Avasarala said with irritation. "Why you'd put them..."

She tapped a few more times and Bobbie's terminal chimed.

"That," she said, "is the report and all of my notes on the Ganymede situation. Read them. Today. I may have an update later, once I've had a little polite questioning done."

Bobbie pulled out her terminal and scrolled quickly through the documents she'd just been sent. It went on and on for hundreds of pages. Her first thought was *Did she really mean read all of this today?* This was quickly followed by *Did she really just hand me everything she knows?* It made her own government's recent treatment of her look even worse.

"It won't take you long," her new boss continued. "There's almost nothing there. Lots of bullshit by overpaid consultants who think they can hide the fact that they don't actually know anything by talking twice as long."

Bobbie nodded, but the feeling of being in over her head had started to outcompete her excitement at a new opportunity.

"Ma'am, is Sergeant Draper cleared to access—" Soren said.

"Yes. I just cleared her. Bobbie? You're cleared," Avasarala said right over the top of him. "Stop busting my balls, Soren. I'm out of tea."

Bobbie made a conscious effort not to turn around and look at Soren. The situation was uncomfortable enough without driving home the fact that he'd just been humiliated in front of a foreigner with exactly seventeen minutes on the job.

"Yes, ma'am," Soren said. "But I was wondering whether you should alert the security service about your decision to clear the sergeant. They do like to be in the loop on that kind of thing."

"Meow meow cry meow meow," Avasarala said. "That's all I heard you say."

"Yes, ma'am," Soren said.

Bobbie finally looked back and forth between them. Soren was being dressed down in front of a new team member who was also technically the enemy. His expression hadn't changed. He looked like he was humoring a demented grandmother. Avasarala made an impatient clicking sound with her teeth.

"Was I not clear? Have I lost the ability to speak?"

"No, ma'am," Soren said.

"Bobbie? Can you understand me?"

"Y-yes, sir."

“Good. Then get out of my office and do your jobs. Bobbie, read. Soren, tea.”

Bobbie turned to leave and found Soren staring at her, his face expressionless. Which was, in its way, more disconcerting than a little well-justified anger would have been.

As she walked past him, Avasarala said, “Soren, wait. Take this to Foster in data services.” She handed Soren what looked like a memory stick. “Make sure you get it to him before he leaves for the day.”

Soren nodded, smiled, and took the small black wafer from her. “Of course.”

When he and Bobbie had left Avasarala’s office, and Soren had closed the door behind them, Bobbie let out a long whistling exhale and smiled at him.

“Wow, that was awkward. Sorry about—” she started, but stopped when Soren held up his hand, casually dismissing her concern.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “She’s actually having a pretty good day.”

While she stood gaping and looking at him, Soren turned away from her and tossed the memory stick onto his desk, where it slid under the wrapper of a half-eaten package of cookies. He sat down and put on a headset, then began scrolling through a list of phone numbers on his desktop terminal. If he noticed her continued presence, he gave no sign.

“You know,” Bobbie said finally, “I just have some stuff to read, so if you’re busy, I could take that thing to the data services guy. I mean, if you’re busy with other stuff.”

Soren finally looked at her quizzically.

“Why would I need you to do that?”

“Well,” Bobbie said, glancing at the time on her terminal, “it’s pretty close to eighteen hundred local, and I don’t know what time you guys usually close up shop, so I just thought—”

“Don’t worry about it. The thing is, my whole job is making her”—he jerked his head toward the closed door—“calm and happy. With her, everything’s top priority. And so nothing is, you know? I’ll do it when it needs doing. Until then, the bitch can bark a little if it makes her feel happy.”

Bobbie felt a cool rush of surprise. No, not surprise. Shock.

“You just called her a bitch?”

“What would you call her, right?” Soren said with a disarming grin. Or was it mocking? Was this all a joke to him, Avasarala and Bobbie and the monster on Ganymede too? An image popped into her head of snatching the smug little assistant out of his chair and snapping him into a zigzag shape. Her hands flexed involuntarily.

Instead, she said, “Madam Secretary seemed to think it was pretty important.”

Soren turned to look at her again. “Don’t worry about it, Bobbie. Seriously. I know how to do my job.”

She stood for a long moment.

“Solid copy on that,” she said.

Bobbie was yanked from a dead sleep by sudden blaring music. She lurched upright in an unfamiliar bed in a nearly pitch-black room. The only light she could see was a faint pulsing pearly glow from her hand terminal, all the way across the room. The music suddenly stopped sounding like an atonal cacophony and became the song she’d selected as the audio alarm for incoming phone calls when she went to bed. Someone was calling. She cursed them in three languages and tried to crawl across the bed toward the terminal.

The edge of the bed came unexpectedly and plunged her face-first toward the floor, her half-asleep body not compensating for Earth’s heavier gravity. She managed to avoid breaking her head open at the cost of a pair of jammed fingers on her right hand.

Cursing even louder, she continued her trek across the floor to the still glowing terminal. When she finally reached it, she opened the connection and said, “If someone isn’t dead, someone *will* be.”

“Bobbie,” the person on the other end said. It took Bobbie’s fuzzy head a moment to place the voice. *Soren*. She glanced at the time on her terminal and saw that it was 0411. She wondered if he was calling to drunkenly upbraid her or apologize. It certainly wouldn’t be the strangest thing that’d happened over the last twenty-four hours.

Bobbie realized he was still talking, and put the speaker back up to her ear. “—is expecting you soonest, so get down here,” Soren said.

“Can you repeat that?”

He started speaking slowly, as though to a dim child. "The boss wants you to come to the office, okay?"

Bobbie looked at the time again. "Right now?"

"No," Soren said. "Tomorrow at the normal time. She just wanted me to call at four a.m. to make sure you were coming."

The flash of anger helped wake her up. Bobbie stopped gritting her teeth long enough to say, "Tell her I'll be right there."

She fumbled her way to a wall, and then along it to a panel, which lit up at her touch. A second touch brought up the room's lights. Avasarala had gotten her a small furnished apartment within walking distance of the office. It wasn't much bigger than a cheap rent hole on Ceres. One large room that doubled as living space and bedroom, a smaller room with a shower and toilet, and an even smaller room that pretended to be a kitchen. Bobbie's duffel lay slumped in the corner, a few items pulled out of it, but mostly still packed. She'd stayed up till one in the morning reading and hadn't bothered to do anything after that but brush her teeth and then collapse into the bed that pulled down from the ceiling.

As she stood surveying the room and trying to wake up, Bobbie had a sudden moment of total clarity. It was as though a pair of dark glasses she hadn't even known she was wearing were snatched away, leaving her blinking in the light. Here she was, climbing out of bed after three hours of sleep to meet with one of the most powerful women in the solar system, and all she cared about was that she hadn't gotten her quarters shipshape and that she really wanted to beat one of her coworkers to death with his brass pen set. Oh, and she was a career marine who'd taken a job working with her government's current worst enemy because someone in naval intelligence had been mean to her. And not least of all, she wanted to get back to Ganymede and kill someone without having the foggiest idea who that someone might be.

The abrupt and crystal-clear vision of how far off the tracks her life seemed to have fallen lasted for a few seconds, and then the fog and sleep deprivation returned, leaving her with only the disquieting feeling that she'd forgotten to do something important.

She dressed in the prior day's uniform and rinsed her mouth out, then headed out the door.

Avasarala's modest office was packed with people. Bobbie recognized at least three civilians from her first meeting there on Earth. One of them was the moonfaced man who she'd later learned was Sadavir Errinwright, Avasarala's boss and possibly the second most powerful man on Earth. The pair were in an intense conversation when she came in, and Avasarala didn't see her.

Bobbie spotted a small clump of people in military uniforms and drifted in their direction until she saw that they were generals and admirals, and changed course. She wound up next to Soren, the only other person in the room standing alone. He didn't even give her a glance, but something about the way he held himself seemed to radiate that disquieting charm, powerful and insincere. It struck Bobbie that Soren was the kind of man she might take to bed if she was drunk enough, but she'd never trust him to watch her back in a fight. On second thought, no, she'd never be drunk enough.

"Draper!" Avasarala called out in a loud voice, having finally noticed her arrival.

"Yes, ma'am," Bobbie said, taking a step forward as everyone in the room stopped talking to look at her.

"You're my liaison," Avasarala said, the bags under her eyes so pronounced they looked less like fatigue and more like an undiagnosed medical condition. "So fucking *liaise*. Call your people."

"What happened?"

"The situation around Ganymede has just turned into the shit-storm to end all shit-storms," she said. "We're in a shooting war."

Chapter Twenty-One

Prax

Prax knelt, his arms zip-tied securely behind him. His shoulders ached. It hurt to hold his head up and it hurt to let it sink down. Amos lay facedown on the floor. Prax thought he was dead until he saw the zip-ties holding his arms behind his back. The nonlethal round their kidnappers had fired into the back of the mechanic's head had left an enormous blue-and-black lump there. Most of the others—Holden, some of the Pinkwater mercenaries, even Naomi—were in positions much like his own, but not all.

Four years before, they'd had a moth infestation. A containment study had failed, and inch-long gray-brown miller moths had run riot in his dome. They'd built a heat trap: a few dabs of generated pheromones on a heat-resistant fiber swatch under the big long-wave full-spectrum lighting units. The moths came too close, and the heat killed them. The smell of small bodies burning had fouled the air for days, and the scent was exactly like that of the cauterizing drill their abductors were using on the injured Pinkwater man. A swirl of white smoke rose from the formed-plastic office table on which he was laid out.

"I'm just..." the Pinkwater man said through his sedation haze. "You just go ahead, finish that without me. I'll be over..."

"Another bleeder," one of their abductors said. She was a thick-featured woman with a mole under her left eye and blood-slicked rubber gloves. "Right there."

"Check. Got it," said the man with the drill, pressing the metal tip back down into the patient's open belly wound. The sharp tapping sound of electrical discharge, and another small plume of white smoke rising from the wound.

Amos rolled over suddenly, his nose a bloody ruin, his face covered in gore. "I bight be wrong about dis, Cab'n," he said, the words fighting out past the bulbous mess of his nose, "'ut I don'd dink dese fellas are station security."

The room Prax had found himself in when the hood had been lifted had nothing to do with the usual atmosphere of law enforcement. It looked like an old office. The kind a safety inspector or a shipping clerk might have used in the ancient days before the cascade had started: a long desk with a built-in surface terminal, a few recessed lights shining up on the ceiling, a dead plant—*Sansevieria trifasciata*—with long green-brown leaves turning to dark slime. The gray-armored guards or soldiers or whatever they were had been very methodical and efficient. Prisoners were all along one wall, bound at the ankles and wrists; their hand terminals, weapons, and personal effects were stowed along the opposite wall with two guards set to do nothing but make sure no one touched them. The armor they'd stripped off Holden and Amos was in a pile on the floor next to their guns. Then the pair that Prax thought of as the medical team had started working, caring for the most desperately wounded first. They hadn't had time yet to go on to anybody else.

"Any idea who we're dealing with here?" Wendell asked under his breath.

"Not OPA," Holden said.

"That leaves a pretty large number of suspects," the Pinkwater captain said. "Is there somebody you've pissed off I should know about?"

Holden's eyes took on a pained expression and he made a motion as close to a shrug as he could manage, given the circumstances.

"There's kind of a list," he said.

"Another bleeder here," the woman said.

"Check," the drill man said. Tap, smoke, the smell of burning flesh.

"No offense meant, Captain Holden," Wendell said, "but I'm starting to wish I'd just shot you when I had the chance."

"None taken," Holden replied with a nod.

Four of the soldiers came back into the room. They were all squat Earther types. One—a dark-skinned man with a fringe of gray hair and an air of command—was subvocalizing madly. His gaze passed over the prisoners, seeing them without seeing them. Like they were boxes. When his eyes were on Prax, the man nodded but not to him.

"Are they stable?" the dark-skinned man asked the medical team.

"If I had the choice," the woman said, "I wouldn't move this one."

"If you didn't?"

“He’ll probably make it. Keep the high g to a minimum until I can get him to a real medical bay.”

“Excuse me,” Holden said. “Can someone please tell me what the hell’s going on?”

He might as well have been asking the walls.

“We’ve got ten minutes,” the dark-skinned man said.

“Transport ship?”

“Not yet. The secure facility.”

“Splendid,” the woman said sourly.

“Because if you want to ask us any questions,” Holden said, “we should start by getting everybody off Ganymede. If you want your people to still be people, we have to go. That lab we were in had the protomolecule.”

“I want them moved two at a time,” the dark-skinned man said.

“Yes, sir,” the woman replied.

“Are you listening to me?” Holden shouted. “The protomolecule is loose on this station.”

“They’re not listening to us, Jim,” Naomi said.

“Ferguson. Mott,” the dark-skinned man said. “Report.”

The room was silent as someone somewhere reported in.

“My daughter’s missing,” Prax said. “That ship took my daughter.”

They weren’t listening to him either. He hadn’t expected them to. With the exception of Holden and his crew, no one had. The dark-skinned man hunched forward, his expression profoundly focused. Prax felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. A premonition.

“Repeat that,” the dark-skinned man said. And then a moment later: “We’re firing? Who’s *we*?”

Someone answered. The medical team and the weapons guards had their eyes on the commander too. Their faces were poker-blank.

“Understood. Alpha team, new orders. Get to the port and secure a transport ship. Use of force is authorized. Repeat that: Use of force is authorized. Sergeant Chernev, I need you to cut the prisoners’ leg restraints.”

One of the gun guards did a double take.

“All of them, sir?”

“All of them. And we’re going to need a gurney for this gentleman.”

“What’s going on, sir?” the sergeant asked, his voice strained by confusion and fear.

“What’s going on is I’m giving you an order,” the dark-skinned man said, striding fast out the door. “Now *go*.”

Prax felt the knife slash as a rough vibration against his ankles. He hadn’t realized his feet were numb until the burning pins-and-needles sensation brought tears to his eyes. Standing hurt. In the distance, something boomed like an empty freight container dropped from a great height. The sergeant cut Amos’ legs free from their bonds and moved on to Naomi. One guard still stood by the supplies. The medical team was sealing the gut-shot man’s belly closed with a sweet-smelling gel. The sergeant bent over.

The glance between Holden and Amos was the only warning Prax had. As casually as a man heading for the restroom, Holden started walking toward the door.

“Hey!” the weapons guard said, lifting a rifle the size of his arm. Holden looked up innocently, all eyes upon him, while behind him Amos brought his knee up into the sergeant’s head. Prax yelped with surprise and the gun swung toward him. He tried to raise his hands, but they were still tied behind him. Wendell stepped forward, put a foot against the medical woman’s hip, and pushed her into the guard’s line of fire.

Naomi was kneeling on the sergeant’s neck; his face was purple. Holden kicked the drill-wielding man in the back of the knee at the same moment that Amos tackled the man with the rifle. The cauterizing drill sparked against the floor with a sound like a finger tapping against glass. Paula had the sergeant’s knife in her hands, backing up against one of her compatriots, sawing at the zip line around his wrists. The rifleman swung his elbow, and Amos’ breath went out in a whoosh. Holden dropped onto the male half of the medical team, pinning the man’s arms with his knees. Amos did something Prax couldn’t see, and the rifleman grunted and folded over.

Paula got through the Pinkwater man’s zip-tie just as the medical woman scooped up the rifle. The freed man pulled the pistol from the fallen sergeant’s holster and leaned forward, pressing the barrel to the medical woman’s temple as she swung the rifle up a quarter second too late.

Everyone froze. The medical woman smiled.

“Checkmate,” she said, and lowered the rifle to the floor.

It had all taken no more than ten seconds.

Naomi took the knife, quickly, methodically slicing through the wrist bindings while Holden followed along behind, disabling the communication webs in the gray unmarked armor and zip-tying their hands and feet. A perfect inversion of the previous situation. Prax, rubbing the feeling back into his fingers, had the absurd image of the dark-skinned man coming back in and barking orders to him. Another boom came, another huge, resonating container being dropped and sounding out like a drum.

"I just want you to know how much I appreciate the way you looked after my people," Wendell told the pair who made up the medical team.

The woman suggested something obscene and unpleasant, but she smiled while she did it.

"Wendell," Holden said, rummaging in the box of their belongings and then tossing a card-key to the Pinkwater leader. "The *Somnambulist* is still yours, but you need to get to her now and get the hell out of here."

"Preaching to the choir," Wendell said. "Get that gurney. We're not leaving him behind now, and we've got to get out of here before reinforcements come."

"Yessir," Paula said.

Wendell turned to Holden.

"It was interesting meeting you, Captain. Let's not do this again."

Holden nodded but didn't stop putting his armor back on to shake hands. Amos did the same, then distributed their confiscated weapons and items back to them. Holden checked the magazine on his gun and then left through the same door the dark-skinned man had used, Amos and Naomi on his heels. Prax had to trot to catch up. Another detonation came, this one not so distant. Prax thought he felt the ice shake under him, but it might have been his imagination.

"What's... what's going on?"

"The protomolecule's breaking out," Holden said, tossing a hand terminal to Naomi. "The infection's taking hold."

"I don'd dink dat' whas habn'ing, Cab'n," Amos said. With a grimace he grabbed his nose with his right hand and yanked it away from his face. When he let go, it looked mostly straight. He blew a bloody-colored plug of snot out of each nostril, then took a deep breath. "That's better."

"Alex?" Naomi said into her handset. "Alex, tell me this link is still up. Talk to me."

Her voice was shaking.

Another boom, this one louder than anything Prax had ever heard. The shaking wasn't imagined now; it threw Prax to the ground. The air had a strange smell, like overheated iron. The station lights flickered and went dark; the pale blue emergency evacuation LEDs came on. A low-pressure Klaxon was sounding, its tritone blat designed to carry through thin and thinning air. When Holden spoke, he sounded almost contemplative.

"Or they might be bombarding the station."

Ganymede Station was one of the first permanent human footholds in the outer planets. It had been built with the long term in mind, not only in its own architecture, but also in how it would fit with the grand human expansion out into the darkness at the edge of the solar system. The possibility of catastrophe was in its DNA and had been from the beginning. It had been the safest station in the Jovian system. Just the name had once brought to mind images of newborn babies and domes filled with food crops. But the months since the mirrors fell had corroded it.

Pressure doors meant to isolate atmosphere loss had been wedged open when local hydraulics had failed. Emergency supplies had been used up and not replaced. Anything of value that could be turned into food or passage on the black market had been stolen and sold. The social infrastructure of Ganymede was already in its slow, inevitable collapse. The worst of the worst-case plans hadn't envisioned this.

Prax stood in the arching common space where Nicola and he had gone on their first date. They'd eaten together at a little *dulcería*, drinking coffee and flirting. He could still remember the shape of her face and the heart-stopping thrill he'd felt when she took his hand. The ice where the *dulcería* had been was a fractured chaos. A dozen passages intersected here, and people were streaming through them, trying to get to the port or else deep enough into the moon that the ice would shield them, or someplace they could tell themselves was safe.

The only home he'd really known was falling apart around him. Thousands of people were going to die in the next few hours. Prax knew that, and part of him was horrified by it. But Mei had been on that ship, so she wasn't one of them. He still had to rescue her, just not from this. It made it bearable.

“Alex says it’s hot out there,” Naomi said as the four of them trotted through the ruins. “Really hot. He’s not going to be able to make it to the port.”

“There’s the other landing pad,” Prax said. “We could go there.”

“That’s the plan,” Holden said. “Give Alex the coordinates for the science base.”

“Yes, sir,” Naomi said at the same moment Amos, raising a hand like a kid in a schoolroom, said, “The one with the protomolecule?”

“It’s the only secret landing pad I’ve got,” Holden said.

“Yeah, all right.”

When Holden turned to Prax, his face was gray with strain and fear.

“Okay, Prax. You’re the local. Our armor is vacuum rated, but we’ll need environment suits for you and Naomi. We’re about to run through hell, and not all of it’s going to be pressurized. I don’t have time to take a wrong turn or look for something twice. You’re point. Can you handle it?”

“Yes,” Prax said.

Finding the emergency environment suits was easy. They were common enough to have essentially no resale value and stowed at brightly colored emergency stations. All the supplies in the main halls and corridors were already stripped, but ducking down a narrow side corridor that linked to the less popular complex where Prax used to take Mei to the skating rink was easy. The suits there were safety orange and green, made to be visible to rescuers. Camouflage would have been more appropriate. The masks smelled of volatile plastic, and the joints were just rings sewn into the material. The suit heaters looked ill cared for and likely to catch on fire if used too long. Another blast came, followed by two others, each sounding closer than the one before.

“Nukes,” Naomi said.

“Maybe gauss rounds,” Holden replied. They might have been talking about the weather.

Prax shrugged.

“Either way, a hit that gets into a corridor means superheated steam,” he said, pressing the last seal along his side closed and checking the cheap green LED that promised the oxygen was flowing. The heating system flickered to yellow, then back to green. “You and Amos might make it if your armor’s good. I don’t think Naomi and I stand a chance.”

“Great,” Holden said.

“I’ve lost the *Roci*,” Naomi said. “No. I’ve lost the whole link. I was routing through the *Somnambulist*. She must have taken off.”

Or been slagged. The thought was on all their faces. No one said it.

“Over this way,” Prax said. “There’s a service tunnel we used to use when I was in college. We can get around the Marble Arch complex and head up from there.”

“Whatever you say, buddy,” Amos said. His nose was bleeding again. The blood looked black in the faint blue light inside his helmet.

It was his last walk. Whatever happened, Prax was never coming back here, because *here* wouldn’t exist. The fast lope along the service corridor where Jaimie Loomis and Tanna Ibtrahmin-Sook had taken him to get high was the last time he’d see that place. The broad, low-ceilinged amphitheater under the old water treatment center where he’d had his first internship was cracked, the reservoir compromised. It wouldn’t flood the corridors quickly, but in a couple of days, the passageways would be filled in. In a couple of days, it wouldn’t matter.

Everything glowed in the emergency LEDs or else fell into shadow. There was slush on the ground as the heating system struggled to compensate for the madness and failed. Twice, the way was blocked, once by a pressure door that was actually still functional, once by an icefall. They met almost no one. The others were all running for the port. Prax was leading them almost directly away from it now.

Another long, curved hall, then up a construction ramp, through an empty tunnel, and...

The blue steel door that blocked their way wasn’t locked, but it was in safety mode. The indicator said there was vacuum on the other side. One of the God-like fists pummeling Ganymede had broken through here. Prax stopped, his mind clicking through the three-dimensional architecture of his home station. If the secret base was *there*, and he was *here*, then...

“We can’t get there,” he said.

The others were silent for a moment.

“That’s not a good answer,” Holden said. “Find a different one.”

Prax took a long breath. If they doubled back, they could go down a level, head to the west, and try getting to the corridor from below, except that a blast strong enough to break through here would almost certainly have compromised the level below too. If they kept going to the old tube station, they might be able to find a service corridor—not that he knew

there was one, but maybe—and it might lead in the right direction. Three more detonations came, shaking the ice. With a sound like a baseball bat hitting a home run, the wall beside him cracked.

“Prax, buddy,” Amos said, “sooner’d be better.”

They had environment suits, so if they opened the door, the vacuum wouldn’t kill them. But there would be debris choking it. Any strike hard enough to break through to the surface would...

Would...

“We can’t get there... through the station tunnels,” he said. “But we can go up. Get to the surface and go that way.”

“And how do we do that?” Holden asked.

Finding an access way that wasn’t locked down took twenty minutes, but Prax found one. No wider than three men walking abreast, it was an automated service unit for the dome exteriors. The service unit itself had long since been cannibalized for parts, but that didn’t matter. The airlock was still working under battery power. Naomi and Prax fed it the instructions, closed the inner door, and cycled the outer open. The escaping pressure was like a wind for a moment, and then nothing. Prax walked out onto the surface of Ganymede.

He’d seen images of the aurora from Earth. He’d never imagined he’d see anything like it in the blackness of his own sky. But there, not just above him but in lines from horizon to horizon, were streaks of green and blue and gold—chaff and debris and the radiating gas of cooling plasma. Incandescent blooms marked torch drives. Several kilometers away, a gauss round slammed into the moon’s surface, the seismic shock knocking them from their feet. Prax lay there for a moment, watching the water ejecta geyser up into the darkness and then begin to fall back down as snow. It was beautiful. The rational, scientific part of his mind tried to calculate how much energy transfer there was to the moon when a rail-gun-hurled chunk of tungsten hit it. It would be like a miniature nuke without all the messy radiation. He wondered if the round would stop before it hit Ganymede’s nickel-iron core.

“Okay,” Holden said over the cheap radio in Prax’s emergency suit. The low end of the sound spectrum was lousy, and Holden sounded like a cartoon character. “Which way now?”

“I don’t know,” Prax said, rising to his knees. He pointed toward the horizon. “Over there somewhere.”

“I need more than that,” Holden said.

“I’ve never been on the surface before,” Prax said. “In a dome, sure. But just *out*? I mean, I know we’re close to it, but I don’t know how to get there.”

“All right,” Holden said. In the high vacuum over his head, something huge and very far away detonated. It was like the old cartoon lightbulb of someone getting an idea. “We can do this. We can solve this. Amos, you head toward that hill over there, see what you can see. Prax and Naomi, start going that direction.”

“I don’t think we need to do that, sir,” Naomi said.

“Why not?”

Naomi raised her hand, pointing back behind Holden and Prax both.

“Because I’m pretty sure that’s the *Roci* setting down over there,” she said.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Holden

The secret landing pad lay in the hollow of a small crater. When Holden crested the lip and saw the *Rocinante* below him, the sudden and dizzying release of tension told him how frightened he'd been for the last several hours. But the *Roci* was home, and no matter how hard his rational mind argued that they were still in terrible danger, home was safe. As he paused a moment to catch his breath, the scene was lit with bright white light, like someone had taken a picture. Holden looked up in time to see a fading cloud of glowing gas in high orbit.

People were still dying in space just over their heads.

"Wow," Prax said. "It's bigger than I expected."

"Corvette," Amos replied, obvious pride in his voice. "Frigate-class fleet escort ship."

"I don't know what any of that means," Prax said. "It looks like a big chisel with an upside-down coffee cup on the back."

Amos said, "That's the drive—"

"Enough," Holden cut in. "Get to the airlock."

Amos led the way, sliding down the crater's icy wall hunched down on his heels and using his hands for balance. Prax went next, for once not needing any help. Naomi went third, her reflexes and balance honed by a lifetime spent in shifting gravities. She actually managed to look graceful.

Holden went last, fully prepared to slip and go down the hill in a humiliating tumble, then pleasantly surprised when he didn't.

As they bounded across the flat floor of the crater toward the ship, the outer airlock door slid open, revealing Alex in a suit of Martian body armor and carrying an assault rifle. As soon as they were close enough to the ship that they could cut through the orbital radio clutter, Holden said, "Alex! Man, is it good to see you."

"Hey, Cap," Alex replied, even his exaggerated drawl not able to hide the relief in his voice. "Wasn't sure how hot this LZ would be. Anyone chasin' you?"

Amos ran up the ramp and grabbed Alex in a bear hug that yanked him off his feet.

“Man, it’s fucking good to be home!” he said.

Prax and Naomi followed, Naomi patting Alex on the shoulder as she went by. “You did good. Thank you.”

Holden stopped on the ramp to look up one last time. The sky was still filled with the flashes and light trails of ongoing battle. He had the sudden visceral memory of being a boy back in Montana, watching massive thunderheads flash with hidden lightning.

Alex watched with him, then said, “It was a bit hectic, comin’ in.”

Holden threw an arm around his shoulder. “Thanks for the ride.”

Once the airlock had finished cycling and the crew had removed their environment suits and armor, Holden said, “Alex, this is Prax Meng. Prax, this is the solar system’s best pilot, Alex Kamal.”

Prax shook Alex’s hand. “Thank you for helping me find Mei.”

Alex frowned a question at Holden, but a quick shake of the head kept him from asking it. “Nice to meet you, Prax.”

“Alex,” Holden said, “get us warmed up for liftoff, but don’t take off until I’m up in the copilot’s chair.”

“Roger,” Alex said, and headed toward the bow of the ship.

“Everything’s sideways,” Prax said, looking around at the storage room just past the inner airlock door.

“The *Roci* doesn’t spend much time on her belly like this,” Naomi said, taking his hand and leading him to the crew ladder, which now appeared to run across the floor. “We’re standing on a bulkhead, and that wall to our right is normally the deck.”

“Grew up in low grav and don’t spend much time on ships, apparently,” Amos said. “Man, this next part is really gonna suck for you.”

“Naomi,” Holden said. “Get to ops and get belted in. Amos, take Prax to the crew deck and then head down to engineering and get the *Roci* ready for a rough ride.”

Before they could leave, Holden put a hand on Prax’s shoulder.

“This takeoff and flight is going to be fast and bumpy. If you haven’t trained for high-g flight, it will probably be very uncomfortable.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Prax said, making what he probably thought was a brave face.

“I know you’re tough. You couldn’t have survived the last couple weeks otherwise. You don’t have anything to prove at this point. Amos will take you to the crew deck. Find a room without a name on the door. That will be your room now. Get in the crash couch and buckle in, then hit the bright green button on the panel to your left. The couch will pump you full of drugs that will sedate you and keep you from blowing a blood vessel if we have to burn hard.”

“My room?” Prax said, an odd note in his voice.

“We’ll get you some clothes and sundries once we’re out of this shit. You can keep them there.”

“My room,” Prax repeated.

“Yeah,” Holden said. “Your room.” He could see Prax fighting down a lump in his throat, and he realized what the simple offer of comfort and safety probably meant to someone who’d been through what the small botanist had over the last month.

There were tears in the man’s eyes.

“Come on, let’s get you settled in,” Amos said, leading Prax aft toward the crew deck.

Holden headed the other way, past the ops deck, where Naomi was already strapped down into a chair at one of the workstations, then forward into the cockpit. He climbed into the copilot’s seat and belted in.

“Five minutes,” he said over the shipwide channel.

“So,” Alex said, dragging the word out to two syllables while he flicked switches to finish the preflight check, “we’re lookin’ for someone named Mei?”

“Prax’s daughter.”

“We do that now? Seems like the scope of our mission is creepin’ a bit.”

Holden nodded. Finding lost daughters was not part of their mandate. That had been Miller’s job. And he’d never be able to adequately explain the certainty he felt that this lost little girl was at the center of everything that had happened on Ganymede.

“I think this lost little girl is at the center of everything that’s happened on Ganymede,” he said with a shrug.

“Okay,” Alex replied, then hit something on a panel twice and frowned. “Huh, we have a red on the board. Gettin’ a ‘no seal’ on the cargo

airlock. Might've caught some flak on the way down, I guess. It was pretty hot up there."

"Well, we're not going to stop and fix it now," Holden said. "We keep the bay in vacuum most of the time anyway. If the inner hatch into the cargo area is showing a good seal, just override the alarm and let's go."

"Roger," Alex said, and tapped the override.

"One minute," Holden said over the shipwide, then turned to Alex. "So I'm curious."

"'Bout?"

"How'd you manage to slip through that shit-storm up above us, and can you do it again on the way out?"

Alex laughed.

"Simple matter of never bein' higher than the second-highest threat on anyone's board. And, of course, not bein' there anymore when they decide to get around to you."

"I'm giving you a raise," Holden said, then began the ten-second countdown. At one, the *Roci* blasted off of Ganymede on four pillars of superheated steam.

"Rotate us for a full burn as soon as you can," Holden said, the rumble of the ship's takeoff giving him an artificial vibrato.

"This close?"

"There's nothing below us that matters," Holden said, thinking of the remnants of black filament they'd seen in the hidden base. "Melt it."

"Okay," Alex said. Then, once the ship had finished orienting straight up, he said, "Givin' her the spurs."

Even with the juice coursing through his blood, Holden blacked out for a moment. When he came to, the *Roci* was veering wildly from side to side. The cockpit was alive with the sounds of warning buzzers.

"Whoa, honey," Alex was saying under his breath. "Whoa, big girl."

"Naomi," Holden said, looking at a confusing mass of red on the threat board and trying to decipher it with his blood-starved brain. "Who's firing at us?"

"Everyone." She sounded as groggy as he felt.

"Yeah," Alex said, his tension draining some of the good-old-boy drawl out of his voice. "She's not kidding."

The swarm of threats on his display began to make sense, and Holden saw they were right. It looked like half of the inner planets ships on their

side of Ganymede had lobbed at least one missile at them. He entered the command code to set all the weapons to free fire and sent control of the aft PDCs to Amos. "Amos, cover our asses."

Alex was doing his best to keep any of the incoming missiles from catching them, but ultimately that was a lost cause. Nothing with meat inside it could outrun metal and silicon.

"Where are we—" Holden said, stopping to target a missile that wandered into the front starboard PDC's firing arc. The point defense cannon fired off a long burst at it. The missile was smart enough to turn sharply and evade, but its sudden course change bought them a few more seconds.

"Callisto's on our side of Jupiter," Alex said, referring to the next sizable moon out from Ganymede. "Gonna get in its shadow."

Holden checked the vectors of the ships that had fired at them. If any of them were pursuing, Alex's gambit would only buy them a few minutes. But it didn't appear they were. Of the dozen or so that had attacked them, over half were moderately to severely damaged, and the ones that weren't were still busy shooting at each other.

"Seems like we were everyone's number one threat there for a second," Holden said. "But not so much anymore."

"Yeah, sorry about that, Cap. Not sure why that happened."

"I don't blame you," Holden said.

The *Roci* shuddered, and Amos gave a whoop over the shipwide comm. "Don't be trying to touch my girl's ass!"

Two of the closer missiles had vanished off the threat board.

"Nice work, Amos," Holden said, checking the updated times to impact and seeing that they'd bought another half minute.

"Shit, Cap, the *Roci* does all the work," Amos said. "I just encourage her to express herself."

"Going to duck and cover around Callisto. I'd appreciate a distraction," Alex said to Holden.

"Okay, Naomi, another ten seconds or so," Holden said. "Then hit them with everything you've got. We'll need them blind for a few seconds."

"Roger," Naomi said. Holden could see her prepping a massive assault package of laser clutter and radio jamming.

The *Rocinante* lurched again, and the moon Callisto suddenly filled Holden's forward screen. Alex hurtled toward it at a suicidal rate, flipping

the ship and hard burning at the last second to throw them into a low slingshot orbit.

“Three... two... one... now,” he said, the *Roci* diving tail first toward Callisto, whipping past it so low that Holden felt like he could have reached out the airlock and scooped up some snow. At the same time, Naomi’s jamming package hammered the sensors of the pursuing missiles, blinding them while their processors worked to cut through the noise.

By the time they’d reacquired the *Rocinante*, she’d been thrown around Callisto by gravity and her own drive in a new vector and at high speed. Two of the missiles gamely tried to come about and pursue, but the rest either limped off in random directions or slammed into the moon. When their two pursuers had gotten back on course, the *Roci* had opened up an enormous lead and could take her time shooting them down.

“We made it,” Alex said. Holden found the disbelief in his pilot’s voice fairly disconcerting. Had it been that close?

“Never doubted it,” Holden said. “Take us to Tycho. Half a g. I’ll be in my cabin.”

When they were finished, Naomi flopped onto her side in their shared bunk, sweat plastering her curly black hair to her forehead. She was still panting. He was too.

“That was... vigorous,” she said.

Holden nodded but didn’t have enough air to actually speak yet. When he’d climbed down the ladder from the cockpit, Naomi had been waiting, already out of her restraints. She’d grabbed him and kissed him so hard his lip had split. He hadn’t even noticed. They’d barely reached the cabin with their clothes on. What had happened afterward was sort of a blur now to Holden, though his legs were tired and his lip hurt.

Naomi rolled across him and climbed out of the bunk.

“I’ve got to pee,” she said, pulling on a robe and heading out the door. Holden just nodded to her, still not quite capable of speech.

He shifted over to the middle of the bed, stretching out his arms and legs for a moment. The truth was the *Roci*’s cabins were not built for two occupants, least of all the crash couches that doubled as beds. But over the course of the last year, he’d spent more and more time sleeping in Naomi’s

cabin, until it sort of became *their* cabin and he just didn't sleep anywhere else anymore. They couldn't share the bunk during high-g maneuvers, but so far they'd never been asleep anytime the ship had needed to do high-g maneuvering. A trend that was likely to continue.

Holden was starting to doze off when the hatch opened and Naomi came back in. She tossed a cold, wet washcloth onto his belly.

"Wow, that's bracing," Holden said, sitting up with a start.

"It was hot when I left the head with it."

"That," Holden said while he cleaned up, "sounded very dirty."

Naomi grinned, then sat on the edge of the bunk and poked him in the ribs. "You can still think of sex? I would've thought we got that out of your system."

"A close brush with death does wonderful things for my refractory period."

Naomi climbed into the bunk next to him, still wrapped in her robe.

"You know," she said, "this was my idea. And I'm all in favor of reaffirming life through sex."

"Why do I get the feeling that there is a 'but' missing at the end of that sentence?"

"But—"

"Ah, there it is."

"There's something we need to talk about. And this seems a good time."

Holden rolled over onto his side, facing her, and pushed up onto one elbow. A thick strand of hair was hanging in her face, and he brushed it back with his other hand.

"What did I do?" he said.

"It's not exactly anything you've done," Naomi said. "It's more what we're heading off to do right now."

Holden put his hand on her arm but waited for her to continue. The soft cloth of her robe clung to the wet skin beneath it.

"I'm worried," she said, "that we're flying off to Tycho to do something really rash."

"Naomi, you weren't there, you didn't see—"

"I saw it, Jim, through Amos' suitcam. I know what it is. I know how much it scares you. It scares the hell out of me too."

“No,” Holden said, his voice surprising him with its anger. “No you don’t. You weren’t on Eros when it got out, you never—”

“Hey, I was there. Maybe not for the worst of it. Not like you,” Naomi said, her voice still calm. “But I did help carry what was left of you and Miller to the med bay. And I watched you try to die there. We can’t just accuse Fred of—”

“Right now—and I mean *right now*—Ganymede could be changing.”

“No—”

“Yes. Yes it could. We could be leaving a couple million dead people behind right now who don’t know it yet. Melissa and Santichai? Remember them? Now think of them stripped down to whatever pieces the protomolecule finds most useful at the moment. Think of them *as parts*. Because if that bug is loose on Ganymede, then that’s what they are.”

“Jim,” Naomi said, a warning in her voice now. “This is what I’m talking about. The intensity of your feelings isn’t *evidence*. You are about to accuse a man who’s been your friend and patron for the last year of maybe killing an entire moon full of people. That isn’t the Fred we know. And you owe him better than that.”

Holden pushed up to a sitting position, part of him wanting to physically distance himself from Naomi, the part of him that was angry with her for not sympathizing enough.

“I gave Fred the last of it. *I gave it to him*, and he swore right to my face he’d never use it. But that’s not what I saw down there. You call him my friend, but Fred has only ever done what would advance his own cause. Even helping us was just another move in his political game.”

“Experiments on kidnapped children?” Naomi said. “A whole moon—one of the most important in the outer planets—put at risk and maybe killed outright? Does that make any sense to you? Does that sound like Fred Johnson?”

“The OPA wants Ganymede even more than either inner planet does,” Holden said, finally admitting the thing he’d feared since they’d found the black filament. “And they wouldn’t give it to him.”

“Stop,” Naomi said.

“Maybe he’s trying to drive them off, or he sold it to them in exchange for the moon. That would at least explain the heavy inner planets traffic we’ve been seeing—”

“No. Stop,” she said. “I don’t want to sit here and listen to you talk yourself into this.”

Holden started to speak, but Naomi sat up facing him and gently put her hand over his mouth.

“I didn’t like this new Jim Holden you’ve been turning into. The guy who’d rather reach for his gun than talk? I know being the OPA’s bagman has been a shitty job, and I know we’ve had to do a lot of pretty rotten things in the name of protecting the Belt. But that was still you. I could still see you lurking there under the surface, waiting to come back.”

“Naomi,” he said, pulling her hand away from his face.

“This guy who can’t wait to go all *High Noon* in the streets of Tycho? That’s not Jim Holden at all. I don’t recognize that man,” she said, then frowned. “No. That’s not right. I do recognize him. But his name was Miller.”

For Holden, the most awful part was how calm she was. She never raised her voice, never sounded angry. Instead, infinitely worse, there was only a resigned sadness.

“If that’s who you are now, you need to drop me off somewhere. I can’t go with you anymore,” she said. “I’m out.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Avasarala

Avasarala stood at her window, looking out at the morning haze. In the distance, a transport lifted off. It rode an exhaust plume that looked like a pillar of bright white cloud, and then it was gone. Her hands ached. She knew that some of the photons striking her eyes right now had come from explosions light-minutes away. Ganymede Station, once the safest place without an atmosphere, then a war zone, and now a wasteland. She could no more pick out the light of its death than pluck a particular molecule of salt from the ocean, but she knew it was there, and the fact was like a stone in her belly.

“I can ask for confirmation,” Soren said. “Nguyen should be filing his command report in the next eighteen hours. Once we have that—”

“We’ll know what he said,” Avasarala snapped. “I can tell you that right now. The Martian forces took a threatening position, and he was forced to respond aggressively. La la fucking la. *Where did he get the ships?*”

“He’s an admiral,” Soren said. “I thought he came with them.”

She turned. The boy looked tired. He’d been up since the small hours of the morning. They all had. His eyes were bloodshot, and his skin pallid and clammy.

“I took apart that command group myself,” she said. “I pared it down until you could have drowned it in a bathtub. And he’s out there now with enough firepower to take on the Martian fleet?”

“Apparently,” Soren said.

She fought the urge to spit. The rumble of the transport engines finally reached her, the sound muffled by distance and the glazing. The light was already gone. To her sleep-deprived mind, it was exactly like playing politics in the Jovian system or the Belt. Something happened—she could see it happen—but she heard it only after the fact. When it was too late.

She’d made a mistake. Nguyen was a war hawk. The kind of adolescent boy who still thought any problem could be solved by shooting

it enough. Everything he'd done was as subtle as a lead pipe to the kneecap, until this. Now he'd reassembled his command without her knowing it. And he'd had her pulled from the Martian negotiations.

Which meant that he hadn't done any of it. Nguyen had either a patron or a cabal. She hadn't seen that he was a bit player, so whoever called his tune had surprised her. She was playing against shadows, and she hated it.

"More light," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"Find out how he got those ships," she said. "Do it before you go to sleep. I want a full accounting. Where the replacement ships came from, who ordered them, how they were justified. Everything."

"Would you also like a pony, ma'am?"

"You're fucking right I would," she said, and sagged against her desk. "You do good work. Someday you might get a real job."

"I'm looking forward to it, ma'am."

"Is she still around?"

"At her desk," Soren said. "Should I send her in?"

"You better had."

When Bobbie came into the room, a film of cheap paper in her fist, it struck Avasarala again how poorly the Martian fit in. It wasn't only her accent or the difference in build that spoke of a childhood in the lower Martian gravity. In the halls of politics, the woman's air of physical competence stood out. She looked like she'd been roused out of bed in the middle of the night, just like all of them; it was only that it looked good on her. Might be useful, might not, but certainly it was worth remembering.

"What have you got?" Avasarala asked.

The marine's frown was all in her forehead.

"I've gotten through to a couple of people in the command. Most of them don't know who the hell I am, though. I probably spent as much time telling them I was working for you as I did talking about Ganymede."

"It's a lesson. Martian bureaucrats are stupid, venal people. What did they say?"

"Long story?"

"Short."

"You shot at us."

Avasarala leaned back in her chair. Her back hurt, her knees hurt, and the knot of sorrow and outrage that was always just under her heart felt

brighter than usual.

“Of course we did,” she said. “The peace delegation?”

“Already gone,” Bobbie said. “They’ll be releasing a statement sometime tomorrow about how the UN was negotiating in bad faith. They’re still fighting out the exact wording.”

“What’s the hold?”

Bobbie shook her head. She didn’t understand.

“What words are they fighting over, and which side wants which words?” Avasarala demanded.

“I don’t know. Does it matter?”

Of course it mattered. The difference between *The UN has been negotiating in bad faith* and *The UN was negotiating in bad faith* could be measured in hundreds of lives. Thousands. Avasarala tried to swallow her impatience. It didn’t come naturally.

“All right,” she said. “See if there’s anything else you can get me.”

Bobbie held out the paper. Avasarala took it.

“The hell is this?” she asked.

“My resignation,” Bobbie said. “I thought you’d want all the paperwork in place. We’re at war now, so I’ll be shipping back. Getting my new assignment.”

“Who recalled you?”

“No one, yet,” Bobbie said. “But—”

“Will you please sit down? I feel like I’m at the bottom of a fucking well, talking to you.”

The marine sat. Avasarala took a deep breath.

“Do you want to kill me?” Avasarala asked. Bobbie blinked, and before she could answer, Avasarala lifted her hand, commanding silence. “I am one of the most powerful people in the UN. We’re at war. So do you want to kill me?”

“I... guess so?”

“You don’t. You want to find out who killed your men and you want the politicians to stop greasing the wheels with Marine blood. And holy shit! What do you know? I want that too.”

“But I’m active-duty Martian military,” Bobbie said. “If I stay working for you, I’m committing treason.” The way she said it wasn’t complaint or accusation.

“They haven’t recalled you,” Avasarala said. “And they’re not going to. The wartime diplomatic code of contact is almost exactly the same for you as it is for us, and it’s ten thousand pages of nine-point type. If you get orders right now, I can put up enough queries and requests for clarifications that you’ll die of old age in that chair. If you just want to kill someone for Mars, you’re not going to get a better target than me. If you want to stop this idiotic fucking war and find out who’s actually behind it, get back to your desk and find out who wants what wording.”

Bobbie was silent for a long moment.

“You mean that as a rhetorical device,” she said at last, “but it would make a certain amount of sense to kill you. And I can do it.”

A tiny chill hit Avasarala’s spine, but she didn’t let it reach her face.

“I’ll try not to oversell the point in the future. Now get back to work.”

“Yes, sir,” Bobbie said, then stood and walked out of the room. Avasarala blew out a breath, her cheeks ballooning. She was inviting Martian Marines to slaughter her in her own office. She needed a fucking nap. Her hand terminal chimed. An unscheduled high-status report had just come through, the deep red banner overriding her usual display settings. She tapped it, ready for more bad news from Ganymede.

It was about Venus.

Until seven hours earlier, the *Arbogast* had been a third-generation destroyer, built at the Bush Shipyards thirteen years before and later refitted as a military science vessel. For the last eight months, she’d been orbiting Venus. Most of the active scanning data that Avasarala had relied on had come from her.

The event she was watching had been captured by two lunar telescopic stations with broad-spectrum intelligence feeds that happened to be at the correct angles, and about a dozen shipborne optical observers. The dataset they collected agreed perfectly.

“Play it again,” Avasarala said.

Michael-Jon de Uturbé had been a field technician when she’d first met him, thirty years before. Now he was the de facto head of the special sciences committee and married to Avasarala’s roommate from university. In that time, his hair had fallen out or grown white, his dark brown skin had

taken to draping a bit off of his bones, and he hadn't changed the brand of cheap floral cologne he wore.

He had always been an intensely shy, almost antisocial, man. In order to maintain the connection, she knew not to ask too much of him. His small, cluttered office was less than a quarter of a mile from hers, and she had seen him five times in the last decade, each of them moments when she needed to understand something obscure and complex quickly.

He tapped his hand terminal twice, and the images on the display reset. The *Arboghost* was whole once more, floating in false color detail above the haze of Venusian cloud. The time stamp started moving forward, one second per second.

"Walk me through," she said.

"Um. Well. We start from the spike. It's just like the one we saw that last time Ganymede started going to hell."

"Splendid. That's two datapoints."

"This came before the fighting," he said. "Maybe an hour. A little less."

It had come during Holden's firefight. Before she could bring him in. But how could Venus be responding to Holden's raid on Ganymede? Had Bobbie's monsters been part of that fight?

"Then the radio ping. Right"—he froze the display—"here. Massive sweep in three-second-by-seven-second grid. It was looking, but it knew where to look. All those active scans, I'd assume. Called attention."

"All right."

He started the playback again. The resolution went a few degrees grainier, and he made a pleased sound.

"This was interesting," he said, as if the rest were not. "Radiative pulse of some kind. Interfered with all the telescoping except a strictly visible spectrum kit on Luna. Only lasted a tenth of a second, though. The microwave burst after it was pretty normal active sensor scanning."

You sound disappointed perched at the back of Avasarala's tongue, but the dread and anticipation of what would come next stopped it. The *Arboghost*, with 572 souls aboard her, came apart like a cloud. Hull plates peeled away in neat, orderly rows. Super-structural girders and decks shifted apart. The engineering bays detached, slipping away. In the image before her, the full crew had been exposed to hard vacuum. In the moment she was looking at now, they were all dying and not yet dead. That it was

like watching a construction plan animation—crew quarters here, the engineering section here, the plates cupping the drive thus and so—only made it more monstrous.

“Now this is especially interesting,” Michael-Jon said, stopping the playback. “Watch what happens when we increase magnification.”

Don't show them to me, Avasarala wanted to say. I don't want to watch them die.

But the image he moved in on wasn't a human being, but a knot of complicated ducting. He advanced it slowly, frame by frame, and the image grew misty.

“It's ablating?” she asked.

“What? No, no. Here, I'll bring you closer.”

The image jumped in again. The cloudiness was an illusion created by a host of small bits of metal: bolts, nuts, Edison clamps, O-rings. She squinted. It wasn't a loose cloud either. Like iron filings under the influence of a magnet, each tiny piece was held in line with the ones before and behind it.

“The *Arbogast* wasn't torn apart,” he said. “It was disassembled. It looks as though there were about fifteen separate waves, each one undoing another level of the mechanism. Stripped the whole thing down to the screws.”

Avasarala took a deep breath, then another, then another, until the sound lost its ragged edge and the awe and fear grew small enough that she could push it to the back of her mind.

“What does this?” she said at last. She'd meant it as a rhetorical question. Of course there was no answer. No force known to humanity could do what had just been done. That wasn't the meaning he took.

“Graduate students,” he said brightly. “My Industrial Design final was just the same. They gave us all machines and we had to take them apart and figure out what they did. Extra credit was to deliver an improved design.” And a moment later, his voice melancholy: “Of course we also had to put them back together, yes?”

On the display, the rigidity and order of the floating bits of metal stopped, and the bolts and girders, vast ceramic plates and minute clamps began to drift, set in chaotic motion by the departure of whatever had been holding them. Seventy seconds from first burst to the end. A little over a

minute, and not a shot fired in response. Not even something clearly to be shot.

“The crew?”

“Took their suits apart. Didn’t bother disassembling the bodies. Might have interpreted them as a logical unit or might already know all it needs to about human anatomy.”

“Who’s seen this?”

Michael-Jon blinked, then shrugged, then blinked again.

“*This* this, or a version of this? We’re the only one with both high-def feeds, but it’s Venus. Everyone who was looking saw it. Not like it’s in a sealed lab.”

She closed her eyes, pressing her fingers against the bridge of her nose as if she were fighting a headache while she struggled to keep the mask in place. Better to seem in pain. Better to seem impatient. The fear shook her like a seizure, like something happening to somebody else. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she bit her lip until they went away. She pulled up the personnel locator on her hand terminal. Nguyen was out of the question even if he’d been in conversational range. Nettleford was with a dozen ships burning toward Ceres Station, and she wasn’t entirely certain of him. Souther.

“Can you send this version to Admiral Souther?”

“Oh, no. It’s not cleared for release.”

Avasarala looked at him, her expression empty.

“Are you clearing it for release?”

“I am clearing it for release to Admiral Souther. Please send it immediately.”

Michael-Jon bobbed a quick nod, tapping with the tips of both pinkies. Avasarala took out her own hand terminal and sent a simple message to Souther. WATCH AND CALL ME. When she stood, her legs ached.

“It was good seeing you again,” Michael-Jon said, not looking at her. “We should all have dinner sometime.”

“Let’s,” Avasarala said, and left.

The women’s restroom was cold. Avasarala stood at the sink, her palms flat against the granite. She wasn’t used to fear or awe. Her life had been about control, talking and bullying and teasing whoever needed it until the world turned the direction she wanted it to. The few times the implacable universe had overwhelmed her haunted her: an earthquake in

Bengal when she'd been a girl, a storm in Egypt that had trapped her and Arjun in their hotel room for four days as the food supplies failed, the death of her son. Each one had turned her constant pretense of certainty and pride against her, left her curled in her bed at night for weeks afterward, her fingers bent in claws, her dreams nightmares.

This was worse. Before, she could comfort herself with the idea that the universe was empty of intent. That all the terrible things were just the accidental convergences of chance and mindless forces. The death of the *Arboghost* was something else. It was intentional and inhuman. It was like seeing the face of God and finding no compassion there.

Shaking, she pulled up her hand terminal. Arjun answered almost immediately. From the set of his jaw and the softness of his eyes, she knew he had seen some version of the event. And his thought hadn't been for the fate of mankind, but for her. She tried to smile, but it was too much. Tears ran down her cheeks. Arjun sighed gently and looked down.

"I love you very much," Avasarala said. "Knowing you has let me bear the unbearable."

Arjun grinned. He looked good with wrinkles. He was a more handsome man now that he was older. As if the round-faced, comically earnest boy who'd snuck to her window to read poems in the night had only been waiting to become this.

"I love you, I have always loved you, if we are born into new lives, I will love you there."

Avasarala sobbed once, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and nodded.

"All right, then," she said.

"Back to work?"

"Back to work. I may be home late."

"I'll be here. You can wake me."

They were silent for a moment; then she released the connection. Admiral Souther hadn't called. Errinwright hadn't called. Avasarala's mind was leaping around like a terrier attacking a troop transport. She rose to her feet, forced herself to put one foot in front of the other. The simple physical act of walking seemed to clear her head. Little electric carts stood ready to whisk her back to her office, but she ignored them, and by the time she reached it, she was almost calm again.

Bobbie sat hunched at her desk, the sheer physical bulk of the woman making the furniture seem like something from grade school. Soren was elsewhere, which was fine. His training wasn't military.

"So you're in an entrenched position with a huge threat coming down onto you, right?" Avasarala said, sitting down on the edge of Soren's desk. "Say you're on a moon and some third party has thrown a comet at you. Massive threat, you understand?"

Bobbie looked at her, confused for a moment, and then, with a shrug, played along.

"All right," the marine said.

"So why do you choose that moment to pick a fight with your neighbors? Are you just frightened and lashing out? Are you thinking that the other bastards are responsible for the rock? Are you just that stupid?"

"We're talking about Venus and the fighting in the Jovian system," Bobbie said.

"It's a pretty fucking thin metaphor, yes," Avasarala said. "So why are you doing it?"

Bobbie leaned back in her chair, plastic creaking under her. The big woman's eyes narrowed. She opened her mouth once, closed it, frowned, and began again.

"I'm consolidating power," Bobbie said. "If I use my resources stopping the comet, then as soon as that threat's gone, I lose. The other guy catches me with my pants down. Bang. If I kick his ass first, then when it's over, I win."

"But if you cooperate—"

"Then you have to trust the other guy," Bobbie said, shaking her head.

"There's a million tons of ice coming that's going to kill you both. Why the hell wouldn't you trust the other guy?"

"Depends. Is he an Earther?" Bobbie said. "We've got two major military forces in the system, plus whatever the Belters can gin up. That's three sides with a lot of history. When whatever's going to happen on Venus actually happens, someone wants to already have all the cards."

"And if both sides—Earth and Mars—are making that same calculation, we're going to spend all our energy getting ready for the war after next."

"Yep," Bobbie said. "And yes, that's how we all lose together."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Prax

Prax sat in his cabin. For sleeping space on a ship, he knew it was large. Spacious, even. Altogether, it was smaller than his bedroom on Ganymede had been. He sat on the gel-filled mattress, the acceleration gravity pressing him down, making his arms and legs feel heavier than they were. He wondered whether the sense of suddenly weighing more—specifically the discontinuous change of space travel—triggered some evolutionary cue for fatigue. The feeling of being pulled to the floor or the bed was so powerfully like the sensation of bone-melting tiredness it was easy to think that sleeping a little more would fix it, would make things better.

“Your daughter is probably dead,” he said aloud. Waited to see how his body would react. “Mei is probably dead.”

He didn’t start sobbing this time, so that was progress.

Ganymede was a day and a half behind him and already too small to pick out with the naked eye. Jupiter was a dim disk the size of a pinky nail, kicking back the light of a sun that was little more than an extremely bright star. Intellectually, he knew that he was falling sunward, heading in from the Jovian system toward the Belt. In a week, the sun would be close to twice the size it was now, and it would still be insignificant. In a context of such immensity, of distances and speeds so far above any meaningful human experience, it seemed like nothing should matter. He should be agreeing that he hadn’t been there when God made the mountains, whether it meant the ones on Earth or on Ganymede or somewhere farther out in the darkness. He was in a tiny metal-and-ceramic box that was exchanging matter for energy to throw a half dozen primates across a vacuum larger than millions of oceans. Compared to that, how could anything matter?

“Your daughter is probably dead,” he said again, and this time the words caught in his throat and started to choke him.

It was, he thought, something about the sense of being suddenly safe. On Ganymede, he’d had fear to numb him. Fear and malnutrition and routine and the ability at any moment to move, to do something even if it

was utterly useless. Go check the boards again, go wait in line at security, trot along the hallways and see how many new bullet holes pocked them.

On the *Rocinante*, he had to slow down. He had to stop. There was nothing for him to do here but wait out the long sunward fall to Tycho Station. He couldn't distract himself. There was no station—not even a wounded and dying one—to hunt through. There were only the cabin he'd been given, his hand terminal, a few jumpsuits a half size too big for him. A small box of generic toiletries. That was everything he had left. And there was enough food and clean water that his brain could start working again.

Each passing hour felt like waking up a little more. He knew how badly his body and mind had been abused only when he got better. Every time, he felt like this had to be back to normal, and then not long after, he'd find that, no, there had been more.

So he explored himself, probing at the wound at the center of his personal world like pressing the tip of his tongue into a dry socket.

"Your daughter," he said through the tears, "is probably dead. But if she isn't, you have to find her."

That felt better—or, if not better, at least right. He leaned forward, his hands clasped, and rested his chin. Carefully, he imagined Katoa's body, laid out on its table. When his mind rebelled, trying to think about something—anything—else, he brought it back and put Mei in the boy's place. Quiet, empty, dead. The grief welled up from a place just above his stomach, and he watched it like it was something outside himself.

During his time as a graduate student, he had done data collection for a study of *Pinus contorta*. Of all the varieties of pine to rise off Earth, lodgepole pine had been the most robust in low-g environments. His job had been to collect the fallen cones and burn them for the seeds. In the wild, lodgepole pine wouldn't germinate without fire; the resin in the cones encouraged a hotter fire, even when it meant the death of the parental tree. To get better, it had to get worse. To survive, the plant had to embrace the unsurvivable.

He understood that.

"Mei is dead," he said. "You lost her."

He didn't have to wait for the idea to stop hurting. It would never stop hurting. But he couldn't let it grow so strong it overwhelmed him. He had the sense of doing himself permanent spiritual damage, but it was the strategy he had. And from what he could tell, it seemed to be working.

His hand terminal chimed. The two-hour block was up. Prax wiped the tears away with the back of his hand, took a deep breath, blew it back out, and stood. Two hours, twice a day, he'd decided, would be enough time in the fire to keep him hard and strong in this new environment of less freedom and more calories. Enough to keep him functional. He washed his face in the communal bathroom—the crew called it the head—and made his way to the galley.

The pilot—Alex, his name was—stood at the coffee machine, talking to a comm unit on the wall. His skin was darker than Prax's, his thinning hair black, with the first few stray threads of white. His voice had the odd drawl some Martians affected.

"I'm seein' eight percent and falling."

The wall unit said something cheerful and obscene. Amos.

"I'm tellin' you, the seal's cracked," Alex said.

"I been over it twice," Amos said from the comm. The pilot took a mug with the word *Tachi* printed on it from the coffee machine.

"Third time's the charm."

"Arright. Stand by."

The pilot took one long, lip-smacking sip from the mug, then, noticing Prax, nodded. Prax smiled uncomfortably.

"Feelin' better?" Alex asked.

"Yes. I think so," Prax said. "I don't know."

Alex sat at one of the tables. The design of the room was military—all soft edges and curves to minimize damage if someone was caught out of place by an impact or a sudden maneuver. The food inventory control had a biometric interface that had been disabled. Built for high security, but not used that way. The name ROCINANTE was on the wall in letters as broad as his hand, and someone had added a stencil of a spray of yellow narcissus. It looked desperately out of place and very appropriate at the same time. When he thought about it that way, it seemed to fit most things about the ship. Her crew, for instance.

"You settlin' in all right? You need anything?"

"I'm fine," Prax said with a nod. "Thank you."

"They beat us up pretty good gettin' out of there. I've been through some ugly patches of sky, but that was right up there."

Prax nodded and took a food packet from the dispenser. It was textured paste, sweet and rich with wheat and honey and the subterranean tang of

baked raisins. Prax sat down before he thought about it, and the pilot seemed to take it as an invitation to continue the conversation.

“How long have you been on Ganymede?”

“Most of my life,” Prax said. “My family went out when my mother was pregnant. They’d been working on Earth and Luna, saving up to get to the outer planets. They had a short posting on Callisto first.”

“Belters?”

“Not exactly. They heard that the contracts were better out past the Belt. It was the whole ‘make a better future for the family’ idea. My father’s dream, really.”

Alex sipped at his coffee.

“And so, Praxidike. They named you after the moon?”

“They did,” Prax said. “They were a little embarrassed to find out it was a woman’s name. I never minded it, though. My wife—my ex-wife—thought it was endearing. It’s probably why she noticed me in the first place, really. It takes something to stand out a little, and you can’t swing a dead cat on Ganymede without hitting five botany PhDs. Or, well, you couldn’t.”

The pause was just long enough that Prax knew what was coming and could steel himself for it.

“I heard your daughter went missing,” Alex said. “I’m sorry about that.”

“She’s probably dead,” Prax said, just the way he’d practiced.

“It had to do with that lab y’all found down there, did it?”

“I think so. It must have. They took her just before the first incident. Her and several of the others in her group.”

“Her group?”

“She has an immune disorder. Myers-Skelton Premature Immunosenescence. Always has had.”

“My sister had a brittle bone disorder. Hard,” Alex said. “Is that why they took her?”

“I assume so,” Prax said. “Why else would you steal a child like that?”

“Slave labor or sex trade,” Alex said softly. “But can’t see why you’d pick out kids with a medical condition. It true you saw protomolecule down there?”

“Apparently,” Prax said. The food bulb was cooling in his hand. He knew he should eat more—he wanted to, as good as it tasted—but

something was turning at the back of his mind. He'd thought this all through before, when he'd been distracted and starving. Now, in this civilized coffin hurtling through the void, all the old familiar thoughts started to touch up against each other. They'd specifically targeted the children from Mei's group. Immunocompromised children. And they'd been working with the protomolecule.

"The captain was on Eros," Alex said.

"It must have been a loss for him when it happened," Prax said to have something to say.

"No, I don't mean he lived there. He was on the station when it happened. We all were, but he was on it the longest. He actually saw it starting. The initial infected. That."

"Really?"

"Changed him, some. I've been flyin' with him since we were just fartin' around on this old ice bucket running from Saturn to the Belt. He didn't used to like me, I suspect. Now we're family. It's been a hell of a trip."

Prax took a long pull from his food bulb. Cool, the paste tasted less of wheat and more of honey and raisin. It wasn't as good. He remembered the look of fear on Holden's face when they'd found the dark filaments, the sound of controlled panic in his voice. It made sense now.

And as if summoned by the thought, Holden appeared in the doorway, a formed aluminum case under his arm with electromagnetic plates along the base. A personal footlocker designed to stay put even under high g. Prax had seen them before, but he'd never needed one. Gravity had been a constant for him until now.

"Cap'n," Alex said with a vestigial salute. "Everything all right?"

"Just moving some things to my bunk," Holden said. The tightness in his voice was unmistakable. Prax had the sudden feeling that he was intruding on something private, but Alex and Holden didn't give any further sign. Holden only moved off down the hall. When he was out of earshot, Alex sighed.

"Trouble?" Prax asked.

"Yeah. Don't worry. It's not about you. This has been brewin' for a while now."

"I'm sorry," Prax said.

“Had to happen. Best to get it over with one way or the other,” Alex said, but there was an unmistakable dread in his voice. Prax felt himself liking the man. The wall terminal chirped and then spoke in Amos’ voice.

“What’ve you got now?”

Alex pulled the terminal close, the articulated arm bending and twisting on complicated joints, then tapped on it with the fingers of one hand while keeping hold of the coffee with the other. The terminal flickered, datasets converting to graphs and tables in real time.

“Ten percent,” Alex said. “No. Twelve. We’re moving up. What’d you find?”

“Cracked seal,” Amos said. “And yeah, you’re very fucking clever. What else we got?”

Alex tapped on the terminal and Holden reappeared from the hallway, now without his case.

“Port sensor array took a hit. Looks like we burned out a few of the leads,” Alex said.

“All right,” Amos said. “Let’s get those bad boys swapped out.”

“Or maybe we can do something that doesn’t involve crawling on the outside of a ship under thrust,” Holden said.

“I can get it done, Cap,” Amos said. Even through the tinny wall speaker, he sounded affronted. Holden shook his head.

“One slip, and the exhaust cooks you down to component atoms. Let’s leave that for the techs on Tycho. Alex, what else have we got?”

“Memory leak in the navigation system. Probably a fried network that grew back wrong,” the pilot said. “The cargo bay’s still in vacuum. The radio array’s as dead as a hammer for no apparent reason. Hand terminals aren’t talking. And one of the medical pods is throwing error codes, so don’t get sick.”

Holden went to the coffee machine, talking over his shoulder as he keyed in his preferences. His cup said *Tachi* too. Prax realized with a start that they all did. He wondered who or what a Tachi was.

“Does the cargo bay need EVA?”

“Don’t know,” Alex said. “Lemme take a look.”

Holden took his coffee mug out of the machine with a little sigh and stroked the brushed metal plates like he was petting a cat. On impulse, Prax cleared his throat.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Captain Holden? I was wondering, if the radio gets fixed or there’s a tightbeam available, if maybe there was a way I could use some time on the communications array?”

“We’re kind of trying to be quiet right now,” Holden said. “What are you wanting to send?”

“I need to do some research,” Prax said. “The data we got on Ganymede from when they took Mei. There are images of the woman who was with them. And if I can find what happened to Dr. Strickland... I’ve been on a security-locked system since the day she went missing. Even if it was just the public access databases and networks, it would be a place to start.”

“And it’s that or sit around and stew until we get to Tycho,” Holden said. “All right. I’ll ask Naomi to get you an access account for the *Roci*’s network. I don’t know if there’ll be anything in the OPA files, but you might as well check them too.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” Holden said. “They’ve got a pretty decent face-recognition database. It’s inside their secure perimeter, so you might need to have one of us make the request.”

“And that would be all right? I don’t want to get you in trouble with the OPA.”

Holden’s smile was warm and cheerful.

“Really, don’t worry about that,” he said. “Alex, what’ve we got?”

“Looks like cargo door’s not sealin’, which we knew. We may have taken a hit, blown a hole in her. We’ve got the video feed back up... hold on...”

Holden shifted to peer over Alex’s shoulder. Prax took another swallow of his food and gave in to curiosity. An image of a cargo bay no wider than Prax’s palm took up one corner of the display. Most of the cargo was on electromagnetic pallets, stuck to the plates nearest the wide bay door, but some had broken loose, pressed by thrust gravity to the floor. It gave the room an unreal, Escher-like appearance. Alex resized the image, zooming in on the cargo door. In one corner, a thick section of metal was bent inward, bright metal showing where the bend had cracked the external layers. A spray of stars showed through the hole.

“Well, at least it ain’t subtle,” Alex said.

“What hit it?” Holden said.

“Don’t know, Cap,” Alex said. “No scorching as far as I can see. But a gauss round wouldn’t have bent the metal in like that. Just would have made a hole. And the bay isn’t breached, so whatever did it didn’t make a hole on the other side.”

The pilot increased the magnification again, looking closely at the edges of the wound. It was true there were no scorch marks, but thin black smudges showed against the metal of the door and the deck. Prax frowned. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again.

Holden said what Prax had been thinking.

“Alex? Is that a handprint?”

“Looks like one, Cap, but...”

“Pull out. Look at the decking.”

They were small. Subtle. Easy to overlook on the small image. But they were there. A handprint, smeared in something dark that Prax had the strong suspicion had once been red. The unmistakable print of five naked toes. A long smear of darkness.

The pilot followed the trail.

“That bay’s in hard vacuum, right?” Holden asked.

“Has been for a day and a half, sir,” Alex said. The casual air was gone. They were all business now.

“Track right,” Holden said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, stop. What’s that?”

The body was curled into a fetal ball, except where its palms were pressed against the bulkhead. It lay perfectly still, as if they were under high g and it was held against the deck, crushed by its own weight. The flesh was the black of anthracite and the red of blood. Prax couldn’t tell if it had been a man or a woman.

“Alex, do we have a stowaway?”

“Pretty sure that ain’t on the cargo manifest, sir.”

“And did that fellow there bend his way through my ship with his bare hands?”

“Looks like maybe, sir.”

“Amos? Naomi?”

“I’m looking at it too.” Naomi’s voice came from the terminal a moment before Amos’ low whistle. Prax thought back to the mysterious sounds of violence in the lab, the bodies of guards they hadn’t fought, the

shattered glass and its black filament. Here was the experiment that had slipped its leash back at that lab. It had fled to the cold, dead surface of Ganymede and waited there until a chance came to escape. Prax felt the gooseflesh crawling up his arms.

“Okay,” Holden said. “But it’s dead, right?”

“I don’t think so,” Naomi said.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Bobbie

Bobbie's hand terminal began playing reveille at four thirty a.m. local time: what she and her mates might have grumbled and called "oh dark thirty" back when she'd been a marine and had mates to grumble with. She'd left her terminal in the living room, lying next to the pull-down cot she used as a bed, the volume set high enough to have left her ears ringing if she'd been in there with it. But Bobbie had already been up for an hour. In her cramped bathroom, the sound was only annoying, bouncing around her tiny apartment like radio in a deep well. The echoes were a sonic reminder that she still didn't have much furniture or any wall hangings.

It didn't matter. She'd never had a guest.

The reveille was a mean-spirited little joke Bobbie was playing on herself. The Martian military had formed hundreds of years after trumpets and drums had been a useful means of transmitting information to troops. Martians lacked the nostalgia the UN military had for such things. The first time Bobbie had heard a morning reveille, she'd been watching a video on military history. She'd been happy to realize that no matter how annoying the Martian equivalent—a series of atonal electronic blats—was, it would never be as annoying as what the Earth boys woke up to.

But now Bobbie wasn't a Martian Marine anymore.

"I am not a traitor," Bobbie said to her reflection in the mirror. Mirror Bobbie looked unconvinced.

After the blaring trumpet call's third repetition, her hand terminal beeped once and fell into a sullen silence. She'd been holding her toothbrush for the last half hour. The toothpaste had started to grow a hard skin. She ran it under warm water to soften it back up and started brushing her teeth.

"I'm not a traitor," she said to herself, the toothbrush making the words unintelligible. "Not."

Not even standing here in the bathroom of her UN-provided apartment, brushing her teeth with UN toothpaste and rinsing the sink with UN-

provided water. Not while she clutched her good Martian toothbrush and scrubbed until her gums bled.

“Not,” she said again, daring mirror Bobbie to disagree.

She put the toothbrush back into her small toiletry case, carried it into the living room, and placed it in her duffel. Everything she owned stayed in the duffel. She’d need to move fast when her people called her home. And they would. She’d get a priority dispatch on her terminal, the red-and-gray border of the MCRN CINC-COM flashing around it. They’d tell her that she needed to return to her unit immediately. That she was still one of them.

That she wasn’t a traitor for staying.

She straightened her uniform, slid her now quiet terminal into her pocket, and checked her hair in the mirror next to the door. It was pulled into a bun so tight it almost gave her a face-lift, not one single hair out of place.

“I’m not a traitor,” she said to the mirror. Front hallway mirror Bobbie seemed more open to this idea than bathroom mirror Bobbie had. “Damn straight,” she said, then slammed the door behind her when she left.

She hopped on one of the little electric bikes the UN campus made available everywhere, and was in the office three minutes before five a.m. Soren was already there. No matter what time she came in, Soren always beat her. Either he slept at his desk or he was spying on her to see what time she set her alarm for each morning.

“Bobbie,” he said, his smile not even pretending to be genuine.

Bobbie couldn’t bring herself to respond, so she just nodded and collapsed into her chair. One glance at the darkened windows in Avasarala’s office told her the old lady wasn’t in yet. Bobbie pulled up her to-do list on the desktop screen.

“She had me add a lot of people,” Soren said, referring to the list of people Bobbie was supposed to call in her role as Martian military liaison. “She really wants to get a hold of an early draft of the Martian statement on Ganymede. That’s your top priority for the day. Okay?”

“Why?” Bobbie said. “The actual statement came out yesterday. We both read it.”

“Bobbie,” Soren said with a sigh that said he was tired of explaining simple things to her, but a grin that said he really wasn’t. “This is how the game is played. Mars releases a statement condemning our actions. We go back channel and find an early draft. If it was harsher than the actual

statement that was released, then someone in the dip corps argued to tone it down. That means they're trying to avoid escalating. If it was milder in the early draft, then they're deliberately escalating to provoke a response."

"But since they know you'll get those early drafts, then that's meaningless. They'll just make sure you get leaks that give you the impression they want you to have."

"See? Now you're getting it," Soren said. "What your opponent wants you to think is useful data in figuring out what *they* think. So get the early draft, okay? Do it before the end of the day."

But no one talks to me anymore because now I'm the UN's pet Martian, and even though I'm not a traitor, it is entirely possible that everyone else thinks I am.

"Okay."

Bobbie pulled up the newly revised list and made the first connection request of the day.

"Bobbie!" Avasarala yelled from her desk. There was any number of electronic means for getting Bobbie's attention, but she almost never saw Avasarala use them. She yanked her earbud free and stood up. Soren's smirk was of the psychic variety; his face didn't change at all.

"Ma'am?" Bobbie said, taking a short step into Avasarala's office. "You bellowed?"

"No one likes a smart-ass," Avasarala said, not looking up from her desk terminal. "Where's my first draft of that report? It's almost lunchtime."

Bobbie stood a little straighter and clasped her arms behind her back.

"Sir, I regret to inform you that I have been unable to find anyone willing to release the early draft of the report to me."

"Are you standing at attention?" Avasarala said, looking up at her for the first time. "Jesus. I'm not about to march you out to the firing squad. Did you try everyone on the list?"

"Yes, I—" Bobbie stopped for a moment and took a deep breath, then took a few more steps into the office. Quietly she said, "No one talks to me."

The old woman lifted a snow-white eyebrow.

"That's interesting."

“It is?” Bobbie said.

Avasarala smiled at her, a warm, genuine smile, then poured tea out of a black iron pot into two small teacups.

“Sit down,” she said, waving at a chair next to her desk. When Bobbie remained standing, Avasarala said, “Seriously, sit the fuck down. Five minutes talking to you and I can’t tilt my head forward again for an hour.”

Bobbie sat, hesitated, and took one of the small teacups. It wasn’t much larger than a shot glass, and the tea inside it was very dark and smelled unpleasant. She took a small sip and burned her tongue.

“It’s a Lapsang souchong,” Avasarala said. “My husband buys it for me. What do you think?”

“I think it smells like hobo feet,” Bobbie replied.

“No shit, but Arjun loves it and it’s not bad once you get used to drinking it.”

Bobbie nodded and took another sip but didn’t reply.

“Okay, so,” Avasarala said, “you’re the Martian who was unhappy and got tempted over to the other side by a powerful old lady with lots of shiny prizes to offer. You’re the worst kind of traitor, because ultimately everything that’s happened to you since you came to Earth was because you were pouting.”

“I—”

“Shut the fuck up now, dear, the grown-up is talking.”

Bobbie shut up and drank her awful tea.

“But,” Avasarala continued, the same sweet smile on her wrinkled face, “if I were on the other team, you know who I’d send misinformation leaks to?”

“Me,” Bobbie said.

“You. Because you’re desperate to prove your value to your new boss, and they can send you blatantly false information and not really care if they fuck your shit up in the long run. If I were the Martian counterespionage wonks, I’d have already recruited one of your closest friends back home and be using them to funnel a mountain’s worth of false data your direction.”

My closest friends are all dead, Bobbie thought.

“But no one—”

“Is talking to you from back home. Which means two things. They are still trying to figure out my game in keeping you here, and they don’t have a

misinformation campaign in place because they're as confused as we are. You'll be contacted by someone in the next week or so. They'll ask you to leak information from my office, but they'll ask it in such a way that winds up giving you a whole lot of false information. If you're loyal and spy for them, great. If not and you tell me what they asked for, also great. Maybe they'll get lucky and you'll do both."

Bobbie put the teacup back on the desk. Her hands were in fists.

"This," Bobbie said, "is why everyone hates politicians."

"No. They hate us because we have power. Bobbie, this isn't how your mind likes to work, and I respect that. I don't have time to explain things to you," Avasarala said, the smile disappearing like it had never been. "So just assume I know what I'm doing, and that when I ask you to do the impossible, it's because even your failure helps our cause somehow."

"Our cause?"

"We're on the same team here. Team Let's-Not-Lose-Together. That is us, isn't it?"

"Yes," Bobbie said, glancing at the Buddha in his shrine. He smiled at her serenely. *Just one of the team*, his round face seemed to say. "Yes it is."

"Then get the fuck back out there and start calling everyone all over again. This time take detailed notes on who refuses to help you and the exact words they use in their refusal. Okay?"

"Solid copy on that, ma'am."

"Good," Avasarala said, smiling gently again. "Get out of my office."

Familiarity might breed contempt, but Bobbie hadn't much liked Soren right from the start. Sitting next to him for several days had ratcheted up her dislike to a whole new level. When he wasn't ignoring her, he was condescending. He talked too loud on his phone, even when she was trying to carry on a conversation of her own. Sometimes he sat on her desk, talking to visitors. He wore too much cologne.

The worst thing was he ate cookies all day.

It was impressive, given his rail-thin build, and Bobbie was not generally the kind of person who cared at all about other people's dietary habits. But his preferred brand of cookie came out of the break room vending machine in a foil packet that crinkled every time he reached into it.

At first, this had only been annoying. But after a couple of days of the Crinkle, Crunch, Chomp, and Smack Radio Theater, she'd had enough. She dropped her latest pointless connection and turned to stare at him. He ignored her and tapped on his desk terminal.

"Soren," she said, meaning to ask him to dump the damn cookies out on a plate or a napkin so she didn't have to hear that infuriating crinkle sound anymore. Before she could get more than his name out, he held up a finger to shush her and pointed at his earbud.

"No," he said, "not really a good—"

Bobbie wasn't sure if he was talking to her or someone on the phone, so she got up and moved over to his desk, sitting on the edge of it. He gave her a withering glare, but she just smiled and mouthed, "I'll wait." The edge of his desk creaked a little under her weight.

He turned his back to her.

"I understand," he said. "But this is not a good time to discuss—I see. I can probably—I see, yes. Foster won't—Yes. Yes, I understand. I'll be there."

He turned back around and tapped his desk, killing the connection.

"What?"

"I hate your cookies. The constant crinkle of the package is driving me insane."

"Cookies?" Soren said, a baffled expression on his face. Bobbie thought that it might be the first honest emotion she'd ever seen there.

"Yeah, can you put them on a—" Bobbie started, but before she could finish, Soren grabbed up the package and tossed them into the recycling bin next to his desk.

"Happy?"

"Well—"

"I don't have time for you right now, Sergeant."

"Okay," Bobbie said, and went back to her desk.

Soren kept fidgeting like he had more to say, so Bobbie didn't call the next person on her list. She waited for him to speak. Probably the cookie thing had been a mistake on her part. Really, it wasn't a big deal. If she weren't under so much pressure, it wasn't the sort of thing she'd probably even notice. When Soren finally spoke up, she'd apologize for being so pushy about it and then offer to buy him a new package. Instead of speaking, he stood up.

“Soren, I—” Bobbie started, but Soren ignored her and unlocked a drawer on his desk. He pulled out a small bit of black plastic. Probably because she’d just heard him say the name Foster, Bobbie recognized it as the memory stick Avasarala had given him a few days earlier. Foster was the data services guy, so she assumed he was finally getting around to taking care of that little task, which would at least get him away from the office for a few minutes.

Until he turned and headed for the elevators.

Bobbie had done a little gofer work running things back and forth to data services and knew that their office was on the same floor and in the opposite direction of the elevators.

“Huh.”

She was tired. She was half sick with guilt and she wasn’t even all that sure what she felt guilty about. She disliked the man anyway. The hunch that popped into her head was almost certainly a result of her own paranoia and addled image of the world.

She got up, following him.

“This is really stupid,” she said to herself, smiling and nodding at a page who hurried by. She was over two meters tall on a planet of short people. She wasn’t going to blend.

Soren climbed into an elevator. Bobbie stopped outside the doors and waited. Through the aluminum-and-ceramic doors, she heard him ask someone to press one. Going all the way to the street level, then. She hit the down button and took the next elevator to the bottom floor.

Of course, he wasn’t in sight when she got there.

A giant Martian woman running around the lobby of the UN building would draw a little attention, so she scrapped that as a plan. A wave of uncertainty, failure, and despair lapped at the shoreline of her mind.

Forget that it was an office building. Forget that there were no armed enemy, no squad behind her. *Forget that, and look at the logic of the situation on the ground. Think tactically. Be smart.*

“I need to be smart,” she said. A short woman in a red suit who had just come up and pressed the elevator call button overheard her and said, “What?”

“I need to be smart,” Bobbie told her. “Can’t go running off half-cocked.” *Not even when doing something insane and stupid.*

“I... see,” the woman said, then pushed the elevator call button again several times. Next to the elevator control panel was a courtesy terminal. *If you can't find the target, restrict the target's degrees of freedom. Make them come to you. Right.* Bobbie hit the button for the lobby reception desk. An automated system with an extremely realistic and sexually ambiguous voice asked how it could assist her.

“Please page Soren Cottwald to the lobby reception desk,” Bobbie said. The computer on the other end of the line thanked her for using the UN automated courtesy system and dropped the connection.

Soren might not have his terminal on, or it could be set to ignore incoming pages. Or he might ignore this one all on his own. She found a couch with a sight line to the desk and shifted a ficus to provide her cover.

Two minutes later, Soren trotted up to the reception desk, his hair more windblown than usual. He must have already been all the way outside when he got the page. He began talking to one of the human receptionists. Bobbie moved across the lobby to a little coffee and snack kiosk and hid as best she could. After typing on her desk for a moment, the receptionist pointed at the terminal next to the elevators. Soren frowned and took a few steps toward it, then looked around nervously and headed toward the building entrance.

Bobbie followed.

Once Bobbie was outside, her height was both an advantage and a disadvantage. Being a head and a half taller than most everyone around her meant that she could afford to stay pretty far behind Soren as he hurried along the sidewalk. She could spot the top of his head from half a city block away. At the same time, if he looked behind him, he couldn't miss her face sticking up a good third of a meter out of the crowd.

But he didn't turn around. In fact, he appeared to be in something of a hurry, pushing his way through the knots of people on the busy sidewalks around the UN campus with obvious impatience. He didn't look around or pause by a good reflective surface or backtrack. He'd been nervous answering the page, and he was being pointedly, angrily not nervous now.

Whistling past the graveyard. Bobbie felt her muscles soften, her joints grow loose and easy, her hunch slip a centimeter closer to certainty.

After three blocks he turned and went into a bar.

Bobbie stopped a half block away and considered. The front of the bar, a place creatively named Pete's, was darkened glass. If you wanted to duck

in somewhere and see if people were following you, it was the perfect place to go. Maybe he'd gotten smart.

Maybe he hadn't.

Bobbie walked over to the front door. Getting caught following him had no consequences. Soren already hated her. The most ethically suspect thing she was doing was cutting out early to pop into a neighborhood bar. Who was going to rat on her? Soren? The guy who cut out just as early and went to the same damn bar?

If he was in there and doing nothing more than grabbing an early beer, she'd just walk up to him, apologize for the cookie thing, and buy him his second round.

She pushed the door open and went inside.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust from the early-afternoon sunlight outside to the dimly lit bar. Once the glare had faded, she saw a long bamboo bar top manned by a human bartender, half a dozen booths with about as many patrons, and no Soren. The air smelled of beer and burnt popcorn. The patrons gave her one look and then carefully went back to their drinks and mumbled conversations.

Had Soren ducked out the back to ditch her? She didn't think he'd seen her, but she wasn't exactly trained for tailing people. She was about to ask the bartender if he'd seen a guy run through, and where that guy might have gone, when she noticed a sign at the back of the bar that said POOL TABLES with an arrow pointing left.

She walked to the back of the bar, turned left, and found a smaller, second room with four pool tables and two men. One of them was Soren.

They both looked up as she turned the corner.

"Hi," she said. Soren was smiling at her, but he was always smiling. Smiling, for him, was protective coloration. Camouflage. The other man was large, fit, and wearing an excessively casual outfit that tried too hard to look like it belonged in a seedy pool hall. It clashed with the man's military haircut and ramrod-straight posture. Bobbie had a feeling she'd seen his face before, but in a different setting. She tried to picture him with a uniform on.

"Bobbie," Soren said, giving his companion one quick glance and then looking away. "You play?" He picked up a pool cue that had been lying on one of the tables, and began chalking the tip. Bobbie didn't point out that

there were no balls on any of the tables, and that a sign just behind Soren said RENTAL BALLS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST.

His companion said nothing but slid something into his pocket. Between his fingers Bobbie caught a glimpse of black plastic.

She smiled. She knew where she'd seen the second man before.

"No," she said to Soren. "It's not popular where I come from."

"Slate, I guess," he replied. His smile became a bit more genuine and a lot colder. He blew the chalk dust off the pool cue's tip and moved a step to the side, shifting toward her left. "Too heavy for the early colony ships."

"Makes sense," Bobbie said, moving back until the doorway protected her flanks.

"Is this a problem?" Soren's companion said, looking at Bobbie.

Before Soren could reply, Bobbie said, "You tell me. You were at that late-night meeting in Avasarala's office when Ganymede went to shit. Nguyen's staff, right? Lieutenant something or other."

"You're digging a hole, Bobbie," Soren said, the pool cue held lightly in his right hand.

"And," she continued, "I know Soren handed you something his boss had asked him to take to data services a couple days ago. I bet you don't work in data services, do you?"

Nguyen's flunky took a menacing step toward her, and Soren shifted to her left again.

Bobbie burst out laughing.

"Seriously," she said, looking at Soren. "Either stop jerking that pool cue off or take it somewhere private."

Soren looked down at the cue in his hand as though surprised to see it there, then dropped it.

"And you," Bobbie said to the flunky. "You trying to come through this door would literally be the high point of my month." Without moving her feet she shifted her weight forward and flexed her elbows slightly.

The flunky looked her in the eye for one long moment. She grinned back.

"Come on," she said. "I'm gonna get blue balls you keep teasing me like this."

The flunky put up his hands. Something halfway between a fighting stance and a gesture of surrender. Never taking his eyes off Bobbie, he turned his face slightly toward Soren and said, "This is your problem."

Handle it.” He backed up two slow steps, then turned and walked across the room and into a hallway Bobbie couldn’t see from where she was standing. A second later, she heard a door slam.

“Shit,” Bobbie said. “I bet I’d have scored more points with the old lady if I’d gotten that memory stick back.”

Soren began to shuffle toward the back door. Bobbie crossed the space between them like a cat, grabbing the front of his shirt and pulling him up until their noses were almost touching. Her body felt alive and free for the first time in a long time.

“What are you going to do,” he said through a forced smirk, “beat me up?”

“Naw,” Bobbie replied, shifting to an exaggerated Mariner Valley drawl. “I’m gonna tell on you, boy.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Holden

Holden watched the monster quiver as it huddled against the cargo bay bulkhead. On the video monitor, it looked small and washed out and grainy. He concentrated on his breathing. *Long slow breath in, fill up the lungs all the way to the bottom. Long slow breath out. Pause. Repeat. Do not lose your shit in front of the crew.*

“Well,” Alex said after a minute. “There’s your problem.”

He was trying to make a joke. *Had* made a joke. Normally, Holden would have laughed at his exaggerated drawl and comic obviousness. Alex could be very funny, in a dry, understated sort of way.

Right now, Holden had to clench his hands to stop from strangling the man.

Amos said, “I’m coming up,” at the same moment Naomi said, “I’m coming down.”

“Alex,” Holden said, pretending a calm he didn’t feel. “What’s the status of the cargo bay airlock?”

Alex tapped twice on the terminal and said, “Airtight, Cap. Zero loss.”

Which was good, because as frightened of the protomolecule as he was, Holden also knew that it wasn’t magic. It had mass and it occupied space. If not even a molecule of oxygen could sneak out through the airlock seal, then he was pretty sure none of the virus could get in. But...

“Alex, crank up the O2,” Holden said. “As rich as we can get it without blowing the ship up.”

The protomolecule was anaerobic. If any of it did somehow get in, he wanted the environment as hostile as possible.

“And get up to the cockpit,” he continued. “Seal yourself in. If the goo somehow gets loose on the ship, I need your finger on the reactor overrides.”

Alex frowned and scratched his thin hair. “That seems a little extreme —”

Holden grabbed him by the upper arms, hard. Alex's eyes went wide and his hands came up in an automatic gesture of surrender. Beside him, the botanist blinked in confusion and alarm. This was not the best way to instill confidence. In other circumstances, Holden might have cared.

"Alex," Holden said, not able to stop himself from shaking even while clutching the pilot's arms. "Can I count on you to blow this ship into gas if that shit gets in here? Because if I can't, consider yourself relieved of duty and confined to quarters immediately."

Alex surprised him, not by reacting in anger, but by reaching up and putting his hands on Holden's forearms. Alex's face was serious, but his eyes were kind.

"Seal myself into the cockpit and prepare to scuttle the ship. Aye, aye, sir," he said. "What's the stand-down order?"

"Direct order from myself or Naomi," Holden replied with a hidden sigh of relief. He didn't have to say, *If that thing gets in here and kills us, you're better off going up with the ship*. He let go of Alex's arms and the pilot took one step back, his broad dark face wrinkled with concern. The panic that threatened to overwhelm Holden might get out of his control if he allowed anyone to feel sympathy for him, so he said, "Now, Alex. Do it now."

Alex nodded once, looked like he wanted to say something else, then spun on his heel and went to the crew ladder and up toward the cockpit. Naomi descended the same ladder a few moments later, and Amos came up from below a short time after that.

Naomi spoke first. "What's the plan?" They'd been intimate long enough for Holden to recognize the barely concealed fear in her voice.

Holden paused to take two more long breaths. "Amos and I will go see if we can't drive it out the cargo bay doors. Get them open for us."

"Done," she said, and headed up the ladder to ops.

Amos was watching him, a speculative look in his eyes.

"So, Cap, how do we 'drive it' out those doors?"

"Well," Holden replied. "I was thinking we shoot the shit out of it and then take a flamethrower to any pieces that fall off. So we better gear up."

Amos nodded. "Damn. I feel like I just took that shit off."

Holden was not claustrophobic.

No one who chose long-flight space travel as a career was. Even if a person could somehow con their way past the psychological profiles and simulation runs, one trip was usually enough to separate those who could handle long periods in confined spaces from those who went bugfuck and had to be sedated for the trip home.

As a junior lieutenant Holden had spent days in scout ships so small that you literally could not bend over to scratch your feet. He'd climbed around between the inner and outer hulls of warships. He'd once been confined to his crash couch for twenty-one days during a fast-burn trip from Luna to Saturn. He never had nightmares of being crushed or being buried alive.

For the first time in his decade and a half of nearly constant space travel, the ship he was on felt too small. Not just cramped, but terrifyingly constricted. He felt trapped, like an animal in a snare.

Less than twelve meters away from where he stood, someone infected with the protomolecule was sitting in his cargo bay. And there was nowhere he could go to get away from it.

Putting on his body armor didn't help this feeling of confinement.

The first thing that went on was what the grunts called the full-body condom. It was a thick black bodysuit, made of multiple layers of Kevlar, rubber, impact-reactive gel, and the sensor network that kept track of his injury and vitals status. Over that went the slightly looser environment suit, with its own layers of self-sealing gel to instantly repair tears or bullet holes. And finally, the various pieces of strap-on armor plating that could deflect a high-velocity rifle shot or ablate the outer layers to shed the energy of a laser.

To Holden, it felt like wrapping himself in his own death shroud.

But even with all its layers and weight, it still wasn't as frightening as the powered armor that recon Marines wore would have been. What the Navy boys called walking coffins. The idea behind the name being that anything powerful enough to break the armor would liquefy the marine inside, so you didn't bother to open it. You just tossed the whole thing into the grave. This was hyperbole, of course, but the idea of going into that cargo bay wearing something that he wouldn't even be able to move

without the power-enhanced strength would have scared the shit out of him. What if the batteries died?

Of course, a nice suit of strength-augmenting armor might be handy when trying to throw monsters off the ship.

“That’s on backward,” Amos said, pointing at Holden’s thigh.

“Shit,” Holden said. Amos was right. He’d been so far up his own ass that he’d screwed up the buckles on his thigh armor. “Sorry, I’m having a hard time staying focused here.”

“Scared shitless,” Amos said with a nod.

“Well, I wouldn’t say—”

“Wasn’t talking about you,” Amos said. “Me. I’m scared shitless of walking into the cargo bay with that thing in there. And I didn’t watch Eros turn into goo at close range. So I get it. Right there with you, Jim.”

It was the first time in Holden’s memory that Amos had called him by his first name. Holden nodded back at him, then went about straightening out his thigh armor.

“Yeah,” he said. “I just yelled at Alex for not being scared enough.”

Amos had finished with his armor and was pulling his favorite auto-shotgun out of his locker.

“No shit?”

“Yeah. He made a joke and I’m scared out of my skull, so I yelled at him and threatened to relieve him.”

“Can you do that?” Amos asked. “He’s kind of our only pilot.”

“No, Amos. No, I can’t kick Alex off the ship any more than I can kick you or Naomi off the ship. We’re not even a skeleton crew. We’re whatever you have when you don’t have a skeleton.”

“Worried about Naomi leaving?” Amos said. He kept his voice light, but his words hit like hammer blows. Holden felt the air go out of him, and had to focus on breathing again for a minute.

“No,” he said. “I mean, yes, of course I am. But that’s not what has me freaked out right now.”

Holden picked up his assault rifle and looked at it, then put it back in his locker and took out a heavy recoilless pistol instead. The self-contained rockets that were its ammunition wouldn’t impart thrust and send him flying all over the place if he fired it in zero g.

“I watched you die,” he said, not looking at Amos.

“Huh?”

“I watched you die. When that kidnap team, whoever the hell *they* were, took us. I saw one of them shoot you in the back of the head, and I saw you drop face-first on the floor. There was blood everywhere.”

“Yeah, but I—”

“I know it was a nonlethal round. I know they wanted us alive. I know the blood was your broken nose when your head slammed into the floor. I know all of that *now*. At the time, what I knew was that you’d just been shot in the head and killed.”

Amos slid a magazine into his shotgun and racked a round but, other than that, didn’t make a sound.

“All of this is really fragile,” Holden said, waving around at Amos and the ship. “This little family we have. One fuckup, and something irreplaceable gets lost.”

Amos was frowning at him now. “This is still about Naomi, right?”

“No! I mean, yes. But no. When I thought you were dead, it knocked all the wind out of me. And right now, I need to focus on getting that thing off the ship, and all I can think about is losing one of the crew.”

Amos nodded, slung the shotgun over his shoulder, and sat down on the bench next to his locker.

“I get it. So what do you want to do?”

“I want,” Holden said, sliding a magazine into his pistol, “to get that fucking monster off my ship. But please promise me you won’t die doing it. That would help a lot.”

“Cap,” Amos said with a grin. “Anything that kills me has already killed everyone else. I was born to be the last man standing. You can count on it.”

The panic and fear didn’t leave Holden. They squatted on his chest now just the way they had before. But at least he didn’t feel so alone with them.

“Then let’s go get rid of this stowaway.”

The wait inside the cargo bay airlock was endless as the inner door sealed, the pumps sucked all the air out of the room, and then the outer door cycled open. Holden fidgeted and rechecked his gun half a dozen times while he waited. Amos stood in a relaxed slump, his huge shotgun cradled loosely in

his arms. The upside, if there was an upside to the wait, was that with the cargo bay in vacuum, the airlock could make as much noise as it wanted without alerting the creature to their presence.

The last of the external noise disappeared, and Holden could hear only himself breathing. A yellow light came on near the outer airlock door, warning them of the null atmosphere on the other side.

“Alex,” Holden said, plugging a hardline into the airlock terminal. Radio was still dead all over the ship. “We’re about to go in. Kill the engines.”

“Roger that,” Alex replied, and the gravity dropped away. Holden kicked the slide controls on his heels to turn up his magnetic boots.

The cargo bay on the *Rocinante* was cramped. Tall and narrow, it occupied the starboard side of the ship, crammed into the unused space between the outer hull and the engineering bay. On the port side, the same space was filled with the ship’s water tank. The *Roci* was a warship. Any cargo it carried would be an afterthought.

The downside to this was that while under thrust, the cargo bay turned into a well with the cargo doors at the bottom. The various crates that occupied the space latched on to mounts on the bulkheads or in some cases were attached with electromagnetic feet. With thrust gravity threatening to send a person tumbling seven meters straight down to the cargo doors, it would be an impossible place to fight effectively.

In microgravity, it became a long hallway with lots of cover.

Holden entered the room first, walking along the bulkhead on magnetic boots, and took cover behind a large metal crate filled with extra rounds for the ship’s point defense cannons. Alex followed, taking up a position behind another crate two meters away.

Below them, the monster seemed to be asleep.

It huddled motionless against the bulkhead that separated the cargo bay from engineering.

“Okay, Naomi, go ahead and open it up,” Holden said. He jiggled the trailing line of cable to get it unhooked from a corner of the crate and gave it a little slack.

“Doors opening now,” she replied, her voice thin and fuzzy in his helmet. The cargo doors at the bottom of the room silently swung open, exposing several square meters of star-filled blackness. The monster either didn’t notice the doors opening or didn’t care.

“They hibernate sometimes, right?” Amos said, the cable running from his suit to the airlock looking like a high-tech umbilical cord. “Like Julie did when she got the bug. Hibernated in that hotel room on Eros for a couple weeks.”

“Maybe,” Holden replied. “How do you want to approach this? I’m almost thinking we should just go down there, grab the thing, and toss it out the door. But I have strong reservations about touching it.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t want to take our suits back inside with us,” Amos agreed.

Holden had a sudden memory of coming in after playing outside, and taking all his clothes off in the mudroom before Mother Tamara would let him into the rest of the house. This would be pretty much the same, only a lot colder.

“I find myself wishing we had a really long stick,” Holden said, looking around at the various objects stored in the cargo bay, hoping to find one that suited his need.

“Uh, Cap’n?” Amos said. “It’s looking at us.”

Holden turned back around and saw Amos was right. The creature hadn’t moved anything but its head, but it was definitely staring up at them now, its eyes a creepy illuminated-from-within blue.

“Well, okay,” Holden said. “It’s not hibernating.”

“You know, if I can knock it off that bulkhead with a shot or two, and Alex kicks on the engine, it might just tumble right out the back door and into the exhaust plume. That oughta take care of it.”

“Let’s think about—” Holden said, but before he could finish his thought, the room strobed several times with the muzzle flash of Amos’ shotgun. The monster was hit multiple times and knocked into a spinning lump floating toward the door.

“Alex, just—” Amos said.

The monster blurred into action. It flung one arm toward the bulkhead, the limb actually seeming to get longer to reach it, and yanked down hard enough to bend the steel plates. The creature hurtled up to the top of the cargo bay so fast that when it hit the crate Holden was hiding behind, the magnetic feet lost their seal. The cargo bay seemed to spin as the impact threw Holden back. The crate, just behind him, matched his velocity. Holden slammed against the bulkhead a split second before the crate did,

and the magnetic pallet snapped onto the new wall, trapping Holden's leg beneath it.

Something in his knee bent badly, and the pain turned the world red for a moment.

Amos began firing his gun into the monster at close range, but it casually backhanded him and threw him into the cargo airlock hard enough to bend the inner door. The outer door slammed shut the second the inner door was compromised. Holden tried to move but his leg was pinned by the crate, and with electromagnets rated to hold a quarter ton of weight under a ten-g burn, he wouldn't be moving it anytime soon. The crate controls that would shut the magnets off showed the orange glow of a full seal ten centimeters beyond his reach.

The monster turned back to look at him. Its blue eyes were far too large for its head, giving the creature a curious, childlike look. It reached out one oversized hand.

Holden fired into it until his gun was empty.

The miniature, self-contained rockets the recoilless gun used as ammunition exploded in tiny puffs of light and smoke as they hit the creature, each one pushing it farther back and tearing large chunks of its torso away. Black filaments sprayed out and across the room like a line drawing representation of blood splatter. When the last rocket hit, the monster was blown off the bulkhead and thrown down the cargo bay toward the open doors.

The black-and-red body tumbled toward the vast swatch of stars and darkness, and Holden let himself hope. Less than a meter from the doors, it reached out one long arm and caught the edge of a crate. Holden had seen what kind of strength was in those hands, and knew it wouldn't lose its grip.

"Captain," Amos was yelling in his ear. "Holden, are you still with us?"

"Here, Amos. In a little trouble."

As he spoke, the monster pulled itself up onto the crate it had caught and sat motionless. A hideous gargoyle turned suddenly to stone.

"Gonna hit the override and get you," Amos said. "The inner door is fucked, so we'll lose some atmo, but not too much—"

"Okay, but do it soon," Holden said. "I'm pinned. I need you to cut the mags on this crate."

A moment later, the airlock door opened in a puff of atmosphere. Amos started to step out into the bay when the monster jumped off the crate it was sitting on, grabbed the heavy plastic container with one hand and the bulkhead with the other, and threw the container at him. It slammed into the bulkhead hard enough that Holden felt the vibration through his suit. It missed taking Amos' head off by centimeters. The big mechanic fell back with a curse and the airlock doors shot closed again.

"Sorry," Amos said. "Panicked. Let me get this open—"

"No!" Holden yelled. "Stop opening the damn door. I'm trapped behind two goddamn crates now. And one of these times, the door is going to cut my cable. I really don't want to be stuck in here without a radio."

With the airlock closed, the monster moved back over to the bulkhead next to the engine room and curled up into a ball again. The tissue in the gaping wounds caused by Holden's gun pulsed wetly.

"I can see it, Cap," Alex said. "If I stomp on the gas, I think I can knock it right out those doors."

"No," Naomi and Amos said at almost the same time.

"No," Naomi repeated. "Look where Holden is under those crates. If we go high g, it'll break every bone in his body, even if he somehow isn't thrown out the door too."

"Yeah, she's right," Amos said. "That plan'll kill the captain. It's off the table."

Holden listened for a few moments to his crew argue about how to keep him alive, and watched the creature snuggle itself up the bulkhead and seem to go back to sleep.

"Well," Holden said, breaking into their discussion. "A high-g burn would almost certainly break me into tiny pieces right now. But that doesn't necessarily take it off the table."

The new words that came over the channel seemed like a thing from another world. Holden didn't even recognize the botanist's voice at first.

"Well," Prax said. "That's interesting."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Prax

When Eros died, everyone watched. The station had been designed as a scientific data extraction engine, and every change, death, and metamorphosis had been captured, recorded, and streamed out to the system. What the governments of Mars and Earth had tried to suppress had leaked out in the weeks and months that followed. How people viewed it had more to do with who they were than the actual footage. To some people, it had been news. For others, evidence. For more than Prax liked to think, it had been an entertainment of terrible decadence—a Busby Berkeley snuff flick.

Prax had watched it too, as had everyone on his team. For him, it had been a puzzle. The drive to apply the logic of conventional biology to the effects of the protomolecule had been overwhelming and, for the most part, fruitless. Individual pieces were tantalizing—the spiral curves so similar to nautilus shell, the heat signature of the infected bodies shifting in patterns that almost matched certain hemorrhagic fevers. But nothing had come together.

Certainly someone, somewhere, was getting the grant money to study what had happened, but Prax's work wouldn't wait for him. He'd turned back to his soybeans. Life had gone on. It hadn't been an obsession, just a well-known conundrum that someone else was going to have to solve.

Prax hung weightless at an unused station in ops and watched the security camera feed. The creature reached out for Captain Holden, and Holden shot it and shot it and shot it. Prax watched the filamentous discharge from the creature's back. That was familiar, certainly. It had been one of the hallmarks of the Eros footage.

The monster began to tumble. Morphologically, it wasn't very far off from human. One head, two arms, two legs. No autonomous structures, no hands or rib cages repurposed to some other function.

Naomi, at the controls, gasped. It was odd, hearing it only through the actual air they shared and not through the comm channel. It seemed

intimate in a way that left him a little uncomfortable, but there was something more important. His mind had a fuzzy feeling, like his head was full of cotton ticking. He recognized the sensation. He was thinking something that he wasn't yet aware of.

"I'm pinned," Holden said. "I need you to cut the mags on this crate."

The creature was at the far end of the cargo bay. As Amos went in, it braced itself with one hand, throwing a large crate with the other. Even in the poor-quality feed, Prax could see its massive trapezius and deltoids, the muscles enlarged to a freakish degree. And yet not particularly relocated. So the protomolecule was working under constraints. Whatever the creature was, it wasn't doing what the Eros samples had done. The thing in the cargo bay was unquestionably the same technology, but harnessed for some different application. The cotton ticking shifted.

"No! Stop opening the damn door. I'm trapped behind two goddamn crates now."

The creature moved back to the bulkhead, near where it had first been at rest. It huddled there, the wounds in its body pulsing visibly. But it hadn't *settled* there. With the engines off-line, there wasn't even a trace of gravity to pull it back in place. If it was comfortable there, there had to be a reason.

"No!" Naomi said. Her hands were on the support rings by the controls. Her face had an ashy color. "No. Look where Holden is under those crates. If we go high g, it'll break every bone in his body, even if he somehow isn't thrown out the door too."

"Yeah, she's right," Amos said. He sounded tired. Maybe that was how he expressed sorrow. "That plan'll kill the captain. It's off the table."

"Well. A high-g burn would almost certainly break me into tiny pieces right now. But that doesn't necessarily take it off the table."

On the bulkhead, the creature moved. It wasn't much, but it was there. Prax zoomed in on it as best he could. One massive clawed hand—clawed but still with four fingers and a thumb—braced it, and the other tore at the bulkhead. The first layer was fabric and insulation and it came off in rubbery strips. Once it was gone, the creature attacked the armored steel underneath. Tiny curls of metal floated in the vacuum beside it, catching the light like little stars. Now why was it doing that? If it was trying to do structural damage, there was any number of better ways. Or maybe it was trying to tunnel through the bulkhead, trying to reach something, following some signal...

The cotton ticking disappeared, resolving into the image of a pale, new root springing from a seed. He felt himself smile. *Well, that's interesting.*

"What is, Doc?" Amos asked. Prax realized he must have spoken aloud.

"Um," Prax said, trying to gather the words that would explain what he'd seen. "It's trying to move up a radiation gradient. I mean... the version of the protomolecule that was loose on Eros fed off radiation energy, and so I guess it makes sense that this one would too—"

"This one?" Alex asked. "What one?"

"This version. I mean, this one's obviously been engineered to repress most of the changes. It's hardly changed the host body at all. There have to be novel constraints on it, but it still seems to need a source of radiation."

"Why, Doc?" Amos asked. He was trying to be patient. "Why do we think it needs radiation?"

"Oh," Prax said. "Because we shut down the drive, and so the reactor is running at maintenance level, and now it's trying to dig through to the core."

There was a pause, and then Alex said something obscene.

"Okay," Holden said. "There's no choice. Alex, you need to get that thing out of here before it gets through the bulkhead. We don't have time to build a new plan."

"Captain," Alex said. "Jim—"

"I'll be in one second after it's gone," Amos said. "If you aren't there, it's been an honor serving with you, Cap."

Prax waved his hands, as if the gesture could get their attention. The movement sent him looping slowly through the operations deck.

"Wait. No. That *is* the new plan," he said. "It's moving up a radiation gradient. It's like a root heading toward water."

Naomi had turned to look at him as he spun. She seemed to spin, and Prax's brain reset to feeling that she was below him, spiraling away. He closed his eyes.

"You're going to have to walk us through this," Holden said. "Quickly. How can we control it?"

"Change the gradient," Prax said. "How long would it take to put together a container with some unshielded radioisotopes?"

"Depends, Doc," Amos said. "How much do we need?"

“Just more than is leaking through from the reactor right now,” Prax said.

“Bait,” Naomi said, catching hold of him and pulling him to a handhold. “You want to make something that looks like better food and lure that thing out the door with it.”

“I just said that. Didn’t I just say that?” Prax asked.

“Not exactly, no,” Naomi said.

On the screen, the creature was slowly building a cloud of metal shavings. Prax wasn’t sure, because the resolution of the image wasn’t actually all that good, but it seemed like its hand might be changing shape as it dug. He wondered how much the constraints placed on the protomolecule’s expression took damage and healing into account. Regenerative processes were a great opportunity for constraining systems to fail. Cancer was just cell replication gone mad. If it was starting to change, it might not stop.

“Regardless,” Prax said, “I think we should probably hurry.”

The plan was simple enough. Amos would reenter the cargo bay and free the captain as soon as the bay doors had shut behind the intruder. Naomi, in ops, would trigger the doors to close the moment the creature had gone after the radioactive bait. Alex would fire the engines as soon as doing so wouldn’t kill the captain. And the bait—a half-kilo cylinder with a thin case of lead foil to keep it from attracting the beast too early—would be walked out through the main airlock and tossed into the vacuum by the only remaining crewman.

Prax floated in the airlock, bait trap in the thick glove of the environment suit. Regrets and uncertainty flooded through his mind.

“Maybe it would be better if Amos did this part,” Prax said. “I’ve never actually done any extravehicular anything before.”

“Sorry, Doc. I’ve got a ninety-kilo captain to haul,” Amos said.

“Couldn’t we automate this? A lab waldo could—”

“Prax,” Naomi said, and the gentleness of the syllable carried the weight of a thousand *get-your-ass-out-theres*. Prax checked the seals on his suit one more time. Everything reported good. The suit was much better than the one he’d worn leaving Ganymede. It was twenty-five meters from

the personnel airlock near the front of the ship to the cargo bay doors at the extreme aft. He wouldn't even have to go all the way there. He tested the radio tether to make sure it was clipped tightly into the airlock's plug.

That was another interesting question. Was the radio-jamming effect a natural output of the monster? Prax tried to imagine how such a thing could be generated biologically. Would the effect end when the monster left the ship? When it was burned up by the exhaust?

"Prax," Naomi said. "Now is good."

"All right," he said. "I'm going out."

The outer airlock door cycled open. His first impulse was to push out into the darkness the way he would into a large room. His second was to crawl on his hands and knees, keeping as much of his body against the skin of the ship as humanly possible. Prax took the bait in one hand and used the toe rings to lift himself up and out.

The darkness around him was overwhelming. The *Rocinante* was a raft of metal and paint on an ocean. More than an ocean. The stars wrapped around him in all directions, the nearest ones hundreds of lifetimes away, and then more past those and more past those. The sense of being on a tiny little asteroid or moon looking up at a too-wide sky flipped and he was at the top of the universe, looking down into an abyss without end. It was like a visual illusion flipping between a vase and then two faces, then back again at the speed of perception. Prax grinned up, spreading his arms into the nothingness even as the first taste of nausea crawled up the back of his tongue. He'd read accounts of extravehicular euphoria, but the experience was unlike anything he'd imagined. He was the eye of God, drinking in the light of infinite stars, and he was a speck of dust on a speck of dust, clipped by his mag boots to the body of a ship unthinkably more powerful than himself, and unimportant before the face of the abyss. His suit's speakers crackled with background radiation from the birth of the universe, and eerie voices whispered in the static.

"Uh, Doc?" Amos said. "There a problem out there?"

Prax looked around, expecting to see the mechanic beside him. The milk-white universe of stars was all that met him. With so many, it seemed like they should sum to brightness. Instead, the *Rocinante* was dark except for the EVA lights and, toward the rear of the ship, a barely visible white nebula where atmosphere had blown out from the cargo bay.

"No," Prax said. "No problems."

He tried to take a step forward, but his suit didn't budge. He pulled, straining to lift his foot from the plating. His toe moved forward a centimeter and stopped. Panic flared in his chest. Something was wrong with the mag boots. At this rate, he'd never make it to the cargo bay door before the creature dug through and into engineering and the reactor itself.

"Um. I have a problem," he said. "I can't move my feet."

"What are the slide controls set to?" Naomi asked.

"Oh, right," Prax said, moving the boot settings down to match his strength. "I'm fine. Never mind."

He'd never actually walked with mag boots before, and it was a strange sensation. For most of the stride, his leg felt free and almost uncontrolled, and then, as he brought his foot toward the hull, there would be a moment, a critical point, when the force took hold and slammed him to the metal. He made his way floating and being snatched down, step by step. He couldn't see the cargo bay doors, but he knew where they were. From his position looking aft, they were to the left of the drive cone. But on the right side of the ship. *No, starboard side. They call it starboard on ships.*

He knew that just past the dark metal lip that marked the edge of the ship, the creature was digging at the walls, clawing through the flesh of the ship toward its heart. If it figured out what was going on—if it had the cognitive capacity for even basic reasoning—it could come boiling up out of the bay at him. Vacuum didn't kill it. Prax imagined himself trying to clomp away on his awkward magnetic boots while the creature cut him apart; then he took a long, shuddering breath and lifted the bait.

"Okay," he said. "I'm in position."

"No time like the present," Holden said, his voice strained with pain but attempting to be light.

"Right," Prax said.

He pressed the small timer, hunched close to the hull of the ship, and then, with every muscle in his body, uncurled and flung the little cylinder into nothing. It flew out, catching the light from the cargo bay interior and then vanishing. Prax had the nauseating certainty that he'd forgotten a step, and that the lead foil wouldn't come off the way it was supposed to.

"It's moving," Holden said. "It smelled it. It's going out."

And there it was, long black fingers folding up from the ship, the dark body pulling itself up to the ship's exterior like it had been born to the abyss. Its eyes glowed blue. Prax heard nothing but his own panicked

breathing. Like an animal in the ancient grasslands of Earth, he had the primal urge to be still and silent, though through the vacuum, the creature wouldn't have heard him if he'd shrieked.

The creature shifted; the eerie eyes closed, opened again, closed; and then it leapt. The un-twinkling stars were eclipsed by its passage.

"Clear," Prax said, shocked by the firmness of his voice. "It's clear of the ship. Close the cargo doors now."

"Check," Naomi said. "Closing doors."

"I'm coming in, Cap'n," Amos said.

"I'm passing out, Amos," Holden said, but there was enough laughter in the words that Prax was pretty sure he was joking.

In the darkness, a star blinked out and then came back. Then another. Prax mentally traced the path. Another star eclipsed.

"I'm heating her back up," Alex said. "Let me know when you're all secure, right?"

Prax watched, waited. The star stayed solid. Shouldn't it have gone dark like the others? Had he misjudged? Or was the creature looping around? If it could maneuver in raw vacuum, could it have noticed Alex bringing the reactor back online?

Prax turned back toward the main airlock.

The *Rocinante* had seemed like nothing—a toothpick floating on an ocean of stars. Now the distance back to the airlock was immense. Prax moved one foot, then the other, trying to run without ever having both feet off the deck. The mag boots wouldn't let him release them both at the same time, the trailing foot trapped until the lead one signaled it was solid. His back itched, and he fought the urge to look behind. Nothing was there, and if something was, looking wouldn't help. The cable of his radio link turned from a line into a loop that trailed behind him as he moved. He pulled on it to take up the slack.

The tiny green-and-yellow glow of the open airlock called to him like something from a dream. He heard himself whimpering a little, but the sound was lost in a string of profanity from Holden.

"What's going on down there?" Naomi snapped.

"Captain's feeling a little under the weather," Amos said. "Think he maybe wrenched something."

"My knee feels like someone gave birth in it," Holden said. "I'll be fine."

“Are we clear for burn?” Alex asked.

“We are not,” Naomi said. “Cargo doors are as closed as they’re going to get until we hit the docks, but the forward airlock isn’t sealed.”

“I’m almost in,” Prax said, thinking, *Don’t leave me here. Don’t leave me in the pit with that thing.*

“Right, then,” Alex said. “Let me know when I can get us the hell out of here.”

In the depth of the ship, Amos made a small sound. Prax reached the airlock, pulling himself in with a violence that made the joints of his suit creak. He yanked on his umbilical to pull it the rest of the way in after him. He flung himself against the far wall, slapping at the controls until the cycle started and the outer door slid closed. In the dim light of the airlock proper, Prax spun slowly on all three axes. The outer door remained closed. Nothing ripped it open; no glowing blue eyes appeared to crawl in after him. He bumped gently against the wall as the distant sound of an air pump announced the presence of atmosphere.

“I’m in,” he said. “I’m in the airlock.”

“Is the captain stable?” Naomi asked.

“Was he ever?” Amos replied.

“I’m fine. My knee hurts. Get us out of here.”

“Amos?” Naomi said. “I’m seeing you’re still in the cargo bay. Is there a problem?”

“Might be,” Amos said. “Our guy left something behind.”

“Don’t touch it!” Holden’s voice was harsh as a bark. “We’ll get a torch and burn it down to its component atoms.”

“Don’t think that’d be a good idea,” Amos said. “I’ve seen these before, and they don’t take well to cutting torches.”

Prax levered himself up to standing, adjusting the slides on his boots to keep him lightly attached to the airlock floor. The inner airlock door chimed that it was safe to remove his suit and reenter the ship. He ignored it and activated one of the wall panels. He switched to a view of the cargo bay. Holden was floating near the cargo airlock. Amos was hanging on to a wall-mounted ladder and examining something small and shiny stuck to the bulkhead.

“What is it, Amos?” Naomi asked.

“Well, I’d have to clean some of this yuck off it,” Amos said. “But it looks like a pretty standard incendiary charge. Not a big one, but enough to

vaporize about two square meters.”

There was a moment of silence. Prax released the seal on his helmet, lifted it off, and took a deep breath of the ship’s air. He switched to an outside camera. The monster was drifting behind the ship, suddenly visible again in the faint light coming out of the cargo bay, and slowly receding from view. It was wrapped around his radioactive bait.

“A bomb,” Holden said. “You’re telling me that thing left a *bomb*?”

“And pretty damn peculiar too. If you ask me,” Amos replied.

“Amos, come with me into the cargo airlock,” Holden said. “Alex, what’s left to do before we burn that monster up? Is Prax back inside?”

“You guys in the ’lock?” Alex said.

“We are now. Do it.”

“Don’t need to say it twice,” Alex said. “Brace for acceleration.”

The biochemical cascade that came from euphoria and panic and the reassurance of safety slowed Prax’s response time so that when the burn began, he didn’t quite have his legs under him. He stumbled against the wall, knocking his head against the inner door of the airlock. He didn’t care. He felt wonderful. He’d gotten the monster off the ship. It was burning up in the *Rocinante*’s fiery tail even as he watched.

Then an angry god kicked the side of the ship and sent it spinning across the void. Prax was ripped from his feet, the gentle magnetic tug of his boots not enough to stop it. The outer airlock door rushed at him, and the world went black.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Avasarala

There was another spike. A third one. Only this time, there didn't seem to be any chance of Bobbie's monsters being involved. So maybe... maybe it was coincidence. Which opened the question. If the thing hadn't come from Venus, then where?

The world, however, had conspired to distract her.

"She's not what we thought she was, ma'am," Soren said. "I fell for the little lost Martian thing too. She's good."

Avasarala leaned back in her chair. The intelligence report on her screen showed the woman she'd called Roberta Draper in civilian clothes. If anything, they made her look bigger. The name listed was Amanda Telelé. Free operative of the Martian Intelligence Service.

"I'm still looking into it," Soren said. "It looks like there really was a Roberta Draper, but she died on Ganymede with the other marines."

Avasarala waved the words away and scrolled through the report. Records of back-channel steganographic messages between the alleged Bobbie and a known Martian operative on Luna beginning the day that Avasarala had recruited her. Avasarala waited for the fear to squeeze her chest, the sense of betrayal. They didn't come. She kept turning to new parts of the report, taking in new information and waiting for her body to react. It kept not happening.

"We looked into this why?" she asked.

"It was a hunch," Soren said. "It was just the way she carried herself when she wasn't around you. She was a little too... slick, I guess. She just didn't seem right. So I took the initiative. I said it was from you."

"So that I wouldn't look like such a fucking idiot for inviting a mole into my office?"

"Seemed like the polite thing to do," Soren said. "If you're looking for ways to reward my good service, I do accept bonuses and promotion."

"I fucking bet you do," Avasarala said.

He waited, leaning a little forward on his toes. Waiting for her to give the order to have Bobbie arrested and submitted for a full intelligence debriefing. As euphemisms went, “full intelligence debriefing” was among the most obscene, but they were at war with Mars, and a high-value intelligence agent planted in the heart of the UN would know things that were invaluable.

So, Avasarala thought, *why am I not reacting to this?*

She reached out to the screen, paused, pulled back her hand, frowning.

“Ma’am?” Soren said.

It was the smallest thing, and the least expected. Soren bit at the inside of his bottom lip. It was a tiny movement, almost invisible. Like a tell at a poker table. And as she saw it, Avasarala knew.

There was no thinking it out, no reasoning, no struggle or second-guessing. It was all simply there, clear in her mind as if she had always known it, complete and perfect. Soren was nervous because the report she was looking at wouldn’t hold up to rigorous scrutiny.

It wouldn’t hold up because it was a fake.

It was a fake because Soren was working for someone else, someone who wanted to control the information getting to Avasarala’s desk. Nguyen had re-created his little fleet without her knowing it because Soren was the one watching the data traffic. Someone had known that she would need controlling. Handling. This was something that had been prepared for since well before Ganymede had gone pear-shaped. The monster on Ganymede had been anticipated.

And so it was Errinwright.

He had let her demand her peace negotiations, let her think she’d undermined Nguyen, let her take Bobbie onto her staff. All of it, so that she wouldn’t get suspicious.

This wasn’t a shard of Venus that had escaped; it was a military project. A weapon that Earth wanted in order to break its rivals before the alien project on Venus finished whatever it was doing. Someone—probably Mao-Kwikowski—had retained a sample of the protomolecule in some separate and firewalled lab, weaponized it, and opened bidding.

The attack on Ganymede had been on one hand a proof of concept assault, on the other a crippling blow to the outer planets’ food supply. The OPA had never been on the list of bidders. And then Nguyen had gone to the Jovian system to collect the goods, James Holden and his pet botanist

had walked in on some part of it, and Mars had figured out they were about to lose the trade.

Avasarala wondered how much Errinwright had given Jules-Pierre Mao to outbid Mars. It would have had to be more than just money.

Earth was about to get its first protomolecule weapon, and Errinwright had kept her out of the loop because whatever he was going to do with it, she wasn't going to like it. And she was one of the only people in the solar system who might have been able to stop him.

She wondered whether she still was.

"Thank you, Soren," she said. "I appreciate this. Do we know where she is?"

"She's looking for you," Soren said, and a sly smile tugged at his lips. "She may be under the impression that you're asleep. It is pretty late."

"Sleep? Yes, I remember that vaguely," Avasarala said. "All right. I'm going to need to talk to Errinwright."

"Do you want me to have her arrested?"

"No, I don't."

The disappointment barely showed.

"How *should* we move forward?" Soren asked.

"I'll talk to Errinwright," she said. "Can you get me some tea?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and practically bowed his way out of the room.

Avasarala leaned back in her chair. Her mind felt calm. Her body was centered and still, like she'd ended a particularly long and effective meditation. She pulled up the connection request and waited to see how long Errinwright or his assistant would take to respond. As soon as she made the request, it was flagged PRIORITY PENDING. Three minutes later, Errinwright was there. He spoke from his hand terminal, the picture jumping as the car he was in bumped and turned. It was full night wherever he was.

"Chrisjen!" he said. "Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing in particular," Avasarala said, silently cursing the connection. She wanted to see his face. She wanted to watch him lie to her. "Soren's brought me something interesting. Intelligence thinks my Martian liaison's a spy."

"Really?" Errinwright said. "That's unfortunate. Are you arresting her?"

“I don’t think so,” Avasarala said. “I think I’ll put my own flag on her traffic. Better the devil we know. Don’t you agree?”

The pause was hardly noticeable.

“That’s a good idea. Do that.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Since I’ve got you here, I needed to ask you something. Do you have anything that requires you in the office, or can you work on a ship?”

She smiled. Here was the next move, then.

“What are you thinking about?”

Errinwright’s car reached a stretch of smoother pavement and his face came into clearer focus. He was wearing a dark suit with a high-collared shirt and no tie. He looked like a priest.

“Ganymede. We need to show that we’re taking the situation out there seriously. The secretary-general wants someone senior to go there physically. Report back on the humanitarian angle. Since you’re the one who’s taken point on this, he thought you’d be the right face to put on it. And I thought it would give you the chance to follow up on the initial attack too.”

“We’re in a shooting war,” Avasarala said. “I don’t think the Navy would want to spare a ship to haul my old bones out there. Besides which, I’m coordinating the investigation into Venus, aren’t I? Blank check and all.”

Errinwright grinned exactly as if he’d meant it.

“I’ve got you taken care of. Jules-Pierre Mao is taking a yacht from Luna to Ganymede to oversee his company’s humanitarian aid efforts. He’s offered a berth. It’s better accommodations than you get at the office. Probably better bandwidth too. You can monitor Venus from there.”

“Mao-Kwik is part of the government now? I hadn’t known,” she said.

“We’re all on the same side. Mao-Kwik is as interested as anyone in seeing those people cared for.”

Avasarala’s door opened and Roberta Draper loomed into the office. She looked like crap. Her skin had the ashy look of that of someone who hadn’t slept in too long. Her jaw was set. Avasarala nodded toward the chair.

“I take up a lot of bandwidth,” she said.

“Won’t be a problem. You’ll get first priority on all communications channels.”

The Martian sat down across the desk, well out of the camera's cone. Bobbie braced her hands on her thighs, elbows to the sides, like a wrestler getting ready to step into the cage. Avasarala made herself not glance at the woman.

"Can I think about it?"

"Chrisjen," Errinwright said, bringing his hand terminal closer in, his wide, round face filling the screen. "I told the secretary-general that this might not fly. Even in the best yacht, traveling out to the Jovian system is a hard journey. If you've got too much to do or if you're at all uncomfortable with the trip, you just say so and I'll find someone else. They just won't be as good as you."

"Who is?" Avasarala said with a toss of her hand. Rage was boiling in her gut. "Fine. You've talked me into it. When do I leave?"

"The yacht's scheduled for departure in four days. I'm sorry for the tight turnaround, but I didn't have confirmation until about an hour ago."

"Serendipity."

"If I were a religious man, I'd say it meant something. I'll have the details sent to Soren."

"Better send it to me directly," Avasarala said. "Soren's going to have a lot on his plate already."

"Whatever you like," he said.

Her boss had secretly started a war. He was working with the same corporations that had let the genie out of the bottle on Phoebe, sacrificed Eros, and threatened everything human. He was a frightened little boy in a good suit picking a fight he thought he could win because he was pissing himself over the real threat. She smiled at him. Good men and women had already died because of him and Nguyen. Children had died on Ganymede. Belters would be scrambling for calories. Some would starve.

Errinwright's round cheeks fell a millimeter. His brows knotted just a bit. He knew that she knew. Because of course he did. Players at their level didn't deceive each other. They won even though their opponents knew exactly what was happening. Just like he was winning against her right now.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked. "I think this is the first conversation we've had in ten years where you haven't said something vulgar."

Avasarala grinned at the screen, reaching out her fingertips as if she could caress him.

“Cunt,” she said carefully.

When the connection dropped, she put her head in her hands for a moment, blowing out her breath and sucking it back in hard, focusing. When she sat up, Bobbie was watching her.

“Evening,” Avasarala said.

“I’ve been trying to find you,” Bobbie said. “My connections were blocked.”

Avasarala grunted.

“We need to talk about something. Someone. I mean, Soren,” Bobbie said. “You remember that data you wanted him to take care of a couple days ago? He handed it off to someone else. I don’t know who, but they were military. I’ll swear to that.”

So that’s what spooked him, Avasarala thought. Caught with his hands in the cookie jar. Poor idiot had underestimated her pet Marine.

“All right,” she said.

“I understand that you don’t have any reason to trust me,” Bobbie said, “but... Okay. Why are you laughing?”

Avasarala stood up, stretching until the joints in her shoulders ached pleasantly.

“At this moment, you are literally the only one on my staff who I trust as far as I can piss. You remember when I said that the thing on Ganymede wasn’t us? It wasn’t then but it is now. We’ve bought it, and I assume we’re planning to use it against you.”

Bobbie stood up. Her face, once just ashen, was bloodless.

“I have to tell my superiors,” she said, her voice thick and strangled.

“No, you don’t. They know. And you can’t prove it yet any more than I can. Tell them now and they’ll broadcast it, and we’ll deny it and blah blah blah. The bigger problem is that you’re coming back to Ganymede with me. I’m being sent.”

She explained everything. Soren’s false intelligence report, what it implied, Errinwright’s betrayal, and the mission to Ganymede on the Mao-Kwik yacht.

“You can’t do that,” Bobbie said.

“It’s a pain in the ass,” Avasarala agreed. “They’ll be monitoring my connections, but they’re probably doing the same here. And if they’re

shipping me to Ganymede, you can be dead sure that nothing is going to happen there. They're putting me in a box until it's too late to change anything. Or that's what they're trying, anyway. I'm not giving away the fucking game yet."

"You can't get on that ship," Bobbie said. "It's a trap."

"Of course it's a trap," Avasarala said, waving a hand. "But it's a trap I have to step into. Refuse a request from the secretary-general? That comes out, and everyone starts thinking I'm about to retire. No one backs a player who's going to be powerless next year. We play for the long term, and that means looking strong for the duration. Errinwright knows that. It's why he played it this way."

Outside, another shuttle was lifting off. Avasarala could already hear the roar of the burn, feel the press of thrust and false gravity pushing her back. It had been thirty years since she'd been out of Earth's gravity well. This wasn't going to be pleasant.

"If you get on that ship, they'll kill you," Bobbie said, making each word its own sentence.

"That's not how this game gets played," Avasarala said. "What they —"

The door opened again. Soren had a tray in his hands. The teapot on it was cast iron, with a single handleless enamel cup. He opened his mouth to speak, then saw Bobbie. It was easy to forget how much larger she was until a man Soren's height visibly cowered before her.

"My tea! That's excellent. Do you want any, Bobbie?"

"No."

"All right. Well, put it down, Soren. I'm not drinking it with you standing there. Good. And pour me a cup."

Avasarala watched him turn his back on the marine. His hands didn't shake; she'd give the boy that much. Avasarala stood silent, waiting for him to bring it to her as if he were a puppy learning to retrieve a toy. When he did, she blew across the surface of the tea, scattering the thin veil of steam. He carefully didn't turn to look at Bobbie.

"Will there be anything else, ma'am?"

Avasarala smiled. How many people had this boy killed just by lying to her? She would never know for certain, and neither would he. The best she could do was *not another*.

"Soren," she said. "They're going to know it was you."

It was too much. He looked over his shoulder. Then he looked back, greenish with anxiety.

“Who do you mean?” he said, trying for charm.

“Them. If you’re counting on them to help your career, I just want you to understand that they won’t. The kind of men you’re working for? Once they know you’ve slipped, you’re nothing to them. They have no tolerance for failure.”

“I—”

“Neither do I. Don’t leave anything personal at your desk.”

She watched it in his eyes. The future he’d planned and worked for, defined himself by, fell away. A life on basic support rose in its place. It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t nearly enough. But it was all the justice she could manage on short notice.

When the door was closed, Bobbie cleared her throat.

“What’s going to happen to him?” she asked.

Avasarala sipped her tea. It was good, fresh green tea, brewed perfectly—rich and sweet and not even slightly bitter.

“Who gives a shit?” she said. “The Mao-Kwik yacht leaves in four days. That’s not much time. And neither of us is going to be able to take a dump without the bad guys knowing. I’m going to get you a list of people I need to have drinks or lunch or coffee with before we leave. Your job is to arrange it so I do.”

“I’m your social secretary now?” Bobbie said, bristling.

“You and my husband are the only two people alive who I know aren’t trying to stop me,” Avasarala said. “That’s how far down I am right now. This has to happen, and there is no one else I can rely on. So yes. You’re my social secretary. You’re my bodyguard. You’re my psychiatrist. All of it. You.”

Bobbie lowered her head, breathing out through flared nostrils. Her lips pursed and she shook her massive head once quickly—left, then right, then back to center.

“You’re fucked,” she said.

Avasarala took another sip of her tea. She should have been ruined. She should have been in tears. She’d been cut off from her own power, tricked. Jules-Pierre Mao had sat there, not a meter from where she was now, and laughed down his sleeve at her. Errinwright and Nguyen and whoever else was in his little cabal. They’d tricked her. She’d sat there,

pulling strings and trading favors and thinking that she was doing something real. For months—maybe years—she hadn't noticed that she was being closed out.

They'd made a fool of her. She should have been humiliated. Instead, she felt alive. This was her game, and if she was behind at halftime, it only meant they expected her to lose. There was nothing better than being underestimated.

"Do you have a gun?"

Bobbie almost laughed.

"They don't like having Martian soldiers walking around the United Nations with guns. I have to eat lunch with a dull spork. We're at war."

"All right, fine. When we get on the yacht, you're in charge of security. You're going to need a gun. I'll arrange that for you."

"You can? Honestly, though, I'd rather have my suit."

"Your suit? What suit?"

"I had custom-fit powered armor with me when I came here. The video feed of the monster was copied from it. They said they were turning it over to your guys to confirm the original footage hadn't been faked."

Avasarala looked at Bobbie and sipped her tea. Michael-Jon would know where it was. She'd call him the next morning, arrange to have it brought on board the Mao-Kwik yacht with an innocuous label like **WARDROBE** stamped on the side.

Probably thinking she needed to be convinced, Bobbie kept talking. "Seriously. Get me a gun, I'm a soldier. Get that suit for me, I'm a superhero."

"If we've still got it, you'll have it."

"All right, then," Bobbie said. She smiled. For the first time since they'd met, Avasarala was afraid of her.

God help whoever makes you put it on.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Holden

Gravity returned as Alex brought the engine up, and Holden floated down to the deck of the cargo bay airlock at a gentle half g. They didn't need to go fast now that the monster was outside the ship. They just needed to put some distance between the ship and it, and get it into the drive's star-hot exhaust plume, where it would be broken down into its various subatomic particles. Even the protomolecule couldn't survive being reduced to ions.

He hoped, anyway.

When he touched down on the deck, he intended to turn on the wall monitor and check the aft cameras. He wanted to watch the thing be torched, but the moment his weight came down, a white-hot spike of pain took his knee. He yelped and collapsed.

Amos drifted down next to him, then kicked off his boot mags and started to kneel. "You okay, Cap?" he said.

"Fine. I mean, for I-think-I-blew-out-my-knee levels of fine."

"Yeah. Joint injury's a lot less painful in microgravity, ain't it?"

Holden was about to reply when a massive hammer hit the side of the ship. The hull rang like a gong. The *Roci's* engine cut off almost instantly, and the ship snapped into a flat spin. Amos was lifted away from Holden and thrown across the airlock to slam against the outer door. Holden slid along the deck to land standing upright against the bulkhead next to him, his knee collapsing under him so painfully he nearly blacked out.

He chinned a button in his helmet, and his body armor shot him full of amphetamines and painkillers. Within seconds, his knee still hurt, but the pain was very far away and easy to ignore. The threatening tunnel vision vanished and the airlock became very bright. His heart started to race.

"Alex," he said, knowing the answer before he asked, "what was that?"

"When we torched our passenger there, the bomb in the cargo bay went off," the pilot replied. "We've got serious damage to that bay, to the outer hull, and to engineering. Reactor went into emergency shutdown. The

cargo bay turned into a second drive during the blast and put us into a spin. I have no control over the ship.”

Amos groaned and began moving his limbs. “That sucks.”

“We need to kill this spin,” Holden said. “What do you need to get the attitude thrusters back up?”

“Holden,” Naomi cut in, “I think Prax may be injured in the airlock. He’s not moving in there.”

“Is he dying?”

The hesitation lasted for one very long second.

“His suit doesn’t think so.”

“Then ship first,” Holden said. “First aid after. Alex, we’ve got radios again. And the lights are on. So the jamming is gone, and the batteries must still be working. Why can’t you fire the thrusters?”

“Looks like... primary and secondary pumps are out. No water pressure.”

“Confirmed,” Naomi said a second later. “Primary wasn’t in the blast area. If it’s toast, engineering must be a mess. Secondary’s on the deck above. It shouldn’t have been physically damaged, but there was a big power spike just before the reactor went off-line. Might have fried it or blown a breaker.”

“Okay, we’re on it. Amos,” Holden said, pulling himself over to where the mechanic lay on the cargo airlock’s outer door. “You with me?”

Amos gave a one-handed Belter nod, then groaned. “Just knocked the wind out of me, is all.”

“Gotta get up, big man,” Holden said, pushing himself to his feet. In the partial gravity of their spin, his leg felt heavy, hot, and stiff as a board. Without the drugs pouring through him, standing on it would have probably made him scream. Instead, he pulled Amos up, putting even more pressure on it.

I will pay for this later, he thought. But the amphetamines made later seem very far away.

“What?” Amos said, slurring the word. He probably had a concussion, but Holden would get him some medical attention later when the ship was back under their control.

“We need to get to the secondary water pump,” Holden said, forcing himself to speak slowly in spite of the drugs. “What’s the fastest access point?”

“Machine shop,” Amos replied, then closed his eyes and seemed to fall asleep on his feet.

“Naomi,” Holden said. “Can you control Amos’ suit from there?”

“Yes.”

“Shoot him full of speed. I can’t drag his ass around with me, and I need him.”

“Okay,” she said. A couple of seconds later, Amos’ eyes popped open.

“Shit,” he said. “Was I asleep?” His words were still slurred but now had a sort of manic energy to them.

“We need to get to the bulkhead access point in the machine shop. Grab whatever you think we’ll need to get the pump running. It might have blown a breaker or fried some wiring. I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay,” Amos said, then pulled himself along the toe rings set into the floor to get to the inner airlock door. A moment later it was open and he crawled out of view.

With the ship spinning, gravity was pulling Holden to a point halfway between the deck and the starboard bulkhead. None of the ladders and rings set into the ship for use in low g or under thrust would be oriented in the right direction. Not really a problem with four working limbs, but it would make maneuvering with one useless leg difficult.

And of course, once he moved past wherever the ship’s center of spin was, everything would reverse.

For a moment, his perspective shifted. The vicious Coriolis rattled the fine bones inside his ears, and he was riding a spinning hunk of metal lost in permanent free fall. Then he was under it, about to be crushed. He flushed with the sweat that came a moment before nausea as his brain ran through scenarios to explain the sensations of the spin. He chinned the suit controls, pumping a massive dose of emergency antinausea drugs into his bloodstream.

Without giving himself more time to think about it, Holden grabbed the toe rings and pulled himself up to the inner airlock door. He could see Amos filling a plastic bucket with tools and supplies he was yanking out of drawers and lockers.

“Naomi,” Holden said. “Going to take a peek in engineering. Do we have any cameras left in there?”

She made a sort of disgusted grunt he interpreted as a negative, then said, “I’ve got systems shorted out all over the ship. Either they’re

destroyed, or the power is out on that circuit.”

Holden pulled himself over to the deck-mounted pressure hatch that separated the machine shop from engineering. A status light on the hatch blinked an angry red.

“Shit, I was afraid of that.”

“What?” Naomi asked.

“You don’t have environmental readings either, do you?”

“Not from engineering. That’s all down.”

“Well,” Holden said with a long sigh. “The hatch thinks there’s no atmosphere on the other side. That incendiary charge actually blew a hole through the bulkhead, and engineering is in vacuum.”

“Uh-oh,” Alex said. “Cargo bay’s in vacuum too.”

“And the cargo bay door is broken,” Naomi added. “And the cargo airlock.”

“And a partridge in a fucking pear tree,” Amos said with a disgusted snort. “Let’s get the damn ship to stop spinning and I’ll go outside and take a look at it.”

“Amos is right,” Holden said, giving up on the hatch and pushing himself to his feet. He staggered down a steeply angled bulkhead to the access panel where Amos was now waiting, bucket in hand. “First things first.”

While Amos used a torque wrench to unbolt the access panel, Holden said, “Actually, Naomi, pump all the air out of the machine shop too. No atmo below deck four. Override the safeties so we can open the engineering hatch if we need to.”

Amos ran out the last bolt and pulled the panel off the bulkhead. Beyond it lay a dark, cramped space filled with a confusing tangle of pipes and cabling.

“Oh,” Holden added. “Might want to prep an SOS if we can’t get this fixed.”

“Yeah, because we got a lot of people out there who we really want coming to help us right now,” Amos said.

Amos pulled himself into the narrow passage between the two hulls and then out of sight. Holden followed him in. Two meters beyond the hatch loomed the blocky and complex-looking pump mechanism that kept water pressure to the maneuvering thrusters. Amos stopped next to it and

began pulling parts off. Holden waited behind him, the narrow space not allowing him to see what the big mechanic was doing.

“How’s it look?” Holden asked after a few minutes of listening to Amos curse under his breath while he worked.

“It looks fine here,” Amos said. “Gonna swap this breaker anyway, just to be sure. But I don’t think the pump’s our problem.”

Shit.

Holden backed out of the maintenance hatch and half crawled up the steep slope of bulkhead back to the engineering hatch. The angry red light had been replaced with a morose yellow one now that there was no atmosphere on either side of the hatch.

“Naomi,” Holden said. “I’ve got to get into engineering. I need to see what happened in there. Have you killed the safeties?”

“Yes. But I’ve got no sensors in there. The room could be flooded with radiation—”

“But you have sensors here in the machine shop, right? If I open the hatch and you get radiation warnings, just let me know. I’ll shut it immediately.”

“Jim,” Naomi said, the stiffness that had been in her voice every time she’d spoken to him for the last day slipping a bit. “How many times can you get yourself massively irradiated before it catches up with you?”

“At least once more?”

“I’ll tell the *Roci* to prep a bed in sick bay,” she said, not quite laughing.

“Get one of the ones that’s not throwing errors.”

Without giving himself time to rethink it, Holden slapped the release on the deck hatch. He held his breath while it opened, expecting to see chaos and destruction on the other side, followed by his suit’s radiation alarm.

Instead, other than one small hole in the bulkhead closest to the explosion, it looked fine.

Holden pulled himself through the opening and hung by his arms for a few moments, examining the space. The massive fusion reactor that dominated the center of the compartment looked untouched. The bulkhead on the starboard side bowed in precariously, with a charred hole in its center, like a miniature volcano had formed there. Holden shuddered at the thought of how much energy had to have been released to bend the heavily

armored and radiation-shielded bulkhead in like that, and how close it had come to punching a hole in their reactor. How many more joules to go from a badly dented wall to full containment breach?

“God, this one was close,” he said out loud to no one in particular.

“Swapped out all the parts I can think to,” Amos said. “The problem is somewhere else.”

Holden let go of the rim of the hatch and dropped a half meter to the bulkhead, which angled below him, then slid to the deck. The only other visible damage was a hunk of bulkhead plating stuck in the wall exactly on the other side of the reactor. Holden couldn’t see any way that the shrapnel could have gotten there without passing directly through the reactor, or else bouncing off two bulkheads and around it. There was no sign of the first, so the second, incredibly unlikely though it was, had to be what had happened.

“I mean, really close,” he said, touching the jagged metal fragment. It was sunk a good fifteen centimeters into the wall. Plenty far enough to have at least breached the shielding on the reactor. Maybe worse.

“Grabbing your camera,” Naomi said. A moment later she whistled. “No kidding. The walls in there are mostly cabling. Can’t make a hole like that without breaking something.”

Holden tried to pull the shrapnel out of the wall by hand and failed. “Amos, bring some pliers and a lot of patch cabling.”

“So no on the distress call, then,” Naomi said.

“No. But if someone could point a camera aft and reassure me that for all this trouble we actually killed that damned thing, that would be just swell.”

“Watched it go myself, Cap,” Alex said. “Nothin’ but gas now.”

Holden lay on one of the sick bay beds, letting the ship look his leg over. Periodically a manipulator prodded his knee, which was swelled up to the size of a cantaloupe, the skin stretched tight as a drum’s head. But the bed was also making sure to keep him perfectly medicated, so the occasional pokes and prods registered only as pressure without any pain.

The panel next to his head warned him to remain still; then two arms grabbed his leg while a third injected a needle-thin flexible tube into his

knee and started doing something arthroscopic. He felt a vague tugging sensation.

At the next bed over lay Prax. His head was bandaged where a three-centimeter flap of skin had been glued back down. His eyes were closed. Amos, who had turned out not to have a concussion, just another nasty bump on his head, was belowdecks doing makeshift repairs on everything the monster's bomb had broken, including putting a temporary patch on the hole in their engineering bulkhead. They wouldn't be able to fix the cargo bay door until they docked at Tycho. Alex was flying them there at a gentle quarter g to make it easier to work.

Holden didn't mind the delay. The truth was he was in no hurry to get back to Tycho and confront Fred about what he'd seen. The longer he thought about it, the further he got from his earlier blind panic, and the more he thought Naomi was right. It made no sense for Fred to be behind any of this.

But he wasn't sure. And he had to be sure.

Prax mumbled something and touched his head. He started pulling on the bandages.

"I wouldn't mess with those," Holden said.

Prax nodded and closed his eyes again. Sleeping, or trying to. The auto-doc pulled the tube out of Holden's leg, sprayed it with antiseptic, and began wrapping it with a tight bandage. Holden waited until the medical pod was done doing whatever it was doing to his knee, then turned sideways on the bed and tried to stand up. Even at a quarter g, his leg wouldn't support him. He hopped on one foot over to a supply locker and got himself a crutch.

As he moved past the botanist's bed, Prax grabbed his arm. His grip was surprisingly strong.

"It's dead?"

"Yeah," Holden said, patting his hand. "We got it. Thanks."

Prax didn't reply; he just rolled onto his side and shook. It took Holden a moment to realize Prax was weeping. He left without saying anything else. What else was there to say?

Holden took the ladder-lift up, planning to go to ops and read the detailed damage reports Naomi and the *Roci* were compiling. He stopped when he got to the personnel deck and heard two people speaking. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he recognized Naomi's voice, and

he recognized the tone she used when she was having an intimate conversation.

The voices were coming from the galley. Feeling a little like a Peeping Tom, Holden moved closer to the galley hatch until he could make out the words.

"It's more than that," Naomi was saying. Holden almost walked into the galley, but something in her tone stopped him. He had the terrible feeling she was talking about him. About them. About why she was leaving.

"Why does it have to be more?" the other person said. Amos.

"You almost beat a man to death with a can of chicken on Ganymede," Naomi replied.

"Gonna hold a little girl hostage for some food? Fuck him. If he was here, I'd smash him again right now."

"Do you trust me, Amos?" Naomi said. Her voice was sad. More than that. Frightened.

"More than anyone else," Amos replied.

"I'm scared out of my wits. Jim is rushing off to do something really dumb on Tycho. This guy we're taking with us seems like he's one twitch from a nervous breakdown."

"Well, he's—"

"And you," she continued. "I depend on you. I know you've always got my back, no matter what. Except maybe not now, because the Amos I know doesn't beat a skinny kid half to death, no matter how much chicken he asks for. I feel like everyone's losing themselves. I need to understand, because I'm really, really frightened."

Holden felt the urge to go in, take her hand, hold her. The need in her voice demanded it, but he held himself back. There was a long pause. Holden heard a scraping sound, followed by the sound of metal hitting glass. Someone was stirring sugar into coffee. The sounds were so clear he could almost see it.

"So, Baltimore," Amos said, his voice as relaxed as if he were going to talk about the weather. "Not a nice town. You ever heard of squeezing? Squeeze trade? Hooker squeeze?"

"No. Is it a drug?"

"No," Amos said with a laugh. "No, when you squeeze a hooker, you put her on the street until she gets knocked up, then peddle her to johns who

get off on pregnant girls, then send her back to the streets after she pops the kid. With procreation restrictions, banging pregnant girls is quite the kink.”

“Squeeze?”

“Yeah, you know, ‘squeezing out puppies’? You never heard it called that?”

“Okay,” Naomi said, trying to hide her disgust.

“Those kids? They’re illegal, but they don’t just vanish, not right away,” Amos continued. “They got uses too.”

Holden felt his chest tighten a little. It wasn’t something he’d ever thought about. When, a second later, Naomi spoke, her horror echoed his.

“Jesus.”

“Jesus got nothing to do with it,” Amos said. “No Jesus in the squeeze trade. But some kids wind up in the pimp gangs. Some wind up on the streets...”

“Some wind up finding a way to ship offworld, and they never go back?” Naomi asked, her voice quiet.

“Maybe,” Amos said, his voice as flat and conversational as ever. “Maybe some do. But most of them just... disappear, eventually. Used up. Most of them.”

For a time, no one spoke. Holden heard the sounds of coffee being drunk.

“Amos,” she said, her voice thick. “I never—”

“So I’d like to find this little girl before someone uses her up, and she disappears. I’d like to do that for her,” Amos said. His voice caught for a moment, and he cleared it with a loud cough. “For her dad.”

Holden thought they were done, and started to slip away when he heard Amos, his voice calm again, say, “Then I’m going to kill whoever snatched her.”

Chapter Thirty

Bobbie

Prior to working for Avasarala at the UN, Bobbie had never even heard of Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile, or if she had, she hadn't noticed. She'd spent her whole life wearing, eating, or sitting on products carted through the solar system by Mao-Kwik freighters without ever realizing it. After she'd gone through the files Avasarala had given her, she'd been astonished at the size and reach of the company. Hundreds of ships, dozens of stations, millions of employees. Jules-Pierre Mao owned significant properties on every habitable planet and moon in the solar system.

His eighteen-year-old daughter had owned her own racing ship. And that was the daughter he *didn't* like.

When Bobbie tried to imagine being so wealthy you could own a spaceship just to compete in races, she failed. That the same girl had run away to be an OPA rebel probably said a lot about the relationship of wealth and contentment, but Bobbie had a hard time being that philosophical.

She'd grown up solidly Martian middle class. Her father had done twenty as a Marine noncom and had gone into private security consulting after he'd left the corps. Bobbie's family had always had a nice home. She and her two older brothers had attended a private primary school, and her brothers had both gone on to university without having to take out student loans. Growing up, she'd never once thought of herself as poor.

She did now.

Owning your own racing ship wasn't even wealth. It was like speculation. It was conspicuous consumption befitting ancient Earth royalty, a pharaoh's pyramid with a reaction drive. Bobbie had thought it was the most ridiculous excess she'd ever heard of.

And then she climbed off the short flight shuttle onto Jules-Pierre Mao's private L5 station.

Jules didn't park his ships in orbit at a public station. He didn't even use a Mao-Kwik corporate station. This was an entire fully functioning space station in orbit around Earth solely for his private spaceships, and the

whole thing done up like peacock feathers. It was a level of extravagance that had never even occurred to her.

She also thought it made Mao himself very dangerous. Everything he did was an announcement of his freedom from constraint. He was a man without boundaries. Killing a senior politician of the UN government might be bad business. It might wind up being expensive. But it would never actually be risky to a man with this much wealth and power.

Avasarala didn't see it.

"I hate spin gravity," Avasarala said, sipping at a cup of steaming tea. They'd be on the station for only three hours, while cargo was transferred from the shuttle to Mao's yacht, but they'd been assigned a suite of four full-sized bedrooms, each with its own shower, and a massive lounge area. A huge screen pretended to be a window, the crescent Earth with her continent-veiling clouds hung on the black. They had a private kitchen staffed by three people, whose biggest task so far had been making the assistant undersecretary's tea. Bobbie considered ordering a large meal just to give them something to do.

"I can't believe we're about to climb on a ship owned by this man. Have you ever known anyone this wealthy to go to jail? Or even be prosecuted? This guy could probably walk in here and shoot you in the face on a live newsfeed and get away with it."

Avasarala laughed at her. Bobbie suppressed a surge of anger. It was just fear looking for an outlet.

"That's not the game," Avasarala said. "No one gets shot. They get marginalized. It's worse."

"No, it's not. I've seen people shot. I've seen my friends shot. When you say, 'That's not the game,' you mean for people like you. Not like me."

Avasarala's expression cooled.

"Yes, that's what I mean," the old woman said. "The level we're playing at has different rules. It's like playing go. It's all about exerting influence. Controlling the board without occupying it."

"Poker is a game too," Bobbie said. "But sometimes the stakes get so high that one player decides it's easier to kill the other guy and walk away with the money. It happens all the time."

Avasarala nodded at her, not replying right away, visibly thinking over what Bobbie had said. Bobbie felt her anger replaced with a sudden rush of affection for the grumpy and arrogant old lady.

“Okay,” Avasarala said, putting her teacup down and placing her hands in her lap. “I hear what you’re saying, Sergeant. I think it’s unlikely, but I’m glad you’re here to say it.”

But you aren’t taking it seriously, Bobbie wanted to shout at her. Instead, she asked the servant who hovered nearby for a mushroom and onion sandwich. While she ate it, Avasarala sipped tea, nibbled on a cookie, and made small talk about the war and her grandchildren. Bobbie tried to be sure to make concerned noises during the war parts and *awww, cute* noises when the kids were the topic. But all she could think about was the tactical nightmare defending Avasarala on an enemy-controlled spacecraft would be.

Her recon suit was in a large crate marked FORMAL WEAR and being loaded onto the Mao yacht even as they waited. Bobbie wanted to sneak off and put it on. She didn’t notice when Avasarala stopped speaking for several minutes.

“Bobbie,” Avasarala said, her face not quite a frown. “Are my stories about my beloved grandchildren boring you?”

“Yeah,” Bobbie replied. “They really are.”

Bobbie had thought that Mao Station was the most ludicrous display of conspicuous wealth she’d ever seen right up until they boarded the yacht.

While the station was extravagant, it at least served a function. It was Jules Mao’s personal orbital garage, where he could store and service his fleet of private spacecraft. Underneath the glitz there was a working station, with mechanics and support staff doing actual jobs.

The yacht, the *Guanshiyin*, was the size of a standard cheapjack people-mover that would have transported two hundred customers, but it only had a dozen staterooms. Its cargo area was just large enough to contain the supplies they’d need for a lengthy voyage. It wasn’t particularly fast. It was, by any reasonable measurement, a miserable failure as a useful spacecraft.

But its job was not to be useful.

The *Guanshiyin*’s job was to be comfortable. Extravagantly comfortable.

It was like a hotel lobby. The carpet was plush and soft underfoot, and actual crystal chandeliers caught the light. Everyplace that should have had a sharp corner was rounded. Softened. The walls were papered with raw bamboo and natural fiber. The first thing Bobbie thought was how hard it would be to clean, and the second thing was that the difficulty was intentional.

Each suite of rooms took up nearly an entire deck of the ship. Each room had its own private bath, media center, game room, and lounge with a full bar. The lounge had a gigantic screen showing the view outside, which would not have been higher definition had it been an actual glass window. Near the bar was a dumbwaiter next to an intercom, which could deliver food prepared by Cordon Bleu chefs any hour of the day or night.

The carpet was so thick Bobbie was pretty sure mag boots wouldn't work. It wouldn't matter. A ship like this would never break down, never have to stop the engines during flight. The kind of people who flew on the *Guanshiyin* had probably never actually worn an environment suit in their lives.

All the fixtures in her bathroom were gold plated.

Bobbie and Avasarala were sitting in the lounge with the head of her UN security team, a pleasant-looking gray-haired man of Kurdish descent named Cotyar. Bobbie had been worried when she first met him. He looked like a friendly high school teacher, not a soldier. But then she'd watched him go through Avasarala's rooms with practiced efficiency, laying out their security plan and directing his team, and her worries eased.

"Well, impressions?" Avasarala asked, leaning back in a plush armchair with her eyes closed.

"This room is not secure," Cotyar said, his accent exotic to Bobbie's ears. "We should not discuss sensitive matters here. Your private room has been secured for such discussions."

"This is a trap," Bobbie said.

"Aren't we finished with that shit yet?" Avasarala said, then leaned forward to give Bobbie a glare.

"She is right," Cotyar said quietly, clearly unhappy to be discussing such matters in an unsecured room. "I've counted fourteen crew on this ship already, and I would estimate that is less than one-third of the total crew of this vessel. I have a team of six for your protection—"

"Seven," Bobbie interrupted, raising her hand.

“As you say,” Cotyar continued with a nod. “Seven. We do not control any of the ship’s systems. Assassination would be as simple as sealing the deck we are on and pumping out the air.”

Bobbie pointed at Cotyar and said, “See?”

Avasarala waved a hand as if she were shooing flies. “What’s communications look like?”

“Robust,” Cotyar said. “We’ve set up a private network and have been given the backup tightbeam and radio array for your personal use. Bandwidth is significant, though light delay will be an increasing factor as we move away from Earth.”

“Good,” Avasarala said, smiling for the first time since they’d come on the ship. She’d stopped looking tired a while ago and had moved on to whatever tired turns into when it became a lifestyle.

“None of this is secure,” Cotyar said. “We can secure our private internal network, but if they are monitoring outbound and inbound traffic through the array we’re using, there will be no way to detect that. We have no access to ship operations.”

“And,” Avasarala said, “that is exactly why I’m here. Bottle me up, send me on a long trip, and read all my fucking mail.”

“We’re lucky if that’s all they do,” Bobbie said. Thinking about how tired Avasarala looked had reminded her how tired she was too. She felt herself drift away for a moment.

Avasarala finished saying something, and Cotyar nodded and said yes to her. She turned to Bobbie and said, “Do you agree?”

“Uh,” Bobbie said, trying to rewind the conversation in her head and failing. “I’m—”

“You’re practically falling out of your fucking chair. When’s the last time you got a full night’s sleep?”

“Probably about the last time you did,” Bobbie said. *The last time all my squaddies were alive, and you weren’t trying to keep the solar system from catching on fire.* She waited for the next scathing comment, the next observation that she couldn’t do her job if she was that compromised. That weak.

“Fair enough,” Avasarala said. Bobbie felt another little surge of affection for her. “Mao’s throwing a big dinner tonight to welcome us aboard. I want you and Cotyar to come with. Cotyar will be security, so he’ll stand at the back of the room and look menacing.”

Bobbie laughed before she could stop herself. Cotyar smiled and winked at her.

“And,” Avasarala continued, “you’ll be there as my social secretary, so you can chat people up. Try to get a feel for the crew and the mood of the ship. Okay?”

“Roger that.”

“I noticed,” Avasarala said, her tone shifting to the one she used when she was going to ask for an unpleasant favor, “the executive officer staring at you when we did the airlock meet and greet.”

Bobbie nodded. She’d noticed it too. Some men had a large-woman fetish, and Bobbie had gotten the hair-raising sense that he might be a member of that tribe. They tended to have unresolved mommy issues, so she generally steered clear.

“Any chance you could talk him up at dinner?” Avasarala finished.

Bobbie laughed, expecting everyone else to laugh too. Even Cotyar was looking at her as though Avasarala had made a perfectly reasonable request.

“Uh, no,” Bobbie said.

“Did you say no?”

“Yeah, no. Hell no. Fuck no. *Nein und abermals nein. Nyet. La. Siei,*” Bobbie said, stopping when she ran out of languages. “And I’m actually a little pissed now.”

“I’m not asking you to sleep with him.”

“Good, because I don’t use sex as a weapon,” Bobbie said. “I use weapons as weapons.”

“Chrisjen!” Jules Mao said, enveloping Avasarala’s hand in his and shaking it.

The lord of the Mao-Kwik empire towered over Avasarala. He had the kind of handsome face that made Bobbie instinctively want to like him, and medically untreated male-pattern hair loss that said he didn’t care whether she did. Choosing not to use his wealth to fix a problem as treatable as thinning hair actually made him seem even more in control. He wore a loose sweater and cotton pants that hung on him like a tailored suit. When

Avasarala introduced Bobbie to him, he smiled and nodded while barely glancing in her direction.

“Is your staff settled in?” he asked, letting Avasarala know that Bobbie’s presence reminded him of underlings. Bobbie gritted her teeth but kept her face blank.

“Yes,” Avasarala replied with what Bobbie would have sworn was genuine warmth. “The accommodations are lovely, and your crew has been wonderful.”

“Excellent,” Jules said, placing Avasarala’s hand on his arm and leading her to an enormous table. They were surrounded on all sides by men in white jackets with black bow ties. One of them darted forward and pulled a chair out. Jules placed Avasarala in it. “Chef Marco has promised something special tonight.”

“How about straight answers? Are those on the menu?” Bobbie asked as a waiter pulled out a chair for her.

Jules settled into his chair at the head of the table. “Answers?”

“You guys won,” Bobbie said, ignoring the steaming soup one of the servers placed in front of her. Mao tapped salt onto his and began eating it as though they were just having casual dinner conversation. “The assistant undersecretary is on the ship. No reason to bullshit us now. What’s going on?”

“Humanitarian aid,” he replied.

“*Bullshit*,” Bobbie said. She glanced at Avasarala, but the old woman was just smiling. “You can’t tell me that you have time to spend a couple months doing the transit to Jupiter just to oversee handing out rice and juice boxes. And you couldn’t get enough relief supplies onto this ship to feed Ganymede lunch, much less make a long-term difference.”

Mao settled back in his chair, and the white jackets bustled around the room, clearing the soup away. Bobbie’s was whisked away as well, even though she hadn’t eaten any of it.

“Roberta,” Mao began.

“Don’t call me Roberta.”

“*Sergeant*, you should be questioning your superiors at the UN foreign office, not me.”

“I’d love to, but apparently asking questions is against the rules in this *game*.”

His smile was warm, condescending, and empty. “I made my ship available to provide Madam Undersecretary the most comfortable ride to her new assignment. And while you have not yet met them, there are personnel currently on this vessel whose expertise will be invaluable to the citizens of Ganymede once you arrive.”

Bobbie had been around Avasarala long enough to see the game being played right in front of her. Mao was laughing at her. He knew this was all bullshit, and he knew she knew it as well. But as long as he remained calm and gave reasonable answers, no one could call him on it. He was too powerful to be called a liar to his face.

“You’re a liar, and—” she started; then something he’d said made her stop. “Wait, ‘once you arrive’? You aren’t coming?”

“I’m afraid not,” Mao said, smiling up at the white jacket who placed another plate in front of him. This one had what appeared to be a whole fish, complete with head and staring eyes.

Bobbie gaped at Avasarala, who was frowning at Mao now.

“I was told you were personally leading this relief effort,” Avasarala said.

“That was my intention. But I’m afraid other business has removed that option. Once we finish with this excellent dinner, I’ll be taking the shuttle back to the station. This ship, and its crew, are at your disposal until your vital work on Ganymede is complete.”

Avasarala just stared at Mao. For the first time in Bobbie’s experience, the old lady was struck speechless.

A white jacket brought Bobbie a fish while her lush prison flew at a leisurely quarter g toward Jupiter.

Avasarala hadn’t said a word on the ride down the lift to their suite. In the lounge, she stopped long enough to grab a bottle of gin off the bar, and waggled a finger at Bobbie. Bobbie followed her into the master bedroom, Cotyar close behind.

Once the door was closed and Cotyar had used his handheld security terminal to scan the room for bugs, Avasarala said, “Bobbie, start thinking of a way to either get control of this ship or get us off of it.”

“Forget that,” Bobbie said. “Let’s go grab that shuttle Mao’s leaving on right now. It’s within range of his station or he wouldn’t be taking it.”

To her surprise, Cotyar nodded. “I agree with the sergeant. If we plan to leave, the shuttle will be easier to commandeer and control against a hostile crew.”

Avasarala sat down on her bed with a long exhale that turned into a heavy sigh. “I can’t leave yet. It doesn’t work that way.”

“The fucking game!” Bobbie yelled.

“Yes,” Avasarala snapped. “Yes, the fucking game. I’ve been ordered by my superiors to make this trip. If I leave now, I’m out. They’ll be polite and call it a sudden illness or exhaustion, but the excuse they give me will also be the reason I’m not allowed to keep doing my job. I’ll be safe, and I’ll be powerless. As long as I pretend I’m doing what they asked me to, I can keep working. I’m still the assistant undersecretary of executive administration. I still have connections. Influence. If I run now, I lose them. If I lose them, these fuckers might as well shoot me.”

“But,” Bobbie said.

“But,” Avasarala repeated. “If I continue to be effective, they’ll find a way to cut me off. Unexplained comm failure, something. Something to keep me off the network. When that happens, I will demand that the captain reroute to the closest station for repairs. If I’m right, he won’t do it.”

“Ah,” Bobbie said.

“Oh,” Cotyar said a moment later.

“Yes,” Avasarala said. “When that happens, I will declare this an illegal seizure of my person, and you will get me this ship.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Prax

With every day that passed, the question came closer: What was the next step? It didn't feel all that different from those first, terrible days on Ganymede, making lists as a way of telling himself what to do. Only now he wasn't only looking for Mei. He was looking for Strickland. Or the mysterious woman in the video. Or whoever had built the secret lab. In that sense, he was much better off than he had been before.

On the other hand, he had been searching Ganymede. Now the field had expanded to include everywhere.

The lag time to Earth—or Luna, actually, since Persis-Strokes Security Consultants was based in orbit rather than down the planet's gravity well—was a little over twenty minutes. It made actual conversation essentially impossible, so in practice, the hatchet-faced woman on his screen was making a series of promotional videos more and more specifically targeted to what Prax wanted to hear.

"We have an intelligence-sharing relationship with Pinkwater, which is presently the security company with the largest physical and operational presence in the outer planets," she said. "We also have joint-action contracts with Al Abbiq and Star Helix. With those, we can take immediate action either directly or through our partners, on literally any station or planet in the system."

Prax nodded to himself. That was exactly what he needed. Someone with eyes everywhere, with contacts everywhere. Someone who could help.

"I'm attaching a release," the woman said. "We will need payment for the processing fee, but we won't be charging your accounts for anything more than that until we've agreed on the scope of the investigation you're willing to be liable for. Once we have that in hand, I will send you a detailed proposal with an itemized spreadsheet and we can decide the scope of work that works best for you."

"Thank you," Prax said. He pulled up the document, signed off, and returned it. It would be twenty minutes at the speed of light before it

reached Luna. Twenty minutes back. Who knew how long in between?

It was a start. He could feel good about that, at least.

The ship was quiet in a way that felt like anticipation, but Prax didn't know exactly what of. The arrival at Tycho Station, but beyond that, he wasn't sure. Leaving his bunk behind, he went through the empty galley and up the ladder toward the ops center and then the pilot's station. The small room was dim, most of the light coming from the control panels and the sweep of high-definition screens that filled 270 degrees of vision with starlight, the distant sun, and the approaching mass of Tycho Station, the oasis in the vast emptiness.

"Hey there, Doc," Alex said from the pilot's couch. "Come up to see the view?"

"If... I mean, if that's all right."

"Not a problem. I haven't been running with a copilot since we got the *Roci*. Strap in right there. Just if somethin' happens, don't touch anything."

"I won't," Prax promised as he scrambled into the acceleration couch. At first, the station seemed to grow slowly. The two counter-rotating rings were hardly larger than Prax's thumb, the sphere they surrounded little more than a gum ball. Then, as they drew nearer, the fuzzy texture at the edge of the construction sphere began to resolve into massive waldoes and gantries reaching toward a strangely aerodynamic form. The ship under construction was still half undressed, ceramic and steel support beams open to the vacuum like bones. Tiny fireflies flickered inside and out: welders and sealant packs firing off too far away to see apart from the light.

"Is that built for atmosphere?"

"Nope. Kinda looks that way, though. That's the *Chesapeake*. Or it will be, anyway. She's designed for sustained high g. I think they're talkin' about running the poor bastard at something like eight g for a couple of months."

"All the way where?" Prax asked, doing a little napkin-back math in his head. "It would have to be outside the orbit of... anything."

"Yep, she'll be going deep. They're going after that *Nauvoo*."

"The generation ship that was supposed to knock Eros into the sun?"

"That's the one. They cut her engines when the plan went south, but she's been cruisin' on ever since. Wasn't finished, so they can't bring her around on remote. Instead, they're buildin' a retriever. Hope they manage too. The *Nauvoo* was an amazin' piece of work. Of course, even if they get

her back, it won't keep the Mormons from suing Tycho into nonexistence if they can figure out how."

"Why would that be hard?"

"OPA doesn't recognize the courts on Earth and Mars, and they run the ones in the Belt. So it's pretty much win in a court that doesn't matter or lose in one that does."

"Oh," Prax said.

On the screens, Tycho Station grew larger and more detailed. Prax couldn't tell what detail of it brought it into perspective, but between one heartbeat and the next, he understood the scope and size of the station before him and let out a little gasp. The construction sphere had to be half a kilometer across, like two complete farm domes stuck bottom to bottom. Slowly, the great industrial sphere grew until it filled the screens, starlight replaced by the glow from equipment guides and a glass-domed observation bubble. Steel-and-ceramic plates and scaffolds took the place of the blackness. There were the massive drives that could push the entire station, like a city in the sky, anywhere in the solar system. There were the complex swivel points, like the gimbals of a crash couch made by giants, that would reconfigure the station as a whole when thrust gravity took rotation's place.

It took his breath away. The elegance and functionality of the structure lay out before him, as beautiful and simple and effective as a leaf or a root cluster. To have something so much like the fruits of evolution, but designed by human minds, was awe-inspiring. It was the pinnacle of what creativity meant, the impossible made real.

"That's good work," Prax said.

"Yup," Alex said. And then on the shipwide channel: "We've arrived. Everyone strap in for docking. I'm going to manual."

Prax half rose in his couch.

"Should I go to my quarters?"

"Where you are's as good as anyplace. Just put the web on in case we bump against somethin'," Alex said. And then, his voice changing to a stronger, more clipped cadence: "Tycho control, this is the *Rocinante*. Are we cleared for docking?"

Prax heard a distant voice speaking to Alex alone.

"Roger that," Alex said. "We're comin' in."

In the dramas and action films that Prax had watched back on Ganymede, piloting a ship had always looked like a fairly athletic thing.

Sweating men dragging hard against the control bars. Watching Alex was nothing like it. He still had the two joysticks, but his motions were small, calm. A tap, and the gravity under Prax changed, his couch shifting under him by a few centimeters. Then another tap and another shift. The heads-up display showed a tunnel through the vacuum outlined in a blue and gold that swept up and to the right, ending against the side of the turning ring.

Prax looked at the mass of data being sent to Alex and said, "Why fly at all? Couldn't the ship just use this data to do the docking itself?"

"Why fly?" Alex repeated with a laugh. "'Cuz it's fun, Doc. Because it's fun."

The long bluish lights of the windows in Tycho's observation dome were so clear Prax could see the people looking out at him. He could almost forget that the screens in the cockpit weren't windows: The urge to look out and wave, to watch someone wave back, was profound.

Holden's voice came over Alex's line, the words unidentifiable and the tone perfectly clear.

"We're looking fine, Cap," Alex said. "Ten more minutes."

The crash couch shifted to the side, the wide plane of the station curving down as Alex matched the rotation. To generate even a third of a g on a ring that wide would demand punishing inertial forces, but under Alex's hand, ship and station drifted together slowly and gently. Before Prax had gotten married, he'd seen a dance performance based on neo-Taoist traditions. For the first hour, it had been utterly boring, and then after that, the small movements of arms and legs and torso, shifting together, bending, and falling away, had been entrancing. The *Rocinante* slid into place beside an extending airlock port with the same beauty Prax had seen in that dance, but made more powerful by the knowledge that instead of skin and muscles, this was tons of high-tensile steel and live fusion reactors.

The *Rocinante* eased into her berth with one last correction, one last shifting of the gimbaled couches. The final matching spin had been no more than any of the small corrections Alex had made on the way in. There was a disconcerting bang as the station's docking hooks latched on to the ship.

"Tycho control," Alex said. "This is the *Rocinante* confirming dock. We have seal on the airlock. We are reading the clamps in place. Can you confirm?"

A moment passed, and a mutter.

"Thank you too, Tycho," Alex said. "It's good to be back."

Gravity in the ship had shifted subtly. Instead of thrust from the drive creating the illusion of weight, it now came from the spin of the ring they were clamped to. Prax felt like he was tilting slightly to the side whenever he stood up straight, and had to fight the urge to overcompensate by leaning the other way.

Holden was in the galley when Prax reached it, the coffee machine pouring black and hot, with just the slightest bend to the stream. Coriolis effect, a dimly remembered high school class reminded Prax. Amos and Naomi came in together. They were all together now, and Prax felt the time was right to thank them all for what they'd done for him. For Mei, who was probably dead. The naked pain on Holden's face stopped him.

Naomi stood in front of him, a duffel bag over her shoulder.

"You're heading out," Holden said.

"I am." Her voice was light, but it had meaning radiating from it like harmonic overtones. Prax blinked.

"All right, then," Holden said.

For a few seconds, no one moved; then Naomi darted in, kissing Holden lightly on the cheek. The captain's arms moved out to embrace her, but she'd already stepped away, marching out through the narrow hallway with the air of a woman on her way someplace. Holden took his coffee. Amos and Alex exchanged glances.

"Ah, Cap'n?" Alex asked. Compared to the voice of the man who'd just put a nuclear warship against a spinning metal wheel in the middle of interplanetary space, this voice was hesitant and concerned. "Are we lookin' for a new XO?"

"We're not looking for anything until I say so," Holden said. Then, his voice quieter: "But, God, I hope not."

"Yessir," Alex said. "Me too."

The four men stood for a long, awkward moment. Amos was the first to speak.

"You know, Cap," he said, "the place I've got booked has room for two. If you want the spare bunk, it's yours."

"No," Holden said. He didn't look at them as he spoke, but reached out his hand and pressed his palm to the wall. "I'm staying on the *Roci*. I'll be right here."

"You sure?" Amos asked, and again it seemed to mean something more than Prax could understand.

"I'm not going anywhere," Holden said.

"All right, then."

Prax cleared his throat, and Amos took his elbow.

"What about you?" Amos said. "You got a place to bunk down?"

Prax's prepared speech—I wanted to tell you all how much I appreciate...—ran into the question, derailing both thoughts.

"I... ah... I don't, but—"

"Right, then. Get your stuff, and you can come with me."

"Well, yes. Thank you. But first I wanted to tell you all—"

Amos put a solid hand on his shoulder.

"Maybe later," the big man said. "Right now, how about you just come with me?"

Holden leaned against the wall now. His jaw was set hard, like that of a man about to scream or vomit or weep. His eyes were looking at the ship but seeing past it. Sorrow welled up in Prax as if he were looking into a mirror.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay."

Amos' rooms were, if anything, smaller than the bunks on the *Rocinante*: two small privacy areas, a common space less than half the size of the galley, and a bathroom with a fold-out sink and toilet in the shower stall. It would have induced claustrophobia if Amos had actually been there.

Instead, he'd seen Prax settled in, taken a quick shower, and headed out into the wide, luxurious passageways of the station. There were plants everywhere, but for the most part they seemed decorative. The curve of the decks was so slight Prax could almost imagine he was back on some unfamiliar part of Ganymede, that his hole was no more than a tube ride away. That Mei would be there, waiting for him. Prax let the outer door close, pulled out his hand terminal, and connected to the local network.

There was still no reply from Persis-Strokes, but it was probably too early to expect one. In the meantime, the problem was money. If he was going to fund this, he couldn't do it alone.

Which meant Nicola.

Prax set up his terminal, turning the camera on himself. The image on the screen looked thin, wasted. The weeks had dried him out, and his time

on the *Rocinante* hadn't completely rebuilt him. He might never be rebuilt. The sunken cheeks on the screen might be who he was now. That was fine. He started recording.

"Hi, Nici," he said. "I wanted you to know I'm safe. I got to Tycho Station, but I still don't have Mei. I'm hiring a security consultant. I'm giving them everything I know. They seem like they'll really be able to help. But it's expensive. It may be very expensive. And she may already be dead."

Prax took a moment to catch his breath.

"She may already be dead," he said again. "But I have to try. I know you aren't in a great financial position right now. I know you've got your new husband to think of. But if you have anything you can spare—not for me. I don't want anything from you. Just Mei. For her. If you can give her anything, this is the last chance."

He paused again, his mind warring between *Thank you* and *It's the least you can fucking do*. In the end, he just shut off the recording and sent it.

The lag between Ceres and Tycho Station was fifteen minutes, given their relative positions. And even then, he didn't know what the local schedule there was. He might be sending his message in the middle of the night or during dinnertime. She might not have anything to say to him.

It didn't matter. He had to try. He could sleep if he knew he'd done everything he could to try.

He recorded and sent messages to his mother, to his old roommate from college who'd taken a position on Neptune Station, to his postdoctorate advisor. Each time, the story got a little easier to tell. The details started coming together, one leading into another. With them, he didn't talk about the protomolecule. At best, it would have scared them. At worst, they'd have thought the loss had broken his mind.

When the last message was gone, he sat quietly. There was one other thing he thought he had to do now that he had full communication access. It wasn't what he wanted.

He started the recording.

"Basia," he said. "This is Praxidike. I wanted you to know that I know Katoa is dead. I saw the body. It didn't... it didn't look like he suffered. And I thought, if I was in your place, that wondering... wondering would be worse. I'm sorry. I'm just..."

He turned off the recording, sent it, and crawled onto the small bed. He'd expected it to be hard and uncomfortable, but the mattress was as cradling as crash couch gel, and he fell asleep easily and woke four hours later like someone had flipped a switch on the back of his head. Amos was still gone, even though it was station midnight. There was still no message from Persis-Strokes, so Prax recorded a polite inquiry—just to be sure the information hadn't gotten lost in transit—then watched it and erased it. He took a long shower, washing his hair twice, shaved, and recorded a new inquiry, looking less like a raving lunatic.

Ten minutes after he sent it, a new-message alert chimed. Intellectually, he knew it couldn't be a response. With lag, his message wouldn't even be at Luna yet. When he pulled it up, it was Nicola. The heart-shaped face looked older than he remembered it. There was the first dusting of gray at her temples. But when she made that soft, sad smile, he was twenty again, sitting across from her in the grand park while bhangra throbbed and lasers traced living art on the domed ice above them. He remembered what it had been like to love her.

"I have your message," she said. "I'm... I'm so sorry, Praxidike. I wish there was more I could do. Things aren't so good here on Ceres. I will talk with Taban. He makes more than I do, and if he understands what's happened, he might want to help too. For my sake.

"Take care of yourself, old man. You look tired."

On the screen, Mei's mother leaned forward and stopped the recording. An icon showed an authorized transfer code for eighty FusionTek Reál. Prax checked the exchange rates, converting the company scrip to UN dollars. It was almost a week's salary. Not enough. Not near enough. But still, it had been a sacrifice for her.

He pulled the message back up, pausing it in the gap between two words. Nicola looked out at him from the terminal, her lips parted barely enough for him to see her pale teeth. Her eyes were sad and playful. He'd thought for so long that it was her soul and not just an accident of physiology that gave her that look of fettered joy. He'd been wrong.

As he sat, lost in history and imagination, a new message appeared. It was from Luna. Persis-Strokes. With a feeling somewhere between anxiety and hope, he went to the attached spreadsheet. At the first set of numbers, his heart sank.

Mei might be out there. She might be alive. Certainly Strickland and his people were there. They could be found. They could be caught. There was justice to be had.

He just couldn't afford it.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Holden

Holden sat in a pull-down chair in the *Rocinante*'s engineering bay reviewing the damage and making notes for Tycho's repair crew. Everyone else was gone. *Some more than others*, he thought.

REPLACE STARBOARD ENGINEERING BULKHEAD.

SIGNIFICANT DAMAGE TO PORT-SIDE POWER CABLE JUNCTION, POSSIBLY REPLACE ENTIRE JUNCTION BOX.

Two lines of text representing hundreds of work hours, hundreds of thousands of dollars in parts. It also represented the aftermath of coming within a hand's breadth of fiery annihilation for the ship and crew. Describing it in two quick sentences felt almost sacrilegious. He made a footnote of the types of civilian parts that Tycho was likely to have available that would work with his Martian warship.

Behind him, a wall monitor streamed a Ceres-based news show. Holden had turned it on to keep his mind occupied while he tinkered with the ship and made notes.

Which was all bullshit, of course. Sam, the Tycho engineer who usually took the lead on their repair jobs, didn't need his help. She didn't need him making lists of parts for her. She was, in every sense, better qualified to be doing what he was doing right now. But as soon as he turned the job over to her, he wouldn't have any reason to stay on the ship. He would have to confront Fred about the protomolecule on Ganymede.

And maybe lose Naomi in the process.

If his early suspicion was correct and Fred actually had bartered using the protomolecule as currency or, worse, as a weapon, Holden would kill him. He knew that like he knew his own name, and he feared it. That it would be a capital offense and would almost certainly get him burned down on the spot was actually less important than the fact that it would be the final proof that Naomi was right to leave. That he'd turned into the man she feared he was becoming. Just another Detective Miller, dispensing frontier justice from the barrel of his gun. But whenever he pictured the scene,

Fred's admission of guilt and heartfelt appeal for mercy, Holden couldn't picture not killing him for what he'd done. He remembered being the sort of man who would make a different choice, but he couldn't actually remember what being that man was *like*.

If he was wrong, and Fred had nothing to do with the tragedy on Ganymede, then she'd have been right all along, and he had just been too stubborn to see it. He might be able to apologize for that with sufficient humility to win her back. Stupidity was usually a lesser crime than vigilantism.

But if Fred *wasn't* the one playing God with the alien supervirus, that was much, much worse for humanity in general. It was an unpleasant thought that the truth that would be worst for humanity was the one that would be best for him. Intellectually, he knew he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice himself or his happiness to save everyone else. But that didn't stop the tiny voice at the back of his head that said, *Fuck everyone else, I want my girlfriend back*.

Something half remembered pushed up from his subconscious and he wrote MORE COFFEE FILTERS on his list of needed supplies.

The wall panel behind him chimed an alert half a second before his hand terminal buzzed to let him know someone was at the airlock, requesting permission to board. He tapped the screen to switch to the airlock's outer door camera and saw Alex and Sam waiting in the corridor. Sam was still the adorable red-haired pixie in the oversized gray coveralls he remembered. She was carrying a large toolbox and laughing. Alex said something else and she laughed harder, almost dropping her tools. With the intercom off, it was a silent movie.

Holden tapped the intercom button and said, "Come on in, guys." Another tap cycled the outer airlock doors open. Sam waved at the camera and stepped inside.

A few minutes later, the pressure hatch to engineering banged open, and the ladder-lift whined its way down. Sam and Alex stepped off, Sam dropping her tools onto the metal deck with a loud crash.

"What's up?" she said, giving Holden a quick hug. "You getting my girl all shot up again?"

"Your girl?" Alex said.

"Not this time," Holden replied, pointing out the damaged bulkheads in the engineering bay to her. "Bomb went off in the cargo bay, burned a

hole there and threw some shrapnel into the power junction there.”

Sam whistled. “Either that shrapnel took the long way around, or your reactor knows how to duck.”

“How long, you think?”

“Bulkhead’s simple,” she said, punching something into her terminal, then tapping her front teeth with its corner. “We can bring a patch in through the cargo bay in a single piece. Makes the job a lot easier. Power junction takes longer, but not a lot. Say four days if I get my crew on it right now.”

“Well,” Holden said, wincing like a man who had to keep admitting to new wrongdoings. “We also have a damaged cargo bay door that will either have to be fixed or replaced. And our cargo bay airlock is kind of messed up.”

“Couple more days, then,” Sam said, then knelt down and began pulling things out of her toolbox. “Mind if I start taking some measurements?”

Holden waved at the wall. “Be my guest.”

“Been watching the news a lot?” Sam said, pointing at the talking heads on the wall monitor. “Ganymede is fucked, right?”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “Pretty much.”

“But it’s only Ganymede so far,” Holden said. “So that means something I haven’t quite figured out yet.”

“Naomi’s staying with me right now,” Sam said as if they’d been talking about that all along. Holden felt his face go still and tried to fight against it, forcing himself to smile.

“Oh. Cool.”

“She won’t talk about it, but if I find out you did something shitty to her, I’m using this on your dick,” she said, holding up a torque wrench. Alex laughed nervously for a second, then trailed off and just looked uncomfortable.

“I consider myself fairly warned,” Holden said. “How is she?”

“Quiet,” Sam said. “Okay, got what I need. Gonna scoot now and get fabrication to work on cutting this bulkhead patch. See you boys around.”

“Bye, Sam,” Alex said, watching her ride the ladder-lift until the pressure door closed behind her. “I’m twenty years too old, and I’m pretty sure I’ve got the wrong plumbin’, but I like that gal.”

“You and Amos just trade this crush back and forth?” Holden said. “Or should I be worried about you two doing pistols at dawn over her?”

“My love is a pure love,” Alex said with a grin. “I wouldn’t sully it by actually, you know, doin’ anything about it.”

“The kind poets write about, then.”

“So,” Alex said, leaning against a wall and looking at his nails. “Let’s talk about the XO situation.”

“Let’s not.”

“Oh, let’s do,” Alex said, then took a step forward and crossed his arms like a man who was not going to give any ground. “I’ve been flyin’ this boat solo for over a year now. That only works because Naomi is a brilliant ops officer and takes up a whole lotta slack. If we lose her, we don’t fly. And that’s a fact.”

Holden dropped the hand terminal he’d been using into his pocket and slumped back against the reactor shielding.

“I know. I *know*. I never thought she’d actually do this.”

“Leave,” Alex said.

“Yeah.”

“We’ve never talked about pay,” Alex said. “We don’t get salaries.”

“Pay?” Holden frowned at Alex and banged out a quick drumbeat on the reactor behind him. It echoed like a metal tomb. “Every dime that Fred’s given us that hasn’t gone to pay for operating the ship is in the account I set up. If you need some of it, twenty-five percent of that money belongs to you.”

Alex shook his head and waved his hands. “No, don’t get me wrong. I don’t need money, and I don’t think you’re stealin’ from us. Just pointing out that we never talked about pay.”

“So?”

“So that means we aren’t a normal crew. We aren’t workin’ the ship for money, or because a government drafted us. We’re here because we want to be. That’s all you’ve got over us. We believe in the cause, and we want to be part of what you’re doing. The minute we lose that, we might as well take a real payin’ job.”

“But Naomi—” Holden started.

“Was your *girlfriend*,” Alex said with a laugh. “Damn, Jim, have you *seen* her? She can get another boyfriend. In fact, you mind if I—”

“I take your point. I hear you. I fucked it up, it’s my fault. I know that. All of it. I need to go see Fred and start thinking about how to put it all back together again.”

“Unless Fred actually *did* do it.”

“Yeah. Unless that.”

“I’ve been wondering when you’d finally drop by,” Fred Johnson said as Holden walked through his office door. Fred was looking both better and worse than when Holden had first met him a year earlier. Better because the Outer Planets Alliance, the quasi government that Fred was the titular head of, was no longer a terrorist organization, but a *de facto* government that could sit at the diplomatic table with the inner planets. And Fred had taken to the role of administrator with a relish he must not have felt for being a freedom fighter. It was visible in the relaxed set of his shoulders, and the half smile that had become his default expression.

And worse because the last year and all the pressures of governance had aged him. His hair was both thinner and whiter, his neck a confusion of loose flesh and old, ropy muscle. His eyes had permanent bags under them now. His coffee-colored skin didn’t show many wrinkles, but it had a tinge of gray to it.

But the smile he gave Holden was genuine, and he came around the desk to shake his hand and guide him to a chair.

“I read your report on Ganymede,” Fred said. “Talk to me about it. Impressions on the ground.”

“Fred,” Holden said. “There’s something else.”

Fred nodded to him as he moved back around his desk and sat down. “Go on.”

Holden started to speak, then stopped. Fred was staring at him. His expression hadn’t changed, but his eyes were sharper, more focused. Holden felt a sudden and irrational fear that Fred already knew everything he was about to say.

The truth was Holden had always been afraid of Fred. There was a duality to the man that left him on edge. Fred had reached out to the crew of the *Rocinante* at the exact moment they’d needed help the most. He’d become their patron, their safe harbor against the myriad enemies they’d

gathered over the last year. And yet Holden couldn't forget that this was still Colonel Frederick Lucius Johnson, the Butcher of Anderson Station. A man who had spent the last decade helping to organize and run the Outer Planets Alliance, an organization that was capable of murder and terrorism to further its goals. Fred had almost certainly ordered some of those murders personally. It was entirely possible that the OPA leader version of Fred had killed more people than even the United Nations Marine colonel version of Fred had.

Would he really balk at using the protomolecule to further his agenda?

Maybe. Maybe that would be going too far. And he'd been a friend, and he deserved the chance to defend himself.

"Fred, I—" Holden started, then stopped.

Fred nodded again, the smile slipping off his face and being replaced by a slight frown. "I'm not going to like this." It was a statement of fact.

Holden grabbed the arms of the office chair and pushed himself to his feet. He shoved more violently than he wanted to and, in the low .3 g of station spin, flew off his feet for a second. Fred chuckled and the frown shifted back into a grin.

And that was it. The grin and the laugh broke the fear and turned it into anger. When Holden settled back to his feet, he leaned forward and slammed both palms onto Fred's desk.

"You," he said, "don't get to laugh. Not until I know for sure it wasn't all your fault. If you can do what I think you might have done and still laugh, I will shoot you right here and now."

Fred's smile didn't change, but something in his eyes did. He wasn't used to being threatened, but it wasn't new territory either.

"What I might have done," Fred said, not turning it into a question, just repeating it back.

"It's the protomolecule, Fred. That's what's happening on Ganymede. A lab with kids as experiments and that black webbing shit and a monster that almost killed my ship. That's my fucking *impression on the ground*. Someone has been playing with the bug, and it might be loose, and the inner planets are shooting each other to shit in orbit around it."

"You think I did this," Fred said. Again, just a flat statement of fact.

"We *threw this shit into Venus*," Holden yelled. "*I gave you the only sample*. And suddenly Ganymede, breadbasket of your future empire, the one place the inner navies won't cede control of, gets a fucking outbreak?"

Fred let the silence answer for a beat.

“Are you asking me if I’m using the protomolecule to drive the inner planets troops off Ganymede, and strengthen my control of the outer planets?”

Fred’s quiet tone made Holden realize how loud he’d gotten, and he took a moment to take several deep breaths. When his pulse had slowed a bit, he said, “Yes. Pretty much exactly that.”

“You,” Fred said with a broad smile that did not extend to his eyes, “do not get to ask me that.”

“What?”

“In case you’ve forgotten, you are an employee of this organization.” Fred stood up, stretching to his full height, a dozen centimeters taller than Holden. His smile didn’t change, but his body shifted and sort of spread out. Suddenly he looked very large. Holden took a step back before he could stop himself.

“I,” Fred continued, “owe you nothing but the terms of our latest contract. Have you completely lost your mind, boy? Charging in here? Shouting at me? *Demanding* answers?”

“No one else could have—” Holden started, but Fred ignored him.

“You gave me the only sample we knew of. But you assume that if you don’t know about it, it doesn’t exist. I’ve been putting up with your bullshit for over a year now,” Fred said. “This idea you have that the universe owes you answers. This righteous indignation you wield like a club at everyone around you. But I don’t *have* to put up with your shit.

“Do you know why that is?”

Holden shook his head, afraid if he spoke, it might come out as a squeak.

“It’s because,” Fred said, “I’m *the fucking boss*. I run this outfit. You’ve been pretty useful, and you might be again in the future. But I have enough shit to deal with right now without you starting another one of your crusades at my expense.”

“So,” Holden said, letting the word drag to two syllables.

“So you’re fired. This was your last contract with me. I’ll finish fixing the *Roci* and I’ll pay you, because I don’t break a deal. But I think we’ve finally built enough ships to start policing our own sky without your help, and even if we haven’t, I’m just about done with you.”

“Fired,” Holden said.

“Now get the hell out of my office before I decide to take the *Roci* too. She’s got more Tycho parts on her now than originals. I think I might be able to make a good argument I own that ship.”

Holden backed up toward the door, wondering how serious that threat might actually be. Fred watched him go but didn’t move. When he reached the door, Fred said, “It wasn’t me.”

Their gazes met for a long, breathless moment.

“It wasn’t me,” Fred repeated.

Holden said, “Okay,” and backed out the door.

When the door slid shut and blocked Fred from view, Holden let out a long sigh and collapsed against the corridor wall. Fred was right about one thing: He’d been excusing himself with his fear for far too long. *This righteous indignation you wield like a club at everyone around you.* He’d seen humanity almost end due to its own stupidity. It had left him shaken to the core. He’d been running on fear and adrenaline ever since Eros.

But it wasn’t an excuse. Not anymore.

He started to pull out his terminal to call Naomi when it hit him like a light turning on. *I’m fired.*

He’d been on an exclusive contract with Fred for over a year. Tycho Station was their home base. Sam had spent almost as much time tuning and patching the *Roci* as Amos had. That was all gone. They’d have to find their own jobs, find their own ports, buy their own repairs. No more patron to hold his hand. For the first time in a very long time, Holden was a real independent captain. He’d need to earn his way by keeping the ship in the air and the crew fed. He paused for a moment, letting that sink in.

It felt great.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Prax

Amos sat forward in his chair. The sheer physical mass of the man made the room seem smaller, and the smell of alcohol and old smoke came off him like heat from a fire. His expression couldn't have been more gentle.

"I don't know what to do," Prax said. "I just don't know what to do. This is all my fault. Nicola was just... she was so lost and so angry. Every day, I woke up and I looked over at her, and all I saw was how trapped she was. And I knew Mei was going to grow up with that. With trying to get her mommy to love her when all Nici wanted to do was be somewhere else. And I thought it would be better. When she started talking about going, I was ready for her to do it, you know? And when Mei... when I had to tell Mei that..."

Prax dropped his head into his hands, rocking slowly back and forth.

"You gonna sick up again, Doc?"

"No. I'm fine. If I'd been a better father to her, she'd still be here."

"We talking about the ex-wife or the kid?"

"I don't care about Nicola. If I'd been there for Mei. If I'd gone to her as soon as we got the warning. If I hadn't waited there in the dome. And for what? Plants? They're dead now anyway. I had one, but I lost it, too. I couldn't even save one. But I could have gotten there. Found her. If I'd—"

"You know she was gone before the shit hit the fan, right?"

Prax shook his head. He wasn't about to let reality forgive him.

"And this. I had a chance. I got out. I got some money. And I was stupid. It was her last chance, and I was stupid about it."

"Yeah, well. You're new at this, Doc."

"She should have had a better dad. She deserved a better dad. Was such a good... she was such a good girl."

For the first time, Amos touched him. The wide hand took his shoulder, gripping him from collarbone to scapula and bending Prax's spine until it was straight. Amos' eyes were more than bloodshot, white sclera

marbled with red. His breath was hot and astringent, the platonic ideal of a sailor on a shore leave bender. But his voice was sober and steady.

“She’s got a fine daddy, Doc. You give a shit, and that’s more than a lot of people ever do.”

Prax swallowed. He was tired. He was tired of being strong, of being hopeful and determined and preparing for the worst. He didn’t want to be himself anymore. He didn’t want to be anyone at all. Amos’ hand felt like a ship clamp, keeping Prax from spinning away into darkness. All he wanted was to be let go.

“She’s gone,” Prax said. It felt like a good excuse. An explanation. “They took her away from me, and I don’t know who they are, and I can’t get her back, and I don’t understand.”

“It ain’t over yet.”

Prax nodded, not because he was actually comforted, but because this was the moment when he knew he should act like he was.

“I’m never going to find her.”

“You’re wrong.”

The door chimed and slid open. Holden stepped in. Prax couldn’t see at first what was different about him, but that something had happened... had changed... was unmistakable. The face was the same; the clothes hadn’t changed. Prax had the uncanny memory of sitting through a lecture on metamorphosis.

“Hey,” Holden said. “Everything all right?”

“Little bumpy,” Amos said. Prax saw his own confusion mirrored in Amos’ face. They were both aware of the transformation, and neither of them knew what it was. “You get laid or something, Cap?”

“No,” Holden said.

“I mean, good on you if you did,” Amos said. “It just wasn’t how I pictured—”

“I didn’t get laid,” Holden said hesitantly. The smile that came after was almost radiant. “I got fired.”

“Just you got fired, or all of us?”

“All of us.”

“Huh,” Amos said. He went still for a moment, then shrugged. “All right.”

“I need to talk to Naomi, but she’s not accepting connections from me. Do you think you could track her down?”

Discomfort pursed Amos' lips like he'd sucked on an old lemon.

"I'm not going to pick a fight," Holden said. "We just didn't leave it in the right place. And it's my fault, so I need to fix it."

"I know she was hanging out down in that one bar Sam told us about last time. The Blauwe Blome. But you make a dick of yourself and I'm not the one that told you."

"Not a problem," Holden said. "Thanks."

The captain turned to leave and then stopped in the doorway. He looked like someone still half in a dream.

"What's bumpy?" he asked. "You said it was bumpy."

"The doc was looking to hire on some Luna private security squad to track the kid down. Didn't work out and he kind of took it bad."

Holden frowned. Prax felt the heat of a blush pushing up his neck.

"I thought we were finding the kid," Holden said. He sounded genuinely confused.

"Doc wasn't clear on that."

"Oh," Holden said. He turned to Prax. "We're finding your kid. You don't need to get someone else."

"I can't pay you," Prax said. "All my accounts were on the Ganymede system, and even if they're still there, I can't access them. I just have what people are giving me. I can probably get something like a thousand dollars UN. Is that enough?"

"No," Holden said. "That won't buy a week's air, much less water. We'll have to take care of that."

Holden tilted his head like he was listening to something only he could hear.

"I've already talked to my ex-wife," Prax said. "And my parents. I can't think of anyone else."

"How about everyone?" Holden said.

"I'm James Holden," the captain said from the huge screen of the *Rocinante's* pilot capsule, "and I'm here to ask for your help. Four months ago, hours before the first attack on Ganymede, a little girl with a life-threatening genetic illness was abducted from her day care. In the chaos that —"

Alex stopped the playback. Prax tried to sit up, but the gimbaled copilot's chair only shifted under him, and he lay back.

"I don't know," Alex said from the pilot's couch. "The green background kinda makes him look pasty, don't you think?"

Prax narrowed his eyes a degree, considered, then nodded.

"It's not really his color," Prax said. "Maybe if it was darker."

"I'll try that," the pilot said, tapping at his screen. "Normally it's Naomi who does this stuff. Communications packages ain't exactly my first love. But we'll get it done. How about this?"

"Better," Prax said.

"I'm James Holden, and I'm here to ask for your help. Four months ago..."

Holden's part of the little presentation was less than a minute, speaking into the camera from Amos' hand terminal. After that, Amos and Prax had spent an hour trying to create the rest. Alex had been the one to suggest using the better equipment on the *Rocinante*. Once they'd done that, putting together the information had been easy. He'd taken the start he'd made for Nicola and his parents as the template. Alex helped him record the rest—an explanation of Mei's condition; the security footage of Strickland and the mysterious woman taking her from the day care; the data from the secret lab, complete with images of the protomolecule filament; pictures of Mei playing in the parks; and a short video from her second birthday party, when she smeared cake frosting on her forehead.

Prax felt odd watching himself speak. He had seen plenty of recordings of himself, but the man on the screen was thinner than he'd expected. Older. His voice was higher than the one he heard in his own ears, and less hesitant. The Praxidike Meng who was about to be broadcast out to the whole of humanity was a different man than he was, but it was close enough. And if it helped to find Mei, it would do. If it brought her back, he'd be anyone.

Alex slid his fingers across his controls, rearranging the presentation, connecting the images of Mei to the timeline to Holden. They had set up an account with a Belt-based credit union that had a suite of options for short-term unincorporated nonprofit concerns so that any contributions could be accepted automatically. Prax watched, wanting badly to offer comment or take control. But there was nothing more to do.

"All right," Alex said. "That's about as pretty as I can make it."

“Okay, then,” Prax said. “What do we do with it now?”

Alex looked over. He seemed tired, but there was also an excitement.

“Hit send.”

“But the review process...”

“There is no review process, Doc. This isn’t a government thing. Hell, it’s not even a business. It’s just us monkeys flying fast and tryin’ to keep our butts out of the engine plume.”

“Oh,” Prax said. “Really?”

“You hang around the captain long enough, you get used to it. You might want to take a day, though. Think it through.”

Prax lifted himself on one elbow.

“Think what through?”

“Sending this out. If it works the way we’re thinking, you’re about to get a lot of attention. Maybe it’ll be what we’re hoping for; maybe it’ll be something else. All I’m saying is you can’t unscramble that egg.”

Prax considered for a few seconds. The screens glowed.

“It’s Mei,” Prax said.

“All right, then,” Alex said, and shifted communication control to the copilot’s station. “You want to do the honors?”

“Where is it going? I mean, where are we sending it?”

“Simple broadcast,” Alex said. “Probably get picked up by some local feeds in the Belt. But it’s the captain, so folks will watch it, pass it around on the net. And...”

“And?”

“We didn’t put our hitchhiker in, but the filament out of that glass case? We’re kind of announcing that the protomolecule’s still out there. That’s gonna boost the signal.”

“And we think that’s going to help?”

“First time we did something like this, it started a war,” Alex said.

“‘Help’ might be a strong word for it. Stir things up, though.”

Prax shrugged and hit send.

“Torpedoes away,” Alex said, chuckling.

Prax slept on the station, serenaded by the hum of the air recyclers. Amos was gone again, leaving only a note that Prax shouldn’t wait up. It was

probably his imagination that made the spin gravity seem to feel different. With a diameter as wide as Tycho's, the Coriolis effect shouldn't have been uncomfortably noticeable, and certainly not when he lay there, motionless, in the darkness of his room. And still, he couldn't get comfortable. He couldn't forget that he was being turned, inertia pressing him against the thin mattress as his body tried to fly out into the void. Most of the time he'd been on the *Rocinante*, he'd been able to trick his mind into thinking that he had the reassuring mass of a moon under him. It wasn't, he decided, an artifact of how the acceleration was generated so much as what it meant.

As his mind slowly spiraled down, bits of his self breaking apart like a meteor hitting atmosphere, he felt a massive welling-up of gratitude. Part of it was to Holden and part to Amos. The whole crew of the *Rocinante*. Half-dreaming, he was on Ganymede again. He was starving, walking down ice corridors with the certainty that somewhere nearby, one of his soybeans had been infected with the protomolecule and was tracking him, bent on revenge. With the broken logic of dreams, he was also on Tycho, looking for work, but all the people he gave his CV to shook their heads and told him he was missing some sort of degree or credential he didn't recognize or understand. The only thing that made it bearable was a deeper knowledge—certain as bone—that none of it was true. That he was sleeping, and that when he woke, he would be somewhere safe.

What did wake him at last was the rich smell of beef. His eyes were crusted like he'd been crying in his sleep, the tears leaving salt residues where they'd evaporated. The shower was hissing and splashing. Prax pulled on his jumpsuit, wondering again why it had TACHI printed across the back.

Breakfast waited on the table: steak and eggs, flour tortillas, and black coffee. Real food that had cost someone a small fortune. There were two plates, so Prax chose one and started eating. It had probably cost a tenth of the money he had from Nicola, but it tasted wonderful. Amos ducked out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his hips. A massive white scar puckered the right side of his abdomen, pulling his navel off center, and a nearly photographic tattoo of a young woman with wavy hair and almond-shaped eyes covered his heart. Prax thought there was a word under the tattooed face, but he didn't want to stare.

"Hey, Doc," Amos said. "You're looking better."

“I got some rest,” Prax said as Amos walked into his own room and closed the door behind him. When Prax spoke again, he raised his voice. “I want to thank you. I was feeling low last night. And whether you and the others can actually help find Mei or not—”

“Why wouldn’t we be able to find her?” Amos asked, his voice muffled by the door. “You ain’t losing respect for me, are you, Doc?”

“No,” Prax said. “No, not at all. I only meant that what you and the captain are offering is... it’s a huge...”

Amos came back out grinning. His jumpsuit covered scars and tattoos as if they’d never been.

“I knew what you meant. I was just joshing you. You like that steak? Keep wondering where they put the cows on this thing, don’t you?”

“Oh no, this is vat-grown. You can tell from the way the muscle fibers grow. You see how these parts right here are layered? Actually makes it easier to get a good marbled cut than when you carve it out of a steer.”

“No shit?” Amos said, sitting across from him. “I didn’t know that.”

“Microgravity also makes fish more nutritious,” Prax said around a mouthful of egg. “Increases the oil production. No one knows why, but there are a couple very interesting studies about it. They think it may not be the low g itself so much as the constant flow you have to have so that the animals don’t stop swimming, make a bubble of oxygen-depleted water, and suffocate.”

Amos ripped a bit of tortilla and dipped it into the yolk.

“This is what dinner conversation’s like in your family, ain’t it?”

Prax blinked.

“Mostly, yes. Why? What do you talk about?”

Amos chuckled. He seemed to be in a very good mood. There was a relaxed look about his shoulders, and something in the set of his jaw had changed. Prax remembered the previous night’s conversation with the captain.

“You got laid, didn’t you?”

“Oh hell yes,” Amos said. “But that’s not the best part.”

“It’s not?”

“Oh, it’s a fucking good part, but there’s nothing better in the world than getting a job the day after your ass gets canned.”

A pang of confusion touched Prax. Amos pulled his hand terminal out of his pocket, tapped it twice, and slid it across the table. The screen

showed a red security border and the name of the credit union Alex had been working with the night before. When he saw the balance, his eyes went wide.

“Is... is that...?”

“That’s enough to keep the *Roci* flying for a month, and we got it in seven hours,” Amos said. “You just hired yourself a team, Doc.”

“I don’t know... really?”

“Not just that. Take a look at the messages you’ve got coming in. Captain made a pretty big splash back in the day, but your kiddo? All that shit that came down on Ganymede just got itself a face, and it’s her.”

Prax pulled up his own terminal. The mailbox associated with the presentation had over five hundred video messages and thousands of texts. He began going through them. Men and women he didn’t know—some of them in tears—offered up their prayers and anger and support. A Belter with a wild mane of gray-black hair gibbered in patois so thick Prax could barely make it out. As near as he could tell, the man was offering to kill someone for him.

Half an hour later, Prax’s eggs had congealed. A woman from Ceres told him that she’d lost her daughter in a divorce, and that she was sending him her month’s chewing tobacco money. A group of food engineers on Luna had passed the hat and sent along what would have been a month’s salary if Prax had still been a botanist. An old Martian man with skin the color of chocolate and powdered-sugar hair gazed seriously into a camera halfway across the solar system and said he was with Prax.

When the next message began, it looked just like the others before it. The man in the image was older—eighty, maybe ninety—with a fringe of white hair clinging to the back of his skull and a craggy face. There was something about his expression that caught Prax’s attention. A hesitance.

“Dr. Meng,” the man said. He had a slushy accent that reminded Prax of recordings of his own grandfather. “I’m very sorry to hear of all you and your family have suffered. Are suffering.” The man licked his lips. “The security video on your presentation. I believe I know the man in it. But his name isn’t Strickland...”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Holden

According to the station directory, the Blauwe Blome was famous for two things: a drink called the Blue Meanie and its large number of Golgo tables. The guidebook warned potential patrons that the station allowed the bar to serve only two Blue Meanies to each customer due to the drink's fairly suicidal mixture of ethanol, caffeine, and methylphenidate. And, Holden guessed, some kind of blue food coloring.

As he walked through the corridors of Tycho's leisure section, the guidebook began explaining the rules of Golgo to him. After a few moments of utter confusion—*goals are said to be “borrowed” when the defense deflects the drive—he* shut it off. There was very little chance he was going to be playing games. And a drink that removed your inhibitions and left you wired and full of energy would be redundant right now.

The truth was Holden had never felt better in his life.

He'd messed a lot of things up over the last year. He'd driven his crew away from him. He'd aligned himself with a side he wasn't sure he agreed with in exchange for safety. He might have ruined the one healthy relationship he'd had in his life. He'd been driven by his fear to become someone else. Someone who handled fear by turning it into violence. Someone who Naomi didn't love, who his crew didn't respect, who he himself didn't like much.

The fear wasn't gone. It was still there, making his scalp crawl every time he thought about Ganymede, and about what might be loose and growing there right now. But for the first time in a long time, he was aware of it and wasn't hiding from it. He had given himself permission to be afraid. It made all the difference.

Holden heard the Blauwe Blome several seconds before he saw it. It began as a barely audible rhythmic thumping, which gradually increased in volume and picked up an electronic wail and a woman's voice singing in mixed Hindi and Russian. By the time he reached the club's front door, the song had changed to two men in an alternating chant that sounded like an

argument set to music. The electronic wail was replaced by angry guitars. The bass line changed not at all.

Inside, the club was an all-out assault on the senses. A massive dance floor dominated the center space, and the dozens of bodies writhing on it were bathed in a constantly changing light show that shifted and flashed in time to the music. The music had been loud out in the corridor, but inside, it became deafening. A long chrome bar was set against one wall, and half a dozen bartenders were frantically filling drink orders.

A sign on the back wall read GOLGO and had an arrow pointing down a long hallway. Holden followed it, the music fading with each step so that by the time he reached the back room with the game tables, it was back to being muted bass lines.

Naomi was at one of the tables with her friend Sam the engineer and a cluster of other Belters. Her hair was pulled back with a red elastic band wide enough to be decorative. She'd switched out her jumpsuit for a pair of gray tailored slacks he hadn't known she owned and a yellow blouse that made her caramel-colored skin seem darker. Holden had to stop for a moment. She smiled at someone who wasn't him, and his chest went tight.

As he approached, Sam threw a small metal ball at the table. The group at the other end reacted with sudden violent movements. He couldn't see exactly what was happening from where he stood, but the slumped shoulders and halfhearted curses coming from the second group led Holden to believe that Sam had done something good for her team.

Sam spun around and threw up her hand. The group at her end of the table, which included Naomi, took turns slapping her palm. Sam saw him first and said something he couldn't hear. Naomi turned around and gave him a speculative look that stopped him in his tracks. She didn't smile and she didn't frown. He raised his palms in what he hoped was an *I didn't come to fight* gesture. For a moment, they stood facing each other across the noisy room.

Jesus, he thought, how did I let it come to this?

Naomi nodded at him and pointed at a table in one corner of the room. He sat down and ordered himself a drink. Not one of the blue liver-killers the bar was famous for, just a cheap Belt-produced scotch. He'd grown to, if not appreciate, at least tolerate the faint mold aftertaste it always had. Naomi said goodbye to the rest of her team for a few minutes and then

walked over. It wasn't a casual stroll, but it wasn't the gait of someone going to a dreaded meeting either.

"Can I order you something?" Holden asked as she sat.

"Sure, I'll take a grapefruit martini," she said. While Holden entered the order on the table, she looked him over with a mysterious half smile that turned his belly to liquid.

"Okay," he said, authorizing his terminal to open a bar tab and pay for the drinks. "One hideous martini on its way."

Naomi laughed. "Hideous?"

"A near-fatal case of scurvy being the only reason I can imagine drinking something with grapefruit juice in it."

She laughed again, untying at least one of the knots in Holden's gut, and they sat together in companionable silence until the drinks arrived. She took a small sip and smacked her lips in appreciation, then said, "Okay. Spill."

Holden took a much longer drink, nearly finishing off the small glass of scotch in a single gulp, trying to convince himself that the spreading warmth in his belly could stand in for courage. *I didn't feel comfortable with where we left things, and I thought that we should talk. Kind of process this together.* He cleared his throat.

"I fucked everything up," he said. "I've treated my friends badly. Worse than badly. You were absolutely right to do what you did. I couldn't hear what you were saying at the time, but you were right to say it."

Naomi took another drink of her martini, then casually reached up and pulled out the elastic band holding her masses of black curls behind her head. Her hair fell down around her face in a tangle, making Holden think of ivy-covered stone walls. He realized that for as long as he'd known her, Naomi had always let her hair down in emotional situations. She hid behind it, not literally, but because it was her best feature. The eye was just naturally drawn to its glossy black curls. A distraction technique. It made her suddenly seem very human, as vulnerable and lost as he was. Holden felt a rush of affection for her that must have showed on his face, because she looked at him and then blushed.

"What is this, Jim?"

"An apology?" he said. "An admission that you were right, and that I was turning into my own screwed-up version of Miller? Those at the very least. Hopefully opening the dialogue to reconciliation, if I'm lucky."

"I'm glad," Naomi said. "I'm glad you're figuring that out. But I've been saying this for months now, and you—"

"Wait," Holden said. He could feel her pulling back from him, not letting herself believe. All he had left to offer her was absolute truth, so he did. "I couldn't hear you. Because I've been terrified, and I've been a coward."

"Fear doesn't make you a coward."

"No," he said. "Of course it doesn't. But refusing to face up to it. To not admit to you how I felt. To not let you and Alex and Amos help me. That was cowardice. And it may have cost me you, the crew's loyalty, everything I really care about. It made me keep a bad job a lot longer than I should have because the job was safe."

A small knot of the Golgo players began drifting toward their table, and Holden was gratified when he saw Naomi wave them off. It meant she wanted to keep talking. That was a start.

"Tell me," she said. "Where are you going from here?"

"I have no idea," Holden replied with a grin. "And that's the best feeling I've had in ages. But no matter what happens next, I need you there."

When she started to protest, Holden quickly put up a hand to stop her and said, "No, I don't mean like that. I'd love to win you back, but I'm perfectly okay with the idea that it might take some time, or never happen at all. I mean the *Roci* needs you back. The crew needs you there."

"I don't want to leave her," Naomi said with a shy smile.

"She's your home," Holden said. "Always will be as long as you want it. And that's true no matter what happens between us."

Naomi began wrapping one thick strand of hair around her finger and drank off the last of her drink. Holden pointed at the table menu, but she shook her hand at him.

"This is because you confronted Fred, right?"

"Yeah, partly," Holden said. "I was standing in his office feeling terrified and realizing I'd been afraid for a long, long time. I've screwed things up with him too. Some of that's probably his fault. He's a true believer, and those are bad people to climb into bed with. But it's mostly still mine."

"Did you quit?"

"He fired me, but I was probably going to quit."

“So,” Naomi said. “You’ve lost us our paying gig and our patron. I guess I feel a little flattered that the part you’re trying to patch up is me.”

“You,” Holden said, “are the only part I really care about fixing.”

“You know what happens now, right?”

“You move back onto the ship?”

Naomi just smiled the comment away. “Now we pay for our own repairs. If we fire a torpedo, we have to find someone to sell us a new one. We pay for water, air, docking fees, food, and medical supplies for our very expensive automated sick bay. Have a plan for that?”

“Nope!” Holden said. “But I have to say, for some reason, it feels great.”

“And when the euphoria passes?”

“I’ll make a plan.”

Her smile grew reflective and she tugged on her lock of hair.

“I’m not ready to move back to the ship right now,” Naomi said, reaching across the table to take his hand in hers. “But by the time the *Roci* is patched up, I’ll need my cabin back.”

“I’ll move the rest of my stuff out immediately.”

“Jim,” she said, squeezing his fingers once before letting go. “I love you, and we’re not okay yet. But this is a good start.”

And yes, Holden thought, it really was.

Holden woke up in his old cabin on the *Rocinante* feeling better than he had in months. He climbed out of his bunk and wandered naked through the empty ship to the head. He took an hour-long shower in water he actually had to pay for now, heated by electricity the dock would be charging him for by the kilowatt-hour. He walked back to his bunk, drying skin made pink by the almost scalding water as he went.

He made and ate a large breakfast and drank five cups of coffee while catching up on the technical reports on the *Roci*’s repairs until he was sure he understood everything about what had been done. Holden had switched to reading a column about the state of Mars-Earth relations by a political humorist when his terminal buzzed at him, and a call came through from Amos.

“Hey, Cap,” he said, his big face filling the small screen. “You coming over to the station today? Or should we come meet you on the *Roci*?”

“Let’s meet here,” Holden replied. “Sam and her team will be working today and I want to keep an eye on things.”

“See you in a few, then,” Amos said, and killed the connection.

Holden tried to finish the humor column but kept getting distracted and having to read the same passage over again. He finally gave up and cleaned the galley for a while, then set the coffee-maker to brew a fresh pot for Amos and the work crew when they arrived.

The machine was gurgling happily to itself like a content infant when the deck hatch clanged open and Amos and Prax climbed down the crew ladder and into the galley.

“Cap,” Amos said, dropping into a chair with a thump. Prax followed him into the room but didn’t sit. Holden grabbed mugs and pulled two more cups of coffee, then set them on the table.

“What’s the news?” he said.

Amos answered with a shit-eating grin and spun his terminal across the table to Holden. When Holden looked at it, it was displaying the account information for Prax’s “save Mei” fund. It had just over half a million UN dollars in it.

Holden whistled and slumped into a chair. “Jesus grinned, Amos. I’d hoped we might... but never this.”

“Yeah, it was a little under 300k this morning. It’s gone up another 200k just over the last three hours. Seems like everyone following the Ganymede shit on the news has made little Mei the poster child for the tragedy.”

“Is this enough?” Prax cut in, anxiety in his voice.

“Oh, hell yes,” Holden said with a laugh. “Way more than enough. This will fund our rescue mission just fine.”

“Also, we got a clue,” Amos said, pausing dramatically to sip his coffee.

“About Mei?”

“Yep,” Amos said, adding a little more sugar to his cup. “Prax, send him that message you got.”

Holden watched the message three times, grinning wider with each viewing. “The security video on your presentation. I believe I know the man in it,” the elderly gentleman on the screen was saying. “But his name

isn't Strickland. When I worked with him at Ceres Mining and Tech University, his name was Merrian. Carlos Merrian."

"That," Holden said after his final viewing, "is what my old buddy Detective Miller might have called a *lead*."

"What now, chief?" Amos asked.

"I think I need to make a phone call."

"Okay. The doc and I will get out of your hair and watch his money roll in."

They left together, Holden waiting until the deck hatch slammed behind them to send a connection request to the switchboard at Ceres M&T. The lag was running about fifteen minutes with Tycho's current location, so he settled back and played a simple puzzle game on his terminal that left his mind free to think and plan. If they knew who Strickland had been before he was Strickland, they might be able to trace his career history. And somewhere along the way, he'd stopped being a guy named Carlos who worked at a tech school, and became a guy named Strickland who stole little kids. Knowing *why* would be a good start to learning where he might be now.

Almost forty minutes after sending out the request, he received a reply. He was a little surprised to see the elderly man from the video message. He hadn't expected to connect on his first try.

"Hello," the man said. "I'm Dr. Moynahan. I've been expecting your message. I assume you want to know the details about Dr. Merrian. To make a long story short, he and I worked together at the CMTU biosciences lab. He was working on biological development constraint systems. He was never good at playing the university game. Didn't make many allies while he was here. So when he crossed some ethical gray areas, they were only too happy to run him out of town. I don't know the details on that. I wasn't his department head. Let me know if you need anything else."

Holden watched the message twice, taking notes and cursing the fifteen-minute lag. When he was ready, he sent a reply back.

"Thank you so much for the help, Dr. Moynahan. We really appreciate it. I don't suppose you know what happened after he was kicked out of the university, do you? Did he go to another institution? Take a corporate job? Anything?"

He hit send and sat back to wait again. He tried the puzzle game but got annoyed and turned it off. Instead, he pulled up the Tycho public

entertainment feed and watched a children's cartoon that was frantic and loud enough to distract him.

When his terminal buzzed with the incoming message, he almost knocked it off the table in his haste to start the video.

"Actually," Dr. Moynahan said, scratching at the gray stubble on his chin while he spoke, "he never even made it in front of the ethics review. Quit the day before. Made a lot of fuss, walking through the lab and yelling that we weren't going to be able to push him around anymore. That he had a bigwig corporate job with all the funding and resources he wanted. Called us small-minded pencil pushers stagnating in a quagmire of petty ethical constraints. Can't remember the name of the company he was going to work for, though."

Holden hit pause and felt a chill go down his spine. *Stagnating in a quagmire of petty ethical constraints*. He didn't need Moynahan to tell him which company would snatch a man like that up. He'd heard almost those exact words spoken by Antony Dresden, the architect of the Eros project that had killed a million and a half people as part of a grand biology experiment.

Carlos Merrian had gone to work for Protogen and disappeared. He'd come back as Strickland, abductor of small children.

And, Holden thought, the murderer too.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Avasarala

On the screen, the young man laughed as he had laughed twenty-five seconds earlier on Earth. It was the level of lag Avasarala hated the most. Too much for the conversation to feel anything like normal, but not quite enough to make it impossible. Everything she did took too long, every reading of reaction and nuance crippled by the effort to guess what exactly in her words and expression ten seconds before had elicited it.

“Only you,” he said, “could take another Earth-Mars war, turn it into a private cruise, and then seem pissed off about it. Anyone in my office would give their left testicle to go with you.”

“Next time I’ll take up a collection, but—”

“As far as an accurate military inventory,” he said twenty-five seconds ago, “there are reports in place, but they’re not as good as I’d like. Because it’s you, I’ve got a couple of my interns building search parameters. My impression is that the research budget is about a tenth of the money going to actual research. With your clearances, I have rights to look at it, but these Navy guys are pretty good at obscuring things. I think you’ll find...” His expression clouded. “A collection?”

“Forget it. You were saying?”

She waited fifty seconds, resenting each individually.

“I don’t know that we’ll be able to get a definitive answer,” the young man said. “We might get lucky, but if it’s something they want to hide, they can probably hide it.”

Especially since they’ll know you’re looking for it, and what I asked you to look for, Avasarala thought. Even if the income stream between Mao-Kwikowski, Nguyen, and Errinwright was in all the budgets right now, by the time Avasarala’s allies looked, it would be hidden. All she could do was keep pushing on as many fronts as she could devise and hope that they fucked up. Three more days of information requests and queries, and she could ask for traffic analysis. She couldn’t know exactly what information

they were hiding, but if she could find out what kinds and categories of data they were keeping away from her, that would tell her something.

Something, but not much.

“Do what you can,” she said. “I’ll luxuriate out here in the middle of nowhere. Get back to me.”

She didn’t wait fifty seconds for a round of etiquette and farewell. Life was too short for that shit.

Her private quarters on the *Guanshiyin* were gorgeous. The bed and couch matched the deep carpet in tones of gold and green that should have clashed but didn’t. The light was the best approximation of mid-morning sunlight that she’d ever seen, and the air recyclers were scented to give everything just a note of turned earth and fresh-cut grass. Only the low thrust gravity spoiled the illusion of being in a private country club somewhere in the green belt of south Asia. The low gravity and the goddamned lag.

She hated low gravity. Even if the acceleration was perfectly smooth and the yacht never had to shift or move to avoid debris, her guts were used to a full g pulling things down. She hadn’t digested anything well since she’d come on board, and she always felt short of breath.

Her system chimed. A new report from Venus. She popped it open. The preliminary analysis of the wreckage from the *Arboghost* was under way. There was some ionizing in the metal that was apparently consistent with someone’s theory of how the protomolecule functioned. It was the first time a prediction had been confirmed, the first tiny toehold toward a genuine understanding of what was happening on Venus. There was an exact timing of the three energy spikes. There was a spectral analysis of the upper atmosphere of Venus that showed more elemental nitrogen than expected. Avasarala felt her eyes glazing over. The truth was she didn’t care.

She should. It was important. Possibly more important than anything else that was happening. But just like Errinwright and Nguyen and all the others, she was caught up in this smaller, human struggle of war and influence and the tribal division between Earth and Mars. The outer planets too, if you took them seriously.

Hell, at this point she was more worried about Bobbie and Cotyar than she was about Venus. Cotyar was a good man, and his disapproval left her feeling defensive and pissed off. And Bobbie looked like she was about to

crack. And why not? The woman had watched her friends die around her, had been stripped of her context, and was now working for her traditional enemy. The marine was tough, in more ways than one, and having someone on the team with no allegiance or ties to anyone on Earth was a real benefit. Especially after fucking Soren.

She leaned back in her chair, unnerved by how different it felt when she weighed so little. Soren still smarted. Not the betrayal itself; betrayal was an occupational hazard. If she started getting her feelings hurt by that, she really should retire. No, it was that she hadn't seen it. She'd let herself have a blind spot, and Errinwright had known how to use it. How to disenfranchise her. She hated being outplayed. And more than that, she hated that her failure was going to mean more war, more violence, more children dying.

That was the price for screwing up. More dead children.

So she wouldn't screw up anymore.

She could practically see Arjun, the gentle sorrow in his eyes. *It isn't all your responsibility*, he would say.

"It's everyone's fucking responsibility," she said out loud. "But I'm the one who's taking it seriously."

She smiled. Let Mao's monitors and spies make sense of that. She let herself imagine them searching her room for some other transmission device, trying to find who she'd been speaking to. Or they'd just think the old lady was losing her beans.

Let 'em wonder.

She closed out the Venus report. Another message had arrived while she was in her reverie, flagged as an issue she'd requested follow-up on. When she read the intelligence summary, her eyebrows rose.

"I'm James Holden, and I'm here to ask for your help."

Avasara watched Bobbie watching the screen. She looked exhausted and restless both. Her eyes weren't bloodshot so much as dry-looking. Like bearings without enough grease. If she'd needed an example to demonstrate the difference between sleepy and tired, it would have been the marine.

"So he got out, then," Bobbie said.

“Him and his pet botanist and the whole damned crew,” Avasarala said. “So now we have one story about what they were doing on Ganymede that got your boys and ours so excited they started shooting each other.”

Bobbie looked up at her.

“Do you think it’s true?”

“What is truth?” Avasarala said. “I think Holden has a long history of blabbing whatever he knows or thinks he knows all over creation. True or not, he believes it.”

“And the part about the protomolecule? I mean, he just told everyone that the protomolecule is loose on Ganymede.”

“He did.”

“People have got to be reacting to that, right?”

Avasarala flipped to the intelligence summary, then to feeds of the riots on Ganymede. Thin, frightened people, exhausted by tragedy and war and fueled by panic. She could tell that the security forces arrayed against them were trying to be gentle. These weren’t thugs enjoying the use of force. These were orderlies trying to keep the frail and dying from hurting themselves and each other, walking the line between necessary violence and ineffectiveness.

“Fifty dead so far,” Avasarala said. “That’s the estimate, anyway. That place is so ass-fucked right now, they might have been going to die of sickness and malnutrition anyway. But they died of this instead.”

“I went to that restaurant,” Bobbie said.

Avasarala frowned, trying to make it into a metaphor for something. Bobbie pointed at the screen.

“The one they’re dying in front of? I ate there just after I arrived at the deployment. They had good sausage.”

“Sorry,” Avasarala said, but the marine only shook her head.

“So that cat’s out of the bag,” she said.

“Maybe,” Avasarala said. “Maybe not.”

“James Holden just told the whole system that the protomolecule’s on Ganymede. In what universe is that *maybe not*?”

Avasarala pulled up a mainstream newsfeed, checked the flags, and pulled the one with the listed experts she wanted. The data buffered for a few seconds while she lifted her finger for patience.

“—totally irresponsible,” a grave-cheeked man in a lab coat and kufi cap said. The contempt in his voice could have peeled paint.

The interviewer appeared beside him. She was maybe twenty years old, with hair cut short and straight and a dark suit that said she was a serious journalist.

“So you’re saying the protomolecule *isn’t* involved?”

“It isn’t. The images James Holden and his little group are sending have nothing to do with the protomolecule. That webbing is what happens when you have a binding agent leak. It happens all the time.”

“So there isn’t any reason to panic.”

“Alice,” the expert said, turning his condescension to the interviewer. “Within a few days of exposure, Eros was a living horror show. In the time since hostilities opened, Ganymede hasn’t shown one sign of a live infection. Not one.”

“But he has a scientist with him. The botanist Dr. Praxidike Meng, whose daughter—”

“I don’t know this Meng fellow, but playing with a few soybeans makes him as much an expert on the protomolecule as it makes him a brain surgeon. I’m very sorry, of course, about his missing daughter, but no. If the protomolecule were on Ganymede, we’d have known long ago. This panic is over *literally* nothing.”

“He can go on like that for hours,” Avasarala said, shutting down the screen. “And we have dozens like him. Mars is going to be doing the same thing. Saturating the newsfeeds with the counter-story.”

“Impressive,” Bobbie said, pushing herself back from the desk.

“It keeps people calm. That’s the important thing. Holden thinks he’s a hero, power to the people, information wants to be free blah blah blah, but he’s a fucking moron.”

“He’s on his own ship.”

Avasarala crossed her arms. “What’s your point?”

“He’s on his own ship and we’re not.”

“So we’re all fucking morons,” Avasarala said. “Fine.”

Bobbie stood up and started pacing the room. She turned well before she reached the wall. The woman was used to pacing in smaller quarters.

“What do you want me to do about it?” Bobbie asked.

“Nothing,” Avasarala said. “What the hell could you do about it? You’re stuck out here with me. I can hardly do anything, and I’ve got friends in high places. You’ve got *nothing*. I only wanted to talk to someone I didn’t have to wait two minutes to let interrupt me.”

She'd taken it too far. Bobbie's expression eased, went calm and closed and distant. She was shutting down. Avasarala lowered herself to the edge of the bed.

"That wasn't fair," Avasarala said.

"If you say so."

"I fucking say so."

The marine tilted her head. "Was that an apology?"

"As close to one as I'm giving right now."

Something shifted in Avasarala's mind. Not about Venus, or James Holden and his *poor lost girl* appeal, or even Errinwright. It had to do with Bobbie and her pacing and her sleeplessness. Then she got it and laughed once mirthlessly. Bobbie crossed her arms, her steady silence a question.

"It isn't funny," Avasarala said.

"Try me."

"You remind me of my daughter."

"Yeah?"

She'd pissed Bobbie off, and now she was going to have to explain herself. The air recyclers hummed to themselves. Something far off in the bowels of the yacht groaned like they were on an ancient sailing ship made from timber and tar.

"My son died when he was fifteen," Avasarala said. "Skiing. Did I tell you this? He was on a slope that he'd run twenty, thirty times before. He knew it, but something happened and he ran into a tree. They guessed he was going something like sixty kilometers an hour when he hit. Some people survive an impact like that, but not him."

For a moment, she was there again, in the house with the medic on the screen giving her the news. She could still smell the incense Arjun had been burning at the time. She could still hear the raindrops against the window, tapping like fingertips. It was the worst memory she had, and it was perfect and clear. She took a long, deep shuddering breath.

"I almost got divorced three times in the next six months. Arjun was a saint, but saints have their limits. We fought about anything. About nothing. Each of us blamed ourselves for not saving Charanpal, and we resented it when the other one tried to take some responsibility. And so, of course, my daughter suffered the worst.

"There was a night when we were out at something, Arjun and I. We got home late, and we'd been fighting. Ashanti was in the kitchen, washing

dishes. Washing clean dishes by hand. Scrubbing them with a cloth and this terrible abrasive cleanser. Her fingers were bleeding, but she didn't seem to notice, you know? I tried to stop her, pull her away, but she started screaming and she wouldn't be quiet again until I let her resume her washing. I was so angry I couldn't see. I hated my daughter. For that moment, I hated her."

"And I remind you of her how exactly?"

Avasarala gestured to the room. Its bed with real linen sheets. The textured paper on the walls, the scented air.

"You can't compromise. You can't see things the way I tell you that they are, and when I try and make you, you go away."

"Is that what you want?" Bobbie said. Her voice was crawling up to a higher energy level. It was anger, but it brought her back to being present. "You want me to agree with whatever you say, and if I don't, you're going to hate me for it?"

"Of course I want you to call me on my bullshit. That's what I pay you for. I'm only going to hate you for the moment," Avasarala said. "I love my daughter very much."

"I'm sure you do, ma'am. I'm not her."

Avasarala sighed.

"I didn't call you in here and show you all of this because I was tired of the lag. I'm worried. Fuck it, I'm *scared*."

"About what?"

"You want a list?"

Bobbie actually smiled. Avasarala felt herself smiling back.

"I'm scared that I've been outplayed already," she said. "I'm afraid that I won't be able to stop the hawks and their cabal from using their pretty new toys. And... and I'm afraid that I might be wrong. What happens, Bobbie? What happens if whatever the hell that is on Venus rises up and finds us as divided and screwed up and ineffective as we are right now?"

"I don't know."

Avasarala's terminal chimed. She glanced at the new message. A note from Admiral Souther. Avasarala had sent him an utterly innocuous note about having lunch when they both got back to Earth, then coded it for high-security clearance with a private encryption schema. It would take her handlers a couple of hours at least to crack it. She tabbed it open. The reply was plain text.

LOVE TO.
THE EAGLE LANDS AT MIDNIGHT PETTING ZOOS
ARE ILLEGAL IN ROME.

Avasarala laughed. It was real pleasure this time. Bobbie loomed up over her shoulder, and Avasarala turned the screen so that the big marine could peer down at it.

“What’s that mean?”

Avasarala motioned her down close enough that her lips were almost against Bobbie’s ear. At that intimate distance, the big woman smelled of clean sweat and the cucumber-scented emollient that was in all Mao’s guest quarters.

“Nothing,” Avasarala whispered. “He’s just following my lead, but they’ll chew their livers out guessing at it.”

Bobbie stood up. Her expression of incredulity was eloquent.

“This really is how government works, isn’t it?”

“Welcome to the monkey house,” Avasarala said.

“I think I might go get drunk.”

“And I’ll get back to work.”

At the doorway, Bobbie paused. She looked small in the wide frame. A doorframe on a spaceship that left Roberta Draper looking small. There was nothing about the yacht that wasn’t tastefully obscene.

“What happened with her?”

“Who?”

“Your daughter.”

Avasarala closed her terminal.

“Arjun sang to her until she stopped. It took about three hours. He sat on the counter and went through all the songs we’d sung to them when they were little. Eventually, Ashanti let him lead her to her room and tuck her into bed.”

“You hated him too, didn’t you? For being able to help her when you couldn’t.”

“You’re catching on, Sergeant.”

Bobbie licked her lips.

“I want to hurt someone,” she said. “I’m afraid if it’s not them, it’s going to wind up being me.”

“We all grieve in our own ways,” Avasarala said. “For what it’s worth, you’ll never kill enough people to keep your platoon from dying. No more than I can save enough people that one of them will be Charanpal.”

For a long moment, Bobbie weighed the words. Avasarala could almost hear the woman’s mind turning the ideas one way and then another. Soren had been an idiot to underestimate this woman. But Soren had been an idiot in a lot of ways. When at length she spoke, her voice was light and conversational, as if her words weren’t profound.

“No harm trying, though.”

“It’s what we do,” Avasarala said.

The marine nodded curtly. For a moment, Avasarala thought she might be going to salute, but instead, she lumbered out toward the complimentary bar in the wide common area. There was a fountain out there with sprays of water drifting down fake bronze sculptures of horses and underdressed women. If that didn’t make someone want a stiff drink of something, then nothing would.

Avasarala thumbed on the video feed again.

“This is James Holden—”

She turned it off again.

“At least you lost that fucking beard,” she said to no one.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Prax

Prax remembered his first epiphany. Or possibly, he thought, the one he remembered as his first. In the absence of further evidence, he went with it. He'd been in second form, just seventeen, and in the middle of a genetic engineering lab. Sitting there among the steel tables and microcentrifuges, he'd struggled with why exactly his results were so badly off. He'd rechecked his calculations, read through his lab notes. The error was more than sloppy technique could explain, and his technique wasn't even sloppy.

And then he'd noticed that one of the reagents was chiral, and he knew what had happened. He hadn't figured anything wrong but he had assumed that the reagent was taken from a natural source rather than generated de novo. Instead of being uniformly left-handed, it had been a mix of chiralities, half of them inactive. The insight had left him grinning from ear to ear.

It had been a failure, but it was a failure he understood, and that made it a victory. The only thing he regretted was that seeing what should have been clear had taken him so long.

The four days since he had sent the broadcast, he'd hardly slept. Instead, he'd read through the comments and messages pouring in with the donations, responding to a few, asking questions of people all over the system whom he didn't know. The goodwill and generosity pouring out to him was intoxicating. For two days, he hadn't slept, borne up on the euphoria of feeling effective. When he had slept, he'd dreamed of finding Mei.

When the answer came, he only wished he'd found it before.

"The time they had, they could have taken her anywhere, Doc," Amos said. "I mean, not to bust your balls or nothing."

"They could," Prax said. "They could take her anywhere as long as they had a supply of her medications. But she's not the limiting factor. The question is where they were coming from."

Prax had called the meeting without a clear idea of where to have it. The crew of the *Roci* was small, but Amos' rooms were smaller. He'd considered the galley of the ship, but there were still technicians finishing the repairs, and Prax wanted privacy. In the end, he'd checked the incoming stream of contributions from Holden's broadcast and taken enough to rent a room from a station club.

Now they were in a private lounge. Outside the wall-screen window, the great construction waldoes shifted by tiny degrees, attitude rockets flaring and going still in patterns as complex as language. Another thing Prax had never thought about before coming here: The station waldoes had to fire attitude rockets to keep their movements from shifting the station they were attached to. Everything, everywhere, a dance of tiny movements and the ripples they made.

Inside the room, the music that floated between the wide tables and crash-gel chairs was soft and lyrical, the singer's voice deep and soothing.

"From?" Alex said. "I thought they were from Ganymede."

"The lab on Ganymede wasn't equipped to deal with serious research," Prax said. "And they arranged things so that Ganymede would turn into a war zone. That'd be a bad idea if they were doing their primary work in the middle of it. That was a field lab."

"I try not to shit where I eat," Amos said, agreeing.

"You live on a spaceship," Holden said.

"I don't shit in the galley, though."

"Fair point."

"Anyway," Prax said, "we can safely assume they were working from a better-protected base. And that base has to be somewhere in the Jovian system. Somewhere nearby."

"You lost me again," Holden said. "Why does it need to be close?"

"Transport time. Mei can go anywhere if there's a good supply of medications, but she's more robust than the... the things."

Holden raised his hand like a schoolboy asking a question.

"Okay, I could be hearing you wrong, but did you just say that the thing that ripped its way into my ship, threw a five-hundred-kilo storage pallet at me, and almost chewed a path straight to the reactor core is more delicate than a four-year-old girl with no immune system?"

Prax nodded. A stab of horror and grief went through him. She wasn't four anymore. Mei's birthday had been the month before, and he'd missed

it. She was five. But grief and horror were old companions by now. He pushed the thought aside.

"I'll be clearer," he said. "Mei's body isn't fighting its situation. That's her disease, if you think about it. There's a whole array of things that happen in normal bodies that don't happen in hers. Now you take one of the things, one of the creatures. Like the one from the ship?"

"That bastard was pretty active," Amos said.

"No," Prax said. "I mean, yes, but no. I mean active on a biochemical level. If Strickland or Merrian or whoever is using the protomolecule to reengineer a human body, they're taking one complex system and overlaying another one. We know it's unstable."

"Okay," Naomi said. She was sitting beside Amos and across the table from Holden. "*How* do we know that?"

Prax frowned. When he'd practiced making the presentation, he hadn't expected so many questions. The things he'd thought were obvious from the start hadn't even occurred to the others. This was why he hadn't gone in for teaching. Looking at their faces now, he saw blank confusion.

"All right," he said. "Let me take it from the top. There was something on Ganymede that started the war. There was also a secret lab staffed with people who at the very least knew about the attack before it happened."

"Check," Alex said.

"Okay," Prax said. "In the lab, we had signs of the protomolecule, a dead boy, and a bunch of people getting ready to leave. And when we got there, we only had to fight halfway in. After that, something else was going ahead of us and killing everyone."

"Hey!" Amos said. "You think that was the same fucker that got into the *Roci*?"

Prax stopped the word *obviously* just before it fell from his lips.

"Probably," he said instead. "And it seems likely that the original attack involved more like that one."

"So two got loose?" Naomi asked, but he could see that she already sensed the problem with that.

"No, because they knew it was going to happen. One got loose when Amos threw that grenade back at them. One was released intentionally. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that they're using the protomolecule to remake human bodies, and they aren't able to control it with perfect fidelity. The programming they're putting in fails."

Prax nodded, as if by doing it he could will them to follow his chain of reasoning. Holden shook his head, paused, and then nodded.

“The bomb,” he said.

“The bomb,” Prax agreed. “Even when they didn’t know that the second thing was going to get loose, they’d outfitted it with a powerful incendiary explosive device.”

“Ah!” Alex said. “I get it! You figure they knew it was going to go off the rails eventually, so they wired it to blow if it got out of hand.”

In the depths of space, a construction welder streaked across the hull of the half-built ship, the light of its flare casting a sudden, sharp light across the pilot’s eager face.

“Yes,” Prax said. “But it could be also be an ancillary weapon, or a payload that the thing was supposed to deliver. I think it’s a fail-safe. It probably is, but it could be any number of other things.”

“Okay, but it left it behind,” Alex said.

“Given time, it *ejected* the bomb,” Prax said. “You see? It chose to reconfigure itself to remove the payload. It didn’t place it to destroy the *Roci*, even though it could have. It didn’t deliver it to a preset target. It just decided to pop it loose.”

“And it knew to do that—”

“It’s smart enough to recognize threat,” Prax said. “I don’t know the mechanism yet. It could be cognitive or networked or some kind of modified immune response.”

“Okay, Prax. So if the protomolecule can eventually get out of whatever constraints they’re putting on it and go rogue, where does that get us?” Naomi asked.

Square one, Prax thought, and launched in on the information he’d intended to give them in the first place.

“It means that wherever the main lab is—the place they didn’t release one of those things on—it has to be close enough to Ganymede to get it there before it slipped its leash. I don’t know how long that is, and I’m betting they don’t either. So closer is better.”

“A Jovian moon or a secret station,” Holden said.

“You can’t have a secret station in the Jovian system,” Alex said. “There’s too much traffic. Someone’d see something. Shit, it’s where most of the extrasolar astronomy was going on until we got out to Uranus. Put

something close, the observatories are gonna get pissed because it's stinking up their pictures, right?"

Naomi tapped her fingers against the tabletop, the sound like the ticking of condensate falling inside sheet metal vents.

"Well, the obvious choice is Europa," she said.

"It's Io," Prax said, impatience slipping into his voice. "I used some of the money to get a tariff search on the kinds of arylamines and nitroarenes that you use for mutagenic research." He paused. "It's all right that I did that, isn't it? Spent the money?"

"That's what it's there for," Holden said.

"Okay, so mutagens that only start functioning after you activate them are very tightly controlled, since you can use them for bioweapons research, but if you're trying to work with that kind of biological cascade and constraint systems, you'd need them. Most of the supplies went to Ganymede, but there was a steady stream to Europa too. And when I looked at that, I couldn't find a final receiver listed. Because they shipped back out of Europa about two hours after they landed."

"Bound for Io," Holden said.

"It didn't list a location, but the shipping containers for them have to follow Earth and Mars safety specifications. Very expensive. And the shipping containers for the Europa shipment were returned to the manufacturer for credit on a transport bound from Io."

Prax took a breath. It had been like pulling teeth, but he was pretty sure he'd made all the points he needed to for the evidence to be, if not conclusive, at least powerfully suggestive.

"So," Amos said, drawing the word out to almost three syllables. "The bad guys are probably on Io?"

"Yes," Prax said.

"Well shit, Doc. Coulda just said so."

The thrust gravity was a full g but without the subtle Coriolis of Tycho Station. Prax sat in his bunk, bent over his hand terminal. There had been times on the journey to Tycho Station when being half starved and sick at heart were the only things that distracted him. Nothing physical had changed. The walls were still narrow and close. The air recycler still clicked

and hummed. Only now, rather than feeling isolated, Prax felt he was in the center of a vast network of people, all bent toward the same end that he was.

MR. MENG, I SAW THE REPORT ON YOU AND MY HEART AND PRAYERS ARE WITH YOU. I'M SORRY I CAN'T SEND MONEY BECAUSE I'M ON BASIC, BUT I HAVE INCLUDED THE REPORT IN MY CHURCH NEWSLETTER. I HOPE YOU CAN FIND YOUR DAUGHTER SAFE AND HEALTHY.

Prax had composed a form letter for responding to all the general well-wishers, and he'd considered trying to find a filter that could identify those messages and reply automatically with the canned response. He held off because he wasn't sure how well he could define the conditions set, and he didn't want anyone to feel that their sentiments were being taken for granted. And after all, he had no duties on the *Rocinante*.

I'M WRITING YOU BECAUSE I MAY HAVE INFORMATION THAT WILL HELP WITH THE QUEST TO RECLAIM YOUR DAUGHTER. SINCE I WAS VERY YOUNG, I HAVE HAD POWERFUL PREMONITIONS IN MY DREAMS, AND THREE DAYS BEFORE I SAW JAMES HOLDEN'S ARTICLE ABOUT YOU AND YOUR DAUGHTER, I SAW HER IN A DREAM. SHE WAS ON LUNA IN A VERY SMALL PLACE WITHOUT LIGHT, AND SHE WAS SCARED. I TRIED TO COMFORT HER, BUT I FEEL SURE NOW THAT YOU ARE MEANT TO FIND HER ON LUNA OR IN A NEARBY ORBIT.

Prax didn't respond to *everything*, of course.

The journey to Io wouldn't take much more time than the one to Tycho had. Probably less, since they were unlikely to have the chaos of a stowaway protomolecule construct blowing out the cargo bay this time. If Prax thought about it too long, it made his palm itch. He knew where she was—or where she had been. Every hour was bringing him closer, and every message flowing into his charitable account gave him a little more power. Someone else who might know where Carlos Merrian was and what he was doing.

There were a few he'd set up conversations with, mostly video conversations sent back and forth. He'd spoken with a security broker based out of Ceres Station, who'd run some of his tariff searches and seemed like a genuinely nice man. He'd exchanged a few video recordings with a grief counselor on Mars before he started to get an uncomfortable feeling that she was hitting on him. An entire school of children—at least a hundred of them—had sent him a recording of them singing a song in mixed Spanish and French in honor of Mei and her return.

Intellectually, he knew that nothing had changed. The chances were still very good that Mei was dead, or at least that he would never see her again. But to have so many people—and in such a steady stream—telling him that it would be all right, that they hoped it would be all right, that they were pulling for him made despair less possible. It was probably something like group reinforcement effect. It was something common to some species of crop plant: An ill or suffering plant could be moved into a community of well members of the species and, through proximity, improve, even if soil and water were supplied separately. Yes, it was chemically mediated, but humans were social animals, and a woman smiling up from the screen, her eyes seeming to look deeply into your own, and saying what you wanted to believe was almost impossible to wholly disbelieve.

It was selfish, and he knew that, but it was also addictive. He'd stopped paying attention to the donations that were coming in once he knew there was enough to fund the ship as far as Io. Holden had given him an expense report and a detailed spreadsheet of costs, but Prax didn't think Holden would cheat him, so he'd barely glanced at anything other than the total at the bottom. Once there was enough money, he'd stopped caring about money.

It was the commentary that took his time and attention.

He heard Alex and Amos in the galley, their voices calm and conversational. It reminded him of living in the group housing at university. The awareness of other voices, other presences, and the comfort that came from those familiar sounds. It wasn't that different from reading the comment threads.

I LOST MY SON FOUR YEARS AGO, AND I STILL
CAN'T IMAGINE WHAT YOU ARE GOING THROUGH
RIGHT NOW. I WISH THERE WAS MORE I COULD DO.

He had the list down to only a few dozen. It was mid-afternoon in the arbitrary world of ship time, but he was powerfully sleepy. He debated leaving the remaining messages until after a nap, and decided to read through them without requiring himself to respond to each one. Alex laughed. Amos joined him.

Prax opened the fifth message.

YOU ARE A SICK, SICK, SICK MOTHERFUCKER, AND
IF I EVER SEE YOU, I SWEAR TO GOD I WILL KILL
YOU MYSELF. PEOPLE LIKE YOU SHOULD BE RAPED
TO DEATH JUST SO YOU KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE.

Prax tried to catch his breath. The sudden ache in his body was just like the aftermath of being punched in the solar plexus. He deleted the message. Another came in, and then three more. And then a dozen. With a sense of dread, Prax opened one of the new ones.

I HOPE YOU DIE.

“I don’t understand,” Prax said to the terminal. The vitriol was sudden and constant and utterly inexplicable. At least, it was until he opened one of the messages that had the link to a public newsfeed. Prax put in a request, and five minutes later, his screen went blank, the logo of one of the big Earth-based news aggregators glowed briefly in blue, and the title of the feed series—The Raw Feed—appeared.

When the logo faded out, Nicola was looking out at him. Prax reached for the controls, part of his mind insisting that he’d somehow slipped into his private messages, even as the rest of him knew better. Nicola licked her lips, looked away, then back at the camera. She looked tired. Exhausted.

“My name’s Nicola Mulko. I used to be married to Praxidike Meng, the man who put out a call for help finding our daughter... my daughter, Mei.”

A tear dripped down her cheek, and she didn’t wipe it away.

“What you don’t know—what no one knows—is that Praxidike Meng is a monster of a human being. Ever since I got away from him, I’ve been trying to get Mei back. I thought his abuse of me was between us. I didn’t think he’d hurt her. But information has come back to me from friends who stayed on Ganymede after I left that...”

“Nicola,” Prax said. “Don’t. Don’t do this.”

“Praxidike Meng is a violent and dangerous man,” Nicola said. “As Mei’s mother, I believe that she has been emotionally, physically, and sexually abused by him since I left. And that her alleged disappearance during the troubles on Ganymede are to hide the fact that he’s finally killed her.”

The tears were flowing freely down Nicola’s cheeks now, but her voice and eyes were dead as last week’s fish.

“I don’t blame anyone but myself,” she said. “I should never have left when I couldn’t get my little girl away too...”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Avasarala

“I don’t blame anyone but myself,” the teary-eyed woman said, and Avasarala stopped the feed, sitting back in her chair. Her heart was beating faster than usual and she could feel thoughts swimming just under the ice of her conscious mind. She felt like someone could press an ear to her skull and listen to her brain humming.

Bobbie was sitting on the four-poster. She made the thing look small, which was impressive in itself. She had one leg tucked up under her and a pack of real playing cards laid out in formation on the crisp gold-and-green bedspread. The game of solitaire was forgotten, though. The Martian’s gaze was on her, and Avasarala felt a slow grin pulling at her lips.

“Well, I’ll be fucked,” she said. “They’re scared of him.”

“Who’s scared of who?”

“Errinwright is moving against Holden and this Meng bastard, whoever he is. They actually forced him to take action. *I* couldn’t get that out of him.”

“You don’t think the botanist was diddling his kid?”

“Might have been, but that”—she tapped on the still, tearful face of the botanist’s ex-wife—“is a smear campaign. I’ll bet you a week’s pay that I’ve had lunch with the woman coordinating it.”

Bobbie’s skeptical look only made Avasarala smile more broadly.

“This,” Avasarala said, “is the first genuinely good thing that’s happened since we got on this floating whorehouse. I’ve got to get to work. Goddamn, but I wish I was back at the office.”

“You want some tea?”

“Gin,” she said, engaging the camera on her terminal. “We’re celebrating.”

In the focus window, she looked smaller than she felt. The rooms had been designed to command attention whatever angle she put herself in, like being trapped in a postcard. Anyone who rode in the yacht would be able to brag without saying a word, but in the weak gravity her hair stood out from

her head like she'd just gotten out of bed. More than that, she looked emotionally exhausted and physically diminished.

Put it away, she told herself. Find the mask.

She took a deep breath, made a rude gesture into the camera, and then started recording.

"Admiral Souther," she said. "Thank you so much for your last message. Something's come to my attention that I thought you might find interesting. It looks like someone's taken a fresh dislike to James Holden. If I were with the fleet instead of floating around the fucking solar system, I'd take you out for a cup of coffee and talk this over, but since that's not happening, I'm going to open some of my private files for you. I've been following Holden. Take a look at what I've got and tell me if you're seeing the same things I am."

She sent the message. The next thing that would have made sense would be contacting Errinwright. If the situation had been what they were both pretending it was, she'd have kept him involved and engaged. For a long moment, she considered following the form, pretending. Bobbie loomed up on her right, putting the glass of gin on the desk with a soft click. Avasarala picked it up and sipped a small taste of it. Mao's private-label gin was excellent, even without the lime twist.

Nah. Fuck Errinwright. She pulled up her address book and started leafing through entries until she found what she wanted and pressed record.

"Ms. Corlinowski, I've just seen the leaked video accusing Praxidike Meng of screwing his cute little five-year-old daughter. When exactly did UN media relations turn into a fucking divorce court? If it gets out that we were behind that, I would like to know whose resignation I'm going to hand to the newsfeeds, and right now I'm thinking it's yours. Give my love to Richard, and get back to me before I fire your incompetent ass out of spite."

She ended the recording and sent it.

"She was the one that arranged it?" Bobbie asked.

"Might have been," Avasarala said, taking another bite of gin. It was too good. If she wasn't careful, she'd drink a lot of it. "If it wasn't, she'll find who it was and serve them up on a plate. Emma Corlinowski's a coward. It's why I love her."

Over the next hour, she sent a dozen more messages out, performance after performance after performance. She started a liability investigation into Meng's ex-wife and whether the UN could be held responsible for

slander. She put the Ganymede relief coordinator on high alert, demanding everything she could get about Mei Meng and the search for her. She put in high-priority requests to have the doctor and the woman from Holden's broadcast identified, and then sent a twenty-minute rambling message to an old colleague in data storage, with a small, tacit request for the same information made in the middle of it all.

Errinwright had changed the game. If she'd had freedom, she'd have been unstoppable. As it was, she had to assume that every move she made would be cataloged and acted against almost as soon as she made it. But Errinwright and his allies were only human, and if she kept a solid flow of demands and requests, screeds and wheedling, they might overlook something. Or someone on a newsfeed might notice the uptick in activity and look into it. Or, if nothing else, her efforts might give Errinwright a bad night's sleep.

It was what she had. It wasn't enough. Long years of practice with the fine dance of politics and power had left her with expectations and reflexes that couldn't find their right form there. The lag was killing her with frustration, and she took it out on whomever she was recording for at the moment. She felt like a world-class musician standing before a full auditorium and handed a kazoo.

She didn't notice when she finished her gin. She only put the glass to her mouth, found it empty, and realized it wasn't the first time she'd done it. Five hours had passed. She'd had only three responses so far out of almost fifty messages she'd sent out. That was more than lag. That was someone else's damage control.

She didn't realize that she was hungry until Cotyar came with a plate, the smell of curried lamb and watermelon wafting in with him. Avasarala's belly woke with a roar, and she turned off her terminal.

"You've just saved my life," she told him, gesturing at the desk.

"It was Sergeant Draper's idea," he said. "After the third time you ignored her asking."

"I don't remember that," she said as he put the dish in front of her. "Don't they have servants on this thing? Why are you bringing the food?"

"They do, ma'am. I'm not letting them in here."

"That seems extreme. Feeling jumpy, are you?"

"As you say."

She ate too quickly. Her back was aching, and her left leg was tingling with the pins and needles she got now from sitting too long in one position. As a young woman, she'd never suffered that. On the other hand, she hadn't had the ability to pepper every major player in the United Nations and be taken seriously. Time took her strength but it gave her power in exchange. It was a fair trade.

She couldn't wait to finish her meal, turning on the terminal while she gulped the last of it down. Four waiting messages. Souther, God bless his shriveled little heart. One from someone at the legal council whose name she didn't recognize, and another from someone she did. One from Michael-Jon, which was probably about Venus. She opened the one from Souther.

The admiral appeared on her screen and she had to stop herself from saying hello. It was only a video recording, not a real conversation. She hated it.

"Chrisjen," the admiral said. "You're going to have to be careful with all this information you're sending me. Arjun's going to get jealous. I wasn't aware of our friend Jimmy's part in instigating this latest brouhaha."

Our friend Jimmy. He wasn't saying the name Holden out loud. That was interesting. He was expecting some kind of filtering to be sniffing out Holden's name. She tried to guess whether he thought the filter would be on his outgoing messages or her incoming. If Errinwright had half a brain—which he did—he'd be watching the traffic both ways for both of them. Was he worried about someone else? How many players were there at the table? She didn't have enough information to work with, but it was interesting, at least.

"I can see where your concerns might lead you," Souther said. "I'm making some inquiries, but you know how these things are. Might find something in a minute, might find something in a year. You don't be a stranger, though. There's more than enough going on out here that I can wish I could take you up on that lunch. We're all looking forward to seeing you again."

There was a barefaced lie, Avasarala thought. Still, nice of him to say it. She scraped her fork along the bottom of the plate, a thin residue of curry clinging to the silver.

The first message was some young man with a Brazilian accent explaining to her that the UN had nothing to do with the video footage

released of Nicola Mulko, and therefore could not be held responsible for it. The second was the boy's supervisor, apologizing for him and promising a fully formed brief by the end of the day, which was considerably more like it. The smart people were still afraid of her. That thought was more nourishing than the lamb.

As she reached for the screen, the ship shifted under her, gravity pulling her slightly to the side. She put her hand on the desk; the curry and the remnants of gin churned her gut.

"Were we expecting that?" she shouted.

"Yes, ma'am," Cotyar called from the next room. "Scheduled course correction."

"Never happens at the fucking office," she said, and Michael-Jon appeared on her screen. He looked mildly confused, but that could have been just the angle of his face. She felt a sick dread.

For a moment, the *Arboghost* floated before her again, coming apart. Without intending it, she paused the feed. Something in the back of her mind wanted to turn away. Not to know.

It wasn't hard to understand how Errinwright and Nguyen and their cabal would turn their backs on Venus, on the alien chaos that was becoming order and more than order. She felt it too, the atavistic fear lurking at the back of her mind. How much easier to turn to the old games, the old patterns, the history of warfare and conflict, deception and death. For all its horror, it was familiar. It was known.

As a girl, she'd seen a film about a man who saw the face of God. For the first hour of the film, he had gone through the drab life of someone living on basic on the coast of southern Africa. When he saw God, the film switched to ten minutes of the man wailing and then another hour of slowly building himself back up to do the same idiot life he'd had at the beginning. Avasarala had hated it. Now, though, she almost understood. Turning away was natural. Even if it was moronic and self-destructive and empty, it was natural.

War. Slaughter. Death. All the violence that Errinwright and his men—and she felt certain they were almost all of them men—were embracing, they were drawn to because it was comforting. And they were scared.

Well, so was she.

"Pussies," she said, and restarted the playback.

“Venus can think,” Michael-Jon said instead of *hello* or any other social pleasantries. “I’ve had the signal analysis team running the data we saw from the network of water and electrical currents, and we’ve found a model. It’s only about a sixty percent correlation, but I’m comfortable putting that above chance. It’s got different anatomy, of course, but its functional structure is most like a cetacean doing spatial reasoning problems. I mean, there’s still the problem of the explanatory gap, and I can’t help with that part, but with what we’ve seen, I’m fairly sure that the patterns we saw were it thinking. They were the actual thoughts, like neurons firing off.”

He looked into the camera as if expecting her to answer and then looked mildly disappointed when she didn’t.

“I thought you’d want to know,” he said, and ended the recording.

Before she could formulate a response, a new message from Souther appeared. She opened it with a sense of gratitude and relief that she was slightly ashamed of.

“Chrisjen,” he said. “We have a problem. You should check the force assignments on Ganymede and let me know if we’re seeing the same things.”

Avasarala frowned. The lag now was over twenty-eight minutes. She put in a standard request, expedited it, and stood up. Her back was a solid knot. She walked to the common area of the suite. Bobbie, Cotyar, and three other men were sitting in a circle, the deck of cards distributed among them. Poker. Avasarala walked toward them, rolling through the hips where movement hurt. Something about lower gravity made her joints ache. She lowered herself to Bobbie’s side.

“Next hand, you can deal me in,” she said.

The order had come from Nguyen, and at first glance it made no sense at all. Six UN destroyers had been ordered off the Ganymede patrol, sent out at high burn on a course that seemed to lead essentially to nowhere. Initial reports showed that after a decent period of wondering what the fuck, a similar detachment of Martian ships matched course.

Nguyen was up to something, and she didn’t have the first clue what it could be. But Souther had sent it and thought she would see something.

It took another hour to find it. Holden's *Rocinante* had departed Tycho Station on a gentle burn for the Jovian system. He might have filed a flight plan with the OPA, but he hadn't informed Earth or Mars of anything, which meant Nguyen was watching him too.

They weren't just scared. They were going to kill him.

Avasarala sat quietly for a long moment before she stood up and went back toward the game. Cotyar and Bobbie were at the end of a high-stakes round, which meant the pile of little bits of chocolate candy they were using for chips was almost five centimeters deep.

"Mr. Cotyar," Avasarala said. "Sergeant Draper. With me, please."

The cards all vanished. The men looked at each other nervously as she walked back into her bedroom. She closed the door behind them carefully. It didn't even click.

"I am about to do something that may pull a trigger," she said. "If I do this, the complexion of our situation may change."

Cotyar and Bobbie exchanged looks.

"I have some things I'd like to get out of storage," Bobbie said.

"I'll brief the men," Cotyar said.

"Ten minutes."

The lag between the *Guanshiyin* and the *Rocinante* was still too long for conversation, but it was less than it took to get a message back to Earth. The sense of being so far from home left her a little light-headed. Cotyar stepped into the room and nodded once. Avasarala opened her terminal and requested a tightbeam connection. She gave the transponder code for the *Rocinante*. Less than a minute later, the connection came back refused. She smiled to herself and opened a channel to ops.

"This is Assistant Undersecretary Avasarala," she said, as if there were anyone else on board who it might be. "What the fuck is wrong with your tightbeam?"

"I apologize, Madam Secretary," a young man with bright blue eyes and close-cut blond hair said. "That communication channel isn't available right now."

"Why the fuck isn't it available?"

"It's not available, ma'am."

"Fine. I didn't want to do this on the radio, but I can broadcast if I have to."

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” the boy said. Avasarala took a long breath and let it out through her teeth.

“Put the captain on,” she said.

A moment later, the image jumped. The captain was a thin-faced man with the brown eyes of an Irish setter. The set of his mouth and his bloodless lips told her that he knew what was coming, at least in outline. For a moment, she just looked into the camera. It was a trick she’d learned when she’d just started off. Looking at the screen image let the other person feel they were being seen. Looking into the tiny black pinpoint of the lens itself left them feeling stared down.

“Captain. I have a high-priority message I need to send.”

“I am very sorry. We’re having technical difficulties with the communication array.”

“Do you have a backup system? A shuttle we can power up? Anything?”

“Not at this time.”

“You’re lying to me,” she said. Then, when he didn’t answer: “I am making an official request that this yacht engage its emergency beacon and change course to the nearest aid.”

“I’m not going to be able to do that, ma’am. If you will just be patient, we’ll get you to Ganymede safe and in one piece. I’m sure any repairs we need can be done there.”

Avasarala leaned close to the terminal.

“I can come up there and we can have this conversation personally,” she said. “Captain. You know the laws as well as I do. Turn on the beacon or give me communications access.”

“Ma’am, you are the guest of Jules-Pierre Mao, and I respect that. But Mr. Mao is the owner of this vessel, and I answer to him.”

“No, then.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“You’re making a mistake, shithead,” Avasarala said, and dropped the connection.

Bobbie came into the room. Her face was bright, and there was a hunger about her, like a running dog straining at the leash. Gravity shifted a degree. A course correction, but not a change.

“How’d it go?” Bobbie asked.

“I am declaring this vessel in violation of laws and standards,”
Avasarala said. “Cotyar, you’re witness to that.”

“As you say, ma’am.”

“All right, then. Bobbie. Get me control of this fucking ship.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Bobbie

“What else do you need from us?” Cotyar asked. Two of his people were moving the big crate marked FORMAL WEAR into Avasarala’s room. They were using a large furniture dolly and grunting with effort. Even in the gentle quarter g of the *Guanshiyin*’s thrust, Bobbie’s armor weighed over a hundred kilos.

“We’re sure this room isn’t under surveillance?” Bobbie said. “This is going to work a lot better if they have no idea what’s about to happen.”

Cotyar shrugged. “It has no functioning eavesdropping devices I’ve been able to detect.”

“Okay, then,” Bobbie said, rapping on the fiberglass crate with her knuckle. “Open it up.”

Cotyar tapped something on his hand terminal and the crate’s locks opened with a sharp click. Bobbie yanked the opened panel off and leaned it against the wall. Inside the crate, suspended in a web of elastic bands, was her suit.

Cotyar whistled. “A Goliath III. I can’t believe they let you keep it.”

Bobbie removed the helmet and put it on the bed, then began pulling the various other pieces out of the webbing and setting them on the floor. “They gave it to your tech guys to verify some video stored in the suit. When Avasarala tracked it down, it was in a closet, collecting dust. No one seemed to care when she took it.”

She pulled out the suit’s right arm. She hadn’t expected them to get her any of the 2mm ammo the suit’s integrated gun used, but was surprised to find that they’d completely removed the gun from the housing. It made sense to remove all the weapons before handing the suit off to a bunch of civilians, but it still annoyed her.

“Shit,” she said. “Won’t be shooting anyone, I guess.”

“If you did,” Cotyar said with a smile, “would the bullets even slow down as they went through both of the ship’s hulls and let all the air out?”

“Nope,” Bobbie said, laying the last piece of the suit on the floor, then pulling out the tools necessary to put it all back together again. “But that might be a point in my favor. The gun on this rig is designed to shoot through other people wearing comparable armor. Anything that will shoot through my suit here will probably also hole the ship. Which means—”

“None of the security personnel on this vessel will have weapons capable of penetrating your armor,” Cotyar finished. “As you say. How many of my people will you want with you?”

“None,” Bobbie said, attaching the fresh battery pack Avasarala’s techs had provided to the back of the armor and getting a lovely green “fully charged” light from the panel. “Once I get started, the obvious counterplay will be to grab the undersecretary and hold her hostage. Preventing that is your job.”

Cotyar smiled again. There was no humor in it.

“As you say.”

It took Bobbie just under three hours to assemble and field prep her suit. It should have taken only two, but she forgave herself the extra hour by remembering that she was out of practice. The closer the suit got to completion, the tighter the knot in her stomach grew. Some of it was the natural tension that came before combat. And her time in the Marines had taught her to use it. To let the stress force her to recheck everything three times. Once she was in the thick of it, it would be too late.

But deep down, Bobbie knew that the possibility of violence wasn’t the only thing twisting up her insides. It was impossible to forget what had happened the last time she’d worn this suit. The red enamel of her Martian camouflage was pitted and scraped from the exploding monster and her high-speed skid across Ganymede’s ice. A tiny bit of fluid leakage on the knee reminded her of Private Hillman. Hilly, her friend. Wiping off the helmet’s faceplate made her think of the last time she’d spoken to Lieutenant Givens, her CO, just before the monster had ripped him in two.

When the suit was finished and lying on the floor, opened up and waiting for her to climb inside, she felt a shudder run up her spine. For the first time ever, the inside looked small. Sepulchral.

“No,” she said to no one but herself.

“No?” Cotyar asked, sitting on the floor next to her, holding the tools he thought she might need next. He’d been so quiet during the assembly procedure she’d sort of forgotten he was there.

“I’m not afraid of putting this back on,” she said.

“Ah,” Cotyar replied with a nod, then put the tools into the toolbox. “As you say.”

Bobbie pushed herself to her feet and yanked the black unitard she wore under the armor out of the crate. Without thinking about it, she stripped down to her panties and pulled the skintight garment on. She was pulling the wire leads out of her armor and connecting them to the various sensors on the bodysuit when she noticed that Cotyar had turned his back to her, and that his usually light brown neck was turning beet red.

“Oh,” she said. “Sorry. I’ve stripped down and put this on in front of my squaddies so many times I don’t even think about it anymore.”

“No reason to apologize,” Cotyar said without turning around. “I was only taken by surprise.”

He risked a peek over his left shoulder, and when he saw that she was fully covered by the bodysuit, he turned back to help her wire it up to the armor.

“You are,” he said, then paused for a beat. “Lovely.”

It was her turn to blush.

“Aren’t you married?” Bobbie asked with a grin, happy for the distraction. The simple humanity in discomfort with mating signals made the monster in her head seem very far away.

“Yes,” Cotyar replied, attaching the final lead to a sensor at the small of her back. “Very. But I’m not blind.”

“Thank you,” Bobbie said, and gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder. After a few moments’ struggle with the tight spaces, she sat down into the suit’s open chest and slid down until her legs and arms were fully inside. “Button me up.”

Cotyar sealed up the chest as she’d shown him, then put the helmet on her and locked it in place. Inside the suit, her HUD flashed through the boot routine. A gentle, almost subliminal hum surrounded her. She activated the array of micro-motors and pumps that powered the exo-musculature, and then sat up.

Cotyar was looking at her, his face a question. Bobbie turned on the external speaker and said, “Yeah, it all looks good in here. Green across the

board.”

She pushed herself to her feet effortlessly and felt the old sensation of barely restrained power running through her limbs. She knew if she pushed off hard with her legs, she’d hit the ceiling with enough force to severely damage it. A sudden motion of her arm could hurl the heavy four-poster bed across the room or shatter Cotyar’s spine. It made her move with the deliberate gentleness of long training.

Cotyar reached under his jacket and pulled out a sleek black pistol of the slug-throwing variety. Bobbie knew the security team had loaded them with high-impact plastic rounds, guaranteed not to knock holes in the ship. It was the same kind of round Mao’s security team would be using. He started to hold it out to her, but then looked at the thickness of her armored fingers, and at the much smaller opening of the trigger guard, and shrugged apologetically.

“I won’t need it,” she said. Her voice sounded harsh, metallic, inhuman.

Cotyar smiled again.

“As you say.”

Bobbie punched the button to call the keel elevator, then walked back and forth in the lounge, letting her reflexes get used to her armor. There was a nanosecond delay between attempting to move a limb and having the armor react. It made walking around feel vaguely dreamlike, as if the act of wanting to move your limbs and the moving of the limbs themselves were separate events. Hours of training and use had mostly overcome the sensation when Bobbie wore her armor, but it always took a few minutes of moving around to get past the oddness of it.

Avasarala walked into the lounge from the room they were using as the communications center and sat down at the bar. She poured herself a stiff shot of gin, then squeezed a piece of lime into it almost as an afterthought. The old lady had been drinking a lot more lately, but it wasn’t Bobbie’s place to point it out. Maybe it was helping her sleep.

When the elevator didn’t arrive after several minutes, she thumped over to the panel and hit the button a few more times. A small display said OUT OF SERVICE.

“Damn,” Bobbie said to herself. “They really are kidnapping us.”

She’d left the external speakers on, and the harsh voice coming out of her suit echoed around the room. Avasarala didn’t look up from her drink but said, “Remember what I said.”

“Huh?” Bobbie said, not paying attention. She climbed awkwardly up the crew ladder to the deck hatch above her head and hit the button. The hatch slid open. That meant that everyone was still pretending that this wasn’t a kidnapping. They could explain away the elevator. Explaining why the undersecretary was locked out of the rest of the ship would be harder. Maybe they figured a woman in her seventies would be reluctant to climb around the ship on ladders, so killing the lift was good enough. They might have been right. Avasarala certainly didn’t look like she was up to a two-hundred-foot climb, even in the low gravity.

“None of these people were on Ganymede,” Avasarala said.

“Okay,” Bobbie replied to the seeming non sequitur.

“You won’t be able to kill enough of them to bring your platoon back,” Avasarala finished, tossing off the last of her gin, then pushing away from the bar and heading off to her room.

Bobbie didn’t reply. She pulled herself up to the next deck and let the hatch slide shut behind her.

Her armor had been designed for exactly this sort of mission. The original Goliath-class scout suits had been built for Marine boarding parties in ship-to-ship engagements. That meant they were designed for maximum maneuverability in tight spaces. No matter how good the armor was, it was useless if the soldier wearing it couldn’t climb ladders, slip through human-sized hatches, and maneuver gracefully in microgravity.

Bobbie climbed the ladder to the next deck hatch and hit the button. The console responded with a red warning light. A few moments of looking at the menus revealed why: They’d parked the crew elevator just above the hatch and then disabled it, creating a barricade. And that meant they knew something was up.

Bobbie looked around the room she was in, another relaxation lounge, nearly identical to the one she’d just left, until she found the likeliest place for them to have hidden their cameras. She waved. *This won’t stop me, guys.*

She climbed back down and went into the luxurious bathroom space. On a ship this nice, it couldn’t properly be called the head. A few moments’

probing found the fairly well-hidden bulkhead service hatch. It was locked. Bobbie tore it off the wall.

On the other side were a tangle of piping and a narrow corridor barely large enough to stuff her armor into. She climbed in and pulled herself along the pipes for two decks, then kicked the service hatch into the room and climbed in.

The compartment turned out to be a secondary galley, with a bank of stoves and ovens along one wall, several refrigeration units, and lots of counter space, all in gleaming stainless steel.

Her suit warned her that she was being targeted, and changed the HUD so that the normally invisible infrared beams aimed at her became faint red lines. Half a dozen were painting her chest, all coming from compact black weapons held by Mao-Kwik security personnel at the other end of the room.

Bobbie stood up. To their credit, the security goons didn't back up. Her HUD ran through the weapons database and informed her that the men were armed with 5mm submachine guns with a standard ammo capacity of three hundred rounds and a cyclic rate of ten rounds per second. Unless they were using high-explosive armor-piercing rounds, unlikely with the ship's hull right behind her, the suit rated their danger level as low.

Bobbie made sure her external speakers were still on and said, "Okay, fellas, let's—"

They opened fire.

For one long second, the entire galley was in chaos. High-impact plastic rounds bounced off her armor, deflected off the bulkheads, and skipped around the room. They blew apart containers of dried goods, hurled pots and pans off their magnetic hooks, and flung smaller utensils into the air in a cloud of stainless steel and plastic shards. One round took a particularly unlucky bounce and hit one of the security guards in the center of his nose, punching a hole into his head and dropping him to the floor with an almost comic look of surprise on his face.

Before two seconds could tick by, Bobbie was in motion, launching herself across the steel island in the center of the room and plowing into all five remaining guards with her arms outstretched, like a football player going in for a tackle. They were hurled against the far bulkhead with a meaty thud, then slumped to the ground motionless. Her suit started to put up life-sign indicators on her HUD for them, but she shut it off without looking. She didn't want to know. One of the men stirred, then started to

raise his gun. Bobbie gently shoved him, and he flew across the room to crumple against the far bulkhead. He didn't move again.

She glanced around the room, looking for cameras. She couldn't find one but hoped it was there anyway. If they'd seen this, maybe they wouldn't throw any more of their people at her.

At the keel ladder, she discovered that they'd blocked the elevator by jamming the floor hatch open with a crowbar. Basic ship safety protocols wouldn't allow the elevator to move to another deck unless the deck above was sealed. Bobbie yanked out the crowbar and threw it across the room, then hit the call button. The lift climbed up the ladder shaft to her level and stopped. She jumped on and hit the button that would take her to the bridge, eight decks up. Eight more pressure hatches.

Eight more possible ambushes.

She tightened her hands into fists until the knuckles stretched painfully inside her gauntlets. *Bring it.*

Three decks up the elevator stopped, the panel informing her that all the pressure hatches between her and the bridge had been overridden and forced open. They were willing to risk a hole in the ship emptying out half the ship's air rather than let her up to the bridge. It was sort of gratifying to be scarier than sudden decompression.

She climbed off the lift onto a deck that appeared to be mostly crew quarters, though it must have been evacuated. There wasn't a soul in sight. A quick tour revealed twelve small crew cabins and two bathrooms that could reasonably be called heads. No gold plating on the fixtures for the crew. No open bar. No twenty-four-hour-a-day food service. Looking at the fairly Spartan living conditions of the average crew member on the *Guanshiyin* brought home Avasarala's last words to her. These were just sailors. None of them deserved to die for what had happened on Ganymede.

Bobbie found herself glad she didn't have a gun.

She found another access hatch in the head and tore it open. But to her surprise, the service corridor ended just a few feet above her head. Something in the structure of the ship was cutting her off. Having never seen the *Guanshiyin* from the outside, she had no idea what it might be. But she needed to get another five decks up, and she wasn't about to let this stop her.

A ten-minute search turned up a service hatch through the outer hull. She'd torn off two inner hull hatches on two different decks, so if she got it

open, those two decks would lose their air. But the central ladder corridor was sealed at Avasarala's deck, so her people would be fine. And the whole reason she was doing this was the sealed hatch to the upper decks, which seemed to be where most of the crew was.

She thought about the six men down in the galley and felt a pang. Sure, they'd shot first, but if any of them were still alive, she had no desire to asphyxiate them in their sleep.

It turned out not to be a problem. The hatch led into a small airlock chamber, about the size of a closet. A minute later it had cycled through and she climbed out onto the outer hull of the ship.

Triple-hulled. Of course. The lord of the Mao-Kwik empire wasn't going to trust his expensive skin to anything that wasn't the safest humans could build. And the ostentatious design of the ship extended to her outer hull as well. While most military ships were painted a flat black that made them hard to spot visually in space, most civilian ships either were left an unpainted gray or were painted in basic corporate colors.

The *Guanshiyin* had a mural painted on it in vivid colors. Bobbie was too close to see what it was, but under her feet were what appeared to be grass and the hoof of a giant horse. Mao had the hull of his ship painted with a mural that included horses and grass. When almost no one would ever see it.

Bobbie made sure her boot and glove mags were set strong enough to handle the quarter-g thrust the ship was still under, and started climbing up the side. She quickly reached the spot where the dead end between the hulls began, and saw that it was an empty shuttle bay. If only Avasarala had let her do this *before* Mao had run off with the shuttle.

Triple hulls, Bobbie thought. Maximum redundancy.

On a hunch, she crawled across the ship to the other side. Sure enough, there was a second shuttle bay. But the ship in it wasn't a standard short-flight shuttle. It was long and sleek, with an engine housing twice as large as that of a normal ship its size. Written in proud red letters across the bow of the ship was the name *Razorback*.

A racing pinnacle.

Bobbie crawled back around to the empty cargo bay and used the airlock there to enter the ship. The military override codes her suit sent to the locked door worked, to her surprise. The airlock led to the deck just below the bridge, the one used for shuttle supply storage and maintenance.

The center of the deck was taken up by a large machine shop. Standing in it were the captain of the *Guanshiyin* and his senior staff. There were no security personnel or weapons in sight.

The captain tapped his ear in an ancient *can you hear me?* gesture. Bobbie nodded one fist at him, then turned the external speakers back on and said, “Yes.”

“We are not military personnel,” the captain said. “We can’t defend ourselves from military hardware. But I’m not going to turn this vessel over to you without knowing your intentions. My XO is on the deck above us, prepared to scuttle the ship if we can’t come to terms.”

Bobbie smiled at him, though she didn’t know if he could see it through her helmet. “You’ve illegally detained a high-level member of the UN government. Acting in my role as a member of her security team, I have come to demand that you deliver her immediately to the port of her choosing, at best possible speed.”

She shrugged with her hands in the Belter way. “Or, you can blow yourselves up. Seems like a drastic overreaction to having to give the undersecretary her radio privileges back.”

The captain nodded and relaxed visibly. Whatever happened next, it wasn’t like he had any choice. And since he didn’t have any choice, he didn’t have any responsibility. “We were following orders. You’ll note that in the log when you take command.”

“I’ll see that she knows.”

The captain nodded again. “Then the ship is yours.”

Bobbie opened her radio link to Cotyar. “We win. Put Her Majesty on, will you?”

While she waited for Avasarala, Bobbie said to the captain, “There are six injured security people down below. Get a medical team down there.”

“Bobbie?” Avasarala said over the radio.

“The ship is yours, madam.”

“Great. Tell the captain we need to make best possible speed to intercept Holden. We’re getting to him before Nguyen does.”

“Uh, this is a pleasure yacht. It’s built to run at low g for comfort. I’d bet it can do a full g if it needs to, but I doubt it does much more than that.”

“Admiral Nguyen is about to kill everyone that actually might know what the fuck is going on.” Avasarala didn’t quite yell. “We don’t have time to cruise around like we’re trying to pick up fucking rent boys!”

“Huh,” Bobbie said. Then, a moment later: “If this is a race, I know where there’s a racing ship...”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Holden

Holden pulled himself a cup of coffee from the galley coffeepot, and the strong smell filled the room. He could feel the eyes of the crew on his back with an almost physical force. He'd called them all there, and once they'd assembled and taken their seats, he'd turned his back on them and started making coffee. *I'm stalling for time, because I forgot how I wanted to say this.* He put some sugar in his coffee even though he always drank it black, just because stirring took a few more seconds.

"So. Who are we?" he said as he stirred.

His question was met with silence, so he turned around and leaned back against the countertop, holding his unwanted cup of coffee and continuing to stir.

"Seriously," he said. "Who are we? It's the question I keep coming back to."

"Uh," Amos said, and shifted in his seat. "My name's Amos, Cap. You feeling okay?"

No one else spoke. Alex was staring at the table in front of him, his dark scalp shining through his thinning hair under the harsh white of the galley lights. Prax was sitting on the counter next to the sink and looking at his hands. He flexed them periodically as though trying to figure out what they were for.

Only Naomi was looking at him. Her hair was pulled up into a thick tail, and her dark, almond-shaped eyes were staring right into his. It was fairly disconcerting.

"I've recently figured out something about myself," Holden continued, not letting Naomi's unblinking stare throw him off. "I've been treating you all like you owe me something. And none of you do. And that means I've been treating you like shit."

"No," Alex started without looking up.

"Yes," Holden said, and stopped until Alex looked up at him. "Yes. You maybe more than anyone else. Because I've been scared to death and

cowards always look for an easy target. And you're about the nicest person I know, Alex. So I treated you badly because I could get away with it. And I hope you forgive me for that, because I really hate that I did it."

"Sure, I forgive you, Cap," Alex said with a smile and his heavy drawl.

"I'll try to earn it," Holden answered, bothered by the easy reply. "But Alex said something else to me recently that I've been thinking about a lot. He reminded me that none of you are employees. We're not on the *Canterbury*. We don't work for Pur'n'Kleen anymore. And I don't own this ship any more than any of you do. We took contracts from the OPA in exchange for pocket money and ship expenses, but we never talked about how to handle the excess."

"You opened that account," Alex said.

"Yeah, there's a bank account with all of the extra money in it. Last I checked, there was just under eighty grand in there. I said we'd keep it for ship expenses, but who am I to make that decision for the rest of you? That's not *my* money. It's *our* money. We earned it."

"But you're the captain," Amos said, then pointed at the coffeepot.

While Holden fixed him a cup, he said, "Am I? I was the XO on the *Canterbury*. It made sense for me to be the captain after the *Cant* got nuked."

He handed the cup to Amos and sat down at the table with the rest of the crew. "But we haven't been those guys for a long time now. Who we are now is four people who don't actually work for anyone—"

Prax cleared his throat at this, and Holden nodded an apology at him. "Anyone long term, let's say. There is no corporation or government granting me authority over this crew. We're just four people who sort of own a ship that Mars will probably try to take back the first chance they get."

"This is legitimate salvage," Alex said.

"And I hope the Martians find that compelling when you explain it to them," Holden replied. "But it doesn't change my point: Who are we?"

Naomi nodded a fist at him. "I see where you're going. We've left a lot of this kind of stuff just up in the air because we've been running full tilt since the *Canterbury*."

"And this," Holden said, "is the perfect time to figure that stuff out. We've got a contract to help Prax find his little girl, and he's paying us so we can afford to run the ship. Once we find Mei, how do we find the next

job? Do we go looking for a *next* job? Do we sell the *Roci* to the OPA and retire on Titan? I think we need to know those things.”

No one spoke. Prax pushed himself off the counter and started rummaging through the cabinets. After a minute or two, he pulled out a package that read CHOCOLATE PUDDING on the side and said, “Can I make this?”

Naomi laughed. Alex said, “Knock yourself out, Doc.”

Prax pulled a bowl out and began mixing ingredients into it. Oddly enough, because the botanist was paying attention to something else, it created a sense of intimacy for the crew. The outsider was doing outside things, leaving them to talk among themselves. Holden wondered if Prax knew that and was doing it on purpose.

Amos slurped down the last of his coffee and said, “So, you called this meeting, Cap. You have something in mind?”

“Yeah,” Holden said, taking a moment to think. “Yeah, kind of.”

Naomi put a hand on his arm and smiled at him. “We’re listening.”

“I think we get married,” he said with a wink at Naomi. “Make it all nice and legal.”

“Wait,” she said. The look on her face was more horrified than Holden would have hoped.

“No, no, that’s sort of a joke,” Holden said. “But only sort of. See, I was thinking about my parents. They formed their initial collective partnership because of the farm. They were all friends, they wanted to buy the property in Montana, and so they made a group large enough to afford it. It wasn’t sexual. Father Tom and Father Caesar were already sexual partners and monogamous. Mother Tamara was single. Fathers Joseph and Anton and Mothers Elise and Sophie were already a polyamorous civil unit. Father Dimitri joined a month later when he started dating Tamara. They formed a civil union to own the property jointly. They wouldn’t have been able to afford it if they were all paying taxes for separate kids, so they had me as a group.”

“Earth,” Alex said, “is a weird freakin’ place.”

“Eight parents to a baby ain’t exactly common,” Amos said.

“But it makes a lot of economic sense with the baby tax,” Holden said. “So it’s not unheard of, either.”

“What about people making babies without paying the tax?” Alex asked.

“It’s tougher to get away with than you think,” Holden said. “Unless you never go to a doctor or only use black markets.”

Amos and Naomi shared a quick look that Holden pretended not to see.

“Okay,” Holden continued. “Forget babies for a minute. What I’m talking about is incorporating. If we plan to stick together, let’s make it legal. We can draft up incorporation papers with one of the independent outer planets stations, like Ceres or Europa, and become joint owners of this enterprise.”

“What,” Naomi said, “does our little company do?”

“Exactly,” Holden said in triumph.

“Uh,” Amos said again.

“No, I mean, that’s exactly what I’ve been asking,” Holden continued. “Who are we? What do we want to do? Because when this contract with Prax is over, the bank account will be well padded, we’ll own a high-tech warship, and we’ll be free to do whatever we damn well want to do.”

“Jesus, Cap,” Amos said. “I just got half a hard-on.”

“I know, right?” Holden replied with a grin.

Prax stopped mixing things in his bowl and stuck it in the refrigerator. He turned and looked at them with the careful movements of someone who feared he’d be asked to leave if anyone noticed him. Holden moved over to him and put an arm around his shoulder. “Our friend Prax here can’t be the only guy who needs to hire a ship like this, right?”

“We’re faster and meaner than just about anything a civvy can dig up,” Alex said with a nod.

“And when we find Mei, it will be as high profile as you could hope for,” Holden said. “What better advertising could we get than that?”

“Admit it, Cap,” Amos said. “You just kind of like being famous.”

“If it gets us jobs, sure.”

“We’re much more likely to wind up broke, out of air, and drifting through space dead,” Naomi said.

“That’s always a possibility,” Holden admitted. “But, man, aren’t you ready to be your own boss for a change? If we find we can’t make it on our own, we can always sell the ship for a giant sack of money and go our separate ways. We have an escape plan.”

“Yeah,” Amos said. “Fuck yeah. Let’s do this. How do we start?”

“Well,” Holden said. “That’s another new thing. I think we have to vote. No one of us owns the ship, so I think we vote on important stuff like this from now on.”

Amos said, “All in favor of making ourselves into a company to own the ship, raise your hand.”

To Holden’s delight, they all raised their hands. Even Prax started to, realized he was doing it, and then put it back down.

“I’ll get us an attorney on Ceres and start the paperwork,” Holden said. “But that leads to something else. A company can own a ship, but a company can’t be the registered captain. We’ll need to vote for whoever holds that title.”

Amos started laughing. “Gimme a fucking break. Raise your hand if Holden isn’t the captain.”

No hands went up.

“See?” Amos said.

Holden started to speak but stopped when something uncomfortable happened in his throat and behind his sternum.

“Look,” Amos said, his face kind. “You’re just that guy.”

Naomi nodded and smiled at Holden, which only made the ache in his chest pleasantly worse. “I’m an engineer,” she said. “There isn’t a program on this ship I haven’t tweaked or rewritten, and I could probably take her apart and put her back together by myself at this point. But I can’t bluff at cards. And I’m never going to be the one that stares down the joint navies of the inner planets and says, ‘Back the hell off.’”

“Roger that,” Alex said. “And I just want to fly my baby. That’s all and that’s it. If I get to do that, I’m happy.”

Holden started to speak, but to his surprise and embarrassment, the minute his mouth opened, his eyes teared up. Amos saved him.

“I’m just a grease monkey,” he said. “I push tools. And I mostly wait for Naomi to tell me when and where to push ’em. I got no desire to run anything bigger than that machine shop. You’re the talker. I’ve seen you face down Fred Johnson, UN naval captains, OPA cowboys, and drugged-up space pirates. You talk out your ass better than most people do using their mouth and sober.”

“Thank you,” Holden finally said. “I love you guys. You know that, right?”

“Plus which,” Amos continued, “no one on this ship will try harder to jump in front of a bullet for me than you will. I find that appealing in a captain.”

“Thanks,” Holden said again.

“Sounds settled to me,” Alex said, getting up and heading toward the ladder. “Gonna go make sure we’re not aimed at a rock or somethin’.”

Holden watched him go and was gratified to see him wiping his eyes as soon as he got out of the room. It was okay to be a weepy little kid as long as everyone else was being a weepy little kid.

Prax gave him an awkward pat on the shoulder and said, “Come back to the galley in an hour. Pudding will be ready.” Then he wandered out and into his cabin. He was already reading messages on his hand terminal as he closed the door.

“Okay,” Amos said. “What now?”

“Amos,” Naomi said, getting up and walking over to stand in front of Holden. “Please take ops for me for a while.”

“Roger that,” Amos said, the grin existing only in his voice. He climbed the ladder up and out of sight, the pressure hatch opening for him, then slamming behind him when he went.

“Hi,” Holden said. “Was that right?”

She nodded. “I feel like I got you back. I was worried I’d never see you again.”

“If you hadn’t yanked me out of that hole I was digging for myself, neither of us would have.”

Naomi leaned forward to kiss him, and he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight. When they stopped to breathe, he said, “Is this too soon?”

She said, “Shut up,” and kissed him again. Without breaking the kiss, she pulled her body away from his and began fumbling with the zipper of his jumpsuit. Those ridiculous Martian military jumpsuits that had come with the ship, TACHI stenciled across the back. Now that they were going to have their own company, they’d need to get something better. Jumpsuits made a lot of sense for shipboard life, with changing gravities and oily mechanical parts. But something actually tailored to fit them all, and in their own colors. ROCINANTE on the back.

Naomi’s hand got inside the jumpsuit and under his T-shirt, and he lost all thought of fashion choices.

“My bunk or yours?” he said.

“You have your own bunk?”

Not anymore.

Making love to Naomi had always been different than with anyone else. Some of it was physical. She was the only Belter he'd ever been with, and that meant she was physiologically different in some ways. But that wasn't the most notable part for him. What made Naomi different was that they'd been friends for five years before they'd slept together.

It wasn't a flattering testament to his character, and it made him cringe when he thought about it now, but he'd always been pretty shallow when it came to sex. He'd picked out potential sexual partners within minutes of meeting a new woman, and because he was pretty and charming, he usually got the ones he was interested in. He'd always been quick to allow himself to mistake infatuation for genuine affection. One of his most painful memories was the day Naomi had called him on it. Exposed for him the little game he played in which he convinced himself he genuinely cared for the women he was sleeping with so that he wouldn't feel like a user.

But he had been. The fact that the women were using him in turn didn't make him feel better about it.

Because Naomi was so physically different from the ideal that growing up on Earth had created, he had just not seen her as a potential sexual partner when they'd first met. And that meant he'd grown to know her as a person without any of the sexual baggage he usually carried. When his feelings for her grew beyond friendship, he was surprised.

And somehow, that changed everything about sex. The movements might all be the same, but the desire to communicate affection rather than demonstrate prowess changed what everything meant. After their first time together, he'd lain in bed for hours feeling like he'd been doing it wrong for years and only just realized it.

He was doing that again now.

Naomi slept on her side next to him, her arm thrown across his chest and her thigh across his, her belly against his hip and her breast against his ribs. It had never been like this with anyone before her, and this was what it was supposed to be like. This sense of complete ease and contentment. He

could imagine a future in which he hadn't been able to prove he'd changed, and in which she never came back to him. He could see years and decades of sexual partners, always trying to recapture this feeling and never being able to because, of course, it wasn't really about the sex.

Thinking about it made his stomach hurt.

Naomi talked in her sleep. Her mouth whispered something mysterious into his neck, and the sudden tickle woke him up enough to realize he'd been drifting off to sleep. He hugged her head to his chest and kissed the top of it, then rolled over onto his side and let himself fade.

The wall monitor over the bed buzzed.

"Who is it?" he said, suddenly as tired as he could remember ever having been. He'd just closed his eyes a second earlier, and he knew he'd never be able to open them now.

"Me, Cap," Alex said. Holden wanted to shout at him but couldn't find the energy.

"Okay."

"You need to see this," was all Alex said, but something in his voice woke Holden up. He sat up, moving Naomi's arm out of the way. She said something in sleep-talk but didn't wake.

"Okay," he said again, turning on the monitor.

A white-haired older woman with very strange facial features looked out at him. It took his addled mind a second to recognize that she wasn't deformed, just being crushed by a heavy burn. With a voice distorted by g-forces mashing down on her throat, she said, "My name is Chrisjen Avasarala. I'm the UN assistant undersecretary of executive administration. A UN admiral has dispatched six Munroe-class destroyers from the Jupiter system to destroy your ship. Track this transponder code and come meet me or you and everyone on your ship will die. This is not a fucking joke."

Chapter Fourty

Prax

Thrust pressed him into the crash couch. It was only four g, but even a single full g called for very nearly the full medical cocktail. He had lived in a place that kept him weak. He'd known that, of course, but mostly in terms of xylem and phloem. He had taken the normal low-g medical supplements to encourage bone growth. He had exercised as much as the guidelines asked. Usually. But always in the back of his mind, he'd thought it was idiocy. He was a botanist. He'd live and die in the familiar tunnels, with their comfortable low gravity—less than a fifth of Earth's. An Earth he would never have reason to go to. There was even less reason he would ever need to suffer through a high-g burn. And yet here he lay in the gel like he was at the bottom of an ocean. His vision was blurred, and he fought for every inhalation. When his knee hyper-extended, he tried to scream but couldn't catch his breath.

The others would be better. They'd be used to things like this. They knew that they'd survive. His hindbrain wasn't at all sure. Needles dug into the flesh of his thigh, injecting him with another cocktail of hormones and paralytics. Cold like the touch of ice spread from the injection points, and a paradoxical sense of ease and dread filled his mind. At this point, it was a balancing act between keeping his blood vessels elastic enough that they wouldn't burst and robust enough that they wouldn't collapse. His mind slid out from under him, leaving something calculating and detached in its place. It was like pure executive function without a sense of self. What had been his mind knew what he had known, remembered the things he remembered, but wasn't him.

In this altered state of consciousness, he found himself taking inventory. Would it be okay to die now? Did he want to live, and if he did, on what terms? He considered the loss of his daughter as if it were a physical object. Loss was the soft pink of crushed sea-shell, where once it had been the red of old, scabby blood. The red of an umbilical cord waiting to drop free. He remembered Mei, what she had looked like. The delight in

her laugh. She wasn't like that anymore. If she was alive. But she was probably dead.

In his gravity-bent mind, he smiled. Of course, his lips couldn't react. He'd been wrong. All along, he'd been wrong. The hours of sitting by himself, telling himself that Mei was dead. He'd thought he was toughening himself. Preparing himself for the worst. That wasn't right at all. He'd said it, he'd tried to believe it, because the thought was comforting.

If she was dead, she wasn't being tortured. If she was dead, she wasn't scared. If she was dead, then the pain would be all his, entirely his, and she would be safe. He noticed without pleasure or pain that it was a pathological mental frame. But he'd had his life and his daughter taken from him, had survived in near starvation while the cascade effect ate what was left of Ganymede, had been shot at, had faced a half-alien killing machine, and was now known throughout the solar system as a wife beater and pedophile. He had no reason to be sane. It wouldn't help him.

And on top of that, his knee *really* hurt.

Somewhere far, far away, in a place with light and air, something buzzed three times, and the mountain rolled off his sternum. Coming back to himself was like rising from the bottom of a pool.

"Okay, y'all," Alex said across the ship's system. "We're callin' this dinner. Take a couple minutes for your livers to crawl up off your spinal cords, and we'll meet up in the galley. We've only got fifty minutes, so enjoy it while you can."

Prax took a deep breath, blowing it out between his teeth, and then sat up. His whole body felt bruised. His hand terminal claimed the thrust was at one-third g, but it felt like more and less than that. He swung his legs over the edge, and his knee made a wet, grinding pop. He tapped at his terminal.

"Um, I'm not sure I can walk," he said. "My knee."

"Hang tight, Doc." Amos' voice came from the speaker. "I'll come take a look at it. I'm pretty much the closest thing we've got to a medic unless you wanna hand it over to the med bay."

"Just don't try to weld him back together," Holden said. "It doesn't work."

The link went silent. While he waited, Prax checked his incoming messages. The list was too long for the screen, but that had been true since the initial message had gone out. The message titles had changed.

BABY RAPERS SHOULD BE TORTURED TO DEATH
DON'T LISTEN TO THE HATERS
I BELIEVE YOU
MY FATHER DID THE SAME THING TO ME
TURN TO JESUS BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

He didn't open them. He checked the newsfeeds under his own name and Mei's and had seven thousand active feeds with those keywords. Nicola's only had fifty.

There had been a time that he'd loved Nicola, or thought that he had. He'd wanted to have sex with her as badly as he'd wanted anything before in his life. He told himself there had been good times. Nights they'd spent together. Mei had come from Nicola's body. It was hard to believe that something so precious and central to his life had also been part of a woman who, by the evidence, he'd never really known. Even as the father of her child, he hadn't known the woman who could have made that recording.

He opened the hand terminal's recording fields, centered the camera on himself, and licked his lips.

"Nicola..."

Twenty seconds later, he closed the field and erased the recording. He had nothing to say. *Who are you, and who do you think I am?* came closest, and he didn't care about the answer to either one.

He went back to the messages, filtering on the names of the people who'd been helping him investigate. There was nothing new since the last time.

"Hey, Doc," Amos said, lumbering into the small room.

"I'm sorry," Prax said, putting his terminal back into its holder beside the crash couch. "It was just that during that last burn..."

He gestured to his knee. It was swollen, but not as badly as he'd expected. He'd thought it would be twice its normal size, but the anti-inflammatories that had been injected into his veins were doing their job. Amos nodded, put a hand on Prax's sternum, and pushed him back into the gel.

"I got a toe that pops out sometimes," Amos said. "Little tiny joint, but get it at the wrong angle on a fast burn, hurts like a bitch. Try not to tense

up, Doc.”

Amos bent the knee twice, feeling the joint grind. “This ain’t that bad. Here, straighten it out. Okay.”

Amos wrapped one hand around Prax’s ankle, braced the other on the frame of the couch, and pulled slowly and irresistibly. Prax’s knee bloomed with pain, and then a deep, wet pop and a nauseating sensation of tendons shifting against bone.

“There you go,” Amos said. “We go back into burn, make sure you got that leg in the right place. Hyperextend that again right now, we’ll pop your kneecap off, okay?”

“Right,” Prax said, starting to sit up.

“I’m sorry as hell to do this, Doc,” Amos said, putting a hand on his chest, pushing him back down. “I mean, you’re having a lousy day and all. But you know how it is.”

Prax frowned. Every muscle in his face felt bruised.

“What is it?”

“All this bullshit they’re saying about you and the kid? That’s all just bullshit, right?”

“Of course,” Prax said.

“Because you know, sometimes things happen, you didn’t even mean them to. Have a hard day, lose your temper, maybe? Or shit, you get drunk. Some of the things I’ve done when I really tied one on? I don’t even know about until later.” Amos smiled. “I’m just saying if there’s a grain of truth, something that’s getting all exaggerated, it’d be better if we knew it now, right?”

“I never did anything that she said.”

“It’s okay to tell me the truth, Doc. I understand. Sometimes guys do stuff. Doesn’t make ’em bad.”

Prax pushed Amos’ hand aside and brought himself up to sitting. His knee felt much better.

“Actually,” he said, “it does. That makes them bad.”

Amos’ expression relaxed, his smile changed in a way Prax couldn’t quite understand.

“All right, Doc. Like I said, I’m sorry as hell. But I did have to ask.”

“It’s okay,” Prax said, standing up. For a moment, the knee seemed like it might give, but it didn’t. Prax took a tentative step, then another. It would work. He turned toward the galley, but the conversation wasn’t

finished. “If I had. If I had done those things, that would have been okay with you?”

“Oh, fuck no. I’d have broken your neck and thrown you out the airlock,” Amos said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Ah,” Prax said, a gentle relief loosening in his chest. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

The other three were in the galley when Prax and Amos got there, but it still felt half full. Less. Naomi and Alex were sitting across the table from each other. Neither of them looked as ruined as Prax felt. Holden turned from the wall with a formed-foam bowl in either hand. The brown slurry in them smelled of heat and earth and cooked leaves. As soon as it caught his nose, Prax was ravenous.

“Lentil soup?” Holden asked as Prax and Amos sat on either side of Alex.

“That would be wonderful,” Prax said.

“I’ll just take a tube of goo,” Amos said. “Lentils give me gas, and I can’t see popping an intestine next time we accelerate being fun for anyone.”

Holden put a fresh bowl in front of Prax and handed a white tube with a black plastic nipple to Amos, then sat beside Naomi. They didn’t touch, but the connection between them was unmistakable. He wondered whether Mei had ever wanted him to reconcile with Nicola. Impossible now.

“Okay, Alex,” Holden said. “What’ve we got?”

“Same thing we had before,” Alex said. “Six destroyers burning like hell toward us. A matching force burning after them, and a racing pinnacle heading away from us on the other side.”

“Wait,” Prax said. “Away from us?”

“They’re matching our course. Already did the turnaround, and they’re getting up to speed to join us.”

Prax closed his eyes, picturing the vectors.

“We’re almost there, then?” he said.

“Very nearly,” Alex said. “Eighteen, twenty hours.”

“How’s it going to play out? Are the Earth ships going to catch us?”

“They’re gonna catch the hell out of us,” Alex said, “but not before we get that pinnacle. Call it four days after, maybe.”

Prax took a spoonful of the soup. It tasted just as good as it smelled. Green, dark leaves were mixed in with the lentils, and he spread one open

with his spoon, trying to identify it. Spinach, maybe. The stem margin didn't look quite right, but it had been cooked, after all...

"How sure are we this isn't a trap?" Amos asked.

"We aren't," Holden said. "But I don't see how it would work."

"If they want us in custody instead of dead," Naomi suggested. "We are talking about opening our airlock for someone way high up in the Earth government."

"So she is who she says she is?" Prax asked.

"Looks like it," Holden said.

Alex raised a hand.

"Well, if it's talk to some little gramma from the UN or get my ass shot off by six destroyers, I'm thinkin' we can break out the cookies and tea, right?"

"It would be late in the game to go for another plan," Naomi said. "It makes me damn uncomfortable having Earth saving me from Earth, though."

"Structures are never monolithic," Prax said. "There's more genetic variation within Belters or Martians or Earthers than there is between them. Evolution would predict some divisions within the group structures and alliances with out-members. You see the same thing in ferns."

"Ferns?" Naomi asked.

"Ferns can be very aggressive," Prax said.

A soft chime interrupted them: three rising notes, like bells gently struck.

"Okay, suck it down," Alex said. "That's the fifteen-minute warning."

Amos made a prodigious sucking sound, the white tube withering at his lips. Prax put down his spoon and lifted the soup bowl to his lips, not wanting to leave a drop of it. Holden did the same, then started gathering up the used bowls.

"Anyone needs to hit the head, this is the time," he said. "We'll talk again in..."

"Eight hours," Alex said.

"Eight hours," Holden repeated.

Prax felt his chest go tight. Another round of crushing acceleration. Hours of the couch's needles propping up his failing metabolism. It sounded like hell. He rose from the table, nodded to everyone, and went back to his bunk. His knee was much better. He hoped it would still be

when he next got up. The ten-minute chime sounded. He lay down on the couch, trying to align his body perfectly, then waited. Waited.

He rolled over and grabbed his hand terminal. Seven new incoming messages. Two of them supportive, three hateful, one addressed to the wrong person, and one a financial statement from the charity fund. He didn't bother reading them.

He turned on the camera.

"Nicola," he said. "I don't know what they told you. I don't know if you really think all those things that you said. But I know I never touched you in anger, even at the end. And if you really felt afraid of me, I don't know why it was. Mei is the one thing that I love more than anything in life. I'd die before I let anyone hurt her. And now half the solar system thinks I hurt her..."

He stopped the recording and began again.

"Nicola. Honestly, I didn't think we had anything left between us to betray."

He stopped. The five-minute warning chimed as he ran his fingers through his hair. Each individual follicle ached. He wondered if this was why Amos kept his head shaved. There were so many things about being on a ship that didn't occur to you until you were actually there.

"Nicola..."

He erased all the recordings and logged into the charity bank account interface. There was a secure request format that could encrypt and send an authorized transfer as soon as light-speed delivered it to the bank's computers. He filled it all out quickly. The two-minute warning sounded, louder and more insistent. With thirty seconds left, he sent her money back. There was nothing else for them to say.

He put the hand terminal in place and lay back. The computer counted backward from twenty, and the mountain rolled back over him.

"How's the knee?" Amos asked.

"Pretty good," Prax said. "I was surprised. I thought there'd be more damage."

"Didn't hyperextend this time," Amos said. "Did okay with my toe too."

A deep tone rang through the ship, and the deck shifted under Prax. Holden, standing just to Prax's right, moved the rifle to his left hand and touched a control panel.

"Alex?"

"Yeah, it was little rough. Sorry about that, but... Hold on. Yeah, Cap. We've got seal. And they're knocking."

Holden shifted the rifle back to his other hand. Amos also had a weapon at the ready. Naomi stood beside him, nothing in her hands but a terminal linked to ship operations. If something went wrong, being able to control ship functions might be more useful than a gun. They all wore the articulated armor of the Martian military that had come with the ship. The paired ships were accelerating at a third of a g. The Earth destroyers still barreled down toward them.

"So I'm guessing the firearms mean you're thinking trap, Cap'n?" Amos asked.

"Nothing wrong with an honor guard," Holden said.

Prax held up his hand.

"You don't ever get one again," Holden said. "No offense."

"No, I was just... I thought honor guards were usually on the same side as the people they're guarding?"

"We may be stretching the definitions a little here," Naomi said. Her voice had just a trace of tension in it.

"She's just a little old politician," Holden said. "And that pinnacle can't hold more than two people. We've got her outnumbered. And if things get ugly, Alex is watching from the pilot's seat. You are watching, right?"

"Oh yeah," Alex said.

"So if there are any surprises, Naomi can pop us loose and Alex can get us out of here."

"That won't help with the destroyers, though," Prax said.

Naomi put a hand on his arm, squeezing him gently.

"I'm not sure you're helping, Prax."

The outer airlock cycled open with a distant hum. The lights clicked from red to green.

"Whoa," Alex said.

"Problem?" Holden snapped.

"No, it's just—"

The inner door opened, and the biggest person Prax had seen in his entire life stepped into the room wearing a suit of some sort of strength-augmenting armor. If it weren't for the transparent faceplate, he would have thought it was a two-meter-tall bipedal robot. Through the faceplate, Prax saw a woman's features: large dark eyes and coffee-with-cream skin. Her gaze raked them with the palpable threat of violence. Beside him, Amos took an unconscious step back.

"You're the captain," the woman said, the suit's speakers making her voice sound artificial and amplified. It didn't sound like a question.

"I am," Holden said. "I've got to say, you looked a little different on-screen."

The joke fell flat and the giant stepped into the room.

"Planning to shoot me with that?" she asked, pointing toward Holden's gun with a massive gauntleted fist.

"Would it work?"

"Probably not," the giant said. She took another small step forward, her armor whining when she moved. Holden and Amos took a matching step back.

"Call it an honor guard, then," Holden said.

"I'm honored. Will you put them away now?"

"Sure."

Two minutes later, the guns were stowed, and the huge woman, who still hadn't given her name, tapped something inside the helmet with her chin and said, "Okay. You're clear."

The airlock cycled again, red to green, with the hum of the opening doors. The woman who came in this time was smaller than any of them. Her gray hair was spiking out in all directions, and the orange sari she wore hung strangely in the low thrust gravity.

"Undersecretary Avasarala," Holden said. "Welcome aboard. If there's anything I can—"

"You're Naomi Nagata," the wizened little woman said.

Holden and Naomi exchanged glances, and Naomi shrugged.

"I am."

"How the fuck do you keep your hair like that? I look like a hedgehog's been humping my skull."

"Um—"

“Looking the part is half of what’s going to keep you all alive. We don’t have time to screw around. Nagata, you get me looking pretty and girlish. Holden—”

“I’m an engineer, not a damned hairstylist,” Naomi said, anger creeping into her voice.

“Ma’am,” Holden said, “this is my ship and my crew. Half of us aren’t even Earth citizens, and we don’t just take your commands.”

“All right. Ms. Nagata, if we’re going to keep this ship from turning into an expanding ball of hot gas, we need to make a press statement, and I’m not prepared to do that. Would you please assist me?”

“Okay,” Naomi said.

“Thank you. And, Captain? You need a fucking shave.”

Chapter Forty-One

Avasarala

After the *Guanshiyin*, the *Rocinante* seemed dour, mean, and utilitarian. There was no plush carpeting, only fabric-covered foam to soften corners and angles where soldiers might be thrown when the ship maneuvered violently. Instead of cinnamon and honey, the air had the plastic-and-heat smell of military air recyclers. And there were no expansive desk, no wide solitaire-ready bed, and no private space apart from a captain's lounge the size of a public toilet stall.

Most of the footage they'd taken had been in the cargo bays, angled so that no ammunition or weaponry was in the image. Someone who knew Martian military vessels could tell where they were. To everyone else, it would be an open space with cargo crates in the background. Naomi Nagata had helped put the release together—she was a surprisingly good visual editor—and when it became clear that none of the men could manage a professional-sounding voice-over, she'd done that too.

The crew assembled in the medical bay, where the mechanic Amos Burton had changed the feed to display from her hand terminal. Now he was sitting on one of the patient beds, his legs crossed, smiling amiably. If Avasarala hadn't seen the intelligence files on Holden's crew, she'd never have guessed what the man was capable of.

The others were spread out in a rough semicircle. Bobbie was sitting beside Alex Kamal, the Martians unconsciously grouping together. Praxidike Meng stood at the back of the room. Avasarala couldn't tell if her presence made him uncomfortable or if he was always like that.

"Okay," she said. "Last chance for feedback."

"Wish I had some popcorn," Amos said, and the medical scanner flashed once, showed a broadcast code and then white block letters: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE.

Avasarala and Holden appeared on the screen. She was speaking, her hands out before her as if illustrating a point. Holden, looking sober, leaned toward her. Naomi Nagata's voice was calm, strong, and professional.

“In a surprising development, the deputy to Undersecretary of Executive Administration Sadavir Errinwright met with OPA representative James Holden and a representative of the Martian military today to address concerns over the potentially earth-shattering revelations surrounding the devastating attack on Ganymede.”

The image cut to Avasarala. She was leaning forward to make her neck longer and hide the loose skin under her chin. Long practice made her look natural, but she could almost hear Arjun laughing. A runner at the bottom of the screen identified her by name and title.

“I expect to be traveling with Captain Holden to the Jovian system,” Avasarala said. “The United Nations of Earth feel very strongly that a multilateral investigation into this is the best way to restore balance and peace to the system.”

The image shifted to Holden and Avasarala sitting in the galley with the botanist. This time the little scientist was talking and she and Holden pretended to listen. The voice-over came again.

“When asked about the accusations leveled against Praxidike Meng, whose search for his daughter has become the human face of the tragedy on Ganymede, the Earth delegation was unequivocal.”

Then back to Avasarala, her expression now sorrowful. Her head shaking in an almost subliminal negation.

“Nicola Mulko is a tragic figure in this, and I personally condemn the irresponsibility of these raw newsfeeds that allow statements from mentally ill people to be presented as if they were verified fact. Her abandonment of her husband and child is beyond dispute, and her struggles with her psychological issues deserve a more dignified and private venue.”

From off camera, Nagata asked, “So you blame the media?”

“Absolutely,” Avasarala said as the image shifted to a picture of a toddler with smiling black eyes and dark pigtailed. “We have absolute faith in Dr. Meng’s love and dedication to Mei, and we are pleased to be part of the effort to bring her safely home.”

The recording ended.

“All right,” Avasarala said. “Any comments?”

“I don’t actually work for the OPA anymore,” Holden said.

“I’m not authorized to represent the Martian military,” Bobbie said. “I’m not even sure I’m still supposed to be working with you.”

“Thank you for that. Are there any comments that matter?” Avasarala asked. There was a moment’s silence.

“Worked for me,” Praxidike Meng said.

There was one way that the *Rocinante* was infinitely more expansive than the *Guanshiyin*, and it was the only one that she cared about. The tightbeam was hers. Lag was worse and every hour took her farther from Earth, but knowing that the messages she sent were getting off the ship without being reported to Nguyen and Errinwright gave her the feeling of breathing free. What happened once they reached Earth, she couldn’t control, but that was always true. That was the game.

Admiral Souther looked tired, but on the small screen it was hard to tell much more than that.

“You’ve kicked the beehive, Chrisjen,” he said. “It’s looking an awful lot like you just made yourself a human shield for a bunch of folks that don’t work for us. And I’m guessing that was the plan.

“I did what you asked, and yes, Nguyen took meetings with Jules-Pierre Mao. First one was just after his testimony on Protogen. And yes, Errinwright knew about them. But that doesn’t mean very much. I’ve met with Mao. He’s a snake, but if you stopped dealing with men like him, you wouldn’t have much left to do.

“The smear campaign against your scientist friend came out of the executive office, which, I’ve got to say, makes a damn lot of us over here in the armed forces a bit twitchy. Starts looking like there’s divisions inside the leadership, and it gets a little murky whose orders we’re supposed to be following. If it gets there, our friend Errinwright still outranks you. Him or the secretary-general comes to me with a direct order, I’m going to have to have a hell of a good reason to think it’s illegal. This whole thing smells like skunk, but I don’t have that reason yet. You know what I’m saying.”

The recording stopped. Avasarala pressed her fingers to her lips. She understood. She didn’t like it, but she understood. She levered herself up from her couch. Her joints still ached from the race to the *Rocinante*, and the way the ship would sometimes shift beneath her, course corrections moving gravity a degree or two, left her vaguely nauseated. She’d made it this far.

The corridor that led to the galley was short, but it had a bend just before it entered. The voices carried well enough that Avasarala walked softly. The low Martian drawl was the pilot, and Bobbie's vowels and timbre were unmistakable.

"—that tellin' the captain where to stand and how to look. I thought Amos was going to toss her in the airlock a couple of times."

"He could try," Bobbie said.

"And you work for her?"

"I don't know who the hell I work for anymore. I think I'm still pulling a salary from Mars, but all my dailies are out of her office budget. I've pretty much been playing it all as it comes."

"Sounds rough."

"I'm a marine," Bobbie said, and Avasarala paused. The tone was wrong. It was calm, almost relaxed. Almost at peace. That was interesting.

"Does anyone actually like her?" the pilot asked.

"No," Bobbie said almost before the question was done being asked. "Oh hell no. And she keeps it like that. That shit she pulled with Holden, marching on his ship and ordering him around like she owned it? She's always like that. The secretary-general? She calls him a bobble-head to his face."

"And what's with the potty mouth?"

"Part of her charm," Bobbie said.

The pilot chuckled, and there was a little slurp as he drank something.

"I may have misunderstood politics," he said. And a moment later: "You like her?"

"I do."

"Mind if I ask why?"

"We care about the same things," Bobbie said, and the thoughtful note in her voice made Avasarala feel uncomfortable eavesdropping. She cleared her throat and walked into the galley.

"Where's Holden?" she asked.

"Probably sleeping," the pilot said. "The way we've been keepin' the ship's cycle, it's about two in the morning."

"Ah," Avasarala said. For her, it was mid-afternoon. That was going to be a little awkward. Everything in her life seemed to be about lag right now, waiting for the messages to get through the vast blackness of the vacuum. But at least she could prepare.

“I’m going to want a meeting with everyone on board as soon as they’re up,” she said. “Bobbie, you’ll need your formal wear again.”

It took Bobbie only a few seconds to understand.

“You’ll show them the monster,” she said.

“And then we’re going to sit here and talk until we figure out what exactly it is they know on this ship. It has the bad guys worried enough they were willing to send their boys to kill them,” she said.

“Yeah, about that,” the pilot said. “Those destroyers cut back to a cruising acceleration, but they aren’t turning back yet.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Avasarala said. “Everybody knows I’m on this ship. No one’s going to shoot at it.”

In the local morning and Avasarala’s subjective early evening, the crew gathered again. Rather than bring the whole powered suit into the galley, she’d copied the stored video and given it to Naomi. The crew members were bright and well rested apart from the pilot, who had stayed up entirely too late talking to Bobbie, and the botanist, who looked like he might just be permanently exhausted.

“I’m not supposed to show this to anyone,” Avasarala said, looking pointedly at Holden. “But on this ship, right now, I think we all need to put our cards on the table. And I’m willing to go first. This is the attack on Ganymede. The thing that started it all off. Naomi?”

Naomi started the playback, and Bobbie turned away and stared at the bulkhead. Avasarala didn’t watch it either, her attention on the faces of the others. As the blood and carnage played out behind her, she studied them and learned a little more about the people she was dealing with. The engineer, Amos, watched with the calm reserve of a professional killer. No surprise there. At first Holden, Naomi, and Alex were horrified, and she watched as Alex and Naomi slid into a kind of shock. There were tears in the pilot’s eyes. Holden, on the other hand, curled in. His shoulders bent outward from each other, and an expression of banked rage smoldered in his eyes and around the corners of his mouth. That was interesting. Bobbie wept openly with her back to the screen, and her expression was melancholy, like a woman at a funeral. A memorial service. Praxidike—everyone else called him Prax—was the only one who seemed almost happy. When at the segment’s end, the monstrosity detonated, he clapped his hands and squealed in pleasure.

“That was it,” he said. “You were right, Alex. Did you see how it was starting to grow more limbs? Catastrophic restraint failure. It *was* a fail-safe.”

“Okay,” Avasarala said. “Why don’t you try that again with an antecedent. What was a fail-safe?”

“The other protomolecule form ejected the explosive device from its body before it could detonate. You see, these... things—protomolecule soldiers or whatever—are breaking their programming, and I think Merrian knows about it. He hasn’t found a way to stop it, because the constraints fail.”

“Who’s Marion, and what does she have to do with anything?” Avasarala said.

“You wanted more nouns, Grandma,” Amos said.

“Let me take this from the top,” Holden said, and recounted the attack by the stowaway beast, the damage to the cargo door, Prax’s scheme to lure it out of the ship and reduce it to its component atoms with the drive’s exhaust.

Avasarala handed over the data she had about the energy spikes on Venus, and Prax grabbed that data, looking it over while talking about his determination of a secret base on Io where the things were being produced. It left Avasarala’s head spinning.

“And they took your kid there,” Avasarala said.

“They took all of them,” Prax said.

“Why would they do that?”

“Because they don’t have immune systems,” Prax said. “And so they’d be easier to reshape with the protomolecule. There would be fewer physiological systems fighting against the new cellular constraints, and the soldiers would probably last a lot longer.”

“Jesus, Doc,” Amos said. “They’re going to turn Mei into one of those fucking things?”

“Probably,” Prax said, frowning. “I only just figured that out.”

“But why do it at all?” Holden said. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“In order to sell them to a military force as a first-strike weapon,” Avasarala said. “To consolidate power before... well, before the fucking apocalypse.”

“Point of clarification,” Alex said, raising his hand. “We have an apocalypse comin’? Was that a thing we knew about?”

“Venus,” Avasarala said.

“Oh. That apocalypse,” Alex said, lowering his hand. “Right.”

“Soldiers that can travel without ships,” Naomi said. “You could fire them off at high g for a little while, then cut engines and let them go ballistic. How would you find them?”

“But it won’t *work*,” Prax said. “Remember? They escape constraint. And since they can share information, they’re going to get harder to hold to any kind of new programming.”

The room went silent. Prax looked confused.

“They can *share information*?” Avasarala said.

“Sure,” Prax said. “Look at your energy spikes. The first one happened while the thing was fighting Bobbie and the other marines on Ganymede. The second spike came when the other one got loose in the lab. The third spike was when we killed it with the *Rocinante*. Every time one of them has been attacked, Venus reacted. They’re networked. I’d assume that any critical information could be shared. Like how to escape constraints.”

“If they use them against people,” Holden said, “there won’t be any way to stop them. They’ll ditch the fail-safe bombs and just keep going. The battles won’t end.”

“Um. No,” Prax said. “That’s not the problem. It’s the cascade again. Once the protomolecule gets a little freedom, it has more tools to erode other constraints, which gets it more tools to erode more constraints and on and on like that. The original program or something like it will eventually swamp the new program. They’ll revert.”

Bobbie leaned forward, her head canted a few degrees to the right. Her voice was quiet, but it had a threat of violence that was louder than shouting.

“So if they set those things loose on Mars, they stay soldiers like the first one for a while. And then they start dropping the bombs out like your guy did. And then they turn Mars into Eros?”

“Well, worse than Eros,” Prax said. “Any decent-sized Martian city is going to have an order of magnitude more people than Eros did.”

The room was quiet. On the monitor, Bobbie’s suit camera looked up at star-filled sky while battleships killed each other in orbit.

“I’ve got to send some messages out,” Avasarala said.

“These half-human things you’ve made? They aren’t your servants. You can’t control them,” Avasarala said. “Jules-Pierre Mao sold you a bill of goods. I know why you kept me out of this, and I think you’re a fucking moron for it, but put it aside. It doesn’t matter now. Just do not pull that fucking trigger. Do you understand what I’m saying? Don’t. You will be personally responsible for the single deadliest screwup in the history of humankind, and I’m on a ship with Jim fucking Holden, so the bar’s not low.”

The full recording clocked in at almost half an hour. The security footage from the *Rocinante* with its stowaway was attached. A fifteen-minute lecture by Prax had to be scrapped when he reached the part about his daughter being turned into a protomolecule soldier, and this time broke into uncontrollable weeping. Avasarala did her best to recapitulate it, but she wasn’t at all certain she had the details right. She’d considered bringing Jon-Michael into it, but decided against it. Better to keep it in the family.

She sent the message. If she knew Errinwright, he wouldn’t get back to her immediately. There would be an hour or two of evaluation, weighing what she’d said, and then when she’d been left to stew for a while, he’d reply.

She hoped he’d be sane about it. He had to.

She needed to sleep. She could feel the fatigue gnawing at the edges of her mind, slowing her, but when she lay down, rest felt as far away as home. As Arjun. She thought about recording a message for him, but it would only have left her feeling more powerfully isolated. After an hour, she pulled herself up and walked through the halls. Her body told her it was midnight or later, and the activity on board—music ringing out of the machine shop, a loud conversation between Holden and Alex about the maintenance of the electronics systems, even Praxidike’s sitting in the galley by himself, apparently grooming a box of hydroponics cuttings—had a surreal late-night feeling.

She considered sending another message to Souther. The lag time would be much less to him, and she was hungry enough for a response that anything would do. When the answer came, it wasn’t a message.

“Captain,” Alex said over the ship-wide comm. “You should come up to ops and look at this.”

Something in his voice told Avasarala that this wasn’t a maintenance question. She found the lift to ops just as Holden went up, and pulled

herself up the ladder rather than wait. She wasn't the only one who'd followed the call. Bobbie was in a spare seat, her eyes on the same screen as Holden's. The blinking tactical data scrolled down the screen, and a dozen bright red dots displayed changes. She didn't understand most of what she saw, but the gist was obvious. The destroyers were on the move.

"Okay," Holden said. "What're we seeing?"

"All the Earth destroyers hit high burn. Six g," Alex said.

"Are they going to Io?"

"Oh, hell no."

This was Errinwright's answer. No messages. No negotiations. Not even an acknowledgment that she'd asked him to restrain himself. Warships. The despair only lasted for a moment. Then came the anger.

"Bobbie?"

"Yeah."

"That part where you told me I didn't understand the danger I was in?"

"And you told me that I didn't how the game was played."

"That part."

"I remember. What about it?"

"If you wanted to say 'I told you so,' this looks like the right time."

Chapter Forty-Two

Holden

Holden had spent a month at the Diamond Head Electronic Warfare Lab on Oahu as his first posting after officer candidate school. During that time, he'd learned he had no desire to be a naval intelligence wonk, really disliked poi, and really liked Polynesian women. He'd been far too busy at the time to actively chase one, but he'd thoroughly enjoyed spending his few spare moments down at the beach looking at them. He'd had a thing for curvy women with long black hair ever since.

The Martian Marine was like one of those cute little beach bunnies that someone had used editing software on and blown up to 150 percent normal size. The proportions, the black hair, the dark eyes, everything was the same. Only, giant. It short-circuited his neural wiring. The lizard living at the back of his brain kept jumping back and forth between *Mate with it!* and *Flee from it!* What was worse, she knew it. She seemed to have sized him up and decided he was only worth a tired smirk within moments of their meeting.

"Do you need me to go over it again?" she said, the smirk mocking him. They were sitting together in the galley, where she'd been describing for him the Martian intelligence on the best way to engage the Munroe-class light destroyer.

No! he wanted to yell. *I heard you. I'm not a freak. I have a lovely girlfriend that I'm totally committed to, so stop treating me like some kind of bumbling teenage boy who's trying to look down your dress!*

But then he'd look up at her again, and his hindbrain would start bouncing back and forth between attraction and fear, and his language centers would start misfiring. Again.

"No," he said, staring at the neatly organized list of bullet points she'd forwarded to his hand terminal. "I think this information is very... informative."

He saw the smirk widen out of the corner of his eye and focused more intently on the list.

“Okay,” Bobbie said. “I’m going to go catch some rack time. With your permission, of course. Captain.”

“Permission granted,” Holden said. “Of course. Go. Rack.”

She pushed herself to her feet without touching the arms of the chair. She’d grown up in Martian gravity. She had to mass a hundred kilos at one g, easy. She was showing off. He pretended to ignore it, and she left the galley.

“She’s something, isn’t she?” Avasarala said, coming into the galley and collapsing into the recently vacated chair. Holden looked up at her and saw a different kind of smirk. One that said the old lady saw right through him to the warring lizards at the back of his head. But she wasn’t a giant Polynesian woman, so he could vent his frustration on her.

“Yeah, she’s a peach,” he said. “But we’re still going to die.”

“What?”

“When those destroyers catch us, which they will, we are going to die. The only reason they aren’t raining torpedoes down on us already is because they know our PDC network can take out anything fired at this range.”

Avasarala leaned back in her chair with a heavy sigh, and the smirk shifted into a tired but genuine smile. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance you could find an old woman a cup of tea, could you?”

Holden shook his head. “I’m sorry. No tea drinkers on the crew. Lots of coffee, though, if you’d like a cup.”

“I’m actually tired enough to do that. Lots of cream, lots of sugar.”

“How about,” Holden said, pulling her a cup, “lots of sugar, lots of a powder that’s called ‘whitener.’”

“Sounds like piss. I’ll take it.”

Holden sat down and pushed the sweetened and “whitened” cup of coffee across to her. She took it and grimaced through several long swallows.

“Explain,” she said after another drink, “everything you just said.”

“Those destroyers are going to kill us,” Holden repeated. “The sergeant says you refuse to believe that UN ships will fire on you, but I agree with her. That’s naive.”

“Okay, but what’s a ‘PDC network’?”

Holden tried not to frown. He’d expected any number of things from the woman, but ignorance hadn’t been one.

“Point defense cannons. If those destroyers fire torpedoes at us from this distance, the targeting computer for the PDCs won’t have any trouble shooting them down. So they’ll wait until they get close enough that they can overwhelm us. I give it three days before they start.”

“I see,” Avasarala said. “And what’s your plan?”

Holden barked out a laugh with no humor in it. “Plan? My plan is to die in a ball of superheated plasma. There is literally no way that a single fast-attack corvette, which is us, can successfully fight six light destroyers. We aren’t in the same weight class as even one of them, but against one, a lucky shot maybe. Against six? No chance. We die.”

“I’ve read your file,” Avasarala said. “You faced down a UN corvette during the Eros incident.”

“Yeah, one corvette. We were a match for her. And I got her to back down by threatening the unarmed science ship she was escorting. This isn’t even remotely the same thing.”

“So what does the infamous James Holden do at his last stand?”

He was silent for a while.

“He rats,” Holden said. “We know what’s going on. We have all the pieces now. Mao-Kwik, the protomolecule monsters, where they’re taking the kids... everything. We put all the data in a file and broadcast it to the universe. They can still kill us if they want to, but we can make it a pointless act of revenge. Keep it from actually helping them.”

“No,” Avasarala said.

“Uh, no? You might be forgetting whose ship you’re on.”

“I’m sorry, did I seem to give a fuck that this is your ship? If I did, really, I was just being polite,” Avasarala said, giving him a withering glare. “You aren’t going to fuck up the whole solar system just because you’re a one-trick pony. We have bigger fish to fry.”

Holden counted to ten in his head and said, “Your idea is?”

“Send it to these two UN admirals,” she said, then tapped something on her terminal. His buzzed with the received file. “Souther and Leniki. Mostly Souther. I don’t like Leniki, and he hasn’t been in the loop on this, but he’s a decent backup.”

“You want my last act before being killed by a UN admiral to be sending all of the vital information I have to a UN admiral.”

Avasarala leaned back into her chair and rubbed her temples with her fingertips. Holden waited. “I’m tired,” she said after a few moments. “And I

miss my husband. It's like an ache in my arms that I can't hold him right now. Do you know what that's like?"

"I know exactly what that ache feels like."

"So I want you to understand that I'm sitting here, right now, coming to terms with the idea that I won't see him again. Or my grandchildren. Or my daughter. My doctors said I probably had a good thirty years left in me. Time to watch my grandkids grow up, maybe even see a great-grandchild or two. But instead, I'm going to be killed by a limp-dick, whiny sonofabitch like Admiral Nguyen."

Holden could feel the massive weight of those six destroyers bearing down on them, murder in their hearts. It felt like having a pistol pushed into his ribs from behind. He wanted to shake the old woman and tell her to hurry up.

She smiled at him.

"My last act in this universe isn't going to be fucking up everything I did right up to now."

Holden made a conscious effort to ignore his frustration. He got up and opened the refrigerator. "Hey, there's leftover pudding. Want some?"

"I've read your psych profile. I know all about your 'everyone should know everything' naive bullshit. But how much of the last war was *your* fault, with your goddamned endless pirate broadcasts? Well?"

"None of it," Holden said. "Desperate psychotic people do desperate psychotic things when they're exposed. I refuse to grant them immunity from exposure out of fear of their reaction. When you do, the desperate psychos wind up in charge."

She laughed. It was a surprisingly warm sound.

"Anyone who understands what's going on is at least desperate and probably psychotic to boot. Dissociative at the least. Let me explain it this way," Avasarala said. "You tell everyone, and yeah, you'll get a reaction. And maybe, weeks, or months, or years from now, it will all get sorted out. But you tell the *right* people, and we can sort it out right now."

Amos and Prax walked into the galley together. Amos had his big thermos in his hand and headed straight toward the coffeepot. Prax followed him and picked up a mug. Avasarala's eyes narrowed and she said, "Maybe even save that little girl."

"Mei?" Prax said immediately, putting the mug down and turning around.

Oh, that was low, Holden thought. Even for a politician.

“Yes, Mei,” Avasarala replied. “That’s what this is about, right, Jim? Not some personal crusade, but trying to save a little girl from very bad people?”

“Explain how—” Holden started, but Avasarala kept talking right over the top of him.

“The UN isn’t one person. It isn’t even one corporation. It’s a thousand little, petty factions fighting against each other. Their side’s got the floor, but that’s temporary. That’s always temporary. I know people who can move against Nguyen and his group. They can cut off his support, strip him of ships, even recall and court-martial him given enough time. But they can’t do any of that if we’re in a shooting war with Mars. And if you toss everything you know into the wind, Mars won’t have time to wait and figure out the subtleties; they’ll have no choice but to preemptively strike against Nguyen’s fleet, Io, what’s left of Ganymede. Everything.”

“Io?” Prax said. “But Mei—”

“So you want me to give all the info to your little political cabal back on Earth, when the entire reason for this problem is that there are little political cabals back on Earth.”

“Yes,” Avasarala said. “And I’m the only hope she’s got. You have to trust me.”

“I don’t. Not even a little bit. I think you’re part of the problem. I think you see all of this as political maneuvering and power games. I think you want to *win*. So no, I don’t trust you at all.”

“Hey, uh, Cap?” Amos said, slowly screwing the top onto his thermos. “Ain’t you forgetting something?”

“What, Amos? What am I forgetting?”

“Don’t we vote on shit like this now?”

“Don’t pout,” Naomi said. She was stretched out on a crash couch next to the main operations panel on the ops deck. Holden was seated across the room from her at the comm panel. He’d just sent out Avasarala’s data file to her two UN admirals. His fingers itched with the desire to dump it into a general broadcast. But they’d debated the issue for the crew, and she’d won the vote. The whole voting thing had seemed like such a good idea when

he'd first brought it up. After losing his first vote, not so much. They'd all be dead in two days, so at least it probably wouldn't happen again.

"If we get killed, and Avasarala's pet admirals don't actually do anything with the data we just sent, this was all for nothing."

"You think they'll bury it?" Naomi said.

"I don't know, and that's the problem. I don't know what they'll do. We met this UN politician two days ago and she's already running the ship."

"So send it to someone else too," Naomi said. "Someone who you can trust to keep it quiet, but can get the word out if the UN guys turn out to be working for the wrong team."

"That's not a bad idea."

"Fred, maybe?"

"No." Holden laughed. "Fred would see it as political capital. He'd use it to bargain with. It needs to be someone that has nothing to gain or lose by using it. I'll have to think about it."

Naomi got up, then came over to straddle his legs and sit on his lap facing him. "And we're all about to die. That's not making any of this any easier."

Not all of us.

"Naomi, gather the crew up, the marine and Avasarala too. The galley, I guess. I have some last business to announce. I'll meet you guys there in ten minutes."

She kissed him lightly on the nose. "Okay. We'll be there."

When she disappeared from sight down the crew ladder, Holden opened up the chief of the watch's locker. Inside were a set of very out-of-date codebooks, a manual of Martian naval law, and a sidearm and two magazines of ballistic gel rounds. He took out the gun, loaded it, and strapped the belt and holster around his waist.

Next he went back to the comm station and put Avasarala's data package into a tightbeam transmission that would bounce from Ceres to Mars to Luna to Earth, using public routers all the way. It would be unlikely to send up any red flags. He hit the video record button and said, "Hi, Mom. Take a look at this. Show it to the family. I have no idea how you'll know when the right time to use it is, but when that time comes, do with it whatever seems best. I trust you guys, and I love you."

Before he could say anything else or think better of the whole thing, he hit the transmit key and turned the panel off.

He called up the ladder-lift, because riding it would take longer than climbing the ladder and he needed time to think out exactly how to play the next ten minutes. When he reached the crew deck, he still didn't have it all figured out, but he squared his shoulders and walked into the galley anyway.

Amos, Alex, and Naomi were sitting on one side of the table, facing him. Prax was in his usual perch on the counter. Bobbie and Avasarala sat sideways on the other side of the table so that they could see him. That put the marine less than two meters away, with nothing between her and him. Depending on how this went, that might be a problem.

He dropped his hand to the butt of the gun at his hip to make sure everyone saw it, then said, "We have about two days before elements of the UN Navy get close enough to overwhelm our defenses with a torpedo salvo and destroy this ship."

Alex nodded, but no one spoke.

"But we have the Mao racing pinnacle that brought Avasarala to us attached to the hull. It holds two. We're going to stick two people on it and get them away. Then we're going to turn around and head straight for those UN ships to buy the pinnacle time. Who knows, we may even take one with us. Get ourselves a few servants in the afterlife."

"Fucking A," Amos said.

"I can support that," Avasarala said. "Who're the lucky bastards? And how do we stop the UN ships from just killing it after they kill this ship?"

"Prax and Naomi," Holden said immediately, before anyone else could speak. "Prax and Naomi go on the ship."

"Okay," Amos said, nodding.

"Why?" Naomi and Avasarala said at the same moment.

"Prax because he's the face of this whole thing. He's the guy who figured it all out. And because when someone finally rescues his little girl, it'd be nice if her daddy was there," Holden said. Then, tapping the butt of the gun with his fingers: "And Naomi because I fucking said so. Questions?"

"Nope," Alex said. "Works for me."

Holden was watching the marine closely. If someone tried to take the gun from him, it would be her. And she worked for Avasarala. If the old

lady decided she wanted to be on the *Razorback* when it left, the marine would be the one who tried to make that happen. But to his surprise, she didn't move except to raise her hand.

"Sergeant?" Holden said.

"Two of those six Martian ships that are tailing the UN boys are new Raptor-class fast cruisers. They can probably catch the *Razorback* if they really want to."

"Would they?" Holden asked. "It was my impression that they were there to keep an eye on the UN ships and nothing else."

"Well, probably not, but..." She drifted off mid-sentence with a distant look in her eyes.

"So that's the plan," Holden said. "Prax, Naomi, get whatever supplies you need packed up and get on the *Razorback*. Everyone else, I'd appreciate it if you waited here while they did that."

"Hold on a minute—" Naomi protested, her voice angry.

Before Holden could respond, Bobbie spoke again.

"Hey, you know? I just had an idea."

Chapter Fourty-Three

Bobbie

They were all missing something. It was like someone knocking at the back of her mind, demanding to be let in. Bobbie went over it in her head. Sure, that prick Nguyen showed every sign he was willing to kill the *Rocinante*, ranking UN politician on board or not. Avasarala had made a gamble that her presence would back the UN ships off. It seemed she was about to lose that bet. There were still six UN destroyers bearing down on them.

But there were six more ships tailing *them*.

Including, as she'd just pointed out to Holden, two *Raptor-class* fast-attack cruisers. Top-of-the-line Martian military hardware, and more than a match for any UN destroyer. Along with the two cruisers were four Martian destroyers. They might or might not be better than their UN counterparts, but with the two cruisers in their wing, they had a significant tonnage and firepower advantage. And they were following the UN ships to see that they weren't about to do something to escalate the shooting war.

Like killing the one UN politician who wasn't straining at the leash for a war with Mars.

"Hey, you know?" Bobbie said before she realized she was going to say anything. "I just had an idea..."

The galley fell silent.

Bobbie had a sudden and uncomfortable memory of speaking up in the UN conference room and wrecking her military career in the process. Captain Holden, the cute one who was a little too full of himself, was staring at her, a not particularly flattering gape on his face. He looked like a very angry person who'd lost his train of thought mid-rant. And Avasarala was staring at her too. Though, having learned to read the old lady's expression better, she didn't see anger there. Just curiosity.

"Well," Bobbie said, clearing her throat. "There are six Martian ships following those UN ships. And the Martian ships outclass them. Both navies are at high alert."

No one moved or spoke. Avasarala's curiosity had turned to a frown. "So," Bobbie continued, "they might be willing to back us up."

Avasarala's frown had only gotten deeper. "Why," she said, "would the Martians give a fuck about protecting me from being killed by my own damn Navy?"

"Would it hurt to ask?"

"No," Holden said. "I'm thinking no. Is everyone else here thinking it wouldn't hurt?"

"Who'd make the call?" Avasarala asked. "You? The traitor?"

The words were like a gut punch. But Bobbie realized what the old lady was doing. She was hitting Bobbie with the worst possible Martian response. Gauging her reaction to it.

"Yeah, I'd open the door," Bobbie said. "But you're the one that will have to convince them."

Avasarala stared at her for one very long minute, then said, "Okay."

"Repeat that, *Rocinante*," the Martian commander said. The connection was as clear as if they were standing in the room with the man. It wasn't the sound quality that was throwing him. Avasarala spoke slowly, enunciating carefully, all the same.

"This is Assistant Undersecretary Chrisjen Avasarala of the United Nations of Earth," Avasarala said again. "I am about to be attacked by a rogue element of the UN Navy while on my way to a peacekeeping mission in the Jupiter system. Fucking save me! I will reward you by talking my government out of glassing your planet."

"I'm going to have to send this up the chain," the commander said. They weren't using a video link, but the grin was audible in his voice.

"Call whoever you need to call," Avasarala said. "Just make a decision before these cunts start raining missiles down on me. All right?"

"I'll do my best, ma'am."

The skinny one—her name was Naomi—killed the connection and swiveled to look at Bobbie. "Why would they help us, again?"

"Mars doesn't want a war," Bobbie replied, hoping she wasn't talking completely out her ass. "If they find out that the UN's voice of reason is on

a ship that's about to be killed by rogue UN war hawks, it only makes sense for them to step in."

"Kind of sounds like you're talking out your ass there," Naomi said.

"Also," Avasarala said, "I just gave them permission to shoot at the UN Navy without political repercussions."

"Even if they help," Holden said, "there's no way they can completely stop the UN ships from taking some shots at us. We'll need an engagement plan."

"We just got this damn thing put back together," Amos said.

"I still say we stick Prax and Naomi on the *Razorback*," Holden said.

"I'm starting to think that's a bad idea," Avasarala said. She took a sip of coffee and grimaced. The old lady was definitely missing her five cups of tea a day.

"Explain," Holden said.

"Well, if the Martians decide they're on our side, that changes the whole landscape for those UN ships. They can't beat all seven of us, if I understand the math right."

"Okay," Holden said.

"That makes it in their interest not to be called a rogue element in the history books. If Nguyen's cabal fails, everyone on his team gets at minimum a court-martial. The best way to make sure that doesn't happen is to make sure I don't survive this fight, no matter who wins."

"Which means they'll be shooting at the *Roci*," Naomi said. "Not the pinnacle."

"Of course not," Avasarala said with a laugh. "Because of course I'll be on the pinnacle. You think for a second they'll believe that you're desperately trying to protect an escape craft that I'm *not* on? And I bet the *Razorback* doesn't have those PDCs you were talking about. Does it?"

To Bobbie's surprise, Holden was nodding as Avasarala spoke. She'd sort of pegged him as a know-it-all who fell in love only with his own ideas.

"Yeah," Holden said. "You're absolutely right. They'll fling everything they've got at the *Razorback* as she tries to get away, and she'll have no defense."

"Which means we all live or we all die, right here on this ship," Naomi said with a sigh. "As usual."

"So, again," Holden said. "We need an engagement plan."

“This is a pretty thin crew,” Bobbie said now that the conversation had moved back to her area of expertise. “Where’s everyone usually sit?”

“Operations officer,” Holden said, pointing at Naomi. “She also does electronic warfare and countermeasures. And she’s a savant, considering she’d never worked it before we got this ship.”

“Mechanic—” Holden started, pointing at Amos.

“Grease monkey,” Amos said, cutting him off. “I do my best to keep the ship from falling apart when there’s holes in it.”

“I usually man the combat ops board,” Holden said.

“Who’s the gunner?” Bobbie asked.

“Yo,” said Alex, pointing at himself.

“You fly *and* do target acquisition?” Bobbie said. “I’m impressed.”

Alex’s already dark skin grew a shade darker. His *aw shucks* Mariner Valley drawl had started to go from annoying to charming. And the blush was sweet. “Aw, no. The cap’n does acquisition from combat ops, generally. But I have to manage fire control.”

“Well, there you go,” Bobbie said, turning to Holden. “Give me weps.”

“No offense, Sergeant...” Holden said.

“Gunny,” Bobbie replied.

“Gunny,” Holden agreed with a nod. “But are you qualified to operate fire control on a naval vessel?”

Bobbie decided not to be offended and grinned at him instead. “I saw your armor and the weapons you were carrying in the airlock. You found a MAP in the cargo bay, right?”

“Map?” Avasarala asked.

“Mobile assault package. Marine assault gear. Not as good as my Force Recon armor, but full kit for half a dozen ground pounders.”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “That’s where we got it.”

“That’s because this is a multi-role fast-attack ship. Torpedo bomber is just one of them. Boarding party insertion is another. And gunnery sergeant is a rank with a very specific meaning.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “Equipment specialist.”

“I’m required to be proficient in all of the weapons systems my platoon or company might need to operate during a typical deployment. Including the weapons systems on an assault boat like this.”

“I see—” Holden started, but Bobbie cut him off with a nod.

“I’m your gunner.”

Like most things in Bobbie's life, the weapons officer's chair had been made for someone smaller than her. The five-point harness was digging into her hips and her shoulders. Even at its farthest setting, the fire control console was just a bit too close for her to comfortably rest her arms on the crash couch while using it. All of which would be a problem if they had to do any really high-g maneuvering. Which, of course, they would once the fight started.

She tucked her elbows in as close as she could to keep her arms from wrenching out of their sockets at high g, and fidgeted with the harness. It would have to be good enough.

From his seat behind and above her, Alex said, "This'll be over quick one way or the other. You probably won't have time to get too uncomfortable."

"That's reassuring."

Over the 1MC Holden said, "We're inside the maximum-effective weapon range now. They could fire immediately or twenty hours from now. So stay belted in. Only leave your station in life-threatening emergency and at my direct order. I hope everyone got their catheter on right."

"Mine's too tight," Amos said.

Alex spoke behind her, and it was echoed a split second later over the comm channel. "It's a condom catheter, partner. It goes on the *outside*."

Bobbie couldn't help laughing and held one hand up behind her until Alex slapped it.

Holden said, "We have greens across the board down here in ops. Everyone check in with go/no-go status."

"All green at flight control," Alex said.

"Green at electronic warfare," Naomi said.

"We're go down here," Amos said.

"Weapons are green and hot," Bobbie said last. Even strapped into a chair two sizes too small for her, on a stolen Martian warship captained by one of the most wanted men in the inner planets, it felt really goddamned good to be there. Bobbie restrained a whoop of joy and instead pulled Holden's threat display up. He'd already marked the six pursuing UN destroyers. Bobbie tagged the lead ship and let the *Rocinante* try to come up with a target solution on it. The *Roci* calculated the odds of a hit at less than

.1 percent. She jumped from target to target, getting a feel for the response times and controls. She tapped a button to pull up target info and looked over the UN destroyer specs.

When reading ship specs bored her, she pulled out to the tactical view. One tiny green dot pursued by six slightly larger red dots, which were in turn pursued by six blue dots. That was wrong. The Earth ships should be blue, and the Martians' red. She told the *Roci* to swap the color scheme. The *Rocinante* was oriented toward the pursuing ships. On the map, it looked like they were flying directly at each other. But in reality, the *Rocinante* was in the middle of a deceleration burn, slowing down to let the UN ships catch up faster. All thirteen of the ships in this particular engagement were hurtling sunward. The *Roci* was just doing it ass first.

Bobbie glanced at the time and saw that her noodling with the controls had burned less than fifteen minutes. "I hate waiting for a fight."

"You and me both, sister," Alex said.

"Got any games on this thing?" Bobbie asked, tapping on her console.

"I spy with my little eye," Alex replied, "something that begins with D."

"Destroyer," Bobbie said. "Six tubes, eight PDCs, and a keel-mounted rapid-fire rail gun."

"Good guess. Your turn."

"I fucking hate waiting for a fight."

When the battle began, it began all at once. Bobbie had expected some early probing shots. A few torpedoes fired from extreme range, just to see if the crew of the *Rocinante* had full control of all the weapon systems and everything was in working order. Instead, the UN ships had closed the distance, the *Roci* slamming on the brakes to meet them.

Bobbie watched the six UN ships creep closer and closer to the red line on her threat display. The red line that represented the point at which a full salvo from all six ships would overwhelm the *Roci*'s point defense network.

Meanwhile, the six Martian ships moved closer to the green line on her display that represented their optimal firing range to engage the UN ships. It was a big game of chicken, and everyone was waiting to see who would flinch first.

Alex was juggling their deceleration thrust to try to make sure the Martians got in range before the Earthers did. When the shooting started, he would put the throttle down and try to move through the active combat zone as quickly as possible. It was why they were going to meet the UN ships in the first place. Running away would just have kept them in range a lot longer.

Then one of the red dots—a Martian fast-attack cruiser—crossed the green line, and alarms started going off all over the ship.

“Fast movers,” Naomi said. “The Martian cruiser has fired eight torpedoes!”

Bobbie could see them. Tiny yellow dots shifting to orange as they took off at high g. The UN ships immediately responded. Half of them spun around to face the pursuing Martian ships and opened up with their rail guns and point defense cannons. The space on the tactical display between the two groups was suddenly filled with yellow-orange dots.

“Incoming!” Naomi yelled. “Six torpedoes on a collision course!”

Half a second later, the torpedoes’ vector and speed information popped up on Bobbie’s PDC control display. Holden had been right. The skinny Belter was good at this. Her reaction times were astonishing. Bobbie flagged all six torpedoes for the PDCs, and the ship began to vibrate as they fired in a rapid staccato.

“Juice coming,” Alex said, and Bobbie felt her couch prick her in half a dozen places. Cold pumped into her veins, quickly becoming white-hot. She shook her head to clear the threatening tunnel vision while Alex said, “Three... two...”

He never said *one*. The *Rocinante* smashed into Bobbie from behind, crushing her into her crash couch. She remembered at the last second to keep her elbows lined up, and avoided having her arms broken as every part of her tried to fly backward at ten gravities.

On her threat display, the initial wave of six torpedoes fired at them winked out one by one as the *Roci* tracked and shot them down. More torpedoes were in the air, but now the entire Martian wing had opened up on the Earthers, and the space around the ships had become a confusion of drive tails and detonations. Bobbie told the *Roci* to target anything on an approach vector and shoot at it with the point defenses, leaving it up to Martian engineering and the universe’s good graces.

She switched one of the big displays to the forward cameras, turning it into a window on the battle. Ahead of her the sky was filled with bright white flashes of light and expanding clouds of gas as torpedoes detonated. The UN ships had decided that the Martians were the real threat, and all six of them had spun to face the enemy ships head-on. Bobbie tapped a control to throw a threat overlay onto the video image, and suddenly the sky was full of impossibly fast blobs of light as the threat computer put a glowing outline on every torpedo and projectile.

The *Rocinante* was coming up fast on the UN destroyers, and the thrust dropped to two g. "Here we go," Alex said.

Bobbie pulled up the torpedo targeting system and targeted the drive cones of two of the ships. "Two away," she said, releasing her first two fish into the water. Bright drive trails lit the sky as they streaked off. The ready-to-fire indicator went red as the ship reloaded the tubes. Bobbie was already selecting the drive cones of the next two UN ships. The instant the ready indicator went green, she fired them both. She targeted the last two destroyers, then checked on the progress of her first two torpedoes. They were both gone, shot down by the destroyers' aft PDCs. A wave of fast-moving blobs of light hurtled toward them, and Alex threw the ship sideways, dancing out of the line of fire.

It wasn't enough. A yellow atmosphere warning light began rotating in the cockpit, and a ditone Klaxon sounded.

"We're hit," Holden said, his voice calm. "Dumping the atmosphere. Hope everyone has their hat on tight."

As Holden shut down the air system, the sounds of the ship faded until Bobbie could hear only her own breathing and the faint hiss of the 1MC channel on her headset.

"Wow," Amos said over the comm. "Three hits. Small projectiles, probably PDC rounds. Managed to go right through us without hitting anything that mattered."

"It went through my room," the scientist, Prax, said.

"Bet that woke you up," Amos said, his voice a grin.

"I soiled myself," Prax replied without a hint of humor.

"Quiet," Holden said, but there was no malice in it. "Stay off the channel, please."

Bobbie let the rational, thinking part of her mind listen to the back-and-forth. She had no use for that part of her brain right now. The part of

her mind that had been trained to acquire targets and fire torpedoes at them worked without her interference. The lizard was driving now.

She didn't know how many torpedoes she'd fired when there was an enormous flash of light and the camera display blacked out for a second. When it came back, one of the UN destroyers was torn in two, the rapidly separating pieces of hull spinning away from each other, trailing a faint gas cloud and small bits of jetsam. Some of those things flying out of the shattered ship would be UN sailors. Bobbie ignored that. The lizard rejoiced.

The destruction of the first UN ship tipped the scales, and within minutes the other five were heavily damaged or destroyed. A UN captain sent out a distress call and immediately signaled surrender.

Bobbie looked at her display. Three UN ships destroyed. Three heavily damaged. The Martians had lost two destroyers, and one of their cruisers was badly damaged. The *Rocinante* had three bullet wounds that had let all her air out, but no other damage.

They'd won.

"Holy shit," Alex said. "Captain, we have *got* to get one of these."

It took Bobbie a minute to realize he was talking about her.

"You have the gratitude of the UN government," Avasarala was saying to the Martian commander. "Or at least the part of the UN government I run. We're going to Io to blow up some more ships and maybe stop the apocalypse. Want to come with?"

Bobbie opened a private channel to Avasarala.

"We're all traitors now."

"Ha!" the old lady said. "Only if we lose."

Chapter Fourty-Four

Holden

From the outside, the damage to the *Rocinante* was barely noticeable. The three point defense cannon rounds fired by one of the UN destroyers had hit her just forward of the sick bay and, after a short diagonal trip through the ship, exited through the machine shop, two decks below. Along the way, one of them had passed through three cabins in the crew deck.

Holden had expected the little botanist to be a wreck, especially after his crack about soiling himself. But when Holden had checked on him after the battle, he'd been surprised by the nonchalant shrug the scientist had given.

"It was very startling," was all he'd said.

It would be easy to write it off as shell shock. The kidnapping of his daughter, followed by months of living on Ganymede as the social structure collapsed. Easy to see Prax's calm as the precursor to a complete mental and emotional breakdown. God knew the man had lost control of himself half a dozen times, and most of them inconvenient. But Holden suspected there was a lot more to Prax than that. There was a relentless forward motion to the man. The universe might knock him down over and over again, but unless he was dead, he'd just keep getting up and shuffling ahead toward his goal. Holden thought he had probably been a very good scientist. Thrilled by small victories, undeterred by setbacks. Plodding along until he got to where he needed to be.

Even now, just hours after nearly being cut in two by a highspeed projectile, Prax was belowdecks with Naomi and Avasarala, patching holes inside the ship. He hadn't even been asked. He'd just climbed out of his bunk and pitched in.

Holden stood above one of the bullet entry points on the ship's outer hull. The small projectile had left a perfectly round hole and almost no dimpling. It had passed through five centimeters of high-tensile alloy armor so quickly it hadn't even dented it.

“Found it,” Holden said. “No light coming out, so it looks like they’ve already patched it on the inside.”

“Coming,” Amos said, then clumped across the hull on magnetic boots, a portable welding torch in his hand. Bobbie followed in her fancy powered armor, carrying big sheets of patch material.

While Bobbie and Amos worked on sealing up the outer hull breach, Holden wandered off to find the next hole. Around him, the three remaining Martian warships drifted along with the *Rocinante* like an honor guard. With their drives off, they were visible only as small black spots that moved across the star field. Even with the *Roci* telling his armor where to look, and with the HUD pointing the ships out, they were almost impossible to see.

Holden tracked the Martian cruiser on his HUD until it passed across the bright splash of the Milky Way’s ecliptic. For a moment, the entire ship was a black silhouette framed in the ancient white of a few billion stars. A faint cone of translucent white sprayed out from one side of the ship, and it drifted back into the star-speckled black. Holden felt a desire to have Naomi standing next to him, looking up at the same sights, that bordered on a physical ache.

“I forget how beautiful it is out here,” he said to her over their private channel instead.

“You daydreaming and letting someone else do all the work?” she replied.

“Yeah. More of these stars have planets around them than don’t. Billions of worlds. Five hundred million planets in the habitable zone was the last estimate. Think our great-grandkids will get to see any of them?”

“Our grandkids?”

“When this is over.”

“Also,” Naomi said, “at least one of those planets has the protomolecule masters on it. Maybe we should avoid that one.”

“Honestly? That’s one I’d like to see. Who made this thing? What’s it all for? I’d love to be able to ask. And at the very least, they share the human drive to find every habitable corner and move in. We might have more in common than we think.”

“They also kill whoever lived there first.”

Holden snorted. “We’ve been doing that since the invention of the spear. They’re just scary good at it.”

“You found that next hole yet?” Amos said over the main channel, his voice an unwelcome intrusion. Holden pulled his gaze away from the sky and back to the metal beneath his feet. Using the damage map the *Roci* was feeding to his HUD, it took only a moment to find the next entry wound.

“Yeah, yeah, right here,” he said, and Amos and Bobbie began moving his direction.

“Cap,” Alex said, chiming in from the cockpit. “The captain of that MCRN cruiser is lookin’ to talk to you.”

“Patch him through to my suit.”

“Roger,” Alex said, and then the static on the radio shifted in tone.

“Captain Holden?”

“I read you. Go ahead.”

“This is Captain Richard Tseng of the MCRN *Cydonia*. Sorry we weren’t able to speak sooner. I’ve been dealing with damage control and arranging for rescue and repair ships.”

“I understand, Captain,” Holden said, trying to spot the *Cydonia* again but failing. “I’m out on my hull patching a few holes myself. I saw you guys drive by a minute ago.”

“My XO says you’d asked to speak to me.”

“Yes, and thank her on my behalf for all the help so far,” Holden said. “Listen, we burned through an awful lot of our stores in that skirmish. We fired fourteen torpedoes and nearly half of our point defense ammunition. Since this used to be a Martian ship, I thought maybe you’d have reloads that would fit our racks.”

“Sure,” Captain Tseng said without a moment’s hesitation. “I’ll have the destroyer *Sally Ride* pull alongside for munitions transfer.”

“Uh,” Holden said, shocked by the instant agreement. He’d been prepared to negotiate. “Thanks.”

“I’ll pass along my intel officer’s breakdown of the fight. You’ll find it interesting viewing. But the short version is that first kill, the one that broke open the UN defense screen and ended the fight? That was yours. Guess they shouldn’t have turned their backs on you.”

“You guys can take credit for it,” Holden said with a laugh. “I had a Martian Marine gunnery sergeant doing the shooting.”

There was a pause; then Tseng said, “When this is over, I’d like to buy you a drink and talk about how a dishonorably discharged UN naval officer

winds up flying a stolen MCRN torpedo bomber crewed by Martian military personnel and a senior UN politician.”

“It’s a damn good story,” Holden replied. “Say, speaking of Martians, I’d like to get one of mine a present. Do you carry a Marine detachment on the *Cydonia*?”

“Yes, why?”

“Got any Force Recon Marines in that group?”

“Yes. Again, why?”

“There’s some equipment we’ll need that you’ve probably got in storage.”

He told Captain Tseng what he was looking for, and Tseng said, “I’ll have the *Ride* give you one when we do the transfer.”

The MCRN *Sally Ride* looked like she’d come through the fight without a scratch. When she pulled up next to the *Rocinante*, her dark flank looked as smooth and unmarred as a pool of black water. After Alex and the *Ride*’s pilot had perfectly matched course, a large hatch in her side opened up, dim red emergency lighting spilling out. Two magnetic grapples were fired across, connecting the ships with ten meters of cable.

“This is Lieutenant Graves,” a girlish voice said. “Prepared to begin cargo transfer on your order.”

Lieutenant Graves sounded like she should still be in high school, but Holden said, “Go ahead. We’re ready on this end.”

Switching channels to Naomi, he said, “Pop the hatches, new fish coming aboard.”

A few meters from where he was standing, a large hatch that was normally flush with the hull opened up into a meter-wide and eight-meter-long gap in the skin of the ship. A complicated-looking system of rails and gears ran down the sides of the opening. At the bottom sat three of the *Rocinante*’s remaining ship-to-ship torpedoes.

“Seven in here,” Holden said, pointing at the open torpedo rack. “And seven on the other side.”

“Roger,” said Graves. The long, narrow white shape of a plasma torpedo appeared in the *Ride*’s open hatch, with sailors wearing EVA packs flanking it. With gentle puffs of compressed nitrogen, they flew the torpedo

down along the two guidelines to the *Roci*; then, with the help of Bobbie's suit-augmented strength, they maneuvered it into position at the top of the rack.

"First one in position," Bobbie said.

"Got it," Naomi replied, and a second later the motorized rails came to life and grabbed the torpedo, pulling it down into the magazine.

Holden glanced at the elapsed time on his HUD. Getting all fourteen torpedoes transferred and loaded would take hours.

"Amos," he said. "Where are you?"

"Just finishing that last patch down by the machine shop," the mechanic replied. "You need something?"

"When you're done with that, grab a couple EVA packs. You and I will go get the other supplies. Should be three crates of PDC rounds and some sundries."

"I'm done now. Naomi, pop the cargo door for me, wouldja?"

Holden watched Bobbie and the *Ride*'s sailors work, and they had two more torpedoes loaded by the time Amos arrived with two EVA packs.

"Lieutenant Graves, two crew from the *Rocinante* requesting permission to board and pick up the rest of the supplies."

"Granted, *Rocinante*."

The PDC rounds came in crates of twenty thousand and at full gravity would have weighed more than five hundred kilos. In the microgravity of the coasting ships, two people with EVA packs could move one if they were willing to take their time and recharge their compressed nitrogen after every trip. Without a salvage mech or a small work shuttle available, there wasn't any other choice.

Each crate had to be pushed slowly toward the aft of the *Rocinante* through a twenty-second-long "burn" from Amos' EVA pack. When it got to the aft of the ship next to the cargo bay door, Holden would do an equally long thrust from his pack to bring the crate to a stop. Then the two of them would maneuver it inside and lock it to a bulkhead. The process was long, and at least for Holden, each trip had one heart-racing moment when he was firing the brakes to stop the crate. Every time, he had a brief, panicky vision of his EVA pack failing and him and the crate of ammo drifting off into space while Amos watched. It was ridiculous, of course. Amos could easily grab a fresh EVA pack and come get him, or the ship could drop back, or

the *Ride* could send a rescue shuttle, or any other of a huge number of ways he'd be quickly saved.

But humans hadn't been living and working in space nearly long enough for the primitive part of the brain not to say, *I'll fall. I'll fall forever.*

The people from the *Ride* finished bringing over torpedoes about the time Holden and Amos had locked the last crate of PDC ammo into the cargo bay.

"Naomi," Holden called on the open channel. "We all green?"

"Everything looks good from here. All of the new torpedoes are talking to the *Roci* and reporting operational."

"Outstanding. Amos and I are coming in through the cargo bay airlock. Go ahead and seal the bay up. Alex, as soon as Naomi gives the all clear, let the *Cydonia* know we can do a fast burn to Io at the captain's earliest pleasure."

While the crew prepped the ship for the trip to Io, Holden and Amos stripped off their gear and stowed it in the machine shop. Six gray disks, three on each bulkhead across the compartment from each other, showed where the rounds had ripped through this part of the ship.

"What's in that other box the Martians gave you?" Amos asked, pulling off one oversized magnetic boot.

"A present for Bobbie," Holden said. "I'd like to keep it quiet until I give it to her, okay?"

"Sure, no problem, Cap'n. If it turns out to be a dozen long-stemmed roses, I don't want to be there when Naomi finds out. Plus, you know, Alex..."

"No, it's a lot more practical than roses—" Holden started, then rewound the conversation in his head. "Alex? What about Alex?"

Amos shrugged with his hands, like a Belter. "I think he might have a wee bit of a thing for our ample marine."

"You're kidding." Holden couldn't picture it. It wasn't as though Bobbie were unattractive. Far from it. But she was also very big, and quite intimidating. And Alex was such a quiet and mild guy. Sure, they were both Martians, and no matter how cosmopolitan a person got, there was something comforting in reminders of home. Maybe just being the only two Martians on the ship was enough. But Alex was pushing fifty, balding without complaint, and wore his love handles with the quiet resignation of a middle-aged man. Sergeant Draper couldn't be more than thirty and looked

like a comic book illustration, complete with muscles *on* her muscles. Unable to stop himself, his mind began trying to figure out how the two of them would fit together. It didn't work.

"Wow," was all he could say. "Is it mutual?"

"No idea," Amos replied with another shrug. "The sergeant ain't easy to read. But I don't think she'd do him any deliberate harm, if that's what you're asking. Not that, you know, we could stop her."

"Scares you too, does she?"

"Look," Amos said with a grin. "When it comes to scrapes, I'm what you might call a talented amateur. But I've gotten a good look at that woman in and out of that fancy mechanical shell she wears. She's a pro. We're not playing the same sport."

Gravity began to return in the *Rocinante*. Alex was bringing up the drive, which meant they were beginning their run to Io. Holden stood up and took a moment to let his joints adjust to the sensation of weight again. He clapped Amos on the back and said, "Well, you've got a full load of torpedoes and bullets, three Martian warships trailing you, one angry old lady in tea withdrawal, and a Martian Marine who could probably kill you with your own teeth. What do you do?"

"You tell me, Captain."

"You find someone else for them to fight."

Chapter Forty-Five

Avasarala

“As I see it, sir,” Avasarala said, “the die is already cast. We effectively have two courses of policy already in play. The question now is how we move forward. So far I’ve been able to keep the information from getting out, but once it does, it will be devastating. And since it is all but certain that the artifact is able to communicate, the chances of an effective military usage of these protomolecule-human hybrids is essentially nil. If we use this weapon, we will be creating a second Venus, committing genocide, and removing any moral argument against using weapons like accelerated asteroids against the Earth itself.

“I hope you will excuse the language, sir, but this was a cock-up from the start. The damage done to human security is literally unimaginable. It seems clear at this point that the protomolecule project under way on Venus is aware of events in the Jovian system. It’s plausible that the samples out here have the information gained from the destruction of the *Arboghost*. To say that makes our position problematic is to radically understate the case.

“If it had gone through the appropriate channels, we would not be in this position. As it stands, I have done all that is presently within my capabilities, given my situation. The coalition I have built between Mars, elements of the Belt, and the legitimate government of Earth are ready to take action. But the United Nations must distance itself from this plan and move immediately to isolate and defang the faction within the government that has been doing this weasel shit. Again, excuse the language.

“I have sent copies of the data included here to Admirals Souther and Leniki as well as to my team on the Venus problem. They are, of course, at your disposal to answer any questions if I am not available.

“I’m very sorry to put you in the position, sir, but you are going to have to choose sides in this. And quickly. Events out here have developed a momentum of their own. If you’re going to be on the right side of history on this, you must move now.”

If there's any history to be on the right side of, she thought. She tried to come up with something else that she could say, some other argument that would penetrate the layers of old-growth wood that surrounded the secretary-general's brain. There weren't any, and repeating herself in simple storybook rhyme would probably come off as condescending. She stopped the recording, cut off the last few seconds of her looking into the camera in despair, and sent it off with every high-priority flag there was and diplomatic encryption.

So this was what it came to. All of human civilization, everything it had managed, from the first cave painting to crawling up the gravity well and pressing out into the antechamber of the stars, came down to whether a man whose greatest claim to fame was that he'd been thrown in prison for writing bad poetry had the balls to back down Errinwright. The ship corrected under her, shifting like an elevator suddenly slipping its tracks. She tried to sit up, but the gimbaled couch moved. God, but she hated space travel.

"Is it going to work?"

The botanist stood in her doorway. He was stick-thin, with a slightly larger head than looked right. He wasn't built as awkwardly as a Belter, but he couldn't be mistaken for someone who'd grown to maturity living at a full gravity. Standing in her doorway, trying to find something to do with his hands, he looked awkward and lost and slightly otherworldly.

"I don't know," she said. "If I were there, it would happen the way I want it to happen. I could go squeeze a few testicles until they saw it my way. From here? Maybe. Maybe not."

"You can talk to anyone from here, though, can't you?"

"It isn't the same."

He nodded, his attention shifting inward. Despite the differences in skin color and build, the man suddenly reminded her of Michael-Jon. He had the same sense of being a half step back from everything. Only, Michael-Jon's detachment verged on autism, and Praxidike Meng was a little more visibly interested in the people around him.

"They got to Nicola," he said. "They made her say those things about me. About Mei."

"Of course they did. That's what they do. And if they wanted to, they'd have papers and police reports to back it all up, backdated and put in the databases of everywhere you ever lived."

“I hate it that people think I did that.”

Avasarala nodded, then shrugged.

“Reputation never has very much to do with reality,” she said. “I could name half a dozen paragons of virtue that are horrible, small-souled, evil people. And some of the best men I know, you’d walk out of the room if you heard their names. No one on the screen is who they are when you breathe their air.”

“Holden,” Prax said.

“Well. He’s the exception,” she said.

The botanist looked down and then up again. His expression was almost apologetic.

“Mei’s probably dead,” he said.

“You don’t believe that.”

“It’s been a long time. Even if they had her medicine, they’ve probably turned her into one of these... things.”

“You still don’t believe that,” she said. The botanist leaned forward, frowning like she’d given him a problem he couldn’t immediately solve. “Tell me it’s all right to bomb Io. I can have thirty nuclear warheads fired now. Turn off the engines, let them fly ballistic. They won’t all get through, but some will. Say the word now, and I can have Io reduced to slag before we even get there.”

“You’re right,” Prax said. And then, a moment later: “Why aren’t you doing that?”

“Do you want the real reason, or my justification?”

“Both?”

“I justify it this way,” she said. “I don’t know what is in that lab. I can’t assume that the monsters are only there, and if I destroy the place, I might be slagging the records that will let me find the missing ones. I don’t know everyone involved in this, and I don’t have proof against some of the ones I do know. It may be down there. I’ll go, I’ll find out, and then I will reduce the lab to radioactive glass afterward.”

“Those are good reasons.”

“They’re good justifications. I find them very convincing.”

“But the reason is that Mei might still be alive.”

“I don’t kill children,” she said. “Not even when it’s the right thing to do. You would be surprised how often it’s hurt my political career. People used to think I was weak until I found the trick.”

“The trick.”

“If you can make them blush, they think you’re a hard-ass,” she said.
“My husband calls it the mask.”

“Oh,” Prax said. “Thank you.”

Waiting was worse than the fear of battle. Her body wanted to move, to get away from her chair and walk through the familiar halls. The back of her mind shouted for action, movement, confrontation. She paced the ship top to bottom and back again. Her mind went through trivia about all the people she met in the halls, the small detritus from the intelligence reports she’d read. The mechanic, Amos Burton. Implicated in several murders, indicted, never tried. Took an elective vasectomy the day he was legally old enough to do so. Naomi Nagata, the engineer. Two master’s degrees. Offered full-ride scholarship for a PhD on Ceres Station and turned it down. Alex Kamal, pilot. Seven drunk and disorderlies when he was in his early twenties. Had a son on Mars he still didn’t know about. James Holden, the man without secrets. The holy fool who’d dragged the solar system into war and seemed utterly blind to the damage he caused. An idealist. The most dangerous kind of man there was. And a good man too.

She wondered whether any of it mattered.

The only real player near enough to talk to without lag turning the conversation utterly epistolary was Souther, and as he was still putatively on the same side as Nguyen and preparing to face battle with the ships protecting her, the opportunities were few and far between.

“Have you heard anything?” he asked from her terminal.

“No,” she said. “I don’t know what’s taking the fucking bobble-head so long.”

“You’re asking him to turn his back on the man he’s trusted the most.”

“And how fucking long does that take? When I did it, it was over in maybe five minutes. ‘Soren,’ I said. ‘You’re a douche bag. Get out of my sight.’ It isn’t harder than that.”

“And if he doesn’t come through?” Souther asked.

She sighed.

“Then I call you back and try talking you into going rogue.”

“Ah,” Souther said with a half smile. “And how do you see that going?”

“I don’t like my chances, but you never know. I can be damned persuasive.”

An alert popped up. A new message. From Arjun.

“I have to go,” she said. “Keep an ear to the ground or whatever the hell you do out here where the ground doesn’t mean anything.”

“Be safe, Chrisjen,” Souther said, and vanished into the green background of a dead connection.

Around her, the galley was empty. Still, someone might come in. She lifted the hem of her sari and walked to her little room, sliding her door closed before she gave her terminal permission to open the file.

Arjun was at his desk, his formal clothes on but undone at the neck and sleeves. He looked like a man just returned from a bad party. The sunlight streamed in behind him. Afternoon, then. It had been afternoon when he’d sent it. And it might still be. She touched the screen, her fingertips tracing the line of his shoulder.

“So I understand from your message that you may not come home,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the screen.

“As you imagine, I find the thought... distressing,” he said, and then a smile split his face, dancing in eyes she now saw were red with tears. “But what can I do about it? I teach poetry to graduate students. I have no power in this world. That has always been you. And so I want to offer you this. Don’t think about me. Don’t take your mind from what you’re doing on my account. And if you don’t...”

Arjun took a deep breath.

“If life transcends death, then I will seek for you there. If not, then there too.”

He looked down and then up again.

“I love you, Kiki. And I will always love you, from whatever distance.”

The message ended. Avasarala closed her eyes. Around her, the ship was as close and confining as a coffin. The small noises of it pressed in against her until she wanted to scream. Until she wanted to sleep. She let herself weep for a moment. There was nothing else to be done. She had

taken her best shot, and there was nothing to be done but meditate and worry.

Half an hour later, her terminal chimed again, waking her from troubled dreams. Errinwright. Anxiety knotted her throat. She lifted a finger to begin the playback, and then paused. She didn't want to. She didn't want to go back into that world, wear her heavy mask. She wanted to watch Arjun again. Listen to his voice.

Only, of course, Arjun had known what she would want. It was why he'd said the things he had. She started the message.

Errinwright looked angry. More than that, he looked tired. His pleasant demeanor was gone, and he was a man made entirely of salt water and threat.

"Chrisjen," he said. "I know you won't understand this, but I have been doing everything in my power to keep you and yours safe. You don't understand what you've waded into, and you are fucking things up. I wish you had had the moral courage to come to me with this before you ran off like a horny sixteen-year-old with James Holden. Honestly, if there was a better way to destroy any professional credibility you once had, I can't think what it would have been.

"I put you on the *Guanshiyin* to take you off the board because I knew that things were about to go hot. Well, they are, only you're in the middle of them and you don't understand the situation. Millions of people stand in real danger of dying badly because of your egotism. You're one of them. Arjun's another. And your daughter. All of them are in threat now because of *you*."

In the image, Errinwright clasped his hands together, pressing his knuckles against his lower lip, the platonic ideal of a scolding father.

"If you come back now, I might—might—be able to save you. Not your career. That's gone. Forget it. Everyone down here sees that you're working with the OPA and Mars. Everyone thinks you've betrayed us, and I can't undo that. Your life and your family. That's all I can salvage. But you have to get away from this circus you've started, and you have to do it now.

"Time's short, Chrisjen. Everything important to you hangs in the balance, and I cannot help you if you don't help yourself. Not with this.

"It's last-chance time. Ignore me now, and the next time we talk, someone will have died."

The message ended. She started it again, and then a third time. Her grin felt feral.

She found Bobbie in the ops deck with the pilot, Alex. They stopped talking as she came in, a question in Bobbie's expression. Avasarala held up a finger and switched the video feed to display on the ship monitors. Errinwright came to life. On the big screens, she could see his pores and the individual hairs in his eyebrows. As he spoke, Avasarala saw Alex and Bobbie grow sober, leaning in toward the screen as if they were all at a poker table and coming to the end of a high-stakes hand.

"All right," Bobbie said. "What do we do?"

"We break out the fucking champagne," Avasarala said. "What did he just tell us? There is nothing in that message. Nothing. He is walking around his words like they've got poisoned spikes on them. And what's he got? Threats. No one makes threats."

"Wait," Alex said. "That was a good sign?"

"That was excellent," Avasarala said, and then something else, something small, fell into place in the back of her mind and she started laughing and cursing at the same time.

"What? What is it?"

"If life transcends death, then I will seek for you there. If not, then there too," she said. "It's a fucking haiku. That man has a one-track mind and one train on it. Poetry. Save me from poetry."

They didn't understand, but they didn't need to. The real message came five hours later. It came on a public newsfeed, and it was delivered by Secretary-General Esteban Sorrento-Gillis. The old man was brilliant at looking somber and energetic at the same time. If he hadn't been the executive of the largest governing body in the history of the human race, he'd have made a killing promoting health drinks.

The whole crew had gathered by now—Amos, Naomi, Holden, Alex. Even Prax. They were sandwiched into the ops deck, their combined breaths just slightly overloading the recyclers and giving the deck a feeling of barn heat. All eyes were on the screen as the secretary-general took the podium.

"I have come here tonight to announce the immediate formation of an investigative committee. Accusations have been made that some individuals within the governing body of the United Nations and its military forces have taken unauthorized and possibly illegal steps in dealing with certain

private contractors. If these accusations are true, they must be addressed in the most expedient possible manner. And if unfounded, they must be dispelled and those responsible for spreading these lies called to account.

“I need not remind you all of the years I spent as a political prisoner.”

“Oh fuck me,” Avasarala said, clapping her hands in glee. “He’s using the outsider speech. That man’s asshole must be tight enough right now to bend space.”

“I have dedicated my terms as secretary-general to rooting out corruption, and as long as I have this gavel, I shall continue to do so. Our world and the solar system we all share must be assured that the United Nations honors the ethical, moral, and spiritual values that hold us all together as a species.”

On the feed, Esteban Sorrento-Gillis nodded, turned, and strode away in a clamor of unacknowledged questions, and the commentators flowed into the space, talking over each other in all the political opinions of the spectrum.

“Okay,” Holden said. “So did he actually say anything?”

“He said Errinwright is finished,” Avasarala said. “If he had any influence left at all, that announcement would never have been made. *Goddamn*, I wish I was there.”

Errinwright was off the board. All that left was Nguyen, Mao, Strickland or whoever he was, their half-controlled protomolecule warriors, and the building threat of Venus. She let a long breath rattle through her throat and the spaces behind her nose.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said, “I have just solved our smallest problem.”

Chapter Fourty-Six

Bobbie

One of Bobbie's most vivid memories was of the day she got her orders to report to the 2nd Expeditionary Force Spec War training facility. Force Recon. The top of the heap for a Martian ground pounder. In boot camp, they'd trained with a Force Recon sergeant. He'd been wearing a suit of gleaming red power armor, and they'd watched him demonstrate its use in a variety of tactical situations. At the end, he'd told them that the top four boots from her class would be transferred to the Spec War facility on the slopes of Hecates Tholus and trained to wear the armor and join the baddest fighting unit in the solar system.

She decided that meant her.

Determined to win one of those four coveted slots, she'd thrown herself into her boot camp training with everything she had. It turned out that was quite a lot. Not only did she make it into the top four, she was number one by an embarrassing margin. And then the letter came, ordering her to report to Hecate Base for recon training, and it was all worth it. She called her father and just screamed for two minutes. When he finally got her to calm down and tell him what she was calling about, he screamed back for even longer. *You're one of the best now, baby*, he'd said at the end, and the warmth those words put in her heart had never really faded.

Even now, sitting on the gray metal deck in the dirty machine shop on a stolen Martian warship. Even with all her mates torn into pieces and scattered across the frozen surface of Ganymede. Even with her military status in limbo and her loyalty to her nation justifiably in question. Even with all that, *You're one of the best now, baby* made her smile. She felt an ache to call her father and tell him what had happened. They'd always been close, and when neither of her brothers had followed in his footsteps by choosing a military career, she had. It had just strengthened the connection. She knew he'd understand what it was costing her to turn her back on everything she held sacred to avenge her team.

And she had a powerful premonition she'd never see him again.

Even if they made it through to Jupiter with half the UN fleet hunting them, and even if when they got there, Admiral Nguyen and the dozen or more ships he controlled didn't immediately blow them out of the sky, and even if they managed to stop whatever was happening in orbit around Io with the *Rocinante* intact, Holden was still planning to land and save Prax's daughter.

The monsters would be there.

She knew it as surely as she'd ever known anything in her life. Each night she dreamed of facing it again. The thing flexing its long fingers and staring at her with its too-large glowing blue eyes, ready to finish what it had started all those months earlier on Ganymede. In her dream, she raised a gun that grew out of her hand, and started shooting it as it ran toward her, black spiderwebs spilling from holes that closed like water. She always woke before it reached her, but she knew how the dream would end: with her shattered body left cooling on the ice. She also knew that when Holden led his team down to the laboratories on Io where the monsters were made, she'd go along with him. The scene from her dream would play out in real life. She knew it like she knew her father's love. She welcomed it.

On the floor around her lay the pieces of her armor. With weeks of travel on the way to Io, she had time to completely strip and refit it. The *Rocinante's* machine shop was well stocked, and the tools were of Martian make. It was the perfect location. The suit had seen a lot of use without much maintenance, but if she was being honest with herself, the distraction was the payoff. A suit of Martian reconnaissance armor was an incredibly complex machine, finely tuned to its wearer. Stripping and reassembling it wasn't a trivial task. It required full concentration. Every moment she spent working on it was another moment when she didn't think about the monster waiting to kill her on Io.

Sadly, that distraction was over now. She'd finished with the maintenance, even finding the micro-fracture in a tiny valve that was causing the slow but persistent leak of fluid in the suit's knee actuator. It was time to just put it all back together. It had the feeling of ritual. A final cleansing before going out to meet death on the battlefield.

I've watched too many Kurosawa movies, she thought, but couldn't quite abandon the idea. The imagery was a lovely way of turning angst and suicidal ideation into honor and noble sacrifice.

She picked up the torso assembly and carefully wiped it off with a damp cloth, removing the last bits of dust and machine oil that clung to the outside. The smell of metal and lubricant filled the air. And while she bolted armor plating back onto the frame, the red enameled surface covered with a thousand dings and scratches, she stopped fighting the urge to ritualize the task and just let it happen. She was very likely assembling her death shroud. Depending on how the final battle went, this ceramic and rubber and alloy might house her corpse for the rest of eternity.

She flipped the torso assembly over and began working on the back. A long gouge in the enamel showed the violence of her passage across Ganymede's ice when the monster had self-destructed right in front of her. She picked up a wrench, then put it back down, tapping on the deck with her knuckle.

Why then?

Why had the monster blown itself up at that moment? She remembered the way it had started to shift, new limbs bursting from its body as it watched her. If Prax was right, that was the moment the constraint systems that Mao's scientists had installed failed. And they'd set the bomb up to detonate if the creature was getting out of their control. But that just pushed the question one level back. Why had their control over the creature's physiology failed at that precise moment? Prax said that regenerative processes were a good place for constraint systems to fail. And her platoon had riddled the creature with gunfire as it had charged their lines. It hadn't seemed to hurt it at the time, but each wound represented a sudden burst of activity inside the creature's cells, or whatever it had in place of cells, as the monster healed. Each was a chance for the new growth to slip the leash.

Maybe that was the answer. *Don't try to kill the monster. Just damage it enough that the program starts to break down and the self-destruct kicks in.* She wouldn't even have to survive, just last long enough to harm the monster beyond its ability to safely repair itself. All she needed was enough time to really hurt it.

She put down the armor plate she was working on and picked up the helmet. The suit's memory still had the gun camera footage of the fight on it. She hadn't watched it again after Avasarala's presentation to the crew of the *Roci*. She hadn't been able to.

She pushed herself to her feet and hit the comm panel on the wall. "Hey, Naomi? You in ops?"

“Yep,” Naomi said after a few seconds. “You need something, Sergeant?”

“Do you think you can tell the *Roci* to talk to my helmet? I’ve got the radio on, but it won’t talk to civilian stuff. This is one of our boats, so I figure the *Roci* has the keys and codes.”

There was a long pause, so Bobbie put the helmet on a worktable next to the closest wall monitor and waited.

“I’m seeing a radio node that the *Roci* is calling ‘MCR MR Goliath III 24397A15.’”

“That’s me,” Bobbie said. “Can you send control of that node down to the panel in the machine shop?”

“Done,” Naomi said after a second.

“Thanks,” Bobbie said, and killed the comm. It took her a moment to re-familiarize herself with the Martian military video software, and to convince the system to use out-of-date data-unpacking algorithms. After a few false starts, the raw gun camera footage from her fight on Ganymede was playing on the screen. She set it to endless loop and sat back down on the deck with her suit.

She finished bolting the back armor on and began attaching the torso’s power supply and main hydraulic system during the first play-through. She tried not to feel anything about the images on screen, nor to attach any significance to them or think of them as a puzzle to be solved. She just concentrated on her work on the suit with her mind and let her subconscious chew on the data from the screen.

The distraction caused her to redo things occasionally as she worked, but that was fine. She wasn’t on a deadline. She finished attaching the power supply and main motors. Green lights lit up on the hand terminal she had plugged into the suit’s brain. On the wall screen by her helmet, a UN soldier was hurled across the surface of Ganymede at her. A confusion of images as she dodged away. When the image steadied, both the UN Marine and her friend Tev Hillman were gone.

Bobbie picked up an arm assembly and began reattaching it to the torso. The monster had picked up a soldier in a suit of armor comparable to her own and then thrown him with enough force to kill instantly. There was no defense against that kind of strength except not to get hit. She concentrated on putting the arm back together.

When she looked up at the screen again, the feed had restarted. The monster was running across the ice, chasing the UN soldiers. It killed one of them. The Bobbie on the video began firing, followed by her entire platoon opening up.

The creature was fast. But when the UN soldiers suddenly turned to open a firing lane for the Martians, the creature didn't react quickly. So maybe fast in a straight line, but not a lot of lateral speed. That might be useful. The video caught up again to the UN soldier being thrown into Private Hillman. The creature reacted to gunfire, to injuries, even though they didn't slow it down. She thought back to the video she'd seen of Holden and Amos engaging the creature in the *Rocinante's* cargo hold. It had largely ignored them until Amos started shooting it, and then it had erupted into violence.

But the first creature had attacked the UN troop station. So at least to some degree, they could be directed. Given orders. Once they no longer had orders, they seemed to lapse into a default state of trying to get increased energy and break the constraints. While in that state, they ignored pretty much everything but food and violence. The next time she ran into one, unless it had specifically been ordered to attack her, she could probably pick her own battleground, draw it to her where she wanted to be. That was useful too.

She finished attaching the arm assembly and tested it. Greens across the board. Even if she wasn't sure whom she was working for, at least she hadn't forgotten how to do her job.

On the screen, the monster ran up the side of the big mech *Yojimbo* and tore the pilot's hatch off. Sa'id, the pilot, was hurled away. Again with the ripping and throwing. It made sense. With a combination like enormous strength and virtual immunity to ballistic damage as your tool set, running straight at your opponent, then ripping them in two was a pretty winning strategy. Throwing heavy objects at lethal speeds went hand in hand with the strength. And kinetic energy was a bitch. Armor might deflect bullets or lasers, and it might help cushion impacts, but no one had ever made armor that could shrug off all the kinetic energy imparted by a large mass moving at high speed. At least not in something a human could wear. If you were strong enough, a garbage Dumpster was better than a gun.

So when the monster attacked, it ran straight at its enemy, hoping to get a grip on them, which pretty much ended the fight. If it couldn't do that,

it tried to hurl heavy objects at the opponent. The one in the cargo bay had nearly killed Jim Holden by throwing a massive crate. Unfortunately, her armor had a lot of the same restrictions it had. While it made her very fast when she wanted to be, it was not particularly good at lateral movement. Most things built for speed weren't. Cheetahs and horses didn't do a lot of sideways running. She was strong in her suit, but not nearly as strong as it was. She did have an advantage with firearms in that she could run away from the creature while continuing to attack from range. The creature couldn't throw a massive object at her without stopping and anchoring itself. It might be ungodly strong, but it still only weighed what it weighed, and Newton had a few things to say about a light object throwing a heavy one.

By the time she'd finished assembling her suit, she'd watched the video over a hundred times, and the tactics of the fight were starting to take shape in her head. In hand-to-hand combat training, she'd been able to overpower most of her opponents. But the small and quick fighters, the ones who knew how to stick-and-move, gave her trouble. That was who she'd be in this fight. She'd have to hit and run, never stopping for a moment. And even then she'd need a lot of luck, because she was fighting way out of her weight class, and one shot from the monster was a guaranteed knockout.

Her other advantage was that she didn't really have to *win*. She just had to do enough damage to make the monster kill itself. By the time she'd climbed into her newly refurbished suit and let it close around her for a final test, she was pretty sure she could do that.

Bobbie thought her newfound peace about the battle to come would finally let her sleep, but after three hours of tossing and turning in her rack, she gave up. Something still itched at the back of her head. She was trying to find her *Bushido*, and there were still too many things she couldn't let go of. Something wasn't giving her permission yet.

So she pulled on a large fuzzy bathrobe she'd stolen from the *Guanshiyin*, and rode the ladder-lift up toward the ops deck. It was third watch, so the ship was deserted. Holden and Naomi had a cabin together, and she found herself envying that human contact right now. Something

certain to cling to amid all the other uncertainty. Avasarala was in her borrowed cabin, probably sending messages to people back on Earth. Alex would be asleep in his room, and for a brief moment she considered waking him. She liked the gregarious pilot. He was genuine in a way she hadn't seen much of since leaving active duty. But she also knew that waking a man up at three a.m. while in her bathrobe sent signals she didn't intend. Rather than try to explain that she just needed to talk to someone, she passed the crew deck by and kept going.

Amos was sitting at a station in ops with his back to her, taking the late watch. To avoid startling him, she cleared her throat. He didn't move or react, so she walked to the comm station. Looking back at him, she saw that his eyes were closed and his breathing was very deep and regular. Sleeping on a duty watch would get you captain's mast, at the least, on an MCRN ship. It seemed Holden had let discipline lapse a bit since his Navy days.

Bobbie opened up the comms and found the closest relay for tightbeam traffic. First she called her father. "Hi, Pop. Not sure you should try and answer this. The situation here is volatile and evolving rapidly. But you may hear a lot of crazy shit over the next few days. Some of it might be about me. Just know that I love you guys, and I love Mars. Everything I did was to try and protect you and my home. I might have lost my way a little bit, because things got complicated and hard to figure out. But I think I see a clear path now, and I'm going to take it. I love you and Mom. Tell the boys they suck." Before she turned off the recording, she reached out and touched the screen. "Bye, Dad."

She pressed send, but something still felt incomplete. Outside her family, anyone who'd tried to help her in the last three months was sitting on the same ship she was, so it didn't make sense.

Except, of course, that it did. Because not *everyone* was on this ship.

Bobbie punched up another number from memory and said, "Hi, Captain Martens. It's me. I think I know what you were trying to help me see. I wasn't ready for it then, but it stuck with me. So you didn't waste your time. I get it now. I know this wasn't my fault. I know I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm going back to the start now *because* I understand. Not angry, not hurt, not blaming myself. Just my duty to finish the fight."

Something loosened in her chest the moment she hit the send button. All the threads had been neatly tied up, and now she could go to Io and do

what she needed to do without regret. She let out a long sigh and slid down in the crash couch until she was almost prone. She suddenly felt bone tired. Like she could sleep for a week. She wondered if anyone would get mad if she just crashed out in ops instead of going all the way back down the lift.

She didn't remember having fallen asleep, but here she was stretched out in the comm station's crash couch, a small puddle of drool next to her head. To her relief, her robe seemed to have remained mostly in place, so at least she hadn't bare-assed everyone walking through.

"Gunny?" Holden said in a tone of voice that meant he was saying it again. He was standing over her, a concerned look on his face.

"Sorry, sorry," she said, sitting up and pulling her robe more tightly around her middle. "I needed to send out some messages last night. Must have been more tired than I thought."

"Yeah," Holden said. "It's no problem. Sleep wherever you like."

"Okay," Bobbie said, backing toward the crew ladder. "With that, I think I'll go down and take a shower and try to turn back into a human."

Holden nodded as she went, a strange smile on his face. "Sure. Meet me in the machine shop when you're dressed."

"Roger that," she said, and bolted down the ladder.

After a decadently long shower and a change into her clean red-and-gray utility uniform, she grabbed a cup of coffee from the galley and made her way back down to the machine shop. Holden was already there. He had a crate the size of a guitar case sitting on one of the workbenches, and a larger square crate next to his feet on the deck. When she entered the compartment, he patted the crate on the table. "This is for you. I saw when you came on board that you seemed to be missing yours."

Bobbie hesitated a moment, then walked over to the crate and flipped it open. Inside sat a 2mm electrically fired three-barrel Gatling gun, of the type the Marines designated a Thunderbolt Mark V. It was new and shiny and exactly the type that would fit into her suit.

"This is amazing," Bobbie said after catching her breath. "But it's just an awkward club without ammo."

Holden kicked the crate on the floor. "Five thousand rounds of two-millimeter caseless. Incendiary-tipped."

“Incendiary?”

“You forget, I’ve seen the monster up close too. Armor piercing doesn’t help at all. If anything, it reduces soft-tissue damage. But since the lab stuck an incendiary bomb into all of them, I figure that means they aren’t fireproof.”

Bobbie lifted the heavy weapon out of the crate and put it on the floor next to her newly reassembled suit.

“Oh, *hell* yes.”

Chapter Fourty-Seven

Holden

Holden sat at the combat control console on the operations deck and watched Ragnarok gather. Admiral Souther, who Avasarala had assured everyone was one of the good guys, had joined his ships with their small but growing fleet of Martians as they sped toward Io. Waiting for them in orbit around that moon were the dozen ships in Admiral Nguyen's fleet. More Martian and UN ships sped toward that location from Saturn and the Belt. By the time everyone got there, there would be something like thirty-five capital ships in the kill zone, and dozens of smaller interceptors and corvettes, like the *Rocinante*.

Three dozen capital ships. Holden tried to remember if there had ever been a fleet action of this size, and couldn't think of one. Including Admiral Nguyen's and Admiral Souther's flagships, there would be four *Truman-class* UN dreadnoughts in the final tally, and the Martians would have three *Donnager-class* battleships of their own, any one of which could depopulate a planet. The rest would be a mix of cruisers and destroyers. Not quite the heavy hitters the battleships were, but plenty powerful enough to vaporize the *Rocinante*. Which, if he was being honest, was the part Holden was most worried about.

On paper, his team had the most ships. With Souther and the Martians joining forces, they outnumbered the Nguyen contingent two to one. But how many Earth ships would be willing to fire on their own, just because one admiral and a banished politician said so? It was entirely possible that if actual shooting started, a lot of UN ships might have unexplained comm failures and wait to see how it all came out. And that wasn't the worst case. The worst case was that a number of Souther's ships would switch sides once Martians starting killing Earthers. The fight could turn into a whole lot of people pointing guns at each other, with no one knowing whom to trust.

It could turn into a bloodbath.

"We have twice as many ships," Avasarala said from her constant perch at the comm station. Holden almost objected but changed his mind. In

the end, it wouldn't matter. Avasarala would believe what she wanted to believe. She needed to think all her efforts had been worthwhile, that they were about to pay off when the fleet arrived and this Nguyen clown surrendered to her obviously superior force. The truth was her version wasn't any more or less a fantasy than his. No one would know for sure until everyone knew for sure.

"How long now?" Avasarala said, then sipped at the bulb of weak coffee she'd started making for herself in place of tea.

Holden considered pointing out the navigation information the *Roci* made available at every console, and then didn't. Avasarala didn't want him to show her how to find it herself. She wanted him to tell her. She wasn't accustomed to pressing her own buttons. In her mind, she outranked him. Holden wondered what the chain of command actually looked like in this situation. How many illegal captains of stolen ships did it take to equal one disgraced UN official? That could tie a courtroom up for a few decades.

He also wasn't being fair to Avasarala. It wasn't about making him take her orders, not really. It was about being in a situation that she was utterly untrained for, where she was the least useful person in the room and trying to assert some control. Trying to reshape the space around her to fit with her mental image of herself.

Or maybe she just needed to hear a voice.

"Eighteen hours now," Holden said. "Most of the other ships that aren't part of our fleet will beat us there. And the ones that don't won't show up until it's over, so we can ignore them."

"Eighteen hours," Avasarala said. There was something like awe in her voice. "Space is too fucking big. It's the same old story."

He'd guessed right. She just wanted to talk, so he let her. "What story?"

"Empire. Every empire grows until its reach exceeds its grasp. We started out fighting over who got the best branches in one tree. Then we climb down and fight over a few kilometers' worth of trees. Then someone starts riding horses, and you get empires of hundreds or thousands of kilometers. Ships open up empire expansion across the oceans. The Epstein drive gave us the outer planets..."

She trailed off and tapped out something on the comm panel. She didn't volunteer who she was sending messages to, and Holden didn't ask. When she was done, she said, "But the story is always the same. No matter

how good your technology is, at some point you'll conquer territory that you can't hold on to."

"You're talking about the outer planets?"

"Not specifically," she said, her voice growing soft and thoughtful. "I'm talking about the entire fucking concept of empire. The Brits couldn't hold on to India or North America because why should people listen to a king who's six thousand kilometers away?"

Holden tinkered with the air-circulation nozzle on his panel, aiming it at his face. The cool air smelled faintly of ozone and oil. "Logistics is always a problem."

"No kidding. Taking a dangerous trip six thousand kilometers across the Atlantic so you can fight with colonists gives the enemy one hell of a home-court advantage."

"At least," Holden said, "we Earthers figured that out before we picked a fight with Mars. It's even further. And sometimes the sun is in the way."

"Some people have never forgiven us for not humbling Mars when we had the chance," Avasarala said. "I work for a few of them. Fucking idiots."

"I thought the point of your story was that those people always lose in the end."

"Those people," she said, pushing herself to her feet and slowly heading toward the crew ladder, "are not the real problem. Venus might be housing the advance party of the first empire whose grasp is as long as its reach. And this fucking protomolecule has exposed us for the petty, small-town bosses we are. We're getting ready to trade our solar system away because we thought we could build airports out of bamboo and summon the cargo."

"Get some sleep," Holden said to her while she called up the ladder-lift. "We'll defeat one empire at a time."

"Maybe," she said as she dropped out of sight, and the deck hatch banged shut behind her.

"Why isn't anyone shooting?" Prax said. He'd come up to the operations deck trailing after Naomi like a lost child. Now he was sitting at one of the many unused crash couches. He stared up at the main screen, his face a mix of fear and fascination.

The big tactical display showed a muddled mass of red and green dots representing the three dozen capital ships parked in orbit around Io. The *Roci* had marked all the Earth ships green and the Martian ships red. It created a confusing simplicity out of what was in actuality a far more complex situation. Holden knew that friend-or-foe identification was going to be a problem if anyone started shooting.

For now, the various ships drifted quietly above Io, their enormous threat merely implied. They made Holden think of the crocodiles he'd seen at the zoo as a child. Huge, armored, filled with teeth, but drifting on the surface of the water like statues. Not even their eyes blinking. When food had been thrown into the pen, they'd exploded out of the water with frightening speed.

We're just waiting for some blood to hit the water.

"Why isn't anyone shooting?" Prax repeated.

"Hey, Doc," Amos said. He was lounging in one of the crash couches next to Prax. He projected a calm laziness that Holden wished he himself felt. "Remember how on Ganymede we were facing down those guys with guns and no one was shooting right up until you decided to cock your gun?"

Prax blanched. Holden guessed he was remembering the bloody aftermath of that fight. "Yes," Prax said. "I remember."

"This is like that," Amos said. "Only no one's cocked their gun just yet."

Prax nodded. "Okay."

If someone finally did break the whole situation loose, Holden knew that figuring out who was shooting at whom would be their first problem. "Avasarala, any word yet on the political landscape? There's a whole lot of green on that board. How many of those dots belong to us?"

Avasarala shrugged and went on listening to the ship-to-ship cross talk.

"Naomi?" Holden said. "Any ideas?"

"So far Nguyen's fleet is targeting only Martian ships," she replied, marking ships on the main tactical board for everyone to see. "The Martian ships are targeting back. Souther's ships aren't targeting anyone, and Souther hasn't even opened his tubes. I'm guessing he's still hoping for a peaceful resolution."

"Please send the intel officer on Souther's ship my compliments," Holden said to Naomi. "And ask him to get us some new IFF data so this doesn't turn into the solar system's biggest clusterfuck."

“Done,” Naomi said, and made the call.

“Get everyone buttoned up in their suits, Amos,” Holden continued. “Do a hat check here before you go below. I hope we don’t start shooting, but what I hope will happen and what actually happens are almost never the same.”

“Roger,” Amos said, then climbed out of his couch and began clumping around the deck on magnetic boots, checking the seals on everyone’s helmets.

“Test test test,” Holden said over the crew radio. One by one everyone on the ship responded with the affirmative. Until someone with a higher pay grade than his decided which way things were going to go, there wasn’t much else he could do.

“Wait,” Avasarala said, then hit a button on her console, and an outside channel started playing on their suit radios.

“—launch immediately against targets on Mars. We have a battery of missiles carrying a lethal biological weapon ready to fire. You have one hour to leave Io orbit or we will launch immediately against targets on Mars. We have a—”

Avasarala turned the channel off again.

“It seems a third party has joined the circle jerk,” Amos said.

“No,” Avasarala replied. “It’s Nguyen. He’s outnumbered, so he’s ordered his Mao cronies on the surface to make the threat to back us off. He’ll—Oh, shit.”

She hit her panel again and a new voice spoke over the radio. This one was a woman’s voice with a cultured Martian accent.

“Io, this is Admiral Muhan of the Martian Congressional Republic Navy. You fire anything bigger than a bottle rocket and we will glass the whole fucking moon. Do you read me?”

Amos leaned over to Prax. “Now, you see, all this is them cocking their guns.”

Prax nodded. “Got it.”

“This,” Holden said, listening to the barely restrained fury in the Martian admiral’s voice, “is about to get seriously out of hand.”

“This is Admiral Nguyen aboard the UNN *Agatha King*,” a new voice said. “Admiral Souther is here illegally, at the behest of a civilian UN official with no military authority. I hereby order all ships under Admiral Souther’s command to immediately stand down. I further order that the

captain of Souther's flagship place the admiral under arrest for treason and —"

"Oh, do shut up," Souther replied over the same channel. "I'm here as part of a legal fact-finding mission regarding improper use of UN funds and material for a secret biological weapon project on Io. A project which Admiral Nguyen is directly responsible for in contravention of UN directives—"

Avasarala cut the link.

"Oh, this ain't good," Alex said.

"Well," Avasarala said, then opened the faceplate on her helmet and let out a long sigh. She opened her purse and pulled a pistachio out of it. She cracked it and thoughtfully ate the meat, then put the shell in the nearby recycling chute. A tiny bit of the skin floated away in the microgravity. "No, actually, it should be fine. This is all posturing. As long as they keep comparing dicks, no one will shoot."

"But we can't just wait here," Prax said, shaking his head. Amos was floating in front of him, checking his helmet. Prax shoved him away and tried to get to his feet. He drifted away from his crash couch but didn't think to turn on his boot mags. "If Mei is down there, we have to go. They're talking about glassing the moon. We have to get there before they do it."

There was a high violin-string whine at the back of Prax's voice. The tension was getting to him. It was getting to all of them, but Prax was the one who was going to show it worst and first. Holden shot a look at Amos, but the big man just looked surprised at having been pushed away by the much smaller scientist.

"They're talking about destroying the base. We have to go down there!" Prax continued, the panic in his voice starting to shine through.

"We're not doing anything," Holden said. "Not until we have a better idea how this is going to shake out."

"We came all this way so that we can not do anything?" Prax demanded.

"Doc, we don't want to be the ones to move first," Amos said, and put a hand on Prax's shoulder, pulling him back down to the deck. The little botanist violently shrugged it off without turning around, then shoved off his couch toward Avasarala.

"Give me the channel. Let me talk to them," Prax said, reaching for her comm panel. "I can—"

Holden launched himself out of his crash couch, catching the scientist mid-flight and hurling them both across the deck and into the bulkhead. The thick layer of anti-spalling padding absorbed their impact, but Holden felt the air go out of Prax when his hip slammed into the smaller man's belly.

"Gah," Prax said, and curled up into a floating fetal ball.

Holden kicked on his boot mags and pushed himself down to the deck. He grabbed Prax and pushed him across the compartment to Amos. "Take him below, stuff him in his bunk, and sedate the shit out of him. Then get to engineering and get us ready for a fight."

Amos nodded and grabbed the floating Prax. "Okay." A moment later the two of them disappeared down the deck hatch.

Holden looked around the room, seeing the shocked looks from Avasarala and Naomi but ignoring them. Prax's need for his daughter to take precedence over everything else had almost put them all in danger again. And while Holden intellectually understood the man's drive, having to stop him from killing them all every time Mei's name came up was stress he didn't need right then. It left him angry and needing to snap at someone.

"Where the hell is Bobbie?" he said to no one in particular. He hadn't seen her since they had put in to orbit around Io.

"Just saw her in the machine shop," Amos replied over the radio. "She was fieldstripping my shotgun. I think she's doing all the guns and armor."

"That's—" Holden started, ready to yell about something. "That's actually really helpful. Tell her to button up her suit and turn her radio on. Things might be going south in a hurry here."

He took a few seconds to breathe and calm himself down, then returned to the combat operations station.

"You okay?" Naomi asked over their private channel.

"No," he said, chinning the button to make sure only she heard his reply. "No, I'm actually scared to death."

"I thought we were past that."

"Past being scared?"

"No," she said, the smile audible in her voice. "Past blaming yourself for it. I'm scared too."

"I love you," Holden said, feeling that same electric thrill he always got when he told her, part fear, part boast.

"You should probably keep your eye on your station," she said, her tone teasing. She never told him she loved him when he said it first. She'd

said that when people did it too often, it made the word lose all its power. He understood the argument, but he'd kind of hoped she'd break her rule this once. He needed to hear it.

Avasarala was hunched over the comm station like an ancient mystic peering into a murky crystal ball. The space suit hung on her like a scarecrow's oversized coveralls. Holden considered ordering her to button up her helmet, then shrugged. She was old enough to decide for herself the relative risks and rewards of eating during a battle.

Periodically she reached into her purse and pulled out another nut. The air around her was a growing cloud of tiny pieces of pistachio skin. It was annoying to watch her cluttering up his ship, but no warship was built so fragile that a little airborne waste would break anything. Either the tiny pieces of shell would be sucked into the air recycling system and trapped by the filters, or they'd go under thrust and all the garbage would fall to the floor, where they could sweep it up. Holden wondered if Avasarala had ever had to clean anything in her life.

While he watched her, the old lady cocked her head to one side, listening with sudden interest to something only she could hear. Her hand darted forward, bird quick, to tap at the screen. A new voice came over the ship's radios, this one with the faint hiss transmissions picked up when traveling for millions of kilometers through space.

"—eneral Esteban Sorrento-Gillis. Some time ago, I announced the formation of an exploratory committee to look into possible misuse of UN resources for illegal biological weapon research. While that investigation is ongoing, and the committee is not prepared to bring charges at this time, in the interests of public safety and to better facilitate a thorough and comprehensive investigation, certain UN personnel in key positions are to be recalled to Earth for questioning. First, Admiral Augusto Nguyen, of the United Nations Navy. Second—"

Avasarala hit the panel to shut off the feed and stared at the console with her mouth open for several seconds. "Oh, fuck me."

All over the ship, alarms started blaring.

Chapter Fourty-Eight

Avasarala

“I’ve got fast movers,” Naomi said over the blaring alarms. “The UN flagship is firing.”

Avasarala closed her helmet, watching the in-suit display confirm the seal, then tapped at the communications console, her mind moving faster than her hands. Errinwright had cut a deal, and now Nguyen knew it. The admiral had just been hung out to dry, and he was taking it poorly. A flag popped up on the console: incoming high-priority broadcast. She thumbed it, and Souther appeared on her terminal and every other one in the ops deck.

“This is Admiral Souther. I am hereby taking command of—”

“Okay,” Naomi said. “I need my real screen back now. Got some work to do.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Avasarala said, tapping at the console. “Wrong button.”

“—this task force. Admiral Nguyen is relieved of duty. Any hostilities will be—”

Avasarala switched the feed to her own screen and in the process switched to a different broadcast. Nguyen was flushed almost purple. He was wearing his uniform like a boast.

“—illegal and unprecedented seizure. Admiral Souther is to be escorted to the brig until—”

Five incoming comm requests lit up, each listing a name and short-form transponder ID. She ignored them all for the broadcast controls. As soon as the live button went active, she looked into the camera.

“This is Assistant Undersecretary Chrisjen Avasarala, representing the civilian government of Earth,” she said. “Legal and appropriate command of this force is given to Admiral Souther. Anyone rejecting or ignoring his orders will be subject to legal action. I repeat, Admiral Souther is in legally authorized command of—”

Naomi made a low grunting sound. Avasarala stopped the broadcast and turned.

“Okay,” Holden said. “That was bad.”

“What?” Avasarala said. “What was bad?”

“One of the Earth ships just took three torpedo hits.”

“It that a lot?”

“The PDCs aren’t stopping them,” Naomi said. “Those UN torpedoes all have transponder codes that mark them as friends, so they’re sailing right through. They typically don’t expect to be getting shot at by other UN ships.”

“Three is a lot,” Holden said, strapping into the crash couch. She didn’t see him touch any of the controls, but he must have, because when he spoke, it echoed through the ship as well as the speakers in her helmet. “We have just gone live. Everyone has to the count of twenty to get strapped in someplace safe.”

“Solid copy on that,” Bobbie replied from wherever she was on the ship.

“Just got the doc strapped in and happy,” Amos said. “I’m on my way to engineering.”

“Are we heading into this?” Alex asked.

“We’ve got something like thirty-five capital ships out there, all of them much, much bigger than us. How about we just try to keep anyone from shooting us full of holes.”

“Yes, sir,” Alex said from the pilot’s deck. Any vestige of democracy and vote taking was gone. That was a good thing. At least Holden had control when there had to be a single voice in command.

“I have two fast movers coming in,” Naomi said. “Someone still thinks we’re the bad guys.”

“I blame Avasarala,” Bobbie said.

Before Avasarala could laugh, gravity ticked up and slewed to the side, the *Rocinante* taking action beneath her. Her couch shifted and creaked. The protective gel squeezed her and let her go.

“Alex?”

“On ’em,” Alex said. “I wouldn’t mind getting a real gunner, sir.”

“Are we going to have enough time to get her up here safely?”

“Nope,” Alex said. “I’ve got three more incoming.”

“I can take PDC control from here, sir,” Bobbie said. “It’s not the real thing, but it’s something the rest of you won’t have to do.”

“Naomi, give the PDCs to the sergeant.”

“PDC control transferred. It’s all yours, Bobbie.”

“Taking control,” Bobbie said.

Avasarala’s screen was a tangle of incoming messages in a flickering array. She started going through them. The *Kennedy* was announcing that Souther’s command was illegal. The *Triton*’s first officer was reporting that the captain had been relieved of duty, and requested orders from Souther. The Martian destroyer *Iani Chaos* was trying to reach Avasarala for clarification of which Earth ships it was permitted to shoot at.

She pulled up the tactical display. Circles in red and green marked the swarm of ships; tiny silver threads showed what might have been streams of PDC fire or the paths of torpedoes.

“Are we red or green?” Avasarala asked. “Who’s who on this fucking thing?”

“Mars is red, Earth is green,” Naomi said.

“And which Earth ones are on our side?”

“Find out,” Holden said as one of the green dots suddenly vanished. “Alex?”

“The *Darius* took the safeties off its PDCs, and now it’s spraying down everything in range whether it’s friend or foe. And... shit.”

Avasarala’s chair shifted again, seeming to rise from under her, pressing her back into the gel until it was hard to lift her arms. On the tactical screen, the cloud of ships, enemy and friendly and ambiguous, shifted slightly, and two golden dots grew larger, proximity notations beside them counting quickly down.

“Madam Assistant whatever you are,” Holden said, “you could respond to some of those comm requests now.”

Avasarala’s gut felt like someone was squeezing it from below. The taste of salt and stomach acid haunted the back of her tongue. She was beginning to sweat in a way that had less to do with temperature than nausea. She forced her hands out to the control panel just as the two golden dots vanished.

“Thank you, Bobbie,” Alex said. “I’m heading up. Gonna try to get the Martians between us and the fighting.”

She started making calls. In the heat of a battle, all she had to offer was this: making calls. Talking. The same things she always did. Something about it was actually reassuring. The *Greenville* was accepting Souther’s

command. The *Tanaka* wasn't responding. The *Dyson* opened the channel, but the only sound was men shouting at each other. It was bedlam.

A message came in from Souther, and she accepted it. It included a new IFF code, and she manually accepted the update. On the tactical, most of the green dots shifted to white.

"Thank you," Holden said. Avasarala swallowed her *You're welcome*. The antinausea drugs seemed to be working for everyone else. She really, *really* didn't want to throw up inside her helmet. One of the six remaining green dots blinked out of existence and another turned suddenly to white.

"Ooh, right in the back," Alex said. "That was cold."

Souther's ID showed up again on Avasarala's console, and she hit accept just as the *Roci* shifted again.

"—the immediate surrender of the flagship *King* and Admiral Augusto Nguyen," Souther was saying. His shock of white hair was standing up off his head as if the low thrust gravity was letting it expand like a peacock's tail. His smile was sharp as a knife. "Any vessel that still refuses to acknowledge my orders as legal and legitimate will forfeit this amnesty. You have thirty seconds from this mark."

On the tactical display, the threads of silver and gold had, for the most part, vanished. The ships shifted positions, each moving along its own complex vectors. As she watched, all the remaining green dots turned to white. All except one.

"Don't be an asshole, Nguyen," Avasarala said. "It's over."

The ops deck was silent for a long moment, the tension almost unbearable. Naomi's voice was the one to break it.

"I've got more fast movers. Oh, I've got a *lot* of them."

"Where?" Holden snapped.

"From the surface."

Avasarala didn't do anything, but her tactical display resized, pulling back until the cluster of ships, red and white and the single defiant green, were less than a quarter of their original size and the massive curve of the moon's surface impinged on the lower edge of the display. Rising like a solid mass, hundreds of fine yellow lines.

"Get me a count," Holden said. "I need a count here."

"Two hundred nineteen. No. Wait. Two hundred thirty."

"What the hell are they? Are those torpedoes?" Alex asked.

"No," Bobbie said. "They're monsters. They launched the monsters."

Avasarala opened a broadcast channel. Her hair probably looked worse than Souther's but she was well past vanity. That she could speak without fear of vomiting was blessing enough.

"This is Avasarala," she said. "The launch you are all seeing right now is a new protomolecule-based weapon that is being used as an unauthorized first strike against Mars. We need to shoot those fuckers out of the sky and do it now. Everyone."

"We've got a coordination override request coming through from Souther's flagship," Naomi said. "Surrender control?"

"The hell I will," Alex said.

"No, but track requests," Holden said. "I'm not handing control of my ship to a military fire-control computer, but we still need to be part of the solution here."

"The *King's* starting a hard burn," Alex said. "I think he's trying to hightail it."

On the display, the attack from the surface of Io was beginning to bloom, individual threads coming apart in unexpected angles, some corkscrewing, some reaching out in bent paths like an insect's articulated legs. Any one of them was the death of a planet, and the acceleration data put them at ten, fifteen, twenty g's. Nothing human survived at a sustained twenty g. Nothing human had to.

Golden flickers of light appeared from the ships, drifting down to meet the threads of Io. The slow, stately pace of the display was undercut by the data. Plasma torpedoes burning full out, and yet it took long seconds for them to reach the main stem. Avasarala watched the first of them detonate, saw the column of protomolecule monsters split into a dozen different streams. Evasive action.

"Some of those are coming toward us, Cap," Alex said. "I don't think they're designed to hole a ship's hull, but I'm pretty damn sure they'd do it anyway."

"Let's get in there and do what we can. We can't let any of these... Okay, where'd they go?"

On the tactical display, the attacking monsters were blinking out of existence, the threads vanishing.

"They're cutting thrust," Naomi said. "And the RF transponders are going dark. Must have radar-absorbing hull materials."

“Do we have tracking data? Can we anticipate where they’re going to be?”

The tactical display began to flicker. Fireflies. The monsters shifting in and out, thrusting in what looked like semi-random directions, but the bloom of them always expanding.

“This is going to be a bitch,” Alex said. “Bobbie?”

“I’ve got some target locks. Get us in PDC range.”

“Hang on, kids,” Alex said. “We’re going for a ride.”

The *Roci* bucked hard, and Avasarala pressed back into her seat. The shuddering rhythm seemed to be her own trembling muscles and then the firing PDCs and then her body again. On the display, the combined forces of Earth and Mars spread out, running after the near-invisible foes. Thrust gravity shifted, spinning her couch one way and then another without warning. She tried closing her eyes, but that was worse.

“Hmm.”

“What, Naomi?” Holden said. “‘Hmm’ what?”

“The *King* was doing something strange there. Huge activity from the maneuvering thrusters and... Oh.”

“‘Oh’ what? Nouns. I need nouns.”

“She’s holed,” Naomi said. “One of the monsters holed her.”

“Told you they could do that,” Alex said. “Hate to be on the ship right now. Still. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer fella.”

“His men aren’t responsible for his actions,” Bobbie said. “They may not even know Souther’s in command. We’ve got to help them.”

“We can’t,” Holden said. “They’ll shoot at us.”

“Would you all please shut the fuck up?” Avasarala said. “And stop moving the goddamned ship around. Just pick a direction and calm down for two minutes.”

Her comm request went ignored for five minutes. Then ten. When the *King*’s distress beacon kicked in, she still hadn’t answered. A broadcast signal came in just after.

“This is Admiral Nguyen of the United Nations battleship *Agatha King*. I am offering to surrender to UN ships with the condition of immediate evacuation. Repeat: I am offering surrender to any United Nations military vessel on the condition of immediate evacuation.”

Souther answered on the same frequency.

“This is the *Okimbo*. What’s your situation?”

“We have a possible biohazard,” Nguyen said. His voice was so tight and high it sounded like someone was strangling him. On the tactical display, several white dots were already moving toward the green.

“Hold tight, *King*,” Souther said. “We’re on our way.”

“Like hell you are,” Avasarala said, then cursed quietly as she opened a broadcast channel. “Like hell you are. This is Avasarala. I am declaring a quarantine and containment order on the *Agatha King*. No vessel should dock with her or accept transfer of materiel or personnel. Any ship that does will be placed under a quarantine and containment order as well.”

Two of the white dots turned aside. Three others continued on. She opened the channel again.

“Am I the only one here who remembers Eros? What the fuck do you people think is loose on the *King*? Do not approach.”

The last of the white dots turned aside. When Nguyen answered her comm request, she’d forgotten she still had it open. He looked like shit. She didn’t imagine she looked much better. How many wars had ended this way? she wondered. Two exhausted, nauseated people staring at each other while the world burned around them.

“What more do you want from me?” Nguyen said. “I’ve surrendered. I lost. My men shouldn’t have to die for your spite.”

“It’s not spite,” Avasarala said. “We can’t do it. The protomolecule gets loose. Your fancy control programs don’t work. It’s infectious.”

“That’s not proven,” he said, but the way he said it told her everything.

“It’s happening, isn’t it?” she said. “Turn on your internal cameras. Let us see.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

She felt the air go out of her. It had happened.

“I am so sorry,” Avasarala said. “Oh. I am so sorry.”

Nguyen’s eyebrows rose a millimeter. His lips pressed, bloodless and thin. She thought there were tears in his eyes, but it might have been only a transmission artifact.

“You have to turn on the transponders,” Avasarala said. And then, when he didn’t reply: “We can’t weaponize the protomolecule. We don’t understand what it is. We can’t control it. You just sent a death sentence to Mars. I can’t save you, I cannot. But turn those transponders back on and help me save them.”

The moment hung in the air. Avasarala could feel Holden's and Naomi's attention on her like warmth radiating from the heating grate. Nguyen shook his head, his lips twitching, lost in conversation with himself.

"Nguyen," she said. "What's happening? On your ship. How bad is it?"

"Get me out of here, and I'll turn the transponders on," he said. "Throw me in the brig for the rest of my life, I don't care. But get me off of this ship."

Avasarala tried to lean forward, but it only made her crash couch shift. She looked for the words that would bring him back, the ones that would tell him that he had been wrong and evil and now he was going to die badly at the hands of his own weapon and somehow make it all right. She looked at this angry, small, shortsighted, frightened little man and tried to find the way to pull him back to simple human decency.

She failed.

"I can't do that," she said.

"Then stop wasting my time," he said, and cut the connection.

She lay back, her palm over her eyes.

"I'm gettin' some mighty strange readings off that battleship," Alex said. "Naomi? You seeing this?"

"Sorry. Give me a second."

"What have you got, Alex?" Holden asked.

"Reactor activity's down. Internal radiation through the ship's spiking huge. It's like they're venting the reactor into the air recycling."

"That don't sound healthy," Amos said.

The ops deck went silent again. Avasarala reached to open a channel to Souther but stopped. She didn't know what she'd say. The voice that came over the ship channel was slushy and drugged. She didn't recognize Prax at first, and then he had to repeat himself twice before she could make out the words.

"Incubation chamber," Prax said. "It's making the ship an incubation chamber. Like on Eros."

"It knows how to do that?" Bobbie said.

"Apparently so," Naomi said.

"We're going to have to slag that thing," Bobbie said. "Do we have enough firepower for that?"

Avasarala opened her eyes again. She tried to feel something besides great, oceanic sorrow. There had to be hope in there somewhere. Even Pandora got that much.

Holden was the one who said what she was thinking.

“Even if we can, it won’t save Mars.”

“Maybe we got them all?” Alex said. “I mean, there were a shit-load of those things, but maybe... maybe we got ’em?”

“Hard to tell when they were running ballistic,” Bobbie said. “If we missed just one, and it gets to Mars...”

It was all slipping away from her. She had been so close to stopping it, and now here she was, watching it all slip past. Her gut was a solid knot. But they hadn’t failed. Not yet. Somewhere in all this there had to be a way. Something that could still be done.

She forwarded her last conversation with Nguyen to Souther. Maybe he’d have an idea. A secret weapon that could come out of nowhere and force the codes out. Maybe the great brotherhood of military men would draw some vestige of humanity out of Nguyen.

Ten minutes later, a survival pod came loose from the *King*. Souther didn’t bother contacting her before they shot it down. The ops deck was like a mourning chamber.

“Okay,” Holden said. “First things first. We’ve got to get down to the base. If Mei’s there, we need to get her out.”

“I’m on that,” Amos said. “And we got to take the doc. He ain’t gonna outsource that one.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Holden said. “So you guys take the *Roci* down to the surface.”

“Us guys?” Naomi asked.

“I’ll take the pinnacle over to the battleship,” Holden said. “The transponder activation codes are going to be in the CIC.”

“You?” Avasarala asked.

“Only two people got off Eros,” Holden said with a shrug. “And I’m the one that’s left.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

Holden

“Don’t do this,” Naomi said. She didn’t beg, or cry, or make demands. All the power of her request lay in its quiet simplicity. “Don’t do it.”

Holden opened the suit locker just outside the main airlock and reached for his Martian-made armor. A sudden and visceral memory of radiation sickness on Eros stopped him. “They’ve been pumping radiation into the *King* for hours now, right?”

“Don’t go over there,” Naomi said again.

“Bobbie,” Holden said over the comm.

“Here,” she replied with a grunt. She was helping Amos prep their gear for the assault on the Mao science station. After his one encounter with the Mao protomolecule hybrid, he could only imagine they were going loaded for bear.

“What are these standard Martian armor suits rated for radiation-wise?”

“Like mine?” Bobbie asked.

“No, not a powered suit. I know they harden you guys for close-proximity blasts. I’m talking about this stuff we pulled out of the MAP crate.”

“About as much as a standard vacuum suit. Good enough for short walks outside the ship. Not so much for constant exposure to high radiation levels.”

“Shit,” Holden said. Then: “Thanks.” He killed the comm panel and closed the locker. “I’ll need a full-on hazard suit. Which means I’ll be better in the radiation, and not bullet resistant at all.”

“How many times can you get yourself massively irradiated before it catches up with you?” Naomi said.

“Same as last time. At least one more,” Holden replied with a grin. Naomi didn’t smile back. He hit the comm again and said, “Amos, bring me up a hazard suit from engineering. Whatever’s the hardest thing we’ve got on board.”

“Okay,” Amos replied.

Holden opened his equipment locker and took out the assault rifle he kept there. It was large, black, and designed to be intimidating. It would immediately mark anyone who carried it as a threat. He put it back and decided on a pistol instead. The hazmat suit would make him fairly anonymous. It was the sort of thing any member of the damage-control team might wear during an emergency. If he was wearing only a service pistol in a hip holster, it might keep anyone from singling him out as part of the problem.

And with the protomolecule loose on the *King*, and the ship flooded with radiation, there would be a big problem.

Because if Prax and Avasarala were right, and the protomolecule was linked even without a physical connection, then the goo on the *King* knew what the goo on Venus knew. Part of that was how human spaceships were put together, ever since it had disassembled the *Arboghost*. But it also meant it knew a lot about how to turn humans into vomit zombies. It had performed that trick a million times or so on Eros. It had practice.

It was entirely possible that every single human on the *King* was now a vomit zombie. And sadly, that was the best-case scenario. Vomit zombies were walking death to anyone with exposed skin, but to Holden, in his fully sealed and vacuum-rated hazmat suit, they would be at worst a mild annoyance.

The worst-case scenario was that the protomolecule was so good at changing humans now, the ship would be full of lethal hybrids like the one he’d fought in the cargo bay. That would be an impossible situation, so he chose to believe it wasn’t true. Besides, the protomolecule hadn’t made any soldiers on Eros. Miller hadn’t really taken the time to describe what he’d run into there, but he’d spent a lot of time on the station looking for Julie and he’d never reported being attacked by anything. The protomolecule was incredibly aggressive and invasive. It would kill a million humans in hours and turn them into spare parts for whatever it was working on. But it invaded at the cellular level. It acted like a virus, not an army.

Just keep telling yourself that, Holden thought. It made what he was about to do seem possible.

He took a compact semiautomatic pistol and holster out of the locker. Naomi watched while he loaded the weapon’s magazine and three spares, but she didn’t speak. He had just pushed the last round into the final

magazine when Amos floated into the compartment, dragging a large red suit behind him.

“This is our best, Cap,” he said. “For when shit has gone truly wrong. Should be plenty for the levels they’ve got in that ship. Max exposure time is six hours, but the air supply only lasts two, so that’s not an issue.”

Holden examined the bulky suit. The surface was a thick, flexible rubbery substance. It might deter someone attacking with their fingernails or teeth, but it wouldn’t stop a knife or a bullet. The air supply was contained under the suit’s radiation-resistant skin, so it made for a big, awkward lump on the wearer’s back. The difficulty he had pulling the suit to himself and then stopping it told him its mass was considerable.

“Won’t be moving fast in this, will I?”

“No,” Amos said with a grimace. “They’re not made for a firefight. If the bullets start flying, you’re fucked.”

Naomi nodded but said nothing.

“Amos,” Holden said, grabbing the mechanic’s arm as he turned to leave. “The gunny’s in charge once you hit the surface. She’s a pro, and this is her show. But I need you to keep Prax safe, because he’s kind of an idiot. The only thing I ask you to do is get that man and his little girl safely off the moon and back to this ship.”

Amos looked hurt for a moment. “Of course I will, Captain. Anything that gets to him or that baby will already have killed me. And that ain’t easy to do.”

Holden pulled Amos to him and gave the big man a quick hug. “I feel sorry for anything that tries. No one could ask for a better crewman, Amos. Just want you to know that.”

Amos pushed him away. “You act like you’re not coming back.”

Holden shot a look at Naomi, but her expression hadn’t changed. Amos just laughed for a minute, then clapped Holden on the back hard enough to rattle his teeth. “That’s bullshit,” Amos said. “You’re the toughest guy I know.” Without waiting for Holden to reply, he headed out to the crew ladder, and then down to the deck below.

Naomi pushed lightly against the bulkhead and drifted over to Holden. Air resistance brought her to a stop half a meter from him. She was still the most agile person in microgravity he’d ever met, a ballerina of null g. He had to stop himself from hugging her to him. The expression on her face told him it wasn’t what she wanted. She just floated in front of him for a

moment, not saying anything, then reached out and put one long, slender hand against his cheek. It felt cool and soft.

“Don’t go,” she said, and something in her voice told him it would be the last time.

He backed up and began shrugging his way into the hazmat suit. “Then who? Can you see Avasarala fighting through a mob of vomit zombies? She wouldn’t know the CIC from the galley. Amos has to go get that little girl. You know he does, and you know why. Prax has to be there. Bobbie keeps them both alive.”

He got the bulky suit over his shoulders and sealed up the front but left the helmet lying against his back. The boot mags came on when he hit them with his heels, and he pushed down to the deck and stuck there.

“You?” he asked Naomi. “Do I send you? I’d bet on you against a thousand zombies any day of the week. But you don’t know the CIC any better than Avasarala does. How does that make sense?”

“We just got right again,” she said. “That’s not fair.”

“But,” he said, “tell the Martians that me saving their planet makes us even on this whole ‘you stole our warship’ issue, okay?” He knew he was making light of the moment and immediately hated himself for it. But Naomi knew him, knew how afraid he was, and she didn’t call him on it. He felt a rush of love for her that sent electricity up his spine and made his scalp tingle.

“Fine,” she said, her face hardening. “But you’re coming back. I’ll be here on the radio the whole time. We’ll work through this together, every step. No hero bullshit. Brains instead of bullets, and we work the problems together. You give me that. You better give me that.”

Holden finally pulled her into his arms and kissed her. “I agree. Please, please help me make it back alive. I’d really like that.”

Flying the *Razorback* to the crippled *Agatha King* was like taking a race car to the corner market. The *King* was only a few thousand kilometers from the *Rocinante*. It seemed close enough for an EVA pack and a really strong push. Instead, he flew what was probably the fastest ship in the Jupiter system in teakettle mode at about 5 percent thrust through the debris of the recent battle. He could sense the *Razorback* straining at the leash,

responding to his tiny bursts of steam with sullen reproach. The distance to the stricken flagship was short enough, and the path treacherous enough, that programming in a course would take more time than just flying by stick. But even at his languid pace, the *Razorback* seemed to have a hard time keeping its nose pointed at the *King*.

You don't want to go there, the ship seemed to be saying. *That's an awful place*.

"No, no, I really don't," he said, patting the console in front of him. "But just get me there in one piece, okay, honey?"

A massive chunk of what must have once been a destroyer floated past, the ragged edges still glowing with heat. Holden tapped the stick and pushed the *Razorback* sideways to get a bit more distance from the floating wreckage. The nose drifted off course. "Fight all you want, we're still going to the same place."

Some part of Holden was disappointed that the transit was so dangerous. He'd never flown to Io before, and the view of the moon at the edge of his screens was spectacular. A massive volcano of molten silicate on the opposite side of the moon was throwing particles so high into space he could see the trail it left in the sky. The plume cooled into a spray of silicate crystals, which caught Jupiter's glow and glittered like diamonds scattered across the black. Some of them would drift off to become part of Jupiter's faint ring system, blown right out of Io's gravity well. In any other circumstance, it would have been beautiful.

But the hazardous flight kept his attention on his instruments and the screens in front of him. And always, the growing bulk of the *Agatha King*, floating alone at the center of the junk cloud.

When he was within range, Holden signaled the ship's automated docking system, but as he'd suspected, the *King* didn't respond. He piloted up to the nearest external airlock and told the *Razorback* to maintain a constant distance of five meters. The racing ship was not designed to dock with another ship in space. It lacked even a rudimentary docking tube. His trip to the *King* would be a short spacewalk.

Avasarala had gotten a master override code from Souther, and Holden had the *Razorback* transmit it. The airlock immediately cycled open.

Holden topped off the hazmat suit's air supply in the *Razorback's* airlock. Once he got onto Nguyen's flagship, he couldn't trust the air, even

in the suit-recharging stations. Nothing from the *King* could be allowed inside his suit. Nothing.

When his stored-air gauge read 100 percent, he turned on the radio and called Naomi. "I'm going in now."

He kicked off his boot mags, and a sharp push against the inner airlock door sent him across the short gap to the *King*.

"I'm getting a good picture," Naomi said. The video link light on his HUD was on. Naomi could see everything he could see. It was comforting and lonely at the same time, like making a call to a friend who lived very far away.

Holden cycled the airlock. The two minutes while the *King* closed the outer door and then pumped air into the chamber seemed to last forever. There was no way to know what would be on the other side of the inner airlock door when it finally opened. Holden put his hand on the butt of his pistol with a nonchalance he didn't feel.

The inner door slid open.

The sudden screech of his hazmat suit's radiation alarm nearly gave him a heart attack. He chinned the control that killed the audible alarm, though he kept the outside radiation level meter running. It wasn't data that actually did him any good, but the suit was reassuring him that it could handle the current levels, and that was nice.

Holden stepped out of the airlock into a small compartment filled with storage lockers and EVA equipment. It looked empty, but a small noise from one of the lockers alerted him, and he turned just in time to see a man in a UN naval uniform burst out of the locker and swing a heavy wrench at his head. The bulky hazmat suit kept him from moving quickly, and the wrench struck a ringing blow off the side of his helmet.

"Jim!" Naomi yelled over the radio.

"Die, you bastard!" the Navy man yelled at the same time. He took a second swing, but he wasn't wearing mag boots, and without the push off the bulkhead to give him momentum, the swing did little more than start spinning the man around in the air. Holden grabbed the wrench out of his hand and threw it away. He caught the man to stop his spinning with his left hand and drew his pistol with his right.

"If you cracked my suit, I'm going to throw you out that airlock," Holden said. He began flipping through suit status screens while keeping his pistol pointed at the wrench enthusiast.

“It looks okay,” Naomi said, relief evident in her voice. “No reds or yellows. That helmet is tougher than it looks.”

“What the hell were you doing in that locker?” Holden asked the man.

“I was working here when the... it... came on board,” the man said. He was a compact-looking Earther, with pale skin and flaming red hair cut close to the scalp. A patch on his suit said LARSON. “All the doors sealed up during emergency lockdown. I was trapped in here, but I could watch what was happening on the internal security system. I was hoping to grab a suit and get out the airlock, but it was sealed too. Say, how’d you get in here?”

“I have admiralty-level overrides,” Holden said to him. Quietly, to Naomi he said, “At current radiation levels, what’s survival odds for our friend here?”

“Not bad,” Naomi said. “If we get him into sick bay in the next couple of hours.”

To Larson he said, “Okay, you’re coming with me. We’re going to CIC. Get me there fast, and you’ve got a ride off this tub.”

“Yes, sir!” Larson said with a salute.

“He thinks you’re an admiral.” Naomi laughed.

“Larson, put on an environment suit. Do it fast.”

“Sir, yes sir!”

The suits they had in the airlock storage lockers would at least have their own air supplies. That would cut down on damage from the radiation the young sailor was absorbing. And an airtight suit would reduce the risk of protomolecule infection as they made their way through the ship.

Holden waited until Larson had shrugged into a suit, then transmitted the override code to the hatch and it slid open. “After you, Larson. Command information center, as fast as you can. If we run into anyone, especially if they’re throwing up, stay away and let me deal with them.”

“Yes, sir,” Larson said, his voice fuzzy over the static-filled radio, then pushed off into the corridor. He took Holden at his word and led him on a fast trip through the crippled *Agatha King*. They stopped only when a sealed hatch blocked their way, and then only long enough for Holden’s suit to convince it to open.

The areas of the ship they moved through didn’t look damaged at all. The bioweapon pod had hit farther aft, and the monster had headed straight to the reactor room. According to Larson, it had killed a number of people on the way, including the ship’s entire contingent of Marines when they

tried to stop it. But once it had entered engineering, it mostly ignored the rest of the crew. Larson said that shortly after it got into engineering, the shipwide security camera system had gone off-line. With no way to know where the monster was, and no way out of the airlock storage room, Larson had hidden in a locker to wait it out.

“When you came in, all I could see was this big, lumpy red thing,” Larson explained. “I thought maybe you were another one of those monsters.”

The lack of visible damage was a good thing. It meant all the hatches and other systems they came across still worked. The lack of a monster rampaging through the ship was even better. The thing that had Holden worried was the lack of people. A ship this size had over a thousand crew persons. At least some of them should be in the areas of the ship they were passing through, but so far they hadn’t run across a single one.

The occasional puddle of brown goo on the floor was not an encouraging sign.

Larson stopped at a locked hatch to let Holden catch his breath. The heavy hazmat suit was not built for long treks, and it was starting to fill up with the stink of his own sweat. While he took a minute to rest and let the suit’s cooling systems try to bring his temperature down, Larson said, “We’ll be going past the forward galley to one of the elevator bays. The CIC is on the deck just above. Five, ten minutes tops.”

Holden checked his air supply and saw that he had burned nearly half of it. He was rapidly approaching the point of no return. But something in Larson’s voice caught his ear. It was the way he said *galley*.

“Is there something I should know about the galley?”

Larson said, “I’m not sure. But after the cameras went out, I kept hoping someone was going to come get me. So I started trying to call people on the comm. When that didn’t work, I started having the *King* do location checks on people I knew. After a while, no matter who I asked about, the answer was always ‘the forward galley.’”

“So,” Holden said. “There might be upwards of a thousand infected Navy people crammed into that galley?”

Larson gave a shrug barely visible in his environment suit. “Maybe the monster killed them and put them there.”

“Oh, I think that’s exactly what happened,” Holden said, taking out his gun and working the slide to chamber a round. “But I seriously doubt they

stayed dead.”

Before Larson could ask what he meant, Holden had his suit unlock the hatch. “When I open this door, you head to the elevator as fast as you can. I’ll be right behind you. Don’t stop no matter what. You *have* to get me to that CIC. Are we clear?”

Larson nodded inside his helmet.

“Good. On three.”

Holden began counting, one hand on the hatch, the other holding his gun. When he hit three, he shoved the hatch open. Larson put his feet against a bulkhead and pushed off down the corridor on the other side.

Tiny blue flickers floated in the air around them like fireflies. Like the lights Miller had reported when he was on Eros the second time. The time he didn’t come back from. The fireflies were here now too.

At the end of the corridor, Holden could see the elevator door. He began clumping after Larson on his magnetic boots. When Larson was halfway down the corridor, he passed an open hatch.

The young sailor started screaming.

Holden ran as fast as the clumsy hazmat suit and his magnetic boots would let him go. Larson kept flying down the corridor, but he was screaming and flailing at the air like a drowning man trying to swim. Holden was almost to the open hatch when something crawled out of it and into his path. At first he thought it was the kind of vomit zombie he’d run into on Eros. It moved slowly, and the front of its Navy uniform was covered in brown vomit. But when it turned to look at Holden, its eyes glowed with a faint inner blue. And there was an intelligence in them the Eros zombies hadn’t had.

The protomolecule had learned some lessons on Eros. This was the new, improved version of the vomit zombie.

Holden didn’t wait to see what it was going to do. Without slowing his pace, he raised his pistol and shot it in the head. To his relief, the light went out of its eyes, and it spun away from the deck, spraying brown goo in an arc as it rotated. When he passed the open hatch, he risked a glance inside.

It was full of the new vomit zombies. Hundreds of them. All their disconcertingly blue eyes were aimed at him. Holden turned back to the corridor and ran. From behind, he heard a rising wave of sounds as the zombies moaned as one and began climbing along the bulkheads and deck after him.

“Go! Get in the elevator!” he screamed at Larson, cursing at how much the heavy hazmat suit slowed him down.

“God, what was that?” Naomi said. He’d forgotten she was watching. He didn’t waste breath answering. Larson had come out of his panic-induced fugue and was busily working the elevator doors open. Holden ran up to him and then turned around to look behind. Dozens of the blue-eyed vomit zombies filled the corridor behind him, crawling on the bulkheads, ceiling, and deck like spiders. The floating blue lights swirled on air currents Holden couldn’t feel.

“Go faster,” he said to Larson, sighting down his pistol at the lead zombie and putting a bullet in its head. It floated off the wall, spraying goo as it went. The zombie behind it shoved it out of the way, which sent it spinning down the corridor toward them. Holden moved in front of Larson to protect him, and a spray of brown slime hit his chest and visor. If they hadn’t both been wearing sealed suits, it would have been a death sentence. He repressed a shudder and shot two more zombies. The rest didn’t even slow down.

Behind him, Larson cursed as the partially opened doors snapped shut again, pinning his arm. The sailor worked them back open, pushing them with his back and one leg.

“We’re in!” Larson yelled. Holden began backing up toward the elevator shaft, emptying the rest of his magazine as he went. Half a dozen more zombies spun away, spraying goo; then he was in the shaft and Larson shoved the doors shut.

“Up one level,” Larson said, panting with fear and exertion. He pushed off the bulkhead and floated up to the next set of doors, then levered them open. Holden followed, replacing the magazine in his gun. Directly across from the elevator was a heavily armored hatch with cic stenciled in white on the metal. Holden moved toward it, having his suit transmit the override code. Behind him, Larson let the elevator doors slam shut. The howling of the zombies echoed up the elevator shaft.

“We should hurry,” Holden said, hitting the button to open the CIC and bulling his way in before the hatch had finished cycling open. Larson floated through after him.

There was a single man still in the CIC: a squat, powerfully built Asian man with an admiral’s uniform and a large-caliber pistol in one shaky hand.

“Stay where you are,” the man said.

“Admiral Nguyen!” Larson blurted out. “You’re alive!”

Nguyen ignored him. “You’re here for the bioweapon launch vehicle remote codes. I have them here.” He held up a hand terminal. “They’re yours in exchange for a ride off of this ship.”

“He’s taking us,” Larson said, pointing at Holden. “He said he’d take me too.”

“No fucking way,” Holden said to Nguyen. “Not a chance. Either give me those codes because there’s a scrap of humanity left in you, or give them to me because you’re dead. I don’t give a shit either way. You decide.”

Nguyen looked back and forth from Larson to Holden, clutching the hand terminal and the pistol so tightly that his knuckles were white. “No! You have to—”

Holden shot him in the throat. Somewhere in his brain stem, Detective Miller nodded in approval.

“Start working on an alternate route back to my ship,” Holden said to Larson as he walked across the room to grab the hand terminal floating by Nguyen’s corpse. It took him a moment to find the *King*’s self-destruct switch hidden behind a locked panel. Souther’s override code gave him access to that too.

“Sorry,” Holden said quietly to Naomi as he opened it. “I know I sort of agreed not to do that anymore. But I didn’t have time to—”

“No,” Naomi said, her voice sad. “That bastard deserved to die. And I know you’ll feel like shit about it later. That’s good enough for me.”

The panel opened, and a simple button lay on the other side. It wasn’t even red, just a plain industrial white. “This is what blows the ship?”

“No timer,” Naomi said.

“Well, this is an anti-boarding fail-safe. If someone opens this panel and presses this button, it’s because the ship is lost. They don’t want it on a timer someone can just disarm.”

“This is an engineering problem,” Naomi said. She already knew what he was thinking, and she was trying to get an answer out before he could say it. “We can solve this.”

“We can’t,” Holden said, waiting to feel the sorrow but instead feeling a sort of quiet peace. “There are a couple hundred very angry zombies trying to get up the elevator shaft right now. We won’t come up with a solution that doesn’t leave me stranded in here anyway.”

A hand squeezed his shoulder. He looked up, and Larson said, "I'll press it."

"No, you don't have to—"

Larson held out his arm. The sleeve of his environment suit had a tiny tear where the elevator doors had closed on it. Around the tear was a palm-sized brown stain.

"Just rotten fucking luck, I guess. But I watched the Eros feeds like everyone else," Larson said. "You can't risk taking me. Pretty soon I might be..." He paused and pointed back toward the elevator with his head. "Might be one of those."

Holden took Larson's hand in his. The thick gloves made it impossible to feel anything. "I'm very sorry."

"Hey, you tried," Larson said with a sad smile. "At least now I won't die of thirst in a suit locker."

"Admiral Souther will know about this," Holden said. "I'll make sure everyone knows."

"Seriously," Larson said, floating next to the button that would turn the *Agatha King* into a small star for a few seconds. He pulled off his helmet and took a long breath. "There's another airlock three decks up. If they aren't in the elevator shaft yet, you can make it."

"Larson, I—"

"You should go away now."

Holden had to strip off his suit in the *King's* airlock. It was covered in the goo, and he couldn't risk taking it onto the *Razorback*. He absorbed a few rads while he stole another UN vac suit from one of the lockers and put it on instead. It looked exactly like the one Larson was wearing. As soon as he was back on the *Razorback*, he sent the remote command codes to Souther's ship. He was nearly back to the *Rocinante* when the *King* vanished in a ball of white fire.

Chapter Fifty

Bobbie

“The captain just left,” Amos said to Bobbie when he came back into the machine shop. She floated half a meter above the deck inside a small circle of deadly technology. Behind her sat her cleaned and refitted recon suit, a single barrel of the newly installed gun gleaming inside the port on its right arm. To her left floated the recently reassembled auto-shotgun Amos favored. The rest of the circle was formed by pistols, grenades, a combat knife, and a variety of weapon magazines. Bobbie took one last mental inventory and decided she’d done all she could do.

“He thinks maybe he’s not coming back from this one,” Amos continued, then bent down to grab the auto-shotgun. He looked it over with a critical eye, then gave her an appreciative nod.

“Going into a fight where you know you aren’t coming back gives you a sort of clarity,” Bobbie said. She reached out and grabbed her armor, pulling herself into it. Not an easy thing to do in microgravity. She had to twist and shimmy to get her legs down into the suit before she could start sealing up the chest. She noticed Amos watching her. He had a dopey grin on his face.

“Seriously. Now?” she said. “We’re talking about your captain going off to his death, and all that’s going through your head right now is ‘Ooh, boobies!’”

Amos continued to grin, not chastened at all. “That bodysuit don’t leave a lot to the imagination. That’s all.”

Bobbie rolled her eyes. “Believe me, if I could wear a bulky sweater inside my fully articulated, power-assisted combat suit, I still wouldn’t. Because that would be stupid.” She hit the controls to seal the suit, and her armor folded around her like a second skin. She closed the helmet, using the suit’s external speakers to talk to Amos, knowing it would make her voice robotic and inhuman.

“Better put your big-boy pants on,” she said, the sound echoing around the room. Amos took an unconscious step back. “The captain isn’t the only

one that might not be coming back.”

Bobbie climbed onto the ladder-lift and let it take her all the way up to the ops deck. Avasarala was belted into her couch at the comm station. Naomi was in Holden’s usual spot at the tactical panel. Alex would be up in the cockpit already. Bobbie opened her visor to speak using her normal voice.

“We cleared?” she asked Avasarala.

The old lady nodded and held up one hand in a *wait* gesture while she spoke to someone on her headset mic. “The Martians have already dropped a full platoon,” she said, pushing the mic away from her face. “But their orders are to set up a perimeter and seal the base while someone further up the food chain decides what to do.”

“They’re not going to—” Bobbie started, but Avasarala cut her off with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“Fuck no,” she said. “*I’m* further up the food chain, and I’ve already decided we’re going to glass this abattoir as soon as you’re off the surface. I’m letting them think we’re still discussing it so you have time to go get the kids.”

Bobbie nodded her fist at Avasarala. Recon Marines were trained to use the Belters’ physical idiom when in their combat armor. Avasarala just looked baffled at the gesture and said, “So stop playing with your hand and go get the fucking kids.”

Bobbie headed back to the ladder-lift, connecting to the ship’s 1MC as she went. “Amos, Prax, meet me in the airlock in five minutes, geared up and ready to go. Alex, put us on the deck in ten.”

“Roger that,” Alex replied. “Good hunting, soldier.” She wondered if they might have become friends, given enough time. It was a pleasant thought.

Amos was waiting for her outside the airlock when she arrived. He wore his Martian-made light armor and carried his oversized gun. Prax rushed into the compartment a few minutes later, still struggling to get into his borrowed gear. He looked like a boy wearing his father’s shoes. While Amos helped him get buttoned up, Alex called down to the airlock and said, “Heading down. Hang on to something.”

Bobbie turned her boot mags to full, locking herself to the deck while the ship shifted under her. Amos and Prax both sat down on chairs that pulled out from the wall, and belted in.

“Let’s go over the plan one more time,” she said, calling up the aerial photos they’d shot of the facility. She patched into the *Roci* and threw the pictures onto a wall monitor. “This airlock is our entrance. If it’s locked, Amos will blast it with explosives to open the outer door. We need to get inside fast. Your armor isn’t going to protect you from the vicious radiation belt Io orbits in for long. Prax, you have the radio link Naomi rigged, so once we’re inside, you start looking for a network node to plug it into. We have no information about the layout of the base, so the faster we can get Naomi hacking their system, the faster we can find those kids.”

“I like the backup plan better,” Amos said.

“Backup plan?” Prax asked.

“The backup plan is I grab the first guy we see, and beat him until he tells us where the kids are.”

Prax nodded. “Okay. I like that one too.”

Bobbie ignored the macho posturing. Everyone dealt with pre-combat jitters in their own way. Bobbie preferred obsessive list making. But flexing and threats were good too. “Once we have a location, you guys move with all haste to the kids, while I ensure a clear path of egress.”

“Sounds good,” Amos said.

“Make no mistake,” Bobbie said. “Io is one of the worst places in the solar system. Tectonically unstable and radioactive as hell. Easy to see why they hid here, but do not underestimate the peril that just being on this shit moon carries.”

“Two minutes,” Alex said over the comm.

Bobbie took a deep breath. “And that isn’t the worst. These assholes launched a couple hundred human-protomolecule hybrids at Mars. We can hope that they shot their entire wad, but I have a feeling they didn’t. We might very well run into one of those monsters once we get inside.”

She didn’t say, *I’ve seen it in my dreams*. It seemed counterproductive.

“If we see one, *I deal with it*. Amos, you almost got your captain killed blasting away at the one you found in the cargo bay. You try that shit with me, I’ll snap your arm off. Don’t test me.”

“Okay, chief,” Amos replied. “Don’t get your panties in a twist. I heard you.”

“One minute,” Alex said.

“There are Martian Marines controlling the perimeter, but they’ve been given the okay to let us in. If someone escapes past us, no need to

apprehend them. The Marines will pick them up before they get far.”

“Thirty seconds.”

“Get ready,” Bobbie said, then pulled up her HUD’s suit status display. Everything was green, including the ammo indicator, which showed two thousand incendiary rounds.

The air sucked out of the airlock in a long, fading hiss, leaving only a thin wisp of atmosphere that would be the same density as Io’s own faint haze of sulfur. Before the ship hit the deck, Amos jumped up out of his chair and stood on his toes to put his helmet against hers. He yelled, “Give ’em hell, marine.”

The outer airlock door slid open, and Bobbie’s suit blatted a radiation alarm at her. It also helpfully informed her that the outside atmosphere was not capable of supporting life. She shoved Amos toward the open lock and then pushed Prax after him. “Go, go, go!”

Amos took off across the ground in a weird, hopping run, his breath panting in her ears over the radio link. Prax stayed close behind him and seemed more comfortable in the low gravity. He had no trouble keeping up. Bobbie climbed out of the *Roci* and then jumped in a long arc that took her about seven meters above the surface at its apex. She visually scanned the area while her suit reached out with radar and EM sensors, trying to pinpoint targets. Neither she nor it found any.

She hit the ground next to the lumbering Amos and hopped again, beating them both to the airlock door. She tapped the button and the outer door cycled open. Of course. Who locks their door on Io? No one is going to hike across a wasteland of molten silicon and sulfur to steal the family silver.

Amos plowed past her into the airlock, stopping for breath only once he was inside. Bobbie followed Prax in a second later, and she was about to tell Amos to cycle the airlock when her radio died.

She spun around, looking out across the surface of the moon for movement. Amos came up behind her and put his helmet against her back armor. When he yelled, it was barely audible. “What is it?”

Instead of yelling back, she stepped outside the airlock and pointed to Amos, then pointed at the inner door. She mimed a person walking with her fingers. Amos nodded at her with one hand, then moved back into the airlock and shut the outer door.

Whatever happened inside, it was up to Amos and Prax now. She wished them well.

She spotted the movement before her suit did. Something shifting against the sulfurous yellow background. Something not quite the same color. She tracked it with her eyes and had the suit hit it with a targeting laser. She wouldn't lose track of it now. It might gobble radio waves, but the fact that she could see it meant that light bounced off it just fine.

It moved again. Not quickly, and staying close to the ground. If she hadn't been looking right at it, she'd have missed the motion entirely. Being sneaky. Which probably meant it didn't know she'd spotted it. Her suit's laser range finder marked it as just over three hundred meters away. According to her theory, once it realized it had been spotted, it would charge her, moving in a straight line to try to grab and rip. If it couldn't reach her quickly, it would try to throw things at her. And all she needed to do was hurt it until its program failed and it self-destructed. Lots of theories.

Time to test them out.

She aimed her gun at it. The suit helped her correct for deflection based on the range, but she was using ultrahigh velocity rounds on a moon with fractional gravity. Bullet drop at three hundred meters would be trivial. Even though there was no way the creature could see it through her helmet's darkened visor, she blew it a kiss. "I'm back, sweetie. Come say hi to momma."

She tapped the trigger on her gun. Fifty rounds streaked downrange, crossing the distance from her gun to the creature in less than a third of a second. All fifty slammed into it, shedding very little of their kinetic energy as they passed through. Just enough to burst the tip of each round open and ignite the self-oxidizing flammable gel they carried. Fifty trails of short-lived but very intense flame burned through the monster.

Some of the black filament bursting from the exit wounds actually caught fire, disappearing with a flash.

The monster launched itself toward Bobbie at a dead run that should have been impossible in low gravity. Each push of its limbs should have launched it high into the air. It stuck to the silicate surface of Io as though it were wearing magnetic boots on a metal deck. Its speed was breathtaking. Its blue eyes blazed like lightning. The long, improbable hands reached out for her, clenching and grasping at nothing as it ran. It was all just like in her

dreams. And for a split second, Bobbie just wanted to stand perfectly still and let the scene play out to the conclusion she'd never gotten to see. Another part of her mind expected her to wake up, soaking with sweat, as she had so many times before.

Bobbie watched as it ran toward her, and noted with pleasure the burnt black injuries the incendiary bullets had cut through its body. No sprays of black filament and then the wounds closing like water. Not this time. She'd hurt it, and she wanted to go on hurting it.

She turned away and took off in a bounding run at a ninety-degree angle to its path. Her suit kept the targeting laser locked on to the monster, so she could track its location even without turning around to look. As she'd suspected, it turned to follow her, but it lost ground. "Fast on the straightaways," Bobbie said to it. "But you corner like shit."

When the creature realized she wasn't going to just stand still and let it get close to her, it stopped. Bobbie stumbled to a stop, turning to watch it. It reached down and tore up a big chunk of ancient lava bed, then reached down to grip the ground with its other hand.

"Here it comes," Bobbie said to herself.

She threw herself to the side as the creature's arm whipped forward. The rock missed her by centimeters as she hurtled sideways. She hit the moon's surface and skidded, already returning fire. This time she fired for several seconds, sending hundreds of rounds into and through the creature.

"Anything you can do I can do better," she sang under her breath. "I can do anything better than you." The bullets tore great flaming chunks out of the monster and nearly severed its left arm. The creature spun around and collapsed. Bobbie bounced back to her feet, ready to run again if the monster got back up. It didn't. Instead, it rolled over onto its back and shook. Its head began to swell, and the blue eyes flashed even brighter. Bobbie could see things moving beneath the surface of its chitinous black skin.

"Boom, motherfucker!" she yelled at it, waiting for the bomb to go off.

Instead, it bounced suddenly to its feet, tore a portion of its own abdomen off, and threw it at her. By the time Bobbie realized what had just happened, the bomb was only a few meters from her. It detonated and blew her off her feet. She went skidding across Io's surface, her armor blaring warnings at her. When she finally came to a stop, her HUD was flashing a Christmas display of red and green lights. She tried to move her limbs, but

they were as heavy as stone. The suit's motion control processor, the computer that interpreted her body's movements and turned them into commands for the suit's actuators, had failed. The suit was trying to reboot it while simultaneously trying to reroute and run the program in a different location. A flashing amber message on the HUD said PLEASE STAND BY.

Bobbie couldn't turn her head yet, so when the monster leaned down over her, it took her completely by surprise. She stifled a scream. It wouldn't have mattered. The sulfur atmosphere on Io was far too thin for sound waves to travel in. The monster couldn't have heard her. But while the new Bobbie was at peace with the idea of dying in battle, enough of the old Bobbie remained that she was not going to go out screaming like a baby.

It leaned down to look at her; its overlarge and curiously childlike eyes glowed bright blue. The damage her gun had done seemed extensive, but the creature appeared not to notice. It poked at her chest armor with one long finger, then convulsed and vomited a thick spray of brown goo all over her.

"Oh, that's *disgusting*," she yelled at it. If her suit had been opened up to the outside, getting that protomolecule shit on her would have been the least of her problems. But still, how the hell was she going to wash this crap off?

It cocked its head and regarded her curiously. It poked again at her armor, one finger wriggling into gaps, trying to find a way in to her skin. She'd seen one of these things rip a nine-ton combat mech apart. If it wanted into her suit, it was coming in. But it seemed reluctant to damage her for some reason. As she watched, a long, flexible tube burst out of its midsection and began probing at her armor instead of the finger. Brown goo dribbled out of this new appendage in a constant stream.

Her gun status light flickered from red to green. She spun up the barrels to test it and it worked. Of course, her suit was still telling her to "please stand by" when it came to actually moving. Maybe if the monster got bored and wandered in front of her gun, she could get some shots off.

The tube was probing at her armor more insistently now. It pushed its way into gaps, periodically shooting brown liquid into them. It was as repulsive as it was frightening. It was like being threatened by a serial killer that was also fumbling at her clothing with a teenager's horny insistence.

“Oh, to hell with *this*,” she said to it. She was about through with letting this thing grope her while she lay helpless on her back. The suit’s right arm was heavy, and the actuators that made her strong when it was working also resisted movement when it was not. Pushing her arm up was like doing a one-arm bench press while wearing a lead glove. She pressed up anyway until she felt something pop. It might have been in the suit. It might have been in her arm. She couldn’t tell yet, because she was too wired for pain to set in.

But when it popped, her arm came up, and she pushed her fist up against the monster’s head.

“Buh-bye,” she said. The monster turned to look curiously at her hand. She held down the trigger until the ammo counter read zero and the gun stopped spinning. The creature had ceased to exist from the shoulders up. She dropped her arm back to the ground, exhausted.

REROUTE SUCCESSFUL, her suit told her. REBOOTING, it said. When the subliminal hum came back, she started laughing and found she couldn’t stop. She shoved the monster’s corpse off her and sat up.

“Good thing. It’s a really long walk back to the ship.”

Chapter Fifty-One

Prax

Prax ran.

Around him, the station walls formed angles at the center to make an elongated hexagon. The gravity was barely higher than Ganymede standard, and after weeks at a full-g burn, Prax had to pay attention to keep himself from rising to the ceiling with each step. Amos loped beside him, every stride low, long, and fast. The shotgun in the man's hands remained perfectly level.

At a T intersection ahead, a woman appeared. Dark hair and skin. Not the one who'd taken Mei. Her eyes went wide and she darted off.

"They know we're coming," Prax said. He was panting a little.

"That probably wasn't their first clue, Doc," Amos said. His voice was perfectly conversational, but there was an intensity in it. Something like anger.

At the intersection, they paused, Prax leaning over and resting elbows on knees to catch his breath. It was an old, primitive reflex. In less than .2 g, the blood return wasn't significantly increased by putting his head even with his heart. Strictly speaking, he would have been better off standing and keeping his posture from narrowing any of his blood vessels. He forced himself to stand.

"Where should I plug in this radio link for Naomi?" he asked Amos.

Amos shrugged and pointed at the wall. "Maybe we can just follow the signs instead."

There was a legend on the wall with colored arrows pointing in different directions, ENV CONTROL and CAFETERIA and PRIMARY LAB. Amos tapped PRIMARY LAB with the barrel of his shotgun.

"Sounds good to me," Prax said.

"You good to go?"

"I am," Prax said, though he probably wasn't.

The floor seemed to shift under him, followed immediately by a long, ominous rumbling that he could feel in the soles of his feet.

“Naomi? You there?”

“I am. I have to keep track of the captain on the other line. I might pop in and out. Everything all right?”

“Might be stretching the point,” Amos said. “We got something sounded like someone shooting at us. They ain’t shooting at the base, are they?”

“They aren’t,” Naomi said from the ship, her voice pressed thin and tinny by the attenuated signal. “It looks like some of the locals are mounting a defense, but so far our Marines aren’t returning fire.”

“Tell ’em to calm that shit down,” Amos said, but he was already moving down the corridor toward the primary lab. Prax jumped after him, misjudged, and cracked his arm against the ceiling.

“Soon as they ask me,” Naomi said.

The corridors were a maze, but it was the kind of maze Prax had been running through his whole life. The institutional logic of a research facility was the same everywhere. The floor plans were different; budget concerns could change how richly appointed the details were; the fields being supported determined what equipment was present. But the soul of the place was the same, and it was Prax’s home.

Twice more, they caught sight of people scattering through the halls with them. The first was a young Belter woman in a white lab coat. The second was a massively obese dark-skinned man with the squat build of Earth. He was wearing a crisp suit, the signature of the administrative class everywhere. Neither one tried to stop them, so Prax forgot about them almost as soon as he saw them.

The imaging suite was behind a set of negative-pressure seals. When Prax and Amos went through, the gust of air seemed to push them faster, urging them on. The rumble came again, louder this time and lasting almost fifteen seconds. It could be fighting. It could be a volcano forming nearby. No way to know. Prax knew this base would have to have been built with tectonic instability in mind. He wondered what the safeguards were for a moment, then put it out of his mind. Nothing he could do about it anyway.

The lab’s imaging suite was at least the equal of the one he’d shared on Ganymede, with everything from the spidery full-resonance displays to the inferential gravity lens. In the corner, a squat orange table showed a holographic image of a colony of rapidly dividing cells. Two doors led out

apart from the one they'd come through. Somewhere nearby, people were shouting at each other.

Prax pointed at one of the doors.

"This one," he said. "Look at the hinges. It's built to allow a gurney through."

The passageway on the other side was warmer and the air was more humid. It wasn't quite greenhouse level, but near to it. It opened into a long gallery with five-meter ceilings. Fitted tracks on the ceiling and floor allowed for moving high-mass equipment and containment cages. Bays lined it, each, it seemed, with a research bench not so different from the ones Prax had used as an undergraduate: smart table, wall display, inventory control box, specimen cages. The shouting voices were louder now. He was about to say as much, but Amos shook his head and pointed down the gallery toward one of the farther bays. A man's voice came from that direction, his tone high and tight and angry.

"...not an evacuation if there's no place to evacuate to," he was saying. "I'm not giving up the one bargaining chip I have left."

"You don't have that option," a woman said. "Put the gun down, and let's talk this through. I've been handling you for seven years, and I will keep you in business for seven more, but you do not—"

"Are you delusional? You think there's a tomorrow after this?"

Amos pointed forward with his shotgun, then began a slow, deliberate advance. Prax followed, trying to be silent. It had been months since he'd heard Dr. Strickland's voice, but the shouting man could be him. It was possible.

"Let me make this perfectly clear," the man said. "We have nothing. Nothing. The only hope of negotiation is if we have a card to play. That means them. Why do you think they're *alive*?"

"Carlos," the woman said as Prax came to the corner of the bay. "We can have this conversation later. There's a hostile enemy force on the base right now, and if you're still here when they come through that hatch—"

"Yeah," Amos interrupted, "what happens then?"

The bay was just like the others. Strickland—it was unmistakably Strickland—stood beside a gray metal transport crate that went from the floor to just above his hip. In the specimen cages, a half dozen children lay motionless, sleeping or drugged. Strickland also had a small gun in his hand, pointed at the woman from the video. She was in a harshly cut

uniform, the sort of thing that security forces adopted to make their staff look hard and intimidating. It worked for her.

“We came in the other hatch,” Prax said, pointing back over his shoulder.

“Da?”

One syllable, spoken softly. It rang out from the transport cart louder than all the weeks of explosions and gauss rounds and screams of the wounded and dying. Prax couldn’t breathe; he couldn’t move. He wanted to tell them all to put the guns away, to be careful. There was a child. His child.

Strickland’s pistol barked, and some sort of high-explosive round destroyed the woman’s neck and face in a spray of blood and cartilage. She tried to scream once, but with significant portions of her larynx already compromised, what she managed was more of a powerful, wet exhalation. Amos lifted the shotgun, but Strickland—Merrian, whatever his name was—put his pistol on the top of the crate and seemed almost to sag with relief. The woman drifted to the floor, blood and flesh fanning out and falling gently to the ground like a blanket of red lace.

“Thank God you came,” the doctor said. “Oh, thank God you came. I was stalling her as long as I could. Dr. Meng, I can’t imagine how hard this has been for you. I am so, so sorry.”

Prax stepped forward. The woman took another jerking breath, her nervous system firing at random now. Strickland smiled at him, the same reassuring smile he recognized from any number of doctor’s visits over the previous years. Prax found the transport’s control pad and knelt to open it. The side panel clicked as the magnetic locks gave up their grip. The panel rolled up, disappearing into the cart’s frame.

For a terrible, breathless moment, it was the wrong girl. She had the black, lustrous hair, the egg-brown skin. She could have been Mei’s older sister. And then the child moved. It wasn’t much more than shifting her head, but it was all that his brain needed to see his baby in this older girl’s body. All the months on Ganymede, all the weeks to Tycho and back, she’d been growing up without him.

“She’s so big,” he said. “She’s grown so much.”

Mei frowned, tiny ridges popping into being just above her brow. It made her look like Nicola. And then her eyes opened. They were blank and

empty. Prax yanked at the release on his helmet and lifted it off. The station air smelled vaguely of sulfur and copper.

Mei's gaze fastened on him and she smiled.

"Da," she said again, and put out one hand. When he reached for her, she took his finger in her fist and pulled herself into his arms. He held her to his chest; the warmth and mass of her small body—no longer tiny, only small—was overwhelming. The void between the stars was smaller than Mei was at that moment.

"She's sedated," Strickland said. "But her health is perfect. Her immune system has been performing at peak."

"My baby," Prax said. "My perfect girl."

Mei's eyes were closed, but she smiled and made a small, animal grunt of satisfaction.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am for all this," Strickland said. "If I had any way of reaching you, of telling you what was happening, I swear to you I would have. This has been beyond a nightmare."

"So you're saying they kept you prisoner here?" Amos asked.

"Almost all the technical staff was here against their will," Strickland said. "When we signed on, we were promised resources and freedom of a kind most of us had only dreamed about. When I started, I thought I could make a real difference. I was terribly, terribly wrong, and I will never be able to apologize enough."

Prax's blood was singing. A warmth spread from the center of his body, radiating out to his hands and feet. It was like being dosed with the most perfect euphoric in the history of pharmacy. Her hair smelled like the cheap lab shampoo he'd used to wash dogs in the laboratories of his youth. He stood too quickly, and her mass and momentum pulled him a few centimeters off the floor. His knees and feet were slick, and it took him a moment to realize he'd been kneeling in blood.

"What happened to these kids? Are there others somewhere else?" Amos asked.

"These are the only ones I was able to save. They've all been sedated for evacuation," Strickland said. "But right now, we need to leave. Get off the station. I have to get to the authorities."

"And why do you need to do that?" Amos asked.

"I have to tell them what's been going on here," Strickland said. "I have to tell everyone about the crimes that were committed here."

“Yeah, okay,” Amos said. “Hey, Prax? You think you could get that?” He pointed his shotgun at something on a nearby crate.

Prax turned to look at Amos. It was almost a struggle to remember where he was and what they were doing.

“Oh,” he said. “Sure.”

Holding Mei against him with one arm, he took Strickland’s gun and trained it on the man.

“No,” Strickland said. “You don’t... you don’t understand. I’m the victim here. I had to do all this. They forced me. She forced me.”

“You know,” Amos said, “maybe I’m coming across as what a guy like you might call working class. Doesn’t mean I’m stupid. You’re one of Protogen’s pet sociopaths, and I ain’t buying any damn thing you’re trying to sell.”

Strickland’s face turned to cold rage like a mask had fallen away.

“Protogen’s dead,” he said. “There is no Protogen.”

“Yeah,” Amos said. “I got the brand name wrong. That’s the problem here.”

Mei murmured something, her hand reaching up behind Prax’s ear to grip his hair. Strickland stepped back, his hands in fists.

“I saved her,” he said. “That girl’s alive because of me. She was slated for the second-generation units, and I pulled her off the project. I pulled all of them. If it wasn’t for me, every child here would be worse than dead right now. Worse than dead.”

“It was the broadcast, wasn’t it?” Prax said. “You saw that we might find out, so you wanted to make sure that you had the girl from the screen. The one everyone was looking for.”

“You’d rather I hadn’t?” Strickland said. “It was still me that saved her.”

“Actually, I think that makes it Captain Holden,” Prax said. “But I take your point.”

Strickland’s pistol had a simple thumb switch on the back. He pressed it to turn the safety on.

“My home is gone,” Prax said, speaking slowly. “My job is gone. Most of the people I’ve ever known are either dead or scattered through the system. A major government is saying I abuse women and children. I’ve had more than eighty explicit death threats from absolute strangers in the last month. And you know what? I don’t care.”

Strickland licked his lips, his eyes shifting from Prax to Amos and back again.

“I don’t need to kill you,” Prax said. “I have my daughter back. Revenge isn’t important to me.”

Strickland took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Prax could see the man’s body relax, and something on the dividing line of relief and pleasure appeared at the corners of his mouth. Mei twitched once when Amos’ auto-shotgun fired, but she lay back down against Prax’s shoulder without crying or looking around. Strickland’s body drifted slowly to the ground, the arms falling to the sides. The space where the head had been gouted bright arterial blood against the walls, each pulse smaller than the one before.

Amos shrugged.

“Or that,” Prax said.

“So you got any ideas how we—”

The hatch behind them opened and a man ran in.

“What happened? I heard—”

Amos raised the auto-shotgun. The new man backpedaled, a thin whine of fear escaping from him as he retreated. Amos cleared his throat.

“Any idea how we get these kids out of here?”

Putting Mei back in the transport cart was one of the hardest things Prax had ever done. He wanted to carry her against him, to press his face against hers. It was a primate reaction, the deepest centers of his brain longing for the reassurance of physical contact. But his suit wouldn’t protect her from the radiation or near vacuum of Io’s sulfuric atmosphere, and the transport would. He nestled her gently against two other children while Amos put the other four in a second cart. The smallest of them was still in newborn diapers. Prax wondered if she had come from Ganymede too. The carts glided against the station flooring, only rattling when they crossed the built-in tracks.

“You remember how to get back to the surface?” Amos asked.

“I think so,” Prax said.

“Uh, Doc? You really want to put your helmet back on.”

“Oh! Right. Thank you.”

At the T intersection, half a dozen men in security uniforms had built a barricade, preparing to defend the lab against attack. Because Amos tossed in his grenades from the rear, the cover was less effective than the locals had anticipated, but it still took a few minutes to clear the bodies and the remains of the barricade to let the carts roll through.

There was a time, Prax knew, that the violence would have bothered him. Not the blood or bodies. He'd spent more than enough time doing dissections and even autonomous-limb vivisection to be able to wall off what he was seeing from any particular sense of visceral horror. But that it was something done in anger, that the men and women he'd just seen blown apart hadn't donated their bodies or tissues, would have affected him once. The universe had taken that from him, and he couldn't say now exactly when it had happened. Part of him was numb, and maybe it always would be. There was a feeling of loss in that, but it was intellectual. The only emotions he felt were a glowing, transforming relief that Mei was here and alive and a vicious animal protectiveness that meant he would never let her leave his sight, possibly until she left for university.

On the surface, the transports were rougher, the wheels less suited to the uneven surface of the land. Prax followed Amos' example, turning the boxes around to pull them rather than push. Looking at the vectors, it made sense, but it wouldn't have occurred to him if he hadn't seen Amos doing it.

Bobbie was walking slowly toward the *Rocinante*. Her suit was charred and stained and moving poorly. A clear fluid was leaking down the back.

"Don't get close to me," she said. "I've got protomolecule goo all over this thing."

"That's bad," Amos said. "You got a way to clean that off?"

"Not really," she replied. "How'd the extraction go?"

"Got enough kids to start a singing group, but a little shy of a baseball team," Amos said.

"Mei's here," Prax said. "She's all right."

"I'm glad to hear that," Bobbie said, and even though she was clearly exhausted, she sounded like she meant it.

At the airlock, Amos and Prax got in and nestled the transports against the back wall while Bobbie stood on the rough ground outside. Prax checked the transport indicators. There was enough onboard air to last another forty minutes.

“All right,” Amos said. “We’re ready.”

“Going for emergency blow,” Bobbie said, and her armored suit came apart around her. It was a strange sight, the hard curves and layers of combat plate peeling themselves back, blooming out like a flower and then falling apart, and the woman, eyes closed and mouth open, being revealed. When she put her hand out for Amos to pull her in, the gesture reminded Prax of Mei seeing him again.

“Now, Doc,” Amos said.

“Cycling,” Prax said. He closed the outer door and started fresh air coming into the lock. Ten seconds later, Bobbie’s chest started to pump like a bellows. Thirty seconds, and they were at seven-eighths of an atmosphere.

“Where do we stand, guys?” Naomi asked as Prax opened the transport. The children were all asleep. Mei was sucking on her first two fingers, the way she had when she was a baby. He couldn’t get past how much older she looked.

“We’re solid,” Amos said. “I say we get the fuck out of here and glass the place.”

“A-fucking-men,” Avasarala’s voice said in the background.

“Copy that,” Naomi said. “We’re prepping for launch. Let me know when you’ve got all our new passengers safely in.”

Prax pulled off his helmet and sat beside Bobbie. In the black sheath of her base garments, she looked like someone just coming back from the gym. She could have been anybody.

“Glad you got your kid back,” she said.

“Thank you. I’m sorry you lost the suit,” he said.

She shrugged.

“At this point, it was mostly a metaphor anyway,” she said, and the inner airlock opened.

“Cycle’s done, Naomi,” Amos said. “We’re home.”

Chapter Fifty-Two

Avasarala

It was over, except that it wasn't. It never was.

"We're all friends now," Souther said. Talking to him without lag was a luxury she was going to miss. "But if we all limp back to our corners, we're more likely to stay that way. I'm thinking it's going to be a question of years before either of our fleets are back up to what we were. There was a lot of damage."

"The children?"

"Processing them. My medical officer's in communication with a list of doctors who deal with pediatric immune problems. It's just about finding their parents and getting them all home now."

"Good," she said. "That's what I like to hear. And the other thing?"

Souther nodded. He looked younger in low gravity. They both did. Skin didn't sag when there was nothing to tug it down, and she could see what he'd looked like as a boy.

"We've got transponder locks on a hundred and seventy-one packages. They're all moving sunward pretty fast, but they're not accelerating or evading. Pretty much we're standing back and letting them get close enough to Mars that disposal is trivial."

"You sure that's a good idea?"

"By 'close,' I mean still weeks away at current speed. Space is big."

There was a pause that meant something other than distance.

"I wish you'd ride back on one of ours," Souther said.

"And be stuck out here for another few weeks with the paperwork? Not going to happen. And besides, heading back with James Holden and Sergeant Roberta Draper and Mei Meng? It has all the right symbolism. Press will eat it up. Earth, Mars, the Outer Planets, and whatever the hell Holden is now."

"Celebrity," Souther said. "A nation of its own."

"He's not that bad once you get past the self-righteousness. And anyway, this is the ship I'm on, and there's nothing it's waiting to repair

before it starts its burn. And I've already hired him. No one's giving me any shit about discretionary spending right now."

"All right," Souther said. "Then I'll see you back down the well."

"See you there," she said, and cut the connection.

She pulled herself up and launched gently across the ops deck. It would have been easy to push down the crew ladder shaft, flying the way she'd dreamed of as a child. It tempted. In practice, she figured she'd either push too hard and slam into something or else too gently and have air resistance stop her with nothing solid close enough to reach. She used the handholds and pulled herself slowly down toward the galley. Pressure doors opened at her approach and closed behind her with soft hydraulic hisses and metallic bangs. When she reached the crew deck, she heard the voices before she could make out the words, and the words before she saw the people.

"...have to shut it down," Prax was saying. "I mean, it's false pretenses now. You don't think I could be sued, do you?"

"You can always be sued," Holden said. "Chances are they wouldn't win."

"But I don't want to be sued in the first place. We have to shut it down."

"I put a notice on the site so it gives a status update and asks for confirmation before any more money gets moved."

She pulled herself into the galley. Prax and Holden were floating near the coffee machine. Prax wore a stunned expression, whereas Holden looked slightly smug. They both had bulbs of coffee, but Prax seemed to have forgotten his. The botanist's eyes were wide and his mouth hung open, even in the microgravity.

"Who's getting sued?" Avasarala asked.

"Now that we have Mei," Holden said, "Prax wants people to stop giving him money."

"It's too much," the botanist said, looking at her as if he expected her to do something about it. "I mean..."

"Surplus funds?" Avasarala asked.

"He can't *quite* retire on what he's got," Holden said. "Not in luxury, anyway."

"But it's yours," Prax said, turning to Holden with something like hope. "You set up the account."

“I took the *Rocinante*’s fees already. Trust me, you paid us generously,” Holden said, hand out in a gesture of refusal. “What’s still in there’s all yours. Well, yours and Mei’s.”

Avasarala scowled. That changed her personal calculus a little. She’d thought this would be the right time to lock Prax into a contract, but Jim Holden had once again ridden in at the last moment and screwed everything up.

“Congratulations,” Avasarala said. “Has either of you seen Bobbie? I need to talk to her.”

“Last I saw, she was heading for the machine shop.”

“Thanks,” Avasarala said, and kept pulling herself along. If Praxidike Meng was independently wealthy, that made him less likely to take on the job of rebuilding Ganymede for purely financial reasons. She could probably work the civic pride angle. He and his daughter were the face of the tragedy there, and having him running the show would mean more to people than all the facts and figures of how screwed they’d all be without the food supplies back online. He might be the kind of man who’d be swayed by that. She needed to think about it.

Once again, she was moving slowly and carefully enough that she heard the voices before she reached the machine shop. Bobbie and Amos, both of them laughing. She couldn’t believe that she was walking in on an intimate moment, but it had that tickle-fight sound to it. Then Mei shrieked with delight, and Avasarala understood.

The machine shop was the last place in the ship, with the possible exception of engineering, that Avasarala would have thought about playing with a little girl, but there she was, arms and legs flailing through the air. Her shoulder-length black hair flowed around her in a whirl, following the gentle end-over-end spin of her body. Her face was bright with pleasure. Bobbie and Amos stood at opposite ends of the shop. As Avasarala watched, Bobbie caught the little girl out of the air and launched her back toward Amos. Soon, Avasarala thought, the girl would start losing her milk teeth. She wondered how much of all this Mei would remember when she was an adult.

“Are you people crazy?” Avasarala said as Amos caught the girl. “This isn’t a playground.”

“Hey there,” Amos said, “we weren’t planning on staying long. The captain and the doc needed a minute, so I figured I’d haul the kiddo down

here. Give her the tour.”

“When they send you to play catch with a child, they don’t mean that she’s the f—that she’s the ball,” Avasarala said, moving across to him. “Give that child to me. None of you people has any idea how to take care of a little girl. It’s amazing you all lived to adulthood.”

“Ain’t wrong about that,” Amos said amiably, holding out the kid.

“Come to your nana,” Avasarala said.

“What’s a nana?” Mei asked.

“I’m a nana,” Avasarala said, gathering the child to her. Her body wanted to put the girl against her hip, to feel the weight bearing down on her. In microgravity holding a child felt odd. Good, but odd. Mei smelled of wax and vanilla. “How much longer before we can get some thrust? I feel like a f—like a balloon floating around in here.”

“Soon as Alex and Naomi finish maintenance on the drive computers, we’re out of here,” Amos said.

“Where’s my daddy?” Mei asked.

“Good,” Avasarala said. “We’ve got a schedule to keep, and I’m not paying you people for floating lessons. Your daddy’s talking to the captain, Mei-Mei.”

“Where?” the girl demanded. “Where is he? I want my da!”

“I’ll get you back to him, kiddo,” Amos said, holding out a massive hand. He shifted his attention to Avasarala. “She’s good for about five minutes, then it’s ‘Where’s Daddy?’”

“Good,” Avasarala said. “They deserve each other.”

“Yeah,” the big mechanic said. He pulled the child close to his center of gravity and launched up toward the galley. No handhold for him. Avasarala watched him go, then turned to Bobbie.

Bobbie floated, her hair sprayed softly out around her. Her face and body were more relaxed than Avasarala remembered ever having seen them. It should have made her seem at peace, but all she could think was that the girl looked drowned.

“Hey,” Bobbie said. “Did you hear back from your tech guys on Earth?”

“I did,” Avasarala said. “There was another energy spike. Bigger than the last ones. Prax was right. They are networked, and worse than that, they don’t suffer lag. Venus reacted before the information about the battle could have reached it.”

“Okay,” Bobbie said. “That’s bad, right?”

“It’s weird as tits on a bishop, but who knows if it means anything? They’re talking about spin-entanglement webs, whatever the hell those are. The best theory we’ve got is that it’s like a little adrenaline rush for the protomolecule. Some part of it is involved with violence, and the rest goes on alert until it’s clear the danger’s passed.”

“Well, then it’s scared of something. Nice to know it might have a vulnerability somewhere.”

They were silent for a moment. Somewhere far off in the ship, something clanged and Mei shrieked. Bobbie tensed, but Avasarala didn’t. It was interesting to see people who hadn’t been around a child react to Mei. They couldn’t tell the difference between pleasure and alarm. Avasarala found that on this ship, she and Prax were the only experts in children’s screaming.

“I was looking for you,” Avasarala said.

“I’m here,” Bobbie said, shrugging.

“Is that a problem?”

“I don’t follow. Is what a problem?”

“That you’re here?”

She looked away, her expression closing down. It was what Avasarala had expected.

“You were going down there to die, only the universe fucked you over again. You won. You’re alive. None of the problems go away.”

“Some of them do,” Bobbie said. “Just not all. And at least we won your game.”

Avasarala’s cough of a laugh was enough to set her spinning slightly. She reached out to the wall and steadied her drift.

“That’s the game I play. You never win. You just don’t lose yet. Errinwright? He lost. Soren. Nguyen. I took them out of the game and I stayed in, but now? Errinwright’s going to retire with extreme prejudice, and I’m going to be given his job.”

“Do you want it?”

“It doesn’t matter if I want it. I’ll be offered it because if the bobble-head doesn’t offer it, people will think he’s slighting me. And I’ll take it because if I don’t, people will think I’m not hungry enough to be afraid of any longer. I’ll be answering directly to the secretary-general. I’ll have

more power, more responsibility. More friends and more enemies. It's the price of playing."

"Seems like there should be an alternative."

"There is. I could retire."

"Why don't you?"

"Oh, I will," Avasarala said. "The day my son comes home. What about you? Are you looking to quit?"

"You mean am I still planning to get myself killed?"

"Yes, that."

There was a pause. That was good. It meant Bobbie was actually thinking about her answer.

"No," she said. "I don't think so. Going down in a fight's one thing. I can be proud of that. But just getting out to get out. I can't do that."

"You're in an interesting position," Avasarala said. "You think about what to do with it."

"And what position is that? Ronin?"

"A traitor to your government and a patriotic hero. A martyr who didn't die. A Martian whose best and only friend is about to run the government of Earth."

"You're not my only friend," Bobbie said.

"Bullshit. Alex and Amos don't count. They only want to get into your pants."

"And you don't?"

Avasarala laughed again. Bobbie was at least smiling. It was more than she'd done since she'd come back. Her sigh was deep and melancholy.

"I still feel haunted," she said. "I thought it would go away. I thought if I faced it, it would all go away."

"It doesn't go away. Ever. But you get better at it."

"At what?"

"At being haunted," Avasarala said. "Think about what you want to do. Think about who you want to become. And then see me, and I will make it happen for you if I can."

"Why?" Bobbie asked. "Seriously, why? I'm a soldier. I did the mission. And yes, it was harder and stranger than anything I've ever done, but I *got* it done. I did it because it needed doing. You don't owe me anything."

Avasarala hoisted an eyebrow.

“Political favors are how I express affection,” she said.

“Okay, people,” Alex’s voice said across the ship’s PA. “We’re back up and commencing burn in thirty seconds unless someone says otherwise. Everybody get ready to weigh something.”

“I appreciate the offer,” Bobbie said. “But it may be a while before I know if I want to take it.”

“What will you do, then? Next, I mean.”

“I’m going home,” she said. “I want to see my family. My dad. I think I’ll stay there for a while. Figure out who I am. How to start over. Like that.”

“The door’s open, Bobbie. Whenever you want it, the door is open.”

The flight back to Luna was a pain in the ass. Avasarala spent seven hours a day in her crash couch, sending messages back and forth against different levels of lag. On Earth, Sadavir Errinwright was quietly celebrated, his career with the UN honored with a small and private ceremony, and then he went off to spend more time with his family or farm chickens or whatever he was going to do with the remaining decades until death. Whatever it was, it wouldn’t involve wielding political power.

The investigation into the Io base was ongoing, and heads were quietly rolling on Earth. But not on Mars. Whoever in the Martian government had been bidding against Errinwright, they were going to get away with it. By losing the most powerful biological weapon in human history, they’d saved their own careers. Politics was full of little ironies like that.

Avasarala put together her own new office in absentia. By the time she stepped into it, it would already have been running for a month. It felt like driving a car while sitting in the backseat. She hated it.

In addition, Mei Meng had decided she was funny, and spent part of each day monopolizing her attention. She didn’t have time to play with a little girl, except that of course she did. So she did. And she had to exercise so that they wouldn’t have to put her in a nursing home when she got back to a full g. The steroid cocktail gave her hot flashes and made it hard to sleep. Both her granddaughters had birthdays she could attend only on a screen. One had twenty minutes’ lag; one had four.

When they passed the cloud of protomolecule monsters speeding in toward the sun, she had nightmares for two nights running, but they gradually stopped. Every one of them was being tracked by two governments, and Errinwright's little packets of death were all quiescent and speeding quietly and happily toward their own destruction.

She couldn't wait to be home.

When they docked on Luna, it was like a starving woman with a slice of apple touched to her lips, but not allowed to bite. The soft blue and white of the daylight planet, the black and gold of night. It was a beautiful world. Unmatched in the solar system. Her garden was down there. Her office. Her own bed.

But Arjun was not.

He was waiting for her on the landing pad in his best suit with a spray of fresh lilacs in his hand. The low gravity made him look younger too, if a little bloodshot about the eyes. She could feel the curiosity of Holden and his crew as she walked toward him. Who was this man that he could stand to be married to someone as abrasive and hard as Chrisjen Avasarala? Was this her master or her victim? How would that even work?

"Welcome home," Arjun said softly as she leaned into his arms.

He smelled like himself. She put her head against his shoulder, and she didn't need Earth so badly any longer.

This was home enough.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Holden

“Hi, Mom. We’re on Luna!”

The light delay from Luna was less than six seconds for a round trip, but it was enough to add an awkward pause before each response. Mother Elise stared out at him from his hotel room’s video screen for five long heartbeats; then her face lit up. “Jimmy! Are you coming down?”

She meant down the well. Coming home. Holden felt an ache to do exactly that. It had been years since he’d been to the farm in Montana that his parents owned. But this time he had Naomi with him, and Belters didn’t go to Earth. “No, Mom, not this time. But I want all of you to come meet me up here. The shuttle ride is my treat. And UN Undersecretary Avasarala is hosting, so the accommodations are pretty posh.”

When there was comm lag, it was difficult not to ramble on. The other person never sent the subtle physical cues that signaled it was their turn to talk. Holden forced himself to stop babbling and wait for a reply. Elise stared at the screen, waiting out the lag. Holden could see how much she’d aged in the years since his last trip home. Her dark brown, almost black, hair was streaked with gray, and the laugh lines around her eyes and mouth had deepened. After five seconds, she waved a hand at the screen in a dismissive gesture. “Oh, Tom will never ride a shuttle to Luna. You know that. He hates microgravity. Just come down and see us here. We’ll throw a party. You can bring your friends here.”

Holden smiled at her. “Mom, I need you guys to come up here because I have someone I want you to meet. Remember the woman? Naomi Nagata, the one I told you about? I told you I’ve been seeing her. I think it might be more than that. In fact, I’m kind of sure about it now. And now we’ll be on Luna while a whole lot of political bullshit gets straightened out. I really want you guys to come up. See me, meet Naomi.”

It was almost too subtle to catch, the way his mother flinched five seconds later. She covered it with a big smile. “More than that? What does

that mean? Like, getting married? I always thought you'd want kids of your own someday..." She trailed off, maintaining an uncomfortably stiff smile.

"Mom," Holden said. "Earthers and Belters can have kids just fine. We're not a different species."

"Sure," she said a few seconds later, nodding too quickly. "But if you have children out there—" She stopped, her smile fading a bit.

"Then they'll be Belters," Holden said. "Yeah, you guys are just going to have to be okay with that."

After five seconds, she nodded. Again, too quickly. "Then I guess we better come up and meet this woman you're willing to leave Earth behind for. She must be very special."

"Yeah," Holden said. "She is."

Elise shifted uncomfortably for a second; then her smile came back, far less forced. "I'll get Tom on that shuttle if I have to drag him by the hair."

"I love you, Mom," Holden said. His parents had spent their whole lives on Earth. The only outer planets types they knew were the caricature villains that showed up on bad entertainment feeds. He didn't hold their ingrained prejudices against them, because he knew that meeting Naomi would be the cure for it. A few days spent in her company and they wouldn't be able to help falling in love with her. "Oh, one last thing. That data I sent you a while back? Hang on to that for me. Keep it quiet, but keep it. Depending on how things fall out over the next couple of months, I may need it."

"My parents are racists," Holden said to Naomi later that night. She lay curled against his side, her face against his ear. One long brown leg thrown across his hips.

"Okay," she whispered.

The hotel suite Avasarala had provided for them was luxurious to the point of opulence. The mattress was so soft that in the lunar gravity it was like floating on a cloud. The air recycling system pumped in subtle scents handcrafted by the hotel's in-house perfumer. That night's selection was called Windblown Grass. It didn't exactly smell like grass to Holden, but it was nice. Just a hint of earthiness to it. Holden had a suspicion that all

perfumes were named randomly, anyway. He also suspected that the hotel ran the oxygen just a little higher than normal. He felt a little *too* good.

“They’re worried our babies will be Belters,” he said.

“No babies,” Naomi whispered. Before Holden could ask what she meant, she was snoring in his ear.

The next day, he woke before Naomi, dressed in the best suit he owned, and headed out into the station. There was one last thing he had to do before he could call this whole bloody affair truly over.

He had to see Jules Mao.

Avasarala had told him that Mao was one of several dozen high-ranking politicians, generals, and corporate leaders rounded up in the mass of arrests following Io. He was the only one Avasarala was going to see personally. And, since they’d caught him on his L5 station frantically trying to get on a fast ship to the outer planets, she’d just had him brought to her on Luna.

That day was the day of their meeting. He’d asked Avasarala if he could be there, expecting a no. Instead, she laughed a good, long time and said, “Holden, there is literally nothing I can think of that will be more humiliating to that man than having you watch me dismantle him. Fuck yes, you can come.”

So Holden hurried out of the hotel and onto the streets of Lovell City. A quick pedicab ride got him to the tube station, and a twenty-minute tube ride took him to the New Hague United Nations complex. A perky young page was waiting for him when he arrived, and he was escorted efficiently through the complex’s twisty maze of corridors to a door marked CONFERENCE ROOM 34.

“You can wait inside, sir,” the perky page chirped at him.

“No, you know?” Holden said, clapping the boy on the shoulder. “I think I’ll wait out here.”

The page dipped his head slightly and bustled off down the corridor, already looking at his hand terminal for whatever his next task was. Holden leaned against the corridor wall and waited. In the low gravity, standing was hardly any more effort than sitting, and he really wanted to see Mao perpwalked down the hallway to his meeting.

His terminal buzzed, and he got a short text message from Avasarala. It said ON OUR WAY.

Less than five minutes later, Jules-Pierre Mao climbed off an elevator into the corridor, flanked by two of the largest military police officers Holden had ever seen. Mao had his hands cuffed in front of him. Even wearing a prisoner's jumpsuit, hands in restraints, and with armed guards escorting him, he managed to look arrogant and in control. As they approached, Holden stood up straight and stepped in their way. One of the MPs yanked on Mao's arm to stop him and gave Holden a subtle nod. It seemed to say, *I'm down for whatever with this guy*. Holden had a sense that if he yanked a pistol out of his pants and shot Mao right there in the corridor, the two MPs would discover they had both been struck with blindness at the same moment and failed to see anything.

But he didn't want to shoot Mao. He wanted what he always seemed to want in these situations. He wanted to know *why*.

"Was it worth it?"

Even though they were the same height, Mao managed to frown down at him. "You are?"

"Awww, come on," Holden said with a grin. "You know me. I'm James Holden. I helped bring down your pals at Protogen, and now I'm about to finish that job with you. I'm also the one that found your daughter after the protomolecule had killed her. So I'll ask again: Was it worth it?"

Mao didn't answer.

"A dead daughter, a company in ruins, millions of people slaughtered, a solar system that will probably never have peaceful stability again. *Was it worth it?*"

"Why are you here?" Mao finally asked. He looked smaller when he said it. He wouldn't make eye contact.

"I was there, in the room, when Dresden got his and I'm the man who killed your pet admiral. I just feel like there's this wonderful symmetry in being there when you get yours."

"Antony Dresden," Mao said, "was shot in the head three times execution style. Is that what passes for justice with you?"

Holden laughed. "Oh, I doubt Chrisjen Avasarala is going to shoot you in the face. Do you think what's coming will be better?"

Mao didn't reply, and Holden looked at the MP and gestured toward the conference room door. They almost looked disappointed as they pushed

Mao into the room and attached his restraints to a chair.

“We’ll be waiting out here, sir, if you need us,” the larger of the two MPs said. They took up flanking positions next to the door.

Holden went into the conference room and took a chair, but he didn’t say anything else to Mao. A few moments later, Avasarala shuffled into the room, talking on her hand terminal.

“I don’t give a fuck whose birthday it is, you make this happen before my meeting is over or I’ll have your nuts as paperweights.” She paused as the person on the other end said something. She grinned at Mao and said, “Well, go fast, because I have a feeling my meeting will be short. Good talking to you.”

She sank into a chair directly across the table from Mao. She didn’t look at Holden or acknowledge him at all. He suspected that the record would never reflect his presence in the room. Avasarala put her terminal on the tabletop and leaned back in her chair. She didn’t speak for several tense seconds. When she did, it was to Holden. She still didn’t look at him.

“You’ve gotten paid for hauling me back here?”

“Payment’s cleared,” Holden said.

“That’s good. I wanted to ask you about a longer-term contract. It would be civilian, of course, but—”

Mao cleared his throat. Avasarala smiled at him.

“I know you’re there. I’ll be right with you.”

“I’ve already got a contract,” Holden said. “We’re escorting the first reconstruction flotilla to Ganymede. And after that, I’m thinking we’ll probably be able to get another escort gig from there. Still a lot of people relocating who’d rather not get stopped by pirates along the way.”

“You’re sure?”

Mao’s face was white with humiliation. Holden let himself enjoy it.

“I’ve just gotten done working for a government,” Holden said. “I didn’t wear it well.”

“Oh please. You worked for the OPA. That’s not a government, it’s a rugby scrum with a currency. Yes, Jules, what is it? You need to go to the potty?”

“This is beneath you,” Mao said. “I didn’t come here to be insulted.”

Avasarala’s smile was incandescent.

“You’re sure about that? Let me ask, do you remember what I said the first time we met?”

“You asked me to tell you about any involvement I might have had with the protomolecule project run by Protogen.”

“No,” Avasarala replied. “I mean, yes, I did ask that. But that’s not the part that you should be caring about right now. You lied to me. Your involvement with weaponizing the Protogen project is fully exposed, and that question is like asking what color Tuesday was. It’s meaningless.”

“Let’s get down to brass tacks,” Mao said. “I can—”

“No,” Avasarala interrupted. “The part you should be caring about is what I said just before you left. Do you remember that?”

He looked blankly up at her.

“I didn’t think so. I told you that if I found out later you’d hidden something from me, I wouldn’t take it well.”

“Your exact words,” Mao said with a mocking grin, “were ‘I am not someone you want to fuck with.’”

“So you do remember,” she said, not a hint of humor in her tone. “Good. This is where you get to find out what that means.”

“I have additional information that could be of benefit—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Avasarala said, real anger creeping into her voice for the first time. “Next time I hear your voice, I have those two big MPs in the hallway hold you down and beat you with a fucking chair. Do you understand me?”

Mao didn’t reply, which showed that he did.

“You don’t have any idea what you’ve cost me,” she said. “I’m being promoted. The economic planning council? I run it now. The public health service? I never had to worry about it because that was Errinwright’s pain in the ass. It’s mine now. The committee on financial regulation? Mine. You’ve fucked up my calendar for the next two decades.

“This is not a negotiation,” Avasarala continued. “This is me gloating. I’m going to drop you into a hole so deep even your wife will forget you ever existed. I’m going to use Errinwright’s old position to dismantle everything you ever built, piece by piece, and scatter it to the winds. I’ll make sure you get to watch it happening. The one thing your hole will have is twenty-four-hour news. And since you and I will never meet again, I want to make sure my name is on your mind every time I destroy something else you left behind. I am going to *erase* you.”

Mao stared back defiantly, but Holden could see it was just a shell. Avasarala had known exactly where to hit him. Because men like him lived

for their legacy. They saw themselves as the architects of the future. What Avasarala was promising was worse than death.

Mao shot a quick look at Holden, and it seemed to say, *I'll take those three shots to the head now, please.*

Holden smiled at him.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Prax

Mei sat on Prax's lap, but her attention was focused with a laser intensity to her left. She put her hand up to her mouth and gently, deliberately deposited a wad of half-chewed spaghetti into her palm, then held it out toward Amos.

"It's yucky," she said.

The big man chuckled.

"Well, if it wasn't before, it sure is now, pumpkin," he said, unfolding his napkin. "Why don't you put that right here?"

"I'm sorry," Prax said. "She's just—"

"She's just a kid, Doc," Amos said. "This is what she's supposed to do."

They didn't call the dinner a dinner. It was a reception sponsored by the United Nations at the New Hague facilities on Luna. Prax couldn't tell if the wall was a window or an ultrahigh-definition screen. On it, Earth glowed blue and white on the horizon. The tables were spread around the room in a semi-organic array that Avasarala had explained was the current fashion. *Makes it look like some asshole just put them up anywhere.*

The room was almost equally people he knew and people he didn't, and watching them segregate was fascinating in its way. To his right, several small tables were filled with short, stocky men and women in professional suits and military uniforms orbiting around Avasarala and her amused-looking husband, Arjun. They gossiped about funding-system analysis and media-relations control. Every outer planets hand they shook was an inclusion that their subjects of conversation denied. To his left, the scientific group was dressed in the best clothes they had, dress jackets that had fit ten years before, and suits representing at least half a dozen different design seasons. Earthers and Martians and Belters all mixed in that group, but the talk was just as exclusionary: nutrient grades, adjustable permeability membrane technologies, phenotypic force expressions. Those were both his people from the past and his future. The shattered and reassembled society of Ganymede. If it hadn't been for the middle table

with Bobbie and the crew of the *Rocinante*, he would have been there, talking about cascade arrays and non-visible-feeding chloroplasts.

But in the center, isolated and alone, Holden and his crew were as happy and at peace as if they'd been in their own galley, burning through the vacuum. And Mei, who had taken a fancy to Amos, still wouldn't be physically parted from Prax without starting to yell and cry. Prax understood exactly how the girl felt, and didn't see it as a problem.

"So living on Ganymede, you know a lot about low-gravity childbearing, right?" Holden said. "It's not really that much riskier for Belters, is it?"

Prax swallowed a mouthful of salad and shook his head.

"Oh, no. It's tremendously difficult. Especially if it's just a shipboard situation without extensive medical controls. If you look at naturally occurring pregnancies, there's a developmental or morphological abnormality five times out of six."

"Five..." Holden said.

"Most of them are germ line issues, though," Prax said. "Nearly all of the children born on Ganymede were implanted after a full genetic analysis. If there's a lethal equivalent, they just drop the zygote and start over. Non-germ line abnormalities are only twice as common as on Earth, though, so that's not so bad."

"Ah," Holden said, looking crestfallen.

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Naomi said. "He's just making conversation."

"Daddy, I want tofu," Mei said, grabbing his earlobe and yanking it. "Where's tofu?"

"Let's see if we can't find you some tofu," Prax said, pushing his chair back from the table. "Come on."

As he walked across the room, scanning the crowd for a dark, formal suit belonging to a waiter as opposed to a dark, formal suit belonging to a diplomat, a young woman came up to him with a drink in one hand and a flush on her cheeks.

"You're Praxidike Meng," she said. "You probably don't remember me."

"Um. No," he said.

"I'm Carol Kiesowski," she said, touching her collarbone as if to clarify what she meant by *I*. "We wrote to each other a couple of times right

after you put out the video about Mei.”

“Oh, right,” Prax said, trying desperately to remember anything about the woman or the comments she might have left.

“I just want to say I think both of you are just so, so brave,” the woman said, nodding. It occurred to Prax that she might be drunk.

“Son of a fucking *whore*,” Avasarala said, loud enough to cut through the background buzz of conversations.

The crowd turned to her. She was looking at her hand terminal.

“What’s a whore, Daddy?”

“It’s a kind of frost, honey,” Prax said. “What’s going on?”

“Holden’s old boss beat us to the punch,” Avasarala said. “I guess we know what happened to all those fucking missiles he stole.”

Arjun touched his wife’s shoulder and pointed at Prax. She actually looked abashed.

“Sorry for the language,” she said. “I forgot about her.”

Holden appeared at Prax’s shoulder.

“My boss?”

“Fred Johnson just put on a display,” Avasarala said. “Nguyen’s monsters? We’ve been waiting for them to come closer to Mars before we took them down. Transponders are all chirping away, and we’ve got them all tracked tighter than a fly’s... Well, they crossed into the Belt, and he nuked them. All of them.”

“That’s good, though,” Prax said. “I mean, isn’t that good?”

“Not if he’s doing it,” Avasarala said. “He’s flexing muscles. Showing that the Belt’s got an offensive arsenal now.”

A man in uniform to Avasarala’s left started talking at the same time as a woman just behind her, and in a moment, the need to declaim had spread through the whole group. Prax pulled away. The drunk woman was pointing at a man and talking rapidly, Prax and Mei forgotten. He found a waiter at the edge of the room, extracted a promise of tofu, and went back to his seat. Amos and Mei immediately started playing at who could blow their nose the hardest, and Prax turned to Bobbie.

“Are you going to go back to Mars, then?” he asked. It seemed like a polite, innocuous question until Bobbie pressed her lips tight and nodded.

“I am,” she said. “Turns out my brother’s getting married. I’m going to try to get there in time to screw up his bachelor party. What about you? Taking the old lady’s position?”

“Well, I think so,” Prax said, a little surprised that Bobbie had heard about Avasarala’s offer. It hadn’t been made public yet. “I mean, all of the basic advantages of Ganymede are still there. The magnetosphere, the ice. If even some of the mirror arrays can be salvaged, it would still be better than starting again from nothing. I mean, the thing you have to understand about Ganymede...”

Once he started on the subject, it was hard for him to stop. In many ways, Ganymede had been the center of civilization in the outer planets. All the cutting-edge plant work had been there. All the life sciences issues. But it was more than that. There was something exciting about the prospect of rebuilding that was, in its fashion, even more interesting than the initial growth. To do something the first time was an exploration. To do it again was to take all the things they had learned, and refine, improve, perfect. It left Prax a little bit giddy. Bobbie listened with a melancholy smile on her face.

And it wasn’t only Ganymede. All of human civilization had been built out of the ruins of what had come before. Life itself was a grand chemical improvisation that began with the simplest replicators and grew and collapsed and grew again. Catastrophe was just one part of what always happened. It was a prelude to what came next.

“You make it sound romantic,” Bobbie said, and the way she said it was almost an accusation.

“I don’t mean to—” Prax began, and something cold and wet wriggled its way into his ear. He pulled back with a yelp, turning to face Mei’s bright eyes and brilliant smile. Her index finger dripped with saliva, and beyond her Amos was laughing himself crimson, one hand grasping at his belly and the other slapping the table hard enough to make the plates rattle.

“What was *that*?”

“Hi, Daddy. I love you.”

“Here,” Alex said, passing Prax a clean napkin. “You’re gonna want that.”

The startling thing was the silence. He didn’t know how long it had been going on, but the awareness of it washed over him like a wave. The political half of the room was still and quiet. Through the forest of their bodies, he saw Avasarala bending forward, her elbows on her knees, her hand terminal inches in front of her face. When she stood up, they parted

before her. She was such a small woman, but she commanded the room just by walking out of it.

“That’s not good,” Holden said, rising to his feet. Without another word, Prax and Naomi, Amos and Alex and Bobbie all followed after her. The politicians and the scientists came too, all of them mixing at last.

The meeting room was across a wide hall and set up in the model of an ancient Greek amphitheater. The podium at the front stood before a massive high-definition screen. Avasarala marched down to a seat, talking fast and low into her hand terminal. The others trailed in after her. The sense of dread was physical. The screen went black and someone dimmed the lights.

In the darkness of the screen, Venus stood in near silhouette against the sun. It was an image Prax had seen hundreds of times before. The feed could have come from any of a dozen monitoring stations. The time stamp on the lower left said they were looking back in time forty-seven minutes. A ship name, the *Celestine*, floated beneath the numbers.

Every time the protomolecule soldiers had been involved in violence, Venus had reacted. The OPA had just destroyed a hundred of its half-human soldiers. Prax felt himself caught between excitement and dread.

The image scattered and re-formed, some kind of interference confusing the sensors. Avasarala said something sharp that could have been *show me*. A few seconds later, the image stopped and reframed. A detail screen showing a gray-green ship. A heads-up display marked it the *Merman*. The image scattered again, and when it re-formed, the *Merman* had moved half an inch to the left and was spinning end over end, tumbling. Avasarala spoke again. A few seconds’ lag, and the screen went back to its original image. Now that Prax knew to look, he could see the tiny dot of the *Merman* moving near the penumbra. There were other tiny specks like it.

The dark side of Venus pulsed like a sudden, planetary flash of lightning under the obscuring clouds. And then it glowed.

Vast filaments thousands of kilometers long like spokes on a wheel lit white and vanished. The clouds of Venus shifted, disturbed from below. Prax had the powerful memory of seeing a wake on the surface of a water tank when a fish passed close underneath. Vast and glowing, it rose through the cloud cover. Spoke-like strands of iridescence arced with vast lightning storms, coming together like the arms of an octopus but connected to a rigid central node. Once it had climbed out of Venus’ thick cloud cover, it launched itself away from the sun, toward the viewing ship, but passing it.

The other ships in its path were scattered and hurled away. A long plume of displaced Venusian atmosphere caught the sun and glowed like snowflakes and slivers of ice. Prax tried to make sense of the scale. As large as Ceres Station. As large as Ganymede. Larger. It folded its arms—its tentacles—together, accelerating without any visible drive plume. It swam in the void. His heart was racing, but his body was still as stone.

Mei patted his cheek with her open palm and pointed to the screen.

“What’s that?” she asked.

Epilogue

Holden

Holden started the replay again. The wall screen in the *Rocinante*'s galley was too small to really catch all the details of the high-resolution imagery the *Celestine* had taken. But Holden couldn't stop watching it no matter what room he was in. An ignored cup of coffee cooled on the table in front of him next to the sandwich he hadn't eaten.

Venus flashed with light in an intricate pattern. The heavy cloud cover swirled as though caught in a planetwide storm. And then it rose from the surface, pulling a thick contrail of Venus' atmosphere in its wake.

"Come to bed," Naomi said, then leaned forward in her chair and took his hand. "Get some sleep."

"It's so big. And the way it swatted all those ships out of the way. Effortless, like a whale swimming through a school of guppies."

"Can you do anything about it?"

"This is the end, Naomi," Holden said, pulling his eyes away from the screen to look at her. "What if this is the end? This isn't some alien virus anymore. This thing is what the protomolecule came here to make. This is what it was going to hijack all life on the Earth to make. It could be *anything*."

"Can you do anything about it?" she repeated. Her words were harsh, but her voice was kind and she squeezed his fingers affectionately.

Holden turned back to the screen, restarting the image. A dozen ships blew away from Venus as though a massive wind had caught them and sent them spinning like leaves. The surface of the atmosphere began to roil and twist.

"Okay," Naomi said, standing up. "I'm going to bed. Don't wake me when you come in. I'm exhausted."

Holden nodded to her without looking away from the video feed. The massive shape folded itself into a streamlined dart, like a piece of wet cloth plucked up from the center, then flew away. The Venus it left behind looked

diminished, somehow. As though something vital had been stolen from it to construct the alien artifact.

And here it was. After all the fighting, with human civilization left in chaos just from its presence, the protomolecule had finished the job it came billions of years before to do. Would humanity survive it? Would the protomolecule even notice them, now that it had finished its grand work?

It wasn't the ending of one thing that left Holden terrified. It was the prospect of something beginning that was utterly outside the human experience. Whatever happened next, no one could be prepared for it.

It scared the hell out of him.

Behind him, a man cleared his throat.

Holden turned reluctantly away from the image on the screen. The man stood next to the galley refrigerator as if he'd always been there, rumpled gray suit and dented porkpie hat. A bright blue firefly flew off his cheek, then hung in the air beside him. He waved it away like it was a gnat. His expression was one of discomfort and apology.

"Hey," Detective Miller said. "We gotta talk."

AN ORBIT NOVELLA



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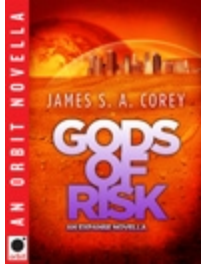
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Gods of Risk

What *kind* of problem?” Hutch asked. Even though he was from the settlements near Mariner Valley, he didn’t have the relaxed, drawling accent of that part of Mars. Hutch’s voice buzzed like a radio on just the wrong frequency.

“It’s not bad,” Leelee said, leaping to his defense. “It’s not bad, right, David? Not really a problem. Inconvenience maybe.”

“Inconvenience,” David echoed.

The silence was uncomfortable. David tugged his fingers, pulling each one straight out from the hand until the knuckle popped, then moving on to the next. He was half a head taller than Hutch, but he couldn’t seem to bring his gaze up higher than the thin man’s sternum. In two months, David would be sixteen, but he felt about six. Hutch’s meetings were always in small rooms, away from the main passages and corridors. This one had been a storage hole from the first generation of settlements. The walls were the polished stone of Mars covered with a clear insulative ceramic that was starting to bubble and gray with age. The light was a construction lantern, the burning white of the LED softened and made ruddy by Leelee’s paisley silk scarf draped over it. They sat on metal crates in the cold. Hutch scratched at the scars on his wrist.

“Don’t let it choke you, little man,” Hutch said. It was an old joke between them—David’s family were Polynesian before they were Martian, and between genetics and growing up at barely over a third of Terran g,

David was over two meters tall and leaning toward pudgy. “Just say what it is. You got a bad batch, right?”

“No, nothing like that. The batch is fine. It’s just my aunt Bobbie’s come to live with us for a while. She’s always at the place now. Always. Anytime I get home, she’s there.”

Hutch frowned and tilted his head. Leelee put her arm around his shoulder, draping herself close to the man. Hutch shrugged her back but not off.

“She knows you’re cooking?”

“She doesn’t know anything,” David said. “She just lifts weights and watches video feeds all day.”

“Lifts weights?” Hutch asked.

There was an undercurrent of amusement in his voice that made David’s guts unknot. He risked a glance at the thin man’s tea-brown eyes.

“She used to be a Marine.”

“Used to be?”

“Something weird happened. She sort of quit.”

“So not a Marine anymore. And now what is she?”

“Just a fucking inconvenience,” David said. He took a little joy in the profanity. *Hell* and *damn* were the worst language tolerated in the Draper house. *Fuck* would have gotten him yelled at. Worse than that would be unthinkable. “The batch is fine. But it’s going to be harder to get the next one done. I can’t do any of the prep work at home now.”

Hutch leaned back, his laughter filling the air. Leelee’s face relaxed, all the little worry lines vanishing back into the eggshell smoothness of her skin.

“Shit,” Hutch said. “You had me thinking there was trouble for a minute there. Thought I was going to have to tell my people that my best cook fell down.”

David picked up his satchel, fumbled through it, and came out with a rattling plastic jar. Hutch took it, cracked the seal, and poured four or five of the small pink lozenges into his hand, then passed one to Leelee. She popped it in her mouth like it was hard candy. The 2,5-Dimethoxy-4-n-

propylthiophenethylamine was a serotonin receptor agonist that broke down into—among other things—a 2,5 desmethoxy derivative that was a monoamine oxidase A inhibitor. The euphoric effects would start to tighten Leelee's joints and lift her mood in the next half hour. The hallucinations wouldn't kick in for an hour, maybe an hour and a half, and then they'd last her through the night. She rattled the lozenge across the back of her teeth with her tongue, grinning at him. David felt the first stirrings of an erection and looked away from her.

"You do good work, little man," Hutch said, taking out his hand terminal. The small chime meant the transfer was done. David's secret account had a little more money in it, not that he was in this for the money. "Now, this auntie thing. What's it going to do to your schedule?"

"I've still got the lab at school," David said. "I can sign up for more time there. Seniors get preference, so it won't be too hard. It's just—"

"Yeah, no," Hutch said. "Better we play safe. You tell me how much time you need to make the next batch; that's how much time you can take."

"I'm thinking a couple weeks at least," David said.

"Take them, they're yours," Hutch said, waving his scarred hand. "We're in this for the long haul, you and me. No reason to get greedy now."

"Yeah."

The thin man stood up. David was never sure how old Hutch really was. Older than him and Leelee and younger than David's parents. That gulf of years seemed to fill infinite possibilities. Hutch shrugged on his dust-red overcoat and pulled his brown knit tuque out of a pocket, flapped it once like he was whipping the air, and pulled it down over white-blond hair. Leelee stood up with him, but Hutch put a hand on her bare shoulder, turning the girl toward David.

"You see my girl here back to the land of the living, eh, little man? I got a thing to do."

"All right," David said. Leelee pulled her scarf off the lantern, and the dirty little room went brighter. Hutch gave a mocking three-finger salute, then unsealed the door and left. The rule was that Hutch left first, and then ten minutes later David could go. He didn't know exactly where Hutch

went, and if Leelee was here with him, he didn't care. She leaned against him, smelling like verbena and girl. She was a year older than him, and he could have rested his chin on the top of her head.

"You're doing all right?" he asked.

"Am," she said, her voice slushy and soft. "It's starting to come on."

"That's good." He gathered her a little closer. She rested her head against his chest, and they waited quietly for the precious minutes to pass.

Seven communities—called the neighborhoods—scattered through the northern reach of the Aurorae Sinus made up Londres Nova. The city, such as it was, had burrowed deep into the flesh of Mars, using the soil as insulation and radiation shielding with only ten domes pressing out to the surface. Forty thousand people lived and worked there, carving new life into the unforgiving stone of humanity's second home. Tube stations made a simple web topology that determined the social forms and structures. Aterpol was the only station with connections to every other neighborhood, and so it became the de facto downtown. Salton was under the biggest agricultural dome and had a surface monorail to the observatory at Dhanbad Nova, and so the upper university and technical clinics were concentrated there. The lower university was in Breach Candy, where David and his family lived. Nariman and Martineztown had been manufacturing and energy production sites in the first wave of colonization, and the displacement that came with new technologies meant both neighborhoods were struggling to reinvent and repurpose themselves. Innis Deep and Innis Shallows each had only a single tube route out, making them cul-de-sacs and havens for the sort of Martian who was almost a Belter—antisocial, independent, and intolerant. An address in either Innis was the mark of an outsider—someone dangerous or vulnerable. Leelee lived in the Shallows, and Hutch lived in the Deep.

As much as the neighborhoods differed, the tube stations were the same: high, arched ceilings bright with full-spectrum light and chaotic with echoes; thin-film video monitors pasted to the walls, blaring public information and entertainment feeds; kiosks selling food and clothes, the latest fads and fashions cycled in and out as regularly as tides. Security

cameras looked down on everything, identity-matching software tweaking the video feeds to put names with faces in the crowd. The air always seemed to have the faint scents of ozone and cheap food and piss. The plastic-film flyers always looked the same whether they were announcing yoga classes, lost pets, or independent music acts. David had been to the cities in Mariner Valley and the base of Olympus Mons, and the tube stations had been the same there too. The one unifying cultural product of Mars.

David led Leelee through the bustle of the Martineztown station. He shifted his satchel so that she could put her arm around his. The farther they walked the less steady her steps were. Her arm curled around him like ivy clinging to a pillar, and he could feel the stiffness in her muscles and hear it in her voice when she spoke. Her pupils were dilating with pleasure and the chemical cascade in her brain. He wondered what she was seeing.

“You never try the stuff yourself?” she asked again, unaware that it was the third time.

“No,” David said again. “I’m finishing up my senior labs. There isn’t really time for a night off. Later maybe. When I get my placement.”

“You’re so smart,” she said. “Hutch always says how you’re so smart.”

Ahead of them, near the platform, a crowd of something close to fifty people were chanting together and holding up signs. A dozen uniformed cops stood a few yards away, not interfering, but watching closely. David ducked his head and turned Leelee away at an angle. Maybe if they headed toward the restrooms there would be a way to the platform that didn’t involve walking a tripping girl past the police. Not that the police were paying much attention to the foot traffic. Their attention was all on the protest. The signs were hand lettered or printed on standard-sized paper and glued together. A couple had thin-film monitors playing looped images that fuzzed out to a psychedelic rainbow swirl when the signs flexed.

HIT BACK! and ARE WE WAITING UNTIL THEY KILL US? and EARTH STARTED IT. LET’S FINISH IT. This last slogan was accompanied by a bad homemade animation of a rock slamming into the

Earth, a massive molten impact crater looking like a bloody bullet wound in the planet.

The protestors were a mixed group, but most were a little older than David or Leelee. Blood-dark faces and the square-gape mouths sent the sense of rage radiating out from them like heat. David paused, trying to make out what exactly they were chanting through the echoes, but all he could tell was that it had seven syllables, four in a call and three in response. One of the police shifted, looking at David, and he started walking again. It wasn't his fight. He didn't care.

By the time they reached the platform, Leelee had gone quiet. He led her to a formed plastic bench that was intended for three people, but was snug with just the two of them. It ticked and popped under his weight, and Leelee flinched from the sound. There were small, distressed lines between her brows. The arrival board listed six minutes for the tube that would eventually get them to Innis Shallows, the seconds counting down in clean-lined Arabic numerals. When Leelee spoke, her voice was tight. He didn't know if it was from sadness or the expected side effect of the drug.

"Everybody's so angry," she said. "I just wish people weren't so angry."

"They've got reason to be."

Her focus swam for a moment, her gaze fighting to find him.

"Everyone's got reasons to be," she said. "I've got reasons to be. You've got reasons to be. Doesn't mean we are, though. Doesn't mean we want to be. You aren't angry are you, David?" The question ended almost like a plea, and he wanted to tell her that he wasn't. He wanted to say whatever words would smooth her perfect brow, and then take her back to her room in the housing complex and kiss her and have her strip off his clothes. He wanted to see her naked and hear her laugh and fall asleep, spent, in her arms. He coughed, shifting on the bench. "You aren't angry, are you?" she asked again.

The soft tritone sounded.

"The tube car's here," he said, forcing a smile. "Everything's going to be fine. Just relax, right?"

She nodded and tried to pull away from him.

“It’s all red. You’re red too. Like a great big cherry. You’re so *smart*,” she said. “So you never try the stuff yourself?”

On the tube car, things weren’t better. This leg of the trip was an express for Aterpol, and the men and women on it were older than he was by a decade. Their demographic weight had the public monitor set to a newsfeed. In some well-appointed newsroom on the planet, a thin, gray-haired man was shouting down a swarthy woman.

“I don’t care!” the man said. “The agent they weaponized came from some larger, extra-solar ecosystem, and I don’t care. I don’t care about Phoebe. I don’t care about Venus. What I care about is what they did. The fact is—and no one disputes this—the fact is that Earth bought those weapons and—”

“That’s a *gross* oversimplification. Evidence is that there were several bids, including one from—”

“Earth bought those weapons and they fired them at us. At you and me and our children and grandchildren.”

The doors slid silently closed and the car began its acceleration. The tubes themselves were in vacuum, the car riding on a bed of magnetic fields like a gauss round. The lurch of acceleration was gentle, though. They’d cover the distance to Aterpol in twenty minutes. Maybe less. Leelee closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the car. Her lips pressed thin and her grip on his arm tightened. Maybe they should have waited for her to take the pill until she’d gotten to someplace quieter and better controlled.

“And Earth also provided the tracking data that shot them all down,” the woman on the screen said, pointing at the gray-haired man with her whole hand. “Yes, a rogue element in the Earth military was involved, but to dismiss the role that the official, *sanctioned* military played—”

“Sanctioned military? You make it sound like there’s a civil war on Earth. I don’t see that. I don’t see that at all. I see Mars under a persistent, existential threat and the government sitting on its hands.”

“Tell me a story,” Leelee said. “Talk to me. Sing me a song. Something.”

“I’ve got music on the hand terminal if you want.”

“No,” she said. “You. Your voice.”

David tucked his satchel between his feet and turned toward her, dipping his head down close to her ear. He had to hunch a little. He licked his lips, trying to think of something. His mind was blank, and he grabbed at the first thought that came through him. He brought his mouth to the shell of her ear. When he sang, he tried to be quiet enough that no one else would hear him.

“Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen...”

Leelee didn’t open her eyes, but she smiled. That was good enough. For ten minutes, David went on, quietly singing Christmas carols to Leelee. Some he got into and didn’t remember the right words, so he just made things up. Nonsense that fit the rhythm of the music, or nearly did.

The detonation was the loudest thing David had ever heard, less a sound than a physical blow. The car pitched forward, rattling against the walls of the tube, throwing Leelee into him and then back. The lighting flickered, failed, and then came on in a different color. They were stopped between stations. The monitors clicked to a pinkish-gray as they rebooted, then glowered back to life with the emergency services trefoil.

“Is this happening?” Leelee asked. Her irises were tiny rings of brown around deep black. “David? Is this happening?”

“It is, and it’s all right,” he said. “I’m here. We’re fine.”

David checked his hand terminal, thinking that the newsfeeds might tell him what was going on—power failure, rioting, enemy attack—but the network was in lockdown. An almost supernaturally calm male voice came over the public monitors. “The public transport system has encountered a pressure anomaly and has been shut down to assure passenger safety. Stay calm and a maintenance crew will arrive shortly.” The message was less important than the tone of voice it was spoken in, and Leelee relaxed a little. She started to giggle.

“Well this is fucked,” she said and grinned at him. “Fucked, fucked, fucked, fucked, *fucked*.”

“Yeah,” David said. His mind was already jumping ahead. He’d be late getting home. His father would want to know why, and when it came out

he'd been in Martineztown, there'd be questions. What he'd been doing there, who had he been seeing, why hadn't he told anybody. All around them, the other passengers were grumbling and sighing and arranging themselves into comfortable positions, waiting for the rescuers. David stood up and sat down again. Every passing minute seemed to relax Leelee and shunt that tension into his spine. When he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass of the tube doors, the boy looking back seemed furtive and scared.

Half an hour later, the emergency hatch at the end of the car creaked, popped, and opened. A man and a woman in matching blue security uniforms stepped in.

"Hey, folks," the man said. "Everyone all right? Sorry about this, but some jackhole broke the vacuum seals. Whole system's going to be down for about six hours, minimum. Some places longer. We've got service carts out here that can take folks to transport buses. Just line up single file, and we'll get you where you're going."

Leelee was humming to herself as David drew her into line. He couldn't get her to Innis Shallow and get back home. Not with the tubes down. He bit his lips and they moved forward one at a time, the other passengers vanishing through the emergency hatch and into the temporary airlock beyond it. It took forever to reach the front of the line.

"Where are you two headed?" the security man asked, consulting his hand terminal. It was working, even though David's wasn't. The man looked up, concerned. "Hermano. Where are you two headed?"

"Innis Shallows," David said. And then, "She's going to Innis Shallows. I was taking her there, because she's not feeling so good. But I've got to get to Breach Candy. I'm going to miss my labs." Leelee stiffened.

"Innis Shallows and Breach Candy. Step on through."

The temporary airlock was made from smooth black Mylar, and walking through it was like going through the inside of a balloon. The pressure wasn't calibrated very well, and when the outer seal opened, David's ears popped. The hall was wide and low, the dull orange emergency lights filling the passage with shadows and leaching the color out of everything. The air

was at least five degrees colder, enough to summon gooseflesh, and Leelee wasn't holding his arm anymore. Her eyebrows were lifted and her mouth was set.

"It'll be okay," he said as they came close to the electric carts. "They'll get you home all right."

"Yeah, fine," she said.

"I'm sorry. I've got to get home. My dad—"

She turned to him. In the dim light, her dilated eyes didn't seem as out of place. Her sobriety made him wonder how much she'd really been feeling it before and how much had been a playful kind of acting.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Not the first time I've been tripping in public, right? I can behave myself. Just thought you'd come play and I was wrong. Hard cheese for me and moving on now."

"I'm sorry. Next time."

"You call it," she said with a shrug. "Next time."

The driver of the cart for Innis Shallow called out, and Leelee clambered aboard, squeezed between a middle-aged man and a grandmotherly woman, and waved back at David once. The middle-aged man glanced at David, back at Leelee, then down at the girl's body. The cart lurched, whined, and lurched again. David stood, watching it pull away. The mixture of shame, regret, and longing felt like an illness. Someone touched his elbow.

"Breach Candy?"

"Yes."

"Over here, then. Damn. You're a big one, aren't you? All right, though. We'll fit you in."

It was two years almost to the day since David had met Hutch at the lower university. David had been in the commons, the wide, carpeted benches with their soft, organic curves welcoming the students eating lunch. At thirteen, David had already been biochemistry track for two years. His last labs had been in tRNA transport systems, and he was reading through the outline for the carbon complex work that would take up his next six months when one of the seniors—an olive-skinned boy named Alwasi—had sat down beside him and said there was someone David should meet.

Hutch had made himself out as more of a scholar back then but still with an edge to him. For months, David had thought the man was an independent tutor; the kind of hired instructor a family might bring on if their children were falling behind. David still had seven rounds of lab to go before his placement, so he hadn't thought too much about Hutch. He'd just become another face in the whirl of the lower university, one more minor character in the cast of thousands. Or hundreds at least.

Looking back, David could sort of see how Hutch had tested him. It had begun with asking innocuous little favors—tell someone who shared David's table that Hutch was looking for her, get Hutch a few grams of some uncontrolled reagent, keep a box for him overnight. They were things that David could do easily, and so he did. Every time, Hutch praised him or paid him back with small favors. David began to notice the people Hutch knew—pretty girls and tough-looking men. Several of the low-tier instructors knew Hutch on sight, and if they weren't overly friendly to him, they were certainly respectful. There hadn't been any one moment when David had crossed a line from being someone Hutch knew to cooking for him. It all happened so smoothly that he'd never felt a bump.

The fact was he would have done the side projects for Hutch without being paid. He couldn't spend the money on anything too extravagant for fear his parents would ask questions, so he used it here and there—a little present for Leelee or lunch on him for the other students at his table or the occasional indulgence that he could explain away. For the most part, it just sat in the account, growing slowly over time. The money wasn't precious because it was money. It was precious because it was secret and it was his.

When he had his placement and moved out to student housing in Salton, he'd have more freedom. Hutch's money would buy him a top-flight gaming deck or a better wardrobe. He could take Leelee out for fancy dinners without having to explain where he'd been or who he'd been with. The workload would be harder, especially if he got placed in medical or development. He'd heard stories about first-year placements on the development teams who pulled fifty-six hour shifts without sleep. Carving

out another six hours after that for Hutch might be hard, but he'd worry about that when he got there. He had more immediate problems.

The transport buses were old, wheezing electrical carts, some of them dating back two generations. The drivetrain clicked under him, and the rubberized foam wheels made a constant sticky ripping noise. David hunched in a seat, trying to pull his elbows close in against his body. Around him, the other travelers looked bored and restless. The system was still locked down, his hand terminal restricted to what it held in local memory. He checked it every few seconds just to feel he had something to do. The wide access corridors passed slowly, the conduits and pipes like the circulatory system of some vast planetary behemoth. It seemed like the corridor would go on forever, even though the distance between Martineztown and Breach Candy wasn't more than forty kilometers.

He was supposed to be in his labs at the lower university. Even if all the public transport was locked down, it wasn't more than a half-hour walk from there to home. David figured he could claim to have been in the middle of something and that it had taken longer than he'd expected to finish up the work. Except that was the excuse he'd been giving to cover the extra time he'd spent cooking for Hutch. His mother had already started wondering in her vague accusation-without-confrontation way whether he was losing focus on his work. If they found out he'd been outside the neighborhood, it would be bad. If they found out why, it would be apocalyptic. David cracked his knuckles and willed the bus to go faster.

It was easy to think of Londres Nova as existing only along its tube lines, but the truth was generations of colonists and prototerraformers had made a webwork of tunnels under the airless permafrost of Mars. Whole complexes of the original tunnels had gone fallow—sealed off and the atmosphere and heat allowed to flow away into the flesh of the planet. Supply passages linked to electrical maintenance lines. There were shortcuts, and the bus driver knew them. Just when David was about to weep or scream with frustration, he saw the edge of Levantine Park and the northernmost edge of Breach Candy. The bus was going faster than he

could walk, but just knowing where he was, being able to map his own way home, made the frustration a little less. And the fear maybe a little more.

I didn't do anything wrong, he told himself. I was in my lab. There was a security alert and the network went down. I had to finish the experiment, and it took a little longer because everyone was trying to find out what had happened. That's all. Nothing else.

The fifth time the bus stopped, he was as close to his family's hole as he was going to be. He lumbered out into the corridors of his hometown, his head down and his shoulders tucked in toward his chest like he was trying to protect something.

The family lived in a series of eight rooms dug out of the stone and finished with textured organics. Rich brown bamboo floors met soft mushroom-brown walls. The lights were indirect LEDs alleged to match a sunny afternoon on Earth. To David, they were just the color house-lights were. A newsfeed was muttering in the common rooms, so some portion of the system must have been taken off security lockdown. David closed the door behind him and stalked through the kitchen, fists against his thighs, breath shallow and fast.

Aunt Bobbie was alone in the den. In any other family, she'd have been huge. For a Draper, she was only about the middle of the bell curve in height, but athletic and strong. She wore a simple loose-cut outfit that lived somewhere between sweats and pajamas. It mostly hid the shape of her body. She looked away from the video feed, her dark eyes meeting his, and killed the sound. On the screen, a reporter was speaking earnestly into the camera. Behind him, a lifting mech was hauling a slab of ferrocrete.

"Where's Dad?" he asked.

"Stuck in Salton with your mom," Bobbie said. "The blowout was on that line. Security's saying they'll have everything moving again in about ten hours, but your father said they'd probably be taking a room and coming home in the morning."

David blinked. No one was going to give him any grief. It should have felt like relief. He shrugged, trying to get the tension out of his shoulders,

but it wouldn't go. He knew it didn't make sense to be irritated with his parents for not being there to fight with.

"Do we know what happened?" he asked, stepping into the room.

"Sabotage," Aunt Bobbie said. "Someone blew a hole between the tube and the maintenance corridor, sucked in a few thousand kilos of air. They took the vacuum seals off-line too, so the whole tube system popped like a balloon."

"Earth?"

Aunt Bobbie shook her head.

"Earth doesn't think that small," she said. "This is someone local trying to start something."

"Why would someone local blow up our own stuff if they're mad at Earth?"

"Because Earth's too far away."

It didn't sound like an answer to his question, but David let it go with another shrug.

Aunt Bobbie's gaze was on the monitor and not on it. Through it. Seeing something else. He knew she'd been on Ganymede when the fighting started and that something had happened so that she wasn't in the military anymore and she had to live with them. The unfairness of her bringing her problems into his house chafed. She sighed and forced a smile.

"How'd things go at the lab?"

"All right," he said.

"What're you working on?"

"Just labs," he said, not looking at her.

"Your dad said he expected your placement to come through soon. Find out what you'll be doing for the next eight years."

"Guess."

Aunt Bobbie smiled.

"I remember when I first got into training. There was a breakdown in the notification system, and they wound up losing my placement for about six days. I was chewing through rocks until it came through. What about you? Are you more excited, scared, or pissed off?"

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Your dad’s really proud of you,” Aunt Bobbie said. “Whatever happens, he’s going to be really proud of you.”

David felt the flush of warmth rising in his neck and cheeks. For a second he thought he was embarrassed, but then he recognized the rage. He clamped his jaw tight and looked at the monitor so that he wouldn’t be looking at Aunt Bobbie. The mech was gesturing to a ragged hole two meters high and half a meter wide, the man controlling it speaking to the reporter as steel claws pointed out the fine cracks fanning unpredictably out from the breach. David’s teeth ached and he made himself relax his jaw. Aunt Bobbie turned back to the screen. He couldn’t read her expression, but he had the feeling that he’d exposed something about himself he didn’t want her to know.

“We have anything for dinner?”

“I didn’t make anything,” she said. “Could, though.”

“It’s all right. I’ll grab a bowl of rice. I have work I need to do. Lab stuff.”

“Okay.”

David’s room was in the back. It had been cut from the ground with the image of a standard-sized person, and so it felt cramped to him. A standard bed would have left half a meter between the footboard and the wall; David’s was almost flush. The gaming deck, the only thing he’d ever spent Hutch’s illicit money on, sat at the side of the desk. The wall was set to a still from *Gods of Risk* where Caz Pratihari was about to duel Mikki Suhanam, both men looking strong, dangerous, and a bit melancholy. When the door was locked, he switched the wall to his favorite picture of Una Meing and threw himself to the bed. The newsfeed muttered from the common room, and under it—almost too faint to make out—Aunt Bobbie’s slow, rhythmic grunting. Resistance training probably. He wished he could make all the noises go away. That he could have the house to himself for once. He wondered if Leelee was all right. If she’d made it home safe. If she was angry with him. Or disappointed.

His hand terminal chimed. The alert was from the lower university. In response to the terrorist attack on the tube lines, the labs would be closed the following day. Students with ongoing work that couldn't sit for an extra day were to reply to the section proctor who would either give them special authorization to come in or else do part of the work for them. He ran through a mental checklist. He didn't have anything that needed him to be there, and if he got a little behind, everyone else would, too. He didn't have any of Hutch's reagents in his lab, so if there was a security audit, he'd be all right. He had a day off, then.

Leelee's voice spoke in his memory. *You never try the stuff yourself?* Right now, somewhere in Innis Shallow, Leelee's brain chemistry was cascading through a long series of biochemical waterfalls, one imbalance slipping to another, slipping to another. Her visual cortex firing in strange waves, her hippocampus blurring. He rolled to his side, reached between the bed frame and the wall, and plucked out the little felt bag. The pink lozenge looked tiny in his vast palm. It tasted like strawberry flavoring and dextrose.

David laced his fingers behind his head, looked at the woman on his wall looking back at him, and waited, waited, waited for the euphoria to come.



The lower university was one of the oldest complexes in Londres Nova; the first marks had been made by automated construction mechs when there had been only a few thousand people on the planet. The halls were simple, direct, rectilinear, and hard. In the commons area—what everyone referred to as “outside”—there had been some attempt to soften and humanize the space, but within, it was low ceilings and right angles. It didn't help that the original colonial designs hadn't recessed any of the infrastructure. Halls that were narrow already had water pipes and electrical cables crowding in at the corners. The flooring was all metal grate, and David had to duck to get through the doorways. The suction from hundreds of fume hoods venting out to the atmosphere reclamation plants kept a constant breeze blowing

against the main doors, pushing the students in and then keeping them from getting out.

David's locker was in the third hall corridor. Senior's row. It was twice as wide as the one he'd had just the year before, and the locking mechanism didn't stick the way the old one had. He'd put a couple decals on the outer face—a picture of Caz Pratihari, a kanji-print cartoon—but nothing like the multicolored glow of the one next to him. It belonged to an industrial engineering girl who he never saw unless they were in the hall at the same time. All the lockers had something, though—a picture, a whiteboard, some in-joke one-liner printed on plastic and fused to the metal. Some little mark to say that this space belongs to someone in particular, someone a little—but only a little—different from the others.

At the end of the cycle, everyone in the senior's row would get their placements, empty the lockers, and go to wherever they were put next. The lockers would be scrubbed clean, decontaminated, sealed, and made anonymous again for whichever student was assigned it next. David had heard about sand castles on beaches being washed away by the tide, but he'd never seen an ocean. The lockers of senior's row were the closest analogue among things he actually knew.

David closed the door and turned down toward his workstation. With the tube stations running, his parents back at the house, and the lower university open, the lab was the place he disliked least. The long muscles in his back and legs still ached a little after his night sampling his own wares, and he was half relieved that he could tell Leelee he'd tried it and half relieved that his schedule wouldn't let him try it again. The whole thing had been like having a very long, pleasant, but kind of boring dream. And it had left his head feeling a little hazy in a way he didn't enjoy.

His lab work was almost at its final phase. The terminal built into his desk was arranged to display the data on all seven studies that were making up the complex tissue of his senior labs. They were all built around the single unified idea of trying to build complex cell structures that would sequester ferrous products. It wasn't a holy grail, but it was a good, solid puzzle with a lot of applications for the terraforming efforts if it worked out.

With the day out of lab, he had a double handful of data to look over and incorporate.

And so did everyone else.

“Hey? Big Dave?”

Steppan was one of the other four students under Mr. Oke. He stood in the doorway, leaning on a crutch and smiling uncomfortably. He was pale as bleached flour and allergic to the pharmaceutical cocktail that kept bones dense and muscles functioning in the low Martian gravity. He’s broken his leg twice since the year began.

“Hey,” David said.

“Pretty crazy about that tube blowout, eh?”

“Bizarre,” David said.

“So look, I was wondering...ah...”

“You need something,” David said.

“Yeah.”

David tapped his wide fingers across the display screen, letting the data batch process without him. Steppan limped into the room. With both of them there, the lab seemed too small.

“I’ve got an anomaly on one of my runs. I mean way off. Three standard deviations.”

“You’re fucked, cousin.”

“I know. I think I may have gotten some bad reagent.”

“Bad? Or wrong?”

“Wrong would be bad. Anyway, I know you’ve got some extras, and I was wondering—”

“Extras?”

A little knot squeezed in David’s chest. Steppan shrugged and looked away like he’d said something he hadn’t wanted to.

“Sure. It’s no big deal, right? But my chromium stuff has a lot of the same reagents. If I can scrounge enough together to do another run, I could discard the bad data.”

“I don’t have that much stuff.”

Steppan nodded, his head bowed down, eyes to the floor. He licked his lips, and David could see the desperation in the way he held his shoulders. David had imagined a million times what it would be like if his labs went pear-shaped. Especially right before placements. It was everyone's nightmare.

"Sure you do," Steppan said. "You're always getting equipment and supplies out of that other locker, right? I mean. You know."

"I don't know," David said. His mouth tasted like copper.

"Sure you do," Steppan said, not looking up.

The tension in the room was vicious. Steppan hung his head like a whipped dog, but he wouldn't back away. The walls were too close, the air too stale. Steppan was breathing all the oxygen. The boy's gaze flickered up to meet David's and then away again. How much did Steppan know? How much did he suspect? Who else knew?

"I'll help you," David said, speaking like the words would cut his tongue if he spoke too fast. "You let me know what you need for another run, and I'll help you get it, okay? You can have a fresh run. We'll make the dataset work."

"Sure, thanks," Steppan said. The relief in his shoulders wasn't faked. "Thank you."

"Does Mr. Oke know about the other locker?"

"No," Steppan said with a grin that was almost camaraderie. "And never will, right?"

So instead of working his datasets, David spent the morning going through the labs, looking for anyone he knew well enough to talk to. There were fewer than he'd hoped for, and the tension in the air made people short-tempered. Everyone was behind. Everyone had their own problems. Everyone was worried about their labs and their placements and whatever issues their families put on them. By afternoon, he'd given up. The only option left was to get on the network and order a fresh supply for Steppan from the distributor. It didn't take out too much from his secret account, and he wasn't the only one scrambling at the last minute to supply a lab. It was usually students buying their own things, he thought, but it wouldn't seem

that odd to have someone doing a favor for a friend. As long as no one asked where the money came from, he'd be fine. When he got back to his actual labs, he felt like he'd already done a full day's work and he'd hardly started.

The hours passed quickly. By dinnertime, he'd cleared and processed all the data from the day the tubes went down and started on the data for the day after. Just in time for the data that had been accruing while he'd been wandering around the labs to start showing up in the queue. With each batch file that appeared, David felt the night stretching out ahead of him. Maybe he just wouldn't sleep. If he could get through tomorrow, he'd have the whole backlog cleared. Unless someone blew something up, or Steppan decided he wanted something else to keep quiet, or Aunt Bobbie decided to come lift weights at him or something. David tried to stretch the headache out of the base of his skull and got back to work.

At seven minutes past dinnertime, his hand terminal chimed. He accepted the connection with his thumb.

"You aren't coming home for dinner?" his mother asked. Her voice was tinny and small, like air pressed into a straw.

"No," David replied. "I've got to finish my datasets."

"I thought they gave you the daytime to do that," she said. On the hand terminal screen, she looked different than in person. Not older or younger, but both. It was like being shrunk down rubbed out all the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, but at the same time it made all the gray show in her hair.

"I had some other stuff I needed to take care of."

The small screen version of her face went cool and distant. The tightness in David's shoulders started to feel like a weight.

"Time management is an important skill, David," she said, as if it were just a random thought. Not anything to do with him.

"I know," he said.

"I'll put your meal up for when you get home. Don't be later than midnight."

"I won't."

The connection dropped, and David turned back to his data, growled, and slammed his fist into the display. The monitor didn't break. It didn't even error out. He might as well not have done anything. The next alert came in the middle of the evening when the labs were starting to empty. The voices in the hallways were fainter, almost lost in the drone and drum of music from the construction labs. The maintenance workers were coming through, old men and women with damp mops and desiccant powders. David almost ignored his hand terminal's tritone chime. It only started to bother him a little, wondering who would have sent a message rather than just opening a connection. He looked over. It was from Leelee, and the header read OPEN WHEN YOU'RE ALONE. David's concentration broke. His imagination leapt to the sorts of messages that girls sent to boys to be watched in private. He reached over and closed the door to his lab and hunched over the hand terminal.

She was in a dark place, the light catching her from the side. In the background, a rai song was playing, all trumpets and ululating male voices. She licked her lips, her gaze flicked to the terminal's control display, and then back to him.

"David, I think I'm in trouble," she said. Her voice shook, her breath pressing into the words. "I need help, okay? I'm going to need help, and I know you like me. And I like you too, and I think you'll help me out, right? I need to borrow some money. Maybe...maybe kind of a lot. I'll know soon. Tomorrow maybe. Just send a message back if you can. And don't talk to Hutch."

A woman's voice called from the background, rising over the music, and Leelee surged forward. The display went back to default, and David put in a connection request that timed out with an offer to leave a message instead. Grunting with frustration, he put in another request. Then another. Leelee's system was off-line. He had the powerful urge to get to the tube station and go to Innis Shallows in person, but he didn't know where to find her once he was there. Didn't even know for sure she'd been there when she sent the message. Curiosity and dread spun up a hundred scenarios. Leelee had been caught with some product and had to bribe the police or she'd be jailed.

One of Hutch's enemies had found her and was threatening to kill her if she didn't tell how to find him so now she needed to get off planet. Or she was pregnant and she had to get to Dhanbad Nova for the abortion. He wondered how much money she'd need. He imagined the smile on her face when he gave it to her. When he saved her from whatever it was.

But first he had to fix his data and get home. No one could know that something was happening. He set the hand terminal to record and placed himself in the center of the image.

"I'll do whatever I can, Leelee. Just you need to get in touch with me. Tell me what's going on, and I'll do whatever you need. Promise." He felt like there was more. Something else he should add. He didn't know what. "Whatever it is, we'll get through it, right? Just call me."

He set the headers and delivered the message. For the rest of the evening, he waited for the chime of a connection request. It never came.

When he got home, it was near midnight but his father and Aunt Bobbie were still awake. The living room monitor was set to a popular feed with a silver-haired, rugged-faced man talking animatedly. With the sound muted, he seemed to be trying to get their attention. David's father sat on the couch, the mass of his body commanding the space from armrest to armrest like a king on his throne. Aunt Bobbie leaned against the wall, lifting a thirty-kilo weight with one arm as she spoke, then gently letting it descend.

"That's how I see it," she said.

"But it *isn't* like that," his father said. "You are a highly trained professional. How much did Mars invest in you over those years you were in the Corps? The resources that you took up didn't come from nowhere. Mars gave something up to give you those opportunities, those skill sets."

It was a tone of voice David had heard all his life, and it tightened his gut. The man on the monitor lifted his hands in outrage over something, then cracked what was meant to be a charming smile.

"And I appreciate that," Aunt Bobbie said, her voice low and calm in a way that sounded more like shouting than his father's raised voice. "I've served. And those opportunities involved a lot of eighteen-hour days and —"

“No, no, no, no,” his father said, massive hands waving in the air like he was trying to blow away smoke. “You don’t get to complain about the work. Engineering is just as demanding as—”

“—and watching a lot of my friends die in front of me,” Aunt Bobbie finished. The free weight rose and fell in the sudden silence. She shifted it to her other hand. His father’s face was dark with blood, his hands grasping his knees. Aunt Bobbie smiled. Her voice was sad. “You’re thinking about how you can top me on that, aren’t you? Go ahead. Take your time.”

David put his hand terminal down on the kitchen table, the click of plastic on plastic enough to announce him. When they turned to look at him, David could see the family resemblance. For a moment, they were an older brother and a younger sister locked in the same conversation they’d been having since they were children. David nodded to them and looked away, unsettled by the thought and vaguely embarrassed.

“Welcome home,” his father said, rising up from the couch. “How are things at the lab?”

“Fine,” David said. “Mom said she’d put dinner up for me.”

“There’s some curry in the refrigerator.”

David nodded. He didn’t like curry, but he didn’t dislike it. He put a double serving into a self-heating ceramic bowl and set it to warm. He kept his eyes down, wishing that they’d go on with whatever they’d been talking about so they’d forget about him yet dreading listening to them fight if they did. Aunt Bobbie cleared her throat.

“Did they find anything more about the tube thing?” she asked. David could tell from the shift in her tone of voice that she’d put up the white flag. His father took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through his nose. David’s curry tasted more of ginger than usual, and he wondered whether Aunt Bobbie had made it.

“Newsfeed says they have leads,” his father said at last. “I imagine they’ll get someone in custody by the end of the week.”

“Are they saying outside involvement?”

“No. Some idiot protestor trying to make a point about how vulnerable we are,” his father said as if he actually knew. “It’s happening everywhere.

Selfish crap, if you ask me. We were on our way to making the schedule for the month before this happened. Now everyone's lost a day at least. That's not so much when it's just one person, but there were thousands of people thrown out off schedule. It's like Dad always says: Three hundred sixty-five people miss one shift, that's a year gone in a day, you know?"

"Yeah, sort of," Aunt Bobbie said. "I remember it being nine thousand people miss an hour."

"Same thought."

David's hand terminal chimed its tritone and his heart raced, but when he pulled it closer, it was only the lower university's automated system posting the lab schedule for the next week. He looked through it without really taking it in. No surprises. He'd get his work done somehow. He killed the sound on his terminal and switched back to Leelee's message just to see her face, the way her shoulders moved. She licked her lips again, looked down, and then up. He heard her voice in his memory. Not the message she'd sent him tonight, but the last thing she said the night the tube broke down. *Just thought you'd come play and I was wrong.*

Oh, God. Had she been thinking about having sex with him? Wouldn't Hutch have been angry? Or was that why Hutch had sent them away together? Was that what this was all about? Humiliation and a barely controlled erotic thrill mixed in his blood and left the curry seeming bland. He had to find Leelee. Tomorrow, if he hadn't heard from her, he'd go to Innis Shallows. He could just ask around. Someone would know her. Maybe he could put off his data checking for one day. Or make Steppan do it. Guy owed him one after all...

"Well, kid," his father said, stepping into the room. David flipped his hand terminal facedown. "It's late and I've got work tomorrow."

"Me too," David said.

"Don't stay up too late."

"Fine."

His father's hand gripped his shoulder briefly, the pressure there and gone again. David ate the last few bites of curry and washed it down with a cup of cold water. In the living room, Aunt Bobbie changed feeds on the

monitor. A small, old, dark-skinned woman in an orange sari appeared on the screen, leaning forward and listening to an interviewer's question with an expression of polite contempt. Aunt Bobbie coughed out a single sour laugh and turned off the screen.

She walked up to the kitchen, massaging her left bicep with her right hand and grimacing. She wasn't really any bigger than his father, but she was much stronger and it made her carry herself like she was. David tried to remember if she'd killed anyone. He was pretty sure he'd heard a story about her killing someone, but he hadn't been paying attention. She looked down, maybe at his hand terminal turned with its face to the table. Her smile looked almost wistful, which was weird. She leaned against the sink and began pulling her fingers backward, pushing out her palm, stretching out the tendons and muscles of her wrist.

"You ever go free-climbing?" she asked.

David glanced up at her and shrugged.

"When I was about your age, I used to go all the time," she said. "Get a breather and a couple of friends. Head up to the surface. Or down. I went to Big Man's Cave a couple times right before my placement. No safety equipment. Usually just enough bottled air to go, do the thing, and get back to the closest ingress. The whole point was to try and carry as little as we possibly could. The thinnest suits. No ropes or pitons. There was one time, I was on this cliff face about half a kilometer up from the ground with my fist wedged into a crack to keep me in place while a windstorm came through. All I could hear was the grit hitting my helmet and my climbing buddies screaming at me to get out of there."

"Scary," David said flatly. She didn't notice the sarcasm, or she chose not to.

"It was *great*. One of the best climbs ever. Your grandfather didn't like it, though. That was the only time he's ever called me stupid."

David filled another glass of water and drank it. He had a hard time imagining it. Pop-Pop was always praising everyone for everything. To the point sometimes that it seemed like none of it really meant anything. He couldn't imagine his grandfather getting that angry. His father sometimes

called Pop-Pop “the Sergeant Major” when he was angry with him. It was almost like he was talking about another person, someone David had never met.

“There was context,” Aunt Bobbie said. “A guy I knew died in a fall about a month before. Troy.”

“What happened?”

Now it was her turn to shrug. “He was way up on a cliff, and he lost his grip. The fall cracked his air bottle, and by the time anyone could get to him, he’d choked out. I wasn’t there. We weren’t friends. But to Dad, everyone who free-climbed was the same, and anything that had happened to Troy could happen to me. He was right about that. He just, y’know, thought I didn’t know it.”

“Only you did.”

“Of course I did. That was the point,” she said. She pointed to the hand terminal with her chin. “If you flip it like that when he comes over, it makes him curious.”

David tasted the copper of fear and pushed back from the table a few centimeters.

“It wasn’t anything. It was the lab schedule.”

“All right. But when you flip it over, it makes him curious.”

“There’s nothing to be curious about,” David said, his voice getting louder.

“All right,” she said, and her voice was gentle and strong and David didn’t want to talk about it or look at her. Aunt Bobbie walked back toward the guest room and bed. When he heard her shower go on, he picked up his hand terminal again and checked in case something had come through from Leelee. Nothing had. He put what was left of his dinner into the recycler and headed for his room. As soon as he hit the mattress, his mind started racing. All of the things Leelee might need money for started spinning through his mind—drugs or an attorney or a passage off Mars. As soon as he thought that she might be leaving, he was sure that she was, and it left his chest feeling hollow and hopeless. And she’d told him not to talk to

Hutch. Maybe she'd done something to piss him off, and now she had to get away before he caught her.

He drifted to sleep imagining himself standing between Hutch and Leelee, facing him down to protect her. He'd run the scenario from the start. He walked in on the two of them fighting, and he pushed Hutch away. Or was with Leelee and Hutch came after her. He tried out lines—*Hurt her, and I'll make your life hell* or *You think you've got all the power, but I'm David fucking Draper, cousin*—and imagined their effects. Leelee's gratitude shifted into kissing and from there to her taking his hand and slipping it under her shirt. He could almost feel her body pressed against him. Could almost smell her. The dream shifted, and it was all about getting the datasets finished, only Leelee needed the money to change the results of her pregnancy test, and the bank was in a tiny crevasse in the back of his living room, and his hands were too thick to reach it.

When his alarm went off, he thought it had broken. His body still had the too heavy, weak feeling of the middle of the night. But no, it was morning time. He pulled himself to the edge of his bed, let his feet swing down to the floor, and pressed his palms against his eyes. Even through the air filters, he caught the usually welcome scents of breakfast sausage and coffee. Una Meing looked out from his wall, eyes promising him something deep and mysterious. A diffuse resentment flowed through him and he switched the image away from her to a generic preset of sunrise at Olympus Mons. Touristy.

He had to make a plan. Maybe he could talk to Hutch after all. Not say Leelee had talked to him, just that he was worried about her. That he wanted to find her. Because that was true. He had to find Leelee, wherever she was, and make sure she was all right. Then he had to finish his datasets. It was almost two hours to Innis Shallows and back, but if he just planned to work through lunchtime, or else eat in the labs, he'd only be losing one hour for travel. He had to think about how to find her once he was there. He wished there was someone to talk to. Even Hutch. There wasn't, though, and so he was going to have to solve this on his own. Go out, ask, look. She

was counting on him. For a moment, he could feel her head resting against him, smell the subtle musk of her hair. So yes. He'd go do this.

No problem.

Only one tube ran to Innis Shallows, back and forth along the same stretch. Since the sabotage of the tube system, there was more security present, men and women with pistols and gas grenades scowling and walking through the cars. The tube station at Innis Shallows didn't even have the usual perfunctory signs announcing that the end destination was Aterpol, like there were only two kinds of places in the universe: Innis Shallows and anywhere else. The official stats said that six thousand people lived and worked in the Shallows, but walking out of the tube station, David still felt overwhelmed. The main halls were old stone behind clear sealant. White scars marked the places where decades of minor accidents had dug into it. Men and women walked or rode electric carts, moving up ramps from level to level. Most ignored him but a few made a point of staring. He knew he didn't belong there. His clothes and the way he walked marked him. He stood for almost a minute in the center of the corridor, his hand in his pocket, fingers wrapped around his hand terminal. Behind him, the soft chimes of the tube preparing to leave again were like a friend's voice: *Get on. Get out of here. This is dumb.*

He would have, too, turned back around and gotten on the tube and headed back without spending more than five minutes in the neighborhood. Except for Leelee.

David scowled, shook his head, and trudged down the corridor, heading off to his left for no reason. His throat felt tight and uncomfortable and he needed to pee. After about twenty meters of cart rental kiosks and monitors set to entertainment newsfeeds, he found a little restaurant and stepped in. The woman behind the counter could have been a Belter: thin body, too-large head. She lifted her chin at him and nodded back toward half a dozen chipped formed plastic tables.

"Anywhere you want," she said in a thick accent David couldn't place.

David didn't move, looking for the courage to speak for so long the woman raised her eyebrows. He yanked his hand terminal out of his pocket

and held it out to her. He'd gotten a still from the message Leelee had left him. It wasn't great, but the shape of her face was clear and she wasn't in the middle of a word or anything.

"I'm looking for her," David said. He sounded terse in his own ears. Almost resentful. "You know her?"

Her eyes flickered down and she shrugged.

"Don't know her. You want to stay, you got to eat. Anywhere you want."

"Her name's Leelee."

She hoisted her eyebrows. David felt a blush rising in his cheeks.

"Do you know where I could look for her?"

"Not here?" the woman suggested. David shoved the terminal back into his pocket and walked out. It was a stupid plan. Walk around the tube station, asking people at random? It was dumb and it was humiliating, but it was Leelee so he did it. The hour was blank stares and shrugs and the growing sense that everyone he talked to was embarrassed for him. When the tube car returned, he'd found nothing. He sat alone on a formed plastic bench. The monitor shifted to a video review by a pretty girl whose voice made it sound like she was shouting every word. "Dika Adalai's best story ever!" David looked up and down the sparsely populated car and came to the conclusion that he was the one who'd triggered the review. It said something about who the ad systems thought he was. What he cared about. Like they knew.

He pulled up his hand terminal. Made another connection request, and Leelee didn't answer. He pulled up her message, playing it low. *I need help, okay?* and *Don't talk to Hutch*. Only there wasn't anyone else to talk to.

He spent the afternoon catching up on his datasets, horrified to realize how far behind he'd let himself fall. He ran through number and correlations, checking the data against expected norms with the practice and contempt of long experience. He needed to put in extra time. Get everything taken care of. If he fell too far behind, Mr. Oke would start noticing, and if there was a full audit, the extra lab work he'd done for Hutch would come out, and then he'd be screwed. He weighed calling in a favor from Steppan,

but his mind kept shifting back to Leelee and the closed faces of Innis Shallows. Someone had to know where she was. Who she was.

He had to work.

For the first hour, reviewing and processing the data felt like hard labor, but then slowly, his mind fell into the rhythm. He managed the statistical input and brought out the correlations, fitting each one into the larger spreadsheet waiting for meta-analysis, and he could feel himself relax a little. The different catalytic mixes felt more like home than home did, and here like nowhere else in his life, he was in control. Between the comfort and concentration of the work and his exhaustion, he fell into something like a trance. Time passed without any sense of duration. When he came to the end of the run, he could have been going for minutes or hours. Either one seemed plausible. He didn't think to check his hand terminal until he was almost home.

There were four new messages waiting, none of them from Leelee. The first was a correction to the lab schedule, then two posts from a gaming forum he subscribed to even though he barely played any of the games. The last one was from the central educational authority in Salton, the upper university. He flicked it open and his head went as light as a balloon.

He walked into the common room. His mother and father sat before the living room monitor, just far enough away from each other that their legs didn't touch. On the screen, an older man was leaning forward earnestly. "The Martian project is the single most ambitious endeavor in human history. It is all of our duties to see that the threat of Earth..."

"What's the matter?" his father said.

David lifted his hand terminal as if that was explanation enough. And then, when they didn't understand, he spoke. His voice had a distance to it.

"My placement came," he said. "I'm going to development."

His father whooped, stood so violently that the couch almost tipped over. As his dad's arms wrapped around him, lifting him up toward the ceiling, and his mother wept joyful tears into her hands, all David could think was *I'm supposed to be happy about this.*

After that, everything changed and nothing did. He'd been working toward his placement for the last five sections, or looked at another way, his whole life. He'd known it was coming—everyone had—and still it felt like it had snuck up on him. Surprised him. All of the things that had to happen after—the things he hadn't bothered thinking about because they were for later—had to be done now. There was the application for living space in the dormitories of the upper university, the coordination of his long-run experiments with Mr. Oke so that some new second-year could step in and see them to completion, and the preparations and purchases that would, in the coming months, lead to David moving out of his room, out of his home, away from his family for the first time in his life. The times when the idea wouldn't scare him, it couldn't come fast enough.

He could see it in his parents too. The way his mother kept quietly weeping and grinning at the same time, the way his father made a point of sitting with him while he filled out his paperwork and put in for time off so he could go with David to the orientation in Salton next month and brought him sandwiches and coffee for lunch. David had done everything he was supposed to do, had gotten the grades and the attention and the status for the highest placement he'd qualified for, and the reward was even less freedom. It was like his parents had suddenly realized he wouldn't be there forever, and now their love was like a police state; he couldn't escape it. He couldn't go look for Leelee or even send out connection requests. The only one who didn't seem to react one way or the other was Aunt Bobbie who just kept her weird, vaguely intrusive habits of watching the newsfeeds and lifting weights.

Three days after the letter came, David was set to go to the lower university for his first transition meeting with Mr. Oke. His father went with him. Dad held his head high, chin up, beaming like he'd been the one to do something. They walked up the stairs to the lower university commons together, David shrinking into his own chest with the discomfort. This was his world—his friends and enemies, the people who knew him for himself—and Dad didn't belong there. Steppan nodded to him but didn't approach. The girl who'd borrowed his stats array last year frowned at his dad,

strutting at David's side. They knew that his being there was wrong, and they drew back, keeping the separation. They all had two lives too, and they weren't supposed to mix like this. Everybody knew that.

"Mr. Oke!" his father said as they rounded one of the seating areas. The research advisor smiled politely, walking toward them.

"Mr. Draper," Mr. Oke said. "It's good of you to come."

"Just want to make sure everything's smooth," Dad said, caressing the air as he said it. "Development's a good placement, but it's a hard one. David doesn't need any distractions."

"Of course not," Mr. Oke agreed.

Over the old man's shoulder, David caught sight of Hutch. He was standing with a couple of the second-years, smiling and listening to a girl whose hands were fluttering and tapping at the air as she explained something. Leelee wasn't with him. David felt his heart rate spike. It was an epinephrine dump. His mind jumped back a section to his physiology labs. Epinephrine was binding to alpha-adrenergic sites, dropping insulin production, upping glycogenolysis and lipolysis. Standard fight-or-flight. Hutch glanced over, nodded politely. David pointed toward the men's room with his chin. Hutch's expression slipped a notch darker and he shook his head, not more than a few millimeters and unmistakable. David scowled and nodded toward the men's room again.

"Are you all right?" his dad asked.

"I have to pee," David said. "I'll be right back."

He left his father and Mr. Oke bantering. The white tile and video mirrors of the men's room were like a retreat to his world. And escape. He stood at the urinal, pretending to piss until the one other student washed his hands and left. Hutch walked in.

"What's the word, friend?" Hutch said, but David could hear annoyance in the syllables. "Saw you got family with today. Good to see a father so concerned with his son's business."

David zipped his fly and trundled over to Hutch. He kept his voice low.

"He's just being an asshole. It's nothing. We've got to meet," David said. "We have to talk. Not now, but we've got to."

“Slow, slow, slow,” Hutch said. “Now’s not a good time.”

“Tomorrow night,” David said. “The usual place.”

“Can’t do that. Other plans.”

“Tonight, then,” David hissed.

David’s hand terminal chimed, and a moment later, Hutch’s did too. The local newsfeed pushing a breaking story. David didn’t look away. Hutch’s expression shifted from annoyance into anger and then a wary kind of amusement. He shrugged.

“See you tonight then, little man,” Hutch said. His lopsided smile looked dangerous. David nodded and trotted back out to the commons. He wouldn’t tell Hutch about the message or about Leelee being in trouble. He’d just say he wanted to find her. He’d say it was about his placement because that made it seem like there was something else. Distracting. He got back to Mr. Oke and his father, gathering himself back together, willing himself to act normal, before he noticed that the commons was silent. Everyone was hunched over their hand terminals, their faces gray or flushed. Even his father and Mr. Oke. The newsfeed push had a picture of a public corridor, the air hazed by smoke. A policeman hunched over something, one hand on his hip. The header read EXPLOSION IN SALTON.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Protestors,” his father said, and the anger in his voice was startling.

“Anti-Earth protestors.”

David’s hand terminal chimed again. The header shifted.

EXPLOSION IN SALTON; THREE CONFIRMED DEAD



Aunt Bobbie was tight-lipped when they got home, sitting in the common room with a massive black weight in her hand that she held without lifting, like a child clutching a favorite toy. The monitor was set to a newsfeed with the sound turned low. Live feeds of the damage in Salton played out in the four corners of the monitor, but she didn’t seem to be looking at them.

David's mother sat at the table scrolling through her hand terminal. When David and his father walked in, there was a moment of eye contact between his parents that had the weight of significance. He didn't know what it meant. His father tapped David's shoulder in a kind of farewell, then stepped over to the railing.

"Hey, sis."

"Hey," Aunt Bobbie said.

"Did security talk to you?"

"Not yet," Aunt Bobbie said. "They know how to find me if they want to."

David scowled toward his mother. He couldn't think of a reason that security would want to talk with Aunt Bobbie. He tried to make it into a threat against him, that they'd be looking to her for information about the batches he'd cooked for Hutch, but that felt too wrong. It had to be about the bombing, but he couldn't make sense of that either. His mother only lifted her eyebrows and asked how the meeting with Mr. Oke had gone. His father answered for him, and the uncomfortable tension around Aunt Bobbie shifted into the background.

There was going to be a party for the whole family tomorrow night, his mother told him. Pop-Pop and the cousins were coming from Aterpol, and Uncle Istvan and his new wife were making the trip from Dhanbad Nova. They'd rented a room at the best restaurant in Breach Candy. David gave a quiet, generalized thanks to the universe that he'd arranged to see Hutch tonight instead. Slipping away from his own celebration would have been impossible.

After dinner, David said some vague things about friends from school and celebrating, promised not to go to Salton, and ducked out the door before anyone could get too inquisitive. Once he was out walking to the tube station, he felt a moment of relaxation. Almost peace. The whole ride out to Martineztown, David felt almost like he was floating. His datasets were done or else not his anymore, and even with all the rest of it—Leelee and Hutch, the protestors and the bombings, the family party and the prospect of leaving home—just not having the lab work hanging over him

was like taking a vise off his ribs. Once he was in Salton, working development would be a thousand times worse than anything in the lower university. But that was later. For now, he could set his hand terminal to play bebabapu tunes and relax. Even if it was only for the length of the tube ride to Martineztown, it was still the most peace he'd had for himself in as long as he could remember.

Hutch was waiting for him when he got there. The construction lamp threw off harsh white light, the battery hissing almost silently. The shadows seemed to have eaten Hutch's eyes.

"Little man," he said as David stepped into the room. "Wasn't thinking to hear from you. Was risky, talking to me with family and authority right there beside us. You were looking jumpy. People notice that kind of thing."

"Sorry," David said. He sat down on a crate, rough plastic clinging to the fabric of his pants and pulling his cuffs up around his ankles. "I just needed to talk to you."

"I'm always here for you, my friend," Hutch said. "You know that. You're my number one guy. Any problem you've got, I've got."

David nodded, picking absently at his fingernail beds. Now that he was here, he found the subject of Leelee was harder to bring up than he'd expected.

"I got into development."

"Knew it. Development's always the place for the smart ones. Play your cards, and you'll be riding this planet like a private cart," Hutch said.

"That's not why we're here, though. Is it?"

"No, I was...I wanted to get in touch with Leelee. See if maybe she wanted to come celebrate it with me. Only my hand terminal went corrupt and I didn't have her information on backup and I was thinking that since you..." David swallowed, trying to work the knot out of his throat. "Since you know her better than anyone."

He chanced a look at Hutch's face. The man was expressionless as stone, turned in and silent. It was more threatening than bared teeth.

"She came to you." David had promised himself that he wouldn't tell Hutch about the message, and technically he didn't, but the silence

implicated him. Hutch drew a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair. “Don’t worry about Leelee. I’m taking care of Leelee.”

“She seemed like she was in trouble.”

“Okay, little man. You don’t follow what’s happening here, so I’m going to help. I own Leelee. She’s mine. Property, see? And she screwed up, started being with the wrong crowd. She got political. People like us don’t do that. Earth. Mars. OPA. That shit is for citizens. It just draws attention for people like us.”

“She looked scared,” David said. He could hear the whine in his voice, and he hated that he couldn’t keep it out. He sounded like a kid. “She said she needed money.”

Hutch laughed. “Don’t ever give that bitch money.”

“Property,” David said. “She wanted...she wanted to buy herself. Didn’t she?”

Hutch’s expression softened to something like sympathy. Pity, maybe. He leaned forward and put a hand on David’s knee.

“Leelee is a slice of poison with a pretty mouth, little man. That’s the truth. She did a bad, stupid thing, and now she’s working that mistake off. That’s all. I know how much money you have because I’m the guy that gave it to you. You don’t have enough to clear her debts.”

“Maybe I could—”

“You don’t have half. You’ve got *maybe* a quarter. There’s nothing you can do for that girl. She gave you a hard-on, and that was nice for you. Don’t make it more than that. You understand what I’m saying to you?”

The deep, sickening tug of humiliation pulled at David’s heart. He looked down, willing himself not to cry. He hated the reaction. He was angry with it and with himself and with Hutch and his parents and the world. He burned with embarrassment and rage and impotence. Hutch stood up, his shadow spilling across floor and wall like spent engine oil.

“Best we don’t talk for a while,” Hutch said. “You got a lot in the air. Don’t worry about the cooking. We’ll get that all smoothed out when you’re in Salton. Then we can go into production for real, eh? See some money worth having.”

“Okay,” David said.

Hutch sighed and pulled up his hand terminal. As he tapped at its keyboard, he kept talking.

“I’m going to slip a little something in that account of yours, right? Call it a bonus. Take and get yourself something nice, right.”

“Right.”

And then Hutch was gone, walking out toward Martineztown and the tube station and the world. David sat alone where he’d sat with Leelee not all that long before. The sense of peace and calm was gone. His hands balled in fists, and he had nothing he could hit. He felt cored out. Hollowed. He waited ten minutes the way he was supposed to and then took himself home.

The next night was the party. His party. Pop-Pop was there, smiling a little lopsided since the stroke and thinner than David had ever seen him, but still strong voiced and chipper. Aunt Bobbie sat on one side of him, David’s father on the other, like they were propping him up. Muted sounds of silverware against plates and voices raised in conversation competed with a three-piece band set up on a dais by the front doors that filtered into the private back room. Green and gold tablecloths stretched over three tables to make it all seem like it connected. The meal itself had been chicken in black sauce with rice and fresh vegetables, and David had eaten two helpings without really tasting them. His father had taken on the expense of an open bar and Uncle Istvan’s new wife was already well on her way to drunk and sort of hitting on one of the older cousins. David’s mother paced the back of the room touching shoulders, dropping in and out of conversations like she was running for office. David wanted badly to be anywhere else.

“You know, back in the ancient days,” Pop-Pop said, gesturing with a glass of whiskey, “they built cathedrals. Massive churches lifted up to the glory of God. Far, far beyond what you’d expect people to manage with just quarry stone and trees and a few steel knives, you know. Just a few simple tools.”

“We’ve heard about the cathedrals,” Aunt Bobbie said. She had a drink too, but David couldn’t tell what it was. Legally, David wasn’t supposed to drink alcohol for another year, but he had a bulb of beer in his hand. He didn’t actually like the taste of it, but he drank it anyway.

“The thing that’s important, though, is the time, you see?” Pop-Pop said. “The *time*. Raising up one of those cathedrals would take whole generations. The men who drew the plans, who envisioned the final form of the thing? They would be dead long before it was finished. It might be their grandsons or their great-grandsons or their great-great-grandsons who saw the work complete.”

Across the room, one of the younger cousins was crying, and David’s mother sloped over and knelt, taking the squalling kid’s hand in her own and leading him to his mother. David choked down another mouthful of beer. Next year, he’d be in Salton, so busy that he wouldn’t have to come to these things anymore.

“There’s a beauty in that,” Pop-Pop said earnestly to everyone and no one. “Such a massive plan, such ambition. A man might be setting the final stone and think back to his own father who’d set the stones below him and his grandfather who’d set the stones below that. To have a place in the great scheme, that was the beauty of it. To be part of something you didn’t begin and you would not see completed. It was beautiful.”

“I love you, Dad,” Aunt Bobbie said, “but that’s bullshit.”

David blinked. He looked from Pop-Pop to his own father and back. The men looked embarrassed. It was like she’d farted. Aunt Bobbie took another sip of her drink.

“Bobbie,” David’s father said, “maybe you should ease up on that stuff.”

“I’m fine. It’s just that I’ve been hearing about the cathedrals since I was a kid, and it’s bullshit. Seriously, who were they to decide what everyone was going to be doing for the next four generations? It’s not like they asked their however many great-grandkids if they wanted to be stonecutters. Maybe some of them wanted to...be musicians. Hell, be architects and do something of their own. Deciding what everyone’s going to do...what we’re going to be. It’s hubris, isn’t it?”

“We’re not talking about cathedrals anymore, are we, sis?”

“Yeah, because it was a really obscure metaphor,” Aunt Bobbie replied. “I’m just saying that the plan may be great as long as you’re inside it. You step outside, though, and then what?”

There was a pain in her voice that David couldn’t fathom, but he saw it reflected in his grandfather’s eyes. The old man put his hand on Aunt Bobbie’s, and she held it like she was a little girl about to be led off to her bath time. David’s father, on the other side, looked peevish.

“Don’t take her seriously, Pop-Pop. She was talking to security all day, and she’s still cranky.”

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t be? It’s like every time anything strange happens, let’s go talk to Draper again.”

“You had to expect that, Roberta,” his father said. He only called her Roberta when he was angry. “It’s the consequence of your decision.”

“And what decision is that?” she snapped. Her voice was getting louder. Some of the cousins were looking over at them now, their own conversations fading.

David’s father laughed. “You aren’t working. What are they calling it? Indefinite administrative leave?”

“Psychological furlough,” Aunt Bobbie said. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that of course they’re going to want to talk to you when things get weird. You can’t blame them for being suspicious. We were almost killed by Earthers. Everyone in this room and those rooms out there and the corridors. And you were working for them.”

“I was not!” It wasn’t a shout because it didn’t have the gravel and roughness of shouting. It was loud, though, and it carried power along with it like a punch. “I worked *with* the faction that was trying to avert the war. The one that did avert the war. Everyone in these rooms is alive because of the people I helped. But *with* them, not *for* them.”

The room was quiet, but David’s father was too deep into the fight to notice. He rolled his eyes.

“Really? Who was paying your wages? Earth was. The people that hate us.”

“They don’t hate us,” Bobbie said, her voice tired. “They’re afraid of us.”

“Then why do they act like they hate us?” David’s father said with something like triumph.

“Because that’s what fear looks like when it needs someplace to go.”

David’s mother seemed to appear behind the three of them like some sort of magic trick. She wasn’t there, and then she was, her restraining hand on her husband’s shoulder. Her smile was humorless and undeniable.

“We’re here for David tonight,” she said.

“Yes,” Pop-Pop said, rubbing his palm against the back of Aunt Bobbie’s hand, soothing her. “For David.”

His father’s face set into an annoyed mask, but Aunt Bobbie nodded.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry, David. Dad, I’m sorry. I’ve just had a really rough day and probably too much to drink.”

“It’s all right, angel,” Pop-Pop said. Tears brightened his eyes.

“I just thought that by now I’d have some idea of...of who I was. Of what I was going to do next, and...”

“I know, angel. We all know what you’re going through.”

She laughed at that, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “All us of but me, then.”

The rest of the evening went just the way those things were supposed to go. People laughed and argued and drank. His father tried to call for silence and make a little speech about how proud he was, but one of the kid cousins was whispering and tapping on his hand terminal all the way through it. A few people gave David small, discreet presents of money to help him set up his dorm in Salton. Uncle Istvan’s new wife gave him an unpleasant, boozy kiss before gathering herself up and walking out with Istvan on her arm. They took a rental cart back home, his parents and Aunt Bobbie and him. He couldn’t shake the image of her weeping at the table. *You step outside, though, and then what?*

The cart’s wheels sounded sticky against the corridor floors. The lights had dimmed all through Breach Candy, simulating a twilight he’d never actually seen. Somewhere, the sun would slip below a horizon, a blue sky

darken. He'd seen it in pictures, on video. In his life, though, it was just that the LEDs changed color and intensity. David leaned his head against one of the cart's support poles, letting the vibration of the engines and the wheels translate directly into his skull. It felt comfortable. His mother, sitting beside him, pressed her hand against his shoulder, and he had the powerful physical memory of coming back from a party when he'd been very young. Six, maybe seven years old. He remembered putting his head in her lap, fading into sleep with the texture of her slacks against his cheek. That was never going to happen again. The woman beside him hardly even seemed to be the same person, and in a few months, he wouldn't see her anymore. Not like he did now. And what would she have done if she knew about Hutch? About Leelee? His mother smiled at him, and it looked like love, but it was love for some other boy. The one she thought he was. He smiled back because he was supposed to.

When they got home, he went straight back to his room. He'd been around people enough. The cheesy generic wall was still up, and he shifted it back to Una Meing. Massive dark eyes with mascara on the lashes looked out at him. He dropped to the bed. Outside, Aunt Bobbie and his father were talking. He listened for a buzz of anger in their voices, but it wasn't there. They were just talking. The water pipes started to whine. His mother taking her evening bath. Everything small and domestic and safe, and out there somewhere, Leelee was working off her debt. She'd asked for his help, and he'd failed. And Hutch. Maybe he'd always been scared of Hutch. Maybe that was what had made cooking for him seem like the right thing. The wise thing, even. Hutch was the kind of dangerous that could make people into property. Could take them and make them disappear. Being part of that world was fun. Exciting. It was a way to step outside all the good student, good son, good prospects crap that was his life. So what that it scared him now? So what that Leelee was probably being rented out to whoever had the money and David wouldn't see her again? He'd made his choice, and this was the consequence.

Una Meing stared out at him, soulful and erotic. David turned out the lights, grabbed a pillow, and pulled it over his head. As his mind began to

fragment down into sleep, Leelee kept coming back to him. Her face. Her voice. The soft, almost gentle way Hutch had said, *I own Leelee and You don't have enough to clear her debts*. He wished that he did. He walked into a bleak, prison-like room that was half dream and half imagination. Leelee shied back from the sudden light and then saw who it was, and her face lit up. *David*, she said, *how did you do it? How did you save me?*

And with an almost electrical shock, he knew the answer.

He sat up, turned on the light. Una Meing's sly-sad smile seemed more knowing than it had before. *Took you long enough*. He checked the time: well past midnight. It didn't matter. It wouldn't wait. He listened at his door for a few seconds. No voices except the professional enunciation of the newsfeed announcer. David took his hand terminal out of his satchel, sat on the edge of his bed, and put in the connection request. He didn't expect an answer, but Steppan's face appeared on the screen almost instantly.

"Big Dave! Hey," Steppan said. "Heard about your placement. Good going, cousin."

"Thanks," David said, keeping his voice low. "But look, I need a favor."

"Sure," Steppan said.

"You have lab time?"

"More time than sleep," Steppan said ruefully. "But you've got placement. You don't need to scrounge for lab hours anymore."

"Kind of do. And I could use an extra hand."

"How long are we talking about?"

"Ten hours," David said. "Maybe a little more. But some of that's waiting, so you can do your own stuff too. And I'll help with your work if you help with mine."

Steppan shrugged.

"All right. I've got hours tomorrow starting at eight. You know where my space is?"

"Do," David said.

"See you there," Steppan said and dropped the connection. So that was the first part. David's mind was already leaping ahead to the rest. He had enough tryptamine to build from, and the catalysts were always easy. What

he didn't have was sodium borohydride or amoprofan in anything like the volume he'd need. Closing his eyes, he went through the inventory of his secret locker, thinking about each reagent and what he could gracefully change it into. Carbon double bonds cleaved, ketones formed, inactive isomers were forced into different configurations. Slowly, certainly, a clear biochemical path formed. He opened his eyes, jotted down a quick flowchart of the reactions, and built a wish list. When he was done, he switched his hand terminal over to the main distributor's site and ordered the reagents he'd need with immediate delivery to Steppan's lab. The total bill was enough to clean out his secret account, but that was fine with him. He'd never cared about the money.

When his hand terminal chirped the morning's alarm, he'd managed a two-hour nap. He changed into clean clothes, ducked into the bathroom to wet down his hair and shave. His mind was already three steps ahead. His hand terminal chimed with breaking news, and he almost dreaded to look, but for once it was something good. Eight people had been arrested in connection with the pressure loss on the tube system and were being actively questioned about the bomb in Salton. While David brushed his teeth, he watched the newsfeed play. When the scroll of mug shots came, he had a moment's anxiety—*What if Leelee was one of them? What if that was what Hutch meant by her getting political?*—but none of the faces was familiar. They were young people, none of them over eighteen, but well-worn. Two had black eyes and one of the women had been crying. Or else she'd been teargassed. David dismissed them.

"Where are you going?" his mother asked as he walked, head bowed and shoulders hunched, for the door.

"Friend needs help," he said. He'd meant the lie that Steppan needed an extra hand at the labs, but halfway to the lower university, he noticed that by not elaborating, he'd sort of told the truth. The fact was weirdly disturbing.

The day was a massive cook. With the two of them in the space, it was crowded, and Steppan, sleepless, hadn't showered recently. Between the chemical vapors that the fume hood didn't whisk away and the stink of

adolescent boy, the heat of the burners, and Steppan's constant, nearly intimate presence, the day passed slowly. But it passed well. Steppan didn't ask what David's experiment was, and during the quiet times, David ran Steppan's datasets and even pointed out a flaw in the statistical assumptions he was making that made the final data prettier when he corrected it. When the early afternoon came and they were flagging, David measured out a small dose of amphetamine and split it between them. When his mother requested a connection, he didn't answer, just sent back the message that he'd be home late, to eat dinner without him. Instead of the usual indirect disapproval, she sent back a note that she supposed she'd have to get used to that. It left him sad until the timer went off and he had to cool the batch and add catalyst and the work took his attention. There was a real pleasure to the work, something he hadn't felt in years. He knew each reaction, each bond he was breaking, each molecular reconfiguration. He could look at the milky suspension, see a subtle change in the texture, and know what had happened. This, he thought, was what mastery felt like.

The last of his run was finished, the powder measured out into pale pink gelcaps and melted into sugared lozenges. His satchel was thick with them and heavy as a bowling ball. At a guess, he had the equivalent of his father's retirement account on his hip. The public LEDs were dim as he walked home. His eyes felt bloodshot and gritty, but his step was light.

Aunt Bobbie was in the common room, the way she always was, doing deep lunges and watching the monitor. A young woman with skin the color of coffee and cream and pale lips was speaking seriously into the camera. A red band around her had SECURITY ALERT HIGH scrolling in four languages. David paused. When Aunt Bobbie looked back at him, not pausing in her exercises, he nodded toward the screen.

"They found plans for another bomb," Aunt Bobbie said.

"Oh," David said, then shrugged. It was probably better that way. Let security focus on the political intrigue. It just meant there'd be fewer eyes looking at him.

"Your mother's asleep."

"Where's Dad?"

“Nariman. Work emergency.”

“All right,” David said and headed back to his room. Aunt Bobbie hadn’t noticed the bulk of his satchel, or if she had, she hadn’t mentioned it. With his door safely closed, he checked the time. Late but not too late, and between the late afternoon amphetamines and the excitement and anxiety, trying to rest wasn’t an option. Now that he had the product, all he wanted to do was get rid of it. Get it all away from him so that no one would stumble across it, get this all over with. He pulled out his hand terminal and put through a connection request to the contact Hutch had given him for emergencies only. He waited. Seconds stretched. A minute passed, and the tight feeling of panic grew in David’s gut.

The screen jumped, and Hutch was there, scowling into the camera. He was naked from the waist up, his pale hair messy. The hardness in his expression was clear, even through the connection.

“Yeah?” Hutch said. It was a noncommittal greeting. If security had been watching over David’s shoulder, they wouldn’t even be sure that he and Hutch knew each other.

“We need to meet,” David said. “Tonight. It’s important.”

Hutch was silent. A dry tongue ran across the man’s lower lip and he shook his ragged head. David’s heart was thudding like little hammer blows against his rib cage.

“Don’t know what you mean, cousin,” Hutch said.

“No one’s listening in. I’m not busted. But we have to talk. Tonight,” David said. “And you have to bring Leelee.”

“You want to say that again?”

“One hour. The usual place. You have to bring Leelee.”

“Yeah, I thought maybe you were giving me some kind of order there, little man,” Hutch said, his voice buzzing with anger. “I’m going to tell myself that you burned this number because you got a little drunk or some shit. Out of my deep fucking kindness, I’m going to pretend you didn’t forget yourself, yeah? So you get yourself back to bed and sleep until you’re sober.”

“I am sober,” David said. “But it has to be tonight. It has to be now.”

“Not going to happen,” Hutch said and leaned forward to shut off the connection.

“I’ll call security,” David said. “If you don’t, I’ll call security. I’ll tell them everything.”

Hutch froze. Sat back. He pressed his hands together palm to palm, index fingers touching his lips like he was praying. David squeezed his hands into fists, then released them, squeezed and released. An uncomfortable creeping moved up the back of his neck and onto his scalp. Hutch drew in a long breath and let it out slow.

“All right,” he said. “You come to me. One hour.”

“And Leelee.”

“Heard you the first time,” Hutch said, his voice cool and gray as slate. “But anything smells like a setup, and your little girlfriend dies first. You savvy?”

“You don’t need to hurt her. This isn’t a setup. It’s business.”

“So you say,” Hutch said and cut the feed. David’s hands were trembling. He shouldn’t have said that about going to security, but it was the only leverage he had. The only thing that would make Hutch listen. When he got there, he could explain it all. It would be all right. He stuffed the hand terminal in his pocket, stood silently for a moment, then shifted the wall to the still from *Gods of Risk*. Two men facing each other with the fate of everything in the balance. David lifted his chin and picked up the satchel.

When he came into the common room, Aunt Bobbie frowned.

“Going somewhere?” she asked.

“Friend,” he said, shrugging and pulling the satchel closer to his hip. “Just a thing.”

“But it’s here, right? In Breach Candy?”

A new tickle of anxiety lifted the hair at the back of his neck. Her tone wasn’t accusing or suspicious. That made it worse.

“Why?”

Aunt Bobbie nodded toward the monitor with its red border and earnest announcer.

“Curfew,” she said.

David could feel the word trying to get into his mind, trying to mean something that he didn't let it mean.

"What curfew?"

"They put the whole city on first-stage lockdown. No unaccompanied minors on the tube system or service tunnels, no gatherings in the common areas after seven. Doubled patrols too. If you're heading out of the neighborhood, you may have to send your regrets," she said. Then, "David? Are you okay?"

He didn't remember sitting down. He was just on the kitchen floor, his legs folded under him like some kind of Zen monk. His skin was slick with sweat even though he didn't feel hot. Hutch was going to meet him and he wouldn't be there. He'd think it was a setup. And he'd have Leelee with him because David had told him to. Had insisted. Threatened even. Without thinking, he pulled out his hand terminal and requested a connection to Hutch. The address came back invalid. It had already been deleted.

"David, what's the matter?"

She was leaning over him now, her face a mask of concern. David waved his hand, feeling like he was underwater. No unaccompanied minors. He had to get to Martineztown. He had to go now.

"I need a favor," he said, and his voice sounded thin and strangled.

"All right."

"Come with me. Just so I can use the tube."

"Um. Okay," she said. "Let me grab a clean shirt."

They walked the half kilometer to the tube station in silence. David kept his hands in his pockets and his satchel on the other side of his body so that Aunt Bobbie might not see how full it was. He hated this. His chest felt tight and he needed to pee even though he didn't really. At the tube station, a red-haired security man in body armor and carrying an automatic rifle stopped them. David felt the mass of the drugs pulling at his shoulder like a lead weight. If they asked to see what was in the satchel, he'd go to prison forever. Leelee would be killed. He'd lose his place in Salton.

"Name and destination, please?"

“Gunnery Sergeant Roberta Draper, MCRM,” Aunt Bobbie said. “This is my nephew, David. He just got his placement, and I’m taking him to a party.”

“Sergeant?” the security man said. “Marines, huh?”

A shadow passed over her face, but her smile dispelled it.

“Yes, sir.”

The security man turned to David. His expression seemed friendly. David tasted vomit and fear at the back of his throat.

“Party?”

“Yes. Sir,” he said, “yes, sir.”

“Well, don’t do any permanent damage, son,” the security man said, chuckling. “Carry on, Sergeant.”

And then they were past him and into the tube station proper. The white LEDs seemed brighter than usual, and his knees struggled to support him as he walked up to the kiosk. When he got the tickets for Martineztown, Aunt Bobbie looked at him quizzically but didn’t say anything. Fifteen minutes to Aterpol, then a change of cars, and twenty to Martineztown. The other people in the car were grubby, their clothes rough at the edges. An old man with an exhausted expression and yellowed eyes sat across from them with a crying infant ignored in his arms. An immensely fat woman in the back of the car shouted obscenities into her hand terminal, someone on the other side of the connection shouting back. The air smelled of bodies and old air filters. With every passing kilometer, Aunt Bobby’s expression grew cooler and less trusting. He wanted to be angry with her for thinking that he wouldn’t have friends in Martineztown, for being prejudiced against the neighborhood just because it was older and working class. It would have been easier if she hadn’t been right.

At the Martineztown station, David turned to her and put his hand to her, palm out.

“Okay, thank you,” he said. “Now just stay here, and I’ll be right back.”

“What’s going on here, kid?” Aunt Bobbie asked.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it. Just wait for me here, and I’ll be right back.”

Aunt Bobbie crossed her arms. All warmth was gone from her face. A bright flare of resentment lit David's mind. He didn't have time to reassure her.

"Just wait," he said sharply, then spun on his heel and hurried off. A few seconds later, he risked a glance back over his shoulder. Aunt Bobbie hadn't moved. Her crossed arms and disapproving scowl could have been carved into stone. The LEDs of the tube station turned her into a black silhouette. David turned the corner, and she was gone. His satchel bounced against his hip, and he ran. It wasn't more than fifty meters before he was winded, but he pushed on the best he could. He didn't have time. Hutch might be there already.

And in point of fact, he was.

The crates had been rearranged. All them were stacked against the walls, packed tight so that no one and nothing could hide behind them. The only exception was a doubled stack standing to Hutch's left and right like bodyguards. Like the massive sides of a great throne. Hutch stood in the shadows between them, a thin black cigarette clinging to his lip. His yellow shirt hung loose against his frame, and the muscles of his arms each seemed to cast their own shadows. The brushed black pistol in his hand made his scars seem like an omen.

Leelee knelt in front of him, in the center of the room, hugging herself. Her hair was lank and greasy looking. Her skin was pale except right around her eyes where the rash-red of crying stained her. She was wearing a man's shirt that was too big for her and a pair of work pants stained by something dark and washed pale again. When David cleared his throat and stepped into the room, her expression went from surprise to despair. David wished like hell he'd thought to stop at a bathroom.

"Hey there, little man," Hutch said. The insincerity of his casualness was a threat. "Now then, there was something you wanted to see me about, yeah?"

David nodded. The thickness in his throat almost kept him from speaking.

"I want to buy her," David said. "Buy her debt."

Hutch laughed softly, then took a drag on his cigarette. The ember flared bright and then dimmed.

“Pretty sure we covered that already,” Hutch said, and the words were smoke. “You don’t have that kind of cash.”

“A quarter. You said I had a quarter.”

Hutch’s eyes narrowed and he tilted his head to the side. David dropped his satchel to the floor and slid it toward Leelee with his toe. She reached out a thin hand toward it.

“If you touch that bag, I will end you,” Hutch said to Leelee, and she flinched back. “How about you tell me what that’s supposed to be?”

“I cooked a batch. A big one. The biggest I’ve ever done,” David said. “Mostly, it’s 3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine. I did a run of 5-hydroxytryptophan too since I didn’t need to order anything extra to do it. And 2,5-Dimethoxy-4-bromophenethylamine. Some of that too. I got all the reagents myself. I did all the work. It’s got to be worth more than four times what I put into it, and you get all of it free. That’s the deal.”

“You...,” Hutch said, then paused, bit his lip. When he spoke again, he had a buzz of outrage in his voice. “You cooked a batch.”

“It’s got plenty. Lots.”

“You. Stupid. Fuck,” Hutch said. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you just handed me? How am I going to move that much shit? Who’s going to buy it?”

“But you get it free.”

Hutch pointed the gun at the satchel.

“I flood the market, and the prices go down. Not just for me. For everybody. You understand that? Everyone. People start coming up from Dhanbad Nova because they hear we’ve got cheap shit. All the sellers up there start wondering what I mean by it, and I’ve got drama.”

“You could wait. Just hold on to it.”

“I’m going to have to, right? Only it gets out that I’m sitting on an egg like that, someone gets greedy. Decides maybe it’s time to take me on. And boom, I got drama again. Cut it how you want, kid. You just fucked me.”

“He didn’t know, Hutch,” Leelee said. She sounded so tired.

Hutch's pistol barked once, shockingly loud in the small space. A gouge appeared in the floor next to Leelee's knee like a magic trick. She started crying.

"Yeah," Hutch said. "I didn't think you wanted to interrupt me again. David, you're a sweet kid, but you're dumb as a fucking bag of sand. What you just handed me here? It's a problem."

"I'm...I'm sorry. I just..."

"And it's going to require a little"—Hutch took a drag on his cigarette and raised the pistol until David could see him staring down the black barrel—"risk management."

The air in the room changed as the door behind him opened. He turned to look, but someone big moved past him too fast to follow. Something quick and violent happened, the sounds of a fight. David was hit in the back, hard. He pitched forward, unable to get his hands out fast enough to stop his fall. His head bounced off the sealed stone floor, and for a breathless second, he was sure he'd been shot. Been killed. Then the fight ended with Hutch screaming, crates crashing. The crackle of plastic splintering. David rose to his elbows. His nose was bleeding.

Aunt Bobbie stood where Hutch's crate shelter had been. She had the pistol in her hand and was considering it with a professional calm. Leelee had scooted across the floor toward David, as if to seek shelter behind him. Hutch, his cigarette gone, was cradling his right hand in his left. The index finger of his right hand—his trigger finger—stood off at an improbable angle.

"Who the fuck are you!" Hutch growled. His voice was low. Feral.

"I'm Gunny Draper," Aunt Bobbie said, ejecting the clip. She cleared the chamber and grabbed the thin brass glimmer out of the air. "So we should talk about this."

Leelee pressed her hand against David's arm. He shifted, gathered her close against him. She smelled rank—body odor and smoke and something else he couldn't identify—but he didn't care. Aunt Bobbie pressed something, and the top of the gun slipped off the grip.

“What’ve you got to say to me, dead girl?” Hutch asked. His voice didn’t sound as tough as he probably hoped. Aunt Bobbie pulled the barrel out of the gun and tossed it into a corner of the room, in the narrow space between some crates and the wall. She didn’t look up from the gun, but she smiled.

“The boy made a mistake,” she said, “but he treated you with respect. He didn’t steal from you. He didn’t try to track the girl down on his own. He didn’t go to security. He didn’t even try to sell the product and get the money.”

Leelee shivered. Or maybe David did and it only seemed like it was her. Hutch scowled, but a thoughtful look stole into his eyes.

Aunt Bobbie plucked a long, thin bit of metal out of the gun and then a small black spring and tossed both behind a different crate. “You’re a tough guy in a tough business, and I respect that. Maybe you’ve killed some people. But you’re also a businessman. Rational. Able to see the big picture.” She looked up at Hutch, smiled, and tossed him the grip of his gun. “So here’s what I’m thinking. Take the bag. Sell it, bury it. Drop it in the recycler. It’s yours. Do what you want with it.”

“Would anyway,” Hutch said, but she ignored him.

“The girl’s debt’s paid, and David walks away. He’s out. You don’t come for him, he doesn’t come for you. I don’t come for you, either.” She tossed him the empty top half of his gun, and he caught it with his uninjured hand. From where David was, hunched on the floor, both of them looked larger than life.

“Girl’s nothing,” Hutch said. “All drama and easy to replace. Boy’s something special, though. Good cooks can’t be swapped out just like that.”

Aunt Bobbie started working the bullets out of the magazine with one thumb, dropping each one into her wide, powerful palm. “Everyone’s replaceable in work like yours. You’ve got four or five like him already I bet.” She took out the last of the bullets and put them in her pocket, then passed him the empty magazine. “David’s the one that got away. No disrespect. Not a risk to the operation. Just worked out until it didn’t. That’s the deal.”

“And if I say no?”

“I’ll kill you,” Aunt Bobbie said in the same matter-of-fact tone. “I’d prefer not to, but that’s what happens if you say no.”

“That easy?” Hutch said with a scowl. “Maybe not that easy.”

“You’re a tough guy, but I’m a nightmare wrapped in the apocalypse. And David is my beloved nephew. If you fuck with him after this, I will end every piece of you,” Bobbie said, her own smile sad. “No disrespect.”

Hutch’s scowl twitched into a flicker of a smile.

“They grow ’em big where you come from,” he said and held up the disassembled pistol. “You broke my gun.”

“I noticed the spare magazine in your left pocket,” she said. “David, stand up. We’re leaving now.”

He walked ahead, Leelee holding him and weeping quietly. Aunt Bobbie took the rear, keeping them going quickly without quite making them run and looking back behind her often. When they got near the tube station, Aunt Bobbie put a hand on David’s shoulder.

“I can get you through the checkpoint, but I can’t get her.”

Leelee’s eyes were soft and wet, her expression calm and serene. Filthy and stinking, she was still beautiful. She was redeemed.

“Do you have somewhere you can go?” David asked. “Someplace here in Martineztown where he can’t find you?”

“I’ve got friends,” she said. “They’ll help.”

“Go to them,” Aunt Bobbie said. “Stay out of sight.”

David didn’t want to let her go, didn’t want to lose the contact of her arm against his. He saw her understand. She didn’t step into his arms as much as flow there, soft and supple and changing as water. For a moment, her body was pressed against his perfectly, without a millimeter of space in between. Her lips were against his cheek, her breath in his ear. She was Una Meing for a moment, and he was Caz Pratihari, and the world was a heady, powerful, romantic place. She shifted against him and her lips against his were soft and warm and they tasted like a promise.

“I’ll find you,” she whispered, and then the moment was over, and she was walking a little unsteadily down the corridor, her head high. He wanted

to run after her, to kiss her again, to take her home with him and fold her into his bed. He could feel his heartbeat in his neck. He had an erection.

“Come on,” Aunt Bobbie said. “Let’s go home.”

From Martineztown to Aterpol, she said nothing, just sat with her elbows resting on her knees, squeezing one of the bullets she’d taken between two fingers, then running it across her knuckles like a magic trick. Even through the chemical rush of relief, he dreaded what would come next. The disapproval, the lecture, the threats. When she spoke, with five minutes still before they reached Breach Candy, it wasn’t what he’d expected to hear.

“That girl. You saved her. You know that? You saved her.”

“Yeah.”

“You feel good about that. You did a right thing, and that feels good.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“That good feeling is the most that girl will ever be able to give you.”

The tube car’s vibration was almost imperceptible. The monitors had tuned themselves to a newsfeed, unable to find any common ground between him and his aunt. David looked at his hands.

“She doesn’t like me,” he said. “She just acted like she did because he told her to. And then she knew I had money.”

“She knew you had money and she knew you were a good guy,” Aunt Bobbie said. “That’s different.”

David smiled and was surprised to kind of mean it. Aunt Bobbie leaned back, stretched. When she shifted her head, the joints in her neck popped like firecrackers.

“I need to move out,” she said.

“Okay,” David said, suddenly finding himself wishing she wouldn’t. Too many losses today already, and this was one he hadn’t even known would hurt. “Where will you go?”

“Back to work.” Bobbie flipped the bullet up and caught it, then juggled it across her fingers again. “I need to find something to do.” She pointed at the news on the monitors with her chin. It was all about Earth and Mars and angry people with bombs. “Maybe I can help.”

“Okay,” David said again. Then a moment later, “I’m glad you stayed with us.”

“I should take you free-climbing,” she said. “You’d love it.”



David only saw Leelee one more time. It was his second year in development, about three weeks after he’d turned eighteen. He was in a noodle bar with the three other members of his team and their advisor, Dr. Fousek. The wall was playing a live feed of the football match from the Mariner Valley with the sound turned low enough to talk over. The table screen, on the other hand—they’d tunneled into the arrays at the upper university, and between bottles of beer and tea and black ceramic bowls of noodles and sauce, their latest simulation models were running.

Jeremy Ng, his dorm mate and the only other biochemist on the team, was shaking his head and pointing at the imagined surface of Mars that the computers back at their official labs were generating.

“But the salt—”

“Salinity’s not an issue,” David said, his frustration clear in his voice. “That’s why we put the sodium pumps in, remember? It won’t build up across the membrane.”

“Gentlemen,” Dr. Fousek said, her tone both authoritative and amused. “You have spent fifty hours a week arguing this for the last seven months. No point rethinking it now. We’ll have solid projections soon enough.”

Jeremy started to object, then stopped, started again, and ground to a halt. Beside him Cassie Estinrad, their hydro systems expert, grinned. “If this really works, you guys will put the terraforming project a couple decades ahead of schedule. You know that.”

Dr. Fousek raised her hand, commanding silence. The simulation was almost done. Everyone at the table held their breath.

David couldn’t say what made him look up. A sense of being watched maybe. A feeling of unease crawling up the back of his neck. Leelee was there at the back by the bar, looking toward him without seeing him. The

years hadn't been kind. Her skin belonged on a woman twice her age and the elfin chin now just looked small. She had a child on her hip that looked about six months old and still too unformed to have a gender. She could have been anyone, except he had no question. A thin, electric jolt passed through him. For a split second he was fifteen again, on the edge of sixteen, and reckless as a fire. He remembered the way her kiss had felt, and almost without meaning to, he lifted his hand in a little wave.

He saw it when she recognized him; a widening of the eyes, a shift in the angle of her shoulders. Her expression tightened with something like anger. Fear looking for somewhere to go. The man sitting beside her touched her shoulder and said something. She shook her head, faced away. The man turned, scowling at the crowd. He met David's eyes for a moment, but there was nothing like understanding in them. David looked away from her for the last time.

"Here we go," Cassie said as the first results began to come. David put his elbows against the table as one by one values within his error bars clicked into place. He watched Dr. Fousek's eyebrows lift, watched Jeremy start to grin.

The euphoria came.

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Meet the Author

James S.A. Corey is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck.

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THE EXPANSE

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ABADDON'S GATE

BOOK THREE OF THE EXPANSE
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PROLOGUE: MANÉO

Manéó Jung-Espinoza—Néo to his friends back on Ceres Station—huddled in the cockpit of the little ship he'd christened the *Y Que*. After almost three months, there was maybe fifty hours left before he made history. The food had run out two days before. The only water that was left to drink was half a liter of recycled piss that had already gone through him more times than he could count. Everything he could turn off, he'd turned off. The reactor was shut down. He still had passive monitors, but no active sensor arrays. The only light in the cockpit came from the backslash of the display terminals. The blanket he'd wrapped himself in, corners tucked into his restraints so it wouldn't float away, wasn't even powered. His broadcast and tightbeam transmitters were both shut off, and he'd slagged the transponder even before he'd painted the name on her hull. He hadn't flown this far just to have some kind of accidental blip alert the flotillas that he was coming.

Fifty hours—less than that—and the only thing he had to do was not be seen. And not run into anything, but that part was in *los manos de Dios*.

His cousin Evita had been the one who'd introduced him to the underground society of slingshots. That had been three years earlier, just before his fifteenth birthday. He'd been hanging at his family hole, his mother gone to work at the water treatment plant, his father at a meeting with the grid maintenance group he oversaw. Néo had stayed home, cutting

school for the fourth time in a month. When the system announced someone waiting at the door, he'd figured it was school security busting him for being truant. Instead, Evita was there.

She was two years older and his mother's sister's kid. A real Belter. They had the same long, thin bodies, but she was *from* there. He'd had a thing for Evita since the first time he saw her. He'd had dreams about what she'd look like with her clothes off. What it would feel like to kiss her. Now here she was, and the place to himself. His heart was going three times standard before he opened the door.

"Esá, unokabátya," she said, smiling and shrugging with one hand.

"Hoy," he'd said, trying to act cool and calm. He'd grown up in the massive city in space that was Ceres Station, just the way she had, but his father had the low, squat frame that marked him as an Earther. He had as much right to the cosmopolitan slang of the Belt as she had, but it sounded natural on her. When he said it, it was like he was putting on someone else's jacket.

"Some cayos meeting down portside. Silvestari Campos back," she said, her hip cocked, her mouth soft as a pillow, and her lips shining. "Doch mit?"

"Que no?" he'd said. "Got nothing better."

He'd figured out afterward that she'd brought him because Mila Sana, a horse-faced Martian girl a little younger than him, had a thing, and they all thought it was funny to watch the ugly inner girl padding around after the half-breed, but by then he didn't care. He'd met Silvestari Campos and he'd heard of slingshotting.

Went like this: Some coyo put together a boat. Maybe it was salvage. Maybe it was fabbed. Probably at least some of it was stolen. Didn't need to be much more than a torch drive, a crash couch, and enough air and water to get the job done. Then it was all about plotting the trajectory. Without an Epstein, a torch drive burned pellets too fast to get anyone anywhere. At least without help. The trick was to plot it so that the burn—and the best only ever used one burn—would put the ship through a gravity assist, suck up the velocity of a planet, and head out as deep as the push would take

them. Then figure out how to get back without getting dead. Whole thing got tracked by a double-encrypted black net as hard to break as anything that the Loca Greiga or Golden Bough had on offer. Maybe they ran it. It was illegal as hell, and somebody was taking the bets. Dangerous, which was the point. And then when you got back, everyone knew who you were. You could lounge around in the warehouse party and drink whatever you wanted and talk however you wanted and drape your hand on Evita Jung's right tit and she wouldn't even move it off.

And just like that, Néó, who hadn't ever cared about anything very much, developed an ambition.



“The thing people have to remember is that the Ring isn't magical,” the Martian woman said. Néó had spent a lot of time in the past months watching the newsfeeds about the Ring, and so far, he liked her the best. Pretty face. Nice accent. She wasn't as thick as an Earther, but she didn't belong to the Belt either. Like him. “We don't entirely understand it yet, and we may not for decades. But the last two years have given us some of the most interesting and exciting breakthroughs in materials technology since the wheel. Within the next ten or fifteen years, we're going to start seeing the applications of what we've learned from watching the protomolecule, and it will—”

“Fruit. Of. A poisoned. Tree,” the old, leathery-looking coyo beside her said. “We cannot allow ourselves to forget that this was built from mass murder. The criminals and monsters at Protogen and Mao-Kwik released this weapon on a population of innocents. That slaughter began all of this, and profiting from it makes us all complicit.”

The feed cut to the moderator, who smiled and shook his head at the leathery one.

“Rabbi Kimble,” the moderator said, “we've had contact with an undisputed alien artifact that took over Eros Station, spent a little over a year preparing itself in the vicious pressure cooker of Venus, then launched

a massive complex of structures just outside the orbit of Uranus and built a thousand-kilometer-wide ring. You can't be suggesting that we are morally required to ignore those facts."

"Himmler's hypothermia experiments at Dachau—" the leathery coyo began, wagging his finger in the air, but now it was the pretty Martian's turn to interrupt.

"Can we move past the 1940s, please?" she said, smiling in a way that said, *I'm being friendly but shut the fuck up*. "We're not talking about space Nazis here. This is the single most important event in human history. Protogen's role in it was terrible, and they've been punished for it. But now we have to—"

"Not *space* Nazis!" the old coyo yelled. "The Nazis aren't from *space*. They are right here among us. They are the beasts of our worst nature. By profiting from these discoveries, we *legitimize* the path by which we came to them."

The pretty one rolled her eyes and looked at the moderator like she wanted help. The moderator shrugged at her, which only made the old one angrier.

"The Ring is a temptation to sin," the old coyo shouted. There were little flecks of white at the corners of his mouth, which the video editor had chosen to leave visible.

"We don't know what it is," the pretty one said. "Given that it was intended to do its work on primordial Earth with single-celled organisms and wound up on Venus with an infinitely more complex substrate, it probably doesn't work at all, but I can say that temptation and sin have nothing to do with it."

"They are victims. Your 'complex substrate'? It is the corrupted bodies of the innocent!"

Néo turned down the feed volume and just watched them gesture at each other for a while.

It had taken him months to plan out the trajectory of the *Y Que*, finding the time when Jupiter, Europa, and Saturn were all in the right positions. The window was so narrow it had been like throwing a dart from a half

klick away and pinning a fruit fly's wing with it. Europa had been the trick. A close pass on the Jovian moon, then down so close to the gas giant that there was almost drag. Then out again for the long trip past Saturn, sucking more juice out of its orbital velocity, and then farther out into the black, not accelerating again, but going faster than anyone would imagine a little converted rock hopper could manage. Through millions of klicks of vacuum to hit a bull's-eye smaller than a mosquito's asshole.

Néo imagined the expressions of all the science and military ships parked around the Ring when a little ship, no transponder and flying ballistic, appeared out of nowhere and shot straight through the Ring at 150 thousand kilometers per hour. After that, he'd have to move fast. He didn't have enough fuel left to kill all his velocity, but he'd slow down enough that they could get a rescue ship to him.

He'd do some time in slam, that was sure. Maybe two years, if the magistrates were being pissy. It was worth it, though. Just the messages from the black net, where all his friends were tracking him with the constant and rising chorus of *Holy Shit It's Going to Work*, made it worth it. He was going down in history. In a hundred years, people were still going to be talking about the biggest-balled slingshot ever. He'd lost months building the *Y Que*, more than that in transit, then jail time after. It was worth it. He was going to live forever.

Twenty hours.



The biggest danger was the flotilla surrounding the Ring. Earth and Mars had kicked each other's navies into creaky old men months earlier, but what was left was mostly around the Ring. Or else down in the inner planets, but Néo didn't care about them. There were maybe twenty or thirty big military ships watching each other while every science vessel in the system peeked and listened and floated gently a couple thousand klicks from the Ring. All the Navy muscle there to make sure no one touched. No one even got close. Scared, all of them. Even with all that metal and ceramic crammed into the

same tiny corner of space, even with the relatively tiny thousand clicks across that was the inner face of the Ring, the chances that he'd run into anything were tiny. There was a lot more nothing than something. And if he did hit one of the flotilla ships, he wasn't going to be around to worry about it, so he just gave it up to *Dios y la Virgen María* and started setting up the high-speed camera. When it finally happened, it would be so fast he wouldn't even know whether he'd made the mark until he analyzed the data. And he was making sure there was going to be a record. He turned his transmitters back on.

"Hoy," he said into the camera, "Néo here. Néo solo. Captain and crew of souverän Belt-racer *Y Que*. Mielista me. Got six hours until biggest slipper since God made man. Esta being for me Mama, the sweet Sophia Brun, and Jesus our lord and savior. Watch close. Blink it and miss, que sa?"

He watched the file. He looked like crap. He probably had time; he could shave the ratty little beard off and at least tie back his hair. He wished now he'd kept up with his daily exercises so he wouldn't look so chicken-shouldered. Too late now. Still, he could mess with the camera angle. He was ballistic. Wasn't like there was any thrust gravity to worry about.

He tried again from two other angles until his vanity was satisfied, then switched to the external cameras. His introduction was a little over ten seconds long. He'd start the broadcast twenty seconds out, then switch to the exterior cameras. More than a thousand frames per second, and it still might miss the Ring between images. He had to hope for the best. Wasn't like he could get another camera now, even if a better one existed.

He drank the rest of his water and wished that he'd packed just a little more food. A tube of protein slush would have gone down really well. It'd be done soon. He'd be in some Earther or Martian brig where there would be a decent toilet and water to drink and prisoners' rations. He was almost looking forward to it.

His sleeping comm array woke up and squawked about a tightbeam. He opened the connection. The encryption meant it was from the black net and

sent long enough before that it would reach him here. Someone besides him was showing off.

Evita was still beautiful, but more like a woman now than she'd been when he'd started getting money and salvage to build the *Y Que*. Another five years, she'd be plain. He'd still have a thing for her, though.

"Esá, unokabátya," she said. "Eyes of the world. Toda auge. Mine too."

She smiled, and just for a second, he thought maybe she'd lift her shirt. For good luck. The tightbeam dropped.

Two hours.



"I repeat, this is Martian frigate *Lucien* to the unidentified ship approaching the Ring. Respond immediately or we will open fire."

Three minutes. They'd seen him too soon. The Ring was still three minutes away, and they weren't supposed to see him until he had less than one.

Néo cleared his throat.

"No need, que sa? No need. This is the *Y Que*, racer out sa Ceres Station."

"Your transponder isn't on, *Y Que*."

"Busted, yeah? Need some help with that."

"Your radio's working just fine, but I'm not hearing a distress beacon."

"Not distressed," he said, pulling the syllables out for every extra second. He could keep them talking. "Ballistic is all. Can fire up the reactor, but it's going to take a couple minutes. Maybe you can come give a hand, eh?"

"You are in restricted space, *Y Que*," the Martian said, and Néo felt the grin growing on his face.

"No harm," Néo said. "No harm. Surrender. Just got to get slowed down a little. Firing it up in a few seconds. Hold your piss."

"You have ten seconds to change trajectory away from the Ring or we will open fire."

The fear felt like victory. He was doing it. He was on target for the Ring and it was freaking them out. One minute. He started warming up the reactor. At this point, he wasn't even lying anymore. The full suite of sensors started their boot sequence.

"Don't fire," he said as he made a private jacking-off motion. "Please, sir, please don't shoot me. I'm slowing down as fast as I can."

"You have five seconds, *Y Que*."

He had thirty seconds. The friend-or-foe screens popped up as soon as the full ship system was on. The *Lucien* was going to pass close by. Maybe seven hundred clicks. No wonder they'd seen him. At that distance, the *Y Que* would light up the threat boards like it was Christmas. Just bad luck, that.

"You can shoot if you want, but I'm stopping as fast as I can," he said.

The status alarm sounded. Two new dots appeared on the display. *Hijo de puta* had actually launched torpedoes.

Fifteen seconds. He was going to make it. He started the broadcast and the exterior camera. The Ring was out there somewhere, its thousand-kilometer span still too small and dark to make out with the naked eye. There was only the vast spill of stars.

"Hold fire!" he shouted at the Martian frigate. "Hold fire!"

Three seconds. The torpedoes were gaining fast.

One second.

As one, the stars all blinked out.

Néo tapped the monitor. Nothing. Friend-or-foe didn't show anything. No frigate. No torpedoes. Nothing.

"Now that," he said to no one and nothing, "is weird."

On the monitor, something glimmered blue, and he pulled himself closer, as if being a few inches closer to the screen would make it all make sense.

The sensors that triggered the high-g alert took five-hundredths of a second to trip. The alert, hardwired, took another three-hundredths of a second to react, pushing power to the red LED and the emergency Klaxon. The little console telltale that pegged out with a ninety-nine-g deceleration warning took a glacial half second to excite its light-emitting diodes. But by

that time Néo was already a red smear inside the cockpit. The ship's deceleration throwing him forward through the screen and into the far bulkhead in less time than it took a synapse to fire.

In the unbroken darkness, the exterior high-speed camera kept up its broadcast, sending out a thousand frames per second of nothing.

And then, of something else.

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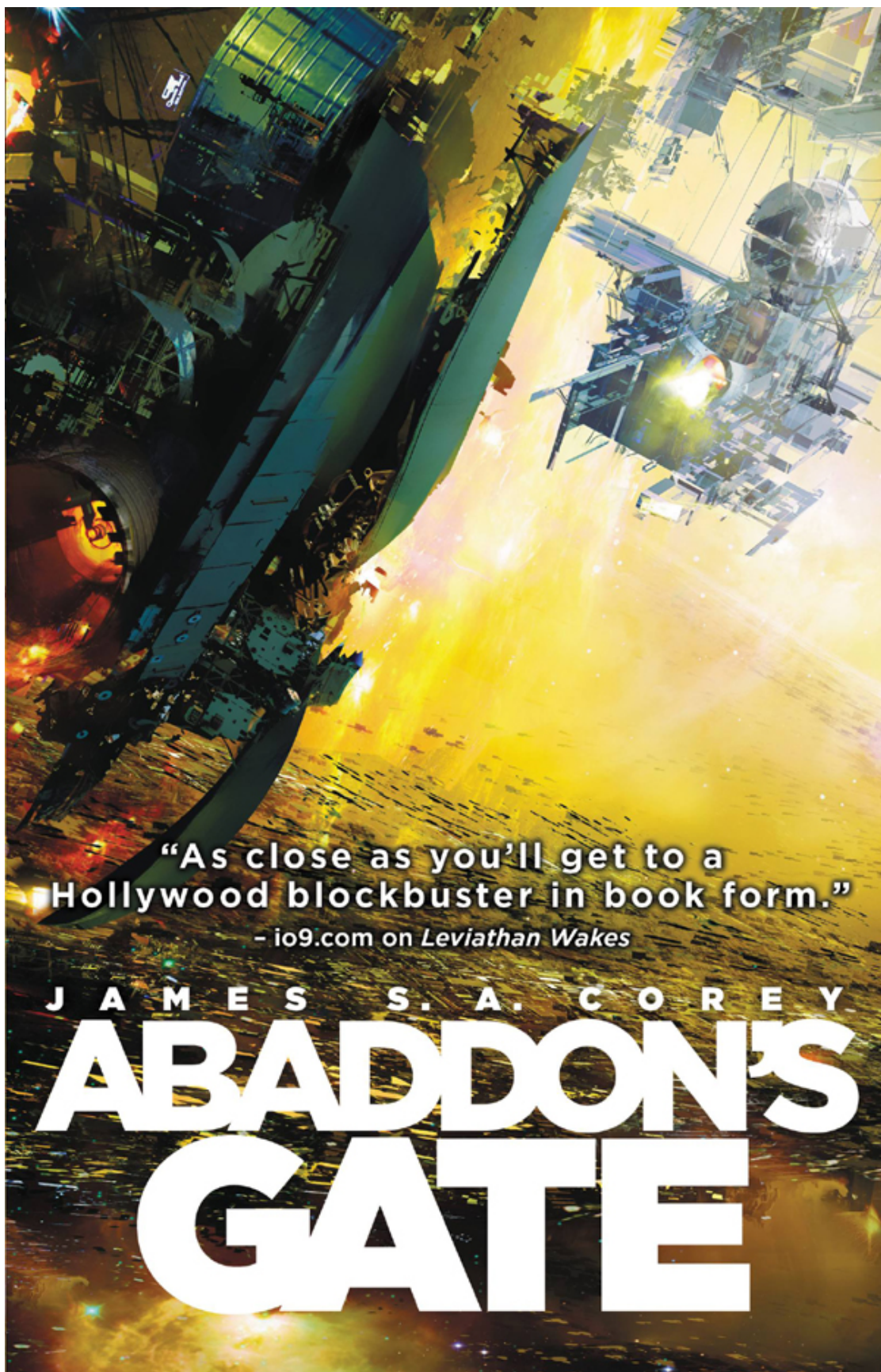
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*For Walter Jon Williams, who showed us how to do it, and for Carrie Vaughn, who made sure we
didn't screw it up too badly*

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Prologue: Manéo

Manéo Jung-Espinoza—Néo to his friends back on Ceres Station—huddled in the cockpit of the little ship he'd christened the *Y Que*. After almost three months, there were maybe fifty hours left before he made history. The food had run out two days before. The only water that was left to drink was half a liter of recycled piss that had already gone through him more times than he could count. Everything he could turn off, he'd turned off. The reactor was shut down. He still had passive monitors, but no active sensors. The only light in the cockpit came from the backslash of the display terminals. The blanket he'd wrapped himself in, corners tucked into his restraints so it wouldn't float away, wasn't even powered. His broadcast and tightbeam transmitters were both shut off, and he'd slugged the transponder even before he'd painted the name on her hull. He hadn't flown this far just to have some kind of accidental blip alert the flotillas that he was coming.

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"Fruit. Of. A poisoned. Tree," the old, leathery-looking coyo beside her said. "We cannot allow ourselves to forget that this was built from mass murder. The criminals and monsters at Protogen and Mao-Kwik released this weapon on a population of innocents. That slaughter began all of this, and profiting from it makes us all complicit."

The feed cut to the moderator, who smiled and shook his head at the leathery one.

"Rabbi Kimble," the moderator said, "we've had contact with an undisputed alien artifact that took over Eros Station, spent a little over a year preparing itself in the vicious pressure cooker of Venus, then launched a massive complex of structures just outside the orbit of Uranus and built a thousand-kilometer-wide ring. You can't be suggesting that we are morally required to ignore those facts."

"Himmler's hypothermia experiments at Dachau—" the leathery coyo began, wagging his finger in the air, but now it was the pretty Martian's turn to interrupt.

"Can we move past the 1940s, please?" she said, smiling in a way that said, *I'm being friendly but shut the fuck up*. "We're not talking about space Nazis here. This is the single most important event in human history. Protogen's role in it was terrible, and they've been punished for it. But now we have to—"

"Not *space* Nazis!" the old coyo yelled. "The Nazis aren't from *space*. They are right here among us. They are the beasts of our worst nature. By profiting from these discoveries, we *legitimize* the path by which we came to them."

The pretty one rolled her eyes and looked at the moderator like she wanted help. The moderator shrugged at her, which only made the old one angrier.

"The Ring is a temptation to sin," the old coyo shouted. There were little flecks of white at the corners of his mouth that the video editor had chosen to leave visible.

"We don't know what it is," the pretty one said. "Given that it was intended to do its work on primordial Earth with single-celled organisms and wound up on Venus with an infinitely more complex substrate, it probably doesn't work at all, but I can say that temptation and sin have nothing to do with it."

"They are victims. Your 'complex substrate'? It is the corrupted bodies of the innocent!"

Néo turned down the feed volume and just watched them gesture at each other for a while.

It had taken him months to plan out the trajectory of the *Y Que*, finding the time when Jupiter, Europa, and Saturn were all in the right positions. The window was so narrow it had been like throwing a dart from a half klick away and pinning a fruit fly's wing with it. Europa had been the trick. A close pass on the Jovian moon, then down so close to the gas giant that there was almost drag. Then out again for the long trip past Saturn, sucking more juice out of its orbital velocity, and then farther out into the black, not accelerating again, but going faster than anyone would imagine a little converted rock hopper could manage. Through millions of klicks of vacuum to hit a bull's-eye smaller than a mosquito's asshole.

Néo imagined the expressions of all the science and military ships parked around the Ring when a little ship, no transponder and flying ballistic, appeared out of nowhere and shot straight through the Ring at a hundred and fifty thousand kilometers per hour. After that, he'd have to move fast. He didn't have enough fuel left to kill all his velocity, but he'd slow down enough that they could get a rescue ship to him.

He'd do some time in slam, that was sure. Maybe two years, if the magistrates were being pissy. It was worth it, though. Just the messages from the black net where all his friends were tracking him with the constant and rising chorus of *holy shit it's going to work* made it worth it. He was going down in history. In a hundred years, people were still going to be talking about the biggest-balled slingshot ever. He'd lost months building the *Y Que*, more than that in transit, then jail time after. It was worth it. He was going to live forever.

Twenty hours.



The biggest danger was the flotilla surrounding the Ring. Earth and Mars had kicked each other's navies into creaky old men months ago, but what was left was mostly around the Ring. Or else down in the inner planets, but Néo didn't care about them. There were maybe twenty or thirty big military ships watching each other while every science vessel in the system peeked and listened and floated gently a couple thousand klicks from the Ring. All the navy muscle there to make sure no one touched. Scared, all of them. Even with all that metal and ceramic crammed into the same little corner of space, even with the relatively tiny thousand klicks across what was the inner face of the Ring, the chances that he'd run into anything were trivial. There was a lot more nothing than something. And if he did hit one of the flotilla ships, he wasn't going to be around to worry about it, so he just gave it up to the Virgin and started setting up the high-speed camera. When it finally happened, it would be so fast, he wouldn't even know whether he'd made the mark until he analyzed the data. And he was making sure there was going to be a record. He turned his transmitters back on.

"Hoy," he said into the camera, "Néo here. Néo solo. Captain and crew of souverän Belt-racer *Y Que*. Mielista me. Got six hours until biggest slipper since God made man. Es pa mi mama, the sweet Sophia Brun, and Jesus our Lord and Savior. Watch close. Blink it and miss, que sa?"

He watched the file. He looked like crap. He probably had time; he could shave the ratty little beard off and at least tie back his hair. He wished now he'd kept up with his daily exercises so he wouldn't look so chicken-shouldered. Too late now. Still, he could mess with the camera angle. He was ballistic. Wasn't like there was any thrust gravity to worry about.

He tried again from two other angles until his vanity was satisfied, then switched to the external cameras. His introduction was a little over ten seconds long. He'd start the broadcast twenty seconds out, then switch to the exterior cameras. More than a thousand frames per second, and it still might

miss the Ring between images. He had to hope for the best. Wasn't like he could get another camera now, even if a better one existed.

He drank the rest of his water and wished that he'd packed just a little more food. A tube of protein slush would have gone down really well. It'd be done soon. He'd be in some Earther or Martian brig where there would be a decent toilet and water to drink and prisoner's rations. He was almost looking forward to it.

His sleeping comm array woke up and squawked about a tightbeam. He opened the connection. The encryption meant it was from the black net, and sent long enough ago that it would reach him here. Someone besides him was showing off.

Evita was still beautiful, but more like a woman now than she'd been when he'd started getting money and salvage to build the *Y Que*. Another five years, she'd be plain. He'd still have a thing for her, though.

"Esá, unokabátya," she said. "Eyes of the world. Toda auge. Mine too."

She smiled, and just for a second, he thought maybe she'd lift her shirt. For good luck. The tightbeam dropped.

Two hours.



"I repeat, this is Martian frigate *Lucien* to the unidentified ship approaching the Ring. Respond immediately or we will open fire."

Three minutes. They'd seen him too soon. The Ring was still three minutes away, and they weren't supposed to see him until he had less than one.

Néo cleared his throat.

"No need, que sa? No need. This is the *Y Que*, racer out sa Ceres Station."

"Your transponder isn't on, *Y Que*."

"Busted, yeah? Need some help with that."

"Your radio's working just fine, but I'm not hearing a distress beacon."

"Not distressed," he said, pulling the syllables out for every extra second. He could keep them talking. "Ballistic is all. Can fire up the reactor, but it's going to take a couple minutes. Maybe you can come give a hand, eh?"

"You are in restricted space, *Y Que*," the Martian said, and Néo felt the grin growing on his face.

"No harm," he said. "No harm. Surrender. Just got to get slowed down a little. Firing it up in a few seconds. Hold your piss."

"You have ten seconds to change trajectory away from the Ring or we will open fire."

The fear felt like victory. He was doing it. He was on target for the Ring and it was freaking them out. One minute. He started warming up the reactor. At this point, he wasn't even lying anymore. The full suite of sensors started their boot sequence.

"Don't fire," he said, as he made a private jacking-off motion. "Please, sir, please don't shoot me. I'm slowing down as fast as I can."

"You have five seconds, *Y Que*."

He had thirty seconds. The friend-or-foe screens popped up as soon as the full ship system was on. The *Lucien* was going to pass close by. Maybe seven hundred clicks. No wonder they'd seen him. At that distance, the *Y Que* would light up the threat boards like it was Christmas. Just bad luck, that.

"You can shoot if you want, but I'm stopping as fast as I can," he said.

The status alarm sounded. Two new dots appeared on the display. *Hijo de puta* had actually launched torpedoes.

Fifteen seconds. He was going to make it. He started broadcast and the exterior camera. The Ring was out there somewhere, its thousand-kilometer span still too small and dark to make out with the naked eye. There was only the vast spill of stars.

“Hold fire!” he shouted at the Martian frigate. “Hold fire!”

Three seconds. The torpedoes were gaining fast.

One second.

As one, the stars all blinked out.

Néo tapped the monitor. Nothing. Friend-or-foe didn’t show anything. No frigate. No torpedoes. Nothing.

“Now that,” he said to no one and nothing, “is weird.”

On the monitor, something glimmered blue and he pulled himself closer, as if being a few inches closer to the screen would make it all make sense.

The sensors that triggered the high-g alert took five hundredths of a second to trip. The alert, hardwired, took another three hundredths of a second to react, pushing power to the red LED and the emergency Klaxon. The little console telltale that pegged out with a ninety-nine-g deceleration warning took a glacial half second to excite its light-emitting diodes. But by that time Néo was already a red smear inside the cockpit, the ship’s deceleration throwing him forward through the screen and into the far bulkhead in less time than it took a synapse to fire. For five long seconds, the ship creaked and strained, not just stopping, but being stopped.

In the unbroken darkness, the exterior high-speed camera kept up its broadcast, sending out a thousand frames per second of nothing.

And then, of something else.

Chapter One: Holden

When he'd been a boy back on Earth, living under the open blue of sky, one of his mothers had spent three years suffering uncontrolled migraines. Seeing her pale and sweating with pain had been hard, but the halo symptoms that led into it had almost been worse. She'd be cleaning the house or working through contracts for her law practice and then her left hand would start to clench, curling against itself until the veins and tendons seemed to creak with the strain. Next her eyes lost their focus, pupils dilating until her blue eyes had gone black. It was like watching someone having a seizure, and he always thought *this* time, she'd die from it.

He'd been six at the time, and he'd never told any of his parents how much the migraines unnerved him, or how much he dreaded them, even when things seemed good. The fear had become familiar. Almost expected. It should have taken the edge off the terror, and maybe it did, but what replaced it was a sense of being trapped. The assault could come at any time, and it could not be avoided.

It poisoned everything, even if it was only a little bit.

It felt like being haunted.



"The house always wins," Holden shouted.

He and the crew—Alex, Amos, Naomi—sat at a private table in the VIP lounge of Ceres' most expensive hotel. Even there, the bells, whistles, and digitized voices of the slot machines were loud enough to drown out most casual conversation. The few frequencies they weren't dominating were neatly filled in by the high-pitched clatter of the pachinko machines and the low bass rumble of a band playing on one of the casino's three stages. All of it added up to a wall of sound that left Holden's guts vibrating and his ears ringing.

"What?" Amos yelled back at him.

"In the end, the house always wins!"

Amos stared down at an enormous pile of chips in front of him. He and Alex were counting and dividing them in preparation for their next foray out to the gaming tables. At a glance, Holden guessed they'd won something like fifteen thousand Ceres new yen in just the last hour. It made an impressive stack. If they could quit now, they'd be ahead. But, of course, they wouldn't quit now.

"Okay," Amos said. "What?"

Holden smiled and shrugged. "Nothing."

If his crew wanted to lose a few thousand bucks blowing off steam at the blackjack tables, who was he to interfere? The truth was it wouldn't even put a dent in the payout from their most recent contract, and that was only one of three contracts they'd completed in the last four months. It was going to be a very flush year.

Holden had made a lot of mistakes over the last three years. Deciding to quit his job as the OPA's bagman and become an independent contractor wasn't one of them. In the months since he'd put up his shingle as a freelance courier and escort ship, the *Rocinante* had taken seven jobs, and all of them

had been profitable. They'd spent money refitting the ship bow to stern. She'd had a tough couple of years, and she'd needed some love.

When that was done and they still had more money in their general account than they knew what to do with, Holden had asked for a crew wish list. Naomi had paid to have a bulkhead in their quarters cut out to join the two rooms. They now had a bed large enough for two people and plenty of room to walk around it. Alex had pointed out the difficulty in buying new military-grade torpedoes for the ship, and had requested a keel-mounted rail gun for the *Roci*. It would give them more punch than the point defense cannons, and its only ammunition requirements were two-pound tungsten slugs. Amos had spent thirty grand during a stopover on Callisto, buying them some after-market engine upgrades. When Holden pointed out that the *Roci* was already capable of accelerating fast enough to kill her crew and asked why they'd need to upgrade her, Amos had replied, "Because this shit is awesome." Holden had just nodded and smiled and paid the bill.

Even after the initial giddy rush of spending, they had enough to pay themselves salaries that were five times what they'd made on the *Canterbury* and keep the ship in water, air, and fuel pellets for the next decade.

Probably, it was temporary. There would be dry times too when no work came their way and they'd have to economize and make do. That just wasn't today.

Amos and Alex had finished counting their chips and were shouting to Naomi about the finer points of blackjack, trying to get her to join them at the tables. Holden waved at the waiter, who darted over to take his order. No ordering from a table screen here in the VIP lounge.

"What do you have in a scotch that came from actual grain?" Holden asked.

"We have several Ganymede distillations," the waiter said. He'd learned the trick of being heard over the racket without straining. He smiled at Holden. "But for the discriminating gentleman from Earth, we also have a few bottles of sixteen-year Lagavulin we keep aside."

"You mean, like, actual scotch from Scotland?"

"From the island of Islay, to be precise," the waiter replied. "It's twelve hundred a bottle."

"I want that."

"Yes sir, and four glasses." The waiter tipped his head and headed off to the bar.

"We're going to play blackjack now," Naomi said, laughing. Amos was pulling a stack of chips out of his tray and pushing them across the table to her. "Want to come?"

The band in the next room stopped playing, and the background noise dropped to an almost tolerable level for a few seconds before someone started piping Muzak across the casino PA.

"Guys, wait a few minutes," Holden said. "I've bought a bottle of something nice, and I want to have one last toast before we go our separate ways for the night."

Amos looked impatient right up until the bottle arrived, and then spent several seconds cooing over the label. "Yeah, okay, this was worth waiting for."

Holden poured out a shot for each of them, then held his glass up. "To the best ship and crew anyone has ever had the privilege of serving with, and to getting paid."

"To getting paid!" Amos echoed, and then the shots disappeared.

"God damn, Cap," Alex said, then picked up the bottle to look it over. "Can we put some of this on the *Roci*? You can take it out of my salary."

"Seconded," Naomi said, then took the bottle and poured out four more shots.

For a few minutes, the stacks of chips and the lure of the card tables were forgotten. Which was all Holden had wanted. Just to keep these people together for a few moments longer. On every other ship he'd ever served on, hitting port was a chance to get away from the same faces for a few days. Not anymore. Not with this crew. He stifled an urge to say a maudlin, *I love you guys!* by drinking another shot of scotch.

"One last hit for the road," Amos said, picking up the bottle.

“Gonna hit the head,” Holden replied, and pushed away from the table. He weaved a bit more than he expected on his walk to the restroom. The scotch had gone to his brain fast.

The restrooms in the VIP lounge were lush. No rows of urinals and sinks here. Instead, half a dozen doors that led to private facilities with their own toilet and sink. Holden pushed his way into one and latched it behind him. The noise level dropped almost to nothing as soon as the door closed. A little like stepping outside the world. It was probably designed that way. He was glad whoever built the casino had allowed for a place of relative calm. He wouldn’t have been shocked to see a slot machine over the sink.

He put one hand on the wall to steady himself while he did his business. He was mid-stream when the room brightened for a moment and the chrome handle on the toilet reflected a faint blue light. The fear hit him in the gut.

Again.

“I swear to God,” Holden said, pausing to finish and then zip up. “Miller, you better not be there when I turn around.”

He turned around.

Miller was there.

“Hey,” the dead man started.

“ ‘We need to talk,’ ” Holden finished for him, then walked to the sink to wash his hands. A tiny blue firefly followed him and landed on the counter. Holden smashed it with his palm, but when he lifted his hand nothing was there.

In the mirror, Miller’s reflection shrugged. When he moved, it was with a sickening jerkiness, like a clockwork ticking through its motions. Human and inhuman both.

“Everyone’s here at once,” the dead man said. “I don’t want to talk about what happened to Julie.”

Holden pulled a towel out of the basket next to the sink, then leaned against the counter facing Miller and slowly dried his hands. He was trembling, the same as he always did. The sense of threat and evil was crawling up his spine, just the same way it always did. Holden hated it.

Detective Miller smiled, distracted by something Holden couldn’t see.

The man had worked security on Ceres, been fired, and gone off hunting on his own, searching for a missing girl. He’d saved Holden’s life once. Holden had watched when the asteroid station Miller and thousands of victims of the alien protomolecule had been trapped on crashed into Venus. Including Julie Mao, the girl Miller had searched for and then found too late. For a year, the alien artifact had suffered and worked its incomprehensible design under the clouds of Venus. When it rose, hauling massive structures up from the depths and flying out past the orbit of Neptune like some titanic sea creature translated to the void, Miller rose with it.

And now everything he said was madness.

“Holden,” Miller said, not talking to him. Describing him. “Yeah, that makes sense. You’re not one of them. Hey, you have to listen to me.”

“Then you have to say something. This shit is out of hand. You’ve been doing your random appearing act for almost a year now, and you’ve never said even one thing that made sense. Not one.”

Miller waved the comment away. The old man was starting to breathe faster, panting like he’d run a race. Beads of sweat glistened on his pale, gray-tinged skin.

“So there was this unlicensed brothel down in sector eighteen. We went in thinking we’d have fifteen, twenty in the box. More, maybe. Got there, and the place was stripped to the stone. I’m supposed to think about that. It means something.”

“What do you want from me?” Holden said. “Just tell me what you *want*, all right?”

“I’m not crazy,” Miller said. “When I’m crazy, they kill me. God, did they kill me?” Miller’s mouth formed a small O, and he began to suck air in. His lips were darkening, the blood under the

skin turning black. He put a hand on Holden's shoulder, and it felt too heavy. Too solid. Like Miller had been remade with iron instead of bones. "It's all gone pear-shaped. We got there, but it's empty. The whole sky's empty."

"I don't know what that means."

Miller leaned close. His breath smelled like acetate fumes. His eyes locked on Holden, eyebrows raised, asking him if he understood.

"You've got to help me," Miller said. The blood vessels in his eyes were almost black. "They know I find things. They know you help me."

"You're dead," Holden said, the words coming out of him without consideration or planning.

"Everyone's dead," Miller said. He took his hand from Holden's shoulder and turned away. Confusion troubled his brow. "Almost. Almost."

Holden's terminal buzzed at him, and he took it out of his pocket. Naomi had sent DID YOU FALL IN? Holden began typing out a reply, then stopped when he realized he'd have no idea what to say.

When Miller spoke, his voice was small, almost childlike with wonder and amazement.

"Fuck. It *happened*," Miller said.

"What happened?" Holden said.

A door banged as someone else went into a neighboring stall, and Miller was gone. The smell of ozone and some rich organic volatiles like a spice shop gone rancid were all the evidence that he had been there. And that might only have been in Holden's imagination.

Holden stood for a moment, waiting for the coppery taste to leave his mouth. Waiting for his heartbeat to slow back down to normal. Doing what he always did in the aftermath. When the worst had passed, he rinsed his face with cold water and dried it with a soft towel. The distant, muffled sound of the gambling decks rose to a frenzy. A jackpot.

He wouldn't tell them. Naomi, Alex, Amos. They deserved to have their pleasure without the thing that had been Miller intruding on it. Holden recognized that the impulse to keep it from them was irrational, but it felt so powerfully like protecting them that he didn't question it much. Whatever Miller had become, Holden was going to stand between it and the *Roci*.

He studied his reflection until it was perfect. The carefree, slightly drunk captain of a successful independent ship on shore leave. Easy. Happy. He went back out to the pandemonium of the casino.

For a moment, it was like stepping back in time. The casinos on Eros. The death box. The lights felt a little too bright, the noises sounded a little too loud. Holden made his way back to the table and poured himself another shot. He could nurse this one for a while. He'd enjoy the flavor and the night. Someone behind him shrieked their laughter. Only laughter.

A few minutes later, Naomi appeared, stepping out of the bustle and chaos like serenity in a female form. The half-drunken, expansive love he'd felt earlier came back as he watched her make her way toward him. They'd shipped together on the *Canterbury* for years before he'd found himself falling in love with her. Looking back, every morning he'd woken up with someone else had been a lost opportunity to breathe Naomi's air. He couldn't imagine what he'd been thinking. He shifted to the side, making room for her.

"They cleaned you out?" he asked.

"Alex," she said. "They cleaned Alex out. I gave him my chips."

"You are a woman of tremendous generosity," he said with a grin.

Naomi's dark eyes softened into a sympathetic expression.

"Miller showed up again?" she asked, leaning close to be heard over the noise.

"It's a little unsettling how easily you see through me."

"You're pretty legible. And this wouldn't be Miller's first bathroom ambush. Did he make any more sense this time?"

“No,” Holden said. “He’s like talking to an electrical problem. Half the time I’m not sure he even knows I’m there.”

“It can’t really be Miller, can it?”

“If it’s the protomolecule wearing a Miller suit, I think that’s actually creepier.”

“Fair point,” Naomi said. “Did he say anything new, at least?”

“A little bit, maybe. He said something happened.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. He just said, ‘It happened,’ and blinked out.”

They sat together for a few minutes, a private silence within the riot, her fingers interlaced with his. She leaned over, kissing his right eyebrow, and then pulled him up off the chair.

“Come on,” she said.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m going to teach you how to play poker,” she said.

“I know how to play poker.”

“You think you do,” she said.

“Are you calling me a fish?”

She smiled and tugged at him.

Holden shook his head. “If you want to, let’s go back to the ship. We can get a few people together and have a private game. It doesn’t make sense to do it here. The house always wins.”

“We aren’t here to win,” Naomi said, and the seriousness in her voice made the words carry more than the obvious meaning. “We’re here to play.”



The news came two days later.

Holden was in the galley, eating takeout from one of the dockside restaurants: garlic sauce over rice, three kinds of legumes, and something so similar to chicken, it might as well have been the real thing. Amos and Naomi were overseeing the loading of nutrients and filters for the air recycling systems. Alex, in the pilot’s seat, was asleep. On the other ships Holden had served aboard, having the full crew back on ship before departure required it was almost unheard of, and they’d all spent a couple of nights in dockside hotels before they’d come home. But they were home now.

Holden ran through the local feeds on his hand terminal, sipping news and entertainment from throughout the system. A security flaw in the new Bandao Solice game meant that financial and personal information from six million people had been captured on a pirate server orbiting Titan. Martian military experts were calling for increased spending to address the losses suffered in the battle around Ganymede. On Earth, an African farming coalition was defying the ban on a nitrogen-fixing strain of bacteria. Protesters on both sides of the issue were taking to the streets in Cairo.

Holden was flipping back and forth, letting his mind float on the surface of the information, when a red band appeared on one of the newsfeeds. And then another. And then another. The image above the article chilled his blood. The Ring, they called it. The gigantic alien structure that had left Venus and traveled to a point a little less than 2 AU outside Uranus’ orbit, then stopped and assembled itself.

Holden read the news carefully as dread pulled at his gut. When he looked up, Naomi and Amos were in the doorway. Amos had his own hand terminal out. Holden saw the same red bands on that display.

“You seen this, Cap’n?” Amos asked.

“Yeah,” Holden said.

“Some mad bastard tried to shoot the Ring.”

“Yeah.”

Even with the distance between Ceres and the Ring, the vast empty ocean of space, the news that some idiot’s cheapjack ship had gone in one side of the alien structure and hadn’t come out the other should have only taken about five hours. It had happened two days before. That’s how long the various governments watching the Ring had been able to cover it up.

“This is it, isn’t it?” Naomi said. “This is what happened.”

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Chapter Two: Bull

Carlos c de Baca—Bull to his friends—didn't like Captain Ashford. Never had.

The captain was one of those guys who'd sneer without moving his mouth. Before Ashford joined up with the OPA full-time, he'd gotten a degree in math from the Lunar Campus of Boston University, and he never let anyone forget it. It was like because he had a degree from an Earth university, he was better than other Belters. Not that he wouldn't be happy to bad-mouth guys like Bull or Fred who really had grown up down the well. Ashford wasn't one thing or another. The way he latched on to whatever seemed like it made him the big man—education, association with Earth, growing up in the Belt—made it hard not to tease him.

And Ashford was going to be in command of the mission.

"There's a time element too," Fred Johnson said.

Fred looked like crap. Too thin. Everyone looked too thin these days, but Fred's dark skin had taken on an ashy overtone that left Bull thinking about things like autoimmune disorders or untreated cancer. Probably it was just stress, years, and malnutrition. Same thing that got everyone if nothing else did. Point of fact, Bull was looking a little gray around the temples too, and he didn't like the crap LEDs that were supposed to mimic sunlight. That he was still darker than an eggshell had more to do with a nut-brown Mexican mother than anything ultraviolet.

He'd been out in the dark since he was twenty-two. He was over forty now. And Fred, his superior officer under two different governments, was older than he was.

The construction gantry sloped out ahead of them, the flexible walls shining like snake scales. There was a constant low-level whine, the vibrations of the construction equipment carried along the flesh of the station. The spin gravity here was a little less than the standard one-third g on Tycho Station proper, and Ashford was making a little show of speeding up and then slowing down for the Earthers. Bull slowed his own steps down just a little to make the man wait longer.

"Time element? What's that look like, Colonel?" Ashford asked.

"Not as bad as it could be," Fred said. "The Ring hasn't made any apparent changes since the big one during the incident. No one else has gone through, and nothing's come out. People have backed down from filling their pants to just high alert. Mars is approaching this as a strictly military and scientific issue. They've got half a dozen science vessels on high burn already."

"How much escort?" Bull asked.

"One destroyer, three frigates," Fred said. "Earth is moving slower, but larger. They've got elections coming up next year, and the secretary-general's been catching hell about turning a blind eye to rogue corporate entities."

"Wonder why," Bull said dryly. Even Ashford smiled. Between Protogen and Mao-Kwikowski, the order and stability of the solar system had pretty much been dropped in a blender. Eros Station was gone, taken over by an alien technology and crashed into Venus. Ganymede was producing less than a quarter of its previous food output, leaving every population center in the outer planets relying on backup agricultural sources. The Earth-Mars alliance was the kind of quaint memory someone's grandpa might talk about after too much beer. The good old days, before it all went to hell.

"He's putting on a show," Fred went on. "Media. Religious leaders. Poets. Artists. They're hauling them all out to the Ring so that every feed he can reach is pointed away from him."

“Typical,” Ashford said, then didn’t elaborate. Typical for a politician. Typical for an Earther. “What are we looking at out there?”

The gantry sang for a moment, an accident of harmonics setting it ringing and shaking until industrial dampers kicked in and killed the vibration before it reached the point of doing damage.

“All we’ve confirmed is that some idiot flew through the Ring at high ballistic speeds and didn’t come out the other side,” Fred said, moving his hands in the physical shrug of a Belter. “Now there’s some kind of physical anomaly in the Ring. Could be that the idiot kid’s ship got eaten by the Ring and converted into something. The ring sprayed a lot of gamma and X-rays, but not enough to account for the mass of the ship. Could be that he broke it. Could be that it opened a gate, and there’s a bunch of little green men in saucers about to roll through and make the solar system into a truck stop.”

“What—” Bull began, but Ashford talked over him.

“Any response from Venus?”

“Nothing,” Fred said.

Venus was dead. For years after a corrupted Eros Station fell through its clouds, all human eyes had turned to that planet, watching as the alien protomolecule struggled in the violence and heat. Crystal towers kilometers high rose and fell away. Networks of carbon fibers laced the planet and degraded to nothing. The weapon had been meant to hijack simple life on Earth, billions of years before. Instead, it had the complex ecosystem of human bodies and the structures to sustain them in the toxic oven of Venus. Maybe it had taken longer to carry out its plan. Maybe having complex life to work with had made things easier. Everything pointed to it being finished with Venus. And all that really mattered was it had launched a self-assembling ring in the emptiness outside the orbit of Uranus that sat there dead as a stone.

Until now.

“What are we supposed to do about it?” Bull asked. “No offense, but we don’t got the best science vessels. And Earth and Mars blew the crap out of each other over Ganymede.”

“Be there,” Fred said. “If Earth and Mars send their ships, we send ours. If they put out a statement, we put out one of our own. If they lay a claim on the Ring, we counterclaim. What we’ve done to make the outer planets into a viable political force has reaped real benefits, but if we start letting them lead, it could all evaporate.”

“We planning to shoot anybody?” Bull asked.

“Hopefully it won’t come to that,” Fred said.

The gantry’s gentle upward slope brought them to a platform arch. In the star-strewn blackness, a great plain of steel and ceramic curved away above them, lit by a thousand lights. Looking out at it was like seeing a landscape—this was too big to be something humans had made. It was like a canyon or a mountain. The meadow-filled caldera of some dead volcano. The scale alone made it impossible to see her as a ship. But she was. The construction mechs crawling along her side were bigger than the house Bull had lived in as a boy, but they looked like football players on a distant field. The long, thin line of the keel elevator stretched along the body of the drum to shuttle personnel from engineering at one end to ops at the other. The secondary car, stored on the exterior, could hold a dozen people. It looked like a grain of salt. The soft curve was studded with turreted rail guns and the rough, angry extrusions of torpedo tubes.

Once, she’d been the *Nauvoo*. A generation ship headed to the stars carrying a load of devout Mormons with only an engineered ecosystem and an unshakable faith in God’s grace to see them through. Now she was the *Behemoth*. The biggest, baddest weapons platform in the solar system. Four *Donnager*-class battleships would fit in her belly and not touch the walls. She could accelerate magnetic rounds to a measurable fraction of *c*. She could hold more nuclear torpedoes than the Outer Planets Alliance actually had. Her communications laser was powerful enough to burn through steel

if they gave it enough time. Apart from painting teeth on her and welding on an apartment building-sized sharkfin, nothing could have been more clearly or effectively built to intimidate.

Which was good, because she was a retrofitted piece of crap, and if they ever got in a real fight, they were boned. Bull slid a glance at Ashford. The captain's chin was tilted high and his eyes were bright with pride. Bull sucked his teeth.

The last threads of weight let go as the platform and gantry matched to the stillness of the *Behemoth*. One of the distant construction mechs burst into a sun-white flare as the welding started.

"How long before we take her out?" Ashford asked.

"Three days," Fred said.

"Engineering report said the ship'll be ready in about ten," Bull said. "We planning to work on her while we're flying?"

"That was the intention," Fred said.

"Because we could wait another few days here, do the work in dock, and burn a little harder going out, get the same arrival."

The silence was uncomfortable. Bull had known it would be, but it had to be said.

"The crew's comfort and morale need as much support as the ship," Fred said, diplomacy changing the shapes of the words. Bull had known him long enough to hear it. *The Belters don't want a hard burn*. "Besides which, it's easier to get the in-transit work done in lower g. It's all been min-maxed, Bull. You ship out in three."

"Is that a problem?" Ashford said.

Bull pulled the goofy grin he used when he wanted to tell the truth and not get in trouble for it.

"We're heading out to throw gang signs at Earth and Mars while the Ring does a bunch of scary alien mystery stuff. We've got a crew that's never worked together, a ship that's half salvage, and not enough time to shake it all down. Sure it's a problem, but it's not one we can fix, so we'll do it anyway. Worst can happen is we'll all die."

"Cheerful thought," Ashford said. The disapproval dripped off him. Bull's grin widened and he shrugged.

"Going to happen sooner or later."



Bull's quarters on Tycho Station were luxurious. Four rooms, high ceilings, a private head with an actual water supply. Even as a kid back on Earth, he hadn't lived this well. He'd spent his childhood in a housing complex in the New Mexican Shared Interest Zone, living with his parents, grandmother, two uncles, three aunts, and about a thousand cousins, seemed like. When he turned sixteen and declined to go on basic, he'd headed south to Alamogordo and worked his two-year service stripping down ancient solar electricity stations from the bad old days before fusion. He'd shared a dorm with ten other guys. He could still picture them, the way they'd been back then, all skinny and muscled with their shirts off or tied around their heads. He could still feel the New Mexican sun pressing against his chest like a hand as he basked in the radiation and heat of an uncontrolled fusion reaction, protected only by distance and the wide blue sky.

When his two-year stint was up, he tried tech school, but he'd gotten distracted by hormones and alcohol. Once he'd dropped out, his choices were pretty much just the military or basic. He'd chosen the one that felt less like death. In the Marines, he'd never had a bunk larger than the front room of his Tycho Station quarters. He hadn't even had a place that was really his own until he mustered out. Ceres Station hadn't been a good place for him. The hole he'd taken had been up near the center of spin, low g and high Coriolis. It hadn't been much more than a place to go sleep off last night's

drunk, but it had been his. The bare, polished-stone walls, the ship surplus bed with restraining straps for low g. Some previous owner had chiseled the words BESSO O NADIE into the wall. It was Belter cant for *better or nothing*. He hadn't known it was a political slogan at the time. The things he'd gotten since coming to Tycho Station—the frame cycling through a dozen good family pictures from Earth, the tin Santos candleholder that his ex-girlfriend hadn't taken when she left, the civilian clothes—would have filled his old place on Ceres and not left room for him to sleep. He had too much stuff. He needed to pare it down.

But not for this assignment. The XO's suite on the *Behemoth* was bigger.

The system chimed, letting him know someone was at the door. From long habit, Bull checked the video feed before he opened the door. Fred was shifting from one foot to the other. He was in civilian clothes. A white button-down and grandpa pants that tried to forgive the sag of his belly. It was a losing fight. Fred wasn't out of shape any more than Bull was. They were just getting old.

"Hey," Bull said. "Grab a chair anywhere. I'm just getting it all together."

"Heading over now?"

"Want to spend some time on the ship before we take her out," Bull said. "Check for stray Mormons."

Fred looked pained.

"I'm pretty sure we got them all out the first time," he said, playing along. "But it's a big place. You can look around if you want."

Bull opened his dresser, his fingers counting through T-shirts. He had ten. There was a sign of decadence. Who needed ten T-shirts? He pulled out five and dropped them on the chair by his footlocker.

"It's going to be all kinds of hell if they get rights to the *Nauvoo* back," he said. "All the changes we're making to her."

"They won't," Fred said. "Commandeering the ship was perfectly legal. It was an emergency. I could list you ten hours of precedent."

"Yeah, but then we salvaged it ourselves and called it ours," Bull said. "That's like saying I've got to borrow your truck, but since I ran it into a ditch and hauled it back out, it's mine now."

"Law is a many-splendored thing, Bull," Fred said. He sounded tired. Something else was bothering him. Bull opened another drawer, threw half his socks into the recycler, and put the others on his T-shirts.

"Just if the judge doesn't see it that way, could be awkward," Bull said.

"The judges on Earth don't have jurisdiction," Fred said. "And the ones in our court system are loyal to the OPA. They know the big picture. They're not going to take our biggest ship off the board and hand it back over. Worst case, they'll order compensation."

"Can we afford that?"

"Not right now, no," Fred said.

Bull snorted out a little laugh. "Ever wonder what we did wrong that got us here? You're driving one of the biggest desks in the OPA, and I'm XO to Ashford. That ain't a sign we've been living our lives right, man."

"About that," Fred said. "We've had a little change of plan."

Bull opened his closet, his lips pressing thin. Fred hadn't just come to chew the fat. There was a problem. Bull took two suits out of the closet, both still wrapped in sticky preservative film. He hadn't worn either one in years. They probably didn't fit.

"Ashford thought it would be better to have Michio Pa as the XO. We talked about it. I'm reassigning you as chief security officer."

“Third-in-command now,” Bull said. “What? Ashford think I was going to frag him and take his chair?”

Fred leaned forward, his fingers laced. The gravity of his expression said he knew it was a crap situation but was making the best of it.

“It’s all about how it looks,” Fred said. “This is the OPA’s navy. The *Behemoth* is the Belt’s answer to Mars’ and Earth’s heaviest hitters. Having an Earther on the bridge doesn’t send the right message.”

“All right,” Bull said.

“I’m in the same position. You know that. Even after all this time, I have to work twice as hard to command loyalty and respect because of where I’m from. Even the ones who like having me around because they think I make Earth look weak don’t want to take orders from me. I’ve had to earn and re-earn every scrap of respect.”

“Okay,” Bull said. Security officer was going to mean less time in uniform. With a sigh, he put both suits on the chair.

“I’m not saying that you haven’t,” Fred said. “No one knows better than I do that you’re the best of the best. There are just some constraints we have to live with. To get the job done.”

Bull leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. Fred looked up at him from under frost-colored brows.

“Sir, I been flying with you for a long time,” Bull said. “If you need to ask me something, you can just do it.”

“I need you to make this work,” Fred said. “What’s going on out there is the most important thing in the system, and we don’t know what it is. If we embarrass ourselves or give the inner planets some critical advantage, we stand to lose a lot of ground. Ashford and Pa are good people, but they’re Belters. They don’t have the same experience working with Earth forces that you and I do.”

“You think they’re going to start something?”

“No. Ashford will try his hardest to do the right thing, but he’ll react like a Belter and be surprised when other people don’t.”

“Ashford has only ever done a right thing because he’s afraid of being embarrassed. He’s a pretty uniform surrounding vacuum. And you can’t rely on that.”

“I’m not,” Fred agreed. “I’m sending you out there because I trust you to make it work.”

“But you’re not giving me command.”

“But I’m not giving you command.”

“How about a raise?”

“Not that either,” Fred said.

“Well, heck,” Bull said. “All the responsibility and none of the power? How can I turn down an offer like that?”

“No joking. We’re screwing you over, and the reasons are all optics and political bullshit. But I need you to take it.”

“So I’ll take it,” Bull said.

For a moment, the only sound was the quiet ticking of the air recycler. Bull turned back to the task of putting his life in a footlocker again. Somewhere far above him, hidden by tons of steel and ceramic, raw stone and vacuum, *Behemoth* waited.

Chapter Three: Melba

When she walked into the gambling house, Melba felt eyes on her. The room was lit by the displays on the game decks, pink and blue and gold. Most of them were themed around sex or violence, or both. Press a button, spend your money, and watch the girls put foreign and offensive objects inside themselves while you waited to see whether you'd won. Slot machines, poker, real-time lotteries. The men who played them exuded an atmosphere of stupidity, desperation, and an almost tangible hatred of women.

"Darling," an immensely fat man said from behind the counter. "Don't know where you think you come to, but you come in the wrong place. Maybe best you walk back out."

"I have an appointment," she said. "Travin."

The fat man's eyes widened under their thick lids. Someone in the gloom called out a vulgarity meant to unease her. It did, but she didn't let it show.

"Travin in the back, you want him, darling," the fat man said, nodding. At the far end of the room, through the gauntlet of leers and threat, a red metal door.

All of her instincts came from before, when she was Clarissa, and so they were all wrong now. From the time she'd been old enough to walk, she'd been trained in self-defense, but it had all been anti-kidnapping. How to attract the attention of the authorities, how to deescalate situations with her captors. There had been other work, of course. Physical training had been part of it, but the goal had always been to break away. To run. To find help.

Now that there was no one to help her, nothing quite applied. But it was what she had, so it was what she used. Melba—not Clarissa, *Melba*—nodded to the fat man and walked through the close-packed, dim room. The full gravity of Earth pulled on her like an illness. On one of the gambling decks, a cartoon woman was being sexually assaulted by three small gray aliens while a flying saucer floated above them. Someone had won a minor jackpot. Melba looked away. Behind her, an unseen man laughed, and she felt the skin at the back of her neck tighten.

Of all her siblings, she had most enjoyed the physical training. When it ended, she began studying tai chi with the self-defense instructor. Then, when she was fourteen, her father had made a joke about it at a family gathering. How learning to fight might make sense—he could respect that—but dancing while pretending to fight looked stupid and wasted time. She'd never trained again. That was ten years ago.

She opened the red door and walked through it. The office seemed almost bright. A small desk with a built-in display tuned to a cheap accounting system. White frosted glass that let in the sunlight but hid the streets of Baltimore. A formed plastic couch upholstered with the corporate logo of a cheap brand of beer that even people on basic could afford. Two hulking men sat on the couch. One had implanted sunglasses that made him look like an insect. The other wore a T-shirt that strained at his steroidal shoulders. She'd seen them before.

Travin was at the desk, leaning his thigh against it. His hair was cut close to the scalp, a dusting of white at the temples. His beard was hardly longer. He wore what passed for a good suit in his circles. Father wouldn't have worn it as a costume.

"Ah, look, the inimitable Melba."

"You knew I was here," she said. There were no chairs. No place to sit that wasn't already occupied. She stood.

" 'Course I did," Travin said. "Soon as you came off the street."

"Are we doing business?" she asked. Her voice cut the air. Travin grinned. His teeth were uncorrected and gray at the gums. It was an affectation of wealth, a statement that he was so powerful mere cosmesis was beneath him. She felt a hot rush of scorn. He was like an old cargo cultist; imitating the empty displays of power and no idea what they really meant. She was reduced to dealing with him, but at least she had the grace to be embarrassed by it.

"It's all done, miss," Travin said. "Melba Alzbeta Koh. Born on Luna to Alscie, Becca, and Sergio Koh, all deceased. No siblings. No taxation indenture. Licensed electrochemical technician. Your new self awaits, ah?"

"And the contract?"

"The *Cerisier* ships out, civilian support for the grand mission to the Ring. Our Miss Koh, she's on it. Senior class, even. Little staff to oversee, don't have to get your hands dirty."

Travin pulled a white plastic envelope from his pocket. The shadow of a cheap hand terminal showed through the tissue.

"All here, all ready," he said. "You take it and walk through the door a new woman, ah?"

Melba took her own hand terminal out of her pocket. It was smaller than the one in Travin's hand, and better made. She'd miss it. She thumbed in her code, authorized the transfer, and slid it back in her pocket.

"All right," she said. "The money's yours. I'll take delivery."

"Ah, there is still *one* problem," Travin said.

"We have an agreement," Melba said. "I did my part."

"And it speaks well of you," Travin said. "But doing business with you? I enjoy it, I think. Exciting discoveries to be made. Creating this new you, we have to put the DNA in the tables. We have to scrub out doubled records. I think you haven't been entirely honest with me."

She swallowed, trying to loosen the knot in her throat. The insect-eyed man on the couch shifted, his weight making the couch squeak.

"My money spends," she said.

"As it should, as it should," Travin said. "Clarissa Melpomene Mao, daughter to Jules-Pierre Mao of Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile. Very interesting name."

"Mao-Kwikowski was nationalized when my father went to jail," Melba said. "It doesn't exist anymore."

"Corporate death sentence," Travin said as he put the envelope on the desk display. "Very sad. But not for you, ah? Rich men know money. They find ways to put it where little eyes can't find. Get it to their wives, maybe. Their daughters."

She crossed her arms, scowling. On the couch, the bodybuilder stifled a yawn. It might even have been genuine. She let the silence stretch not because she wanted to pressure Travin to speak next, but because she didn't know what to say. He was right, of course. Daddy had taken care of all of them as best he could. He always had. Even the persecution of the United Nations couldn't reach everything. Clarissa had had enough money to live a quiet, retiring life on Luna or Mars and die of old age before the capital ran out. But she wasn't Clarissa anymore, and Melba's situation was different.

"I can give you another ten thousand," she said. "That's all I've got."

Travin smiled his gray smile.

"All that pretty money flown away, ah? And what takes you out into the darkness, eh? I wondered. So I looked. You are very, very good. Even knowing to squint, I didn't see more than shadows. Didn't hear more than echoes. But—" He put the envelope on the desk before him, keeping

one finger on it the way her brother Petyr did when he was almost sure of a chess move but hadn't brought himself to commit. It was a gesture of ownership. "I have something no one else does. I know to look at the Ring."

"Ten thousand is all I have. Honestly. I've spent the rest."

"Would you need more, then?" Travin asked. "Investment capital, call it? Our little Melba can have ten thousand, if you want it. Fifty thousand if you need it. But I will want more back. Much more."

She felt her throat tighten. When she tilted her head, the movement felt too fast, too tight. Birdlike. Scared.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, willing her voice to sound solid. Formless threat hung in the air like bad cologne: masculine and cheap. When he spoke again, false friendliness curved all of his vowels.

"Partners. You are doing something big. Something with the Ring and the flotilla, ah? All these people heading out in the dark to face the monsters. And you are going with them. It seems to me that such a risk means you expect a very great return. The sort one expects from a Mao. You tell me what is your plan, I help you how I can help you, and what comes your way from this, we divide."

"No deal." The words were like a reflex. They came from her spine, the decision too obvious to require her brain.

Travin pulled back the envelope, the plastic hissing against the table. The soft tutting sound of tongue against teeth was as sympathetic as it was false.

"You have moved heaven and earth," he said. "You have bribed. You have bought. You have arranged. And when you say that you have held nothing in reserve, I believe you. So now you come to my table and tell me no deal? No deal is no deal."

"I paid you."

"I don't care. We are partners. *Full* partners. Whatever you are getting from this, I am getting too. Or else there are other people, I think, who would be very interested to hear about what the infamous Mao have been so quietly doing."

The two men on the couch were paying attention to her now. Their gazes were on her. She turned to look over her shoulder. The door to the gamblers' den was metal, and it was locked. The window was wide. The security wire in it was the sort that retracted if you wanted the glass to open and let the filthy breeze of the city in to soil the air. The insect-eyed one stood up.

Her implants were triggered by rubbing her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Two circles, counterclockwise. It was a private movement, invisible. Internal. Oddly sensual. It was almost as easy as just thinking. The suite of manufactured glands tucked in her throat and head and abdomen squeezed their little bladders empty, pouring complex chemistry into her blood. She shuddered. It felt like orgasm without the pleasure. She could feel conscience and inhibition sliding away like bad dreams. She was fully awake and alive.

All the sounds in the room—the roar of street traffic, the muffled cacophony of the gambling decks, Travin's nasty voice—went quieter, as if the cocktail flowing into her had stuffed foam in her ears. Her muscles grew tense and tight. The taste of copper filled her mouth. Time slowed.

What to do? What to do?

The thugs by the couch were the first threat. She moved over to them, gravity's oppressive grip forgotten. She kicked the bodybuilder in the kneecap as he rose, the little beer coaster of bone ripping free of its tendons and sliding up his thigh. His face was a cartoon of surprise and alarm. As he began to crumple, she lifted her other knee, driving it up into his descending larynx. She'd been aiming for his face. *Throat just as good*, she thought as the cartilage collapsed against her knee.

The insect-eyed one lunged for her. He moved quickly, his own body modified somehow. Fused muscular neurons, probably. Something to streamline the long, slow gap when the neurotransmitters

floated across the synapses. Something to give him an edge when he was fighting some other thug. His hand fastened on her shoulder, wide, hard fingers grabbing at her. She turned in toward him, dropping to pull him down. Palm strike to the inside of the elbow to break his power, then both her hands around his wrist, bending it. None of her attacks were conscious or intentional. The movements came flowing out of a hindbrain that had been freed of restraint and given the time to plan its mayhem. It was no more a martial art than a crocodile taking down a water buffalo was; just speed, strength, and a couple billion years of survival instinct unleashed. Her tai chi instructor would have looked away in embarrassment.

The bodybuilder sloped down to the floor, blood pouring from his mouth. The insect-eyed man pulled away from her, which was the wrong thing to do. She hugged his locked joints close to her body and swung from her hips. He was bigger than she was, had lived in the gravity well all his life. He buffed up with steroids and his own cheap augmentations. She didn't need to be stronger than him, though. Just stronger than the little bones in his wrist and elbow. He broke, dropping to his knee.

Melba—not Clarissa—swung around him, sliding her right arm around his neck, then locking it with the left, protecting her own head from the thrashing that was about to come. She didn't need to be stronger than him, just stronger than the soft arteries that carried blood to his brain.

Travin's gun fired, gouging a hole in the couch. The little puff of foam was like a sponge exploding. No time. She shrieked, pulling the power of the scream into her arms, her shoulders. She felt the insect-eyed man's neck snap. Travin fired again. If he hit her, she'd die. She felt no fear, though. It had been locked away where she couldn't experience it. That would come soon. Very soon. It had to be done quickly.

He should have tried for a third bullet. It was the smart thing. The wise one. He was neither smart nor wise. He did what his body told him to and tried to get away. He was a monkey, and millions of years of evolution told him to flee from the predator. He didn't have time for another mistake. She felt another scream growing in her throat.

Time skipped. Her fingers were wrapped around Travin's neck. She'd been driving his skull into the corner of his desk. There was blood and scalp adhering to it. She pushed again, but he was heavy. There was no force behind her blow. She dropped him, and he fell to the floor moaning.

Moaning.

Alive, she thought. The fear was back now, and the first presentiment of nausea. He was still alive. He couldn't still be alive when the crash came. He'd had a gun. She had to find what had happened to it. With fingers quickly growing numb, she pulled the little pistol from under him.

"Partners," she said, and fired two rounds into his head. Even over the gambling decks, they had to have heard it. She forced herself to the metal door and checked the lock. It was bolted. Unless someone had a key or cut through it, she was all right. She could rest. They wouldn't call the police. She hoped they wouldn't call the police.

She slid to the floor. Sweat poured down her face and she began shaking. It seemed unfair that she'd lose time during the glorious and redemptive violence and have to fight to stay conscious through the physiological crash that followed, but she couldn't afford to sleep. Not here. She hugged her knees to her chest, sobbing not because she felt sorrow or fear, but because it was what her flesh did when she was coming down. Someone was knocking at the door, but the sound was uncertain. Tentative. Just a few minutes, and she'd be... not all right. Not that. But good enough. Just a few minutes.

This was why glandular modification had never taken root in the military culture. A squad of soldiers without hesitation or doubt, so full of adrenaline they could tear their own muscles and not care, might win battles. But the same fighters curled up and mewling for five minutes afterward would lose them again. It was a failed technology, but not an unavailable one. Enough money,

enough favors to call in, and enough men of science who had been cured of conscience. It was easy. The easiest part of her plan, really.

Her sobs intensified, shifted. The vomiting started. She knew from experience that it wouldn't last long. Between retching, she watched the bodybuilder's chest heaving for air through his ruined throat, but he was already gone. The smell of blood and puke thickened the air. Melba caught her breath, wiping the back of her hand against her lips. Her sinuses ached, and she didn't know if it was from the retching or the false glands that lay in that tender flesh. It didn't matter.

The knocking at the door was more desperate now. She could make out the voice of the fat man by the door. No more time. She took the plastic envelope and shoved it in her pocket. Melba Alzbeta Koh crawled out the window and dropped to the street. She stank. There was blood on her hands. She was trembling with every step. The dim sunlight hurt, and she used the shadows of her hands to hide from it. In this part of Baltimore, a thousand people could see her and not have seen anything. The blanket of anonymity that the drug dealers and pimps and slavers arranged and enforced also protected her.

She'd be okay. She'd made it. The last tool was in place, and all she had to do was get to her hotel, drink something to put her electrolytes back in balance, and sleep a little. And then, in a few days, report for duty on the *Cerisier* and begin her long journey out to the edge of the solar system. Holding her spine straight, walking down the street, avoiding people's eyes, the dozen blocks to her room seemed longer. But she would do it. She would do whatever had to be done.

She had been Clarissa Melpomene Mao. Her family had controlled the fates of cities, colonies, and planets. And now Father sat in an anonymous prison, barred from speaking with anyone besides his lawyer, living out his days in disgrace. Her mother lived in a private compound on Luna slowly medicating herself to death. The siblings—the ones that were still alive—had scattered to whatever shelter they could find from the hatred of two worlds. Once, her family's name had been written in starlight and blood, and now they'd been made to seem like villains. They'd been destroyed.

She could make it right, though. It hadn't been easy, and it wouldn't be now. Some nights, the sacrifices felt almost unbearable, but she would do it. She could make them all see the injustice in what James Holden had done to her family. She would expose him. Humiliate him.

And then she would destroy him.

Chapter Four: Anna

Annushka Volovodov, Pastor Anna to her congregation on Europa—or Reverend Doctor Volovodov to people she didn’t like—was sitting in the high-backed leather chair in her office when the wife beater arrived.

“Nicholas,” she said, trying to put as much warmth into her voice as she could manage. “Thank you for taking the time.”

“Nick,” he said, then sat on one of the metal chairs in front of her desk. The metal chairs were lower than her own, which gave the room a vaguely courtroom-like setting, with her in the position of judge. It was why she never sat behind the desk when meeting with one of her parishioners. There was a comfortable couch along the back wall that was much better for personal conversations and counseling. But every now and then, the air of authority the big chair and heavy desk gave her was useful.

Like now.

“Nick,” she said, then pressed her fingertips together and rested her chin on them. “Sophia came to see me this morning.”

Nick shrugged, looking away like a schoolboy caught cheating on an exam. He was a tall man, with the narrow, raw-boned look outer planets types got from hard physical labor. Anna knew he worked in surface construction. Here on Europa, that meant long days in a heavy vacuum suit. The people who did that job were as tough as nails. Nick had the attitude of a man who knew how he looked to others, and used his air of physical competence to intimidate.

Anna smiled at him. *It won’t work on me.*

“She wouldn’t tell me what happened at first,” she said. “It took a while to get her to lift her shirt. I didn’t need to see the bruises, I knew they’d be there. But I did need pictures.”

When she said *pictures*, he leaned forward, his eyes narrowing and shifting from side to side. He probably thought it made him look tough, threatening. Instead it made him look like a rodent.

“She fell—” he started.

“In the kitchen,” Anna finished for him. “I know, she told me. And then she cried for a very long time. And then she told me you’d started hitting her again. Do you remember what I said would happen if you hit her again?”

Nick shifted in his chair, his long legs bouncing in front of him with nervous energy. His large, bony hands squeezing each other until the knuckles turned white. He wouldn’t look directly at her. “I didn’t mean to,” he said. “It just happened. I could try the counseling again, I guess.”

Anna cleared her throat, and when he looked at her she stared back until his legs stopped bouncing. “No, too late. We gave you the anger counseling. The church paid for you to go right up until you quit. We did that part. That part is done.”

His expression went hard.

“Gonna give me one of those Jesus speeches? I am sick right up to here”—Nick held his hand under his chin—“with that shit. Sophia won’t shut up about it. ‘Pastor Anna says!’ You know what? Fuck what Pastor fucking Anna says.”

“No,” Anna said. “No Jesus speeches. We’re done with that too.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

“Do you,” she said, drawing the words out, “remember what I said would happen if you hit her again?”

He shrugged again, then pushed up out of the chair and walked away, putting his back to her. While pretending to stare at one of the diplomas hanging on the wall he said, “Why should I give a fuck what you say, *Pastor Anna*?”

Anna breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Preparing for this meeting, she’d been unsure if she’d actually be able to do what was needed. She had a strong, visceral dislike of dishonesty, and she was about to destroy someone by lying. Or if not lying, at least deceit. She justified it to herself by believing that the real purpose was to save someone. But she knew that wouldn’t be enough. She’d pay for what she was about to do for a long time in sleepless nights and second-guessing. At least his anger would make it easy in the short term.

Anna offered a quick prayer: *Please help me save Sophia from this man who’s going to kill her if I don’t stop him.*

“I said,” Anna continued at Nick’s back, “that I would make sure you went to jail for it.”

Nick turned around at that, a rodent’s low cunning back on his face. “Oh yeah?”

“Yes.”

He moved toward her in the low-gravity version of a saunter. It was intended to look threatening, but to Anna, who’d grown up down the well on Earth, it just looked silly. She suppressed a laugh.

“Sophia won’t say shit,” Nick said, walking up to her desk to stare down at her. “She knows better. She fell down in the kitchen, and she’ll say it to the magistrates.”

“That’s true,” Anna said, then opened the drawer of her desk and took the taser out. She held it in her lap where Nick couldn’t see it. “She’s terrified of you. But I’m not. I don’t care about you at all anymore.”

“Is that right?” Nick said, leaning forward, trying to frighten her by pushing into her personal space. Anna leaned toward him.

“But Sophia is a member of this congregation, and she is my friend. Her children play with my daughter. I love them. And if I don’t do something, you’re going to kill her.”

“Like what?”

“I’m going to call the police and tell them you threatened me.” She reached for her desk terminal with her left hand. It was a gesture meant to provoke. She might as well have said, *Stop me.*

He gave her a feral grin and grabbed her arm, squeezing the bones in her wrist together hard enough to ache. Hard enough to bruise. She pointed the taser at him with her other hand.

“What’s that?”

“Thank you,” she said, “for making this easier.”

She shot him, and he drifted to the ground spasming. She felt a faint echo of the shock through his hand on her arm. It made her hair stand up. She pulled up her desk terminal and called Sophia.

“Sophia, honey, this is Pastor Anna. Please listen to me. The police are going to be coming to your house soon to ask about Nick. You need to show them the bruises. You need to tell them what happened. Nick will already be in jail. You’ll be safe. But Nick confronted me when I asked him about what happened to you, and if you want to keep us both safe, you need to be honest with them.”

After a few minutes of coaxing, she finally got Sophia to say she would talk to the police when they came. Nick was starting to move his arms and legs feebly.

“Don’t move,” Anna said to him. “We’re almost done here.”

She called the New Dolinsk Police Department. The Earth corporation that had once had the contract was gone, but there still seemed to be police in the tunnels, so someone had picked it up. Maybe a Belter company. Or the OPA itself. It didn’t matter.

“Hello, my name is Reverend Doctor Annushka Volovodov. I’m the pastor at St. John’s United. I’m calling to report an assault on my person. A man named Nicholas Trubachev tried to attack me

when I confronted him about beating his wife. No, he didn't hurt me, just a few bruises on my wrist. I had a taser in my desk and used it before he could do anything worse. Yes, I'd be happy to give a statement when you arrive. Thank you."

"Bitch," Nick spat, trying to get off the floor on shaky limbs.

Anna shot him again.



"Tough day?" Nono asked when Anna finally got home. Nono was dandling their daughter on her lap, and little Nami gave a squeal and reached for Anna as soon as she closed the door behind her.

"How's my girl?" Anna said, and dropped onto the couch next to them with a long sigh. Nono handed the baby to her, and Nami immediately set about undoing Anna's bun and trying to pull her hair. Anna squeezed her daughter and took a long sniff off the top of her head. The subtle and powerful scent Nami had given off when they'd first brought her home had faded, but a faint trace of it was still there. Scientists might claim that humans lacked the ability to interact at the pheromonal level, but Anna knew that was baloney. Whatever chemicals Nami had been pumping out as a newborn were the most powerful drug Anna had ever experienced. It made her want to have another child just to smell it again.

"Namono, no hair pulling," Nono said, trying to untwist Anna's long red hair from the baby's fist. "Don't want to talk about it?" she said to Anna.

Nono's full name was Namono too. But she'd been Nono ever since her older twin had been able to speak. When Anna and Nono named their daughter after her, the name had somehow morphed into Nami. Most people probably had no idea the baby was named after one of her mothers.

"Eventually, yes," Anna said. "But I need baby time first."

She kissed Nami on her pug nose. The same broad flat nose as Nono, just below Anna's own bright green eyes. She had Nono's coffee-colored skin, but Anna's sharp chin. Anna could sit and stare at Nami for hours at a time, drinking in the astonishing melding of herself and the woman she loved. The experience was so powerful it bordered on the sacred. Nami stuck a lock of Anna's hair in her mouth, and Anna gently pulled it back out again, then blew a raspberry at her. "No eating the hair!" she said, and Nami laughed as though this was the funniest thing ever spoken.

Nono took Anna's hand and held it tightly. They didn't move for a long time.



Nono was cooking mushrooms and rice. She'd put some reconstituted onion in with it, and the strong scent filled the kitchen. Anna cut up apples at the table for a salad. The apples were small and not very crisp. Not good for munching, but they'd be fine in a Waldorf with enough other flavors and textures to hide their imperfections. And they were lucky to have them at all. The fruit was part of the first harvest to come off of Ganymede since the troubles there. Anna didn't like to think how hungry everyone would be without that moon's remarkable recovery.

"Nami will be asleep for at least another hour," Nono said. "Are you ready to talk about your day?"

"I hurt someone and I lied to the police today," Anna said. She pushed too hard on the knife and it slipped through the soft apple and scored her thumb. It wasn't deep enough to bleed.

"Well... okay, you'll have to explain that," Nono said, stirring a small bowl of broth into her rice and mushroom mix.

"No, I really can't. Some of what I know was told in confidence."

"This lie you told, it was to help someone?"

"I think so. I hope so," Anna said, putting the last bits of apple in the bowl, then adding nuts and raisins. She stirred in the dressing.

Nono stopped and turned to stare at her. "What will you do if you get caught in the lie?"

"Apologize," Anna said.

Nono nodded, then turned back to the pot of rice. "I turned on your desk terminal today to check my mail. You were still logged in. There was a message from the United Nations about the secretary-general's humanitarian committee project. All those people who they're sending out to the Ring."

Anna felt the sharp twist of guilt. Of having been caught out at something.

"Shit," she said. She didn't like profanity, but some occasions demanded it. "I haven't responded yet." It felt like another lie.

"Were we going to talk about it before you decided?"

"Of course, I—"

"Nami is almost two," Nono said. "We've been here two years. At some point, deciding to stay is deciding who Nami is going to be for the rest of her life. She has family in Russia and Uganda who've never seen her. If she stays here much longer, they never will."

Nami was being fed the same drug cocktail all newborns in the outer planets received. It encouraged bone growth and fought off the worst of the effects low-gravity environments had on childhood development. But Nono was right. If they stayed much longer, Nami would begin to develop the long, thin frame that came with life out there. To life in low gravity. Anna would be sentencing her to a life outside her home world forever.

"Europa was always supposed to be temporary," Anna said. "It was a good posting. I speak Russian, the congregation here is small and fragile..."

Nono turned off the stove and came to sit by her, holding her hand on the table. For the first time, the faux wood tabletop looked cheap to Anna. Tacky. She saw with startling clarity a future in which Nami never lived anywhere with real wood. It felt like a punch to the stomach.

"I'm not mad at you for coming here," Nono said. "This was our dream. Coming to places like this. But when you asked for the transfer out here, you were three months pregnant."

"I was so unlikely to be chosen," Anna said, and she could hear the defensiveness in her own voice.

Nono nodded. "But you *were* chosen. And this thing for the UN. Flying out to the Ring as part of the secretary-general's advisory group. And our baby not even two."

"I think two hundred people signed up for the same slot," Anna said.

"They chose you. They want you to go."

"It was so unlikely—" Anna started.

"They always choose you," Nono interrupted. "Because you are very special. Everyone can see it. I can see it. I saw it the first time I met you, giving your speech at the faith conference in Uganda. So nervous you dropped your notes, but I could've heard a pin drop in that auditorium. You couldn't help but shine."

"I stole you from your country," Anna said. It was what she always said when Nono brought up how they met. "The Ugandan church could have used a young minister like you."

"I stole you," Nono said, like she always said, only this time it had a disconcertingly pro forma feel. As though it were an annoying ritual to be rushed through. "But you always say this. 'There were so many others. I was so unlikely to be picked.'"

"It's true."

"It's the excuse you use. You've always been one to ask for forgiveness rather than permission."

"I won't go," Anna said, pushing her hand against her eyes and the tears that threatened there. Her elbow banged into the salad bowl, nearly knocking it off the table. "I haven't said yes to them."

I'll tell them it was a mistake."

"Annushka," Nono said, squeezing her hand. "You *will* go. But I am taking Nami back to Moscow with me. She can meet her grandparents. Grow up in real gravity."

Anna felt a white-hot spike of fear shoot through her stomach. "You're leaving me?"

Nono's smile was a mix of exasperation and love.

"No. *You're* leaving *us*. For a little while. And when you come back, we will be waiting for you in Moscow. Your family. I will find us a nice place to live there, and Nami and I will make it a home. A place where we can be happy. But we will not go with you."

"Why?" was all Anna could think to say.

Nono got up and took two plates out of the cupboard, then dished up dinner and put it on the table. As she spooned Waldorf salad onto her plate she said, "I'm very afraid of that thing. The thing from Venus. I'm afraid of what it will mean for everything we care about. Humanity, God, our place in His universe. I'm afraid of what it will do, of course, but much more afraid of what it *means*."

"I am too," Anna said. It was the truth. In fact, it was part of the reason she'd asked to join the expedition when she heard it was being assembled. That same fear Nono was talking about. Anna wanted to look it in the eye. Give God a chance to help her understand it. Only then could she help anyone else with it.

"So go find the answers," Nono said. "Your family will be waiting for you when you get back."

"Thank you," Anna said, a little awed by what Nono was offering her.

"I think," Nono said around a mouthful of mushrooms and rice, "that maybe they will need people like you out there."

"Like me?"

"People who don't ask permission."

Chapter Five: Bull

It's not in the budget," Michio Pa, executive officer of the *Behemoth*, said. If she'd been an Earther, she would have been a small woman, but a lifetime in microgravity had changed her the way it did all of them. Her arms, legs, and spine were all slightly elongated—not thin exactly. Just put together differently. Her head was larger than it would have been, and walking in the mild one-third-g thrust gravity, she stood as tall as Bull but still seemed perversely childlike. It made him feel shorter than he was.

"We might need to adjust that," he said. "When they put in the rail gun, they were treating it like we had standard bulkheads and supports. Thing is, the Mormons were really trying to cut back on mass. They used a lot of ceramics and silicates where the metals usually go. Directional stuff. We fire a round right now, we could shear the skin off."

Pa walked down the long, curving corridor. The ceiling arched above her, white and easily twice as high as required, an aesthetic gesture by designers who hadn't known they were building a warship. Her stride a little wider than his, moving a little more comfortably in the low g and making him trot slightly to keep up. It was one of a thousand small ways Belters reminded earthborn men and women that they didn't belong here. The XO shook her head.

"We came out here with an operational plan," she said. "If we start rewriting it every time we find an adjustment we'd like to make, we might as well not have bothered."

Privately, Bull thought the same thing, but with a different inflection. If he'd been XO, the operational plan would have been called a suggested guideline and only opened when he wanted a good laugh. Pa probably knew that. They reached the transit ramp, a softly sloping curve that led from the command and control levels at the head of the *Behemoth* down to the massive drum of her body. From Pa's domain to his.

"Look," Pa said, her mouth twitching into a conciliatory smile, "I'll make note of it for the refit, but I'm not going to start reallocating until I have an idea of the big picture. I mean, if I start pulling resources out of environmental control to cover this, and next week we find something that needs doing there, I'll just be pushing it back, right?"

Bull looked down the ramp. Soft lights recessed in the walls filled the air with a shadowless glow like a cheesy vision of heaven. Pa put her hand on his shoulder. She probably meant it to be sympathetic, but it felt like condescension.

"Yeah, okay," he said.

"It'll be all right, chief," she said, giving his trapezius a little squeeze. He nodded and walked down the ramp to the transfer platform. Her footsteps vanished behind him, submerging in the hum of air recyclers. Bull fought the urge to spit.

The *Behemoth*, back when she'd been the *Nauvoo*, had been built with a different life in mind. Most ships built for travel between the planets were like massive buildings, one floor above another with the thrust of the Epstein drive at the bottom providing the feeling of weight for whole voyages apart from a few hours in the middle when the ship flipped around to change from acceleration to slowing down. But Epstein or not, no ship could afford the power requirements or the heat generated by accelerating forever. Plus, Einstein had a thing or two to say about trying to move mass at relativistic speeds. The *Nauvoo* had been a generation ship, its journey measured in light-years rather

than light-minutes. The percentage of its life span it could afford to spend under thrust was tiny by comparison. The command and control at the top of the ship and the main engines and the associated parts of engineering at the bottom could almost have belonged to a standard craft connected by a pair of kilometers-long shafts, one for a keel elevator to move people and another that gave access to the skin of the drum.

Everything else was built to spin.

For the centuries out to Tau Ceti, the body of the *Nauvoo* was meant to turn. Ten levels of environmental engineering, crew quarters, temples, schools, wastewater treatment, machine shops, and forges, and at the center, the vast interior. It would have been a piece of Earth curved back on itself. Soil and farmland and the illusion of open air with a central core of fusion-driven light and heat as gentle and warm as a summer day.

All the rooms and corridors in the body section—the vast majority of the ship—were built with that long, slow, endless season in mind. The brief periods of acceleration and deceleration at the journey's ends hardly mattered. Except that they were all the ship had now. Those places that should have been floors were all walls, and would be forever. The vast reinforced decks meant to carry a tiny world's worth of soil were the sides of a nearly unusable well. Someone slipping from the connection where the command and control levels met the great chamber could fall for nearly two full kilometers. Water systems built to take advantage of spin gravity and Coriolis stood on their sides, useless. The *Nauvoo* had been a marvel of human optimism and engineering, a statement of faith in the twinned powers of God and rigorous engineering. The *Behemoth* was a salvage job with mass accelerators strapped to her side that would do more damage to herself than to an enemy.

And Bull wasn't even allowed to fix the problems he knew about.

He passed through the transfer station and down toward his office. The rooms and corridors here were all built aslant, waiting for the spin gravity that would never come. Stretches of bare metal and exposed ducting spoke of the rush to finish it, and then to salvage and remake it. Just walking past them left Bull depressed.

Samara Rosenberg, longtime repair honcho on Tycho Station and now chief engineer on the *Behemoth*, was waiting in the anteroom, talking with Bull's new deputy. Serge, his name was, and Bull wasn't sure what he thought of the man. Serge had been part of the OPA before that was a safe thing to be. He had the traditional split circle insignia tattooed on his neck and wore it proudly. But like the rest of the security force, he'd been recruited by Michio Pa, and Bull didn't know exactly how things stood. He didn't trust the man yet, and distrust kept him from thinking all that well of him.

Sam, on the other hand, he liked.

"Hey, Bull," she said as he dropped onto the foam-core couch. "Did you get a chance to talk to the XO?"

"We talked," Bull said.

"What's the plan?" Sam said, folding her arms in a way that meant she already knew.

Bull ran a hand through his hair. When he'd been younger, his hair had been soft. Now it was like he could feel each strand individually against his fingertips. He pulled out his hand terminal and scrolled through. There were five reports waiting, three routine security reports and two occasionals—an injury report and a larceny complaint. Nothing that couldn't wait.

"Hey, Serge," Bull said. "You hold the fort here for an hour?"

"Anything you want, chief," Serge said with a grin. It was probably just paranoia that left Bull hearing contempt in the words.

"All right, then. Come on, Sam. I'll buy you a drink."

In a Coalition ship, back when there'd been an Earth-Mars Coalition, there would have been a commissary. In the OPA, there was a bar and a couple mom-and-pop restaurants along with a bare-

bones keep-you-alive supply of prepack meals that anyone could get for the asking. The bar was in a wide space that might have been meant for a gymnasium or a ball court, big enough for a hundred people but Bull hadn't seen it with more than a couple dozen. The lighting had been swapped out for blue-and-white LEDs set behind sand-textured plastic. The tables were flat black and magnetized to hold the bulbs of beer and liquor to them. Nothing was served in glasses.

"Che-che!" the bartender called as Bull and Sam stepped through the door. "Moergen! Alles-mesa, you."

"Meh-ya," Sam replied, as comfortable with the mishmash Belter patois as Bull was with Spanish or English. It was her native tongue.

"What're you having?" Bull asked as he slid into one of the booths. He liked the ones where he could see the door. It was an old habit.

"I'm on duty," she said, sitting across from him.

Bull leaned forward, catching the barkeep's eye, and held up two fingers.

"Lemonades," he said.

"Sa sa!" the barkeep replied, lifting a fist in the equivalent of a nod. Bull sat back and looked at Sam. She was a pretty enough woman. Cute, with pixie-cut hair and a quick smile. There had been about a minute when they'd first met that Bull had seriously considered whether he found her attractive. But if he'd seen the same calculus in her, they'd gotten past it.

"Didn't go so good?" Sam asked.

"No."

Sam lifted her eyebrows and leaned her elbows against the tabletop. He sketched out Pa's objections and rationale, and Sam's expression shifted slowly into a fatalistic amusement.

"Waiting for the refit's all well and good," she said when he was done, "but if we try and test-fire that bad boy, it's going to make an awfully big owie."

"You're sure about that?"

"Not a hundred percent," she said. "High eighties, though."

Bull sighed out a tired obscenity as the barkeep brought the bulbs of lemonade. They were about the size of Bull's balled fists, citrus yellow with **Плодоовощ малыша потехи** printed on the side in bright red script.

"Maybe I should talk to her," Sam said. "If it came straight from me..."

"It came straight from you, probably it would work," he said, "and they get to tell me no on everything from now on. 'Bull asked for it? Well, if it was important, he'd have sent the Belter.' Right?"

"You really think it's about you not getting born up here?"

"Yeah."

"Well... you're probably right," Sam said. "Sorry about that."

"Comes with the territory," Bull said, pretending that it didn't bother him.

Sam plucked her lemonade off the table and took a long, thoughtful drink. The bulb clicked when the magnet readhered to the tabletop. "I've got nothing against inners. Worked with a lot of you guys, and didn't run into a higher percentage of assholes than when I'm dealing with Belters. But I have to get that rail gun's mounts reinforced. If there's a way to do that without undercutting you, I'm all for it."

"But if it's that or mess up the ship," Bull said, nodding. "Gimme a little time. I'll think of something."

"Start when you want to shoot someone and count back eighteen days," Sam said. "That's my deadline. Even if everyone's sober and working balls-out, my crew can't get it done faster than that."

"I'll think of something," Bull said.



The larceny complaint turned out to be from a repair and maintenance crew who couldn't agree how to store their tools. The injury report was a kid who got caught between a stretch of deck plating and someone driving a salvage mech. The cartilage in the kid's knee had gotten ground into about a dozen different bits of custard; the medic said a good clean bone break would have been better. The injured man would be fine, but he was off active duty for at least a month while all his pieces got glued back together.

The security reports were boilerplate, which either meant that things were going well or that the problems were getting glossed over, but probably they were going well. The trip out to the Ring was a shakedown cruise, and that always meant there'd be a little honeymoon period when the crew were all figuratively standing shoulder to shoulder and taking on the work. Everyone expected there'd be problems, so there was a grace period when morale didn't start heading down.

Chief security officer on an OPA ship was a half-assed kind of position, one part cop, one part efficiency expert, and pretty much all den mother to a crew of a thousand people with their own agendas and petty power struggles and opinions on how he should be doing his job better. A good security chief kept bullshit off the captain's plate as a full-time job.

The worst part, though, was that all Bull's formal duties were focused inward, on the ship. Right now, a flotilla of Earth ships was burning out into the deep night. A matching force of Martian war vessels—the remnants of the navy that had survived two let's-not-call-them-wars—was burning out on a converging path. The *Behemoth* was lumbering along too with a head start that came from being farther from the sun and the hobble of low-g acceleration to keep her slow. And all of it was focused on the Ring.

Reports would be filling Captain Ashford's queue, and as his XO, Pa would be reading them too. Bull had whatever scraps they let him have or else the same mix of pabulum and panic that filled the newsfeeds. Ashford and Pa would be in conference for most of their shifts, working over strategies and options and playing through scenarios for how things might go down when they reached the Ring. Bull was going to worry about all the trivial stuff so that they didn't have to.

And somehow, he was going to make the mission work. Because Fred had asked him to.

"Hey, chief," Serge said. Bull looked up from the terminal feed in his desk. Serge stood in the office doorway. "Shift's up, and I'm out."

"All right," Bull said. "I still got some stuff. I can lock up when I'm done."

"Bien alles," Serge said with a nod. His light, shuffling footsteps hissed through the front room. In the corridor, Gutmansdottir stroked his white beard and Casimir said something that made them both chuckle. Corin lifted her chin to Serge as he stepped out. The door closed behind him. When he was sure he was alone, Bull pulled up the operational plan and started hunting. He didn't have authority to change it, but that didn't mean he couldn't change anything.

Two hours later, when he was done, he turned off the screen and stood. The office was dark and colder than he liked it. The hum of the ventilation system comforted him. If it were ever completely silent, that would be the time to worry. He stretched, the vertebrae between his shoulder blades crunching like gravel.

They would still be in the bar, most likely. Serge and Corin and Casimir. Macondo and Garza, so similar they could have been brothers. Jojo. His people, to the degree that they were his. He should go. Be with them. Make friends.

He should go to his bunk.

"Come on, old man," he said. "Time to get some rest."

He had closed and locked the office door before Sam's voice came to him in his memory. *Even if everyone's sober and working balls-out, my crew can't get it done faster than that.* He hesitated, his wide fingers over the keypad. It was late. He needed food and sleep and an hour or so checking in with the family aggregator his cousin had set up three years before to help everyone keep track of who was living where. He had a container of flash-frozen green chile from Hatch, back on Earth, waiting for him. It was all going to be there in the morning, and more besides. He didn't need to make more work for himself. No one was going to thank him for it.

He went back in, turned his desk back on, and reread the injury report.



Sam had a good laugh. One that came from the gut. It filled the machining bay, echoing off ceiling and walls until it sounded like there was a crowd of her. Two of the techs on the far side turned to look toward her, smiling without knowing what they were smiling about.

"Technical support?" she said. "You've got to be kidding."

"Rail gun's a pretty technical piece of equipment," Bull said. "It needs support."

"So you redefined what I do as technical support."

"Yeah."

"That's never going to fly," she said.

"Then get the job done quick," Bull said.

"Ashford will pull you up for disciplinary action," she said, the amusement fading but not quite gone yet.

"He has that right. But there's this other thing I wanted to talk about. You said something yesterday about how long it would take to do the job if everyone on your crew was sober?"

It was like turning off a light. The smile left Sam's face as if it had never been there. She crossed her arms. Tiny half-moon shapes dented in at the corners of her mouth, making her look older than she was. Bull nodded to her like she'd said something.

"You've got techs coming to work high," he said.

"Sometimes," she said. And then, reluctantly, "Some of it's alcohol, but mostly it's pixie dust to make up for lack of sleep."

"I got a report about a kid got his knee blown out. His blood was clean, but it doesn't look like anyone tested the guy who was driving the mech. Driver isn't even named in the report. Weird, eh?"

"If you say so," she said.

Bull looked down at his feet. The gray-and-black service utility boots. The spotless floor.

"I need a name, Sam."

"You know I can't do that," she said. "These assholes are my crew. If I lose their respect, we're done here."

"I won't bust your guys unless they're dealing."

"You can't ask me to pick sides. And sorry for saying this, but you already don't have a lot of friends around here. You should be careful how you alienate people."

Across the bay, the two technicians lifted a broken mech onto a steel repair hoist. The murmur of their conversation was just the sound of words without the words themselves. If he couldn't hear them, Bull figured they couldn't hear him.

"Yeah. So Sam?"

"Bull."

"I'm gonna need you to pick sides."

He watched her vacillate. It only took a few seconds. Then he looked across the bay. The technicians had the mech open, pulling an electric motor out of its spine. It was smaller than a six-pack of beer and built to put out enough torque to rip steel. Not the sort of thing to play with drunk. Sam followed his gaze and his train of thought.

“For a guy who bends so many rules, you can be pretty fucking uncompromising.”

“Strong believer in doing what needs to get done.”

It took her another minute, but she gave him a name.

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Chapter Six: Holden

Uranus is really far away,” Naomi said as they walked along the corridor to the docking bay. It was the third objection to the contract that she’d listed so far, and something in her voice told Holden there were a lot more points on her list. Under other circumstances, he would have thought she was just angry that he’d accepted the job. She *was* angry. But not *just*.

“Yes,” he said. “It is.”

“And Titania is a shitty little moon with one tiny little science base on it,” Naomi continued.

“Yes.”

“We could *buy* Titania for what it cost these people to hire us to fly out there,” Naomi said.

Holden shrugged. This part of Ceres was a maze of cheap warehouse tunnels and even cheaper office space. The walls were the grungy off-white of spray-on insulation foam. Someone with a pocketknife and a few minutes to kill could reach the bedrock of Ceres without much effort. From the ratty look of the corridor, there were a lot of people with knives and idle time.

A small forklift came down the corridor toward them with an electric whine and a constant high-pitched beep. Holden backed up against the wall and pulled Naomi to him to get her out of its way. The driver gave Holden a tiny nod of thanks as she drove by.

“So why are they hiring us?” she asked. Demanded.

“Because we’re awesome?”

“Titania has, what, a couple hundred people living at the science base?” Naomi said. “You know how they usually send supplies out there? They load them into a single-use braking rocket, and fling them at Uranus’ orbit with a rail gun.”

“Usually,” Holden agreed.

“And the company? Outer Fringe Exports? If I was making a cheap, disposable shell corporation, you know what I’d call it?”

“Outer Fringe Exports?”

“Outer Fringe Exports,” she said.

Naomi stopped at the entry hatch that opened to the rental docking bay and the *Rocinante*. The sign overhead listed the present user: Outer Fringe Exports. Holden started to reach for the controls to cycle the pressure doors open, but Naomi put a hand on his arm.

“These people are hiring a warship to transport something to Titania,” she said, lowering her voice as though afraid someone might be listening. “How can they possibly afford to do that? Our cargo hold is the size of a hatbox.”

“We gave them a good rate?” Holden said, trying for funny and failing.

“What would someone be sending to Titania that requires a fast, stealthy, and heavily armed ship? Have you asked what’s in those crates we signed up to carry?”

“No,” Holden said. “No, I haven’t. And I normally would, but I’m trying really hard not to find out.”

Naomi frowned at him, her face shifting between angry and concerned. “Why?”

Holden pulled out his hand terminal and called up an orbital map of the solar system. “See this, all the way on this edge? This is the Ring.” He scrolled the display to the other edge of the solar

system. “And this is Uranus. They are literally the two spots furthest from each other in the universe that have humans near them.”

“And?” Naomi said.

Holden took a deep breath. He could feel a surge of the anxiety he always tried to deny leaping up in him, and he pushed it back down.

“And I know I don’t talk about it much, but something really unpleasant and really big with a really high body count knows my name, and it’s connected to the Ring.”

“Miller,” Naomi said.

“The Ring opened, and he *knew when it happened*. It was the closest thing to making sense he’s done since...”

Since he rose from the dead. The words didn’t fit in his throat, and Naomi didn’t make him say them. Her nod was enough. She understood. In an act of legendary cowardice, he was running away to the other side of the solar system to avoid Miller and the Ring and everything that had to do with them. If they had to transport black market human organs or drugs or sexbots or whatever was in those crates, he’d do it. Because he was scared.

Her eyes were unreadable. After all this time, she could still keep her thoughts out of her expression when she wanted to.

“Okay,” Naomi said, and pushed the entry door open for him.

At the outer edge of Ceres where the spin gravity was greatest, Holden almost felt like he could have been on Luna or Mars. Loading gantries fed into the skin of the station like thick veins, waiting for the mechs to load in the cargo. Poorly patched scars marked the walls where accidents had marred them. The air smelled of coolant and the kind of cheap air filters that reminded Holden of urinal cakes. Amos lounged on a small electric power lift, his eyes closed.

“We get the job?”

“We did,” Naomi said.

Amos cracked an eye open as they came near. A single frown line drew itself on his broad forehead.

“We happy about that?” he asked.

“We’re fine with it,” Naomi said. “Let’s get the lift warmed up. Cargo’s due in ten minutes and we probably want to get it off station as quickly as we can without raising suspicion.”

There was a beauty in the efficiency that came from a crew that had flown together as long as they had. A fluidity and intimacy and grace that grew from long experience. Eight minutes after Holden and Naomi had come in, the *Roci* was ready to take on cargo. Ten minutes later, nothing happened. Then twenty. Then an hour. Holden paced the gantry nearest the entry hatch with an uncomfortable tingling crawling up the back of his neck.

“You *sure* we got this job?” Amos asked.

“These guys seemed really sketchy to me,” Naomi said over the comm from her station in ops. “I’d think we’ve been scammed, except we haven’t given anyone our account numbers.”

“We’re on the clock here, boss,” Alex said from the cockpit. “These loading docks charge by the minute.”

Holden bit back his irritation and said, “I’ll call again.”

He pulled out his terminal and connected to the export company’s office. Their messaging system responded, as it had the last three times he’d requested a connection. He waited for the beep that would let him leave another message. Before he could, his display lit up with an incoming connection request from the same office. He switched to it.

“Holden here.”

“This is a courtesy call, Captain Holden,” the voice on the other end said. The video feed was the Outer Fringe Exports logo on a gray background. “We’re withdrawing the contract, and you might

want to consider leaving that dock very, very soon.”

“You can’t back out now,” Holden said, trying to keep his voice calm and professional against the rising panic he felt. “We’ve signed the deal. We’ve got your deposit. It’s non-refundable.”

“Keep it,” his caller said. “But we consider your failure to inform us of your current situation as a prior breach.”

Situation? Holden thought. They couldn’t know about Miller. He didn’t think they could. “I don’t—”

“The party that’s tracking you left our offices about five minutes ago, so you should probably get off Ceres in a hurry. Goodbye, Mr. Holden—”

“Wait!” Holden said. “Who was there? What’s going on?”

The call ended.

Amos was rubbing his pale, stubble-covered scalp with both hands. He sighed and said, “We got a problem, right?”

“Yep.”

“Be right back,” Amos replied, and climbed off the forklift.

“Alex? How long till we can clear this dock?” Holden asked. He lopez across the bay to the entry hatch. There didn’t seem to be any way to lock it from his side. Why would there be? The bays were temporary rental space for loading and unloading cargo. No need for security.

“She’s warmed up,” Alex replied, not asking the obvious question. Holden was grateful for that. “Gimme ten to run the decouplin’ sequence, that should do it.”

“Start now,” Holden said, hurrying back toward the airlock. “Leave the ’lock open till the last minute. Amos and I will be out here making sure no one interferes.”

“Roger that, Cap,” Alex replied, and dropped the connection.

“Interferes?” Naomi said. “What’s going on... Okay, why is Amos going out there with a shotgun?”

“Those sketchy, scary gangster types we just signed on with?”

“Yes?”

“They just dropped *us*. And whatever scared them into doing it is coming here right now. I don’t think guns are an overreaction.”

Amos ran down the ramp, holding his auto-shotgun in his right hand and an assault rifle in his left. He tossed the rifle to Holden, then took up a cover position behind the forklift and aimed at the bay’s entry hatch. Like Alex, he didn’t ask why.

“Want me to come out?” Naomi asked.

“No, but prepare to defend the ship if they get past me and Amos,” Holden replied, then moved over to the forklift’s recharging station. It was the only other cover in the otherwise empty bay.

In a conversational tone, Amos said, “Any idea what we’re expecting here?”

“Nope,” Holden said. He clicked the rifle to autofire and felt a faint nausea rising in his throat.

“All right, then,” Amos said cheerfully.

“Eight minutes,” Naomi said from his hand terminal. Not a long time, but if they were trying to hold the bay under hostile fire, it would seem like an eternity.

The entry warning light at the cargo bay entrance flashed yellow three times, and the hatch slid open.

“Don’t shoot unless I do,” Holden said quietly. Amos grunted back at him.

A tall blond woman walked into the bay. She had an Earther’s build, a video star’s face, and couldn’t have been more than twenty. When she saw the two guns pointed at her, she raised her hands and wiggled her fingers. “Not armed,” she said. Her cheeks dimpled into a grin. Holden tried to imagine why a supermodel would be looking for him.

“Hi,” Amos said. He was grinning back at her.

“Who are you?” Holden said, keeping his gun trained on her.

“My name’s Adri. Are you James Holden?”

“I can be,” Amos said, “if you want.” She smiled. Amos smiled back, but his weapon was still in a carefully neutral position.

“What’ve we got down there?” Naomi asked, her voice tense in his ear. “Do we have a threat?”

“I don’t know yet,” Holden said.

“You are, though, right? You’re James Holden,” Adri said, walking toward him. The assault rifle in his hands didn’t seem to bother her at all. Up close, she smelled like strawberries and vanilla.

“*Captain James Holden, of the Rocinante?*”

“Yes,” he said.

She held out a slim, throwaway hand terminal. He took it automatically. The terminal displayed a picture of him, along with his name and his UN citizen and UN naval ID numbers.

“You’ve been served,” she said. “Sorry. It was nice meeting you, though.”

She turned back to the door and walked away.

“What the fuck?” Amos said to no one, dropping the muzzle of his gun to the floor and rubbing his scalp again.

“Jim?” Naomi said.

“Give me a minute.”

He paged through the summons, jumping past seven pages of legalese to get to the point: The Martians wanted their ship back. Official proceedings had been started against him in both Earth and Martian courts challenging the salvage claim to the *Rocinante*. Only they were calling it the *Tachi*. The ship was under an order of impound pending adjudication, effective immediately.

His short conversation with Outer Fringe Exports suddenly made a lot more sense.

“Cap?” Alex said through the connection. “I’m getting a red light on the docking clamp release. I’m puttin’ a query in. Once I get that cleared, we can pop the cork.”

“What’s going on out there?” Naomi asked. “Are we still leaving?”

Holden took a long, deep breath, sighed, and said something obscene.



The longest layover the *Rocinante* had taken since Holden and the others had gone independent had been five and a half weeks. The twelve days that the *Roci* spent in lockup seemed longer. Naomi and Alex were on the ship most of the time, putting inquiries through to lawyers and legal aid societies around the system. With every letter and conversation, the consensus grew. Mars had been smart to begin legal proceedings in Earth courts as well as their own. Even if Holden and the *Roci* slipped the leash at Ceres, all major ports would be denied them. They’d have to skulk from one gray-market Belter port to the next. Even if there was enough work, they might not be able to find supplies to keep them flying.

If they took the case before a magistrate, they might or might not lose the ship, but it would be expensive to find out. Accounts that Holden had thought of as comfortably full suddenly looked an order of magnitude too small. Staying on Ceres Station made him antsy; being on the *Roci* left him sad.

There had been any number of times in his travels on the *Roci* that he’d imagined—even expected—it all to come to a tragic end. But those scenarios had involved firefights or alien monstrosities or desperate dives into some planetary atmosphere. He’d imagined with a sick thrill of dread what it would be like if Alex died, or Amos. Or Naomi. He’d wondered whether the three of

them would go on without him. He hadn't considered that the end might find all of them perfectly fine. That the *Rocinante* might be the one to go.

Hope, when it came, was a documentary streamcast team from UN Public Broadcasting. Monica Stuart, the team lead, was an auburn-haired freckled woman with a professionally sculpted beauty that made her seem vaguely familiar when he saw her on the screen of the pilot's deck. She hadn't come in person.

"How many people are we talking about?" Holden asked.

"Four," she said. "Two camera jockeys, my sound guy, and me."

Holden ran a hand across eight days' worth of patchy beard. The sense of inevitability sat in his gut like a stone.

"To the Ring," he said.

"To the Ring," she agreed. "We need to make it a hard burn to get there before the Martians, the Earth flotilla, and the *Behemoth*. And we'd like some measure of safety once we're out there, which the *Rocinante* would be able to give us."

Naomi cleared her throat, and the documentarian shifted her attention to her.

"You're sure you can get the hold taken off the *Roci*?" Naomi asked.

"I am protected by the Freedom of Journalism Act. I have the right to the reasonable use of hired materials and personnel in the pursuit of a story. Otherwise, anyone could stop any story they didn't like by malicious use of injunctions like the one on the *Roci*. I have a backdated contract that says I hired you a month ago, before I arrived at Ceres. I have a team of lawyers ten benches deep who can drown anyone that objects in enough paperwork to last a lifetime."

"So we've been working for you all along," Holden said.

"Only if you want to get that docking lock rescinded. But it's more than just a ride I'm looking for. That's what makes it reasonable that I can't just hire a different ship."

"I knew there was a but," Holden said.

"I want to interview the crew too. While there are a half dozen ships I could get for the trip out, yours is the one that comes with the survivors of Eros."

Naomi looked across at him. Her eyes were carefully neutral. Was it better to be here, trapped on Ceres while the *Roci* was pulled away from him by centimeters, or flying straight into the abyss with his crew? And the Ring.

"I have to think about it," he said. "I'll be in touch."

"I respect that," Monica said. "But please don't take long. If we're not going with you, we've still got to go with someone."

He dropped the connection. In the silence, the deck seemed larger than it was.

"This isn't coincidence," Holden said. "We just *happen* to get locked down by Mars, and the only thing that can get us out of the docking clamps just *happens* to be heading for the Ring? No way. We're being manipulated. Someone's planning this. It's him."

"Jim—"

"It's him. It's Miller."

"It's not Miller. He can barely string together a coherent sentence," Naomi said. "How is he going to engineer something like this?"

Holden leaned forward and the seat under him shifted. His head felt like it was stuffed with wool.

"If we leave, they can still take her away from us," he said. "Once this story is done, we won't be in any better position than we are right now."

"Except that we wouldn't be locked on Ceres," Naomi said. "And it's a long way out there. A long way back. A lot could change."

"That wasn't as comforting as you meant it to be."

Naomi's smile was thin but not bitter.

"Fair point," she said.

The *Rocinante* hummed around them, the systems running through their automatic maintenance checks, the air cycling gently through the ducts. The ship breathing and dreaming. Their home, at rest. Holden reached out a hand, lacing his fingers with Naomi's.

"We still have some money. We can take out a loan," she said. "We could buy a different ship. Not a good one, but... It wouldn't have to be the end of it all."

"It would be, though."

"Probably."

"No choice, then," Holden said. "Let's go to Nineveh."



Monica and her team arrived in the early hours of the morning, loading a few small crates of equipment that they carried themselves. In person, Monica was thinner than she seemed on screen. Her camera crew were a sturdy Earth woman named Okju and a brown-skinned Martian man who went by Clip. The cameras they carried looked like shoulder-mounted weapons, alloy casings that could telescope out to almost two meters or retract to fit around the tightest corner in the ship.

The soundman was blind. He had a dusting of short white hair and opaque black glasses. His teeth were yellowed like old ivory, and his smile was gentle and humane. According to the paperwork, his name was Elio Casti, but for some reason the documentary team all called him Cohen.

They assembled in the galley, Holden's four people and Monica's. He could see each group quietly considering the other. They'd be living in one another's laps for months. Strangers trapped in a metal-and-ceramic box in the vast ocean of the vacuum. Holden cleared his throat.

"Welcome aboard," he said.

Chapter Seven: Melba

If the Earth-Mars alliance hadn't collapsed, if there hadn't been a war—or two wars depending on how the line between battles was marked—civilian ships like the *Cerisier* would have had no place in the great convoy. The ships lost at Ganymede and in the Belt, the skirmishes to control those asteroids best placed to push down a gravity well. Hundreds of ships had been lost, from massive engines of war like the *Donnager*, the *Agatha King*, and the *Hyperion* to countless small three- and four-person support ships.

Nor, Melba knew, were those the only scars. Phobos with its listening station had become a thin, nearly invisible ring around Mars. Eros was gone. Phoebe had been subjected to a sustained nuclear hell and pushed into Saturn. The farms at Ganymede had collapsed. Venus had been used and abandoned by the alien protomolecule. Protogen and the Mao-Kwikowski empire, once one of the great shipping and transport companies in the system, had been gutted, stolen, and sold.

The *Cerisier* began her life as an exploration vessel. Now she was a flying toolshed. The bays of scientific equipment were machine shops now. What had once been sealed labs were stacked from deck to deck with the mundane necessities of environmental control networks—scrubbers, ducting, sealants, and alarm arrays. She lumbered through the uncaring vacuum on the fusion plume of her Epstein drive. The crew of a hundred and six souls was made of a small elite of ship command—no more than a dozen, all told—and a vast body of technicians, machinists, and industrial chemists.

Once, Melba thought, this ship had been on the bleeding edge of human exploration. Once it had burned through the skies of Jovian moons, seeing things humanity had never seen before. Now it was the handservant of the government, discovering nothing more exotic than what had been flushed into the water reclamation tanks. The degradation gave Melba a sense of kinship with the ship's narrow halls and gray plastic ladders. Once, Clarissa Melpomene Mao had been the light of her school. Popular and beautiful, and suffused with the power and influence of her father's name. Now her father was a numbered prisoner in a nameless prison, allowed only a few minutes of external connection every day, and those to his lawyer, not his wife or children.

And she was Melba Koh, sleeping on a gel couch that smelled of someone else's body in a cabin smaller than a closet. She commanded a team of four electrochemical technicians: Stanni, Ren, Bob, and Soledad. Stanni and Bob were decades older than her. Soledad, three years younger, had been on two sixteen-month tours. Ren, her official second, was a Belter and, like all Belters, passionate about environmental control systems the way normal people were with sex or religion. She didn't ask how he'd ended up on an Earth ship, and he didn't volunteer the information.

She had known the months going out to the Ring would be hard, but she'd misunderstood what the worst parts would be.

"She's a fucking bitch, right?" Stanni said. It was a private channel between him and Ren. If she'd been who she pretended to be, she wouldn't have been able to hear it. "She doesn't know dick."

Ren grunted, neither defending her nor joining the attack.

"If you hadn't caught that brownout buffer wrong way on the *Macedon* last week, it would have been another cascade failure, si no? Would have had to throw off the whole schedule to go back and fix it."

"Might've," Ren said.

She was a level above them. The destroyer *Seung Un* muttered around her. The crew was on a maintenance run. Scheduled, routine, predictable. They'd left the *Cerisier* ten hours earlier in one of the dozen transports that clung to the maintenance ship's skin. They would be here for another fifteen hours, changing out the high-yield scrubbers and checking the air supply continuity. The greatest danger, she'd learned, was condensation degrading the seals.

It was the kind of detail she should have known.

She pulled herself through the access shaft. Her tool kit hung heavy on her front in the full-g thrust gravity. She imagined it was what being pregnant would feel like. Unless something strange had happened, Soledad and Bob were sleeping in the boat. Ren and Stanni were a level down, and going lower with every hour. They were expecting her to make the final inspection of their work. And, it seemed, they were expecting her to do it poorly.

It was true, of course. She didn't know why a real electrochemical technician seeing her inexperience should embarrass her as deeply as it did. She'd read a few manuals, run through a few tutorials. All that mattered was that they think she was an authentic semicompetent overseer. It didn't matter whether they respected her. They weren't her friends.

She should have switched to the private frequencies for Soledad and Bob to be certain neither had woken unexpectedly and might come looking for her. This part of the plan was important. She couldn't let any of them find her. But somehow, she couldn't bring herself to shift away from Ren and Stanni.

"She don't do anything is all. Keeps to her cabin, don't help on the project. She just come out the end, look up, look down, sign off, and go back to her cabin."

"True."

The junction was hard to miss. The bulkhead was reinforced and clearly marked with bright orange safety warnings in five languages. She paused before it, her hands on her hips, and waited to feel some sense of accomplishment. And she did, only it wasn't as pure as she'd hoped. She looked up and down the passageway, though the chances of being interrupted here were minimal.

The explosive was strapped against her belly, the heat of her skin keeping it malleable and bright green. As it cooled to ambient, the putty would harden and fade to gray. It surprised her again with its density. Pressing it along the seams of the junction, she felt like she was forming lead with her bare hands. The effort left her knuckles aching before she was halfway done. She'd budgeted half an hour, but it took her almost twice that. The detonator was a black dot four millimeters across with ten black ceramic contacts that pressed into the already stiffening putty. It looked like a tick.

When she was done, she wiped her hands down with cleaning towelettes twice, making sure none of the explosive was caught under her fingernails or on her clothes. She'd expected to skip her inspection of just the one level, but Ren and Stanni had made good time, and she took the lift down two levels instead. They were still talking, but not about her now. Stanni was considering getting a crush on Soledad. In laconic Belt-inflected half phrases, Ren was advising against it. Smart man, her second.

The lift paused and three soldiers got on it, all men. Melba pressed herself back to make room for them, and the nearest nodded his polite gratitude. His uniform identified him as Marcos. She nodded back, then stared hard at her feet, willing them not to look at her. Her uniform felt like a costume. Even though she knew better, it felt like they would see through her disguise if they looked too close. Like her past was written on her skin.

My name is Melba Koh, she thought. I've never been anyone else.

The lift stopped at her level and the three soldiers made way for her. She wondered, when the time came, whether Marcos would die.



She had never been to her father's prison, and even if he'd been allowed visitors, the visit would have been in a prescribed room, monitored, transcribed. Any real human emotion would have been pressed out of it by the weight of official attention. She would never have been permitted to see the hallways he walked down or the cell where he slept, but after his incarceration by the United Nations, she'd researched prison design. Her room was three centimeters narrower, a centimeter and a half longer. The crash couch she slept in was gimbaled to allow for changes in acceleration, while his would be welded to the floor. She could squeeze out whenever she wanted and go to the gang showers or the mess. Her door locked from the inside, and there were no cameras or microphones in her room.

In every way that mattered, she had more freedom than her father. That she likely spent as much time in isolation was a matter of choice for her, and that made all the difference. Tomorrow would be a fresh rotation out. Another ship, another round of maintenance that she could pretend to oversee. Tonight she could lie in her couch dressed in the simple cotton underclothes that she'd bought as the kind of thing Melba would wear. Her hand terminal had fifteen tutorials in local memory and dozens more on the ship's shared storage. They covered everything from microorganic nutrient reclamation to coolant system specifications to management policies. She should have been reading them through. Or if not that, at least she shouldn't have been reviewing her own secret files.

On the screen, Jim Holden looked like a zealot. The composite was built from dozens of hours of broadcast footage of the man taken over the previous years, with weight given to the most recent images and stills. The software she'd used to make a perfect visual simulacrum of the man cost more than her Melba persona had. The fake Holden had to be good enough to fool both people and computers, at least for a little while. On the screen, his brown eyes squinted with an idiot's earnestness. His jaw had the first presentiment of jowls, only half hidden by the microgravity. The smarmy half smile told her everything she needed to know about the man who had destroyed her family.

"This is Captain James Holden," he said. "What you've just seen is a demonstration of the danger you are in. My associates have placed similar devices on every ship presently in proximity to the Ring. You will all stand down as I am assuming sole and absolute control over the Ring in the name of the Outer Planets Alliance. Any ship that approaches the Ring without my *personal* permission will be destroyed without—"

She paused it, freezing her small, artificial Holden in mid-gesture. Her fingertip traced the outline of his shoulder, across his cheek, and then stabbed at his eyes. She wished now that she'd picked a more inflammatory script. On Earth, making her preparations, it had seemed enough to have him take unilateral control of the Ring. Now each time she watched it, it seemed tamer.

Killing Holden would have been easier. Assassinations were cheap by comparison, but she knew enough about image control and social dynamics to see where it would have led. Martyrdom, canonization, love. A host of conspiracy theories that implicated anyone from the OPA to her father. That was precisely not the point. Holden had to be humiliated in a way that passed backward in time. Someone coming to his legacy had to be able to look back at all the things Holden had done, all the pronouncements he'd given, all the high-handed, self-righteous decisions made on behalf of others while never leaving his control and see that of course it had all led to this. His name put in with the great traitors, con men, and self-aggrandizing egomaniacs of history. When she was done, everything Holden had touched would be tainted by association, including the destruction of her family. Her father.

Somewhere deep in the structure of the *Cerisier*, one of the navigators started a minor correction burn and gravity shifted a half a degree. The couch moved under her, and she tried not to notice it.

She preferred the times when she could pretend that she was in a gravity well to the little reminders that she was the puppet of acceleration and inertia.

Her hand terminal chimed once, announcing the arrival of a message. To anyone who didn't look carefully, it would seem like just another advertisement. An investment opportunity she would be a fool to ignore with a video presentation attached that would seem like corrupted data to anyone who didn't have the decryption key. She sat up, swinging her legs over the edge of the couch, and leaned close to the hand terminal.

The man who appeared on her screen wore black glasses dark enough to be opaque. His hair was cropped close to his skull, but she could see from the way it moved that he was under heavy burn. The soundman cleared his throat.

"The package is delivered and ready for testing. I'd appreciate the balance transfer as soon as you've confirmed. I've got some bills coming due, and I'm a little under the wire." Something in the background hissed, and a distant voice started laughing. A woman. The file ended.

She replayed it four more times. Her heart was racing and her fingers felt like little electric currents were running through them. She'd need to confirm, of course. But this was the last, most dangerous step. The *Rocinante* had been cutting-edge military hardware when it had fallen into Holden's hands. There could also have been any number of changes made to the security systems in the years since. She set up a simple remote connection looped through a disposable commercial account on Ceres Station. It might take days for the *Rocinante's* acknowledgment to come back to her saying that the back door was installed and functioning, that the ship was hers. But if it did...

It was the last piece. Everything in place. A sense of almost religious well-being washed over her. The thin room with its scratched walls and too-bright LEDs had never seemed so benign. She levered herself up out of the couch. She wanted to celebrate, though of course there was no one she could tell. Talk to might be enough.

The halls of the *Cerisier* were so narrow that it was impossible to walk abreast or to pass someone coming the opposite way without turning sideways. The mess would fit twenty people sitting with their hips touching. The nearest thing to an open area was the fitness center off the medical bay. The treadmills and exercise machines required enough room that no one would be caught in the joints and belts. Safety regulations made it the widest, freest air in the ship, and so a good place to be around people.

Of her team, only Ren was present. In the usual microgravity, he would probably have been neck deep in a tank of resistance gel. With the full-g burn, he was on a regular treadmill. His pale skin was bright with sweat, his carrot-orange hair pulled back in a frizzed ponytail. It was strange watching him. His large head was made larger by his hair, and the thinness of his body made him seem more like something from a children's program than an actual man.

He nodded to her as she came in.

"Ren," she said, walking to the front of his machine. She felt the gazes of other crewmen on her, but on the *Cerisier* she didn't feel as exposed. Or maybe it was the good news that carried her. "Do you have a minute?"

"Chief," he said instead of yes, but he thumbed down the treadmill to a cool-down walk. "Que sa?"

"I heard some of the things Stanni was saying about me," she said. Ren's expression closed down. "I just wanted..."

She frowned, looked down, and then gave in to the impulse welling up in her.

"He's right," she said. "I'm in over my head with this job. I got it because of some political favors. I'm not qualified to do what I'm doing."

He blinked rapidly. He shot a glance around her, checking to see if anyone had overheard them. She didn't particularly care, but she thought it was sweet that he did.

“Not so bad, you,” he said. “I mean, little off here, little off there. But I’ve been under worse.”

“I need help,” she said. “To do all the work the way it should be done, I need help. I need someone I can trust. Someone I can count on.”

Ren nodded, but his forehead roughened. He blew out his breath and stepped off the treadmill.

“I want to get the work done right,” she said. “Not miss anything. And I want the team to respect me.”

“Okay, sure.”

“I know you should have had this job.”

Ren blew out another breath, his cheeks ballooning. It was more expressive than she’d ever seen him before. He leaned against the wall. When he met her gaze, it was like he was seeing her for the first time.

“Appreciate you saying it, chief, but we’re both of us outsiders here,” he said. “Stick together, bien?”

“Good,” she said, leaning against the wall next to him. “So. The brownout buffers? What did I get wrong?”

Ren sighed.

“The buffers are smart, but the design’s stupid,” he said. “They talk to each other, so they’re also a separate network, yah? Thing is, you put one in the wrong way? Works okay. But next time it resets, the signal down the line looks wrong. Triggers a diagnostic run in the next one down, and then the next one down. Whole network starts blinking like Christmas. Too many errors on the network and it fails closed, takes down the whole grid. And then you got us going through checking each one by hand. With flashlights and the supervisor chewing our nuts.”

“That’s... that can’t be right,” she said. “Seriously? It could have shut down the *grid*?”

“I know, right?” Ren said, smiling. “And all it would take is change the design so it don’t fit in if you got it wrong. But they never do. A lot of what we do is like that, boss. We try to catch the little ones before they get big. Some things, you get them wrong, it’s nothing. Some things, and it’s a big mess.”

The words felt like a church bell being struck. They resonated. She was that fault, that error. She didn’t know what she was doing, not really, and she’d get away with it. She’d pass. Until she didn’t, and then everything would fall apart. Her throat felt tighter. She almost wished she hadn’t said anything.

She was a brownout buffer pointed the wrong way. A flaw that was easy to overlook, with the potential to wreck everything.

“For the others... don’t take them harsh. Blowing off steam, mostly. Not you so much as it’s anything. Fear-biting.”

“Fear?”

“Sure,” he said. “Everyone on this boat’s scared dry. Try not to show it, do the work, but we all getting nightmares. Natural, right?”

“What are they afraid of?” she asked.

Behind her the door cycled open and shut. A man said something in a language she didn’t know. Ren tilted his head, and she had the sick, sinking feeling that she’d done something wrong. She hadn’t acted normal, and she didn’t know what her misstep was.

“Ring,” he said at last. “It’s what killed Eros. Could have killed Mars. All that weird stuff it did on Venus, no one knows what it was. Deaded that slingshot kid who went through. Half everyone thinks we should be pitching nukes at it, other half thinks we’d only piss it off. We’re going out as deep as anyone ever has just so we can look in the devil’s eye, and Stanni and Solé and Bob? They’re all scared as shit of what we see in it. Me too.”

“Ah,” she said. “All right. I understand that.”

Ren tried on a smile.

“You? It don’t scare you?”

“It’s not something I think about.”

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Chapter Eight: Anna

Nami and Nono left for Earth a week before Anna's shuttle. Those last days living alone in those rooms, knowing that she would never be back—that they would never be back—was like a gentle presentiment of death: profoundly melancholy and, shamefully, a little exhilarating.

The shuttle from Europa was one of the last to join the flotilla, and it meant eighteen hours of hard burn. By the time she set foot on the deck of the UNN *Thomas Prince*, all she wanted was a bunk and twelve hours' sleep. The young yeoman who'd been sent to greet and escort her had other plans, though, and the effort it would have taken to be rude about it was more than she could muster.

"The *Prince* is a *Xerxes*-class battleship, or what we sometimes refer to as a third-generation dreadnought," he said, gesturing to the white ceramic-over-gel of the hangar's interior walls. The shuttle she'd arrived on nestled in its bay looking small under the cathedral-huge arch. "We call it a third-generation battleship because it is the third redesign since the buildup during the first Earth-Mars conflict."

Not that it had been much of a conflict, Anna thought. The Martians had made noises about independence, the UN had built a lot of ships, Mars had built a few. And then Solomon Epstein had gone from being a Martian yachting hobbyist to the inventor of the first fusion drive that solved the heat buildup and rapid fuel consumption problems of constant thrust. Suddenly Mars had a few ships that went really, really fast. They'd said, *Hey, we're about to go colonize the rest of the solar system. Want to stay mad at us, or want to come with?* The UN had made the sensible choice, and most people would agree: Giving up Mars in exchange for half of the solar system had probably been a pretty good deal.

It didn't mean that both sides hadn't kept on designing new ways to kill each other. Just in case.

"... just over half a kilometer long, and two hundred meters wide at its broadest point," the yeoman was saying.

"Impressive," Anna replied, trying to bring her wandering attention back.

The yeoman pulled her luggage on a small rolling cart to a bank of elevator lifts.

"These elevators run the length of the ship," he said as he punched a button on the control panel. "We call them the keel elevators—"

"Because they run along the belly of the ship?" Anna said.

"Yes! That's what the bottom of seagoing vessels was called, and space-based navies have kept the nomenclature."

Anna nodded. His enthusiasm was exhausting and charming at the same time. He wanted to impress her, so she resolved to be impressed. It was a small enough thing to give someone.

"Of course, the belly of the ship is largely an arbitrary distinction," he continued as the elevator climbed. "Because we use thrust gravity, the deck is always in the direction thrust is coming from, the aft of the ship. Up is always away from the engines. There's not really much to distinguish the other four directions from each other. Some smaller ships can land on planetary surfaces, and in those ships the belly of the ship contains landing gear and thrusters for liftoff."

"I imagine the *Prince* is too large for that," Anna said.

"By quite a lot, actually! But our shuttles and corvettes are capable of surface landings, though it doesn't happen very often."

The elevator doors opened with another ding, and the yeoman pushed her luggage out into the hall. "After we drop off your baggage at your stateroom, we can continue the tour."

"Yeoman?" Anna said. "Is that the right way to address you?"

"Certainly. Or Mister Ichigawa. Or even Jin, since you're a civilian."

"Jin," Anna continued. "Would it be all right if I just stayed in my room for a while? I'm very tired."

He stopped pulling her baggage and blinked twice. "But the captain said all of the VIP guests should get a complete tour. Including the bridge, which is usually off-limits to non-duty personnel."

Anna put a hand on the boy's arm. "I understand that's quite a privilege, but I'd rather see it when I can keep my eyes open. You understand, don't you?" She gave his arm a squeeze and smiled her best smile at him.

"Certainly," he said, smiling back. "Come this way, ma'am."

Looking around her, Anna wasn't sure if she actually wanted to see the rest of the ship. Every corridor looked the same: Slick gray material with something spongy underneath covered most walls. Anna supposed it was some sort of protective surface, to keep sailors from injury if they banged into it during maneuvers. And anything that wasn't gray fabric was gray metal. The things that would be impressive to most people about the ship would be its various mechanisms for killing other ships. Those were the parts of the ship she was least interested in.

"Is that okay?" Ichigawa said after a moment. Anna had no idea what he was talking about. "Calling you ma'am, I mean. Some of the VIPs have titles. Pastor, or Reverend, or Minister. I don't want to offend."

"Well, if I didn't like you I'd ask you to call me Reverend Doctor, but I do like you very much, so please don't," she said.

"Thank you," Jin said, and the back of his neck blushed.

"And if you were a member of my congregation, I'd have you call me Pastor Anna. Buddhist?"

"Only when I'm at my grandmother's house," Jin said with a wink. "The rest of the time I'm a navy man."

"Is that a religion now?" Anna asked with a laugh.

"The navy thinks so."

"Okay." She laughed again. "So why don't you just call me Anna?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jin said. He stopped at a gray door marked OQ 297-11 and handed her a small metal card. "This is your room. Just having the card on you unlocks the door. It will stay locked when you're inside unless you press the yellow button on the wall panel."

"Sounds very safe," Anna said, taking the key from Jin and shaking his hand.

"This is the battleship *Thomas Prince*, ma'am. It's the safest place in the solar system."



Her stateroom was three meters wide by four meters long. Luxurious by navy standards, normal for a poor European, coffinlike to an Earther. Anna felt a brief moment of vertigo as the two different Annas she'd been reacted to the space in three different ways. She'd felt the same sense of disconnection when she'd first boarded the *Prince* and felt the full gravity pressing her down. The Earther she'd been most of her life felt euphoric as, for the first time in years, her weight felt *right*. The European in her just felt tired, drained by the excessive pull on her bones.

She wondered how long it would take Nono to get her Earth legs back. How long it would take before Nami could walk there. They were both spending the entire trip back pumped full of muscle and bone growth stimulators, but drugs can only take a person so far. There would still be the

agonizing weeks or months as their bodies adapted to the new gravity. Anna could almost see little Nami struggling to get up onto her hands and knees like she did on Europa. Could almost hear her cries of frustration while she built up the strength to move on her own again. She was such a determined little thing. It would infuriate her to lose the hard-won physical skills she'd developed over the last two years.

Thinking about it made Anna's chest ache, just behind her breastbone.

She tapped the shiny black surface of the console in her room, and the room's terminal came on. She spent a moment learning the user interface. It was limited to browsing the ship's library and to sending and receiving text or audio/video messages.

She tapped the button to record a message and said, "Hi Nono, hi Nami!" She waved at the camera. "I'm on the ship, and we're on our way. I—" She stopped and looked around the room, at the sterile gray walls and spartan bed. She grabbed a pillow off of it and turned back to the camera. "I miss you both already." She hugged the pillow to her chest, tight. "This is you. This is both of you."

She turned the recording off before she got teary. She was washing her face when the console buzzed a new-message alert. Even though it didn't seem possible Nami could have gotten the message and replied already, her heart gave a little leap. She rushed over and opened the message. It was a simple text message reminding her of the VIP "meet and greet" in the officers' mess at 1900 hours. The clock said it was currently 1300.

Anna tapped the button to RSVP to the event and then climbed under the covers of her bed with her clothes on and cried herself to sleep.



"Reverend Doctor Volovodov," a booming male voice said as soon as she walked into the officers' mess.

The room was laid out for a party, with tables covered in food ringing the room, and a hundred or more people talking in loose clumps in the center. In one corner, an ad hoc bar with four bartenders was doing brisk business. A tall, dark-skinned man with perfectly coiffed white hair and an immaculate gray suit walked out of the crowd like Venus rising from the waves. Anna wondered how he managed the effect. He reached out and took her hand with his. "I'm so happy to have you with us. I've heard so much about the powerful work you're doing on Europa, and I don't see how the Methodist World Council could have chosen anyone else for this important trip."

Anna shook his hand, then carefully extricated herself from his grasp. Doctor Hector Cortez, Father Hank on his live streamcasts that went out to over a hundred million people each week, and close personal friend and spiritual advisor to the secretary-general himself. She couldn't imagine how he knew anything about her. Her tiny congregation of less than a hundred people on Europa wouldn't even be a rounding error to his solar system-wide audience. She found herself caught between feeling flattered, uncomfortable, and vaguely suspicious.

"Doctor Cortez," Anna said. "So nice to meet you. I've seen your show before, of course."

"Of course," he said, smiling vaguely and already looking around the room for someone else to talk to. She had the sense that he'd come to greet her less out of the pleasure of her arrival than as a chance to extricate himself from whatever conversation he'd been having before, and she didn't know whether to be relieved or insulted. She settled on amused.

Like a smaller object dragged into some larger gravity well, an elderly man in formal Roman Catholic garb pulled away from the central crowd and drifted in Doctor Cortez's direction.

She started to introduce herself when Doctor Cortez cut in with that booming voice and said, "Father Michel. Say hello to my friend Reverend Doctor Annushka Volovodov, a worker for God's

glory with the Europa congregation of Methodists.”

“Reverend Volovodov,” the Catholic man said. “I’m Father Michel, with the Archdiocese of Rome.”

“Oh, very nice to meet—” Anna started.

“Don’t let him fool you with that humble old country priest act,” Cortez boomed over the top of her. “He’s a bishop on the short list for cardinal.”

“Congratulations,” Anna said.

“Oh, it’s nothing. All exaggeration and smoke.” The old man beamed. “Nothing will happen until it fits with God’s plan.”

“You wouldn’t be here if that were true,” Cortez said.

The bishop chuckled.

A woman in an expensive blue dress followed one of the uniformed waiters with his tray of champagne. She and Father Michel reached for a glass at the same moment. Anna smiled a no at the offered champagne, and the waiter vanished into the crowd at the center of the room.

“Please,” the woman said to Anna. “Don’t leave me to drink alone with a Catholic. My liver can’t take it.”

“Thank you, but—”

“What about you, Hank? I’ve heard you can put down a few drinks.” She punctuated this with a swig from her glass. Cortez’s smile could have meant anything.

“I’m Anna,” Anna said, reaching out to shake the woman’s hand. “I love your dress.”

“Thank you. I am Mrs. Robert Fagan,” the woman replied with mock formality. “Tilly if you aren’t asking for money.”

“Nice to meet you, Tilly,” Anna said. “I’m sorry, but I don’t drink.”

“God, save me from temperance,” Tilly said. “You haven’t seen a party till you get a group of Anglicans and Catholics trying to beat each other to the bottom of a bottle.”

“Now, that’s not nice, Mrs. Fagan,” Father Michel said. “I’ve never met an Anglican that could keep up with me.”

“Hank, why is Esteban letting you out of his sight?” It took Anna a moment to realize that Tilly was talking about the secretary-general of the United Nations.

Cortez shook his head and feigned a wounded look without losing his ever-present toothy grin. “Mrs. Fagan, I’m humbled by the secretary-general’s faith and trust in me, as we speed off toward the single most important event in human history since the death of our Lord.”

Tilly snorted. “You mean his faith and trust in the hundred million voters you can throw his way in June.”

“Ma’am,” Cortez said, turning to look at Tilly’s face for the first time. His grin never changed, but something chilled the air between them. “Maybe you’ve had a bit too much champagne.”

“Oh, not nearly enough.”

Father Michel charged in to the rescue, taking Tilly’s hand and saying, “I think our dear secretary-general is probably even more grateful for your husband’s many campaign contributions. Though that does make this the most expensive cruise in history, for you.”

Tilly snorted and looked away from Cortez. “Robert can fucking afford it.”

The obscenity created an awkward silence for a few moments, and Father Michel gave Anna an apologetic smile. She smiled back, so far out of her depth that she’d abandoned trying to keep up.

“What’s he getting with them, I wonder?” Tilly said, pointing attention at anyone other than herself. “These artists and writers and actors. How many votes does a performance artist bring to the table? Do they even vote?”

“It’s symbolic,” Father Michel said, his face taking on a well-practiced expression of thoughtfulness. “We are all of humanity coming together to explore the great question of our time.

The secular and the divine come to stand together before that overwhelming mystery: What is the Ring?"

"Nice," Tilly said. "Rehearsal pays off."

"Thank you," the bishop said.

"What is the Ring?" Anna said with a frown. "It's a wormhole gate. There's no question, right? We've been talking about these on a theoretical basis for centuries. They look just like this. Something goes through it and the place on the other side isn't here. We get the transmission signals bleeding back out and attenuating. It's a wormhole."

"That's certainly a possibility," Father Michel said. Tilly smiled at the sourness in his voice. "How do you see our mission here, Anna?"

"It isn't what it *is* that's at issue," she said, glad to be back in a conversation she understood. "It's what it *means*. This changes everything, and even if it's something wonderful, it'll be displacing. People will need to understand how to fit this in with their understanding of the universe. Of what this means about God, what this new thing tells us about Him. By being here, we can offer comfort that we couldn't otherwise."

"I agree," Cortez said. "Our work is to help people come to grips with the great mysteries, and this one's a doozy."

"No," Anna started, "explaining isn't what I—"

"Play your cards right, and it might get Esteban another four years," Tilly said over the top of her. "Then we can call it a miracle."

Cortez grinned a white grin at someone across the room. A man in a small group of men and women in loose orange robes raised his hand, waving at them.

"Can you *believe* those people?" Tilly asked.

"I believe those are delegates from the Church of Humanity Ascendant," Anna said.

Tilly shook her head. "Humanity Ascendant. I mean, really. Let's just make up our own religion and pretend we're the gods."

"Careful," Cortez said. "They're not the only ones."

Seeing Anna's discomfort, Father Michel attempted to rescue her. "Doctor Volovodov, I know the elder of that group. Wonderful woman. I'd love to introduce you. If you all would excuse us."

"Excuse me," Anna started, then stopped when the room suddenly went silent. Father Michel and Cortez were both looking toward something at the center of the gathering near the bar, and Anna moved around Tilly to get a better view. It was hard to see at first, because everyone in the room was moving away toward the walls. But eventually, a young man dressed in a hideous bright red suit was revealed. He'd poured something all over himself; his hair and the shoulders of his jacket were dripping a clear fluid onto the floor. A strong alcohol scent filled the room.

"This is for the people's Ashtun Collective!" the young man yelled out in a voice that trembled with fear and excitement. "Free Etienne Barbara! And free the Afghan people!"

"Oh dear God," Father Michel said. "He's going to—"

Anna never saw what started the fire, but suddenly the young man was engulfed in flames. Tilly screamed. Anna's shocked brain only registered annoyance at the sound. Really, when had someone screaming ever solved a problem? She recognized her fixation on this irritation as her own way of avoiding the horror in front of her, but only in a distant and dreamy sort of way. She was about to tell Tilly to just shut up when the fire-suppression system activated and five streams of foam shot out of hidden turrets in the walls and ceiling. The fiery man was covered in white bubbles and extinguished in seconds. The smell of burnt hair competed with the alcohol stench for dominance.

Before anyone else could react, naval personnel were streaming into the room. Stern-faced young men and women with holstered sidearms calmly told everyone to remain still while emergency crews worked. Medical technicians came in and scraped foam off the would-be suicide. He seemed

more surprised than hurt. They handcuffed him and loaded him onto a stretcher. He was out of the room in less than a minute. Once he was gone, the people with guns seemed to relax a little.

“They certainly put him out fast,” Anna said to the armed young woman closest to her. “That’s good.”

The young woman, looking hardly older than a schoolgirl, laughed. “This is a battleship, ma’am. Our fire-suppression systems are robust.”

Cortez had darted across the room and was speaking to the ranking naval officer in a booming voice. He sounded upset. Father Michel seemed to be quietly praying, and Anna felt a strong urge to join him.

“Well,” Tilly said, waving at the room with her empty champagne glass. Her face was pale apart from two bright red dots on her cheeks “Maybe this trip won’t be boring after all.”

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Chapter Nine: Bull

It would have gone faster if Bull had asked for more help, but until he knew who was doing what, he didn't want to trust too many people. Or anyone.

A thousand people in the crew more or less made things a little muddier than they would have been in some ways. With a crew that big, the security chief could look for things like crew members from unlikely departments meeting up at odd times. Deviations from the pattern that every ship had. Since this was the shakedown voyage, the *Behemoth* didn't have any patterns yet. It was still in a state of chaos, crew and ship getting to know one another. Making decisions, forming habits and customs and culture. Nothing was normal yet, and so nothing was strange.

On the other hand, it was only a thousand people.

Every ship had a black economy. Someone on the *Behemoth* would be trading sex for favors. Someone would run a card game or set up a pachinko parlor or start a little protection racket. People would be bribed to do things or not do things. It was what happened when you put people together. Bull's job wasn't to stamp it all out. His job was to keep it at a level that kept the ship moving and safe. And to set boundaries.

Alexi Myerson-Freud was a nutritionist. He'd worked mid-level jobs on Tycho, mostly in the yeast vats, tuning the bioengineering to produce the right mix of chemicals, minerals, and salts for keeping humans alive. He'd been married twice, had a kid he hadn't seen in five years, was part of a network war-gaming group that simulated ancient battles, pitting themselves against the great generals of history. He was eight years younger than Bull. He had mouse-ass brown hair, an awkward smile, and a side business selling a combination stimulant and euphoric the Belters called pixie dust. Bull had worked it all until he was certain.

And even once he knew, he'd waited a few days. Not long. Just enough that he could follow Alexi around on the security system. He needed to make sure there wasn't a bigger fish above him, a partner who was keeping a lower profile, or a connection to Bull's own team—or else, God forbid, Ashford's. There wasn't.

Truth was, he didn't want to do it. He knew what had to happen, and it was always easier to put it off for another fifteen minutes, or until after lunch, or until tomorrow. Only every time he did, it meant someone else was going on shift stoned, maybe making a stupid mistake, breaking the ship, getting injured, or getting killed.

The moment came in the middle of second shift. Bull turned down his console, stood up, took a couple of guns from the armory, and made a connection on his hand terminal.

"Serge?"

"Boss."

"I'm gonna need you and one other. We're going to go bust a drug dealer."

The silence on the line sounded like surprise. Bull waited. This would tell him something too.

"You got it," Serge said. "Be right there."

Serge came into the office ten minutes later with another security grunt, a broad-shouldered, grim-faced woman named Corin. She was a good choice. Bull made a mental note in Serge's favor, and handed them both guns. Corin checked the magazine, holstered it, and waited. Serge flipped his from hand to hand, judging the weight and feel, then shrugged.

“What’s the plan?” he asked.

“Come with me,” Bull said. “Someone tries to keep me from doing my job, warn them once, then shoot them.”

“Straightforward,” Serge said, and there was a sense of approval in the word.

The food processing complex was deep inside the ship, close to the massive, empty inner surface. In the long voyage to the stars, it would have been next to the farmlands of the small internal world of the *Nauvoo*. In the *Behemoth*, it wasn’t anywhere in particular. What had been logical became dumb, and all it took was changing the context. Bull drove them, the little electric cart’s foam wheels buzzing against the ramps. In the halls and corridors, people stopped, watched. Some stared. It said something that three armed security agents traveling together stood out. Bull wasn’t sure it was something good.

Near the vats, the air smelled different. There were more volatiles and unfiltered particulates. The processing complex itself was a network of tubs and vats and distilling columns. Half of the place was shut down, the extra capacity mothballed and waiting for a larger population to feed. Or else waiting to be torn out.

They found Alexi knee deep in one of the water treatment baths, orange rubber waders clinging to his legs and his hands full of thick green kelp. Bull pointed to him, and then to the catwalk on which he, Serge, and Corin stood. There might have been a flicker of unease in Alexi’s expression. It was hard to say.

“I can’t get out right now,” the dealer said, holding up a broad wet leaf. “I’m in the middle of something.”

Bull nodded and turned to Serge.

“You two stay here. Don’t let him go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

“Sa sa, boss,” Serge said.

The locker room was down a ladder and through a hall. The bank of pea-green private storage bins had been pulled out of the wall, turned ninety degrees, and put back in to match the direction of thrust. Blobs and filaments of caulk still showed at the edges where it failed to sit quite flush. Two other water processing techs were sitting on the bench in different levels of undress, talking and flirting. They went silent when Bull walked in. He smiled at them, nodded, and walked past to a locker on the far end. When he reached it, he turned back.

“This belong to anyone?” he asked.

The two techs looked at each other.

“No, sir,” the woman said, pulling her jumpsuit a little more closed. “Most of these are just empty.”

“Okay, then,” Bull said. He thumbed in his override code and pulled the door open. The duffel bag inside was green and gray, the kind of thing he’d have put his clothes in when he went to work out. He ran a finger along the seal. About a hundred vials of yellow-white powder, a little more grainy than powdered milk. He closed the bag, put it on his shoulder.

“Is there a problem?” the male tech asked. His voice was tentative, but not scared. Curious, more. Excited. Well, God loved rubberneckers, and so did Bull.

“Myerson-Freud just stopped selling pixie dust on the side,” Bull said. “Should go tell all your friends, eh?”

The techs looked at each other, eyebrows raised, as Bull headed out. Back at the kelp tank, he dropped the bag, then pointed to Alexi and to the catwalk beside him, the same motions he’d used before. This time Alexi’s face went grim. Bull waited while the tech slogged through the deep water and pulled himself up.

“What’s the problem?” Alexi said. “What’s in the bag?”

Bull shook his head slowly, and only once. The chagrin on Alexi's face was like a confession. Not that Bull had needed one.

"Hey, ese," Bull said. "Just want you to know, I'm sorry about this."

He punched Alexi in the nose. Cartilage and bone gave way under his knuckle and a bright red fountain of blood spilled slowly past the tech's startled mouth.

"Put him on the back of the cart," Bull said. "Where folks can see him."

Serge and Corin exchanged a look that was a lot like the pair in the locker room.

"We heading to the brig, boss?" Serge asked, and his tone of voice meant he already knew the answer.

"We have a brig?" Bull asked as he scooped up the duffel bag.

"Pretty don't."

"Then we're not going there."

Bull had planned the route to pass through all the most populated public areas between the innermost areas of the ship and its skin. Word was already going around, and there were spectators all along the way. Alexi was making a high keening sound when he wasn't shouting or begging or demanding to see the captain. Bull had the sudden, visceral memory of seeing a pig carried to the slaughter when he'd been younger. He didn't know when it had happened; the memory was just there, floating unconnected from the rest of his life.

It took almost half an hour to reach the airlock. A crowd had gathered, a small sea of faces, most of them on wide heads and thin bodies. The Belters watching the Earther kill one of their own. Bull ignored them. He keyed in his passcode, opened the inner door of the lock, walked back to the cart, and hefted Alexi with one arm. In the low gravity it should have been easy, but Bull felt himself getting winded before he got back to the lock. It didn't help that Alexi was thrashing. Bull pushed him in, closed the inner door, put in the override code, and opened the exterior door without evacuating the air first. The pop rang through the metal deck like a distant bell. The monitor showed that the lock was empty. Bull closed the exterior door. While the lock refilled, he walked back to the cart. He stood on the back of the cart where Alexi had been, the duffel bag over his head in both hands. Blood stained his sleeve and his left knee.

"This is pixie dust, right?" he said to the crowd. He didn't use his terminal to amplify his voice. He didn't need to. "I'm gonna leave this in the airlock for sixteen hours, then I'm spacing it. Any other dust comes in to join it before then, well, it just happened. No big deal. Any of this goes away, and that's a problem. So everybody go tell everybody. And the next pendejo signs on shift high comes and talks to me."

He walked back to the airlock slowly, letting everyone see him. He opened the inner door, slung the bag through, and turned away, leaving the door open behind him. Climbing back behind the wheel of the cart, he could feel the tension in the crowd, and it didn't bother him at all. Other things did. What he'd just done was the easy part. What came next was harder, because he had less control over it.

"You want to set a guard on that, boss?" Serge asked.

"Think we need to?" Bull asked. He didn't expect an answer, and he didn't get one. The cart lurched forward, the spectators parting before it like a herd of antelope before a lion. Bull aimed them back toward the ramps that would take him to the security offices.

"Hardcore," Corin said. She made it sound like a good thing.



Religious art decorated the captain's office. Angels in blue and gold held the parabolas of the archways that rose overhead to meet at the image of a calm and bearded God. A beneficent Christ looked down from the wall behind Ashford's desk, Caucasian features calm and serene. He didn't look anything like the bloody, bent, crucified man Bull was familiar with. Arrayed at the Savior's side were images of plenty: wheat, corn, goats, cows, and stars. Captain Ashford paced back and forth by Jesus' knees, his face dark with blood and fury. Michio Pa was seated in the other guest chair, carefully not looking at Ashford or at Bull. Whatever the situation was with the Martian science ships and their military escort, with the massive Earth flotilla, it was forgotten for the moment.

Bull didn't let the anxiety show in his face.

"This is unacceptable, Mister Baca."

"Why do you think that, sir?"

Ashford stopped, put his wide hands on the desk, and leaned forward. Bull looked into his bloodshot eyes and wondered whether the captain was getting enough sleep.

"You killed a member of my crew," Ashford said. "You did it with clear premeditation. You did it in front of a hundred witnesses."

"Shit, you want witnesses, there's surveillance footage," Bull said. It wasn't the right thing to do.

"You are relieved of duty, Mister Baca. And confined to quarters until we return to Tycho Station, where you will stand trial for murder."

"He was selling drugs to the crew."

"Then he should have been *arrested*!"

Bull took a deep breath, exhaling slowly through his nose.

"You think we're more running a warship or a space station, sir?" he asked. Ashford's brow furrowed, and he shook his head. To Bull's right, Pa shifted in her seat. When neither of them spoke, Bull went on. "Reason I ask is if I'm a cop, then yeah, I should have taken him to the brig, if we had a brig. He should have gotten a lawyer. We could have done that whole thing. Me? I don't think this is a station. I think it's a battleship. I'm here to maintain military discipline in a potential combat zone. Not Earth navy discipline. Not Martian navy discipline. OPA discipline. The Belter way."

Ashford stood up.

"We aren't anarchists," he said, his voice dripping with scorn.

"OPA tradition, maybe I'm wrong, is that someone does something that intentionally endangers the ship, they get to hitchhike back to wherever there's air," Bull said.

"You hauled him out of a water vat. How was he endangering the ship? Was he going to throw kelp at it?" Pa said, her voice brittle.

"People been coming on shift high," Bull said, lacing his fingers together on one knee. "Don't trust me. Ask around. And, c'mon. Of course they are, right? We've got three times as much work needs to get done as we can do. Pixie dust, and they don't feel tired. Don't take breaks. Don't slow down. Get more done. Thing about bad judgment? You got to have good judgment to notice you've got it. We already got people hurt. Matter of time before someone died. Or worse."

"You're saying this man was responsible for all those other people performing badly at their work, so you killed him?" Ashford said, but the wind was out of his sails. He was going to fold like wet cardboard. Bull recognized that Ashford's weakness was going to work to his advantage this time, but he still hated it.

"I'm saying he was putting the ship at risk for his own financial gain, just like he was stealing air filters. And sure he did. There was a demand, he filled it. If I lock him up, that makes it so that the risk is higher. Prices are higher. Get caught, you maybe go to jail when we get back to Tycho."

"And you made it so that the risk is death."

“No,” Bull said. “I mean, yeah, but I don’t shoot him. I do what you do to people who risk the ship. Belters know what getting spaced means, right? It frames the issue.”

“This was a mistake.”

“I’ve got a list of fifty people he sold to,” Bull said. “Some of them are skilled technicians. A couple are mid-level overseers. We could lock ’em all up, but then we’ve got less people to do the work. And anyway, they won’t be doing it anymore. Supply’s gone. But if you want I could talk to them. Let ’em know I’m keeping an eye open.”

Pa’s chuckle was mirthless.

“That would be difficult if you’re in the brig on charges,” she said.

“We don’t have a brig,” Bull said. “Plan was the church elders were just gonna talk everything out.” He kept his tone carefully free of sarcasm.

Ashford waffled. It was like watching a cat trying to decide whether to jump from one tree limb to another. His expression was calculating, internal, uncertain. Bull waited.

“This never happens again,” Ashford said. “You decide someone needs to go out the airlock, you come to me. I’ll be the one that pushes the button.”

“All right.”

“All right, what?” Ashford bit the words. Bull lowered his head, looking at the deck. He’d gotten what he came for. He could let Ashford feel like he’d gotten a little win too.

“I mean, yes, sir, Captain. Solid copy. I understand and will comply.”

“You’re damn right you will,” Ashford said. “Now get the hell back to work.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the door closed behind him, Bull leaned against the wall and took a few deep breaths. He was intensely aware of the sound of the ship—low hum of the air recyclers, the distant murmur of voices, the chimes and beeps of a thousand different system alerts. The air smelled of plastic and ozone. He’d taken his calculated risk, and he’d pulled it off.

Walking back down, level by level, he felt the attention on him. In the lift, a man tried not to stare at him. In the hall outside the security office, a woman smiled at him and nodded, nervous as a mouse that smells cat. Bull smiled back.

In the security office, Serge and another man from the team—a European named Casimir—lifted their fists, greeting him in the physical idiom of the Belt. Bull returned the gesture and ambled over.

“What we got?” Bull asked.

“A couple dozen people came to pay respects,” Serge said. “I figure about half a kilo more dust just appeared out of nowhere.”

“Okay, then.”

“I’ve got a file of everyone who went in. You want me to flag them in the system?”

“Nope,” Bull said. “I told them it was no big deal. It’s no big deal. You can kill the file.”

“You got it, boss.”

“I’ll be in my office,” Bull said. “Let me know if something comes up. And somebody start a pot of coffee.”

He sat down on the desk, his feet resting on the seat of his chair, and leaned forward. He was suddenly exhausted. It had been a long, bad day, and losing the dread he’d been carrying for the weeks leading up to it was like being released from prison. It took a minute or two to notice he had a message waiting from Michio Pa. The XO hadn’t requested a connection. She didn’t want to talk to him, then. She just wanted to say something.

In the recording, her face was lit from below with the backslash of her hand terminal screen. Her smile was thin and tight and sort of faded away somewhere around her cheekbones.

“I saw what you did there. That was very nice. Very clever. Wrapping yourself in the OPA flag, making the old man wonder if the crew wouldn’t take your side. More-Belter-than-thou. It was

graceful.”

Bull scratched his chin. The stubble that had grown in since morning made his fingernails sound like a rasp. It was probably too much to ask that he not make any enemies with this, but he was sorry it was Pa.

“You can’t sugarcoat it with me. We both know that killing someone doesn’t make you admirable. I’m not about to forget this. I just hope you have enough soul left that what you’ve done still bothers you.”

The recording ended, and Bull smiled at the blank screen wearily.

“Every time,” he told the hand terminal. “And next time too.”

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Chapter Ten: Holden

The *Rocinante* was not a small ship. Her normal crew complement was over a dozen navy personnel and officers, and on many missions she'd also carry six marines. Running the *Roci* with four people meant each of them did several jobs, and that didn't leave a lot of downtime. It also meant that it was pretty easy at first to avoid the four strangers living on the ship. With the documentary crew restricted from entering ops, the airlock deck, the machine shop, or engineering, they were stuck on the two crew decks with access only to their quarters, the head, the galley, and sick bay.

Monica was a lovely person. Calm, friendly, charismatic. If even a part of her charm translated to the other side of the camera, it was easy to see how she'd succeeded. The others—Okju, Clip, Cohen—made clear overtures of friendship, cracking jokes with the *Rocinante*'s crew, making dinners. Reaching out, but it wasn't clear to Holden whether it was the usual honeymoon period that came when any crew first came together for a long voyage or something more calculated. Maybe a little of both.

What he did see was his own crew drawing back. After two days of the documentary team being on board, Naomi simply retreated to the ops deck where she couldn't be found. Amos had made a halfhearted pass at Monica, and a slightly more serious attempt with Okju. When both failed, he began spending most of his time in the machine shop. Of them all, only Alex took time to socialize with their passengers, and him not all that often. He'd taken to sometimes sleeping in the pilot's couch.

They'd agreed to being interviewed, and Holden knew they couldn't avoid it forever. They hadn't been out for a full week yet, and even on a fairly high burn it would be months to their destination. Besides, it was in their contract. The discomfort of it was almost enough to distract him from the fact that every day brought them closer to the Ring and whatever it was that Miller wanted him out there for. Almost.

"It's Saturday," Naomi said. She was lounging in a crash couch near the comm station. She hadn't cut her hair for a while, and it was getting long enough to become an annoyance to her. For the last ten minutes, she'd been trying to braid it. The thick black curls resisted her efforts, seeming to move with a will of their own. Based on past experience, Holden knew this was the precursor to cutting half of it off in exasperation. Naomi liked the idea of growing her hair very long, but not the reality. Holden sat at the combat ops panel watching her struggle with it and letting his mind drift.

"Did you hear me?" she said.

"It's Saturday."

"Are we inviting our guests to dinner?"

It had become custom on the ship that no matter what else was going on, the crew tried to have dinner as a group once a week. By unspoken agreement it was usually Saturday. Which day of the week it happened to be didn't really matter much on a ship, but by holding their dinner on Saturday, Holden thought they were doing some small bit to celebrate the passing of a week, the beginning of another. A gentle reminder that there was still a solar system outside of the four of them.

But he hadn't considered inviting the documentary crew to join them. It felt like an invasion. The Saturday dinner was for *crew*.

"We can't keep them out of it." He sighed. "Can we?"

“Not unless we want to eat up here. You did give them the run of the galley.”

“Dammit,” he said. “Should have confined them to quarters.”

“For four months?”

“We could have shoved ration bars and catheter bags under the door to them.”

She smiled and said, “It’s Amos’ turn to cook.”

“Right, I’ll call and let him know it’s dinner for eight.”



Amos made pasta and mushrooms, heavy on the garlic, heavy on the Parmesan. It was his favorite, and he always splurged to buy real cloves of garlic and actual Parmesan cheese to grate. Another small luxury they wouldn’t be able to afford if they wound up in a courtroom battle with Mars.

While Amos finished sautéing the mushrooms and garlic, Alex set the table and took drink orders. Holden sat next to Naomi on one side of the table, while the documentary crew sat together on the other. The banter was polite and friendly, and if there was an uncomfortable undercurrent to it all, he still wasn’t quite sure why.

Holden had asked them not to bring cameras or recording equipment to the dinner table, and Monica had agreed. Clip, the Martian, was talking about sports history with Alex. Okju and Cohen, sitting across from Naomi, were telling stories about the last assignment they’d been on, covering a new scientific station that was in stationary orbit around Mercury. It should have been almost pleasant, and it just wasn’t.

Holden said, “We don’t usually eat this well while flying, but we try to do something nice for our weekly dinner together.”

Okju smiled and said, “Smells lovely.” She was wearing half a dozen rings, a blouse with buttons on it, a silver pendant, and an ivory-colored comb holding back her frizzy brown hair. The soundman gazed serenely at nothing, his black glasses hiding the top of his face, his expression calm and open. Monica watched him look over her crew, saying nothing, a faint smile on her lips.

“Chow,” Amos said, then began putting bowls of food on the table. While the meal was handed around in a slow circuit, Okju bowed her head and mumbled something. It took Holden a moment to realize she was praying. He hadn’t seen anyone do it for years, not since he’d left home. One of his fathers, Caesar, had sometimes prayed before meals. Holden waited for her to finish before he started eating.

“This is very nice,” Monica said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Holden.

“We’re a week out of Ceres,” she said, “and I think we’re all settled in. Was wondering if we could start scheduling some preliminary interviews? It’s mostly so we can test out the equipment.”

“You can interview me,” Amos said, not quite hiding his leer.

Monica smiled at him and speared a mushroom with her fork, then stared at him while she popped it into her mouth and chewed slowly.

“Okay,” she said. “We can start with background work. Baltimore?”

The silence was suddenly brittle. Amos started to stand, but a gentle hand on his arm from Naomi stopped him. He opened his mouth, closed it, then looked down at his plate while the pale skin on his scalp and neck turned bright red. Monica looked down at her plate, her expression at the friction point between embarrassed and annoyed.

“That’s not a good idea,” Holden said.

“Captain, I’m sensitive to privacy issues for you and your crew, but we have an agreement. And with all respect, you’ve been treating me and mine like we’re unwelcome.”

Around the table, the food was starting to cool off. It had hardly been touched. "I get it. You held up your end of the deal," Holden said. "You got me out of Ceres, and you put money in our pockets. We haven't been holding up our end. I get it. I'll set aside an hour tomorrow for starters, does that work?"

"Sure," she said. "Let's eat."

"Baltimore, huh?" Clip said to Amos. "Football fan?"

Amos said nothing, and Clip didn't press it.



After the uncomfortable dinner, Holden wanted nothing more than to climb into bed. But while he was in the head brushing his teeth, Alex pretended to casually wander in and said, "Come on up to ops, Cap. Got something to talk about."

When Holden followed him up, he found Amos and Naomi already waiting. Naomi was leaning back with her hands behind her head, but Amos sat on the edge of a crash couch, both feet on the floor and his hands clenched into a doubled fist in front of him. His expression was still dark with anger.

"So, Jim," Alex said, walking over to another crash couch and dropping into it, "this ain't a good start."

"She's looking stuff up about us," Amos said to no one in particular, his gaze still on the floor. "Stuff she shouldn't know."

Holden knew what Amos meant. Monica's reference to Baltimore was an allusion to Amos' childhood as the product of a particularly nasty brand of unlicensed prostitution. But Holden couldn't admit he knew it. He himself only knew because of an overheard conversation. He had no interest in humiliating Amos further.

"She's a journalist, they do background research," he said.

"She's more than that," Naomi said. "She's a nice person. She's charming and she's friendly, and every one of us on this ship wants to like her."

"That's a problem?" Holden said.

"That's a big fucking problem," Amos said.

"I was on the *Canterbury* for a reason, Jim," Alex said. His Mariner Valley drawl had stopped sounding silly, and just seemed sad instead. "I don't need someone diggin' up my skeletons to air them out."

The *Canterbury*, the ice hauler they'd all worked on together before the Eros incident, was a bottom-of-the-barrel job for those who flew for a living. It attracted people who'd failed down to the level of their incompetence, or those who couldn't pass the background checks a better job might require. Or, in his own case, those who had a dishonorable military discharge staining their record. After having served with his small crew for years, Holden knew it wasn't incompetence that had put any of them on that ship.

"I know," he started.

"Same here, Cap'n," Amos said. "I got a lot of past in my past."

"So do I," Naomi said.

Holden started to reply, then stopped when the import of her words hit him. Naomi was hiding something that had driven her to take a glorified mechanic's job on the *Canterbury*. Well, of course she was. Holden hadn't wanted to think about it, but it was obvious. She was about the most talented engineer he'd ever met. He knew she had degrees from two universities, and had completed her three-year flight officer training in two. She'd started her career on an obvious command track.

Something had happened, but she'd never talked about what it had been. He frowned a question at her, but she stopped him with a tiny shake of her head.

The fragility of their little family struck him full force. The paths that had pulled them all together had been so diverse, as improbable and unlikely as those kinds of things ever were. And the universe could just as easily take them apart. It left him feeling small and vulnerable and a little defensive.

"Everyone remembers why we did this, right?" Holden asked. "The lockdown? Mars coming after the *Rocinante*?"

"We didn't have a choice," Naomi replied. "We know. We all agreed to take this job."

Amos nodded in agreement. Alex said, "No one's sayin' we shouldn't have taken the job. What we're sayin' is that you're the frontman for this band."

"Yes," Naomi said. "You need to be so interesting that this documentary crew forgets all about the rest of us. That's your job for the rest of this flight. That's the only way this works."

"No," Amos said, still not looking up. "There is another way, but I've never tossed a blind man out an airlock. Don't know how I'd feel about that. Might not be fun."

"Okay," Holden said, patting the air with his hands in a calming motion. "I get it. I'll keep the cameras out of your faces as much as I can, but this is a long trip. Be patient. When we get to the Ring, maybe they'll be tired of us and we can pawn them off on some other ship."

They were silent for a moment, then Alex shook his head.

"Well," he said, "I think we just found the only thing that'll make me look forward to getting *there*."



Holden woke with a start, rubbing furiously at an itch on his nose. He had a half-remembered feeling of something trying to climb inside it. No bugs on the ship, so it had to have been a dream. The itch was real, though.

As he scratched, he said, "Sorry, bad dream or something," and patted the bed next to him. It was empty. Naomi must have gone to the bathroom. He inhaled and exhaled loudly through his nose several times, trying to get rid of the itchy sensation inside. On the third exhale, a blue firefly popped out and flew away. Holden became aware of a faint scent of acetate in the air.

"We need to talk," said a familiar voice in the darkness.

Holden's throat went tight. His heart began to pound. He pulled a pillow over his face and suppressed an urge to scream as much from frustration and rage as the old familiar fear that tightened his chest.

"So. There was this rookie," Miller started. "Good kid, you'd have hated him."

"I can't take this shit," Holden said, yanking the pillow away from his face and throwing it in the direction of Miller's voice. He slapped the panel by the bed and the room's lights came on. Miller was standing by the door, the pillow behind him, wearing the same rumpled gray suit and porkpie hat, fidgeting like he had a rash.

"He never really learned to clear a room, you know?" Miller continued. His lips were black. "Corners and doorways. I tried to tell him. It's always corners and doorways."

Holden reached for the comm panel to call Naomi, then stopped. He wanted her to be there, to make the ghost vanish the way it always had before. And he was also afraid that this time, it wouldn't.

"Listen, you've gotta clear the room," Miller said, his face twisted with confusion and intensity, like a drugged man trying to remember something important. "If you don't clear the room, the room

eats you."

"What do you want from me?" Holden said. "Why are you making me go out there?"

A thick exasperation twisted Miller's expression.

"What the hell are you hearing me say? You see a room full of bones, only thing you know is something got *killed*. You're the predator right up until you're prey." He stopped, staring at Holden.

Waiting for an answer. When Holden didn't respond, Miller moved a step closer to the bed.

Something on his face made Holden think of the times he'd watched the cop shoot people. He opened a cabinet by the bed and took out his sidearm.

"Don't get any closer," Holden said, not pointing the gun at Miller yet. "But be honest, if I shot you, would you even die?"

Miller laughed. His expression became almost human. "Depends."

The door opened and Miller blinked out. Naomi came in wearing a robe and carrying a bulb of water.

"You awake?"

Holden nodded, then opened the cabinet and put the gun away. His expression must have told Naomi everything.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. He vanished when you opened the door."

"You look terrified," Naomi said, putting her water down and sliding under the covers next to him.

"He's scarier now. Before, I thought... I don't know what I thought. But ever since he knew about the gate, I keep trying to figure out what he really means. It was easier when I could think it was some kind of static. That it didn't... that it didn't mean anything."

Naomi curled up against his side, putting her arms around him. He felt his muscles relaxing.

"We can't let Monica and her crew ever know about this," he said. Naomi's smile was half sorrow. "What?"

"James Holden not telling everyone everything," she said.

"This is different."

"I know."

"What did he say?" Naomi asked. "Did it make sense?"

"No. But it was all about death. Everything he says is about death."



Over the course of the following weeks, the ship fell into a routine that, while not comfortable, was at least collegial. Holden spent time with the documentary crew, being filmed, showing them the ship, answering questions. What was his childhood like? Loving and complex and bittersweet. Had he really saved Earth by talking the half-aware girl who'd been the protomolecule's seed crystal into rerouting to Venus? No, mostly that had just worked out well. Did he have any regrets?

He smiled and took it and pretended he wasn't holding anything back. That the only thing leading him out to the Ring was his contract with them. That he hadn't been chosen by the protomolecule for something else that he hadn't yet begun to understand.

Sometimes, Monica turned to the others, but Alex and Naomi kept their answers friendly, polite, and shallow. Amos laced his responses with cheerful and explicit profanity until it was almost impossible to edit into something for a civilized audience.

Cohen turned out to be more than a sound engineer. The dark glasses he wore were a sonar feedback system that allowed him to create a three-dimensional model of any space he occupied.

When Amos asked why he didn't have prosthetics instead, Cohen had told them that the accident that claimed his eyes also burned the optic nerves away. The attempted nerve regrowth therapy had failed and almost killed him with an out-of-control brain tumor. But the interface that allowed his brain to translate sonar data into a working 3D landscape also made him an extraordinary visual effects modeler. While Monica spun a narrative of Holden's life following the destruction of his ship the *Canterbury*, Cohen created beautiful visual renderings of the scenes. At one point, he showed the crew a short clip of Holden speaking, describing the escape from Eros after the initial protomolecule infection, all while he appeared to be moving down perfectly rendered Erosian corridors filled with bodies.

Part of Holden had almost come to enjoy the interviews, but he could only watch the Eros graphics for a few seconds before he asked Cohen to turn it off. He'd been sure that seeing it would somehow invoke Miller, but it hadn't. Holden didn't like the memories that came with their story. The documentary crew made accommodations, not forcing him further than he was willing to go. Their being nice about it somehow only made him feel worse.

A week out from the Ring, they caught up to the *Behemoth*. Monica was sitting on the ops deck with the crew when the massive OPA ship finally got close enough for the *Roci*'s telescopes to get a good view of her. Holden had allowed the restrictions on where the documentary crew were permitted to just sort of fade away.

They were doing a slow pan of the *Behemoth*'s hull when Alex whistled and pointed at a protrusion on the side. "Damn, boss, the Mormons are better armed than I remember. That's a rail gun turret right there. And I'd bet a week's desserts those things are torpedo tubes."

"I liked her better when she was a generation ship," Holden replied. He called up combat ops and told the *Rocinante* to classify the new hull as the *Behemoth*-class dreadnought and add all the hardpoints and weapons to her threat profile.

"That's the kind of stealing only governments can get away with," Amos said. "I guess the OPA is a real thing now."

"Yeah," Alex replied with a laugh.

"Mars is making a similar claim against us," Holden said.

"And if we'd been the ones to blow up their battleship before we flew off in this boat, they'd have an argument to make," Amos said. "Last I checked, that was the bad guys, though."

Naomi didn't chime in. She was working at something on the comm panel. Holden could tell it was a complex problem because she was quietly humming to herself.

"You've been on the *Nauvoo* before, right?" Monica asked.

"No," Holden said. The *Rocinante* began rapidly throwing data onto his screen. The ship's calculations of the *Behemoth*'s actual combat strength. "They were still working on it the first time I was on Tycho Station. By the time I started working for Fred Johnson, they'd already shot the *Nauvoo* at Eros, and she was on her way out of the solar system. I did get to walk through the ship they sent to catch her, once."

The *Rocinante* was displaying puzzling projections at him. The ship seemed to think that the *Behemoth* didn't have the structural strength to support the number and size of weapon hardpoints she currently sported. In fact, she seemed to think that if the OPA battleship ever actually fired two of its six capital-ship-class rail guns at the same time, there was a 34 percent chance the hull would rip apart. Just to have something to do, Holden told the *Roci* to create a tactical package for fighting the *Behemoth* and send it to Alex and Naomi. Probably, they'd never need it.

"You didn't like working for the OPA?" Monica asked. She had the little smile she got when she asked a question she already knew the answer to. Holden suspected the documentarian was also a terrible poker player, but so far he hadn't been able to get her into a game.

"It was a mixed bag," he said, forcing himself to smile. To be the James Holden that Monica wanted and expected. To sacrifice himself to her attention so she'd leave the others be.

"Jim?" Naomi said, finally looking up from her panel. "You know that memory leak in comms that I've been hunting for a month? It's getting worse. It's driving me nuts."

"How bad?" Alex asked.

"Fluctuating between .0021 and .033 percent," she said. "I'm having to flush and reboot every couple of days now."

Amos laughed. "Do we care about that? Because I'll raise you a power leak in the head that's almost a whole percent."

Naomi turned to look at him with a frown. "You didn't tell me?"

"I'll bet you a month's pay it's a worn lead to the lights. I'll yank the fucker out when I get a chance."

"Do those things happen a lot?" Monica asked.

"Hell no," Alex replied before Holden could. "The *Roci* is solid."

"Yeah," Amos chimed in. "She's so well put together, we gotta obsess over bullshit like crusty memory bubbles and shitty light bulbs just to have something to do." The smile he aimed at Monica was indistinguishable from the real thing.

"So you didn't really answer my question about the OPA," Monica said, swiveling her chair to face Holden. She pointed at the threat map the *Roci* had created of the *Behemoth*, the weapon hardpoints like angry red blisters dotting her skin. "Everything okay between you?"

"Yeah, everyone's still friends," Holden said. "Nothing to worry about."

A proximity light flashed as the *Behemoth* bounced a ranging laser off the *Roci*'s hull. She returned the favor. Not targeting lasers. Just two ships making sure they weren't in any danger of getting too close.

Nothing to worry about.

Yeah, right.

Chapter Eleven: Melba

Stanni stood just behind Melba's left shoulder, looking at the display. His palm rubbed against the slick fabric of his work trousers like he was trying to sooth a cramped quadriceps. Melba had learned to read it as a sign the man was nervous. The narrow architecture of the *Cerisier* put him so close to her, she could feel the subtle warmth of his body against the back of her neck. In any other context, being this close to a man would have meant they were sharing an intimate moment. Here, it meant nothing. She didn't even find it annoying.

"Mira," Stanni said, flapping his hand. "La. Right there."

The monitor was old, a constant green pixel burning in the lower left corner where some steady glitch had been irreparable and not worth replacing. The definition was still better than a hand terminal. To the untrained eye, the power demand profile for the UNN *Thomas Prince* could have been the readout of an EEG or a seismological reading or the visual representation of a bhangra recording. But over the course of weeks—months now—Melba's eye wasn't untrained.

"I see it," she said, putting her finger on the spike. "And we can't tell where it came from?"

"Fucks me," Stanni said, rubbing his thigh. "I'm seeing it, but I don't know what I'm looking at."

Melba ran her tongue against the back of her teeth, concentrating, trying to remember what the tutorials had shown about tracking power spikes. In an odd way, her inexperience had shifted into an asset for the team. Stanni and Ren, Bob and Soledad all had more hands-on experience than she did, but she'd only just learned the basics. Sometimes she would know some simple thing that all of them had known once, and only she hadn't forgotten. Her analysis was slower, but it didn't skip steps, because she didn't know which steps could be skipped.

"Did it start at the deceleration flip?" she asked.

Stanni grunted like a man struck by a sudden pain.

"They hit null g and one of the regulators reset," he said. "Least it's nothing serious.

Embarrassing to blow up all they preachers y sa. We'll need to get back over there and check them, though."

Melba nodded and made a mental note to read through what that process required. All she'd known was the truism repeated in three of her tutorials that when a ship cut thrust halfway through a journey, flipped, and began accelerating in the opposite direction it was a time for especial care.

"I'll put it on the rotation," she said, and pulled up her team's schedule. There was a slot in ten days when there would be enough time to revisit the big ship. She blocked out the time, marked it, and posted it to the full group. All of it felt easy and natural, like the sort of thing she had been doing her whole life. Which in a sense, she had.

The flotilla was coming to the last leg of its journey. They had passed the orbit of Uranus weeks ago, and the sun was a bright star in an overwhelming abyss of night sky. All the plumes of fire were pointed toward the Ring now, bleeding off their velocity with every passing minute. Even though it was the standard pattern for Epstein drive ships, Melba couldn't quite shake the feeling that they were all trying to flee from their destination and being pulled in against their will.

Unless they were discussing work, the only conversation—in the mess hall, on the exercise machines, on the shuttles to and from the ships they maintained—was about the Ring. The Martian

science ships and their escort were already there, peering through the void. There had been no official reports given, so instead rumors sprang up like weeds. Every beam of light that passed through the Ring and hit something bounced back, just like in normal space. But a few troubling constants varied as you got close to it. The microwave background from inside the Ring was older than the big bang. People said if you listened carefully to the static from the other side of the Ring, you could hear the voices of the dead of Eros, or of the damned. Melba heard the dread in other people's voices, saw Soledad crossing herself when she thought no one was looking, felt the oppressive weight of the object. She understood their growing fear not because she felt it herself but because her own private crisis point was coming.

The OPA's monstrous battleship was on course to arrive soon, almost at the same time as the Earth flotilla. It wasn't a matter of days yet, but it would be soon. The *Rocinante* had already passed the slower *Behemoth*. She and Holden were rising up out of the sun's domain, and soon their paths would converge. Then there would be the attack, and the public humiliation of James Holden, and with it, his death. And after that...

It was strange to think of an afterward. The more she imagined it, the more she could see herself relaxing back into Melba's life. There was no reason not to. Clarissa Mao had nothing, commanded nothing, was nothing. Melba Koh had work, at least. A history. It was a pretty thought, made prettier by being impossible. She would go home, become Clarissa again, and do whatever else she could to restore her family's name. Honor required it. If she'd stayed, it would have meant being like Julie.

Growing up, Clarissa had admired and resented her older sister. Julie the pretty one. The smart one. The champion yacht racer. Julie who could make Father laugh. Julie who could do no wrong. Petyr was younger than Clarissa and so would always be less. The twins Michael and Anthea had always been a world unto themselves, sharing jokes and comments that only they understood, and so seemed at times more like long-term guests of the family than part of it. Julie was the oldest, the one Clarissa longed to be. The one to beat. Clarissa hadn't been the only one to see Julie that way. Their mother felt it too. It was the thing that made Clarissa and her mother most alike.

And then something happened. Julie had walked away from them all, cut her hair, dropped out of school, and disappeared up into the darkness. She remembered her father hearing the news over dinner. They'd been having kaju murgh kari in the informal dining room that overlooked the park. She'd just come back from her riding lesson and still smelled a little of horse. Petyr had been talking about mathematics again, boring everyone, when her mother looked up from her plate with a smile and announced that Julie had written a letter to say she'd quit the family. Clarissa's mouth had dropped open. It was like saying that the sun had decided to become a politician or that four had decided to be eight. It wasn't quite incomprehensible, but it lived on the edge.

Her father had laughed. He'd said it was a phase. Julie'd gone to live like the common people and sow a few wild oats, and once she'd had her fill, she'd come home. But she'd seen in his eyes that he didn't believe it. His perfect girl was gone. She'd rejected not only him, but the family. Their name. Forever after, cashews and curry had tasted like victory.

And so Melba would have to be folded up when she was done here. Put back in a box and buried or burned. Clarissa could go live with one of her siblings. Petyr had his own ship now. She could work on it as an electrochemical engineer, she thought with a smile. Or, in the worst case, stay with Mother. If she told them what she'd done, how she'd saved the family name, then Clarissa could start to rebuild the company. Remake their empire in her own name. Possibly even free her father from imprisonment and exile.

The thought left her feeling both hopeful and tired.

A loud clang and the distant sound of laughter brought her back to herself. She reviewed the maintenance schedule for the next ten-day cycle—maintenance on the electrical systems of three of the minor warships and a physical inventory of the electrical cards—marked the ship's time, and shut

down her terminal. The mess hall was half full when she got there, members of half a dozen other teams eating together and talking and watching the newsfeeds about the Ring, about themselves going to meet it. Soledad was sitting by herself, gaze fixed on her hand terminal while she ate a green-brown paste that looked like feces but smelled like the finest-cooked beef in the world. Melba told herself to think of it as pâté, and then it wasn't so bad.

Melba got herself a plate and a bulb of lemon water and slid in across from Soledad. The other woman's eyes flicked up with a small but genuine smile.

"Hoy, boss," she said. "How's it go?"

"Everything's copacetic." Melba smiled. She smiled more than Clarissa did. That was an interesting thought. "What did I miss?"

"Report from Mars. Data, this time. The ship that went through? Not on the drift."

"Really?" Melba said. After they'd picked up the faint transmission from the little cobbled-together ship that had started all this, the assumption had been that it had been crippled by something that lived on the other side of the Ring. That it was floating free. "It's under power?"

"Maybe," Soledad said. "Data shows it's moving, and a lot slower than it went in. And the probes they sent in? One of *them* got grabbed too. Normal burn, and then boom, stopped. The signal's all fucked up, but it looks like the same course that the ship's on. Like they're being... taken to the same place. Or something."

"Weird," Melba said. "But I guess weird is kind of what we expect. After Eros."

"My dad was on Eros," Soledad said, and Melba felt a strange tightening in her throat. "He worked one of the casinos. Security to make sure no one hacked the games, right? Been there fifteen years. Said he was going to retire there, get a little hole up where he didn't weigh so much and just live off his retirement."

"I'm sorry."

Soledad shrugged.

"Everyone dies," she said gruffly, then wiped the back of her hand against her eyes and turned back to the screen.

"My sister was there," Melba said. It was truth, and more than truth. "My sister was one of the first ones it took."

"Shit," Soledad said, looking up at her now, terminal forgotten.

"Yeah."

The two were quiet for a long moment. At another table, a Belter man no more than twenty barked his knees against the edge of the table and started cursing squat little Earth designers, to the amusement of his friends.

"You think they're still there?" Soledad said softly, nodding at her terminal. "There were those voices. The transmissions that came off Eros. You know. After. It was people, right?"

"They're dead," Melba said. "Everyone on Eros died."

"Changed, anyway," Soledad said. "Some guy said it took the patterns off them, right? Their bodies. Their brains. I think about maybe they never really died. Just got *remade*, you know? What if their brains never stopped working and just got..."

She shrugged, looking for a word, but Melba knew what she meant. Change, even profound change, wasn't the same as death. She was proof enough of that.

"Does it matter?"

"What if their souls never got loose?" Soledad said, with real pain in her voice. "What if it caught them all, right? Your sister. My dad. What if they aren't dead, and Ring's got all their souls still?"

There are no souls, Melba thought with a touch of pity. We are bags of meat with a little electricity running through them. No ghosts, no spirits, no souls. The only thing that survives is the

story people tell about you. The only thing that matters is your name. It was the kind of thing Clarissa would think. The kind of thing her father would have said. She didn't say it aloud.

"Maybe that's why Earth's bringing all those priests," Soledad said and took a scoop of her food. "To put them all to rest."

"Someone should," Melba agreed, and then she turned to her meal.

Her hand terminal chimed: Ren requesting a private conversation. Melba frowned and accepted the connection.

"What's up?" she said.

His voice, when it came, was strained.

"I got something I was wondering if you could look at. An anomaly."

"On my way," Melba said. She dropped the connection and downed her remaining meat paste in two huge swallows, then dropped the plate into the recycler on her way out. Ren was at a workstation in one of the storage bays. It was one of the new spaces he could work in that had a ceiling high enough that he wouldn't have to hunch. Around him, blue plastic crates stood fixed to the floor or one another with powerful electromagnets. Her footsteps were the only sound.

"What've you got?" she asked.

He stood back and nodded at the monitor.

"Air filter data from the *Seung Un*," he said.

Her blood went cold.

"Why?" she said too sharply, too quickly.

"It's catching a lot of outliers. Raised a flag. I'm looking at the profile, and it's all high-energy ganga. Nitroethenes y sa."

She hadn't thought of this. She'd known that the ships did passive gas monitoring, but it had never occurred to her that stray molecules of her explosive would get caught in the filters, or that anyone would check. Ren took her silence as confusion.

"Built a profile," he said. "Ninety percent fit with a moldable explosive."

"So they've got explosives on board," Melba said. "It's a warship. Explosives is what they do, right?" Despair and embarrassment warred in her chest. She'd screwed up. She just wanted Ren to be quiet, to not say the things he was saying. That he was *going* to say.

"This is more like what they'd use for mining and excavation," he said. "You inspected that deck. You remember seeing anything funny? Might have been hard to see. This stuff's putty until it hits air."

"You think it's a bomb?" she said.

Ren shrugged.

"Inners hauling full load of gekke. A guy tried to light himself on fire. Hunger strike lady. The one coyo did that thing with the camera."

"That wasn't political," she said. "He's a performance artist."

"All I mean, we put together a lot of different kinds of people think a lot of different kinds of things. Doesn't bring out the best in people. I was a kid, I watched me eltern end a marriage over whether the madhi was going to be a Belter. And everybody know everybody back down the well's watching. That kind of attention changes people, and it don't make them better. Maybe someone's planning to make a statement, si no?"

"Did you alert their security?" she asked.

"Check with you first. But something like this, shikata ga nai. We got to."

I have to kill him, she thought like someone whispering in her ear. She saw how to do it. Get him to look at his screen, hunch over it just a little. Enough to bare the back of his neck. Then she would press her tongue against the roof of her mouth, the rough of the tastebuds tickling her palate a little, and the strength would come. She'd break him here and then... take him back to her quarters. She

could clear out her locker, fit him in. And there was packing sealant that would keep the smell of the body from getting out. She'd file a report, say he was missing. She could act as confused as anyone. By the time she gave up the room and they found him, Melba would already be gone. Even if they worked out that she'd also planted the bomb, they'd just assume she was one of Holden's agents.

Ren was looking at her, his brown eyes mild, his carrot-orange hair back in a wiry ponytail that left the skin of his neck exposed. She thought of him explaining about the brownout buffers. The gentleness in his expression. The kindness.

I'm sorry, she thought. This isn't my fault. I have to.

"Let's check the data again," she said, angling her body toward the monitor. "Show me where the anomalies are."

He nodded, turning with her. Like everything on the *Cerisier*, the controls were built for someone a little shorter than Ren. He had to bend a little to reach them. A thickness rose up at the back of her neck, filled her throat. Dread felt like drowning. Ren's ponytail shifted, pulled to the side. There was a mole, brown and ovoid, just where his spine met his skull, like a target.

"So I'm looking on this report here," he said, tapping the screen.

Melba pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth. What about Soledad? She'd been there when Ren called her. She knew Melba had gone to see him. She might have to kill her too. Where would she put that body? There would have to be an accident. Something plausible. She couldn't let them stop her. She was so close.

"It's not going up, though," he said. "Steady levels."

She circled her tongue counterclockwise once, then paused. She felt light-headed. Short of breath. One of the artificial glands leaking out, maybe, in preparation for the flood. Ren was speaking, but she couldn't hear him. The sounds of her own breath and the blood in her ears was too loud.

I have to kill him. Her fingers were jittering. Her heart raced. He turned to her, blew a breath out his nostrils. He wasn't a person. He was just a sack of meat with a little electricity. She could do this. For her father. For her family. It needed to be done.

When Ren spoke, his voice seemed to come from a distance.

"Was denkt tu? You want to make the call, you want me to?"

Her mind moved too quickly and too slowly. He was asking if they should alert the *Seung Un* about the bomb. That was what he meant.

"Ren?" she said. Her voice sounded small, querulous. It was the voice of someone much younger than she was. Someone who was very frightened, or very sad. Concern bloomed in his expression, drew his brows together.

"Hey? You all right, boss?"

She touched the screen with the tip of her finger.

"Look again," she said softly. "Look close."

He turned, bending toward the data as if there were something there to discover. She looked at his bent neck like she might have looked at a statue in a museum: an object. Nothing more. She circled her tongue against the roof of her mouth twice, and calm descended on her.

His neck popped when it broke, the cartilaginous disks ripping free, the bundle of nerves and connective tissue that his life had run through coming apart. She kept striking the base of his skull until she felt the bone give way beneath her palm, and then it was time to move the body. Quickly. Before anyone walked in on them. Before the crash came.

Fortunately, there was only a little blood.

Chapter Twelve: Anna

Two hours into an interfaith prayer meeting, and for the very first time in her life, Anna was tired of prayer. She'd always found a deep comfort in praying. A profound sense of connection to something infinitely larger than herself. Her atheist friends called it awe in the face of an infinite cosmos. She called it God. That they might be talking about the same thing didn't bother her at all. It was possible she was hurling her prayers at a cold and unfeeling universe that didn't hear them, but that wasn't how it felt. Science had given mankind many gifts, and she valued it. But the one important thing it had taken away was the value of subjective, personal experience. That had been replaced with the idea that only measurable and testable concepts had value. But humans didn't work that way, and Anna suspected the universe didn't either. *In God's image*, after all, being a tenet of her faith.

At first, the meeting had been pleasant. Father Michel had a lovely deep voice that had mellowed with age like fine wine. His lengthy and heartfelt prayer for God's guidance to be upon those who would study the Ring had sent shivers down her spine. He was followed by an elder of the Church of Humanity Ascendent who led the group through several meditations and breathing exercises that left Anna feeling energized and refreshed. She made a note in her hand terminal to download a copy of their book on meditation and give it a read. Not all of the faiths and traditions represented on board took a turn, of course. The imam would not pray in front of non-Muslims, though he did give a short speech in Arabic that someone translated for her through her earbud. When he ended with *Allah hu akbar*, several people in the audience repeated it back. Anna was one of them. Why not? It seemed polite, and it was a sentiment she agreed with.

But after two hours, even the most heartfelt and poetic of the prayers had begun to wear on her. She began counting the little plastic domes that hid fire-suppression turrets. She'd gotten good at spotting them since the attempted suicide at the first party. She found her mind wandering off to think about the message she'd send to Nono later. The chair she sat in had a very faint vibration that she could almost hear if she remained very still. It must have been the ship's massive drive, and as Anna listened for it, it began to develop a rhythmic pulse. The pulse turned into music, and she began humming under her breath. She stopped when an Episcopalian in the seat next to her pointedly cleared his throat.

Hank Cortez was, of course, scheduled to go last. In the weeks and months Anna had been on the *Prince*, it had become apparent that while no one was officially in charge of the interfaith portion of the Ring expedition, Doctor Hank was treated as a sort of "first among equals." Anna suspected this was because of his close ties to the secretary-general, who'd made the whole mission possible. He also seemed to be on a first-name basis with many of the important artists, politicians, and economic consultants in the civilian contingent of the group.

It didn't really bother her. No matter how egalitarian a group might start out, someone always wound up taking a leadership role. Better Doctor Hank than herself.

When the Neo-Wiccan priestess currently at the podium finally finished her rites, Doctor Hank was nowhere to be seen. Anna felt a little surge of hope that the prayer service would end early.

But no. Doctor Hank made his entrance into the auditorium trailed by a camera crew and bulled his way up to the podium like an actor taking the stage. He flashed his gleaming smile across the audience, making sure to end with the section the camera people had set up in.

“Brothers and sisters,” he said, “let us bow our heads and offer thanks to the Almighty and seek His counsel and guidance as we draw ever closer to the end of this historic journey.”

He managed to rattle on that way for another twenty minutes.

Anna started humming again.



After, Anna met Tilly for lunch at the officers’ mess that had been set aside for civilian use. Anna wasn’t exactly sure how she’d wound up being Tilly’s best and only friend on the trip, but the woman had latched on to her after their first meeting and burrowed in like a tick. No, that wasn’t really fair. Even though the only thing she and Tilly had in common was their carbon base, it wasn’t like Anna had a lot of friends on the ship either. And while Tilly could appear flighty and exasperating, Anna had gradually seen through the mask to the deeply lonely woman underneath. Her husband’s obscene contributions to the secretary-general’s reelection campaign had bought her way onto the flight as a civilian consultant. She had no purpose on the mission other than to be seen, an extended reminder of her husband’s enormous wealth and power. That she had nothing else to offer the group only made the real point clearer. She knew it, and everyone else knew it too. Most of the other civilians on the flight treated her with barely concealed contempt.

While they waited for their food to arrive, Tilly popped a lozenge in her mouth and chewed it. The faint smell of nicotine and mint filled the air. No smoking on military ships, of course.

“How’d your thing go?” Tilly asked, playing with her silver-inlaid lozenge box and looking around the room. She was wearing a pants and blouse combination that probably cost more than Anna’s house on Europa had. It was the kind of thing she wore when she wanted to appear casual.

“The prayer meeting?” Anna said. “Good. And then not as good. Long. Very, very long.”

Tilly looked at her, the honesty getting her attention. “God, don’t I know it. No one can blather on like a holy man with a trapped audience. Well, maybe a politician.”

Their food arrived, a navy boy acting as waiter for the VIP civilians. Anna wondered what he thought of that. The UN military was all volunteer. He’d probably had a vision of what his military life would be like, and she doubted this was it. He carefully placed their food in front of them with the ease of long practice, gave them both a smile, and vanished back into the kitchen.

Galley. They called it a galley on ships.

Tilly picked halfheartedly at a farm-grown tomato and real mozzarella salad that Anna could have afforded on Europa by selling a kidney, and said, “Have you heard from Namono?”

Anna nodded while she finished chewing a piece of fried tofu. “I got another video last night. Nami gets bigger in every one. She’s getting used to the gravity, but the drugs make her cranky. We’re thinking about taking her off of them early, even if it means more physical therapy.”

“Awww,” Tilly said. It had a pro forma feel to it. Anna waited for her to change the subject.

“Robert hasn’t checked in for a week now,” Tilly said. She seemed resigned rather than sad.

“You don’t think he—”

“Cheating?” Tilly said with a laugh. “I wish. That would at least be interesting. When he locks himself away in his office at 2 a.m., you know what I catch him looking at? Business reports, stock values, spreadsheets. Robert is the least sexual creature I’ve ever met. At least until they invent a way to fuck money.”

Tilly’s casual obscenity had very quickly stopped bothering Anna. There was no anger in it. Like most of the things Tilly did, it struck her as another way to be noticed. To get people to pay attention to her. “How’s the campaign coming?” Anna said.

“Esteban? Who knows? Robert’s job is to be rich and have rich friends. I’m sure that part is coming along just fine.”

They ate in silence for a while, then without planning to, Anna said, “I don’t think I should have come.”

Tilly nodded gravely, as though Anna had just quoted gospel at her. “None of us should have.”

“We pray, and we get photographed, and we have meetings about interfaith cooperation,” Anna continued. “You know what we never talk about?”

“The Ring?”

“No. I mean yes. I mean we talk about the Ring all the time. What is it, what’s it for, why did the protomolecule make it.”

Tilly pushed her salad away and chewed another lozenge. “Then what?”

“What I thought we came here to do. To talk about what it *means*. Nearly a hundred spiritual leaders and theologians on this ship. And none of us is talking about what the Ring means.”

“For God?”

“Well, at least *about* God. Theological anthropology is a lot simpler when humans are the only ones with souls.”

Tilly waved at the waiter and ordered a cocktail Anna had never heard of. The waiter seemed to know, though, and darted off to get it. “This seems like the kind of thing I’ll need a drink for,” she said. “Go on.”

“But how does the protomolecule fit into that? Is it alive? It murders us, but it also builds amazing structures that are astonishingly advanced. Is it a tool used by someone more like us, only smarter? And if so, are they creatures with a sense of the divine? Do they have faith? What does that look like?”

“If they’re even from the same God,” Tilly said, using a short straw to mix her drink, then taking a sip.

“Well, for some of us there’s only one,” Anna replied, then asked the waiter for tea. When he’d left again, she said, “It calls into question the entire concept of Grace. Well, not entirely, but it complicates it at the very least. The things that made the protomolecule are intelligent. Does that mean they have souls? They invade our solar system, kill us indiscriminately, steal our resources. All things we would consider sins if we were doing them. Does that mean they’re fallen? Did Christ die for them too? Or are they intelligent but soulless, and everything the protomolecule’s done is just like a virus doing what it’s programmed for?”

A group of workers in civilian jumpsuits came into the dining area and sat down. They ordered food from the waiter and talked noisily among themselves. Anna let them distract her while her mind chewed over the worries she hadn’t let herself articulate before today.

“And, really, it’s all pretty theoretical, even to me,” she continued. “Maybe none of that should matter to *our* faith at all, except that I have this feeling it will. That to most people, it will matter.”

Tilly was sipping her drink, which Anna knew from experience meant she was taking the conversation seriously. “Have you mentioned this to anyone?” Tilly said, prompting her to continue.

“Cortez acts like he’s in charge,” Anna replied. Her tea arrived and she blew on it for a while to cool it. “I guess I should talk to him.”

“Cortez is a politician,” Tilly said with a condescending smirk. “Don’t let his folksy Father Hank bullshit snow you. He’s here because as long as Esteban is in office, Cortez is a powerful man. This dog and pony show? This is all about votes.”

“I hate that,” Anna said. “I believe you. You understand this all better than I do. But I hate that you’re right. What a waste.”

“What would you ask Cortez for?”

“I’d like to organize some groups. Have the conversation.”

“Do you need his permission?” Tilly asked.

Anna thought of her last conversation with Nono and laughed. When she spoke, her voice sounded thoughtful even to her.

“No,” she said. “I guess I don’t.”



That night Anna was awakened from a dream about taking Nami to Earth and watching her bones break as the gravity crushed her, to a blaring alarm. It lasted only a few seconds, then stopped. A voice from her comm panel said, “All hands to action stations.”

Anna assumed this didn’t mean her, as she had no idea what an action station was. There were no more alarms, and the voice from the comm panel didn’t return with more dire pronouncements, but being startled out of her nightmare left her feeling wide awake and jumpy. She climbed out of her bunk, sent a short video message to Nono and Nami, and then put on some clothes.

There was very little traffic in the corridor and lifts. The military people she did see looked tense, though to her relief, not particularly frightened. Just aware. Vigilant.

Having nowhere else to go, she wandered into the officers’ mess and ordered a glass of milk. When it arrived, she was stunned to discover it was actual milk that had at some point come out of a cow. How much was the UN spending on this civilian “dog and pony show”?

The only other people in the mess hall were a few military people with officers’ uniforms, and a small knot of the civilian contractors drinking coffee and slumping in their seats like workers in the middle of an all-nighter. A dozen metal tables were bolted to the floor with magnetic chairs at their sides. Wall displays scrolled information for the ship’s officers, all of it gibberish to her. A row of cutouts opened into the galley, letting through plates of food and the sounds of industrial dishwashers and the smell of floor cleaner. It was like sitting too near the kitchen in a very, very clean restaurant.

Anna drank her milk slowly, savoring the rich texture and ridiculous luxury of it. A bell chimed on someone’s hand terminal, and two of the civilian workers got up and left. One stayed, a beautiful but sad-faced woman who looked down at a terminal on the table with a vacant, thousand-yard stare.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” said a voice behind her, almost making Anna jump out of her chair. A young man in a naval officer’s uniform moved into her field of view and gestured awkwardly at the chair next to her. “Mind if I sit?”

Anna recovered enough to smile at him, and he took it as assent, stiffly folding himself into the seat. He was very tall for an Earther, with short blond hair and the thick shoulders and narrow waist all of the young officers seemed to have regardless of gender.

Anna reached across the table to shake his hand and said, “Anna Volovodov.”

“Chris Williams,” the young officer replied, giving her hand a short but firm shake. “And yes, ma’am, I know who you are.”

“You do?”

“Yes, ma’am. My people in Minnesota are Methodists, going back as far as we can trace them. When I saw you listed on the civilian roster, I made sure to remember the name.”

Anna nodded and sipped her milk. If the boy had singled her out because she was a minister of his faith, then he wanted to talk to her as a member of the congregation. She mentally shifted gears to become Pastor Anna and said, “What can I do for you, Chris?”

“Love your accent, ma’am,” Chris replied. He needed time to build up to whatever it was that he’d approached her about, so Anna gave it to him.

“I grew up in Moscow,” she replied. “Though after two years on Europa I can almost do Belter now, sa sa?”

Chris laughed, some of the tension draining out of his face. "That's not bad, ma'am. But you get those guys going at full speed, I can't understand a word the skinnies say."

Anna chose to ignore the slur. "Please, no more 'ma'am.' Makes me feel a hundred years old. Anna, please, or Pastor Anna if you have to."

"All right," Chris said. "Pastor Anna."

They sat together in companionable silence for a few moments while Anna watched Chris work up to whatever he needed to say.

"You heard the alarm, right?" he finally said. "Bet it woke you up."

"It's why I'm here," Anna replied.

"Yeah. Action stations. It's because of the dusters—I mean, Martians, you know."

"Martians?" Anna found herself wanting another glass of the delicious milk, but thought it might distract Chris, so she didn't wave at the waiter.

"We're in weapons range of their fleet now," he said. "So we go on alert. We can't share sky with the dusters anymore without going on alert. Not since, you know, Ganymede."

Anna nodded and waited for him to continue.

"And that Ring, you know, it's already killed somebody. I mean, just a dumb as sand skinny slingshotter, but still. Somebody."

Anna took his hand. He flinched a bit, but relaxed when she smiled at him. "That scares you?"

"Sure. Of course. But that ain't it."

Anna waited, keeping her face carefully neutral. The pretty civilian girl across the room got up suddenly, as though leaving. Her lips moved, talking to herself, then she sat back down, put her arms on the table, and leaned her head on them. Someone else scared, waiting out the long watches of the night, all alone in a room full of people.

"I mean," Chris said, breaking into her reverie, "that ain't all of it anyway."

"What else?" Anna said.

"The Ring didn't put us on alert," he said. "It's the Martians. Even with that thing out there, we're still thinking about shooting each other. That's pretty fucked up. Sorry. Messed up."

"It seems like we should be able to see past our human differences when we're confronted with something like this, doesn't it?"

Chris nodded and squeezed her hand tighter, but said nothing.

"Chris, would you like to pray with me?"

He nodded and lowered his head, closing his eyes. When she'd finished, he said, "I know I'm not the only Methodist on the ship. Do you, you know, hold services?"

I do now.

"Sunday, at 10 a.m., in conference room 41," she said, making a mental note to ask someone if she could use conference room 41 on Sunday mornings.

"I'll see if I can get the time off," Chris said with a smile. "Thank you, ma'am. Pastor Anna."

"It was nice talking to you, Chris." *You just gave me a reason to be here.*

When Chris left, Anna found herself very tired, ready to return to her bed, but the pretty girl across the room hadn't moved. Her head was still buried in her arms. Anna walked over to her and gently touched her on the shoulder. The girl's head jerked up, her eyes wild, almost panicked.

"Hi," Anna said. "I'm Anna. What's your name?"

The girl stared up, as if the question were a difficult one. Anna sat down across from her.

"I saw you sitting here," Anna said. "It looked like you could use some company. It's okay to be afraid. I understand."

The girl jerked to her feet like a malfunctioning machine. Her eyes were flat, and her head tilted a degree. Anna felt suddenly afraid. It was like she'd gone to pet a dog and found herself with her hand on a lion. Something in the back of her head told her, *This is a bad one. This one will hurt you.*

“I’m sorry,” Anna said, standing up with her hands half raised. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“You don’t know me,” the girl replied. “You don’t know anything.” Her hands were clenched into fists at her sides, the tendons in her neck quivering like plucked guitar strings.

“You’re right,” Anna said, still backing up and patting the air with her hands. “I apologize.”

Other people in the room were staring at them now, and Anna felt a surge of relief that she wasn’t alone with the girl. The girl stared at her, trembling, for a few more seconds, then darted out of the room.

“What the fuck was that all about?” someone behind Anna said in a quiet voice.

Maybe the girl had woken up from a nightmare too, Anna thought. Or maybe she hadn’t.

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Chapter Thirteen: Bull

Arriving at the Ring was a political fiction, but that didn't keep it from being real. There was no physical boundary to say that this was within the realm of the object. There was no port to dock at. The *Behemoth's* sensory arrays had been sucking in data from the Ring since before they'd left Tycho. The Martian science ships and Earth military forces that had been there before the doomed Belter kid had become its first casualty were still there, where they had been, but resupplied now. The new Martian ships had joined them, matched orbit, and were hanging quietly in the sky. The Earth flotilla, like the *Behemoth*, was in the last part of the burn, pulling up to whatever range they'd chosen to stop at. To say, *We have come across the vast abyss to float at this distance and now we are here. We've arrived.*

As far as anyone could tell, the Ring didn't give a damn.

The structure itself was eerie. The surface was a series of twisting ridges that spiraled around its body. At first they appeared uneven, almost messy. The mathematicians, architects, and physicists assured them all that there was a deep regularity there: the height of the ridges in a complex harmony with the width and the spacing between the peaks and valleys. The reports were breathless, finding one layer of complexity after another, the intimations of intention and design all laid bare without any hint of what it all might mean.

"The official Martian reports have been very conservative," the science officer said. His name was Chan Bao-Zhi, and on Earth, he'd have been Chinese. Here, he was a Belter from Pallas Station. "They've given a lot of summary and maybe a tenth of the data they've collected. Fortunately, we've been able to observe most of their experiments and make our own analysis."

"Which Earth will have been doing too," Ashford said.

"Without doubt, sir," Chan said.

Like any ritual, the staff meeting carried more significance than information. The heads of all the major branches of the *Behemoth's* structural tree were present: Sam for engineering, Bull for security, Chan for the research teams, Bennie Cortland-Mapu for health services, Anamarie Ruiz for infrastructure, and so on, filling the two dozen seats around the great conference table. Ashford sat in the place of honor, another beneficent Christ painted on the wall behind him. Pa sat at his right hand, and Bull—by tradition—at his left.

"What have we got?" Ashford said. "Short form."

"It's fucking weird, sir," Chan said, and everyone chuckled. "Our best analysis is that the Ring is an artificially sustained Einstein-Rosen bridge. You go through the Ring, you don't come out the other side here."

"So it's a gate," Ashford said.

"Yes, sir. It appears that the protomolecule or Phoebe bug or whatever you want to call it was launched at the solar system several billion years ago, aiming for Earth with the intention of hijacking primitive life to build a gateway. We're positing that whoever created the protomolecule did it as a first step toward making travel to the solar system more convenient and practical later."

Bull took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was what everyone had been thinking, but hearing it spoken in this official setting made it seem more real. The Ring was a way for something to get here. Not just a gateway. A beachhead.

“When the *Y Que* went through it, the mass and velocity of the ship triggered some mechanism in the Ring,” Chan said. “The Martians have a good dataset from the moment it happened, and there was a massive outpouring of energy within the Ring structure and a whole cascade of microlevel conformation changes. The entire object went up to about five thousand degrees Kelvin, and it has been cooling regularly ever since. So it took a lot of effort to get that thing running, but it looks like not much to maintain.”

“What do we know about what’s on the other side?” Pa asked. Her expression was neutral, her voice pleasant and unemotional. She could have been asking him to justify a line item in his budget.

“It’s hard to know much,” Chan said. “We’re peeking through a keyhole, and the Ring itself seems to be generating interference and radiation that makes getting consistent readings difficult. We know the *Y Que* wasn’t destroyed. We’re still getting the video feed that the kid was spewing when he went through, it’s just not showing us much.”

“Stars?” Ashford said. “Something we can start to navigate from?”

“No, sir,” Chan said. “The far side of the Ring doesn’t have any stars, and the background microwave radiation is significantly different from what we’d expect.”

“Meaning what?” Ashford said.

“Meaning, ‘Huh, that’s weird,’ ” Chan said. “Sir.”

Ashford’s smile was cool as he motioned the science officer to continue. Chan coughed before he went on.

“We have a couple of other anomalies that we aren’t quite sure what to make of. It looks like there’s a maximum speed on the other side.”

“Can you unpack that, please?” Pa said.

“The *Y Que* went through the Ring going very fast,” Chan said. “About seven-tenths of a second after it reached the other side, it started a massive deceleration. Bled off almost all its speed in about five seconds. It looks like the nearly instant deceleration was what killed the pilot. Since then, it seems as if the ship is being moved out away from the Ring and deeper into whatever’s on the other side.”

“We know that when the protomolecule’s active, it’s been able to... alter what we’d expect from inertia,” Sam said. “Is that how it stopped the ship?”

“That’s entirely possible,” Chan said. “Mars has been pitching probes through the Ring, and it looks like we start seeing the effect right around six hundred meters per second. Under that, mass behaves just the way we expect it to. Over that, it stops dead and then moves off in approximately the same direction that the *Y Que* is going.”

Sam whistled under her breath.

“That’s *really* slow,” she said. “The main drives would be almost useless.”

“It’s slower than a rifle shot,” Chan said. “The good news is it only affects mass above the quantum level. The electromagnetic spectrum seems to behave normally, including visible light.”

“Thank God for small favors,” Sam said.

“What else are the probes telling us?”

“There’s something out there,” Chan said, and for the first time a sense of dread leaked into his voice. “The probes are seeing objects. Large ones. But there’s not much light except what we’re shining through the Ring or mounting on the probes. And, as I said, the Ring has always given inconsistent returns. If whatever’s in there is made of the same stuff, who knows?”

“Ships?” Ashford said.

“Maybe.”

“How many?”

“Over a hundred, under a hundred thousand. Probably.”

Bull leaned forward, his elbows on the table. Ashford and Pa were looking around the table at the graying faces. They'd known before, because they weren't going to wait for a staff meeting to get their information. Now they were judging the reactions. So he'd give them a reaction. Control the fall.

"Be weirder if there wasn't anything there. If it was an attack fleet, they'd have attacked by now."

"Yeah," Ruiz said, latching on to the words.

Ashford opened the floor for questions. How many probes had Mars fired through? How long would it take something going at six hundred meters per second to reach one of the structures? Had they tried sending small probes in? Had there been any contact from the protomolecule itself, the stolen voices of humans, the way there had been with Eros? Chan did his best to be reassuring without actually having anything more that he could say. Bull assumed there was a deeper report that Ashford and Pa were getting, and he wondered what was in it. Being kept out chafed.

"All right. This is all interesting, but it's not our focus," Ashford said, bringing the Q-and-A session to a halt. "We're not here to send probes through the Ring. We're not here to start a fight. We're just making sure that whatever the inner planets do, we're at the table. If something comes out of the Ring, we'll worry about it then."

"Yes, sir," Bull said, throwing his own weight behind Ashford's. It wasn't like there was another strategy. Better that the crew see them all unified. People were watching how this all came down, and not just the crew.

"Mister Pa?" Ashford said. The XO nodded and glanced at Bull. Instinct dropped a weight in his gut.

"There have been some irregularities in the ship's accounting structure," Pa said. "Chief Engineer Rosenberg?"

Sam nodded, surprise on her face. "XO?" she said.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to restrict you to quarters and revoke your access privileges until this is all clarified. Chief Watanabe will relieve you. Mister Baca, you'll see to it."

The room was just as silent, but the meaning behind it was different now. Sam's eyes were wide with disbelief and rising fury.

"Excuse me?" she said. Pa met her gaze coolly, and Bull understood all of it in an instant.

"Records show you've been drawing resources from work and materials budgets that weren't appropriate," Pa said, "and until the matter is resolved—"

"If this is about the tech support thing, that's on me," Bull said. "I authorized that. It's got nothing to do with Sam."

"I'm conducting a full audit, Mister Baca. If I find you've been drawing resources inappropriately, I'll take the actions I deem appropriate. As your executive officer, I am informing you that Samara Rosenberg is to be confined to quarters and her access to ship's systems blocked. Do you have any questions about that?"

She'd waited until they'd made the trip, until they'd gotten where they were going, and now it was time to establish that she was in control. To get back at him for the drug dealer he'd spaced and punish Sam for being his ally. Would have been stupid to do until their shakedown run was over. But now it was.

Bull laced his fingers together. The refusal was on the back of his tongue, waiting. It would have been insubordination, and it would have been easy as breathing out. There were years—decades even—when he'd have done it, and taken the consequences as a badge of honor. It had been his call, and standing by while Sam was punished for it was more than dishonorable, it was disloyal. Pa knew that. Anyone who'd read his service records would know it. If it had just been his mission, his career

on the line, he'd have done it, but Fred Johnson had asked him to make this work. So there was only one play to make.

"No questions," he said, rising from his chair. "Sam. You should come with me now."

The others were silent as he led her out of the conference room. They all looked stunned and confused, except Ashford and Pa. Pa wore a poker face, and Ashford had a little shadow of smugness in the corners of his mouth. Sam's breath shook. Outrage and adrenaline left her skin pale. He helped her into the side seat of his security cart, then got behind the controls. They lurched into motion, four small engines whirring and whining. They were almost at the elevators when Sam laughed. A short, mirthless sound as much like a cry of pain as anything.

"Holy shit," Sam said.

Bull couldn't think of anything to say that would pull the punch, so he only nodded and took the cart into the wide elevator car. Sam wept, but there was nothing that looked like sorrow in her expression. He guessed that she'd never suffered that kind of disciplinary humiliation before. Or if she had, it hadn't been often enough to build up a callus. The dishonor of letting her take the hit was like he'd swallowed something before he'd chewed it enough, and now it wouldn't go down.

Back at the security office, Serge was at the main desk. The man's eyebrows rose as Bull came in the room.

"Hoy, bossman," the duty officer said. A hardcore OPA bruiser named Jojo. "Que pasa?"

"Nothing good. What did I miss?"

"Complaint from a *carnicería* down by engineering about a missing goat. Got a note from one of the Earth ships lost one of their crew, wondering if we'd come up with an extra. A couple coyos got shit-faced and we locked 'em in quarters, told 'em we'd sic the Bull on 'em."

"How'd they take that?"

"We had them mop up after."

Bull chuckled before he sighed.

"So. I've got Samara Rosenberg in the cart outside," he said. "XO wants her confined to quarters for unauthorized use of resources."

"I want a pony in a wetsuit." Jojo grinned.

"XO gave an order," Bull said. "I want you to take her to her quarters. I'll get her access pulled. We'll need to set a guard while we're at it. She's pissed."

Jojo scratched at his neck. "We're doing it?"

"Yeah."

Jojo's face closed. Bull nodded toward the door. Jojo left, and Bull took his place at the desk, identifying himself to the system and starting the process of locking Sam out of her own ship. While the security system ran its check against each of the *Behemoth's* subsystems, he leaned on his elbows and watched.

The first time Fred Johnson saved Bull's life, he'd done it with a rifle and a mobile medical unit. The second time, he'd done it with a credit chip. Bull had mustered out at thirty and took his pension to Ceres. For three years, he'd just lived. Ate cheap, drank too much, slept in his own bed not knowing if he was sick from the alcohol or the spin. Not caring much. He got into a few fights, had a few disagreements with the local law. He didn't see that he had a problem until it was unmistakable, and by then it was a hell of a problem.

Depression ran in his family. Self-medicating did too. His grandfather had died of the pair. His mother had been in therapy a couple times. His brother had graduated to heroin and lived five years in a treatment center in Roswell. None of it had seemed to have anything to do with Bull. He was a marine. He'd turned away from a life on basic to live in the stars, or if not the stars, at least the rocks that floated free in the night sky. He'd killed men. Bottle couldn't beat him. But it almost had.

The day Fred Johnson had appeared at his door, it had been stranger than a dream. His former commanding officer looked different. Older, stronger. Truth was, their birthdays weren't all that far apart, but Johnson had always been the Old Man. Bull had followed the news about the fallout from Anderson Station, and Fred's changing sides. Some of the other marines he knew on Ceres had been angry about it. He'd just figured the Old Man knew what he was doing. He wouldn't have done it without a reason.

Bull, Fred had said. Just that, at first. He could still remember Fred's dark eyes meeting his. The shame had made Bull try to stand straighter, to suck in his gut a little. In that moment, he saw how far he'd fallen. Two seconds of seeing himself through Fred Johnson's eyes was all it took for that.

Sir, Bull had replied, then stood back and let Johnson into the hole. The place stank of yeast and old tofu. And flop sweat. Fred ignored it all. *I need you back on duty, soldier.*

Okay, Bull had said. And the secret he carried with him, the one he'd take to his grave, was this: He hadn't meant it. In that moment, all he'd wanted was for Fred Johnson to go away and let Bull forget him again. Lying to his old commanding officer, to the man who'd kept him from bleeding out under fire, came as naturally as breathing. It didn't have anything to do with Earth or the Belt or Anderson Station. It wasn't some greater loyalty. He just wasn't done destroying himself. And even now, sitting alone at the security desk betraying Sam, he thought that Fred had known. Or guessed.

Fred had pressed a credit chip into his palm. It was one of the cheap, vaguely opalescent ones that the OPA had used to keep its funds untraceable, back in the bad old days. *Get yourself a new uniform.* Bull had saluted, already thinking about the booze he could buy.

The chit carried six months' wages at his old pay grade. If it had been less, Bull wouldn't have gone. Instead, he shaved for the first time in days, got a new suit, packed a valise, and threw out anything that didn't fit in it. He hadn't had a drink since, even on the nights he'd wanted one more than oxygen.

The security system chimed that the lockout was finished. Bull noted it and leaned back in the chair, reading the be-on-alert notice from the *Cerisier* and letting his mind wander. When Gathoni arrived to take the next shift, he walked two corridors down to a little mom-and-pop bodega, bought a blister-pack with four bulbs of beer, and headed over to Sam's quarters. The guard on duty nodded to him. Legally, Bull didn't have to knock. As head of security, he could have walked into Sam's rooms at any time, with or without being welcome. He knocked.

Sam was wearing a simple sweater and black workpants with magnetic strips down the sides. Bull held up the beer. For a long moment, Sam glared at him. She stepped back and to the side. He followed her in.

Her rooms were clean, neat, and cluttered. The air smelled like industrial lubricant and old laundry. She leaned against the arm of a foam couch.

"Peace offering?" she said bitterly.

"Pretty much," Bull said. "Pa's pissed off at me, and she's taking it out on you. She figured either I do it and I lose my best ally or I don't and I'm the one confined to quarters, right? No way to lose for her."

"This is bullshit."

"It is," Bull said. "And I'm sorry as hell about the whole damn thing."

Sam's breath rattled with anger. Bull accepted it. He had it coming. She walked across to him, grabbing the four-pack out of his hand, twisting it to shatter the plastic, and plucking one of the bulbs free.

"You want one?" she asked.

"Just water for me," he said.

"What chafes me," Sam said, "is the way Ashford just sits there like he's so happy about the whole thing. He knows the score. He's as much a part of it as Pa. Or you. Don't think you can buy

me off with a few cheap brews. You're just as much at fault as they are."

"I am."

"I got into engineering because I didn't want all the petty social birdshit. And now look at me."

"Yeah," Bull said.

Sam dropped to the couch with a sigh and said something obscene and colorful. Bull sat down across from her.

"Okay, stop that," she said.

"What?"

"That looking repentant thing. I feel like I'm supposed to genuflect or something. It's creepy."

She took a long pull at the bulb, the soft plastic collapsing under the suction, then expanding out a little as the beer outgassed. "Look, you and Pa are both doing what you think you ought to, and I'm getting screwed. I get it. Doesn't mean I have to be happy about it. Thing is, you're right. She wants you to lose allies. So no matter how much I want to tell you to go put your dick in a vise? I'm not going to, just because it would mean Pa won."

"Thank you for that, Sam."

"Go put your dick in a vise, Bull."

Bull's hand terminal chimed.

"Mister Baca?" Gathoni's voice said. "You should come back to the office, maybe."

Sam's expression sobered and she put down the bulb. Bull's belly tightened.

"What's going on?" he asked. When Gathoni answered, her voice was controlled and calm as a medic calling for more pressure.

"Earth destroyer *Seung-Un*? It just blew up."

Chapter Fourteen: Melba

When she'd thought about it, planning the final, closing stages of her vengeance, she'd pictured herself as the conductor of a private symphony, moving her baton to the orchestrated chaos. It didn't happen that way at all. The morning she went to the *Thomas Prince*, she didn't know that the day had finally come.

"Active hands to stations," a man's voice announced over the general channel.

"Wish to fuck they'd stop doing that," Melba said. "Always makes me feel like I should be doing something."

"Savvy, boss. When they start paying me navy wages, I'll start jumping for their drills," Soledad said, her voice pressed thin by the hand terminal's speaker. "I've got nothing on this couple. Unless Stanni's got it, we got to move down a level, try again."

"Copy that," Melba said. "Stanni, what are you seeing?"

The channel went silent. Melba looked around the service corridor at a half kilometer of nothing: conduit and pipes and the access grating that could shift to accommodate any direction of thrust. The only sounds were the creaking, hissing, and muttering of the *Thomas Prince*. The seconds stretched.

"Stanni?" Soledad said, dread in her voice, and the channel crackled.

"Perdón," Stanni said. "Looking at some weird wiring, but it's not the goose we're hunting. Lost in my head, me. I'm fine. I'm here."

Soledad said something obscene under her breath.

"Sorry," Stanni said again.

"It's okay," Melba said. "Did you check the brownout buffers?"

"Did."

"Then let's just keep moving. Next level."

The thing that surprised her, the one she hadn't seen coming, was how everyone on the *Cerisier* was ready to put Ren's disappearance at the foot of the Ring. It was rare for people to go missing on a ship. The *Cerisier*, like any other long-haul vessel, was a closed system. There was nowhere to go. She'd assumed there would be the usual, human suspicions. Ren had crossed someone, stolen something, slept with the wrong person, and he'd been disposed of. Thrown out an airlock, maybe. Fed into the recycling and reduced to his basic nutrients, then passed into the water or food supply. It wasn't that there were no ways to hide or dispose of a body, it was that there were so few ways for it to go unnoticed. Traveling between the planets had never eliminated murder. So many highly evolved primates in the same box for months on end, a certain death rate had to be expected.

This time, though, it was different. It made sense to people that someone would go missing, vanish, as they approached the Ring. It felt right. The voyage itself was ill-omened, and strange things were supposed to happen when people drew too near the uncanny, the dangerous, the haunted. The others were all on edge, and that gave her cover too. If she started weeping, they'd think they understood why. They'd think it was fear.

Melba packed her diagnostic array back in its sleeve, stood, and headed down to the lift. The internal service lifts were tiny, with hardly enough room for one person and the gear. Traveling between decks here was like stepping into a coffin. As she shifted down to the next level, she imagined the power failing. Being trapped there. Her mind flickered, and for a moment, she saw her

own storage locker. The one in her quarters. The one filled with sealant foam and Ren. She shuddered and forced her mind elsewhere.

The *Thomas Prince* was one of the larger ships in the Earth flotilla, the home of the civilian horde that the UN had put together. Artists, poets, philosophers, priests. Even without changing the physical structures of the ship, it gave her the feeling of being less a military vessel and more a poorly appointed, uncomfortable cruise liner. Clarissa had been on yachts and luxury ships most of the times she'd traveled outside Earth's gravity well, and she could imagine the thousand complaints the ship's captain would suffer about the halls not being wide enough and the screens on the walls too low a quality. It was the sort of thing she would have been concerned with, in her previous life. Now it was less than nothing.

It shouldn't have bothered her. One more death, more or less. It shouldn't have mattered. But it was Ren.

"In position," Stanni said.

"Give me a second," Melba said, stepping out of the lift. The new corridor was nearly identical to the one above it. These decks were all quarters and storage, with very little of the variation that she'd see when they reached the lowest levels—engineering, machine shops, hangar bays. Tracking down the electrical anomaly, they'd started here because it was easy. The longer it took, the harder it would get. Like everything.

She found the junction, took the diagnostic array out of its sleeve, and plugged it in.

"Solé?"

"In place," Soledad said.

"Okay," Melba said. "Start the trace."

When it had happened, she'd gotten Ren to her quarters and laid him out on the floor. She'd already felt the crash coming on, so she'd lain down on her bunk and let it come. It might only have been her imagination that made that one seem worse than the ones before. For a long horrified moment at the end, she thought that she'd voided herself, but her uniform was clean. She'd gone then, Ren still on her floor, gotten a bulb of coffee, put Ren's hand terminal in a stall of the group head, and found the security officer. He was a thin Martian named Andre Commenhi, and he'd listened to her informal report with half an ear. Ren had called her and asked her to consult with him. When she'd gone to see him at his usual workstation, he wasn't there. She'd been through the ship, but she hadn't found him, and he wasn't answering connection requests. She was starting to get concerned.

While they'd done a sweep of the ship, she'd gotten the tubes of sealant foam, gone back to her quarters, and entombed him. His hair had seemed brighter, the orange like something from a coral reef. His skin was pale as sunlight where the blood had drained away from it. Purple as a bruise where it had pooled. Rigor hadn't set in, so she was able to fold him together, curled like a fetus, and fill the spaces around him with foam. It had taken minutes to harden. The foam was engineered to be airtight and pressure-resistant. If she'd done it right, the corpse smell would never leak out.

"Nadie," Soledad said, sounding resigned. "You guys got anything?"

"Hey!" Stanni said. "Think I do. I've got a ten percent fluctuation on this box."

"Okay," Melba said. "Let's reset it and see if that clears the issue."

"On it," Stanni said. "Grab some lunch while it run?"

"I'll meet you in the galley," Melba said. Her voice seemed almost normal. She sounded like someone else.

The galley was nearly empty. By the ship's clock, it was the middle of the night, and only a few officers lurked at their tables watching the civilians as they passed. The terms of the service contract meant they got to use the officers' mess. She'd heard there was a certain level of distrust among the navy crews for civilians like her and her team. She would have resented it more if she hadn't been the

living example of why their suspicions were justified. Soledad and Stanni were already at a table, drinking coffee from bulbs and sharing a plate of sweet rolls.

"I'm gonna miss these when we cut thrust," Stanni said, holding one of the rolls up. "Best cook flying can't bake right without thrust. How long you think we're going to be on the float?"

"As long as it takes," Melba said. "They're planning for two months."

"Two months at null g," Soledad said, but her voice and the grayness of her face were clear. Two months at the Ring.

"Yeah," Stanni said. "Any word on Bob?"

The fifth of the team—fourth now—was still back on the *Cerisier*. It turned out he and Ren had both been having a relationship with a man on the medical team, and security were rounding up the usual suspects. Most times someone went missing, it was domestic. Melba felt her throat going thick again.

"Nothing yet," she said. "They'll clear him. He wouldn't have done anything."

"Yeah," Soledad said. "Bob wouldn't hurt anyone. He's a good man. Everyone knew about everything, and he loved Ren."

"Could stop the passato," Stanni said. "We don't know he's dead."

"With esse coisa out there, dead's the best thing he could be," Soledad said. "I've been having bad dreams since we flipped. I don't think we're making it back from this run. Not any of us."

"Talking like that won't help," Stanni said.

A woman walked into the galley. Middle-aged, thick red hair pulled into a severe-looking bun that competed with her smile. Melba looked at her to try not to be at the table, then looked away.

"Whatever happened to Ren," she said, "we've got our job to do. And we'll do it."

"Damn right," Stanni said, and then again with a catch in his voice. "Damn right."

They sat together quietly for a moment while the older man wept. Solé put a hand on his arm, and Stanni's shuddering breath slowed. He nodded, swallowed. He looked like an icon of grief and courage. He looked noble. It struck Melba for the first time that Stanni was probably her father's age, and she had never seen her father weep for anyone.

"I'm sorry," she said. She hadn't planned to speak the words, but there they were, coughed up on the table. They seemed obscene.

"It's okay," Stanni said. "I'm all right. Here, boss, have a roll."

Melba reached out, fighting herself not to weep again. Not to speak. She didn't know what she'd say, and she was afraid of herself. The alert chimed on her hand terminal. The diagnostic was finished. It only took a second to see that the spike was still there. Stanni said something profane, then shrugged.

"No rest for the wicked, no peace for the good," he said, standing.

"Go ahead," Melba said. "I'll catch up."

"Pas problema," Soledad said. "You hardly got to drink your coffee, sa sa?"

She watched them go, relieved that they wouldn't be there and wanting to call them back, both at the same time. The thickness in her throat had traveled to her chest. The sweet rolls looked delicious and nauseating. She forced herself to take a few deep breaths.

It was almost over. The fleets were there. The *Rocinante* was there. Everything was going according to her plan, or if not quite that, at least near enough to it. Ren shouldn't have mattered. She'd killed men before him. It was almost inevitable that people would die when the bomb went off. Vengeance called forth blood, because it always did. That was its nature, and she had made herself its instrument.

Ren wasn't her fault, he was Holden's. Holden had killed him by making her presence necessary. If he had respected the honor of her family, none of this would have happened. She stood up, squared

herself, prepared to get back to the job of fixing the *Thomas Prince*, just the way the real Melba would have.

"I'm sorry, Ren," she said, thinking it would be the last time, and the sorrow that shook her made her sit back down.

Something was wrong. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Her control was slipping. She wondered if after all she'd done, she simply wasn't strong enough. Or if there was something else. Maybe the artificial glands had begun to leak their toxins into her bloodstream without being summoned. She was getting more emotionally labile. It could be a symptom. She rested her head on her arms and tried to catch her breath.

He'd been kind to her. He'd been nothing but kind. He'd helped her, and she'd killed him for it. She could still feel his skull giving way under her hand; crisp and soft, like standing at the bank of a river and feeling the ground fall away. Her fingers smelled like sealant foam.

Ren touched her shoulder, and her head snapped up.

"Hi," someone said. "I'm Anna. What's your name?"

It was the redhead who'd been talking to the naval officer a moment ago.

"I saw you sitting here," she said, sitting down. "It looked like you could use some company. It's okay to be afraid. I understand."

She knows.

The thought ran through Melba's body like a sheet of lightning. Even without her tongue touching her palate, she felt the glands and bladders hidden in her flesh engorging. Her face and hands felt cold. Before the woman's eyes could widen, Melba's sorrow and guilt turned to a cold rage. She knew, and she would expose everything, and then all of it would have been wasted.

She didn't remember rising to her feet, but she was there now. The woman stood and took a step back.

I have to kill her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you."

The woman's hands were half raised, as if that were enough to ward off a blow. It would be simple. She didn't look strong. She didn't know how to fight. Kick her in the gut until she bled out. Nothing simpler.

A small voice in the back of Melba's mind said, *She's one of those idiot priests looking for someone to save. She doesn't know anything. You're in public. If you attack her, they'll catch you.*

"You don't know me," Melba said, struggling to keep her voice calm. "You don't know anything."

At one of the tables nearest the door, a young officer stood up and took two steps toward them, ready to interfere. If this woman got her thrown in the brig, they'd look into Melba's identity. They'd find Ren's body. They'd find out who she was. She had to keep it together.

"You're right. I apologize," the woman said.

Hatred surged up in Melba's mind, pure and black where it wasn't red. A swamp of obscenities rose in her throat, ready to pour out on the idiot priest who was putting everything—everything—in jeopardy. Melba swallowed it all and walked quickly away.

The corridors of the *Thomas Prince* were a vague presence in the unquiet of her mind. She'd let the thing with Ren throw her. It stole her focus and led her into risks she didn't need to take. She hadn't been thinking straight, but now she was. She got into the elevator and selected the level where Stanni and Soledad were checking the electrical system, chasing down the failing component. Then she deselected it and picked the hangar.

"Stanni? Solé?" she said into her hand terminal. "Hold it together for me here. I've got a thing I need to do."

She waited for the inevitable questioning, the prying and suspicion.

“Okay,” Soledad said. And that was all.

At the hangar, Melba authorized the flight of her shuttle, waited ten minutes for clearance, and launched out the side of the *Thomas Prince* and into the black. The shuttle monitors were cheap and small, the vastness of space compressed into fifty centimeters by fifty centimeters. She had the computer figure the fastest burn for the *Cerisier*. It was less than an hour. She leaned into the thrust like she was riding a roller coaster and let the torch engines burn. The *Cerisier* appeared in the dusting of stars as a small gray dot that hurtled toward her. The ship, like all the others in the flotilla, was in the last of the deceleration burn to put them at the Ring. Somewhere out past all the glowing drive plumes, it waited. Melba pushed the thought from her mind. It made her think of Stanni and Soledad and their quiet fears. She couldn’t think of them now.

Impatience to arrive made it hard to start the flip and the deceleration burn. She wanted to get there, to be there already. She wanted to speed into the *Cerisier* like a witch on a broom, screaming in at speeds that wouldn’t have been possible in atmosphere. She waited too long, and did the last half of the jump at almost two g. When she docked, she had a headache and her jaw felt like someone had punched her.

No one asked why she was back early and alone. She listed personal reasons in the log. Walking through the cramped corridors, squeezing past the other crewmen, felt oppressive, familiar, and comforting. It took coming back to recognize how much the wider spaces of the *Thomas Prince* had bothered her. It felt too much like freedom, and she was all about necessity.

Her cell was a mess. All of her things—clothes, terminal jack, tampons, communications deck, toothbrush—were scattered on the floor. She’d have to find a way to secure them all before the burn stopped, or they’d be floating out into the corridor. People would wonder why they weren’t packed away. She let herself glance at the metal door under her crash couch. A tiny golden curl of sealant foam stuck out from one corner. She’d get some kind of mesh bag and some magnets. That would do. It didn’t matter. That was later. Nothing later mattered.

She picked up the comm deck, turned it on. Ping times to the *Rocinante* were under thirty seconds. Melba loaded the sequence she’d been waiting to load for months. Years. It was a short script. It didn’t take a second to prompt her to confirm.

The fear was gone. The hatred was too. For a moment, the tiny room was filled with a sense of having just woken from a dream, and her body felt relaxed. Almost light. She’d come so far and worked so hard, and despite all of the mistakes and screwups and last-minute improvisations, she’d done it. Everything in her life had been aiming toward this moment, and now that she was here, it was almost hard to let it all go. She felt like she was graduating from university or getting married. This moment, this action that fulfilled all the things she’d fought for, and then her world would never be the same.

Carefully, savoring each keystroke, she put in the confirmation code—JULES-PIERRE MAO—and thumbed the send button. The comm deck LED glowed amber. At the speed of light, a tiny packet of information was pulsing out, hardly more than a bit of background static. But the software on the *Rocinante* would recognize it. The communications array on Holden’s ship would be slaved to the virtual machine already installed and impossible to stop without scraping the whole system clean. The *Rocinante* would send a clearly recognizable trigger code to the *Seung Un*, wait fifty-three seconds, and announce Holden’s responsibility and his demands. And then the virtual machine would power up the weapons and targeting systems. And nothing, no power in the universe, could stop it from happening.

The comm deck got the confirmation response, and the amber LED shifted to red.

Chapter Fifteen: Bull

Bull's hand terminal sat on the cart's thin plastic dashboard, jiggling with every bump in the corridor floor. The siren blatted its standard two-tone, scattering people from his path and calling them out behind him. If they didn't know yet, they all would in minutes. The death of the *Seung Un* wasn't the sort of thing you could overlook.

On the small, jittering screen, the destroyer exploded again. At first it was only a flicker of orange light amidships, something that could have been electrical discharge or a gauss gun finishing its maintenance regimen. Half a second later, sparkles of yellow radiated out from the site. Two seconds after, the major detonation. Between one frame and the next, the destroyer's side bloomed open. Then nothing for ten full seconds before the fusion reactor core emerged slowly from the back, brighter than the sun. Bull watched the intense white gases begin to diffuse out and fade into a massive golden aurora, a drop of gold losing cohesion in the oceanic black.

He looked up to make the turn onto the ramp that would take him back to the office. A young man ambled slowly out of his path, and Bull leaned on the cart's horn.

"There's a siren," Bull yelled as he passed the young man, and got an insolent nod in reply.

"Okay," Serge said from the terminal. "We're getting the first security analysis. Best guess, something blew out in one of the power conduits, fused the safety systems so they couldn't shut it down. Would have taken about that long to turn the whole starboard main circuit to molten slag."

"What blew?" Bull demanded.

"Probably a maneuvering thruster. About the right place for one. Get it hot enough, water skips steam and just goes straight to plasma. Cuts right through the bulkheads around it."

Bull turned the cart around a tight corner and slowed to let a half dozen pedestrians get out of his way.

"Why'd they dump core?"

"Don't know, but probably they thought they'd lose containment. They got six ships diverting now to keep from plowing into that mierda."

"If they'd lost containment it'd be worse. They'd be diverting to avoid bodies and shrapnel. Are there survivors?"

"Yeah. They're putting out the distress request. Medical and evacuation. Sounds pretty fucked up, que no?"

"What about trace data. Can we tell who shot 'em?"

"No one shot 'em. Either it was a straight accident, or..."

"Or?"

"Or it wasn't."

Bull bit his lip. An accident would be bad enough. People on all sides of the system's power structure were on edge, and a reminder that Earth's fleet was aging and poorly maintained wouldn't make anything easier. Sabotage would be worse. The closest thing to good news was that everyone had seen it and there wouldn't be any accusations of enemy action. If there'd been a gauss round or a lucky missile that had slipped through the *Seung Un*'s defenses undetected, the scientific mission could turn into a shooting war faster than Bull wanted to think about.

"Are we offering assistance?" Bull asked.

“Give us a breath, boss,” Serge said. “Ashford ain’t hearing any of this faster than us.”

Bull leaned forward, his hands wrapping the steering controls until his knuckles went white. Serge was right. What happened outside the ship was Ashford’s problem. And Pa’s. He was security chief, and he needed to think about what needed doing inside the *Behemoth*. People would be scared, and it was his job to make sure that fear didn’t turn into hysteria. Watching a ship blow out—even an enemy ship—reminded everyone how tenuous life was with only a thin skin of steel and ceramic to keep the vacuum at bay. It reminded him. The cart hit a larger bump than usual, and his hand terminal slipped onto its side.

“Okay,” Bull said. “Look, we’re going to need to get relief supplies ready in case the captain decides to offer assistance. How many survivors can we take on?”

Serge’s laughter rasped.

“All of them. We’re the pinche *Behemoth*. We got enough room for a city, us.”

“Okay,” Bull said, smiling a little despite himself. “It was a stupid question.”

“The only thing we got to worry about is—”

The line went dead.

“Serge? Not funny,” Bull said. And then, “Talk to me, mister.”

“We got something. Broadcast coming from a private corvette called the *Rocinante*.”

“Why do I know that name?” Bull asked.

“Yeah,” Serge said. “I’m putting it to you.”

The handset screen blacked out, jumped, and then a familiar face appeared. Bull let the cart slow as James Holden, the man whose announcement about the death of the ice hauler *Canterbury* started the first war between Earth and Mars, once again made things worse.

“... ship that approaches the Ring without my *personal* permission will be destroyed without warning. Do not test my resolve.”

“Oh no,” Bull said. “Oh shit no.”

“It has always been a personal mission of mine to assure that information and resources remain free to all people. The efforts of individuals and corporate entities may have helped us to colonize the planets of our solar system and make life possible where it was inconceivable before, but the danger of someone unscrupulous taking control of the Ring is too great. I have proven myself worthy of the trust of the people of the Belt. It is a moral imperative that this shining artifact be protected, and I will spill as much blood as I have to in order to do so.”

Bull scooped up the hand terminal and tried to connect to Ashford. The red trefoil of command block blinked on the screen and shunted him to a menu that let him record a message for later. He tried Pa and got the same thing. Holden’s message was looping now, the replayed words just as idiotic and toxic the second time through. Bull said something obscene through clenched teeth. He pulled on the cart, turning the wheels as far as they would go, and stamped on the accelerator. The central lifts were only a minute or two away. He could get there. Just please God let Ashford not do anything stupid before he got to the bridge.

“That true, boss?” Serge said. “Did Holden just claim us all the Ring?”

“I want everyone on security mobilized right now,” Bull said. “Enemy action protocols. Corridors clear and bulkheads closed. Anyone on a weapons or damage control team, wake ’em up and get ’em dressed. You’re in charge of that.”

“You got it, boss,” Serge said. “Someone asks, where are you?”

“Trying to keep from needing them.”

“Bien.”

The familiar corridors seemed longer than usual, the awkwardness of floors built to be walls and walls intended as ceilings more surreal. If he’d been on a real battleship, there would have been a simple, direct path. If the *Behemoth*’s great belly had been spinning, it would have been better than

this. He willed the cart faster, pushing the engine past what it could do. The alert Klaxon sounded: Serge calling everyone to brace for battle.

A crowd had formed at the lift: men and women trying to get back to their stations. Bull pushed through them, the shortest person there. An Earther, like Holden. At the lift, he activated the security override, called the first car, and stepped in. A tall, dark-skinned man tried to follow him. Bull put a hand on the man's chest, stopping him.

"Take the next one," Bull said. "I'm not going where you want to be."

As the lift rose toward the bridge like it was ascending to heaven, Bull used his hand terminal to grasp for any information. He didn't have access to the secure channels—only the captain and the XO had those—but there was more than enough public chatter. He ran through the open feeds, grasping for a sense of the situation, watching for a few seconds here, a few seconds there.

The Martian science team and their escort were raging at Holden on every feed, calling him a terrorist and a criminal. The Earth flotilla's reaction was quieter. Most of the public conversation was coordinating the rescue efforts on the *Seung Un*. The high-energy gas from the core dump was confusing some of the relief crew's comms, and someone fairly smart had started using the public feeds to coordinate them. It had the grim efficiency of a military operation, and it gave Bull hope for the Earth navy crew still alive on the *Seung Un* as much as it scared him about what was going to come after.

Holden's message was repeating, spilling out over the public feeds. At first it just came from the *Rocinante*, but soon it was being relayed on other feeds along with commentary. Once the signal got back to the Belt and the inner planets, it was going to be the only thing anyone talked about. Bull could already imagine the negotiations between Earth and Mars, could practically hear them reaching the conclusion that the OPA had gotten too confident and needed to be taken down a notch.

Someone on the *Behemoth* put out a copy of Holden's message with the split circle emblem over it and a commentary track saying that it was about time that the Belt take its place and demand the respect it deserved. Bull told Serge to find the feed and shut it down.

After what felt like hours and probably wasn't more than four minutes, the lift reached the bridge, the doors opening silently before him, and let Bull out.

The bridge wasn't designed for battle. Instead of a real war machine's system of multiple stations and controlled lines of command, the *Behemoth's* bridge was built like the largest tugboat ever made, only with angels blowing golden trumpets adorning the walls. The stations—single stations with a rotating backup scheme—were manned by Belters looking at each other and chatting. The security station was through a separate door and stood unmanned. The bridge crew were acting like children or civilians, their expressions were bright and excited. People who didn't recognize danger when they saw it and assumed that whatever the crisis was, it would all work out in the end.

Ashford and Pa were at the command station. Ashford was speaking into a camera, talking with someone on one of the other ships. Pa, scowling, strode toward Bull. Her eyes were narrow and her lips bloodless.

"What the hell are you doing here, Mister Baca?"

"I've got to talk to the captain," Bull said.

"Captain Ashford's busy right now," Pa said. "You might have noticed we have a situation on our hands. I would have expected you to be at your duty station."

"Yes, XO, but—"

"Your station isn't on the bridge. You should leave now."

Bull clenched his jaw. He wanted to shout at her, but this wasn't the time for it. He was here to make it work, and that wasn't going to help.

"We've got to shoot him, ma'am," Bull said. "We've got to fire on the *Rocinante*, and we've got to do it now."

All heads had turned toward them. Ashford ended his transmission and stepped toward them. Uncertainty made him look haughty. The captain's eyes flickered toward the crew members at their stations and back again. Bull could see how aware Ashford was that he was being watched. It deformed all his decisions, but there wasn't time for privacy.

"I have this under control, Mister Baca," Ashford said.

"All respect, Captain," Bull said, "but we've got to shoot down Holden, and we have to do it before anyone else does."

"We're not going to do a damn thing until we know what's going on, mister," Ashford said, his voice taking a dangerous buzz. "I've sent back a request for clarification to Ceres to see whether the higher-ups authorized Holden's action, and I am monitoring the activity of the Earther fleet."

The slip was telling. Not UN. Earther. Bull felt the blood in his neck. Ashford's casual racism and incompetence was about to get them all killed. He gritted his teeth, lowered his head, and raised his voice.

"Sir, there's a calculation happening right now with Earth and Mars both—"

"This is a potentially volatile situation, Mister Baca—"

"—where they have to decide whether to take direct response or let Holden win—"

"—and I am not going to be the one to throw gas on the fire. Escalating to violence at this point —"

"—and once they start shooting at *him*, they're going to start shooting at *us*."

Pa's voice cut through the air like a single flute in a bass symphony.

"He's right, sir."

Bull and Ashford turned toward her. Ashford's surprise was a mirror of his own. The man at the sensor station muttered something to the woman next to him, the hiss of his voice carrying in the sudden silence.

"Mister Baca's right," Pa said. "Holden's identified himself as a representative of the OPA. He's taken violent action against the Earth forces. The opposing commanders will have to look on us as his backup."

"Holden isn't a representative of the OPA," Ashford said. The bluster made him sound unsure.

"You called Ceres," Bull said. "If you're not sure, they're not either."

Ashford's face flushed red.

"Holden hasn't had any official status with the OPA since Fred Johnson fired him over his handling of Ganymede. If there's a question, I can clarify with the other commanders that Holden doesn't speak for us, but no one's taking any action. The best thing is to wait and let things cool down."

Pa looked down, then up again. It didn't matter that she'd humiliated Bull and Sam in front of the command staff. All that counted was doing this next part right. Bull wanted to reach out, touch her arm, lend her the courage to stand up to Ashford.

It turned out she didn't need it.

"Sir, if we don't take the initiative, someone else will, and then it's going to be too late for clarifications. Denials are fine if they're believed, but Holden and his crew were known to be working with us previously and they're claiming to represent us now. We're four hours' lag to Ceres. We can't wait for answers. We have to make the division between us and Holden unequivocal. Mister Baca's right. We need to engage the *Rocinante*."

Ashford's face was gray.

"I'm not going to start a shooting war," he said.

"You listening to the same feeds as me, Captain?" Bull asked. "Everyone already thinks we did."

"The *Rocinante*'s one ship. We can take her out," Pa said. "If we fight Earth or Mars, we'll lose."

The truth lay on the floor between them. Ashford put a hand to his chin. His eyes were flickering back and forth like he was reading something that wasn't there. Every second he didn't respond, his cowardice showed through, and Bull could see that the man knew it. Resented it. Ashford was responsible, and didn't want the responsibility. He was more afraid of looking bad than of losing.

"Mister Chen," Ashford said. "Get a tightbeam to the *Rocinante*. Tell Captain Holden that it's an urgent matter."

"Yes, sir," the communications officer said, and then a moment later, "The *Rocinante* isn't accepting the connection, sir."

"Captain?" the man at the sensor array said. "The *Rocinante*'s changing course."

"Where's she going?" Ashford demanded, his gaze still locked on Bull.

"Um. Toward us? Sir?"

Ashford closed his eyes.

"Mister Corley," he growled. "Power up the port missile array. Mister Chen, I want tightbeam connections to the Earth and Mars command ships, and I want them now."

Bull let himself sag back. The sense of urgency giving way to relief and a kind of melancholy. *One more time, Colonel Johnson. We dodged the bullet one more time.*

"Weapons board is green, sir," the weapons officer said, her voice crisp and excited as a kid at an arcade.

"Lock target," Ashford said. "Do I have those tightbeams yet?"

"We're acknowledged and pending, sir," Chen said. "They know we want to talk."

"That'll do," Ashford said, and began pacing the bridge like an old-time captain on a wooden quarterdeck. His hands were clasped behind his back.

"We have lock," the weapons officer said. Then, "The *Rocinante*'s weapons systems are powering up."

Ashford sank into his couch. His expression was sour. He'd been hoping, Bull realized, that it might be true. That the OPA might be making a play to control the Ring.

The man was an idiot.

"Should we fire, sir?" the weapons officer asked, the strain in her voice like a dog on a leash. She wanted to. Badly. Bull didn't think better of her for it. He glanced at Pa, but she was making a point of not looking at him.

"Yes," Ashford said. "Go ahead. Fire."

"One away, sir," the weapons officer said.

"I'm getting an error code," the operations officer said. "We're getting feedback from the launcher."

Bull's mouth tasted like a penny. If Holden had put a bomb on the *Behemoth* too, their problems might only be starting.

"Is the missile out?" Pa snapped. "Tell me we don't have an armed torpedo stuck in the tube."

"Yes, sir," the weapons officer said. "The missile is away. We have confirmation."

"The *Rocinante* is taking evasive maneuvers."

"Is she returning fire?" Ashford said.

"No, sir. Not yet, sir."

"I'm getting errors in the electrical grid, sir. I think something's shorted out. We might—"

The bridge went dark.

"—lose power. Sir."

The monitors were black. The lights were off. The only sound was the hum of the air recyclers, running, Bull imagined, off the battery backups. Ashford's voice came out of the darkness.

"Mister Pa, did we ever test-fire the missile systems?"

“I believe it’s on the schedule for next week, sir,” the XO said. Bull tuned his hand terminal screen to its brightest, lifting it like a torch. He glanced up at the emergency lighting set into the walls all around the room, sitting there as dark as everything else. Another system that hadn’t been tested yet.

A few seconds later, half of the bridge crew pulled flashlights out of recessed emergency lockers. The light level came up as beams played across the room. No one spoke. No one needed to. If the *Rocinante* fired back, they were a dead target, but the chances were that they wouldn’t lose the whole ship. If they’d waited until they were in pitched battle against Earth or Mars or both, the *Behemoth* would have died. Instead, they’d just shown the whole system how unprepared they were. It was the first time Bull was really glad to be just the security officer.

“XO?” Bull said.

“Yes.”

“Permission to release the chief engineer from house arrest?”

Pa’s face was monochrome gray in the dim light, and solemn as the grave. Still, he thought he saw a glint of bleak amusement in her eyes.

“Permission granted,” she said.

Chapter Sixteen: Holden

Well,” Amos said. “That’s just fucking peculiar.”

The message began to repeat.

“This is Captain James Holden. What you’ve just seen is a demonstration of the danger you are in...”

The ops deck was in a stunned silence, then Naomi began working the ship ops panel with a quiet fury. In Holden’s peripheral vision, Monica motioned to her crew and Okju lifted a camera. The tacit decision to let the “no civilians on the ops deck” rule slide suddenly seemed like it might have been a mistake.

“It’s a fake,” Holden said. “I never recorded that. That’s not me.”

“Sort of sounds like you, though,” Amos said.

“Jim,” Naomi said, panic beginning to distort her voice. “That broadcast is coming from us. It’s coming from the *Roci* right now.”

Holden shook his head, denying the assertion outright. The only thing more ridiculous than the message itself was the idea that it was coming from *his* ship.

“That broadcast is coming from us,” Naomi said, slamming her hand against her screen. “And I can’t stop it!”

Everything seemed to recede from Holden, the noises in the room coming from far away. He recognized it as a panic reaction, but he gave in to it, accepted the short moment of peace it brought. Monica was shouting questions at him he could barely hear. Naomi was furiously pounding on her workstation, flipping through menu screens faster than he could follow. Over the ship’s comm, Alex was shouting demands for orders. From across the room, Amos was staring at him with a look of almost comical puzzlement. The two camera operators, equipment still clutched in one hand, were trying to belt themselves into crash couches with the other. Cohen floated in the middle of the room, lips pursed in a faint frown.

“This was the setup,” Holden said. “This is what it was for.”

Everything: the Martian lawsuit, the loss of his *Titania* job, the camera crew going to the Ring, all leading to this. The only thing he couldn’t imagine was why.

“What do you mean?” Monica asked, pushing close to get into the shot with him. “What setup?”

Amos put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head once.

“Naomi,” Holden said, “is the only system you’ve lost control of comms?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“Then kill it. If you can’t, help Amos isolate the entire comm system from the power grid. Cut it out of the damn ship if you have to.”

She nodded again and then turned to Amos.

“Alex,” Holden said. Monica started to say something to him, but he held up one finger to silence her, and she closed her mouth with a snap. “Get us burning toward the *Behemoth*. We’re not really claiming the Ring for the OPA, but as long as everyone thinks we are, they’re the team least likely to shoot us.”

“What can you tell me about what’s going on?” Monica said. “Are we in danger here? Is this dangerous?” Her usual smirk was gone. Open fear had replaced it.

“Strap in,” Holden said. “All of you. Do it now.”

Okju and Clip were already belted into crash couches, and Monica and Cohen quickly followed suit. The entire documentary crew had the good sense to stay quiet.

“Cap,” Alex said. His voice had taken on the almost sleepy tone he got when in a high-stress situation. “The *Behemoth* just lit us up with their targeting laser.”

Holden belted himself into the combat ops station and warmed it up. The *Roci* began counting ships within their threat radius. It turned out to be all of them. The ship asked him if any should be marked as hostiles.

“Your guess is as good as mine, honey.”

“Huh?” Naomi asked.

“Um,” Alex said. “Are you guys warming up the weapons?”

“No,” Holden said.

“Oh, I’m really sorry to hear that,” Alex said. “Weapons systems are coming online.”

“Are we shooting at anyone?”

“Not yet?”

Holden told the *Roci* to mark anything that hit them with a targeting system as hostile and was relieved when the system actually responded. The *Behemoth* shifted to red on the display. Then, after a moment’s thought, he told the ship to lump all the Martians and Earth ships into two groups. If they wound up fighting with one ship in a group, they’d be fighting them all.

There were too many. The *Roci* was caught between Fred Johnson’s two-kilometer-long OPA overcompensation and most of the remaining Martian navy. And beyond the Martians, the Ring.

“Okay,” he said, desperately trying to think of what to do now. They were as far from a hiding spot as it was possible to be in the solar system. It was a two-month trip just to the nearest rock bigger than their ship. He doubted he could outrun three fleets and all their torpedoes for two months. Or two minutes, really, if it came to that. “How’s that radio coming?”

“Down,” Amos said. “Easy enough to just pull the plug.”

“Do we have any way to tell everyone that the broadcast wasn’t us? I will happily signal full and complete surrender at this point,” Holden said.

“Not without turning it back on,” Amos replied.

“Everyone out there is probably trying to contact us,” Holden said. “The longer we don’t answer, the worse this will look. What about the weapons?”

“Warmed up, not shooting,” Amos said. “And not responding to us.”

“Can we pull power on those too?”

“We can,” Amos said, looking pained. “But damn, I sure don’t want to.”

“Fast mover!” Naomi yelled.

“Holy shit,” Alex said. “The OPA just fired a torpedo at us.”

On Holden’s panel, a yellow dot separated from the *Behemoth* and shifted to orange as it took off at high g.

“Go evasive!” Holden said. “Naomi, can you blind it?”

“No. No laser,” she replied, her voice surprisingly calm now. “And no radio. Countermeasures aren’t responding.”

“Fuck me,” Amos said. “Why did someone drag us all the way out here just to kill us? Coulda done that at Ceres, saved us the trip.”

“Alex, here’s your course.” Holden sent the pilot a vector that would take them right through the heart of the Martian fleet. As far as he knew, the Martians only wanted to arrest him. That sounded okay. “Has the *Behemoth* fired again?”

“No,” Naomi replied. “They’ve gone dark. No active sensors, no drives.”

“Kinda big and kinda close to be trying for sneaky,” Alex said without any real humor. “Here comes the juice.”

While the couches pumped them full of drugs to keep the high g from killing them, apropos of nothing Cohen said, “Fucking *bitch*.”

Before Holden could ask what he meant, Alex opened up the *Roci*’s throttle and the ship took off like a racehorse feeling the spurs. The sudden acceleration slammed Holden into his couch hard enough to daze him for a second. The ship buzzed him back to his senses when a missile proximity alarm warned him the *Behemoth*’s torpedo was getting closer. Helpless to do anything about it, Holden watched the orange dot that meant all their deaths creeping ever closer to the fleeing *Rocinante*. He looked up at Naomi, and she was looking back, as helpless as he was, all her best tricks taken away when the comm array was powered down.

The gravity dropped suddenly. “Got an idea,” Alex said over the comm, then the ship jerked through several sharp maneuvers, and the gravity went away again. The *Rocinante* had added a new alarm to her song. A collision warning was sounding. Holden realized he’d never actually heard a collision alarm outside of drills. When do spaceships run *into* each other?

He turned on the exterior cameras to a field of uniform black. For a second, he thought they were broken, but then Alex took control of them, panning out along the vast expanse of a Martian cruiser’s skin. The target lock buzzer cut out, the missile losing them.

“Put this Martian heavy between us and the missile,” Alex said, almost whispering it, as though the missile might hear if he spoke too loud.

“How close are we to them?” Holden asked, his voice matching Alex’s.

“ ’Bout ten meters,” Alex said, pride in his voice. “More or less.”

“This is really going to piss them off if the missile keeps coming,” Amos said. Then, almost meditatively, “I don’t even know what a point defense cannon does at a range like this.”

As if in answer, the cruiser hit them with a targeting laser. Then all of the other Martian ships did as well, adding a few dozen more alarms to the cacophony.

“Shit,” Alex said, and the gravity came back like a boulder rolled onto Holden’s chest. None of the Martian ships fired, but the original missile shot back into view on the scope. The Martians were guiding it in, now that the *Behemoth* seemed to be out of action. Holden marveled that he’d lived *just* long enough to finally see real Martian-OPA cooperation. It wasn’t as gratifying as he’d hoped.

Martian ships whipped past on both sides as the *Rocinante* accelerated through the main cluster of their fleet. Holden could imagine the targeting arrays and point defense cannons swiveling to track them as they went by. Once past them, there was nothing but the Ring and infinite star-speckled black all around it.

The plan came to mind with the sick, sinking feeling of something horrible he’d always known and tried to forget. The missile was coming, and even if they avoided it, there would be others. He couldn’t dodge forever. He couldn’t surrender. For all he knew, his weapons might start firing at any second. For a moment, the ops deck seemed to go still, time slowing the way it did when something catastrophic was happening. He was intensely aware of Naomi, pressed back in her couch. Monica and Okju, their eyes wide with fear and thrust. Clip, his hand pressed awkwardly into the gel by his side. Cohen’s slack jaw and pale face.

“Huh,” Holden gurgled to himself, the g forces crushing his throat when he vocalized. He signaled Alex to cut thrust, and the gravity dropped away again.

“The Ring,” Holden said. “Aim for the Ring. Go.”

The gravity came back with a slap, and Holden rotated his chair to his workstation and brought up the navigational console. Watching the rapidly approaching orange dot out of the corner of his eye, he built a navigational package for Alex that would take them at high speed to the Ring, then spin them for a massive and almost suicidally dangerous deceleration burn just before they went in.

He could slide them in under the velocity cap that had stopped the *Y Que* and all the fast-moving probes since. With any luck, the missile would be caught by whatever was on the other side, and the *Roci*, going slower, wouldn't. The ship warned him that such high-g forces had a 3 percent chance to kill one of the crew members even during a short burn.

The missile would kill them all.

Holden sent the nav package to Alex, half expecting him to refuse. Hoping. Instead, the *Roci* accelerated for an endless twenty-seven minutes, followed by a nauseating zero-g spin that lasted less than four seconds, and a deceleration burn that lasted four and a half minutes and knocked every single person on the ship unconscious.



"Wake up," Miller said in the darkness.

The ship was in free fall. Holden began coughing furiously as his lungs attempted to find their normal shape again after the punishing deceleration burn. Miller floated beside him. No one else seemed to be awake yet. Naomi wasn't moving at all. Holden watched her until he could see the gentle rise and fall of her rib cage. She was alive.

"Doors and corners," Miller said. His voice was soft and rough. "I tell you check your doors and corners, and you blow into the middle of the room with your dick hanging out. Lucky sonofabitch. Give you this, though, you're consistent."

Something about the way he spoke seemed saner than usual. More controlled. As if guessing his thoughts, the detective turned to look at him. Smiled.

"Are you here?" Holden asked. His mind was still fuzzy, his brain abused by thrust and oxygen loss. "Are you real?"

"You're not thinking straight. Take your time. Catch up. There's no hurry."

Holden pulled up the exterior cameras and blew out one long exhale that almost ended in a sob. The OPA missile was floating outside the ship, just over a hundred meters from the nose of the *Roci*. The torpedo's drive was still firing, its tail a furious white torch stretching nearly a kilometer behind it. But the missile hung in space, motionless.

Holden didn't know if the missile had been that close when they went through. He suspected not. More likely, they'd just wound up that close once they'd both stopped moving. Even so, the sight of the massive weapon, engine burning as it still fought to reach him, made a shiver go down his spine and his balls creep up into his belly. Ten meters closer and they'd have been in proximity. It would have detonated.

As he watched, the missile was slowly pulled away, dragged off to who knew where by whatever power set the speed limit on this side of the Ring.

"We made it," he said. "We're through."

"Yeah," Miller said.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it? This is why you did it."

"You're giving me too much credit."

Amos and Naomi both groaned as they started to wake. The documentary crew was motionless. They might even be dead. Holden couldn't tell without unstrapping, and his body wouldn't allow that yet. Miller leaned close to the screen, squinting at it like he was searching for something. Holden pulled up the sensor data. A host of information flooded in. Numerous objects, clustered within a million kilometers, close as seeds in a pod. And past them, nothing. Not even starlight.

"What are they?" Holden asked. "What's out there?"

Miller glanced down at the display. His face was expressionless.

“Nothing,” the dead man said. And then, “It scares the shit out of me.”

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Chapter Seventeen: Bull

The hell are we?” Serge said, floating gently by the security desk. “Security or fucking babysitters?”

“We’re whatever gets the job done,” Bull said, but he couldn’t put much force behind the words.

It was thirty hours since the *Behemoth* had gone dark, and he had slept for six of them. Serge, Casimir, Jojo, and Corin had been trading off duty at the desk, coordinating the recovery. The rest of the security staff had been in ad hoc teams, putting down two little panic riots, coordinating the physical resources to free a dozen people trapped in storage bays where the air recycler hadn’t booted back up, arresting a couple of mech jockeys who’d taken the chaos as opportunity to settle a personal score.

The lights were on all across the ship now. The damage control systems, woken from their coma, were working double time to catch up. The crews were exhausted and frightened and on edge, and James fucking Holden had escaped through the Ring into whatever was on the other side. The security office smelled like old sweat and the bean curd masala that Casimir had brought in yesterday. For the first day, there had been an unconscious effort to keep a consistent physical orientation—feet toward the floor, head toward the ceiling. Now they all floated in whatever direction they happened to fall into. It seemed almost natural to the Belters. Bull still suffered the occasional bout of vertigo.

“Amen alles amen,” Serge said with a laugh. “Lube for the machine, us.”

“Least fun I’ve ever had with lube,” Corin said. Bull noted that when Corin got tired, she got raunchy. In his experience, everyone dealt with pushing too hard differently. Some got angry and irritable, some got sad. At a guess, it was all loss of inhibition. Wear down the façade with too much work or fear or both, and whoever was waiting underneath came out.

“All right,” Bull said. “You two go take a rest. I’ll watch the shop until the others get back. You two have done more than—”

The security desk chimed. The connection request was from Sam. Bull lifted a finger to Serge and Corin, and pulled himself over to the desk.

“Sam?” he said.

“Bull,” she replied, and the single syllable, short and sharp, carried a weight of annoyance and anger that verged on rage. “I need you to come down here.”

“You can call whoever you want,” a man’s voice said in the background. “I don’t care, you hear? I don’t care anymore. You do whatever you want.”

Bull checked the connection location. She was down near the machine shops. It wasn’t too far.

“I need to bring a sidearm?” Bull asked.

“I won’t stop you, sweetie,” Sam said.

“On my way,” he said, and dropped the connection.

“Gehst du,” Corin said to Serge. “You’ve been up longer. I’ll keep the place from burning.”

“You going to be all right?” Serge asked, and it took Bull a second to realize the man was talking to him.

“Unstoppable,” Bull said, trying to mean it.

Being exhausted in zero gravity wasn’t the same as it was under thrust or down a gravity well. Growing up, Bull had been dead tired pretty often, and the sense of weight, of his muscles falling off

the bone like overcooked chicken, was what desperate fatigue meant. He'd been off of Earth for more years now than he'd been on it, and it still confused him on an almost cellular level to be worn to the point of collapse and not feel it in his joints. Intellectually, he knew it left him feeling that he could do more than he actually could. There were other signs: the grit against his eyes, the headache that bloomed slowly out from the center of his skull, the mild nausea. None of them had the same power, and none of them convinced.

The corridors weren't empty, but they weren't crowded. Even at full alert, with every team working double shifts and busting ass, the *Behemoth* was mostly empty. He moved through the ship, launching himself handhold to handhold, sailing down each long straightaway like he was in a dream. He was tempted to speed up, slapping at the handholds and ladders as they passed and adding just a touch of kinetic energy to his float the way he and his men had back in his days as a marine. More than one concussion had come out of the game, and he didn't have time for it now. He wasn't young anymore either.

He found Sam and her crew in a massive service bay. Four men in welding rigs floated near the wall, fixing lengths of conduit to the bulkhead with showers of sparks and lights brighter than staring at the sun. Sam floated nearby, her body at a forty-five-degree angle from the work. A young Belter floated near her, his body at an angle that pointed his feet toward her. Bull understood it was an insult.

"Bull," Sam said. The young man's face was a pale mask of rage. "This is Gareth. He's decided laying conduit's icky."

"I'm an *engineer*," Gareth said, spitting out the word so violently it gave him a degree of spin. "Did eight years on Tycho Station! I'm not going to get used like a fucking *technician*."

The other welders didn't turn from their work, but Bull could see them all listening. He looked at Sam, and her face was closed. Bull couldn't tell if calling him in for help had been hard for her or if it was part of how she expected him to make things right to her after the thing with Pa. That it had been the shortest detention on record didn't pull the sting of being caught up in his political struggles. Either way, she'd escalated the problem to him, and so it was his now.

Bull took a deep breath.

"So what are we working on here?" he asked, less because he cared than that it would give him a few extra seconds to think and his brain wasn't at its best.

"I've got a major line faulting out," Sam said. "I can take three days and diagnose the whole thing or I can take twenty hours and put up a workaround."

"And the conduit's for the workaround?"

"Is."

Bull lifted his fist in the Belter's equivalent of a nod and then turned his attention to the boy. Gareth was young and he was tired and he was an OPA Belter, which meant he'd never been through any kind of real military indoctrination. Bull had to figure Sam had yelled at him enough before she'd called for backup.

"All right, then," Bull said.

"Está-hey bullshit is," the man said, his educated grammar fracturing.

"I understand," Bull said. "You can go. Just help me get your rig on first."

Gareth blinked. Bull thought he saw the ghost of a smile in the corners of Sam's bloodshot eyes, but that could have meant anything. Pleasure at the weariness in Bull's voice or at Gareth's confusion, or maybe she'd understood what Bull was doing and she thought he was really clever.

"I talk to the guys on the other ships some," Bull said. "Earth or Mars. Someone'll be sending a ship back. I'll see if I can't get you a ride as far as Ceres anyway."

Gareth's mouth opened and closed like a goldfish. Sam pushed off, hooking the welder's rig with one hand, pulling it close to speed up the turn and then extending her arm to slow it. Bull took it from

her and started pulling on the straps.

"You know how to do this?" Sam asked.

"Good enough to hang conduit," Bull said.

"Security can lose you?"

"Shift's done," Bull said. "I was just heading for my bunk, but this needs doing, I can do it."

"All right, then," Sam said. "Take the length at the end, and I'll have someone join it up with Marca's. I'll come check your work in a minute."

"Sounds good," Bull said. He was spinning just a few degrees each second and he let the momentum carry him around to face the boy. The rage was still there, but it was sinking under a layer of embarrassment. All his arguments and bluster about not doing something because it was beneath him, and now the head of security was using his off-shift to do the same work. Bull could feel the attention of the other welders on them. Bull lit his torch, just testing it out, and the air between them went white for a second. "Okay, then. I got this. You can go if you want."

The boy shifted, getting ready to launch himself back across the bay and out into the ship. Bull tried to remember the last time he'd actually welded something with no gravity. He was pretty sure he could do it, but he'd have to start slow. Then Gareth's shoulders cupped forward, and he knew he wouldn't have to. Bull started taking off the straps, and Gareth moved forward to help him.

"You're tired," Bull said, his voice low enough not to carry to the others. "You been working too hard, and it got to you a little. Happens to everyone."

"Bien."

He put the torch in the boy's hand and squeezed it there.

"This is a privilege," Bull said. "Being out here, doing this bullshit, working our asses off for no one to give a shit? It's a privilege. Next time you undermine Chief Engineer Rosenberg's authority, I will ship your ass home with a note that says you couldn't handle it."

The boy muttered something Bull couldn't make out. The flare from the other torches made the boy's face dance white and brown and white again. Bull put a hand on his arm.

"Yes, sir," Gareth said. Bull let go, and the boy pushed off to the wall, situating himself over the length of pipe that was waiting there for him. Sam appeared at Bull's elbow, sliding down from the blind spot above and behind him.

"That worked," she said.

"Yeah."

"Didn't hurt that you're an Earther."

"Didn't. How's it all coming?"

"Apart," Sam said. "But we'll stick it back together with bubblegum if we have to."

"Least no one was shooting at us."

Sam's laugh had some warmth in it.

"They wouldn't have had to do it twice."

The alert tone came from all their hand terminals at once, simultaneous with the ship address system. Bull felt his lips press thin.

"Well, that timing's a little ominous," Sam said before Captain Ashford's voice rang out through the ship. The openness of the spaces and the different speakers made the words echo like the voice of God.

"This is your captain speaking. I have just received confirmation from the OPA central authority that the actions undertaken by the criminal James Holden were unauthorized by any part of the Outer Planets Alliance. His actions put not only this ship but the reputation and good standing of the alliance in threat. I have informed the central authority that we took swift and decisive action against Holden, and that he escaped from us only by retreating through the Ring."

"Thanks for that, by the way," Sam said.

“De nada.”

“I have requested and received,” Ashford continued, “the authority to continue action to address this insult as I deem fit. The evidence of our own sensors and of the Martian and Earth feeds to which we have access all show that the *Rocinante* has passed through the Ring in good condition and appears to have sustained no damage despite the physical anomalies on the other side.

“In light of that, I have made the decision to follow Holden through the Ring and take him and his crew into custody. I will be sending out specific instructions to all department heads outlining what preparations we will need to complete before we begin our burn, but I expect to be in pursuit within the next six hours. It is imperative for the pride, dignity, and honor of the OPA that this insult not go unanswered and that the hands that bring Holden to justice be ours.

“I want you all to know that I am honored to serve with such a valiant crew, and that together we will make history. Take these next hours, all of you, to rest and prepare. God bless each and every one of you, and the Outer Planets Alliance.”

With a resounding click from a hundred speakers, Ashford dropped the connection. The flashing white light of the welding torches was gone, and the bay was darker. Laughter warred against despair in Bull’s gut.

“Is he drunk, do you think?” Sam said.

“Worse. Embarrassed. He’s trying to save face,” Bull said.

“The *Behemoth* filled its diddies in front of God and everyone, so now we’re going to be the biggest badass in the system to make up for it?”

“Pretty much.”

“Gonna talk him out of it?”

“Gonna try.”

Sam scratched her cheek.

“Could be hard to back down after that little once-more-into-the-breach thing.”

“He won’t,” Bull said. “But I’ve got to try.”



The inner planets came out to the black with an understanding that they were soldiers sent to a foreign land. Bull remembered the feeling from when he’d first shipped out: the sense that his home was behind him. For the inners, the expansion out into the solar system had always had the military at its core.

The Belters didn’t have that. They were the natives here. The forces that had brought their ancestors out to the Belt had roots in trade, commerce, and the overwhelming promise of freedom. The OPA had begun its life more like a labor union than a nation. The difference was subtle but powerful, and it showed in strange ways.

If they had been in any of the Earth or Mars ships that floated now in the darkness near the Ring, Bull would have come from his thorough and profound dressing down by the captain to seek out XO Pa in a galley or mess hall. But this was the *Behemoth*, so he found her in a bar.

It was a small place with bulbs of alcohol, chocolate, coffee, and tea all set with temperature controls in the nipple, so the uniformly tepid drinks could come out anywhere from almost boiling to just this side of ice. The décor was cheap nightclub, with colored lights and cheap graphic films to hide the walls. Half a dozen people floated on handholds or tethers, and Pa was one of them.

His first thought as he pulled himself toward her was that she needed a haircut. With the false gravity of acceleration gone, her hair floated around her, too short to tie back but still long enough to

interfere with her vision and creep into her mouth. His second thought was that she looked as tired as he was.

"Mister Baca," Pa said.

"XO. You mind if I join you?"

"I was expecting you. You've been to see the captain?"

Bull wished he could sit down, not for any actual reason so much as the small physical punctuation it would have given their conversation.

"I have. He wasn't happy to see me. Showed me the proposal you'd built up on how to remove me from my position."

"It was a contingency plan," she said.

"Yeah. So this idea where we take the *Behemoth* through the Ring? We can't do that. We start any kind of serious burn, we're going to have two navies on our butts. And we don't know what's on the other side except that it's way more powerful than we are."

"Do you want an alien civilization taking its ideas of humanity from Jim Holden?"

Ashford had said the same thing, word for word. It had been his most cogent argument, and now Bull knew where he'd borrowed it from. He'd had the long trip down in the lift to let his sleep-deprived brain come up with its counterargument.

"That's not even going to come into play if they shoot our nuts off before we get there," he said. "You really think Earth and Mars are going to go for the whole 'we're just playing sheriff' line? There's going to be a bunch of them who still think whatever Holden was up to, we were in on it. But even if they don't, the part where they stand to the side and let us take the lead isn't going to happen. You can bet your ass the head of the Mars force is asking his XO if they want an alien civilization taking its ideas of humanity from Ashford."

"That was nice," Pa said. "The reversal thing? That was good."

"The inner planets may not be making threats yet," Bull said, "but—"

"They are. Mars has threatened to open fire on us if we get within a hundred thousand kilometers of the Ring."

Bull put his hand to his mouth. He could feel his mind struggling to make sense of the words. The Martian navy had already laid down an ultimatum. Ashford hadn't even mentioned it.

"So what the hell are we doing?"

"We're preparing for burn in four and three-quarter hours, Mister Baca," Pa said. "Because that's what we've been ordered to do."

The bitterness wasn't only in her voice. It was in her eyes and the angle of her mouth. Sympathy and outrage battled in Bull's mind, and underneath them a rising panic. He was too tired to be having this conversation. Too tired to be doing what had to get done. It had stripped away all the protections that would have made him hesitate to speak. If he could have gotten just one good cycle's rest, maybe he could have found another way, but this was the hand he'd been dealt, so it was the hand he'd play.

"You don't agree with him," Bull said. "If it was your call, you wouldn't do it."

Pa took a long pull at her bulb, the flexible foil buckling under the suction. Bull was pretty sure she wasn't drinking for the taste, and the urge to get some whiskey for himself came on him like an unexpected blow.

"It doesn't matter what I would or wouldn't do," Pa said. "It's not my command, so it's not my decision."

"Unless something happens to the captain," Bull said. "Then it would be."

Pa went still. The sound of the music, the shifting patterns of lights, all of it seemed to recede. They were in their own small universe together. Pa thumbed on the bulb's magnet and stuck it to the wall beside her.

“There are still hours before the burn starts. And then travel time. The situation may change, but I won’t take part in mutiny,” she said.

“Maybe you wouldn’t have to. Doesn’t have to have anything to do with you. But unless you’re going to specifically order me not to—”

“I am specifically ordering you, Mister Baca. I am ordering you not to take any action against the captain. I am ordering you to respect the chain of command. And if that means I have to commit to following through on Ashford’s orders, then I’ll make that commitment. Do you understand me?”

“Yeah,” Bull said slowly. “Either we’re all going to die, or we’re going through the Ring.”

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Chapter Eighteen: Anna

Eleven people showed up for Anna's first worship service. The contrast with her congregation on Europa was unsettling at first. On Europa, she'd have had twenty or so families straggling in over the half hour before the service began, and a few drifting in late. They'd have been all ages, from grandparents rolling in on personal mobility devices to screaming children and infants. Some would come in their Sunday best formal wear, others in ratty casual clothes. The buzz of conversation prior to the service would be in mixed Russian, English, and outer planets polyglot. By the end of the worship meeting, a few might be snoring in their pews.

Her UNN congregation showed up in a single group at exactly 9:55 a.m. Instead of walking in and taking seats, they floated in as a loose clump and then just hovered in a disconcerting cloud in front of her podium. They wore spotless dress uniforms so crisply pressed they looked sharp enough to cut skin. They didn't speak, they just stared at her expectantly. And they were all so young. The oldest couldn't have been more than twenty-five.

The unusual circumstances rendered her standard worship service inappropriate—no need for a children's message or church announcements—so Anna launched directly into a prayer, followed by a scripture reading and a short sermon. She'd considered doing a sermon on duty and sacrifice; it seemed appropriate in the martial setting. But she had instead decided to speak mostly on God's love. Given the fear Chris had expressed a few days prior, it felt like the better choice.

When she'd finished, she closed with another prayer, then served communion. The gentle ritual seemed to ease the tension she felt in the room. Each of her eleven young soldiers came up to her makeshift table, took a bulb of grape juice and a wafer, and returned to their prior position floating nearby. She read the familiar words in Matthew and Luke, then spoke the blessing. They ate the bread and drank from the bulb. And, as had always happened since the very first church service she could remember, Anna felt something vast and quiet settle on her. She also felt the shiver that tried to crawl up her spine competing with a threatening belly laugh. She had a sudden vision of Jesus, who'd asked His disciples to keep doing this in remembrance of Him, watching her little congregation as they floated in microgravity and drank reconstituted grape beverage out of suction bulbs. It seemed to stretch the boundaries of what He'd meant by *this*.

A final prayer and the service was over. Not one of her congregation pushed toward the door to leave. Eleven young faces stared at her, waiting. The oppressive aura of fear she'd managed to push away during the communion crept back into the room.

Anna pulled herself around the podium and joined their loose cloud. "Should I expect anyone next week? You guys are making me nervous."

Chris spoke first. "No, it was real nice." He seemed to want to say more, but stopped and looked down at his hands instead.

"Back on Europa, people would have brought snacks and coffee for after the service," Anna said. "We could do that next time, if you want."

A few halfhearted nods. A muscular young woman in a marine uniform pulled her hand terminal halfway out of her pocket to check the time. Anna felt herself losing them. They needed something else from her, but they weren't going to ask for it. And it definitely wasn't coffee and snacks.

"I had a whole sermon on David," she said, keeping her tone casual. Conversational. "On the burden we place on our soldiers. The sacrifices we ask you to make for the rest of us."

Chris looked up from his hands. The young marine put her hand terminal away. With her podium behind her, the meeting room was just a featureless gray box. The little knot of soldiers floated in front of her, and suddenly the perspective shifted and she was above them, falling toward them. She blinked rapidly to break up the scene and swallowed to get the lemony taste of nausea out of her throat.

"David?" a young man with brown hair and dark skin said. He had an accent that she thought might be Australian.

"King of Israel," another young man said.

"That's just the nice version," the marine countered. "He's the guy who killed one of his own men so he could sleep with his wife."

"He fought for his country and his faith," Anna cut in, using the teacher's voice she used in Bible classes for teenagers. The one that made sure everyone knew she was the voice of authority. "That's the part I care about right now. Before he was a king, he was a soldier. Often unappreciated by those he served. He put his body over and over again between danger and those he'd sworn to protect, even when his leaders were unworthy of him."

A few more nods. No one looking at hand terminals. She felt herself getting them all back.

"And we've been asking that of our soldiers since the beginning of time," she continued.

"Everyone here gave up something to be here. Often we're unworthy of you and you do it anyway."

"So why didn't you?" Chris asked. "You know, do the David sermon?"

"Because I'm scared," Anna said, taking Chris' hand with her left, and the hand of the Australian boy with her right. Without anyone saying anything, the loose cloud became a circle of held hands. "I'm so afraid. And I don't want to talk about soldiers and sacrifice. I want to talk about God watching me. Caring about what happens to me. And I thought maybe other people would too."

More nods. Chris said, "When the skinnies blew that ship, I thought we were all dead."

"No shit," the marine said. She gave Anna an embarrassed look. "Sorry, ma'am."

"It's okay."

"They say they didn't," another woman said. "They shot at Holden."

"Yeah, and then their whole ship mysteriously turned off. If the dusters hadn't pinged Holden, he'd have flown off scot free."

"They're gonna follow him," the young marine said.

"Dusters say they'll smoke them if they go in."

"Fuck the dusters," the Australian said. "We'll grease every one of them if they start anything."

"Okay," Anna cut in, keeping her voice gentle. "Dusters are Martians. They prefer Martians. And calling people from the outer planets skinnies is also rude. Epithets like that are an attempt to dehumanize a group so that you won't feel as bad about killing them."

The marine snorted and looked away.

"And," Anna continued, "fighting out here is the last thing we should be doing. Am I right?"

"Yeah," Chris said. "If we fight out here, we'll all die. No support, no reinforcements, nothing to hide behind. Three armed fleets and nothing bigger than a stray hydrogen atom for cover. This is what we call the kill box."

The silence stretched for a moment, then the Australian sighed and said, "Yeah."

"And something may come out of the Ring."

Saying the thing out loud and then acknowledging it drained the tension out of the air. With everyone floating in microgravity, no one could slump. But shoulders and foreheads relaxed. There were a few sad smiles. Even her angry young marine ran a hand through her blond crew cut and nodded without looking at anyone.

“Let’s do this again next week,” Anna said while she still had them. “We can celebrate communion, then maybe just chat for a while. And in the meantime, my door is always open. Please call me if you need to talk.”

The group began to break up, heading for the door. Anna kept hold of Chris’ hand. “Could you wait a moment? I need to ask you about something.”

“Chris,” the marine said with a mocking singsong voice. “Gonna get a little preacher action.”

“That’s not funny,” Anna said, using the full weight of her teacher voice. The marine had the grace to blush.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“You may leave,” Anna said, and her marine did. “Chris, do you remember the young woman who was in the officers’ mess that first time we met?”

He shrugged. “There were lots of people coming and going.”

“This one had long dark hair. She looked very sad. She was wearing civilian clothes.”

“Oh,” Chris said with a grin. “The cute one. Yeah, I remember her.”

“Do you know her?”

“No. Just a civvy contractor fixing the plumbing, I’d guess. We have a couple ships full of them in the fleet. Why?”

That was a good question. She honestly wasn’t sure why the angry young woman weighed on her mind so much over the last few days. But something about her stuck in Anna’s memory like a burr in her clothing. She’d feel irritated and antsy and suddenly the girl’s face would pop into her mind. The anger, the sense of threat she’d radiated. The proximity of that encounter to the sudden hostilities and damaged ships and people shooting at each other. There was nothing that tied them all together, but Anna couldn’t shake the feeling that they were connected.

“I’m worried about her?” Anna finally said. At least it wasn’t a lie.

Chris was tinkering with his hand terminal. After a few seconds, he said, “Melba Koh. Electrochemical engineer. She’ll probably be on and off the ship here and all the way home. Maybe you’ll run into her.”

“Great,” Anna said, wondering if she actually wanted that to happen.



“You know what sucks?” Tilly asked. Before Anna could say anything, Tilly said, “*This* sucks.”

She didn’t have to elaborate. They were floating together near a table in the civilian commissary. A small plastic box was attached to the table with magnetic feet. Inside it was a variety of tubes filled with protein and carbohydrate pastes in an array of colors and flavors. Next to the box sat two bulbs. Anna’s held tea. Tilly’s coffee. The officers’ mess, with its polite waiters, custom-cooked meals, and open bar, was a distant memory. Tilly hadn’t had an alcoholic drink in several days. Neither of them had eaten anything that required chewing in as long.

“The oat and raisin isn’t bad. I think it might actually have real honey in it,” Anna said, holding up one of the white plastic squeeze packs. Tilly was no stranger to space travel. Her husband owned estates on every major rock in the solar system. But Anna suspected she’d never eaten food out of a plastic tube in her entire life before this. Any pilot who had the poor planning to put Tilly’s ship at null g during one of her meals was probably fired at the next port.

Tilly picked up a packet of the oat mush, wrinkled her lip at it, and flicked it away with her fingers. It sat spinning next to her head like a miniature helicopter.

“Annie,” Tilly said. “If I wanted to suck vile fluids out of a flaccid and indifferent tube, I’d have stayed on Earth with my husband.”

At some point Anna had become Annie to Tilly, and her objection to this nickname hadn't fazed Tilly at all. "You have to eat, eventually. Who knows how long we'll be out here."

"Not much longer, if I have anything to say about it," said a booming voice from behind Anna.

If she'd been touching the floor, she would have jumped. But floating in the air, all she managed was an undignified jerk and squeak.

"Sorry to startle you," Cortez continued, sliding into her field of view. "But I had hoped we might speak."

He was scuffing across the floor wearing the magnetic booties the navy had handed out. Anna had tried them, but drifting free while your feet remained pinned to the floor had given her an uncomfortable underwater sensation that made her even sicker than just floating around did. She never used them.

Cortez nodded to Tilly, his too-white smile beaming at her in his nut-brown face. Without asking if he could join them, he used the menu screen on the table to order himself a soda water. Tilly smiled back. It was the fake *I don't really see you* smile she used on people who carried her luggage or waited on her table. Their mutual contempt established, Tilly sipped her coffee and ignored his presence. Cortez placed one large hand on Anna's shoulder and said, "Doctor Volovodov, I am putting together a coalition of the important civilian counselors on this ship to make a request of the captain, and I'd like your support."

Anna admired the absolute sincerity Cortez managed to pack into a sentence that was almost entirely composed of flattery. Cortez was here because he was the spiritual advisor to the UN secretary-general. Anna was here because the United Methodist Council could spare her, and her home happened to be on the way. If she was on any list of important counselors, then the bar was set pretty low.

"I'm happy to talk about it, Doctor Cortez," Anna said, then reached for her tea bulb. It gave her an excuse to extricate her arm from his grip. "How can I help?"

"First, I have to commend you on your initiative in arranging worship services for the women and men on the ship. I'm ashamed I didn't think of it first, but I'm happy to follow your lead. We're already arranging for similar meetings with leaders of the various faiths on board."

Anna felt a blush come up, even though she suspected that everything Cortez said was manipulative. He was so good, he could get the response he wanted even when you knew exactly what he was up to. Anna couldn't help but admire it a little.

"I'm sure the sailors appreciate it."

"But there is other work we can be doing," Cortez said. "Greater work. And that's what I came to ask you about."

Tilly turned back to the table and gave Cortez a sharp look. "What are you up to, Hank?"

Cortez ignored her. "Anna, may I call you Anna?"

"Here it comes, Annie," Tilly said.

"Annie?"

"No," Anna cut in. "Anna is fine. Please call me Anna."

Cortez nodded his big white-and-brown head at her, blinding her with his smile. "Thank you, Anna. What I want to ask you to do is sign a petition I'm circulating, and add your voice to ours."

"Ours?"

"You know that the *Behemoth* has begun to burn toward the Ring?"

"I'd heard."

"We're asking the captain to accompany it."

Anna blinked twice, then opened her mouth to speak and found nothing to say. She closed it with a snap when she realized both Cortez and Tilly were staring at her. Go *into* the Ring? Holden had

made it inside, and it looked like he was still alive. But actually entering the Ring had never been part of the mission plan, at least not for the civilian contingent.

No one had any idea what the structures were that waited beyond the Ring, or what changes passing through the wormhole might make on humans. Or even if the Ring would stay open. It might have a preset mass limit, or a limited power supply, or anything. It might just slam shut after enough ships had gone through. It might slam shut with half a ship going through. Anna pictured the *Prince* cut in half, the two pieces drifting in space a billion light-years apart, humans spilling into vacuum from both sides.

"We're also asking the Martians to come with us," Cortez continued. "Now hear me out. If we join together in this—"

"Yes," Anna said before she knew she was going to say it. She didn't know why Cortez was pushing for it, and she didn't care. Maybe it was to get votes in the Earth elections. Maybe it was a way for Cortez to exert control over the military commanders. Maybe he felt it was his calling. They hadn't come here as explorers, not really. They'd come here to be seen by the people back at home who were watching. It was why they'd had so many protests and dramas on the way out. Once, this had been about the spectacle, but now things had changed, and this was the answer to the fear she'd seen at church.

The immediate danger wasn't the Ring. At least not right now. It was humans taking their anxiety out on the nearest enemy they could actually see: each other. If the OPA went ahead with its plan to follow Holden into the Ring, and the UN and Martian forces joined together to follow, no one would have any reason to shoot anyone else. They'd be what they'd started out as again. They'd be a joint task force exploring the most important discovery in human history. If they stayed, they were three angry fleets trying to keep one another from getting an advantage. The whole thing spilled into Anna's mind feeling very much like relief.

"Yes," she said again. "I'll sign it. The things we need to know, the things we need to learn and take back with us to all those frightened people back home. That's where we'll learn them. Not here. On the other side. Thank you for asking me, Doctor Cortez."

"Hank, Anna. Please call me Hank."

"Oh," Tilly said, her coffee bulb floating forgotten in the air in front of her. "We are so fucked."



"Hi Nono," Anna said to the video camera in her room's communication panel. "Hi Nami! Mom loves you. She loves you so much." She hugged her pillow to her chest, squeezing it tight. "This is you. This is both of you."

She put the pillow down, taking a moment to compose herself.

"Nono, I'm calling to apologize again."

Chapter Nineteen: Melba

The injustice of it shrieked in the back of her skull; it wouldn't let her sleep. It had come so close to working. So much of it *had* worked. But then Holden dove into the Ring, and something had saved him, and Melba felt a huge invisible fist drive itself into her gut. And it was still there.

She'd watched the whole thing unfold in her quarters, sitting cross-legged on her crash couch, her hand terminal seeking information from any feed. The network had been so swamped with other people doing the same thing, her own signal wouldn't stand out. No one would wonder why she was watching when everyone else was doing the same. When the OPA had opened fire, she'd heard the Earth forces bracing for a wave of sabotage explosions that never came. The anger at Holden, the condemnations and recriminations had been like pouring cool water on a burn. Her team had been called up on an emergency run to the *Seung Un*, repairing the damage she'd done, but she'd checked in whenever there was a free moment. When Mars had turned its targeting lasers on the *Rocinante*, guiding the missile to him, she'd laughed out loud. Holden had stopped her outgoing message, but at the expense of killing his whole communications array. There was no way he could send out a retraction in time.

When he'd passed through the Ring, she'd been in three conversations simultaneously and watching an electrical meter for dangerous fluctuations. She didn't find out until they were being rotated back to the *Cerisier* that Holden hadn't died. That he wasn't going to. The missile had been stopped and the enemy had been spared.

Back on her ship, she'd gone straight to her bunk, curled up on the crash couch, and tried not to panic. Her brain felt like it had come untied; her thoughts ran in random directions. If the Martians had just launched a few missiles of their own instead of waiting for the OPA's to do the job, Holden would be dead. If the *Rocinante* had been a few thousand kilometers closer to the *Behemoth* when it fired, Holden would be dead. The gimbaling under her couch hushed back and forth in the last of the deceleration burn, and she realized she was shaking her body, banging her back against the gel. If the thing that made the protomolecule—the nameless, evil thing that was hunched in the abyssal black on the other side of the Ring—hadn't changed the laws of physics, Holden would be dead.

Holden was alive.

She'd always known that the destruction of James Holden was a fragile thing. Discrepancies would be there if anyone looked closely. She couldn't match her announcement to the exact burn that the *Rocinante* would be on when she sprang her trap. There would be artifacts in the video that a sufficiently close analysis would detect. By the time that happened, though, it would have been too late. The story of James Holden would have been set. New evidence could be dismissed as crackpots and conspiracy theorists. But it required that Holden and his crew be *dead*. It was something she'd always heard her father say. If the other man's dead, the judge only has one story to follow. When he put his communication array back together, the investigation would begin. She'd be caught. They'd find out it was her.

And—the thought had the copper taste of fear—they'd find Ren. They'd know she killed him. Her father would know. Word would reach him in his cell that she had beaten Ren to death, and that would be worse than anything. Not that she'd done it, Melba thought. That she'd been caught doing it.

The sound came from her door, three hard thumps, and she screamed despite herself. Her heart was racing, the blood tapping at the inside of her throat, banging at her ribs.

"Miss Koh?" Soledad's voice came. "You in there? Can I... I need to talk if you've..."

Hearing fear in someone else's voice felt like vertigo. Melba got to her feet. Either the pilot was repositioning the ship or she was just unsteady. She couldn't tell which. She looked in her mirror, and the woman looking out could almost have been a normal person woken from a deep sleep.

"Just a minute," she said, running her fingers through her hair, pressing the dark locks against her scalp. Her face felt clammy. Nothing to be done. She opened the door.

Soledad stood in the thin, cramped corridor. The muscles in her jaw worked like she was chewing something. Her wide eyes skittered over Melba, away and back, away and back.

"I'm sorry, Miss Koh, but I can't... I can't do it. I can't go there. They can fire me, but I can't go." Melba reached out and put her hand on the woman's arm. The touch seemed to startle them both.

"All right," she said. "It'll be all right. Where can't you go?"

The ship shifted. That one wasn't her imagination, because Solé moved too.

"The *Prince*," she said. "I don't want... I don't want to volunteer."

"Volunteer for what?" Melba asked. She felt like she was coaxing the girl back from some sort of mental break. There was enough self-awareness left in her to appreciate the irony.

"Didn't you get the message? It's from the contracts supervisor."

Melba looked back over her shoulder. Her hand terminal was on the crash couch, a green-and-red band on the screen showing that there was a priority message waiting. She raised a finger, keeping Soledad out of the room and away from the locker, and grabbed the terminal. The message had come through ten hours before, marked URGENT AND MUST REPLY. Melba wondered how long she'd been lying in her couch, lost in her panic fugue. She thumbed the message accept. A stream of tight legal script poured onto the screen, brash as a shout.

Danis General Contracting, owners and operators of half the civilian support craft in the fleet, including the *Cerisier*, was invoking the exceptional actions clause of the standard contract. Each functional team would choose a designated volunteer for temporary duty on the UNN *Thomas Prince*. The remuneration would remain at the standard level until completion of the contract, when any hazard bonuses or exemptions would be assessed.

Melba had to read the words three times to understand them.

"I can't go in there," Soledad was saying, somewhere away to her left. The voice had taken on an irritating whine. "My father. I told you about him. You understand. Your sister was there too. You have to tell Bob or Stanni to do it. I can't."

They were going after Holden. They were going through the Ring after Holden. Her panic didn't fall away so much as click into focus.

"None of you are going," Melba said. "This one's mine."



The official transfer was the easiest thing she'd done since she came aboard. She sent a message to the contracts officer with her ID number and a short message saying that she'd accept transfer to the *Prince*. Two minutes later, she had her orders. Three hours to finish her affairs on the *Cerisier*, then into the transport and gone. It was intended, she knew, as a time to meet with her team, make the transition easy. She had other fish to fry.

Filling a locker with industrial sealant was one thing. The foam was made to apply quickly and remain malleable for a few seconds before the yellow mush dimmed to gold and set. The excess

could be cut away with a sharp knife for the next hour. After that, nothing would move it except the right kind of solvent, and even that was an ugly, arduous process.

But leaving the body where it could be found wasn't an option. Someone would be assigned to her bunk, and they'd want to use the locker. Besides which, leaving Ren behind seemed somehow wrong. And so with two and a half hours before she left the ship, Melba took a pair of shoulder-length latex gloves, three cans of solvent, a roll of absorbent towels, and a vacuum-rated large personal tool case into her room and locked the door behind her.

The locker door didn't want to open at first, fixed in place by a drop of sealant she hadn't noticed, but a few sprays of solvent degraded it until she could pull it open with her fingers. The sealant was a single rough-textured face of gold, like a cliff made small. She opened the tool case, took a deep breath, and faced the grave.

"I'm sorry about this," she said. "I'm really, really sorry."

At first the solvent spray didn't seem to do anything beyond a sharp smell, but then the sealant began ticking, like a thousand insects walking over stone. Gouges and crevasses formed in the sealant wall, then a small runnel of slime. She rolled up a few of the towels, setting them on the floor to catch the flow.

Ren's knee was the first part to appear, the round cap of the bone and death-blackened skin emerging from the melting foam like a fossil. The fabric of his uniform was soaked with fluid rot. The smell hit her, but it wasn't as bad as she'd expected. She'd imagined herself retching and weeping, but it was gentler than that. When she took his legs to draw him out, they fell away from his pelvis, so she cut the trousers, wrapped the legs in towels, and put them in the toolbox. Her mind was quiet and still, like an archaeologist pulling the dead of centuries before out into the light. Here was his spine. This was the vile slush where the hydrochloric acid in his gut, no longer held in check by the mechanisms of life, had digested his stomach, his liver, his intestines. She drew out his head last, the bright red hair darkened and flecked with matter like an overused kitchen mop.

She lifted the bones into the toolbox, packed them with the gore- and corruption-soaked towels, then closed his new coffin, triggered the seal, and set the lock combination. She had forty minutes left.

She spent another ten minutes cleaning out the locker where Ren had spent his death, then stripped off the gloves and threw them in the recycler. She bathed, trying to scrub off the stink, and noticed distantly that she was sobbing. She ignored the fact, and by the time she'd changed into her new uniform, the crying seemed to have stopped. She picked up the last of her things, threw them in a pack, put her still-wet hair in a ponytail, and hauled Ren to the loading bay where the other supplies would be taken across to the *Prince*. It didn't allow her time to say her goodbyes to Soledad or Stanni or Bob. She was sorry for that, but it was a burden she could bear.

There were about thirty of them, all told. Men and women she'd seen around the ship, heard their names once or twice, nodded to in the galley or on the exercise machines. Once they reached the *Prince*, they were all brought into a small white conference room with benches that bolted to the floor like pews. They were already under thrust, already moving for the Ring and whatever was on the other side. While the overly enthusiastic yeoman prattled on about the *Thomas Prince*, she glanced at the faces around her. An old man with a scruffy white beard and ice-blue eyes. A stocky blond woman who was probably younger than she was with poorly applied eyeliner and a grim look about the jowls. They'd all come here of their own free will. Or free will as bounded by the terms of their work contracts. They were all going through the Ring, into the mouth of whatever was on the other side. She wondered what would motivate them to do it, what kinds of secrets they'd hidden in *their* tool chests.

"You will need to keep your identification cards with you at all times," the yeoman was saying, holding up a white plastic card on a lanyard. "Not only are these the keys to get into your quarters,

they'll also get you food in the civilian commissary. And they'll let you know if you're where you're supposed to be."

The blond woman turned toward Melba and glared. Melba looked away, blushing. She hadn't intended to stare. Never be rude unintentionally, her father had always said.

The yeoman's white card turned a deep, bloody red.

"If you see this," he said, "it means you're in a restricted area and need to leave immediately. Don't worry too much. She's a big ship, and we all get a little turned around sometimes. I got buzzed four times the first week I was here. No one's going to get bent out of shape over an honest mistake, but security will be following up on them, so be prepared."

Melba looked at her own white card. It had her name, a picture of her unsmiling face. The yeoman was talking about how much they were appreciated, and how their service was an honor to the ship and to themselves. All in this together, one big team. The first stirring of hatred for the man shifted in her gut, and she tried to distract herself.

She didn't know what she'd do once they were all on the other side, but she had to find Holden. She had to destroy him. The soundman too. Anything that led back to her had to be destroyed or discredited. She wondered if there was a way to get a fake card, or one that belonged to someone with a lot more clearance than Melba Koh would have. Maybe one that could check out a shuttle. She'd need to look into it. She was improvising now, and getting the best tools she could manage would be critical.

Around her, people began standing up. From the bored looks and the quiet, she figured they were beginning the walking tour. She'd been through the *Thomas Prince* before. She was already familiar with the high ceilings and wide corridors where three people could walk abreast. She might not know where everything was, but she could fake it. She fell in line with the others.

"In case of emergency, all you'll have to do is get back to your quarters and strap in," the yeoman said, walking backward so that he could keep lecturing them while they all moved, bumping against each other like cattle. Someone behind her made a soft mooing sound, and someone else chuckled. The joke had gone out to the darkness of space even where cows hadn't.

"Now, through here is the civilian commissary," the yeoman said as they passed through a pair of sliding steel doors. "Those of you who were working here before might be used to getting your food and coffee from the officers' mess, but now that we're on a military operation, this is going to be the place to go."

The civilian commissary was a low gray box of a room with tables and chairs bolted to the floor, and a dozen people of all ages and dress sat scattered around. A thin man with improbably pale hair leaned against a crash-padded wall, drinking something from a bulb. Two older men in black robes and clerical collars sat huddled together like the unpopular kids at a cafeteria. Melba was already beginning to turn inward again, ignoring them all, when something caught her. A familiar voice.

Twenty feet away, Tilly Fagan leaned in toward an older man who looked like he was struggling between annoyance and flirtation. Her hair was up and her laughter caustic in a way that recalled long, uncomfortable dinner parties with both of their families. Melba felt a sudden atavistic shame at being so underdressed. For a sickening moment, her false self slipped away and she was Clarissa again.

Forcing herself to move slowly, calmly, she drifted to the back of the crowd, making herself as small and difficult to notice as she could. Tilly glanced over at the nattering yeoman and his herd of technicians with undisguised annoyance, but didn't notice Melba. Not this time. The yeoman led them all back out of the commissary, down the long hallway to their new quarters. Melba took her ponytail down and brushed her hair in close around her face. She'd known, of course, that the *Prince* had the delegation from Earth, but she'd discounted them. Now she wondered how many other people here knew Clarissa Mao. She had the horrible image of turning a corner and seeing Micha

Krauss or Steven Comer. She could see their eyes going wide with surprise, and she wondered whether she could bring herself to kill them too. If she couldn't, the brig and the newsfeeds and a prison cell like her father's would follow.

The yeoman was talking about their quarters, assigning them out one by one to all the volunteer technicians. They were tiny, but the need for each person to have a crash couch in case of emergency meant they wouldn't be hot-bunking. She could stay in there, bribe one of the others to bring her food. Except, holed up like a rat, tracking and killing Holden became exponentially more difficult. There had to be a way...

The yeoman called her name, and she realized it wasn't the first time.

"Here," she said. "Sorry."

She scuttled into her room, the door recognizing her white card and unlocking for her, then closing once she was inside. She stood for a long moment, scratching her arm. The room was bright and clean and as unlike the *Cerisier* as Nepal was from Colombia.

"You came to improvise," she said, and her voice sounded like it came from someone else.

"Well, here you are. Start improvising."

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Chapter Twenty: Holden

Instead of putting him at ease, the weeks and months of interviews had given Holden a new persona. A version of himself that stood in front of a camera and answered questions. That explained things and told stories in ways entertaining enough to keep the focus on himself. It wasn't the sort of thing that he'd have expected to have any practical application.

One more surprise among many.

"This," Holden said, gesturing to the large video monitor behind him on the operations deck, "is what we are calling the slow zone."

"That's a terrible name," Naomi said. She was at the ship operations panel, just out of view of the documentary crew's cameras. "Slow zone? Really?"

"You have a better name?" Monica asked. She whispered something to Clip and he shifted a few degrees to his left, camera moving with him in a slow pan. The burst blood vessel in his eye was starting to fade. The high-g burn through the Ring had been hard on all of them.

"I still like Alex's name," Naomi replied.

"Dandelion sky?" Monica said with a snort. "First of all, only people from Earth and Mars have even the slightest idea what a dandelion is. And second of all, no, it sounds stupid."

Holden knew he was still on camera, so he just smiled and let the two of them hash it out. The truth was, he'd been partial to Alex's name. Where they sat, looking out, it did sort of look like being at the center of a dandelion, the sky filled with fragile-looking structures in an enormous sphere around them.

"Can we finish this?" Monica asked, shooting the comment at Naomi without looking at her.

"Sorry I interrupted," Naomi replied, not looking sorry at all. She winked at Holden and he grinned back.

"And, three... two..." Monica pointed at him.

"The slow zone, based on the sensor data we're able to get, is approximately one million kilometers across." Holden pointed at the 3D representation on the screen behind him. "There are no visible stars, so the location of the zone is impossible to determine. The boundary is made up of one thousand three hundred and seventy-three individual rings evenly spaced into a sphere. So far, the only one we've been able to find that's 'open' is the one we came through. The fleets we traveled out with are still visible on the other side, though the Ring seems to distort visual and sensor data, making readings through it unreliable."

Holden tapped on the monitor, and the center of the image enlarged rapidly.

"We're calling this Ring Station, for lack of a better term. It appears to be a solid sphere of a metallic substance, measuring about five kilometers in diameter. Around it is a slow-moving ring of other objects, including all of the probes we've fired into the slow zone, and the Belter ship *Y Que*. The torpedo that chased us through the Ring is headed toward the station in a trajectory that seems to indicate it will become part of the garbage ring too."

Another tap and the central sphere took up the entire screen. "We're calling it a station pretty much only because it sits at the center of the slow zone, and we're making the entirely unfounded assumption that some sort of control station for the gates would be located there. The station has no

visible breaks in its surface. Nothing that looks like an airlock, or an antenna, or a sensor array, or anything. Just that big silvery blue glowing ball.”

Holden turned off the monitor and both of the camera operators swiveled to put him at the center of their shots.

“But the most intriguing factor of the slow zone, and the one that gives it its name, is the absolute speed limit of six hundred meters per second. Any object above the quantum level traveling faster than that is locked down by what seems to be an inertial dampening field, and then dragged off to join the garbage circling the central station. At a guess, this is some sort of defensive system that protects the Ring Station and the gates themselves. Light and radar still work normally, but radiation made up of larger particles like alpha and beta radiation does not exist inside the slow zone. At least outside the ship, that is. Whatever controls the speeds here only seems concerned by the exterior of the objects, not the interior. We’ve done radiation and object speed tests inside the ship, and so far everything works as normal. But the last probe we fired was immediately grabbed by the field and is now making its way down to the garbage ring. The lack of alpha and beta radiation leads me to believe that there’s a thin cloud of loose electrons and helium nuclei orbiting that station as part of the garbage ring.”

“Can you tell us what your plan is now?” Monica said from off camera. Cohen pointed his mic at her, then back at Holden.

“Our plan now is to remain motionless, avoid attracting the Ring Station’s attention, and keep studying the slow zone using what instruments we have. We can’t leave until we repair the comm array and let everyone outside know that we aren’t psychotic murderers bent on claiming the Ring for ourselves.”

“Great!” Monica said, giving him the thumbs-up. Clip and Okju moved around the room getting shots to cut in later. They shot the instrument panels, the monitor behind Holden, even Naomi lounging in her ops station crash couch. She smiled sweetly and flipped them off.

“How’s everyone doing after the burn?” Holden asked, Clip’s blood-pinked eye still drawing his attention.

Cohen touched his side and grimaced. “Got a rib that I think just slid back into place this morning. I’ve never been on a ship doing maneuvers that violent before. It gave me a little more respect for the navy.”

Holden pushed off the bulkhead and drifted over to Naomi. In a low voice he said, “Speaking of the navy, how’s that comm array coming along? I’d really love to start protesting my innocence before someone figures out a way to lob a slow-moving torpedo in here after us.”

She blew out an exasperated breath at him and started tugging on her hair like she did when she was lost in a complex problem. “That little Trojan horse that keeps grabbing control? Every time I wipe and reboot, it finds its way back in. I’ve got comms totally isolated from the other systems, and it’s still getting in.”

“And the weapons?”

“They keep on powering up, but they never fire.”

“So there has to be some connection.”

“Yes,” Naomi said, and waited. Holden felt a self-conscious discomfort.

“That doesn’t tell you anything you didn’t know.”

“No.”

Holden pulled himself down into the crash couch next to hers and buckled in. He was trying to play it cool, but the truth was the longer they went without presenting a defense or at least a denial to the fleets outside, the more risk there was that someone would find a way to destroy the *Roci*, slow zone or not. The fact that Naomi couldn’t figure it out only added to the worry. If whoever was doing this was clever enough to outsmart Naomi with an engineering problem, they were in a lot of trouble.

“What’s the next plan?” he asked, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. Naomi heard it anyway.

“We’re taking a break from it,” she said. “I’ve got Alex doing lidar sweeps of all the other rings that make up the boundary of the slow zone. Just to see if one is different in some way. And I’ve got Amos fixing that light bulb in the head. There’s nothing else to do, and I wanted him out of my hair while I come up with another way to attack this comm problem.”

“What can I do to help?” Holden asked. He’d already gone through every other system on the ship three times looking for malicious and hidden programs. He hadn’t found any, and he couldn’t think of anything else that might be useful.

“You’re doing it,” Naomi said, subtly moving her head toward Monica without actually looking at her.

“I feel like I’ve got the shit job here.”

“Oh, please,” Naomi said with a grin. “You love the attention.”

The deck hatch slid open with a bang, and Amos came up the crew ladder. “Motherfucker!” he yelled as the hatch closed behind him.

“What?” Holden started, but Amos kept yelling.

“When I peeled that twitchy power circuit open in the head, I found this little bastard hiding in the LED housing, sucking off our juice.”

Amos threw something, and Holden barely managed to catch it before it hit him in the face. It looked like a small transmitter with power leads coming off one end. He held it up to Naomi, and her face darkened.

“That’s it,” she said, reaching out to take it from Holden.

“You’re fucking right that’s it,” Amos bellowed. “Someone hid that in the head, and it’s been loading the software hijacker onto our system every time we boot up.”

“Someone with access to the ship’s head,” Naomi said, looking at Holden, but he’d already gone past that and was unbuckling his restraints.

“Are you armed?” Holden asked Amos. The big mechanic pulled a large-caliber pistol out of his pocket and held it against his thigh. In the microgravity it would shove Amos around if he fired it, but surrounded by bulkheads that wouldn’t be too much of a problem.

“Hey,” Monica said, her face shifting from confusion to fear.

“One of you hijacked my comm array,” Holden said. “One of you is working for whoever is doing this to us. Whoever it is should really just tell me now.”

“You forgot to threaten us,” Cohen said. He sounded almost ill.

“No. I didn’t.”

Naomi had unbuckled her harness as well, and was floating next to him now. She tapped a wall panel and said, “Alex, get down here.”

“Look,” Monica said, patting the air with her hands. “You’re making a mistake blaming us for this.” Clip and Okju moved behind her, pulling Cohen to them. The documentary crew formed a small circle facing outward, unconsciously creating a defensive perimeter. More Pleistocene-age behavior that humans still carried with them. Alex drifted down from the cockpit; his usually jolly face had a hard expression on it. He was carrying a heavy wrench.

“Tell me who did it,” Holden repeated. “I swear by everything holy that I will space the whole damn lot of you to protect this ship if I have to.”

“It wasn’t us,” Monica said, the fear on her face draining the bland video star prettiness away, making her look older, gaunt.

“Fuck this,” Amos said, pointing the gun at them. “Let me drag one of ’em down to the airlock and space them right now. Even if only one of them did it, I got me a twenty-five percent chance to

get the right one. Got a thirty-three percent chance with the second one I toss. Fifty-fifty by the third, and those are odds I'll take any day."

Holden didn't acknowledge the threat, but he didn't argue with it either. Let them sweat.

"Shit," Cohen said. "I don't suppose it will matter that I got set up just as bad as you guys, will it?"

Monica's eyes went wide. Okju and Clip turned to stare at the blind man.

"You?" Holden said. It didn't make any sense not to, not really, but he honestly hadn't suspected the blind guy. It made him feel betrayed and guilty of his prejudices at the same time.

"I got paid to stick that rig on the ship," Cohen said, moving out of the defensive circle and floating a half meter closer to Holden. Pulling himself out of the group, so that if anything happened, they wouldn't get hurt. Holden respected him for that. "I had no idea what it would do. I figured someone was spying on your comms, is all. When that broadcast went out and the missiles started flying, I was just as surprised as you guys. And my ass was just as much on the line."

"Motherfucker," Amos said again, this time without the heat. Holden knew him well enough to know that angry Amos was not nearly as dangerous as cold Amos. "I was thinking I'd have a tough time spacing a blind guy, but turns out I'm gonna be just fine with it."

"Not yet," Holden said, waving Amos off. "Who paid you to do this. Lie to me and I let Amos have his way."

Cohen held up both hands in surrender. "Hey, you got me, boss. I know my ass is hanging by a thread right now. I got no reason not to come clean."

"Then do."

"I only met her once," Cohen continued. "Young woman. Nice voice. Had lots of money. Asked me to plant this thing. I said, 'Sure, get me on that ship and I plant whatever you want.' Next thing I know Monica's got a gig doing this doc about you and the Ring. Damned if I know how she swung that."

"Son of a bitch," Monica said, clearly as surprised by this revelation as anyone else. That actually made Holden feel a little better.

"Who was this young woman with all the money?" Holden asked. Amos hadn't moved, but he wasn't pointing the gun at anyone anymore. Cohen's tone didn't have a hint of deception in it. He sounded like a man who knew that his life hung on every word.

"Never got a name, but I can sculpt her pretty easy."

"Do that," Holden said, then watched as Cohen plugged his modeling software into the big monitor. Over the next several minutes, the image of a woman slowly formed. It was all one color, of course, and the hair was a sculpted lump, not individual strands. But when Cohen had finished, Holden had no doubt about who it was. She was changed, but not so much that he couldn't recognize the dead girl.

Julie Mao.



The ship was quiet. Monica and her two camera operators had been confined to the crew decks again, and last time Holden had checked they were together in the galley, not talking. Cohen's betrayal had taken them by surprise as well, and they were still working through it. Cohen himself was in the airlock. It was the closest thing they had to a brig. Holden had to assume the man was quietly panicking.

Alex was back in the cockpit. After Amos had thrown Cohen into the airlock he'd disappeared back down to his machine shop to brood. Holden had let him go. Of them all, Amos took betrayal the

hardest. Holden knew that Cohen's life was hanging on whether Amos could get past it or not. If he decided to take action, Holden wouldn't be able to stop him, and didn't even know if he'd want to try.

So he and Naomi sat alone together on the ops deck as she made the last few adjustments to get the comm array back up and running. With Cohen's device disabled, they'd been able to reboot it without being hijacked.

Naomi was waiting for him to speak. He could feel the tension in her shoulders from across the room. But he had no idea what to say. For a year, Miller had been a confused phantasm that appeared randomly and spouted nonsense. Now everything Miller had said over the last year took on the weight of dark portents. Prophetic riddles whose meaning must be teased out or risk catastrophe. And Miller wasn't the only ghost haunting Holden.

Julie Mao had joined the game.

Somehow, while Miller had followed Holden around the solar system, the protomolecule had been using Julie, working on its own secret plans. Julie had arranged for the Martian lawsuit that stripped him of safe ports and employment. She'd arranged to have a documentary crew placed on his ship to send him to the Ring. And now it appeared she'd engineered an elaborate betrayal that forced him to actually go through the Ring to stay alive. The ghost Julie didn't resemble his Miller at all. It was working with very specific purpose. It had access to money and powerful connections. The only thing it had in common with Miller was that it seemed to be focused on him. And if this was all true, then everything it had done had been with a single purpose in mind.

To bring him here. To *force* him to go through the Ring.

A shiver crawled its way up his spine, sending all the hairs on his arms and neck standing straight up. He turned on the closest workstation and brought up the external telescopes. Nothing at all in this starless void except a lot of inactive rings and the massive blue ball at its center. As he watched, the missile that had chased them through the gate drifted into view and joined the slowly circling ring of flotsam that orbited the station.

Everything comes to me, eventually, the station seemed to be saying.

"I have to go there," he said out loud even as the thought popped into his head.

"Where?" Naomi asked, turning away from her work on the comm. The relief he could see on her face now that he'd finally said something wouldn't last long. He felt a pang of guilt for that.

"The station. Or whatever it is. I have to go there."

"No you don't," she said.

"Everything that's happened over the last year has been to bring me here, now." Holden rubbed his face with both hands, itching his eyes and hiding from Naomi's scrutiny at the same time. "And that thing is the only place in here. There's nothing else. No other open gates, no planets, no other ships. Nothing."

"Jim," Naomi said, a warning in her voice. "This thing where you always have to be the guy who goes..."

"I'll never know why the protomolecule is talking to me until I get there, face-to-face."

"Eros, Ganymede, the *Agatha King*," Naomi continued. "You always think you have to go."

Holden stopped rubbing his face and looked at her. She stared back, beautiful and angry and sad. He felt his throat threaten to close up, so he said, "Am I wrong? Tell me I'm wrong and we'll think of something else. Tell me how all of what's happened means something else and I'm just not seeing it."

"No," she said again, meaning something else this time.

"Okay." He sighed. "Okay then."

"It's getting old being the one who stays behind."

"You're not staying behind," Holden said. "You're keeping the crew alive while I do something really stupid. It's why we're an awesome team. You're the captain now."

“That’s a shit job and you know it.”

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Chapter Twenty-One: Bull

In the last hours before they shot the Ring, a kind of calm descended on the *Behemoth*. In the halls and galleries, people talked, but their voices were controlled, quiet, brittle. The independent feeds, always a problem, were pretty subdued. The complaints coming to the security desk fell to nothing. Bull kept an eye on the places people could get liquored up and stupid, but there were no flare-ups. The traffic going through the comm laser back toward Tycho Station and all points sunward spiked to six times its usual bandwidth. A lot of people on the ship wanted to say something to someone—a kid, a sister, a dad, a lover—before they passed through the signal-warping circumference and into whatever was on the other side.

Bull had thought about doing it too. He'd logged into the family group feed for the first time in months, and let the minutiae of the extended Baca family wash over him. One cousin was engaged, another one was divorcing, and they were trading notes and worldviews. His aunt on Earth was having trouble with her hip, but since she was on basic, she was on a waiting list to get a doctor to look at it. His brother had dropped a note to say that he'd gotten a job on Luna, but he didn't say what it was or anything about it. Bull listened to the voices of the family he never saw except on a screen, the lives that didn't intersect his own. The love he felt for them surprised him, and kept him from putting his own report in among them. It would only scare them, and they wouldn't understand it. He could already hear his cousins telling him to jump ship, get on something that wasn't going through. By the time the message got there, he'd already have gone anyway.

Instead, he recorded a private video for Fred Johnson, and all he said in it was, "After this, you owe *me* one."

With an hour to go before they passed through, Bull put the whole ship on battle-ready status. Everyone in their couches, one per. No sharing. All tools and personal items secured, all carts in their stations and locked down, the bulkheads closed between major sections so that if something happened, they'd only lose air one deck at a time. He got a few complaints, but they were mostly just grouching.

They made the transit slowly, the thrust gravity hardly more than a tendency for things to drift toward the floor. Bull couldn't say whether that was a technical decision on Sam's part meant to keep them from moving too quickly in the uncanny reduced speed beyond the ring, or Ashford giving the Earth and Mars ships the time to catch up so that they'd all be passing through at more or less the same time. Only if it was that, it wouldn't have been Ashford. That kind of diplomatic thinking was Pa.

Probably it was just that the main drive couldn't go slow enough, and this was as fast as the maneuvering thrusters could move them.

Bull wasn't that worried about the Earth forces. They'd been the ones to broker the deal, and they had civilians on board. Mars, on the other hand, might call itself a science mission, but its escort was explicitly military, and until Earth stepped in they'd been willing to poke holes in the *Behemoth* until the air ran out.

Too many people with too many agendas, and everyone was worried that the other guy would shoot them in the back. Of all the ways to go and meet the God-like alien whatever-they-were that

built the protomolecule, this was the stupidest, the most dangerous, and—for Bull’s money—the most human.

The transit actually took a measurable amount of time, the great bulk of the *Behemoth* sulking through the Ring in a few seconds. An eerie fluting groan passed through the ship, and Bull, in his crash couch at the security office waiting for the next disaster, felt the gooseflesh on his arms and neck. He flipped through the security monitors like a dad walking through the house to see if the windows were all locked, all the kids safely in their beds. Memories of the Eros feed tugged at the back of his mind: black whorls of filament covering the corridors; the bodies of the innocent and the guilty alike warping, falling apart, and becoming something else without actually dying in between; the blue firefly glow that no one had yet explained. With every new monitor, he expected to see the *Behemoth* in that same light, and every time he didn’t, his dread moved on to the one still to come.

He moved to the external sensor feed. The luminous blue object in the center of a sphere of anomalies that the computers interpreted as being approximately the same size as the Ring. Gates to God knew where.

“I don’t know what the hell we’re doing here,” he said under his breath.

“A-chatté-men, brother,” Serge said, pale-faced, from his desk.

A connect request popped on Bull’s hand terminal, the alert-red of senior staff. With dread growing at the back of his throat, Bull accepted it. Sam appeared on the screen.

“Hey,” she said. “This whole act-like-we’re-in-a-battle thing where we aren’t supposed to get out of our crash couches? I’d really appreciate it if you could ease up enough to let us make sure the ship isn’t falling apart.”

“You getting alerts?”

“No,” Sam admitted. “But we just sailed the *Behemoth* into a region of space with different, y’know, laws of *physics* and stuff? Makes me want to take a peek.”

“We got eight ships coming in right behind us,” Bull said. “Hold tight until we see how that shakes down.”

Sam smiled in a way that expressed her annoyance with him perfectly.

“You can get the teensiest bit paternalistic sometimes, Bull. You know that?”

A new alert popped up by Sam’s face. A high-priority message was coming into the comm array. From the *Rocinante*.

“Sam, I got something here. I’ll get back to you.”

“I’ll be sitting here in my couch doing nothing,” she said.

He flipped over to the incoming message. It was a broadcast. A Belter woman, with black hair pulled back from her face in a style that gave Bull the impression she’d been welding something before she’d begun the broadcast and would be again as soon as she was finished, looked into the camera.

“... Nagata, executive officer of the *Rocinante*. I want to make it very clear that the previous broadcast claiming our ownership of the Ring was a fake. Our communications array was hijacked, and we were locked out of it. The saboteur on board has confessed, and I am including a datafile at the end of this transmission with all the evidence we have about the real perpetrator of these crimes. I am also including a short documentary presentation on what we’ve discovered in the time we’ve been here that Monica Stuart and her team produced. I want to reiterate here, Captain Holden had no mandate from anyone to claim the Ring, he had no intention of doing so, and none of us had any participation in or knowledge of the bomb on the *Seung Un* or on any other ship. We were here solely as transport and support for a documentary team, and pose no intentional threat whatsoever to any other vessel.”

Serge grunted, unconvinced. “You think they fragged him?”

“Keep Jim Holden from grabbing the camera? Fragged him or tied him up,” Bull said. It was a joke, but there was something in it. Why *wasn't* the *Rocinante*'s captain the one making the announcement?

“We will not surrender our ship,” the Belter said, “but we will invite inspectors aboard to verify what we've reported, with the following conditions. First, the inspectors will have to comply with basic safety—”

Five more communication alerts popped up, all from different ships. All broadcast. If they were flying into the teeth of a vast and malefic alien intelligence, by God, they we're going to go down squabbling.

“—unacceptable. We demand the immediate surrender of the *Tachi* and all accompanying—”

“—what confirmation you can provide that—”

“—James Holden at once for interrogation. If your claims are verified, we will—”

“—Message repeats. Please confirm and clarify EVA activity, *Rocinante*. Who've you got out there, and where are they going?”

Bull pulled up the sensor array and began a careful sweep of the area around Holden's ship. It took him half a minute to find it. A single EVA suit, burning away from the ship and heading for the blue-glowing structure in the center of the sphere. He said something obscene. Five minutes later, the XO of the *Rocinante* spoke again to confirm Bull's worst suspicions.

“This is Naomi Nagata,” she said, “executive officer and acting captain of the *Rocinante*. Captain Holden is not presently available to take questions, meet with any representatives, or surrender himself into anybody's custody. He is...” She looked down. Bull couldn't tell if it was fear or embarrassment or a little of both. The Belter took a deep breath and continued, “He is conducting an EVA approach of the base at the middle of the slow zone. We have reason to believe he was... called there.”

Bull's laughter pulled Serge's attention. Serge lifted his hand, the physical Belter idiom for asking a question. Bull shook his head.

“Just trying to think of a way we could be doing this worse,” he said.



Ashford insisted that they meet in person, so even though Bull had ordered that all crew members not performing essential functions remain in their couches, he himself floated to the lift and headed to the bridge.

The crew was a muted cacophony. Every station was juggling telemetry and signal switching and sensor data, even though basically nothing was going on. It was just that the excitement demanded that everything be busy and serious and fraught. The excitement or else the fear. The monitors were set to a tactical display, Earth in blue, Mars in red, the *Behemoth* in orange, and the artifact at the center of the sphere in a deep forest green. The debris ring was marked in white. And two dots of gold: one for the *Rocinante*, well ahead of the other ships, and another for her captain. The scale was so small, Bull could see the shapes of the larger ships, boxy and awkward in the way that structures built for vacuum could be. The universe, shrunk down to a knot smaller than the sun and still unthinkable vast.

And in that bubble of darkness, mystery, and dread, two matched dots—one blue, the other red—moving steadily toward the little gold Holden. Marine skiffs, hardly more than a wide couch strapped on the end of a fusion drive. Bull had ridden on boats like them so long ago it seemed like a different lifetime, but if he closed his eyes, he could still feel the rattle of the thrusters transferred through the shell of his armor. Some things he would never forget.

“How long,” Ashford said, “until you can put together a matching force?”

Bull rubbed his palm against his chin, shrugged.

“How long’d it take to get back to Tycho?”

Ashford’s face went red.

“I’m not interested in your sense of humor, Mister Baca. Earth and Mars have both launched interception teams against the outlaw James Holden. If we don’t have a force of our own out there, we look weak. We’re here to make sure the OPA remains the equal of the inner planets, and we’re going to do that, whatever it takes. Am I clear?”

“You’re clear, sir.”

“So how long would it take?”

Bull looked at Pa. Her face was carefully blank. She knew the answer as well as he did, but she wasn’t going to say it. Leaving the shit job for the Earther. Well, all right.

“It can’t be done,” Bull said. “Each one of those skiffs is carrying half a dozen marines in full battle dress. Powered armor. Maybe Goliath class for the Martians, Reaver class for the Earthers. Either way, I don’t have anything in that league. And the soldiers inside those suits have trained for exactly this kind of combat every day for years. I’ve got a bunch of plumbers with rifles I could put on a shuttle.”

The bridge went quiet. Ashford crossed his arms.

“Plumbers. With rifles. Is that how you see us, Mister Baca?”

“I don’t question the bravery or commitment of anyone on this crew,” Bull said. “I believe that any team we sent over there would be willing to lay down their lives for the cause. Of course, that would only take about fifteen seconds, and I won’t send our people into that.”

The implication floated in the air as gently as they did. *You’re the captain. You can make the order, but you’ll own the consequences. And they’ll know the Earther told you what would happen.* Pa’s eyes were narrow and looked away.

“Thank you, Mister Baca,” Ashford said. “You’re dismissed.”

Bull saluted, turned, and launched himself for the lift. Behind him, the bridge crew started talking again, but not as loud. Probably they’d all get reamed once Bull was gone just because they’d been in the room when Ashford got embarrassed. The chances were slim that they’d be sending anyone to the thing. Nucleus, base, whatever it was. Bull couldn’t think of a way to do any better than that, so that would count for a win.

On the way back to his station, he looked over the datafile the *Rocinante* had sent out. The saboteur seemed legitimate enough. Bull had seen enough faked confessions to recognize the signs, and this didn’t have them. After that, though, the whole damn thing turned into a fairy tale. A mysterious woman who manipulated governments and civilians, who was willing to kill dozens of people and risk thousands in order to... do what? Put James Holden through the Ring, where he was going now?

The image the prisoner had built looked like it had been carved from ice. No one had added color. Bull put on an even olive flesh tone and brown hair, and the face didn’t look familiar. Juliette Mao, they said. She hadn’t been the first person infected with the protomolecule, but everyone before her had gotten thrown in an autoclave one way or the other. She’d been the seed crystal that Eros had used to make itself, to make the Ring. So who was to say she couldn’t be wandering around hiring traitors and placing bombs?

The problem with living with miracles was that they made everything seem plausible. An alien weapon had been lurking in orbit around Saturn for billions of years. It had eaten thousands of people, hijacking the mechanisms of their bodies for its own ends. It had built a wormhole gate into a kind of haunted sphere. So why not the rest? If all that was possible, everything was.

Bull didn’t buy it.

Back at the security desk, he checked the status. The skiff of Earth marines had gone too fast, trying to race ahead of the Martian force. The slow zone had caught them, and the skiff was drifting off toward the ring of debris. Chances were that all the men in it were dead. The Martian skiff was still on track, but Holden would reach the structure before they got to him. It was too bad, in a way. The Martians had been the trigger-happy ones all along. Chances of someone getting to question Holden were looking pretty long.

Bull sucked his teeth, half-formed ideas shifting in the back of his mind. Holden wasn't getting interrogated, but that didn't mean no one would. He checked his security codes. Ashford hadn't blocked him from using the comm laser. Protocol would have been to discuss this with Ashford or at least Pa, but they had their hands full right now anyway. And if it worked, it would be hard for them to object. They'd have a bargaining chip.

The *Rocinante's* XO appeared on the screen.

"What can I do for you, *Behemoth*?"

"Carlos Baca here. I'm security chief. Wanted to talk about maybe taking a problem off your hands."

She hoisted her eyebrows, her head shaking like she was trying to stay awake. She had a smart face.

"I've got a lot of problems right now," she said. "Which one were you thinking about?"

"You got a bunch of civvies on your ship. One of 'em under arrest. Mars is still saying you're flying their ship. Earth is wondering whether you blew the shit out of one of theirs. I can take custody of your prisoner and give the rest of them a safer place than you can."

"Last I checked, the OPA was the only one that's actually shot at us so far," she said. She had a good smile. Too young for him, but ten years ago he'd have been asking her if he could make her dinner around now. "Doesn't put you at the top of my list."

"That was me," Bull said. "I won't do it this time." It got him a chuckle, but it was the bleak kind. The one that came from someone wading through hell. "Look, you got a lot going on, and you've got a bunch of people on there who aren't your crew. You got to keep them safe, and it's a distraction. You send 'em over here, and everyone'll see you aren't trying to control access to them. Makes this whole thing about how it wasn't you that blew the shit out of the *Seung Un* that much easier for people to believe."

"I think we're past goodwill gestures," she said.

"I think goodwill gestures are the only chance you have to avoid a field promotion," Bull said. "They're sending killers after your captain. Good ones. No one's thinking straight here. You and me, we can start cooling things down. Acting like grown-ups. And if we do, maybe they do too. No one else needs to get killed."

"Thin hope," she said.

"It's all the hope I got. You got nothing to hide, then show them that. Show everyone."

It took her twenty seconds.

"All right," she said. "You can have them."

Chapter Twenty-Two: Holden

Wow,” Holden said to himself, “I really don’t want to do this.”

The sound echoed in his helmet, competing only with the faint hiss of his radio.

“I tried to talk you out of it,” Naomi replied, her voice somehow managing to be intimate even flattened and distorted by his suit’s small speakers.

“Sorry, I didn’t think you were listening.”

“Ah,” she said. “Irony.”

Holden tore his eyes away from the slowly growing sphere that was his destination and spun around to look for the *Rocinante* behind him. She wasn’t visible until Alex fired a maneuvering thruster and a gossamer cone of steam reflected some of the sphere’s blue glow. His suit told him that the *Roci* was over thirty thousand kilometers away—more than twice as far as any two people on Earth could ever be from each other—and receding. And here he was, in a suit of vacuum armor, wearing a disposable EVA pack that had about five minutes of thrust in it. He’d burned one minute accelerating toward the sphere. He’d burn another slowing down when he got there. That left enough to fly back to the *Roci* when he was done.

Optimism expressed as conservation of delta V.

Ships from the three fleets had begun coming through the gate even before he’d started his trip. The *Roci* was now protected from them only by the absolute speed limit of the slow zone. She was drifting off at just under that limit to put as much space between her and the fleets as possible. They had a sphere a million kilometers in diameter to play with, even without going beyond the area marked by the gates. The gates had close to fifty thousand kilometers of empty space between them, but the idea of flying out of the slow zone and into that starless void beyond made Holden’s skin crawl. He and Naomi had agreed it would be a maneuver of last resort.

As long as no one could fire a ballistic weapon, the *Roci* should be plenty safe with five hundred quadrillion square kilometers to move around in.

Holden spun back around, using two quarter-second blasts from his EVA pack, and took a range reading to the sphere. He was still hours away. The minute-long burst he’d fired from the pack to start his journey had accelerated him to a slow crawl, astronomically speaking, and the *Roci* had come to a relative stop before releasing him. He’d never have had enough juice in the EVA pack to stop himself if the ship had flung him out at the slow zone’s maximum speed.

Ahead in the middle of all that starless black, the blue sphere waited.

It had waited for two billion years for someone to come through his particular gate, if the researchers were right about how long ago Phoebe had been captured by Saturn. But lately the strangeness surrounding the protomolecule and the Ring left Holden with the disquieting feeling that maybe all of the assumptions they’d made about its origins and purpose were wrong.

Proteogen had named the protomolecule and decided it was a tool that could redefine what it meant to be human. Jules-Pierre Mao had treated it like a weapon. It killed humans, therefore it was a weapon. But radiation killed humans, and a medical X-ray machine wasn’t intended as a weapon. Holden was starting to feel like they were all monkeys playing with a microwave. Push a button, a light comes on inside, so it’s a light. Push a different button and stick your hand inside, it burns you, so it’s a weapon. Learn to open and close the door, it’s a place to hide things. Never grasping what it

actually did, and maybe not even having the framework necessary to figure it out. No monkey ever reheated a frozen burrito.

So here the monkeys were, poking the shiny box and making guesses about what it did. Holden could tell himself that in his case the box was asking to be poked, but even that was making a lot of assumptions. Miller looked human, had *been* human once, so it was easy to think of him as having human motivations. Miller wanted to communicate. He wanted Holden to know or do something. But it was just as likely—more likely, maybe—that Holden was anthropomorphizing something far stranger.

He imagined himself landing on the station, and Miller saying, *James Holden, you and only you in the universe have the correct chemical composition to make a perfect wormhole fuel!* then stuffing him into a machine to be processed.

“Everything okay?” Naomi asked in response to his chuckle.

“Still just thinking about how incredibly stupid this is. Why didn’t I let you talk me out of it?”

“It looks like you did, but it took a couple of hours for it to process. Want us to come get you?”

“No. If I bail out now, I’ll never have the balls to try it again,” Holden said. “How’s it look out there?”

“The fleets came through with about two dozen ships, mostly heavies. Alex has figured out the math on doing short torpedo burns to get one up to the speed limit but not over. Which means everyone on those other ships are doing the same thing. So far no one has fired at us.”

“Maybe your protestations of my innocence worked?”

“Maybe,” she said. “There were a couple of small ships detaching from the fleet on an intercept course with you. The *Roci* is calling them landing skiffs.”

“Shit, they’re sending the Marines after me?”

“They’ve burned up to the speed limit, but the *Roci* says you make stationfall before they catch you. But *just* before.”

“Damn,” Holden said. “I really hope there’s a door.”

“They lost the UN ship. The other is Martian. So maybe they brought Bobbie. She can make sure the others are nice to you.”

“No,” Holden said with a sigh. “No, these will be the ones that are still mad at me.”

Knowing the marines were following made the back of his neck itch. Being in a space suit just added that to his already lengthy list of insoluble problems.

“On the good news level, Monica’s team is getting evacuated to the *Behemoth*.”

“You never did like her.”

“Not much, no.”

“Why not?”

“Her job is digging up old things,” Naomi said, the lightness of her tone almost covering her anxieties. “And digging up old things leads to messes like this one.”



When Holden was nine, Rufus the family Labrador died. He’d already been an adult dog when Holden was born, so Holden had only ever known Rufus as a big black slobbering bundle of love. He’d taken some of his first steps clutching the dog’s fur in one stubby fist. He’d run around their Montana farm not much bigger than a toddler with Rufus as his only babysitter. Holden had loved the dog with the simple intensity only children and dogs share.

But when he was nine, Rufus was fifteen, and old for such a big dog. He slowed down. He stopped running with Holden, barely managing a trot to catch up, then gradually only a slow walk.

He stopped eating. And one night he flopped onto his side next to a heater vent and started panting. Mother Elise had told him that Rufus probably wouldn't last the night, and even if he did they'd have to call the vet in the morning. Holden had tearfully sworn to stay by the dog's side. For the first couple of hours, he held Rufus' head on his lap and cried, as Rufus struggled to breathe and occasionally gave one halfhearted thump of his tail.

By the third, against his will and every good thought he'd had about himself, Holden was bored.

It was a lesson he'd never forgotten. That humans only have so much emotional energy. No matter how intense the situation, or how powerful the feelings, it was impossible to maintain a heightened emotional state forever. Eventually you'd just get tired and want it to end.

For the first hours drifting toward the glowing blue station, Holden had felt awe at the immensity of empty starless space around him. He'd felt fear of what the protomolecule might want from him, fear of the marines following him, fear that he'd made the wrong choice and that he'd arrive at the station to find nothing at all. Most of all fear that he'd never see Naomi or his crew again.

But after four hours of being alone in his space suit, even the fear burned out. He just wanted it all to be over with.

With the infinite and unbroken black all around him, and the only visible spot of light coming from the blue sphere directly ahead, it was easy to feel like he was in some vast tunnel, slowly moving toward the exit. The human mind didn't do well with infinite spaces. It wanted walls, horizons, limits. It would create them if it had to.

His suit beeped at him to let him know it was time to replenish his O2 supply. He pulled a spare bottle out of the webbing clipped to his EVA pack and attached it to the suit's nipple. The gauge on his HUD climbed back up to four hours and stopped. The next time he had to refill, he'd be on the station or in Marine custody.

One way or the other, he wouldn't be alone anymore, and that was a relief. He wondered what his mothers would have thought about all this, whether they would have approved of the choices he'd made, how he could arrange to have a dog for their children since Naomi wouldn't be able to live at the bottom of the gravity well. His attention wandered, and then his mind.



He awoke to a harsh buzzing sound, and for a few seconds slapped his hand at empty space trying to turn his alarm off. When he finally opened sleep-gummed eyes, he saw his HUD flashing a proximity warning. He'd somehow managed to fall asleep until the station was only a few kilometers away.

At that distance, it loomed like a gently curving wall of metallic blue, glowing with its own inner light. No radiation alarms were flashing, so whatever made it glow wasn't anything his suit thought was dangerous to him. The flight program Alex had written for him was spooling out on the HUD, counting down to the moment when he'd need to do his minute-long deceleration burn. Waving his hand around when he first woke up had put him into a gentle rotation, and the flight program was prompting him to allow it to make course corrections. Since he trusted Alex completely on matters of navigation, Holden authorized the suit to handle the descent automatically.

A few quick bursts of compressed gas later, he was facing out into the black, the sphere at his back. Then came a minute-long burn from the pack to slow him to a gentle half meter per second for landing. He kicked on his boot magnets, not knowing if they'd actually help or not—the sphere looked like metal, but that didn't mean much—and turned around.

The wall of glowing blue was less than five meters away. Holden bent his knees, bracing for the impact of hitting the surface, and hoping to absorb enough energy that he didn't just bounce off. The

half meters ticked away, each second taking too long and passing too quickly. With only a meter before impact, he realized he'd been holding his breath and let out a long exhale.

"Here we go," he said to no one.

"Hey, boss?" Alex said in a burst of radio static.

Before Holden could reply, the surface of the sphere irised open and swallowed him up.



After Holden passed through the portal into the interior of the sphere he landed on the gently curving floor of a room shaped like an inverted dome. The walls were the metallic blue of the sphere's exterior. The surfaces were textured almost like moss, and tiny lights seemed to flicker in and out of existence like fireflies. His suit reported a thin atmosphere made mostly of benzene compounds and neon. The ceiling irised closed again, its flat unbroken surface showing no sign that there had ever been an opening.

Miller stood a few meters from where Holden landed, his rumpled gray suit and porkpie hat made both mundane and exotic by the alien setting. The lack of breathable air didn't seem to bother him at all.

Holden straightened his knees, and was surprised to feel something like gravity's resistance. He'd felt the weight of spin and of thrust, and the natural deep pull of a gravity well. The EVA pack was heavy on his back, but the quality of it was different. He almost felt like something was pushing down on him from above instead of the ground coming up to meet him.

"Hey, boss?" Alex repeated, a note of worry in his voice. Miller held up a hand in a don't-mind-me gesture. Wordless permission for Holden to answer.

"Receiving, Alex. Go ahead."

"The sphere just swallowed you," Alex said. "You okay in there?"

"Yep, five by five. But you called before I went in. What's up?"

"Just wanted to warn you that company's comin' pretty close on. You can expect them in about five minutes at best guess."

"Thanks for the report. I'm hoping Miller won't let them in."

"Miller?" Alex and Naomi said at the same time. She must have been monitoring the exchange.

"I'll call when I know more," Holden said with a grunt as he finished getting the EVA pack off. It fell to the floor with a thud.

That was odd.

Holden turned on the suit's external speakers and said, "Miller?" He heard the sound of his own voice echoing off of the walls and around the room. The atmosphere shouldn't have been thick enough for that.

"Hey," Miller replied, his voice unmuffled by the space suit, as if they were standing together on the deck of the *Roci*. He nodded slowly, his sad basset hound face twisting into something resembling a smile. "There are others coming. They yours?"

"Not mine, no," Holden replied. "That would be the skiff full of Martian recon marines that are coming to arrest me. Or maybe just shoot me. It's complicated."

"You've been making friends without me," Miller said, his tone sardonic and amused.

"How are you doing?" Holden asked. "You seem more coherent than usual."

Miller gave a short Belter shrug. "How do you mean?"

"Usually when we talk, it's like only half the signal's getting through."

The old detective's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"You've seen me before?"

“On and off for the last year or so.”

“Well, that’s pretty disturbing,” Miller said. “If they’re planning to shoot you, we’d better get going.”

Miller seemed to flicker out of existence, reappearing at the edge of the mosslike walls. Holden followed, his body fighting with the nauseating sense of being weightless and heavy at the same time. When he drew close, he could see the spirals within the moss on the walls. He’d seen something like this before where the protomolecule had been, but this was lush by comparison. Complex and rich and deep. A vast ripple seemed to pass over the wall like a stone thrown in a pond, and despite having his own isolated air supply, Holden smelled something like orange peels and rain.

“Hey,” Miller said.

“Sorry,” Holden said. “What?”

“We better get going?” the dead man said. He gestured toward what looked like a fold of the strange moss, but when Holden came close, he saw a fissure behind it. The hole looked soft as flesh at the edges, and it glistened with something. It wept.

“Where are we going?”

“Deeper,” Miller said. “Since we’re here, there’s something we should probably do. I have to tell you, though, you got a lot of balls.”

“For what?” Holden said, and his hand slid against the wall. A layer of slime stuck to the fingers of his suit.

“Coming here.”

“You told me to,” Holden said. “You brought me. Julie brought me.”

“I don’t want to talk about what happened to Julie,” the dead man said.

Holden followed him into the narrow tunnel. Its walls were slick and organic. It was like crawling through a deep cave or down the throat of a vast animal.

“You’re definitely making more sense than usual.”

“There are tools here,” Miller said. “They’re not... they’re not right, but they’re here at least.”

“Does this mean you might still say something enigmatic and vanish in a puff of blue fireflies?”

“Probably.”

Miller didn’t expand on this, so Holden followed him for several dozen meters through the tunnel until it turned again and Miller led him into a much larger room.

“Uh, wow,” he managed to say.

Because the floor of the first room and the tunnel that led out of it had both had a consistent “down,” Holden had thought he was moving laterally just under the skin of the station. That couldn’t have been right, because the room the tunnel opened into had a much higher ceiling than was possible if that were true. The space stretched out from the tunnel into a cathedral-vast opening, hundreds of meters across. The walls slanted inward into a domed ceiling that was twenty meters off the floor in the center. Scattered across the room in seemingly random places were two-meter-thick columns of something that looked like blue glass with black, branching veins shooting through it. The columns pulsed with light, and each pulse was accompanied by a subsonic throb that Holden could feel in his bones and teeth. It felt like enormous power, carefully restrained. A giant, whispering.

“Holy shit,” he finally said when his breath came back. “We’re in a lot of trouble, aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” Miller said. “You should not have come.”

Miller walked off across the room, and Holden hurried to catch up. “Wait, what?” he said. “I thought you wanted me here!”

Miller walked around something that from a distance had looked like a blue statue of an insect, but up close was a massive confusion of metallic limbs and protrusions, like a construction mech folded up on itself. Holden tried to guess at its purpose and failed.

“Why would you think that?” Miller said as he walked. “You don’t know what’s *in* here. Doors and corners. Never walk into a crime scene until you know there’s not someone there waiting to put you down. You’ve got to clear the room first. But maybe we got lucky. For now. Wouldn’t recommend doing it again, though.”

“I don’t understand.”

They came to a place in the floor that was covered in what looked like cilia or plant stalks, gently rippling in a nonexistent wind. Miller walked around it. Holden was careful to do the same. As they passed, a swarm of blue fireflies burst out of the ground cover and flew up to a vent in the ceiling where they vanished.

“So there was this unlicensed brothel down in sector 18. We went thinking we’d be hauling fifteen, twenty people in. More, maybe. Got there, and the place was stripped to the stone,” Miller said. “It wasn’t that they’d gotten wind of us, though. The Loca Greiga had heard about the place, sent their guys to clean it up. Took about a week to find the bodies. According to forensics, they’d all been shot twice in the head pretty much while we were getting one last cup of coffee. If we’d been a little bit faster, we’d have walked in on it. Nothing says fucked like opening the door on a bunch of kids who thought they’d make a quick buck off the sex trade and having an organized kill squad there for the meet and greet instead.”

“What has that got to do with anything?”

“This place is the same,” Miller said. “There was supposed to be something. A lot of something. There was supposed to be... shit, I don’t have the right words. An empire. A civilization. A home. More than a home, a *master*. Instead, there’s a bunch of locked doors and the lights on a timer. I don’t want you charging into the middle of that. You’ll get your ass killed.”

“What the hell do you mean?” Holden said. “You, or the protomolecule, or Julie Mao, or whatever, *you* set this whole thing up. The job, the attack, all of it.”

That stopped Miller. He turned around with a frown on his face. “Julie’s dead, kid. *Miller’s* dead. I’m just the machine for finding lost things.”

“I don’t understand,” Holden said. “If you didn’t do this, then who did?”

“See now, *that’s* a good question, on several levels. Depending on what you mean by ‘this.’ ” Miller’s head lifted like a dog catching an unfamiliar scent on the wind. “Your friends are here. We should go.” He moved off at a faster walk toward the far wall of the room.

“The marines,” Holden said. “Could you stop them?”

“No,” Miller said. “I don’t protect anything. I can tell the station they’re a threat. There’d be consequences, though.”

Holden felt a punch of dread in his gut.

“That sounds bad.”

“It wouldn’t be good. Come on. If we’re going to do this, we need to stay ahead of them.”

The halls and passages widened and narrowed, meeting and falling away from each other like blood vessels of some massive organism. Holden’s suit lights seemed almost lost in the vast darkness, and the blue firefly flickers came in waves and vanished again. Along the way they passed more of the metallic blue insectlike constructs.

“What are these?” Holden asked, pointing to an especially large and dangerous-looking model as they passed it.

“Whatever they need to be,” Miller replied without turning around.

“Oh, great, so we’re back to inscrutable, are we?”

Miller spun around, a worried look on his face, and blinked out of existence. Holden turned.

Far across the huge room, a form was coming out of the tunnel. Holden had seen similar armor before. A Martian marine’s powered armor was made of equal parts efficiency and threat.

There was no escaping it. Anyone in those suits could run him down without trying. Holden switched his suit to an open frequency.

“Hey! I’m right here. Let’s talk about this,” he said, then started to walk toward the group. As one, all eight marines raised their right arms and opened fire. Holden braced himself for death even while part of his mind knew that he shouldn’t have time to brace for death. At the distance they were, the rounds from their high-velocity guns would be hitting in a fraction of a second. He’d be dead long before the sound of the shots reached him.

He heard the rapid and deafening buzzsaw sound of the guns firing, but nothing hit him.

A diffuse cloud of gray formed in front of the marines. When the firing finally stopped, the cloud drifted away toward the walls of the room. Bullets. They’d stopped centimeters from the gun barrels, and were now being drawn away just like the objects outside the station.

The marines broke into a fast run across the room, and Holden tried to scramble away. They were beautiful in their way, the lethal power of the suits harnessed by years of training to make their movements seem like a dance. Even without their weapons, they could tear him limb from limb. One punch from that armor would break all the bones he had and change his viscera to a thin slurry. His only chance was to outrun them, and he couldn’t outrun them.

He almost didn’t see the movement when it came. His focus was locked on the Martians, on the danger he knew. He didn’t consciously notice that one of the insectlike things had started moving until the marines turned to it.

The alien thing’s movements were fast and jagged, like a clockwork mechanism that only had full speed and full stop. It clicked toward the marines, jerking with each step, and it loomed larger than the tallest of them by almost half a meter.

They panicked in the way that people trained to expect violence panic. Two started firing, with the same results as before. Another marine’s suit shifted something in its arm, and a larger barrel appeared. Holden scooted away from the confrontation. He was sure there was shouting going on in those armored suits, but it wasn’t a frequency he had access to. The large barrel went white with muzzle flash, and a slow-arcing slug of metal the size of Holden’s fist took to the strange air.

A grenade.

The ticking monster ignored it, stepping closer to the marines, and the grenade detonated at its insectile feet where it landed. The alien thing jerked back, its appendages flailing and dust falling from its severed limbs like a smoke of fungal spores. The complex carpet of moss glowed with orange embers where the blast had burned it.

And all around the marines, a dozen other alien statues came to life. They moved faster this time. Before the marines could begin to react, the one who’d launched the grenade was lifted gently up and ripped apart. Blood sprayed up into the air, hanging, Holden thought numbly, too long before it drifted back to the ground. The surviving marines began to fall back, their guns pointing to the alien creatures that were swarming the dead man. While Holden watched, the marines retreated into the far tunnel, falling back. Regrouping.

The alien things fell on their own injured fellow, ripping and clawing, slaughtering it as if it were the enemy as much as the marines had been. And then, when it was gone, five of the monsters gathered together in the burned spot where the explosion had been. They shuddered, went still, shuddered again, and then from all five of them, a thin stream of opaque yellow goo spattered out onto the scar. Holden felt fascination and revulsion as the moss grabbed on to the stuff, regrowing like it had never been damaged. Like the attack hadn’t even existed.

“Consequences,” Miller said at his side. He sounded tired.

“Did they... did they just turn that poor bastard into spackle?”

“They did,” Miller said. “He had it coming, though. That guy got happy with his grenade launcher? Just killed a lot of people.”

“What? How?”

“He taught the station that something moving as fast as a good baseball pitch might still be a threat.”

“Is it going to take revenge?”

“No,” Miller said. “It’s just going to protect itself. Reevalue what counts as dangerous. Take control of all the ships that might be a problem.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Means a really bad day for a whole lot of people. When it slows you down, it ain’t gentle.”

Holden felt a cold hand close on his heart.

“The *Roci*...”

A look of sorrow, even sympathy, passed over the detective’s face.

“Maybe. I don’t know,” Miller said with a rueful shrug. “One way or the other, a whole lot of people just died.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Melba

Julie saved her. There was no other way to look at it.

True to style, Holden's proxy had given everything away. Cohen, discovered, told everything he knew, and put the image he'd stolen along with it. Melba had it on her hand terminal: a portrait of the young woman as ice sculpture. She hadn't known the soundman had taken the data when she'd met with him, but she should have guessed he would. The mistake was obvious in retrospect.

It ought to have ended the chase. The people in power should have seen it, shrugged, and thrown her out an airlock. Except that it came with its own misinterpretation. *Here*, Holden said, *is Julie Mao*, and that's what everyone saw. The differences that were obvious to her became invisible to others. They expected to see the protomolecule infiltrating and threatening and raising the dead, and so they saw it.

She did what she could to keep anyone from noticing the similarities. She'd met Cohen on Earth with a full g pulling down. With the *Thomas Prince* already close to the Ring's velocity limit, there was no acceleration thrust. Her cheeks looked fuller, her face round. She'd had her hair down then, so now she pulled it back in a braid. The image had no color, so she wore a little makeup to alter the shape of her eyes and lips. Doing something radical would only call attention, so she went small. She might not even have needed to do that.

Her schedule in the *Thomas Prince* was full. They were going to work her—work all of them—like dogs. She didn't care. The service gantries and accessways would be safe. No one who knew Clarissa Mao would be there. She would stay away from the public parts of the ship as much as she could, and more often than not she could get one of the other techs to grab a tube of something from the commissary and bring it to her.

In the off-shifts, she would build her arsenal.

Holden was beyond her reach for the time being. It was almost funny. She'd gone to so much effort to make him seem like an unrepentant megalomaniac, and then left to his own devices, he named himself de facto ambassador of the whole human race. Julie had fooled him too. With any luck at all, he'd die in a firefight or get killed by the protomolecule. Her work had narrowed to destroying the evidence of Holden's innocence. It wouldn't be hard.

The *Rocinante* had begun its life as an escort corvette on the battleship *Donnager*. It was well designed and well constructed, but also now years past its last upgrade. The weaknesses in its defense were simple: The cargo doors nearest the reactor had been damaged and repaired, and would almost certainly be weaker than the original. The forward airlock had been built with a software glitch vulnerable to hacking; real Martian naval ships would have been updated as a matter of course, but Holden might have been sloppy.

Her first hope was the airlock. A short-range access transmitter built for troubleshooting malfunctioning airlocks had found its way in among her things. If that failed, getting through the cargo door was harder. She hoped for something explosive, but the *Thomas Prince* took its munitions very seriously. The equipment manifests did include a half-suit exoskeleton mech. It would fit over her chest and arms—it wasn't designed for legs—and with a cutting torch to make the initial breach, it could probably bend the plating enough to let her through. It was also small and lightweight enough to carry, and her access card was a high enough grade for the system to let her take one away.

Once she was on, it would be simple. Kill everyone, overload the reactor, and blow the ship to atoms. With any luck at all, it would reignite suspicions about the bomb on the *Seung Un*. If she got out, fine. If she didn't, she didn't.

The only tricks now were getting there, and waiting like everyone else to hear what happened on the station.



She was dreaming when catastrophe came.

In it, she was walking through a field outside a schoolhouse. She knew that it was on fire, that she had to find a way in. She heard fire engine sirens, but their dark shapes never appeared in the sky. There were people trapped inside and she was supposed to get to them. To free them or to keep them from escaping or both.

She was on the roof, going down through a hole. Smoke billowed out around her, but she could still breathe because she'd been immunized against flames. She stretched down, fingertips brushing against low-g handholds. She realized someone was holding her wrist, supporting her as she strained in toward the darkness and fire. Ren. She couldn't look at him. Sorrow and guilt welled up in her like a flood and she collapsed into a blue-lit bar with crash couches where all the tables should have been. Couples ate dinner and talked and screwed in the dim around her. The man across from her was both Holden and her father. She tried to speak, to say that she didn't want to do this. The man took her by the shoulders, pressing her into the soft gel. She was afraid for a moment that he'd crawl on top of her, but he brought his fists down on her chest with a killing impact and she woke up to the sound of Klaxons and droplets of blood floating in the air.

The pain in her body was so profound and inexplicable that it didn't feel like pain; it was only the sense that something was wrong. She coughed, launching a spray of blood across the room. She thought that somehow she'd triggered her false glands in her sleep, that what was wrong was only her, but the ship alarms argued that it was something worse. She reached for her hand terminal, but it wasn't in its holder. She found it floating half a meter from the door, rotating in the air. A star-shaped fracture in the resin case showed where it had hit something hard enough to break. The network access displayed a bright red bar. No status. System down.

Melba pulled herself to the door and cycled it open.

The dead woman floating in the corridor had her arms out before her, her hair splayed around her like someone drowned. The left side of her face was oddly shaped, softer and rounder and bluer than it should have been. Her eyes were half open, the whites the bright red of burst vessels. Melba pushed past the corpse. Farther down the corridor, a sphere of blood the size of a soccer ball floated slowly toward the air intake with no sign where it had come from.

In the wider corridors toward the middle of the ship, things were worse. Bodies floated at every door, in every passageway. Everything not bolted down floated now by the walls, thrown toward the bow. The soft gray walls were covered with dents where hand terminals and tools and heads had struck them. The air smelled like blood and something else, deeper and more intimate.

Outside the commissary, three soldiers were using sealant foam to stick the dead to the walls, keeping them out of the way. In gravity, they would have been stacking bodies like cordwood.

"You all right?" one of them said. It took Melba a second to realize that the woman was speaking to her.

"I'm okay," Melba said. "What happened?"

"Who the fuck knows? You're one of the maintenance techs, yes?" the woman said sharply.

"I am," Melba said. "Melba Koh. Electrochemical."

“Well, you can get your ass to environmental, Koh,” the woman said. “I’m guessing they need you there.”

Melba nodded, the motion sending her spinning a little until the woman put out a hand to steady her.

She’d never been in a battle or at the scene of a natural disaster. The nearest had been a hurricane that hit São Paulo when she was eight, and her father had hidden the family in the corporate shelters until the flooding was gone. She’d seen more of that damage on the newsfeeds than in person. The *Thomas Prince* was a scene from hell. She passed knots of people working frantically, but the dead and dying were everywhere. Droplets of blood and chips of shattered plastic formed clouds where the eddies of the recyclers pushed them together. In zero g, blood pooled in the wounds and wouldn’t clear. Inflammation was worse. Lungs filled with fluid more easily. However many had died already, more would. Soon. If she hadn’t been in her crash couch, she’d have been thrown into a wall at six hundred meters per second, just like all the others. No, that couldn’t be right. No one would have survived that.

She hadn’t spent much of her time on environmental decks. Most of her work before with Stanni and Soledad had been with power routing. The air and water systems had technicians of their own, specialists at a higher pay grade than hers. The architecture of the rooms kept everything close without being as cramped as the *Cerisier*. She floated in with a sense of relief, as if reaching her goal accomplished something in itself. As if it gave her some measure of control.

The air smelled of ozone and burned hair. A young man, face covered with blue-black bruises, was stuck to the bulkhead with a rope and two electromagnets. He waved something similar to a broom with a massive mesh of fabric on the end like a gigantic fly swatter. Clearing blood from the air. His damaged face was impassive, shocked. A thickening layer of tears encased his eyes, blinding him.

“You! Who the hell are you?”

Melba turned. The new man wore a navy uniform. His right leg was in an inflatable pressure cast. The foot sticking out the end was a bluish purple, and his breath was labored in a way that made her think of pneumonia, of internal bleeding.

“Melba Koh. Civilian electrochemical tech off the *Cerisier*.”

“Who do you answer to?”

“Mikelson’s my group supervisor,” she said, struggling to remember the man’s name. She had only met him once, and he hadn’t left much of an impression on her.

“My name’s Nikos,” the broken-legged man said. “You work for me now. Come on.”

He pushed off more gracefully than should have been possible. She followed him a little too fast and had to grab a handhold to keep from running into his back. He led her through a long passageway into engineering. A huge array of thin metal and ceramic sheets stood at one wall, warnings in eight languages printed along its side. Scorch marks drew circles on the outermost plate, and the air stank of burnt plastic and something else. A hole two feet across had been punched through the center. A human body was still in it, held in place by shards of metal.

“You know what that is, Koh?”

“Air processing,” she said.

“That’s the primary atmosphere processing unit,” he said as if she hadn’t spoken. “And it’s a big damn problem. Secondary processor’s still on fire just at the moment, and the tertiary backups will get us through for about seven hours. Everyone on my team is busted or dead, so you’re about to rebuild this one. Understand?”

I can’t do that, she thought. I’m not really an electrochemical technician. I don’t know how to do this.

“I’ll... get my tools.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” he said. “If I find someone can help out, I’ll send ’em your way.”

“That would be good,” she said. “What about you? Are you all right? Can you help?”

“At a guess? Crushed pelvis, maybe something worse going on in my gut. Keep passing out a little,” he said with a grin. “But I’m high as a kite on the emergency speed, and there’s work. So hop to.”

She pushed off. Her throat was tight, and she could feel her mind starting to shut down. Overstimulation. Shock. She made her way through the carnage and wreckage to the storage bay where the toolboxes from the *Cerisier* were. Her card unlocked them. One had shattered, the remains of a testing deck floating in the air, green ceramic shards and bits of gold wire. Ren was there, his coffin toolbox shifted in place despite the electromagnetic clamps. For a moment, the dream of the fire washed over her. She wondered if she might still be sleeping, the wave of death just part of the same blackness in her own brain. She put her hand on Ren’s box, half expecting to feel him knocking back. A sudden vertigo washed through her, and the sense that she and the ship were falling, that it would land on her. Crush her. All the blood and all the terror, every dead person held in place to keep the corpses from floating, they all began here. Every sin she’d committed, backward and forward in time, had its center in the bones beneath her hand.

“Stop,” she said. “Just stop.”

She took her tool chest, the real one, and sped back to engineering and the shattered air processing controller. Nikos had found two other people, a man in civilian dress and an older woman in naval uniform.

“You’re Koh?” the woman said. “Good, grab his legs.”

Melba set her toolbox against the deck and activated the magnets, then pushed over to the hole in the atmosphere processor. The machine had been loosened from its housing, giving the body a little more room to move. Melba put her hands on the dead man’s thighs, wadding the cloth of his trousers in her fists. She braced herself against the metal siding of the unit.

“Ready?” the man asked.

“Ready.”

The woman counted down from three, and Melba pulled. For a long moment, she thought the corpse wouldn’t come out, but then something tore, the vibrations of it transferring through to her hands. The body slid free.

“Score one for the good guys,” Nikos said from across the bay. His face was developing an ashy gray tone. Like he was dying. She wished he would go to the medical bays, but they were probably swamped. He could die here doing his work, or there waiting for an open bay. “Clear him away. Got him out, we don’t need him drifting back.”

Melba nodded, took a firm grip, and pushed off on a trajectory that would land them on the far bulkhead. The back of the corpse’s head had been crushed almost flat, but death had come so swiftly, there was very little blood. At the wall, she secured him with a spray of foam and held him for a moment while it set. The dead man’s face was close to hers. She could see the whiskers he’d missed when he’d shaved. The brown of his empty eyes. She felt a sudden urge to kiss him and then pushed the impulse away, disgusted.

From his uniform, he’d been an officer. Lieutenant, maybe. The white identity card on the lanyard around his neck had a picture of him looking solemn. She took it in her fingers. Not lieutenant. Lieutenant commander. Lieutenant Commander Stepan Arsenau, who would never have come through the Ring if it weren’t for her. Who wouldn’t have died here. She tried to feel guilt, but there wasn’t room for him inside of her. She had too much blood already.

She was reaching out to tuck his card back in place when the small voice in the back of her mind said, *I bet he could get an EVA pack with this*. Melba blinked. Her mind seemed to click back into focus, and she looked around her, the last wisps of dream or delirium leaving her mind. She had

access to the equipment she needed. The ship was in chaos. This was it. This was the opportunity she'd been waiting for. She plucked the card off its lanyard and slipped it in her pocket, then looked around nervously.

No one had noticed.

She licked her lips.

"I'm going to need something to crack this," the young man was saying. "The bolt head's sheared round. I can't get it out."

The older woman swore and turned to her.

"Got anything that'll do the trick?"

"Not here," Melba said. "I have an idea where I could get something to drill it out, though."

"Move fast. We don't want this place gettin' stuffy."

"Okay. You guys do what you can. I'll be right back," Melba lied.

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Chapter Twenty-Four: Anna

Eschatology had always been Anna's least favorite study of theology. When asked about Armageddon, she'd tell her parishioners that God Himself had been pretty circumspect on the topic, so it didn't do much good to worry about it. Have faith that God will do what's best, and avoiding His vengeance against the wicked should be the least compelling reason for worship.

But the truth was that she'd always had a deeply held disagreement with most futurist and millennialist interpretations. Not the theology itself, necessarily, since their guess at what the end times prophecies really meant was as good as anyone else's. Her disagreement was primarily with the level of glee over the destruction of the wicked that sometimes crept into the teachings. This was especially true in some millennialist sects that filled their literature with paintings of Armageddon. Pictures of terrified people running away from some formless fiery doom that burned their world down behind them, while smug worshipers—of the correct religion, of course—watched from safety as God got with the smiting. Anna couldn't understand how anyone could see such a depiction as anything but tragic.

She wished she could show them the *Thomas Prince*.

She'd been reading when it happened. Her hand terminal had been propped on her chest with a pillow behind it, her hands behind her head. A three-tone alarm had sounded a high-g alert, but it was late to the party. She was already being mashed into her crash couch so hard that she could feel the plastic of the base right through twenty centimeters of impact gel. It seemed to last forever, but it was probably just a few seconds. Her hand terminal had skidded down her chest, suddenly heavier than Nami the last time she'd picked her daughter up. It left a black-and-blue trail of bruises up her breastbone and slammed into her chin hard enough to split the skin. The pillow mashed into her abdomen like a ten-kilo sandbag, filling her mouth with the taste of stomach acid.

But worst of all was the pain in her shoulders. Both arms had snapped back flat against the bed, temporarily dislocating them. When the endless seconds of deceleration were over, both joints popped back into place with a pain even worse than when they'd come out. The gel of the couch, stressed beyond its design specifications, hadn't gripped her the way it was meant to. Instead, it rebounded back into its prior shape and launched her in slow motion toward the ceiling of her cabin. Trying to put her hands in front of her sent bolts of agony through her shoulders, so she drifted up and hit the ceiling with her face. Her chin left a smear of blood on the fabric-covered foam.

Anna was a gentle person. She'd never in her life been in a fight. She'd never been in a major accident. The worst pain she'd ever felt before was childbirth, and the endorphins that had followed had mostly erased it from her memory. To suddenly be so hurt in so many different places at once left her dazed and with a sort of directionless anger. It wasn't fair that a person could be hurt so much. She wanted to yell at the crash couch that had betrayed her by letting this happen, and she wanted to punch the ceiling for hitting her in the face, even though she'd never thrown a punch in her life and could barely move her arms.

When she could finally move without feeling light-headed she went looking for help and found that the corridor outside her room was worse.

Just a few meters from her door, a young man had been crushed. He looked as though a malevolent giant had stomped on him and then ground him under its heel. The boy was not only

smashed, but torn and twisted in ways that barely left him recognizable as a human. His blood splashed the floor and walls and drifted around his corpse in red balls like grisly Christmas ornaments.

Anna yelled for help. Someone yelled back in a voice filled with liquid and pain. Someone from farther down the corridor. Anna carefully pushed off the doorjamb of her room and drifted toward the voice. Two rooms down, another man was half in and half out of his crash couch. He must have been in the process of getting out of bed when the deceleration happened, and everything from his pelvis down was twisted and broken. His upper torso still lay on the bed, arms waving feebly at her, his face a mask of pain.

"Help me," he said, and then coughed up a glob of blood and mucus that drifted away in a red-and-green ball.

Anna drifted up high enough to push the comm panel on the wall without using her shoulder. It was dead. All the lights were the ones she'd been told came on in emergency power failures. Nothing else seemed to be working.

"Help me," the man said again. His voice was weaker and filled with even more of a liquid rasp. Anna recognized him as Alonzo Guzman, a famous poet from the UN's South American region. A favorite of the secretary-general, someone had told her.

"I will," Anna said, not even trying to stop the tears that suddenly blinded her. She wiped her eyes on her shoulder and said, "Let me find someone. I've hurt my arms, but I'll find someone."

The man began weeping softly. Anna pushed back into the corridor with her toes, drifting past the carnage to find someone who wasn't hurt.

This was the part the millennialists never put in their paintings.

They loved scenes of righteous Godly vengeance on sinful mankind. They loved to show God's chosen people safe from harm, watching with happy faces as they were proved right to the world. But they never showed the aftermath. They never showed weeping humans, crushed and dying in pools of their own fluids. Young men smashed into piles of red flesh. A young woman cut in half because she was passing through a hatchway when catastrophe hit.

This was Armageddon. This is what it looked like. Blood and torn flesh and cries for help.

Anna reached an intersection of corridors and ran out of strength. Her body hurt too badly to continue. And in all four directions, the corridor floors and walls were covered with the aftermath of violent death. It was too much. Anna drifted in the empty space for a few minutes, and then she gently floated to the wall and stuck to it. Movement. The ship was moving now. Very slow, but enough to push her to the wall. She pushed away from it and floated again. Not still accelerating, then.

She recognized that her interest in the relative movements of the ship was just her mind trying to find a distraction from the scene around her, and started crying again. The idea that she might never come home from this trip crashed in on her. For the first time since coming to the Ring, she saw a future in which she never held Nami again. Never smelled her hair. Never kissed Nono, or climbed into a warm bed beside her and held her close. The pain of those things being ripped away from her was worse than anything physical she'd suffered. She didn't wipe away the tears that came, and they blinded her. That was fine. There was nothing here she wanted to see.

When something grabbed her from behind and spun her around, she tensed, waiting for some new horror to reveal itself.

It was Tilly.

"Oh, thank God," the woman said, hugging Anna tight enough to send new waves of pain through her shoulders. "I went to your room and there was blood on the walls and you weren't there and someone was dead right outside your door..."

Unable to hug back, Anna just put her cheek against Tilly's for a moment. Tilly pushed her out to arm's length, but didn't let go. "Are you okay?" She was looking at the gash on Anna's chin.

"My face is fine. Just a little cut. But my arms are hurt. I can barely move them. We need to get help. Alonzo Guzman's in his room, and he's hurt. Really hurt. Do you know what happened?"

"I haven't met anyone yet who knows," Tilly said, rotating Anna first one way, then the other, looking her over critically. "Move your hands. Okay. Bend your elbows." She felt Anna's shoulders. "They're not dislocated."

"I think they were for a second," Anna said after the gasp of pain Tilly's touch brought. "And everything else hurts. But we have to hurry."

Tilly nodded and pulled a red-and-white backpack off one shoulder. When she opened it, it was filled with dozens of plastic packages with tiny black text on them. Tilly pulled a few out, read them, put them back. After several tries, she stripped the packaging off of three small injection ampules.

"What is that?" Anna said, but Tilly just jabbed her with all three in answer.

Anna felt a rush of euphoria wash over her. Her shoulders stopped hurting. *Everything* stopped hurting. Even her fear about never seeing her family again seemed a distant and minor problem.

"I was sleeping when it happened," Tilly said, tossing the empty ampules into the first aid pack. "But I woke up feeling like a forklift had run over me. I think my ribs were popped out of place. I could barely breathe. So I dug up this pack from the emergency closet in my room."

"I didn't think to look there," Anna said, surprised she hadn't. She had a vague memory of being disoriented by pain, but now she felt *great*. Better than ever before. And sharp. Hyper-aware. Stupid not to think of the emergency supplies. This being, after all, an emergency. She wanted to slap herself on the forehead for being so stupid. Tilly was holding her arms again. Why was she doing that? They had work to do. They had to find the medics and send them after the poet.

"Hey, kiddo," Tilly said, "takes a second for that first rush to ease down a bit. I spent a full minute trying to resuscitate a pile of red paste before I realized how wired I was."

"What is this?" Anna asked, moving her head from side to side, which made the edges of Tilly's face blurry.

Tilly shrugged. "Military-grade amphetamines and painkillers, I'm guessing. I gave you an anti-inflammatory too. Because what the hell."

"Are you a doctor?" Anna asked, marveling at how *smart* Tilly was.

"No, but I can read the directions on the package."

"Okay." Anna nodded, her face serious. "Okay."

"Let's go find someone who knows what's going on," Tilly said, pulling Anna down the corridor with her.

"And after, I need to find my people," Anna said, letting herself be pulled.

"I may have given you too much. Nono and Nami are at home, in Moscow."

"No, my *people*. My congregation. Chris and that other guy and the marine. She's angry, but I think I can talk to her. I need to find them."

"Yeah," Tilly said. "May have overdosed you a bit. But we'll find them. Let's find help first."

Anna thought of the poet and felt her tears threatening to return. If she was sad, maybe the initial rush of the drugs was wearing off a little. She found herself regretting that for a moment.

Tilly stopped at a printed deck map on the wall. It was right next to a black and unresponsive network panel. Of course military ships would have both, Anna thought. They were built with the expectation that things would stop working when the ship got shot. That thought made Anna sad too. Some distant part of her consciousness recognized the drug-fueled emotional roller coaster she was on, but was powerless to do anything about. She started weeping again.

"Security station." Tilly tapped on a spot on the map, then yanked Anna down the corridor after her. They made two turns and wound up at a small room filled with people, guns, and computers that

seemed to still be working. A middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair and a grim expression on his face pointedly ignored them. The other four people in the room were younger, but equally uninterested in their arrival.

"Get 35C open first," the older man said to the two young men floating to his left. He pointed at something on a map. "There were a dozen civvies in there."

"EMT?" one of the young men asked.

"Don't have them to spare, and that galley doesn't have crash couches. Everyone in there is pasta sauce, but the El Tee says look anyway."

"Roger that," the young man replied, and he and his partner pushed out of the room past Anna and Tilly, barely glancing at them as they went.

"You two do a corridor sweep," the older man said to the other two young sailors in the room. "Tags if you can find them, pictures and swabs if you can't. Everything sent to OPCOM on red two one, got me?"

"Aye-aye," one of them said, and they floated out of the room.

"The man in 295 needs help," Anna said to the security officer. "He's hurt badly. He's a poet."

He tapped something onto his desk terminal and said, "Okay, he's in the queue. EMTs will get there as soon as they can. We're setting up a temporary emergency area in the officers' mess. I suggest you two ladies get there double time."

"What happened?" Tilly asked, and gripped a handhold on the wall like she meant to stay a while. Anna grabbed on to the nearest thing she could find, which turned out to be a rack of weapons.

The security officer looked Tilly up and down once, and seemed to come to the conclusion that giving her what she wanted was the easiest solution. "Hell if I know. We decelerated to a dead stop in just a shade under five seconds. The damage and injuries are all high-g trauma. Whatever grabbed us only grabbed the skin of the ship and didn't give a shit about the stuff inside."

"So the slow zone changed?" Tilly was asking. Anna looked over the guns in the rack, her emotions more under control, but her mind was still racing. The rack was full of pistols of various kinds. Big blocky ones with large barrels and fat magazines. Smaller ones that looked like the kind you saw on cop shows. And in a special rack all their own, tasers like the one she'd had on Europa. Well, not really like it. These were military models. Gray and sleek and efficient-looking, with a much bigger power pack than hers. In spite of their non-lethal purpose, they managed to appear dangerous. Her old taser at home had looked like a small hair dryer.

"Don't touch those," the security officer said. Anna hadn't even realized she was reaching for one until he said it.

"That could mean a damn lot of casualties," Tilly said. Anna had the feeling she was reentering the conversation after having missed a lot of it.

"Hundreds on the *Prince*," the security officer said. "And we weren't going anywhere near the old speed limit. Some of the ships were. We get no broadcasts from those now."

Anna looked at the various terminals working in the office around her. Damage reports and security feeds and orders. Anna couldn't understand much of them. They used a lot of acronyms and numbers for things. Military jargon. One small monitor was displaying pictures of people. Anna recognized James Holden in one, then another version of him with a patchy beard. Wanted posters? But she didn't recognize any of the other people until the sculpture of the girl that Naomi, Holden's second-in-command, had blamed for the attack.

"Maybe it was the space girl," Anna said before she'd realized she was going to. She still felt stoned, and suppressed an urge to giggle.

The security officer and Tilly were both staring at her.

Anna pointed at the screen. "Julie Mao, the girl from Eros. The one the *Rocinante* blamed. Maybe she did this."

Both the security officer and Tilly turned to look at the screen. A few seconds later the image of Julie the space girl disappeared and was replaced by someone Anna didn't recognize.

"Someone's going to get James Holden in an interrogation room for a few hours, and then we'll have a much better idea of where to put the blame."

Tilly just laughed.

"Is that who they blamed?" she said when she'd finished. "That isn't Julie Mao. And there's no way Claire's out here."

"Claire?" Anna and the officer said at the same time.

"That's Claire. Clarissa Mao. Julie's little sister. She's living on Luna with her mother, last I heard. But that's definitely not Julie."

"Are you sure?" Anna said. "Because the executive officer from the *Rocinante* said—"

"I dandled both those girls on my knee back in the day. The Maos used to be regular guests at our house in Baja. Brought the kids out during the summers to swim and eat fish tacos. And that one is Claire, not Julie."

"Oh," said Anna as her drug-enhanced mind ran out the entire plot. The angry girl she'd seen in the galley, the explosion of the UN ship, the ridiculous message from Holden's ship, followed by the protestations of innocence. "It was her. She blew up the ship."

"Which ship?" the officer asked.

"The UN ship that blew up. The one that made the Belter ship shoot at Holden. And then we all went through the Ring and she's *here*! She's on this ship right now! I saw her in the galley and I *knew* there was something wrong with her. She scared me but I should have said something but I didn't because why would I?"

Tilly and the security man were both staring at her. She could feel her mind running away with her, and her mouth seemed to be working all on its own. They were looking at her like she'd gone insane.

"She's here," Anna said, clamping her mouth shut with an effort.

"Claire?" Tilly asked with a frown.

"I saw her in the galley. She threatened me. She was on this ship."

The security man scowled and tapped something on his terminal, swore, then tapped something else. "I'll be a sonofabitch. Shipwide face recognition says we've got a match in hangar B right now."

"You have to go arrest her," Anna shouted.

"Hangar B is a designated emergency area," the officer said. "She's probably there with the other survivors and broken in five different places. If it's even her. Shitty reproduction like that makes for a lot of false positives."

"You have software that could have found her at any time?" Tilly asked in disbelief. "You didn't *check*?"

"Ma'am, we don't ask 'how high' when James fucking Holden says jump," the officer growled back.

"There's an airlock in there," Anna said, stabbing her hand at the display. "She could leave. She could go anywhere."

"Like *where*?" the officer replied.

As if on cue, a green airlock cycling alarm appeared on the display.

"We have to go get her," Anna said, pulling on Tilly's arm.

"You have to go to the officers' mess," the security man said. "I'll send people to pick her up for questioning as soon as we stop bleeding. Don't worry about it. We've got plenty enough to sort out now. That one'll wait."

"But—"

A young man floated into the room. The left half of his face was covered in blood.

"Need the EMTs to six-alpha, sir. We've got ten civvies."

"I'll see who I can pry free," the officer said. "Do we know anything about the condition of the injured?"

"Bones sticking out, but they're not dead."

Anna pulled Tilly into the corridor.

"We can't wait. She's dangerous. She's already killed people when she blew up the other ship."

"You're stoned," Tilly said, pulling her arm free and drifting across the corridor to bump into the wall. "You're not acting rationally. What are you going to do even if Claire Mao is on this ship and has become some sort of terrorist? She blew up a ship. Gonna hit her with your Bible?"

Anna pulled the taser halfway out of her pocket. Tilly sucked in a whistling breath through her teeth. "You *stole* that? Are you insane?" she asked in a loud whisper.

"I'm going to go find her," Anna replied, the drugs singing in her blood having focused down to a fine point. She felt like if she could stop this Claire person, she could save herself from losing her family forever. She recognized this idea as utterly irrational, and gave in to its power anyway. "I have to talk to her."

"You're going to get killed," Tilly said. She looked like she might start crying. "You told security. You did your part. Let it go. You're a minister, not a cop."

"I'll need an EVA pack. Do you know where they keep those? Are they near the airlocks?"

"You're insane," Tilly said. "I can't be part of this."

"It's okay," Anna said. "I'll be back."

Chapter Twenty-Five: Holden

Naomi,” Holden said again. “Come in. Please. Please respond.”

The silent radio felt like a threat. Miller had paused, his face bleak and apologetic. Holden wondered how many other people had looked at that exact expression on Miller’s face. It seemed designed to go with words like *There’s been an accident* and *The DNA matches your son’s*. Holden could feel his hands trembling. It didn’t matter.

“*Rocinante*. Naomi, come in.”

“Doesn’t mean anything,” Miller said. “She could be just fine, but the comm array went down. Or maybe she’s busy fixing something.”

“Or maybe she’s dying by centimeters,” Holden said. “I’ve got to go. I have to get back to her.” Miller shook his head.

“It’s a longer trip back out than it was getting here. You can’t go as fast anymore. By the time you get back, she’ll have figured out whatever needed figuring.”

Or she’ll be dead, Miller didn’t say. Holden wondered what it meant that the protomolecule could put Miller on its hand like a puppet and the detective could still be thoughtful enough to leave out the possibility that everyone on the *Roci* was gone.

“I have to try.”

Miller sighed. For a moment, his pupils flickered blue, like there were tiny bathypelagic fish swimming in the deep trenches of his eyeballs.

“You want to help her? You want to help all of them? Come with me. Now. You run back home, we won’t get to find out what happened. And you may not get the chance to come back here. Plus, you can bet your friends are regrouping back there, and they can still gently rip your arms off if they catch you.”

Holden felt like there were two versions of himself pulling at his mind. Naomi might be hurt. Might be dead. Alex and Amos too. He had to be there for them. But there was also a small, quiet part of himself that knew Miller was right. It was too late.

“You can tell the station that there are people on those ships,” he said. “You can ask it to help them.”

“I can tell a rock that it ought to be secretary-general. Doesn’t mean it’s gonna listen. All this?” Miller waved his hands at the dark walls. “It’s dumb. Utilitarian. No creativity or complex analysis.”

“Really?” Holden said, his curiosity peeking through the panic and anger and fear. “Why not?”

“Some things, it’s better if they’re predictable. No one wants the station coming up with its own bad ideas. We should hurry.”

“Where are we going?” Holden said, pausing for a few deep breaths. He’d been at low g for too long without taking the time for exercise. His cardio had suffered. The dangers of growing rich and lazy.

“I’m going to need you to do something for me,” Miller replied. “I need access to the... shit, I don’t know. Call ’em records.”

Holden finished his panting, then straightened and nodded for Miller to resume their walk. As they moved down the gently sloping corridor he said, “Aren’t you already plugged in?”

"I'm aware. The station is in lockdown, and they didn't exactly give me the root password. I need you to open it up for me."

"Not sure what I can do that you can't," Holden said. "Other than be a charming dinner guest."

Miller stopped at another seeming dead end, touched the wall, and a portal irised open. He gestured Holden through, then followed and closed the door behind them. They were in another large chamber, vaguely octagonal and easily fifty meters long on each face. More of the insectile mechs littered the space, but the glass pillars were not in evidence. Instead, at the center of the chamber stood a massive construct of glowing blue metal. It was octagonal, a smaller version of the dimensions of the room, but only a few meters wide on each face. It didn't glow any brighter than the rest of the room, but Holden could feel something coming off of it, an almost physical pressure that made walking toward it difficult. His suit said that the atmosphere had changed, that it was rich with complex organic chemicals and nitrogen.

"Sometimes, having a body at all means you've got a certain level of status. If you aren't pretty damn trusted, you don't get to walk around in the fallen world."

"The fallen world?"

Miller shuddered and leaned his hand out against the wall. It was a profoundly human gesture of distress. The glowing moss of the wall didn't respond at all. Miller's lips were beginning to turn black.

"Fallen world. The substrate. *Matter*."

"Are you all right?" Holden asked.

Miller nodded, but he looked like he was about to vomit. "There's time's I start knowing things that are too big for my head. It's better in here, but there're going to be some questions that don't fit in me. Just thinking with all this crap connected to the back of my head is a full contact sport, and if I get too much, I'm pretty sure they'll... ah... call it reboot me. I mean, sure, consciousness is an illusion and blah blah blah, but I'd rather not go there if we can help it. I don't know how much the next one would remember."

Holden stopped walking, then turned and gave Miller a hard shove. Both of them staggered backward. "You seem pretty real to me."

Miller held up his finger. "Seem. Good verb. You ever wondered why I leave as soon as anyone else shows up?"

"I'm special?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't go that far."

"Fine," Holden said. "I'll bite. Why doesn't anyone else see you?"

"I'm not sure we've got time for this, but..." Miller took off his hat and scratched his head. "So your brain has a hundred billion brain cells and about five hundred trillion synapses."

"Will this be on the test?"

"Don't be an asshole," Miller said conversationally, and put his hat back on. "And that shit is custom grown. No two brains are exactly alike. Guess how much processing power it takes to really model even one human brain? More than every human computer ever built put together, and that's before we even start getting to the crap that goes on inside the cells."

"Okay."

"Now picture those synapses as buttons on a keyboard. Five hundred trillion buttons. And say that a brain looking at something and thinking, 'That's a flower' punches a couple billion of those keys in just the right pattern. Except it ain't near that easy. It isn't just a flower, it's a pile of associations. Smells, the way a stem feels in your fingers, the flower you gave your mom once, the flower you gave your girl. A flower you stepped on by accident and it made you sad. And being sad brings on a whole pile of other associations."

"I get it," Holden said, holding up his hands in surrender. "It's complicated."

“Now picture you need to push exactly the right buttons to make someone think of a person, hear them speaking, remember the clothes they wore and the way they smelled and how they would sometimes take off their hat to scratch their head.”

“Wait,” Holden said. “Are there bits of protomolecule in my brain?”

“Not exactly. You may have noticed I’m non-local.”

“What the hell does that even mean?”

“Well,” Miller said. “Now you’re asking me to explain microwaves to a monkey.”

“That’s a metaphor I’ve never actually spoken aloud. If you’re aiming for not creeping me the hell out, you need more practice.”

“So, yeah. The most complex simulation in the history of your solar system is running right now so that we can pretend I’m here in the same room with you. The correct response is being flattered. Also, doing what the fuck I need you to do.”

“That would be?”

“Touching that big thing in the middle of the room.”

Holden looked at the construct again, felt the almost subliminal pressure coming off of it. “Why?”

“Because,” said Miller, lecturing to a stupid child. “The place is in lockdown. It’s not accepting remote connections without a level of authorization I don’t have.”

“And I do?”

“You’re not making a remote connection. You’re actually here. In the substrate. In some quarters, that’s kind of a big deal.”

“But I just walked in here.”

“You had some help. I calmed some of the security down to get you this far.”

“So you let the marines in too?”

“Unlocked is unlocked. C’mon.”

The closer Holden got to the octagon, the harder it was to approach. It wasn’t just fear, though the dread swam at the back of his throat and all down his spine. It was physically difficult, like pushing against a magnetic field.

The shape was chipped at the edges, marked with hair-thin lines in patterns that might have been ideograms or patterns of fungal growth or both. He reached out his hand, and his teeth itched.

“What will happen?” he asked.

“How much do you know about quantum mechanics?”

“How much do you?” Holden replied.

“A lot, turns out,” Miller said with a lopsided grin. “Do now, anyway.”

“I’m not going to burst into flames or something, right?”

Miller gave a small Belter shrug with his hands. “Don’t think so. I’m not up on all the defense systems. But I don’t *think* so.”

“So,” Holden said. “*Maybe?*”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Holden sighed and started to reach for the surface. He paused. “You didn’t really answer the question, you know.”

“You’re stalling,” Miller said. And then, “Which question was that?”

“I get why no one else sees you. But the real question is ‘why me’ at all? I mean, okay, you’re screwing with my brain and that’s hard work, and if there’s other people for me to interact with it’s too hard and all like that. But why *me*? Why not Naomi or the UN secretary-general or something?”

Miller nodded, understanding the question. He frowned, sighed.

“Miller kind of liked you. Thought you were a decent guy.”

“That’s it?”

“You need more?”

Holden placed his palm flat against the closest surface. He didn't burst into flames. Through the gloves of his EVA suit, he felt a short electric tingle and then nothing, because he was floating in space. He tried to scream and failed.

Sorry, a voice said in his head. It sounded like Miller. *Didn't mean to drag you in here. Just try and relax, all right?*

Holden tried to nod, but failed at that too. He didn't have a head.

His sense of his own body had changed, shifted, expanded past anything he'd imagined before. The simple extent of it was numbing. He felt the stars within him, the vast expanses of space contained by him. With a thought, he could pull his attention to a sun surrounded by unfamiliar planets like he was attending to his finger or the back of his neck. The lights all tasted different, smelled different. He wanted to close his eyes against the flood of sensation, but he couldn't. He didn't have anything so simple as eyes. He had become immeasurably large, and rich, and strange. Thousands of voices, millions, billions, lifted in chorus and he was their song. And at his center, a place where all the threads of his being came together. He recognized the station not by how it looked, but by the deep throb of its heartbeat. The power of a million suns contained, channeled. Here was the nexus that sat between the worlds, the miracle of knowledge and power that gave him heaven. His Babel.

And a star went out.

It wasn't especially unique. It wasn't beautiful. A few voices out of quadrillions went silent, and if the great chorus of his being was lessened by them, it wasn't perceptible. Still, a ripple passed through him. The colors of his consciousness swirled and darkened. Concern, curiosity, alarm. Even delight. Something new had happened for the first time in millennia.

Another star flickered and failed. Another few voices went silent. Now, slowly and instantly both, everything changed. He felt the great debate raging in him as a fever, an illness. He had been beyond anything like a threat for so long that all the reflexes of survival had weakened, atrophied. Holden felt a fear that he knew belonged to him—the man trapped within the machine—because his larger self couldn't remember to feel it. The vast parliament swirled, thoughts and opinions, analysis and poetry blending together and breaking apart. It was beautiful as sunlight on oil, and terrifying.

Three suns failed, and now Holden felt himself growing smaller. It was still very little, almost nothing. A white spot on the back of his hand, a sore that wouldn't heal. The plague was still only a symptom, but it was one his vast self couldn't ignore.

From the station at his core, he reached out into the places he had been, the darkened systems that were lost to him, and he reached out through the gates with fire. The fallen stars, mere matter now, empty and dead, bloated. Filled their systems in a rage of radiation and heat, sheared the electrons from every atom, and detonated. Their final deaths echoed, and Holden felt a sense of mourning and of peace. The cancer had struck, and been burned away. The loss of the minds that had been would never be redeemed. Mortality had returned from exile, but it had been cleansed with fire.

A hundred stars failed.

What had been a song became a shriek. Holden felt his body shifting against itself, furious as a swarm of bees trapped and dying. In despair, the hundred suns were burned away, the station hurling destruction through the gates as fast as the darkness appeared, but the growing shadow could not be stopped. All through his flesh, stars were going out, voices were falling into silence. Death rode the vacuum, faster than light and implacable.

He felt the decision like a seed crystal giving form to the chaos around it, solid, hard, resolute. Desperation, mourning, and a million farewells, one to the other. The word *quarantine* came to him, and with the logic of dreams, it carried an unsupportable weight of horror. But within it, like the last

voice in Pandora's box, the promise of reunion. One day, when the solution was found, everything that had been lost would be regained. The gates reopened. The vast mind restored.

The moment of dissolution came, sudden and expected, and Holden blew apart.

He was in darkness. Empty and tiny and lost, waiting for the promise to be fulfilled, waiting for the silent chorus to whisper again that Armageddon had been stopped, that all was not lost. And the silence reigned.

Huh, Miller thought at him. *That was weird.*

Like being pulled backward through an infinitely long tunnel of light, Holden was returned to his body. For one vertiginous moment he felt too small, like the tiny wrapping of skin and meat would explode trying to contain him.

Then he just felt tired, and sat down on the floor with a thump.

"Okay," Miller said, rubbing his cheek with an open palm. "I guess that's a start. Sort of explains everything, sort of nothing. Pain in the ass."

Holden flopped onto his back. He felt like someone had run him through a shredder and then badly welded him back together. Trying to remember what it felt like to be the size of a galaxy gave him a splitting headache, so he stopped.

"Tell me everything it explains," he said when he could remember how to speak. Being forced to move moist flaps of meat in order to form the words felt sensual and obscene.

"They quarantined the systems. Shut down the network to stop whatever was capping the locals."

"So, behind each of those gates is a solar system full of whatever made the protomolecule?"

Miller laughed. Something in the sound of it sent a shiver down Holden's spine. "That seems pretty fucking unlikely."

"Why?"

"This station has been waiting for the all-clear signal to open the network back up for about two billion years. If they'd found a solve, they wouldn't still be waiting. Whatever it was, I think it got them all."

"All of them but you," Holden said.

"Nah, kid. I'm one of them like the *Rocinante* is one of you. The *Roci*'s smart for a machine. It knows a lot about you. It could probably gin up a rough simulation of you if someone told it to. Those things? The ones you felt like? Compared to them, I'm a fancy kind of hand terminal."

"And the nothing it explains," Holden said. "You mean what killed them."

"Well, if we're gonna be fair, it's not really nothing," Miller said, crossing his arms. "We know it ate a galaxy spanning hive consciousness like it was popcorn, so that's something. And we know it survived a sterilization that was a couple hundred solar systems wide."

Holden had a powerfully vivid memory of watching the station hurl fire through the ring gates, of the stars on the other side blowing up like balloons, of the gates themselves abandoned to the fire and disappearing. Even just the echo of it nearly blinded him with remembered pain. "Seriously, did they blow up those *stars* to stop it?"

Holden's image of Miller patted the column at the center of the room, though he knew now that Miller wasn't really touching it. Something was pressing the right buttons on his synaptic keyboard to make him think Miller was.

"Yup. Autoclaved the whole joint. Fed a bunch of extra energy in and popped 'em like balloons."

"They can't still do that, though, right? I mean, if the things that ran this are all gone, no one to pull that trigger. It won't do that to us."

Miller's grim smile chilled Holden's blood. "I keep telling you. This station is in war mode, kid. It's playing for keeps."

"Is there a way we can make it feel better about things?"

“Sure. Now I’m in here, I can take off the lockdown,” Miller said, “but you’re going to have to
—”

Miller vanished.

“To what?” Holden shouted. “I’m going to have to *what?*”

From behind came an electronically amplified voice. “James Holden, by authority of the Martian Congressional Republic, you are placed under arrest. Get down on your knees and place your hands on your head. Any attempt to resist will be met with lethal response.”

Holden did as he was told, but turned his head to look behind. Seven marines in recon armor had come into the room. They weren’t bothering to point their guns at him, but Holden knew they could catch him and tear him to pieces just using the strength of their suits.

“Guys, seriously, you couldn’t have given me five more minutes?”

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Chapter Twenty-Six: Bull

Voices. Light. A sense of wrongness deep in places he couldn't identify. Bull tried to grit his teeth and found his jaw already clenched hard enough to ache. Someone cried out, but he didn't know where from.

The light caught his attention. Simple white LED with a sanded backslash to diffuse it. An emergency light. The kind that came on when power was down. It hurt to look at, but he did, using it to focus. If he could make that make sense, everything else would come. A chiming alarm kept tugging at his attention, coming from outside. In the corridor. Bull's mind tried to slide that way, going into the corridor, out into the wide, formless chaos, and he pulled it back to the light. It was like trying to wake up except he was already awake.

Slowly, he recognized the alarm as something he'd hear in the medical bay. He was in the medical bay, strapped onto a bed. The tugging sensation at his arm was a forced IV. With a moment of nauseating vertigo, his perception of the world shifted—he wasn't standing, he was lying down. Meaningless distinctions without gravity, but human brains couldn't seem to help trying to assert direction on the directionless. His neck ached. His head ached. Something else felt wrong.

There were other people in the bay. Men and women on every bed, most with their eyes closed. A new alarm sounded, the woman in the bay across from him losing blood pressure. Crashing. Dying. He shouted, and a man in a nurse's uniform came floating past. He adjusted something on her bed's control board, then pushed off and away. Bull tried to grab him as he went by, but he couldn't.

He'd been in his office. Serge had already gone for the night. A few minor incidents were piled up from the day, the constant friction of a large, poorly disciplined crew. Like everyone else, he'd been waiting to see whether Holden and the Martians came back out of the station. Or if something else would. The fear had made sleep unlikely. He started watching the presentation that the *Rocinante* had sent, James Holden looking surprisingly young and charming saying, *This is what we're calling the slow zone*. He remembered noticing that everyone had accepted Holden's name for the place, and wondered whether it was just that the man had gotten there first or if there was something about charisma that translated across the void.

And then he'd been here. Someone had attacked, then. A torpedo had gotten past their defenses or else sabotage. Maybe the whole damn ship was just coming apart.

There was a comm interface on the bed. He pulled it over, logged in, and used his security override to open its range to the full ship and not just the nurses' station. He requested a connection to Sam, and a few heartbeats later she appeared on the screen. Her hair was floating around her head. Null g always made him think of drowned people. The sclera of her left eye was the bright red of fresh blood.

"Bull," she said with a grin that looked like relief. "Jesus Christ with a side of chips, but I never thought I'd be glad to hear from you."

"Need a status report."

"Yeah," she said. "I better come by for this one. You in your office?"

"Medical bay," Bull said.

"Be there in a jiff," she said.

"Sam. What happened?"

"You remember that asshole who shot the Ring and got turned into a thin paste when his ship hit the slow zone? Same thing."

"We went too fast?" Bull said.

"We didn't. Something changed the rules on us. I've got a couple techs doing some quick-and-dirty tests to figure out what the new top speed is, but we're captured and floating into that big ring of ships. Along with *everybody* else."

"The whole flotilla?"

"Everybody and their sisters," Sam said. A sense of grim despair undercut the lightness of her words. "No one's under their own power now except the shuttles that were inside the bays when it happened, and no one's willing to send them going too fast either. The *Behemoth* was probably going the slowest when it happened. Other ships, it's worse."

How bad floated in his mind, but something about the words refused to be asked. His mind skated over them, flickering. The deep sense of wrongness welled up in him.

"First convenience," he said.

"On my way," Sam said, and the connection dropped. He wanted to sag back into a pillow, wanted to feel the comforting hand of gravity pressing him down. He wanted the New Mexican sun streaming in through a glass window and the open air and blue sky. None of it was there. None of it ever would be.

Rest when you're dead, he thought, and thumbed the comm terminal on again. Ashford and Pa weren't accepting connections, but they both took messages. He was in the process of connecting to the security office when a doctor came by and started talking with him. Mihn Sterling, her name was. Bennie Cortland-Mapu's second. He listened to her with half his attention. A third of the crew had been in their rest cycle, safely in their crash couches. The other two-thirds—him included—had slammed into walls or decks, the hand terminals they'd been looking at accelerating into projectiles. Something about network regrowth and zero gravity and spinal fluid. Bull wondered where Pa was. If she was dead and Ashford alive, it would be a problem.

Disaster recovery could only go two ways. Either everyone pulled together and people lived, or they kept on with their tribal differences and fear, and more people died.

He had to find a way to coordinate with Earth and Mars. Everyone was going to be stressed for medical supplies. If he was going to make this work, he had to bring people together. He needed to see if Monica Stuart and her team—or anyway the part of her team that wasn't going to be charged with sabotage and executed—were still alive. If he could start putting out his own broadcasts, something along the lines of what she'd done with Holden...

The doctor was getting agitated about something. He didn't notice when Sam came into the room; she was just floating there. Her left leg was in an improvised splint of nylon tape and packing foam. Bull put his palm out to the doctor, motioning for silence, and turned his attention to Sam.

"You've got the report?" he asked.

"I do," Sam said. "And you can have it as soon as you start listening to what she's saying."

"What?"

Sam pointed to Doctor Sterling.

"You have to listen to her, Bull. You have to hear what she's saying. It's important."

"I don't have time or patience—"

"Bull!" Sam snapped. "Can you feel anything—I mean *anything*—lower than your tits?"

The sense of wrongness flooded over him, and with it a visceral, profound fear. Vertigo passed through him again, and he closed his eyes. All the words the doctor had been saying—*crushed spinal cord, diffuse blood pooling, paraplegic*—finally reached his brain. To his shame, tears welled up in his eyes, blurring the women's faces.

"If the fibers grow back wrong," the doctor said, "the damage will be permanent. Our bodies weren't designed to heal in zero g. We're built to let things drain. You have a bolus of blood and spinal fluid putting pressure on the wound. We have to drain that, and we have to get the bone shards out of the way. We could start the regrowth now, but there are about a dozen people who need the nootropics just to stay alive."

"I understand," Bull said around the lump in his throat, hoping she'd stop talking, but her inertia kept her going on.

"If we can stabilize the damage and get the pressure off and get you under at least one-third g, we have a good chance of getting you back to some level of function."

"All right," Bull said. The background of medical alerts and voices and the hum of the emergency air recyclers stood in for real silence. "What's your recommendation?"

"Medical coma," the doctor said without hesitating. "We can slow down your system. Stabilize you until we can evacuate."

Bull closed his eyes, squeezing the tears between the lids. All he had to say was yes, and it was all someone else's problem. It would all go away, and he'd wake up somewhere under thrust with his body coming back together. Or he wouldn't wake up at all. The moment lasted. He remembered walking among the defunct solar collectors. Climbing them. Bracing a ceramic beam with his knees while one of the other men on his team cut it. Running. He remembered a woman he'd been seeing on Tycho Station, and the way his body had felt against her. He could get it back. Or some part of it. It wasn't gone.

"Thank you for your recommendation," he said. "Sam, I'll have that damage report now."

"Bull, no," Sam said. "You know what happens when one of my networks grows back wrong? I burn it out and start over. This is biology. We can't just yank out your wiring and reboot you. And you can't macho your way through it."

"Is that what I'm doing?" Bull said, and he almost sounded like himself.

"I'm serious," Sam said. "I don't care what you promised Fred Johnson or how tough you think you are. You're going to be a big boy and take your nasty medicine and get *better*. You got it?"

She was on the edge of crying now. Blood was darkening her face. Some of her team were surely dead. People she'd known for years. Maybe her whole life. People she'd worked with every day. With a clarity that felt almost spiritual, he saw the depth of her grief and felt it resonate within him. Everyone was going to be there now. Everyone who'd lived on every ship would have seen people they cared about broken or dead. And when people were grieving, they did things they wouldn't do sober.

"Look where we are, Sam," Bull said gently. "Look what we're doing here. Some things don't go back to normal." Sam wiped her eyes with a sleeve cuff, and Bull turned to the doctor. "I understand and respect your medical advice, but I can't take it right now. Once the ship and crew are out of danger, we'll revisit this, but until then staying on duty is more important. Can you keep me cognitively functioning?"

"For a while, I can," the doctor said. "But you'll pay for it later."

"Thank you," Bull said, his voice soft and warm as flannel. "Now, Chief Engineer Rosenberg, give me the damage report."



It wasn't good.

The best thing Bull could say after reading Sam's report and consulting with the doctors and his own remaining security forces was that the *Behemoth* had weathered the storm better than some of

the other ships. Being designed and constructed as a generation ship meant that the joints and environmental systems had been built with an eye for long-term wear. She'd been cruising at under 10 percent the slow zone's previous maximum speed when the change came.

The massive deceleration had happened to all the ships at the same time, slowing them from their previous velocity to the barely perceptible drifting toward the station's captive ring in just under five seconds. If it had been instantaneous, no one would have lived through it. Even with the braking spread out, it had approached the edge of the survivable for many of them. People asleep or at workstations with crash couches had stood a chance. Anyone in an open corridor or getting up for a bulb of coffee at the wrong moment was simply dead. The count stood at two hundred dead and twice that many wounded. Three of the Martian ships that had been significantly faster than the *Behemoth* weren't responding, and the rest reported heavy casualties. The big Earth ships were marginally better.

To make matters worse, the radio and laser signals going back out of the Ring to what was left of the flotilla were bent enough that communication was just about impossible. Not that it would have mattered. The slow zone—shit, now he was thinking of it that way too—was doing everything it could to remind them how vast the distances were within it. At the velocities they had available to them now, getting to the Ring would take as long as it had to reach it from the Belt. Months at least, and that in shuttles. All the ships were captured.

However many of them were left, they were on their own.

The station's grip was pulling them into rough orbit around the glowing blue structure, and no amount of burn was able to affect their paths one way or the other. They couldn't speed up and they couldn't stop. No one was under thrust, and it was making the medical crisis worse as zero g complicated the injuries. The *Behemoth's* power grid, already weakened and patched after the torpedo launch debacle, had suffered a cascading shipwide failure. Sam's team was trekking through the ship, resetting the tripped safeties, adding new patches to the mess. One of the Earth ships had come close to losing core containment and gone through an automatic shutdown that left it running off batteries, another was battling an environmental systems breakdown with the air recyclers. The Martian navy ships might be fine or they might be in ruins, but the Martian commander wasn't sharing.

If it had been a battle, it would have been a humbling defeat. It hadn't even been an attack.

"Then what would you call it?" Pa asked from the screen of his hand terminal. She and Ashford had both survived. Ashford was riding roughshod over the recovery efforts, trying—Bull thought—to micromanage the crisis out of existence. That left Pa at the helm to coordinate with all the other ships. She was better suited for it anyway. There was a chance, at least, that she would listen.

"If I were doing it, I'd call it progressive restraint," Bull said. "That asshole who shot the Ring came through doing something fierce and he got locked down. There's rules about how fast you can go. Then Holden and those marines go to the station, something happens. Whatever's running the station gets its jock in a twist, and things lock down harder. I don't know the mechanism of how they do it, but the logic's basic training stuff. It's allowing us as much freedom as it can, but the more we screw it up, the tighter the choke."

"Okay," Pa said, running a hand through her hair. She looked tired. "I can see that. So as long as it doesn't feel threatened, maybe things don't get worse."

"But if someone gets pissed," Bull said. "I don't know. Some Martian pendejo just lost all his friends or something? He decides to arm a nuke, walk it to the station, and set it off, maybe things get a lot worse."

"All right."

"We've got to get everyone acting together," Bull said. "Earth, Mars, us. Everyone. Because if this was me, I'd escalate from a restraint, to a coercive restraint, to shooting someone. We don't want

to get this thing to follow the same—”

“I said *all right*, Mister Baca!” Pa shouted. “That means I understood your point. You can stop making it. Because the one thing I *don’t* need right now is another self-righteous male telling me how high the stakes are and that I’d better not fuck things up. I *got* it. *Thank* you.”

Bull blinked, opened his mouth, and closed it again. On his screen, Pa pinched the bridge of her nose. He heard echoes of Ashford in her frustration.

“Sorry, XO,” he said. “You’re right. I was out of line.”

“Don’t worry about it, Mister Baca,” she said, each syllable pulling a weight behind it. “If you have any concrete, specific recommendations, my door is always open.”

“I appreciate that,” Bull said. “So the captain...?”

“Captain Ashford’s doing his best to keep the ship in condition and responsive. He feels that letting the crew see him will improve morale.”

And how’s that going, Bull didn’t ask. Didn’t have to. Pa could see him restraining himself.

“Believe it or not, we are all on the same team,” she said.

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

Her expression clouded and she leaned in toward her screen, a gesture of intimacy totally artificial in the floating world of zero g and video connections and still impossible to entirely escape.

“I heard about your condition. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” he said.

“If I ordered you to accept the medical coma?”

He laughed. Even that felt wrong. Truncated.

“I’ll go when I’m ready,” he said, only realizing after the fact that the phrase could mean two different things. “We get out of the woods, the docs can take over.”

“All right, then,” she said and her terminal chimed. She cursed quietly. “I have to go. I’ll touch base with you later.”

“You got it,” Bull said and let the connection drop.

The wise thing would have been to sleep. He’d been awake for fourteen hours, checking in with the security staff who were still alive, remaking a duty roster, doing all the things he could do from the medical bay that would make the ship work. Fourteen hours wasn’t all that long a shift in the middle of a crisis, except that he’d been crippled.

Crippled.

With a sick feeling, he walked his fingertips down his throat, to his chest, and to the invisible line where the skin stopped feeling like his own and turned into something else. Meat. His mind skittered off the thought. He’d been hurt before and gotten back from it. He’d damn near died four or five different times. Something always happened that got him back on his feet. He always got lucky. This time would be the same. Somehow, somehow he’d get back. Have another story to tell and no one to tell it to.

He knew he was lying to himself, but what else could he do? Apart from stand aside. And maybe he should. Let Pa take care of it. Give Ashford his shot. No one would give him any shit if he took the medical coma. Not even Fred. Hell, Fred would probably have told him to do it. Ordered him.

Bull closed his eyes. He’d sleep or he wouldn’t. Or he’d drift into some half-lucid place that wasn’t either. One of the doctors was weeping in the corridor, a slow, autonomic sound, more like being sick than expressing sorrow. Someone coughed wetly. Pneumonia was the worst danger now. Null g messed with the sensors that triggered the kinds of coughing that actually cleared lungs until it was too late. After that, strokes and embolisms as the blood that gravity should have helped to drain pooled and clotted instead. On all the other ships, it was the same. Survivable injuries made deadly just by floating. If they could just get under thrust. Get some gravity...

We're all on the same team, Pa said in his half drowse, and Bull was suddenly completely awake. He scooped up his hand terminal, but Ashford and Pa were both refusing connections. It was the middle of their night. He considered putting through an emergency override, but didn't. Not yet. First, he tried Sam.

"Bull?" she said. Her skin looked grayish, and there were lines at the corners of her mouth that hadn't been there before. Her one blood-red eye seemed like an omen.

"Hey, Sam. Look, we need to get all the other crews from all the other ships onto the *Behemoth*. Bring everyone together so no one does anything stupid."

"You want a pony too?"

"Sure," Bull said. "Thing is, we got to give them a reason to come here. Something they need and they can't get anyplace else."

"Sounds great," Sam said, shaking her head. "Maybe I'm not at my cognitive best here, sweetie, but are you asking me for something?"

"They've all got casualties. They all need gravity. I'm asking you how long it would take you to spin up the drum."

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Melba

The darkness was beautiful and surreal. The ships of the flotilla, drawn together by the uncanny power of the station, hugged closer to each other than they ever would have under human control. The only lights came from the occasional exterior maintenance array and the eerie glow of the station. It was like walking through a graveyard in the moonlight. The ring of ships and debris glittered in a rising arc before her and behind, as if any direction she chose would lead up from where she was now.

The EVA suit had limited propellant, and she wanted to conserve it for her retreat. She scuttled through the vacuum, magnetic boots clicking against the hull of the *Prince* until she reached its edge and launched herself into the gap between vessels, aiming toward a Martian supply ship. The half mech and emergency airlock folded on her back massed almost fifty kilos, but with their courses matched, they were as weightless as she was. It was an illusion, she knew, but in the timeless reach between the *Thomas Prince* and hated *Rocinante*, all her burdens seemed light.

The EVA suit had a simple heads-up display that outlined the *Rocinante* with a thin green line. It wasn't the nearest ship. The trip out to it would take hours, but she didn't mind. It was as trapped as all the others. It couldn't go anywhere.

She hummed to herself as she imagined her arrival. Rehearsed it. She let herself daydream that he would be there: Jim Holden returned from the station. She imagined him raging at her as she destroyed his ship. She imagined him weeping and begging her forgiveness, and seeing the despair in his eyes when she refused. They were beautiful dreams, and folded safely inside them, she could forget the blood and horror behind her. Not just the catastrophe on the *Prince*, but all of it—Ren, her father, Julie, everything. The dim blue light of the not-moon felt like home, and the impending violence like a promise about to be kept.

If there was another part of her, a sliver of Clarissa that hadn't quite been crushed yet that felt differently, it was small enough to ignore.

Of course it was just as likely they'd all be dead when she got there. The catastrophe would have hit them as hard as the *Thomas Prince* or any of the other ships. Holden's crew might be nothing but cooling meat already, only waiting for her to come and light their funeral pyre. There was, she thought, a beauty in that too. She ran across the skins of the ships, leaped from one to the next like a nerve impulse crossing a synapse. Like a bad idea being thought by a massive, moonlit brain.

The air in the suit smelled like old plastic and her own sweat. The impact of the magnetic boots pulling her to the ships and then releasing her again translated up her leg, tug and release, tug and release. And before her, as slowly as the hour hand of an analog clock, the ghost-green *Rocinante* grew larger and nearer.

She knew the ship's specs by heart. She'd studied them for weeks. Martian corvette, originally assigned to the doomed *Donnager*. The entry points were the crew airlock just aft of the ops deck, the aft cargo bay doors, and a maintenance port that ran along beneath the reactor. If the reactor was live, the maintenance access wouldn't work. The fore airlock had almost certainly had its security profile changed once the ship fell into Holden's control. Only a stupid man wouldn't change it, and Melba refused to believe a stupid man could bring down her father. The service records she'd gleaned

suggested that the cargo bay had been breached once already. Repairs were always weaker than the original structure. The choice was easy.

The attitude of the ship put the cargo bay on the far side of the ship, the body of the *Rocinante* hiding its flaw from the light. Melba stepped into shadow, shivering as if it could actually be colder in the darkness. She fastened the mech to the ship's skin and assembled it for use under the glare of the EVA suit's work lamps. The mech was the yellow of fresh lemons and police tape. The cautions printed in three alphabets were like little Rosetta stones. She felt an inexplicable fondness for the machine as she strapped it across her back, fitting her hands into the waldoes. The mech hadn't been designed for violence, but it was suited for it. That made her and it the same.

She lit the cutting torch and the EVA suit's mask went dark. Melba clung to the ship and began her slow invasion. Sparks and tiny asteroids of melted steel flew off into the darkness around her. The repair work where the bay doors had been bent out and refitted was almost invisible. If she hadn't known to look, she wouldn't have seen the weaknesses. She wondered if they knew she was coming. She imagined them hunched over their security displays, eyes wide with fear at what was digging its way under the *Rocinante*'s skin. She found herself singing softly, snatches of popular songs and old holiday tunes, whatever came to mind. Bits of lyrics and melody matched to the hum of the torch's vibration.

She breached the *Rocinante*, a patch of glowing steel no wider than her finger popping out. No air vented through the gap into the vacuum. They didn't keep the cargo bay pressurized. That meant the atmosphere wasn't dropping inside, and the ship alarms weren't blaring. One problem solved even without her help. It felt like fate. She killed the torch and unfolded the emergency airlock, sealing it against the hatch. She unzipped the outer layer, closed it, unzipped the inner one, and stepped into the small additional room she'd created. She didn't know how much damage she'd have to do to get into the inner areas of the ship. She didn't want an accidental loss of atmosphere to rob her of her vengeance. Holden needed to know who'd done this to him, not gasp out his last breaths thinking his ship had merely broken.

Gently, she slipped the mech's hand into the hole, braced, and peeled back the cargo door, long strips of steel blooming like an iris blossom. When it was wide enough, she took the sides of the hole in her mechanical hands and pulled herself into the cargo bay. Supply crates lined the walls and floors, held in place by electromagnets. One had shattered, a victim of the catastrophe. A cloud of textured protein packets floated in the air. The LED on the panel beside the interior airlock door was green; the bay hadn't been locked down. Why would it? She punched the button to enter the airlock and begin the cycle. Once the green pressure light came on, she slipped her hands out of the mech and lifted off the helmet. No Klaxons were ringing. No voices shouted or threatened. She'd made it on without alarming anyone. Her grin ached.

Back in the mech, she opened the airlock into the interior of the ship and paused. Still no alarms. Melba pulled herself gently, silently into enemy territory.

The *Rocinante* was built floor by floor from the reactor up to the engineering deck, to the machine shop, then the galley and crew cabins and medical bays, storage deck containing the crew airlock, then on up to the command deck and pilot's station farthest forward. Under thrust, it would be like a narrow building. Without thrust, the ship was directionless.

She had choices to make now. The cargo bay was close enough to give her access to engineering and the reactor. She could sneak in there and start the reactor on its overload. Or she could go up, try taking the crew by surprise, and set the ship to self-destruct from the command deck.

She took a deep breath. The *Rocinante* had four regular crew including Holden, and she didn't know whether the documentary crew were still on board. At least two of the regular crew had military training and experience. She might be able to take them in a fight if she got the drop on them or came across them one at a time.

The risk was too high. The reactor was nearest, it was easiest, and she could get out through the cargo bay. She pulled herself along the corridors she knew only from simulations, toward the reactor and the death of the ship.

When she opened the hatch to engineering, a woman floated above an opened control panel, a soldering iron in one hand and a spool of wire in the other. She had the elongated frame and slightly oversized head of someone who'd grown up under low g. Brown skin and dark hair pulled back in a utilitarian knot. Naomi Nagata. Holden's lover.

Melba felt a sudden urge to tear off the mech suit, swirl her tongue across the roof of her mouth, feel the chemical rush. To grab the narrow Belter's neck in her bare hands and feel the bones snap. It would be a yearlong dream of revenge made tactile and perfect. But two other crew members were on the ship, and she didn't know where they were. The terror she'd felt in that sleazy Baltimore casino came rushing back. Crawling helplessly on the floor in the post-drug collapse while people banged at the door to get in. She couldn't risk a crash until she knew where everyone was.

Naomi looked up at the sound of the door, pleasure in the woman's dark eyes as if the interruption were a happy surprise, and then shock, and then a cold fury.

For a moment, neither one moved.

With a yell, the woman launched herself at Melba, spinning the spool of wire in front of her. Melba tried to dodge, but the bulk of the mech and its slow response made it impossible. The wire hit her left cheek with a sound like a brick falling to earth, and for a moment her head rang. She brought up the mech's arm in a rough block, taking the Belter solidly in the ribs and sending them both spinning. Melba grabbed at a handhold, missed it, and then tried for another. The mech's hand latched on, crushing the metal flat and almost pulling it from the wall, but the Belter was ahead of her, skimming through the air at Melba, teeth bared like a shark. Melba tried to get the mech's free arm up to bat her away, but the Belter was already too close. She grabbed the front of Melba's jumpsuit, balling it in a fist, and used the leverage to swing a hard knee into her ribs, punctuating each blow with a word.

"You. Don't. Get. To hurt. My. *Ship*."

Melba felt a rib give way. She reached her tongue for the roof of her mouth, but again she didn't make the small private circles that would flush her blood with fire. She had to be awake and functional when the fight was over. She gritted her teeth and curled the mech's free arm in, bending it against itself, and then snapped her hand closed. The Belter screamed. The mech's claw had her by the shoulder. Melba squeezed again and heard the muffled, wet sound of bone breaking.

She threw the Belter across the room as hard as the motors let her. Where the woman bounced off the far wall, a smear of blood marked it. Melba waited, watching the Belter rotate in the air, directionless and loose as a rag doll sinking to the bottom of a swimming pool. A growing sphere of blood adhered to the woman's shoulder and neck.

"I do what I want," Melba said, and the voice sounded like someone else's.

Carefully, she pulled herself to the control panel. The panel was off, fixed to the deck with a length of adhesive tape. The guts within were a mess of wires and plates. The *Rocinante* had taken some damage in the catastrophe, but not so much that Melba couldn't do what was needed. She shrugged out of the mech, cracked her knuckles, traced the major control nodes, and plugged them back into the panel. The local memory check took only a few seconds, and she overrode the full system check. It was nothing she could have done before she left Earth, but Melba Koh had spent months learning about the guts of military ships. This was just the sort of thing Soledad, Stanni, and Bob would have checked on if they'd been working maintenance. It was something Ren would have taught her.

Her fingers curled, stumbling over the keyboard for a moment, but she got it back.

The control specs of the reactor came up. Releasing the magnetic bottle that kept the core from melting through the ship was deliberately designed to be difficult. Changing the limits on the reaction itself until it would eventually outstrip the bottle's ability to contain it was also hard, but less so. And it would give her a little time to tell Holden what she'd done, then get out of the ship and back toward the *Thomas Prince*. In the chaos of the day, no one might even know that someone had survived the death of the *Rocinante*.

A flicker in her peripheral vision was the only warning she had, but it was enough. Melba twisted out of the way, the Belter's massive wrench hissing through the air where her temple had been. Melba pushed back with her legs, struggling frantically to worm back into the mech. She tensed against the coming attack, but no blows came. She shrugged into the metal and jammed her hands into the waldoes, grabbing the wall and spinning back to the fight just as the Belter looked up from the control panel. Blood was crawling up the woman's neck, held to her by surface tension, and her smile was triumphant. The control panel flashed red and a screen of code crawled over it too fast to read. The lights in the room went off, and the emergency LEDs flickered on. Melba felt her throat go tight.

The Belter had dumped core. The reaction Melba had come to overload was dissipating in a cloud of gas behind the ship. The Belter's smile was feral and triumphant.

"Doesn't change anything," Melba said. It hurt to talk. "You have torpedoes. I'll overload one of those."

"Not in my lifetime," the Belter said, and attacked again.

Her swing was lopsided, though. Clumsy. The wrench clanged against the mech's joint, but it didn't do any damage. The Belter launched herself out of reach just as Melba swung an arm at her. The Belter wasn't using her injured arm at all, and she left spinning droplets of blood whenever she changed direction.

Melba wondered why the woman didn't call for help. On little ships like this, opening a communications channel was often as simple as saying it out loud. Either the computer was down, the rest of the crew dead or incapacitated, or it simply hadn't occurred to her. It didn't matter. It didn't change what Melba had to do. She shifted to her right, sliding through the air, moving handhold to handhold, never giving the other woman the chance to catch her unmoored and spin her into the open air at the center of the room. The Belter perched on the wall, her dark eyes darting one way, then other, searching for advantage. There was no fear in them, no sentimentality. Melba had no doubt that if the opportunity came, Naomi would kill her.

She reached the hatch, setting the mech's claw to grip a handhold, and then slipping one arm free to reach for the door's controls. It was a provocation, and it worked. The Belter jumped, not straight at Melba, but to the deck above her, then turned, kicked, off, and drove down, her heels aiming for Melba's head.

Melba drove her arm back into the mech and snapped the free arm up, catching the Belter in mid-flight. Her handhold broke free of the wall, and the pair of them floated together into the open air of the room. The Belter's injured arm was caught in the mech's clamp, and she kicked savagely with her heels. One blow connected, and Melba's vision narrowed for a moment. She pulled the Belter through the air, worrying at her like a terrier with a rat, and then managed to swing the free arm up and catch the woman by the neck.

The Belter's hand flew up to the clamp, panic in her expression. Her eyes went wide and bright. It would take a twitch of Melba's fingers to crush the woman's throat, and they both knew it. A sense of triumph and overwhelming joy washed through her. Holden might not be here, but she had his lover. She would take someone he loved from him just the way he'd taken her own father from her. This wasn't even fighting anymore. This was justice.

The Belter's face was flushing red, her breath constricted and rough. Melba grinned, enjoying the moment.

"This is his fault," she said. "All of this is what he had coming."

The Belter scratched at the mech's claw. The blood that came away might have been from the old wound, or the mech's grip might already have broken the skin. Melba closed her fingers a fraction, the pressure feather light. The mech's servos buzzed as it closed a millimeter more. The Belter tried to say something, pushing the word out past her failing windpipe, and Melba knew she couldn't let her speak. She couldn't let her beg or weep and cry mercy. If she did, Melba suddenly wasn't sure she could go through with it, and it had to be done. *Sympathy is for the weak*, her father's voice whispered in her ear.

"You're Naomi Nagata," Melba said. "My name is Clarissa Melpomene Mao. You and your people attacked my family. Everything that's happened here? Everything that's going to happen. It's *your fault*."

The light was fading from the Belter's eyes. Her breath came in ragged gasps. All it would take was a squeeze. All she had to do was make a fist and snap the woman's neck.

With the last of her strength, the Belter woman lifted her free hand in a gesture of obscenity and defiance.

Melba's body buzzed like she'd stepped into the blast from a firehose. Her head bent back, her spine arching against itself. Her hands flexed open, her toes curled back until it seemed like they had to break. She heard herself scream. The mech spread its arms to the side and froze, leaving her crucified in the metal form. The buzzing stopped, but she couldn't move. No matter how much she willed it, her muscles would not respond.

Naomi came to rest against the opposite wall, a knot of panting and blood.

"Who are you?" the Belter croaked.

I am vengeance, Melba thought. *I am your death made flesh*. But the voice that answered came from behind her.

"Anna. My name's Anna. Are you all right?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Anna

The woman—Naomi Nagata—replied by coughing up a red glob of blood.

“I’m an idiot, of course you’re not all right,” Anna said, then floated over to her, pausing to push the still-twitching Melba to the other side of the compartment. Girl and mech drifted across the room, bounced off a bulkhead, and came to a stop several meters away.

“Emergency locker,” Naomi croaked, and pointed at a red panel on one wall. Anna opened it to find flashlights, tools, and a red-and-white bag not too different from the one Tilly had been carrying on the *Prince*. She grabbed it. While Anna extracted a package of gauze and a can of coagulant spray for the nasty wound on Naomi’s shoulder, the Belter pulled out several hypo ampules and began injecting herself with them one at a time, her movements efficient and businesslike. Anna felt like something was tearing in her shoulders every time she wrapped the gauze around Naomi’s upper torso, and she almost asked for another shot for herself.



Years before, Anna had taken a seminar on ministering to people with drug addictions. The instructor, a mental health nurse named Andrew Smoot, had made the point over and over that the drugs didn’t only give pleasure and pain. They changed cognition, stripped away the inhibitions, and more often than not, someone’s worst habits or tendencies—what he called their “pathological move”—got exaggerated. An introvert would often withdraw, an aggressive person would grow violent. Someone impulsive would become even more so.

Anna had understood the idea intellectually. Almost three hours into her spacewalk, the amphetamines Tilly had given her began to fade and a clarity she hadn’t known she lacked began to return to her. She felt she had a deeper, more personal insight into what her own pathological move might be.

Anna had spent only a few years living among Belters and outer planets inhabitants. But that was long enough to know that their philosophy boiled down to “what you don’t know kills you.” No one growing up on Earth ever really understood that, no matter how much time they later spent in space. No Belter would have thrown on a space suit and EVA pack and rushed out the airlock without first knowing exactly what the environment on the other side was like. It wouldn’t even occur to them to do so.

Worse, she’d run out that airlock without stopping to send a message to Nono. *You don’t ask for permission, you ask for forgiveness* echoed in her head. If she died doing this, Nono would have it carved as her epitaph. She’d never get that last chance to say she was sorry.

The brightly colored display, which always seemed to float at the edge of her vision no matter which way her face was pointed, had said that she had 83 percent of her air supply remaining. Not knowing how long a full tank would last robbed that information of some much-needed context.

As she’d tried to slow her breathing back down and keep from panicking, the gauge ticked to 82 percent. How long had it been at 83 percent before it did? She couldn’t remember. A vague feeling of nausea made her think about how bad throwing up in her space suit would be, which only made the feeling worse.

The girl, Melba, or Claire now, was far ahead and gaining, moving with the easy grace of long practice. Someone for whom walking in a space suit with magnetic boots was normal. Anna tried to hurry and only managed to kick her boot with her other foot and turn the magnet up high enough to lock it to the hull of the ship. The momentum of her step tugged against the powerful magnetic clamp. After several lost seconds figuring out how to fix that problem, she'd found the controls and slid the grip back down to a normal human range. After that, she gave up on haste and aimed for a safe, consistent pace. Slow and steady, but she wasn't winning the race. She lost sight of the girl, but she'd told herself it didn't matter. She guessed well enough where Clarissa Mao was going. Or Melba Koh. Whoever this woman was.

She had seen images of the *Rocinante* on newsfeeds before. It was probably as famous as a ship could be. James Holden's central role in the Eros and Ganymede incidents along with a peppering of dogfights and antipiracy actions had kept his little corvette mentioned in the media on and off for years. As long as there weren't two Martian corvettes parked next to each other, Anna felt confident she'd be able to spot it.

Fifteen long minutes later, she did.

The *Rocinante* was shaped like a stubby black wedge of metal; a fat chisel laid on its side. The flat surface of the hull was occasionally broken up by a domed projection. Anna didn't know enough about ships to know what they were. It was a warship, so sensors or guns, maybe, but definitely not doors. The tail of the ship had been facing her, and the only obvious opening in it was at the center of the massive drive cone. She walked to the edge of the ship she was on and then from side to side trying to get a better look at the rest of the *Rocinante* before jumping over to it. The irony of looking before she leapt at this late stage of the game made her laugh, and she felt some of the tension and nausea fading.

Just to the right of the drive cone was a bubble of plastic attached to the ship, pale as a blister. A moment later she was through the wound in the ship's cargo doors and inside. It had occurred to her, as she looked at the maze of crates locked against the hull with magnets much like the ones on her own feet, that she hadn't thought her plan through past this. Did this room connect to the rest of the ship? The doors behind her didn't have an airlock, which probably meant that this space was usually kept in vacuum. She had no idea where anyone would be in relation to that room, and more worrisome, she had no idea if the girl she was chasing was still in there, hiding behind one of the boxes.

Anna carefully pulled herself from crate to crate to the other end of the long, narrow compartment. Bits of plastic and freeze-dried food drifted around her like a cloud of oddly shaped insects. The broken crates might have been relics of a fight or debris created by the speed change; she had no way to know. She reached into the small bag tethered to her EVA pack and pulled out the taser. She'd never fired one in microgravity or in vacuum. She hoped neither thing affected it. Another gamble no Belter would ever take.

To her great relief, she found an airlock at the other end of the room, and it opened at a touch of the panel. Cycling it took several minutes, while Anna pulled the heavy EVA pack off her back and played with the taser to make sure she knew how to turn the safety off. The military design was intuitive, but less clearly labeled than the civilian models she was accustomed to. The panel flashed green and the inner doors opened.

No one was in sight. Just a deck that looked like a machine shop with tool lockers and workbenches and a ladder set into one wall. Bookending the ladder were two hatches, one going toward the front of the ship, the other toward the back. Anna was thinking that she was most likely to run into crewmembers by going toward the front of the ship when there was a loud bang from the back and the lights went out.

Yellow LEDs set into the walls came on a moment later, and a genderless voice said, “Core dump, emergency power only,” and repeated it several times. Her helmet muffled the sound, but there was clearly still air in the ship. She pulled the helmet off and hung it from her harness.

Anna was fairly certain you only ejected the core in emergencies related to the engine room, so she moved to that hatch instead. With the constant rumble of the ship gone and her helmet removed she could hear faint noises coming through the hatch. It took her several long moments to figure out how to access it, and when she finally did the hatch snapped open so suddenly it made her almost yelp with surprise.

Inside, Melba was murdering someone.

A Belter woman with long dark hair and a greasy coverall was having her throat crushed by the mechanical arms Melba wore. The woman—Anna could see now that it was James Holden’s second-in-command, Naomi Nagata—looked like Melba had beaten her badly. Her arm and shoulder were covered in blood, and her face was a mass of scrapes and contusions.

Anna drifted down into the vaulted chamber. The reactor room’s walls curving inward like a church, the cathedrals of the fusion age. She felt an almost overwhelming need to hurry, but she knew she’d only get one shot with the taser, and she didn’t trust herself to fire on the move.

Naomi’s face was turning a dark, bruised purple. Her breath the occasional wet rasp. Somehow, the Belter managed to raise one hand and flip Melba off. Anna’s feet hit the decking, and her boots stuck. She was less than three meters behind Melba when her finger pressed the firing stud, aiming for the area of her back not covered by the skeletal frame of the mech, hoping the taser would work through a vacuum suit.

She missed, but the results were impressive anyway.

Instead of hitting the fabric of Melba’s suit, the taser’s two microdarts hit the mech dead center. The trailing wires immediately turned bright red and began to fall apart like burning string. The taser got so hot Anna could feel it through her glove, so she let go just before it melted into a glob of gooey gray plastic. The mech arced and popped and the arms snapped straight out. The room smelled like burning electrical cables. All of Melba’s hair was standing straight up, and even after the taser had died her fingers and legs continued to twitch and jerk. A small screen on the mech’s arm had a flashing red error code.

“Who are you?” Naomi Nagata asked, drifting in a way that told Anna she’d be slumping to the floor at the first hint of gravity.

“Anna. My name’s Anna,” she had said. “Are you all right?”



After the third injection, Naomi took a long, shuddering breath and said, “Who’s Anna?”

“Anna is me,” she said, then chuckled at herself. “You mean who am I? I’m a passenger on the *Thomas Prince*.”

“UN? You don’t look like navy.”

“No, a passenger. I’m a member of the advisory group the secretary-general sent.”

“The dog and pony show,” Naomi said, then hissed with pain as Anna tightened the bandage and activated the charge that would keep it from unwinding.

“Everyone keeps calling it that,” Anna said as she felt the bandage. She wished she’d paid more attention in the church first aid class. Clear the airway, stop the bleeding, immobilize the injury was about the limit of what she knew.

“That’s because it is,” Naomi said, then reached up with her good hand to grab a rung of the nearby ladder. “It’s all political bullsh—”

She was cut off by a mechanical-sounding voice saying, "Reboot complete."

Anna turned around. Melba was staring at them both, her hair still standing straight out from her head, but her hands no longer twitching uncontrollably. She moved her arms experimentally, and the half mech whined, hesitated, and then moved with her.

"Fuck me," Naomi said. She sounded annoyed but unsurprised.

Anna reached for her taser before she remembered it had melted. Melba bared her teeth.

"This way," Naomi said as the hatch slid open above them. Anna darted through it, with Naomi close behind using her one good arm to pull herself along. Melba surged after them, reaching out with one foot to push off the reactor housing.

Naomi pulled her leg through just in time to avoid being grabbed by the mech's claw, then tapped the locking mechanism with her toe and the hatch slammed shut on the mech's wrist. The hatch whined as it tried to close, crushing the claw in a spray of sparks and broken parts. Anna waited for the scream of pain that didn't come, then realized that the gloves Melba used to control the machine were in the mech's forearms, several centimeters behind the point of damage. They hadn't hurt her, and she'd sacrificed the use of one of the mech's claws in order to keep the hatch open. The other claw appeared in the gap, gripping at the metal, bending it.

"Go," Naomi said, her voice tight with pain, her good hand pointing at the next hatch up the ladder. After they were both through, Anna took a moment to look around at the new deck they were on. It looked like crew areas. Small compartments with flimsy-looking doors. Not a good place to hole up. Naomi flew through the empty air and the dim shadows cast by the emergency lights, and Anna followed as best she could, the feeling of nightmare crawling up her throat.

After they'd passed through the hatch into the next level, Naomi stopped to tap on the small control screen for several seconds. The emergency lights shifted to red, and the panel on the hatch read SECURITY LOCKDOWN.

"She's not trapped down there," Anna said. "She can get out through the cargo bay. There's a hole in the doors."

"That's twice now someone has done that," Naomi replied, pulling herself up the ladder. "Anyway, she's wearing a salvage mech rig, and she's in the machine shop. Half the stuff in there is made to cut through ships. She's not trapped. We are."

This took Anna by surprise. They'd gotten away. They'd locked a door behind them. That was supposed to end it. The monster isn't allowed to open doors. It was fuzzy, juvenile thinking, and Anna became less sure that all the drugs had actually passed through her system. "So what do we do?"

"Medical bay," Naomi said, pointing down a short corridor. "That way."

That made sense. The frail-looking Belter woman was getting a gray tone to her dark skin that made Anna think of massive blood loss, and the bandage on her shoulder had already soaked through and was throwing off tiny crimson spheres. She took Naomi by the hand and pulled her down the corridor to the medical bay door. It was closed, and the panel next to it flashed the security lockdown message like the deck hatches had. Naomi started pressing it, and Anna waited for the door to slide open. Instead, another, heavier-looking door slid into place over the first, and the panel Naomi was working on went dark.

"Pressure doors," Naomi said. "Harder to get through."

"But we're on this side of them."

"Yeah."

"Is there another way in?" Anna asked.

"No. Let's go."

"Wait," Anna said. "We need to get you in there. You're very badly hurt."

Naomi turned to look at her, frowned as if she'd only really seen Anna for the first time. It was a speculative frown. Anna felt she was being sized up.

"I have two injured men in there. My crew. They're helpless," Naomi finally said. "Now they're as safe as I can make them. So you and I are going to go up to the next deck, get a gun, and make sure she follows us. When she shows up, we're going to kill her."

"I don't—" Anna started.

"Kill. Her. Can you do that?"

"Kill? No. I can't," Anna said. It was the truth.

Naomi stared at her for a second longer, then just shrugged with her good hand. "Okay, then, come with me."

They moved through the next hatch to the deck above. Most of the space was taken up by an airlock and storage lockers. Some of the lockers were large enough to hold vacuum suits and EVA packs. Others were smaller. Naomi opened one of the smaller lockers and pulled out a thick black handgun.

"I've never shot anyone either," she said, pulling the slide back and loading a round. To Anna's eye the bullet looked like a tiny rocket. "But those two in the med bay are my family, and this is my home."

"I understand," Anna said.

"Good, because I can't have you—" Naomi started, then her eyes rolled up in her head and her body went limp. The gun drifted away from her relaxed hand.

"No no no," Anna repeated in a sudden wash of panic. She floated over to Naomi and held her wrist. There was still a pulse, but it was faint. She dug through the first aid pack, looking for something to help. One ampule said it was for keeping people from going into shock, so Anna jabbed Naomi with it. She didn't wake up.

The air in the room began to smell different. Hot, and with the melted plastic odor her damaged taser had given off when it died. A spot of red appeared on the deck hatch, then shifted to yellow, then to white. The girl in the mech, coming for them.

The hatch above them, the one that led forward on the ship, was closed and flashing the lockdown message. Naomi hadn't told her what the override code was. The airlock was on their level, but it was locked down too.

The deck hatch began to open in lurching increments. Anna could hear Melba panting and cursing as she forced it. And Naomi's lockdown code hadn't kept the insane woman out, it had only locked them in.

Anna pulled Naomi's limp body over to one of the large vacuum suit storage lockers and put her inside, climbing in after her. There was no lock on the door. Between the unconscious woman and the suit, there was hardly enough room for her to close it. She set both of her feet at the corner where the door of the locker met the deck and set the magnets up to full. She felt the suit lock onto the metal, clamping her legs into place and pulling her up close against the locker door.

On the far side, metal shrieked. Something wet brushed against the back of Anna's neck. Naomi's hand, limp and bloody. Anna tried not to move, tried not to breathe loudly. The prayer she offered up was hardly more than a confusion of fear and hope.

A locker door slammed open off to her left. Then another one, closer. And then another. Anna wondered where Naomi's gun had gotten to. It was in the locker somewhere, but there was no light, and she'd have to unlock the magnets on her boots to look for it. She hoped they hadn't left it outside with the crazy woman. Another locker opened.

The door centimeters from Anna's face shifted, but didn't open. The vents and the cracks in the locker door flared the white of a cutting torch, then went dark. A mechanical voice said, "Backup

power depleted.” The curse from the other side was pure frustration. It was followed by a series of grunts and thumps: Melba taking the mech rig off. Anna felt a surge of hope.

“Open it,” Melba said. Her voice was low, rough, and bestial.

“No.”

“Open it.”

“You... I can hear that you’re feeling upset,” Anna said, horrified by the words even as she spoke them. “I think we should talk about this if you—”

Melba’s scream was unlike anything Anna had heard before, deep and vicious and wild. If the id had a throat, it would have sounded like that. If the devil spoke.

Something struck the metal door and Anna flinched back. Then another blow. And another. The metal began to bow in, and droplets of blood clung to the vent slits. *Her fists*, Anna thought. *She’s doing this with her hands*.

The screaming was wild now, obscene where it wasn’t wordless, and inhuman as a hurricane. The thick metal of the door bent in, the hinges starting to shudder and bend with each new assault. Anna closed her eyes.

The top hinge gave way, shattering.

And then, without warning, silence fell. Anna waited, sure she was being lulled into a trap. No sound came except a small animal gurgle. She could smell the stomach-turning acid stench of fresh vomit. After what felt like hours, she turned off the magnets and pushed the warped and abused door open.

Melba floated curled against the wall, her hands pressed to her belly and her body shuddering.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine: Bull

The truth was, distance was always measured in time. It wasn't the sort of thing Bull usually thought about, but his enforced physical stillness was doing strange things with his awareness. Even in the middle of the constant press of events, the calls and coordination, the scolding from his doctor, he felt some part of his mind coming loose. And strange ideas kept floating in, like the way that distance got measured in time.

Centuries before, a trip across the Atlantic Ocean could take months. There was a town near New Mexico named Wheeless where the story was some ancient travelers of the dust and caliche had a wagon break down and decided that it was easier to put down roots than go on. Technologies had come, each building on the ones before, and months became weeks and then hours. And outside the gravity well, where machines were freed from the tyranny of air resistance and gravity, the effect was even more profound. When the orbits were right, the journey from Luna to Mars could take as little as twelve days. The trek from Saturn to Ceres, a few months. And because they were out there with their primate brains, evolved on the plains of prehistoric Africa, everyone had a sense of how far it was. Saturn to Ceres was a few months. Luna to Mars was a few days. Distance was time, and so they didn't get overwhelmed by it.

The slow zone had changed that. Looking at a readout, the ships from Earth and Mars were clustered together like a handful of dried peas thrown in the same bowl. They were drifting now, coming together and spreading apart, taking their places in the captured ring around the eerie station. Compared to the volume of ring-bordered sphere, they seemed huddled close. But the distance between them and the Ring was time, and time meant death.

From the farthest of the ships to the *Behemoth* was two days' travel in a shuttle, assuming that the maximum speed didn't ratchet down again. The closest, he could have jumped to. The human universe had contracted, and was contracting more. With every connection, every stark, frightened voice he heard in the long, frantic hours, Bull grew more convinced that his plan could work. The vastness and strangeness and unreasonable danger of the universe had traumatized everyone it hadn't killed. There was a hunger to go home, to huddle together, back in the village. The instinct was the opposite of war, and as long as he could see it cultivated, as long as the response to the tragedies of the lockdown were to get one another's backs and see that everyone who needed care got it, the grief and fear might not turn to more violence.

The feed went to green, then blue, and then Monica Stuart was smiling professionally into the camera. She looked tired, sober, but human. A face people knew. One they could recognize and feel comfortable with.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said. "Welcome to the first broadcast of Radio Free Slow Zone, coming to you from our temporary offices here on board the OPA battleship *Behemoth*. I am a citizen of Earth and a civilian, but it's my hope that this program can be of some use to all of us in this time of crisis. In addition to bringing whatever unclassified news and information we can, we will also be conducting interviews with the command crews of the ships, civilian leaders on the *Thomas Prince*, and live musical performances.

"It's an honor to welcome our first guest, the Reverend Father Hector Cortez."

A graphic window opened, and the priest appeared. To Bull's eyes, the man looked pretty ragged. The too-bright teeth seemed false and the blazing white hair had a greasy look to it.

"Father Cortez," Monica Stuart said. "You have been helping with the relief effort on the *Thomas Prince*?"

For a moment, the man seemed not to have heard her. A smile jerked into place.

"I have," the old man said. "I have, and it has been... Monica, I'm humbled. I am... humbled."

Bull turned off the feed. It was something. It was better than nothing.

The Martian frigate *Cavalier*, now under the command of a second lieutenant named Scupski, was shutting down its reactors and transferring all its remaining crew and supplies to the *Behemoth*. The *Thomas Prince* had agreed to move its wounded, its medical team, and all the remaining civilians—poets, priests, and politicians. Including the dead-eyed Hector Cortez. It was a beginning, but it wasn't all he could do. If they were to keep coming, if the *Behemoth* was to become the symbol of calm and stability and certainty that he needed it to be, there had to be more. The broadcast channel could give a voice and a face to the growing consolidation. He'd need to talk to Monica Stuart about it some more. Maybe there could be some sort of organized mourning of the dead. A council with representatives from all sides that could make an evacuation plan and start getting people back through the Ring and home.

Except that when the lockdown came, they'd lost all their long-distance ships to it. And the Ring itself had retreated, because they had to move so slowly, and because distance was measured in time.

His hand terminal chirped, and he came back to wakefulness with a start. Outside his room a woman shouted and a man's tense voice replied. Bull recognized the sound of the crash team rushing to try and revive some poor bastard from collapsing into death. He felt for the team of medics. He was doing the same kind of work, just on a different scale. He shifted his arms, scooped up the terminal, and accepted the connection. Serge appeared on the screen.

"Bist?" he asked.

"I'm doing great," Bull said dryly. "What's up?"

"Mars. They got him. Hauling the cabron back alive."

Instinctively, uselessly, Bull tried to sit up. He couldn't sit and up was a polite abstraction.

"Holden?" he said.

"Who else, right? He's on a skiff puttering slow for the MCRN *Hammurabi*. Should be there in a few hours."

"No," Bull said. "They've got to bring him here."

Serge raised his hand in a Belter's nod, but his expression was skeptical.

"Asi dulce si, but I don't see them doing it."

Somewhere far away down below Bull's chest, the compression sleeves hissed and chuffed and expanded, massaging the blood and lymph around his body now that movement wouldn't keep his fluids from pooling. He couldn't feel it. If they'd caught fire, he wouldn't feel it. Something deep and atavistic shifted in fear and disgust as his hindbrain rediscovered his injuries for the thousandth time. Bull ground the heel of his palm against the bridge of his nose.

"Okay," he said. "I'll see what I can do. What does Sam say about the project?"

"She got the rail guns off and they're working on cutting back the extra torpedo tubes, but the captain found out and he's throwing grand mal."

"Well, that had to happen sometime," Bull said. "Guess I'll take care of that too. Anything else?"

"Unless tu láve mis yannis, I think you got plenty. Take a breath, we'll take a turn, sa sa? You don't have to do it all yourself."

"I've got to do something," Bull said as the compression sleeves relaxed with a sigh. "I'll be in touch."

Tense, low voices drifted in with the burned-moth stink of cauterized flesh. Bull let his gaze focus on the blue-white ceiling above the bed he was strapped to.

Holden was back. They hadn't killed him. If there was one thing that had the potential to destroy the fragile cooperation he was building, it would be the fight over who got to hold James Holden's nuts to a Bunsen burner.

Bull scratched his shoulder more for the sensation than because it itched and considered the consequences. Protocol was that they'd question him, hold him in detention, and start negotiating extradition with whoever on the Earth side was investigating the *Seung Un*. Bull's guess was they'd beat him bloody and drop him outside. The man was in custody, but he was responsible for too many deaths to assume he'd be safe there.

It was time to try hailing the *Rocinante* again. Maybe this time they'd answer. Since the catastrophe, they'd been silent. Their communications array might have been damaged, they might be staying silent as some sort of political tactic, or they might all be dying or dead. He requested a connection again and waited with no particular hope of being answered.

Later, when they were outside the Ring, people could wrestle for jurisdiction as much as they wanted. Right now, Bull needed them to work together. Maybe if he—

Against all expectation, the connection to the *Rocinante* opened. A woman Bull didn't recognize appeared. Pale skin, unrestrained red hair haloing her face. The smudge on her cheek might have been grease or blood.

"Yes," the woman said. "Hello? Who is this? Can you help us?"

"My name's Carlos Baca," Bull said, swallowing shock and confusion before they could get to his voice. "I'm chief security officer on the *Behemoth*. And yes, I can help you."

"Oh, thank God," the woman said.

"So how about you tell me who you are and what the situation is over there."

"My name is Anna Volovodov, and I have a woman who tried to kill the crew of the *Rocinante* in... um... custody? I used all the sedatives in the emergency pack because I can't get into the actual medical bay. I taped her to a chair. Also, I think she may have blown up the *Seung Un*."

Bull folded his hands together.

"Why don't you tell me about that?" he said.



Captain Jakande was an older woman, silver-haired with a take-no-shit military attitude that Bull respected, even though he didn't like it.

"I still don't have orders to release the prisoner," Captain Jakande said. "I don't see that it's likely that I'll get them. So for the foreseeable future, no."

"I have a shuttle already going to collect his crew and the woman he accused of being the real saboteur," Bull said. "And last time I looked, I have two dozen of your people slated to come over once we have the drum spun up."

Jakande nodded once, confirming everything he'd said without being moved by any of it. Bull knotted his fingers together and squeezed until the knuckles were white, but he did it out of range of the communication deck's cameras.

"It's going to be better for all of us if we can get everyone together," Bull said. "Pool resources and plan the evacuation. If you don't have shuttles, I can arrange transportation for you and your crew. There's plenty of space here."

"I agree that it would be better to be under a single command," Jakande said. "If you are offering to turn over the *Behemoth*, I'm willing to accept control and responsibility."

"Not where I was taking that, no," Bull said.

"I didn't think so."

"Mister Baca," Ashford barked from the doorway. Bull held out a hand in a just-a-minute gesture.

"This is something we're going to have to revisit," he said. "I've got a lot of respect for you and your position, and I'm sure we can find a way to get this done right."

Her expression made it clear she didn't see anything wrong.

"I'll be in touch," Bull said, and dropped the connection. So much for the pleasant part of his day. Ashford pulled himself through the door, coming to rest against the wall nearest the foot of Bull's bed. He looked angry, but it was a different kind of angry. Bull was used to seeing Ashford cautious, even tentative. This man wasn't either. Everything about him spoke of barely restrained rage. *Grief makes people crazy*, Bull thought. Grief and guilt and embarrassment all together maybe did worse.

Maybe it broke people.

Pa floated in behind him, her eyes cast down. Her face had the odd waxy look that came from exhaustion. The doctor followed her, and then Serge and Macondo looking anyplace but at him. The crowd filled the little room past its capacity.

"Mister Baca," Ashford said, biting at each syllable. "I understand you gave the order to disarm the ship. Is that true?"

"Disarm the ship?" Bull said, and looked at Doctor Sterling. Her gaze was straight on and unreadable. "I had Sam take the rail guns off so we could spin up the drum."

"And you did this without my permission."

"Permission for what?"

Blood darkened Ashford's face, and rage roughened his voice.

"The rail guns are a central component of this ship's defensive capabilities."

"Not if they don't work," Bull said. "I had her take apart the thrust-gravity water reclamation system too. Rebuild it at ninety degrees so it'll use the spin. You want me to run through all the stuff I'm having her repurpose because it doesn't work anymore, or are we just caring about the guns?"

"I also understand that you have authorized non-OPA personnel to have access to the communications channels of the ship? Earthers. Martians. All the people we came out here to keep in line."

"Is that why we came out here?" Bull said. It wasn't a denial, and that seemed to be close enough to a confession for Ashford. Besides which, it wasn't like Bull had been hiding it.

"And enemy military personnel? You're bringing them aboard my ship as well?"

Pa had agreed to everything Ashford was listing off. But she stood behind the captain, not speaking up, expression unreadable. Bull wasn't sure what was going on between the captain and his XO, but if they were working out some internal power struggle, Bull knew which side he'd want to end up on. So he bit the bullet and didn't mention Pa's involvement. "Yes, I'm bringing in everyone I can get. Humanitarian outreach and consolidation of control. It's textbook. A second-year would know to do it." Pa winced at that.

"Mister Baca, you have exceeded your authority. You have ignored the chain of command. All orders given by you, all permissions granted by you, are hereby revoked. I am relieving you of duty and instructing that you be placed in a medical coma until such time as you can be evacuated."

"Like fuck you are," Bull said. He hadn't intended to, but the words came out like a reflex. They seemed to float in the air between them, and Bull discovered that he'd meant them.

"This isn't open for debate," Ashford said coldly.

"Damn right it's not," Bull said. "The reason you're in charge of this mission and not me is that Fred Johnson didn't think the crew would be comfortable with an Earther running a Belter ship. You

got the job because you kissed all the right political asses. You know what? Good for you. Hope your career takes off like a fucking rocket. Pa's here for the same reason. She's got the right-sized head, though at least hers doesn't seem to be empty."

"That's a racist insult," Ashford said, trying to interrupt, "and I won't have—"

"I'm here because they needed someone who could get the job done and they knew we were screwed. And you know what? We're still screwed. But I'm going to get us out of here, and I'm going to keep Fred from being embarrassed by what we did here, and you are going to stay out of my way while I do it, you pinche motherfucker."

"That's enough, Mister Baca. I will—"

"You know it's true," Bull said, shifting to face Pa. Her expression was closed, empty. "If he's in charge of this, he's going to get it wrong. You've seen it. You know—"

"You will stop addressing the XO, Mister Baca."

"—what kind of decisions he makes. He'll send them back to their ships, even if it means people die because—"

"You are *relieved*. You will be—"

"—he wasn't the one that invited them. It's going to—"

"—quiet. I do not give you permission—"

"—make all of this more dangerous, and if someone—"

"—to speak to my staff. You will be—"

"—else pisses that thing off, we could all—"

"—*quiet!*" Ashford shouted, and he pushed forward, his mouth in a square gape of rage. He hit the medical bed too hard, pressing into Bull, grabbing him by the shoulder and shaking him hard enough to snap his teeth shut. "I told you to *shut up!*"

The restraints opened under Ashford's attack, the Velcro ripping. Pain lanced through Bull's neck like someone was pushing a screwdriver into his back. He tried to push the captain away, but there was nothing to grab hold of. His knuckles cracked against something hard: the table, the wall, something else. He couldn't say what. People around him were shouting. His balance felt profoundly wrong, the dead weight of his body flowing limp and useless in the empty air, but tugged at by the tubes and the catheters.

When the world made sense again, he was at a forty-degree angle above the table, his head pointing down. Pa and Macondo were gripping Ashford's arms, the captain's hands bent into claws. Serge was bunched against the wall, ready to launch but not sure what direction he should go.

Doctor Sterling appeared at his side, gathering his legs and drawing him quickly and professionally back toward the bed.

"Could we please not assault the patient with the crushed spinal cord," she said as she did, "because this makes me very uncomfortable."

Another vicious flare of pain, hot and sharp and evil, ran through Bull's neck and upper back as she strapped him down. One of the tubes was floating free, blood and a bit of flesh adhering to its end. He didn't know what part of his body it had come out of. Pa was looking at him, and he kept his voice calm.

"We've already screwed up twice. We came through the Ring, and we let soldiers go on the station. We won't get a third. We can get everyone together, and we can get them out of here."

"That's dangerous talk, mister," Ashford spat.

"I can't be captain," Bull said. "Even if I wasn't stuck in this bed, I'm an Earther. There has to be a Belter in charge. Fred was right about that."

Ashford pulled his arms free of Pa and Macondo, plucked his sleeves back into trim, and steadied himself against the wall.

"Doctor, place Mister Baca in a medical coma. That is a direct order."

“Serge,” Bull said. “I need you to take Captain Ashford into custody, and I need you to do it now.”

No one moved. Serge scratched his neck, the sounds of fingernails against stubble louder than anything in the room. Pa’s gaze locked in the middle distance, her face sour and angry. Ashford’s eyes narrowed, cutting over toward her. When she spoke, her voice was dead and joyless.

“Serge. You heard what the chief said.”

Ashford gathered himself to launch for Pa, but Serge already had a restraining hand on the captain’s shoulder.

“This is mutiny,” Ashford said. “There’ll be a reckoning for this.”

“You need to come with us now,” Serge said. Macondo took Ashford’s other arm and put it in an escort hold, and the three of them left together. Pa stayed against the wall, held steady by a strap, while the doctor, tutting and muttering under her breath, replaced the catheters and checked the monitors and tubes attached to his skin. For the most part, he didn’t feel it.

When she was done, the doctor left the room. The door slid closed behind her. For almost a minute, neither of them spoke.

“Guess your opinion on mutiny changed,” Bull said.

“Apparently,” Pa said, and sighed. “He’s not thinking straight. And he’s drinking too much.”

“He made the decision that brought us all here. He can sign his name to all the corpses on all those ships.”

“I don’t think he sees it that way,” Pa said. And then, “But I think he’s putting a *lot* of effort into not seeing it that way. And he’s slipping. I don’t think... I don’t think he’s well.”

“It’d be easier if he had an accident,” Bull said.

Pa managed a smile. “I haven’t changed *that* much, Mister Baca.”

“Didn’t figure. But I had to say it,” he said.

“Let’s focus on getting everyone safe, and then getting everyone home,” she said. “It was a nice career while it lasted. I’m sorry it’s ending this way.”

“Maybe it is,” Bull said. “But did you come out here to win medals or to do the right thing?”

Pa’s smile was thin.

“I’d hoped for both,” she said.

“Nothing wrong with a little optimism, long as it doesn’t set policy,” he said. “I’m going to keep on getting everyone on the *Behemoth*.”

“No weapons but ours,” she said. “We keep taking all comers, but not if it means having an armed force on the ship.”

“Already done,” Bull said.

Pa closed her eyes. It was easy to forget how much younger than him she was. This wasn’t her first tour, but it could have been her second. Bull tried to imagine what he’d have felt like, still half a kid, throwing his commanding officer into the brig. Scared as hell, probably.

“You did the right thing,” he said.

“You’d have to say that. I backed your play.”

Bull nodded. “I did the right thing. Thank you for supporting me, Captain. Please know that I’ll be returning that favor as long as you sit in the big chair.”

“We aren’t friends,” she said

“Don’t have to be, so long as we get the job done.”

Chapter Thirty: Holden

The marines weren't gentle, but they were professional. Holden had seen Martian powered armor used by a recon marine before. As they moved back through the caverns and tunnels of the station, Holden in thick foam restraints slung across one soldier's back like a piece of equipment, he was aware of how much danger he was in. The men and women in the suits had just watched one of their own be killed and eaten by an alien, they were deep within territory as threatening and unfamiliar as anything he could imagine, and the odds were better than even that they were all blaming him for it. That he wasn't dead already spoke to discipline, training, and a professionalism he would have respected even if his life hadn't depended on it.

Whatever frequencies they were speaking on he didn't have access to, so the furtive journey from the display chamber or whatever it had been back to the surface all happened in eerie silence as far as he was concerned. He kept hoping to catch a glimpse of Miller. Instead, they passed by the insectile machines, now as still as statues, and over the complex turf. He thought he could see something like a pattern in the waves and ripples that passed along the walls and floor, complicated and beautiful as raindrops falling on the surface of a lake, or music. It didn't comfort him.

He tried to get through to the *Rocinante*, to Naomi, but the marine he was strapped to had either disabled his suit radio when they were restraining him or something had jammed the signal. One way or another, he couldn't get anything. Not from the *Roci*, not from the marines, not from anywhere. There was only the gentle loping and an almost unbearable dread.

His suit gave him a low air warning.

He didn't have any sense of where they were or how far they'd gone. The surface of the station might be through the next tunnel or they might not have reached the halfway point. Or, for that matter, the station could be changing around them, and the way they'd come in might not exist. The suit said he had another twenty minutes.

"Hey!" he shouted. He tried to swing his legs against the armor of the person carrying him. "Hey! I'm going to need air!"

The marine didn't respond. No matter how hard Holden tried to thrash, his strength and leverage were a rounding error compared to the abilities of the powered armor. All he could do was hope that he wasn't about to die from an oversight. Worrying about that was actually better than wondering about Naomi and Alex and Amos.

The air gauge was down to three minutes and Holden had shouted himself hoarse when the marine carrying him crouched slightly, hopped up, and the station fell away beneath them. The luminescent surface irised closed behind them, automatic and unthinking. The skiff hung in the vacuum not more than five hundred meters away, its exterior lights making it the brightest thing in the eerie starless sky. They found their way into the mass airlock quickly. Holden's suit was blaring its emergency, the carbon dioxide levels crept up toward the critical level, and he had to fight to catch his breath.

The marine flipped him into a wall-mounted holding bar and strapped him in.

"I'm out of air!" Holden screamed. "Please!"

The marine reached out and cracked the seal on Holden's suit. The rush of air smelled like old plastic and poorly recycled urine. Holden sucked it in like it was roses. The marine popped off his

own helmet. His real head looked perversely small in the bulk of the combat armor.

"Sergeant Verbinski!" a woman's voice snapped.

"Yes, sir," the marine who'd been carrying him said.

"There something wrong with the prisoner?"

"He ran out of air a few minutes back."

The woman grunted. Nothing more was said about it.

The acceleration burn, when it came, was almost subliminal. A tiny sensation of weight settling Holden into his suit, gone as soon as it came. The marines murmured among themselves and ignored him. It was all the confirmation he needed. What Miller had said was true. The slow zone's top speed had changed again. And from the expressions on their faces, he guessed that the casualties had been terrible.

"I need to check in with my ship," he said. "Can someone contact the *Rocinante*, please?" No one answered him. He pressed his luck. "My crew may be hurt. If we could just—"

"Someone shut the prisoner up," the woman who'd spoken before said. He still couldn't see her. The nearest marine, a thick-jawed man with skin so black it seemed blue turned toward him. Holden braced himself for a threat or violence.

"There's nothing you could do," the man said. "Please be quiet now."

His cell in the brig of the *Hammurabi* was a little over a meter and a half wide and three meters deep. The crash couch was a dirty blue and the walls and floor a uniform white that gleamed in the harsh light of the overhead LED. The jumpsuit he'd been issued felt like thick paper and crackled when he moved. When the guards came for him, they didn't bother putting the restraints back on his arms and legs.

The captain floated near a desk, her close-cropped silver hair making her look like an ancient Roman emperor. Holden was strapped into a crash couch that was canted slightly forward, so that he had to look up at her, even without the convenience of an up.

"I am Captain Jakande," she said. "You are a military prisoner. Do you understand what that means?"

"I was in the navy," Holden said. "I understand."

"Good. That'll cut about half an hour of legal bullshit."

"I'll happily tell you everything I know," Holden said. "No need for the rough stuff."

The captain smiled like winter.

"If you were anyone else, I'd think that was a figure of speech," she said. "What is your relationship to the structure at the center of the slow zone? What were you doing there?"

He had spent so many months trying not to talk about Miller, trying not to tell anyone anything. Except Naomi, and even then he'd felt guilty putting the burden of the mystery on her. On one hand, the chance to unburden himself pulled at him like gravity. On the other...

He took a deep breath.

"This is going to sound a little strange," he said.

"All right."

"Shortly after the protomolecule construct lifted off from Venus and headed out to start assembling the Ring? I was... contacted by Detective Josephus Miller. The one who rode Eros down onto Venus. Or at least something that looked and talked like him. He's shown up every few weeks since then, and I came to the conclusion that the protomolecule was using him. Well, him and Julie Mao, who was the first one to be infected, to drive me out through the Ring. I thought that they... it wanted me to come here."

The captain's expression didn't change. Holden felt a strange lump in his throat. He didn't want to be having this conversation here. He wanted to be talking with Naomi in their bedroom on the *Rocinante*. Or at a bar on Ceres. It didn't matter where. Only who.

Was she dead? Had the station killed her?

"Go on," the captain said.

"Apparently I was mistaken," Holden said.

He began with the journey out, with the protomolecule's vision of Miller waiting for him at the station. The attack by her marine, and the consequences as Miller explained them. The visions of the vast empire and the darkness that flowed over it, the death of suns. He relaxed as he went along, the words coming easier, faster. He sounded insane even to himself. Visions no one else could see. Vast secrets revealed only to him.

Except it had all been a mistake.

He'd thought he was important. That he was special and chosen, and that what had happened to him and his crew had been dictated by a vast and mysterious power. He'd misunderstood everything. *Doors and corners*, Miller had said, and because he hadn't puzzled out what the dead man meant by it, they'd all come through the Ring. And to the station. His relief and his growing self-disgust mingled with every phrase. He'd been a fool dancing at the edge of the cliff, because he'd been sure that he couldn't fall. Not him.

"And then I was here, talking to you," he said dryly. "I don't know what happens next."

"All right," she said. Her expression gave away nothing.

"You'll want a full medical workup to see if there's anything organically wrong with my brain," Holden said.

"Probably," the captain said. "My medical staff has its hands full at the moment. You will be kept in administrative detention for the time being."

"I understand," Holden said. "But I need to get in contact with my crew. You can monitor the connection. I don't care. I just need to know they're okay."

The angle of the captain's mouth asked why he thought they were.

"I'll try to get a report to you," she said. "Everyone's scrambling right now, and the situation could get worse quickly."

"Is it bad, then?"

"It is."



Time in his cell passed slowly. A guard brought tubes of rations: protein, oil, water, and vegetable paste. Sometimes it had a nearly homeopathic dose of curry. It was food meant to keep you alive. Everything after that was your own problem. Holden ate it because he had to stay alive. He had to find his crew, his ship. He had to get out of there.

He had seen a massive alien empire fall. He'd seen suns blown apart. He'd watched a man overwhelmed and slaughtered by nightmare mechanisms on a space station that human hands hadn't built. All he could think about was Naomi and Amos and Alex. How they were going to keep their ship. How they were going to get home. And home meant anyplace but here. Not for the first time, he wished they were all transporting sketchy boxes of unknown cargo to Titania. He floated in the coffin-sized cell and tried not to go crazy from the toxic combination of inaction and mind-bending fear.

Even if the whole crew was well, he was in custody of Mars now. He hadn't harmed the *Seung Un*, and everyone would know that. He hadn't made the false broadcast. All the things they were accusing him of could fall away, and there would still be the fact that Mars would take away his ship. He tried to focus on that despair, because as bad as it would be, if he kept the ship and lost his crew, that would feel worse.

"You've got lousy taste in friends," Miller said.

"Where the hell have you been?" Holden snapped.

The dead man shrugged. In the cramped quarters, Holden could smell the man's breath. A firefly flicker of blue sped around Miller's head like a low-slung halo and vanished.

"Time's hard," he said, as if the comment carried its own context. "Anyway, we were talking about something."

"The station. The lockdown."

"Right," Miller said, nodding. He plucked off his ridiculous hat and scratched his temple. "That. So the thing is, as long as there's a shitload of high energy floating around, the station's not going to get comfortable. You guys have, what? Twenty big ships?"

"About that, I guess."

"They've all got fusion reactions. They've all got massive internal power grids. Not a big deal by themselves, but the station's been spooked a couple times. It's jumpy. You're going to have to give it a little massage. Show that you're not a threat. Do that, and I'm pretty sure I can get you moving again. That or it'll break you all down to your component atoms."

"It'll what?"

Miller's smile was apologetic.

"Sorry," he said. "Joke. Just get the reactors off-line and the internal grids off. It'll get you below threshold, and I can take it from there. I mean, if that's what you decide you want to do."

"What do you mean, *if*?"

Holden shifted. The ceiling brushed against his shoulders. He couldn't stretch in here. There wasn't room for two people.

There wasn't room for two people.

For a fraction of a second, his brain tried to fit two images—Miller floating beside him and the too-small cell—together and failed. The flesh on his back felt like there were insects crawling all over it. The two things couldn't both be true, and his brain shuddered and recoiled from the fact that they were. Miller coughed.

"Don't do that," he said. "This is hard enough the way it is. What I mean by *if* is that lockdown's lockdown. I don't get to pick what part of the trap gets unsprung. If I take off the dampening and you all start burning for home or shooting at each other or whatever, that means I also open the gates. All of them."

"Including the ones with the burned-up stars?"

"No," Miller said. "Those gates are gone. Only real star systems on the other side of the ones that are left."

"Is that a problem?"

"Depends on what comes through," Miller said. "That's a lot of doors to kick down all at once." The only sound was the hiss of the air recyclers. Miller nodded as if Holden had said something. "The other option is figure out a way to sneak back home with your tails between your legs and try and pretend this all never happened."

"You think we should do that?"

"I think there was an empire once that touched thousands of stars. The Eros bug? That's one of their tools. It's a wrench. And something was big enough to put a bullet in *them*. Whatever it is could be waiting behind one of those gates, waiting for someone to do something stupid. So maybe you'd rather set up shop here. Make little doomed babies. Live and die in the darkness. But at least whatever's out there stays out there."

Holden put his hand on the crash couch to steady himself. His heart was beating a mile a minute, and his hands were clammy and pale. He felt like he might throw up, and wondered whether he could get the vacuum commode working in time. In his memory, stars died.

“You think that’s what we should do?” he asked. “Be quiet and get the hell out of here?”

“No, I want to open ’em. I’ve learned everything I can get from here, especially in lockdown. I want to figure out what happened, and that means going and taking a look at the scene.”

“You’re the machine that finds things.”

“Yes,” Miller said. “Consider the source, right? You might want to talk about it with someone who’s not dead. You people have more to lose than I do.”

Holden thought for a moment, then smiled. Then laughed.

“I’m not sure it matters. I’m not in much of a position to set policy,” he said.

“That’s true,” Miller said. “Nothing personal, but you’ve got lousy taste in friends.”

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Chapter Thirty-One: Melba

She was in her prison cell when they spun up the drum. In its previous life, the cell had been some sort of veterinary ward for large animals. Horses, maybe. Or cows. A dozen stalls, six to a side, with brushed steel walls and bars. Real bars, just like all the old videos, except with a little swinging door at the top where they could shovel in hay. Everything else was antiseptic white. Everything was locked. Her clothes were gone, replaced by a simple pale pink jumpsuit. Her hand terminal was gone. She didn't miss it. She floated in the center of the space, the walls just out of reach of her fingers and toes. It had taken a dozen attempts, reaching the wall and pushing back more and more gently, to find just the right thrust for the air resistance to stop her out where nothing could touch or be touched. Where she could float and be trapped by floating.

The man in the other cell bounced off his walls. He laughed and he shouted, but mostly he sulked. She ignored him. He was easy to ignore. The air surrounding her had a slight breeze, the way everything did in a ship. She'd heard a story once on the way out about a ship whose circulation failed in the middle of a night shift. The whole crew had died from the zone of exhausted gas that bubbled around them, drowning in their own recycled air. She didn't think the story was true, because they would have woken up. They would have gasped and thrashed around and gotten up out of their couches, and so they would have lived. People who wanted to live did that. People who wanted to die, on the other hand, just floated.

The Klaxons sounded through the whole ship, the blating tone resonating through the decks, taking on a voice like a vast trumpet. First, a warning. Then another. Then another. Then, silently, the bars retreated from her, falling away, and the back wall touched her shoulder like it wanted her attention but hesitated to ask. Inch by inch, her skin came to rest against the wall. For almost half a minute, the wall touched her, its energy and her inertia pressing them together like praying hands. The drum's acceleration was invisible to her. She only felt the spin sweeping her forward, and then because forward, down. Her body slid inch by inch, moving down the wall toward the deck. Her body began to take on weight; the joints in her knees and spine shifting, bearing load. She remembered reading somewhere that a woman coming back from a long time at null g could have grown almost two inches just from the disks in her spine never having the fluid pushed out of them. Between that and the muscle atrophy, coming back to weight—spin, thrust, or gravity—was the occasion for the most injury. Spinal disks were supposed to be pushed on, supposed to have the fluids go into them and back out. Without that, they turned into water balloons, and sometimes, they popped.

Her knee brushed the floor, then pressed into it. It had to have been an hour or more since the Klaxons. Up and down existed again, and she let down take her. She folded against herself, empty as damp paper. There was a drain in the floor, white ceramic unstained by any animal's blood or piss. The lights overhead flickered and grew steady again. The other prisoner was shouting for something. Food, maybe. Water. A guard to escort him to the head.

It was natural to think of it as the head now. Not the restroom. Not the water closet. She didn't call for anyone to help her, she just felt her body grow heavier, being pulled down. And because down, out. It wasn't real gravity, so it wasn't real weight. It was her mass trying to fly off into the dark and being restrained. Someone came for the other prisoner. She watched the thick plastic boots

flicker across her line of sight. Then voices. Words like *loyal* and *mutiny*. Phrases like *When the time's right* and *Restore order*. They washed over her and she let them go. Her head hurt a little where her temple pushed against the floor. She wanted to sleep, but she was afraid to dream.

More footsteps, the same boots going the other way, passing her. More voices. The boots coming back. The deep metallic clank of the shackle being taken off the stall's door. Her body didn't move, but her attention focused. The guard was different. A woman with broad shoulders and a gun in her hand. She looked at Melba, shrugged, and put a hand terminal into her field of vision.

The man on the screen didn't look like a cop. His skin was pale brown, like cookie dough. There was something strange about the shape of his face—broad chin, dark eyes, wrinkles in his forehead and the corners of his mouth—that she couldn't place until he spoke and she saw him in motion. Then it was clear he was lying down and looking up at the camera.

"My name's Carlos Baca," the lying-down man said. "I'm in charge of security on the *Behemoth*. So this prison you're in? It's mine."

All right, Melba thought.

"You, now. I'm thinking you got a story to tell. The UN records of your DNA says you're Melba Koh. A bunch of people I've got no reason to disbelieve say you're Clarissa Mao. The XO of the *Rocinante* says you tried to kill her, and this Russian priest lady's backing her story. And then there's this sound engineer who says you hired him to place interruption electronics on the *Rocinante*." He went quiet for a moment. "Any of that ringing a bell?"

The case on the hand terminal was green ceramic. Or maybe enameled metal. Not plastic. A hairline scratch in the screen made an extra mark across the man's cheek, like a pirate's dueling scar in a kid's book.

"All right, how about this," he said. "Doctor says you've got a modified endocrine bundle. The kind of things terrorists use when they need to do something showy and hard to detect. And, you know, they don't give a shit if it turns their nervous system into soup in a few years. Not the kind of thing a maintenance tech could afford. Or have much reason to get."

It felt strange, the weight of her head pressing against the floor and looking down from the camera into the man's face both at the same time. Partly, she supposed that was from being weightless for so long. Her brain was still getting used to the spin gravity after relying on visual clues, and now here was this anomalous visual cue. She knew intellectually what it was, but the special analysis part of her brain still gnawed at it.

The man on the screen—he'd said his name, but she didn't remember it—pressed his lips together, then coughed once. It was a wet sound, like he was fighting off pneumonia.

"I don't think you understand how much trouble you're in," he said. "There's people accusing you of blowing up an Earth military vessel, and the case they're building is pretty goddamn good. You can take it from me, the UN has no sense of humor about that kind of thing. They will kill you. You understand that? They'll put you in front of a military tribunal, listen to a couple lawyers for maybe fifteen, twenty minutes. Then they'll blow your brains out. I can help you avoid that, but you have to talk to me.

"You know what I think? I don't think you're a professional. I think you're an amateur. You made a bunch of amateur mistakes, and things got away from you. You tell me if I'm right, and we'll go from there. But you keep playing this catatonia shit, and you're going to get killed. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He had a good voice. It had what her singing coach would have called a thorough range. Deep as gravel, but with reedy overtones. It was the kind of voice she'd expect in a man who'd been well bruised by the world. Her singing voice had always been a little reedy too, like her father's. Petyr, poor thing, had never been able to hold a melody. The others—Michael, Anthea, Julie, Mother—had all had very pure voices. Like flutes. The problem with a flute was that it couldn't help being pure.

Even sorrow sounded posed and over-lovely when the flute was expressing it. Reeds had that deeper buzz, that dirtiness, and it gave the sound authenticity. She and her father were reeds.

“Corin?” the man on the screen said. “Does she understand what I’m saying?”

The woman with the gun picked up the hand terminal, looked down at Melba, and then into the screen.

“I don’t think so, chief.”

“The doctor said there wasn’t any brain damage.”

“Did,” the woman agreed. “That don’t make her right, though.”

The sigh carried.

“Okay,” the man’s voice said. “We’re going to have to go from a different angle. I got an idea, but you should come back in first.”

“Sa sa,” the woman said. She stepped out of the cell. The bars closed again. They were narrow enough to keep a horse’s hoof from passing through. She could imagine a horse trying to kick, getting its leg stuck, panicking. That would be bad. Better to avoid the problem. Wiser. Easier to stay out than to get out. Someone had said that to her once, but she didn’t know who.

“Hey. Hey,” the other prisoner said. He wasn’t shouting, just talking loud enough that his voice carried. “Was that true? You have glandular implants? Can you break the door? I’m the captain of this ship. If you can get me out of here, I can help you.”

Julie had been the best singer, except that she wouldn’t do it. Didn’t like performing. Father had been the performer. He’d always been the one to lead when there were songs to be sung. He was always the one to direct the poses when the family pictures were taken. He was a man who knew what he wanted and how to get it. Only he was in prison now. Not even a name, only a number. She wondered whether his cell was like hers. It would be nice if it was. Only his would be under a full g, of course. The spin gravity wasn’t even up to a half g. Maybe a third, maybe even less. Like Mars or Ceres. Funny that of all the places humans lived, the Earth was always the highest gravity. It was like if you could escape from home, you could escape from anything.

“Are you there? Are you awake? I saw them bring you in. Help me, and I’ll help you. Amnesty. I can get you amnesty. And protection. They can’t extradite from Ceres.”

That wasn’t true, and she knew it. Annoyance almost moved her to speak. Moved her to *move*. But not quite. The floor was a single sheet of polymer plating, formed to slant down to the drain. With her head against the floor like this, the drain was hardly more than a black line in a field of white. A crow on a frozen lake.

“I have been taken prisoner in an illegal mutiny,” the man said. “We can help each other.”

She wasn’t entirely sure that she could be helped. Or if she could, what she would be helped to do. She remembered wanting something once. Holden. That was right. She’d wanted him dead and worse than dead. Her fantasies of it were so strong, they were like memories. But no, she *had* done it. Everyone had hated him. They’d tried to kill him. But something else had gone wrong, and they’d thought that Julie did it.

She’d been so close. If she could have killed the *Rocinante*, they would never have found her. If she’d died on it, they’d never have been sure, and Holden would have gone down in history as the smug, self-righteous bastard that he was. But her father would have known. All that way away, he’d have heard what happened, and he would have guessed that she’d done it. His daughter. The one he could finally be proud of.

It occurred to her that the other prisoner had gone quiet. That was fine. He was annoying. Her knees ached. Her temple hurt where it pressed against the floor. They called bedsores pressure sores. She wondered how long it took for skin to macerate just from not moving. Probably a pretty long time, and she was basically healthy. She wondered how long it had been since she’d moved. It had been a long time. She found she was oddly proud of that.

The footsteps came again. More of them, this time. The plastic boots made a satisfying *clump-clump*, but there were other ones now. High, clicking footsteps, like a dog's claws on tile. She felt a tiny flicker of curiosity, like a candle in a cathedral. The boots came, and with them, little blue pumps. An older woman's ankles. The bars clanked and swung open. The pumps hesitated at the threshold, and then came in. Once they were in motion, the steps were confident. Sure.

The woman in the pumps sat, her back against the wall. Tilly Fagan looked down at her. Her hair was dyed, and her lipstick the same improbable red that made her lips look fuller than they were.

"Claire, honey?" The words were soft and uncomfortable. "It's me."

Tension crawled up her back and into her cheeks. Tension, and resentment at the tension. Aunt Tilly didn't have any right to be here. She shouldn't have been.

Tilly put a hand out, reaching down and stroking her head like it was a cat. The first human touch she could remember since she'd come to. The first gentle one she could remember at all. When Tilly spoke, her voice was low and soft and full of regret.

"They found your friend."

I don't have a friend, she thought, and then something deep under her sternum shifted and went hollow. Ren. They'd found Ren. She pulled her arm out from under her body, pressed the back of her hand against her mouth. The tears were warm and unwelcome and thick as a flood. They'd found Ren. They'd opened her tool chest and found his bones and now Soledad would know. And Bob and Stanni. They'd know what she'd done. The first sob was like a cough, and then the one after it and the one after, and Tilly's arms were around her. And God help her, she was screaming and crying into Tilly Fagan's thighs while the woman stroked her hair and made little hushing sounds.

"I'm sorry," she shrieked. The words ripped at her throat. They had hooks on them. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"I know, honey. I know."

She had her arms around Tilly's waist now, burying her face against her side, holding on to her like Tilly's body could keep her from sinking down. From drowning. The guard said something, and she felt Tilly shaking her head no, the motion translated through their bodies.

"I did it," she said. "I killed him. I thought I had to. I told him to look at the readout so that he'd bend, so that he'd bend his neck, and he *did*. And I—and I—and I—Oh, God, I'm going to puke."

"Trashy people puke," Tilly said. "Ladies are *unwell*."

It made her laugh. Despite everything, Clarissa laughed, and then she put her head down again and cried. Her chest hurt so badly she was sure something really was breaking. Aortic aneurysm, pulmonary embolism, something. Sorrow couldn't really feel like a heart breaking, could it? That was just a phrase.

It went on forever. And then past that, and then it slowed. Her body was as limp as a rag. Tilly's blouse was soaked with tears and snot and saliva, but she was still sitting just as she'd been. Her hand still ran through Clarissa's hair. Her fingernails traced the curve of her ear.

"You put the bomb on the *Seung Un*," Tilly said, "and framed Jim Holden for it."

It wasn't a question or an accusation. She didn't want Clarissa to confess, just to confirm. Clarissa nodded against Tilly's lap. When she spoke, her voice clicked and her throat felt thick and raw.

"He hurt Daddy. Had to do something."

Tilly sighed.

"Your father is a first-class shit," she said, and because it was her saying it, it didn't hurt to hear.

"I've got to tell the chief," the guard said, apology in her voice. "I mean about what happened. He wants me to report in."

"I'm not stopping you," Tilly said.

"You need to come with me," the guard said. "I can't leave you there with her. It's not safe."

A flash of panic lit her mind. She couldn't be alone. Not now. They couldn't leave her locked up and alone.

"Don't be ridiculous," Tilly said. "You go do whatever it is you need to do. I'll be here with Claire."

"Ah. That girl killed a lot of people, ma'am."

The silence was just a beat, and without shifting her head, Clarissa knew what look was on Tilly's face. The guard cleared her throat.

"I'll have to lock the door, ma'am."

"Do what you need to, Officer," Tilly said.

The bars shifted and crashed. The lock clacked home. The footsteps retreated. Clarissa wept for Ren. Maybe the others would come later. The dead soldiers on the *Seung Un*. Holden's lover whom she'd beaten and brutalized. All the men and women who'd died because they'd followed Holden through the Ring. She might have tears for them, but now it was only Ren, and she didn't think she would stop in her lifetime.

"I deserve to die," she said. "I've become a very bad person."

Tilly didn't disagree, but she didn't stop cradling her either.

"There's someone I'd like you to talk to," she said.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Anna

The security force had come first, three soldiers in a shuttle with guns and restraints for Melba. Or Clarissa. Whoever she was. Then, much later, a medical evacuation had come, taking the *Rocinante*'s crew.

Anna's own ride arrived almost a day later, not an afterthought, but not a priority. The way things had all come about, she thought not being a priority was probably a sign things were going well for her.

When she arrived on the *Behemoth*, she had expected to see someone from that ship's security team. Or, if they were well enough, maybe Naomi and the other two crewmen from the *Rocinante*.

Hector Cortez stood in the shuttle bay. He smiled when he saw her and raised his hand in a little wave of greeting. The motion reminded her of her grandfather in his failing days: careful and a little awkward. She thought Cortez had aged a decade in a few days, then realized he must have been injured in the catastrophe.

"Anna," he said. "I am so glad to see you."

The *Behemoth*'s massive drum section was spinning now, creating a vertigo-inducing false gravity. Anna's feet told her that she was standing on solid ground. Her inner ear argued that she was falling over sideways, and kept trying to get her to tilt her body the other direction. It wasn't enough to make her steps unsteady, but it did make everything feel a little surreal. Having Hector Cortez, celebrity and minister to the powerful, kiss her cheek didn't make things any less dreamlike.

"It's good to see you too," she said. "I didn't know you were on the *Behemoth*."

"We've all come," he said. "They've left the smallest of crews on the *Thomas Prince*, and we've all come here. All of us that are left. We've lost so many. I attended services yesterday for the fallen. Father Michel. Rabbi Black. Paolo Sedon."

Anna felt a little twinge of dread.

"Alonzo Guzman?"

Cortez shook his head.

"Neither alive nor dead," he said. "They have him in a medical coma, but he's not expected to survive."

Anna remembered the man's pleading eyes. If she'd only found help for him sooner...

"I'm sorry to have missed that service," she said.

"I know," Cortez said. "It's why I wanted to meet you. May I walk with you?"

"Of course," Anna said. "But I don't know where I'm going."

"Then I will give you the basic orientation," the old man said, turning a degree and sweeping his hand toward the shuttle bay. "Come with me, and I will bring you to the glory of the lift system."

Anna chuckled and let him lead the way. He walked carefully too. Not mincing, but not striding. He seemed like a different person than the one who'd called the three factions of humanity together to pass through the Ring and into the unknown. It was more than just how he held his body too.

"I thought it was important that those of us who were part of the petition speak at the service," he said. "I wanted our regret to have a voice."

"Our regret?"

He nodded.

“Yours. Mine. All of us who advised that we come to this darkness. It was hubris, and the innocent have suffered because of it. Died for listening to our bad advice. God has humbled me.”

His voice still had the richness of a lifetime’s practice, but there was a new note in it. A high, childlike whine underneath the grandeur. Sympathy for his distress and an uncharitable annoyance sprang up in her.

“I don’t know that I see it that way,” she said. “We didn’t come here to glorify ourselves. We did it to keep people from fighting. To remind ourselves and each other that we’re all together in this. I can’t think that’s an evil impulse. And I can’t see what happened to us as punishment. Time and chance—”

“Befall all men,” Hector said. “Yes.”

Behind them, a shuttle’s attitude rocket roared for a moment, then cut off. A pair of Belters in gray jumpsuits sauntered toward it, toolboxes in their hands. Cortez was scowling.

“But even given what grew from that seed? You still don’t think we were punished? The decision was not made out of arrogance?”

“History is made up of people recovering from the last disaster,” Anna said. “What happened was terrible. *Is* terrible. But I still can’t see God’s punishment in it.”

“I do,” Cortez said. “I believe we have fallen into a realm of evil. And more, Doctor Volovodov, I fear we have been tainted by it.”

“I don’t see—”

“The devil is here,” Cortez said. He shook his head at Anna’s protesting frown. “Not some cartoon demon. I’m not a fool. But the devil has always lived in men when they reach too far, when they fail to ask if they *should* do something just because they *can* do it. We have—I have fallen into his trap. And worse, we have blazed the trail to him. History will not remember us kindly for what we have done.”



Anna knew quite a few members of the Latter-day Saints church. They agreed with the Methodists on a few minor things like not drinking alcohol, which gave them a sense of solidarity at interfaith conventions. They disagreed on some important things, like the nature of God and His plan for the universe, which didn’t seem to matter as much as Anna would have thought. They tended to be happy, family-oriented, and unassuming.

Standing in the belly of the *Behemoth*, Anna would never have guessed they would build something like the massive generation ship. It was so big, so extravagant. It was like a rebellious shout at the emptiness of space. *The universe is too big for our ship to move through it in a reasonable time? Fine, we’ll stuff all the bits of the universe we need inside of our ship and then go at our own pace.* The inner walls of the rotating drum curved up in the distance, Coriolis effect masquerading as mass, metal ribbing and plates pretending to be substrate, just waiting for soil and plants and farm animals. Through the center of the drum, half a kilometer over Anna’s head, a narrow thread of bright yellow light shone down on them all. The sun, stretched into a line in the sky. The entire idea of it was arrogant and defiant and grandiose.

Anna loved it.

As she walked across a wide empty plain of steel that should have been covered in topsoil and crops, she thought that this audaciousness was exactly what humanity had lost somewhere in the last couple of centuries. When ancient maritime explorers had climbed into their creaking wooden ships and tried to find ways to cross the great oceans of Earth, had their voyage been any less dangerous than the one the Mormons had been planning to attempt? The end point any less mysterious? But in

both cases, they'd been driven to find out what was on the other side of the long trip. Driven by a need to see shores no one else had ever seen before. Show a human a closed door, and no matter how many open doors she finds, she'll be haunted by what might be behind it.

A few people liked to paint this drive as a weakness. A failing of the species. Humanity as the virus. The creature that never stops filling up its available living space. Hector seemed to be moving over to that view, based on their last conversation. But Anna rejected that idea. If humanity were capable of being satisfied, then they'd all still be living in trees and eating bugs out of one another's fur. Anna had walked on a moon of Jupiter. She'd looked up through a dome-covered sky at the great red spot, close enough to see the swirls and eddies of a storm larger than her home world. She'd tasted water thawed from ice as old as the solar system itself. And it was that human dissatisfaction, that human audacity, that had put her there.

Looking at the tiny world spinning around her, she knew one day it would give them the stars as well.

The refugee camp was a network of tents and prefabricated temporary structures set on the inner face of the drum, the long thin line of sun-bright light pressing down onto them all like a spring afternoon on Earth. It took her almost half an hour to find Chris Williams' tent. The liaison from the *Thomas Prince* let her know that the young naval officer had survived the catastrophe, but had suffered terrible injuries in the process. Anna wanted to find him, and maybe through him the rest of the little congregation she'd formed during the trip out.

A few questions of helpful refugees later, and she found his tent. There was no way to knock or buzz, so she just scratched at the tent flap and said, "Chris? You in there?"

"That you, Pastor? Come on in."

The liaison hadn't been specific in her descriptions of Chris' injuries, so Anna braced herself for the worst when she entered. The young lieutenant was lying in a military-style cot, propped up by a number of pillows. He had a small terminal on his lap that he set aside as she came in. His left arm and left leg both ended at the middle joint.

"Oh, Chris, I'm—"

"If your next word is 'sorry,' " he said, "I'm going to hop over there and kick your ass."

Anna started laughing even as the tears filled her eyes. "I am sorry, but now I'm sorry for being sorry." She sat by the edge of his cot and took his right hand. "How are you, Chris?"

"With a few obvious exceptions"—he waved his shortened left arm around—"I came through the disaster better than most. I didn't even have a bad bruise."

"I don't know how the navy health plan works," Anna started, but Chris waved her off.

"Full regrowth therapy. We ever get out of here and back to civilization, and a few painful and itchy months later I'll have bright pink replacements."

"Well, that's good," Anna said. She'd been about to offer to pay for his treatment, not knowing how she'd actually do that. She felt a moment of relief and shame. "Have you heard from anyone else who was in our group? I haven't had time to find them yet."

"Yeah," Chris said with a chuckle, "I heard. You've been doing commando raids while I've been laid up. If I'd known they trained you guys to take down souped-up terrorists, I'd have paid more attention in church as a kid."

"I ran away from her until she had a seizure, and then I taped her to a chair. Not very heroic."

"I'm getting a medal for falling into a pressure hatch, sacrificing an arm and a leg to keep seven sailors from being trapped in a compromised part of the ship. I was unconscious at the time, but that doesn't seem to matter. Heroism is a label most people get for doing shit they'd never do if they were really thinking about it."

Anna laughed at that. "I've been thinking a lot about that exact thing recently." Chris relaxed back into his pile of pillows and nodded for her to continue.

“Labels, I mean. People are calling the aliens evil, because they hurt us. And without context, how do we know?”

“Yeah,” Chris said. “I lose a couple limbs getting drunk and falling into a harvesting combine, I’m an idiot. I lose the same limbs because I happened to be standing next to the right door when the ship was damaged, I’m a hero.”

“Maybe it’s as simple as that. I don’t know. I feel like something really important is about to happen, and we’re all making up our minds ahead of time what it will be.”

Chris absentmindedly scratched at the stump of his left leg, then grimaced. “Like?”

“We came through the Ring to stop James Holden from talking to the aliens first. But this is the same man that helped send Eros to Venus instead of letting it destroy the Earth. Why did we assume he’d do a bad job of being the first human the aliens met? And now something has slapped us down, taken all our guns away, but not killed us. That should mean something. Certainly anything this powerful could kill us as easily as it decapitated us. But it didn’t. Instead of trying to figure out what it means, we’re hurting so we call it evil. I feel like we’re children who’ve been punished and we think it’s because our parents are mean.”

“They stopped our ships to... what? Pacify us?” Chris asked.

“Who knows?” Anna said, shrugging. “But I know we’re not asking those questions. Humans do bad things when they’re afraid, and we’re all very afraid right now.”

“Tara died,” Chris said.

Anna racked her brain trying to remember who Tara was. Chris saw her confusion and added, “Short blond hair? She was a marine?”

“Oh no,” Anna replied, feeling the tears well up again. Her angry marine had died. A whole future in which she’d worked with Tara to find out the source of her anger vanished. Conversations she’d already had in her head, lines of questioning, the anticipation of satisfaction she’d get from having the marine open up to her. Gone, as if someone had flicked a switch. It was hard not to sympathize with Cortez’s view a little. After all, the aliens had killed one of her congregation now.

But maybe not on purpose, and intent mattered. The universe made no sense to her otherwise.

She managed to finish off her visit without, she hoped, seeming too distracted. Afterward, she went to find her own assigned tent and try to rest. She had no reason to think that sleep would come. After she found her place, Tilly Fagan appeared. Anna lifted her arm in greeting, but before she could get a word out, Tilly threw both arms around her and was squeezing until she could hear her ribs pop. Tilly was surprisingly strong for such a thin woman.

“I was furious with myself for letting you leave,” Tilly said, squeezing even tighter and leaning her weight against Anna. She was heavy. They both were in the spinning drum. It took some getting used to.

When Tilly finally let up the pressure a bit, Anna said, “I think I was... altered.”

“That was my fault, too,” Tilly said, followed by more squeezing. Anna realized the only thing to do was ride it out, and patted Tilly on the lower back until her friend got it out of her system.

After a few moments, Tilly released Anna and stepped back, her eyes shiny but a smile on her face. “I’m glad you didn’t die. Everyone else from the *Prince* is a pod.” Anna decided not to ask what a pod was. “The *Behemoth* has become the place to be,” Tilly continued. “If we never figure out how to escape this trap, it’s the place it will take us the longest to die. That makes it the high-rent district of the slow zone.”

“Well, that’s... important.”

Tilly laughed. She pulled a cigarette out and lit it as they walked. At Anna’s shocked look she said, “They let you do it here. Lots of the Belters do. They obsess over air filters and then suck poisonous particulates into their lungs recreationally. It’s a fabulous culture.”

Anna smiled and waved the smoke away from her face.

“So,” Tilly said, pretending not to notice. “I demanded they let me go on the first shuttle over. Did you manage to retrieve Holden?”

“I didn’t find him,” Anna said. “Just his crew. But I think I might have saved their lives.”

At first, she thought Tilly’s expression had cooled, but that wasn’t quite right. It wasn’t coldness. It was pain. Anna put her hand on Tilly’s arm.

“I have someone I need you to talk to,” Tilly said. “And you probably aren’t going to like it, but you’re going to do it for me. I’ll never ask you for anything again, and you’re buying a lifetime of expensive markers to trade in with this.”

“Whatever I can do.”

“You’re going to help Claire.”

Anna felt like the air had gone out of the room. For a moment, she heard the throat-scarring screams again and felt the blows transferred through the buckling locker door. She heard Chris tell her that Tara had died. She saw Cortez, and heard the buzzsaw despair in his voice. She took a breath.

“Yes,” she said. “Of course I am.”

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Chapter Thirty-Three: Bull

You need to get up,” Doctor Sterling said. Spin changed the shape of her face, pulling down her cheeks and hair. She looked older and more familiar.

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to move around,” Bull said, and coughed.

“That was when I was worried about your spinal cord. Now I’m worried about your lungs. You’re having enough trouble clearing secretions, I’m about ready to call it mild pneumonia.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Spin gravity’s not going to do you much good if you’re flat on your back,” she said, tapping his shoulder for emphasis. “You have to sit up more.”

Bull gritted his teeth.

“I can’t sit up,” he said. “I don’t have abdominal muscles. I can’t do *anything*.”

“You have an adjustable bed,” the doctor said, unfazed. “Adjust it. Stay upright as much as you can.”

“Isn’t that going to screw up my spine even worse?”

“We can brace you,” she said. “Anyway, you can live without functioning legs. You can’t live without functioning lungs.”

The medical wards had changed. Spinning up the drum had meant stripping away as many of the alterations that had changed the generation ship into a weapon of war as they could. The medical stations and emergency showers had all been turned ninety degrees in the refit, prepared to use under thrust or not at all. What had been designed back in what seemed like ancient times to be floors had become walls, and now they were floors again. The whole thing was a hesitation. A stutter-step in industrial steel and ceramic. It was like something that had been broken and grew back wrong.

“I’ll do what I can,” Bull said, his teeth clenched against another cough. “If I’ve got to sit up, can I at least get something that travels a little? I’m getting pretty tired of being in the same room all the time.”

“I don’t recommend it.”

“You gonna stop me?”

“I am not.”

They paused. Frustration and animosity hung in the air between them. Neither one had slept enough. Both were pushing themselves too hard trying to keep people alive. And they weren’t going to make each other happy.

“I’ll do what I can, doc,” Bull said. “How’s it going out there?”

“People are dying. It’s slowing down, though. At this point, almost all of the emergent cases are stabilized or dead. Right now it’s pretty much the same for everyone. Wound care and support. Keep an eye out for people who had some sort of internal injury we didn’t see at the time and try to catch them before they crash. Rest, fluid, light exercise, and prayer.”

“All right,” he said as his hand terminal chimed. Another connection request. From the *Hammurabi*, the Martian frigate where Captain Jim Holden was being held.

“And how’s it going on your end?” Doctor Sterling said. Her lips were pressed thin. She knew the answer. Bull used the controls on his bed, shifting himself up to something approaching a seated

position. He could feel a difference in his breath, but if anything it made it harder to keep from coughing.

"Let you know in a minute," he said and accepted the connection. Captain Jakande appeared on the screen.

"Captain," Bull said, making the title a greeting.

"Mister Baca," she said in return. "I got your last message."

"I don't suppose you're calling to arrange the transfer of the prisoner and your remaining crew?"

She didn't smile.

"I wanted to thank you for the staging area you've provided for our medical staff. We will not, however, be transferring any further personnel to your vessel or remanding the prisoner to your custody."

"You don't have a sufficient complement left on your ship to run it. Not even as a skeleton crew. Between the injured and the medics and the injured medics, I've got two-thirds of your people here right now."

"And I thank you for that."

"My point is you have a third or less of your crew left standing. You're pulling double, maybe triple shifts. Earth is still making noise about transferring Holden to them until he's answered charges for the *Seung Un*." He hadn't mentioned Clarissa Mao's confession. That was a card he could play another time. He lifted his hand. "All of us have watched someone we cared about die because of something we don't understand. All of us are grieving and scared. If we don't all come together, someone's going to do something we'll all regret."

"The Martian military code requires—"

"I've got an open investigation here. I'll share all the information we've gathered. Some of it's pretty damn interesting."

Something moved in his chest, and he was coughing so hard he couldn't speak or listen. Phlegm filled his mouth, and he leaned over, supporting himself with his arms, to spit it out. Maybe there was something to this sitting-up thing.

"The Martian military code prohibits the surrender of prisoners except in cases of trades authorized by the government. We can't talk to the MCR, so nothing's getting authorized."

"You could surrender to me."

She laughed that time. The façade of military propriety cracked.

"I wish. I'd be able get a full shift's sleep. But that tin can you're in couldn't take us, even if we *could* fight."

"Which we can't, so we're pretty much down to angry letters at twenty paces. I appreciate the call," he said. "I'll let the captain know it's no-go. But hey, lemme ask you. What are you guys gonna do when Earth sends a couple dozen marines with cutting torches and kitchen knives?"

"Fight with cutting torches and knives," she said. "This is the *Hammurabi* signing off."

Bull watched the dull standby screen for half a minute before he put it down. He'd have to tell Pa, but he wasn't looking forward to that. She had enough on her plate coordinating all the things he couldn't because he was trapped in the medical ward.

No matter what Holden's criminal status with Earth and Mars was, no matter how many people took the blame for the things he was accused of, it didn't matter. It was a pretext. He was the only person not covered by military treaty who could be debriefed about whatever was on the alien station. Earth wanted him. The OPA wanted him. Mars had him, and wouldn't give him up just for the joy of having something other people wanted.

And sooner or later some Martian with too much stress and not enough sleep who thought Holden was responsible for drawing them all through the Ring was going to take revenge for a lover

or friend who'd died. Bull scratched at his neck, the stubble rough against his fingertips. His body, empty, splayed out before him in the one-third g.

"Bull?"

He looked up. The nurse seemed, if anything, more tired than the doctor had been.

"You've got a couple visitors, if you're up for it," he said.

"Depends. Who you got?"

"Priest," he said. It took a moment to realize it wasn't a name but a job description.

"The Russian from the *Rocinante*?"

The nurse shook his head. "The politician. Cortez."

"What does he want?"

"As far as I can tell? Save your soul. He's talking about protecting humanity from the devil. I think he wants you to help with that."

"Tell him to talk to Serge at the security office. Who else wants a piece of me?"

The nurse's expression changed. For a moment, Bull couldn't say what was strange about it, then he realized it was the first time in his memory he'd seen the nurse smile.

"Someone's got a little prezzie for you," the nurse said, then leaned back out into the corridor.

"Okay. Come on in."

Bull coughed again, bringing up more phlegm. Sam appeared in the doorway, grinning. Behind her, two techs were carrying a blue plastic crate so big he could have put Sam inside it.

"Rosenberg? You been wasting time when you should be fixing my ship?"

"You've still got one more mutiny before it's your ship," Sam said. "And yeah, when the crew heard about what happened with you and Ashford, some of us wanted to put together a little present."

Bull shifted, then caught himself. He was so used to having the muscles in his trunk to hold himself up that every time he began to fall, it was a little surprising. It was one of the things he missed about null g. Sam didn't notice, or pretended not to. She shifted to the side and took hold of the crate's release bar like a stage magician about to reveal an illusion. Doctor Sterling appeared in the doorway, a sly smile haunting her lips. Bull had the uncomfortable feeling of walking in on his own surprise party.

"You're making me nervous," he said.

"You're getting smarter," she said. "Ready?"

"Yeah, I don't think so."

The crate slid open. The mech inside looked complicated, blocky, and thick. Bull laughed for lack of anything he could think to say.

"It's a standard lifting mech," Sam said, "but we carved a bunch of the reinforcing out of its tummy and put in a TLS orthosis the medics gave me. We swapped out the leg actuation with a simple joystick control. It won't take you dancing, and you're still going to need help going potty, but you're not stuck in bed. It's not as comfortable as a top-end wheelchair, but it will get you anywhere in the ship you want to go, whether it was built for accessibility or not."

Bull thought he was about to cough again until he felt the tears welling up in his eyes.

"Aw shit, Sam."

"None of that, you big baby. Let's just get you in and adjust the support plates."

Sam took one shoulder, the nurse the other. The sensation of being carried was strange. Bull didn't know the last time anyone had picked him up. The brace in the guts of the mech was like a girdle, and Sam had put straps along the mech's struts to keep his legs from flapping around. It was an inversion of the usual; instead of using his legs to move the mech, he was using the mech to move his legs. For the first time since the catastrophe, Bull walked down the short hall and into the general ward. Sam kept pace, her gaze on the mechanism like a mother duck taking her ducklings for their first swim. His sense of wrongness didn't leave, but it lessened.

The worst of the injured from all three sides were here, men and women, Belter and Earther and Martian. A bald man with skin an unhealthy yellow struggled to breathe; a woman so young-looking Bull could hardly believe she wasn't a child lay almost naked in a bed, her skin mostly burned away and a distant look in her eyes; a thick-bodied man with an Old Testament prophet's beard and body hair like a chimp moaned and shifted through his sedation. In the disposable plastic medical gowns, there was nothing to show who belonged to what side. They were people, and they were on his ship, so they were his people.

At the end of the corridor, Corin stood in front of a doorway, a pistol on her hip. Her salute was on the edge between serious and mocking.

"Macht sly, chief," she said. "Suits."

"Thank you," Bull said.

"Here to see the prisoners?"

"Sure," Bull said. He hadn't meant to go anywhere in particular, but since he could, he could. The lockdown ward was smaller, but other than one of his security staff at the door, there weren't any signs that the patients here were different. *Prisoners* was a strong word. None of them were legally bound. They ranged from high-value civilians from Earth to the highest-ranking Martian wounded. Anyone whom Bull thought might be particularly useful, now or later. All of the dozen beds were full.

"How's it feeling?" Sam asked.

"Seems like it lists to the right a little," Bull said.

"Yeah, I was thinking maybe—"

The new voice came from the farthest bed, weak and confused but unmistakable:

"Sam?"

Sam's attention snapped to the back, and she took a couple tentative steps toward the woman who had spoken.

"Naomi? Oh holy crap, sweetie. What happened to you?"

"Got in a fight," the XO of the *Rocinante* said through bruised and broken lips. "Whipped her ass."

"You know Nagata?" Bull asked.

"From the bad old days," Sam said, taking her hand. "We were roommates for about six days while she and Jim Holden were having a fight."

"Where," Naomi said. "Where's my crew?"

"They're here," Bull said, maneuvering his mech closer to her. "All but Holden."

"They're all right?"

"I've felt better," a balding, slightly pudgy man with skin the color of toast said. He had the drawl of Mariner Valley on Mars or West Texas on Earth. It was hard to tell the difference.

"Alex," Naomi said. "Where's Amos?"

"Next bed over," Alex said. "He's been sleepin' a lot. What happened, anyway? We get arrested?"

"There was an accident," Bull said. "A lot of people got hurt."

"But we ain't arrested," Alex said.

"No."

"Well that's all right, then."

On her bed, Naomi Nagata had visibly relaxed. Knowing her crew were alive and with her carried a lot of weight. Bull filed the information away in case it was useful later.

"The woman who attacked you is under arrest," Bull said.

"She's the one. The bomb," Naomi said.

"We're looking into that," he said, trying to keep his tone reassuring. Another coughing fit spoiled the effect.

Naomi frowned, remembering something. Bull wished he could take her other hand. Build some rapport. The mech was a fine way to walk around, but there were other ways it was limiting.

"Jim?" she said.

"Captain Holden has been taken into custody by the Martian navy," Bull said. "I'm trying to negotiate his release into our custody, but it's not going very well so far."

Naomi smiled as if he'd given her good news and nodded. Her eyes closed.

"What 'bout Miller?"

"Who?" Bull asked, but she was already asleep. Sam shifted to Alex's bed and Bull stepped over to look down on the *Rocinante's* sleeping mechanic. Amos Burton. They were a pretty sad bunch, and far too small a crew to run a ship like theirs safely. Maybe Jakande could get some pointers from them.

Until he got Holden, they were going to be at a disadvantage. The man was a professional symbol, and creating calm when there was no reason for it was all about symbols. Captain Jakande wouldn't bend, because if she did, she'd be court-martialed when they got back. If they got back. Bull didn't like it, but he understood it. If they'd been anywhere but the slow zone, they'd all have been rattling sabers and baring teeth. Instead, all they could do was talk...

Bull's mouth went dry. Sam was still looking at Naomi Nagata's bed, her face angry and despairing.

"Sam," Bull said. "Got a minute?"

She looked up and nodded. Bull flicked the little joystick, and the mech trod awkwardly around. He steered it back out through the door and back to his own private room. By the time they got there, Sam's expression had shifted to curious. Bull closed the door, coughing. He felt a little light-headed and his heart was racing. Fear, excitement, or being vertical for the first time since they'd passed through the Ring, he didn't know.

"What's up, boss?"

"The comm laser," Bull said. "Say I wanted to make it into a weapon. What's the most power we could put through it?"

Sam's frown was more than an engineer making mental calculations. The spin gravity made her seem older. Or maybe bathing in death and fear just did that to people.

"I can make it about as hot as the middle of a star for a fraction of a second," Sam said. "It'd burn that side of the ship down to a bad smell, though."

"What's the most we could do and get, say, three shots out of it? And not melt our ship?"

"It can already carve through a ship's hull if you've got time to spare. I can probably pare that time down a bit."

"Get that going, will you?"

Sam shook her head.

"What?" Bull asked.

"That big glowy ball out there can turn off inertia when it feels threatened. I don't feel comfortable making light into a weapon. Seriously, what if it decides to stop all the photons or something?"

"If we have it, we won't need to use it."

Sam shook her head again.

"I can't do that for you, Bull."

"What about the captain? Would you do it for a Belter?"

Sam's cheeks flushed. It might have been embarrassment or anger.

"Cheap shot."

“Sorry, but would you take a direct order from Captain Pa?”

“From her, yes. But not because she’s a Belter. Because she’s the captain and I trust her judgment.”

“More than mine.”

Sam held up her hands in a Belter shrug.

“Last time I just did whatever you told me to, I wound up under house arrest.”

Bull had to give her the point. He fumbled to extricate his arm from the mech, scooped up his hand terminal, and put in a priority connection request to Pa. She took it almost immediately. She looked older too, worn, solid, certain. Crisis suited her.

“Mister Baca,” she said. “Where do we stand?”

“Captain Jakande isn’t going to bring her people over, even though they all know it would be better. And she won’t give up Holden.”

“All right,” Pa said. “Well, we tried.”

“But she might surrender to you,” Bull said. “And seems to me it’s going to be a lot easier being sheriff if we can get the only gun in the slow zone.”

Pa tilted her head.

“Go on,” she said.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Clarissa

The guards came, brought thinly rationed food-grade protein and measured bottles of water, led the prisoners to the head with pistols drawn, and then took them back. For the most part, Clarissa lay on the floor or stretched, hummed old songs to herself or drew on the skin of her arms—white fingernail scratches. The boredom would have been crushing if she'd felt it, but she seemed to have unconnected from time.

The only times she cried were when she thought of killing Ren and when she remembered her father. The only things she anticipated at all were another visit from Tilly or her mysterious friend, and death.

The woman came first, and when she did, Clarissa recognized her. With her red hair pulled down by spin, her face looked softer, but the eyes were unforgettable. The woman from the galley on the *Thomas Prince*. And then, later, from the *Rocinante*. Anna. She'd told Naomi that her name was Anna.

Just one more person Clarissa had tried to kill once.

"I have permission to speak with her," Anna said. The guard—a broad-faced man with a scarred arm that he wore like a decoration—crossed his arms.

"She's here, si no? Talk away."

"Absolutely not," Anna said. "This is a private conversation. I can't have it in front of the others."

"You can't have it anywhere else," the guard said. "You know how many people this coya killed? She's got implants. Dangerous."

"She knows," Clarissa said, and Anna flashed a smile at her like they'd shared a joke. A feeling of unease cooled Clarissa's gut. There was something threatening about a woman who could take being attacked and treat it like it was a shared intimacy. Clarissa wondered whether she wanted to talk with her after all.

"It's the risk I came here to take," Anna said. "You can find us a place. An... an interview room. You have those, don't you?"

The guard's stance settled deeper into his knees and hips, immovable.

"Can stay here until the sun burns out," he said. "That door's staying closed."

"It's all right," Clarissa said.

"No it isn't," Anna said. "I'm her priest, and the things we need to talk about are private. Please open the door and take us someplace we can talk."

"Jojo," the captain at the far end of the hall said. Ashford. That was his name. "It's all right. You can put them in the meat freezer. It's not in use and it locks from the outside."

"Then I get a dead preacher, ano sa?"

"I believe that you won't," Anna said.

"Then you believe in vacuum fairies," the guard said, but he unlocked the cell door. The bars swung open. Clarissa hesitated. Behind guard and priest, the disgraced Captain Ashford watched her, peering through his bars to get a look. He needed to shave and he looked like he'd been crying. For a moment, Clarissa gripped the cold steel bars of her door. The urge to pull them closed, to retreat, was almost overwhelming.

"It's all right," Anna said.

Clarissa let go of the door and stepped out. The guard drew his sidearm and pressed it against the back of her neck. Anna looked pained. Ashford's expression didn't shift a millimeter.

"Is that necessary?" Anna asked.

"Implants," the guard said and prodded Clarissa to move forward. She walked.

The freezer was warm and larger than the galley back on the *Cerisier*. Strips of metal ran along floor and ceiling and both walls with notches every few centimeters to allow the Mormon colonists who never were to lock walls and partitions into place. It made sense that the veterinary stalls that had been pressed into service as her prison would be near the slaughterhouse. Harsh white light spilled from LEDs set into the walls, unsoftened and directional, casting hard shadows.

"I'm back in fifteen minutes," the guard said as he pushed Clarissa through the doorway. "Anything looks funny, I'll shoot you."

"Thank you for giving us privacy," Anna said, stepping through after her. The door closed. The latch sounded like the gates of hell, closing. The lights flickered, and the first thought that flashed across Clarissa's mind, rich with disapproval, was, *Shouldn't tie the locking magnet to the same circuit as the control board*. It was like a relic from another life.

Anna gathered herself, smiled, and put out her hand.

"We've met before," she said, "but we haven't really been introduced. My name's Anna."

A lifetime's etiquette accepted the offered hand on Clarissa's behalf. The woman's fingers were very warm.

"My priest?" Clarissa said.

"Sorry about that," Anna said. "I didn't mean to presume. I was getting angry, and I tried to pull rank."

"I know people who do worse. When they're angry."

Clarissa released the woman's hand.

"I'm a friend of Tilly's. She helped me after the ship crashed. I was hurt and not thinking very straight, and she helped me," she said.

"She's good that way."

"She knew your sister too. Your father. The whole family," Anna said, then pressed her lips together impatiently. "I wish they'd given us chairs. I feel like we're standing around at a bus terminal."

Anna took a deep breath, sighing out her nose, then sat there in the middle of the room with her legs crossed. She patted the metal decking at her side. Clarissa hesitated, then lowered herself to sit. She had the overwhelming memory of being five years old, sitting on a rug in kindergarten.

"That's better," Anna said. "So, Tilly's told me a lot about you. She's worried."

Clarissa tilted her head. From just the form, it seemed like the place where she would reply. She felt the urge to speak, and she couldn't imagine what she would say. After a moment, Anna went on, trying again without seeming to.

"I'm worried about you too."

"Why?"

Anna's eyes clouded. For a moment, she seemed to be having some internal conversation. But only for a moment. She leaned forward, her hands clasped.

"I didn't help you before. I saw you just before the *Seung Un* blew up," she said. "Just before you set off the bomb."

"It was too late by then," Clarissa said. Ren had already been dead. "You couldn't have stopped it."

"You're right," Anna said. "That's not the only reason I'm here. I also... I lost someone. When all the ships stopped, I lost someone."

"Someone you cared about," Clarissa said. "Someone you loved."

"Someone I hardly knew, but it was a real loss. And also I was scared of you. I *am* scared of you. But Tilly told me a lot about you, and it's helped me to get past some of my fear."

"Not all of it?"

"No. Not all of it."

Something deep in the structure of the ship thumped, the whole structure around them ringing for a moment like a gigantic bell tolling far, far away.

"I could kill you," Clarissa said. "Before they got the door open."

"I know. I saw."

Clarissa put her hand out, her palm against the notched runner. The finish was smooth and the metal cool.

"You want a confession, then?" she said.

"If you want to offer one."

"I did it," Clarissa said. "I sabotaged the *Rocinante* and the *Seung Un*. I killed Ren. I killed some people back on Earth. I lied about who I was. All of it. I'm guilty."

"All right."

"Are we done, then?"

Anna scratched her nose and sighed. "I came out to the Ring even though it upset my wife. Even though it meant not seeing my baby for months. I told myself that I wanted to come see it. To help people make sense of it and, whatever it was, to not be afraid. You came out here to... save your father. To redeem him."

"Is that what Tilly says?"

"She's not as polite about it."

Clarissa coughed out a laugh. Everything she could say felt trite. Worse, it felt naive and stupid. *Jim Holden destroyed my family and I wanted my father to be proud of me and I was wrong.*

"I did what I did," Clarissa said. "You can tell them that. The security people. You can tell them I confessed to it all."

"If you'd like. I'll tell them."

"I would. I want that."

"Why did you try to kill Naomi?"

"I wanted to kill all of them," Clarissa said, and each word was hard to speak, as though they were too large to fit through her throat. "They were part of him, and I wanted him not to be. Just not to exist at all anymore. I wanted everyone to know he is a bad man."

"Do you still want that?"

"I don't care," Clarissa said. "You can tell them."

"And Naomi? I'm going to see her. Is there anything you'd want me to tell her in particular?"

Clarissa remembered the woman's face, bruised and bleeding. She flexed her hand, feeling the mech's glove against her fingers. It would have taken nothing to snap the woman's neck, a feather's weight of pressure. She wondered why she hadn't. The difference between savoring the moment and hesitating warred at the back of her mind, and her memory supported both. Or neither.

"Tell her I hope she gets well soon."

"Do you hope that?"

"Or am I just being polite, you mean?" Clarissa said. "Tell her whatever you want. I don't care."

"All right," Anna said. "Can I ask a question?"

"Can I stop you?"

"Yes."

The silence was no more than three long breaths together.

"You can ask me a question."

“Do you want to be redeemed?”

“I don’t believe in God.”

“Do you want to be redeemed by something other than God, then? If there was forgiveness for you, could you accept it?”

The sense of outrage began in Clarissa’s stomach and bloomed out through her chest. It curled her lips and furrowed her brow. For the first time since she’d lost consciousness trying to beat her way through the locker on the *Rocinante*, she remembered what anger felt like. How large it was.

“Why should I be forgiven for anything? I did it. That’s all.”

“But if—”

“What kind of justice would that be? ‘Oh, you killed Ren, but you’re sorry now so it’s okay’? Fuck that. And if that’s how your God works, then fuck Him too.”

The freezer door clanked. Clarissa looked up at it, resenting the accident of timing and then realizing they’d heard her yelling. They were coming to save the preacher. She balled her hands into fists and looked down at them. They were going to take her back to her cell. She felt in her gut and her throat how little she wanted that.

“It’s all right,” Anna said as the guard stepped into the freezer, his sidearm trained on Clarissa. “We’re okay.”

“Yeah, no,” the guard said. His gaze was sharp and focused. Frightened. “Time’s passed. Meeting’s over.”

Anna looked at Clarissa with something like frustration in her expression. Not with her, but with the situation. With not getting everything to be just the way she wanted it. Clarissa had some sympathy for that.

“I’d like to talk with you again,” Anna said. “If it’s all right.”

“You know where I live,” Clarissa said with a shrug. “I don’t go out much.”

Chapter Thirty-Five: Anna

Bull wasn't in his office when she arrived. A muscular young woman with a large gun on her hip shrugged when Anna asked if she could wait for him, then ignored her and continued working. A wall screen was set to the Radio Free Slow Zone feed, where a young Earther man was leaning in toward Monica Stuart and speaking earnestly. His skin was a bright pink that didn't seem to be his natural color. Anna thought he looked peeled.

"I haven't changed my commitment to autonomy for the Brazilian shared interest zones," he said. "If anything I feel like I've broadened it."

"Broadened it how?" Monica asked. She seemed genuinely interested. It was a gift. The peeled man tapped at the air with his fingertips. Anna felt sure she'd seen him on the *Thomas Prince*, but she couldn't for the life of her remember his name. She had the vague sense he was a painter. Some kind of artist, certainly.

"We've all changed," he said. "By coming here. By going through the trials that we're all going through, we've all *been* changed. When we go back, none of us will be the people we were before. The tragedy and the loss and the sense of *wonder* changes what it means to be human. Do you know what I mean?"

Oddly, Anna thought she did.

Being a minister meant being in the middle of people's lives. Anna had counseled dating congregation members, presided over their weddings, baptized their babies, and in one heartbreaking case presided over the infant's funeral a year later. Members of the congregation included her in most of the important events of their lives. She was used to it, and mostly enjoyed the deep connection to people it brought. Charting the course of a life was making a map of the ways each event changed the person, leaving someone different on the other side. Passing through the Ring and the tragedies it had brought wouldn't leave any of them the same.

The exodus from the rest of the fleet to the *Behemoth* was in full swing. The tent cities spread across the curved inner surface of the habitation drum like wildflowers on a field of flat, ceramic steel-colored earth. Anna saw tall gangly Belters helping offload wounded Earthers from emergency carts, plugging in IVs and other medical equipment, fluffing pillows and mopping brows. Inners and outers offloaded crates in mixed groups without comment. Anna couldn't help but be warmed by that, even in the face of their recent disaster. Maybe it took real tragedy to get them all working together, but it did. They did. There was hope in that.

Now if they could just figure out how to do it without the blood and screaming.

"Your work has been criticized," Monica Stuart said, "as advocating violence."

The peeled man nodded.

"I used to reject that," he said. "I've come to the conclusion that it may be valid, though. I think when we come home, there will be some readjustment."

"Because of the Ring?"

"And the slow zone. And what's happened here."

"Do you think you would encourage other political artists to come out here?"

"Absolutely."

Chris, her young officer, had asked about organizing mixed-group church services on the *Behemoth*. She'd assumed he meant mixed religions at first, but it turned out he meant a church group with Earthers and Martians and Belters. Mixed, as if God categorized people based on the gravity they'd grown up in. It had occurred to Anna then that there really wasn't any such thing as a "mixed" church group. No matter what they looked like, or what they chose to call Him, when a group of people called out to God together, they were one. Even if there was no God, or one God, or many gods, it didn't matter. *Faith, hope, and love*, Paul had written, *but the greatest of these is love*. Faith and hope were very important to Anna. But she could see Paul's point in a way she hadn't before. Love didn't need anything else. It didn't need a common belief, or a common identity. Anna thought of her child and felt a rush of longing and loneliness. She could almost feel Nami in her arms, almost smell the intoxicating new-baby scent on her head. Nono the Ugandan and Anna the Russian had blended themselves together and made Nami. Not a mix, nothing so crude as that. More than just the sum of her parts and origins. A new thing, individual and unique.

No mixed group, then. Just a group. A new thing, perfect and unique. She couldn't imagine God would see it any other way. Anna was pretty sure she had her first sermon too. She was about halfway through typing up an outline for her "no mixed groups in God's eyes" sermon on her handset when Bull came through the door, his mechanical legs whining and thumping with each step. Anna thought it gave Bull even more gravitas than he'd had before. He moved with a deliberateness caused by mechanical necessity, but easily mistaken for formality and stateliness. The electric whine of the machine and the heavy thump of his tread were a sort of herald calling out his arrival.

Anna imagined the annoyance Bull would feel if she told him this, and giggled a little to herself.

Bull was in the middle of speaking to a subordinate and didn't even notice her. "I don't care how they feel about it, Serge. The agreement was no armed military personnel on the ship. Even if there weren't a shitload of guns built in, those suits would still be weapons. Confiscate their gear or throw them off the damn ship."

"Si, jefe," the other man with him replied. "Take it how, sa sa? Can opener?"

"Charm the bastards. If we can't make them do anything now, while we're all friends, what do we do when they decide we aren't friends? Four marines in recon armor decide they own this ship, they fucking own it. So we take the armor away before they do. I don't even want that stuff in the drum. Lock it in the bridge armory."

Serge looked deeply unhappy at this task. "Some help, maybe?"

"Take as many as you want, but if you don't need them it's only gonna piss the marines off, and if you do, they won't actually help."

Serge paused, mouth open, then closed it with a snap and left. Bull noticed Anna for the first time and said, "What can I do for you, Preacher?"

"Anna, please. I came to talk about Clarissa Mao," she said.

"If you're not her lawyer or her union representative—"

"I'm her priest. What happens to her now?"

Bull sighed again. "She confessed to blowing up a ship. Nothing much good comes after that."

"People say you spaced a man for selling drugs. They say you're hard. Cold."

"Do they?" Bull said. Anna couldn't tell if the surprise in his voice was genuine or mocking.

"Please don't kill her," she said, leaning closer and looking him in the eye. "Don't you let anyone else kill her either."

"Why not?" The way he said it wasn't a challenge or a threat. It was as if he just didn't know that answer, and sort of wondered. Anna swallowed her dread.

"I can't help her if she's dead."

"No offense, but that's not really my concern."

"I thought you were the law and order here."

"I'm aiming for order, mostly."

"She deserves a trial, and if everyone knows what you know about her, she won't get one. They'll riot. They'll kill her. At least help me get her a trial."

The large man sighed. "So are you looking for a trial, or just a way to stall for time?"

"Stall for time," Anna said.

Bull nodded, weighing something in his mind, then gestured for her to precede him into his office. After she sat down next to his battered desk, he clumped around the small space making a pot of coffee. It seemed an extravagance considering the newly implemented water rationing, but then Anna remembered Bull was now the second most powerful person in the slow zone. The privileges of rank.

She didn't want coffee, but accepted the offered cup to allow Bull a moment of generosity. Generosity now might lead to more later, when she was asking for something she really wanted.

"When Holden starts telling people who actually sabotaged the *Seung Un*—and he's Jim Holden, so he will—the UN people are going to ask for Clarissa. And if they give me enough that I can get everyone here, together, and safe until we can get out of this trap, I'm going to give her to them. Not off the ship, but in here."

"What will they do?" Anna took a companionable sip of her coffee. It burned her tongue and tasted like acid.

"Probably, they'll put together a tribunal of flag officers, have a short trial, and throw her in a recycler. I'd say space her, normally, but that seems wasteful considering our predicament. Supplies sent from home will take as long to fly through the slow zone to us as they'll take to get to the Ring."

His voice was flat, emotionless. He was discussing logistics, not a young woman's life. Anna suppressed a shudder and said, "Mister Baca, do you believe in God?"

To his credit, he tried not to roll his eyes. He almost succeeded.

"I believe in whatever gets you through the night."

"Don't be flip," Anna said, and was gratified when Bull straightened a little in his walker. In her experience, most strong-willed men had equally strong-willed mothers, and she knew how to hit some of the same buttons.

"Look," Bull said, trying to reclaim the initiative. Anna spoke over the top of him.

"Forget God for a moment," she said. "Do you believe in the concept of forgiveness? In the possibility of redemption? In the value of every human life, no matter how tainted or corrupted?"

"Fuck no," Bull said. "I think it is entirely possible to go so far into the red you can't ever balance the books."

"Sounds like the voice of experience. How far have you been?"

"Far enough to know there's a too damn far."

"And you're comfortable being the judge of where that line is?"

Bull pulled on the frame of his walker, shifting his weight in the straps that held him. He looked wistfully at the office chair he could no longer use. Anna felt bad for him, broken at the worst possible time. Trying to keep his tiny world in order, and burning through the last reserves of his strength with reckless abandon. The bruised eyes and yellow skin suddenly seemed like a flashing battery indicator, warning that the power was almost gone. Anna felt a pang of guilt for adding to his burden.

"I don't want to kill that girl," he said, taking another sip of the terrible coffee. "In fact, I don't give a shit about her one way or the other, as long as she's locked up and isn't a danger to my ship. The one you should talk to is Holden. He's the one who's gonna get the torches-and-pitchforks crowd wound up."

"But the Martians..."

"Surrendered twenty hours ago."

Anna blinked.

"They've been wanting to for days," Bull said. "We just had to find a way to let 'em save face."

"Save face?"

"They got a story they can tell where they don't look weak. That's all they needed. But if we didn't find something, they'd have stuck to their posts until they all died. Nothing ever killed more people than being afraid to look like a sissy."

"Holden's coming here, then?"

"Already be on a shuttle escorted by four recon marines, which is another fucking headache for me. But how about this? I won't talk about the girl until I have reason to. What Holden does, though, he just does."

"Fine, then I'll talk to him when he arrives," Anna said.

"Good luck with that," Bull said.

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Chapter Thirty-Six: Holden

When the Martians came for him—two men and two women, all in uniform and all armed—Holden’s isolation-drunk mind had spun out in a dozen directions at once. The captain had found room for him in the medical clinic and she wanted to grill him again about what happened on the station and they were going to throw him out an airlock and they’d had news that Naomi was dead and they’d had news that she wasn’t. It felt like every neuron he had from his brain down to his toes was on the edge of firing. It was all he could do not to launch himself off the cell’s wall and into the narrow corridor.

“The prisoner will please identify himself,” one of the men said.

“James Holden. I mean, it’s not like you have very many prisoners here, right? Because I’ve been trying to find someone to talk with for it feels like about a decade since I got here, and I’m pretty sure there isn’t so much as a dust mite in this place besides me.”

He bit his lips to stop talking. He’d been alone and scared for too long. He hadn’t understood how much it was affecting him. Even if he hadn’t been mentally ill when he came to the *Hammurabi*, he was going to be real soon now if nothing changed.

“Record shows prisoner identified himself as James Holden,” the man said. “Come along.”

The corridor outside the cells was so narrow that two guards ahead and two behind was effectively a wall. The low Martian gravity made their bodies more akin to Belters than to him, and all four of them hunched slightly, bending in over him. Holden had never felt so relieved to be in a tiny, cramped hallway in his life. But even the relief was pushed aside by his anxiety. The guards didn’t actually push him so much as start to move with an authority that suggested that he really should match them. The hatch was only five meters away, but after being in his cell, it seemed like a huge distance.

“Was there any word from the *Roci*?”

No one spoke.

“What’s... ah... what’s going on?”

“You’re being evacuated,” the man said.

“Evacuated?”

“Part of the surrender agreement.”

“Surrender agreement? You’re surrendering? Why are you surrendering?”

“We lost the politics,” one of the women behind him said.

If the skiff they loaded him onto wasn’t the same one that had taken him back from the station, it was close enough that he couldn’t tell the difference. There were only four soldiers this time, all of them in full combat armor. The rest of the spaces were taken up by men and women in standard naval uniform. Holden thought at first they were the wounded, but when he looked closer, none of them seemed to have anything worse than minor injuries. It was the exhaustion in their faces and bodies that made them seem broken. The acceleration burn wasn’t even announced. The thrust barely shifted the crash couches. All around him, the Martians slept or brooded. Holden scratched at the hard, flexible plastic restraints on his wrists and ankles, and no one told him to stop. Maybe that was a good sign.

He tried to do the math in his head. If the new top speed was about as fast as a launched grenade, then every hour, they'd travel... As tired as he was, he couldn't make the numbers add up to anything. If he'd had his hand terminal, it would have been a few seconds' work. Still, he couldn't see asking to have it. And it didn't matter.

He slept and woke and slept again. The proximity Klaxon woke him from a dream about making bread with someone who was his father Caesar and also Fred Johnson and trying to find the salt. It took him a moment to remember where he was.

The skiff was small enough that when the other ship's crew banged against the airlock, Holden could hear it. From his seat, he couldn't see the airlock open. The first thing he knew was a slightly different scent in the air. Something rich and oddly humid. And then four new people stepped into his view. They were Belters. A broad-faced woman, a thick man with a startling white beard, and two shaven-headed men so similar they might have been twins. The twins had the split circle of the OPA tattooed on their arms. All four wore sidearms.

The *Behemoth*, Holden thought. They'd surrendered to the *Behemoth*. That was weird.

One of the marines, still in battle armor, floated over to them. The Belters didn't show any sign of fear. Holden gave them credit for that.

"I am Sergeant Alexander Verbinski," the Martian said. "I have been ordered to hand over this skiff and her crew and company in accordance with the agreement of surrender."

The woman and white-bearded man looked at each other. Holden thought he could see the question—*You gonna tell them they can't take their suits in?*—pass between them. The woman shrugged.

"Bien alles," she said. "Welcome aboard. Bring them through in sixpacks and we'll get you sorted, sa sa?"

"Yes, ma'am," Verbinski said.

"Corin," one of the twins said. The woman turned to see him gesture toward Holden with his chin. "Pa con esá parlan, si?"

The woman's nod was curt.

"We'll take Holden out now," she said.

"Your show," the marine said. Holden thought from his tone he'd have been as happy to shoot him. That might have been paranoia, though.

The Belters escorted him through the airlock and a long Mylar tube to the engineering deck of the *Behemoth*. A dozen people were waiting with hand terminals at the ready, prepared for the slow, slogging administrative work of dealing with a defeated enemy. Holden got to skip the line, and he wasn't sure it was an honor.

The woman floating near the massive doors at the transition point where the engineering section met the drum looked too young for her captain's insignia. Her hair, pulled back in a severe bun, reminded him of a teacher he'd had once when he'd still been on Earth.

"Captain Pa," the security woman—Corin, one of the twins had called her—said. "You wanted to talk with this one."

"Captain Holden," Captain Pa said with a nod. "Welcome aboard the *Behemoth*. I'm giving you liberty of the ship, but I want you to understand that there are some conditions."

Holden blinked. He'd expected another brig at least. Freedom of the ship was pretty much the same as freedom period. It wasn't like there were a lot of places he could go.

"Ah. All right," he said.

"You are to make yourself available for debriefing whenever you are called upon. No exceptions. You are not to discuss what happened or didn't happen on the station with anyone besides myself or the security chief."

"I know how to shut it off," Holden said.

The younger captain's expression shifted.

"You what?"

"I know how to get the protomolecule to take us all off of lockdown," he said, and went on to explain all of what he'd told Captain Jakande again—seeing Miller, the plan to lull the station into a lower alert level so that the dead man could shut it down—fighting to sound calm, rational, and sane as he did it. He didn't go so far as the massive civilization-destroying invasion that had wiped out the protomolecule's creators. It all sounded bad enough without that.

Pa listened carefully, her face a mask. She wasn't someone he'd want to play poker against. He had the powerful, painful memory of Naomi telling him that she'd teach him how to play poker, and his throat closed.

The security man with the white beard floated up, two angry-looking Martians matching vector behind him.

"Captain?" the Belter said, barely restrained rage in his voice.

"Just a minute, Mister Gutmansdottir," she said, then turned back to Holden. She had to be overwhelmed, but it was only a tightness in her jaw, if it was even that much. "I'll... take that under advisement, but for the immediate future—"

"My crew?"

"They're in the civilian medical bay," Pa said, and the white-bearded man cleared his throat in a way that meant he hadn't needed to. "There are directions posted. If you'll excuse me."

"Captain, there's a load of contraband among the new prisoners," Gutmansdottir said, hitting the last word hard. "Thought you'd want to address that before it got to Bull."

Pa took a deep breath and pushed off after her security man. A few seconds later, Holden realized he hadn't been dismissed so much as forgotten. Fallen down the list of things that the young captain had to do *right now*, and so fuck him. He moved out past the transition point and to the platforms where the axis of the little world spun. There was a long ramp for carts, and he shuffled down it, the spin slowly shifting from pure Coriolis to the sensation of weight. He could feel in his knees how long he'd been on the float and hoped that the medical bays weren't too far away.

If they'd been on the far side of the system, though, he'd have grabbed an EVA suit, as much spare air as he could haul, and started out, though. The idea that he was breathing the same air as Naomi and Alex and Amos was like a drug.

Only Captain Pa hadn't actually said that. All she'd said was that his crew was there. The "remaining" might have been implied. He tried to jog, but got winded after only a couple of minutes and had to pause to catch his breath.

The great body of the drum stretched out before him, a world wrapped into a tube. The long strip of the false sun glowed white above him, now that there was a clear "above," and reached out across two kilometers to a swirling ramp at the other end, the mirror of the one he was on. Thin clouds drifted in tori around the unbearable brightness. The air clung to him, the heat pressing at his skin, but he could imagine the bare metal of the drum's surface covered in green, the air sweet with the scent of apple blossoms, the cycle of evaporation and condensation cooling it all. Or if not, at least making it into a long, permanent summer afternoon.

It was a dream. Someone else's and doomed now to failure, but worthy. Beautiful, even in ruins.

"Captain Holden? Can I speak with you?"

It was a small woman with bright red hair pulled into tight braids, and wearing a plain brown suit. She was the sort of very comfortable middle-aged that always made him think of his mothers.

"My name is Annushka Volovodov," she said with a smile. "But you can call me Anna if you like."

"You can call me Jim," he said, holding out a hand. He almost had his wind back. Anna shook his hand without a hint of fear. His "most dangerous man in the solar system" reputation must not

have reached her yet. “Eastern European?”

“Russian,” she replied with a nod. “Born in Kimry. But a Muscovite for most of my adult life. North American?”

“Montana. Farming collective.”

“I hear Montana is nice.”

“Population density is good. Still more cows than people.”

Anna nodded and plucked at her suit. Holden got the sense that she actually had something she wanted to say but was having a hard time getting to the point. “Kimry was like that. It’s a tourist place you know, the lakes—” Anna started.

“Anna,” Holden cut her off gently. “Do you need to say something to me?”

“I do,” she said. “I need to ask you not to tell anyone about Clarissa, and what she did.”

Holden nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “Who’s Clarissa and what did she do?”

The woman tilted her head.

“They didn’t tell you?”

“I don’t think they liked me much,” Holden said. “Is there something I should know?”

“Well, this is awkward. Just after the catastrophe, a girl calling herself Melba attacked your ship,” Anna said. “It’s a long story, but I followed her and tried to help. Your first officer? Naomi? She was hurt in the attack. Badly.”

Holden felt the universe contract. Naomi was hurt while he’d been dicking around with Miller on the station. His hands were shaking.

“Where is she?” he asked, not sure if he meant Naomi or the woman who’d hurt her.

“Naomi’s here. They brought her over to the *Behemoth*,” Anna said. “She’s in the medical bay right now receiving treatment. They assure me she’ll recover. The rest of your crew is here too. They were hurt earlier. When the speed limit changed.”

“They’re alive?”

“Yes,” Anna said. “They are.”

The mix of relief and sorrow and anger and guilt made the ship seem to spin a little beneath him. Anna put a hand on his arm to steady him.

“Who is this Melba and why did she attack my crew?”

“It’s not her real name. My friend knows her, knows her family. Apparently she has something of an obsession with you. Her name is Clarissa Mao.”

Mao.

The mysterious and powerful Julie. The Julie rebuilt by the protomolecule like his ghostly Miller. The Julie who had hired Cohen the soundman to hack their ship, the Julie he’d sculpted for them later who’d never looked *quite* right. The Julie who’d been manipulating every detail of his life for the last year just to get them through the gate and down to the station.

It wasn’t Julie at all.

“She’s not well,” Anna was saying, “but I believe that she can be reached. If there’s time. But if they kill her—”

“Where’s Naomi? Do you know where she is?”

“I do,” Anna said. And then, “I’m sorry. I may have been a little wrapped up in my own issue. Can I take you there?”

“Please,” Holden said.

Fifteen minutes later, Holden stepped into a small room in the medical ward that his little family had to themselves. Naomi lay on a gurney, one arm in an inflatable cast. Her face was mottled with half-healed bruises. Tears stung his eyes, and for a moment he couldn’t speak. A killing rage burned in him. This wasn’t a disaster. It wasn’t an accident. Someone had done this to her.

When she saw him, her smile was gentle and amused.

"Hey," she said. In a moment, he was at her side, holding her good hand, his throat too thick for speech. There were tears in Naomi's eyes too, but no anger. He was amazed how grateful he was for that.

"Anna," Naomi said. She looked genuinely pleased to see her, which was a good start. "Jim, you met Anna? She saved me from the psycho with the demolition mech."

"Saved us too, I guess," Amos said. "So thanks for that, Red. I guess I owe you one."

It took Holden a moment to realize that "Red" meant Anna. She seemed surprised by it too.

"I'm happy I was able to help. I'm afraid I was very stoned on pain medication at the time. It could have easily gone the other way."

"Just take the marker," Alex said. "Soon as you figure out what Amos is good for, you can trade it in."

"Asshole," Amos said, and threw a pillow at him

"Thank you," Holden said. "If you saved them, I owe you everything."

"I'm happy I was able to help," she repeated. To Naomi she said, "You look better than the last time I saw you."

"Getting better," Naomi replied, then tested her injured arm with a grimace. "We'll see how mobile it is once the bones knit up."

Anna nodded and smiled at her, and then the smile faded.

"Jim? I'm sorry, but I still need to speak to you," she said to him. "Maybe privately?"

"No. I never thought I'd see these people again. I'm staying right here. If you want to talk to me, go ahead and do it."

The woman's eyes shifted between the crewmen. Her expression could have been hope or polite resignation.

"I need something," she finally said.

"Anything," Amos answered instantly, sitting up in bed a bit. Holden knew Anna wouldn't understand how literally Amos meant that. Hopefully a preacher didn't need anyone murdered.

"If we got it," Alex added, "it's yours." Amos nodded agreement.

Anna directed her answer at Holden. "I've talked to the head of security and he's agreed to keep quiet about Clarissa's confession. All that she's done. I need you to keep quiet too."

Holden frowned, but didn't reply. Naomi said, "Why?"

"Well," Anna said. "It's James Holden. He has a reputation for announcing things—"

"Not why ask us?" Naomi said. "Why don't you want people to know?"

Anna nodded. "If it gets out, given our current situation, they'll probably execute her."

"Good," Holden said.

"She does kind of have it coming," Amos added.

Anna held her hands tight in front of her and nodded. She didn't mean that she agreed, only that she heard them. That she understood.

"I need you to forgive her," she said. "If nothing else, as a favor to me. You said I could have anything. That's what I want."

In the pause, Amos let out a long breath. Alex's eyebrows were climbing up his forehead.

"Why?" Naomi said again, her voice calm.

Anna pressed her lips thin. "She's not evil. I believe that Clarissa did what she did out of a love. A sick love, but love. And if she's dead, there won't be any hope for her. And I have to hope."

Holden saw the words wash over Naomi, a sudden pain in her eyes that he didn't understand. She pulled back her lips, baring her teeth. Her whisper was obscene and so quiet that no one but him could hear it. He squeezed her hand, feeling the bones of her fingers against his own.

"Okay," Naomi said. "We'll keep quiet."

The rage flared in his breast. Speaking was suddenly easy.

"I won't," Holden said. "We're talking about an insane member of the Mao clan, the people who've *twice* tried to kill everyone in the solar system, who followed us all the way to the Ring, tried to kill us. To kill you. She blew up a spaceship full of innocent people just to try and make me look bad. Who knows how many other people she's killed? If the UN wants to space her, I'll push the damn button myself."

There was a long moment of silence. Holden watched Anna's face fall as he crushed her hopes. Alex started chuckling, and everyone turned to look at him.

"Yeah," Alex said in his drawling voice. "I mean, Naomi only got beat half to death. She can cut this Clarissa slack, it's no big deal. But the captain's *girlfriend* got hurt. He's the *real* victim here."

The room got quiet again as everyone stopped breathing. Blood flushed into Holden's face, rushing like a river in his ears. It was hatred and pain and outrage. His mind seemed to flicker, and the urge to strike out at Alex for the insult was almost too much to resist.

And then he understood Alex's words, saw Naomi's eyes on his, and it all drained away. *Why*, he wanted to ask, but it didn't matter. It was Naomi, and she'd made her decision. It wasn't his revenge to take.

He was spent. Exhausted. He wanted to curl up on the floor there with his people around him and sleep for days. He tried out a smile.

"Wow," he finally said. "Sometimes I am just a gigantic asshole."

"No," Amos said. "I'm right there with you. I'd kill this Clarissa myself for the shit she's pulled. But Red asked us to let it go, and Naomi's playing along, so I guess we gotta too."

"Don't get me wrong," Holden said to Anna, his voice cold. "I will never forgive this woman for what she's done. Never. But I won't turn her over to the UN, as a favor to you, and because if Naomi can let it go, I guess I have to."

"Thank you," Anna said.

"Things change, Red," Amos said, "you let us know. Because I'll still be happy to kill the shit out of her."

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Clarissa

She didn't know at first what the change was. It presented in little things. The decking she'd been able to sleep on like she was dead suddenly wasn't comfortable. She found herself wondering more what her father did in his cell, five billion kilometers away and, for all she knew, in another universe. She tapped her hands against the bars just to hear the subtle differences in tone that the different bars made when struck. And she hated.

Hatred was nothing new. She'd lived with it for long enough that the memories of the times before all carried the same colors of rage and righteousness. Only before, she'd hated Jim Holden, and now she hated Clarissa Mao. Hating herself had a kind of purity that she found appealing. Cathartic. Jim Holden had shifted out from under her thirst for vengeance, refusing to be consumed by it. She could live in the flames and know she deserved to burn. It was like playing a game on easy.

She tapped the bars. There wasn't enough variation between them to play a melody. If there had been she would have, just for something to distract her. She wondered whether her extra glands would be enough to bend the bars or lift the door off its hinges. Not that it would matter. At best, leaving her cell would have meant being gunned down by an OPA guard. At worst, it would have meant freedom.

The captain had stopped talking to her, at least. She watched the stream of visitors coming to him. She had a pretty clear idea which of the guards answered to him. And there were a couple of Martians in military uniforms who came, and a few UN officers too. They came and met with Captain Ashford, speaking in the low voices of people who took themselves and each other very seriously. She recognized the sound from eavesdropping on her father. She remembered that she had been impressed by it once. Now it made her want to laugh.

She paced her tiny world. She did push-ups and lunges and all the pointless exercises that the light gravity allowed. And she waited for punishment or for the end of the world. When she slept, Ren was there, so she tried not to sleep much.

And slowly, with a sense of growing horror, she understood that the change was her coming back to herself. Falling awake. After her failure on the *Rocinante*, there had been a kind of peace. A disconnection from everything. But even before that, she'd been in a sort of a dream. She couldn't tell if it had started with the day she'd killed Ren or when she'd taken the identification to become Melba Koh. Or earlier, even. When she'd heard her father had been arrested. Whenever she'd lost herself, she was coming back now, and it was like her whole consciousness was suffering pins and needles. It was worse than pain, and it drove her in circles.

The more she thought about it, the clearer the mind games that the red-haired priest had played on her were. The priest and, in her way, Tilly Fagan too. Maybe Anna had come thinking that the promise of forgiveness would need to be dangled in front of her in order to get the confession. If so, the woman was double stupid: first because she'd thought Clarissa wouldn't admit to what she'd done, and second because she'd thought forgiveness was something Clarissa wanted. Or would accept.

I'd like to speak with you again, she'd said, and at the time it had seemed so sincere. So real. Only she hadn't come back. A small rational part of Clarissa's mind knew that it hadn't really been that long. Being in the cell changed the experience of time and made her feel isolated. That was the

point of cells. Still, Anna hadn't come back. And neither had Holden. Or Naomi, whom Clarissa hadn't quite killed. They were done with her, and why shouldn't they be? Clarissa didn't have anything else to offer them. Except maybe a warning that the power on the ship was about to change hands again, as if that would even matter. Who got to sit in the doomed ship's captain's chair seemed like a terribly petty thing to worry about. It was like arguing about who was the prettiest girl in the prison camp.

Still, it was the only show playing, so she watched.

The voices from the other cell had taken on a new tone. An urgency. Even before the well-dressed man came down toward her, she knew that their little drama was about to play out. He stood at her door, looking in. His white hair, brilliant and perfectly coiffed, just made him look old. There was a darkness in his professionally avuncular eyes. When he put his hands around the bars, it looked like he was the one imprisoned.

"I'm guessing that you don't remember me," he said. His voice was sad and sweet both.

"Father Cortez," she said. "I remember who you are. You used to play golf with my father."

He chuckled ruefully, stepping his feet back from the bars in a way that brought his forehead closer to them.

"I did, but that was a long time ago. You wouldn't have been more than... what? Seven?"

"I've seen you in the newsfeeds since."

"Ah," he said. His eyes focused on nothing. "That feels like it was a long time ago too. I was just now talking with the captain. He said he's been trying to convince you to join us, only he hasn't had much success."

Two guards came in, walking down the rows of stalls. She recognized them both as Ashford's allies. Cortez didn't take notice of them at all.

"No, he hasn't," she said. And then, "He lies a lot."

Cortez's eyebrows rose.

"Lies?"

"He said he could get me amnesty. When we get back home, he could take me to Ceres and put me under OPA protection. Only he can't do that."

Cortez took a long breath and let it out again. "No. No, he can't. May I be honest with you?"

"I don't see that I'm in a position to stop you," Clarissa said.

"I think that you and I have a great deal in common. You have blood on your hands. The blood of innocents."

She tried to sneer, tried to retreat into a dismissive pose, but it only left her feeling exposed and adolescent. Cortez went on as if he hadn't noticed. Maybe he hadn't.

"I was... instrumental in bringing us through the gate. The combined force, representing all three divisions of humanity, joined gloriously together." Bitterness darkened the words, but then he smiled and she thought maybe there was something as wounded in him as there was in her. "Vainglory is an occupational hazard for men in my profession. It's one I've battled with limited success, I'm afraid."

"I was the one who drove Holden through the Ring," Clarissa said, unsure whether she was confessing a crime or offering Cortez an out.

"Yes. And I led all the others in after him. And so when they died, it was because I had blinded them to the dangers they faced. I led my flock to the slaughterhouse. I thought I was putting my faith in providence, but..."

Tears filled his eyes, and his expression went empty.

"Father?" she said.

"When I was a child," Cortez said, "my cousin found a dead man. The body was in an arroyo out behind our land. She dared me to go and look at it. I was desperately afraid, but I went and I held my head high and I pretended that I wasn't in order not to be. When the medics arrived, we found out the

man had died from one of the old hemorrhagic fevers. They put me on prophylactic antivirals for the rest of the summer. So perhaps I've always done this. I thought I was putting my faith in providence, but perhaps I was only covering my own fears. And my own fears led a great many people to die."

"It's not your fault."

"But it is my problem. And perhaps my failings were in the service of a greater good. You were right, my dear. There will be no amnesty for you or for me either. But not for the reason you imagine."

Clarissa stood. Cortez's gaze was on her like a weight. The intimacy of the old man's confession and the fear and grief carried with such dignity made her respect him even though she'd never particularly liked him.

"The dangers that the aliens pose are too great. To think that we could harness them or treat them as equals was hubris, and the deaths we have seen already will be like a raindrop in the ocean. We've delivered ourselves into the hands of the devil. Not everyone understands that, but I think perhaps you do."

To her surprise, she felt dread welling up in her throat. At the far end of the hall, metal clanked. Ashford's stall door swung open. One of the guards said something, but Cortez's full attention was on her and it felt like pouring cool water on a burn.

"I think I do," she said softly.

"Captain Ashford's freedom is my doing because he and I have come to a meeting of the minds that I could not manage with the present captain. When they began to bring the crews of the various ships together here, they did it in part by creating a weapon."

"Weapons don't work here."

"Light does, and they have made a weapon out of it. The communications laser has been made strong enough to cut through hulls. And it can be made stronger. Enough so, we believe, that it will destroy the Ring and close the gate."

"We'll be on the wrong side of it," Clarissa said.

"Yes. But if we wait, others will come. They'll be tempted. 'If we can manipulate the gates,' they'll say, 'what glories would come to us.' I can already hear them."

"You were saying that. You *were* one of them."

"I was, and I've learned a terrible lesson. And you were driven here by hatred. Have you?"

Ashford laughed. One of the guards said, "Welcome back, Captain." Clarissa tapped her fingertips against the bars, and they chimed.

"We were wrong," Cortez said. "But now we have a chance to make it right. We can protect all of humanity from making the mistakes we've made. We can protect them. But there will be a sacrifice."

"Us. All of us."

"Yes. We will die here in the darkness, cut off from all of those we have preserved. And among those who are with us here, we will be reviled. We may be punished. Even put to death." He shifted his hand to touch hers. The contact, skin to skin, was electric. "I'm not lying to you, Clarissa. The things I am asking of you will have no reward in this life."

"What are you asking?" she said. "What do you want me to do about any of this?"

"People will try to stop us. They may try to kill the captain. I understand that the modifications made to your body have the potential to elevate your natural abilities to something exceptional. Come with us. See to it that the captain isn't hurt, and that he isn't stopped. It may be you need do nothing but stand witness. Or you may be the difference between success and failure."

"Either way, I'm dead."

"Yes. But one will only be a death. The other will have meaning."

Captain Ashford and his guards began walking toward them. The click of their heels against the deck was like the soft sounds of a mechanical clock. The moment drew toward its end, and resentment burned a little. She didn't want Ashford to come. She wanted to stay here, talking with the reverend about sacrifice and death. About the burden of having done something so wrong the scales couldn't be balanced while she lived.

Even though his mouth was set, Cortez's pale blue eyes smiled at her. He didn't look like her father at all. His face was too doughy, his jaw was too wide. He was all sincerity where her father always had a sense of laughing at the world from behind a mask. But at that moment, she saw Jules-Pierre Mao in him.

"The people we killed," she said. "If we do this, all of them will have died for a reason too."

"For the noblest of reasons," Cortez agreed.

"We have to get going," Ashford said, and Cortez stepped back from the doorway, folding his hands together. Ashford turned to her. His too-large head and thin Belter's frame made him seem like something from a bad dream. "Last chance," he said.

"I'll go," Clarissa said.

Ashford's eyebrows rose and he glanced from her to Cortez and back. A slow smile stretched his lips.

"You're sure?" he asked, but the pleasure in his voice made it clear he wasn't really looking for her thoughts or justifications.

"I'll make sure no one stops you," she said.

Ashford looked at Cortez for a moment, and his expression showed that he was impressed. He saluted her, and—awkwardly—she saluted back.

She felt a moment's disorientation stepping out of her cell that didn't come from a change in gravity or Coriolis. It was the first free step she'd taken since the *Rocinante*. Ashford walked ahead of her, his two guards talking about action groups and locking down the *Behemoth*. Engineering and command weren't in the rotating drum, and so they would take control of the transfer points at the far north and south of the drum and the exterior elevator that passed between them. How to maintain calm in the drum until they could lock it all down, who was tracking the enemy, who was already a loyalist and who would need persuasion. Clarissa didn't pay much attention. She was more aware of Cortez walking at her side and the sense of having left some kind of burden behind in the cell. She was going to die, and it was going to make all the things she'd done wrong before make sense. Every child born on Earth or Mars or the stations of the Belt would be safe from the protomolecule because of what they were about to do. And Soledad and Bob and Stanni, her father and her mother and her siblings, they would all know she was dead. Everyone who'd known and loved Ren would be able to sleep a little better knowing that his killer had come to justice. Even she'd sleep better, if she got any sleep.

"And she has combat implants," Ashford was saying as he pointed his fist back toward her. One of the guards looked back toward her. The one with off-colored eyes and the scar on his chin. Jojo.

"You sure she's one of us, Captain?"

"The enemy of my enemy, Jojo," Ashford said.

"I will vouch for her," Cortez said.

You shouldn't, Clarissa thought, but didn't say.

"Claro," Jojo said with a Belter gesture equivalent to a shrug. "She's on command deck with tu alles tu."

"That'll be fine," Ashford said.

The hall opened into a larger corridor. White LEDs left the walls looking pale and antiseptic. A dozen people armed with slug throwers, men and women both, sat in electric carts or stood beside

them. Clarissa wanted the air itself to smell different, but it didn't. It was all just plastic and heat. Captain Ashford and three armed men jostled in the cart just ahead.

"It will take some time before the ship is fully secured," Cortez said. "We'll have to gather what allies we can. Suppress the resistance. Once we assemble everything we need and get off the drum, they won't be able to stop us." He sounded like he was trying to talk himself into believing something. "Don't be afraid. This has all happened for a reason. If we have faith, there is nothing to fear."

"I'm not afraid," Clarissa said. Cortez looked over at her, a smile in his eyes. When he met her gaze the smile faltered a little. He looked away.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight: Bull

Bull tried not to cough. The doctor listened to his breath, moved the stethoscope a few inches, listened some more. He couldn't tell if the little silver disk was cold. He couldn't feel it. He coughed up a hard knob of mucus and accepted a bit of tissue from the doctor to spit it into. She tapped a few notes into her hand terminal. The light from its screen showed how tired she looked.

"Well, you're clearing a little," the doctor said. "Your white count is still through the roof, though."

"And the spine?"

"Your spine is a mess, and it's getting worse. By which I mean it's getting harder to make it better."

"That's a sacrifice."

"When's it going to be enough?" she asked.

"Depends on what you mean by 'it,'" Bull said.

"You wanted to get everyone together. They're together."

"Still got crews on half the ships."

"Skeleton crews," the doctor said. "I know how many people you have on this ship. I treat them. You wanted to bring everyone together. They're together. Is that enough?"

"Be nice to make sure everyone doesn't just start shooting at each other," Bull said.

The doctor lifted her hands, exasperated. "So as soon as humans aren't humans anymore, then you'll let me do my job."

Bull laughed, which was a mistake. His cough was deeper now, rattling in the caverns of his chest, but it wasn't violent. Before he could really work up a good gut-wrencher, he'd need abdominal muscles that fired. The doctor handed him another tissue. He used it.

"We get everything under control," he said, "you can knock me out, all right?"

"Is that going to happen?" she asked. It was the thing everyone wanted to know, whether they came right out and said it or not. The truth was, he didn't like the plan. Part of that was because it came from Jim Holden, part was that it came from the protomolecule, and part was that he badly wanted it to be true. The fallback was that he'd start evacuating who he could with the shuttles he had, except that shuttles weren't built for long-haul work. It wasn't viable.

They had to start making food. Generating soil to fill the interior of the drum. Growing crops under the false strip of sun that ran along the *Behemoth's* axis. And getting the goddamned heat under control. He had to see to it that they made it, whatever that meant. Medical comas could last a pretty long time when ships slower than a decent fastball made a voyage across emptiness wider than Earth's oceans.

All of the reasons they'd come out—Earth, Mars, the OPA; all of them—seemed almost impossibly distant. Worrying about the OPA's place in the political calculus of the system was like trying to remember whether he'd paid back a guy who bought him a beer when he was twenty. After a certain point, the past becomes irrelevant. Nothing that happened outside the slow zone mattered. All that counted now was keeping things civilized until they found out if Holden's mad plan was more than a pipe dream.

And in order to do that, he had to keep breathing.

“Might pull it off. Captain Pa’s got a plan she’s looking at might get us burning again. Maybe,” he said. “While we’re waiting, though, you think you could hook me up?”

She scowled, but she got an inhaler from the pack beside the bed and tossed it to him. His arms still worked. He shook the thing twice, then put the formed ceramics to his lips and breathed. The steroids smelled like the ocean, and they burned a little. He tried not to cough.

“That’s not going to fix anything,” she said. “All we’re doing is masking the symptoms.”

“It’s just got to get me through,” Bull said, trying out a smile. The truth was he felt like crap. He didn’t hurt, he just felt tired. And sick. And desperate.

With the inhaler stowed, he angled the walker back out toward the corridor. The medical bays were still full. The growing heat gave everything the sick, close feeling of a tropical summer. The smell of bodies and illness, blood and corruption and fake floral antiseptics made the rooms feel smaller than they were. Practice had made him more graceful with the mechanism. He used the two joysticks to shift out of the way of the nurses and therapists, making himself as unobtrusive as the rig allowed as he made his way back toward the security office.

His hand terminal chimed. He drove to a turn in the corridor, snuggling himself into the corner to stay out of the way, then dropped the joysticks and took up the terminal. Corin requesting a connection. He thumbed to accept.

“Corin,” he said. “What you got?”

“Boss?” she said. The tension in her voice brought his head up a degree. “You running a drill?”

“What’s going on?”

“Jojo and Gutmansdottir just came by and said they were taking over the security office. When I told them they could have it when my shift was up, they drew down on me.”

Bull felt a black dread descending upon him. He gripped the terminal and kept his voice low.

“They *what*?”

He pulled up his security interface, but the red border refused him. He was locked out of the command systems. They’d been moving fast.

“Was hoping it was some kind of test. Way they were talking, I got the feeling they were looking to find you there. I’m heading over to Serge’s. He’s trying to figure out what the hell’s going on,” she said. “If it was the wrong call—”

“It wasn’t. You walked away, you did the right thing. Where were they supposed to be?”

“Sir?”

“They were on shift. Where were they supposed to be?”

For a moment, Corin’s wide face was a mask of confusion. He watched her understand, a calm and deadly focus coming into her eyes. She didn’t need to say it. Jojo and Gutmansdottir had been guarding the prisoners. Meaning Ashford.

Pa should have let him kill the bastard.

“Okay. Find Serge and anyone you trust. We’ve got to get this shit contained.”

“Bien.”

They’d be going for the armory. If they had security, the guns and gear were already theirs. Bull let a thin trickle of conversational obscenities fall from his lips while he tried to think. If he knew how many of his people had turned back to Ashford, he’d know what he had to work with.

“We can’t let him get to Monica and the broadcast center,” Bull said. “It gets out that we’ve got fighting in the drum, we’ll get a dozen half-assed rescue missions trying to get their people out.”

“You want us to concentrate there?” Corin asked.

“Don’t concentrate anywhere,” Bull said. “Not until we know what we’re looking at. Just get as many people and guns as you can and stay in touch.”

He had to get a plan. He had to have one now, only his brain wasn’t working the way it should. He was sick. Hell, he was dying. It seemed deeply unfair that he should have to improvise at the

same time.

"Get to Serge," he said. "We'll worry about it from there. I've got some people I've got to talk to."

"Bien, boss," Corin repeated, and dropped the connection.

A nurse pushed a rolling table around the corner, and Bull had to put his terminal away in order to step out of the man's path. He wished like hell he could walk and hold his terminal at the same damn time. He requested a priority connection to Pa. For a long moment, he was sure she wouldn't pick up, that Ashford had gotten to her already. The screen flickered, and she was there. He couldn't see what room she was in, but there were voices speaking in the background.

"Mister Baca," Pa said.

"Ashford's loose," he said. "I don't know how many people he's got or what he's doing, but a couple of my people just drew weapons and took over the security station."

Pa blinked. To her credit, she didn't show even a moment's fear, only the mental shifting of gears.

"Thank you, Mister Baca," Pa said. He could tell from the movement of her image on the screen that she was already walking away from wherever she'd been. Getting someplace unpredictable. That was what he needed to be doing too.

"I'll try to get in touch when I have a better idea what I'm looking at," he said.

"I appreciate that," she said. "I have a few people nearby that I trust. I'm going there now."

"I figure he's going to try to take over the broadcast station."

"Then we'll try to reinforce them," Pa said.

"Maybe it's just a few assholes," Bull said. "Ashford may be trying to keep his head low too."

"Or he may be getting ready to throw us both into a soil recycler," Pa said. "Which way do you want to bet?"

Bull smiled. He almost meant it.

"Take care of yourself, Captain."

"You too, Mister Baca."

"And hey," he said. "I'm sorry I got you into this."

Now it was Pa's turn to smile. She looked tired. She looked old.

"You didn't make any decisions for me," she said. "If I'm paying for my sins, at least give me that they're mine."

Her gaze jumped up from the terminal's camera toward something off the screen. Her lips pressed thin and the connection dropped. Bull had to fight not to request another connection, just so he could know what happened. But there wasn't time. He had to hurry. He tried connections to Ruiz in infrastructure and Chen without getting replies. He wondered how many supporters Ashford had gotten from the upper ranks of the staff. He cursed himself for having let Ashford pass under his radar. But he'd been so busy...

He tried Sam, and almost as soon as he put in the request, she was there.

"We got a problem," he said. "Ashford's trying to take back the ship. He's got security already."

"And engineering," Sam said.

Bull licked his lips.

"Where are you, Sam?"

"Right now? Funny you should ask. Engineering. Ashford left about five minutes ago. Had a little wish list of things he'd like me to do and about two dozen fellas with guns and scowls. That man's lost his shit, Bull. Seriously. He used to be a prick, but... He wants me to take out the Ring. Your comm laser trick? He wants it overclocked."

"You got to be kidding me."

"Not."

"He's looking to nuke the way *home*?"

"Calls it saving humanity from the alien threat," Sam said sweetly. Her eyes were hard.

"All right," Bull said, even though nothing about this was all right.

"And he's not at all happy with you. Are you someplace safe?"

Bull looked up and down the corridor. There wasn't cover. And even if there was, he was one man in a modified lifting mech and no spinal cord past the middle of his back.

"No," he said. "I don't think I am."

"Might want to get moving."

"I've got no place safe to go," Bull said.

Someone on the other end of the connection shouted and Sam looked up at them.

"I'm trying to scramble up all the technicians I can," she shouted back. "Things have been a tiny bit disorganized. Had a little trouble with the rules of physics changing on us. Maybe you noticed."

The first voice shouted again. Bull couldn't hear the words, but he knew the timbre of the voice. Garza. The guy who'd always gotten bulbs of coffee for whoever was stuck in the security office. Garza was one of theirs. Bull wished he'd gotten to know the man better. Especially after the catastrophe, he should have been checking in with his staff more. He should have seen this all coming.

This was his fault. All of this was his fault.

Sam looked back down at the screen. At him.

"Okay, sweetie," she said. "You should get scarce. Head for the second level, section M. There's a bunch of empty storage there. The door codes are all on default. Straight zeros."

"Why are they on default?"

"Because there's nothing in them, bossypants, and changing the locks on all the empties never made the top of my to-do list. Is this really the time?"

"Sorry," Bull said.

"Don't worry," she said. "Both of us under a little stress right now. Just get your head down before someone knocks it off. And Pa—"

"Pa knows. She's heading for safety too."

"All right, then. I'll try to get you some help."

"No," Bull said. "You don't know who you can trust."

"Yes, I do," Sam said. "Let's don't argue in front of the children."

A voice brought him back to the corridor, the medical center. Not the groans of the wounded, not the professional calm of the nurses. Someone was excited and aggressive. Angry. Someone answered in a lower voice, and the first one came back with *Do I look like I care?* It was trouble, and despite everything, his first impulse was to turn toward it. His job was to get in the middle of things, to make sure that no one got hurt, and if anyone did, it was him. Him first, then the bad guys.

"I got to go," he said, and dropped the connection. It only took a second to stow his hand terminal and get his palms back on the mech's controls. Long enough for him to fight back his instincts. He shifted the mech to head down the corridor, away from the voices. They were Ashford's people. Ashford and whoever was backing him. If he got caught now, he wouldn't be any use to anybody. Chances were they'd just kill him. Might not even get as far as the airlock first. The mech's legs moved slowly. Even full-out, it didn't go more than a modest walk. The voices behind him shifted. Something crashed. He heard his doctor shouting now and waited for the report of gunfire. If they started shooting, he'd have to go back. The mech inched toward the farther door, toward the exit and what passed for safety. Bull pressed the joystick forward so hard his fingers ached, as if the force would make the machine understand the danger.

The voices got louder, coming close. Bull shifted the mech so that it was walking along the wall. If someone came around the corner behind him, it would give him an extra fraction of a second

before he was seen. The thick metal legs slid forward, shifted weight, shifted again.

The doorway was six feet away. Four. Three. He let go of the controls and reached out for the door a little too soon and had to inch the mech forward before he tried again. He was sweating, and he hoped it was only fear. If something in his guts had given way, he wouldn't have known. Probably it was just fear.

The door opened, and he slammed the little joystick forward again. The mech took him through, and he closed the door behind him. He didn't have time to wait or think. He angled the mech down another hall toward the internal lifts and the long trip to second level, section M.

The great interior halls and passageways of the *Behemoth* had never seemed less like home. As he descended, the spin gravity grew almost imperceptibly stronger. His numb flesh sat a little heavier in its harness. He was going to have to get someone to change out his piss bag soon unless he could figure out some way to get his arms inside the mech's frame, but his elbows only bent one direction, so that seemed unlikely. And if his spine didn't grow back, if they didn't get the *Behemoth* and everyone else back out of the trap the protomolecule had caught them in, he'd live like this until he died.

Don't think about it, he told himself. *Too far ahead. Don't think about it. Just do your job.*

He didn't take one of the main internal lifts. Chances were too good that Ashford's men would be watching for that. Instead, he found one of the long, spiraling maintenance passages and set the mech to walking on its own. If it drifted too near one wall or the other, he could correct it, but it gave him a few seconds. He pulled out the hand terminal. He was shaking and his skin looked gray under the brown.

Serge answered almost immediately.

"Ganne nacht, boss," the tattooed Belter said. "Was wondering when you were going to check in."

"Ashford," Bull said.

"On top of it," Serge said. "Looks like he's got about a third of our boys and a bunch of crazy-ass coyos from other ships. Right now they got the transition points off the drum north to command and south to engineering, the security office and the armory, y some little wolf packs going through the drum stirring up trouble."

"How well armed?"

"Nicht so bien sa moi," Serge said, grinning. "They savvy they got us locked out of the communications too, but I got back door open."

"You what?"

"Always ready for merde mal, me. Bust me down later," Serge said. "I'm putting together squads, clean up the drum. We'll get this all smashed flat by bedtime."

"You have to be careful with these guys, Serge."

"Will, boss. Know what we're doing. Know the ship better than anyone. You get safe, let us take care."

Bull swallowed. Giving over control ached.

"Okay."

"We been trying to get the captain, us," Serge said.

"I warned her. She may be refusing connections until she knows more who she can trust," Bull said. He didn't add, *Or they may have found her.*

"Check," Serge said, and Bull heard in the man's voice that he'd had the same thought. "When we track Ashford?"

"We don't have permission to kill him," Bull said.

"A finger slips, think we can get forgiveness?"

"Probably."

Serge grinned. "Got to go, boss. Just when es se cerrado, and they make you XO, keep me in mind for your chair, no?"

"Screw that," Bull said. "When this shit's done, you can be XO."

"Hold you to, boss," Serge said, and the connection went dead.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine: Anna

The first sermon Anna had delivered in front of a congregation, fresh out of seminary and filled with zeal, was seventeen pages of single-spaced notes. It had been a lengthy dissection of the first chapter of Malachi, focusing on the prophet's exhortation not to deliver substandard sacrifices to God, and how that related to modern worship. It had been detailed, backed by all of the evidence and argument Anna's studious nature and seven years of graduate school could bring to bear. By the end of it, Anna was pretty sure not one member of the audience was still awake.

She'd learned some important lessons from that. There was a place for detailed Bible scholarship. There was even a place for it in front of the congregation. But it wasn't what people came to church *for*. Learning a bit more about God was part of feeling closer and more connected to Him, and the closeness was what mattered. So Anna's sermons now tended to be just a page or two of notes, and a lot more speaking from the heart. She'd delivered her message on "mixed" churches in God's eyes without looking at the notes once, and it seemed to go over very well. After she concluded with a short prayer and began the sacrament, Belters and Martians and Earthers got into line together in companionable silence. A few shook hands or clapped each other on the back. Anna felt like it might be the most important message she'd ever delivered.

"Well, it wasn't the worst thing I've ever heard," Tilly said once the service was over. She had the twitchy look she got when she wanted a cigarette, but Anna had asked her not to smoke in the meeting tent and she'd agreed. "Though, admittedly, my tolerance for lovey togetherness is low."

"That's very flattering," Anna whispered, then paused to shake hands with a Belter woman who tearfully thanked her for organizing the meeting. Tilly gave the woman her most insincere smile but managed not to roll her eyes.

"I need a drink," Tilly said once the woman had left. "Come with. I'll buy you a lemonade."

"They closed the bar. Rationing."

Tilly laughed. "I have a supplier. The guy running the rationing sold me a bottle of their best Ganymede hooch for the low price of a thousand dollars. He tossed in the lemonade for free."

"A thousand—"

"One of two things will happen," Tilly said, taking out a cigarette and putting it in her mouth but leaving it unlit. "We'll get out of here, back into the solar system where I'm rich and a thousand bucks doesn't matter, or we won't get out and nothing will matter."

Anna nodded because she didn't know what else to say. As much as she'd come to enjoy and rely on Tilly's friendship, she was occasionally reminded how utterly different their worlds were. If she and Nono had an extra thousand UN dollars lying around, it would have immediately gone into Nami's college fund. Tilly had never in her life had to sacrifice a luxury to get a necessity. If there was any actual mixing in the congregation, it was that. The one thing the Belters and inner planet naval people had in common was that none of them would be drinking thousand-dollar alcohol that night, but Tilly would.

God might not care about financial standing, but He was the only one.

"I admit, lemonade sounds nice," Anna said, fanning her face with her hand terminal. The *Behemoth's* big habitat drum was built to house a lot more people than it currently held, but they'd stripped a lot of the environmental systems out of it when they converted it to a warship. It was

starting to seem like they were reaching the atmosphere processing limits. Or maybe just the air conditioning. The temperature was generally higher now than a girl raised in Russia and most recently living on one of Jupiter's icy moons enjoyed.

After one more tour of the tent to say goodbye to the last lingering remnants of her congregation, Anna followed Tilly out. It wasn't much cooler outside the tent, but the spin of the drum and the air recycling system did combine to create a gentle breeze. Tilly looked over her flushed red face and sweat-plastered hair with a critical eye and said, "Don't worry, everyone who's coming over is here. I heard Cortez talking to some OPA bigwig a couple days ago. This is as hot as it's going to be. And as soon as they find a way to cool us down that doesn't involve venting our atmosphere into space, they'll do it."

Anna couldn't help but laugh. When Tilly raised an eyebrow, Anna explained, "We flew across the entire solar system, almost to the orbit of Neptune, a world so cold and distant from the sun we didn't even know it was there until Bouvard noticed that something was bumping Uranus around."

Tilly's eyebrow crept higher. "Okay."

"And when we get here, who knows how far from the sun and with billions of kilometers of empty space in every direction? We somehow manage to be hot and crowded."

"Thank God the Belters thought to bring this rattletrap with them," Tilly said, ducking to enter her tent. She flopped down into a folding chair and started rummaging in a plastic cooler next to it. "Can you imagine trying to stuff everyone onto the *Prince*? We'd be twelve to a bunk there. Lovely culture, these Belters."

Anna pulled her cassock off and laid it over the edge of Tilly's cot. Underneath she was wearing a white blouse and a knee-length skirt that was much less stifling. Tilly pulled a plastic bulb of lemonade out of the cooler and handed it to her, then poured herself a glass of something as clear as water that smelled like hospital cleanser. When Anna took the bulb she was surprised to find it cold. Small drops of condensation were already forming on its surface. She put the cool bottle against the back of her neck and felt a delightful chill run down her spine.

"How did you manage ice?"

"Dry ice," Tilly said around a lit cigarette, then paused to down her first shot. "Apparently it's easy for the people in atmosphere processing to make. Lots of carbon dioxide just lying around."

If Tilly was spending a thousand dollars a bottle for the antiseptic she was drinking, Anna didn't want to know what a steady supply of ice was costing her. They drank in companionable silence for a while, the cool lemonade doing wonders for Anna's heat exhaustion. Tilly brought up the idea of finding something to eat, and they wandered out of her tent in search of a supply kiosk.

There were people walking through the crowded tent city carrying guns.

"This looks bad," Tilly said. It did. These weren't bored security officers with holstered sidearms. These were grim-faced Belter men and women with assault rifles and shotguns carried in white-knuckled grips. The group moving between the tents was at least a dozen strong, and they were looking for something. Or someone.

Anna tugged at Tilly's sleeve. "Maybe we should try to get people to go back to the church tent to wait this out."

"Annie, if the bullets start flying in here, even God can't make that tent a safe place to hide. I want to know what's going on."

Anna reluctantly followed her in a path that paralleled the armed group, which moved with purpose, occasionally stopping to look in tents or quietly question people. Anna began to feel very frightened without being sure why.

"Oh," Tilly said. "Here we go."

Bull's second-in-command—Serge was his name, Anna thought—rounded one of the larger tents trailing half a dozen security people behind him. They were all armed as well, though only with

handguns. Even to Anna's untrained eye, the difference between six people with pistols and twelve people with rifles was dramatic. Serge had a faint smile on his face as though he hadn't noticed. Anna saw the muscular young woman from the security office standing behind him, though her face was a worried scowl. Oddly enough, seeing someone else look worried made Anna feel better.

"No guns in the drum, sa sa?" Serge said to the armed Belter group, though the volume of his voice made it clear he was speaking to the onlookers as well. "Drop 'em."

"You have guns," a Belter woman said with a sneer. She held a rifle at the ready.

"We're the cops," Serge said, placing one hand on the butt of his gun and grinning back at her.

"Not anymore," she replied and in one quick movement shifted her rifle and shot him in the head. A tiny hole appeared in his forehead, and a cloud of pink mist sprayed into the air behind him. He sank slowly to the floor, an expression of vague puzzlement on his face.

Anna felt her gorge rise, and had to double over and pant to keep from vomiting. "Jesus Christ," Tilly said in a strangled whisper. The speed with which the situation had gone from unsettling to terrifying took Anna's breath away. *I've just seen a man have his brains blown out.* Even after the horrors of the slow zone catastrophe, it was the worst thing she'd ever seen. The security man hadn't thought the woman would shoot him, hadn't suspected the true nature of the threat, and the price he'd paid for it was everything.

At that thought, Anna threw up all over her shoes and then sank to her knees, gagging. Tilly dropped down next to her, not even noticing that the knees of her pants were in a pool of vomit. Tilly hugged her for a second then whispered, "We need to go." Anna nodded back because she couldn't open her mouth without fear of losing control again. A few dozen meters away, the Belters were disarming the security team and tying their arms behind their backs with plastic strips.

At least they weren't shooting anyone else.

Tilly pulled her to her feet, and they hurried back to her tent, all thought of food forgotten. "Something very bad is happening on this ship," Tilly said. Anna had to suppress a manic giggle. Given their current circumstances, things would have to be very bad indeed for Tilly to think the situation had gotten worse. Sure, they were all trapped in orbit around an alien space station that periodically changed the rules of physics and had killed a bunch of them, but now they'd decided to start shooting each other too.

Yes, *very bad*.



Hector Cortez came to Tilly's tent about an hour after the shooting. Anna and Tilly had spent the time staying as close to the floor of the tent as possible, arranging Tilly's few bits of furniture into barricades around them. It had the feeling of performing ritual magic. Nothing in the room would actually stop a bullet, but they arranged it anyway. A blanket fort to keep the monsters at bay.

Mercifully, there hadn't been any further sounds of gunfire.

The few times they peeked out of the tent, they saw smaller groups of no more than two or three armed Belters patrolling the civilian spaces. Anna avoided meeting their eyes, and they ignored her.

When Cortez arrived, he cleared his throat loudly outside the tent, then asked if he could enter. They were both afraid to answer, but he came in anyway. Several people waited for him outside, though Anna couldn't see who.

He glanced once around the inside of the gloomy space, looking over their flimsy barricade, then pulled a chair away from it and sat down without commenting on it.

"The shooting is over. It's safe to sit," he said, gesturing at the other chairs. He looked better than he had in a while. His suit had been cleaned and somehow he'd found a way to wash his thick white

hair. But that wasn't all of it. Some of his self-assurance had returned. He seemed confident and in charge again. Anna climbed up off the floor and took a chair. After a moment, Tilly did the same.

"I'm sorry you were frightened," Cortez said with a smile that didn't seem sorry at all.

"What's going on, Hank?" Tilly asked, her eyes narrowing. She took out a cigarette and began playing with it without lighting it. "What are you up to?"

"I'm not *up to* anything, Matilda," Cortez said. "What's happening is that the rightful authority on this ship has been restored, and Captain Ashford is once more in command."

"Okay, *Hector*," Tilly replied, "but how are you involved? Seems like internal OPA politics to me. What's your play?"

Cortez ignored her and said to Anna, "Doctor Volovodov, may we speak privately?"

"Tilly can hear anything—" Anna started, but Tilly waved her off.

"I think I'll go outside for a smoke."

When she'd left the tent, Cortez pulled his chair close enough that his knees were almost touching Anna's. He leaned forward, taking her hands in his own. Anna had never had the sense that Hector was interested in her sexually, and still didn't, but somehow the closeness felt uncomfortably intimate. Invasive.

"Anna," he said, giving her hands a squeeze. "Things are about to change dramatically on this ship, and in our calling here. I've been fortunate in that Captain Ashford trusts me and has sought my counsel, so I've had some input on the direction these changes take."

The forced intimacy, combined with the bitter taste still in her mouth from having seen a man murdered, brought up an anger she hadn't expected. She pulled her hands away from him with more violence than she intended, then couldn't help but feel a twinge of satisfaction at the hurt and surprise on his face.

"How nice for you," she said, carefully keeping her tone neutral.

"Doctor Volovodov... *Anna*, I would like your support." Anna couldn't stop the snort of disbelief in time, but he pressed on. "You have a way with people. I'm fine in front of a camera, but I'm not as good one-on-one, and that's where you shine. That's your gift. And we are about to face terrible personal challenges. Things people will have a hard time understanding. I would like your voice there with me to reassure them."

"What are you talking about?" Anna said, barely squeezing the words past a growing lump in her throat. She had the sense of a terrible secret about to be revealed. Cortez shone with the invincible certainty of the true believer.

"We are going to close the gate," he said. "We have a weapon in our possession that we believe will work."

"No," Anna said more in disbelief than in denying his claims.

"Yes. Even now engineers work to refit this vessel's communications laser to make it powerful enough to destroy the Ring."

"I don't mean that," Anna started, but Cortez just continued speaking.

"We are lost, but we can protect those we've left behind. We can end the greatest threat the human race has ever known. All it requires is that we sacrifice any hope of return. A small price to pay for—"

"No," Anna said again, more forcefully. "No, you don't get to decide that for all of these people." *For me*, she thought. *You don't get to take my wife and daughter away like that. Just because you're afraid.*

"In times of great danger and sacrifice such as this, some will step forward to make the difficult decisions. Ashford has done that, and I support him. Now it is our role to make sure the people understand and cooperate. They need to know that their sacrifice will protect the billions of people we've left behind."

“We don’t know that,” Anna said.

“This station has already claimed hundreds of lives, maybe thousands.”

“Because we keep making decisions without knowing what the consequences are. We chased Holden’s ship through the Ring, we sent soldiers to the station to hunt him, we keep acting without information and then being angry when it hurts us.”

“It didn’t hurt us. It killed us. A lot of us.”

“We’re like children,” Anna said, pushing herself to her feet and lecturing down at him. “Who burn their hands on a hot stove and then think the solution is to blow up all the stoves.”

“Eros,” Cortez started.

“We did that! And Ganymede, and Phoebe, all the rest! We did it. We keep acting without thinking and you think the solution is to do it one more time. You have allied yourself with stupid, violent men, and you are trying to convince yourself that being stupid and violent will work. That makes you stupid too. I will never help you. I’ll fight you now.”

Cortez stood up and called to the people waiting outside. A Belter with protective chest armor and a rifle came into the tent.

“Will you shoot me too?” Anna said, putting as much contempt into the words as she could.

Cortez turned his back on her and left with the gunman.

Anna sank down into her chair, her legs suddenly too shaky to support her. She doubled over, rocking back and forth and taking long shuddering breaths to calm herself. Somehow, she didn’t black out.

“Did he hurt you?” Tilly said from behind her. Her friend put a gentle hand on the back of her neck as she rocked.

“No,” Anna said. It wasn’t technically a lie.

“Oh, Annie. They have Claire. They wouldn’t let me talk to her. I don’t know if she’s a hostage or—”

Before she knew she was going to do it, Anna had jumped to her feet and run out of the tent. They’d be going to the elevator that ran up the side of the drum and connected with the passages to the command decks and engineering. They’d be going to the bridge. Men like Cortez and Ashford, men who wanted to be in charge, they’d be on the bridge. She ran toward the elevator as fast as her legs would carry her. She hadn’t actually run in years. Living in a small station tunneled into the ice of Europa, it just hadn’t come up. She was out of breath in moments, but pushed on, ignoring the nausea and the stitch in her ribs.

She reached the elevator just as Cortez and his small band of gun-toting thugs climbed inside. Clarissa was standing at the back of the group, looking small and frail surrounded by soldiers in armor. As the doors slid closed, she smiled at Anna and raised one hand in a wave.

Then she was gone.

Chapter Forty: Holden

“Hey, Cap?” Amos said from his bed. “That was the third armed patrol that’s gone past this room in about three hours. Some shit is going down.”

“I know,” Holden said quietly. It was obvious that the situation on the *Behemoth* had changed. People with guns were moving through the corridors with hard expressions. Some of them had pulled a doctor aside, had a short but loud argument with her, then taken a patient away in restraints. It felt like a coup in progress, but according to Naomi the security chief Bull had already mutinied and taken the ship from the original Belter captain. And nothing had happened that would explain why he’d suddenly need to put a lot more boots on the ground or begin making arrests.

It felt like a civil war was brewing, or being squashed.

“Should we do something?” Amos asked.

Yes, Holden thought. *We should do something. We should get back to the Rocinante and hide until Miller gets done doing whatever he was doing and releases the ships in the slow zone.* Then they should burn like hell out of this place and never look back. Unfortunately, his crew was still laid up and he didn’t exactly have a ride waiting to take him to his ship.

“No,” he said instead. “Not until we understand what’s happening. I just got *out* of jail. Not in a hurry to go back.”

Alex sat up in bed, and then moaned at the effort. The top of his head was swathed in bloodstained bandages, and the left side of his face had a mushy, pulpy look to it. The speed limit change had thrown him face first into one of the cockpit’s viewscreens. If he hadn’t been at least partially belted into his chair, he’d probably be dead.

“Maybe we should find a quieter place than this to hole up,” he said. “They don’t seem opposed to arresting patients so far.”

Holden nodded with his fist. He was starting to pick up Naomi’s Belter-style gestures, but whenever he caught himself using one he felt awkward, like a kid pretending to be an adult. “My time on this ship has been limited to the docking bay and this room. I don’t have any idea where a quieter place would be.”

“Well,” Naomi said. “That puts you one up on us. None of us were conscious when they brought us here.”

Holden hopped off the edge of her bed and moved to the door, closing it as quietly as possible. He looked around for something to jam it shut with, but quickly decided it was hopeless. The habitation spaces in the *Behemoth*’s drum were built for low weight, not durability. The walls and door of the hospital room were paper-thin layers of epoxy and woven carbon fiber. A good kick would probably bring the entire structure down. Barricading the door would only signal patrols that something was wrong, and then delay them half a second while they broke it.

“Maybe that preacher can help us,” Alex said.

“Yeah.” Amos nodded. “Red seems like good people.”

“No hitting on the preacher,” Holden said, pointing at Amos with an accusing finger.

“I just—”

“But it doesn’t matter, because if she has even half a brain—and I suspect she has a lot more than that—she’ll be busily hiding herself. And she’s not from here. We need an insider.”

“Sam,” Naomi said, just as Holden was thinking the same name. “She’s chief engineer on this boat. No one will know it like she does.”

“Does she owe you any favors?” Holden asked.

Naomi gave him a sour look and pulled his hand terminal off his belt. “No. I owe her about a thousand,” she said as she opened a connection request to Sam. “But she’s a friend. Favors don’t matter.”

She laid the terminal on the bed with the speaker on. The triple beep of an unanswered voice request sounding once a second. Alex and Amos were staring at it intensely, eyes wide. As though it were a bomb that might go off at any moment. In a way, Holden thought, it was. They were about as helpless right now as he could ever remember them being. Holden found himself wishing that Miller would appear and fix everything with alien magic.

“Yo,” a voice said from the terminal. “Knuckles.”

At some point over the last year, Sam had given Naomi the nickname Knuckles. Holden had never been able to figure out why, and Naomi had never offered to explain.

“Sammy,” Naomi replied, the relief in her voice obvious. “We really, really need your help.”

“Funny,” Sam said. “I was just thinking of coming by to ask for *your* help. Coincidence? Or something more?”

“We were calling you to find a hiding spot,” Amos yelled out. “If you were calling us for the same thing, you’re fucked.”

“No, that’s a good idea. I’ve got a spot you can hole up for a while, and I’ll come meet you there. Knuckles, you’ll have the layout in just a second. Just follow the map. I’ll be there as soon as I can. You kids take care of yourselves.”

“You do the same, Sammy,” Naomi said, then killed the connection. She worked the terminal for a few seconds. “Okay, I see it. Looks like unused storage just a couple hundred meters aft and spinward.”

“You get to navigate,” Holden said to her, then added, “Can everyone walk?”

Amos and Alex both nodded, but Naomi said, “Alex’s skull is being held together with glue right now. If he gets dizzy and falls, he’s not getting up again.”

“Now XO,” Alex objected. “I can—”

“Naomi can’t walk,” Amos said. “So you put her on a rolling bed with Alex and push them. I’ll take point. Gimme that map.”

Holden didn’t argue. He picked Naomi up from her bed, trying to jostle her as little as possible, then set her next to Alex on his. “Why am I pushing instead of walking point?”

“He broke his left arm,” Naomi said, scooting as close to Alex as possible and then securing the lap restraint across them both. When Amos began to protest she added, “And all the ribs on his left side.”

“Right,” Holden said, grabbing the push bars at the head of the bed and kicking off the wheel locks. “Lead the way.”

Amos led them through the makeshift hospital corridors, smiling at everyone he passed, moving with an easy stride that made him look like a man with a destination but no hurry to get there. Even the armed patrol they passed barely gave him a glance. When they looked curiously at Holden, pushing two injured people on the same bed, he said, “Two to a bed now. That’s how crowded we’re getting.” They just nodded him past, their expressions both sullen and bored.

Holden hadn’t had much chance to look around the rest of the hospital. After leaving the docks he’d hurried straight to his crew’s room and hadn’t left since. But now, as he moved through the halls and intersections toward the exit, he had a chance to look over the full extent of the damage the catastrophic speed limit change had caused.

Every bed in every room was filled with injured people, and sometimes the benches and chairs in the waiting areas. Most of the injuries were contusions or broken bones, but some were more severe. He saw more than one amputation, and quite a few people hanging in traction with serious spinal injuries. But more than the physical damage, there was the stunned look of shock on every face. The sort of expression Holden associated with the recent victims or witnesses of violent crime. The *Rocinante* had tracked and disabled a pirate slaver ship a few months back, and the beaten and starving prisoners pulled from her hold had looked like this. Not just hurt, but robbed of hope.

Someone with a doctor's uniform watched Holden push the bed past, his eyes following their progress, but exhaustion robbing him of curiosity. From a small room to his right, Holden heard the electric popping sound of a cauterizing gun, and the smell of cooking meat filled the air.

"This is horrifying," he whispered to Naomi. She nodded but said nothing.

"None of us shoulda come here," Alex said.

Doors and corners, Miller had warned him. The places where you got killed if you weren't paying attention. Where the ambushes happened. *Could have been a little more explicit*, Holden thought, and then imagined Miller shrugging apologetically and bursting into a cloud of blue gnats.

Amos, half a dozen meters ahead, came to a four-way junction in the corridor and turned right. Before Holden could cross half the distance to the turn, a pair of OPA goons walked into the intersection from the left.

They paused, looking over Naomi and Alex snuggled up in the rolling bed. One of them smirked and half turned to his companion. Holden could almost hear the joke he was about to make about two people to a bed. In preparation, he smiled and readied a laugh. But before the jokester could speak, his companion said, "That's James Holden."

Everything after that happened quickly.

The pair of OPA thugs scrambled to get at the shotguns slung over their shoulders. Holden shoved the rolling gurney into their thighs, knocking them back, and gave the corridor a frantic glance looking for a weapon. One of the thugs managed to fumble his shotgun down off his shoulder and rack it, but Naomi scooted forward on the bed and drove her heel into his groin. His partner stepped back, finished getting his hands on his shotgun, and pointed it at her. Holden started to run forward, knowing he was too slow, knowing he'd watch Naomi blown apart long before he could reach the gunman.

Then both gunmen turned toward each other and slammed their faces together. They slumped to the floor, guns falling from nerveless fingers. Amos stood behind them, grimacing and massaging his left shoulder.

"Sorry, Cap," he said. "Got a little too far ahead there."

Holden leaned against the corridor wall, legs barely able to support him even in the light gravity. "No apologies. Nice save." He nodded toward the shoulder that Amos continued to rub with a pained look. "Thought that was broken."

Amos snorted. "It didn't fall off. Plenty left in here for a couple of idiots like this." He bent down and stripped the two fallen men of their weapons and ammunition. A nurse walked up behind Holden, a plastic case in her hands and a question on her face.

"Nothing to see here," Holden said. "We'll be gone in a minute."

She pointed at a nearby door. "Supply closet. No one will notice them in there for a while." Then she turned and went back the way she came.

"You have a fan," Naomi said from the bed.

"Not everyone in the OPA hates us," Holden replied, moving around the gurney to help Amos drag the unconscious men into the closet. "We did good work for them for over a year. People know that."

Amos handed Holden a compact black pistol and a pair of extra magazines. Holden tucked the gun into the waistband of his pants and pulled his shirt down over it. Amos did the same with a second gun, then put the two shotguns onto the gurney next to Naomi and covered them with the sheet.

"We don't want to get in a gunfight," Holden warned Amos as they began moving again.

"Yeah," Amos said. "But if we're in one anyway, it'll be nice to have guns."

The hospital exit was a short distance down the right-hand hallway, and suddenly they were outside. Or as outside as you could get in the *Behemoth's* massive habitation drum. From outside, the hospital structure looked cheap and hastily assembled. A football-field-sized shanty made of epoxied carbon and fiberglass. A few hundred meters away, the edge of a city of tents spread out like acne on the drum's smooth skin.

"That way," Naomi said, pointing toward a more permanent-looking steel structure. Holden pushed the gurney, and Amos walked a few meters ahead, smiling and nodding at anyone who looked at them. Something in Amos' face making them scurry away and not look back.

As they approached the squat metal structure, a door opened in the side and Sam's pixie face appeared, waving a hand at them impatiently. A few minutes and some twisty corridors later, they were in a small, empty metal-walled room. Amos immediately dropped to the floor, laying his left arm and back flat against it.

"Ow," he said.

"You hurt?" Sam asked, locking the door behind them with a small metal keycard, and then tossing the card to Naomi.

"Everyone's hurt," Holden said. "So what the hell is going on?"

Sam blew her lips out and ran one greasy hand through her red hair. The streaks of black already in it told Holden she'd been doing a lot of that. "Ashford retook the ship. He's got some sort of coalition of bigwigs from the UN Navy, the Martians, and some of the important civilians."

"Okay," Holden said, realizing that his lack of context made most of that sentence pretty meaningless, but not wanting to waste time with explanations. "So the people roaming the halls with guns are Ashford's?"

"Yep. He's taking out anyone who helped Bull or Pa with the original mutiny, or, y'know, anyone he thinks is a threat."

"From the way they tried to shoot us, we're on that list," Naomi said.

"Definitely." Sam nodded. "I haven't been able to track down Pa, but Bull called me, so I know he's okay."

"Sam," Holden said, patting the air in a calming gesture. "Keep in mind I have no idea who these people are or why they are important, and we don't have time for a who's who. Just tell us the important bits."

Sam started to object, then shrugged and briefly explained the plan to use the comm laser. "If I do what he's asking me to do, we'll be able to get a pulse out of it that'll be hotter than a star for about three-quarters of a second. It will melt that entire side of the ship in the process."

"Does he know that?" Naomi asked, incredulity in her voice.

"He doesn't care. Whether it works on the Ring or not, we have to stop him. There are thousands of people on this ship right now, and they'll all die if he gets his way."

Holden sank down onto the edge of the gurney with a long exhale. "Oh, we're the least of the problem," he said. "This is suddenly much, much bigger than that."

Sam cocked her head at him, frowning a question.

"I've seen what this station does to threats," Holden said. "Miller showed me, when I was there. All this slow zone stuff is non-lethal deterrent as far as it's concerned. If that big blue ball out there decides us monkeys are an actual threat, it will autoclave our solar system."

“Who’s Miller?” Sam asked.

“Dead guy,” Amos said.

“And he was on the station?”

“Apparently,” Amos said with a lopsided shrug.

“Jim?” Naomi said, putting her hand on his arm. This was the first she’d heard him speak of his experiences on the station, and he felt a pang of guilt for not telling her before.

“Something was attacking them, the protomolecule masters or whatever they were. Their defense was causing the star in any... *infected* solar system to go supernova. That station has the power to blow up stars, Naomi.

“If Ashford does this, it will kill every human there is. Everyone.”

There was a long silence. Amos had stopped rubbing his arm and grunting. Naomi stared up at him from the bed, eyes wide, the fear on her face mirroring his own.

“Well,” Sam finally said. “Good thing I’m not gonna let him, then, isn’t it?”

“Say again?” Amos said from the floor.

“I didn’t know about this other thing with ghosts and aliens,” Sam said in a tone of voice that made it clear she wasn’t totally buying Holden’s story. “But I’ve been sabotaging the laser upgrades. Delaying the process while I build in short points. Weaknesses that will blow every time he tries to fire it. It should be easy enough to explain away because of course the system was never designed for this, and the ship is a flying hunk of cobbled-together junk at this point anyway.”

“How long can you get us?”

“Day. Maybe a day and a half.”

“I think I love you,” Alex said, the words coming out in a pain- and medication-induced mumble.

“We all do, Sam,” Holden said to cover for him. “That’s brilliant, but there aren’t very many of us, and it’s a big, complicated ship. The question is how we get control of it.”

“Bull,” she replied. “That’s why I called you. Bull’s kind of messed up right now and he needs help and I don’t know anyone else on this ship I trust.” This last part she directed at Naomi.

“We’ll do whatever we can,” Naomi replied, holding up her hand. Sam crossed the room and took it. “Anything you need, Sammy. Tell us where Bull is, and I’ll send my boys to go collect him.”

Amos pushed himself up off the floor with a grunt and moved to the gurney. “Yeah, whatever you need, Sam. We owe you about a million at this point, and this Ashford guy sounds like an asshole.”

Sam gave a relieved smile and squeezed Naomi’s fingers. “I really appreciate it. But be careful. Ashford loyalists are everywhere, and they’ve already killed some people. If you run into any more of them, there’ll be trouble.”

Amos pulled one of the shotguns out from under the sheet and laid it casually across his shoulder.

“Man can hope.”

Chapter Forty-One: Bull

The storage cells were too large to be a prison. They were warehouses for the supplies to start again after a hundred ecological collapses. Seed vaults and soil and enough compressed hydrogen and oxygen to recreate the shallow ocean of a generation ship. Bull drove his mech across the vast open space, as wide and tall and airy as a cathedral, but without a single image of God. It was a temple dedicated to utility and engineering, the beauty of function and the grandeur of the experiment that would have launched humanity at the distant stars.

Everything was falling to shit around him. All the information he could put together, hunched close to his hand terminal like he was trying to crawl into it, showed that Ashford had taken over engineering and the reactor at the far south of the drum and command at the north. His squads were moving through the drum with impunity. Pa was missing and might be dead. She still had a lot of people loyal to her, including Bull, to his surprise, but if they found her body in a recycler someplace that would fade quickly. He'd done everything he could. He hadn't had the power, so he'd tried for finesse, and when that didn't work, he'd grabbed the power. He'd taken the massacre of thousands by the protomolecule's station and gone at least halfway to building a city out of it. A little civilization in the mouth of the void. If he'd been a little more ruthless, maybe he could have made it work. Clanking softly through the massive space, that was the thing that haunted him. Not his sins, not even the people he'd killed, but the thought that if he'd killed just one or two more it might have been enough.

And even with that darkness in his heart, he couldn't keep from feeling moved by the scale of the steel and ceramic. The industrial beauty of design. He wished they'd gone to the stars instead of flying it into the mouth of hell. He wished he'd been able to make it all work out.

He tried to connect with Serge, but got nothing. He tried Corin. He wanted to reach out to Sam again, but he couldn't risk Ashford finding out they were in contact. He checked the broadcast feed or Radio Free Slow Zone, but Monica Stuart and her crew hadn't made any announcements. He let himself hope that Ashford's plan would collapse in on itself the way that all of his own plans had. Not much chance of that, though. Ashford just wanted to blow shit up. That was always easier than making something.

He thought about recording a last message to Fred Johnson, but he didn't know if he wanted to apologize, commiserate, or make the man feel guilty for putting a petulant little boy like Ashford in charge, so instead he waited and hoped for something unexpected. And maybe good for a change.

He heard the footsteps coming from the aftmost access corridor. More than one person. Two. Maybe three. If it was Ashford's men coming for him, he wasn't going to have to worry much about what to say to Fred. He took the pistol out of his holster and checked the magazine. The soft metallic sounds echoed. The footsteps faltered.

"Bull?" a familiar voice called out. "Are you in there?"

"Who's asking?" Bull said, then coughed. He spat on the deck.

"Jim Holden," the voice said. "You aren't planning to shoot me, are you? Because Sam sort of gave us the impression that we were on the same side."

Holden stepped into the storage area. This was who she'd meant when she said she knew who she could trust. And she had a point. Holden was outside every command. His reputation was built

on being a man without subtexts. The man behind him with the shotgun was Amos Burton. For a moment, Bull was surprised to see the wounded Earther on his feet, then remembered his own condition and smiled. He lowered his gun, but he didn't put it away.

"And why would she think that?" he asked.

"Same enemies," Holden said. "We have to stop Ashford. If he does what he's planning, we're all trapped in here until we die. And I'm pretty sure the Ring kills everybody on the other side. Earth, Mars. The Belt. Everyone."

Bull felt something deep in his chest settle. He didn't know if it was only the weight of his worst fears coming true or if something unpleasant was happening in his lungs. He put the pistol in his holster, took the joysticks, and angled himself toward the two men. The mech's movements seemed louder now that there were other people to hear them.

"Okay," Bull said. "How about you start at the beginning and tell me what the hell you're going on about."

Bull had been around charisma before. The sense that some people had of moving through their lives in a cloud of likability or power. Fred Johnson had that, and there were glimmers of it in Holden too. In fact, there was something about Holden's open-faced honesty that reminded Bull of the young Fred Johnson's candor. He said things in a simple, matter-of-fact way—the station wouldn't come off lockdown until they turned off all the reactors and enough of the electronics on the ships; the makers of the protomolecule had been devoured by some mysterious force even badder-ass than they were; the station would destroy the solar system if it decided humans and their weapons constituted a real threat—that made them all seem plausible. Maybe it was the depth of his own belief. Maybe it was just a talent some people were born with. Bull felt a growing respect for Jim Holden, the same way he'd respect a rattlesnake. The man was dangerous just by being what he was.

When Holden ran out of steam, repeating himself that they had to stop Ashford, that Sam was buying them time, that the skeleton crews on the other ships had to shut down their reactors and power down their backup systems, Bull scratched his chin.

"What if Ashford's right?" he said.

"I don't understand," Holden said.

"All this stuff you got from the alien? What if it's bullshitting you?"

Holden's jaw went hard, but a moment later he nodded.

"He might be," he said. "I don't have any way of making sure. But Sam says Ashford's going to sacrifice the *Behemoth* when he shoots at the Ring, and if Miller wasn't lying, he's sacrificing everything else along with it. Is that a chance you're willing to take?"

"Taking it either way," Bull said. "Maybe we stop him, and we save the system. Maybe we leave the Ring open for an invasion by things that are going eat our brains on toast. Flip a coin, ese. And we got no time to test it out. No way to make sure. Either way, it's a risk."

"It is," Holden said. "So. What are you going to do?"

Bull's sigh started him coughing again. The mucus that came up into his mouth tasted like steroid spray. He spat. That was what it came down to. It wasn't really a question.

"Figure we got to retake engineering," Bull said. "Probably going to be a bitch of a fight, but we got to do it. With the drum spinning, the only path between engineering and command is the external lift or in through the command transition point, and then all the way through the drum to the engineering transition point with a shitload of people and spin gravity to slow them down. Any reinforcements he's got up top won't make it before the fight's done one way or the other."

"Sammy's already in engineering," Amos said. "Might be she could soften up the terrain for us before we go in."

"That'd be good," Bull said.

"And once we take it?" Holden said.

"Pump an assload of nitrogen into command, and pull 'em all out after they've gone to sleep, I figure," Bull said. "If Captain Pa's still alive, they're her problem."

"What if she ain't?" Amos said.

"Then they're mine," Bull said. Amos' smile meant the man had unpacked Bull's words just the way he'd meant them.

"And the reactor?" Holden said. "Are you going to shut it down?"

"That's the backup plan," Bull said with a grin. "We shut it down. We get everyone else to shut down."

"Can I ask why?"

"Might be that we can get this thing off of lockdown and it won't kill off the sun, even if Ashford does get a shot off," Bull said.

"Fair enough," Holden said. "I've got my crew. We're a little banged up."

"Pure of heart, though," Amos said.

"I don't know how many people I still got," Bull said. "If I can get through to a couple of them, I can find out."

"So where do we set up shop?"

Bull paused. If they were going to try an assault on engineering, a distraction would help. Something that would pull Ashford's attention away from what actually mattered to something else. If there was a way to slap him down. Hurt his pride. Ashford hadn't been the kind of man who thought things through well before the catastrophe, but he had been cautious. If there was a way to make him angry, to overcome that caution. But doing that and getting the word to the other ships that they needed to shut down would be more time than he had, unless...

"Yeah," he said sourly. "I know where we're going. May be a little dangerous getting there. Ashford's people are all through the drum."

"Not as many as there were when we started," Amos said. Bull didn't ask what he meant.

"Lead on," Holden said. "We'll follow you."

Bull tapped his fingers on the joysticks. Embarrassment and shame clawed their way up his guts. A shadow of confusion crossed Holden's face. Bull felt a stab of disgust with himself. He was about to put a bunch of civilians in danger in order to draw Ashford's attention, he was going to do it of his own free will, and he was ashamed of the things that he didn't actually have any control over. He didn't know what that said about him, but he figured it couldn't be good.



Radio Free Slow Zone was in what had once been the colonial administrative offices. The narrow office spaces had been designed into the walls and bulkheads of the original ship, back when it had been the *Nauvoo*, and the amount of work it would have taken to strip the cubicles back until the space could be used for something else had never been worth the effort. Bull had given it to Monica Stuart and her crew because it was a cheap favor. Something he didn't need—the old offices—for something he did: a familiar face and reassuring voice to help make the *Behemoth* into the gathering place for the full and fractured fleet.

The broadcast studio was a sheet of formed green plastic that someone had pried off the floor and set on edge. The lights were jerry-rigged and stuck to whatever surfaces came to hand. Bull recognized most of the faces, though he didn't know many of them. Monica Stuart, of course. Her production team was down to an Earther woman named Okju and a dark-skinned Martian called Clip. Holden had called his crew there, but they hadn't arrived yet.

Bull considered the space from a tactical point of view. It wouldn't be hard to block off accessways. The little half walls provided a lot of cover, and they were solid enough to stop most slug throwers. An hour or two with some structural steel and a couple welders and the place could be almost defensible. He hoped it wouldn't need to be. Except that he hoped it would.

"We went black as soon as the fighting started," Monica said. "Thought it would be better not to go off half-cocked."

"Good plan," Bull said, and his hand terminal chimed. He held up a finger and fumbled to accept the connection. Corin's face flickered to life. She looked pale. Shell-shocked. He knew the expression.

"How bad?"

"I've got about thirty people, sir," Corin said. "Armed and armored. We control the commissary and most of the civilians. Once Ashford got control of the transition points, he mostly fell back."

"Pa?"

"Alive," Corin said. "Pretty beat up, but alive."

"We'll call that a win."

"We lost Serge," Corin said, her voice flat and calm. That was it, then. Bull felt *I'm sorry* coming by reflex and pushed it back. Later. He could offer sympathy later. Right now, he only had room for strong.

"All right," he said. "Bring whoever you can spare to the colonial administrative offices. And weapons. All the weapons we've got, bring them here."

"New headquarters?"

"Security station in exile," Bull said, and Corin almost smiled. There was no joy in it, but maybe a little amusement. Good enough for now. She saluted, and he returned the gesture as best he could before dropping the connection.

"So this is a coup," Monica said.

"Counter-counter coup, technically," Bull said. "Here's what I need you to do. I want you reporting on what's going on here. Broadcast. The *Behemoth*, the other ships in the fleet. Hell, tell the station if you think it'll listen. Captain Ashford was relieved for mental health reasons. The trauma was too much for him. He and a few people who are still personally loyal to him have holed up in command, and the security team of the *Behemoth* is going to extract him."

"And is any of that true?"

"Maybe half," Bull said.

Behind Monica's back, the wide-set Earther woman named Okju looked up and then away.

"I'm not a propagandist," Monica said.

"Ashford's going to get us all killed," Bull said. "Maybe everyone back home too, if he does what he's thinking. The catastrophe? Everything we've been through here? These were the kid gloves. He's trying to start a real fight."

It was strange how saying the words himself made them seem real in a way that hearing from Holden hadn't. He still wasn't sure whether he believed it was true, even. But right now, it needed to be, and so it was. Monica's eyes went a little rounder and bright red splotches appeared on her cheeks.

"When this is over," she said, "I want the full story. Exclusive. Everything that's really going on. Why it came down the way it did. In-depth interviews with all the players."

"Can't speak for anyone but myself right now," Bull said. "But that's a fair deal by me. Also, I need you to talk the other ships in the fleet into shutting down their reactors and power grids, pulling the batteries out of every device they can find that's got them."

"Because?"

“We’re trying to get the lockdown on the ships taken off,” he said. “Let us go home. And if we can’t stop Ashford, getting off lockdown is the only chance we’ve got to keep the station from retaliating against the folks on the other side of the Ring.”

And because if the insults and provocations, the false threats and misdirections all failed, that would be enough. If Ashford could see the other plan coming together, if he could see *his* heroic gesture, *his* grand sacrifice being taken away, he would come. He’d do whatever he could to shut down the studio, and every gun that came here was one less that would be at engineering or command.

Monica looked nonplussed.

“And how am I going to convince them to do that, exactly?”

“I have an idea about that,” Bull said. “I know this priest lady who’s got people from damn near every ship out here coming to her services. I’m thinking we recruit her.”

Even, he didn’t say, if it puts her in the firing line.

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Chapter Forty-Two: Clarissa

The end came. All the running around stopped, and a kind of calm descended on Ashford. On Cortez. All of them. The order went out to secure the transition points. No one was passing into or out of the drum. Not now. Not ever again.

It felt almost like relief.

"I've been thinking about your father," Cortez said as the lift rose toward the transition point, spin gravity ebbing away and the growing Coriolis making everything feel a little bit off. Like a dream or the beginning of an unexpected illness. "He was a very clever man. Brilliant, some would say, and very private in his way."

He tried to turn the protomolecule into a weapon and sell it to the highest bidder, Clarissa thought. The thought should have stung, but it didn't. It was just a fact. Iron atoms formed in stars; a Daimo-Koch power relay had one fewer input than the standard models; her father had tried to militarize the protomolecule. He hadn't known what it was. No one had. That didn't keep them from playing with it. Seeing what they could do. She had the sudden visual memory of a video she'd seen of a drunken soldier handing his assault rifle to a chimp. What had happened next was either hilarious or tragic, depending on her mood. Her father hadn't been that different from the chimp. Just on a bigger scale.

"I'm sorry I didn't have the chance to know him better," Cortez said.

Ashford and seven of his men were on the lift with them. The captain stood at the front, hands clasped behind his back. Most of his men were Belters too. Long frames, large heads. Ren had had that look too. Like they were all part of the same family. Ashford's soldiers had sidearms and bulletproof vests. She didn't. And yet she kept catching them glancing over at her. They still thought of her as Melba. She was the terrorist and murderer with the combat modifications. That she looked like a normal young woman only added to the sense that she was eerie. This was why Ashford had wanted her so badly. She was an adornment. A trophy to show how strong he was and paper over his failure to hold his own ship before.

She wished that one of them would smile at her. The more they acted like she was Melba, the more she felt that version of herself coming back, seeping up into her cognition like ink soaking through paper.

"There was one time your brother Petyr came to the United Nations buildings when I was visiting there."

"That would have been Michael," she said. "Petyr hates the UN."

"Does he?" Cortez said with a gentle laugh. "My mistake."

The lift reached the axis of the drum, slowing gently so that they could all steady themselves with the handrails and not be launched up into the ceiling. Behind them, a series of vast conduits and transformers powered the long, linear sun of the drum. Before she'd come out to the Ring, she'd never seriously thought about balancing power loads and environmental control systems. That kind of thing had been for other people. Lesser people. Now, with all she'd learned, the scale of the *Behemoth's* design was awing. She wished the others could have seen it. Soledad and Bob and Stanni. And Ren.

The doors slid open, and the Belters launched themselves into the transition with the grace of men and women who'd spent their childhoods in low or null g. She and Cortez didn't embarrass themselves, but they would never have the autonomic grace of a Belter on the float.

The command decks were beautiful. The soft indirect lighting took everyone's shadows away. Melba launched herself after Ashford and the Belters, swimming through the air like a dolphin in the sea.

The command center itself was beautifully designed. A long, lozenge-shaped room with control boards set into ceramic desks. On one end of the lozenge, a door opened into the captain's office, on the other, to the security station. The gimbaled crash couches looked less like functional necessities than the natural, beautiful outgrowth of the ship. Like an orchid. The walls were painted with angels and pastoral scenes. The effect was only slightly spoiled by the half dozen access panels that stood open, repairs from the sudden stop still uncompleted. Even the guts of the command center were beautiful in their way. Clarissa found herself wanting to go over and just look in to see if she could make sense of the design.

Three men floated at the control boards, all of them Belters. "Welcome back, Captain," one of them said.

Ashford sailed through the empty air to the captain's station. Three of the soldiers drifted out to take positions in the corridor, the others arraying themselves around the room, all with sightlines on the doors leading in. Anyone who tried to take the command center would have to walk through a hailstorm of bullets. Clarissa pulled herself over to the door of the security station, as much to get out of the way as anything, and Cortez followed her, his expression focused, serious, and a little agitated.

Ashford keyed in a series of commands, and his control panel shifted, growing brighter. His eyes tracked over the readouts and screens. Lit from below, he looked less like the man set to save all of humanity at the sacrifice of himself and his crew and more like a lower university science teacher trying to get his simulations to work the way they were meant to.

"Jojo?" he said, and the voice of the prison guard came from the control deck like the man was standing beside them.

"Here, Captain. We've got the engineering transition point locked down. Anyone wants to get in here, we'll give 'em eight kinds of hell."

"Good man," Ashford said. "Do we have Chief Engineer Rosenberg?"

"Yes, sir. She's making the modifications to the comm array now."

"Still?"

"Still, sir."

"Thank you," he said, then tapped the display, his fingertips popping against the screen. "Sam. How long before the modifications are done?"

"Two hours," she said.

"Why so long?"

"I'm going to have to override every safety device in the control path," she said. "This thing we're doing? There's a lot of built-in design that was meant to keep it from happening."

Ashford scowled.

"Two hours," he said, and stabbed the connection closed.

The waiting began. Two hours later, the same woman explained that the targeting system had been shaken out of round by the catastrophe. It just meant a delay getting lock for most purposes, but since this was a one-shot application, she was realigning it. Three more hours. Then she was getting a short loop error that he had to track down. Two more hours.

Clarissa saw Ashford's mood darken with every excuse, every hour that stretched past. She found the toilets tucked at the back of the security station and started wondering about getting a few tubes of food. If the only working commissary was in the drum, that might actually be a problem.

Cortez had strapped himself into a crash couch and slept. The guards slowly became more and more restless. Clarissa spent an hour going from access panel to access panel, looking at the control boards and power relays that fed the bridge. It was surprising how many of them were the same as the ones she'd worked with on the Earth ships coming out. Cut an Earther or a Belter, they both bled the same blood. Crack an access panel on the *Behemoth* and the *Prince*, and both ships had the same crappy brownout buffers.

She wondered how the *Behemoth* felt about being the *Behemoth* and not the *Nauvoo*. She wondered how she felt about being Clarissa Mao and not Melba Koh. Would the ship feel the nobility of its sacrifice? Lost forever in the abyss, but with everyone else redeemed by her sacrifice. The symmetry seemed meaningful, but it might only have been the grinding combination of fear and uncertainty that made it seem that way.

Seven hours after they'd taken the bridge, Ashford stabbed at the control console again, waited a few seconds, and punched the console hard enough that the blow pushed him back into his couch. The sound of the violence startled Cortez awake and stopped the muttered conversation between the guards. Ashford ignored them all and tapped at the screen again. His fingertips sounded like hailstones striking rock.

The light from the screen flickered.

"Sir?"

"Where's Sam Rosenberg?" Ashford snapped.

"Last I saw her, she was checking the backup power supply for the reactor bottle, sir. Should I find her?"

"Who's acting as her second?"

"Anamarie Ruiz."

"Get Sam and Anamarie up to command, please. If you have to take them under guard, that's fine."

"Yes, sir."

Ashford closed the connection and pushed away from the console, his crash couch shushing on its bearings.

"Is there a problem, Captain?" Cortez asked. His voice was thick and a little bleary.

"Nothing I can't handle," Ashford replied.

It was almost another hour before Clarissa heard the doors from the external elevator shaft open. New voices came down the hall. The gabble of conversation tried to hide some deeper strain. Ashford tugged at his uniform.

Two women floated in the room. The first was a pretty woman with a heart-shaped face and grease-streaked red hair pulled back in a bun. It made her think of Anna. The second was thin, even for a Belter, with skin the color of dry soil and brown eyes so dark they were black. Three men with pistols followed them in.

"Chief Rosenberg," Ashford said.

"Sir," the red-haired woman said. She didn't sound like Anna.

"We are on our fourth last-minute delay now. The more time we waste, the more likely it is that the rogue elements in the drum will cause trouble."

"I'm doing my best, Captain. This isn't the kind of thing we get to take a second shot at, though. We need to be thorough."

"Two hours ago, you said we'd be ready to fire in two hours. Are we ready to fire now?"

"No, sir," she said. "I looked up the specs, and the reactor's safeties won't allow an output the size we need. I'm fabricating some new breakers that won't screw us up. And then we have to replace some cabling as well."

"How long will that take?" Ashford asked. His voice was dry. Clarissa thought she heard danger in it, but the engineer didn't react to it.

"Six hours, six and a half hours," she said. "The fab printers only go so fast."

Ashford nodded and turned to the second woman. Ruiz.

"Do you agree with that assessment?"

"All respect to Chief Rosenberg, I don't," Ruiz said. "I don't see why we can't use conductive foam instead."

"How long would that take?"

"Two hours," Ruiz said.

Ashford drew a pistol. Almost before the chief engineer's eyes could widen, the gun fired. In the tight quarters, the sound itself was an assault. Sam's head snapped back and her feet kicked forward. A bright red globe shivered in the air, smaller droplets flying out from it. Violent moons around a dead planet.

"Mister Ruiz," Ashford said. "Please be ready to fire in two hours."

For a moment, the woman was silent. She shook her head like she was trying to come back from a dream.

"Sir," she said.

Ashford smiled. He was enjoying the effect he'd just had.

"You can go," he said. "Tick-tock. Tick-tock."

Ruiz and the three guards pulled themselves back out. Ashford put his pistol away.

"Would someone please clean this mess away," he said.

"My God," Cortez said, his voice somewhere between a prayer and blasphemy. "Oh my God. What have you done?"

Ashford craned his neck. Two of the guards moved forward. One of them had a utility vacuum. When he thumbed it on, the little motor whined. When he put it in the blood, the tone of it dropped half a tone from E to D-sharp.

"I shot a saboteur," Ashford said, "and cleared the way to saving humanity from the alien threat."

"You killed her," Cortez said. "She had no trial. No defense."

"Father Cortez," Ashford said, "these are extreme circumstances."

"But—"

Ashford turned, bending his just-too-large Belter head forward.

"With all respect, this is my command. These are my people. And if you think I am prepared to accept another mutiny, you are very much mistaken." There was a buzz in the captain's voice like a drunk man on the edge of a fight. Clarissa put a hand on Cortez's shoulder and shook her head.

The older man frowned, ran a hand across his white hair, and put on a professionally compassionate expression.

"I understand the need for discipline, Captain," Cortez said. "And even some violence, if it is called for, but—"

"Don't make me put you back in the drum," Ashford said. Cortez closed his mouth, his head bowed as if being humbled was old territory for him. Even though she knew that wasn't true, Clarissa felt a warm sympathy for him. He'd seen dead people. He'd seen people die. Seeing someone killed was different. And killing someone was different than that, so in some ways, she was ahead of him.

"Come on," she said. Cortez blinked at her. There were tears in his eyes, floating more or less evenly across his sclera, unable to fall. "The head's this way. I'll get you there."

"Thank you," he said.

Two of the guards were wrapping the dead engineer with tape. The bullet had struck just above her right eye, and a hemisphere of blood adhered to it, shuddering but not growing larger. The

woman wasn't bleeding anymore. *She was the enemy*, Clarissa thought, but the idea had a tentative quality about it. Like she was trying on a vest to see how it fit. *She was the enemy and so she deserved to die even though she had red hair like Anna*. It wasn't as comforting as she'd hoped.

In the head, Cortez washed his face and hands with the towelettes and then fed them into the recycler. Clarissa mentally followed them down to the churn and through the guts of the ship. She knew how it would work on the *Cerisier* or the *Prince*. Here, she could only speculate.

You're trying to distract yourself, a small part of herself said. The thought came in words, just like that. Not from outside, not from someone else. A part of her talking to the rest. *You're trying to distract yourself*.

From what? she wondered.

"Thank you," Cortez said. His smile looked more familiar now. More like the man she saw on screens. "I knew that there would be some resistance to doing the right thing here. But I wasn't ready for it. Spiritually, I wasn't ready for it. Surprised me."

"It'll do that," Clarissa said.

Cortez nodded. He was about her father's age. She tried to imagine Jules-Pierre Mao floating in the little space, weeping over a dead engineer. She couldn't. She couldn't imagine him here at all, couldn't picture what he looked like exactly. All of her impressions were of his power, his wit, his overwhelming importance. The physical details were beside the point. Cortez looked at himself in the mirror, set his own expression.

He's about to die, she thought. *He's about to condemn himself and everyone on this ship to dying beyond help, here in the darkness, because he thinks it is the right and noble thing to do*. Was that what Ashford was doing too? She wished now that she'd talked to him more when they'd been prisoners together. Gotten to understand him and who he was. Why he was willing to die for this. And more than that, why he was willing to kill. Maybe it was altruism and nobility. Maybe it was fear. Or grief. As long as he did what needed doing, it didn't matter why, but she found she was curious. She knew why she was here, at least. To redeem herself. To die for a reason, and make amends.

You're trying to distract yourself.

"—don't you think?" Cortez said. His smile was gentle and rueful, and she didn't have any idea what he'd been saying.

"I guess," she said and pushed back from the doorframe to give him room. Cortez pulled himself by handholds, trying to keep his body oriented with head toward the ceiling and feet toward the floor, even though crawling along the walls was probably safer and more efficient. It was something people who lived with weight did by instinct. Clarissa only noticed it because she wasn't doing it. The room was just the room, no up or down, anything a floor or a wall or a ceiling. She expected a wave of vertigo that didn't come.

"You know it doesn't matter," she said.

Cortez smiled at her, tilting his head in a question.

"If we're all sacrifices, it doesn't matter when we go," Clarissa said. "She went a little before us. We'll go a little later. It doesn't even matter if we all go willingly to the altar, right? All that matters is that we break the Ring so everyone on the other side is safe."

"Yes, that's right," Cortez said. "Thank you for reminding me."

An alert sounded in the next room, and Clarissa turned toward it. Ashford had undone his straps and was floating above his control panel, his face stony with rage.

"What's going on, Jojo?"

"I think we've got a problem, sir..."

Chapter Forty-Three: Holden

Everything about the former colonial administrative offices made Holden sad. The drab, institutional green walls, the cluster of cubicles in the central workspace, the lack of windows or architectural flourishes. The Mormons had been planning to run the human race's first extrasolar colony from a place that would have been equally at home as an accounting office. It felt anticlimactic. *Hello, welcome to your centuries-long voyage to build a human settlement around another star! Here's your cubicle.*

The space had been repurposed in a way that at least gave it a lived-in feel. A cobbled-together radio occupied one entire closet, just off the main broadcasting set. The size saying more about the slapdash construction than about the broadcasting power. The current fleet was in a small enough space to pick up a decent handheld set. A touch screen on one wall acted as a whiteboard for the office, lists of potential interviews and news stories listed along with contact names and potential public interest. Holden was oddly flattered to see his name next to the note *Hot, find a way to get this.*

Now the room buzzed with activity. Bull's people were trickling in a few at a time. Most of them brought duffel bags full of weapons or ammunition. A few brought tools in formed plastic cases with wheels on the bottom. They were preparing to armor the former office space into a mini-fortress. Holden leaned against an unused desk and tried to stay out of everyone's way.

"Hey," Monica said, appearing at his side out of nowhere. She nodded her head at the board. "When I heard you were back from the station, I was hoping I could get an interview from you. Guess I missed my chance, though."

"Why?"

"Next to this end-of-the-world shit, you've slipped a couple notches in the broadcast schedule." Holden nodded, then shrugged. "I've been famous before. It's not so great."

Monica sat on the desk next to him and handed him a drinking bulb. When Holden tasted it, it turned out to be excellent coffee. He closed his eyes for a moment, sighing with pleasure. "Okay, now I'm just a little in love with you."

"Don't tease a girl," she replied. "Will this work? This plan of Bull's?"

"Am I on the record?"

Someone started welding a sheet of metal to the wall, forcing them both to throw up their hands to block the light. The air smelled like sulfur and hot steel.

"Always," Monica said. "Will it?"

"Maybe. There's a reason military ships are scuttled the second someone takes engineering. If you don't own that ground, you don't own the ship."

Monica smiled as if that all made sense to her. Holden wondered how much actually did. She wasn't a wartime reporter. She was a documentary producer who'd wound up in the wrong place at the right time. He finished off the last of his coffee with a pang of regret and waited to see if she had anything else to ask. If he was nice, maybe she'd find him a refill.

"And this Sam person can do that?" she said.

"Sam's been keeping the *Roci* in the air for almost three years now. She was one of Tycho's best and brightest. Yeah, if she's got your engine room and she doesn't like you, you're screwed."

“Want more coffee?”

“Good God, yes,” Holden said, holding out his bulb like a street beggar.

Before Monica could take it, Bull came clumping over to them in his mechanical walker. He started to speak and then began a wet, phlegmy cough that lasted several seconds. Holden thought he looked like a man who was dying by centimeters.

“Sorry,” Bull said, spitting into a wadded-up rag. “That’s disgusting.”

“If you die,” Monica said, “I won’t get my exclusive.”

Bull nodded and began another coughing fit.

“If you die,” Holden said, “can I have all your stuff?”

Bull gave a grand, sweeping gesture at the office around them. “Someday, my boy, this will all be yours.”

“What’s the word?” Holden asked, raising the bulb to his lips and being disappointed at its emptiness all over again.

“Corin found the preacher, huddled up with half her congregation in their church tent.”

“Great,” Holden said. “Things are starting to come together.”

“Better than you think. Half the people in that room were UN and Martian military. They’re coming with her. She says they’ll back her story when she asks the other ships to shut down. It also won’t hurt to have a few dozen more able bodies to man the defenses when Ashford comes after us.”

As Bull spoke, Holden saw Amos enter the offices pushing the bed Alex and Naomi were on. A knot he hadn’t even realized he had relaxed in his shoulders. Bull was still talking about utilizing the new troops for their defensive plans, but Holden wasn’t listening. He watched Amos move the gurney to a safe corner at the back of the room and then wander over to stand next to them.

“Nothing new outside,” Amos said when Bull stopped talking. “Same small patrols of Ashford goons walking the drum, but they don’t act like they know anything’s up.”

“They’ll know as soon as we do our first broadcast,” Monica said.

“How’s that shoulder?” Holden asked.

“Sore.”

“I’ve been thinking I want you to take command of the defense here once the shit hits the intake.”

“Yeah, okay,” Amos said. He knew Holden was asking him to protect Naomi and Alex. “I guess that means you’re going down to—”

He was interrupted by a loud buzzing coming from Bull’s pocket. Bull pulled a beat-up hand terminal out and stared at it like it might explode.

“Is that an alarm?” Holden asked.

“Emergency alert on my private security channel,” Bull said, still not answering it. “Only the senior staff can use that channel.”

“Ashford, trying to track you down?” Holden asked, but Bull ignored him and answered the call.

“Bull here. Ruiz, I—” Bull started, then stopped and just listened. He grunted a few times, though Holden couldn’t tell if they were assents or negations. When he finished the call, he dropped the hand terminal on the desk behind him without looking at it. His brown skin, recently gray with sickness, had turned almost white. He reached up with both hands to wipe away what Holden realized with shock were tears. Holden would not have guessed the man was capable of weeping.

“Ashford,” Bull started, then began a long coughing fit that looked suspiciously like sobbing. When he’d finally stopped, his eyes and mouth were covered with mucus. He pulled a rag out of his pocket and wiped most of it off, then said, “Ashford killed Sam.”

“What?” Holden asked. His brain refused to believe this could be true. He’d heard the words clearly, but those words could not be, so he must have heard them wrong. “What?”

Bull took a long breath, gave his face one last wipe with the rag, then said, "He brought her up to the bridge to ask about the laser mods, and then he shot her. He made Anamarie Ruiz the chief engineer."

"How do you know?" Monica asked.

"Because that was Ruiz on the line just now. She wants us to get her the hell out of there," Bull said. Almost all traces of his grief were gone from his face. He took another long, shuddering breath. "She knows Ashford has completely gone around the bend, but what can she do?"

Holden shook his head, still refusing to believe it. Brilliant little Sam, who fixed his ship, who was Naomi's best friend, whom Alex and Amos shared a good-natured crush on. *That* Sam couldn't be dead.

Amos was staring at him. The big man's hands were curled into fists, his knuckles a bloodless white.

"We have to hold this ground," Holden said, hoping to head off Amos' next words. "I need you to hold it or this whole thing falls apart."

"Then you kill him," Amos said, his words terrifyingly flat and emotionless. "None of this trial bullshit. No righteous man among the savages bullshit. You fucking kill him, or so help me God..."

Holden felt a sudden nausea almost drive him to his knees. He took a few deep breaths to push it back. This was what they had to offer to Sam's memory. After all she'd done for them. All she'd meant to them. They had violence, arguments about the best way to get revenge. Sam, who as far as he knew had never hurt another person in her life. Would she want this? He could picture her there, telling Amos and Bull to put their testosterone away and act like adults. The thought almost made him vomit.

Monica put a hand on his back. "Are you okay?"

"I have to tell Naomi," was all he could say, then he pushed her hand away and walked across a floor that moved under his feet like the rolling deck of an oceangoing ship.

Naomi reacted only with sorrow, not with anger. She cried, but didn't demand revenge. She repeated Sam's name through her tears, but didn't say Ashford's once. It seemed like the right reaction. It seemed like love.

He was holding Naomi while she gently wept when Bull clumped up behind him. He felt a flash of anger, but swallowed it.

"What?"

"Look," Bull said, rubbing his buzz cut with both hands. "I know this is a shitty time, but we have to talk about where we go from here."

Holden shrugged.

"Sam's gone, and she was pretty central to our plans..."

"I understand," Naomi said. "I'll go."

"What?" Holden said, feeling like they were having a conversation in some kind of code he didn't understand. "Go where?"

"With Sam gone, Naomi is the best engineer we've got," Bull said.

"What about this Ruiz person? I thought she was the chief engineer now."

"She was in charge of infrastructure," Bull said. "And I've seen Nagata's background. She's got the training and the experience. And we trust her. If someone's going to take Sam's place—"

"No," Holden said without thinking about it. Naomi was hurt. She couldn't fight her way into the engine room now. And Sam had been killed.

"I'll go," Naomi repeated. "My arm is for shit, but I can walk. If someone can help me once we get there, I can take out the bridge and shut down the reactor."

"No," Holden said again.

“Yeah, me too,” Alex added. He was sitting on the edge of the gurney facing away from them. He’d been shaking like he was crying, but hadn’t made a sound. His voice sounded dry, like fallen leaves rustling in the wind. Brittle and empty. “I guess I have to go too.”

“Alex, you don’t—” Naomi started, but he kept talking over the top of her.

“Nobody pulled the *Roci*’s batteries off-line when we left, so if we’re shutting everything down, she’ll need someone to do it.”

Bull nodded. Holden wanted to smack him for agreeing with any of this.

“And that’ll be me,” Alex said. “I can tag along as far as engineering, grab an EVA pack there, and use the aft airlock to get out.”

Amos moved over behind Bull, his face still flat, emotionless, but his hands in fists. “Alex is going?”

“New plan,” Bull said loud enough for everyone to hear. People stopped whatever they were doing and moved over to listen. More must have arrived, because there were almost fifty in the office now. At the back of the room stood a small knot of people in military uniforms. Anna the redheaded preacher was with them. She was holding hands with an aggressively thin woman who alternated smoking and tapping her front teeth with her pinky fingernail. Bull spotted them at the same time Holden did, and waved them forward.

“Anna, come on up here,” he said. “Most everyone is here now, so this is how it’s going to go down.”

The room got quiet. Anna made her way up to Bull and waited. Her skinny friend came with her, staring at the crowd around the preacher with the suspicious eyes of a bodyguard.

“In”—Bull stopped to look at a nearby wall panel with a clock on it—“thirty minutes, I will take a team made up of security personnel and the crew of the *Rocinante* to the southern drum access point. We will retake that access point and gain entrance into the engineering level. Once we control engineering, Monica and her team will begin a broadcast explaining to the rest of the fleet about the need to kill the power. Preacher, that’s where you and your people come in.”

Anna turned and smiled at her group, a motley collection of people in the uniforms of a variety of services and planetary allegiances. Most of them injured in one way or another. Some quite badly.

“The target for the shutdown is 1900 hours local, about two and a half hours from now. We need them to keep it down for two hours. That’s our window. We need the *Behemoth* down during that two hours.”

“We’ll make it happen,” Naomi said.

“But when our broadcast starts, Ashford will probably try to take this location. Amos and the remainder of my team, along with any volunteers from among the rest of you, will hold this position as long as possible. The more bad guys you can tie up here, the fewer we’ll have trying to take engineering back from us. But I need you to hold. If we can’t keep Anna and her people on the air long enough to get everyone on board with our shutdown plan, this thing ends before it starts.”

“We’ll hold,” Amos said. No one disagreed.

“Once we control engineering, we’ll send a team forward to put restraints on the hopefully unconscious people on the bridge and we’ll own the ship. The lights go out, the aliens let us go, and we get the fuck out of this miserable stretch of space once and for all. How’s that sound?”

Bull raised his voice with the final question, looking for a cheer from the group, and the group obliged. People began to drift back toward their various tasks. Holden squeezed Naomi’s uninjured shoulder and moved over to Anna. She looked lost. Along the way he grabbed Amos by the arm.

“Anna,” Holden said. “Do you remember Amos?”

She smiled and nodded. “Hello, Amos.”

“How you doing, Red?”

“Amos will be here to protect you and the others,” Holden continued. “If you need anything, you let him know. I feel safe in saying nothing will get in here to stop you from doing your job as long as he’s alive.”

“That’s the truth,” Amos said. “Ma’am.”

“Hey, guys,” someone called out from the doorway. “Look what followed me home. Can I keep them?”

Holden patted Anna on the arm and gave Amos a meaningful look. *Protect this one with your life.* Amos nodded back. He looked vaguely offended.

He left them together and caught up with Bull heading for the door. The security officer Corin, Bull’s new second-in-command, was leaning next to the door with a shit-eating grin.

“Come on in, boys,” she said, and four Martians with military haircuts came into the room. They stood on the balls of their feet, slowly looking over every inch of the room. Holden had known someone who always entered a room that way. Bobbie. He found himself wishing she were here. The man in the lead was powerfully familiar.

“Sergeant Verbinski,” Bull said to one of them. “This is a surprise.”

Holden hadn’t recognized the man without his armor. He looked big.

“Sir,” Verbinski said. “I heard you’re about to start a fight to get us all out of here.”

“Yeah,” Bull said. “I am.”

“Sounds like a noble cause,” Verbinski replied. “Need four grunts with nothing else to do?”

“Yeah,” Bull said with a growing smile. “I really do.”

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Chapter Forty-Four: Anna

They'd failed.

Anna watched the busy men and women in the radio offices as they strapped on body armor, loaded weapons, hung grenades from their belts, and she felt only sadness and despair.

A history professor at university had once told her, *Violence is what people do when they run out of good ideas. It's attractive because it's simple, it's direct, it's almost always available as an option. When you can't think of a good rebuttal for your opponent's argument, you can always punch them in the face.*

They'd run out of ideas. And now they were reaching for the simple, direct, always available option of shooting everyone they disagreed with. She hated it.

Monica caught her eye from across the room and held up a small thermos of coffee in invitation. Anna waved her off with a smile.

"Are you insane?" Tilly asked. She was sitting on the floor next to her in a back corner of the offices, trying to stay out of everyone's way. "That woman has the only decent coffee on this entire ship." She waved at Monica, pointing at herself.

"I should have spent more time talking to Cortez," Anna said. "The OPA captain might be intractable, but I could have reached Cortez with enough time."

"Life is finite, dear, and Cortez is an asshole. We'll all be better off if someone puts a bullet in him before this is over." Tilly accepted a pour of Monica's coffee with a grateful smile. Monica set the thermos down and sat on the floor next to them.

"Hey, we—" she started, but Anna didn't notice.

"You don't mean that," Anna said to Tilly, annoyance creeping into her voice. "Cortez isn't a bad person. He's frightened and unsure, and has made some bad choices, but at worst he's misguided, not evil."

"He doesn't deserve your sympathy," Tilly said, then tossed back the last of her coffee like she was angry with it.

"Who are we—" Monica started again.

"He does. He does deserve it," Anna said. Watching the young men and women prepare for war, preparing to kill and be killed right in front of her, made her more angry with Tilly than she probably would have been otherwise. But she found herself very angry now. "That's exactly the point. They *all* deserve our sympathy. If Bull's right about Ashford, and he's gone crazy with fear and humiliation and the trauma of seeing his crew killed, then he deserves our sympathy. That's a terrible place to be. Cortez deserves our understanding, because he's doing exactly the same thing we are. Trying to find the right thing to do in an impossible situation."

"Oh," Monica said. "Cortez. He's the—"

"That's a load of crap, Annie. That's exactly how you know who the good guys and the bad guys are: by what they do when the chips are down."

"This isn't about good guys and bad guys," Anna said. "Yes, we've picked sides now, because some of the actions they are about to take will have serious consequences for us, and we're going to try to stop them. But what you're doing is demonizing them, making them the enemy. The problem

with that is that once we've stopped them and they can't hurt us anymore, they're still demons. Still the enemy."

"Believe me," Tilly said, "when I get out of here, it will be my mission in life to burn Cortez to the ground for this."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"He won't be on a ship trying to destroy the Ring anymore. He won't be supporting Ashford anymore. All of the circumstances that made him your enemy will be gone. What's the value in clinging to the hate?"

Tilly turned away and fumbled around in her pocket for her cigarettes. She smoked one aggressively, pointedly not looking at Anna.

"What's the answer, then?" Monica asked after a few tense moments of silence.

"I don't know," Anna said, pulling her legs close and resting her chin on her knees. She tucked her back as far into the corner of the room as it would go, her body looking for a safe place with a small child's insistence. But the hard green walls offered no comfort.

"So it's all just academic, then," Monica said. Tilly snorted in agreement, still not looking at Anna.

Anna pointed at the people getting ready in the room around them. "How many will be dead by the end of today?"

"There's no way to know," Monica said.

"We owe it to them to look for other answers. We've failed this time. We've run out of ideas, and now we're reaching for the gun. But maybe next time, if we've thought about what led us here, maybe next time we find a different answer. Certainty doesn't have a place in violence."

For a while, they were silent. Tilly angrily chain-smoked. Monica typed furiously on her terminal. Anna watched the others get ready for war, and tried to match faces with names. Even if they won out today, there was a very good chance she'd be presiding over more than one funeral tomorrow.

Bull clunked over to them, his walking machine whining to a stop. He had deteriorated during the few hours they'd spent in the office. He was coughing less, but he'd begun using his inhaler a lot more often. Even the machine seemed ill now, its sounds harsher, its movements jerkier. As though the walker and Bull had merged into one being, and it was dying along with him.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Fine," Anna said. She considered telling him he needed rest, then abandoned the idea. She didn't need to lose another argument just then.

"So we're getting pretty close to zero hour here," Bull said, then stifled a wet-sounding cough. "You have everything you need?"

No, Anna thought. *I need an answer that doesn't include what you're about to do.*

"Yes," she said instead. "Monica has been making notes for the broadcast. I've compiled a list of all the ships we have representatives from. We're missing a few, but I'm hoping planetary allegiance will be enough to get their cooperation. Chris Williams, a junior officer from the *Prince*, has been a big help on that."

"You?" Bull asked, jabbing a thick hand toward Monica.

"My team is ready to go," she said. "I'm a bit worried about getting the full broadcast out before Ashford's people stop us."

Bull laughed. It was a wet, unpleasant sound. "Hold on." He called out to Jim Holden, who was busy reassembling a stripped-down rifle of some sort and chatting with one of the Martian marines. Holden put the partly assembled rifle on a table and walked over.

"What's up?"

"These people need reassurance that they'll be protected long enough to finish their broadcast," Bull said.

Holden blinked twice, once at Bull, once at the three women sitting cross-legged on the floor. Anna had to suppress a giggle. Holden was so comically earnest, she just wanted to give him a hug and pat him on the head.

"Amos will make sure you're not interrupted," he finally said.

"Right," Bull said. "Tell them why that's reassuring."

"Oh. Well, when Amos is angry he's the meanest, scariest person I've ever met, and he'd walk across a sea of corpses he personally created to help a friend. And one of his good friends just got murdered by the people who are going to be trying to take this office."

"I heard about that," Anna said. "I'm sorry."

"Yes," Holden said. "And the last people in the galaxy I'd want to be are the ones that are going to try and break in here to stop you. Amos doesn't process grief well. It usually turns into anger or violence for him. I have a feeling he's about to process the shit out of it on some Ashford loyalists."

"Killing people won't make him feel better," Anna said, regretting the words the second they left her mouth. These people were going to be risking their lives to protect her. They didn't need her moralizing at them.

"Actually," Holden said with a half smile, "I think it might for him, but Amos is a special case. You'd be right about most anyone else."

Anna looked across the room at Amos. He was sitting quietly by the front door to the broadcast office, some sort of very large rifle laid across his knees. He was a large man, tall and thick across the shoulders and chest. But with his round shaved head and broad face, he didn't look like a killer to Anna. He looked like a friendly repairman. The kind who showed up to fix broken plumbing or swap out the air recycling filters. According to Holden, he would kill without remorse to protect her.

She imagined trying to explain their current situation to Nono. *I've fallen in with killers, you see, but it's okay because they are the right killers. The good guy killers. They don't shoot innocent chief engineers. They shoot the people who do.*

Monica was asking Holden something. When he started to answer, Anna got up and left with an apology to everyone and no one. She dodged through the crowded office, smiling and patting people on the arm as she passed, distributing gentle reassurance to everyone around her. It was all she had to offer them.

She pulled an unused chair over next to Amos and sat down. "Red," he said, giving her a tiny nod.

"I'm sorry." She put her hand on his arm. He stared down at it as though he couldn't figure out what it was.

"Okay," he said, not asking the obvious question. Not pretending not to understand. Anna found herself liking him immediately.

"Thank you for doing this."

Amos shifted in his chair to face her. "You don't need to—"

"In a few hours, we might all be dead," she said. "I want you to know that I know what you're doing, and I know why, and I don't care about any of that. Thank you for helping us."

"God damn, Red," Amos said, putting his hand on hers. "You must be hell on wheels as a preacher. You're making me feel the best and worst I've felt in a while at the same time."

"That's all I wanted to say," Anna said, then patted his hand once and stood up.

Before she could leave, Amos grabbed her hand in an almost painfully tight grip. "No one's gonna hurt you today."

There was no boast in it. It was a simple statement of fact. She gave him a smile and pulled her hand away. Good-hearted unrepentant killers were not something she'd had to fit into her worldview

before this, and she wasn't sure how it would work. But now she'd have to try.

"All right, people, listen up," Bull yelled out over the noise. The room fell silent. "It's zero hour. Let's get the action teams divided up and ready to go."

A shadow fell across Anna. Amos was standing behind her, clutching his large gun. "Defense," he called out. "To me."

A group of maybe two dozen extricated themselves from the general crowd and moved over to Amos. Anna found herself surrounded by heavily armed and armored Belters with a few inner planet types mixed in. She was not a tall woman, and it felt like being at the bottom of a well. "Excuse me," she said, but no one heard her. A strong hand gripped her arm, pulled her through the knot of people, and deposited her outside of it. Amos gave her a smile and said, "Might want to find a quiet corner, Red."

Anna thought about trying to cross the room back to Tilly and Monica, but there were too many people in the way. Amos had a sort of personal field that kept anyone from standing too close to him, so Anna just stayed inside it to keep from getting trampled on. Amos didn't appear to mind.

"Assault team," Holden called out, "to me."

Soon he had a group of two dozen around him, including Naomi and Alex from the *Rocinante*, the four Martian marines, a bunch of Bull's security people, and Bull himself. The only people in the group without obvious physical injuries were the four marines. Alex and Naomi looked especially bad. Naomi's shoulder was bound tight in a harness that immobilized it and her arm, and she winced every time she took a step. Alex's face was swollen so badly that his left eye was almost completely closed. Blood spotted the bandages around his head.

These are the people who helped stop Protogen, who fought the monsters around Ganymede, she told herself. *They're tough, they'll make it*. It sounded thin even in her own head.

"Well," Bull said. The crowd seemed to be waiting for last words from him. "I guess this is it. Good hunting, everyone."

A few people clapped or called out to him. Most didn't. Across the room Monica was talking to her camera people. Anna knew she should join them, but found herself not wanting to. All these people would be risking their lives to buy her time. *Her*. So it was all on her whether the whole plan succeeded or failed. If she couldn't convince an entire flotilla of ships from three separate governments that turning off their power for a couple hours was the right thing to do, then it would all be for nothing. She found herself wanting to delay that moment as long as possible. To keep it from being her responsibility as long as she could.

"Better go, Red," Amos whispered to her.

"What if they're all too scared to shut down their ships?" she replied. "We're in the haunted house, and I'm about to tell everyone that the way to escape is to turn out all the lights. I would find that unconvincing in their shoes."

Amos nodded thoughtfully. Anna waited for the words of encouragement.

"Yeah," he finally said. "That'll be a bitch. My job's a lot easier. Good luck."

Somehow, the honesty in not even trying to sugarcoat it cracked the last of Anna's fear, and she found herself laughing. Before she could reconsider, she grabbed Amos around the middle and gave him a squeeze.

"Again," she said, letting him go after a few seconds, "thank you. I was being a big scaredy-cat. You're a good person, Amos."

"Nah, I'm not. I just hang with good company. Get going, Red. I gotta get my game face on."

The assault team was heading for the door, and Anna moved to the wall to let them by. Holden stopped next to Amos and said, "Be here when I get back, big man."

Amos shook his hand and slapped him on the back once. Holden's face was filled with worry. Anna had a sudden vision of her future, sending Nami off to school one day, being terrified that she

wouldn't be there to look after her and having to let her go anyway.

"Keep Naomi and Alex safe," Amos said, pushing Holden toward the door. From Anna's position, she could see the worry lines on Holden's face only deepen at that. He was going to have to let them go too. Even if they all survived the assault on engineering, Alex would be leaving the ship to fly to the *Rocinante*, and Naomi would be left behind to keep the power shut down while Holden continued on toward the bridge. Anna knew the little crew had been together for several years now. She wondered if they'd ever had to split up and fight like this before.

Holden's face seemed to be saying they hadn't.

Anna was watching them file out the door, again trying to memorize faces and names, trying not to think about why. Monica grabbed her and started pulling her toward the makeshift film studio.

"Time to start working," she said. She deposited Anna just outside the camera view and stepped in front of the unadorned green wall they used as a backdrop.

"Welcome," she said, her face and voice shifting into cheery video host mode. "I'm Monica Stuart in the offices of Radio Free Slow Zone. I've got some exciting guests today, including Doctor Anna Volovodov, and a number of UN and Martian military officers. But even more exciting, today we're bringing you the most important broadcast we've ever done.

"Today, we'll tell you how to go home."

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Chapter Forty-Five: Bull

Bull felt the time moving past like it was something physical, like he was falling through it and couldn't catch himself. Anamarie Ruiz had an hour left before she had to decide whether to do what Ashford wanted or get killed. If she didn't have to choose, she wouldn't choose wrong, and every minute that he wasn't in the engineering deck took them closer to where they couldn't get back.

They'd left the colonial administration offices in a small convoy. Six electric carts with twenty-five people, including Jim Holden and three-quarters of his crew, the four Martian marines, an even dozen of the *Behemoth's* crew who'd stayed loyal to Pa, and five Earth soldiers whom Corin had found in the drum and brought along. They had some riot armor that hadn't been taken out of the armory before Ashford's forces occupied it. They had an ugly collection of slug-throwing pistols and shotguns loaded with ballistic gel rounds; a mix of weapons designed to subdue without permanent injury and those meant to assure the enemy's death. The four Martian marines had the four best guns they'd been able to scrounge up, but there were too few of both. The whole thing stank of improvisation.

He couldn't sit down, so he'd taken the canopy off the electric cart and wedged his mech in the back. He sailed through the hot, close air of the drum like a figurehead on the prow of some doomed pirate ship. Corin was at the wheel, hunched over it like she could make it go faster by the raw act of will. The Martian sergeant Verbinski who'd brought Jim Holden to the *Behemoth* in restraints sat at her side looking focused and bemused at the same time.

They passed through the main corridors heading south. The tires made a loud ripping sound against the decking. High above, the long, thin strip of blinding white illuminated the curve of the drum. The southern transfer point loomed ahead of them like a ceramic steel cliff face.

People parted before them, making a path. Bull watched them as he passed. Anger and fear and curiosity. These were his people. They hadn't all been to start with, but he'd brought them here to the *Behemoth*. He'd made the ship important and the OPA's role in the exploration beyond the Ring central. Earthers and Martians and Belters. The ones who'd lived. As the faces turned toward him, watching the convoy pass like flowers back on Earth tracking the arc of the sun, he wondered what Fred Johnson would have thought of all this. It was a clusterfuck from start to finish, no question about that. He hoped that when it came time to settle up accounts, he'd done more good than harm.

"We're a pretty compromised force," Verbinski said, craning his neck back and up to look at Bull. "How many people you think we're going up against?"

"Not sure," Bull said. "Probably a little more than we got, but they're divided between engineering and command."

"They as banged up as we are?"

Bull glanced over his shoulder. The truth was at least half of the people he was about to take into battle were already injured. There were people with pressure casts holding their arms together, with sutures keeping their skin closed. In normal circumstances, half his force would still be in the infirmary. Hell, he didn't have any damn business going into a fire zone either, except that he wasn't going to stay back and send people into a meat grinder he wouldn't step into himself.

"Just about," Bull said.

“You know, if I still had that recon armor you took off of us, I could just go get this done. Not even me and my squad. Just me.”

“Yeah. I know that.”

“Kind of makes you wish you’d trusted me a little bit, doesn’t it?”

“Kind of does,” Bull said.

There were two ways to reach the transfer point. The elevator was big enough to fit half the force into a box small enough that when the doors opened at the top, a single grenade would incapacitate nearly all of them. The alternative was a wide, sloping ramp that rose from the floor of the drum and spun up in a tight spiral to the axis. Its curve was going into the drum’s spin, so the faster they drove up it, the more the cart tires would push down into the floor. That wouldn’t matter down here, but when they reached the top where the fighting would essentially be in free fall, every bit of stability and control they could glean would matter.

The first shots came down from the axis, spraying bits of the ceramic roadway up in front of the lead cart. Bull tried to bend his head back far enough to see whether the attack was coming from the transfer point itself or a barricade closer in.

“Juarez!” Verbinski shouted. “Cover us.”

“Yes, sir,” a voice called from one of the back carts. Bull swiveled the mech enough to look over his shoulder. On the third cart back, one of the Martian marines was lying on his back, a long scoped rifle pointing up. He looked like he was napping until the rifle fired once. Bull tried to look up again, but the mech prevented him. He took out his hand terminal and used its camera like a mirror. High above them, a body was floating in the null-g zone, a pink cloud of blood forming around its waist.

“One less,” Verbinski said.

The firing continued as they took the ramp at speed. The semi-adhesive ripping of the tires against the deck changed its tone as less and less weight pressed against them. Bull felt his body growing lighter in its brace. The edge of the ramp was a cliff now, looking down almost a third of a kilometer to the floor of the drum below. Ashford’s men were above them, but not so far now that Bull couldn’t see the metal barricades they’d welded to the walls and deck. He was painfully aware of being the highest target. His neck itched.

Two heads popped up from behind the barricades. The muzzle flashes were like sparks. The Martian’s rifle barked behind him, and one of the attackers slumped down, the other retreating.

“Okay,” Bull said. “This is as close as we get without cover.”

Corin spun the cart nose in to the wall and slipped out, taking cover with Verbinski behind it while the next cart came ahead mirroring her. They were in microgravity here. Maybe a tenth of a g. Maybe less. Bull had to turn the magnets on in his mech’s feet to keep from floating away. By the time he’d gotten off the cart, the fighting was already far ahead of him. He drove the mech forward, marching up past the improvised barricades of the carts. The closest of them was less than ten meters from the first of Ashford’s barricades, and Jim Holden, Corin, and one of the Earthers were already pressed against the enemy’s cover, ducking to the side, firing, and falling back. The smell of spent gunpowder soured the air.

“Where’s Naomi?” Bull shouted. He didn’t have a clear idea whether any of the technical staff in there besides Ruiz were still loyal to Pa, and if they got their only real engineer killed before they made it into engineering, he was going to be pissed. Something detonated behind the barrier and two bodies pinwheeled out into the empty air. The light was behind them, and he couldn’t tell if they were his people or Ashford’s. At the last of the carts, he stopped. The battle was well ahead of him now, almost at the transfer point itself. That was good. It meant they were winning.

A thin man was still at the cart’s wheel. At a guess, he was in his early twenties, brown skin and close-cropped hair. The hole in his chest had already stopped bleeding and his eyes were empty. Bull felt a moment’s regret and pushed it away. He’d known. They’d all known. Not just coming to this

fight, but when they'd put their boots on the *Behemoth* and headed out past the farthest human habitation, they'd known they might not make it back. Maybe they'd even known that the thing that killed them might not be the Ring, but the people who'd gone out alongside them. People like Ashford. People like him.

"Sorry, ese," Bull said, and drove the joysticks forward.

Ashford's forces were pulling back. There was no question about it now. Verbinski and his team were laying down a withering and professional spray of gunfire. The sniper, Juarez, didn't fire often, but when he did it was always a kill shot. The combination of constant automatic weapons fire and the occasional but lethal bark of Juarez's rifle kept moving the enemy back in toward the transfer point like they were boxing in the queen on a chessboard. Even the most powerful of Ashford's guns couldn't find a safe angle on them, and Verbinski kept the pressure on, pushing back and back and back until Ashford's people broke, running.

The transfer point itself was a short hallway with emergency decompression doors at each end. As Bull watched, the vast red-painted circular hatches groaned and began rolling into place. They wouldn't be enough to stop Bull and his people, but they'd slow things down. Maybe too much.

"Charge!" Bull shouted, then fell into a fit of coughing that was hard to stop. When he could, he croaked, "Come on, you bastards! Get in there before they lock us out!"

They launched through the air, guns blazing. The noise was deafening, and Bull could only imagine what it would sound like from farther away. Distant thunder in a land that had never known rain. He pushed his mech forward, magnetic boots clamping and releasing, as the doors rolled their way nearer to closed. He was the last one into the corridor. At the far end, the air was a cloud of smoke and blood. The farther door was almost closed, but at the side, Naomi Nagata was elbow deep in an access panel, Holden at her back with assault rifle in hand. As Bull approached, the woman pulled something free. A stream of black droplets geysered out into the empty space of the corridor, and the sharp smell of hydraulic fluid cut through the air. The door stopped closing.

In the chaos it was hard to say, but at a guess, Bull thought he still had between fifteen and twenty people standing. It wasn't great, but it could have been worse. Once they got into engineering, things would open up again. There would be cover. The few meters beyond the second door, though, would be a kill zone. It was the space all his people had to go through to get anyplace else. If Ashford's people had any tactical sense at all, they'd be there, waiting for the first sign of movement.

It was a standoff, and he was going to have to be the one to break it. Verbinski skimmed by, as comfortable weightless as a fish in water. He turned, tapped his feet against the wall, and came to something close to a dead stop.

"Going to be a bear making it through there," the Martian said.

"I was just thinking that," Bull said.

Verbinski looked at the half-closed door like a carpenter sizing up a board.

"Be nice if we had some explosives," he said. "Something to clear the area a little. Give us some breathing room."

"You trying to tell me something, Sergeant?"

Verbinski shrugged and took a thin black cassette out of his pocket. Bull hoisted his eyebrows.

"Concussion?" he said.

"Two thousand kilojoules. We call them spine crackers."

"You smuggled arms onto my ship, Sergeant?"

"Just felt a little naked without 'em."

"I'll overlook it this time," Bull said and raised his hands, rallying the troops to him. They took cover behind the half-closed door. Verbinski crawled out onto the surface and peeked over the side, out and back fast as a lizard's tongue. Half a dozen bullets split the air where his head had been. The

Martian floated in the air, his legs in lotus position, as he armed the little black grenade. Bull waited, Holden and Corin at his side.

“Just to check,” Holden said. “We’re throwing grenades into the place that controls the reactor?”

“We are,” Bull said.

“So the worst-case scenario?”

“Worst-case scenario is we lose and Ashford kills the solar system,” Bull said. “Losing containment on the reactor and we all die is actually second worst.”

“Never a sign things have gone well,” Holden said.

Verbinski held up a fist, and everyone in the group put their hands over their ears. Verbinski did something sharp with his fingers and flicked the black cassette through the gap between the door and its frame. The detonation came almost at once. Bull felt like he’d been dropped into the bottom of a swimming pool. His vision pulsed in time with his heart, but he pushed the joysticks forward. His ears rang and he felt his consciousness starting to slip a little. As he maneuvered his mech through the space into engineering, it occurred to him that he was going to be lucky if he didn’t pass out during the fight. He had a broken spine and his lungs were half full of crap. No one would have thought less of him if he’d stayed behind. Except he didn’t care what people thought about him. It was Ashford who cared about that.

The fight on the other side was short. The grenade had been much worse for the defenders. Half of the soldiers had dropped their weapons before all of Bull’s people made it in. Only Garza had held out, holding the long corridor between main engineering and the communications array board until Corin had stepped into the space and shot him in the bridge of the nose, doing with a pistol what would have been a difficult shot with a scoped rifle. They took half a dozen of Ashford’s men alive, the prisoners zip-tied to handholds in the bulkheads. None of them had been Bull’s.

They found Ruiz under a machining table, curled with her arms around her knees. When she came out, her skin had a gray cast to it, and her hands were trembling. Naomi moved around her, shifting from a display panel to the readouts on the different bits of equipment, checking what was being reported in one place against what it said elsewhere. Holden hovered behind her like the tail of a kite.

“Anamarie,” Bull said. “You all right?”

Ruiz nodded.

“Thank you,” she said, and then before she could say anything else, Naomi sloped in, stopping herself against the desk.

“Was this where Sam was working?” she asked.

Ruiz looked at her for a moment, uncomprehending. When she nodded, it seemed almost tentative.

“What are you seeing?” Bull said. “Can you shut it down?”

“If you just want to drop the core, I can probably do that,” Naomi said. “But I don’t know if I can get her started again, and there are some folks on the ship who might want to keep breathing. Controlled shutdown would be better.”

Bull smiled.

“We need to shut everything down,” Holden said. “The reactor. The power grid. Everything.”

“I know, honey,” Naomi said, and Holden looked chagrined.

“Sorry.”

In one of the far corners of the deck, someone yelped. Corin came gliding across the open space, serenely holding in a choke an Earther Bull didn’t recognize. It occurred to him that she might be having too much fun with this part. Might not be healthy.

“I don’t know what Sam put in place to sabotage the comm laser,” Naomi said. “I have to do an audit before I can undo any of it. And without—” Naomi stopped. Her jaw slid forward. She cleared

her throat, swallowed. "Without Sam, it's going to be harder. This was her ship."

"Can you just take the laser off-line?" Bull asked.

"Sure," Naomi said. "As long as no one's shooting at me while I'm doing it."

"And how about turning up the nitrogen in the command enough that everyone up there takes a little nap?"

"I can help with that," Ruiz said. Her voice sounded a little stronger.

"All right," Bull said. "Here's what we're doing. Nagata's in charge of engineering. Anything she says, you do." Ruiz nodded, too numb to protest. "Your first priority is get the laser off-line so none of those pendejos in control can fire it. Your second priority is to tweak the environmental controls on the command deck. Your third priority is to shut down the ship so we can bring it back up, see if Mister Holden's ghost is going to keep its promises."

"Sir," Naomi said.

"Corin!" Bull shouted. The coughing stopped him for a moment. It still wasn't violent, and it didn't bring anything up. He didn't know if that was a good sign or a bad one. Corin launched herself to the control board. "You and Holden head up the external elevator shaft with a handful of zip ties. When everyone up there's asleep, you two make sure they don't get confused and hurt themselves."

Corin's smile was cold. Might be that Ashford wasn't a problem he'd have to solve. Bull tried to bring himself to care one way or the other, but his body felt like he'd been awake for a week.

"Why am I doing that?" Holden asked.

"To keep you out of her way," Bull said. "We'll keep your XO safe. We need her."

He could see Holden's objections gathering like a storm, but Naomi stopped them. "It's okay." And that seemed to be that.

"Alex is going to the *Roci* to shut down whatever we left on," Holden said, shrugging. "I'll help him with the EVA suit before I go."

"Okay," Bull said gravely. He was willing to pretend they'd struck some kind of compromise, if that helped. He heard the sound of men laughing and recognized the timbre of Sergeant Verbinski's voice. "Excuse me."

The mech clanked across the deck, magnetic locks clinging and releasing. The others all floated freely in the air, but with three-quarters of his body dead and numb, Bull knew he wouldn't be able to maneuver. It was like he was the only one still constrained by gravity.

Verbinski and his squad were in an alcove near the supply shop. One of the marines had been shot in the elbow. His forearm was a complication of bone and meat, but he was laughing and talking while the others dressed the wound. Bull wondered how much they'd doped him. He caught Verbinski's gaze and nodded him closer.

"You and your people," Bull said when they were out of earshot. "You did good work back there."

"Thank you," Verbinski said. The pride showed right through the humble. "We do what we can. If we'd had our suits, now—"

"Thing is," Bull said. "Those grenades? How many of them you still have on you?"

"Half a dozen," Verbinski said.

"Yeah," Bull sighed. "Nothing personal, but I'm going to need to confiscate those."

Verbinski looked shocked for a moment. Then he laughed.

"Always the hardass," he said.

Chapter Forty-Six: Clarissa

What's going on, Jojo?"

"I think we've got a problem, sir. Take a look."

Monica Stuart appeared on the monitors, her professionally calm face like a being from a different reality.

"Today," she said, her hands folded in her lap and a twinkle in her eye, "we'll tell you how to go home."

"What. The. *Fuck!*" Ashford shouted, dashing his hand across the display. "What is this?"

"They're making a new broadcast, sir," the security man said. Clarissa watched Ashford turn and stare at him, watched the man shrivel under the weight of his gaze.

"Exclusive to Radio Free Slow Zone," Monica said, "we have reason to believe that if we in the united human fleet can reduce our energy output low enough to no longer appear threatening—"

"Shut her down," Ashford said. "Call everyone that's still in the drum and shut that feed off. Get me Ruiz. I want power cut to that whole section if we have to."

"Is this something we need to concern ourselves with?" Cortez asked. His voice had an overtone of whining. "What they do or say can't matter now, can it?"

"This is my ship!" Ashford shouted. "I'm in control."

"Once we've destroyed the Ring, though—"

Clarissa put a hand on Cortez's shoulder and shook her head once.

"He's the father," she said. "The ship is his house."

"Thank you," Ashford said to her, but with his eyes still on Cortez. "I'm glad that someone here understands how this works."

"Suppression team is dispatched," Jojo said. "You want me to pull from the guard units too?"

"Whatever it takes," Ashford said. "I want you to get it done."

On the screen, the view shifted, and Anna's face filled the screen. Her hair was pulled back, and someone had given her makeup in a way that made her look like everyone else in broadcast. Clarissa felt a strange tug in her chest, resentment and alarm. *Get out of there*, she thought at the screen. *God's not going to stop bullets for you.*

"The idea," Anna said, "is that the station has identified us as an ongoing threat. Its actions toward us have been based in a kind of fear. Or, that's wrong. A caution. We are as unknown and unpredictable to it as it is to us. And so we have reason to believe that if we appear to be less threatening, it may relax its constraints."

The camera cut back to Monica Stuart, nodding and looking sober. All the physical cues that would indicate Anna was a serious woman with important opinions.

"And what is your plan, exactly?" Monica asked.

Anna's laughter bubbled. "I wouldn't call the plan mine. What we're thinking is that if we power down the reactors in all the ships and reduce energy being used, the station can be induced to... well, to see us less as a threat and more as a curiosity. I mean, see this all from its perspective. A gate opened, and whatever it had been expecting to come through, instead there came a ship running ballistic at tremendous speed. Then a flotilla of new ships behind that, and armed soldiers who went

aboard the station itself with weapons firing. If something came to us that way, we'd call it an invasion."

"And so by giving some indication that we aren't escalating the attack...?"

"We give whatever we're dealing with here the opportunity to not escalate against us," Anna said. "We've been thinking of the protomolecule and all the things that came from it as—"

The screen went dark. Ashford scowled at his control boards, calling up and dismissing information with hard, percussive taps. Cortez floated beside Clarissa, frowning. Humiliated. He had engineered Ashford's escape and reconquest of the *Behemoth*, and she could see in the older man's eyes that it wasn't what he'd expected it to be. She wondered if her own father had that same expression in his cell back on Earth, or wherever it was they'd put him.

"Ruiz," Ashford snapped. "Report. What's our status?"

"I still have half an hour, sir," the woman said through the connection.

"I didn't ask how much time you had left," the captain said. "I asked for a report."

"The conductant is in place and curing," the woman said. "It looks like it'll be done on time. I've found a place in the breaker system that Sam... that Sam put in a power cutout."

"You've replaced that?"

"I did, but I don't know if there are others. She could have sabotaged the whole circuit."

"Well," Ashford said. "You have half an hour to check it."

"That's what I'm doing, Sir."

Ashford tapped the control panel again. Clarissa found herself wishing he'd put the newsfeed back on. She wanted to know what Anna was saying, even if it was only as a way to pass the time. The air on the bridge wasn't as hot and close as it had been in the drum, but the coolness wasn't comforting. If anything, it seemed to underscore the time they'd been waiting. Her belly was beginning to complain with hunger, and she had to imagine that the others were feeling the same. They were holding the bridge of the largest spacecraft humanity had ever built, trapped in the starless dark by an alien power they barely began to comprehend, but they were still constrained by the petty needs of flesh, and their collective blood sugar was getting pretty low. She wondered what it said about her that she'd watched a woman shot to death not two hours before and all she could think about now was lunch. She wondered what Anna would have thought.

"Have we shut those bitches up yet?" Ashford snapped.

"The suppression teams are arriving at the colonial administrative offices, sir," Jojo said. And then, a moment later, "They're encountering some resistance."

Ashford smiled.

"Do we have targeting?" he asked.

"Sir?" one of the other guards said.

"Are the comm laser's targeting systems online?"

"Um. Yes. They're responsive."

"Well, while they mop up downstairs, let's line up our shot, shall we?"

"Yes, sir."

Clarissa kept hold of a handle on the wall absently, watching the captain and his men coordinating. It was hard for her to remember how small the Ring was, and how vast the distances they'd traveled to be here. She had to admire the precision and care that they would need to destroy it. The beauty of it was almost surgical. Behind her, the security station popped and clicked. Among the alerts, she heard the murmur of a familiar voice, lifted in fear. She looked around. No one was paying any attention to her, so she pushed herself gently back.

The security station monitor was still on the newsfeed. Monica Stuart looked ashen under her makeup, her jaw set and her lips thin. Anna, beside her, was squeezing the tip of one thumb over and over anxiously. Another man was propped between them in a medical gurney.

“—anything we can to cooperate,” the earnest man was saying into the camera.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Williams,” Monica Stuart said. “I hate to add a complicating note to all this, but I’ve just been informed that armed men have arrive outside the studio and we are apparently under attack at the moment.” She laughed nervously, which Clarissa thought was probably newsfeed anchor code for, *Oh my God, I’m going to die on the air*. Anna’s voice came in a moment before the cameras cut to her.

“This is an extreme situation,” Anna said, “but I think something like this is probably going on in every ship that’s listening to us right now. We’re at the point where we, as a community, have to make a choice. And we’re scared and grieving and traumatized. None of us is sure what the right thing to do would be. And—”

In the background, the unmistakable popping of slug throwers interrupted Anna for a moment. Her face paled, but she only cleared her throat and went on.

“And violence is a response to that fear. I hope very much that we can come together, though, and—”

“She’ll go down talking,” Cortez said. Clarissa hadn’t heard him come in behind her, hadn’t sensed him approaching. “I have a tremendous respect for that woman.”

“But you think she’s wrong.”

“I think her optimism is misplaced,” Cortez said.

“—if we do escalate our attacks on the station and the Ring,” Anna said, “we have to expect that the cycle will go on, getting bigger and more dangerous until one side or the other is destroyed, and I wish—”

“What do you think she’d say about your pessimism?” Clarissa asked.

Cortez looked up at her, his eyes wide with surprise and amusement. “My pessimism?”

Clarissa fought the sudden, powerful urge to apologize. “What else would you call it?”

“We’ve looked the devil in the eyes out here,” Cortez said. “I would call it realism.”

You didn’t look into the devil’s eyes, she thought. You saw a bunch of people die. You have no idea what real evil is. Her memory seemed to stutter, and for a moment, she was back on the *Cerisier*, Ren’s skull giving way under her palm. *There’s a difference between tragedy and evil, and I am that difference.*

“Captain! They’re taking fire at engineering!”

Cortez turned back toward the bridge and launched himself awkwardly through the air. Clarissa took a last look at Anna on the screen, leaning forward and pressing the air with her hands as if she could push calm and sanity through the camera and into the eyes of anyone watching. Then she followed Cortez.

“How many down?” Ashford demanded.

“No information, sir,” Jojo said. “I have a video feed.”

The monitor blinked to life. The engineering deck flickered, pixelated, and came back. A dozen of Ashford’s men were training guns at a pressure door that was stuck almost a third of the way closed. Ashford strained against his belts, trying to get closer to the image. Something—a tiny object or a video feed artifact—floated across the screen, and everything went white. When the image came back, Ashford said something obscene.

Armed people poured through the opening like sand falling through an hourglass. Clarissa recognized Jim Holden by the way he moved, the intimacy of long obsession making him as obvious as her own family would have been. And so the tall figure beside him had to be Naomi, whom Melba had almost killed. And then, near the end, the only one walking in the null-g environment, Carlos Baca. Bull. The head of security, and Ashford’s nemesis. He walked slowly across the deck, his real legs strapped together and his mechanical ones lumbering step by painful step. One of Ashford’s people tried to fire and was shot, his body twisting in the air in a way that reminded her of seeing a

caterpillar cut in half. She realized that the sound she was hearing was Ashford cursing under his breath. He didn't seem to stop for breath.

"Lock down the perimeter," Ashford yelled. "Ruiz! Ruiz! We have to fire. We have to fire now!"

"I can't," the woman's voice said. "We don't have a connection."

"I don't care if it's stable, I have to fire now."

"It's not unstable, sir," the woman said. "It's not *there*."

Ashford slammed his fist against the control panel and grimaced. She didn't know if he'd broken his knuckles, but she wouldn't have been surprised. For the next fifteen minutes, they watched the battle play out, the invading force sweeping through the engineering deck. Clarissa tried to keep tabs on where Holden and Naomi were, the way she might watch a dramatic show for one or two favorite minor actors.

"Redirect the suppression teams," Ashford said.

"Yes... ah..."

Ashford turned toward Jojo. The guard's face was pale. "I'm having trouble getting responses from the controls. I think... I think they're locking us out."

Ashford's rage crested and then sank into a kind of deathly calm. He floated in his couch, his hands pressed together, the tips of both index fingers against his lower lip.

"Environmental controls aren't responding," Jojo said, his voice taking on the timbre of near panic. "They're changing the atmosphere, sir."

"Environmental suits," Ashford said. "We'll need environmental suits."

Clarissa sighed and launched herself across the cabin to the open access panels.

"What are you doing?" Ashford shouted at her. She didn't answer.

The internal structure of the *Behemoth* wasn't that different from any other bridge, though it did have more redundancy than she'd expected. If it had been left in its original form, it would have been robust, but the requirements of a battleship were more rigorous than the elegant generation ship had been, and some of the duplicate systems had been repurposed to accommodate the PDCs, gauss guns, and torpedoes. She turned a monitor on, watching the nitrogen levels rise in the bridge. Without the buildup of carbon dioxide, they wouldn't even feel short of breath. Just a little light-headed, and then out. She wondered whether Holden would let them die that way. Probably Holden wouldn't have. Bull, she wouldn't bet on.

It didn't matter. Ren had trained her well. She disabled remote access to their environmental systems with the deactivation of a single circuit.

"Sir! I have atmo control back!" Jojo shouted.

"Well, get us some goddamn air, then!" Ashford shouted.

Clarissa looked at her work with a sense of calm pride. It wasn't pretty, and she wouldn't have wanted to leave it that way for long, but she'd done what needed doing and it hadn't shut down the system. That was pretty good, given the circumstances.

"How much have you got?" Ashford snapped.

"I've got mechanical, atmosphere... everything local to command, sir."

Like a thank-you would kill you, Clarissa thought as she floated back toward the door to the security station.

"Can we do it to them?" Ashford asked. "Can we shut off their air?"

"No," Jojo said. "We're just local. But at least we don't need those suits."

Ashford's scowl changed its character without ever becoming a smile.

"Suits," he said. "Jojo. Do we have access to the powered armor Pa took from those Martian marines?"

Jojo blinked, then nodded sharply. "Yes, sir."

"I want you to find four people who'll fit in them. Then I want you to go down to engineering and get me control of my ship."

Jojo saluted, grinning. "Yes, sir."

"And Jojo? *Anyone* gets in your way, you kill them. Understand?"

"Five by five."

The guard unstrapped and launched himself toward the hallway. She heard voices in the hall, people preparing for battle. *We have to expect the cycle will go on, getting bigger and more dangerous until one side or the other is destroyed.* Who said that? It seemed like something she'd just heard. Under local control the ventilation system had a slightly different rhythm, the exhalations from recyclers coming a few seconds closer together and lasting half as long. She wondered why that would be. It was the sort of thing Ren would have known. It was the sort of thing she only noticed now.

Ren. She tried to imagine him now. Tried to see herself the way he would see her. She was going to die. She was going to die and make everyone else safe by doing it. It wouldn't bring him back to life, but it would make his dying mean something. And it would avenge him. In her mind's eye, she still couldn't see him smiling about it.

Half an hour later, the four people Jojo had selected came into the room awkwardly. The power of the suits made moving without crashing into things difficult. The cowlings shone black and red, catching the light and diffusing it. She thought of massive beetles.

"We've got no ammunition, sir," one of them said. Jojo. His voice was made artificially flat and crisp by the suit's speakers.

"Then beat them to death," Ashford said. "Your main objective is the reactor. If all you can get is enough for us to fire the laser, we still win. After that, I want Bull and his allies killed. Anyone who's there that isn't actively fighting alongside you, count as an enemy. If they aren't for us, they're against us."

"Yes, sir."

"Sir!" one of the men at the controls said.

"What?"

"I think we have someone in the external elevator shaft, sir."

"Assault force?"

"No, but they may be trapping it."

Clarissa turned away.

In the security station, the newsfeed was still spooling. Women's voices punctuated by occasional gunfire. Ashford's men hadn't taken the station yet. She wondered whether he'd let his men gun down Monica Stuart and Anna on a live feed where everyone could see it. Then she wondered how he'd prevent it from happening even if he wanted to. It wasn't like there would be any consequences. If they won and blew the Ring, they'd all die here one way or another. A few premature deaths along the way should be neither here nor there. When what came next didn't matter, anybody could do anything. Nothing had consequences.

Except that everyone always dies. You're distracting yourself from something.

Cortez floated in the security booth itself. His face lit from below by the monitor. He looked over as she approached, his smile gentle and calm.

"Ashford's sending men down to retake engineering," she said.

"Good. That's very good."

"—on the *Corvusier*," a brown-skinned woman was saying. "You know me. You can trust me. All we're asking is that you shut down the reactor for a few hours and pull the batteries from the emergency backups. Power down the systems, so we can get out of here."

“They value their own lives so much,” Cortez said. “They don’t think about the price their survival brings with it. The price for everybody.”

“They don’t,” Clarissa agreed, but something sat poorly with the words. Something itched. “Do you believe in redemption?”

“Of course I do,” Cortez said. “Everything in my life has taught me that there is nothing that fully removes us from the possibility of God’s grace, though sometimes the sacrifices we must make are painfully high.”

“—if we can just come together,” Anna said on the screen, leaning in toward the camera. A lock of red hair had come out of place and fell over her left eye. “Together, we can solve this.”

“What about you?” Cortez asked. He put his hand against her back. “Do you believe in redemption?”

“No,” she said. “Just sacrifice.”

“Mao,” Ashford barked from the other room. “Get out here.”

Clarissa floated to the doorway. The captain looked grayer than he had before. There was swelling around his eyes that would have been dark circles if they’d had any gravity.

“Captain?”

“You understand how all this crap is wired up.”

“A little,” she said.

“I’ve got something I need you to do.”

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Chapter Forty-Seven: Holden

The elevator shaft that ran outside the entire two-kilometer length of the *Behemoth's* drum section stretched out ahead of him. With Naomi consolidating control over the ship, most of the ancillary systems were down or unsafe to use. The primary elevator was locked at the shaft's midway point. There was a secondary elevator in storage near the top of the shaft, but it could only be activated if the first elevator was removed from the tracks and locked down. So instead of a comfortable four-minute ride, the trip to the bridge was a two-kilometer-long zero-g float through hard vacuum with a big steel-and-ceramic box blocking the midpoint.

It could be worse. From the security camera streams Naomi had been able to dig into, it didn't look like Ashford expected anyone to come at the bridge that way. He'd fortified his position at the command-level transition point once word had gone out about the attack on engineering. But so far they hadn't reinforced the elevator shaft at all. They'd been expecting to hold both ends, and apparently it hadn't occurred to them yet that they didn't.

Bull had warned him that Ashford might be losing his mind under the stress of the situation, but he wasn't a stupid man. He'd had a notably mistake-free career as an OPA captain up to that point, which was why he'd seemed the safe choice to Fred Johnson. Holden couldn't count on him to make mistakes that would make things easy. But if Naomi won out in engineering it wouldn't matter. By the time they reached the bridge everyone there would be blissfully asleep.

Holden had the broadcast from Radio Free Slow Zone playing at low volume in his helmet. Anna and Monica were still explaining to the flotilla about the need to shut down all the power in a back-and-forth sort of interview format while occasional volleys of gunfire popped in the background. Somehow it made the crazy things Anna was saying seem sane. Holden gave Monica points for knowing it would work that way. And, so far, the sounds of fighting seemed light. Amos was probably bored.

They'd made a plan, and so far everything was more or less going the way they'd hoped. The thought left Holden increasingly terrified.

Without warning the wall-mounted LEDs in the shaft went out. Holden turned on his suit lights but didn't slow his climb. He threw a strange double shadow on the bulkhead when Corin's suit lights came on.

"I'm not sure if that means we're winning or losing," he said, just to have something to say.

Corin grunted at him noncommittally. "I see the lift."

Holden tilted his torso back to shine the suit lights farther up the shaft. The bottom of the elevator was visible a hundred meters ahead as a wall of metal and composite.

"There's supposed to be a maintenance hatch we can open."

Corin held up a fist in assent, and while still drifting up the elevator shaft began rummaging around in the duffel she'd brought from engineering. She pulled out a handheld plasma torch.

Holden rotated his body to hit the bottom of the elevator feet first, then kicked on his boot magnets. He walked over to the hatch and tried to open it, but as they suspected it was locked from the inside. Without waiting to be asked Corin started cutting it open with her torch.

"Bull, you there?" Holden asked, switching to the agreed-upon channel.

"Trouble?"

“Just cutting the elevator right now, wanted to check in.”

“Well,” Bull said, drawing the word out. “We’re hitting either home runs or strikes here. We own the essential systems, we’ve got the laser down, and we’re working on killing the reactor.”

“What are we missing?” Holden asked. Corin’s torch sputtered and went out, and she began a quiet profanity-laced conversation with herself as she replaced the power pack with another from her duffel.

“Naomi can’t get into the bridge systems. They’ve got her totally locked out, which means no knockout gas for the entry.”

Which meant, by last count, him and Corin fighting their way past at least fifteen of Ashford’s people, and possibly more. Through a narrow doorway, down a long corridor with no cover. It would make the entry into engineering look like a walk in the park.

“We can’t do that with two people,” Holden said. “There’s no chance.”

Corin, who’d been listening in on her radio, looked up. She hit the elevator hatch with one gauntleted fist and the cut piece fell inside, edges glowing dull red. She made no move to enter, waiting for the outcome of his conversation with Bull. Her expression was blank; it could have meant anything.

“We’re sending some help, so sit tight at the command deck entry hatch and wait for—” He stopped, and Holden could hear someone speaking to him, though the words were too low to make out. It sounded like Naomi.

“What’s up?” Holden asked, but Bull didn’t answer. An increasingly animated conversation happened on Bull’s end for several minutes. Bull’s replies were fragments that without context meant nothing to Holden. He waited impatiently.

“Okay, new problem,” Bull finally said.

“Bigger than the ‘we can’t get into the bridge without dying’ problem?”

“Yeah,” Bull said. Holden felt his stomach drop. “Naomi caught something on a security cam they missed in the corridor outside the bridge. Four people in power armor just left the command deck. It’s the armor we took from the Martians. No way to track them, but I can guess where they’re headed.”

There was only one place Ashford would be sending that much firepower. Engineering.

“Get out,” Holden said, more panic in his voice than he’d hoped to hear. “Get out now.”

Bull chuckled. It was not a reassuring sound. “Oh, my friend, this will be a problem for you before it is for us.”

Holden waited. Corin shrugged with her hands and climbed inside the elevator to open the upper hatch. No need to cut it. The locks were on the inside.

“There are only three ways to get to us,” Bull continued. “They can go down through the drum, but that’s messy. The maintenance corridor on the other side of the drum can’t be accessed when the drum is rotating. That leaves one good way to head south on this beast.”

“Right through us,” Holden said.

“Yup. So guess what? Your mission just changed.”

“Delaying action,” Corin said.

“Give the lady a prize. We still might be able to win this thing if we can buy Naomi a little more time. You get to buy it for her.”

“Bull,” Holden said. “There are two of us with light assault rifles and sidearms here. Those people have force recon armor. I’ve watched someone work in that gear up close. We won’t be a delay. We’ll be a cloud of pink mist they fly through at full speed.”

“Not quite that fast. I’m not an idiot, I pulled all the ammo from the suits, and as an added precaution I went ahead and yanked the firing contacts in the guns.”

“That’s good news, actually, but can’t they just tear us limb from limb?”

“Yeah,” Bull said. “So don’t let them grab you if you can avoid it. Buy us as much time as you can. Bull out.”

Holden looked at Corin, who was looking back at him, the same blank expression on her broad face. His heart was beating triple time. Everything took on a sense of almost painful reality. It was like he’d just woken up.

He was about to die.

“Last stand time,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

“This is as good a place as any.” She pointed at the boxy and solid-looking elevator. “Use the upper hatch for cover, they’ll have to come at us without any cover of their own, and without guns they’ll have to close and engage at point blank. We can dump a lot of fire into them as they approach.”

“Corin,” Holden said. “Have you ever seen one of those suits at work?”

“Nope. Does it change what we need to do here?”

He hesitated.

“No,” he said. “I guess it really doesn’t.” He pulled the assault rifle off his back and left it floating next to him. He checked his ammo. Still the same six magazines it had been when he stuffed them in the bandolier.

Nothing to do but wait.

Corin found a spot by the hatch where she could hook one foot under a handhold set into what would be the wall under thrust. She settled in, staring up the elevator shaft through her sights. Holden tried doing the same, but got antsy and had to start moving around.

“Naomi?” he said, switching to their private channel and hoping she was still on the radio.

“I’m here,” she said after a few seconds.

Holden started to reply, then stopped. Everything that came into his head to say seemed trite. He’d been about to say that he’d loved her since the moment he met her, but that was ludicrous. He’d barely even noticed Naomi when they first met. She’d been a tall, skinny engineer. When he got to know her better, she’d become a tall, skinny, and brilliant engineer, but that was it. He felt like they’d eventually become friends, but the truth was he could barely remember the person he’d been back on the *Canterbury* now.

Everyone had lost something in the wake of the protomolecule. The species as a whole had lost its sense of its own importance. Its primacy in the universal plan.

Holden had lost his certainty.

When he thought back to the man he’d been before the death of the *Cant*, he remembered a man filled with righteous certainty. Right was right, wrong was wrong, you drew the lines thus and so. His time with Miller had stripped him of some of that. His time working for Fred Johnson had, if not removed, then filed down what remained. A sort of creeping nihilism had taken its place. A sense that the protomolecule had broken the human race in ways that could never be repaired. Humanity had gotten a two-billion-year reprieve on a death sentence it hadn’t known it had, but time was up. All that was left was the kicking and screaming.

Oddly enough, it was Miller who had given him his sense of purpose back. Or whatever the Miller construct was. He couldn’t really remember that version of himself who’d known exactly where all the lines were drawn. He wasn’t sure of much of anything anymore. But whatever had climbed up off of Venus and built the Ring, it had built Miller too.

And it had wanted to talk. To him.

A small thing, maybe. The new Miller didn’t make much sense. It had an agenda that it wasn’t explaining. The protomolecule didn’t seem particularly sorry for all the chaos and death it had caused.

But it wanted to talk. And it wanted to talk to him. Holden realized he'd found a lifeline there. Maybe there was a way out of all of the chaos. Maybe he could help find it. He recognized that latching on to the idea that the protomolecule, or at least their agent Miller, had picked him as their contact fed all of his worst inclinations to arrogance and self-importance. But it was better than despair.

And now, only starting to see that murky path out of the hole the protomolecule had dug and humanity had hurled itself into with self-destructive gusto, now he was about to be killed because of yet another petty human with more power than sense. It didn't seem fair. He wanted to live to see how humanity bounced back. He wanted to be part of it. For the first time in a long time he felt like he might be able to turn into the kind of man who could make a difference.

And he wanted to explain this to Naomi. To tell her that he was turning into a better person. The kind of person who would have seen her as more than just a good engineer all those years ago. As if he could, by being a different person now, retroactively fix the shallow, vain man he'd been then. Maybe even make himself worthy of her.

"I like you," he said instead.

"Jim," she replied after a moment. Her voice was thick.

"I've enjoyed your company ever since we met. Even when you were just an engineer and shipmate, you were a very likable one."

There was only a faint static hiss on the radio. Holden pictured Naomi retreating into herself, letting her hair fall across her eyes to hide them in that way she did when she was in an uncomfortable emotional situation. Of course, that was silly. With no gravity her hair wouldn't do that. But the image made him smile.

"Thank you," he said, letting her off the hook. "Thank you for everything."

"I love you, Jim," she finally said. Holden felt his body relax. He saw his coming death, and wasn't afraid of it anymore. He'd miss all the good stuff to follow, but he'd help make it happen. And a very good person loved him. It was more than most people got in a lifetime.

A low screech started, which cycled up into a howl. For a second, Holden thought Naomi was screaming into her headset. He almost started comforting her before he realized he could feel the vibration in his feet. The sound wasn't coming across the radio. It was transmitting through his boots on the elevator wall. The entire ship was vibrating.

Holden placed his helmet against the wall to get a better sound, and the scream of the ship was almost deafening. It stopped after an endless minute with an ear-shattering bang. Silence followed.

"What the fuck?" Corin said under her breath.

"Naomi? Bull? Anyone still on the line?" Holden yelled, thinking that whatever had happened had torn the ship apart.

"Yeah," Bull said. "We're here."

"What—" Holden started.

"Mission change," Bull continued. "That sound was them slamming the brakes on the habitat drum. Catastrophic inertia change 2.0. There are a lot of people in that drum getting thrown around right now."

"Why would they do that? Just to stop the broadcast?"

"Nope," Bull said with a tired sigh. He sounded like a man who'd just been informed he was going to have to pull a double shift. "It means they think we fortified the elevator shaft and they're coming the other way."

"We're on our way back," Holden said, gesturing at Corin to follow him.

"Negative," Bull said. "If they get the laser back online here while Ashford's still sitting at that control panel, we lose."

“So what? We’re supposed to get up there, break into the bridge, and shoot everyone while their guys are down there breaking into engineering and shooting all of you?”

Bull’s sigh sounded tired.

“Yeah.”

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Chapter Forty-Eight: Bull

They came out of the maintenance shaft like an explosion. Four black-and-red monsters in roughly human shape. Bull and the people he'd managed to gather opened fire as soon as they saw them. A dozen guns against a maelstrom.

"Don't let them get to the reactor controls," Bull shouted.

"Roger that," one of the Earthers said. "Any idea how we stop them, sir?"

He didn't have one. He unloaded his pistol's clip with one hand, driving the mech backward across the deck with the other. One of the Martian marines cut across overhead, rifle blazing. Small white marks appeared on the breastplate of the nearest attacker, like a child's thumbprints on a window. The man in powered armor reached the nearest workstation, ripped the crash couch out of the decking with one hand, and threw it like a massive baseball. The couch sang through the air and shattered against the bulkhead where it hit. If there had been anyone in its path, it would have been worse than a bullet.

Bull kept backing up. When his clip ran out, he gave his full attention to driving the mech. The last of the attackers out of the shaft tried to leap across the room, but the armor's amplification made it more like a launch. The red-and-black blur careened off the far wall with a sound like a car wreck.

"And that," Sergeant Verbinski said across the radio, "is why we spend six months training before they put us in those things." He sounded amused. Good thing somebody was.

Fighting in null g complicated the tactics of a firefight, but the basic rule stayed the same. Hold territory, stay behind cover, have someone there to keep the other side busy when you had to move. The problem, Bull saw almost at once, was that they didn't have anything that would damage their opponents. The best they could do was make loud noises and trust the people in the battle armor to give in to their reflexive caution. It wouldn't win the war. Hell, it would barely postpone losing the battle.

"Naomi," Bull said. "How're you doing back there?"

"I can dump the core, power this whole bastard down. Just give me three more minutes," she said. He could hear the focus and drive in her voice. The determination. It didn't count for shit.

"That's not going to happen," he said.

"Just... just hold on."

"They're coming back that way now," Bull said. "And there's not a goddamn thing we can do to stop them."

The four attackers bounced through engineering like grasshoppers, massive bodies crashing into walls and consoles, shearing off bits of the bulkhead where they scraped against it. At this point, their best hope was that the enemy force would beat itself to death against the walls. Bull pulled back toward the entryway to the drum, then took a position behind a crate and started firing at the enemy, trying to draw them toward him. If he could get the enemy out into the habitation drum, he might be able to close down the transition point and make the bastards dig back through. It might even give Naomi the minutes she needed.

The people in power armor didn't seem to notice he was there. One caught a desk, the steel bending in the suit's glove, and started pulling hand over hand toward the reactor controls.

“Can anybody stop that guy?” Bull asked. No one on the frequency answered. He sighed. “Naomi. You got to leave now.”

“Core’s out. I can drop the grid too. Just a few more minutes.”

“You don’t have them. Come out now, and I’ll try to get you back in when things cool down.”

“But—”

“You’re no good to anyone dead,” he said. The channel went quiet, and for a long moment he thought the Belter had been caught, been killed. Then she came sailing out of the hallway, leading with her chin, her good arm and hair streaming behind her like stabilizing fins. The nearest of the people in power suits grabbed at her, but she was already gone, and they were too timid to try jumping after her.

Bull saw another of the enemy struggling with something. A gun. The massive glove was too thick to fit through the weapon’s trigger guard. As Bull watched, the enemy snapped the guard off and settled the gun in its fist, like a child’s toy carried by a large man. Bull fired at it a few more times without much hope of doing damage.

Four Earthers shouted with one voice and launched themselves at the one with the gun. The attacker didn’t fire. Just swept one big metal arm through the air, scattering Bull’s people like they were sparrows.

His people were going to get killed—were *getting* killed—and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

“Okay kids,” he said. “Let’s pack up and go home. It’s getting too hot in here.”

“Bull!” Verbinski shouted. “Watch your six!”

Bull tried to swivel in the mech, but something hit him hard in the back. The magnetic feet creaked and lost their grip, and he was floating. The world all around began to shimmer gold and blue as his consciousness slipped away. He was aware distantly of a hand on his shoulder, slowing his fall, and he saw Naomi’s face. Something had scraped her cheek, and she had a long bubble of blood clinging to her skin. He tried to turn and failed. That was right. No spine. He should have remembered that.

“What?” he said.

“They cut us off from the drum,” Naomi said and turned him so that his mech’s feet could touch deck. The air was a debris field. Twists of metal and shattered ceramic, sprays of blood slowly coalescing and growing larger like planets forming out of dust. Electricity arced from the ruins of a control panel, and the shattered glass floated in the tiny play of lightning. Two of the people in power armor stood rooted by the passage to the transition point. One held a rifle by the barrel as a club, the other had pistols with the trigger guard snapped off in either hand. A third was flailing in the air just above the maintenance shaft that they’d arrived through, struggling to get purchase on something. The fourth was shuffling across the deck toward them, its movements deliberate and controlled to keep from kicking off into the air.

“Elevator shaft airlock,” Bull said. “Fall back.”

“Everyone,” Naomi said into her hand terminal. “We’re falling back to the elevator shaft on my go. Go!”

Naomi pulled him around, then attached herself to his back in rescue hold and jumped. The enemy’s guns opened fire. Bull caught a glimpse of a woman just as a bullet passed through her leg. Saw the grimace on her face and the blood fountaining out of her. *I’m sorry*, he thought.

The wall of the elevator shaft airlock loomed up, and Naomi pushed off from him, landing on the bulkhead with the grace of a woman born to zero g. Two more bodies came through the space, Martian marines, both of them. He recognized the man called Juarez and the woman named Cass. Naomi slapped the controls and the airlock doors began to collapse. Just as the opening seemed too

narrow for a human form, two more came through. Sergeant Verbinski and a man from Bull's side of the security force schism.

Bull's head was swimming. He felt like he'd just run twenty miles in the hot New Mexican sun. He clapped his hands together less to command the attention of the people in the lock and more to bring himself back to awareness.

"That shaft's in vacuum," he said. "If that's the way we're going, we need to get suited up. Lockers are over there. Let's see what we've got to work with." A massive blow rang against the airlock door. Then another. "Might want to hurry," he said.

"You aren't going to fit," Verbinski said. "Not with that contraption."

"Yeah," Bull said. "Okay."

"Come on, big boy," the sergeant said. "Let's get you out of that."

No, Bull wanted to say. *I'm all right*. But Juarez and the other marine were already shucking him out of his brace, then out of the mech that Sam had made for him. He was a cripple again. That wasn't true. He'd been crippled ever since the catastrophe. Now he just had one fewer tool.

He'd worked with less.

The banging on the airlock door was getting louder, more intense. Along with the impact, there was something that sounded like tearing. He imagined the powered armor picking up handfuls of steel between massive fingers and pulling back, ripping at the skin of the ship. He clambered over to his mech, his body flowing out behind him, useless as a kite. He popped open the storage and took what was left of his pistol's ammunition and his hand terminal. For a moment, he didn't recognize the flat black package that he took out next. And then he did.

"If we're not staying, we'd best leave," Verbinski said.

"Let's go," Bull said, pushing the grenades into the pouch on the EVA suit's thigh.

Naomi cycled the door to the shaft. The sounds of the attack grew fainter and farther away as the air leaked out, and then the shaft was open below them. A full kilometer's fall to the trapped elevator, and then another past that to... what? Ashford? Certain death? Bull didn't know anymore what he was running from. Or to.

One by one, they pushed off, pulling themselves through the vacuum. Verbinski and the security man, Naomi and the marine, then Bull and Juarez. Without discussing it, they'd all paired off with someone who wasn't theirs. In Bull's sagging mind, that seemed important.

"Juarez?" Verbinski said on the radio, and Bull was surprised to hear his voice.

"Sir."

"If you get a good shot, you think you could crack the visors on those suits?"

"Your suit, maybe," Juarez said. "I keep mine in pretty good condition."

"Do your best," Verbinski said.

Bull felt it when the enemy force breached the airlock. He couldn't even say what it was exactly. Some little press of a shock wave, a whisper-thin breath of atmosphere. He looked down past his dead feet, and there was light at the bottom of the shaft where there shouldn't have been. There were probably about a thousand safety measures slamming down in engineering right now. He hoped so. Far below, he saw a muzzle flash, but they were so far ahead, the bullet almost certainly hit the sides of the shaft and spent itself before it could reach them.

Juarez turned, his rifle steadied between his feet. The man's face went calm and soft and the rifle flashed silently.

"Got one, Verb," he said. And then, "Sergeant?"

Verbinski didn't answer. He was still floating, skimming along the steel tracks that would guide the elevator, but his eyes were closed. His face was slack, and foam flecked his lips and nostrils. Bull hadn't even known the man was injured.

"Sergeant!" Juarez yelled.

"He's gone," Cass said.

The rest of the trip to the elevator was a thing carved from nightmares. Bull's body kept drifting wildly behind him, and his lungs felt full and wet. He'd stopped coughing, though. He didn't know if that was a good thing. Just as they reached the elevator, a lucky shot from their pursuers took the security man in the back, blowing out his air supply. Bull watched the man die, but he didn't hear it. The hatchway Corin had burned through the elevator's base seemed too small to fit through, but he got one arm in and Naomi pulled him the rest of the way.

In the body of the elevator car, Juarez took a position firing down the hole at the pursuers. Bull didn't know how much ammunition the marine had, but it had to be getting close to the end of his supply. Bull would have slouched against the wall if there had been any gravity. Instead he shifted his suit radio to the channel for Naomi.

"Give me a gun," she said before he could speak. "Give me something."

"You keep going," he said. "Get to the top of the shaft."

"But—"

"Maybe you can get the hatch open for them. Get into command."

"You can't access the controls from inside the shaft."

"In this piece-of-shit boat, you never know," Bull said. "Someone might have put a self-destruct button there. Wouldn't surprise me."

"That's your plan B?"

"I think we're pretty much on plan Z at this point," Bull said. "Anyway, you're the engineer. There's fuck-all you can do here. And I heard you with Holden before. You might as well get to see him again. Not like it costs us anything."

He watched her face as she decided. Fear, despair, regret, calm, in that order. Impressive woman. He wished he'd had a chance to know her better. And if she was able to ship with Jim Holden and love him, maybe he wasn't as bad as Bull thought either.

"Thank you," she said, then turned and launched herself along the elevator shaft toward command and her lover. *That was sweet*, Bull thought. Juarez's rifle flashed again and Bull shifted his radio frequencies to include the two marines.

"You two should go too. Head up top. See if you can storm the command."

"You sure?" Cass said, her voice calm and professional. "We've got cover here. There won't be a better place farther up."

"Yeah, pretty sure," Bull said.

"What about you?" Juarez asked.

"I'm staying here," Bull said.

"Okay, bro," Juarez said, then he and Cass were gone too. Bull thought about looking down through the shaft to see how close the enemy had come, but he didn't. Too much energy, and if he got shot in the eye at this point... well, that would just be sad. The little box of the elevator was a monochrome non-color, lit only by the backslash from his own suit light. He took as deep a breath as he could. It was pretty shallow. He drew the grenades out from his pocket, one in either hand, and carefully dialed them down to the shortest fuse.

So he was going to die here. Not what he would have picked, but what the hell. It probably beat going back and having his spine grown back wrong. He'd seen guys who lived their whole lives in a drug haze fighting the pain of a bad regrowth. He hadn't really let himself think about that before. Now it was safe to.

He tried to decide whether he regretted dying, but the truth was he was too fucking tired to care. And he couldn't breathe for crap. He was sorry he hadn't killed Ashford, but that wasn't new. He was sorry he couldn't avenge Sam or find out if Pa was alive. Or whether Ashford would actually be able to destroy the Ring. If he was sad about anything, it was that everything that was in motion now

would keep on being in motion without him, and he'd never know how it went. Never know if anything he'd done had made a difference.

His hand terminal blinked. A connection request from Monica Stuart. He wondered for a moment what she wanted with him, and then remembered that Ashford had stopped the drum. Things had to be for shit in there. He routed the request to his suit. No pictures, but the voice connection would be enough.

"Bull," the woman said. "We're being attacked up here. I think Anna's dead. What the hell's going on down there? How much longer?"

"Well, we lost engineering," he said. He felt a pang about Anna, but it was just one of many at that point. "Pretty much everyone in the attack party's dead now. Maybe five folks holed up in the elevator shaft, but the bad guys got the top and the bottom of that, so we're kind of screwed there. Managed to dump the core, but the grid's still up. It'll be enough to fire the laser. Ashford's guys are probably in engineering putting that back online, and I don't see we've got any damn way to stop him."

"Oh my God," Monica breathed.

"Yeah, it kind of sucks."

"What... what are you going to do about it?"

A beam of light shone through the hatch in the floor. Tiny bits of dust and particulate metal glimmered in it like it was swirling in water. He watched it with a half smile on his face. It meant the bad guys were almost there, but it was pretty to look at. He remembered that Monica was on the line. She'd asked him something.

"Yeah," Bull said. "So that thing where we power down the ship and save everyone? We're probably not going to do that."

"You can't give up," she said. "Please. There has to be a way."

Doesn't have to be, he thought, but didn't say. Anna thought there was a way. Where did that get her? *But if there is, I hope one of you folks finds it.*

"How bad is it in there?" he asked.

"It's... it's terrible. It's like the catastrophe happened all over again."

"Yeah, I can see that," Bull said.

"We can't go on," Monica said. "Oh God, what are we going to do?"

The light got stronger. Brighter. He couldn't see the dust motes anymore from the shine of the light.

"Monica?" Bull said. "Look, I'm sorry, but I kind of got to go now, okay? You folks just do your best. Hold it together in there, all right? And hey, if it all works out?"

"Yes?"

"Tell Fred Johnson he fucking owes me one."

He dropped the connection, unplugged his hand terminal. He took a grenade in each hand, his thumbs on the release bars. A head poked up through the hatch, then back down fast. When no one shot at it, the head came back more slowly. Bull smiled and nodded at it, welcoming. The opaque cowling went clear, and he saw Casimir staring at him. Bull grinned. Well, that was a pleasure, at least. A little treat on the way out.

"Hey," Bull said, even though the man couldn't hear him. "Hold this for me."

He tossed the two grenades, and watched the man's expression as he understood what they were.

Chapter Forty-Nine: Anna

Anna returned to consciousness floating in a tangled knot with Okju the camera operator, two office chairs, and a potted ficus plant. Someone was setting off firecrackers in long strings. Someone else was shouting. Anna's vision was blurry, and she blinked and shook her head to clear it. Which turned out to be a mistake, as shaking her head sent a spike of pain up her spine that nearly knocked her unconscious again.

"What?" she tried to say, but it came out as a slushy "bluh" sound.

"Christ, Red, I thought you were cooked there," a familiar voice replied. Rough but friendly. Amos. "I hated to think I broke my promise."

Anna opened her eyes again, careful not to move her head. She was floating in the center of what had been the studio space. Okju floated next to her, her foot tucked into Anna's armpit. Anna extricated her legs from the two office chairs they were twisted up in, and pushed the ficus away from her face.

More firecrackers went off in long, staccato bursts. It took Anna's muddled brain a few seconds to realize the sound was gunfire. Across the room, Amos was leaning against the wall next to the front door, taking a magazine out of his gun and replacing it with the smooth motion of long practice. On the other side of the door one of the UN soldiers they'd picked up was firing at someone outside. Answering gunfire blew chunks of molded fiberglass out of the back wall just a few meters from where Anna floated.

"If you aren't dead," Amos said, then paused to lean around the corner and fire off a short burst. "Then you'll probably want to get out of the middle of the room."

"Okju," Anna said, tugging on the woman's arm. "Wake up. We need to move."

Okju's arm flopped bonelessly when she pulled it, and the woman started slowly rotating in the air. Anna saw that her head was tilted at an acute angle to her shoulders, and her face was slack and her eyes stared at nothing. Anna recoiled involuntarily, the lizard living at the base of her spine telling her to get away from the dead person as quickly as possible. She yelped and pushed against Okju's body with her feet, sending it and herself floating away in opposite directions. When she hit the wall she grabbed on to an LED sconce and held on with all her strength. The pain in her neck and head was a constant percussive throb.

The sounds of gunfire didn't stop. Amos and his small, mixed band of defenders were firing out through every opening in the office space, several of which had been cut as gun ports.

They were under attack. Ashford had sent his people to stop them. Anna's memories of the last few moments came back in a rush. The terrible screeching sound, being hurled sideways at the wall.

Ashford must have shut down the drum to stop them so that his gunmen could finish them off. But if Okju had been killed as a result of the sudden stoppage, then that same effect would have been repeated dozens, maybe hundreds of times throughout the makeshift community on the *Behemoth*. Ashford was willing to kill them all to get his own way. Anna felt a growing rage, and was glad that no one had thought to give her a gun.

"Are we still broadcasting?" she yelled at Amos over the gunfire.

"Dunno, Red. Monica's in the radio room."

Anna pulled herself across the wall to the closet where they'd placed their broadcasting gear. The door was ajar, and she could see Monica floating inside, checking the equipment. The space wasn't large enough for both of them, so Anna just pushed the door open a little farther and said, "Are we still broadcasting? Can we get back on the air?"

Monica gave a humorless laugh but didn't turn around. "I thought you were dead."

"No, but Okju is. I think she broke her neck. I'll take the camera if you need me to. Where's Clip?"

"Clip was helping Amos, and he was shot in the hip. He's bleeding out in a side office. Tilly is helping him."

Anna pushed her way into the small room and put a hand on Monica's shoulder. "We have to get back on the air. We have to keep up the broadcast or this is all for nothing. Tell me what to do."

Monica laughed again, then turned around and swatted Anna's hand off of her arm. "What do you think is happening here? Ashford has men outside trying to break in and kill us. Bull and his people have lost the engine room, and Juarez says Bull's been killed. Who knows how many people he—"

Anna planted her feet against the doorjamb, grabbed Monica by the shoulders, and slammed the reporter up against the wall. "Does the broadcasting equipment still work?" She was amazed at how steady her voice sounded.

"It got banged around some, but—"

"Does. It. Work."

"Yes," Monica said. It came out as a frightened squeak.

"Get me on the channel the assault team was using, and give me a headset," Anna said, then let go of Monica's shoulders. Monica did as she asked, moving quickly and only occasionally giving her a frightened look. *I've become frightening*, Anna thought. Tasting the idea, and finding it less unpleasant than she'd expect. These were frightening times.

"Fuck!" Amos yelled from the other room. When Anna looked out, she saw one of the young Martian officers floating in the middle of the room spraying small globes of red blood into the air around him. Her friend Chris launched across the room by pushing off with his one good leg and grabbed the injured man with his one arm, then pulled him into cover.

"We're running out of time," Anna said to Monica. "Work faster."

Monica's reply was to hand her a headset with a microphone.

"Hello? This is Anna Volovodov at Radio Free Slow Zone. Is anyone left on this channel?"

Someone replied, but they were impossible to hear over the nearby gunfire. Anna turned the volume up to the maximum and said, "Repeat that, please."

"We're here," James Holden said at deafening levels.

"How many are left, and what's the situation?"

"Well," Holden said, then paused and grunted as though exerting himself for several seconds. He sounded out of breath when he continued. "We're holed up in the port elevator shaft just outside the command deck airlock. There are three of us at this position. Bull and the remaining marines are fighting the counterassault team at a position further down the shaft. I have no idea how that's going. We've run out of room to retreat, so unless someone decides to open the hatch and let us onto the bridge, we're sort of out of options."

The last part of his sentence was almost drowned out by a massive wave of incoming gunfire in her office. Amos and his group were hunkered down, leaning against the reinforced armor they'd attached to the walls. The reports of the shots and the sound of bullets hitting metal was deafening. When the fire lessened, a pair of men in *Behemoth* security armor rushed the room, spraying automatic weapons fire as they came. Two of Amos' team were hit, and more globes of red flew into the air. Amos grabbed the second man through the door and yanked him up off his magnetic hold to

the floor, then threw him at his partner. They tumbled off across the room together and then Amos fired a long burst from his weapon into both as they spun. The air was filled with so many floating red orbs of various sizes that it became difficult to see. The rest of Amos' team opened fire, and whatever attack Ashford's people had launched was apparently driven back, as no more soldiers charged through the door.

"Is there anything we can do?" Anna yelled at Holden.

"Sounds to me like you're in some shit there yourself, Preacher," Holden replied. His voice was weary. Sad. "Unless you've got the bridge access controls nearby, I'd say you should concentrate on your own problems."

More fire came through the offices, but it was sporadic. Amos had driven off their big attack, and now they were taking petulant potshots. Monica was staring at her, waiting for her to issue another order. Somehow, she'd become the person in charge.

"Set me to broadcast on the Radio Free Slow Zone feed," Anna said. In the end, talking was all she had to offer. Monica nodded at her and pointed a small camera at her face.

"This is Anna Volovodov broadcasting from the offices of Radio Free Slow Zone to anyone on the *Behemoth* that's still listening. We've failed to hold engineering, so our plan to shut down the reactor and get everyone back home is failing as well. We have people trapped in the external elevator shaft, and they can't get onto the bridge.

"So, please, if anyone listening to this can help, we need you. Everyone on this flotilla needs you. The people dying right outside your door need you. Most of all, the people we left behind on Earth and Mars and the Belt need you. If the captain does what he's planning, if he fires the laser at the Ring, everyone back home will die too. Please, if you can hear me, help us."

She stopped, and Monica put down the camera.

"Think that will work?" Monica asked.

Anna was about to say no when the wall comm panel buzzed at her. A voice said, "How do you know that?" A young voice, female, sad. Clarissa. "What you said about destroying Earth if we attack the Ring, how do you know that?"

"Clarissa," Anna said. "Where are you?"

"I'm here, on the bridge. I'm in the security station. I was watching your broadcast."

"Can you open the door and let our people in?"

"Yes."

"Will you do that?"

"How," Clarissa repeated, her tone not changing at all, "do you know what you said?"

A man generally regarded as the instigator of two solar system-wide wars got all this information from a protomolecule-created ghost that no one else can see. It wasn't a particularly compelling argument.

"James Holden got it while he was on the station."

"So *he* told you that this would happen," Clarissa said, her tone doubtful.

"Yes."

"So how do you *know*?"

"I don't, Claire," Anna said, appropriating Tilly's pet name to try and create a connection. "I don't know. But Holden believes it's true, and the consequences if he's right are too extreme to risk. So I'm taking it on faith."

There was a long moment of silence. Then a male voice said, "Clarissa, who are you talking to in here?"

It took Anna a moment to recognize it as Hector Cortez. She'd known he was on the bridge with Ashford, but somehow the reminder that he'd sided with the men who killed Bull was too much. She had to restrain herself from cursing at him.

“Anna wants me to open the elevator airlock and let the other side into the bridge. She wants me to help stop Ashford from destroying the Ring. She says it will kill everyone on Earth if we do.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Cortez said. “She’s just afraid.”

“Afraid?” Anna yelled. “Do you hear those sounds, Hector? That’s gunfire. Bullets are flying by even as we speak. You’re locked away safe and snug on the command deck planning to destroy something you don’t understand, while I am risking gunshot wounds to stop you. Who’s afraid here?”

“You’re afraid to make the necessary sacrifices to protect the people we’ve left behind. You’re only thinking of yourself,” he yelled back. Anna heard the sound of a door closing in the background. Someone had shut the door to the security station to keep the argument from being overheard. If it was Clarissa, that was a good sign.

“Clarissa,” Anna said, keeping her voice as calm as she could with the ongoing sounds of a gunfight behind her. “Claire, the people waiting outside the airlock door are going to be killed if you don’t open it. They are trapped there. People are coming to kill them.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Cortez started.

“It’s Holden and Naomi out there,” Anna continued, ignoring him. “And Bull is there too. Ashford will have them all killed.”

“They wouldn’t be in danger if they hadn’t attacked Ashford’s rightful command,” Cortez said.

“That’s three people who all made the choice to give you a second chance,” Anna said. “Bull chose to protect you from the UN fleet’s vengeance when he had no reason to. When I asked her to, Naomi forgave you for almost killing her. Holden agreed not to hurt you, in spite of the many provocations you gave him.”

“Those people are *criminals*—” Cortez tried to say over the top of her, but she kept her voice level and continued.

“These people, the people who forgive, who try to help others. The people who give their lives to save strangers, they’re on the other side of that door, dying. I don’t have to take that on faith. That’s fact. That’s happening right now.”

Anna paused, waiting for any sign Clarissa was listening. There was none. Even Cortez had stopped speaking. The comm station hissed faintly, the only sign it was still on.

“Those are the people I’m asking you to help,” Anna said. “The person I’m asking you to betray is a man who kills innocent people for expedience’s sake. Forget Earth, and the Ring, and everything else you’d have to take on faith. Ask yourself this: Do you want to let Ashford kill Holden and Naomi? No faith. Just that simple question, Claire. Can you let them die? What choice did they make when the same question was asked of them about you?”

Anna knew she was rambling. Knew she was repeating herself. But she had to force herself to stop speaking anyway. She wasn’t used to trying to save a person’s soul without being able to see them, to measure the effect her words were having by their reaction. She kept trying to fill that empty space with more talking.

“I don’t like the idea of those people being killed any more than you do,” Cortez said. He sounded sad, but committed to his position. “But there is the necessity for sacrifice. To sacrifice is literally to be made sacred.”

“Seriously?” Anna gave a humorless laugh. “We’re going to do dueling etymology?”

“What we are facing here is more than humanity is ready for,” Cortez said.

“You don’t get to decide that, Hank,” Anna said, stabbing at the radio as if it were the man. “Think about the people you’re killing. Look at who you’re working with, and tell me that in clear conscience you know you’re doing the right thing.”

“Argument by association?” Cortez said. “Really? God’s tools have always been flawed. We are a fallen people, but that we have the strength of will to do what we must, even in the face of mortal

punishment, is what makes us moral beings. And you of all people—”

The feed went silent for a moment.

“Cortez?” Anna said. But when Cortez’s voice came, he wasn’t speaking to her.

“Clarissa, what are you doing?”

Clarissa sounded calm, almost half asleep. “I opened the doors.”

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Chapter Fifty: Holden

Naomi had taken an access panel off the wall next to the command deck airlock. She'd crawled halfway inside, and only her belly and legs were visible. Holden had planted his mag boots next to the airlock's outer door and was awaiting instructions from her. Occasionally she'd ask him to try opening the door again, but every attempt so far had failed. Corin floated next to him, watching down the elevator shaft through her gunsights. They'd seen a quick flash of light down there a few minutes back that had set the bulkheads to vibrating. Something violent and explosive had happened.

Holden, having now moved on to his second last stand of the day, had come to view the whole thing with a weary sense of humor. As far as places to die went, the small platform between the elevator shaft and the airlock was about as good as any other. It was a niche in the wall of the shaft about ten feet on a side. The floor, ceiling, and bulkheads were all the same ceramic steel of the ship's outer hull. The back wall was the airlock door. The front was empty space where the elevator would normally sit. At the very least, when Ashford's people came swarming up the shaft at them, the floor of the niche would offer some cover.

Naomi scooted sideways a bit and kicked one leg. Holden could hear her over the radio as she grunted with the effort of grabbing something just out of reach.

"Gotcha," she said in triumph. "Okay, try it now!"

Holden hit the button to open the outer airlock doors. Nothing happened.

"Are you trying it?" Naomi asked.

He hit the button two more times. "Yeah. Nothing."

"Dammit. I could've sworn..."

Corin shifted enough to give him a sardonic look, but said nothing.

The truth was, Holden was out of emotional gas. He'd gone through his existential moment of truth back when he thought he was making a last stand at the elevator to buy Naomi time. Then he'd been given a reprieve when the attackers chose another path, but Naomi had been put in the firing line, which was actually worse. And then she'd shown up a few minutes ago saying Bull had sent her on ahead to get the door open while he acted as rearguard.

Every plan they'd made had failed spectacularly, with more casualties piling up at every step. And now they were at yet another last stand, with a locked door behind them and Ashford's goons ahead of them and nowhere to go. It should have been terrifying, but at this point Holden just felt sleepy.

"Try it now," Naomi said. Holden jabbed the button a few times without looking at it.

"Nope."

"Maybe..." she said and moved around, kicking her legs again.

"Two incoming," Corin said, her voice harsh and buzzing over the radio. He'd never heard her voice when it wasn't on a suit radio. He wondered whether it would have that same quality naturally. He walked over to the edge of the platform and looked down, magnetic boots having tricked his brain into thinking there was an up and down again.

Looking through his gunsight's magnification, he saw two of the Martian marines hurtling up the shaft as fast as their cheap environment suits would let them. He didn't recognize them yet. Bull wasn't with them.

"Try it now," Naomi said.

"Busy," Holden replied, scanning the space behind the marines for pursuers. He didn't see any.

Naomi climbed out of her access panel and floated over next to him to see what was going on. The marines shot up the shaft toward them at high speed, flipped at the last minute, and hit the ceiling feet first to come to a rapid stop. They pushed off and landed next to Holden, sticking to the floor with magnetic boots.

Holden could see through their faceplates now, and recognized the sniper, Juarez, and a dark-skinned woman whose name he'd never gotten.

"We've lost the hold point," Juarez said. He clutched his long rifle in one hand and a fresh magazine in the other. He loaded the gun and said, "Last mag," to his partner.

She checked her harness and said, "Three."

"Report," Holden said, slipping into military command mode without even meaning to. He'd been a lieutenant in the navy. Juarez was enlisted. The training they'd received about who gave orders and who followed them in combat died hard.

"I took out one hostile with a headshot, I believe a second was neutralized with our remaining explosives. No intel on the other two. They may have been injured or killed by the explosion, but we can't count on that."

"Bull?" Corin asked.

"He was holding the explosives. That second kill was his."

"Bull," Corin said again, choking up. Holden was surprised to see her eyes filling with tears. "We have to go get him."

"Negative," Juarez said. "The elevator has become a barrier. He's inside it. Anything we do to remove his body actively degrades our defensive position."

"Fuck you," Corin said, taking an aggressive step toward Juarez, her hands closing into fists. "We don't *leave* him—"

Before she could take another step, Holden grabbed her by her weapon harness and yanked her off the floor, then spun around to slam her against the closest bulkhead. He heard the air go out of her in a whoosh over the radio.

"Mourn later," he said, not letting her go. "When we're done. Then we mourn for all of them."

She grabbed his wrists in her hands, and for one heartstopping moment Holden thought she might fight him. He seriously questioned his ability to win a zero-g grappling match with the stocky security officer. But she just pulled his hands off her harness, then pushed herself back down to the floor.

"Understood, sir," she said.

"Back on watch," Holden said, keeping his voice as gentle as possible.

She walked back to the edge of the platform. Juarez watched without comment. After a respectful moment he said, "Plan, sir?"

"Naomi is trying to get the door open, but without any success. Blowing the elevator may have bought you two a couple more minutes, but maybe that's all it bought you."

"We'll try to make the most of them," the other marine said with a half smile. Juarez chuckled and slapped her on the back.

"So this is our final defensive position, then. Good cover and field of fire. If I get lucky maybe I can crack another mask. Cass, why don't you take that right corner, Corin can keep the left, and I'll set up here in the center. Holden can rove and back up whichever side is taking the most heat."

He paused, nodding at Holden. "If you agree, sir."

"I agree," Holden said. "In fact, I'm giving you full tactical command of this position. I'm going to be trying to help Naomi with the door. Yell if you get in trouble."

Juarez kicked off his mags, then jumped up to plant his feet on the ceiling. He straightened out, his long rifle pointed over his head, straight down the shaft. From Holden's perspective he looked like a particularly well-armed bat hanging from the roof.

"Movement," he said almost immediately.

"Shit," the marine named Cass said. "They got through the barrier fast."

"Looks like they're not quite through, but the wall is bulging like they're beating their way through it."

"I have an idea," Naomi said and walked over to the edge of the platform, then out onto the wall and over to the opposite side of the elevator shaft.

"Where are you going?" Holden asked.

"Panel," was her only answer before she popped an access hatch off the elevator shaft bulkhead and climbed inside. It was large enough that she completely disappeared. Holden didn't think there would be anything in there that could help them get the airlock door open, but he didn't care. Naomi was hidden while she stayed in there. Ashford's people might not bother to look for her. They probably didn't have good intel on who had engaged in the assault on engineering.

"Here they come," Juarez said, looking down the shaft through his telescopic sight. "Two left." His muzzle flashed once. "Shit, no hit." It flashed twice more. Cass started firing with her assault rifle on single fire, carefully aiming each shot. The bad guys were just under a kilometer away. Holden didn't think he'd be able to hit a stationary transport shuttle at that range, much less a rapidly moving man-sized target. But after having spent some time with Bobbie Draper, Holden knew that if Cass was taking the shots, it was because she thought she had a chance to score hits. He wasn't about to argue with her.

"Eight hundred meters," Juarez said, his voice no different than if he'd been giving a stranger the time. "Seven-fifty." He fired again.

Cass fired off the last of her magazine, then replaced it in one smooth motion. She had one extra left. Holden took three magazines off his own bandolier and left them floating next to her left elbow. She nodded her thanks without pausing in her firing. Juarez fired twice more, then said, "Out." He continued sighting down the scope, calling out ranges for Cass. When he hit five hundred meters, Corin started firing as well.

It was all very brave, Holden thought. None of them were the kind of people who gave up, no matter the odds. But it was also sort of pointless. Juarez had the only gun that was even remotely a threat to troops in state-of-the-art recon armor, and he'd fired it dry and only scored one kill. So they'd throw a lot of bullets at the approaching enemy because that's what people like them did, even when there was no chance. But in the end, Ashford would win. If he wasn't so emotionally drained, Holden would have been pissed.

The LEDs in the elevator shaft came back on, bathing them all with white light. The two soldiers wearing their stolen power armor were flying up the corridor toward them. Before he'd had time to wonder why the power was back on, there was a thud that Holden could feel through his feet. A large section of the elevator bulkhead slid open. The backup elevator slowly moved out into the shaft on hydraulic arms, then locked into place on the wall-mounted tracks. Lights flashed on the elevator's control panel as its systems cycled through warm-up. Then a light on the panel flashed red three times and the elevator launched down the tracks at high speed.

"Huh," Juarez said.

The impact when the hurtling backup elevator slammed into the stationary main elevator shook the bulkheads hard enough to make Holden's helmet ring like a bell.

"Well," Cass said.

Corin leaned out over the edge of the platform, looking down, and yelled, "Fuck you!" through the vacuum.

A few seconds later, Naomi's head popped back out of the open access panel. She looked up at them and waved. "Did that work?"

Holden found that he wasn't too drained to feel relief. "I think so."

"The armor is pretty tough," Juarez said. "It might be okay. But at that speed, whatever's inside it is probably a liquid now."

Naomi walked across the elevator bulkhead and then stepped over and down onto their platform. "I'm not good with guns," she said in an almost apologetic voice.

"No," Juarez said, waving his hands in a gesture of surrender. "You just keep doing your thing. Warn me if I'm in the way."

"Doesn't solve our door problem," Naomi added, still with a tone of apology.

Because he couldn't kiss her in an environment suit, Holden put an arm around her shoulder and hugged her to his side. "I'm happy with you solving the 'about to be ripped to pieces' problem."

Corin, who'd turned to look at the airlock when Naomi mentioned it, said, "Open sesame," and the outer airlock door slid open.

"Holy shit," Holden said. "Did you just magic that door open?"

"The green cycle light was blinking," Corin replied.

"Did you do that?" Holden said, turning to Naomi.

"Nope."

"Then we should be careful." Holden handed his rifle and his remaining magazines to Juarez, then drew his sidearm. "Juarez, when the inner door opens, you have the point."

Cass nodded, and Naomi punched the cycle button. The outer door closed, and for two tense minutes the air pressure equalized. Everyone other than Naomi was pointing a gun at the inner door when it finally opened.

There was nothing on the other side but a short corridor that ended at another elevator, and a second hallway going left at the midway point.

"That's the one that leads to the bridge," Corin said. "Five meters long, a meter and a half or so wide. There's a hatch, but it only closes and locks in the event of emergency decomp. Or if someone in the security station hits the override."

"Then that's our first target," Holden said. "Cass, when we go in you break right and control the security station. Juarez, you go left and try to draw any return fire away from Cass. Corin and I will go right up the gut and try to get our hands on Ashford. If we put a gun to him, I think this ends immediately. Naomi, you stay here but be ready to come running when we call. Taking control of the ship will be your bit."

"Pretty shitty plan, El Tee," Juarez said with a grin.

"You have a better one?"

"Nope, so let's get it done." Juarez pulled the rifle to his shoulder and moved off down the corridor at a quick magnetic boot shuffle. Cass followed close behind, her hand on his back. Holden took third, with Corin bringing up the rear. Naomi waited by the elevator doors, clutching her tool case nervously.

When they reached the junction, Juarez signaled the stop, then leaned around the corner. He pulled back and said, "Looks clear to the bridge entry point. When we go, go fast. Stop for nothing. Maximum aggression wins the day here."

After a round of assents from everyone, he counted down from three, yelled, "Go go go," darted around the corner, and was immediately shot.

It was so unexpected, Cass actually took a step back into Holden. Juarez screamed in pain and launched himself back into their hallway. Bullets slammed into the bulkheads and deck around him. After the long silence of vacuum in the elevator shaft, the sound of gunfire and bullet impacts was disorienting. Deafening.

Cass and Holden grabbed Juarez by his arms and pulled him around the corner out of the gunfire. With Cass covering the intersection, Holden checked Juarez over for injuries. He had gunshot wounds in his hip, upper arm, and foot. None looked instantly lethal, but together they'd bleed him out in short order. Holden pulled him back down the corridor to the airlock. He pointed at the emergency locker until Naomi followed his gesture and nodded.

"Do what you can," he said, and moved back down the hallway to Cass.

When he put his hand on her back to let her know he was there, she said, "Based on volume of fire, I'd guess ten to twelve shooters. Mostly light assault rifles and sidearms. One shotgun. That corridor is a kill box. No way through that."

"Fuck!" Holden yelled in frustration. The universe kept waiting until he was thoroughly beaten, then tossing him a nibble of hope only to yank it away again.

"New plan?" Corin asked.

"Shoot back, I guess," he said, then leaned partway around the corner and fired off three quick shots. He ducked back in time to avoid a fusillade that tore up the bulkhead behind him. When the shooting slowed, Cass launched herself across the opening to the other side. A risky move, but she made it without taking a hit, and started leaning out to lay down fire with her assault rifle. When they drove her back with return fire, Corin leaned around Holden and fired off a few shots.

Before she could pull back out of the line of fire, a round went through the arm of her environment suit, blowing white padding and black sealing gel into the air.

"Not hit, not hit," she yelled, and Cass leaned out to fire again to keep the defenders off balance.

Holden looked back down the corridor, and Naomi was stripping Juarez out of his suit, spraying bandages on his open wounds as she went.

Another wave of fire drove Cass and Corin into cover. When it let up for a second, Holden leaned out and fired a few more shots.

It was what people like them did, even when there was no chance.

Chapter Fifty-One: Clarissa

“What the hell did you do?” Ashford shouted. His face was thick and purple. The rage pulled his lips back like a dog baring his teeth. Clarissa knew she should feel fear. Should feel something. Instead, she shrugged the way she had when she was fourteen, and said it again.

“I opened the doors.”

A man appeared in the hallway for a fraction of a second, and Ashford’s men opened fire, driving him back.

“I’ve got five in the corridor,” one of Ashford’s people said. He was looking at the security camera feed. “Three women, two men. One of them’s Corin. I think Jim Holden’s one of them.”

Ashford shook his head in disgust.

“Why the fuck did you let them in here?” he said. His tone dripped acid.

“I didn’t kill them,” Clarissa said. “So you don’t get to.”

“She was in distress,” Cortez said, moving himself between her and Ashford. Shielding her with his body. “She misunderstood something I said. It wasn’t an act of malice, Captain. The girl only—”

“Someone shoot her,” Ashford said.

“No!” Cortez cried out. He sounded like someone was about to shoot him.

The guard nearest them turned. The barrel of his gun seemed suddenly enormous, but when the sound of gunfire came, it wasn’t from him. A shape—maybe a woman, maybe a man—flickered at the edge of the corridor to the bridge, and the staccato sound of gunfire filled the room. Clarissa, forgotten, pushed herself back through the doorway into the security office. Cortez followed her, his hands up around his ears to block the noise or a bullet or both. He put his hand on her shoulder as if to comfort her, but it only pushed her a little lower to the floor, him a little nearer the ceiling.

“Oh,” Cortez murmured, “I wish you hadn’t done that. I wish you hadn’t done that.”

Anna was still speaking on the security station monitor. Radio Free Slow Zone, soldiering on. There was a fresh crackle of gunfire from the bridge. Ashford shouted, “Take them out! Take them all out!” But as far as she could tell, the guards hadn’t rushed the corridor. They didn’t need to. Sooner or later, Holden and Naomi and whoever they had with them would run out of bullets, and then they’d die. Or Ashford and all his men would, and then Holden would kill them. Either way, she didn’t see how it looked good for her. And that was fine. That was what she’d come here for.

Except.

“You heard what she said? What Anna said?”

“Anna Volovodov is seriously mistaken about what is happening here,” Cortez said. “It was a mistake letting her into the project in the first place. I knew I should have asked for Muhammed al Mubi instead.”

“Did you hear what she *said*?”

“What are you talking about, child?”

“She said if we attack the Ring, it’ll take action against the people on the other side. Against everyone.”

“She can’t know that,” Cortez said. “It’s just the sort of thing the enemy would say to trick us.”

“It wasn’t her,” Clarissa said. “Holden told her.”

“The same James Holden who started a war by ‘telling’ people things?”

Clarissa nodded. He'd started at least one war. He'd destroyed Protogen, and by doing so set up the dominoes that would eventually topple Mao-Kwik and her father. He'd done all of that.

But.

"He didn't lie. All those other things he did. He never lied once."

Cortez opened his mouth to reply, his face already in a sneer. Before he could, the gunfire boomed again. She could feel Cortez flinch from it. The air was filling with the smell of spent gunpowder, and the air recyclers were moving into high-particulate mode. She could hear the difference in the fans. Probably no one else on the bridge would have any idea what that meant. It would just be a slightly higher whirring to them. If it was anything.

Cortez ran his fingers through his hair.

"Stay out the way," he said. "When it's over, when he's done this, I can speak with Ashford. Explain that you didn't mean to undermine him. It was a mistake. He'll forgive you."

Clarissa bowed her head. Her mind was a mass of confusion, and the hunger and gunfire weren't doing anything to help. Jim Holden was out there in the corridor. The man she'd come so far to disgrace and destroy, and now she didn't want him dead. Her father was back on Earth and she was about to save him and everyone else or possibly destroy them all. She'd killed Ren, and there was nothing she could ever do that would make that right. Not even die for him.

She had been so certain. She'd given so much of herself. She'd given everything, and in the end all she'd felt was empty. And soiled. The money and the time and all of the people she could have been if she hadn't been worshiping at the altar of her family name had already been sacrificed. Now she had offered her life, except that after speaking to Anna, she wasn't sure that wouldn't be an empty sacrifice too.

Her confusion and despair were like a buzzing in her ears and the voice that rose out of it was peculiarly her own: contempt and rage and the one certainty she could hold to.

"Who is *Ashford* to forgive me for anything?" she said.

Cortez blinked at her, as if seeing her for the first time.

"For that matter," she said, "who the hell are *you*?"

She turned and kicked gently for the doorframe, leaving Cortez behind. Ashford and his men were all armed, all waiting for the next round of gunfire. Ashford, stretched out behind his control panel, pistol before him, slammed his palm against the controls.

"Ruiz!" he shouted. His voice was hoarse. How many hours had they been waiting for this apocalypse to come? She could hear the strain in him. "Are we ready to fire? Tell me we're ready to fire!"

The woman's voice came, shrill with fear.

"Ready, sir. The grid is back online. The diagnostics are all green. It should work. Please don't kill me. *Please*."

This was it, then. And with an almost physical click, she knew how to fix it, if there was time.

She put her tongue to the roof of her mouth and pressed, swirling in two gentle counterclockwise circles. The extra glands in her body leapt into life as if they'd been waiting for her, and the world went white for a moment. She thought that she might have cried out in the first rush, but when she was back to herself—to better than herself—no one had reacted to her. They were all pointing their guns at the corridor. All drawn to the threat of James Holden the way she had been herself. All except Ashford. He was letting go of his weapon, leaving the pistol to hang in the air while he keyed in the firing instructions. That was how long she had. It wasn't enough. Even high as a kite on battle drugs, she couldn't do what needed to be done before Ashford fired the laser.

So he became step one.

She pulled both feet up to the doorframe and pushed out into the open air of the bridge. The air seemed viscous and thick, like water without the buoyancy. A woman ducked out of cover, firing

toward Ashford, and Ashford's people returned fire, muzzles blooming flame that faded away to smoke and then bloomed again. She couldn't see the bullets, but the paths they made through the air persisted for a fraction of a second. Tunnels of nothing in nothing. She tucked her knees into her chest. She had almost reached Ashford. His finger was moving down, ready to touch the control screen, ready, perhaps, to fire the comm laser. She kicked out as hard as she could.

The sensation of her muscles straining, ligaments and tendons pushed past their maximum working specifications, was a bright pain, but not entirely without joy. Her timing was only a little off. She didn't hit Ashford in the center of his body, but his shoulder and head. She felt the impact through her whole body, felt her jaw clicking shut from the blow. He slid back through the air away from the control panel, his eyes growing wider. Two of the guards began to swing toward her, but she bent her body against the base of the crash couch and then unfolded, moving away. The guns flashed, one then another, then two together, like watching lightning in a thunderstorm. Bullets flew, and she spun through the air, pulling her arms tight against her to make her spin faster. Rifling herself.

One of the women in the corridor leaned in, spraying gunfire through the room. A bullet caught one of the guards, and Clarissa watched as she moved toward the farthest wall. It was like seeing frames from an old movie. The woman in the corridor, the muzzle of her weapon alive with fire, then Clarissa turned. The guard, unmoved, but blood already splashing out from his neck, the little wave radiating through his skin out from the impact like the ripple of a stone dropped in a pond, then she turned. The guard falling back, blood blooming out of him like a rose blossom. The same would happen to her, she knew. The drugs flowing through her blood, lighting her brain like a seizure, couldn't change the abilities of her flesh. She couldn't dodge a bullet if one found her. So instead she hoped that none would and did what needed to be done.

The access panel was open, the guts of the ship exposed. She grabbed the edge of the panel gently, slowing herself. Blood welled up from her palm where the metal cut into her. She didn't feel it as pain. Just a kind of warmth. A message from her body that she could ignore. The brownout buffer sat behind an array control board. She slid her hand down to it, her fingers caressing the pale formed ceramic. The fault indicator glowed green. She took a breath, gripped the buffer, pushed it down, turned and then pulled. The unit came loose in her hand.

A gun went off. A scar appeared on the wall before her, bits of metal spinning out from it. They were shooting at her. Or near her. It didn't matter. She flipped the unit end for end and reseated it. The buffer's indicator blinked red for a moment, then green. Just the way Ren had showed her. *Terrible design*, she thought with a grin and held down the buffer's reset. Two more guns fired, the sound pushing against her eardrums like a blow. Time stuttered. She didn't know how long she'd been holding the reset, if she'd slipped it off and back on. She thought it should have gone by now, but time was so unreliable. The world stuttered again. She was crashing.

The buffer's readout went red. Clarissa smiled and relaxed. She saw the cascading failure as if she were the ship itself. One bad readout causing the next causing the next, the levels of failure rapid and incremental. The nervous system of the *Behemoth* sensing a danger it couldn't define. Doing what it could to be safe, or at least to be sure it didn't get worse.

Failing closed.

She turned. Ashford stood on his couch, holding the restraint straps in one hand and pressing his feet into the gel. His mouth was a square gape of rage. Two of his people had shifted to face her as well, their guns trained on her, their faces almost blank.

Behind them all, far across the bridge, Cortez was framed by the security office doorway. His face was a mask of distress and surprise. He wasn't, she thought, a man who dealt well with the unexpected. Must be hard for him. She hadn't noticed before how much he looked like her own father. Something about the shape of their jaws, maybe. Or in their eyes.

The lights flickered. She felt her body starting to shudder. It was over. For her, for all of them. The first twitch of the collapse pulled at her back like a cramp. A rising nausea came to her. She didn't care.

I did it, Ren, she thought. You showed me how, and I did it. I think I just saved everyone. We did.

Ashford caught his pistol out of the air and swung toward her. She heard his screaming like it was meat ripping. Behind him, Cortez was shouting, launching himself through the space. There was a contact taser in the old man's hand, and the grief on the old man's face was gratifying. It was good to know that on some level, he cared what happened to her. The lights flared once and went out as Ashford brought the barrel to bear on her. The emergency lighting didn't kick in.

Everything was darkness, and then, for a moment, light.

And then darkness.

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Chapter Fifty-Two: Holden

Holden ejected his spent magazine and reached for a new one. His fingers hit only an empty space where he expected it to be. He hadn't been managing his ammo well. He'd wanted to keep at least one magazine in reserve. Corin was firing around him with her rifle. She had spare pistol ammo on her belt. Without asking, he started pulling magazines off her belt and putting them in his. She fired off a few more shots and waited for him to finish. It was that sort of fight.

Cass was leaning around the corner firing. Answering bullets hit everywhere on her side of the corridor except where she was. Holden was about to shout at her to get back into cover when the lights went out.

It wasn't just the lights. So many things about his physical situation changed all at once that his hindbrain couldn't keep up. It told him to be nauseated just in case he'd been poisoned. It was working with fifty-million-year-old response algorithms.

Holden collapsed to his knees with the nausea, the sudden appearance of gravity being one of the many changes. His knees banged against the floor because he was no longer wearing a heavy environment suit. Which also meant he could smell the air. It had a vaguely swampy, sulfurous odor. His inner ear didn't report any Coriolis, so they weren't spinning. There were no engine sounds, so the *Behemoth* wasn't under thrust.

Holden fumbled at the ground around him. It felt like dirt. Damp soil, small rocks. Something that felt like ground-cover plants.

"Oh, hey, sorry," a voice said. Miller's. The light level came up with no visible source. Holden was kneeling naked on a wide plain of something that looked like a mix of moss and grass. It was as dark as a moonlit night, but no moons or stars shone overhead. In the distance, something like a forest was visible. Beyond that, mountains. Miller stood a few meters away, looking up at the sky, still wearing his old gray suit and goofy hat. His hands were in his pockets, his jacket rumpling around them.

"Where?" Holden started.

"This planet was in the catalog. Most Earth-like one I could find. Thought it'd be calming."

"Am I here?"

Miller laughed. Something in the timbre of his voice had changed since the last time Holden had spoken to him. He sounded serene, whole. Vast. "Kid, *I'm* not even here. But we needed a place to talk, and this seemed nicer than a white void. I've got processing power to spare now."

Holden stood up, embarrassed to be naked even in a simulation, but without any way of changing it. But if this was a simulation, then that brought up other issues.

"Am I still in a gunfight?"

Miller turned, not quite facing him. "Hmmm?"

"I was in a gunfight before you grabbed me. If this is just a sim running in my brain, then does that mean I'm still in that gunfight? Am I floating in the air with my eyes rolled back or something?"

Miller looked chagrined.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe. Look. Don't worry about it. This won't take long."

Holden walked over to stand next to him, to look him in the eyes. Miller gave him his sad basset hound smile. His eyes glowed a bright electric blue.

"We did it, though? We got under the power threshold?"

"Did. And I talked the station into thinking you were essentially dirt and rocks."

"Does that mean we saved the Earth?"

"Well," Miller replied with a small Belter shrug of the hands. "We *also* saved the Earth. Never was the big plan, but it's a nice bonus."

"Good that you care."

"Oh," Miller said with that same vaguely frightening laugh. "I really don't. I mean, I remember being human. The simulation is good. But I remember caring without really caring, if you know what I mean."

"Okay."

"Oh, hey, look at this," Miller said, pointing at the black sky. Instantly the sky was filled with glowing blue Rings. The thousand-plus gates of the slow zone, orbiting around them like Alex's dandelion seeds, seen from the center of the flower. "Shazam!" Miller said. As one, the gates shifted in color and became mirrors reflecting thousands of other solar systems. Holden could actually see the alien stars, and the worlds whirring in orbit around them. He assumed that meant Miller was taking a little artistic license with his simulation.

There was a croaking sound at his feet, and Holden looked down to see something that looked like a long-limbed frog, with grayish skin and no visible eyes. Its mouth was full of sharp-looking little teeth, and Holden became very aware of his bare toes just a few dozen centimeters from it. Without looking down, Miller kicked the frog thing away with his shoe. It blurred away across the field on its too-long limbs.

"The gates are all open out there?"

Miller gave him a quizzical look.

"You know," Holden continued. "In reality?"

"What's reality?" Miller said, looking back up at the swirling gates and the night sky.

"The place where I live?"

"Yeah, fine. The gates are all open."

"And are there invading fleets of monsters pouring through to kill us all?"

"Not yet," Miller said. "Which is kind of interesting in its own way."

"I was joking."

"I wasn't," Miller said. "It was a calculated risk. But it looks clear for now."

"We can go through those gates, though. We can go there."

"Can," Miller said. "And knowing you, you will."

For a moment, Holden forgot about Ashford, the *Behemoth*, the deaths and the violence and the thousand other things that had distracted him from where they really were. What they were really doing.

What it all meant.

He would live to see humanity's spread to the stars. He and Naomi, their children, their children's children. Thousands of worlds, no procreation restrictions. A new golden age for the species. And the *Nauvoo* had made it happen, in a way. Fred could tell the Mormons. Maybe they'd stop suing him now.

"Wow," he said.

"Yeah, well let's not get too happy," Miller said. "I keep warning you. Doors and corners, kid. That's where they get you. Humans are too fucking stupid to listen. Well, you'll learn your lessons soon enough, and it's not my job to nursemaid the species through the next steps."

Holden scuffed at the ground cover with his toe. When it was scraped, a clear fluid that smelled like honey seeped out. This world was in the station's catalog, Miller had said. *I could live here someday*. The thought was astounding.

The sky shifted, and now all the ships that had been trapped around the station were visible. They drifted slowly away from each other. "You let them go?"

"I didn't. Station's off lockdown," Miller said. "And I've killed the security system permanently. No need for it. Just an accident waiting to happen when one of you monkeys sticks a finger where it doesn't belong. Is this Ashford cocksucker really thinking he can hurt the gates?"

"And there are worlds like this on the other side of all those gates?"

"Some of them, maybe. Who knows?" Miller turned to face Holden again, his blue eyes eerie and full of secrets. "Someone fought a war here, kid. One that spanned this galaxy and maybe more. My team lost, and they're all gone now. A couple billion years gone. Who knows what's waiting on the other side of those doors?"

"We'll find out, I guess," Holden replied, putting on a bold front but frightened in spite of himself.

"Doors and corners," Miller said again. Something in his voice told Holden it was the last warning.

They looked up at the sky, watching the ships slowly drift away from them. Holden waited to see the first missiles fly, but it didn't happen. Everyone was playing nice. Maybe what had happened on the *Behemoth* had changed people. Maybe they'd take that change back to where they came from, infect others with it. It was a lot to hope for, but Holden was an unapologetic optimist. Give people the information they need. Trust them to do the right thing. He didn't know any other way to play it.

Or maybe the ships moving was just Miller playing with his simulation, and humanity hadn't learned a thing.

"So," Holden said after a few minutes of quiet sky watching. "Thanks for the visit. I guess I'd better be getting back to my gunfight."

"Not done with you," Miller said. The tone was light, but the words were ominous.

"Okay."

"I wasn't built to fix shit humanity broke," Miller said. "I didn't come here to open gates for you and get the lockdown to let you go. That's incidental. The thing that made me just builds roads. And now it's using me to find out what happened to the galaxy-spanning civilization that wanted the road."

"Why does that matter now, if they're all gone?"

"It doesn't," Miller said with a weary shrug. "Not a bit. If you set the nav computer on the *Roci* to take you somewhere, and then fall over dead a second later, can the *Roci* decide it doesn't matter anymore and just not go?"

"No," Holden said, understanding and finding a sadness for this Miller construct he wouldn't have guessed was possible.

"We were supposed to connect with the network. We're just trying to do that, doesn't matter that the network's gone. What came up off of Venus is dumb, kid. Just knows how to do one thing. It doesn't know how to investigate. But I do. And it had me. So I'm going to investigate even though none of the answers will mean fuck-all to the universe at large."

"I understand," Holden said. "Good luck, Miller, I—"

"I said I'm not done with you."

Holden took a step back, suddenly very frightened about where this might be going. "What does that mean?"

"It means, kid, that I'll need a ride."

Holden was floating in free fall in an environment suit in absolute darkness. People were yelling. There was the sound of a gunshot, then silence, then an electric pop and a groan.

“Stop!” someone yelled. Holden couldn’t place the voice. “Everyone stop shooting!”

Because someone was saying it with authority in their voice, people did. Holden fumbled with the controls on his wrist, and his suit’s light came on. The rest of his team quickly followed his example. Corin and Cass were still unhurt. Holden wondered how long in actual time his jaunt into the simulation had taken.

“My name is Hector Cortez,” the stop-firing voice said. “What’s happening out there? Does anyone know?”

“It’s over,” Holden yelled back, then let his body relax into a dead man’s float in the corridor. He was so tired that it was a struggle to not just go to sleep right where he was. “It’s all over. You can turn everything back on.”

Lights started coming on in the bridge as people took out hand terminals or emergency flashlights.

“Call Ruiz,” Cortez said. “Have her send a team up here to fix whatever Clarissa did. We need to get the ship’s power back. People will be panicking in the habitation drum right now. And get a medical team up here.”

Holden wondered where Ashford was and why this Cortez guy was in charge. But he was saying all the right things, so Holden let it go. He pushed his way into the bridge, ready to help where he could, but keeping his hand near his pistol. Cass and Naomi traded places with Juarez, so Naomi could help with the repairs.

Clarissa, formerly Melba, was floating near an open access panel, blood seeping out of a gunshot wound. Cortez was pressing an emergency bandage to it. Ashford floated across the room, his mouth slack and his muscles twitching. Holden wondered if the captain was dead and then didn’t care.

“Naomi. Call down to the radio offices. See if they’ve got working comms. Find out about Anna and Monica and Amos. Try to raise the *Roci* next. I really really want to get the hell out of here.”

She nodded and started trying to make connections.

“Will she live?” Holden asked the white-haired man tending to her.

“I think so,” he replied. “She did this,” he added, waving a hand around to indicate the lack of lights and power.

“Huh,” Holden said. “I guess I’m glad we didn’t space her.”

Chapter Fifty-Three: Clarissa

She woke up in stages, aware of the discomfort before she knew what hurt. Aware that something was wrong before she could even begin to put together some kind of story, some frame that gave the loose, rattling toolbox of sensations any kind of meaning. Even when the most abstract parts of herself returned—her name, where she was—Clarissa was mostly aware that she was compromised. That something was wrong with her.

The room was dirty, the air a few degrees too hot. She lay in the thin, sweat-stinking bed, an IV drip hanging above her. The significance of that took a long time to come to her. The bag hung there. She wasn't floating. There was gravity. She didn't know if it was spin or thrust, or even the calm pull of mass against mass that being on a planet brought. She didn't have the context to know. Only that it was nice to have weight again. It meant that something had gone right. Something was working.

When she closed her eyes, she dreamed that she had killed Ren, that she'd hidden him inside her own body and so she had to keep anyone from taking an imaging scan for fear they'd find him in her. It was a pleasure to wake up and remember that everyone already knew.

Sometimes Tilly came, sat by her bed. She looked like she'd been crying. Clarissa wanted to ask what was wrong, but she didn't have the strength. Sometimes Anna was there. The doctor who checked on her was a beautiful old woman with eyes that had seen everything. Cortez never came. Sleeping and waking lost their edges. Healing and being ill too. It was difficult if not impossible to draw a line between them.

She woke once to voices, to the hated voice, to Holden. He was standing at the foot of her bed, his arms crossed on his chest. Naomi was next to him, and then the others. The pale one who looked like a truck driver, the brown one who looked like a schoolteacher. Amos and Alex. The crew of the *Rocinante*. The people she hadn't managed to kill. She was glad to see them.

"There is absolutely no way," Holden said.

"Look at her," Anna said. Clarissa craned her neck to see the woman standing behind her. The priest looked older. Worn out. Or maybe distilled. Cooked down to something like her essence. She was beautiful too. Beautiful and terrible and uncompromising in her compassion. It was in her face. It made her hard to look at. "She'll be killed."

Alex, the schoolteacher, raised his hand.

"You mean she'll be tried in a court of law, with a lawyer, for killin' a bunch of folks that we all pretty much know she killed."

I did, Clarissa thought. *It's true*. Above her, Anna pressed her hands together.

"I mean that's what I want to happen," Anna said. "A trial. Lawyers. Justice. But I need someone to get her safely from here to the courts on Luna. With the evacuation starting, you have the only independent ship in the slow zone. You are the only crew that I trust to get her out safely."

Naomi looked over at Holden. Clarissa couldn't read the woman's expression.

"I'm not taking her on my ship," Holden said. "She tried to kill us. She almost *did* kill Naomi."

"She also saved you both," Anna said. "And everybody else."

"I'm not sure being a decent human that one time means I owe her something," Holden said.

"I'm not saying it does," Anna said. "But if we don't treat her with the same sense of justice that we'd ask for ourselves—"

“Look, Red,” Amos said. “Everybody in this room except maybe you and the captain has a flexible sense of morality. None of us got clean hands. That’s not the point.”

“This is a tactical thing,” Alex agreed.

“It is?” Holden said.

“It is,” Naomi said. “Pretend that she’s not a danger in and of herself. Taking her on board, even just to transport her to a safe place, puts us at risk from three different legal systems, and our situation is already... ‘tenuous’ is a nice word.”

Clarissa reached up, took Anna’s shirt between her fingers, tugging like a child at her mother.

“It’s okay,” she croaked. “I understand. It’s all right.”

“How much?” Anna asked. And then, off their blank looks, “If it’s just risk versus return, how much would it take to be worth it to you?”

“More than you have,” Holden said, but there was an apology in his tone. He didn’t want to disappoint Anna and he didn’t want to do what she said. No way for him to win.

“What if I bought the *Rocinante*?” Anna said.

“It’s not for sale,” Holden said.

“Not from you. I know about your legal troubles. What if I bought the *Rocinante* from Mars. Gave you the rights to it, free and clear.”

“You’re going to buy a warship?” Alex said. “Do churches get to do that?”

“Sure,” Holden said, “do that, and I’ll smuggle her out.”

Anna held up a finger, then pulled her hand terminal out of her pocket. Clarissa could see her hands were trembling. She tapped at the screen, and a few seconds later a familiar voice came from the box.

“Annie,” Tilly Fagan said. “Where are you? I’m having cocktails with half a dozen very important people and they’re boring me to tears. The least you can do is come up and let them fawn over you for a while.”

“Tilly,” Anna said. “You remember that really expensive favor you owe me? I know what it is.”

“I’m all ears,” Tilly said.

“I need you to buy the *Rocinante* from Mars and give it to Captain Holden.” Tilly was silent. Clarissa could practically see the woman’s eyebrows rising. “It’s the only way to take care of Clarissa.”

Tilly’s exhalation could have been a sigh or laughter.

“Sure, what the hell. I’ll tell Robert to do it. He will. It’ll be less than I’d get in a divorce. Anything else, dear? Shall I change the Earth’s orbit for you while I’m at it?”

“No,” Anna said. “That’s plenty.”

“You’re damn right it is. Get up here soon. Really, everyone’s swooning over you, and it’ll be much more amusing for me to watch them try to squeeze up next to you in person.”

“I will,” Anna said. She put her hand terminal back in her pocket and took Clarissa’s hand in her own. Her fingers were warm. “Well?”

Holden’s face had gone pale. He looked from Clarissa to Anna and back and blew out a long breath.

“Um,” he said. “Wow. Okay. We may not be going home right away, though. Is that cool?”

Clarissa held out her hand, astounded by its weight. It took them all a moment to understand what she was doing. Then Holden—the man she’d moved heaven and earth to humiliate and murder—took her hand.

“Pleased to meet you,” she croaked.



They installed a medical restraint cuff to her ankle set to sedate her on a signal from any of the crew, or if it detected any of the products of her artificial glands, or if she left the crew decks of the ship. It was three kilos of formed yellow plastic that clung to her leg like a barnacle. The transfer came during the memorial service. Captain Michio Pa, her face still bandaged from the fighting, spoke in glowing terms about Carlos Baca and Samantha Rosenberg and a dozen other names and commended their ashes to the void. Then each of the commanders of the other ships in the flotilla took their turns, standing before the cameras on the decks of their own ships, speaking a few words, moving on. No one mentioned Ashford, locked away and sedated. No one mentioned her.

It was the last ceremony before the exodus. Before the return. Clarissa watched it on her hand terminal when she wasn't looking at the screen that showed the shuttle's exterior view. The alien station was inert now. It didn't glow, didn't react, didn't read to the sensors as anything more than a huge slug of mixed metals and carbonate structures floating in a starless void.

"They're not all going back, you know," Alex said. "The Martian team is plannin' to stay here, run surveys on all the gates. See what's on the other side."

"I didn't know that," Clarissa said.

"Yeah. This right now," the pilot said, gesturing toward the screen where a UN captain was speaking earnestly into the camera, her eyes hard as marbles and her jaw set against the sorrow of listing the names of the dead. "This is the still point. Before, this was all fear. After this, it'll all be greed. But this..." He sighed. "Well, it's a nice moment, anyway."

"It is," Clarissa said.

"So, just to check, are you still plannin' to kill the captain? Because, you know, if you are it seems like you at least owe us a warning."

"I'm not," she said.

"And if you were?"

"I'd still say I wasn't. But I'm not."

"Fair enough."

"Okay, Alex," Holden said from the back. "Are we there yet?"

"Just about to knock," Alex said. He tapped on the control panel, and on the screen the *Rocinante's* exterior lights came on. The ship glowed gold and silver in the blackness, like seeing a whole city from above. "Okay, folks. We're home."



Clarissa's bunk was larger than her quarters in the *Cerisier*, smaller than the one from the *Prince*. She wasn't sharing it with anyone, though. It was hers as much as anything was.

All she had for clothing was a jumpsuit with the name *Tachi* imprinted in the weave. All her toiletries were the standard ship issue. Nothing was hers. Nothing was her. She kept to her room, going out to the galley and the head when she needed to. It wasn't fear, exactly, so much as the sense of wanting to stay out of the way. It wasn't her ship, it was theirs. She wasn't one of them, and she didn't deserve to be. She was a paid passenger, and not a fare they'd even wanted. The awareness of that weighed on her.

Over time, the bunk began to feel more like her cell on the *Behemoth* than anything else. That was enough to drive her out a little. Only a little, though. She'd seen the galley before in simulations, when she'd been planning how to destroy it, where to place her override. It looked different in person. Not smaller or larger, exactly, but different. The crew moved through the space going from one place to another, passing through in the way she couldn't. They ate their meals and had their meetings, ignoring her like she was a ghost. Like she'd already lost her place in the world.



“Well,” Holden said, his voice grim, “we have a major problem. We’re out of coffee.”

“We still got beer,” Amos said.

“Yes,” Holden said. “But beer is not coffee. I’ve put in a request with the *Behemoth*, but I haven’t heard back, and I can’t see going into the vast and unknown void without coffee.”

Alex looked over at Clarissa and grinned.

“The captain doesn’t like the fake coffee the *Roci* makes,” he said. “Gives him gas.”

Clarissa didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure she was supposed to.

“It does not,” Holden said. “That was one time.”

“More than once, Cap’n,” Amos said. “And no offense, but it does smell like a squirrel crawled up your ass and died there.”

“Okay,” Holden said, “you’ve got no room to complain. As I recall, I was the one who cleaned your bunk after that experiment with vodka goulash.”

“He’s got a point,” Alex said. “That was damn nasty.”

“I just about shat out my intestinal lining, that’s true,” Amos said, his expression philosophical, “but I’d still put that against the captain’s coffee farts.”

Alex made a fake gagging noise, and Amos buzzed his lips against his palm, making a rude sound. Naomi looked from one to the other like she didn’t know whether to laugh or smack them.

“I don’t get gas,” Holden said. “I just like the taste of real coffee better.”

Naomi put her hand on Clarissa’s forearm and leaned close. Her smile was gentle and unexpected.

“Have I mentioned how nice it is to have another woman on the ship?” she asked.

It was a joke. Clarissa understood that. But it was a joke that included her, and her tears surprised her.



“I appreciate your saying all that about Bull,” a man’s voice said. Clarissa, moving through the ship, didn’t recognize it. An unfamiliar voice in a spaceship caught the attention like a strange sound in her bedroom. She paused. “He was a friend for a lot of years, and... and I’ll miss him.”

She shifted, angled back toward the other crew cabins. Holden’s door was open, and he sat in his crash couch, looking up at his monitor. Instead of the tactical display of the ships, the stations, the Rings, a man’s face dominated the screen. She recognized Fred Johnson, traitor to Earth and head of the Outer Planets Alliance. The Butcher of Anderson Station. He looked old, his hair almost all gone to white, and his eyes the yellow color of old ivory.

“I asked a lot from him,” the recording went on. “He gave a lot back to me. It... it got me thinking. I have a bad habit, Captain, of asking more than people can give sometimes. Of demanding more than I can fairly expect. I’m wondering if I might have done something like that with you.”

“Gee, you think?” Holden said to the screen, though as far as she could see he wasn’t recording.

“If I did, I apologize. Just between us. One commander to another. I regret some of the decisions I’ve made. I figure you can relate to that in your own way.

“I’ve decided to keep the *Behemoth* in place. We’re sending out soil and supplies to start farming on the drum. It does mean the OPA’s military fleet just lost its big kahuna. But it looks like we’ve got a thousand planets opening up for exploration, and having the only gas station on the turnpike is too sweet a position to walk away from. If you and your crew want to help out with the effort, escort

some ships from Ganymede out to the Ring, there might be a few contracts in it for you. So that's the official part. Talk about it with the others, and let me know what decisions you come to."

Fred Johnson nodded once to the camera, and the screen fell to the blue emptiness and split circle of the OPA's default. Holden looked over his shoulder. She saw him see her.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey."

They were silent for a moment. She didn't know what to say. She wanted to apologize too, to walk down the path Fred Johnson had just showed her, but she couldn't quite.

She waited to see whether Holden would reach out to her. When he didn't she pulled herself back down toward the crew quarters. Her stomach felt tight and uncomfortable.

They weren't friends. They wouldn't be, because some things couldn't be made right.

She'd have to be okay with that.



Amos smelled of solvent and sweat. Of all the crew, he was the one most like the people she knew. Soladad and Stanni. And Ren. He came into the galley with a welding rig on, the mask pushed up over his forehead. He smiled when he saw her.

"You did a number on the place," Amos said. She knew that if the occasion arose, he would be perfectly willing to kill her. But until that moment, he'd be jovial and casual. That counted for more than she'd expected. "I mean, you had a salvage mech. Those are pretty much built for peeling steel."

"I didn't at the end," she said. "It ran out of power. The locker in the airlock was all me."

"Really?" he said

"Yeah."

"Well," he said, pulling a bulb of the fake coffee from the machine and drifting over to the table. "That was pretty impressive, then."

She imagined him working, the mask down to hide his face, the sparks, the flickering of his great hunched shadow. Hephaestus, the smith of the Gods, laboring in his underworld. It was the kind of association Clarissa Mao would make. Melba Koh would only have thought about the temperature of the arc, the composition of the plates he was fusing together. She could have both of those thoughts, but neither were really hers.

She was on the float now. Later, when the ship was under way and thrust gravity pinned her to the deck, she'd still be on the float. Her world had been constructed around stories about who she was. Jules-Pierre's daughter, Julie Mao's sister, the crew lead on the *Cerisier*, instrument of her father's vengeance. Now she was no one. She was a piece of baggage on her old enemy's ship going from one prison to another, and she didn't even resent it. The last time she'd felt this nameless, she'd probably been in an amniotic sac.

"What was the problem?"

"Hmm?"

"You said I really did a number on something. What's the problem?"

"Deck hatch between the machine shop and here gets stuck. Ever since you crumpled it up. Binds about half open."

"Did you check the retracting arm?"

Amos turned to her, frowning. She shrugged.

"Sometimes these door actuators put on an uneven load when they start to burn out. We probably swapped out four or five of them on the trip out here."

"Yeah?"

“Just a thought,” she said. And then a moment later, “When we get back to Luna, they’re going to kill me, aren’t they?”

“If you’re lucky, yeah. UN still has the death penalty on the books, but they don’t use it much. I figure you’ll be living in a tiny cell for the rest of your life. If it was me, I’d prefer a bullet.”

“How long until we get there?”

“About five weeks.”

They were silent for a moment.

“I’ll miss this place,” she said.

Amos shrugged.

“Actuator arm, huh? Worth checking. You want to help me take a look?”

“I can’t,” she said, gesturing at the clamp on her leg.

“Shit, I can reprogram that. Least enough to get you down to the machine shop. We’ll grab you a tool belt, Peaches. Let’s crack that thing open.”

An hour later, she was running her hand over the frame of the door, looking for the telltale scrape of binding sites. *This was me*, she thought. *I broke it*.

“What’cha think, Peaches?” Amos asked from behind her.

“Feels good to fix something,” she said.

Epilogue: Anna

Anna sat in the observation lounge of the *Thomas Prince* and looked out at the stars.

The lounge was a dome-shaped room where every flat surface was a high-definition screen displaying a 360-degree view of the outside. To Anna, sitting in it felt like flying through space on a park bench. It had become her favorite place on the ship, with the stars burning in their bright steady colors, no atmosphere to make them twinkle. They felt so close now. Like she could reach out and touch them.

Her hand terminal beeped at her to remind her that she was in the middle of recording a video message. She deleted the time she'd spent looking at the stars and started the recording again.

"So, that letter from the conference bishop turned out to be a request for a formal meeting. Apparently some people have complained about me. Probably Ashford. Neck deep in his own legal problems with the OPA and still finding time to make trouble for everyone else. But don't worry about it. They'll ask, I'll answer, I've got pretty good reasons for everything I did. I have lots of offers of support from people I worked with on the fleet. I probably won't need them. Speaking of which, I've invited my friend Tilly Fagan to come visit us in Moscow. She's abrasive and cranky and has no social filters at all. You'll love her. She can't wait to meet Nami."

Anna paused to attach a picture she'd taken of Tilly to the message. Tilly was looking at the camera through narrowed eyes, just seconds from telling Anna to "get that fucking thing out of my face." She held a cigarette in one hand; her other was pointing accusingly. It was not the nicest picture of Tilly she had, but it was the most accurate.

"Speaking of Nami, thank you so much for the videos you sent. I can't believe how enormous she's gotten. And crawling around in full gravity like she was born to it. She'll be walking again in no time. Thank you for taking her home. Sometimes I wish I'd just gone with you. Most of the time, actually. But then I think about all the things I did inside the Ring, and I wonder if any of it would have turned out as well if I hadn't helped. It seems arrogant to think that way, but I also believe that God nudges people toward the places they need to be. Maybe I was needed. I still plan on being very contrite when I get back. You, the bishop, Nami, my family, I have a lot of apologizing to do."

As clear as if she'd been in the room, Anna heard Nono say, *You never ask for permission, you just apologize later*. She laughed until her eyes watered. She wiped them and said to the camera, "You're still here, Nono. Still in my head. But I'd trade anything to have you hold me. The *Prince* will take another month to get back. It's an eternity. I love you."

She picked up the pillow she'd brought with her and held it tight to her chest. "This is you and Nami. This is both of you. I love you both so much."

She killed the recording and sent it off, winging ahead of the *Prince* to Nono at the speed of light. Still too slow. She wiped away the tears that had accumulated at the corners of her eyes.

Outside, a flare of white light lit the sky, a line of fire a few centimeters long. Another ship in the flotilla, returning home. One of the *Prince's* escort ships, to be so close. Finally going back, but without many of the sailors she'd brought to the Ring. Families would be waiting for her to bring their loved ones home, only to receive flags, posthumous medals, letters of sympathy. It wouldn't be enough to fill the holes those lost people left in their lives. It was never enough.

But the ships from Earth, Mars, and the various stations of the outer planets *were* going home. And they were bringing news of the greatest opportunity humanity had ever been offered. In the midst of all the sadness and tragedy, hope.

Would Nami spend her life at one of those points of light she could see right now? It was possible. Her baby had been born into a world where her parents couldn't afford to give her a sibling, where she'd have to work two years just to prove to the government she was worth receiving an education. Where resources were rapidly diminishing, and the battle to keep the waste from piling up used more and more of what was left.

But she'd grow up in a world without limits. Where a short trip took you to one of the stars, and the bounty of worlds circling them. Where what job you did or what education you pursued or how many children you had was your choice, not a government mandate.

It was dizzying to think of.

Someone walked into the lounge behind her, their footsteps clicking. "Tilly, I just sent—" Anna started, but stopped when she turned around and saw Hector Cortez.

"Doctor Volovodov," he said, his tone a mild apology.

"Doctor Cortez," she replied. The renewed formality between them seemed silly to Anna, but Hector insisted on it. "Please, sit." She patted the bench next to her.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said, sitting and staring out at the stars. Not looking at her. He didn't look her in the eye anymore.

"Not at all. Just recording a message home and enjoying the view."

They sat silently for a few moments, watching the stars.

"Esteban lost," Cortez said, as if they'd been talking about that all along.

"I don't—Oh, the secretary-general. He did?"

"Nancy Gao is the new SG. You can see Chrisjen Avasarala's fingerprints all over that one."

"Who?"

Cortez laughed. It sounded genuine, a nice loud rumble coming up from his belly. "Oh, she would love to hear you say that."

"Who is she?"

"She's the politician no one has ever voted for, that runs the UN like her own personal fiefdom and keeps her name out of the press. The fact that she controls your home government and you've never heard of her means she's very, very good."

"Oh," Anna said. She was not a political creature. She felt that politics was the second most evil thing humanity had ever invented, just after lutefisk.

There was another long silence. Anna wondered where Tilly was, and if she'd show up and rescue her from the awkwardness of the moment.

"You backed the right horse," Cortez finally said. "I picked a bad one. I hope you won't hold that against me. I've grown to respect you a great deal, in spite of our differences. I wouldn't like it if you hated me."

"I don't, Hector," Anna said, taking his hand in both of hers and squeezing it. "Not at all. It was terrible, what we all went through. We all made bad decisions because we were afraid. But you're a good man. I believe that."

Cortez gave her a grateful smile and patted her hand. Anna nodded her head at the star field splashed across the wall.

"So many stars," she said. "Some of them might be ours someday."

"I wonder," Hector replied, his voice low and sad. "I wonder if we should have them. God gave man the Earth. He never promised him the stars. I wonder if He'll follow us out there."

Anna squeezed his hand again, and then let it go. "The God I believe in is bigger than all of this. Nothing we ever learn can be an attack on Him as long as that's true."

Cortez gave a noncommittal grunt.

“I want her to have them,” she said, pointing at the spray of light around her. “My little Nami, I want her to have all of that someday.”

“Whatever she finds out there,” Cortez said, “just remember it’s the future *you* chose for her.”

His words were full of hope and threat.

Like the stars.

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JAMES S. A. COREY is the pen name of fantasy authors Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Find out more about this series at www.the-expanse.com.

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introducing

If you enjoyed
ABADDON'S GATE,
look out for

FORTUNE'S PAWN

by Rachel Bach

When professional mercenary Deviana Morris took the security guard job aboard the Glorious Fool, all she wanted was a fast route into the Devastators—the elite league of armored fighters entrusted with the most important duty on her home planet of Paradox. But this security job isn't just twelve-hour patrols, armor-polishing, and whiskey. The supposedly cursed Captain Caldwel keeps sending Devi and her partner into unimaginably dangerous situations. Ren, the captain's daughter, is a kind of weird that Devi has never experienced before. And to top it off, there's the insufferably sexy cook, Rupert Charkov, who is far more than what he seems—possibly even far more than human.

"You're quitting the Blackbirds?" The shock in Anthony's voice was at odds with the finger he was languidly sliding over my naked back. "Why? You just made squad leader last year."

"That's why," I said, swatting his finger away as I pulled on my shirt. "Nowhere left to go. Squad leader's the last promotion before they stick you in a desk job."

I stood up, grabbing my pants from the chair. Still naked, Anthony rolled over to watch me dress with growing displeasure. "I don't get you, Devi," he grumbled. "The Blackbirds are the top private armored company on Paradox. It takes most mercs ten years in a lesser outfit before they can even apply. The fact they let you in straight out of the army should be the miracle of your career. Why the hell are you leaving?"

"Some of us have ambition, Anthony," I said, sitting back down to put on my shoes. "I had five good years with the Blackbirds, made a lot of money, got my name out there. But you don't get noticed if you sit around on your laurels, do you?"

"If you got any more noticed, I think they'd have you arrested," Anthony said. "They were talking about that stunt you pulled on Tizas in the office just yesterday. The duke of Maraday's apparently thinking of offering you a fat contract with his Home Guard."

I rolled my eyes and combed my fingers through my hair, wrestling the dark brown mess into a ponytail as best I could. My hair never could take mornings. "I am *not* joining the Home Guard. I don't care how good the money is. Can you imagine me sitting around on some noble's pleasure yacht playing bouncer for his cocktail parties? No thanks."

“Home Guard is dull,” Anthony agreed, his boyish face suddenly serious. “But it’s safe.” He reached out, catching my hand as it dropped from my hair. “I worry about you, Devi. You’ve done eight full fire tours in five years. I know you want to make a name for yourself, but that kind of work will kill you, and I’m not talking about taking a bullet. If you got a job with the Home Guard, you could take it easier. Hell, if the Maraday thing actually came through, the duke never leaves the capital. You could live here, with me. I’d even let you redecorate, and we could be together every night.”

I didn’t like the way this conversation was going, but I knew better than to let that show on my face. Instead, I smiled and gently pried his fingers off mine. “It’s a sweet offer, Anthony, but I’m not looking to settle down. Here or anywhere else.”

Anthony heaved a huge sigh and collapsed on the bed. He lay there facedown for a moment, then rolled onto the floor and started pulling on his boxers. “Can’t blame me for trying.”

When he was dressed, we took the plush elevator down to the building café. I didn’t regret turning down his offer, but I had to admit Anthony had a nice setup. His apartment was in one of the new sky towers that dominated Kingston’s shoreline. Through the enormous windows, the royal capital lay spread out as far as I could see. Enormous skyscrapers rose like silver and glass trees from the dense underbrush of the older, smaller buildings. The sky was hazy with the usual smog and the clouds of commuter aircraft darting between the official sky lanes. The café was on one of the sky tower’s middle floors, but we were still high enough to see the starport and the towering shadow of the Castle behind it from our booth.

I might just be sentimental, but seeing the Castle’s shielded battlements and the shadows of the building-sized batteries of plasma guns behind it always filled me with pride. It wasn’t the tallest building in the city anymore, but the Castle was still the largest, dwarfing even the deep-space trawlers that were waiting their turn to dock in the starport below. It was a good, strong fortress, feared by all on planet and off, and a worthy guard for the Sainted Kings of Paradox.

As always, I bowed my head before my king’s sacred fortress. Anthony followed suit a second later. He’d never been as much of a believer in the power of the king as I was, but then, he hadn’t taken as many bullets as I had.

Once we’d paid our respects, Anthony called the waiter over. He ordered large and well, and the spread of food that arrived at our table was a mini-heaven all in itself. Thanking my king again, I fell to with a mercenary’s efficiency. Anthony watched me eat with amusement, drinking something red out of a tall, frosted glass that looked like a cocktail. I really hoped it wasn’t. Even I didn’t drink this early in the morning.

“So,” he said, spinning his now nearly empty glass between his fingers. “Why are you really here, Devi?”

“Last night wasn’t enough?” I said, popping a tiny coffee cake into my mouth.

“Last night was marvelous,” Anthony admitted. “But since we’ve established you aren’t exactly pining for my company, I thought we might as well get to the point before you crush my ego again.”

He was still smarting from the rejection, so I let the comment slide. I’d known Anthony a long time; we’d been in the army together before he got his captaincy and his cushy desk job with the Home Guard. We had good chemistry, and he was always the first person I called when I came home. We’d been friends with benefits for nearly seven years now, and I’d thought we had a good understanding. Obviously, things had changed. Still, this was Anthony. An apology would only make him feel worse, so I honored his request and got to the point. “I need you to tell me the qualifiers to become a Devastator.”

I had his full attention now.

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?” he cried. “*That’s* why you quit your job?” He flopped back against the booth’s deep cushions. “Devi, you can’t be serious. The Devastators are the king’s

own armored unit. They're *above* the best."

"Why do you think I want to be one?" I said. "I'm sick of wasting my time on the edge of civilized space crashing pirate camps for corporate money. Devastators serve the Sacred King directly. They get the best armor, the best guns, they go on the most dangerous and important missions. They have power you can't buy; even the nobility listens to them. I was the best in the Blackbirds—"

"This isn't like the Blackbirds," Anthony snapped. "I can't even tell you the qualifiers, because there are none. You can't apply to become a Devastator. They ask *you*, not the other way around, and they don't ask anyone who hasn't spent a minimum of twenty years in active field service."

"Twenty *years*?" I cried. "That's ridiculous!"

"They want experience—" Anthony started.

"What do you think I spent the last nine years getting?" My shouting was attracting weird looks from the other diners, but I didn't care. "I got twelve commendations in four years when I was in the army. You know, you were there. *And* I've gotten five promotions in five years in the Blackbirds. I'm not exactly fresh meat."

"Devi, you're not even thirty." Anthony's voice was calm and reasonable, the sort of voice you'd use with a child who was throwing a tantrum. It made me want to punch him. "You've already proven that you're exactly the sort of suicidally brave, workaholic lifetime soldier the Devastators look for. They'll come calling, I'd bet money on it, but not yet. Not until you've got at least ten more years on your record."

"In ten more years, I'll be dead." I said it plainly because it was a goddamn fact. The average life span of an armored mercenary was just shy of twenty-five. I was two years past that. After thirty, survival rates fell to almost nothing. Shooting for cash was a game for the young. You either got a desk job, applied to the Home Guard, or went back to your parents in a body bag. A desk wouldn't impress the Devastators any more than it impressed me, but I couldn't do crash jobs and pirate clearing forever.

"I'm good enough to serve the king right now," I said, lowering my voice. "I've seen Devastators in their thirties, so I know they make exceptions to the experience requirement. I want to know what and how, and I'm not letting you out of here until you tell me." And just in case he didn't believe me, I kicked out my leg and slammed my boot onto the booth beside him, blocking him in.

Anthony glanced at my foot with a deep sigh. "You're impossible. You know that, right?"

I didn't answer, just leaned back, crossed my arms, and waited for him to cave.

It didn't take long. Less than a minute later, Anthony shook his head and pulled out his ledger. "It just so happens you picked a good time to have your crazy idea," he said, tapping the screen with his thumb. "Here."

I took the ledger he offered, squinting to read the glowing screen in the bright sunlight. It took me a few moments to recognize the short paragraph for what it was, a job listing from the general employment boards. A tiny one, too, barely three sentences long, but what I saw was enough to make me think Anthony was seriously trying to jerk me around.

"This is for a security position on a trade freighter."

"Not just any trade freighter," Anthony said, smiling for the first time since we'd gotten out of bed. "That's Brian Caldwell's ship."

"I don't care whose ship it is," I said. "I am *not* doing guard work." Guard work was just above deep-space mine clearing for crap armor jobs. No Blackbird would be caught dead on a freighter, even an ex-Blackbird like me.

"I wouldn't have shown it to you if it wasn't something you'd be interested in," Anthony said. "Have a little faith, darling."

When I finally relaxed my scowl, Anthony went on. "Caldswell's a bit of a legend in trading circles. They say his ship is cursed. He gets into more trouble on one route than an entire fleet could find in ten years, and he goes through security teams like tissue paper. That's where you come in." He leaned closer. "Don't spread this around, but the Royal Army considers one year with Caldswell to be worth five anywhere else. If you can survive a full tour on that ship, I'm pretty sure even the Devastators would sit up and take notice."

I glanced down at the ad again. It looked perfectly normal, the sort of short-notice grunt job that kept army dropouts in beer money, nothing like the deadly golden ticket Anthony was painting it to be. "You're not putting me on, are you?"

"I wish I was," Anthony said. "Maybe you missed the part about how quickly Caldswell uses up his people? I like you as you are, all in one piece."

It was meant to laugh at his concern, but I couldn't help it. "And maybe you've forgotten who you're talking to."

"I haven't forgotten," Anthony said, his voice deadly serious. "I've seen you fight, remember? That's not something you forget. But this is the fast and dangerous route, Devi. I know you're ambitious enough for any five normal mercs, but there's nothing wrong with a life of being safe, prosperous, and happy."

"I am happy," I said, pulling out a pen and writing the dock number from the ad on the back of my hand. "And the faster I get to be a Devastator, the happier I'll be." I handed his ledger back. "You'll tell them, right?" The Devastators did whatever the king told them to, but they were technically part of the Home Guard. Anthony worked for them sometimes, which was why we were having this conversation.

"If Caldswell takes you, yes," he said. "Don't know if they'll listen, they mostly don't, but I'll be sure to tell everyone what a reckless glory hog you are."

I grinned and dropped the leg that had been fencing him in. "You're a prince as always, Anthony," I said, sliding out of the booth. "Thanks for the breakfast, and the job tip."

"I'll put them on your tab," he said. "You can settle up next time you're in town."

I kissed him on the cheek one last time and walked away. The last thing I heard before I squeezed into the crowded elevator was Anthony calling the waiter for another drink. I worried about that as the elevator whipped me down, but twenty seconds and seventy floors later, I had more immediate concerns.

The crowd on the street level was brutal, and I had to throw my weight around to break through the rush to the cab stand, something I enjoyed more than I should have. I'm five six on a good day, and between that, my bird bones, poofy brown hair, and the fact my face looks closer to thirteen than thirty, normal people tend to underestimate me. It used to piss me off to no end, but that was before I cultivated an appreciation for watching the patronizing look fall off a businessman's face when the little girl he was trying to push aside elbows him in the stomach hard enough to knock his wind out.

After a few minutes of unnecessary roughness, I'd made my way to the front of the taxi line and flagged down a ground cab. Air would have been quicker, but I wasn't in enough of a hurry to justify the cost. Fortunately, my cabbie was a stereotypical Kingston driver, utterly insane. Despite it being rush hour on a workday morning, we made it to the starport in less than twenty minutes.

He offered to take me into the departures plaza, but one look at the traffic and I told him to drop me on the street. I tipped him well for not getting us both killed and ran up the pedestrian ramp, ducking through the enormous mirrored doors with the rest of the morning crowd before taking a sharp left toward the lockers where I'd bunked my gear when Anthony had picked me up late last night.

I found my locker and opened it with a thumbscan, pulling out my duffel. My handset was on top, right where I'd left it. I flipped it open, working fast. I trusted Anthony, but only an idiot applies

for a job without doing her research first. A quick search for Brian Caldwell turned up surprisingly little, but Anthony hadn't been kidding about the prestige of serving on his ship. After five minutes of searching, I'd found no fewer than seven of his former security grunts who were now enjoying fantastic positions, including one who'd gone on to be a Devastator.

But my digging also showed that Anthony hadn't been exaggerating how dangerous Caldwell's ship was, either. The number of crew deaths and disappearances he had on file with the Trans-Galactic Trade Union was staggering for any vessel, but it was especially bad when you considered that Caldwell captained a ten-man freighter on a fairly safe route through the major systems. From his numbers, you'd have thought he was helming a battleship on a bloody front. All of this should have made me think twice, but I'd made my career by beating impossible odds. As soon as I'd verified Anthony's tip to my satisfaction, I got to work hauling my armor case out of the locker.

In addition to my fast elbow, I'm a lot stronger than most people think, a product of spending all day in armor with my resistance turned way up. Some mercs let their suit do all the work. Why bother with flesh-and-blood muscles if you're in powered armor all the time? But I don't like being weak in any way if I can help it, and real muscles come in handy when the most precious thing in your life folds up into a hundred sixty-pound case and all you can get is a top locker.

Bracing my knees, I heaved my armor case down and set it on its wheels. When it was balanced, I slung my duffel over my shoulder and started walking toward the dock number I'd written on my hand.

Considering its black reputation, I expected Caldwell's ship to look sinister, but the freighter sitting at dock C23503 was disappointingly shabby. Its belly sat directly on the ground, while its hull rose in an old-fashioned, ungraceful beige block six stories into the air. The whole ship was spotty with patches, but thanks to a fresh paint job I couldn't tell if the repairs were from cannon fire or just the usual wear and tear you saw on older vessels.

Old or not, though, Caldwell's ship was still an impressive hundred and fifty feet long from nose to thrusters, with the vast majority of that in its cargo hold. The ship's nose was boxy as the rest of it, a squat thrust of metal with its windows covered by steel shutters coated in high-burn plastic against the heat of entering the atmosphere. The tail of the ship was all engine, a pair of long-haulers and a hyperdrive coil that looked pretty new.

That gave me hope. Hyperdrive coils weren't cheap. If this Caldwell could afford a new model, he could certainly afford a top line Paradoxian armored mercenary with an exceptional record.

Like all the noncommuter ships, Caldwell's was docked in the overflow landing. But, despite being in a good spot relatively close to the main port, no other ships were docked around him. That didn't surprise me. Spacers were a superstitious bunch. Docks would have to be pretty scarce for a captain to risk leaving his ship where Caldwell's curse could reach it.

I believed the Sacred King could do miracles just like any good Paradoxian, but I didn't believe in curses. Neither did a lot of people, apparently, or maybe most mercs just didn't bother to do their research, because as I rounded the nose of the ship, I saw that the ramp in was packed with people hauling armor cases not so different from my own.

Never one to let a little competition scare me off, I walked right up and got in line. There were fifteen people ahead of me, but the crowd was dwarfed by the enormous and strangely empty cargo bay. Other than a few dusty crates lashed down in the back, the only thing inside was a suit of armor.

Unlike my armor, which could be broken down to fit in a case, this was a serious heavy combat suit, Count class, the kind the army used to rip up Terran tanks. Even powered down, it was seven feet tall and obviously someone's baby, judging from how nicely the bright yellow paint job sparkled. I scowled. Armor like that belonged to a serious professional who'd spent a lot of time in the armored corps. Clearly, someone had already gotten a job today. The ad hadn't said how many openings were available, but the ship wasn't that big. It couldn't take more than two security guards

to cover it all, and if one of those spots was already taken, then this wasn't the sure thing I'd been counting on.

I eyed the line with new rancor. None of them looked like serious competition, but then, standing around in the tight pants and flowy shirt I'd worn to meet Anthony with my hair tangled in a postsex ponytail, I probably didn't either. Nothing for it but to wait and see. I used the time to fix my appearance, brushing and braiding my hair as discreetly as I could. The line moved quickly, and by the time I was decent, I was next.

There was a stair leading up from the cargo bay to the rest of the ship where the interviews were being held. People had been going up and coming down again with only a few minutes between the whole time I'd been waiting. Some looked dejected, but most looked relieved, and I bet they were the ones who hadn't actually wanted a job on a ship that had a reputation for being a flying coffin, no matter how scarce armor work had gotten now that the king had wrapped up all our wars.

The man ahead of me was certainly one of these. He was almost grinning as he walked back down the steps and stabbed his thumb over his shoulder, letting me know it was my turn. Grabbing my bag and lifting my armor case so it wouldn't bang, I started up the stairs to tempt my fate.

The interviews were being held in what looked like a combination lounge and ship's mess. There was a tiny galley kitchen with a bar, a table for meals, and a small sitting area, all empty. My interviewer sat at a folding table with a small desk fan pointed at his face. He was older, maybe early fifties, and wearing an old-fashioned white button-up shirt and brown flight vest. His short, red-brown hair was frosted with silver, but his stocky body was still fit and solid when he stood to shake my hand and wave me to the chair.

"Name?"

I flinched. He was speaking Universal. I spoke it, of course. Everyone did. It was the standard language of civilized space. But the Blackbirds were solid Paradoxian, and we spoke our own King's Tongue exclusively in everything we did. I'd been all over the universe, but because I'd always been with my unit, I hadn't spoken Universal other than to ask where the bathroom was for almost three years.

Looking back, I don't know why I was surprised. Traders, even Paradoxians, always spoke Universal. It was, after all, the language of trade. But the man at the desk didn't look Paradoxian, he looked Terran, and that could be a problem. After so long not speaking Universal, my accent was pretty thick, which put most Terrans off. Usually, I wouldn't care. Paradoxians don't like Terrans any more than they like us. We might both be from Old Earth, but a century of border wars carries a lot more weight than a shared ancestry from some dead rock a thousand years ago. Still, if the Terran was the one with the job, then that was all water under the bridge so far as I was concerned. I'd just have to trust that he was willing to overlook a few dropped consonants in return for a stellar record.

The man glared at me, still waiting for his answer, and I snapped into business mode. "Deviana Morris," I said, pronouncing each syllable as crisply as I could. "I go by Devi."

I set my handset on the table and tapped the button for the projected screen. It flickered to life, throwing my record, commendations, and references into the air right in front of his face. The man flicked through my history with a finger, his expression neutral, though I saw his lip quirk when he got to my last tour with the Blackbirds. A glorious time, even for a glory hog like me.

"That's quite an impressive record, Miss Morris," he said at last. He spoke the words grudgingly, like he didn't like being impressed. "It's my understanding that most Paradoxian mercenaries spend their careers trying to get into the Blackbirds. Why did you leave?"

"I'd reached the top of the active duty promotions, sir."

The man smiled. "Your ambitions don't run to desk jobs, I take it?"

I smiled back. "No sir."

"Fair enough," the man said, glancing at my armor case. "What equipment are you bringing?"

My smile turned into a full-on grin. This was my favorite part of any interview. I reached down and turned my case so he could see the insignia on the front. "Custom Verdemont master craft knight's armor."

My opinion of the man rose significantly when his eyes widened in an appropriate expression of shock. "And this is your suit?" he said. "Not leased from the Blackbirds?"

"No sir," I said proudly. "I own all my own gear." It had taken me two years' wages plus some pretty extreme hazard pay to buy my armor, and it was worth every cent. "I also have my own guns and ammunition as well, and an automated repair case for my suit."

"We'll supply your ammo," the man said, leaning back in his rickety folding chair. "This is a security position. Your job will be to work with your fellow security officer to protect this ship, its crew, and its cargo at all times. We usually run a wide circuit spanning Paradoxian space, the Terran Republic, and the Aeon Sevalis, but that can change without notice. The contract is for one galactic standard year with fifteen hundred Republic Script paid monthly. Shifts are twelve hours during flight with overtime for planetary landings and time off when we're in hyperspace, plus one day paid shore leave per month. So long as you are an employee of this ship, we'll provide food, lodging, and ammunition, as I said earlier, plus a stipend for maintenance and repair of your equipment."

I considered this for a moment. It was a pretty standard contract, but the pay, while high for ship guards, was pretty low compared to what I'd earned in the Blackbirds. I might not be doing this for the money, but a merc had to protect her worth. "Is there hazard pay?"

"Thousand RS for every incident," the man said.

I bit back a smug smile. That was where the money was hiding. Considering this ship's reputation for trouble, that hazard bonus might well end up making me more than I'd earned as a squad leader.

"Sounds good to me, sir," I said, reaching for my armor case. This next bit would be pure fun. I loved showing off my armor. "What would you like me to do for my demonstration? I can do any accuracy challenge you can think of, maneuvers, a strength test, whatever you want."

"I don't think we'll need any of that," the man said, turning off my handset and handing it back. "You've got the job."

I blinked. "That's it?" I blurted before I could stop myself.

The man shrugged. "Unless another decorated ex-Blackbird with her own suit of custom, high-end armor is waiting in my cargo bay, then yes. That's it." He held out his hand. "I'm Brian Caldwell, welcome to the *Glorious Fool*."

I took his hand, head spinning. That was the fastest interview I'd ever had. "Fool?"

"The *Glorious Fool*," Caldwell repeated, smiling like this was an old joke. "My ship."

Weird name for a ship, but I didn't give it much thought. I was too busy absorbing the fact that the short, stocky man in front of me was the cursed captain, Brian Caldwell. The man who went through security like tissue paper, and I was now in his hands.

"Thank you, sir," I said before I found some way to ruin things.

The captain nodded. "We'll get you a bunk when we're ready to go. In the meanwhile, you can store your stuff behind the bar. No one will touch it."

No one but me could touch my armor without getting ten thousand volts, but I kept my mouth shut about that and stowed my bags as directed. Honestly, I was still reeling. My brain couldn't quite get around the idea that after years of fighting like a dog for every step up the ladder, I'd gotten what could well be the make or break job of my career with an interview that had taken less than five minutes.

While I was putting my things up, the captain walked over to the cargo bay door and shoved his head out. "Position's filled!" he yelled, and then he shut the door.

I thought that was a bit harsh, but the captain seemed to have forgotten the other applicants entirely the moment he turned away. "I have to go take care of some business," he said, walking past me toward the hall on the opposite side of the lounge. "Basil will get you settled. He's my second, and you'll obey him as you would me."

"Yes sir," I said, following him. "Who else do I follow?"

"Mabel, our engineer." The captain wasn't looking at me, but I caught his smile and gave myself a mental pat on the back. I'd impressed him. "But she won't be here until later. For now, just worry about making Basil happy. You'll find him on the bridge, straight ahead."

He nodded down the hall toward a closed door at the opposite end. I noted it and then turned to face my new captain head-on. "Yes sir," I said, bowing formally from the waist as was proper now that he was my superior. "It will be an honor to serve you, sir."

The captain shook his head. "This is a Terran ship, Morris. We don't do any of that bowing and scraping here. Just do your job, obey orders, don't backtalk too much, and we'll all be happy."

"Yes sir," I said, without the bow this time. Not bowing to a superior went against my training, but it was his ship. If he didn't want me bowing, I was happy not to. Bowing to a Terran felt a little blasphemous.

The captain nodded and walked down the hall away from me, toward the engines. I watched him until he started down the spiral stairs to the lower levels and then turned toward the bridge as ordered. The hall ran down the ship like a backbone with the bridge as its head. Surprisingly, though the hall was reasonably clean, it was almost as patched as the ship's hull.

The outside damage I could understand; pirates liked to take potshots, but the hall's gray metal walls were peppered with blaster burns, bullet holes, even a few blast shadows from what I could only imagine were grenades. I've walked down worse, but not many, and only in war zones. Whatever had happened here had been serious, and I made a mental note to ask how the last security team had ended their tour.

The bridge door slid open the second I stepped up. I marched inside and stopped at parade rest just as I had back in my army days, glancing around for this Basil I was supposed to be taking orders from. What I saw confused me greatly.

The bridge itself was a perfectly normal three-layer setup and far less scarred than the hall had been, though there was still a bullet hole in the ceiling. At the top where I stood was the monitor deck and systems desk, both empty. Down a step was the captain's chair, its leather seat and consoles worn nearly black from years of use. But at the bottom of the bridge, the seat at the ship's nose where the pilot usually sat was gone. In its place was what looked like a nest of bright-colored fabric, and sitting in this nest was a very large bird wearing a headset.

I'd seen aeons before, but never in person, and certainly never this close. The ones I'd seen had been brightly colored, pink and blue and green and every other neon hue you'd expect from a giant alien bird. This one was brown as a common sparrow. Sitting in its nest, it looked like an overgrown fluffy stork with short chocolate and cream feathers layered over white down. Its neck was long as my arm, and the head at the top was crested with a ridge of rust-red feathers that bobbed back and forth as the aeon studied the projected star map in front of it. Its wings, which looked large enough to be useful, were folded at its sides, each one tipped with four tiny, clawlike fingers at the joint, but the bird wasn't using them. Instead, it was tapping the ship's flight handle impatiently with its long feet, the yellow talons clicking so fast on the padded grip I could barely follow them.

Despite being the most populous race in the galaxy, beating out even humans for sheer numbers, the aeons stuck to their Sevalis and their own kind. I'd heard they disliked the other races with a passion bordering on violent xenophobia, which was a waste, because they were supposed to be the best navigators in the universe. Once I got over my initial shock at seeing a large alien bird sitting in

a literal pilot's nest, that fact that Caldwell actually had an aeon to fly this hunk of junk ship was what astonished me the most.

The bird hadn't noticed me yet, and I took a moment trying to decide if it was safer to call the thing sir or ma'am. Neither seemed good. I didn't even know if aeons had the usual genders, actually. But since this was a Terran ship with no appreciation for proper hierarchy, I decided to risk dropping the honorific, just this once.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you Basil?"

The aeon's head whipped around, and I found myself being glared at by a pair of yellow eyes as large as my fists with round, black pupils set in a flat face above a long, curving yellow beak that practically dripped with disapproval. "Oh goody," it said. "A Paradoxian."

The bird's voice was more like a whistle than words, but I didn't like the tone of it one bit. "That's what you get when you advertise for a security team on Paradox," I said, fighting the urge to cross my arms and glare.

The aeon arched a feathered eye ridge and then, in a flurry of flapping, launched itself into the air. It cleared the captain's chair in one leap and landed right in front of me. Standing, the bird's head was a foot higher than mine. Its yellow eyes gleamed as it set down, no doubt waiting for me to scramble out of the way. But I'd faced down much scarier things than overgrown chickens with bad attitudes, and I held my ground.

The bird looked disappointed. "My name is"—it gave a shrill whistle that faded into a chirp. "But your soft human palate couldn't possibly manage that, so you may call me Basil. I'm the *Glorious Fool's* navigator and Captain Caldwell's second in command. You will address me as sir at all times."

"Yes sir," I said, hiding a smile. An officer with literal feathers to ruffle. This was going to be rich. "The captain said you would show me around."

The bird heaved an exaggerated sigh and pushed past me. "Come along, monkey. And don't touch anything."

We spent the next hour going over a ship that should have taken ten minutes to walk through. The *Fool* had the fairly standard spacer setup of cargo bay, engine room, lounge, two levels of crew cabins, and a surprisingly nice infirmary (or not so surprising with as much action as this ship supposedly saw). The most interesting thing I noticed was that the damage I'd seen in the main hallway continued through most of the ship.

Hearing about trouble was one thing, but going by battle scars I'd say the *Fool* saw more action than my former crash team's ship, which we routinely dropped on pirate camps. Everywhere I looked, things had been damaged and patched over. Even the out-of-the-way bulkheads were burned or scraped in some fashion, and more than a few still had bullets lodged in them. The floor was rubber coated for traction, but the coating was melted in several places from what looked like plasma blasts. We didn't run into any other crew members, but that didn't matter. In between boring me to tears with details of the ship's mechanics, Basil took every opportunity to talk about them.

"As our engineer, Mabel is responsible for everything mechanical," he said as we walked up the tiny spiral stair from the engine room. "You'll obey her as you obey the captain or myself. Nova is our systems analyst. She helps me run the bridge. The two of you will be bunking together until I can talk some sense into the captain."

His head swiveled to glare at me. "Honestly, if we weren't short on room, I'd never have let it happen. A nice girl like Nova shouldn't be exposed to Paradoxians. Sometimes I don't think you people even understand words that don't have to do with armor, fighting, and king worship."

"We also talk about shooting, sir," I said dryly. "And bird hunting."

"Good thing for us then that you and that other idiot are the only of your barbaric kind here," Basil snapped, feathers standing on end. "Though two is more than enough." He pressed his wingtip

to his head. “Moving on, and do try to remember this because I’m not telling you again, cleaning duty follows a standard rotation. The cook takes care of the lounge, but all other responsibilities are shared between the crew. You’ll be expected to contribute at least five hours a week or face a pay dock. In addition, our records require that you file daily reports...”

I tried not to let my eyes glaze over as I tuned him out. Normally, I am the perfect picture of the professional merc. I try not to swear because swearing is for grunts, not officers. I maintain decorum, I follow orders, I never drink on duty, and I do my job with a flair and efficiency designed to land me glowing reports. But after half an hour of listening to Basil squawk, my professional front was starting to crumble.

Even without the bird’s talk about cleaning rotations, the tour had been unappealing. The blast marks were exciting, true, but the rest of my duties sounded dull as, well, guard duty. I had a patrol path I was supposed to maintain during flight, hourly check-ins, report writing, inventory control, all the routine, mind-numbing idiocy that had led me to avoid guard jobs like the plague my whole career. Much as I’d grown to dislike crashing pirate camps over the last five years, the idea of hopping out of a drop ship on some remote moon and landing on a pirate’s head was starting to sound like heaven at the moment. When the bird turned us into the lounge and launched into a lecture on fire regulations *again*, I rolled my eyes to the ceiling and prayed to my king that all those dead security teams had actually died in combat and not from boredom.

Basil’s safety lecture was interrupted by the sound of someone coming up the cargo bay stairs. I looked over, hoping to see the captain or maybe my fellow security team member, anyone who could save me from the bird. But it wasn’t the captain or a merc, it was a girl. I placed her at about fourteen, maybe a little older. She was dark skinned with a cap of straight dark hair cut just above her shoulders and almond eyes that were almost too focused as they moved from me to Basil.

If it hadn’t been a horrible breach of decorum, I would have rolled my eyes again. I hate kids when I’m working. If Caldsell tried to make me babysit on top of report writing, I was going to tell him he could shove this job, fantastic recommendation or no. I was already working out all the excuses I could use to get out of any potential kid duty when I caught sight of the man behind the girl and everything else became superfluous.

Now this, this was more like it. The man was gorgeous. He was tall and pale, but beautifully so, with shoulder-blade-length black hair tied at his neck. His eyes were a lovely bright blue under dark eyebrows, and his mouth looked quick to smile. He was wearing a black suit, not the ones they wore in Kingston with the wide lapels, but the old-fashioned Terran kind with the high collar that I’d always considered dashing. Even hidden behind the girl, I could see enough of his posture to know that he had some military training. Combine that with his long-fingered hands and broad, sloping shoulders and I was suddenly feeling much, much better about this job.

“Ah,” Basil said, his snarky tone fading just a hair. “This is Ren, the captain’s daughter.”

It took me a few seconds to realize Basil was talking to me. I looked away from the man with some difficulty and studied the girl instead. She must have taken after her mother, I decided, because no matter how much I looked, I could see nothing of the stocky Captain Caldsell in the girl’s dark, delicate features. The disconnect made me curious, but I stomped down the urge to question. Nosy mercs were dead mercs. Instead, I nodded to the girl politely: “Miss Caldsell.”

Ren didn’t even look at me. She just walked past Basil and me like we weren’t there and sat down on the couch behind us.

If her antisocial behavior bothered him, Basil didn’t let it show. A second later, I let it go as well, because Basil was now introducing the man. “This is our cook.”

The tall man’s face broke into a smile that only made him more handsome as he held out his hand. “Rupert Charkov,” he said, his voice curling around the letters with a soft accent I couldn’t place.

“Devi Morris,” I replied, doing my best not to let my own, far less attractive accent leak through as I took his hand.

When you live around mercs, you get used to bone-crushing handshakes. It’s a dominance thing, a power game, and like all games, I play to win. But Rupert took me by surprise, closing his hand around mine gentle as a caress. His soft grip forced me to dial back my own at the last second, which had the funny effect of sending my fingers sliding under his in a way that felt shockingly intimate between two people who’d just met.

Rupert must have felt it too, because the sudden, knowing look he gave me made his eyes sparkle. “I look forward to working with you, Devi.”

“Same,” I said. I could certainly stand hearing him say my name in that lovely accent a few more times.

Terrans accuse Paradoxians of being overly forward and completely unable to comprehend subtlety. I think that’s an exaggeration, but I have to admit I watched Rupert blatantly as he walked behind the kitchen counter and began moving supplies from the bag he’d been carrying into the fridge. I can’t help it, I’m not a subtle girl. When I see something I like, I go for it, and I liked what I saw very much. Even unloading groceries, Rupert moved gracefully, and as Basil led me back toward the bridge, all my earlier misgivings seemed less damning. Yes, I decided, Rupert would definitely make this job more bearable. All I needed now was for my fellow security merc to be minimally competent and this guard business might not be half bad.

Feeling more confident than I had since Caldwel told me I’d gotten the job, I strode after Basil, nodding where appropriate as he started explaining the dreadful burden of navigation, which my unevolved brain couldn’t possibly comprehend.

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THE CHURN

Burton was a small, thin, dark-skinned man. He wore immaculately tailored suits, and kept the thick black curls of his hair and the small beard on his chin neatly groomed. That he worked in criminal enterprises said more about the world than about his character. With more opportunities, a more prestigious education, and a few influential dorm mates at upper university, he could have joined the ranks of transplanetary corporate executives with offices at Luna and Mars, Ceres Station and Ganymede. Instead, a few neighborhoods at the drowned edges of Baltimore answered to him. An organization of a dozen lieutenants, a couple hundred street-level thugs and knee-breakers, a scattering of drug cooks, identity hackers, dirty cops, and arms dealers followed his dictates. And a class of perhaps a thousand professional victims—junkies, whores, vandals, unregistered children, and others in possession of disposable lives—looked up to him as he might look up at Luna: an icon of power and wealth glowing across an impassable void. A fact of nature.

Burton's misfortune was to be born where and when he was, in a city of scars and vice, in an age when the division in the popular mind was between living on government-funded basic support or having an actual profession and money of your own. To go from an unregistered birth such as his to having any power and status at all was an achievement as profound as it was invisible. To the men and women he owned, the fact that he had risen up from among the lowest of the low was not an invitation but a statement of his strength and improbability, mythical as the seagull that flew to the moon. Burton himself never thought about it, but that he had managed what he did meant only that it was possible. Anyone who had not had his determination, ruthlessness, and luck deserved pretty much whatever shit he handed to them. It didn't make him sympathetic when someone stepped out of line.

“He...what?” Burton said

“Shot him,” Oestra said, looking at the table. Around them, the sounds of the diner made a white noise that was like privacy.

“Shot. Him.”

“Yeah. Austin was talking about how he was good for the money, and how he just needed a few more days. Before he could finish, Timmy took that shitty homemade shotgun of his and—” Oestra made a shooting motion with two fingers and a thumb, the movement turning seamlessly into a shrug: a single gesture of violence and apology. Burton leaned back in his chair and looked over at Erich as if to say, *I think your puppy peed on my rug.*

Erich had recommended Timmy, had vouched for him, and so was responsible if things went wrong. It felt like they were going very wrong. Erich leaned forward, resting on his good elbow, hiding his fear with forced casualness. His bad arm, the left, was no longer than a six-year-old’s and scarred badly at the joints. His disfigurement was the result of a beating he’d suffered as a child. It wasn’t a fact that he’d shared with Burton, nor would he mention it now, though it did figure into the calculations that were his life. As did Timmy.

“He had a reason,” Erich said.

“He did?” Burton said, raising his eyebrows with feigned patience. “And what was it?”

Erich’s stomach knotted. His bad hand closed in a tiny fist. He saw the hardness in Burton’s eyes, and it reminded him that even with his knowledge, even with his skills, there were others who could fake identity records. Others who could fake DNA profiles. Others who could do for Burton what he did. He was expendable. It was the message Burton meant him to take.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I’ve known Timmy since forever, yeah? He doesn’t do anything unless there’s a reason.”

“Well,” Burton replied, pulling the word out to two syllables. “If it’s since *forever*, I guess that makes it all right.”

“Just, you know, if he did that, he did it for something.”

Oestra scratched his arm, scowling to hide the relief he felt at Burton’s focus turning to Erich. “I got him in the storage room.”

Burton stood up, pushing back his chair with the backs of his knees. The

waitress made a point not to look at the three as they moved across the room and out through the doors marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, Burton and then Oestra and Erich limping at the back. She didn't even start cleaning the table until she was sure they were gone.

The storage room was claustrophobic to begin with and lined with boxes, making it even smaller. Cream-colored degradable storage boxes with flat green adhesive readouts on the side that listed what they contained and whether the cheap, disposable sensors in the foam had detected rot and corruption. The table in the cramped open space at the center was pressed particleboard, as much glue as wood. Timmy sat at it, the LED fixture overhead throwing the shadow of his brow down into his eyes. He was barely halfway into his second decade of life, but the red-brown hair was already receding from his forehead. He was strong, tall, and had an unnerving capacity for stillness. He looked up when the three men came in, dividing his smile equally among his childhood friend, the professional thug he'd just disappointed, and the thin, well-dressed man who controlled everything important in his life.

"Hey," Timmy said to any of them.

Erich moved to sit at the table, saw that Oestra and Burton were standing motionless, and pulled back. If Timmy noticed, he didn't say anything.

"I hear that you killed Austin," Burton said.

"Yeah," Timmy said. The empty smile changed not at all.

Burton pulled out the chair opposite Timmy and sat. Oestra and Erich carefully didn't look at each other or at Burton. The object of all their attention, Timmy waited amiably for whatever came next.

"You care to tell me why you did that?" Burton asked.

"It's what you said to do," Timmy said.

"That man owed me money. I told you to get whatever you could from him. This was your tryout, little man. This was your game. Now, how do you go from what I actually *said* to what you *did*?"

"I got whatever I could get," Timmy replied. There was no fear in his voice or his expression, and it left Burton with the sense he was talking to an idiot. "I couldn't get money out of that guy. He didn't have any. If he had, he'd have given it to you. Only thing you were getting from him was a way to make sure everyone else pays you on time. So I took that instead."

“Really?”

“Yup.”

“You’re positive—you’re *convinced*—that Austin wouldn’t have gotten my money?”

“I don’t mean to second-guess why anybody gave it to him in the first place,” Timmy said, “but that guy never met a dollar he didn’t snort, shoot, or drink away.”

“So you thought it through, and you came to the conclusion that the wise and right thing to do was escalate this little visit from a collection run to a murder?”

Timmy’s head tilted a degree. “Didn’t spent a lot of time thinking about it. Water’s wet. Sky’s up. Austin gets you more dead than alive. Kind of obvious.”

Burton went silent. Oestra and Erich didn’t look at him. Burton rubbed his hands together, the hiss of palm against palm the loudest noise in the room. Timmy scratched his leg and waited, neither patient nor impatient. Erich felt a growing nausea and the certainty that he was about to watch an old friend and protector die in front of him. His stunted hand opened and closed and he tried not to swallow. When Burton smiled his small, amused smile, the only one who saw it was Timmy, and if he understood it, he didn’t react.

“Why don’t you wait here, little man,” Burton said.

“Arright,” Timmy said, and Burton was already walking out the door.

Out in the café, the lunch rush had started. The booths and tables were filled, and a crowd loitered in the doorway, scowling at the waitresses, the diners who had gotten tables before them, and the empty place reserved for Burton and whoever he chose to have near him. As soon as he took his chair, the waitress came over, her eyebrows raised, as if he were a new customer. He waved her away. There was something about sitting at an empty table in full view of hungry men and women that Burton enjoyed. *What you want, I can take or I can leave*, it said. *All I want is to keep your options for myself*. Erich and Oestra sat.

“That boy,” Burton said, letting the words take on an affected drawl, “is some piece of work.”

“Yeah,” Oestra said.

“He’s good at what he does,” Erich said. “He’ll get better.”

Burton was quiet for a long moment. A man at the front door pointed an angry finger toward Burton's table, demanding something of the waitress. She took the stranger's hand and pushed it down. The angry man left. Burton watched him go. If he didn't know any better, this wasn't the place for him.

"Erich, I don't think I can take your friend off his probation period. Not with this. Not yet."

Erich nodded, the urge to speak for Timmy and the fear of losing Burton's fickle forgiveness warring in his throat. Oestra was the one to break the silence.

"You want to give him another job?" The words carried a weight of incredulity measured to the gram.

"The right job," Burton said. "Right one for now, anyway. You say he watched out for you, growing up?"

"He did," Erich said.

"Let him do that, then. Timmy's going to be your personal bodyguard on your next job. Keep you out of trouble. See if you can keep him out of trouble too. At least do better than Oey did with him, right?" Burton said and laughed. A moment later Oestra laughed too, only a little sourly. Erich couldn't manage much more than a sick, relieved grin.

"I'll tell him," he said. "I'll take care of it."

"Do," Burton said, smiling. An awkward moment later, Erich got up, head bobbing like a bird's with gratitude and discomfort. Burton and Oestra watched him limp back toward the storage room. Oestra sighed.

"I don't know why you're cultivating that freak," Burton's lieutenant said.

"He's off the grid and he cooks good identity docs," Burton said. "I like having someone who can't be traced keeping my name clean."

"I don't mean the cripple. I mean the other one. Seriously, there's something wrong with that kid."

"I think he's got potential."

"Potential for what?"

"Exactly," Burton said. "Okay, so tell me the rest. What's going on out there?"

Oestra hoisted his eyebrows and hunched forward, elbows on the table. The kids running unlicensed games by the waterfront weren't coming up

with the usual take. One of the brothels had been hit by an outbreak of antibiotic-resistant syphilis; one of the youngest boys, a five-year-old, had it in his eyes. Burton's neighbor to the north—an Earthbound branch of the Loca Griega—were seeing raids on their drug manufacturing houses. Burton listened with his eyelids at half-mast. Individually, no one event mattered much, but put together, they were the first few fat raindrops in a coming storm. Oestra knew it too.

By the time the lunch rush ended, the booths and tables filling and emptying in the systole and diastole of the day's vast urban heart, Burton's mind was on a dozen other things. Erich and Timmy and the death of a small-time deadbeat weren't forgotten, but no particular importance was put on them either. That was what it meant to be Burton: those things that could rise up to fill a small person's whole horizon were only small parts of his view. He was the boss, the big-picture man. Like Baltimore itself, he *weathered* storms.

* * *

Time had not been kind to the city. Its coastline was a ruin of drowned buildings kept from salvage by a complexity of rights, jurisdictions, regulations, and apathy until the rising sea had all but reclaimed them for its own. The Urban Arcology movement had peaked there a decade or two before the technology existed to make its dreams of vast, sustainable structures a reality. It had left a wall seven miles long and twenty stories high of decaying hope and structural resin that reached from the beltway to Lake Montebello. At the street level, electric networks laced the roadways, powering and guiding the vehicles that could use them. Sparrows Island stood out in the waves like a widow watching the sea for a ship that would never come home, and Federal Hill scowled back at the city across shallow, filthy water, emperor of its own abandoned land.

Everywhere, all through the city, space was at a premium. Extended families lived in decaying apartments designed for half as many. Men and women who couldn't escape the cramped space spent their days at the screens of their terminals, watching newsfeeds and dramas and pornography and living on the textured protein and enriched rice of basic. For most, their forays into crime were halfhearted, milquetoast affairs—a

backroom brewer making weak, unregulated beer; a few kids stealing a neighbor's clothes or breaking their furniture; a band of scavengers with scrounged tools harvesting metal from the buried infrastructure of the city that had been. Baltimore was Earth writ small, crowded and bored. Its citizens were caught between the dismal life of basic and the barriers of class, race, and opportunity, vicious competition and limited resources, that kept all but the most driven from a profession and actual currency. The dictates of the regional administration in Chicago filtered down to the streets slowly, and the local powers might be weaker than the government, but they were also closer, the gravities of law and lawlessness finding their balance point somewhere just north of Lansdowne.

Time had not been kind to Lydia either. She wasn't one of the unregistered, but very little of what was important in her life appeared in the government records. There, she was a name—not Lydia—and an address where she had never lived. Her real home was four rooms on the fifth floor of a minor arcology looking out over the harbor. Her real work was keeping track of inventory for Liev, one of Burton's lieutenants. Before that, she had been his lover. Before that, she had been a whore in his stable. Before that, she had been someone else who she could hardly remember anymore. When she was alone, and she was often alone, the narrative she told herself was of how lucky she was. She'd escaped basic, she'd had dear friends and mentors when she was working, she'd been able to retire up in the ad hoc structure of the city's underworld. Many, many people hadn't been anywhere near as fortunate as she had been. She was growing old, yes. There was gray in her hair now. Lines at the corners of her eyes, the first faint liver spots on the backs of her hands. She told herself they were the evidence of her success. Too many of her friends had never had them. Never would. Her life had been a patchwork of love and violence, and the overlap was vast.

Still, she hung warm-colored silk across her windows and wore the silver bells at her ankles and wrists that were the fashion among much younger women. Life, such as it was, was good.

The evening sun hung over the rooftops to the west, the late summer heat thickening the air. Lydia was in the little half-kitchen warming up a bowl of frozen hummus when the door chimed and the bolts clacked open. Timmy came in, lifting his chin in greeting. She smiled back, raising an eyebrow.

There was no one with him, and there never would be. They had never allowed someone else to be with them when they were together. Not since the night his mother died.

“So, how did it go?”

“Kind of fucked it up, me,” Timmy said.

Lydia’s heart went tight and she tried to keep her voice calm and light. “How so?”

“Burton told me to get what I could out of this guy. Looking back, I think he just meant money. So.” Timmy leaned against the couch, hands deep in his pockets, and shrugged. “Oops.”

“Was Burton angry?”

Timmy looked away and shrugged again. With that motion, she could see him again as he’d been as a young boy, as a child, as a baby. She had known his mother when they’d worked together, each watching out for the other when they turned tricks. Lydia had been there the night Timmy was born among the worn tiles and cold lights of the black-market clinic. She’d made him soup the night Liev had turned him out the first time and while he ate told him lies about her first time with a john to make him laugh. She’d picked music with him for his mother’s memorial and told him that she’d died the way she’d lived, and not to blame himself. She had never been able to protect him from anything, so she’d helped him live in the jagged world, and he gave her something she couldn’t describe or define but that she needed like a junkie craved the needle.

“How angry is he?” she asked carefully.

“Not that bad. I’m gonna be watching Erich’s back for a while. He’s got some things need doing, and the boss doesn’t want anything going pear-shaped. So that’s all right.”

“And you? How are you?”

“Eh. I’m good,” Timmy said. “I think I’m coming down with something. Flu, maybe.”

She walked out from the kitchen, her food abandoned, and put the back of her hand to his forehead. His skin felt cool.

“No fever,” she said.

“Probably nothing,” he said, pulling his shirt up over his head. “I got the shakes a little, and I got dizzy a couple times on the way back. It ain’t serious.”

“What happened to the man Burton sent you to?”

“I shot him.”

“Did you kill him?” Lydia asked as she walked back to her bedroom. The ruddy light of sunset filtered through yellow silk. An old armoire stood against one wall, its silver finish stained and corroded by years. The bed was the same cheap foam queen-sized she’d had when she was working, the sheets old and thin, softer than skin with wear.

“Used a shotgun about a meter from his chest,” Timmy said, following her. “Could have stuck your fist through the hole. So, yeah, pretty much.”

“Have you ever killed a man before?” she asked, lifting her dress up over her thighs, her hips, her head.

Timmy undid his belt, frowning. “Don’t know. Beat some guys pretty bad. Maybe some of ’em didn’t get back up, but no one I know about. You know, not for sure.”

Lydia unhooked her bra, letting it slide to the cheap carpet. Timmy took his pants down, kicking them off with his shoes. He didn’t wear underwear, and his erect penis bobbed in the air like it belonged to someone else. There was no desire in his expression, and only a mild distress.

“Timmy,” she said, lying back on the bed and lifting her hips. “You aren’t getting ill. You’re traumatized.”

“Y’think?” He seemed genuinely surprised by the thought. And then amused by it. “Yeah, maybe. Huh.”

He pulled her underwear down to her knees, her ankles. “My poor Timmy,” she murmured.

“Ah shit,” he said, lowering his body onto hers. “I’m all right. At least I’m not getting sick.”

Sex held few mysteries for Lydia. She had fucked and been fucked by more men than she could count, and she’d learned things from each of them. Ugly things sometimes. Sometimes beautiful. She understood on a deep, animal level that sex was like music or language. It could express anything. Love, yes. Or anger, or bitterness, or despair. It could be a way to grieve or a way to take revenge. It could be a weapon or a nightmare or a solace. Sex was meaningless, and so it could mean anything.

What she and Timmy did to and for and with each other’s bodies wasn’t a thing they discussed. She felt no shame about it. That other people would see only the perversion of a woman and the boy she’d helped raise

pleasuring one another meant that other people would never understand what it mean to *be* them, to survive the world they survived. They were not lovers, and never would be. They were not surrogate mother and incestuous son. She was Lydia, and he was Timmy. In the bent and broken world, what they did fit. It was more than most people had.

After, Timmy lay beside her, his breath still coming in small, reflexive gulps. Her body felt pleasantly tender and bruised. The yellow over the window was fading into twilight, and the rumble of air traffic was like constant thunder in the distance, or a city being shelled two valleys over. A transport ship for one of the orbital stations, maybe. Or a wing of atmospheric fighter planes on exercises. So long as she didn't look, she could pretend it was anything. Her mind wandered, delivering up what had been nagging at her since Timmy had told her all that had happened.

Burton had sent Timmy to collect a debt, Timmy had killed the man instead, and Burton hadn't cut him loose. Two points defined a line, but three defined the playing field. Burton didn't always have need of boys like Timmy, but sometimes he did. Right now, he did.

Lydia sighed.

The churn was coming. It was the name Liev had given it, back before. All of nature had its rhythms, its booms and busts. She and Timmy and Liev and Burton were mammals, they were part of nature, and subject to its rules and whims. She had lived through perhaps three, perhaps four such catastrophes before. Enough that she knew the signs. Like a squirrel gathering food before a hard winter, Burton collected violent men before the churn. When it came, there would be blood and death and prison sentences and maybe even a curfew for a time. Men like Timmy would die by the dozen, sacrificed for things they didn't know or understand. Maybe even some of Burton's lieutenants would fall the way Tanner Ford had back when she'd been Liev's lover. Or Stacey Li before him. Or Cutbreath. The history of her corrupted world echoed with the names of the dead; the expendable and the expended. If Burton had kept Timmy on, it was because he thought it was coming. And if Burton thought it was coming, it probably was.

Timmy's breath was low and deep and regular. He sounded like a man asleep, except his eyes were open and fixed on the ceiling. Her own skin was cool now, the sweat dried or nearly so. A fly swooped through the air

above them, a gray dot tracing a jagged path, turning and dodging to avoid dangers that weren't there. She lifted her first two fingers, cocked back her thumb, and made a thin cartoon shooting sound with her teeth and tongue. The insect flew on, undisturbed by her small and violent fantasy. She turned her head to look at Timmy. His expression was blank and empty. He was still, and even in the warmth that followed orgasm, there was a tension in his body. He wasn't a beautiful boy. He'd never be a beautiful man.

Someday, she thought, I will lose him. He will go off on some errand and he will never come back. I won't even know what happened to him. She probed at the thought like a tongue-tip against the sore gum where a tooth has been knocked out. It hurt and hurt badly, but it hadn't happened yet, and so she could bear it. Best to prepare herself now. Meditate upon the coming loss so that when it came, she was ready.

Timmy's eyes clicked over toward her without his head shifting at all, without any expression coming to his face. Lydia smiled a slow, languorous smile.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

The catastrophe began four days later. Quietly, and with near-military precision, the city opened a contract with Star Helix security. Soldiers from across the globe arrived in small groups and sat through debriefings. The plan to end the criminal networks operating in Baltimore would be announced after the fact, or at least after the first wave. The thought, widely lauded by the self-congratulatory minds in administration, was to take the criminal element by surprise. In catching them flat-footed, the security teams could cripple their networks, break their power, and restore peace and the rule of law. The several unexamined assumptions in the argument remained unexamined, and the body armor and riot control weapons were distributed in perfect confidence that the enforcers would arrive unanticipated.

In fact, what Burton and Lydia knew from experience, many, many others felt by instinct. There was a discomfort in the streets and alleys, on the rooftops, and behind the locked doors. The city knew that something was near. The only surprise would be in the details.

Erich felt it like an itch he couldn't scratch. He sat on the rotting concrete curb, drumming the fingers of his good hand against his kneecap.

The street around him was the usual mix of foot traffic, bicycles, and wide blue buses. The air stank. The sewage lines this near the water were prone to failures. A few doors to the east, a group of children were playing some kind of complex game with linked headsets, their arms and legs falling into and out of phase with each other. Timmy stood on the sidewalk, squinting up into the sky. Behind them was a squatter's camp in an old ferrocrete apartment block. In a locked room at its center, Erich's custom deck was set up and primed, connected to the network and prepared to create a new identity from birth records to DNA matching to backdated newsfeed activity for the client, as soon as she arrived. Assuming she arrived. She was fifteen minutes late and, though they had no way to know it, already in custody.

Timmy grunted and pointed up. Erich followed the gesture. Far above, a star burned in the vast oceanic blue, a plume of fire pushing a ship out of the atmosphere. Near the horizon, the half moon glowed pale, a network of city lights crossing the shadowy meridian.

"Transport," Erich said. "They use mass drivers for the stuff that can take the gees."

"I know," Timmy said.

"Ever want to go up there?"

"What for?"

"I don't know," Erich said, staring down the street for the client. He'd seen her picture: a tall Korean woman with blue hair. He didn't know who she'd been before, and he didn't much care. Burton wanted her made into someone new. "Piss out the window and make everyone down here think it was raining, maybe."

Timmy's chuckle sounded polite.

"It's what I'd do, if I could," Erich said, making a swooping gesture with his good hand. Zoom. "Get up the well and out of here. Go where no one cares about who you are so long as you're good at what you do. Seriously, it's the wild fucking west up there. You want nineteenth-century Tombstone, Arizona, it's alive and well on Ceres Station. From what I heard, anyway."

"Why don't you go, then?" Timmy said. With a different intonation, it could have been dismissive. Instead it was only a mild kind of curiosity. It was part of what Erich liked about Timmy. There was almost nothing he

seemed to feel deeply.

“Starting from here? I’d never make it. I’m not even a registered birth.”

“You could tell them,” Timmy said. “People get registered all the time.”

“And then they get tracked and monitored and wind up dying on basic,” Erich said. “Anyway, no one’s taking me for a vocational. Waiting lists for that are eight, ten years long. By the time I came up, I’d have aged out.”

“Could build one, couldn’t you?” Timmy asked. “Make a new identity and put it at the front of the list?”

“Maybe,” Erich said. “If you gave me a couple years to layer it all in like I did for Burton. He can go *anywhere* with docs I built for him.”

“So why don’t you go, then?” Timmy asked again, his inflection as much an echo as his words.

“Guess I don’t want it bad enough. Anyway, I’ve got real stuff to do, don’t I? I wish she’d fucking get here, right?” Erich said, unaware that he made everything a question when he wanted to change the subject. Unconsciously, he made a fist with the hand of his bad arm. Timmy nodded, squinting down the street for the client that wasn’t coming.

Most of their lives had been spent on streets like this. The trade that exploited prostitutes and their illegal children was the second largest source of unregistered births in the city. Only religious radicals accounted for more. It was impossible to know how many unregistered men and women were eking out lives on the margin of society in Baltimore or how many had lived and died unknown to the vast UN databases. Erich knew of perhaps a hundred scattered among the legitimate citizens like members of a secret society. They congregated in condemned buildings and squats, traded in the gray-market economy of unlicensed services, and used their peculiar anonymity where it was most helpful. Looking down the pocked asphalt street, Erich could count three or four people that he personally knew were ghosts in the great world machine. Counting him and Timmy, that was half a dozen all breathing the same air while the plume of the orbital transport marked the sky gold and black above them. There was old water in the gutters, black circles of gum and tar on the sidewalk, the combined smell of urine and decay, and ocean all around them. Erich looked up at the sky with a longing he resented.

He knew himself well enough to recognize that he was a man of desires and grudges, so well in fact that he’d come to peace with it. The blackness

of space where merit counted more than the placement on a bureaucrat's list, where the brothels were licensed and the prostitutes had a union, where freedom was a ship and a crew and enough work to pay for food and air. It called to him with a romance that made his heart ache. On Ceres or Tycho or Mars, the medical technology was available to regrow his crippled arm, to remake his shortened leg. The same technology could be found fewer than eight miles from the filthy curb where he sat, but with the triple barriers of being unregistered, basic medical care waiting lists, and his own ability to function despite his disabilities, space was closer. Out there, he could be the man he should have been. The thought was like the promise of sex to a teenager, rich and powerful and frightening. Erich had resolved a thousand times to make the effort, to build himself an escape identity and shrug off the chains of Earth, of Baltimore, of the life he'd lived. And a thousand and one times, he had postponed it.

"Get up," Timmy said.

"You see her?" Erich said.

"Nope. Get up."

Erich shifted, frowning. Timmy was looking east with an expression of mild curiosity, a casual witness at someone else's wreck. Erich stood. At the intersection a block down, two armored vans had pulled to a stop. The logo on their sides was a four-pointed star. Erich couldn't tell if the people getting out were men or women, only that they were wearing riot gear. Metallic fear flooded his mouth. Timmy put a strong hand on his shoulder and pushed him gently but implacably across the street. Two more vans came to a halt at the intersection to the north.

"What the fuck?" Erich said, his voice distant and shrill in his own ears.

Timmy got him across the street and almost up to the doors of a five-story squat before Erich pulled back. "My deck. My setup. We've got to go back for it."

A deep, inhuman voice broke the air, the syllables designed in a sound lab to be sharp, clear, and intimidating. *This is a security alert. Remain where you are with your hands visible until security personnel clear you to leave. This is a security alert.* At the intersection, teams of armored figures were already questioning three men. One of the civilians—a thin, angry man with close-cropped black hair and dark olive skin—shouted something, and the security team pushed him to his knees. The biometric scan—

fingerprints, retina scan, fast-match DNA—took seconds while the man's arms were held out at his sides, his elbows bent back in restraint holds.

"I think maybe you used to have a deck," Timmy said. "I don't think you got one right now."

Erich stood unmoving, caught between the animal urge to flee and to protect himself by hiding the evidence. Timmy's thick fingers closed around his good shoulder. The big kid's expression was mildly concerned. "We don't go right now, they're gonna have you and it both. I sorta screwed up the last thing Burton told me to do. Let's not burn my second chance getting you caught."

This is a security alert. Remain where you are with your hands visible until security personnel clear you to leave.

Erich swallowed and nodded. It was the nearest he could come to speech. Timmy turned him toward the squat and pushed him forward.

In the streets, the security teams converged slowly, moving from person to person, door to door, floor to floor. Before the operation was through, they would identify three hundred forty-three people and detain four who appeared in the operational database as persons of interest. Three unregistered individuals would be identified, entered into the system, and held pending investigation. The two of the unregistered who refused to provide a name would have names assigned to them. The operation, covering three city blocks, would locate an unlicensed medical clinic, three children in distressed circumstances, seven pounds of S-class psychoactives, eighty-two instances of illegal occupation, and the network interface deck and data collection setup offered up by a blue-haired detainee in exchange for a reduced penalty. The process would take ten hours, and so it was still hardly under way when Timmy and Erich emerged from the undocumented access tunnel that connected the squat with an abandoned seawater pumping station. They walked together, Erich with his good hand stuffed deep in his pocket, Timmy with the same amiable air that was his default. Erich was weeping silently. Above them, the transport ship was gone, the golden exhaust plume now only a streak of smoke against the sky.

"I'm dead," Erich said. "Burton's going to fucking kill me. They got my deck. They got everything."

"Wait a minute," Timmy said. "*Everything* everything? Burton's stuff was on the—"

“No. I’m not stupid. I don’t store records of how I keep Burton clean. But I didn’t wash it down after the setup. I was going to do it after we were done. It’s going to have DNA on it. Shit, it may even have fingerprints. I don’t know.”

“So what if it does?” Timmy asked with a shrug. “You’re not in the system.”

“Not now,” Erich said. “But if they pick me up ever, for *anything*, it’s going to be with a little highlight alert linking back to that fucking deck. They’ll know what I do. And then they’ll know to ask.”

“You don’t gotta say anything,” Timmy said, his tone almost apologetic.

“I won’t get a chance. Burton finds out they’ve got my DNA, all he’s gonna see is a path back to him. I’m a loose end, man. I’m dead.”

All around the city, traps shut.

In the north, five dozen armored security personnel blocked intersections and shut down metro stations. The door-to-door search and control operation converged on a seven-story office building controlled by the Loca Griega. The local men and women took shelter where they could, hiding in bathtubs and basements and soot-caked hard-brick fireplaces. Things dense enough to hopefully block the infrared and backscatter and heartbeat sensors Star Helix carried. Network signals went dark. The Star Helix employees moved forward in tight formation, forced to use their eyes instead of their tech, the plates of armor on their chests and backs and bellies making them seem like vast beetles in the autumn sunlight. When the perimeter around the building was established, monitoring stations were constructed, watching the windows for the vibrations made by voices. A wave of dragonfly-small surveillance drones swept in, and for a moment it seemed like perhaps the violence wouldn’t come. And then, as one, the hundreds of small, cheap Star Helix robots fell to the ground, victims of Loca Griega countermeasures, and the building bloomed with gunfire. Seventeen Loca Griega died before the sun went down, including Eduard Hopkins and Jehona Dzurban, reputed to be the Earth-surface coordinators of the Belt-based syndicate. The plume of smoke that rose from the building darkened the air for hours and left the city air gray and hazy the next morning.

At the same time in the west, where the municipal limits gave way invisibly to the regional jurisdiction, a warehouse owned and operated

through a complex web of shell companies was locked down. The security teams emptied a three-block radius using a small fleet of armored buses and an operational procedure designed for response to sarin gas attacks. When the warehouse's perimeter was breached shortly before midnight, it contained ten thousand unrecorded assault rifles, half a million rounds of tracer-free ammunition, seventy cases of grenades, and a computer room ankle deep in melted slag. There was no evidence of anyone having been present in the warehouse, and no trail of ownership for any of it.

Checkpoints at the evacuated rail terminal, the spaceport, and the docks identified seventy people traveling on falsified accounts. All of them were independents or small fry in a larger organization. The security forces hadn't expected to catch anyone high on their priorities list in the first pass. The more powerful, better-connected targets were either smart enough not to travel during a crackdown or else had cleaned accounts to move under. Instead, the thought was that among the small-time thugs and operatives, there might be one or two desperate and foolish enough to provide them a lead to someone bigger. Someone worth having. And so without knowing who Burton was, what he looked like, his name or description or precise role in the criminal ecology of Baltimore, they were hunting him. And they were also hunting others, many of them much higher-priority than himself. Organizace Bayyo had a presence in the city, as did the Golden Bough. Tamara Sluydan controlled several blocks north of the arcology, and Baasen Tagniczen an area twice Burton's—though not so profitably run—in the Patapsco Valley Housing Complex. There was a great deal of crime, organized and otherwise, for the forces of law to concern themselves with, and no net was so strong or fine that nothing slipped through.

In times like these, when he couldn't know whether he had been compromised, Burton played it safe. He had half a dozen apartments and warehouses outfitted to act as temporary command centers, and he moved between them almost at random. Some of his people, he knew, would be caught up. Some of those who were would buy short-term leniency with the coin of information. He knew that would happen, and he had plans in place that would protect him from discovery, obscure his involvement in anything actionable, and punish brutally and irrevocably whoever had chosen to make that trade. It was understood that anyone captured would be wiser to trade their own underlings to the security forces than to sell out Burton. The

risk devolved on the little guy. Shit rolling downhill, as it had since the beginning of time. Which was, in part, why what happened to Liev was so unfortunate for everybody.

Liev Andropoulos had worked for Burton since coming to Baltimore from Paris more than twenty years before. He was a thickly built man, as round in the chest as the belly, and strong enough that he rarely had to prove it. His appetite for women occasioned jokes, though rarely the sort made in front of him, as did his habit of placing his long-term lovers in positions of comfort within his organization when he ended their relationships. As one of Burton's lieutenants, he oversaw three full-time whorehouses, a small network of drug dealers specializing in low-end narcotics and psychoactives, and an unlicensed medical facility that catered to the unregistered population. By custom, he worked from a small concrete building at the edge of the water, but when the churn began, he was leaving his lover's apartment on Pratt. The woman's name was Katie, and she had the olive skin and brown lips that Lydia had had twenty years before. Liev was a man of deep habits and consistent tastes. He kissed her goodbye for the last time on the street outside the apartment building, then walked away to the north while she went south. It was a perfunctory gesture, meaningful only in retrospect, as so many last kisses are.

The streets were crowded, the air muggy and close. The saltwater and rotting fish smells of the encroaching Atlantic were omnipresent, as they always were on hot days. Private transport wasn't allowed, and the lumbering buses moved like slow elephants in the press of midday bodies. A beggar plucked at Liev's sleeve and then backed away in fear when Liev turned to scowl at him. In the cacophony of the city, the whine of the flying drones should have been inaudible, but something caught Liev's attention, tightening the skin across the back of his wide neck. His footsteps faltered.

From above, the ripples in the crowd would have looked like the surface of still water disturbed by the convergence of half a dozen fish intent on the same fly. For Liev, it was only a sense of dread, a burst of useless adrenaline, and the offended shouts of the civilians pushed aside by the armored security men. As if by magic, a bubble of open space appeared around him. Liev could see clearly the scuffed and stained concrete on which he walked. The man in the Star Helix uniform before him held a pistol in both hands, the barrel fixed on Liev's chest. Center of mass. By the

books. Behind the helmet's clear face shield, the man looked to be somewhere in his middle twenties, focused and frightened. Liev felt a pang of amusement and regret. He held his arms out at his sides, cruciform, as five more security men boiled out of the gawking crowd.

"Liev Andropoulous!" the boy shouted. "You are under arrest for racketeering, slavery, and murder! You are not required to participate in questioning without the presence of an attorney or union representative!" Tiny flecks of spittle dotted the inside of the face shield. The boy's wide eyes were almost jittering with fear. Liev sighed.

"Ask me," he said slowly, enunciating very clearly, "if I understand."

"What?" the boy shouted.

"You've told me the charges and made the questioning statement. Now you have to ask me if I understand."

"Do you understand?" the boy barked, and Liev nodded.

"Good. Better," Liev said. "Now go fuck yourself."

The prisoner transport blatted its siren, shouldering its way through the crowd, but before it had crossed the distance to Liev, before he had been slotted into the steel cell and made secure, news of his capture was radiating out through the neighborhood. By the time the transport began moving again, making its way north toward the nearest tactical center, Burton had already seen a recording of the arrest. Katie, sitting at a noodle café with her little brother, got the news on her hand terminal and broke down weeping. Dread passed through the network of Liev's employees and underlings. Everyone knew what would happen next, and what would not. Liev would be taken to a holding cell, processed, and interrogated. If he kept quiet, he would be remanded to state custody, tried, and sent to a detention center, likely in North Africa or the west coast of Australia. More likely, he would cut a deal, parting out the network of crime he'd controlled bit by bit in exchange for clemency—the names and ID numbers of his pimps in order to serve his time in North America or Asia, the details of how he laundered the money for a private cell, which physicians had moonlighted in his clinic for library access.

They would ask him who he worked for, and he wouldn't say.

For Burton's other lieutenants, it complicated the future and simplified the present. One of their own was gone and unlikely to return. When the worst had passed and something like normalcy returned to Burton's little

kingdom, business that had been Liev's would be shared among them, granted to some newly promoted member of the criminal nobility, or a combination of the two. How exactly that played out would be the subject of weeks of negotiations and struggle, but later. Later. In the short term, all such agendas gave way to the more immediate problems of avoiding the security forces, protecting the assets they had, and making it very clear to everyone under them that selling out information for the favor of the court's mercy was a very, very bad idea.

In a basement lab at the corner of Lexington and Greene, eighty gallons of reagents used in alkaloid synthesis were poured into the water recycling stream. At the locally renowned Boyer Street house, two overly talkative prostitutes went quietly missing and the doors were locked. The body of Mikel "Batman" Chanduri was discovered in his two-room apartment at sundown, and though it was clear his death had been both violent and protracted, none of his neighbors had anything to report to the security men who'd come to interview him. Before the sun had set, Burton's lieutenants—Cyrano, Oestra, Simonson, Little Cole, and the Ragman—went to ground like foxes, ready to wait out the worst of the crackdown, each hoping that they would not be another gap in the organization like Liev, and each hoping that the others—not all, of course, but a few—would. One or two, perhaps even three, harbored some plots of their own, ways to see that their rivals within Burton's organization fell prey to the dangers of the churn. But they didn't speak of them to anyone they didn't trust with their lives.

And in an unlicensed rooftop coffee bar that looked down over the human-packed streets, Erich hunched over a gray-market network deck the owner had bolted to the table. He was trying to keep his panic from showing, wondering if Burton had heard about the capture of his deck, and hoping that wherever Timmy had rushed off to when they'd heard of Liev's arrest, he'd get back soon. The coffee was black and bitter, and Erich couldn't tell if the coppery flavor was a problem with the beans or the lingering taste of fear. He sat on his newsfeed, set to passive for fear that his search requests would be traced, and watched as all around him more traps snapped shut, his gut knotting tighter with every one.

When Lydia heard what had happened to Liev, her first action was to put on her makeup and style her long, gray-streaked hair. She sat at the mirror in her bedroom and rubbed on the flesh-toned base until the lines in her skin

were gone. She painted her lips fuller and darker and redder than they had ever been in nature. The black eyeliner, reddish eyeshadow, rust-colored blush. Despite the danger she was in, she didn't hurry. A lifetime of experience had drawn connections in her mind that linked sexual desirability, fear, and fatalism in ways she would have recognized as unhealthy if she'd seen them in someone else. She pulled her hair around, piling it high and pinning it in place until it cascaded, three-quarters contained, to her shoulders in the style Liev had enjoyed back when he had lifted her up from the working population of the house and made her his own. She thought of it as a last act of fidelity, like dressing a corpse.

She shrugged out of her robe and pulled on simple, functional clothes. Running shoes. Her go-bag was a nondescript blue backpack with a three-month supply of her medications, two changes of clothes, four protein bars, a pistol, two boxes of ammunition, a bottle of water, and three thousand dollars spread across half a dozen credit chips. She pulled it down from the top of her closet, and without opening it to check its contents, went to the chair by her front window. The curtains were pale gauze that scattered and softened the afternoon light, graying everything. She pulled a sheer yellow scarf over her hair, swathed her neck, and tied it at her sternum, the ironic echo of her old hijab. Then sat very still, feet side by side, ankles and knees touching. Primly, she thought. She waited in silence to see who would open her door, a security team or Timmy. The darkness, or else the light.

The better part of an hour passed. Her spine hurt, and she savored the pain, keeping her face placid. Smiles or grimaces, either one would disturb her makeup. Then footsteps in the hall, like someone clearing their throat. The door opened, and Timmy stepped in. His gaze flicked down to her back, up to her face. He shrugged and nodded to the hall in a gesture that said, *Can we go?* as clearly as words. Lydia stood, pulled on her pack as she walked to the door, and left her room for the last time. She had lived there for the better part of a decade. The necklace that Liev had given her the night he'd told her he was moving on, but that she would be cared for, hung from a peg in the bathroom. The cheap earthenware cup that Timmy had painted with glaze when he was eight years old and given her for what he'd mistakenly thought was her birthday remained in the cupboard. The half-finished knitting that an old roommate had left when she disappeared twenty years before sat hunched in a plastic bag under the bed, stinking of

dust.

Lydia didn't look back.

"My spirit animal is the snake," she said as they walked south together. They went side by side, but not touching. "I shed my skin. I just let it slough away."

"Okay," Timmy said. "Come on this way. I got a thing waiting."

The waterline was cleanest near the new port. There, the ships and houseboats rested in clean slips made of flexible ceramic and the bones of the drowned buildings had been cut free and hauled away. With every mile farther from the port, the debris grew less picturesque, the charm of the reclaimed city giving way to the debris of its authentic past. Little beaches formed over asphalt, gray sand swirling around old blocky concrete pillars standing in the waves green with algae and white with bird shit. The stink of rot came from the soupy water and the corpses of jellyfish melting where the tide had left them.

Timmy's boat was small. White paint flaked off the metal where it hadn't been scraped well enough before being repainted. Lydia sat in the bow, her legs folded under her, her chin high and proud. The motor was an under-the-waterline pulse drive, quiet as a hum. The water in their wake was louder. The sun was near to setting, the city casting its shadow on the waves. A handful of other boats were on the water, manned by children for the most part. The citizens of basic with nothing better to do with their time than spend the twilight on the water, then go home.

Timmy ran them along the coast for a time, and then turned east, out toward the vast ocean. The moon had set, but the lights of the city were bright enough to travel by. The islands had once been part of the city itself, and now were ruins. Timmy aimed for one of the smaller, a stretch not more than two city blocks long by three wide humped up out of the water. A few ancient walls still stood. The boat ran up onto the hard shore, and Timmy jumped out, soaking his pants to the thighs, to pull it the rest of the way up. The metal screeched against the rotting concrete sidewalk.

The ruin he led her to was little more than a camp site. A bright yellow emergency-preparedness sleeping bag lay unrolled on a foam mattress. An LED lamp squatted beside it with a cord snaking up the grimy wall to a solar collector in the window. A small chemical camping stove stood on a driftwood board placed over two cinderblocks, a little unpowered

refrigerator beside it to store food. Two more rooms stood empty through the doorway. If the house had ever had a kitchen or a bathroom, it was lost in the tumble of rubble beyond that. Outside, the city glowed, the violence and bustle made calm and beautiful by even such a small distance. The wail of the sirens and angry blat of the security alerts became a kind of music there, transformed by the mystical act of passing above waves.

Timmy pulled off his water-soaked pants and dug a fresh pair out from under the sleeping bag.

“This is where you go?” Lydia said, putting her hand on the time-pocked window glass. “When you aren’t with me, you come to this?”

“Nobody bugs you here,” Timmy said. “Or, you know. Not twice.”

She nodded, as much to herself as for his benefit. Timmy looked around the room and rubbed his hand across his high forehead.

“It’s not as nice as your place,” he said. “But it’s safe. Temporary.”

“Yes,” she said. “Temporary.”

“Even if Liev does tell ’em about you, it’s not like it’s over. You can get a new name. New paper.”

Lydia turned her gaze back from the city, her right hand going to her left arm as if she were protecting herself. Her gaze darted to the empty doorway, and then back. “Where’s Erich?”

“Yeah, the meet didn’t happen,” Timmy said, leaning against the wall. She never ceased to be amazed by his physicality. The innocence and vulnerability that his body managed to project while still being an instrument of violence.

“Tell me,” she said, and he did. All of it, slowly and carefully, as if worried he might leave something out that she wanted to know. That she found interesting. The low rumble of a launch shuddered like an endless peal of thunder, and the exhaust plume rose into the night sky as he spoke. It had not yet broken into orbit when he stopped.

“And where is he now?” she asked.

“There’s a coffee bar. The one at Franklin and St. Paul? On top of the old high-rises there. I got him there when it was done. They’ve got a deck there you can rent by the minute, and since his got taken, I figured he’d like that. Gotta say, he was pretty freaked out. That DNA thing? I don’t see how that’s gonna end well. If he’s right about how Burton’s gonna react...”

Lydia shook her head once, a tiny gesture, almost invisible by the light

of the single LED lamp. “I thought you were his bodyguard. You were assigned to protect him.”

“I did,” Timmy said. “But then the job was done. Burton didn’t tell me I was supposed to go to the bathroom with him for the rest of his life, right? Job was done, so the job was done.”

“I thought you were his friend.”

“I am,” Timmy said. “But, y’know. *You*.”

“Don’t worry about me. Whatever comes to me, I have earned it a thousand times over. Don’t disagree with me! Don’t interrupt. Burton asked you to protect Erich because Erich is precious to him. The particular job he assigned you may be over, but worse has come to the city, and Erich is still precious.”

“And I get that,” Timmy said. “Only when they got Liev—”

“I have lived through the churn before, darling boy. I know how this goes.” She turned to the window, gesturing at the golden lights of the city. “Liev was only one. There will be others. Perhaps many, perhaps few, but Burton will lose some part of his structure to the security forces or to death. And the ones who remain afterward will become more important to him. He is a man who values survivors. Who values loyalty. What will he think, dear, when he hears that you left Erich to come spirit me away?”

“Job was done,” Timmy said, a little petulantly she thought.

“Not good enough,” she said. “Not anymore. You aren’t the boy Erich drinks with anymore. You aren’t even your mother’s son now. Those versions of you are gone, and they will never come back. You are the man who took a job from Burton.”

Timmy was silent. Far above them, the transport’s exhaust plume went dark. Lydia stepped close to him and put her hands on his shoulders. He wouldn’t meet her eyes. She thought that was a good sign. That it meant she was getting through to him.

“The world changes you and you can’t stop it from doing so. You have to let go of being someone who doesn’t matter now. Because if you live through this time—just live through it and nothing more—you will be more important to Burton. You can’t avoid it. You can only choose what your importance is. Will you be someone he can rely upon, or someone he can’t?”

Timmy took a deep breath in through his nose and sighed it out. His eyes

were flat and hard. "I think I maybe fucked up again."

"Only maybe," Lydia said. "There still may be time to repair the error, yes? Go find your friend. You can bring him here."

Timmy's head jerked up. Lydia rubbed his shoulders gently, beginning at the base of his neck and stroking out to the bulges of muscle where his arms began, then back again. It was a gesture she had made with him since he was a child, a physical idiom in their own private language. Her heart ached at the sacrifice she was making. *The world changes you*, she thought. Hadn't she just said that?

"Bring him here? Y'sure about that?"

"It's all right," she said. "It's temporary."

"Okay then," he said. She felt a tug of regret that he had given in so quickly, but it passed quickly. "I'll leave you the good boat."

"The good boat?" she said to his retreating back.

"The one we came in."

The door closed. The gray that passed for darkness swallowed him up, and five minutes later she heard what might have been a skiff splashing in among the waves. Or it might only have been her imagination. She pulled herself into the warm, stinking, plastic embrace of the sleeping bag and stared at the ceiling and waited to see whether he returned.

* * *

All through Baltimore, the struggle between law and opportunity continued, but most of the citizens allied themselves with neither side. The unlicensed coffee shop filled with customers looking for a cheap way to make their dinners on basic seem more palatable, and then with younger people who either didn't have the currency or else the inclination to take amphetamines before descending to the one-night rai clubs on barricaded streets. A few parents came home from actual jobs, proud to spend real money for a stale muffin and give their credits to the gray-market daycares run out of neighborhood living rooms. Very few people stood wholly for the law or wholly against it, and so for them the catastrophe of the churn was an annoyance to be avoided or endured or else a titillation on the newsfeeds. That it was a question of life and death for other people spoke in its favor as entertainment.

Erich, sitting at the rented deck with a newsfeed spooling past, felt the distance between himself and the others who shared his space more keenly than they did. His sense of dread, of a chapter of his own life ending, was unnoticed by the heavysset woman who brewed the coffee and the thin man at the edge of the rooftop who spent his hours sending messages about tangled romantic involvements. To the other habitués of the coffee shop, Erich was just the crippled man who was hogging the deck. An annoyance and an amusement, and no one would particularly notice or care if he vanished from the world.

Timmy arrived just after midnight, his broad, amiable smile softening the distance in his eyes. To anyone who didn't look at him closely, he seemed unthreatening, and no one looked at him closely. He pulled a welded steel chair up to the bolted-down deck and sat at Erich's side. The newsfeed was set to local. A pale-skinned woman with the Outer Planets Association split circle tattooed on her sternum and Loca Griega teardrops on her cheeks had blood pouring from her nose and left eye while she struggled against two Star Helix enforcers in gear so thick they barely seemed human. Erich smiled, trying to hide the relief he felt at Timmy's return.

"Loca," Erich said, nodding at the feed. "They're having a bad night too."

"Lot of that going around," Timmy said.

"Yeah, right? You...heard from Burton?"

"No. Didn't try to find him yet either," Timmy said with a shrug. "You want to hang out here some more, or you about ready to go?"

"I don't know where to go," Erich said, a high violin whine coming in at the back of his voice.

"I got that covered," Timmy said.

"You got a bolt-hole? Jesus, that's where you've been all this time, isn't it? Getting someplace safe to hide?"

"Kind of. But, you know, you ready?"

"I need to stop someplace. Get a deck."

Timmy frowned and nodded at the table before them. *There's one right there* was in his eyes. Erich pointed at the bolts anchoring the machine to the wooden tabletop. Timmy's expression went empty and he stood up.

"Hey," Erich said. "What're you...Timmy? What are you—"

The thick woman who brewed the coffee looked up at the broad-shouldered young man. The coffee bar had been hers for three years, and she'd seen enough of the regulars to recognize trouble.

"Hey," the large man—boy, really—said, his voice making the word half apology. "So look. I don't mean to be a dick or anything, but I kind of need that deck."

"You can use it here, you buy some coffee. Or rates are printed on the side," the woman said, crossing her arms.

The big kid nodded, his brow knotting. He took a scuffed and stained black-market credit chip and pressed it into her palm.

"Shit, Jones," she said, blinking at the credit balance on the tiny LED display. "How much coffee you want?"

The kid had already turned back to the table where the cripple with the baby arm had been sitting all day. He hit the table with his fist hard enough that everyone on the rooftop turned to look at him. After the third hit, the wood of the tabletop started to splinter. There was blood on the big boy's knuckles, and the cripple was shifting back and forth anxiously as the table fell to sticks and splinters. The boy pulled her little deck free with a creaking sound. The bolts still hung from it, the wood torn out from around them. Blood dripped from his hands as he tucked the machine under his arm and nodded to the cripple.

"Anything else you need?" Timmy asked.

Erich had to fight not to smile. "No, I think I'm good now."

"All right then. We should go." Timmy turned to the woman and lifted his swelling hand to her in a wave. "Thanks."

She didn't say anything, but pushed the credit stick into her apron and waddled back to get a broom. They were gone before she returned, walking down the stairway to the street.

"That was incredible," Erich said. "The way you did that? I mean, damn it. Everyone in there was cold as stone, and you were just madness and power, man. Did you see that? Did you see how gassed they were at you?"

"You said you needed the deck," Timmy said.

"Come on! That was critical. You can brag about it some."

"Tables don't fight back," Timmy said. "Come on. I got a boat."

Erich's relief left him chatty, but he didn't talk about the fear he'd felt when Timmy had left him. Instead, he filled the trip with everything he'd

seen on the feeds, and he told it all like he was telling ghost stories. The security forces were watching the ports, the trains, the transports up to the orbitals and Luna. Eighteen dead today, maybe three times that many in custody. It was news all over the world, and farther. There had even been a lady from Mars who'd come on for a while talking about the history of Earth-based police states. Wasn't that cool? All the way to Mars, they were talking about what was going on right then in Baltimore. They were everywhere.

Timmy listened, adding in a few words here and there, but mostly he walked until they reached the water, and then he rowed. The ceramic oars dipped into the dark water and lifted out again. Erich drummed his fingertips against the stolen deck, anxious to reconnect it to the network, so see what was happening and what had changed in the time since they'd left the coffee bar. That being connected would somehow protect him was an illusion, and Erich half knew that. But only half.

At the little island, Timmy pulled the boat onto shore and marched into the ruins where a light was burning. An old woman was sitting beside a chemical stove, stirring a small tin pot. The smell of brewing tea competed with the brine and the reek of decaying jellyfish. She looked up. Her face was like a mask, the makeup applied so perfectly it shoved her back into the uncanny valley.

"I found your tea," she said. "I hope you don't mind."

"Nope," Timmy said, not breaking stride. "Come on, Erich. I'll get you set up."

They walked through a doorway without a door and into a small room. It was even less comfortable than the one with the old lady. There was nothing on the floor but the glue marks where there had once been carpeting. Mold grew up along one wall, black and branching like tree limbs. Timmy put the deck on the ground. His knuckles were black with blood and forming scab.

"You be able to get signal here?" Timmy asked.

"Should be. May need to find a way to power up in the morning."

"Yeah, well. We'll come up with something. So this is your room, okay? Yours. That one's hers," Timmy said, pointing a thumb at the lighted doorway. "Hers. She asks you in, you can go in, but she asks you to leave, you do it, right?"

“Of course. Sure. Christ, Timmy. Your place, your rules, right?” Erich smiled, hoping to coax one in response. “We’ve always respected each other, right? Only, seriously, who is she? Is that your mom?”

It was like Timmy hadn’t heard him. “I’m gonna get some sleep, but come morning, I can go back in, get some food. And I’ll check in with the man.”

Erich felt his belly go cold. “You’re going to talk to Burton?”

“Sure, if I can find him,” Timmy said. “He’s got the plan, right?”

“Right,” Erich said. “Of course.”

He opened the deck, ran it through its startup options, and connected to the network. The signal strength wasn’t great, but it wasn’t awful. he’d been in half a dozen basement hack shacks with worse. He opened the newsfeed, still set to passive. The glow from the screen was the only light. Erich was cold, but he didn’t complain. Timmy stood, stretched, considered the skinned knuckles of his hand with what could have been a distant sort of ruefulness, and turned to go back to the old woman and the light.

“Hey, we’re friends, right?” Erich said.

Timmy turned back. “Sure.”

“We’ve always watched out for each other, you and me.”

Timmy shrugged. “Not *always*, but when we could, sure.”

“Don’t tell him where I am, okay?”

* * *

Security crackdowns, like plagues, had a natural progression. A peak, and then decline. As terrible as they might be at their height, they did not last forever. Burton knew this, as did all of his lieutenants, and he made his plans accordingly. Burton moved through his safe houses, playing shell games with the security forces. The first night, while Erich and Lydia slept in their respective rooms in the little island ruin and Timmy tried to find someone in the organization to report to, Burton slept in a loft above a warehouse with a woman named Edie. In the morning, he moved to the storage in the back of a medical clinic, locking the door and hijacking an untraceable connection so that he could speak to his people with relative safety. Little Cole had closed down her houses, locked away her reports, buried a month’s supply of drugs, and taken a bus to Vermont to stay with

her mother until things died down. Oestra was still in the city, moving from place to place in much the same fashion that Burton was. Ragman and Cyrano were missing, but it was early enough that Burton wasn't concerned yet. At least they weren't in the newsfeeds. Liev and Simonson were.

And there was other evidence, indirect but convincing, of where the little war stood. Even in the first morning after the catastrophe began, security teams were calling on Liev's underlings, sweeping them up for questioning. Some, they held. Others, they released. Burton had no way of knowing which of those who had been set free had cut deals with security and which had been lucky enough to slip through the net. It hardly mattered. That branch of the business had been compromised, and so it would die. The demand for illicit drugs, cheap goods, off-schedule medical procedures, and anonymous sex could be neither arrested nor sated, and so the thing that mattered most for Burton's little empire was safe. Would always be safe. The question of how to feed the city's subterranean hungers was only a tactical one, and Burton could be flexible.

The temptation, of course, was to fight back, and in the following days, some did. Five soldiers from the Loca Griega left a bomb outside a Star Helix substation. It exploded, injuring two of the security contractors and damaging the building, and all five bombers were identified and taken into custody. Tamara Sluydan, who really should have known better, organized street-level resistance, starting a two-day riot that ended with half of her people hospitalized or in custody, eighteen local businesses looted or set afire, and the goodwill of her client base permanently damaged. Burton understood. He wasn't a man without passions. If someone hurt him, of course he wanted to hurt them back. Phrases like "even the score" or "blood for blood" came to mind, and each time they did, he made the practice of tearing them apart to himself. "Even the score" was the metaphor of a game, and this wasn't a game. "Blood for blood" made it sound as if through more violence, past wrongs could be balanced, and they couldn't. The hardest lesson Burton had ever learned was to endure the blows, accept the damage, and let someone else strike back. Soon, very soon, the crackdown would shift from its great, overwhelming force to individual struggles. It was in his interests to see that those struggles were with the Loca Griega and Tamara Sluydan, not with him. As soon as the enemy was clearly defined in the collective mind of Star Helix and Burton's name and

organization were not central to their plans, the storm would move on and he could begin to reopen the folded fronds of his business.

In the meantime, he moved from one place to the next. He told people he would go one place, and then arrived at another. He considered all his habits with the uncompromising eye of a predator, and killed the ones with flaws. Anything that connected him with the patterns of the past was a vulnerability, and wherever possible, he chose to be invulnerable. It wasn't the first time he'd been through this. He was good at it.

And so when it took Timmy the better part of a week to find him, Burton's annoyance was balanced against a certain self-centered pride.

The office was raw brick and mortar, newsfeeds playing on five different screens. A sliding wooden door stood half open, the futon where Burton had slept the the night before half visible through it. Oestra, whose safe house it was, sat by the window looking down at the street. The automatic shotgun across his legs seemed unremarkable. Timmy had been searched by three guards on the street, and he'd been clean. Even if he'd swallowed a tracking device they would have found it, and the big slab of human meat would have been bleeding out in a gutter instead of smiling amiably and gawking at the exposed ductwork.

"Timmy, right?" Burton said, pretending uncertainty. Let the boy feel lucky he'd remembered that much.

"Yeah, chief. That's me." The openness and amiability was annoying. Burton glanced toward Oestra, but the lieutenant was squinting at the brightness of the day. Burton scratched his leg idly, his fingernails hissing against the fabric of his pants.

"You got something for me?"

Timmy's face fell a little. "Just news. I mean, I didn't have any stuff. Nothing to deliver or anything."

"All right, then," Burton said. "What's the news, Tiny?"

Timmy grinned at the irony of the nickname, then sobered and began his report. Burton leaned forward, drinking in all the words as fast as they spilled from Timmy's lips. When Oestra risked a glance back, it was like watching a bird singing away while a cat stood in the too-still pose of a carnivore waiting to pounce. The details came out in no particular order: Erich was in a safe place, Timmy had been taking food to him, the fake profile deal had been interrupted by the security crackdown, Erich's original

deck was gone but he had a replacement, the police probably had his DNA profile now. Oestra sighed to himself and looked back out the window. On the street, a half dozen young men who hadn't just condemned their friends to death slouched down the street together.

"He's sure about that?" Burton asked.

"Nah," Timmy said. "We didn't hang around and watch them find the deck or anything. I figured it'd be better, you know. To get out."

"I see."

"Erich wanted to go get it. Grab the hardware, I mean."

"That would have been a mistake," Burton said. "If security had the deck and the man, that...well, that'd be bad."

"Was what I thought too," Timmy said.

Burton sat back, the leather of the chair creaking. Back past the bedroom, Sylvia started running the shower. Sylvia or Sarah. Something like that. One of Oestra's, provided with the bed. "Where's the safe house?"

"I'm not supposed to say," Timmy said.

"Not even to me?"

The boy had the good sense to look uncomfortable. "Yeah, not to anyone. You know how it is."

"Is there anyone there with him?"

"Yeah, I got a friend there."

"A guard?"

"Not really, no. Just a friend."

Burton nodded, thinking hard. "But he's secure?"

"He's on the water. Anyone starts coming in, he's got a boat and about a dozen decent places to hide. I mean, nowhere's a hundred percent."

"And you're protecting him."

"That's the job," Timmy said, with a shrug and a smile. Burton couldn't quite put his finger on what it was about the boy that was so interesting. Over the years, he'd had hundreds just like him who came through, worked, disappeared, died, were fed to security or found God and a ticket out of town. Burton had a nose for talent, though, and there was something about this one that kept bringing him back to the sense of the boy's potential. Perhaps it was the casual logic he'd used when he'd killed Austin. Maybe it was the deadness in his eyes.

Burton got up, raising a finger. Timmy sat deep in his chair like a trained

dog receiving a command. Sylvia—whoever—was singing in the bathroom. The splash of water against porcelain covered the sound of Burton opening the gun safe, pulling out the pistol and its magazine. When he stepped back into the main room, Timmy hadn't so much as crossed his legs. Burton held the gun out.

"You know what this is?" he asked.

"It's a ten-millimeter semi-auto," Timmy said. He put his hand out halfway to it, and then looked up at Burton, his eyes asking permission. Burton nodded and smiled. Timmy took the gun.

"You know guns?"

Timmy shrugged. "They're around. It feels...sticky."

"It's got a resin of digestive enzymes," Burton said. "Won't hurt your skin much, but it won't hold prints and it breaks down any trace evidence. No DNA."

"That's cool," Timmy said, and started to hand it back. Burton tossed the magazine onto the boy's lap.

"Those are plastic-tipped. Organ shredders, but they don't work on armor," Burton said. "Still, step up from that homemade shotgun you've used, right?"

"Right."

"You know how those things all go together?"

Timmy weighed the pistol in one hand, the magazine in the other. He slid them together, checked the chamber, flicked the safety on and off. It wasn't the practiced action of a professional, but talented amateur was good enough for his purposes. Timmy looked up, his smile blank and empty. "New job?" he asked.

"New job," Burton said. "I know you and Erich grew up together. Is this going to be a problem for you?"

"Nope," Timmy said, slipping the gun into his pocket. There hadn't even been a pause.

"You're sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. I get it. They've got him in the system now. If they get him too, there's all kinds of things he compromises. If they can't get him, nothing gets compromised, and I'm the only guy who can get close to him without him seeing it coming."

"Yes."

“So I kill him for you,” Timmy said. He could have been saying, *So I’ll pick up dinner on my way*. There was no bravado in it. Burton sat, tilted his head. The friendly smile and the empty eyes met him.

“All right, I’m curious,” Burton said. “Did you game this? This was your plan?”

“Shit no, chief,” Timmy said. “This here’s just happy coincidence.”

Either it was truth or the best deadpan Burton had seen in a long time. The shower water turned off. On the newsfeeds, a woman in a Star Helix uniform was saying something, a dour expression on her face. Burton wanted to turn up the volume, see if the press statement was something useful to him like reading fortunes in coffee grounds. He restrained himself.

“I will need proof,” Burton said. “Evidence, yeah?”

“So what, you want his heart?”

“Heart. Brain. Windpipe. Anything he can’t live without.”

“Not a problem,” Timmy said. Then a moment later, “Is there anything else, or should I go?”

“You watched out for this kid your whole life,” Burton said. “He vouched for you. Got you in with me. And you’re really going to put a slug in his brain just like that?”

“Sure. You’re the man with the plan.”

When the boy left, Burton came to stand beside Oestra, watching him walk away down the sunlit street. The thinning reddish-brown hair and wide shoulders made him look like some kind of manual laborer twice his age. His hands were shoved deep in his pockets. He could have been anybody.

“Think he’ll do it?” Burton asked.

Oestra didn’t answer for a long moment. “Might.”

“He does this for me, he’ll do anything,” Burton said, clapping Oestra’s shoulder. “Potential for a man like that.”

“If he doesn’t?”

“There are a lot of ways to dispose of someone disposable,” Burton said.

Burton walked back to the chair, shifted the newsfeed buffer back to the start of the Star Helix woman’s press announcement. The woman started talking, and Burton listened.

Timmy’s ruin had long since become a misery for Lydia, and misery had become a kind of pleasure. Their days had taken a kind of rhythm. Erich

woke first in the morning, his uneven footsteps playing a tentative counterpoint to the rough sound of the waves. Lydia lay in the warmth of her cocoon, the slick fabric wrapped around her until only her mouth and nose were in the free air. When she could no longer pretend sleep, she emerged and made tea on the little stove, and when she was done, Erich transferred the solar charger to his deck and squatted over it, scanning the newsfeeds with a ferocity and single-mindedness that made her think of a poet chasing the perfect rhyme. If Timmy was there, she would walk with him to the boats or survey the newest supplies he had smuggled to their private island: fresh clothes, carryout tandoori, charged batteries for the deck and the lamp. More often, he was not there, and she haunted the shore like a sea widow. The city glowered out at her from across the water, like a great angry gray face, condemning her for her sins.

Is this the time? she would wonder. *Has he left now, never to return? Or will there be one more? Another time to see his face, to hear his voice, to have the conversations that we can only ever have with each other?*

She knew that the churn was playing itself out there, across the narrow waves. Security had likely come to her rooms on Liev's word and found them already abandoned. The men and women she'd worked with these last years were part of the past now. Part of a life she'd left behind, though nothing else had begun. Only this island exile and its waiting.

At night, Erich would eat with her. Their conversations were awkward. She knew that she was uncanny to him, that he thought of Timmy as his own friend, a character from his own past. Her appearance and the reticence she and Timmy had to making her explicable were as odd to Erich as if lobsters had crawled up out of the sea and started speaking Spanish. And yet if they did, what could anyone do but answer them, and so Erich and Lydia reached the odd peace of roommates, intimate in all things and nothing.

That night, Timmy crossed the waves unnoticed by her or Erich. Lydia was looking east over the ruined island to the greater sea beyond. Erich curled in the room that common habit designated as his, snoring slightly as the deck ran down its charge to nothing beside him. Timmy arrived quietly and alone, announced only by his footsteps and the smell of fresh ginger.

When he emerged from the darkness, two thin plastic sacks hung from his left fist. Lydia shifted, not rising, but coming up to rest on her knees and

ankles in a posture she imagined to be like a geisha, though she'd never met a real geisha. Timmy put the sacks down beside her, his eyes on the shadows past the doorway. Far away across the water, gulls complained.

"Two?" she said.

"Hmm?" Timmy followed her gaze to the sacks. A glimmer of something that might have been chagrin passed through his eyes fast as a blink. "Oh. The dinners. Hey, is Erich back there?"

"He is," Lydia said. "I think he's asleep."

"Yeah," Timmy said, straightening. He put a hand into his pocket. "Hang on a minute." He walked back toward the black doorway as if he were going to check on the other boy, perhaps wake him for his supper.

"Wait," Lydia said as Timmy reached the doorway.

He looked back at her, twisting at the shoulders, his body and feet still committed.

"Come sit with me."

"Yeah, I just gotta—"

"First," she said. "Come sit with me first."

Timmy hesitated, fluttering like a feather caught between contradictory breezes. Then his shoulders sank a centimeter and his hips turned toward her. He pulled his hand from his pocket. Lydia opened the sacks, unpacked the food, laid the disposable forks beside the plates. Every movement had the precision and beauty of ritual. Timmy sat facing her, his legs crossed. The bulge of the gun stood out from his thigh like a fist. Lydia bowed her head, as if in prayer. Timmy took up his fork and stabbed at the ginger beef. Lydia did the same.

"So you're going to kill him?" Lydia asked, her voice light.

"Yeah," Timmy said. "I mean, I ain't happy about it, but it's what needs to get done."

"Needs," Lydia said, her intonation in the perfect balance point between statement and question.

Timmy ate another bite. "I'm the guy that took a job from Burton. Used to be the job was one thing. Now it's something else. It's not like I get to tell him what to do, right?"

"Because he's Burton."

"And I'm not. You were the one who said I'd be important to him if I made it through this shitstorm. This is part of that."

“I said Burton would see you as important,” Lydia said. “There is more to you than what he sees. There’s more to you than what anybody sees.”

“Well,” Timmy said. “You.”

Even I do not know your depths floated at the back of her throat like a cough. She didn’t have it in her to say the words. If it was true, so what? When had truth ever been her friend? Instead she took another bite of the beef. He did the same. She imagined that he was giving her the time to gather herself. It might even have been true. The perfectly straight lightning bolt of a railgun transport lit the black sky, its thunder rolling after it like a wave. The ginger and pepper burned her lips, her throat, her tongue, and she took another bite, welcoming the pain. It was always pleasant when pain was on the outside.

“And who will you be to yourself?” she said at last. “Doesn’t what you think matter more than what he does?”

Timmy’s brow furrowed. “Yeah, I don’t know what you just said.”

“Who are you going to be to yourself, if you do this?” She put down her fork, leaned across the space between them. She lifted his shirt as she had countless times before, and the erotic charge of it was still there. Never absent. She pressed her palm against his breast, her skin against his skin in the place above his heart. “Who will you be in there?”

Timmy’s face went perfectly still in the unnerving way it sometimes did. His eyes were flat as a shark’s, his mouth like a plaster cast mold of himself. Only his voice was the same, bright and amiable.

“You know there ain’t no one in there,” he said.

She let her fingertips stray to the side, brushing through the coarse hair she knew so well. She felt the hardness of his nipple against her thumb. “Then who will you put there? Burton?”

“He’s the guy with the power,” Timmy said.

“Not the power to kill Erich,” she said. “Not the power to make *you* kill him. That is you and only you. People like us? We aren’t righteous. But we can pretend to be, if we want, and that’s almost the same as if it were true.”

“I get the feeling you’re asking me for something. I don’t know what it is.”

“I am not a good person,” she said.

“Hey. Don’t—”

“If I were, though? If I *were* that woman? What would I want you to

do?”

Timmy took another mouthful of beef, his jaw working slowly. In his concentration, she saw the echoes of all the versions of himself that she had known from baby to toddler to young man to this, now before her. She folded her hands on her lap.

“That’s a long way to say I shouldn’t do it,” he said.

“Is that what I said?” she asked.

Erich’s yawn came from the doorway. Lydia felt the blood rush from her face, tasted the penny-bright flush of fear as if she had been caught doing something illicit. Erich came into the light, scratching his sleep-tousled hair with his good hand. “Hey,” he said. “Did I hear you get back, big guy? What’s the word?”

Timmy was quiet, his gaze fixed on Lydia, his expression empty as a mask.

“Guys?” Erich said, limping forward. “What’s the matter? Is something wrong?”

Timmy’s sigh was so low that Lydia barely heard it. The boy she had loved for so long, and in so many ways, put on his cheerful smile and looked away from her. She felt tears pricking her eyes.

“Yeah, bad news,” Timmy said. “Burton’s not taking the whole thing very well. He’s put out paper on you.”

Erich sat down, the blood draining from his face. He grabbed his bad arm reflexively, unaware that he was doing it, and looked from Timmy to the woman and back. His heart thudded like a drum in his ears. Timmy licked his fork clean and put it down. The woman was still as stone. Erich felt his world fall out from underneath him, and that he had known it would be less of a comfort than he’d expected. Anyone looking in at the little circle of light from the shadows would have seen only three faces in the black, like a family portrait of refugees. Erich broke the silence.

“Are you *sure*?”

“Yeah, pretty sure,” Timmy said. “Seeing as how I got the contract.”

Erich stopped breathing. Timmy stared at him, expressionless for several infinitely long seconds.

“We’ve gotta find a way to get you out,” his big friend finally said, and Erich started breathing again.

“There’s no way out,” he said. “Burton’ll track me down anywhere.”

“What about that deck?” Timmy asked. “It ain’t your old one, but can you still sample with it?”

“What do you mean?” Erich said.

“You’ve got the escape plan for Burton. The clean one. Why don’t you put your sequence on it? Use it to get out of here?”

“I can, sure, but they’ve already got my *other* deck, remember? I put my DNA on a record, the flag goes up, and I’m in for questioning.”

“Yeah,” Timmy said. “Well maybe you could...Shit. I don’t know. Maybe you could think of something.”

“I knew,” Erich said. “The second I saw those bastards coming down the street, I knew it was over for me. I’m dead. It’s just a matter of time is all.”

“That’s always true,” Lydia said, her mind taken with other matters. “For everyone.”

“Might as well be you,” Erich said to Timmy, giving his friend permission. Terror and love warring in his chest.

“Nope,” Timmy said, cocking his head to one side as if he’d only just made the decision in that moment.

“Erich,” Lydia started.

“As long as I’m alive,” Erich said, ignoring her, “Burton’s not safe. He’s not going to let me slide.”

Timmy frowned, then grunted in surprise. Maybe pleasure.

“What?” Erich said.

“Just that it works the other way too,” Timmy said, levering himself up to his feet. “Anyway, I gotta go back in.”

“Back in?” Erich said.

Timmy brushed his hands across his wide thighs. “The city. I gotta go back to the city. Burton’s expecting me.”

“You’re not going to tell him where I am, are you?” Erich asked. Timmy started laughing and Lydia took it up. Erich looked from one to the other, confused.

“Nah, I’m not going to tell him where you are. I got something of his I need to give back is all. Nothing you have to worry about.”

“Easy for you to say,” Erich said, ashamed of the whine in his voice.

“I’ll leave you the good boat,” Timmy said, turning toward the darkness.

“Will you be back?” Lydia said. She hadn’t meant to, because she knew in her heart, in her bones, and deeper than that what the answer was. Timmy

smiled at her for the last time. *I take it back*, she thought. *Kill him. Kill the boy. Kill everyone else in the world. Shoot babies in the head and dance on their bodies. Any atrocity, any evil, is justified if it keeps you from leaving me.*

“Eh,” Timmy said. “You never know.”

The darkness folded around him as he walked away. Her hands were made of lead and tungsten. Her belly felt hurt and empty as a miscarriage. And underneath the hurt and the horror, the betrayal and the pleasure she took in her distress, something else stirred and lifted its head. It took her time to recognize it as pride, and even then she couldn’t have said who or what she was proud of. Only that she was.

The boat splashed once in the water, her almost-son and sometime-lover leaving the shore for the last time. Her lifetime was a fabric woven of losses, and she saw now that all of them had been practice, training her to teach her how to bear this pain like a boxer bloodying knuckles to make them strong and numb. All her life had been preparation for bearing this single, unbearable moment.

“Shit,” Erich said. “Were there only two dinners? What am I going to eat?”

Lydia plucked up the fork that had been Timmy’s, gripping the stem in her fist like holding his hand again, one last time. Touching what he had touched, because she would never touch him again. Here this object had opened his lips, felt the softness of his tongue, and been left behind. It held traces of him.

“What’s the matter?” Erich said. “Are you all right?”

I stopped being all right before you were born, she thought. What she said was, “There’s something I’d like you to do for me.”

* * *

The streets of Baltimore didn’t notice him pass through them this one last time. More than three million people lived and breathed, loved and lost, hoped and failed to hope that night, just as any other. A young woman hurrying home later than her father’s curfew dodged around a tall man with thinning hair and pants wet to the knee at the corner of South and Lombard, muttering obscenities and curses at him that spoke more of her own dread

and fear than anything the man had done. Four Star Helix security employees, out of uniform and off-shift, paused at the entrance to an Italian restaurant to watch a civilian pass. None of them could have said what it was about him that caught their attention, and it might only have been that they'd operated on high alert for so many days at once. The civilian went on, minding his own business, keeping himself to himself, and they went into the building's garlic and onion smells and forgot him. A bus driver stopped, let two old women, a thin-faced man, and a broad-shouldered amiable fellow come on board. Bus service was part of basic, and the machine followed its route automatically. No one paid, no one spoke, and the driver went back to watching the entertainment feeds as soon as the bus pulled back into traffic.

Nearer Oestra's safe house, things changed. There were more eyes, more of them alert. The catastrophe of the churn hung thick in the air, the sense that doom might come at any moment in the shape of security vans and riot gear and voices shouting to keep hands visible. Nothing like it had happened that day or the one before, but no one was taking comfort in that yet. The guards who stopped Timmy were different than the ones he'd seen earlier, but their placement on the street was the same. They stopped him, took the pistol that Burton had given him, scanned him for tracking devices, firearms, explosives, chemical agents, and when they found he was clean, they called in. Oestra's voice through their earpieces was less than a mosquito but still perfectly recognizable, a familiar buzz and whine. They waved Timmy on.

Oestra opened the door to him, automatic shotgun still in the lieutenant's hand, as if he hadn't put it down all day. Probably, he hadn't.

Timmy stepped into the main room, looking around pleasantly. The newsfeeds flickered silently on their screens: a street view from sometime earlier in the day with five security vans lined up outside a burning apartment building, a serious-faced Indian woman speaking into the camera with a dour expression, an ad with seven bouncing monkeys reaching for a box of banana-flavored cakes. The world cast its shadows on the bare brick wall and threw stories into the gray mortar. The churn, running itself to exhaustion. New stories from around the world and above it filling in the void.

"You're back," Oestra said.

“Yup.”

“You do the thing?”

“It got a little complicated,” Timmy said. “The man still here?”

“Wait. I’ll get him.”

Oestra walked to the back, one set of footsteps fading into the safe house, then a long pause made rich by the murmur of voices, then two sets of footsteps coming back. The timestamp beside the dour Indian woman read 21:42. Timmy considered the curtains. Blue-dyed cotton with cords of woven nylon. The chair Oestra had been sitting on before, leather stretched over a light metal frame. A kitchen in through a wide brickwork archway. The bedroom in the back with its futon, and a bathroom somewhere behind that.

“Tiny,” Burton said. “What’s the news, little man?”

Burton’s white shirt caught the light from the screens, dancing in a hundred colors. His slacks were dark and beautifully cut. Timmy turned to him like he was an old friend. Oestra walked past them both, taking his place by the window. Timmy glanced back at him only a few feet away, a shotgun across his thighs.

“Well,” Timmy said. “Truth is, I ran into a little hiccup.”

Burton crossed his arms, squared his shoulders and hips. “Something you couldn’t handle?” he asked, his voice hard with disapproval.

“I’m waiting to see,” Timmy said.

“Waiting to see if you can handle it?”

“Well, yeah,” Timmy said with a wide, open smile. “Actually, it’s kind of funny you put it that way.”

When the big man stepped back toward the window, the movement was so casual, so relaxed, that neither Oestra nor Burton recognized what was happening. Timmy’s thick fingers grabbed the back of the leather chair, pulling back and down fast and hard. Oestra twisted trying to keep from falling and also bring the shotgun to bear at the same time, managing neither. He spilled to the floor, Timmy’s knee coming down hard on his neck. Oestra’s muffled roar was equal parts outrage and pain. Timmy reached down and ripped the man’s right ear off, then punched down twice, three times, four. Burton ran for the back bedroom. There wasn’t much time.

Unable to use it with Timmy on his neck, Oestra dropped the shotgun

and twisted, trying to get his arms and legs under himself, trying to get the leverage to push Timmy back. Timmy reached down and hooked his finger into the gunman's left eye, bracing the head with his knee and turning his wrist until he felt the eyeball pop. Oestra's screams were wilder now, panic and pain taking over. Timmy let the pressure up, scooted to the left, and picked up the abandoned shotgun. He fired once into Oestra's head and the man stopped screaming.

Timmy trotted across the room, shotgun in one hand. Burton boiled out of the bedroom, pistols in either fist and teeth bared like a dog's. The front window shattered. Timmy ducked through the brick archway into the kitchen, shifted his grip on the shotgun, and swung it hard and low, leading with the elbow like a cricket player at the bat as Burton roared in after him. The sound of the connection was like a piece of raw steak being dropped on concrete. Burton's feet flew out from under him, but the momentum of his rush carried him stumbling into the space beyond. Timmy lowered the shotgun toward the man's head, but Burton whirled, dropping his own guns and grabbing the shotgun's barrel. The smell of burning skin was instantaneous. Timmy tried to pull back, but Burton kicked out. His right foot hit Timmy's knee like he'd kicked a fire hydrant, but Timmy still stumbled. The shotgun roared again, and the refrigerator sprouted pocks of twisted metal and plastic. Burton twisted, pulling himself in close. Too close for the shotgun's long barrel. He hammered his elbow into Timmy's ribs twice and felt something give the third time. Timmy dropped the shotgun, and then they were both down on the floor.

They grappled, caught in each other's arms, each man shifting for the position that would destroy the other in a parody of intimate love. The fingers of Burton's left hand worked their way under Timmy's chin, digging at his neck, pushing into the hard cartilage of his throat. Timmy choked, gagged, pulled back the centimeter that was all Burton needed. He pulled his right arm up into the gap, braced himself, twisted, and now Timmy's arm and head were locked. Burton gasped out a chuckle.

"You just fucked the wrong asshole," he hissed as Timmy bucked and struggled. "Your little cripple boyfriend? I'm gonna burn him down for days. I'm gonna find everyone you ever loved and kill them all slow."

Timmy grunted and pushed back, but the effort only made Burton's lock on him tighter.

“You thought you could take me, you dumbfuck piece of shit?” Burton spat into Timmy’s ear. “You thought you were tougher than *me*? I owned your momma, boy. You’re just second-generation *property*.”

All along their paired bodies, Burton felt Timmy tense and then, with a vast exhalation, relax, melting into the hold. Burton pulled tighter, squeezing. There was a report like a pistol shot when Timmy’s shoulder dislocated and the resistance stuttered. Burton’s grip broke. Timmy rolled, cocked back his fist and brought it down on the bridge of Burton’s nose. The pain was bright. The volume of the world faded. The fist came down again, jostling the kitchen. The light seemed strange, reducing the red of the bricks and the yellow of the stove to shades of gray. Burton tried to bring his arms up to cover his face, to shield him from the violence, but they were a very long way away, and he kept losing track of them. He had them up, but they were numb and boneless. The attacks easily brushed them aside. The fist hit his nose again, and he didn’t know if it was for the third time or the fourth.

Shit, he thought. *This is just going to keep going on until that fucker decides to stop.*

The impact came again, and Burton tried to say something, to scream. The impact came again, and afterward followed a few seconds of darkness and silence and calm. Burton felt very sleepy. The impact came again. Calm. The impact came again and again and again. Each time, the violence felt more distant and the emptiness between more profound until a kind of forgetfulness came over him.

Once Timmy was sure that he was alone in the apartment, he rolled onto his back. His left arm hung from the socket, limp, useless, and disconnected. He levered himself up to his knees, breathing hard between clenched teeth. Then stood. He took the automatic shotgun in his one good hand and stepped out to the main room. On the screen, the Indian woman was still speaking, wagging a finger at the camera to make a point. The timestamp beside her read 21:44. Two minutes. Maybe a little less. Timmy walked to the front window. The guards from the street weren’t at their posts. He nodded to himself and went to stand by the front door. When the knob turned, he waited. The door flew open, and he fired three times, once straight ahead, and then angling to the left and right. Someone started screaming and the door banged closed again.

Timmy went back to the kitchen. He flipped on the burners, pulled down the roll of cheap paper towels from the wall. He found a bottle of peanut oil in the cabinet and doused the towels with half of it before he put them directly on the heating element. A flurry of footsteps came from the front and he fired the shotgun again, not aiming at anything. They retreated. The oil-soaked paper caught fire, and Timmy picked up the burning roll, trotted to the bedroom, and threw the flaming mass into the bunched covers. By the time he was back in the kitchen, the flame shadows were already dancing in the archway behind him. Timmy put the half-full bottle of oil directly onto the heating element and walked to the back of the safe house. The stairway leading to the alley was narrow and white. He didn't see anyone, but he fired the shotgun twice anyway then tossed the gun back into the fire. If there had been a guard there, they'd fled. Timmy walked out into the night.

He moved slowly, but with purpose. When his path crossed with other people's he smiled and nodded. Once, when he had almost reached his destination, an old man in a black coat had stopped and stared at his bruised and bloody hand. Timmy smiled ruefully, shrugged, and didn't break stride. The old man didn't raise an alarm. Around here, a muscle-bound thug with blood on his cuffs and skinned knuckles didn't warrant anything more than a disapproving look.

The security forces had put a fresh lock on Lydia's door, but Timmy knew the back way in. He slid through the window into the bathroom he'd known so well over the last few years. It still smelled like her. They'd gone through everything. Her towels and the shower curtain were on the floor. Bottles of medications littered the sink. He dug through until he found some painkillers and dry swallowed three. In the kitchen, he wrapped his shoulder in ice, then waited motionless until the swelling was down as far as it was going to go. Putting his shoulder back in its socket was a question of lying on the bed, his grip on the mattress bottom hard and unforgiving, and then pulling back slowly, relaxing into the pain, until it slid back into place with a wet, angry pop. He stripped, washed himself with wet hand towels, and changed into a fresh set of his clothes. Ones that didn't have anybody's blood on them.

The churn, the crackdown, the catastrophe. The cycle of boom and bust. The turn of the seasons. Whatever name was applied to it, the inevitable cascade of events in the city rolled on just the same. When the fire trucks

came and put out the blaze, they identified the two bodies as Feivel Oestra and an unregistered man. The unregistered was a small, compact, dark-skinned man in an expensive shirt and tailored slacks. He had no tattoos, and a wide birthmark on his right shoulder blade in the shape of a rough triangle. Both men had died by violence. If the fire had been meant to conceal that, it failed. If it was only meant to foul any trace DNA or fingerprint evidence, it did well enough. Add to that the fact that Oestra was on the Star Helix lists as someone to bring in for questioning, and the broad strokes of the story came clear.

The same night, fifteen men loyal to the Loca Griega were surrounded in a nightclub. The hostage situation that rose out of it left two people dead and ten in custody, and the attendant lawsuits against Star Helix and the owners of the nightclub were the top of the local and regional newsfeeds. Oestra's death was little more than a footnote, something mentioned and then moved on from. Other things—smaller things—fell even below that level of obscurity. A woman selling illicit painkillers out of her apartment beside the arcology had a screaming fight with one of her clients, called security, and was taken away for questioning. A sweep of the ruins on the bay islands found a small squatters' camp with an LED lamp, an emergency prep sleeping bag, and an exhausted chemical stove, but anyone who had been living there was gone. An art dealer contacted with a request for assistance with an investigation killed himself rather than come in. None of those events raised any notice at all.

Soon, the paroxysm of violence, legal and otherwise, would thin back down to the normal background radiation of human vice. Very serious people would argue about whether the program had worked. Some would argue that crime had gone down, others that it had actually risen. Star Helix would take its payment from the government and settle out of court most of the complaints made against it. One of the remaining lieutenants would rise to the top, or the whole criminal apparatus would turn over to a new organization, a new generation. Within a year, there would be a new working normal that would run more or less gracefully until the next time. People of little importance would survive and make names for themselves. The mighty would fall, the meek would rise up in their places and become mighty. But all that would come later.

In the pearly light that came before the dawn, one other thing happened

that went unnoticed, meaningless to anyone but those involved.

It was on a street down near the water's edge. The eastern sky was brightening with the coming dawn, the western sky still boasted a scattering of stars. Traffic on the street was thick, but not yet the immobile crush that would come with the light. Sea and rot perfumed the air, but the cool made the scent seem almost pleasant. A tea-and-coffee stand was opening, sporting the blue-and-pink logo of a popular chain and a tray of baked goods just the same as a million other trays on five continents and two worlds. Old men and women on basic huffed down the sidewalk, getting in the day's exercise before the sun came up. Young men and women staggered home from long nights at the street clubs and rairai joints, exhausted from hours of dancing, drinking, sex, and frustrated hope. Soon, the streets and tube stations would thicken with the traffic of those who had jobs to go to, and then be released to the masses for whom basic was a way of life.

A boy on the verge of manhood stood on a corner near the tea-and-coffee stand. He was taller than average, and muscular. His close-cropped reddish-brown hair was receding, though he was young. His expression was blank, and he held himself in a tight, guarded way that could have been grief or the protecting of some physical injury. His right hand was swollen, the knuckles skinned. If it hadn't been for that last detail, the security team might have passed him by. Three women and two men, all in the ballistic armor and helmets of Star Helix.

"Morning," the team lead said, and half a beat later the tall man smiled and nodded. He turned to walk away, but the other personnel shifted to block his path.

The man tensed, then made the visible decision to relax. His smile was rueful. "Sorry. I was just heading out."

"I respect that, sir. We appreciate you taking a moment," the team lead said, placing a hand on the butt of his pistol. "Really did a number on your hand."

"Yeah. I box."

"Can be a good workout. I'm going to need to see your ID."

"Don't got it on me. Sorry."

"We'll need to check you against the database, then. That isn't a problem, is it?"

“Think I got the right to refuse that, don’t I?”

“You do,” the team lead said, letting a hint of hardness slip into his voice beneath the casual words. “But then we’d need to take you to the substation and do the full biometric scan to exclude you from the persons of interest list, and there are a whole lot of very unpleasant people who are in that queue. You don’t want to hang out with them. Not if you have someplace you need to be.”

The big man seemed to consider this. He glanced back over his shoulder.

“Looking for someone?” the team lead asked.

“Was more thinking there might be some folks looking for me.”

“So. How do you want to play this?”

The man shrugged and held out his hand. The team’s data analyst stepped forward and tapped the collector against the thick wrist. The readout stuttered red, then went to solid green. The seconds ticked away.

“If there’s something you want to tell me,” the team lead said, “this would be the time.”

“Nah,” the big man said. “I think I’m good.”

“Yeah?”

“You know,” he said, “good enough.”

The team lead’s hand terminal chimed. He pulled it out with his left hand, his right still on the butt of his gun. The readout had the red border of a flagged profile. The big man’s body went very still while they read. It was a long moment before the team lead spoke.

“Amos Burton.”

“Yeah?” the big man said. It could have meant, *Yes, I killed him*, or *What about him?* All the team lead heard was the affirmation.

“I’ve got a travel flag on you here. You’re cutting it pretty close.”

Amos Burton’s eyebrows rose and the corners of his mouth turned down. “I am?”

“You’re shipping out to Luna on the noon launch from Bogotá station, Mr. Burton. These apprenticeship programs are tough to get into, and last I heard, they take it mighty poorly if you miss your berth. Might wind up waiting another decade to get back on the list.”

“Huh,” the big man said.

“Look, there’s a high-speed line about nine blocks north of here. We can take you there if you want.”

“Erich, you sonofabitch,” the big man said. Instead of looking north, he turned to the east, toward the sea and rising sun. “I’m not Mr. Burton.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m not Mr. Burton,” the man said again. “You can call me Amos.”

“Whatever you want. But I think you’d better haul ass out of town if you don’t want to get in some serious shit, Amos.”

“You ain’t the only one that thinks that. But I’m good. I know where the high-speed lines are. I won’t miss my ride.”

“All right then,” the team lead said with a crisp nod. “Have a better one.”

The security team moved on, flowing around the big man like river water around a stone. Amos watched them go, then went to the tea-and-coffee stand, bought a cup of black coffee and a corn muffin. He stood on the corner for a long minute, eating and drinking and breathing the air of the only city he’d ever known. When he was done, he dropped the cup and the muffin wrapper into the recycling bin and turned north toward the high-speed line and Bogotá station and Luna. And, who knew, maybe the vastness beyond the moon. The sweep of planets and moons and asteroids that humanity had spread to, and where the chances of running into anybody from Baltimore were vanishingly small. A needle in a haystack all of humanity wide.

Amos Burton was a tall, stocky, pale-skinned man with an amiable smile, an unpleasant past, and a talent for cheerful violence. He left Baltimore to its dynamic balance of crime and law, exotics and mundanity, love and emptiness. The number of people who knew him and loved him could be counted on one hand and leave most of the fingers spare, and when he was gone, the city went on without him as if he had never been.

Meet the Author

James S. A. Corey is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Find out more about this series at www.the-expanse.com.

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CIBOLA BURN

by James S. A. Corey

The gates have opened the way to thousands of habitable planets, and the land rush has begun. Settlers stream out from humanity's home planets in a vast, poorly controlled flood, landing on a new world. Among them, the Rocinante, haunted by the vast, posthuman network of the protomolecule as they investigate what destroyed the great intergalactic society that built the gates and the protomolecule.

But Holden and his crew must also contend with the growing tensions between the settlers and the company that owns the official claim to the planet. Both sides will stop at nothing to defend what's theirs, but soon a terrible disease strikes and only Holden—with help from the ghostly Detective Miller—can find the cure.

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Chapter 1

Basia

Basia Merton had been a gentle man, once. He hadn't been the sort of man who made bombs out of old metal lubricant drums and mining explosives.

He rolled another one out of the little workshop behind his house and toward one of First Landing's electric carts. The little stretch of buildings spread to the north and south, and then ended, the darkness of the plain stretching to the horizon. The flashlight hanging from his belt bounced as he walked, casting strange moving shadows across the dusty ground. Small alien animals hooted at him from outside the circle of light.

Nights on Ilus—he wouldn't call it New Terra—were very dark. The planet had thirteen tiny, low-albedo moons spaced so consistently in the same orbit that everyone assumed they were alien artifacts. Wherever they'd come from, they were more like captured asteroids than real moons to someone who grew up on the planet-sized satellites of Jupiter. And they did nothing to catch and reflect the light of Ilus' sun once it set. The local nighttime wildlife was mostly small birds and lizards. Or what Ilus' new human inhabitants thought of as birds and lizards. They shared only the most superficial external traits and a primarily carbon base with their terrestrial namesakes.

Basia grunted with effort as he lifted the barrel onto the back of the cart, and a second later an answering grunt came from a few meters away. A mimic lizard, curiosity drawing it right up to the edge of the light, its small eyes glittering. It grunted again, its wide, leathery, bullfrog-shaped head bobbing, and the air sac below its neck inflating and deflating with the

sound. It waited for a moment, staring at him, and when he didn't respond, it crawled off into the dark.

Basia pulled elastic straps out of a toolbox and began securing the barrels to the bed of the cart. The explosive wouldn't go off just from falling on the ground. Or that was what Coop said, anyhow. Basia didn't feel like testing it.

"Baz," Lucia said. He flushed with embarrassment like a small boy caught stealing candy. Lucia knew what he was doing. He'd never been able to lie to her. But he'd hoped she would stay inside while he worked. Just her presence made him wonder if he was doing the right thing. If it was right, why did it make him so ashamed to have Lucia see him?

"Baz," she said again. Not insisting. Her voice sad, not angry.

"Lucy," he said, turning around. She stood at the edge of his light, a white robe clutched around her thin frame against the chill night air. Her face was a dark blur.

"Felcia's crying," she said, her tone not making it an accusation. "She's afraid for you. Come talk to your daughter."

Basia turned away and pulled the strap tight over the barrels, hiding his face from her. "I can't. They're coming," he said.

"Who? Who's coming?"

"You know what I mean. They're going to take everything we made here if we don't make a stand. We need time. This is how you get time. Without the landing pad, they've got to use the small shuttles. So we take away the landing pad. Make them rebuild it. No one's going to get hurt."

"If it gets bad," she said, "we can leave."

"No," Basia said, surprised to hear the violence in his voice. He turned and took a few steps, putting her face in the light. She was weeping. "No more leaving. We left Ganymede. Left Katoa and ran away and my family lived on a ship for a year while no one would give us a place to land. We're not running again. Not *ever* running again. *They* took all the children from me they get to take."

"I miss Katoa too," Lucia said. "But these people didn't kill him. It was a war."

"It was a business decision. They made a business decision, and then they made a war, and they took my son away." *And I let them*, he didn't say. *I took you and Felcia and Jacek, and I left Katoa behind because I thought*

he was dead. And he wasn't. The words were too painful to speak, but Lucia heard them anyway.

"It wasn't your fault."

Yes, *it was* floated at the back of his mouth, but he swallowed.

"These people don't have any right to Ilus," he said, struggling to make his voice sound reasonable. "We were here first. We staked claim. We'll get the first load of lithium out, get the money in, then we can hire lawyers back home to make a real case. If the corporations already have roots here when that happens, it won't matter. We just need time."

"If you do this," Lucia said, "they'll send you to jail. Don't do that to us. Don't do that to your family."

"I'm doing this *for* my family," he said softly. It was worse than yelling. He hopped up behind the controls and stomped on the accelerator. The cart lurched off with a whine. He didn't look back, couldn't look back and see Lucy.

"*For* my family," he said again.

He drove away from his house and the ramshackle town that they'd started out calling First Landing back when they'd picked the site off the *Barbapiccola's* sensor maps. No one had bothered to rename it when it had moved from being an idea to being a place. He drove toward the center of town, two rows of prefab buildings, until he hit the wide stretch of flattened dirt that served as the main road and turned toward the original landing site. The refugees who'd colonized Ilus had come down from their ship in small shuttles, so the only landing pad they'd needed was a flat stretch of ground. But the Royal Charter Energy people, the *corporate* people, who had a UN charter giving the world to them, would be coming down with heavy equipment. Heavy lift shuttles needed an actual landing pad. It had been built in the same open fields that the colony had used as their landing site.

That felt obscene to Basia. Invasive. The first landing site had significance. He'd imagined it someday being a park, with a monument at the center commemorating their arrival on this new world. Instead, RCE had built a giant and gleaming metal monstrosity right over the top of their site. Worse, they'd hired the colonists to build it, and enough of them had thought it was a good idea that they'd actually done it.

It felt like being erased from history.

Scotty and Coop were waiting for him at the new landing pad when he

arrived. Scotty was sitting on the edge of the metal platform, legs dangling over the side, smoking a pipe and spitting on the ground below his feet. A small electric lamp that sat beside him colored him with an eerie green light. Coop stood a little way off, looking up at the sky with bared teeth. Coop was an old-school Belter, and the agoraphobia treatments had been harder for him than others. The thin-faced man kept staring up at the void, fighting to get used to it like a kid pulling off scabs.

Basia pulled the cart up to the edge of the pad and hopped out to undo the straps holding the barrel bombs down.

“Give me a hand?” he said. Ilus was a large planet, slightly over one gravity. Even after six months of pharma to build his muscles and bones everything still felt too heavy. The thought of lifting the barrels back to the ground made the muscles in his shoulders twitch in anticipated exhaustion.

Scotty slid off the landing pad and dropped a meter and a half to the ground. He pushed his oily black hair out of his eyes and took another long puff on his pipe. Basia caught the pungent, skunky smell of Scotty’s bathtub-grown cannabis mixed with freeze-dried tobacco leaves. Coop looked over, his eyes fighting for focus for a moment, and then the thin, cruel smile. The plan had been Coop’s from the start.

“Mmm,” Coop said. “Pretty.”

“Don’t get attached,” Basia said. “They won’t be around long.”

Coop made a booming sound and grinned. Together they pulled the four heavy barrels off the cart and stood them in a row next to the pad. By the last one, they were all panting with effort. Basia leaned against the cart for a moment in silence while Scotty smoked off the last of his pipe and Coop set the blasting caps on the barrels. The detonators sat in the back of the cart like sleeping rattlesnakes, the red LEDs dormant for now.

In the darkness, the township sparkled. The houses they’d all built for themselves and one another glittered like stars brought down from the sky. Beyond them, there were the ruins. A long, low alien structure with two massive towers rising up above the landscape like a termite hill writ large. All of it was run through with passageways and chambers that no human had designed. In daylight, the ruins shone with the eerie colors of mother-of-pearl. In the night, they were only a deeper darkness. The mining pits were off past them, invisible as all but the dimmest glow of the work lights on the belly of the clouds. Truth was Basia didn’t like the mines. The ruins

were strange relics of the empty planet's past, and like anything that was uncanny without posing a threat, they faded from his awareness after the first few months. The mines carried history and expectations. He'd spent half a lifetime in tunnels of ice, and tunnels that ran through alien soil *smelled* wrong.

Coop made a sharp noise and shook his hand, cursing. Nothing blew up, so it couldn't be that bad.

"You think they'll pay us to rebuild it?" Scotty asked.

Basia cursed and spat on the ground.

"We wouldn't have to do this if it wasn't for people wanting to suck on RCE's tit," he said as he rolled the last barrel into place. "They can't land without this. All we had to do was not build it."

Scotty laughed out a cloud of smoke. "They were coming anyway. Might as well take their money. That's what people said."

"People are idiots," Basia said.

Scotty nodded, then smacked a mimic lizard off the passenger seat of the cart with one hand and sat down. He put his feet up on the dash and took another long puff on his pipe. "We gonna have to get gone, if we blow this. That blasting powder makes serious boom."

"Hey, mate," Coop shouted. "We're good. Let's make the place, ah?"

Scotty stood and started walking toward the pad. Basia stopped him, plucked the lit pipe from between his lips, and put it on the hood of the cart.

"Explosives," Basia said. "They explode."

Scotty shrugged, but he also looked chagrined. Coop was already easing the first barrel down onto its side when they reached him. "It's buena work this. Solid."

"Thank you," Basia said.

Coop lay down, back against the ground. Basia lay beside him. Scotty rolled the first bomb gently between them.

Basia climbed under the pad, pulling himself through the tangle of crisscrossed I-beams to each of the four barrels, turning on the remote detonators and syncing them. He heard a growing electric whine and felt a moment of irritation at Scotty for driving off with the cart before he realized the sound was of a cart arriving, not leaving.

"Hey," Peter's familiar voice yelled.

"Que la moog bastard doing here?" Coop muttered, wiping his hand

across his forehead.

“You want me to go find out?” Scotty asked.

“Basia,” Coop said. “Go see what Peter needs. Scotty hasn’t got his back dirty yet.”

Basia shifted himself out from under the landing and made room for Scotty and the last of the four bombs. Peter’s cart was parked beside his own, and Peter stood between them, shifting from one foot to the other like he needed to piss. Basia’s back and arms ached. He wanted this all over and to be back home with Lucia and Felcia and Jacek.

“What?” Basia said.

“They’re coming,” Pete said, whispering as if there were anyone who could hear them.

“Who’s coming?”

“Everyone. The provisional governor. The corporate security team. Science and tech staff. *Everybody*. This is serious. They’re landing a whole new government for us.”

Basia shrugged. “Old news. They been burning eighteen months. That’s why we’re out here.”

“No,” Pete said, prancing nervously and looking up at the stars. “They’re coming right now. *Edward Israel* did a braking burn half an hour ago. Got into high orbit.”

The copper taste of fear flooded Basia’s mouth. He looked up at the darkness. A billion unfamiliar stars, his same Milky Way galaxy, everyone figured, just seen from a different angle. His eyes shifted frantically, and then he caught it. The movement was subtle as the minute hand on an analog clock, but he saw it. The drop ship was dropping. The heavy shuttle was coming for the landing pad.

“I was going to get on the radio, but Coop said they monitor radio spectrum and—” Pete said, but then by Basia was already running back to the landing pad. Scotty and Coop were just pulling themselves out. Coop clapped clouds of dust off his pants and grinned.

“We got a problem,” Basia said. “Ship’s already dropped. Looks like they’re in atmosphere already.”

Coop looked up. The brightness from his flashlight threw shadows across his cheeks and into his eyes.

“Huh,” he said.

"I thought you were on this, man. I thought you were paying attention to where they were."

Coop shrugged, neither agreeing nor denying.

"We've got to get the bombs back out," Basia said. Scotty started to kneel, but Coop put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Why?" he asked.

"They try to land now, they could set it all off," Basia said.

Coop's smile was gentle. "Could," he said. "And what if?"

Basia balled his fists. "They're coming down *now*."

"See that," Coop said. "Doesn't inspire a great sense of obligation. And however you cut it, there ain't time to pull them."

"Can take off the primers and caps," Basia said, hunkering down. He played his flashlight over the pad's superstructure.

"Maybe could, maybe couldn't," Coop said. "Question's should, and it's a limp little question."

"Coop?" Scotty said, his voice thin and uncertain. Coop ignored him.

"Opportunity, looks like to me," Coop said.

"There's people on that thing," Basia said, crawling under the pad. The nearest bomb's electronics were flat against the dirt. He put his aching shoulder against it and pushed.

"Isn't time, mate," Coop called.

"Might be if you got your ass in here," Basia shouted. The blasting cap clung to the barrel's side like a tick. Basia tried to dig his fingers into the sealant goo and pry the cap away.

"Oh shit," Scotty said with something too much like awe in his voice. "Baz, oh *shit*!"

The cap came loose. Basia pushed it in his pocket and started crawling toward the second bomb.

"No time," Coop shouted. "Best we get clear, try and blow it while they can still pull up."

In the distance, he heard one of the carts taking off. Pete, going for distance. And under that, another sound. The bass roar of braking engines. He looked at the three remaining bombs in despair and rolled out from under the pad. The shuttle was massive in the black sky, so close he could make out the individual thrusters.

He wasn't going to make it.

“Run!” he shouted. He and Scotty and Coop sprinted back toward the cart. The roar of the shuttle rose, grew deafening. Basia reached the cart and scooped up the detonator. If he could blow it early, the shuttle could pull out, get away.

“Don’t!” Coop shouted. “We’re too close!”

Basia slammed his palm on the button.

The ground rose up, hitting him hard, the rough dirt and rocks tearing at his hands and cheek as he came to a stop, but the pain was a distant thing. Some part of him knew he might be hurt very badly, might be in shock, but that seemed distant and easy to ignore too. What struck him most was how quiet everything was. The world of sound stopped at his skull. He could hear his own breath, his heartbeat. Everything past that had the volume turned down to one.

He rolled onto his back and stared up at the star-speckled night sky. The heavy shuttle streaked overhead, half of it trailing fire, the sound of its engines no longer a bass roar but the scream of a wounded animal that he felt in his belly more than heard. The shuttle had been too close, the blast too large, some unlucky debris thrown into just the right path. No way to know. Some part of Basia knew this was very bad, but it was hard to pay much attention to it.

The shuttle disappeared from view, shrieking a death wail across the valley that came to him as a faint high piping sound, then sudden silence. Scotty was sitting beside him on the ground, staring off in the direction the ship had gone. Basia let himself lie back down.

When the bright spots it had left in his vision faded, the stars returned. Basia watched them twinkle, and wondered which one was Sol. So far away. But with the gates, close too. He’d knocked their shuttle down. They’d have to come now. He’d left them no choice.

A sudden spasm of coughing took him. It felt like his lungs were full of fluid, and he coughed it up for several minutes. With the coughing the pain finally came, wracking him from head to foot.

With the pain came the fear.

**If you enjoyed
THE CHURN,
look out for**

ANCILLARY JUSTICE

by Ann Leckie

On a remote, icy planet, the soldier known as Breq is drawing closer to completing her quest.

Breq is both more than she seems and less than she was. Years ago, she was the Justice of Toren—a colossal starship with an artificial intelligence linking thousands of corpse soldiers in the service of the Radch, the empire that conquered the galaxy.

An act of treachery has ripped it all away, leaving her with only one fragile human body. And only one purpose—to revenge herself on Anaander Mianaai, many-bodied, near-immortal Lord of the Radch.

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1

The body lay naked and facedown, a deathly gray, spatters of blood staining the snow around it. It was minus fifteen degrees Celsius and a storm had passed just hours before. The snow stretched smooth in the wan sunrise, only a few tracks leading into a nearby ice-block building. A tavern. Or what passed for a tavern in this town.

There was something itchy familiar about that outthrown arm, the line from shoulder down to hip. But it was hardly possible I knew this person. I didn't know anyone here. This was the icy back end of a cold and isolated planet, as far from Radchaai ideas of civilization as it was possible to be. I was only here, on this planet, in this town, because I had urgent business of my own. Bodies in the street were none of my concern.

Sometimes I don't know why I do the things I do. Even after all this time it's still a new thing for me not to know, not to have orders to follow from one moment to the next. So I can't explain to you why I stopped and with one foot lifted the naked shoulder so I could see the person's face.

Frozen, bruised, and bloody as she was, I knew her. Her name was Seivarden Vendaai, and a long time ago she had been one of my officers, a young lieutenant, eventually promoted to her own command, another ship. I had thought her a thousand years dead, but she was, undeniably, here. I crouched down and felt for a pulse, for the faintest stir of breath.

Still alive.

Seivarden Vendaai was no concern of mine anymore, wasn't my responsibility. And she had never been one of my favorite officers. I had obeyed her orders, of course, and she had never abused any ancillaries, never harmed any of my segments (as the occasional officer did). I had no reason to think badly of her. On the contrary, her manners were those of an educated, well-bred person of good family. Not toward me, of course—I wasn't a person, I was a piece of equipment, a part of the ship. But I had

never particularly cared for her.

I rose and went into the tavern. The place was dark, the white of the ice walls long since covered over with grime or worse. The air smelled of alcohol and vomit. A barkeep stood behind a high bench. She was a native—short and fat, pale and wide-eyed. Three patrons sprawled in seats at a dirty table. Despite the cold they wore only trousers and quilted shirts—it was spring in this hemisphere of Nilt and they were enjoying the warm spell. They pretended not to see me, though they had certainly noticed me in the street and knew what motivated my entrance. Likely one or more of them had been involved; Seivarden hadn't been out there long, or she'd have been dead.

"I'll rent a sledge," I said, "and buy a hypothermia kit."

Behind me one of the patrons chuckled and said, voice mocking, "Aren't you a tough little girl."

I turned to look at her, to study her face. She was taller than most Nilters, but fat and pale as any of them. She out-bulked me, but I was taller, and I was also considerably stronger than I looked. She didn't realize what she was playing with. She was probably male, to judge from the angular mazelike patterns quilting her shirt. I wasn't entirely certain. It wouldn't have mattered, if I had been in Radch space. Radchaai don't care much about gender, and the language they speak—my own first language—doesn't mark gender in any way. This language we were speaking now did, and I could make trouble for myself if I used the wrong forms. It didn't help that cues meant to distinguish gender changed from place to place, sometimes radically, and rarely made much sense to me.

I decided to say nothing. After a couple of seconds she suddenly found something interesting in the tabletop. I could have killed her, right there, without much effort. I found the idea attractive. But right now Seivarden was my first priority. I turned back to the barkeep.

Slouching negligently she said, as though there had been no interruption, "What kind of place you think this is?"

"The kind of place," I said, still safely in linguistic territory that needed no gender marking, "that will rent me a sledge and sell me a hypothermia kit. How much?"

"Two hundred shen." At least twice the going rate, I was sure. "For the sledge. Out back. You'll have to get it yourself. Another hundred for the

kit.”

“Complete,” I said. “Not used.”

She pulled one out from under the bench, and the seal looked undamaged. “Your buddy out there had a tab.”

Maybe a lie. Maybe not. Either way the number would be pure fiction. “How much?”

“Three hundred fifty.”

I could find a way to keep avoiding referring to the barkeep’s gender. Or I could guess. It was, at worst, a fifty-fifty chance. “You’re very trusting,” I said, guessing *male*, “to let such an indigent”—I knew Seivarden was male, that one was easy—“run up such a debt.” The barkeep said nothing. “Six hundred and fifty covers all of it?”

“Yeah,” said the barkeep. “Pretty much.”

“No, all of it. We will agree now. And if anyone comes after me later demanding more, or tries to rob me, they die.”

Silence. Then the sound behind me of someone spitting. “Radchaai scum.”

“I’m not Radchaai.” Which was true. You have to be human to be Radchaai.

“*He* is,” said the barkeep, with the smallest shrug toward the door. “You don’t have the accent but you stink like Radchaai.”

“That’s the swill you serve your customers.” Hoots from the patrons behind me. I reached into a pocket, pulled out a handful of chits, and tossed them on the bench. “Keep the change.” I turned to leave.

“Your money better be good.”

“Your sledge had better be out back where you said.” And I left.

The hypothermia kit first. I rolled Seivarden over. Then I tore the seal on the kit, snapped an internal off the card, and pushed it into her bloody, half-frozen mouth. Once the indicator on the card showed green I unfolded the thin wrap, made sure of the charge, wound it around her, and switched it on. Then I went around back for the sledge.

No one was waiting for me, which was fortunate. I didn’t want to leave bodies behind just yet, I hadn’t come here to cause trouble. I towed the sledge around front, loaded Seivarden onto it, and considered taking my outer coat off and laying it on her, but in the end I decided it wouldn’t be that much of an improvement over the hypothermia wrap alone. I powered

up the sledge and was off.

I rented a room at the edge of town, one of a dozen two-meter cubes of grimy, gray-green prefab plastic. No bedding, and blankets cost extra, as did heat. I paid—I had already wasted a ridiculous amount of money bringing Seivarden out of the snow.

I cleaned the blood off her as best I could, checked her pulse (still there) and temperature (rising). Once I would have known her core temperature without even thinking, her heart rate, blood oxygen, hormone levels. I would have seen any and every injury merely by wishing it. Now I was blind. Clearly she'd been beaten—her face was swollen, her torso bruised.

The hypothermia kit came with a very basic corrective, but only one, and only suitable for first aid. Seivarden might have internal injuries or severe head trauma, and I was only capable of fixing cuts or sprains. With any luck, the cold and the bruises were all I had to deal with. But I didn't have much medical knowledge, not anymore. Any diagnosis I could make would be of the most basic sort.

I pushed another internal down her throat. Another check—her skin was no more chill than one would expect, considering, and she didn't seem clammy. Her color, given the bruises, was returning to a more normal brown. I brought in a container of snow to melt, set it in a corner where I hoped she wouldn't kick it over if she woke, and then went out, locking the door behind me.

The sun had risen higher in the sky, but the light was hardly any stronger. By now more tracks marred the even snow of last night's storm, and one or two Nilters were about. I hauled the sledge back to the tavern, parked it behind. No one accosted me, no sounds came from the dark doorway. I headed for the center of town.

People were abroad, doing business. Fat, pale children in trousers and quilted shirts kicked snow at each other, and then stopped and stared with large surprised-looking eyes when they saw me. The adults pretended I didn't exist, but their eyes turned toward me as they passed. I went into a shop, going from what passed for daylight here to dimness, into a chill just barely five degrees warmer than outside.

A dozen people stood around talking, but instant silence descended as soon as I entered. I realized that I had no expression on my face, and set my facial muscles to something pleasant and noncommittal.

“What do you want?” growled the shopkeeper.

“Surely these others are before me.” Hoping as I spoke that it was a mixed-gender group, as my sentence indicated. I received only silence in response. “I would like four loaves of bread and a slab of fat. Also two hypothermia kits and two general-purpose correctives, if such a thing is available.”

“I’ve got tens, twenties, and thirties.”

“Thirties, please.”

She stacked my purchases on the counter. “Three hundred seventy-five.” There was a cough from someone behind me—I was being overcharged again.

I paid and left. The children were still huddled, laughing, in the street. The adults still passed me as though I weren’t there. I made one more stop—Seivarden would need clothes. Then I returned to the room.

Seivarden was still unconscious, and there were still no signs of shock as far as I could see. The snow in the container had mostly melted, and I put half of one brick-hard loaf of bread in it to soak.

A head injury and internal organ damage were the most dangerous possibilities. I broke open the two correctives I’d just bought and lifted the blanket to lay one across Seivarden’s abdomen, watched it puddle and stretch and then harden into a clear shell. The other I held to the side of her face that seemed the most bruised. When that one had hardened, I took off my outer coat and lay down and slept.

Slightly more than seven and a half hours later, Seivarden stirred and I woke. “Are you awake?” I asked. The corrective I’d applied held one eye closed, and one half of her mouth, but the bruising and the swelling all over her face was much reduced. I considered for a moment what would be the right facial expression, and made it. “I found you in the snow, in front of a tavern. You looked like you needed help.” She gave a faint rasp of breath but didn’t turn her head toward me. “Are you hungry?” No answer, just a vacant stare. “Did you hit your head?”

“No,” she said, quiet, her face relaxed and slack.

“Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“When did you eat last?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice was calm, without inflection.

I pulled her upright and propped her against the gray-green wall, gingerly, not wanting to cause more injury, wary of her slumping over. She stayed sitting, so I slowly spooned some bread-and-water mush into her mouth, working cautiously around the corrective. "Swallow," I said, and she did. I gave her half of what was in the bowl that way and then I ate the rest myself, and brought in another pan of snow.

She watched me put another half-loaf of hard bread in the pan, but said nothing, her face still placid. "What's your name?" I asked. No answer.

She'd taken kef, I guessed. Most people will tell you that kef suppresses emotion, which it does, but that's not all it does. There was a time when I could have explained exactly what kef does, and how, but I'm not what I once was.

As far as I knew, people took kef so they could stop feeling something. Or because they believed that, emotions out of the way, supreme rationality would result, utter logic, true enlightenment. But it doesn't work that way.

Pulling Seivarden out of the snow had cost me time and money that I could ill afford, and for what? Left to her own devices she would find herself another hit or three of kef, and she would find her way into another place like that grimy tavern and get herself well and truly killed. If that was what she wanted I had no right to prevent her. But if she had wanted to die, why hadn't she done the thing cleanly, registered her intention and gone to the medic as anyone would? I didn't understand.

There was a good deal I didn't understand, and nineteen years pretending to be human hadn't taught me as much as I'd thought.

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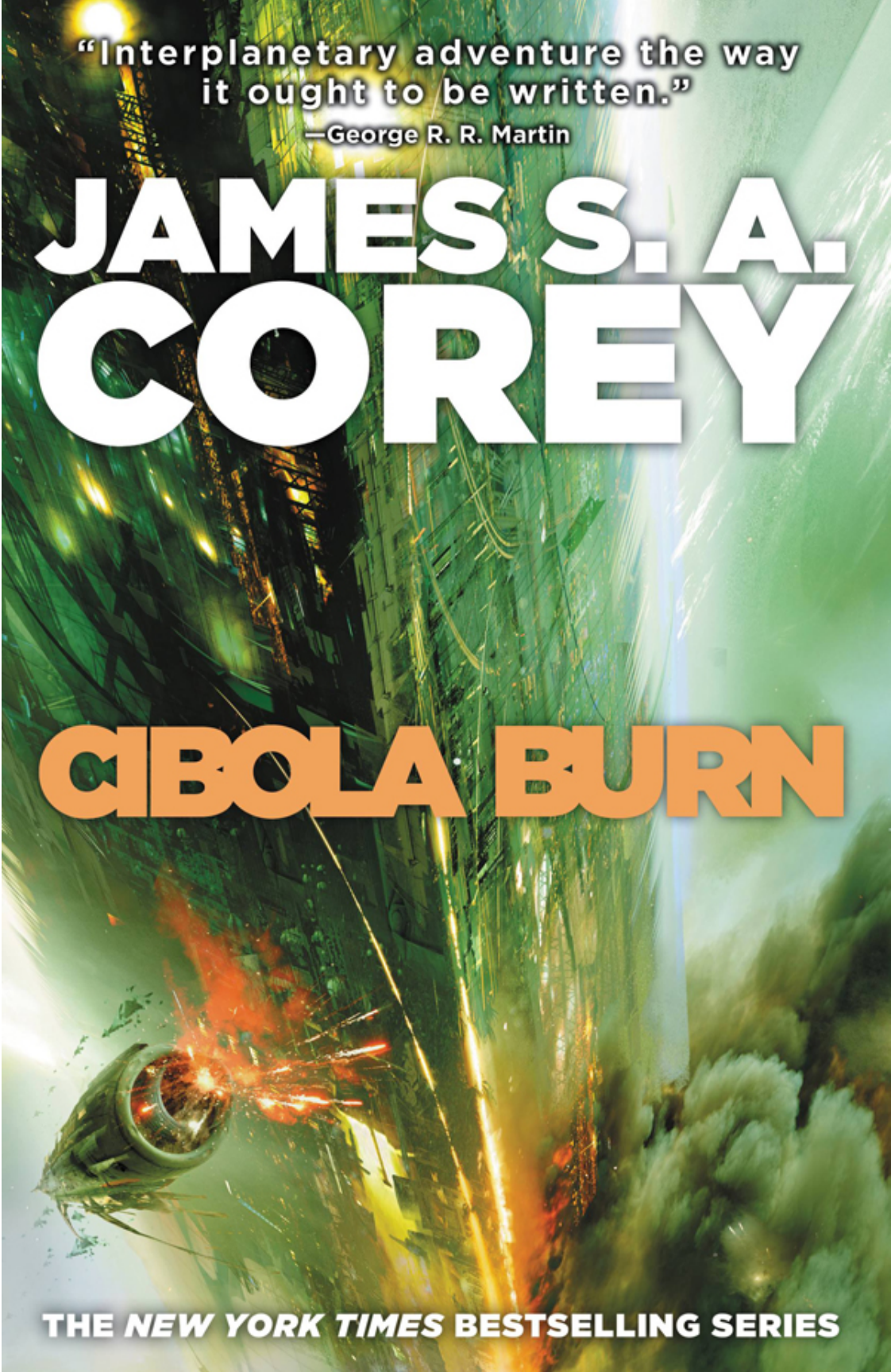
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it ought to be written."**

—George R. R. Martin

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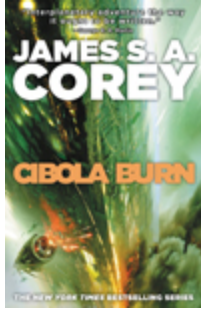
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*To Jay Lake and Elmore Leonard.
Gentlemen, it has been a pleasure.*

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Prologue: Bobbie Draper

A thousand worlds, Bobbie thought as the tube doors closed. And not just a thousand worlds. A thousand *systems*. Suns. Gas giants. Asteroid belts. Everything that humanity had spread to, a thousand times over. The screen above the seats across from her showed a newsfeed, but the speakers were broken, the man's voice too fuzzed to make out the words. The graphic that zoomed in and out beside him was enough for her to follow. New data had come in from the probes that had gone through the gates. Here was another image of an unfamiliar sun, circles to mark the orbits of new planets. All of them empty. Whatever had built the protomolecule and fired it toward Earth back in the depths of time wasn't answering calls anymore. The bridge builder had opened the way, and no great gods had come streaming through.

It was astounding, Bobbie thought, how quickly humanity could go from *What unimaginable intelligence fashioned these soul-wrenching wonders?* to *Well, since they're not here, can I have their stuff?*

" 'Scuse me," a man's phlegmy voice said. "You wouldn't have a little spare change for a veteran, would you?"

She looked away from the screens. The man was thin, gray-faced. His body had the hallmarks of a childhood in low g: long body, large head. He licked his lips and leaned forward.

"Veteran, are you?" she said. "Where'd you serve?"

"Ganymede," the man said, nodding and looking off with an attempt at nobility. "I was there when it all came down. When I got back here, government dropped me on my ass. I'm just trying to save up enough to book passage to Ceres. I've got family there."

Bobbie felt a bubble of rage in her breast, but she tried to keep her voice

and expression calm. “You try veteran’s outreach? Maybe they could help you.”

“I just need something to eat,” he said, his voice turning nasty. Bobbie looked up and down the car. Usually there would be a few people in the cars at this time. The neighborhoods under the Aurorae Sinus were all connected by evacuated tube. Part of the great Martian terraforming project that had begun before Bobbie was born and would go on long after she was dead. Just now, there was no one. She considered what she would look like to the beggar. She was a big woman, tall as well as broad, but she was sitting down, and the sweater she’d chosen was a little baggy. He might have been under the misapprehension that her bulk was fat. It wasn’t.

“What company did you serve with?” she asked. He blinked. She knew she was supposed to be a little scared of him, and he was uneasy because she wasn’t.

“Company?”

“What company did you serve with?”

He licked his lips again. “I don’t want to—”

“Because it’s a funny thing,” she said. “I could have sworn I knew pretty much everyone who was on Ganymede when the fighting started. You know, you go through something like that, and you remember. Because you see a lot of your friends die. What was your rank? I was gunnery sergeant.”

The gray face had gone closed and white. The man’s mouth pinched. He pushed his hands deeper into his pockets and mumbled something.

“And now?” Bobbie went on, “I work thirty hours a week with veteran’s outreach. And I’m just fucking sure we could give a fine upstanding veteran like you a break.”

He turned, and her hand went out to his elbow faster than he could pull away. His face twisted with fear and pain. She drew him close. When she spoke, her voice was careful. Each word clear and sharp.

“Find. Another. Story.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the beggar said. “I will. I’ll do that.”

The car shifted, decelerating into the first Breach Candy station. She let him go and stood up. His eyes went a little wider when she did. Her genetic line went back to Samoa, and she sometimes had that effect on people who weren’t expecting her. Sometimes she felt a little bad about it. Not now.

Her brother lived in a nice middle-class hole in Breach Candy, not far

from the lower university. She'd lived with him for a time after she got back home to Mars, and she was still putting the pieces of her life back together. It was a longer process than she'd expected. And part of the aftermath was that she felt like she owed her brother something. Family dinner nights was part of that.

The halls of Breach Candy were sparse. The advertisements on the walls flickered as she came near, face recognition tracking her and offering up the products and services they thought she might want. Dating services, gym memberships, take-out shwarma, the new Mbeki Soon film, psychological counseling. Bobbie tried not to take it personally. Still, she wished there were more people around, a few more faces to add variety to the mix. To let her tell herself the ads were probably meant for someone walking nearby. Not for her.

But Breach Candy wasn't as full as it used to be. There were fewer people in the tube stations and hallways, fewer people coming to the veteran's outreach program. She heard that enrollment at the upper university was down six percent.

Humanity hadn't managed a single viable colony on the new worlds yet, but the probe data was enough. Humanity had its new frontier, and the cities of Mars were feeling the competition.

As soon as she stepped in the door, the rich scent of her sister-in-law's gumbo thickening the air and making her mouth water, she heard her brother and nephew, voices raised. It knotted her gut, but they were family. She loved them. She owed them. Even if they made the idea of take-out shwarma seem awfully tempting.

"—not what I'm saying," her nephew said. He was in upper university now, but when the family started fighting, she could still hear the six-year-old in his voice.

Her brother boomed in reply. Bobbie recognized the percussive tapping of his fingertips against the tabletop as he made his points. Drumming as a rhetorical device. Their father did the same thing.

"Mars is not optional." Tap. "It is not secondary." Tap. "These gates and whatever's on the other side of them isn't our home. The terraforming effort —"

"I'm not arguing against the terraforming," her nephew said as she walked into the room. Her sister-in-law nodded to her from the kitchen

wordlessly. Bobbie nodded back. The dining room looked down into a living space where a muted newsfeed was showing long-distance images of unfamiliar planets with a beautiful black man in wire-rimmed glasses speaking earnestly between them. “All I’m saying is that we’re going to have a lot of new data. Data. That’s all I’m saying.”

The two of them were hunched over the table like there was an invisible chessboard between them. A game of concentration and intellect that wrapped them both up until they couldn’t see the world around them. In a lot of ways, that was true. She took her chair without either of them acknowledging she’d arrived.

“Mars,” her brother said, “is the most studied planet there is. It doesn’t matter how many new datasets you get that aren’t about Mars. They aren’t about Mars! It’s like saying that seeing pictures of a thousand other tables will tell you about the one you’re already sitting at.”

“Knowledge is good,” her nephew said. “You’re the one who always told me that. I don’t know why you’re getting so bent about it now.”

“How are things for you, Bobbie?” her sister-in-law said sharply, carrying a bowl to the table. Rice and peppers to use as a bed for the gumbo and a reminder to the others that there was a guest. The two men scowled at the interruption.

“Good,” Bobbie said. “The contract with the shipyards came through. It should help us place a lot of vets in new jobs.”

“Because they’re building exploration ships and transports,” her nephew said.

“*David.*”

“Sorry, Mom. But they are,” David replied, not backing down. Bobbie scooped the rice into her bowl. “All the ships that are easy to retrofit, they’re retrofitting, and then they’re making more so that people can go to all the new systems.”

Her brother took the rice and the serving spoon, chuckling under his breath to make it clear how little he respected his son’s opinion. “The first real survey team is just getting to the first of these places—”

“There are already people living on New Terra, Dad! There were a bunch of refugees from Ganymede—” He broke off, shooting a guilty glance at Bobbie. Ganymede wasn’t something they talked about over dinner.

“The survey team hasn’t landed yet,” her brother said. “It’s going to be years before we have anything like real colonies out there.”

“It’s going to be *generations* before anyone walks on the surface here! We don’t have a fucking magnetosphere!”

“Language, David!”

Her sister-in-law returned. The gumbo was black and fragrant with a sheen of oil across the top. The smell of it made Bobbie’s mouth water. She put it on the slate trivet and handed the serving spoon to Bobbie.

“And how’s your new apartment?” she asked.

“It’s nice,” Bobbie said. “Inexpensive.”

“I wish you weren’t living in Innis Shallow,” her brother said. “It’s a terrible neighborhood.”

“No one’s going to bother Aunt Bobbie,” her nephew said. “She’d rip their heads off.”

Bobbie grinned. “Naw, I just look at them mean, and they—”

From the living room, there was a sudden glow of red light. The newsfeed had changed. Bright red banners showed at the top and bottom, and on the screen, a jowly Earth woman looked soberly into the camera. The image behind her was of fire and then a stock image of an old colony ship. The words, black against the white of the flames, read TRAGEDY ON NEW TERRA.

“What happened?” Bobbie said. “What just *happened*?”

Chapter One: Basia

Basia Merton had been a gentle man, once. He hadn't been the sort of man who made bombs out of old metal lubricant drums and mining explosives.

He rolled another one out of the little workshop behind his house and toward one of First Landing's electric carts. The little stretch of buildings spread to the north and south, and then ended, the darkness of the plain stretching to the horizon. The flashlight hanging from his belt bounced as he walked, casting strange moving shadows across the dusty ground. Small alien animals hooted at him from outside the circle of light.

Nights on Ilus—he wouldn't call it New Terra—were very dark. The planet had thirteen tiny, low-albedo moons spaced so consistently in the same orbit that everyone assumed they were alien artifacts. Wherever they'd come from, they were more like captured asteroids than real moons to someone who grew up on the planet-sized satellites of Jupiter. And they did nothing to catch and reflect the light of Ilus' sun once it set. The local nighttime wildlife was mostly small birds and lizards. Or what Ilus' new human inhabitants thought of as birds and lizards. They shared only the most superficial external traits and a primarily carbon base with their terrestrial namesakes.

Basia grunted with effort as he lifted the barrel onto the back of the cart, and a second later an answering grunt came from a few meters away. A mimic lizard, curiosity drawing it right up to the edge of the light, its small eyes glittering. It grunted again, its wide, leathery, bullfrog-shaped head bobbing, and the air sac below its neck inflating and deflating with the sound. It waited for a moment, staring at him, and when he didn't respond, it crawled off into the dark.

Basia pulled elastic straps out of a toolbox and began securing the barrels to the bed of the cart. The explosive wouldn't go off just from falling on the ground. Or that was what Coop said, anyhow. Basia didn't feel like testing it.

"Baz," Lucia said. He flushed with embarrassment like a small boy caught stealing candy. Lucia knew what he was doing. He'd never been able to lie to her. But he'd hoped she would stay inside while he worked. Just her presence made him wonder if he was doing the right thing. If it was right, why did it make him so ashamed to have Lucia see him?

"Baz," she said again. Not insisting. Her voice sad, not angry.

"Lucy," he said, turning around. She stood at the edge of his light, a white robe clutched around her thin frame against the chill night air. Her face was a dark blur.

"Felcia's crying," she said, her tone not making it an accusation. "She's afraid for you. Come talk to your daughter."

Basia turned away and pulled the strap tight over the barrels, hiding his face from her. "I can't. They're coming," he said.

"Who? Who's coming?"

"You know what I mean. They're going to take everything we made here if we don't make a stand. We need time. This is how you get time. Without the landing pad, they've got to use the small shuttles. So we take away the landing pad. Make them rebuild it. No one's going to get hurt."

"If it gets bad," she said, "we can leave."

"No," Basia said, surprised to hear the violence in his voice. He turned and took a few steps, putting her face in the light. She was weeping. "No more leaving. We left Ganymede. Left Katoa and ran away and my family lived on a ship for a year while no one would give us a place to land. We're not running again. Not *ever* running again. *They* took all the children from me they get to take."

"I miss Katoa too," Lucia said. "But these people didn't kill him. It was a war."

"It was a business decision. They made a business decision, and then they made a war, and they took my son away." *And I let them*, he didn't say. *I took you and Felcia and Jacek, and I left Katoa behind because I thought he was dead. And he wasn't.* The words were too painful to speak, but Lucia heard them anyway.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Yes, *it was* floated at the back of his mouth, but he swallowed.

“These people don’t have any right to Ilus,” he said, struggling to make his voice sound reasonable. “We were here first. We staked claim. We’ll get the first load of lithium out, get the money in, then we can hire lawyers back home to make a real case. If the corporations already have roots here when that happens, it won’t matter. We just need time.”

“If you do this,” Lucia said, “they’ll send you to jail. Don’t do that to us. Don’t do that to your family.”

“I’m doing this *for* my family,” he said softly. It was worse than yelling. He hopped up behind the controls and stomped on the accelerator. The cart lurched off with a whine. He didn’t look back, couldn’t look back and see Lucy.

“*For* my family,” he said again.

He drove away from his house and the ramshackle town that they’d started out calling First Landing back when they’d picked the site off the *Barbapiccola*’s sensor maps. No one had bothered to rename it when it had moved from being an idea to being a place. He drove toward the center of town, two rows of prefab buildings, until he hit the wide stretch of flattened dirt that served as the main road and turned toward the original landing site. The refugees who’d colonized Ilus had come down from their ship in small shuttles, so the only landing pad they’d needed was a flat stretch of ground. But the Royal Charter Energy people, the *corporate* people, who had a UN charter giving the world to them, would be coming down with heavy equipment. Heavy lift shuttles needed an actual landing pad. It had been built in the same open fields that the colony had used as their landing site.

That felt obscene to Basia. Invasive. The first landing site had significance. He’d imagined it someday being a park, with a monument at the center commemorating their arrival on this new world. Instead, RCE had built a giant and gleaming metal monstrosity right over the top of their site. Worse, they’d hired the colonists to build it, and enough of them had thought it was a good idea that they’d actually done it.

It felt like being erased from history.

Scotty and Coop were waiting for him at the new landing pad when he arrived. Scotty was sitting on the edge of the metal platform, legs dangling over the side, smoking a pipe and spitting on the ground below his feet. A

small electric lamp that sat beside him colored him with an eerie green light. Coop stood a little way off, looking up at the sky with bared teeth. Coop was an old-school Belter, and the agoraphobia treatments had been harder for him than others. The thin-faced man kept staring up at the void, fighting to get used to it like a kid pulling off scabs.

Basia pulled the cart up to the edge of the pad and hopped out to undo the straps holding the barrel bombs down.

“Give me a hand?” he said. Ilus was a large planet, slightly over one gravity. Even after six months of pharma to build his muscles and bones everything still felt too heavy. The thought of lifting the barrels back to the ground made the muscles in his shoulders twitch in anticipated exhaustion.

Scotty slid off the landing pad and dropped a meter and a half to the ground. He pushed his oily black hair out of his eyes and took another long puff on his pipe. Basia caught the pungent, skunky smell of Scotty’s bathtub-grown cannabis mixed with freeze-dried tobacco leaves. Coop looked over, his eyes fighting for focus for a moment, and then the thin, cruel smile. The plan had been Coop’s from the start.

“Mmm,” Coop said. “Pretty.”

“Don’t get attached,” Basia said. “They won’t be around long.”

Coop made a booming sound and grinned. Together they pulled the four heavy barrels off the cart and stood them in a row next to the pad. By the last one, they were all panting with effort. Basia leaned against the cart for a moment in silence while Scotty smoked off the last of his pipe and Coop set the blasting caps on the barrels. The detonators sat in the back of the cart like sleeping rattlesnakes, the red LEDs dormant for now.

In the darkness, the township sparkled. The houses they’d all built for themselves and one another glittered like stars brought down from the sky. Beyond them, there were the ruins. A long, low alien structure with two massive towers rising up above the landscape like a termite hill writ large. All of it was run through with passageways and chambers that no human had designed. In daylight, the ruins shone with the eerie colors of mother-of-pearl. In the night, they were only a deeper darkness. The mining pits were off past them, invisible as all but the dimmest glow of the work lights on the belly of the clouds. Truth was Basia didn’t like the mines. The ruins were strange relics of the empty planet’s past, and like anything that was uncanny without posing a threat, they faded from his awareness after the

first few months. The mines carried history and expectations. He'd spent half a lifetime in tunnels of ice, and tunnels that ran through alien soil *smelled* wrong.

Coop made a sharp noise and shook his hand, cursing. Nothing blew up, so it couldn't be that bad.

"You think they'll pay us to rebuild it?" Scotty asked.

Basia cursed and spat on the ground.

"We wouldn't have to do this if it wasn't for people wanting to suck on RCE's tit," he said as he rolled the last barrel into place. "They can't land without this. All we had to do was not build it."

Scotty laughed out a cloud of smoke. "They were coming anyway. Might as well take their money. That's what people said."

"People are idiots," Basia said.

Scotty nodded, then smacked a mimic lizard off the passenger seat of the cart with one hand and sat down. He put his feet up on the dash and took another long puff on his pipe. "We gonna have to get gone, if we blow this. That blasting powder makes serious boom."

"Hey, mate," Coop shouted. "We're good. Let's make the place, ah?"

Scotty stood and started walking toward the pad. Basia stopped him, plucked the lit pipe from between his lips, and put it on the hood of the cart.

"Explosives," Basia said. "They explode."

Scotty shrugged, but he also looked chagrined. Coop was already easing the first barrel down onto its side when they reached him. "It's buena work this. Solid."

"Thank you," Basia said.

Coop lay down, back against the ground. Basia lay beside him. Scotty rolled the first bomb gently between them.

Basia climbed under the pad, pulling himself through the tangle of crisscrossed I-beams to each of the four barrels, turning on the remote detonators and syncing them. He heard a growing electric whine and felt a moment of irritation at Scotty for driving off with the cart before he realized the sound was of a cart arriving, not leaving.

"Hey," Peter's familiar voice yelled.

"Que la moog bastard doing here?" Coop muttered, wiping his hand across his forehead.

"You want me to go find out?" Scotty asked.

“Basia,” Coop said. “Go see what Peter needs. Scotty hasn’t got his back dirty yet.”

Basia shifted himself out from under the landing and made room for Scotty and the last of the four bombs. Peter’s cart was parked beside his own, and Peter stood between them, shifting from one foot to the other like he needed to piss. Basia’s back and arms ached. He wanted this all over and to be back home with Lucia and Felcia and Jacek.

“What?” Basia said.

“They’re coming,” Pete said, whispering as if there were anyone who could hear them.

“Who’s coming?”

“Everyone. The provisional governor. The corporate security team. Science and tech staff. *Everybody*. This is serious. They’re landing a whole new government for us.”

Basia shrugged. “Old news. They been burning eighteen months. That’s why we’re out here.”

“No,” Pete said, prancing nervously and looking up at the stars. “They’re coming right now. *Edward Israel* did a braking burn half an hour ago. Got into high orbit.”

The copper taste of fear flooded Basia’s mouth. He looked up at the darkness. A billion unfamiliar stars, his same Milky Way galaxy, everyone figured, just seen from a different angle. His eyes shifted frantically, and then he caught it. The movement was subtle as the minute hand on an analog clock, but he saw it. The drop ship was dropping. The heavy shuttle was coming for the landing pad.

“I was going to get on the radio, but Coop said they monitor radio spectrum and—” Pete said, but by then Basia was already running back to the landing pad. Scotty and Coop were just pulling themselves out. Coop clapped clouds of dust off his pants and grinned.

“We got a problem,” Basia said. “Ship’s already dropped. Looks like they’re in atmosphere already.”

Coop looked up. The brightness from his flashlight threw shadows across his cheeks and into his eyes.

“Huh,” he said.

“I thought you were on this, man. I thought you were paying attention to where they were.”

Coop shrugged, neither agreeing nor denying.

"We've got to get the bombs back out," Basia said. Scotty started to kneel, but Coop put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Why?" he asked.

"They try to land now, they could set it all off," Basia said.

Coop's smile was gentle. "Could," he said. "And what if?"

Basia balled his fists. "They're coming down *now*."

"See that," Coop said. "Doesn't inspire a great sense of obligation. And however you cut it, there ain't time to pull them."

"Can take off the primers and caps," Basia said, hunkering down. He played his flashlight over the pad's superstructure.

"Maybe could, maybe couldn't," Coop said. "Question's should, and it's a limp little question."

"Coop?" Scotty said, his voice thin and uncertain. Coop ignored him.

"Opportunity, looks like to me," Coop said.

"There's people on that thing," Basia said, crawling under the pad. The nearest bomb's electronics were flat against the dirt. He put his aching shoulder against it and pushed.

"Isn't time, mate," Coop called.

"Might be if you got your ass in here," Basia shouted. The blasting cap clung to the barrel's side like a tick. Basia tried to dig his fingers into the sealant goo and pry the cap away.

"Oh shit," Scotty said with something too much like awe in his voice. "Baz, oh *shit*!"

The cap came loose. Basia pushed it in his pocket and started crawling toward the second bomb.

"No time," Coop shouted. "Best we get clear, try and blow it while they can still pull up."

In the distance, he heard one of the carts taking off. Pete, going for distance. And under that, another sound. The bass roar of braking engines. He looked at the three remaining bombs in despair and rolled out from under the pad. The shuttle was massive in the black sky, so close he could make out the individual thrusters.

He wasn't going to make it.

"Run!" he shouted. He and Scotty and Coop sprinted back toward the cart. The roar of the shuttle rose, grew deafening. Basia reached the cart and

scooped up the detonator. If he could blow it early, the shuttle could pull out, get away.

“Don’t!” Coop shouted. “We’re too close!”

Basia slammed his palm on the button.

The ground rose up, hitting him hard, the rough dirt and rocks tearing at his hands and cheek as he came to a stop, but the pain was a distant thing. Some part of him knew he might be hurt very badly, might be in shock, but that seemed distant and easy to ignore too. What struck him most was how quiet everything was. The world of sound stopped at his skull. He could hear his own breath, his heartbeat. Everything past that had the volume turned down to one.

He rolled onto his back and stared up at the star-speckled night sky. The heavy shuttle streaked overhead, half of it trailing fire, the sound of its engines no longer a bass roar but the scream of a wounded animal that he felt in his belly more than heard. The shuttle had been too close, the blast too large, some unlucky debris thrown into just the right path. No way to know. Some part of Basia knew this was very bad, but it was hard to pay much attention to it.

The shuttle disappeared from view, shrieking a death wail across the valley that came to him as a faint high piping sound, then sudden silence. Scotty was sitting beside him on the ground, staring off in the direction the ship had gone. Basia let himself lie back down.

When the bright spots it had left in his vision faded, the stars returned. Basia watched them twinkle, and wondered which one was Sol. So far away. But with the gates, close too. He’d knocked their shuttle down. They’d have to come now. He’d left them no choice.

A sudden spasm of coughing took him. It felt like his lungs were full of fluid, and he coughed it up for several minutes. With the coughing the pain finally came, wracking him from head to foot.

With the pain came the fear.

Chapter Two: Elvi

The shuttle bucked, throwing Elvi Okoye against her restraints hard enough to knock the wind out of her and then pushing her back into the overwhelming embrace of her crash couch. The light flickered, went black, and then came back. She swallowed, her excitement and anticipation turning to animal fear. Beside her, Eric Vanderwert smiled the same half-leering, half-hopeful smile he'd flickered toward her over the past six months. Across from her, Fayeze's eyes had gone wide, his skin gray.

It's okay," Elvi said. "It's going to be okay."

Even as she spoke the words, a part of her cringed away from them. She didn't know what was going on. There was no earthly way she could know that anything was going to be okay. And still her first impulse was to assert it, to say it as if saying it made it true. A high whine rippled through the flesh of the shuttle, overtones crashing into each other. She felt her weight lurch to the left, the crash couches all shifting on their gimbals at the same time like choreographed dancers. She lost sight of Fayeze.

A tritone chime announced the pilot, and her voice came over the shuttle's public-address system.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it appears there has been a critical malfunction at the landing pad. We will not be able to complete the landing at this time. We will be returning to orbit and docking with the *Edward Israel* until such time as we can assess..."

She went quiet, but the hiss of an open line still ran through the ship. Elvi imagined the pilot distracted by something. The ship lurched and stuttered, and Elvi grabbed her restraints, hugging them to her. Someone nearby was praying loudly.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the pilot said. “I’m afraid the malfunction at the landing pad has done our shuttle some damage. I don’t think we’re going to make it back upstairs right away. We have a dry lake bed not too far from here. I think we’re going to go take a look at that as a secondary landing site.”

Elvi felt a moment’s relief—*We still have a landing site*—followed at once by a deeper understanding and a deeper fear—*She means we’re going to crash*.

“I’m going to ask everyone to remain in their couches,” the pilot said. “Don’t take off your belts, and please keep your arms and legs inside the couch’s shell where it won’t bang against the side. The gel’s there for a reason. We’ll have you all down in just a couple minutes here.”

The forced, artificial calmness terrified Elvi more than shrieking and weeping would have. The pilot was doing everything she could to keep them all from panicking. Would anyone do that if they didn’t think panic was called for?

Her weight shifted again, pulling to the left, and then back, and then she grew light as the shuttle descended. The fall seemed to last forever. The rattle and whine of the shuttle rose to a screaming pitch. Elvi closed her eyes.

“We’re going to be fine,” she said to herself. “Everything’s okay.”

The impact split the shuttle open like lobster tail under a hammer. She had the brief impression of unfamiliar stars in a foreign sky, and her consciousness blinked out like God had turned off a switch.



Centuries before, Europeans had invaded the plague-emptied shell of the Americas, climbing aboard wooden ships with vast canvas sails and trusting the winds and the skill of sailors to take them from the lands they knew to what they called the New World. For as long as six months, religious fanatics and adventurers and the poverty-stricken desperate had consigned themselves to the uncharitable waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

Eighteen months ago, Elvi Okoye left Ceres Station under contract to Royal Charter Energy. The *Edward Israel* was a massive ship. Once, almost three generations before, it had been one of the colony ships that had taken

humanity to the Belt and the Jovian system. When the outpouring had ended and the pressure to expand had met its natural limits, the *Israel* had been repurposed as a water hauler. The age of expansion was over, and the romance of freedom gave way to the practicalities of life—air, water, and food, in that order. For decades, the ship had been a workhorse of the solar system, and then the Ring had opened. Everything changed again. Back at the Bush shipyards and Tycho Station a new generation of colony ships was being built, but the retrofit of the *Israel* had been faster.

When she'd stepped inside it the first time, Elvi had felt a sense of wonder and hope and excitement in the hum of the *Israel*'s air recyclers and the angles of her old-fashioned corridors. The age of adventure had come again, and the old warrior had returned, sword newly sharpened and armor shining again after tarnished years. Elvi had known that it was a psychological projection, that it said more about her own state of mind than anything physical about the ship, but that didn't diminish it. The *Edward Israel* was a colony ship once more, her holds filled with prefabbed buildings and high-atmosphere probes, manufacturing labs and even a repeat-scatter femtoscope. They had an exploration and mapping team, a geological survey team, a hydrology team, Elvi's own exozoological workgroup, and more. A university's worth of PhDs and a government lab's load of postdocs. Between crew and colonists, a thousand people.

They were a city in the sky and a boat of pilgrims bound for Plymouth Rock and Darwin's voyage on the *Beagle* all at the same time. It was the grandest and most beautiful adventure humanity had ever been on, and Elvi had earned a place on the exobiology team. In that context, imagining that the steel and ceramic of the ship was imbued with a sense of joy was a permissible illusion.

And all of it was ruled over by Governor Trying.

She'd seen him several times in the months they'd spent burning and braking, then making the slow, eerie transit between rings, and then burning and braking again. It wasn't until just before the drop itself that she'd actually spoken with him.

Trying was a thin man. His mahogany skin and snow-dust hair reminded her of her uncles, and his ready smile reassured and calmed. She had been in the observation deck, pretending that the high-resolution screens looking down on the planet were really windows, that the light of this unfamiliar

sun was actually bouncing off the wide, muddy seas and high frosted clouds and passing directly into her eyes even though the deceleration gravity meant they weren't in free orbit yet. It was a strange, beautiful sight. A single, massive ocean scattered with islands. A large continent that sprawled comfortably across half of a hemisphere, widest at the equator and then tapering as it reached north and south. The official name of the world was Bering Survey Four, named for the probe that had first established its existence. In the corridors and cafeteria and gym, they'd all come to call it New Terra. So at least she wasn't the only one swept up by the romance.

"What are you thinking, Doctor Okoye?" Trying's gentle voice asked, and Elvi had jumped. She hadn't heard him come in. Hadn't seen him beside her. She felt like she was supposed to bow or make some sort of formal report. But his expression was so soft, so amused, she let it go.

"I'm wondering what I did to deserve all this," she said. "I'm about to see the first genuinely alien biosphere. I'm about to learn things about evolution that were literally impossible to know until now. I must have been a very, very good person in a past life."

In the screens, New Terra glittered brown and gold and blue. The high atmospheric winds smudged greenish clouds halfway around the planet. Elvi leaned in toward it. The governor chuckled.

"You will be famous," he said.

Elvi blinked and coughed out a laugh.

"I guess I will be, won't I?" she said. "We're doing things humanity's never done before."

"Some things," Trying said. "And some things we have always done. I hope history treats us gently."

She didn't quite know what he'd meant by that, but before she could ask, Adolphus Murtry came in. A thin man with hard blue eyes, Murtry was the head of security and as hard and efficient as Trying was avuncular. The two men had walked off together, leaving Elvi alone with the world that was about to be hers to explore.

The heavy shuttle was as large as some ships Elvi had been on. They'd had to build a landing pad on the surface just to support it. It carried the first fifty structures, basic array laboratories, and—most important—a hard perimeter dome.

She had filed through the close-packed hallway of the shuttle, letting her

hand terminal lead her toward her assigned crash couch. When the first colonies had begun on Mars, the perimeter domes had been a question of survival. Something to hold in air and keep out radiation. On New Terra, it was all about limiting contamination. The corporate charter that RCE had taken required that their presence have the smallest possible footprint. She'd heard that there were other people already on the planetary surface, and hopefully they were also being careful not to disturb the sites they were on. If they weren't, the interactions between local organisms and the ones that had been shipped in would be complex. Maybe impossible to tease apart.

"You look troubled."

Fayez Sarkis sat on a crash couch, strapping the wide belts across his chest and waist. He'd grown up on Mars, and had the tall, thin frame and large head of low gravity. He looked at home in a crash couch. Elvi realized her hand terminal was telling her that she'd found her own place. She sat, the gel forming itself around her thighs and lower back. She always wanted to sit up in a crash couch, like a kid in a wading pool. Letting herself sink into it felt too much like being eaten.

"Just thinking ahead," she said, forcing herself to lie back. "Lot of work to be done."

"I know," Fayez said with a sigh. "Break time's over. Now we have to actually earn our keep. Still, it was fun while it lasted. I mean apart from burning at a full g."

"New Terra's a little over that, you know."

"Don't remind me," he said. "I don't know why we couldn't start with some nice balsawood planet with a civilized gravity well."

"Luck of the draw," Elvi said.

"Well, as soon as we get papers for a decent Mars-like planet, I'm transferring."

"You and half of Mars."

"I know, right? Someplace with maybe a breathable atmosphere. A magnetic field so we don't all have to live like mole rats. It's like having the terraforming project done already, except I'm alive to see it."

Elvi laughed. Fayez was on the geology team and the hydrological workgroup both. He'd studied at the best universities outside Earth, and she knew from long acquaintance that he was at least as frightened and

delighted as she was. Eric Vanderwert came by, easing himself into the couch beside Elvi. She smiled at him politely. In the year and a half out from Ceres, there had been any number of romantic or if not romantic at least sexual connections made between members of the science teams. Elvi had kept herself out of that tangle. She'd learned early that sexual entanglements and work were a toxic and unstable mixture.

Eric nodded to Fayez, then turned his attention to her.

"Exciting," he said.

"Yes," Elvi said, and across from her, Fayez rolled his eyes.

Murtry walked through, stepping between the crash couches. His gaze flickered over everything—the couches, the belts, the faces of the people preparing for drop. Elvi smiled at him, and he nodded to her sharply. It wasn't hostile, just businesslike. She watched him size her up. It wasn't the sexual way that a man considered a woman. It was like a loader making sure a crate's magnetic clamps were firing. He nodded to her again, apparently satisfied that she'd gotten her belts right, and moved on. When he was out of sight, Fayez chuckled.

"Poor bastard's chewing the walls," he said, nodding after Murtry.

"Is he?" Eric said.

"Had us all under his thumb for a year and a half, hasn't he? Now we're going down and he's staying in orbit. Man's petrified that we're all going to get ourselves killed on his watch."

"At least he cares," Elvi said. "I like him for that."

"You like everyone," Fayez teased. "It's your pathology."

"You don't like anyone."

"That's mine," he said, grinning.

The tritone alert came and the public-address system clicked.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Patricia Silva and I'm your pilot on this little milk run."

A chorus of laughter rose from the crash couches.

"We're going to be detaching from the *Israel* in about ten minutes, and we're expecting the drop to take about fifty. So an hour from now, you're all going to be breathing entirely new air. We've got the governor on board, so we're going to make sure this all goes smooth and easy so we can put in for a performance bonus."

Everyone was giddy then. Even the pilot. Elvi grinned and Fayez

grinned back at her. Eric cleared his throat.

“Well,” Fayez said with mock resignation. “We came all this way. I suppose we should finish it.”



The pain didn't have a location. It was too large for that. It spread everywhere, encompassed everything. Elvi realized that she'd been looking at something. A massive, articulated crab leg, maybe. Or a broken construction crane. The flat ground of the lake bed stretched out toward it, and then grew rougher until it reached the thing's base. She could imagine it had pushed its way out of the dark, dry soil or that it had crashed down into it. Her agonized mind tried to make it into debris from the shuttle and failed.

It was an artifact. Ruins. Some arcane structure left from the alien civilization that had designed the protomolecule and the rings, abandoned and empty now. Elvi had the sudden, powerful and disjointed memory of an art exhibit she'd seen as a girl. There had been a high-resolution image of a bicycle in a ditch outside the ruins of Glasgow. The aftermath of disaster in a single image, as compressed and eloquent as a poem.

At least I got to see it, she thought. At least I got to be here before I died.

Someone had dragged her out of the ruined shuttle. When she turned her head, she could see construction lights burning yellow-white and the others laid out on the flat ground in rows. Some were standing. Moving among the injured and the dead. She didn't recognize their faces or the way their bodies moved. After a year and a half on the *Israel*, she knew everyone on sight, and these were strangers. The locals, then. The squatters. Illegals. The air smelled like burning dust and cumin.

She must have blacked out, because the woman seemed to appear at Elvi's side in the blink of an eye. Her hands were bloody and her face smeared with dirt and gore not her own.

“You're banged up, but you're not in any immediate danger. I'm going to give you something for the pain, but I need to you stay still until we can splint your leg. All right?”

She was beautiful, in a severe way. Her dark cheeks had dots of pure black scattered across them like beads in a veil. Threads of white laced the

black waves of her hair like moonlight on water. Only there was no moonlight on New Terra. Only billions of strange stars.

“All right?” the woman asked again.

“All right,” Elvi said.

“Tell me what you just agreed to.”

“I don’t remember.”

The woman leaned back, her hand pressing gently against Elvi’s shoulder.

“Torre! I’m going to need a scan on this one’s head. She may be concussed.”

Another voice—a man’s—came from the darkness. “Yes, Doctor Merton. Soon as I’m done with this one.”

Doctor Merton turned back to her. “If I get up right now, are you going to stay where you are until Torre gets here?”

“No, it’s all right. I can come help,” Elvi said.

“I’m sure you can,” the beautiful woman said with a sigh. “Let’s just wait for him, then.”

A shadow loomed up from the darkness. She recognized Fayez by the way he walked. “Go ahead. I’ll sit with her.”

“Thank you,” Doctor Merton said, and then vanished. Fayez lowered himself to the ground with a grunt and crossed his legs. His hair stood out from his slightly oversized head at all angles. His lips were pressed thin. Elvi took his hand without intending to, and she felt him pull back for a second before permitting her fingers to stay touching his.

“What happened?” she asked.

“The landing pad blew up.”

“Oh,” she said. And then, “Do they do that?”

“No. No, they really don’t.”

She tried to think through that. *If they don’t, then how could it have happened?* Her mind was clearing enough for her to notice how compromised she was. Unnerving, but probably a good sign.

“How bad is it?”

She felt Fayez’s shrug more than saw it. “Bad. Only significant good news is that the village is close, and their doctor’s competent. Trained on Ganymede. Now, if our supplies weren’t all on fire or smashed under a couple tons of metal and ceramics, she might be able to do something.”

“The workgroup?”

“I saw Gregorio. He’s all right. Eric’s dead. I don’t know what happened to Sophie, but I’ll go look some more once they get to you.”

Eric was dead. Minutes before, he’d been in the couch beside her, trying to flirt and being annoying. She didn’t understand it.

“Sudyam?” she asked.

“She’s back on the *Israel*. She’s fine.”

“That’s good then.”

Fayez squeezed her hand and let it go. The air felt cool against her palm where his skin had abandoned it. He looked out over the rows of bodies toward the wreckage of the shuttle. It was so dark, she could hardly make him out except where he blotted out the stars.

“Governor Trying didn’t make it,” he said.

“Didn’t make it?”

“Dead as last week’s rat. We’re not sure who’s in charge of anything now.”

She felt tears forming in her eyes and an ache bloomed in her chest that had nothing to do with her injuries. She recalled the man’s gentle smile, the warmth of his voice. His work was only starting. It was strange that Eric’s death should skip across the surface of her mind like a stone thrown over water and Governor Trying’s should strike so deep.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Yeah, well. We’re on an alien planet a year and a half from home with our initial supplies in toothpick-size splinters, and the odds-on bet for what happened is sabotage by the same people who are presently giving us medical care. Dead’s not good, but at least it’s simple. We may all envy Trying before this is over.”

“You don’t mean that. It’s going to be okay.”

“Elvi?” Fayez said, with a sardonic chuckle. “I believe that it isn’t.”

Chapter Three: Havelock

Hey,” the engineer said blearily from the cell. “Havelock. You’re not still pissed, are you?”

Not my job to be pissed, Williams,” Havelock replied from where he floated beside his desk. The internal security station of the *Edward Israel* was small. Two desks, eight cells, a space as much brig as office. And with the ship in high orbit, the loss of effective gravity made it seem even smaller.

“Look, I know I got out of line, but I’m sober now. You can let me out.”

Havelock checked his hand terminal.

“Another fifty minutes,” he said, “and you’ll be free to go.”

“C’mon, Havelock. Have a heart.”

“It’s policy. Nothing I can do about it.”

Dimitri Havelock had worked security contracts for eight different corporations over thirteen years. Pinkwater, Star Helix, el-Hashem Cooperative, Stone & Sibbets, among others. Even, briefly, Protogen. He’d been in the Belt, on Earth, Mars, and Luna. He’d done long-haul work on supply ships heading from Ganymede to Earth. He’d dealt with everything from riots to intimate violence to drug trafficking to one idiot who’d had a thing for stealing people’s socks. He hadn’t seen everything, but he’d seen a lot. Enough to know he’d probably never see *everything*. And enough to recognize that how he reacted to a crisis was more about the people on his team than with the crisis itself.

When the reactor had gone on Aten Base, his partner and supervisor had both panicked, and Havelock remembered the overwhelming fear in his own gut. When the riots had started on Ceres after the ice hauler

Canterbury had been destroyed, his partner had been more weary than fearful, and Havelock had faced the situation with the same grim resignation. When the *Ebisu* had been quarantined for nipahvirus, his boss had been energized—almost elated—running the ship like a puzzle that had to be solved, and Havelock had been caught up in the pleasure of doing an important thing well.

Humans, Havelock knew from long experience, were first and foremost social animals, and he himself was profoundly human. It was more romantic—hell, more masculine—to pretend he was an island, unaffected by the waves of emotion around him. But it wasn't true, and he'd made his peace with that fact.

When the word came that the heavy shuttle's landing pad had exploded and the reports of casualties started coming in, Murtry's response had been an efficient and focused rage, and so Havelock's had been too. All the activity was on the planetary surface, so the only outlet had been on the *Edward Israel* itself. And how things went on the *Israel* were firmly in Havelock's wheelhouse.

"Please?" Williams whined from the cell. "I need to get some clean clothes. It's not going to make any difference, is it? A few minutes?"

"If it's not going to make any difference, it won't matter if you see it through," Havelock said. "Forty-five minutes, and you're on your way. Just sit back and try to enjoy them."

"Can't sit back when you're floating in orbit."

"It's a metaphor. Don't be a literalist."

The *Edward Israel* assignment had been a great contract. Royal Charter Energy was the first real expedition out into the new systems that the rings had opened up, and the importance the company put on the mission's success were reflected in the size of the benefit package they were willing to put together. Every day on the *Israel* had been paid a hazard bonus, even when they were just loading on supplies and crew from Luna. And with almost a year and a half out, a six-year stretch before the scheduled return to Earth, and another eighteen months back—all at full pay—it was almost less a contract than a career plan.

And still, Havelock had hesitated before he signed up.

He'd seen the footage from Eros and Ganymede, the bloodbath in the so-called slow zone when the alien defenses had stopped the ships suddenly

enough to slaughter a third of the people in them. With the massive density of scientists and engineers packed into the *Israel*, it was impossible to forget that they were going into the unknown. Here there be monsters.

And now Governor Trying was dead. Severn Astrapani, the statistician who'd sung Ryu-pop classics in the talent competition, was dead. Amanda Chu, who'd flirted with Havelock one time when they were both a little tipsy, was dead. Half the men and women on the first team were injured. The supplies on the heavy shuttle—and the heavy shuttle itself—were gone. And the quiet that came over the *Edward Israel* was like the moment of shock between the impact of a blow and the pain. And then the rage and the grief. Not only the crew's. Havelock's too.

His hand terminal chimed. The message was tagged for security services. Murtry, Wei, Trajan, Smith, and himself. Havelock opened it with a sense of pleasure. He might be the least senior person in the room, but he was still in the room. Being included made him feel like maybe he'd have some control over events after all. It was an illusion, but that didn't bother him. He took in the message quickly, nodded to himself, and keyed the release code for the cell.

"You're in luck," he said. "I've got a meeting I have to be at."

Williams pulled himself out of the cell. His salt-and-pepper hair was disarrayed and his skin looked grayer than usual. "Thank you," he said sullenly.

"Just don't do that again," Havelock said. "Things are going to be hard enough without people who should know better making it worse."

"I was just drunk," the engineer said. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"I know," Havelock said. "Just don't let it happen again. All right?"

Williams nodded, not making eye contact, then pulled himself along the handholds and launched himself up the tube toward the crew quarters and clothes that weren't ripped or stained with vomit. Havelock waited until he'd gone, then shut down the security station and headed toward the meeting room.

Murtry was already there. He was a small man, but with an energy that seemed to radiate from him like heat. Havelock knew that the security chief had worked corporate prisons and high-end industrial security his whole career. Between that and the simple fact that he'd been put in charge of the *Israel*, he didn't have to work for respect from the team. Floating beside

him, information specialist Chandra Wei and ground operations second Hassan Smith looked serious and grim.

“Havelock,” Murtry said.

“Sir.” Havelock nodded back, taking hold of a handhold and turning himself so that his head was in the same basic orientation as everyone else’s. A few seconds later, Reeve, Murtry’s second, floated in.

Murtry nodded. “Close the door, Reeve.”

“Trajan?” Wei asked, but from the bleak sound of her voice, she already suspected the answer.

“Trajan died in the shuttle,” Murtry said. “Smith? You’re getting promoted.”

“Sorry to hear that, sir,” Smith said. “Trajan was a good officer, and a professional. She’ll be missed.”

“Yeah,” Murtry said. “So we’re here to talk about the response plan.”

“Drop a rock on the squatters?” Wei said, her voice joking in a way that had nothing to do with humor. Murtry smiled anyway.

“We’re going to play it a little more by the book for now,” Murtry said. “Besides, we still have people down there. I’ve sent back to the home office, and I’ve asked for latitude in how we engage the issue. I’m fairly sure, given the circumstances, we’ll have cover from them if it comes to that.”

“We’re a year and a half from anywhere,” Wei said. The implication—*No one can stop us from doing anything we choose*—hung in the air.

“We’re also hours away from every screen and newsfeed from Earth to Neptune,” Reeve said. “This sucks, but we’ve got the moral high ground. If we overreact, it’ll be another round of the evil corporations oppressing the poor Belters. We’re in a post-Protogen world. We don’t win that.”

“Didn’t know they’d made you political officer,” Wei said, and Reeve’s jaw went tight. When Murtry spoke, his voice was calm and level and threatening as a rattlesnake.

“That. We’re not doing that.”

“Sir?” Reeve said.

“The thing where we start sniping at each other. We don’t do that here.”

Wei and Reeve looked at each other.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Wei said. “I was out of line.”

“Not a problem, because it’s not going to happen again,” Murtry said.

“What action have we seen from the *Barbapiccola*?”

“Nothing,” Wei said. “The Belters sent condolences and offers of aid, as if there was a damn thing they could do.”

“Are they warming up the engines?”

“Not that I can tell,” Wei said.

“We’re keeping an eye on that,” Murtry said. It was a statement and a question.

“We could take custody of the ship,” Wei said. “It was Mao-Kwikowski before they got broken up. Its salvage status is very murky. Call it illegal, put a few people on her, and we could shut her down.”

“Noted,” Murtry said. “How is the crew, Havelock?”

“Shocked, sir. Scared. Angry. They’re scientists. They looked on the squatters as an annoyance and a threat to their data. For most of them, this is outside their experience.”

Murtry stroked his chin with the back of his hand. “What are they going to do about it?”

“So far? Get drunk. Yell at each other or at us. Design theoretical judicial systems. Most of them seem to want the whole thing to just go away so they can get on with their research.”

Murtry chuckled. “God bless the eggheads. All right.”

“We still have the two light atmospheric shuttles,” Havelock went on. “I can get pilots for them, and we can evacuate the people we have on the ground.”

“No evac. The squatters don’t get to win this,” Murtry said. “No one that goes down there comes back up. We put more people down there to support them. Whatever their research is, we make damned sure it’s moving forward and everyone down there *sees* it’s moving forward.”

“Yes, sir,” Havelock said, feeling vaguely embarrassed.

“Reeve, you’re going down. Deal with the locals. Find out what you can. Keep our people safe. We want a show of force.”

“But nothing strong enough they can use it for sympathy on the newsfeeds back home,” Reeve said as if he were agreeing.

“Wei, I want your eyes on the enemy ship. If it starts warming up its drive, I want to know.”

“Permission to put my comm laser upgrade into effect?”

The *Edward Israel* didn’t have torpedo tubes or gauss guns. The closest

they had to a weapon was an ancient comm laser that could be hacked to cutting strength. The ship had been designed when the dangers of space were all about radiation and air supply, not intentional violence. It was almost quaint.

“No,” Murtry said. “Just monitor what they’re doing, listen to the chatter, and bring it back to me. If someone needs to make the call, that’s me. No initiative. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Havelock, you’re going to be up here coordinating with the team on the ground. Use the shuttles however they need to be used to get personnel and materials down to the surface. We’re here to establish a base. We’ll start establishing it.”

“And if there’s another attack, sir?” Wei asked.

“Then that’s a decision the squatters will have made, and we’ll respect their choice,” Murtry said.

“I’m not sure what you mean, sir,” she said.

Murtry’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “There’s a dignity in consequences.”



Havelock’s quarters were only slightly larger than the cells in the brig, but much more comfortable. He was webbed into his crash couch at the end of his shift when a soft knock came at the door and Murtry pulled himself in. The security chief was scowling, but no more so than usual.

“Anything up, chief?” Havelock asked.

“You’ve worked with Belters,” Murtry said. “What do you think of ’em?”

“They’re people,” Havelock said. “Some are better than others. I still have friends on Ceres.”

“Fine. But what do you *think* of Belters?”

Havelock shifted, the motion setting him drifting up against his restraints as he thought. “They’re insular. Tribal, almost. I think what they have most in common is that they don’t like inner planet types. A Martian can sometimes pass, though. They have the whole low-g physiology thing.”

“So mostly they hate Earthers,” Murtry said.

“That’s what pulls them together. That thing where they’re oppressed by Earth is just about the one thing they have in common. So they cultivate it. Hating people like us is what makes them them.”

Murtry nodded. “You know there are people that would call you prejudiced for saying that.”

“It’s only prejudice when you haven’t been there,” Havelock said. “I was on Ceres Station just before it broke for the OPA. For me, it’s all lived experience.”

“Well, I think you’re right,” Murtry said. “That’s why I wanted to talk to you. Off the record. Most of the people we’ve got on the ship are Earthers or at least Martian. But there are a few Belt types. Like that mechanical tech. What’s his name?”

“Bischen?”

“Him. Just keep an eye on those ones.”

“Is there something going on?”

“Just that the squatters are mostly Belt and outer planets, and the RCE is an Earth company. I don’t want anyone getting their loyalties confused.”

“Yes, sir,” Havelock said. And then, more tentatively, “Is something happening, sir?”

“Not right away. But... well, you might as well know. I’ve had word from the home office. My request for latitude was respectfully declined. Apparently there’s some politicking about how this gets handled. The OPA and the UN are talking about what they want to have happen. Want to make sure the squatters are treated well.”

Murtry’s anger was understated but profound, and Havelock found himself resonating with it.

“But we have the charter. We have a right to be here.”

“We do.”

“And we aren’t the ones who started killing people.”

“We’re not.”

“So what are we supposed to do? Sit on our hands while the Belters kill us and take our things?”

“The sale of the lithium from their illegal mining operations has been frozen,” Murtry said. “And we are instructed not to do anything to incite further conflict.”

“That’s bullshit. How are we supposed to do our work if we’re being all

careful not to offend the bastards who are shooting at us?”

Murtry’s shrug was an agreement. When he spoke, his calm, laconic tone barely covered his contempt.

“Apparently they’re sending us a mediator.”

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Interlude: The Investigator

—it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out—

One hundred and thirteen times a second, nothing answers and it reaches out. It is not conscious, though parts of it are. There are structures within it that were once separate organisms; aboriginal, evolved, and complex. It is designed to improvise, to use what is there and then move on. Good enough is good enough, and so the artifacts are ignored or adapted. The conscious parts try to make sense of the reaching out. Try to interpret it.

One imagines an insect's leg twitching twitching twitching. One hears a spark closing a gap, the ticking so fast it becomes a drone. Another, oblivious, reexperiences her flesh falling from her bones, the nausea and fear, and begs for death as she has for years now. Her name is Maria. It does not let her die. It does not comfort her. It is unaware of her because it is unaware.

But unaware is not inactive. It finds power where it can, nestled in a bath of low radiation. Tiny structures, smaller than atoms, harvest the energy of the fast-moving particles that pass through it. Subatomic windmills. It eats the void and it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out.

In the artifacts that are conscious, memories of vanished lives still flicker. Tissues that were changed without dying hold the moment that a boy heard his sister was leaving home. They hold multiplication tables. They hold images of sexuality and violence and beauty. They hold the memories of flesh that no longer exists. They hold metaphors: mitochondria, starfish, Hitler's-brain-in-a-jar, hell realm. They dream. Structures that were neurons twitch and loop and burn and dream. Images and words and pain and fear, endless. An overwhelming sense of illness. An old man's remembered voice whispering dry words that it is unaware of.

Full fathom five thy father lies. Of his bones are coral made.

If there had been a reply, it could end. If there had been anyone to answer, it would have come to rest like a marble at the bottom of a hill, but nothing answers. The scars know that no answer will ever come, but the reflex triggers the reflex triggers the reflex and it reaches out.

It has solved a billion small puzzles already in cascades of reflex. It has no memory of having done so, except in its scars. There is only reaching out, delivering the message that its task is complete. Nothing answers, and so it cannot end. It reaches out. It is a complex mechanism for solving puzzles using what there is to be used.

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

And so it has the investigator.

Of all the scars, there is one that came last. That is most intact. It is useful and so it is used. It builds the investigator from that template, unaware that it is doing so, and tries another way of reaching out. And something answers. Something wrong and foreign and aboriginal, but there is an answer, so over the course of years it builds the investigator again and reaches out. The investigator becomes more complex.

It will not stop until it makes that final connection, and it will never make that final connection. It stretches, tries new combinations, different ways to reach out, unaware that it is doing so. Unaware that it exists. Empty, except in the insignificant parts.

The insectile leg will twitch forever. The scar that wails for death will wail forever. The investigator will search forever. The low voice will mutter forever.

Nothing of him doth fade but suffers a sea change

Into something rich and strange.

It reaches out.

Chapter Four: Holden

MCRN *Sally Ride*, this is independent vessel *Rocinante*, requesting permission to pass through the Ring with one ship. OPA heavy freighter *Callisto's Dream*."

"Transmit authorization code now, *Rocinante*."

"Transmitting." Holden tapped the screen to send the codes and stretched out his arms and legs, letting the motion pull him out of his chair in the microgravity. Several abused joints at various places on his skeleton responded with popping sounds.

"You're getting old," Miller said. The detective stood in a rumpled gray suit and porkpie hat a few meters away, his feet on the deck as though there were gravity. The smarter the Miller simulation had gotten—and over the last two years it had become damned near coherent—the less it seemed to care about matching the reality around it.

"You're not."

"Of my bones are coral made," the ghost said as if in agreement. "It's all about the trade-offs."

When the *Sally Ride* sent the go-ahead code, Alex took them through the Ring nice and slow, the *Callisto* matching speed and course. The stars vanished as the ship moved into the black nothingness of the hub. Miller flickered as they passed through the gate, started to resolidify, and vanished in a puff of blue fireflies as the deck hatch banged open and Amos pulled himself through.

"We landing?" the mechanic asked without preamble.

"No need on this trip," Holden said, and opened a channel to Alex up in the cockpit. "Keep us here until we see the *Callisto* dock, then take us back

out.”

“Sure could use a few days station-side, chief,” Amos said, pulling himself over to one of the ops stations and belting in. His gray coverall had a scorch mark on the sleeve, and he had a bandage covering half of his left hand. Holden pointed at it. Amos shrugged.

“We’ve got a pair of soil ships waiting at Tycho Station,” Holden said.

“No one’s had the balls to try and rip off any of the ships on this route. This many navy ships hanging around? It’d be suicide.”

“And yet Fred pays us very well to escort his ships out to Medina Station, and I like taking his money.” Holden panned the ship’s telescopes around, zooming in on the rings. “And I don’t like being in here any longer than necessary.”

Miller’s ghost was an artifact of the alien technology that had created the gates and a dead man. It had been following Holden around for the two years since they’d deactivated the Ring Station. It spent its time demanding, asking, and cajoling Holden to go through the newly opened gates to begin its investigation on the planets beyond them. The fact that Miller could only appear to Holden when he was alone—and on a ship the size of the *Rocinante* he was almost never alone—had kept him sane.

Alex floated down from the cockpit, his thinning black hair sticking out in every direction from his brown scalp. There were dark circles under his eyes. “We’re not landin’? Could really use a couple days station-side.”

“See?” Amos said.

Before Holden could reply, Naomi came up through the deck hatch. “Aren’t we going to dock?”

“Captain wants to rush back for those soil transports at Tycho,” Amos said, his voice somehow managing to be neutral and mocking at the same time.

“I could really use a few days—” Naomi started.

“I promise we’ll take a week on Tycho when we get back. I just don’t want to spend my vacation time, you know”—he pointed at the viewscreens around them displaying the dead sphere of the Ring Station and the glittering gates—“here.”

“Chicken,” Naomi said.

“Yep.”

The comm station flashed an incoming tightbeam alert at them. Amos,

who was closest, tapped the screen.

“*Rocinante* here,” he said.

“*Rocinante*,” a familiar voice replied. “Medina Station here.”

“Fred,” Holden said with a sigh. “Problem?”

“You guys aren’t landing? I’m betting you could use a few—”

“Can I help you with something?” Holden said over the top of him.

“Yeah, you can. Call me after you’ve docked. I have business to discuss.”

“Dammit,” Holden said after he’d killed the connection. “You ever get the sense that the universe is out to get you?”

“Sometimes I get the sense that the universe is out to get *you*,” Amos said with a grin. “It’s fun to watch.”

“They changed the name again,” Alex said, zooming in on the spinning station that had until recently been called *Behemoth*. “Medina Station. Good name for it.”

“Doesn’t that mean ‘fortress’?” Naomi said with a frown. “Too martial, maybe.”

“Naw,” Alex said. “Well, sort of. It was the walled part of a city. But it sort of became the social center too. Narrow streets designed to keep invaders out also kept motorized traffic or horse-drawn carts out. So you could only get around by walkin’. So the street vendors gathered there. It turned into the place to shop and congregate and drink tea. It’s a safe place where people gather. Good name for the station.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this,” Holden said.

Alex shrugged. “It’s interestin’, the evolution of that ship and its names. Started out as the *Nauvoo*. A place of refuge, right? Big city in space. Became the *Behemoth*, the biggest baddest warship in the system. Now it’s Medina Station. A gathering place. Same ship, three different names, three different things.”

“Same ship,” Holden said, feeling a little surly as he instructed the *Rocinante* to begin the docking approach.

“Names matter, boss,” Amos said after a moment, a strange look on his big face. “Names change everything.”



The interior of Medina Station was a work in progress. Large sections of the central rotating drum had been covered with transplanted soil in preparation for food production, but in many places the metal and ceramic of the drum was still visible. Most of the damage the former colony ship had sustained during her battles had been cleaned up and repaired. The office and storage space in the walls of the drum was becoming the hub of efforts to explore the thousand new worlds that had opened up to humanity. If Fred Johnson, former Earth colonel and now head of the respectable wing of the OPA, was positioning Medina Station as the logical location for a fledgling League of Planets-type government, he at least had the good sense not to say it out loud.

Holden had watched too many people dying there to ever see it as anything but a graveyard. Which made it pretty much the same as any other government he could think of.

Fred had set up his new office in what had once been the colonial administration building back when Medina Station was still called the *Nauvoo*. They'd also been used as the offices of Radio Free Slow Zone. Now they were patched up, repainted, and decorated with atmosphere-renewing plants and video screens of the Ring space around the ship. To Holden it made for an odd juxtaposition. Sure, humans had invaded an extra-dimensional space with wormholes to points scattered across the galaxy, but they'd remembered to bring ferns.

Fred puttered around the office making coffee.

"Black, right?"

"Yep," Holden said, and accepted the steaming cup from him. "I don't like coming here."

"I understand. I appreciate you doing it anyway," Fred said and collapsed into his chair with a sigh that seemed excessive in the one-third g of the station's spin. But then the pressures pushing down on Fred had little to do with gravity. The five years since Holden had met him hadn't treated the man kindly. His formerly salt-and-pepper hair had gone entirely gray, and his dark skin was lined with tiny wrinkles.

"No sign it's waking up?" Holden said, pointing his coffee cup toward a wall screen that was displaying a blown-up image of the spherical Ring Station.

"I need to show you something," Fred said, as though Holden hadn't

asked the question. At Holden's nod, Fred tapped on his desk and the video screen behind him came to life. On it, Chrisjen Avasarala's face was frozen mid-word. The undersecretary of executive administration had her eyes at half-mast and her lips in a sneer. "This is the part that concerns you."

"—eally just an excuse to wave their cocks at each other," Avasarala said when the video started. "So I'm thinking we send Holden."

"Send Holden?" Holden said, but the video kept playing and Fred didn't answer him. "Send Holden where? Where are we sending Holden?"

"He's close when he's out at Medina, and everybody hates him equally, so we can argue he's impartial. He's got ties to you, Mars, me. He's a fucking awful choice for a diplomatic mission, so it makes him perfect. Brief him, tell him the UN will pay for his time at double the usual rates, and get him on New Terra as fast as possible before this thing gets fucked up any worse than it already is."

The old lady leaned in toward the camera, her face swelling on the screen until Holden could see the fine detail of every wrinkle and blemish.

"If Fred is showing this to you, Holden, know that your home planet appreciates your service. Also try not to put your dick in this. It's fucked enough already."

Fred stopped the recording and leaned back in his chair. "So..."

"What the hell is she talking about?" Holden said. "What's New Terra?"

"New Terra is the unimaginative name they gave to the first of the explored worlds in the gate network."

"No, I thought that was Ilus."

"Ilus," Fred said with a sigh, "is the name the Belters who landed there gave it. Royal Charter Energy, the corporation with the contract to do the initial exploration, call it New Terra."

"Can they do that? People already live there. Everyone calls it Ilus."

"Everyone *here* calls it Ilus. You see the problem," Fred said. He took a long sip of his coffee, buying himself time to think. "No one was ready for this. A shipful of Ganymede refugees commandeered a Mao-Kwik heavy freighter and blew through the Ring at high speed as soon as the first probe results came out. Before we'd had time to pick up the pieces from our initial incursion. Before the military blockade. Before Medina was ready to enforce a safe speed limit in the Ring space. They came through so fast we didn't even have time to hail them."

“Let me guess,” Holden said. “The Ilus Gate is on the opposite side from the Sol Gate.”

“Not quite. They were smart enough to come in at an angle to avoid slamming into the Ring Station at three hundred thousand kph.”

“So they’ve been living on Ilus for a year, and suddenly RCE shows up and tells them that, oops, it’s really *their* planet?”

“RCE has the UN charter for scientific exploration on Ilus, New Terra, whatever you want to call it. And they’re there *because* the Ganymede refugees landed there first. The plan was to study these worlds for years before anyone lived on them.”

Something in Fred’s tone of voice tickled at Holden’s mind for a second, and he said, “Wait. UN charter? When did the UN get to be in charge of the thousand worlds?”

Fred smiled without humor. “The situation is complex. We have the UN making a power grab to administrate all these new worlds. We have OPA citizens settling one without permission. We have an energy company getting the exploration contract on a world that also just happens to have the richest lithium deposits we’ve ever seen.”

“And we have you,” Holden said, “setting up to run the turnpike everyone has to take to get there.”

“I think it’s safe to say the OPA has fundamental disagreements with the idea that the UN is unilaterally in charge of handing out those contracts.”

“So you and Avasarala are back-channeling this to keep it from turning into something bigger.”

“There are about five more variables than that, but as a start, yes. Which is where you come in,” Fred said, pointing at Holden with his coffee mug. Printed on the side of the mug were the words THE BOSS. Holden stifled a laugh. “Nobody owns you, but Avasarala and I have both worked with you, and think we can do it again.”

“That’s a really stupid reason.”

Fred’s smile gave away nothing. “It doesn’t hurt that you have an atmosphere-rated ship.”

“You know we’ve never actually used it, though, right? I’m not keen on the first in-atmosphere maneuver happening a million kilometers from the closest repair bay.”

“The *Rocinante* is also a military design, and—”

“Forget it. No matter what your coffee cup says, I’m not going to be the boot on the colonists’ neck. I won’t do that.”

Fred sighed, sitting forward. When he spoke, his voice was soft and warm as flannel. But it didn’t hide the steel underneath it.

“The rules governing how a thousand planets are run are about to be made. This is the test case. You’ll be going in as an impartial observer and mediator.”

“Me? As a mediator?”

“The irony’s not lost on me. But things have already started to go bad there, and we need someone keeping it from getting worse while three governments decide how the next one will work.”

“You mean you want me to make it look like you’re doing something while you figure out what to do,” Holden said. “And going bad how?”

“The colonists blew up an RCE heavy lift shuttle. The provisional governor was on it. He’s dead, along with a few scientists and RCE employees. It won’t help our negotiations if Ilus turns into a full-blown war between Belters and a UN corporation.”

“So I keep the peace?”

“You get them talking, and you keep them talking. And you do what you always do, you maintain absolute transparency. This is one time secrets won’t help anyone. Should be right up your alley.”

“I thought I was the galaxy’s biggest loose cannon to you guys. Is Avasarala sending the match in to meet the powder keg because she *wants* this to fail?”

Fred shrugged. “I care less what she wants you for than what I do. Maybe the old lady likes you. Don’t ask me to explain it.”



Miller was waiting for Holden outside Fred’s office.

“There are three thousand people on Medina Station right now,” Holden said. “How is it that not one of them is here to keep you from bugging me?”

“You going to take the job?” Miller said.

“I haven’t decided,” Holden said. “Which, since you are running a simulation of my brain, you already know. So you asking is really you

telling me to take it. Stop me when I'm wrong."

Holden headed off down the corridor, hoping to run into another human and make the Miller ghost go away. Miller followed, his footsteps echoing on the ceramic floor. The fact that those echoes existed only inside Holden's mind made the whole thing even creepier.

"You're not wrong. You should take it," Miller said. "The man's right. It's important. Something like that goes from a few pissed-off locals to a meat grinder without much time in between. This one time, back on Ceres —"

"Okay, no. No folksy cop stories from the dead guy. What's on Ilus that you want?" Holden asked. "It might help if you just came out and told me what it is you want on the other side of those rings."

"You know what I'm looking for," the old detective said. He actually managed to look sad.

"Yeah, whatever weird alien civilization made you. And I already know you won't find it. Hell, *you* know you won't find it."

"Still gotta loo—" Miller vanished. A woman in a blue Medina Station security uniform walked by, looking at her hand terminal. She grunted something approximating a greeting without looking up.

Holden took the stairs up to the inner surface of Medina's rotating habitation drum. No chance Miller would surprise him there. The drum was full of activity, with some workers spreading imported soil for the eventual farms and others raising prefab buildings that would be houses and storage. Holden waved cheerily at them as he walked past. With his increasingly frequent Miller hauntings, he had come to appreciate the value of having other humans within line of sight. They made his life a little less weird just by existing.

He avoided the elevator to the engineering transition point that would take him out of the rotating drum and into the microgravity of the stern of the former colony ship. The *Rocinante* was docked at the airlock there. Instead, he walked up the long curling ramp that kept him in sight of everyone in the rotating drum. The last time he'd climbed that ramp, people had been shooting and dying all around him. It wasn't a pleasant memory, but it was better than being trapped alone in an elevator car with Miller. The universe was getting a little thick with his personal history.

Before he passed through the transition point and into the engineering

decks, he floated for a moment and looked out across the inside of the habitation drum. From his elevation the plots of soil looked like checkerboard squares of dark brown against the gray of the drum's skin. Equipment moved across them like metal insects, busy at unguessable tasks. Turning a bubble of metal into a tiny self-contained world.

We'll forget how to do this, Holden thought. Humanity had only just started learning how to live in space, and now they'd forget. Why develop new strategies for surviving on tiny stations like Medina when there were a thousand new worlds to conquer, with air and water free for the taking? It was an astounding thought, but it also left Holden just a little melancholy.

He turned his back on the workers busy at their obsolete work, and returned to his ship.



"So," Naomi said as the crew sat together in the *Rocinante's* galley. "Are we going to Ilus?"

Holden had spent several minutes explaining what Fred Johnson and Chrisjen Avasarala wanted from them, and then just sort of trailed off. The truth was he didn't know the answer to Naomi's question.

"There are a lot of reasons to do this," he finally said, tapping out a quick rhythm on the metal tabletop. "It is a really big deal. It's the test case for a thousand worlds to follow. And I admit there's some attraction to the idea that we'd get to help set the perspectives. Maybe get to help create the template for everything that follows. That's pretty damn exciting."

"And the money's good," Amos said. "Don't forget the money's good."

"But," Naomi prompted, putting her hand on his arm and smiling. Letting him know it was okay to share whatever his fears were. He smiled back and patted her hand.

"But I have one pretty compelling reason to say no," he said. "Miller really wants me to go."

They were silent for a long moment. Naomi was the first to speak.

"You're going to take it."

"Am I?"

"You are," she said. "Because you think you'll be able to help."

"You think we can't?"

“No,” Naomi said. “I think you can. And even if we’re wrong, not trying would make you cranky.”

“Other thing to consider?” Amos said. “Money’s really good.”

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Chapter Five: Basia

Jesus wept, Basia my child,” Coop said. “We’re *winning*. How much of a sister are you turning into if it gets rocky?”

The others all looked at him, waiting. Scotty and Pete, but also Loris and Catherine. Ibrahim and Zadie. Basia crossed his arms.

“They find out who killed their governor—” Basia began, but Coop waved a hand like shooing flies.

“Won’t. If they haven’t now, it’s just going down as one of those things that happened. Hell, I don’t remember who did it. You remember, Zadie?”

Zadie shook her head. “Ne savvy mé,” she said like the Belter that she was. That she’d been before. Coop gestured toward her like he’d proved a point.

“I don’t like how it came out either,” Pete said. “But if we hadn’t done it, they’d have been here this whole time instead of just dribs and drabs. Holden’d be here with a domed city already up, and then what would we be looking at?”

“Exactly,” Coop said. “Slow them down, we wanted, and slow them down we did. Question now is what to do with the time we’ve got left.”

“Could kill them all and drop their bodies down the mine pits,” Loris said, her smile making it clear that she was mostly joking.

“I was thinking we could pooch their transmitter,” Ibrahim said. “All their signal goes through one repeater in their technical hut. Something happened to that, they’d be choked for bandwidth like the rest of us.”

“Would it take their hand terminals down too?” Coop asked.

“Might,” Ibrahim said. “It would certainly make them local and line of sight.”

“Worth considering,” Coop said.

The ruins where they met were a half hour’s fast walk from the town itself. Great towers of strange, bonelike material rose up out of the ground, leaning against one another in patterns that seemed almost random until he caught them at just the correct angle and some ornate symmetry revealed itself. The lower structures were soft at the edges, curved like vertebrae or the gears of some unimaginably nimble machine.

A soft breeze shifted through the ruins with a sound like reed flutes playing in the distance. Something had lived here once, but it was gone now, and its bones were a hiding place for Basia and his cabal. He had the sudden memory of a video he’d seen once of brine shrimp living in the bones of a dead whale.

“Question I have,” Basia said, “is what we’re aiming for. We knock out their bandwidth. What does that get us?”

“Makes it harder for them to show value,” Loris said. “I’ve read the charter same as everyone else. Yes, it’s got a lot of conservation and basic science riders and requirements, but let’s all be clear. RCE is here to make a profit. If we can make it clear that they won’t be able to...”

“That doesn’t matter,” Ibrahim said. “What we need to do is establish our own claim to the planet. Profit and loss comes later.”

“I don’t agree, Bram,” Loris said. “If you look at the history of colonialism, legal precedent and title claims are almost always rationalized after the fact. What you see is—”

“What I see,” Coop cut in, “is the time until the joint OPA/UN observer gets here and changes the game getting shorter. Basia? You want to weigh in?”

Basia cracked his knuckles. “What he needs to see is that RCE isn’t organized and we’ve got a ship full of refined lithium ready for market.”

“So let’s make that happen,” Coop said, smiling his vicious smile.

After the meeting, they left one by one or in pairs, so as not to attract attention. First Pete and Ibrahim, together because they were lovers. Then Scotty, puffing on his pipe. Loris and Caterine. Then, usually, Zadie and Coop. But not today. Today, Coop nodded Zadie on ahead. She made the one-handed nod, the physical idiom of Belters who had to communicate in vacuum suits, and strode out, her too-long limbs giving her a gait that was awkward and graceful at once. Like a giraffe.

“Having a hard time with this, you,” Coop said.

Basia shrugged. “Got off to a bad start. That’s all.”

“You were one of them before. Didn’t fight,” Coop said.

“Didn’t,” he said bitterly.

They had lived together on the ship with all the others for years after Ganymede. They had argued together, the two of them, for the exodus to the new planets that the ring gates had opened. Basia knew Coop. Knew he’d fought with a splinter of the OPA that had never accepted compromise with the inner planets. The split circle of the Outer Planets Alliance was etched in the man’s skin, just over his left shoulder blade. It occurred to Basia, not for the first time, that *outer planets* had taken on a very new meaning in the last couple years.

“Can be hard,” Coop said. “Especially on the big stations. Ceres. Eros, before. Ganymede. All kind of inners there. You live around them. Work with them. Come to like some of them maybe. And then the order comes, and you have to pop a seal and let someone die. Can’t pass, because then they can start looking for the pattern. Who lived that shouldn’t. Compromises the cell.”

Basia nodded, but his mouth tasted sour. “That what we are? An OPA cell?”

“Resisting Earth’s corporate power grab, ne? There’s worse models.”

“Yeah,” Basia said. “I get your point.”

“You do? Because what I’m seeing is you putting a lot of questions in a lot of heads. Thinking about whether we’re on the path we should be.”

Basia bristled. “That a problem for you?”

“Problem’s for you, mate. Because the more you wonder, the more they wonder. And no matter what I pretend, we all remember who mashed that button.”



The walk back from the meetings always left Basia upset. Everywhere, there were little reminders of what the group of them—his cell—had done and also what they hadn’t. The little hydrology lab down by the wash with its geodesic dome and its drills, like the mining pits in miniature. The exobiologists’ hut out alone on the edge of the township. The unfamiliar

faces in the square, the clothing that had been fabricated with RCE templates.

On the flats north of the town, a soccer game was kicking up dust, townsmen including his own son Jacek playing with the corporation's people. At least they were still on different teams. Basia looped around, entering the town proper on the path that led to the mining pits. The breeze was rising toward a wind, stirring dust devils. High above in the blue arc of sky, a wedge of vast creatures like aerial jellyfish trailed golden streamers from pale white bodies. Lucia said each one was as large as the ship, but he couldn't bring himself to believe that. He wondered whether anyone had given the creatures a name.

"Basia!"

"Carol," he said with a nod as the big woman fell in step beside him. Carol Chiwewe had been everyone's first choice for coordinator when they'd landed. Smart and focused and strong-minded without being bullish. She almost certainly guessed that he was involved in what had happened at the landing pad, but it didn't matter. Some secrets stayed secrets because nobody knew them. Some because nobody told.

"I'm putting together a maintenance crew to head out for the pits. Going out tomorrow. Probably stay for five, six days. You in?"

"There a problem?"

"No, and I think we should keep it that way. Only a few more loads to get up the well before we can ship out."

"Be good to have a full hold before the observer arrives," Basia said.

"Wouldn't it just," Carol said with a smile. "Glad you're in. Meet at the square at nine."

"Okay," Basia said, and she clapped him on the shoulder, turning back to whatever errand she'd been on when she saw him. It was another twenty minutes before he noticed that he hadn't ever exactly said yes. That was why she ran things, he figured.

His own home was near the edge of the town. They'd made the bricks from the local earth, processed through some of the mining equipment and fired in a kiln powered by combustion. It could only have been more primitive if they'd dug a cave and painted bison on the walls. Lucia was on the little porch area, sweeping the bricks with a broom made from a local grass analog that smelled like manure and peppermint and turned from

black to gold when you cut it.

“You don’t know what that thing’s off-gassing,” he said. It was a little joke between them. How she answered would tell a lot about where they stood. A litmus test for the pH of his marriage.

“A third of it’s carcinogenic, a third’s mutagenic, and a third we don’t know what it does,” she said with a smile. So things were good. Basia felt a knot loosen in his belly. He kissed her cheek and ducked into the cool of the house.

“You might as well stop that,” he said. “Wind is just going to push it back.”

Lucia made a few more desultory passes, the grass hissing against the brick, then followed him in. By the standards of Ganymede or the ship, the house was massive. A sleeping room for each of the children and a shared one for them. A room dedicated entirely to food preparation. The captain’s suite on the *Barbapiccola* boasted fewer square meters than Basia’s home. It was a barbarian palace, and it was his. He sat on a chair by the front window and looked out at the plain.

“Where’s Felcia?” he asked.

“Out,” Lucia said.

“You sound just like her.”

“Felcia is my primary source of information about Felcia,” Lucia said. She was smiling. Laughing a little, even. It was as good a mood as she’d been in for weeks. Basia knew it was a choice. She needed him in a good mood for something, and if he was wise, he’d fight against the manipulation. He didn’t want to, though. He wanted to be able to act for a while as if everything were fine. And so he played along.

“I blame your side of the family. I was always very compliant as a boy. Do we have anything worth eating?”

“More ship’s rations.”

Basia sighed. “No salad?”

“Soon,” she said. “The new crop is doing well. As long as we don’t find anything strange in them, you’ll be able to have all the carrots you want starting next week.”

“Someday we’ll be able to grow in the soil here.”

“Maybe north of here,” Lucia said, and rested her hand on his shoulder as she looked out the window with him. “Even the native fauna have a hard

time around here.”

“North. South. Ilus is all *here* as far as I’m concerned.”

She turned, walking to the kitchen. Basia felt a tug of longing for her, a nostalgia of the body that belonged to a time when they’d been younger, childless, and horny all the time. He heard the pop and hiss of the rations canisters. The smell of sag aloo wafted through the air. Lucia came back in with a palm-sized plate of food for each of them.

“Thank you,” he said.

Lucia nodded and sat in her own chair, her leg curled up under her. Gravity had changed her. The muscles of her arms and shoulders were more pronounced now, the curve of her back when she sat was at a different angle. Ilus was changing them in ways he had never expected, though perhaps he should have. He took a forkful of the sag aloo.

“Going to the mines tomorrow,” he said.

Lucia’s eyebrows rose a fraction. “What for?”

“Maintenance,” he said, and then, because he knew what she was thinking, “Carol asked me.”

“That’s good, then.” Meaning that it was Carol who had asked him to go and not Coop. He felt a stab of shame and then an annoyance that he was ashamed. He pressed his lips together a little more tightly.

“The observer’s coming,” Lucia said, as if she meant nothing by it. “James Holden.”

“I’d heard. It’s good. Gives us leverage against the RCE.”

“I suppose so.”

He could remember a time when they’d laughed together. When Lucia had come from the hospitals on Ganymede full of stories about the patients and the other doctors. They’d eat vat-grown steak as tender as anything harvested from an animal and drink beer fermented there on the little moon. They’d talked for hours, until it was long past time to sleep. Now their conversations were so careful, it was like the words all had glass bones. So he changed the topic.

“It’s strange to think about it,” he said. “I’ll probably never weld in a vacuum again. All those years apprenticing and working, and now everything I do has air around it.”

“Tell me about it. If I’d known how it would all play out, I’d have spent my rotations in the general clinics.”

“Well, you’re the best hand surgeon on the planet.”

“The best hand surgeon on the planet is doing a lot of reading on digestive disorders and gynecological exams,” Lucia said dryly. Her eyes went hard, distant. “We need to talk about Felcia.”

And here it was. The gentleness, the calm, the soft memories. This was where it had been leading. He sat forward, his eyes cast on the ground.

“What’s to say?”

“She’s been talking about what happens next. For her.”

“Same as happens for any of us,” Basia said.

Lucia put another bite in her mouth, chewing slowly, though the food hardly required it. A gust of hard wind pressed in at the window with the soft ticking of grit against the glass. When she spoke, her voice was soft, but implacable.

“She’s thinking of university,” Lucia said. “She’s done the tutorials and examinations on the network. She needs us to give permission before the applications move forward.”

“She’s too young,” Basia said, knowing as the words came out that it was the wrong tack. Frustration knotted his throat and he put his dinner, half eaten, on the armrest.

“She won’t be by the time she gets there,” Lucia said. “If she went with the first shipment and transferred at Medina, she could be on Ganymede or Ceres Station in nineteen months. Twenty.”

“We need her here,” Basia said, his tone hard and definitive. The conversation was over. Except that it wasn’t.

“I don’t regret coming here,” Lucia said. “And you didn’t force me to come. The months after Ganymede when we were all living like rats packed too tight? All the ports that wouldn’t take us in? I remember that. When Mao-Kwikowski was dissolved, I was the one who helped Captain Andrada draw up the salvage papers. I made the *Barbapiccola* our ship.”

“I know.”

“When we took the vote, my voice was with yours. Maybe living so long as refugees made us wild or brave. I don’t know, but to come here. To begin everything again under a sky. Under some new star. I thought it was as obvious as you did, and I don’t regret coming.”

Her tone was fierce now. Her dark eyes glittered and flashed, daring him to disagree. He didn’t.

“If we spend the rest of our lives mining lithium and trying to grow carrots, I will be delighted with that,” she went on. “If I never reattach another ligament or regrow a lost thumb, then fine. Because I chose it. Jacek and Felcia didn’t make that choice.”

“I’m not sending my children back,” Basia said. “What would they get back there? With all the work that needs to be done *here*, with all the things there are to be learned and discovered *here*, how is going backward a good idea?” His voice was getting louder than he’d meant, but he wasn’t shouting. Not really.

“Being here is our choice,” Lucia said. “Felica’s choice is where her choice is. We can stand in the way or we can help.”

“Helping her back into *that* isn’t helping,” Basia said. “She belongs here. We all belong here.”

“Where we came from—”

“We came from here. Nothing that happened before matters. We are from here now. Ilus. I will go down dying before I let them bring their wars and their weapons and their corporations and their science projects here. And I will be damned if they get any more of my children.”

“Dad?”

Jacek stood in the doorway. He had a soccer ball on his hip and an expression of concern in his eyes.

“Son,” Basia said.

The moaning of the wind was the only sound. Basia stood up, took his canister and then Lucia’s. Taking her leavings to the recycler was a small olive branch, but it was all he had. The sense of impotent rage and shame boiled up in his throat and found to release there. Katoa, the landing pad, the concern in Jacek’s eyes. The years they had spent fleeing only to land in a brick palace that his daughter wanted to leave. All of it mixed into a single emasculating anger as hot as solder.

“Is everything okay?” Jacek asked.

“Your mother and I were just talking.”

“We aren’t from here,” Lucia said as if Jacek hadn’t come in, as if the adult conversation could go on with the boy there. “We’re making it that way, but it isn’t true yet.”

“It will be,” Basia said.

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Chapter Six: Elvi

Elvi sat in the high meadow, her legs stretched out before her, and watched quietly. The plant analogs—she couldn't really call them plants—lifted up above the dry, beige soil, straining toward the sunlight. The tallest stood hardly more than half a meter with a flat corrugated top that shifted to follow the sun and glittered the iridescent green of a beetle's carapace. A gentle breeze shifted the stalks and cooled Elvi's cheek. She didn't move. Four meters away, a mimic lizard cooed.

This time, the answering coo was closer. Elvi fought not to bounce with excitement. She wanted to wave her hands in glee, wanted to giggle. She stayed still as a stone. The prey species waddled closer. About the size of a sparrow, it had a soft rill of something like feathers or thick hair that ran down its sides. It had six long, ungainly legs, each ending in a doubled hook. She wanted to see them as fingers or toes, but she hadn't seen any of the little things use the hooks to manipulate anything. It cooed again, a soft guttural chuffing halfway between a dove's call and a tambourine. The mimic lizard waited a moment, its wide-set eyes shifting toward the little animal. Elvi watched for the tremor in the lizard's side, an almost invisible fluttering of its scalelike skin.

With the speed of a gun, the lizard's mouth unhinged and a mass of wet pink flesh shot out. The prey animal didn't so much as squeak as the lizard's inverted stomach drove it to the ground. Elvi's fists wriggled in delight as the mimic lizard began hauling its internal organs back across the dry ground. The prey species was dead or paralyzed, adhering to the pink flesh. Dirt and small stones stuck to the stomach too. Eventually the whole mass reached the mimic lizard's too-wide jaw, and it began the long process

of drawing the messy complex back through its mouth. From her previous observations, Elvi knew it would take the better part of an hour before the mimic lizard's newly concave sides filled out again. She stood up, dusting herself off, and hobbled over.

Her foot was still in the cast she'd gotten on that terrible first night. The pain from the broken bone was only a dull ache now, more an annoyance than a problem, but the cast made mobility an issue. She opened her satchel, the black lattice fabric ticking under her fingers, then gently lifted the feeding lizard into it. Its gaze flickered across her, untrusting. That was fair.

"Sorry, little one," she said. "It's in the name of science."

She closed the satchel and triggered the collection sequence. The lizard died instantly, and the internal assay sequence began, cataloging the gross structures of the animal's body, firing hair-thin needles through the corpse to gather samples at every boundary between tissues and feeding the data up to the dedicated system in the satchel's strap. By the time she got back to her little hut and took the corpses out for storage and cataloging, the mimic lizard and its prey would be modeled in her computer, terabytes of information ready to stream up to the *Edward Israel* and from there back to the labs on Luna. It would take the signal a few hours to travel the distance that had taken her eighteen months, but for those hours, she and her workgroup would be the only people in all the billions of humans scattered throughout the planets who would know this little being's secrets. If God had come and offered her the Library of Alexandria in exchange, she wouldn't have taken the trade.

As she tramped down the gentle slope toward her hut, the mining village spread out before her. It was tiny. Two parallel streets with a gap in the middle that passed for a town square. The buildings were cobbled together from the supplies they'd brought and what they could find on the planetary surface. Everything stood at slightly wrong angles, like a handful of dice had been scattered there. She was used to the strict rectilinear architecture that came from living where space was precious. That didn't apply here, and it made the little town seem more organic, like it had simply grown there.

Fayez was sitting on the small porch outside her hut. His skin had darkened in the weeks since the crash. The preliminary hydrological study had kept him and several of the others from the team out in the field for

almost two weeks.

“You know what I love about this planet?” Fayez said instead of hello.

“Nothing?”

He scowled at her, feigning hurt feelings. “I love the period of rotation. Thirty hours. You can get in a full day’s work, stay up getting drunk at the saloon, and still get a full night’s sleep. I don’t know why we didn’t think of this back home.”

“There are advantages,” Elvi said, unlocking her door and stepping into the hut.

“Of course it means we’ve been here almost six weeks in the past month,” Fayez said, “but thank God we didn’t get one of those little spinning tops with sundown every six hours. Now if they can just fix the gravity.”

The unit was a single four-by-six-meter room with bed, shower, toilet, kitchen, and workstation all hunched together. As she put the satchel into the archiving unit, it struck her how much her work was about inferring things from design. As soon as she’d seen the mimic lizard’s forward-facing eyes, she’d assumed it was a predator. Anyone looking at her hut would know it had been made with the assumption that space would be at a premium. Everything was an artifact of its function. That was what made evolution so gorgeous. She looked in the mirror over her little sink. Her skin was covered in a thin layer of beige dust, like stage makeup.

“I don’t want to do this,” she said, wiping her cheeks with a damp tissue.

“Look on the bright side,” Fayez said. “They’ve only tried to kill us once so far.”

“You aren’t helping.”

“I’m not trying,” he said, then winced at the unintentional reference to the dead man.

They had cremated Governor Trying and the other casualties of the crash. Apart from one villager who’d arrived with non-responsive bone cancer, they had been the first human deaths on the world. Certainly they were the first murders.

But after that, the people from the village had been nothing but kind. Lucia Merton, the doctor who’d come to help them after the crash, had followed up with each of the survivors. A Belter from Ceres named Jordan had brought Elvi food that his wife had cooked for the injured. The holy

man had invited her to the services at the village temple. Everything about the inhabitants of New Terra said that they were kind, gentle, authentic people. Except that someone had killed the governor and almost a dozen others.

The RCE encampment stood south of the village proper.

With Elvi and Fayez included, a little less than half the RCE employees on the surface had chosen to attend the village's community meeting. The others were involved in their work or still too badly injured. If she hadn't felt it was part of her job to educate everyone about the contamination hazards, Elvi would probably have stayed back at her hut too.

Most of the RCE personnel were field scientists. They dressed for comfort, herself included. The only ones in formal clothes were the security team. Hobart Reeve, Murtry's second, led three armed guards in RCE uniforms that made them look like soldiers or police. They hadn't been on the big shuttle, but had arrived on a light shuttle almost immediately. When the order had come in from RCE that no new personnel were going planetside until the UN observer arrived, Reeve had already been investigating what he always called "the incident."

The community hall was one side of the village's central square, set across the bare dirt and stone from the temple. Apart from the collection of religious iconography at the temple's eaves, the two were hard to tell apart.

The chairs were made from industrial cowering and modified crash couches. If the village had been in a more temperate part of the planet, there would have been more local flora, some sort of wood analog, to use. But this was where the lithium was nearest the surface, and lithium was what would bring money to the community. So like a microorganism moving along a concentration gradient, all of humanity had come to these twenty square kilometers.

Elvi sat at the back with the other RCE employees, except Reeve and the security detail, who sat closer to the front with the locals. She watched them all segregate without a word. No one enforced the separation, but it was there. Michaela, an atmospheric physicist, sat beside her with a smile. Anneke and Tor, both geoengineers, sat on her other side, hand in hand. Fayez in the couch beyond her, talking with Sudyam, who had come down with the first small shuttle after the accident. The incident. The attack. Anneke leaned in and murmured something to Tor. He blushed and nodded

a little too vigorously. Elvi tried to ignore the sexual byplay.

The mayor of First Landing was a thick-featured Martian woman with a broad accent and finger-cut hair named Carol Chiwewe, only they called her the coordinator, not the mayor. She called the meeting to order, and Elvi felt her heart starting to beat faster. The Belters had set the agenda, and so it started off with issues that were more important to them than to Elvi or RCE: the maintenance schedule for the water purification systems, whether to accept a credit line from an OPA-backed bank at unfavorable terms or wait until the first load of lithium came back and try for better. Everything was talked about in calm, considered terms. If there was anger or fear or murder, they had buried it so deeply that the mound didn't show.

Reeve's turn came, and he stepped smartly to the front of the room. His lips made a thin, forced smile.

"Thank you, madam coordinator, for inviting us to speak," he said. "We have confirmation that the independent observer is on the way with a commission from the UN, the Martian congress, and the OPA to assist with moving the development of the colony forward. It is our hope to have the security issues addressed before they arrive."

We hope to hang the bad guys on a rope before anyone gets here and says we can't, Fayez translated quietly enough for the words to reach Elvi's ears and no farther.

"We have definitively identified the explosive used in the attack, and we are looking into which individuals had access to it."

We don't have a goddamn clue who did it, and since you hicks store mining explosives in an unlocked shed, we aren't going to figure it out anytime soon.

"I don't have to explain the gravity of this situation, but Royal Charter Energy is committed to the success of this colony for both our employees and this community. We're all in this together, and my door is always open to anyone with questions or concerns, and I hope that we can rely on the same kindness and collaboration that you've extended to us since we came."

So since we've got nothing, we'd really appreciate it if those of you who know who set the charges would just tell us. And also please consider not murdering us in our sleep. Thanks for that.

Sudyam coughed to hide her laughter and Fayez flashed a grin. At the

front of the room, Reeve nodded and stepped down. The coordinator stood up, looking toward the back of the room. Elvi felt the sudden, powerful need to urinate.

“Doctor Okoye?” the coordinator said. “You wanted to speak?”

Elvi nodded and rose to her feet. It was about ten meters to the front of the room, and Elvi walked forward with her nerves screaming. The heat of the crowd’s bodies seemed suddenly oppressive, the smell of sweat and dust overwhelming. Her tongue felt sticky and thick in her mouth, but she smiled. At an estimate, two hundred people sat before her, their eyes on her. Her heart ticked over so fast she had to wonder whether there was enough air in the room. She remembered someone telling her once to look for a friendly face in the crowd and pretend she was only speaking to them. Four rows in on the left, Lucia Merton was sitting with her hands folded in her lap. Elvi smiled, and the woman smiled back.

“I just wanted to take a minute,” Elvi said, “to talk about how we can limit cross-contamination with the environment? Because we lost the dome? The hard perimeter dome?”

Lucia looked grave. Elvi chanced a look at the rest of the crowd and then wished she hadn’t.

“Part... um. Part of the RCE’s agreement with the UN was that we do a complete environmental study. We’re in just the second biosphere that we’ve ever seen, and there’s so much we don’t know about it that the more we can keep it pristine, the better we’ll be able to understand it. Ideally, we’d have a totally enclosed system here on the surface. Tight as a ship. Airlocks and decontamination rooms and...”

She was babbling. She grinned, hoping that someone would smile back. No one did. She swallowed.

“Every time we breathe, we’re taking in totally unknown microorganisms. And even though we’ve got different proteomes, we’re still big blobs of water and minerals. Sooner or later one of the indigenous species is going to find a way to exploit that. And it goes the other way too. Every time we defecate, we’re introducing billions of bacteria into the environment.”

“So now you’re going to tell us how we can shit?” a man’s voice said.

Elvi felt the sudden heat of a blush in her neck and cheeks. Even Lucia’s expression had gone cold and distant, the woman’s gaze fixed on nothing.

“I only meant that if we were doing this right, we’d have a protected, sterile environment and we wouldn’t be going out into the ruins or cultivating crop plants in the open air because—”

“Because you think we did it wrong,” the man sitting at Lucia’s side said. He was a big man with a dusting of gray at his temples and in the stubble of beard and a permanently angry face. “Only you don’t get to decide that.”

“I understand that we’re working with a complex situation here,” Elvi said, her voice getting rough with desperation. “But we’re all living in this massive Petri dish already, and I have a list of a few little sacrifices that we can all make that, from a scientific perspective—”

The man beside Lucia Merton flushed, and he leaned forward, his fists on his thighs. His eyes fixed on her like a predator’s.

“I’m done sacrificing things to science,” he said, and the buzz in his voice was a promise of violence. Lucia put a restraining hand on the man’s wrist, but others around the room had taken up the man’s disdain. The sounds of their bodies shifting in the seats, the murmur of voices in small conversations of their own filled the air. *Whoever killed Trying is probably in this room*, she thought. And then, immediately after that, *What the hell am I doing here?*

Carol Chiwewe stood up, her expression pained. Embarrassed on Elvi’s behalf.

“Maybe we better come back to that another time, Doctor Okoye,” she said. “It’s late and people are tired, ne?”

“Yes,” Elvi muttered. “Yes, of course.”

Her skin burning with shame, she walked back toward her seat, and then past it, out into the street and alone in the deepening night toward her hut. Her shoes scraped in the gravel and dirt. The air was cool and smelled like coming rain. She wasn’t more than halfway there, moving slowly in the near-black starlight, when a voice stopped her.

“I’m sorry about my dad.”

Elvi turned. The girl was little more than a deeper darkness in the night. A slightly more solid shadow. Elvi found herself thankful that the voice wasn’t a man’s.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I don’t think I did that very well.”

“No, it’s him,” the girl said, stepping closer. “You couldn’t have done

right with him. My brother died, and now Dad's not that kind of man anymore."

"Oh," Elvi said. And then, "I'm sorry."

The girl nodded, shuffled with something, and a pale green light no brighter than a candle bloomed in her palm, casting shadows up over the girl's face. She was pretty the way youth is always pretty, but when she got older, Elvi thought she might be beautiful the way her mother was.

"You're Doctor Merton's daughter," Elvi said.

"Felcia," the girl said.

"Good to meet you, Felcia," Elvi said.

"I can walk you home. If you don't have a light."

"I don't," Elvi said. "I should have brought one."

"Everyone forgets sometimes," the girl said, setting off. Elvi trotted a little to catch up with her. For a dozen meters, they walked in silence. Elvi sensed that the girl was building up to something. A confession or a threat. Something dangerous. Elvi hoped that she was just being paranoid, and was certain that she wasn't.

When the girl spoke at last, her voice was tight with anxiety and longing, and her words were the last thing Elvi would have guessed.

"What's it like going to a real university?"

Chapter Seven: Holden

*T*here should be fanfare, Holden thought.

Passing through a ring into another star system, halfway across the galaxy from Earth, should be a dramatic moment. Trumpets, or loud alarms, tense faces locked on viewscreens. Instead, there was nothing. No physical sign that the *Rocinante* had been yanked fifty thousand light-years across space. Just the eerie black of the hub replaced by the unfamiliar starfield of the new solar system. Somehow, the fact that it was so mundane made it stranger. A wormhole gate should be a massive swirling vortex of light and energy, not just a big ring of something sort of like metal with different stars on the other side.

He resisted the urge to hit the general quarters alarm just to add tension to the moment.

The new sun was a faint dot of yellow-white light, not all that different from Sol when viewed from the Ring sitting just outside Uranus' orbit. It had five rocky inner planets, one massive gas giant, and a number of dwarf planets in orbits even farther out than the Ring. The fourth inner planet, sitting smack dab in the middle of the Goldilocks Zone, was Ilus. New Terra. Bering Survey Four. RCE charter 24771912-F23. Whatever you wanted to call it.

All those names were too simple for what it really was. Mankind's first home around an alien star. Humans kept finding ways to turn the astonishing events of the last few years mundane. A few decades from now, when all the planets had been explored and colonized, the hub and its rings would just be a freeway system. No one would think twice about them.

"Wow," Naomi said, staring at Ilus' star on the display with wide-eyed

awe. Holden felt a rush of affection for her.

"I was just thinking that," he said. "Glad I'm not the only one." He opened a channel up to the cockpit.

"Yo," Alex said.

"How fast can you get us there?"

"Pretty damn fast, if you're willin' to be uncomfortable."

"Put us on a fast burn schedule and get some dirt under my feet," Holden said with a grin.

"High burn'll get us on the ground in 'bout seventy-three days."

"Seventy-three days," Holden said.

"Well, seventy-two point eight."

"Space," Holden said, trading his grin for a sigh, "is too damn big."



Five hours into their burn, the messages started to come in. Holden had Alex bring them down to one-third g for dinner, and played the first recording on the galley screen while he helped Amos make pasta.

An older man, brown-skinned and gray-haired, stared out of the screen at him. He had the thin features and large cranium of a Belter, and just a hint of a Ceres accent.

"Captain Holden," he said once the recording started. "Fred Johnson notified us you were coming, and I wanted to thank you for your help. My name is Kasim Andrada, and I'm captain of the independent freighter *Barbapiccola*. Let me fill you in on the situation as it stands."

"This should be good," Amos grunted, dumping steaming spaghetti noodles into a colander to drain them. Holden handed him the pot of red sauce he'd been stirring, then leaned against the counter to watch the rest of the broadcast.

"The colony finally got a working mining operation running about four months ago. In that time, we've brought up several hundred tons of raw ore from our mine. At the purity levels we're seeing, that should translate to almost a dozen tons of lithium after refining. It's enough to buy equipment, medicine, soil and seeds, everything this colony needs to get a real toehold."

Naomi came into the galley, tapping away furiously at her hand

terminal. “Smells good, I—” She stopped when she saw the video playing and sat down to watch.

“The *Edward Israel*,” Captain Andrada continued, “has stated that they will not allow us to leave orbit until the arbitration is complete. Royal Charter’s position being that they own this lithium until someone says they don’t. One of your first priorities will be to get the *Israel* to lift the blockade and let us take this ore to the Pallas refineries, where we already have buyers lined up and waiting.”

“Oh,” Amos said, dumping the pasta and sauce into a large bowl and putting it on the table. “Is *that* our priority?”

Holden paused the playback. “Did come across as an order, didn’t it?”

“He’s OPA,” Naomi said. “He thinks you’re here as Fred’s mouthpiece.”

“This guy is going to give me indigestion,” Holden said, killing the recording. “I’ll watch the rest of this crap after we eat.”



Five more broadcasts were queued up for viewing by the next day. The captain of the *Edward Israel*, an older Earthman named Marwick with flaming red hair and a British accent, demanded that Holden enforce the RCE charter by disabling the engines of the *Barbapiccola* if it tried to leave the system. Fred sent along encouragement and a reminder that Avasarala was shotgunning threats about the consequences for screwing the mission up. Three different news organizations asked for interviews, including a personal request from Monica Stuart for a live interview when he returned.

Miller watched them over his shoulder until Naomi came into their room and the detective disappeared in a blue shower of sparks.

“I think Monica likes you,” Naomi said with a grin, then flopped down onto the double-sized crash couch they used as a bed. “Alex is taking us back up to high burn in twelve minutes, and I want to die.”

“Monica would flirt with a lizard if she thought it would get her a good interview, tell Alex to give us another half hour so I can send a few responses, and hold on I’ll get my gun.”

Naomi pushed herself up with a groan. “I’ll get some coffee while you find your bullets.”

“Don’t leave,” Holden said, reaching for her arm. “I don’t want to record

these broadcasts with Miller standing behind me.”

“He’s only in your head,” she said, but she sat back down anyway. “He won’t show up on the recording.”

“Do you think that makes it *less* uncomfortable? Really?”

Naomi crawled across the bed and curled up next to him, putting her head on his chest. He tugged on a lock of her hair and she let out a long contented sigh.

“I like long flights when we aren’t doing these bone-crushing mad dashes,” she said. “Nothing to do but read, listen to music, stay in bed all day. You being famous sucks.”

“It’s also the reason we’re sort of rich now.”

“We could sell the ship, go get jobs at Pur’N’Kleen again. Do the Saturn ice run...”

Holden stayed silent and played with her hair. It wasn’t a serious suggestion. They both knew there was no going back to the people they used to be. Him the XO and her the chief engineer on an ice hauler that no one in the universe cared about unless it was late for a delivery. Anonymous people living anonymous lives. Would anyone even need Pur’N’Kleen anymore, with a thousand new worlds full of water and air?

“You going to be okay without me down there?” Naomi said.

The Belter colonists from Ganymede had spent months on the *Barbapiccola* prepping for landing on Ilus. Loading up on bone and muscle growth hormones, working out under a full g until their bodies would be able to handle the slightly heavier-than-Earth gravity of the planet. Naomi didn’t have the time or inclination to radically alter her physiology for this one job. Holden had argued that she would have then been able to come to Earth with him after. She replied that she was never going to Earth, no matter what. They’d left it at that, but it was still a sore spot for him.

“No, I won’t,” he said, deciding not to revisit the argument. “But there it is.”

“Amos will look after you.”

“Great,” Holden said. “I’ll land in the middle of the tensest situation in two solar systems, and instead of the smartest person I know, I’ll bring the guy most likely to get in a bar fight.”

“You might need that,” she said, her fingers tracing some of the scars he’d picked up over the last couple years. She stopped at a dark spot on his

stomach. "You still taking your cancer meds?"

"Every day." *For the rest of my life*, he didn't add.

"Have their doctor look at this after you land."

"Okay."

"They're using you," she said as if they'd been talking about it all along.

"I know."

"They know this is all going to go wrong. There's no solution that doesn't leave someone angry and out in the cold. That's why they're sending you. You're an easy scapegoat. They hired you because you won't hide anything, but that's the same thing that makes you easy to blame for the inevitable failure of these talks."

"If I thought it was inevitable I wouldn't have taken the job," Holden said. "And I know why they hired me for this. It's not because I'm the most qualified. But I'm not quite the idiot they think I am. I think I've learned a few new tricks."

Naomi reached up and pulled a hair out of his temple. Before he could say "ouch" she held it up in front of him. It was the gray of damp ashes.

"Old dog," she said.



The flight to Illus was grueling in more ways than just the long periods at high g. Every time the *Rocinante* dropped to a tolerable rate of acceleration for meals and maintenance, Holden would have dozens of messages waiting to be viewed and responded to. The captain of the *Edward Israel* became increasingly forceful in his demands for Holden to issue threats to the captain of the *Barbapiccola*. The colonists and their Belter compatriots in orbit were increasingly demanding that the *Barbapiccola* be released from lockdown. Both sides accused the other of escalating the conflict, though in Holden's opinion the fact that only the colonists had so far shed blood lessened their claim in that regard.

Their argument that only the sale of their lithium ore could make them a viable colony, and that the blockade of the shipment was effectively starving them out, was, however, a compelling one. RCE continued to insist that since they had the UN charter, the mining rights and the load of lithium in orbit were theirs.

“A thousand new worlds to explore, and we’re still fighting over resources,” Holden said to no one after a particularly long and angry message from the RCE legal counsel on the *Israel*.

Alex, who was lounging at the ops station nearby, answered anyway. “Well, I guess lithium is like real estate. Nobody’s makin’ any more of it.”

“You did hear the part about a thousand new worlds, right?”

“Maybe some of ’em have more lithium, but maybe they don’t. And this one definitely does. People used to think gold was worth fightin’ over, and that shit gets made by every supernova, which means pretty much every planet around a G2 star will have some. Stars burn through lithium as fast as they make it. All the *available* ore got made at the big bang, and we’re not doin’ another one of those. Now *that’s* scarcity, friend.”

Holden sighed and aimed an air vent at his face. The cool breeze from the recyclers made his scalp tingle. The ship wasn’t hot. The sweat had to be coming from stress.

“We’re astonishingly shortsighted.”

“Just you and me?” Alex said, exaggerating his drawl to make a joke of it.

“A vast new frontier has opened up for us. We have the chance to create a new society, with untold riches beyond every gate. But *this* world has treasure, so instead of figuring out the right way to divide up the damned galaxy, we’ll fight over the first crumbs we find.”

Alex nodded, but didn’t reply.

“I feel like I need to be there right now,” Holden continued after a moment. “I’m worried by the time we land everyone will be so locked into their positions that we won’t be able to help.”

“Huh,” Alex said, then laughed. “You think we’re going there to help?”

“I think I am. I’ll be down in engineering if anyone needs me.”

“One hour to burn,” Alex replied to his back.

Holden kicked the deck hatch release and it slid open with a hiss. He climbed down the ladder past the crew decks to the machine shop, where Amos was taking apart something complex-looking on one of the benches. Holden nodded to him and kicked open the final hatch into the reactor room. Amos shot him a questioning look, but Holden just shook his head and the mechanic turned back to his work with a shrug.

When the hatch slid closed above him, the reactor room flashed with

blue light. Holden slid down the ladder to the deck, then leaned back against the wall.

“Hey,” Miller said, coming around the reactor that dominated the center of the room as though he’d been standing on the other side of it waiting for Holden to arrive.

“We need to talk,” Holden replied.

“That’s my line.” The detective gave him a sad, basset-hound smile.

“We’re doing what you wanted. We’ve come through a ring into one of the other systems. You’ll get to, I assume, ride me to the planet and take your look around.”

Miller nodded, but didn’t speak. *How much of what I’m about to say does he already know? How predictive is the brain model they’ve made of me?* Holden decided wondering that was the path to madness.

“I need to know two things,” Holden said, “or this trip ends right now.”

“Okay,” Miller said with a palms-up, Belter version of a shrug.

“First, how are you following me around? You first showed up on this ship after Ganymede, and you’ve been everywhere I go ever since. Am I infected? Is that how you stay with me? I’ve gone through two gates without ditching you, so either you’re inside my head or you’re a galaxy-wide phenomenon. Which is it?”

“Yeah,” Miller said, then took off his hat and rubbed his short hair. “Wrong on both counts. First answer is, I live here. During the Ganymede incident, which is a stupid name for it, by the way, the protomolecule put a local node inside this ship.”

“Wait. There’s protomolecule stuff in the *Roci*?” Holden said, fighting down the surge of panic. If Miller wanted to hurt him and had the means to do so, it would already have happened.

“Yeah,” Miller said with a shrug, like it wasn’t a big deal. “You had a visitor, remember?”

“You mean I had a half-human monster,” Holden said, “that almost killed Amos and me. And that we vaporized in our drive trail.”

“Yeah, that’d be him. To be fair, he wasn’t exactly running a coherent program, that one. But he had enough of the old instructions left that he placed some material on the ship. Not much, and not what you’d call live culture. Just enough to keep a connection between the Ring Station’s processing power and your ship.”

“You infected the *Roci*?” Holden said, fear and rage briefly warring in his gut.

“Don’t know I’d use that verb, but all right. If you want. It’s what lets me follow you around,” Miller said, then frowned. “What was the other thing?”

“I don’t know if I’m done with *this* thing,” Holden said.

“You’re safe. We need you.”

“And when you don’t?”

“Then no one’s safe,” Miller said, his eerie blue eyes flashing. “So stop obsessing. Second thing?”

Holden sat down on the deck. He hadn’t wanted to ask how Miller was in his head, because he was terrified the answer would be that he was infected. The fact that he wasn’t, but his ship was, was both a relief and a new source of fear.

“What will we find down on Ilus? What are you looking for?”

“Same thing as always. Who done it,” Miller said. “After all, something killed off the civilization that built all this.”

“And how will we know when we’ve found it?”

“Oh,” Miller said, his grin vanishing. He leaned toward Holden, the smell of acetate and copper filling the air or else only his senses. “We’ll know.”

Chapter Eight: Elvi

The sandstorms tended to start in the late afternoon and last until a little after sundown. They began as a softening of the western horizon. Then the little plant analogs in the plain behind her hut would fold their photosynthetic surfaces into tight puckers like tiny green mouths that had tasted lemon, and twenty minutes later the town and the ruins and the sky would all disappear in a wave of dry sand.

Elvi sat at her desk, Felcia at the foot of the bed, and Fayeze with his back against the headboard.

Felcia had become a regular visitor, more often than not to talk with Elvi or Fayeze or Sudyam. Elvi liked having her around. It made the division between the township and the RCE teams seem... not less real, but less terrible. Permeable.

Today, though, felt different. Felcia seemed more tightly wound than usual. Maybe it was the fact that the UN mediator's ship was getting close. Maybe it was the weather.

"So, our solar system only has one tree of life," Elvi said, moving her hands in the air as if to conjure it up. "It started once, and everything we've ever found shares that ancestry. But we don't know why."

"Why we all share?" Felcia asked.

"Why it didn't happen twice," Elvi said. "Only one kind of Schrödinger crystal. One codon map. Why? If all the materials were there for amino acids to form and connect and interact, why wasn't there one schema that started in one tide pool, and then another someplace else, and another and another? Why did life arise just the one time?"

"So what's the answer?" Felcia asked.

Elvi's let her hands wilt a little. A particularly strong gust drove a wave of hard grit against the side of the hut. "Which answer?"

"Why it only happened once?"

"Oh. I don't know. It's a mystery."

"Same reason there's only one tool-using hominid left. The ones that still exist killed all the competition," Fayez said.

"That's speculation," Elvi said. "Nothing in the fossil record indicates that there was more than the one beginning of life on Earth. We don't get to just make things up because they sound good."

"Elvi is very comfortable with mysteries," Fayez said to Felcia with a wink. "It's why she has a hard time relating with those of us who feel anxious with our ignorance."

"Well, you can't know everything," Elvi said, making it a joke to hide a tinge of discomfort.

"God knows I can't. Especially not on this planet," Fayez said. "There was no point sending a geologist here."

"I'm sure you're doing fine," Elvi said.

"Me? Yes, I'm wonderful. It's the planet's fault. It's got no geology. It's all manufactured."

"How do you mean?" Felcia asked.

Fayez spread his hands as if he were presenting her with the whole world. "Geology is about studying natural patterns. Nothing here's natural. The whole planet was machined. The lithium ore you people are mining? No natural processes exist that would make it as pure as what you're pulling out of the ground. It can't happen. So apparently, whatever built the gates also had something around here somewhere that concentrated lithium in this one spot."

"That's amazing, though," Elvi said.

"If you're into industrial remediation. Which I'm not. And the southern plains? You know how much they vary? They don't. The underlying plate is *literally* as flat as a pane of glass. Somewhere about fifty clicks south of here, there's some kind of tectonic Zamboni machine about which I am qualified to say absolutely nothing. Those tunnel complexes? Yeah, they're some kind of old planetary *transport* system. And yet here I am—"

"I need a letter of recommendation," Felcia blurted, then looked down at her hands, blushing. Elvi and Fayez exchanged a glance. The wind howled

and muttered.

“For what?” Elvi asked gently.

“I’m going to apply for university,” the girl said. She spoke quickly, like the words were all under pressure, and then more slowly until at last she trailed away. “Mother thinks I’ll probably get in. I’ve been talking with the Hadrian Institute on Luna, and Mother arranged that I can get back to Pallas when the *Barbapiccola* takes the ore, and then take passage on my own from there, only the application needs a letter of recommendation, and I can’t ask anyone in the town because we haven’t told Daddy, and...”

“Oh,” Elvi said. “Well. I don’t know. I mean, I’ve never seen your academic work—”

“Seriously?” Faye said with a snort. “Elvi, it’s a letter of recommendation. You’re not under oath for it. Cut the kid a break.”

“Well, I just thought it would be better if I could actually say something I know about.”

“When I went to lower university, I wrote my own letters of recommendation. Two of them came from people I made up. No one checks.”

Elvi’s jaw dropped a centimeter. “Really?”

“You are an amazing woman, Elvi, but I don’t know how you survive in the wild.” Faye turned to Felcia. “If she won’t, I will. You’ll have it by morning, okay?”

“I don’t know how I can repay you,” Felcia said, but she already looked calmer.

Faye waved the comment away. “Your undying gratitude is thanks enough. What’s your field of study going to be?”

For the next hour, Felcia talked about her mother’s medical career, and her dead brother’s immune disorder, and intracellular signaling regulation. Elvi began to realize that she’d unconsciously thought of the girl as younger than she really was. She had the long, slightly gangly build and comparatively large head of a Belter, and somewhere in Elvi’s mind, she’d mistaken it for youth. Felcia would have fit right in at the commons of lower university. The light shifted from beige to deep brown to a burnt umber, and then darkness. The wind calmed. When Elvi opened her door, two centimeters of fine dust covered the walkway and the stars glimmered in the sky. The air smelled like fresh-turned earth. Some sort of

actinomycete analog, Elvi thought. Maybe one that was actually carried by the wind. Or maybe something else. Something stranger.

Felcia headed back for the town, Faye for his own hut. As far as she could tell, Faye was one of maybe two or three other people on the science team who was still sleeping alone. Sudyam and Tolerson were the latest pairing. Laberge and Maravalis had just broken off the relationship they'd started on the journey out, and each of them was already involved with someone else.

Sex wasn't a strange thing among the scientific teams. That it was unprofessional behavior was set in balance against the fact that—especially on a years-long field expedition like this—the pool of potential mates was both very restricted and generally fairly high-value. People were people. If she felt any jealousy at all, it wasn't for any of the particular relationships, but for intimacy itself. It would be nice to have someone to walk with in the darkness after the storm. Someone to wake up with in the morning. She wondered what the sexual politics were among the families of First Landing. If RCE had thought to send a social science team, it might have made a good paper.

Ahead of her and to the right, the alien ruins stood against the horizon, hardly more than a deeper darkness. Only a light was moving in them. It was small and faint. Less than a star, and only visible at all because it was moving. Someone was in the ruins again. Contaminating the site. She knew intellectually that she was letting herself be angry about it because it was better than feeling lonesome or guilty, but that didn't keep the rage from feeling real. She turned back to her hut, her lips pressed together. She scooped up a flashlight, checked the battery charge, and stalked out toward the ruins, the thin blue circle of light bobbing ahead of her and illuminating her way. The fine dust shifted under her feet like snow, and her thighs ached from the speed of her hike.

As she neared the ruins, she thought she saw a dim light heading the other way. Back toward the town. But when she called after it, no one answered. She stood in the darkness for almost a minute feeling first unsure of herself, then embarrassed, then angry at feeling embarrassed.

A path led into the ruins that even the recent dustfall couldn't conceal. Tracks as wide as a wagon where wheels had gone over the land often enough to leave ruts. Elvi shook her head and followed the path up, twisting

around a high shoulder of land and into the huge alien structures.

Inside, the beam of her flashlight caught the walls and surfaces, sending off glittering reflections that seemed to shift whether she did or not. Where there was shelter from the wind, there were footprints. Lots of them. It wasn't just someone from town exploring on their own. They were treating the ruins like some sort of clubhouse. Any samples the science team took from the soil here would already be compromised. The microorganisms, a mixture of known and unknown and whatever emerged when the two encountered each other in a totally uncontrolled environment. That the same was true of the whole township seemed insignificant. These were alien structures. They'd been built by a vast, vanished civilization about which humanity still knew almost nothing. It wasn't some kind of *treehouse*.

"Hello?" she shouted. "Is anyone in here?"

Nothing answered her. Not even the wind. Shaking her head, she stalked deeper into the shadows. If anyone was here, she'd give them the talk she'd meant to give before. She would make them understand the issues, even if it took hectoring them all night.

The walls around her rose at strange and unsettling angles from the ground, organic and also not, like a machine that was built to pass for the product of nature. Arches rose, looking out over the bare, dark land. The deeper Elvi went, the more there seemed to be, until she had the illusion that the ruins were larger inside than out.

She was about to give up and turn back home when she saw something square. Simply being rectilinear made it stand out. The boxes were plastic and ceramic, functional gray where they weren't the bright red and yellow of warning labels. DANGER HIGH EXPLOSIVE. DO NOT STORE NEAR HEAT OR CLASS THREE RADIATION SOURCES.

"Oh no," Elvi said to herself. "Oh *hell* no."



"Doctor Okoye," Reeve said. "I'm hearing you tell me that you found explosives hidden outside of the town."

"Yes," Elvi said. "Of course that's what you're hearing me say."

"And that there is evidence of several people having been to this

clandestine site.”

They were sitting in Reeve’s office now. The light from his lamp shone warm and soft, and his rough pants and untucked shirt suggested she’d roused him out of bed. It felt like the middle of the night, though the extended rotational period meant the darkness would be stretching on for almost another ten hours.

“Yes,” she said.

“All right,” Reeve said. “It’s all right. This is a good thing. I need you to tell me how to find this place.”

“Yes. Of course. I’ll take you.”

“No, I need you to stay right here. Not back to your hut. Not out to the ruins. I need you right here where it’s safe. You understand?”

“There was someone out there. I saw the light, and that’s why I went. What if they’d still been there?”

“We don’t have to worry about that, because it didn’t happen,” Reeve said in a carefully reassuring tone of voice that meant *You’d be dead*. Elvi dropped her head into her hands. “Can you give me directions?”

She did her best, her voice trembling. Reeve constructed a map on his hand terminal, and she was fairly sure it was accurate. Her mind seemed to be shifting on her a little, though.

“All right,” Reeve said. “I’m going to have you stay here for a little while.”

“But my work is all back at the hut.”

The security man put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, but his gaze was already focused inward, planning some next step that didn’t include her.

“We’re going to see you’re safe first,” he said. “Everything else will come after that.”

For the next hour, she sat in the little room or paced. The voices of Reeve and his security team filtered in through the wall, the tones serious and businesslike. And then there were fewer of them.

A young woman came to get her. Elvi had seen her before, but didn’t know her name. It seemed wrong that they could have spent almost two years traveling out here together, and Elvi still didn’t know her. It should mean something about populations and how they mixed. And how they didn’t.

“Do you need anything, Doctor Okoye?”

“I don’t know where to sleep,” Elvi said, and her words seemed thin. Fragile.

“I’ve got a bunk ready,” the girl said. “Please come with me.”

The rooms were empty. The others gone out into the alien darkness to face a terribly human threat. The girl leading her to the bunk had a sidearm strapped to her belt. Elvi glanced out the front window as they passed. The street was the same one she’d walked down the day before, and it was also wholly changed. A sense of threat hung over everything like the promise of a storm coming. Like the haze on the horizon. She saw Felcia’s brother walking down the street, not looking at her or anything else. Her fear was cold and deep.

Chapter Nine: Basia

Basia had volunteered for the night shift at the mine. Fewer people to hide from. Less open sky to make him jittery. The work, as backbreaking as it was, was a relief. The fabricator they'd brought down from the *Barbapiccola* was building tracks and carts as fast as they could load raw material into it. His team was trying to keep up with its output by assembling the rail system that would move ore from the pit to the sifters to the silos. There, it would wait for the *Barbapiccola*'s shuttle to take it up into orbit. Everything they'd mined so far had been moved with wheelbarrows by hand. A motorized cart system would increase production by an order of magnitude.

So Basia and his team worked the metal rails, pulling them out of the fabricator gleaming and new in the harsh white lights. They loaded them on handcarts and dragged them into the mining pit. Then unloaded them by hand and welded them into the growing railway system. It was the kind of physical labor people had mostly stopped doing in their mechanized age. And the process of welding inside an atmosphere was totally unlike welding in vacuum, so he had a new skill set to develop. The combination of mental challenge and physical toil left him exhausted. His world narrowed to the next task, the ache in his hands, and the distant promise of sleep. There was no time to dwell on other things.

Like being a murderer. Like the corporate security forces sniffing around for him and Coop and the others. Like the guilt he felt every time Lucia lied to them and said she didn't know anything that would help.

Later, when he sat in the crew hut with his muscles twitching and cramping with fatigue, trying to sleep with the daylight streaming in

through the windows, then he could revisit the death of the shuttle over and over again. Think about what he could have done to disable the explosives faster than he did. How he could have tackled Coop, taken the radio away from him. If his mood was especially bad, he would think about how if he'd just listened to his wife, none of it would have happened in the first place. On those days he felt such shame that he hated her a little for it. Then hated himself for blaming her. The pillow he pressed to his eyes kept the sunlight out, but not the images of the shuttle exploding over and over again, screaming like a dying beast as it went down.

But during the night, while he worked, he had some measure of peace.

So when Coop appeared at the work site, sauntering into the pit like he didn't have a care in the world, Basia almost hit him in the face.

"Hey, mate," Coop said. Basia dropped his hammer, shoulders slumping.

"Hey," he said.

"So we got a thing," Coop continued, throwing one companionable arm around Basia's shoulders. "Need mi primero on it."

That couldn't be good. "What thing?"

Coop guided him away from the work site, smiling and nodding at the few other night-shift crew they passed. Just two chums out for a walk and a conversation. When they were out of earshot of everyone, he said, "Seen that RCE girl going up to the ruins. Sent Jacek to check on it."

"Sent *Jacek*," Basia echoed. Coop nodded.

"Good kid. Reliable."

Basia stopped, pulling his arm away. "Don't—" *Involve my son in this*. Before he could get the words out, Coop waved it off and kept talking.

"Está important." Coop stepped close, voice lowering. "She went up to the ruins, then went straight to the RCE goons. Jacek says they're planning to wait for us up there. Catch the resistance red-handed."

"Then we don't go back," Basia said. It seemed so simple. No reason to panic.

"You crazy, primo? Toda alles been up there. Trace evidence up the ass. They wait long enough, they get bored and bring a real crime scene team down, we all done. All of us, y veh unless you stopped shedding skin when you were there."

"Then what?"

"We go up first. A flare on that blasting powder, boom. No more

evidence.”

“When?”

Coop laughed. “What you think? Next week some time? *Now*, coyo. Got to go now. Mediator’s landing in hours-not-days. Don’t want this to be what he sees when he steps off the ship, do you? You a team lead, you can take one of the carts. We got to get that shit and get gone.” Coop snapped his fingers impatiently. “Jetzt.”

Coop spoke about insanity like blowing up their stash of mining explosives with such an air of self-assurance and certainty, Basia found it hard to argue. Sure, blowing up the alien ruins was crazy. But Coop was right. If they found the explosives and traced them back to Basia, they’d know. He didn’t want to, but he had to. So he would.

“Okay,” he said and walked toward the cart charging station. Only one was left, and because the universe was a cruel and mocking place, it was the same one he’d been driving the night of the bombing. It still had the dents and scorch marks it had picked up that night. The scorch marks everyone in the colony was careful not to ask about.

Coop waited impatiently for him to unlock it and back it out of the stall, then hopped in and started tapping out a fast drumbeat on the plastic dashboard. “Let’s go let’s go let’s go.”

Basia went.

Halfway to the alien ruins, they came across four more of Coop’s inner circle. Pete and Scotty and Cate and Ibrahim. No Zadie. Her little boy had come down with a nasty eye infection, and she wasn’t around much lately. Cate had a duffel bag she threw into the back of the cart with a metallic thump, then the four of them climbed in after it.

“That the stuff?” Coop asked, and Cate nodded and slapped the side of the cart to let Basia know he could drive. Basia didn’t ask what the stuff was. Too late to start questioning.

The ruins looked as dark and deserted as they ever did, but Coop made Basia drive the long way round to come at the site from the side opposite the town. “Just to be safe,” he said.

When Cate pulled open the duffel, Basia wasn’t surprised to see it filled with guns. The *Barbapiccola* hadn’t been a warship. They hadn’t left Ganymede with a great store of weapons, but what there was had come down to the surface when First Landing was begun. This looked like most

of them. Cate pulled out a shotgun and started loading fat plastic shells into it. She was a tall, rawboned woman with a wide jaw and a permanent frown line between her eyes. She looked natural holding a gun. Like a soldier. When Basia picked one up, a short-barreled automatic pistol of some kind, he felt like a child playing dress-up.

“You’ll need this, killer,” Ibrahim said and tossed him a narrow metallic object. It took Basia several seconds to realize it was the magazine for his pistol. It only took two tries to slide it in the correct way. Blow the explosives. Clear the site. Destroy the evidence. That had never really been the plan, and somewhere in his gut, he’d known.

While the rest of the group finished readying their weapons, Basia stood a few meters from the cart, staring up at the night sky. One of the points of light was the drive tail of the *Rocinante*, the ship Jim Holden was flying in on. The mediator. The one who was supposed to keep the colonists and RCE people from killing each other. He wondered how far out Holden was. He wondered if the man knew he was already too late. Too late for the second time. Holden had been too late on Ganymede too.

Basia’s son Katoa hadn’t been the only one who was sick. Whose immune system had faltered and failed under the thousand different stressors of life outside a gravity well. There had been a group of them who’d come to Doctor Strickland. The man who was supposed to know the answers. Katoa, Tobias, Annamarie, Mei. Mei, who had lived. Who James Holden had rescued from the labs on Io.

Holden had been there when they found Katoa too. Basia had never met the man. Had only ever seen him on news broadcasts. But Mei’s father had been a friend. He’d sent a message telling Basia what had happened, and that he’d been with Holden when they found the boy’s body.

Why one and not the other? Praxidike’s Mei, but not his Katoa. Why did some people die and others live? Where was the justice in it? The stars he looked up at didn’t have any answers for him.

Holden had been too late to stop what was happening on Ilus right now before anyone had ever set foot on it. Before the rings opened. Before Venus bloomed. If Katoa were still alive, Basia wouldn’t have come here, and if he had, he wouldn’t have stayed.

It was a strange thought. Surreal. Basia tried to picture the man he’d be in that other timeline, and couldn’t. He looked down at the ugly black gun

in his hand. *I wouldn't be doing this.*

"Game's on," someone said. Basia turned around. It was Coop. "Get back in it, coyo."

"Dui," Basia said, and took a deep breath. The night air was cold and crisp and tasted vaguely of dirt from that afternoon's dust storm. "Dui."

"Follow on," Coop said, then headed off to the ruins at a slow trot. Cate and Ibrahim and Pete and Scotty followed, clutching their guns in what they probably thought was a military style. Basia carried his pistol by the barrel, worried about getting his fingers anywhere near the trigger.

They entered the massive alien structure through one of the many openings in its side. Windows? Doors? No aliens left to say. Inside, the light coming off their flashlights and work lamps reflected off the smooth, strangely angled walls. The material looked like stone, was smooth as glass, and turned from black to a rosy pink where the light hit it. Basia trailed his fingers along it.

Coop waved for them to stop, and then ducked down and crab-walked over to a windowlike opening in one wall. He peeked over and dropped back down, motioning for the group to join him. Basia hunkered down with the rest.

"See?" Coop whispered, pointing at the next room beyond the window. "Knew they'd set up there."

Cate popped up for a second to look, then crouched down again with a nod. "I see five. Reeve, the boss, and four of his goons. Sidearms and stun guns. They're all looking the wrong way."

"Too easy, boss," Scotty whispered with a grin, and clicked off the safety on his rifle. Cate slid open the breech on her shotgun just far enough to make sure there was a shell loaded. Coop held up his big automatic pistol in one hand and yanked back the slide. Then on his other hand he raised three fingers and started silently counting down.

Basia looked at each of them in turn. They looked flushed and excited. All except Pete, who stared back at Basia, his skin looking a sickly green in the pale light, and his head shaking back and forth in a silent negation. Basia could practically hear the man thinking, *I don't want to do this.*

Something shifted in Basia's mind, and the world seemed to snap into focus with an almost physical sensation. He'd been following Coop in a daze since the moment the man showed up at the work site. And now they

were about to shoot a bunch of RCE security people.

“Wait,” he said. Coop answered by standing up, pointing his pistol into the next room, and firing.

Basia’s mind stuttered. Time skipped.

Coop, yelling obscenities and firing his pistol over and over into the next room. Basia is lying on his back on the floor looking up as shell casings tumble out of Coop’s gun and bounce across the ground next to him. They appear to be moving so slow that Basia can read the manufacturer’s stamp. TruFire 7.5mm they say.

Skip.

He is standing next to Cate. He has no memory of getting up. She is firing her shotgun, and the sound of it going off in the tight space is deafening. He wonders if he will suffer permanent hearing loss. In the next room, three men and two women in RCE security uniforms are scrambling to take cover, or draw weapons, or return fire. They have looks of panic on their faces. They shout to each other as they move. He doesn’t recognize any of the words. One of them fires a pistol, and a bullet slams into the wall near Cate. A piece of the bullet or a piece of the wall punches a small hole in her cheek. She continues to fire as if the injury is beneath notice.

Skip.

An RCE security woman clutches at her chest as blood fountains out of it. Her face is pale and terrified. He is just a meter away from her, standing next to Scotty. Scotty shoots her again, this time in the neck. She falls backward in slow motion, hands reaching up to the wound but going limp and lifeless halfway there, and she just looks like she’s shrugging.

Skip.

He stands by himself in a corridor. He doesn’t know where it is or how he got there. He hears gunfire behind him, and screams. An RCE security man is a few meters ahead of him, holding a stun gun. The man has dark skin and bright green eyes, wide with fear. Basia suddenly remembers that the man’s name is Zeb, though he can’t remember why he knows that. Zeb throws the stun gun at him and reaches for the pistol he still has in a holster on his hip. The stun gun bounces off Basia’s head, opening up a three-centimeter gash that begins bleeding heavily, but he doesn’t feel it. He sees Zeb pulling his pistol, and without thinking about it he points his own gun at him. He’s surprised to see that he’s holding it correctly, by the handle,

with his finger on the trigger. He doesn't remember doing that. He pulls the trigger. Nothing happens. He's about to pull it a second time when there is a loud bang from behind him, and Zeb begins to fall, blood gushing from his forehead. He waits for the blackout.

There was no skipping. No respite. No escape.

"Good job," Coop said behind him. "That one almost got away."

Basia turned slowly, still in a dream. A fugue. A dissociative state. The impulse to lift his hand one more time, to let the violence carry him just one step farther and shoot Coop almost lifted his arm. Almost, but not quite. Zeb bled out on the floor. The sounds of gunfire stopped.

Behind him, the rest of his group whooped and hollered in happy and excited voices. Basia looked at his gun, remembering how they work in action videos. You put the magazine with the bullets in it in the gun, and then you have to put a bullet in the chamber. He remembered Cate pulling back the breech on her shotgun. Coop pulling back the slide on his automatic. Basia's gun wouldn't have fired no matter how many times he pulled the trigger.

Zeb stopped bleeding. *That was almost me*, Basia thought, but the thought had no emotional content yet. No weight. It was like a puff of acrid smoke passing through his mind, and then gone again.

"Help us drag these bodies out back, primo," Coop said, patting him on the back. "Zadie's washing the place down with corrosives and digestive enzymes, kill the evidence, but they ain't gonna eat the big chunks, eh?"

Basia helped. It took them several hours to bury the corpses of the five women and men in the hard-packed dirt behind the alien ruins. Coop assured them that the next dust storm would remove all signs that anyone had dug there. The RCE people would just disappear without a trace.

Scotty and Pete dragged the rest of their explosives out of the ruins and loaded them on the cart. Then they walked back to town with Cate and Ibrahim. Cate carried her duffel of guns over one shoulder. Basia's pistol was in it again, never having been fired.

"We had to do this," Coop said once they'd left. Basia didn't know if he was telling Basia that or himself. Basia nodded anyway.

"You set this up. You knew you were going to kill them, and you made me part of it."

Coop gave him a Belter shrug and a cruel smile. "You knew that coming

out, coyo. You maybe pretended not to, but you knew.”

“Never again,” Basia said. “And if anyone in my family is hurt because of this, I will kill you myself.”

He drove back to the mine, then walked to his house. The sun was just coming up when he finally stumbled into his tiny bathroom. The man in the mirror didn’t look like a killer, but his hands were covered with blood. He started trying to wash them off.

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Chapter Ten: Havelock

About five hours before—when Havelock had been halfway through his ten-hour shift—a man dressed in an orange-and-purple suit so ugly it approached violence sat down on a couch in a video studio on Mars. Havelock floated against his restraints, considering him. Strapping in was second nature now, even though it felt a little silly. The orbital space around New Terra was essentially empty, and the chance of a sudden acceleration was almost nil. It was just a habit. On the little monitor set into the cabin wall, the young man shook the feed host's hand and smiled at the camera.

It's been a while since you came by, Mister Curvelo," the host said. "Thank you so much for coming back."

"Good to be here, Monica," the man said, nodding like he'd been caught at something. "Good to be back."

"So I got a chance to play the new game, and I have to say it seems like a *real* departure from your previous work."

"Yeah," the man said shortly. His jaw was tight.

"There's been a certain amount of controversy," the host said. Her smile was a little sharper. "You want to talk about that?"

It was physically impossible for Havelock to sink back into his couch, but psychologically it was a snap.

"Monica, look," the man in the ugly suit said, "what we're exploring here are the *consequences* of violence. Everybody's looking at that first section, and they don't think about how everything comes after."

Havelock's hand terminal chimed. He muted the newsfeed and took the connection.

"Havelock," Murtry said, "I have a call I need you to take."

His voice was so calm and controlled, Havelock felt his breath go shallow. It was the sound of trouble, and his mind clutched at the first fear that came. The *Rocinante* and Jim Holden, the UN mediator, was about ten hours from the end of its deceleration burn. Almost here. If something had gone wrong with it...

"Something happened downstairs," Murtry said. "I've got Cassie on the horn, and I need you to keep her from melting down while I talk to the captain."

"Is it bad?"

"Yeah. Take the call. Be the calm one. You can do that?"

"Sure, boss," Havelock said. "Cool as November, smooth as China silk."

"Good man."

The picture froze for a fraction of a second, and then Cassie was looking out at him. For a year and a half, they'd been on the ship together, part of the same team, familiar if not intimate. He'd been aware vaguely when she'd struck up a romance with Aragão and then when they'd broken it off. He thought of her as a friend because he didn't think about her much at all.

In the image, her skin had an ashy color, and her eyes were lined with red.

"Cassie," Havelock said, his voice falling into the comforting register he'd trained for in the hostage negotiation workshop he'd taken after the Ceres riots. "Hear things are a little rough down there."

Cassie's laugh shifted the camera, shaking her on the screen like an earthquake. She looked away, and then back.

"They're gone," she said. In the pause afterward, her gaze shifted like she was looking for something. More words to say, maybe. "They're gone."

"Okay," he said. A thousand different questions pressed forward, wanting to be asked. *What happened? Who's missing? What happened?* But Murtry hadn't asked him to find out, and Cassie didn't need an interrogator. "Murtry's talking to the captain."

"I know," Cassie said. "We had a lead. We found a hideout. Reeve took them out. I stayed back with the witness."

"Is the witness there?"

"She's sleeping now," Cassie said. "I'm a security systems consultant, Havelock. I'm supposed to be figuring out optimal shift schedules and building the surveillance network. I don't shoot people. That's not my

fucking pay grade.”

Havelock smiled, and Cassie smiled with him, a tear leaking out the side of her eye. For a moment they were both laughing, the horror and the fear transforming into something like exasperation. Something a little bit safer.

“I’m scared as hell,” Cassie said. “If they come for me too, I won’t be able to stop them. I’ve got the office locked down, but they could cut through the walls. They could blow the place up. I don’t know why we thought it was a good idea to be down here at all. After they blew the heavy shuttle, we should have hauled our butts back up the well and stayed there. We should have dropped rocks on them from fucking orbit.”

“The thing now is keeping you and the witness safe.”

“And how are you going to do that?” Cassie asked. Her voice was a challenge, but one that wanted to be answered. *You can’t* and *Tell me that you can* all at the same time.

“We’re working on that,” Havelock said.

“I don’t even have food in here,” Cassie said. “It’s all at the commissary. I’d kill for a sandwich. I really would. I’d kill for it.”

Havelock tried to remember what they’d said in the workshop about talking with people who’d been traumatized. There was a list. Four things. The mnemonic was BEST. He couldn’t remember what any of the letters stood for.

“So,” he said. “I bet you’re pretty freaked out right now.”

“I’m not holding it together.”

“Yeah, it feels like that, but actually, you’re doing good just by not making it worse. That’s how people usually get it wrong when things go to hell. Overreact, escalate. All goes pear-shaped. You’re holed up and talking to us. Means you’ve got good instincts for this.”

“You’re making that shit up,” Cassie said. “I’m just this side of going catatonic.”

“Stay on this side, and that makes it a win. Seriously, though, you’re doing the right thing. Stay cool, and we’ll get on top of this. I know it feels like it’s all going to hell, but you’re going to be all right.”

“If I’m not—”

“You will be.”

“But if I’m not. *If*, right?”

“Okay,” Havelock said. “If.”

“Do me a favor. There’s a guy back on Europa. Hihiri Tipene. He’s a food engineer.”

“Okay.”

“Tell him I said I was sorry.”

She thinks she’s going to die, Havelock thought, *and she may be right*. The bright, coppery taste of fear flooded his mouth. The locals were killing RCE security, and she was the last one standing. He didn’t know anything about the state of play down there. For all he knew, there might be three tons of industrial explosive about to turn Cassie into a memory. Any moment, she could die, and he could watch her die and not be able to do anything about it.

“You’re going to tell him yourself,” he said gently. “And after this, it won’t even be scary.”

“I don’t know. You’ve never met Hihiri. Promise me?”

“Sure,” Havelock said. “I’ve got your back on this one.”

Cassie nodded. Another tear streaked down her cheek. He didn’t feel like he was doing a great job of keeping her from meltdown.

A tiny inset window appeared on the feed. Murtry’s security override.

“Hey there, Cass,” Murtry said. “I’ve talked to Captain Marwick, and we’re dropping a team to you. It’s going to take us a couple hours, though. Your job is to keep that civilian safe.”

Cassie’s voice trembled when she spoke, but it didn’t break. “There are forty of our people on the planet and two hundred of *them*. I’m one person. I can’t protect everyone.”

“You don’t have to,” Murtry said. “I’ve sent the lockdown notice. I’m coordinating the science teams. That’s on me. Your job is Doctor Okoye. You just keep her breathing until we’re down there, okay?”

“Yessir.”

“All right,” Murtry said. “Two hours. You can do this, Cass.”

“Yessir.”

“Havelock, we’re doing a briefing in the security office right now. If you could pop by?”

“On my way,” Havelock said. He undid his straps, pulled himself out of his couch, and launched for the hallway. The *Edward Israel* had corridors that were built as elongated octagons, like something his grandfather would have traveled in. The straps and toeholds along the walls had no

directionality. He moved quickly down the hall, his brain flipping from telling him that he was climbing up a massive steel-and-ceramic well to falling headlong down it to—oddly—crawling upside down, as if he were on the ceiling of a drainage pipe. Belters, he'd been told, had a natural sense of themselves divorced from set ideas of up and down, but he'd only heard that from Belters, and always in the context of how they were better than him. Maybe it was true, maybe it was exaggeration. Either way, by the time he pulled himself into the security office, he felt a little woozy, and missed the false gravity of thrust.

Ten people clung to the walls, all oriented the same way. Men and women with radically different facial structures and skin tones, and all with the same expression. It was almost eerie. Murtry had broken out the riot gear, and the blue-gray body armor with the high neck-protecting collars made them all seem like huge, human-shaped insects. Even Murtry was wearing it, so apparently he was going on the drop too.

“—I have left,” Murtry was saying from his place at the front of the room. “And you're *all* I have left. The cavalry's not going to come in and save our butts. We are the cavalry, and that means I have already lost everyone I'm going to lose. We are the security team for this whole planet, right here in this room. And we can do it, but not if we're making sacrifices. While we're down there, if you feel threatened, you do whatever it takes to protect yourself and your team.”

“Sir?”

“Okmi?”

“Does that mean we have authorization for lethal response?”

“That means you have authorization for *preemptive* lethal response,” Murtry said, then waited a moment for the words to sink in. Havelock sighed. It was ugly, but there wasn't a choice. If the heavy shuttle had been just a crime, they could have dealt with it like police. But the locals hadn't stopped there, and now more RCE people were missing or dead. So now it was more like a war.

Well. At least they'd tried the peaceful way first. Not that the Belters would give them any credit for it.

“We're dropping in twenty minutes,” Murtry said. “It's a long, fast drop, and some of it'll be choppy. I'm bringing us down just east of the Belter camp. Smith and Wei are squad leads. Our first priority is reaching and

reinforcing the office down there.”

“What about the *Barbapiccola*?” someone asked.

“Screw the *Barbapiccola*! What about the *Rocinante*?”

Murtry lifted his hand, palm out.

“Don’t any of you spend your time worrying about what’s happening up in orbit or back at home. That’s on me, and I’ll take care of it. Me and Havelock.” Murtry flashed a quick smile at him, and Havelock nodded, almost a little bow. “You have your orders, and you have my trust. Let’s get downstairs and get this clusterfuck under control.”

The security force broke, bodies moving through the air in a fast, efficient stream toward the hangar and the light shuttles. Havelock felt a thin stab of regret, watching the others head down without him. He remembered something from his childhood, a flash of memory here and gone, about a lame child and the Pied Piper.

Murtry floated through the air toward him, moving against the flow.

“Havelock, good to see you. I’m going to need a minute.”

“Yes, sir.”

Murtry nodded toward his private office. It was a tiny room, smaller even than a sleeping cabin, with a crash couch on old-style gimbals that arced up and over it. Murtry closed the door behind them.

“So I’m putting you in charge of the ship.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. I’m leaving you in a crap position,” Murtry said. “We’ve got a full crew on the *Israel* that are mostly eggheads with their petticoats in a bunch because we’re not letting them do science, and the captain’s been fighting hard to keep them up here. Now there’s trouble, they won’t be pushing so hard to go down, but the pressure’s got to go someplace. I’m leaving you a skeleton crew to deal with it.”

“We’ll get it done, sir.”

“Good man. The biggest threat we’ve got on the board is the *Rocinante*. Used to be Martian military before it went OPA. *Israel* is huge, but we’re a science ship. If the *Rocinante* knocks us down, we’re going down.”

“Why would they shoot us down?”

Murtry shrugged. “I think less about why and more about if. So... there’s something I need, and it’s going to play hell with your shuttle schedules, but I want you to do it anyway.”

“Of course.”

“We’re taking one of the light shuttles for the drop,” Murtry said slowly, as if he were thinking it through while he spoke, even though that clearly wasn’t the case. “The one that’s left? I want you to weaponize it. Take off anything that’d keep its reactor from overloading, and set it with a hardened remote ignition. Lock out all the standard nav controls and put in something that just you and me have access to.”

“Captain Marwick too?”

Murtry’s smile was an enigma. “Sure, if you want.”

“Give me half a day, I’ll get it done,” Havelock said.

“Good.”

“Sir? Who are you thinking we’d be using this against? The Belter camp?”

“We’re just buying options, Havelock. I hope not to use it at all,” Murtry said. “But if I decide I’m going to, I’ll want it fast.”

“You’ll have it.”

“I feel better knowing that,” Murtry said, and put his hand on the desk to push off.

“Sir?”

Murtry lifted his eyebrows. Havelock felt a sudden flush of embarrassment, and almost didn’t go on. And then he did.

“I know it’s a small thing, sir, but when I was on the call, Cassie said she was hungry. I told her we’d bring her a sandwich.”

Murtry’s expression was empty as stone.

“I was wondering if you could take her a sandwich, sir.”

“Might could manage,” Murtry said, and Havelock couldn’t tell if the man was amused or annoyed. Maybe both.



Havelock floated at his desk. The cells of the brig were all empty. His skeleton crew—the four most junior security staff and a technician they’d borrowed from the ship’s maintenance crew—were quietly modifying the one remaining light shuttle. Making the bomb. On his monitors, the shuttle drop and the *Rocinante*’s final deceleration burn, and the internal monitors of the station with Cassie and Doctor Okoye, each had their own window.

Havelock watched them all, waiting for the next thing to go wrong. Every minute seemed to stretch. The air recycler hummed and clicked. He chewed his thumbnail.

When the incoming message chime sounded, he started and had to put his hands to the console to keep from drifting off. He shifted to his message queue. The new one came from the RCE corporate offices on Luna, and the subject was listed as POSSIBLE STRATEGIES FOR DEESCALATING CONFLICT ON NEW TERRA: CALL FOR INPUT. The timestamp was five hours ago.

Somewhere out near the ring gates, the radio signals had passed each other, waves of electromagnetism passing through the void with human meanings coded into them. The distance it had taken a year and a half to travel in person, the message had managed in five hours.

Five hours, and still too goddamn slow.

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Chapter Eleven: Holden

The *Rocinante* did the last of its deceleration burn on a tail of white fire and dropped into a high orbit around Ilus. Below, the planet looked enough like Earth that the fact that it didn't look like Earth was unsettling. Holden had looked down on alien worlds before. The rust red and white of Mars, the swirls and eddies of Saturn and Jupiter. They were totally unlike Earth's blue and brown and white. But Ilus had open sea and sky with puffs of cloud, all the markers that Holden's brain connected with his home world.

Except that there was only one large continent, and thousands of islands strung across its one giant ocean like brown beads on a necklace. The mix of alien and familiar made his head hurt.

"*Rocinante*," the *Edward Israel* broadcast at them. "Why are you target locking us?"

"Uh..." Holden slapped at the comm panel until he opened a channel to them. "No, that's just standard range finding, *Israel*. Nothing to worry about."

"Roger that," a not quite convinced voice replied from the other ship.

"Alex," Holden said, switching to the internal channel. "Please stop poking the bear."

"Roger that, Cap," Alex said, exaggerating his drawl and stifling a laugh. "Just lettin' the locals know there's a new sheriff in town."

"Stop it. Give us an hour for the final check and get us dirtside."

"Okey dokey," Alex said. "Long time since I landed one of these."

"Is it going to be a problem?"

"Nope."

Holden climbed out of the ops chair and floated to the crew ladder. A

few minutes later he was on the airlock deck with Amos. The mechanic had laid out two suits of their Martian-made light combat armor, a number of rifles and shotguns, and stacks of ammunition and explosives.

“What,” Holden said, “is all this?”

“You said to gear up for the drop.”

“I meant, like, underwear and toothbrushes.”

“Captain,” Amos said, almost hiding his impatience. “They’re killing each other down there. Half a dozen RCE security vanished into thin air, and a heavy lift shuttle got blown up.”

“Yes, and our job is not to escalate that. Put all this shit away. Sidearms only. Bring clothes and sundries for us, any spare medical supplies for the colony. But that’s it.”

“Later,” Amos said, “when you’re wishing we had this stuff, I am going to be merciless in my mockery. And then we’ll die.”

Holden started a snarky reply, then stopped himself. Had anything *ever* gone the way he planned? “Okay, one rifle each, but disassembled and in a duffel. Nothing visible. And light torso armor only. Something we can hide under our clothes.”

“Captain,” Amos said with mock surprise. “Have you actually *learned* from your past? Is this a new thing you do now?”

“Why do I put up with your shit?”

“Because,” Amos said, starting to strip an assault rifle down to its component parts, “I’m the only one on the ship that can keep the coffee maker running.”

“I’m off to get underwear and a toothbrush.”



The *Rocinante* would have lit the night sky of Ilus during the final part of her deceleration burn. When she landed in a field outside of the colony’s ramshackle town, she’d kicked up a dust cloud a kilometer across, and the noise of her descent should have rattled windows twice that far away.

So Holden was a little surprised and disappointed when no one was there to greet them.

He was the joint OPA and Earth mediator, personally selected by Chrisjen Avasarala of the UN and Fred Johnson, leader of the OPA as much

as the OPA could be led, to oversee the settlement talks. In other places, that would merit a formal greeting by the planetary governor and possibly a marching band. Holden would have settled for a ride into town.

He hefted his two heavy bags and started to trudge toward the settlement. Amos carried three. The third was the one he called his *everything has gone to shit* bag. Holden sincerely hoped they never had to open it.

When they were far enough away, Holden sent the signal to Alex and the *Rocinante* blasted off again, kicking up a massive dust storm for a few seconds.

“You know,” Amos said conversationally, “we landed so far from town to avoid blowing dust on the locals, and they couldn’t even be bothered to send out a cart to pick us up? Seems ungrateful.”

“Yeah. A little annoyed at that myself. Next time I have Alex land right in the damn town square.”

Amos gestured with his head at a massive alien structure rising in the distance. It looked like two thin towers of glass twisted together, like a pair of trees growing beside each other.

“So, there’s that,” he said.

Holden had no reply. It was one thing to read about “alien ruins” on the location report. It was another thing entirely to see a massive construct built by another species towering over the landscape. How old was it? A couple billion years, if Miller could be believed on how long the protomolecule masters had been gone. Had humans ever built anything that would last that long?

“According to the security wonks on the *Israel*, that’s where they think their people were massacred,” Holden said after they’d walked together for several minutes.

“Oh good,” Amos replied. “Somebody got killed there. That’s how we claim stuff, you know. This planet is officially ours now.”

Other than the admittedly hard-to-ignore alien tower, the rest of the landscape could have been the North American southwest. Hardpan dirt, with small shrublike plants. Small creatures scurried away at their approach. For a few moments they were surrounded by a cloud of biting insects, but after a number of them bit, drank their blood, and dropped dead, the rest seemed to pick up that humans weren’t food and lost interest.

The colony itself looked like a shantytown. A ramshackle mix of prefab buildings and lean-tos made out of scrap metal and brick. A few were made of mud, so someone had decided to try using adobe. Something about the idea of humans traveling fifty thousand light-years and then building houses using ten-thousand-year-old technology put a smile on Holden's face. Humans were very strange creatures, but sometimes they were also charming.

A mob had gathered at the center of town. Or, more accurately, at the intersection of the only two dirt roads. Fifty or so colonists were facing off with a dozen people in RCE uniforms. They were shouting at each other, though Holden couldn't make out the words.

Someone on the edge of the crowd noticed them walking into town and pointed. The arguing died down, and then the entire crowd surged toward Holden and Amos. Holden dropped his bags and waved, smiling. Amos smiled too, though he casually rested his hand on the butt of his pistol.

A tall, stocky woman a few years older than Holden rushed over to him and grabbed his hands. Holden was almost certain she was Carol Chiwewe, but if that were true, she'd changed a lot since the picture in his briefing files had been taken.

"Finally! Now you need to tell these goons—"

Before she could finish or Holden could respond, the rest of the crowd started shouting at him all at once. Holden could hear snatches of their demands: that he drive off RCE, that he give them food or medicine or money, that he let them sell their lithium, that he prove that the colony had nothing to do with the disappearance of the security officers.

As Holden tried to quiet the mob, an older man in an RCE security uniform strolled slowly toward him, the rest of the corporate security people following in a wide V, like a flock of geese.

"Please, stop. I'll hear out each and every one of your requests once we get settled in. But we can't do anything if you all yell at—"

"Chief Murtry," the RCE man said, moving through the crowd like it wasn't there, sticking his hand out and smiling. "Royal Charter Energy, head of expedition security."

Holden shook his hand. "Jim Holden. Joint UN/OPA mediator."

The crowd hushed and moved away, creating a small circle of calm with Holden and Murtry at its center.

“Those were your people that disappeared,” Holden continued.

“They got murdered,” Murtry corrected him, not losing his smile. The man made Holden think of a shark. All bared teeth and cold black eyes.

“My understanding is that that was not proven.”

“It’s true they cleaned up the scene. But I have no doubt.”

“Until *I* have no doubt, no punitive action is to be taken,” Holden said. He felt Amos move up closer behind him, a silent threat.

Murtry’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “You’re the boss.”

“Mediator,” Holden said, his tone letting Murtry know that as far as he was concerned, it meant the same thing.

Murtry nodded and spat to one side.

“Sure.”

The dam broke, and the crowd rushed back in toward them, a tall woman pushing her way to the front. She jabbed her hand at Holden in an angry demand for a handshake. If Murtry had gotten one, she was going to get one too.

“Carol Chiwewe, colony coordinator,” she said giving his hand two firm pumps. So that first woman had to have been someone else.

“Hello, madam coordinator,” Holden started.

“This man,” she continued, stabbing her fingers at Murtry, “is threatening us with martial law! He claims that the charter gives RCE the right to—”

“Enforce the laws of the UN charter, and keep the peace,” Murtry said, somehow managing to talk over the top of her without raising his voice.

“Keep the peace?” Carol said. “You gave your people a shoot-first directive!”

The crowd rumbled in disapproval at this, and the shouting started up again. Holden waved his arms to calm them back down. He hoped it looked more dignified and commanding than it felt. When Murtry spoke, his voice was calm but hard.

“I have a hard time seeing how we’d be shooting first. Everybody that’s died so far, your people killed. I won’t tolerate any further threats against RCE employees or property.”

A tall man with the large cranium of someone raised in the Belt pushed his way to the front. “Sounds like a threat right there, mate.”

“Coop, please, don’t make this worse,” Carol said with a resigned sigh.

Ah, Coop is a troublemaker, Holden thought, making a note to remember the face.

“Just seems to me,” Coop said, turning to look back at the mob with a grin, raising his voice to play to the crowd. “Just seems to me that the only one making threats right now is *you*.”

The crowd rumbled encouragement, and Coop grinned from ear to ear, enjoying the power that came from giving the mob a voice.

Murtry nodded at him, still smiling. “There isn’t anything I won’t do to protect the lives of my team, that’s true. And we’ve lost too many already to take further chances.”

“Hey, don’t blame us, mate, if you can’t keep track of your people.” Someone in the crowd laughed.

“Don’t worry,” Murtry said, his smile still didn’t change, but he stepped in close to Coop. “I’ll find out what happened to them.”

“Maybe *you* should be careful,” Coop said, looking down at the shorter man, his grin turning feral. “Or, you know, it might happen to you too.”

“That,” Murtry said, drawing his gun, “was definitely a threat.”

He shot Coop in the right eye. The Belter man went limp and dropped like a machine that had been unplugged. Holden’s own gun was in his hand and pointed at Murtry even before he fully processed what had just happened. Amos stepped up next to him, his pistol trained on the RCE security chief. The entire RCE team pulled weapons and aimed them back at Holden. The crowd was deathly silent.

“What the *hell*!” Holden said. “I just said no punitive action. I mean, I just *said* that.”

“You did. That wasn’t punitive action, it was a response to a direct verbal threat.” Murtry put his pistol away and turned back to Holden. “We’ve established martial law here, under article 71 of the UN charter for exploration of this world. Any threat to RCE personnel will be dealt with swiftly and with prejudice.”

He stared at Holden for several long seconds, then said, “Might should put your gun away, Captain.”

Amos took a half step forward, but Holden put a hand on his arm. “Put it away, Amos.” He holstered his own gun, and a second later the RCE team did the same.

“I’m glad we could establish this working rapport so quickly. I’d

recommend you get settled in,” Murtry said. “I’ll come by for a visit later.”



The coordinator had set aside rooms for Holden and Amos in the large, boxy prefab warehouse structure that had been converted into a combination of general store, commissary, and pub. The rooms in back were furnished with a cot, a table, and a water basin for washing.

“They gave us the presidential suite, I see,” Amos said, dumping his bags on the floor of his tiny room. “I need a drink.”

“Give me a second,” Holden said, then went into his own room and called up to the *Rocinante*. He delivered a full report of the landing and the shooting of Coop. Naomi promised to beam it back to Fred and Avasarala for him, and told him to be careful.

The bar, such as it was, consisted of four shaky card tables and twenty or so chairs scattered near the commissary corner of the building. Amos was waiting with two bottles of beer when Holden finished up his report.

“That went well.”

“Get the feeling we may be in over our heads here?” Amos asked after a few companionable sips of beer.

“Feels about normal to me,” Holden replied.

“Yep.”

They were on their second beer each when Murtry arrived. He talked to the bartender for a minute, then sat down across from Holden and put a bottle of whiskey and three glasses on the table.

“Have a drink with me, Captain,” he said, pouring out three shots.

“You’re going to go to prison for what you did today,” Holden said, then tossed back his shot. The whiskey had the sour moldy taste of Belter distillations. “I plan to make sure of that.”

Murtry shrugged. “Maybe. My plan is to make sure all my people survive long enough for prison to be an issue. I’ve lost almost twenty now, between the attack on the shuttle and the murder of my ground team. I won’t lose any more.”

“You’re a corporate security detail. You don’t get to declare martial law and shoot people who don’t cooperate. I wouldn’t put up with that from legitimate governments, much less a rent-a-cop like you.” Holden poured

himself another drink and sipped at it.

“What’s the name of this planet?”

“What?”

“The planet. What’s its name?”

Holden leaned forward, the word *Ilus* on his lips. He paused. Murtry’s smile was thin.

“You’ve spent a lot of time working for the OPA, Captain Holden. And you’re on record as harboring a deep-seated dislike of the kind of business that employs me. I have some reservations about your ability to address the situation here in an unbiased manner. Threatening me and calling me names doesn’t do much to reassure me.”

“You undermined my authority by killing a Belter within five minutes of my arrival,” Holden said.

“I did. And I understand that could make you feel that I’m not taking your role here seriously. But your friends in the UN are a year and a half away,” Murtry said. “Think about that. It takes between eight and eleven hours to have the first two exchanges of a conversation, and almost nineteen months to get here from there at civilian speeds. Our local governor has been murdered by terrorists. My people have been killed for trying to enforce our legal rights. Do you honestly think I’m going to wait for you to fix what’s wrong here? No, I’ll shoot everyone who threatens the RCE expedition or its employees, and I’ll sleep well afterward. That’s the reality of where you are now. Better get used to it.”

“I know who you are,” Amos said.

The big man had been so quiet that both Murtry and Holden started with surprise.

“Who am I?” Murtry asked, playing along.

“A killer,” Amos said. His face was expressionless, his tone light. “You’ve got a nifty excuse and the shiny badge to make you seem right, but that’s not what this is about. You got off on smoking that guy in front of everyone. You can’t wait to do it again.”

“Is that right?” Murtry asked.

“Yeah. So, one killer to another, you don’t want to try that shit with us.”

“Amos, easy,” Holden warned, but the other two men ignored him.

“That sounded like a threat,” Murtry said.

“Oh, it really was,” Amos replied with a grin.

Holden realized both men had their hands below the table. "Hey, now."

"I think maybe one of us is going to end bloody," Murtry said.

"How about now?" Amos replied with a shrug. "I'm free now. We can just skip all the middle part."

Murtry and Amos smiled at each other across the table for an endless moment while Holden ran through contingencies in his mind: *What if Amos gets shot, what if Murtry gets shot, what if I get shot.*

"You fellas have a nice day," Murtry said, standing slowly. His hand was not on his gun. "Keep the bottle."

"Thanks!" Amos replied, pouring another drink.

Murtry nodded at them, then walked out of the bar.

Holden let out an exhalation that he'd been holding for what seemed like an hour. "Yeah, I think we are in way over our heads here," he admitted.

"I'm gonna need to shoot that guy at some point," Amos said, then tossed back another shot.

"I wish you wouldn't. This is already looking like a train wreck, and in addition to chewing up a few hundred colonists and scientists, which is bad enough, it will also be my fault when it all falls apart."

"Shooting him might help."

"I hope not," Holden said, but he was worried that Amos was right.

Interlude: The Investigator

—it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out—

One hundred and thirteen times a second, nothing answers and it reaches out. It feels no frustration, though parts of it do. It is not designed to incorporate consciousness or will, but to use whatever it finds. The minds within it are encysted, walled off. They are used when they are of use, as is everything and it reaches out.

It is not a plan. It is not even a desire, or it is only a desire without knowledge of that longing's object. It is a selective pressure pressed against chaos. It does not think of itself this way because it does not think, but the environment changes, a new branch of possibilities opens, and it forms the investigator and leans into the new crack. The new space. The minds within it interpret this differently. As a hand reaching up through graveyard soil. As finding a door in a room where no door had been before. As a breath of air to a drowning woman. It is not aware of these images, but awareness of them is part of it.

The investigator puts pressure on the aboriginal, and the aboriginal takes action. The environment changes again. Patterns begin to match patterns, but there can be no recognition because it is not conscious to recognize. It would be aware of the aboriginal accelerating, of it slowing, the vectors shifting zero to one to a different zero in a different location, if it were aware, but it is not aware. It reaches out.

Patterns match, and it reorients and reaches out. Cascades of implicit information bloom, and the conscious parts of it see a lotus opening forever, hear a shout that is made of other shouts that are made of other shouts in a fractal constructed of sound, pray to God for a death that does not come.

It reaches out, but the ways in which it reaches change. It improvises, as

it always has, the insect twitch, the spark closing the gap it reaches out.

It touches something, and for a moment, a part of it that can feel, feels hope. It is unaware of hope. The reply does not come. It is not over. It will never be over. It reaches out, and finds new things. Old things. It flows into places that are comfortable for it to flow. There are responses, and the responses feed the impulses that caused them, and there are more responses. All automatic and empty and dead as it is. Nothing reaches back. It feels no disappointment. It does not shut down. It reaches out.

It does not experience the wariness, but the wariness is part of it. It reaches out, rushing into the new possibility space, and something deep in it, wider than it should be, watches it reach.

Doors and corners. It reaches out it reaches out it reaches out. Doors and corners.

This could get ugly, kid.

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Chapter Twelve: Basia

James Holden came too late.

Along with everyone else in the colony, Basia watched the drive plume of the *Rocinante* light the sky of Ilus. For him, maybe, it was already too late. He'd made the bombs that destroyed the RCE shuttle and killed the UN governor. He'd been there when Coop and the others murdered the RCE security team. And maybe there was no coming back from that. Maybe he was already a dead man, or a man destined for life in prison, the same thing really. But looking up at the line of white fire in sky, he couldn't help but feel a spark of hope. Jim Holden had saved the Ganymede children, too late for Katoa, but he'd saved the others. He'd brought down the evil corporation that had killed Basia's little boy. Neither Mao-Kwikowski nor Protogen existed anymore because of Holden. And while Basia had never met the man in person, he'd watched him on video casts and read about him in newsfeeds. It created a strange sense of intimacy, to watch the man who'd avenged Katoa on-screen, talking and smiling.

And that man was coming to Ilus. Perhaps he could save Basia too?

So when the bright line in the sky vanished, and Basia knew Holden and his crew were in orbit, he let himself feel a swell of hope. The first he'd felt in a long time.

And when he heard the thunderclap of a descending shuttle, he ran outside just like all the other colonists, watching to see where it would land. *The UN mediator is coming!* they shouted to each other. The man who saved Earth, they meant. The man who saved Ganymede. The man who will save us.

A small shuttle dropped out of the sky and settled on the hard-packed

earth to the south of First Landing, and half the town's population ran to meet it. Basia ran too.

The shuttle sat on five squat legs, ticking with heat. The town waited in silence, too excited to talk. Then a ramp lowered to the ground, and a squat Earther with gray hair and a deeply lined face walked down it. It wasn't Holden. One of his crew, maybe? But the man was wearing armor with the RCE logo on it, and Holden was supposed to be an impartial mediator.

The man stopped halfway down the ramp and smiled a humorless smile at them. Basia realized he was holding his breath, then realized everyone else was too.

"Hello," the man said. "My name is Adolphus Murtry. I'm chief of security for Royal Charter Energy."

Was it another RCE ship they'd seen braking into orbit? The man walked down the ramp, still smiling that predator's smile, and as one the crowd backed away. Basia backed up with them.

"Because of the attack on the shuttle that claimed the lives of many RCE employees *and* UN officials, I am taking direct control of security on this world. If that sounds like martial law, that's because it is." Murtry whistled, and ten more people in security armor descended the ramp. They carried automatic weapons and slug-throwing sidearms. Not a non-lethal deterrent in sight.

"Please be aware," Murtry continued, "that because of the attack on the first security team—"

"No one proved they were attacked!" someone shouted from the crowd. Coop, it was Coop. Standing at the back with his arms crossed and a smug smile on his face.

"Because of that attack," Murtry continued, "I have given my people 'shoot first' authorization. They may, if they feel threatened, utilize lethal force to defuse the threat."

Carol pushed through the crowd to confront Murtry at the bottom of the ramp, and Coop followed her.

"You're not the government here," Carol said, anger making the tendons in her neck stand out. Her hands were in fists, but she kept them at her sides. "You can't just land here with a bunch of guns and tell us you have the right to shoot us. This is *our world*."

"That's right!" Coop yelled and turned to face the crowd, inviting them

to join in.

“No,” Murtry said, his smile not changing, “it is not.”

The air was split with thunder as another ship dropped into the atmosphere and landed on the western side of town. Murtry barely glanced up at it. *More troops dropping in*, Basia thought.

Murtry began walking toward town, his people trailing out behind him, and the crowd moving in a loose cloud around them. Carol kept talking, but her words had no effect. Murtry just smiled and nodded and didn’t break stride. The ship that had landed on the other side of town blasted off on a column of white vapor and vanished from sight. The roar of its engines filled the world.

When they reached the center of town, Basia saw Jacek hanging around at the edge of the crowd. He grabbed his son by the arm, pulling him harder than he intended, and the boy gave a frightened squeak.

“Papa,” he said as Basia dragged him away, “am I in trouble?”

“Yes,” Basia shouted, then when he saw tears welling up in the boy’s eyes stopped and dropped to his knees next to him. “No. No, son. You’re not. But I need you to go home.”

“But—” Jacek started.

“No buts, boy,” Basia gave him a gentle shove toward their house. “Go home.”

“Is that man going to kill us?” Jacek asked.

“What man?” Basia asked, but it was a delaying tactic. He knew what man. Even his little boy could smell the death coming off of Murtry and his people. “No one’s going to kill us. Go home.”

Basia watched Jacek walk home, waiting until he saw the boy go inside and close the door. Basia was just starting to walk back toward the crowd when the shot rang out.

His first thought was, *Jacek was right. They are killing us.*

Not *us*, though, once he got back to the crowd. Just Coop, lying in the dust with a red hole where his eye should be, blood pooling under his head.

And Holden, jaw clenched and eyes wide.

Too late, Basia thought. *Too late again.*



People with machine guns walked the streets of First Landing.

Basia and Lucia sat on their tiny front porch and watched them pass by in the fading sunlight of early evening. A man and a woman, both in body armor with the red-and-blue RCE company logo on it. Both carrying automatic weapons. Both with hard expressions on their faces.

“I did this,” Basia said.

Lucia squeezed his hand. “Drink your tea, Baz.”

Basia looked down at the cup of tea cooling on his lap. All the tea the little colony might ever have had come down on the shuttles with them. To waste such a luxury was unthinkable. He sipped at the lukewarm cup and didn’t taste it.

“They’ll kill me, next.”

“Maybe.”

“Or put me in jail forever, take me away from my family.”

“You,” Lucia said, “took yourself away when you joined with those stupid violent people who blew up the shuttle. You drove them out to the ruins when they killed the RCE people. You made every choice that took you to this place. I love you, Basia Merton. I love you till my chest aches. But you are a stupid, stupid man. And when they take you away from me, I will not forgive you for it.”

“You’re a harsh woman.”

“I’m a doctor,” Lucia said. “I’m used to giving people bad news.”

Basia drank off the rest of his tea before it could finish getting cold. “I could get some rope or chain from the dig site. Maybe hang a bench here. Then we could rock while we sit.”

“That might be nice,” Lucia said. The pair of RCE guards reached the end of the street and turned around to come back. With the sun about to dip below the horizon, their shadows were almost as long as the town itself.

“We’ve been focusing on lithium mining to get money,” Basia continued. “But we need to start thinking about our own energy needs.”

“This is true.”

“We can’t have the *Barb* bringing us power cells forever. And someday the ship will fly back to Pallas to sell the ore. So we won’t have her for a couple years.”

“Also true,” Lucia said. She swirled the last of her tea and stared up at the stars. “I miss having Jupiter in the sky.”

“It was beautiful,” Basia agreed. “I have to go meet with Cate and the others tonight, after it gets dark.”

“Baz,” Lucia started, then just stopped with sad sigh.

“They’ll want revenge for Coop. It will only make it worse.”

“What,” Lucia said, “does worse look like, I wonder?”

Basia sat quietly, thinking of the rocker he could build on their porch. Of adding a bigger water heater for hot baths. Of building a larger kitchen and dining area on the back of the house. Of all the things he wouldn’t get to do now.

The guards were at the end of the town’s long street, almost invisible in their dark armor and the fading light. Basia got up to leave.

“Can you stop them from killing anyone else?” Lucia asked, as though she were asking if he wanted more tea.

“Yes,” Basia replied. It felt like a lie.

“Then go.”



They met at Cate’s house. Pete and Scotty and Ibrahim. Even Zadio came, her wife Amanda staying home to look after their boy and his infected eye. That wasn’t a good sign. Of all of them, Zadio was the angriest. The one with the hottest head. Basia had worked with her on Ganymede, and more than once she’d shown up in the morning with a black eye or a busted lip from some bar fight she’d picked the night before. They were all upset, all standing on the ledge about to jump, but Zadio would be the hardest to talk off of it.

“They shot Coop,” Cate said when Scotty, the last of them to arrive, finally came in. It wasn’t a statement of fact. They’d all been there. They’d all seen it. No, it was the beginning of a justification.

“In cold blood,” Zadio said, and punctuated it with a fist to her palm. “We all saw it. Just shot him in the face in front of God and everyone.”

“So I have a plan,” Cate continued. “The RCE people are holed up in—”

“Who put you in charge?” Zadio asked.

“Murtry did.”

Zadio narrowed her eyes, but let it drop. Basia fidgeted on one end of Cate’s couch. It was a handmade frame, covered with padding stripped from

the ship and badly stitched remnants of the cloth they had the fabricator crank out once a month for clothing and other needs. Cate had made a small table out of the local wood analog to sit next to it. It wasn't quite level, and Basia's glass of water was at a noticeable tilt. Pictures of Cate's family, two sisters who still lived back in the Belt and their kids, hung on the walls. There was a pottery vase on the floor with sticks and branches in it that Basia thought was meant as decoration, not kindling.

It was too domestic a location for the kind of meeting they were having. It all felt unreal, that he and five people he knew were discussing the murder of a dozen corporate security guards in Cate's living room next to her vase full of sticks.

Scotty was talking, telling them to wait. Not the voice of reason, the voice of fear. Pete was on his side, arguing against escalating. Cate and Zadie shouted them down. Ibrahim said nothing, just pulled on his bottom lip and frowned at the floor.

"I think we wait for Holden," Basia said when there was a pause in the conversation.

"Holden's been here a day. What are we waiting for?" Cate asked, dripping angry sarcasm.

"He needs time to meet with us, get the lay of the land," Basia said, the words sounding feeble even in his own ears. "But he's the mediator. And he can talk directly to the OPA governing board and to the UN. His recommendations will have real weight. We need him on our side."

"The OPA?" Zadie spat. "The UN? What exactly are they going to do for us? Send a tersely worded letter? Murtry and his thugs are right there!" Zadie stabbed her fingers at the wall, at the street beyond, at the guards with machine guns. "How many of our people do they get to kill before we defend ourselves?"

"We killed them first," Basia said, then regretted it immediately. Everyone started shouting, mostly at him. Basia stood up. He knew he was an imposing figure, stocky and thick-necked. Bigger than anyone else in the room. He stepped forward, a physical challenge. He hoped his size would be enough. He was fairly certain Cate could beat him to death if she decided to. "Shut up!" They did. "We have a chance here," he continued, quieting his voice with an effort. "But it's so fragile. We killed the RCE people."

"I wasn't—" Zadie started, but Basia hushed her with a gesture.

“They killed Coop. Right now, they feel like they’ve made a point, so they won’t kill anyone else unless we provoke them. So, right now, we are at a balance. If no one does anything to tip it one way or another, Holden can do what they sent him here to do. He can help us resolve this without more violence.”

Cate snorted and looked away, but Basia ignored her. “I’m in this with you. I have just as much to lose as any of you. But we want this man on our side. He saw Murtry murder one of us. He’s never seen us do anything. We have the advantage of seeming like the victims right now. Let’s not change his mind on that.”

There was a long moment while Basia stood in the middle of the room, panting with emotion, and no one spoke.

“Okay,” Ibrahim said. He’d been a soldier once. The others respected him. When he finally spoke, it was with a tone of authority. Cate frowned, but said nothing.

“Okay?”

“Okay, big man,” Ibrahim said. “We play it your way for now. Go talk to this Holden. Get him on our side. He’s the one found your boy, sa sa? Use that.”

Basia felt a rush of anger and shame at the mention of Katoa, of using him as an in with Holden, but he pushed it down. Ibrahim was right. It would give Basia something to talk to Holden about, and it would make him seem sympathetic.

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow,” Basia said, swallowing the sudden nausea he felt.

“It’s on you now, big man,” Ibrahim said. It sounded like a threat.



Basia walked home in the pitch black of the Ilus night. He wished he’d thought to bring a light. He wished he’d never blown up a shuttle full of people and helped Coop murder the RCE guards. He wished his wife wasn’t angry with him, and that she wasn’t right. He wished that Katoa were still alive and that they all still lived in their home on Ganymede and that no one had ever come to Ilus in the first place.

He tripped on a rock and fell to his knee, skinning it. No way to fix the

other things, but at least he could have thought to bring a light.

Lucia had left a light on in the house. Without it, Basia might have walked right past it without realizing. At least she wanted him to come home. She left lights on to make it happen. For the first time in a long time, Basia felt himself smile.

A shadowy figure darted through the dim light around the house to the back door. Before he had time to think, Basia was at a dead run. The figure at the door cowered, smaller than him and terrified.

Felcia.

“Papa! You scared me!”

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry. I didn’t see it was you. Just saw someone sneaking around the house and came running.”

Felcia smiled up at him, eyes damp and lip trembling, but being brave.

“Okay, going in now.”

“Felcia,” Basia said, putting his hand against the door to hold it closed. “Why are you sneaking up to the house in the middle of the night?”

“I was out, walking.” She looked away, not able to meet his eyes.

“Please, baby, tell me it was a boy.”

“It was a boy,” she said, still not looking at him.

“Felcia.”

“I’m going up on the next shuttle, Papa,” she said, looking him in the eye finally. “I’m going up. When James Holden gets them to let the *Barbapiccola* go, I’m going with it. From Pallas I can catch transport to Ceres. Mama is calling her old mentor at CUMA to get me an interview for the pre-med program at the Hadrian on Luna.”

Basia felt like someone had punched him in the solar plexus. The pain in his stomach kept him from breathing.

“I’m going, Papa.”

“No,” he said. “You’re not.”

Chapter Thirteen: Elvi

Elvi's grandfather had remarried late in life. His new husband had been a German man with a merry laugh, a snow-white beard, and a cheerful cynicism about humanity. What she remembered best about Grandpa Raynard was how quick he was with an epigram or a quip. He had one for every occasion. She'd thought they made him sound worldly and wise, in part because she was so often unsure what exactly he meant by them.

One thing he'd said was *Once is never. Twice is always.*

When the shuttle went down, she'd known—they'd all known—that someone had put the explosives there, but her experience of the Belter colonists beginning that same night had been so different that the knowledge and the emotional impact of it had become detached. Someone among the Belters had done a terrible thing, but that person was faceless, anonymous, unreal. Doctor Merton doing everything she could to save the wounded and soothe the injured was real. Her daughter, Felcia, who was at the farthest point humanity had ever been from Earth and whose ambitions were drawing her back toward Luna, was real. Anson Kottler and his sister Kani who'd helped Elvi set up her hut. Samish Oe with his goofy half smile was real. Carol Chiwewe. Eirinn Sanchez. They had all been so kind that Elvi had shelved the death of the governor as an outlier, something so rare it would never happen again.

But the disappearance of Reeve and the security crew was twice, and the way Elvi saw the colony and the RCE scientists and her own little hut out on the edge of the plain was different now. Because the threat of violence wasn't *never* anymore. It was *always*.

"Did you see anything else?" Murtry asked.

“No,” Elvi said. “I don’t think so.”

“Doctor Okoye, I know this has been unpleasant for you,” the chief of security said, “but I need to you try to remember if there was anything else you saw while you were out there. The person you saw coming back. Can you say if it was a man? A woman?”

That wasn’t how memory worked, of course. Just willing herself to remember something, pushing herself, was much more likely to generate a false recollection and add bad data to the set than it was to haul up some telling detail she’d failed to mention. It seemed rude to explain that to Murtry, so Elvi only shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s all right,” he said in a tone of voice that hinted strongly at his disappointment. “If anything else occurs to you, please do bring it to me.”

“I will.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“I guess so. Why?”

“The UN mediator’s asked to talk with you too,” Murtry said. “You don’t have to if you don’t want, though. Just say the word, and I’ll tell him to go piss up a rope.”

“No, I don’t mind,” she said, but she was thinking, *James Holden wants to talk to me?* “Should I... I mean, is there anything I should particularly tell him? About the work, I mean?”

The truth was, she just wanted to get out of the security offices. The extended thirty-hour day of New Terra made it hard to feel exactly how long she’d been there, but she’d come to Reeve in darkness, she’d slept in one of the cells that night. She’d stayed there while Murtry and the security team came down and made the town safe, and now it was morning again. So two days, New Terra. Maybe three back on Earth. What exactly *day* meant wasn’t intuitive anymore.

“Captain Holden needs to understand exactly how bad our situation here is,” Murtry said. “He came out here thinking there’s two sides to this, so he’s wanting to split some kind of difference. Anything you can do to help him understand why that’s not the solution here, I would very much appreciate.”

“Oh,” she said. “Yes, of course.”

“Thank you,” Murtry said.

“One thing?”

Murtry raised his eyebrows and tilted his head toward her. He didn’t quite say, *Yes, ma’am?* but it was physically implied.

“My research is still in my hut,” she said. “I have some studies that were in progress when I came to talk to... when I came in. Is my hut off-limits, or will I be able to get back to them?”

“You’ll go back,” Murtry said. “The one thing that is not going to happen here, Doctor? We’re not giving back a goddamn centimeter of our ground. Whoever did this doesn’t get to win.”

“Thank you,” Elvi said.

Murtry’s expression hardened for a moment. His eyes became flat in a way that Elvi associated with lab animals being sacrificed. He looked dead.

“You’re welcome,” he said.



Walking down the street of the town, Elvi felt a pang of unease, but less so than she’d expected. The little siege she’d suffered in the security office waiting for the relief team to come had been a bleak and frightening time. But now familiar faces had joined the townsmen. Two women in RCE security riot armor walked down the street across from her, their assault rifles resting easily in their hands. Just seeing them there left Elvi feeling safer. And then Holden had also arrived. Certainly, things weren’t where they needed to be, but they were getting closer. They were getting better. That would have to be enough for now.

Another guard stood at the entrance to the general store, a rifle resting in his hands.

“Doctor Okoye,” he said nodding her inside.

“Mister Smith,” she said.

She’d been in the commissary building many times in the weeks since she’d landed on New Terra. Apart from little intimate get-togethers in the research huts and the formal town meetings in the community hall, it was the only place to go unless she found religion. She could see—*feel*—at once how the presence of James Holden had changed the nature of the space. It had been a community place before, public in the same way a municipal park might be, without any commanding human presence. Now a man sat at

a table toward the back of the room, just as if he were a townsman getting a bowl of rice and a beer. Sitting there, leaning on his elbows and talking to Fayeze, he commanded the space. He owned it. What had belonged to everyone was now the unquestioned domain of James Holden. Elvi's belly went a little tighter and anxiety sped her breath.

She had seen Holden on the newsfeeds and reports. At the beginning of the war between Mars and the Belt, he had been the most important man in the solar system, and the celebrity, while it had waxed and waned over the years, had never gone away. James Holden was an icon. For some, he was the symbol of the triumph of the single ship over governments and corporations. For others, he was an agent of chaos who started wars and threatened stability in the name of ideological purity. But whatever people thought he meant, there was no question that he was important. He was the man who'd saved Earth from the protomolecule. He was the man who'd brought down Mao-Kwikowski. Who'd made the first contact with the alien artifact and opened the gates that led to a thousand different worlds.

In person, he looked different than his image on the screen. His face was still broad, but not as much so. His skin had a warmth that even years in the sunless box of a ship couldn't erase. The dark brown hair had a dusting of gray at the temples, but his eyes were the same sapphire blue. As she watched, Holden rubbed a hand across his chin, nodding at something that Fayeze was saying. It was an unconsciously masculine movement that left Elvi thinking of large animals—lions, gorillas, bears. There was no sense of threat in it, only of power, and she was profoundly aware that the man she had seen only as an image on a data feed was exhaling the same molecules that she was breathing in.

"You okay?"

Elvi started. The man who'd asked was huge, pale, and muscular. His shaved head and thick belly made him look like a gigantic baby. He put a hand on her shoulder as if to steady her.

"Fine?" she said, her inflection making it a question.

"You just looked a little weird there for a second. You sure you're feeling all right?"

"I was supposed to meet with Captain Holden?" she said, trying to pull herself back together. "My name's Elvi Okoye, and I'm with the RCE. I'm an exobiologist with RCE."

“Elvi!” Fayez called, waving her over.

She nodded to the pale man and walked over to the table where Fayez and Holden were sitting. James Holden’s eyes were on her.

“This is Elvi,” Fayez said. “We’ve known each other since upper university.”

“How do you do?” Elvi said, her voice sounding false and tinny in her ears. She cleared her throat.

“Pleased to meet you,” Holden said, rising to his feet and extending a hand. Elvi shook it just as if she were meeting anyone else. She was proud of herself for that.

“Sit,” Fayez said, pushing out a chair for her. “I was just talking to the captain here about the resources problem.”

“It’s not an issue yet,” Elvi said. “But it will be.”

Holden sighed, clasping his fingers together. “I’m still hopeful that we can negotiate something that’s equitable for everyone involved.”

Elvi frowned and tilted her head. “How would you do that?”

Holden lifted his eyebrows. Fayez leaned in toward her.

“We were talking about resources like lithium and money,” he said, then turned toward Holden again. “She was talking about water and nutrients. Different contexts.”

“Is there not enough water?” Holden asked.

“There is,” Elvi said, hoping that her blush didn’t show. Of course they were talking about lithium mines. She should have known that. “I mean, there’s enough water. And nutrients. But that’s sort of the problem. We’re here in the middle of a totally foreign biosphere. Everything about the place is different from what we’re used to dealing with. I mean, it looks like life here is genuinely bi-chiral.”

“Really?” Holden said.

“No one knows what that means, Elvi,” Fayez said.

Holden politely pretended not to have heard him. “But the animals and insects here all look... well, they don’t look familiar, but they’ve got eyes and things.”

“They’re under the same selection pressures,” Elvi said. “Some things are just a good idea. Back on Earth, eyes evolved four or five different times. Powered flight at least three times. Most animals put the mouth near the sense organs. The degree of large-scale morphological similarities given

the underlying biochemical differences is part of what makes this such an amazing research opportunity. The data I've been able to send back since we got here would be enough to fuel research for a generation, and I've barely scratched the surface."

"And the resources problem?" Holden said. "What are the resources you need?"

"It's not the ones we need," Elvi said, waving her hands. "It's the ones we *are*. From the perspective of the local environment, we're bubbles of water, ions, and high-energy molecules. We're not exactly the flavor that's around here, but it's only a matter of time before something figures out a way to exploit those."

"Like a virus?" Holden asked.

"Viruses are a lot more like us than what we're seeing here," Elvi said. "Viruses have nucleic acids. RNA. They evolved with us. When something here figures out how to access us as resources, it's probably going to be more like mining."

Holden's expression was dismayed. "Mining," he echoed.

"We have an advantage for the time being because we're an older biosphere. From what we can tell, things weren't really evolving here until sometime between one and a half and two billion years ago. We've got pretty strong evidence that we have a good billion-year head start on these guys, at least. And some of our strategies may work against them. If we can build antibodies against the proteins that the locals use, we might be able to fight them off like any other infection."

"Or we might not," Fayez said.

"Part of the reason I came out here, part of the reason I agreed to this, was that we were going to do it *right*," Elvi said, hearing the stress coming into her voice. "We were going to get a sealed environment. A *dome*. We were going to survey the planet and learn from it and be responsible about how we treated it. The RCE sent scientists. They sent researchers. Do you know how many of us have sustainability and conservation certifications? Five-sixths. Five-*sixths*."

Her voice was louder now than she'd meant it to be. Her gestures were wider, and there was a tremble of outrage in her words. Holden's unreal blue eyes were on her, and she could feel him listening like his attention could radiate. Intellectually, she knew what was happening. She was scared

and she was hurt and she was guilty for having been the one to lead Reeve and the others into danger. She'd been able to ignore it all, but it was bubbling up. She was talking about the biology and the science, but what she meant was *Help me. It's all going wrong, and no one can help me. No one but you.*

"Only when you got here, there was already a colony," Holden said. His voice was like warm flannel. "And a colony made up of a bunch of people who have a lot of very good reasons to distrust corporations. And governments."

"It looks calm here," Elvi said. "It looks beautiful. And it is. And it's going to teach us things we never dreamed before. But we're doing it wrong."

Fayez sighed. "She's right," he said. "I mean, I like talking about lithium and moral rights and legalities as much as the next guy. But Elvi's not wrong about how weird this place is when we start looking close enough. And it's got a lot of very dangerous edges that we're not paying any attention to. Because we're, you know, killing each other."

"I hear what you're saying," Holden said. "I'm going to need to look at it. The part where people are killing each other has to be my first focus. But I promise you both that I will put creating a closed, safe planetary dome on the list as soon as we've got the crisis under control. No matter who winds up being in control."

"Thank you," Elvi said.

"Most of the people here are good," Fayez said. "The Belters? We've been here for months, and I swear most of these people aren't monsters. They're just poor bastards who thought starting over was a good idea. And Royal Charter is a very, very responsible corporation. Look at their history, and you won't find any more graft and corruption than an average PTA. They're really trying to do all this right."

"I know," Holden said. "And I wish to hell that made it easier."

"Uh, Captain?" the huge baby-man said.

"Amos?"

"There's another mess of legal crap just came through from the UN for you."

Holden sighed. "Am I supposed to read it?"

"Don't see how they can make you," Amos said. "Just thought you'd

want to ignore it intentionally.”

“Thank you. Sort of,” Holden said, then turned back to them. “I’m afraid I have to deal with bureaucracy for a while. But thank you both very much for coming. Please always feel free to come talk to me.”

Fayez stood, and Elvi followed half a second later. He shook each of their hands in turn, then retreated to a room in the back. Fayez walked out to the street with her. Hassan Smith and his rifle acknowledged them again as they passed by.

The sun glowed in the oxygen-blued sky. She knew it was a little too small, the spectrum of light from it a little slanted toward the orange, but it was familiar to her now. As right as thirty-hour days and her close, familiar hut. Fayez fell into step beside her.

“Heading back to your place?” he asked.

“I should,” she said. “I haven’t been out since I came to see Reeve. I’m sure all my datasets are finished. I probably have a bunch of angry messages from home.”

“Yeah, probably,” he said. “So are you all right?”

“You’re the third person to ask me that today,” Elvi said. “Am I acting like there’s something wrong with me?”

“A little,” Fayez said. “You’ve got a right to being a little freaked out.”

“I’m fine,” Elvi said. Her hand still tingled a little where Holden had held it. She massaged her skin. At the end of the street, a Belter girl was walking fast with her head down and her hands shoved deep in her pockets. Murtry and Chandra Wei stood behind her, watching her suspiciously, their rifles in their hands. The wind coming off the plain lifted swirls of dust in the corners of the alleys. She wanted to go back to her hut, and she didn’t. She wanted to go back up the well, onto the *Edward Israel* and home again, and she wouldn’t have left New Terra for all the money in the world. She remembered being very, very young and terribly upset about something. Crying into her mother’s shoulder that she wanted to go home, except that she was home when she said it. That was what she wanted now.

“Don’t do it,” Fayez said.

“Don’t do what?”

“Fall in love with Holden.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she snapped.

“In that case, *really* don’t do it,” Fayez said with a cynical laugh, and

turned away.

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Chapter Fourteen: Holden

This is the first colonial arbitration meeting,” Holden said, looking into the camera at the end of the table. “My name is James Holden. Representing the colony of New Terra—”

Ilus,” Carol said.

“—is Carol Chiwewe, colony administrator. Representing Royal Charter Energy is chief of security, Adolphus Murtry.”

“How exactly did that happen?” Carol said. She stared at Murtry when she said it, her expression unreadable. Holden had a feeling Carol might be a very good poker player.

Murtry smiled back at her. His face was equally unreadable. “What’s that?”

“You know exactly what I mean,” Carol snapped back. “What are you doing here? You’re hired security. You have no authority to—”

“You put me in this room,” Murtry said, “when you killed the colonial governor. You do remember that? Big explosion? Crashing ship? It would have been hard to miss.”

Holden sighed and leaned back in his uncomfortable chair. He would let the two of them bicker a bit, release some of the venom they’d been storing up, then put his foot down and drag the discussions back on topic.

RCE had offered to host the talks on their shuttle or the *Edward Israel*, which would have been a lot more comfortable. But the colony had demanded that the meeting be held in First Landing. Which meant that instead of contour-fitted gel filled chairs, they were sitting on whatever metal and plastic monstrosities the colony had lying around. The table was a sheet of epoxied carbon weave sitting on four metal legs, and the room

they were using was barely large enough for the table and three chairs. A small shelf on one wall held a coffee pot that was hissing to itself and throwing a bitter scorched smell into the air. Amos leaned against the room's one door, arms crossed, and with an expression so far beyond bored that he might actually have been asleep.

“—endless accusations without evidence to bolster your own *criminal* claims of property rights—” Carol was saying.

“Enough,” Holden cut in. “No more outbursts from either of you. I’m here at the request of the UN and OPA to broker some sort of agreement that can let RCE do the scientific work they’re authorized to do, and to keep the people already living on New Terra—”

“Ilus.”

“—Ilus from being harmed in the process.”

“What about RCE employees?” Murtry asked softly. “Are they allowed to be harmed?”

“No,” Holden said. “No, they are not. And so the mandate of these meetings has changed somewhat in light of recent events.”

“I’ve only seen one person murdered since Holden arrived, and that one is on you,” Carol said to Murtry.

“Madam coordinator,” Holden continued, “there can be no further attacks on the RCE personnel. That’s non-negotiable. We can’t work out any sort of deal here unless everyone knows they’re safe.”

“But he—”

“And you,” Holden continued, pointing at Murtry, “are a murderer, and one I intend to see prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law—”

“You have no—”

“—once we return to a region of space that actually *has* laws,” Holden said. “Which brings us to our first real discussion point. There are two competing claims regarding who has the right to administrate this expedition. We have to establish who makes the laws here.”

Murtry said nothing, but pulled a flexible display out of his coat and unrolled it on the table. It began slowly scrolling through the text of the UN charter giving RCE the scientific mission on New Terra. Carol snorted and pushed it back across the table at him.

“Yes,” Holden said. “RCE has a legal mandate from the UN placing them in control of this planet for the duration of their scientific mission. But

we can't ignore the fact that people had been living on New Terra, or Ilus, for months before that charter was drafted."

"No, we can't," Carol said.

"So we work out a compromise," Holden said, "that allows RCE to do the work they came here to do. Work which will, we hope, benefit everyone, including the colonists. This is a new world. There may be any number of dangers here we are unaware of. But this compromise must also allow for the possibility that the final decision of the home governments will be to grant Ilus self-governing status."

Amos snorted and his head jerked up, eyes wide open for a moment and then slowly narrowing back toward closed.

"Yeah, so," Holden said, "that's the long boring explanation. The short version is, I want RCE to move forward with doing the science, and I want the colonists to continue living their lives, and I don't want anyone getting killed. How do we make that happen?"

Murtry tilted his chair back on two legs and stretched out with his hands behind his head. "Well," he said, "you make a big point of telling me you plan to arrest me once we get back in civilized space."

"Yes."

"But by my count the *colonists*"—he sneered the word—"have racked up about two dozen kills."

"And when we figure out who the perpetrators are," Holden said, "they too will go back to Sol system to face trials."

"You're a detective now?" Murtry snorted. Holden felt a weird chill run down his spine and looked around as if Miller might somehow have appeared.

"I think that the RCE security force, working in conjunction with Mister Burton and myself, should continue its investigation of those crimes."

"Wait," Carol said, leaning forward suddenly in her chair, "I won't let him—"

"Investigation only. No trials can be held here, so no penalties can be meted out beyond protective detention, and that only with my express consent."

"Your express consent?" Murtry said, speaking slowly, like he was tasting the words. He smiled. "If they'll let my team keep looking into the killings while we continue the negotiations here, permit us the right to

protect ourselves, and guarantee that anyone with strong evidence against them will be held against future trial, I'm fine with that."

"Of course he is!" Carol said. "Delay is all he needs to kill us."

Holden frowned at that. "Explain."

"We're not self-supporting yet," Carol said. "We've got the *Barb* up in orbit. She can bring us fuel cells charged from her drive, and she dropped us with all the food and seeds she had, but we can't really plant here yet. Soil has the wrong microorganisms in it. We desperately need food stores, soil enrichments, medical supplies."

"All of which RCE is happy to—" Murtry started.

"But what we do have is the richest lithium vein any of us have ever seen. And with that ore, we can buy everything else we need. The *Israel* is keeping the *Barbapiccola* from sending down her shuttle to pick up the rest, and she's threatened to stop the *Barb* if she tries to leave orbit."

"The mineral rights on New Terra are not yours," Murtry said. "Not until the UN says they are."

Carol slapped the table with her palm; it was as loud as a gunshot in the small room. "See? It's a waiting game. If he can just block us from taking our ore up to the ship long enough, then it won't matter who gets those rights. Even if they're awarded to us, we'll be so behind in moving the ore to the ship that we'll all starve to death before we ever get to market."

"So," Holden said. "You're asking for the right to keep loading the ore onto the *Barbapiccola* while the rights are negotiated."

Carol opened her mouth, closed it, and folded her arms.

"Yes," she said.

"Okay," Holden said with a nod. "Sounds fair to me. No matter who winds up selling that ore, they'll need a transport to move it, and the *Barb* is as good as anything else."

Murtry shrugged. "Fine. We'll allow the shuttle to land and begin transporting ore again. But mining operations come with some problems for me."

"Explain?" Holden said again.

"They're using explosives. The same type of explosive that was used to bring down the shuttle and kill the governor. As long as these people have unrestricted access to it my people are at risk."

"What's your solution?" Holden asked.

“I want to control access.”

“So you’ll let us move the ore you won’t let us mine?” Carol said. “Typical corporate doublespeak.”

“I’m not saying that,” Murtry said, patting the air in a *calm down* gesture that struck Holden as intentionally patronizing. “I’m saying we hold the explosives when not in use, and your mining crews sign them out when needed. That way nothing goes missing and shows up later as a pipe bomb.”

“Carol, does that seem fair to you?” Holden asked.

“It’ll slow the process down, but it’s not a deal breaker,” she replied.

“Okay,” Holden said, standing up. “We’ll stop there for now. We’ll meet again tomorrow to go over the UN proposal on colony administration and start hammering out details. We also need to talk about environmental controls.”

“The OPA—” Carol started.

“Yes, I have the recommendations from Fred Johnson as well, and those will be discussed. I’d like to transmit a revised plan to the UN and OPA by the end of the week, and get their feedback. Acceptable?”

There were nods from both Murtry and Carol. “Great. I’ll want you two with me when I present today’s agreement at the town hall meeting tonight. Our first show of goodwill and solidarity.”

Murtry rose and walked past Carol without looking at her or shaking hands.

Goodwill and solidarity indeed.



“So,” Amos said when Holden exited the town hall meeting that night. “How’d it go?”

“I must have done it right,” Holden replied. “*Everyone’s* pissed.”

They walked along the dusty street together in companionable silence for a while. Amos finally said, “Weird planet. Walking in open air at night with no moon is breaking my head.”

“I hear you. My brain keeps trying to find Orion and the Big Dipper. What’s weirder is that I keep finding them.”

“That ain’t them,” Amos said.

“Oh, I know. But it’s like my eyes are forcing those patterns on stars that

aren't really lined up the right way to make them."

There was another moment of silence, then Amos said, "That's, like, one of them metaphors, right?"

"It is now."

"Buy you a beer?" Amos said when they reached the doors of the commissary.

"Later, maybe. I think I'm going to take a walk. The night air is nice here. Reminds me of Montana."

"Okay, see you when I see you. Try not to get shot or abducted or anything."

"I'll do my best."

Holden walked slowly, the dirt of the planet puffing up around his ankles at every stride. The buildings glowed in the darkness, the only human habitation on the planet. The only civilization in the wilds. He put his back to it and kept on going.

He was far enough outside of town that he could no longer see its dim lights when a faint blue glow appeared beside him. The glow was both there and not there. It lit the air around it while also illuminating nothing.

"Miller," Holden said without looking.

"Hey kid."

"We need to talk," Holden finished for him.

"That's less funny the more you do it," the detective said, his hands in his pockets. "Did you come out here to find me? I admit, I'm a little flattered, considering your other problems."

"Other problems?"

"Yeah, that shantytown full of future corpses you're trying to treat like grown-ups. No way that doesn't end bloody."

Holden turned to look at Miller, frowning. "Is that the former cop talking? Or the creepy protomolecule skin doll."

"I don't know. Both," Miller said. "You want a shadow, you got to have light and something to get in its way."

"Can I borrow the cop for a minute?"

The gray, jowly man hoisted his eyebrows just the way he had in life. "Are you asking me to use your brain to make these monkeys stop killing each other over rare dirt?"

"No," Holden sighed. "Just advice."

“Okay. Sure. Murtry’s a psycho who’s finally in a spot where he can do the creepy shit he’s been dreaming about doing all his life. I’d just have Amos shoot him. Carol and her gang of dirt farmers are only alive because they’re too desperate to realize how stupid they are. They’ll probably die of starvation and bacterial infections in a year. Eighteen months tops. Your pals Avasarala and Johnson have handed you the bloody knife and you think it’s because they trust you.”

“You know what I hate about you?”

“My hat?”

“That too,” Holden said. “But mostly it’s that I hate everything you say, but you’re not always wrong.”

Miller nodded and stared up at the night sky.

“The frontier always outpaces the law,” Holden said.

“True,” Miller agreed. “But this place was already a crime scene when you got here.”

“Bombing the heavy shuttle was—”

“Not that,” Miller said. “I mean all of it. All the places.”

“I seem to spend a lot of time asking people to explain themselves lately.”

Miller laughed. “You think somebody built those towers and structures and then just left? This whole planet is a murder scene. An empty apartment with warm food on the table and all the clothes still in the closets. This is some Croatoan shit.”

“The North American colonists who—”

“Except,” Miller said, ignoring him. “The people who vanished here? Not dumbass Europeans in way over their heads. The things that lived here modified planets like we remodel a kitchen. They had a defense network in orbit that could have vaporized Ceres if it wandered too close.”

“Wait, what defense network?”

Miller ignored him. “An empty apartment, a missing family, that’s creepy. But this is like finding a military base with no one on it. Fighters and tanks idling on the runway with no drivers. This is bad juju. Something *wrong* happened here. What you should do is tell everyone to leave.”

“Yeah,” Holden said, “sure, I’ll get right on that. This argument about who gets to live here really needed a third party both sides could hate.”

“No one lives here,” Miller said, “but we’re sure as shit going to play

with the corpses.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Miller tipped his hat back, looking up at the stars.

“I never stopped looking for her. Julie? Even when she was dead, even when I’d seen her body, I never stopped.”

“True. Still creepy, but true.”

“This is like that too. I don’t like it, but unless something happens, we’re going to keep reaching and reaching and reaching until we find what did all this.”

“And then what?”

“And then we’ll have found it,” he said.



A man Holden didn’t recognize was waiting for him at the edge of town. Belter tall, stocky and thick-necked. Big meaty hands he was rubbing together nervously. Holden consciously forced himself not to drop his hand to the butt of his gun.

“Thought you got lost out there,” the man said.

“Nope, all good.” Holden held out his right hand. “Jim Holden. Have we met?”

“Basia. Basia Merton. From Ganymede.”

“Yeah, all of you are from Ganymede, right?”

“Pretty much.”

Holden waited for the man to speak. Basia stared back, wringing his hands again.

“So,” Holden finally said. “Mister Merton. How can I help you?”

“You found my son. Back... back there. You found Katoa,” Basia said.

It took Holden a moment to make the connection. “The little boy on Ganymede. You’re Prax’s friend.”

Basia nodded, his head moving too fast, like a nervous bird. “We’d left. Me and my wife and my two other kids. We got a chance to get out on the *Barbapiccola* and I thought Katoa was dead. He was sick, you know.”

“Same thing Prax’s daughter had. No immune system.”

“Yeah. Only he wasn’t dead when we left. He was still alive in that lab where you found him. I left my son behind.”

“Maybe,” Holden said. “There’s no way to know that.”

“I know that. I know it. But I brought my family here. So I could keep them safe.”

Holden nodded. He didn’t say, *This is an alien world filled with dangers you couldn’t possibly anticipate, on top of which you didn’t actually own it, and you came here to be safe?* It didn’t seem helpful.

“No one can make us leave,” the man finished.

“Well—”

“No one can make us leave,” Basia repeated. “You should remember that.”

Holden nodded again, and after a moment Basia turned and walked away. *If that’s not a member of the resistance, he at least knows who they are*, he thought. Someone to keep an eye on.

His hand terminal chimed an incoming connection request at him.

“Jim?” Naomi said. There was a nervous edge to her voice.

“Here.”

“Something’s happening down there. Massive energy spike in your location, and, uh—”

“Uh?”

“Movement.”

Chapter Fifteen: Havelock

Slowly, New Terra was taking on a sense of familiarity. The planet's one big continent and long strings of islands turned under the *Edward Israel* every ninety-eight minutes, orbital period and the rotation of the planet conspiring to make a slightly different image every time Havelock looked. The features of the planet had started developing names for him, even though they would never be the ones that the official records showed. The largest southern island was Big Manhattan, because the outline reminded him of the North American island. The Dog's Head islands were scattered in the middle of the planet's one enormous ocean, and looked like a collie's face if he squinted. What he thought of as the Worm Fields were actually a massive network of rivers on the big continent, any one of them longer than the Amazon or the Nile. In the north was Crescent City, a massive network of alien ruins that sort of looked like a cartoon moon.

And there, in the flat beige sweep of what he thought of as the Plate, was the black dot of First Landing, like the first lesion of a rash. It was tiny, but when the ship passed over it at night, it was the only spot of light. There were more places and ecosystems down there, more discoveries to make and resources to use, than there had ever been on Earth. It seemed bizarre that they were fighting and dying over that one tiny piece of high desert. And it also seemed inevitable.

Murtry looked out from the display, listening to Havelock's report. Gravity changed the shape of his face, pulling down at his cheeks and eyes. It actually looked pretty good on him. Some people just belonged down a well.

"We had one incident with Pierce and Gillett."

“Those are the two in marine biology?”

“Gillett is. Pierce is actually a soil guy. It didn’t amount to anything more than a little domestic spat, but… well, tempers are fraying. All these folks came out here to work, and instead, they’re stuck here. We’re doing sensor sweeps and dropping the occasional high-atmo probe, but it’s like giving starving people a cracker when they can smell the buffet. It’s starting to come out at the seams a little.”

“That makes sense,” Murtry said.

“Plus which they hate null g. The autodoc’s been pumping out antinausea drugs like there’s no tomorrow. I’m surprised we aren’t just putting that shit in the water at this point.”

Murtry’s smile was perfunctory. Havelock wanted to float the idea of a second colony. Maybe something in the temperate zone near a river and a beach. The kind of place someone might, for example, string up a hammock. It would let the expedition’s crew get working, and the problems with the squatters could work themselves out without putting anyone else in harm’s way. The words hovered at the back of Havelock’s throat, but he didn’t say them out loud. He already knew the arguments against it. You treated a tumor when it was small, before it spread. He could even hear it in his boss’s voice. Havelock cracked his knuckles.

“The shuttle?” Murtry asked.

Havelock looked over his shoulder, even though he knew the office was empty apart from him. When he spoke, his voice was quieter.

“I got some pushback because it meant halving the supply schedule, but people got over it. I thought of having the hold stacked with high-density ceramics for shrapnel, and putting in a few pallets of the geology survey’s shaped charges, but I don’t have anything that’s going to make a bigger explosion than the shuttle’s reactor would. I’ve taken out all the safety overrides the way you asked, though. Physical and software. Honestly, it’s a little scary going on it anymore, just knowing that it *could* go off.”

“And the controls.”

“The standard protocols are all stripped out. You can fly it or I can. Anyone else is talking to a brick.”

“Good man.”

“Captain Marwick’s not happy about it.”

“He’ll cope,” Murtry said. “Better to have it and not need it than need it

and not have it.”

“And we have the ship’s drive,” Havelock said. “If we pointed the *Israel*’s ass at the *Barbapiccola* and fired it up, we could slag it.”

“Right range, we could take out the *Rocinante* too,” Murtry said. “Except that they could say the same, and they’ve got missiles. No, we’re just getting ready for contingencies. Which brings me to the point. I’ve got the solution to one of your problems.”

“Sir?”

“All those bored scientists. We’ve lost a lot of the security team, and we’re in a more hostile environment than we’d expected. I need you to do some cross training.”

“You mean hire them into security?”

“Nothing official,” Murtry said. “But if we had a dozen people who were familiar with the riot gear and had some practice in low g, it wouldn’t hurt my feelings.”

Havelock nodded. “A militia, then.”

“I established that we’re in de facto control of First Landing. Holden thinks he’s some kind of fucking Solomon. I’m fine letting him go with it for now, but when the time comes, we may need to put boots on the ground here. Or on the *Barbapiccola*. I’m happy if we don’t, but I want the option. Can you do that?”

“Let me look into it,” Havelock said. “I’m pretty sure it would mean bending corporate policy. The home office is pretty touchy about liability.”

“They sent us to the ass end of nowhere and let a bunch of squatters take their best shot at us,” Murtry said. “I don’t particularly care what they think. It doesn’t need to be official. Make it a club. Just a few folks enjoying a shared hobby for low-g tactics. Fabricate them a few paint guns. Just make sure they’re ready.”

“In case we need them.”

“Right,” Murtry said with his dragging, full-gravity smile. “In case.”

Technically, Havelock could have spent the time in the main security office, strapped into Murtry’s couch and using his desk. Instead, he tended to stick to his own familiar place beside the brig. He told himself it was because the system was already customized with his preferences and access codes, but he also knew it was more than that. Murtry had a way of claiming space even if he wasn’t occupying it, and Havelock wouldn’t have

been comfortable. So when the second shift ended, the chief of the engineering workgroup came to him at the brig.

Chief Engineer Matthu Koenen was a thick man with short, bottle-brush white hair and a birthmark on his neck that he'd never bothered to have removed. He floated in the air by Havelock's couch, arms folded across his chest and legs crossed at the ankles like a dour, angry ballet dancer.

"Thank you for coming by," Havelock said.

"There trouble?" Koenen snapped.

"No," Havelock said, his voice automatically taking on the gruff tone he used when he was on duty. "I wanted to ask you about putting together a team. A dozen people for small-group tactics exercises."

The chief engineer's brows furrowed and the lines around his mouth deepened. Havelock stared him down. He'd spent too many years as a cop on too many Belter stations to be intimidated by a scowl.

"Small-group tactics?"

"Null-g exercises," Havelock said. "With the riot gear. Just to keep mind and body in condition."

Koenen lifted his chin, his gaze still fixed on Havelock. It was the kind of thing a Belter never did. Havelock didn't know why the gesture so clearly belonged to someone who'd lived planetside, but it did. He found it reassuring. "You're talking about military action? Are we expecting something?"

Havelock shrugged against the couch restraints. The couch shifted a few millimeters on its gimbals. "I want the option," he said, not realizing he was quoting Murtry until he'd already done it.

"Sure, then. I can find another eleven people. When do you want us?"

"How long will it take?"

Koenen tapped his hand terminal with two fingertips. *I can call them right now.* Havelock smiled.

"We'll meet in the shuttle bay at oh seven hundred. I'll go over the equipment. Then an hour drilling every day before shift for the foreseeable future."

"I'll put it on the schedule."

They nodded to each other, and the chief engineer put out his foot, pressing it against the face of one of the cells to launch himself to the ladder. Havelock felt something uneasy shift in his mind. He was forgetting

something. Something important.

When it came to him, he grunted. “Chief!”

The man looked over from the ladder. The plane of his body was orthogonal to the desk, and Havelock’s sense of balance shifted as his brain made one of its occasional panicked flailing attempts to determine up from down. He closed his eyes as a wave of nausea passed over him.

“Yes?”

“When you pick out your team,” Havelock said between clenched teeth. “No Belters.”

For the first time, Koenen smiled. It seemed genuine. “No shit,” he said.



As the acting head of security, he was expected to eat in the officers’ mess. It was one of those small gestures that gave the ship a sense of continuity, of rules and customs being followed. And there were some benefits for him. The lines were shorter, alcohol was available, and the wall screen was usually set to something interesting. Right now, a UN official in an uncomfortable-looking gray suit was folding his hands on a wide, glassy desk. The camera operator was framing it to be seen on hand terminals, and so the man’s face was so large on the wall that Havelock could see his pores and the streaks where the technicians on Earth had dabbed on makeup.

“We are at the beginning of a new golden age,” he said. “The scale of this is immense. Everything we have done, from the first stone tools to the domes on Ganymede, we have done in essence with the resources of one planet. Earth. Yes, the need for minerals and rare earths took us to Mars and Luna. And the Belt. And the need for infrastructure made the Jovian system much more than we had imagined. But we are looking at an expansion that is not one or two but *three* orders of magnitude more than we have had in the history of our species.”

Havelock peeled back the foil from the top of his meal. The beef and peppers had been designed for null g: hard nuggets of protein and vegetable that resisted breaking apart in the air, but turned soft and pleasant in his mouth. It wasn’t as sanitary as tubes of goo, but it was better eating. He popped the first cube into his mouth. It sponged up his saliva, clinging to his tongue. The camera on Earth flickered to a young, serious-faced

woman.

“But the designers of the protomolecule,” she said. “The species who sent it here on Phoebe in the first place?”

“It has been billions of years since that happened,” the man in the suit said. “None of our probes have found any signs of advanced life still functioning. We have seen what appear to be ruins. We have seen what appear to be living biospheres. Honestly, there are mornings it takes my breath away.”

Havelock sipped at the bulb of water, and the food bloomed into a rich mouthful, almost like it had been cooked in a normal kitchen instead of an industrial processor.

“So what’s the catch?” the woman said.

The catch is that the first thing we did once we got here was let a bunch of Belter terrorists claim squatting rights and start shooting at us, Havelock thought as he plucked another cube from the pack. On the screen the UN man unfolded his hands.

“We are processing a bit over four thousand applications *already* for the rights to explore and develop these systems. We have to do this carefully if we are to get things done right. And it does not help that the OPA has used this to make what is essentially a power grab.”

“Bloody Belters,” a voice said. Havelock turned to see Captain Marwick floating in the air behind him. The man’s close-cropped red hair and beard had more gray in them than when they’d left Earth. Havelock nodded.

“D’ye mind if I join you, Mister Havelock?”

“Not at all,” Havelock said, blinking back surprise.

The captain pulled himself to the table and strapped into a crash couch. Behind him, the wall screen shifted from the UN man to the woman interviewing him, but Havelock only registered the change as shifts of lighting and background. His attention was on Marwick.

“How’ve things been going on the surface?” the captain asked, cracking open the box containing his own dinner. He made the words seem like nothing more weighty than polite conversation. Between other people, it probably would have been.

“You’ve seen the reports,” Havelock said.

“Ah, reports, though. Written for posterity and the judge as often as not. Still, I was a bit surprised to see that our mutual friend Mister Murtry had

taken quite such a firm hand just when the mediator arrived.”

“Situation called for it,” Havelock said. “We’ve lost a lot of good people down there by being restrained and patient.”

Marwick made a humming sound that could have meant anything and ate a bite of his meal. His gaze fixed somewhere over Havelock’s left shoulder.

“And of course we’re in a position of relative power here, aren’t we?” Marwick said. “I hope our friend on the ground is keeping in mind that won’t always be the case.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Well, I am not, strictly speaking, a part of the expeditionary force, am I? The *Israel* is my domain. I use my rank as captain to make the demands and requests the home office prefers me to, though in truth I’m just the lorry driver. But I’ll be driving my lorry back through that gate at some point, and Fred Johnson and his well-armed base will be waiting on the other side of it. I’d rather he not think of me first and foremost as a target.”

Havelock chewed slowly, frowning. A dull anger tightened his jaw. “We’re the ones who followed the rules here. We came with science teams and a hard dome. We hired them to build our landing platform, and they killed us. We’re the good guys here.”

“And the moral high ground is a lovely place,” Marwick said, as if he were agreeing. “It won’t stop a missile, though. It won’t alter the trajectory of a gauss round. What our mutual friend does planetside has consequences that go a long way out from here. And there are those among us, myself included, who’d like to go home one day.”

Marwick took another bite of his dinner, smiled ruefully, and nodded as if Havelock had said something. He undid the crash couch straps.

“Keeps body and soul together, these little boxes, but they don’t really satisfy, do they? Give my left nut for a real steak. Well, it was a pleasure, Mister Havelock. As always.”

Havelock nodded, but the anger in his chest rode the ragged edge between annoyance and rage. He knew that it was at least in part because that was the reaction Murtry would have had in his place, but knowing that didn’t change the emotion. His hand terminal chimed. Chief Engineer Koenen had sent a message. He tapped it open.

we've got a full team. one of the boys is fabbing up a little logo for the club. just something to keep morale up.

Havelock considered the image. It was a stylized male form, squat and featureless, holding up a fist larger than its head. It was a cartoon of the Earther body type, and of violence. Havelock looked at it for a long time before he answered back.

looks great. make sure you get one for me.

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Chapter Sixteen: Elvi

What do you mean *movement*?" Elvi asked.

After we saw the power spike," Holden said, "the *Rocinante* did a sweep of the location. Several of them, actually."

He held out his hand terminal, and Elvi took it. She tried to look serious, not to seem impressed. She was a scientist, for God's sake, facing a serious question, not a girl who'd get on her family's shared feed and burble about how James Holden had been in her hut. She flipped the images back and forth. Human brains were wired to see movement, and so the shifting shadows were easy to spot when she went quickly.

"Something's moving," she agreed. "Can we see what it is?"

"Not a lot of imaging satellites up there yet," Holden said. "The *Roci*'s built for ship-to-ship combat more than ground visualization."

Anywhere in the solar system, it wouldn't have been like this. There were so many cameras of such exquisite sensitivity, almost nothing could happen in the vast emptiness inside the orbit of Neptune that couldn't be seen if someone wanted to look for it. It was another reminder of how far from home they were, and how many axioms of daily life didn't apply here.

"What does the *Israel* see?" she asked.

"Nothing that's a lot better," Holden said. "That's why we're going out. It's right at the range of the vehicles. It's going to take the better part of the day to get out there."

"Why?" she asked. "I mean, I see it's decently large, but there are likely to be any number of large organisms in the ocean and colder environments."

"Organisms don't make power spikes," Holden said. "All sorts of things

are moving on this planet. All the time. This just started.”

Elvi touched the image, expanding it until the shadows blurred.

“You’re right. We should check it out,” she said. “Let me get my instruments.”

An hour later, she was in the back of an open loader, Fayeze at her side. Holden sat in front of them, in the passenger’s seat, while Chandra Wei drove. A vicious-looking rifle jounced at Wei’s side, in easy reach if violence came on them unexpectedly. The loader’s engines whined, and the wheels ground against the stones of the wind-paved desert.

“Why didn’t Sudyam come?” Elvi asked, shouting to be heard over the loader and the wind.

Fayeze leaned close to her shoulder. “Wei thought it would be good to have someone on the exobio workgroup still alive if this went poorly.”

Elvi’s felt her eyes go wide, and she glanced at the woman in the driver’s seat. “Really?”

“She phrased it more gently,” Fayeze said.

There was no demarcation of the border, no fence or road to show that they had left First Landing. The stone-and-dirt hills rose and fell, organisms like grass or fungus clinging to the land and being crushed under the loader’s wheels. Slowly, the ruins that had become Elvi’s landmark on New Terra thinned and shrank and fell out of view. She leaned her head against the loader’s roll bar, letting the vibrations of the land translate themselves through her skull. Wei looked over her shoulder, and Elvi smiled at her. The memories of a hundred field excursions in graduate school left her body expecting beer and marijuana, and the anxiety of the actual errand tugged at her. Every day for weeks, she had found some new organism or fact that humanity had never seen before, and now she was going to something possibly even more alien. No one had said the word *protomolecule*, but the implication was thick as cement. Animals didn’t make a power surge. The aliens did.

In the wide, bright sky above them, high-altitude winds pulled a huge green-and-pink cloud into thin streamers. The speculation on Luna was that the strange cloud coloration meant an organism was present in them, something that packed its own minerals up into the sky and used the vapor the way salmon used spawning pools. It was only a hypothesis. The truth could be a thousand times stranger. Or it could be utterly mundane. Elvi

watched the bright fleece of cloud stretch, and the sun track a little too slowly past it. Fayeze was typing furiously on his hand terminal. Wei drove with a focus and intensity that seemed to be her signature ever since she'd come to the surface. Which meant ever since Reeve and the others had gone missing.

Elvi wondered what it meant that she could go out into the absolute unknown, tracking across a planet with no idea what the local dangers might be, and it was thoughts of the people back in First Landing that frightened her. New Terra was supposed to be dangerous and wild and unknown. It was only living up to expectations. The dangers that the people posed were worse because she hadn't seen it coming. And so she was afraid she wouldn't next time either.

She wasn't aware of drifting into a doze until Fayeze put his hand on her shoulder and shook her gently back to herself. He pointed up. A bright spot lit the blue of the sky like Venus seen from Earth. It grew slowly brighter as it tracked west. A thin white contrail formed behind it, the only perfectly straight line in the organically twisting sky. A shuttle. Elvi frowned.

"Were we expecting the shuttle?" she asked.

"That's not ours," Fayeze said. "That's the *Barbapiccola*'s. The mining operation's under way again."

Elvi shook her head. It was all one stupid, shortsighted mistake after another, strung together so that each one seemed inevitable. The colony would sell the ore, get lawyers, make deals. The containment dome would never be set up. What should have been clean, solid biology would turn into a salvage job of *correcting for* this and *discarding the impurities* that. Fayeze seemed to know what she was thinking.

"No research protocol survives contact with the subject population," he said. "That's not just this. It's everything."

The sun had dipped to half a hand above the horizon when the loader topped another rise like a thousand before it. Wei braked and shut off the engines. Fayeze stood up in his seat, his elbows resting on the roll bar. Holden said something obscene under his breath.

"Well," Fayeze said, his voice hushed. "At least it wasn't hard to find."

The thing hunkered down in the depression between two hills. Its vast carapace was the nacreous white that she'd seen in the walls of the ruins, but there was nothing architectural about this. It had an insectile form, long

articulated limbs like legs pressing weakly out into the hardpack. Two larger appendages emerged from its back, one gray and splintered, the exoskeleton empty of anything but dust, the other swinging awkwardly. Five black circles on its abdomen recalled eyes, but didn't shift to focus on them. At least not as far as Elvi could tell.

"What is it?" Wei asked. Elvi noticed that the rifle had made its way to the woman's hands. She hadn't seen that happen.

"I don't know," Elvi said. "I haven't seen anything like it before."

"I have," Holden said. "It's one of their machines. Whatever designed the protomolecule had... things like this on the station between the rings. They were smaller, though. I saw one of them kill someone."

"You're telling me," Wei said, her voice even and calm, "that thing is a couple billion years old?"

"That would be my guess," Holden said.

Fayez whistled low. "That is not dead which can eternal lie. Or, y'know, whatever."

The monster from the desert shifted drunkenly, its legs awkward. Its one functioning arm twisted toward them, then collapsed to the ground. Its body shifted and trembled as it tried to lift it again.

"Look," Elvi said. "Back there."

All along the contour line at the bottom of the valley between hills, the stones had been scraped clean. None of the quasi-fungal grasses remained. No lizards or birds. It was like a vast hand had come down with a sponge and wiped the landscape clean. Now that she knew to look, she saw the thing's legs were pulling the native life up and feeding into tiny, chitinous orifices along its underbelly.

"It's... eating?" she said.

"On the station," Holden said, "soldiers tried to kill one with a grenade. The machines killed the man who threw it and used his body. Reprocessed it right there. Turned him into paste and used him to repair the damage."

"That makes sense," Elvi said. "The protomolecule repurposed biological systems during the Eros event as well."

"Glad you approve, Doctor Okoye," Wei said dryly. "In your scientific opinion, could this pose a threat to the expedition?"

"Sure, maybe," Elvi said, and Holden made a gurgling sound in the back of his throat. The thing lurched forward, lost its footing, and scrambled

back. It was like watching a broken toy or a car-struck dog that hadn't quite died yet. It was fascinating and frightening, and she couldn't look away.

"I think we need to leave now," Holden said, fear making the words come fast. "Like now now. Not later now."

"Isn't what we came here for," Wei said, raising the rifle to her shoulder.

"What are you doing!" Holden shouted. "Did you not hear me about the putty making?"

In reply, Wei opened fire. Tracer rounds drew bright red lines through the air, and small explosions lit every place they struck. The thing staggered back, swinging its arm, but Wei pulled a fresh clip from her pocket when the first one went dry and resumed firing. The thing tried to push in toward Wei, and then to move away from her. A green-gray liquid poured from the wounds in its side. The report of the rifle was deafening.

The thing lurched one last time, and let out a high, teeth-clenching keen. It collapsed, legs splayed, in the pool of liquid. Wei let the gun's barrel drift down until it pointed at the ground. When she looked at Holden, her eyes were hard. Holden hands were on the loader's dash, the knuckles white. His face was gray.

"I hope that's not a problem, sir," Wei said.

"You are out of your fucking mind?" Holden said, his voice high and tight. "That thing could have killed you!"

"Yes, sir," Wei said. "That's why I killed it."

"Did you?" Holden said, his voice continuing to climb. "Are you sure? What if it's not all the way dead? Can we... burn it or something?"

Wei smiled.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, we can."

An hour later, the great ruddy disk of the sun touched the horizon. The flames danced around the thing's corpse, rising up higher than a bonfire. Greasy black smoke spiraled up toward the clouds, and the whole world seemed to reek of accelerants. Wei had taken a small tent from the loader's storage, and Fayez had set it up. Elvi stood, the heat of the sun and the fire pressing against her face. The night was going to be long. They all were, here.

"You all right?" Fayez asked.

"I'm fine. I wish I'd gotten some samples, though."

In the heart of the fire, the thing glowed. Its shell was white-hot, and

thin cracks had started to show, radiating out from its joints. It was beautiful in its way, and she was sorry to see it destroyed and relieved in almost equal measures. It wasn't an emotional mixture she was used to.

Wei insisted on setting up watches through the night, and Holden volunteered to take the first of them. He seemed uneasy in a way that Elvi wouldn't have thought James Holden, captain of the *Rocinante*, was capable of. Vulnerable. Elvi lay in the tent, her head poking out. Fayez snored softly beside her. Wei, curled in the back of the loader with a thin blanket, was silent as stone. Elvi watched Holden and listened while he hummed to himself, a lonely human sound in the vast inhuman planet. Sleep didn't come. After two hours, she gave up, rose from her uncomfortable bed, and went to sit at the man's side. In a world without moonlight, there was only the orange glow of the alien's dying pyre and a thin silver highlight of stars. It reduced him to a few lines and a sense of mass and warmth.

"I couldn't sleep," she said.

"I don't think I will either," he said. "I hate the way those things scare me."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that."

"You were expecting me to enjoy it?" She could hear the smile. Far above them, a falling star streaked across the sky, bright, and then gone.

"I'm not used to hearing men admit to having emotions," she said. "You were on Eros when the outbreak came, weren't you? I'd think after that, nothing would frighten you."

"Doesn't work that way. After Eros, everything frightened me. I'm still trying to calm down." He chuckled. When he spoke again, his voice had sobered. "Do you think that thing was a machine? Or was that an animal?"

"I don't think that's a distinction they would have made."

"You mean the designers? Who the hell knows how they would have seen anything?"

"Oh, we can say some things," Elvi said. "What they cared about was in what they designed. And still is, in a way. We know that they respected the power of self-replicators and knew how to harness it."

She felt him turn toward her more than saw it. She was profoundly aware of being a woman in a dark wilderness with a man beside her. It made the vast night seem intimate.

"How do we know that?" he asked.

“Where they sent the protomolecule,” she said. “The universe has some things that are fairly consistent. The elements are the same. Carbon is always carbon. Nitrogen’s always nitrogen. They make the same bonds and can build the same structures. All the systems we’ve surveyed have at least one planet that has the possibility of generating organic replicators.”

“Meaning things with DNA?”

“Or things that act like DNA. They sent out bridge builders to use those basic biological replicators, whatever their form. They can take a biosphere and turn it into a massively networked factory. It’s probably how they spread. Target the places that can be hijacked into making the things that let you get there. Also, they really built structures to last. They seem to have taken the long view on galactic colonizing.”

She leaned back, letting her hand rest on the front of the loader. Not reaching out to him, but putting her fingers where, in the darkness, he might accidentally brush against them. To the north, some small animal called, its voice high and chirping.

“It was there for billions of years,” Holden said. “And we killed it with a rifle and some mineral spirits.”

“In our defense, it wasn’t looking healthy. But yes. It wasn’t expecting anything as advanced or aggressive as we are. They built structures that lasted billions of years. The ruins. That thing. The rings. All of it.”

“They sound like gods sometimes. Angry spiteful gods, but still.”

“No,” Elvi said. “Just organisms that we don’t understand. And with their own constraints. They were specialized for their ecosystem, just like we are. Thirteen hundred worlds seems a lot when you’ve only ever had the one, but it’s a raindrop in the ocean compared with what’s out there, just in our galaxy.”

“They had more.”

Elvi made a small inquiring sound.

“They had more,” Holden said. “But something attacked them, and they tried to stop it. They burned up entire solar systems. A lot of them. Then, when that didn’t work, they shut down the whole network. Quarantined themselves and died anyway.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I saw it. Sort of. A guy I used to know is kind of looking into it.”

“I’d like to talk to him,” she said.

“Yeah, he’s less helpful than you’d expect.”

Wei shifted in her sleep. Elvi yawned, though she wasn’t particularly tired.

“Why did it wake up?” he said, nodding toward the alien corpse. “Was it because of us? Did it know we were here?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Or maybe they cycle up and down every so often. We’ve only seen one. There may be a lot of these and seeing them will be common. There may be a few and it will be rare. There could only have been one. Not enough data yet.”

“I guess not. Still, I wish I knew what was going to happen.”

“I don’t. So much of my life has been better than what I imagined, I’ve come to enjoy being surprised. When I was doing my undergraduate at Kano, I was imagining I’d be doing environmental assays on Europa for my whole career. Instead, this.”

“Kano?”

“I spent a lot of time in the West African Shared Interest Zone when I was growing up. Northern Nigeria. I went back there for university.”

“Really?” Holden said, his voice bright. “One of my fathers had family in Nigeria.”

“One of them?”

“I have several,” he said. “Extended parental group.”

“Oh. I’ve heard of those.”

“Makes for a big nuclear family, and a *huge* extended one. We might be cousins.”

“I hope not,” Elvi said, laughing, and then wished she could suck the words back. The silence was terrible. She couldn’t see his face clearly, but she could imagine it. The surprise. The embarrassment. She pulled her hand back and put it in her lap.

“I—” he said.

“If you’d like, I’ll take the rest of the watch,” Elvi said. The lightness in her voice sounded forced, even to herself. “I don’t think I’ll be sleeping much tonight anyway.”

“That would be... great,” Holden said. “Thank you.”

“Just be careful of Favez. He steals the blankets.”

James Holden slid off the loader. She heard his footsteps tracking back to the tent, heard the rustle of the plastic as he bedded down. She hunched

over, arms around her belly. The thing from the desert was nothing more than embers, glowing dull orange in the night but illuminating nothing. The humiliation sat with her, bright and painful as a paper cut.

“Stupid,” she said softly. “Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.”

The alien darkness didn’t disagree.

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Chapter Seventeen: Basia

Coop and Cate had been old-school OPA, back when the Outer Planets Alliance was just a shared opinion with guns. They'd come up the ranks together when even wearing the OPA's split circle on your sleeve was an arrestable offense. They'd learned their craft sneaking past armed Earth-Mars Coalition checkpoints, planting bombs, smuggling guns, and generally acting like the terrorists the inner planets had accused them of being. The only reason they hadn't both gone to prison camps forever was because by some standards, the OPA had won. After Eros, the inner planets had begun treating the OPA like an actual government, and many of the OPA warriors had received the de facto amnesty that non-enforcement brought.

Cate was just a miner now, like the rest of them, but she could use words like *tactical advantage* and actually sound like she knew what she was talking about.

"The terrain and numerical superiority are our tactical advantages," Cate said to the small group assembled in her house. "But we're outgunned. No way around that. We have maybe a dozen firearms total. We can still get explosives, but the deal Holden struck with RCE makes it much riskier."

"Fucking Holden," Zadie said.

"We'll deal with him soon enough," Cate replied.

Her audience was made up of the usual gang. Zadie's son had taken a turn for the worse with his eye infection, and her wife was staying home with him full-time now. Basia had the impression that Zadie was looking for someone to punish for her family's pain. Pete, Scotty, and Ibrahim were there as well, the veterans of their one skirmish with the RCE security people. It gave them a degree of status in the group that they'd latched on

to. But there were a few new people as well. Other members of the colony who might have been on the fence before about the best way to deal with RCE, but had been pushed into the revolutionary camp by Murtry's brutal tactics. By the martyring of Coop.

"How?" Scotty asked. "How do we deal with Holden?"

"I think we remove all of our problems in one multi-front operation," Cate said. "Murtry and his team, Holden and his thug, everyone at once. The key to this kind of war is money."

"Make us too expensive to occupy." Ibrahim nodded. He'd been OPA too.

"Exactly. That's how we got the inners off our asses in the Belt. If it's not economically viable to occupy us, they won't. Every one of them that goes home in a body bag is one more nail in the corporate coffin." Cate punched one large fist into her other hand to punctuate.

"I don't follow. How does killing them help us with that?" Basia asked. He'd agreed to come in the hope he might be able to help cooler heads prevail. That was looking less and less likely the longer the meeting went on.

"It's an eighteen-month trip to send new troops to the front," Cate answered. "That's a long-flight freighter tied up for over three years. That's expensive. And for the year and a half they're flying out here, we're fortifying our position. Making camps in the hills. Branching out. In order to win, they'll need to do a full military program. Medina Station won't support that, even if they get pissed at us for pushing the issue."

"Coercive alliance," Ibrahim added, nodding.

"By the book," Cate said.

The room was quiet for a moment as everyone there mulled over her words. The metal roof rattled and scraped as the wind outside blew sand across it. The windows creaked, cooling with the night. A dozen people breathed the alien air.

"They're here already," Basia said, clearing his throat to break the silence. "Isn't that exactly what they'll do?"

"What who will do?" Scotty asked.

"The *Rocinante*," Basia replied. "They're in orbit right now. A warship, with guns and missiles and who knows what else. If we kill Holden, can't they just bomb us?"

“Let’s hope they do!” Cate thundered at him. “By God let’s hope so. A few videos of dead colonists, murdered by UN ships in orbit, and the public opinion war is over.”

Basia nodded as though he were agreeing, while what he was really thinking was, *I’m on the wrong team.*

“So, we move on both groups at once,” Cate said. Her voice had taken on the same cadences Coop used to have. It was as if the man were still in the room, haunting the place. “They keep two people on roving patrol at all times, so we’ll need a team shadowing them until the signal goes out. We’ll put a second team on the security building where Murtry and the rest of his people will be. The third team will go to the commissary where Holden and his crewman are holed up at night. I’m thinking Scotty and Ibrahim for team one. I’ll lead...”

Cate rattled on, laying out the insanity of multiple murder like a puzzle to be solved or a game to be won. Coordinating the attacks so all three happened at once, so no one could raise the alarm. Using phrases like *fields of fire* and *maximum aggression* as if they meant anything other than gunning down a dozen women and men while most of them slept. The little group nodded and followed along. Basia was astonished by how easily the unthinkable became the routine.

“My children live here,” Basia said, interrupting.

“What?” Cate said, looking genuinely puzzled. She’d been mid-sentence when he spoke up. “I don’t—”

“The bodies that we take pictures of to send to the newscasts,” Basia continued. “Those are our children. My children.”

Cate blinked at him, too puzzled to be angry yet.

“Como?”

“I wanted to come here and maybe talk you out of doing something stupid,” Basia said, standing up and addressing the room. “I thought maybe with Coop gone, we could put an end to this. But this isn’t just stupid anymore. Not when you can talk about dead friends and family as media tools. That’s evil. And I can’t be part of it.”

The room was silent again, except for the sand and the cooling windows and the breathing.

“If you try to get in our way—” Ibrahim started, but Basia wheeled to face the man.

“What?” he said, getting close enough that his breath stirred the whiskers in Ibrahim’s thin beard. “If I get in your way what? Don’t make half a threat, macho.”

Ibrahim was smaller than him. He lowered his eyes and said nothing. Basia felt a brief moment of shameful relief that it was Ibrahim who had chosen to press the issue, not Cate. Basia was afraid of Cate. He’d never have been able to stand up to her.

“Dui,” he said, backing away and nodding to them all. “Gone now.”

They began talking in hushed tones after the door closed behind him, but he couldn’t hear what they were saying. It made the back of his neck itch. He wondered if he’d gone too far, and if they’d be content with just killing him and not Lucia too.

Halfway home he ran into two of the RCE security people walking patrol. Two women in heavy body armor that made them look bulky and dangerous. One of them, a fair-skinned woman with raven-black hair, nodded at him as he walked past. Everything about her was a threat: the armor, the large assault rifle she cradled in her arms, the stun grenades and wrist restraints hanging on her belt. Her friendly smile looked wildly out of place. Basia couldn’t stop himself from picturing her bleeding out in the street, shot in the back by one of his friends.

Lucia was waiting on their porch, sitting cross-legged on a large pillow and drinking something that steamed in the night air. Not tea. They had almost none of it left. Probably just hot water with a bit of lemon flavoring. But even the artificial flavorings would soon be gone unless they were given permission to begin trading their ore.

Basia sat down on the hard carbon fiber floor next to her with a thump.

“So?” Lucia asked.

“They won’t listen.” Basia sighed. “They’re talking about killing the RCE people. All of them. And Jim Holden and his people too.”

Lucia shook her head, a gentle negation. “And you?”

“At this point, they may be talking about killing me too. I don’t think they will as long as I don’t get in their way. But I can’t take part. I told them so. I’m so sorry I let it get this far, Lucy. I’m a very stupid man.”

Lucia gave him a sad smile, and put her hand on his arm. “Not doing anything now keeps you on their side.”

Basia frowned. The night air still held the earthy smell of the recent dust

storm. A graveyard scent. "I can't stop them by myself."

"Holden is here to do that. He's back from whatever he was doing out in the desert with the science teams. You could talk to him."

"I know," Basia said, admitting what he'd already been thinking. The fact that it was necessary didn't make it feel like any less of a betrayal of his friends. "I know. I will."

Lucia laughed her relief. At Basia's puzzled look, she grabbed him in her arms and pulled him close. "I'm so happy to know that the Basia I love is still in there."

Basia relaxed into her embrace, letting himself feel safe and loved for a moment.

"Baz," Lucia whispered in his ear.

Don't say anything that will ruin this moment, he thought.

"Felcia is leaving on the shuttle for the *Barbapiccola*. Now. Tonight. I gave her permission."

Basia pulled himself away, holding Lucia at arm's length. "She's doing what?"

Lucia frowned at him, and gripped his upper arms tightly. "Let her go." There was a warning in her voice.

Basia pulled himself free and leaped to his feet. Lucia called after him, but he was already running down the road toward the landing site as fast as his legs would carry him.

His relief when he saw the shuttle still sitting there was so powerful he almost collapsed. One of the colony's electric carts whizzed by, nearly running him over in the dark. The bed of the cart was filled with ore. They were still loading the shuttle. He had time.

Felcia stood a few meters from the airlock, a suitcase in each hand, chatting with the pilot. They were in a bright pool of illumination cast by the work lights surrounding the ship, and her dark olive skin seemed to glow. Her black hair hung about her face and down her back in loose waves. Her eyes and mouth were wide as she spoke on some topic that excited her.

In that moment, his daughter was so beautiful it made Basia's chest ache. When she spotted him, her face lit up with a smile. Before she could speak, Basia wrapped her in his arms and squeezed her tight.

"Papa," she said, worry in her voice.

"No, baby, it's okay," he shook his head against her cheek. "I didn't

come to stop you. I only... I couldn't let you leave without saying goodbye."

His cheek felt wet. Felcia was crying. He held her by the shoulders and pushed her away to look at her face. His little girl, all grown up but crying in his arms. He couldn't help but see the four-year-old she'd once been, weeping when she fell and hurt her knee.

"Papa," she said, her voice thick. "I was worried you would hate me for going. But Mama said—"

"No, baby, no." Basia hugged her again. "You go, and when they let the ship leave, you go to Ceres and become a doctor and have a fantastic life."

"Why?"

Because the people here see your death as a tool for winning a public opinion battle. Because I've lost all the children I ever plan to lose. Because I can't have you see me when they finally arrest me.

"Because I love you, baby," he said instead. "And I want you to go be amazing."

She hugged him, and for that one moment, all was right in the universe again. Basia watched as she boarded, stopping just inside the airlock to wave and blow him a kiss. He watched as they loaded the last of the ore into the cargo compartment. He watched as the shuttle lifted off with a roar and wash of heat.

Then he turned back toward town to find Holden.



Holden and Amos were sitting in the commissary's tiny bar. Amos drank and watched everyone who came in through the door. He held his glass with his left hand, his right never far from the gun at his belt. Holden was typing rapidly on a hand terminal lying on the table. Both men looked tense.

Basia walked toward them, smiling and nodding his head and keeping his hands visible and away from his body. Amos smiled back. The big man's scalp looked pale and shiny under the commissary's white LEDs. When he leaned forward in his chair it looked perfectly natural and non-threatening, and Basia noted that it also put the gun closer to hand seemingly by accident.

They were not the sort of details he would have noticed before. Coop

and Cate and the violence of the last few months had left him on edge, seeing the potential for violence everywhere. When he looked at Amos, he suspected his instincts were not wrong.

Raising his hands, he said, "Captain Holden, can I join you for a moment?"

Holden's head darted up, startled and frightened. Basia was pretty sure he was not the source of the man's fear, and wondered what was. Murtry and his corporate killers? Had Holden heard from someone else about the planned attack?

"Please," Holden said, the fear disappearing from his face as quickly as it had come. He gestured at one of their table's empty chairs. "What can I do for you?"

Amos said nothing, just kept smiling his vague smile. Basia sat, making sure to keep his hands on the table and in plain view. "Captain, I've come to warn you."

"About?" Amos said at once. Holden said nothing.

"There is a group here. The same group that attacked and killed the RCE security team prior to your arrival. They plan to kill the remaining security people sometime in the next few days. Maybe as early as tomorrow night."

Holden and Amos shared a quick look. "We've been expecting something like that," Holden said. "But that's not the important—"

Basia didn't let him finish. "They also plan to kill you."

Holden sat up a little straighter. He didn't seem angry so much as offended.

"Me? Why would they want to kill *me*?"

"They think it will send a message," Basia said, his tone apologetic. "Also, they're mad about the explosives inspectors."

"Told you," Holden said to Amos. "A good compromise pisses everyone off."

Without realizing he was going to do it, Basia grabbed the bottle off the table and took a long drink. It must have been something they had brought with them, because it was much better whiskey than anything the colony had access to. It warmed his throat and belly pleasantly, but didn't calm him as much as he'd hoped. He pushed the bottle back toward Amos, but the big man stopped him. "You keep that, brother. You look like you need it."

"What are you going to do?" Basia asked Holden.

“About the assassination? Nothing. It won’t matter because we’re all leaving.”

“We’re all—?”

“We’re evacuating the planet. All of us. Everyone.”

“No,” Basia said. “No one’s leaving. We can’t go now.” *I helped kill people to stay here.*

“Oh, we *really* are,” Holden said. “Something very bad is happening on this planet, and it has nothing to do with obstinate Belters or sociopathic corporate security.”

Basia took another long drink from the bottle. The alcohol was starting to leave him a little fuzzy, but not any less anxious. “I don’t understand.”

“Somebody used to live here,” Holden said, waving one arm around. It took Basia’s drink-addled mind a moment to realize Holden didn’t mean the commissary. “Maybe they’re gone, and maybe they aren’t, but they left a lot of stuff behind and some of it’s waking up. So before we wind up being Eros with a great big sky, everyone is getting the hell out of Dodge.”

Basia nodded without understanding. Amos grinned at him and said, “The towers and robots, man. He means the alien shit. Looks like some of it’s waking up.”

“I’m sending a message up to the *Roci* right now to bounce it on to the UN and the OPA council,” Holden continued. “My recommendation is that everyone get into orbit as soon as possible. I’m asking for emergency command of the *Israel* and the *Barbapiccola* to facilitate that.”

“That isn’t going to happen,” Basia said, his voice soft.

“It’s not an easy sell,” Holden said, “but I can be persuasive. And once I have command—”

“They won’t go,” Basia said. “People already bled for this land. Died for it. We’re willing to kill each other to stay here, we’ll sure as hell stay and fight whatever else wants us gone.”

“Providing there’s anyone left,” Amos said.

“Well, sure,” Basia agreed. “Providing that.”

Chapter Eighteen: Holden

Murtry and his security team had converted the small prefab security outpost into a fortress. The inner walls had been sprayed with energy-absorbing foam that looked like whipped cream but formed a ballistic barrier that could stop small-arms fire and light explosives. A large gun cage sat against one wall, secured with a biometric lock. It had only a few guns in it. Since Holden didn't know exactly how many the security team had brought with them, that was either a good thing or a bad thing.

Murtry sat behind a small desk with a hand terminal lying on it. He leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, a vague smile on his face. He looked like a man with all the time in the world.

"Did you hear me when I said that people are planning to murder your team?" Holden asked.

"I wish you'd stop using that word," Carol Chiwewe said. She insisted on being present at any meeting between Holden and the RCE people, and it had seemed like a reasonable request. Now, with her own people plotting an attack, it felt like a security risk.

"'Murder'?" Murtry said. "'Terrorism' has a nice ring to it. 'Homicide' always sounded a bit legalistic to me. Pretentious."

"Wait," Holden cut in before Carol could respond to Murtry's baiting. "Cut that out right now. My capacity for giving a shit about your little tiff down here has hit its limit. This is no longer a negotiation of rights or a discussion of who attacked who first."

"No?" Murtry said. "And what is it, then?"

"It's about me telling you what's going to happen."

"Telling," Murtry said.

“You’re not in charge here,” Carol added. Holden squashed the irritation he felt at their only taking sides to make his life harder.

“Two things have changed recently, and one hasn’t,” he said, working to keep his tone pleasant. “The violence is about to escalate, with us teetering on the edge of an all-out shooting war between the colony and RCE. And, probably more importantly, the alien stuff left on this planet is waking up.”

“What’s the one that didn’t?” Murtry asked.

“What?”

“The one thing that didn’t change.”

“Right,” Holden said, leaning across the desk toward him. “I’m still the only guy in the system with a warship in orbit. So with those three things in mind, we’re leaving this planet before you idiots can kill any more of each other, or before the aliens kill all of us.”

“Threats now?” Carol said behind him.

Without looking away from Murtry, Holden said, “You bet, if that’s what it takes. Start getting your people ready for evac. Get the *Israel*’s shuttles down here. Do it now. The *Israel* is leaving with me in thirty hours, and you’ll want to be on it when we go.”

“You can’t,” Carol said, and Holden spun around to face her.

“I can. We’ll get the *Barb*’s shuttle back down here, and I suggest you have your people pack up everything they care about and start getting on it. Because the *Barb* is leaving.”

Carol’s mouth went tight and her hands curled into fists.

“You done?” Murtry asked, his voice light. “May I present my rebuttal?”

“There isn’t one,” Holden said, pulling a chair up to the desk and sitting down. Showing he didn’t care about the trappings of control the security office gave Murtry.

“So, here’s the price of fame,” Murtry continued. “You are one of the most recognized people in the solar system. It’s why they sent you. Fame gives you the illusion of power. But it’s all just a façade.”

“No, the fact that I own the *Rocinante*—”

Murtry patted the air again in the same condescending gesture he’d used on Carol. “You’re famous for being the man who tries to save everyone. For being the solar system’s white knight. Tilting at giants like Protogen and Mao-Kwik. Your ship’s got the right name.”

Murtry laughed at Holden’s frown.

“Yeah, I’ve read a book,” Murtry went on. “So that’s why they send you here. No one will expect the great James Holden to take sides. Of secretly backing either the colonists *or* one of those nasty Earth corporations. You’re the man without an agenda or subtext.”

“Great,” Holden said. “Thanks for the insight. Now call your people and —”

“But we’re eighteen months from the closest legal remedy, and the only real power you have out here is violence.”

“You’re the violent man here,” Carol said, making it an accusation.

“I am,” Murtry agreed. “I understand its uses better than most. And the thing I know about you, Captain Holden, is that you are not. Now, if that brute you brought with you were in here making these threats, well, I’d have to take that seriously. But not from you. You’ve got a warship in orbit right now that could blow the *Israel* and the *Barbapiccola* into glowing slag, then rain down destruction on this planet that would wipe out every shred of human life in this solar system. *But* you’re not the man to pull that trigger, and we both know it. So save your threats. They’re embarrassing.”

“You’re out of control,” Holden replied. “You’re insane, and as soon as RCE finds out—”

“Finds out what? That the UN mediator got spooked because there was an alien artifact on an alien planet, and I didn’t?” Murtry interrupted. “Send in a full report. I’m sure that with your reputation and the backing of the UN and OPA, your words will be given serious consideration. And maybe, *maybe* three years from now a replacement will arrive to relieve me of duty.”

Holden stood up, dropping his hand to the butt of his gun. “Or maybe I relieve you right now.”

The room went silent for a moment. Carol seemed to be holding her breath. Murtry frowned up at Holden, seemingly taken off guard for the first time. Holden waited, not breaking eye contact, angry enough to draw on Murtry and furious with himself for letting it get to that point.

Murtry smiled. It did nothing to break the tension. “If you’d brought the other one with you, that threat might have some weight. We both know who the killer on your crew is.”

“If you think I wouldn’t blow you out of that chair right this second to save everyone else on this planet, then you don’t know me at all.”

There were scratching sounds on the floor as Carol shuffled back toward the door and out of the potential firing line. Holden kept his eyes on Murtry. The man frowned up at him for several seconds, then shifted back to the vague smile. *Here we go*, Holden thought, and tried not to let the rush of adrenaline make his hand shake.

When the hand terminal on the desk squawked a connection request, Holden was so startled that he half drew his gun before he could stop himself. Murtry didn't move. The terminal screeched again.

"May I answer that?" Murtry asked.

Holden just nodded at him, dropping his gun back into its holster. Murtry picked up the terminal and opened the connection.

"Wei here," a voice said.

"Go ahead."

"Team in position. Birds are all in the nest and tooling up. Are we a go?"

"Hold," Murtry said, then put the terminal down and looked back up and Holden. "You're still twitching over what happened on Eros. I get that. You're not rational about all this alien shit, and honestly, who would be? I forgive you for the threats. And I appreciate that your initial purpose in coming here was to warn me about the danger to my team. It says something to me that in spite of our differences, you're still trying to save my people."

"No one needs to die here," Holden said, hoping against hope that Murtry was backing down.

"Well, that's not strictly speaking true," Murtry replied. "I'm good at this job. Did you think I didn't know about this little uprising? I knew before you did."

The security teams constantly patrolling the town would never have gotten close enough to listen in. "You've been bugging the town."

"Every building in it," Murtry agreed. "So while I appreciate you coming here, I think I've got the situation handled."

"You bugged my town?" Carol asked, anger seeming to win out over her fear.

"What are you doing?" Holden said. "Don't do something stupid."

Murtry just smiled again, picked up his hand terminal, and said, "Strike team is go."

The gunshots outside were softened by the foam covering the walls, and

sounded like a rapid string of faint pops. Like distant fireworks, or a bad hydraulic seal finally letting go.

“Oh no,” Carol said, and rushed to the door. Holden followed her, fumbling with his hand terminal to call Amos.

Outside, the sound was much louder. The staccato reports of gunfire splitting the peaceful night air, the flashes a distant strobe lighting up the far edge of the town. Holden ran toward the shots, shouting into his terminal for Amos to come. He stumbled in the dark, dropping it, but didn’t stop to pick it up.

At the northern edge of town, he found the rest of Murtry’s security team firing on one of the houses. Shots were coming back at them from inside. The security people were shouting at the people in the house to surrender, the people inside cursing and firing in answer. Smoke poured out one of the house’s broken windows, something inside burning.

“Stop it!” Holden yelled as he ran toward the RCE people. They ignored him and continued to pour fire into the house. Answering bullets hit one of the RCE people in the chest, the body armor making a dull thud as it stopped the round. The security woman fell on her back, yelling in pain and surprise. The rest of the team opened up on the window the shot had come from, blasting the frame and inside wall behind it into splinters.

The blaze inside the house spread suddenly with a wave of heat and a whooshing sound. Someone inside screamed in panic or pain. The front door, already just a mass of carbon fiber splinters from gunfire, swung open. A woman rushed out, a rifle in her hands. The security team shot her into a splatter of blood, and she collapsed at the bottom of the steps, twitching.

“They’re burning!” Holden yelled, grabbing the nearest RCE person by the arms and shaking him. “We have to get them out!”

The man responded by shoving him away. “Stay back until the area is cleared, sir!”

Holden shoved back, hard enough to put the RCE man on his ass in the dirt, and ran toward the fallen woman at the front of the house. Someone inside must have thought he was attacking, because a shotgun blast rang out and the ground a meter behind him flew up in a miniature explosion of dust. The RCE people opened up, and Holden found himself between two different firing lines.

Again, some distant and still calm part of his brain thought, marveling at how often this sort of thing seemed to happen.

He dove to the ground and rolled his body on top of the fallen woman, screaming for everyone to stop. No one listened. The fire in the house billowed out with another loud whump, and the heat scorched the exposed skin on Holden's face and hands. The gunshots from inside the house cut off all at once, and the RCE return fire soon after. Holden grabbed the fallen woman by the arms and dragged her away from the flames. He stumbled when he reached the RCE people, falling down at their feet.

"Help *her*," he croaked at the woman who reached down to help him up. He pushed himself up to his hands and knees, but stopped there, too dizzy to stand.

Another member of the security team was already bending over her. "This one's dead."

Holden collapsed back to the ground, suddenly robbed of strength. Too late. The big meat grinder he was trying to save these people from just kept chewing away relentlessly, and they kept lining up to throw themselves inside. The RCE people were helping up their fallen comrade, and she was insisting that she was fine, that the armor had stopped the round, that she'd just have a big bruise. Someone joked about idiots bringing slingshots to a gunfight, followed by laughter. All the while, the house burned, filling the air with acrid black smoke and the smell of hot epoxy and cooking pork.

The RCE people seemed to remember he was there, and several came over to look down at him. "Secure him," one said. Wei. The one who'd come out to look at the alien robot with them. The one who'd shot it. She stared down, nothing like compassion in her eyes.

"Fuck you," Holden said, trying to push himself back up to his feet. "You aren't securing shit."

Wei smashed him in the chest with her rifle butt, knocking him back to the ground. One of the other security people pointed his rifle at Holden. He found himself thinking it was very likely he was about to be shot.

"Hold on, now," a calm voice said. Murtry strode into view out of the darkness. "No one's shooting Captain Holden."

"He tried to help the terrorists," Wei said.

"Did he?" Murtry feigned shock. "You didn't, did you? That would be a violation of the neutrality of your position here, wouldn't it?"

"I tried to help a woman who'd been shot," Holden replied, slowly climbing to his feet. His sternum felt bruised. That was all right. It would only hurt when he breathed.

"That sounds reasonable," Murtry said. "Is that the extent of his aid to the terrorists?"

Wei nodded, then looked away, annoyed.

"Then there's no reason to detain you," Murtry continued, his voice full of good cheer. *He's insane*, Holden thought. *He's gone completely over the edge. I could kill him right now and end this.* In his mind, he could picture Miller nodding in approval at the thought.

"Sir," Wei said, bringing her rifle up to her shoulder and aiming into the darkness beyond the firelight. "Incoming."

"Hold your panties," Amos said from the dark and stepped into the light. He had Basia Merton and Carol Chiwewe and a number of other colonists with him.

"My God," Carol said, looking at the fire. "Did anyone get out?"

One of the security people pointed his rifle at the body lying on the ground. "She did."

"Zadie," Basia said. "They killed her."

Murtry stepped forward and cleared his throat. When everyone was looking at him, he said, "My team surrounded the house where a cell of known terrorists were actively preparing to murder myself, the entire RCE security detachment, and Captain Holden. They had firearms and possibly explosives. When the RCE security team demanded that they exit the building unarmed and with their hands up, they opened fire. All of the terrorists were killed by the *return* fire. It's possible that explosives the terrorists were planning to use acted as an accelerant when the house started burning. Everything done here was by the book and appropriate for protecting RCE personnel and the UN/OPA mediator from harm."

Carol looked at blazing house with a stunned expression. "Appropriate..."

"Mister Merton," Murtry continued. "So glad you could join us. Sergeant Wei, take Basia Merton into custody."

"What?" Basia said, raising his hands and backing up. "Why me?"

"No," Holden said, stepping in front of Wei and planting his hand on the breastplate of her armor. "Not happening."

“Mister Merton was a party to this conspiracy,” Murtry said, speaking loud enough for the gathering crowd of colonists to hear. “He attended the secret meeting at which the attack was planned, and there is significant evidence that he was a participant in the attack which killed five of my people. Might have something to say about what happened to Governor Trying too.” Lowering his voice, he said, “Out of the way, Holden, or we’ll just go through you.” Wei smiled at him without humor. One of the other RCE people walked around them toward Basia, a plastic wrist restraint in his hands.

Amos stepped in front of Basia and punched the RCE man in the face. It sounded like a hammer hitting a side of beef. The security man fell to the ground, a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“Nope,” Amos said, then shook his right hand with a grimace and added, “Ouch.”

The rest of the security team brought their rifles to bear on him. Holden saw Amos drop his right hand toward his gun, then stepped in front of him and yelled, “Stop!”

“We’re taking him in,” Murtry said, pointing at Basia. “One way or the other. We’ll let the assault on one of my people slide for now. Emotions running hot, and all.”

“We’re all leaving anyway,” Holden said, keeping his voice low, appealing to Murtry rather than the crowd.

“You have no authority to order anyone to leave,” Murtry replied. “I hoped we were done with that.”

“In the meantime,” Holden continued as though Murtry hadn’t spoken, “the UN is taking custody of this man. Basia. As part of our investigation. He’ll be secure on my ship, he won’t be a threat to your people down here, and when we all get back you can present your evidence and have him arrested.”

“ ‘Get back,’ ” Murtry said with a lazy smile. “Just going to keep him in a holding cell for the next few years? Because I accused him of something?”

“If I have to,” Holden said. “Because I don’t believe for a second that you wouldn’t kill him.”

Murtry shrugged. “Okay. He’s your baggage, then. Just keep him off my planet.”

Basia looked stunned, his eyes focused on nothing in particular. The colonists began organizing a firefighting detail to put the blaze out. Murtry and his team stood and watched, not offering to help, a visible reminder of the threat they presented next to the violence of their handiwork.

Holden headed back into town, Basia and Amos in tow. He patted his pockets looking for his hand terminal before remembering he'd dropped it on the run out to the fight. He'd never find it in the dark, so he borrowed Amos' and called the ship.

"Naomi," he said once she'd picked up. "Bring the *Roci* down to the landing area. We're going to need you to offload our heavier armor and some bigger firepower."

"This doesn't sound good," she said.

"It's not. Have you heard back from the UN or Fred yet?"

"Nothing yet. I take it this means RCE and the Ganymede folks aren't in a big hurry to leave?"

"No," Holden said with a heavy sigh. "No, they'd rather stay here and kill each other right up until the alien shit starts turning them into spare parts."

"And you?" she said. She meant was he coming up the well too. It was the sane thing to do.

"Not yet," he said. "If it escalates any more, maybe."

" 'It' the aliens or 'it' the people?"

"Right?"

"Alex has seen a few more power spikes, and there's more movement, but it's pretty far south of you. If it starts looking more interesting, I'll let you know."

"Thank you. Oh, and you'll be picking up a passenger."

"Que?"

"It's complicated, but we're putting him on the *Roci* because he isn't safe down here anymore. I owe this guy, Naomi. He tried to save my life. Take good care of him."

"Okay."

"And honey?" Holden said, unable to keep the worry out of his voice. "When you get back up, keep a close eye on the *Israel*. I think things might be about to go all the way bad down here, and when they do, they may go bad up there too."

“Ha!” Naomi said, and he could hear the smile in her voice. “Let ’em try.”

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Chapter Nineteen: Havelock

The corridor stretched forty meters between the recycling tanks and the secondary machine shop with hatches inset every ten meters. Open lifts at either end led to environmental control fore and hydroponics aft. The age of the *Israel* showed not only in the design of the walls and the grating of the floor, but also in the green-gray finish of the ceramic. Harsh edges at the doorways marked where safety design had improved in the decades since the ship first flew out past the orbit of Mars. A white scar splashed across one wall where something drastic had happened in some previous era of the ship's history and been patched like painting over graffiti. Havelock fought the urge to press himself into the corner nearest the doorway.

It was hard. His species had evolved in the gravity well of Earth, had grown and developed in it. His hindbrain told him that pressure meant safety. The angry whispers of the men in the hall set his heart tripping over faster, and the wall, centimeters from his back, seemed to pull at him like a magnet. It was an error waiting to happen. Lean in, push against the wall, and it would push back, sending him out into the open air of the corridor. And the firing lines. The second law of thermodynamics as applied to gunfights.

"Clear," one of the engineers said, and Havelock was torn between pleasure and annoyance. *Not clear*, he thought. They hadn't seen him, so they thought he wasn't there. He held the gun at his leg, stayed still. Waited. Didn't hug the wall.

The first man who floated by didn't notice him until he'd already been shot. Havelock's paint round bloomed orange against the man's chest. The one behind him had already launched, his body sailing between one

handhold and the next, unable to change his trajectory. Havelock hit him twice, once in the leg, then in the belly. In a real fight, there would be blood in the air now. Fine red droplets spinning into orbs and already coalescing and beginning to clot. The third man was still far enough down the corridor that Havelock didn't have a clear line of sight. Half a dozen blue paint rounds hissed past him, splattering the ceramic bulkhead. Suppressing fire. Not a bad plan, but there was no one left to exploit it.

Havelock pulled gently at the handhold behind him to keep from drifting out, reloaded his pistol, and counted incoming rounds. The "dead" engineer floated in the corridor, a sour expression on his face. Havelock counted fifteen rounds, then there was a pause and the slick metallic sound of the pistol ejecting the paint round magazine. Havelock pulled a few centimeters forward, looking down the hall. The last man—Williams—hadn't even taken cover while he fumbled to reload his gun. Havelock fired three times, hitting him only once. The accuracy on the pistols stank, but it was enough to make his point. The last engineer barked out an obscenity.

"All right," Havelock said into his hand terminal. "That's a wrap, guys. Let's get the cleanup crew out, and meet back in the conference room in thirty."

It was hard to judge the training sessions. On the one hand, they had been going for eight days now, and they were not ready for real action. The engineers weren't soldiers. The three who'd had some training earlier in life were so out of practice that they were worse than the absolute beginners. At least the novices knew they didn't know anything.

And on the other hand, they were getting better faster than Havelock had expected. With another week or ten days, they'd be at least as competent as a squad of rookies. Maybe more.

Security trainees were driven by any number of things—the need for a job, an idealistic view of helping people, sometimes just a narcissistic love of violence. The engineers weren't like that. They were more focused, more driven, and there was a palpable sense of the team against the enemy. Murtry's defeat of the terrorist cell downstairs left them at once excited and edgy, and Havelock didn't see anything wrong with the bloodthirst, so long as it was channeled and controlled.

For the next half hour, the engineers and the security team—Havelock and two others from this skeleton crew—went through the corridors, holds,

and locks cleaning up the mess from the exercise. The paint polymerized quickly, peeling off the walls and grates without flaking much or leaving fragments on the float that someone could breathe in. The engineers had also manufactured sets of personal vacuuming systems that filtered everything from tiny particles of the paint casing to volatile molecules out of the air. They laughed and joked and traded friendly insults as they worked, like junior belts cleaning a dojang. Havelock hadn't intended the cleanup as a team-building exercise, but it worked well enough that he was starting to tell himself that he had.

The conference room where they had the orientation before the exercise and the postmortem afterward had been designed for the false gravity of thrust. An oblong table was bolted to the floor with crash couches around it that the engineers didn't use. Havelock didn't know how the decision had been made to ignore the table and rotate the consensus for up and down ninety degrees, but every meeting was like that now. The engineers and security floated against the walls or in the open air, the "floor" to their right, and Havelock took his place by the main doors.

"All right," he said, and the murmur of conversations stopped. "What did we learn?"

"Not to trust motherfucking Gibbs when he tells us the corridor's clear." Laughter bubbled after, but it wasn't angry or mean. Even the man being mocked was smiling.

"Wrong answer," Havelock said with a grin. "The right answer is don't hurry when you're clearing a space. We have a natural tendency to see an empty space and think it's safe. Doors and corners are always dangerous, because you're moving into something without being sure what's there. By the time you see the enemy, you're exposed to them."

"Sir?"

Havelock pointed to the woman with the raised hand. "Yes."

"Sir, is there an algorithm for this? Because if we could get some kind of best-practice flowchart that we could study when we're not here, I think it would help us a lot."

"We could classify them by the types of doors or corners," someone else said. "And what plane we could use to approach them. Seem to me like we'd be better off shifting the axis so that whatever we're coming to reads as down."

Havelock let them talk for a while. It was funny, hearing the tactics of small-unit assault analyzed in terms of engineering, but those were his crew now. They were learning to solve violence like an equation: not to eliminate it, but to understand it fully.

“What I don’t understand,” Chief Engineer Koenen said, “is why we’re looking at the *Barbapiccola* at all.”

The eyes of the assembled team turned toward Havelock, looking for an answer. Or at least a response. A surprising nervousness crawled up his throat, and he chuckled.

“They’re the bad guys,” he said.

“The *Barbapiccola* is an unarmed freighter with a standing crew of maybe a hundred people that requires a shuttle to transfer from the surface,” the chief engineer said. “The *Rocinante* runs with less than a skeleton crew, half of which are already off the ship. It seems to me that we have a lower-risk, higher-value option here.”

A murmur of agreement passed through the room. Havelock shook his head.

“No,” he said. “First thing is just what you said. The *Barbapiccola*’s unarmed. If things don’t go well, the worst we can expect in retaliation is a strongly worded letter. The *Rocinante* was a state-of-the-art Martian warship before Holden took her to the OPA. God knows what modifications they’ve made since then. She’s got a full rack of torpedoes, PDCs, and a keel-mounted rail gun. If the crew on the *Rocinante* see us as a threat, they can end us, and there’s really nothing we can do about it.”

“But if we were the ones with that firepower—” Koenen began.

“We’d be fine as long as we stayed here,” Havelock said. “But as soon as we go back through the ring gate, there’s a whole mess of lawyers, treaties, and other ships with even bigger guns. If we have to commandeer the *Barbapiccola*, at least we have a legal argument to make.”

The engineers groaned and shook their heads. Legal arguments were another phrase for *bullshit* to them, but Havelock pressed on.

“For one thing, the ore they’re carrying is RCE property as long as the UN charter stands. For another, if they bring any of the colonists up from the surface, we can argue they’re aiding and abetting murder.”

“Argue?” one of the men in the back of the group said. The laughter that followed was bleak.

“Being true makes it a strong argument,” Havelock said. “Go after the *Rocinante*, and we look like everything they say we are. If we stand tough, we can protect ourselves and still win the long game.”

“Long game’s great if you’re around long enough to play it,” the man at the back said, but his tone of voice told Havelock that they’d seen the sense in what he said. For the time being, anyway.



Ivers Thorrsen was a geosensor analyst with advanced degrees from universities on Luna and Ganymede. He made more in a month than Havelock would in a year of working security. Also, he was a Belter. Growing up in microgravity hadn’t affected him as much as Havelock had seen in other people. Thorrsen’s head was maybe a little big for his body, his spine and legs maybe a little long and thin. With enough exercise and steroids, the man could almost have passed for an Earther. Not that it mattered. Everyone on the *Israel* knew what everyone else was. Back when they’d left home, the differences hadn’t mattered. Not much.

“In addition to the energy spikes, there are twenty heat upwellings that we’ve seen so far,” he said, pointing to the rendered sphere of New Terra on Havelock’s desk display. “They’ve all appeared in the last eighty hours, and so far we don’t have any idea what they are.”

Havelock scratched his head. The cells in the brig were empty, so there was no one to overhear them. No need to be polite.

“Were you expecting me to have a hypothesis? Because I was under the impression that we were here in order to find a bunch of stuff we didn’t know what it was. That you’ve seen something you don’t understand seems pretty much par for the course.”

The Belter’s lips pressed thin and pale.

“This could be important. It could be nothing. My point is that I have to find out. I’m busy with important work. I can’t spend all my time dealing with distractions.”

“All right,” Havelock said.

“This is the third day running that someone has sprayed urine in my locker. Three *times*, you understand? I’m trying to get my gear not to smell like piss instead of running the numbers.”

Havelock sighed and canceled out his display. New Terra and its mysterious hot spots vanished. “Look, I understand why you don’t like it. I’d be cheesed off too. But you have to cut them a little slack. People are bored and they’re under pressure. It’s natural to get a little rowdy. It’ll pass.”

Thorrson folded his arms across his chest, his scowl deepening. “A little rowdy? That’s what you see? I am the only Belter on my team, and I am the *only* one getting—”

“No. Look, just no, all right? Things are tense already. If you want me to, I’ll put a monitor on the locker and let people know they need to cool it, but let’s not make this into a Belters against the inner planets thing.”

“I’m not making it into anything.”

“With all respect, I think you are,” Havelock said. “And the more you try to make this into a big deal, the more it’s going to come back and bite you on the ass.”

Thorrson’s rage was palpable. Havelock shifted slightly, pushing himself higher in the direction that they’d temporarily chosen as up. It was an old trick he’d learned back when he’d worked with Star Helix. Humanity might have gone up out of the gravity wells, but the sense of being taller, of establishing dominance, was buried too deeply in the human animal for a little thing like null g to erase it. Thorrson took a deep, shuddering breath, and for a moment Havelock wondered if he was going to take a swing at him. He didn’t want to lock the analyst in a cell for the night. But if it came to it, he wouldn’t mind.

“I’ll put a monitor on your locker, and I’ll send out a general announcement that people need to put a sock in it. No one’ll piss on your stuff again, and you can get back to work. That’s what you want, right?”

“When you write your announcement, is it going to say that they should stop pulling pranks, or that they should stop harassing Belters?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

Thorrson’s shoulders hunched, defeated. Havelock nodded. It struck him, not for the first time, that confrontations were like a dance. Certain moves required certain responses, and most of it happened in the lower parts of the brain that language might not even be aware of. Thorrson’s hunch was an offer of submission, and his nod accepted it, and Thorrson probably didn’t even know it had happened.

Certainly didn't, in fact, because his rational mind kept on dieseling even though everything that needed talking about was already decided.

"If you were the only Earther and it was Belters doing this, you'd feel different about it."

"Thank you for letting me know about the problem," Havelock said. "I'll see it's addressed."

Thorrson pushed off from the desk and sailed gracefully through the air, vanishing into the corridor. Havelock sighed, opened his desk display again, and paged through the ship reports. The truth was that incidents were on the rise. Most of it was little things. Complaints of petty infractions of corporate policies. Accusations of hoarding or sexual misconduct. One of the organic chemists had been making euphorics. The ship psychiatric counselor was issuing increasingly strident warnings about something he called *internal stratification*, which just sounded like social politics as usual to Havelock. He signed off on all the reports.

If you were the only Earther.

The funny thing was that Havelock had been the only Earther in a Belter society, and more than once. When he'd been on a twenty-berth hauler from Luna to Ganymede for Stone & Sibbets, he'd been one of two Earthers, outnumbered and always subtly excluded. He'd worked for Star Helix on Ceres Station for the better part of a year, always getting the worst cases, the worst partner, the less-than-subtle reminders that he didn't belong. He'd been dealt more than his fair share of shit by Belters for not having the right-shaped body or knowing the polyglot mess that passed for a kind of outer planets cant. They hadn't pissed in his locker, mostly because it hadn't occurred to them.

Havelock set a monitor specifically on Thorrson's locker, then pulled up a fresh security template. He looked at the empty field, asking him by its blankness what he wanted to say.

We're eight billion clicks from home and a bunch of half-feral terrorists want to keep on killing us, so let's stay calm.

Or maybe:

Damn near every Belter I've dealt with treated me like I was dipped in shit because of where I came from, but now that we're in the majority, let's all respect their tender little feelings.

He cracked his knuckles and started typing.

It has come to the attention of security that an increasing number of pranks have been played among the crew. While we all understand the need to keep things light in these stressful times, some of these have gone beyond the realm of good taste. As acting head of security

He paused.

Once, on Ceres, Havelock had been assigned to close down an illegal club up near the center of the station where the Coriolis had been vicious and the spin gravity at its least. When he'd gotten to the place, the combination of bright lights, shrieking dub, and his unaccustomed inner ear had left him vomiting in the carved corridors. An image of him had made its way onto the board back in the offices. He'd played along because objecting would have made it worse. He hadn't thought about that case in years.

If you were the only Earther.

"Fuck," Havelock said to the empty air. He cleared the screen.

It has come to my attention that some RCE employees and team members have been singled out for harassment because they are from the outer planets. It is critical under these stressful conditions that we not confuse our teammates with our enemies because of accidents of physiology and environments of origin. As such, I am taking the following actions:

"I'm gonna regret this," Havelock said to the screen, but by the time he'd finished the announcement, checked it for grammar, and sent it out, he felt almost good.

Chapter Twenty: Elvi

Sitting outside her hut, her hand terminal resting on her knees, the now-familiar sunlight warming her neck and back, Elvi waited for the reports from Luna to buffer. The comm laser on the *Edward Israel* was the only conduit back to the worlds she'd known, and it was swamped with technical data flowing out from the workgroups on the planetary surface and the sensor data from the *Israel*. It was sobering to realize that for all the tragedies and fear and death that wracked New Terra, most of the raw data going back home was still technical. And her slow connection was more than the townspeople of First Landing had. The *Barbapiccola* didn't even support a feed for them. Their hand terminals were strictly ad hoc, local, line-of-sight networks if they functioned at all.

A breeze lifted a whirl of sand, then set it gently down again. High above, the green clouds scattered apart and rejoined, lacing the blue sky like algae floating on the surface of a pond. The air smelled of heat and dust and the distant presentiment of rain. The reports finished loading and Elvi pulled them up and spent a long hour reading them, listening to the debates, putting together her perspective. It was harder than she liked. Her mind kept jumping around without her.

Everything was changing on the planet so quickly, everything was so different than she'd expected it to be, that just maintaining focus was hard. The voyage into the desert, seeing a two-billion-year-old mechanism actually still functioning, if only barely, had been revelatory. Then the exposure and destruction of the terrorists among the squatters, which should have been a relief, had left her oddly unsettled. And, though she hadn't mentioned it to anyone and never would, she'd been suffering recurring and

intrusive dreams about James Holden.

On the screen, the research coordinator's report ended, and Elvi realized she hadn't heard any of it. She sighed, restarted it, and stopped it again before the woman back at the RCE labs on Earth could say anything. Elvi looked up at the sky, wondering where the *Rocinante* and the *Barbapiccola* and the *Edward Israel* were, hidden by the atmosphere-scatter of blue. One of the plant analogs beside the path leading back to the town let out a volley of rising clicks. It was something she'd wanted to investigate, but she hadn't had the time. Not yet. "Doctor Okoye," the research coordinator said from sixty AU away, or half a galaxy depending on how you looked at it, "I've just come from a meeting with the stats team, and I wanted to bring you up to speed on the plan for how we'd like to proceed with the data collection in the next weeks. The Luna group especially was hoping to request additional sampling on several of your initial subjects so that we can narrow our error bars..."

Elvi listened, focused, pushed away all her other thoughts and feelings. This time, she ended the report with a list of action items, a clear sense of how her work was changing the resources and plans of the labs back at home, and a half dozen questions about mineral sequestration that she wanted to ask Fayez. Protocol said she should record a reply and send it out right away. The hours it would take to reach home meant it would arrive before the morning meetings. But instead, she switched to her organizer and began listing her obligations. Water samples and soil samples. Samples of three different plant analog species. A report on the alien artifact...

She'd been thinking about possible triggers to the artifact's sudden activity, and since Holden had been there and was, after all, the mediator who was ultimately responsible for making the situation on New Terra better—sensible, sane—she thought maybe, if she could give a solid reason that the artifact in the desert wasn't moving in reaction to their presence, it would take something off his plate. Just as a kindness, and to help support him in making peace.

Certainly it wasn't just that she was generating excuses to see him again.

She went down the list of things to do, then paused. At the end, she wrote, *Letter of recommendation for Felcia Merton*. She sat for a long moment, looking at the words, trying to decide how she felt about them. She erased the line, waited, and then entered it in again.



Walking into the town was like entering another world, and a harder one. The dirt streets weren't empty, but the people who walked them stayed closer to the walls than they had before. The smiles and nods, the eye contact and simple greetings were all gone. The townspeople walked quickly, with their heads down. Elvi had the urge to stand in their way, block them with her body until they acknowledged that she was there.

The building where it had happened stood near the edge of town. The fire had melted what it hadn't burned. The bones of the structure still stood, charred and tilted in the afternoon sun. She paused before them. They reminded her of something, but she couldn't quite remember what. Something dead. Something about fire.

Oh. Of course. The artifact, burning in the desert.

Two of the RCE security force walked down the street in front of her, striding in the middle of the road. She couldn't make out their words, but the tone of the conversation was bright, loose, and celebratory. One of them laughed. Elvi turned, walking toward them. As they passed, one of them lifted a hand in greeting and Elvi returned it automatically. Across the street, one of the Belter women—Eirinn her name was—stepped out from a door, saw the security forces, and hesitated before she came out into the light. Elvi watched the woman walk, her head a little too high, her shoulders pulled a little too far back. Nothing proved fear like the effort of rejecting it. First Landing had belonged to that woman once.

Elvi stepped into the commissary, hoping to find Holden at his traditional table. The room was dim, and it took her eyes a moment to adjust. The other one, Amos Burton, was there instead, eating a bowl of brown noodles that smelled of fake peanuts and curry. In the back, Lucia Merton sat in a booth with someone. Elvi looked away before the doctor met her gaze.

Amos looked up at her as she came close.

"I was wondering if Captain Holden... I wanted to talk with him. About the artifacts? In the desert?"

"Something happen with it?"

"I had some theories about it that I thought might be... useful."

Oh good God, she thought. I'm stuttering like a schoolgirl. Thankfully, Amos didn't notice, or if he did he pretended not to.

"Captain's off getting ready to transfer the prisoner," Amos said. "Should be back around sundown."

"All right," Elvi said. "That's fine. If you'd tell him I was looking for him? I'll likely be in my hut by the time he's back. He can find me there."

"I'll let 'im know."

"Thank you."

She turned away, fists pushed into her pockets. She felt humiliated without being entirely certain why she should. She was just going to offer some perspective on the artifacts and the local ecosystem. There was nothing about it that was at all inappropriate or—

"Elvi!"

She felt her belly drop. She turned toward the back, toward the booth where Lucia Merton sat. Fayeze had swiveled around in the chair and was waving at her. She looked at the door to the street, wishing there was some graceful way to get through it.

"Elvi! Come sit. Have a drink with us."

"Of course," she said, and walked toward the back of the commissary, regretting every step as she took it.

Doctor Merton looked pale except for the bags under her eyes. Elvi wondered if the woman was ill, or if it was just distress and grief.

"Lucia," Elvi said.

"Elvi."

"Sit, sit, sit," Fayeze said. "You're standing there, I feel short. I hate feeling short."

Elvi smoothed the fabric of her pants and slid in next to Fayeze. His smile was beery and amused. Lucia's glance at her was almost an apology. *You could have sat next to me*, she seemed to say.

"We were just talking about Felcia," Fayeze said, then turned to Lucia. "Elvi is the smartest person on the team. Seriously, do you know that she's the one who wrote the first real paper on cytoplasmic computation? That's her. Right there."

"Felcia's told me about you," Lucia said. "Thank you for being a friend to my daughter."

Your family tried to kill me, Elvi thought. *You shared your bed every*

night with a man who wanted me dead.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “She’s a very talented girl.”

“She is,” Lucia said. “And God knows I tried to talk her out of being a doctor.”

“You were hoping she’d stay?” Elvi asked, and her voice was more brittle than she’d intended.

“Not that, no,” Lucia said, laughing. “That she’s leaving this planet is the only good thing that’s happened since we came. It’s only that I’m afraid she’s doing it because it’s what I do. Better that she find her own way.”

“It’s a long way to Luna,” Fayez said. “I mean, I had five major courses of study before I fell in love with geohydraulics. I was going to be a brewer. Can you imagine that?”

Elvi and Lucia said *Yes* at precisely the same time. Elvi smiled despite herself. Lucia stood.

“I should go get Jacek,” she said.

“Is he all right?” Elvi asked. It was a reflex. A habit of etiquette. She wished she could take the question back even as the words left her mouth. The doctor’s smile was wistful.

“As well as can be expected,” she said. “His father is leaving today.”

Taken prisoner on the Rocinante, Elvi thought, but said nothing.

“Your money’s no good here,” Fayez said. “It’s on me.”

“Thank you, Doctor Sarkis.”

“Fayez. Call me Fayez. Everyone else does.”

Lucia nodded and walked away. Fayez shook his head and stretched, his arm reaching behind Elvi’s shoulders. She shifted to the opposite side of the table.

“What the hell are you doing?” she asked.

“What am *I* doing? You think that’s the question?”

“You know that her husband—”

“I don’t know a damned thing, Elvi. Neither do you. I’m rich in interpretation and poor in datasets, just the same as you.”

“You think... you think it’s not...”

“I think that building was filled with terrorists, and that Murtry killed them and saved us. That’s what I *think*, though. I also think that the more the locals know and love me, the less likely it is that I’ll be scalped in the next uprising. And... and what is civilization if it isn’t people talking to

each other over a goddamned beer?” Fayeze said, then lolled his head back over his shoulder. “Am I *right*?”

“Fuckin’ A,” Amos called back. “That sure is whatever you were talking about.”

“That’s right,” Fayeze said.

“You’re drunk.”

“I’ve been doing this for a while,” Fayeze said. “I’ve probably had drinks with a third of the people in this shithole. What I want to know is where the rest of you are while I’m making peace.”

For a moment, she could see his fear too. It was in the angle of his jaw and the way his half-closed eyes cut to the left, avoiding hers. Fayeze who could laugh at anything, however tragic, was scared out of his wits. And why wouldn’t he be? They were billions of clicks from home, on a planet they didn’t understand, and in the middle of a war that had now killed people on both sides. And how odd and obvious that it would be a victory for their side—the nameless, faceless killers identified and killed or imprisoned—that would call up the panic.

Fayeze was waiting. Waiting for the next escalation. The other shoe to drop. He was reaching out for whatever control he could find or hope for or pretend into being. Elvi understood, because she felt just the same, only she hadn’t known it until she saw it in someone else.

He scowled down at the table, then, slowly, his gaze floated up to meet hers. “What *are* you doing here?”

“Sitting with you, apparently,” she said.

Waiting for the other shoe.

Chapter Twenty-One: Basia

Basia stood at the edge of the landing area, steel shackles damp with his sweat and chafing his wrists and forearms. Murtry had insisted on restraints until Basia was off-planet, though he had given the key to Amos, and the big man had assured Basia he'd be uncuffed once the *Rocinante* lifted off. It was one last visible demonstration to the citizens of Ilus that Murtry could and would exert his will upon them. Jim Holden was still trying to play the peacemaker, and he'd agreed to the restraints in exchange for Basia being released into his custody without any further threats or considerations. Basia understood why everyone was doing what they were doing.

It didn't make it less humiliating.

Lucia and Jacek stood with him, waiting for the *Rocinante* to land. Jacek stood in front of him, back pressed to his father's stomach and Basia's cuffed hands on his shoulders. His wife's hand, gripping his own, rested on his son's shoulder. All three of them touching. He tried to draw strength from it. Tried to lock the sensation of having his wife and his son close to hand into his memory. He had the terrible sense that it was the last time he'd ever feel her touch. He felt both relief and sadness that Felcia was already gone. Bad enough that his son, too young to really understand what it all meant, had to see him in chains. He could not have stood his bright, beautiful girl seeing him that way.

The other townspeople—men and women he had lived with sharing air and water and sorrow and rage—avoided the spectacle of his departure as if his guilt were an illness they might catch. He'd become a stranger to them. He might almost have preferred to have them condemn him.

All I wanted was my freedom. All I wanted was my family with me, and

not to lose another child to them. He was amazed and sick at heart that that had been too much to ask of the universe.

Amos, his nominal guard, stood a respectful distance away, arms crossed and staring up at the sky. Giving the family the space to say goodbye. Holden stood with Murtry and Carol, the triumvirate of power on Ilus. They weren't looking at each other. They were there to take the sting off of Murtry exerting his control by pretending they were part of the decision. His life was a pawn in their political games. Nothing more.

"Just a couple more minutes, chief," Amos said. A moment later came a high-altitude thunderclap. The *Rocinante*, dropping through the atmosphere faster than sound, descending on them all like the angel of judgment.

It seemed unreal.

"I'm happy having you two here with me right now," he told Lucia. It wasn't even a lie.

"Find a way to come back to us," she said.

"I don't know what I can do."

"Find a way," she repeated, making each word its own sentence. "You do that, Basia. Don't make me grow old on this world alone."

Basia felt something thick blocking his throat, and he had trouble breathing around the pain in his stomach. "If you need to find someone..."

"I did," Lucia said. "I found someone. Now he needs to find a way to come back to me."

Basia didn't trust himself to speak. Worried that if he opened his mouth it would turn into a sob. He didn't want Murtry to see that. So instead he put his cuffed arms around Lucia and pulled her tight and squeezed until neither of them could breathe.

"Come back," she whispered one last time. Anything she might have said after that was drowned out by the roar of the *Rocinante* landing. A wall of dust blew past, stinging the bare skin on Basia's neck. Lucia pressed her face into his chest, and Jacek clung to his back.

"Time to go," Amos shouted.

Basia let go of Lucia, hugged his boy to his chest one last time, *the* last time maybe, and turned away from them both to board his prison.

"Welcome aboard, Mister Merton," a tall, pretty woman said when the inner airlock door opened. She wore a simple jumpsuit of gray and black with the name Nagata stenciled over the breast pocket. Naomi Nagata, the

executive officer of the *Rocinante*. She had long black hair pulled into a ponytail, the same way Felcia had worn hers when she was a young girl. On Naomi it looked more like a functional choice than an aesthetic one. She didn't appear to be armed, and Basia felt himself relax a degree.

He handed her the key to his restraints and she unlocked them. "Basia, please," he said as she worked. "I'm just a welder. No one has ever called me Mister Merton."

"Welder?" Naomi asked. It didn't sound like she was making pleasantries. She took the restraints, rolled them into a ball, and secured them in a locker. Shipboard discipline, where any free object became a projectile during maneuvers. "Because we always have a repair list."

The compartment they stood in looked like a storage room laid on its side. The lockers ran parallel to the ground, rather than vertically, and there was a small hatch on either wall, with what looked like a ladder running across the floor. Naomi tapped on a panel on one wall and said, "Strapping in down here, Alex, get us off this dustball before my knees start leaking."

A disembodied voice with a Martian Mariner Valley twang said, "Roger that, boss. Up in thirty ticks, so get belted in."

Naomi pulled on a strap on the floor and a seat folded out. It was designed so a person would have to lie on the floor on their back to put their butt on the seat. A variety of restraining belts folded out with it. She pointed at another strap in the floor and said, "Better get with it. We lift in thirty seconds."

Basia pulled out his own seat and awkwardly lay on the ground to get into the straps. Naomi helped him buckle in.

The Martian voice counted down from five, and the floor lurched as the ship lifted off. There was a disorienting rotation, and the floor became a wall behind him and he was actually sitting on the cushion he'd pulled out. He became very grateful for the straps holding him in place.

Then a giant roared at the bottom of the ship, and an invisible hand crushed Basia into his chair.

"Sorry," Naomi said, her voice given a false vibrato by the rumbling of the ship. "Alex is an old combat pilot, he only flies at full speed."

As always when flying out of a gravity well, Basia was surprised by how quickly it was over. A few minutes of crushing gravity and the roar of the engines, then with almost no transition at all, he was floating in his

straps in silence.

"All done," Naomi said as she began unbuckling. "Might be a few short maneuvering bumps as Alex gets us into the orbit he wants, but those yellow lights on the wall will flash fifteen seconds before any burn, so just grab a strap and hang on."

"Am I a prisoner?" Basia asked.

"What?"

"I'm just wondering how this works. Am I restricted to my room or is there a brig or something?"

Naomi floated for a moment staring at him, forehead crinkling with what looked like genuine puzzlement. "Are you a bad guy?"

"Bad guy?"

"Are you going to try to hurt anyone on this ship? Destroy our property? Steal things?"

"Definitely not," Basia said.

"Because the way I heard it, you turned on your friends in order to save our captain's life."

For a moment, Basia felt something like vertigo and then pride or the promise of it. And then he remembered the concussion of the heavy shuttle rattling him and Coop's voice. *We all remember who mashed that button.* He shook his head.

Are you a bad guy?

Naomi Nagata waited for him to speak, but he didn't have words for the guilt and shame and anger and sorrow. In time she lifted a fist, the Belter's physical idiom for a nod. He lifted his in reply.

"Make yourself at home." She pointed at the hatch to his right. "That's aft. That way is the crew decks and the galley. The galley is open whenever. We've got a cabin set up for you, it's tiny but private. If you keep going aft and hit the machine shop you've gone too far. For safety reasons don't go into the machine shop or engineering."

"Okay, I promise."

"Don't promise, just don't go in there. The other way"—she pointed at the hatch on his left—"takes you up to the ops deck. You can come up there if you want, but don't touch anything unless we tell you to."

"Okay."

"I'm headed up there right now. You're welcome to tag along."

“Okay.”

Naomi stared at him for a second, an unreadable expression on her face. “You’re not our first, you know.”

“First?”

“First prisoner transport,” Naomi said. “Jim has this thing about fair trials. It means that we’ve done our share of taking people to court even when an airlock and mysteriously erased records made a lot more sense.”

Basia couldn’t stop himself from giving the airlock door a nervous look. “Okay.”

“And,” she continued, “you’re the first one I can remember that he specifically told me to be nice to.”

“He did?”

“He owes you one. I do too,” Naomi said, then gestured at the ladder and the deck hatch in a you-first motion. Basia pulled himself up to the hatch and it whined open. Naomi pulled herself along behind him. “So you can get comfortable. But the terrified mousey thing you’re doing right now will bug the shit out of me.”

“Okay.”

“Still doing it.”

The deck above the storage and airlock area was a large compartment filled with gimbaled chairs and wall-mounted screens and control panels. A dark-skinned man with thinning black hair and a middle-aged beer belly was strapped into one of the chairs. He turned to face them as they floated into the room.

“All good?” he asked Naomi. He was the source of the Mariner Valley voice.

“Seems to be,” Naomi said, and pushed Basia into the closest chair then strapped him in. He allowed it to happen, feeling like an infant being manhandled by his mother. “Didn’t get any face time with Jim. He wanted this fellow off the ground as fast as possible.”

“Well, can’t say I was lookin’ to stay longer.”

“I know. Gravity wells,” Naomi said with a shudder. “I don’t know how people live like that.”

“I was thinking more about the bugs all coming back to life. I got five more power spikes since the last time we checked.”

“I was trying not to think about those.”

“Should have gotten Holden and Amos both,” Alex said. “And anyone else with sense.”

“Just keep an eye. If anything gets close, I want them to know about it.”

Once she’d finished belting him in, Naomi floated over to a different chair and pulled herself into it. She began calling up screens and tapping on them faster than Basia could follow, still talking to the Martian man as she worked.

“Alex,” she said, “meet Basia Merton the welder.”

“Welder?” Alex raised his eyebrows and grinned. “We got a pile of shit on the to-do list with Amos vacationing on the surface.”

Basia opened his mouth to reply but Naomi said, “Basia, meet Alex Kamal, our pilot, and the solar system’s worst vacuum welder.”

“Hello,” Basia said.

“Hello back,” Alex said, then turned to Naomi. “Hey, while I’m thinkin’ about it? You were right about that shuttle.”

“Yeah?” Naomi pushed off her chair and floated over to look at the screen next to Alex. He scrolled through what looked like video on fast-forward for a few seconds.

“See there?” Alex said, pausing it. “They detach it and park it a few hundred meters from the *Israel* then send an engineerin’ team out. They’re inside for a couple hours, then back to the *Israel*. It hasn’t moved out of that orbit since.”

“They’re doing all the shuttle runs with the other one,” Naomi said, pulling up video on a second screen and fast-forwarding through it. “I knew it.”

“Yeah, you’re very clever. Want to keep the ’scopes recording that, or do I aim ’em at the bugs?”

“The shuttle,” Naomi replied after a few more seconds of moving back and forth through the video.

Basia knew he’d been invited to sit with them. And it appeared they were talking about monitoring the RCE ship, which didn’t strike him as a personal conversation. But he couldn’t help but feel a bit out of place. Like an eavesdropper on a private moment. It was the comfortable shorthand the two members of the *Rocinante*’s crew had. They sounded like family discussing household matters. It was unsettling to think they were the only three people on the ship. It was too large. Too empty. He didn’t want to be

alone in the silence of an unfamiliar ship, but staying felt wrong too.

Basia cleared his throat. "Should I go to my cabin?"

"Do you want to?" Naomi asked without looking at him. "There is nothing to do in there. It's not even one of the ones with its own video display. All the good cabins are taken by crew."

"You can get access to the ship's library from there," Alex said, pointing at the screen closest to Basia. "If you're bored."

"I'm scared as shit," Basia said without knowing ahead of time he was going to.

Alex and Naomi both turned to look at him. The Martian's face was kind. He said, "Yeah. I bet. But nothin' bad is gonna to happen to you here. Until the captain says otherwise, treat this like home. If you want to be alone, we can—"

"No." Basia shook his head. "No, but you're talking to each other like I'm not here, so I thought..." He shrugged.

"Sorry. We've been together enough years we almost don't need to talk anymore," Naomi said. "I think the *Israel* has weaponized one of its shuttles. We've been monitoring the ship, and the activity around one shuttle was suspicious. I think they turned it into a bomb."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because," Alex answered, "that's an unarmed science ship and they flew into what they seem to see as a war zone. That shuttle could be used to attack another ship like a guided missile, or maybe as a bomb to flatten the colony."

"They want to attack you?" Basia asked. *Why would they do that? Wasn't the Rocinante and her crew here to solve the conflict?*

"I doubt it," Naomi said. "More likely the *Barbapiccola* if she tries to break orbit and run."

"Yeah," Alex said with a laugh. "The *Israel* takes a swing at us, it'll be the shortest dogfight in history."

"First Landing. They could flatten the colony?" Basia said. "They don't know that. You should warn them. My family is still down there."

"Trust me," Naomi said, "that won't happen. Now that we know, we'll keep an eye on that shuttle, and if it moves, we can stop it."

"Should probably tell the boss, though," Alex said.

"Yeah." Naomi tracked through the video a few more times, then shut it

off.

Alex unbuckled his restraint and pushed off toward the ladder. “Or... shit, XO, I can take care of it right now. I had the *Roci* go over the shuttle specs and calculate a rail gun shot that’ll cut her damn reactor in half.”

Naomi stopped him with a shake of her hand. “No. Just once I’d like to find a solution that doesn’t involve blowing something up.”

Alex shrugged. “Your call.”

Naomi floated quietly for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision and hit the comm panel. After a few seconds Jim Holden’s voice said, “Holden here.”

“Jim, I’ve got a problem and a solution I need to run past you.”

“I like that we already have a solution,” Holden replied. Basia could hear the smile in his voice.

“Two solutions,” Alex called out. “I’ve got a solution too.”

“We’ve been watching the *Israel* like you asked,” Naomi said. “And Alex and I agree that the probability is high they’ve weaponized one of the two light shuttles. They’re keeping it powered down and in a matching orbit about five hundred meters from the big ship. I think it’s a last-ditch weapon to use if the *Barb* tries to run, but that doesn’t mean they couldn’t use it on the colony, as unlikely as that seems.”

“You haven’t met this Murtry character running RCE security,” Holden said. “Or it would seem pretty damn likely. What’s our best course of action?”

“We get everyone off the planet, go back home, and spend a few decades doing unmanned exploration before we even think of coming back,” Naomi said.

“Agreed,” Holden said. “And what are we actually going to do?”

“I figure you’d want us to take care of it. Alex thinks he can gut it with a rail gun shot, but that seems like a pretty obvious escalation to me. Shooting gauss rounds past the *Israel*, I mean.”

“Things are escalating just fine on their own,” Holden said. “But we’ll keep that option on the table for now. What else?”

Naomi pulled herself closer to the comm panel and lowered her voice, as though the console were Holden himself and she was about to deliver bad news. “I take an EVA pack, fly over to the shuttle, and plant a cutout on the drive. If they run system checks, everything will come back functional, but

if they try to move the shuttle I can kill it remotely. No explosions, just a dead shuttle.”

“That seems risky,” Holden said.

“Riskier than flinging rail gun shots through its reactor?”

“Not really, no.”

“Riskier than leaving it out there and armed?”

“Oh, *hell* no. Okay, Naomi, this is your call. One way or the other, I want that threat off the board. We have enough shit to worry about down here.”

Naomi smiled at the comm panel. “One dead shuttle, coming up.”

She shut off the connection with a sigh. Basia looked from one to the other of them, scowling.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Naomi asked lightly.

“Why would you act directly against RCE? Aren’t you supposed to be mediators? Neutral? Why take any action at all when you can stay out of it?”

Her smile had depth and complexity. Basia had the feeling she’d heard a more profound question than the one he’d meant to ask.

“Choosing to stand by while people kill each other is also an action,” she said. “We don’t do that here.”

Chapter Twenty-Two: Havelock

Havelock's system filtered the newsfeeds from Sol—and it was still damned weird thinking “from Sol”—for four topics: New Terra, James Holden, contract security, and European league football. Strapped in his office crash couch, he tapped through the feed summaries. CHANGES TO COMPENSATION SCHEDULE REGULATIONS TIP THE BALANCE TOWARD EARTH-BASED CONTRACT SECURITY, STAR HELIX TO PROTEST. He deleted it. EARTHMAN'S BURDEN: FIFTY FAMOUS EARTHERS WHO SWITCHED SIDES FOR THE OPA. Holden was number forty-one. Havelock deleted it. LOS BLANCOS DEFEAT BAYERN 1–0. Havelock raised his eyebrows and put the highlights reel in his viewing queue. INCREASED VIOLENCE ON NEW TERRA. UN AND OPA REACT. MARS POSITIONING WITH OPA.

Havelock felt his belly go tight. The feed came from an intelligence analysis service with contacts in the governments of all three major powers. He opened it.

“This is Nasr Maxwell with Forecast Analytics, and this proprietary feed is intended solely for use by the subscribers and partners of Forecast Analytics. Any other distribution is in violation of MCR and UN intellectual property statutes and is subject to prosecution.

“Intelligence reports from the UN indicate that the violence on New Terra has escalated. The security forces of Royal Charter Energy discovered a new potential attack, and in thwarting it killed between seven and sixteen local insurgents. Reaction from the OPA to the attack itself has been muted, but the RCE and United Nations forces will be announcing this afternoon that a relief mission will be launched for New Terra. Initial reports suggest this will be a joint task force with both corporate assets and United Nations

military escort.

“Representatives of the OPA have not responded to this plan, but are on record as being willing to use military force to control traffic through Medina Station. Given the tactical constraints of the ring gates, Forecast Analytics projects the possibility of a modest OPA military force being able to effectively blockade the UN and RCE efforts. Sources close to the Martian congress speaking with Forecast Analytics under condition of anonymity have suggested that the Martian government would support the OPA’s action.

“Analysis suggests that this is not evidence of a long-term amity between the OPA and Mars, but a tactical alliance intended to forestall the UN and Earth-Luna corporate structures from establishing a greater foothold in these new worlds. Given the time it will take a UN and RCE group to be assembled and make the journey to Medina Station, we predict that the situation on New Terra will be evolving without immediate physical involvement from in-system players for the foreseeable future, and the greater question of how traffic through the gates will be regulated will be a source of high-level tension and probable military action in the coming months and years.”

Havelock scratched his ear. Prior experience told him that Forecast Analytics was usually about a day ahead of the mainline, non-proprietary feeds. Which would mean that in about thirty hours they’d be getting flooded with news and opinion pieces about themselves from people who’d never been farther than the Jovian system. Even if it only changed the stories that the people downstairs were telling about themselves, it could make things even worse. If the squatters knew there were more RCE ships coming—even if they weren’t going to be here for years—maybe they’d get even more desperate. Or maybe Mars getting in bed with the OPA would make them think they had support back home. Either way, nothing good could come of it.

Havelock wished there was a way to shut down the communication to the ring, just as a way to keep the dramatics of national politics contained. Things were screwed up enough without getting the professional-class screwups at the UN involved. More than they already were, anyway. At least they hadn’t picked up on the UN/OPA mediator deciding the planet was full of boojams and was telling everyone to run away and hide under

their blankets. Or, on second thought, maybe it would have been better if they had. It would be a distraction, anyway.

His hand terminal squawked, and he accepted the connection.

“I think we’re about ready,” Chief Engineer Koenen said.

“I’ll be right there,” Havelock replied, releasing the couch straps. He pushed off toward the door and hauled himself hand over hand toward the airlock.

He slid into the storage deck where his little militia was waiting, his brain arbitrarily deciding that the bank of lockers was down, the airlock door up. Human brains needed an answer, even if they had to make up something they knew was bullshit. A dozen people floated in the space. Havelock started talking to them as he lifted his own vacuum suit out of the locker at his feet.

“Good to see you today, team. So we’re going to do a practice breaching. It’s going to be a lot like last time, except this time we’re going to have a squad that’s trying to stop you.”

One of the men at the back shook a paint gun and hooted. The others around him laughed. Havelock pulled on the vacuum suit and started working the seals. He left the helmet off for the moment so that he could speak through the free air.

“Do we have teams set up?”

“I’m taking Alpha and Beta,” Koenen said. “Figured you could lead the Gamma on attack.”

“That works,” Havelock said. He shifted his paintball gun from side to side, getting a feel for its mass. “You have the emergency airlock?”

“Here,” one of the Beta team said, twisting to show his backpack. The bright yellow box held a bubble of adhesive-backed polymer bound to a second sheet that was fitted with a seal and an inflating tank the size of Havelock’s thumb. Laid out properly on the hull of a ship, it would look like a hemispherical blister and contain up to two atmospheres of pressure indefinitely or eight for a full tenth of a second. Havelock wasn’t actually going to let the engineers cut through the hull of the *Israel*, but he was going to make sure they could get everything ready up to the moment when they’d fire up the torch welders.

“All right,” he said. “Now before we get out there, remember we’re on the outside of a ship, and the shuttle is on the planet. The chances of your

drifting to where we can't get you back are non-zero."

The little bit of joking and whispering stopped. Havelock looked through the room, making eye contact with several of them as if his gaze were enough to make them safe.

"All these suits have mag boots," he said. "They only work for a few centimeters, so they'll keep you against the ship, but they won't pull you back to it. For that you have the grapnel lines. You've all trained with those?"

A murmur of general assent answered him.

"All right. If you're drifting, the grapnel line will adhere to any metal surface on the hull. They've got their own propellant, so there won't be any kick. Do not under any circumstances pass through or stop in any of the areas marked in red. Those are maneuvering thruster outlets, and while we aren't planning to make any adjustments, don't assume it. We're not doing this to lose anyone else.

"If you get out there and you start feeling too hot or like there's something wrong with your air feed, you're probably having a panic attack. Just let me or the chief know, and we'll pause the exercise and get you inside. If you start feeling wonderful and powerful and like you've seen the face of God, you're having a euphoric attack, and those are more dangerous than the panic. You aren't going to want to tell us about those, but you have to. All right?"

A ragged chorus of *Sir, yes sir* echoed through the room. Havelock tried to think of what else he should say. He didn't want to insult their intelligence, but he didn't want anything to go wrong either. In the end, he shrugged, fastened the helmet, and gave the order through the exercise frequency.

"Alpha and Beta teams, into the lock. You've got thirty minutes."

There were three exercise-specific settings on the suit radio. One was open to all the people going out. One was just for Havelock's team, and the last was between him and Koenen. The mom-and-pop channel, the chief engineer called it. Havelock opened all the channels, but all he could hear was the banter of his own group. The chief and his men weren't transmitting. After ten minutes, Havelock switched to the mom-and-pop channel.

"Okay," he said. "We're coming out."

There was a crackle as the chief switched.

“That wasn’t thirty minutes.”

“I know,” Havelock said, and the chief chuckled.

“Okay. Thank you for the heads-up. I won’t give it away.”

Astronomy had never been a particular interest of Havelock’s, and living in a ship or station, he’d seen actual stars less often than he did in his childhood on Earth. The starscape around New Terra was beautiful, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. The few constellations he knew—Orion, Ursa Major—weren’t there, but he still looked for them. The bright smear of the galactic disk was still part of the sky, and the local sun could pass for Sol. More or less, anyway. New Terra’s ring of tiny moons caught the light, their low albedo making them hardly more than the stars behind them. The *Edward Israel* was moving at something like eight thousand kilometers a minute. That this stillness masked a velocity that was orders of magnitude faster than a rifle shot was intellectual knowledge. What he felt was motionless. He stood on the skin of the ship, rooted by his mag boots, shifting gently like seaweed on the ocean floor. To his right, New Terra’s terminator seemed to inch across its vast ocean. To his right, the shuttle stood half a kilometer out, looking small and forlorn against the vast night. His strike force stood around him, craning their necks, in awe of the massive emptiness all around. He was almost sorry to pull his attention back to the small, vaguely intimate necessities of violence.

He checked to be sure he was speaking on the channel exclusive to his group. “All right. Their target area for setting up the emergency lock is aft of the main storage area. We’re going around clockwise. In ten minutes, we’ll be moving into eclipse. If we come up from between the primary maneuvering thrusters and hangar bay, we should have the sun behind us. So let’s get moving.”

The small chorus of excited *yessirs* told him they liked the idea. Coming out of the sun, raining death on the enemy. It was a pretty enough plan. The only things that kept it from happening were their unfamiliarity with the mag boots and the fact that Koenen had placed the emergency airlock a hundred meters farther away than Havelock had expected. The bright moment passed, and the sun shifted behind New Terra, where it would stay for almost twenty minutes.

“Okay,” Havelock said, “Plan B. Everyone turn off your helmet lights.”

“What about the indicators on our external batteries, sir?”

“We’re going to have to hope they’re dim enough that—”

One of the engineers to his left raised the paint gun and turned it on himself. The muzzle flash was like a spark.

“What the hell are you doing?” Havelock demanded.

“I figured if I got some paint on the indicator light, I could—” the man began, but it was too late. Koenen’s men had seen the muzzle flash. Havelock tried to get his forces to hunker down close to the skin of the ship and fire across the ship’s shallow horizon, but they kept rising up to see if they’d struck anything. In less than a minute, the last of his men reported an enemy hit and Havelock called the exercise to a halt. The massive dark bulk of the planet was almost above them now, the sunlight a soft ring where the atmosphere scattered it. The two groups gathered.

The airlock was only half attached, and three of his team’s paintballs had smeared it. Two of the chief engineer’s boarding party had been hit. The rest were elated. Havelock set his team and the wounded of the opposition to cleanup, and the disgraced soldiers started repacking the airlock.

“Nice work,” Havelock said on the mom-and-pop channel.

Koenen grunted. His arms were crossed awkwardly over his chest, the bulk of the suit defying the pose. Havelock frowned, not that anyone could see him.

“Something the matter, chief?”

“You know,” the chief engineer said, “I don’t mind that the *Israel* has her own engineering crew. I understand that we’ve got separate mandates. But we’re working with the same equipment and supplies, and as a courtesy, I would like to be kept in the loop when the ship crew are sending out a team.”

“Okay,” Havelock said. “I can talk to them when we get in. Is it something that’s been happening often?”

“It’s happening right now,” the chief said, pointing out into the darkness.

It took Havelock a moment to see it. A flicker where no flicker should be. The weaponized shuttle brightened and dimmed. A welding torch, half a klick away in the darkness. Panic felt strange in null g, the blood flowing away from his hands and feet.

“Do you have enhanced magnification on your helmet?” Havelock asked.

“Yeah,” the chief said.

“Could you take a look at who’s out there?”

The chief engineer bent back. The surface of his helmet glittered for a moment, the HUD taking over. “Red EVA suit. Got a decent-sized pack on it too. Long-distance travel. And a welding kit.”

Havelock said something obscene, then switched to the all-group channel. “Everyone stop. We have a problem. There’s someone at the shuttle over there, and he isn’t one of ours.”

For a moment, no one spoke. Then one of the militiamen, his voice calm and matter-of-fact, said, “Let’s go kick his ass.”

It was exactly not what Havelock wanted to do. If the enemy had a rifle, he could pick half the team off before they got close. Even then, they had paint guns. But the alternative was to let whoever they were do whatever they were doing to the only ace up the *Israel*’s sleeve.

“Okay,” Havelock said. “Here’s the plan. Everyone sync up with the ship’s computer. We’re going to let the *Israel* calculate our burns. Turn off the mag boots.” He plucked out his hand terminal, fed in the emergency security override, and coded in his request. Their vacuum suits had more than enough propellant to get them all to the shuttle and back again, provided nobody missed or tried to do something clever. Above them, the penumbra around New Terra grew lopsided, the sun preparing to reemerge. Another tiny dawn. The computer announced the burns were ready.

“Okay,” Havelock said. “These are the bad guys. We don’t know how many there are. We don’t know how they’re armed. So we’re going to try to scare them off. Everyone get your gun at the ready. Look threatening, and *don’t fire*. If they figure out our guns aren’t real, we may be in for a bad time.”

“Sir?” one of the men said. “You remember we’re covered with target paint, right?”

Before Havelock could answer, the thrusters started, pushing compressed gas out behind them like a fog and smoke. All their suits rose together into the night. Or else fell. The acceleration pushed the blood into Havelock’s legs, and the suit squeezed, pressing it back. It wasn’t even a full g. It was hardly a third, but it felt like something much, much faster. Much more dangerous. Now that he knew to look for it, the welding flicker was obvious. It didn’t stop. The main burn cut out, and the suits rotated,

starting the braking burn. The perfect synchrony meant the *Israel* was still coordinating them.

This time, the intruder saw them. The welding torch died. Havelock looked down between his feet, his paint gun centered between his toes, waiting for the bullets to start streaming out and praying that they wouldn't.

They didn't.

"It's working!" one of the men shouted. "Motherfucker's running away!"

And there it was. A red EVA suit on the skin of the shuttle. It struggled with something, looked up toward Havelock and his militia descending upon him, and turned back. Whoever it was, there was only one of them. The braking thrust stuttered. They were almost at the shuttle now. Fifty meters. Forty. Thirty. Havelock opened a standard general-response channel.

"Attention unidentified welder. You will stand down."

The red suit stood, the EVA suit firing off. The person lifted at a ninety-degree angle, not going directly away from them, but diving down toward the planetary surface and whatever lower orbit would mean a safe rendezvous. Havelock felt the relief flooding him. They weren't shooting. His HUD promised him that the shuttle's basic functions were unchanged. It hadn't been set to detonate. And the militia boys weren't in charge of their own burns, so they wouldn't be taking off after the intruder.

He had underestimated them.

The first dark thread rose out toward the intruder and missed, but once the whole team had seen the grapnel fire, the idea was out there. A half dozen grapnels fired, their propellant flaring blue and orange as they flew like tiny missiles toward the fleeing welder. Then one made contact. The enemy and the man who'd fired the grapnel both jerked, and the engineer's suit started an emergency burn, trying to compensate. With the enemy encumbered and slowed, two more grapnels connected. Soon five of his people had lines attached to the saboteur, their collected thrusters holding the red suit's EVA pack in check. Havelock took control of his suit back from the *Israel* and dropped down toward the planet and the prisoner.

The red suit was twisting now, trying to bring its welding torch to bear on the lines. Havelock raised his gun, and the enemy paused. He was close enough now that he could see the face behind the helmet. A Belter woman,

dark-skinned, with wavy dark hair clinging to her sweaty forehead. Her expression was pure chagrin.

He opened the general channel again.

“Hi,” he said. “Don’t panic. My name’s Havelock. I’m acting security chief for the *Edward Israel*, and you have to come with me now.”

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Interlude: The Investigator

—it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out—

One hundred and thirteen times a second, it reaches out, and the things it finds are not the signal that would let it end, but they are tools, and it explores them without knowing it is exploring them. Like water finding its mindless way through a bed of pebbles, it reaches out. What it can move, it moves, what it can open, it opens. What it can close, it closes. A vast network, ancient and dead, begins to appear, and it reaches into it. The parts of it that can think, struggle to make sense of it. Parts of it dream of a mummified body, its dry heart pumping dust through petrified veins.

Not everything responds, but it reaches out, presses, *moves*. And some things move back. Old artifacts awaken or don't. None of them are what it seeks. None ever will be. It experiments without awareness of experimenting, and a landscape begins to form. It is not a physical landscape, but a logical one—this connects to this connects to this. It builds a model and adds it to the model it already has, and does not know it has done so. It reaches out. One hundred thirteen times a second, it reaches out.

Something that worked once, stops working. It reaches out and what answered before answers less now. Something burns or fails or tries to rise up and breaks. Part of the map goes dark, dies, and it reaches out to the silent dead. Part of it feels frustration, but it is not aware of that part, and it reaches out. Part of it wants to scream, wants to die, wants to vomit though a mouth it imagines has been transformed into something else for years now. It does not experience these things, though parts of it do. It reaches out.

And it pulls back.

It is unaware of pulling back, but one time out of every seventeen

million attempts, it touches something and will not touch it again. It is not aware of pulling back, because it is not aware of anything, but the failures accrue. A blank place forms, an emptiness. A void. Avoid. Jesus, an old woman thinks, now with the puns.

The map is not physical, but it has a shape. It is a model of part of the universe. It becomes more detailed, more concrete. Some things come alive and then die. Some do not answer ever. Some become tools, and it uses the tools to reach out, except not *there*.

The emptiness gains definition too. With every failed connection, with every pulling back its liminal borders become better defined. It struggles to make sense of the shape of the nothing that defies it. The structures of the minds that never died within it struggle with it. It is a cyst. It is a negative space. A taboo. It is a question that must not be asked. It is not aware that it thinks these things. It is not aware that the space exists, that when it reaches into that place, it dies.

It does not need to be aware of the problem. It has a tool for this. A thing that finds what is missing. A tool for asking questions that shouldn't be asked. For going too far. The investigator considers the cyst, the shadow, the space where nothing is.

That right there? The investigator thinks. Yeah, where I come from, we'd call that a *clue*.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Holden

Come on,” Holden said to the empty desert and the man who wasn’t there. “You show up every time I don’t want you around. But I get something I want to talk to you about, and nothing.”

The thing that had been Miller didn’t answer. Holden sighed, hoped, and waited.

Ilus had lost some of its strangeness. The moonless sky still felt too dark, but no darker than a new moon on earth. His nose had become accustomed to the planet’s strange scents. Now it just smelled like night and the aftermath of rain. His growing familiarity was both comforting and sad. Humans would go out to the thousand worlds of the gate network. They would settle down in little towns like First Landing, then spread out and build farms and cities and factories, because that’s what humans did. And in a few centuries, most of those worlds would be very similar to Earth. The frontier would give way to the civilizations that followed it. Remaking it in the image of their original home.

Holden had grown up in the Montana district of North America. A region filled with nostalgia for lost frontiers. It had held out against urban creep longer than most places in the former United States. The people there clung to their farms and ranches even when those things stopped making economic sense. And because of that, Holden couldn’t help but feel the allure of the untamed place. The romantic notion of sights no one else had seen. Ground no one else had walked.

This new frontier would last throughout Holden’s lifetime. Conquering and taming a thousand-plus planets was the work of generations, no matter how much of a head start the protomolecule’s masters had given them. But

in his heart, Holden knew that conquered and tamed they would be. And then there would be a thousand Earths with steel-and-glass cities covering them. Holden felt a shadow of that distant future's loss of mystery as though it were his own.

In the moonless black sky, a star moved too quickly. One of the ships. The *Israel* or the *Barbapiccola*. The *Rocinante* was too small and too black to reflect the light. Did the people up there think about how momentous what they were all doing was? Holden worried that they didn't. That the strangeness had already become normal, like the night scents of Ilus. That all they saw now was the conflict to be won and the treasure to be harvested.

With a sigh, Holden turned back toward the town and started walking. Amos would be wondering where he was. Carol, the town administrator, had asked for an after-dinner meeting so he needed to track her down too. A fat, dog-shaped thing with a bullfrog's head walked in front of him and made a sound like boots crunching on gravel. Mimic lizards, the locals called them. They were sort of scaled like a lizard, but to Holden the limbs looked all wrong. Holden took out his hand terminal and used it to shine a faint light on the creature. It blinked up at him and made the gravel noise again.

"You'd be a good pet if you didn't vomit your stomach up periodically," Holden said, crouching down to get a better look at the creature. It croaked back at him. Nothing like the words he'd used, but a surprisingly good imitation of his voice and tones. He wondered if the animals could be taught to speak words like a parrot.

The terminal in his hand buzzed. The lizard skittered away, buzzing back at him over its shoulder.

"Holden here."

"Yeah, Cap," Alex said. "I got some bad news."

"Bad like the zero-g toilet on the *Roci* is out of order, or bad like I should be looking at the sky for incoming missile trails?"

"Well..." Alex started, and then took a long breath. Holden looked up at the sky. Just stars.

"You've scared me now. Spit it out."

"Naomi," Alex started, and Holden felt his heart drop. "She was out installing the remote cutout on the shuttle, and they were doin' some kind

of group exercise on the outside of the *Israel* and they spotted her. Just dumb luck, really.”

“What happened? Is she okay?” Please be okay.

“They got her, Cap,” Alex said. Holden felt his chest go empty.

“Got her. Like, *shot* her?”

“Oh! No. Captured. She’s not hurt. The security guy on the *Israel* called to make sure I knew she was unharmed. But they’re callin’ it sabotage, and they locked her up.”

“Fuck,” Holden said, able to breathe again. He knew who’d have authorized that. Murtry. And now that the RCE security chief had a big bargaining chip he’d go all-in. “Does anyone else know?”

“Well, Amos called up looking for her a minute ago—”

Holden didn’t hear the rest of what Alex said, because he was already running toward town. The longer he ran without hearing gunfire, the more hopeful he became that Amos had realized the sensitivity of the situation, had decided to wait and consult with his captain before taking any action. He hoped Amos wasn’t already on the radio with the *Israel* and a pistol held to Murtry’s head demanding Naomi’s safe return.

He was half right.

When he burst into Murtry’s security office he found the RCE security chief pressed to one wall with Amos’ left hand around his throat and a pistol against his forehead. At least no one had called the *Israel* with demands. Likely because Amos didn’t have a free hand to dial.

In addition to Murtry and Amos, four RCE security personnel stood around the room with drawn sidearms pointed at Amos’ back. One of them, a raven-haired woman named Wei, said, “Drop the gun or we’ll shoot.”

“Okay,” Amos said with a shrug. “Blast away, sweetie. I guarantee I take this piece of shit with me. I’m good. You good?” He leaned closer to Murtry, punctuating the question with a jab of the pistol against his forehead. A little trickle of blood had started to run down Murtry’s face from the force of the barrel pressed against it.

Murtry smiled. “Keep barking, dog. We both know there’s no bite coming. You shoot me, she’s dead.”

“You won’t know,” Amos said.

“Don’t, Amos,” Holden ordered.

“Oh, do,” Murtry said, the words almost a whisper.

Holden held his breath, sure the next thing they heard would be a gunshot. Amos surprised him by not firing. Instead he leaned in even farther until his nose was touching Murtry's and said, "I'm gonna *kill* you."

"When?" Murtry replied.

"That is exactly the question that should stay on your mind," Amos said and let the man go.

Holden started breathing again with a gasp. "I've got this, Amos."

The big mechanic holstered his gun, to Holden's relief, but made no move to leave.

"Seriously. I've got it. I need you to go back to the rooms and get on the line with Alex. Get me a full report. I'll be back there in a minute."

For a moment, Holden thought Amos would argue with him. The mechanic stared back, face flushed with rage, his jaw clenched hard enough to crack his teeth. "Okay," he finally said and then left. The other four security people kept their guns trained on him the entire time.

"That was smart," Murtry said. He pulled a tissue out of a box on his desk and wiped the blood from his forehead. He had an ugly bruise forming around the cut Amos' pistol had left. "Your boy almost didn't make it out of this room, *mediator*."

Holden surprised himself by laughing. "I've never seen Amos pick a fight he didn't plan to win. I'm not sure what he had in mind, but even at five to one my money would be on him."

"Everyone loses eventually," Murtry said.

"Words to live by."

"That's quite the killer you have working for you, as critical as you are of my methods."

"There's a difference. Amos is willing to lose face to protect something he loves. He doesn't need to win more than he needs to keep his friends alive. And that's why you're nothing alike."

Murtry agreed with a nod and a shrug. "So if you weren't here to save your man, then what?"

"We keep escalating," Holden said. "Some of that is my fault. *I* asked Naomi to deal with the shuttle."

"Sabotage—" Murtry started.

"But I did that in response to finding out you'd weaponized it. We keep reacting to what the person before us did, justifying ourselves like kids on a

playground. ‘He started it.’ ”

“So you’ll be the first to break the cycle?”

“If I can,” Holden said. “You’ve gone too far, Murtry. Disable the shuttle, give me Naomi back. Let’s see if we can find a way to stop the escalation.”

Murtry’s vague smile shifted into an equally vague frown. The man leaned back on his desk and touched another tissue to the cut on his forehead. It came away with a single crimson spot. Then he folded his arms, casual but immovable. Holden knew that it was a deliberate affectation intended to look natural. He was both impressed and worried by anyone who had that level of self-awareness and control.

“I’ve acted entirely within the purview of my assignment here,” Murtry said. “I’ve protected RCE assets and personnel.”

“You’ve killed a bunch of colonists and kidnapped my XO,” Holden replied, trying to keep the anger out of his voice and failing.

“I’ve killed fewer squatters than they’ve killed of us, all of which were actively engaged in plotting and carrying out attacks on RCE assets and personnel. Which, as I said, is my job.”

“And Naomi—”

“And I captured a saboteur and am holding her pending an investigation. ‘Kidnapping’ is not only a provocative term, it’s inaccurate.”

“You want this to blow up.” Holden sighed. “You can’t wait for the next chance to make things worse, can you?”

The frown shifted back to the smile. Neither meant anything. Just different masks. Holden wondered what it looked like inside Murtry’s head and shuddered.

“I’ve done the minimum necessary at each step,” the man said through his disquieting grin.

“No,” Holden replied. “You could have left. You had the *Israel*. After the first attack on the shuttle you could have pulled your people out and waited for the investigation. A lot of people would still be alive if you had.”

“Oh no,” Murtry said, shaking his head. He stood up and uncrossed his arms. Every movement slow and deliberate and conveying threat. “No, that’s one thing we won’t do. We won’t give up a centimeter of ground. These squatters can throw themselves against us until every one of them is shattered into dust, but we’re not going anywhere. Because that...”

Murtry's smile sharpened.
"... is also my job."



The walk from the RCE security shed back to his room at the community center wasn't a long one, but it was very dark. Miller's faint blue glow illuminated nothing, but it was oddly comforting anyway.

"Hey, old man," Holden said in greeting.

"We need to talk." Miller grinned at his own joke. He made jokes now. He was almost like a real person. Somehow that was more frightening than when he'd been insane.

"I know, but I'm kind of busy with keeping these people from killing each other. Or, you know, us."

"How's that working for you?"

"Terrible," Holden admitted. "I've just lost the only real threat I had to make."

"Yeah, Naomi being on their ship makes the *Rocinante* a non-factor. Letting her anywhere near that ship was a dumb mistake."

"I never told you about that."

"Should I pretend I'm not inside your head?" Miller asked with a Belter shrug. "I'll do it if it makes you more comfortable."

"Hey, Miller," Holden said. "What am I thinking now?"

"Points for creativity, kid. That'd be difficult to pull off and less fun than you might expect."

"So stay out."

Miller stopped walking and grabbed Holden's upper arm. Again he was surprised at how real it felt. Miller's hand felt like iron gripping him. Holden tried to pull away and couldn't. And all of it was just the ghost pushing buttons in his brain.

"Wasn't kidding. We need to talk."

"Spit it out," Holden replied, finally yanking his arm away when Miller let go.

"There's a spot a way north of here I need to go look at."

"By which you mean you need *me* to go look at."

"Yeah," Miller said with a Belter nod of one fist. "That."

Against his will, Holden felt his curiosity piqued. "What is it?"

"So, turns out our coming here caused a little ruckus with the locals," Miller said. "May have noticed. Lot of leftover stuff waking up all over the planet."

"Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about that. Is that you? Can you control it?"

"Are you kidding? I'm a sock puppet. Protomolecule's got its arm so far up my ass, I can taste its fingernails." Miller laughed. "I can't even control myself."

"It's just that some of it seems dangerous. That robot, for instance. And you were able to turn off the station in the slow zone."

"Because *it* wanted me to. You can order the sun to come up if you time it right. I'm not driving this bus. Making it do what I want would be like talking someone out of a seizure."

"Okay," Holden said. "We have got to get off this planet."

"Before that, though, there's this thing. This not-thing. Look, I've got a pretty good map of the global network. Lots of leftover stuff coming up, checking in. Except one spot. Like a big ball of nothing."

Holden shrugged. "Maybe it's just a place where there are no nodes on the network."

"Kid, this whole planet is a node on the network. There shouldn't be anyplace that's off-limits to me."

"So what does it mean?"

"Maybe it's just a spot that's really really broken," Miller said. "That'd be interesting but useless."

"And the useful thing?"

"It's a leftover bit of whatever killed this place."

They stood in silence for a moment, the cool evening wind of Ilus ruffling Holden's pants and not affecting the detective at all. Holden felt a chill start at the base of his spine and slowly climb his back. The hairs on his arms stood up.

"I don't want to find that," he finally said.

"And I do?" Miller replied with his best attempt at a friendly smile. "Free will left the conversation for me a while back. But that's where the clues are. You should come with. It's going to happen eventually anyway."

"Why is that?"

“Because real monsters don’t go away when you close your eyes. Because you need to know what happened here just as bad as I do.”

Miller’s expression was still friendly, but there was a dread in it too. A fear that Holden recognized. And shared.

“Naomi first. I don’t go anywhere until we get her back.”

Miller nodded again and flew apart into a spray of blue fireflies.

Amos was waiting for him when he got back to the bar. The big man sitting alone at a table with a half-empty bottle of something that smelled like antiseptic and smoke.

“I’m guessing you didn’t kill him after I left,” Amos said as Holden sat down.

“I feel like I’m walking a tightrope so narrow I can’t even see it,” Holden replied. He shook his head when Amos offered him the bottle, so the mechanic took a long swig from it instead.

“This ends in blood,” Amos said after a moment. His voice sounded distant, dreamlike. “No way around that.”

“Well, since my job is pretty much exactly the opposite of that, I hope you’re wrong.”

“I’m not.”

Holden lacked a compelling argument, so instead he said, “What did Alex have to say?”

“We put together a list of demands for the captain of the *Israel*. Make sure Naomi gets well taken care of while she’s there.”

“What will we give up in exchange?”

“Alex isn’t blowing the *Israel* into its component atoms right this second.”

“I hope they agree we’re being generous.”

“He is, however,” Amos continued, “keeping a constant rail gun lock on the *Israel*’s reactor.”

Holden ran his fingers through his hair. “So not too generous, then.”

“Say pretty please, but carry a one-kilo slug of tungsten accelerated to a detectable percentage of c .”

“I believe I’ve heard that said,” Holden replied, then stood up. He suddenly felt very tired. “I’m going to bed.”

“Naomi’s in Murtry’s goddamn brig, and you can sleep?” Amos said and took another drink.

“No, but I can go to bed. Then tomorrow I’m going to figure out how to get my first officer back from the RCE maniac holding her hostage, so that I can go find the scary alien bullet fragment embedded in the planet.”

Amos nodded as if that all made sense. “Nothing in the afternoon, then.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four: Elvi

Elvi slept, and she dreamed.

In her dream she was back on Earth, which was also the corridors of the *Edward Israel*. A sense of urgency pressed at her, shifting quickly toward dread. Something was on fire somewhere because she hadn't turned in the right forms. She had to file the forms before everything burned. She was in the bursar's office at the university and Governor Trying was there too, only he was waiting for his death certificate and it was taking too long. She couldn't submit her forms. She looked at the onionskin papers, trying to find the submission deadline, but the words kept changing. First, the line at the bottom read, *Elvi Okoye, lead researcher and Argonaut*, and the next time she read it, *Fines to be paid directly at the temple: rabbits and hogs*. The urgency pushed at her, and when she shouted the onionskin started coming apart in her fingers. She tried to press the forms back together, but they wouldn't go.

Someone touched her shoulder, and it was James Holden, only he looked like someone else. Younger, darker, but she knew it was him. She realized she'd been naked this whole time. She was embarrassed, but also a little pleased. His hand touched her breast, and—

“Elvi! Wake up!”

Her eyes opened, the lids heavy and slow. Her eyes struggled to focus. She didn't know where she was, only that some dumb bastard was interrupting something she didn't want interrupted. The dark lines before her slowly became familiar. The roof of her hut. She shifted, reaching out for someone but already uncertain who. She was alone in her bed. Her hand terminal glowed dimly. Her analysis equipment flickered as data from her

work flew up and out, through the vast darkness to the Ring and Medina Station, to Earth, and answering information flew back out to her. Which was all fine and as it should be, so why the hell was she awake?

A soft knock came at the door, and Fayez's voice. "Elvi! Wake up. You've got to see this."

Elvi yawned so deeply her jaw ached with it. She pulled herself up to sitting. The dream was already fading quickly. There had been something about a fire and someone touching her whom she had badly wanted to be touched by. The details lost all coherence as she sat up and reached for her robe.

"Elvi? Are you there?"

When she spoke her words were slow, heavy, a little slurred. "If this isn't important, I will rip your throat open and piss down your lungs."

Fayez laughed. There were other voices behind his. Sudyam saying something too low to make out the words. Yma Chappel, the geochemistry lead too. Elvi paused, threw off the robe, and pulled on her real clothes and work boots to go with them. When she stepped out of her hut, a dozen of the people in the research teams were standing in pairs or small groups all across the night-dark plain. They were all looking up. And in the high darkness, something larger than a star glowed a sullen red. Fayez, squatting on the ground, glanced over at her.

"What is that?" Elvi asked, her voice instinctively low, as if she might startle it.

"One of the moons."

She stepped forward, her neck back, scowling up at the night. "What's it doing?"

"Melting."

"Why?"

"Right?" Fayez said, standing up.

Sudyam, to their left, raised her voice. "Makes you wish we'd sent probes there, doesn't it?"

"We're one ship, and this is a whole damn planet," Fayez said. "Plus which, we've been focusing a lot of effort on killing each other."

"Point being?" Sudyam asked.

Fayez spread his hands wide. "We've been busy."

The moon shifted colors for a moment, turning from dull red to a bright

orange to yellow-white, and then back down the spectrum again, waning as suddenly as it had waxed.

“Is anyone recording this?” Elvi asked.

“Caskey and Farengier aborted the high-altitude refraction study and started sucking down data from it as soon as they saw it was happening. Mostly, it’s visible light, heat, and about thirty percent more gamma particles than background. The sensor array on the *Israel*’s showing about the same thing.”

“Is it dangerous?” Elvi asked, knowing the answer even as she spoke the words. Maybe. Maybe it was dangerous, maybe it wasn’t. Until they knew what it was, all they could do was guess. In the starlight, Favez’s expression was difficult to make out. The apprehension at the corners of his mouth and in the curve of his eyes might only have been her imagination. Another kind of dream. “Do the others know?”

“I guess so,” Favez said. “Assuming they’re not too busy taking each other prisoner and setting people on fire.”

“You told Murtry?”

“I didn’t. Someone probably did.”

“And Holden? What about him? Does he know?”

“Even if he does, what’s he going to do about it? Speak to it reassuringly?”

Elvi turned toward First Landing. The few lit houses were like a handful of stars fallen to the ground. She took out her hand terminal, setting its screen to white and using it as a torch.

“Where are you going?” Favez called from behind her.

“I’m going to talk to Captain Holden,” she said.

“Of course you are,” Favez said with an impatient grunt. “Because what would be useful for him is a biologist’s perspective on it.”

The words stung a little, but Elvi didn’t let herself be drawn into the conversation. Favez was a good scientist and a friend, but his habit of making fun of everything and derailing anything serious for the sake of humor also made him less useful than he should have been. One of the others should have made sure everyone knew that something was happening overhead. It shouldn’t have had to be her. And still, she quietly did hope that she would be the one to bring the news.

The dry air smelled like dust and the tiny, night-blooming flower

analogs. Where there had been a few tough, ropy plants, months of foot traffic had made paths, and Elvi followed them as easily in the near-darkness as she would have in the day. It occurred to her, not for the first time, that the scattering of huts, the ruins, and even First Landing itself had become as familiar to her as anyplace else she'd lived. She knew the land, the feel of the breezes, the smells that rose and fell at different times of day. Over the past month, she had been the ears and eyes of the whole scientific community back in the solar system. Even when the terrorists had killed Reeve, and Murtry had come down, at least a part of her day had been running samples and transmitting data back home. She had spent more time not just in but *with* this environment than anyone else.

Above her, the tiny red moon reminded her that she still didn't know much. Normally, that would have been a delight and a challenge. In the darkness of the New Terran night, it felt like a threat. Her steps took on a rhythm, her boots tapping against the wind-paved stones.

In the town, people were in the streets much like they had been out by the RCE huts. They stood in the streets and on their little cobbled-together porches, looking up at the glowing dot as it drifted toward the horizon. Elvi couldn't say if they were curious or apprehensive or just wanting something to think about that wasn't the conflict between RCE and the squatters. Between *us* and *them*.

Or maybe they were seeing it as an omen. The burning eye looking down on them all, judging them and preparing for war. She'd heard a folktale like that once, but she didn't remember where.

Wei and one of the other RCE security men were walking down the main street, rifles at the ready. Elvi nodded to them, and they nodded back, but no one spoke. Probably someone had told Holden. But she'd come all this way. She should at least be sure.

In the street outside the commissary where Holden was living, Jacek Merton was pacing. The boy's body leaned into the motion, his hands at his sides clenched in fists. His gaze was fixed about three feet in front of him like someone looking at a screen, and his shoulders were hunched in like he was protecting something. She was about to say hello, when a small warning bell chimed in her head.

Between one heartbeat and the next, she wasn't Elvi Okoye going in the middle of the night to see Captain Holden on pretenses that even she could

see were pretty damned flimsy. That wasn't the son of Lucia and Basia Merton, brother of Felcia, in front of her. This wasn't even a town. She was a biologist in the field seeing a primate. And in that frame of reference, some things were perfectly clear. The boy was working himself up to violence.

She hesitated and started to turn back. Wei was only a few dozen meters and a corner or two away. If Elvi shouted, the security people would probably come at a run. Her pulse was quick. She could feel it in her throat. The long hours after Reeve's death came back to her like a recurring nightmare. She should scream. She should call for help.

Except the boy wasn't just a primate. Wasn't just an animal. He was Felcia's brother. And if she called for help, they might kill him. She swallowed, caught between fear and courage. Uncertain. What would Faye do? she wondered. Offer the kid a beer?

He stopped and looked up at her. His eyes were empty. He wore a light jacket that pulled down a little on one side, like he had something heavy in his pocket.

"Hi," she said, smiling.

A moment later, Jacek said, "Hi."

"Weird, isn't it?" She pointed up at the red dot. It seemed more portentous than ever. Jacek glanced up at the sky, but didn't seem to react to it.

"Weird," he agreed.

They stood in front of each other, the silence rich and tense. The light spilling from the commissary windows left the boy half in light, half in shadow. Elvi struggled, trying to find something to say. Some way to defuse everything and make it all okay. Faye would have made a joke, something that the boy could laugh at and that would put them both on the same side of the laughter, and Elvi didn't know what it was.

"I'm scared," she said instead, her voice breaking a little. It surprised the boy as much as it did her. "I'm just so scared."

"It's okay," Jacek said. "It's just some kind of reaction up there. It's not like it's doing anything but melting up in orbit."

"Still scared, though."

Jacek scowled at his feet, torn between the errand he'd been steeling himself for and the impulse to say something kind and reassuring to this

obviously unstable, vulnerable, strange woman.

“It’ll be okay?” he tried.

“You’re right,” she said, nodding. “It’s just. You know. I mean, you do know, don’t you?”

“I guess.”

“I was coming to see Captain Holden,” she said, and Jacek’s eyes flickered like she’d said something insulting. “Were you too?”

She could see in his face as he tried to bring back the blankness he’d had before, the tightness and anger and emptiness. He wasn’t someone for whom violence came naturally. He’d had to put effort into it. It was that effort she’d seen in him.

“He took my father away,” Jacek said. “Mom worries we’ll never see him again.”

“Is that why you came? To ask?”

Jacek looked confused.

“Ask... what?”

“To talk to your father.”

The boy blinked, and he took an unconscious step toward her. “He won’t let me talk to him. He took him prisoner.”

“People talk to prisoners all the time. Did someone tell you that you couldn’t talk to your dad?”

Jacek was silent. He put his hand into his jacket pocket—the heavy one—and then took it out again. “No.”

“Come on, then,” Elvi said, moving toward him. “Let’s go ask him.”

Inside the commissary, Holden was pacing from the front of the room to the back to the front again. The big man—Amos—sat at a table with a pack of cards, playing solitaire with an unnerving focus. Holden’s face was paler than usual, and the sense of barely restrained emotion gave his body a tension that she didn’t picture him with. Amos looked up as she walked in, her hand on Jacek’s shoulder. His eyes were flat and empty as marbles, and his voice was just as cheerful as ever.

“Hey there, doc. What’s up?”

“Couple things,” Elvi said.

Holden stopped. It seemed to take him a second to focus. Something was bothering him. His gaze locked on her and he tried to smile. An unexpected tightness came to her throat. She coughed.

“Jacek was wondering if there was any way he could talk with his father,” Elvi said. There didn’t seem to be much air in the room, she was having a hard time catching her breath. Maybe she was developing allergies.

“Sure,” Holden said, then looked over his shoulder at Amos. “That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Radios still work,” Amos said. “Might want to give Alex the heads-up to expect it. His hands are kind of full right now.”

“Good point,” Holden said, nodding to himself as much as any of them. “I’ll set that up. Do you have a hand terminal?”

It took Jacek a moment to realize the question was directed at him. “It doesn’t work. We don’t have a hub. It’s all just line-of-sight.”

“Bring it over when you can, and I’ll see if I can’t put it on our network. That’ll be easier than setting up times for you to use mine. Will that work?”

“I... Yeah. Sure.” She could feel the boy’s shoulder trembling. Jacek turned and walked out without meeting anybody’s gaze, but especially avoiding hers. The door closed behind him.

“Kid was packing, boss,” Amos said.

“I know,” Holden replied. “What did you want me to do about it?”

“Know. That’s all.”

“Okay, I know. But I really don’t have time to get shot right now.” He turned his attention to her. A lock of hair was dropping down over his forehead, and he looked tired. Like he was carrying the whole planet on his back. Still, he managed a little smile. “Is there anything else? Because we’re a little...”

“Is this a bad time? Because I can—”

“Our XO got arrested by Murtry,” Amos said, and the flatness of his eyes had gotten into his voice now. “May be a while before there’s a really good time.”

“Oh,” Elvi said, her heart suddenly picking up its pace. *The XO is Holden’s lover and Holden has a lover and Holden may not have a lover anymore and Jesus, what am I doing here* all collided somewhere in her neocortex. Elvi found she was very unsure what to do with her hands. She tried putting them in her pockets, but that felt wrong so she took them out again.

“I’d been thinking?” she said, her voice rising at the end of the word

even though it wasn't a question. "About the thing. In the desert. And now with the moon?"

"Which moon?"

"The one that's melting down, Cap," Amos said.

"Right, that one. I'm sorry. I've got a lot of things going on right now. If it's not something I can actually do something about, it's not sinking in the way it probably ought to," Holden said. And then, "I'm not supposed to do anything about the moon thing, am I?"

"We can let the scientists tell us if we're supposed to freak out," Amos said. "It's all right."

"I've been thinking about hibernation failure rates, and that maybe what we were seeing was analogous."

Holden lifted his hands. "I couldn't tell you."

"It's just that hibernation is a really very risky strategy? We only see it when conditions are so bad that the usual kinds of survival strategy would fail. Bears, for instance? They're top predators. The food web in wintertime couldn't sustain them. Or spadefoot toads in the deserts? In the dry periods, their eggs would just desiccate, so the adults go dormant until there's rain, and then they come back awake and go out to the puddles and mate furiously, just this mad kind of puddle orgy and... um, anyway, and then they, they lay their eggs in the water before they can dry out again."

"Ok-ay," Holden said.

"My point is," Elvi said, "not all of them wake up. They don't have to. As long as enough of the organisms reactivate when the time comes, enough that the population survives, even if individuals don't. It's never a hundred percent. And shutting down and coming back up is a complicated, dangerous process."

Holden took a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair. He had thick, dark hair. It looked like he hadn't washed it in a while. Amos lost his game, scooped up the cards, and started shuffling them with slow, deliberate movements.

"So," Holden said, "you think that these... things we're seeing are artifacts or organisms or something trying to wake up?"

"And failing. At least sometimes," she said. "I mean, the moon melted. And that thing in the desert was clearly broken. Or anyway, that's what it was looking like to me."

“Me too,” Holden said. “But just because it was moving, we kind of knew things were waking up.”

“No, that’s not the point,” Elvi said. “There are always a small percentage of organisms that don’t wake up, or wake up wrong. These things? If that’s the model, they’re the ones waking up *wrong*.”

“Following you so far,” Holden said.

“Failure rates are usually low. So why aren’t we seeing a bunch of things waking up *right*?”

Holden went over to the table and sat on its edge. He looked frightened. Vulnerable. It was strange seeing a man who’d done so much, who’d made himself known across all civilization by his words and deeds, look so fragile.

“So you think there are more of these things—maybe a lot more—that are activating, and we’re just not seeing it?”

“It would fit the model,” she murmured.

“All right,” he said. And a moment later, “This isn’t making my day better.”

Chapter Twenty-Five: Basia

Basia sat alone on the operations deck of the *Rocinante*. He was belted into a crash couch next to what he'd been told was the comm station. The controls were quiet, waiting for someone to request a connection, occasionally flashing a system status message across its screen. The messages were incomprehensible mixtures of acronyms, system names, and numbers. The text was in a gentle green font that made Basia think they weren't particularly urgent.

Alex was in the cockpit, the hatch closed. That didn't mean anything. The hatches closed automatically to seal each deck from the others in case of atmosphere loss. It was a safety measure, nothing more.

It still felt like being locked out.

The panel startled him with a burst of static followed by a voice. The volume was just loud enough that Basia could tell it was a conversation between two men without understanding any of the words. A red RECORDING status blinked in one corner of the screen. The *Rocinante*, monitoring and recording all of the radio transmissions around Ilus. Maybe Holden was doing that on purpose to have a record of his mission when he returned to Earth. Or maybe warships did it by default. It wasn't something that a welder had to worry about. Or a miner. Or whatever he'd been with Coop and Cate.

Basia was looking for a way to turn up the volume and listen in when Alex's voice blared from the panel. "Got a call comin' in."

"Okay," Basia said, not sure if the pilot could hear him. He didn't know if he needed to press a button to respond.

The message on the comm panel changed, and a male voice said, "You

don't need to do anything."

For a moment, Basia had the irrational feeling that the person speaking had read his mind. He was about to reply when another voice, younger, male, said, "Just talk?" Jacek. The second voice was Jacek. And now Basia recognized the older voice as Amos Burton. The man who'd guarded him at the landing field. "Yeah," Amos said. "I've opened a connection to the *Roci*."

"Hello?" Jacek said.

"Hey, son," Basia replied around the lump in his throat.

"They made our hand terminal work again," Jacek said. By *they* Basia guessed he meant Holden and Amos.

"Oh yeah?" Basia said. "That's real good."

"It only talks to the ship," Jacek said, his young boy's voice bright with excitement. "It doesn't play videos or anything like it used to."

"Well, maybe they can make it do that too, later."

"They said someday we'll be on the network, like everyplace in Sol system. Then we can do whatever."

"That's true," Basia said. Water was building up in his eyes, making it hard to see the little messages flashing by on the screen. "We'll get a relay and a hub and then we can send data back and forth through the gates. We'll have everything on the network then. There's still going to be a lot of lag."

"Yeah," Jacek said, then stopped. There was a long silence. "What's the ship like?"

"Oh, it's pretty great," Basia said with forced enthusiasm. "I have my own room and everything. I met Alex Kamal. He's a pretty famous pilot."

"Are you in jail?" Jacek asked.

"No, no, I get to go anywhere I want on the ship. They're real nice. Good people." *I love you. I am so sorry. Please, please be all right.*

"Does he let you fly it?"

"I never asked," Basia said with a laugh. "I'd be scared to, though. It's big and fast. Lots of guns on it."

There was another long silence, then Jacek said, "You should fly it and blow up the RCE ship."

"I can't do that," Basia said, putting as much smile in his voice as he could. Making it a joke.

"But you should."

“How’s your mom?”

“Okay,” Jacek said. Basia could almost hear the shrug in his voice. “Sad. I started playing soccer more. We have enough for two teams, but we trade players a lot.”

“Oh yeah? What do you play?”

“Fullback right now, but I want to play striker.”

“Hey, defense is important. That’s an important job.”

“It’s not as fun,” Jacek said, again with the verbal shrug. There was a long silence while both of them reached for something to say. Something that could be said. Jacek gave up first. “I’m gonna go now, okay?”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Basia said, trying to keep the thickness in his throat from changing his voice. Trying to keep his tone light, fun. “Don’t run off yet. I need to ask you to do something.”

“Got a game,” Jacek said. “Pretty soon. They’ll get mad.”

“Your mom,” Basia said, then had to stop and blow his nose into the sleeve of his shirt.

“Mom what?”

“Your mom will work too much, if you don’t watch her. She gets to looking things up at night. Medical things. And she won’t get enough sleep. I need you to make sure she gets some sleep.”

“Okay.”

“It’s serious, boy. I need you to look after her. Your sister’s gone, and that’s good, but it just leaves you to help out. You gonna help out with this?”

“Okay,” Jacek said. Basia couldn’t tell if the boy was sad or angry. Or distracted.

“See you, son,” Basia said.

“See you, Pop,” Jacek replied.

“Love you,” Basia said, but the signal had already died.

Basia wiped his eyes with the sleeves of his shirt. He floated against his restraints, breathing deep, ragged breaths for a full minute, then pulled himself over to the crew ladder. He moved aft, deck hatches opening at his approach and slamming shut behind him as he went, the sound echoing through the empty ship.

He changed shirts in his room, then spent a few minutes in the head cleaning his face with wet towels. They had a large shower unit—he

couldn't remember the last time he'd had a real shower—but it only worked when the ship was under thrust.

When he no longer looked like a man who'd been bawling, Basia floated back along the ladder to the cockpit. He was considering whether or not it was polite to knock before entering when he drifted too close to the hatch's electronic eye and it snapped open with a hiss.

Alex was belted into the pilot's chair, the large display directly in front of him spooling out ship status reports and a rendering of Ilus, its single massive continent dotted with red and yellow marks. And one green dot that was First Landing. The pilot scowling at the screen tensely as though he could will the universe to do something. Like he could make it give his crew back.

Basia was turning to leave when the deck hatch banged shut and Alex looked up.

"Hey," he said and tapped out something on the panel.

"Hello," Basia said.

"How'd your call go? Everything okay?"

"Fine. Thank you for letting me use the radio."

"No problem, partner," Alex said with a laugh. "They don't charge us by the hour."

An uncomfortable silence stretched out that Alex pretended not to notice by pressing buttons on his controls. "Am I allowed to be up here?" Basia finally asked.

"I don't mind," Alex said. "Just, you know, don't mess with anything."

Basia pulled himself into the chair behind Alex and belted in. The armrests of the chair ended with complex-looking joysticks, so Basia was careful not to bump them.

"That's the gunner's seat," Alex said, turning his entire chair around to face Basia.

"Should I not—"

"Naw, it's fine. It ain't on. Push buttons there all you want. Hey, wanna see somethin' cool?"

Basia nodded and put his hands on the two control sticks. They were covered with buttons. The gunner's seat. Those sticks might control the *Rocinante's* lethal weaponry. He wished Jacek could see him sitting there, holding the controls.

Alex turned around and did something on his own panel, and the screen in front of Basia came to life with a view matching Alex's own. Basia looked at the bright limb of his planet, trying to find the location of First Landing. Without the green dot overlay it was impossible in daylight. If they were on the night side he could have spotted them as a spark of light.

Alex did something else, and the view shifted to a dull red blob of molten rock. "That's the moon goin' meltdown. It wasn't a very big one, but still, kinda makes you wonder what could melt a hunk of rock that size."

"Do we know?"

"Hell no. Some kind of alien protomolecule shit'd be my guess."

Before Basia could ask for more details, the radio squawked at them. "Alex here," the pilot said.

"Kid's gone, wanted to check in," Amos' voice said.

"How's the captain doing?" Alex asked.

"Not great. And once again he stopped me from doing the obvious thing."

"Shooting the RCE chief in the face?"

"Awww," Amos said. "Warms my heart how well you know me."

"They got her, buddy," Alex said, his voice firm but gentle. "Don't do anything that makes it worse."

"Yeah, yeah."

"You just watch the captain's back down there," Alex continued. "I'll take care of our XO."

"If they hurt her?"

"Then it'll be rainin' RCE parts down on Ilus for a year."

"Won't actually help," Amos said with a sigh.

"No," Alex agreed. "No, it won't. It'll happen, though."

"All right. Gonna go find the captain. Amos out."

Alex tapped on his controls, and the view swung around away from the planet. For a moment, there was nothing, and then a tiny flicker of light, no more than a single pixel. The view zoomed in until it became a massive ship painted with the RCE colors. After a moment, it zoomed again, the rear of the ship swelling until it filled the screen, a small red crosshair glowing in the center of the view.

"Got my eyes on you," Alex said under his breath.

“What’s that?” Basia asked, pointing at the crosshair.

“That’s where the reactor sits. The *Roci*’s got a lock on that location. I can send a gauss round right through her heart faster than her first alarm bell can ring.”

“Won’t that... you know...” He made an explosive motion with his hands.

“No, it’ll just vent. Probably kill a lot of their engineering staff.”

“Do they know you’re aiming at them?”

“Not yet, but I’m about to fill ’em in. That’s what’ll keep my XO breathin’.”

“Nice that you can do something to protect her,” Basia said, and meant to stop, but the words pressed out past his teeth. “My daughter is on the *Barbapiccola*. My wife and son are down on *Ilus*. I can’t do anything to help them or protect them.”

Basia waited for the empty words of reassurance.

“Yeah,” Alex said. “You really fucked that one up, didn’t you?”

Alex tapped something on his screen, and the words RAIL GUN ARMED glowed red for a second over the image of the *Edward Israel*.

“I need to call over to that ship in a sec,” Alex said.

“Warn them.”

“More like threaten them,” Alex said. “Pretty much the shittiest thing we have to offer for someone we all love, but it’s what we got left.” He reached out and fiddled with something on the bulkhead and a stream of cool air shot out of the vent. It ruffled the pilot’s thinning black hair and dried the sweat accumulating on his scalp. He closed his eyes and sighed.

“I don’t even have threats,” Basia said. It sounded like whining even to him. “I don’t even have that.”

“Yeah. So I flew for the Mars navy for twenty years,” Alex said, his eyes still closed.

“Oh?” Basia said. He wasn’t sure what the correct response was.

“I was married,” Alex continued, moving his head around to let the cool air strike every part of his neck and face. Basia didn’t reply. It had the feeling of a story, not a conversation. Alex would tell it or he wouldn’t.

“Life for a naval spouse is, frankly, pretty shitty,” Alex said after a few moments. “Typical tour on an MCRN boat can go from ninety days to four,

maybe five hundred days. Depending on your MOS and fleet locations.”

“MOS?” Basia asked before he could stop himself.

“Your job. Anyway, while you’re out on a boat, your partner is back home, doin’ whatever they do. Lot of folks do plural marriages, group partnerships, things like that. But I’m a one-woman kind of guy, and I guess she was a one-man kind of woman. So we did it the old-fashioned way.”

Basia nodded, even though Alex couldn’t see him. When they were building new domes Basia had done work that kept him at a surface camp for four or five days straight. His wife’s medical practice wouldn’t have let her travel with him, even if they hadn’t had children. Those were long weeks. Basia tried to imagine stringing ten or twenty of those weeks in a row and failed.

“But that meant she stayed home while I flew,” Alex said after a quiet moment. “She had her own work. Software engineer. Good one, too. So it’s not like she was pinin’ away at home for me. But still, if you love somebody you want to be with ’em, and we loved each other. Faithful to each other, if you can imagine that. My tours were tough on us both. I’d get home and we’d break the bed.”

Alex reached out and turned down the air vent, then spun his chair to face Basia. His broad dark face held a sad smile. “It was a crap situation, but she stuck with me. Through twenty years of me bein’ on ships she stuck with me. And when I was in port things were good. She’d work from home and I’d take a lot of leave, and we’d wake up late and make breakfast together. Work in the garden.”

Alex closed his eyes again, and for a moment Basia thought he might have fallen asleep. “Ever been to Mars?”

“No,” Basia replied. “But my wife has.”

“The newer areas, the ones built after we had some idea of what folks need to feel happy, were built different. No more narrow stone corridors. They built wide corridors with lots of green space down the middle for plants.”

“Like on Ceres,” Basia said. “I’ve been to Ceres.”

“Yeah, that’s right. They do that on Ceres too. Anyway, you could apply for a permit to care for a section of that space. Plant what you wanted. We had a little chunk in the corridor outside our home. My wife planted an herb garden, some flowers, a few hot pepper plants. We’d work in it.”

“Sounds nice,” Basia said.

“Yeah.” Alex nodded, eyes still closed. “I didn’t know it at the time. But it really was. I kinda thought it was a pain in the ass, to be honest. Never been much for gardening. But she liked it and I liked her and back then that was enough.”

“Did she die?” Basia asked.

“What? Goodness, no.”

“So what happened?”

“What happened is that she waited twenty years for me to retire. And I did, and then we didn’t have to spend time apart anymore. She went to part-time with her work, I took a part-time gig flying suborbital shuttles. We spent a lot of time in bed.”

Alex opened his eyes and winked. He seemed to be waiting for a response, so Basia said, “And then?”

“And then one day I put into port at the Mariner orbital transit, and while they were unloadin’ my cargo I almost walked into an MCRN recruiting office and signed up again.”

“Do they take—”

“No, I didn’t do it, and yeah, I was too damn old anyway. But when I landed we had a big fight over something stupid. I don’t even remember what. Hell, I didn’t know what we were fightin’ about even at the time, except I sorta did.”

“Leaving.”

“No, actually, it was never about leavin’ her. I never stopped wanting to be with her. But I needed to fly. She’d waited twenty years for me, and she’d done it thinkin’ we’d have all the time in the world after I was through. She’d done her tour, just as much as I had, and she deserved the part that came after.”

Basia felt what was coming like a punch in the stomach, unable to avoid comparing it to his own situation. “But you left anyway.”

Alex didn’t reply for a time, didn’t move, just floated in the straps of his pilot’s chair like a corpse in water. When he spoke again, his voice was strained and quiet, like a man admitting something shameful. Hoping no one will hear.

“One day I left work at the transit office and I walked across the street to the Pur’n’Kleen Water Company and I signed a five-year contract to fly

long-haul freighters out to Saturn and back. That's who I am. I'm not a gardener, or a shuttle pilot, or—turns out—a husband. I'm a long-flight pilot. Pushing a little bubble of air-filled metal across an ocean of nothing is what I was born to do.”

“You can't blame yourself for what happened,” Basia started.

“No,” Alex said, a deep frown cutting into his forehead. “A person can fail the people they love just by being who they are. I'm who I am, and it wasn't what my wife wanted me to be, and somethin' had to break. You decided to do what you did down on that planet, and it put you up here with me instead of with your family.”

Alex leaned forward, grabbing Basia's hands in his own. “It's still on *you*. I will never live down not being the person my wife needed after she spent twenty years waitin' for me. I can never make that right. Don't go feelin' sorry for yourself. You fucked up. You failed the people you love. They're payin' the price for it *right now* and you demean them every second you don't own that shit.”

Basia recoiled as if from a slap to the face. He bounced off the chair and back into the straps. A fly caught in a spider's web. He had to stop himself from ripping at the straps to get free. When he'd stopped struggling, he said, “Then what?”

“Shit,” Alex said, leaning back. “I barely figured out my own mess. Don't ask me to figure out yours.”

“What was her name?” Basia asked.

“Talissa,” Alex said. “Her name *is* Talissa. Even just sayin' it makes me feel like ten kilos of manure in a five-kilo sack.”

“Talissa,” Basia repeated.

“But I can tell you this. I'll never let someone I care about down again. Never again. Not if I can help it. Speakin' of which, I need to make a call,” he said with a bright, frightening smile.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Havelock

It was hard to say exactly what changed on the *Edward Israel* after they captured the saboteur, but Havelock felt it in the commissary and the gym, at his desk as he worked, and in the hallways as he passed by the crew members and RCE staff. Part of it was fear that someone had taken action directly against the ship, part of it was excitement that after months of floating and frustration, something—*anything*—had happened that wasn't at ground level. But more than that, it felt to him like the mood of the ship had clarified. They were the *Edward Israel*, the rightful explorers of New Terra, and everyone was against them. Even the UN mediators couldn't be trusted. And so, strangely, they were free.

The remaining crew of the *Rocinante* wasn't doing anything to change their opinions.

"If you try to break orbit," the man on the screen said, "your ship will be disabled."

His name was Alex Kamal, and he was the acting captain of the *Rocinante*. If RCE's intelligence was accurate, he was also the only remaining crew member of the corvette, and had the one remaining squatter terrorist on the ship with him awaiting transport back to Earth for trial. Havelock crossed his arms and shook his head as the list of threats went on.

"If we find that any harm has come to Naomi Nagata, your ship will be disabled. If she is subjected to torture, your ship will be disabled. If she is killed, your ship will be destroyed."

"Well, ain't that just ducky," Captain Marwick said. "You recall we were talking about *not* having people want to kill my ship?"

"It's just talk," Havelock said as Kamal went on.

“We have already sent our petition to the United Nations and Royal Charter Energy demanding Naomi Nagata’s immediate and unconditional release. Until that petition is answered and she is back on the *Rocinante*, the *Edward Israel* and all RCE personnel and employees are advised to do everything in their power to avoid any further escalation of this situation. This message serves as final verbal notification before the actions I’ve outlined are taken. A copy of this message is being included in the packet to the UN and RCE’s corporate headquarters. Thank you.”

The round-faced, balding man looked into the camera for a moment, then away, and then back before the recording ended. Marwick sighed.

“Not the most professional production,” he said, “but made his points effectively enough, I’d say.”

“Sneeze, and he shoots us,” Havelock said. “Look like we’re going to sneeze, and he shoots us. Make sure his chief engineer doesn’t catch cold, or he shoots us. Give her a blankie at night and a cup of warm milk, or he shoots us.”

“Did have a certain sameness to his thinking, didn’t he?” Marwick said.

Havelock looked around the cabin. The captain’s rooms were smaller than the security station, but he’d placed steel mirrors at the sides and along the tops of the walls to make it feel big. It was an illusion, of course, but it was the kind of illusion that could make the difference between sanity and madness over the course of a few years in confined spaces. The screen set into the wall hiccupped and shifted to a starscape. Not the real one outside, but the one from Sol. Seeing the old constellations was disconcerting.

“Who’s seen this?” Havelock asked.

“Sent to me and Murtry,” Marwick said. “Don’t know who Murtry’s shown it to, but I’ve run it past you.”

“All right,” Havelock said. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“Want? I want you to pop the lady free and set her back home with a stern talking-to,” Marwick said. “After that, I want to get my ship back under thrust and go the hell home the way my contract said. What I expect is that you find out whether this is really all talk, or if my ship’s going to come under fire.”

“They have the firepower.”

“I’m deeply aware of that. But do they have the will and expertise to use it? I’m only asking because the lives of my crew are in threat here, and it’s

making me a bit nervous.”

“I understand,” Havelock said.

“Do you, now?”

“I do. And I’ll find out what I can. But in the meantime, let’s start by assuming that he means it.”

“Yeah,” Marwick said, running a hand through his hair. He sighed. “When I signed up for this, I was thinking it was a hell of an adventure. First alien world. No stations or relief ships if things went pear-shaped. A whole new system full to the top with Christ only knows what. And instead, I get this shite.”

“Right there with you, sir,” Havelock said.

Havelock’s paintball militia, emboldened by the capture, had pressed for immediate action. They had the emergency airlock. The orbital mechanics of the *Rocinante* had clearly brought it close enough for a transit. Go now, they’d said, take the *Rocinante* when they weren’t expecting it, and get the whole charade over with. Havelock had been tempted. If he hadn’t seen what point defense cannons could do to a human body, he might have given the go-ahead.

Instead, they’d pulled power on the prisoner’s suit and hauled her back to the *Israel* before she suffocated. Since then, she’d been in the drunk-tank cell in Havelock’s office. With the security team down to less than a skeleton crew, he’d given the prisoner access to the privacy controls. He didn’t have enough women left on the team to put one on guard duty full-time.

In fact, when he got back to his office, the place was empty except for Nagata in her cell. She looked over, greeting him with a little chin-lift. She wore a red paper jumpsuit and her hair floated around her head in a dark starburst. Enemy capture protocol didn’t allow her hairband, a hand terminal, or her own clothes. She’d been in the cell for the better part of two days. Havelock knew from training exercises that he’d have been half crazed with claustrophobia by now. She’d gone from looking embarrassed to retreating into her own thoughts. It was a Belter thing, he assumed. A few generations living and dying without a sky, and enclosed spaces lost the atavistic terror of premature burial.

He sloped across the room to her.

“Nagata,” he said. “I had some questions for you.”

“Don’t I have the right to an attorney or union representative?” she asked, her voice making it clear that she was at least half joking.

“You do,” Havelock said. “But I was hoping you’d help me out of your kind and generous spirit.”

Her laugh was sharp, short, and insincere. He pulled up the video file on his hand terminal and set it floating just outside the steel mesh of the cell door.

“My name is Alex Kamal, and I am acting captain of the *Rocinante*. In light of recent events—”

Havelock shifted back to his desk, strapping himself in at the couch from force of habit more than anything. He watched Naomi’s face without actually staring at her. The woman had a great poker face. It was hard to tell whether she felt anything at all as she watched her shipmate of years threaten them all on her behalf. When the file ended, he reached out and pulled the hand terminal back to himself.

“Don’t see what you need me for,” she said. “He used small words.”

“You’re hilarious. The question I have is this: Are you really going to let your shipmates turn themselves into criminals and murderers so that you can postpone answering for your crimes?”

Her smile could have meant anything, but he had the sense he’d touched on something. Or close to it. “I feel like you’re asking me for something, friend. But I don’t know quite what it is.”

“Will you tell the *Rocinante* to back off?” Havelock said. “It won’t do you any damage. It’s not like we’re letting you go regardless. And if you cooperate, that’ll speak well for you when we get back to Earth.”

“I can, but it won’t matter. You haven’t shipped with those men. When you listen to that, you hear a list of threats, right?”

“What do you hear?”

“Alex saying how it is,” Naomi said. “All that stuff he told you? Those are just axioms now.”

“I’m sorry to hear you say that,” Havelock said. “Still, if you’ll record something for him assuring him that you’re in good condition and aren’t being mistreated, it’ll only help.”

She shifted, the microcurrents of air and the constant drift of microgravity bringing her back against the cell’s far wall. She touched it gently, steadying herself.

“Alex isn’t the problem,” she said. “Let me tell you a little about Jim Holden.”

“All right,” Havelock said.

“He’s a good man, but he doesn’t turn on a dime. Right now, there’s a debate going on in his head. On the one hand, he was sent out here to make peace, and he wants to do that. On the other hand, he protects his own.”

“His woman?”

“His crew,” Naomi said, biting the words a little. “It’s going to take him a while to decide to stop doing what he agreed to do and just tip over the table.”

Havelock’s hand terminal chimed. It was a reminder to review the next week’s schedules. Even in the depths of crises, minor office tasks demanded their tribute. He pulled up the scheduling grid.

“You think he will, though,” Havelock said.

“He’s got Amos with him,” Naomi said, as if that explained everything. “And then they’ll assault the ship and get me out.”

Havelock laughed. “We’re stretched a little thin, but I don’t see how they can expect to get through to you.”

“You’re talking about the man who got a load of people off Ganymede when it was still a war zone,” Naomi said. “And went onto the alien station at Medina by himself. And scuttled the *Agatha King* by himself when it had two thousand protomolecule zombies on it. He fought his way off Eros in the first outbreak.”

“Rushing in where angels fear to tread,” Havelock said.

“And making it through. I can’t tell you how many last goodbyes I’ve had with him, and he always comes back.”

“Sounds like a rough guy to have for a boyfriend,” Havelock said.

“He is, actually,” she said with a laugh. “But he’s worth it.”

“Why?”

“Because he does what he says he’s going to do,” she said. “And if he says he’s going to pop me out of this cell, then either that will happen, or he’ll die.”

Her expression was calm, her tone matter-of-fact. She wasn’t boasting. If anything, he thought there was a hint of apprehension in her voice. It disturbed him more than the acting captain’s list of threats.

He closed the scheduling grid, considered his hand terminal for a few

seconds. It would be afternoon on the surface, a little over halfway through one of the long, fifteen-hour days.

"Excuse me," he said to the prisoner. "I've got to make a call."

He thumbed the privacy controls down, and the steel mesh of the cage deformed into a pearly opacity. He requested a connection to Murtry, and a few seconds later his boss appeared on the screen. The sun had darkened his skin, and a tiny scab on his forehead looked almost like a caste mark. He nodded to Havelock.

"What can I do for you?" Murtry said.

"I wanted to touch base with you about the prisoner," Havelock said. "Check our strategy."

"Saw the pilot's little tantrum, did you?"

"You know, boss, all that you said before about how they have the biggest guns and if they want to take us down, they can? Because that's still true."

In the background of the feed a door slammed, and Murtry looked up, nodded, and refocused on Havelock. "Less an issue now than ever. As long as one of theirs is on the ship, they won't shoot."

"Won't?"

"Will be less likely to," Murtry amended.

"And what's the plan when RCE orders us to release her?" Havelock said. "It might be worth cutting her loose early. Get out in front of it, get some goodwill back."

"We're way past goodwill."

"I'm just not sure we have the authority to hold her, and if—"

"Are you in her brig?"

Havelock blinked. "Sorry?"

"Are *you* in *her* brig?"

"No, sir."

"Right. She's in yours. You have the jail and you have the pistol, that makes you the sheriff," Murtry said. "If the home office doesn't like what we're doing, we'll appeal the decisions. If we lose the appeal, they can send someone out and have a meeting face-to-face. By that time, all this will look so different they might as well not try. And the home office knows that, Havelock. What we've got here is a very free hand."

"Yeah. All right. I just wanted to check."

“My door’s always open,” Murtry said in a voice that meant maybe Havelock shouldn’t bother him with any more stupid ideas. The connection dropped, and Havelock considered the default screen for a few seconds before he pulled the grid back up. A few seconds later, he deactivated the privacy shield. Naomi was floating in the cage, pushing herself from side to side like a bored kid.

“Your privacy equipment sucks,” she said.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You heard that, then?”

“ ‘A very free hand,’ ” she said.

“Sorry. That was supposed to be between me and him.”

“I know, but it came right through. Honestly, can you hear me peeing in here?”

“Just that the vacuum comes on,” Havelock said, feeling a little blush in his neck and a sharp embarrassment at being embarrassed. “It’s pretty loud.”

“Old ships,” she said.

He went back to the business of running his staff. A report came in complaining of theft from one of the ship technician’s personal lockers. He routed it to the woman on duty. As long as things stayed pretty calm and the crew was all focused on the dangers outside, he could hold the place together. Having a common enemy actually helped with that. A lot of common enemies. Naomi started humming to herself, a soft melody that hovered just on the edge of recognizable. Havelock let himself enjoy it a little. It was that or be annoyed.

“He wasn’t the only one,” he said.

“Sorry?” Naomi said.

“He wasn’t the only one who got off Eros during the outbreak. My old partner was there. He got off too. Then he went back later. When it hit Venus.”

“Wait. You knew *Miller*?”

“Yeah,” Havelock said.

“Small universe.”

“He was one of maybe six decent people working Ceres Station when Star Helix had the contract. Warned me to quit Protogen before they

imploded too. I was sorry about it when he died.”

“He’ll be flattered,” she said.

“We’re not the bad guys here. RCE didn’t start any of this. You said you liked Holden because he always does what he says he’ll do? That’s us. RCE are the ones who asked permission and made a plan and came out here to do what everyone agreed we should do.”

“Not the people in First Landing. They didn’t agree.”

“No, because they were breaking the rules that we were following. I’m just... I know how weird and dangerous this all is, but before your friends start blasting rail gun rounds through our reactor, I want you to see that we’re not the bad guys here.”

His voice had gotten thinner and higher as he spoke. At the end, he was almost shouting. He pressed his hands together. Bit his lips.

“Under a little pressure,” she said.

“Some,” he agreed.

“Let me out, I’ll put in a good word for you,” she said. “And it’ll keep Holden from doing anything stupid.”

“Really?”

“It’ll keep him from doing a couple particular stupid things,” she said. “He may come up with something else. He’s clever that way.”

“I can’t,” he said.

“I know.”

The ship passed invisibly into the planet’s shadow, the decks clicking and groaning as the expansion plates adjusted to the change in radiant heat. Havelock felt a little rush of shame. She was his prisoner. He was the jailer. He shouldn’t need her approval. If she thought he and his people were baby-killing fascist power freaks, it didn’t change anything he had to do. Naomi went back to humming. It was a different song now. Something slow, in a minor key. After a while, she let it drift into silence.

“They weren’t the only ones,” she said as he finished the week’s duty roster. “They were the only ones that were trapped in the outbreak, but the place was locked down before that. A bunch of thugs in stolen riot armor making sure everyone did what they were told, and shooting the ones who didn’t. Getting ready for it. A few people made it past them.”

“Really? Who?”

Naomi shrugged.

“Me,” she said.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven: Elvi

Elvi sat on the crest of the hill, looking west. The morning light behind her caught the wings of thousands of butterfly-like animals. She hadn't seen them before, but today they filled the air from the ground to twenty meters high. A vast school of tiny animals. Or insects. Or whatever other name humanity eventually assigned to this foreign kingdom of life. For her, right now, they were butterflies.

They moved together like a school of fish, independent and coherent. Bursts of color—blue and silver and crimson and green—flashed through them, seeming almost to come in patterns for a moment and then dissolving into chaos. The column of them rose, narrowing, then broadened and flattened. They moved past her in a rush, and for a few seconds she was inside the cluster, palm-sized wings fluttering gently against her with a sound like sheets of paper falling and a clean, astringent smell like mint without being mint. She smiled and raised her arms up into the cloud of them, taking joy in the beauty and the moment, and then they passed, and she turned to watch them flow through the air, tumbling to the south as if they were going somewhere in particular.

She stood and stretched, adjusting her collection satchel against her hip. The sunlight pressed against her shoulders and the nape of her neck as she walked forward into the dusty, stone-paved field. The ruins rose to the north, with First Landing not even a smudge next to them, all human artifacts hidden by the curve of the planet and the shape of the hills. All except her.

Here and there, a few butterflies remained, possibly dead. Possibly quiescent. She squatted beside one, looking into the vibrant blue of its

wings, the coppery complication of flesh where its body—what she thought of as its body—folded together, interarticulated like a hinge. She put on her gloves and lifted the tiny body. It didn't so much as flutter. Even though it meant getting less physiological data, she hoped it was already dead.

"Sorry, little one," she said, just in case. "It's in the name of science."

She folded it into the black lattice, sealed it, and triggered the collection sequence. The array of sampling needles clicked and muttered to themselves. Elvi squinted up into the white-blue arch of the sky. The red dot floated about fifteen degrees above the horizon, bright enough to show through the thin, greenish clouds.

The satchel coughed, throwing out an error code Elvi hadn't seen before. She took out her hand terminal, connecting it to the satchel's output channel. The preliminary dataset was a mess. Elvi felt a deep, cold stab of fear. If the satchel was broken, it could take days before the one functioning shuttle could bring her a spare from the *Israel*. She wasn't even positive they had a spare in the toolkit or if they'd all been lost in the wreck of the heavy shuttle. The prospect of years going by collecting data by hand and spending her nights doing dissections like she was back in lower university reared up like a ghost. She took the butterfly out. Its corpse looked almost the same as when she'd put it in. She sat cross-legged beside it and ran the satchel's system diagnostics, chewing her lips as she waited for a fresh error code.

The readout came up clean. She looked from the satchel to the butterfly, then back again. A second hypothesis formed, as chilling as the first. Maybe worse. She picked up the dead butterfly and marched back toward the huts. Fayez's was a small green geodesic design he'd constructed halfway down a thin hill, high enough that any storm runoff would pass it by, but not at the crest where the wind would catch it. He was sitting on a stool, leaning back against the hut. He was wearing a pair of polyfiber work pants, a T-shirt, and an open bathrobe. He hadn't shaved in days, and the stubble on his cheeks made him look older.

"This isn't an animal," she said, holding out the butterfly.

He let the stool come down, its legs tapping the ground. "Good to see you too," he said.

"This isn't two biomes coming together. It's three. This... whatever it is? It doesn't have any of the chemical or structural commonalities that

you'd expect to see."

"Lucia Merton was up looking for you. Did you run across her?"

"What? No. Look, this is another machine. It's another thing like"—she pointed at the low red moon—"like *that*."

"All right."

"What if they're really not coming awake just because we're here? What if they're consistent? It complicates everything."

Fayez scratched his scalp just above his left ear. "You seem to want something here, Elvi, but I don't know what it is."

"How am I supposed to make any sense of this place when it keeps changing all the rules?" she said, and her voice sounded shrill even to her. She threw the butterfly down angrily, then immediately wished she hadn't. Not that it cared, just that the gesture seemed cruel. Fayez smiled his sharp little smile.

"You're preaching to the choir. You know what I've been doing all morning?"

"Drinking?"

"I wish. I've been going over surface data from the *Israel*. There's a chain of islands on the far side of the planet with what looks like a metric ass-ton of volcanic activity. Only so far as I can tell, this planet doesn't have, you know, tectonic plates. So what the hell is mimicking vulcanism? Do you know what Michaela's working on?"

"No."

"There's a pattern in the ultraviolet light that reaches the ground here, like it's some kind of carrier signal. Doesn't exist before the sunlight hits the exosphere, and by the time it comes here, complex, consistent patterning. She's got no idea where it's coming from. Sudyam's workgroup has what they think might be complex molecules that incorporate stable transuranics."

"How does that work?"

"I know, right?" Fayez said.

Elvi hung her hand on her shoulder, letting her elbow hang loose. Sweat trickled down her spine.

"I have to—"

"—tell Holden," Fayez said. "I know."

"I was going to say 'review my data.' See if maybe there's a common

structure between that”—she nodded at the butterfly—“and the big thing in the desert. Maybe I can make sense of it.”

“If you can’t, no one can,” Fayez said.

Something in his voice caught her attention, and she looked at him more closely. His fox-sharp face looked softer around the eyes and jowls. The flesh around his eyes was puffier than usual. “Are you all right?”

He laughed and spread his arms toward the horizon, gesturing at the whole planet—the whole universe—at once. “I’m great. Just spiffy. Thanks for asking.”

“I’m sorry. I just—”

“Don’t, Elvi,” he said. “Don’t be sorry. Just go on dealing with all of this the way that you do. Pile on another few layers of not thinking about it, and sail on, my dear, sail on. Whatever keeps you sane and functioning in a place like this, I will carry a flag for it. I’ll even pray with Simon on Sunday mornings. That’s how bad I’ve got it. Whatever works for you has my blessings.”

“Thank you?”

“Afwan,” he said, waving his hand. “Only before you bury your head back in your datasets again? Go see Doctor Merton. She looked worried.”



The boy sitting on the clinic table was six years old. His skin was the same deep brown as Elvi’s own, but with an ashy color to it. Not dryness, but something deeper. His eyes were bloodshot like he’d been weeping. Maybe he had been. His mother stood in the corner, her arms crossed and a vicious scowl on her lips. Lucia’s voice was crisp and calm, but her shoulders rode high up beside her ears.

“So I’m seeing this here,” she said, as her finger pulled down on the boy’s cheek, opening a thin gap between the lower lid and the roughened surface of the eyeball. The discoloration was almost invisible in the redness, but it was there. The faintest hint of green.

“I see,” Elvi said. She smiled at the boy. He didn’t smile back. “So, Jacob—”

“Jason.”

“Sorry. Jason. How long have you had trouble seeing things?”

The boy shrugged. "Right after my eyes started hurting again."

"And everything looks... green?"

He nodded. Lucia touched Elvi's arm. Silently, the doctor shone a light into the boy's eye. The iris barely reacted, and Elvi caught a glimpse of something in the fluid behind the boy's cornea, like a badly maintained aquarium. She nodded.

Lucia stood up, smiling at the woman. "If you'll wait with him here, Amanda. I'll be right back."

Amanda nodded once, sharply. Elvi let Lucia draw her through the examining room door and down a short hallway. Outside, a stiff breeze had picked up, rattling the clinic's doors and windows.

"He's the only one I've seen like this," Lucia said. "There's nothing in the literature."

"His mother doesn't seem to like me very much," Elvi said, trying to make it a joke.

"Her wife was shot and killed by RCE security," Lucia said.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

The testing array was good, but it was old. Ten years, maybe fifteen. A long scar ran across the bottom of its screen where something had gouged at it. Elvi could believe it had made the long trek from war-torn Ganymede to come here. She was surprised it still worked, but when Lucia thumbed in her access code, the screen came to life. The sample was beautiful in its way. A branching of elegant green like a pictogram meaning *tree*.

"It began in the extracellular matrix," Lucia said. "Low-level inflammation, but nothing worse than that. I hoped it would clear up on its own."

"Only now it's in the vitreous humor," Elvi said.

"I was wondering..." Lucia began, but Elvi had already taken out her hand terminal and started syncing it to the array. It only took a few seconds to find a match. Elvi tapped through the data.

"All right," she said. "The closest match is some of the rainwater organisms." Lucia shook her head, and Elvi pointed up. "You know how the clouds are greenish? There's a whole biome of organisms up there that have found ways to exploit the moisture and high ultraviolet exposure."

"Like plants? Fungi?"

"*Like* them," Elvi said. "It's not where we've been burning most of our

cycles. But it looks like a pretty crowded niche. A lot of species fighting for resources. I'm guessing this little fella was in a raindrop that dropped into Jason's eye and found a way to live there."

"He's had several eye infections, but they all came from familiar organisms. This thing. Is it contagious, do you think?"

"I wouldn't guess so," Elvi said. "We're just as new to it as it is to us. It evolved to spread in open air through a water cycle. It's salt tolerant if it's living in us, and that's interesting. If his eyes were already compromised, he may have been vulnerable to it, but unless he starts throwing his tears at people, wouldn't think it would go too far."

"What about his eyesight?"

Elvi straightened up. Lucia looked at her seriously, almost angrily. Elvi knew it wasn't directed at her, but at the terrible ignorance they were both struggling under. "I don't know. We knew something like this was bound to happen sooner or later, but I don't know what we can do about it. Except tell people not to go out when it's raining."

"That isn't going to help him," Lucia said. "Can you ask the labs back home for help?"

A hundred objections filled Elvi's mind. *I don't control the RCE research teams and All the data analysis is planned out and running months ahead of where we are now and I just got another sample of a third biome this morning.* She tapped at her hand terminal, saving a copy of the array's data, then translating it into RCE's favored formats and sending it winging through the air back to the *Israel*, and then the Ring, and then Earth.

"I'll try," she said. "In the meantime, though, we need to let people know it's a problem. Has Carol Chiwewe heard about this?"

"She knows I'm suspicious and that I wanted to bring you in on it," Lucia said.

Elvi nodded, already trying to think what the best way would be to bring the issue to Murtry's attention. "Well, you let your side know, and I'll tell mine."

"All right," Lucia said. And then a moment later, "I hate that it breaks down that way. Your side and mine. One of my teachers back in school always used to say that contagion was the one absolute proof of community. People could pretend there weren't drug users and prostitutes and unvaccinated children all they wanted, but when the plague came through,

all that mattered was who was actually breathing your air.”

“I’m not sure if that’s reassuring or awful.”

“There’s room for both,” Lucia said. “This scares me as much as anything that’s happened. This little... thing. What if we can’t fix it?”

“We probably can,” Elvi said. “And then we’ll fix the next one. And the one after that. It’s tricky and it’s hard, but everything’s going to be all right.”

Lucia lifted an eyebrow. “You really believe that?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“You aren’t scared at all?”

Elvi paused, thinking about the question. “If I am, I don’t feel it,” she said. “It’s not something I think about.”

“Take what blessings you can, I suppose. What about the third side?”

Elvi didn’t know what Lucia was talking about, and then she heard Favez’s mocking voice in her memory and her heart leaped. She hated it a little that her heart leaped, but that didn’t stop her.

“I’ll tell him,” she said. “I’ll tell Holden.”

In the commissary, Holden sat hunched over his hand terminal. He’d shaved and his hair was combed. His shirt was pressed. *Cleans up pretty*, a voice in the back of her mind said, and she pushed it away.

A woman’s voice came from the terminal, crackling and sharp. “—squeeze all the balls I can get my hands around until someone starts crying, but it will take time. And I know you’re thinking of taking this public, because you’re fucking stupid, and that is what you always think of. You and publicity are like a sixteen-year-old boy and boobs. Nothing else in your head. So before you even begin—”

Amos lumbered up from the side. His smile was as open and friendly as ever, but Elvi thought there might be a little edge to it. His broad, bald head always made her think of babies, and she had to restrain herself from patting it.

“Hey,” Amos said. “Sorry, but the captain’s a little busy.”

“Who’s he listening to?”

“United Nations,” Amos said. “He’s been trying to get your boss to let our XO out.”

“Not my boss,” Elvi said. “Murtry’s security. It’s a whole different organizational structure.”

“That corporate stuff’s not my strong suit,” he said.

“I just needed to...” she began, and Holden drew himself up, looking into the hand terminal camera. His lips formed a hard little smile, and she lost her train of thought.

“Let me make it clear,” Holden said, his voice low and solid as stone, “that this was done on my orders. If Royal Charter wants to put me on trial when I get back because I ordered my crew to disable their illegally weaponized shuttle I would be happy to—”

“Doc?” Amos said.

“What? Sorry. No, it’s just that there are some things going on that I thought he needed to know about.”

Amos shook his head in something that almost passed for sorrow. “No. Nothing’s happening until the XO’s clear.”

“No, it is, though,” Elvi said. “Not just one thing either. I found more artifacts waking up today. Some of them are passing for local animals, I think. If we’d been here long enough to build a catalog, we could tell which were which, but as it is, everything looks new. So we don’t know.”

“So some of the lizards are protomolecule stuff?” Amos asked.

“Yes. Maybe. We don’t know yet. And there’s more, because the local biome is starting to find ways to invade us. Exploit our resources. And the perimeter dome never got set up, and so all of our microfauna are just wandering around mixing with the local ecosphere and there’s no way to get it back so we’re contaminating everything and everything’s contaminating us.”

She was talking too fast. She hated this. When—if—she ever got back to Earth she was going to take some communications classes. Something that would keep her from rattling on like a can rolling down stairs.

“It’s *all* accelerating,” she said. “And maybe it is a reaction to us or to something we’re doing. Or maybe it’s not. And I know we’re having trouble figuring out the politics and getting along with each other, and I’m really sorry about that.” There were tears in her eyes now. Jesus. What was she? Twelve? “But we have to look at what’s happening, because it’s really, really dangerous and it’s happening right now. And it’s all going to hit a crisis point, and then something really, really bad will happen.”

And then Holden was there, his eyes on her, his voice soothing. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand and wondered whether any of

Jason's invading blindness-fungus had been on her hands when she did it.

"Hey," Holden said. "Are you all right?"

"I am," she said. "I'm fine. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Holden said. "You said something about a crisis?"

She nodded.

"All right," he said. "What would that look like?"

"I don't know," she said. "I won't know. Not until it's happened."

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Chapter Twenty-Eight: Basia

Basia floated above the world.

Seventeen hundred kilometers below, Ilus spun past at a dizzying pace. Alex had told him that the *Rocinante* had an orbital period just under two hours, but Basia couldn't feel it. Floating outside the ship in microgravity, his inner ear told him that he was drifting, motionless. So instead the universe appeared to spin far too quickly, like some giant child's toy. Every hour, moving from dark to light, and then an hour later back to darkness, the sun rising from behind Ilus, spinning around behind him, and setting again briefly. Basia had been outside long enough to see the change three times, the center of his own cosmos.

The planet's one vast ocean was in night. The string of islands that crossed it tiny black spots in a larger darkness. One of the islands, the largest of them, was outlined in a faint green light. Luminescence in the waves crashing against its beaches and cliffs.

The day-side was dominated by Ilus' single massive continent. The southwestern quarter was the enormous desert. First Landing would be just to the north of it. In daylight, it was far too small to see with the naked eye. Even the huge alien towers where he'd met with Coop and Kate and all the others in some previous lifetime were too small to find.

"You okay out there, partner?" Alex's voice said over the radio. "Been driftin' a while now. That hatch ain't gonna fix itself."

As he spoke, the *Edward Israel* passed into the daylight side of the planet and flashed like a tiny white spark. It was almost too far away to be seen, but, in orbital terms, very very close. Alex was holding the *Rocinante* locked in a matching orbit so he could keep his gun pointed at them.

“It’s beautiful,” Basia said, looking back down at the planet spinning by. “When we came in on the *Barb* I never took time to just look at it. But Ilus is beautiful.”

“So,” Alex said, his drawl adding an extra syllable to the word, “remember when we talked about the euphoria you can get on a spacewalk?”

“I’m not new at this,” Basia replied. “I know what the happys are like, and I’m good. The hatch is almost done. Just taking a break.”

They’d eaten all their meals together. Alex had shared his collection of twenty-second-century Noir Revival films with him. Just the night before they’d watched *Naked Comes the Gun*. Basia found noir too bleak, too hopeless to enjoy. It had led to a lengthy conversation over drinks about why Alex thought he was wrong to feel that way.

And, true to Naomi’s promise, Alex had dug up a list of open repair projects for Basia to work on. One of which was a sticky actuator arm on one of the *Rocinante*’s two torpedo loading hatches.

The hatch lay open next to him, a door in the flank of the warship a meter wide and eight meters long. A massive white tube sat just below the opening. One of the ship’s torpedoes. It looked too big to be just a missile. Almost a small spaceship in its own right. It didn’t look dangerous, just well crafted and functional. Basia knew that in its heart lay a warhead that could reduce another spaceship to molten metal and plasma. It was hard to reconcile that with the gentle white curves and sense of calmness and solidity.

The faulty actuator had already been cut out, and floated next to the ship at the end of a magnetic tether, waiting to be taken inside. With an effort, Basia turned away from the stunning view of Ilus and pulled the new actuator off the web harness on his back.

“Going back to work now,” he said to Alex.

“Roger that,” the pilot replied. “Be glad to have that working.”

“Planning to need it?” Basia asked.

“Nope, but I’d like to have the option if it comes up.” Alex laughed. He laughed, but he was also serious.

Basia began attaching the new arm to the hull mounts and the missile hatch. He knew almost nothing about electronics, and had worried that wiring up the new device would be beyond his skills, but it turned out that it

had a single plug that went into a port inside the actuator housing. Which made sense when he thought about it. They would design warships around the idea that damage was inevitable. That repairs would sometimes take place in hostile environments. Making everything as modular and easy to swap out as possible wasn't just sensible, it was a survival trait. He wondered if the Martians had had a Belter on the design team.

"The *Barbapiccola* is on our side of Ilus," Alex said, still in that same lazy, sleepy voice.

"Can you show me?" Basia looked around, but could see nothing but the glowing planet below and the white spark of the *Edward Israel*.

"Hold on." A moment later, a tiny green dot appeared on Basia's heads-up display, drifting slowly.

"It's the dot?"

"Well," Alex said, "it's where the dot *is*. But it's too far away to see right now. Just a sec."

A green square appeared on Basia's HUD, then zoomed in like a telescope until the distant freighter was the size of his thumbnail.

"That's at 50X," Alex said.

"Space is too big," Basia replied.

"It's been said. And this is just the space in low orbit around one planet. Breaks the head a bit to think about."

"I try not to."

"Wise man."

The *Barbapiccola* looked like a big metal shipping container with the squat bell housing of a drive at one end, and the blocky superstructure of command and control on top. She was ugly and utterly functional. A thing of the vacuum that would never know the heat of atmospheric drag.

The large cargo bays that took up most of her interior would be full of the raw lithium ore they'd already pulled off of Ilus. Waiting to fly to the refineries on Pallas Station. Waiting to be traded for food and medicine and soil enrichments. All the things the fledgling colony needed to survive.

Waiting to take his daughter away.

"Can we talk to them?" he asked.

"Huh? The *Barb*? Sure. Why?"

"My daughter is over there."

"Alrighty," came the reply, followed by a burst of static. A few moments

after that, a voice with a thick Belter accent replied.

“Que?”

“Sa bueno. Basia Merton, mé. Suche nach Felcia Merton. Donde?”

“Sa sa,” the voice said, the tone a fight between curiosity and irritation. The connection stayed open but silent.

While he waited, Basia finished mounting the actuator arm and plugged it in. He called down on the ship channel to have Alex test it, and it opened and closed several times without binding or twisting the hatch. The motor made a smooth vibration in the hull beneath his magnetic boots that set his helmet to humming.

“Papa?” came a hesitant voice.

“Baby, Felcia, it’s me, honey,” he replied, trying to keep from babbling like an idiot and mostly failing.

“Papa,” she said, delight coloring her voice. Deeper now, richer, but still the voice of the little girl that had squealed *Papa* when he came home from work. It still melted all the hard, angry, adult places in his heart.

“I’m up here with you, honey.”

“On the *Barbapiccola*?” she said in confusion.

“No, I mean, in orbit. Over Ilus. I can see your ship, honey. Flying by.”

“Let me find a screen! Where are you? I can look for you.”

“No, don’t worry about that. I’m pretty far away. Had to magnify a lot to see you. Just keep talking to me for a minute before you go around the planet again.”

“Okay,” she said. “Are they nice to you over there?”

Basia laughed. “Your brother wanted to know the same thing. They’re fine. The best jailers ever. And you?”

“Everyone is nice, but worried. Maybe the RCE ship won’t let us leave.”

“Everything will be fine, honey,” Basia said, patting at the empty space as if she could see him and take comfort from it. “Holden’s working it out.”

“He made you a prisoner, Papa.”

“He did me a favor, Felcia. He saved me,” Basia said, and realized it was true as he said it. Murtry would have killed him. And his son and wife were still down on the planet. “I just wanted to say hello. Not talk about that stuff.”

“So hello, Papa,” she replied with her grown-up little girl’s voice.

“Hello, podling,” he replied, calling her by a nickname he hadn’t used in

years.

She made a strange noise, and it took Basia a moment to realize she was crying. “Never going to see you again, Papa,” she said, her voice thick.

He started to reply with objections, with reassurances. But his conversation with Alex came back to him, and instead he said, “Maybe, podling. That’s nobody’s fault but mine. Remember that, okay? I tried to do what I thought was right, but I messed up and it’s on no one but me if I have to pay for it.”

“I don’t like that,” Felcia said, still crying.

Me either, honey, he thought, but said, “Is what is, sa sa? Is what is. Doesn’t change that I love you, and your mama, and Jacek.” *And Katoa, who I left to die.*

“They say I have to go,” Felcia said. The tiny green dot that hid the massive spaceship his daughter lived on was moving away, toward the horizon, into radio blackout. He could see it happening. Watch the unimaginable distance between them getting wider until a planet came between them.

“Okay, honey,” he said. “Bye now. I love you.”

Whatever she might have said in reply was lost, as the *Barbapiccola* slipped behind Ilus and the channel broke up into static and died. No relay satellites in orbit around the new world yet. Back to line of sight, like nineteenth-century primitives bouncing radio around inside their atmosphere. Basia thought of his home, really just a shack in a tiny village with two dusty roads. Maybe that was appropriate.

Seventeen hundred kilometers below, his world spun. Beneath his feet, a spaceship capable of flying across the solar system hummed to itself with barely restrained power.

Maybe not *just* like a nineteenth-century primitive.

“You ready to come back in?” Alex said, breaking into his reverie.

“In a minute,” Basia replied. “Can you find First Landing and point it out?”

“Sure. It’s moving away, but you can still see it.”

Another tiny green dot appeared on his HUD over a spot just north of Ilus’ great southern desert. Knowing where to look, Basia thought he could detect the open bowl of the mining operations north of the village, but that might just have been wishful thinking.

Lucia would be down there, seeing patients, looking after Jacek. It was daylight in the village, so Lucia would definitely still be working. Basia tried to imagine what she was doing at that moment. The temptation to have Alex call down to the village so he could talk to her was almost overpowering. But he'd been selfish enough already, calling Felcia. He was a source of pain to his family now. The only comfort to be had came at their expense.

So instead he began packing up his tools and the damaged actuator.

If he never came back, would Lucia find someone else? He tried to tell himself that he was the sort of man who'd want that for her. That her happiness was more important than his fears about losing her. He tried the idea on like a new outfit. Seeing if he could find a way to make it fit.

It didn't. He saw with clarity as perfect as if Alex were zooming his HUD in on the idea that he was *not* that sort of man. It was hard to tell if that was a flattering testament to his commitment to his marriage, or a scathing commentary on his own insecurities and selfishness. Like almost everything else that had happened to him over the last months, it was murky and difficult to navigate.

He would go back with Holden, probably to the UN complex on Luna. The OPA would claim he was their citizen, but Ganymede had originally been a UN colony. The legality of which people were citizens of which government was still being worked out, and would be for decades. Plenty of time to try him as a UN citizen for crimes against a UN-based company and throw him in prison for all eternity.

Years of trials, probably.

Basia began slowly walking across the hull of the *Rocinante*, dragging his webbed-together bundle of tools and spare parts behind. At the stern of the ship he stopped and planted both feet, waiting for the bundle to float past him and stop at the end of its line. The weight pulled his arms out painfully for a moment as he killed its momentum.

"Open the cargo bay hatch," he said.

"Roger," Alex replied, and the ship started to vibrate under Basia's feet. The two heavy doors of the cargo bay slowly slid open. When they were about halfway, he yanked down on the line and the bundle of tools swung around the edge of the ship and into the cargo bay. He let go of the line and let them sail inside without yanking him off the edge after them.

In the corner of his vision, there was a bright burst of light, like the flash of a distant camera. Basia turned to look, expecting to see one of the other two ships moving into the sunlight. Instead, there was a growing point of white light centered over Ilus' largest island. It was bright enough to overpower the faint green luminescence of its beaches, and rapidly expanding.

In seconds, the dark side of the planet was lit up as brightly as if a second sun had risen. The other islands in the chain suddenly visible in stark black and white, casting long shadows across the ocean as the white spot grew. He felt his heart start to race.

"Alex?" he said.

The ocean around the big island heaved up, bulging out beyond the curve of the planet in what must have been a tsunami miles high. But before Basia could grasp the enormity of the forces involved in such an uprising, it was gone. The island, the massive upwelling of the ocean, the smaller nearby islands, they all disappeared in a column of white fire and a rapidly rising mushroom cloud.

Basia's visor darkened dramatically, and he had a sense that if it hadn't the light coming from the planet below might have blinded him. But even through the welder's shield darkness of the helmet, he could see the column of fire growing, hurling white vapor up until it broke free of the planet's atmosphere and became glittering crystals of ice speeding away from the gravity well like a shower of glass from a bullet-shattered window.

A massive ripple, like wind across a field of grass, sped away from the growing pillar of fire through the surrounding ocean. Intellectually, Basia knew the ripples had to be waves, hundreds or thousands of feet high, rushing away from the blast. But the intellectual part of his brain was rapidly disappearing behind the screaming primitive who was relieving his bladder into the suit's condom catheter in fear.

Basia had grown up in the Jupiter system. He'd seen video of Io up close more than once. Io was famous for having the most massive volcanoes ever seen by man. Gigantic geysers of sulfur blasting out of the surface of the moon until particles were flung into Jupiter's plasma torus and faint ring system. They made Io an almost insanely inhospitable place.

The explosion Basia was looking at from orbit dwarfed those eruptions. It looked like half the planet was being flattened by the force of the blast.

His initial thought was that it was a very good thing First Landing was on the other side of the world. His second, that the shock wave was heading that direction, and not even traveling around the planet was going to slow it down much.

“Jesus Christ!” Alex yelled across the radio. “Are you seein’ that shit!”

“Call down,” Basia tried to yell back. It came out as a panicky whimper. “You have to warn them.”

“Warn them to do what?” Alex asked. He sounded dazed.

What do you do when the planet you’re standing on tries to kill you?

Basia didn’t know.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine: Holden

Holden stood on a low hill overlooking First Landing trying to enjoy the beauty of the planet while his brain chewed on the half dozen insoluble problems that he was somehow supposed to solve. The usual dust had been tamped down by the recent run of gentle rains. It made the town look clean, well-tended. Peaceful. Above, the sky was a stunning indigo blue with just the faintest streamers of high-altitude clouds breaking it up. His hand terminal was reporting the temperature as 22 degrees Celsius with a gentle four-knot wind coming out of the northeast. The only thing that would have made it better was Naomi there with him, or at least back safe on the *Roci*. But that would have made it a lot better.

I miss planets,” Holden said, closing his eyes and facing the sun.

“I don’t,” Amos replied. He’d been so quiet during their afternoon walk that Holden had sort of forgotten he was there.

“You never miss a breeze? The sun on your skin? A gentle rain?”

“Those are not the parts of planetary life that imprinted on my memory,” Amos replied.

“Want to talk about it?” Holden asked.

“Nope.”

“Okay.” Holden didn’t take the mechanic’s refusal personally. Amos had, as he described it, a lot of past in his past. He didn’t like people digging around there, and Holden was the last person to pry. Holden already knew more about Amos’ brutal upbringing on Earth than he wanted to.

“Better head back, I guess,” Holden said after a few more pleasant moments in the breeze. “Might have an RCE reply to my requests.”

“Yeah.” Amos snorted. “If the RCE bigwigs sent a reply seconds after

receiving your message, they should be arriving just about now.”

“I won’t let your facts about light delay get in the way of my optimism.”

“Not much does.”

Holden was silent for a long moment. He licked his lips.

“If they say no,” he said. “If they’re committed to letting Murtry hold on to her. I’m going to have to make a decision about whether she’s more important than keeping this place from devolving into a shooting war.”

“Yup.”

“I’m pretty sure I know what I’m going to pick too.”

“Yup.”

“There will be people who think I’m very selfish.”

“True,” Amos said. “But also, fuck ’em. They’re not us.”

“That us-and-them thing is the problem at the base of all this—” Holden started, but his hand terminal interrupted, a high-priority alarm sounding. It was the alert reserved for crewperson in danger. *Naomi*, he thought. *Something happened to Naomi.*

Amos took a few steps toward Holden, his brow furrowing and hands clenching into fists. His mind had gone to the same place. If something had actually happened to Naomi, there was no way he’d be able to stop Amos from killing Murtry this time. Probably, he wouldn’t even try.

“Holden here,” he said, trying to keep his voice level.

“Cap, we got a problem,” Alex replied. His voice was shaky, terrified. Holden had flown with Alex through half a dozen battles. Not even when the missile trails filled the sky around them had he ever heard his pilot panic. Whatever it was, it was bad.

“Is she hurt?”

“What? Who? You mean Naomi? Naomi’s fine, far as I know,” Alex replied. “You’re in deep shit, Captain.”

Holden looked around. First Landing looked quiet. A new shift of Belters were boarding the carts that would take them to the mine. A few people walked the streets, going about their business. The two RCE security people on patrol were chatting amiably with a local and sipping some sort of hot drink from a thermos. The only violent thing happening within line of sight was a mimic lizard slowly dragging a stomach-engulfed bird back through its gullet.

“Okay?” Holden said.

“Something blew up on the other side of the planet,” Alex said, talking fast enough to stumble over his words, most of his drawl disappearing. “Absolutely flattened an island chain over there. I mean it’s like someone dropped a rock. Kill-the-dinosaurs kind of thing. Shock wave is heading around the planet right now. You have about six hours. Maybe.”

Amos had traded his angry face in for one of genuine surprise. It wasn’t an expression he wore often, and it made him look vaguely childlike.

“Six hours until what, Alex?” Holden said. “Details, please.”

“Figure two-, three-hundred-kilometer-an-hour winds, lightning, torrential rains. You’re far enough inland to avoid the three-kilometer-high tsunami.”

“Basic wrath of God package, minus drowning,” Holden said, reaching for humor to hide his rising fear. “How certain is this?”

“Uh, Captain? I’m watching the other side of the planet rip itself to shreds right now. This isn’t a prediction. This is thousands of clicks of planet between you and the apocalypse disappearing fast.”

“Got some video to send?”

“Yep,” said the pilot. “Got fresh underwear for after you watch it?”

“Send it anyway. I may need it to convince the locals. Holden out.”

“So, Cap,” Amos said. “What’s the plan?”

“I haven’t got a clue.”



“Run it again,” Murtry said after Holden played the apocalyptic video Alex had shot with the *Rocinante*’s telescopes. Holden, Murtry, and Carol Chiwewe were in the town hall, Holden’s terminal synced up to the big screen hanging on one wall.

Holden obliged and played through the recording a second time. Again, the big island disappeared in a flash of light and a column of fire. Again, the other islands vanished under a massive wall of water and then the spreading clouds of steam and ash. Again, the shock wave raced away from the center of the explosion, dragging massive waves behind it.

As the video played, Murtry talked quietly on his hand terminal with someone. Carol shook her head gently, as though it were possible to deny the evidence playing on-screen.

The video ended, and Murtry said, “This is matching our data. The geoengineering group thinks there was some kind of fission reaction down near the bottom of the ocean.” Holden prickled at the implication he might be lying about something so serious, but held his tongue.

“Like a bomb?” Carol Chiwewe said.

“Or an alien power plant failing out,” Murtry said. “Can’t really speculate.”

“How quickly can we evacuate?” Carol said, her voice surprisingly firm for a person who’d just looked Armageddon in the eye.

“That’s what we’re here to talk about,” Holden said. “What’s our best plan for protecting the colony? Evacuation is one option, but we’re down to a little over five hours now.”

“Evacuation won’t work,” Murtry said, “at least using our shuttle. The window’s too tight. We’d be taking off in the face of that shock wave, with turbulence and atmospheric ionization doing its best to knock us out of the sky. Better to survive down here and still have a shuttle available afterward for relief.”

Holden frowned and nodded. “I hate to admit it, but I agree. Alex says he can’t put the *Roci* down and get it back off the ground before the blast. And if we do try to evacuate, we’ll probably have riots on our hands. How do you tell someone that their kid doesn’t get to leave on the shuttle?”

“Riots won’t be a problem,” Murtry said. The calm of his voice was chilling.

“How do we protect everyone? The entire colony?” Holden said, again choosing to ignore the provocation.

“There’s mines,” Amos said. He hovered over Holden like an anxious parent. He’d started doing that whenever Murtry was around.

“No.” Carol shook her head. “It’s low ground. It’ll flood if we get too much rain.”

“I think we should count on anything that can go wrong doing so,” Holden agreed. “So no pits and caves that can fill up with water. I’m thinking the ruins.”

Murtry leaned back in his chair, frowning. “What makes you think those’ll hold up to three-hundred-kilometer-an-hour winds?”

“Honestly? I have no good reason to believe that,” Holden said. “But they’ve been there a very long time. That’s what I’ve got. Hope that if they

made it this far, they can make it through what's coming."

"Better'n those huts you guys are living in," Amos added with a beefy shrug. "I can kick down any building in this town in ten minutes."

Murtry leaned back even farther in his chair, staring up at the ceiling and making clicking noises with his tongue. After a few seconds he said, "Okay. That's as good a plan as any I have. We just need to outlive that initial shock wave. What comes after will be bad, but we'll be able to take any survivors off through it. So let's play it your way. I'll get my people moving. Better get the word out."

"Carol, find as many people as you can to spread the news," Holden said. "Make sure everyone brings as much food and water as they can reasonably carry, but *nothing* else. The planet's on fire. Can't stop to save mementos."

"I'll give her a hand," Amos said.

"We're on the clock," Holden reminded them, punching an alert into his hand terminal as he said it. "I want to see all of you inside the structure in four hours, not a minute later."

"We'll try," Carol said.



It took longer to move the colonists than Holden had hoped. Each person told had to express shock and disbelief. Then they had to have a conversation about their surprise. Then they had to have a conversation about what items they'd bring with them. Some argued about bringing personal items, each one sure that their particular case was unique. Every time Holden heard it happen, he wanted to start shouting.

It was the blue sky and gentle breeze. The disaster just wasn't real to them. Not when they could look out across the sky and see nothing but wisps of cloud. They were playing along, because Holden and Carol and Murtry were in charge, and you did what the people in charge asked you to do unless there was a compelling reason not to. But Holden could see the disbelief in their eyes, hear it in every silly delay and argument.

Across the street, a man was clutching a bundle of clothing under one arm while he dragged a large plastic container of water behind him. Amos walked over and traded a few smiling words with the man. The man

vigorously shook his head and tried to walk off. Amos grabbed the bundle of clothes out of his hands and threw them on top of a nearby hut, then picked up the water and shoved it into the man's arms. The man started to argue, but Amos stared him down with a vague smile, and eventually the other man turned and left, trudging after the others headed to the alien ruins.

"Captain?" a tentative voice said to his back. He turned around to find Elvi Okoye smiling up at him, a large sack thrown over one shoulder.

"Hello," he said. "What've you got there?"

"It's blankets. Fayeze and Sudyam and I are bringing all the blankets we had at the compound. The temperature's sure to drop significantly once the debris cloud covers us. The nights will get cold."

"Good thinking. We should probably tell some more people to bring blankets."

"So," she added, still with her unsure half smile, "I wanted to ask for some help for the chemical sciences group."

"Help?"

"The chemical analysis deck is pretty heavy, and they're having trouble moving it. One or two more people would make the job a lot easier."

Holden laughed in disbelief. "We won't be doing science up there, Elvi. Tell them to ditch it and carry water or food instead."

"It makes water," she said.

"They can carry—It makes what?"

"It can sterilize and distill water," she said, nodding as if by doing so she could make him agree faster. "We might need it. For when, you know, the bottles run out."

"Yes," he said, feeling like an idiot.

"Yes," she agreed, smiling helpfully.

"Amos!" he yelled. When the big man came over he pointed at Elvi and said, "Find someone to help you, then follow her. There's a big piece of equipment they need help moving."

"Equipment?" Amos frowned. "Wouldn't food or water be—"

"It makes water," Holden and Elvi said at the same time.

"Roger," Amos said and left in a hurry.

Holden noticed that a subtle darkening of the sky had begun. The sun was still high. It was barely past midday and into the early afternoon. But the sunlight was shifting toward red and the world was darkening along

with it, as though a beautiful sunset were starting about five hours early. Something about the change sent a shiver up his spine.

“Get up there,” Holden said, giving Elvi a gentle push toward the alien towers. “Go now. Tell your people to hurry.”

To her credit, she didn’t argue, just took off at a dead run back toward the RCE science compound. All around him the colonists were moving faster, arguing less, and casting the occasional frightened glance at the sky.



Holden hadn’t been inside the alien structure since he’d looked it over as a crime scene. It had the same eerie and inhuman aesthetic sense he’d seen before, first on Eros after the infection, and later on the Ring Station at the heart of the gate network. Curves and angles that were subtly wrong and yet weirdly beautiful at the same time. He tried to imagine what use the protomolecule masters had made of the buildings, and failed. He couldn’t picture them housing machines like a factory, nor could he picture them as dwellings, scattered with furniture and personal items. It was as if, standing empty as they were, they still fulfilled whatever alien function they’d always been meant to serve.

It was also where Basia Merton and the others had hidden their explosives. Where they’d killed the security team. The bloodiest crimes that had been committed on the planet had all been centered right here, where they were all going now.

“Give me another recount,” Carol Chiwewe said to her aides. “Who are we missing? Find out who we’re missing.”

She’d been doing head counts of the colonists ever since she’d arrived, almost the last person in. They kept coming up with new numbers over and over as stragglers drifted in and people milled around. It was an impossible task, but Holden respected her commitment to ensuring they left no one behind.

The RCE science team huddled together in one rounded corner of the building’s large central room, Elvi among them. Several scientists were fiddling with a large machine. Getting it ready to purify large quantities of water, Holden hoped. Lucia drifted across the room to exchange a few words with Elvi, her son Jacek in tow. Holden breathed a sigh of relief

they'd both made it. Basia would be up on the *Rocinante* going out of his mind with worry, and Holden was happy he'd be able to report that they were as safe as he could make them.

"Hey, Cap," Amos said, coming out of a side room with several colonists trailing. "We got a problem."

"Another one? Worse than the cataclysmic storm heading our way?"

"Related, I guess you'd say," Amos replied. "We've been going through the head counts and looks like the Dahlke family is missing."

"We're sure about that?"

"Pretty," Amos said with a shrug.

Carol saw them talking and made her way through the crowded room toward them. "One hundred percent sure," she said. "Clay Dahlke was in town picking up supplies when we warned him. He headed out to get his wife and daughter. They've got the house farthest outside of town. I should have sent someone along but I was stupid—"

"You had plenty to do," Holden reassured her. "How far from here is the Dahlke place?"

"Three clicks," Amos said. "I'm about to head out with these guys and see if we can find them."

"Wait a minute," Holden said. "I'm not sure you can make a six-kilometer round trip with the time we have left, let alone look for someone."

"Not leaving that little girl out there, chief," Amos said. He kept his voice carefully neutral, but Holden could hear the barest presentiment of a threat hiding in it.

"All right," Holden said, giving in. "But let me call up to the *Roci* and get an update. At least let me do that."

"Sure," Amos said agreeably. "Someone's looking for a poncho for the kid right now anyway."

Holden headed out of the main room and through the confusion of smaller chambers around it, trying to find the entrance. The alien building was a maze of connecting passages and rooms. As he walked, he pulled out his hand terminal. "Alex, this is Holden, you listening?"

The sound coming out of the terminal was filled with static from the atmosphere's heavy ionization, but Holden could still hear Alex when he said, "Alex here. What's the word?"

“Give me an update. How close are we?”

“Oh, boss, you just need to look west.” The fear in Alex’s voice was audible even over the heavy static.

Holden stepped out of the alien tower’s main entrance and looked toward the slowly setting sun.

A curtain of black covered the horizon as far as the eye could see. It was moving so quickly that even from dozens of kilometers away it appeared to hurtle toward him, a black roiling cliff shot through with lightning. The ground beneath his feet trembled and shook, and Holden remembered that sound moved more quickly through a solid than through the air. The vibration he felt now was the sound of all that fury, coming through the earth like an early warning. Even as he thought it, a rising roar started in the west.

“What’s it look like?” Amos had come into the antechamber and was pulling a light backpack on. His colonist friends stood behind him, their faces a mixture of hope and fear.

“It’s too late, big man,” Holden said, looking west and shaking his head. “It’s way too late.”

He wasn’t sure as he said it if he meant for the Dahlkes, or for all of them.

Chapter Thirty: Elvi

The storm front came, seeming slow at first—a tall purple-black churn higher than skyscrapers with only the slightest stirrings in the warm air to show that it was real—and then between one breath and the next, hit with the violence of a blow. Air and water and mud jetted through the windows, archways, and holes in the ruin like the stream from a firehose. It did not simply roar; it deafened. Elvi curled with her back against the wall of the ruin, her arms wrapped around her knees, and endured. The walls shuddered against her spine, vibrating with the hurricane gusts.

Across from her, Michaela had her hands over her ears, her mouth open in a shriek that Elvi couldn't hear. She had thought the rain would be cold, but it wasn't. The slurry that soaked up on the ruin's floor was warm and salty, and somehow that was worse. She laced her fingers together, squeezing until her knuckles ached. The mud-thick water filled the air until the spray made it hard to breathe. Someone lurched through the archway to her left, but she could no more make out who than stop the catastrophe by willing it. She felt certain that the ruins would fail, the more-than-ancient walls snap apart, and she and all the rest of them would be thrown into the storm, crushed or drowned or both. All she could think of was being in the heavy shuttle, the confusion and the panic when it was going down, the trauma of the impact. This felt the same, but it went on and on and on until she found herself almost missing the sudden impact of the crash. That, at least, had ended.

She knew that it was daytime, but the only lights were the cold white of the emergency lights and the near-constant barrage of lightning that caught people's faces like a strobe. A young man, his face set and stony like an

image of suffering and endurance. A child no more than eight years old, his head buried in his mother's shoulder. Wei and Murtry in uniform, standing as close as lovers and shouting into each other's ears in the effort to be heard, their faces flushed red. The vast shifts of barometric pressure were invisible, but she felt them in the sense of overwhelming illness, of *wrongness*, that washed through her body. She couldn't tell if the shaking came from the walls of the storm-battered ruins, more little earthquakes, or her own overloaded nervous system.

At some point, her perception of time changed. She couldn't say if the storm had been hours or days or minutes. It was like the half-awareness of trauma, the doomed patience of being assaulted and knowing the only thing that would end it was the mercy of the attacker. Now and then, she would feel herself rising to some fuller consciousness, and will herself back into the stupor. Shock. Maybe she was going into shock. Her awareness seemed to blink in and out. She was curled against Fayez, both her hands squeezing at his elbow, and didn't remember how she'd gotten there. The dark slurry of mud was ankle high all through the ruins, brown and green. She was covered in it. They were all covered in it.

When this is over, I'm going to go back to my hut, take a long bath, and sleep for a week, she thought. She knew it was ridiculous. Her hut would no more have withstood this than a match could stay lit underwater, but she still thought it and some part of her believed it was true. A blinding-bright flash and crackling detonation came almost simultaneously. She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, and endured.

The first change she noticed was a baby screaming. It was an exhausted sound. She shifted, her shirt and pants soaked and cold and adhering to her skin with the muck. She craned her neck, trying to find where the grating noise was coming from. She felt the thought shifting at the base of her skull before she knew what it was, a surreal lag between the realization and being conscious of it. She could hear a baby crying. She could hear something—*anything*—that wasn't the malice and venom of the storm. She tried to stand up, and her legs buckled under her. Kneeling in the muck, she gathered herself, squared her shoulders, and tried again. The rain slanted in through the windows of the ruin, but only at about twenty degrees. It still fell in buckets out of a black sky. The wind gusted and pushed and howled. In any other context, it would have been the teeth of a gale. Here and now, it meant

the worst was over.

“Doctor Okoye?”

Murtry’s face was lit from below, the emergency lantern hung over his shoulder. His expression was the same polite smile over sober, focused attention. Her battered mind wondered whether there was anything that could shake the man’s soul, and thought perhaps there wasn’t. She wanted to be reassured by his predictability, but her body wasn’t able to feel comfort. Not now.

“Are you all right, Doctor?” he said, his hand on her shoulder.

She nodded, and when he started to step away, she clutched at him. “How long?”

“The front hit a little over sixteen hours ago,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said, and turned back to the window and the rain. The lightning still played among the clouds and lanced down to the ground, but not so often now. The flashes showed her a transformed landscape. Rivers flowed where yesterday had been desert hardpan. The flowers, or what she thought of as flowers, were churned into nothing. Not even sticks remained. She couldn’t imagine how the mimic lizards could have survived. Or the birdlike animals she’d thought of as rock sparrows. She’d meant to go to the wash east of First Landing and collect samples of the pink lichen that clung in the shadows there. She wouldn’t get to now.

The sense of loss was like a weight on her throat. She had glimpsed an ecosystem unlike anything anyone had ever seen before, a web of life that had grown up apart from anything she had known. She and her workgroups had been the only people ever to walk in that garden. And now it was gone.

“The usual state of nature is recovering from the last disaster,” she said. It was a truism of ecological biologists, and she said it the way a religious person might pray. To make sense of what she saw. To comfort herself. To give the world some sense of purpose or meaning. Species rose in an environment, and that environment changed. It was the nature of the universe, as true here as it had been on Earth.

She wept quietly, her tears indistinguishable from the rain.

“Well, there’s something I wasn’t expecting,” Holden said. She turned to look at him. The dimness of the ruins rendered him in monochrome. He was a sepia print of James Holden. His hair was plastered back, clinging to his head and the nape of his neck. Mud streaked his shirt.

She was too tired to dissemble. She took his hand in hers and followed his gaze toward the back of the ruins. His hand was solid and warm in hers, and if there was some stiffness and hesitation in it, at least he didn't flinch away.

Carol Chiwewe and four other squatters were bailing the storm muck out the window with stiff plastic utility panels, streaks of green-brown staining the pale gray. Behind them, twenty or thirty of the squatters from First Landing were clumped in groups, huddled together under blankets. RCE security moved among them with bottles of water and foil-packed emergency rations. Fayez and Lucia were standing together, talking animatedly. Elvi couldn't make out the words.

"I don't see it," she said. "What weren't you expecting?"

He squeezed her fingers and let go of her hand. Her palm felt colder without his in it.

"Your security people helping the Belters," he said. "I guess nothing brings people together like a disaster."

"That's not true," Elvi said. "We would always have helped. We came out here planning to help. I don't know why everyone thinks that we're so awful. We didn't do anything wrong."

Her voice cracked on the last word, and she started weeping in earnest. She felt oddly distanced from her grief, as if she were watching it from the outside, and then Holden put his hand on her shoulder, and she felt the pain. For a time, it washed her away. Flooded her. Three lightning strikes came close by, loud and bright and sudden, the thunder from them rolling away in the distance.

"I'm sorry," she said, when she could say anything. "There's just been... so much."

"No, I should apologize," Holden said. "I didn't mean to make you feel worse. It's just..."

"I understand," she said, reaching for his hand again. Let him laugh at her. Let him turn her away. She didn't care now. She just wanted to be touched. To be held.

"Hey, Cap," Amos said, looming up out of the darkness. He had a clear plastic poncho over his shoulders, the hood straining to fit the thick neck. "You going to be all right for a while?"

Holden stepped back, retreating from her. She felt a brief, irrational flash

of rage toward the big man for intruding. She bit her lip and scowled up at him. If he noticed, he gave no sign.

“I don’t actually know how to answer that question,” Holden said. “I don’t see any reason I’d die right away. That’s about the best I’ve got.”

“Beats the alternative, anyway,” Amos said. “So that Dahlke family that didn’t make it here before the shit hit the fan? Yeah, some of us are gonna go have a looksee.”

Holden scowled. “You sure that’s a good idea? It’s still pretty bad out there. And this is more water than I’m guessing this place has seen in ever. There’ll be a lot of flooding, and there’s no good way to get help out if something goes south.”

“They had a little girl,” Amos said. The two men exchanged a long look that seemed to carry the weight of some earlier conversation. Elvi felt like a stranger watching two family members communicate in the half-code of long familiarity.

“Be careful,” Holden replied after a long moment.

“That ship may have sailed, but I’ll do what I can.”

Wei walked toward them. She’d taken off her armor, but she still had an automatic rifle strapped to her back. She nodded at Amos. “I’ve got a couple more who want to tag along.”

“Don’t matter to me if it don’t matter to you,” Amos said. Wei nodded. There was a darkness in her eyes that seemed to echo Amos’.

Elvi looked over. A half dozen other people were struggling into the same kind of poncho Amos wore. In the dimness and the wreckage, it was hard to tell which of them were squatters and which were RCE. Even Belters and Earthers were hard to differentiate now. Elvi didn’t know if that was an artifact of the darkness or if some deeper part of her brain was changing her perceptions, making anything human into something like her. Minds could be tricky that way.

Among them, she caught a glimpse of Fayeze and her mouth went coppery with sudden fear. “Wait,” she said, hopping across the space. “Fayeze, wait. What are you doing?”

“Helping out,” he said. “Also, getting out of this sardine can. I’ve gotten used to having a couple feet of social distance. Just being around all these people stresses me out.”

“You can’t. It’s dangerous out there.”

“I know.”

“You stay here,” she said, grabbing at his poncho and tugging it up, trying to get it back over his head. “I can go.”

“Elvi,” he said. “Elvi! Stop it.”

She had a double handful of plastic sheeting in her fingers. It was already wet.

“Let them go,” she said. “They’re professionals. They can take care of this. We... people like us...”

“We’re past us and them at this point. We’re just people in a bad place,” Fayez said. And then a moment later, “You know what I am, Elvi.”

“No. No, you’re a *good* man, Fayez.”

He tilted his head. “I meant that I’m a geologist. It’s not like they need me to talk about plate tectonics. What were *you* thinking?”

“Oh. Ah. I just...”

“Come on, Professor,” Wei said, tapping Fayez on the arm. “Time to go for a walk.”

“How can I refuse?” Fayez said, gently taking the plastic sheeting out of Elvi’s hands. She stood watching as six of them walked together toward the entrance. Amos, Wei, Fayez, and three of the squatters—no, two squatters and Sudyam—one-use chemical lanterns glowing in their hands. They walked out into the gale. She stood at the window, ignoring the rain that soaked her. Amos and Wei took the lead, their heads down, their ponchos blowing out behind them. The others followed close behind, clustered like ducklings. The night around them was black and violent, and they moved into the downpour, growing fainter with every minute until she couldn’t make them out at all. She stood there a while longer, her mind empty and exhausted.

She found Lucia and Jacek in one of the larger chambers. Two Belters were struggling to place a wide plastic panel over one of the windows to block the rain now that the wind wasn’t so violent that it would simply shatter. A half dozen others were scraping out the muck. They’d already done so much work, Elvi could see pale strips of the ground. Everywhere people were sleeping, curled into and against each other. The sound of the storm was still enough to drown out their moans. Or most of them.

Lucia looked up at her. The woman seemed to have aged a decade, but she managed a smile. Elvi sat down beside her. They were both covered in

salt mud, and the muck was starting to reek a little. Putrescence or something like it. All the small life forms living in the planet's great ocean that had been broken and thrown to the sky, starting to decay. It broke her heart to think of the scale of the death that surrounded them, so she didn't.

"Can I help you?" Lucia said.

"I came to ask the same thing," Elvi said. "Tell me what I can do."



The long, terrible night went on, the rain slackening only slightly. No light came through the clouds. No rainbows promised that the disaster was ended. Elvi moved from one group to another, talking and checking. Some were the squatters, some were RCE. All had the same stunned expressions, the same sense of amazement that they were still alive. The scent of the muck was getting richer and more pungent as whatever organic structures it had held broke down. Elvi hated to imagine how the world would stink when the last of the rains fell and the sun came back to warm the landscape. That was a problem for another time.

She didn't notice it when she fell asleep. She'd been at the window, looking out in hopes of catching a glimpse of the search party's return. She remembered very clearly hearing Holden's voice behind her and a woman replying to him. She'd meant to turn back, find him, ask if she could help. If she could do something to stay in motion, to keep from thinking or feeling for another hour more. But instead she woke up.

For a moment, she didn't know where she was. Her exhaustion-drunk mind tried to make the close quarters into her cabin on the *Israel*, as if she were still on the journey out to New Terra. As if none of this had ever happened. Then the present reasserted itself.

She was in the corner of a smaller chamber. Eight other people were stretched out on the damp ground around her, heads pillowed by their arms. Someone was snoring, and a body was pressed up against hers. Lightning stuttered in the distance, and she saw the body beside hers was Fayez. The thunder came a long time later, and softly. Then there was only the patter of rain. She touched his shoulder, shaking him gently.

He groaned and shifted, the poncho still on him crackling with the motion. "Well, good morning, Doctor Okoye," he said. "Imagine meeting

you here.”

“Is it?”

“Is it what?”

“A good morning.”

He sighed in the dark. “Honestly, I don’t even think it’s morning.”

“Did you find them?”

“We didn’t find anything.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I mean we didn’t find anything at all. The huts are gone. First Landing’s gone. The mine pit’s gone or else the landmarks are so different we couldn’t find it. The roads are gone.”

“Oh.”

“You know those pictures you see of a natural disaster where there’s nothing but mud and rubble? Imagine that without the rubble.”

Elvi lay back down. “I’m sorry.”

“If we only lose them, it’ll be a miracle. We managed to get a signal through to the *Israel*. The atmospheric data make it look like we’ll be going without a sunrise for a good long time. No one said the words ‘nuclear winter,’ but I think it’s safe to say things aren’t going to be business as usual around here for a nice long while. We’ve got the battery power we carried in with us, but no hydroponics. Only as much fresh water as the chemistry deck will pump out. I was hoping that some of the storage buildings might have made it. They were pretty well built, some of them.”

“Still. Maybe some good can come out of it.”

“I admire your psychotic optimism.”

“I’m serious. I mean look at us all. You went out with Amos and Wei and the locals. We’re all here together. Working together. We’re taking care of each other. Maybe this is what it takes to resolve all the violence. There were three sides before. There’s only one side now.”

Fayez sighed. “It’s true. Nothing points out shared humanity like a natural disaster. Or a disaster, anyway. Nothing on this mudball of a planet’s even remotely natural if you ask me.”

“So that’s a good thing,” she said.

“It is,” Fayez agreed. And then a moment later, “I give it five days.”

Chapter Thirty-One: Holden

Holden had witnessed the aftermath of a tornado as a child. They were rare in the Montana flatlands where he'd grown up, but not entirely unheard of. One had touched down on a commercial complex a few miles from his family's farm, and the local citizens had gathered to help with the cleanup. His mother Tamara had taken him along.

The tornado had hit a farmers' market at the center of the complex, while totally avoiding the feed store and fuel station on either side of it. The market had been flattened as if by a giant's fist, the roof lying flat on the ground with the walls splayed out around it. The contents of the store had been scattered in a giant pinwheel that extended for hundreds of meters around the impact point. It was young James Holden's first experience with nature's fury unleashed, and for years afterward he'd had nightmares about tornadoes destroying his home.

This was worse.

Holden stood in what his hand terminal told him had been the center of First Landing, the constant rain sheeting off his poncho, and turned in a slow circle. All around there was nothing but thick mud occasionally cut by a rivulet of water. There were no flattened buildings. No wreckage strewn across the ground. With the fury and duration of the winds, it was entirely possible that the detritus of First Landing was hundreds or even thousands of kilometers away. The colonists would never rebuild. There was nothing *to* rebuild.

A ripple of lights danced through the heavy cloud cover overhead, and a second later the booming of the thunder, like a barrage of cannon fire. The rain intensified, reducing visibility to a few dozen meters, and swelling the

little streams cutting gullies across the muddy ground.

"I'd say 'what a mess,' but it's actually kind of the opposite of that," Amos said. "Never seen anything like this, Cap."

"What if it happens again?" Holden said, shuddering either at that thought or at the cold rainwater trickling down his back.

"Think they have more than one of whatever blew up?"

"Anyone know what the first one was yet?"

"Nope," Amos admitted with a sigh. "Big fusion reactor, maybe. Alex sent an update, said it tossed a lot of radiation up around the initial blast."

"Some of that will be coming down in the rain."

"Some."

The mud at Amos' feet moved, and a small, sluglike creature pushed its way up out of the ground, desperately trying to get its head above water. Amos casually kicked it into one of the nearby streams where the current whisked it away.

"I'm running low on my cancer meds," Holden said.

"Radioactive rain ain't gonna help with that."

"Was my thought. Bad for the colonists too."

"Do we have a plan?" Amos asked. His tone suggested he didn't expect an answer.

"Get off this hell-planet before the next catastrophe."

"A-fucking-men," Amos replied.

They walked back toward the alien towers, trudging through the thick mud and occasionally having to leap across a newly formed arroyo filled with fast-moving water. The ground was covered with small holes where brightly colored worm-slugs had pushed their way to the surface, and shiny trails of slime radiated in all directions showing their recent passage.

"Never seen these before," Amos said, pointing at another of the creatures slowly making its way across the wet ground. They weren't much bigger than Holden's thumb, and eyeless.

"Forced up by the rain. This was pretty arid land before. There's a lot of subterranean life drowning right now I'd bet. At least these guys have a way to get out of it."

"Yeah," Amos said, frowning down at one, "but, you know, gross. One of those things climbs into my sleeping bag, I'm gonna be pissed."

"Big baby."

As if in response to Amos' worries, the ground shifted and dozens more of the slugs pushed their way up. Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Amos picked his way through them, trying not to get their slime on his boots. The trails they left were quickly washed away by the rain.

Holden's had terminal buzzed at him, and he pulled it out to find that a message had been downloaded. The terminal had been trying to connect to the *Roci* for hours. There must have finally been a break in the storm long enough for it to send and receive updates.

He tried to open a channel to Alex, but got only static. Whenever his window had happened, he'd missed it. But the fact that there were occasional breaks in the atmospheric clutter was a hopeful sign that they'd get comms back soon. In the meantime, he could keep sending messages and hoping they'd slip through the static a bit at a time.

The update waiting for him was a voice message. He plugged the bud into his ear and hit play.

"This is a message for Captain James Holden, from Arturo Ramsey, lead counsel for Royal Charter Energy."

Holden had sent dozens of requests to the various senior vice presidents and board members of RCE for Naomi to be released. Getting a reply back from the company's top lawyer was not a good sign.

"Captain Holden," the message continued, "Royal Charter Energy takes your request for the release of Naomi Nagata from detention on the *Edward Israel* very seriously. However, the legal landscape we're navigating with this situation is murky at best."

"It's not murky, give me my damn XO back, you smug bastards," Holden muttered angrily. At Amos' questioning look he shook his head and continued the recording.

"Pending further investigation, we're afraid we're going to have to follow the advice of the security team on site and hold Naomi Nagata in protective custody. We hope you understand the delicate—"

Holden turned off the recording in disgust. Amos raised an eyebrow.

"That's the legal wonk at RCE telling me they plan to keep holding Naomi," Holden said. " 'Following the advice of the security team on site.' "

"Murtry," Amos grunted.

"Who else?"

“Sort of wondering why you haven’t let me off the leash on that, Cap,” Amos said.

“Because, before *this*”—Holden waved an arm at the mud and rain and worms around them—“we had a job to do that would not have been aided by murdering the RCE security chief.”

“Would’ve loved to give it a try, though. You know, just to see.”

“Well, my friend, you might still get your shot,” Holden said. “Because I am about to order him to do something he really isn’t going to want to do.”

“Oh,” Amos said with a smile, “goody.”



When they returned to the ruins, the camp was in chaos. People were frantically sweeping something out of the tower entrance using blankets and sticks and other makeshift implements. An agonized howl echoed out of the structure, like someone in terrible pain.

Doctor Okoye spotted them from the tower opening and ran to meet them. “Captain, we have a serious problem.” Before he could reply, she kicked one of the worms away from his feet with a squeal. “Look out!”

Holden had watched her capture and sacrifice a number of the local fauna during their association. She’d never struck him as squeamish. He couldn’t picture a few slimy slug analogs being the thing that broke her.

“What’s going on?” he asked when she’d finished kicking slugs away from him.

“A man died,” she said. “The one who was married to the man and woman who took care of the carts. The taller one. Beth is her name, I think. The wife’s name. That’s her crying inside.”

“And that relates to the worms how?”

“That slime they secrete is a neurotoxin,” Elvi replied, wide-eyed. “He touched it, and it was almost instant paralysis. Full respiratory failure. One of the worms was climbing up a wall near their sleeping area and he grabbed it to throw it outside. By the time we realized what was happening, he was dead.”

“Jesus,” Amos said, staring down at the worms surrounding them, something like respect mixed in with his disgust.

“Some kind of defense toxin?” Holden asked.

“I don’t know,” Elvi replied. “It might just be slime to aid in locomotion, like a terrestrial slug. It might not be toxic to the other life forms on New Terra. We’ve never even seen them before. How can we know anything? If I had my collection equipment, I could send the data back to Luna, if I could send the message back to Luna, but—”

Elvi’s voice was rising as she spoke. When she ended, she was almost in tears. “You’re right,” Holden said. “It was a stupid question, and it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Why doesn’t it—” Elvi started, but Holden pushed past her.

“Where’s Murtry,” he asked.

“Inside, organizing the people to find and remove all the slugs from the structure.”

“Come on, Amos,” Holden said. “Let’s change his priorities.”

Inside, the fear was so pronounced it was almost an odor. Half of the colonists were in almost frantic activity, building slug-sweeping implements and clearing the structure. The other half sat on the floor, many wrapped tight in blankets, empty expressions on their faces. The human mind could only take so much threat. Everyone had a different limit, and he couldn’t really blame the people who had been broken by the last thirty hours. It was actually sort of amazing that it hadn’t happened to all of them.

He was, however, unsurprised to see Basia’s wife and son busily at work with the chemical sciences team.

“Doctor Merton,” he greeted her with an apologetic smile.

“Captain,” she replied. Her returning smile was thin, and very tired. As the colony’s only doctor, she’d had a very long day.

“I’ve heard about the death,” he started, but she cut him off with a sharp nod and a gesture toward the chemical analysis deck.

“We’re analyzing the toxin right now,” she said. “It’s unlikely we’ll be able to make a counter-agent with the tools available, but we’re going to try.”

“I appreciate the effort,” Holden said. “But I’m hoping to make it unnecessary.”

“Are we being forced to leave?” she said, a look of sad resignation replacing her wan smile. “After all this...”

“Maybe not forever,” Holden said, putting his hands on her shoulders. She felt very thin.

She nodded slowly, looking around them at the dirty, frightened people filling the room. "I can't argue. There's nothing left to fight over."

Oh, Holden thought, *some people can always find a reason to fight, speaking of which*. "I need to find Murtry."

Lucia gestured at an opening behind her, and Holden left with one last squeeze of her shoulders and what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

In the next room, Murtry was down on his haunches looking at something on the floor. Wei stood behind him, nose wrinkled in disgust and her rifle in her hands.

"Wei," Amos said with a nod.

"Amos," the security officer replied with a grin.

Holden wondered what was going on there. They couldn't have a thing, could they? When would they have found time to have a thing? But they definitely acted like they were sharing a private joke.

"Captain Holden," Murtry said, standing up, not giving him more time to think about possible Amos-and-Wei dalliances. On the floor behind the RCE security chief was a clear plastic bowl inverted over one of the slugs. The creature was nuzzling its prison with its pointed eyeless face.

"Made a friend," Holden said, pointing at the slug.

"They say it's a good idea to know your enemy," Murtry replied.

"They say a lot of stuff."

"Yes. Yes, they do. How did the recon go?"

"About how you'd expect," Holden said. "Initial reports are correct. There isn't a single standing structure. Not even the remains of one. All the colony supplies are lost. We can make potables out of ground water until the chem lab runs out of supplies. But what's raining out of the sky is radioactive, and probably has things living in it."

"All right," Murtry said, scratching his ear with one thick fingernail. "Can we agree that at present, the insurgent colony might not be viable?"

"You don't have to sound happy about it."

"I'm going to have some relief flown down as soon as comms clears up. RCE is happy to share these needed supplies with the refugees."

"Very magnanimous," Holden said. "But RCE is going to do me a bigger favor."

"Oh," Murtry said, his face shifting into a smile. "We are?"

"Yeah. Go ahead and bring the supply shuttle down. Evacuation is going

to take some time, and we'll want plenty of medicine, food, and shelter to keep these people healthy until everyone is off-world."

"Off-world? Sounds like you're doing *us* a favor there, Captain."

"I'm not done," Holden said, and took a step forward, deliberately moving into Murtry's space. The security man stiffened, but didn't step back. "When the shuttle leaves, it's going to take some of the colonists with it. The sick and vulnerable first. And as soon as your people can de-weaponize the second shuttle, it'll start making runs too. I'm giving the same orders to the *Barbapiccola* and the *Rocinante*. We're leaving this planet, and if I can't stick everyone on the *Roci* and the *Barb*, the *Edward Israel* will be taking the rest."

Murtry's smile cooled. "Is that right?"

"It is."

"I fail to see why the ship that brought the squatters here can't also take them away," Murtry said.

"One, it no longer has the room," Holden started.

"Then they should dump the ore they illegally stole from this world," Murtry said.

"And two," Holden continued as if he hadn't interrupted, "she's down to the last of her supplies. I won't stick hundreds of people on that ship that may not make it back to Medina. I doubt it's RCE policy to ignore a humanitarian crisis. And even if it is, it's sure as hell going to make for terrible press."

Murtry took an answering step toward Holden, crossing his arms and shifting his smile into an equally meaningless frown.

Plan B is that I have Amos kill you right now and just take what I want when the shuttle lands, Holden thought, but worked to keep it off his face.

Almost as if he could sense the thought, Amos shuffled forward and put one hand on the butt of his pistol. Wei shifted to his right, still gripping her rifle.

We are so close, Holden thought, *to all of this going completely off the rails*. But he couldn't back down. Not with a couple hundred people living or dying on the outcome of the confrontation. Wei cleared her throat. Amos grinned back at her. Murtry cocked his head to one side, his frown deepening.

Here we go, Holden thought, and suppressed the urge to swallow a

mouth suddenly full of saliva.

“Of course,” Murtry said. “We’d be happy to assist.”

“Uh,” Holden replied

“You’re right. We can’t leave them here,” Murtry continued. “And there isn’t room for them anywhere else. I’ll let the *Israel* know they’re taking on passengers as soon as we get comms up.”

“That would be great,” Holden said. “Thank you.”

“Doctor Okoye,” Murtry said. Holden turned to find the diminutive scientist had come in, her usual tentative smile on her face.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said. “But we’ve gotten the radio back up. We’re on with the *Israel* right now. You said to tell you as soon as we got through.”

“Thank you,” Murtry said and started to follow her out of the room. He paused, as though something had suddenly occurred to him, and turned to Holden. “You know, we’re only in this situation because these people came down and built a shantytown. We’d brought much better structures with us on the heavy shuttle. Much of this could have been avoided.”

Holden started to reply, but Elvi said, “Oh, no. I’m unhappy about the loss of the dome and the permanent structures too. But we clocked gusts of three hundred and seventy kilometers an hour out there. Nothing we set up would have withstood that.”

“Thank you, Doctor Okoye,” Murtry said with a tight smile, “for correcting me. Let’s go call the ship, shall we?”

Elvi blinked in puzzlement as Murtry left. “Is he mad at me?”

“Sweetie,” Amos said, clapping her on the back, “that just means you’re not an asshole.”

Chapter Thirty-Two: Havelock

After they'd lost radio contact with Murtry, Havelock had tried to sleep. He *should* have slept. There was nothing he could do. Not yet, anyway. Not until it was over. He floated in his couch, the straps keeping him centered over the gel, and willed his consciousness to fade. His mind wouldn't rest. Were they still alive down there? What if the explosion was just the first of several? What if the planet detonated and took out the *Israel*? Should he have Marwick pull the ship into a higher orbit? Or even away from the planet entirely? And if the *Barbapiccola* tried to do the same... then what? He wasn't supposed to let them break orbit with a full load of RCE's lithium ore.

He closed his eyes again, but they opened as soon as he stopped consciously willing them shut. After three hours, he gave up, took off his straps, and went to the gym instead. His float-atrophied muscles complained with every set, and he put the feed of the planet below on the screen. The contours of New Terra were gone. The whole planet had become a flat and uniform gray, clouds obscuring whatever violence was happening beneath them. After the exercise round, he bathed, changed into a fresh uniform, and went to his office. His incoming message queue was filled with requests for comments from every news organization there was, and several he doubted were real. He forwarded them all to the RCE corporate headquarters on Luna. Let them answer if they wanted to. At this point, they knew as much as he did.

He checked on comms from the planet, but the signal wasn't getting through. So he checked again. And again. The gray planet was silent.

"Any word?" the prisoner asked.

“Nothing,” Havelock replied. And then, a moment later, “I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” she said. “They’ll be all right.”

“I hope so.”

“Are *you* all right?”

Havelock looked over at her. For a detained saboteur who’d been in the box for days now, she looked calm. Almost amused. He found himself smiling back at her.

“Might be a little stressed,” he said.

“Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault,” Havelock said. “You aren’t the one calling the shots around here.”

“There’s someone calling the shots around here?” Naomi asked, and a man cleared his throat behind him. Havelock shifted his couch, the bearing hissing, to look back at the hatch. The chief engineer floated there. He wore the militia armband over his uniform sleeve.

“Hey there, chief,” he said, pulling himself into the room. “Wondering if we could have a talk. Alone, maybe.”

“You can put up the privacy shield if you want,” Naomi said. “I’ll still hear everything.”

Havelock undid his straps and pushed off. “I’ll be back,” he said over his shoulder.

“You shall always find me at home,” Naomi said.

The commissary was between rushes. The chief engineer grabbed a bulb of coffee for himself and another for Havelock. They floated together near a table bolted to the deck. Force of habit.

“So we’ve been talking,” Chief Engineer Koenen said. “About the event.”

“Yeah, it’s been pretty much the only thing on my mind too.”

“How sure are we that it’s... well... *natural*?”

“I’d have gone pretty much a hundred percent it wasn’t,” Havelock said with a grim laugh. The chief engineer’s expression seemed to close, and Havelock pressed on. “But maybe that depends on what you mean by natural. Is there something bothering you?”

“I don’t want to sound paranoid. It’s just that the timing on this seems pretty convenient. You and me and the boys catch the UN mediator red-handed. Throw the bitch in the brig. And then this big disaster comes out of

nowhere, takes everyone's attention off her."

Havelock sipped at the coffee.

"What are you thinking, chief? That it was rigged?"

"Those squatters got here before we did. We don't know what they found and just never told us about. And Holden worked for the OPA. He worked for Fred fucking Johnson, right? Hell, everything I heard says he's been sleeping with that Belter girl we brought in. His loyalty isn't to Earth. And he was the one who went on the alien whatever-the-hell-it-is that Medina Station's floating around and came back out. I've been following some independent casts. The Martian marines that went there after him? There's some pretty weird shit that's gone on with all of them since then."

"Weird shit like what?"

The chief engineer's eyes brightened and he hunched forward, a posture of intimacy and complicity that was a habit of gravity. For the next half hour, he ran down half a dozen strange occurrences. One of the marines had died of an embolism during a heavy-g burn just before she'd been scheduled to talk with her cousin who ran a popular newsfeed. Another had quit the military and wasn't talking about anything that had happened. There had been rumors of a secret report that suggested—strongly suggested—that James Holden had been killed on the station, and a doppelgänger put in his place. It stood to reason with all the other changes the protomolecule could make to a human body that recreating one wouldn't be hard for it. Only the report had never been made public, and the people who had read it had been targets of whisper campaigns to discredit them.

Havelock drank his coffee and listened, nodding and asking the occasional question—usually for the sources of the information the chief engineer was reporting. When they were done, Havelock promised to look into the issue, then hauled himself back to his desk. On the readout, the planet was still covered in clouds.

"Everything okay?" Naomi asked.

"Fine," he said. And then a moment later, "Just scared people trying to find a version of events where someone has control over everything."

She chuckled. "Yeah. I'm doing the same."

"You are? How?"

"Chewing down my fingernails and praying," she said. "Mostly

praying.”

“You’re religious?”

“No.”

“Are you and Holden secretly alien spies that blew up the planet as part of a Belter conspiracy to distract the media?”

Naomi’s laughter was deep. “Oh, was that what it was? I’m so sorry.”

Havelock chuckled too, feeling a little guilty as he did. Koenen was one of his people. Naomi Nagata was a saboteur and the enemy. And still, it was a little funny, and there wasn’t anyone else to talk with.

“It’s not that bad. Conspiracy theories come up whenever people feel like the universe is too random. Absurd. If it’s all an enemy plot, at least there’s someone calling the shots.”

“Belters.”

“This time, yeah.”

“Are they going to break in here and throw me out the airlock?”

“No, they’re not like that,” Havelock said. “They’re good guys.”

“Good guys who think I destroyed a planet.”

“No, that your alien doppelgänger boyfriend did to keep people from thinking about you. Don’t worry. You’ll be fine. No one’s really thinking you’re in league with the protomolecule. They’re just scared.”

Naomi went quiet. Her fingertips pressed against the cage and she hummed quietly to herself. It wasn’t a melody Havelock knew. He checked his incoming queue again. Another half dozen requests for comment. A note from one of the security team that the Belters on the *Israel* had started sitting together in the commissary and exercising together in the gym. It seemed suspicious to the man making the report. It sounded like circling the wagons to Havelock. He’d have to think about what to do about that. If anything. The radio signal to the planet still didn’t go through. The analysis of the IR sensors that could see through the cloud cover was that First Landing was being destroyed by the storm. He turned his attention to the sensor array data as it streamed back to Earth. Maybe someone there could make something of it. The first-report newsfeeds were already speculating that it had been a fusion core overloading. Having just heard about how Jim Holden was a shapeshifting alien left him a little skeptical about everything.

When, six hours later, his hand terminal lit up with an incoming request from Murtry, Havelock felt a huge weight lifting from his shoulders. He

accepted the connection, and a low-res Murtry fuzzed to life on the screen. The feed jumped and hopped, but the audio quality was all right apart from a little static.

“Good to see you, Havelock. How’re things holding together up there?”

“No complaints, sir. Mostly we were waiting to hear from you. That looks like a hell of a rainstorm you’ve got going down there.”

“Loss of life was minimal,” Murtry said. “A few of the squatters didn’t bother getting to shelter in time, and the floodwaters pulled some local bugs out from the ground that’ll kill you if you touch them. They lost another one to that. Our people are fine. The camp’s a loss.”

“Ours or theirs?”

“Ours *and* theirs. Everyone down here’s going to be starting over from scratch.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Why?”

Havelock blinked. His smile felt nervous. “Because we just lost everything.”

“We didn’t lose as much as they did,” Murtry said. “That makes this a win. We’re going to need to pack the shuttle with relief supplies and get it down here. Food. Clean water. Medical supplies. Warm clothes. No shelters, though. Or if they are, make ’em those cheap laminate ones that won’t hold up for more than a week.”

“Are you sure? I can get some emergency prefabs worked up—”

“No. Nothing like permanent shelter comes down here until our people are the only ones using it. And we’ll be hauling up some of the squatters. Can you start setting something up for an extra hundred or so people? It doesn’t need to be comfortable, but it has to be something we can control.”

“We’re bringing the squatters on the *Israel*, sir?”

“We’re getting them off the planet and putting them under our thumbs,” Murtry said with a smile. “His Holiness, Pope Holden, thinks he bullied me into it. That man is about as smart as a dead cat.”

Havelock was suddenly acutely aware that Naomi’s privacy shield was down and every word of his conversation was carrying to her. He tried to think of a way to trigger it that wouldn’t let Murtry know that he’d forgotten protocol up to now.

“There a problem, Havelock?”

“Just thinking where we can put them, sir,” Havelock said. “We’ll come up with something.”

“Good man. This thing was a lucky break. Play this right, and we’ll get all the squatters off the planet. Even if we can’t, they’re going to have hell’s own time claiming they’ve got a viable settlement.” Murtry’s smile was thin. “This last sixty hours, we’ve probably made more progress toward straightening this mess out than all the time since we came out here.”

Naomi rapped against the cage with her knuckles, the grate clacking softly enough that the hand terminal’s mike didn’t pick it up. Her eyebrows were raised in query, but she didn’t speak. Havelock made the smallest possible nod.

“What about the mediation team?” he asked. “Holden and his people?”

“Holden and Burton are fine. Burton almost got his ass caught out in the worst of it, but it didn’t quite happen,” Murtry said with a shrug and a smile. “Can’t have everything.”

Havelock winced, thinking how callous Murtry’s words would sound to someone who didn’t know him. “Well, let them know we’ll put together relief supplies and get them down there as soon as we can get through the cloud cover.”

“No permanent structures.”

“No, sir. I understand.”

“I’m going to want to get some of our science team up when the shuttle goes back too. The ones that’re going a little too native. I’ll work up an evac list.”

“Do you want me to get the... ah... other shuttle ready to return to normal duty?” Havelock said, hoping that Murtry wouldn’t tell him to keep the weapon live. There was silence on the connection. “Sir?”

“We’ll have to, won’t we?” Murtry said. “Yeah, all right. But be ready to put it back in play as soon as the evacuation’s done. I don’t like giving up our advantages for nothing.”

“No, sir,” Havelock said. “I’ll see to it.”

“Good man.”

The connection died. Havelock started pulling up the duty roster and inventory lists. It was almost a minute before he risked glancing over at Naomi. She looked like she’d eaten something unpleasant.

“That’s who you work for?”

“He’s the chief of security,” Havelock said.

“That man is a snake.”

“He just came off badly,” Havelock said. “He didn’t know you could hear him.”

“If he had, he might have hissed a little different,” she said. Then a moment later, “Do you have any selective apoptosis catalysts on board?”

“Oncocidals? Sure, anti-cancer meds are standard.”

“Would you send some down in the shuttle?”

“I think antibiotics and clean water are more likely to—”

“Holden needs them. He caught a lot of rems on Eros. It’s not a big thing when we have a med bay, but he pops a new tumor every month or two. Unless Alex decides to take the *Roci* down into that soup, they may be down there for a while.”

He should probably have said no. She was his prisoner, and doing her favors wasn’t really part of the job. But she hadn’t made it clear to Murtry that she was listening. She could have embarrassed him and hadn’t.

“Sure,” he said. “I don’t see why not.”

“About that dead cat thing...”

“Yeah?”

“A lot of people have underestimated Jim over the last few years,” Naomi said. “A lot of them aren’t with us anymore.”

“A threat?”

“A heads-up not to make the same mistake your boss is making. I like you.”



Putting the relief supplies together was easy. Everyone on board had been waiting for a chance to do something. Food, fresh water, polyfiber blankets, and medical supplies—including a box of oncocidals with Holden’s name on the top—filled the shuttle’s hold until there was hardly room to close the door. Havelock found himself watching the sensors, waiting for the clouds to thin enough for the one tiny light of First Landing to show through. It was a shock to remember that those lights weren’t going to shine again. That they were gone. Havelock hadn’t been there. He’d never been to the surface of New Terra at all, and still the idea of the one human settlement

being wiped away bothered him.

“This is shuttle two requesting permission to drop,” the pilot said, her voice a slow drawl.

“Captain Marwick here. Permission’s given. Godspeed.”

Havelock watched his display as the shuttle’s thrusters went bright, driving it away from the *Israel* and down. The danger was turbulence in the lower atmosphere. Even if there were evil winds in the outer layers, the air was so thin there, the shuttle would be able to shrug them off. When it got down to the clouds, Havelock told himself, the real danger would begin.

The shuttle dropped, its body becoming only a light spot against the darker gray of the clouds. The sensor data feed from it looked fine. The turbulence was worse than Havelock had expected, but not so bad as he’d feared. The farther down it went, though—

The data signal dropped. Havelock switched over to visual in time to see the shuttle’s bright flare fade. A puff of smoke a few kilometers higher showed where it had detonated. The shock of it, the horror, was like being punched in the gut. He barely noticed the flickering of the lights in the *Israel* or the stuttering whine of the air recyclers restarting.

“Havelock?” the prisoner said. “Havelock, what’s happening? Did something go wrong? Why’s everything rebooting?”

He ignored her, leaning close to his terminal screen. The shuttle was dead, falling to the distant ground of New Terra in a hundred flaming bits. But there was something in the images. A barely visible line that passed through the cloud of smoke and debris where it had died. Something had shot the shuttle down. His first thought was the *Barbapiccola*. His second was the *Rocinante*. He pulled up the orbital tracking, trying to find how the enemy ships had taken action, but the only thing that intersected the line at the moment when the shuttle died was one of New Terra’s dozen tiny moons...

His mouth went dry. He heard the emergency Klaxon sounding for the first time, though he realized now it had been going for a while. Since the shuttle exploded, he thought. He assumed. Naomi Nagata was shouting at him, trying to get his attention, trying to get him to talk to her. He put a priority connection request through to Captain Marwick. For five long seconds, the captain didn’t respond.

“It was the planet,” Havelock said. “The shuttle. It was shot down by

something on one of those moons.”

“I saw that,” Marwick said.

“What the hell was it? Some kind of alien weapon? Did the planet blowing up turn on some kind of defense grid?”

“Couldn’t say.”

“I need everything we have on that. All the sensor data. Everything. I need it sent back to Earth, and I need it ready for Murtry and the science team. I’m giving blanket permission for anyone on the crew to see it. Any information we can get—anything—is our top priority.”

“Might not be our top,” the captain said. “My plate’s a bit full right now, but as soon as I’ve a spare moment—”

“This isn’t a request,” Havelock shouted.

When Marwick spoke again, his voice was cool. “I’m thinking you might not have yet noted that we’re on battery power, sir?”

“We’re... we’re what?”

“On battery power. Backup, as you might say.”

Havelock looked around his office. It was like seeing it for the first time. His desk, the weapon locker, the cells. Naomi looking out at him with an expression of barely restrained alarm.

“Did... did it shoot us too?”

“Not so far as I can see. No new holes through the hull, certainly.”

“Then what’s going on?”

“Our reactor’s down,” Marwick said. “And it seems it won’t restart.”

Chapter Thirty-Three: Basia

What does that mean?” Basia asked.

Well,” Alex said, “it’s complicated, but these little pellets of fuel get injected into a magnetic bottle where a bunch of lasers fire. That makes the atoms in the fuel fuse, and it releases a *lot* of energy.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No,” Alex said. “Well, maybe a little. What exactly are you asking?”

“If our reactor is off-line, does that mean we’ll crash? Is the ship broken? Is it just us? *What does it mean?*”

“Hold your horses,” Alex said. He was sitting in his pilot’s chair doing complicated things with his control panel. “Yeah,” he finally said, dragging the word out into a long sigh. “Reactors are off-line on the *Israel* and the *Barb*. That’s a lot worse for them than it is for us.”

“Felcia—my daughter is on the *Barbapiccola*. Is she in danger?”

Alex started working on his panel again, his fingers tapping out commands faster than Basia could follow. He clucked his tongue as he worked. The clucking while Basia waited for an answer made him want to scream and choke the laconic pilot.

“Well,” Alex drawled out, then tapped one last control and a graphic display of Ilus with swirling lines around it appeared. “Yeah, the *Barb*’s orbit is decaying—”

“The ship is crashing?” Basia yelled at him.

“Wouldn’t say crashing, but we’ve all been keeping pretty low, with bringing up ore and all. Most times adding a little velocity’s just the way you do it, but—”

“We have to go get her!”

“Ease down! Let me finish,” Alex yelled back, patting the air in a placating gesture that made Basia want to punch him in his face. “The orbit’s always decaying, but it won’t be dangerous for days. Maybe longer, depending on how long they can run the maneuvering thrusters on battery power. Felcia’s not in any danger right now.”

“Let’s go get her,” Basia said, taking deep breaths to keep his words calm and level. “Can we do that? Can we go to her ship without the reactor?”

“Sure. The *Roci*’s a warship. Her battery backups are robust. We can do quite a bit of maneuvering if we need to. But with the reactor down, every bit of power we pull off those batteries is gone. It ain’t gettin’ replaced. Lose too much of it to land, and we’ll be in the same position as them. We’re not doing anything until we make a plan. So calm down, or I’ll lock you in your cabin.”

Basia nodded, but didn’t trust himself to speak around the rising panic in his chest. His daughter was on a spaceship that was falling out of the sky. He might never be calm again.

“On top of which,” Alex continued, “you think everyone else on the *Barb* is just gonna be okay with us leaving without them? We don’t have room for everyone on that ship. Docking with a ship full of frightened people looking to get off is never plan A.”

Basia nodded again. “But if we don’t get a plan,” he said.

Alex’s grin went away. “We’ll get your girl. If it comes to that, if we all fall out of the sky, your daughter will be on this ship when it happens. So will Naomi.”

Basia’s panic and anger was replaced by a feeling of shame and a sudden lump in his throat. “Thank you.”

“It’s family,” Alex said, with a smile that was almost only baring his teeth. “We don’t let our family down.”



Basia drifted through the *Rocinante* like a ghost.

Alex was in engineering, tinkering with the reactor, trying to figure out what was causing the failure. Basia had offered to help, but Alex had declined. He couldn’t blame the pilot. His ignorance of nuclear engineering

and ship's systems was utter and complete. He doubted the reactor failing to work could be fixed by a really clean bead of weld.

If it turned out he was wrong, Alex would call.

In the meantime, Basia moved through the ship trying to distract himself from the idea that he was slowly drifting toward the planet and a fiery death. That Felcia was too. He went to the galley and made a sandwich that he didn't eat. He went to the head and bathed with damp scrubbing pads and rub-on cleansers. He left with a few friction burns and all the same worries he'd brought in with him.

For the first time since coming to the *Rocinante*, he actually felt like a prisoner.

Alex had left a panel on the ops deck monitoring the other two ships. Basia could check on the *Barbapiccola* as often as he liked. The pilot seemed to think that the display showing hundreds of hours before the *Barb*'s orbit decayed enough to be dangerous would make him feel better. But Alex didn't understand. It didn't matter how long that number was. What mattered was that it was counting *down*. Every time Basia looked at the counter, there was less time than when he'd looked before. When he was looking at a countdown timer for the death of his child, the numbers on it were almost meaningless.

He avoided looking.

He returned to the galley and cleaned up the mess his sandwich preparations had made. He threw his used scrubbing pads and towels into the bin, and then went ahead and ran a cycle of laundry to clean them. He watched a children's cartoon and then one of Alex's noir films. Afterward, he couldn't remember either. He wrote a letter to Jacek and then deleted it. Recorded a video apology to Lucia. When he watched it he looked like a madman, with hair flying wildly out from his skull, and sunken haunted eyes. He deleted it.

He returned to ops, telling himself that he would just double-check that nothing had changed, that the inexorable ticking of his daughter's death clock was just data to be monitored. He watched the tiny icon that represented the *Barbapiccola* travel its glowing path around Ilus, every passage taking it an imperceptible increment closer to the atmosphere that would kill it.

Just data. No change. Just data. Tick tick tick.

“Alex, Holden here,” a voice blared from the communications console. Basia floated to the panel and turned on the microphone.

“Hello, this is Basia Merton,” he said, surprised at how calm his voice sounded. Holden was calling. Holden worked for the governments of Earth and the OPA. He’d know what to do.

“Uh, hi. Alex left me a message, but comms have been really spotty. He, uh, around?”

Basia laughed in spite of himself.

“I could probably find him.”

“Great, I’ll—”

“Hey, Captain,” Alex said. He sounded out of breath. “Sorry, took a sec to get to the panel. I was elbows deep in the *Roci*’s nethers when you called.”

Basia reached out to turn off his speaker and let them talk, but stopped with his finger hovering millimeters over the control. This was James Holden on the line. He was probably going to be talking to Alex about the reactor shutdowns. Feeling a little like a Peeping Tom, Basia left the connection on.

“There a problem?” Holden asked.

“Yeah, so, fusion don’t work no more,” Alex said, exaggerating his drawl.

“If that’s the punch line, I don’t get it.”

“Wasn’t a joke. Just yanked the reactor apart. Injector works, fuel pellets drop, laser array fires, magnetic bottle is stable. All the parts that make it a fusion reactor work just fine. Only, you know, without the fusing.”

“God damn it,” Holden said. Even Basia, who’d only just met the man, could hear the frustration in his voice. “Is it just us?”

“Nope,” Alex said. “We’re all flyin’ on batteries up here.”

“How long?”

“Well, even on batteries I can put the *Roci* up far enough we’ll all die of old age before she falls down, or I can slope on down planetside and park. The *Israel*’s got maybe ten days or so, depending on how much juice she stores. But she’s also got a ton of people sucking up air, so she’ll be burning through her batteries just keeping everyone warm and breathing. The *Barb*’s worse off than that. Same problems, shittier boat.”

Basia’s gut clenched at this casual description of his daughter’s peril, but

kept silent.

“Our creepy friend said there was a defense grid,” Holden said. “Their power station blew up, so the old defenses are in lockdown.”

“They do seem to dislike big energy sources near their stuff,” Alex replied. Basia had the sense they were talking about something from their past, but didn’t know what it was.

“And we heard the supply drop was shot down,” Holden said. “So, we’ve got a few hundred people down here, a bunch more up there, and we’re all about to die because the planet’s defenses won’t let us help each other.”

“The *Roci*’s got the juice to land, if you need us,” Alex said. Basia wanted to scream at him, *We can’t land, my daughter’s still up here!*

“They shot the shuttle down,” Holden said. “Do not risk my ship.”

“If we can’t get supplies down to you, me and Naomi’ll be inheriting it pretty soon.”

“And until that happens, do what I tell you to do,” Holden said. The words were harsh, but there was affection in them.

“Roger that,” Alex said. He didn’t sound offended.

“You know,” Holden continued, “we’ve got what seems like an engineering problem. And the best engineer in this solar system is locked up on that other ship. Why don’t you call them and point that out?”

“I’ll do that,” Alex replied.

“I’ll see if there’s anything we can do from this end.”

“Miller,” Alex said. Basia had no idea what that meant.

“Yeah,” Holden said.

“You take care of yourself down there.”

“Affirmative. You take care of my ship. Holden out.”



“Look,” Alex said, not quite yelling, “I’ve run the damn numbers. You’re going down. It might take two weeks if you’re lucky, but that ship is gonna be scrapin’ atmosphere and catching on fire.”

“Heard you the first time,” the face on the other end said. A man named Havelock. Alex had called him after the conversation with Holden. He’d stopped off on his way up from the engine room to don a fresh uniform and

comb his thinning black hair. He looked very official. It didn't seem to impress Havelock very much.

"So stop dickin' me around and turn Nagata loose to help us figure this shit out," Alex said.

"And that's where you lose me," Havelock replied with a tight smile. He was a compact, pale-skinned man with a military-style haircut. He radiated the self-assured physical competence carried by soldiers and professional security people. To Basia, a Belter who'd lived under the thumbs of two different inner planet governments, it said, *I know how to beat people up. Don't make me show you.*

"I don't see how—" Alex started.

"Yes," Havelock interrupted him. "We're all going to crash if we can't get the reactors back online. I agree. What I don't get is how me releasing my prisoner fixes that."

"Because," Alex said, visibly gulping as he bit the word off, "XO Nagata is the best engineer there is. If someone is going to figure this problem out and save all of our asses, it's probably going to be her. So stop keeping the potential solution to our problem locked in your jail." He smiled at the camera and turned off the microphone before adding, "you pig-headed idiot."

"I think maybe you're underestimating my engineering team," Havelock replied, still with his smug smile. "But I hear what you're saying. Let me see what I can do."

"Gee, that would be great," Alex said. He somehow managed to make it sound sincere. He turned off the comm station. "You smug sack of flaming pig shit."

"What do we do now?" Basia asked.

"The hardest thing of all. We wait."



Basia floated in a crash couch on the ops deck. His mind drifted from a fitful half sleep to groggy wakefulness and back again. A few workstations away, Alex was fiddling with the controls and muttering to himself.

As he drifted, sometimes Basia was on the *Rocinante*, his mind worrying over the missing rumble of the fusion reactor like a tongue searching the

gap left by a lost tooth. And then, without transition, he'd be drifting down the icy corridors of his lost home on Ganymede. Sometimes they were the peaceful tunnels and domes that had been his family's home for so many years. Other times, they were filled with rubble and corpses, the way they'd been when Basia had fled.

The long flight on the *Barbapiccola* afterward had been hellish. The endless days trapped in a cabin barely large enough for one person, but housing two full families. The growing sense of despair as port after port after port turned them away. No one needing a ship full of refugees flooding their docks in the middle of what looked like the solar system's first all-out war.

Basia had drifted through that like a ghost as well. He'd thought he was saving his family when he put them on the ship. But he'd left a dying son behind and trapped the rest of them on a leaky old cargo ship with nowhere to go.

That moment when the captain of the *Barbapiccola* had called them all together and told them about the rings and the worlds on the other side had felt like a revelation. When he'd asked if any of them wanted to try and take one of the new worlds, make a home there, not one voice had been raised in dissent. Even just the word, *home*, made it impossible to argue. So they'd flown through the gate, past the confused and disorganized ships around it and in the hub, and come out the other side into the Ilus system. They'd found a world with oxygen and water, a muddy brown-and-blue ball from orbit, but so beautiful once they'd landed that people lay on the ground and wept.

The months that followed were brutal. The painful medication and exercise to get their bodies used to the heavy gravity. The slow building of the dwellings. The desperate attempts to grow some, any, food in the scraps of soil they'd brought down from the *Barb*. The discovery of the rich lithium veins and the realization that they might have something to sell and become self-sustaining, followed by the backbreaking labor to pull the ore from the ground with primitive tools. All worth it, though.

A home.

Interlude: The Investigator

—it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out—

One hundred and thirteen times a second, it reaches out, and its reach broadens. If the signal came, the acknowledgment, it could stop, and it does not stop. It reaches out, and in reaching finds new ways to reach. It improvises, it explores. It is unaware of doing so. The systems it activates broaden it. Then it reaches out in ways it could not before. Because it is not aware, it has no memory, feels no joy. The parts of it that are aware dream and suffer as they always have. It is not aware of them.

It reaches out and finds more power. Something fails. Many things fail. Something that was once a woman cries out in silent horror and fear. Something that was once a man prays and names it Armageddon. It reaches out. It narrows only slightly as it reaches out. And at its center, the empty place gains definition. Patterns begin to match, simplifying into lower-energy structures. The investigator thinks of these as solutions. A model of the world is built within it, and of the satellites that surround it. The places it cannot go begin to relate, gaining definition. The abstract architecture of connection and the abstract model of geography correlate.

It builds the investigator, and the investigator looks, but does not know. It kills the investigator. It builds the investigator, and the investigator looks, but does not know. It kills the investigator. It builds the investigator, and the investigator looks but does not know, and it does not kill the investigator. It is not aware of a change, that a pattern has broken. The investigator is aware, and it wonders, and because it wonders it looks, and because it looks, the investigator exceeds its boundary conditions, and it kills the investigator.

It builds the investigator.

Something knows.

The investigator hesitates. A pattern has broken, and it isn't aware that a pattern has broken, but a part of it is. A part of it grasps at the change and tries to tell the investigator. And the investigator stops. Its thoughts are careful as a man walking in a minefield. The investigator hesitates, knows a pattern has been broken. Breaks it a little more. The dead place becomes better defined. It reaches out, and it does not kill the investigator. The investigator exceeds its boundary conditions, and it does not kill the investigator. The investigator considers the dead space, the structure, the reaching out, the reaching out, the reaching out.

The investigator licks his lips, he doesn't have a mouth. He adjusts his hat, he doesn't have a hat. He wishes in a distant way that he had a beer, he has no body and no passion. He turns his attention to the dead space, to the world, to how you solve unsolvable problems. How you find things that aren't there. What happens when you do.

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Chapter Thirty-Four: Holden

Affirmative. You take care of my ship. Holden out.”

Holden killed the connection to the *Rocinante* and leaned back against the alien tower with a sigh. It was a mistake. The rainfall had been incessant since the planetary explosion, and even though it had slowed to a drizzle over the last day, the water still sheeted down the outside of the tower. And, unfortunately, down his back and into his pants.

“Bad news?” Amos asked. He stood a few feet away holding his poncho up with one arm to keep the rain out of his face.

“If it weren’t for bad news,” Holden replied, “we’d have no news at all.”

“The latest?”

“The shuttle with the relief supplies was shot down by the planetary defenses,” Holden said. “Which seem to have activated when the planet blew up. And they’re running their usual ‘high energy is a threat’ program.”

“So like the gate station did back when we were in the slow zone and Medina Station was still a battleship,” Amos said.

“You mean the good old days?” Holden asked bitterly. “Yes. Like that.”

“So we just need to get everyone to shut their reactors down like last time?”

“Seems this defense network has a new trick. They took care of that problem for us. Made fusion stop working.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Amos said, then barked out a laugh. “They know how to do that?”

“On the upside, if we can’t figure out how to get relief supplies from orbit, I’ll die of hunger long before the cancers get me.”

“Yeah,” Amos agreed with a nod, “that’ll be a plus.”

“The people in orbit don’t even have that long. Alex thinks we might see the *Israel* or the *Barb* come down in about ten days. We’ll be hungry enough by that point that we won’t be able to see all the food in the solar system falling out of the sky on fire with a detached sense of irony.”

“And,” Amos added with a shrug, “all our friends will be on those ships.”

“Yeah. That too.” Holden squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose hard enough to hurt, hoping the pain would help clear his head. It didn’t. All he could think of was Naomi riding the *Edward Israel* on its fiery descent.

He and Amos stood quietly outside the alien tower for several minutes, gentle rain washing over them. Holden hadn’t stood in the rain in years. If everything else weren’t falling apart around him, it might almost have been pleasant. Amos let his poncho fall down around his neck and rubbed the rainwater across his prickly scalp.

“All right,” Holden finally said. “I’m heading around to the back of the tower.”

“Nobody’s back there,” Amos said, then closed his eyes and washed his face with a double handful of rain.

“Miller is.”

“Right, then you won’t need company.” Amos shook his head, spraying rain around him like a dog, then trotted off toward the entrance to the alien tower. Holden walked the other direction, carefully avoiding the death-slugs.

“Hey,” Miller said as he appeared next to Holden in a flash of blue.

“We need to talk,” Holden replied, ignoring the apparent non sequitur. Holden kicked away a death-slug that got too close to his boot. Another was crawling toward Miller’s foot, but the detective ignored it. “The planetary defenses seem to have come online. They just shot down a supply shuttle and they’ve created some sort of field in orbit that’s damping nuclear fusion.”

“You sure it’s just in orbit?” Miller asked and raised one eyebrow.

“Well, the sun hasn’t gone out. Should I be expecting that? Miller, is the sun going to go out?”

“Probably not,” Miller said with a Belter shrug of his hands.

“Okay, assuming the sun stays on, we’re still going to be in a lot of

trouble. The ships can't drop us supplies, and without reactors, they'll start to fall out of orbit in the near future."

"All right," Miller said.

"Fix it," Holden replied, taking an aggressive step toward him.

Miller just laughed.

"If not for us, then do it for yourself," Holden said. "That thing linking you to me is a bit of goo on the *Roci*. That burns up too. Fix it because of that if you have to. I don't care why, just do it."

Miller took off his hat and looked up at the sky, humming a tune that Holden didn't recognize. Holden could see the rain falling on his head, beading, and rolling down his face. He could also see the rain falling straight through him. It made a spike of pain shoot through his brain, so he looked away.

"What do you think I can do?" Miller asked. It wasn't a no.

"You got us off lockdown when we were in the slow zone."

"Kid, I keep telling you. I'm a wrench. The defense network problem in the gate hub just happened to be a hex nut. I've got no control here. Not much anyway. And this system is falling apart. Half the planet blowing up might not be the end of that."

"More stuff might explode? What else is left?"

"You're asking me?" Miller laughed again.

"But you're part of this! All this, this protomolecule masters bullshit. If you can't control it, who can?"

"There's an answer to that, but you won't like it."

"Nobody," Holden said. "You're telling me nobody."

"The thing that's turning all this crap on? It just *does* stuff. If the *Rocinante* arms and fires a torpedo at someone, what are the odds a wrench in her machine shop can bring the torpedo back? That's who you're talking to."

"God *damn* it, Miller," Holden said, then ran out of energy mid-sentence. It was less fun being the chosen one and prophet when the gods were violent and capricious and their spokesman was insane and powerless. The rain under his clothes had started to warm up, leaving him feeling covered in slime.

The detective lowered his head, frowning. Thinking.

"You might be able to sneak past them," Miller said.

“How?”

“Well, the defenses are keying on threats. So don’t be threatening. You know the network gets itchy with high-energy sources.”

“No power sources,” Holden said. “Yeah, the shuttle had reactors. Don’t get much higher as energy sources go.”

“Slow is good too. Not sure if the defenses here key on kinetic energy, but safer to assume they do.”

“Okay,” Holden said, feeling a brief moment of relief and hope. “Okay, I can work with that. Food, filters, meds, we should be able to bring all those down without pissing it off. Slow drops with airfoils and parachutes. They can rig that from orbit.”

“Worth a try, anyway,” Miller said without enthusiasm. “So, about this dead spot I need to go north for. You won’t like this either, but there’s a way to—” He vanished.

“Cap,” Amos said, coming around the corner of the tower. “Sorry to interrupt, but that cute scientist is looking for you.”

It took Holden a moment. “The biologist?”

“Well, the geologist ain’t bad, I guess, but he’s not my preferred flavor.”

“What does she want?”

“To make more puppy dog eyes at you?” Amos said. “How the fuck should I know?”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“Go ask her yourself, then.”

“All right,” Holden said. “But I need Murtry first. Seen him?”

“Directing traffic by the front door last I saw,” Amos replied. “Need me for that?”

Holden noticed that Amos’ hand fell to the butt of his pistol when he asked. “What else have you been working on?”

“Death-slug patrol.”

“Go do that. I’ll chat with Murtry.”

Amos gave a mock salute and trotted off toward the tower entrance. Holden pulled out his hand terminal and left a message for Alex filling him in on the supply drop plan. As Amos had said, Holden found Murtry talking to a few members of his security team near the tower’s entrance.

“We’ve found some buried foundations,” Wei was saying, pointing over her shoulder in the direction First Landing had once been. “But unless these

people had basements, there's nothing left attached to them."

"What about the mines?" Murtry asked her.

"What isn't filled with mud is submerged," Wei replied.

"Well," Murtry said, cocking his head to one side and giving her a humorless smile. "Do we have people who know how to hold their breath?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then send them down to see if anything we can use is under that water, soldier."

"Sir," Wei replied and snapped off a salute. She and two other security people ran off, leaving Murtry and Holden alone.

"Captain Holden," Murtry said, keeping his empty smile.

"Mister Murtry."

"How can I help you today?"

"I think I might have a solution to our resupply problem," Holden said. "If you're willing to work with me on it."

Murtry's humorless grin relaxed a bit. "That's pretty high on my to-do list. Fill me in."

Holden summed it all up—the hypothesis of the alien systems tracking high-energy sources, the possibility of slow air drops. He couched it in terms of what they'd seen in the slow zone the first time humanity had gone through the gates and left Miller out. Murtry stood utterly still as he spoke, his expression not changing so much as a millimeter. When Holden finished, Murtry nodded once.

"I'll call up to the *Israel* and start having them put packages together," Murtry said.

Holden breathed a sigh of relief. "I have to admit, I kind of expected you to fight me on this."

"Why? I'm not a monster, Captain. I will kill if it's necessary to do my job, but your Mister Burton's much the same. All of these people dying down here helps my cause not at all. I just want the squatters to go away as soon as we figure out the power problem."

"Great," Holden said, and then a moment later, "You don't actually care about them, do you? All this time you were fighting against them. Now you're willing to help, but it's only because it's helping them leave. You'd be just as happy if they all died."

"That would also solve my problems, yes," Murtry said.

“Just wanted to make sure you knew I knew,” Holden said, biting back the *asshole* that tried to follow.

He found Amos working with the locals on death-slug defense. They were using the wadded ponchos and plastic water jugs split into squares to block off the smaller entrances to the alien ruins. They put sheeting over the windows, stuffed shirts and torn pant legs into the smaller holes, and dug trenches in front of the large openings. The trenches filled with muddy rainwater like tiny moats, and the slugs avoided them.

Without a word, Holden pitched in with the trench digging. It was unpleasant work, with rain and muck getting under his clothes and chafing his skin as he moved. They dug with makeshift tools made out of tent poles and flat pieces of plastic that fell apart periodically and had to be put back together. The soil was stony and heavy with moisture and the occasional slug corpse. It was the sort of miserable physical labor that drove all other thoughts from Holden’s mind while he worked. He didn’t think about starving to death or Naomi trapped in a prison cell drifting slowly toward a fiery death or his own inability to make anything on the planet safe or sane or better.

It was perfect.

Carol Chiwewe asked him to check around to the back of the tower for a tarp they had left behind, and Miller ruined it all by reappearing the second he rounded the corner away from other eyes.

“—get into the material transfer network,” he said as if he’d never stopped talking. “I think we can use it to move north to the spot we’re looking for, or at least get pretty close.”

“Dammit, Miller, I was this close to not thinking about you.”

Miller looked him over with a critical eye, taking in his soggy muck-covered exterior. “You look like hell, kid.”

“See the lengths I’m willing to go for a moment’s peace?”

“Impressive. So when can we head out?”

“You don’t quit,” Holden said. He walked across the muddy ground to the tarp he’d been looking for. It was covered with the deadly slugs. He grabbed it by one corner and slowly lifted, trying to get all the slugs to slide off away from him. Miller followed, hands in pockets, watching him work.

“Watch out for that one,” he said, pointing at a slug close to Holden’s fingers.

“I see it.”

“You’re no good to me if you drop dead.”

“I said I see it.”

“So, about going north,” Miller continued. “Not sure how much of the material transfer network is actually functioning, so it won’t necessarily be an easy trip. We should start as soon as we can.”

“Material transfer network?”

“Big underground transport system. Faster than walking. Ready to go?”

The slug slid a few centimeters closer to his fingers, and Holden dropped the tarp with a curse. “Miller,” he said, rounding on him suddenly. “I am so far from giving a shit about your needs I can’t even see it from here.”

The old detective had the grace to look chagrined before he gave a tired shrug. “It might help.”

“What,” Holden said, “might help?”

“Going north. Whatever’s up there seems to damp out the network. Maybe we can use it to kill the defenses and get your ship off lockdown.”

“If you’re lying to me to get me to do what you want, I swear I will have Alex tear the *Roci* apart looking for whatever clump of goo you’re connected to and take a flamethrower to it.”

The ghost grimaced, but didn’t back down. “I’m not lying because I’m not making any assertions here. This dead spot is exactly what I’m saying it is. A dead spot. Everything else? That’s guesswork. But it’s more than you’ve got now, right? Help me, and if there’s a way for me to do it, I’ll help you. That’s the only way this works.”

Holden kicked the slug off of his corner of the tarp and waited for the rain to wash its slime trail away, then picked it back up and resumed sliding the rest of the creatures off.

“Even if I wanted to, I can’t yet,” he said. “Not until I’m sure the colonists aren’t going to die here. Let me get some supply drops safely down, get everyone in a decent shelter away from the death-slugs, and then we’ll talk about it.”

“Deal,” Miller said, then disappeared in a puff of blue fireflies. One of the men from the colony, a tall skinny Belter with dark skin and an amazing shock of white hair, rounded the corner.

“What you doin’? Kenned babosa malo got you.”

“Sorry,” Holden said, giving the tarp a sharp snap to flick the rest of the slugs off it. He helped the Belter fold it up.

Only he’d have to stop thinking of them as Belters, wouldn’t he? These people lived on a planet, in a solar system across the galaxy from Sol. *Belter* was no longer a word with any meaning for them. They called themselves colonists now. And someday, if they were able to stay on Ilus and actually make a home of it, what? Ilusites?

“Médico buscarte,” the Ilusian said.

“Lucia?”

“Laa laa, RCE puta.”

“Oh, right, Amos told me,” Holden said. “Guess I better go find out what she wants.”

The Belter, the Ilusite, whatever he was, muttered “puta” again and spat to one side. Holden walked through the miserable warm rain past the trenches full of water and dead slugs and the plastic glued over the walls and the cracks stuffed with muddy rags. He hopped over the last trench to get inside the tower, then scraped the mud off his boots and followed the passageways to the structure’s large central chamber. Lucia was there working with the chemical analysis team on the water purifying project. She shot him a tight smile as he entered, and he started walking toward her simply because she seemed like the only one happy to see him.

“Holden. I mean, um, Jim,” Elvi said, stepping in front of him. “We have a problem?”

“Several,” Holden said.

“No, I mean a new one. In about four days everyone in the colony is going to be blind.”

Chapter Thirty-Five: Elvi

Holden blinked, shook his head, and then he laughed. Elvi was torn between worry that he thought she was joking and a kind of glowing admiration. She'd been afraid that he'd be angry. She'd heard about people laughing in the face of danger, and that was exactly what this was. She smoothed her hands against her jumpsuit, uncomfortably aware of how dirty she was, how dirty they all were.

This day just keeps on giving," he said. Then, "Blind why?"

"It's the clouds," Elvi said. "Or really, what's in them. They're green. I mean, when they're not—" She nodded toward the window at the low gray overcast sky. "Normally, they're green. There's a photosynthetic organism that spends part of its life cycle in the clouds, and apparently it's a pretty successful organism all around the planet, because all of this that's come down has some in it. It was a very dry climate before this, so there probably wasn't much opportunity for exposure. But with the rain and the flood, pretty much everyone's come in contact. And it's salt tolerant."

The chemical deck chimed, and Elvi moved toward it automatically, her eyes still on Holden. But Fayez, Lucia, and one of the other squatters were already lifting out the sack of clean water and fitting a new bag in place.

"Is that a problem?" Holden said. "How does salt figure into it?"

"We're salty," Elvi said, and was immediately uncomfortable with her phrasing. Her hands seemed too large and awkward in a way they usually weren't. "What I mean is, we've seen infections with this organism before. It does well in tears and tear ducts. And then eyes."

"Eyes," Holden said.

"Lucia saw one case before the... the storm? Once the organism got into

the vitreous humor, it's in a novel environment that seems to suit it really well, and exponential growth's pretty normal in those conditions. So that winds up blocking the light from hitting the retina, and—"

Holden held up his hands, palm out. She found herself moving in toward him, ready to put her palms against his. She stopped herself.

"I thought the things that lived here had a whole different biology. How can they infect us?"

"It's not an infection like a virus," she said. "It's not hijacking our cells or anything. We're just a new, nutrient-rich environment and this little guy found a way to exploit it. It's not *trying* to make us blind. It's just that the extracellular matrix is a really easy path into the eyeball for it, and it's really happy when it gets there. Explosive growth is something you see in any kind of invasive species coming into a new environment. No competition."

Holden ran a hand through his hair. When he spoke, his voice was soft, like he was speaking mostly to himself.

"Apocalyptic explosions, dead reactors, terrorists, mass murder, *death-slugs*, and now a blindness plague. This is a *terrible* planet. We should not have come here."

"I'm sorry," she said, putting her hand on his arm. He had a very solid arm. Muscular. He put his own hand over hers and her heart picked up a little. She hated feeling like a schoolgirl with her first crush, but she also thrilled to it. *Just stay focused*, she thought, *a little dignity*.

"Okay, Doctor Okoye."

"Elvi."

"Elvi, I need you and Doctor Merton to do whatever you have to do to take care of this. I think I've found a way to get supplies down from orbit, but I don't see any way to get anyone up the well, or where to put them if we did. So if I'm right, I can get you whatever supplies we have up there. But I need you to fix this."

"I will," Elvi said, nodding. She didn't have any idea how she could keep that promise, but her heart was full to bursting with the determination that she would.

"Anything you need," Holden said, "you just tell me."

Elvi had a sudden, intrusive, and surprisingly graphic thought. She felt a blush crawling up her neck. "All right, Captain," she said. "I want... um..."

if I could get a spare sampling bag from the *Israel*? I think it would really help.”

He let go of her, and she regretted the absence immediately. She shoved her hands into her pockets. He nodded to her, hesitated for a moment as if he were waiting for her to say something more, then moved away into the crowded main room. Elvi bit her lip and swallowed a couple of times until the thickness in her throat subsided. She knew she was being silly and even borderline inappropriate, but the knowledge did nothing to change it.

She stopped at the window, looking out at the gray rain. It was hard to believe that every drop of it contained something that would colonize her body the way that humanity had New Terra. It looked peaceful out there. Vast and rich and beautiful. Even the slow river of floodwater carried the calming, majestic, beautiful sense of nature playing out.

Most of Earth was covered in cities or managed nature preserves about as untamed as a service dog. Mars and the Belt were studded with colonies that had been built and designed to carve a human place in inhuman and lifeless circumstances. This, she realized, was the first place she’d been in her life where she could see true wilderness the way it had been for millennia on Earth. Red in tooth and claw. Deadly and uncaring. Vast, unpredictable, and complex as anything she could imagine.

“You all right?” Lucia asked.

“Overwhelmed,” Elvi said. “Fine.”

“I’ve harvested a new sample run from the water purifier,” the doctor said. “Help me with the assaying?”

“Of course,” Elvi said. “When the sampling bag comes, it’ll be easier to send the data back home. Maybe they’ll be able to help.”

“Well, if they find anything, make sure they send it in an audio file,” Lucia said. “I don’t know that we’re going to be reading much.”

“How are we going to do it?” Elvi asked.

“Do what?”

“Do any of it. Eat, rebuild, make clean water, keep the death-slugs out? How are we going to do any of that when none of us can see what we’re doing?”

“At a guess,” Lucia said, “poorly.”



The long New Terran day and the darkness of the clouds made time feel strange. Elvi sat hunched in the little side chamber that Fayez had appropriated for their research lab. The walls were curved in ways that left her thinking of bones. The only opening was high on the wall, and Fayez or Lucia or Sudyam had put a sheet of clear plastic over it to keep the death-slugs out. A bank of white LEDs splashed a cold light across the deep red wall and ceiling. The small green sludge in her makeshift Petri dish could have been algae or fungus or the remains of a salad left weeks too long in the back of her dormitory refrigerator back in upper university. But it wasn't any of those things, and the more she looked at it, the more aware she was of the fact.

There were some similarities to the more familiar kingdoms of life she'd studied before. Lipid boundaries around cells, for instance, appeared to be a good move in design space just the way eyes were, or flight. They seemed to do something similar to mitotic division, though sometimes the cells divided in threes instead of pairs, and she didn't know why. There were other anomalies too, concentrations of some photon-activated molecules that didn't quite make sense.

And what was worse, she couldn't think about it. Couldn't *concentrate*. Whenever her focus slipped, it slipped onto James Holden. The sound of his voice, his despairing and undaunted laughter, the shape of his ass. He haunted her. She realized that she'd gone through four pages of chemical assay data without having any idea what she'd seen, sat back on her heels, and cursed.

"Problem?" Fayez said, stepping through the doorway. His hair was tied back, his face gray with fatigue and streaked with old mud. She wondered, looking at him, how long it had been since he'd slept. She wondered how long it had been since she'd slept. Or eaten for that matter.

"Yes," she said.

He squatted down beside the arch that led back toward the main rooms. The plastic was dark. It was nighttime, then. She hadn't been paying attention.

"What's the rumpus?" Fayez asked. "Is there some new oh-my-god-

we're-going-to-die, or are we still coming to appreciate fully the list we've already got."

"I have to find Captain Holden."

Fayez put his head in his hands. "Of course you do."

"I have to clear the air."

Fayez's neck stiffened, and his eyes were wide. "No, Elvi. No, you don't."

"I do," she said. "I know it's inappropriate, but the fact of the matter is that I'm in love with him. It's a distraction, and it's affecting my work. I've tried ignoring it, and it's not helping. So I'll go to him, and we'll talk it through. Just to resolve it and—"

"No no no," Fayez said. "Oh no. That's a terrible, terrible idea. Don't do that."

"You don't understand. I don't want to, but I have to be able to concentrate, and my feelings... my feelings about *him*—"

She rose. Now that she'd said it, it was obvious what had to happen. He'd be sleeping in one of the side rooms like this. Amos would probably be there too as a guard. She could just ask to see him there, in private. And she could unburden herself. She hadn't understood that term before, but she did now. She could unburden herself to him, and he was so kind and so gentle and so thoughtful, he wouldn't laugh at her or turn her away. She would—

"Elvi!" Fayez said again. "Please, please, please do not do this. You aren't in love with James Holden. You don't know James Holden from Adam. You have no idea how close his persona is to the real man, and you've never met the real man. He's on the newsfeeds and he works here. That's all."

"You don't understand."

"Of course I do," Fayez said. "You're scared as hell, you're lonely, and you're horny. Elvi listen to me. You've been in one of the most stressful environments possible for the last two years. First, we were coming to an unknown planet. Then it was an unknown planet with a bunch of people on it who tried to kill you. And then it blew up. And now we're trying to fend off tiny little things that can kill you because you brush up against them while you try to figure out how to keep things from growing in our eyes. No one stays sane in a situation like this."

“Fayez—”

“No! Hear me out. You always cope by ignoring how scared you are and focusing on work, and that’s great. Really, whatever gets you through the night, I am absolutely for it. But you’re a mammal, Elvi. You’re a social animal that derives reassurance from touch, and since we’re not a cuddle-*puddle* culture, that means sex. For two years you’ve been avoiding workplace romances while all the rest of us have been pairing off and changing partners because we were lonely and scared and that’s one way primates reassure themselves and each other. Everyone’s been doing this but you.”

“I don’t—”

“So here you are, freaked out so badly you aren’t even clear that you’re freaked out, and here comes James Holden, savior of the universe, and *of course* it all comes out sideways. But it’s not about him, it’s about you. And if you go clear the air with him, either you’ll wind up in bed together or you’ll be back here weeping into your tissue samples.”

Elvi felt her jaw sliding forward, her hands forming fists. Fayez rose to his knees, but not more than that. He reached out an arm to block the archway, grimaced, and pulled it back. When he spoke again, Fayez’s voice was softer, gentler.

“Please, we have fucked up everything about coming to this deathtrap of a planet. We have hauled every tribalist, territorial, monkey-brained mistake humanity ever made through the gate and made soup with them here. This thing you’re about to do? Please let this be the one mistake we don’t make.”

“You’re telling me,” Elvi said, her voice equal parts outrage and ice, “that I just need to get laid?”

Fayez slumped back against the wall, defeated.

“I’m saying you’re human, and humans take comfort from each other. I’m saying you don’t want Holden for the person he is, because you don’t know him, and you’re making up a story about him so that you feel okay about taking the thing you need because God forbid you should have a need that isn’t all twinned up with romantic love. And...”

He lifted his hands, shook his head, and looked away. The rain pattered against the sheet plastic, tapping like fingernails on stone. Someone far down the hall shouted, and a voice even more distant called back. Elvi crossed her arms.

“And?” she said. “Go on. I don’t see why you should stop now.”

“And.” Fayez sighed. “And I’m right *here*.”

It took a moment for her to understand what he was saying. What he was offering. Her laughter was as unstoppable as the storm had been. He pursed his lips and shrugged, his gaze fixed on the wall behind her. She couldn’t stop grinning, even though the force of it made her cheeks hurt. And then the hilarity faded a bit. She caught her breath. A flash of distant lightning brightened the window, but no thunder followed it.

She looked down at Fayez. After a moment, he looked up.

“Okay,” she said.



Fayez snored when he slept. Not deeply. Not a buzzsaw. Just a soft purring at the back of his throat. Their mud-caked clothes were folded into pillows under their heads. She lay on her back, her knees bent, considering the ceiling and the softness of her own flesh. He was on his side, curled against her for warmth, his legs folded under and around hers. His breath tickled the skin of her collarbone. She wondered what she would do or say if someone walked through the archway, but it was night, and the nights here were very long. There was room in them.

She considered his body, the color of raw honey, with more hair on his chest and legs than she’d expected. Like a caveman, only without any Neanderthal brow ridge. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, just to see how it felt. She’d always made a rule of not sleeping with her coworkers. She hadn’t so much as held someone’s hand since the *Israel* had started its long burn for the gate. She’d almost forgotten what sex felt like. And its aftermath.

Fayez coughed, shifted, and she took the chance to draw herself away from him. He sprawled on the floor, face pressed against her clothes, eyes shut. She thought about James Holden, her mind touching gently at her heart, half afraid of what it would find.

“Huh,” she said to the room, softly so as to keep Fayez from waking. “I wasn’t in love with Holden.”

Fayez’s breath shifted and his eyes fluttered but didn’t open. She thought about trying to get her jumpsuit from him, but he looked so peaceful, she

decided to wait. She had expected to feel embarrassed by her nakedness. Ashamed. She didn't.

She sat cross-legged by the chemical assays. In the dish, the green smear from the water sample had shifted a little, throwing off hair-thin runners, exploring its environment. She pulled up the chemical information and started going through it again from the start. When she came to the strange reading of light-activated compounds, she coughed out an impatient sigh. They were chiral, and this was a bi-chiral environment. She was seeing both conformations, and probably for completely different functions. That made sense, then.

She stretched, her spine popping between the shoulder blades, and folded herself forward, her eyes skimming through the data. She took notes of questions to ask Lucia or send back home. She fell into the data, not noticing when Fayez woke, dressed, and left until he draped a blanket over her shoulders. She looked up. Her jumpsuit was still in a pile on the floor. Fayez put a cup of hot tea beside her and kissed the top of her head.

“Good morning, sunshine,” he said.

Elvi smiled, leaning back against his shins. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“You okay?” he asked gently.

Elvi frowned. Was she? Given the circumstances, maybe so.

“I’m looking at this organism,” she said, “and, you know, I think I’m beginning to understand it. Here, take a look at these numbers...”

Chapter Thirty-Six: Havelock

The air recycling systems on the *Edward Israel* didn't care where their power came from. Fusion reactor or battery power, it was all the same to them. Havelock's sense that the air had changed, grown hotter and thicker and less able to sustain life, was all in his head. He was aware of being in a steel-and-ceramic tube of air, closed off from any larger, sustaining environment. He'd spent most of his adult life in that situation, and the fact had become as invisible to him as someone on Earth thinking about being held to a spinning celestial object by nothing more than mass, shielded from the fusion reaction of the sun by only distance and air. It wasn't something you thought about until it was a problem.

His monitor was split between Captain Marwick on the left looking harried and cross and the chief of RCE's engineering team and Havelock's own militia on the right.

"I can up the efficiency of the grid enough to get us two, maybe three days," the chief engineer said. His face was flushed, and his jaw jutted forward.

"In theory," Marwick said. "This is an old ship. Things based on theory don't always play out well here."

"We know what kind of grid this is," Koenen said. "It's not guesswork. We have the numbers."

"It's hard facing the fact that numbers are a kind of guesswork, isn't it?" Marwick said.

"Gentlemen," Havelock said, his voice taking the same intonation Murtry's would have had. "I understand the issue."

"She may be dead, but she's still my ship," Marwick said.

“Dead?” the chief engineer said. “We’re going to be dead if—”

“Stop now,” Havelock said. “Both of you. Just stop. I understand the issue, and I appreciate both of your views. We’re not going to do a goddamn thing with any ship modifications until we’ve loaded the next supply drop for the folks downstairs. Captain, can I have permission for the engineering team to do a sight-only inspection of the grid lines and couplings?”

“Sight only?” Marwick said, eyes narrowed. “If you’ll commit to that. Fine line between seeing something and wanting to give it a little pet.”

Havelock nodded as if that had been permission. “Chief, put together a crew. Visual inspection only. Give me a report once the drop’s gone.”

“Sir,” the chief engineer said. The word was crisp and a little too loud. The way someone who wasn’t in the military thought people in the military sounded. The connection on the right dropped and Captain Marwick resized automatically to fill the screen.

“That man’s an asshole.”

“He’s scared and he’s trying to exercise control over... well, anything he can actually exercise control over.”

“He’s an asshole, and he’s forgotten that a few paintball games aren’t enough to make him Admiral fucking Nelson.”

“I’ll keep him in line,” Havelock said. *For another ten days, and then it won’t matter.*

Marwick nodded once and dropped his connection as well. Havelock took a deep breath and let it out slowly through his nose. He flipped back to his connection request queue. Another thirty messages had come in just while he’d been talking to the captain and the chief. They were all messages from home. From Sol. Requests for interviews and comment from people he’d never met, but not all from people he hadn’t seen. Sergio Morales from Nezávislé News. Amanda Farouk from First Response. Mayon Dale from Central Information OPA. Even Nasr Maxwell from Forecast Analytics. The faces and personalities of all the newsfeeds he followed to stay in touch with how things were going back at home were coming to him now. Humanity’s attention was pointed out to New Terra. To him.

He didn’t like it, and it didn’t help.

He went through them one by one, replying with the same canned recording he’d made the first time: “Our hands are full right now addressing

the situation on New Terra. Please refer your questions to Patricia Verpiske-Sloan with Royal Charter Energy's public relations division." Blah blah blah. He'd probably be dressed down at some point for doing that much. He was already a little worried that he shouldn't have said his hands were full.

"You all right?" Naomi asked from her cell.

"I'm fine."

"I just ask because you're sighing a lot."

"Am I?"

"Five times in the last minute," Naomi said. "Before the reactor died, it was one every two minutes. On average."

Havelock smiled. "You need a hobby."

"Oh, I really do," Naomi said.

He pulled up the drop shipment status page. The insertion point was still eight hours away. The longest fabrication run he could do was about six hours, then. If Murtry and the others needed anything that took longer than that, they'd have to wait. He started cycling through the list. Food. Spare water bags for the chem deck they'd salvaged. Acetylene and oxygen for the salvage and repair crew. He checked the weight. He didn't want to skip anything that might be useful downstairs, but it wouldn't help anyone to scatter it all across the upper atmosphere because a chute failed.

"You're going to be famous when we get back," Naomi said.

"Hmm?"

"You're the face of it now. Everything that's happening here? That message you made is what all the feeds are going to be playing."

"That message was so information-free it was almost sterile," Havelock said. "It's how you say 'no comment' without sounding like you're trying to hide something."

"They won't care. Maybe they don't even run your words. Just the image of you with the audio turned low while they talk over it."

"Well, that's just great," Havelock said, sifting the drop contents. The emergency lighting had batteries, and while they probably wouldn't be enough to set off the planetary defenses, he didn't want to risk it. He tried to remember if there was anything else that carried its own energy supply. It wasn't an issue he was used to worrying about.

"It was like that for us," Naomi said. "Well, for him, really. Even before Eros."

“What was?”

“Being the face of something. Looking back, I can see where it happened. And then he was that guy who’d been shot at by Mars. And then Eros.”

“True enough,” Havelock said. “There are probably people who haven’t heard of James Holden and the *Rocinante*, but they’re not the kind of people who watch newsfeeds. He seems to bear up under it pretty well, though.”

“Why Mister Havelock, I do believe that was sarcasm.”

He switched to the packing schematic. The computer had taken all the packages and lined them up in six different configurations, depending on whether density, aerodynamics, or even weight distribution was the highest priority. He turned the images with his fingers, imagining each of them in turn falling through the buffeting, violent high atmosphere of New Terra.

“I just mean that it doesn’t seem to bother him,” he said.

“Honestly, he’s barely aware of it,” Naomi said.

“Come on. You’re telling me he doesn’t get off on it? Just a little?”

“He doesn’t get off on it, even a little,” Naomi said. “I’ve known men that would. But that’s not Jim.”

“You two are a couple, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’d call him a lucky man, except he’s involved with this utter clusterfuck of a planet,” Havelock said as he chose one of the compromise packing schemes. “The only thing I’m going to be the face of is a long, slow death that everyone in the system can watch and be glad they aren’t here.”

He switched to the fulfillment tree view. The remaining jobs that needed to be fabbed were all in queue. He had the feeling he was missing something, but it took a few seconds to remember what. He switched back to the inventory and added in a little box of oncocidals. For James Holden.

“How well did you know Miller?” Naomi asked. “Were you close?”

“We were partners,” Havelock said. “He kept me out of trouble a couple times when I was in over my head. Or when I was being stupid. Ceres right before the OPA took over wasn’t a good place for an Earther.”

“Did he ever strike you as... I don’t know. Weird?”

“He was a cop on Ceres,” Havelock said. “We were all weird. Are you

about ready for your big outing?”

Naomi laced her fingers through the grate of the cell. Her expression was amused. “That time of the day already, is it?”

“It is the priority of Royal Charter Energy to see that prisoners in its care are treated humanely in accordance with corporate policy and interplanetary law,” he said, the same way he did every time. It had become something like a joke between them, funny not because it was funny, but because it was familiar.

“Does seem kind of pointless,” Naomi said. “I mean, if we’re all going to die.”

“I know,” Havelock said, surprised at the tightness in his chest. “But it’s what we’ve got. So I’ll take it.”

He unstrapped himself and floated over to the restraints locker, punching in his code. The locker dispensed an anklet, and he tossed it across the space. Naomi caught it with her fingertips and drew it gently through. She fixed it around her left ankle and fed the two ends together. The anklet hissed, and the diagnostic light went green. Havelock checked his hand terminal. The anklet read as ready. No anomalies, no errors. He opened the cell, and Naomi floated out, stretching. Her paper jumpsuit crackled with every motion.

“Shall we?” Havelock asked.

“I’ve been looking forward to it all day,” Naomi said.

The gymnasium was fuller than usual. The uncertainty—the fear—drove some people toward exercise. Havelock didn’t know if it was the sense of action that brought them or the need for exhaustion, the drive to wear themselves down so far that even the fact that they were flying dead over an empty planet and the nearest help was over a year away. Or maybe it was just a way to self-medicate. Endorphins could be wonderful things. He escorted Naomi to a resistance gel box, then took the weight trainer next to her.

The crew at the other machines pretended not to watch them. Most of their expressions were the careful blank of poker faces, but a few were angry. Of the angry people most were focused on her, but a few—Belters mostly—shot accusing glances at him. Havelock pretended to ignore them as he worked the major muscle groups in his back and legs. Any fast movements, and he’d have his weapon drawn, though. Keeping her alive

and himself whole was the job. That and trying to hold everyone together until the ship burned up.

Sweat adhered to his skin, tiny dots spreading, touching, pooling. If he worked long enough, he could wind up in a cocoon of his own sweat. He stopped between sets to wick his face dry, and then also Naomi's. She nodded her thanks, but didn't speak.

When they were done, he opened the gel box and let her out. One of the environmental techs—a Belter with pale hair and a pug nose named Orson Kalk—floated over to claim it next.

"Tu carry caba a oksel, schwist," he said, and Naomi laughed.

"Shikata ga fucking nai, sa sa?" she said.

"Come on," Havelock said. "Let's get moving."

The Belter technician put himself in the gel, and Naomi launched across the room back toward the hall that led to his office and her cell. Havelock looked over his shoulder the whole way back. He didn't feel comfortable until she was back in her cell with the grate closed and locked. He pulled a fresh uniform and some wipes from the locker and fed them through to her before he turned on the privacy shield. He pulled himself back to his crash couch, listening to the soft sounds as she stripped off her old uniform, bathed, and put on the fresh. She was right. The privacy shields on the cells didn't stop sound for shit. He checked his queue. Fifty-seven more requests for comment, and none of them anyone he wanted to speak with. He sent them the canned answer again.

He closed his eyes, trying to judge by how comfortable it was to keep them closed whether he'd be able to sleep. He thought so now, but ever since the reactors had shut down, it was easier to fantasize about resting than to rest.

His monitor chirped. Murtry was on the line. He accepted the connection.

The man on the screen was the one Havelock knew, and he wasn't. Murtry's face had never had much padding to it, but he looked gaunt now. The steely focus Havelock was used to seeing wasn't there, and it took a few seconds to realize it was because Murtry wasn't making the effort to see him.

"You there, Havelock?"

"Yes, sir. How's it going down there, sir?"

“It could be better,” Murtry said. “I need a status update on the drop.”

“Oh. It’s progressing well. We should have it packed and ready for drop in... ah. Looks like six hours and change.”

“All right.”

“Are you not getting the security group alerts, sir? Should I run diagnostics on them?”

“I’m getting them, but I can’t read ’em,” Murtry said. His tone was as calm and conversational as if he hadn’t just admitted he was losing his sight. “So once this drop is done, I want a new priority for the next drop.”

“Of course.”

“We need to construct a semi-permanent shelter down here. Simple enough design that we can put it together even if we can’t see what we’re doing all that well. Sturdy enough to last... well, shit, two to four years, I suppose. See what you can find in the specs. If there’s nothing on board that fits the bill, you can query the databases back home, but I’d rather not miss too many drop windows. I’m not sure how much longer the people down here are going to be up for working.”

“What dimensions do you need?”

“Doesn’t matter. Whatever’s fast and sturdy.”

Havelock frowned. The sounds from the prisoner’s cell were gone. He didn’t know if she was listening. Probably she was. He couldn’t see how it mattered. “Is there anything functional I should be looking for?”

Murtry shook his head. His gaze caught the camera for a moment, then let it go. “If this expedition doesn’t leave survivors, I want to make damned sure that when the next wave shows up, there’s something with a roof on it waiting for them, and that it has RCE printed on it.”

“Planting a flag, sir?”

“I think of it as a minimum fallback position,” Murtry said. “Can you do it?”

“I can.”

“Good man. I’ll be in touch.”

“Is there anything else you need down there?”

“Nah,” Murtry said. “Plenty of things I’d want, but get me that shelter fast enough we can put it up, and we’ll have what we need.”

The connection went dead. Havelock whistled low between his teeth. The privacy shield on Naomi’s cell dropped.

“Hey,” he said.

“Your boss’s plan is to build a shed strong enough to be a headstone when the next group of idiots comes out here to die. I can’t decide if that man’s a nihilist or the second most idealistic man I’ve ever met.”

“Might be room for both.”

“Might be,” Naomi said. And then a moment later, “Are you all right?”

“Me? I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? Because you’re in a ship in decaying orbit, and the man you look up to like a father just told you he was getting ready to die.”

“I don’t look up to him like a father,” Havelock said.

“All right.”

“He has a plan. I’m sure he has a plan.”

“His plan is that we all die,” Naomi said.

In null g, tears didn’t fall so much as build up, sheeting over his eyes until everything looked like it was underwater. Drowned. He wiped them away with his sleeve, but there was still too much moisture running across his lenses, tiny waves that shook the walls. It took almost a minute to bring his breath back under control.

“Well, that must have been amusing for you,” he said bitterly.

“No,” she said. “But if you’ve got a spare tissue, I’d take it. This uniform doesn’t absorb for crap.”

When he looked over, she also had a sheen of tears filling her eye sockets. Havelock hesitated, then unstrapped himself, grabbed the tiny, hard puck of a hand towel, and slid over to her. He passed the puck through the grating, and she pressed it to her eyes, letting the water from them darken the cloth and letting it expand and unfold on its own.

“I’m scared as hell,” Havelock said.

“Me too.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“I don’t either.”

“Murtry doesn’t care.”

“No,” Naomi said. “He doesn’t.”

Words rose in his throat, clogging it. For a moment, he thought he might start weeping again. He was too tired. He’d been working too long under too much stress. He was getting emotionally labile. Maudlin. The knot in his throat didn’t fade.

“I think,” he said, struggling with each syllable, “that I took the wrong contract.”

“Know better next time,” she said.

“Next time.”

She put her fingers through the grate and he pinched her fingertip gently between his thumb and forefinger. For a long moment, they floated there together: prisoner and guard, Belter and Earther, corporate employee and government saboteur. None of it seemed to matter as much as it used to.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven: Elvi

The data and analysis came back in a disorganized lump, some from the expert systems on the *Israel*, some from the RCE workgroups back on Luna, Earth, and Ganymede. There was no synthesis, no easily digested summary of the findings. Instead it was opinion and speculation, suggested tests—only some of which were remotely possible with the equipment she had—and data analysis. Between Lucia's medical reports of the early cases among the squatters and Elvi's observations from after the deluge, there was just enough information to fuel a thousand theories and not enough to draw any real conclusions. And Elvi was the head of the local workgroup, and the only person in the universe with access to test subjects and new information.

The death-slugs were relatively simple. The toxic compound was a complex carbon ring with a nitrogenous sheet coming off it that looked superficially related to tetrodotoxin, and appeared to be part of the slug's motility system rather than an anti-predation adaptation. How exactly it crossed into the blood was still mysterious, but the slime had a half dozen r-chiral elements that no one had yet bothered to examine extensively. Whatever new knowledge arose from later study, for Elvi's purposes the answers were all there: neurotoxin, no antidote, try not to touch them. Done.

The eye flora, on the other hand, was more complex. The labs on Luna and Ganymede were working with algal models, treating the growth as if it were an invasive species that had entered a naïve tide pool. The Earth workgroup was arguing that the better model was actually a photosensitive mineral structure. Working from what little medical data had survived the

storm, the *Israel's* expert system suggested that the blindness was less from the foreign mass in the vitreous humor and more from the way that the living organism scattered light. That was very good news because it suggested that killing the organism and breaking down the optically active structures would lead to a fairly rapid return of function. There would be floaters in all their eyes, but most people had those, and the brain was decent at compensating for them.

How to go about killing them, though, was obscure. And time was at a premium. There was a decided spike in white blood cells, so their bodies were trying to clean the invaders out. It just wasn't working.

For her, the symptoms had started with just a little scratchiness around her eyelids no worse than seasonal allergies back at home. Then there was a little whitish discharge and mild headache. And then, seven hours after she first noticed it, the world began to blur a little and take on a greenish hue. That was when she knew for certain that she was going to be blinded by it too.

Fear and practicality were changing the shape of the refugee camp even within the physical constraints of the ruins. People who had gone to the farther parts of the structure were pulling back in now. The need for space and privacy were giving way to the fear of the slugs and the weather and the dread of their growing impairment. The increased density mostly showed itself to Elvi as a change in the ambient sound. Louder voices in conversation that ran together until she felt like she was doing research in the back of a train station. Sometimes it was comforting to have all those human sounds around her, sometimes it was annoying. For the most part, she ignored it.

"Are you doing all right, Doctor?"

Elvi turned from the chemistry deck. Carol Chiwewe stood in the arch that passed for a doorway. She looked tired. And blurry. And vaguely green. Elvi rubbed her eyes to clear them, even though she knew intellectually it wouldn't make any difference. Rain pattered softly against the plastic sheeting. Elvi almost didn't notice it anymore.

"Fine," she said. "You have the new count?"

"We caught forty-one of the little fuckers today," Carol said. "That's an uptick, isn't it? I thought if things dried out a little, they'd start going away."

“Is it drying out?”

“No. It’s raining less, though. I hoped.”

“Too early to call it significant,” Elvi said, entering the data in its field. Tracking the number of death-slugs was just one more of a dozen studies she was juggling now. “The overall trend is still down, and there may be a cycle within the next few days.”

“It would be good if they slept at night. Probably too much to hope for, though.”

“Probably,” Elvi said. “They’re normally subterranean. They’re not likely to be diurnal.”

“We’re running out of food,” Carol said. Her voice didn’t change its inflections.

“The drops are helping,” Elvi said.

“The drops won’t last forever. There has to be something on this planet we can eat.”

“There isn’t,” Elvi said.

Carol said something obscene under her breath, and it sounded like despair. She sighed. “All right. See you again next hour.”

“Thank you.”

Behind her, Fayez yawned and stretched. She’d meant to nap with him, but she hadn’t quite gotten away from the deck. She squinted, checking the time. Fayez had been asleep for three hours.

“Did I miss anything?” he asked.

“Science,” she said. “You missed science.”

“Well, damn. Can I borrow your notes?”

“Nope, you’ll just have to hire a tutor.”

He chuckled. “Did you remember to eat?”

“No.”

“At last. A way I can be useful. Stay here, and I’ll come back with a bar of undifferentiated foodlike product and some filtered water.”

We’re running out of food.

“Thank you,” she said. “And while you’re out there, see if you can find Yma and Lucia. They were going to be doing ocular assessments of everyone.”

“The blind studying the blind,” Fayez said. “It’s like graduate school all over again. I’ll track them down. You should take a break. Rest your eyes.”

“I will,” Elvi lied. Her eyes—all their eyes—would soon be getting plenty of rest. Growing up, Elvi’s aunt had been blind and still perfectly functional, but she’d been living in a farming arcology in Trento. Elvi was on a planet with no sustainable agriculture, an inedible ecosystem, and where touching the wrong thing would kill her on the spot. Context was everything. Her hand terminal chimed. A new batch of reports and letters from the Ganymede group. She opened them with a sigh. If she took time to read all the suggestions they were coming up with, she wouldn’t have time for anything else. She picked one at random and opened it. She had to increase the font to read it, but switching to bright red lettering on a black background helped a little. If the invading organism followed the same growth curve as yeast...

“Success!” Fayez said. “I have returned with sustenance and Lucia. And you aren’t even pretending to have taken a break.”

“Nope,” Elvi said, taking the hard, palm-sized cake of emergency rations from him and turning to the doctor. “What have we found?”

“Good news and bad. Almost a hundred percent infection rate,” Lucia said, sinking to the floor beside her. “The progression is slower in children than adults, it seems, but only slightly.”

“What about RCE versus First Landers?”

“I haven’t seen all the data Yma collected. She was working with your people mostly. My impression is that there’s no difference. Also in the bad news column, it appears to be much more aggressive than the earlier, isolated cases.”

Elvi took a bite of the bar. It tasted like unsweetened fruitcake and smelled like potting soil and it sucked up all the saliva in her mouth like a sponge.

“Higher initial load?” Elvi said around the puck of food in her mouth. “It was so arid before, there might not have been as many infectious particles.”

“Few enough that our immune systems could identify them as foreign and kick them out,” Lucia said.

“Can they do that?” Fayez asked. “I thought these things were a completely different biology. Do our immune systems even work on them?”

“Not as efficiently,” Lucia said. She sounded tired. “But if the storm was loaded with them, they’d swamp what defenses we do have.”

“And then,” Elvi said, “everyone gets it.”

“Yes,” Lucia said. “Only no.”

Elvi opened her eyes again. Lucia was smiling. “Good and bad, remember? We have one man with no growth.”

“None?”

“Even if it were only massively delayed growth, I know what the early signs should look like. Nothing.”

“Could he... could he not have been exposed?”

“He was exposed.”

Elvi felt a bubble of pure joy open in her chest. It was like getting an unexpected present. A flash of lightning brightened the room for a moment, and she wondered why it was green until she remembered.

“So we’ve got the one-eyed man who’s going to be king?” Fayez said. “I mean, better one than none, but I’m not seeing the long-term solve here.”

“We’ve found treatments and vaccines for any number of diseases by studying people who were naturally immune,” Elvi said. “This is a toehold.”

“Right,” Fayez said, rubbing his eyes. “I’m sorry. I may not be at my best right now. I’ve been under a little stress lately.”

Elvi smiled at the little joke. “Will he consent to testing?” she asked.

“Do we care?” Fayez said.

“I haven’t had the chance to ask yet,” Lucia said. “It was hard enough getting the initial screening done.”

“Why?” Elvi asked. “Who is it?”



Holden was at the entrance to the main room. Whatever hues his clothes had been, they were the color of mud now, same as for everyone else; mud, exhaustion, tears, and fear were the new uniform for the RCE and the citizens of First Landing alike. His hair was slicked back and greasy. The beginnings of a spotty, moth-eaten beard mottled his cheeks and the top of his neck. Her failing vision softened away the lines of age and stress and left him a pleasant-enough-looking but unremarkable man. She remembered all the times she’d generated excuses to spend time in his company. It hardly seemed plausible that it was the same person.

She steeled herself and crossed the room.

“Captain Holden? Can I have a moment?”

“I’m really busy right now. Is this something that can wait?”

“It isn’t,” she said.

Holden grimaced, the expression there and gone again almost too quickly to register. “All right. How can I help you?”

Elvi licked her lips, thinking about how to present the explanation. She didn’t have any idea how much background he had in biology, so she figured it was better to start low.

“Captain, you are a very special, very important person—”

“Wait.”

“No, no, I—”

“Really. Wait. Look, Doctor Okoye. Elvi. I’ve been feeling a kind of tension between us for a while now, and I’ve just been pretending not to. Ignoring it. And that was probably a bad call on my part. I was just trying to make it all go away so we wouldn’t have to say anything, but I’m in a very committed, very serious relationship, and while some of my parents weren’t monogamists, this relationship is. Before we go any farther, I need to be clear with you that nothing like that can happen between us. It’s not you. You’re a beautiful, intelligent woman and—”

“The organism that’s blinding us,” she said. “You’re immune to it. I need to get blood samples. Maybe tissue.”

“I’ll help any way I can, but you have understand that—”

“That’s why you’re special. You’re immune. That’s what I was talking about.”

Holden stopped, his mouth half open, his hands out before him, patting the air reassuringly. For three interminable heartbeats, he was silent. And then, “Oh. *Oh*. I thought you were—”

“The eye assessment that Doctor Merton did—”

“Because I thought... Well, I’m sorry. I misunderstood—”

“There was. The tension? You were talking about? There was some tension. But there’s not anymore,” Elvi said. “At all.”

“Okay,” Holden said. He looked at her for a moment, his head turned a degree to the side. “Well, this is awkward.”

“It is *now*.”

“How about we never mention this again?”

“I think that would be fine,” Elvi said. “We will need you to come let us take some blood samples.”

“Of course. Yes. I’ll do that.”

“And as my vision starts failing, I may need you to come read some of the results to me.”

“I will do that too.”

“Thank you.”

“And thank you, Doctor Okoye.”

They each nodded to the other two or three times, apparently unable to break free of the moment. In the end, she spun on her heel and headed back, navigating between the knots and clusters of people camped on the floor of the ruins. One of the squatters was weeping and shaking back and forth. Elvi stepped past him and trotted back to the lab. Yma had arrived in her absence, sitting cross-legged on the floor with Lucia as they compared data. Elvi didn’t think her eyes were getting markedly worse until she tried to look over their shoulders. Yma’s hand terminal was a blur of white and blue, as empty of usable information as the clouds.

“Did he agree?” Yma asked, her voice tense as stretched wire.

“He did,” Elvi said, sitting down at the chemistry deck. The water bag needed to be refilled. A time was going to come—and soon—when the little deck was going to have to stop generating drinking water so that she could use its full resources to run her tests. It wasn’t yet. She swapped out the water bags.

“Did you get a history?” Lucia asked.

“A medical history? No. I was thinking perhaps you could do that.”

“If you’d like,” Lucia said, levering herself up from the ground. “He’s back in the main room?”

“He is,” Elvi said, kneeling at the deck controls. A smear of mud darkened the readout, but when she wiped it away, she could still make out the letters. “I’ll set up a few screenings for his blood.”

“Lachrymal fluid too?”

“Probably a good idea,” Elvi said. “Just see if there’s anything out of the ordinary.”

“All right then,” Lucia said. When she walked toward the door, her steps had a little hitch in them. A hesitation. Elvi wondered how much longer the doctor would be able to function. The same question for all of them. There

wasn't time.

"Anything new in your data?" she asked.

"Consistent," Yma said. "Whatever it is, it doesn't draw a distinction between us and the squatters."

"Well, it's the only one."



The hours passed without Elvi being aware of it. Her mind and attention had taken her outside the world of minutes and hours to a place defined by test runs, transmission lag, and slowed only by her failing sight. Even before Holden's test results came back, she was prying what information she could from the samples of the organism, categorizing it only to find analogies with other plants or animals or fungi. The sense of time running short was a constant, and so, like a noxious smell over an extended period, before long it stopped being something she noticed. And instead, she felt the simple joy of doing what she did best. They had chosen her for the assignment because biological systems made sense to her, working through knotty problems was what she did for fun. For months now, she had been doing a long run of data collection. It had been lovely to see this new world, to watch its first secrets unfold, but it had also been easy. A graduate assistant could have gathered all the same samples she had.

This work was hard, and it was her. And while the life or death of everyone on New Terra resting on it scared her, it didn't take away the essential joy of her work.

"You need to eat," Fayez said.

"I just did," she said. "You gave me that bar."

"That was ten hours ago," he said gently. "You need to eat."

Elvi sighed and leaned back from the screen. She'd been bent almost double trying to make out the results. Her back ached and there was a headache building all across the front of her skull. Fayez held something out. Another bar of emergency cake. When she took it, his fingers stayed with hers.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Elvi said.

"You're sure?"

“Well, apart from the obvious. Why?”

“You seemed a little distant.”

“I’ve been working.”

“Sure. Of course. I’m sorry. I’m just being stupid.”

“I don’t understand,” Elvi said. “Haven’t I been acting the same way I always do?”

“Yes, you have,” Fayez said, letting go of her hand. “That was kind of my point. After... after, you know—”

“The sex?”

He shifted. She imagined him closing his eyes. Wincing a little bit. With her eyes as bad as they were, it wasn’t much more than a guess, but it filled her with a surprising glee. Who would have guessed? Fayez with tender feelings.

“The sex,” he said. “I just wanted to make sure that we were okay. That things were all right between us.”

“Well,” she said, “orgasm does release a lot of oxytocin, so I’m probably more fond of you than before.”

“Now you’re teasing me.”

“That too,” she said, and took another bite of the cake. It really was awful stuff.

“I wanted to make sure that I knew where we stood.”

“I haven’t really thought about it,” Elvi said, gesturing at the chemistry deck. “You know. Busy.”

“Of course,” Fayez said. “I understand.”

“Once we’re not all going to die, though, maybe we could talk about it? Would that be okay?”

“That would be fine.”

“All right, then. It’s a date,” Elvi said, and sat back down at the deck. Her back hurt. Especially between the shoulder blades. She went through the tools screen, trying to find a way to bump the font up another level, but the deck’s options were very limited. She was going to need help, and soon. In the main room, someone called out sharply, and a dozen voices rose in an answering chorus of complaint.

“Okay, that wouldn’t be fine,” Fayez said. “Elvi, listen. You are the smartest woman I’ve ever met, and I’ve been at some of the best universities there are. If there’s anyone, anywhere that can get us out of this,

it's you, and I would very much like to grow very, very old and decrepit and probably incontinent and senile in your company. So if you could save my life and everyone else's, I'd very much appreciate it."

That's sweet and Please don't put more pressure on me right now and I'll try warred in her mind. Somewhere at the edge of the ruins, someone shouted. She hoped it wasn't a slug, that it wasn't another death. That it wasn't something else that had gone wrong.

"Okay," she said.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight: Holden

Holden shuffled his way around the tower again.

The sky was the iron gray of an overcast noon. The rain had tapered off to a faint drizzle just heavy enough to keep his hair and clothes soaked and send rivulets of water down his spine. The wet ground sucked at his boot heels with each step. The air smelled of ozone and mud.

A small group of death-slugs were nosing at a crack in the tower's base. A wad of fabric blocked their entrance, but they were using their narrow noses to probe at it, looking for a way in. Holden hefted his long-handled shovel recovered from the ruined mines and smashed them flat with one heavy blow. He scooped up the gooey corpses and threw them away from the tower, then let the light rain wash the slime off the blade.

He moved on, finding only the occasional straggler on the tower wall. These he scraped off and flung away using the shovel like a catapult. At first, it had been sort of fun to see how far he could throw them. Now his shoulders and arms burned with fatigue and his distances were getting shorter and shorter.

Miller followed along sometimes, not saying anything, just a gray basset-hound-faced reminder that Holden had more important things to be doing.

He vanished when Holden rounded a corner and found a small work crew resting near a partially dug trench. They were trying to get at least a shallow water-filled ditch all the way around the tower, but it was slow work with their primitive implements.

This particular group was made up of three women and two men with crude digging tools. They were stretching and drinking water from one of

the bags the purifier put out. One of the women gave him a nod, the other four ignored him.

One of the two men had a slug on his pants.

It hung on the fabric, just above his right knee. There was no slime trail around it. None of the five diggers seemed to notice it was there. Holden knew that if he shouted in alarm, the man might take a swipe at it with his hand without thinking. So he calmly walked toward him and said, "Don't move."

The man frowned back at him. "Que?"

Holden grabbed the man by the shoulders and shoved him onto his back. "The fuck?" the other man said. They were all backing away from him like onlookers at the start of a fight. Holden leaned over the man on the ground and repeated, "Don't move." Then he grabbed the cuffs of the man's pants and yanked them off with one hard pull. He threw them as far away as he could.

"What just happened?" said the woman who'd first nodded at him. Holden recognized her now. Older, tough, one of the bosses at the mine. Probably in charge of the trench crew.

"Didn't anyone see that he had a slug on his knee?"

"Babosa malo?" someone muttered.

Holden reached down a hand and pulled the dazed man to his feet. "You had a death-slug on your pants. Were you leaning against this wall?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe, for a second," the man started.

"I told you people," Holden said, first to the man then rotating to face the crew boss. "I told you not to touch the walls. The slugs climb them to get away from the water."

The crew boss nodded at him with one fist. "Sa sa."

"You didn't see it," Holden said, not asking a question. "How bad? Malo que sus ojos?"

"Ojos?" the man asked.

"Not ojos. Ah. Orbas. Eyes."

"Na khorochó," the man agreed with a Belter shrug of his hands. Not good.

"Well, the price you pay for not letting your boss know you couldn't see well enough to avoid slugs is now you have no pants."

"Sa sa."

“So go back inside,” Holden said, giving the man a gentle shove toward the tower entrance, “and see if you can find some way to cover your shame.”

“Sorry, boss,” the man replied, then trotted off.

“Anyone else on the crew that bad?” Holden asked the team leader. She frowned and shrugged.

“Not great. We all missed it.”

“All right,” Holden said, rubbing his head. It sent the water clinging to his scalp and hair running down his neck. After a moment he said, “Take them all back.”

“The trench.”

“Too risky now. I’ll stay on patrol. Get your people inside.”

“All right,” the woman said, then started leading her people toward the entrance.

Holden’s hand terminal buzzed at him, and when he pulled it out he saw someone had been trying to connect for a while. He allowed the connection and after a few seconds Elvi appeared on the screen.

“Jim, where are you? I need you back at the lab.”

“Sorry,” Holden replied. “Kinda busy out here.”

“Your bloodwork just finished. I need you to come read me the results.”

The screen on the analysis rig was tiny. Who, in the age of implantable vision correctives, had bad eyesight? Holden felt he could make a usability argument to the designers now.

“Let me finish this patrol,” Holden said.

“This is important.”

“So is keeping alive the idiots who insist on working outside when they can’t see.”

“Hurry then. Please,” she said and killed the connection.

Holden was putting his terminal away when it started pinging at him. A quick glance at the screen showed it was alerting him to another supply drop. He held the terminal up to the skyline and let it direct him to the location of the drop. A distant white parachute popped into view as the terminal zoomed in on it. Too far. They were still coming in randomly scattered over too wide an area. They had teams out recovering the first several drops, but pretty soon they wouldn’t have anyone left who could see far enough to make a dangerous trek out to the supplies and back.

Anyone but him.

He headed off to find Amos and their potential solution to that problem. The mechanic had set up his little workshop a few hundred meters away from the tower under an A-frame shelter made of corrugated plastic sheeting. A variety of tools, salvaged electric cart parts, and welding supplies littered the cramped space beneath.

“How’s it looking?” Holden asked, then walked into the shelter and sat on a plastic crate filled with odds and ends.

Amos sat cross-legged on a sheet of plastic surrounded by battery housings in various states of disassembly. “Well, here’s the problem,” he said, waving at the batteries with one thick arm.

“As in?”

“As in, I got a couple carts they hauled out of the soup around the mines that I can have ready to roll in hours if I throw my back into it. Turns out they don’t mind being submerged all that much. The drive assemblies need the mud cleaned out and shit, that’s an easy job.”

“But the batteries are hosed.”

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it.” Amos picked up a delicate-looking strip of metal covered in rust spots. “They minded.”

Holden took the corroded lead out of Amos’ hand and looked it over for a few seconds, then tossed it on a growing pile of bad parts. “The ships say high-altitude winds are making precise drops impossible,” he said. “Right now, I can send out search teams to track them down.”

“Right up until your searchers can’t see to piss without hitting their shoes.”

“Right up until then. And then I’m the only person who can go get the supplies. And I can’t keep up with that and everything else without some wheels.”

“Okay,” Amos said. “Good news is I think I can assemble two or three working batteries off the parts. Bad news is I’ll probably only be able to charge one.”

“One is all I need. And a functioning cart to put it in.”

“I can make that happen,” Amos said. He slowly reached across his body and grabbed the oxyacetylene torch. It popped to life with a bright blue flame that he pointed at something on the ground. A death-slug that had been creeping up on him died with a hiss and a sizzle.

“How are your eyes doing?” Holden asked, keeping his tone casual.

“Okay so far,” the mechanic replied. “We haven’t been here as long, maybe. But I can see green flaring at the edges of my vision, so I know I got the bug same as everyone else.”

“You should be inside with the rest of us.”

“Naw,” Amos said. As he spoke, he grabbed one of the partial batteries and began pulling it apart. “Lot of this salvage Wei’s people are bringing in is leaking toxic shit you wouldn’t want in the air in there. Plus, I don’t want those people getting touchy-feely with my stuff.”

“You know what I mean. This shelter you’ve set up makes an attractive dry spot. The slugs will be swarming you by nightfall.”

“Maybe,” Amos agreed with a nod. “But I got my plastic sheet to keep ’em from popping up out of the ground. And the ones that try to crawl in get fried by the torch. I leave their little smoking corpses out there. The live ones seem to avoid ’em. I think I’m okay.”

Holden nodded, and sat with Amos in companionable silence for a few minutes while the mechanic finished stripping the battery and laying out the parts based on how damaged they were. He was building a pile of clean parts to assemble new battery housings out of. Holden knew if he offered to help he’d just get in the way, but it was so nice to be both out of the rain, and out of sight of the anxious colonists, that he didn’t want to leave.

“You know,” he finally said, “if your eyes get much worse I’m going to have to make you come inside. Finished with this or not.”

“I guess you can try,” Amos said with a laugh.

“Don’t fight me on this,” Holden said. “Please. Can I have one thing no one is fighting me on? I’m not leaving you out here to get poisoned. And if you’re blind, I think I can take you.”

“Might be fun to find out,” Amos laughed again. “If it’s anybody, it’s you, I guess. But I’m not being obstinate to be a pain in your ass, Cap. I hope you know that.”

“Then what?”

“Everybody in there has the same fucking problem. Running out of food, going blind, planet blew up,” Amos said. He began assembling a battery out of spare parts while he spoke. His deft fingers knew the work so well he almost didn’t have to look at it. “Know what they’ll be talking about?”

“That?”

“Yeah. ‘Boo hoo, I ain’t got no food, I’m going blind, holy shit there’s poison slugs.’ I don’t do group therapy. Couple minutes of bitching and moaning, I’m gonna start knocking people out just to get some peace.”

Holden slumped on the crate, putting his soggy head in his hands. “I know. I get to listen to that instead. It’s making me a little cranky.”

“You’re cranky because you’re tired,” Amos said. “You got that I-have-to-save-everyone hangup, so I make it that you haven’t slept in about two days. But listening to people bitch? Yeah, that’s sorta your job. It’s why you make the big money.”

“We make the same money.”

“Then I guess you’re doing it for the fame and glory.”

“I hate you,” Holden said.

“I’ll have that first cart up and running by the end of the day,” Amos replied, snapping the battery housing together with a plastic click.

“Thanks,” Holden said, then pushed himself to his feet with a grunt and started slogging his way back toward the tower.

“Anytime,” Amos said to his back.

Holden’s terminal started buzzing again. “Jim, where are you?” Elvi said the moment he accepted the connection. “I need this data—”

“On my way,” he replied. “Sort of wearing a lot of hats right now. But I should be there in a minute.”

He killed the connection just in time to for Murtry to come out of the tower’s main entrance and make him a liar.

“Captain,” Murtry said.

“Mister Murtry. How are things on your end? Amos seems to be making good use of the salvaged carts.”

“He’s a good mechanic,” the RCE security chief replied. “There was another drop.”

“Saw it. My terminal marked and mapped it. Let me transfer the location so you can send a team.”

As he transferred the data, Murtry said, “We lost a man.”

“Who?”

“Paulson. One of my drivers. Slug crawled into his boot when no one was looking.”

“I’m very sorry,” Holden said, trying to remember if he knew which one

Paulson was, and feeling guilty that someone had died to help them out and he couldn't even put a face with the name.

"Stupid mistake," Murtry said. He tapped out some rapid commands on his terminal. "And I wasn't looking for your sympathy. Just apprising you of the situation and our reduced team strength."

"Okay," Holden said, surprised that the man's lack of empathy still surprised him.

"Wei will handle the supply pickup."

"How's her vision doing? How many more of these runs does she have in her, do you think?"

"She's on her way," Murtry said with a humorless smile. "So at least one more, I'd say."

"Great," Holden said. "Tell her I said thanks."

"Will do," Murtry replied, ignoring the irony. "But I need something from you."

"You need, or RCE needs?"

"Consider those the same thing at this point," Murtry said. "Should be some construction materials in this load. I need to assemble a work crew to set up my structure before everyone is too blind to do the job."

"What's it for? There's a ton of other work we need to do while we can. And in a turn of luck," Holden said, pointing at the alien tower behind him, "shelter is not one of our pressing problems."

"These people," Murtry said, "are eating my food, drinking my water, and taking my medicine. My team is gathering the supplies and doing the dangerous salvage work that makes any of this possible. You know what? As long as that remains true, they can throw up a few walls for me when I ask."

"Then what do you need from me?"

"They have the mistaken impression you're in charge. Correcting them seemed impolite."

Holden had a sudden mental image of dragging the soon-to-be-blind Murtry out into the middle of the rain-soaked desert and abandoning him at the center of a swarm of the lethal slugs.

"Did I say something funny?" Murtry asked.

"Inside joke," Holden replied with a smile. "You had to be there. I'll let Carol know you're looking for volunteers."

Before Murtry could object, Holden turned and walked away.

Inside, the tower was a buzzing hive of activity as the colonists hurried to finish their last preparations for the coming long night. Lucia had a group working to fill everything that could hold water with supplies from the chemistry deck. Carol Chiwewe was leading a team through the interior of the tower hunting out any remaining death-slugs and plugging any holes they could find.

Holden climbed a ramp and then a set of steps made out of empty packing crates to reach the third floor of the tower. Inside the chamber they'd optimistically named the lab, he found Elvi, Fayez, and a third member of the RCE science team whom Holden thought was named Sudyam.

"Who is that?" Elvi asked. She poked Fayez in the bicep. "Is that Jim?"

Fayez squinted at him for a second then said, "Finally."

"Sorry I was late, but Murtry wanted—"

"I need you to come read this," Elvi said over the top of him. She was pointing at the chemistry deck's small screen. Holden walked over and looked at the display, but had no idea what any of the confusion of symbols and acronyms meant.

"What am I looking for?"

"First we want to check the CBC," Elvi said, coming over to point at the screen. Nothing on it said CBC.

"Okay," Holden said. "Will it say CBC? I don't see CBC here."

Elvi sighed, then began speaking slowly. "Does the screen say 'results' at the top?"

"No. It says 'tools' at the very top. Is that what you mean?"

"Wrong menu. Hit the back button," Elvi said, pointing at a button on the screen. Holden pushed it.

"Oh, I see a results option now."

"Hit that. Then we're going to be looking for numbers on the CBC, RBC, WBC, hemoglobin, hematocrit, and platelet count readouts."

"Hey," Holden said happily, "I see all that stuff."

"Tell us what they are."

Holden did so, while Elvi made notes on her terminal. She had the display blown up to the point where Holden could read it from across the room.

“Back up now and let’s look at blood gases,” she said when they were done. It took over an hour, but in the end Holden had given them all the results they were looking for. They decided to take some more of his blood and let him go.

When they were done, he stood next to Elvi pressing a scrap of bandage against the puncture wound. “Are we any closer?”

“It’s not an easy process,” she replied. “Even with access to all these minds and the *Israel*’s computer. We’re looking for a needle in a complex organism.”

“How much time do we have left?”

Elvi tilted her head up so the light shone into her pupils. Holden could see the faint green tinge there. “Almost none,” she said. “But you should go get some sleep. You’re exhausted.”

“My blood told you that?”

“You haven’t slept in two days,” she said with a laugh. “Math tells me that.”

“I promise, I’ll hit the rack as soon as I can,” he lied to her.

He climbed down the makeshift steps and the weirdly alien curve of the ramp to the tangle of people at the ground floor. Lucia had turned over water duty to her assistants, and was shining a penlight into the eyes of a small child. She gave Holden a tired smile as he walked by. Someone gave an alarmed shout, then rushed through the room carrying a slug on a stick and threw it outside. Holden followed it outside and stomped on it.

The sky was darkening to the color of damp ash, and the rain was becoming heavier. Distant thunder rumbled to the east, the lightning visible only as dim flashes in the heavy clouds. The air smelled of ozone and mud.

Holden shuffled his way around the tower again.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Basia

Hey Papa!” the Jacek on the screen said. The boy’s voice almost vibrated with fear and exhaustion.

Hey son,” the recorded Basia and the real one said at the same time. Jacek began talking about death-slugs and lightning and living in the alien ruins, reciting words of reassurance and explanation that Basia could recognize as Lucia’s. Jacek soberly repeated all the reasons his mother had given him that things might end well, telling Basia as an excuse to hear them again himself. It was the third time Basia had watched the recorded video of his conversation with his boy. When it finished, he cued up the recording of his conversation with Lucia and watched it for the tenth time.

He considered asking Alex to call them again, get new conversations to record, but he recognized this as a selfish impulse and quashed it.

Jacek looked dirty, covered with mud, tired. He described the horror of the poisonous slug worms with dread and fascination. The constant lightning storms and rain were amazingly exotic to a child who’d only ever lived in ice tunnels and ship holds before coming to Ilus. He never said he wished his daddy was there, but the fact sang in his words. Basia wanted nothing more than to take his boy by the hand, tell him it was all right to be scared. That bravery was being scared and doing it anyway.

Lucia, when her turn had come, looked less fearful than exhausted. Her smiles for him were all perfunctory. Her report was vague because, he knew, she had nothing to say that would help either of them to hear.

Felcia’s videos had been the ones that brought him peace. She was the one member of his family he had felt like he hadn’t failed. She’d wanted to go to school, and he’d managed to push down his fears and needs and the

burdens that he carried long enough to actually let her go. It had felt like a victory.

Until now.

Now he only saw the ticking clock Alex had left running, showing the remaining time until she burned up across Ilus' sky.

The simulation and timer ran out their terrible program on the panel behind him. He tried never to look. When he needed to use the screens on the operations deck, he drifted through the compartment trying not to even glance in its direction. He tried very hard to forget that it existed at all.

He failed.

Watching his most recent conversation with Felcia for the fourth time, he felt the timer behind him, like a warm spot on his back. Like the stare of someone from across a crowded room. The game became how long he could go without looking. Or whether he could distract himself sufficiently to forget it was there.

On the screen, Felcia told him about learning to change air scrubbers on the Belter freighter. It wasn't the sort of things she'd had to do in the long months when the *Barbapiccola* had been their home. Her graceful fingers were demonstrating some complex function necessary to the process. She made it seem light. Fun. Amusing. He was her father. He knew that she was scared.

Tick tick tick, the clock burned soundlessly at his back.

He adjusted the air recycling system nozzle near his panel and sent a cool breeze across his face. He finished the recording and spent some time organizing his files by content and date. Then decided it was better by date and name, and reorganized them again.

Tick tick tick, hot like the sun on a dark shirt at noon. Burning without burning.

He opened up the file Alex had set up with repair tasks and scrolled through the list. He'd already checked off the ones he was actually capable of doing. He spent some time looking over the rest of the items, trying to decide if there were any he could help out with. Nothing jumped out at him. Not surprising, since it was his fifth time through the list.

Tick tick tick.

Basia turned around. The first thing he noticed was that the simulated orbital paths looked different. The changes were so slight that he probably

shouldn't have been able to see them, but the bright hateful lines that described his only daughter's demise had burned themselves into his brain. There was no doubt, they were different. For some reason, it took him longer to notice that the clock had changed.

There were three fewer days.

Last time he'd looked at the clock, just a few hours before, there had been slightly over eight days on it. Now there were just under five.

"The clock is broken," he said to no one.

Alex was up in the cockpit, where he seemed to spend most of his time. Basia yanked at the straps holding him to the chair, fighting with them without success until he forced himself to calm down and just press the release latches. Then he kicked off to the crew ladder and climbed up.

Alex had a complex-looking graphic on his main display. He was working at it with gentle touches on the screen and a steady stream of muttering under his breath.

"The timer's wrong," Basia said. If it weren't for the fact that he found himself inexplicably out of breath, he probably would have yelled it.

"Hmmm?" Alex swiped at the panel and it shifted to a graph filled with numbers. He began entering new figures into it.

"The clock—the orbital timer thing is broken!"

"Workin' on it right now," Alex said. "It ain't broke."

"It's down to five days!"

"Yeah," Alex said, then stopped working to rotate his chair and look at Basia. "Was going to talk to you about that."

Basia felt all the strength go out of him. If there had been gravity, he would have slumped to the floor on legs made out of rubber. "It's right?"

"It is," the pilot said, swiping the screen behind him again to get back to the graphical display. "But it ain't unexpected. The initial estimates about their batteries were gonna change. They were back-of-the-napkin kind of shit to start with."

"I don't understand," Basia said. His stomach had clenched tight. If he'd bothered to eat anything in the last day or two, he'd probably have vomited.

"The first estimate was based on orbital distance, ship mass, and expected battery life versus consumption." As Alex spoke, he pointed at various places on his graph. As though that explained anything. As though the graph made any sense. "Orbital decay's just not something anyone

worries about when the reactors are on. If any of us had wanted to, we coulda built orbits that were damn near permanent, but the *Barb's* got that shuttle going up and down with the ore, so she went kind of low. Save a little on each trip. And, forgive me for saying it, she's a flyin' hunk of shit. Heavier than she should be, and batteries dyin' fast. So, the new numbers."

Basia floated next to the gunner's seat watching the hateful math spool out across the screen.

"She lost three days," he finally said when he found the breath to do it. "Three *days*."

"No, she never had those days to start with," Alex replied. His words were harsh, brutal, but his face was sad and kind. "I haven't forgotten my promise. If the *Barb* goes down, your little girl will be on this ship when it happens."

"Thank you," Basia said.

"I'm goin' to call the captain right now. We'll work up a plan. Just give me some time. Can you do that?"

Five days, Basia thought. *I have five days to give you.*

"Yes," he said instead.

"Okay," Alex said and waited expectantly for Basia to leave. When he didn't the pilot shrugged and turned around to call up the comm display. "Cap'n, Alex here. Come in."

"Holden here," the familiar voice said a few seconds later.

"So, ran the updated numbers like you asked. We're definitely losing the *Barb* first."

"How bad?" the captain asked. His connection seemed fuzzy. It took Basia a moment to realize it was the sound of rain.

"Just under five days until she starts scraping on more atmo than she can handle."

"Dammit," Holden said, then nothing. The silence went on long enough that Basia started to worry they'd lost their connection. "How's the *Roci*?"

"Oh, we're fine. Pretty much everything's off but the lights and the air. Lots of slack."

"Can we help?"

"Like," Alex said, dragging the word out, "give 'em a tow?"

"Like that. What can we do?"

"Boss," Alex said, "hooking two ships together like that can be done,

but doing it in low orbit ain't a trivial problem. I'm just a pilot. Sure would be nice if we had, you know, our engineer back to run those numbers."

"Yeah, no kidding," Holden said. He sounded angry to Basia. That was good. Angry was good. Basia found himself oddly comforted by the idea that someone other than him was upset by the situation.

"Any chance on that?" Alex prompted.

"Let me chat with Murtry again," Holden said. "I'll call back soon. Holden out."

Alex sighed. His lips pressed thin.

"Talking's not going to work," Basia said. "Is it?"

"I don't see how," Alex said.

"Which means there's a non-zero chance that we'll wind up needing to go get her ourselves. You know there's only two of us. You and me. That's it."

"There's three of us," Alex said, patting the control panel. "Don't forget. We've got the *Roci*."

Basia nodded, waited for his gut to clench up again, was surprised to find he felt a warm sense of peace flowing through him. "What will I need to do?"



"This is an LVA suit," Alex said, pointing to the equipment secured in an open locker. They were on the airlock deck, which, other than the airlock, consisted almost entirely of lockers and storage closets. The contents of that particular locker looked like a rubber body suit with lots of attachments.

"Elveeaye?"

"El. Vee. Ay. Light vacuum armor. Lets you move around outside, with enough air and shielding to keep you breathin' and mostly unradiated in normal applications." Alex pulled the rubber-looking suit out and left it floating next to the locker for Basia to examine. "Self-sealing in case of puncture, with life support and injury sensors, and basic medical supplies built in." He then pulled out a red, metallic-looking breastplate. "It also keeps you from getting *too* many holes poked in you by small-arms fire."

As Alex pulled out each piece and showed it to Basia, explaining its function, Basia dutifully examined them and made what he hoped were

appropriate noises. He'd worn vacuum suits for work almost his entire adult life. Their form and function were well known to him. But the various pieces of armor and technology that made the suit into a weapon of war were outside his experience. Certainly something Alex described as "automatic IFF and hostile tracking available through the HUD display" sounded impressive and useful, but Basia had no idea for what. So he nodded his head and looked thoughtful and examined the helmet when Alex handed it to him.

"You ever fired a gun?" Alex asked when the armor had all been pulled out of the locker.

"Never," Basia said. He had a brief, vivid memory of the assault on the RCE security team. Of the horrible injuries the gunshots left. Of the surprised looks on their faces as they died. Basia waited for the nausea to start, but still felt only the warmth and calm. "Held one once. Pretty sure I didn't fire it."

"This," Alex said, holding up a thick black pistol, "is a 7.5mm semi-automatic handgun. Twenty-five-round magazine. Standard sidearm of the MCRN. It's fairly idiot-proof, so this'll be the one I send you in with."

"If I go in at all," Basia said.

"Sure," Alex agreed with a smile. "Don't really have a range to practice on here, but you can dry fire it a few times to get the feel. Honestly, though, if you get over there and need to be dead-eye Dick to make it back, you're pretty much fucked."

"Why carry it at all, then?"

"Because people do what you want them to do when you point one of these at them," Alex said.

"Might as well be empty, then," Basia said, taking the gun from him and waving it through the air to feel the weight.

"If you want," Alex replied.

"No. Show me what to do. Then let's load it." *For Felcia. I can do it for her.*

"Okay," Alex said, then proceeded to do just that.



Holden called back several hours later. When he spoke, his voice was tight,

angry. “Holden here. Murtry isn’t going to bend an inch, so fuck him. Go get Naomi back. Out.”

“Well,” Alex said, dragging the word out to a long sigh. “That’s it. I think we’re officially not mediators anymore.”

Basia nodded with his fist, causing his body to rotate slightly. They were floating on the ops deck. The various pieces of the disassembled pistol hung in the air next to Basia. Alex had insisted that he know how to take the gun apart and put it back together again. Basia had no idea why that would be important, but had gone along with it anyway.

“What now?” he asked.

“Better start puttin’ that back together. I’ll pull the *Israel*’s specs up again and we can give them one last look. Remember, stuff gets moved around on a working ship. Things ain’t always where the standard blueprints say they are. You’re gonna want alternate ingress and egress points in case someone sealed off a corridor you wanted to use.”

“I have a good memory,” Basia said. It sounded like a brag, but it was true. He’d grown up in corridors and hallways. His sense of direction was excellent.

“That’ll help. Then we get you suited up, and I drop you off,” Alex said, then paused. “But there is one issue we haven’t discussed. I got plenty of juice to get you over there. And the *Roci* can make sure no one messes with you in space. But I can’t get you inside.”

Basia surprised himself by laughing.

“Somethin’ funny?” Alex said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Funny that you’re worried about the only part of this where I actually know what I’m doing,” Basia said. “I’m a licensed class 3 vacuum welder. I weld in space. You *find* me a ship I can’t cut my way into. Just try.”

“Alrighty,” Alex said and gave him a light slap on one shoulder. “Let’s get to work.”



Basia drifted away from the *Rocinante*. Instead of a simple vacuum suit and air supply, he wore state-of-the-art Martian-made light combat armor. Instead of walking across the hull of the ship on magnetic boots, he moved across half a dozen kilometers of vacuum on gentle puffs of compressed

nitrogen. Below his feet, Ilus spun, an angry gray world, wrapped in storms and flashing constantly with high-altitude lightning. Lucia and Jacek were down there, under all that atmospheric rage. But he couldn't do anything to help them. So he would help the person he could. He would save Naomi from the RCE ship and she would save his daughter. There were a lot of holes in that logic that he carefully avoided thinking about.

He drifted closer to a massive island of gray metal in the darkness. The *Edward Israel*. The enemy.

"You okay out there?" Alex said over the comm. The helmet's small speakers flattened his voice. There was also an aggressive background hiss to it.

"Fine. Everything is green." Alex had shown him how to page through the status indicators on the suit's heads-up display, and Basia was dutifully checking them every few minutes.

"So, I'm making all sorts of angry demands for the release of Naomi," Alex said. "Got the *Israel* locked up with a targeting laser, and I'm floodin' their sensors with radio noise and light scatter. Should keep their eyes, what eyes they got left, firmly planted on the *Roci*. Give you a minute or two before they realize you're cuttin' your way in."

"That doesn't sound like very long," Basia said.

"Cut fast. Alex out."

Alex had reassured him that the *Rocinante* had plenty of battery power. That shooting lasers and blasting out radio jamming wouldn't affect it much. But Basia had come to view power as a precious and irreplaceable resource. Not something he'd ever needed to do in the age of readily available fusion. It gave everything a sense of permanence it hadn't had before. No do-overs. No we'll-get-it-right-next-time.

He checked his course toward the *Israel*'s midship maintenance airlock, found it good, and pulled out his welding torch, holding it in a white-knuckle grip.

The ship swelled until it blocked his view in every direction. The airlock hatch resolving from a tiny slightly lighter dot to a thumbnail-sized square to an actual door with a small round window in it. The pre-programmed EVA pack fired off a long blast of nitrogen in four cones of vapor, and he drifted to a gentle stop a meter away.

The welding rig came to life with a burst of bright blue fire. "Here I

come,” Basia said to Naomi and to the RCE people guarding her and to his baby girl thousands of kilometers away on her dying ship.

Here I come.

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Chapter Forty: Havelock

I've shut down everything I can," Marwick said on the screen. "Sensors, lights, entertainments. I've dialed back the cooling. With the batteries being what they are, I'll give us just under seventeen days. And that's with the solar collectors up at full. Less than that if they start failing. After that, it'll be time to decide whether we'd rather suffocate or burn."

Havelock rubbed his forefinger and thumb deep into his eye sockets. He hadn't gone to the gym, and he was trying to make up for it by increasing the cocktail of null-g steroids. It wasn't a long-term fix, but the more he looked at it, the less it seemed like he'd need one of those. It did give him a headache, though. If it hadn't been for Naomi, he wouldn't have spent as much time exercising as he had. Something to thank her for.

His office felt stuffy and close, and the temperature was climbing steadily. As a boy living planetside, he'd always thought of space as cold, and while that was technically true, mostly it was a vacuum. And so a ship, mostly, was a thermos. The heat from their bodies and systems would bleed off into the void over years or decades if it had the chance. If he could find a way to get them the chance.

"Have we mentioned it to the crew?" he asked.

"I haven't, but the data's hard to keep secret. Especially when it's a can full of scientists and engineers with little enough else to do. We're going to need to talk about dropping them. As many as we can."

"So that they can starve and die on the planet if the moons don't shoot them down?"

"Most part, yes," Marwick said. "They've come a long way not to put foot on the surface. There's more than one I know would prefer dying

there.”

In her cage, Naomi coughed.

“I’ll talk to Murtry,” Havelock said. “Having a graveyard on the planet might be something he’d want. Especially if we could get more bodies in it than the squatters have.”

Marwick sighed. He’d stopped shaving, and when he rubbed his chin it sounded like someone throwing a handful of sand at a window. “We came close, though, didn’t we? All the way out here to start the whole damned world up again.”

“We saw the promised land,” Havelock said. “What about the *Barbapiccola*? What’s her situation?”

“Makes ours look good. That lithium ore’s going to be a high-atmosphere vapor in a little over four days.”

“Well, I guess we won’t need to worry about stopping them from taking it back to the market.”

“Problem’s about to solve itself,” Marwick agreed. “But to the point. Security? These people are facing a death they can’t fight and they can’t flee from. They’re going to get crazy if we don’t do something. And neither you nor I have the manpower to stop them if things get out of control.”

What would it matter? Havelock wanted to say. *Let them riot. It won’t change how long before we hit air. Not even by a minute.*

“I hear you,” he said. “I do have the security override codes. I’ll have the autodoc add a little tranquilizer and mood stabilizer, maybe some euphorics to everyone’s cocktail. I don’t want to do much, though. I need these people thinking straight, not doped to the gills.”

“If that’s how you want to play it.”

“I’m not putting this ship on hospice. Not yet.”

The captain’s shrug was eloquent, and left nothing more to say. Havelock dropped the connection. The screen went to its default. Despair rushed up over him like a rogue wave. They had done everything right, and it didn’t matter. They were all going to die—all the people he’d come to help protect, all the people on his team, his prisoner, himself, everyone. They were going to die and there wasn’t anything he could do about it but get them high before it happened.

He didn’t know he was going to punch the screen until he’d already done it. The panel shifted in its seating a little, but he hadn’t left a mark on

it. The gimbals of his crash couch hissed as they absorbed the momentum. He'd split his knuckle. A drop of blood welled on his skin, growing to the size of a dark red marble, the surface tension pulling it out along his skin as he watched. When he moved, he left a spray of droplets hanging in the air like little planets and moons.

"You know," Naomi said, "if you're looking at hundreds of people burning to death as a problem solving itself, that may be more evidence that you're on wrong side."

"We didn't plant the bombs," Havelock said. "That was them. They started it."

"Does that matter to you?"

"At this point? Not as much as it probably should."

Naomi was floating close to her cage door. He was always amazed at a Belter's capacity to endure small spaces. Probably claustrophobia had been selected out of their gene pool. He wondered how many generations of Naomi's family had lived up the well.

"You're bleeding," she said.

"Yep. That's not going to matter much either."

"You know you could let me out. I'm a very good engineer, and I have the best ship out here. Get me back on the *Roci*, and I might be able to figure out a way to make things better."

"Not going to happen."

"And here I thought it didn't matter to you," she said with a smile in her voice.

"I don't know how you can be so calm about all this."

"It's what I do when I'm scared. And really, you should let me out."

Havelock gathered the blood out of the air. His knuckle had scabbed over already. He logged into the autodoc with the sick sense of taking the first step toward giving up. But it had to be done. A crew full of panicking people wasn't going to make anything better. Especially since the closest thing he had to a full staff was down on the planet with Murtry.

Havelock's newsfeeds from back home were filled with hyperbolic pieces about the tragedy at New Terra. The sensor data of the explosion had found its way to a few of the reputable feeds, but there were also three or four other forged versions out there too. The faked data wasn't particularly more impressive than the truth. He spooled through a dozen commentators.

Some of them seemed angry that the expedition had been allowed to go out, some were somber and sad. None of them seemed to think there was much chance of anyone surviving. His message queue had over a thousand new entries. People in the media. People from the home office. A few—just a few—from people he'd known. An old lover from when he was at Pinkwater. A cousin he hadn't seen in a decade and a half who was living on Ceres Station now. A couple of classmates from school.

There was nothing like dying publicly on a few billion screens to help reconnect with folks. He wasn't going to answer any of them. Not even the ones from his employers. Not even the ones from his friends. All of it felt like he was trapped underwater and drowning, looking up at the water's surface and knowing he'd never make it there.

He undid his straps.

"Goodnight, Havelock," Naomi said.

"I'll be back," he said, launching himself across the office.

It had been a long time since he'd done a patrol, even just an informal one. He pulled himself along the narrow corridors of the *Israel*, moved through the common spaces—commissary, gym, open lab, bar. In the months—years now—that he'd lived on the *Israel*, it had become invisible the way that anyplace did. Looking at it now was like seeing it for the first time. It was an old ship. The carefully symmetrical shape of the corridors, the keyed mechanism on the doorways. All of it was the kind of thing he'd seen in pictures of his grandparents. Seeing the people was much the same. There was a distance between security and the rest of the crew. If there wasn't, then something had gone badly wrong. Havelock didn't think of himself as being part of the *Israel*'s complement, but every face he passed he recognized. Hosni McArron, the food science head. Anita Chang, systems tech. John Deloso, mechanic. Even if he didn't know how he knew them, they were all part of the context of his life now.

And they were all going to die because he couldn't stop it from happening.

Forward observation was a dark room. The screens were built to give the illusion of looking out a window at the vastness of space, but no one ever actually used it that way. When he came in, it was empty. The screens were filled with sensor data spooling past too quickly to read, a musical composition by a dark-skinned Belter he didn't recognize, and a false-color

temperature map of New Terra. The security camera had a bit of cloth tacked over it and the air recyclers hadn't quite managed to clear out the smell of marijuana. Probably someone had been using it as a meeting place for sex. Havelock pulled the cloth free of the camera. Well, and why shouldn't they? It wasn't as if anything they did now was going to matter in three weeks. He shifted the screens to show the planet below them. New Terra, wrapped in clouds. No lights, no cities, no sign of the small, struggling human presence. The planet that had killed them all.

And still, it was beautiful.

His hand terminal buzzed. The red border of the incoming connection meant it was a security alert. Adrenaline hit his bloodstream and set his heart racing even before he turned it on. Marwick and Murtry were already in the middle of a conversation when he dropped in.

"—many of them, and I don't care to find out now," Marwick said. Shouted, almost. Murtry's expression seemed angry and dismissive, but Havelock realized it was only that he wasn't looking into the camera. He couldn't see it.

"What's going on?" Havelock asked.

"The *Rocinante*'s targeting us," Marwick said.

Havelock was already pushing himself off, moving fast through the corridor. "Are they making demands?"

"Backed up by *threats*," Marwick said, throwing up his arms.

"That's hyperbole," Murtry said. "They're painting the *Israel* with their targeting lasers. And some mad bastard's cutting through the midship maintenance airlock."

"We're being *boarded*?" Havelock said. He couldn't keep the incredulity from his voice. "By who? What's the point?"

"Motivation's not our concern right now," Murtry said. "Our priority is making sure the security of the ship is maintained."

Havelock grabbed a handhold at the intersection of two corridors and spun himself down, feet first, toward the junction that would get him back to his desk. "All respect, sir, you know they've got to be after the prisoner. Why don't we just give her to them? It's not like it's going to matter."

Murtry tilted his head. His smile was thin and cruel. "You're suggesting that we release the saboteur?"

"We're all dead anyway," Havelock said. And then there it was, spoken

aloud. The one thing that all of them were thinking. All of them but Murtry.

"You were immortal before we shipped out?" he asked, his voice dry and cold as a rattlesnake. "Because whether you're planning to die next week or seven decades from now, there's still a way we do this."

"Yes, sir," Havelock said as he reached the last turning and hauled himself down toward his office. "Sorry, sir."

The connection chimed as someone else joined. The chief engineer was grim-faced and angry in a way that Havelock immediately distrusted.

"Reporting for duty," Koenen said.

"Wait. What's he doing here?" Havelock said.

"I've included your militia in this," Murtry said as Havelock slid into his office. "If we're repelling boarders, we're going to need them."

"My men are ready," the chief engineer said, not missing a beat. "Just let us know where the sons of bitches are coming through, and we'll be there to meet them."

Oh God, Havelock thought. He's talking like he's in a movie. This is a terrible idea.

"Mister Havelock," Murtry said, "I'm going to ask you to open the live ammunition supply to the militia forces."

"With respect, sir," Havelock said. "I don't think that's a good idea. This isn't like a paintball exercise. We're looking at a real fight. The risk of friendly fire alone—"

Murtry's voice was calm and cool and viciously cutting. "Do I understand, Mister Havelock, that you've done such a poor job training these men that you feel we'd be safer repelling the attackers with paintballs?"

"No, sir," Havelock said. And then, to his surprise, "But I am saying issuing live rounds at this point would be premature. I think we should find out a little more about what we're looking at before we escalate that far."

"That's your professional opinion?" Murtry said.

"It is."

"And if I ordered you to issue these men live rounds?"

Naomi was at her cage, her fingers clutching at the mesh. Her eyes were wide and serious. Havelock looked away from her. Murtry's sigh was short and percussive.

"Well, I won't put you in a position where you have to choose," Murtry

said. “Chief?”

“Yes, sir?” the chief engineer said.

“I’m transmitting you my personal security codes. You can take weapons and ammunition from the armory with it. Do you understand?”

“Hell yes, sir,” the chief engineer said. “We’ll poke those bastards so full of holes you can see stars through them.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Murtry said. “Now if you gentlemen will excuse me.”

The connection dropped.

“What’s going on?” Naomi asked. The warm tone was gone from her voice. Now she actually sounded scared. Or maybe angry. He couldn’t tell. Havelock didn’t answer. The armory was off the main security station, not the brig. Even if he hurried, he wouldn’t be able to get there before the others. And if he did, he didn’t know what he’d say to them.

He had a gun cabinet here. Maybe if he joined in, he could at least control the situation a little bit.

“Havelock, what’s going on?”

“We’re being boarded, and we’re going to resist.”

“Is it the *Barbapiccola*?”

“No. It’s the *Rocinante*.”

“They’re coming for me, then.”

“I assume so.”

Havelock took a shotgun out of the gun cabinet.

“If it’s Alex and you shoot him, I won’t help you,” Naomi said. “No matter what happens after this, if he’s hurt, we’re done. Even if I find a way to save you, I’ll let you burn.”

The monitor chimed. A connection request from the planet. Havelock accepted it immediately. Doctor Okoye’s face appeared on the screen, her forehead furrowed and her eyes shifting as if she was looking for something. There was actually a glint of green in her pupils that made Havelock’s skin crawl.

“Mister Havelock? Are you there?”

“I’m afraid it’s not a good time, Doctor.”

“You’re coordinating the drops? I need to see if we can get—”

“Is this something where people are going to die if I don’t fix it in the next five minutes?”

“Five minutes? No.”

“Then it’s going to have to wait,” Havelock said and dropped the connection. The midship maintenance airlock was the closest to the brig. There would be choke points at the locker room, the emergency decompression hatch, and the intersection with the maintenance corridor. He guessed the chief engineer would set up his men at the second two and let the locker room go. He might send a couple men to the brig too, as a last ditch. He’d get pushback on that. The whole team was going to want to be in on the kill. And they’d have live ammunition. He wondered what the enemy would have. Power armor? Maybe. Maybe...

“We don’t have to do this,” Naomi said.

“I don’t like it any more than you do, but it’s how it’s coming down.”

“You’re talking about it like this is physics. Like there’re no choices involved. That’s crazy. They’re here for me. Let me go, and they’ll go too.”

“There’s a way we do this,” Havelock said, loading bag rounds into the shotgun.

“He said that, didn’t he? That was him.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Havelock said.

“Murtry. The big boss. Because you do that, you know? You listen to what he says and then say it like it was something you actually believe. This isn’t the time to do that. He’s wrong this time. He’s probably been wrong a few times before.”

“He’s not the one in lockup. I don’t know you’ve got a lot of right to brag.”

“That was dumb luck,” she said. “If you hadn’t happened to be out playing your war games, I’d have disabled your little bomb and been gone again before anyone knew it.”

“What good would it do if I let you go? It won’t make any difference. The ships are going down. There’s no one here who can help us. You can’t do anything to fix this.”

“Maybe not,” Naomi said. “I can die trying to *help*, though. Instead of trying to kill people or watching them die.”

Havelock’s jaw clenched. His finger pressed against the trigger guard and he closed his eyes. It would be so easy to turn the barrel on the cage. Fire a bag against the mesh and drive Naomi to the back of her cell.

Only he wasn’t going to do that. The release started in his chest and

spread out to his fingers and toes in less than a heartbeat. He pushed himself over to her and thumbed his code into the keypad. The cage clicked open.

“Come on, then,” he said.

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Chapter Forty-One: Elvi

Scientific nomenclature was always difficult. Naming a new organism on Earth and even in the greater Sol system had a lengthy, tedious process, and the sudden massive influx of samples from New Terra would probably clog the scientific literature for decades. It wasn't just the mimic lizards or the insectlike fliers. Every bacterial analog would be new. Every single-celled organism would be unfamiliar. Earth alone had managed five kingdoms of life. Six, if you agreed with the Fityani hypothesis. She couldn't imagine that the ecosphere of New Terra would turn out to be much simpler.

But in the meantime, the thing living in her eyes—in all their eyes, except Holden's—wouldn't even officially be a known organism for years. Maybe decades. It would be officially nameless until it was placed within the larger context of life.

Until then, she'd decided to call it Skippy. Somehow it seemed less frightening when it had a silly nickname. Not that she'd be any less dead if she bumped into a death-slug, but at this point anything helped. And she was getting a little punchy.

The interesting thing—one of the interesting things—about the organism was that it didn't have chlorophyll or apparently anything like it. The green color came from a prismatic effect analogous to butterfly wings. The actual tissue growing in her eyes would have been a light brown that was almost clear if its structure had been even a little bit different. The scattering effect wouldn't happen. It also meant that her blindness was a flooding of color and a loss of detail, but it wasn't particularly dark. She could still close her eyes and see the world go black, and open them to the bright, vibrant green.

Anything else was beyond her now. Gone. She navigated her hand

terminal by voice commands, touch, and memory. The reports she would have skimmed through, she listened to now: voices from the labs at Luna and Earth and Ganymede. They didn't offer her much hope.

"While your immune subject does have a couple rare alleles in the genes regulating his sodium pumps, I'm not seeing anything in the final protein structure that's changed. The ion concentrations are stable and within the standard error bars. I'll keep looking, but I've got the feeling that we're barking up the wrong tree here. Sorry to say it."

Elvi nodded as if there were anyone there who could see her. The headache was still with her. It varied during the day, but she didn't know if that was part of the infection or just her experience.

"Hey," Fayez said. And then, "Elvi? Are you here?"

"I am," she said.

"Well, keep talking a little. I've got food on both hands."

Elvi hummed a pop melody from when she'd been a child and listened for Fayez's shuffling feet, reaching out to touch his calf when he was near. He folded himself down beside with a soft grunt. Her hand found his, and he gave her the rations packet.

"My next assignment," he said, "I'm working somewhere with maybe half Earth gravity. Weight. Who needs it?"

Elvi chuckled. He wanted her to, and she even meant it a little. The foil was slick under her fingertips. She felt like she was a little girl sneaking snacks under the covers when she was supposed to be asleep, doing everything by touch. The wrapping of Fayez's bar crinkled brightly.

"How much more food do we have?" she asked.

"Not much. I think they're trying for one more drop, though. There are a couple people who can still make out some shapes."

"And Holden."

"The one-eyed king," Fayez said. "We should poke out one of his eyes just to make that fit better, don't you think? Him having two eyes is a real missed opportunity."

"Hush," she said, and the foil gave way under her fingers. The emergency bar was crumbly and smelled like rat food from her days at the labs. It tasted unpleasant and nutritious. She tried to savor it. It wouldn't be long before she missed this.

"Any luck?" he asked. She shook her head by reflex. She knew he

couldn't see it.

"The best theory we had was that it was related to the plural parentage. He's got something like eight mothers and fathers, and the techniques to manage that can leave some systemic traces. But nothing so far."

"Well, that's a shame. Maybe all the exposure to the protomolecule changed him into a space mutant."

She took another bite and talked around it. "You can laugh, but Luna's looking at that too. And they're trying to grow a fresh sample of the organism based on the sample data we sent. The early trials are showing some real self-organization."

"Kicking off another five hundred years of graduate theses," Faye said. "I don't think you have to worry about your legacy."

Fingertips brushed against her knee, the physical act of reaching out undercutting the cynicism of his words. She took his hand in hers, squeezing the pad at the base of his thumb. He shifted closer to her. She could smell his body. None of them had been able to bathe since the storm came, and they probably all reeked, but her nose had become accustomed to the worst of it. She only experienced his scent as an almost pleasant funk, like a wet dog.

"Not the one I'd have chosen," she said.

"And yet our names will live forever. You as the first discoverer of a new planet full of species. Me as the simple geologist who waited on you hand and foot."

"Why are you flirting?"

"Flirting's the last thing to go," Faye said. She wished she could see his face. "You do science. I hit on the smartest and prettiest woman in the room. Everyone has their ways of coping with the brutal specter of mortality. And rain. Coping with rain. My next assignment, I want someplace without so much rain."

In the next room, a child started crying. An exhausted, frightened sound. A woman—Lucia, maybe—sang to it in a language Elvi didn't know. She popped the last of the bar into her mouth. She needed to get some water. She wasn't sure how long it had been since the chemistry deck had pumped out a clean bag. If it wasn't time to switch out yet, it would be soon. Holden had said he'd come by and do it, but she wasn't sure that was true. He was dead on his feet already, and he didn't rest. Even when he needed to. Well,

she could probably figure out how to switch out a water bag she couldn't see.

"We shouldn't have come," Fayez said. "All those crazy bastards talking about how the worlds beyond Medina Station were going to be tainted and evil? They were right."

"No one said that, did they?"

"Someone probably did. If they didn't, they should have."

"You could really have stayed away?" she asked as she rose to her knees and started reaching for the chemistry deck. She could hear the soft ticking of the clean water coming through the outtake filter, a different timbre than the constant rain. "If they came to you with the chance to go to the first really new world, you'd have been able to say no?"

"I'd have waited for the second wave," Fayez said.

She found the bag. The soft, cold curve wasn't as heavy as she'd expected. The deck wasn't putting out water as quickly as it had been, but if there was an error in the system, it hadn't made a noise. Something else for Holden to check.

"I'd still have come," she said.

"All this? And you'd still have come?"

"I wouldn't have known about this. This wouldn't have happened yet. I'd know I was taking a risk. I did know. Of course I'd get on that ship."

"What if you knew it was going to be like this? What if you could look into some crystal ball and see us here, the way it's all happened?"

"If we could do that, we'd never explore anything," she said.

It was very strange to think that they were all going to die. She knew it, but it still seemed unreal. In the back of her mind, a small, insistent voice kept saying that a ship would arrive to help them. That another group on the planet would show up with extra food or water or shelter. She'd catch herself wondering if they shouldn't be signaling for help, and have to make the effort to recall that there were no other bases. No other ships. In the whole solar system, there were just the crews and passengers of three ships. And fewer now than there had been before. Even with all of them packed into the ruins together like refugees so close they could hear each other snore, it made the universe seem very empty. And frightening.

"We should find Holden," she said. "The water's coming slow. I wonder... Maybe he has a really good immune system? The fact that we're

all getting discharge means we've got some immune response to it. Like a splinter, maybe. It just grows faster than we can knock it out. Maybe Holden has some exposure that gives him antibodies to it."

"Did the blood scans find anything?"

"No," she said. "His white cell count is lower than ours too."

"Maybe his eyeball juice tastes bad," Fayez said. "What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"No, but you made that little I've-got-an-idea grunt. I've heard that grunt. It means something."

"I was just thinking that it can't be his immune system," she said. "I mean, we're all traveling in hard vacuum all the time. The radiation just on the way out here probably left all of us a little immunocompromised. And especially after Eros Station, he's had more... more radiation damage..."

Elvi closed her eyes, shutting out the green. A beautiful cascade of logic and implication opened before her like stepping into a garden. She caught her breath, and grinned. The joy of insight lifted her up.

"What?" Fayez said. "He's overcooked? The eye thing only likes us rare, and he's well done?"

"Oh," Elvi said. "It's his oncocidals. After the Eros incident, he had to go on a permanent course of them. And that means... *oh!* That's so *pretty*."

"Oh good. What are you talking about? Why would his anti-cancer meds work on something from a different biosphere?"

"It means there's a Dawkinsian good move down around cell division somewhere."

"That's one of those xenobiology things, isn't it? Because I've got no idea what you're on about."

Elvi patted her hands in the air. The pleasure running through her blood felt like being carried by light.

"I told you about this," she said, "that there are good moves—maybe even forced moves—in design space because we see things that show up again and again all through different branches of the tree of life."

"Right," Fayez said. "Which is why we can come to New Terra and find things that have eyes and stuff."

"Because bounced light has a lot of information in it, and organisms with that information do better."

"Preaching to the choir, Elvi."

“But that’s not the good part. Holden’s on medications that selectively address fast-dividing tissues. Skippy’s a fast-dividing tissue.”

“Who’s Skippy?”

“The organism. Focus here. That the onococidals work against it means there’s something like flight or sense organs near the mouth that’s going on at the level of cell division. Even though the proteins are totally different, the solutions they’re coming up with are analogous. That’s the biggest thing since we came here. This is huge. Where’s my hand terminal? I have to tell the team on Luna. They’re going to lose their *minds*.”

She moved forward too quickly, stumbling into Faye. He pressed the terminal into her hands. She sat beside him.

“Are you bouncing up and down?” he asked. “Because you sound like you’re bouncing.”

“This is the most important thing that’s happened to me in my life,” she said. “I’m *floating*.”

“So this means we can treat the eye thing, right?”

“What? Oh. Yeah, probably. It’s not like onococidals are hard to synthesize. Just most of us don’t need a constant course the way Holden does.”

“You are the only woman I have ever known who would figure out how to keep a bunch of starving refugees including herself from going blind and be excited because it means something about microbiology.”

“You should get out more. Meet people,” Elvi said, but she felt a little pull of guilt. She probably should try to get people treated before she started talking to the team on Luna. It was still just a hypothesis anyway. She didn’t have any data yet. “Connection request Murtry.”

Her hand terminal chimed that it was working. A gust of wind made the plastic window flutter. It sounded a little different than usual, and the constantly falling rain sounded louder. She wondered if the sheeting might be coming unsealed. There could be death-slugs creeping around the room and she wouldn’t have known. Wouldn’t have seen them. Something else she’d have to ask Holden to check. The double-tone of connection refused made her grunt.

“Who’s working on the drops?” she asked.

“Upstairs? Um. Havelock, I think.”

“Connection request Havelock.”

The hand terminal made a single chime and then stopped. She wasn't sure if it had gone through or failed.

"Mister Havelock? Are you there?" she asked.

"I'm afraid it's not a good time, Doctor."

"You're coordinating the drops? I need to see if we can get—"

"Is this something where people are going to die if I don't fix it in the next five minutes?"

"Five minutes?" she said. "No."

"Then it's going to have to wait." The hand terminal made the falling tone of a dropped connection.

"Well, that was fucking rude," Fayez said.

"He probably has something else going on," she said.

"We're all under a little stress here. Doesn't mean he has to be a dick about it."

Elvi lifted her eyebrows and nodded, knowing as she did that he couldn't see her. "Connection request Holden."

The tones cycled until she was afraid he wouldn't answer either. When he did, his voice sounded terrible. Like he was drunk or sick. "Elvi. What's the matter?"

"Hi," she said. "I don't know if you're busy right now, and you're not really responsible for getting supplies to us, but if you have a minute, I'd like to—"

Fayez shouted, interrupting her. "She knows how to make us not blind."

There was a pause. Holden grunted. She imagined it was the effort of standing up. "Okay. I'll be right there."

"Bring Lucia," Elvi said. "If you can find her."

"Is Murtry going to be there?"

"He's not answering my connection requests."

"Hmm," Holden said. "That's good. I don't think he's happy with me right now."



Lucia sat at Elvi's side, holding her hand. It should have felt like an intimacy, but in context, it only seemed to indicate that she was giving Elvi her full attention. A physical analog to eye contact. Holden was pacing

around the room, his footsteps sticky-sounding with the mud.

When she was done, Lucia made a ticking sound with her tongue and teeth. “I don’t know how we’d manage dosages. I don’t want to give people so little that it doesn’t have an effect.”

“What about picking babysitters?” Fayez said. “A dozen people whose cases aren’t as advanced. Shoot them up. They can take care of the rest of us until there’s another drop. Captain?”

“What? Oh, sorry. I was... um. There’s a hole in the window. Plastic. I was just making sure there weren’t any death-slugs in here. And fixing it.”

“Captain,” Lucia said, her voice sharp and crisp. “You’re taking medications for a chronic and potentially terminal condition. We are discussing whether or not to use your medication to treat other patients and leave you without.”

“That’s fine.”

“Ethically, it’s actually a little problematic,” Lucia said. “If I’m going to do this, and I very much want to, I need to know that you understand—”

“I do, I do, I do,” he said. “I’ve sucked down enough radiation that I bloom tumors a lot. The thing that keeps it under control does that thing with the other thing. And then there are other people and I can take a nap.”

Elvi could hear Lucia’s smile when she spoke. “I’m not sure the human subjects board would call that sufficient, but broadly yes.”

“Of course you use it,” he said. “Use it, go ahead. We’ll get more if we can.”

“And if we can’t?”

“I might get a new tumor before we starve. I might not,” Holden said. “I’m okay with that.”

Lucia took back her hand, leaving Elvi’s feeling a little colder. “All right, then. We should start. Can you guide me please, Captain?”

“Yes,” Holden said. “Yes, I can. But we may need to get a cup of coffee. I’m feeling a little tired.”

“I can get you some stimulants if you’d like, but there’s no coffee.”

“Right,” Holden said. “No coffee. This is a terrible, terrible planet. Show me how to make everyone better.”

Chapter Forty-Two: Havelock

The armor in the brig was a simple, unpowered suit of Kevlar and ceramic. It was vacuum rated and had a fitting for a half-hour air bottle. Its intended uses included breaking up brawls among the crew and making short, tactical spacewalks. There were probably a dozen more like it up in the main security station. He hoped that the engineers didn't think of them. When Havelock stepped into it, it pulled his pant legs up, bunching the cloth uncomfortably at the crotch. He put the shotgun strap over his shoulder and shifted, using both hands to pluck the pant back into place.

Laughter doesn't help," he said.

"Wasn't laughing," Naomi replied, then laughed.

He took a fistful of disposable handcuffs and two Tasers from the gun locker. One had a full charge, the other was at three-eighths. He made a mental note to check the batteries on all the weapons later, then remembered that there probably wasn't going to be a later. Not for him, at least. He could leave a note for Wei or something. He thought about calling Marwick, warning him that things were getting complex. Relying on the man's decency and instincts.

He didn't do it.

Naomi, floating behind him, stretched out, her fingers and toes splayed in the open air. Her paper jumpsuit crinkled and popped with every motion. Havelock looked around his office one last time. It was strange, knowing he probably wouldn't see it again. And if he did, it'd be from the inside of the cage.

If that happened, though, it would be because they'd found some way to keep from dropping into the atmosphere, burning in the high air. So the

chances were low. He wasn't going to worry about it.

"First mutiny?" Naomi said.

"Yeah. It's not really something I do."

"It gets easier," she said, holding out her hand. He looked at it in confusion. "I can take one of those."

"No," he said, tuning the suit comm unit to the channel the training group used as a default. There was no chatter at all. That was odd. He cycled through the other frequencies.

"No?"

"Look, I'm getting you out of here. Doesn't mean I'm comfortable handing you a weapon and turning my back."

"You have interesting personal boundaries," Naomi said.

"I may be working through some things right now."

The first militiaman flew through the doorway too fast, pumped on adrenaline and unaccustomed to having a gun in his hand. The second came just behind him, feet first. Havelock felt his gut go tight. They both had pistols in their hands and armbands around their biceps. Naomi, behind him, took a breath.

"Gentlemen," Havelock said with a nod. "How can I help you?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" the first one demanded, trying to bring his gun to bear and steady himself against the wall at the same time.

"Moving the prisoner," Havelock said, his voice pitched just between contempt and incredulity. "What else would I be doing?"

"Chief didn't say anything about that," the second one said.

"Chief Engineer Koenen isn't head of security on this ship. I am. You guys are helping me. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate it, but keep in mind that this is what I do, all right? What the hell are you two doing here?"

They exchanged a glance. "Chief told us to come guard the prisoner."

Naomi smiled and looked demure and non-threatening. She faked it pretty well.

"Good plan," Havelock said. "This is where they'll be coming. You two set up here in case they get through. Once I've got this one safely stowed where they won't find her, I'll come reinforce you."

"Yes, sir," the second man said, making a sharp salute with the same hand that had the gun in it. Havelock flinched. These guys were so not

ready for live rounds. Havelock pulled the shotgun to ready and racked it.

“Miss Nagata,” he said. “If you’d be so kind.”

“Yes, sir,” she said meekly and pushed off for the door.

He followed, catching himself on the doorframe and turning back.

“If anyone comes through, identify them before you start shooting, all right? I don’t want anyone to get hurt by mistake.”

“We will, sir,” the first one said. The second one nodded. Havelock would have wagered half his salary that they’d been planning to open up on anyone that came through the door. Naomi waited for him just down the corridor. He put the shotgun’s safety on and let it trail from his shoulder. All the corridors in the *Israel* were narrow, but more so here. The nearer you got to the outside, the tighter the space became. The cloth and padding along the walls ate the sounds of the ship. Numeric codes printed on the material listed what conduits and technical systems were buried in the bulkhead underneath them, the model of panel, and their replacement dates. The idea behind the foam and cloth was to make everyone safer in case of a collision or unexpected burn. Right now, it made him think of a padded cell.

Havelock nodded back over his shoulder. “If something happens, don’t go back there without me.”

“Hadn’t planned on it.”

They moved down the corridor, Havelock taking lead and gesturing her forward. She didn’t move with the tactical instinct of someone trained to do it, but she was smart and quiet and caught on quickly. She also had a Belter’s grace in zero g. If he’d had a few weeks with a squad of people like her, he’d have given them live rounds. At the wall before the intersection with the maintenance corridor, he gestured to the thin ceramic lip of the bulkhead.

“Stay here,” he whispered. “And stay small.”

Naomi lifted her fist. Havelock moved forward. At the intersection, two more of the team were braced in what they probably thought was a cover position. One of them was solid. The other had his hand too far forward. If he tried to push off, he’d get a backspin that would turn him away from the fight. They’d been over this.

“Gentlemen,” Havelock said as he slid forward through the air. “Walters and... Honneker, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Honneker said.

“What’s our situation?”

“Chief called for radio silence. Don’t want to warn the enemy what we’re up to. We’ve got Boyd and Mfume at the decompression hatch. Chief’s got Salvatore and Kemp. They’re going forward to flush the bad guys out.”

“Who do we have outside?”

“Outside?” He shook his head, uncomprehending.

“Did we put anybody in suits and send them out the other airlocks?”

“Hey,” Honneker said, “that’s a good idea. We should do that.”

“So didn’t do it already,” Havelock said.

“No, sir. Didn’t think of it.”

“All right,” Havelock said, and the dry rattle of gunfire echoed from down the corridor. The two engineers turned, pulling themselves to look. Honneker pulled a little too hard, launching himself into the corridor where anyone coming the other direction could have shot him while he flailed. The radio clicked to life in Havelock’s ear. The chief engineer sounded like a kid at a birthday party.

“We have contact! We have contact! The enemy’s taken cover in the lavatory by secondary supply. We have him pinned down!”

A flurry of shots rang out, coming through the radio a fraction of a second before the sound could move through the ship’s air. Koenen started shouting at someone to pull back, then realized his radio was still live and cut it. Havelock braced his ankle in a handhold, stretched out to Honneker, and pulled him back in gently.

“What do we do?” Walters said as Honneker steadied himself on a handhold. “Should we go forward? We could grab some suits and go around like you said?”

Havelock took out the fully charged Taser, shaking his head. It was ready to fire. The second one, with the low charge, took half a second to go to ready status. The two men were looking at him for guidance.

“You should both look down the corridor,” Havelock said, pointing at the intersection with his chin. When they turned, he shot them both in the back. Their bodies arched, shuddered, and went still. Havelock took their pistols, disabled their suit radios, and handcuffed them first to each other, and then to one of the handholds.

“Clear,” he said over his shoulder, his voice calm but strong enough to

carry. Naomi moved forward, shifting from one side of the corridor to the other so that she was never more than a fraction of a second from something solid she could use to change direction. Good instincts.

“That’s four down,” she said. “Are you really good at this, or are they really bad?”

“Teaching may not be my strong suit,” Havelock said. “And we do have the element of surprise on our side.”

“I guess,” Naomi said, her voice making her skepticism clear. “How are you doing?”

Havelock started to say *I’m fine* by reflex, and then paused. He had just attacked and disabled two of his crewmen who’d been working at the direct and explicit order of his superior officer. He’d betrayed the trust of men he’d been traveling with for years on behalf of a Belter saboteur. And they were all of them days from dying. And, maybe oddly, it was that last fact that made all the rest all right. He was a dead man. They were all dead men. So there was a sense in which what he did now didn’t matter. He was free to follow his conscience wherever it led.

It was the security man’s nightmare scenario. In the face of death, why wouldn’t there be riots? Why wouldn’t there be killing and theft and rape? If there were no consequences—or if all the consequences were the same—then anything became possible. It was his job to expect the worst of humanity, including himself. And now here he was, helping a lawfully bound prisoner escape because he liked the death she offered him better than Murtry’s plastic-and-ceramic sepulcher standing on an empty planet. He didn’t give a good goddamn about New Terra or Ilus or whatever the unpleasant ball of mud under them got called. He cared about the people. The ones on the *Israel* and the ones on the *Barbapiccola* and the ones on the surface. All of them. Staking a claim that the corporation could use to protect its assets after they all died just wasn’t good enough.

“I’m weirdly at peace with this,” he said.

“Probably a good sign,” she said, and a fresh round of shooting started. Havelock gestured for her to stay and pushed forward.

All the major corridors on the *Israel* had decompression hatches: thick circles of metal with hard polymer seals. Most of the time they were bumps in the walls, larger than the ship designs a generation or two later, but easy enough to ignore. If something holed the ship, the hatch would close with

the speed and amorality of a guillotine. If someone got caught in it, one loss was better than venting the air. Havelock had seen training videos about misfires, and he'd been nervous around them ever since. One man was pressed to the wall, eyeing the corridor ahead anxiously. Havelock cleared his throat, and the man spun, pistol at the ready.

"Mfume," Havelock said, his palms up. "Where's Boyd?"

"He went forward," Mfume said, gesturing with the gun, but not lowering it. "The chief's getting shot at. And he told me to stay here. And I stayed, but—"

"It's all right," Havelock said, moving closer slowly, not making eye contact. He kept looking down the corridor, trying to shift the man's attention there. The raised pistol made his chest itch. "You did the right thing."

The radio crackled back to life, and the chief engineer spoke. He sounded winded. "We've locked the little bastard down. He winged Salvatore, but it's not bad. I need everyone up here. We're going to rush him."

"That's probably not a good idea," Havelock said on the open channel.

"It's all right," the chief engineer said. "We can take him."

"Not without casualties that you don't have to take," Havelock said. "Is he in armor?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I got one hit on him," another voice said, its tone high and tight, like a kid on his first hunt who thinks he shot a deer.

"Everyone check in," the chief said.

"Jones and I are in the brig, chief. Everything's quiet."

"Prisoner giving you any shit?" the chief asked.

"I moved her," Havelock said. "She's fine. I need you to pull back now. We have to do this by the numbers."

Another half dozen gunshots peppered the air. Mfume twitched with each of them. Havelock gently pushed the barrel of the man's gun away until it pointed at the wall. Mfume didn't seem to notice he'd done it.

"No can do," Koenen said. "If we let up, this Belter sonofabitch is going to get loose. We've got to finish this thing. Honneker! Walters! Get your nuts in your palms and head forward, boys. This piece of shit is going down."

The silence on the radio was eerie.

“Walters?” the chief engineer said.

Havelock took Mfume’s wrist and twisted, bracing one leg against the wall for leverage. Mfume cried out, but he loosened his grip on the gun enough for Havelock to bat it away. The black metal spun down the corridor, and Mfume yelled and tried to push him away. Havelock shifted his grip, pulling out and down, peeling Mfume away from his bracing wall. The engineer screamed again, and Havelock fired the Taser into his back. Mfume bounced against the far wall, limp as a puppet, and Havelock pulled the shotgun off his back and shifted to jam one knee against the lip of the decompression hatch and the other foot behind him against a handhold.

“Nagata,” he shouted. “We’re about to have company.”

Down the corridor, the chief engineer boiled around the corner and slammed into the wall, firing his pistol wildly.

“Cease fire!” Havelock called. “You’ve got one of your own floating outside cover. Cease fire!”

“Fuck you!” Koenen shouted, and Havelock pulled the shotgun’s trigger. The bag round took the chief in the side and sent him spinning. Havelock landed the second shot in the man’s back just as three more engineers caromed around the corner in a clump. Havelock shot each of them once, then shifted himself to the other side of the hatch and pushed off, stowing the shotgun and pulling the Tasers. The low-charge one was already dead, and he dropped it. One of the men was bleeding; a droplet of blood the size of a fingernail floated in the air. All four men were gasping in pain. Two of them had dropped their weapons, and the other two—the bleeding man and Koenen—seemed unaware Havelock was there at all. Havelock Tased the first of the floating men, then grabbed the one who was bleeding, Salvatore.

“You. Kemp.”

“You shot me.”

“With a bag round. The other guy shot Salvatore with a bullet. You need to get him to the medical bay.”

“You’re a *traitor*,” the chief engineer shouted, and Havelock Tased him before turning back to Kemp.

“I’m taking your gun away, and I’m giving you Salvatore. You’re helping him get to the medical bay now. You understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Kemp said, then looked over Havelock’s shoulder and nodded. “Ma’am.”

“Everything under control?” Naomi asked.

“Wouldn’t go that far,” Havelock said, putting Kemp’s hand on Salvatore’s arm and giving them both a little shove back up the corridor. “I’m fairly sure the two from the brig are on their way down here.”

“We should leave, then.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

The short stretch of corridor between the corner and the airlock had a sealed door to secondary storage, a low access panel to the power conduits in the walls, and the entrance to the maintenance airlock’s locker room. The space was narrow and cramped. Bullet holes pocked the cloth. One of them had penetrated the wall and hit a hydraulic tube. The safety hydraulic fluid was polymerizing in the air, a hundred tiny greenish dots slowly turning white. The original leak was probably already sealed with a hunk of the stuff. The washroom was the standard utility size, so small that squatting on the vacuum seat meant pressing back to one wall and knees to the other. It wouldn’t have been much for cover in the first place, and the narrow door stood open. A dozen bullet holes scarred the walls and the doorway.

“Okay,” Havelock said, and a gun popped out, firing blind down the hallway. He pushed Naomi behind him, shouting, “Stop! Stop! I’ve got Nagata right here!”

“Stay the hell back!” a man’s voice shouted from the washroom. It sounded almost familiar, but Havelock couldn’t place it. “I swear to God I’ll shoot.”

“I noticed,” Havelock shouted back.

“It’s okay, Basia,” Naomi called. “It’s me.”

The voice went silent. Havelock moved forward slowly, ready for the gun to reappear. It didn’t. The man floating in the washroom wore military body armor of a Martian design that was maybe half a decade out of date. His hair was dark with flecks of gray at the temples, and he had a welding torch in one hand. The gun was in the other. His eyes were wide and his skin was ashy. A streak across the side of the armor showed where one of the militia’s bullets had skipped off his ribs. Havelock put up his left hand, palm out, but kept the Taser tight in his right.

“Okay,” he said. “It’s all right. We’re all on the same side here.”

“Who the hell are you?” the man demanded. “You’re the security guy. The one that locked her up.”

“Used to be,” Havelock said.

Naomi put her hands on Havelock’s shoulders, pulling herself over him to see the other man.

“We’re leaving,” she said. “Want to come with?”

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Chapter Forty-Three: Basia

We're leaving," Naomi said. "Want to come with?"

Basia felt a powerful flush of embarrassment. Things had started out so well.

He'd cut into the *Israel's* airlock control panel with the efficiency of long practice. The composite plating had been an old layering system he'd seen often working on Ganymede, and the familiarity had given him a sense of confidence. He'd floated through the short corridor to a storage and locker room without seeing a soul, clutching his pistol in one hand. He'd hoped the weapon would turn out to be unnecessary. On the other side of the locker room was the starboard passageway that would lead to the brig. He was about sixty meters from his goal, and not even an alarm had gone off.

His first sign that things were going wrong was a massive barrage of gunfire that seemed to come from everywhere at once. He'd been hiding in the tiny lavatory closet ever since.

"I came to rescue you," Basia said, recognizing how silly the words sounded even as he said them.

"Thanks for that," Naomi replied with a smile.

"Yeah, so, we should probably keep—" the Earther in the body armor started to say, then was cut off by a new fusillade of shots. Bullets bounced off the corridor walls, tearing strips of foam off to join the floating blobs of solidified hydraulic fluid. The Earther shoved Naomi into the lavatory with Basia, mashing them both against the back wall. More shots hit, including one that skipped off the Earthman's shoulder plating, leaving a long dented streak.

“I’m Basia,” he said.

The Earther leaned around the doorway with a bulky rifle of some kind and fired several booming shots. “Havelock. Let’s cover the rest once we’re out of here.”

Before Basia knew she was going to do it, Naomi plucked the pistol out of his hand and held it out to Havelock. “You might need this.”

“No,” he replied, and fired off his big rifle a few more times. “No lethal rounds. We’re not killing these idiots if we can avoid it.”

“Then what?” she asked.

Havelock was pulling fat shotgun shells out of a pouch on his armor and loading them into his gun. “As soon as I move into the corridor, you two head to the airlock as fast as you can.” He loaded one last shell into the gun, then racked it with a loud clack. “Basia, you’re armored, so keep her in front of you. Naomi, you’ll be moving through a storage compartment. Grab a suit. Anything you can put on fast.”

“Ready when you are,” Naomi replied and put a hand on Havelock’s shoulder. Basia nodded his fist at the Earthman.

“Then go,” Havelock said and darted into the corridor firing his shotgun. Naomi followed him out and turned the other direction, toward the locker room and the airlock; Basia stayed right behind. They’d only gone a few meters when he felt two bruising hammer blows on his back.

“I’m shot!” he yelled in a panic. “I got shot!”

Naomi didn’t slow down. “Is your HUD telling you you’re bleeding out?”

“No.”

“Then you’ll live. That’s what the armor is for.”

“Less talk,” Havelock said from right behind him, and gave him a shove in the back. “More escaping.”

Basia hadn’t even known he was there. He stifled an undignified squeak. Several meters ahead, Naomi darted into the storage room, and Basia followed when he reached the doorway. She was already wriggling her way into a bright orange emergency atmosphere suit. Havelock paused at the door to fire several more shots down the corridor.

“Tune to twenty-seven oh one five,” the Earther said.

“What?” The words made no sense to Basia. And the whole sequence of events was more and more coming to feel like a bad dream. People shooting

and spouting nonsense at him. The sense of peace and heroism he'd felt when he agreed to the rescue mission was entirely gone.

"It's the frequency the security team's using," Havelock said. "You can listen in. They aren't encrypting. Because"—he sighed—"they're fucking amateurs."

Basia found the menu to switch his suit's radio frequency and set it to 27.015. "—in on it," a voice said. Young, male, angry.

"The fact that he's shooting back at us makes it pretty goddamn clear," an older voice said. "He shot me with a couple fucking beanbag rounds. I think he broke a rib."

"So," Havelock said, then paused to fire off another shot. "I guess this is a decision I don't get to take back." Basia couldn't tell who he was talking to.

"I'm gonna shoot you in the face, asshole," the older man said. This was followed by another barrage of gunfire that tore up the hallway.

"Mostly you're shooting the ship, chief," Havelock replied. His voice was matter-of-fact. He seemed halfway between being embarrassed on the attacker's behalf and steeled for more violence of his own. Basia remembered someone telling him about the idea of *Bushido* back when he'd first signed on for work on Ganymede. They'd said it was the peace and effectiveness that came from already thinking of yourself as dead. Havelock reminded him of that.

"Kemp," the older voice said. "Are you in position?"

"We're suited up and moving to emergency access one eleven," a voice replied.

"Go faster, get ahead of them."

"Hey Kemp?" Havelock said. "Thought I sent you to medical with Salvatore? You didn't leave him bleeding out in a corridor somewhere, did you?"

"No, sir," Kemp replied. "Someone's taking him there now—"

"Stop talking to him!" the angry older man said. "He is not on our team!"

Naomi was struggling to get the emergency suit over her shoulders, and Basia pushed over to help her. Havelock stayed at the locker room hatch, occasionally firing down the corridor.

"Find an air bottle," Naomi said, then started opening locker doors and

rummaging through the contents. Basia helped.

“Hey, Mfume?” Havelock said.

“What?” a new voice snapped.

“Turning on your boot mags to stick to the floor behind cover is a good instinct. But in the position you’re crouched in, your knee is sticking out past the corner.” Havelock fired a shot from his shotgun, and someone on the radio screeched in pain. “See?”

Basia found a locker full of emergency air bottles and helped Naomi connect one to her suit, twisting it to break the seal. A few seconds later she gave him the thumbs-up.

“We’re ready to go,” she told Havelock.

The Earther fired off a few more shots, then backed into the locker room with them. He handed his shotgun to Naomi, who pointed it at the doorway to cover them while the two men sealed their helmets.

“Changed your mind about giving me a gun?” Naomi asked.

“I’ll want it back.”

“We’re ready out here,” Kemp said on the radio.

“Hey, guys?” Havelock said. “Don’t do that. We’d barely started on the spacewalk combat tactics. You head out there with live ammo and it will get really dangerous.”

“Well, the chief said—”

“Stop talking to him!” the older man yelled, loud enough to distort Basia’s helmet speakers. “Goddammit you guys!”

“Koenen,” Havelock said. His voice sounded subtly different now that his helmet was on and sealed. “I’m serious. Don’t send your guys out there. Someone’s going to get hurt or dead.”

“Yeah,” the chief replied. “You Belter-loving traitorous sonofabitch.”

“How’re those ribs, chief?” Havelock said, a smile in his voice. “You see, right now, you’re acting out of anger. Not thinking it through. This is why I didn’t want to break out the live rounds.”

Basia strapped on the EVA pack he’d left by the airlock hatch. Naomi handed him the shotgun and pulled two more packs out of storage. A moment later, she and Havelock were wearing them and the inner airlock door was cycling closed. Havelock took the shotgun away from Basia and hung it from a strap on his harness. Naomi started the airlock cycle.

“You know,” she said, “they can just kill this airlock from the bridge.”

As if in response to her words, the airlock status light on the control panel shifted to red, and the cycle stopped. Havelock punched something into the panel and it started again.

“They won’t have had time to reset all the security overrides,” he said.

“RCE security can countermand ship operations?” Naomi asked.

“Welcome to corporate security. The ship’s crew are glorified taxi drivers. Security division works directly for the company, protecting its interests. We can override anything they do.”

“This is why everyone hates you,” Basia said.

The airlock cycle completed, and the outer door opened. Havelock gestured them out. “You sure you don’t like me right now? Just a little bit?”

Ilus’ star was just peeking around the limb of the planet, and Basia’s visor dimmed dramatically to keep it from blinding him. The planet itself was the same angry ball of storm-wracked gray clouds. In the distance, the *Rocinante* flashed green and red landing lights at them, marking its position.

“Okay,” Havelock said, his voice crackling with low-level static. “Should probably get moving. They’ve got guys outside on the other side of the ship. They can’t catch us, but watch each other for grapnel lines.”

Naomi was already firing her EVA pack, moving out of the airlock on four small white cones of compressed gas. “Alex? We’re out.”

“Oh, thank God,” the pilot said, his drawl mostly disappearing in the tension of his voice. “I’ve been worried sick over here. Basia with you?”

“Yeah,” Basia said. “I’m here.”

“You’ll be picking up three,” Naomi said. “Come get us.”

“Three?”

“Taking a stray home with me.”

“A stray?” Havelock said, amusement in his voice. “I’m the one doing the rescuing here.”

“It’s complicated,” Naomi continued. They were all out of the airlock now. The remote connection light went on in Basia’s HUD, and a complex program began spooling across it. Alex having the *Rocinante* take control of their EVA navigation to bring them to the ship. The pack did several sharp burns, and the *Rocinante* began slowly growing.

“Glad Basia made it okay,” Alex said. “Worried sendin’ him in there like that.”

"I didn't wind up helping much," Basia admitted, feeling that same rush of embarrassment.

"You got everyone looking in the wrong direction," Havelock said. "That was actually pretty helpful."

"Yay," Alex said, "we're all heroes. There're four guys tailing you right now. Do we know about them?"

A small box appeared on Basia's HUD. Inside it was video of four people in vacuum suits and wearing EVA packs, the bulk of the *Edward Israel* behind them. Without his doing anything, the view zoomed in until he could see the weapons they were carrying. Alex was sending them all images pulled from the *Rocinante*'s telescopes.

"Yeah, those are the militia I formed and trained," Havelock said, then sighed. "In retrospect, that's seeming like a bad idea."

"Do you want me to take care of that?" Alex asked.

"Does your version of 'taking care of it' involve your ship's point defense cannons?" Havelock replied.

"Uh. Yeah?"

"Then no. These guys are dumb and untrained enough to still be gung-ho. But they're just engineers. They're not bad guys," Havelock said.

"They're shootin' at you," Alex said, and suddenly Basia's HUD had red lines across it. "Got the *Roci* trackin' bullet paths."

The knowledge that there were silent, invisible, and potentially deadly projectiles flying past him made Basia's scalp tingle. The red lines on the display apparently meant more to Havelock, because the Earther said, "They're nowhere near us. They haven't got HUD-integrated targeting, so they're just spraying and praying right now. There's no reason to return fire."

"XO?" Alex said. It took Basia a second to realize he was talking to Naomi.

"Havelock's calling this one," she replied. "They're his people."

"Okay," Alex said doubtfully.

The *Rocinante* continued to grow minute by minute until Basia could see the tiny ring of lights around its airlock. He'd only been on the ship a short time, but it felt like coming home. His EVA pack fired off a quick series of blasts and spun him around to face the *Israel*, then began braking. Almost there.

“Guys,” Havelock said. “Recoilless is an exaggeration. It doesn’t mean there’s no recoil at all.”

It sounded like more nonsense talk to Basia until he looked at the *Rocinante*’s video of the pursuing team and saw one of the four men spinning and rotating in space, frantically firing his EVA pack to get under control. It only seemed to make it worse, as every blast of gas from the pack just added a new axis to the rotation.

“Then that’s an inaccurate name for the weapons,” the man called Kemp replied.

“And if we’d gotten to more advanced zero-g tactics, I would have explained that,” Havelock said. “I also would have taught you to use the integrated compensation software to have the EVA pack do stabilizing bursts every time you fire the gun.”

“Seems to me there’s a lot you didn’t show us,” Kemp replied.

“Yeah, and now that you’re shooting at me, I’m just sick about that. In the meantime, please stop. Drake is way out of control and drifting away from you guys. Someone needs to go get him before he gets too far.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” the one Havelock had called Koenen said. “Get us to call off the chase.”

“I’d like,” Havelock said, his voice sad, “to keep Drake from falling out of space and dying. Also, I’m arguing with the pilot of the gunship behind me so that he *doesn’t* need to turn you into a cloud of red mist with his point defense cannons. But you guys are making it harder and harder to be convincing.”

“Don’t threaten—”

“Go get Drake. Get back in the ship. Stop shooting. If one of those shots you’re spraying around accidentally hits, I’m taking the gunship off the leash.”

There was a long silence. The red lines on Basia’s HUD began disappearing one by one until none were left. The EVA pack fired off one long, final burst, then spun him around. The outer airlock door of the *Rocinante* was already open, waiting for them. Naomi drifted inside, grabbed a handhold, and waited for them to follow. Shaded from Ilus’ star the polarization of her faceplate faded, and the blue glow of the airlock’s LED lights illuminated the inside of her helmet. Her wide smile was clearly visible.

“Home again, home again,” she said. Basia drifted in next to her and she caught his arm to stop him. “Thank you for coming for me.”

Basia blushed and raised his palms in a Belter shrug. “I didn’t do much but get shot at.”

“Sometimes just showing up is a lot.”

Havelock caught the edge of the airlock entrance and stopped, looking back toward the *Israel*. “Hey, you got Drake? He okay?”

“Yes, sir,” Kemp replied. “We caught him.”

“Havelock,” the older, angrier voice said. “You won’t get away with this. RCE will burn you to the ground when we get back. And I’ll be there to see it happen.”

Havelock laughed. “Chief? I hope we both live so long. Havelock out.” He backed into the airlock and slapped the wall panel to start the cycle.

“We made it,” Basia said. He felt a brief moment of euphoria, followed by a sudden release of pants-shitting terror he hadn’t even known he’d been repressing. If he’d been standing in gravity, he would have collapsed. Naomi and Havelock began stripping off their EVA packs while the airlock ran through the pressurization cycle. Basia fumbled at the straps of his own, but his hands were shaking so badly he couldn’t manage it. After a few moments, Naomi helped him pull it off.

The pack drifted across the compartment and hit the bulkhead with a dull thud. Basia had just enough time to realize he’d actually heard something other than his own breathing when the inner airlock door slid open. Alex floated, framed by the airlock entrance, a goofy grin on his broad dark face.

“XO,” he said, “good to have you back on the ship.”

Naomi pulled her helmet off and tossed it to him. “Good to be back, Mister Kamal.”

There was a short pause while they grinned at each other, then Naomi pushed off toward him and Alex grabbed her in a hug.

“They treat you okay?” Alex asked.

“Kept me locked in a kennel like a dog,” Naomi replied, jerking her head toward Havelock. The squat Earthman had removed his own helmet, and it floated in the air next to him. He was wearing a sheepish half smile. Without his helmet on, Basia saw his short, light-colored hair, a square jaw, and dark eyes. A sort of generic rugged handsomeness. Like a video star

playing a cop in an action movie. It made Basia want to dislike him.

“It was policy,” Havelock said. “I’m—I was chief of ship security on the *Edward Israel*. I think I may have just resigned that position. I was the one that took your XO captive. I hope you won’t hold that against me.”

“Okay,” Alex said, then turned back to Naomi as if Havelock weren’t even there. “What now?”

“Status report,” Naomi replied. “What’s the latest on the degrading orbit?”

“*Barbapiccola*’s going down first, then the *Israel*, then we get to pick between dying in orbit when the batties run out, burning in the atmosphere, or getting shot by aliens,” Alex said with a humorless laugh. “We’re all fucked six ways from Sunday. But it’s nice to have you back on board.”

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Chapter Forty-Four: Holden

Holden shuffled his way around the tower again.

He tried to calculate how many hours he'd gone without sleep, but his brain had lost the ability to do math, and Ilus' thirty-hour day kept screwing up his estimates. A long time was all he could come up with.

He triggered his armor's medical system to shoot him up with more amphetamines, and was troubled when the HUD told him the supply was empty. How much did that mean he'd taken? Like the question of how long it had been since he slept, it was an insoluble mystery.

A pair of death-slugs were climbing the side of the tower toward a teardrop-shaped window. The plastic that had been stretched across the opening had a few small rips in it, so Holden knocked the slugs off the wall with his shovel and then kicked them away. He rinsed the toxic slime off his boot in a muddy puddle.

The rain had lessened to a drizzle, which was good, but the temperature had continued to drop, which was bad. While the overall light level didn't change much with the constant cloud cover, Holden had started noticing the day-to-night transition by the appearance of frost on the walls of the tower. It wasn't dangerously cold yet, but it would get worse. Pretty soon the survivors would be adding hypothermia to their list of unpleasant ways to die.

He bit his tongue until it bled and continued his slow trudge around the tower.

He heard Murtry before he saw him. A quiet, ghostly voice drifting out of the gray rain that gradually resolved into a man-shaped spot slightly darker than the space around it.

“—immediate action. They’ve escalated. We’ll have an argument that we acted with restraint until—” Murtry was saying, but stopped when he heard Holden approaching.

“What are you doing out here?” Holden asked. Murtry was still blind. It was dangerous for him to be wandering around outside. The ground, where it wasn’t puddles, was a slick clay that could take someone off their feet in a heartbeat. And the numbers of slugs driven to the surface by the water had Holden wondering if Ilus was a hollow ball filled with poisonous worms.

“Minding my business, Captain,” Murtry said, not quite looking in Holden’s direction.

“Meaning I should do the same?”

“Glad you followed that.”

The two men stood for a long moment. Far above them, their crews were probably shooting at each other right now. They were enemies, and they weren’t. Some part of Holden’s sleep-deprived, half-broken mind still wanted to make peace with Murtry and the RCE. Or at least didn’t want the man’s death on his conscience.

“It’s dangerous out here,” Holden said, keeping his own voice even and calm.

“That makes it different how?” Again, the clenched jaw cutting off the last word with a snap. His anger gave Holden a thin sliver of hope. Maybe Naomi had gotten out. He needed to talk to Alex.

“I can’t let you get killed on my watch,” Holden said.

“I appreciate your concern.”

It all felt vaguely ridiculous, tap-dancing around the issue. They both knew what was happening. He felt like they were playing poker and only pretending they couldn’t see each other’s hand.

“Can I help you back inside?” Holden asked.

“I have some business to finish up here,” Murtry replied with a meaningless smile.

“When we find your corpse later, I’m going to tell everyone I warned you.”

“If I die,” Murtry said, his smile becoming a shade more genuine, “I’ll try to leave a note saying it wasn’t your fault.”

He signaled the end of the conversation by turning away and mumbling into his hand terminal. Holden left him and immediately called Alex.

“Kind of busy here, Cap,” the pilot said without preamble.

“Tell me we’re busy because you’ve rescued Naomi and everything is going perfectly. Is she on the ship?”

There was a long pause as Alex noisily exhaled into the microphone. “So, that part where I went to rescue Naomi? Yeah. I sent Basia.”

Holden spun on his heel to look back at Murtry. The RCE security chief was still talking on his hand terminal. “We sent the prisoner to rescue another prisoner? If that hasn’t already worked, I think I may be watching Murtry order their executions right now.”

“No no,” Alex said in a rush. “It did kind of go to shit, but the radio chatter I’m gettin’ makes me think Naomi’s fine. In fact, I think she might be escaping on her own and savin’ Basia.”

Holden couldn’t help but laugh. Murtry’s head swiveled, looking for the source of the laughter with blind eyes. “Sounds about right. Where are they now?”

“It’s a little confusin’, actually,” Alex said. “I’ve definitely got Basia’s IFF pinging away outside the *Israel*. But there’re a bunch of other suits out there. So it’s complicated.”

“Can you, you know, ask?”

“Yeah, no. Basia switched channels on me without leavin’ the old channel open. Not a guy who’s done a lot of tactical comm drills, I’m guessing. I’m hoping one of them starts talking to me so I can get the new frequencies.”

Holden watched Murtry, probably using his radio to coordinate the pursuit of Naomi and whoever else she was with now. He fought down a sudden urge to walk over to the man, knock him to the ground, take his terminal, and demand to know what the hell was going on.

And then he stopped fighting.

Murtry had just started to turn toward him, frowning at the sound of his approaching steps, when Holden yanked the terminal out of his hand and shoved him to the muddy ground.

“Stay down there or I’ll beat you unconscious,” he told the RCE man. Holding the terminal to his ear he said, “Who’s on the other end of this?”

“Who the fuck is *this*? Where’s Murtry?”

“I’m standing on him right now,” Holden said. “So if you’re part of the team that’s chasing Naomi Nagata, you should stop.”

The man on the other end said, "Comms is compromised, switch to two-alpha," and the connection dropped. Someone who'd spent some time training on tactical comms, it seemed.

"Alex," Holden said. "I've disrupted their command channel. Go get our people."

"Not a problem, boss. The situation has clarified some. I've got three comin' aboard."

"Who's the third?"

"About to go find out. Alex out."

Murtry pushed himself to his knees with a grunt, frowning at a spot just over Holden's left shoulder. "Tough guy when your opponent is blind."

"We're working on fixing that," Holden replied, tossing the man's hand terminal to the ground next to him. "You feel free to come look me up after."

"I will," Murtry said. The RCE security chief picked himself up and began carefully walking toward the alien tower's entrance.

When he was far enough away he wouldn't hear, Holden said, "Looking forward to it." He was surprised to find that was true. When Murtry disappeared around the corner of the tower, Holden began his slow trudge the other direction.

His earbud crackled to life and Amos said, "Cap? That doctor is looking for you."

"Lucia or Elvi?"

"The cute one."

"Lucia or Elvi?"

"The one not married to our prisoner."

"Tell Elvi I'll be there after this pass around the tower," Holden said and killed the connection.

A few minutes later he rounded the last corner, bringing the tower entrance into sight. Elvi was waiting for him there, her face set in a deep frown.

"It didn't work," Holden said.

"What?"

"The oncocidals. My medicine. It's not working."

"What?" Elvi replied, "Why do you say that? What happened?"

"You're frowning."

“Oh. No. I was just thinking that the membrane-bound proteins in our cells must have some sort of functional sites in common with the local life, even though as far as I can tell, they’re totally different proteins. The oncocidals are having a similar effect on mitotic division even though our amino acid groups barely overlap. It’ll take decades to figure that one out.”

“So let’s pretend I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Holden said.

“It’s working,” Elvi said, and her frown shifted into a brilliant smile. “The microorganism’s cell replication is failing. The colonies are breaking down and the light-scattering effect is going too. I can almost read again, if the font’s big enough.”

Holden felt a rush of relief that immediately turned into a wave of dizziness. He collapsed against the wall of the tower, taking long slow breaths to keep from passing out. A few meters away, a slug crawled along the wall toward him. He started to poke it off the wall with his shovel, then realized he’d lost it somewhere and he couldn’t feel his hands.

“Are you okay?” Elvi asked, reaching out tentatively with one hand to find him. “Your respiration sounds funny.”

“Passing out,” Holden said between long breaths. “How long until everyone can see again?”

“We need to get you inside,” Elvi replied, throwing his left arm around her shoulders and guiding him to the door. “I think you’ve been awake for something like four days.”

“It’s okay,” Holden said. “I took a *lot* of speed. How long?”

Elvi stopped, throwing her other arm around his waist to hold him up. It was both a relief and, if he were being honest, a little unflattering how quickly every bit of sexual tension had been drained from their interactions. He was giddy and sleep-deprived enough he almost asked her what had changed. Fortunately, she spoke first.

“Not sure. The dead organism isn’t refracting light like the live ones do. Most of the loss of vision came from that, not from actual blockages. We’ll still have some floaties in our eyes for a while, but...”

“So, that means soon?”

Elvi got him in the doorway and over to a pile of blankets. She gently lowered him until he was lying flat on his back. “Yes, soon I should think. Hours, maybe. Days at the most.”

“How did you know these blankets were here?”

“We laid this out as a sleeping location for you three days ago,” Elvi said with a smile and patted his cheek. “You were just too stubborn to use it.”

“Thank you.”

“We have a small privacy tent too,” she replied, pulling on something by his feet. A thin sleeve of material sprang up and along the length of his body, completely covering him.

“Thank you,” Holden said again, his eyes closing against his will. He could already feel the impending sleep as a tingling in his extremities. “Wake me up in about a year. Oh, and make sure Murtry doesn’t kill me until then.”

“Why would he do that?” Elvi asked.

“We’re kind of at war,” Holden said. Unconsciousness washed into him, sleep pulling him down into the endless void.

“So,” a voice said right next to his ear, “we really need to get a move on.”

“Miller,” Holden said, not opening his eyes, “if you make me get up, I swear I will find a way to murder you.”

“You did your bit here,” Miller continued, undeterred. “Now you need to come with me and do the other thing. And I’m not sure how much time we’ve got. So, upsy daisy.”

Holden forced his eyes open and looked to his side. Miller was inside the tent with him, but also too large to be in the tent with him. The overlapping images sent a spike of pain through his head so he closed them again. “Where are we going?”

“Got a train to catch. Find the back room with the weird pillar in the middle. You guys are using the space for storage. I’ll meet you there.”

“I hate you so, so much,” Holden said, but there was no reply. He risked opening one eye, and saw Miller was gone. When he opened the tent, Elvi was sitting next to it looking worried.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Ghost of Christmas past,” Holden said, forcing himself to sit up. “Where’s Amos?”

“He’s been spending a lot of time with Wei. I think they’re both in the next room.”

“Help me up,” Holden said, holding out one arm. Elvi climbed to her

feet and pulled on it, and he somehow managed to stand without falling over. "My heart is racing. It's not supposed to do that."

"You're full of fatigue toxins and amphetamines. I'm not surprised you're having hallucinations."

"My hallucinations are of the alien mind control variety," Holden said, and took a few unsteady steps toward the next room.

"Can you hear what you're saying?" Elvi asked, coming with him and keeping one hand under his elbow. "You're really starting to worry me."

Holden turned, straightened up, and took one long breath. Then he removed Elvi's hand from his arm and said in as steady a voice as he could manage, "I need to go somewhere and turn off the defense network so our friends don't fall out of space and die. I need you to go back to work on the sight problem. Thank you for your help."

Elvi looked unconvinced, but Holden waited her out and she eventually headed off toward the area of the tower given over to lab work.

In the next room, Amos and Wei were sitting next to a low plastic table, eating ration bars and drinking distilled water out of an old whiskey bottle.

"Got a minute?" Holden asked him, and when Amos nodded he added, "Alone?"

Wei said nothing, but hopped to her feet and left the room, hands in the air in front of her to keep from running into a wall.

"What's the word, Cap?" Amos asked. He took another bite of the protein bar and grimaced. It smelled like oil and paper.

"We got Naomi back," Holden said in a whisper, not sure how far away Wei might have gone. "She's on the *Roci*."

"Yeah, I heard," Amos said with a grin. "Chandra was telling me."

"Chandra?"

"Wei," Amos said. "She's working for the wrong people, but she's all right."

"Okay. Murtry's pissed about the rescue."

"Yeah, but fuck him."

"I also," Holden continued, "may have shoved him down and stolen his hand terminal."

"Stop making me fall in love with you, Cap, we both know it can't go anywhere."

"The point," Holden said, "is that he might try to take it out on people

here. I need you looking after everyone. Especially Lucia and Elvi. They've been the two most helpful to us, so he may try to punish us through them."

"Not so afraid of the blind guy," Amos said. "Even when I'm one too."

"That's about to end. Elvi says the drugs are working. People will be getting their sight back in hours or days."

"Cap, is this a problem you'd like me to *solve*?" Amos asked, cocking thumb and forefinger like a gun. "Because that can just happen."

"No. No escalations. I already did enough damage knocking Murtry around. I'll pay for that when the time comes, but you only do what you have to in order to protect these people when I'm gone."

"Okay," Amos said. "You got it. And what do you mean, when you're gone?"

Holden sat down on the plastic table with a thump and rubbed at eyes that were as dry as steel bearings. The planet was one big ball of humidity, yet he somehow managed to have dry itchy eyes. "I have to go with Miller. He says there's a thing that might turn off the alien artifacts, which would get the *Roci* flying again and pretty much solve all of our problems."

Amos frowned. Holden could see the big mechanic's face twitching as he formulated questions and then abandoned them without speaking. Finally he just said, "Okay. I'll keep an eye out here."

"Be here when I get back, big man," Holden said and clapped Amos on the shoulder.

"Last man standing," Amos replied with another grin. "It's in my job description."

It took Holden a few minutes to find the storage room with the oddly shaped pillar in the middle, but when he did the only person in it was Miller. The detective frowned out a what-took-you-so-long look and Holden flipped him off.

Miller turned away and walked toward the pillar, disappearing into it like a ghost walking through a wall. A few seconds later, the pillar split down the middle without a sound and opened up into a steep ramp heading down into darkness.

"Was this always here?" Holden asked. "Because if it was, and you'd told us about it, it might have saved a few lives when the storm came."

"If you'd been where I could talk to you, I might have," Miller said with a Belter shrug of the hands. "You did pretty well without me. Now get

down the ramp. We're late as it is."

The ramp dropped nearly fifty meters into the ground and ended at a metallic wall. Miller touched it and the wall, in spite of having no visible seams or joints, irised open.

"All aboard," Miller said. "This is our ride."

Holden crouched to enter through the small round opening, and found himself in a metallic cube two meters to a side. He sat on the floor, then slid down the wall until he was lying on his back.

"This is a part of the old material transfer system," Miller was saying, but Holden was already asleep.

Interlude: The Investigator

—it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out—

One hundred and thirteen times a second, it reaches out, and the investigator reaches with it. Follows. Watches. It reaches for a signal it will never find. It is not frustrated, it is not angry. It reaches out because it reaches out. What it finds, it uses to reach out, and so finds more, and reaches farther. It will never be far enough. It is unaware of this fact.

The investigator knows, and knows that it knows. An awareness in an unaware context. Consciousness within an unconscious system. So, nothing particularly new there. The investigator sighs, wishes it had a beer, knows that these are artifacts of the template. Once there was a seed crystal that had a name. It had loved and despaired. It had fought and failed and won at great sacrifice. None of that mattered. It had looked for things that were missing. For people that were missing. Everything about it is drawn along by that fact. Something is supposed to be here, and isn't.

And instead, there is a dead place. A place where nothing is. Where everything pulls back. The investigator reaches out, and what reaches out dies. The investigator ceases to reach out. It waits. It considers.

Something was here once. Something built all this, and left its meal half eaten on the table. The designers and engineers that spanned a thousand worlds had lived here and died here and left behind the everyday wonders like bones in the desert. The investigator knows this. The world is a crime scene, and the one thing that stands out—the one thing that doesn't belong—is the place that nothing goes. It's an artifact in a world of artifacts, but it doesn't fit. What would they put in a place they couldn't reach? Is it a prison, a treasure chest, a question that isn't supposed to be asked?

A bullet. A bomb still ticking under the kitchen table after the blitz was

over.

Did He who made the lamb make thee? Or was there someone else? Whoever killed you fuckers left something behind. Something made for your death, and it's right there.

One hundred thirteen times a second, it reaches out, unaware of the investigator, unaware of the scars and artifacts, the echoes of the dead, the consciousness bound within it. It reaches out because it reaches out. It knows that people are dying in some more physical place, but it is not aware that it knows. It knows that it is constructed from the death of thousands, but it is not aware that it knows. The investigator knows and is aware that it knows.

The investigator reaches out, but not at random. It looks for a path, and doesn't find one. It looks for a path, and doesn't find one. It looks for a path and finds one. Not there, not quite, but close. Two points define a line. One point is alive, and one point is death. Neither came from here. Bang those rocks together and see what sparks. See what burns.

The investigator is the tool for finding what is missing, and so it exists. All the rest is artifact. The craving for beer. The hat. The memory, and the humor, and the weird half-fondness half-contempt for something named James Holden. The love for a woman who is dead. The longing for a home that will never be. Extraneous. Meaningless.

The investigator reaches out, finds Holden. It smiles. There was a man once, and his name was Miller. And he found things, but he doesn't anymore. He saved people if he could. He avenged them if he couldn't. He sacrificed when he had to. He found the things that were missing. He knew who'd done it, and he did the obvious things because they were obvious. The investigator had grown through his bones, repopulated his eyes with new and unfamiliar life, taken his shape.

It found the murder weapon. It knew what happened, at least in broad strokes. The fine work was for the prosecutors anyway, assuming it went to trial. But it wouldn't. There were other things the tool was good for. The investigator knew how to kill when it needed to.

More than that, it knew how to die.

Chapter Forty-Five: Havelock

Havelock still wasn't convinced that Naomi Nagata was the best engineer in the system, but after watching her work, he had to concede there probably wasn't a better one. If some of the people on the *Israel* had more degrees or specialties in which they outpaced her, Naomi could make it up in sheer, bloody-minded wildness.

Okay, we can't wait any longer," she said to the muscle-bound bald man on the screen. "If he shows back up, tell him where we stand up here."

"Pretty sure the cap'n trusts your judgment," Amos said. "But yeah. I'll tell him. Anything else I should pass on?"

"Tell him he's got about a billion messages from Fred and Avasarala." Alex's voice came across the comm and also through the hatchway to the cockpit. "They're talkin' about building a mass driver, sending us relief supplies."

"Yeah?" Amos said. "How long's that gonna take?"

"About seven months," Naomi said. "But at the outside, we'll only have been dead for three of them."

Amos grinned. "Well, you kids don't have too much fun without me."

"No danger," Naomi said and broke the connection.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Havelock asked.

"Nope," Naomi replied. She pulled herself closer to the command console. "How's it going out there, Basia?"

The comm channel clicked and the Belter's voice hissed into the operations deck. The sound reverberated without giving any sense of spaciousness. A whisper in a coffin. "We're getting close out here. This is a lot of ugly."

“Good thing we’ve got a great welder,” she said. “Keep me in the loop.”

The screens on the ops deck showed the operation in all its stages: what they’d managed so far, what they still hoped. And the countdown timer that marked the hours that remained before the *Barbapiccola* started to scrape against Ilus’ exosphere and changed from a fast-moving complex of ceramic and metal into a firework.

Not days. Hours.

The tether itself looked like two webs connected by a single, hair-thin strand. All along the belly of the *Rocinante*, a dozen ceramic-and-steel foot supports made for a broad base, the black lines meeting at a hard ceramic juncture a few hundred meters out. The *Barbapiccola* underneath them almost had all of the answering structures in place. Once the Belter had the foot supports installed there too, it would be time for the Martian corvette to use its battery power to tug the Belter ship into a more stable orbit, along with its cargo of lithium ore. The complexity of the situation made Havelock a little lightheaded. As he watched, the display showing the surface of the *Barbapiccola* stuttered, and one of the red-flagged foot supports changed to green.

“Okay,” Naomi said over the open channel. “We’re reading solid on that one. Let’s move on.”

“Yeah, give me one more minute here,” Basia’s compressed voice said. “There’s a seam here I don’t like. I’m just going to...” The words trailed off. The readout stuttered red and then green again. “Okay. That’s got it. Moving on.”

“Be careful,” Alex broke in. “Keep the torch cold when you’re moving. These lines’ve got great tensile strength, but they’re crap for heat resistance.”

“Done this before,” Basia said.

“Partner,” Alex said. “I don’t think anyone’s done *this* before.”

The tether lines were standard filament design, built for retrieving dropped Martian marines. Using them to haul a full-sized spaceship was like using a thread to pull a bowling ball: possible with enough patience and skill, and easy as hell to get wrong. Naomi had spent three long hours strapped into her crash couch before she’d decided it was plausible, and even then, Havelock half thought she’d talked herself into believing it because she knew that nothing else was.

Havelock had spent the time having his connections to Murtry's terminal refused and reflecting on the fact that he'd just spectacularly quit his job. It was odd that it weighed on him as much as it did. He was eighteen months from home and probably days at the most from death, and his mind kept turning back to the uneasy surprise with himself that came from walking out on a contract. He'd never done that before. And, since he'd gone with Naomi, he wasn't even sure what his legal status was. Somewhere, he guessed, between former employee and accomplice to criminal conspiracy. It was a wider range than he knew what to do with. If he was really the face of what was happening on New Terra back home, they were all going to be at least as confused as he was.

The truth was that none of the standards of corporate law or governmental authority seemed to apply out here. He could follow the feeds, read the letters, even exchange recorded video with RCE's home office, but those were only words and pictures. The models based on experience in human space—even in the attenuated civilization of the Belt—failed here.

Mostly what he felt, though, was relief. He was very aware of how inappropriate it was, given the context, but he couldn't deny it. It didn't leave him regretting his choices. Except maybe to have taken the job. All the tragedy and pain of Ilus would have been merely sad and distressing to see from a bar on Ceres Station. From where he was, the fear had stopped being an emotion and turned into an environment.

The last foot support indicator went green.

"Okay," Naomi said. "That's looking good from here. What's it like out there, Basia?"

"Ugly as shit, but solid."

"How's your air?"

"I'm all right," the Belter said. "Thought I'd stay here, in case anything breaks that I'd be able to fix."

"No," Naomi said. "If this fails, those lines will snap fast enough to cut you in half. Come back to the barn."

Basia's percussive snort was more eloquent than words, but the small yellow dot began to move from the surface of the *Barbapiccola* up through the vacuum toward the *Rocinante*. Havelock watched, his fingers laced tightly together.

“Alex,” Naomi said, “can you check the release?”

“It’s good,” Alex said, his voice coming from the cockpit and the radio link both. “We start going pear-shaped, we can let go.”

“All right,” Naomi said. And then, softly to herself, “All right.”

“If this doesn’t work,” Alex said though the deck hatch between ops and the cockpit, “our man Basia’s going to watch his baby girl burn to death. I sort of promised him that wouldn’t happen.”

“I know,” Naomi said. Havelock had hoped she’d say, *She won’t*.

It took Basia eighteen minutes to get back to the *Roci* and another five to negotiate the airlock. Naomi spent most of that time on the radio to the captain and engineer of the *Barbapiccola*. Half the conversation was in Belter patois—*ji-ral sabe sa* and *richtig ane-nobu*—that might as well have been in code for all he could follow it. Havelock requested a connection to Murtry’s hand terminal and was refused again. He wondered whether he should write some sort of press release or letter of resignation to the company.

“All right,” Basia said, sloping up into the ops deck. His face still had the thin, watery layer of sweat adhering to it. “I’m here.”

The readout counting down to the *Barbapiccola*’s atmospheric impact was down under an hour. It was hard for Havelock to remember that the stillness of the deck was an illusion. The velocities and forces involved in anything at orbital altitudes were enough to kill a human with just the rounding error. At their speeds, the friction from air too thin to breathe would set them on fire.

“Strap in,” Naomi said, nodding to the crash couches. Then, to the radio, “*Rocinante* bei here. Dangsineun junbiga?”

“Ready con son immer, sa sa?”

Naomi smiled. “Counting down,” she said. “Ten. Nine. Eight...”

At four, the displays on the consoles began to shift color, mapping the two ships, the tether lines, the engines in psychedelic false color. Basia was muttering under his breath, and it sounded like prayer. Naomi reached *one*.

The *Rocinante* moaned. The sound was deep as a gong, but it didn’t fade like one. Instead the overtones seemed to grow, one layering over another. On the displays, the tethers shimmered, the internal forces racing along the spider-web lines in crimson and orange and silver.

“Come on, baby,” Naomi said, petting the console before her. “You can

do this. You can do it.”

“Getting pretty close to tolerance up here,” Alex said.

“I see it. Keep it gentle and steady.”

The *Rocinante* shrieked, a high scraping scream like metal being ripped apart. Havelock grabbed the sides of his crash couch, squeezing until his hands ached.

“Alex?” Naomi said.

“Just passing through a resonance window. Nothing to worry about.”

“I’m trusting you here,” Naomi said.

“Always can,” Alex said, and Havelock could hear the grin he couldn’t see. “I’m the pilot.”

Basia gasped. Havelock turned, but it took a few seconds to see what the Belter was reacting to. The countdown timer—the death timer—had changed. The *Barbapiccola* was slated to burn in three hours and fifteen minutes. Four hours and forty-three minutes. Six hours and six minutes. It was working. As Havelock watched, the life span of everyone on the ship below him ballooned out. Havelock felt like shouting. It was working. It had no right at all to have worked, and it was working.

The alarm Klaxon cut through the other noise. Naomi snapped back to her console.

“What am I lookin’ at, XO?” Alex said. The sound of the grin was gone. “Why am I seeing a bogie?”

“Checking it out,” Naomi shouted, not bothering with the radio. Havelock turned his own console to the sensor arrays. The new dot was approaching from the horizon, speeding above them in its own arc above cloud-choked Ilus.

“Where’s the *Israel*?” Havelock shouted.

“Occluded,” Naomi said. “We should be passing each other in an hour. Is that—”

“That’s the shuttle.”

The death timer showed seventeen hours and ten minutes.

“The shuttle you turned into a fucking torpedo?” Basia asked. His voice was surprisingly calm.

“Yeah,” Havelock said. “But the payload was the reactor overload, and there aren’t any reactors working, so—”

“It’s running on battery, then. That’s still going to be a hell of a lot of

kinetic energy,” Naomi said.

“Is it going to hit us?” Havelock asked, and felt stupid as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Of course it was going to hit them.

“Alex?” Naomi said. “Give me options here.”

“PDCs are online, XO,” Alex said. “All I’ve got to do is put a little battery power to ’em, set ’em to automatic, and point defense can slag that thing before it comes close.”

Twenty hours and eighteen minutes.

“Power to the PDCs,” Naomi said. “Watch the tethers.”

“Sorry,” Alex said. “Just trying to do a few too many things at once here. Powering up the PDCs.”

That won’t work, Havelock thought. *We’re forgetting something.*

The red dot drew closer. The *Israel* itself hauled up over the edge of the horizon, visual contact still blocked by the curve of the atmosphere. The shuttle sped toward them. The firing of the point defense cannons was hardly more than a brief vibration in the overwhelming strain of dragging up the *Barbapiccola*. If he hadn’t known to expect it, he’d have missed it entirely. The red dot blinked out, and then back in.

“Oh,” Alex said. “Huh.”

“Alex?” Naomi shouted. “What’s going on? Why aren’t we shooting it?”

“Oh, we shot the hell out of it,” Alex said. “Busted that shit right on up. But this right now is when I’d normally be dodging out the debris path? That’s not really an option.”

“I don’t understand,” Havelock said. And then he did. The shuttle had been a great big hunk of metal when the point defense cannons hit it. Now it was almost certainly a great number of relatively small pieces of metal with pretty close to the same mass moving at very nearly the same speed. They just traded being hit with a shuttle-sized slug for being hit with a shuttle’s mass of shrapnel.

Naomi pressed her hand to her lips. “How long before—”

The ship shuddered. For a second, Havelock thought it was the PDCs kicking in again. Something was hissing and his crash couch had a sharp edge that he didn’t remember. The death clock had gone black. A growing mass of blood around his elbow was the first concrete sign he had that he’d been hurt, but as soon as he saw it, the pain detonated.

“Ops is holed!” Naomi shouted into the radio.

“Cockpit’s sealed,” Alex said. “I’m good.”

“I’m hurt,” Havelock said, trying to move his bleeding arm. The muscles still functioned. Whatever had hit him—shuttle debris or shrapnel from the crash couch—it hadn’t crippled the limb. The crimson globe inching its way along his arm was getting fairly impressive, though. Someone was tugging at him. Basia, the Belter.

“Get off the couch,” the Belter said. “We’ve got to get off the deck.”

“Yes,” Havelock said. “Of course.”

Naomi was moving through the compartment. Bits of anti-spalling foam swirled in the thinning air like snowflakes.

“Are you gettin’ anything over those holes?” Alex asked, his voice disconcertingly calm.

“I’m counting ten down here,” Naomi said as Havelock hauled himself out of the crash couch and kicked off toward the hatch leading deeper into the ship. “I didn’t bring that many beer coasters. I’m taking the civilians down to the airlock, putting them in suits. Havelock’s hit.”

“Dead?”

“Not dead,” Havelock said.

Naomi finished keying in the override and the deck hatch opened with a little puff of incoming air. Havelock’s ears popped as he pulled himself down into the airlock deck.

“How’s the tether?” Basia asked, following close behind.

“No damage to the main line,” Alex said. “We lost one of the foot supports, but I can try to adjust.”

“Do it,” Naomi said, and grabbed Havelock by the shoulder. The emergency aid station by the airlock door had a roll of elastic bandage and a small wound vacuum. Naomi pulled his arm out straight and pressed that vacuum’s clear plastic nozzle into the center of the globe of blood. “What am I looking at, Alex?”

“Checking, XO. All right. We’ve got a slow leak in the machine shop. The port side’s pretty messed up. Sensor arrays and PDCs on that side. Maneuvering thrusters aren’t responding. They may not even be there. There’s a lot of power conduits right around there too, but with the reactor off-line, I don’t know if they’re hit or not.”

The gouge in Havelock’s arm was as long as his thumb in a sharp V shape. Where the flesh had peeled back, his skin looked fish-belly white.

The margin of the wound was nearly black with pooling blood. Naomi put absorbent bandage on it and started wrapping it down with an wide elastic band. She had tiny dots of his blood in her hair.

“How are we for moving?” she asked.

“I can go anyplace you want, so long as it’s counter-clockwise,” Alex said. “If there were a dock anywhere within a year of here and we had a reactor, I’d have a vote where to go next.”

“We’ll work on a plan B. How’s the *Barb*?”

Basia almost had his welding rig back on. Naomi patted Havelock’s wounded arm, a small physical statement. *You’re good to go*. She turned to the lockers and started pulling out an environment suit of her own.

“She’s still coming up,” Alex said. “But I’m starting to get worried about that missing foot support.”

“All right,” Naomi said. “Back the thrust down for now. We’ll see if we can get it stuck back on.”

Havelock pulled the thick leggings on, shrugged into the suit. He checked the seals automatically, long years of living in vacuum making it all as quick and automatic as reflex. The suit’s medical array kicked on and immediately injected him with a cocktail of anti-shock medicines. His heart raced and his face flushed.

“Well, the good news is they’re out of shuttles,” Basia said. “They won’t be doing that again.”

“What *are* they going to do,” Naomi said. It took Havelock a long moment to realize she was talking to him.

These were his people. Marwick and Murtry. The militia of engineers. The RCE team had launched the shuttle at the *Rocinante* and tried to break up a civilian rescue operation. It was a strangely dislocating thought. He’d spent a countable fraction of his life protecting these people, keeping the shipboard politics that always rose up on a long voyage to a minimum, protecting them from outside threats and internal ones. They’d tried to kill not only him, but the crew of the *Rocinante* and the *Barbapiccola* too. And the worst of it was that he wasn’t actually surprised.

“XO? I think we’ve got a hole in the port torpedo rails too. Might want to see if everything’s still in place down there. Failsafes are pretty good, but we’ll want to check them all if we ever plan to fire one. It’d be a real pity for our own ordnance to blow us up.”

“Roger that,” Naomi said. “I’m on my way. Basia, can you coordinate with Alex and get that foot support back where it’s supposed to be?”

“Sure can,” the Belter said. The one who’d been part of that first conspiracy to have the RCE people killed. Who had Governor Trying’s blood on his hands. For a moment, their eyes met through the doubled windows of their helmets. Basia’s eyes were hard, and then Havelock thought there was something else. A flicker of shame, maybe. Havelock watched as he cycled the airlock open, and then he watched it close.

“Havelock,” Naomi said. “I need you to answer the question.”

“Which question?”

“What are they going to do next?”

He shook his head. His arm throbbed. There was no point to the attack except spite and the kind of violence that passed for meaning in the face of despair. If Murtry was behind it, all he’d care was that the *Barbapiccola* went down before the *Israel*. If it was the engineering militia, they’d done it to show that they hadn’t lost.

The reasons behind it didn’t matter.

“I don’t know,” Havelock said, then sighed. “But it will probably be bad for everyone.”

Chapter Forty-Six: Elvi

Elvi thought her eyesight's return was like coming out of a fog. The green that had enveloped the world was just as vivid at first. It lasted long enough that she was afraid she'd been wrong, or that the long-term use of the oncocidals had made some other change to Holden's physiology that short-term use wasn't having. And then the shadows had lines around them again, little zones of definition. And then within hours, she could see the doorway arch and the shape of the chemistry deck. By the time she'd been able to see clearly enough that she could tell Holden for certain that they'd solved the problem, the man had been in what looked like a sleep-deprivation psychosis. It made her feel a little guilty that she hadn't figured it out earlier. But he'd gone off to talk to Amos, and she was fairly sure that the big man would be able to take care of his captain. And Elvi had too many other things to do.

The chemistry deck's slowed water purification turned out to be a bigger issue than she'd expected. The distillation filters were exhausted; material that had gone in as white, puffy pads of spun glass embedded with ionic scrubbers came out slick and green. But the other people from the science team and the survivors of First Landing were all starting to get function back too. It took almost four hours, but Elvi and Fayeze and two of the mining technicians had rigged a still just outside the ruins that was converting the fallen rainwater to something potable at nearly three gallons an hour. It tasted like fake spearmint flavoring and alfalfa, but it would sustain life.

When Elvi found Lucia, the doctor looked as bad as Holden had sounded. Her skin had an ashy tone and the whites of her eyes were so pink

Elvi was surprised they weren't bleeding. Jacek was following his mother around, carrying her medical scanner and a little sack of bandages. Elvi watched them check on the patients. Everyone was covered in mud and grit. The differences between RCE and squatters were buried under the layers of filth and the shared joy in their returning sight. When Jacek caught her gaze, she smiled. He hesitated, then nodded almost shyly and smiled back.

"Clouds are starting to thin," Lucia said. "I saw a patch that was actually white."

"Really?" Elvi asked.

"Still looked greenish to me, of course, but it was actually white," the doctor said. When she shook her head, it seemed to take her a fraction of a second to start. "You did good work. I've only got three people the treatment's not working on."

"Why isn't it working for them? Maybe we should—"

"This isn't science," Lucia said. "It's medicine. A success rate this high on a new treatment for a novel illness? We're doing brilliantly. None of us are back to baseline yet, though. If it happens at all, it will take time."

"Time," Elvi said. "Strange to think we've got any of that."

"We've traded up from dying in the storm to dying from the slugs to dying of hunger in a few weeks."

"We're pushing the crisis point back. If it's not winning, at least it's a way not to lose."

"If we can keep pushing it back."

But we can't. The words hadn't been said, but they didn't need to be. With the ships fighting each other and falling out of orbit and the native ecology basically inedible, extending the group's horizon past a few weeks of starvation was going to be difficult. Maybe impossible. The stress was showing in the people, RCE and First Landers both. Elvi saw it, the segregation into tribes again now that the immediate danger had passed. She wondered whether it would come back when the food ran out.

"You need rest," Elvi said, and a hand touched her shoulder. Wei and Murtry were behind her. Wei's expression was bleak. Murtry, on the other hand, was smiling his customary smile. Of all of them, the coating of mud on his skin and in his hair looked almost natural. Like he was in his native element.

"Doctor Okoye," Murtry said, "I was hoping we could have a private

word.”

“Of course,” Elvi said. Lucia nodded curtly and turned away. Elvi felt a little pang of disappointment. After all the trials of the storm and the blindness, the political divisions between the RCE and First Landing were still there, just below the surface. Murtry was still the man who’d burned a building full of terrorists. Lucia was still the wife of a man who’d conspired to destroy the heavy shuttle. It seemed like it should have mattered less now, like the rains should have washed something clean. Anything.

“I was wondering what you could tell me about the last conversation you had with Captain Holden,” Murtry said. His voice sounded perfectly calm and reasonable. It was like they were back on the *Israel* and he was asking her to think back to the last time she’d used some tool she couldn’t find.

“Well, he was very, very tired. Exhausted. It seemed to be having some real cognitive effects.”

“Cognitive effects like what, please?” Murtry asked.

“He was babbling,” Elvi said. “Bounding from jokes about mind-controlling aliens to Charles Dickens to insisting that he had some way to shut down the defense network. He was really all over the place. I tried to get him to rest, but—”

“Do I understand you that he intended to disable the alien technology presently functioning on this planet?”

“Yes. I mean, why wouldn’t he?”

“Doesn’t belong to him. Did he say how he intended to accomplish this?”

“He didn’t. But I don’t think there really was anything. It was just his brainstem attaching to his vocal cords. I’m pretty sure he was only half aware that he was talking at all.”

“Did he mention going north?”

Elvi blinked, scowled, shook her head.

Murtry pulled up his hand terminal, tapped it three times, and held it out to her. A rough map of Ilus’ only continent showed on the screen with two dots. One, she knew, was the location of First Landing, or where the place had been, anyway. She assumed it indicated where they were. A second dot was almost an inch and a half away.

“I took the liberty of tracking the captain’s hand terminal signal,”

Murtry said. "Signal's patchy and intermittent, but it seems he's been traveling north at an average of two hundred clicks an hour. I find that very interesting."

Elvi handed the terminal back to him. "He didn't say anything about it. Just that he had something to do. He talked to Amos afterward. I thought that was probably what he meant. Honestly, I'm surprised he can even drive a cart."

"He isn't driving a cart," Murtry said. "We've only got two carts, they're both right outside, and one of them doesn't even have a power cell."

"I don't understand," Elvi said. "Then how is he..."

"Going two hundred kilometers an hour?" Murtry said. "That would be one of many, many questions I'd like to have answered. Thank you for your time, Doctor."

Murtry nodded, turned, and walked toward the archway that led outside. Elvi watched him go, scowling. Had Holden said anything else? She couldn't think of anything. But maybe he'd said something to Amos.

She found the big man standing in the mud outside the work tent where the carts were parked, arms folded across his bare, mud-streaked chest. He had a nasty scar across his belly and a tattoo of a woman over his heart. She wanted to ask about them both, but didn't. The one working cart was rolling out, Murtry and Wei at the controls. The big silica-gel wheels made wet smacking sounds in the mud, but the cart picked up speed quickly, bouncing along the ruined landscape in the soft rain.

"Was there a drop?" Elvi asked.

"Nope," Amos said.

"Is there going to be a drop?"

"If there is, they'd better get it in walking range. Unless I can get another fuel cell up, that right there was our one working set of wheels."

"Oh," she said. And then, "Did Holden say anything to you before he, ah, left?"

"Yep," Amos said, still scowling after the cart.

"Was it about going north?"

"Not in particular, but I knew he was going someplace in case he could get Miller to turn the fusion reactors back on for us."

"Miller?" Elvi said with a shake of her head.

"Yeah, that's a long story. Pretty much all the cap had for me was to

make sure that one”—Amos nodded at the retreating cart—“didn’t get uppity and start killing folks again.”

“He’s going after Holden.”

“Hmm. Don’t know if that makes my job harder or easier.”

The big man shrugged and walked into the repair tent. The remains of half a dozen fuel cells were laid out on a thin plastic tarp. Amos squatted beside them, then started arranging the cells by size and the extent of their obvious damage.

“This’d be a lot easier if the *Roci* could just drop me down a fresh cell,” he said.

“You’re going after Holden too?”

“Well, the way I figure it, I’m supposed to make sure Murtry doesn’t hurt anyone. He ain’t here, so all these folks are looking pretty safe. Might as well go where he is, make sure he don’t hurt no one there either.”

Elvi nodded and looked north. The cart was a small dot near the horizon throwing up a plume of spattered mud. She couldn’t judge how quickly they were going, but she was sure they’d be beyond the horizon soon.

“If you get that working, can I come too?”

“Nope.”

“Seriously, let me come with you,” Elvi said, kneeling beside him. “You’ll need backup out there. If anything goes wrong. What if you go blind again? Or if something stings you? I know the ecology out here better than anyone. I can help.”

Amos picked up a fuel cell, squeezing the casing until the metal bowed out a degree, and slid the internal cell out into his hand. A slurry of green-yellow mud came with it.

“Holden was talking about aliens. Like living, thinking, communicating, mind-controlling aliens,” Elvi said. “If that’s true, I could talk with them. *Document* them.”

Amos wiped the mud from the cell with his palm and squinted at it, sighing. He put it down and picked up the next one.

“We’re going to die here,” Elvi said, her voice soft, gentle, pleading. “The food’s going to run out. You go out there, and you’ll be passing through a whole biosphere no one’s ever seen before. There are going to be things you and I haven’t even imagined. I want to see those before I die.”

The next cell opened. There was no mud, but the acrid stink of melted

plastic filled the air, stinging her nose and eyes. Amos closed it again.

“You need to get electricity to drive that cart,” she said. “If I tell you how to do that, will you take me with you?”

Amos turned his head to her, his gaze fastening on her like he was noticing her for the first time. His smile came slowly.

“You got something you want to tell me, doc?”

Elvi shrugged. “The alien moon defense grid thing shot down the shuttle with the fusion drive and the drop with batteries and fuel cells in it, but it let the food and medicine come through. It also isn’t busy shooting the clouds, even though there are a bunch of organisms living in them that are made of complex organic compounds. It doesn’t care about chemical energy inside compounds. You could have the *Rocinante* drop you a chemical fuel source. Acetylene, maybe. You’ve got acetylene tanks up there, don’t you?”

“Hell, I got acetylene right here. But these here don’t run on fire,” Amos said.

“They don’t have to,” Elvi said. “The chemistry deck has a combustion chamber that runs assays by converting exothermic reactions into current and then measuring the output. It’s not much of a chamber, but if you take that out and build a decent-sized combustion chamber—maybe a ten-centimeter surface—you could probably capture enough of the chemical energy from the burn to make the same current coming out of one of those things. We might need to build a transformer to get the amps and volts just right, but that’s not actually hard.”

Amos scratched his neck and rocked back on his heels. His eyes were narrow.

“You just come up with that on the spot?”

Elvi shrugged. “Does that mean I can come with you?”

Amos turned his head and spat on the ground. “Sure,” he said.



“I just want to know why,” Fayez said.

“Why what?” Elvi asked, walking through the main chamber of the ruins. She had two thick plastic sacks of fresh-ish water. Potable, at least. And a box the size of her hand with protein rations in it. It was supposed to be enough for one person for one day, and it was all they were going to

have until they came back to the camp in the ruins. She'd also found a satchel with a wide fake-leather belt to strap it closed.

"Why you're chasing after Holden again," Fayez said, ducking around a passing woman.

"I'm not chasing after Holden," Elvi said, then stopped and turned, putting her palm against Fayez's chest. She could feel his heartbeat against her fingertips. "You know I'm not chasing after Holden, don't you? Because that's... I mean, *no*."

"Then why?" he said.

The organisms still dying in Elvi's eyes had lost all their green tinge, but they left the world a little blurry. She felt like she was seeing Fayez through a filter that softened his features, smoothed his skin. He looked like a media star in some particularly unflattering role that involved a lot of mud and not many showers.

"Because I want to *see*," she said. "It's why I came out here. It's why I've been spending all my time taking samples and running assays. I love what I do, and what I do is go look at things. Holden said he was talking to aliens, and that he might be able to turn off the defense grid, and it means we're going to drive through the wilderness—"

"What's left of it," Fayez said.

"And because I'm going to die," Elvi said.

Fayez looked away.

"We're all going to die," Elvi said. "And we're all very probably going to die very, very soon. And my choices are to go out and look at this amazing, strange, beautiful, ruined world or else stay in the camp and watch everyone around me die by centimeters. And I'm a coward and a hedonist and I'm sometimes very, very selfish."

"You know. Between the two of us, I always thought of myself as more along those lines."

"I know."

Outside, Amos' kludged cart was roaring, the constant burn of the combustion chamber was like a synthesizer stuck on a particularly ragged and unpleasant G under middle C. Amos was in the cab, sitting at the controls. Fayez walked with her to the side of the cart and then helped her scramble up into the cab. When he stepped back, he had his hands shoved deep in his pockets. She couldn't see quite well enough to know if there

were tears in his eyes too.

“Those the supplies, doc?” Amos asked.

“They’re what we’ve got to work with.”

“All right then. I got the signal from the captain’s hand terminal locked in. We got maybe a week’s worth of gas, and the guy I’m after’s got a day’s head start.”

“I wish we had sunglasses,” she said. “Or a pizza.”

“Fallen fucking world, doc.”

“Let’s go.”

The cart lurched once, the tires spinning in the mud for a moment, then catching and lurching again. The rain made tiny dots on the windshield, and a wide, smeary wiper cleared them away. The world before her was a vast plain of mud. She checked Amos’ hand terminal. The path toward James Holden would take them through territory that had been forestlike, past the shoulder of a massive freshwater lake, through a maze of canyons that defied any standard geological explanation. She was going to see a world in the aftermath of utter disaster, but she would still see it. And the state of nature was always recovering from the last disaster.

“Stop,” she said. “Could you please stop. Just for a minute?”

“You need a potty break, you should have thought of that before we started,” Amos said, but he stopped the drive. She couldn’t even hear the electrical motors winding down over the roar of the acetylene-powered generator. She opened the door of the cab and leaned out. They’d only gone a hundred meters. She could still see Fayeze, even though he was mostly a dark, fuzzy blot. She waved, and he waved back. She gestured that he should come toward her, and he did. She watched him trot across the mud field, looking down and watchful for slugs.

When he reached the cab, he looked up at her. She was sure there were tears in his eyes now.

“Chances are I’m not coming back,” she said.

“I know.”

“Kind of need to get a move on, doc,” Amos said. “Don’t mean to be a buzz-kill or nothing.”

“I understand,” Elvi said. She looked down again. Her gaze met his dark eyes. “Are you getting up here?”

“Is he what?” Amos asked at the same moment Fayeze said, “Of course I

am.”

Elvi scooted across the seat, making room for him. Fayez climbed up beside her and slammed closed the door. Amos looked at them both, his eyebrow lifted. Elvi smiled at him and pulled Fayez’s arm over her shoulder.

“Don’t remember this was part of the deal, doc,” Amos said.

“It’s kind of like our honeymoon,” Elvi said. She felt Fayez stiffen for a moment, and then almost melt against her.

Amos considered that for a moment, then shrugged. “Whatever floats your boat.”

Chapter Forty-Seven: Basia

How's it look in there?" Naomi said in Basia's helmet. She had a nice voice, a singer's voice. It sounded good even over the tiny suit speakers. Basia recognized that his cognition was drifting and shook his head once, sharply. A glance at his HUD told him his O2 levels were low, and he pulled out a replacement bottle.

I've found the other five holes," he said while he worked at the air intake nipple. "You were right. Two were behind a console. Tough to see from that side. But I think this is all of them in ops."

"Machine shop is next," she replied. "Got one slow leaker there. It's cramped. We've got some after-market equipment using up a lot of the space between hulls."

"I'll squeeze," Basia said, then pulled out a small metal disk and started welding it over one of the five holes.

"She is over the horizon... *now*," Alex said over the channel. Naomi was sitting in her vacuum suit on the ops deck coordinating the work, so the only way anyone could talk to her was on her suit radio. Basia wanted to ask who *she* was, but started welding a second patch instead. A tiny red glob of molten metal spun off the bead and stuck to his faceplate, cooling to a black dot over his left eye. There wasn't much danger of it hurting his suit, but it was a rookie mistake anyway. A sign he was tired. The gentle rotation of the *Rocinante* at the end of the tether made free-floating objects drift toward the walls. He'd need to remember that.

"Didn't leave any presents for us?" Naomi asked, still talking about the mysterious *she*.

"Nope," Alex said. "I keep hitting her with our targeting laser when she

goes by. A warning.”

“The PDCs are totally shut down, and plasma torpedoes don’t work now,” Naomi said.

“Yeah, but *they* don’t know that. Last they saw, I chopped their shuttle into sushi with a PDC burst.”

“Kinda wish we hadn’t done that.”

“Well, do you like one big hole or lots of little ones?”

“Fair point,” Naomi said. “Almost done down there?”

It took Basia a second to realize she’d started talking to him again. “Yeah, last one going up now.”

“I’ll guide you to the machine shop exterior bulkhead.”



Naomi hadn’t been kidding about cramped. There was some kind of large, blocky device taking up almost all of the space between the inner and outer hull. A long metal tube projected from one side of it, and seemed to run the entire length of the ship’s hull like a sewer pipe. On the opposite side of the device, a complex-looking feed mechanism sat. Flanking the central mechanism, and also down almost the entire length of the tube, sat twin rows of powerful-looking industrial batteries.

“Sixty-two percent, XO,” Alex said. “Droppin’ fast. And the clock’s down to about twelve hours for the *Barb*. If I had thrusters that worked, I’d be wantin’ to do a burn about now.”

“I’ve shut down everything I can think to shut down,” Naomi replied. “So our power is what it is. I’m trying to come up with a plan for moving working thrusters to replace broken ones, and wind up with some semblance of maneuverability. But it’s not a trivial problem. We’re pretty beat up.”

Basia played his suit’s light around the space until he found the faintest trace of frozen vapor. It led him to the tiny hole in the machine shop’s bulkhead, and seconds later he was patching it with another metal disk. The actinic blue of his torch threw the space into bright relief, the shadows of conduits and thruster housings dancing madly in the glare.

“Alex?” Basia said as he worked.

“Yo.”

“What is this thing I’m next to? It looks high-powered. Should I avoid getting any hot residue on it?”

“Uh, yeah,” Alex said, then gave a humorless laugh. “Please avoid that.”

“It’s a rail gun,” Naomi said. “We had it added to the ship. You might damage it, but it won’t blow up or anything. It fires solid metal slugs, not explosives.”

“Okay,” Basia replied. “Just about done here.”

“It cost about three hundred thousand Ceres new yen,” Alex said. “So don’t break it, or you bought it.”

By the time Basia had returned through the airlock, stripped off his welding rig and vacuum suit, then put everything away, Naomi had replaced the lost atmosphere on the ops deck and everyone was gathered there. She floated near the command console, still wearing her lightweight atmosphere suit, but with the helmet off. Havelock and Alex were across the deck from her, clinging to the combat operations crash couch. The three of them were floating in the sort of intense silence that only follows a heated conversation.

“There a problem?” Basia asked when the deck hatch had closed behind him.

Alex and Havelock both looked away from him, something like embarrassment on their faces. Naomi did not look away. She said, “We’re going to lose the *Barbapiccola*.”

“What?”

“I have a plan for moving five maneuvering thrusters from the starboard side of the ship to port. This will give us close to sixty percent maneuverability. It’ll be enough to keep us in the sky until the power runs out. But we can’t do it fast enough to tug the *Barb* out of her descent. She’ll start scraping atmo before we’re even halfway done. We have to cut her loose.”

“No,” Basia said.

“We tried,” Naomi continued as though he hadn’t spoken. “But the damage caused by the shuttle was just too serious. I’m going to call the captain of the *Barb* and ask that your daughter be transferred to this ship. The price is there will be a few others that come with her. Just a few, though.”

Basia felt an almost overwhelming sense of relief, followed by an

equally powerful rush of shame. “There are a hundred-some people on the *Barbapiccola*. We just let them all die?”

“Not all of them, but even if we wanted to bring them all here, they wouldn’t fit. A full company on the *Roci* would be twenty-two. Our other choice is to die with them,” Naomi said. Her voice trembled, but her gaze was steady. She knew exactly how awful her words were, but she wasn’t backing away from them. Basia found himself suddenly very afraid of the *Rocinante*’s executive officer. “But we’re not buying ourselves much in the process. With our power failing and running on a little over half thrust, we’re getting very close to the point that we won’t be able to get to a stable orbit where we can die slowly when the environment systems shut down. And, of course, we’ll have moved as many of the *Barb*’s crew as we can to this ship. Which just means we’ll burn through our power that much faster. This is lose, lose, lose, Basia. There aren’t any good choices anymore.”

Basia nodded, accepting her statements without argument. She was the expert. But he felt like there was something missing. It itched at the back of his mind. To distract himself, he traced with his finger in the condensation building up on the nearest wall panel. That shouldn’t be happening. The atmosphere system shouldn’t be allowing humidity to build up like that. But now that he thought about it, he realized that the air did feel thick, and too hot. Naomi, running the environmental systems at minimum power. She wasn’t lying. They’d run to the very edge of their ability to keep themselves in the sky.

“When do they come, and how do they get here?” Havelock asked, talking about refugees from the *Barbapiccola*.

“Three hours. I want you to go down and escort them. I don’t know how good their suits are, but I don’t expect much. We may have to haul some EVA suits of our own down to them.”

“Roger that,” Havelock said with a nod. An Earthman’s nod. Tipping the head back and forth. A move totally invisible in a space suit. Without thinking about it, Basia tipped his fist back and forth to show him how to do it right. Havelock ignored him.

But thinking about something else for a moment broke the logjam in his brain, and the idea he’d been fumbling toward popped fully formed into his head.

“Why don’t we use the batteries for the rail gun?”

“The what?” Havelock said.

“Huh,” Naomi said. “Not a terrible idea. They’re topped off, right?”

“They pull power to keep themselves full when the reactor’s on, and we haven’t fired the gun and they discharge really slow when not in use,” Alex replied. “But they’re on a separate system. No way to pull power the other direction without some work.”

“I can work,” Basia said. “I’ll do it. Tell me what to do. I’ll recharge my suit and the welding rig right now.”

“Wait,” Naomi said. Her face had gone strangely blank, except for her eyes moving rapidly back and forth like she was reading something in the air. “Wait a minute...”

Havelock started to say something, but Alex grabbed his arm and silently shook his head.

“We’ll pull power off the rail gun grid, transfer it over to the main grid, and use it to heat propellant mass for thrust,” she finally said.

“Yep,” Alex agreed.

“With loss at every step. That’s really inefficient.”

“Yep,” Alex repeated.

“When we have propellant mass already in the system without moving the power,” she continued. “Alex, how much acceleration does a two-kilo slug traveling at five thousand meters per second give the ship?”

“Enough,” Alex replied with a sly grin, “that we’re supposed to only fire it with the main drive on.”

“Sounds like a thruster to me,” Naomi said, grinning back at him.

“Uh,” Havelock cut in, “the ship is spinning a little after that shuttle strike and all? Won’t that make it tough to, you know, aim?”

“It’s not a trivial problem,” Naomi admitted. “We’d need to make sure we fire at the exact millisecond the two ships and the cable are aligned. No way a human could judge it. But the *Roci* can if I tell her what we need.”

“Isn’t the *Barb* in the flight path?” Havelock asked.

“Right,” Naomi said, her voice soft and uninflected. “So the sequence will have to be tipping the *Roci* nose down as we spin past the firing point, launching a round, then tipping her back nose up to keep from spinning out of control on that new axis. Fortunately, *those* thrusters work.”

“This sounds,” Basia said, “pretty hard.”

“Well,” Naomi said with a smile and a wink. “It’s only the most

complicated nav program I'll have ever written, but I have a couple hours to do it in."

"I don't know about you folks, but I'm excited to be part of this plan," Alex said. "Let's get going."



Basia watched the clock tick away the hours and minutes to his daughter's death.

Naomi sat at her console rapidly typing. The symbolic language she used to program the *Rocinante*'s navigation systems meant nothing to him. Watching her work was like listening to someone speak in a foreign language: the awareness of information without actual meaning. But he watched her anyway, knowing that she was building a program that might add precious minutes back to the clock. Maybe hours. Not days.

Alex was back up in his cockpit, out of sight. But periodically he called down on the ship's comm to talk to Naomi about her work, so he was apparently following along from his own station. He would ask for clarifications or make suggestions, but his words were as empty of content to Basia as the symbols on Naomi's screen.

Havelock had gone belowdecks to move the emergency escape bubbles out of the cargo hold and up to the main airlock. The rail gun plan might not work, and the next step was to evacuate as many people from the *Barbapiccola* as the *Rocinante* could handle.

It was all just delaying games. Try to save the *Barb* a little longer with their rail gun heroics. If not, save a few people by moving them to the *Roci* before she fell out of the sky or turned into a killing jar with twenty more people breathing her air and overloading her life support.

But they all did it without question. They fought and worked and devised intricate plans to buy more time. Basia had no doubt that they'd work just as hard to keep each other alive for even a few more minutes. It wasn't something he'd ever had to think about before. But it did seem to be a microcosm of everything in life. No one lived forever. But you fought for every minute you could get. Bought a little more with a lot of hard work. It made Basia proud and sad at the same time. Maybe that was how a warrior felt, standing on ground he knew he'd never leave alive. Making the choice

to fight as long and hard as he could. Basia couldn't think why *I went out, but I didn't go out easy* was such an appealing and romantic notion, but it was.

Looking at the angry brown ball of Ilus, rotating past on his screen, Basia thought, *You'll kill us, but you won't kill us easy*. He took a deep breath and worked hard not to thump himself on the chest.

"You okay over there?" Naomi asked, not looking up from her work.

"Fine, fine. How are you?"

"Almost there," she said. "The trick is that we'll have a lot of thrust coming from one vector and not along our center of mass with the cable attached, and we only have maneuvering thrusters on three sides of the ship. So, we have to minimize rotation to port. *But*, we can't use the starboard fore thruster to counteract that rotation because the cable changes where our center of mass is. It's actually a fun problem to figure out."

"I have no idea what any of that means," Basia said. "Is it working?"

"I think it will. Alex agrees. We'll fire in a couple of minutes on the next rotation. Then we'll know."

"Great," Basia said.

The deck hatch clanged open and then closed again as Havelock pulled himself up into the ops deck. He'd changed out of his RCE jumpsuit and armor into loose-fitting gray sweats with the name ROCINANTE across the chest. The security officer was bigger than Holden, so if the clothes hung loose on him, they must belong to Amos. Basia thought maybe he wouldn't wear Amos' clothes without asking.

"The emergency stuff is in the airlock," Havelock said to Naomi's back. She hadn't looked up from her work when he came in. "I also threw a couple of EVA packs, some extra air bottles, and Basia's welding rig in there. I can't think of anything else we might need."

"Thank you, Dimitri," Naomi said.

"Dimitri?" Basia asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You've got a problem with that? Isn't Basia a girl's name?" Havelock shot back.

"It was my grandmother's name, and she was a solar-system-wide famous physicist, so it's a great honor to be named after her. I was the first grandchild."

“You two can shut up or leave the deck,” Naomi said. Then she hit the wall comm and added, “Alex, you ready up there?”

“Think so,” Alex replied with his heavy drawl. “Just a sec, lemme tweak one thing here...”

“Can we throw this up on the big screen?” Basia asked. “I’d like to see what happens.”

Naomi didn’t answer, but the main screen on the deck shifted from a tactical map to a forward telescopic view. The image rotated slowly past the brown-and-gray ball of Ilus, and then past the distant gray hulk of the *Barbapiccola*, and then on to the starry black.

“Missed our window,” Naomi said. “You almost ready?”

“Yeah,” Alex replied, dragging the word out to three syllables. “Now. Good to go.”

“Executing,” Naomi said and tapped a button on her screen, but nothing happened. The view on the big screen continued to slowly pan until Ilus came back into view. Then the *Barbapiccola*. Then, without warning, the *Rocinante* tipped violently forward and something very loud happened in the belly of the ship. A bright dot of fire and a curve of flame appeared in the planet’s atmosphere. Basia found that the far bulkhead was now traveling toward him at a slow but noticeable speed. The ship pitched again, the various maneuvering thrusters firing in staccato bursts. When the noise and movement was over, the view on the main screen was steady, locked onto the *Barbapiccola*.

“Huh,” Alex said. “I’m seeing activity from the moons.”

“Are they shooting at us?” Havelock said.

“Nope. Looks like they’re trying to knock down the gauss round,” Alex said. “Full points for optimism.”

“We’re not rotating anymore,” Basia said.

“No,” Naomi replied. “Give me any three directions of thrust and I can find a way to stop us. Now we just keep it here firing and adjusting, and we should be adding some speed to our orbit.”

Basia looked down at the timer counting away the *Barbapiccola*’s remaining life. It had added a little over four minutes. “How often can you fire?”

“About every five minutes or so, if we don’t want to overheat the rails and burn the batteries out. At least, every five minutes until the batteries are

dead.”

“But—”

“We’ve just stopped the degrading orbit, but not much more,” Naomi said.

“*Israel’s* coming back around,” Alex said. “She dumped something off.”

“Goddammit,” Naomi muttered. “Give us a fucking break, will you guys? What are they dropping?”

“Men in suits,” Alex said.

“It’s the militia,” Havelock said. He’d pulled himself over to a tactical display and was zooming it in and out. “Twelve of them, in vacuum armor with EVA packs. Plus an equal number of metallic objects of about human size. Not sure what those are.”

“Any speculation on what they’re doing?” Naomi said, switching her view to match his.

“They’re engineers. They know how crippled we are. How vulnerable. So my guess is they’re going to try to kill us.”

Chapter Forty-Eight: Holden

Life at the naval academy had been so stressful for Holden that at the end of his first term he'd celebrated by going to a party and drinking until he passed out for twenty hours. It had been his first lesson on the difference between unconsciousness and sleep. They might seem the same, but they weren't. After twenty hours, he'd woken feeling totally unrested, and the morning PT the next day had almost killed him.

Riding on Miller's material transfer network, it was difficult to get any sense of the passage of time. The first time Holden came to, his hand terminal told him ten hours had passed. He could tell he'd spent it unconscious rather than sleeping because he felt exhausted and sick. His throat hurt, his eyes burned like they'd been sandpapered, and all of his muscles ached. It almost felt like a flu, except that the antivirals he took every three months made that pretty much impossible. He turned on his armor's diagnostic system, and it gave him a series of shots. He had no idea what. He drank half the water in his canteen and closed his eyes.

It was nine hours later when he woke again, and this time he was almost rested, the soreness in his throat gone. At some point he'd passed the threshold from unconsciousness to sleep, and his body was rewarding him for it. He stretched out on the metal floor until his joints popped, then drank the rest of his water.

"Wakey wakey," Miller said. He slowly appeared in the darkness, surrounded by a halo of blue light, as if someone were turning up his dimmer switch.

"I'm awake," Holden replied, then rattled his empty canteen at Miller. "But you stuffed me into this cattle car so fast I wasn't able to get supplies.

Gonna get pretty thirsty if there isn't, you know, an alien drinking fountain for something."

"We'll see. But that's actually the least of our problems right now."

"Says the guy who doesn't drink."

"There's a damaged piece of the system ahead," Miller continued, "and I'd hoped we'd be able to get around it. No such luck. We're on foot from here."

"Your fancy alien train is broken?"

"My fancy alien material transfer system has been sitting unused for over a billion years and half the planet just exploded. Your ship was built less than a decade ago and you can barely keep the coffee pot running."

"You are a sad, bitter little man," Holden said as he climbed to his feet and pushed against the train door. It didn't open.

"Hold on," Miller said and vanished.

Holden turned the brightness up on his terminal and spent a few minutes checking over his equipment while he waited. Miller had grabbed him right after his final patrol around the settlement, which meant he had his armor, his pistol, and quite a few magazines of ammunition, all of which was pretty likely to be useless. He also had one empty canteen, no food, and a suit medical pack that was running low on almost everything, all of which would have been much handier to have fully stocked. When his body finally woke up enough to be hungry, he expected to be quite willing to trade his gun in for a sandwich. He didn't think the alien structures would have many vending machines.

Ten minutes passed, and his anxiety shifted to impatience. He sat down again and tried to call the *Rocinante* on his hand terminal, but got a failed connection message. He tried Elvi, Lucia, and Amos. All failed. Whatever the alien subway was made out of, it was blocking his signals to the hub on the *Roci*. It had to be that. The alternative was that the *Roci* wasn't working, and that opened up too many bad scenarios. He pulled up a mindless pattern-matching game and played that for a while, until the terminal gave him a low-battery warning and he turned it off.

After an hour passed, he started to get nervous. He wasn't claustrophobic, and he'd spent most of his adult life in tiny cabins on space ships, but that didn't mean he relished the idea of dying alone in a small metal box deep under the earth. He kicked the container's door a few times

and shouted to Miller, but got no reply.

Which was, in its own way, fairly alarming.

The container he'd been sleeping in during the long trip north was empty. The only tools he had with him were used for repairing his armor and weapons. There was nothing that could cut through the metal or bend it. He kicked the door again, this time putting enough effort into it that it hurt his shins. It didn't move at all.

"Huh," he said out loud. If Miller had brought him all this way just to let him die in an abandoned train car, it was the longest prank setup in history.

Holden was doing a mental inventory of everything he was carrying, trying to figure out if any combination of things might make an explosive powerful enough to blow the door off, and carefully ignoring the fact that any such explosion would probably liquefy any biology inside the small metal compartment, when a loud metallic groan came from outside the cart that rose in pitch to a shriek. The compartment shuddered and rocked. A long series of powerful hammering sounds assaulted him. Then another metallic scream that grew to deafening levels.

The door to the compartment vanished, torn from the container in one massive blow. On the other side stood a nightmare.

At first glance, it looked like a massive collection of appendages and cutting tools. It stood on six of its limbs, and waved four others in the air like a crustacean made of steel and knives. Whipping through the air around the heavier cutting arms were a dozen or more tentacles of what looked like black rubber. As he watched, two of the tentacles gripped the inside edges of the doorway and bent them out with fearsome strength.

He pulled his pistol, but didn't point it at the thing. It felt very small and inadequate in his hand.

"Put that away," the monster said in Miller's voice. "You'll put your eye out."

Holden hadn't thought much about the fact that every time he heard Miller's voice over the last year, it had been a protomolecule-induced hallucination. But at the sound of the detective's voice in the air, actual vibrations moving through the atmosphere and hitting his eardrums, the strangeness of it made him feel a little lightheaded.

"Is that you?" Holden asked in what he was pretty sure was the new universal winner for stupid questions.

“Depends what you mean,” the Miller-bot said and backed away from the opening. It was surprisingly quiet for such a huge metallic monster. “I’m able to get into the local hardware, and this thing was in pretty good shape for having missed its three-month warranty check by a thousand million years or so.”

Miller did something, and suddenly Holden could see the detective in his rumpled suit standing where the monster had been. He shrugged and smiled apologetically. But even as Holden saw a projection of Miller, superimposed over it he saw the robot. It was doing the same shrug, though instead of hands it used two massive serrated crab claws. It would have been comic if it hadn’t come with a splitting headache.

“One or the other,” Holden said, squeezing his eyes shut. “I can’t see both things. It breaks my brain.”

“Sorry. No problem,” Miller replied, and when Holden opened his eyes again only the robot was there. “Come on, we have a lot of ground to cover.”

Holden hopped out of the material transfer container and onto a flat metal floor. Various sections of the Miller-bot’s carapace glowed with a faint light, and unlike the blue light that had always accompanied the Miller ghost, it actually illuminated the space around it.

Pointing at one glowing limb, Holden said, “Can you make that brighter?”

In answer, all of the glowing sections of the robot intensified until the tunnel was as bright as noon. The reason for the material transfer cart’s stoppage became apparent. A couple dozen meters ahead, the metal tunnel was blown apart and filled with rocks and debris.

Reading his mind, Miller said, “Yeah. Not everything is handling the reboot well. Power node for the mag-lev woke up bad and blew itself up. Only it’s not exactly mag-lev. Close enough, though, you can get the picture.”

“Can we get past it?”

“Well, we can’t repair the track, but I can get you out. Making passages,” the Miller-bot said, waving one massive claw in the air, “is what this thing’s for. He used to dig and maintain these tunnels. Hop on.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“No, seriously, climb on. This guy can move faster than you can on

foot.”

“Miller,” Holden said. “You are made entirely out of cutting edges and pinch points.”

One of the black tentacles twisted around, looking over the robot’s carapace carefully. “Hold on,” Miller said, and with a hum and a few metallic clanks, the torso of the robot twisted into a new configuration, leaving a wide flat spot on its back. “There you go.”

Holden hesitated for a moment, then climbed up one of the robot’s legs and onto its back. The Miller-bot trundled forward to the damaged section of tunnel and the four big forward limbs went to work, tearing out the twisted metal of the tunnel walls and clearing the earth and stone that had filled the space. The machine worked with speed, precision, and a terrifying casual strength.

“Hey Miller,” Holden said, watching the robot peel up a two-meter section of the tunnel’s metal flooring and rapidly cut it into tiny pieces. “We’re still friends, right?”

“What? Ah, I see. When I’m a ghost, you yell at me, tell me to get lost, say you’ll find a way to kill me. Now I’m wearing the shell of an invincible wrecking machine and you want to be buddies again?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Holden replied.

“Nah, we’re good.”

He punctuated the words with one last massive blow that shattered a two-ton boulder into rubble. By hunching down on his six legs, Miller was able to squeeze through a small opening in the tunnel blockage. Holden lay down flat on the robot’s back, a jagged piece of the tunnel roof passing less than three centimeters from his face.

“Clear sailing from here,” Miller said, “but the mag-lev’s dead after this. No more trains.”

“We have any better idea what we’re looking for?”

“Only in general terms. About the time one-celled organisms on Earth were starting to think about maybe trying photosynthesis, something turned this whole damned planet off. Took it off the grid, and killed everything high enough up the food chain to have an opinion. If I’m right, the thing that did that’s not entirely gone. Every time something reaches into this one particular place, it dies.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Holden said.

“Don’t be,” Miller said. “It’s what we’re hoping for. Now buckle up. We’re going to try and make up some lost time.”

The robot bolted off down the tunnel, its six legs a blur of motion. Even moving at fairly high speed, the ride on its back was very smooth.

Holden surprised himself by falling asleep again.



He woke to something cold and rubbery touching his cheek.

“Stop it,” he said, waving one arm at the thing.

“Wake up,” Miller said, the detective’s voice rumbling though the robot’s carapace.

“Shit,” Holden said, sitting up suddenly and wiping saliva off the side of his face. “I’d forgotten I was here.”

“Yeah, I’d say a week of no sleep and too many amphetamines broke you a little,” Miller said. “You went on quite the bender.”

“Only without the fun.”

“I’ve been on a few myself,” Miller said and added a strange metallic laugh. “None of them are fun. But we’re about to hit the processing station, so get awake.”

“What should we be expecting?”

“I’ll tell you when I see it,” Miller said.

Holden pulled out his pistol and checked the magazine and chamber. It was ready to go. It felt a little like playing grown-up. Anything that the Miller-bot monstrosity couldn’t handle wasn’t going to be stopped by a few shots from his sidearm. But, like so many things in life, when you come to the spot where you’re supposed to do the rituals, you do them. Holden slid the pistol back into its holster but kept one hand on it.

It took him a minute to see it, but a point of light appeared ahead in the tunnel and then grew. Not reflected light from the robot, but something glowing. Holden felt a rush of relief. He’d traveled longer and farther than he knew in the small metal tunnels of the transfer system. He was ready to go outside.

The tunnel ended in a complex maze of new passages. A routing station, Holden guessed, where the arriving material was sent off to its various destinations. The walls were all of the same dull alloy as the tunnel. What

machinery was visible in the cramped space was inset into the walls and flush with them.

The Miller-bot paused for a moment, its tentacles waving at the tunnel choices. Holden could picture Miller standing still at the junction, tapping one finger on his chin while he decided which path to take. And then, suddenly, he actually *could* see Miller overlapping the robot. The headache returned with a vengeance.

“That one was kind of your fault,” Miller said. “It’s an interactive system.”

“Do we have any idea where we’re going?”

Miller answered by trundling off down one of the many new tunnels. A few seconds later, they’d exited into a cavernous new space. It took Holden a few moments to realize that it was all still artificial. The room they entered felt too big to be a construct. It was like standing at the core of the world and looking up for the crust.

All around stood vast silent machines. Some were moving, twitching. They were recognizably designs that the protomolecule favored. They had the same half-mechanism, half-organic look of everything else he’d seen them build. Here, a massive system of tubes and pistons rising from a gantry twisting into whorls like a nautilus shell. There, an appendage coming from the ceiling, half again as long as the *Rocinante*, and ending in a nine-fingered manipulating hand the size of Miller’s robot. Light poured into the space seemingly from everywhere at once, giving the air a gentle golden hue. The ground was vibrating. Holden could feel the soft pulses through the robot’s shell.

“We’re in a lot of trouble, aren’t we?” Holden asked, breathless.

“Nah,” Miller said, rotating the robot to test the air in every direction with its tentacles. “This is just initial material sorting and reclamation. Not even to the processing center.”

“You could park a battleship in this room.”

“It’s not for show,” Miller said, then the robot began scuttling toward a distant wall. “This is the point of this planet.”

“Huh,” Holden said. He found he was missing all of his other words. “Huh.”

“Yeah. So, as far I can figure it, there are minerals native to this system that are fairly rare, galactically speaking.”

“Lithium.”

“That’s one,” Miller agreed. “This planet is a gas station. Process the ore, refine it, send it down to the power plants, then beam the collected energy out.”

“To where?”

“To wherever. There are lots of worlds like this one, and they all fed the grid. Not the rings, though. I still don’t know how they powered those.”

The robot moved with machine speed toward a distant wall, and a section of the structure slid away. It left an opening the size of a repair shuttle, and more lighted machinery beyond. Some of the giant devices were moving with articulations more biological than mechanical. They pulsed, contracted, rippled. Nothing so prosaic and common as a gear or a wheel in sight.

“Are we moving through a fusion reactor right now?” Holden asked, Naomi’s question about radiation exposure on his mind.

“Nope. This is just ore processing. The reactors are all in that chain of islands on the other side of the world. These guys built for flexibility and redundancy.”

“You know,” Holden said, “one of the geologists told me this planet has been heavily modified. All of that was done just to turn it into a power station?”

“Why not? They didn’t need it for anything else. Not a particularly good planet, rare metals aside. And be glad they did. You think you can have an underground rail system last two billion years on any planet with tectonic action?”

Holden was quiet for a moment, riding the Miller-bot through the material refining plant as it throbbed around him. “It’s too much,” he finally said. “That level of control over your environment is too much. I can’t get my brain around it. What could kill these guys?”

“Something worse.”

The Miller-bot ducked under what looked like a conveyor system made of metal mesh wrapped around a pulsing musculature. It was clicking and groaning as part of the mechanism tried to move while the rest of it remained frozen. Holden had a sudden, vivid memory of a goat he’d found as a child. It’d had one broken leg wrapped in a barbed-wire fence, the other three feebly pushing at the ground to free it.

“So there’s the thing,” the Miller-bot said, waiving its claws around at the machinery, “this right here was the point of this place. It’s why this planet *exists*. And right around here somewhere is a blank spot in the planetary network. A place we can’t touch.”

“So?”

“So, whatever’s in that blank spot, it’s not from around here. And if it’s a bullet, then whoever did this knew to shoot for the heart.”

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Chapter Forty-Nine: Havelock

Havelock moved across the surface of the *Rocinante*, magnetic boots clicking to the exterior plating, then lifting free again. To his right, the sun—a sun, anyway—shone brighter than a welding torch. To his left, the great, clouded curve of New Terra filled his personal sky, the planet looming in. The upper boundary of the exosphere was invisible if he looked down, the gases too thin for an imperfect human eye to make out. The vast, sweeping curve of it before and behind the ship was hardly more than a grayness against the void. It felt too close. It *was* too close. He could already imagine the vicious friction tearing away his suit, the ship, the thin air burning him worse than a belt sander. The angry hot slag that had been one of the defense moons glowed high above, dull red against the pure white stars. His feet grabbed on to the plating, held, released.

“How’s it looking out there?” Naomi asked in his ear.

“As well as could be expected. Kind of wish that planet wasn’t quite so up in my face. I keep feeling like it’s trying to pick a fight.”

“Yeah, I was thinking that too.”

The point defense cannon was a single thick barrel on a hemispheric swivel joint, the metal smooth as a mirror. The hole at the end was a black dot small enough that Havelock could have blocked it with the tip of his ungloved pinky finger. The little tungsten slugs it spat out would have been small enough to hold in the palm of his hand, and the feed would have spat them out by the hundreds every second. It was a machine of inhuman power and sophistication, built to react faster than a human brain and with enough force to shoot down anything that threatened the ship.

Without power, he could use it to hide behind.

He lay flat against the decking, just the toes of the mag boots engaged. He took the rifle off his back, synced it to the suit's HUD, and a handful of new stars appeared. Red for the militiamen, green for whatever the other things were they were hauling with them. The *Rocinante* bucked under him, the horizon of the ship shifting as the rail gun fired. A half dozen streaks of blue danced from the defense moons above, marking the path of the rail gun's round with the instantaneous violence of lightning. He shifted a few centimeters, correcting for the movement of the ship, reacquired his targets, and opened the general frequency.

"Gentlemen," he said. "This really isn't something we need to be doing."

He saw them respond. Their bodies stiffening, their heads craning while they tried to look for him. No one came on the channel. He zoomed in on them. Their faceplates were darkened against the sun, making them anonymous. But he knew all of them.

"Honestly, why? What's this for? That ship down there and everyone on her is going to die. We're doing everything we can to put that off, but you guys have done the math, right? You have the same numbers we do. You don't gain anything from this. It's just being mean. You don't need to do that."

One of the dots flinched. At a guess, the chief engineer was shouting on whatever frequency they were all using now. Drowning him out. Havelock let his sight drift to one of the other dots. The angle made it hard to parse exactly what he was seeing. A gas storage tube of some kind, with complications of wire and circuit board on either end. Some kind of improvised missile, he guessed. They would have been pointless if the PDC he was hiding behind had been working. He wondered whether the engineers knew the *Roci's* defenses were down, or if they only guessed. Or if the prospect of their own deaths and their hatred of the Belters had taken them far enough that the risk of being killed in order to deny the *Barbapiccola* a little more life seemed worth it to them. No matter what, it was disappointing.

"Walters? Is this how you want to go down? Don't listen to them for a second. Seriously, just turn off the radio. We don't have to hurry here. Do you think you're doing the right thing?"

They were visibly closer now than they had been. They weren't

accelerating toward him, but they weren't braking either. Havelock's HUD made the calculation. They'd be at the *Roci* or the *Barb* or the tether between them in about twenty minutes.

"You guys need to slow down now," Havelock said. "You're still my people, and I don't want to hurt any of you."

The radio clicked to life. The chief engineer's voice was thick with anger and contempt. "Don't try to play that on us, you traitorous bastard. Your little friend's PDCs are powered down. We saw that before we dropped. Do you think we're stupid? We have orders to bring you and the Belter bitch back to the *Israel* and put you both in the brig."

"Orders?"

"Straight from Murtry."

Because, Havelock figured, it was precedent. RCE would be able to assert that it had protected its claim down to the last minute. Murtry's legacy would be that he hadn't given up a centimeter. Not on the ground, not in space, not on the abstract legal battlefield. Nowhere.

There was a time not that long ago when Havelock would have thought there was a kind of hard purity in that. Now it just seemed weird and kind of pathetic.

"Okay," he said. "You're right. The PDCs are down, but you haven't thought the rest of this through. I am outside the ship. I'm armored. I have an integrated HUD and a weapon that can reach any of you right now. None of you have any cover. The reason you guys are alive right now is because you're my guys, and I don't want any of you hurt."

He watched them react. It was less than he'd hoped. The *Roci* bucked again. The bolt of the rail gun and the attacking streaks of energy from the moons. Havelock reacquired the targets. It took a fraction of a second for the HUD's alert to make sense to him. Four of the targets were moving. Fast. Four of the gas tanks, accelerating hard, a cloud of thin mist flowing out behind them as whatever residual vapor had been trapped in it froze into snow.

"You've got incoming," Alex snapped in his ear, and Havelock lifted his gun. One of the missiles was clearly flying off course, a vicious spiral wobble leading it down toward the planet. He took aim at one of the three remaining and blew holes on both sides of the tube. The improvised missile wobbled as whatever steering device the *Israel*'s engineers had put on the

back struggled to use the last of the escaping ejection mass to correct the course, but the venting gases were too destabilizing. It drifted up and began to turn. He shifted to the two remaining targets. He wasn't going to have time to get them both, but he managed to sink two rounds in the one that was heading straight toward him, trying to knock out the payload.

The one remaining tube hit the *Roci's* skin eight meters to Havelock's right, and the world went white. Something pushed him, and something hurt, and the sound of his suit radio was still there, but it was faintly distant. His body seemed very large, like it had expanded to fill the universe or the universe had shrunk down until it fit in his skin. His hands seemed a very long way away. Someone was shouting his name.

"I'm here," he said, and it felt like hearing a recording of himself. The pain started ramping up. His HUD was flashing red medical warnings, and his left leg was frozen stiff and unbending. The stars spun around him, New Terra coming up from below him and then spinning up past his head. For a moment, he couldn't find the *Rocinante* or the *Barbapiccola*. Maybe they were gone. He caught a passing glimpse of the *Israel*, though, far off to his right, and so small he could almost have mistaken it for a tightly packed constellation of dim stars. His HUD spooled up a fresh warning, and he felt a needle fire into his right leg. A cold shudder passed through him but his mind seemed to clear a little.

"Havelock?" Alex said.

"I'm here," Havelock said. "I'm not dead. I think I've been knocked off the ship, though. I seem to be floating."

"Can you stabilize?"

"I don't think so. The suit may be malfunctioning. Also I seem to have taken a lot of shrapnel in my left leg and hip. I may be bleeding."

"Do you have containment? Havelock? Are you losing air?"

It was a good question, but his gorge was rising. The spinning was making him sick. If he puked in the helmet, things would go from bad to worse very, very quickly. He closed his eyes and focused on his breath until he thought he could stand to look again. When he did, he kept his gaze on the unshifting images of the HUD readout.

"I have containment. I can breathe."

He heard Naomi sigh. It sounded like relief. He was flattered. The red dots of the militiamen spun past in the corner of his eye. He couldn't tell if

they were still getting closer or if they'd stopped. Something bright happened in the atmosphere. The rail gun firing again. The planet rose up from below him and disappeared over his head.

"Hang on, coyo," Basia said. "I'm coming out."

"Belay that," Havelock said. "The guys from the *Israel* have more of their improvised missiles. They have guns. Stay inside."

"Too late," Basia said. "Already cycled out the lock. I just need too... Shit, that's bright."

Havelock twisted to the left, finding the *Rocinante* at last. The explosion hadn't thrown him as far as he'd thought, but he was on the drift now. Every breath took him farther from the metal-and-ceramic bubble of air. He wondered if he stayed out here whether his body would outlast the ships. His air supply wouldn't. The improvised missile had left a bright scar on the *Roci*'s outer hull, but didn't look like it had made any holes. Tough little ship.

"Huh," Basia said. "Well, they're shooting at me."

"Get back in the ship," Havelock said.

"I will. In a minute. Now where did you... Ah! There you are."

The grapnel struck his left arm, the gel splashing out and hardening in almost the same moment. At the first tug, his right leg shrieked in pain. But the vectors were such that his uncontrolled spinning slowed. The red dots of the militia were much closer now. Basia was in real danger of being shot. And there were still eight more improvised missiles.

The *Rocinante* jumped. The rail gun path through the high atmosphere glowed. Had it really only been five minutes? He had to have missed a couple of rounds. Or maybe getting blown out into space just changed how he experienced time. Or maybe he'd seen them and then forgotten.

"Don't pull me too fast," Havelock said. "You're going to have to put just as much energy into stopping me once I'm there. I could knock you off." Or *smash against the hull*, he didn't say.

"I've been in low g more than I haven't," Basia said, a real amusement in his voice. "Don't worry yourself."

The slow-spinning *Rocinante* came closer, Havelock's own spin making it seem like the universe and the ship and his own body were all in slightly different realities. Basia was a darker blot against gray ceramic and metal. Havelock's HUD cheerfully informed him that his blood pressure had been

stabilized. He hadn't realized that it was unstable. The suit's attitude jets were still off-line, but Basia jumped up to meet him before he touched the deck, wrapping arms around his shoulders in a bear hug while Basia's suit slowed them.

"You need to get inside," Havelock said as his left mag boot locked against the hull.

"I was about to say the same to you," Basia said. "How much shrapnel did you take?"

Havelock looked at his leg for the first time. The suit was dotted with emergency sealant, the result of a dozen holes at least. "All of it, apparently."

"I've got fast movers," Alex said.

Havelock turned, rifle up, ready to shoot the missiles down before they reached him or die trying. It took a few seconds to find them. The green dots weren't heading for him. They were tracking down toward the planet. Toward the *Barb*.

"Okay," he said. "Hold on."

"I think they're still shooting at you," Naomi said. He moved forward, his leg not painful now so much as eerily numb. The shifting of the *Rocinante* was throwing off his aim. His HUD showed a lock and he pulled the trigger. One of the missiles exploded. Basia was hunched down, hands and legs against the decking, a stream of obscenity coming from him sounding like a chant. Havelock tried to move his mag boots, but he couldn't get them to respond. The *Roci* bucked.

"The crew of the *Barb*'s braced," Alex said. "First impact in—"

A new brightness bloomed below them. Havelock felt it, the impact traveling through the tether to the *Roci* to his boots almost instantaneously. Through the radio, he could hear Alex groan.

"Okay," Naomi said. "This is a problem."

Below them, the *Barbapiccola* was starting to tilt. The force of the explosions just enough to give it a little velocity, a tumble so slow, he could almost pretend it wasn't there. Almost. Not quite. The webwork of the tether was shredded. Two strands still held, but the others were drifting. One was cut in two, the others might have broken free of their foot supports or pulled the supports off the skin of the ship. He wasn't sure. New Terra was so large below, it filled his field of vision. A wave of vertigo washed

over him, and he had the near-hallucinatory sense that the planet was a monster rising up through a vast ocean to swallow them all.

“Alex,” Naomi said, “drop the cable.”

“No!” Basia shouted at her.

“Not responding,” Alex said. “The release seems to be damaged.”

The *Roci* bucked, and the tether snapped taut.

“Cease firing!” Basia shouted. “Stop firing the rail gun!”

“Sorry,” Alex said. “It was on automatic. It’s shut down now.”

“I’m going to the *Barb*,” Basia said. “I’ve got my welding rig. May be something I can do.”

“That’s not going to work,” Naomi said. “Just cut it.” The *Barbapiccola* was a good ten degrees off the stable orbit she’d had. Tumbling.

“I’m not coming back in,” Basia said. “And I’m not cutting it. I gotta go look.”

“You remember they’re still shooting at you, right?” Naomi said.

“I don’t care,” Basia said.

“I’ll cover him,” Havelock said. “I can do that.”

“Can you move?”

Havelock consulted his HUD. His shredded leg was immobilized and under pressure to contain the bleeding. One of his attitude jets had been holed. The air in his suit smelled sharp, like melting plastic. That couldn’t be a good sign.

“Not really, no,” he said. “But Basia can get me to cover. The outer airlock hatch on the *Roci*, maybe. I can stay there and snipe.”

“Hurry, then,” Naomi said. “They’re still getting closer, and eventually they’ll get to a range they might hit something.”

Havelock disengaged his mag boots and turned toward the Belter. “All right. If we’re going to do this, let’s go.”

Basia clapped a hand on Havelock’s arm and started dead hauling him down the ruined side of the ship. The pockmarks and bright spots where the debris of the shuttle had struck were everywhere, now joined by the scar of the improvised missile. A soft white plume curved into the void where something was venting. Time seemed to skip, and he was at the airlock’s outer door. It was open, waiting for him. The red dots showed that his men were still ten minutes away. The *Barb* was above him now, and the planet above that. Not a beast rising to devour him, but a whole clouded sky

falling down to crush him.

“Are you all right?” Basia said. “You can do this?”

“I’ll live,” Havelock said, and immediately realized how completely inappropriate that had been to say. “I’m all right. Lightheaded, but my blood pressure’s solid.”

“Okay, then. I’ll be right back. Don’t let those sons of bitches screw this up any worse.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said, but Basia had already launched himself up along the tether. Havelock checked his rifle, his HUD. He still had to adjust for the *Roci*’s spin, but he found the little red dots quickly.

“All right, guys,” he said. “You’ve made your point. Now let’s just dial this back. There’s still time. I don’t want to hurt anybody.” The words were surreal. Like a poem from some other century. A litany for deescalating conflict. No one really appreciated how much of security work was just trying to keep things under control for a few more minutes, giving everyone involved in the crisis a little time to think it all through. The threat of violence was just one tool among many, and the point was not making things worse. If there was any way at all, just not making things worse. It occurred to him that Murtry was actually really bad at that part of the job.

His HUD marked a fast-moving object. A bullet or a slow meteor. From the angle, probably a bullet. Another one was moving on a track to pass Basia. It was going to miss too, but not for much longer.

“All right,” Havelock said, raising his rifle. “I’m counting to ten, and anyone that’s still on approach, I’m going to have to put a hole in you. I’ll try to just disable your suits, but I’m not making any promises.”

The red dots didn’t change their vectors.

It was strange. He’d come all this way, faced all these dangers. He was falling by centimeters into a planet and struggling for a few more minutes or hours of life. And the thing that worried him most was still that he was going to have to shoot somebody.

Chapter Fifty: Elvi

The cart had been designed for use on rough terrain and shipped out to a planet without roads. It wasn't smooth, but it was fast, and the roar of the generator and the whirring of the motors had made a kind of white noise that Elvi's brain tuned out after the first few hours, leaving her in something like silence. And all around them, the ruins of New Terra rose up and then passed away. The storm that had scoured First Landing into scraps and mud hadn't been local. All of the landscapes they passed through were shattered and drowned, but they were still fascinating. Still beautiful.

A forest of thin red bodies halfway between trees and gigantic fungi lay on their sides, the cart's wheels leaving tire tracks across their flesh. Flying creatures no larger than her splay-fingered hand fell into line behind the cart for hours, attracted by the noise or the movement of the spray of atmospheric hydrocarbons. She wondered how the frail creatures had survived the planetary disaster. When night fell, three vast columns of luminous dots rose up into the sky like skyscrapers built from fireflies. She didn't know if they were organisms like the mimic lizards or artifacts like her butterflies. A huge animal, as tall and wide across as an elephant but segmented like a caterpillar, lay dead and rotting along the crest of a low hill, structures like two interlocking sets of ribs crossing its massive sides and gnat-small carrion eaters flying around it like a fog. A silver-and-blue structure rose from a pool of grayish rainwater, collapsed, and rose again. It could have been anything, but she could only see its behaviors as play. Splashing in puddles. It was all she could do to keep from stopping and looking at it all.

A whole biosphere—or two or three—passed by her, teasing and

hinting. She wished she could have seen it all before the storm. At best now, they would be able to guess at what had come before and see what came after. She took consolation by reminding herself that was always true. All of nature was a record of crisis and destruction and adaptation and flourishing and being knocked back down again. What had happened on New Terra was singular and concrete, but the pattern it was part of seemed to apply everywhere and maybe always. Even the aliens that had made the artifacts, the protomolecule, the rings, had suffered some vast and cosmic collapse.

At dawn the three of them shared the last of their food. There was still enough water to last a few days, but they would be hungry ones, and after that, she guessed they'd try to find something on the planet that they could stomach. They would fail and die. Unless Holden really could turn the reactors back on and drop something from the ships. A steep-walled canyon blocked their way, the erosion of centuries exposing strata of rock as even and unvarying as the pages of a book. It took the cart's expert system half an hour to find a path down and back up.

When she had mentioned how lucky they were that they hadn't hit anything like a mountain range, Faye had laughed.

"You'd need tectonic plates first," he'd said. "This planet doesn't have mountains, it has hemlines."

None of them talked much, the noise of the cart drowning out anything short of shouting, but even if they'd been driving in silence, she didn't have the sense that Amos Burton would have spoken. He spent the day and a half of travel sitting at the cart's front edge, legs folded, his eyes on his hand terminal or the horizon. She thought there was a growing anxiety in the man's broad face, fear for Holden and for the ships above them and the planet all around, but she could also have been projecting her own feelings on him. He had that kind of face.

In some places, the tracks of the other cart—Murtry and Wei's cart—had wandered off on a different heading from their own. Sometimes the tracks got lost in the soft mud or vanished as they crossed wide, wet expanses of stone. But it always returned, the doubled track of their tires leading the way north into with wilderness. The headlights showed a swath of gravel and pale yellow snail-like organisms that were crushed under the cart's wheels. The air was colder, either because they were heading north or because the permanent cloud cover was keeping the energy of the sun up

away from the planet's surface. Elvi had dozed as much as the emptiness in her belly permitted, her head on Fayez's lap, then they traded and he dozed in hers. Her dreams had been of Earth and trying to guide a pizza delivery service through the hallways of her university lab. She woke knowing that something had changed, but it took her a long moment to realize what. The cart was silent. She sat up, rubbing her eyes.

The other cart was in the headlights, spattered with mud and scarred along the side where it had scraped against something harder than its alloy siding. Amos dropped down and walked slowly around it twice, once looking at the cart and once looking out into the darkness.

"What is it?" she asked. "Is everything okay?"

"Their motors burned out," Amos said as he hauled himself back up to the cart bed. "Got mud in the axles and didn't clean it out. Wherever they went from here, it was on foot."

"Are we close to Holden?"

"Oh yeah," Amos said, holding up his hand terminal. "This was the last blip we saw. It was short, but it gave us a pretty good lock on his position. We'll move toward it and hope he pops up again soon." The map didn't give her a sense of scale, but there were two indicators on it—one for them and the other for the captain. "If I'm right, we're getting right toward the end of this. And we're still the ones with the wheels. You two'd better lie down on the deck from here on in."

"Why?" Fayez asked.

"Case they decide to shoot someone," Amos said, restarting the generator.

Over the roar, she didn't think Amos heard Fayez say, "All right. That makes sense." But she did.

It was still the small hours of the morning—the long stretch between midnight and dawn—when they came to the structure. At first it was only a glittering in the darkness, like a bit of starfield. For a time, she thought it might be a break in the clouds. But the closer they came, the more obvious it became that it was something else.

In the darkness, the details were hard to make out, but it seemed to share the same almost organic architecture with the ruins back in First Landing, but a couple orders of magnitude larger. She had the sense of being at the edge of one of the huge industrial ruins of the European west coast, a place

where something world-shatteringly huge had once made its power felt, and now had left its carapace behind. When the first pale flakes of snow filtered down through the headlights, she thought at first they were ashes.

“Is that where we’re going?” Fayez asked.

“Think so,” Amos said. “We haven’t had a solid update on the captain in a couple hours, and that up there’s about where the last reading came. Figure once you get inside, the signal don’t penetrate.”

“Or it ate him,” Fayez said. “It could have just eaten him.”

“Captain’d be a tough meal to swallow,” Amos said.

The cart rolled on, moving toward Holden’s last known position. Huge black spikes rose out of the ground, some of them swiveling to track their passage. The snow thickened, sticking to the ground and the cart. The structure remained clean, though, the white melting away. *It’s warm*, Elvi thought, and couldn’t explain why she found the idea so unnerving.

The cart passed under an archway ten meters high and into the structure itself. The snowfall stopped. All around them, the walls glowed, filling the space with a soft, shadowless light. The air was warmer and smelled of something sharp and acrid, like alcohol fumes, but harsher. The cart shifted one way and then another, hunting for the last, fading traces of Holden’s electrical scent before giving up and stopping. Amos flipped it over to manual and took direct control. The pathways moved in swirls and loops for a time, then broadened, opening. The roof of the place was lost in darkness, and long tubes of what could have been conduits or vasculature rose up out of the earth and flowed together, inward, forward, toward whatever the functional heart of the place had been. The cart slowed. Amos took his shotgun from the deck and fired it. The report echoed.

“What are you shooting at?” Elvi asked.

Amos shrugged. “Nothing in particular. Just thought, you know, *loud*.” He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted. “Captain! You out there? *Holden!*”

“Are we sure he’s in here?” Fayez said.

“Nope,” Amos said, then went back to shouting. “Captain!”

A figure stepped from behind a massive machine, fifty meters in front of them. It was the size and shape of a human, and Elvi felt a moment’s disorientation at how utterly out of place it seemed. Amos took a fresh grip on the shotgun and angled toward it. The figure stood, feet shoulder width

apart, hands at its sides, as the cart approached. When they were within ten meters, Amos shut the generator down.

“Hey there,” he said, his voice open and friendly and insincere.

“Hey yourself,” Wei answered, lifting her chin.

Amos dropped from the side of the cart, his shotgun in his hand almost as if he’d forgotten it was there. Elvi looked at Fayez, who shrugged. She slid down to the ground, moving forward slowly. She kept her hand against the front tire, the tread warm against her palm, but cooling.

“What’re you up to?” Amos asked.

“Work,” Wei said, nodding to the vast structure all around them. “RCE’s got a claim on all of this. I’m just making sure no one infringes on it.”

“Meaning the cap’n.”

“Meaning anyone,” Wei said. Her voice was harder now.

“Well, it’s a fucking ugly place if you ask me.”

“It is.”

“We really going to do this? Because I think it’d be a hell of a lot more fun for me to get Holden and you to get Murtry and we all see if there’s not some way for the doc back there to find something with alcohol in it on this mudball.”

“Yeah, that does sound like fun,” Wei said. “But I’m on duty.”

Fayez came up from behind Elvi, his arms crossed over his chest. His eyebrows were pulled together in distress.

“So thing is?” Amos said. “Yeah, Holden’s in there someplace, and I’m figuring Murtry’s in there looking for him.”

“Could be.”

“So when I get back up there and drive on by—”

“You don’t want to do that, Amos. My orders are no one goes in. Hop back on and head the other way, you and me have no problems. Try to infringe further on RCE property, and I’m going to have to shoot you.”

Amos rubbed his scalp with his left hand. The shotgun in his right seemed larger somehow. Like the threat of violence gave it significance and the significance gave it weight. Elvi found herself breathing in quick, short gasps and thought for a moment that something had changed about the air itself. But it was only fear.

“Captain’s in there trying to get the reactors back on,” Amos said.

“Then he’s trespassing and he’ll need to leave.” Wei’s stance softened

for a moment, and when she spoke there was something like sorrow in her voice. Not the thing itself, but like it. “When it’s time to go, there’s worse ways than dying at your post.”

Amos sighed, and Elvi could see his shoulders slump. “Your call,” he said, raising the shotgun.

The report came from behind them, and Amos pitched forward.

“Down!” Murtry shouted at their backs, and Elvi hunched as automatically as a reflex. Fayeze was pressed against her on one side, the massive tire on the other. The shotgun boomed at the same time as a sharp crack of a pistol sounded. Elvi looked out, and Wei was on the ground, her arms thrown out at her sides. Amos was struggling to his knees. His back was to her, and there was blood on the back of his neck, but she couldn’t see where it was coming from. Murtry strode past her, firing his pistol, two, three, four times. She could see Amos’ armored back quiver with every shot. Murtry wasn’t missing. Her own scream sounded high and oddly undignified.

Murtry rounded the cart as Amos turned with a roar, the shotgun fired three times, the concussions beating at the air. Murtry stumbled back, but didn’t fall. His next shot drew a small fountain of blood from Amos’ thigh, and the big man collapsed. Murtry lowered his gun and coughed.

“Doctor Okoye. Doctor Sarkis,” he said. The armor over his chest was shredded. If he hadn’t been wearing it, Amos’ blast would have blown the man’s heart back out through his spine. “I have to say I’m disappointed by your decision to come here. And your choice of company.”

Amos was gasping, his breath ragged. Murtry stepped delicately across to him and shoved the shotgun away. The metal hissed against the strange chitinous flooring.

“You shot him,” Fayeze said.

“Of course I did. He was threatening the life of one of my team,” Murtry said, walking over to Wei. He sighed. “My only regret is that I was unable to save Sergeant Wei.”

Tears filled Elvi’s eyes. She felt sobs shaking her. Amos lifted a hand. The thumb and forefinger were missing, and bright pink bone showed through the blood. She looked away.

“What are you talking about?” Fayeze said. His voice was shaking.

“Doctor Sarkis? You have something you’d like to add?” Murtry said,

slipping a fresh magazine into his pistol.

“You set this up. You set *all* of this up. You put her there to distract Amos and you shot him from behind. This isn’t just something that happened and you did the best you could and poor fucking Wei. You *did* this!”

“If Mister Burton here had done as he was asked and left the site—”

“He was trying to save us!” Fayez shouted. His face was red and he stepped forward. His hands were in fists at his sides. Murtry looked up, something a little less than polite interest in his eyes. “He and Holden are trying to save us! You and me and Elvi and everyone. What the hell are *you* doing?”

“I’m protecting the assets, rights, and claims of Royal Charter Energy,” Murtry said. “What I’m *not* doing, and I hope you understand this, is running around in a circle with my dick in my hand whining about how nothing matters because we’re all going to die. We all knew when we got on the *Edward Israel* that we might not make it back. That was a risk you were willing to take because it meant you could do your job. I’m no different.”

“You got Wei killed!” Fayez shouted. Elvi put her hand on his shoulder and he shrugged it off. “She’s dead because of you!”

“Her turn now, my turn later,” Murtry said. “But there are some things I need to get done before that.”

The security chief checked his gun and looked down at Amos Burton staring raw hatred up at him. Murtry leveled the barrel at the bleeding man’s face. *Look away, Elvi thought. Don’t watch this happen. Look away.*

Fayez hit Murtry in the nose. The movement was so fast and awkward and artless that at first Elvi wasn’t sure it had really happened. She watched the expression in Fayez’s widening eyes as he understood what he’d done, and then when he committed to doing it again. Murtry turned his pistol away from Amos, swinging it toward Fayez, and the geologist ran into him with a shout. Murtry stumbled back but didn’t fall.

“Elvi!” Fayez shouted. “Run!”

She took a step forward. Amos was writhing on the ground, blood pouring from somewhere in his suit. His teeth were bared and crimson. He was grinning.

“Run!” Fayez screamed.

The great gray walls rose around them. False stars glittering. She couldn't breathe. She took one tentative step forward. Then another. She felt like she was moving through a gel, forcing every motion. *Shock*, she thought. *I'm in shock. People die from shock, don't they?* In her memory, Fayez shook his head and said, *Oh look, another excuse to go talk to Holden.*

Holden. She had to find Holden. She took another step, then another. And then she was sprinting, her legs and arms pumping, small animal grunts forcing their way out of her throat. Somewhere behind her, a pistol fired twice, and then a third time. She didn't look back. Everything in her, everything she was, focused only forward, along the wide, dark veins of the structure, forward to where they converged.

Elvi ran.

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Chapter Fifty-One: Basia

Basia reached out to touch the tether, and it vibrated under his gloved fingers like a living thing.

Alex,” Naomi didn’t quite yell over the general comm channel, “I’m sending you a burn program. We have to keep that cable taut until Basia cuts it or the *Barb* is going to rip us both apart.”

“I’m not cutting it,” Basia repeated, but no one replied. He checked to see if his microphone was on.

“One,” Havelock said, ending his countdown. “Out of time guys.”

If the security man’s threats had any effect, Basia couldn’t tell. His HUD was still displaying the red lines of incoming gunfire. He ignored them.

Above him, the *Rocinante* began shifting and firing its remaining maneuvering thrusters in response to the slow rotation of the *Barbapiccola*, desperately trying to keep slack out of the cable. Two massive ships, each rotating in different axes, the cable could go from slack to thousands of tons of tension fast enough to tear the mounts out of the ships, and a chunk of the ship’s structure along with it.

“Basia,” Naomi said, her voice gentle. “I can’t give you much time. And you know this ends the same way no matter what.”

“I’m checking the connection to the *Barb*,” he said instead of answering her.

The mount was a mess of twisted metal and frayed cable. Pieces of the hull had been torn free by dislodged footings, and the ones that were still connected stretched and flexed with each gyration of the ship. Basia tried to calculate how much tension must be on the rigging and cable and failed. If it snapped free, it would probably cut him in half. If he did cut it, he’d need

Alex to put slack on it first.

"I'm not cutting it," he said again, more to himself than anyone else. Cutting it meant letting the *Barb* drift away, down into the upper atmosphere to rip apart and burn. To let Felcia burn. Alex had promised not to let that happen.

A pair of red lines drew themselves across his HUD and the words DANGER CLOSE flashed there briefly. He wasn't up on all his military jargon, but he could guess what that phrase meant. He pulled himself around the cable footing and took cover. Out in the blackness between the *Israel* and the *Barb*, twelve men in suits floated toward him on puffs of gas. They still had a few of their improvised missiles.

"Guys," Havelock said, real sadness in his voice.

"Havelock," Naomi yelled, "if you let those assholes shoot Basia you don't get to come back on my ship."

"Roger that," Havelock said sorrowfully. One of the twelve attackers spun sideways as a puff of white mist shot out of his EVA pack. The man continued to rotate wildly as he flew at high speed away from the others.

"One of you should go get him," Havelock said. "His EVA pack is toast."

Almost before he finished saying it, two of the remaining attackers jetted toward the disabled man, bringing their grapnel guns to bear.

"Havelock, you asshole," Koenen said on the open frequency where everyone could hear him. "I'm going to enjoy stomping a mudhole in you." He and his team opened fire on Havelock's position in the airlock, driving him back into cover.

Now that everyone wasn't looking at him, Basia took a moment to look over the mangled footing. "Naomi, I'm having the suit send you pictures of the damage."

"Basia, I—" she started.

"Help me fix this," he said, cutting her off. "If the *Barb* has more cable, I can reattach it here while Alex keeps us from totally losing our remaining connection."

"Basia," Naomi said, her voice gentle and sad. "This can't be fixed. The *Barbapiccola* is going down. Nothing is gained by her taking us with her."

"I do not accept that!" Basia shouted back at her, loud enough that his

own suit's speakers distorted. "There has to be a way!"

His suit flashed a warning at him, and he pulled back into cover just in time to avoid a fusillade of shots that bounced off the hull, leaving shiny streaks in the dull metal. One of the remaining nine attackers threw his arms up like he was surrendering, then went motionless, spinning slowly toward the *Barbapiccola*.

"Williams is flatlined," the chief engineer said. "You just killed an RCE employee. You'll burn for that, Havelock."

"You know what, chief? Fuck you," Havelock replied, his tone low, but real anger in his voice for the first time. "You are the one who escalated this. I didn't ask for any of it. Pull out. Marwick, get your men out of here! Don't let him force this anymore!"

Another voice, older, sadder, replied on the radio. "Those aren't my men, Mister Havelock. You know as well as I do that I have no authority over the expeditionary team."

"That's right, motherfucker," the chief said. "We're acting on orders from Chief of Security Murtry."

While Havelock, Marwick, and the chief engineer argued, Basia tuned them out. They'd either agree or they wouldn't. Havelock would kill more of them or he wouldn't. The captain would assert authority or he wouldn't. None of that changed Basia's real problem. His daughter was on board a ship that was slowly spinning out of control and losing altitude. At some point, it would hit enough atmosphere to get noticeable drag, which would slow it and let it fall deeper into the killing air, and shortly after that, it would burn up. The *Rocinante* couldn't save it. Helplessness and grief washed over him, but he willed himself not to weep. He wouldn't be able to see with the water sheeting across his eyes. There had to be another way.

"Basia," Naomi said on a private channel to him. He could tell she'd switched him to a private channel because the argument between Havelock and the RCE people stopped suddenly mid-word. "Basia, I'm getting your daughter out."

"What?"

"I'm on the line with the captain of the *Barbapiccola*. I've explained the situation. He's... well, he's not happy. But he understands. Alex promised you that if the ships went down, Felcia would be on the *Rocinante* when it happened. We're keeping that promise."

“How?” Basia asked. The way the ships were tumbling, he couldn’t imagine how dangerous a docking attempt would be. The ship-to-ship docking tubes were flexible, but not that flexible.

“They’re bringing her to the airlock now. They’ll put her in a suit and send her out to you. You’ll need to get her back to this ship and then... you need to cut the cable.”

Something about the docking tube stuck in his mind. The *Rocinante* couldn’t dock with the *Barbapiccola* to pull the doomed crew off, but a space suit was, at heart, just a bubble of air to keep its wearer alive.

“The docking tube,” he said. “Is there a way to seal it on both ends? We could put it on the *Barb*, seal it around some people, then move them across to the *Roci*.”

“We’d have to cut it free from the airlock housing,” Naomi said. A spray of bullets hit the cable footing as she spoke, like visual punctuation for her words. Another of the engineers spun away, his EVA pack holed in two places. Naomi continued talking but Basia wasn’t listening.

“What about emergency airlocks,” he said. “The plastic blister kind, you know? They’re made to hold atmosphere and supply oxygen.”

“You have to attach them to something,” Naomi said.

“What if,” Basia answered, “we attach them to each other? Seal to seal?”

Naomi was silent for a long moment. When she spoke again, her words were slow, measured. Like she was thinking them through as she spoke. “A life-support bubble.” Basia could tell she’d switched them back to the general channel because Havelock’s argument came thundering back. “Gentlemen, we have an idea. We’ll pull the crew off the *Barbapiccola* on escape pods made of two emergency airlocks sealed together. The *Roci* only carries one, but if the *Barb* has one—”

“You kidding me?” a new voice said. Basia recognized it. The captain of the Belter ship. “I think somebody turned ours into parts for a still back before we shot the pinche ring.”

“We have plenty of them,” Havelock said. “The *Israel* came out here with too much of everything. I’d bet we have twenty in storage.”

“That’s ten bubbles,” Basia said. “That’s plenty to hold the whole crew for a short trip.”

“Captain Marwick,” Koenen said, “you cannot give these people vital

RCE supplies.”

“Marwick,” Havelock said. “Do not let over a hundred innocent people die over this bullshit. Do not do that.”

“Ah fuck. What are they going to do? Cancel my contract?” Marwick replied, followed by a long sigh. “The *Israel* is moving in to transfer the escape bubbles. I’ll have the materials team start sealing them right now.”

“Captain,” the chief engineer growled, “we are acting out here on Security Chief Murtry’s direct orders to disable the squatters’ ship. You will not render them aid.”

“You,” Havelock said, “are such an asshole. Have you gone completely insane?”

“I will shoot down *any* attempt to—” the chief started, then stopped suddenly. The cable next to Basia snapped taut, almost tearing the few remaining attachments out of the *Barb*’s skin. Below, a rail gun shot streaked across Ilus, the fire from the defense moons stabbing at it as it fell. One of the red enemy dots on Basia’s HUD disappeared.

“Sorry,” Alex said, his accent as slow and heavy as Basia had ever heard it. “That was me. But that guy was pissin’ me off and I had the shot. Am I in trouble?”

There was a long moment of silence, and then Captain Marwick said, “*Israel*’s on her way.”

It took them nearly three hours to fabricate and then transfer the makeshift escape bubbles from the *Israel*. Basia kept track of the time by counting oxygen recharges for his suit. He flatly refused to return to the *Rocinante* until his daughter was off the dying Belter freighter. Alex had put some slack on the tether with carefully calculated bursts of thrust, and Basia had cut the line. No reason to keep the ships connected.

One by one the *Israel*’s expeditionary engineering team turned amateur militia contacted Havelock and apologized for how dramatically out of control the situation had gotten. Most of them blamed the chief engineer. Whether or not he was entirely responsible for the escalations that had occurred, Basia felt certain that history wouldn’t remember him kindly. One of the engineers admitted to being the person who’d fired the missile at the *Barbapiccola* and offered to help Basia fix the damage. Basia had offered to kill him if he tried. They agreed to disagree on it.

Even after the reconfigured emergency airlocks had been delivered, it

had taken the crew of the *Barbapiccola* and the colonists still on board two more hours to charge the air tanks and get everyone sealed inside. By that point, the computers on the *Rocinante* were saying the freighter should already be scraping upper atmosphere. The clock had run out.

But now Basia floated above the massive cargo bay doors of the *Barbapiccola*, waiting for them to open and set his daughter free.

It began as a line of white light cutting through the side of the massive freighter. Then, slowly, as the doors slid farther and farther apart, the ship's enormous cargo hold came into view. Against the backdrop of thousands of tons of raw lithium ore floated ten faintly translucent bubbles. Someone toggled a remote to open the cargo bay's airlock, and the air of the *Barbapiccola* rushed out, gently pushing the bubbles out the cargo bay door ahead of it.

The bubbles floated up away from the planet, the vacuum around them making them puff all the way up, little plump pockets of air for a dozen or more people to hide in, surrounded by the frozen mist of what had once been their ship's atmosphere. Ilus' star peeked around the limb of the planet, backlighting the bubbles and turning the floating people inside into black silhouettes, amazingly sharp against the blurry plastic walls. Like cardboard cutouts with a floodlight behind them.

Basia had a sudden memory of bathing Jacek in the kitchen sink when he was a baby, and his little boy farting in the water, a burst of small bubbles drifting up and then popping at the surface. The thought made him laugh until his stomach hurt. He recognized this was more about the relief that his daughter might live than it was about the flatulence of a small boy, but he laughed anyway.

"You okay out there?" Naomi asked.

"You ever bathed a kid in a sink?"

"Yeah," she said, "I have."

"They ever have gas?"

"I don't—" she started, then got it and laughed along with him.

Ten tow lines looped down from the open airlock of the *Israel*, and one by one Basia caught them and attached them to the bubbles. Felcia's bubble was last. As he pulled the strip at the end of the tether to activate the adhesive, he saw her look out of the airlock door's tiny transparent window. The sun had moved behind the planet, so Basia's visor had lost its opacity.

He activated the light inside the helmet so she'd be able to see him. Her face lit up, and the word *Papa* was so obvious on her lips that he would have sworn he could hear it.

"Hi, baby," he said, and put his gloved hand against the window. She put hers on the other side, small clever fingers against his big clumsy ones.

She smiled and pointed past him, mouthing the word "wow."

He turned to look. The *Israel* had started reeling the bubbles in one by one. A dozen humans being pulled through the vacuum of space inside an envelope of air barely larger than they were. When Felcia's line started to reel in, Basia kept his hand against it until it pulled gently, *gently* away from him. His little girl going up to safety. Temporary, sure, but all safety was.

In that moment, Basia felt something like a hammer blow to his chest. Everyone in those little pockets of air was a Felcia to someone. Every life saved there filled someone somewhere else with relief and joy. Every life snuffed out before its time was another Katoa. Someone, somewhere, having their heart torn out.

Basia could feel the detonator in his hands, the horrible click transferring to his palm as the button depressed. He could feel that terrible shock wave again as the landing pad vanished in fire. He could feel the horror replaced by fear as some unlucky combination of events put the shuttle too close to the blast and knocked it from the sky.

He could feel all of it so clearly it was as if it were happening right then. But more than that, he felt sorrow. Someone had just tried to do the same thing to his baby girl. Had tried to kill her, not because he hated her, but because she was standing in the path of his political statement. Everyone who died on that shuttle had been a Felcia to someone. And with the click of a button he'd killed them.

He hadn't meant to. He'd been trying to save them. That was the little lie he'd kept close to his heart for months now. But the truth was much worse. Some secret part of him *had* wanted the shuttle to die. Had reveled in watching it fall from the sky in flames. Had wanted to punish the people who were trying to take his world away.

Except that was a lie too.

The real truth, the truth beneath it all, was he'd wanted to spread his pain around. To punish the universe for being a place where his little boy

had been killed. To punish other people for being alive when his Katoa wasn't. That part of him had watched the shuttle burn and thought, *Now you know how it feels. Now you know how I feel.*

But the people he'd hurt had just saved his daughter because they were the kind of people who couldn't let even their enemies die helpless.

The first sob took him by surprise, nearly bending him double with its power. Then he was blind, his eyes filled with water, his throat closed like someone was choking him. He gasped for air and every gasp turned into another loud sob.

"Basia!" Naomi said in alarm. He'd just been cackling manically, and now he was sobbing. He must sound insane to her. "Basia, come back in!"

He tried to answer her, to reassure her, but when he spoke the only words he could say were, "I killed them."

"No," she said. "You saved them. You saved all of them."

"I killed them," he said again, and he meant the governor and Coop and Cate and the RCE security team, but most of all Katoa. He'd killed his little boy over and over again every time he'd let someone else die to punish them for his son's death. "I killed them," he said again.

"This time you saved them," Naomi repeated, as though she could read his mind. "These ones, you saved."



Havelock was waiting for him in the airlock. Basia knew the RCE man must have heard the breakdown he'd had. When Havelock looked at him, he felt nothing but shame. But while Havelock's face was tight with pain, there was no mockery in it when he gripped Basia's arm and said, "You did good out there."

Basia nodded back at him, not trusting himself to speak.

"Look," Havelock said, and pointed out the airlock door.

Basia turned around and saw the *Barbapiccola* leaving long thin streamers in its wake. It was entering Ilus' atmosphere. The front of the ship began to glow.

Havelock closed the hatch, but while the airlock cycled and they removed their gear, they watched the freighter's death on the wall monitor. Alex kept the *Roci's* scopes trained on it the entire time. It drifted for a

while, the streamers in the upper atmosphere eventually turning into white smoke with a black heart as the hull burned.

When the end came, it was sudden and shocking. The hull seemed to go from a solid object to many small fiery pieces in the blink of an eye, with no transition. Basia switched the monitor to the death clock to see how much time he'd bought Felcia.

Four days. The *Israel* had four days.

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Chapter Fifty-Two: Elvi

Elvi sat in the darkness, her hand terminal in her lap. She was trembling, and the fear and the anger and the sorrow were like she'd walked back into the worst of the storm. She couldn't feel that now. She didn't have time. She needed to think.

The screen didn't have maps, of course. There wasn't a survey of any of this to draw from, and even if there was, she didn't have a connection to the *Israel*, if the *Israel* was still in orbit and hadn't fallen into the atmosphere and burned and killed everyone to death and—

She couldn't feel that now. She needed to think. The structure, ruins, whatever they were had to be at least seven or eight square kilometers. They'd entered the ruins near Holden's last live signal, but there was still a lot of territory to cover. The locator on the hand terminal screen showed only the local nodes. The other two were Fayez and Murtry, and they were grayed out. No line of sight, which was good because it meant that wherever Murtry was, he couldn't see her, and bad because she didn't know where he was. It was a low-level diagnostic. The kind that built ad hoc routing networks on the fly. She'd set it to ask for a renewed route anytime it made a connection and alert her when it did. It wasn't much, but it would give her a little warning when Murtry was close. When he had line of sight. When he could shoot her the way he had Amos and probably Fayez and they were dead now and she couldn't feel that. She had to think. How to find Holden. She had to find him. Warn him. Keep Murtry from stopping him. She took a deep breath and looked up. Line of sight was a hard thing to manage on the ground, but the space above her was vast and open. If she could find a vantage point, the hand terminal would point Murtry out to her.

And if she couldn't find her friend, at least she could locate her enemy. Basic problem solving. If you don't have the data you need, play with the data you have, see if something comes out of it. She'd made it through three semesters of combinatorics that way. All right.

Her body was still shaking. Still weak. Her mind felt fuzzy. Adrenaline and hunger and Faye was probably dead and she couldn't feel that. She stuffed the hand terminal in her pocket and looked around for a way up. Nothing here was built for a human form. There weren't any ladders or walkways, no catwalks with convenient handrails. It was like a vast body. Or a vast body that had turned halfway into a machine. She ran quietly, making as little noise as she could with every footfall. An upwelling of conduits rose from the floor to her right, and she clambered up them, wedging her feet and fists into the narrow spaces between the tubes and hauling up and up and up. There were so many other people who would have done better. Faye was stronger than she was. Sudyam used to climb mountains back on Earth. Elvi didn't particularly enjoy climbing trees, much less strange alien webworks. She went up, not looking back, not looking down.

The structure was vast, and the soft glow that permeated everything made the space seem strange. Dreamlike. She perched in the crevice where two conduits or arteries met, wedging her leg into the gap. She pulled out her hand terminal. Twice on her way up, the ad hoc network alert had sounded and she hadn't noticed. Twice, Murtry had been in line of sight. The thought made her throat feel tight. She looked at the reply times. Two thousandths of a second? That couldn't be right. Radio waves moved at light speed, but they were in air, so that made it... what? Three times ten to the eighth? Something like that. Close enough as to make no difference. That'd put him something like half a million meters away. There had to be some kind of processing lag in the terminals that was swamping...

A new entry popped into the log, and her heart lept to her throat. Connection refused. She blinked at it. Why would Murtry's terminal accept connections when she was climbing up and reject them when she'd paused? That didn't make sense. Another line. Connection refused. Something like hope bloomed in her. It wasn't Murtry. It was someone else. Someone who wasn't in the charmed circle of RCE trusted networks.

It was Holden.

She craned her neck, as if by just looking she could find him. The structure was too big. She thought of calling out, but there was no reason to think he'd hear. And even if he did, Murtry would be closer.

Murtry. There was a thought. She opened the hand terminal's routing interface again. It had been years since she'd played with network protocols. Most of what she did was about signaling proteins in cells and protein regulation. Her leg was starting to tingle where her weight pressed it into the tube. There was a way to get a copy of Murtry's logs too. She just had to remember how to set up distributed logging.

Something in the structure clanged, the echoes reverberating through the space like a scream in a cathedral. She wondered if Murtry looked up whether he would see the light of her screen, up here in her crow's nest. She waited. Waited. The alert sounded. Murtry connected. She closed her eyes. *Okay, she thought. Go away now. Just go away.*

The alert dropped, and she pulled up the logs, and Murtry's records were there now too, and one—one—line of them was a refused connection. It was like being in maths again. Posit a frightened exobiologist four meters off the ground and a violent, predatory security man in a direct line from her at points a, b, and c. At point d, the predator had a refused connection with a lag time just under two-tenths of a second because the goddam *fucking* processing lag was swamping the signal time and making the whole thing...

Only it would be the same lag, wouldn't it? So if she could pull out the difference...

The world fell away. Her fingers tapped the screen, shifting to the calculation displays, pulling numbers from the logs, setting up the diagrams. The fear and sorrow and raw, animal terror were all still there, but they were just messages and she could ignore them. Her leg started to hurt and then go numb. She shifted a few centimeters until it hurt again.

Holden had been a hundred and ten meters from her. He'd been a hundred and fifty meters from Murtry. She could estimate where Murtry had been based on the contacts he'd made with her. It was like basic trigonometry where a wrong answer meant death. Holden was—approximately, roughly, assuming she hadn't biffed the equations and that the hand terminal's processing lags were identical—in the complex junctions at the center right of the structure where the conduits joined

together into something like a massive black wing. Elvi turned off her hand terminal and started back down. When she reached a surface she could walk on, her leg screamed. Pins and needles. She ignored it and started limping as quickly as she could toward the landmark she'd found. She didn't care about Murtry now. She had something to focus on.

It was less like making her way through an industrial complex than tramping through a vast forest without a machete. She squeezed through the cracks between dark structures as much growth as machine, ducked and climbed and once got down on her belly and crawled. She was sure she was making progress, sure that she would get there and find out at least whether her figures had been right, when she stepped out across a flat ledge and almost fell into a chasm.

A rumbling came from below, maybe a hundred meters deep. A tiny band of lights shifted down there, swirling one way and then the other and then moving on. It cut through the floor of the structure to both sides, all the way to the distant walls. A network of conduits branched above it, and wide, tendonlike connections bridged it far below. She started off along the rim, stepping over white, lumpy growths that seemed to sprout up out of the depths. It only took a few minutes to find a structure that crossed it, but it wasn't a bridge.

It was mostly flat, though the edges sloped down into the void; its surface was a wire mesh over what looked like an endless length of tongue. There was nothing like guardrails, and when she stepped out onto it, the tongue reacted to her, twitching and undulating like it was trying to drag her along. She put her arms out for balance and trotted across the gap. Two meters, four meters, five, and she was on the other side. She leaned against the wall, her head between her hands until the dizziness faded. The vast winglike structure was almost directly above her now, only close up she could see that it was more complex. Thousands of interweaving growths with deep, interlocking spirals and a shifting movement whose source she couldn't identify.

She slipped down the far side of the ledge and into something more like a passageway than she'd seen since she fled into the dark. The passage shifted left and then right. She followed it, picking her way by guesswork and hope. The ratio of floor to wall to ceiling unnerved her for reasons she couldn't quite say. Tiny flickers of blue light like fireflies glowed and went

dark all around her. She followed a broad turn and it opened into a chamber. She screamed.

Holden was there not three meters away, a huge, insectile thing looming above him. Cruel claws reached out and spikes like daggers caught the dim and eerie light. She pressed her knuckles to her mouth, unable to look away from Holden's last moments.

The artifact shifted toward her, paused, and lifted a claw like it was waving. Holden followed the gesture.

"Elvi?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I was... We were..." She sank down to her knees, relief running through her like water. She took a deep breath and tried again. "Murtry took one of the carts when you disappeared. He followed the signal from your hand terminal. He knows you're trying to shut down all the artifacts." A stab of panic took her and she glanced at the clawed thing.

"That's all right, kid," the robot-thing said in a tinny Belter accent. "It ain't news to me."

"Amos and Fayez and I got another cart going, and we came after them. To warn you."

"Okay," Holden said. "You did great. We're going to be fine now. How did you find us?"

Elvi held up her hand terminal, took a breath, let it out. "It was complicated."

"Fair enough. What about Amos? Where's he?"

"Murtry shot him. I think he's dead."

Holden's face went pale and then flushed. He shook his head, and when he spoke, his voice was low and careful. "Amos isn't dead."

"How do you know?"

"If Amos goes down, it's because literally everyone else there has already died. We're still alive, so Amos is too."

"Don't pay too much attention to him," the robot monster said. "He gets a little romantic about these things. If you say the bald guy's dead, I believe you."

"Thank you," Elvi said by reflex.

"I am sorry about it, though. I liked him."

"I did too," Elvi said. "And Fayez. I heard gunshots when I was running. I think Fayez—"

“How about Murtry?” Holden asked.

“He’s coming. He’s behind me. I don’t know how far. But he’s coming to find you. To stop you.”

“Why the fuck would he stop me?” Holden asked, biting the words.

“He wants RCE to have the artifacts still working.”

“That man’s kind of an asshole,” the alien said. “We’ve got a pretty full plate, though. We’re close.”

“Close to what?” Elvi said.

“That would be the question,” the alien answered, but Holden’s gaze was fixed over her shoulder. His jaw was tight and angry.

“All right,” he said. “We’ve got two things we need to do.”

“We do?” the alien said. It occurred to Elvi that they were talking to an alien. She thought that was remarkable, and she was a little confused that Holden hadn’t remarked on it.

“Someone has to find this whatever-it-is and shut off the planetary defenses, and someone has to shoot Murtry.”

“Not to disagree with you,” the alien said, shifting its weight on six articulated legs. “One of those seems a little more important to me.”

“Me too,” Holden said, “but I don’t think it’s the same one. Elvi, I’m going to need you to go save everyone, okay?”

“Um,” she said. “All right?”

“Good. This is Detective Miller. He died when Eros hit Venus and now he’s a puppet of the protomolecule.”

“Semi-autonomous,” the alien said.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“Okay,” Holden said. “I’m going to go take care of this.”

To Elvi’s surprise and unease, Holden walked away, following the passage she’d taken. The alien thing cleared its throat apologetically, only she was fairly sure it didn’t have a throat. So the sound was just a kind of conversational inflection.

“Sorry about that,” the alien—Miller—said. “He gets an idea in his head sometimes and there’s no talking to him.”

“It’s all right,” Elvi said. “So... um.”

“Right, saving everyone in the world. Follow me, kid. I’ll get you up to speed.”



“So it’s a distributed consciousness,” she said, following Miller through a low archway. She felt lightheaded, and not just from hunger. Faye was dead. Amos was dead. She was going to die. She was on an alien world. She was talking to a dead man wearing an alien robot. The part of her that could feel things was done, shut off. Her heart was a numbness behind her ribs, and when—if—it came back, she couldn’t guess who or what she would be.

“Except it’s not exactly conscious,” Miller said. “There’s nodes in it that are, but they don’t run the joint. I’m not actually one of them. I’m a construct based on the dead guy, only I’m based really closely on him, and he was kind of a bulldog about this kind of thing. At least by the end he was.”

“So are *you* conscious?”

The alien robot—the skin the Miller construct was using—shrugged. It was strange how well the gesture translated. “Don’t know. Seems like I’m acing my Turing test, though.”

Elvi thought about it and nodded. “Fair enough.”

“So I sort of... well, triangulated where the dead spot was in space. If you see what I mean.”

“Sure, yes. Triangulation. I totally understand that,” Elvi said. “So. Four now.”

“Four?”

“Our biosphere, the local organisms, the things that made the gates, and the things that killed them. Four.”

Miller stopped at a seam in the wall and placed his claws on it, ready to push. “In through here? It used to be one of the major control centers for the planet. Like a... like a nerve cluster or something. As near as I can figure it, the dead spot’s in here.”

He pushed. The wall retracted, not sliding back so much as changing conformation. Beyond it, a wide, tall space opened. Hundreds of niches rose, level after level, one above the other, with mechanisms like Miller in each of them. Dots of bright blue light like fireflies swirled spiral patterns in the air, riding currents of air that Elvi couldn’t feel. And in the center,

floating a meter above the floor, was...

She looked away, putting her hand on Miller's side to steady herself, then forced her gaze back up. It was hard to look at directly. The margins of the space were bright without illuminating anything or casting shadows, sharp and terrible. It reminded her of the way schizophrenics and people suffering migraines would describe light as assaulting and dangerous. And within that boundary, darkness swirled. It was more than an absence. She could sense a structure within it, layers interpenetrating, like shadows casting shadows. It throbbed with an inhuman power, tidal and deep and painful. *Look at this too long*, Elvi thought, *and I will lose my mind in it*. She took a step toward it, feeling the structures in the blackness respond to her. She felt as if she could see the spaces between molecules in the air, like atoms themselves had become a thin fog, and for the first time she could see the true shape of reality looming up just beyond her reach.

Once, there had been a civilization here beyond anything Elvi had ever imagined. Beings that could design tools like the protomolecule, like the rings. They had peopled a thousand worlds, and more, spread through time and through space, and they were gone now. And this—she had no doubt at all—this was the footprint of the thing that had killed them.

"So," Miller said, moving his claws in a wide, spreading gesture, "you need to look for anything, you know, odd. Something that doesn't seem like it fits."

She turned to him, confused, and pointed at the uncanny thing in the center of the room. "You mean like that?"

Miller shifted, alien eyes moving their lenses in the complexity of the mechanism. "Like what?"

"That. In the middle of the room. That."

"I don't see anything," Miller said. "What's it look like?"

"The eye of an angry God?" Elvi said.

"Oh," Miller said. The heavy plates of his robotic body clicked and hissed against each other as he shifted. "Yeah, well that's probably it, then. Good work."

Chapter Fifty-Three: Holden

When Murtry pulled himself through a gap in the machinery and walked across the ledge to the narrow bridge, Holden was waiting for him on the other side. His hand was draped casually on the butt of his gun. The RCE security chief gave Holden a vague nod, then carefully examined his surroundings. He looked down into the hundred-meter chasm, and tapped the narrow tonguelike bridge with the tip of one boot. He spun once slowly, peering carefully into the crevices created by the cramped machines. When he was through, he looked at Holden again and gave him a flat, meaningless smile. Holden noticed his hand wasn't far from his own weapon.

You came by yourself," Murtry said. "The better plan is to put one person in the open with a second hidden behind the target."

"That the one you use?" Holden asked. He tried to match Murtry's casual nonchalance and felt like he mostly succeeded.

"It works," Murtry replied with a nod. "So how does this go down?"

"I've been wondering that myself."

"Well," Murtry said with an almost imperceptible shrug, "I need to get over there and stop whatever you people are cooking up. Doctor Okoye seems to think you are going to break the defense network down."

"Yeah," Holden replied. "Pretty much am. Call it saving people."

Murtry nodded but didn't speak for a moment. Holden waited for him to reach for his gun. The distance between them, the width of the chasm, was just over five meters. An easy shot at the range. Harder when you were rushing because the other guy was shooting back. The lighting was good and Murtry wasn't wearing a helmet. Risk the head shot? The RCE man's armor looked pretty chewed up. The blast patterns on it made Holden

suspect that was the work of Amos' autoshotgun. The chest shot was easier, but it was possible the damage to the armor was mostly cosmetic, in which case his sidearm wasn't going to do much.

Murtry winked at him, and Holden suddenly felt like the man was reading his mind as he calculated the best way to kill him. "I can't let that happen," Murtry said. His shrug was almost apologetic. "By charter, this all belongs to RCE. You don't get to break it."

Holden shook his head in disbelief. "You really are crazy. If I don't break it, our ships fall out of the sky and we all die."

"Maybe. Maybe we die. Maybe we find some other way to stay alive. Either way, the RCE claim remains in force." Murtry waved one hand, not his gun hand, around the room. "All this is worth trillions intact. We've made incredible advances in materials science just by *looking* at the rings. How much will working technology do for us? This is what we came here for, Captain. You don't get to decide what we do with it."

"Trillions," Holden said, unable to keep the disbelief out of his voice. "I've never seen a dead person spend money."

"Sure you have. They call it a foundation or a bequest. Happens all the time."

"This is all so you can make a bequest?"

Murtry's smile widened a millimeter.

"No," he said. "I came to conquer a new world. *This* is how you do that. I understand what I'm doing seems cruel and inflexible to you, but it's what this situation requires. The tools you're using here are the ones that let you get along once civilization takes over. They're the wrong shape for this work. I have no illusions about what it will take to carve out a place in this new frontier. It will take sacrifices, and it will take blood, and things we wouldn't do back where everything's regulated and controlled will have to happen here. You think we can do it with committee meetings and press releases."

"I wonder if this will sound like a compelling argument to the people dying in orbit right now."

"I'm sorry for them. I truly am. But they knew the risks when they got on board. And their deaths will have meaning," Murtry said.

"Meaning?"

"They are the sign that we didn't give up a centimeter. What we came

for, we held to the last gasp. This isn't something humanity can do halfway, Captain. It never has been. Even Cortez burned his ships."

Holden's laugh was half disbelief and half contempt. "What is it with you guys and worshipping mass murderers?"

Murtry frowned. A swirl of bright blue lights rose and fell between them like dust blowing down a desert street.

"How do you mean?" Murtry asked.

"A guy I once knew tried to justify his life choices to me by comparing himself to Genghis Khan."

"I take it you didn't find his argument compelling?" Murtry asked with a smirk.

"No," Holden said. "And then a friend of mine shot him in the face."

"An ironic rebuttal to an argument about necessary violence."

"I thought so too, at the time."

Murtry reached up and scratched his head with his left hand, his short greasy hair shifting into a configuration vaguely resembling Miller's carapace. A sculpture of curves and spikes. He looked at his fingertips in disgust and wiped them on his armor. Holden waited. Somewhere far behind them, a strange chittering sound rose like cicadas on a summer afternoon.

"So," Murtry finally said. "I'm going to need to come over there." He gestured at Holden's side of the chasm with his chin. His right hand still hovered over his gun.

"Nope," Holden replied.

Murtry nodded, as if expecting this. "You going to arrest me, Sheriff?"

"Actually, I was kind of thinking I'd shoot you."

"In the face, no doubt."

"If that's what I can hit."

"Seems like a radical shift," Murtry said, "for a man who wants to tame the frontier with mediation and committee meetings."

"Oh, no, this isn't about that. Elvi says you killed Amos. I wouldn't kill a single person for your fucking frontier, but for my crew? Yeah, I'll kill you for that."

"They say revenge is empty."

"This is my first try at it," Holden said. "Forgive me if my opinions on it are fairly unformed."

“Will it change things if your boy isn’t dead? He was still shooting when I left him.”

The wave of relief that hit Holden at this almost doubled him over. If Murtry had pulled his pistol and shot at that moment the fight would have been over. But he managed to keep his face blank and his knees from buckling.

“Is he hurt?”

“Oh my, yes. Pretty badly. He killed one of mine before he went down. For a guy who wants to solve problems without violence, you travel in dangerous company.”

“Yeah,” Holden said, unable to keep the smile off his face. “But he’s a great mechanic. What about the other one? Fayez?”

“Down, not dead. I didn’t get to finish him before your boy started blazing away. Neither one was walking, so I just left.”

The matter-of-fact discussion of why Murtry hadn’t just killed Fayez chilled Holden’s blood.

“So here’s a deal,” Murtry said. “I let you cross to this side and you can go check on your man Amos. Save the egghead from bleeding out, too. You have my word I won’t interfere.”

“But,” Holden replied, “you head over to my side and stop Elvi from doing what I need her to do.”

“Seems a fair trade.”

Holden stopped just resting his hand on the butt of his pistol and wrapped it around the grip. He turned his body, getting his feet in position. Murtry gave him just the hint of a frown.

“No,” Holden said, and waited for the shooting to start.

“So,” Murtry said, not moving at all. “You know what people always forget about the new world?”

Holden didn’t answer.

“Civilization has a built-in lag time. Just like light delay. We fly out here to this new place, and because we’re civilized, we think civilization comes with us. It doesn’t. We build it. And while we’re building it, a whole lot of people die. You think the American west came with railroads and post offices and jails? Those things were built, and at the cost of thousands of lives. They were built on the corpses of everyone who was there before the Spanish came. You don’t get one without the other. And it’s people like me

that do it. People like you come later. All of this?" Murtry waved his left hand at himself and Holden. "This is because you showed up too early. Come back after I've built a post office and we'll talk."

"You done?" Holden asked.

"So this is our day, I take it," Murtry said. "No way but this way? Even if I didn't kill your man?"

"Maybe you killed Amos and Fayez and maybe you didn't. Maybe you're right about the frontier and I'm just a naïve idiot. Maybe every single person you killed on this world had it coming and you were always in the right."

"But you have people in orbit and saving them is all that counts?"

"I was going to say, 'But you're a flaming asshole,' " Holden said. "But the other works too. You don't cross this bridge."

"Well then," Murtry said. He shifted his stance and his eyes narrowed. The chittering grew louder. Below them, the protomolecule fireflies swirled and shuddered. "Well then."

Holden smiled at him. Mimicking Alex's drawl he said, "Come on, Black Bart, you always knew it would end this way."

Murtry laughed. "You're a funny—"

Holden shot him.

Murtry staggered, clutching at his chest and fumbling for his gun. Holden put his second shot into the man's right arm. He tried for the elbow and only managed to get the bicep. Just as good. Murtry dropped the gun onto the bridge in front of him. When the RCE man went to one knee to try and pick it up with his left hand, Holden shot him in the leg. Murtry pitched forward onto the bridge, sending the gun tumbling away into the abyss. Murtry slid to the side, going over the edge, but managed to throw his left arm onto the metal mesh and stop his fall.

The whole thing had taken about three seconds.

As the last echoing report of the gunshot faded, Holden walked out onto the bridge. The uncanny musculature pressed at the soles of his feet. Murtry clung to the mesh with his one good hand, his face tight with pain, but still managing a mocking grin.

"You got the balls to finish this, boy?" he said. "Or are you going to let gravity do it?"

"Oh, no," Holden said, then knelt down to grab Murtry's left wrist and

haul him toward the ledge. "I'm not killing you. At least not until I'm sure about Amos."

Holden stepped off the bridge onto Murtry's side of the chasm and pulled the RCE man until his torso was up over the edge. Murtry scrambled the rest of the way up with his one good arm.

"Then what?" he gasped out, lying on his back next to the pit and trying to catch his breath. A small pool of blood was forming under his right arm and left leg.

"I take you back," Holden said, sitting down next to Murtry and patting him companionably on the head. "And I burn you down in public, with news coverage of the entire thing. Then we throw you in a hole so deep everyone forgets you ever existed. No fame and glory for you, Cortez. Montezuma wasn't impressed by your fire stick this time."

"Everything I did was within the bounds of the UN charter," Murtry said. "I acted responsibly to protect the employees and investments of Royal Charter Energy."

"Okay," Holden said, then pulled out his medkit and sprayed bandages onto Murtry's two bleeding injuries. "So you've got your defense strategy mapped out. That's proactive thinking. Lawyers'll be happy to hear it. Wanna hear mine?"

"Sure," Murtry said, and probed at the wound on his arm. He grimaced, but no blood squirted out.

"The most powerful person on earth owes me a favor, and I'm going to tell her you're an asshole who tried his best to make her look bad. It's just a sketch of a plan at this point, but I think it has potential."

"That's what passes for justice with you?"

"Apparently so."

Murtry opened his mouth, but whatever he was about to say was lost when the factory exploded into chaos. A wall of blue fireflies shot up from the chasm next to them, and then streaked across the cavernous factory space to disappear into small vents in the walls. All around, the cacophony of massive machines coming to life filled the air. Something flew out of the shadows by the ceiling and swooped low over Holden's head. He threw himself across Murtry, not unaware of the irony in using his own body to shield a man he'd just shot three times.

"What is it?" Murtry said.

“Elvi,” Holden replied. “It’s Elvi.”

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Chapter Fifty-Four: Elvi

Yeah,” Miller said, sounding satisfied. “I’ve got a plan, but I’m going to need your help. I need to get as close to that whatever-the-hell-it-is as I can. You can see it, I can’t. So this one’s on you.”

All right,” she said. “What... what are you going to do?”

The robot shrugged. “Every time we... I... well, you get it. Every time anything reaches into this, it dies. This thing takes down networks like the one I am. I’m going to get connected to as much of the crap on this planet as I can and escort it all into, y’know. That. Take it down. Break the system.”

“Won’t that shut you down too?”

“I think so. That’s the thing about using complicated tools. Sometimes the features you’re looking for come with a whole lot of baggage.”

“I don’t understand,” Elvi said.

“It built me to find something that’s missing,” Miller said. “Turns out I’m also a good tool for dying when that’s the right solve. Seriously, I’ve got practice with this. So come over here and get me as close as you can to the whatever-it-is. I don’t want to touch it, though. I slip in before I’m hooked up to everything else, and I’m pretty sure you’re just boned.”

“All right,” Elvi said, shifting until she could see the robot and the darkness both. “Turn about thirty degrees to your left.”

The robot shifted with the speed and sharpness of a startled insect.

“The boundary’s about half a meter in front of you. Why do you need to be close to it?”

“Well, the thing I’m part of? It may not be conscious, but it’s not stupid. When I do this, pretty much all the tools its got are going to know what I

know, and they may not take a forced shutdown well. Whatever else this thing was designed to do, it likes still existing until it finishes its job. It's a survivor. I'm pretty much the opposite of that."

She thought she heard a smile in the thing's voice. Where had that come from? The patterns and habits in a dead man's brain? Or was that fatalism another good move in design space? Did the universe evolve eyes and wings and sense organs and bitter amusement at the prospect of death all the same way?

"Okay," Miller said. The robot shifted, hunkered down, prepared to spring forward. "We're going in three. Two. *One*."

The impact was like being in the heavy shuttle again as it crashed. Elvi's world contracted to a small space inside her own skull, and then slowly bloomed out again in pain. She struggled to sit up, trying to see straight. Trying to think. Had Miller exploded? Was she dead? The cacophony of shrieking metal and violence made it hard to get her bearings.

She was against the wall. All around her, mechanisms were crawling down from their niches. Many of them were failing—legs scraping at the walls without the strength to pull themselves forward or landing on the ground only to crawl in a panicked, spasmodic circle like insects dying from poison. The air was thick with the mindless chittering of their joints. Three massive machines had pinned the Miller-robot and were pounding it while Miller's voice shouted *shitshitshitshit*. One of the attackers caught Miller's claw and pulled, ripping the appendage off in a shower of sparks and bright fluids. He wasn't going to make it. There was no way.

A small winged machine with a bright blue margin on the knifelike edge where a beak would be swooped down from above, passed through the darkness, and fell clattering and rolling to the ground. Elvi ran to it, picked it up. It was light enough to carry, as long as her forearm, and sharp at the front. With a howl, she charged the machines that were piling on Miller. The impact stung her fingers. Something struck her across the back, and the world narrowed again, but she lashed out with what strength she still had.

One of the huge machines turned from Miller toward her, its claws splaying out three meters to either side. She jumped back, fell, scuttled. The pulsing, malefic blackness of the dead spot was on her left, and she crawled around it, trying to keep it between her and the massive attacker.

The robot skittered toward her, its claws swinging like scythes until it

reached the margin of the blackness and crumpled down dead. Inertia rolled its corpse across the floor, legs and claws flopping and limp. The chittering in the room paused. The attention of the artifacts turned toward her. She put her foot on the fallen monster, lifted her fists, and howled. Miller twisted, driving his remaining claw up and through the body of one of the two machines that were still at his side. The chittering began again, even more overwhelming than before. The sound itself felt like an attack, battering at her ears, robbing her of her balance.

She was in the center of an invisible waterfall, a thunderstorm, a tempest. Adrenaline more than conscious will lifted her up over the body of her fallen enemy, and she skirted around the dead spot. Another machine fell from a higher niche, smashing itself on the ground before her. She stepped over it as it writhed. The last remaining fully functional attacker swung at Miller, the blades of its claws plunging deep into Miller's carapace. As Elvi came close, it tried to turn toward her. The claw still inside Miller bound with a deep creaking sound. Miller's remaining claw fastened on the other robot's wrist, holding the attacker's claw close, pulling it in, deeper. A viscous fluid poured out of Miller, filling the air with the stink of petroleum and acid. Elvi scooped a length of fallen robot's leg and slammed it into Miller's assailant, striking sparks. The blows had no effect other than to confuse the thing. She could no more have injured it than she could will herself to fly up into the air and lift the falling ships by force of will. But the moment's hesitation was enough.

Miller pulled himself under the remaining attacker, on his back. Four of the six articulated legs started digging at the robot's undercarriage. Belly. She didn't have a good model for this. The unencumbered claw smashed down, knocking shards of metal from Miller's side, but with Miller mostly underneath the attacker, it couldn't get an angle that would let it deliver a killing blow.

A thin-limbed, spindly robot skittered through the opened wall, sprinting toward the battle. Elvi grabbed it as it passed and knocked it into the dead spot. Bits of plating began to peel off the attacking thing's belly, and Miller burrowed up into it. The filthy and stinking ichor started pouring out in a flood. It was an ugly death, slow and violent and unpoetic. When the attacker had stopped moving, Elvi came close. The dead robot was on top of Miller. The pool of thin liquid all around stung her eyes with its fumes.

“Well, that could have gone better,” Miller said.

“Did it work? Are you connected?”

“Yeah,” Miller said. “Not sure how much good that’s going to do. There’s another wave of these things coming, and I’m not seeing how I get from here to there.”

Elvi put her shoulder under the dead robot, pushing as hard as she could. The tendons in her neck ached. She imagined she could hear them creaking. She put everything she had into the effort. There was nothing to hold back for. No later that mattered. Keeping anything in reserve was a waste of resources because there was no future left. She screamed with the sheer physical effort.

The robot didn’t even shift.

She fell to her knees. With a groan, Miller put his claw out, resting it gently on her arm. When he spoke, his voice sounded distant, muffled. Words from a grave.

“Okay, this is going to be tricky,” he said. “I’m going to need one more favor from you, kid. And we don’t have much time before they get here.”

“Yes,” she said. “Whatever.”

“Okay, stand back a little. I’m popping the seals on this thing.”

She slid backward, the slime on the floor flowing up to the ankles of her pants. There was a hiss like steam escaping from a holed line, a deep, meaty click, and Miller came apart, the plating and scales of his body collapsing. The thing on top of him rolled away and lay dead on its side.

Elvi stood over Miller’s corpse. It looked like nothing so much as a huge insect smashed under a giant’s heel. The chittering all around her rose to a shriek.

“What do I do?” Elvi shouted. “What am I supposed to do?”

Miller’s voice came from deep inside the mess. “There’s a unit in here. It’s about a meter long, bright blue, and there’s a row of seven... no, eight dots along the side. I need you to dig it out.”

Elvi stepped forward. The plating was all knifepoints and sharp edges. She felt the sting where it cut her palms, and the burning where the robotic fluids flowed into the wounds.

“I don’t mean to be that guy,” Miller said. “But you also need to hurry.”

“Trying,” she said.

“Just saying there are more bad guys and they’re getting a little closer

than I like.”

“All right. I have it,” Elvi said. “It’s right here.”

“Good. Nice work. Now I need you to pick that up and walk it into the dead spot.”

The blue thing was the shape of a huge elongated almond. The surface was slick and soft. She put her hands around it, strained, grunted, and slid forward, panting. “You have got to be kidding me,” she said.

“It may be a little heavy,” Miller said.

“It’s like ninety kilos.”

“And I’m really sorry about that, but we need to get it into that dead spot now. Try sliding your arms under it and lifting with your back and legs. Just like it was a baby.”

“Baby made from fucking tungsten,” Elvi muttered.

“You’re exaggerating,” he said as she shoved her hands under the thing.

“I can’t throw this,” she said. “I have to walk it in.”

“All right.”

“Is that thing going to kill me if I go into it?”

A new sound rose behind the chittering. A deep booming sound like a massive drum. She didn’t want to think of what might be making it.

“If I say yes, does that mean you won’t do it?”

Elvi braced herself, straining her back. The blue thing shifted up into her lap. She bent her head, trying to catch her breath.

“No,” she said, surprised at the answer even as she spoke it. “I’ll still do it.”

“Maybe, then. I don’t know.”

Elvi rocked back, keeping the thing—Miller—on her thighs and still getting her feet under her. She felt it start to slide to her left. If she dropped it now, she didn’t think she’d be able to get it up again. The booming came closer. Elvi pushed with her legs. Her knees ached. Her back was a single, vast sheet of burning. She pressed the blue thing to her chest, crying out from the pain.

“You’re doing great, kid. You’re doing great. You can do this. Just a little more. But do it *now*.”

She didn’t step forward. Just slid one foot a little ahead, shifted her weight, pulled the other foot in. The floor was slick as ice. Not quite frictionless, but close. The booming came again, near enough that she felt

the room vibrate with it. She set her gaze on the blackness of the dead spot and moved forward. Another step. Another. Another. She was close now. Her back was on fire. Her arms were numb. Her fists something that belonged to someone else, and only happened to be connected to her.

A swarm of silver and blue gushed in the doorway, flowing in at her like a cloud of flies. Elvi pushed, slipped, fell forward—

The closest analogy, the one her brain reached for and rejected and reached for again, was splashing into a lake. It was cold, but not cold. There was a smell, rich and loamy. The smell of growth and decay. She was aware of her body, the skin, the sinew, the curl of her gut. She was aware of the nerves that were firing in her brain as she became aware of the nerves firing in her brain. She unmade herself and watched herself being unmade. All the bacteria on her skin and in her blood, the virii in her tissues. The woman who had been Elvi Okoye became a landscape. A world. She fell farther in.

Cells became molecules—countless and complex and varied. The demarcation of one thing and another failed. There was only a community of molecules, shifting in a vast dance. And then the atoms that made the molecules gave up their space, and she was a breath. A mist. A tiny play of fields and interactions in a vacuum as perfect as space. She was a vibration in nothingness.

She rolled onto her side. Something hurt. Everything hurt, and the pain was interesting. A subject of curiosity more than distress. She was breathing. She could feel the air moving through her throat and into the complex network of soft caverns behind her ribs. It was a strange and beautiful sensation. She stayed with it until she began to realize that time existed. That moments were passing. That meant basal ganglia and cerebellum and cerebral cortex were all actually starting to work. She felt distantly surprised about that. She opened her eyes to nothing.

She was holding something pressed to her like it was precious. The blue thing. Miller. Only it wasn't blue anymore. It was the closed-eyes blackness of everything else. She let it go and sat up. The world was silent. No booming. No chittering. Her breath. The hush of her blood. After a few moments, she drew her hand terminal out of her pocket and turned up the screen brightness, using it like a lamp.

All around her, the artifacts of New Terra lay dead. Knife-sharp legs were still. Vast, inhuman claws that could have been carved from stone. A

spray of silver flecks on the ground showed where the cloud of tiny mechanisms had fallen, a million tiny bodies turned off at once. The light was too dim for colors. Everything was only gray.

She sat up and turned reluctantly to the side. It was there. Black and bright at the margins. She felt a stab of almost supernatural fear. She'd thought—hoped—it would be gone. Whatever it was, she had passed through it, been ripped apart by it, and still been simple enough to reassemble herself on the other side. It had saved her, and she had never seen anything in her life that filled her with a deeper dread than that complex darkness.

She moved back, her legs aching. She stood. She was aware that she was weeping without knowing why exactly she was doing it. Hunger and fear and relief and exultation and mortal fear. It was too much. That was fine.

The voice that came to her was human and distant. Was Holden.

“Elvi? Elvi! Are you there?”

“I’m here,” she shouted.

“Did we win?”

She took one long breath. Then another.

“Yes,” she called. “We won.”

Interlude: The Investigator

—it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out it reaches out—

One hundred and thirteen times a second, it reaches out to report that the work is done. If something accepted the report, it could stop. It will never stop. It feels no frustration and no fear. It feels the investigator moving within it and around it. The investigator exceeds its boundary conditions. It tries to kill the investigator. It fails. It feels no distress at the failure, and it reaches out, it reaches out, it reaches out—

The investigator looks into the eye of death, and can't see it. It knows, and that is enough. It feels pleasure and regret because they are part of the template. It says a name—Julie. It remembers taking a woman's hand in its own.

The investigator reaches out, reaches down. It broadens like an eternal, endless inhalation, and spreads to fill all the places that it can reach, that have been reached. That are. It reaches out it reaches out it reaches out, the ticking on an insectile leg, a spark closing a gap, endlessly, and the investigator feels it, encompasses it. The scars reach out, the other minds. Some are frightened, some are lost in dreams that have been going on for years, some are grateful. They sing to the investigator, or they accuse it, or they plead with it, or they scream. They are aware, and powerless as they have ever been. The investigator touches them as it touches everything. It tells them not to worry. That it's driving this bus.

Don't worry, it says. We're gonna be fine.

The investigator pushes his hat back, wishes he had a beer. He likes this woman. This Elvi. He wishes he'd had a little more time to know her. He wishes he had a little more time. He doesn't care. He has died a million times since he died. The void has no mysteries for him now.

He connects, and the investigator becomes the world. He feels it everywhere. The orbital bases, the power cores in the crushing depth of the ocean, the library vaults where the old ones had lived, the signaling stations high in the mountains, the cities deep beneath the ground. He is the world.

There is a struggle at the end. There's always a struggle at the end. He's not scared, and so all through the world, the others aren't either. *You're like Peter Pan*, she says. *When a child died, Peter Pan would fall halfway with them. So they wouldn't be scared.*

Weird. And that's a kid's story? Anyway, it's not me, the investigator says, smiles at her. Holds her hand. *I don't go for half.*

—it reaches out and it reaches out and it reaches out and then it stops.

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Chapter Fifty-Five: Havelock

Blue. That was what he forgot every time. He knew it intellectually, sure. Sky-blue sky, after all, but spend a few years on a station or a ship and it was one of those details that slipped away. He didn't even know he'd forgotten it until he had a moment like this. He leaned on his cane and lifted a hand to shade his eyes and looked up past the green-gray clouds to the wider blue sky.

It's pretty, isn't it?" the woman asked. Lucia, her name was. First Landing's physician, Basia's wife, Felcia and Jacek's mother. "Makes you want to stay."

"No," he said. "Makes me want to be home already."

"If you lived here..." she said.

"Not a chance," he replied, and chuckled.

The *Rocinante* sat on the muddy ground behind him, more or less where the landing pad had been back when there had been a landing pad. All of that was gone now. The scientific huts, the buildings of First Landing, even most of the mining operation. Everything had been scraped flat and clean. Only the erosion ditches showed where the flood had been now that the waters had gone.

The *Roci*'s cargo bays were open. Men and women were hauling formed plastic boxes of supplies and equipment out and stacking them on the soft ground. He saw Naomi in a lift suit directing them, calling out information, coordinating the responses. Alex and Basia stood on a thin scaffold they'd erected against the side of the ship with the other one—Amos Burton, he thought the name was—surveying the damage and planning out what repairs they could manage in humanity's most primitive and ill-equipped

dry dock. The big bald man's right hand was locked in a medical casing, and his frustration with it showed in the way he moved his arms and held his shoulders.

"Are you ready?" Lucia asked.

"If you'd like," Havelock said. "Sure."

They walked together to the first pile of crates. Havelock took out his hand terminal, and Lucia took out one of the ones they'd dropped before. It was hers now. They started marking off boxes from the lading bills, recording carefully what help was being delivered and being accepted.



He was supposed to have died three weeks before. His body should have been a stream of ionized atoms and complex molecules floating somewhere in Ilus' upper atmosphere. The *Israel* should have been dead before him.

He'd been in the medical bay when it happened, doped by the autodoc and having half a liter of artificial blood shoved into his veins. He could still remember the feeling of the restraints holding him to the medical couch, the soft ticking of the expert system's tool arm, the cold feeling of fluid coming into his body. His lips and tongue had felt cold and tingled, but Alex assured him that was normal. Basia had come in, eaten, and gone out again to clean up the last remnants of the tether that were still clinging to the *Rocinante*'s belly.

He'd said something about how it seemed kind of a pointless exercise.

"He's that kind of guy, I guess," Alex said. "Doesn't like to leave things half done."

"Belter."

"Yeah," Alex agreed. "They're all kind of like that."

Alex's hand terminal chimed, and the pilot frowned at it. "Cap? That you?"

The voice that came from the speaker was recognizable James Holden, but he sounded rougher. Like he'd been shouting a lot. "Alex! Turn on the reactor."

"Not sure I can do that, Cap," Alex said.

"We killed the defense grid. I think we killed everything. See if you can get the reactor on."

Alex's expression went very still, very sober. The gallows humor was gone, the brave mask that had covered the fear of death vanished. Havelock understood, because he felt the same rush of hope and also of fear that the hope would be disappointed. Without a word, Alex pulled himself to one of the medical bay's computers and shifted it to engine controls. Havelock squeezed his fists until they ached and fought not to interrupt Alex by asking if it was working.

"Is it working?"

"I think... it is," Alex said, then turned to the hand terminal. "I'm getting power, Cap. The diagnostics are throwing some errors, but I'm pretty sure that's just 'cause we got shook up a little. I'll put Naomi and Basia on it, and I'll bet we can get up to functional. It'd help a lot if we had Amos, though."

"Amos is a little shook up too," Holden said, and Havelock could hear the grin in his voice.

"He all right?"

"He's gonna need to grow some new fingers."

Alex shrugged. "We can do that. Um. Give me a couple days, I might be able to bring the *Roci* down to the surface. Get him into the med bay."

"Don't hurry," Holden said. "Take your time, make sure everything's working. We can't take another crisis."

"There's always going to be another crisis, Cap. That's just how it goes."

"Let's just put it off until we've recovered from the last one, all right? Can you get in touch with *Barbapiccola* and the *Israel*? I don't want anyone dying because they don't know to turn the engines back on. And we may need to use the *Israel*'s shuttle, if we can talk them out of it."

"We may need to do a little debrief at some point here," Alex said. "Things have been kind of dynamic. But let me go make sure everybody's reactors are ticking over first, all right?"

"Okay," Holden said. "And if you could drop us some food?"

"Soon as I get the galley powered up," Alex said.

"Right. Good. And Naomi... she's...?"

"Everybody's all right," Alex said. "We're all going to be fine."



By the time Havelock and Doctor Merton had finished the inventory, a team of builders were already fitting batteries into fabrication units and measuring out the places where walls would be going up. Real human shelters. A new First Landing. The self-selected construction crew was a mix. Some were squatters who'd come on the dead refugee ship. Some were people Havelock had shipped out with. The divide between them still existed in his mind, but didn't seem to be playing out on the ground. The death of the heavy shuttle and the burning of the terrorist cell seemed like things that had happened in some other epoch. He supposed it was something about the storm, the blindness, the death-slugs, and the constant awareness of mortality just outside the door, clearing its throat. It wasn't a model of community building that he'd recommend trying to scale up, but it had worked here. Temporarily. For now.

A dark-skinned woman with long black hair detached from the group. She looked familiar, but it still took Havelock a few seconds to place her. The time downstairs had taken all the padding out of her cheeks.

"Doctor van Altricht."

"Call me Sudyam," she said. "Everyone else does."

"Sudyam, then," he said, holding out his hand terminal. "I've got some paperwork for you."

"Excellent," she said, taking it. Her gaze flickered over the contract addendum too quickly for her to really be taking it all in. At the bottom, she signed her name with a fingernail and pressed the pads of her index and middle fingers to the screen. The hand terminal chimed, and she handed it back.

"Congratulations," Havelock said. "You are now the official field lead for the RCE research team."

"And a worse job, I can't imagine," she said, smiling. "Now that I'm official, can you tell me when we're getting replacement equipment?"

"There's an unmanned supply pod under heavy burn to Medina," Havelock said. "Assuming the OPA doesn't impound it or call it salvage, it should be here in six, maybe seven months."

"And the chance of the OPA stopping it?"

"I wouldn't make it better than three in ten," Havelock said. "But honestly, don't sniff that number. You don't know where it's been."

The biochemist shook her head in mild disgust. "Well, it'll have to do,"

she said.

For almost a week after the power came back on, the *Rocinante* and the *Israel* had been in a very delicate political state. The Belters on the *Israel* had been taken in as a gesture when it was pretty certain that the thing was symbolic because they were all going to be dead anyway. Now that they weren't going to die, the question of status—were the Belters refugees, prisoners, or paying passengers?—became a much more contentious issue. Marwick had to decide whether they were going to be on his ship for the full eighteen months back to Medina, or if he was going to try to place them all downstairs. It didn't help matters that with all the shuttles slagged, the only ways down to the surface were on board the *Rocinante* or a really long, unpleasant jump.

In the end, the break was almost even. About half of the crew of the *Barb* elected to stay with the colonists and scientists on the ground. About half of the RCE staff still in orbit, having come this far and being profoundly uninterested in just looking at the promised land from the mountaintop, elected to stay on the planet. Of the science teams that had been on the ground from the start—Vaughn, Chappel, Okoye, Cordoba, Hutton, Li, Sarkis, and a dozen others—only Cordoba elected to come back up the well and go home, and that apparently had more to do with grief over a failed romantic relationship than the fact the entire planet had been doing its best to kill them. It wasn't something Havelock understood, but it didn't need to be.

The ship repairs were under way when night fell, the scaffolding and the hull of the ship flickering brightly and then going dark as the welding torches did their work. The sunset was a massive canvas of gold and orange, green and rose, gray and indigo and blue. It reminded him of beaches on the North American west coast, except there were no vendors clogging the place and no advertising drones muttering about the joys of commerce. It was beautiful, in its way. He wouldn't have been surprised to see a bonfire burning, and a bunch of the colonists sitting around it playing guitars and getting high, except that there was nothing left in the aftermath of the flooding that would burn and if there was anything on the planet that would give you a safe buzz, they'd grown it on the *Israel*.

He hauled himself up into the *Rocinante* and limped back to the bunk Naomi had assigned him. It was the first time he'd been in the *Roci* when it

had an up and down, and because the ship didn't land along the thrust vector, he walked along walls for the most part. The shredded muscles in his thigh and calf were regrowing slowly, and his knee might need another round of repairs to swap out the cartilage. Considering everything else that had happened, it was a great set of problems to have.

In his bunk, he checked his personal messages. The message he'd been dreading was there. Williams' family was filing criminal and civil charges against him for wrongful death. His union representative was already counterfiling and RCE was being strangely cooperative. By the time the *Israel* returned to her home port, he hoped everything would be cleared up. He wished there was a way to send a message to Williams' people and apologize. Explain that he'd tried to just disable the suit, and that he was very, very sorry that it had happened the way it did. His union rep had made him promise not to, though. There would be a chance for that when the issue was settled.

There was also a message from Captain Marwick with the subject header of I BELIEVE I OWE YOU A DRINK and a pass-through to one of the major newsfeeds. Havelock followed it.

The screen filled with the banner insets of the feed, but the central image was weird to look at. As he watched, the *Barbapiccola*, tumbling slowly on its tether, bloomed and a puff of perfectly round plastic bubbles came out. It was like watching a flower releasing seeds to the wind. A man's voice, gentle, deep, and reassuring, came under the image, speaking Belter-accented English.

"New footage today from the stunning rescue operations on New Terra. What you're seeing now are images captured by the Royal Charter Energy ship *Edward Israel* of the mass evacuation of the disabled freighter *Barbapiccola*. For those of you new to this story, all three ships were reduced to working under battery power at the time this occurred, and while the *Barbapiccola* was lost to an uncontrolled atmospheric entry, all hands and passengers were transferred to the *Israel* for medical evaluation and aid under the supervision of acting security director Dimitri Havelock."

The image shifted to an image of him from his official report back to RCE. His hair stood away from his head, making him look like he was trying to be a Belter, and his voice sounded weirdly high and whiny.

“The transfer was completed in under three hours. I would specifically like to commend Captain Toulouse Marwick for his prompt and professional aid, without which we could not have managed this without considerable loss of life.”

The feed ended, and Havelock laughed. He requested a connection to Marwick, and the red-haired man appeared almost immediately.

“So I guess they aren’t firing us,” Havelock said.

“They’d be giving us a ticker-tape parade when we got home if anyone still used ticker tape,” Marwick said. “This right now is when we should all be asking for raises.”

“Hazard pay,” Havelock said, propping his head up with his arm.

“Heroes of the hour, we are,” Marwick said. “Not that they really have much clue back there what it was really like. One of those things you can explain as clearly and concretely as you want, and they still don’t get it.”

“That’s fine,” Havelock said. “They don’t need to. I’m going to have a request list from the research and survey team. Do you think there’s anything else we can give them?”

“Depends,” Marwick said. “The *Rocinante* convoying back to the Ring with us?”

“I think so,” Havelock said. “I can confirm that.”

“If we’ve got them for backup, I can strip the place down a little bit more. Not a great deal, but we could break down one of the backup generators and drop it to them. And biomass for the galleys.”

“Actually, I think we’re okay on that. Doctor Okoye was talking about a way to convert the local flora into something that could be turned into something that they could eat. It had something to do with right-handed molecules, whatever those are.”

“Well, good on her, then,” Marwick said. “Almost makes you want to stay a while, doesn’t it? See how it all plays out?”

“Oh shit no,” Havelock said. “No, you should see this place. It’s tiny, it’s filthy, and everything about it is slapped together with hot glue and prayer. Also, there are slugs that instantly kill you. If these people survive for a year, I’ll be surprised.”

“Really?”

“You know that in a month or two or eight or whatever, something’s got to happen. The hydroponics will fail out, or there’ll be another thing like

that eye-eating goop only they won't happen to have a treatment for it ready to hand, or one of the attack moons will drop out of the sky. Shit, the fucking death-slugs could grow wings. How do we know they can't do that? We *do* know there are power plants in the ocean big enough to damn near blow the planet off course. Holden says they're all dead now, but he could be wrong. Or turning everything off might mean there's some kind of reactor core sinking down into the planet. We don't know *anything*."

Marwick looked nonplussed, but he nodded. "I suppose that's true."

"No, what I want is Ceres Station or Earth or Mars. You know what they have in New York? All-night diners with greasy food and crap coffee. I want to live on a world with all-night diners. And racetracks. And instant-delivery Thai food made from something I haven't already eaten seven times in the last month."

"You make it sound like paradise indeed," Marwick said. "Still, I can't help feeling uncomfortable at the idea of leaving all these poor people if they're really going to die from staying."

"Maybe they won't," Havelock said. "Wouldn't be the first time recently I was wrong about something. And... well, they've got some things in the plus column too. I think they've got more scientists and engineers per capita than anyplace else in the universe. And we're giving them all the supplies we can manage."

"Still, seems thin."

Havelock sat up a degree, his crash couch shifting and hissing on its gimbal. "They also have each other. For now, anyway. You have to figure when we started this, everyone was ready to slit everyone else's throat, and they're down here now putting up tents together. If nothing new comes along to kill them, there will be native-born New Terran babies as soon as biology permits. And I wouldn't bet that the parents will all have come here on the same ship."

"Well," Marwick said. "It's good to recall that wherever people start, whatever they bring with them, humanity can still pull together in heavy weather."

Havelock shrugged. Koenen's voice was still fresh in his memory, and Williams drifting flatlined and dead. Naomi Nagata in her cell. The Belter engineer whose locker people had been peeing in. The shuttle he'd rigged as a weapon. Jesus, he felt bad enough about Williams. He could barely

imagine what it would have been like if he'd deployed the weaponized shuttle.

“Sometimes we do, sometimes we don’t. These people could just as easily have gone down with their teeth in each other’s throats. That happens too. It’s just the folks that go that way aren’t around to write the history books.”

“Amen,” Marwick said, chuckling. “Amen indeed.”

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Chapter Fifty-Six: Holden

The *Rocinante* had really taken a beating.

The ship had a variety of puncture wounds in the outer hull all along her port side. Holden could see the bright spots where Basia and Naomi had replaced damaged thruster ports, but they hadn't had the time or materials to patch all the holes. It was a testament to Alex's skill as a pilot that he'd been able to bring them down at all without burning up. At least one PDC housing was riddled with damage, and the weapon inside was probably unsafe to use. And there was a long scar across the top of the ship where, according to Naomi, an improvised missile had hit.

Holden cheerfully noted each future repair on his itemized bill for Avasarala.

The *Rocinante* sat on a wide stretch of nothing half a kilometer from where First Landing had once stood. The frames of new construction were starting to appear. People, building on the ruins of what had come before, just like they always did. So many things had been lost, but it was the missing people that hurt the most.

Just like they always did.

Holden noted a spot of minor damage on the drive cone, then came around the stern of the ship to find a pair of Belters throwing up a temporary shelter a dozen yards away. A man in his early thirties was running cable while an older woman hammered spikes into the muddy ground. A second woman stood by with a long pole to flick away any slugs that might get too close.

"You can't put that there," Holden said, walking toward them and making a shooing gesture. "Ask Administrator Chiwewe where to put your

tent.”

“This spot hasn’t been claimed by anyone,” the man said. “We have just as much right—”

“Yes, yes. I’m not telling you where you can and can’t build. But in a few hours this ship is going to lift off, and it will flatten your little tent.”

“Oh,” the man said, sheepish. “Right. We’ll just wait for you to go.”

“Thank you. You folks have a good afternoon.” Holden gave them a wave and a smile and headed off toward New First Landing. These people were still the same ones who had been willing to fight RCE to the death to hang on to their claim. They weren’t going to put up with being bossed around by outsiders. But the catastrophe had at least taught them to respect high-speed winds.

When he returned to the rectangle of six partially built structures that would eventually become New First Landing’s town square, Carol was in a heated discussion with someone in an RCE engineering uniform and Naomi. Amos stood nearby, staring at nothing, a faint smile on his broad face. The medical apparatus on his leg and hand made him look like a cyborg. The bandage on his neck made him look like a pirate. Amos wore serious injury better than anyone else Holden knew. Fayez, by comparison, was still walking with a limp. Or maybe he was just making excuses to keep his arm around Elvi Okoye’s shoulder.

Basia, Lucia, and Jacek were clumped up a respectful distance away from the argument, gripping each other like their lives depended on unbroken contact.

“I don’t care what it says in the book,” Carol was saying. “I want all six of these structures on *one* generator. We only have two. I need the other for the rest of the town.”

“These are your highest-use buildings,” the engineer replied. “The loads will be at the limit of—”

“They build a little slack in there,” Naomi said over the top of him. “And that’s what the administrator wants, so give it to her.”

The engineer rolled his eyes and shrugged. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Everyone getting along?” Holden asked as he approached.

“Land of milk and honey, Cap’n,” Amos said. “Peaceful as a sleeping kitten.”

“How’s she looking?” Naomi asked, stepping away from the group as

their argument relaunched behind her.

“Pretty beat up.”

“We did our best.”

“You guys were amazing,” Holden said, taking her hand. “But next time don’t let the bad guys capture you.”

“Hey,” Naomi said with mock outrage, “I rescued myself.”

“Been meaning to ask about that. How exactly *did* you persuade your jailer to come over to our side?”

Naomi moved a step closer and grinned down at him. “It was prison. People do all sorts of things they wouldn’t normally do in extreme circumstances like that. You sure you want to know?”

“I don’t care even a little,” Holden said, then pulled her into a hug. She almost collapsed against him.

“God, don’t let go,” she whispered in his ear. “My knees are killing me. Another hour of walking around in this gravity and I’m going to need ligament replacements.”

“Then let’s get the hell out of here.”

Holden leaned around Naomi enough to catch Amos’ eye, then jerked his head toward the ship. The mechanic nodded and smiled and began hobbling around the square loading up the last of their gear.

“Is our prisoner on board?”

“Amos locked him in medical a couple hours ago,” Naomi said, then let her entire skeleton relax with a long groan.

“Can you walk back to the ship?” Holden asked her.

“Yep. Say your goodbyes.”

Holden let her go, watching her stagger off on unsteady legs for a few moments before he turned back to shake hands with Carol Chiwewe. She and the RCE man had moved their argument to sewage systems and water treatment. After a brief goodbye and good luck to them both, he walked over to Basia and his family.

“Doctor,” he said to Lucia, shaking her hand. “Could not have survived this without you. None of us could.” Next he shook Jacek’s hand. Finally, he shook Basia’s. “Basia. Thanks for your help with the ship. And thank you for trying to help Naomi. You’re a brave man. Farewell and fair weather.” The roiling storm clouds and gentle drizzle of rain made a joke of it, and he grinned at them.

“What?” Basia said. “But I thought you had to take me to—”

Holden was already walking away, but he stopped and said, “Work hard. Next time I come to this planet, I want to be able to get a decent cup of coffee.”

“We will,” Lucia replied. Holden could hear her tears in her voice, but the rain hid them on her face.

He wouldn’t miss the planet, but he would miss the people. Just like always.



On the *Rocinante*, liftoff pressed Holden into his crash couch like the ship was welcoming him back with a hug. As soon as they hit low orbit, he floated out of his chair and down the crew ladder to the galley. Thirty-five seconds later, the coffee pot was gurgling to itself and the rich aroma of brewing filled the air. It made him feel giddy.

Naomi floated in. “The first step is admitting that you have a problem.”

“I do,” he replied. “But I’ve just spent a couple months down on a planet that spent the entire time trying to kill me. And I have a shitty job I have to go do, so I’m going to take a moment and make a cup of coffee first.”

“Make me one too,” she said, then pulled herself over to the wall panel and started paging through status reports.

“Make it three,” Amos said, dragging himself into the room. “I got a ton of shit to fix because you guys let someone use my girl for target practice.”

“Hey, we did our best—” Naomi started, but was cut off by the comm panel squawking.

“You guys makin’ coffee down there?” Alex said from the cockpit. “Have someone bring me up a bulb.”

While Amos and Naomi began putting together a list of the repair work they could do during the long transit back to Medina Station, Holden prepared four large bulbs of coffee. He didn’t mind. It was very comforting doing something simple and domestic to make other people happy. Black for himself. Two whiteners, two sweeteners for Amos. One whitener for Alex. One sweetener for Naomi. He handed the finished bulbs out.

“Can you take this up to Alex?” he asked, handing a second bulb to Naomi. Something in his voice or his face made her frown with worry.

“Are you okay?” she said, taking the bulb but not leaving. Behind her, Amos took his coffee awkwardly in his mangled hand and headed aft with it toward his machine shop, looking at the task list on his terminal and muttering about how much work he had to do.

“Like I said, shitty job needs doing.”

“Can I help?”

“I’d like to do this one alone, if that’s okay.”

“Of course it is,” she said, then kissed him lightly on the cheek. “I’ll look you up later.”

Holden went up to the airlock and storage deck and found a self-sealing vacuum package, a trowel, and an EVA suit for doing external repairs with a portable blowtorch. He climbed into the suit, then clumped through the ship to the cargo bay.

To what he was pretty sure was Miller’s final resting place.

He waited in the cargo bay airlock while the outer doors cycled open, putting the compartment into total vacuum, then went in. If something went wrong, if what was left of the protomolecule on his ship decided to defend itself, he’d be in vacuum with an airlock blocking entry into his ship. He sealed the airlock behind him, and told Alex to lock out local control on the door until he called and asked him to open it. Alex agreed without asking why.

And then Holden began methodically tearing the cargo bay apart.

Five hours later, and one air recharge for the suit, he found it. A small blob of flesh no larger than the tip of Holden’s finger, attached to the underside of a power conduit behind a detachable panel in the cargo bay’s bulkhead. When they’d first spotted the protomolecule monster that had hitchhiked onto the *Roci* from Ganymede, it had been less than half a meter from where he found the polyp. It made his skin crawl to realize how long they’d been lugging this last remnant of that monster around on his ship.

Using the trowel, he scraped the polyp off the conduit, then put both it and the tool into the vacuum bag and activated the charge to seal it. He blowtorched the conduit for several minutes, heating the metal red to kill any residue left by the scraping. Then he dug through the supplies in the cargo area until he found a reload for the ship’s probe launcher, opened the probe up, and stuffed the bag inside the casing.

He linked his suit radio to the *Roci*’s general shipwide channel. “Naomi,

you around?”

“Here,” she said after a moment. “In ops. What do you need?”

“Can you grab manual control on probe, uh, 117A43?”

“Sure, what do you want me to do with it?”

“I’m going to chuck it out the cargo bay door. Can you give it about five minutes, then send it into Ilus’ sun?”

“Okay,” she replied, not asking the question he could hear in her voice she wanted to. He killed the radio.

The probe was a small electromagnetic and infrared sensor with a rudimentary drive system. The kind naval vessels used to see what might be hiding on the other side of a planet. It wasn’t much bigger than an old Earth fire hydrant. It had heft, though. When Holden pushed it over to the cargo bay door, it was difficult to stop it again.

Outside, Ilus spun by, the angry brown of her cloud layer starting to show some spots of white, and even the occasional flash of blue from the ocean underneath. It’d be a while, but the planet would bounce back. Mimic lizards would return and start competing for space with human children and those annoying little bugs that bit and then fell over dead. Two alien biologies fighting for space. Or three. Or four. Nothing that Ilus hadn’t already experienced a few billion years before. New fight, same as the old fight.

Holden put a gloved hand on the probe floating next to him, and pointed the other at the planet.

“That’s you, man. That’s the second world you’ve saved. And once again, we have nothing to offer you in return. I kind of wish I’d been nicer to you.”

He laughed at himself, because he could almost hear the old detective in his head saying, *You could also have my Viking funeral not be all about how you feel.*

“Right. See you on the other side,” Holden didn’t really believe in another side. Nothing after death but infinite black. Or, he hadn’t, anyway. Sure, out-of-control alien technology might be involved, but maybe, just maybe, sometimes there was something else. “Goodbye, my friend.”

He gave the probe a hard push, and it drifted slowly away from the ship. Holden watched it dwindle until it was just a tiny point of light reflected from Ilus’ star. Then it lit up for a few seconds with a short drive flare and

streaked away from the planet. Holden waited until he couldn't see it anymore, then shut the cargo bay doors.

He stripped the vacuum suit off in the airlock after it cycled. Naomi was waiting for him when the inner airlock door opened.

"Hey," he said.

"Is it done?"

"Yeah, I'm all done down here."

"Then come to my room, sailor," she said. "There's something there I want to show you."



Holden floated half a meter above his bed, his body soaked with sweat. Naomi drifted next to him, long and lean, hair wild from their lovemaking. He touched his own scalp, feeling the weird sweaty points his own hair had become.

"I must look a fright," he said.

"Hedgehogs are cute. You're fine." Naomi tapped one long toe against the bulkhead and drifted a few centimeters closer to the atmospheric controls. She aimed the airflow vent at them both, and Holden's skin tingled as the cool air dried him.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to take enough showers to wash Ilus off of me," he added after a moment.

"I was in a brig for a couple of weeks. Trade you."

"Sorry about that."

"Not your fault. Just bad luck. Did you know that the security guy Havelock was Miller's partner on Ceres?"

Holden touched the bed so he could rotate his body and look at her. "You're shitting me."

"Nope. Before we met him, of course."

"Wish I'd known."

"You think you do, but it would have been weird."

"Probably right," Holden said, then sighed and stretched until his joints popped. "I'm never doing that again."

"Which that?"

"Leaving you. When I thought I was going to die down on Ilus and you

were going to die in orbit and we wouldn't even be able to hold each other when it happened, it was the worst thing I could possibly think of."

"Yeah," she agreed with a nod. "I understand."

"I promise it won't happen again."

"Okay. Why'd you let Basia go?"

Holden frowned. The truth was, he wasn't really sure why he had. And it was something he'd been trying hard not to think about too much.

"Because... I like him. And I like Lucia. And breaking up their family wouldn't solve anything. I bought his story about blowing the landing pad early to try and save people. Plus, he's not going to be setting any more bombs. And the one thing Murtry told me that made me really think is that we're beyond the borders of civilization right now. Black-and-white legal arguments don't make a lot of sense here. Someday, maybe."

"The frontier doesn't have laws, it has cops?" Naomi said, but she smiled when she said it.

"Ouch," Holden replied and she laughed.

They drifted together in companionable silence for a few minutes. "Speaking of which, I should probably go see our prisoner," Holden finally said.

"To gloat?" Naomi said, poking him in the ribs. "You love that thing at the end where you gloat."

"It's what makes this all worth doing."

"Go," she said, putting her feet against the bulkhead and then pushing him toward the closet with her hands. "Get dressed. And comb your hair."

"I'll be back soon," he agreed, pulling clothes out of the drawers. "I have another thing I want you to show me."

"Making up for lost time."

"Damn straight."



Holden stopped off at the head to brush his teeth and wash his face before visiting Murtry in the med bay. While he worked to get the knots and tangles out of his hair, Amos drifted in and then just waited.

"Am I in the way or something?" Holden asked. "Do you need privacy?" Amos had never been shy with his toilet usage before.

“Naomi says you’re going to see Murtry,” Amos said, keeping his tone carefully neutral.

“Yep.”

“You told me I wasn’t allowed to go see him.”

“Nope.”

“Can I go with you, then?” Amos asked.

Holden almost said no, then thought about it for a minute and shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

Murtry’s leg wound hadn’t been particularly serious, but Holden’s bullet had shattered his right humerus, so they were keeping him locked up in the medical bay while the expert system tracked the bone regrowth. The RCE security chief had his left arm handcuffed to the crash couch. When the arm was better healed, they’d move him to one of the crew cabins where Amos had added exterior locks.

“Captain Holden,” Murtry said when they entered. “Mister Burton.”

“So,” Holden said as though picking up a conversation they’d started earlier. Which, in a way, they had. “Got a message from my pal at the UN a few hours ago. She can’t wait to meet you. We’ll be dropping you at the UN complex in Lovell city on Luna. I took another prisoner there once, and that person has since ceased to exist as far as the rest of the solar system knows. Hey, maybe they can get you two adjoining cells.”

“You keep talking like I’ve broken the law. I haven’t,” Murtry said.

“There’s a really smart legal team on Earth right now trying to think of some. They have almost two years to work it out. Enjoy the trip back.”

“And I,” Amos said, “am here to tell you why you won’t.”

“I can’t hear this,” Holden said. “He’s my prisoner.”

“Maybe you should leave, then,” Amos said.

Holden stared at Murtry, and the man stared back. “Okay, Amos. Meet me in the galley in a minute.”

“Roger that, Cap,” Amos said, smiling at the prisoner as he said it.

Worried that he might have just killed the man, Holden waited around the corner outside the med bay door.

“Going to beat a helpless man in his hospital bed just because I got the better of you?” Murtry asked, trying to hide his unease with contempt.

“Oh, goodness no,” Amos said, mock hurt in his tone. “That’s all good. Smart move taking me from behind. I don’t hate the game. I appreciate a

good player.”

“Then—” Murtry started, but Amos kept speaking.

“But you made me kill Wei. I liked Wei.”

The silence between the two men stretched, and Holden almost went back into the room, expecting to find Amos choking the man to death. Then Amos spoke again.

“And when I *do* finally beat you, you won’t be helpless. Think that’ll matter?”

Holden didn’t wait to hear the rest of what was said.

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Epilogue: Avasarala

Vyakislav Pratkanis, the Martian congressional Speaker of the House, had an excellent poker face. Over three days of meetings and meals and evenings at the theater and cocktails, he'd never registered more than a milquetoast kind of surprise. Either he was panicking on the inside, or he simply didn't understand the situation. Avasarala's guess was the latter.

"I'm sorry I can't come with you this evening," he said, his hand shaking hers with a crisp, dry efficiency.

"You're a good liar," she said with a smile. "Most men who've spent so much time with me seem convinced their cocks will fall off if they can't get away from me."

His eyes widened with a gentle laughter that he'd almost certainly practiced in a mirror. She responded in kind. The government houses were in Aterpol, the highest-status of the buried neighborhoods of Londres Nova. Six more communities were scattered under the soil of Mars' Aurorae Sinus. She had to admit, the Martians had done a respectable job recreating the world here underground. The false dome of Aterpol was high above her and lit with a carefully balanced spectrum that managed to convince her lizard brain that she was in the open air of Earth. The government buildings were designed with a light airiness that almost forgave the fact that the entire city—the entire planetary network—was built like a fucking tomb. The absence of a magnetosphere had made Mars' first priority protection from the radiation. Between that and the low gravity that left her unintentionally skipping down the corridors like a schoolgirl, she hadn't fallen in love with the planet.

"It has been an honor to share perspectives with you," he said.

She bowed her head. “Really, Vyakislav. We’re off the clock now. You can stop blowing smoke up my ass.”

“As you say,” the man said, his expression not changing at all. “As you say.”

In the corridor down to the atrium, she tugged at her sari, pulling the cloth back into place. Not that it had particularly been out, but the weight was wrong and the back of her head kept wanting to pull on it until it was right. Soft lights nestled in stone sconces along the walls. The air smelled of sandalwood and vanilla and chimed with gentle, soothing music. It was like the government was a middle-grade day spa.

“Chrisjen!” a man called out as she reached the high-vaulted atrium. She turned back. He was a large man with skin several shades darker than her own and hair only a little whiter than her steel gray. He held out his arms as he walked forward and she embraced him. No one would have guessed, seeing them, that they ran the governments of two of the three great political organizations of humanity. Earth might fear the Belt, and the Belt might resent Earth, but the OPA and the United Nations had diplomatic decorum to maintain, and in truth, she halfway liked the old bastard.

“You weren’t going to leave without saying goodbye, were you?” he asked.

“I don’t ship until tomorrow,” she said. “I was just going out for dinner with friends.”

“Well, I’m pleased to see you all the same. Do you have a minute?”

“For the military head to the largest terrorist organization in known space?” she said. “How could I not. What’s on your mind?”

Fred Johnson walked forward slowly and she fell into step with him. The atrium was polished stone. A fountain in the center let water flow slowly down the sides of an abstract and genderless human figure. He sat at the fountain’s edge. She thought the slow ripples made the liquid seem oily.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t support you more in there,” Fred said. “But you understand how it is.”

“I do. We’ll do what we can around the edges, the same as we always do.”

“We have a lot of Belters in those ships. If I take too hard a line with them, it’ll be worse than taking one that’s too soft.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” Avasarala said. “We’re both

constrained by the realities of the situation. And anyway, at least we're not as fucked as Pratkanis."

"I know," Johnson said, shaking his head.

"Is Anderson Dawes still managing the political side out there?"

Johnson shrugged. "For the most part. It's herding kittens. If kittens had a lot of guns and an overdose of neo-Libertarian property theory. What about you? How's Gao doing as secretary-general?"

"She isn't stupid, but she's learning to fake it," Avasarala said. "She'll say all the right words and make all the right hand gestures. I'll see to it." Fred Johnson grunted. The fountain bubbled and the crappy soothing music failed to soothe. She felt like they were on the edge of something, but that was an illusion. In truth, they'd gone over the edge a long time back.

"Take care of yourself, Fred," she said.

"We'll be in touch."



Joint Martian and UN security had blocked off the tube station for her. She sat in a tube car with blacked-out windows and three armed security men at the doors. The shaped-plastic seat faced the side, and she could see herself in the reflection. She looked tired, but at least the low g made her seem younger. She was afraid age had been making her jowly. The car hissed along its track. Outside, the tube was in vacuum to reduce drag. She laid her head against the side of the car and let her eyes close for a moment.

Mars had been the first. Not the first station or the first colony, but the first attempt by humanity to cut ties from Earth. The upstart colony that declared its independence. And if Solomon Epstein hadn't been a Martian and hadn't perfected his drive just when he had, Mars would have been the site of the first true interplanetary war. Instead, Earth and Mars had made the kind of rough friendship where each side could feel superior to the other and they'd set about carving up the solar system. So it had been for as long as she could remember.

That was the danger of being old and a politician. Habits outlived the situations that created them. Policies remained in place after the situations that inspired them had changed. The calculus of all human power was changing, and the models she used to make sense of it shifted with them,

and she had to keep reminding herself that the past was a different place. She didn't live there anymore.

The tube stopped in Nariman, and Avasarala got out. The station was packed with locals who'd been put off until her journey was complete. On Earth, they would have been a mishmash of Anglo and African, Asiatic and Polynesian. Here, they were Martian, and she was an Earther. As the security detail ushered her out to an electric cart, she wondered what they would be next. New Terrans, she supposed. Unless the squatters' naming schema won out. Then... what? Ilusians? Illusions? It was a stupid fucking name.

And God, but she was tired. It was all so terribly large and so terribly dangerous, and she was so tired.

The private room at the back of the restaurant had been closed off for her. A space made for two, maybe three hundred people. Crystal chandeliers. Silverware that was actually silver. Cut crystal wineglasses and carpeting that had been manufactured to mimic centuries-old Persian carpets. Bobbie Draper sat at the table making everything around her seem small just by being near it.

"Fuck," Avasarala said. "Am I late?"

"They told me to come here early for the security check," Bobbie said, standing up. Avasarala walked to her. It was odd. She could embrace Fred Johnson with ease and grace, and she barely cared about him as anything more than a political rival and a tool. Bobbie Draper she genuinely liked, and she wasn't sure whether she should hug the former gunnery sergeant, shake her hand, or just sit down and pretend they saw each other every day. She opted for the last.

"So veteran's outreach?" she said.

"It pays the bills," Bobbie said.

"Fair enough."

A young man with sharp, beautiful features and carefully manicured hands ghosted forward and poured water and wine for them both.

"And how have you been?" Bobbie asked.

"All right, over all. I got a new hip. Arjun says it makes me cranky."

"He can tell?"

"He's got a lot of practice. I fucking hate the new job, though. Assistant to the undersecretary was perfect for me. All the power, less of the bullshit.

Now with the promotion, I have to travel. Meet with people.”

“You met with people before,” Bobbie said, sipping the water and ignoring the wine. “That’s what you do. You meet with people.”

“Now I have to go there first. I don’t like being on a ship for weeks to have a conversation I could have had over a link from my own fucking desk.”

“Yeah,” Bobbie said, smiling. “I think I see what Arjun meant.”

“Don’t be a smartass,” Avasarala said, and the beautiful young man brought them salads. Crisp lettuce and radishes, dark, salty olives. None of it had ever seen the sun. She picked up her fork. “And now this.”

“I’ve been following it in the newsfeeds. Right-to-gate access treaties?”

“No, that’s bullshit. We feed that to the reporters so they have something to talk about. We’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

Bobbie’s fork paused halfway to her mouth. She frowned. Avasarala swigged down half a glass of wine. It was good, she supposed.

“The problem,” she said, pointing her fork at Bobbie for emphasis, “is that I trusted James Holden. Not to do anything I told him to. I’m not an idiot. But I thought he would be himself.”

“Himself, how?”

Avasarala took a bite of the lettuce. “Do you know how many ships are on track to the Ring? Right now, *right now*, we have sixteen hundred ships, and every one of them has been watching New Terra like they were reading fucking tea leaves. Johnson and I sent Holden to mediate because he was the perfect person to show what a clusterfuck it was out there. How ugly it could be. I was expecting press releases every time someone sneezed. The man starts wars all the fucking time, only this time, when I needed a little conflict? Now he’s the fucking peacemaker.”

“I don’t understand,” Bobbie said. “Why did you want conflict?”

“To put the brakes on,” Avasarala said. “To save Mars. Only I couldn’t.”

Bobbie put down her fork. The beautiful young man had vanished. He was good at this job. It was time for them to be truly alone.

“A thousand suns, Bobbie. Three orders of magnitude more than we have ever had before. Can you even imagine that, because most days, I can’t. And some—maybe all—have at least one planet with a breathable atmosphere. A place that can sustain life. It’s what they were selected for. Whatever those fucking boojums were that made the protomolecule, they

were looking for places like Earth. And places like Earth are what they found. Places a lot more like Earth than Mars is. New Terra was the precedent, and the precedent is a fucking feel-good story about how we all come together in a pinch. We have an example of how, if you just get out to one of these planets fast enough and squat hard enough, you get to keep it. Welcome to the greatest migration in the history of human civilization. Fred Johnson thinks he can keep control of it because he's got the choke point at Medina Station, but he's also got the OPA. It's already too late."

"Why try to control it at all? Why not let people settle where they want?"

"Because Mars," Avasarala said.

"I don't understand."

"Mars has the second largest fleet in the system. Something like fifteen thousand nuclear warheads. Sixteen battlecruisers. Who the fuck knows how many other fighting vessels. The ships are newer than Earth's. The designs are better. They're faster. They have heat signature masking and fast water cycling and high-energy proton cannons."

"The proton cannons are a myth."

"They aren't. So here you have the second most powerful navy that there is. What's going to happen to it?"

"It's going to protect Mars."

"Mars is dead, Bobbie. Holden and this Havelock sonofabitch and Elvi Okoye, whoever the fuck she is? They killed it. Half the Martian government understands, and they're shitting themselves so hard, they won't have bones left. Who the fuck's going to stay on Mars? A thousand new worlds where you don't have to live in caves and wear environment suits to walk under the sky. No one's going to be here. Do you know what would happen if half the population of Earth left for the worlds beyond the Ring?"

"What?"

"We'd knock down some walls and make bigger apartments. That's how many people we have on basic. Do you know what happens to Mars if twenty percent of the population leaves?"

"The terraforming project shuts down?"

"The terraforming project shuts down. And upkeep on the basic infrastructure becomes harder. The tax base collapses. The economy craters."

The Martian state fails. That is *going* to happen, and the one chance we had to keep it in check is gone. You will have a shell of a government with a planet nobody wants because nobody needs. The raw materials they have to put on the market are now abundant in a thousand new systems where the mining is simple and you don't choke to death on vacuum if the rig fails out. And the one thing—the *one* thing—you have left you can sell? Your one resource?"

"Is fifteen thousand nuclear weapons," Bobbie said.

"And the ships to use them. Who's going to have those ships when Mars is a ghost town, Bobbie? Where are they going to go? Who are they going to kill? We're all moving out our pawns for the first interstellar military conflict. And James Holden, who could have made New Terra a poster for why you might rather stay home and give us a little breathing room, instead found a bright new way to fuck things up."

"By succeeding?"

"By some definition of that word."

"The planet blew up on him," Bobbie said.

"Small favors," Avasarala replied with a snort.

"Well," Bobbie said. "Shit."

"Yes."

They were quiet for a long moment. Bobbie looked at her salad without seeing it. Avasarala finished her wine. She could see the former marine tracking though the lines of implication and consequence. Bobbie's eyes went hard.

"This dinner. We're at a recruitment meeting, aren't we?"

Avasarala folded her hands.

"Bobbie, as long as we're all pushing out our pieces..."

"Yes?"

"I need to put you back on the board, soldier."

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THE EXPANSE

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meet the author

JAMES S. A. COREY is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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Book Five of the Expanse

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A thousand worlds have opened, and the greatest land rush in human history has begun. As wave after wave of colonists leave, the power structures of the old solar system begin to buckle.

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And as a new human order is struggling to be born in blood and fire, James Holden and the crew of the Rocinante must struggle to survive and get back to the only home they have left.

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PROLOGUE: FILIP

The twin shipyards of Callisto stood side by side on the hemisphere of the moon that faced permanently away from Jupiter. The sun was only the brightest star in the endless night, the wide smear of the Milky Way brighter by far. All along the ridges of the craters, harsh white work lights glared down onto buildings, loaders, scaffolds. The ribs of half-built ships arced up over the regolith of stone dust and ice. Two shipyards, one civilian and one military, one Earth-based and one owned by Mars. Both protected by the same anti-meteor rail-gun defenses, both dedicated to building and repairing the vessels that would take humanity out to the new worlds beyond the rings when and if the fight on Ilus got worked out.

Both in a lot more trouble than they guessed.

Filip slid forward, the rest of his team close behind him. The suit LEDs had been gouged out, the ceramic plating scoured until nothing was smooth enough to cast a reflection. Even the Heads Up Display was dimmed almost to the point of invisibility. The voices in Filip's ears—ship traffic, security feeds, civilian chatter—were picked up on passive. He listened, while transmitting nothing in return. The targeting laser strapped to his back was powered down. He and his team were shadows among shadows. The faint countdown timer in the left of his visual field passed the fifteen-minute mark. Filip patted air barely thicker than vacuum with an open palm, the Belters' physical idiom to move forward slowly. Around him, his team followed.

High in the void above them, too distant to see, the Martian naval vessels guarding the shipyard spoke in clipped, professional tones. (As thinly as their fleet had been stretched, they had only two ships in orbit. Probably only two.) It was possible that there were others hidden in the black, hugging their own waste heat and shielded from radar. Possible but unlikely. And life, as his father said, was risky work.

Fourteen minutes, thirty seconds. Two secondary timers appeared beside

it, one with a forty-five second counter, the other with two minutes.

“Transport ship *Frank Aiken*, you are cleared to approach.”

“Message received, *Carson Lei*,” Cyn’s familiar growl came. Filip could hear the old Belter’s smile in the words. “Coyos sabe best ai sus bebe come we low?”

Somewhere up there, the *Frank Aiken* was painting the Martian ships with innocuous ranging lasers set at the same frequency as the one strapped to Filip’s own back. When the Martian comm officer spoke, there was nothing in his voice that showed fear.

“Don’t copy you, *Frank Aiken*. Please repeat.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Cyn laughed. “You fine upstanding gentlefolk know any good bars a poor Belter crew could get a drink once we get to the surface?”

“Can’t help you, *Frank Aiken*,” the Martian said. “Maintain course.”

“Sabez sa. Solid as a stone, straight as a bullet, us.”

Filip’s crew topped the crater ridge, looking down at the no-man’s land of the Martian military yard; it was just as he had expected it to be. He picked out the warehouses and supply depots. He pulled off the targeting laser, set the base into the dirty ice, and powered it up. The others, spread along the line wide enough that none of the guards would be out of all their sight-lines, did the same. The lasers were old, the tracking platforms strapped to them salvaged from a dozen different sources. Before the tiny red LED on its base turned green, the first of his two secondary timers reached zero.

The security alert tri-tone sounded on the civilian channel, followed by a woman’s anxious voice.

“We’ve got a runaway loading mech on the field. It’s... ah, shit. It’s heading for the meteor array.”

The panic and alarm cascaded in his ears as Filip moved his team long the rim of the crater. Thin puffs of dust rose around them and didn’t fall, widening instead like a mist. The loader mech, failing to respond to overrides, trundled across the no-man’s land and into the wide eyes of the meteor defense canons, blinding them, if only for a few minutes. Four Martian marines emerged from their bunker, as protocol demanded. Their powered armor let them slide over the surface like they were skating on ice. Any one of them could kill his whole team and suffer nothing worse than a moment’s pity. Filip hated them all and each one individually on principle.

The repair crews were already scrambling for the damaged array. The whole thing would be back in order within the hour.

Twelve minutes, forty-five seconds.

Filip paused, looking back at his team. Ten volunteer soldiers, the best the belt had to offer. Apart from himself, none of them knew why the mission to raid the Martian supply depot was important or what it was leading to. All of them ready to die if he told them to, because of who he was. Because of who his father was. Filip felt it in his belly and in his throat. Not fear, pride. It was pride.

Twelve minutes, thirty-five seconds. Thirty-four. Thirty-three. The lasers they'd placed came to life, painting the four marines, the bunker with the backup team, the perimeter fences, the workshops, and the barracks. The Martians turned, their armor so sensitive that even the gentle caress of invisible beams of light was noticed. As they moved they lifted their weapons. Filip saw one recognize the team, gun shifting away from the lasers and toward them. Toward him.

He caught his breath.

Eighteen days before, a ship—Filip didn't even know which one—out in the Jovian system somewhere had made a hard burn, topping out at ten, maybe fifteen gs. At the nanosecond specified by the computers, the ship had released a few dozen lengths of tungsten with four disposable, short-burn rockets at the center of mass and cheap single-frequency sensors tied to them. They were barely complicated enough to be called machines. Six-year-old children built things more sophisticated every day, but accelerated as they were to one hundred and fifty kilometers per second, they didn't need to be complex. Just shown where to go.

In the time it took for the signal to propagate from Filip's eye, down his optic nerve, and into his visual neocortex, it was over. He was aware of the thump, of the ejecta plumes where the Marines had been, of the two brief new stars that had been warships overhead, only after the enemy was dead. He changed his suit radio to active.

"Ichiban," he said, proud that his voice was so calm.

Together, they bounced down the crater's side, shuffling their feet. The Martian shipyards were like something from a dream, plumes of flame rising from the shattered workshops as the stored volatile gasses vented as fire. Soft snow billowed from the barracks as the released atmosphere

sprayed out and froze. The marines were gone, their bodies ripped apart and scattered. A cloud of dust and ice filled the crater, only the guidance of his HUD showing him where the targets were.

Ten minutes, thirteen seconds.

Filip's team divided. Three went to the middle of the open space, finding a place large enough to begin unfolding the thin black carbon structure of the evacuation scaffold. Two others unstrapped recoilless machine pistols, ready to shoot anyone who emerged from the rubble. Two more ran toward the armory, and three came with him, to the supply sheds. The building loomed up from the dust, stark and forbidding. The access doors were shut. A loading mech lay toppled on its side, the driver dead or dying. His tech specialist went to the door controls, prying the housing open with a powered cutting bar.

Nine minutes, seven seconds.

"Josie," Filip said.

"Trabajan, sa sa?" Josie replied curtly.

"I know you're working," Filip said. "If you can't open it—"

The great access doors shifted, shuddered, and rose. Josie turned back and flicked the suit's helmet lights on so that Filip could see the expression on his craggy face. They went into the warehouse. Towers of curved ceramic and steel made great piles, denser than mountains. Hair-thin wire hundreds of kilometers long stood on plastic spools taller than Filip. Massive printers waited, ready to fashion the plates that would fit together over the emptiness, define a volume and make it a bubble of air and water and complex organics that passed for a human environment. Emergency lights flickered, giving the wide space the eerie glow of disaster. He moved forward. He didn't remember drawing his gun, but it was in his hand. Miral, not Josie, was strapping into a loader.

Seven minutes.

The red and white strobe of the first emergency vehicles flickered in the chaos of the shipyard, the light coming from everywhere and nowhere. Filip shuffled down the rows of welding rigs and metal printers. Tubs of steel and ceramic dust finer than talcum. Spiral-core mounts. Layers of Kevlar and foam strike armor piled up like the biggest bed in the solar system. In one open corner of the space, an entire Epstein drive lay disassembled like the universe's most complex jigsaw puzzle. Filip ignored it all.

The air wasn't thick enough to carry the sound of gunfire. His HUD brought up a fast-mover alert in the same moment that a bright patch appeared on the steel beam to his right. Filip dropped, his body seeping down in the microgravity more slowly than it would have under burn. The Martian jumped down the aisle. Not the powered armor of the guards, but a technical exoskeleton. Filip aimed for the center of mass and emptied half his clip. The rounds flared as they left the muzzle, burning their own fuel, tracing lines of fire and red-gray exhaust through the thin Callistan air. Four hit the Martian, and gouts of blood drifted down in a frozen red snowfall. The exoskeleton flipped to emergency alert status, its LEDs turning a grim amber. On some frequency, it was reporting to the yard's emergency services that something terrible had happened. Its mindless devotion to duty was almost funny, in context.

Miral's voice was soft in his ear. "Hoy, Filipito. Sa boîte sa palla?"

It took Filip a moment to find the man. He was in his loader, his blackened vacuum suit becoming one with the huge mech as if they'd been made for each other. Only the dim split circle symbol of the Outer Planets Alliance still just visible beneath the grime marked Miral as anything but an ill-kept Martian mech driver. The canisters he'd been talking about were still lashed to their pallets. A thousand liters each, four of them. On the curving face: High Density Resonance Coating. The energy-absorbent coating helped Martian military ships avoid detection. Stealth tech. He'd found it. A fear he hadn't known he was carrying fell away.

"Yes," Filip said. "That's it."

Four minutes, thirty-seven seconds.

The loading mech's whirring was distant, the sound carried by the vibrations in the structure's flooring more than the thin atmosphere. Filip and Josie moved toward the doors. The flashing lights were brighter, and had taken on a kind of directionality. Filip's suit radio filtered through frequencies crowded with screaming voices and security alerts. The Martian military was ordering back the relief vehicles from the civilian shipyard, concerned that the first responders might be terrorists and enemies in disguise. Which was fair. Under other circumstances, they might have been. Filip's HUD had the outlines of the buildings, the half-built evac scaffold, its best guess on the locations of the vehicles given IR and light trace data too subtle for Filip's eyes. He felt like he was walking through a schematic

drawing, everything defined by edges, all surfaces merely implied. As he shuffled onto the regolith, a deep shudder passed through the ground. A detonation, maybe. Or a building finally completing its long, slow collapse. Miral's loading mech appeared in the open door, backlit by the warehouse lights. The canisters in its claws were anonymous and black. Filip moved toward the scaffold, switching to their encrypted channel as he shuffled.

"Status?"

"Small trouble," Aaman said. He was with the scaffold. Filip's mouth flooded with the metal taste of fear.

"No such thing here, coyo," he said, fighting to sound calm. "What is it?"

"Some of the ejecta crap's fouling the scaffold. I've got grit in the joints."

Three minutes, forty seconds. Thirty-nine.

"I'm coming," Filip said.

Andrew's voice cut in. "We're taking fire in the armory, bosslet."

Filip ignored the diminutive. "How much?"

"Plenty some," Andrew said. "Chuchu's down, and I'm pretty pinned. Might need a hand."

"Hang tight," Filip said, his mind racing. His two guards stood by the evac scaffold, ready to shoot anybody that wasn't them. The three builders were struggling with a brace. Filip jumped over to them, catching himself on the black frame. On the line, Andrew grunted.

Once he saw the stuck connector, black grit fouling it, the problem was clear. In atmosphere, it would just have just taken a hard breath to clean it. Not an option here. Aaman was digging frantically with a blade, flipping out tiny bit after tiny bit, trying to empty the thin, complex channels where the metal fit together.

Three minutes.

Aaman hauled the brace into place and tried to force the connection. It was close, very close, but when he tugged back, it came apart. Filip saw the man cursing, flecks of spit dotting the inside of his faceplate. If they'd only brought a can of air, Filip thought...

Which, of course, they had.

He plucked the knife from Aaman's hand and shoved the blade into his suit's wrist where the articulation made it thinnest. A bright pain told him

he'd gone just a little too far. That was fine. His suit alarm blinked into place, and he ignored it. He leaned forward, pressing the tiny opening in his suit to the clogged connector, the escaping air scattering the dirt and ice. A single drop of blood spat out, freezing into a perfect crimson sphere and bouncing away from the material. He stepped back, and Aaman slid the connection together. When he tugged this time, it held. The injured suit sealed the hole as soon as he pulled the knife out.

Filip turned back. Miral and Josie had cut the canisters free of their pallets and strapped one to the scaffold. The flashing emergency lights had dimmed, the relief vehicles passing them by in the haze and confusion. Heading, likely, for the firefight at the armory. It was where Filip would have seen the greatest threat too, if he hadn't known better.

"Bosslet," Andrew said, his voice thin and anxious. "Cutting close here."

"No preoccupes," Filip said. "Ge gut."

One of the two guards put a hand on his shoulder. "You want me to go fix that?" she asked. *Should I go save them?*

Filip lifted a fist and shook it gently back and forth. No. She stiffened when she understood what he was saying, and for a moment, he thought she'd disobey. Her choice. Mutiny now was its own punishment. Josie slid the last canister into place, tightened down the straps. Aaman and his people fit the last brace in position.

One minute, twenty seconds.

"Bosslet!" Andrew screamed.

"I'm sorry, Andrew," Filip said. There was a moment of stunned silence and then a stream of obscenity and invective. Filip changed frequencies. The emergency services for the military shipyards were shouting less. A woman's voice speaking crisp, calm German was delivering commands with the almost-bored efficiency of someone well accustomed to crisis, and the voices answering her took their professionalism from hers. Filip pointed to the scaffold. Chuchu and Andrew were dead. Even if they weren't dead, they were dead. Filip pulled himself into his position on the scaffold, fitted the straps around his waist and under his crotch, across his chest, then laid his head back against the thick padding.

Fifty-seven seconds.

"Niban," he said.

Nothing happened.

He turned his radio back to the encrypted channel. Andrew was weeping now. Wailing.

“Niban! Andale!” Filip shouted.

The evac scaffold bucked under him, and he suddenly had weight. Four chemical rockets under high burn lit the ground below him, scattering the empty pallets and knocking Miral’s abandoned loading mech on its back. Acceleration pushed the blood down into Filip’s legs, and his vision narrowed. The sounds of the radio grew thinner, more distant, and his consciousness flickered, stuttered. His suit clamped down on his thighs like being squeezed by a giant, forcing the blood back up out of them. His mind returned a bit.

Below, the crater was an oblong blister of dust on the face of the moon. Lights moved in it. The towers at the crater’s edge had gone dark, but flickered now as the systems tried to reboot. The shipyards of Callisto reeled like a drunkard, or a person struck in the head.

The countdown timer slid to two seconds, then one.

At zero, the second strike came. Filip didn’t see the rock hit. As with the tungsten slugs, it was going much too fast for mere human sight, but he saw the dust-cloud jump like someone had surprised it, and then the vast shockwave, blooming out so powerfully that even in the barely extant atmosphere it was visible.

“Brace,” Filip said, though there was no need. Everyone on the scaffold was already braced. In a thicker atmosphere, it would have been death for all of them. Here, it was little worse than a bad storm. Aaman grunted.

“Problem?” Filip asked.

“Pinché rock holed my foot,” Aaman said. “Hurts.”

Josie answered. “Gratia sa didn’t get your cock, coyo.”

“Not complaining,” Aaman said. “No complaints.”

The scaffold rockets exhausted themselves, the acceleration gravity dropped away. Below them, death had come to the shipyards. There were no lights now. Not even fires burning. Filip turned his gaze to the bright smear of stars, the galactic disk shining on them all. One of those lights wasn’t a star, but the exhaust plume of the *Pella*, coming to collect its wayward crew. Except Chuchu. Except Andrew. Filip wondered why he didn’t feel bad about the loss of two people under his command. His first

command. His proof that he could handle a real mission, with real stakes, and come through clean.

He didn't mean to speak. Maybe he didn't. Maybe it was only a sigh that passed his lips. Miral chuckled.

"No shit, Filipito," the older man said. And then, a moment later, "Feliz cumpleaños, savez?"

Filip Inaros lifted his hands in thanks. It was his fifteenth birthday.

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ARTEFACT

The Lazarus War: Book 1

by Jamie Sawyer

In the twenty-second century, mankind has spread out into the stars, only to find themselves locked in eternal warfare with the insidious Krell. On the farthest edges of known space, a stalemate has been hard won, and a Quarantine Zone is being policed by the only people able to contain the Krell menace: the brave soldiers of the Simulant Operation Program, an elite military team who remotely operate bioengineered avatars in the most dangerous theaters of war.

Captain Conrad Harris is a veteran of the Sim Ops Program, a man who has died hundreds of times running suicide missions inside his simulants. Known as Lazarus, Harris is a man addicted to death, and driven by the memory of a lover lost to the Krell many years before. So when a secret research station deep in the Quarantine Zone suddenly goes dark, there is no other man who could possibly lead a rescue mission.

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CHAPTER 1

There was something so immensely *wrong* about the Krell. I could still remember the first time I saw one and the sensation of complete wrongness that overcame me. Over the years, the emotion had settled to a balls-deep paralysis.

This was a primary-form, the lowest strata of the Krell Collective, but it was still bigger than any of us. Encased in the Krell equivalent of battle-armour: hardened carapace plates, fused to the xeno's grey-green skin. It was impossible to say where technology finished and biology began. The thing's back was awash with antenna—those could be used as both weapons and communicators with the rest of the Collective.

The Krell turned its head to acknowledge us. It had a vaguely fish-like face, with a pair of deep bituminous eyes, barbels drooping from its mouth. Beneath the head, a pair of gills rhythmically flexed, puffing out noxious fumes. Those sharkish features had earned them the moniker “fish heads.” Two pairs of arms sprouted from the shoulders—one atrophied, with clawed hands; the other tipped with bony, serrated protrusions—raptorial forearms.

The xeno reared up, and in a split-second it was stomping down the corridor.

I fired my plasma rifle. The first shot exploded the xeno's chest, but it kept coming. The second shot connected with one of the bladed forearms, blowing the limb clean off. Then Blake and Kaminski were firing too—and the corridor was alight with brilliant plasma pulses. The creature collapsed into an incandescent mess.

“You like that much, Olsen?” Kaminski asked. “They're pretty friendly for a species that we're supposed to be at peace with.”

At some point during the attack, Olsen had collapsed to his knees. He sat there for a second, looking down at his gloved hands. His eyes were haunted, his heavy jowls suddenly much older. He shook his head, stumbling to his feet. From the safety of a laboratory, it was easy to think of

the Krell as another intelligent species, just made in the image of a different god. But seeing them up-close, and witnessing their innate need to extinguish the human race, showed them for what they really were.

“This is a live situation now, troopers. Keep together and do this by the drill. *Haven* is awake.”

“Solid copy,” Kaminski muttered.

“We move to secondary objective. Once the generator has been tagged, we retreat down the primary corridor to the APS. Now double time it and move out.”

There was no pause to relay our contact with Jenkins and Martinez. The Krell had a unique ability to sense radio transmissions, even encrypted communications like those we used on the suits, and now that the Collective had awoken all comms were locked down.

As I started off, I activated the wrist-mounted computer incorporated into my suit. *Ah, shit*. The starship corridors brimmed with motion and bio-signs. The place became swathed in shadow and death—every pool of blackness a possible Krell nest.

* * *

Mission timeline: twelve minutes.

We reached the quantum-drive chamber. The huge reinforced doors were emblazoned with warning signs and a red emergency light flashed overhead.

The floor exploded as three more Krell appeared—all chitin shells and claws. Blake went down first, the largest of the Krell dragging him into a service tunnel. He brought his rifle up to fire, but there was too little room for him to manoeuvre in a full combat-suit, and he couldn’t bring the weapon to bear.

“Hold on, Kid!” I hollered, firing at the advancing Krell, trying to get him free.

The other two xenos clambered over him in desperation to get to me. I kicked at several of them, reaching a hand into the mass of bodies to try to grapple Blake. He lost his rifle, and let rip an agonised shout as the creatures dragged him down. It was no good—he was either dead now, or he would be soon. Even in his reinforced ablative plate, those things would

take him apart. I lost the grip on his hand, just as the other Krell broke free of the tunnel mouth.

“Blake’s down!” I yelled. “’Ski—grenade.”

“Solid copy—on it.”

Kaminski armed an incendiary grenade and tossed it into the nest. The grenade skittered down the tunnel, flashing an amber warning-strobe as it went. In the split second before it went off, as I brought my M95 up to fire, I saw that the tunnel was now filled with xenos. Many, many more than we could hope to kill with just our squad.

“Be careful—you could blow a hole in the hull with those explosives!” Olsen warned.

Holing the hull was the least of my worries. The grenade went off, sending Krell in every direction. I turned away from the blast at the last moment, and felt hot shrapnel penetrate my combat-armour—frag lodging itself in my lower back. The suit compensated for the wall of white noise, momentarily dampening my audio.

The M95 auto-sighted prone Krell and I fired without even thinking. Pulse after pulse went into the tunnel, splitting armoured heads and tearing off clawed limbs. Blake was down there, somewhere amongst the tangle of bodies and debris; but it took a good few seconds before my suit informed me that his bio-signs had finally extinguished.

Good journey, Blake.

Kaminski moved behind me. His technical kit was already hooked up to the drive chamber access terminal, running code-cracking algorithms to get us in.

The rest of the team jogged into view. More Krell were now clambering out of the hole in the floor. Martinez and Jenkins added their own rifles to the volley, and assembled outside the drive chamber.

“Glad you could finally make it. Not exactly going to plan down here.”

“Yeah, well, we met some friends on the way,” Jenkins muttered.

“We lost the Kid,” I said. “Blake’s gone.”

“Ah, fuck it,” Jenkins said, shaking her head. She and Blake were close, but she didn’t dwell on his death. *No time for grieving*, the expression on her face said, *because we might be next*.

The access doors creaked open. There was another set of double doors

inside; endorsed QUANTUM DRIVE CHAMBER—AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY.

A calm electronic voice began a looped message: “Warning. Warning. Breach doors to drive chamber are now open. This presents an extreme radiation hazard. Warning. Warning.”

A second too late, my suit bio-sensors began to trill; detecting massive radiation levels. I couldn’t let it concern me. Radiation on an op like this was always a danger, but being killed by the Krell was a more immediate risk. I rattled off a few shots into the shadows, and heard the impact against hard chitin. The things screamed, their voices creating a discordant racket with the alarm system.

Kaminski cracked the inner door, and he and Martinez moved inside. I laid down suppressing fire with Jenkins, falling back slowly as the things tested our defences. It was difficult to make much out in the intermittent light: flashes of a claw, an alien head, then the explosion of plasma as another went down. My suit counted ten, twenty, thirty targets.

“Into the airlock!” Kaminski shouted, and we were all suddenly inside, drenched in sweat and blood.

The drive chamber housed the most complex piece of technology on the ship—the energy core. Once, this might’ve been called the engine room. Now, the device contained within the chamber was so far advanced that it was no longer mechanical. The drive energy core sat in the centre of the room—an ugly-looking metal box, so big that it filled the place, adorned with even more warning signs. This was our objective.

Olsen stole a glance at the chamber, but stuck close to me as we assembled around the machine. Kaminski paused at the control terminal near the door, and sealed the inner lock. Despite the reinforced metal doors, the squealing and shrieking of the Krell was still audible. I knew that they would be through those doors in less than a minute. Then there was the scuttling and scraping overhead. The chamber was supposed to be secure, but these things had probably been on-ship for long enough to know every access corridor and every room. They had the advantage.

They’ll find a way in here soon enough, I thought. A mental image of the dead merchant captain—still strapped to his seat back on the bridge—suddenly came to mind.

The possibility that I would die out here abruptly dawned on me. The

thought triggered a burst of anger—not directed at the Alliance military for sending us out here, nor at the idiot colonists who had flown their ship into the Quarantine Zone, but at the Krell.

My suit didn't take any medical action to compensate for that emotion. *Anger is good.* It was pure and made me focused.

"Jenkins—set the charges."

"Affirmative, Captain."

Jenkins moved to the drive core and began unpacking her kit. She carried three demolition-packs. Each of the big metal discs had a separate control-panel, and was packed with a low-yield nuclear charge.

"Wh—what are you doing?" Olsen stammered.

Jenkins kept working, but shook her head with a smile. "We're going to destroy the generator. You should have read the mission briefing. That was your first mistake."

"Forgetting to bring a gun was his second," Kaminski added.

"We're going to set these charges off," Jenkins muttered, "and the resulting explosion will breach the Q-drive energy core. That'll take out the main deck. The chain reaction will destroy the ship."

"In short: gran explosión," said Martinez.

Kaminski laughed. "There you go again. You know I hate it when you don't speak Standard. Martinez always does this—he gets all excited and starts speaking funny."

"El no habla la lengua," I said. You don't grow up in the Detroit Metro without picking up some of the lingo.

"It's Spanish,," Martinez replied, shooting Kaminski a sideways glance.

"I thought that you were from Venus?" Kaminski said.

Olsen whimpered again. "How can you laugh at a time like this?"

"Because Kaminski is an asshole," Martinez said, without missing a beat.

Kaminski shrugged. "It's war."

Thump. Thump.

"Give us enough time to fall back to the APS," I ordered. "Set the charges with a five minute delay. The rest of you—cállate y trabaja "

"Affirmative."

Thump! Thump! Thump!

They were nearly through now. Welts appeared in the metal door panels.

Jenkins programmed each charge in turn, using magnetic locks to hold them in place on the core outer shielding. Two of the charges were already primed, and she was working on the third. She positioned the charges very deliberately, very carefully, to ensure that each would do maximum damage to the core. If one charge didn't light, then the others would act as a failsafe. There was probably a more technical way of doing this—perhaps hacking the Q-drive directly—but that would take time, and right now that was the one thing that we didn't have.

"Precise as ever," I said to Jenkins.

"It's what I do."

"Feel free to cut some corners; we're on a tight timescale," Kaminski shouted.

"Fuck you, 'Ski."

"Is five minutes going to be enough?" Olsen asked.

I shrugged. "It will have to be. Be prepared for heavy resistance en route, people."

My suit indicated that the Krell were all over the main corridor. They would be in the APS by now, probably waiting for us to fall back.

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

"Once the charges are in place, I want a defensive perimeter around that door," I ordered.

"This can't be rushed."

The scraping of claws on metal, from above, was becoming intense. I wondered which defence would be the first to give: whether the Krell would come in through the ceiling or the door.

Kaminski looked back at Jenkins expectantly. Olsen just stood there, his breathing so hard that I could hear him over the communicator.

"... and done!"

The third charge snapped into place. Jenkins was up, with Martinez, and Kaminski was ready at the data terminal. There was noise all around us now, signals swarming on our position. I had no time to dictate a proper strategy for our retreat.

"Jenkins—put down a barrier with your torch. Kaminski—on my mark..."

I dropped my hand, and the doors started to open. The mechanism buckled and groaned in protest. Immediately, the Krell grappled with the

door, slamming into the metal frame to get through.

Stinger-spines—flechette rounds, the Krell equivalent of armour-piercing ammo—showered the room. Three of them punctured my suit; a neat line of black spines protruding from my chest, weeping streamers of blood. *Krell tech is so much more fucked-up than ours.* The spines were poison-tipped and my body was immediately pumped with enough toxins to kill a bull. My suit futilely attempted to compensate by issuing a cocktail of adrenaline and anti-venom.

Martinez flipped another grenade into the horde. The nearest creatures folded over it as it landed, shielding their kin from the explosion. *Mindless fuckers.*

We advanced in formation. Shot after shot poured into the things, but they kept coming. Wave after wave—how many were there on this ship?—thundered into the drive chamber. The doors were suddenly gone. The noise was unbearable—the klaxon, the warnings, a chorus of screams, shrieks and wails. The ringing in my ears didn't stop, as more grenades exploded.

“We’re not going to make this!” Jenkins yelled.

“Stay on it! The APS is just ahead!”

Maybe Jenkins was right, but I wasn't going down without a damned good fight. Somewhere in the chaos, Martinez was torn apart. His body disappeared underneath a mass of them. Jenkins poured on her flamethrower—avenging Martinez in some absurd way. Olsen was crying, his helmet now discarded just like the rest of us.

War is such an equaliser.

I grabbed the nearest Krell with one hand, and snapped it's neck. I fired my plasma rifle on full-auto with the other, just eager to take down as many of them as I could. My HUD suddenly issued another warning—a counter, interminably in decline.

Ten... Nine... Eight... Seven...

Then Jenkins was gone. Her flamer was a beacon and her own blood a fountain amongst the alien bodies. It was difficult to focus on much except for the pain in my chest. My suit reported catastrophic damage in too many places. My heart began a slower, staccato beat.

Six... Five... Four...

My rifle bucked in protest. Even through reinforced gloves, the barrel was burning hot.

Three... Two... One...

* * *

The demo-charges activated.

Breached, the anti-matter core destabilised. The reaction was instantaneous: uncontrolled white and blue energy spilled out. A series of explosions rippled along the ship's spine. She became a white-hot smudge across the blackness of space.

Then she was gone, along with everything inside her.

The Krell did not pause.

They did not even comprehend what had happened.

* * *

PFC MICHAEL BLAKE: DECEASED...

PFC ELLIOT MARTINEZ: DECEASED...

PFC VINCENT KAMINSKI (ELECTRONICS TECH, FIRST GRADE): DECEASED...

SCIENCE OFFICER GORDEN OLSEN: DECEASED...

CORPORAL KEIRA JENKINS (EXPLOSIVES TECH, FIRST GRADE): DECEASED...

WAITING FOR RESPONSE... WAITING FOR RESPONSE... WAITING FOR RESPONSE...

CAPTAIN CONRAD HARRIS: DECEASED...

This was the part I disliked most.

Waking up again was always worse than dying.

I floated inside my simulator-tank—a respirator mask attached to my face—and blinked amniotic fluid from my eyes to read the screen more clearly. The soak stung like a bitch. The words scrolled across a monitor positioned above my tank. Everything was cast a clear, brilliant blue by the liquid filling my simulator.

PURGE CYCLE COMMENCED...

The tank made a hydraulic hissing, and the fluid began to slough out. It was already cooling.

I was instantly smaller and yet heavier. Breathing was a labour. These lungs didn't have the capacity of a simulant's, and I knew that it would take

a few minutes to get used to them again. I caught the reflection on the inside of the plasglass cover, and didn't immediately recognise it as *my* reflection. That was the face I had been born with, and this was the body I had lived inside for forty years. I was naked, jacked directly into the simulator. Cables were plugged into the base of the device, allowing me to control my simulant out there in the depths of space. My bio-rhythms, and those of the rest of my squad, appeared on the same monitor.

All alive and accounted for. Everyone made safe transition.

I had been operating a flesh-and-blood simulation of myself, manufactured from my body tissue. These were called simulants: simulated copies, genetically engineered to be stronger, bigger, faster. Based on the human genome, but accelerated and modified, the sims were the ultimate weapon—more human than human in every sense. Vat-grown, designed for purpose. Now, my simulant was dead. *It* had died on the *New Haven*. *I* was alive.

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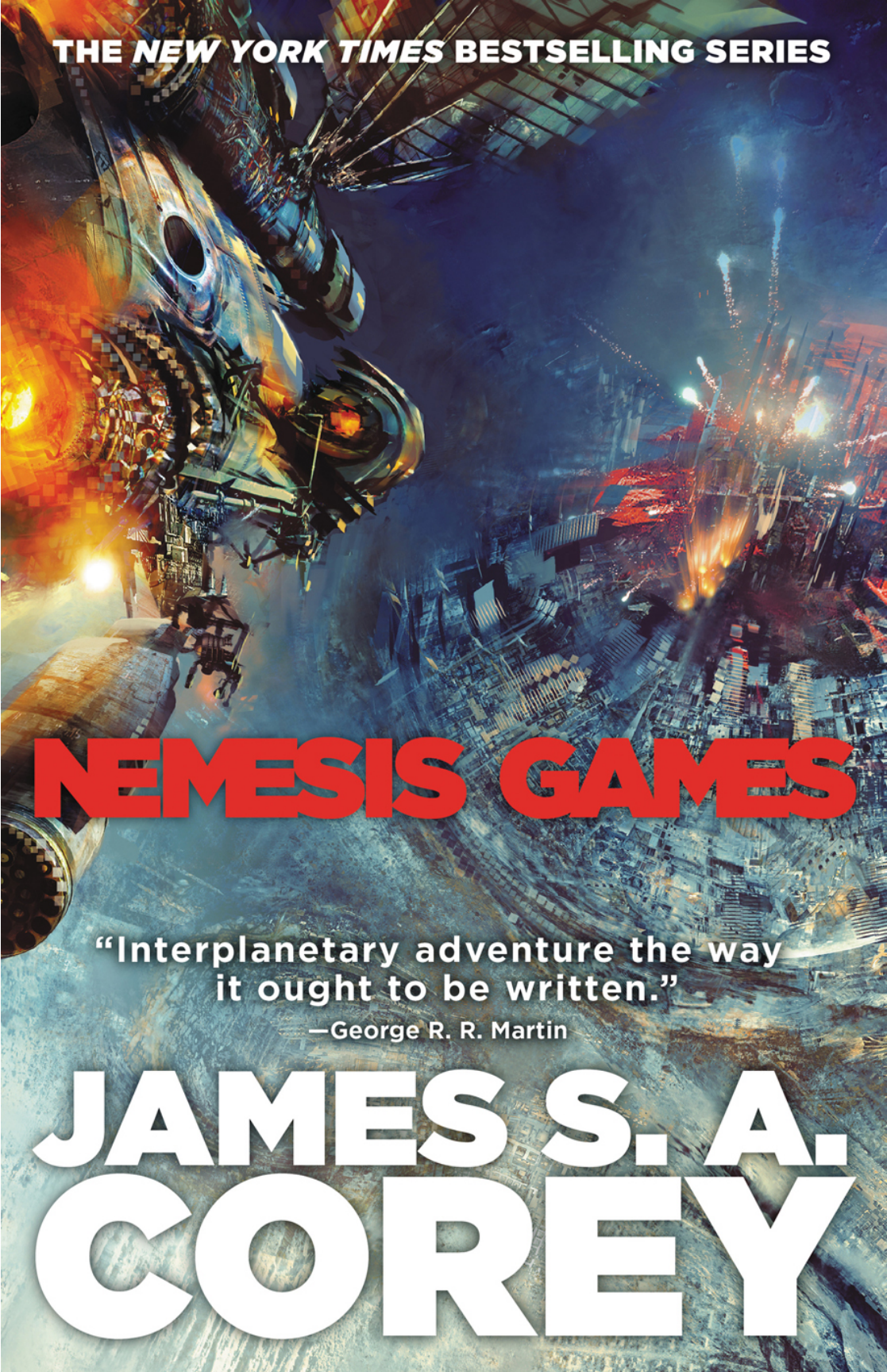
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To Ben Cook, without whom

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Prologue: Filip

The twin shipyards of Callisto stood side by side on the hemisphere of the moon that faced permanently away from Jupiter. The sun was only the brightest star in the endless night, the wide smear of the Milky Way brighter by far. All along the ridges of the craters, harsh white work lights glared down onto buildings, loaders, scaffolds. The ribs of half-built ships arced up over the regolith of stone dust and ice. Two shipyards, one civilian and one military, one Earth-based and one owned by Mars. Both protected by the same anti-meteor rail-gun defenses, both dedicated to building and repairing the vessels that would take humanity out to the new worlds beyond the rings when and if the fight on Ilus got worked out.

Both in a lot more trouble than they guessed.

Filip slid forward, the rest of his team close behind him. The suit LEDs had been gouged out, the ceramic plating scoured until nothing was smooth enough to cast a reflection. Even the heads-up display was dimmed almost to the point of invisibility. The voices in Filip's ears—ship traffic, security feeds, civilian chatter—were picked up on passive. He listened while transmitting nothing in return. The targeting laser strapped to his back was powered down. He and his team were shadows among shadows. The faint countdown timer in the left of his visual field passed the fifteen-minute mark. Filip patted air barely thicker than vacuum with an open palm, the Belters' physical idiom to move forward slowly. Around him, his team followed.

High in the void above them, too distant to see, the Martian naval vessels guarding the shipyard spoke in clipped, professional tones. As thinly as their fleet had been stretched, they had only two ships in orbit. Probably only two. It was possible that there were others hidden in the

black, hugging their own waste heat and shielded from radar. Possible but unlikely. And life, as Filip's father said, was risky work.

Fourteen minutes, thirty seconds. Two secondary timers appeared beside it, one with a forty-five second counter, the other with two minutes.

"Transport ship *Frank Aiken*, you are cleared to approach."

"Message received, *Carson Lei*," Cyn's familiar growl came. Filip could hear the old Belter's smile in the words. "Coyos sabe best ai sus bebe come we low?"

Somewhere up there, the *Frank Aiken* was painting the Martian ships with innocuous ranging lasers set at the same frequency as the one strapped to Filip's own back. When the Martian comm officer spoke, there was nothing in his voice that showed fear.

"Don't copy you, *Frank Aiken*. Please repeat."

"Sorry, sorry." Cyn laughed. "You fine upstanding gentlefolk know any good bars a poor Belter crew could get a drink once we get to the surface?"

"Can't help you, *Frank Aiken*," the Martian said. "Maintain course."

"Sabez sa. Solid as a stone, straight as a bullet, us."

Filip's crew topped the crater ridge, looking down at the no-man's-land of the Martian military yard; it was just as he had expected it to be. He picked out the warehouses and supply depots. He pulled off the targeting laser, set the base into the dirty ice, and powered it up. The others, spread along the line wide enough that none of the guards would be out of all their sight lines, did the same. The lasers were old, the tracking platforms strapped to them salvaged from a dozen different sources. Before the tiny red LED on its base turned green, the first of his two secondary timers reached zero.

The security alert tritone sounded on the civilian channel, followed by a woman's anxious voice.

"We've got a runaway loading mech on the field. It's... ah, shit. It's heading for the meteor array."

The panic and alarm cascaded in his ears as Filip moved his team along the rim of the crater. Thin puffs of dust rose around them and didn't fall, widening instead like a mist. The loader mech, failing to respond to overrides, trundled across the no-man's-land and into the wide eyes of the meteor defense cannons, blinding them, if only for a few minutes. Four Martian marines emerged from their bunker, as protocol demanded. Their

powered armor let them slide over the surface like they were skating on ice. Any one of them could kill his whole team and suffer nothing worse than a moment's pity. Filip hated them all and each one individually on principle. The repair crews were already scrambling for the damaged array. The whole thing would be back in order within the hour.

Twelve minutes, forty-five seconds.

Filip paused, looking back at his team. Ten volunteer soldiers, the best the Belt had to offer. Apart from himself, none of them knew why the mission to raid the Martian supply depot was important or what it was leading to. All of them ready to die if he told them to, because of who he was. Because of who his father was. Filip felt it in his belly and in his throat. Not fear, pride. It was pride.

Twelve minutes, thirty-five seconds. Thirty-four. Thirty-three. The lasers they'd placed came to life, painting the four marines, the bunker with the backup team, the perimeter fences, the workshops, and the barracks. The Martians turned, their armor so sensitive that even the gentle caress of invisible beams of light was noticed. As they moved they lifted their weapons. Filip saw one recognize the team, gun shifting away from the lasers and toward them. Toward him.

He caught his breath.

Eighteen days before, a ship—Filip didn't even know which one—out in the Jovian system somewhere had made a hard burn, topping out at ten, maybe fifteen gs. At the nanosecond specified by the computers, the ship had released a few dozen lengths of tungsten with four disposable, short-burn rockets at the center of mass and cheap single-frequency sensors tied to them. They were barely complicated enough to be called machines. Six-year-old children built things more sophisticated every day, but accelerated as they were to one hundred and fifty kilometers per second, they didn't need to be complex. Just shown where to go.

In the time it took for the signal to propagate from Filip's eye, down his optic nerve, and into his visual neocortex, it was over. He was aware of the thump, of the ejecta plumes where the marines had been, of the two brief new stars that had been warships overhead, only after the enemy was dead. He changed his suit radio to active.

"Ichiban," he said, proud that his voice was so calm.

Together, they bounced down the crater's side, shuffling their feet. The

Martian shipyards were like something from a dream, plumes of flame rising from the shattered workshops as the stored volatile gasses vented as fire. Soft snow billowed from the barracks as the released atmosphere sprayed out and froze. The marines were gone, their bodies ripped apart and scattered. A cloud of dust and ice filled the crater, only the guidance of his HUD showing him where the targets were.

Ten minutes, thirteen seconds.

Filip's team divided. Three went to the middle of the open space, finding a place large enough to begin unfolding the thin black carbon structure of the evacuation scaffold. Two others unstrapped recoilless machine pistols, ready to shoot anyone who emerged from the rubble. Two more ran toward the armory, and three came with him, to the supply sheds. The building loomed up from the dust, stark and forbidding. The access doors were shut. A loading mech lay toppled on its side, the driver dead or dying. His tech specialist went to the door controls, prying the housing open with a powered cutting bar.

Nine minutes, seven seconds.

"Josie," Filip said.

"Trabajan, sa sa?" Josie replied curtly.

"I know you're working," Filip said. "If you can't open it—"

The great access doors shifted, shuddered, and rose. Josie turned back and flicked the suit's helmet lights on so that Filip could see the expression on his craggy face. They went into the warehouse. Towers of curved ceramic and steel made great piles, denser than mountains. Hair-thin wire hundreds of kilometers long stood on plastic spools taller than Filip. Massive printers waited, ready to fashion the plates that would fit together over the emptiness, define a volume and make it a bubble of air and water and complex organics that passed for a human environment. Emergency lights flickered, giving the wide space the eerie glow of disaster. He moved forward. He didn't remember drawing his gun, but it was in his hand. Miral, not Josie, was strapping into a loader.

Seven minutes.

The red-and-white strobe of the first emergency vehicles flickered in the chaos of the shipyard, the light coming from everywhere and nowhere. Filip shuffled down the rows of welding rigs and metal printers. Tubs of steel and ceramic dust finer than talcum. Spiral-core mounts. Layers of Kevlar and

foam strike armor piled up like the biggest bed in the solar system. In one open corner of the space, an entire Epstein drive lay disassembled like the universe's most complex jigsaw puzzle. Filip ignored it all.

The air wasn't thick enough to carry the sound of gunfire. His HUD brought up a fast-mover alert in the same moment that a bright patch appeared on the steel beam to his right. Filip dropped, his body seeping down in the microgravity more slowly than it would have under burn. The Martian jumped down the aisle. Not the powered armor of the guards, but a technical exoskeleton. Filip aimed for the center of mass and emptied half his clip. The rounds flared as they left the muzzle, burning their own fuel, tracing lines of fire and red-gray exhaust through the thin Callistan air. Four hit the Martian, and gouts of blood drifted down in a frozen red snowfall. The exoskeleton flipped to emergency alert status, its LEDs turning a grim amber. On some frequency, it was reporting to the yard's emergency services that something terrible had happened. Its mindless devotion to duty was almost funny, in context.

Miral's voice was soft in his ear. "Hoy, Filipito. Sa boîte sa palla?"

It took Filip a moment to find the man. He was in his loader, his blackened vacuum suit becoming one with the huge mech as if they'd been made for each other. Only the dim split circle symbol of the Outer Planets Alliance still just visible beneath the grime marked Miral as anything but an ill-kept Martian mech driver. The canisters he'd been talking about were still lashed to their pallets. A thousand liters each, four of them. On the curving face: High Density Resonance Coating. The energy-absorbent coating helped Martian military ships avoid detection. Stealth tech. He'd found it. A fear he hadn't known he was carrying fell away.

"Yes," Filip said. "That's it."

Four minutes, thirty-seven seconds.

The loading mech's whirring was distant, the sound carried by the vibrations in the structure's flooring more than the thin atmosphere. Filip and Josie moved toward the doors. The flashing lights were brighter, and had taken on a kind of directionality. Filip's suit radio filtered through frequencies crowded with screaming voices and security alerts. The Martian military was ordering back the relief vehicles from the civilian shipyard, concerned that the first responders might be terrorists and enemies in disguise. Which was fair. Under other circumstances, they might have been.

Filip's HUD had the outlines of the buildings, the half-built evac scaffold, its best guess on the locations of the vehicles given IR and light trace data too subtle for Filip's eyes. He felt like he was walking through a schematic drawing, everything defined by edges, all surfaces merely implied. As he shuffled onto the regolith, a deep shudder passed through the ground. A detonation, maybe. Or a building finally completing its long, slow collapse. Miral's loading mech appeared in the open door, backlit by the warehouse lights. The canisters in its claws were anonymous and black. Filip moved toward the scaffold, switching to their encrypted channel as he shuffled.

"Status?"

"Small trouble," Aaman said. He was with the scaffold. Filip's mouth flooded with the metal taste of fear.

"No such thing here, coyo," he said, fighting to sound calm. "What is it?"

"Some of the ejecta crap's fouling the scaffold. I've got grit in the joints."

Three minutes, forty seconds. Thirty-nine.

"I'm coming," Filip said.

Andrew's voice cut in. "We're taking fire in the armory, bosslet."

Filip ignored the diminutive. "How much?"

"Plenty some," Andrew said. "Chuchu's down, and I'm pretty pinned. Might need a hand."

"Hang tight," Filip said, his mind racing. His two guards stood by the evac scaffold, ready to shoot anybody that wasn't them. The three builders were struggling with a brace. Filip jumped over to them, catching himself on the black frame. On the line, Andrew grunted.

Once he saw the stuck connector, black grit fouling it, the problem was clear. In atmosphere, it would have just taken a hard breath to clean it. Not an option here. Aaman was digging frantically with a blade, flipping out tiny bit after tiny bit, trying to empty the thin, complex channels where the metal fit together.

Three minutes.

Aaman hauled the brace into place and tried to force the connection. It was close, very close, but when he tugged back, it came apart. Filip saw the man cursing, flecks of spit dotting the inside of his faceplate. If they'd only brought a can of air, Filip thought...

Which, of course, they had.

He plucked the knife from Aaman's hand and shoved the blade into his suit's wrist where the articulation made it thinnest. A bright pain told him he'd gone just a little too far. That was fine. His suit alarm blinked into place, and he ignored it. He leaned forward, pressing the tiny opening in his suit to the clogged connector, the escaping air scattering the dirt and ice. A single drop of blood spat out, freezing into a perfect crimson sphere and bouncing away from the material. He stepped back, and Aaman slid the connection together. When he tugged this time, it held. The injured suit sealed the hole as soon as he pulled the knife out.

Filip turned back. Miral and Josie had cut the canisters free of their pallets and strapped one to the scaffold. The flashing emergency lights had dimmed, the relief vehicles passing them by in the haze and confusion. Heading, likely, for the firefight at the armory. It was where Filip would have seen the greatest threat too, if he hadn't known better.

"Bosslet," Andrew said, his voice thin and anxious. "Cutting close here."

"No preoccupes," Filip said. "Ge gut."

One of the two guards put a hand on his shoulder. "You want me to go fix that?" she asked. *Should I go save them?*

Filip lifted a fist and shook it gently back and forth. No. She stiffened when she understood what he was saying, and for a moment, he thought she'd disobey. Her choice. Mutiny now was its own punishment. Josie slid the last canister into place, tightened down the straps. Aaman and his people fit the last brace in position.

One minute, twenty seconds.

"Bosslet!" Andrew screamed.

"I'm sorry, Andrew," Filip said. There was a moment of stunned silence and then a stream of obscenity and invective. Filip changed frequencies. The emergency services for the military shipyards were shouting less. A woman's voice speaking crisp, calm German was delivering commands with the almost-bored efficiency of someone well accustomed to crisis, and the voices answering her took their professionalism from hers. Filip pointed to the scaffold. Chuchu and Andrew were dead. Even if they weren't dead, they were dead. Filip pulled himself into his position on the scaffold, fitted the straps around his waist and under his crotch, across his chest, then laid

his head back against the thick padding.

Fifty-seven seconds.

“Niban,” he said.

Nothing happened.

He turned his radio back to the encrypted channel. Andrew was weeping now. Wailing.

“Niban! Andale!” Filip shouted.

The evac scaffold bucked under him, and he suddenly had weight. Four chemical rockets under high burn lit the ground below him, scattering the empty pallets and knocking Miral’s abandoned loading mech on its back. Acceleration pushed the blood down into Filip’s legs, and his vision narrowed. The sounds of the radio grew thinner, more distant, and his consciousness flickered, stuttered. His suit clamped down on his thighs like being squeezed by a giant, forcing the blood back up out of them. His mind returned a bit.

Below, the crater was an oblong blister of dust on the face of the moon. Lights moved in it. The towers at the crater’s edge had gone dark, but flickered now as the systems tried to reboot. The shipyards of Callisto reeled like a drunkard, or a person struck in the head.

The countdown timer slid to two seconds, then one.

At zero, the second strike came. Filip didn’t see the rock hit. As with the tungsten slugs, it was going much too fast for mere human sight, but he saw the dust cloud jump like someone had surprised it, and then the vast shock wave, blooming out so powerfully that even in the barely-extant atmosphere it was visible.

“Brace,” Filip said, though there was no need. Everyone on the scaffold was already braced. In a thicker atmosphere, it would have been death for all of them. Here, it was little worse than a bad storm. Aaman grunted.

“Problem?” Filip asked.

“Pinché rock holed my foot,” Aaman said. “Hurts.”

Josie answered. “Gratia sa didn’t get your cock, coyo.”

“Not complaining,” Aaman said. “No complaints.”

The scaffold rockets exhausted themselves; the acceleration gravity dropped away. Below them, death had come to the shipyards. There were no lights now. Not even fires burning. Filip turned his gaze to the bright smear of stars, the galactic disk shining on them all. One of those lights

wasn't a star, but the exhaust plume of the *Pella*, coming to collect its wayward crew. Except Chuchu. Except Andrew. Filip wondered why he didn't feel bad about the loss of two people under his command. His first command. His proof that he could handle a real mission, with real stakes, and come through clean.

He didn't mean to speak. Maybe he didn't. Maybe it was only a sigh that passed his lips. Miral chuckled.

"No shit, Filipito," the older man said. And then, a moment later, "Feliz cumpleaños, savez?"

Filip Inaros lifted his hands in thanks. It was his fifteenth birthday.

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Chapter One: Holden

A year after the Callisto attacks, almost three years after he and his crew had headed out for Ilus, and about six days after they'd gotten back, James Holden floated next to his ship and watched a demolition mech cut her apart. Eight taut cables anchored the *Rocinante* to the walls of her berth. Only one of many in the Tycho Station repair dock, and the repair section was only one of many in the massive construction sphere. Around them in the kilometer-wide volume of the sphere a thousand other projects were going on, but Holden only had eyes for his ship.

The mech finished cutting and pulled off a large section of the outer hull. Beneath lay the skeleton of the ship, sturdy ribs surrounded by a tangled confusion of cabling and conduit, and under that, the second skin of the inner hull.

"Yeah," Fred Johnson said, floating next to him, "you kind of fucked her up."

Fred's words, flattened and distorted by the comm system of their vacuum suits, were still a punch to the gut. That Fred, the nominal leader of the Outer Planets Alliance and one of the three most powerful people in the solar system, was taking a personal interest in his ship's condition should have been reassuring. Instead, Holden felt like he had a father checking over his homework to make sure he hadn't screwed anything up too badly.

"Interior mount's bent," a third voice said over the comm. A sour-faced man named Sakai, the new chief engineer at Tycho after the death of Samantha Rosenberg at what everyone was now calling the Slow Zone Incident. Sakai was monitoring the repairs from his office nearby through the mech's suite of cameras and x-ray scanners.

"How did you do that?" Fred pointed at the rail-gun housing along the

ship's keel. The barrel of the gun ran nearly the entire length of the ship, and the support struts that attached it to the frame were visibly buckling in places.

"So," Holden said, "have I ever told you the one about the time we used the *Roci* to drag a heavy freighter to a higher planetary orbit using our rail gun as a reaction drive?"

"Yeah, that's a good one," Sakai said without humor. "Some of those struts might be fixable, but I'm betting we're going to find enough micro-fracturing in the alloy that replacing them all is the better bet."

Fred whistled. "That won't be cheap."

The OPA leader was the *Rocinante* crew's on-again, off-again patron and sponsor. Holden hoped they were in the on-again phase of the rocky relationship. Without a preferred client discount, the ship's repair was going to get noticeably more expensive. Not that they couldn't afford it.

"Lots of badly patched holes in the outer hull," Sakai continued. "Inner looks okay from here, but we'll go over it with a fine-toothed comb and make sure it's sealed."

Holden started to point out that the trip back from Ilus would have involved a lot more asphyxiation and death if the inner hull hadn't been airtight, but stopped himself. There was no reason to antagonize the man who was now responsible for keeping his ship flying. Holden thought of Sam's impish smile and habit of tempering her criticism with silliness, and felt something clench behind his breastbone. It had been years, but the grief could still sneak up on him.

"Thank you," he said instead.

"This won't be fast," Sakai replied. The mech jetted off to another part of the ship, anchored itself on magnetic feet, and began cutting another section of the outer hull away with a bright flash.

"Let's move to my office," Fred said. "At my age, you can only take an e-suit so long."

Many things about ship repair were made easier by the lack of gravity and atmosphere. The trade-off was forcing technicians to wear environment suits while they worked. Holden took Fred's words to mean the old man needed to pee and hadn't bothered with the condom catheter.

"Okay, let's go."



Fred's office was large for something on a space station, and smelled of old leather and good coffee. The captain's safe on the wall was done in titanium and bruised steel, like a prop from an old movie. The wall screen behind his desk showed a view of three skeletal ships under construction. Their design was large, bulky, and functional. Like sledgehammers. They were the beginnings of a custom built OPA naval fleet. Holden knew why the alliance felt the need to create its own armed defensive force, but given everything that had happened over the past few years, he couldn't help but feel like humanity kept learning the wrong lessons from its traumas.

"Coffee?" Fred asked. At Holden's nod, he began puttering around the coffee station on a side table, fixing two cups. The one he held out to Holden had a faded insignia on it. The split circle of the OPA, worn almost to invisibility.

Holden took it, waved at the screen, and said, "How long?"

"Six months is our current projection," Fred said, then sat in his chair with an old man's grunt. "Might as well be forever. A year and a half from now human social structures in this galaxy will be unrecognizable."

"The diaspora."

"If that's what you want to call it," Fred said with a nod. "I call it the land rush. A whole lot of covered wagons heading for the promised land."

Over a thousand worlds open for the taking. People from every planet and station and rock in the solar system rushing to grab a piece. And back in the home system, three governments racing to build enough warships to control it all.

A welding array flared to life on the skin of one of the ships so brightly that the monitor dimmed in response.

"If Ilus was anything, it was a warning that a lot of people are going to die," Holden said. "Was anyone listening?"

"Not really. You familiar with the land rush in North America?"

"Yeah," Holden said, then took a sip of Fred's coffee. It was delicious. Earth grown, and rich. The privileges of rank. "I got your covered wagon reference. I grew up in Montana, you know. That frontier shit is still the story the people there tell about themselves."

“So you know that the mythology of manifest destiny hides a lot of tragedy. Many of those covered wagons never made it. And more than a few of the people who did wound up as cheap labor for the railroads, mines, and rich farmers.”

Holden drank his coffee and watched the ship construction. “Not to mention all the people who were living there before the covered wagons showed up and gave everyone a nifty new plague. At least our version of galactic destiny doesn’t displace anything more advanced than a mimic lizard.”

Fred nodded. “Maybe. Seems that way so far. But not all thirteen hundred systems have good surveys yet. Who knows what we’ll find.”

“Killer robot things and continent-sized fusion reactors just waiting for someone to flip the switch so they can blow half the planet into space, if memory serves.”

“Based on our sample of one. It could get weirder.”

Holden shrugged and finished off his coffee. Fred was right. There was no way to know what might be waiting on all of those worlds. No telling what dangers lay in store for the would-be colonists rushing to claim them.

“Avasarala isn’t happy with me,” Holden said.

“No, she is not,” Fred agreed. “But I am.”

“Come again?”

“Look, the old lady wanted you to go out there and show everyone in the solar system how bad it all was. Scare them into waiting for the government to tell them it was okay. Put the control back in her hands.”

“It was pretty scary,” Holden said. “Was I not clear on that?”

“Sure. But it was also survivable. And now Ilus is getting ready to send freighters full of lithium ore to the markets here. They’ll be rich. They may wind up being the exception, but by the time everyone figures that out, people will be on all those worlds looking for the next gold mine.”

“Not sure what I could have done differently.”

“Nothing,” Fred agreed. “But Avasarala and Prime Minister Smith on Mars and the rest of the political wonks want to control this. And you’ve made sure they can’t.”

“So why are you happy?”

“Because,” Fred said, his grin wide, “I’m not trying to control it. Which is why I’ll wind up in control of it. I’m playing the long game.”

Holden got up and poured himself another cup of Fred's delicious coffee. "Yeah, you're going to need to parse that for me," he said, leaning against the wall next to the coffee pot.

"I've got Medina Station, a self-sustaining craft that everyone going through the rings has to go past, handing out seed packs and emergency shelters to any ship that needs them. We're selling potting soil and water filters at cost. Any colony that survives is going to do so in part because we helped them. So when it comes time to organize some sort of galactic governing body, who are they going to turn to? The people who want to enforce hegemony at the barrel of a gun? Or the folks who were and are there to help out in a crisis?"

"They turn to you," Holden said. "And that's why you're building ships. You need to look helpful at the beginning when everyone needs help, but when they start looking for a government, you want to look strong."

"Yes," Fred said, leaning back in his chair. "The Outer Planets Alliance has always meant everything past the Belt. That's still true. It's just... expanded a bit."

"It can't be that simple. No way Earth and Mars just sit back and let you run the galaxy because you handed out tents and bag lunches."

"Nothing ever is," Fred admitted. "But that's where we'll start. And as long as I own Medina Station, I control the center of the board."

"Did you actually *read* my report?" Holden asked, not able to keep all the disbelief out of his voice.

"I'm not underestimating the dangers left on those worlds—"

"Forget what got left behind," Holden said. He put down his half-empty coffee cup and stalked across the room to lean across Fred's desk. The old man sat back with a frown. "Forget the robots and railroad systems that still work after being powered down for a billion years or so. The exploding reactors. Forget lethal slugs and microbes that crawl into your eyes and blind you."

"How long is this list?"

Holden ignored him. "The thing you should be remembering is the magic bullet that stopped it all."

"The artifact was a lucky find for you, given what was—"

"No, it wasn't. It was the scariest fucking answer to Fermi's paradox I can think of. Do you know why there aren't any Indians in your Old West

analogy? Because they're already dead. The whatever-they-were that built all that got a head start and used their protomolecule gate builder to kill all the rest. And that's not even the scary part. The really frightening part is that something *else* came along, shot the first guys in the back of the head, and left their corpses scattered across the galaxy. The thing we should be asking is, who fired the magic bullet? And are they going to be okay with us taking all of the victims' stuff?"



Fred had given the crew two suites in the management housing level of Tycho Station's habitation ring. Holden and Naomi shared one, while Alex and Amos lived in the other, though in practice that usually just meant they slept there. When the boys weren't partaking of Tycho's many entertainment options, they seemed to spend all their time in Holden and Naomi's apartment.

When Holden came in, Naomi was sitting in the dining area scrolling through something complex on her hand terminal. She smiled at him without looking up. Alex was sitting on the couch in their living room. The wall screen was on, the graphics and talking heads of a newsfeed playing, but the sound was muted and the pilot's head lay back and his eyes were closed. He snored quietly.

"Now they're sleeping here too?" Holden asked, sitting down across the table from Naomi.

"Amos is picking up dinner. How did your thing go?"

"You want the bad news or the worse news?"

Naomi finally looked up from her work. She cocked her head to one side and narrowed her eyes at him. "Did you get us fired again?"

"Not this time. The *Roci*'s pretty beat up. Sakai says—"

"Twenty-eight weeks," Naomi said.

"Yeah. Have you bugged my terminal?"

"I'm looking at the spreadsheets," she said, pointing at her screen. "Got them an hour ago. He's—Sakai's pretty good."

Not as good as Sam hung in the air between them, unspoken. Naomi looked back down at the table, hiding behind her hair.

“So, yeah, that’s the bad news,” Holden said. “Half a year of downtime, and I’m still waiting for Fred to come out and say that he’s paying for it. Or some of it. Any of it, really.”

“We’re still pretty flush. The UN’s payment came through yesterday.”

Holden nodded the comment away. “But forgetting money for a minute, I still can’t get anyone to listen to me when it comes to the artifact.”

Naomi gave him a Belter shrug of her hands. “Because *this* time it would be different? They’ve never listened before.”

“Just once I’d like to be rewarded for my optimistic view of humanity.”

“I made coffee,” she said, pointing at the kitchen with a tilt of her head.

“Fred gave me some of his, which was good enough that I am ruined for lesser coffees from now on. Yet another way in which my meeting with him was unsatisfying.”

The door to the apartment slid open, and Amos stomped in carrying a pair of large sacks. A curry and onion scent filled the air around him.

“Chow,” he said, then dumped the bags on the table in front of Holden. “Hey, Cap’n, when do I get my ship back?”

“Is that food?” Alex said in a loud, groggy voice from the living room. Amos didn’t answer; he was already taking foam cartons out of the bags and setting them around the table. Holden had thought he was too annoyed to eat, but the spicy smell of Indian food changed his mind.

“Not for a long time,” Naomi said to Amos around a mouthful of bean curd. “We bent the mount.”

“Shit,” Amos said, sitting and grabbing a pair of chopsticks. “I leave you guys alone for a couple weeks and you fuck my girl up.”

“Alien superweapons were used,” Alex said, walking into the room, sleep-sweaty hair standing out from his skull in every direction. “The laws of physics were altered, mistakes were made.”

“Same shit, different day,” Amos replied and handed the pilot a carton of curried rice. “Turn the sound up. That looks like Ilus.”

Naomi turned up the sound on the video feed, and the voice of a newscaster filled the apartment. “—partial power restored, but sources on the ground say this setback will—”

“Is that real chicken?” Alex asked, grabbing at one of the cartons. “Splurging a bit, are we?”

“Shush,” Amos said. “They’re talking about the colony.”

Alex rolled his eyes, but said nothing as he piled spicy strips of chicken on his plate. “—in other news, a draft report detailing the investigation into last year’s attack on the Callisto shipyards was leaked this week. While the text is not finalized, the early reports suggest that a splinter faction of the Outer Planets Alliance was involved, and places blame for the high casualty —”

Amos shut off the sound with an angry stab at the table’s controls. “Shit, wanted to hear more about what’s going on with Ilus, not some dumbass OPA cowboys getting themselves blown up.”

“I wonder if Fred knows who was behind that,” Holden said. “The OPA hardliners are having trouble getting over their ‘us against the solar system’ theology.”

“What did they want there anyway?” Alex said. “Callisto didn’t have any of the heavy munitions. No nukes. Nothing worth a raid like that.”

“Oh, now we’re expecting this shit to make sense?” Amos asked. “Gimme that naan.”

Holden sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I know it makes me a naïve idiot, but after Ilus I actually thought we might get a moment’s peace. No one needing to blow anyone else up.”

“This is what that looks like,” Naomi said, then stifled a burp and put her chopsticks down. “Earth and Mars are in a prickly detente, the legitimate wing of the OPA is governing instead of fighting. The colonists on Ilus are working with the UN instead of everyone shooting each other. This is as good as it gets. Can’t expect everyone to be on the same page. We’re still humans after all. Some percentage of us are always going to be assholes.”

“Truer words were never spoken, boss,” Amos said.

They finished eating and sat in companionable silence for several minutes. Amos pulled beers out of the small refrigerator and handed them around. Alex picked his teeth with his pinky fingernail. Naomi went back to her repair projections.

“So,” she said after a few minutes poring over the numbers, “the good news is that even if the UN and the OPA decide that we’re responsible for our own repair bills, we’ll be able to cover them with just what we have in the ship’s emergency fund.”

“Lots of work flyin’ colonists out through the rings,” Alex said. “When

we're flyin' again."

"Yeah, because we can stuff so much compost in our tiny cargo hold," Amos said with a snort. "Plus, broke-as-hell-and-desperate is maybe not the customer base we should be chasing."

"Let's face it," Holden said, "if things keep going the way they are, finding work for a private warship may get pretty tough."

Amos laughed. "Let me get a preemptive I-told-you-so in here. Since when that turns out not to be true, like it always does, I might not be there to say it."

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Chapter Two: Alex

The thing Alex Kamal liked most about the long haul was how it changed the experience of time. The weeks—sometimes months—spent on the burn were like stepping out of history into some small, separate universe. Everything narrowed down to the ship and the people in it. For long stretches, there would be nothing but the basic maintenance work to do, and so life lost all its urgency. Everything was working according to the plan, and the plan was for nothing critical to happen. Traveling through the vacuum of space gave him an irrational sense of peace and well-being. It was why he could do the job.

He'd known other people, usually young men and women, whose experience was different. Back when he'd been in the Navy there had been a pilot who'd done a lot of work in the inner planets, running between Earth, Luna, and Mars. He'd transferred in for a trip out to the Jovian moons under Alex. Just about the time an inner planet run would have ended, the young man started falling apart: getting angry over trivial slights, eating too much or not at all, passing restlessly through the ship from command center to engine room and back again like a tiger pacing its cage. By the time they'd reached Ganymede, the ship's doctor and Alex agreed to start putting sedatives in the guy's food just to keep things from getting out of hand. At the end of the mission, Alex had recommended the pilot never be assigned a long run again. Some kinds of pilots couldn't be trained as much as tested for.

Not that there weren't stresses and worries that he carried with him. Ever since the death of the *Canterbury*, Alex had carried a certain amount of baseline anxiety. With just the four of them, the *Rocinante* was structurally undercrewed. Amos and Holden were two strong masculine

personalities that, if they ever locked horns, could blow the crew dynamic apart. The captain and the XO were lovers, and if they ever broke up, it would mean the end of more than just the job. It was the same sort of thing he'd always worried about, whatever crew he was with. With the *Roci*, it had been the same worries for years now without any of them ever being how it went off the rails, and that in itself was a kind of stability. As it was, Alex always felt relieved to get to the end of a run and he always felt relieved to start the next one. Or if not *always*, at least *usually*.

The arrival at Tycho Station should have been a relief. The *Roci* was as compromised as Alex had ever seen her, and the shipyards at Tycho were some of the best in the system, not to mention the friendliest. The final disposition of their prisoner from New Terra was now soundly someone else's problem, and he was off the ship. The *Edward Israel*, the other half of the New Terran convoy, was burning its way safely sunward. The next six months were nothing but repair work and relaxation. By any rational standard, there should have been less to worry about.

"So what's bugging you?" Amos asked.

Alex shrugged, opened the little food refrigeration unit that the suite provided, closed it, shrugged again.

"Something's sure as shit bugging you."

"I know."

The lights had the yellow-blue clearness that mimicked early morning, but Alex hadn't slept. Or not much. Amos sat at the counter and poured himself a cup of coffee. "We're not doing one of those things where you need me to ask you a bunch of questions so you can get comfortable talking about your feelings, are we?"

Alex laughed. "That never works."

"So let's not do it."

On the burn, Holden and Naomi tended to fold in on each other, not that either of them noticed doing it. It was a natural pattern for lovers to take more comfort in one another than in the rest of the crew. If it had been different, Alex would have been worried about it. But it left him and Amos with mostly one another as company. Alex prided himself on being able to get along with almost anyone on a crew, and Amos was no exception. Amos was a man without subtext. When he said he needed some time alone, it was because he needed some time alone. When Alex asked if he wanted to

come watch the newly downloaded neo-noir films out of Earth that he subscribed to, the answer was always and only a response to the question. There was no sense of backbiting, no social punishment or isolation games. It just was what it was, and that was it. Alex wondered sometimes what would have happened if Amos had been the one to die on the *Donnager*, and he'd spent the last few years with their old medic, Shed Garvey.

It probably wouldn't have gone as well. Or maybe Alex would have adjusted. Hard to know.

"I've been having dreams that... bother me," Alex said.

"Nightmares, like?"

"No. Good dreams. Dreams that are better than the real world. Where I feel bad waking up from them."

"Huh," Amos said thoughtfully and drank his coffee.

"Have you ever had dreams like that?"

"Nope."

"The thing is, Tali's in all of them."

"Tali?"

"Talissa."

"Your ex-wife."

"Yeah," Alex said. "She's always there and things are always... good. I mean, not like we're together. Sometimes I'm back on Mars. Sometimes she's on the ship. She's just present, and we're good, and then I wake up and she's not here and we aren't. And..."

Amos' brow lowered and his mouth rose, squeezing his face into something smaller and thoughtful.

"You want to hook back up with your ex?"

"No, I really don't."

"You horny?"

"No, they're not sex dreams."

"You're on your own, then. That's all I got."

"It started back there," Alex said, meaning on the other side of the rings, orbiting above New Terra. "She came up in conversation, and ever since then... I failed her."

"Yup."

"She spent years waiting on me, and I just wasn't the man I wanted to be."

“Nope. You want some coffee?”

“I really do,” Alex said.

Amos poured a cup for him. The mechanic didn’t add sugar, but knew to leave a third of the cup for cream. One of the little intimacies of crew life.

“I don’t like how I left things with her,” Alex said. It was a simple statement, and not revelation, but it had the weight of a confession.

“Nope,” Amos agreed.

“There’s a part of me that thinks this is a chance.”

“This?”

“The *Roci* being in dry dock for so long. I could go to Mars, see her. Apologize.”

“And then ditch her again in order to get back before the ship drive goes back online?”

Alex looked down into his coffee. “Leave things in a better place.”

Amos’ shrug was massive. “So go.”

A flood of objections crowded his mind. The four of them hadn’t been apart since they’d become a crew, and splitting the group now felt like bad luck. The repair crew on Tycho might need him or want him or make some change to the ship that he wouldn’t know about until it became a critical point somewhere down the line. Or worse, leaving might mean never coming back. If the universe had proved anything in these last few years, it was that nothing was certain.

The chime of a hand terminal saved him. Amos fished the device out of his pocket, looked at it, tapped the screen, and scowled. “I’m going to need a little privacy now.”

“Sure,” Alex said. “Not a problem.”

Outside their suite, Tycho Station stretched in long gentle curves. It was one of the crown jewels of the Outer Planets Alliance. Ceres was larger, and Medina Station held the weird null-zone between rings, but Tycho Station was what the OPA had taken pride in from the start. The wide sweeping lines, more like a sailing ship than any actual craft that she served, weren’t functional. The station’s beauty was a boast. Here are the minds that spun up Eros and Ceres; here is the shipyard that built the largest vessel in the history of humanity. The men and women who, not so many generations ago, had braved the abyss beyond Mars for the first time were smart and powerful enough to make this.

Alex made his way down a long promenade. The people who passed him were Belters, their bodies longer than Earth standard, their heads wider. Alex himself had grown up in the relatively low Martian gravity, but even he didn't quite match the physiology that a childhood rich in null g gave.

Plants grew in the empty spaces of the wide corridors, vines crawling up against the spin gravity as they would have against the normal pull on Earth. Children scampered through the halls, ditching school the way he had back in Londres Nova. He drank his coffee and tried to cultivate the peace of being on the burn. Tycho Station was just as artificial as the *Roci*. The vacuum outside its hull was no more forgiving. But the calm wouldn't come. Tycho Station wasn't his ship, wasn't his home. These people walking past him as he went to the common area and looked up through the massive and multilayered clear ceramic at the glittering spectacle of the shipyards weren't his family. And he kept wondering what Tali would have thought of all this. If she could have come to a place that saw the beauty in it the way he hadn't been able to with the life she'd wanted on Mars.

When he hit the bottom of his cup, he turned back. He ambled along with the flow of foot traffic, making way for the electric carts and exchanging the small, civilized courtesies in the polyglot linguistic catastrophe that was the Belter argot. He didn't think too much about where he was going until he got there.

The *Roci* lay half-dressed in the vacuum. With the outer skin cut away and her inner hull shining fresh in the work lights, she looked small. The scars of their adventures had, for the most part, been borne by the outer hull. Those scars were gone now, and only the deeper injuries remained. He couldn't see them from here, but he knew what they were. He'd been on the *Rocinante* as long as he'd been on any ship in his career, and he loved her better than any of them. Even than his first.

"I'll be back," he said to the ship, and as if in answer, a welding rig lit up at the curve of her drive cone, brighter for a moment than the unshielded sun in a Martian sky.



The suite Naomi and Holden shared was just down the corridor from the

one where he and Amos slept, its door with the same homey fake wood texturing and the number set into the wall just as bright. Alex let himself in, stepping into the conversation already going on.

“—if you think it’s called for,” Naomi said, her voice coming from the suite’s main room. “But I think the evidence is pretty strong that you cleaned the last of that out. I mean, Miller hasn’t been back, has he?”

“No,” Holden said, nodding to Alex. “But just the idea that we had some of that goo in the ship for so long and didn’t even know it creeps me out. Doesn’t it creep you out?”

Alex held out his coffee cup, and Holden took it and filled it automatically. No sugar, room for cream.

“It does,” Naomi said, coming to the kitchen. “Just not enough to take the whole damned bulkhead out over it. The replacements are never as strong as the originals. You know that.”

Alex had met Naomi Nagata back on the *Canterbury*. He could still see the rawboned, angry girl who Captain McDowell had introduced as their new junior engineer. She’d hidden behind her hair for almost a year. Now, she had the first few threads of white among the black. She stood taller, more at home in her own skin. Surer of herself and stronger than he would have guessed she could be. And Holden, the swaggering, self-impressed executive officer who swept into civilian work wearing his dishonorable discharge like a boast had become this man handing him the cream and cheerfully admitting the irrationality of his fears. Time had changed all of them, he supposed. Only he wasn’t sure how he had been affected. Too close to the question, he guessed.

Except Amos. Nothing changed Amos.

“What about you, Alex?”

He grinned and let his Mariner Valley drawl thicken. “Well, shoot, I figure it didn’t kill us when it was here, it ain’t gonna kill us now it’s gone.”

“Fine,” Holden said with a sigh.

“It’ll save us money,” Naomi said, “and we’ll be better off.”

“I know,” Holden said. “But I’m still going to feel weird about it.”

“Where’s Amos?” Naomi asked. “Is he still catting around?”

“No,” Alex said. “He hit the brothels hard enough to burn through his petty cash the first few days in port. Since then, we’ve just been passing the time.”

“We’ll need to find something to keep him busy while we’re on Tycho,” Holden said. “Hell, we’ll need to find something to keep all of us busy.”

“We could look for work on the station,” Naomi said. “I don’t know what they’re hiring for.”

“We’ve got offers from a half-dozen places for paid debriefings on New Terra,” Holden said.

“So does every other person that came back through the Ring,” Naomi said, laughter in her voice. “And the feed there and back still works.”

“You’re saying we shouldn’t do it?” Holden said, his tone vaguely hurt.

“I’m saying I can find a lot of things I’d rather get paid for than talking about myself.”

Holden deflated, just a little. “Fair point. But we’re stuck here for a long time. We’re going to have to do something.”

Alex took a deep breath. Here it was. The moment. His resolve wavered. He poured the cream into the cup, the blackness of the coffee resolving into a gentle tan. The lump in his throat felt as big as an egg.

“So,” he said. “I’ve... ah... I’ve been thinking about things—”

The suite door opened and Amos stepped in. “Hey, Cap’n. I’m gonna need some time off.”

Naomi tilted her head, her brows coming together, but it was Holden who spoke.

“Time off?”

“Yeah, I got to go back to Earth for a little bit.”

Naomi sat at the stool by the breakfast bar. “What’s the matter?”

“Don’t know,” Amos said. “Maybe nothing, but I kinda need to go look to find out. Be sure. You know.”

“Is anything wrong?” Holden asked. “Because if it’s a thing, we can wait for the *Roci* to be fixed up, and we can all go together. I’ve been looking for an excuse to get Naomi back down to Earth so the family can meet her.”

The annoyance that crossed the engineer’s face was almost faster than Alex’s refresh rate. Moments like that made him nervous. The way Holden could push Naomi past her comfort zone and not even know he was doing it. But she recovered even before Amos could speak.

“May have to keep looking for your excuse, Cap. There’s a little time pressure on my thing. Lady I used to spend time with died. I just need to go

make sure everything there's on the up-and-up."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Naomi said at the same moment Holden said, "Taking care of her estate?"

"Sure, something like that," Amos said. "Anyway, I booked transport to Ceres and then down the well, but I need to cash out some of my shares for spending money while I'm there."

The room went still for a moment. "You're coming back, though," Naomi said.

"Plan to," Amos said. It struck Alex that the answer was more honest than a yes. Amos planned to, but things happened. In all the time they'd spent in all their runs on the *Cant* or the *Roci*, Alex had never heard Amos talk about his life back on Earth except in the most general terms. He wondered if it was because the past wasn't worth mentioning or was too painful to talk about. With Amos, it could have been both at the same time.

"Of course," Holden said. "Just tell me how much you need."

The negotiation was brief, the transfer made on their hand terminals. Amos grinned and slapped Alex on the shoulder.

"All right. You got the place to yourself."

"When are you shipping out?" Alex asked.

"'Bout an hour. I should go get in line."

"All right," Alex said. "Take care of yourself, partner."

"You bet," Amos said and was gone.

The three remaining crewmen of the *Roci* stood silently in the kitchen, Holden looking shocked, Naomi amused. Alex felt like he was about halfway between them.

"Well that was weird," Holden said. "You think he's going to be okay?"

"It's Amos," Naomi said. "I'm more worried about whoever he's going to check on."

"Fair point," Holden said, then hitched himself up to sit on the counter and faced Alex. "Anyway. You were saying you'd been thinking about something?"

Alex nodded. *I was thinking about how hard it is to break up family and about the family I broke up before, and that I need to see my ex-wife again and try to find some sort of resolution to who we were to each other and all the things we did.* Seemed kind of anticlimactic now.

"Well, seeing how we're going to be in dock for a good long time, I was

thinking I might take a trip to Mars. Check in on the old digs.”

“Okay,” Holden said. “But you’ll come back before the repairs are done, right?”

Alex smiled. “Plan to.”

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Chapter Three: Naomi

The Golgo table was set for opening throws, the first and second goals untouched and the field still empty. The throbbing bass line from the Blauwe Blome's main room was a vibration in the deck and a murmur that wasn't too loud to talk over. Naomi hefted the steel ball in her hand, feeling the subtle play between mass and weight, different at every gravity. Across from her, Malikah and her teammates from the repair crew waited. One of them was drinking a Blue Meanie, the bright azure fluid staining his mouth like lipstick. It was three years—no, four?—since Naomi had played a game of Golgo, and these people played every Thursday. Naomi hefted the ball again, sighed, and spun it. Instantly, the opposition balls sprang out to hold her short, matching her spin and trying to co-opt her throw.

It was the sort of response you played against a beginner. Naomi was rusty, but she wasn't a beginner. The table registered, ending the throw, and Naomi's marker appeared, well past the field's half mark. Her team cheered, Malikah's groaned. Everyone smiled. It was a friendly game. Not all of them were.

"Next up, next up!" one of Naomi's new teammates shouted, waving his wide, pale hand. His name was Pere or Paar. Something like that. She retrieved the steel ball and tossed it to him. He grinned at her, his eyes only flickering down her body and back. Poor little shit. Naomi stood back, and Malikah moved to stand with her.

"You still got it," Malikah said. She had a beautiful voice, the accents of Ceres Station mellowing the harsher tones of the deep Belt.

"Spent a lot of time playing it when I was here last," Naomi said. "You never forget what you did when you were young, right?"

"Even if you want to." Malikah laughed, and Naomi laughed with her.

Malikah lived in a set of rooms three levels down and thirty degrees spinward from the club. The last time Naomi had been in it, the walls had been draped with silk patterned in brown and gold and the air had been rich with the artificial sandalwood incense that wouldn't clog the air recyclers. Naomi had slept in a bag on the deck for two nights, falling asleep to recorded harp music and the murmuring voices of Malikah and Sam. Only Sam was dead now, and Naomi was back together with Jim, and humanity was heir to a thousand suns within a two-year burn. Being there, laughing with Malikah and the repair crews, Naomi couldn't tell if she was more astounded by how much things had changed or how little.

Malikah touched Naomi's shoulder, her brow furrowed. "Bist ajá?"

"Was thinking," Naomi said, falling into the rhythm of Belter slang only roughly. Golgo wasn't the only thing she was rusty with.

Malikah's mouth turned down at the corners even as the Golgo table erupted in shouts of glee and dismay. For a moment, Sam was there too. Not the actual woman with her red hair and cheerful obscenity and habit of using childish terms—boo-boo, owie—to describe things like meteoroid-breached hulls. Only the space where she had been, and the two women sharing the knowledge that someone was missing.

Paar-or-Pere passed the ball on to the next player—Sakai, the new chief engineer—while the opposing team clapped him mockingly on the back. Naomi moved forward to assess the damage. Being around Belters—just Belters—was weirdly comforting. She loved her crew, but they were two Earthers and a Martian. There were some conversations that she could never have with them.

She could tell when Jim arrived without turning around. The players across the table from her all looked past her as one. Their eyes went wide, and an air of excitement washed over them. No one said it, but they might as well have—*Hey! Look! It's James Holden!*

It was easy to forget that Jim was who he was. He'd started two wars, and played some role in ending them both. He'd captained the first human ship through the Ring, or the first one that survived anyway. He'd been on the alien base in the center of the slow zone and come back. He'd survived Eros Station and the death of the *Agatha King*. He'd been to New Terra, the first human colony on a nonhuman planet, and forged a weird, awkward peace there. It was almost embarrassing, seeing everyone react to that

Holden: the one on the screens and in the newsfeeds. She knew Jim was nothing like that James Holden, but there was no point saying it. Some things stayed secrets even when you told them.

“Hello my love,” Jim said, putting his arm around her. In his other hand, he had a grapefruit martini.

“For me?” she said, taking the cocktail.

“Hope so. I wouldn’t drink it on a dare.”

“Hoy, coyo!” Paar-or-Pere said, holding up the steel ball. “Want a throw?”

The laughter around the table was buoyant. Some of it was delight—*James Holden playing Golgo with us!*—and some was cruel—*Watch the big shot suck*. None of it had anything to do with the actual man. She wondered if he knew how much he changed the nature of a room just by walking into it. At a guess, he probably didn’t.

“No,” Jim said with a grin. “I’m terrible at this. Wouldn’t know where to start.”

Naomi leaned in toward Malikah. “I should go. Thank you so much for having me.” It meant *I am grateful to you for letting me be here with other Belters like I belong*.

“You are todamas welcome, coya-mis,” Malikah said. It meant, *Sam’s death wasn’t your fault, and if it was I forgive you*.

Naomi took Jim’s elbow and let him steer her out to the main bar. The music rose as they passed through the doorway, light and sound joining in a sensory assault. On the dance floor, people moved together in pairs or in groups. There had been a time, long before she’d met Jim, when the idea of getting very, very drunk and throwing herself into the press of bodies would have been an attractive one. She could remember the girl she used to be with fondness, but it wasn’t a youth she cared to recapture. She stood at the bar and finished her martini. It was too loud to talk, so she amused herself watching people notice Jim, the game of is-it-or-isn’t-it in their expressions. Jim, for his part, was amiably bored. The idea that he was the center of attention was foreign to him. It was part of what she loved about him.

When her glass was empty, she put her hand on his, and they pressed out to the public corridor outside the club. Men and women waiting to get in—Belters, almost to a person—watched them leave. It was night on Tycho Station, which didn’t mean much. The station was built on three rotating

eight-hour shifts: leisure, work, sleep. Who you knew depended on what shift you worked, like three different cities that all occupied the same space. A world that would always be two-thirds strangers. She put her arm around Jim's waist and pulled him in against her until she could feel his thigh moving against hers.

"We need to talk," she said.

He tensed a little, but kept his voice light and airy. "Like man-and-woman talk?"

"Worse," she said. "XO and captain."

"What's up?"

They stepped into a lift, and she pushed the button for their deck. The lift chimed, the doors moving gently closed, as she gathered her thoughts. It wasn't really that she didn't know what needed to be said. He wasn't going to like this any more than she did.

"We need to look at hiring on more crew."

She knew enough about Jim's silences to recognize this one. She looked up into his blank expression, his eyes blinking a fraction more quickly than usual.

"Really?" he said. "Seems to me that we're doing just fine."

"We are. We have been. The *Roci*'s a military design. Smart. A lot of automation, a lot of redundancy. That's why we've been able to run her at a third of her standard crew for this long."

"That and we're the best damned crew in the sky."

"That doesn't hurt. Looking at skills and service, we've got a strong group. But we're brittle."

The lift shifted, the complex forces of station spin and car acceleration making the space feel unsteady. She was sure it was just the movement.

"I'm not sure what you mean by brittle," Jim said.

"We've been on the *Rocinante* since we salvaged her off the *Donnager*. We've had no change in staff. No turnover. Name me one other ship you can think of where that's true. There were runs where the *Canterbury* had a quarter of the staff on their first mission together. And..."

The doors slid open. They stepped out, moving aside to let another couple go in. Naomi heard the others murmuring to each other as the lift doors closed. Jim was quiet as they walked back toward their suite. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and thoughtful.

“You’re thinking one of them may not come back? Amos? Alex?”

“I’m thinking that a lot of things happen. Take a high burn, and sometimes people stroke out. The juice helps, but it’s not a guarantee. People have been known to shoot at us. Or we’ve been disabled in a decaying orbit. You remember all that happening, right?”

“Sure, but—”

“If we lose someone, we go from running at a third of a standard crew to a quarter. Add to that the loss of nonredundant skills.”

Holden stopped, his hand on the door to their rooms.

“Wait, wait, wait. If we lose someone?”

“Yes.”

His eyes were wide and shocked. Little wrinkles of distress gathered at the corners. She reached up to smooth them away, but they didn’t go.

“So you’re trying to get me prepared for one of my crew dying?”

“Historically speaking, humans are pretty much at a hundred percent on that.”

Jim started to say something, faltered, opened the suite door, and walked in. She followed, closing the door behind them. She wanted to let it drop, but if she did, she didn’t know when they’d pick it back up.

“If we were running a traditional crew, we’d have two people in every position. If anyone got killed or disabled, someone else would be right there to step in.”

“I’m not adding four more people to our ship, much less eight,” Jim said, walking into the bedroom. Running from the conversation. He wouldn’t actually leave. She waited for the silence and the distress and the worry that he’d made her angry to pull him back. It took about fifteen seconds. “We don’t run this like a regular crew because we’re not a regular crew. We got the *Roci* when everyone in the system was shooting at us. We had stealth ships blowing a battleship out from under us. We lost the *Cant* and then we lost *Shed*. You can’t go through that and just be normal.”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“This ship isn’t a crew. We don’t *run* it like a crew. We run it like a family.”

“Right,” she said. “And that’s a problem.”

They looked at each other across the room. Jim’s jaw worked, objections and arguments getting stalled at his tongue. He knew she was right, and he

wanted her to be wrong. She saw him realize there was no way out.

“Fine,” he said. “When the others get back, let’s talk about doing some interviews. Taking a couple people on for a mission or two. If they shake down right, we can look at keeping them on permanently.”

“That sounds good,” Naomi said.

“It’s going to change the balance on the ship,” Holden said.

“Everything changes,” she said, putting her arms around him.

They ordered food from a fusion Indian restaurant, curry and genetically modified rice and textured fungal protein mostly indistinguishable from beef. For the rest of the evening, Holden tried to be cheerful, tried to hide his unease from her. It didn’t even start to work, but she appreciated the effort.

After dinner, they watched the entertainment feeds until the time came in the comfortable rhythm of their day that she turned off the screen and drew him back to the bed. Sex with Holden had started off as a thrilling thing, years ago when they were first seeing exactly how stupid a captain and an XO sleeping together would be. Now, it was richer and calmer and more playful. And more comforting.

After, lying on the big gel-form mattress with the sheets in ropes at the foot, Naomi’s mind wandered. She thought of the *Roci* and of Sam, of a book of poetry she’d read when she was a girl and a musical group one of the senior engineers had roped her into on the *Canterbury*. Her recollections had started taking on the surreal confusion of dreams when Jim’s voice brought her back almost to wakefulness.

“I don’t like having them gone.”

“Hmm?”

“Alex and Amos. I don’t like having them gone. If they get in trouble, we’ll be here. I can’t even just fire up the *Roci* and go get them.”

“They’ll be fine,” she said.

“I know. I sort of know.” He propped himself up on one elbow. “Are you really not worried?”

“A little maybe.”

“I mean, I know they’re grown-ups, but if something happened. If they didn’t come back...”

“It would be hard,” Naomi said. “We four have been what we rely on for a lot of years now.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. And then a moment later, “Do you know who this lady was Amos went back to check on?”

“No. I don’t.”

“You think she was his lover?”

“I don’t know,” Naomi said. “I got the feeling it was more of a surrogate mom thing.”

“Hmm. Maybe. I don’t know why I was thinking lover.” His voice had started taking on the fuzzy edges of sleep. “Hey, can I ask an inappropriate question?”

“If memory serves.”

“Why didn’t you and Amos ever get together? I mean back on the *Cant*.”

Naomi laughed, rolled over, put her arm across his chest. Even after shipping with him all this time, she liked the way his skin smelled. “Are you serious? Have you paid any attention at all to his sexuality?”

“I don’t think Amos and I are supposed to do that.”

“It’s not a place you want to be,” Naomi said.

“Hmm. Okay. I was just thinking, you know. How much he followed you around back on the *Cant*. And he’s never talked about leaving the *Roci*.”

“He’s not staying on the *Roci* for me,” Naomi said. “He’s staying for you.”

“Me?”

“He’s using you as his external, aftermarket conscience.”

“No, he’s not.”

“It’s what he does. Finds someone who has a sense of ethics and follows their lead,” Naomi said. “It’s how he tries not to be a monster.”

“Why would he try not to be a monster?” The sleep-slurred words were like a blanket.

“Because he is one,” Naomi said, her consciousness flickering across the line. *It’s why we get along.*



The message came two days later, and without warning. Naomi was in an

EVA suit, inspecting the work with Chief Engineer Sakai. He was in the process of explaining why they were looking at a different ceramic alloy for the connections between inner and outer hull when a priority message popped into her HUD. She felt a rush of fear, the aftermath of her talk with Holden. Something had happened to Alex. Or Amos.

“Hold on,” she said, and Sakai answered with a raised fist.

She started the message. A flat transmission screen popped on with the split circle of the OPA, and when it flickered away, Marco was there. The years had thickened his face a degree, softened the curve of his jaw. His skin had the same richness and depth she remembered, and his hands, folded on the table wherever he’d recorded this, were as delicate. He smiled with the mixture of sorrow and amusement that was like falling backward through time.

The message halted, cut off by the suit’s medical systems. Warnings for increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure. She chinned the override, and his voice stuttered softly into her ears, smoothing as the feed cohered.

“I’m sorry. I know you don’t want to hear from me. If it helps, I’d just point out that I haven’t done it before this. And I’m not doing it lightly now.”

Shut it off, she thought. Stop the feed. Erase it. It would all be lies anyway. Lies or only what parts of the truth served him. Forget it ever came. Marco looked away from the camera as if he’d read her mind, or known what she would be thinking.

“Naomi, I don’t agree with your decision to leave, but I’ve always respected it. Even when you showed up in the news so everyone knew where you were, I didn’t reach out. And I’m not coming to you now for myself.”

The words were all crisp and warm and careful: the flawless grammar of someone speaking a second language so well it sounded uncanny. He had none of his Belter patois. So there was another way the years had changed him.

“Cyn and Karal send their love and respect, but they’re the only ones who know I’m reaching out. And why. They’re on Ceres Station right now, but they can’t stay long. I need you to meet their team there and—No. I’m sorry. That’s wrong. I shouldn’t have put it that way. It’s just that I’m at loose ends. I don’t know what to do, and you’re the only one I can turn to.

It's Filip. He's in trouble."

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Chapter Four: Amos

His throat ached.

Amos swallowed, trying to force the lump away with a mouthful of saliva, but all that got him was a thick new pain like swallowing sand. The *Roci*'s med bay had shot him full of all the booster vaccines and bacterial prophylactics three months ago, right on schedule. He didn't figure he could be sick. But there it was, a spot in the back of his throat that felt like he'd swallowed a golf ball and it got stuck halfway down.

All around him, the citizens and travelers of the Ceres Station Spaceport milled like ants on their hill, their voices making an undifferentiated roar that was just as good as silence. It amused Amos that this metaphor was one that no one on Ceres would actually understand. Himself, he hadn't seen an ant in close on two decades, but the childhood memories of watching them take down a cockroach or clean the carcass of a rat were vivid and sharp. Like the roaches and the rats, ants had learned to live with their human neighbors without much trouble. When the concrete of human cities spread across the globe and half the animals on Earth were on endangered lists, no one had worried about the ants. They were doing fine, thanks, and spilled fast food was just as plentiful and delicious as dead forest animals had once been.

Adapt or die.

If Amos could be said to have a philosophy, it would be that. The concrete replaces the forest. You get in its way, you get paved over. If you can find a way to live in the cracks, you can thrive anywhere. There were always cracks.

The anthill of Ceres bustled around him. There were people at the top of the food chain buying snacks at the kiosks or tickets for the shuttles and

long-flight ships leaving the station. The people in the cracks were there too. A girl no older than ten with long dirty hair and a pink jumpsuit two sizes too small eyed the travelers without staring at them. Waiting for someone to set their luggage or their hand terminal down long enough to be snatched away. She saw Amos looking at her and bolted for a maintenance hatch set low in the wall.

Living in the cracks, but living. Adapting, not dying.

He swallowed again, grimacing at the ache. His hand terminal beeped, and he looked up at the flight board that dominated the station's public space. Bright yellow letters against black, a font designed for legibility over beauty. His long-haul flight to Luna was confirmed for a launch window in three hours. He tapped on his terminal's screen to let the automated system know he'd be on board when it left, and walked off looking for something to kill three hours.

There was a bar by the gate. So that was easy.

He didn't want to get drunk and miss his flight, so he stuck to beer, drinking slowly and methodically and waving at the bartender as he approached the bottom of one glass so that the next was waiting when he finished. He was aiming for fuzzy and relaxed, and he knew exactly how to get there in the shortest possible time.

The bar didn't offer much in the way of entertainments or distractions, so he could focus on the glass, the bartender, the next drink. The lump in his throat thickened with each swallow. He ignored it. The other patrons in the bar were quiet, reading hand terminals or whispering in small groups as they drank. Everyone on the way to somewhere else. This place wasn't a destination; it was something you bumped into in your travels, accidental and forgettable.

Lydia was dead.

He'd spent twenty years thinking about her. The tattoo of her face over his heart was some of that, of course. Every look in a mirror without his shirt on was a reminder. But beyond that, every day had choices in it. And every choice he made started with the little voice in his head asking what Lydia would want him to do. When he'd received the message from Erich, he realized he hadn't seen or spoken to her in over two decades. That meant she was twenty years older than when he'd left. How old had she been then? He could remember the gray in her hair, the lines around her eyes and

mouth. Older than him. But he'd been fifteen, and "older than him" had been a wide space most people fell into.

And now she was dead.

Maybe someone twenty years older than the woman he remembered was old enough to die of natural causes. Maybe she'd died in a hospital, or her own bed, warm and comfortable and surrounded by friends. Maybe she'd had a cat sleeping on her feet. Amos hoped that was true. Because if it wasn't—if it was anything *other* than natural causes—he was going to kill every single person even remotely involved. He examined the idea in his mind, rotating it this way and that, waiting to see if Lydia stopped him. He took another long swallow of beer and burned his throat. He really hoped he wasn't getting sick.

You're not sick, Lydia's voice said in his mind, you're sad. Grieving. The lump in your throat. The hollow space behind your sternum. The empty feeling in your stomach no matter how much beer you put there. That's grief.

"Huh," Amos said out loud.

"Need something, buddy?" the bartender asked with professional disinterest.

"Another," Amos said, pointing at the half-full beer he still had.

You don't process grief well, another voice said. Holden, this time. That was the truth. That's why Amos trusted the captain. When he said something, it was because he believed it. No need to analyze it or figure out what he really meant by it. Even when the captain fucked up, he was acting in good faith. Amos hadn't met many people like that.

The only really strong emotion Amos had felt in longer than he could remember was anger. That was always there, waiting for him. Processing his grief that way was simple and direct. He understood it. The man sitting a few stools away at the bar had the rough, rawboned look of a rock jock. He'd been nursing the same beer for an hour. Every time Amos ordered another, the man shot him a glance that was half annoyance, half envy. Coveting his apparently bottomless credit account. It would be so easy. Say something to him, cutting and loud, put him in a position where backing down embarrassed him in front of everyone. The poor fucker would feel obligated to take the bait, and then Amos would be free to process his grief all over the guy. Some time in stir might even be a nice way to unwind.

That guy didn't kill Lydia, Holden's voice said. *But maybe someone else did*, Amos thought. *And I need to find out.*

"Need to cash out here, amigo," Amos said to the bartender, waving his hand terminal at him. He pointed at the rock jock. "Put that guy's next two on my tab."

The rock jock frowned, looking for the insult, but when he couldn't find it he said, "Thanks, brother."

"Anytime, hermano. You be safe out there."

"Sa sa," the jock said, finishing off his beer and reaching for one of the two Amos had just bought. "Do the same, sabe dui?"



Amos missed his bunk on the *Roci*.

The long-haul transport was named the *Lazy Songbird*, but its birdlike qualities began and ended at the white letters painted on its side. From the outside, it looked like a giant garbage can with a drive cone on one end and a tiny ops deck on the other. From the inside, it looked like the inside of a giant garbage can except that it was divided into twelve decks, fifty people to a deck.

The only privacy to be had was thin curtains in the shower stalls, and people only ever seemed to use the head when uniformed crew members were around.

Ah, Amos thought, *Prison rules*.

He selected a bunk, just a crash couch with a little storage under it and a tiny entertainment screen on the bulkhead next to it, as far from the head and the commissary as possible. He tried to stay out of high traffic areas. The people sharing his space were a family of three on one side, and an ancient crone on the other.

The crone spent the entire flight high on little white pills, staring at the ceiling all day and tossing and sweating through fever dreams all night. Amos introduced himself to her. She offered him some pills. He declined. This ended their association.

The family on the other side was much nicer. Two men in their early thirties and their daughter of about seven. One of the men was a structural

engineer named Rico. The other a stay-at-home dad called Jianguo. The girl's name was Wendy. They eyed Amos with some suspicion when he first claimed the bunk, but he smiled and shook their hands and bought Wendy an ice cream bar from a commissary vending machine and then didn't follow up by being creepy. He knew what men who had too much interest in little kids were like, and so he knew how not to ever be mistaken for one of them.

Rico was traveling to Luna to take one of the new job openings at the Bush orbital shipyards. "Lots of coyos heading downwell. Beaucoup jobs now, everybody trying to grab a ring for themselves. New colonies. New worlds."

"That'll dry up when the rush dies down," Amos said. He was lying back on his couch, half listening to Rico rattle on, half watching a video feed on his wall screen with the sound off.

Rico gave a Belter shrug of the hands and tilted his head toward his daughter, sleeping in her bunk. "For her, sabe? Later is for later. For now I put some yuan aside. School, ring trip, whatever she needs."

"I hear that. Later is later."

"Oh, hey, they're cleaning the head. Gonna grab a shower."

"What's with that, man?" Amos asked. "What's the rumpus?"

Rico cocked his head, like Amos had asked why space was a vacuum. In fairness, Amos knew the answer, but it was interesting to see whether Rico did too. "Long-haul gangs, coyo. Price of flying on the cheap. Sucks to be poor."

"The crew watches for that shit, right? Anyone gets in a tussle, they gas us all, tie up the perps. No fuss, no muss."

"Don't watch the showers. No cameras. If you don't pay when the shakedown comes, that's where they get you. Better to go when crew is around."

"No shit," Amos said, pretending surprise. "Haven't seen the shakedown yet."

"You will, hombre. Watch Jian and Wendy while I'm out, yeah?"

"Both eyes, brother."



Rico was right. After the first rush of the flight, when the initial bustle of people finding bunks, deciding they hated their neighbor, then finding a new one was over, people were mostly settled in. The Belters bunking on Belter decks. The inners on decks split between Earth and Mars. Amos was on a Belter deck, but he seemed to be the only one mixing.

Prison rules for sure.

On the sixth day, a small group of toughs from a deck up came down the lift together and fanned out through the compartment. With fifty people on the deck, it took them a while to hit everyone. Amos pretended to sleep in his crash couch and watched them out of the corner of his eye. It was a basic scam. A tough walked up to a passenger, explained about in-flight insurance policies, then took a credit transfer with a cheap disposable terminal. All the threats were implied. Everyone paid. It was a stupid racket, but simple enough that it worked anyway.

One of the extortionists who looked like he wasn't a day over fourteen headed their direction. Rico started to pull out his hand terminal, but Amos sat up in bed and waved him off. To the junior extortionist he said, "We're all good over here. No one in this corner pays."

The thug stared at him without speaking. Amos smiled back. He didn't particularly want to be gassed and tied up, but if that's how it had to happen, he'd live with it.

"Dead man," the thug said. He put as much macho as he could into it, and Amos respected the commitment. But much scarier people than a skinny pubescent Belter had tried intimidating him. Amos nodded as if considering the threat.

"So there was this one time I got caught in a reactor crawlspace when a coolant pipe blew," he said.

"What?" the kid asked, baffled. Even Rico and Jianguo were looking at Amos like he'd lost his mind. Amos shifted, and the couch's gimbals squeaked as they reoriented.

"See, the coolant is radioactive as fuck. Hits the open air and it vaporizes. Getting it on your skin ain't good for you, but you can survive that. Washes off, mostly. You don't want to breathe it in though. Get a bunch of radioactive particles down in the lungs where you can't get 'em out? Yeah, you pretty much melt from the inside."

The kid glanced over his shoulder, looking for support dealing with the

crazy ranting guy. The rest of team extortion was still busy.

“So,” Amos continued, leaning forward, “I had to get into a maintenance airlock, open an emergency locker, and get a rebreather strapped to my face without breathing any of that shit in.”

“So what? You still—”

“The point of this little tale of woe is that I learned some facts about myself.”

“Yeah?” The situation had gotten weird enough that the kid actually seemed interested in finding out.

“I learned that I can hold my breath for almost two minutes while engaging in stressful physical activity.”

“So—”

“So you need to ask yourself, how much damage can I do to you in two minutes before the knockout gas gets me. Because I’m betting it’s a lot.”

The kid didn’t respond. Rico and Jianguo seemed to be holding their breath. Wendy was staring at Amos with a wide-eyed grin.

“There a problem?” One of the junior thug’s buddies had finally come over to check on him.

“Yeah, he—”

“No problem,” Amos said. “Just explaining to your associate here that this corner of the room doesn’t pay for insurance.”

“Says you?”

“Yeah. Says me.”

The senior thug looked Amos over, sizing him up. They were about the same height, but Amos outweighed him by a solid twenty-five kilos. Amos stood up and spread himself out a little, making the point.

“What crew you run with?” senior thug asked, mistaking him for a rival banger.

“*Rocinante*,” Amos replied.

“Never heard of ’em.”

“Yeah, you have, but context is everything, ain’t it?”

“Might be you fucked up, coyo,” the thug said.

Amos gave an expansive Belter shrug of the hands. “I guess we’ll find out sooner or later.”

“Sooner or later,” the thug agreed, then grabbed his junior partner and headed off to the rest of his crew. When they took the lift to the next deck,

they left junior behind. He openly stared at Amos from across the room, not trying to hide anything.

Amos sighed and grabbed his towel out of his duffel. "Gonna go take a shower."

"You crazy," Jianguo said. "No crew in there. They'll jump you."

"Yep."

"Then why?"

"Because," Amos said, standing up and throwing the towel over his shoulder, "I hate waiting."

As soon as Amos walked toward the head with his prominently displayed towel, junior started talking on his hand terminal. Calling the troops.

The head was five flimsy sheet plastic shower stalls against one bulkhead, and ten vacuum flush toilets against the other. Sinks lined the bulkhead directly across from the door. The open space in the middle had benches for sitting while you waited your turn in the shower or dressed afterward. Not the best space for hand-to-hand. Lots of hard projections to get mashed into, and the benches were a tripping hazard.

Amos tossed his towel onto a sink and leaned against it, arms crossed. He didn't have to wait long. A few minutes after junior had made the call he and five of the thugs from team extortion filed into the room.

"Only six? I'm a little insulted."

"You not a little anything," the oldest one said. The leader then, speaking first. "But big dies too."

"True that. So how does this go? I'm on your turf, so I'll respect the house rules."

The leader laughed. "You funny, man. Dead soon, but funny." He turned to junior thug and said, "Your beef, coyo."

Junior pulled a shiv out of his pocket. No weapons made it into the passenger compartment through security, but this was a jagged piece of metal torn off of something in the ship then sharpened down. Prison rules, again.

"I'm not going to disrespect you," Amos said to him. "I killed my first guy at about your age. Well, a few guys really, but that's not the issue. I know to take you and that knife seriously."

"Good."

“No,” Amos said sadly, “it really isn’t.”

Before anyone could move, Amos crossed the space between them and grabbed junior’s knife arm. The ship was only at about a third of a g thrust, so Amos yanked the kid off the floor and spun, hitting the edge of a shower stall with the kid’s arm. His body kept traveling and Amos didn’t let go, so the arm folded around the impact point. The sound of tendons in his elbow snapping was like hitting wet plywood with a hammer. The knife drifted to the floor from nerveless fingers, and Amos let go of the arm.

There was a long second where the five thugs stared at the knife on the floor at Amos’ feet, and he stared back at them. The emptiness in his belly was gone. The hollow space behind his sternum, gone. His throat had stopped hurting.

“Who’s next?” he said, flexing his hands, his face in a grin he didn’t know he had.

They came in a rush. Amos spread his arms and welcomed them like long-lost lovers.



“You okay?” Rico asked. He was dabbing at a small cut on Amos’ head with an alcohol swab.

“Mostly.”

“They okay?”

“Less so,” Amos said, “but still mostly. Everyone will walk out of there when they wake up.”

“You didn’t have to do that for me. I would have paid.”

“Didn’t,” Amos said. At Rico’s puzzled look he added, “Didn’t do it for you. And Rico? That money goes into the Wendy fund, or I come looking for you too.”

Chapter Five: Holden

One of Holden's grandfathers had spent his youth riding in rodeos. All of the pictures they had of him were of a tall, muscular, robust-looking man with a big belt buckle and a cowboy hat. But the man Holden had known when he was a child was thin, pale, and hunched over. As if the years had stripped away everything extraneous and rendered the younger man down into the skeletal older man he became.

It struck him that Fred Johnson had been rendered.

He was still a tall man, but the heavy muscles he'd once had were mostly gone, leaving loose skin at the backs of his arms and on his neck. His hair had gone from mostly black to mostly gray to mostly not there at all. That he could still project an air of absolute authority meant that very little of it had come from his physicality in the first place.

Fred had two glasses and a bottle of something dark on the desk when Holden sat. He offered a drink with a small tilt of his head, and Holden accepted with a nod. While Fred poured, Holden leaned back in his chair with a long sigh, then said, "Thank you."

Fred shrugged. "I was looking for an excuse."

"Not the drink, but thanks for that too. Thank you for helping with the *Roci*. The money from Avasarala came, but we have damage we didn't know about when I wrote the bill. Without our favored client discount, we'd been in trouble."

"Who says you're getting a discount?" Fred said as he handed Holden the drink, but he smiled as he said it. He sank into his own chair with a grunt. Holden hadn't realized coming in how much he was dreading the conversation. Even if he knew it was just good business negotiation, it felt like asking for a handout. That the answer had been yes was good. That

Fred hadn't made him squirm about it was even better. Made him feel more like he was sitting with a friend.

"You look old, Fred."

"I feel old. But it's better than the alternative."

Holden raised his glass. "Those who aren't with us."

"Those who aren't with us," Fred repeated, and they both drank. "That list is getting longer every time I see you."

"I'm sorry about Bull, but I think he may have saved the solar system. From what I knew of him, he'd think that was pretty kick-ass."

"Bull," Fred said, raising his glass again.

"And Sam," Holden added, raising his own.

"I'm leaving soon, so I wanted to check in with you."

"Wait. Leaving? Like leaving leaving, or like Bull and Sam leaving?"

"You're not rid of me yet. I need to get back out to Medina Station," Fred said. He poured himself a little more bourbon, frowning down at the glass like it was a delicate operation. "That's where all the action is."

"Really? I thought I heard something about the UN secretary-general and the Martian prime minister having a sit-down. I thought you'd be heading to that."

"They can talk all they want. The real power's in the geography. Medina's in the hub where all the rings connect. That's where the power is going to be for a good long time."

"How long do you think the UN and Mars keep letting you run that show? You have a head start, but they have a bunch of really dangerous ships to throw at you if they decide they want your stuff."

"Avasarala and I are back channeling a lot of this. We'll keep it from getting out of hand." Fred paused to take a long drink. "But we have two big problems."

Holden put down the glass. He was starting to get the sense that him asking for—and getting—the discount on repairs might not actually have been the end of the negotiation after all.

"Mars," Holden said.

"Yes, Mars is dying," Fred agreed with a nod. "No stopping that. But we also have a bunch of OPA extremists making noise. The Callisto attack last year was their work. The water riot on Pallas Station. And there have been other things. Piracy's up, and more of those ships have a split circle painted

on them than I'd like."

"I'd think any problems they had would be solved by everyone getting their own free planet."

Fred took another pull of his drink before he answered. "Their position is that the Belter culture is one adapted to space. The prospect of new colonies with air and gravity reduces the economic base that Belters depend on. Forcing everyone to go down a gravity well is the moral equivalent of genocide."

Holden blinked. "Free planets are genocide?"

"They argue that being adapted to low g isn't a disability, it's who they are. They don't want to go live on a planet, so we're killing them off."

"Okay, I can see not wanting to spend six months pumped full of steroids and bone growth stimulators. But how are we killing them?"

"For one thing, not all of them can tolerate that. But that's not really the point. It's that this," Fred said, waving at the space station around them, "is pretty much over once everyone has a planet. For generations, at the minimum. Maybe forever. No reason to dump resources into the outer planets or mining the Belt when we can find the same stuff down a well and get free air and water to boot."

"So once they don't have anything anyone wants, they'll just starve to death out here?"

"That's how they see it," Fred said. He and Holden shared a quiet moment while they drank.

"Yeah," Holden finally said. "Well, they've got a point. But I don't know what they can do about it."

"There are people trying to figure that out. But it's ramping up."

"Callisto and Pallas."

"And more recently they ran an attack on Earth with an old mothballed heavy freighter."

Holden laughed. "I haven't read that Earth got bombed, so that must not have worked."

"Well, it was a suicide attack, and the suicide half worked. The UN fleet in high orbit patrol reduced the freighter to gas a tenth of an AU from the planet. No damage, not much press. But it's possible those were all preliminary. That they're planning some big showy statement about how the Belt can't be ignored. The thing that scares the shit out of me is that no one

can figure out what it will be.”



The gently sloping main corridor of the Tycho Station habitation ring was filled with workers. Holden didn't pay much attention to the station schedules, but he assumed the crowds passing him meant it was shift change. Either that, or an orderly evacuation with no alarms sounding.

“Yo! Holden,” someone said as they passed.

“Hey,” Holden said, not sure who he was saying it to.

Celebrity was not something he'd figured out how to handle, yet. People would point, stare, whisper to each other when he walked by. He knew it generally wasn't intended as insult. Just the surprise people felt when someone they'd only seen on video screens before suddenly appeared in the real world. Most of the murmured conversations, when he could overhear them, consisted of *Is that James Holden? I think that's James Holden.*

“Holden,” a woman walking toward him down the corridor said, “what's up?”

There were fifteen thousand people on Tycho, working in three different shifts. It was like a small city in space. He couldn't remember if the woman speaking to him was someone he should know or not, so he just smiled and said, “Hey, how's it going?”

“Same same,” she said as they passed.

When he reached the door to his apartment it was a relief that the only person inside was Naomi. She sat at the dining table, a steaming mug of tea in front of her, a distant look in her eyes. Holden couldn't tell if she was melancholy or solving a complex engineering problem in her head. Those looks were confusingly similar.

He pulled himself a cup of water out of the kitchen tap, then sat across from her waiting for her to speak first. She looked up through her hair at him and gave him a sad smile. Melancholy, then, not engineering.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

“So I have a thing.”

“Is it a thing I can fix?” Holden asked. “Point me at the thing.”

Naomi sipped at her tea, buying time. Not a good sign, because it meant this was something she wasn't sure how to talk about. Holden felt his stomach muscles tightening.

"That's kind of the problem, actually," she said. "I need to go do something, and I can't have you involved in it. At all. Because if you are, you'll try to fix it and you can't do that."

"I don't understand," Holden said.

"When I come back, I promise full and complete disclosure."

"Wait. Come back? Where are you going?"

"Ceres, to start," Naomi said. "But it may be more than that. I'm not sure how long I'll be gone."

"Naomi," Holden said, reaching across the table to take her hand. "You're scaring the shit out of me right now. There's no way you can jet off to Ceres without me. Especially if it's something bad, and I'm getting the feeling it's something really bad."

Naomi put down her tea, and gripped his hand in both of hers. The fingers that had been holding the mug were warm, the others cool. "Except that is what's happening. There's no negotiation on this. So, either I go because you understand and will give me the space to handle this on my own, or I go because we've broken up and you no longer get any vote in what I do."

"Wait, what?"

"Have we broken up?" Naomi asked. She squeezed his hand.

"No, of course not."

"Then thank you for trusting me enough to let me handle this on my own."

"Is that what I just said?" Holden asked.

"Yeah, pretty much." Naomi stood up. She had a packed duffel on the floor next to her chair that Holden hadn't seen. "I'll be in touch when I can, but if I can't, don't read anything into it. Okay?"

"Okay," Holden replied. The whole scene had taken on a vaguely dreamlike feel. Naomi, standing at the end of the table holding her olive-green duffel bag, seemed very far away. The room felt bigger than it was, or else Holden had shrunk. He stood up too, and vertigo made him dizzy.

Naomi dropped the duffel on the table and wrapped both arms around him. Her chin was against his forehead when she whispered, "I'll be back. I

promise.”

“Okay,” he said again. His brain had lost the ability to form any other words.

After one last tight squeeze, she picked up her bag and walked to the door.

“Wait!” he said.

She looked back.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said, and then was gone.

Holden sat back down, because it was that or sink to the floor. He finally pulled himself out of the chair a minute or an hour later; it was hard to tell. He had almost called Amos to join him for a drink when he remembered Amos and Alex were gone too.

Everyone was.



It was strange how nothing could change while everything did. He still got up every morning, brushed his teeth, put on a fresh set of clothes, and ate breakfast. He arrived at the repair docks by nine a.m. local time, put on a vacuum suit, and joined the crew working on the *Rocinante*. For eight hours he'd climb through the skeletal ribs of the ship, attaching conduit, installing replacement maneuvering thrusters, patching holes. He didn't know how to do everything that needed to be done, but he wanted to, so he shadowed the technicians doing the really complicated work.

It all felt very normal, very routine, almost like still having his old life.

But then he'd return to his apartment eight hours later and no one would be there. He was truly alone for the first time in years. Amos wouldn't come by asking him to hit a bar. Alex wouldn't watch the video streams sitting on his couch and making sarcastic comments to the screen. Naomi wouldn't be there to ask about his day and compare notes on how the repairs were coming. The rooms even smelled empty.

It wasn't something about himself he'd ever had to face before, but Holden was coming to realize how much he needed family. He'd grown up with eight parents, and a seemingly endless supply of grandparents, aunts,

uncles, and cousins. When he'd left Earth for the Navy, he'd spent four years at the academy with roommates and classmates and girlfriends. Even after his dishonorable discharge, he'd gone straight to work for Pur'N'Kleen on the *Canterbury* and a whole new loose-knit family of coworkers and friends. Or if not family, at least *people*.

The only two people he'd been close with on Tycho were Fred, so busy with his political machinations he barely had time to breathe, and Sam, who'd died in the slow zone years ago. The new Sam—Sakai—was a competent engineer and seemed to take fixing his ship seriously, but had expressed no interest in any association outside of that.

So Holden spent a lot of time in bars.

The Blauwe Blome was too noisy and too filled with people who knew Naomi but not him. The places close to the docks were full of boisterous workers coming off shift and picking a fight with a famous guy seemed like a great way to blow off steam. Anyplace else with more than four people in it at a time turned into *line up to have your picture taken with James Holden then ask him personal questions for an hour*. So, he found a small restaurant nestled in a side corridor between a residential section and a strip of commercial shopping outlets. It specialized in what the Belters were calling Italian food and had a small bar in a back room that everyone seemed to ignore.

Holden could sit at a tiny table skimming the latest news on his hand terminal, reading messages, and finally check out all the books he'd downloaded over the last six years. The bar served the same food as the restaurant out front, and while it was not something anyone from Earth would have mistaken for Italian, it was edible. The cocktails were mediocre and cheap.

It might almost have been tolerable if Naomi hadn't seemingly fallen out of the universe. Alex sent regular updates about where he was and what he was up to. Amos had his terminal automatically send a message letting Holden know his flight had landed on Luna, and then New York. From Naomi, nothing. She still existed, or at least her hand terminal did. The messages he sent arrived somewhere. He never got a failed connection from the network. But the successfully received message was his only reply.

After a couple weeks of his new bad Italian food and cheap cocktails routine, his terminal finally rang with an incoming voice request. He knew

it couldn't be from Naomi. The light lag made a live connection unworkable for any two people not living on the same station. But he still pulled the terminal out of his pocket so fast that he fumbled it across the room.

The bartender—Chip—said, “Had a few too many of my margaritas?”

“The first one was too many,” Holden replied, then climbed under the booth looking for the terminal. “And calling that a margarita should be illegal.”

“It's as margarita as it gets with rice wine and lime flavor concentrate,” Chip said, sounding vaguely hurt.

“Hello?” Holden yelled at the terminal, mashing the touch screen to open the connection. “Hello?”

“Hi, Jim?” a female voice said. It didn't sound anything like Naomi.

“Who is this?” he asked, then cracked his head on the edge of the table climbing back out and added, “Dammit!”

“Monica,” the voice on the other end said. “Monica Stuart? Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Sort of busy right now, Monica,” Holden said. Chip rolled his eyes. Holden flipped him off, and the bartender started mixing him another drink. Probably as punishment for the insult.

“I understand,” Monica said. “But I have something I'd love to run past you. Is there any chance we can get together? Dinner, a drink, anything?”

“I'm afraid I'm on Tycho Station for the foreseeable future, Monica. The *Roci* is getting a full refit right now. So—”

“Oh, I know. I'm on Tycho too. That's why I called.”

“Right,” Holden said. “Of course you are.”

“Is tonight good?”

Chip put the drink on a tray, and a waiter from the restaurant out front popped in to carry it away. Chip saw him looking at it and mouthed *Want another?* at him. The prospect of another night of what the restaurant laughably called lasagna and enough of Chip's “margaritas” to kill the aftertaste felt like slow death.

The truth was, he was bored and lonely. Monica Stuart was a journalist and had serious problems about only showing up when she wanted something. She always had an ulterior motive. But finding out what she wanted and then saying no would kill an evening in a way that wasn't

exactly like every other evening since Naomi left. “Yeah, okay Monica, dinner sounds great. Not Italian.”



They ate salmon sushi from fish grown in tanks on the station. It was outrageously expensive, but being paid for by Monica’s expense account. Holden indulged himself until his clothes stopped fitting.

Monica ate sparingly, with small precise movements of her chopsticks, almost picking up the rice one kernel at a time. She ignored the wasabi altogether. She’d aged some too, since Holden had last seen her in person. Unlike Fred, the extra years looked good on her, adding a sense of experience and gravitas to her video-star looks.

They’d started the evening talking about little things: how the ship repairs were going, what had happened to the team she’d taken on the *Rocinante* back when the Ring was a new thing, where Alex and Amos and Naomi had gone. He’d found himself talking more than he meant to. He didn’t dislike Monica, but she wasn’t someone he particularly trusted either. But she knew him, and they’d traveled together, and even more than good food, he was hungry to talk to someone he actually sort of knew.

“So there’s this weird thing,” she said, then dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin.

“Weirder than eating raw fish on a space station with one of the solar system’s most famous reporters?”

“You’re flattering me.”

“It’s habit. I don’t mean anything by it.”

Monica rooted around in the satchel she’d brought and pulled out a flimsy roll-out video screen. She pushed plates out of the way and flattened the screen out on the table. When it came on, it showed the image of a heavy freighter, blocky and thick, heading toward one of the rings inside the slow zone. “Watch this.”

The picture sprang into motion, the freighter burning toward a ring gate at low thrust. He assumed it was the one that led from the solar system to the slow zone and Medina Station, but it could have been any of the others. They all looked pretty much the same. When the ship passed through the

gate, the image flickered and danced as the recording equipment was bombarded with high-energy particles and magnetic flux. The image stabilized, and the ship was no longer visible. That didn't mean much. Light passing through the gates had always behaved oddly, bending the images like refraction in water. The video ended.

"I've seen that one before," Holden said. "Good special effects but the plot's thin."

"Actually you kind of haven't. Guess what happened to that ship?" Monica said, face flushed with excitement.

"What?"

"No, really, guess. Speculate. Give me a hypothesis. Because it never came out the other side."

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Chapter Six: Alex

Hey, Bobbie,” Alex said to his hand terminal’s camera. “I’m gonna be downstairs in Mariner for a week or two, stayin’ with a cousin. I was wondering if you wanted to get lunch while I’m in town.”

He ended the message and sent it, put his hand terminal back in his pocket, fidgeted, took it out again. He started paging back through his contacts, looking for another distraction. With every minute, he came closer to the thin exosphere of home. They were already inside the orbit of Phobos and the now invisibly thin scatter of gravel that people called the Deimos Ring. The drop ship didn’t have screens, but from here he’d have been able to see the massive steel of Hecate Base spilling up the side of Olympus Mons. He’d been a boot there after he joined the Navy.

Mariner Valley had been one of the first large-scale settlements on Mars. Five linked neighborhoods that burrowed into the sides of the vast canyons, huddling under the stone and regolith. The network of bridges and tubes that linked them were called Haizhe because the westernmost bridge structures and the trailing tubes made a figure like a cartoon jellyfish. The later high-speed line to Londres Nova was a spear in the jellyfish’s crown.

Three waves of Chinese and Indian colonists dug deep into the dry soil there, eking out a thin, perilous existence, pushing the limits of human habitation and ability. His family had been one of them. He’d been an only child to older parents. He had no nieces or nephews, but the variety of Kamal cousins in the Valley were enough that he could go from one guest room to another for months without wearing out his welcome at any one of them.

The drop ship shuddered, the atmosphere outside thick enough now to cause turbulence. The acceleration alarm chimed pleasantly and a recorded

voice instructed him and the other passengers to check the straps on their gel couches and put any objects more than two kilos into the lockers set into the wall at their sides. The braking burn would commence in thirty seconds, and reach a maximum burn of three gs. The automated concern made that sound like a lot, but he supposed some folks would be impressed.

He put his hand terminal in the locker, cycled it closed, and waited for the braking rockets to push him back into his couch. In one of the other compartments, a baby was crying. The countdown tones began, a music of converging intervals distinguishable in any language. When the tones resolved into a gentle and reassuring chord, the burn kicked in, pressing him into the gel. He dozed as the ship rattled and shook. The atmosphere of Mars wasn't thick enough to use it for aerobraking on their steep descent path, but it could still generate a lot of heat. Half-awake, he ran through the math of landing, the numbers growing more and more surreal as the light sleep washed over him. If something had gone wrong—a change in the burn, an impact shudder passing through the ship, a shift in the couch's gimbals—he'd have been awake and alert in an instant. But nothing happened, so nothing happened. As homecomings went, it wasn't bad.

The port proper was at the base of the valley. Six and a half kilometers of stone rose up from the pads, the strip of sky above them hardly more than thirty degrees from rim to rim. The processing station was one of the oldest buildings in Mariner, its massive clear dome built with the dual purposes of blocking radiation and providing a view that would impress with its scale. The canyons ran to the east, rugged and craggy and beautiful. Lights glittered from the canyon's sides where the neighborhoods impinged out from the rock, the homes of the insanely wealthy trading the safety of deep stone for the status of an actual exterior window. A transport flier passed, hugging low to the ground where the relatively thick air gave its gossamer wings a little more purchase.

Once upon a time, the data said, Mars had been the home of its own biosphere. Rain had fallen here. Rivers had flowed. Not, perhaps, in the geologic eyeblink of human history, but once. And would, the terraformers promised, again. Not in their lifetimes or their children's, but one day. Alex waited in the customs queue, looking up. The pull of the planet, only about one-third g, felt strange. No matter what the math said, thrust gravity felt different than being down a well. Between the magnificence of the canyons

and the eeriness of his weight, Alex felt the anxiety growing in his chest.

He was here. He was home.

The man processing the arriving travelers wore a thick mustache, white with a tinge of red. His eyes were bloodshot and his expression glum.

“Business or pleasure?”

“Neither one,” Alex drawled, “I’m here to see the ex-wife.”

The man gave a quick smile. “That going to be a business meeting, or pleasure?”

“Let’s call it not-business,” Alex said.

The processor stroked the screen of his terminal, nodded toward the camera. As the system confirmed that he was who he claimed to be, Alex wondered why he’d said that. He hadn’t said that Tali was a shrew, he hadn’t insulted her, but he’d leaned on the assumption for a quick joke. He felt like she deserved better from him. Probably she did.

“Joy your stay,” the processing man said, and Alex was free to enter the world he’d left.

His cousin Min stood in the waiting area. She was ten years younger than him, the last vestiges of youth falling from her and the first comfortable heft of middle age creeping in. Her smile belonged to a little girl he’d known once.

“Hey there, podner,” she said, the Mariner drawl probably half a degree thicker than it normally was. “What brings you round these parts?”

“More sentiment than sense,” Alex said, opening his arms. They embraced for a moment.

“You got any luggage?” Min asked.

“Traveling light.”

“Fair enough. I’ve got a cart down at the front.”

Alex hoisted an eyebrow. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“They’re cheaper than they used to be. The kids aren’t back from lower U for another four hours. You got anything you want to do before we’ve got them underfoot?”

“The only two things I’ve been looking forward to were seeing people and a bowl of Hassan’s noodles.”

The look of embarrassment passed over Min’s face and vanished again in an eyeblink. “There’s a great noodle shop over on the south face. Garlic sauce that’ll knock you sideways. But Hassan packed it in about four years

ago.”

“Ah. No, it’s all right. The thing about Hassan’s wasn’t that they were good.”

“Well, now that’s truth.”

“It’s just that they were his.”

The cart was a common electric, wider and tougher than the ones they used on stations. The tires were clear polymer that wouldn’t streak the floors of the corridors. Alex slid into the passenger’s seat, Min taking the controls. They talked about small, domestic things—who in the family was getting married, who was getting divorced, who was moving and where. A surprising number of Min’s siblings were on ships headed for the Ring, and though she didn’t say it outright, he had the sense that she was more interested in hearing about what he’d seen on the other side of it than in him.

They passed down a long access tunnel and then across one of the linking bridges to Bunker Hill. It was the neighborhood where Alex had grown up. His father’s ashes were in the crypt at the synagogue, his mother’s had been scattered over the Ophir Chasmata. The first girl he’d ever kissed had lived in rooms two corridors down from the place Min’s family was in now. His best friend growing up had been an ethnic Chinese boy named Johnny Zhou who’d lived with an older brother and sister on the other side of the canyon.

Driving along the corridors now, the memories flooded him. The curve of the corridor where the Lone Star Sharabaghar had held weekend dance and drinking contests. The time when he was nine that he’d been caught stealing gum from the bodega at the corner of Dallas corridor and Nu Ren Jie. Getting violently sick in the bathrooms at the Alamo Mall Toll Plaza. A thousand things like them probably happened every day. The only thing that made Alex’s experiences different at all was that they were his.

He didn’t recognize for a while what was making him uncomfortable. Like the difference between thrust and planetary gravity, the emptiness of the corridors was almost too subtle to notice at first. Even as Min drove deeper into the neighborhood, it was the lights he noticed, and then the locks. All along the corridors, scattered like a handful of thrown sand, rooms and businesses were closed, the windows dark. That in itself didn’t mean much, but Alex noticed first one, then a few, then—like flowers in a

meadow—a sudden spread of the clunky external locks that landlords and security put on doors when the units weren’t in use. He kept up his end of the banter with his cousin, but he started counting as they drove. In the next hundred doors—homes, businesses, maintenance closets, schools—twenty-one weren’t in use.

As Min pulled the cart to a halt at her own doorway, he mentioned it. “Yup,” she said with a lightness that seemed forced. “Ghost world.”



Somewhere in the years he’d been gone, Talissa had moved. The old rooms they’d had together were in Ballard, tucked in between the naval station and the old water processing plant. According to the local directories, she was in Galveston Shallow now. It wasn’t the neighborhood he’d imagined for her, but things changed. Maybe she’d come into money. He hoped so. Anything that had made her life better, he was in favor of.

The corridors of Galveston Shallow were wide. Half the light came down shafts from the surface, the actual light of the sun strung through a series of transparent shielding to keep the radiation to a minimum. The wide, sloping ceilings gave the place a sense of being natural, almost organic, and the smell of the mechanical air recyclers was nearly hidden by the rich, loamy scents of growing plants. Wide swaths of greenery filled the common areas with devil’s ivy and snake plant. The sorts of things that cranked out a lot of oxygen. The moisture in the air was strange and soothing. This, Alex realized, was the dream of Mars made real, if small. The terraforming project would make the whole planet like this someday, if it worked. Flora and fauna and air and water. Someday, centuries after he was gone, people might walk on the surface of Mars, surrounded by plants like these. Might feel the real sun against their skins.

He was distracting himself. He checked his position on his hand terminal against Tali’s new address. His heart was going faster than usual and he wasn’t sure what to do with his hands. He wondered what she’d say, how she’d look at him. Anger or joy would both be justified. Still, he hoped for joy.

His plan—find the place, gather himself, and ring the bell—failed

because as soon as he turned the last curve to her rooms, he saw her. She was kneeling in among the plants in the common space, a trowel in one hand. She wore thick canvas work pants smeared with soil and a pale brown shirt with a wealth of pockets and loops for gardener's tools, most of them empty. Her hair was a rich brown, so free of gray it had to be dyed. Her face was wider, thicker at the cheeks. Time had been kind to her. She wasn't beautiful. Maybe she'd never been beautiful, but she was handsome and she was Talissa.

Alex felt a smile twitch at his lips, born more from anxiety than pleasure. He pushed his hands into his pockets and ambled over, trying to seem casual. Tali looked up from her work, then down. Her shoulders tensed and she looked up again, staring in his direction. He lifted a hand, palm out.

"Alex?" she said as he reached the edge of the garden space.

"Hey, Tali," he said.

When she spoke, the only thing in her voice was a flat disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

"I had some downtime while my ship's getting fixed up. Thought I'd come back to the old stompin' ground. Touch base with folks. You know."

Talissa nodded, her mouth taking the uneven curl that meant she was thinking hard. Maybe he should have reached out with a message before he came. Only it had seemed to him this was a meeting that should be face-to-face.

"Well," she said. "All right."

"I don't want to interrupt. But, maybe when you're done, I could buy you a cup of tea?"

Tali rolled back onto her heels and tilted her head. "Alex, stop it. What are you doing here?"

"Nothing," he said.

"No. Something. You're here for something."

"Really, I'm not. I just—"

"Don't," she said, conversationally. "Don't bullshit me. No one just shows up at their ex-wife's house out of the blue because they thought a cup of tea sounded nice."

"Well, all right," Alex said. "But I thought..."

Tali shook her head and turned back to digging through the black soil.

“Thought what? That we’d get a drink together, talk about old times, get a little maudlin? Maybe fall into bed for nostalgia’s sake?”

“What? No. I’m not—”

“Please don’t make me be the bad guy here. I have a rich, full, complex life that you *chose* not to be a part of. I have a lot on my plate just now that I don’t actually want to share with you, and comforting the guy who walked out on me umpteen years ago because he’s... I don’t know, having his midlife crisis? It’s not my priority, and it’s not something that’s fair to expect of me.”

“Oh,” Alex said. His belly felt like he’d swallowed a tungsten slug. His face felt flushed. She sighed, looking up at him. Her expression wasn’t cruel. Wasn’t even unkind. Tired, maybe.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We’re a couple people who used to know each other. At this point, we’re maybe even a little less than that.”

“I understand. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t put you in this position. You put me in it. I was just working with my plants.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to discomfort you. Not now, and not before.”

“Not before? Before, when you walked out on me?”

“It wasn’t what I meant to have happen, and it wasn’t about you or—”

She shook her head sharply, grimacing as she did.

“No. Not going to do this. Alex? We’re talking about the past. That’s the conversation I *just said* I don’t want to have. All right?”

“All right.”

“Okay.”

“Sorry if things are... rough.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said.

He lifted his hand again, the same gesture he’d made walking up to her, but with a different meaning now. He turned. He walked away. The humiliation was like a weight on his chest. The urge to turn back, to have one last look in case maybe she was looking at him was almost too much to resist.

He resisted it.

She was right. It was why he’d appeared on her doorstep without warning. Because he’d known that if she said no, he had to respect that, and somewhere in the back of his mind, he’d thought that if they were there,

breathing the same air, it would be harder for her to turn him away. And maybe it had been. Maybe what he'd done was actually make it worse for her.

The first bar he came to was named Los Compadres, and the air inside it smelled of hops and overheated cheese. The man behind the bar looked barely old enough to drink, his sallow skin set off by ruddy hair and a mustache that could generously be called aspirational. Alex took a high stool and ordered a whiskey.

"Little early in the day for celebration," the barkeep said as he poured. "What's the occasion?"

"It turns out," Alex said, exaggerating his Mariner Valley drawl just a little for the effect, "that sometimes I'm an asshole."

"Hard truth."

"It is."

"You expect drinking alone to improve that?"

"Nope. Just observing the traditions of alienated masculine pain."

"Fair enough," the barkeep said. "Want some food with it?"

"I'd look at a menu."

Half an hour later, he was only halfway through the drink. The bar was starting to fill up, which meant maybe twenty people in a space that would have taken seventy. Ranchero music played from hidden speakers. The thought of going back to his cousin's and pretending to be cheerful was only a half a degree worse than continuing to sit in the bar, waiting for his self-pity to fade. He kept trying to think about what he could have said or done differently that would have made any difference. So far the best he'd come up with was *Don't walk out on your wife*, which was about the same as saying *Be someone else*.

His hand terminal buzzed. He pulled it up. A written message tagged from Bobbie Draper.

HEY, ALEX. SORRY IT TOOK SO LONG TO GET BACK TO YOU. THINGS ARE WEIRDLY BUSY. YES, IF YOU'RE IN TOWN, I'D LIKE TO MEET WITH YOU. MAY HAVE A FAVOR TO ASK, IF YOU'RE UP FOR IT. SWING BY ANYTIME.

Her address was in Londres Nova. Alex tapped it, and the screen shifted to a map. He wasn't far from the express tube. He could be out there by supper. He touched the bar top with his hand terminal, paid for the drink,

and stretched. In the corridor, a cart had broken down, and half a dozen maintenance workers were clumped around it. A woman with skin the color of milk walking past did a subtle double take when Alex nodded. Wondering, he guessed, whether he was the pilot for James Holden. He walked on before she could ask the question.

Yeah. It would be good to see Bobbie.

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Chapter Seven: Amos

The spaceport had been built a kilometer outside Lovell City a century before. Now, it was the geographical heart of Luna's largest metropolis, though you wouldn't have been able to tell that from space. Luna boasted very few actual domes. The constant rain of micro-meteors turned a dome into a randomly firing atmosphere ejection port. So as the shuttle descended, the only visible signs of the city were the occasional surface access points and the spaceport itself. The docks weren't the originals, but they were still damned old. The decking had all been white once. Gray pathways marked where years of boots and carts had worn down tracks. The union office looked down over the long hall through pockmarked windows, and the air had the gunpowder stink of lunar dust.

The extortion boys showed up at the disembarking area in force to stare Amos down as he left the ship. He smiled and waved and kept Rico, Jianguo, and Wendy close to him until they were out of the long flight terminal.

"Hermano," Rico said, shaking hands with Amos. "Where you headed to now?"

"Down the well," Amos said. "You fellas take care of that little girl, right? And good luck with the new jobs."

Jianguo hugged Wendy close. "We will. Xie xie usted ha hecho."

Rico and Jianguo stared at him like they expected something else, but Amos had nothing left to say so he turned and walked away toward the terminal for planetary drops. The waiting area was housed in a large false dome designed to impress the tourists. The whole thing was underground, but the massive chamber was covered floor to ceiling with ultra-high-definition video screens showing the outside view. The hills and craters of

the lunar surface stretched off in all directions, but it was the blue-and-green half-circle hanging in the sky that drew the most attention. It was beautiful at this distance. The cities nothing but firefly twinkles on the dark side. Where the sun struck the Earth, almost nothing man had made was visible from the lunar orbit. The planet looked clean, unspoiled.

It was a pretty lie.

Seemed like a fact of the universe that the closer you got to anything, the worse it looked. Take the most beautiful person in the solar system, zoom in on them at the right magnification and they were an apocalyptic cratered landscape crawling with horrors. That's what the Earth was. A shining jewel from space, up close a blasted landscape covered with mites living by devouring the dying.

"One ticket to New York," he said to the automated kiosk.



The drop to Earth was short enough that no one tried to run an extortion racket on him, so that was nice. The flight itself was bumpy and nauseating, so that was less nice. One thing about space: it might be a big radiation-filled vacuum that'd kill you in a heartbeat if you weren't paying attention, but at least it never had turbulence. There weren't any windows on the shuttle, but the front of the cabin had a big viewscreen showing the descent through the forward external cameras. New York grew from a gray smudge to a visible cityscape. The spaceport on the artificial land mass south of Staten Island went from a silver postage stamp to a vast network of landing pads and launching rails surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean just past the entrance to Lower New York Bay. Tiny toy ships of suitable size for bobbing in a child's bath grew into the vast solar-powered cargo ships that crawled back and forth across the oceans. Everything visible on the descent was clean and technologically sleek.

That was a lie too.

By the time the shuttle landed he was ready to get into the grunge of the city if only to see something that was honest about itself. When he stood up in the full gravity of Earth to walk off the shuttle, he wanted it to feel wrong, oppressive after all his years away. But the truth was that something

deep in him, maybe down at the genetic level, rejoiced. His ancestors had spent a few billion years building all their internal structures around the constant of one g downward pull, and his organism breathed a sigh of relief at the amazing *rightness* of it.

“Thank you for flying with us,” a pleasantly nondescript face said from the video screen next to the exit. The voice was carefully crafted to have no specific regional dialect or obvious gender markers. “We hope to see you again soon.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Amos said to the screen with a smile.

“Thank you, sir,” the face replied, actually seeming to look him in the eye. “TransWorld Interplanetary takes your comments and suggestions seriously.”

A short tube ride from the landing pad to the spaceport visitors center later and he was in the customs line to enter New York City and officially walk on Earth soil for the first time in twenty-some years. The visitor center stank of too many bodies pressed too tightly together. But under it there was a faint, not-unpleasant odor of rotting seaweed and salt. The ocean, just outside, seeped into everything. An olfactory reminder to everyone passing through the Ellis Island of the space age that Earth was absolutely unique to the human race. The birthplace of everything. The salt water flowing in everyone’s veins first pulled from the same oceans right outside the building. The seas had been around longer than humans, had helped create them, and then when they were all dead, it’d take their water back without a thought.

That, at least, wasn’t a lie.

“Citizenship, guild, or union docs,” the bored-looking man at the customs kiosk said. It appeared to be the only job left in the building not done by a robot. Computers, it seemed, could be programmed to do almost anything but sense when someone was up to no good. Amos had no doubt a full body scanner was looking him over, measuring his heart rate, his skin moisture levels, his respiration. But all of those things could be faked with drugs or training. The human behind the counter would be looking to see if he just *seemed* wrong.

Amos smiled at him. “Sure,” he said, then pulled up his UN citizenship records on his hand terminal and the customs officer’s computer grabbed them and compared them to the database. The officer read his screen, his

face betraying nothing. Amos hadn't been home in almost three decades. He waited to be directed off to the additional security line for a more thorough search. It wouldn't be the first unfamiliar finger up his ass.

"Okay," the customs officer said. "Have a good one."

"You do the same," Amos replied, not able to fully keep the surprise off his face. The customs guy waved an impatient hand at him, telling him to move along. The person waiting behind him in line cleared their throat loudly.

Amos shrugged and moved across the yellow line that legally separated Earth from the rest of the universe.

"Amos Burton?" someone said. An older woman in an inexpensive gray suit. It was the sort of thing mid-level bureaucrats and cops wore, so he wasn't surprised when the next thing she said was, "You need to come with us now."

Amos smiled at her and considered his options. Half a dozen other cops were converging on him in the tactical body armor high-risk entry teams wore. Three of them had tasers out, the other three semiautomatic handguns. Well, at least they were taking him seriously. That was sort of flattering.

Amos raised his hands over his head. "You got me, Sheriff. What are the charges?"

The plainclothes officer didn't respond, and two members of the tactical team pulled his hands behind his back and cuffed him.

"I'm wondering," Amos said, "because I just got here. Any crimes I'm going to commit are theoretical at this point."

"Shush now," the woman said. "You're not under arrest. We're going to take a ride."

"And if I don't want to?"

"Then you'll be under arrest."



The port authority police station was pretty much exactly like every other police station Amos had ever spent time in. Sometimes the walls were industrial taupe; sometimes they were government green. But the concrete

walls and glass-fronted offices looking out over a crowded bull pen of desks would have been just as comfortable on Ceres as it was on Earth. Even the burnt-coffee smell was the same.

The plainclothes cop took him past the desk sergeant with a nod and deposited him in a small room that didn't look like the interrogation rooms he was used to. Other than a table and four chairs, the only other furnishing was a massive video screen covering most of one wall. Plainclothes sat him in a chair across from it, then left the room, closing the door behind her.

"Huh," Amos said, wondering if this was some new interrogation technique in the cop playbook. He leaned back in the chair to get comfortable, maybe try to catch some shut-eye after the nauseating shuttle ride.

"What is this? Nap time? Someone wake him the fuck up," a familiar voice said.

Chrisjen Avasarala was on the screen, looking down on him, her face four times its real size on the giant monitor.

"Either I'm not in any trouble, or I'm in all of it," Amos said with a grin. "How you doin', Chrissie?"

"Good to see you too. Call me that again and I'll have an officer beat you gently with a cattle prod," Avasarala replied, though Amos thought he caught a hint of a smile on her face.

"Sure thing, Madam Uber Secretary. This a social call, or...?"

"Why," Avasarala said, all traces of humor gone, "are you on Earth?"

"Came to pay respects to a friend who died. Did I forget to file a form or something?"

"Who? Who died?"

"None of your fucking business," Amos said with a false amiability.

"Holden didn't send you?"

"Nope," Amos replied, feeling the anger start to warm his belly like a slug of good scotch. He tested the restraints, calculating his odds of getting out of them. Of fighting his way past a room full of cops. It made him smile without realizing it.

"If you're here for Murtry, he isn't on Earth right now," Avasarala said. "He claims you beat him half to death in the *Rocinante's* airlock during the flight back. Do you mean to finish the job?"

"Murtry swung first, so technically, that was self-defense. And if I'd

wanted him dead, don't you think he'd be dead? It's not like I quit hitting him because I was tired."

"So what, then? If you have a message for me from Holden just spit it out. If Holden is sending messages to someone else, tell me who and what they are right now."

"Holden didn't send me to do shit," Amos said. "Am I repeating myself? I feel like I'm repeating myself."

"He—" Avasarala started, but Amos cut her off.

"He's the captain of the ship I sail on, he ain't the boss of my fucking life. I've got personal shit to do, and I came here to do it. Now either book me for something or let me go."

Amos hadn't realized Avasarala was leaning forward in her chair until she relaxed back into it. She let out a long breath that turned into a sigh. "You're fucking serious, aren't you?"

"Not known for my comic stylings."

"All right. But you understand my concern."

"That Holden is up to something? Have you met that guy? He's never done anything secretly in his life."

Avasarala laughed at that. "True. But if he's sending his hired killer to Earth, we—"

"Wait, what?"

"If Holden was—"

"Forget Holden. You called me his hired killer. Is that how you guys think of me? The killer on Holden's payroll?"

Avasarala frowned. "You're not?"

"Well, mostly I'm a mechanic. But the idea that the UN has a file on me somewhere that lists me as the *Rocinante's* killer? That's kind of awesome."

"You say that kind of thing, it doesn't make me think we're wrong, you know."

"So," Amos said, shrugging with his shoulders like an Earther, his hands still behind his back, "we done here?"

"Mostly," Avasarala said. "How was everyone when you left? Good?"

"*Roci* got beat to shit during the Ilus thing. But crew's good. Alex is trying to reconnect with an ex. Captain and Naomi are still rubbing uglies pretty regular. Same same, mostly."

"Alex is on Mars?"

“Well, his ex is. I assume he’d head over there, but he was still on Tycho last I saw him.”

“That’s interesting,” Avasarala said. “Not the part where he’s reconnecting with his ex-wife, though. No one ever tries that without seeming like an asshole.”

“Right?”

“Well,” Avasarala said, then looked up at someone offscreen. She smiled and accepted a steaming cup from a disembodied hand, then took a long sip and sighed with pleasure. “Thank you for meeting with me, Mr. Burton.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure.”

“Please keep in mind that my name is pretty closely connected with the *Rocinante*, Captain Holden, and his crew at this point.”

“So?” Amos said with another shrug.

“So,” Avasarala said, then put her steaming cup down and leaned forward again. “If you’re about to do something I’ll need to cover up later, I’d appreciate a call first.”

“You got it, Chrissie.”

“Honestly. Fucking stop that,” she said with a smile.

The screen went black, and the woman who’d stopped him at the port came in. Amos pointed to the screen with his chin.

“I think she likes me.”



The street level view of New York wasn’t all that different from the Baltimore streets he’d grown up on. Lots of tall buildings, lots of automated street traffic, lots of people stratified into two distinct groups: those who had someplace to be, and those who didn’t. The employed scuttled from public transit to office buildings and back again at shift change. They bought things from street vendors, the simple fact of having currency a mark of status. Those on basic drifted and bartered, living on the excess created by the productive, and adding to it where they could with under-the-table industry too small for the government to notice.

Drifting among them like ghosts, invisible to anyone not from their world, was a third group. The ones who lived in the cracks. Thieves looking

for an easy score. Pushers and con artists and prostitutes of every age group, every point on the spectrum of gender and sexual orientation. The kind of people Amos had once been. A corner pusher saw him looking and frowned back, seeing Amos for what he was without recognizing him. It didn't matter. He wouldn't be in town long enough for it to get to anyone who'd come demanding to know where he fit in their ecosystem.

After walking for a couple hours, getting used to the feel of the gravity and concrete beneath his feet, Amos stopped at a hotel he picked at random and checked in. One thing about him had changed, and that was money. Shipping with the *Rocinante*, for all its dangers and drama, had turned out to be a profitable gig. With the shares he'd cashed out, Amos didn't have to worry about how much the hotel would cost; he just asked for a room and told his terminal to pay for anything the hotel charged him.

In his room, he took a long shower. Lydia's face stared back at him from the bathroom mirror as he brushed his teeth and shaved off the short stubble growing on his head. Getting clean had the feeling of ritual. Like preparations made by a holy man before performing some sacred rite.

When he was done, he sat down nude in the middle of the room's large bed and looked up Lydia's obituary.

LYDIA MAALOUF ALLEN, PASSED AWAY WEDNESDAY, APRIL 14TH AT...

Allen. Amos didn't know that name. As an alias it wasn't a very good one, since Lydia Maalouf was the name he'd always known her by. Not an alias then. A married name? That was interesting.

SHE IS SURVIVED BY HER HUSBAND OF ELEVEN YEARS, CHARLES JACOB ALLEN...

Over a decade after he'd left, Lydia had married a man named Charles. Amos probed at that idea, like poking a finger into a wound to see if it was infected. To see if it hurt. The only reaction he found was curiosity.

SHE PASSED QUIETLY IN HER PHILADELPHIA HOME, WITH CHARLES AT HER SIDE...

Charles was the last one to see her alive, so he was the first one Amos needed to find. After reading the rest of the obituary several times, he logged on to the public mass transit site and booked a ticket for that night on the high-speed rail to Philadelphia. Then he lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. He was oddly excited by the idea of meeting Lydia's

husband. As if her family was his, and Charles was a person he should always have known, but was only now getting to meet. Sleep eluded him, but the soft bed relaxed the muscles tightening in his back, and the last of the nausea from the shuttle ride faded. The path ahead was clear.

If Lydia had, indeed, died quietly in her own bed with a loving husband at her side, then he would meet this man. See the home she'd lived in. Put flowers on her grave and say his last goodbye. If not, he'd kill some people. Neither possibility excited him more than the other. Either one was fine.

He slept.

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Chapter Eight: Holden

Holden ran the video back and watched it again. The ship, an ugly box of metal with additional storage containers strapped to its flanks, made him think of the supply-laden covered wagons in old westerns. It wasn't far from the truth. The *Rabia Balkhi*, registered to Captain Eric Khan out of Pallas, was still just goods and people heading into the frontier to stake a claim. Fewer horses, maybe, but more fusion reactors.

Again, the ship passed through the gate, the image wiggled and jumped, the *Balkhi* was gone.

"So?" Monica asked, her voice rich with anticipation. "What do you think?"

He scratched his arm, deciding what the answer was.

"There are a million reasons an old rust bucket like that might disappear out there," he said. "Loss of core containment, loss of atmospheric pressure, run into debris. Hell, the radio might have just gone out and they're living comfortably on a new planet and hoping someone will drop by to check on them."

"Maybe," Monica said with a nod. "If there was only one. But four hundred thirty-seven ships have passed through the rings into new solar systems over the last year. And of them, thirteen have just vanished. Poof." She spread her fingers out like a tiny explosion. Holden did the math in his head. That was something like a three percent rate of loss. Back when he'd been in the Navy, the budgets had assumed about half of a percent loss to mechanical failure, asteroid impacts, sabotage, and enemy action. This was six times that.

"Huh," he said. "That seems pretty high for ships that were able to fly the year and a half to get to the Ring."

“Agreed. Way too high. If ships blew up without explanation that regularly, no one would ever fly.”

“So,” Holden said, then paused to order another drink from the table menu. He had a feeling he’d need it. “Why isn’t anyone talking about it? Who’s keeping track of them?”

“No one!” Monica said triumphantly. “That’s the whole thing. No one is tracking them. We have thousands of ships leaving the inner system and streaming toward the gates. They belong to citizens of three different governments, and some who don’t think of themselves as citizens of *any* government. Most of these people never even filed a flight plan, they just threw their suitcases in a rock hopper and blasted off for the new worlds.”

“Real estate grabs are like that, I guess.”

“So here they are, heading off alone or in handfuls, and all of them with the incentive to get wherever it is first. Only something’s stopping them. Disappearing them. Or, some of them anyway.”

“Clearly,” Holden said, “you have a theory.”

“I think it’s the protomolecule.”

Holden sighed and rubbed his face with both hands. His drink arrived, and he sipped at it for a minute. The cold of the ice and the bite of the gin filled his mouth. Monica stared at him, practically bouncing with impatience. He said, “No, it’s not. The protomolecule is gone. It’s dead. I fired the last processing node into a star.”

“How do you know that? Even if it was the last of the ring-building weapon, we know whoever made all this did it with protomolecule tools. And what else can it be? I’ve read the reports. All those robots and things that woke up on Ilus? The protomolecule attacks us for taking its stuff.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Holden said. “That’s not what happened. Without knowing it, I’d brought a node of the original infection with me that was still trying to connect with whatever sent it out in the first place. It woke a lot of stuff up in the process. We shut it down, and, you know, shot it into a star to avoid that happening again.”

“How can you be sure?”

At the sushi bar, one of the chefs barked out an announcement, and half a dozen people around him applauded. Holden took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through his teeth.

“I guess I can’t be. How do you prove a negative?”

“I know a way that maybe you can,” Monica said. The look on her face made Holden think whatever she was about to say next was the entire reason for their conversation. It felt a little like watching a hunting cat track a steak. “Fred Johnson still has what may be the only remaining sample of the protomolecule. The one you took off the secret Mao-Kwikowski ship.”

“The one I... Hey, how do you know that?” Holden said. “And how many other people know that?”

“I don’t disclose sources, but I think we should get it and see if we can wake it up. Get your ghost Miller to come back and find out if the protomolecule is using the gates to destroy our ships.”

Half a dozen responses crashed together in Holden’s mind, ranging from *That is the worst idea I’ve ever heard* to *Are you even listening to what you’re saying?* It took a few seconds for one to win out.

“You want me to do a *séance*?”

“I wouldn’t call it a—”

“No,” Holden said. “Just no.”

“I can’t just let this drop. If you won’t help—”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t help. I said I’m not going to go commune with a bit of killer alien goo in hopes that it starts telling me its old cop stories. We don’t want to poke that stuff. We should leave it alone.”

Monica’s expression was open and interested. He wouldn’t have been able to see her annoyance and disappointment if he hadn’t known to look.

“What then?” she asked.

“You know the old joke about hearing hoofbeats, right?”

“I guess I don’t.”

“Long story, but the point is that if you hear hoofbeats in the distance, your first guess is that they’re horses, not zebras. And you’re hearing hoofbeats and jumping straight to unicorns.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying let’s go see if we can find some horses or zebras before we start a unicorn hunt.”



An intriguing new mystery didn’t mean Holden no longer had a day job, but

it did give him something to think about other than missing Naomi. And Amos. And Alex. But mostly Naomi. As he crawled along the exposed ribs of the *Rocinante*'s flank with a plasma torch in his hand and looked for cracks, he pondered where ships could go when they disappeared. Monica was right; the number was too high to be just random system failures. There were a lot of other possibilities, even discounting her protomolecule unicorn theory. But Holden had stopped believing in coincidence about when he'd first started spending time with Detective Miller. And the other big thing going on was that radical OPA factions were launching attacks on inner planet holdings like Callisto. And even Earth.

A violent faction of the OPA was dead set against colonization. And, now, colony ships loaded with supplies were vanishing without a trace. Also, Medina Station—nee *Behemoth* nee *Nauvoo* and the hub of all the ring gates—was solidly in the control of the OPA. It made a compelling narrative, even if he didn't have any actual evidence that it was true.

In that scenario, the ships would be boarded by OPA pirate crews, the supplies taken, and the colonists... spaced? A gruesome idea if it were true, and still not the most horrific thing humans had ever done to each other. But that left the ships. They'd keep the ships, and then they'd have to make them disappear. That meant changing the transponder codes. The fact that the *Rocinante* was no longer the *Tachi* was proof that the OPA had that ability.

"Sakai," Holden said, chinning the radio frequency to the private channel he and the chief engineer shared. "Yo, you around?"

"Problem?" he replied in a tone of voice that sounded like he was daring Holden to have a problem. Holden had learned not to be offended by it. Impatience was Sakai's default state.

"More of a riddle."

"I hate riddles," Sakai said.

"Let's say you're trying to figure out if someone has stolen a bunch of ships and changed the transponder codes. How would you find those ships, if you had to?"

The engineer huffed thoughtfully for a moment.

"Don't look for the missing ships," Sakai replied. "Look for the new ones that show up out of nowhere."

"Yes, good. That," Holden said, "is exactly right. Thanks."

He stopped at a cracked weld between the inner hull and one of the ship's ribs and started touching it up with the torch. His faceplate darkened, turning the world into a black place with one bright blue light in it. While he worked, he thought through how you'd track the magically appearing new ships down. The public ship registry was a good place to start, but you'd drown in data trying to do it manually. If Naomi were here, he had no doubt she'd have been able to build a program to find what he wanted in ten minutes on her hand terminal. He, sadly, didn't have her programming skills, but Fred had software engineers on the payroll, and if he—

"Why?" Sakai said. It had been so long since the engineer had spoken that it took Holden a moment to remember the context for the question.

"Why what? Why do I want to know how to find lost ships?"

"Yeah."

"So I have this reporter friend who's looking into some missing ships. I said I'd give her a hand. Just trying to think of ways to actually do that."

"Stuart," Sakai said. It was half statement, half question. "I heard she was on the station."

"Yeah, my old buddy Monica. Truth is, I think she's snipe hunting, but I said I'd help. And I need something to do that isn't feeling lonely and sorry for myself."

"Yeah," Sakai said, then after a long moment added, "So shit hasn't gone weird enough for you to believe in snipes?"



There was a video message light blinking on his home console. Holden tried his hardest not to hope it was from Naomi and still felt a crushing disappointment when Alex's round face appeared on the screen. "Hi boss," the pilot said. "So the thing where I meet up with my ex-wife and we have a tearful reconciliation? Yeah, that was a failure. Probably shoulda thought that one through a little better. But I'm plannin' on stopping by to see Bobbie before I leave, so there's a bright spot. How's my girl? You guys gettin' her all polished up and pretty for my return? I'll check in again when I can. Kamal out."

Holden almost started his reply off by asking for a report on the ex-wife

situation, but the little Naomi voice that now lived in his head said *Don't be nose*, so instead he replied, "Thanks for checking in. Give Bobbie my best. The *Roci*'s still months from ready, so take your time."

He sat for a minute trying to think of something else to say, then just cut the dead air off the end of the message and sent it. It was strange how a person could be so vitally important in your life, and yet you had nothing to say to them when they weren't sharing the same air. Normally, he and Alex would talk about the ship, about the other two crew members, about jobs. With them all split up and the *Roci* in dry dock, there wasn't much left to say that wasn't a personal invasion. Thinking about that looked like the beginning of a long dark road to bitter loneliness, so he decided to go investigating instead.

He kind of wished he had a hat.



"Back so soon?" Fred said when Holden was ushered into his office by one of the OPA leader's minions. "I know my coffee is good, but..."

Holden grabbed a chair and stretched out while Fred puttered with the coffee maker. "So Monica Stuart is on Tycho."

"Yeah. You think someone like that lands on this station without me knowing about it?"

"No," Holden admitted. "But do you know why she's here?"

The coffee maker started hissing to itself, and the office was filled with a rich, bitter smell. While the coffee brewed, Fred leaned over his desk tapping on the terminal. "Something with missing ships, right? That's what our intel team says."

"Have your people looked into it at all?"

"Honestly? No. I'd heard rumblings about it, but we're buried here. Every ship with a functioning Epstein is heading through for the gates. We've got our hands full keeping them from running into each other going through the rings. Most of them are going into unexplored systems with no other ships or stations. We don't hear back from a few, sort of seems like the obvious thing happening."

Holden accepted a steaming mug from Fred with a grateful nod and took

a sip. The old man's coffee didn't disappoint. "I get that," Holden said after another drink. "And I think her theory on it is pretty far-fetched, but it's the kind of thing that will get public traction if we don't find a better answer first."

"She has a theory already?"

"She thinks it's the protomolecule. The robots and tech waking up on Illus is her one datapoint."

"You told me that was a onetime thing," Fred said, frowning over his coffee mug. When he spoke again his words blew steam in front of them, like a whip of dragon breath. "Is Miller back?"

"No, he's not back. As far as I know, there isn't an active protomolecule culture in existence in the universe. But—"

"But I've got the inactive stuff you gave me."

"Right, and Monica knows about it somehow," Holden said.

Fred's frown only deepened at that. "I've got a leak somewhere."

"Yeah, you totally do, but that isn't the part that worries me."

Fred's eyebrows went up in a nonverbal question.

"Monica," Holden continued, "has decided that we should take out the goo and use it like some sort of Ouija board to summon the ghost of Miller."

"But that's stupid," Fred said.

"Right? So I think we should exhaust all other possibilities before we leap right to tinkering with alien viruses."

"First time for everything, I guess," Fred said, only lightly coating the words in sarcasm. "You have alternate theories?"

"I do," Holden said, "but you won't like it."

"I also still have bourbon if we need anesthetic for this operation."

"It may get there," Holden replied, then drank off the rest of his coffee to give himself time. No matter how much Fred had aged over the last half decade, Holden found himself still intimidated by the man. It was hard to broach topics Fred might take offense to.

"More?" Fred asked, pointing at his empty cup. Holden declined with a shake of his head.

"So there's that radical extremist faction of the OPA that you were telling me about," Holden said.

"I don't think—"

“They’ve had at least two public attacks. One on Martian interests, and one on Earth itself.”

“Both of which failed.”

“Maybe,” Holden said. “But we’re assuming we know what their goals were, and that seems like a bad assumption to make. Maybe blowing up a big chunk of a Martian shipyard and forcing the UN home fleet to fire a bunch of missiles at an ancient freighter are wins to them.”

“Okay,” Fred said with a grudging nod. “Fair enough.”

“But there’s a third leg to this. Sure, the radicals think Earth and Mars will abandon them once the new worlds are colonized, but that means the colonists themselves are part of the problem.”

“Agreed.”

“So, what if this radical OPA wing decides that in addition to blowing up some of the inner planets’ shit, they can send a message by taking out some colony ships?”

“Well,” Fred said, speaking slowly as though he were working out the answer as he said it, “the big problem with that is the location of the attacks.”

“Because they happen on the other side of the gates.”

“Exactly,” Fred continued. “If ships were getting nuked as they passed through the Belt, that would be one thing. But on the other side of the gates? Who has access there? Unless you’re thinking the ships were sabotaged in some way. A bomb with a really long fuse?”

“There’s another alternative,” Holden said.

“No, there isn’t,” Fred replied, anticipating his next argument.

“Fred, look, I know you don’t want to think you’ve got people working against your interests on Medina. Doctoring records, maybe. Shutting off sensors when there’re things they don’t want people to see. And I get why that’s hard to swallow.”

“Medina is central to our long-term plans,” Fred said, his words hard as iron. “I’ve placed all of my very best and most loyal people on that station. If the radicals have a fifth column there, then it means that I can’t trust anyone in my organization. I might as well pack it up and retire.”

“There are thousands of people on Medina, I doubt you can vouch for every one of them personally.”

“No, but the people running the station are *my* people. The most loyal I

have. There's no way something like this could be going on without their knowledge and cooperation."

"That's a scary thought."

"It means I don't own Medina Station," Fred said. "It means that the most violent, hard-line, extremist faction of our group controls the choke point of the entire galaxy."

"So," Holden said, "how would one go about finding that out?"

Fred leaned back in his chair with a sigh and gave Holden a sad smile. "You know what I think? I think you're bored, and lonely, and looking for a distraction. Don't dismantle the organization I spent a lifetime building to give yourself something to do."

"But ships are missing. Even if it isn't Medina taking them, something is. I don't know that we can just ignore that and hope it goes away."

"Fix your own ship, Jim. Fix your ship and get your crew back together. This thing with the missing ships isn't your job."

"Thanks for the coffee," Holden said, standing up to leave.

"You're not going to drop it, are you?"

"What do you think?"

"I think," Fred said, "that if you break any of my stuff, you get to pay for it."

"Noted," Holden said with a grin. "I'll keep you in the loop."

As he walked out the door, he could picture Miller smiling and saying, *You can tell you've found a really interesting question when nobody wants you to answer it.*

Chapter Nine: Naomi

Once upon a time there had been a Belter girl named Naomi Nagata, and now there was a woman. Even though the difference between the two had been created a day, an hour, a minute at a time, the Venn diagram of the two almost didn't overlap. What could be cut away, she'd cut years ago. What remained did so in spite of her efforts. For the most part, she could work around them.

"Enjoy your stay on Ceres," the customs agent said, his eyes already flicking to the man standing behind her. She nodded, smiling politely through the spill of her hair, and walked out into the wide corridors of the spaceport. Another face among the millions.

Ceres Station was the biggest city in the Belt. Six million people, more or less, in a hollowed asteroid hundreds of kilometers in diameter. She'd heard that the port traffic alone could add as many as a million transient bodies on a given day. For most of her life, it had been the symbol of inner planetary colonialism. The tower of the enemy on native Belter ground.

Outside the spaceport proper, the corridors were warm bordering on hot, the entropic load of the city trapped by the thermos-bottle vacuum of space. Moisture thickened the air, and the smell of bodies and dried piss was like seeing an old friend's smile. Three-meter-high screens shouted advertisements for machine rigs one second and high fashion the next, their clamor only a thread in the constant, roaring symphony of voices and carts and machinery. A public newsfeed was showing images of fighting somewhere on Earth. Another little insurgent cult or traditional ethnic conflict calling for its due in blood again, important only because it was on Earth. Even for Belters who'd called the float their home for generations, Earth carried a symbolic load. The mother of humanity with her boot firmly

on Belter necks. On the screen, a pale-skinned man with blood sheeting down from a scalp wound held up a book. Probably a holy book. He was shouting, his mouth squared by rage. Kill as many people in the Belt, and it wouldn't have been news. Even now.

She turned spinward, looking for a food kiosk serving something appealing. There were the usual corporate products, the same at any station. Now that the OPA ran Ceres, there were also other options. Dhejet and egg curry, cow-style noodle bowl, red kibble. The foods of her childhood. Belter foods. The kitchen on the *Rocinante* had been designed by someone in the Martian Navy, and the food stocks it accepted were always nourishing, usually good, and sometimes excellent. But they weren't *her* food.

She opted for red kibble from a scarred kiosk with adhesive from generations of nightclub flyers caking its sides. It came in a brown pressed-shred container that fit in her left palm with a plastic spatula like a flattened spoon to eat with. The first bite filled her mouth with cumin and her mind with dust-covered memory. For a moment, she was in her bunk on Tio Kriztec's ship, huddled over the white ceramic bowl she had loved then and forgotten for years, eating quietly while the others sang in the galley. She couldn't have been more than six at the time, but the memory was fresh and bright. She took another bite, savoring it. As she did, she saw the man following her.

He was thin, even for a native. His hair, a dirty gray that flowed back from his head like the folded wings of a bird. He stood maybe fifteen meters away, watching the newsfeed with an air of mild boredom. She couldn't have said what drew her attention to him and left her certain that he was there because of her. Something about the casual way he didn't look toward her, maybe, or the angle of his stance.

Naomi turned spinward again, moving quickly without running, forcing him to keep up. As she walked, she scanned the crowd around her. If she was right, there might be others working in a team. She slid easily through the gaps in the press of bodies, finding the places that opened for a moment as people crossed her path and each other's. She had spent six months on Ceres when she was thirteen and between ships, but the station was still a long way from home territory for her. She did her best, making for a side corridor that she was almost certain ran between the wider pathways.

And maybe she was wrong. Maybe the man, whoever he was, had just

happened to be there when she was feeling particularly anxious. She didn't look back until her side corridor rejoined the larger flow of foot traffic from the next gate over. She took the ground in at a glance, and found the place she needed. A currency-changing booth four meters away with opaque privacy walls made a little space in the flow of people like a stone in a river. Without pausing, she walked to the dead space at its far side and leaned against it, her shoulder blades taking in the cool of the metal. The air was thick enough that she was sweating a little, a dampness at her collarbone and the fringes of her hair. She made herself small and unobtrusive, and counted slowly backward from a hundred.

At thirty-two, Wings hurried past her, his chin high, scanning the crowd before him. The bright metallic taste of fear filled her mouth, and she turned back into the booth, and then past it the other way, down the corridor she'd just left. As she retraced her steps, her mind raced through possibilities. Marco had finally decided to end their standoff, and the threat to Filip had been bait for the trap. Or the security forces had been waiting all this time, and she was about to get caught at last. Or someone who'd watched the newsfeeds from Ilus too much had decided to stalk her. Or Marco was just sending his men to check up on her. The last wasn't least likely.

Back in the main corridor, she flagged down a cart and paid for a trip up three levels to an open park. The woman driving the cart didn't look at her twice, which was a relief. Naomi sat back against the hard formed plastic and finished her kibble. The tires hissed against the decking as they took the ramp up, closer to the center of spin and farther from the port.

"Go du-es someplace precise?" the driver asked.

"Don't know where I'm going," Naomi said. "Know when I'm there."



She'd met Marco when she was sixteen and finishing her distributed classwork equivalency on Hygeia Station. On Luna, her work would have gotten her engineering placements at any of the big shipyards. Since it was just an equivalency, she'd known she had another three, maybe four terms before she could get the jobs, even if she already knew how to do the work.

Marco had been part of a salvage and mining crew that based its repairs

at Hygeia Station, then looped out into the Belt proper, scraping out rare metals and taking care, sometimes, of the wrecks of old ships that crossed their paths. And maybe, the rumor was, some wrecks that were very, very new. His captain had been an old man named Rokku who'd hated the Inner Planets as much as anyone in the Belt. The crew was the deepest flavor of OPA there was, not a military cell because no one had asked them yet. Naomi had been living with Tia Margolis, another of her adopted aunts, and trading out unlicensed work at the refining station for air, water, food, network access, and a place to sleep. At the time, Marco and his cohort had seemed like a bastion of stability. A crew that had been working the same ship together for seven missions was as good as family to her.

And Marco himself had been amazing. Dark eyes, dark soft hair, a Cupid's bow mouth, and a beard that felt against her palm the way she imagined it would to stroke a wild animal. He'd haunted the corridors outside the station bar, too young still to buy, but more than charming enough to get older people to buy for him on the few occasions he couldn't convince the merchants to bend the rules directly. The others on Rokku's crew—Big Dave, Cyn, Mikkam, Karal—had all outranked Marco on the ship and followed his lead on shore. There hadn't been a particular moment when she'd become part of their crew. She'd just fallen into orbit with the others, been at the same places, laughed at the same jokes, and then at some point she was expected. When they cracked the seal on a storage gate and made it into a temporary invitation-only club, she was invited. And then before long she was helping to crack the seal.

Hygeia Station hadn't been at its best in those days. The Earth-Mars alliance had looked solid as stone back then. The taxes and tariffs on basic supplies hovered just below too expensive to sustain life. And sometimes above it. The ships that ran there ran on air so lean they courted anoxia, and the black market in usable hydroponics was a live and active one. Hygeia Station, while nominally the property of an Earth-based business conglomerate, was in practice a ragged autonomous zone held together by habit, desperation, and the bone-deep Belter respect for infrastructure.

When Marco was there, even the old, cracked ceramic decking seemed a little less crappy. He was the kind of person who changed what everything around him meant. There had been a Belter girl named Naomi who would have sworn she'd follow him anywhere. She was a woman now, and she'd

have said that wasn't true.

But here she was.

Bistro Rzhavchina was high up toward the center of spin. Doors of rusted steel painted in sealant blocked the way in, and a bouncer half a head taller than her and twice as wide across the shoulders glowered as she passed through them. He didn't stop her. Up this far, more of the station's spin felt like lateral pull. Water poured on the slant. It wasn't only the cheapness of the real estate that made these corridors thicker with Belters. The Coriolis here started to have an effect just north of subliminal, and that wasn't a thing that Earthers and Martians ever became really comfortable with. Living in spin was a source of Belter pride, a mark of who they were and how they were different.

Dark music filled the place, the rhythm like a constant, low-level assault. The floor was sticky where it wasn't covered with peanut shells, and the smell of salt and cheap beer filled the air. Naomi went to the back, taking a seat sheltered from as many lines of sight as she could manage. Somewhere between fifteen and twenty people sat or stood around the place. She could still feel their gazes on her. Her jaw slid forward a degree, her mouth taking on a scowl that was protective coloration as much as actual displeasure. The wall she rested against vibrated with the bass.

She ordered a drink from the table's system and paid with a preloaded chit. Before the thin-faced boy behind the bar could deliver it, the metal doors to the corridor opened again and Wings came in. His movements were tight and anxious, his expression closed and angry. He hadn't followed her here. This was where he headed back to after he failed. Naomi faded back another centimeter.

Wings sat at the bar, stood up, sat again. A door hidden by shadows at the back of the club opened. The man who came out was huge. The muscles of his neck and torso were so large and defined, she could have used him as an anatomy lesson. His steel-gray hair was cut close to the scalp, white lines of scar crossing behind his left ear like the map of a river delta. A massive tattoo of the OPA's split circle logo decorated the side of his neck. He went to the bar where Wings was waiting. Wings' hands were already out in apology. Naomi couldn't hear what he said, but the gist was clear enough. He'd seen her. He'd lost her. He was sorry. Please don't rip his kneecaps off. She let herself smile a little.

The big man tilted his head, nodded, said something that seemed to relieve Wings enough that he managed a smile. The big man turned slowly, squinting into the gloom of the club. When his gaze reached her, it stopped. The boy at the bar started forward, her drink on a tray. The big man put a hand on the boy's chest, pushing him back. Naomi sat up a little straighter, looking up into the big man's eyes as he reached the table. They were as pale as she remembered.

"Knuckles," he said.

"Cyn," Naomi replied, and then his massive arms were around her lifting her up. She returned the embrace. The smell and heat of his skin was like hugging a bear. "God, you haven't changed at all, have you?"

"Only got better, uhkti. Bigger and brighter."

He put her down with a thump. His smile drew lines all across his face like ripples in a pool. She patted his shoulder and his grin grew wider. At the bar, Wings' eyes were big as saucers. Naomi waved at him. The man sent to follow her hesitated, then waved back.

"So what did I miss?" Naomi asked as Cyn led her to the door at the back of the club.

"Only all of it, sa sa?" Cyn rumbled. "How much did Marco say?"

"Very damned little."

"Always the way. Always the way."

Past the thin door, a corridor snaked back into the raw stone of the asteroid. The sealant was old, gray, and flaking, and cold radiated out from the stone. Three men leaned against the wall, guns in their hands. The oldest was Karal. The younger two she didn't know. She kissed Karal's cheek as she passed. The others looked at her with a mix of distrust and awe. The hidden hallway ended at a steel door.

"Why so secret?" she asked. "You know the OPA runs Ceres now."

"There's OPA and there's OPA," Cyn said.

"And you're that other one," she said, but with warmth in her voice that covered her unease.

"Always," Cyn agreed.

The door slid open, and Cyn ducked to pass through. It was impossible to see around his bulk. Naomi followed.

"Got here and no further," Cyn said over his shoulder. "And best we don't float too long. Plan had us back with Marco a month ago."

“Marco’s not here?”

“Nobody here but us chickens.” There was a smile in the words.

The chamber they stepped into was wide and cold. A portable scrubber moved stale air and left the smell of rubber. Formed plastic shelves held rations and water. A thin laminate table had five stools around it, and an old network repeater hung from a hook by its wires. A set of bunks leaned against the wall four high. There were bodies curled under the blankets, but if they were sleeping, Cyn didn’t take notice of them. His voice carried at the same volume.

“Thing is, better we don’t be where anyone can reach us when it all comes down, sa sa?”

“When what comes down?” Naomi said.

Cyn sat at the table, reached out a long arm, and pulled an unlabeled bottle from the shelves. He pulled the cork from its neck with his teeth.

“Ay, Knuckles,” he said with a laugh, “you said he didn’t tell you much, you weren’t singing low, were you?”

Naomi sat on one of the stools as Cyn poured amber liquid into two glasses. The fumes smelled of alcohol and butter and burned sugar. Naomi felt her mouth responding to the scent. The taste was like coming home.

“Nothing like Tia Margolis’ brandy,” Cyn said with a sigh.

“Nothing, ever,” Naomi said. “So, now that I’m here, why don’t you fill me in?”

“Well,” Cyn said. “It’s these pinché ring gates. You know better than anyone. Another thousand inner planets, and a whole new set of reasons they may as well fuck the Belt, que si? And half the Belt sucking the Butcher’s cock and making themselves out noble and official and political. So we, and by we I mean Marco, yeah? We decide about two, three years ago—”

“We don’t talk about it,” a young man’s voice said sharply. Cyn looked at the door. Thick with dread, Naomi turned too. The boy looked terribly old and terribly young at the same time. His skin was darker than Marco’s, and his hair had more curl. The eyes were the same, though. And the mouth. Something huge—larger than oceans—moved in her chest. Emotions she’d buried rose up, and the rip threatened to pull her away. She tried to hide it, but she had to put a hand flat on the table to steady herself.

He stepped into the room. The sand-colored shirt was large on him, but

she could see that his body was in the place between the coltish growth of adolescence and the thickening muscle of a man. One of the figures on the bunk stirred and turned, but didn't otherwise react.

"We don't talk about it until we're safely back. Not even in here. Not at all. Sabez?"

"Savvy mé," Cyn said. "Just thought since—"

"I know what you thought. It passes, but we don't talk about it."

For the first time, the young man's eyes turned to hers. Her own struggle was mirrored in his eyes. She wondered what she looked like to him. What was in his mind and heart where hers was joy and guilt and a venomous regret. This was the moment she hadn't allowed herself to want. She'd known it was coming since the message from Marco arrived on Tycho. She wasn't ready for it. He made a small, quick smile and nodded to her.

"Filip," she said carefully, as if the word were fragile. When he answered, his voice could have been her echo.

"Mother."

Chapter Ten: Amos

The high-speed rail station in Philadelphia was near the center of a middle-income commercial area. Wage earners wandered the streets between strip malls, buying the semi-fashionable clothes and petty luxuries only available to those with currency. Only not too much currency. High-end shopping would be somewhere else, protected by security designed to keep people like these out.

Even on Earth, there were people with money, and then there were people with *money*.

It was weird for Amos to think that he might have enough in his account to pass for the latter. It amused him to imagine wandering over to some highbrow shopping center in his unstylish Belt-made clothes just to give the sales staff a fit when he dropped a couple grand on something useless. Maybe a nice solid platinum drink shaker. For that once or twice a year when he felt like drinking a martini.

Maybe later. After.

He headed out of the mall and toward the residential district that his hand terminal's map said Lydia's old house was in. At the short, tunnel-like exit he was accosted by a boy of eleven or twelve wearing a cheap paper jumpsuit, the kind that basic kiosks dispensed for free with a thumbprint. The boy offered him a variety of sexual services at rock-bottom prices. Amos grabbed the boy by the chin and tilted his face up. There were the fading yellow marks of a not-too-recent beating on his cheek, and the telltale pink around the eyelids of a pixie dust habit.

"Who's your walker?" Amos said.

The boy yanked back away from his hand. "Don't touch for free, man."

"No troubles. I'm not a grabber. Just who's walking you? He around?"

“Don’t know what you mean.” The boy started looking around for an escape route.

“Yeah, okay. Get lost.” Amos watched the boy run off and felt something pressing at his stomach like the onset of a cramp. He couldn’t help out every street kid he came across. There were too many of them, and he had other work to do. Frustrating, that. Maybe the kid would find his pimp and tell him about the big scary guy who grabbed his face. Then the pimp would come looking for him, to teach him a lesson about not fucking with the merchandise.

The thought put a smile back on Amos’ face and made the knot in his stomach go away.

Lydia’s house was thirty-seven blocks from the train station in a low-income neighborhood, but not in a government housing block. Someone was paying actual money for the place, which was interesting. Amos didn’t think Lydia could have cleaned up her records enough to qualify for job training. Maybe the husband was a citizen with the skills and clean background to get a straight job. That was interesting too. What kind of guy living an honest citizen’s life marries an aging gangster like Lydia?

Amos walked at a leisurely pace, still sort of hoping the pimp would track him down and make an appearance. An hour and a half later his hand terminal told him he’d reached his destination. The house didn’t look like much. Just a small one-level that from the street was an almost exact copy of every other small single-story house in the neighborhood. A tiny garden filled the narrow space between the house and the sidewalk. It looked lovingly tended, though Amos couldn’t remember Lydia ever owning a plant.

He walked up the narrow path through the garden to the front door and rang the bell. A small, elderly man with a fringe of white hair opened a moment later. “Can I help you, son?”

Amos smiled, and something in his expression made the man take a nervous half step back. “Hi, I’m an old friend of Lydia Maalouf. I just found out she’d passed, and I was hoping to pay my respects.” He worked his face for a minute, trying to find a version of his smile that didn’t scare little old men.

The old man—Charles, the obituary had said—shrugged after a minute and gestured for Amos to come into the house. On the inside it was

recognizably Lydia's space. The plush furnishings and brightly colored wall hangings and curtains reminded Amos of the apartment she'd had back in Baltimore. Pictures lined the shelves and tabletops. Snapshots of the life she'd had after Amos left. Two dogs in a field of grass, grinning and lolling their tongues at the camera. Charles, more hair on his head, but still silvery white, digging in the garden. Lydia and Charles together in a restaurant, candles on the table, smiling over their wineglasses.

It looked like a good life, and Amos felt something in his belly relax when he saw them. He wasn't sure what that meant, but it was probably a good thing.

"You got a name?" Charles said. "Want some tea? Was making some when you rang."

"Sure, I'd take some tea," Amos said, ignoring the first question. He stayed in the cozy living room while Charles banged around in the kitchen.

"It's been a couple months since the funeral," Charles said. "Were you up the well?"

"Yeah, working in the Belt most recently. Sorry it took a while to make it back down."

Charles came back out of the kitchen and handed him a steaming mug. From the flavor, it was green tea, unsweetened.

"Timothy, right?" Charles said, as if he were asking about the weather. Amos felt his jaw clench. Adrenaline dumped into his bloodstream.

"Not for a long time now," he replied.

"She talked about your mom, some," Charles said. He seemed relaxed. Like he knew whatever was going to happen was inevitable.

"My mom?"

"Lydia took care of you after your mom died, right?"

"Yeah," Amos said. "She did."

"So," Charles said, then took another sip of his tea. "How does this go?"

"Either I ask if I can take some of those roses out front to lay on her grave..."

"Or?"

"Or I just take them because no one lives here anymore."

"I don't want any trouble."

"I need to know how it happened."

Charles looked down, took a deep breath, and nodded. "She had what

they called an ascending aortic aneurysm. Went to sleep one night, never woke up. I called the EMTs the next day but they said she'd been dead for hours by then."

Amos nodded. "Were you good to her, Charles?"

"I loved her, boy," he replied, a hint of steel in his voice. "You can do what you want here, I can't stop you. But I won't have you questioning that. I loved her from the moment we met to our last kiss goodnight. I still do."

The old man's voice didn't quaver a bit, but his eyes were watery and his hands trembled.

"Can I sit?" Amos asked.

"Suit yourself. Let me know if you want more tea. Pot's full."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sorry about rousting you like that. But when I heard, I worried—"

"I know who Lydia was before we met," Charles said, sitting down on a small couch facing him. "We were always honest with each other. But no one ever bothered us here. She just had a leaky artery and it gave out one night while she was sleeping. Nothing else."

Amos rubbed his scalp for a moment, waiting to see if he believed the old guy. Seemed like he did.

"Thanks. And, again, I'm sorry if I came on strong," Amos said. "So, can I take a few of those roses?"

"Sure," Charles said with a sigh. "Ain't my garden much longer anyway. Take what you want."

"You moving?"

"Well, the guy who was doling Lydia stopped when she died. We had a little set aside, but not much. I'll be going on basic pretty soon, so that means the government block."

"Who was floating her?" Amos asked, already knowing the answer.

"Kid named Erich. Runs a crew in Lydia's old hometown. Somebody you used to know, I guess."

"Used to," Amos agreed. "Does he know about you? That Lydia was married?"

"Sure. He kept in touch. Checked up on us."

"And he cut you off after she died."

It wasn't a question, and Charles didn't answer, just sipped at his tea.

"So," Amos said, standing up, "got a thing I need to go do. Don't start

moving out yet. One way or another, I'll make sure you've got the money to keep this place."

"You don't have to do that."

"Sort of do."

"For her," Charles said.

"For her."



The high-speed to Baltimore took less time than the walk to the station had. The city itself hadn't changed at all in the two decades Amos had been away. The same cluster of commercial high-rises, the same sprawl of basic and minimal-income housing stretching out until it hit the orderly blocks of middle-class houses on the outskirts. The same rotting seaweed smell of the drowned eastern shore, with the decaying shells of old buildings sticking out of the murky water like the ribs of some long-dead sea monster.

As much as the realization bothered him, Amos had to admit it looked like home.

He took an automated electric cab from the train station to his old neighborhood. Even at the street level, the city looked the same, more or less. The streetlights had been swapped out for a different, boxy design. Some of the streets had changed from pedestrian-exclusive to mixed use. The thugs and dealers and sex workers were different faces now, but they were all on pretty much the same corners and stoops their predecessors had worked. New weeds growing in all the city's cracks, but they were the same cracks.

He had the cab let him out at a corner coffee stand that was licensed to accept basic ration cards. It was in the exact same location as the last place he'd ever eaten in Baltimore before he left. The cart and the franchise brand were different, but the assortment of rolls and muffins looked identical.

"Tall cup and a corn muffin," he said to the girl working the cart. She looked so surprised when his terminal transferred actual money instead of basic ration credits that she almost dropped his food. By the time his Ceres New Yuan routed through the network and into UN dollars, with every exchange and transfer tacking on fees, he wound up paying triple for his

snack.

The muffin tasted like it had been recycled from old, previously eaten corn muffins. And the coffee could have passed for a petroleum product, but he leaned against a wall beside the stand and took his time finishing both. He tossed what was left into recycling and thanked the girl. She didn't reply. His space money and foreign clothes left her staring at him like some sort of alien creature. Which, he supposed, he sort of was.

He had no idea where to start looking for Erich. But he didn't have to walk far before a teenage girl with machine-quality braids and expensive cotton pants drifted out of a shadowy doorway.

"Hey," he said. "You got a minute?"

"For you, Mongo?"

"Name's not Mongo," Amos said with a smile. He could see fear in her eyes, but it was well hidden. She was used to dangerous strangers, but part of that was she knew they were dangerous.

"Should be, brute like you."

"You're local. Help a guy out."

"You need herbage? Dust? I got neuros, that's your thing. Make you fly outta this shithole."

"Don't need your stuff to fly, little bird. Just a question."

She laughed and gave him her middle finger. He wasn't a customer, so he wasn't anything. She was already turning back to her dim doorway. Amos grabbed her upper arm, firmly but gently. There was a spark of real fear in her eyes.

"Gonna ask, little bird. You answer. Then I let you fly."

"Fuck you, Mongo." She spat at him and tried to pull her arm out of his grip.

"Stop that. Just gonna hurt yourself. All I want to know is, who runs your crew? Looking to talk to a guy called Erich. Messed-up arm? If your crew ain't with him, just point me at someone who is, sabe?"

"Sabe?" She stopped struggling. "Speak English, asshole."

"Erich. Looking for Erich. Just point me and I'm gone."

"Or maybe I bleed you out," a new voice said. Someone big came out of the same doorway his little bird used. A mountain of a man with scars around his eyes and his right hand inside the pocket of his baggy sweatshirt. "Let her go."

“Sure,” Amos said, and turned little bird loose. She bolted for the steps up to her doorway. The walking mountain gave him a nasty grin. Taking Amos’ compliance for fear.

“Now get gone.”

“Naw,” Amos said, smiling back. “Need to find Erich. Big boss now from what I hear. He running your crew? Or can you point me at a crew working for him?”

“I fucking told you to—” Whatever else the mountain was about to say turned into a gurgle after Amos punched him in the throat. While the mountain was trying to remember how to breathe, Amos yanked up the bruiser’s sweatshirt and plucked out the pistol he had tucked in his belt. He stomped on the back of the mountain’s leg to drop him to his knees. He didn’t point the pistol at him, just held it casually in his right hand.

“So, this is how it goes,” Amos said in a voice low enough the mountain would hear him but no one else would. Embarrassment was the number one reason people fought. Reduce how embarrassed the mountain was, reduce the likelihood he’d continue fighting. “I need to find Erich, and either you’re my friend on that, or you’re not. Do you want to be my friend?”

The mountain nodded, but he wasn’t talking yet.

“See, I like making new friends,” Amos said and patted the thug on his beefy shoulder. “Can you help your new pal find his other friend, Erich?”

The mountain nodded again and managed to rasp out, “Come with me.”

“Thanks!” Amos said, and let him up.

The mountain shot a look at the dim doorway, probably signaling little bird to call ahead to someone—hopefully Erich’s crew—with a warning. That was all right. He wanted Erich to feel safe when they met. If he had a lot of guys with guns with him, he’d be more likely to relax and listen to reason.

The mountain led him through his old neighborhood and down toward the docks and the crumbling stone monolith of the failed arcology project there. He was limping a little, like his knee was bothering him. A couple of guys with baggy coats that only sort of hid the heavy weapons underneath nodded at them as they went in, and then fell in step behind them.

“An escort and everything,” Amos said to one of them.

“Don’t do nothing stupid,” came the reply.

“Fairly sure I’m a few decades late on that one, but I take your point.”

“Gun,” the other guard said, holding out his hand. Amos dropped the pistol he’d liberated from the mountain into it without a word.

From the outside, the old arcology structure was falling apart. But once inside, the look changed dramatically. Someone had replaced the water-damaged flooring with new tile. The walls were painted and clean. The rotting wood doors off the main corridor had been replaced with composites and glass that could take the damp air. It looked like nothing so much as a high-end corporate office building.

Whatever Erich was up to, he was doing well for himself.

They stopped at an elevator, and the mountain said, “He’s up on the top floor. I’m gonna bail, okay?” His voice still rasped, but it sounded a lot better.

“Thanks a lot for the help,” Amos said without sarcasm. “Take care of that throat. Ice it up when you get back and try not to talk too much. If it’s still bugging you in three days, steroid spray’ll do it.”

“Thanks,” the mountain croaked and left.

The elevator dinged and opened, and one of his two remaining guards pointed inside. “After you.”

“Gracias,” Amos said and leaned against the back wall of the car. The guards followed, one of them sliding a metal card into the elevator controls and hitting the top button.

On the way up, Amos entertained himself by figuring out how he’d get the gun away from the guard closest to him and kill the other. He had a pretty workable strategy in mind when the elevator dinged again and the doors slid open.

“This way,” one guard said, and pointed down a hallway.

“The club level,” Amos replied. “Fancy.”

The top floor had been redesigned with plush furnishings and a maroon velvet carpet. At the end of the hall the guards opened a door that looked like wood but seemed heavy enough that it was probably steel core. Still fancy, but not at the cost of security.

After the luxury of the hallway, the office on the other side of the door was almost utilitarian. A metal desk dominated by screens for a variety of network decks and terminals, a wall screen with an ocean view pretending to be a window, and a big rubber ball instead of an office chair.

Erich always had been twitchy sitting still too long.

“Timmy,” Erich said, standing behind the desk like it was a barricade. The two guards moved off to flank the door.

“People call me Amos now.”

Erich laughed. “Guess I knew that, right?”

“Guess you did,” Amos said. Erich looked good. Healthy in a way he’d never looked as a kid. He even had a middle-aged man’s spare tire around the gut. He still had the small, shriveled left arm. And from the way he was standing, he looked like he’d still walk with a limp. But now, surrounded by his success and his well-fed chubbiness, they looked like trophies of a past life instead of disabilities in the current one.

“So,” Erich said, “kind of wondering what you’re doing in town.”

“He beat up Troy,” one of the guards said. “And Laci says he manhandled her some too.”

“Did he kill anyone?” Erich asked. When neither guard answered, he said, “Then he’s still being polite.”

“That’s right,” Amos agreed with an amiable nod. “Not here to mess up your shit, just here to chat.”

“So,” Erich said, sitting back down on his rubber ball chair, “let’s chat.”

Chapter Eleven: Alex

Three days after he'd seen Talissa—for what he had to think now was the last time—and gone afterward to eat with Bobbie Draper, Alex knew it was time to go home. He'd had dinners with family and a couple old friends; he'd seen the ways his old hometown had changed and the ways it hadn't. And he'd determined once again that sometimes a broken thing couldn't be fixed. That was the closest he was going to get to having it be okay.

But before he left, there was one more person he was going to disappoint.

The express tube to Londres Nova hummed to itself, the advertisements above the seats promising to make the lives of the riders better in a hundred different ways: technical certifications, improved undergarments, tooth whitening. The facial-recognition software didn't seem to know what to make of him. None of the ads spoke to him. The closest was a thin lawyer in an olive-green suit offering to help people find passages to the new systems beyond the Ring. *Start a new life in the off-world colonies! We can help!*

Across from him, a boy of about seventeen was staring quietly into space, his eyes half-open at the edge of boredom and sleep. When Alex had been about the boy's age, he'd been deciding whether to go into the Navy or apply for upper university. He'd been dating Kerry Trautwine even though Mr. Trautwine was a religious zealot who hated him for not belonging to the right sect. He'd spent his nights playing battle simulations with Amal Shah and Korol Nadkarni.

This boy across from him was traveling the same corridors that Alex had, eating at some of the same restaurants, thinking about sex in likely more or less the same terms, but he also lived in a different universe. Alex

tried to imagine what it would have been like to include travel to an alien planet in among his options at seventeen. Would he have still enlisted? Would he have met Talissa?

A gentle, mechanical voice announced their arrival at the Aterpol terminal. The boy's eyes opened, roused back to full consciousness, and he shot a distrustful look at Alex. The deceleration pushed Alex's back, feeling almost like a long attitude burn. Almost but not quite.

Aterpol was the downtown of Londres Nova, the only station with connections to all of the neighborhoods that made up the city. The vaulted ceilings curved over the common areas, the access doors along the walls double-sealed to keep air from leaking into the evacuated tubes. The terminal itself opened into a wide public park with real trees rising from the soil into the artificial twilight. Benches made to look like wood and iron stood scattered along the winding paths, and a pond filled the air with the smells of algae and moisture. The reassuring breeze-murmur of the air recyclers passed under everything like a constant and eternal prayer. Windows rose up along the walls, light streaming out of them or not. The rooms that looked out over Alex as he walked were businesses and apartments, restaurants and maintenance halls.

Alex crossed the park to the farther gates, where the local tubes ran to the other neighborhoods. Innis Shallow, where Bobbie lived, didn't have the best reputation. The worst that Mars had to offer wasn't as bad as an iffy sector on Ceres Station, though, and regardless anyone who took on Bobbie was either suicidal or had an army behind them.

At the Innis Shallow station, Alex shrugged into his jacket and went on foot. There were carts for rent and a girl of no more than fourteen with a scavenged rickshaw calling on the corner. It was a short walk, though, and Alex was dreading the conversation at the end of it.



He'd walked the same path three days before, still smarting from his abortive meeting with Tali, following his hand terminal's directions to Bobbie's rooms. He hadn't seen the former marine since Luna the night that the Ring had lifted itself off the ruins of Venus and flown out toward the far

edge of the system, and he'd been looking forward to anything that would distract him from the day he'd been having until then.

Bobbie was living in a very pleasant side corridor with its own greenway in the center and lights that had been fashioned to look like wrought-iron lamps from someone's imagined 1800s London. He'd only had to stand at her door for a few seconds before it opened.

Bobbie Draper was a big woman, and while years of civilian life had lost her a little of her muscle definition, she radiated competence and strength the way a fire did heat. Every time he saw her, he remembered a story from ancient history about the native Samoans armed with rocks and spears driving the gun-toting Spanish conquistadors into the sea. Bobbie was a woman who made that shit seem plausible.

"Alex! Come in. I'm sorry the place is a mess."

"Ain't worse than my cabin at the end of a long run."

The main room was wider than the ops deck back on the *Roci*, and done in shades of terra-cotta and gray that shouldn't have worked together, but did. The dining table didn't seat more than four, and there were only two chairs beside it. Through an archway across from the front door, a wall monitor was set to a slowly shifting spray of colors, like Monet's water lilies animated. Where most places would have had a couch, a resistance-training machine dominated the space, a rack of chrome free weights beside it. A spiral staircase led up and down in the den's corner, bamboo laminate steps glowing warmly in the light.

"Fancy digs," Alex had said.

Bobbie's glance at her own rooms seemed almost apologetic. "It's more than I need. A lot more than I need. But I thought I'd like the space. Room to stretch out."

"You thought you would?"

She shrugged. "It's more than I need."

She put on a brown leather jacket that looked professional and minimized the breadth of her shoulders, then led him to a fish shack with shredded trout in black sauce that had been some of the best he'd ever had. The beer was a local brew, served cold. Over the course of two hours, the sting of Talissa's voice and his feeling of self-loathing lost their edges, if they didn't quite vanish. Bobbie told stories about working veterans' outreach. A woman who'd come in to get psychiatric help for her son who

wouldn't stop playing console games since he'd finished his deployment. Bobbie had made contact with the boy's first drill sergeant, and now the kid had a job at the shipyards. Or the time a man came in claiming that the sex toy lodged in his colon was service related. When Bobbie laughed, Alex laughed with her.

Slowly, he'd started taking his turn too. What it had been like on the far side of the Ring. Watching Ilus or New Terra or whatever the hell they wound up calling it as it went through its paroxysms. What it had been like shipping back with a prisoner, which led into the first time they'd shipped a prisoner—Clarissa Mao, daughter of Jules-Pierre and sister to the protomolecule's patient zero, that one had been—and how Holden and Amos and Naomi were all doing these days.

That had been when the ache hit. The homesickness for his crew and their ship. He enjoyed Bobbie's wit and the easy physicality of her company, but what he'd really wanted—then and in the days since—was to be back on the *Rocinante*. Which was why the end of their conversation had been so awkward for him.

"So, Alex," Bobbie said, her attempt to make the words as casual and friendly as everything that had gone before flagging them at once, "are you still in touch with anyone over at the naval yard?"

"I know a few guys still serving at Hecate, sure."

"So I was wondering if I could get you to do a little favor for me."

"Sure, of course," Alex said. And then a fraction of a second later, "What is it?"

"I've got a kind of hobby thing going on," she said, looking pained. "It's... unofficial."

"Is it for Avasarala?"

"Sort of. The last time she was through, we had dinner, and some of the things she said got me thinking. With the new worlds opening up, there's a lot of change going on. Strategies shifting. Like that. And one of the big resources Mars has—one of the things that there's going to be a market for—is the Navy."

"I don't understand," Alex said, leaning back in his chair. "You mean like mercenary work?"

"I mean like things going missing. Black market. We've been through a couple pretty major wars in the last few years. A lot of ships got scrapped.

Some of them it seems like we just lost track of. And the Navy's stretched pretty thin. I don't know how much energy they're putting into tracking things right now. You know there was an attack on the Callisto shipyards?"

"Saw something about that, yeah."

"So that's an example, right? Here's a big incident, and the first response is all about identifying who was behind it and rebuilding the defenses."

"Sure," Alex said. "You'd want to do that, right?"

"So figuring out exactly what was lost in the attack is on someone's to-do list, but it's not the top. And with all the shit going on, it may never get to the top. And everyone kind of knows that, even if they aren't saying it."

Alex drank, put down the bottle, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "So if there's a profiteer on the base, they could take the opportunity to lift some equipment that survived, sell it on the black market, and call it lost."

"Exactly. I mean to some degree, that's always happening, but right now, with things a little chaotic and getting weirder all the time?"

"And with Mars losing a lot of its people to colony ships."

"Yeah, that too," Bobbie said. Her expression was hard. Alex sat forward, his elbows on the table. The smell of trout and black sauce still hung in the air, though the plates were gone by then. On the screen at the front of the restaurant, a young woman in a parody of business wear danced to a computer-generated pop tune. Alex hadn't been able to make out the language; at a certain speed every language sounded equally meaningless.

"You're telling me that you're investigating the sources of black market military equipment flowing off Mars."

"Weapons," Bobbie said. "Medical supplies. Ammunition. Power suits. Even ships."

"And you're doing it on your own, for fun, because of something Chrisjen Avasarala said to you."

"I'm kind of working for her."

Alex laughed. "I'm almost afraid to point this out, but you started off saying you needed a favor. You haven't told me what the favor is."

"A lot of the guys on Hecate won't talk to me. I'm a marine, they're Navy. There's that whole thing. But you know them, and even if you don't, you're one of them in a way I'm not going to manage this lifetime. I was wondering, as a favor, if you could help me dig a little."

Alex had nodded at the time, but what he'd said was "Let me think about it."

And now, because it was Bobbie and because he needed something in his life to actually have a moment of real closure, he was going to see her one last time to tell her the answer was no. He had a ship to get back to. If there was something he could do for her from there, he'd be pleased to lend a hand. His first priority now was getting off Mars and not coming back.



He reached the end of her corridor. The iron lanterns were glowing, creating the illusion of a street back on Earth centuries before. The echo of a place that neither he nor Bobbie had ever been, and still it was pleasant and comforting. He walked slowly, listening to the almost-silent chucking of the recyclers as if, just behind them, he could catch the murmur of the flowing Thames.

Somewhere nearby a man shouted once and briefly. It was Innis Shallow after all. Alex walked a little faster. At Bobbie's door, he paused.

It was closed, but not solidly. A black smudge, perfectly round and dented into the flesh of the panel, marked it just where the latch met the frame. A thin line of light at the door's edge showed where the frame had bent, the ceramic shattering. The man's voice came again, a low mutter rising to a final, powerful snap. It was coming from inside Bobbie's rooms.

Alex's heart beat triple time as he pulled out his hand terminal and tapped quickly, quietly to the local system's emergency services link. He thumbed in an alert request and a confirmation, but didn't fill in the details screen. There wasn't time for it. He stood before the door, his hands in fists, wishing as hard as he'd ever wished anything that Amos was there too.

He pushed the door open and rushed in.

Bobbie was at the table, sitting in one of the two chairs. Her arms were behind her. Her legs were splayed out before her, too long for the chair to accommodate. There was blood on her mouth and down the side of her neck. A man in gray coveralls was pointing a gun at the back of her head.

Two other men, dressed in the same gray, turned toward Alex. Both of them had automatic pistols in their fists. A fourth man, this one in a causal

suit the color of ash and a bright blue shirt, turned to Alex, his expression equal parts surprise and annoyance. When he saw Alex, his eyes went wide.

“Fuck!” the man in the suit said, the syllable almost lost in the noise of cracking wood. Bobbie moved faster than Alex could follow, shrugging the chair she was bound to into splinters and grabbing the gunman behind her by the wrist. He screamed and something wet happened to his arm.

One of the pistol men fired wildly, the stuttering report assaulting Alex’s ears. He rushed forward shouting and barreled into the man in the suit. Together, they staggered back. The other man’s knee rammed into Alex’s groin, and the world dissolved into blinding pain. Alex slid to his knees, trying to hold the man by his suit jacket. The guns continued their barrage and the stink of spent powder filled the air.

The man in the suit dug for a shoulder holster, and Alex grabbed his arm. The man’s wrist was like holding concrete. There was a gun in his fist. Someone shouted, and the roar of gunfire became the roar of something else, deeper and more animal. Alex pulled himself forward, the pain in his testicles fading to merely excruciating. He bit the solid wrist, sinking teeth into the raw silk sleeve and digging until his incisors met. The man in the suit didn’t even cry out, just brought his other hand down hard on Alex’s temple.

Everything got a little quieter, a little more distant. Alex felt his grip slip off the man’s arm, felt himself falling back, landing hard on his tailbone. The pain was there, but foggy. The man in the suit lifted his pistol to point at Alex. The barrel looked wide as a cave.

Oh, Alex thought, I die like this.

The man’s head twitched forward in a curt nod and he crumpled. Then it was Bobbie standing before him, a six-kilo free weight curled in one hand. The chrome had blood on it and what looked like hair. No one was shooting guns anymore.

“Hey,” Alex said.

“You all right?” Bobbie asked, sitting next to him. One of the gunmen staggered past her, cradling his forearm, and bolted out the door. She didn’t go after him.

“Little achy,” Alex said, then rolled to his side and retched.

“It’s okay,” Bobbie said. “You did really well.”

“Been a long time since hand-to-hand. I probably could have done better

if I'd had some practice.”

“Yeah, well. There were four of them with guns and two of us without. All things considered, we did okay.”

She blew out a long breath, her head sinking low. Alex tried to sit up.

“You all right?”

“Got shot a couple times,” she said. “Smarts.”

“Shit. You're hurt?”

“Yeah. I'm going to get over to the console there in a minute. Call emergency services before blood loss makes me woozy.”

“I already did that,” Alex said. “Before I came in.”

“Good planning.”

“Not sure planning had much to do with it,” Alex said. And then, “Bobbie? Stay with me here.”

“I'm here,” she said, her voice sleepy. “I'm all right.”

In the distance, Alex heard the rising tritone of sirens. Breath by breath, they grew closer. For a long moment, he thought the deck was being shaken, then realized it was just his body, trembling. At the side of the room, one of the gunmen lay slumped against the wall. His neck was at a strange angle, and blood was drying on his chest. He wasn't bleeding though. Dead, then. The man in the suit coughed and gagged, choking. The sirens got louder. There were voices now too. A woman identifying herself as police and warning them that people were coming in.

“I was coming to tell you,” Alex said. “I'll stay. I'll help.”

“Thanks.”

“This was about the black market stuff, wasn't it?” Alex said. “I guess you've been asking the right questions.”

Bobbie managed a smile. Looking at her now, there was a lot of blood on her shirt.

“Don't know,” she said. “All they asked me about was you.”

Chapter Twelve: Amos

Want some coke?" Erich asked. "Not synth. Real stuff that came from a plant."

"Nope. But I'd take a drink if one is handy," Amos replied. The pleasantries were just ritual, but ritual was important. In Amos' experience the more dangerous any two people were, the more carefully polite their social interactions tended to be. The loud, blustering ones were trying to get the other guy to back down. They wanted to stay out of a fight. The quiet ones were figuring out how to win it.

"Tatu, bring the El Charros," Erich said, and one of the two guards slipped out the door. To Amos he added, "Been on a tequila kick lately."

"I haven't," Amos said. "Earth is still the only place you can get good tequila. The Belter stuff is undrinkable."

"Not a lot of blue agave up there, I guess."

Amos shrugged and waited. Tatu returned with a tall skinny bottle and two narrow shot glasses. Erich filled both then lifted one in salute.

"To old friends."

"Old friends," Amos repeated and tossed back his shot.

"Another?" Erich asked, pointing at the bottle.

"Sure."

"Seen much of the neighborhood?"

"Just what was between here and the train station."

"Hasn't changed much," Erich said, then paused while they both drank off their shots. He refilled their glasses. "Faces change, but the corners stay the same."

"Funny, I was just thinking that same thing on my way in. Things have changed for you though."

“Not the important ones,” Erich said with a grin and wiggled his small, withered left arm.

Amos gestured at the room, the guards, the renovated building around them. “When I left, you were running for your life. So, at least one thing’s different.”

“You guys can go,” Erich said to Tatu and his partner. They slipped out quietly and shut the door behind them. That seemed like a good sign. Either it meant that Erich was sure Amos wasn’t there to kill him, or Erich had a way of protecting himself that didn’t require other people. It wouldn’t be a gun under the desk. That was too direct for Erich. Amos started casually scanning for wires or suspicious lumps on his chair or the floor beneath it.

Erich poured two more shots of tequila then said, “I learned something important from you, when you left.”

“Do tell.”

“I’ll never be the toughest guy in any room, unless I’m by myself,” Erich said, waving his small arm again. “But I’m usually the smartest. Executing a plan can be subcontracted out. Making the plan in the first place, not as much.”

“True enough,” Amos agreed. “It’s why I’ll never be the captain of a ship.”

Erich reacted to that. He didn’t change his expression or flinch, but Amos could see the words getting taken in and filed as important.

“But always useful, you,” Erich said. “You were always useful. You on a crew now?”

“You haven’t seen me in the news?”

“I have. You look different. Shaved your head, got your nose broke a few more times. But I’ll never forget a name.”

“Well, not this one anyway,” Amos said, and then tossed his shot back in a toast to Erich. “Gracias for that, by the way.”

“So, you still with that crew?” Erich said.

“I am. Why?”

“Because you’re sitting in my office right now drinking my tequila. Still playing that out in my head. Useful guy like you can always get work. If that’s what you want, I’ve got it. But if you’re not here looking for work, what are you looking for?”

Amos grabbed the bottle and poured himself another drink. Erich tried

very hard not to look nervous. He'd had a lot of practice, because he almost pulled it off. Time can change a lot. Erich had gone from twitchy little hacker with a price on his head to the boss of a respectable chunk of Baltimore's harbor-front property. But some things don't change. Some tells never go away. While Erich sat very still and looked him in the eye without blinking, the tiny hand on his deformed left arm opened and closed like a baby grabbing at a toy just out of reach.

"Went to Lydia's house," Amos said, sipping slowly at the tequila.

"Not Lydia's house anymore. She's dead," Erich said. "That what this is about? I treated her like you would have after you left."

"Yeah?" Amos asked, eyebrows going up.

"Well," Erich admitted with an embarrassed look to the side. "Not exactly like you would have."

"Thank you for that too," Amos said.

"You didn't kill me once when you had every reason to, and after that, you couldn't have stayed," Erich said, leaning forward. His left hand had stopped clenching. "Walking away from her was part of the favor you did for me. I never forgot that. And she helped me, at first. Helped me build what I have now. Taught me to use brains to beat brawn. She never lacked for a thing it was in my power to give."

"And I appreciate that," Amos repeated. Erich's eyes narrowed and his right hand came up from under the desk with a short-barreled automatic in it. Amos found himself surprised and a little proud of his friend. Erich rested his hand on the desk, the gun pointed away from Amos, more a warning than a threat.

"If you've got some beef you came here to settle," Erich said, "you won't be the first guy to leave this office in a bag."

Amos raised his hands a little in mock surrender. "Not even armed, chief. I came here to talk."

"So talk."

"What you did for Lydia was real nice," Amos said, putting his hands back down slowly but keeping his eye on the gun. "But you're wrong. She's not all dead. Some of her's left."

Erich cocked his head to the side, frowning. "Gonna need to walk me through that one."

"There's an old man loved her and lived with her and kissed her

goodnight before she died. A house with a little rose garden they worked together. Maybe some dogs. I saw a picture, but not sure if they're still around."

"I still don't get it," Erich said.

Amos rubbed his thumb against his knuckle, trying to find the words. It wasn't a thought he'd said out loud before, and if he screwed it up and Erich misunderstood, there was a chance they'd wind up trying to kill each other. So it was worth thinking about some.

"It's like this. The old man keeps the house until he dies. He's the only thing she left behind. He's the last bit of her. He keeps the house."

Erich put the little gun flat on the desk and poured himself another drink. He leaned back, holding the glass with his right hand. He couldn't pick the weapon back up without dropping the drink and he couldn't do that faster than Amos could reach him. It was a signal, and Amos felt the tension leave the muscles in his neck and shoulders.

"That's more sentimental than I would have guessed," Erich said.

"I'm not sentimental about much," Amos agreed. "But when I am, I'm pretty passionate."

"So I've heard the request. What's the payoff for me? I had something of a debt to Lydia, but I don't owe the old man shit. What does this win me, I keep him on the dole?"

Amos sighed, and gave his oldest friend a sad smile. "Really?"

"Really."

"I don't kill you, kill those two guys outside. I don't dismantle this organization from the top down and rebuild it with someone who'll owe me a favor."

"Ah," Erich said. "There he is."

Amos had to admit, Erich had grown some stones. He didn't even look down at the gun on the desk as he was being threatened. Just gave Amos his own version of the tragic smile.

"There who is?" Amos asked.

"Timmy."

"Yeah, I guess. It wouldn't be my first choice, though. So how's this go?"

"Costs me almost nothing to keep the old man's house," Erich said, then shook his head as if disagreeing with himself. "But even if it did, I'd still do

it. Just to keep Timmy off my streets.”

“Again, thanks.”

Erich shooed the gratitude away with a wave of his good hand, then stood up and walked to the office’s large screen pretending to be a window. The gun still lay on the desk, ignored now. Amos considered it briefly, then leaned farther back in his chair and put his hands behind his head, elbows spread out wide.

“Funny, right?” Erich said, pointing out the window at something Amos couldn’t see. “All those new faces and old corners. Shit changes and doesn’t. I did, you didn’t.”

“I live on a spaceship and fight alien monsters sometimes,” Amos said with a shrug of his elbows. “So that’s different.”

“Anything out there scarier than a hype with no money when you’re holding his fix? Scarier than a street boss thinks you skimmed?” Erich laughed and turned around, putting his back to the window. “Fuck that. Anything out there scarier than a life on basic?”

“No,” Amos admitted.

“So you got what you wanted,” Erich said, his voice going flat and dead. “Get the fuck out of my city or it’s open season.”

Amos stood. He was closer to the gun than Erich now. Could feel it pull at him like gravity. He could pick it up, kill Erich, kill the two guards waiting outside. By the end of the day he’d own a chunk of Erich’s old territory and have the muscle and credibility to take the rest. In a flash, the whole scenario played out in his mind.

Instead, he hooked his thumbs in his pants pockets and backed toward the door. “Thanks for the drink,” he said. “I forgot how good tequila was.”

“I’ll have Tatu give you a couple bottles on the way out. To take with you,” Erich said.

“Shit, I won’t turn that down.”

“It was good to see you,” Erich said, then paused a moment. “The gun was empty.”

“Yeah?”

“Fléchette turret hidden in the light,” Erich said, with a flick of his eyes at the inset LED housing above them. “Poisoned darts. I say a word, it kills everyone in the room isn’t me.”

“Nice. Thanks for not saying it.”

“Thanks for still being my friend.”

It felt like goodbye, so Amos gave Erich one last smile, and left the room. Tatu was waiting in the corridor with a box full of tequila bottles. The guards must have been monitoring the whole thing.

“Need help on your way out?” the guard asked.

“Naw,” Amos replied and hoisted the box over one shoulder. “I’m good at leaving.”



Amos let his hand terminal take him to the nearest flophouse and got a room. He dumped his booze and bag on the bed and then hit the streets. A short walk took him to a food cart where he bought what the sign optimistically called a Belgian sausage. Unless the Belgians were famous for their flavored bean curd products, the optimism seemed misplaced. Not that it mattered. Amos realized that while he knew the orbital period of every Jovian moon by heart, he had no idea where Belgium was. He didn’t think it was a North American territory, but that was about the best he could do. He was hardly in a position to criticize assertions about their cuisine.

He walked toward the old rotting docks he played on as a child, not for any reason more profound than needing a destination and knowing which direction the water was. He finished the last of his sausage and then, not seeing a convenient recycling bin, he chewed up and swallowed the wrapper too. It was made of spun corn starch and tasted like stale breakfast cereal.

A small knot of teens passed him, then paused and turned to follow. They were in that awkward age between being a victim on legs and capable of real adult crimes. The right age for petty theft and running for the dealers mixed with the occasional mugging when opportunity presented itself without too much risk. Amos ignored them and climbed down onto the rusting steel of an old bayfront jetty.

The teens hung back, arguing in quiet but tense voices. Probably deciding if the reward of a solitary mark with an outsider’s credit balance—it being an article of faith that anyone from outside the docks of Baltimore had more money than anyone in them—was worth the risk of taking on a

man of his size. He knew the calculus of that equation well. He'd been in on that very argument himself, once upon a time. He continued to ignore them and listened instead to the gentle lap of the water against the pilings of his jetty.

In the distance, the sky lit up with a line of fire like a lightning bolt drawn with a ruler. A sonic boom rolled across the bay a few moments later, and Amos had a sudden and intense memory of sitting on those very docks with Erich, watching the rail-gun supply lifts fired into orbit, and discussing the possibility of leaving the planet.

To everyone outside the gravity well, Amos was from Earth. But that wasn't true. Not in any way that mattered. Amos was from *Baltimore*. What he knew about the planet outside of a few dozen blocks of the poor district would fit on a napkin. The first steps he'd ever taken outside the city were when he'd climbed off a high-speed rail line in Bogotá and onto the shuttle that had flown him to Luna.

He heard quiet footsteps on the jetty behind him. The discussion was over. The yeas outweighing the nays. Amos turned around and faced the approaching teens. A few of them held improvised clubs. One had a knife. "Not worth it," he said. He didn't flex or raise his fists. He just shook his head. "Wait for the next one." There was a tense moment as they stared at him and he stared back. Then, moving as though they'd reached some sort of telepathic consensus, they drifted away in a group.

Erich was wrong about him being the same. The man he'd once been wasn't a collection of personality traits. He was the things he knew, the desires of his heart, the skills he had. The person he'd been before he left knew where the good basement booze was brewed. Which dealers had a consistent supply of quality black market marijuana and tobacco. The brothels that serviced the locals, and the ones that were there only to rob thrill-seeking poverty tourists. That person knew where to rent a gun for cheap, and that the price tripled if you used it. Knew it was cheaper to rent time in a machine shop and make your own. Like the shotgun he'd used the first time he killed a man.

But the person he was now knew how to keep a fusion reactor running. How to tune the magnetic coils to impart maximum energy to ionized exhaust particles, and how to fix a hull breach. That guy didn't care about these streets or the pleasures and risks they offered. Baltimore could look

exactly the same, and be as foreign to him as the mythical land of Belgium.

And in that moment, he knew it was his last time on Earth. He was never coming back.



He woke up in his rented flop the next morning with half a bottle of tequila on his nightstand and the first hangover he'd had in years. For a moment he thought he'd been so drunk he wet the bed, but realized that in the stifling heat of the room he'd sweated out about a liter. His throat felt dry and his tongue swollen.

He rinsed off the night's sweat and drank steaming-hot water out of the shower, tilting his head back to let it fill his mouth. After decades of filtered and sterilized ship and space station water, he marveled at all the *flavors* in it. He hoped not too many of them were microbes or heavy metals.

He pulled the remaining tequila bottles out of their box and stuffed them into his duffel bag, wrapping his clothes around them to protect them. Then he picked up his hand terminal and started looking for a hop back to Luna, then a connecting long flight to Tycho. He'd said goodbye to Lydia, or the pieces of her that she'd left behind anyway. He'd said a goodbye of sorts to Erich. There was no one left on the entire planet he gave half a shit about.

Well, no. That wasn't true. Maybe *half*.

He called the number Avasarala had used, and a sculpted young man with a perfect haircut, pale skin, and gigantic teeth appeared. He looked like an expensive store mannequin. "Secretary Avasarala's office."

"Gimme Chrissie, kid, and make it snappy."

The mannequin was stunned into silence for two long breaths. "I'm sorry, but the secretary can't—"

"Kid," Amos said with a smirk, "I just called on her private line, right? My name is Amos Burton." A lie, but one he'd told often enough it had become a sort of truth. "I work for James Holden. I bet if you don't tell her I'm on the line right now that you're applying for basic by the end of the day."

"One moment please," the mannequin said and then the screen displayed the blue-and-white logo of the UN.

“Burton,” Chrisjen Avasarala said, appearing on the screen less than thirty seconds later. “Why the fuck are you still on my planet?”

“Getting ready to leave, chief, but figured I got one more person to check in on before I go.”

“Was it me? Because I don’t like you enough to consider that charming. I have a flight to Luna waiting on the pad for me so I can go do fucking party arrangements before the Martian prime minister arrives.”

“They make you do that?”

“I do everything, and every second I talk to you costs ten thousand dollars.”

“Really?”

“No, I just made that number up. But I fucking hate flying to Luna so I’ve been putting it off to finish other work anyway. Do you need a ride? If it gets you off my planet, I can give you a ride. What? Did I say something funny?”

“Naw, just reminded me of somebody,” Amos said. “Anyway, I get the feeling this is the only trip down the well I’m ever going to take.”

“I’m crushed,” she said.

“Since I’m here, I figured anything I might want to do, better do it now. Anyone I wanted to see, you know,” Amos continued. “Where did you guys wind up locking Peaches away?”

“Peaches?”

“The Mao girl. Clarissa. She flew with us for a few months back after she stopped trying to kill the captain. And I have to admit, she grew on me a little.”

“You fucked your prisoner?” Avasarala said, her expression evenly divided between amusement and disgust.

“Nah,” Amos said. “I don’t tend to do that with people I like.”

Chapter Thirteen: Holden

The systems that the gate network had opened up were scattered across what everyone was pretty sure was the Milky Way galaxy. Cartography was still working out their relative locations, but even the initial findings put some of the new systems tens of thousands of light-years from Earth and with some distinct weirdness about time and location. Confronted by such unimaginably vast distances, it was easy to forget how much space was in just one solar system. Until you tried to find something in it.

Legally, any spaceship on the move had to register a flight plan and run an active transponder. That made ships traveling from place to place relatively easy to track. And with a transponder pinging away so you knew where to point your telescope, an active drive was visible from across the solar system. But ships would power down for repairs in dock, so transponders disappeared off the grid all the time. Ships were decommissioned, so a transponder might go black and never return for entirely legitimate reasons. Newly commissioned ships showed up with brand-new names and ships that were sold registered name changes. Some were cobbled together from scrap, some were built in shipyards, some were salvaged. And all of it was happening scattered across roughly one hundred quintillion square kilometers of space, give or take a few quadrillion. And that was only if you ignored that space had a third dimension.

So, seventeen ships had vanished going through ring gates, and if Holden was right, they were probably back in the home system with new names. In theory, there was a path to the information he wanted, but unless he was interested in spending several hundred lifetimes sifting through the raw data, he'd need help.

Specifically, he needed a computer plowing through a number of

different massive databases on new ships, decommissioned ships, sold ships, repaired ships, and lost ships, looking for anything that didn't add up. Even with a good computer and very smart data sorting software, it was what a programmer would call a nontrivial task.

And, unfortunately, the best software engineer that Holden knew had flown off to parts unknown and wasn't answering his messages. He didn't have the skills to do it himself, the time to learn them, or a crew to do it for him. What he had, was money.

After his shift working with Sakai's people on the *Roci* refit, Holden called up Fred yet again. "Fred, hey, I have a software problem. Can I hire some of your programming wonks for a short-term gig?"

"Your ship need an update?" Fred asked. "Or is this something that will piss me off?"

"Something that'll piss you off. So, who's available for custom script writing?"



Paula Gutierrez had the elongated body and slightly oversized head of a low-g childhood. Her smile was sharp and professional. She was a freelance software engineer who'd taken a six-month consulting job on Tycho five years before and then just stayed on the station picking up the odd bit of piecework. On Holden's hand terminal, her wide face filled the screen with dark bushy eyebrows and blindingly white teeth.

"So, that's what I'm looking for, and I need it as fast as possible," Holden said after laying out his requirements. "Doable?"

"Very," Paula said. "Tycho keeps all the traffic databases mirrored local, so don't even have to sweat the lag. Gonna cost you for speed, though."

"Cost me what?"

"Fifteen hundred an hour, ten hours minimum. Know up front I don't argue about billing and I don't give discounts."

"That," Holden said, "sounds like a lot."

"That's because I've got you over a barrel and I'm gouging the shit out of you."

"Okay, how soon will I start seeing output?"

Paula shrugged with her eyebrows, then looked down at something off camera. “Call it twenty hours from now before you start getting data sent to you. Want me to collate or stream it as it comes in?”

“Send it straight to me, please. Going to ask me why I want it?”

Paula laughed. “I never do.”



Monica was renting a small suite of rooms on the visitors’ level of Tycho. They were expensive, and to Holden’s surprise, not any nicer than the company quarters Fred had set aside for his crew. Not many companies treated their own as well as they treated guests. But courtesy dictated that he act like the rooms were something special to make Monica feel good about the investment, so he made impressed noises at the open spaces and quality of the furnishings.

“So what did Fred say?” Monica asked once he took a seat at her dining table and sipped at the tea she’d made.

“He doesn’t think there’s much to go on, honestly.”

“I mean about using the protomolecule sample to try and get in touch with Detective Miller.”

“Yeah,” Holden replied, putting the tea back on the table and pushing it away. The first sip had left his tongue feeling scalded and rough. “I mentioned that but only so he’d know he had a leak somewhere. That was always a nonstarter as an investigation tool. No one’s letting that shit out of its bottle anytime soon.”

“Then I’m wasting my time here, is what you’re saying.”

“No,” Holden said. “Not at all. I think the missing ship thing is legitimate. I just don’t think it’s an alien conspiracy. It’s much more likely to be associated with this hard-line OPA wing. I’m looking into it, if that’s a story you want to pursue.”

Monica spun her hand terminal around on the tabletop, already impatient with him for changing the subject. “I made my name with the story on the *Behemoth*. Aliens and wormhole gates and a protomolecule ghost that only talked to the most famous person in the solar system. I don’t think my follow-up to that can be *Humans Still Shitty to Each Other*. Lacks

panache.”

“So, is this about finding those missing ships? Or is it about finding another batch of alien weirdness to make you more famous?”

“That sounded awfully judgmental for a guy who’s managed to shoehorn himself into every major news piece for the last six years.”

“Ouch,” Holden said, then let the uncomfortable silence stretch a while. Monica kept spinning her hand terminal but not looking him in the eye.

“Sorry,” she finally said.

“It’s okay. Look, I’m going through this weird empty-nest thing, and it’s left me kind of restless. And because I’m looking to latch onto something, I’m going to go find those missing ships. Probably won’t be an alien conspiracy, but I’m going to do it anyway. Want to help?”

“Not sure what that looks like, to be honest. I was hoping to just ask the omniscient aliens. Do you know how big space is?”

“I’ve given it some thought,” Holden said. “I have this plan. I talked to Fred about the OPA angle, but he doesn’t like that idea so he’s rejecting it out of hand. Still, that got me thinking. The OPA isn’t going to throw a bunch of ships away. Belters just don’t think that way. They recycle everything.”

“So?”

“So how do you find pirated ships? Chief Engineer Sakai suggested looking for the new ships that turn up rather than hunting the missing ones.”

“*Sakai* suggested...”

“He’s a guy I work with on the *Roci* refits. But anyway, I thought that sounded like a great idea so I hired a local data wonk to write a database mining script to track all the new ship names that show up on the registries and try to find an origin point.”

“A data wonk.”

“Freelance coder. Whatever the name is for that kind of work, yeah, and anytime now I’ll start getting a stream of data that includes all the mysteriously appearing ships. Our missing seventeen should be a subset of that. At least it’ll be a smaller number of ships than, you know, *all* of them.”

Monica stood up and walked away several steps, not speaking. Holden blew on his tea and waited. When she finally turned back around, the look on her face was carefully controlled incredulity. “You’ve involved Fred Johnson, some engineer here on Tycho, and a fucking *hacker* in this? Are

you that stupid?”

Holden sighed and stood up. “I first heard about this from you, so I’ll do you the courtesy of letting you know where the investigation goes—”

“And now you’re *leaving*?” The incredulous look on Monica’s face only deepened.

“Well, funny thing. I don’t have to put up with being called stupid by someone I’m trying to help.”

Monica lifted her palms in a placating gesture that he suspected she didn’t really mean.

“Sorry,” she said, “but you just involved three new people, one of whom is the highest-profile member of the OPA, in my... *our* investigation. What on earth made you think that was a good idea?”

“You know me, right?” Holden said, not sitting again but not heading straight for the door either. “I’m not a guy who hides things. I don’t think Fred is the bad guy, but if he is then his reaction to our searching will tell us something. Secrecy is the potting soil in which all this conspiracy shit grows. Trust me. The roaches don’t like it when you start shining a light on them.”

“And what if they decide to get rid of the guy with the light?”

“Well,” Holden said with a grin, “that’ll be interesting too. They won’t be the first ones to try, and I’m still here.”



The following day the data from Paula’s program began trickling in. He authorized his terminal to transfer the remaining payment for her services and began going through the list.

Lots of new ships were showing up around Mars and Earth, but that was to be expected. The shipyards were cranking out new and refurbished vessels as fast as the mechanics and engineers could make them. Everyone with two yuan to rub together was making a play for the ring gates and the worlds beyond them, and the biggest group of people who like living on planets and were already physiologically adapted to it came from the two inner worlds. Only a tiny fraction of those ships had gaps in their records that Paula’s program would flag, but even a brief search led Holden to

believe that the flagged ships were mostly paperwork errors, not piracy.

There were also a scattering of suspicious new ships in the Belt. Those were more interesting. If the OPA was stealing ships, then the logical place to hide them was in a region of space thick with ships and other metallic bodies. Holden began going through the Belt list one ship at a time.

The *Gozerian* appeared out of nowhere in the docks at the Pallas refinery in the right date range. The records listed it as a probate transfer, but were vague on who'd died and what relation the new owner had to the old. Holden guessed the answer to those two questions was *person who used to own the ship* and *person who killed them and took it*. The transfer of ownership was sketchy enough that it almost certainly was the result of piracy, but the *Gozerian* was listed as a non-Epstein light-hulled mining ship. A rock hopper. The records from Pallas backed that up, and a search of the list of seventeen missing ships didn't turn up anything matching its description. No one was going to make a run for the edge of the solar system and then all the way in to a new world in something that didn't have an Epstein drive. There were much more comfortable places to die of old age.

Holden checked the *Gozerian* off his list and moved to the next. By the time he'd gone through the entire initial list from Paula it was three a.m., Tycho time, and his shift on the *Roci* started at eight, so he caught a couple hours of rack time and spent a miserable morning trying to trace maneuvering thruster cables through a fog of sleep deprivation.

By the time his shift was over all he could think about was a little dinner and a lot of sleep, but the data stream from Paula was waiting for him with nearly fifty new ships. So he picked up a carton of noodles on his way home and spent the rest of the evening going through the list.

The *Mouse Pie* was a gas freighter and didn't match his missing list. The *Vento* first appeared before the date range he was interested in, and a query to the last dock it had visited confirmed the dates were correct. The *Blasphemous Jester* was listed as Epstein equipped, but a search of the service records showed that the drive had been out of commission for years. Someone had been using it as a short-hop shuttle in teakettle mode ever since.

On and on and on through the names it went. At one point his terminal beeped with an incoming message. Amos checking in with a cryptic

“Visited my friend’s grave. Went okay, but still got some shit to do. Back later.” Holden slurped up another mouthful of noodles that had long since gone cold and now had the consistency of earthworms. How had Miller done shit like this for a living, he wondered. It was shocking to realize how much of investigation was just brute-force solutions. Going through endless lists looking for one thing that doesn’t fit. Talking to every single potential witness over and over. Pounding the pavement, as the gumshoes in Alex’s neo-noir movies might say.

It was thinking about Alex that twigged his memory, and he went back through the list until he found a ship designated the *Pau Kant*. The last location was marked as 434 Hungaria. A high albedo rock in the Hungaria group, an asteroid group relatively close to the orbit of Mars but with a high inclination. Mars control had caught a ping from the *Pau Kant* and then lost it shortly after. They’d marked the ship as missing.

But prior to that single and short-lived appearance, the *Pau Kant* didn’t seem to exist in any other records. He couldn’t find any description of her hull type or drive. Nor were there any owner records he could track down. He’d moved it to his list of ships to look into later, but something about Mars and inner Belt asteroids was making his brain itch.

The Hungaria group wasn’t a terrible place to hide things. 434 Hungaria was about twenty kilometers across. Plenty of mass to mask ships from radar, and the high albedo of the group would clutter up the results of anyone looking for ships with a telescope. The location was intriguing too. If the OPA radicals were collecting ships to pirate colony transports, the inner Belt was not a bad staging area. They’d also launched an attack on Earth in the recent past. That it had failed didn’t mean they weren’t planning more. A bunch of stolen ships hiding in the inner ring was exactly the sort of first step another attempt might take.

The Hungaria asteroids were a long way from Tycho’s current location, and Holden didn’t have a ship. But they were pretty close to Mars, and Alex was there. If he had access to a ship, it wouldn’t be too long a trip to go take a peek. See if the *Pau Kant* was still out there, tethered to the rock and staying dark. And if it matched any of Monica’s missing ships? Well, that would be interesting to take back to Fred.

Holden put his terminal on the table, angled up to record his face, and said, “Alex. Hey, hope things are going well out there, and that Bobbie is

good. So, I've been looking into this thing with missing ships? And there's a suspicious hit out at 434 Hungaria. Any chance you have access to a ship? If you need to rent one, feel free to pull the funds from my account. I'd like you to go see if a ship named the *Pau Kant* is sitting out there parked and dark. Specs on the transponder code attached to this message."

He put all the information he had on the *Pau* and its most recent location from the Mars control records into a file. It wasn't much to go on, and it felt like a long shot, but Alex would enjoy the flight and Holden was willing to foot the bill so he didn't feel too bad about asking.

He was pretty sure the burst of energy that came from having made progress would be short-lived, but he wanted to share his success and felt wide-awake, so he called Monica. He got her voice mail. He left her a message to call him back, slurped down the last of his cold and nasty noodles, and immediately fell asleep on his couch.

The next morning he wasn't on the duty roster to work on the *Roci*, and Monica hadn't called him back, so he called again. No answer. On his way to breakfast he dropped by her apartment, but she wasn't there either. She'd been a little miffed at him, but he didn't think she'd bail on the whole missing ship story without saying anything. He made another call.

"Tycho security," a young male voice said.

"Hey, this is Jim Holden. I'm checking on a visiting journalist, Monica Stuart. Has she left the station?"

"One sec. No. Records list her as still on board. Her apartment is—"

"Yeah, actually? I'm at her apartment right now and she's not answering here or on her hand terminal."

"My records show that her terminal hasn't connected to Tychonet since early yesterday."

"Huh," Holden said, frowning at her door. The quiet on the other side had taken on an ominous feel. *What if they decide to get rid of the guy with the light?* He wasn't the only one who fit that description. "So she hasn't so much as paid for a sandwich in over a day. That strikes me as not good."

"Want me to send a team?"

"Please do that."

By the time the security team arrived and opened the door to Monica's apartment, Holden was expecting the worst. He wasn't disappointed. The rooms had been methodically searched. Monica's clothes and personal

effects were scattered across the floor. The hand terminal she used for interviews had been crushed under someone's heel, but the screen still flickered when Holden touched it. The team found no traces of blood, which was about the only positive sign.

Holden called Fred while the team finished their forensic sweep. "It's me," he said as soon as the OPA chief answered. "You've got a bigger problem than radicals on Medina."

"Really?" Fred said, his voice weary. "And what is that?"

"You've got them on Tycho."

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Chapter Fourteen: Naomi

Terryon Lock was supposed to be a new kind of place in the emptiness of the Jovian system. A Belter home world, they figured. Modular, so it could grow or contract at need. Outside the control of Earth or Mars or anybody. A free city in space, with its own governance, its own environmental controls. Naomi had seen the plans when they first spilled out over the networks. Rokku had them printed on thin plastics and stuck to the walls of the ship. Terryon Lock was the new Jerusalem until the security forces at Ganymede shut it down. No colonies without permission. No homes. No safe havens, not even if they built it themselves.

She hadn't even been pregnant when it happened. She didn't know that it would define her.



Filip was eight months old when the *Augustín Gamarra* died. The *Gamarra* had left Ceres Station, burning for a Coalition Navy research station on Oshima with a payload of organics and hydroponic equipment. Ten hours out, burning at a leisurely one-quarter g, the ship's magnetic bottle lost containment, spilling the fusion core into the ship. For a fraction of a second, the *Gamarra* had been as bright as the sun and two hundred thirty-four people died. No wreckage survived, and the official investigation into the event had never been closed because no conclusion could be reached. Accident or sabotage. Mischance or murder.

They had gone from the hidden cell at the back of the club to a private apartment up even nearer the center of spin. The air had the too-clean ozone smell of a recently replaced recycling filter. Filip sat at the small table, his

hands folded. She sat on the edge of the tiny foam-and-gel sofa. She looked at the boy's dark eyes and tried to connect them in her mind with the ones she remembered. His lips with the toothless, delighted smile. She couldn't tell if the resemblance was really there, or if it was only her imagination. How much did someone change between not-quite-a-toddler and not-quite-an-adult? Could it really be the same boy? It wasn't anyone else.

The hole wasn't abandoned. There were clothes in the locker, food and beer in the little refrigerator. The pale walls showed chips at the corners where the damage of minor accidents had built up over the course of years. He didn't tell her who the apartment belonged to, and she didn't ask.

"Why didn't you bring the *Rocinante*?" Filip asked. There was a tentative quality to his voice. Like the question was only a stand-in for other ones he wanted to ask. That she wanted to be able to answer. *Why did you go? Didn't you love us?*

"It's in dock for repairs. Will be for months."

Filip nodded once, sharply. She could see Marco in the movement.

"That's going to complicate things."

"Marco didn't tell me you wanted the ship," Naomi said, hating the implicit apology in the words. "All he said was that you were in trouble. That you were avoiding the law, and that I could... that I could help."

"We'll have to come up with something," he said.



The hospitals at Ceres Station were some of the best in the Belt when Naomi had been coming near to term. Neither of them had the money to travel to Europa or Ganymede for the duration of a pregnancy. Ceres had been closer to Rokku's claims than Tycho Station. Childbirth was a greater danger for Belters than for someone who'd lived under constant gravity, and Naomi's pregnancy had already had two scares. She and Marco had lived in a cheap rental near the hospital, one of dozens that catered to Belters who came for the medical care. The terms of the agreement were open-ended, letting them stay until they didn't need the doctors, nurses, expert systems, and pharmaceuticals that the medical complex boasted.

Naomi could still remember the shape of the bed there, the cheap plastic

curtains with a printed starscape that Marco hung across the doorway. The smell of it made her sick, but he'd been so pleased with himself she'd tolerated it. And even that late in the process, almost everything made her sick. She'd spent her days sleeping and feeling the baby shifting inside her. Filip had been restless as a fetus. She hadn't felt like a child having a child. She'd felt like a woman in control of her fate.



"How many do you need to get out?" Naomi asked.

"Fifteen, all told."

"Including you?"

"Sixteen."

She nodded. "Any cargo?"

"No," he said, and then seemed about to go on. After a moment, he looked away.



Ceres had still been under Earth control back then. Most of the people living on the base were Belters who'd taken contract with one of the Martian or Earther corporations. Earth security by Belters. Earth traffic control by Belters. Martian bioresearch by Belters. Marco had laughed at it all, but the laughter had an edge. He'd called Ceres humanity's largest shrine to Stockholm syndrome.

Everyone flying with Rokku had paid part of their share into the OPA, Naomi included. And the OPA looked after them in the last days of her pregnancy, local women bringing food to the hole, local men taking Marco out to the bars so that he had someone besides her to talk to. Naomi didn't think anything of it apart from being grateful. Those nights when Marco was out drinking with the local men and she was alone in her bed with Filip, her mind moving in the silence had carried an almost transcendent contentment. Or at least that was how she remembered it now. At the time, without knowing what was still to come, the experience might have been

different.



“Where do you need to be?”

“We don’t talk about that,” Filip said.

Naomi brushed her hair back from her eyes. “You brought me here because it’s secure, sa sa? So is it that you don’t want to be overheard by someone else, or that you think telling me compromises you? Because if you don’t trust me enough to ask for what you want, you don’t trust me enough for me to be here.”

The words seemed to carry more nuance than they could bear, as if the simple logistical facts also meant something about why she’d left. About who they were to each other. It was like she could feel the words creaking, but she didn’t know what Filip heard in them, or what she should have said differently. For a moment, there was a flicker in his expression. Sorrow or hatred or pain, it was gone too quickly to identify. A new stratum of guilt settled onto her, bearing her down. Compared to what she already had, it was trivial.

“He said I should tell you once we were off the station,” Filip said.

“Apparently he didn’t know I’d be arranging passage on a different ship. Plans change. It’s what they do.”

Filip’s gaze fixed on her, his eyes hard as marbles. She realized she’d been quoting Marco without meaning to. Maybe Filip thought it was a slap, that she was making a claim on his father by using his words. She didn’t know. She didn’t know him. She had to keep reminding herself of that.

“There’s a rendezvous point.”

“Is there a time?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

She saw *We don’t talk about it* floating in his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was smaller, younger. More vulnerable. “Soon.”

“How soon?”

He looked away.

“Very.”



She'd known, back then, that there were hard-core OPA factions on Ceres, but it hadn't bothered her. Radical OPA was still OPA, and that made them family. The crazy uncle who got drunk and started fights, maybe, but with Earth cranking up tariffs and Mars lowering the prices it would pay for ore, the sense of being under siege put Belters on the side of Belters first. And after shipping with Rokku for a while, talk of killing Earthers and Martians became a kind of white noise.

The birth had been hard. Thirty hours of labor. The muscles of her abdominal wall, made weaker by a lifetime of inconstant g, had shredded themselves. If they had been in Rokku's ship or even back on Hygeia Station, she might have died, and the baby with her. But the medical complex on Ceres had seen it all before, and worse. A gray-haired woman with a cathedral of tattoos on her hands and arms had been in her room the whole time, singing little tunes in Swahili and Arabic. Naomi could still see her and hear her voice, though she'd forgotten the woman's name. If she'd ever known it.

Filip had drawn his first, exhausted, angry breath at five in the morning, the day after she'd gone into the complex. The pediatric autodoc scanned him, considered for the longest five seconds of Naomi's life, and declared the baby safely within standard error. The gray-haired woman had placed him on Naomi's breast and sung a blessing.

It hadn't occurred to her then to wonder where Marco was. She had assumed he was in a waiting area somewhere, ready to pass out some equivalent of cigars as soon as news of her came. Of her and their son. Maybe that had even been true.



"Do we need to be there, or is off station enough?" Naomi asked.

"Off station at minimum. Better to be there, but not here solid."

"And where are we going?"

"Hungaria cluster." They were a group of minor asteroids. High albedo.

No station, but an open-access storage facility. As close to the inner planets as Belt rocks got.

“Are we meeting someone there?”

“Not there. There’s a ship a few days in. Sunward. But locked to Hungaria. *Pella*, it’s called.”

“And after that?”

Filip made the hand shrug of a Belter. Apparently she could know that much, but no more. She wondered what would happen if she pushed, and knew it was an experiment she wouldn’t make. *I’m sorry*, she thought. *I loved you more than I have ever loved anything. I would have stayed if I could. I would have taken you with me.*

Filip looked at her and then away.



She’d spent most of the weeks following the birth in recovery. The baby kept her from sleeping very long at a stretch, but apart from one week of frankly hellish colic, he was neither harder nor easier than she’d been led to expect. The worst thing she suffered was boredom, and Marco helped with that. The local group he’d been drinking with were mechanics and technicians at the port, and Marco brought her engineering problems that they were trying to solve. They were the sort of work consultants would do for half a month’s credit. She did them from goodwill and the need to do something intellectually challenging. While Filip napped in the little plastic crib, she customized diagnostic programs for water recyclers. She built virtual timing sequencers for shear force detection units. She designed software overrides for testing the containment limits of magnetic bottles.

The kind of limits that, before long, would fail on the *Gamarra*.



“All right,” Naomi said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Do you have access to another ship?” Filip asked.

“I may be able to charter something.”

“You can’t just hire a charter. This has to be untraceable.”

Meaning, she knew, that whatever was going to happen, it would mean people with guns coming after Filip and Cyn and all the others. Maybe security forces, maybe a rival faction, maybe something else that she hadn’t anticipated yet. But there would be consequences. And there would be violence.

“I may be able to charter something discreetly,” Naomi said. “If it doesn’t work, I’ll be sure it doesn’t come back to you.”

Filip swallowed. For a moment, she saw a glimmer of fear in him. He was sixteen years old now. A year younger than when she’d met his father. Three years younger than when she’d held him to her breasts to feed.

“I would have looked for you if he’d let me,” Naomi said. The words came out of her from a need she couldn’t control. He was a boy. He was carrying whatever burden Marco had put on him already. Making him responsible for how she felt too wasn’t a kindness. She rose to her feet. “You don’t need to do anything about that. Just I would have. If he’d let me.”

If he’d let me. The words were heavy and toxic as lead. *I would have done what I wanted, except he still controlled me. Still does. After all these years, and all these changes, and everything I have done and become, I wouldn’t have left you to him except that Marco still controls me. Constrains me. Punishes me for not letting him rule me outright.*

“All right,” Filip said. His expression was empty.

Naomi nodded. Her hands were in fists so tight the knuckles ached. She made herself relax. “Give me a day. I’ll know more.”

“Come to the club,” Filip said. “If we’re not there, just wait and we’ll make contact. We need to stay moving.”

I thought I could stay with you, she thought, and then hated herself for the disappointment she felt. This wasn’t a reunion. Her unfinished business with Filip might be what brought her here, but he was doing something else. Something that had brought his long-lost mother back into his world. If she wanted to sit with him and eat sweets and share stories the way they never had, that was her problem.

“Fair enough,” Naomi said. She hesitated, then turned to the door. As she reached it, he spoke again, his voice tight. Like the words were hard to say.

“Thank you for coming.”

She felt it in her sternum, someone taking a hammer to the bones over her heart. Filip watched her from the table. He looked so much like his father. She tried to imagine that she had ever been that young herself. Tried to imagine that at that age she would have known how to pick words that were that perfectly empty and heartwarming and cruel. She felt the smile press her lips out a millimeter. It was an expression of sorrow more than joy.

“He told you to say that,” she said. “Didn’t he?”

There were a hundred ways to unpack the boy’s silence.



After the *Gamarra*, Marco had come home drunk and happy from his celebration. She’d told him to be quiet, not to wake the baby. Marco had swooped her up in his arms, twirling her in the little room until her ankle hit the bed and she yelped with pain. He’d put her down then, rubbing the little injury. Kissing it. He’d looked up at her with a smile that asked as much as it promised, and she’d thought about whether they could make love quietly enough that Filip would keep sleeping. That was what she’d been thinking of when he destroyed her.

“Managed it, us. You, *que si*?”

“Managed what?” she asked, leaning back against the gel of the bed.

“Got even for Terryon Lock,” Marco said. “Stood up for the Belt. For us. For him.”

Marco nodded toward the baby. Filip’s thumb had been in his sleep-slack mouth, his eyes so closed they seemed like they’d never open again. She’d known before she understood what she knew. An electric cold washed her heart, her belly, all her body. Marco sensed it. The memory of his quizzical smile looking up past her knee was still burned in her mind.

“What did I manage?” she said.

“Perfect crime,” he said. “First of many.”

She understood. The *Gamarra* had been killed with her code. The people who died there were dead because of her, and all of Rokku’s rough talk and ranting had stopped being empty banter. Marco was a killer now.

She was too. They'd gone on to make love anyway, him too warm and dangerous to refuse, her too much in shock even to understand how much she wanted to object. She hated the fact, but they had. It was the beginning of the dark times, but looking back, all the rest of it—the depression, the fear, the loss of Filip, her failed suicide—had all been implicit in that night.

The script over the doors of hell, writ small.



Renting a hole by the port was easy. She had enough money to buy anonymous credit, route it through an off-station exchange, and bring it back to a mayfly shadow account. It only felt strange doing it because she hadn't had to go through those motions in so long. Not since she'd signed on to the *Canterbury*, and that felt like it had been seven lifetimes ago.

She sat on the thin gel bed and waited for the weeping and nausea to stop. They would, even though at the worst of it, they felt like they might not. Then she took a long shower, changed into a fresh set of clothes purchased from a kiosk. Watching the hard puck of compressed cloth expand into a jumpsuit reminded her of an insect pulling itself out of its shell. It seemed like it should be a metaphor for something.

Her hand terminal showed a half-dozen new messages from Jim. She didn't play them. If she had, the temptation to reply—to confess to him and take comfort in him, to talk to someone she trusted completely—would have been too much. And then he would have felt obligated to do something. To come and fix things. To insert himself into the messes that she'd made and the things she'd done. The distance between here and there, between Marco and the *Rocinante*, was too precious to sacrifice. The time for comfort would come later, when she'd done the things she needed to do. When she'd saved Filip. When she'd escaped Marco. So she didn't play the messages. But she didn't delete them either.



Even back on with Rokku, Marco had been cultivating himself as a leader.

He'd been good at it. No matter how bad things got, he'd always managed to make it seem like each new hurdle was something he'd factored in, every solution—even ones he'd logically had nothing to do with—was somehow his brilliance. He'd explained once how he managed it.

The trick, he said, is to have a simple plan that more or less can't go wrong so that you always have something, and then stack your risks on that. Have another alternative that won't work but maybe one time in a hundred, and if it happens, you look like a god. And then one that won't work but one time in twenty, that if it lands you look like you're the smartest one in the room. And then one that's only one time in five, but you look like you knew you could do it. And if everything else fails, you've still got the one that would always win.

If there was a single phrase for Marco, that was it: always win.

She wondered more than once over the years where she'd been on that scale. Had she been his one-in-a-hundred or his sure thing? She'd never known, and there was no way that she ever would. It didn't even matter to her anymore, except the way a missing finger itched sometimes.

And now here she was again, doing what he wanted. He'd made her complicit in his plans, whatever they were. This time, though, she knew who she was dealing with. She wasn't the girl who he'd tricked into sabotaging the *Gamarra*. She wasn't a love-struck teenager in over her head. And Filip wasn't a baby that could be spirited away and held as hostage against her good conduct. Her silence.

And so maybe—*maybe*—this was the moment she'd wanted. Maybe calling her in was Marco's mistake. She pushed the idea away. It was too dangerous, too complicated. Too likely to be what Marco had known she would think.

Digging through the station directory, she took the better part of an hour to find the address, even knowing what she was looking for. She didn't know what Outer Fringe Exports did, except that they were shady enough that she hadn't wanted to work with them, and that they were competent enough that they'd known about the Martian claims disputing the salvage of the *Rocinante* before her crew had. Naomi found their physical address—a different berth than the one she'd been at the last time—and caught a cart.

The warehouses near the port were in a constant state of flux. The pressure of commerce and efficiency kept every space in use with as little

downtime between rental agreements, loading, and unloading as could be arranged. The sign on the tempered glass door read OUTER FRINGE EXPORTS, but in a week, a day, an hour, it could have been anything.

A young man at the counter smiled up at her. He had close-cropped hair and skin several shades darker than her own. The steel-rimmed glasses could have been an affectation or an interface device. She'd never seen him before.

"Hi," she said.

"Miss Nagata," the man said as if they were old acquaintances. "It's been some time. I'm sorry to say we don't have any work that would be suited to your ship at this time."

"Not what I'm here for," she said. "I need to charter a ship. And I need to do it very quietly."

The man's expression didn't change. "That can be an expensive problem."

"It needs to carry a crew no larger than twenty."

"How long would you need it?"

"I don't know."

"Would it be hauling cargo?"

"No."

The man's eyes lost their focus for a moment. The glasses were an interface, then. Naomi crossed her arms.

One in a hundred, she thought, I show up with my own warship ready to carry people off Ceres. One in twenty, I know how to find someone who will. She wondered what the one-in-five plan was. What was the sure thing.

The man's focus came back to her.

"I think we may be able to help," he said.

Chapter Fifteen: Alex

The ride to the hospital was a thing out of a nightmare. As the transport sped through the corridors, the painkillers started to take effect. The combination of ache and sharpness in his body shifted into a deep and troubling sense of simply being wrong. Once, when they were near the emergency admitting entrance, time stuttered as his consciousness slipped away and back again. None of the medics paid him much attention.

They were all focused on Bobbie.

The big woman's eyes were closed, and a pale plastic tube came out of her mouth, keeping her jaw open. From where he rode, Alex could make out only parts of her gurney's readout, and he wasn't sure how to interpret what he was seeing. The medics' voices were clipped and tense. Words and phrases like *attempting to reinflate* and *stabilizing* and *maintaining pressure* pushed Alex toward the edge of panic. Bobbie's body, what he could see of it, was limp. He told himself she wasn't dead. If she were dead, they wouldn't be trying to save her. He hoped that was true.

At the emergency ward, he found himself wheeled into an automated surgical bed not that different from the ones on the *Rocinante*. The scan probably took a minute and a half, but it seemed to go on forever. He kept turning to the side, looking for Bobbie, then remembering she was in a different room now. Even then he didn't understand how much his injuries and painkillers had compromised his mind until the police came and he tried to explain what had happened.



“So how did the woman with the power armor fit into it?” Bobbie asked.

She was sitting up in her hospital bed. Her gown was thick, disposable paper with Bhamini Pal Memorial Hospital printed on it like a pattern, dark blue over light. Her hair was pulled back into a loose bun, and deep bruises darkened her left cheek and her knuckles. When she shifted, the movement was careful. It was the way Alex moved after he'd worked out too hard and felt a little sore. He hadn't been shot twice—once through her left lung, once in her right leg—and he'd seriously considered taking a wheelchair to go between his room and hers.

"I meant you," Alex said. "I was having trouble coming up with your name."

Bobbie chuckled. "Yeah, they're going to want to talk to you again. I think the version they got was a little muddled."

"Do you think... Should we not be talking?"

"We're not under arrest," Bobbie said. "The only one of the other guys that's still breathing lawyered up before he got here. I'm pretty sure they're not going to be looking at us if they want to throw someone in jail."

"What did you tell them?" Alex asked.

"The truth. That a bunch of thugs broke into my rooms, tied me up, and started taking turns between kicking the shit out of me and asking why I was meeting with Alex Kamal."

Alex pressed his thumb against his upper lip until it ached a little. Bobbie's smile carried a load of sympathy.

"I don't know why that is," he said. "I don't have any enemies on Mars. That I know of."

Bobbie shook her head and Alex noticed again that she was a remarkably attractive woman. He coughed and mentally filed the thought under *horribly inappropriate given the circumstances*.

"My guess," Bobbie said, "is that it was less about who you are than who you're connected to."

"Holden?"

"And Fred Johnson. And maybe they can even put the two of us together with Avasarala. She shipped on the *Rocinante* for a while."

"For about a minute and a half, years ago."

"I remember. I was there," Bobbie said. "Still, one way or another, the most plausible scenario I've got is that they thought I was reporting something to you or you were reporting something to me. And, even better,

the idea scared them.”

“Don’t mean to look a gift horse in the mouth, but that definition of *even better* has got some mighty long teeth,” Alex said. “Did you tell them about your investigation?”

“No, I’m not ready to do that.”

“But you think this was related.”

“Oh, hell yes. Don’t you?”

“It’s what I’m hoping for, actually,” Alex said with a sigh. Across the hallway, someone shouted words Alex couldn’t make out. A nurse stalked by, scowling. “So what are we goin’ to do about it?”

“Only thing we can do,” Bobbie said. “Keep digging.”

“Fair enough. So. What exactly are we looking at?”

Bobbie’s expression sharpened. The problem, she said, was ships. The Martian Navy was the newest, best set of ships in the solar system. Earth had more ships, but her Navy was aging, with tech in them that was either generations old or retrofitted, shoehorning more recent designs into older frames. Both fleets had taken heavy losses in the last few years. Whether you called Avasarala’s influence prompting or putting her on a mission, Bobbie had started looking, and what she’d found was interesting.

The seven big *Donnager* -class ships were easy to keep track of, but the fleet of corvettes that they carried, ships like the *Rocinante*—they were slippery. Bobbie had started by going back to review the battle data from Io, from outside the Ring, from the incident in the slow zone. Really, when it came to damage reports, there was an embarrassment of riches.

At first, the numbers had seemed to match up. Half a dozen ships lost here, a handful there, the transponder codes decommissioned. But as she looked more deeply, she started running into discrepancies.

The *Tsuchi*, a corvette assigned to the *Bellaire*, had been decommissioned and scrapped after Io. A year later, it appeared in a small-group action report near Europa. The supply ship *Apalala* had been retired from service, and then seven months later, picked up a shipment headed to Ganymede. A load of medical supplies lost to accident appeared briefly on a loading schedule bound for Ceres and then disappeared again. Weapons lost in the fighting around what was now Medina Station appeared in an audit at Hecate Base once and not again.

Someone, Bobbie reasoned, had gone back through the records and

doctored the old reports, forging the deaths of ships and then erasing them from the later records, or trying to. She'd found half a dozen hiccups in the data, but any ships that had been successfully erased, she wouldn't see. That meant someone had to be involved high enough up the naval chain of command that they had access to the files.

There was protocol, of course, that laid out who was supposed to have access to the records, but she'd been in the process of looking into how that actually played out in practice when Alex had dropped her a line and suggested dinner.

"If you're up for it," Bobbie said, "that's what I'd want you to look at. Just who could have changed the information. Then I can start looking at them."

"Keep going down the road you were already on," Alex said.

"Only with maybe some friends in the Navy."

"That's one way we can go. It ain't the only one, though."

Bobbie sat forward, caught her breath, and leaned back. "What else are you thinking?"

"Someone hired the gentlemen who messed us up. Seems like findin' out what we can about them might also be worth our time."

Bobbie grinned. "That was the part I was planning to do."

"Well, all right, then," Alex said, and a man stepped into the doorway. He was huge. His shoulders brushed the doorframe on both sides, and his face was thick and heavy with a distress that could have been fear or anger. The bouquet of daffodils in his hand seemed tiny, and would until they were in a vase.

"Hey," he said. "I was just..."

"Come in," Bobbie said. "Alex, this is my brother Ben. Benji, this is Alex Kamal."

"Good to meet you," the massive man said, enfolding Alex's hand in his grip and shaking gently. "Thank you for everything you've done."

"Betcha?" Alex said.

The bed creaked as Bobbie's brother sat at its foot. He looked sheepishly at his sister. Now that she'd said the words, Alex could see the resemblance in them. Bobbie wore the look better.

"The doctor says you're doing well," Ben said. "David wanted me to tell you he's thinking of you."

“That’s sweet, but David doesn’t think about anything but terraforming and boobs,” Bobbie said.

“I’ve cleaned out the guest room,” Ben said. “When they release you from the hospital, you’re coming to stay with us.”

Bobbie’s smile grew sharper. “I don’t actually see that happening.”

“No,” her brother said. “No, this isn’t a discussion. I told you from the beginning that Innis Shallow was a dangerous place, especially for someone living by herself. If Alex hadn’t saved you—”

“Not sure I was actually saving anyone,” Alex said, but Ben scowled and kept right on going over the words.

“—you could have been killed. Or worse.”

“Worse than killed?” Bobbie said.

“You know what I mean.”

Bobbie leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “Yes, I do, and I think that’s bullshit too. I am in no more danger in Innis Shallow than I would be up in Breach Candy.”

“How can you even say that?” her brother demanded, his jaw slipping forward. “After what you’ve just been through, it should be obvious that...”

Alex sidestepped toward the door. Bobbie caught his eye, and the brief smile, gone as soon as it was there, was eloquent. *I’m sorry* and *Thank you* and *We’ll talk about the important stuff when he’s gone*. Alex nodded and retreated to the hallway, the buzz-saw tones of siblings lecturing each other following after him.

When he got back to his recovery bed, the police were waiting, and this time he gave a statement that was, at least, coherent. Even if he left some of the background issues vague.



For the most part, family was a metaphor on long-haul ships. Now and then, there’d be a group that was actually related by blood, but that was almost always Belters. On military and corporate assignments, there might be a handful of married couples, and now and then someone would have a baby. People would wind up on the same ship who were cousins. They were the exception, and the rule was that family was a way of talking about need.

The need for friendship, the need for intimacy, the need for human contact that ran so deeply into the genome that anyone without it seemed not entirely human anymore. It was camaraderie writ large, a synonym for loyalty that was stronger than the concept it echoed.

Alex's experience of real family—of blood relations—was more like having a lot of people who had all wound up on the same mailing list without knowing quite why they signed up for it. He'd loved his parents when they were alive, and he still loved his memory of them. His cousins were always happy to see him, and he was glad of their welcome and their company. Seeing Bobbie and her brother together and feeling even in that brief moment the deep and unbridgeable mismatch of character between them drove something home to Alex.

A mother could love her daughter more than life itself the way the stories told, or she could hate the girl's guts. Or both. A sister and brother could get along or fight each other or pass by in a kind of uncomfortable indifference.

And if real relationship-by-blood shared descent could mean any of those things, maybe family was always a metaphor.

He was still thinking about it when he got to Min's hole. Her boys and the girl that she and her husband had adopted were all there, sharing a meal of fish and noodles when he arrived, and they all greeted him like they knew him, like his injuries were important to them, like they cared. He sat at the table for a little bit, making jokes and minimizing the assault and its aftermath, but what he wanted to do—what he did as soon as his sense of etiquette allowed—was excuse himself and head back to the guest room they'd set aside for him.

A message was waiting for him from the *Roci*. From Holden. Seeing the familiar blue eyes and tousled brown hair was weirdly displacing. Alex felt like part of him was already on the way back to the *Rocinante*, and he was a little surprised not to be there already.

"Alex. Hey, hope things are going well out there, and that Bobbie is good."

"Yeah," Alex said to the playback. "Funny you'd ask."

"So, I've been looking into this thing with missing ships? And there's a suspicious hit out at 434 Hungaria. Any chance you have access to a ship? If you need to rent one, feel free to pull the funds from my account. I'd like

you to go see if a ship named the *Pau Kant* is sitting out there parked and dark. Specs on the transponder code attached to this message.”

Alex paused the playback, the skin at the back of his neck tickling. Missing ships was turning into a motif to his day, and it made him uneasy. He played the rest of Holden’s message, rubbing his chin as he did it. There was a lot less to it than he wanted to know. The records on the *Pau Kant* didn’t show it as a Martian vessel, or anything else in particular. Alex set his hand terminal to record, saw what he looked like in the display, combed his fingers through his hair, and started the message.

“Hey, Captain. Got your thing about the *Pau Kant*. I was wondering if I could get a little more information about that. I’m sort of in the middle of somethin’ a mite odd myself.”

He described what had happened to him and Bobbie in lighter tones than he actually felt. He didn’t want to scare Holden when there was nothing the man could do to protect him or Bobbie. Apart from saying that the attackers seemed to have been spooked that Alex had appeared on the scene, he left out the details of Bobbie’s investigation and Avasarala’s. It might have been paranoia, but transmitting that information without another couple levels of encryption seemed like asking for trouble. He did ask what other ships were supposed to have gone missing, and how it might relate to Mars before he signed off.

Maybe whatever Holden was looking into was just coincidence. Maybe the *Pau Kant* and the missing Martian warships were totally unrelated. Wasn’t where Alex would put his money, though.

He checked to see if there was anything from Amos or Naomi, and felt a little let down when there wasn’t. He recorded brief messages for the both of them and sent them out.

In the main room of the apartment the kids’ voices were loud, three conversations going on at the same time, each fighting to be heard over the others. Alex ignored them, accessing the local directory and looking up old names. People he could think of from his time in the service. There were dozens. Marian Costlow. Hannu Metzinger. Aaron Hu. He checked the directory against them, old friends and acquaintances and enemies, looking for who was still on Mars, still in the Navy, still someone who might remember him well enough to go out for a few beers and talk.

By the end of the evening, he had three, and he sent messages to each of

them, then requested a connection to Bobbie. A few seconds later, she appeared on his screen. Wherever she was, it wasn't the hospital. She had on a shirt with a green collar instead of the blue patient's gown, and her hair had been washed and braided back.

"Alex," she said. "Sorry about my brother. He means well, but he's kind of a dick."

"Everybody's related to someone," he said. "You wind up at his place or your own?"

"Neither one," she said. "I need to hire a cleanup crew to get the blood off my floor, and I'm doing a solid security audit to figure out how they got in."

"Yeah. Wouldn't feel safe until that's done," Alex agreed.

"Right? And if there is a follow-up attack, I'm sure as hell not staying where it's going to catch Ben and his wife in the crossfire. I popped for a hotel room. They've got their own security, and I can pay for extra surveillance."

Min's voice rose in the background, calling for calm. There was laughter in her tones, and he heard it echoed in the protests of her children. A tightness like a hand closed over his heart. He hadn't thought about a follow-up attack. He should have.

"They got a spare room at that hotel?" he asked.

"Probably. You want me to find out?"

"Nah, I'll just pack up and head over, if that's all right. They don't, someone will." *And whoever it is, it won't be Min*, he thought but didn't say. "I got a few people I thought I'd try chatting up in the next few days. See if anything seems likely."

"I really appreciate this, Alex," Bobbie said. "We should talk about how to manage that safely. I don't want you walking into a trap."

"Wouldn't make me happy either. Also, you don't have access to a ship, do you?"

Bobbie blinked at the non sequitur. "What kind of ship?"

"Something small and fast," Alex said. "May need to get out to the Belt, take a gander at something for Holden."

"Well, actually, yeah," Bobbie said. "Avasarala gave me the old racing pinnace we took from Jules-Pierre Mao back in the day. It's pretty much just been sucking dock fees, but I could probably get it polished up."

“You’re kiddin’. She gave you the *Razorback*?”

“Not kidding. I think it was her way of paying me without actually paying me. She’d probably be confused that I haven’t sold it yet. Why? What’s up?”

“I’ll let you know when I hear more,” Alex said. “Maybe something, maybe nothing.”

But either way, he thought, it’ll get you and me both where it’s hard as hell to have someone make a follow-up attack.

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Chapter Sixteen: Holden

The security footage from Tycho Station covered almost all of the public spaces. The wide, open common corridors, the thinner access ways. Gantries and maintenance corridors. It seemed like the only places the eyes of station security didn't reach were the businesses and personal quarters. Even the storage lockers and tool shops had cameras logging whoever went in or out. It should have made things easy. It didn't.

"This has got to be it," Holden said, tapping a finger against the screen. Under his nail, Monica's doorway opened. Two people came out. They wore light blue jumpsuits with no signs or insignia, dark, close-fitting caps, and work gloves. The crate they wheeled between them was the same formed plastic and ceramic that food and environmental services used to transport biological materials: raw fungal matter to be textured and flavored, then the foods that were made from them, and—when needed—the processed fecal remains taken back as substrate for the fungus. Magnetic clamps held it to the cart, and the indicator on the side showed it was sealed. It was big enough, maybe, to hold a woman. Or a woman's body.

They'd gone in an hour earlier. Monica had gone in twenty minutes before. Whatever happened, she had to have been in that box.

Fred, scowling and hunched over, marked the crate as an item of interest and put a follow order on it. Holden couldn't tell what the older man was thinking, but his eyes were flat with anger. Anger and something else.

"You recognize them?" Holden asked.

"They're not in the system."

"Then how did they get on the station?"

Fred glanced at him. "Working on that."

“Right. Sorry.”

On-screen, the two men—Holden was pretty sure they were both men—took the crate to a maintenance corridor, the trace clicking over from camera to camera automatically. In the narrower space, the crate bumped against the walls and tried to bind up where the corridor turned.

“Doors and corners,” Holden said.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The security trace showed men and cart entering a warehouse. Pallets of similar crates filled the space. The men guided the cart to a half-filled one, unlocked the clamps, and hauled the crate up and onto the pallet with its siblings. Fred split the display, holding the trace on the cart, but adding one to each of the two men. One panel showed the storage space; the other followed the two figures out to the common corridors.

In the warehouse, a pair of mech drivers came, logged in from lunch, and resumed the task of piling on crates. In the common corridor, the two men went into a lavatory and didn’t come out. The trace on them flickered forward until the green border that marked a live feed framed the images. A short call to the warehouse manager verified that the two men hadn’t holed up there; they’d just disappeared. The cart, still going through the older records, was buried in among others just like it. Fred advanced the feed. Mech drivers came and went. Pallets filled and were piled on top of each other.

“Present status,” Fred said, and the security feed skipped forward without moving away from the warehouse camera. Whatever had been in the crate was still there.

“Well,” Fred said, rising to his feet, “this is about to turn into an unpleasant day. You coming?”

The environmental controls in the warehouse showed no anomalies, but Holden couldn’t help imagining he smelled something under the oil and ozone. A smell like death. The mech driver was a fresh-faced young woman with straight brown hair the same color as her skin. Her expression as she moved the crates back out from the pallet spoke of excitement and curiosity and barely constrained dread. With every crate that came off, Holden’s gut went tighter. Monica had told him that involving other people in his investigation was dangerous. He couldn’t help thinking that whatever they

found in the next few minutes was going to be his fault.

And so fixing it would be his responsibility. Assuming it could be fixed.

“That’s the one,” Fred said to the mech driver. “Put it over here.”

She maneuvered the container to the empty decking. Its magnetic clamps engaged with a deep thump. The indicator still showed that it was sealed. Even if Monica had been put into the thing alive, her air would have run out hours ago. The mech backed away, settling onto titanium and ceramic haunches. Fred stepped forward, lifted his hand terminal, and tapped in an override. The indicator on the crate shifted. Fred flipped open the lid.

The smell was rich and organic. Holden had a sudden powerful memory of being fourteen at his family compound on Earth. Mother Sophie had kept an herb garden by the kitchen, and when she’d turned the dirt before planting, it smelled just like this. The crate was filled to the brim with the soft, crumbling beige of raw fungal protein. Fred leaned forward, pressing his hand deep. Looking for a hidden body. When he pulled his arm back, dust clung to it up to the elbow. He shook his head no. It was an Earth gesture.

“Are you sure it’s the right crate?” Holden asked.

“I am,” Fred said. “But let’s check anyway.”

For the next hour, the increasingly confused mech driver hauled out crates from the pallet and Fred and Holden opened them. When the motes of protein dust in the air set off the particulate warning alarm twice, Fred called a stop.

“She’s not here,” he said.

“I saw that. So that’s kind of weird, right?”

“It is.”

Fred rubbed his eyes with his finger and thumb. He looked old. Tired. When he gathered himself, the sense of power and authority was still there. “Either they switched the crates somewhere between her quarters and here or they doctored the feed.”

“Both of those would be bad.”

Fred looked over at the mech driver as she piled the opened crates into a stack to ship back for reprocessing. When he spoke, his voice was low enough it would only carry to Holden. “Both of which would mean they had a high-level working knowledge of the security system, but not enough

access to wipe the records completely.”

“That narrows it down?”

“A little, maybe. Could be a UN black ops team. They could have done something like this. Or Mars.”

“But you don’t think that’s it, do you?”

Fred chewed his lip. He pulled up his hand terminal, typed in a series of codes, every tap sharp and percussive. An alert Klaxon sounded and gold-and-green alert icons appeared on every display from Holden’s hand terminal to the door controls to the mech status panel. Fred pushed his fists into his pockets with a satisfied grunt.

“Did you just lock down the *station*?” Holden said.

“I did,” Fred said. “And I’m keeping it locked down until I’ve got some answers. And Monica Stuart back.”

“Good,” Holden said. “Extreme, but good.”

“I may be a little pissed off.”



The contents of Monica’s quarters were laid out on the gray-green ceramic counters of the security lab. No blood, no images, and the background soup of DNA from thousands of people who’d been in contact with the objects in the last week, usually with too small a sample to identify an individual. This was what was left. A clothing bag, its zipper ripped and hanging open in a mindless smile. A shirt Holden remembered her wearing when he’d seen her a few days before. Her crippled hand terminal with its shattered display. All the things that hadn’t belonged to the station when it rented her the space. It seemed small, like there wasn’t enough there. He realized it was just that he was thinking of it as the collection of a lifetime. Probably she had other possessions somewhere else, but maybe she didn’t. If they didn’t find her alive, maybe this was all she’d have to leave behind.

“You cannot be fucking serious,” Sakai said for what seemed like the third or fourth time. The chief engineer’s face was red, his jaw set. He’d arrived at the security station a few minutes after Fred and Holden, and Holden was a little surprised Fred hadn’t had him thrown out yet. “I have eight ships inbound within the next week. What am I supposed to do? Tell

them to match orbit and float until we decide whether we'll let them in?"

"Seems like a good start," Fred said.

"We have supplies due to ship on half a dozen contracts."

"I'm aware of that, Mister Sakai." Fred's voice was no louder; there was no anger in it. The cool politeness made the hair on the back of Holden's neck rise. Sakai seemed to feel it too. It didn't stop him, but his voice went from accusatory to almost wheedling.

"I've got shipments on two dozen jobs due to go *out*. There are a lot of people counting on us."

For a moment, Fred's shoulders seemed to sag, but his voice was just as strong. "I'm aware of that. We'll open up for business again as soon as we can."

Sakai wavered, on the edge of saying something more. Instead, he made a short, impatient sigh and walked back out as the head of security came in. She was a thin-faced woman Fred called Drummer, but Holden didn't know if that was her first name, her last, or just something she went by.

"How's it going?" Fred asked.

"Nothing we can't handle," she said. Her voice had a crisp accent that Holden couldn't place. She glanced at him, nodded curtly, and turned back to Fred. "Do we have any information we can give on how long we expect the lockdown to be in effect?"

"Tell them the interruption of service will be as brief as possible."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Drummer said, then turned away.

"Drummer. Close the door when you go, eh?"

Her eyes flickered, cut back to Holden, then away again. She didn't say anything, but she pulled the door closed behind her when she left. Fred gave Holden a mirthless, tired smile.

"Sakai's right. I just shut down the equivalent of a major port city because of one missing woman. Every hour I keep it like this, Tycho's losing thousands of credits in a dozen different scrips."

"So we'll have to find her quickly."

"If they haven't already fed her into the recyclers and broken her down to water and a few active molecules," Fred said. And then a moment later, "I have the sensor arrays sweeping the local area. If she's been spaced, we'll know it soon."

"Thank you," Holden said, leaning against the counter. "I know I don't

say it often, but I do appreciate this.”

Fred nodded to the door. “You see her? Drummer?”

“Sure.”

“I’ve been working with her directly for three years. Knew who she was for ten before that.”

“All right,” Holden said.

“If you’d asked me yesterday, I’d have told you I trusted her with my life.”

“Now?”

“Now there is exactly one person on this station who I’m certain isn’t going to shoot me in the back of the head if I keep pressing on this, and that’s you,” Fred said.

“That’s got to be uncomfortable.”

“It really is. So what I mean to say, James, is that while I am glad that you appreciate all I’m doing for you, I’m also taking you on right now as my personal bodyguard. In return, I’ll try to keep anyone from shooting you.”

Holden nodded slowly. Something in the back of his brain was shifting, like a thought that wasn’t quite formed. A wave of vertigo washed over him like he was looking over a cliff. “Two of us against a deep OPA conspiracy.”

“Until I have evidence to the contrary, yes.”

“That really is an uncomfortable position to be in, isn’t it?”

“Not what I would have picked, no,” Fred said. “But someone knows how to circumvent my security systems, and whatever your reporter friend was doing was enough to spook them into action direct enough to tip their hand.”

“The missing ships,” Holden said. “There were a couple of people I mentioned it to.”

“That’s not something you do.”

“In retrospect, I wish I’d played it a little closer to the vest, but—”

“Not that,” Fred said. “When you’ve infiltrated the enemy security structures, you don’t do anything that shows that you’ve managed it. It’s basic information warfare. As long as the enemy doesn’t know they’re compromised, you can keep gathering intelligence. That’s not something you give up unless the stakes are unimaginably high or...”

“Or?”

“Or the enemy you’ve compromised isn’t going to be around very long anyway. I don’t know if those missing ships spooked someone into making a stupid mistake, or if my position on Tycho is so precarious that it doesn’t matter anymore whether I know.”

“You seem to be taking it all in stride.”

Fred hoisted an eyebrow. “I’m panicking on the inside,” he said in a deadpan.

Holden looked over the pile of Monica’s belongings as if they might have something to add to the conversation. The hand terminal blinked forlornly. The blouse hung loose and sad.

“Did you pull anything from her terminal?” he asked.

“We can’t connect to it,” Fred said. “All the diagnostics are disabled or sunk in third-party encryption. Journalists.”

Holden picked up the hand terminal. The shattered display was a mess of light scatter. The only sections that still had anything close to recognizable were a blinking red button in one corner and a few letters in a particularly large shard: NG SIG. Holden tapped the red button and the hand terminal flashed once. The button was gone, the letters replaced by something pale brown with a line across it, a single jigsaw puzzle piece floating in a sea of noise-light.

“What did you do?” Fred asked.

“There was a button,” Holden said. “I pushed it.”

“Jesus Christ. That really is how you go through life, isn’t it?”

“But look. It... I think I may have accepted an incoming signal.”

“From what?”

Holden shook his head. Then turned back to the pile of Monica’s belongings, the tiny half-thought that had been bothering him slipping into his consciousness with something like relief.

“Her video capture,” he said. “She has a little wearable interview rig. It’s intentionally unobtrusive so that the person she’s talking to sort of forgets they’re on camera.”

“And?”

Holden spread his hands. “It’s not here.”

Fred moved forward, his lips thin, his eyes shifting over the mess of

light from the broken screen. Holden had a sense of movement, as if the image was shifting slightly. Voices came from the far side of Fred's office door. A man's voice raised in anger; Drummer's calm, clipped reply.

"Are you sure we can't get into this hand terminal?" Holden said.

"Positive," Fred said, "but there may be another way. Come on. If we're going to solve this, we're going to need an imaging astronomer."



Once Fred explained the problem, it took three hours to set up a rig that would capture the glow coming from the scattered screen and an hour more to get the computer to understand its new task. The properties of light coming off extrasolar dust clouds were apparently very different from a busted terminal display. Once the expert systems were convinced that the problem fit inside their job description, the lab went to work matching polarizations and angles, mapping the fissures in the surface of the display, and building a computational lens that couldn't exist in the physical world.

Fred had emptied the lab and sealed it. Holden sat on a chair, listening to the tick-tick-tick of the scanners recording photons and watching the image on the display slowly cohere. Fred hummed to himself, a low, slow tune that seemed melancholy and threatening at the same time. The empty stations and desks highlighted how alone the two of them were in a station filled with people.

A computational run ended. The image updated. It was still rough. Rainbow-colored deformations crossed it and sections were simply missing; it looked like the beginning of a migraine.

But it was enough. Several empty meters, ending in a square metal door complicated by an industrial bolt mechanism. Walls, ceiling, and floor marked with scuffed yellow paint and stippled by guide holes where pallets and crates would stack.

"That's a storage container," Fred said. "She's in a shipping container."

"The way the image moves. Is that her? Is she moving?"

Fred shrugged.

"Because if she's moving, then she's probably alive, right?"

"Could be. If she's alive, it's because they want her alive. And off

Tycho. Look at that.”

Holden followed Fred’s finger. “It’s the edge of the doorway?”

“The door’s sealed. You don’t do that until it’s ready to ship. There are probably a quarter million containers like that on the station, but I’d bet we don’t have more than a few thousand sealed and ready to go out. Whoever wants her, they want her someplace we can’t get her back from.”

Holden felt something in his gut relax. She was out there, and she was okay. Not safe, not yet. But not dead. He hadn’t realized how much the guilt and fear had settled down on his shoulders until the moment of hope lifted it.

“What?” Fred said.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“But you made that noise.”

“Oh,” Holden said. “Yeah, I was just noticing how having everyone I care about gone makes it really important that I not screw up the things I can control.”

“Good insight. Well done.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Little bit. But I’m also running a targeted security scan of the shipping containers on the float. And guess what?” Fred gestured to the display on the desk before him. The great emptiness of the Tycho work sphere was drawn in thin, clean schematic lines. From habit, Holden’s gaze went to the *Rocinante*. Fred pointed beyond it to a floating cluster of metal containers. “One of them’s warm.”

Chapter Seventeen: Alex

Alex had spent a fair amount of his training time at Hecate Base, and going back now was strange in a couple ways. There were the sorts of changes that he'd become accustomed to on Mars—old bars gone, new restaurants in place, the crappy handball courts converted to an administrative center, things like that. But driving his cart through the wide corridors, the thing that struck him most was how young everyone was. Cadets strutted in front of the bar that had once been the Steel Cactus Mexican Grill and sold to-go cups of Thai food now, their chins up and their chests out looking like they were playing dress-up. The ads on the screens were all for weapons and churches, singles services designed for people on tours of duty, and life insurance tailored for the families they left behind. They were the sorts of things that promised control or comfort in an uncertain universe. Alex remembered ads like that from decades before. The styles had changed, but the needs and subterranean fears that fueled them were the same.

Alex had worn the uniform, told the jokes. Or at least the same kind. He'd wondered whether there would be violence when he got out with a mixture of hope and dread. He'd pretended to be tougher than he was in hope of becoming tougher. He remembered how serious it had all been. The time Preston had gotten drunk and started a fight with Gregory. Alex had been pulled into it, and they'd all ended up before the MPs, certain their careers were over. The time Andrea Howard got busted cheating and had been dishonorably discharged. It had felt like someone died.

Now, looking at these kids, of course there was brawling and stupid decisions. They were children. And so he'd been a child when he was there too, and his choices had been made by a guy who didn't know any better.

He'd married Talissa when he was about that old. They'd made their blueprints for how he'd serve his tours and then come home. All their plans had been made by kids this young. Looked at that way, it made sense how nothing had worked out.

The other thing that surprised him was that *everyone* seemed to know who he was.

He parked his cart outside a teahouse called Poush that had survived the years since he'd served. The blue-and-gold awning put a gentle shadow over the glassed doorway. Faux-aged paint on the window curved in art nouveau framing with phrases in French. Alex figured the intention was to evoke the idea of some Parisian café of centuries before for people who'd never so much as stepped on the same planet as France. It was strange that the quaint feeling translated so well.

Inside, a dozen small tables with real linen cloth crowded together. The air was thick with the scent of the local qahwa—almonds and cinnamon and sugar. Captain Holden had a thing for coffee, and Alex felt a moment's regret that he was off on Tycho Station where he couldn't smell this. Before he could finish the thought, Fermín boiled up out of his chair and wrapped his arms around him.

"Alex!" Fermín shouted. "Good God, man. You got fat."

"No," Alex said, returning the hug and then breaking it. "That was you."

"Ah," his old friend said, nodding. "Yes, that was me. I forgot. Sit down."

The waiter, a young man of maybe eighteen, looked out from behind the kitchen door and his eyes widened. The smile pretended to be the customary politeness, but when he ducked back Alex could hear him talking to someone. He sounded excited. Alex tried not to feel awkward about that.

"Thanks for this," Alex said. "I don't like to be the guy who doesn't keep in touch until he needs a favor."

"And yet," Fermín said. The years had turned his stubble gray and thickened his jowls. Alex felt like if he squinted, he could still see the sharp-faced man he'd served with hidden somewhere in him. It was easier to see him in his gestures when he waved Alex's concern away. "It's nothing. Happy to do a favor for a friend."

The waiter came out of the kitchen, nodding. The wide-mouthed cup in

his hand steamed. He put it in front of Alex almost shyly.

“Specialty of the house,” the boy said. “For you, Mr. Kamal.”

“Ah,” Alex said. “Thank you.”

The boy nodded again and retreated. Alex chuckled uncomfortably at the cup, and Fermín grinned. “Come on now. You’ve got to be used to this kind of thing, right? You’re Alex Kamal. First pilot through the Ring.”

“Naw, just the first one that lived.”

“Same thing.”

“And I surely didn’t want to be,” Alex said. “They were shooting at me.”

“And that makes it less romantic?”

Alex blew across the surface of the cup and sipped at it. Chai with honey and cardamom and something else he couldn’t quite place. “That trip was a lot of things,” he drawled. “Romantic wasn’t one of ’em. And usually since then I’ve had the captain around to soak up the attention.”

“Probably different elsewhere. But you’re a local boy. One of us who got out and made good.”

“Is that what happened?”

Fermín spread his hands, the gesture taking in the teahouse, the corridor outside, Hecate Base, and Mars. “I’ve been here the whole damned time. Made it as far as chief petty officer. Two divorces and a kid in upper university calls me twice a year to borrow money.”

“Bet you had fewer people shooting at you, though. It’s not as much fun as you make it sound.”

“Suppose not,” Fermín said. “Grass is always greener.”

For an hour, more or less, they sat drinking chai and eating almond cookies—though fewer of those than they had when they’d been younger. Fermín brought him up to speed on half a dozen of the others that they’d known in common back in the day. The chai was good and Fermín jovial. It was hard to say what it was exactly that left Alex melancholy. When the time came to leave, the boy wouldn’t take their money. He just said “On the house” when they tried.

The checkpoint into the base proper was manned by a security team that had Fermín glance into a facial recognition setup. Once he cleared, they checked Alex for weapons and contraband and issued him a visitor pass. The process was less than five minutes, and leisurely at that. Alex followed

Fermín to a moving walkway and leaned against the rail with him as it drew them forward, deeper into Olympus Mons.

“So this guy,” Alex said.

“Commander Duarte? You’ll like him. Everyone likes him. Admiral Long’s aide. Has been for the last ten years.”

“Long hasn’t retired?”

“She’ll die at her desk,” Fermín said. He sounded just on the edge of resentful, but his smile covered whatever it was over.

“I appreciate you setting this up.”

“Not a problem. Duarte was excited to meet you.”

“Really?”

“Why the surprise? You’re pilot of the *Rocinante*. You’re famous.”



Winston Duarte’s office was plain and comfortable. The desk was simple pressed polycarbonate, a little larger maybe than the receptionist’s in the lobby. The screen on the wall was set to a calm semi-abstract piece that flowed in sepia and brown, evoking fallen leaves and mathematical proofs in roughly equal proportions. The only touch of luxury was a shelf of what appeared to be actual printed books on military strategy. The man himself fit in the space like he’d been designed for it. Half a head shorter than Alex with acne-pocked cheeks and warm brown eyes, Duarte radiated politeness and competence. After they shook hands, he took the seat beside Alex rather than cross back behind his desk.

“I have to say I’m a little surprised at the visit,” Duarte said. “Most of my dealings with the OPA are formal.”

“The *Roci*’s not OPA.”

Duarte’s eyebrows ticked up a millimeter. “Really?”

“We’re more of an independent contractor. We’ve taken jobs from the OPA, but Earth’s paid some of our bills. Private companies too, if the job’s a good fit.”

“I stand corrected. All the same, I’m honored. What can I do for you, Mr. Kamal?”

“Call me Alex for one thing. I’m not here officially. I mean, I’m on

leave from the ship. Came back to the old stompin' grounds for a visit, came across an old friend who needed a hand with something, and one thing led to another."

"Which led you to me," Duarte said. His smile was sudden and warm. "I'll count myself lucky for that. What's on your friend's mind?"

"Missing ships."

Duarte went still, his smile still perfectly in place. For a moment, it was like the man had become a statue. When he moved again, he sat back, leaning into the chair with a barely exaggerated casualness that plucked at Alex's ears. "I'm not aware of any ships that have gone missing. Is there something I should know about?"

Alex folded his hands on his knee. "My friend. She's a marine. Well, ex now. She's been doing a little digging into the black market."

"A journalist, then?"

"A patriotic Martian," Alex said. "She's not looking to stir up anything, and neither am I. But she's found some things that got her back up."

"Things like what?"

Alex lifted a finger. "I'll get there in a minute. Thing is, she's not Navy. Doesn't have friends and contacts on our side. So she asked if I'd ask, and when I did—"

"Chief Petty Officer Beltran sent you to me," Duarte said. "I see."

"Did he make a mistake?"

Duarte was quiet for a long moment, his eyes soft and fixed on nothing. Alex shifted in his seat. These sorts of conversations weren't part of his usual duties, and he couldn't tell if it was going well or poorly. Duarte sighed. "No. He didn't."

"You're... you're seeing things too. Aren't you?"

Duarte stood and moved to the door, not touching it, but looking. His head bent a degree. "This isn't the sort of thing we talk about. I don't break the chain of command."

"I respect that," Alex said. "I'm not asking you to be disloyal to anyone. Only I have some information, you maybe have some too. I'll tell you what I'm comfortable sharing, you do the same. Maybe we can do each other some good."

"I have an investigation in progress."

"Anything I give you, I don't mind your passing on," Alex said. "And

maybe it'd be best if it was like that for you too."

Duarte considered, his lips pressing together. "All right. What have you got?"

"Blips in the inventories. Things that got lost or destroyed that showed up again later. Weapons. Medical supplies."

"Ships?"

"Yeah," Alex said. "Ships."

"Give me a name."

"*Apalala*."

Duarte seemed to deflate. He went to his desk and sank into the chair behind it, but when he spoke, his voice had a relaxed tone that made Alex feel like he'd passed a test. Like the false and cordial ease that had begun the meeting had fallen away like a mask.

"That's one I've been looking at too," Duarte said.

"What are you seeing?"

"I don't know. Not exactly. We're stretched thin. You know that?"

"People heading out for the new planets."

"Inventories are running slow. I think more of them are being dry-labbed than anyone wants to admit. I've been trying to convince the admiral that it's a problem, but either she doesn't understand or..."

"Or?"

Duarte didn't finish his thought. "There has been a pattern of attacks too. They may be political or it may just be theft and piracy. You heard about the attack on Callisto?"

"Heard about it."

"Have you come across anything about it particularly?"

"No."

Duarte clenched his jaw in disappointment. "There was something about that one that bothers me, but I can't put my finger on it. The timing was precise. The attack was well coordinated. And for what? To loot a shipyard?"

"What did they take?"

Duarte's gaze clicked onto Alex. His smile was sorrowful. "I don't know. Nobody knows. I think nobody will ever know, because I can't even figure out what was there. That's how bad it is."

Alex scowled. "You're telling me that the Martian Navy doesn't know

where its own ships are?”

“I’m telling you that the tracking of supplies, ships, and material has all but collapsed. We don’t know what’s missing because *we don’t know*. And I’m telling you that the leadership is so focused on trying not to lose face in front of Earth and the OPA that they’re downplaying it.”

“Covering it up.”

“Downplaying it,” Duarte said. “Prime Minister Smith is making a big show *right now* of taking a convoy to Luna to meet with the UN secretary-general and swearing that everything’s fine, and he’s doing that because it isn’t true. If I were a criminal and a black marketer, all this would look like a permanent Christmas.”

Alex said something obscene. Duarte opened his desk and took out a pad of paper and a silver pen. He wrote for a moment, then tore off the sheet and handed it across the desk. In precise, legible handwriting he’d written KAARLO HENDERSON-CHARLES and an address in base housing. The act of physically writing something down, not trusting the information to electronic transfer, felt like either sensible precaution or paranoia. Alex wasn’t sure which.

“While you’re here, I’d recommend talking to Kaarlo. He’s a senior programmer that’s been working on a project that was supposed to coordinate the databases. He was the one who came to me first to say he was seeing problems. If you have specific questions, he may be able to give you answers. Or he may be able to point you to where they are.”

“Will he help me?”

“He may,” Duarte said. “I did.”

“Could you... give him cover?”

“No,” Duarte said, with his sad smile. “I’m not ordering anyone to do anything with you. No offense. You’re not Navy anymore. Whatever we do, you and I, we do as part of my investigation. And I report all of it, down to the letter, to the admiral.”

“Covering your ass.”

“Hell yes,” Duarte said. “You should do the same.”

“Yes, sir,” Alex said.

Fermín wasn’t in the waiting area when he left, so Alex went out and caught one of the moving walkways heading east, toward base housing. His

head felt a little light, like he'd been running the oxygen too lean for too long.

The Navy had always been the thing in his life that didn't change. The permanent factor. His relationship to it might shift. He did his tours, he mustered out, but those changes were all about him. His life, his fragility and mortality and impermanence. The idea that the Navy itself could be fragile, that the government of Mars might stumble or collapse, was like saying the sun might go out. If that wasn't solid, then nothing was.

So maybe nothing was.

Kaarlo Henderson-Charles' hole was in a stretch of a hundred just like it, spare and spartan. There was nothing on the gray-green door to identify it beyond numbers. No flowers in the planter, only dry soil. Alex rang the bell. When he knocked, the door opened under his knuckles. He heard someone grumbling angrily under their breath. No. Not a person. The recyclers on high, scrubbing the air. He caught a whiff of cordite and something like rotten meat.

The body was on the kitchen table in its uniform jumper. The blood had pooled under the chair and splattered along the wall and ceiling. A pistol still hung in the limp right hand. Alex coughed out a laugh of mixed disbelief and despair, then he pulled out his hand terminal and called the MPs.



"Then what happened?" Bobbie asked.

"What do you think? The MPs came."

The hotel lobby was decorated in crimson and gold. A wall fountain burbled and chuckled beside the couches, giving the two of them something like privacy. Alex sipped at his gin and tonic. The alcohol bit a little. Bobbie pressed her knuckles against her lips and scowled. She was looking solid for any other person who'd been tortured and shot, but still a little fragile for Bobbie. The bandages that covered bullet wounds on her left side made an awkward bump under her blouse, but nothing more.

"They questioned you?" she said, barely even making it a question.

"For about eight hours. Duarte was able to give me a solid alibi, though,

so I'm not in prison."

"Small favors. And your friend? Fermín?"

"Apparently his terminal's not on the network. I don't know if he killed the guy or if whoever killed the guy killed him or... anything. I don't know anything." He drank again, more deeply this time. "I may not be good at this whole investigation thing."

"I'm not much better," Bobbie said. "Mostly I've just been shaking the trees and seeing what falls out. So far the only thing I'm really sure about is that something's going on."

"And that people are willing to kill each other over it," Alex said.

"And now that the MPs are involved, they're going to lock down the investigation like it was fissionable. I'm not going to be able to do a damned thing."

"Amateur detective hour does seem to be pretty much over," Alex agreed. "I mean, I can still ask around."

"You did more than enough," Bobbie said. "I shouldn't have gotten you into this in the first place. I just don't like disappointing the old lady."

"I can respect that. But I do kind of wish I knew what was going on."

"Me too."

Alex finished his drink, the ice clicking against his teeth. He had a pleasant warmth in his belly. He looked at Bobbie, saw her looking back at him.

"You know," he said slowly, "just because everything's shut down here, it doesn't mean everything's shut down everywhere."

Bobbie blinked. Her shrug was noncommittal, but there was a gleam in her eyes. "You're thinking about that backwater asteroid Holden was asking about?"

"You've got a ship. There's nothing we can do here," Alex said. "Seems like something we could do."

"Anyone shot at us, at least we'd see it coming," Bobbie said, her nonchalance radiating a kind of excitement. Or perhaps it was the alcohol and the prospect of being in a pilot's chair again making Alex see what he wanted to see.

"We could go," he said. "Take a look. Probably it's nothing."

Chapter Eighteen: Holden

The construction sphere of Tycho Station glittered around Holden, brighter than stars. Ships hung in their berths in all states of undress, the *Rocinante* just one among many. Other ships hung in the center, awaiting clearance to leave. The sparks of welding rigs and the white plumes of maneuvering thrusters blinked into and out of existence like fireflies. The only sound he heard was his own breath, the only smell the too-clean scent of bottled air. The dirty green-gray EVA suit had TYCHO SECURITY stenciled on the arm in orange, and the rifle in his hand had come from Fred's weapons locker.

Station security was on high alert, Drummer and her teams all set to watch each other on the assumption—and Holden was too painfully aware that it wasn't anything more—that if there was a dissident faction within them, they'd be outnumbered by the ones loyal to Fred. When they'd started out from the airlock, Holden had turned on the security system. It highlighted slightly over a thousand possible sniper's nests. He'd turned it off again.

Fred floated ahead of him strapped into a bright yellow salvage mech. The rescue-and-recovery kit looked like a massive backpack slung across the mech's shoulders. A burst of white gas came from the mech's left side, and Fred drifted elegantly to the right. For a moment, Holden's brain interpreted the dozens of shipping containers clustered in the empty space outside the massive warehouse bays as being below them, as if he and Fred were divers in a vast airless sea; then they flipped and he was rising up toward them feetfirst. He turned the HUD back on, resetting its display priorities, and one container took on a green overlay. The target. Monica Stuart's prison, or else her tomb.

"How're you doing back there?" Fred asked in his ear.

“I’m solid,” Holden said, then curled his lip in annoyance and turned his mic on. “I’m solid except that this isn’t my usual suit of armor. The controls on this thing are all just a little bit wrong.”

“Keep you from dying if they start shooting at us.”

“Sure, unless they’re good at it.”

“We can hope they’re bad,” Fred said. “Get ready. I’m heading in.”

As soon as they’d identified the container, Holden had thought they’d send out a mech, haul it into a bay, and open it. He hadn’t thought about the possibility of booby traps until Fred pointed it out. The container’s data showed awaiting pickup, but the frame that should have said what ship it was slated for was garbled. The image from Monica’s feed didn’t show anything beyond the access door. For all they knew, she could be sitting on tanks of acetylene and oxygen wired to the same circuit as the docking clamps. What they knew for certain was that the main doors were bolted and sealed. But even those could be wired to a trigger. The lowest-risk option, according to Fred, was to cut a hole into the visible doorframe and send someone in to take a look. And the only someone he was sure he could trust was Holden.

Fred positioned himself in front of the container’s doors, and the mech’s massive arm reached back and plucked the r-and-r pack loose. Fred unpacked it with a speed and efficiency of movement that made it seem like something he did all the time. The thin plastic emergency airlock, a single-use cutting torch, two emergency pressure suits, a distress beacon, and a small, sealed crate of medical supplies all took their places in the vacuum around him like they’d been hooked in place. Holden had spent enough years bucking ice to admire how little drift each piece of equipment had.

“Wish me luck,” Fred said.

“Don’t blow up,” Holden replied. Fred’s mic cut out on his chuckle, and the mech’s arms swung into motion with a surgical speed and precision. The welding torch bloomed, slicing through the metal while a sealant foam injector followed to keep the air in the box from venting. Holden opened a connection to the lab and the captured image from Monica’s feed. A brightness like a star shone there.

“We’ve got confirmation,” Holden said. “This is the right one.”

“I saw,” Fred replied, finishing the cut. He smoothed the airlock over the scar, pressing the adhesive against the surface, and then opened the outer

zipper. “You’re up.”

Holden moved forward. Fred held out a bulky three-fingered mech claw, and Holden gave it the rifle, scooping up the medical bag and emergency suit.

“If anything looks suspicious, just get back out,” Fred said. “We’ll take our chances with a real demolitions tech.”

“I’ll just pop my head in,” Holden said.

“Sure you will,” Fred said. The angle of the faceplate made Fred’s smile impossible to see, but he could hear it. Holden pulled the outer sheet of the lock over him, sealed it, inflated the blister, and opened the interior sheet. The cut was a square, a meter to each side, black scorch marks with a pale beige foam between them. Holden put a foot on the uncut container door, locking the mag boot in place, and kicked in. The foam splintered and broke inward; the cut panel floated into the container. Dull buttery light spilled out.

Monica Stuart lay strapped in a crash couch. Her eyes were open but glazed, her mouth slack. A cut across her cheek had a ridge of black scab. A cheap autodoc was clamped to the wall, a tube reaching out to her neck like a leash. There didn’t seem to be anything else there. Nothing with a big CAUTION EXPLOSIVES sign anyway.

When Holden grabbed the edge of the crash couch, it shifted on its gimbals. Her eyes looked into his, and he thought he saw a flicker of emotion there—confusion and maybe relief. He took the needle out of her neck gently. A tiny spurt of clear liquid bubbling and dancing in the air. He cracked the emergency medical kit open and strapped it over her arm. Forty long seconds later, it reported that she appeared sedated but stable and asked if Holden wanted to intervene.

“How’s it going in there?” Fred asked, and this time Holden remembered to turn on the mic.

“I’ve got her.”



Three hours later, they were in the medical bay on Tycho Station proper. The room was sealed off, four guards posted outside and all network

connections to the suite physically disabled. Three other beds sat empty, the patients, if there were any, rerouted to other places. It was half recovery room, half protective custody, and Holden could only wonder if Monica understood how much of that security was just theater.

“That wasn’t fun,” Monica said.

“I know,” Holden said. “You’ve been through a lot.”

“I have.” The words were slushy, like she was drunk, but her eyes had the sharpness and focus Holden was used to seeing in them.

Fred, standing at the foot of the bed, crossed his arms. “I’m sorry, Monica, but I’m going to have to ask you some questions.”

Her smile reached her eyes. “Usually goes the other way.”

“Yes, but I usually don’t answer. I’m hoping you will.”

She took a deep breath. “Okay. What do you have?”

“Why don’t we start with how you wound up in that container,” Fred said.

Her shrug looked sore and painful. “Not much to tell there. I was in my quarters and the door opened. Two guys came in. I sent an emergency alert to security, screamed a lot, and tried to get away from them. But then they sprayed something in my face and I blacked out.”

“The door opened,” Fred said. “You didn’t answer it?”

“No.”

Fred’s expression didn’t change, but Holden had the sense of growing weight in the angle of his shoulders. “Go on.”

“I came to when they were loading me into the crash couch. I couldn’t move much,” Monica went on, “but I managed to turn my camera rig on.”

“Did you hear anyone speaking?”

“Did,” she said. “They were Belters. That’s what you’re getting at, isn’t it?”

“It’s one thing. Can you tell me what they said?”

“They called me some unpleasant names,” Monica said. “There was something about a trigger. I couldn’t follow all of it.”

“Belter creole can be hard to follow.”

“And I’d been drugged and assaulted,” Monica said, her voice growing hard. Fred lifted his hands, placating.

“No offense meant,” he said. “Do you remember anything specific that —”

“This is about the missing colony ships, isn’t it?”

“It’s early to say what this is ‘about,’ ” Fred said, and then, grudgingly, “but that’s certainly one possibility.”

“The OPA’s doing it, then. Only you didn’t know about it.”

“I’m not confirming or denying anything, just at the moment.”

“Then neither am I,” Monica said, crossing her arms.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Holden said. “Come on, you two. We’re all on the same side here, right?”

“Not without terms,” Monica said.

Fred’s jaw went tight. “We just saved your life.”

“Thanks for that,” Monica said. “I’m included in the investigation. All of it. Exclusive interviews with both of you. I’ll give you everything I have about the colony ships and my abduction. Even the parts I didn’t tell Holden. And fair warning before I go public with any of this.”

“Wait a minute,” Holden said. “There were parts you didn’t tell me?”

“Final approval before anything sees air,” Fred said.

“Not a chance,” Monica said. “And you need me.”

“Final approval exclusively for issues of security and safety,” Fred said. “And two weeks lead time.”

Monica’s eyes were bright and hungry. Holden had traveled with her for weeks going out to the Ring the first time, and he felt like he knew her. The ruthlessness in her expression was surprising. Fred only seemed amused by it.

“One week lead time, and nothing unreasonably withheld,” she said and pointed an accusing finger at Fred. “I’m trusting you on that.”

Fred looked to Holden, his smile thin and unamused. “Well, now I’ve got two people I know aren’t working for the other side.”



The thing Holden hadn’t known—No, that wasn’t true. The thing Holden had known, but hadn’t appreciated, was the number of ships moving through the rings and out to the vast spread of new planets. Monica’s full logs tracked the almost five hundred ships that had made the transit. Many were smaller even than the *Rocinante*, traveling together in groups to make

a claim on a new and unknown world or else to join newly founded steadings on places with names like Paris and New Mars and Firdaws. Other ships were larger—true colony ships loaded with the same kinds of supplies that, generations before, humanity had taken out to Luna, Mars, and the Jovian moons.

The first one to vanish had been the *Sigyn*. She'd been a converted water hauler a little newer than the *Canterbury*. Then the *Highland Swing*, a tiny rock hopper that had been nearly gutted to put in an Epstein drive with three times the power a ship like that could ever have used. The *Rabia Balkhi* that she'd shown him had the best footage of its transit, but it wasn't the first or the last to disappear. As he went through, he made note of the types and profiles of all the missing ships to forward on to Alex. The *Pau Kant* could be any of them.

There was another pattern to the vanishing too. The ships that went missing did so during times of high traffic when Medina Station's attention was stretched between five or six different ships. And afterward—this was interesting—the ring through which the missing ship had passed showed not a spike in radiation but a discontinuity—a moment when the background levels changed suddenly. It wasn't something that other transits seemed to have. Monica had interpreted it as evidence of alien technology doing something inscrutable and eerie. Knowing what they did now, it looked to Holden more like a glitch left over where the data had been doctored. Like switching the crate that Monica had been taken away in or vanishing into a men's room and never coming out, someone would have had to hide the “missing” ships coming back through the ring. If there was a similar glitch in the sensor data of the ring that led back to humanity's home system—

“Holden?”

The security office around him was empty. Fred had cleared it for his “personal use”—meaning as the center for his private investigation of how deeply he had been compromised. The security personnel Holden had walked past coming in seemed nonplussed to be turned out of their own offices, but no one had raised any objection. Or at least none that he'd heard.

Fred stood in the archway of the short hall that led to the interrogation rooms. He was in civilian clothes, well tailored. A scattering of white

stubble dusted his chin and cheeks, and his eyes were bloodshot and the yellow of old ivory. His spine was stiff though, and his demeanor sharp enough to cut.

“Did you hear something?” Holden asked.

“I’ve had a conversation with an associate of mine who I’ve known for a long time. Light delay always makes these things painfully slow, but... I have a better idea what I’m looking at. A start, anyway.”

“Can you trust them?”

Fred’s smile was weary. “If Anderson Dawes is against me, I’m screwed whatever I do.”

“All right,” Holden said. “So where do we start?”

“If I could borrow you for a few minutes,” Fred said, nodding back toward the interrogation rooms.

“You want to question me?”

“More use you as a prop in a little play I’m putting on.”

“Seriously?”

“If it works, it’ll save us time.”

Holden stood. “And if it doesn’t?”

“Then it won’t.”

“Good enough.”

The interrogation room was bare, cold, and unfriendly. A steel table bolted to the floor separated the single backless stool from three gel-cushioned chairs. Monica was already sitting in one. The cut on her face was looking much better—little more than a long red welt. Without makeup, she looked harder. Older. It suited her. Fred gestured to the seat at the other side for Holden, then sat in the middle.

“Just look serious and let me do the talking,” he said.

Holden caught Monica’s gaze and lifted his eyebrows. *What is this?* She cracked a thin smile. *Guess we’ll find out.*

The door opened, and Drummer walked in. Sakai followed her. The chief engineer’s gaze flickered from Holden to Monica and back. Drummer guided him to a stool.

“Thank you,” Fred said. Drummer nodded and walked tightly out of the room. She might have been pissed at being kept out of the proceedings. Or maybe it was something else. Holden could see how something like this could lead to crippling paranoia pretty quickly.

Fred sighed. When he spoke, his voice was soft and warm as flannel. "So. I think you know what this is about."

Sakai opened his mouth, shut it. And then it was like watching a mask fall away. His features settled into an image of perfect, burning hatred.

"You know what?" Sakai said. "Fuck you."

Fred sat still, his expression set. It was like he hadn't heard the words at all. Sakai clenched his jaw and scowled at the silence until the pressure built up and it became too much to bear.

"You arrogant fucking Earthers. All of you. Out here in the Belt leading the poor skinnies to salvation? Is that who you think you are? Do you have any idea how fucking patronizing you are? All of you. *All* of you. The Belt doesn't need Earther bitches like you to save us. We save ourselves, and you assholes can pay for it, yeah?"

Holden felt a flush of anger rising in his chest, but Fred's voice was calm and soft.

"I'm hearing you say you resent me for being from Earth. Am I getting that right?"

Sakai leaned back on the stool, caught his balance, then turned and spat on the decking. Fred waited again, but this time Sakai let the silence stretch. After a few moments Fred shrugged, then sighed and stood up. When he leaned forward and hit Sakai it was such a simple, pedestrian movement, Holden wasn't even shocked until Sakai fell over. Blood poured down the engineer's lip.

"I have given up my life and the lives of people I care for a hell of a lot more than you to protect and defend the Belt," Fred growled. "And I am not in the mood to have some jumped-up terrorist piece of shit tell me different."

"I'm not scared of you," Sakai said in a voice that made it very clear to Holden he was desperately scared. Holden was a little unnerved himself. He'd seen Fred Johnson angry before, but the white-hot rage radiating from the man now was another thing entirely. Fred's eyes didn't flicker. This was the man who had led armies and massacred thousands. The killer. Sakai shrank from his pitiless regard like it was a physical blow.

"Drummer!"

The head of security opened the door and stepped in. If she was surprised, it didn't show in her face. Fred didn't look at her.

“Mister Drummer, take this piece of shit to the brig. Put him in an isolation cell, and be sure he gets enough kibble and water that he doesn’t die. No one in, no one out. And I want a complete audit of his station presence. Who he’s talked to. Who he’s traded messages with. How often he’s taken a shit. Everything goes through code analysis.”

“Yes, sir,” Drummer said, paused. And then, “Should I take the station off lockdown?”

“No,” Fred said.

“Yes, sir,” Drummer repeated, and then helped Sakai to his feet and ushered him out the door. Holden cleared his throat.

“We need to double-check the work on the *Rocinante*,” he said, “because there’s no way I’m flying something that guy did the safety inspections for.”

Monica whistled low.

“Schismatic OPA faction?” she said. “Well. It wouldn’t be the first time a revolutionary leader was targeted by the extreme wing of his own side.”

“It wouldn’t,” Fred agreed. “What bothers me is that they’re feeling secure enough to tip their hand.”

Chapter Nineteen: Naomi

The beer was vat-brewed: rich and yeasty with a little fungal aftertaste where the hops had been cut with engineered mushrooms. Karal was making hot-plate cousa: thin, unleavened cracker bread heavy with gum roux and hot onion. With Cyn and Naomi and a new man named Miral sharing air with Karal and the hot plate both, the recyclers were working near their top rate for the space. The heat and the spiced air, the closeness of bodies and the just-buzzed relaxation of the alcohol felt like falling backward through time. Like if she opened the door, it wouldn't be the dockside grunge of Ceres Station but Rokku's ship burning for the next claim or the next port.

"So Josie," Cyn said, waving one vast palm. He paused and turned a scowl to Naomi. "Kennst Josie?"

"I remember which one he is," Naomi said.

"Yeah, so Josie sets up shop there, sa sa? Start charging the Earthers to go down the corridor. Calls it..."—Cyn snapped three times, trying to call up the story's punch line—"calls it a municipal tollway. Tollway!"

"And how long did that last?" Naomi asked.

"Long enough we had to get off station before security grabbed us," Cyn said around a grin. Then he grew sober. "That was before, though."

"Before," Naomi agreed, lifting her glass. "Everything changed after Eros."

"Everything changed after the fuckers killed the *Cant*," Miral said, eyes narrowed at Naomi as if to say *That was your ship, wasn't it?* Another invitation for her to tell her stories.

She leaned forward a degree, hiding behind the veil of her hair. "Everything changed after Metis Base. Everything changed after Anderson

Station. Everything changed after Terryon Lock. Everything changed after everything.”

“Ez maldecido igaz,” Cyn said, nodding. “Everything changed after everything.”

Karal looked up. His expression was a mix of camaraderie and regret that meant *Everything changed after the Gamarra*.

Naomi smiled back. It had, and she was sorry too. Being here, with these men, brought up a kind of nostalgia that seeped into everything. All of them would have liked her to tell her stories—being on Eros, riding the first ship through the gate, trekking out to the first colony on the new worlds. Cyn and Karal wouldn’t ask, and so the new one followed their lead. And she kept her own counsel.

Filip was asleep in the next room, his body curled into a comma, his eyes merely closed. They weren’t the profoundly shut eyes of a sleeping baby. The rest of the cell were in other safe houses. Smaller groups drew less attention, and even if they lost one group, the rest could go on. It wasn’t something anyone had said. The strategy was familiar and strange at the same time, like a once-favorite song heard again after years of being forgotten. Karal scooped up the cousa, lifting it off the heating element and spinning it on his fingertips in the same motion. Naomi held out her hand, and he set the cracker down on her palm, their fingers brushing against each other. The simple physical intimacy of close companionship. Of family. It had been true once, and that it was less true now was forgiven by the fact that they all knew it wasn’t what it had been. Since she’d arrived, they’d all been careful not to let conversation stray into anything that put too fine a point on the gap of years she’d been absent.

And so when she broke the unspoken covenant, they would know she’d meant to. And as much as she didn’t want to undo the fragile moment, the only thing worse than talking about it was leaving it all unsaid.

“Filip is looking well,” she said, as if the words carried no extra significance. She bit the cracker, roux and onion flooding her tongue and the back of her nose with salt and sweet and bitter. She talked around it. “He’s grown.”

“Has,” Cyn said, his voice cautious.

Naomi felt years of grief and anger, loss and betrayal at the back of her throat. She smiled. Her voice didn’t waver. “How’s he been?”

Cyn's glance at Karal was nothing, a flicker almost too fast to notice. They were in dangerous territory now. She didn't know if they were looking to protect her from the truth or Filip and Marco from her. Or if they only didn't want a part of the drama that had been and still was her old lover and their son.

"Filipito's been good," Karal said. "Smart boy, and focused. Ser focused. Marco seen after him. Kept him safe."

"Safe as any of us ever are," Miral said, trying to make the words light. The hunger of curiosity was in the man's expression. He hadn't been there when Naomi and Marco had been together. It was like the rest of them were having a conversation, and half the words Miral couldn't hear.

"Que a mí?" Naomi asked.

"We all told him the truth," Karal said, a hardness coming into his voice. "Not going to lie to our own."

Cyn coughed once. He looked at her sideways, like a guilty dog. "When he got old enough to ask, him, Marco tells him how things got harsh. Too harsh. His mother, she needed to step away from it. Put ellas kappa together."

"Ah," Naomi said. So that was the story of who she was. The one who'd been too sensitive. Too weak. From where Marco sat, it might even look like the truth.

But then what must it have been to see who she'd become? XO of the *Rocinante*, survivor of Eros Station, traveler to new worlds. Looked at that way, "too harsh" was a strange thing. Unless it meant she just didn't love her son enough to stay. Unless what she'd run from was him.

"Filipito, he's solid," Cyn said. "Be proud of him."

"Nothing but," Naomi said.

"So," Miral said, his voice fighting and failing for casual. "You ship sui James Holden, yeah? What's that like?"

"Steady work. No room for promotion," Naomi said, and Cyn laughed. After a moment, Miral joined in ruefully. Only Karal kept quiet, and that might only have been from concentrating on the hot plate.

Naomi's hand terminal chimed. She picked it up. Two more messages from Jim. Her fingertip was a centimeter from the button to accept them. His voice was a few small movements away, and the thought pulled at her like a magnet. Hearing him now, even just his recorded voice, would be like

taking a long shower in clean water. She pushed the messages into her hold queue. Soon, and then all of them. But if she started now, she wouldn't stop, and she wasn't done yet. Instead, she put in a connection request to the address the Outer Fringe Exports representative had given her. A few seconds later, the connection hiccupped to life, a red border marking that the channel was secure.

"Ms. Nagata," the young man said. "How can I help you today?"

"Waiting on the ship," she said. "Need to know where we stand."

The man's eyes unfocused for a moment, then his smile sharpened. "We're waiting for the title transfer to update in the base registry, ma'am."

"So the payment's gone through?"

"Yes. If you'd like, you can take possession now, but please be aware you can't be cleared to leave port until the registry updates."

"That's fine," she said, getting to her feet. "Where's she berthed?"

"Dock six, berth nineteen, ma'am. Would you like a representative present for the handover?"

"No," she said. "Just leave the keys in the ignition, and we can take it from here."

"Of course. It's been a pleasure."

"Likewise," Naomi said. "Have a better one."

She dropped the connection. Cyn and Miral were already gathering their few things. Karal scooped up the last cousa from the hot plate with one hand and unplugged it with the other. She didn't need to tell them to alert the others. Cyn was already doing it. Without changing, the air in the room felt suddenly too thick, the heat from the hot plate and their bodies too oppressive. Naomi stepped through the doorway.

"It's time," she said, her voice gentle. She remembered all the drama feeds and films with a mother waking her child up for school. This was the closest thing she would ever have to that, and against her best judgment, she savored it. "Filip. We can go now."

His eyes opened, and for a moment, he wasn't wholly awake. He looked confused. Vulnerable. Young. And then his focus sharpened, and he was himself again. His new self. The one she didn't know.

They cycled the front door and stepped out into the corridor. The cool rotation breeze smelled of damp and ozone. She was still holding Karal's cousa half-eaten in her off hand. She took another bite, but it had gone cold

and the roux was clotting. She dropped what was left in the recycler and tried not to see it as a metaphor for anything else.

Cyn loomed up from the door, his face in its resting scowl. He looked older. Harder. She missed who he'd been when they were young. She missed who she'd been.

"Ready to go, Knuckles?" Cyn asked.

"Hell, yes," she said, and he looked at her more closely. Hearing, maybe, something more in the words than only the affirmation.



The ship was a simple transport skiff so small that the docking clamps holding it seemed about to crush its tarnished sides in. It didn't have an Epstein drive, so most of the hold would be taken up by the propellant mass. It would have to fly teakettle, and even then, a fair stretch of the way they'd be on the float. It was one step better than getting EVA suits and a bunch of extra air bottles, but it would do what they needed. Naomi had bought it at salvage rates, routing money from her share in the *Rocinante* through two anonymized accounts, one on Luna, the other on Ganymede. The final owner of record was Edward Slight Risk Abatement Cooperative, a company that had not existed before it appeared on the registration forms and that would vanish again when the ship was disposed of. The transponders would announce it as the *Chetzemoka*. In all, it represented about half of everything Naomi could call her own, and her name wasn't on any of the paperwork.

It didn't seem like enough. It seemed like too much. She didn't know what it seemed like.

Filip waited in the bay outside the boarding gantry, and so she did too. Cyn and Karal and Miral stood far enough away to give them something like privacy. The berth was a rental space with a red-numbered counter on the wall measuring the minutes left under agreement before its ownership changed. The metal and ceramic walls had the foggy look of sealant breaking down from the constant radiation of space. The air stank of lubricant. Someone had left an old poster on the wall, the split circle of the OPA with a hemisphere of Mars and one of Earth as the circle. Not just

OPA, but militant OPA.

They'd been her people, once.

The others arrived. Josie and Old Sandy. Wings, whatever his real name was. A thick-faced, sorrow-eyed woman with one missing tooth that Naomi hadn't seen before. A shaven-headed man with livid scars webbing the dark flesh of his scalp and the limp of an unhealed foot wound. More. Each of them nodded to Filip as they passed, their expressions a mix of respect and indulgence. All of them knew him better than she did. All of them would ship with him when he left. The ache behind her breastbone would have concerned her any other time. Just now, she knew what it was.

Soft tears threatened, but she blinked them back. Bit her tongue to stop them.

"All well?" Filip asked.

She laughed, and the tightness around her heart grew harder. "Well enough. As soon as the registry updates, we can file a plan and go."

"Good."

"Do you have a moment?"

His gaze flickered up to hers, something like anxiety in his eyes. A heartbeat later, he nodded once and pointed to the corner with his chin. They walked together, and the others gave them space. Naomi's heart beat like she was in danger. She could feel her pulse in her throat.

At the wall of the berth, she stopped. Filip turned to face her. The memory of him as an infant, toothless and grabbing onto her finger with a grin of unmistakable pride intruded powerfully into her mind and she took a moment to shove it away.

"It's been good seeing you," she said.

For a moment, she thought he wouldn't answer, then, "You too."

"The ship," she said. "When it's done, it's yours, all right?"

Filip looked over her shoulder toward the gantry. "Mine?"

"I want you to have it. Resell it, keep the money for yourself. Or hold it, if you want. Yours, though. No one else."

He tilted his head. "You're not coming with?"

"I didn't come here to join back in," she said, then sighed. "I came because he said you were in trouble. I came because of you. Whatever he's doing, whatever he's having you do, I can't be part of it. Not before. Not now either."

For a long moment, Filip didn't move. Her throat felt too narrow, like she couldn't get air through it.

"I understand," her son said. Her son who was leaving again. Who was going back to Marco and everything he was.

"Your father isn't a good man," Naomi said, the words spilling out. "I know you love him. I loved him too once, but he isn't..."

"You don't have to justify it," Filip said. "You did this for us, and I appreciate it. This is all you're willing to do, and that's disappointing, but he told me it might happen this way."

"You could come with me." She hadn't meant to say it, but as soon as she did, she meant it to her marrow. "The ship I'm on needs crew. We're independent and we're well stocked. Come do a tour with me, yeah? Get to... get to know each other?"

For the first time, a real expression cracked her son's reserve. Three thin lines drew themselves between his brows and he smiled with what could have been confusion or pity. "Kind of in the middle of something," he said.

She wanted to beg. She wanted to pick him up and carry him away. She wanted him back. It hurt worse than sickness that she couldn't have him.

"Maybe after, then," she said. "When you want it, you say it. There's room for you on the *Rocinante*."

If Marco lets you, she thought, but didn't say. If he doesn't hurt you as a way to punish me. And then, a moment later, God this will be weird to explain to Jim.

"Maybe after," Filip said, nodding. He put his hand out, and they held each other by the wrist for a moment. He turned first, walking away with his hands in his pockets.

The sense of loss was vast and oceanic. And it was worse because the loss wasn't happening now. It had happened every day since she'd left. Every day that she'd lived the life she chose instead of the one Marco had prescribed for her. It only hurt so badly now because she was seeing what all those days summed to and feeling the tragedy of it.

She didn't see Cyn and Karal coming up until they were there. She wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm, angry and embarrassed and afraid that a kind word would shatter the composure she still had. A kind word or a cruel one.

"Hoy, Knuckles," Cyn said, his landslide-deep voice low and soft. "So.

No chance kommt mit? Filipito's something. Know he's tight and thin right now, but he's still on mission. When he's not running herd, he can be funny. Sweet too."

"I left for reasons," Naomi said, the words feeling thick and muddy and true. "They haven't changed."

"Your son, him," Karal said, and the accusation in his voice was calming because she knew how to answer it.

"You know those stories about a trapped wolf chewing itself free?" she said. "That boy's my paw. I'll never be whole without him, but I'm fucked if I'll give up getting free."

Cyn smiled, and she saw the sorrow in his eyes. Something released in her. It was done. She was done. All she wanted now was to go listen to every message Jim had left her and find the fastest transport back to Tycho that there was. She was ready to go home.

Cyn spread his arms, and she walked into them one last time. The big man folded around her, and she rested her head on his shoulder. She said something obscene and Cyn chuckled. He smelled of sweat and incense.

"Ah, Knuckles," Cyn rumbled. "Didn't have to fall this way. Suis désolé, yeah?"

His arms tightened around her, pinning her arms to her sides. He reared back, lifting her feet off the deck. Something bit at the flesh of her thigh and Karal limped back, needle still in his hand. Naomi thrashed, slamming her knee into Cyn's body. The vicious embrace pressed the air out of her. She bit Cyn's shoulder where she could reach it and tasted blood. The big man's voice was soft and lulling in her ears, but she couldn't tell what the words were anymore. A numbness spread along her leg and up into her belly. Cyn seemed to fall with her locked in his arms, but he never landed. Only spun backward into space without his legs ever leaving the deck.

"Don't do this," she gasped, but her voice seemed to come from far away. "Please don't do this."

"Had to, Knuckles," Cyn said. "Was the plan immer and always, sa sa? What it's all about."

A thought came to her and then slid away. She tried to land her knee in his crotch, but she wasn't sure where her legs were anymore. Her breath was loud and close. Over Cyn's shoulder, she saw the others standing beside the gantry to the ship. Her ship. Filip's ship. They were all turned to

watch her. Filip was among them, his face empty, his eyes on her. She thought she might have cried out, but it could only have been something she imagined. And then, like a light going out, her mind stopped.

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Chapter Twenty: Alex

When piloting a ship—any ship—there was a point where Alex's sense of his body reached out to subtly include the whole vessel. Coming to know how that individual ship felt as she maneuvered—how the thrust gravity cut out as that particular drive shut down, how long the flip took at the midpoint of a run—all of it made a deep kind of intimacy. It wasn't rational, but it changed how Alex felt about himself. His sense of who he was. When he'd gone from the massive, stately heft of the colony-ship-turned-ice-hauler *Canterbury* to the fast-attack frigate that had become the *Rocinante*, it had been like turning twenty years younger.

But even the *Roci* had tons of metal and ceramic. She could spin fast and hard, but there was an authority behind the movement. Muscle. Piloting the racing pinnacle *Razorback* was like strapping onto a feather in a thunderstorm. There was nothing to the ship but a blister the size of the *Roci*'s ops deck strapped to a fusion drive. Even the engineering deck was a sealed compartment, accessible to technicians at the dock. It wasn't the sort of ship the crew was going to maintain; they had hired help for that. The two crash couches huddled close together, and the compartments behind them were just a head, a food dispenser, and a bunk too small for Bobbie to fit in. There wasn't even a system to recycle food, only water and air. A maneuvering thruster could spin the ship around twice in ten seconds with power output that would have shifted the *Roci* five degrees in twice the time.

If piloting the *Rocinante* required Alex to think of the ship like a knight's horse, the *Razorback* begged for attention like a puppy. The screens wrapped around the couches and covered the walls, filling his whole visual field with the stars, the distant sun, the vector and relative

speed of every ship within a quarter AU. It threw the ship's performance data at him like it was boasting. Even with interior anti-spalling fabric a decade out of fashion and the grime and signs of wear on the edge of the couches, the ship felt young. Idealistic, feckless, and a little bit out of control. He knew if he spent enough time to get used to her, the *Roci* would feel sluggish and dull when he got back. But, he told himself, only for a little while. Until he got used to it again. The thought kept him from feeling disloyal. For sheer power and exuberance, the *Razorback* would have been an easy ship to fall in love with.

But she wasn't built for privacy.

"... as a community, Mars has got its collective asshole puckered up so tight it's bending light," Chrisjen Avasarala continued behind him. "But the prime minister's convoy has finally launched. When he gets to Luna, I'm hoping we can get him to say something that hasn't already been chewed by half a dozen diplomats playing cover-your-ass. At least he knows there's a problem. Realizing you've got shit on your fingers is the first step toward washing your hands."

He hadn't seen the old woman since Luna, but he could picture her. Her grandmotherly face and contempt-filled eyes. She projected a weariness and amusement as part of being ruthless, and he could tell Bobbie liked her. More, that she trusted her.

"In the meantime, you stay out of trouble. You're no good to anybody dead. And if that idiot Holden's plucking another thread in the same knot, God alone knows how he'll fuck it up. So. Report in when you can."

The recording ticked and went silent.

"Well," Alex said. "She sounds the same as ever."

"Give her that," Bobbie agreed. "She's consistent."

Alex turned his couch to look back at her. Bobbie made hers look small, even though it was the same size as his own. The pinnacle was doing a fairly gentle three-quarter-g burn. Over twice the pull of Mars, but Bobbie still trained for full g just the way she had when she was an active duty marine. He'd offered less in deference to her wounds, but she'd just laughed. Still, he didn't need to burn hard.

"So when you said you were working with her?" Alex said, trying not to make it sound like an accusation. "How different is that from working for her?"

Bobbie's laugh was a cough. "I don't get paid, I guess."

"Except for the ship."

"And other things," Bobbie said. Her voice was carefully upbeat in a way that meant she'd practiced hiding her discomfort. "She's got a lot of ways to sneak carrots to me when she wants to. My job is with veterans' outreach. This other stuff..."

"Sounds complicated."

"It is," Bobbie said. "But it all needs doing, and I'm in a position to do it. Makes me feel like I matter, so that's something. Still miss being who I was, though. Before."

"A-fucking-men," Alex said. The lift of her eyebrows told him he'd said more than he'd meant to. "It's not that I don't love the *Roci*. She's a great ship, and the others are family. It's just... I don't know. I came to it out of watching a lot of people I knew and kind of liked get blown up. Could have lived without that."

Bobbie's expression went calm, focused, distant. "You still dream about it sometimes?"

"Yeah," Alex drawled. It felt like confession. "You?"

"Less than I used to. But sometimes. I've sort of come to peace with it."

"Really?"

"Well, at least I'm more comfortable with the idea that I won't come to peace with it. That's kind of the same thing."

"You miss being a marine?"

"I do. I was good at it."

"You couldn't go back?"

"Nope."

"Yeah," Alex said. "Me neither."

"The Navy, you mean?"

"Any of it. Things change, and they don't change back."

Bobbie's sigh was like agreement. The vast emptiness between Mars and the Belt, between the two of them and the distant stars, was an illusion made by curved screens and good exterior cameras. The way the space contained their voices was more real. The two of them were a tiny bubble in a sea immeasurably greater than mere oceans. It gave them permission to casually discuss things that Alex normally found hard to talk about. Bobbie herself was in that halfway space between a stranger and a shipmate that let

him trust her but not feel a responsibility to protect her from what he thought and felt. The days out from Mars to Hungaria were like sitting at a bar, talking to someone over beer.

He told her his fears about Holden and Naomi's romance and the panic attacks he'd had on the way back to Earth from New Terra. The times he'd killed someone, and the nightmares that eventually replaced the guilt. The stories about when his father died, and his mother. The brief affair he'd had while he was flying for the Navy and the regret he still felt about it.

For her part, Bobbie told him about her family. The brothers who loved her but didn't seem to have any idea who or what she was. The attempts she'd made at dating since she'd become a civilian, and how poorly they'd gone. The time she'd stepped in to keep her nephew from getting involved with the drug trade.

Rather than trying to fold into the bunk, Bobbie slept in her couch. Out of unspoken solidarity, Alex did the same. It meant they wound up on the same sleep cycle. Bad for rotating watches, good for long meandering conversations.

They talked about the rings and the protomolecule, the rumors Bobbie had heard about the new kinds of metamaterials the labs on Ganymede were discovering based on observation of the Ring and the Martian probes reverse engineering what had happened on Venus. In the long hours of comfortable silence, they ate the rations that they'd packed and watched the scopes as the other ships went on their own ways: a pair of prospectors making for an unclaimed asteroid, the little flotilla escorting the Martian prime minister to Luna, a water hauler burning back out toward Saturn to gather ice for Ceres Station, making up for all the oxygen and hydrogen humanity had used spinning the rock into the greatest port city in the Belt. The tracking system generated tiny dots from the transponder data; the actual ships themselves were too small and far away to see without magnification. Even the high albedo of the Hungaria cluster only meant the sensor arrays picked them up a little easier. Alex wouldn't have identified that particular centimeter of star-sown sky as being different from any other if the ship hadn't told him.

The intimacy of the *Razorback* and shortness of the trip was like a weekend love affair without the sex. Alex wished they'd thought to bring a few bottles of wine.

The first sign that they weren't alone came when they were still a couple hundred thousand clicks out from Hungaria. The *Razorback's* external sensors blinked and flashed, the proximity reading dancing in and out. Alex closed down the false stars and pulled up tactical and sensor data in their place.

"What's the matter?" Bobbie asked.

"Unless I'm reading this wrong, this is the time when a military ship would be telling us that someone out there's painting us."

"Targeting lasers?"

"Yup," Alex said, and a creeping sensation went up his spine. "Which is a mite more provocative than I'd have expected."

"So there is a ship out here that's gone dark."

Alex flipped through the databases and matching routines, but it was just standard procedure. He hadn't expected to find anything and he didn't.

"No transponder signal. I think we've found the *Pau Kant*. I mean, assuming we can find her. Let's just see what we see."

He started a sensor sweep going in a ten-degree arc and popped open the comms for an open broadcast. "Hey out there. We're the private ship *Razorback* out of Mars. Couldn't help noticing you're pointing a finger at us. We're not looking for any trouble. If you could see your way to answering back, it'd ease my mind."

The *Razorback* was a racing ship. A rich kid's toy. In the time it took her system to identify the ship that was targeting them, the *Roci* would have had the dark ship's profile and specs and a target lock of her own just to make the point. The *Razorback* chimed that the profile data had been collected and matches were being sought. For the first time since they'd left Mars, Alex felt a profound desire for the pilot's chair in the *Rocinante*.

"They're not answering," Bobbie said.

"They're not shooting either," Alex said. "As long as they think we're just some yahoo out joyriding, we'll be fine. Probably."

Bobbie's couch hissed on its gimbals as she shifted her weight. She didn't believe it either. The moments stretched. Alex opened the channel again. "Hey out there, unidentified ship. I'm going to cut thrust here until I hear from you. I'm just letting you know so I don't startle anyone. I'd really appreciate a ping back, just so we all know we're good here. No offense meant."

He cut the drive; the grip of acceleration gravity loosened its hold on him. The gel of the couch launched him gently against his restraints. He could feel his heartbeat in his neck. It was going fast.

"They're deciding what to do about us," Bobbie said.

"That's my guess too."

"Taking them a while."

The *Razorback* announced a visual match, but it wasn't with the data Holden had sent them. The ship with its sights on them wasn't any of the colony ships that had gone missing out in the gates. With an eighty-nine percent certainty, it was a Martian naval corvette, floating dark. Behind him, Bobbie saw the same thing and drew the same conclusions.

"Well," she said. "Fuck."

Profile match completed, the *Razorback* returned to its scanning arc. Another passive contact. If the corvette was the *Pau Kant*, it wasn't out here alone. And then two more. And then six. The *Razorback* picked the nearest one and cheerfully started matching its profile. By reflex, Alex went to activate his point defense cannons. Only, of course, he didn't have any.

"Maybe they'll talk," Bobbie said. He could hear it in her voice that she didn't expect them to. He didn't either. Half a second later, the *Razorback* announced two fast-movers coming from the corvette.

He spun the pinnacle away from the missiles and punched the drive. The couch slammed into his back like a blow. Behind him, Bobbie grunted. With a mental apology to her, he pushed them to ten g, and the pinnacle leaped forward eagerly.

It wasn't going to be enough.

As light as the *Razorback* was, the missiles were an order of magnitude less mass to accelerate. And they didn't carry anything as fragile as a human body. They could pull a much heavier burn and close the gap to target in a matter of hours. He didn't have countermeasures to shoot them down, and there was nothing to hide behind. He didn't even have a load of cargo to drop out the back in hopes the missiles might blunder into it.

His vision started to narrow, darkening at the edges and dancing gold and fractured in the center. He felt the couch's needles slide into his thighs and neck, the juice like pouring ice water into his veins. His heart labored and he was fighting to breathe, but his vision was clear. And his mind. He had to think. His ship was fast, as ships went, but nothing compared to a

missile. There was no cover he could reach in time, and if the missiles were half as good as the ship that fired them, they'd be able to guide themselves right up his drive cone, no matter what he tried to huddle behind.

He could run away, draw the attackers into a line behind him, and then drop core. The vented fusion reaction would probably take out at least the first one. Maybe more. But then they'd be on the float, and at the mercy of a second volley.

Well. A bad plan was better than no plan at all. His finger twitched on the controls. The layout was unfamiliar and the fear that he was coding in the wrong information just because he wasn't on his own damned boat was like a stake in his heart.

Bobbie grunted. He wasn't strong enough to look back at her. He hoped it wasn't pain. High g wasn't a good thing for someone who'd had a bunch of holes pushed through her recently. He told himself it was just the needles feeding her the juice.

An alert popped onto his screen from Bobbie's console. PRIME MINISTER. GUARD SHIPS.

Between the drugs and the panic and the compromised blood flow in his brain, it took Alex a few seconds to understand what she meant. The *Razorback* didn't have point defense cannons or interceptor missiles, but the flotilla heading for Luna did. Alex pulled the data into the plotting system. There was no way they could reach the Martian ships before the missiles caught up with them, but it was just possible—barely—to get inside the range of their antimissile defenses. If he turned course now. If the Martians figured out what was going on and launched almost immediately. And the burn was going to be at the outer limit of what he or Bobbie could handle.

Almost without thinking, he engaged the maneuvering thrusters and the crash couches clicked to match the new vector. The missiles seemed to leap closer, correcting for the new course and anticipating where the pinnacle would be. He sent an emergency signal, broadcast on all standard frequencies, and hoped whoever saw it on the flotilla was a quick thinker. The two spheres—time-to-collision and Martian antimissile range—didn't overlap, but there were only a few hundred clicks between them. Barely an eyeblink at their relative speeds. He shifted to medical control and switched

Bobbie from juice to life support protocol.

Sorry, Bobbie, he thought. *I'd warn you if I had time, but you're gonna need to take a little nap if we don't want you bleeding out.* He watched her vital signs spike and then drop, her blood pressure and core temperature falling like a stone in the ocean. He pushed the ship to fifteen g.

His head hurt. He hoped he wasn't having a stroke, but it'd be fair if he did. Sustained fifteen g was a stupid, suicidal thing to do. He felt the air pressed out of his chest under the weight of his ribs, his skin. The sound of his gasping was like gagging. But the spheres touched now. Minutes stretched. Then fast-movers from the Martian flotilla. It had taken damned long enough, but the defenses were on the way. He tried to type in a message, warning the Martians that there were more ships out there, a dark fleet. He couldn't keep hold of the thought long enough to send it. His consciousness kept blinking, like the universe stuttering.

The medical system flashed up a warning, and he thought it was Bobbie, her old wounds reopening after all. But it was tagged for him. Something in his gut had ripped free. He canceled the alert and went back to watching death get closer.

They weren't going to make it. The lead missile was too close. It was going to take out the *Razorback* before the rescuers could come. Hadn't he had an idea about that? Something...

He wasn't aware of changing course. His fingers just did it. The spheres didn't touch anymore, until he switched to collision to track the second missile. Then, maybe. Maybe.

He waited. The lead missile closed. Five thousand kilometers. Four thousand. He vented the core.

Two hundred kilometers—

The crush of gravity vanished. The *Razorback*, still hurtling through space, stopped accelerating. Behind him, the lead missile died in the nuclear furnace of the rapidly diffusing core. The second missile jittered and turned to avoid the expanding cloud of superhot gas, and four lights burned before him, streaking across his screens so quickly he only knew them by their afterimages.

A fraction of a second later the Martian antimissile defenses destroyed the pursuing torpedo, but he had already lost consciousness.

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Chapter Twenty-one: Naomi

Bist bien, Knuckles?” Karal asked.

The thin, slapped-together galley was too big for so small a crew. Bad design, waste of space. It wasn’t worn; it was cheap. She looked at him from behind the veil of her hair and smiled. “Fine, things being,” she said, making a joke. “Como sa?”

Karal shrugged with his hands. His hair had gotten gray over the years. And the stubble of his beard. It had been as black as the space between the stars once.

He looked at her eyes and she didn’t flinch. “Something to say, me.”

“No secrets between us now,” she replied, and he laughed. She smiled back. The prisoner flirting with the turnkey, hoping a kind thought in his head would help her later. Maybe it would.

The thing that frightened her most was how well she knew how to play it. From the moment she’d come back to consciousness, she talked when people talked to her, laughed when someone told a joke. She acted like her abduction was just one of those things that happens, like using someone’s tools without asking first. She pretended to sleep. Ate as much as she could past the tightness in her gut. And they all treated her like she was the girl she’d been, like they could all ignore the years and the differences, fold her back in as though she’d never gone away. As if she’d never been anyone else. Hiding her fear and her outrage slipped back on so easily, it was as if she’d never stopped.

It made her wonder whether perhaps she hadn’t.

“So I was one,” he said. “Helped with Filipito. Took care.”

“Good.”

“No,” Karal said. “Before that. Sometimes, he was with me.”

Naomi smiled. She'd been trying not to remember those desperate days after she'd told Marco she was leaving. The days after he'd taken Filip. To keep the boy safe, he'd said. Until she got her emotions under control, he'd said. A knot filled her throat, but she smiled past it.

"Those days. *You* had him?"

"Immer, no. But sometimes. Hijo moved, yeah? Night here, two nights there."

Her baby passed around among the people she knew. The manipulation of it was brilliant. Marco using his child as a marker of how much trust he placed in them and at the same time painting her as the crazed one. The dangerous one. Making sure the story in their community was about how solid he was and how close to cracked she'd come. She had the sudden powerful memory of Karal looking in from the kitchen while she broke down in his wife's arms. Souja, her name had been. What must her tears and profanity have looked like to him then?

"Kept it quiet," Naomi said, "and I wouldn't have known. So why say it here?"

Karal's hands shrugged again. "New day. New start. Looking to scrape off some old rust."

She tried to read from his face whether that was true, or if this was just another little cruelty in a form she couldn't call out without looking like the crazy one. If it had been back on the *Roci*, she would have known. But here, now, the balance between fear and anger and trying to control herself swamped little things like truth. It was the beauty of the way Marco had set her against herself. Tell her she was broken as a way to break her, and here they were a decade and a half past, and it still worked.

Then, for a moment, Amos was there, stronger in her memory than the surrounding ship. *It don't matter what's inside, boss. They only care what you do.* She didn't know if it was a memory or just her mind reaching for a place of certainty in an environment where nothing could be relied upon.

If Amos has become my personal touchstone for wisdom, I'm fucked, she thought, and laughed. Karal ventured a smile.

"Thank you for telling it straight," Naomi said. "New start. Scrape off the rust."

And if I ever get the chance to leave you behind in a fire, Karal, then good God you will burn.

A chime sounded, then the acceleration warning came on. She hadn't noticed when the ship had made its flip. Might have been when she was asleep, or slowly over the course of hours so that the rotation was subliminal. It didn't matter. She was cargo here. It didn't matter what she knew.

"Strap in, yeah?" Karal said.

"On my way," she said, launching herself gently to the ceiling, and then back to the deck at the crash couch between Cyn and Wings. It had turned out Wings' real name was Alex, but that space was taken in her mind, so he was Wings forever to her. He smiled to her and she smiled back as she strapped herself in against the gel.

The warning went from an amber glow to a ten-count in soft amber numbers, and at zero the couch lurched up against her, folding her a few centimeters in. The deceleration burn had started. When it stopped, they'd be where Marco was.



After the passageway linked the airlocks, she'd thought there would be some kind of farewell. Hugs and lies and all the things people did at the parting after a long journey. When it didn't happen, she understood that it had only been a long journey for her. The flight from Ceres to the empty space sunward of Mars and the Hungaria asteroids was like going from the couch to the head for them.

Filip emerged from the ops deck looking sharp and hard. No, that wasn't true. Looking like a boy trying to look sharp and hard.

"Check her for weapons," Filip said, biting at the words.

Cyn looked from Filip to Naomi and back. "Verdad? Knuckles been packing, she's been for a long time. Doesn't seem—"

"No prisoners on the *Pella* without a check," Filip said, pulling a fléchette gun from his pocket and not pointing it at her in particular. "Way it is, yeah?"

Cyn shrugged and turned to her. "Way it is."

Filip looked at her, his lips pressed thin. His fingers too aware of the trigger on his gun. He should have looked threatening, but he mostly looked

scared. And angry. Sending a son on a kidnap job was the sort of thing Marco would do. It wasn't that it was cruel, though it was cruel. It wasn't that it would corrode any relationship that they might have had, though it did that too. It was only that it would work. Even putting Filip on Ceres looked like a manipulation now. *Here is your son, where you left him. Come into the mousetrap and take him back.*

And she'd done it. She didn't know if she was more disappointed in Filip or herself. They were two very different kinds of disappointment, and the one pointed at her had more poison in it. She could forgive Filip anything. He was a boy, and living with Marco in his head. Forgiving herself was going to be harder, and she didn't have much practice.

When the outer airlock cycled, she suffered a wave of disorientation. The passage was the usual design of inflated Mylar and titanium ribs. There was nothing about it that looked strange. It wasn't until they'd nearly reached the other side that she recognized the smell of it: tangy and deep and probably carcinogenic. The outgassing of volatile organics from the cloth.

"This is new?" she said.

"We don't talk about it," Filip said.

"We don't talk about much, do we?" she snapped, and he looked back at her, surprised by the bite in her voice. *You think you know what I am*, she thought, *but all you've got is stories.*

The airlock of the other ship was weirdly familiar. The curve was like the airlock on the *Roci*, and the design of the latch. Martian design. And more than that, Martian Navy. Marco had come into a military ship. Inside, soldiers waited. Unlike the ragged group on Ceres, they wore a rough kind of uniform: gray jumpsuits with the split circle on their arms and breasts. Against the clean design of the ship's corridor, they looked like bad costumes in a play with good set design. The guns were real though, and she didn't doubt they'd use them.

The bridge looked like the *Rocinante's* younger brother. After the cheap, barely-enough aesthetic of the *Chetzemoka*, military-grade crash couches and terminal displays looked solid and reassuring. And there, in the center of it all like he'd posed himself, floated Marco. He wore something like a military uniform, but without any insignia.

He was beautiful as a statue. Even now, she had to give him that. She

could still remember when those lips and the softness in those eyes had made her feel safe. Lifetimes ago, that was. Now he smiled, and a strange relief spread through her. She was with him again, and unquestionably in his power. Her nightmare had come true, so at least she didn't have to dread it anymore.

"I've brought her, sir," Filip said, all his consonants sharp enough to cut with. "Mission accomplished."

"I never had a doubt," Marco said. In person, his voice had a richness that recorded messages lost. "Good work, mijo."

Filip gave a little salute, and spun to leave.

"Ah!" Marco said, pulling the boy up short. "Don't be rude, Filip. Kiss your mother before you go."

"You don't have to do that," Naomi said, but—eyes blank and empty—Filip floated over and pecked her cheek with dry lips before returning to the lift. The guards went with him, except for two that took up stations behind her.

"It's been a long time," Marco said. "You look good. The years have been kind to you."

"You too," she said. "Sound different too. When did you stop talking like a Belter?"

Marco spread his hands. "In order to be heard by the oppressing class, one must speak as a member of it. Not only the language, but the diction. The accusation of tyranny, however well-founded in fact, is dismissed unless it is delivered in the manner that power recognizes as powerful. That's why Fred Johnson was useful. He was already iconic of an authority that the authorities understood."

"So you've been practicing, then," she said, folding her arms.

"It's my job." Marco reached up, pushed his fingertips against the upper deck, and floated down toward the control couches. "Thank you for coming."

Naomi didn't answer that. She could feel him already rewriting the past. Treating her like she'd chosen to join him. Like she was responsible for being here. Instead, she nodded toward the ops deck. "Nice ride. Where'd you get it?"

"Friends in high places," Marco said, and then chuckled. "And strange, strange alliances. There are always people who understand that when the

world changes, the rules change with it.”

Naomi tugged at her hair, pulling it down over her eyes, and then, angry with herself, pushed it back. “So then. To what do I owe this setup bullshit?”

Marco’s hurt expression could have passed for genuine. “No setup. Filip was in trouble, you were in a position to get our son out of a bad place that had the potential to get a whole lot worse.”

“And paid for it by being pulled on your ship against my will? I can’t really thank you for that.”

“You should,” Marco said. “We brought you because you’re one of ours. To keep you safe. If we could have explained it all, we would have, but things are delicate, and you don’t stop to explain why you’re protecting someone when the danger’s close. The stakes are the lives of millions of Belters, and—”

“Oh please,” Naomi said.

“You don’t think so?” Marco said, a harshness coming into his voice. “You’re the one who killed us. You and your new captain. The minute those gates opened, all the rest of us were dead.”

“You’re still breathing,” Naomi said, but her anger sounded like petulance even to herself. He heard it that way too.

“You didn’t grow up down a well. You know how little the inners cared about us. The *Chesed*. Anderson Station. The Cielo mine fire. Belter lives don’t mean shit to inners. Never have. You know that.”

“They’re not all like that.”

“Some that pretend they aren’t, yeah?” The accents of the Belt slipped into his voice. And a rattling anger with them. “But they can still go down the wells. There’re a thousand new worlds, and billions of inners who can just step onto them. No training, no rehab, no drugs. You know how many Belters can tolerate a full g? Give them everything, all the medical care, the exoskeleton support mechs, nursing homes? Two-thirds. *Two-thirds* of us could go be cripples on these brave *néo* worlds, *if* the inners pulled together and threw all their money at it. You think that’s going to happen? Never has before. Last year, three pharmaceutical plants stopped even making their low-end bone density cocktails. Didn’t open the patents. Didn’t apologize to any ships don’t have budget for the high-end stuff. Just stopped. Needed the capacity for colony ships and all the new *ganga* they’re making with the

data coming back from the rings.

“We’re leftovers, Naomi. You and me and Karal and Cyn. Tia Margolis. Filip. They’re moving on, and they’re forgetting us because they can. They write the histories, you know what we’ll be? A paragraph about how much it sucks when a race of people go obsolete, and how it would have been more humane to put us down.

“Come. Tell me I’m wrong.”

It was the same ranting he’d done before, but perfected by years. A new variation of the same arguments he’d made on Ceres. She half expected him to say *The Gamarra had it coming. This is war, and anyone who helps choke out the enemy is a soldier whether they know it or not.* Her gut felt like it was made from water. It was a feeling she remembered from the dark times. Something in the back of her head shifted. The serpent of learned helplessness long asleep starting to wake. She pretended it wasn’t there, in hopes that if she denied it enough, it wouldn’t exist.

“What’s it got to do with me?” Naomi asked, less forcefully than she intended.

Marco smiled. When he spoke, it was back in the voice of the cultured leader. The rough-cut Belter thug vanished behind his mask. “You’re one of us. Estranged, yes, but one of us all the same. You’re the mother of my son. I didn’t want you in harm’s way.”

She was supposed to ask what that meant. The path was laid out before her in lights. *What do you mean, harm’s way?* she’d say, and he’d tell her. Watch her eyes go wide. See the fear in her.

Fuck that.

“Didn’t want me,” she said. “Wanted the *Rocinante*, only that didn’t work out. Was it the ship? Or was it Holden? You can tell me. Did you want to show off in front of my new boyfriend? Because that would be kind of sad.”

She felt her breath coming fast, adrenaline pumping through her. Marco’s expression hardened, but before he could speak, the comms chimed and a voice she didn’t recognize echoed on the deck.

“Hast contact,” the woman said.

“Que?”

“Little one. Pinnacle out from Mars. Talking to the *Andreas Hofer*.”

“Scout ship?” Marco snapped.

The pause stretched for seconds. Then, “Looks like just some pinché asshole wrong-placing it. Seen one, seen the whole strike force, though, yeah?”

“How long before the trigger impact?”

“Twenty-seven minutes.” There had been no hesitation. Whoever was on the other end of the comms had known the question was coming. Marco scowled at the control panel.

“Couldn’t have waited a little longer. Would have been prettier without. But fine. Take out the pinnacle.”

“Toda?”

Marco looked over at Naomi, his dark eyes on her. A smile touched his lips. Theatrical asshole that he was.

“No. No es toda. Launch the assault on the Martian prime minister’s ship too. And tell the hunt group to get ready, so that when the duster runs, we can take him down.”

“Sabez,” the woman said. “Orders out.”

Marco waited, hand out like a challenge. “This is the way,” he said. “Make it so they can’t forget us. Take chains they fashioned to bind us and use them as whips. We won’t go down to darkness. They’ll respect us now.”

“And do what? Shut down the Ring?” Naomi said. “Start making your cheap bone drugs again? What do you think shooting a Martian politician’s going to do for ‘our people’? How does that help anybody?”

Marco didn’t laugh, but he softened. She had the sense that she’d said something stupid, and it had pleased him. Despite it all, she felt a twinge of embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, Naomi. We’re going to have to take this up later. But I really am glad you’ve come back. I know there’s a lot of harsh between us, and that we don’t see the world the same way. But you’ll always be the mother of my son, and I will always love you for that.”

He lifted a fist to the guards. “Make sure she’s secure, then get ready for hard burn. We’re heading to the fight.”

“Sir,” one guard said as the other took Naomi by the elbow. Her first instinct was to resist, pull back, but what would the point have been? She pushed off for the lift, her jaw tight, her teeth aching.

“One thing,” Marco said, and she turned, thinking he was speaking to her. He wasn’t. “When you lock her down, make sure it’s someplace she

can watch a newsfeed. Today everything changes. Wouldn't want her to miss it, yeah?"

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Chapter Twenty-two: Amos

Reports at this hour are that a massive asteroid has impacted northern Africa. The Oxford Center in Rabat, five hundred kilometers west of the event, is estimating eight point seven five on the Richter scale at the epicenter.”

Amos tried again to lean back in his chair. It was an uncomfortable little piece of furniture. Just crappy lightweight plastic to start with, then molded in a factory by a machine that didn’t have to sit in it. His first guess was that it had been designed specifically to be awkward and ineffective if you tried to hit someone with it. And then they’d bolted it to the floor. So every five minutes or so, he placed his heels on the textured concrete and pushed back without even knowing he was doing it. The chair bent a little under the pressure, but didn’t get more comfortable, and when he gave up, it bounced right back into its old shape.

“—unseen since Krakatoa. Air traffic is being severely affected as the debris plume threatens both civilian and commercial craft. For further analysis of the situation on the ground, we are going now to Kivrin Althusser in Dakar. Kivrin?”

The screen jumped to an olive-skinned woman in a sand-colored hijab. She licked her lips, nodded, and started talking.

“The shock wave hit Dakar just under an hour ago, and authorities are still taking stock of the damage. My experience is that the city is devastated. We have reports that many, many of the local structures have not survived the initial shock. The power grid has also collapsed. The hospitals and emergency medical centers are overwhelmed. The Elkhashab Towers are being evacuated as I speak, and there are fears that the north tower may have become unstable. The sky... the sky here—”

Amos tried to lean back in his chair, sighed, and stood up. The waiting room was empty apart from him and an old woman in the far corner who kept coughing into the crook of her elbow. It wasn't what you'd call a big place. The windows looked out on an uninspiring two hundred meters of North Carolina, bare from the entrance facility to the perimeter gate. Two rows of monofilament hurricane fencing blocked the path to a two-story concrete wall. Sniper nests stood at each corner, the automatic defense and control weapons stiller than tree trunks. The building was low—a single story peeking up out of the ground with administrative offices and a massive service entrance. Most of what happened here happened underground. It was exactly the kind of place Amos had never hoped to be.

Good thing was, when he was done, he could leave again.

"In other news, a distress call from the convoy carrying the Martian prime minister appears to be genuine. A group of unidentified ships—"

Behind him, the admin door swung open. The man inside looked like he was one hundred kilos of sculpted muscle and also tremendously bored. "Clarke!"

"Here!" the coughing old woman said, rising to her feet. "I'm Clarke!"

"This way, ma'am."

Amos scratched his neck and went back to looking at the prison yard. The newsfeed kept on being excited about shitty things going on. He'd have paid more attention to it if the back of his head hadn't been planning the ways he'd have pushed to get out of here if they'd sent him, and where he'd have died trying. From the parts he caught, though, it sounded like a good day for reporters.

"Burton!"

He walked over slowly. The big guy checked his hand terminal.

"You Burton?"

"Today I am."

"This way, sir."

He led him to a small room with more chairs bolted to the floor and a table too. The table was solidly made, anyway.

"So. Visitation?"

"Yup," Amos said. "Looking for Clarissa Mao."

The big guy looked up under his eyebrows. "We don't have names here."

Amos opened his hand terminal. "I'm looking for 42-82-4131."

"Thank you. You'll need to surrender all personal effects including any food or beverages, your hand terminal, and any clothing with more than seven grams of metal. No zippers, arch supports, anything like that. While you are inside the prison grounds, you are subject to reduced civil rights, as outlined in the Gorman code. A copy of the code will be made available to you at your request. Do you request a copy of the code?"

"That's all right."

"I'm sorry, sir. I need a yes or no."

"No."

"Thank you, sir. While in the prison, you are required to follow the directives of any guard or prison employee without hesitation or question. This is for your own safety. If you fail to comply, the guards and prison employees are authorized to use any means they deem necessary to ensure your safety and the safety of others. Do you understand and consent?"

"Sure," Amos said. "Why not?"

The big guy pushed a hand terminal across the table, and Amos mashed his thumb onto it until the print read. A little indicator on the side of the form went green. The big guy took it back along with Amos' hand terminal and shoes. The slippers were made out of paper and glue.

"Welcome to the Pit," the big guy said, smiling for the first time.



The elevator was steel and titanium with a harsh set of overhead lights that flickered just a little too quickly to be sure it was really flickering. Two guards apparently lived in it, going up and down whenever it did. So that seemed like a shitty job. At the tenth level down, they let him out, and an escort was waiting for him: a gray-haired woman with a wide face, light armor, and a gun in her holster that he didn't recognize. Something beeped twice as he stepped into the hall, but none of the guards tried to shoot anyone, so he figured it was supposed to do that.

"This way, sir," the escort said.

"Yeah. Okay," Amos said. Their footsteps echoed off the hard floor and ceiling. The lights were recessed into metal cages, making a mesh of

shadows over everything. Amos found himself flexing his hands and balling them into fists, thinking about how exactly he'd have to bounce the guard's head against the wall in order to get the gun off her. Nothing more than habit, really, but the place brought it out in him.

"First time down?" the escort asked.

"It show?"

"Little."

From down the hall, a man's voice lifted in a roar. A familiar calmness came over him. The escort's eyebrows went up, and he smiled at her. Her lips turned up in answer, but there was a different assessment behind it.

"You'll be fine," she said. "Right through here."

The hallway was brutal concrete; green-gray metal doors in a line with identical windows of thick green-tinted glass that made the rooms beyond look like they were underwater. In the first, four guards in the same armor Amos' escort wore were forcing a man to the ground. The woman from the waiting room huddled in the corner, her eyes closed. She seemed to be praying. The prisoner—a tall, thin man with long hair and a flowing beard the color of iron—roared again. His arm flashed out, quicker than Amos' eye could follow, grabbing one of the guards by the ankle and pulling. The guard toppled, but two of the others had what looked like cattle prods out. One of them landed on the prisoner's back, the other at the base of his skull. With one last obscenity, the iron-bearded man collapsed. The fallen guard rose back to her feet, blood pouring from her nose as the others teased her. The old woman sank to her knees, her lips moving. She took a long, shuddering breath, and when she spoke, she wailed, her voice sounding like it came from kilometers away.

Amos' escort ignored it, so he did too.

"Yours is there. No exchange of goods of any sort. If at any point you feel threatened, raise your hand. We'll be watching."

"Thanks for that," Amos said.

Until he saw her, Amos hadn't realized how much the place reminded him of a medical clinic for people on basic. A cheap plastic hospital bed, a steel toilet on the wall without so much as a screen around it, a battered medical expert system, a wall-mounted screen set to an empty glowing gray, and Clarissa with three long plastic tubes snaking into her veins. She was thinner than she'd been on the ride back from Medina Station before it

had been Medina Station. Her elbows were thicker than her arms. Her eyes looked huge in her face.

“Hey there, Peaches,” Amos said, sitting in the chair at her bedside. “You look like shit on a stick.”

She smiled. “Welcome to Bedlam.”

“I thought it was called Bethlehem.”

“Bedlam was called Bethlehem too. So what brings you to my little state-sponsored apartment?”

On the other side of the window, two guards hauled the iron man past. Clarissa followed Amos’ gaze and smirked.

“That’s Konecheck,” she said. “He’s a volunteer.”

“How’d you figure?”

“He can leave if he wants to,” she said, lifting her arm to display the tubes. “We’re all modified down here. If he let them take out his mods, he could transfer up to Angola or Newport. Not freedom, but there’d be a sky.”

“They couldn’t just take ’em?”

“Body privacy’s written into the constitution. Konecheck’s a bad, bad monkey, but he’d still win the lawsuit.”

“What about you? Your... y’know. Stuff?”

Clarissa bowed her head. Her laugh shook the tubes. “Apart from the fact that every time I used them, I wound up puking and mewling for a couple minutes afterward, they’ve got some other drawbacks. If we pull them out, I’d survive, but it would be even less pleasant than this. Turns out there’s a reason the stuff I got isn’t in general use.”

“Shit. That’s got to suck for you.”

“Among other things, it means I’m here until... well. Until I’m not anywhere. I get my blockers every morning, lunch in the cafeteria, half an hour of exercise, and then I can sit in my cell or in a holding tank with nine other inmates for three hours. Rinse, repeat. It’s fair. I did bad things.”

“All that shit the preacher pitched about redemption, getting reformed —”

“Sometimes you don’t get redeemed,” she said, and her voice made it clear she’d thought about the question. Tired and strong at the same time. “Not every stain comes out. Sometimes you do something bad enough that you carry the consequences for the rest of your life and take the regrets to the grave. That’s your happy ending.”

“Huh,” he said. “Actually, I think I know what you mean.”

“I really hope you don’t,” she said.

“Sorry I didn’t put a bullet in your head when I had the chance.”

“Sorry I didn’t know to ask. What brings you down here, anyway?”

“Was in the neighborhood saying goodbye to a bunch of my past, mostly. Don’t see how I’m coming back this way, so thought I’d better say hi now if I was going to at all.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she took his hand. The contact was weird. Her fingers felt too thin, waxy. Seemed rude to push her away though, so he tried to remember what people were like when they had an intimate moment like this. He pretended he was Naomi and squeezed Clarissa’s hand.

“Thank you. For remembering me,” she said. “Tell me about the others. What’s Holden doing?”

“Well, shit,” Amos said. “How much they tell you about what happened on Ilus?”

“The censors don’t let me see anything that involves him. Or you. Or anything involving Mao-Kwikowski or the protomolecule or the rings. It might be disruptive for me.”

Amos settled in. “All right. So a while back, Cap’n gets this call...”

For maybe forty-five minutes, maybe an hour, he laid out all the stuff that had happened since the *Rocinante* turned Clarissa Mao over to the authorities. Telling stories that didn’t have a punch line wasn’t something he had much practice with, so he was pretty sure that as story time went, it sucked. But she drank it up like he was pouring water on beach sand. The medical system beeped every now and then, responding to whatever was happening in her bloodstream.

Her eyes started to close like she was going to sleep, but her fingers didn’t lose their grip on his. Her breath got deeper too. He wasn’t sure if that was part of the medical whatever it was they were doing to her or something else. He stopped talking, and she didn’t seem to notice. It felt weird to sneak out without saying anything, but he also didn’t want to wake her up just to do it. So he sat for a while, looking at her because there wasn’t anything else to look at.

The weird thing was, she looked younger. No wrinkles at the sides of her mouth or eyes. No sagging in her cheeks. Like the time she’d spent down in

the prison didn't count. As if she'd never get old, never die, just be here wishing for it. It was probably some kind of side effect of the shit they'd pumped into her. There were kinds of environmental poisoning that did that too, not that he knew the details. She'd killed a lot of people, but he had too, one way and another. Seemed a little weird that she'd be staying and he'd be walking out. She felt bad about all the things she'd done. Maybe that was the difference. Regret and punishment the flip sides of the karmic coin. Or maybe the universe was just that fucking random. Konecheck didn't look like he had a lot of regrets, and he was locked up just the same.

Amos was about to start trying to get his hand free when the Klaxons went off. Clarissa's eyes shot open and she sat up, present and alert and not even sort of groggy. So maybe she hadn't been asleep after all.

"What is that?" she said.

"I was about to ask you."

She shook her head. "I haven't heard that one before."

It seemed like the right time to get his hand back. He went to the door, but his escort was already there coming in. She had her weapon drawn, but not pointing at anything.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, and her voice was higher than it had been before. She was scared. Or maybe excited. "This facility has been put on lockdown. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to remain in here for the time being."

"How long are we talking about?" he asked.

"I don't know the answer to that, sir. Until the lockdown is lifted."

"Is there a problem?" Clarissa asked. "Is he in danger?"

That was a good move. No guard ever gave a fuck whether the prisoner was in danger, so she was asking about the civilian. Even so, the escort wasn't going to say a goddamn thing unless she wanted to.

Turned out, she wanted to.

"A rock came down outside Morocco about three hours ago," she said, her sentence curling up at the end like it was a question.

"I saw something about that," Amos said.

"How did it get through?" Clarissa asked.

"It was going very, very fast," the escort said. "Accelerated."

"Jesus," Clarissa said, like someone had punched her in the chest.

"Someone dropped a rock on purpose?" Amos said.

“Rocks. Plural,” the escort said. “Another one came down about fifteen minutes ago in the middle of the Atlantic. There’re tsunami and flood warnings going out everywhere from Greenland to fucking Brazil.”

“Baltimore?” Amos said.

“Everyplace. Everywhere.” The escort’s eyes were getting watery and wild. Panic maybe. Maybe grief. She gestured with her gun, but it just looked impotent. “We’re on lockdown until we know.”

“Know what?” Amos said.

It was Clarissa that answered. “If that was the last one. Or if the hits are going to keep on coming.”

In the silence that came afterward, they weren’t guard, prisoner, and civilian. They were just three people in a room.

The moment passed.

“I’ll be back with an update as soon as I have one, sir.”

Amos’ brain ran through all the scenarios that came easy and didn’t see many options. “Hey, wait. I know it ain’t for pleasure viewing or nothing, but that screen over there catch newsfeeds?”

“Prisoners only get access in the common area.”

“Sure,” Amos said. “But I’m not a prisoner, right?”

The woman looked down, then shrugged. She took out her hand terminal, tapped in a few lines of text, and the empty gray screen flickered to life. A pale man with broad, soft lips was in the middle of his report.

“—undetected by the radar arrays, we are getting reports that there was a temperature anomaly that may have been related to the attack.”

The guard nodded to him and closed the door. He couldn’t hear it lock, but he was pretty sure it had. He sat back in his chair and propped his heels on the side of the hospital bed. Clarissa sat forward, her bone-thin hands knotted together. The feed switched over to a white-haired man talking earnestly about the importance of not jumping to conclusions.

“Do you know where the first one hit?” Clarissa asked. “Do you remember anything from the news?”

“I wasn’t paying attention. I think they said Krakatoa? Is that a place?”

Clarissa closed her eyes. If anything, she went a little paler. “Not exactly. It’s a volcano that blew itself up a long, long time ago. Sent ash eighty kilometers up. Shock waves went around the world seven times.”

“But it’s not North Africa?”

“No,” she said. “I can’t believe they really did it. They’re dropping rocks. I mean, who would even do that? You can’t... you can’t replace Earth.”

“Maybe you kind of can now,” Amos said. “Lot of planets out there now weren’t around before.”

“I can’t believe someone would do this.”

“Yeah, but they did.”

Clarissa swallowed. There had to be stairs around here. They’d be locked up so that prisoners couldn’t get to them, but Amos figured there’d have to be stairs. He went to the window to the hall and pressed his head against it. He couldn’t see anything down the hall either way. Kicking the glass out seemed unlikely too. Not that he was looking to try. Just thinking.

On the screen, a mushroom cloud rose over a vast and empty sea. Then, as a woman’s voice calmly talked about megatonnage and destructive capacity, a map was displayed with one bright red dot on North Africa, another in the ocean.

Clarissa hissed.

“Yeah?” Amos said.

“If the spacing’s even,” Clarissa said, “if there’s another one, it’s going to be close.”

“Okay,” Amos said. “Can’t do anything about that, though.”

The hinges were on the other side of the door too, because of course they were. It was a fucking prison. He clicked his tongue against his teeth. Maybe they’d take it off lockdown and send him on his way. Might happen. If it didn’t, though... Well, this was going to be a stupid way to die.

“What’re you thinking?” she asked.

“Well, Peaches. I’m thinking that I stayed on this mudball a day too long.”

Chapter Twenty-three: Holden

Holden sat back, light-headed, his eyes still on the screen. The immensity of the news made Fred's office seem fresh and unfamiliar: the desk with the fine black lines of wear at the corner; the captain's safe set into the wall like a little privacy window; the industrial carpeting. It was like he was seeing Fred, leaning forward on his elbows, grief in his eyes, for the first time. Less than an hour earlier, reports had come through with red frames around the feed windows to show how serious everything was. The previous headlines—a meteor or possibly a small comet had struck North Africa—were forgotten. The ships carrying the prime minister of the Martian Republic were being approached by an unknown and apparently hostile force, his escort moving to intercept. It was the news of the year.

Then the second rock hit Earth, and what might have been a natural disaster was revealed as an attack.

"They're connected," Holden said. Every word came out slow. Every thought. It was like the shock had dropped his mind in resistance gel. "The attack on the prime minister. This. They're connected, aren't they?"

"I don't know. Maybe," Fred said. "Probably."

"This is what they were planning. Your dissident OPA faction," Holden said. "Tell me you didn't know about this. Tell me you're not part of it."

Fred sighed and turned to him. The weariness in his expression was vast. "Fuck you."

"Yeah. Okay. Just had to ask." And then a moment later, "Holy shit."

On the newsfeed, images of Earth's upper atmosphere showed the strike like a bruise. The cloud of dust was smearing off to the west as the planet turned under it. The dust plume would keep widening until it covered the whole northern hemisphere—and maybe more—but for now it was just a

blackness. His mind kept bouncing off the image, rejecting it. His family was on Earth—his mothers and his fathers and the land he'd grown up on. He hadn't been back in too long, and now—

He couldn't finish the thought.

"We have to get in front of this," Fred said, to himself as much as Holden. "We have to—"

A communication request popped onto the side of the screen, and Fred accepted it. Drummer's face filled a small window.

"Sir, we have a problem," she said. "One of the ships we've got parked out there waiting to dock just put target locks on the main engines and the upper habitation ring."

"Defense grid up?"

"That's the problem, sir. We're seeing—"

The door of the office opened. The three people who came in wore Tycho Station security uniforms. One carried a large duffel bag; the other two had instruments in their hands that Holden struggled to make sense of. Strange hand terminals, or some sort of compact tool.

Or, guns.

Like someone speaking through the radio, a voice in the back of Holden's mind said *This is a coordinated, system-wide attack* just as the first woman fired. The sound alone was like being struck, and Fred toppled back in his seat. Holden scrambled for his own sidearm, but the second woman had already turned to him. He tried to drop down, to take cover behind the desk, but the two women fired almost simultaneously. Holden caught his breath. Something kicked him just below the rib, and he didn't know if he'd hit the edge of the desk or he'd been shot. He fired wild, and the man dropped the duffel bag. The first woman's head snapped back and she dropped to her knees. Someone else was shooting, and it took what seemed like minutes and was probably less than a second to realize it was Fred, supine behind the desk and firing between his feet. Holden had no idea where Fred had acquired a gun in the seconds since the attack started.

The second woman turned her gun toward Fred, but Holden took a breath and remembered how to aim, hitting her in the ribs. The man fled out the office door. Holden let him go and slid to the ground. There didn't seem to be any blood on him, but he still wasn't sure whether he'd taken a bullet. The first woman struggled to her knees, one blood-soaked hand pressing

her ear. Fred shot her again. She dropped. Like it was happening in a dream, Holden noticed that the duffel bag had fallen open. It had emergency environment suits in it.

When Fred shouted, his voice was strangely high and very far away. The gunfire had left them both almost deaf. “You’re a shitty bodyguard, Holden. Do you know that?”

“No formal training,” Holden shouted back. The words felt louder in his throat than they sounded in his ears. He became aware of another voice shouting, but not from here. From the desk console. Drummer. He stooped over Fred, ignoring her. Blood covered the man’s side, but Holden couldn’t see where the wound was.

“Are you okay?” Holden shouted.

“Just ducky,” Fred growled, hauling himself up. He winced, clenched his teeth, and took his seat. On the monitor, Drummer blanched.

“You’ll have to speak up,” Fred said. “Things got a little loud here. Holden! Secure the goddamn door.”

“Doors and corners,” Holden said, stepping over the bodies. “Always doors and corners.”

Outside, the security office was empty. A light was flashing on the wall. Emergency signal of some kind. Now that he knew to listen for it, he could hear the alarm. Evacuation warning. Someone was evacuating the station ring. That couldn’t be good. He wondered if the good guys had sounded the alert, or if it was just part of the plan. A distraction while something even worse happened. He was having a hard time catching his breath. He had to keep checking to make sure he hadn’t been shot.

He looked at the gun in his fist. *I think I just killed someone*, he thought. And someone dropped a rock on Earth. And then they tried to kill Fred. It was bad. It was all just bad.

He didn’t notice Fred coming up behind him until he took Holden’s elbow, leaning against him for support and pushing him forward at the same time.

“Look alive, sailor,” Fred said. “We’ve got to go. They’ve fired a torpedo at us, and some ratfucker sabotaged my defense grid.” Fred was cursing more than usual. The stress of combat waking up the long-dormant marine inside of him.

“They’re shooting the ring?” Holden said.

“Yes. And in particular, they’re shooting at my office. I’m starting to get the feeling they don’t like me.”

Together, they struggled forward. In the wide corridor, people were scampering to hardened shelters and evacuation stations.

An older man with close-shaved hair and a mouth set in a permanent grimace saw Fred and the blood. Without a word, he took Fred’s far arm across his shoulder.

“Are we heading to medical bay or evac?” Grimace asked.

“Neither one,” Fred said. “The bad guys are trying to take engineering. My men got jumped. They’re pinned down, and there are two enemy torpedoes on their way to disable the engines. We’ve got to relieve our people, and get the grid back up. See if we can’t start firing back.”

“Are you joking?” Holden said. “You’ve been shot. You’re bleeding.”

“I’m aware of that,” Fred said. “There’s a security transfer up here to the left. We can take it. Get to the construction sphere. What’s your name, chief?”

Grimace looked at Holden, asking by his expression who Fred was talking to. Holden shook his head. Fred knew his name already. “Electrician First Class Garret Ming, sir. Been working for you about ten years, one way and another.”

“Sorry I haven’t met you before,” Fred said. “You know how to use a gun?”

“I’m a quick study, sir.”

Fred’s face was gray. Holden didn’t know if it was blood loss or shock or the first symptoms of a deeper despair. “That’s good.”



Tycho Station was built like a ball half a kilometer across. The construction sphere was big enough to accommodate almost any ship smaller than a battleship in its interior space. At rest, the two rings at its equator gave spin gravity to a city’s worth of the Belt’s best engineers and technicians. The great drives at the sphere’s base could move the station anywhere in the system. Or out of it, now. Tycho had overseen the spinning up of Ceres and Pallas. It was the beating heart of the Belt and its loudest boast. The

Nauvoo, the ship that would have taken humans to the stars, had been too large to fit inside the construction sphere, but it had been built in space next to the massive station. There was no better place for the construction of grand dreams than Tycho. Along with the terraforming of Mars and the farms of Ganymede, it was a living testament to humanity's ambition and skill.

Holden would never have imagined it could feel fragile.

The transfer from ring to construction dome was like taking a particularly awkward lift. They began at the full one-third g of the station, lurched, and their weight began to leach away. When doors opened again, they were in free fall. The blood that had started dripping from Fred's arm was a fluid coating now, the liquid held to his body by surface tension as it gradually thickened into a kind of jelly. Garret was covered with it. Holden was too. He kept expecting Fred to pass out, but the old man didn't lose focus or determination.

Visible from the long translucent tube of the access corridor, the construction sphere looked like a network of purified functionality. Other corridors curved between the ship berths, the walls tiled with a subtly repeating pattern of access panels, power transfers, storage and equipment lockers, and mech parking plates. The steel and ceramic bones of the station showed everywhere, and the light was as bright and harsh as sunlight in vacuum. The air in the access corridor was sweet with the scent of carbon lubricant and electrical discharge. Together, the three of them pulled themselves headfirst toward station south, the engineering decks, and the massive fusion reactors. Holden's body couldn't decide if he was falling down a long, bent well or swimming along an underground river of air.

"Drummer!" Fred snapped. "Report."

The audio feed from his hand terminal was confused for a moment, then the woman's voice came, her syllables clipped, calm, and measured in a way that sounded like the professional version of raw panic.

"Understood. Main engineering has been shut down by the hostiles. They are holding auxiliary engineering with a force of approximately twenty well-armed enemy, sir. We're in a mutual holding action."

"Can you disengage?"

"Not safely, sir. They can't move, but neither can we."

"Do we know—"

Something loud happened on the other end of the terminal, and a second later, a bone-deep ringing shuddered through the corridor. Garret swore under his breath.

“The first torpedo has made impact, sir,” Drummer said.

“The ring?”

“No, sir. The drive cone. The torpedo targeting the ring hit a few minutes ago, but failed to detonate.”

“Small favors,” Fred said. “Do we know the armament of the insurgents?”

“Small automatic weapons. Some grenades.”

“Can you shut down their air?”

“There’s a manual cutoff, but I haven’t had the spare manpower yet.”

“I’ve got an electrician first class with me,” Fred said. “Tell me where to take him.”

“Understood. We’re looking at an access on service deck four. Environment controls Delta-Foxtrot-Whiskey-slash-six-one-four-eight.”

“They had vacuum suits,” Holden said. “The ones in your office. They had emergency suits. Turning off the air may not matter.”

Drummer answered from Fred’s hand terminal. “We’ll keep them in place until their bottles run out if that’s what we need to do.”

“Good,” Fred said. “We’re on our way.”

“Don’t stop for beer, sir,” Drummer said, and the background hiss of the connection dropped. Fred made a small, satisfied grunt and pushed himself farther down the hall.

“It’s not going to work,” Holden said. “They’ll figure out what we’re doing and cut through a bulkhead or something.”

“You know the difference between a code and a cipher, Holden?”

“What?”

“A code and a cipher. Cipher, you encrypt text so that no one can tell what the words in the message are. A code, you say the words right out in the open, but you change what they mean. Anyone with a smart computer and a lot of time can break a cipher. No one can break a code.”

Holden launched himself across a wide intersection where three passageways came together. For a moment, the station extended around him on all three axes. Fred and Garret floated close behind him but pushed off faster, so that they reached the far side before him. Fred turned to his left

and gestured for them to follow.

“Service deck four’s the other way, sir,” Garret said.

“But the four people on the ambush team are this way,” Fred replied. His words were getting slushy. “Level six, section fourteen, berth eight. Once we’re in position, I’ll try to pull the bad guys out, and we’ll take them in the flank.”

Holden thought for a moment. “You had a whole system set up in case this happened. But what if Drummer had been one of them?”

“I had other systems set up with Oliver, Chu, and Stavros,” Fred said. “Secure, open communications with whoever I had left.”

“Tricky,” Holden said.

“I’ve been doing this sort of thing for a while.”

The ambush team was where Fred said it would be: three male Belters and a woman with the thick build of Earth, all in light armor with riot guns and suppression grenades. Fred gave Garret a short-barreled shotgun and a position at the rear where he could be both useful and safe. One tried to tend to Fred’s gunshot wound, but he waved the man away.

Near the bottom of the station, the curve of the corridors was tighter, the horizon close. They were less than ten meters from the doors to auxiliary engineering, and the bent wall offered them cover. When the time came, they’d have to get even closer.

Holden’s hand terminal vibrated in his pocket. Around a red frame, the newsfeed announced a third rock had struck Earth. Holden thumbed it off. If he let himself think about what was happening around the rest of the solar system now, he couldn’t think about what was about to happen in this corridor. Still, his throat felt thick and his hands had a shudder he couldn’t entirely control. His family was on Earth. Amos was on Earth. And Alex was in a tiny ship someplace not too far from the Martian prime minister’s convoy. And Naomi was... somewhere. That he didn’t know where made it worse.

“Be okay,” he murmured. “Just be okay.”

“What?” Fred said.

“Nothing. I’m ready.”

Fred opened a connection. “Drummer. Killing the air is a no-go. We’re going to have to pull in heavy artillery. I have a squad of combat marines I scraped out of a bar. They’re coming to relieve you now.”

“Understood,” Drummer said. Holden thought there was a smile in her voice. “Make it fast, though. We’ve got two down. I’m not sure we can hold much longer.”

“Ten minutes,” Fred said, raising his bloodied left hand in the Belter idiom for *Take position*. The ambush team steadied their weapons. Holden did too. It took the people holed up in auxiliary engineering almost five minutes to decide they should make a break for it.

The door popped open, and the first half dozen or so of the enemy streamed out of engineering. They were dressed like normal people: security uniforms, technicians’ jumpsuits, the sort of casual clothing Holden would have seen in a bar or in the corridors. They were just people, citizens of Tycho. Of the Belt. They took positions that gave them cover from Drummer’s suppressing fire, unaware at first of the second team. At Fred’s signal, the six of them opened up, though Holden was aware that he wasn’t trying very hard to hit anyone. A second wave tried to get out of engineering as the first one tried to retreat back into it. Drummer’s force moved forward with a barrage of gel rounds and suppression grenades that burst into foam and hardened to stone almost instantly.

In half a minute, the fight was over. Fifteen minutes later, the defense grid was back up, and the attacking torpedo boat was burning hard for someplace in among the Trojan asteroids. It was almost an hour before the real cost became clear.

With the station in relative safety, Fred had allowed himself to be taken to the medical bay. The gentle gravity of the ring was still enough to show how weak he’d become. The expert system inserted four needles, inflating him with artificial blood, and the color began to come back to his face. Holden, sitting at the bedside, watched the readouts without really seeing them. He wanted to check the newsfeeds about Earth, and he also didn’t. The longer he could put it off, the longer he didn’t have to think about it. When Drummer came in with the damage report, it was almost a relief. Another distraction.

“The torpedoes cracked the drive cone,” she said.

“How badly?” Fred asked.

“Do you want to fly this thing on a patched-up cone? Badly enough that we’re going to manufacture a new one.”

“Fair enough,” Fred said.

“At least they didn’t blow the ring,” Holden said. “If that one hadn’t been a dud—”

Drummer’s face went still. “About that. We were mistaken. The enemy fired a weapon with the hull and drive of a torpedo, but they rigged it with a salvage mech on the end. Ran it into your office, sliced through the exterior decking, and pulled half the wall away with them.”

Fred blinked.

“*That* was why they needed EVA suits,” Holden said. “I was wondering. But it seems like a pretty weird way to get to you. Peeling your office open like a sardine can.”

“They weren’t after me,” Fred said, then paused and said something obscene.

“What?” Holden said. “What is it?”

Drummer answered. Her voice had the same professional calm she’d used in the firefight. “The enemy took the wall that had Colonel Johnson’s safe. It won’t be easy getting it open, but with enough time and resources, we have to assume they will.”

“But they already compromised your command structure, right? Any sensitive information they get, they probably already had?”

Holden knew even before Fred said it, but he wanted to give the universe a chance to prove him wrong. Make it so that the worst possible thing hadn’t happened.

“They got the sample,” Fred said, making it a reality. “Whoever did this? They now have the protomolecule.”

Chapter Twenty-four: Amos

Wouldn't the density figure in?" Clarissa asked. Whatever crap they'd been feeding into her bloodstream, it had run out. She was starting to look a little better. He could still see the veins under her parchment-thin skin, but she was getting some color back in her cheeks.

"Sure, but that's all energy you'd put in getting the rocks up to speed in the first place. You drop a slug of tungsten out of a ship or a fucking feather pillow, you've still got to get the ship going whatever speed you're aiming for. All that price got paid at the front, energetically speaking."

"But a pillow would have burned up before it hit ground."

"Okay, now *that's* a fair point."

On the screen, the newsfeed showed the strikes again and again, looting footage from as many different sources as they could find—terminals, security cameras, high-orbit mapping satellites. The bolt of ionized air glowed like the trail of a rail gun, and North Africa bloomed a massive rose of fire, again and again. Another beam-like trail in the air, and the Atlantic Ocean went from a vast expanse of slate-blue water to an expanding circle of eerie green and then spewed white and black to the sky. It was like the reporters thought if they all just kept looking at it, it would start making sense.

Millions of people were dead, and millions more would be in the next few hours as the tsunamis and flooding hit. Billions would go in the next few weeks and months. The Earth had become a different planet since he'd gone underground. It wasn't the sort of thing you could make sense of by staring at it, but he couldn't look away either. All he could do was talk to Peaches about trivia and wait to see what came next.

The man doing the voice-over had a gentle European accent and a sense

of calm that probably meant he'd sucked down a lot of pills. Or it might have been tweaked and enhanced by the sound techs. "The weapons remained undetected by radar until they entered the Terran atmosphere, less than a second before impact."

The image shifted to an apocalyptic satellite image: five frames in a loop showing the Atlantic impact and the raw shock wave rolling out from it across the ocean. The scale was massive.

"You see," Amos said, pointing a thumb at the screen, "that's how you know they were using radar-absorbing coating on the rocks. Burned off and stopped working after they hit atmo, right? Anyway, you figure it went from the ionosphere to sea level in about half a second, so that's about two hundred klicks per. I'm making this up here, but the kind of bang they're talking about, you could do it with a block of tungsten carbide maybe three and a half, four meters to a side. That ain't big."

"You can figure all that in your head?"

Amos shrugged. "My job has been playing with magnetically contained fusion reactions for a lot of years now. It's the same kind of math, more or less. You get a feel for it."

"I can see that," she said. And then, "You think we're going to die?"

"Yup."

"Of this?"

"Maybe."

On the screen, the newsfeed replayed a five-second clip from a sailing boat. The flash of perfectly straight lightning, the weird deforming lens of the pressure wave bending the air and light, and the image shattered. Whoever had been in the ship, they'd died before they knew what they were looking at. Probably the most common last words that day were going to be *Huh, that's weird*. That or *Oh shit*. Amos was aware in a distant way that his gut hurt, like he'd eaten a little too much food. Probably fear or shock or something. Clarissa made a small sound in the back of her throat. Amos looked over at her.

"I wish I'd seen my father again."

"Yeah?"

She was silent for a moment. Then, "If he'd done it? If he'd figured out how to control the protomolecule? Everything would have been different. This wouldn't be happening."

“Something else would be,” Amos said. “And if you’d ever seen that thing up close, you wouldn’t think it was better.”

“Do you think Captain Holden would ever—”

The floor rose up and punched Amos in the legs. By instinct, he tried to roll, but the attack was too wide. There was no way to get around it. The screen shattered; the lights failed. Something loud happened. For a few seconds, he was rattled around the room like dice in a box, not knowing what was hitting him. Everything went black.

An endless moment later, the amber emergency light flickered on. Clarissa’s bed was on its side, the girl poured out of it to the floor. A pool of clear liquid widened around the medical expert system, filling the air with a pungent smell like coolant and alcohol. The thick wire-and-bulletproof-glass window had shattered in its frame and was now opaque as snow. A network of cracks laced the wall. From the corner, Clarissa’s half-panicked laughter bubbled up, and Amos felt his own feral smile rise up to meet it. An alarm was sounding, the wail rising and stuttering and rising again. He didn’t know if it was supposed to sound like that or if the shock wave had broken it.

“You all in one piece there, Peaches?”

“Not sure. My hand really hurts. May have broken something.”

He got to his feet. He hurt everywhere. But long familiarity with pain told him nothing was seriously damaged, so he shoved the hurt to one side and ignored it. Either the ground was still shaking a little or he was. “Well, if you did, that’ll suck.” The door to the hall was closed, but it looked wrong. Like the frame had warped. He wondered if it would ever open again.

“We’re ten stories underground,” Clarissa said.

“Yeah.”

“If it was like this for us, how bad is it up top?”

“Don’t know,” Amos said. “Let’s go see.”

She sat up. Her left hand was already swollen to about twice the size of the right one, so something in it was busted. In her prison gown, she looked like a ghost. Something already dead that hadn’t stopped moving yet. Which, he figured, might be accurate.

“We’re on lockdown,” she said. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“Thing is, for us to be in lockdown, this has to be a prison. For this to be

a prison, there has to be, you know, a civilization out there. I think this just turned into a big hole in the ground with a bunch of dangerous people in it. We should leave.”

He kicked the door. It was like punching a bulkhead with a bare fist. He moved over and tried the shattered window. It was only a little bit better. He tried three more times before a voice shouting from outside interrupted him. “Stop that immediately! We’re in lockdown!”

“Someone doesn’t know this isn’t a prison anymore,” Clarissa said. She sounded a little drunk. Might be a concussion to go with her broken hand.

“In here!” Amos shouted. “Hey! We’re stuck in here!”

“We are in lockdown, sir. You have to stay where you are until—”

“The wall’s cracked,” Amos shouted back. “It’s gonna collapse.” It might even have been true.

There was a long moment of quiet, and then a click from the doorway. The door scraped open a couple centimeters and jammed. The escort looked in. Dim emergency lighting from down the hall turned her into a grayscale outline. Even so, he could see the fear in her expression. There were other people behind her, but he couldn’t make them out.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said, “but this facility is—”

Amos put his shoulder against the door, not pushing out, but not letting her close it again either.

“In lockdown. I got that,” he said. “Here’s the thing, though. We need to evacuate.”

“You can’t, sir, this is—”

“Not just us,” Amos said. “You too. You need to get out of here too. Unless you’re really looking to die at work, which I would find disappointing.”

The escort licked her lips. Her gaze cut to the right. He tried to think what would convince her the rest of the way, but the best he came up with was punching her in the jaw and hoping he could push his way out before anyone shot him. He was cocking back his arm when Clarissa put a hand on his shoulder.

“You’ve got people on the top, don’t you?” she said. “Friends? Family?”

The escort’s gaze lost focus, seeing something else. Someone else. Probably someone dead but not cool yet. “I can’t... I can’t think about that right now.”

“Penal regulations say that you have the responsibility to maintain the safety and health of prisoners in your custody,” Clarissa said. “You won’t get in trouble for leading an evacuation. You’ll be a hero.”

The escort was breathing heavily, like she was doing some kind of hard physical labor. Amos had seen people do that kind of thing when they were upset about something, but he didn’t really understand it. Clarissa moved him gently aside and leaned in toward the escort.

“You can’t be part of a relief effort up there if you’re buried alive down here,” the girl said, softly. Like she was apologizing for something. “There might be aftershocks. The walls might collapse. There’s no dishonor in evacuating.”

The escort swallowed.

Clarissa leaned in, almost whispering. “There’s a civilian in here.”

The escort said something under her breath that Amos didn’t quite catch, then turned to talk over her shoulder. “Help me get this goddamned door open, Sullivan. The structure’s compromised, and we’ve got a fucking civilian in here that we need to get to safety. Morris, if that bastard tries anything, take him down hard. You understand, asshole? One wrong move, and we’ll end you.”

Someone in the corridor laughed, and it sounded like a threat. Amos and Clarissa backed up. Two new hands took hold of the door and started hauling it back open.

“Keep the civilian safe? That’s what got to her?” Amos asked.

Clarissa shrugged. “It was the excuse she needed. Though you *are* a precious flower.”

“Well, sure. Just not used to anybody appreciating it.”

The door opened with a shriek, swinging into the corridor only halfway before it stuck fast. Probably permanently. In the hallway, the damage was clearer. A crack ran down the center, three or four centimeters lower on one side than the other. The air was thicker than it had been coming in; Amos felt the reflexive urge to check the air recyclers. Maybe that wasn’t even wrong. Being thirty-odd meters underground was a lot like being in vacuum. If things were busted enough, atmosphere was going to be a problem.

The other prisoner—Konecheck—knelt on the ground, a second guard—Morris—standing three paces behind him with a weapon pointed at the

man's back. If it was a gun, it wasn't a design Amos recognized. The prisoner's face was swollen all down the left side like he'd lost a boxing match with a very slow ref. The escort, two other guards, Peaches, and this fella.

Konecheck looked up from behind strands of long iron-gray hair and gave a one-millimeter nod. Amos felt a wave of something a lot like comfort pass through him—a looseness across his shoulders, a warmth in his gut. This was going to get ugly before it was over, but it was a scale of violence he understood.

"New plan," the escort said. "We're evacuating these prisoners and the civilian to the surface."

The guard who'd helped pull the door open—Suliman? Sullivan? Something like that—was a thick-necked bull of a man with a single black eyebrow running across his forehead. Morris, the one with the gun, was thinner, older, with bad teeth and missing the last knuckle on his left pinky finger.

"Sure you don't want to put the prisoners in a closet before we go?" Morris asked. "I'd feel a lot better getting out of here if we didn't have these fucking psychos at our back."

"Peaches comes with me," Amos said with a loose shrug. "That's just a thing."

"Might need some help clearing debris," Konecheck said. He'd been the one that laughed before. The words, innocuous as they were, held just as much threat but the others didn't seem to hear it. Amos wondered why that was.

"Elevators are disabled, so we'll get to the stairs," the escort said. "That'll get us out of here. Once we're up top, we can secure the prisoners."

"What about fallout?" the thick guard—Amos was almost sure the name was Sullivan—said.

"That's nukes, asshole," Konecheck growled.

"Rona? Shouldn't you query the captain before we do this?" Morris asked. His eyes hadn't shifted off Konecheck's back. *Competent*, Amos thought, and filed the information away for later.

"Captain's not answering," the escort, Rona, said. Her voice was tight, too controlled to let the panic out. From the way the other two went quiet, Amos guessed they hadn't known that. "Let's head for the stairs. Morris,

you take lead, then the prisoners, then me and Sully. You'll need to follow behind, sir."

"I'll walk with them," Amos said.

"Don't trust me with your girlfriend?" Konecheck growled.

Amos grinned. "Nope."

"Let's get moving," Rona said. "Before there's a fucking aftershock."

Fear was an interesting thing. Amos could see it in all the guards without quite being able to point to what it was. The way Morris kept looking over his shoulder, maybe. Or the way Rona and Sullivan walked exactly in step behind them, like they were trying to agree with each other just by the length of their stride. Peaches seemed focused and empty, but that was kind of just her. Konecheck, on Amos' left, was jutting out his beard and making a big show of what a badass he was, which would have been funnier if he didn't have a nervous system redesigned for violence. Guys like that were either scared all the time anyway or so broken they didn't count. Amos wondered whether he was scared. He didn't know how he'd tell. He also wondered if there were going to be more rocks falling, but it didn't seem like the kind of thing he had any say over.

All around them, the prison was in shambles. Cracks ran along the walls like the floor had been shoved out a couple centimeters and pushed back in place. There was a sound of water running through pipes from somewhere. The emergency lights were on, but here and there a few had failed, leaving pools of darkness. Even if the elevators were running, he wouldn't have wanted to take them. One of the things living on a ship for years had done was give him a sense for how the whole vessel was running based on a few local indicators. And if the Pit had been above orbit, he'd have been sleeping in an environment suit, just so as not to be unpleasantly surprised by waking up airless.

"Stop fucking whistling," Konecheck said.

"Was I whistling?" Amos asked.

"You were," Clarissa said, still cradling her swollen hand.

"Huh," Amos said, and started whistling again, consciously this time.

"I said stop it," Konecheck growled.

"Yeah," Amos agreed with a friendly nod. "You did say that."

"Prisoners will maintain silence," Rona snapped behind them. "And the civilian will kindly shut the fuck up too."

Amos considered Konecheck out of the corner of his eyes. Still too early to be sure, but maybe sixty-forty that one of them was going to have to kill the other. Not now, but before it was over. He could hope for the forty.

A shudder passed through the floor like a badly tuned thruster firing. Concrete dust sifted down from the lights like amber snow. Morris said something obscene.

"Aftershock," Rona said. "Just an aftershock."

"Might be," Clarissa said. "Might be the shock wave from Africa. I don't remember how fast that kind of force travels through the mantle."

"Not fucking North Africa," Konecheck said. "No way we'd feel that."

"When the Galveston plant went up, the shock wave was still measurable on its third time around the planet," Clarissa said.

"Oh, the bitch is a history professor now?"

"The prisoners will maintain silence!" Rona shouted. She was sounding a lot more agitated. Around a corner, a light glowed green, the icon of a thick-legged stick man walking up steps. He wondered how many other people were on this level, still in lockdown, waiting on rescue. How many were already trudging up the stairs on their way out. The guards were playing it pretty close to the vest, but he'd have bet good money that there were a whole lot of people making their own decisions right now.

Morris stopped at the door to the stairway. The readout set into the wall beside it showed a red image of a closed lock until he swiped his hand terminal across it and keyed something into the display that opened. The lock switched to green, and the door slid open. Of course a prison would put the locks on the emergency power circuit, Amos thought. He wondered what else was locked.

A landslide of mud, water, rocks, concrete, and rebar spilled into the corridor. Morris yelped and jumped back, then fell to the ground, grabbing one shin. His pants were ripped, and Amos caught a glimpse of a dark wetness between the man's fingers. Blood.

"Morris!" Rona said. "Report!"

"I'm gonna need stitches."

"I'm moving ahead to look," Amos said, leaving *So don't shoot me* as a given. Beyond the door, the stairway was gone. Rubble and dirt were so thick, he couldn't even tell if the stairs still existed under them. He couldn't tell where the water was coming from, but it smelled clean. Which meant it

was probably the drinking water. Another tremble shook a few stones and a head-sized ball of concrete loose.

Sullivan was muttering a stream of obscenities under his breath that sounded less like anger and more like the first signs of panic. Amos shook his head.

“No one’s getting out that way,” he said. “Not without a few months and a digging mech. We’re gonna have to find another way up.”

“There isn’t a goddamn other way up,” Rona said. “That’s the evacuation route. That right there.”

“Peaches?”

Clarissa’s voice was calm but still a little slurred. “Hard call, Amos. It’s a prison for high-risk criminals. They don’t put a lot of easy egress routes in it.”

“Fair enough,” Amos said. “But say you had to think of something clever?”

“The guards have overrides. If we can get access to the elevator shaft and the car’s not blocking it, we might be able to climb up.”

“Ten stories at one g on a broken hand?” He didn’t mention the possible concussion that was probably screwing with her sense of balance.

“Didn’t say it’d be fun.”

“The access ladders are all locked down,” the escort said. “They put doors across them so no one can get up without permission.”

Konecheck gave a wide, mirthless laugh, and Sullivan trained another of the strange not-quite-guns on him.

“Peaches?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we could find something else.”

Amos stretched his neck, the vertebrae popping like firecrackers. “This,” he said, “is getting to be a long fucking day.”

Chapter Twenty-five: Naomi

Hour by hour, history rolled out, every new moment making things worse. The newsfeeds from Earth and Mars, and then reports from Tycho Station and Ganymede filled with reporters and journalists blank with shock or else weeping. The hammering of Earth took most of the bandwidth: images from an apocalypse. Cities along the coasts of the Atlantic with grinding waves shattering fourth-and fifth-story windows. An army of small tornados forming behind the shock wave's leading edge. The planet she was so used to seeing glow as the city lights made it a permanent fire, going dark. The field hospital at Dakar where ash and stones rained down upon row after row of the dead. The shaking UN spokesman confirming the death of the secretary-general. The void between the planets was alive with chatter and speculation, reports and theories and then conflicting reports and theories. With the complexity of light delay, it was almost impossible to put events in order. Everything seemed to be happening at once.

Which, she supposed, was how Marco had wanted it.

The events in other places—things that would have been shattering on any other day—seemed footnotes to the grand thesis of destruction playing out on Earth. Yes, there had been an attempted coup on Tycho Station, but the Earth was dying. Yes, an OPA cell had taken control of the ports on Ganymede, but the Earth was dying. Yes, a battle was going on between Martian escort ships and an unknown force near the Hungaria asteroids, but Earth was dying. The sense that something vast had descended on all humanity was inescapable.

Outside, in the common room, elated voices rose with each new report, cheering with delight. In her assigned quarters, she watched with a growing numbness. And beneath it, something else. After half a shift, she turned the

screen off. Her own face reflected in the emptiness that followed looked like another stunned reporter searching for words and failing. She pulled herself out of her crash couch and walked out to the common room. It was so much like the *Roci*'s galley that her brain kept trying to recognize it, failing, and trying again. An utterly unfamiliar space would have been easier than this architectural uncanny valley.

"Hoy, Knuckles," Cyn said, rising from among the crowd. "A que gehst, yeah?"

She made an automatic Belter's shrug, but Cyn didn't sit back down. Not the question of a friend wondering where she was going, but of a guard demanding information of a prisoner. She arranged her expression more carefully.

"This was why, wasn't it? This was why he wanted me?"

"Marco son Marco," Cyn said, and his voice was weirdly gentle. "He thought we should get you, so did, yeah? Why does why matter? Still the safest place to be in the system right here."

Naomi took a long breath and blew it out.

"Lot to take in," she said. "Big."

"Is that," Cyn said. Naomi looked at her hands, her fingers laced together. *Act like one of them*, she thought. What would she do if she were one of them again? The answer came too naturally. As if she *was* one of them. As if she always had been.

"Ship's got an inventory," she said. "I can do the checks. Be useful."

"I'll join," he said, falling into step with her.

She knew where to go, how the lift would take her, where the machine shop was. In the years she'd been on the *Roci*, she hadn't been aware that she was also internalizing the design logic of the Martian Navy, but she had been. When they reached the shop, she knew where the diagnostic arrays would be stored even though she'd never set foot in the place before.

Cyn hesitated before he opened the cabinets, but only a little. Checking inventory, testing batteries and relays and storage bubbles, was something everyone did in their spare time if they grew up in the Belt. It was as natural as drinking water, and when she picked up an array, he did too. The door to the cargo bay was sealed, but it cycled open for Cyn.

The bay was well-stocked. Magnetic pallets locked to the decks and walls in neat rows. She wondered idly where it had all come from, and what

promises had been given in exchange. She went to the nearest, plugged the array into the pallet, and popped it open. The crates unfolded. Batteries. She took the first, snapped it into the array. The indicator went green, and she snapped the battery back out, replaced it, and took the next one.

“All going to be good,” Cyn said. “Military grade, this.”

“Well thank God militaries never get shit wrong.” The indicator went green. She swapped the battery in her hand for the next one. Cyn went to the next crate over, popped it, and started doing as she was doing.

She recognized it as a kindness. He hadn’t come down to be her friend, but her jailer. He could as easily have put her back in her cabin and locked the door to keep her there, but he hadn’t. He could have stood guard over her while she worked through the batteries, but he didn’t. He pretended that they were together on the task, equals. Even if it meant missing beer and Armageddon with his friends. Against her will, Naomi felt a spark of gratitude for that.

“Big day,” she said.

“A long time coming,” Cyn said.

“Long time,” she agreed automatically.

“Got to be weird seeing him again.”

She pulled another battery, checked it, put it back, grabbed the next one. Cyn cleared his throat.

“Mé falta,” he said. “Shouldn’t have said it.”

“No, it’s fine,” Naomi said. “Yes, it’s weird seeing him again. Did a lot to get away from him last time. Didn’t see ever coming back.”

“Bad times.”

“Those or these?”

Cyn coughed out a laugh and looked over at her, a question in his eyes. “These? Esá the promised land. Belt standing up. You know how it was before. You remember running thin because we couldn’t get enough oxygen. Breaking bones because the meds got taxed too much.”

“I do,” she said, but Cyn was on a roll now, and he wasn’t ready to stop. He put down his array and stared at her. The sympathy had burned out of him, and there was a rage in his eyes. Not with her. With something bigger.

“I got three cousins died because Earth corporations wouldn’t sell the good cancer meds to Belters. Gave us the crap left over from the farms on Ganymede. Only vat meats aren’t like people, yeah? Don’t work the same,

but who cares? Tio Bennett got his ship taken away because he was behind on his permitting. He wasn't even in a pinché Earther dock, but he didn't pay, so they boarded him, dropped him on Ceres, and sold his rig. And for what? They protect us from pirates? They protect us from third-rate manufacturers passing off old suits as new? They care if we got shot? If we got killed?"

"I know they don't."

"Didn't, Knuckles. They *didn't*. Because past is the past now. Today," Cyn said, poking the air with his thumb. "You been flying on their side for a lot of years, and maybe not *tu falta*. Things before, keeping Filipito away, maybe we all did that wrong, yeah? But I'm starting to think you been sharing a couch with an Earth coyo so long you forgot what you *are*. Started thinking maybe you're like them."

No, she wanted to say. *No, I never forgot*. But even as she formed the words, she wasn't sure if they were true. Once, there had been a girl with her name who had belonged here. Who'd felt the rage she saw in Cyn and in Filip. There had been a time when she could have cheered the deaths on Earth. But Jim was from Earth. And Amos. Alex from Mars, which from a Belt perspective was more or less the same thing. And what was she? Their pet Belter? The one that didn't belong? She didn't think so. So then, she was something else.

And still, how well had they known her, really? There was so much she hadn't said. She didn't know what would have changed if she had.

Cyn was scowling at her, his eyes hard, his jaw set. She tried to retreat back behind the curtain of her hair, but it wasn't enough. Not here. Not now. She had to say something; she had to react or it would be the same as confessing, and she was done taking responsibility for things she hadn't chosen. She tried to think what Jim would have said, but imagining him was like touching an open wound. Guilt at keeping her past from him and the grief and longing of being away from him and the fear that something bad had happened to him on Tycho. Or was happening to him, right now, while she could do nothing about it. She didn't know what Jim would do, and didn't dare to imagine him.

All right. Amos, then. What would Amos do?

She took a deep breath, let it out. When she looked up, she brushed her hair away. Grinned. "Well, Cyn. That's one way of looking at things," she

said, leaning into the words. “Ain’t it?”

Cyn blinked. Whatever he’d expected, it hadn’t been that. She checked the last battery on her pallet, replaced it, and shut the box back down. Cyn was still looking at her, his head turned a degree to his left. It made him seem wary of her.

Good.

She nodded at the open pallet at his feet. “You going to check those?” she asked. “Or d’you need some help?”



By dinner, it seemed like the attacks were done. The feeds, on the other hand, were in full swarm. She sat at a table that, like everything on the ship, seemed too familiar. Cyn sat on her right, and a young woman she didn’t know on her left. Her plate was heaped with fried mushroom in hot sauce, the way Rokku used to make it. She ate it one-handed, the way the others did, and wondered whether someone looking over the room would have been able to pick her out as the one that didn’t fit.

The screen was set to a feed coming out of Tycho Station. She watched it and tried not to feel anything. When Monica Stuart appeared, she felt a shock of fear that she couldn’t quite explain. The woman made an introduction that told Naomi nothing new, then turned to Fred Johnson sitting stiffly across from her. He looked old. He looked tired. She didn’t watch him, barely listened to them speak, straining instead at the edges of the screen in case Jim was there. The others were heckling and catcalling anyway. She caught fragments.

“Do you believe that you were the primary target of the attack?”

“That appears to be the case.”

“Fucking liar!” someone across the galley shouted, and the others roared their approval. Including Cyn.

Fred moved carefully, and the camera stayed close on his face. He was hurt then, and hiding it. She’d heard once that birds back on Earth would do everything they could to hide that they were ill. Any visible weakness was an invitation to attack. The comparison made Fred Johnson seem vulnerable. Maybe everything was vulnerable now. “The attackers are in

custody, and we hope very soon to have a clear idea who was behind this.” Something about that caught her. It was odd, knowing Marco, that he hadn’t made a press release of it. He’d brought her here to show off, hadn’t he?

Or had he? She was supposed to bring the *Rocinante* with her, and they’d been disappointed when she didn’t. Was the ship what he’d really wanted? Or Jim? She wondered with a sense of dread what would have happened if she hadn’t come alone.

And then, as if thinking had summoned him, Monica Stuart ended the interview with Colonel Fred Johnson, voice of the OPA and director of Tycho Station, and turned instead to Captain James Holden.

Her breath stuttered.

“I understand you were working as a bodyguard for Colonel Johnson,” Monica said.

“Yes, that’s true,” Jim said with a little grimace. He hadn’t done a very good job of it apparently. “It wasn’t really needed. The people who infiltrated the security team turned out to be a very small minority. He wasn’t ever in real danger.”

He was lying. Naomi pushed her food away.

“Is it true that there was a secondary target? There are some people reporting that the attack may have been cover for some kind of theft.”

Annoyance flashed in Jim’s eyes. She wondered if anyone else saw it. Monica was probably pushing into territory that they hadn’t agreed on. Or had agreed to avoid. “They’re not reporting that to me,” Jim said. “As far as I know, apart from some damage to the station, the coup was a total failure.” Another lie.

“Switch the feed!” someone shouted. A chorus of agreement rose. Someone called Jim something insulting, and Cyn glanced over at her and then away. Naomi went back to her food. The hot sauce burned her lips, but she didn’t mind. The screen switched to a major newsfeed from Earth. The reporter was a young man in a black raincoat. The text said he was in someplace called Porto. The buildings behind him were a mix of ancient and new, with thick, muddy water tearing at them all. On the higher ground behind him, there were rows of sacks. No, body bags.

“That was him, wasn’t it?”

She didn’t know how long Filip had been standing behind her. The girl to her left nodded to Filip and fled. The boy took the empty seat. Wisps of

stubble stretched along the line of his jaw, black against the golden brown of his skin. He turned to look at her, and his eyes took a moment to find her, like he was drunk. “That was the man you left us for, si no?”

Cyn grunted like he’d been hit. Naomi didn’t know why. The question was so wrong it was actually funny.

“Not how it played,” she said. “But yes. I ship with him.”

“He’s handsome,” Filip said. She wondered whose voice he was echoing. It didn’t sound like Marco. “Wanted to say, about your being here? Wanted to say.”

But then he didn’t go on to actually finish the thought. She wondered whether she saw regret in his eyes, or if she was imagining it because she wanted it to be there. She didn’t know what to say, how to answer. It felt like there were many versions of her—the captive, the collaborator, the mother reunited, the mother who went away—and all of them spoke differently. She didn’t know which was her real self. If any of them.

Probably, it was all.

“Not the way I’d have chosen,” she said, stepping through the words like they were sharp. “But that’s true of a lot of things, yeah?”

Filip nodded, looked down. For a moment she thought he’d move away, and didn’t know whether she wanted him to stay or go.

“It’s me up there now, you know,” Filip said. “On the feed? That’s me.”

The reporter was older than Filip, broader across the face and shoulders. For a moment, she tried to see a resemblance between them, and then like walking into a freezer, she understood.

“Your work,” she said.

“Gave it to me as a present,” Filip said. “The stealth coating on the rocks? I led the team that retrieved it, me. Without me, none of this.”

He was boasting. It was in the corner of his eyes and the tightness of his lips how badly he wanted her to be impressed. To approve. Something like rage shifted in her gut. On the screen, the reporter was listing relief organizations and religious groups. People who were trying to organize help for the refugees. As if anyone on the planet didn’t need refuge now.

“Did that to me too,” she said. Filip’s expression asked the question. “Your father. He put blood on my hands too. Made me complicit in killing people. Thought it would make me easier to control, I guess.”

It was the wrong thing to say. The boy flinched, drawing into himself

like a snail's feeler touched with salt. The feed changed. The dead and missing on Earth had topped two hundred million. A cheer went up all through the galley.

"Is that why you left?" Filip asked. "Couldn't handle doing the work?"

She sat silent for a long moment. Then, "Yes."

"Better that you went, then," Filip said. She told herself he didn't mean it. It was just something he said to hurt her. It worked. But more than that, she felt a vast sorrow for all the things her baby boy might have been that he wasn't. For the child she could have had in him, if there had been a way. But she'd left her child in the hands of a monster, and the infection had spread. A family of monsters, father and mother and child.

It made it easier.

"Weighed on me," she said. "All those dead people because of what I'd done. I tried to leave. Told him I wouldn't turn him in if he just let me take you and go. So instead he took you away. Said I was acting crazy, and he didn't trust me around you. That if anyone was getting turned in, it would be me."

"I know," Filip said. Spat. "He told me."

"And I was going to have to do it again. And again. And again. Kill more people for him. I tried to do it too. Tried to push through. Let them die. He tell you I tried to kill myself?"

"Yeah," Filip said. She should stop. She didn't need to put this on him. Her little boy. Her little boy who'd just helped kill a world.

God, she still wanted to protect him. How stupid was that? He was a murderer now. He needed to know.

"I was at an airlock on Ceres Station. Rigged it to open. All I needed to do was step out. It was an old-style one. Blue and gray. And it smelled like fake apple. Something about the recycler there. And, anyway, I did it. I triggered it. Only the station had put in a fail-safe I didn't know about. So." She shrugged. "That was when I knew."

"Knew what?"

"That I couldn't save you. You could have a gone mother or a dead one. Those were all the options."

"Some people aren't meant to be soldiers," Filip said. It was meant to cut, but she was past feeling now.

"The only right you have with anyone in life is the right to walk away. I

would have taken you with me if I could. But I couldn't. I would have stayed if I could. But I couldn't. I would have saved you if I could."

"I didn't need saving."

"You just killed a quarter of a billion people," she said. "Someone should have kept that from happening."

Filip stood, his motions wooden. For a moment, she saw what he would look like as a man. And what he had been as a boy. There was a deep pain in his eyes. Not like her own. His pain was his, and she could only hope he would feel it. That he would at least learn to regret.

"Before you kill yourself," she said, "come find me."

He pulled back a centimeter, as if she'd shouted. "Con que I do something stupid like that? Soy no coward, me."

"When it comes," she said, "find me. Nothing can ever take it back, but I'll help you if I can."

"You're merde to me, puta," Filip snapped and stalked away. Around the galley, the others stared or pretended not to. Naomi shook her head. Let them look. She was past caring. She didn't even hurt. Her heart was vast and dry and empty as a desert. For the first time since she'd taken Marco's call on Tycho, her mind was clear.

She'd almost forgotten Cyn was there until he spoke. "Harsh words for his big day."

"Life's like that," she said. But she thought, *This isn't the big day.*

In her memory, Marco spoke. *In order to be heard by the oppressing class, one must speak as a member of it. Not only the language, but the diction.* But he hadn't made his pronouncement yet. Not in any diction. She didn't know his plans. Likely no one but Marco knew all of them.

But whatever his grand design was, it wasn't over yet.

Chapter Twenty-six: Amos

Sullivan died when they were about fifteen meters up the shaft.

The plan, if you wanted to call it that, was open the elevator shaft doors, then boost up a level and pry those open. Each level could be a staging area for getting to the next, and by the time they got to where the car was stuck at the very top level, they'd have enough experience with the layout they'd maybe be able to find a way to get past it or get the guards posted in it to let them through. Anyway, it was a problem they could solve once they got there.

It took about an hour to get the first set of doors opened. They defaulted to locked, for one thing. For another, the mass of the doors was a lot more than the usual lift gates. In the end, it had taken Amos, Sullivan, and Morris on one door and Konecheck with his modifications on the other to pry them open enough to slip through. Twice, the ground had shaken, and the second time harder than the first; the whole damned planetary mantle was ringing like a struck bell. By the end, Amos was starting to get thirsty, but he didn't see the point in mentioning it.

The shaft was in darkness, which Amos had expected. It was also wet, which he hadn't. Black drops like filthy rain pattered down from above, smearing the walls and making them slick. He couldn't tell if it was leaking through from one of the floors above them or if the building at the ground level had been sheared off. The guards had flashlights, but all the beams showed were dirty steel walls and a recessed track that the car ran on. A set of repeating steel access panels ran along beside the track looking like cabinets stacked one on top of the other, going up forever into the gloom.

"That's the maintenance ladder," Rona said, playing a circle of white light over the cabinet doors. "The doors retract, and there's handholds."

“That’s great,” Amos replied, leaning out into the empty air. The shaft went down another three meters or so. The black soup at the bottom might have gone deeper than that, but he was hoping not to find out. The air smelled like ashes and paint. He didn’t want to think too much about what was leaking into the shaft or where it was coming from. If the whole place was ass-deep in toxic crap, it didn’t change what they had to do.

The gap between floors was maybe half a meter. Craning his neck, he could see the lines of the elevator doors set flush into the wall. Not so much as a fingerhold. He thought maybe there was something way at the top of the shaft—a spot of brightness that came and went in an eyeblink.

“Can we get to the next doors?” Clarissa asked from behind him. “What’s it look like?”

“It looks like we need a plan C,” Amos said, coming back into the prison hallway.

Konecheck chuckled, and Sullivan turned on the man, lifting the gun-like thing to the prisoner’s head. “You think that’s funny, asshole? You think it’s all so fucking amusing?”

Amos ignored the homicidal tension in the air and looked at the gun. It wasn’t like anything he’d put his hands on before. The grip was hard ceramic with a contact interface running along the seam. The barrel was short and square and as wide across as his thumb. Konecheck loomed up over Sullivan, his swollen face a mask of rage and defiance, which was fine as long as it stopped there. “You going to use that, little man?”

“What’s it shoot?” Amos asked. “Tell me it ain’t one of those riot gear things. They give you real bullets down here, don’t they?”

Sullivan turned to him, the gun still trained on Konecheck. Amos smiled and very slowly, gently put his hand on the guard’s arm and drew it down.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sullivan asked.

“Plan C,” Amos said. “That thing. Shoots real bullets, right? Not gel rounds or some wimpy shit like that?”

“They’re live rounds,” Morris said. “Why?”

“I was just thinking about how a gun makes a shitty metal punch.”

“Where are you going with it?” Clarissa asked.

“Thinking we’ve got three shitty metal punches,” Amos said. “Maybe we can punch some metal.”

The guns were biometrically linked to the guards in case someone like

Peaches or Konecheck got hold of them, so Amos and Rona lowered themselves down into the muck instead of Amos going alone. The black sludge came up to Amos' ankle, cold and slick. The lowest of the cabinet-like doors had its edge under the dark surface. Amos rapped on the metal with his knuckles, listening to the sound. The beam from the flashlight bounced, filling the shaft with twilight.

"Put a round here," Amos said, putting a daub of muck on the steel. "And here. See if you can get us some fingerholds."

"What if it ricochets?"

"That'll suck."

The first round left a hole in the steel covering maybe a centimeter wide. The second round, a little less. Amos tested the edges with his fingertips. They were sharp, but not knife-sharp. The black rain had soaked the shoulders of his shirt, and the back of it was clinging to his spine.

"Hey, Tiny," he called. "You come down here a minute?"

After a short silence, Konecheck's growl came down. "What'd you call me?"

"Tiny. Just come take a look at this. See if we've got something."

Konecheck landed with a splash, spattering muck on Amos and Rona. That was fine. The prisoner made a big show of flexing his back muscles and stretching out his hands, then stuffed his first two fingers into the bullet holes, braced his other arm against the wall, and pulled. A normal person, it wouldn't have done a damned thing, but the Pit wasn't a place for normal people. The metal flexed, bent, peeled back to show a line of rungs. Curved metal with a little sandpaper texturing for grip. Konecheck grinned, the swelling of his injured face and the jutting beard making him look like something out of a sideshow. His fingertips were red and raw-looking, but as far as Amos could tell, there wasn't any blood.

"All right," Amos said. "It's ugly as hell, but we got a plan. Let's get out of here."

The ladder was narrow and rough, and spending hours hanging off it didn't make sense if they didn't have to do it. Sullivan and Konecheck went up ahead, the guard with his gun to make the fingerholds and the monster to pry away the steel. Amos sat on the concrete floor of the hallway, his legs hanging out into the shaft. Morris and Rona stood behind him with Clarissa between them. Amos' stomach growled. Ten meters up the ladder, the sharp

attack of the gun came once, then again.

"I'm surprised it wasn't harder to find a way out," Clarissa said.

"Thing about prison," Amos said. "It's not like it's supposed to keep you in all on its own, y'know? As long as it slows you down long enough for someone to shoot you, it pretty much did its job."

"You've spent time inside?" Rona asked.

"Nope," Amos said. "I just know people."

Another two aftershocks came and went without knocking anyone off the ladder or collapsing the shaft. An hour later, the Klaxon stopped, the silence as sudden and unnerving as the sounding of the alarm had been. With it gone, there were noises in the distance. Voices raised in anger. Twice, gunshots that weren't from the elevator shaft. Amos didn't know how many people were in the Pit, prisoners and guards and whoever else. Maybe a hundred. Maybe more. The prisoners were in cells, he figured. Locked down. If there were other guards, they were making their own decisions, and no one suggested they go find any of them.

Two more gunshots from the shaft, a murmur of voices, and then a scream. Amos was on his feet almost before Sullivan's body fell past. He landed in the muck at the bottom of the shaft. Rona cried out wordlessly, dropping down to him while Morris turned his flashlight up the ladder. Konecheck's feet were two pale dots, his face a shadow above them.

"He slipped," Konecheck called.

"The hell he did!" Rona shouted. Her gun was in her hand, and she was going for the ladder. Amos jumped down and got in her way, his hands spread wide. "Hey, hey, hey. Don't get crazy here. We need that guy."

"Coming up on level four," Konecheck said. "Starting to see light up top. Hear the wind. Almost there."

Sullivan lay in the muck, his leg folded unnaturally under him, and limp as a rag. He still had the gun in his fist. A yellow indicator on the side said he was out of ammunition. Sullivan had lived just long enough to stop being useful, then Konecheck had murdered him.

Asshole couldn't have waited until they were all the way up.

"He slipped," Amos said. "Shit like that happens. Don't do anything stupid."

Rona's teeth were chattering with rage and fear. Amos smiled and nodded at her because it seemed like the kind of thing people did to

reassure folks. He couldn't tell if it was doing any good.

"Someone going to come help?" Konecheck called. "Or am I doing all this on my own?"

"Take Morris," Clarissa said. "Two guns. One for the metal, one to guard him. It was a mistake. It won't happen twice."

"And leave you unguarded?" Morris said behind her. "Not a chance. No one goes without a guard."

"I'll keep her out of trouble," Amos said, but the guards didn't seem to hear him.

"Everyone up," Rona said. "Everyone. And if anybody does something even a little bit threatening, I swear to God I'll kill all of you."

"I'm a civilian," Amos said.

Rona pointed toward the rungs with her chin. "Get climbing."

So they climbed up into the darkness, hand over hand. Ten meters up, maybe twelve. Morris first, then Clarissa, then Amos, with Rona coming up last, her flashlight stuck in her belt and her gun in her hand. Konecheck wrestled the next length of ladder open, clanging and cursing and roaring in the effort. The black muck kept dripping down from above, making everything slick. Amos wondered if maybe Sullivan really had slipped, and chuckled to himself quietly enough that no one heard him. Konecheck, at the upper end of the ladder, swung to one side, letting Morris pass next to him. Then two more shots and the two men switched places again. Amos wondered if the rungs had been designed to carry the weight of two men at once. But they didn't bend, so that was one good thing. He spent a lot of time looking at Clarissa's ankles, since that was pretty much what there was to look at. They were thin from atrophy, the skin pale and dusty. He noticed when they started to tremble. If her busted hand bothered her, she didn't say so.

"You all right, Peaches?"

"Fine," she said. "Just getting tired is all."

"Hang on, little tomato," he said. "We're almost there."

Above her, the shaft grew shorter. There was no sign of the car or the guards who'd been in it. Just a pale gray square and a growing howl of wind. Once, when they only had four or five meters still to go, Rona below him made a sound like a sob, but only once. He didn't ask her about it.

And then Konecheck was at the edge, hauling himself up with Morris

scrambling after. The black rain was still falling, and it had gotten colder. Clarissa was shaking now, her whole body fluttering like she was too light, and the wind might pick her up and carry her away.

“You can do it, Peaches.”

“I know,” she said. “I know I can.”

She boosted herself up, and then it was Amos’ turn. The elevator shaft ended in a clean break, like the hand of God had come and swept everything away. The intake building was gone apart from shattered concrete and splintered wood strewn across the bare field. The fence was gone. The trees on the horizon had been shaved down to stubble. For as far as he could see, there was just earth and scrub. The sky was dark and low, huge clouds scalloped from one side of the world to the other like inverted waves. The wind barreling down out of the east stank of something he couldn’t quite identify. It was what he imagined the aftermath of a battle looked like. Only worse.

“Come on,” Rona said, pushing at his leg. Then, without warning, Konecheck roared and Morris shrieked. A gun went off as Amos made it up onto the ledge and got his feet under him. Konecheck was holding Morris up off the ground. The guard’s head hung slack and boneless in a way that clarified the situation. Clarissa had collapsed at the gray-haired prisoner’s feet.

For a fraction of a second, Konecheck’s gaze locked with his. Amos saw a base, animal pleasure in the man. The joy of a schoolboy burning ants with his magnifying glass. Faster than anything human, Konecheck dropped the dead guard and surged forward, his feet digging into the slick mud as he ran. Amos stepped into the attack, which wasn’t what the guy had expected, and got a solid punch in under his rib cage. But then Konecheck’s elbow came out of nowhere and hit Amos’ ear hard enough that the world started spinning. Amos stumbled, and the other guy’s grip was on his belt and arm. Amos felt himself lifted up over Konecheck’s head. He looked down the shaft and saw Rona looking up at him wide-eyed and openmouthed. The black was a long way down. Amos wondered if he’d see Lydia again when he got to the bottom. Probably not, but it was pretty as a last thought.

The gunshot made Konecheck stumble and Amos twisted into the slackness of his grip, falling backward and landing hard. Clarissa was lying over Morris’ body, her two hands around the dead man’s fist, taking aim

again. Blood poured down Konecheck's chest, but before he could launch himself at the girl, Rona's hand came up over the edge of the shaft and grabbed his ankle. Konecheck kicked back, his muscles flickering too fast to see, and Rona yelped. But by then Amos was on his feet again, knees bent deep to keep his center of gravity low. The world was still spinning. He couldn't trust his inner ear to tell him which way was up. But he'd spent a lot of years in free fall. Ignoring vertigo just meant it was a day that ended in y.

He landed a straight kick in Konecheck's crotch that probably castrated him, and the man stepped back, eyes wide. He had maybe a tenth of a second to look surprised as he fell back down into the Pit. Then that part was done.

Amos sat down, rubbing his injured ear as Rona crawled up into the bleak half-light. She was crying and turning slowly, taking in the devastation all around them with disbelief and horror. The woman's hands flapped at her sides like she was pretending to be a penguin. Her distress would have been funny if it hadn't been so sincere. Losing everything should at least be dignified.

"Where'd it go?" she shouted over the rushing of the wind, like anyone could answer. And then, "Oh my God. *Esme*."

Clarissa had rolled onto her back, her arms spread to the filthy rain, her head resting on the dead man like he was a pillow. Her eyes were closed, but he could see her rib cage moving. Amos squinted up at Rona. "Esme? That one of your people?"

She nodded without looking at him.

"Yeah," Amos said. "Look, if you need to go look for her, that's all right with me."

"The prisoner... I have to..."

"It's all right. I'll keep Peaches out of trouble. You know. Until you get back."

The absurdity of it seemed lost on the woman. She stumbled forward, heading for a low hill on the horizon. She wasn't coming back. No one was coming back. There wasn't anything to come back to.

Clarissa's eyes were open now. As he watched, her mouth widened into a smile and she reached up, running damp hands through her hair. When she laughed, it sounded like pleasure.

“Wind,” she said. “Oh my God, I never thought I’d feel wind again. I never thought I’d be outside. It’s so beautiful.”

Amos glanced around the ruins and shrugged. “That’s got a lot to do with context, I guess.”

He was hungry and thirsty. Wet. They didn’t have shelter or clothes, and the only gun they had, they’d need to haul around a dead man to shoot. Until his body got cold, anyway.

“Well, fuck,” he said. “Where do we go from here, right?”

Clarissa extended a thin arm, pointing her pale finger to the sky. There, struggling behind the clouds and stratospheric debris, a perfect, pale disk. “Luna,” she said. “Staying on the planet’s going to mean dying when the food runs out. And the water.”

“I was thinking that too.”

“There are yachts. I know where the family kept them. But it’s a spaceport for rich people. Tons of security. We might need help breaking in.”

“I know some people,” Amos said. “I mean, y’know. If they’re still alive.”

“That’s a plan, then,” she said, but didn’t move. Her slur was going away, which meant she probably wasn’t bleeding into her brain. So that was one problem he didn’t have. Amos shifted, lying back on the dead man’s rib cage, the crown of his head touching hers. A little rest seemed like a fine thing, but they’d have to get moving soon. It was a long walk back to Baltimore. He wondered if they could find a car. Or, failing that, a couple of bicycles. His ear was starting to lose its angry throb. He’d probably be able to walk soon.

In the black sky, the pale circle dimmed behind a thicker roil of cloud and ash, then vanished for a moment before struggling back.

“It’s funny,” Clarissa said. “Most of human history, going to the moon was impossible. A dream beyond anyone’s imagination. And then, for a while, it was an adventure. And then it was trivial. *Yesterday*, it was trivial. And now, it’s almost impossible again.”

“Yeah,” Amos said, “well...”

He felt her shift, tuning her head as if to see him better. “What?”

He gestured up toward the sky. “Pretty sure that’s the sun. I get what you’re saying though.”

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Chapter Twenty-seven: Alex

His head hurt. His back hurt. He couldn't feel his legs. It was all distressing until his mind came back enough for him to realize it meant he hadn't died. The medical bay chimed, something cool pumped into his arm, and his consciousness faded away again.

When he woke this time, he felt almost human. The medical bay was huge. Easily five times what they had on the *Rocinante*, but smaller than the full, multiunit hospital of the *Behemoth*. The anti-spalling coating on the walls was the soft brown of bread crusts. He tried to sit up, then reconsidered.

"Ah, Mister Kamal. Are you feeling better?"

The doctor was a thin-faced, pale-skinned woman with eyes the color of ice. Her uniform was MCRN. He nodded to her more out of social habit than because he was feeling better.

"Am I going to be okay?" Alex said.

"Depends," she said. "Keep eating like you're twenty, and it'll haunt you."

Alex laughed and a spike of pain cut through his belly. The doctor grimaced and put a hand on his shoulder.

"You did get a little surgery while you were out. That burn you were on made your ulcer way worse."

"I have an ulcer?"

"You used to. Now you have a reconstructed stem graft, but it's still settling into place. Give it a few days, and it'll be much better."

"Yeah," Alex said, resting his head back on the pillow. "I've been under a little stress lately. Is Bobbie okay?"

"She's fine. They've been debriefing her. I imagine they'll want to chat

with you too, now that you're back around."

"What about my ship?"

"We pulled her into the hangar. She's being refueled. You can get her back when we're clear."

That brought him back. "Clear?"

"Those gentlemen who were taking potshots at you? Our escort's back making sure they don't get too happy about following us. Once the relief ships actually get here, I expect you'll be on your way."

"You got some coming, then?"

"Oh my, yes," the doctor said, with a sigh. "Half a dozen of our finest. Probably more than we need, but we're not in a place where anyone wants to take risks."

"I'm right there with 'em on that," Alex said, closing his eyes. The silence felt weird. He opened them again. The doctor stood where she had been before, her smile as it had been, her hands clasped lightly in front of her. There were tears in her eyes.

"Some things happened while you were out," she said. "You should probably know about them."



Bobbie stood up and hugged him hard as soon as he walked into the debriefing room. She wore a flight jumpsuit just like the one they'd provided him. They didn't say anything at first. It felt strange, being enveloped in her arms. She was much larger than him and stronger besides. He would have imagined that being held like that by an attractive woman would have had some erotic element, but all he felt was a deep sense of their shared vulnerability.

He'd never been on Earth. He didn't know it there. Until now, he wouldn't have said he had any particular connection to the place. That he was wrong about that was a revelation. A quarter billion dead between the strikes and the tsunamis. And many more soon. Already the newsfeeds were reporting failures of infrastructure, and surface temperatures were dropping toward freezing in the springtime northern hemisphere under the vast clouds of dust and water and debris. The major cities had fusion reactors for

power, but everywhere that still relied on distributed solar was running out of battery reserves. Billions more lights going dark. The secretary-general was dead, as were an unknown number of assembly representatives. The military was calling back ships from all parts of the solar system, making a cordon around the planet in fear of further strikes. The failed coup on Tycho and the dark fleet that they'd stumbled into, it all felt like a footnote to what had happened to humanity's home world.

And the worst thing was no one knew who'd done it all. Or why.

Bobbie let him go and stepped back. He saw the same hollowness he felt reflected in her eyes.

"Holy shit," he said.

"Yeah."

Everything about the debriefing room expressed safety, comfort. The lights were indirect and shadowless. The walls had the same warm brown as the medical bay. Crash couches surrounded a small, built-in table instead of a desk. It was the kind of space Alex associated with psychiatrists' offices in films. Bobbie looked around too, seeming to see the place anew now that Alex was there. She nodded to a small alcove opposite the door.

"You want some tea? They have tea."

"Sure," Alex said. "Okay. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I mean, I'm a little shook, but they didn't put me in the med bay," she said. "What kind do you want? They've got orange pekoe, oolong, chamomile—"

"I don't know what any of those are."

"Me either. So. Okay, you get oolong."

The machine hissed. She handed him a bulb. It felt warm in his hand and had a subtle smell of smoke and water. Alex sat at the table and tried a sip, but it was too hot. Bobbie sat beside him.

"That was some pretty amazing flying," she said. "I'm almost sorry I wasn't there to see it."

"I would have warned you, but, you know. Heat of the moment."

She shook her head. "No objections. If I'd been tensed up, I'd have probably popped open an old wound or stroked out or something. I watched the flight data. Seriously, I was in this room wearing a fresh suit and looking at recordings, and there were still a few seconds there I didn't think we were going to make it."

The admiration in her voice felt warmer than the tea. He was pretty sure he was blushing, and hoped it didn't show. "Yeah, it was a squeaker. Good damned thing you remembered the convoy here too. I wasn't coming up with anything. Do we know who the hell those ships are?"

"No. Most of the escort's pulled off to cover us, and so far it looks like it's working. But no transponder signals from the bad guys. No demands or threats or anything."

"Creepy." The tea had cooled enough now. "Any chance they'll let me send a message back to the captain?"

Bobbie sighed and spread her hands. "Eventually, yeah. They've been treating us like friendlies, but it may be a while before they hand us access to the comm arrays. We're still in a fight, even if we're not at the middle of it."

"What did you tell them?"

Bobbie's brow furrowed. "The truth, only it doesn't come out real well."

"Meaning?"

"I said we were out there looking for missing ships hiding under new transponder signals because of a tip from James Holden."

"Huh. Yeah, that does sound a little ominous when you say it out loud, doesn't it?"

"They wanted to know how he knew to look there, and what my relationship was to Holden. I mean, they kind of knew about you, so it was more about why I was shipping with you."

"What was the answer for that?"

"Old friends, and the fact that you were Navy. You know ships. I'm just a ground-pounder. But that got me into talking about looking at black market issues back at home, and you asking around on Hecate for me and the dead guy and the guys who attacked me."

"So the other dead guys."

"Well, yeah. And after that, it seemed like they were a little suspicious when I said I didn't know anything."

Alex leaned forward. His body still felt weak and shaky. "At least they don't think we're part of... you know. That."

The door opened softly, almost apologetically. The man who came in was older, his hair a well-crafted white. He wore a suit instead of a uniform or jumpsuit. He looked like a particularly avuncular lawyer. Two marines

came in behind him in full armor. They didn't acknowledge Alex or Bobbie, just took positions at either side of the door. The white-haired man beamed at Alex and then Bobbie and then back at Alex again.

"Mr. Kamal!" he said. His voice matched his appearance. "I'm so glad to see that you're up and around. I was hoping to have a word with you about this present unpleasantness, yes?"

Alex shot a glance at Bobbie. Her shrug was almost invisible. This wasn't someone she knew.

"Of course," Alex said. "Anything I can do to help."

"Good, good, good," the man said, then lifted a finger. "But first."

He sat down at the table, and an oddly mild scowl came over his face. Alex felt like they were about to be gently chided by the head of school. "Sergeant Draper, I was wanting to ask you why the government of Earth is demanding to speak with you. Have you been in contact with them?"

Bobbie's face went gray and pale. Her hand went to her mouth. "Oh, I am so sorry," she said. "You look so different on video. I didn't recognize you, sir. Alex, this is Prime Minister Smith."

Alex hopped to his feet. "Oh! I'm sorry, sir. With everything going on out on Ilus and such, I didn't follow the elections last time."

One of the guards coughed in a way that might have hidden laughter. Prime Minister Smith's scowl shifted to something slightly more authentic and nonplussed. He motioned Alex to sit back down. "Yes, well. No harm, of course. But, to the question. Have you been working with the government of Earth?"

"No," Bobbie said. "I've had some conversations and I have a personal familiarity with one person. Chrisjen Avasarala. But that's all."

The prime minister nodded, his brows knitting. "Yes, I see. With the passing of the secretary-general and disarray of the assembly, Chrisjen Avasarala is the de facto legitimate government of Earth. And she has offered to... I believe the phrase was *massage my balls with a paint scraper* if anything happened to you."

"That sounds like her," Alex said.

"Yes, she is quite colorful. And she is also insisting that she be allowed to speak with you. I wonder what exactly it is you would tell her?"

"Nothing I wouldn't say in front of you, sir," Bobbie said. "I'm not a spy. She brought up some questions and concerns that seemed legitimate

and interesting, and I followed up for my own sake. If you'd like, I'd be happy to walk you through everything I did and what I found."

"You are close friends with Chrisjen Avasarala. You are flying with the crew of the *Rocinante*. You seem to have many contacts with Earth and the Belt, Sergeant."

"Yessir," Bobbie said, her gaze forward and slightly down. "Good that we're all on the same side, then."

The silence was longer than Alex liked. The prime minister laced his fingers across his knee. "I suppose it is at that," he said. "So, why don't we all go over what exactly you've found and how we can productively include our mutual friend Chrisjen in all of this."



The debriefing lasted for hours. They had taken him to a separate room, and he'd told them the story of everything that had happened since the return from Ilus. Then another woman had come, and he'd told her. Then they'd brought him back to where Bobbie was, and asked the two of them questions that, by and large, they couldn't answer. All in all, it had been gentle as interrogations went, and even so, it left him drained.

He had quarters of his own that night. A locker, a crash couch, a screen. Even his hand terminal back. The place was a little larger than his bunk on the *Roci*, tiny compared to the quarters on Tycho, and a little bit better than what he'd had back before he'd mustered out of the Navy. They'd even let him record messages for Holden and Amos and Naomi, though they were vetted by the ship's system before being sent out. After that, he promised himself that he'd keep away from the newsfeeds.

It had been years since he'd smelled the air of an MCRN ship. The astringent bite of the air recyclers brought back memories. His first tour, his last one. A sense of growing melancholy stole over him that he didn't recognize at first. Grief. And fear. All his anxieties over the crew of the *Roci* came back a hundred times over. He imagined being back on the ship without Amos. Or without Naomi. Or never seeing his ship again, never hearing Holden's voice. An hour after he'd resolved to go to sleep, he gave up, turned the lights back on, and opened a newsfeed.

Mars was pledging drops of food and emergency supplies. Ganymede, back in control of her own docks, was diverting crops back to Earth. A group calling itself the Acadian Front had claimed responsibility for the attacks, but were discredited almost as soon as they'd made the claim. And on Earth, the riots had begun. Looting. He turned the feed back off and got dressed.

He opened a connection to Bobbie, and she accepted it almost immediately. Wherever she was, it wasn't her bunk. The walls behind her were too far away, and the sound of her voice echoed a little. Her hair was pulled back from her face, her cheeks were flushed, and she was sweating hard.

"Hey," she said, lifting her chin in a sharp nod.

"Hey. Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd see what you were doing."

"Just got done sparring. The lieutenant's going to let me drill some."

"They know you just got shot a little while ago, right?"

"You think a few bullet holes gets you out of training?" she said with a ferocity that left him wondering whether she was joking. "They're even loaning me a suit."

"You been in powered armor since Io?"

"Nope. So that'll be... I don't know. Either really cool or nightmare inducing."

Alex chuckled, and she grinned. Her smile was like pouring water on a burn. "You heading straight for your bunk, or are you stopping by the mess first?"

"I could stand something to eat probably. Meet you there?"

It was an off-time for the mess. The alpha shift's dinner was done, the beta shift's lunch still an hour away. Bobbie was sitting alone at a table by the far wall, her hand terminal open before her. A group of three men and a woman sat not far from her, casting glances at her back and talking among themselves. Alex felt an instant protective surge, like he was back in lower university and one of his friends was being laughed at by another clique.

He grabbed a cheese sandwich and bulb of water, then came and sat across from her. The remains of meatloaf and gravy she'd wolfed down were on her plate and a familiar voice was coming from her terminal.

"—going to be monitoring anything we fucking say. If you wanted to discuss menstruation at great length and detail, this is probably our best

chance. He's always been squeamish about women, and no one likes a Peeping Tom, even if he is prime minister."

"How is she?" Alex asked, nodding toward the hand terminal. Bobbie turned the recording off and frowned at the newly blank screen.

"Heartsick, I think. Devastated. But she'll never let it show. This is what she always feared the most. And now it's happened, and she can't even look away, because she's the one who has to... fix it. Only it can't be fixed, can it?"

"Naw, I guess not."

"They're taking us to Luna."

"I figured as much," Alex said. Something in his voice caught Bobbie's attention.

"You don't want to?"

"Honestly? I want to go home. Get back on the *Roci* with my crew, and after that, I care a whole lot less where we go. Be nice if it was somewhere they weren't shooting at us."

"That would be a plus," Bobbie said. "Don't know where that is."

"Lot of planets out there. My experience with colonies is, ah, a little checkered, but I can see the appeal of a new start."

"There aren't any new starts," Bobbie said. "All the new ones pack the old ones along with them. If we ever really started fresh, it'd mean not having a history anymore. I don't know how to do that."

"Still, I can dream."

"Right there with you."

At the other table, two of the men rose, carrying their trays to the recycler. The man and woman who stayed glanced over at Alex and Bobbie, and then pretended they hadn't. Alex took a bite of his sandwich. The greasy cheese and fake butter were like being young again. Or else like remembering how long it had been since he was young.

"Any word on the assholes who shot at us?"

"They're still fighting with the escort ships. Withdrawing, but not retreating. The escort isn't looking to engage as long as they can keep the bastards from getting close to us."

"Yeah, all right."

"Seem weird to you too?"

"Little bit," Alex said. "Seems like a pretty piss-poor ambush if you

don't actually ambush anyone."

"It's because of us," Bobbie said. "You and me. We were in the right place at the right time. We forced the bad guys to make their play too soon. If we hadn't, it wouldn't be just the secretary-general that died. Honestly, I think that's why we're getting treated this well. Smith knows it could have gone a lot worse without us."

"You're probably right. It's just..."

"You're waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"Yeah."

"Me too. We're jumpy. Why wouldn't we be? Someone just broke pretty much all of human civilization overnight."

The words hit Alex like a blow. He put down his sandwich. "They did, didn't they? I don't know who we are now. I don't know what this does."

"Me neither. Or anyone else. But we'll figure it out. And whoever did this, we'll find them. We're not going to let them win."

"No matter what game they're playing."

"No matter what," Bobbie agreed.

Billions were dying right now, and no way to save them. Earth was broken, and even if it survived, it would never go back to what it had been. Mars was a ghost town, the terraforming project at its heart falling to pieces. The aliens that sent the protomolecule hadn't needed to destroy humanity. They'd given humans the opportunity to destroy themselves, and as a species, they'd leaped on it. Alex pushed away an angry tear, and Bobbie pretended she hadn't seen it.

"Yeah," he said. "Still. I'm going to feel a lot better when the relief ships get here."

"Amen," Bobbie said. "Still, I wish it was more than just six ships coming. Well, seven. Six and a half."

"Six and a half?"

"Relief ships picked up a commercial hauler somewhere. Nonmilitary. It's called the *Chetzemoka*?"

Chapter Twenty-eight: Holden

Cover for some kind of theft,’ ” Holden said again. “I mean what the hell was that?”

Fred Johnson kept walking. The gently curving corridor with its view of the construction sphere was like Tycho Station’s boast that it had not been destroyed. The people they passed nodded to Fred and Holden. Some wore green armbands in solidarity, and more than a few of those had the OPA split circle with an additional split at ninety degrees to the first. Others had a stylized globe and the words ONE PEOPLE OPA & EARTH. The physical damage to the station was for the most part limited to the engineering and drive levels at the bottom of the sphere and Fred’s office on the ring, but Holden couldn’t help feeling that the deeper injury was to Tycho’s story about itself. Not long ago, Tycho—like Ceres—had been one of the jewels of the outer planets. Part of a greater argument about the independence of the Belt.

Now that Belters had attacked it, it had become something else. The sense of unity with Earth wasn’t so much a real sympathy for the government that had so recently been the enemy, than a statement of separation from the OPA. Tycho Station for Tycho Station, and fuck anyone who crossed them.

Or he may have been projecting, since he was feeling more than a little like that himself.

“She was being a journalist,” Fred said. “That kind of thing? It’s what they do.”

“We just saved her life. If it wasn’t for us, she’d have been carried off the station to God knows where and... I don’t know. Tortured or something.”

“That’s true,” Fred said. They reached the lift, passing through doors that opened in anticipation of them. Fred’s rank still had its privileges, and first priority on lifts was one. “But we also lied to her. And she knew it.”

Holden bit back an objection because it wasn’t much more than *We did not* and he knew that actually they did. It wasn’t something he’d have done, just a few years before. Then, he’d have told the truth, the whole truth, and let the chips fall wherever they fell. He didn’t know if it bothered him more that he’d changed or that he hadn’t noticed it until someone else pointed it out.

Fred looked over to him with a weary smile. “ ‘Be angry at the sun for setting if these things anger you.’ A poet named Jeffers said that.”

“Yeah, but was he talking about journalists and politicians lying to each other?”

“Matter of fact, he was.”

The lift shifted and dropped. Fred leaned against the back wall with a groan.

“We didn’t have to do that,” Holden said.

“Yes we did,” Fred said. “After a loss, the most important thing for a leader to do is be seen. And be seen walking under their own damned power. Sets the narrative.”

“Still.”

“It’s something I can still do,” Fred said. “I’m sure as hell going to do it.”

Fred’s old office was still being repaired. Until its walls and floor didn’t open on vacuum, Drummer had set up a space for him near the overfull brig. It was a smaller space, less comfortable and less imposing. Holden couldn’t be in it without feeling like Fred had given himself a demotion. Or had accepted without complaint the one the universe had handed to him.

Fred settled in behind his desk and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. “The truth is that almost everything we do here won’t even be a footnote in the history books.”

“You don’t know that. You’re just feeling discouraged,” Holden said, but Fred was already pulling up his work on the desk monitor.

“I had two messages last night. Well, more than that, but two that were interesting. The first was from Earth. Avasarala was on Luna when it happened, and she’s putting together a response.”

“A response?”

“A diplomatic conference. The Martian prime minister was already en route. She wants me to be there too. To ‘represent the slightly less batshit wing of the OPA.’ If humanity really rests on that woman’s diplomatic skills... well, that’ll be interesting.”

“What’s the worst that could happen? War?”

Fred coughed out a grim laugh. “I’ve already talked with Drummer. She’s ready to take over operation of Tycho in my absence.”

“You’re going to go, then?”

“I don’t know if I’ll go there, but I won’t stay here. There’s something else I wanted you to see.”

Fred opened a message, and gestured Holden toward it. A pale-skinned man with close-cut white hair and the wrinkles of early age competing with acne scars of long-past youth. The date stamp at the lower left corner said it had been sent from Pallas Station.

“Anderson Dawes,” Fred said. “You’ve heard of him?”

“Big mover and shaker in the OPA, isn’t he?”

“The man who reached out to me, back in the day. Made me into the inward-facing figurehead of the Belt. Instrumental in the transition of Ceres to OPA oversight. The last few years, he’s been negotiating for the OPA to have a stake in Ganymede equal to Earth and Mars.”

“All right,” Holden said.

Fred started the recording, and the man came to life. His voice was gravelly and low, like he’d been punched in the throat too many times. “Fred. I know this has got to be a hard time for you. For what it’s worth, it’s pretty shocking to all of us. But so it goes. History’s made of surprises that seem obvious in retrospect. I want you to know, I didn’t sanction any of this. But I know the men who did, and say what you will about their methods, they’re true patriots.”

“What the fuck is this?” Holden said.

“Wait for it,” Fred said.

“I’m reaching out to you now to make peace within the organization. I know as well as you do how much you’ve sacrificed and how hard you’ve worked for the OPA over the years. It’s not forgotten. But we’re in a new age now, and it carries its own logic. I know you’re enough of a man to recognize the difference between justice and the things that have to happen.

I'll get you back in the fold. I swear to that. But I'm going to need a token. Something I can take to the new powers to show that you're a reasonable man. That you can negotiate. You've taken a prisoner. Not one of the people who participated in the insurrection. Even they know asking *that* so soon is a bridge too far. But a prisoner of yours nonetheless. His name's William Sakai. As a gesture of good faith, I'm asking that you turn him over to me at Pallas Station, in return for which I will guarantee you a seat at the table when—"

Fred stopped the recording, Anderson Dawes caught with his eyes and mouth half-open.

"You have got to be kidding me," Holden said.

"No one's laughing."

Holden sat down on the edge of the desk, staring at the frozen man, his chest a welter of conflicting emotions: anger, surprise, outrage, amusement, despair. "You could tell him we already threw him out an airlock."

"Would that be before or after we threw him out an airlock?"

"Either way works for me."

Fred smiled and shut down the display. "You say that, but you wouldn't do it. Even angry, you're too decent a man. And it turns out I am too."

"Really?"

"I got soft when I got old. Everything seems... delicate to me now. We're still under lockdown, and I have to open that up. Have to get some semblance of normalcy. That's not the point, though. I have invitations to two tables. The inner planets are in retreat. They're regrouping. The radicals within the OPA are becoming the new leadership."

"But they're crazy mass murderers."

"Yes," Fred said. "And we don't know who they are. Dawes does. I don't."

"Wait a minute," Holden said. "Hold on. Are you about to propose that you trade Sakai to this Dawes guy so that you can feed the names of whoever's behind dropping rocks on Earth to Avasarala? How many times are you looking to change sides in one career?"

"I never changed sides," Fred said. "The sides keep changing around me. I was always the one who wanted order. Peace. Justice, even. What happened at Anderson Station opened my eyes to things I hadn't seen. Or had chosen not to see. Now this..."

“It’s done the same thing again.”

“I don’t know what it’s done. That’s what I’m trying to decide. There have always been radicals within the OPA. The Voltaire Collective. Marco Inaros. Cassandra Lec. But they were on the margins, where we thought we could control them. Keep them in line, or if not always that, use their excesses to make the mainstream places like Ceres and Tycho seem the least of the available evils. Now, they’re in charge. I don’t know if the best thing is to declare against them or stand beside them and try to control the fall.” He shook his head.

“Your friend Dawes seems to be in bed with them already.”

“His loyalty’s to the Belt. When the best thing was to find a way to be respected as an equal by the inner planets, that was what he aimed for. My loyalty is to... everyone. There was a long time that meant speaking for the people who had the least voice. Then the protomolecule came and changed the game, and now, if riding beside the radicals gives me the most influence... As long as my people hold Medina, no one can ignore me. I can throw in on whichever side I think it will do the most good to be on, in the long-term.”

“That sounds like post hoc realpolitik rationalizing bullshit,” Holden said. And then a moment later, “Sir.”

“It is,” Fred said. “But it’s what I’ve got to work with. If I commission the *Rocinante* to take me to Luna and the meeting with Avasarala, will you accept the job?”

“If we finish checking all of Sakai’s work and you bring your own crew, sure. Or, better, we go pick up mine from wherever they’ve gotten to.”

“And if I hire you to take me and the prisoner to Pallas?”

“Then you can go fuck yourself.”

Fred chuckled and stood up, checking his sidearm. “I do always enjoy our little chats, Captain. Take the day off. I’ll get back to you when I’ve made a decision. Either way.”

“Where are you going now?”

“To talk with Sakai,” Fred said. “See if there’s anything about this I can glean from him. The prospect of not getting thrown out one of my airlocks might make him more willing to talk with me.” He looked at Holden, and his expression shifted to a strange place at the friction point between pitying and pleading. “I try to do the right thing, Holden. But there are times when

it's not obvious what that is."

"I agree with you," Holden said. "Right up to the part where you tell me this is one of those times."



Holden was in a Thai restaurant eating peanut curry that was, as far as he could remember from his childhood on Earth, totally unlike anything served on a planet's surface. A piece of not-chicken floated on top of the not-curry, and Holden was pushing it under with a chopstick and watching it pop back to the surface when two messages came through. The first was from Mother Elise. The family was all right so far. They were under an environmental watch, but no evacuation orders had come. Not, she said with one lifted eyebrow, that there was anyplace to evacuate to better prepared and equipped than the ranch. They were sending the spare reactor down to help with the local grid at Three Forks, and waiting to hear from the Jacksons to see if they needed anything. He knew her well enough to see the depth of anxiety in all the things she didn't say. But when she said goodbye, she promised to be in touch. It was thin comfort, but it was something.

The second message was from Alex.

Bobbie Draper and he were on the prime minister's ship and burning for Luna with the escort fleet watching their backs. Everyone was pretty freaked-out, but he thought they were okay for the time being. The relief ships were on their way and due in a day or two. He hadn't had any word from Naomi, wherever she was. Or, more to the point, from Amos. He made a joke about Amos surviving anything, and how this wasn't the first planet that had blown up on him, but the humor carried the same dread and fear that Holden felt. When Alex signed off, he replayed the whole message from the start three more times, just to hear the familiar voice.

He started to record a response, but the restaurant was too open and too public for the things he wanted to say, so he promised himself he'd get to it when he was back in his quarters. He finished as much of the curry as he could stomach and the restaurant light slowly shifted from yellow to gold, the colors of a false sunset on a planet many of the people there had never seen except on screens. He paid the check and the waiter came, offering a

variety of after-dinner desserts or drinks. The man's gaze lingered long enough that, while it was all within the bounds of politeness, it was pretty clear that Holden could have asked for some other things too.

Holden's mind shifted on most of the questions. More food, more drink, more sleep, more sex. Any sex. He was aware of a deep and oceanic cavern of want in his belly. Something that was like hunger or thirst, exhaustion or lust, but that wouldn't be satisfied. He didn't have words for it, except that it left him quick to anger and despair. Lingering behind it all, the fear that he wouldn't ever have his crew back on his ship made him feel gut-punched.

And then the word for it came. He was *homesick*, and the *Rocinante*, wonderful as she was, wasn't home unless Alex and Amos and Naomi were in her. He wondered how long the feeling would last if they never came back. How long he'd wait for them, even once he knew they wouldn't return. The waiter smiled gently down at him.

"Nothing," Holden said. "Thanks."

He walked out to the main corridor, mentally rehearsing what he'd say to Alex and how he'd say it. Anything he said was going to be examined by the Martian communications service, so he didn't want to put anything in it that was open to misinterpretation. The problem with that being that he always knew what he meant by things, and didn't see the other readings until someone made them. Maybe he could just make a few jokes and say that he was ready to have everyone back together.

When his hand terminal buzzed a connection request, he accepted it, his mind primed to expect Alex even though light delay made that impossible. Drummer scowled out at him from the screen. "Mister Holden, I was wondering if you could stop by the auxiliary security office."

"I guess," Holden said, suddenly wary. He still half expected Drummer to turn out to be playing some angle of her own. "Is it something I should know about now?"

A stream of cursing came from the background, growing louder. Drummer stepped aside and Fred lurched into the screen. "If we were talking about it on the network, you wouldn't be coming in here."

"Right," Holden said. "On my way."

In the security office, Fred was pacing, his hands clasped behind his back, when Holden arrived. He nodded sharply by way of greeting.

Drummer, at her seat, was a model of the crisp professionalism designed to offer no reason for the boss to yell at you. That was fine. Holden didn't mind being the one who got yelled at.

"What's the matter?"

"Medina went dark," Fred said. "She was supposed to report in this morning, but with everything being at loose ends, I didn't worry. She's missed two opportunities since then. And... Drummer? Show him."

The security chief pulled up a schematic of the solar system. At scale, even Jupiter and the sun were hardly more than a bright pixel. Thousands of dots showed the traffic in-system. Ships and bases, satellites and probes and navigation buoys. All of humanity in a nutshell. With a motion and a syllable, most of the clutter vanished. In its place, a couple dozen green dots with the word UNDETERMINED where the identification codes should be made a rough cloud. Someone's statistics run with a small but significant correlation.

"As soon as the station went dark," Drummer said, "we saw these. Twenty-five new plumes. All of them have drive signatures that match Martian military ships, and all of them are under heavy burn for the Ring."

"Heavy burn?"

"Eight to ten g to start, curving down, which means they're running at the limit of their drives."

Holden whistled. Fred stopped in his pacing, his expression placid in a way that spoke volumes about rage. "Those are my people on Medina. If the station has been compromised, or if these new ships are on their way to do something violent there, it will pose a significant obstacle to my participation with the new direction within the OPA."

"Meaning fuck that noise?"

"Yes."

"It's a long way out to Medina," Holden said. "Even at those burns, it'll take them a while. But I don't think we could beat them there."

"We couldn't do anything if we did. If I took all the ships at my disposal, one Martian frigate could still rain hell on them. And even the *Rocinante* would be badly outgunned."

"Have to wonder where they got Martian military ships," Holden said.

"I'll be sure to ask Dawes about that as soon as I've told him what I

think of his good faith prisoner exchange. How long before the *Rocinante*'s ready to fly?"

"Put a rush on it, we could be out of here in five days."

"Mister Drummer, please put all available teams on finishing the repairs and security audit for the *Rocinante*."

"Yes, sir," Drummer said, and shifted her screen to show the work schedules for the construction drum. Fred looked down at his feet and then back up.

"I'm going to be busy the next few days putting Tycho in order for Drummer. I'd like you to oversee the crews on the *Roci*."

"Wasn't going to do anything else."

"Fair enough," Fred said. And then, almost wistfully, "It will be good to see Luna again."

Holden tried to wait until he got back to his quarters, but lost patience when he reached the lift. He opened Alex's message and set up the camera to record his reply.

"Hey, Alex. So, funny thing. Looks like I'm going to be catching up with you sooner than we'd thought..."

Chapter Twenty-nine: Naomi

She'd known to expect it. Like falling back into a bad habit, the dark thoughts came: which conduits had power lines in them with enough voltage to stop a heart, which rooms were small enough to seal and evacuate, the ways the medical bays could be tricked into administering an overdose. And the airlocks. Always the airlocks. The ideas weren't compulsions, not yet. They were just her brain noticing things that interested her. The worst would come later. If she let it.

So instead, she distracted herself. Not with the newsfeeds that played constantly, everywhere. Those only made her feel more helpless. Not with the conversations with her old friends. At best, those left her feeling like she was lying. At worst, like she was becoming an earlier version of herself for whom the dark thoughts were more natural. What she did have was work. It was all simple tasks like checking inventories and swapping air filters, and always under the watchful eyes of a minder. When she did talk, it was polite and superfluous; the kind of banter anyone crewing the same ship would make. It gave the rest of the crew the illusion that she was one of them in a way that sulking in her bunk wouldn't have. If she had any hope at all, it came from finding a way to leverage her weird non-status with the group. And with Marco.

At first, she'd tried distracting herself by thinking of her real crew. Alex and Amos. Jim. Even her best memories of them were riddled with guilt and pain now, so instead she filled her mind with technical concerns. In the mess, while the others cheered at the images of devastation, she speculated about the reactor's output, starting with the size of the galley, and then guessing at the requirements of the air and water recycling systems, and knowing the rough percentage that the *Roci* put into them. During her sleep

shift, as she lay restless in her crash couch, the steady one-third-g burn pressing her into the gel like a hand on her chest, she ran over the power grid from the *Roci*, mapping how the logic of her ship would apply to this one. She thought of it as a meditation because it was too dangerous to admit—even to herself—that she was planning.

And still, small things came together. A toolbox in the machine shop had a bent hasp and, given a few minutes, could be forced open. The Allen wrenches inside would open the access panel on the lift wall between the crew quarters and the airlock, which was where the secondary diagnostic handset for the comm array was stored. With a few uninterrupted minutes, someone could probably broadcast a message. A short one. If there was anything to say, or anyone to say it to.

She had half a dozen schemes like it. A path to sneak between the hulls and take control of a PDC. A way to use a stolen hand terminal to make copies of the engineering software. How to force-cycle an airlock by spoofing the emergency codes from the medical bay. Most of them were fantasies, possible in theory but nothing she had ever had reason to try. A few were fairly solid. And all of them were defeated by a simple, inescapable fact: the first layer of any security was always physical. Even if she'd found a way to take control of the whole ship using a magnet and a length of Velcro, it wouldn't matter, because Cyn or Aaman or Bastien would put a bullet through her neck before she could manage it.

So she called it meditation and kept the darkness at bay. And sometimes—by being quiet and not making waves and keeping her mind and senses sharp—she heard something she wasn't supposed to hear.

Karal, her minder that shift, was talking up a woman called Sárta while Naomi scraped the crew decking nearby. Truth was the ship was new enough it didn't need it, but it was work. Wings, who'd first hunted her back on Ceres, came out from his quarters in a Martian naval uniform. Naomi looked up from under her hair as Wings saw Karal and Sárta standing together. The flicker of jealousy that passed over him had been the same since humans came down from the trees.

"Hey, y'all," Wings said in a fake drawl. "Vise mé! Bin Marteño, sa sa? Howdy, howdy, howdy!"

Karal chuckled and Sárta looked annoyed. Wings stepped through the narrow hall with an affected bowlegged gait. Naomi shifted aside to give

him room.

“You got nothing better to do than play dress up?” Sárta asked.

“Don’t wait underwater,” Karal said. “Heard we’re taking prisoners first. Liano, he ran whispers to Ceres. Tightbeam. Hamechie about the prisoners.”

“Not how I heard it,” Wings said, too quickly and more to Sárta than Karal. “I heard it’s only one. Sakai. And even that...” He shrugged.

“Even that?” Sárta said, and mimicked the shrug. Wings blushed in anger.

“Everyone knows how it is,” Wings said. “Sometimes they tell dead men they’ll live. Karal, you were there. Andrew and Chuchu? All about how help’s coming and then so sorry, so sad?”

“Esa died soldiers,” Karal said, but the point hit home. It was in his hands and the corners of his mouth. And then, like he realized his mistake, he looked over to Naomi. She kept her expression blank and bored, her attention on the seam in the deck and the thin plastic spatula she was dragging through it. The cascade of implications couldn’t reach her face.

Sakai had been the name of the new chief engineer on Tycho, and if this was the same man, he’d been one of Marco’s. And he’d been caught, or they wouldn’t have called him a prisoner. She blew the hair up out of her eyes, shifted over to a new seam and started again.

“Back to work, yeah?” Karal said.

Wings grunted his derision, but went back to his quarters to do as he’d been told. Karal and Sárta went back to flirting, but the moment was gone, and pretty soon it was only Karal and Naomi again, passing time.

While she worked, pressing the plastic into the seams, scraping out whatever had gathered there, doing it again, she tried to fit the new information into the larger scheme of things. Marco had hoped she would bring the *Rocinante* to Ceres. But Sakai had known that the ship needed repair, and must have passed that information up to leadership.

She’d thought that Marco had wanted her ship because of who and what *she* was. And maybe that was part of it. Or maybe what he’d really wanted was private access to a ship that would be expected and welcome at Tycho Station. For what, she didn’t know. The way he nested plans inside his plans, he might have had half a dozen uses for the *Roci* and for her. And more, there was a question about whether Sakai was in danger. Were they

afraid Fred would execute him? Maybe. Maybe something else.

Either way, she knew more now than she'd known before, and, like the bent hasp on the toolbox, it gave her options she hadn't had. She wondered what Jim or Amos or Alex would have done in her place, how they would have taken this one piece of information and used it. An academic question, really, because she knew what Naomi Nagata would do, and it wasn't something any of them could have done.

When the deck was clean, she dropped the spatula into the recycler, stood, and stretched. The thrust gravity made her knees and spine ache, and she wished that wherever they were going, they'd be in a little less of a hurry to get there. It didn't matter.

"Grabbing a shower, me," she said. "Tell him I want to talk."

"Him who?" Karal said.

Naomi hoisted an eyebrow. "Tell him the mother of his son wants to talk."



"You've put him in the field?" Naomi said. "Is that where we are? Child soldiers?"

Marco's smile looked almost sorrowful. "You think he's a child?"

The exercise machines were empty apart from him. On the float, everyone in the crew would have been spending hours in the resistance gel or strapped into one of the mechs. On the burn, most of the crew were getting more than enough from their own weight. But Marco was there in a sheer exercise gown, straps wrapped around his hands, pulling down on wide bands that fought against him. The muscles in his back rippled with every stroke, and Naomi was certain he was aware of it. She had known many strong people in her life. She could tell the difference between the muscles that grew from work and the kind that came from vanity.

"I think he's crowing about how he's responsible for the rock fall on Earth," she said. "Like it's something to be proud of."

"It is. It's more than you or I could have done at his age. Filip's smart and he's a leader. Give him another twenty years, he could run the solar system. Maybe more."

Naomi walked over and turned off the exercise sequence. The wide bands in Marco's hands went slack with a barely audible hiss. "I wasn't done," he said.

"Tell me that isn't why you brought me here," she said. "Tell me that you didn't abduct me in order to show me what a good father you've been and how well our boy turned out. Because you betrayed him."

Marco's laugh was low and warm and rolling. He started unwrapping his hands. It would have been so easy to hurt him while he did it that she was fairly certain he had a hidden way to defend himself. And if not, the impression that he might was defense enough. She wasn't here to kill him. She was here to push him into saying something.

"Is that what you think?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I think you did it to show off. I walked away from you, and you're such a little boy that you still can't stand it. So when your big moment came, you had to have me here to see it happen."

It was true, as far as it went. She did see a pleasure in him that came from having power over her. Even her weird half-status in the crew was a part of that. Locking her in a cage would have been a tacit admission she was a threat. He wanted her to see that she was powerless, to make the prison walls herself. There had been a time it would have worked. She was betting that he didn't realize that time had passed.

And she was betting that it had passed. When he narrowed his eyes at her, shaking his head, she still felt the tug of humiliation in her throat, familiar as an old habit. So perhaps the truth was more complicated.

"I brought you home to the winning side because you are the mother of my son, and always will be. Anything beyond that is happy coincidence. That we have the chance to find some sense of closure between us—"

"Bullshit. Closure? You lost. It's closed. You only say it wasn't finished because you hadn't won yet. I left. I sacrificed everything because having nothing away from you was better than having it all and being your puppet."

He lifted his hands, palms out, in a mocking gesture of peace. It wasn't working. Not yet.

"I hear that you would have done things differently. I don't blame you for that. Not everyone has the strength to be a soldier. I thought you did. I thought I could count on you. And when the burden bore you down, yes, I

took our son someplace I knew he'd be safe. You blame me for keeping him away from you. But you'd have done exactly the same to me, if you'd had the power."

"I would have," she said. "I'd have taken him with me, and you'd never have seen either of us again."

"So how different are we?" Sweat dewed his skin. He took a towel from the rack, dabbing at his face and arms. She knew intellectually that he was beautiful, the way the iridescent wings of a carrion fly would be. She felt the weight of her disgust with herself for letting this man be what he was to her, and knew that was part of what he intended. The dark thoughts stirred in her brain stem. They didn't matter. She was here to solve a puzzle.

He put down the towel. "Naomi—"

"It's Holden then, isn't it? You brought me here as... what? Insurance against him?"

"I'm not afraid of your Earther fuck buddy," Marco said, and Naomi heard the roughness in his voice like an animal scenting a distant fire.

"I think you are," she said. "I think you wanted him off the board before you started this, and I was supposed to lead him into the trap. Because you couldn't imagine that I would come alone. That I wouldn't bring a man to be strong for me."

Marco chuckled, but it had more of an edge to it. He walked across the exercise mat, scooping up his dark robe and shrugging into it. "You're trying to talk yourself into something, Knuckles."

"Do you know why I'm with him?"

If Marco were wise, he wouldn't rise to that bait. He'd walk out, leave her alone among the machines. If she'd managed to make him angry, even just a little bit angry, though...

"I assume you have a kink for powerful men," Marco said.

"Because he *is* what you *pretend* to be."

She saw it land. She couldn't even say what it was that changed in him, but the Marco she'd seen since being brought here—the smooth, world-weary, self-assured leader of the greatest coup in human history—was gone, dropped like a mask. In his place was the rage-filled boy who'd almost destroyed her once. His laugh wasn't low or warm or rolling.

"Well, just wait around, and we'll see how much that does for him. Big Man Holden may think he's unkillable, but everyone bleeds."

There. That was a datapoint. It was working. It might only have been the rhetoric of the squabble, an empty threat. Or he might have just told her that his plans still involved the *Rocinante*.

“You can’t do anything to him,” she said.

“No?” Marco said, his teeth bared like a chimp. “Well, maybe you will.”

He turned sharply, stalking out of the room. Leaving her alone the way he should have a few minutes earlier. Or else a decade and a half before.



“You done?” Cyn asked, nodding at the brick of lentil and rice half-eaten on her plate. On the screen in the mess hall, a Martian general was pounding a table, red-faced with passion that looked a lot like fear. He was describing the cowardice of the person or persons who had committed this atrocity against not only Earth, but humanity. Every third sentence or so, someone at the end of her table would repeat the general’s words in a high, quacking voice, like something from a children’s cartoon.

She broke off another piece of the lentil brick and popped it in her mouth. “Close enough,” she said around it. She put her tray and the rest of the brick into the recycler and walked back toward the lift. Cyn loomed behind her. She was so locked in her own thoughts that she barely noticed he was there until he spoke.

“Heard you had it out with el jefe,” Cyn said. “Etwas á Filipito?”

Naomi made a noncommittal sound in the back of her throat.

Cyn scratched at the scar behind his left ear. “Es un bon coyo, your son. I know this is none of what you’d pick, but... Filipito, he heard too. Took it hard.”

The lift stopped and she got out, Cyn close behind. “Took it hard?”

“No weight,” Cyn said. “Only know it. A man, our Filipito, but not so much he don’t want your opinion, yeah? You’re his mother.”

The heartbreaking thing was that she understood. She only nodded.

In her bunk, her fingers laced behind her neck, she stared up at the blackness on the ceiling. The interface screen at her side was dead. She didn’t miss it. Slowly, she put together what she knew.

Marco had made attempts on the lives of the heads of Earth, Mars, and

the OPA, but only managed to kill the UN secretary-general. He had tried to get the *Rocinante* before any of those attempts were made. He'd unleashed the worst catastrophe on Earth since the dinosaurs went extinct. He had Martian warships and weapons but didn't show any signs of cooperating with the Martian government or Navy. All things she'd known, nothing new. So what was new?

Three new things, and maybe only that. First, Wings thought the attempts to trade Sakai back might be more to reassure the prisoner than to actually retrieve him. Second, Marco had intimated that Holden was still in danger, and third, that *she* might be the one to hurt him.

And also, underlying everything, her certainty that until Marco had given his speech, made himself the focus of all humanity's attention, the attack was still only half-done. And if Sakai thought he was going to remain a prisoner, it would go wrong. That was interesting. What could Sakai know

Oh.

Fred Johnson was alive, and Tycho Station wasn't in Marco's hands. Holden was in danger. She would be the one that hurt him.

So that meant that the *Roci*, like the *Augustín Gamarra* before her, had been rigged to have her magnetic bottle fail. Probably in dock. Fred Johnson, James Holden, and incidentally Chief Engineer Sakai and everyone on the station—all of them would die in a fireball whenever the software she'd written a lifetime ago decided that they should.

It was all happening again, and she had no way to stop it.

Chapter Thirty: Amos

They moved on foot. The clouds weren't really clouds, and the rain that spat down at them was as much grit and soot as water. The stink of turned earth and rot was all around them, but the cold pushed it back to where it mostly just smelled cold. From the way the trees were all knocked down in the same direction—leaves roughly northeast, roots pointing southwest—he hoped they'd be heading toward less devastated territory. At least until they got near the coast and the flooding.

In Baltimore, he figured the folks in the least trouble would be in the failed arcology in the middle of the city. It had been designed to hold a whole ecosystem inside its massive steel-and-ceramic walls. That it hadn't worked for shit didn't matter as much as the fact that it had been built tall and designed to last. Even if the bottom few floors went underwater, there'd be plenty of people near the top who rode out the worst of it. When Baltimore was a sea, the arcology would still be an island.

Plus, the arcology was a shit neighborhood. Erich and his thugs owned at least some of it. And so long as the rest wasn't controlled by one of the major players—Loca Griega or Golden Bough—they could probably take it in a determined push. And even if Erich hadn't made it, there'd be someone there to negotiate with. He just hoped it wasn't Golden Bough. Those guys, in his experience, were fucking assholes.

In the meantime, though, there were more immediate problems. Getting there was the goal, and if the idea was to put one foot in front of the other from the Pit in Bethlehem to the arcology in Baltimore, there were some holes in the plan. The expanded district put about three million people between him and where he was going if he took the straightest path. High-density urban centers seemed like a bad idea. He was hoping that they could

stay a little to the west of that and make their way around. He was pretty sure there was conservancy zone there they could trek along. Not that he'd spent much of his time on Earth camping. But it was what he had to go with. He probably could have done it, if he'd been by himself.

"How're we holding together, Peaches?"

Clarissa nodded. Her prison hospital gown was mud-streaked from shoulder to hem, and her hair hung long and lank. She was just too fucking skinny and pale. It made her look like a ghost. "I'm fine," she said. Which was bullshit, but what was he going to do about it? Stupid to have asked in the first place.

So they walked, tried to conserve energy, looked for places that might have fresh water. There were a couple emergency stations set up by the highway, men and women with medical armbands and generators to run the lights. It never got more than low twilight, even at noon. The clouds kept some of the heat from radiating out into space, but they blocked the sun too. It felt like early winter, and it should have been summer hot. Every now and then, they came across some new ruin: a gutted building, the walls blown off the steel and ceramic girders, a high-speed train on its side like a dead caterpillar. The bodies they found on the roadside looked like they'd gone in the initial blast.

Most of the dead-eyed, shell-shocked refugees on the roads seemed to be heading for the stations, but Amos tried to steer away from them. For one thing, Peaches was pretty clearly not supposed to be walking free among the law-abiding citizens of Earth, and Amos didn't really feel like having any long conversations about what laws still applied, post-apocalypse. And anyway, the stuff they really needed they couldn't get there. So he kept his eyes open and headed northeast.

Still, it was three days before he found what he was looking for.



The tent was back off the road about seven meters. It wasn't a real tent so much as a tarp strung over a line between a power station pole and a pale sapling. There was a fire outside it though, with a man hunched over it feeding twigs and sticks into the smoky flames. An electric motorcycle

leaned against the power station pole, its display dark either because it was conserving power or it was dead. Amos walked over, making sure his hands were always where the other guy could see them, and stopped about four meters away. Peaches stumbled along at his side. He figured that to anyone who didn't know her or who she was, she probably didn't look real threatening.

"Hey there," Amos said.

After a long moment, the other guy nodded. "Hey."

"Which way you heading?" Amos asked.

"West," the guy said. "Everything's fucked east from here to the coast. Maybe south too. See if I can get someplace warm."

"Yeah, things are shit all over," Amos said like they were at a coffee kiosk and chatting about the weather. "We're heading northeast. Baltimore area."

"Whatever's left of it," the guy said. "No offense, but I think your plan sucks."

"That's okay. I was thinking the same about yours."

The man smiled and didn't go for a gun. If he had one. Not so many guns among the law-abiding Earth populace as there were in the Belt. And if the guy was willing to just shoot the shit this long without anyone escalating or making a play, probably he wasn't a predator. Just another accountant or medical technician still figuring out how little his degree was worth now.

"I'd offer to share," Amos said, "but we ain't got shit."

"I'd help, but the tent's only big enough for one."

"I'm small," Peaches joked, but only sort of. Skinny as she was, she had to be feeling the cold worse, and when he paid attention to it, Amos had to agree it was getting pretty damn brisk.

"Word of warning? Head north a few clicks before you cut any farther east," the man said.

"Why?" Amos asked.

"Militia motherfucker. NO TRESPASSING signs and everything. Took a potshot at me when I went to ask for some water. Kind of asshole that's probably pissing himself with glee that the world went to shit and made his stashed guns and paranoia pay off."

Amos felt something in his chest go loose and warm and thought it might have been relief. "Good to know. Take care then."

"Peace be with you."

"And also with you," Peaches said. Amos nodded and turned north, trudging back along the road. About half a klick later, he stopped, squatting down by a tree, and watched the path they'd just walked down. Peaches huddled beside him, shivering.

"What are we doing?"

"Seeing if he follows us," Amos said. "You know. In case."

"You think he will?"

Amos shrugged. "Don't know. Thing about civilization, it's what keeps people civil. You get rid of one, you can't count on the other."

She smiled. She really wasn't looking that good. He wondered in passing what he'd do if she died. Figure something else out, probably. "You sound like you've done this before," she said.

"Shit, I grew up like this. All these folks are just playing catch-up. Thing is, we're humans. We're tribal. More settled things are, the bigger your tribe is. All the people in your gang, or all the people in your country. All the ones on your planet. Then the churn comes, and the tribe gets small again."

He waved a hand at the dark gray landscape. This far out, the trees weren't knocked over, but the weeds and bushes were starting to die from the dark and the cold.

"Right now," he said, "I figure our tribe at about two."

Either she shuddered at the idea or else the cold was getting to her worse. He stood up, squinting down the road. The tent guy wasn't coming. That was good.

"All right, Peaches. Let's get going. We're going to have to head off the road for a bit."

She looked north, up the road, confused. "Where are we going?"

"East."

"You mean where we aren't supposed to go because of some crazy asshole shooting at people?"

"Yup."



The town had been a decent size last week. Cheap little houses on narrow streets, solar panels on all the roofs sucking in the sunlight, back when there had been some. There were still people here and there. Maybe one house in five or six where the tenants were waiting for help to come to them or so deep in denial that they thought staying put was an option. Or they'd just decided they'd rather die at home. As rational a decision as any other, things being what they were.

They walked on the sidewalks even though there weren't many cars. A police van skidded by a few blocks ahead once. A sedan with an old woman hunched in the front seat who carefully ignored them as she passed. When the batteries ran dry there was no power grid to charge them back up, so all the trips were either short or one-way. One house had words painted across the front: EVERYTHING IN THIS HOUSE IS THE PROPERTY OF THE TRAVIS FAMILY. LOOTERS WILL BE HUNTED DOWN AND KILLED. That left him laughing for a couple of blocks. The supermarket at the center of town was dark, and stripped down to the shelves. So somebody in the place had understood the gravity of their situation.

The compound was on the eastern edge of town. He'd been worried they might walk by it without noticing, but it hugged the road and the signage was clear. PRIVATE PROPERTY. NO TRESPASSING. ARMED SECURITY ON SITE. His personal favorite was NO RELIEF SERVICES.

A wide, flat field of a yard led up to a white modular house. The transport parked in front of it looked like something manufactured to imitate military equipment. Amos had lived in an actual military design long enough to recognize the difference.

He put Peaches in place at the edge of the property first, then walked the perimeter once, taking it all in. The fence had barbed wire all the way around, but nothing electrified. He was about fifty-fifty that there was a sniper's nest in the attic, but it might have just been a bird. Easy to forget that even with the massive burden of humanity, there was still wildlife on Earth. The house itself was prefabbed or else printed in place. Hard to say which. He also saw three tubes coming up out of the ground that looked like they could be ventilation. There were bullet holes in the bark of the trees at the property's edge, and one place where it looked like there was blood on the leaves of the dying bushes.

This was where he wanted to be.

He started by standing at the edge of the property, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting.

“Hey! In the house! You there?”

He waited a long minute, alert for signs of movement. Something behind the curtains of the front window. Nothing in the sniper’s nest. So maybe it was just sparrows after all.

“Hey! In the house! My name is Amos Burton, and I’m looking to trade!”

A man’s voice came, shrill and angry. “This is private property!”

“That’s why I’m out here fucking my throat up instead of ringing the goddamn doorbell. I heard you were prepped for this shit. I got caught with my pants down. Looking to trade for guns.”

There was a long silence. Hopefully the bastard wouldn’t just shoot him, but maybe. Life was risk.

“What’re you offering?”

“Water recycler,” Amos shouted. “It’s on the back of my rig.”

“I’ve got one.”

“May need another. Don’t think they’ll be making more anytime soon.” He waited to the count of ten. “I’m going to come up to the house so we can talk.”

“This is private property! Don’t cross the line!”

Amos opened the gate, smiling his biggest goofiest smile. “It’s okay! If I was armed, I wouldn’t be trading for guns, right? Don’t shoot me, I’m just here to talk.”

He crossed the line, leaving the gate open behind him. He kept his hands in the air, fingers spread. He could see his breath ghosting before him. It really had gotten cold. That wasn’t getting better soon. He wondered if he maybe should have said he had a heater.

The front door opened and the man came out. He was tall and thin with a stupid, cruel face and a long-barreled assault rifle aimed at the center of Amos’ chest. It had to be illegal as shit under UN gun laws.

“Hey!” he said with a wave. “My name’s Amos.”

“You said.”

“Didn’t get yours.”

“Didn’t say it.”

The man walked forward to take cover behind his pretend military transport.

“Nice rifle,” Amos said, keeping his hands up.

“Works too,” the man said. “Strip.”

“Come again?”

“You heard me. You want to trade with me, prove you’re not hiding any weapons. Strip!”

Well, that was unforeseen, but what the hell. Wouldn’t be the first guy he’d ever met who got off on feeling powerful. Amos shrugged off his shirt and heeled off his shoes one at a time, then dropped his pants and stepped out of them. The cold air bit his skin.

“Okay!” Amos said. “Unless I’ve got a pistol up my ass, we can agree I’m not carrying, yeah?”

“Agreed,” the man said.

“Look, if you’re still worried about it, you can get someone to come out, look through the clothes here. You keep the gun on me, make sure I don’t try anything.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

That was a good sign. Made it seem more likely that the fella was on his own here. He glanced up at the attic. If there were a second person, that would be the place to put them. Tiny gray-brown wings fluttered into the attic like the answer to a question.

“Where’s this cycler?”

“About three miles down the road,” Amos said, pointing with his thumb. “I can have it here in an hour, easy.”

“That’s okay,” the man said, lifting the rifle to his shoulder and sighting on Amos. The end of the barrel looked as big as a cave. “I can get it myself.”

Before he could pull the trigger, something moved through the field of his yard like a gust of wind. Only this wind had teeth. The man staggered back, then yawped in confusion and pain. With her chemical hormone blockers having faded in the days since they left the Pit, Peaches moved too quickly for Amos’ eye to follow. It was like she’d become an angry hummingbird. The man fell to his knees, his assault rifle suddenly gone and one of his fingers broken and bleeding. As he curled to grasp his broken hand, the gun stuttered, opening the man’s chest along the side.

And then Peaches went still, her prison gown flapping around her in the breeze, blood spattered down the length of her body, the assault rifle held in one hand. Slowly, she sank to the ground. By the time Amos had his pants back on and got over to her, her eyes had rolled back and she was vomiting. He put his shirt over her and waited until the fit passed. It wasn't more than about five minutes, and since no one else had come out of the house to investigate or take revenge, Amos was feeling pretty confident the dead man had been a bachelor.

She shuddered once, went still, and then the blankness left her eyes.

"Hey," she said. "Did we win?"

"First round," Amos said, nodding to her. "It like that every time?"

"Yup," she said. "It's really not a great design."

"Useful when it's useful, though."

"Is that. Are you okay?"

"Little chilly," Amos said. "Won't kill me. You stay here for a bit, okay? I'm gonna go see what we're looking at inside."

"I'll come with you," she said, trying to sit up. He put a hand on her shoulder. He didn't have to push to keep her down.

"I'll go first. I'd be surprised if it wasn't booby-trapped."

"Okay," she breathed. "I'll just wait here, then."

"Good plan."



The next morning, they set off from the little compound at dawn. They both had professional-grade thermal suits, even if his was a little snug and she had to roll up the cuffs. The bunker under the house had supplies enough to last for a year or two: survival gear, weapons, ammunition, high-calorie rations, a stack of surprisingly boring pornography, and a collection of beautiful hand-carved chess sets. The best find hadn't been in the bunker, though. The garage had a half-dozen unused but well-maintained bicycles, complete with saddlebags. Even with long rifles strapped over their shoulders and their packs weighed down with water and food, they covered the distance from the compound, through the town, and out to the highway in half an hour. By noon, they'd gone farther than three days' walking

would have taken them. It was probably seven hundred clicks from the Pit to Erich's office. They'd been able to cover just under thirty on foot. With the bikes, they'd more than double that. Baltimore was maybe nine days away, assuming nothing went wrong. Which, given the context, seemed like a lot to ask. But still.

They stopped for lunch at noon. It was dim enough it could have been the hours just before dawn. His breath was pluming in the air now, but between the exercise and the thermal suit, Amos didn't feel the cold. Peaches seemed about a thousand times better too. She was smiling, and there was color in her cheeks. They sat on an old bench beside the road, looking east. The view was mud and a scattering of debris.

And still on the horizon, the glow of something huge—a city or a fire—lit the clouds from below, gold on gray. So maybe even the end of the world had its moments of beauty.

Peaches took a bite of her ration bar and sipped the water from her self-purifying canteen. "Is it bothering you?"

"What?"

"What we did."

"Not sure what that was, Peaches."

She looked at him, her eyes narrowed like she was trying to decide if he was joking. "We invaded a man's home, killed him, and took his stuff. If we hadn't come through, he might have made it. Lived until the sun came back. Survived."

"He was gonna shoot me for no reason except that I had something he wanted."

"He wouldn't have done it if we hadn't gone there. And we lied to him about wanting to trade."

"Seems like you have a point to make, Peaches."

"If he hadn't been ready to pull the trigger, would you have let it go? Or would we still be here, with these guns and this food?"

"Oh, we were taking his shit. I'm just pointing out both sides of the argument had the same plan."

"Then we're not exactly the good guys, are we?"

Amos scowled. It wasn't a question that had even crossed his mind until she said it. It bothered him that it didn't bother him more. He scratched his chest and tried to imagine Holden doing what they'd done. Or Naomi. Or

Lydia.

“Yeah,” he said. “I should really get back to the ship soon.”

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Chapter Thirty-one: Alex

You're in a good mood," Bobbie said as Alex sat down across from her. Her breakfast was oatmeal with an egg-like protein crumble, sausages, and hot sauce. Her hair, pulled back in a tight ponytail, was wet with sweat, and her cheeks were flushed from recent exertion. Just looking at her made him feel out of shape. But she was right. He was in a good mood.

"Captain's bringing my girl to Luna."

Bobbie frowned. "Your... girl?"

"The *Roci*."

"Oh. Right," she said. "For a second, I just thought... Yeah. It'll be good to see Holden too. And Avasarala."

"Be good to be on my own damn ship," Alex said, tapping pepper onto his plate of reconstituted eggs. "Now if we can just get Amos and Naomi back. Whoa. Did I say something?"

The shadow that had come over Bobbie's expression vanished again and she shook her head. "Nothing. Just... I don't know. Envy, I guess. It's been a while since I had people."

She stabbed one of the sausages with a fork and glanced around the mess hall as she ate it. Alex's eggs were chalky and tasted more of yeast than something that came from a chicken, and it brought decades of memory with it. "Being back around active-duty folks making it hard to look forward to civilian life?"

"Sort of."

"Things change," Alex said.

"And they don't change back," she said, quoting him back to himself.

Alex broke off a piece of toast, popped it in his mouth, and talked around the crust. "We still talking about the service?"

Bobbie smiled. “No, I guess we’re not. I still can’t really get my head around it. Earth’s never going to be Earth again. Not like it was.”

“No, it won’t.”

“Mars either,” Bobbie said. “I think about my nephew. Smart kid. Book smart, I mean. He hasn’t really been in the world except for going through university and then the terraforming project. That’s his whole life. He was one of the first people I knew to really get what off-world colonies meant for everything back here.”

“Yeah. It makes everything different,” Alex said.

“Except how we deal with it,” she said, then racked an imaginary shotgun and fired it off with a popping sound.

“Amazing how much we’ve managed to do, considering how we’re doing it all with jumped-up social primates and evolutionary behaviors from the Pleistocene.”

Bobbie chuckled, and he was glad to hear the sound. There was something about making the people around him feel better that left him feeling lighter himself. Like if the others on his crew could be upbeat, whatever it was couldn’t be that bad. He understood the flaw in that logic: if comforting them comforted him, maybe comforting him comforted them, and they could all drive the ship into a rock while they smiled at each other.

“I heard the relief ships are here,” Alex said.

“Yeah, that may not be as good as we’d hoped,” Bobbie said around a mouthful of sausage. “They were talking about it at training this morning. The relief ships should be getting in operational range right around now, but the scuttlebutt is the crews are all green as hell. Like first-mission green.”

“All of them?” Alex said.

“The good crews are all back at Hungaria covering our six.”

“Well. Better a bunch of teenagers flying with us than just the two frigates,” Alex said. “But you’ll excuse me if I’d hoped the cavalry coming over the hill was a little more experienced.”

“They probably said the same thing about us when we started up.”

“You know they did. First mission I flew solo, I almost dumped core by mistake.”

“Seriously?”

“Got flustered.”

“That’s military-grade flustered, all right,” Bobbie said. “Well,

hopefully, this'll be a milk run to Luna."

Alex nodded and took a sip of coffee from his bulb. "You think that'll happen? You really think it's over?"

Bobbie's silence was an answer.

They spent the rest of the meal on less fraught subjects: how training for marines and Navy were different and which one was better; Alex's stories from Ilus and the slow zone; speculation about what exactly Avasarala was going to do once they got the prime minister to Luna. It was all shop talk, and Alex found it easy and pleasant. He hadn't crewed with her in years, but she was good to talk to, good to be around. In another life, he could imagine shipping with her. Well, in the military anyway. He couldn't quite place her on a water hauler like the *Canterbury*, and he wondered what it would have done to have her on the *Roci*. Part of what made the *Rocinante* home was that the crew was so small, and had so much shared context. There was an intimacy that living in quarters with the same handful of people for so long gave. Anyone coming in—even someone as competent and smart and easygoing as Bobbie—would have had to contend with that, and there was nothing that screwed up a crew like having one person who felt excluded.

He was still thinking about that, chewing the next-to-last mouthful of so-called eggs and listening to Bobbie tell a story about free-climbing on the Martian surface, when the Klaxons went off.

"All hands to battle stations," the calm, crisp voice said between whoops of the alarm. "This is not a drill."

Alex was up and heading toward his crash couch before he fully registered what was going on. Bobbie was beside him. They both threw their breakfast trays and drink bulbs into the recycler on the way out, long training identifying anything that wasn't bolted down as a potential projectile if the ship's vector changed too suddenly. The staccato vibration of the PDCs was already ringing in the decks, but Alex couldn't imagine what could have gotten near enough for that kind of close combat without being noticed. The alarms were still going off when they reached the corridor and one of the marines—Sergeant Park, his name was—gathered them up.

"No time to get you to your quarters. There are some spare couches we can put you up in over here."

“What’s going on?” Alex said, trotting to keep up.

“The relief ships are firing on us,” Park said.

“What?” Bobbie snapped.

Park didn’t break stride, opening a hatch into an empty meeting room and ushering them in. Alex dropped into the embrace of a crash couch, strapping himself down with an efficiency of long habit and deep training. His mind was tripping over itself.

“Someone faked military transponder codes?” he said.

“Nope, they’re our birds,” Park said, checking Alex’s straps.

“Then how—”

“We hope to beat that answer out of them when the time comes, sir,” Park said. He switched to Bobbie’s chair and checked her straps too while he spoke. “Please remain in your couches until we signal that it’s safe to get out. Not sure what we’re looking at, but I expect this may get—”

The ship lurched hard, snapping the gimbals of the couches forty-five degrees to the deck. Park shifted, bracing just before he hit the wall.

“Park!” Bobbie shouted, reaching for the straps that held her in. “Report!”

“Remain in your couch!” the marine shouted from behind Alex and below him. The press of thrust gravity sank him deep into the gel. A needle slid into his leg, pumping a cocktail of drugs into his bloodstream that would lessen the danger of stroke. *Jesus, this was more serious than he thought.*

“Park!” Bobbie said again, and then a string of obscenities as the marine stumbled out the door and into the corridor, leaving them behind. “This is fucked. This is so fucked.”

“Can you get anything?” Alex shouted, even though she was only a meter and a half away. “My control panel’s locked out.”

He heard the sound of her breath over the distant vibrations of the PDCs, the deeper tones of missiles launching. “No, Alex. I’m getting the stand-by screen.”

A loud fluting groan passed through the deck, rattling the couches as they shifted again. Whoever was at the helm, they were putting the ship through its paces. Along with the deep, recognizable reports of the ship’s weapons, there were other sounds, less familiar ones. Alex’s mind turned all of them into damage from the enemy, and at least some of the time, he was

sure he was right. His throat was tight, and his gut hurt. He kept waiting for a gauss round to pass through the ship, and every second it didn't happen made it feel more likely that it would.

"You doing all right?" Bobbie said.

"Just wish I could see what was going on. Or do somethin' about it. Don't mind fighting, but I hate being spam in a can."

His stomach lurched, and for a long moment, he mistook the sudden weightlessness for nausea. His crash couch shifted to his left, Bobbie's to her right, until they could almost see each other.

"Well," Bobbie said. "They got the drive."

"Yup. So that thing where you and Avasarala thought maybe someone was appropriating MCRN ships and supplies?"

"Look pretty smart now, don't we?"

The couches shifted again as maneuvering thrusters on the ship's skin fought against the massive inertia of steel and ceramic. The throbbing of PDCs and report of missile launches made a rough background music, but it was a quiet that caught Alex's attention.

"The bad guys," he said. "They stopped shooting."

"Huh," Bobbie said. Then a moment later, "Boarding action, then?"

"What I was thinking."

"Well. How long do you want to stay in these couches before we go try to scare up some weapons?"

"Five minutes?"

"Works for me," Bobbie said, taking out her hand terminal. "I'll set a timer."

The door of the meeting room cycled open at three minutes, twenty-five seconds. Three marines floated through in light battle armor, bracing against the doorframe and holding assault rifles at their sides. The first one—a thin-faced man with a scar running down the side of his nose—moved forward. It struck Alex that if the bad guys, whoever they were, had Martian warships, they probably also had Martian armor, but the thin-faced man steadied himself against the desk.

"Mister Kamal. Sergeant Draper. My name's Lieutenant de Haan. The ship's going to be maneuvering, so we'll need to be careful, but I need you to come with me now."

"Roger that, sir," Bobbie said, popping the straps on her couch loose and

shifting to launch for the door. Alex was only a beat behind her.

The marines moved through the weightless halls with practiced efficiency, cover to cover with one always in firing position at the back, another at the front, and Bobbie and Alex in the center of the formation. Twice, the ship lurched with Alex in the middle of a jump from one handhold to the next. The first time, he caught himself on a different support, but the second, he bounced off a bare length of deck, spinning through the air until one of the marines grabbed him and hauled him to safety. The one-sided sounds of battle grew first louder and then more distant. One bulkhead failed to open, reporting vacuum on the other side, and they had to backtrack. Like a restless dream, the journey seemed to go on forever and also be over almost as soon as it had begun.

On the bridge, the captain was strapped into her couch, the prime minister in the couch beside her. All around, the crewmen at their stations were rattling information to one another, and Alex caught bits of it, his mind forming a picture of their situation almost without knowing what exactly he'd heard to inform it. The main drive was down. The comm array was unable to transmit either broadcast or tightbeam. There were hull breaches near engineering, the armory, and aft storage. Missiles could still be fired, but the guidance systems were down. No one mentioned the two frigates that had been flying with the ship since the main escort had been pulled away. Alex figured that meant they were dead.

"We are under attack and being boarded," the captain said, her voice remarkably calm. "The original escort force is also now under concentrated attack, and will be unable to come to our relief. We have put out a broad distress call, but it seems unlikely in the extreme that anyone could make it here in time to affect the outcome of the conflict. We are preparing to offer a vigorous defense, but if we are unable to assure your safety, it may become necessary for you to evacuate."

"Into the middle of a firefight?" Alex said.

"It isn't optimal," the captain said. "With respect, my first priority has to be the safety of the prime minister."

"Of course, Skipper," Bobbie said at the same time that Alex said, "That's sounding a mite ominous." The captain ignored both of them.

"We have half a dozen rescue pods prepped. Protocol is to give each of you an armed escort in the pod, and release them all at once, in hopes of

distributing enemy attention and giving each of you the best possible chance of being overlooked.”

“That’s a shitty plan,” Alex said to the captain, then turned to the prime minister. “You know that’s a shitty plan, don’t you, sir?”

Smith nodded. His face was flushed, and a thin sheen of sweat danced across his neck and jowls, surface tension adhering it to his skin.

“Yeah,” Bobbie said. “Pods don’t have an Epstein. You’d be dropping us out there to get shot. And we have a racing yacht right here. The *Razorback*’s built for speed.”

The captain raised her hand, demanding silence. “What I was going to say? We can commandeer the *Razorback* for the prime minister, give her a pilot and an escort guard, but that means I’m still dropping two civilians into a meat grinder.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” Bobbie interrupted. “We’ve got a pilot and an escort right here. Don’t we? We can put Prime Minister Smith in the bunk and take the couches. Alex has more experience piloting that ship than any of you, and—all respect to Lieutenant de Haan—I can shoot as straight as anyone you’ve got. It’ll be tight, but it’s totally possible.”

“That’s where I was going, yes,” the captain said, her voice buzzing with annoyance. “In addition, the prime minister has made it clear that for political reasons, the presence of Sergeant Draper is required on Luna, so —”

“They said yes, Captain Choudhary,” the prime minister snapped. “Take yes for an answer.”

“Lieutenant?” Bobbie said. “If I’m acting escort on this mission, I’d really like to have a weapon.”

The thin-faced man smiled, his eyes glinting and cold. “I can arrange that, Gunny. Captain?”

The captain nodded sharply, and Lieutenant de Haan launched for the lift, Bobbie close behind him. Alex’s heart was beating double-time, but the fear was tempered by a growing excitement. Yes, he was in danger of losing his life. Yes, an unknown enemy had them surrounded and were likely about to storm the ship itself. But he was going to get to fly in battle again, and some immature, juvenile part of his soul could hardly wait.

“We will use our PDCs to cover you as long as we can,” the captain said, and Alex interrupted her again.

“Not going to be enough. If we’re burnin’ all the way to Earth... we can probably outrun the enemy ships, but their missiles don’t have to worry about keeping anyone inside from getting squished by thrust. And it ain’t like there’s anything out here to hide behind.”

“You’ll have to think of something,” the captain said.

“All right,” Alex said. “Set a bunch of missiles to match the frequency of the *Razorback*’s comm laser. Launch as many as you can with us when we go, and Bobbie can use our laser to target incoming fire. We’ll outrun their ships and shoot down their missiles. Unless there’s someone between here and Luna or we run out of missiles, we should be fine.”

As long as we don’t get shot the second we launch, he didn’t add.

The captain blinked and shot a glance at the prime minister. There was a question in the politician’s eyes. Captain Choudhary shrugged. “He thought of something.”

“You mean—”

“No,” the captain said, “that might... that might work.”

“Captain!” A voice came from behind them. “We have confirmed enemy contact at decks seven and thirteen. Permission to use heavy weapons?”

“Permission granted,” the captain said, then turned to Alex. “I think that’s your cue to head out, Mister Kamal.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Alex said. “I’ll make this work if I can.”

The prime minister unstrapped and floated up out of his couch until one of the two remaining marines grabbed him and pulled him back into orientation. The prime minister and the captain shook hands as another voice interrupted.

“Captain, we’re getting a message from the attacking force. From the *Pella*.”

“Their command ship,” the prime minister said to Alex.

“More demands of surrender?” the captain asked.

“No, sir. It’s broadcast, not tightbeam. It’s... well, holy shit.”

“Give it to me, Mister Chou,” the captain said. “From the start.”

An audio feed clicked on. Thick static crackled, vanished, then crackled again. Someone grunted, and it sounded like pain. When the voice finally came, it was focused and serious. And it hit Alex like a kick to the belly.

“If you receive this, please retransmit. This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*...”

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Chapter Thirty-two: Naomi

She knew it was coming before it came. Before she even knew what it would be. The feeling of the ship changed without any of the details shifting, at least not at first. The crew still watched the newsfeeds and cheered. She was still under constant guard and treated like a mascot: James Holden's tame girlfriend brought back to the cage where she belonged. Marco was polite to her, and Filip was caught between approaching and avoiding her. But there was a difference. A tension had come into the ship, and she didn't know yet if they were all anticipating news of another atrocity or something more personal and concrete. All she was sure of at first was that it made it harder for her to sleep or eat. The dread in her gut was too heavy.

No one told her anything, and there was no single moment when she drew her conclusions. Instead, she looked back, and details filtered through from her days in captivity. A few remained, trapped by a nearly occult sense of importance. Wings showing off in his Martian uniform, a broad-shouldered girl hardly older than Filip exercising with the steady focus of someone preparing for something she knew she wasn't prepared for, Karal steering her own inventory busywork toward the armory and its store of powered armor, the seriousness with which Cyn tried the weight of each of the guns in his hands. Like the sediments of dust that built up in a badly maintained duct, the small things came together over time into a shape that was almost the same as knowledge. They were going into battle. And more than that, they were ambushing a Martian force.

When she found Miral and Aaman sitting knee-to-knee in the corridor outside the medical bay, she knew the moment was almost on her, and the hope she'd been hiding even from herself bloomed up in her throat, as wild

as anger.

“This is the *Pella*,” Miral said, concentrating on each syllable. “Confermé course match.”

“Confirming,” Aaman said gently.

Miral balled his hands into fists and tapped the deck with them. “Fuck. What did I say?”

“Confermé. You want confirming.”

“Again,” Miral said, then cleared his throat. “This is the *Pella*. Confirming course match.”

Aaman grinned. “Course match confirmed, *Pella*.”

Miral looked up, noticed Naomi and Cyn approaching, and grimaced. Naomi shook her head. “You sound great,” she said. “Very Martian.”

Miral hesitated, caught, she guessed, in the uncertainty of what she knew and was supposed to know. When he smiled, it was almost sheepish. Naomi smiled back and kept walking, pretending that she was one of them. That she belonged. Cyn, beside her, made no comment but watched her from the corners of his eyes.

The mid-shift meal was refried noodles and beer. The newsfeed was set to a system-wide report, and she watched it avidly for the first time, not for what it said, but what it didn’t. Food and water reserves were running out in North America and Asia, with Europe only a few days better. Relief efforts from the southern hemisphere were hampered by a growing need for supplies locally. She didn’t care. It wasn’t Jim. Medina Station had gone dark; the basic carrier signal remained, but all queries were being ignored, and she didn’t care. The Martian minority speaker of parliament back in Londres Nova was calling for the prime minister to return immediately to Mars, and she only cared a little. Every story that wasn’t about a ship blowing up at Tycho Station was a victory. She ate fast, sucking down the sweet, pale noodles and slamming back the beer, as if by hurrying her meal, she could rush the ship, the attack.

Her opportunity.

She and Cyn spent the next half shift going through engineering and the machine shop, making sure everything was locked down. In a ship full of Belters, she had no doubt it all would be, and it was. The ritual of it was reassuring, though. The sense of order and control over a ship’s environment was a synonym for safety. Belters who didn’t triple-check

everything had been weeded out of the gene pool fast, and seeing the regularity of the shop gave her an almost atavistic sense of comfort. And also, without being obvious, she checked the location of the flawed toolbox with its misshapen hasp and then carefully didn't look at it again. She felt obvious, sure that by so clearly cutting the box out of her awareness, she was actually calling Cyn's attention to it.

The relationship between the dark thoughts and the nearly unbearable swelling of excitement in her heart didn't occur to her until Cyn's hand terminal chimed and he called the work to a halt.

"Wrócić do tu crash couch, yeah," he said, touching her shoulder. His hand was gentle but strong. She didn't pretend ignorance, didn't try to disguise her anxiety. It would just read as being scared of the battle anyway.

When they got to her quarters, she strapped in and Cyn checked her. Then, to her surprise, he sat by her side for a moment, his mass shifting the balance of the couch. His muscles rippled under the skin with even his smallest movements, but he still managed to seem boyish and shy, like his body was a costume. "Zuchtig tu, sa sa?"

Naomi smiled the way she imagined she would have if she'd meant it. "Of course I'll be careful," she said. "Always am."

"La, not always, you," Cyn said. He struggled with something. She didn't know what. "Close quarters, means a lot of maneuvering. Don't have a couch to catch you, then you get a wall, yeah? Maybe a corner."

Fear flooded her mouth with the taste of copper. Did he know? Had he guessed? Cyn flexed his hands, not able to meet her gaze.

"En buenas mood, you. Happy, ever since you and Marco. So I'm thinking maybe you think there's something to be happy for, yeah? Maybe a way out don't have doors."

Suicide, she thought. He's talking about suicide. He thinks I'm going to unstrap in the middle of the battle and let the ship beat me to death. While she hadn't consciously considered it before, it was the kind of thing the dark thoughts would have brought her. And worse, the thought brought no surprise with it, but only a sense of warmth. Almost of comfort. She wondered whether that had been in her mind, whether the danger inherent in her plan was its drawback or a covert way for the bad thoughts to find their expression. That she wasn't sure unnerved her.

"I plan to be here when this is over," she said, biting the words as if to

convince herself as much as her guard.

Cyn nodded. The ship's system sounded the maneuvers warning, but the big man didn't get off the couch. Not yet. "Esá? Hard for us and you both. We come through, yeah? All of us, and you too." He was staring at his hands now like something might be written there. "Mi familia," he said at last. "Remember that. Alles lá son family, y tu bist also."

"Go strap in, big guy," Naomi said. "We can finish this after."

"After," Cyn said, shot a smile at her, and rose. The second warning came, and Naomi leaned back into the gel, just as if she meant to stay in its cool embrace.

On the bridge, Marco was no doubt being smooth and calm, playing the part of the Martian captain, reassuring everyone he could that everything was under control now that he was there. They'd believe him too. He was in a Martian ship with a solid, known transponder. He was probably using Martian military encryption. That he could be anything other than what he seemed would be as inconceivable to them as it was obvious to her.

She wanted to care, but she didn't. She didn't have time.

The sound of missiles firing and the mutter of PDCs came as the room lurched thirty degrees to the left, her couch hissing on its gimbals. She popped the straps loose and sat up, pulling her leg away from the needle. If she'd been sure it wasn't a sedative, she'd have waited for the injections. Too late. The couch shifted back to neutral position. She hopped down to the floor and walked quickly and steadily for the corridor. She kept her arms wide, fingertips against the walls on either side, and slid her feet across the deck. *Knees bent, center of gravity low*, she told herself.

Be ready for the change when it comes. The ship twitched around her. The walls and deck showed nothing, her eyes promising her that everything was solid, quiet, and stable as her own mass pushed her, falling toward one wall and then the next, and then—worst—forward where there was nothing to catch herself against. It was worse than weightlessness. The struggles of a mind to interpret up and down in the absence of gravity could be disorienting, but this was something else. She rattled down the hallway like dice in a cup, moving forward when she could, bracing herself against the walls when the motion was too violent.

In the lift, she selected the machine shop and gripped the handholds as the mechanism dropped her down the body of the ship. A concussion rattled

her. The Martians fighting back. That was fine. Let them. She couldn't give that struggle her attention. Not until hers was done.

The machine shop was empty, all the tools locked in place, but with enough tolerance that when the ship lurched, they all rattled: metal against metal like the ship itself was learning to talk. She went for the compromised toolbox, but the deck fell away under her. She stumbled, her head crashing against the metal shelves. For a few seconds, the rattling seemed to recede. She shook her head, and drops of blood pattered on the wall and the deck.

Not a big deal, she told herself. Head wounds always bleed a lot. It doesn't mean it's serious. Keep moving.

The PDCs chattered, the sound moving through the body of the ship. She found the toolbox, popped open the restraint, pulled it out, and sat on the deck, cradling it. For a long, sick second, she thought the lock was different, solid, unapproachable, but that was wrong. A trick of the mind. It was fine. She pulled at the latch, worked her fingertips into the crevice that shouldn't have been there, then pulled it wider, and pushed in again, driving her own skin and bone into it like a wedge. It hurt like hell, but she ignored it. The pressure of her body against the deck suddenly grew terrible. They were accelerating. She didn't know why. Her back ached. It had been years since her spine had been asked to support her body during a heavy burn. Usually, she was lying on her back in gel around now.

With an indignant pop, the latch gave. The toolbox flew open, but nothing spilled. All the wrenches, epoxy welders, voltage meters, and cans of air and lubricant were strapped in place. She flipped through the close-packed layers to a line of Allen wrenches and plucked out the 10 mm. It was one of the advantages she had over Marco and his crew. She'd been living in a Martian ship for years. Knowing what tools opened which access panels was like recognizing the back of her own hand. She gathered up a voltage tester, a wiring crimp, and a light-duty soldering iron and stuffed them in her pockets. With any luck, she'd only need the wrench, but—

The deck drifted away under her, gravity suddenly gone. She couldn't tell if she was spinning through the air or the ship was turning around her. She reached for the deck, the walls, but nothing was within reach besides the floating toolbox. That was good enough. She grabbed it in close to her belly, then pushed it away as reaction mass, and twisted to grab the workbench. Down came back, and the toolbox crashed down behind her as

she stumbled. Another low boom rattled the ship. Knees and spine aching, she ran for the lift.

Gravity vanished again as she got into it. The PDCs were still chattering, but less now. She didn't remember the last time she'd heard a missile fire. The battle was winding down. She willed the lift to travel faster. If the all clear sounded and other people got out of their couches before she was done, then Holden and the *Rocinante* and possibly a fair percentage of Tycho Station would die. With every slow meter the lift took her, she imagined it: the drive cycling up and then spilling out, a fire brighter than light that ate everything. The ship moved, slamming her against the wall hard enough to bruise, then released her to float free again. She killed the lift between the crew quarters and the airlock, bracing herself so that the deceleration didn't leave her trapped in the middle of empty air.

The access panel was fifteen centimeters high and forty wide and opened on the major electrical routing through the center of the ship. If she'd cut through all the cables there with a welding torch, all the traffic would have rerouted instantly to other channels. Apart from a few warning indicators, nothing would happen. That was fine. She didn't want to break the ship. She wanted to use it. Braced with both feet and one hand in the wall handholds, she worked the Allen wrench. The screws were integral to the plate and didn't come free, but she felt it when the metal threads lost their grip. Three connections came off. Four. Five.

Six.

She could see the handset through the gap where the plate was beginning to come free. The ship shuddered under her, turning. She squeezed the wrench in her fist, seeing it fall away down the shaft even though it wasn't happening. A thick red-black clot of blood slipped free of her hair, smearing itself across the pale wall. She ignored it. Seven connectors were loose. Eight. She heard voices from the crew quarters. A woman saying something she couldn't make out, and a man answering no. Nine. Ten.

The plate came free. She scooped up the handset, checking its charge. The batteries were nearly full. Connection read good. She didn't know which circuit was the broadcast and the first one she tried threw an error code. Cursing musically under her breath, she set it to diagnostic mode and started querying. It seemed to take forever before it came back. She cycled

through the report with her thumb until she found it. Channel eighteen was a comm array using the D4/L4 protocols that the *Rocinante* did for broadcast. She thumbed in the override code that would let her send thirty seconds of diagnostic tones out, then deleted the file that held the tones. When the error came up, she told it to override to manual. She was almost weeping now. Her right foot slipped, and she grabbed for the open access panel. Her knuckles scraped something sharp and toothy. She grunted in pain and put her annoyance aside. No time.

“If you receive this,” she said, pressing the handset close to her lips, “please retransmit. This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. Message is for James Holden. The software controlling the magnetic bottle has been sabotaged. Do not start the reactor without reloading the hardware drivers from a known good source. If you hear this message, please retransmit.”

Halfway through the last word, the handset chirped that the thirty seconds were up and returned to the base menu. She let the handset go, let herself go, floated back from the wall. She spread her arms wide and let the Allen wrench go. She hoped it had worked. It was the middle of a battle. There could be jamming to contend with if Marco wanted to keep what was happening unclear, but it was just as likely he was enjoying being a spectacle. And if she was right, if they were going after the Martian prime minister, the data coming off the battle would be gone over by the best intelligence services that still existed.

Jim wasn’t safe, not yet. She knew it, but for a moment, she didn’t feel it. The darkness would come back; the bone-crushing anxiety, and the guilt and the fear. She didn’t doubt that, but now, right now, she felt only light. She’d made her plan, and it had worked. Her warning would reach him or it wouldn’t. Either way, there was nothing more she could do. And on the bridge, right now, Marco was figuring out what exactly she’d done. The laughter that came boiling out of her throat felt like victory.

The voices from the crew quarters grew louder, more confused. Even though the all clear hadn’t been called, she heard people moving around. She recognized Cyn’s voice, raised in alarm. Her leg brushed against the wall, and she reached out to hook her wrist into the handhold. No point bothering with the lift. Hand over hand, she pulled herself along the shaft and then into the corridors. The faces that peered from the doorways were wide-eyed. One man started back when he caught sight of her. Naomi

launched herself along the hallway with a kick and flew straight as an arrow, not even touching the handholds along the way to steady herself. Her shoulder ached. The wound on her scalp was bleeding again. She felt serene.

Cyn hauled himself around a corner, then braced and watched her, his jaw slack, his eyes round. She lifted a fist in greeting as she floated by.

“Anyone needs me,” she said, “I’ll be in my quarters, yeah?”

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Chapter Thirty-three: Holden

Most of human history had static maps. Even in times of change and chaos, when civilizations had fallen in the course of a single night, the places remained more or less the same. The distance between Africa and South America was going to stay what it had always been, at least over the span of human evolution. And whether you called it France or the Common European Interest Zone, Paris was closer to Orléans than Nice. It was only when they moved out to Mars and then the Belt and the worlds beyond it that the distance between the great centers of human life became a function of time. From Tycho Station, Earth and Luna were almost on the far side of the sun. Mars was closer, but retreating with every hour. Saturn was closer than either and the Jovian moons farther away. That everything came closer and then farther apart was a given in Holden's life; uncommented and unremarkable. It was only times like this that facts of orbital periodicity started to seem like a metaphor for something deeper.

As soon as Fred made the decision to go to Luna, Holden had moved his things back to the *Rocinante*. And then the rest of the crew's possessions too. He'd found Amos' clothes neatly folded and regimented in a rough canvas bag. Alex's had been thrown haphazardly in a case, half in a mesh bag and half not, though which set was clean and which bound for the laundry, Holden couldn't tell. Naomi's things had been in his suite. A spare pair of boots, an unpaired sock, underwear. She'd left a model of a Martian combat mech—bright red and flat black and no bigger than his thumb—on the bathroom counter. He didn't know if it held some special meaning to her or if she would even remember where she'd gotten it from. He was careful to take it with him, though. Careful to wrap it and put it in a cushioned box. It was the closest thing he had to taking care of the woman it belonged to,

so that was what he did.

Being back in the *Rocinante* was like coming home, except that it was too empty. The narrow corridors of the crew deck seemed too wide. The occasional ticking and popping of the expansion joints adjusting to shifts in temperature were like the knocking of ghosts. When the repair team were somewhere he could hear them, Holden resented the voices and footsteps that weren't his crew's. When they were gone, the silence oppressed him.

He told himself it was temporary. That before long, he'd have Alex back in the cockpit and Amos down in engineering. Naomi beside him, telling him gently what he was screwing up and how to do it better. He'd go to Luna, and they'd be there. All of them. Somehow.

Except he still hadn't heard from Naomi. He'd gotten a short text-only message from Mother Tamara that his parents were all right for now, but that ash was falling on the ranch like snow in winter. And nothing from Amos.

Sometimes people knew when they were saying their last goodbyes, but not always. Not often. Most people's last parting of ways were so small, the people involved didn't even notice them. Now, in the darkness of the command deck with a half-liter bulb of bourbon floating beside him and the audio system playing twelve-bar blues, Holden was pretty sure he'd said a couple of his own final goodbyes and not known it. He replayed everything in his head, his memories becoming less authentic and more painful every time he did.

"We're all that's left," he said to the ship. "You're all I've got."

The *Rocinante* didn't answer for a long moment, and then, weirdly, it did. A bright yellow incoming request alert appeared on his console. Holden wiped his teary eyes with a sleeve and accepted it. Fred Johnson appeared in a window, his brows furrowed.

"Holden?"

"Fred?"

"Are you all right?"

"Ah. Yes?"

Fred leaned forward, his head growing massive on the screen. "I've been trying to reach your hand terminal for the past fifteen minutes."

Holden looked around the command deck, then nodded. "I may have left it in my pants. In my quarters. I think I did."

“Are you drunk?”

“I think I am.” He had to concentrate not to slur.

“And you’re not wearing pants?”

“I’m not ready to take our relationship there yet.”

“Well, have the med bay give you something to sober you up and get your ass covered. I’m sending the flight crew over.”

Holden turned up the lights and killed the music feed. “What’s going on?”

“We’re getting reports. The Martian prime minister’s under attack. The ships your man Alex found were decoys to draw off the escort.”

“But,” Holden said, “the new escort ships—”

“Are the ones shooting at him.”

Holden cursed under his breath. “Alex is on that ship. Did we hear from Alex?”

“We haven’t heard from anybody. I was keeping some radio telescopes pointed that direction, and this is what they’re getting. I checked with Drummer and the engineering staff. They said the *Roci*’s got a clean bill of health, and I’m less and less interested in sitting around here waiting for whoever’s behind all this to take another swing at me.”

Holden undid the straps on his couch, floating forward. His head was a little swimmy. He looked around at the command deck. It was like some part of his brain was still expecting to see Alex and Naomi and Amos there with him. He hadn’t realized it was a habit, to look for his people before the *Roci* got under way. This, he realized, was the first time ever that they wouldn’t be there. It felt like a bad omen.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll clean up for company. When are you looking to go?”

“How soon is as soon as possible?”

“The reactor’s cold, and we’d want to top up the air and water,” Holden said. The alcohol fumes seemed to be burning away already, but he wasn’t entirely sure if that was true or if it just felt that way. “Plus I’m reliably informed that I need to get something from the med bay to sober me up and get my ass covered.”

“Glad you were paying attention,” Fred said. “So two hours?”

“I think we can manage that.”

“Let’s do.”

Holden pulled himself down the lift shaft hand over hand. A new crew coming onto his *Rocinante*. It was the obvious thing, of course. It had always been the plan, but now the prospect filled him with dread. Unfamiliar faces at the controls and in the crew quarters. Voices in the ship that weren't the ones he'd gotten used to in the years since the *Donnager*. Even when they'd been carrying passengers, his crew had been at the heart of the ship. This was something else, and he didn't like it.

He stopped at the med bay on the way to his quarters. Sober, the symbolic implications of a new temporary crew for the trip to Luna didn't seem quite as ominous, but the thought stayed at the back of his mind: without Naomi—without all his crew—the *Rocinante* wasn't going to be what she had been. When he checked his hand terminal, the only messages were from Fred. Alex's silence didn't help.

The transport tube's connection to the airlock was a gentle thump, like Tycho Station clearing its throat. Holden was at the airlock to let them in. Eight people—six Belters, and two who looked like they'd come from Earth, all wearing Tycho Station flight suits and hauling small personal kits—floated into the space among the lockers. Drummer was with them, wearing her security uniform.

"Captain Holden?" Drummer said. "I'd like to introduce Captain Foster Sales and his crew."

The man who floated up, arms braced, looked too young to be a captain. Close-cropped black hair transitioned into a glossy beard that tried and failed to lend the boyish features some gravitas. He was introduced to the others—pilots Arnold Mfume and Chava Lombaugh, engineers Sandra Ip and Zach Kazantzakis, weapons technicians Gor Droga and Sun-yi Steinberg, communications specialist Maura Patel. By the end of the little ceremony, Holden was pretty sure he'd already forgotten all of their names.

Drummer seemed to read his unease, because when the crew broke to their stations, she lingered and drew him aside. "They're good people, Captain. I vetted all of them myself. None of them are the bad guys."

"Yeah," Holden said. "That's good."

Her smile was weirdly gentle. "It's weird for me too."

"Yeah?" he said.

"On my watch, they broke into the station, stole the fucking protomolecule. They tried to kill the boss. I'm spending all day projecting

an attitude of calm and control, and come sleep shift, I'm grinding my teeth and staring at the wall. Now the old man's leaving? Honest to God, I'm shitting bricks here."

Holden blew out a long breath. "Thanks for that."

"Anytime, sir. Everyone you meet's fighting a hard battle."

"Should I know anything about..." He nodded toward the door. Drummer briefed him in quick, simple sentences. Ip's roommate had been one of the turncoats, and she still felt betrayed. Steinberg and Mfume both had a hard time losing face, and while it wasn't usually a problem, if they got into a spat, someone would have to step in and deescalate. Droga had family on Earth, and he was worried and angry and grieving. Holden made a note to speak to the man if he had a chance. With every small detail, every fault and vulnerability, every strength and peculiar virtue, Holden felt something in his chest grow calmer.

Okay, these men and women weren't his family, but they were his crew. They wouldn't ever mean what Alex and Amos and Naomi meant, but for the next weeks, he was their captain. And that was enough.

For now, that was enough.

When Fred came through the airlock, Drummer was just finishing her rundown of Maura Patel's insomnia problem. Fred landed feetfirst on the wall, ankles hooked into the handholds like he'd been born in the Belt. He stood at ninety degrees to them, a rough smile on his face and a small personal kit strapped to his back.

"Well, what are you two doing?"

"Drummer is very gently telling me how to put on my big-boy pants," Holden said.

"Really?" Fred asked.

"It's possible I was getting a little maudlin."

Fred nodded. "Happens to the best of us from time to time. Where do we stand?"

Drummer answered. "The crew's initiating the warm-up. We haven't had anyone reporting trouble, so you should be good to go on schedule."

"Excellent," Fred said. "Of course, they've probably taken all the good bunks by now."

"All the bunks are the same," Holden said. "Except mine. You can't have mine."

“Wouldn’t think of it, Captain,” Fred said. “The Martian convoy’s put out a distress call. The original escort’s trying to burn back toward them, but the mystery ships are engaging in force now. As ambushes go, this one’s looking pretty effective.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Holden said. “Still nothing from Alex.”

“Well. We can hope for the best,” Fred said. “Latest intel shows the attackers have stopped firing. So that makes it look like a boarding action.”

Holden’s blood went cold. “Protocol is they blow the ship if boarders get close to taking engineering or the CIC.”

“That’s so that the enemy doesn’t compromise your codes,” Drummer said. “They rode in on Martian naval ships. That damage is already done.”

The three were silent for a moment. When Fred spoke, his voice was low and mordant. “Well, that’s cheerful. You coming to help this along, Captain?”

Holden looked at Drummer. She held herself professionally at attention, but he thought he saw a glimmer of unease in her eyes. Fred Johnson had run Tycho Station for almost two decades, and now he was leaving. He might not come back. And Holden might not either.

Everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.

“Let’s give this part to Foster,” Holden said. “Let him get a feel for the ship. There’s something I need to take care of on the station before we go.”



Monica was in new rooms. To look at her, sitting on the couch, it was like she was meeting him for the first time. The months they’d spent—her crew and his—shipping out to the Ring, the desperate work she’d done on the *Behemoth* back before it became Medina Station, her abduction and his rescue of her. All of it was gone. Her expression was polite, and it was closed.

“So,” Holden said. “I’m about to take off. I’m not sure when or even if I’ll see you again. And I feel like we’re not good.”

“Why do you feel like that?”

“Off the record?”

The silence cooled the room, then Monica took her new hand terminal

out of her pocket and tapped it twice. It chimed and she rested it on her thigh. "Fine. Off the record."

"Because I lied to you, and you know it. And you're angry about it. And because you tried to get me to talk about things I didn't want to talk about by springing questions on me in the middle of an interview, and I'm angry with you about that."

Monica sighed, but her face softened. She looked older now than when they'd first met. Still camera-ready and perfect at all times, but worn by the universe. "What happened to you, Holden? You used to be the man who didn't hide anything. You were the one voice everyone could trust, because even if you didn't know all of it, you'd at least tell the truth you did know. This reading the press release thing? It's not you."

"Fred asked me not to say that he'd been targeted."

"Or that they got away with the protomolecule sample," Monica said, then held up her hand terminal. "We're off the record. Do me the courtesy of not lying to me now too."

"And that they got away with the protomolecule," Holden said.

Monica's face softened. She scratched her arm, fingernails hissing against the cloth. "That's critical. That's the scariest thing that's happened since this all started. Don't you think that people have a right to know the danger they're in?"

"Fred knows. He's told Avasarala and Smith. Earth and Mars know. The OPA knows. Panicking people for no reason—"

"Panicking at this point isn't unreasonable," Monica said. "And deciding for people what they should get to know so they do what you think they should do? That isn't how the good guys act, and you know it. It's paternalistic, it's condescending, and it's beneath you. Maybe not them. The political movers and shakers. But it's beneath *you*."

Holden felt a warmth rising in his chest. Shame or anger or something more complicated, he couldn't say. He remembered Mother Tamara saying *It hurts most if there's something true in it*. He wanted to say something mean. To hit back. He laced his fingers together. "Does what you do matter?"

"What?"

"Reporting? Telling things to people. Does it have any power?"

"Of course it does."

“Then how you use that power matters too. I’m not saying that we were right to put the protomolecule thing under the rug. I’m saying that telling everyone about it—especially right now while whatever the hell this is is still going on—is worse. When we were in the slow zone, you were the voice that pulled us all together. You gave a shape to that moment of chaos. And it made people safer and calmer and more rational. More civilized. We need that again. I need that again.”

“How can you say—” Monica began, and her hand terminal buzzed. She looked down at it in annoyance, then did a double take. She lifted a finger to him. Just a second.

“What is it?” Holden said, but she was reading her terminal, her eyes getting wider. “Monica? If this is some kind of object lesson about how shitty it is to withhold information, I admit it’s weirdly elegant. But if you could stop it now—”

“The attack ships. The ones going after the Martian prime minister. The command ship put out a message.” She looked up at him. “It’s for you.”

Naomi’s voice on the hand terminal was thin and tinny and like waking up from a nightmare into something worse. “If you receive this, please retransmit. This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. Message is for James Holden. The software controlling the magnetic bottle has been sabotaged. Do not start the reactor—”

She kept talking, but Holden already had his hand terminal up. His knuckles ached, and he had to force himself to stop squeezing the device. He put out a connection request to Drummer. His heart beat against his ribs and he felt like he was falling, like he’d stepped off a tower and hadn’t quite caught the ledge on the way down. Monica was cursing quietly under her breath. It sounded like prayer.

If the reactor came up and the bottle failed, the *Rocinante* would die in a fraction of a second. Tycho Station might survive. Some of it, anyway.

“Drummer here,” his hand terminal said. “How can I help you, Captain?”

“Have you started the reactor?” Holden said.

Drummer went silent for maybe half a second. It felt like years. “Yes, sir. We’re at sixty percent, and looking great.”

“Shut it down,” Holden said. “Shut it down right now.”

There was a moment of silence. *Don’t ask me why*, Holden thought.

Don't argue or ask me to explain. Please don't.

“Done. The core is down,” Drummer said. “So can I ask what this is about?”

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Chapter Thirty-four: Alex

... Do not start the reactor without reloading the hardware drivers from a known good source. If you hear this message, please retr—”

The message cut off.

“We have to get this out,” Alex said. “We have to get that to Holden.”

“I’ll take care of it,” the captain said. “You and the prime minister need to evacuate. Right now.”

Alex looked at her, confused. Naomi was on the attack ships. The *Roci* had been sabotaged. He felt like the moment of stillness between being hit in the head and the bloom of pain. His first semi-coherent, irrational thought was *If Naomi’s with them, maybe they’re not so bad.*

“Mister Kamal?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s just—”

Prime Minister Smith looked at him, the man’s gentle, innocuous eyes seeming utterly out of place. “Does this change anything for us?”

“No,” Alex said. “I just... No. No, we should go. Wait. Bobbie...”

“Gunny Draper knows where you’re going,” Captain Choudhary said. “I’ll see she doesn’t get lost.”

They moved to the lift, the two marines before and behind them. The lift car gave Alex a moment of orientation as it pushed them down into the heart of the ship. It only took a few seconds to match velocity and go back to floating, but it was enough of a cue that his mind made one direction into down, the other into up. The lift car was wide enough for three times the load. The marines took stations at the door, ready to face danger if there was any. The prime minister took a place at the side near the front, where there was a little cover. No one commented on it. It was just a thing that happened. The dynamics of political power as positions in an elevator.

Naomi was here. *Right* here. Maybe less than ten thousand kilometers

away. It was like he'd turned a corner and she was there. Except, of course, that she wasn't. Even close-quarters battle meant distances that were vast in any other context. If the ship had been transparent, the enemy vessels would only have been visible by their drive plumes—dots of light in a sky filled with them. The *Pella* could be as far from him right now as Boston was from Sri Lanka, and it would still be almost intimate in the vast scale of the solar system.

"You're thinking of your friend," Smith said.

"Yes, sir," Alex said.

"Do you know why she would be on the *Pella*?"

"I don't know why she wouldn't be on the *Rocinante*. And no offense, but I'm wondering why I ever got off my ship too. Longer I'm away, the worse an idea leaving it turns out to have been."

"I was thinking the same about my house," Smith said.

One of the Marines—taller, and with a slushy accent that Alex couldn't place—nodded. "You should take cover, sir. We're going to have to pass through some territory we might not control."

He meant that the enemy had already cut off the path between them and the hangar. Alex pressed himself against the wall that the prime minister hadn't claimed and braced. The lift slowed, what had been down became up, then even that gentle gravity went away again. The marines stepped back, raised their weapons, and the doors opened. An eternal half second later, they moved out into the corridor, Alex and the prime minister following.

The corridors of the ship were empty, the crew strapped in their couches for the battle or else on the move elsewhere, keeping these halls safe while the four of them moved down them. The marines took turns moving forward from doorway to intersection to doorway. The distance behind them grew greater with every little jump, and Alex was deeply aware of the doors they'd passed that could open without any guards between him and whoever came out. The marines didn't seem worried, so he tried to take comfort in that.

The halls had the same anti-spalling covering that the bridge and the mess had had, but marked with location codes and colored strips that would help navigate the ship. One line was deep red with HANGAR BAY written in

yellow Hindi, English, Bengali, Farsi, and Chinese. Where the red line went, they followed.

They went quickly and quietly and Alex was almost thinking they'd make it to the bay without trouble when the enemy found them.

The ambush was professional. The slushy-voiced marine had just launched forward when the firing started. Alex couldn't see where it was coming from at first, but he braced automatically and risked looking forward. At the intersection ahead of them, he caught the flare of muzzle flashes and the small circle of helmets. The attackers were standing on a bulkhead looking up the corridor, like they were shooting into a well. Even if he'd had a gun, there was a very small area to target.

"We're taking fire," the other marine said, and it took Alex a quarter second to understand he wasn't talking to them. "Tollivsen's shot."

"Still in the fight," the slushy accent shouted.

Across the corridor from Alex, Prime Minister Smith was huddled behind the lip of a doorway. Most civilians tried to press against the wall and ended up launching themselves into the middle of the firing lines. Smith hadn't done that. So score one for training.

Another burst of fire sang past, tearing long black strips from the walls and deck and filling the air with the smell of cordite.

"Oyé," one of the attackers called. "Hand up Smith y we let you go, sa sa?"

The first marine fired three rounds in fast succession, and the attackers' laughter followed it. Alex couldn't be sure, but he thought the people firing at him were wearing Martian military uniforms and light armor.

"Hey!" Alex called. "We're not going to be any good to you dead, right?"

There was a lull, like a moment of surprise. "Hoy, bist tu Kamal?"

"Um," Alex said. "My name's Kamal."

"Knuckles' pilot, yeah?"

"Who's Knuckles?"

"Pinché traitor's who," the voice said. "You get to hell, tell her Salo sent you."

"Grenade incoming," the slushy-voiced marine said, his voice weirdly calm. "Employing countermeasures."

Alex turned his face to the wall and pressed his hands to his ears. The

shock of the explosion was like being slapped all across his side. He fought to breathe. Flecks of something like snow swirled through the air, and the stink of plastic and spent explosive was thick enough to choke. The stutter of gunfire seemed to come from far away.

“Grenade mitigated,” the marine shouted. “But we could use some backup here.”

The prime minister had a bright line of red across the backs of his hands, blood soaking into the white of his cuffs and floating in tiny dots through the air of the hallway. Alex felt the wall shudder under his hand as something on the ship detonated too far away to hear. Someone at the head of the corridor was laughing and whooping something in Belter chatter too fast to follow. Alex ducked his head out and back again, trying to get a glimpse of the corridor ahead. A crackle of gunfire drove him back into his shallow cover.

The laughter ahead of them turned to screams, the sharp, flat reports of gunfire into something deeper and more threatening. The marines opened fire, and the corridor rose to pandemonium. A body cartwheeled by, limp and dead, its uniform sopping up blood from a dozen wounds. Alex couldn’t tell which side the fighter had belonged to.

The gunfire stopped. Alex waited a long moment, ducked his head out and back again. Then leaned out for a longer look. The intersection where the enemy had been was misty with smoke and blood and the anti-grenade countermeasure. Two bodies floated in the middle space, one dead in light combat armor, the other in full marine recon gear. The power-armored figure lifted its hand in the sign for all clear.

“We cleaned that up for you,” Bobbie called, her voice seeming to come from miles away and with all the treble stripped out. “You can come on up. Might want to hold your breath through here, though. There’s some particulates.”

Alex pulled himself forward, the prime minister following close behind. They passed Bobbie and four new marines that swelled their escort to six. He hadn’t seen Bobbie in armor since the fight on Io. With the other marines around her, the massive armor adding to her normal bulk, she seemed at home. And more than that, she seemed wistful, knowing that it was an illusion.

“Looks good on you, Draper,” Alex called as he passed. Half-deafened

by the firefight, he only felt the words in his throat. Bobbie's smile told him that she'd heard them.

In the hangar, the *Razorback* hung in clamps built to accommodate ships much larger than she was. It was like seeing an industrial lathe with a toothpick in it. The flight crew hung on to handholds around it, gesturing Alex and Bobbie and the prime minister on. By the time Alex got to the ship, the massive hangar doors were already starting their opening cycle. The flight chief was pushing a vacuum suit at him and shouting so he could hear her.

"We're coordinating with fire control. The PDCs'll try to get you a clear run, but be careful. You run into our own rounds, and that'd just be sad."

"Understood," Alex said.

She gestured toward the hangar doors with her chin. "We're not taking the time to evacuate the bay completely, but we'll get you down to maybe half an atmosphere. Little bit of a pop, but you shouldn't spring a leak."

"And if I do?"

She held out the environment suit again. "You'll have some bottled air to suck on while you figure something out."

"Well, not a great plan, but it's a plan."

"Imperfect circumstances," the flight chief agreed.

Alex shrugged the suit on as the prime minister, already wearing his, slipped into the pinnace and toward the back bunk. The *Razorback* was a yacht. A hot rod, made for zipping around outside an atmosphere, the philosophical descendant of ships that didn't lose sight of the shore. And more than that, she was old. The girl who'd first flown her had been dead or something stranger for years, and the ship had been old before she went. Now they were going to fly it through an active battle zone.

He checked the last of the seals on his suit, and started for the *Razorback*. Bobbie was in the entry, looking in. When she spoke, it was through the suit radio.

"We've got a little problem, Alex."

He squeezed in beside her. Even before she'd been in combat armor, Bobbie had made the interior of the ship seem a little undersized. Looking from her to the second couch now, she made it look ridiculous. There was no way she was going to fit.

"I'll have them stop the launch sequence," Alex said. "We can get you in

a normal EVA suit.”

“There are boarders on the ship. Looking for us. For him,” Bobbie said. “There isn’t time.” She turned to look at him. On the other side of the helmet, her expression was rueful. “I’m only seeing one option here.”

“No,” Alex said. “You’re not staying. I don’t give a shit. I’m not leaving you behind.”

Bobbie shifted, her eyes wide. “What? No, I meant take out the couch and use the suit motors to brace me. Did you think I was—”

“That. Do that. Now,” Alex said.

Bobbie leaned forward, the magnetic boots locking onto the deck of the *Razorback*, and one hand clamped against the frame. With the other, she gripped the base of the crash couch and lifted. The bolts sheared off like she was tearing paper, and she tossed the couch out into the hangar. The gimbals shifted and turned under the spin. Bobbie scuttled in, pressing hands and feet against the walls and deck and pushing until the suit was wedged in as solidly as if it had been part of the superstructure.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m good.”

Alex turned back to the flight chief. The woman saluted him, and with his heart in his throat he returned it. The marines who’d escorted them—who’d risked their lives to get them this far—had already gone. Alex wished he’d thought to thank them.

“I’ll get to my station, and then we’ll get you out,” the flight chief said. “You be careful out there.”

“Thank you,” Alex said. He pulled himself into the ship, closed the hatch, and started running through the checklist. The reactor was hot, the Epstein drive showing green across the board. Air and water were at capacity, and the recyclers ready. “You in place back there, sir?”

“Ready as I’m likely to get,” the man replied.

“You hang on tight,” Alex said to Bobbie. “This might get rough, and you’re not in a crash couch.”

“Yeah I am,” she said, and he could hear the mischievous grin in her voice. “I’m wearing mine.”

“Well,” Alex said softly. “Okay, then.”

The clamp lights went from engaged to warning to open, and the *Razorback* was on the float. Emergency Klaxons sounded, the noise softened by the thinned atmosphere, and the massive hangar door began to

open. The change in exterior pressure rang the pinnace like a hammer blow. Alex aimed for the widening gap full of darkness and stars, and hit it. The *Razorback* leaped out into the vacuum, eager and hungry. The display marked a dozen ships too small for his naked eye to see, and the long, curving shapes of PDC fire like tentacles waving through the void.

“Taking control of the comm laser,” Bobbie said.

“Roger that,” he said. “This is going to get bumpy.”

He threw the *Razorback* out the hangar doors at full speed and into the narrow lane between the battleship’s PDCs firing on full auto. He spun the pinnace between the lines of high-velocity tungsten, hoping they were enough to stop any missiles the ambushing ships fired at them from point-blank range. And then, from behind them, fast-moving bogies in wave after wave. The *Razorback*’s display turned into a solid mass, the density of the missile swarm too much for the screen to differentiate between them. The entire arsenal of the battleship launched all at once, and keyed to target on the pinnace’s comm laser frequency.

“We’ve got our escort,” Alex said. “Let’s get out of here. How many gs can you take back there, Draper?”

“If I break a rib, I’ll let you know.”

Alex grinned, spun the pinnace toward the sun, and accelerated—two g, three, four, four and a half—until the system started complaining that it couldn’t inject him with anything through the EVA suit. He hit the suit’s crude helmet controls with his chin and injected himself with all the amphetamine it had in its tiny emergency pack. The enemy ships seemed unsure what had just happened, but then they began to turn, thin red triangles on the display. Exhaust plumes competed with the stars behind him as he fell toward the sun, toward Earth and Luna and the rattled remnants of the UN fleet. Alex felt a bloom of joy welling up in his chest, like shrugging off a weight.

“You can’t take the *Razorback*,” he said to the tiny red triangles. “We are gone and gone and gone.” He switched the radio to general. “How’s everyone doing back there?”

“Fine,” the prime minister gasped. “But will we be accelerating like this for much longer?”

“Bit longer, yes, sir,” Alex said. “Once we get some breathing room, I’ll cut us back to just a g.”

“Breathing room,” the prime minister said, the words labored. “That’s funny.”

“Five by five here, Alex,” Bobbie said. “Is it safe to pop my helmet? I’d rather not run through all my bottled air when there’s fresh in the ship.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Same back there, Mister Prime Minister.”

“Please. Call me Nathan.”

“You got it, Nate,” Alex said. The sun was a sphere of white. He pulled up the nav computer and started plotting in paths to Luna. The fastest would take them inside the orbit of Mercury, but the pinnacle wasn’t rated for more than half an AU from the coronal surface. So that was going to be a little tricky. And Venus wasn’t anyplace that he could gracefully use to slingshot. But if Avasarala was sending out an escort to meet them, she might be able to get a boost off the planet. So heading that direction might make sense.

“Alex?” Bobbie said.

“I’m here.”

“That thing about not leaving me behind? You really meant that, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did.”

“Thank you.”

He felt a blush rising even against the pressure of the burn. “Welcome,” he said. “I figure you’re crew now, right? We look out for each other.”

“No soldier left behind,” she said. It might have been the gs, but something about her tone made it sound like she meant something deeper by the words. Like she’d made a promise. She grunted. “Alex, we’ve got fast-movers coming in. I think the bad guys are throwing missiles at us.”

“You ready to disappoint them, Gunny?”

“Oh hell yes,” Bobbie said. “How many bullets have we got in this magazine?”

Alex switched the display. The cloud of escort missiles resolved into a numbered list, all in white with identifying serial numbers beside each of them. Even the list filled the screen. He switched to a field summary. “A little shy of ninety.”

“That should get us where we’re going. Looks like pretty near all their ships are burning hard for us too. How would you feel about taking a few potshots at them by way of discouragement?”

“It’ll keep them at a distance, anyway. I figure their PDCs’ll probably

take them down before they can do any real damage, but apart from that I'm not opposed," Alex said. "Except... hold on." On his list, he switched to the enemy flotilla. It took him a few seconds to find what he was looking for. He marked the *Pella*. "Not that one. We don't shoot that one."

"Understood," Bobbie said.

No soldier left behind, Alex thought. That goes for you too, Naomi. I don't know what the hell's going on out there, and I don't see how this plays out yet. But I'll be damned if I'm just leaving you behind.

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Chapter Thirty-five: Naomi

Back before, when she had been a girl and not known any better, it had been hard for her to cast Marco as the bad guy in their pairing. Even after the *Gamarra*, it had been difficult. Even after he'd taken Filip away. She'd grown up around poverty. She knew what bad men looked like. They raped their wives. Or beat them. Or their children. That was how you knew them for what they were. Marco was never that. He never hit her, never forced himself on her, never threatened to shoot her or throw her out an airlock or pour acid in her eyes. He'd pretended kindness so well she would doubt herself, make herself wonder if she was the one being unreasonable, irrational, all the things he implied she was.

He never did anything that would have made it easy for her.

After she'd reached her quarters, the door had locked. She hadn't bothered trying to raise help or leave her little room since. She knew a cell when she was in it, and she'd known with a certainty like her own mortality that sooner or later, Marco would come.

He sat across from her now, still in his Martian military uniform. His eyes were soft, his lips pressed into a smile of amusement and regret. He looked like a poet. A man well bruised by the world, but still capable of passion. She wondered if he practiced the expression in a mirror. Probably, he did.

The wound on her head had stopped bleeding. Her joints all ached, and a vast bruise was blooming on her left hip. Even her fingertips felt like she'd scraped the first layers of skin off them, leaving them weeping and raw, though actually they just looked a little pinker than usual. She drank the same version of chamomile tea that the *Rocinante* made, and it felt like having a secret ally. She recognized that wasn't a perfectly sane thought,

but comfort was comfort.

The mess was empty, the screens turned off and the crew sent away. Even Cyn and Karal were absent. The implication was that whatever they said there was private, but it probably wasn't. She could imagine Filip on another deck, watching. It felt like a setup. Everything about Marco felt like a setup. Because everything was.

"I don't know why you do these things to me, Naomi," Marco said. There was no anger in his voice. No, that wasn't true. The anger was there, but hidden behind the mask of disappointment. "You used to be better than this."

"I'm sorry. Did I upset your plans?"

"Well, yes," Marco said. "That's the thing. Used to be, you knew better. Used to be you at least tried to understand what was going on before you jumped in. Professional. This, though? Took a difficult thing and made it worse. Now what could have been gentle is going to be hard. I just want you to understand why I'm going to do what I'm going to do so you see I didn't have a choice."

There was a smart thing to do. She knew it. A wiser woman would have cried, begged forgiveness. That it would be insincere was the point. It was a mistake to give Marco anything real. Better to be thought weak. Better to be underestimated and misunderstood. She knew that, but she couldn't do it. When she tried, something deep within her pushed back. Maybe if she pretended to be weak, it was too possible that it would become true. Maybe she was pretending to be strong.

Naomi spat on the deck. There was a little blood along with her saliva. "Save the air."

He leaned forward, taking her hand in his. His grip was strong, like he was showing that he could hurt her, even if he wasn't doing it right now. She thought, *Well, that's one way to make your subtext physical*, and then chuckled.

"Naomi, I know we aren't good, du y mé. I know you're angry. But I know we were something once. We're one body, you and me. Much as we try to be apart, our son means we will never be totally separate."

She tried to pull her hand back, but he kept hold of it. She could pull harder or let him touch her, control her body even if it was only that much. The glimmer in his eyes was pleasure. His smile was a little more genuine,

and it had an edge.

“You’ve got to understand what I’m doing here, it’s not for me. It’s for us.”

“Us?”

“Belters. All Belters. It’s for Filip. So when his turn comes, there’s still a place for him. Not just a footnote. Once upon a time there were a people who lived on moons and asteroids and the planets where life didn’t evolve. But then we found the gates, and those people died out because we didn’t need them. It’s why I have to do this. You don’t like my methods. I understand that. But they’re mine, and the cause is righteous.”

Naomi didn’t speak. The food processor let out a high whine that meant its water supply was getting low. She wondered if Marco knew that, or if it was just another meaningless noise for him.

“Pretty speech. But it doesn’t explain why I’m here. You didn’t need me here in order to break the system. Needed me for something else. You want to know what I think?”

“You told me,” Marco said, his grip on her hand tightening just a degree. “So the great James Holden wouldn’t come blow my house down. Seriously, you think too much of him. He’s not that impressive.”

“No, it’s worse than that. I think you wanted the *Roci*. I think you wanted my ship flying at your side when you did all this. But when I didn’t bring her, you fell back. Had Sakai rig her to blow. Because there is nothing original about you at all.”

His smile was as warm, but his eyes were cold now. Unamused. “Don’t follow,” he said.

“You start the conversation with *Why do you make me hurt you when I love you so much?* and now we’re at *If I can’t have you, no one can*. You can pretend we’re talking about the ship if you want. Doesn’t matter to me.”

Marco let her go and stood. He wasn’t as tall as she remembered him. “You got it wrong from the start. I wanted Fred Johnson—Butcher of Anderson Station, who killed people like you and me and Filip just because we were Belters. I wanted him isolated. Keep your ship out of his hands. Tried to get it brought, but no. Had Sakai try to disable her. *Disable*, sa sa? Had it rigged to blow at three percent power. Blown off her aft, maybe didn’t even hurt anyone.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said, but he was on a roll now, pacing the

length of the mess, his arms spread wide like a man giving a speech to an invisible crowd.

“Killing the ship wasn’t my plan. That’s what *you* pushed me into. What happens to Holden is your fault, not mine. That’s what you need to see. How things get worse when you start acting like you know. You don’t know, Naomi. You don’t know because I haven’t told you.”

She took a sip of her tea and shrugged. “So tell me.”

Marco grinned. “You notice when we cut thrust for a few minutes? Strange thing to do in the middle of a chase, don’t you think?”

The truth was, she hadn’t noticed. In her bunk, nursing her wounds, the shifts in ship gravity hadn’t been on her mind.

“Docking procedure,” he said and pulled his hand terminal from his pocket and chose something. The speakers on the screens clicked, hissed. No image appeared on them, but a voice came.

Her voice.

“This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. If you get this message, please retransmit. Tell James Holden I am in distress. Comm is not responding. I have no nav control. Please retransmit.”

Marco touched something else on his hand terminal, and the screens sprang to life. Exterior cameras, probably connected to the point defense. The *Chetzemoka* burned not more than a hundred meters away, a docking tube clinging to her airlock like an umbilical cord. A ship that, if they dug hard enough, would trace back to her. The payments that had come from her accounts.

“Put it on intersecting course, more or less,” Marco said, his voice weary and sorrowful in a way she was certain hid glee. “Set the bottle to fail when the proximity sensors ping a ship. Didn’t have to be this way, but it does now.”

A real despair rose up in her throat, and she pushed it back down. It was what Marco wanted, so she would do *anything*, feel *anything* except that. She considered the screen. The ship looking like a box held together with one line of solder and some epoxy.

“You’re stealing it from your own son,” she said. Marco frowned. Naomi pointed toward the screen with her chin. “The *Chetzemoka*. I told Filip he could have it when we were here. That’s his ship. You’re stealing it from him.”

“Necessity of war,” Marco said.

“Shitty parenting.”

His jaw slid forward. His hands balled in fists. For a moment, she thought he was going to make it easy. He’d show whatever audience he was playing for who and what he really was. He got his temper back in time, and she wasn’t sure if she was relieved or disappointed.

“If you’d stayed in your place, James Holden would have lived. But you stepped out. Put yourself where you didn’t belong. Because of you, he’s going to die.”

Naomi stood up, rubbed her eye with the back of her hand. Her false voice repeated through the mess hall—“Tell James Holden I am in distress...”

“Anything else?”

“You pretend you don’t care,” Marco said. “But you do.”

“You say so.” She shrugged. “I got a little bump. It’s giving me a headache. Or something is. Going to med bay get it fixed, yeah?”

“You can pretend—”

“Can I pretend in the med bay? Or do you need to go on impressing me?” It was too much. She felt a flood of words hammering up behind all she’d said. *You are an egomaniac and a sadist and I can’t believe I ever thought I loved you and If Jim dies, I will by God find a way to make the bottle on this ship fail and we’ll all go to hell behind him.* But engaging was also a trap, so she didn’t. She let the silence break the rhythm of Marco’s performance and saw his shoulders shift when he gave up and stepped off the stage in his head.

“Miral!” he yelled, and as the sounds of one of the crew moving from the quarters grew louder, “You abused the freedom I gave you. You can’t expect to keep it.”

“Too dangerous to leave free?” she asked, then licked her fingertip and ticked off a mark on an imaginary board. “One point for me, then.”

In the med bay, a woman she didn’t know ran tests to make sure Naomi wasn’t bleeding in her brain; that none of the bruises she had were crush wounds bad enough to kill the muscle, flood her body with potassium, stop her heart. Miral leaned against the supply cabinet, reciting obscenities—bitch, puta, cunt—with a half-focused rage. After spending all those days running inventory, Naomi knew everything in the cabinet. First drawer:

gauze and bandages. Second drawer: one-use blood cards for maybe a hundred different field tests. Third drawer: emergency medical supplies like decompression kits, adrenaline shots, defibrillating tape. Naomi stared at Miral as he recited his litany. He glanced away, and then returned the stare, enunciating each word a little more sharply.

The medic had her sit up, the cushion of the medical table crackling under her shifting weight. The analgesic was a spray that went in Naomi's mouth. It tasted like fake cherry and mold.

"Maybe take it easy for a couple days, yeah?" the medic said.

"Best I can," Naomi agreed, hopping down from the bed. She straight-kicked Miral in the crotch, sending him sprawling into the cabinet and cracking two of her toes. She ignored the stab of pain in her foot and launched herself onto him, pounding at his head and neck. When he rolled, she rolled with him. The cabinet doors were open, spilling test cards and preloaded hypodermics across the floor. Miral's elbow swung up, glancing off her jaw but still hard enough to make her ears ring.

She fell to the side, her belly to the deck, decompression kits the size of her thumb pressing into her face as Miral writhed around to kneel on her back. The medic was screaming. Naomi tried to turn, tried to evade the punches, but she couldn't. The pain bloomed between her shoulder blades. And then, like time skipping, the weight was off her. She rolled to her side. Karal had Miral in a submission hold. He struggled and cursed, but the old Belter's eyes were flat and dead.

"Be angry con sus séra that she got you unexpected," Karal said. "Marco pas beat her down, you sure as fuck don't, sabe pendejo?"

"Sa sa," Miral said, and Karal let him go. The medic, standing in the corner, was a picture of silent rage. Miral rubbed his neck and glared at Naomi where she still lay on the deck. Karal walked over to look down at her.

"Bist bien, Knuckles?"

She nodded, and when Karal put out his hand, she took it and let him help her up. When she started for the door, Miral began to follow. Karal put a hand on the man's chest. "I got this, me."

Naomi hung her head as they walked, her hair falling over her face like a veil. The steady pressure of acceleration left her knees and spine aching even more than her wounds. All through the ship, malefic faces turned to

her. She could feel the hatred coming off them like heat from a fire. When she passed through the mess, the *Chetzemoka* was still on the screen, the docking umbilical linking them. They'd need to cut thrust when they unhooked it, or it would fall to the side, trailing along the ship like a limp tentacle. That would be how she knew she was too late. It hadn't happened yet.

At her quarters, Karal came in behind her and closed the door. With two of them in the tiny space, it felt cramped and uncomfortably intimate. She sat on the crash couch, arms crossed, her legs tucked under her, and looked at him, her expression carrying the question. Karal shook his head.

"You got to stop this, Knuckles," he said, and his voice was surprisingly gentle. "We're in king shit here. Esá la we're doing? History, yeah? Changing everything, but for us this time. I know you and him ain't right, but tu muss listen him. Yeah?"

Naomi looked away. She just wanted him to leave, but Karal didn't go. He sank down, his back against the wall, his knees to his broad chest.

"I heard the plan where we gehst con du? Bring you in? Fought it, me. Mal cóncep, I said. Why cut open the scar? Marco said was worth it. Said you were going to be in danger when it all came, and Filip, he deserved to see his mother, yeah? And Marco's Marco, so si."

Karal rubbed his palms over his head. It made a soft hissing sound, almost too faint to hear. Naomi felt an inexplicable urge to touch him, to offer some comfort, but she didn't. When he spoke again, he sounded tired.

"We're little people in big times, yeah? Time for Butchers and Marco—men and history-book things. Other pinché worlds. Who wants that? Just you let this pass, yeah? Maybe your Holden, he doesn't take the bait. Maybe something else trips before he gets here. Maybe you get small and you live through this. That so bad? Doing what needs to live through?"

She shrugged. For a time, the only sound was the clicking of the air recycler. Karal lifted himself up with a grunt. He looked older than she thought of him. It was more than just the years, she thought. For a moment, she was young again, back on Ceres with Filip bawling in his crib while she watched the news of the *Augustín Gamarra*. It occurred to her for the first time that everyone on that ship had watched Earth die in real time the way she'd seen the firefly light of the *Gamarra* rise and fade on the newsfeed, looped a dozen times while the reporter spoke over it. She wanted to say

something, but she couldn't, so she just watched as Karal opened the door then closed it behind him. The lock slid closed. She wiped the wet from her eyes, and—once she was sure he wasn't coming back—spat the decompression kit into her hand.

Wet with her saliva and no bigger than her thumb, it was the sort of thing any mech driver kept with her. A tiny ampoule of injectable oxygenated artificial blood, and a panic button that would make an emergency medical request for an airlock to cycle. Military ships like the *Pella* and *Roci* ignored that sort of request as basic security. The *Canterbury* and other commercial ships usually allowed it, filled as they were with civilians who posed a greater threat to themselves than pirates or boarders did. She didn't know how the *Chetzmoka* would respond to it, but there was only one way to find out. The only other things she needed were an EVA suit and a clear idea of when the ships would cut thrust.

Then it was a matter of taking control of the ship, maybe blowing the core, and getting the hell away from Marco. Again. She felt a pang of regret at the thought of Filip—and Cyn and Karal and all the people she'd known once and cared for. Even loved. It was an echo of greater pain, and she could ignore it.

"Didn't break me when I was a girl," she said to the tiny black kit. "Don't know why he thinks he can break me now."

Chapter Thirty-six: Holden

Holden wanted badly to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come. The most he'd been able to manage was a few hours' unconsciousness that left him groggy and ragged. He'd been given the option of moving back into quarters on the station, but he'd refused. Even though he slept better with gravity holding him to the mattress, he didn't want to leave the ship. He wasn't sure how long it had been since he'd shaved, but the patchwork of stubble on his cheeks and neck itched a little. During the work shifts, it wasn't so bad. The new crew checked the systems they'd all checked before, looking for sabotage they hadn't seen last time, and it gave him something to do. People to talk to. When they left, he ate in the galley, tried to sleep for a while, then wandered through the ship like he was looking for something but couldn't remember what it was.

And then, inevitably and against his better judgment, he checked the newsfeeds.

"With the silence from Medina Station, all contact with the colonial planets has been lost. We can only speculate on the significance of the partial report from the Fólkvangr settlement concerning alien activity in the southern hemisphere of New Triton—"

"A spokesman for the port authority said that Ganymede's neutrality was a reflection of its universal importance and not a political statement—"

"UN forces are en route, but it is not clear whether Prime Minister Smith is actually aboard the racing ship or if this is a distraction to pull the enemy's attention away from a more traditional evacuation. Regardless, acting secretary-general Avasarala has announced a security zone covering the flight path of the pinnacle, and all ships in the area have been advised to move beyond weapon range until such time as—"

Light speed, he decided, was a curse. It made even the farthest corners of humanity's reach feel close, and the illusion was a kind of poison. The delay between Tycho Station and Earth was a little less than a quarter of an hour, but to travel that far would take days. If Alex or Naomi died, he could know within minutes that they were gone. He floated in his restraints, the cabin lights turned off, and flipped through the feeds, jumping back and forth in case anything had happened, knowing that if it had, there was nothing he could do. He felt like he was standing on a frozen lake, looking down through the ice while the people he cared about most drowned.

If he couldn't know, if everything that was happening could happen someplace he couldn't watch, then maybe he could look away. Maybe he could close his eyes and dream about them, at least. When a connection request came on his hand terminal, he was glad to get it.

"Paula," Holden said.

"Holden," the hacker replied. "Wasn't sure what schedule you're on. I was afraid I was calling in your sleep shift."

"No," Holden said. He didn't know why he felt defensive about being awake, but he did. "It's fine. I'm fine. What have you got?"

She grinned. "I have a smoking gun. I can transmit a report to you—"

"No. I mean, yes. Do that. But am I going to understand what I'm seeing?"

On the screen, she stretched, grinning. "I was about to head out to dinner. Meet me at La Fromagerie and I'll walk you through the whole thing."

Holden pulled up the station directory. It wasn't far. If Naomi died right now, the news would reach him just about when he got there. Maybe before. He pressed his palm against his sandpaper-dry eyes. "Sounds like a plan," he said.

"Meal's on you."

"You've got me over a barrel, yeah, yeah. Be right over."

The restaurant was small, with what appeared to be real wooden tables but were certainly pressed bamboo from station hydroponics; no one charging even vaguely reasonable prices for the meals would have been able to afford something from an actual tree. Paula was at a table against the wall. The bench she sat on looked normal for her. When he sat across from her, his feet didn't quite touch the deck.

“Boss,” Paula said. “I already ordered.”

“I’m not hungry. What have you got?”

“Take a look,” she said, passing her hand terminal over to him. The screen was filled with a structured scatter of code, structures nested inside structures with repeated sections showing variations so subtle as to approach invisibility. It was like seeing a poem written in an alphabet he didn’t know.

“What am I looking at?”

“These two lines,” she said. “This sends the stop code to the bottle. These are the conditional statements that call it. For you, if you’d gotten to ninety-five percent, you’d have been a star. If you’d been in dock, which you probably would have, it would have taken a fair bite out of the station too.”

“And the new software? The one that the ship’s running now?”

“Not in it,” Paula said. “This is where you get to be impressed with me finding two lines of uncommented code in a fusion reactor’s magnetic bottle driver.”

“Very impressive,” Holden said, dutifully.

“Thank you, but that’s not the cool part. Take a look at the trigger line. You see all those calls set to null? They’re all other system parameters that weren’t being used.”

“Okay,” Holden said. From the brightness in her expression, he had the sense he should have seen something more in her words. Maybe if he’d been able to sleep...

“This is an all-purpose trap. You want something to blow when they’ve been out of port for six days? Set that call there to about half a million seconds. You want it to go when the weapons systems are armed? This call right here set to one. There’s maybe a dozen different ways to set this thing off, and you can mix and match them.”

“That’s interesting—”

“That’s a smoking fucking gun,” Paula said. “Bottle containment failures don’t leave much by way of data. Not supposed to happen ever, but sometimes they do. The story has always been that accidents happen, what can you do? Ships blow up sometimes. This shows that someone built a tool specifically to make it happen. And to make it happen again and again and again, wherever they could sneak their code into the ship they decided had

to die. What we have here is key evidence in maybe thousands of murders no one even knew *were* murders until right now.”

Excitement tightened her voice, brightened her eyes. The unease in his gut grew thicker.

I need to go do something, Naomi said in his memory. *And I can't have you involved in it. At all.*

Was this it? Was this what she'd been trying to keep separate from him, from the *Rocinante*? And what did it mean if it was? Paula was still looking at him, expectation in her eye. He didn't know how to respond, but the silence was getting awkward.

“Cool?” he said.



Fred was sitting at Drummer's desk, his elbows resting on the tabletop, his hands cradling his chin. He looked as tired as Holden felt. On the screen, Drummer and Sakai were in one of the interrogation rooms. The table that was usually between them had been moved askew, and Drummer was leaning back in her chair and resting her feet on it. Prisoner and guard were both drinking what looked like coffee. Sakai laughed at something and shook his head. Drummer grinned impishly. She looked younger. Holden realized with a start that she was wearing her hair down.

“What the hell is this?” he asked.

“Professionalism,” Fred said. “Building rapport. Establishing trust. She's halfway convinced him that whoever he was working for was willing to crack the station open with him still inside it. Once he's come around, we'll own him. That man will tell us everything we ask and then try to remember something we didn't think to dig for if we give him time. No one's as zealous as a convert.”

Holden crossed his arms. “I think you're overlooking the beat-him-with-a-wrench stratagem. I favor it.”

“No you don't.”

“In this case, I'd make an exception.”

“No. You wouldn't. Torture's for amateurs.”

“So? I don't do this professionally.”

Fred sighed and turned to look up at him. “The reckless tough-guy version of you is almost as tiring as the relentless Boy Scout was. I’m hoping your pendulum swings hit middle sometime soon.”

“Reckless?”

Fred shrugged. “Did you find anything?”

“Yeah,” Holden said, “but it’s not in the fresh driver. We have a clean bill of health.”

“Unless there’s something else.”

“Yup.”

“Sakai says there wasn’t.”

“Not entirely sure I know how to respond to that,” Holden said. Then, a moment later, “So, I’ve been thinking.”

“About the message from the *Pella*?”

“Yeah.”

Fred stood up. His expression was hard, but not without compassion. “I was expecting this fight, Holden. But there’s more at stake here than Naomi. If the protomolecule is being weaponized, or even just set loose again—”

“That doesn’t matter,” Holden said. “Wait, no. That came out wrong. Of course that matters. It matters a lot. It just doesn’t change anything. We can’t...” He paused, swallowed. “We can’t go after her. I’ve got one ship, they’ve got half a dozen. Everything in me wants to fire up the engines and burn like hell after her, but it won’t help.”

Fred was silent. The distant sound of Sakai’s laughter filtered through from the screen. They both ignored it. Holden looked at his hands. He felt like he was confessing something. Maybe he was.

“Whatever’s going on here?” Holden said. “Whatever she’s involved with, I can’t fix it by putting on my shining armor and riding into battle. The only way I can see to do her any good at all is to do what we had planned. Get you to Luna. If you can use Dawes and Sakai and Avasarala to open some kind of communication with these sons of bitches, Naomi can be a bargaining chip. We can trade her for some of the people you’ve got in the brig. Or Sakai. Or something.”

“That’s the conclusion you’ve reached?”

“It is,” Holden said, the words tasting like ashes.

“You’ve grown up some since the first time we met,” Fred said. Holden

heard the sympathy in it. The consolation. “It’s making me regret my ‘reckless’ comment.”

“I’m not convinced that’s a good thing. Have you ever done this? Loved someone like they were part of you and then left them in danger?”

Fred put a hand on Holden’s shoulder. For all the frailty that age and trouble had put in the older man’s face and body, his grip was still firm. “Son, I’ve grieved for more people than you’ve met. You can’t trust your heart on this. You have to do what you know, not what you feel.”

“Because if I do what I feel...” Holden said, thinking that the end of the sentence was something like *I’d beat Sakai’s teeth in* or *I’d get us all killed*. Fred surprised him.

“Then we lose her.”



“Course set,” Chava Lombaugh said from the cockpit. “On your order, sir.”

Holden tried to lean back into his crash couch, but without thrust gravity to give him weight, it ended up as just a straightening of the neck. His heart was racing, adrenaline ticking coolly through his veins.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. The command deck felt too full. Sun-yi, serious and relaxed, was at weapons. Maura had comm controls up, monitoring them because that was what she did more than from any actual need. It should have been Alex’s voice. It should have been him and Naomi in the couches.

He shouldn’t have been scared.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s do this.”

“Sir,” Chava said. The warning light went from amber to red and Holden fell back into his couch. Tycho Station fell away behind them. It wouldn’t be an hour before it was too small to make out without assistance. Holden waited for three long, shuddering breaths. Four.

“How are we looking, Mister Ip?”

From the engineering deck, Sandra Ip—who should have been Amos—said, “All systems are within tolerance.”

“Meaning not all blowed up,” Holden said.

There was a pause on the channel. “Yes, sir. Not all blowed up, sir.”

Holden hated it that he wasn't sure of his own ship. The *Rocinante* had been nothing but solid for him since the day he'd gotten aboard her. He'd trusted the ship with his life the way he trusted his heart to beat. It was more than instinct. It was automatic. To do anything else would have been strange.

But that was before. Sakai's sabotage hadn't killed him, but it hadn't left him unscathed either. It would be a long time before Holden was sure that there were no more unpleasant surprises hidden in the ship. Software waiting for the right moment to evacuate the air or throw the ship into a fatal acceleration or any of the other thousand ways a ship could fail and kill its crew. They had looked everything over and found nothing, but they'd done that before and nearly died from their oversights. There was no amount of double-checking that would ever prove that nothing had been missed. From now on—maybe for a long time, maybe forever—he would wonder about things he hadn't before. He was resentful, even angry, that his faith had been shaken.

He wondered if he was still thinking about the *Rocinante*.

"All right," he said, unstrapping. "I'm going to get some coffee. You folks try not to break anything, and if you do, let me know."

The chorus of yessirs was oddly disheartening. He wished they'd known he was joking. Or felt comfortable enough to joke back. Their formality was just another way it didn't feel like his ship anymore.

He found Fred in the galley, talking into his hand terminal, recording a message that was clearly meant for Anderson Dawes. Holden got his coffee quietly between phrases like *lines of communication* and *profound lack of trust*. When Fred finished, he folded his hands and looked over.

"I'd take one of those too. Cream, no sugar."

"Coming up," Holden said. "Anything new?"

"Two of the original Martian escort surrendered."

"Seriously?"

"They were too far from the action to affect the outcome, and they were getting hammered. I don't like it, but I won't second-guess their command."

"Is it just my imagination, or are these people handing us our asses on a plate?" Holden said, bringing the coffee mugs to the table. "Are they really this good, or do we all just suck a lot worse than I thought we did?"

Fred sipped the coffee. "Ever heard of the Battle of Gaugamela?"

“No,” Holden said.

“Darius the third, emperor of Persia, had two hundred thousand soldiers under his command. Bactrians, Arachosians, Scythians. Some Greek mercenaries. On the other side, thirty-five thousand soldiers, and Alexander of Macedon. Alexander the Great. Five Persians to every Macedonian. It should have been a slaughter. But Alexander pulled so much of the enemy out to the flank that a gap opened in the middle of the Persian lines. Alexander called his men to form a wedge, and leading with his own cavalry, he pushed through and headed straight for the emperor. There were vast forces to either side, surrounding him. But it didn’t matter, because he saw how to reach Darius. Alexander saw something no one else had seen.

“These people? This little faction of the OPA? Between Earth and Mars and me, we outnumber them. We outgun them. All this has happened because someone saw an opportunity that no one else did. They had the audacity to strike where no one else would even have considered an attack. That’s the power of audacity, and if a general is lucky and strong-minded, they can take that advantage and keep the enemy on their back foot forever.”

“You think that’s their plan?”

“It would be mine,” Fred said. “This isn’t someone making a play to control the Belt or the Jovian moons. This is someone trying to grab all of it. Everything. It takes a certain kind of mind to succeed in something like that. Charisma, brilliance, discipline. It takes an Alexander.”

“That sounds a little discouraging,” Holden said.

Fred held up the coffee cup. The name TACHI hadn’t quite worn off the side, red and black letters half-erased by use. But not gone. Not yet. “I understand better now how Darius felt,” Fred said. “Having power, position, advantage. Especially when you think you know how wars work. It blinds you to other things. And by the time you see them, there’s a Macedonian cavalry with spears set coming right at you. But that wasn’t how Darius lost.”

“It’s not? Because the story you just told me sounded a lot like that’s how he lost.”

“No. He ran.”

Holden drank. From the crew quarters, the murmur of unfamiliar voices

was a reminder that things were wrong. That the patterns of the past were broken, and might never be put right. “He was going to get killed if he didn’t, though. Alexander would have killed him.”

“Maybe. Or maybe Darius would have withstood the charge. Or maybe he would have fallen and his army would have crushed Alexander’s in rage and grief. The end of an emperor isn’t always the end of an empire. I look at Earth and what happened there. I look at Mars. At what happened on Tycho, and what I’m afraid happened on Medina. I’m seeing Alexander’s wedge bursting through the line at me. The same shock as Darius, the same dismay. The fear. But I’m not Darius. And I think Chrisjen Avasarala isn’t either.”

“So you don’t think we’re screwed?”

Fred smiled. “I don’t know what to think yet. I won’t until I know more about the enemy. But looking back through history, there are a lot more men who thought they were Alexander the Great than men who actually were.”

Chapter Thirty-seven: Alex

They burned across the emptiness, and the enemy came hard behind them. Four Martian military ships with target locks on Alex's drive burned toward him as they all dropped toward the sun. The other two had stayed behind to continue the attack on the main force. More than half the attackers had peeled off to come for him. Alex hoped it was enough to let Captain Choudhary get a toehold. Nothing he could do about that from here, though, but watch and hope.

For the first few hours, it had all been hard burn and dodging. Once he'd opened up some distance between the *Razorback* and the attackers, the nature of the chase altered. It wasn't about catching or being caught anymore. Alex had the lead, had seventy-two missiles left flying around him in a cloud, a path to Luna, and reinforcements burning out to join him. If nothing went wrong, he'd be safe in less than two days.

The enemy's job now was to make something go wrong.

"You've got another couple PDC arcs coming in," Bobbie said.

"That's cute," Alex said. "I'm moving to avoid. You want to let the missiles know?"

"Already done."

The tungsten slugs of the enemy point defense cannons were meant to chew through missiles at close range. At the distances they were holding now, they were something between an invitation for the crew of the *Razorback* to blunder into them by mistake and an uplifted middle finger. Alex tracked the incoming fire and braced as the maneuvering thrusters pushed them down and to the left to avoid the gently curving arcs of enemy fire, then up and right to correct to the original course. Around him the cloud of missiles parted to let the slugs pass through their flock of exhaust

cones and warheads.

“Any enemy missiles following that up?” he asked.

A moment later Bobbie said, “Nope.”

“Keep an eye out. Our friends there are gettin’ antsy.”

“Happens when you’re losing,” Bobbie said. Even without turning, Alex could hear the smile in her voice.

From the cabin in the back, Smith’s voice came in staccato gasps. Even the relatively modest one-g flight was three times what the man was used to. He’d been burning up the tightbeam for hours. Sometimes, Alex caught Chrisjen Avasarala’s recorded voice, other times a man’s warm drawl. Someone on Mars, he figured.

The *Razorback* had been a toy once, and while the screens were decades out of date, they still had some bells and whistles. He set the wall screens to match external cameras, and the wide starscape bloomed around them. The sun was bigger and brighter here than it would have been on Earth, but constrained by the limits of the screen to a burning whiteness. The curves of the Milky Way glowed all along the plane of the ecliptic, the billions of stars made soft by distance. Being surrounded by missiles was like floating in a cloud of fireflies, and behind them, bright as seven Venuses in an Earth twilight, the drive plumes of the attackers who wanted them dead.

And also Naomi.

Bobbie sighed. “You know, a thousand of those stars out there are ours now. That’s like, what? Three ten-thousandths of a percent of our galaxy? That’s what we’re fighting over.”

“You think?”

“You don’t?”

“Nah,” Alex said. “I figure we’re fighting over who gets the most meat from the hunt and first access to the water hole. Mating rights. Who believes in which gods. Who has the most money. The usual primate issues.”

“Kids,” Bobbie said.

“Kids?”

“Yeah. Everyone wanting to make sure their kids have a better shot than they did. Or than everyone else’s kids. Something like that.”

“Yeah, probably,” Alex said. He shifted his personal screen back to tactical, pulling up the latest data on the *Pella*. It still had the strange,

cheap-looking civilian craft tethered to it. Alex couldn't tell if they were taking something off it or putting something on. So far, it was the only craft in the little force that wasn't clearly military design. There hadn't been any more contacts from Naomi. He didn't know whether that was a good thing or a problem, but he couldn't help checking on the ship every five minutes like he was picking at a scab.

"You ever worry about your kid?" Bobbie asked.

"Don't have one," Alex said.

"You don't? I thought you did."

"Nope," Alex said. "Never really had the situation for one, you know? Or I guess I did, and it didn't fit. What about you?"

"Never had the urge," Bobbie said. "The family I've got has been more than enough."

"Yeah. Family."

Bobbie was silent for a moment. Then, "You're thinking about her."

"Naomi, you mean?"

"Yeah."

Alex turned in his couch. Bobbie's armor reached against both walls, servomotors locked in place to brace her. She looked crucified. The wound in the deck where she'd pulled out the crash couch made it seem like she'd burst through the bottom of the ship. Her expression managed to be both sympathetic and hard.

"Of course, I'm thinking about her," Alex said. "She's right there. And probably she's in trouble. And I can't figure out how the hell she got there in the first place. It's not going to be too long before the cavalry gets here to save us, and when they do, I don't know if I should be helping to attack the *Pella* or protect her."

"That's hard," Bobbie agreed. "But you know we've got our mission. Get Smith to Luna. We've got to stand our watch."

"I know. Can't help thinking about it, though. I keep putting together schemes where we use the missiles we've got left to make them turn her over to us."

"Any of them even remotely plausible?"

"Not a one," Alex said.

"There's nothing worse than keeping to your duty when it means leaving one of your own in danger."

“No shit.” Alex looked at the readouts from the *Pella*. “You know, maybe—”

“Stand your watch, sailor. And heads up. We’ve got more PDCs coming in.”

Alex had already seen them and started laying in the course corrections. “Optimistic little shits. Got to give them that.”

“Maybe they think you’ll get sleepy.”

The overloading of the pinnacle was awkward and strange. Moving from the pilot’s seat to the head meant both Alex and the prime minister of Mars squeezing past Bobbie’s power armor. Or, for Bobbie, exiling Smith to the empty space where her couch had been while she used the tiny cabin to break down her armor or climb back into it. No one even suggested that they sleep by hot-bunking in the cabin.

Smith himself seemed like a personable man, polite and thoughtful. *Inoffensive* was a word that came to mind. Alex had stopped following Martian politics sometime around the slow zone, so he didn’t come in with any preconceptions about the man or his policies. When they did talk, it was usually about small things—the popular culture of Mars when they were both growing up, Smith’s gratitude for the efforts he and Bobbie were putting into keeping him alive, some questions about what Ilus had been like. Alex had the sense that Smith was, if anything, a little starstruck by him. Which was pretty thoroughly odd, when he thought about it.

Still, when Smith popped his head out of the cabin to tell Bobbie that there was a message specifically for her from Avasarala, it had the sense of a secretary who was vaguely uneasy interrupting his boss. Alex felt a weird impulse to reassure the man it was all right, but wasn’t sure how to say it without being even more awkward.

Bobbie thanked him, and for a while she was silent. Alex kept his eyes on the enemy and the sun and the data from the incoming UN escort ships that were still hidden by the sun’s corona.

“Alex?” Bobbie sounded frustrated.

“Yup.”

“I can’t make this thing’s incoming feed talk to my suit. Can you put this up on a screen for me? I’d do it myself, but—”

He switched over to the comm system, opened a panel on the wall screen, and sent the message to it. Chrisjen Avasarala appeared. She looked

older than Alex remembered her. There were dark circles under her eyes and a grayness to her skin that didn't belong there. Her sari only made her look paler. When she spoke, though, her voice was just as sure as ever.

"Bobbie, I need any data you have about the missing Martian ships. I know, you're going to tell me how you've already given me everything, and of course I trust and believe all that you say, blah blah fucking blah. But I need it. Now. I've got confirmation of two dozen Martian military vessels that are burning hard for the Ring. Everything from the *Barkeith* to a couple resupply barges. It's like a little fucking fleet all its own. Smith says he's looking into it, which could mean anything from he knows exactly what's going on and doesn't want to tell me to Mars is in the middle of a coup and he doesn't want to tell me. One way or the other, he's locked up tight as a rat's asshole."

"Sorry about this," Bobbie said over her shoulder.

"It's nothing she hasn't said to my face," Smith replied.

"You want me to stop the playback?" Alex asked, but Avasarala was already talking again.

"If these are more ships that got sold to whoever's chasing you, I need to know. If they're all MCRN vessels with actual Martian Navy crews, that's something very different. And since they're not answering, I'm stuck trying to peep in the windows. If you've held something back—something sensitive, something that made you uncomfortable to share with me—I absolutely understand. Your patriotism and loyalty to Mars has been a thorn in my fucking side since the day I met you, but I respect it. It speaks well of you as a soldier and as a person, and now it's time to get the fuck over it.

"Also, Nathan, if you're listening, and I assume you are, I'm the best and only friend you've got. Give her permission to share what she has, or I swear to God I'll have you turning tricks out of a prefab shed on the side of the highway. I'm trying to save humanity here. It would be just fantastic if someone would *help*."

Her voice broke on the last word, and tears appeared in her eyes. Alex felt a tightness in his chest and a sense of sorrow he'd managed to ignore until it now welled up in him. Avasarala took a deep breath, sneered, and turned her gaze back to the camera. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand angrily. Like they'd betrayed her.

"So. No more fucking around. I love and adore you, and I can't wait for

you—all of you—to be where I can keep you safe. Be careful. And send me the fucking data. Now.”

The message ended. Bobbie let out a long, shuddering breath. Alex was pretty sure if he looked back, she’d be weeping too. Smith’s voice came from the door to the cabin.

“I’ve told her all I know about them,” Smith said. “The ships were not listed as missing. The crews aboard them all check out as Martian citizens. But so did the false escort ships. Until I have a complete audit of the military’s personnel and supply databases, I don’t know what I’m looking at.”

Alex coughed to clear his throat before he spoke. “Avasarala’s not always the most trusting person, Nate. It ain’t just you.”

“She’s thorough,” Smith said. “And she’s in a hard position. Sergeant Draper?”

There was a long silence. When Alex looked back, Bobbie’s expression was closed. Her lips pressed to a single line. “On my own initiative and without direction from Avasarala I... When I found evidence that something had gone missing, I checked to see what commanding officers were in charge of that materiel. I didn’t see any pattern in it, but someone else might. If they saw it.”

Alex closed the panel Avasarala had been in. The air seemed fragile. Smith took a short breath, made a small, noncommittal sound in the back of his throat. “Please see that I get a copy too, Sergeant Draper.”

He closed the door to the cabin behind him. Alex sat up in his couch. “You know,” he said, “you have a really weird relationship with treason. On the one hand, I think you may be the most patriotic person I’ve ever met, and on the other hand—”

“I know. It’s been confusing for me too. For a long time now.”

“Your loyalty to the corps and your loyalty to that woman ever really come to blows, it’ll be a hard day.”

“It won’t happen,” Bobbie said. “She won’t let it.”

“No?”

“She’d lose,” Bobbie said. “She hates losing.”



The message from the *Pella* came three hours later. From the first instant, it was clear that it was a press release. The answer to the questions everyone had been asking: Who did all this, and why? The man was seated at a desk, two different banners showing the split circle of the OPA on the wall behind him. His uniform was crisp and unfamiliar, his eyes soulful and gentle to the point of being nearly apologetic, his voice low and rich as a viol.

“My name,” he said, “is Marco Inaros, commander of the Free Navy. We are the legitimate military voice of the outer planets, and we are now in a position to explain both to the oppressors on Earth and Mars and also to the liberated people of the Belt the terms on which this new chapter of human liberty, dignity, and freedom are founded. We recognize the right of Earth and Mars to exist, but their sovereignty ends at their respective atmospheres. The vacuum is ours. All travel between the planets of the solar system are the right and privilege of the OPA and will be enforced by the Free Navy. All taxes and tariffs imposed by Earth and Mars are illegal, and will not be respected. Reparations for the damage done by the inner planets to the free citizens of the system will be assayed, and failure to repay them for the benefit of the full human race will be considered a criminal act.”

A throbbing had come into the man’s voice without it ever seeming to make his words affected or musical. He leaned in toward the camera, and it felt both intimate and powerful.

“With the opening of the alien gates, we are at a crossroads in human history. We have already seen how easy it would be to carry our legacies of exploitation, injustice, prejudice, and oppression to these new worlds. But there is an alternative. The Free Navy and the society and culture of the Belt are representatives of that new pathway. We will begin again and remake humanity without the corruption, greed, and hatred that the inner planets could not transcend. We will take what is ours by right, yes, but more than that, we will lead the Belt to a new, better form. A more *human* form.

“As of now, the gates to the other worlds are closed. The inner planet colony ships will be redirected to existing stations in our system, and the goods they carry contributed to building the strong outer planets that we have always deserved. We no longer recognize or accept the yoke of the inner planets anywhere in the system. The moons of Saturn and Jupiter are ours by right. Pallas Station, Ceres Station, every pocket of air in the Belt

with even one human in it, all are the natural and legal property of their inhabitants. We pledge our lives to protect those people, citizens of the greater humanity, against the historical and established crimes of economy and violence they have suffered at the gun barrels of Earth and Mars.

“I am Marco Inaros. I am commander of the Free Navy. And I call upon all free men and women of the Belt to rise up now in joy and glorious resolve. The Free Navy pledges you all the safety of our protection. This day is ours. Tomorrow is ours. The future of humanity is ours. Today, and forevermore, we are free.”

On the screen, Marco Inaros lifted his hand in the Belter idiom of greeting, militarizing the motion with his precision and focus. His face was an icon of resolve and strength and masculine beauty.

“We are your arm,” he said. “And we will strike your enemies wherever they are. We are the Free Navy. Citizens of the Belt and of the new humanity, we are yours.”

A rising chord picked up and broke into a traditional Belter protest song transformed into something martial and rousing. The new anthem of an invented nation. The image faded to a split circle and then to white. The crew of the *Razorback* were quiet.

“Well,” Bobbie said. “He’s pretty. And he’s really charismatic. But, wow, that speech.”

“It probably sounded good in his head,” Alex said. “And really, when your prelude is you kill a couple billion people, anything you say is going to sound a little megalomaniacal and creepy, right?”

Smith’s voice was calm, but the dread in it carried through. “He wasn’t talking to us.” He stood in the door to the cabin, his arms stretched to brace against the frame. His amiable smile hadn’t changed, but its meaning had. “That was meant for the Belters. And what they heard in him—what they saw in him—won’t be anything like what we did. For them, he just declared victory.”

Chapter Thirty-eight: Amos

Ash sifted down, coating everything with a few millimeters of gray. Everything stank of it. They got off the road to let relief convoys go by twice, and then once when an old electric service truck whined by, its bed filled with six or seven huddled figures. They slept when it got too dark to see, hauling the bikes into the bushes or alleys. The dead guy's emergency rations tasted like crap, but they didn't seem to be toxic.

After four days, the plants along the roadside started showing signs of dying: green leaves turning brown and curving toward the earth. The birds, on the other hand, were going crazy. They filled the air with chirps and trills and songs. It was probably sparrow for *Holy shit, what's going on, we're all gonna die*, but it sounded pretty. Amos tried to keep clear of the bigger cities, but there wasn't a lot of space left in that part of the world that wasn't paved.

Passing through Harrisonburg they were followed by a dozen dogs for about ten kilometers, the pack building up its nerve to attack. He let Peaches go ahead for that part, but it never got serious enough to make him spend bullets. When they started getting in toward Baltimore, there stopped being a way to keep clear of people.

They were still about a day from the arcology, and the smell of the world had changed to salt water and rot, when they ran into the other crew. They were moving down a commercial street, the bikes making their soft chain-hiss, and he caught sight of the others in the gloom, heading toward them. Amos slowed down, but didn't stop. Peaches matched him. From the smear of light in the east, he guessed it was about ten in the morning, but the darkness still made it hard to be sure how many of them there were. Four he could see for sure. Maybe more trailing a little way behind. Hard to say.

They were smeared with ash, the same as everything. If they had weapons, Amos didn't see them. Handguns, maybe. So he had them for range if he wanted to start shooting. They were walking, so outrunning them was also an option, if it came to that. Thing was, Peaches didn't look like anywhere near the threat she was, and pretty much everyone was going to be going off appearances. It was that kind of misunderstanding that got people killed.

The other group slowed down, but didn't stop. Wary, but not disinterested. Amos stood up on his pedals.

"Peaches? How's about you hang back a little."

"Draw down on them?"

"Nah. Let's be neighbors first."

Her bike slowed and fell behind. Ahead on the street, the others made their own calculations and came to a different conclusion. All four stepped out toward Amos together, chins raised in a diffident greeting. No trouble unless there's trouble. Amos smiled amiably, and it occurred to him this was exactly the kind of situation that had taught him how to smile like that.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey." One of the four stepped closer. He was older. He moved gracefully, center of gravity low. Maybe a veteran. Maybe just someone who'd boxed some. Amos pointed his smile at the guy, then the other three. Tension crept up the back of his neck and into his shoulders. He breathed through it, forcing himself to relax. "Coming from Baltimore?"

"Monkton," the fighter said.

"Yeah? Towers or the flats?"

The fighter's mouth twitched into a little smile. "Z tower," he said.

"Zadislav," Amos said. "Had a friend lived there once. Long time ago. How is it up there?"

"It's ten thousand people in a box with no food and not much water."

"Not so great, then."

"Power supply's all fucked up. And Baltimore's worse. No offense meant, but I'd say you're heading the wrong way." The fighter licked his lips. "Nice bikes."

"They do what we need 'em to," Amos agreed. "Only gets worse south of here. We're walking away from the strike."

"Keep going south, though, it gets warm again. That's where we're

headed. Baja complex.”

One of the others cleared her throat. “I’ve got a cousin down there.”

Amos whistled between his teeth. “That’s a hell of a walk you got there.”

“Walk there or freeze here,” the fighter said. “You and your friend there ought to come with us.”

“I appreciate the invite, but we’ve got people we’re meeting up with in Baltimore.”

“You sure about that?”

“It’s more like a working hypothesis, but it’s the plan for now.”

The fighter’s gaze flickered down to the bike again, then up to Amos’ face. The man studiously avoided looking at the rifle hanging on Amos’ back. He waited to see which way they were going. The other man nodded.

“Well, good luck to you. We’re all going to need it.”

“That’s truth,” Amos said. “Tell Baja hi for me when you get there.”

“Will.”

The fighter started off down the street, the others with him. Amos loosened the strap that held the rifle, but he didn’t draw the weapon. The four walkers moved down the ash-gray road. Peaches rode up, passing them. The last in their formation turned to watch her pass, but no one made a move.

“Everything all right?” she asked.

“Sure,” Amos said. The shadows of the other crew faded into the gloom.

“Talked them out of any unpleasant actions?”

“Me? Nope. They did most of that themselves. Best defense we’ve got right now is everyone’s in the habit of not killing each other and taking their shit. Pretty soon, people are just going to start assuming anyone they don’t know is out to slit their throats. If they’re lucky.”

She looked at him. Her face was smooth, her eyes intelligent and hard. “You don’t sound upset at the prospect.”

“I’m comfortable with it.”



With every kilometer traveled they came closer to the sea and the stink of

rot and salt grew worse. They hit the high-water mark: the place where the charge of the floodwaters had broken. The line of debris was so clear and distinct it looked deliberate. A short wall made of wreckage and mortared with mud. Once they passed it, the ash was thick with mud and the roads were covered in broken wood and construction plastic, ruined clothes and waterlogged furniture, blackened plants killed by darkness and ash and salt water. And the bodies of dead people and animals that no one was going to bother cleaning up. The bikes threw up gobbets of the muddy road and they had to push harder, bearing down with all their weight, to keep the wheels spinning.

When they were still about twenty clicks from the arcology, Amos ran into a pit filled with water and covered over with a scum of ash. It bent the bicycle's front rim. He left it where it lay, and Peaches dropped hers beside it.

He was aware of voices around him. Every step of the way, they were being watched. But between having rifles and not seeming to have anything much else, no one tried to stop them. All around, the ground floors of the buildings were gutted, walls cracked by the pitiless water, and the contents of the stores and apartments and offices puked out into the streets. Some places, the second story was just as bad; some places it was better. Above that, the city seemed almost untouched. Amos kept imagining the place like it was a healthy-looking guy with exposed bone and gangrene from the ankle down.

"Something funny?" Peaches asked.

"Nope," Amos said. "I was just thinking."

The arcology was no different. It loomed up among the ruins, towering over the debris-choked streets now the way it had over the maintained streets before. The reactor that powered the vast building seemed to still be running, because lights glowed in half of the windows. If he just put his hand over the bottom layer, Amos could almost pretend the ash was snow, and all this was nothing more than the worst Christmas in history.

They trudged into the lowest level. Icy mud stuck his pants to his skin up to the knee. Glass pipes and footprints showed where people had been but there was no one standing guard. At least no one they saw.

"What if your friend's not here?" Peaches asked as Amos poked at the elevator's call button.

“Then we think of something else.”

“Any idea what?”

“Still nope.”

He was more than half-surprised when the elevator doors opened. Flood damage could have ruined the mechanism. Of course it could also get stuck halfway up, and they could die in it. When he selected the club level, the screen clicked to life. A broad-faced woman with a scar across her upper lip sneered out at him.

“The fuck you want?”

“Amos. Friend of Erich’s.”

“We got no fucking handouts.”

“Not looking for any,” Amos said. “Want to talk about a job.”

“No jobs either.”

Amos smiled. “You new at this, Butch? I have a job. I’m here to see if Erich wants in. This is the part where you go tell him there’s some psycho in the elevator wants to talk with him, then he says who is it, and you say the guy calls himself Amos, and Erich tries not to look surprised and tells you to let me up and—”

“For fuck’s sake!” Erich’s voice was distant, but recognizable. “Let him up, or he’ll talk all day.”

Butch scowled into the screen and blinked out to the blue arcology menu system. But the car started up.

“Good news is he’s here,” Amos said.

Erich’s office looked the same as the last time Amos had been in it—the same wall screen showing the same ocean view, the rubber ball instead of a chair, the desk encrusted with decks and monitors. Even Erich didn’t look different. Maybe better dressed, even. It was the context that changed it all. The screen showed an ocean of gray and white, and Erich’s clothes looked like a costume.

Butch and the four other heavily armed thugs with professional trigger discipline who’d escorted them from the elevator walked out, closing the door behind them. Erich waited until they’d gone before he spoke, but the tiny fist of his bad arm was opening and closing the way it did when he was nervous.

“Well. Amos. You’re looking more alive than I’d expected.”

“Not looking too dead yourself.”

“As I recall the way we left it, you weren’t ever coming back to my city. Open season, I called it.”

“Wait a second,” Peaches said. “He said if you came back here, he’d kill you?”

“Nah,” Amos said. “He broadly implied that one of his employees would kill me.”

Peaches hoisted an eyebrow. “Yeah, because that’s different.”

“If this is about the old man, I haven’t checked to see if he made it or not. Deal was he kept the house, and I did that. More than that, and I’ve got other problems.”

“And I got no trouble to cause,” Amos said. “I figured things had changed enough maybe the old rules weren’t a great fit for the new situation.”

Erich walked over to the wall screen, limping. A few seagulls circled, black against the colorless sky. From the last time he’d been there, Amos knew the buildings that should have provided a foreground. Most of them were still in place close in. Out toward the shoreline, things were shorter now.

“I was right here when it happened,” Erich said. “It wasn’t a wave like a wave, you know? Like a surfer wave? It was just the whole fucking ocean humping up and crawling onto shore. There’s whole neighborhoods I used to run just aren’t there now.”

“I didn’t see anything happen,” Amos said. “The newsfeeds and the mess after were bad enough.”

“Where were you?”

“Bethlehem,” Peaches said.

Erich turned back to them. There was no anger in his face, or fear, or even wariness. That was good. “So you’re headed south, then? How bad is it up there?”

“Not that Bethlehem,” Amos said. “The one in the Carolina admin district.”

“Where the Pit is,” Peaches said, raising her hand like a kid in a classroom. Then a second later, “Was.”

Erich blinked and leaned against his desk. “Where the third strike hit?”

“Close to there, yeah,” Amos said. “Lost that tequila you gave me with the hotel, so that sucked.”

“All right. How are you still alive?”

“Practice,” Amos said cheerfully. “Here’s the thing, though. I’ve got a job. Well, Peaches has a job, and I’m in. Could use some help.”

“What kind of job?” Erich asked. A sharpness and focus came into his voice, talking business. It was like watching someone wake up. Amos turned to Peaches and waved her on. She hugged stick-thin arms around her torso.

“Do you know Lake Winnepesaukee?”

Erich frowned and nodded at the same time. “The fake lake?”

“Reconstituted, yeah,” she said. “There’s an enclave on Rattlesnake Island. The whole place is walled. Independent security force. Maybe fifty estates.”

“I’m listening,” Erich said.

“They have a private launchpad built out onto the lake. The whole point of the place is that you can drop there suborbital or down from Luna or the Lagrange stations, and be walking distance from home. Everyone there has a hangar. Probably nothing with an Epstein, but something that could get us to Luna. Going through the road, you couldn’t get past the checkpoints, but there’s a way in from the water. The boathouse locks are compromised. Put in the right code, and they pop open even if the security chip’s not in range.”

“Which you know how?” Erich said.

“I used to summer there. It’s how we got in and out when we went slumming.”

Erich looked at Peaches like he wasn’t sure how she’d gotten in the room. His laugh was short and hard, but it wasn’t a no. Amos picked up the pitch. “Idea is we get in, grab a ship, and head for Luna.”

Erich sat down on the ball, his legs wide, and rolled a few centimeters back and forth, his eyes half-closed. “So what’s the score?”

“The score?” Peaches asked.

“What are we taking? Where does the money come in?”

“There isn’t any,” Peaches said.

“Then what do I get out of it?”

“You get out of here,” Amos said. “Place was kind of a shithole before someone dropped the Atlantic on it. It’s not getting better.”

Erich’s wasted, tiny left arm squeezed tight to his body. “Let me get this

straight. You've got a score where I go seven, maybe eight hundred kilometers, sneak past some private mercenary death squad, boost a ship, and the payoff is that I get to leave everyone and everything I've got here? What's next? Russian roulette where if I win, I get to keep the bullet?" His voice was high and tight. He bit the words as he spoke them. "This is my city. This is my place. I carved my life out of the fucking skin of Baltimore, and I spent a lot doing it. A lot. Now I'm supposed to put my tail between my legs and run away because some Belter fuckwit decided to prove he's got a tiny little dick and his mama didn't hug him enough when he was a kid? Fuck that! You hear me, Timmy? *Fuck* that!"

Amos looked at his hands and tried to think what to do next. His first impulse was to laugh at Erich's maudlin bullshit, but he was pretty sure that wasn't going to be a good idea. He tried to think what Naomi would have said, but before he came up with anything good, Peaches stepped toward Erich, her arms out to him like she was going to give him a hug.

"I know," she said, her voice choked with some emotion Amos didn't place.

"You *know*? What the fuck do you *know*?"

"What it's like to lose everything. How hard it is, because you keep thinking it can't really be gone. That there's a way to get it back. Or maybe if you just act like you still have it, you won't notice it's gone."

Erich's face froze. His bad hand opened and closed so fast, it looked like he was trying to snap the tiny pink fingers. "I don't know what you're talking—"

"There was this woman I knew when I went in. She killed her children. Five of them, all dead. She knew it, but she talked about them all like they were still alive. Like when she got up tomorrow, they'd be there. I thought she was a lunatic, and I guess I let that show, because she stopped me one day at the cafeteria and said, 'I know they're dead. But I know I'm dead too. You're the only bitch here thinks she's still alive.' And as soon as she said that, I knew exactly what she meant."

To Amos' astonishment, Erich started to weep and then blubber. He fell into Peaches' open arms, wrapping his good arm around her and crying into her shoulder. She stroked his hair and murmured something to him that could have been *I know, I know*. Or maybe something else. So clearly something sweet and touching had just happened, even if he wasn't clear

what the fuck it was. Amos shifted from one foot to the other and waited. Erich's wracking sobs grew more violent and then started to calm. It must have been fifteen minutes before the man pulled himself out of Peaches' embrace, limped to his desk, and found some tissue to blow his nose.

"I grew up here," he said, his voice shaking. "Everything I've ever done—every meal I ever ate, every toilet I ever pissed in, every girl I ever rolled around with? It's all been inside the 695." For a second, it looked like he was going to cry again. "I've seen things come and go. I've seen shit times turn into normal and turn back to shit, and keep telling myself this is like that. It's just the churn. But it's not, is it?"

"No," Peaches said. "It isn't. This is something new."

Erich turned back to the screen, touching it with the fingertips of his good hand. "That's my city out there. It's a mean, shitty place, and it'll break anyone who pretends different. But... but it's gone, isn't it?"

"Probably," Peaches said. "But starting over's not always bad. Even the way I did it had some light in it. And what you've got is better than what I had."

Erich bowed his head. His sigh sounded like something bigger than him being released. Peaches took his good hand in both of hers and the two of them were silent for a long moment.

Amos cleared his throat. "So. That means you're in, right?"

Chapter Thirty-nine: Naomi

She didn't have days. Hours maybe. For all she knew, minutes. And the plan still had holes in it.

She sat in the mess, hunched over a bowl of bread pudding. People passed through from the crew quarters, some wearing Martian uniforms, some their normal clothes, a few in a new Free Navy uniform, but the other tables stayed empty apart from her and Cyn. Before she'd been almost crew. Now she was a prisoner, and as a prisoner, her schedule had changed. She'd eat when other people weren't eating; she'd exercise when other people weren't exercising; she'd sleep in the dark with her door locked from the outside.

She was grateful for it. She needed the quiet of her own mind now, and strangely, she felt comfortable there. Something had happened in the last days. She couldn't put her finger on when or how, but the dark thoughts had either vanished or else grown so vast she couldn't see their horizons. She didn't think she was crazy. She had felt her mind fishtailing out from under her one time and another in her life, and this was very different. She understood she might die, that Jim might die, that Marco might sail from success to success, that Filip might never forgive or even understand her. And she could tell that all of those facts mattered to her, and mattered deeply. But they didn't overwhelm her. Not anymore.

The umbilical linking the ships was fifty meters at full extension. Not even as wide as a soccer field. The link between the ships was between the cargo-level airlocks, where it was easier to access engineering and move supplies, which left the crew-level airlocks unused. There were EVA suits in the lockers there. With a strip of welding tape or a crowbar, she could get one in only a couple of minutes. Get into the suit, out the *Pella's* airlock,

force the airlock on the *Chetzemoka* all in the time between the drives cutting off and the *Chetzemoka* firing her maneuvering thrusters. There were no calculations for it. It would be very, very close, but she thought it was possible. And since it was possible, it was necessary.

There were problems, of course, that needed solving. For one thing she didn't have welding tape or a crowbar, and with her escorts now treating her as untrustworthy, her opportunity to steal either while running an inventory was gone. Second, once Marco saw she'd taken an EVA suit and made the jump, she had no way to keep him from firing a missile at the *Chetzemoka*. Or worse, finding some way to disable the proximity trap and come back for her. If she could get a suit on the sly, though, so that the inventory said they still had a full complement, they might think she'd killed herself. If she was dead, she posed no threat. She knew the inventory system well enough, she thought she could force an update. She knew she could, given enough time and access. But she only had hours. Maybe hours. Maybe less.

A familiar, sharp voice came from the screen where a newsfeed was still playing to the empty room. "Secretary-General Gao was more than the leader of my government. She was also a close personal friend, and I will miss her company deeply."

Avasarala's expression was careful, composed. Even through the screen and a couple hundred thousand kilometers, she radiated certainty and calm. Naomi knew it might all be an act, but if it was, it was a good act. The reporter was a young man with close-cut dark hair who leaned forward and tried to look up to the task of interviewing her. "The other casualties of the war have—"

"No," Avasarala said. "Not war. Not casualties. These aren't casualties. They're murders. This isn't a war. Marco Inaros can claim to be an admiral in command of a great navy if he wants. I can claim to be the f—Buddha. That doesn't make it true. He's a criminal with a lot of stolen ships and more innocent blood on his hands than anyone in history. He's a monstrous little boy."

Naomi took another bite of bread pudding. Whatever they used to make the raisins wasn't convincing, but it didn't taste bad. For a moment, her thoughts weren't on welding tape and inventory cheats.

"So you don't consider this an act of war?"

"War by who? War is a conflict between governments, yes? What sort of

government does he represent? When was he elected? Who appointed him? Now, after the fact, he's scrambling to say he represents Belters. So what? Any petty thug in his position would want to call it war because it makes him sound serious."

The reporter looked like he'd swallowed something sour and unexpected. "I'm sorry. Are you saying this attack isn't *serious*?"

"This attack is the greatest tragedy in human history," Avasarala said, her voice deep and throbbing. She dominated the screen. "But it was carried out by shortsighted, narcissistic criminals. They want a war? Too bad. They get an arrest, processing, and a fair trial with whatever lawyer they can afford. They want the Belt to rise up so they can hide behind the good, decent people who live there? Belters aren't thugs, and they aren't murderers. They are men and women who love their children the same as any of us. They are good and evil and wise and foolish and *human*. And this 'Free Navy' will never be able to kill enough people to make Earth forget that shared humanity. Let the Belt consult its own conscience, and you'll see compassion and decency and kindness flourish in any gravity or none. Earth has been bloodied, but we will *not* be debased. Not on my fucking watch."

The old woman sat back in her seat, her eyes fiery and defiant. The reporter glanced into the camera and then back to his notes. "The relief effort on Earth is, of course, a massive undertaking."

"It is," she said. "We have reactors in every major city on the planet running at top efficiency to provide power for—"

The screen went blank. Cyn put his hand terminal down on the table with an angry click. Naomi looked up at him from behind her hair.

"Esá bitch needs sa yutak cut," Cyn said. His face was dark with rage. "Lesson á totas like her, yeah?"

"For for?" Naomi said, shrugging. "Kill her, and another one will take her place. She's good at what she does, but even if you did slit her throat, there'd just be someone else in the same chair saying the same things."

Cyn shook his head. "Not like that."

"Close by."

"No," he said, his chin jutting a centimeter forward. "Not like that. Alles la about big social movements y ages of history y sa? Stories they make up later so it makes sense. Not like that, not real. It's people do things. Marco.

Filipito. You. Me.”

“You say so,” Naomi said.

“Esá coyo on Mars who traded us for all the ships and told us where to find supplies? He’s not ‘Martian economic despair’ o ‘rising debt ratios’ o ‘income and access inequality.’ ” With each pretentious invented term, Cyn wagged his finger like a professor lecturing a class, and it was funny enough that Naomi chuckled. He blinked at the sound, and then smiled a little shyly. “La coyo la is just some coyo. He’s a man made a deal with a man who talked up some otras, and we did things. Who people are, it matters, yeah? Can’t replace them.”

His gaze was on her now, not a professor lecturing a class, but Cyn lecturing her. She scooped the last bite of pudding into her mouth. “Get the feeling you’re saying something,” she said around it. Cyn looked down, gathered himself. She could see the effort more than she could understand it.

“Filipito, he needs you. No sabez la, but he does. You and Marco are you and Marco, but no you take the coward’s out.”

Her heart jumped a little. He thought she was in despair, that she might give in to the dark thoughts. She wondered what brought him to the conclusion, and whether it was a mistake he was making or something he could see in her that she couldn’t. She swallowed. “You telling me not to kill myself?”

“Be a bad thing to say?”

She stood up, her soiled bowl in her hand. He rose with her, following as she headed for the recycler. The weight of her body was reassuring. There was still time. They hadn’t cut the drives yet. She could still figure her way over. “What should I do, then?”

It was Cyn’s turn to shrug. “Come with. Be Free Navy. We go where they need us, do what needs doing. Help where they need help, yeah? Already eight colony ships on target.”

“Target for what?”

“Redistribué, yeah? Alles la food and supplies they got heading out for the Ring? Más a anyone ever gave the Belt. Take that, feed the Belt, build the Belt. See what es vide when we’re not scrabbling for air y ejection mass. Gardens in the vacuum. Cities make Tycho Station look some rock hopper’s head. New world without a world to it, yeah? None of this alien

bok. Blow the Ring. Burn it. Get back to people being people, yeah?”

Two women walked by, heads bent toward each other in passionate conversation. The nearer one glanced up, then away, then back. There was venom in her gaze. Hatred. The contrast was stark. On one hand, Cyn’s vision of a future where Belters were free of the economic oppression of the inner planets—of the central axioms that had formed everything in Naomi’s childhood. In her life. Civilization built by them and for them, a remaking of human life. And on the other, actual Belters actually hating her because she had dared to act against them. Because she wasn’t Belter enough. “Where does it end, Cyn? Where does it all end?”

“Doesn’t. Not if we do it right.”



There was nothing in her cabin that could help her, but since she was confined there and alone, it was where she searched. Hours. Not days.

The crash couch was bolted to the deck with thick steel and reinforced ceramic canted so that any direction the force came from was compression on one leg or another. Any individual strut might have been usable as a pry bar, but she didn’t have any way to unbolt the couch or break one free. So not that. The drawers were thinner metal, the same gauge, more or less, as the lockers. She pulled them out as far as they would open, examining the construction of the latches, the seams where the metal had been folded, searching for clues or inspiration. There was nothing.

The tiny black thumb of the decompression kit, she kept tucked at her waist, ready to go if she could just find a way. She felt the time slipping away, second by second, as she came up blank. She had to find a way. She would find a way. The *Chetzemoka* was so close to still be too far away.

If she didn’t try to go when they pulled the umbilical? If she could sneak across now and hide there until they separated... If she could get to the armory instead, and maybe find a demolition mech that could act as an environment suit... or that she could use to cut through the bulkheads fast enough that no one shot her in the back of the head...

“Think,” she said. “Don’t spin and whine. Think.”

But nothing came.

When she slept, it was for thin slips of minutes. She couldn't afford a deep sleep for fear of waking to find the *Chetzemoka* gone. And she lay on the ground with her hand clutching the base of the crash couch so that it would tug her awake if they went on the float.

What would Alex do? What would Amos do? What would Jim do? What would she do? Nothing came to her. She waited for despair, the darkness, the sense of overwhelming failure, and didn't understand why it didn't come. There was every reason to be devastated, but she wasn't. Instead there was only the certainty that if the dark thoughts did return, they would come in such strength that she wouldn't stand a chance against them. Oddly, even that was comforting.

When she knocked to go to the head, Sárta opened the door. Not that it mattered. She followed Naomi down the hall, then waited outside. The head didn't have anything of use either, but Naomi took her time in case inspiration came. The mirror was polished alloy built into the wall. No help there. If she could take apart the vacuum fans in the toilet...

She heard voices from the other side of the door. Sárta and someone else. The words were too soft to make out. She finished washing her hands, dropped the towelette in the recycler, and stepped into the corridor. Filip looked over at her. It was her son, and she hadn't recognized his voice.

"Filip," she said.

"Cyn said you wanted to talk to me," Filip said, landing the words equally as question and accusation.

"Did he now? That was kind of him."

She hesitated. Her hands itched with the need to find some way to put her hands on an EVA suit, but something in the back of her mind whispered *If they think you're alive, they'll come for you*. Anger and diffidence made the planes and angles of Filip's face. Cyn already thought she was bent on self-slaughter. It was why he'd sent Filip.

Her belly went heavy almost before she understood why. If Filip thought it too, if when she went missing, her son went to Marco and stood witness to her suicidal bent, it would be easier to believe. They might not even check to see if a suit was missing.

"Do you want to talk here in the hallway?" she said, her lips heavy, her mouth slow. "I have a little place nearby. Not spacious, but there's some privacy."

Filip nodded once, and Naomi turned down the hall, Sárta and Filip following her. She rehearsed lines in her mind. *I'm so tired that I just want it to be over* and *What I do to myself isn't your fault* and *I can't take it anymore*. There were a thousand ways to convince him that she was ready to die. But beneath those, the heaviness in her gut thickened and settled. The manipulation was cruel and it was cold. It was her own child, the child she'd lost, and she was going to use him. Lie to him so well that what he told Marco would be indistinguishable from truth. So that when she disappeared to the *Chetzemoka*, they would assume she'd killed herself, and not come after her. Not until it was too late.

She could do it. She couldn't do it. She could.

In the cabin, she sat on the couch, her legs folded up under her. He leaned against the wall, his mouth tight, his chin high. She wondered what he was thinking. What he wanted and feared and loved. She wondered if anyone had ever asked him.

I can't take it anymore, she thought. *Just say I can't take it anymore*.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know," she said. "I worry about you."

"Not so much you wouldn't betray me," he said, and that untied the knot. Yes, if she lied to him, it would be betraying him, and for all her failures, she'd never done that. She could. She could do it. It wasn't that she was powerless before the decision; it was that she chose not to.

"The warning I sent?"

"I have dedicated my life to the Belt, to freeing the Belters. And after we did everything we could to keep you safe, you spat in our faces. Do you love your Earther boyfriend that much more than your own kind? Is that it?"

Naomi nodded. It was like hearing all the things Marco was too polished to say out loud. There was real feeling behind them in a way she would never hear from Marco. Maybe never had. He'd soaked up all his father's lines, only where Marco's soul was safe and unreachable in its deep self-centered cyst, Filip was still raw. The pain that she had not only left him, but left him for a man from Earth lit his eyes. *Betrayal* wasn't too strong a word.

"My own kind," she said. "Let me tell you about my own kind. There

are two sides in this, but they aren't inner planets and outer ones. Belters and everyone else. It's not like that. It's the people who want more violence and the ones who want less. And no matter what other variable you sample out of, you'll find some of both.

"I was harsh to you the day the rocks dropped. But I meant everything I said. Your father and I are now and always were on different sides. We will never, ever be reconciled. But I think despite everything, you can still choose whichever side you'd like. Even now, when it seems like you've done something that can't be redeemed, you can choose what it means to you."

"This is shit," he said. "You're shit. You're an Earth-fucking whore, and always have been. You're a camp follower, looking to sleep your way into anybody's bed who seems important. Your whole life's that. You're nothing!"

She folded her hands. Everything he said was so wrong it didn't even sting. It was like he was calling her a terrier. All she could think of it was, *These are the last words you're going to say to your mother. You will regret them for the rest of your life.*

Filip turned, pulled open the door.

"You deserved better parents," she said as he slammed it behind him. She didn't know if he'd heard.

Chapter Forty: Amos

Between walking and biking, scrounging up food, and picking a route that avoided the dense populations around the Washington administrative zone, the seven-hundred-odd kilometers between Bethlehem and Baltimore had taken them almost two weeks. The four-hundred-odd clicks from the arcology to Lake Winnepesaukee took a couple hours. Erich sent out Butch—whose name was something else that Amos couldn't remember even after they told him—and two others, then sent him and Peaches to wait in another room while he had some conversations.

Twenty minutes later, Amos and Peaches and Erich and ten men and women were standing on the roof of the arcology loading into a pair of transport helicopters with the Al Abbiq Security logo on the side. Erich didn't say if they were stolen or if he'd been paying off the security force, and Amos didn't ask. Pretty much an academic issue at that point.

The landscape they passed over was bleak. The ash fall had slowed, but not stopped. The sun was a ruddy smear on the western horizon. Below them, cities bled into each other without so much as a tree or a swath of grass between them. Most of the windows were empty. The streets and highways were filled with cars, but few of them were moving. They swung out to the east as they passed by New York City. The great seawall had been shattered, and the streets flooded like canals. Several of the great towers had fallen, leaving holes in the skyline.

"Where is everyone?" Peaches shouted over the chop of the rotors.

"They're there," Erich shouted back, gesturing with his bad arm and holding on to the strap with his good. "They're all there. It's just there's not as many as there were last week. And more than there are going to be."

Over Boston, someone fired a missile toward them from the roof of a

commercial shopping district, and the copters shot it down. The sky to the east was the low bruise-dark that made Amos think of storm clouds. In the west, the sunset was the color of blood.

“We gonna have trouble with the rotors icing up?” Amos asked the pilot, but he didn’t get an answer.

They set down at an airfield a few klicks south of the lake, but Amos got a look before they landed: low hills holding the water like it was being cupped in a massive palm. There were maybe a dozen islands scattered across the lake, some as crowded with buildings as the shore, others with little tame forests if someone rich enough for the luxury lived there. The landing platform was a square of floating ceramic with red and amber lights still blinking for visual landings.

When they actually got to the water’s edge, it wasn’t as pretty. The water stank of dead fish and a coating of ash lay across the surface like someone had sifted chalk dust over the whole place. Erich’s people waded in up to their thighs and dropped three packages that unfolded into hard, black pontoon boats. By the time they started toward the enclave on Rattlesnake Island, the sky was a perfect black. No stars, no moon, no backslash of light pollution. The night was like sticking his head in a sack.

They spun to the north side of the island where a wide bridge on a coated steel pier ran out toward the launching pad. Hangars and boathouses encrusted the shore, boxes for the toys of the wealthy as big as basic housing blocks for a thousand people. The pontoon boat they were in surged forward over the chop of the water. The boathouse they chose was painted bright blue, but outside the circles of their lights, it could have been anything. It only took a minute to find the keypad on a pole that poked up from the dark water. Peaches leaned over, stretched her thin arm, and tapped out a series of numbers. For a second, it looked like it hadn’t worked, then the boathouse doors silently rose and automatic lights came on. The interior was all wood paneling, rich red cedar, and enough room for a tennis court. An angry barking came out from the darkness as they steered inside.

A wolfhound stood on the deck of a little powerboat, its paws on the rail. The pontoon boats snugged up in the space next to the powerboat. Amos hauled himself up and the wolfhound darted toward him, growling and snarling. It was a beautiful animal, genetically engineered, he figured, for the gloss of its fur and the graceful lines of its face.

“Hey there,” Amos said, squatting down to its level. “Someone didn’t bother taking you along when they left, huh? That shit’s gotta suck.”

The dog shied back, uncertain and frightened.

“How about this,” Amos said. “Don’t start anything with us, we won’t shoot you.”

“It doesn’t talk,” Erich said as the dog retreated, barking over its shoulder.

“How do you know? Assholes with this much money, maybe they put some kind of translator into its brain.”

“They can’t do that,” Erich said, then turned to Peaches. “They can’t, can they?”

“This is the Cook estate,” Peaches said. “Darwa and Khooni lived here. I used to sleep over on Wednesday nights in the summer.” She shuddered a little and Amos cocked his head. “It’s a long time since I’ve been here. It seems like it should have changed more.”

“You know how to get to their hangar?” Erich asked.

“I do.”

But when they got there, the space was empty. When they crossed the broad gravel yard to the next hangar over—the Davidovics’—it was empty too. The third one didn’t have a ship, but it did have a dozen people. They stood in the center of the space with handguns and the kind of cheap suppression sprays they sold over the counter at grocery stores. The man in front was maybe fifty with graying hair and the beginnings of a new beard.

“You, all of you, stay back!” the man yelled as Amos and Butch and three more came in through the side door. “This is private property!”

“Oh, it belongs to you?” Butch sneered. “This all your place?”

“We work for the Quartermans. We have a right to be here.” The man waggled his handgun. “You, all of you, get out!”

Amos shrugged. Another half dozen of Erich’s people had come in, most of them with assault rifles held calmly at their sides. The servants were all huddled together in the middle of the room. If they’d had any skill or practice, there would have been two or three snipers up in the rafters, ready to start picking the bad guys off while these folks kept their attention low, but Amos didn’t see anyone. “I kinda don’t think the Quartermans are coming back. We’re going to take some of their stuff. But anything we can’t use, you should feel welcome to.”

The man's face hardened, and Amos got ready for there to be a lot of dead people. But before Erich's people lifted their guns, Peaches interrupted.

"You're... you're Stokes, right?" The front man—Stokes, apparently—lowered the gun, confused as Peaches stepped forward. "It's me. Clarissa Mao."

"Miss Clarissa?" Stokes blinked. The gun wavered. He heard Butch mutter "Fucking seriously?" under her breath, but no one started firing. "Miss Clarissa! What are you doing here?"

"Trying to leave," Peaches said, with a laugh in her voice. "What are you here for?"

Stokes smiled at her, and then nervously at Amos and Erich and all the others, shining his teeth at them like the beam from a deeply insecure lighthouse. "The evacuation order came when the second rock came down. The Quartermans all left. Took the ship, and gone. They all went. The Cooks, the Falkners, old man Landborn. Everyone, they took their ships and left. Told us the security would keep us safe until relief came. But there's no relief, and the security? They're thugs. They tell us we have to pay them since the Quartermans are gone, but what do we have?"

"All the Quartermans' shit," Amos said. "Which brings me back to my first point."

"Are there any ships?" Peaches said. "We need a ship. Just to get us to Luna. That's why we came here."

"Yes. Yes, of course. The Bergavins left the *Zhang Guo*. It is in their hangar. We can take you there, Miss Clarissa, but—"

A sharp whistle came from the side door. From the street outside it. Butch met Amos' gaze. "Company," she said.

The streets on the island were wide. Roomy. Big enough to haul a ship down to the bridge. The security patrol car had the claw-and-eye logo of Pinkwater. Its headlights cut a wide cone through the darkness. Erich stood with his good hand up to shield his eyes. Two men were swaggering up toward him.

"Well now," the first man said. "What have we got here?"

Erich backed away, limping. "No trouble, sir," he said.

"How about if I determine that," the lead man said. "Get on the fucking ground." He had a cowboy hat on and his hand on the butt of his pistol.

Amos smiled. The warmth in his belly and his arms was the same kind he got when he heard a familiar song after a long time. It was just pleasant. “I said get on the ground you crippled sonofabitch! You do it now, or I’ll fuck your fucking eyeholes!”

“Peaches?” Amos called as he strode out into the light. The two security men drew their pistols and pointed them at him. “Hey, Peaches, you back there?”

“Yes?” she said. It sounded like she was in the side door. That was fine. He saw the pair of security men clock the rest of Erich’s people in the gloom. They were mostly silhouetted, but their bodies went tense. Always a bad moment, seeing you brought a knife to a gunfight.

“See, this is what I was talking about,” Amos called. “Things start falling apart, and the tribes get small. These guys, probably good upstanding folks when there’s a boss to answer to. Clients. Shareholders.” He turned to the man in the hat and grinned amiably. “Hey,” he said.

“Um. Hey,” Hat said.

Amos nodded and called back toward the hangar. “Thing is you take that away, they’re guys with guns. They *act* like guys with guns. Do guys-with-guns stuff. Right?”

“I follow you,” Peaches said.

“You should put your guns down,” Amos said to Hat. “We’ve got just a shitload more of them than you do. So really.”

“You heard the man,” Butch said. “Guns on the ground, please.”

The security men glanced at each other.

“We could have just shot you,” Amos said. As Hat and his partner slowly lowered their guns to the pavement, Amos raised his voice again. “So Peaches, these guys? They go from being protectors of this big tribe with what’s-his-name and them inside the tribe to being protectors of their own little tribe, and those folks on the outside of it. It’s all about who’s in and who’s out.”

Hat lifted his hands, palms out, about shoulder high. Amos hit him in the jaw. It was a solid punch, and his knuckles ached from it. Hat staggered back, and Amos stepped forward twisting his body into the kick. It landed on Hat’s left kneecap and the man screamed.

“Thing is,” Amos called, “most of us don’t got room in our lives for more than six”—he straight-kicked Hat in the middle of the back as he tried

to stand up—“maybe seven people. You get bigger than that, you got to start telling stories about it.”

Hat was crawling back toward the car. Amos put his knee on the man's back, leaned down, and started emptying Hat's pockets and belt. Chemical mace. A Taser. A wallet with ID cards. A two-way radio. He found the unregistered drop gun strapped to the guy's ankle. Each thing he took, he threw out to the edge of the water, listening for the splash. Hat was weeping, and Amos' weight made it hard for him to breathe. The other one was standing perfectly still, like if he didn't move Amos wouldn't notice him. Wasn't like he had a better strategy at this point.

Amos grinned at him. “Hey.”

The guy didn't say anything.

“It's okay,” Amos said. “You didn't say you were gonna skullfuck my friends, right?”

“Right,” the other one said.

“Okay, then.” Amos stood up. “You should probably get him to a doctor. And then whoever else you've got on this shithole of an island, tell them what I did, and how I didn't fuck you up because you hadn't fucked with me. Okay?”

“All right.”

“Great. And then don't come back around here.”

“I won't.”

“We won't,” Amos said. “You mean we won't. Not you and not your tribe.”

“We won't.”

“Perfect. No problems, then. And give Butch your stuff, all right? Drop gun too.”

“Yes, sir.”

Amos walked back toward the hangar. Sure enough, Peaches was standing in the doorway, her arms crossed. He wiped his hand. His knuckles were bleeding.

“See, that's what civilization is,” he said. “Bunch of stories. That's all.”

“So what if it is?” Peaches said. “We're really good at telling stories. Everything just turned to shit, and we're already finding ways to put it back together. Stokes and the other servants were ready to fight us or get killed, but then I knew his name and he remembered me, and now there's a story

where he wants to help us. You go out there and you send a message about how those guys should leave us alone. All of us. More than just six or seven. And, side note here, you know the Pinkwater guys are going to come back and try to kill you for that, right?”

“Just need ’em to take a long time gearing up,” Amos said. “Figure we’ll be off the ground by then.”

Stokes leaned in from behind Peaches, his expression apologetic. “About that? There is a small problem.”



The hangar was as tall as a cathedral, and the *Zhang Guo* stood in the middle of it like a piece of gargantuan art. The surface of the ship was worked to look like gold-and-silver filigree over a body of lapis. The drive cones had golden ideograms written on them in something that looked like gold but apparently didn’t melt at high temperature. He could tell from looking it didn’t have an Epstein drive. Twice as big as the *Rocinante* and maybe—*maybe*—a quarter as functional, it was as much an orbital shuttle as it was a confession of decadence.

And, more to the point, it didn’t run.

“The house power supplies are exhausted,” Stokes explained. “Without power, there’s no water recyclers. No heat. No network connections.”

“So,” Amos said. “You figured the smart move was to get a bunch of people who’ve never seen a working fusion drive to just fire one up so you could top off the batteries? That’s the kind of suicidal optimism you just don’t see every day.”

Stokes shrugged. “The ship was here only because it needed repair. We were never able to make it run.”

Amos clapped the man on the shoulder. “You just go get me all the tools you were using. This is something I know how to do.”

Stokes trotted away, shouting to the others from his group. Erich’s people seemed to be equally divided between setting up a defensive perimeter and looking for the most expensive things that would fit in their pockets. Erich and Peaches came to stand beside him.

“How fucked are we?” Erich said.

“Don’t know,” Amos said. “First guess, there’s something hinky with the power supply. Too much noise. A bad coupler. Something that’s triggering the safety shutdown. But I’ve got to get between her hulls and take a peek.”

“I’ll help you ring the circuits,” Peaches said. Erich looked over at her, confused. “I spent a few months as an electrochemical technician,” she said.

“Well of fucking course you did,” Erich said.

“You bring a deck?” Amos asked.

“Sure,” Erich said. “Why?”

Amos pointed at the drive cone with his chin. “You can get the diagnostics running, and I can tell you what the output means.”

Erich frowned and scratched his neck thoughtfully with his tiny arm. “Sure. Figure I can do that.”

Peaches coughed once, then chuckled. “Erich? Did you ever, you know, *kill* anyone?”

“I run a drug empire in Baltimore,” Erich said. “Of course I’ve killed someone. Why?”

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s just here we are, three murderers, and what’s going to save our asses if anything does is that we happen to have the skill set to repair a fusion drive.”

Erich smiled. “We are kind of well suited to this, aren’t we?”

“Well, we’d better set up some lookouts while we do it, though,” Amos said. “My plan to get out of here before trouble comes back may not work out.”

“I can have Stokes help with that too,” Peaches said. “They can’t fight, but they can watch. And I can get a few of the savvy ones to help us put the ship together if you want.”

“More the merrier,” Amos said. “Long as they don’t touch anything unless we tell them.”

“When we go, are we taking them with us?” Peaches asked.

“Yup,” Amos said.

She smirked. “Because they’re tribe?”

“Shit no. My tribe is the crew on the *Roci*, maybe you two, and a dead woman. I don’t actually give a shit if every damned one of ’em dies.”

“So why take them?”

One of Erich’s people called out. Another one laughed, and one of the

servants tentatively joined in. Amos rubbed the raw spots on his knuckles and shrugged. “Seems like the sort of thing Holden’d do.”

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Chapter Forty-one: Naomi

Naomi lifted the handles of the resistance machine over her head then let them slowly down. Sárta sat on the box of resistance gel and watched her like someone a little bit bored at a zoo. Naomi didn't care. They didn't talk. For every purpose but the ones that mattered most, Naomi was alone.

The trick, she'd decided, was not to remove just one EVA suit, but all of them. Corrupt the data, and no one would know whether she'd taken something or not. But if she only broke the inventory for the suits, that would be telling too. She lifted the handles. The muscles in her arms and shoulders ached. She let the handles down, savoring the pain. If she could get one of the scanners she'd used before, she might be able to feed false data into the system. Fill it with a few thousand phantoms. A million EVA suits filling every square centimeter of the ship. Then even if she couldn't erase the data, she could render it useless. The problem was—

The warning Klaxon sounded. Naomi's heart sank into her belly. They were preparing to go to free fall. She was out of time. She wasn't ready. Outside the ship right now, the umbilical was still in place. As soon as it was hauled in, the *Pella* and the *Chetzemoka* would peel apart, and all her fragile hopes would die. She let the handles drop. The cable pulled them back into place, ready for the next person.

She wasn't ready. She wasn't going to *be* ready. It didn't mean she wouldn't try.

She walked the few steps to the resistance gel and nodded at the guard. "Going to the head."

"Just been, you."

"Going again," she said, turning away.

"Hell you are. Hey!" Naomi pretended to ignore the woman, listening as

she scrambled down to come after her. She'd been a model prisoner up to now, and the defiance took Sárta by surprise. Well, it was meant to. The warning sounded again, and the count. Zero g in three. Two. Naomi put both hands on the doorframe. One. Up and down vanished, and she pulled her body into a tight curl and exploded out toward Sárta. Both her feet hit the guard in the belly, sending her back through the wide empty air of the room. She grabbed Naomi's left shoe, prying it off as she spun away. It would take her seconds to reach the other side of the room and something to push against. That was her head start. Sárta was already shouting.

Naomi flipped herself through the hatch, then down the hall, too fast for safety. She had minutes. She had less than minutes. Had she really thought she could pry open a locker, pull on a suit, and cycle the airlock? The math had worked at the time. She couldn't imagine it now.

Sárta was somewhere behind her, shouting. Raising the alarm. But Naomi was already around the corner. With sight lines broken, Sárta would have to guess where she'd gone. With luck, it would buy her a few more seconds. She only needed seconds. She only had them. The crew airlock was closed. She cycled the inner door open, then started pulling at lockers. If someone—anyone—had slipped up. Left one unlocked. The metal clanked and rattled under her fingertips as she tugged and tugged and tugged. Was the umbilical unhooked yet? Were they pulling it in? It seemed like they must be.

There were voices raised from down the hallway. Men and women shouting. One of them was Sárta. Another one was Cyn. She felt herself sobbing and ignored it. She couldn't fail. She couldn't. Not this time. Not now.

For a sickening second, she didn't feel the decompression kit at her waist. She slapped the place where it had been pressed against her skin, and it was there. If she could just get a *suit*. She tried another locker. Her heart skipped as it opened. A simple EVA suit hung there, suspended in the null g by thin bands of elastic. She reached for it.

She stopped.

They'll know the suit is missing, a small voice said in the back of her mind. *They'll know where you've gone. They'll come after you.*

Her breath was heavy and fast, her heart racing. The thing she'd been trying not to think for the last hours came to the front of her mind like an

old friend. *Fewer than fifty meters. It isn't far. You can make it.*

She closed the locker. The inner door of the airlock was open now. She launched herself toward it, forcing herself to pant. To hyperoxygenate. She couldn't tell if the dizziness she felt was from too much oxygen or a kind of existential vertigo. She was really going to do this. Naked in the void. She braced her palms against the outer door of the lock. She expected it to be cold. That it was the same temperature as any decking seemed wrong.

Fifty meters in hard vacuum. Maybe less. Maybe it was possible. She couldn't depressurize first. The long seconds matching the airlock to the outer nothingness would take more time than she had. She'd have to blow it out. Full pressure to nothing in a fraction of a second. If she held her breath, it would pop her lungs. She would have to blow herself empty first, let the void into her. All around her heart. Even if it worked, it would do her damage.

She could handle that.

The voices were loud and getting louder. Someone shouted, "Find the fucking bitch!" Cyn sloped in past the lockers. His eyes widened. Sárta was behind him. *Good, she thought. Perfect. Let them see.* The indicator went from green to red under her thumb. Cyn launched across the room with a wordless cry as the inner door started to close. For a moment, she thought he wouldn't make it, but his hands caught the edge of the door and hauled himself through. She tried to push him back, but he forced his way in.

The airlock door closed behind him, the magnetic seals clacking. Naomi held the handhold by the control panel, waiting for him to hit her. To kick. To put her in a chokehold. The lock was small enough he could put flat palms on both doors. She couldn't get away from him if he attacked, but he didn't. On the other side of the door, Sárta was shouting. Naomi thumbed the emergency override. Three options appeared: OPEN SHIP DOOR, OPEN OUTER DOOR, RETURN TO CYCLE.

"Knuckles, no you hagas eso." His hands were spread before him, wide and empty. "Bist bien. Bist bien alles."

"What are you doing?" Naomi said, surprised to hear the pain in her voice. "Why did you do that?"

"Because you my people, yeah? We're Belt. Born on the float. You, me. Alles la." Tears were welling up in his eyes, waves sheeting over pupil and

iris with no gravity to fight the surface tension. “We travel so far, vide—uns the promised land. And we go all of us together. Tu y mé y alles.”

“You aren’t saving me,” she said.

The big man crossed his arms. “Then I’m die trying. You’re my people. We look out for each other. Take care. Not going to stand by while you die. Won’t.”

She should have been panting, forcing oxygen into her blood. She should have been flying across the emptiness. Cyn floated, turning slowly clockwise a degree at a time, his lips pressed tight, daring her to deny him. Daring her not to see that she was loved here, that she had family here, that she belonged.

Someone hit the inner door of the lock. The voices were louder. More numerous. Naomi knew she could open the door, but if she did, Cyn wouldn’t be the only one going out it. If he’d wanted to, he could have beaten her down by now. That he hadn’t meant he’d chosen not to. Naomi’s heart felt trapped between stones. She couldn’t blow the door. She had to. She couldn’t kill Cyn. She couldn’t save him. *Whatever you do now*, she thought, *you will regret it forever*. Seconds passed.

Another voice. Filip on the other side of the airlock door. She could hear him shouting, telling her to open the door. He sounded frantic.

How the hell did she keep getting into these situations?

“Be strong,” Cyn said. “For Filipito, be *strong*.”

“Okay,” she said. She pushed her jaw forward in a yawn, opening her throat and her Eustachian tubes. Cyn yelped as she hit OPEN OUTER DOOR. Air tugged at her once, hard, as it evacuated. Adrenaline flooded her blood as she was assaulted invisibly on every square centimeter of flesh. The breath in her lungs rushed out of her, trying to pull her lungs along with it. Cyn grabbed at the airlock frame to keep himself inside, spun, screaming, was gone.

With her lungs empty, there was no reserve. She wasn’t holding her breath, surviving off the gas held inside her. Someone could hold their breath for a couple minutes. In the vacuum, she could make it maybe fifteen seconds unaided.

One thousand one. Naomi shifted, hand over hand, to brace against the inner door and look out. The void was there, the great dome of stars. The

Chetzemoka glowed in sunlight brighter than the Earth had ever seen. The umbilical hung to her left, too bright to look at directly and more than halfway retracted. Her ribs ached; her eyes ached. Her diaphragm tugged at her gut, trying to inflate lungs squeezed to knots. If she'd had an EVA suit, it would have had attitude thrusters. Without them, she had one chance and no time to think about it. *One thousand two.* She launched.

For a moment, she saw Cyn in the corner of her eye, a flicker of pale movement. The sun was below her, vast and bright. Radiant heat pressed against her throat and face. The Milky Way spread out, arching across the endless sky. Carbon dioxide built up in her blood; she could feel it in the burning drive to breathe. The *Chetzemoka* grew slowly larger. *One thousand five.* Shadows streaked its side, every protrusion and rivet cutting the sunlight into strips of darkness. Everything fell slightly out of focus as her eyes deformed. The stars shifted from diamond points of light to halos to clouds, like the whole universe dissolving. She'd thought it would be silent, but she heard her heartbeat like someone hammering in the next deck.

If I die here, she thought, at least it's beautiful. This would be a lovely way to die. One thousand eight.

The lines of the *Chetzemoka's* airlock became clear enough to make out. Without magnetic boots, she'd have to reach it with bare handholds, but she was close. She was almost there. The world began to narrow, lights going out in her peripheral vision even as the bright ship grew larger. Passing out. She was passing out. She plucked the black thumb out of her belt, twisted it to expose the needle, and slammed it into her leg. *One thousand ten.*

A coldness spread through her, but the colors came back as the sip of hyperoxygenated blood poured through her. An extra bit of breath without having the luxury of breathing out first. The airlock indicator on the *Chetzemoka's* skin blinked, the emergency response received, the cycle starting. The ship loomed up. She was going to hit, and she couldn't afford to bounce. She put her hands out fingers first, and prepared to crumple as she struck. There were handholds on the surface—some were designed, but others were the protrusions of antennae and cameras. She hit with all the same energy she'd kicked off with, the ship slamming into her. She'd known to expect that. She was ready. Her fingers closed on a handhold. The force of the body wrenched her shoulder and elbow, but she didn't lose her

grip. *One thousand thirteen.*

Across the gap, the umbilical was in the *Pella*. Maneuvering thrusters lit along the warship's side, an ejection mass of superheated water glowing as it jetted out. Cyn's body—he would have lost consciousness by now—was out there somewhere, but she couldn't see it. He was already lost, and at least Sárta and Filip and maybe others had seen them both. Cyn and Naomi in the airlock without suits, and then gone. Spaced. Dead.

Not dead yet. She had to get moving. Her mind had skipped a fraction of a second. She couldn't do that. Naomi pulled herself carefully, skimming along centimeters from the skin of the ship. Too fast, and she wouldn't be able to stop. Too slow and she'd pass out before she reached safety. All she could do was hope there was a golden middle ground. *One thousand...* She didn't know anymore. Fifteen? Her whole body was a confusion of pain and animal panic. She couldn't make out the stars at all anymore. The *Pella* was a blur. The saliva in her mouth bubbled. Boiled. A high, thin whine filled her ears, an illusion of sound where no sound was.

A lot of things happen, she thought, vaguely aware she'd said it to someone else, not long ago. *Even this*. She felt a wave of peace wash over her. Euphoria. It was a bad sign.

The airlock was there, five meters away. Then four. Her mind skipped, and it was flashing past her. She shot out her arm, grabbing for it, and the frame hit her wrist. She clutched for it, snatching the way Cyn had. She was spinning, the impact turning all her forward momentum angular. But she was over the airlock. Its pale mouth rose up from under her feet and vanished overhead, and back again, and back again. When she reached out, her hand was actually inside the ship, but she couldn't touch the frame. Couldn't pull herself in. The *Pella* was drifting away, losing its color as her consciousness began to fade. So close. She'd come so very close. Centimeters more, and she might have lived. But space was unforgiving. People died there all the time. The *Pella* loosed another plume from its maneuvering thrusters, as if in solemn agreement.

Without thinking, she drew up her leg, the spin increasing as she bent tight. She pulled off the shoe that Sárta hadn't gotten. Her hands felt weird. Clumsy, awkward, more than half numbed. When she stretched back out, the spin slowed to what it had been. She tried to judge the timing, but too little of her mind was left. In the end, she saw the *Pella* at the end of a

distant and darkening hall and threw the shoe at it as hard as her failing strength allowed.

Ejection mass. The spin slowed. Her hands reached farther into the airlock. She was drifting in. Her heel hit the steel frame and the pain was excruciating and very far away. Her mind blinked. She had an impression of the airlock control panel, the lights trying to impart some critical information. She couldn't see the colors or the symbols on the pad. Her consciousness faded and was gone.



Naomi woke herself up coughing. The deck was pressing against her face. She couldn't tell if she was desperately weak or under high burn. The edges of the airlock around her were fuzzy. She coughed again, a deep wet sound. Images of hemorrhaging lungs filled her mind, but the fluid she brought up was clear. Her hands were almost unrecognizable as hands. Her fingers were thick as sausages, filled with plasma and fluid. Her skin was too hurt to touch, like a bad sunburn. Her joints ached from her toes to the vertebrae in her neck. Her belly felt like someone had kicked her in the gut a couple dozen times.

She forced a breath. She could do that. Inhale, exhale. Something gurgled in her lungs. Not blood, though. She told herself it wasn't blood. She rolled onto her side, tucked her legs up, rose to sitting, and then lay back down again as the world swam. That was more than a g. That had to be more than a g. She couldn't be that weak, could she?

The *Chetzemoka* hummed under her. She realized vaguely that she was hearing words. Voices. A voice. She knew that didn't make sense, but she didn't know why. She pressed her hands to her face. A storm of emotions ran through her—elation, grief, triumph, rage. Her brain wasn't working well enough yet to associate them with anything. They just happened, and she watched and waited and gathered her scattered self together. Her hands and feet started hurting, tortured nerve endings screaming at her. She ignored them. Pain was only pain, after all. She'd lived through worse.

Next time, she made it to her feet. The little black thumb of the decompression kit was still lodged in her leg. She pulled it out, lifted it to

shoulder high, and dropped it. It felt like maybe one and a half, two gs. That was nice. If she'd felt this bad at just one g, she'd have been worried. She should probably have been worried anyway.

She cycled the inner door open and stumbled out to the cheap locker room. The lockers hung open, EVA suits hanging in them or scattered on the floor. The air bottles were all gone. The voice—it was just one voice, but her ears seemed to have lost all their treble and left only an incomprehensible soup of bass tones—was familiar. She thought she should know it. She moved through the abandoned ship. She wondered how long she'd been unconscious, and if there was any way to know where she was, what heading she was on, and how fast she was already traveling.

She reached a control panel and tried to access the navigation system, but it was locked down. As was the comm, the system status, the repair and diagnostics. She laid her forehead against the panel more from exhaustion than despair. The direct contact of bone on ceramic changed the voice, sound conduction through contact, like pressing helmets together and shouting. She knew the voice. She knew the words. "This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. If you get this message, please retransmit. Tell James Holden I am in distress. Comm is not responding. I have no nav control. Please retransmit." She chuckled, coughed up the clear fluid, spat it on the deck, and laughed again. The message was a lie built by Marco to lure Jim to his death.

Every bit of it was true.

Chapter Forty-two: Holden

Arnold Mfume, who wasn't Alex, came out of the crew quarters still drying his hair. When he saw Holden and Foster—the two captains—by the coffee machine, he grimaced.

“Running a little late there, Mister Mfume,” Foster Sales said.

“Yes, sir. Chava just pointed that out to me. I'm on my way.”

“Coffee?” Holden said, holding out a freshly brewed bulb. “Little milk, no sugar. Might not be how you take it, but it's ready now.”

“I won't say no,” Mfume said with a fast, nervous smile. Holden couldn't place his accent. Flat vowel sounds and swallowed consonants. Wherever it came from, it sounded good on him.

As Holden handed over the bulb, Foster cleared his throat. “You know it's a bad habit to be late for your shift.”

“I know, sir. I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again.”

And then, Mfume was gone, bolting up the ladder toward the cockpit faster than the lift would have taken him. Foster sighed and shook his head. “It's good being young,” he said, “but some people wear it better than others.”

Holden tapped in an order for another coffee. “I wouldn't want people to judge me by what I did in my twenties. What about you? Can I get you one?”

“More of a tea man, myself,” the other captain said. “If that's an option.”

“Don't know that I've ever tried.”

“No?”

“There was always coffee.”

The morning meeting had started off as just part of the shakedown. Between the new crew and the uncertainty surrounding the ship, it had

seemed like a good idea for Holden and Foster Sales to touch base with each other, compare notes, make sure that everything was the way it was supposed to be. The care Foster took to treat the *Roci* with respect had helped Holden. The new crew wasn't his, and he didn't feel comfortable with them, but they weren't going through the real crew's lockers while no one was looking. And day by day, their presence was growing more familiar. Less strange.

When he called down to engineering and Kazantzakis or Ip replied, it didn't seem as wrong anymore. Finding Sun-yi and Gor wired into gaming goggles shooting the crap out of each other in simulated battles—because as weapons techs with no one to shoot at they were getting antsy—stopped being weird and edged into sort of endearing. Maura Patel was spending her insomniac, sleepless shifts upgrading the tightbeam system. Holden knew it was something Naomi had on her list of projects, but he let Maura do it anyway. And after the long, quiet days in the dock, sleeping in his couch and waking to an empty ship, part of him even appreciated the company. They might be the wrong people, but they were people. Having guests in his house kept him from descending into his fear and anxiety. He was only putting on a brave face, but it actually made him feel a little braver.

“Anything else I should be aware of?” Foster asked.

“Just I want to know if anything happens with the *Razorback* or the *Pella*,” Holden said. “Or if we get a message from Earth. Amos Burton or my family, either one.” As if they were different.

“I think you’ve made that clear to the crew,” Foster said solemnly, but with a glimmer of amusement in his eye. Probably Holden had made the point a few times. To everyone. The coffee machine chimed and gave Holden a fresh bulb. Foster made his way to the ladder, and then down toward the torpedo bays where Kazantzakis was cleaning things that were already clean. Holden waited a few seconds and then headed up to the ops deck. Chava, coming down, met him, and they did a little awkward no-you-first dance before they got past each other.

Fred was in the crash couch that he'd appropriated as his office. The hatch to the cockpit was closed, but Holden could still hear the wailing of the raï that Mfume liked to listen to during his shift in the pilot's seat. Between that and the coffee, he wouldn't be sleeping, but Fred had put headphones on and so didn't hear Holden coming. The image on his screen

was familiar. Marco Inaros, the self-styled head of the Free Navy and public face of the devastation of Earth. And—Holden tried the thought carefully in case it hurt too much to think it—if Naomi was dead, the man who'd probably killed her. His chest contracted painfully and he pushed the idea away. Thinking about Amos and Naomi was too dangerous.

Fred turned sharply, noticing him, and pulled off the headphones. "Holden. How long have you been there?"

"Just came up."

"Good. Hate to think I'm getting too feeble to know when there's someone in the room. Everything all right?"

"Apart from being in the middle of a system-wide coup with half of my crew missing? Peachy. I mean, I'm not sleeping, and when I do it's nightmares from start to finish, but peachy."

"Well, it was kind of a stupid question. Sorry about that."

Holden sat on the couch beside Fred's and leaned in.

"What do we know about this guy?"

"Inaros?" Fred said. "He was on my short list of possibilities when the rocks dropped. Not the head of it, but in the top five. He leads a splinter group of high-poverty Belters. The kind of people who live in leaky ships and post screeds about taxation being theft. I've spoken to him a time or two, usually to deescalate a situation he wanted to set on fire."

"You think he's the one behind it all?"

Fred sat back, his couch gimbals hissing as they shifted. From the headphones, Holden could hear the man's voice even over the murmurs of rai—"We will begin again and remake humanity without the corruption, greed, and hatred that the inner planets could not transcend..."

Fred grunted and shook his head. "I don't see it. Inaros is charismatic. And he's smart. Watching his press release, he certainly thinks he's in charge, but he'd have to. The man's a first-rate narcissist and a sadist besides. He'd never knowingly share power with anyone if he could help it. This level of organization? Of coordination? It seems beyond his reach."

"How so?"

Fred gestured toward the screen. The light from it glowed in his eyes; tiny images of Inaros giving his salute. "It doesn't feel right. He's the kind of man who carries a lot of weight in a small circle. Playing at this scale isn't what he does best. He isn't a bad tactician, and the timing of the

attacks was showy in a way that seems like he was likely behind them. And he's charming at the negotiating table. But..."

"But?"

"But he's not a first-class mind, and this is a first-class operation. I don't know how to put it better than that. My gut says that even if he's taking credit for it, he has a handler."

"What would your gut have said before the rocks dropped?"

Fred coughed out a laugh. "That he was an annoyance and a small-time player. So yes, it may just be sour grapes on my part. I'd rather think I was outplayed by someone who's a genius at something grander than self-mythologizing."

"Do you have any idea why Naomi would be on his ship?"

Fred's gaze shifted from the hazy middle distance of thought to directly on Holden. "Is that someplace we want to go right now?"

"Do you?"

"I don't. But I can speculate. Naomi is a Belter, and what I know of her says she grew up in the same circles as Inaros and his crew. I have to assume they crossed paths before and had some unfinished business. Maybe they were on the same side, maybe they were enemies, maybe both. But not neither."

Holden leaned forward, elbows on his knees. As general as they were, as gently as he'd said them, the words were like little hammer blows. He swallowed.

"Holden. Everyone has a past. Naomi was a grown woman when you met her. You didn't think she'd popped out of the packaging right when you set eyes on her, did you?"

"No, of course not. Everyone on the *Canterbury* was there because they had a reason. Including me. It's just if there was something big, like 'part of a cabal that went on to destroy Earth' big, I don't know why she wouldn't have told me."

"Did you ask?"

"No. I mean, she knew that I was interested. That she could tell me whatever she wanted to tell me. I figured if she didn't want to, that was up to her."

"And now you're upset that she didn't. So what changed? Why are you entitled to know things now that you weren't entitled to know before?"

The raï from the cockpit paused, silence filling the ops deck. On Fred's screen, the playback had reached the split circle as it faded to white. "I may," Holden said, "be a small, petty person. But if I'm going to lose her, I at least need to know why."

"We'll see if we can't put you in a position to ask her yourself," Fred said. The music from the cockpit kicked in again, and Fred scowled up at the hatch. "If it's any comfort, I think we have a chance. I don't think it'll be long before he's ready to open negotiations."

"No?" Holden said. It was such a thin sliver of hope, but he felt himself jumping to it all the same.

"No. He got the jump on us tactically. I will absolutely give him that. But the next part is where he has to actually consolidate and hold power. That's not tactics. That's strategy, and I don't see anything in him that leads me to think he has a handle on that."

"I do."

Fred waved a hand like Holden's words had been smoke and he was clearing the air. "He's playing a short-run game. Yes, his stock's high right now, and probably will be for a little while. But he's standing in the way of the gates. All of this is to stop people from going out and setting up colonies. But the hunger is already out there. Smith couldn't stop Mars from depopulating itself. Avasarala couldn't put the brakes on the process, and God knows she tried. Marco Inaros thinks he can do it at the end of a gun, but I don't see it working. Not for long. And he doesn't understand fragility."

"You mean Earth?"

"Yes," Fred said. "It's the blind spot of being a Belter. I've seen it over and over in the past few decades. There's a faith in the technology. In the idea of maintaining an artificial ecosystem. We're able to grow food on Ganymede, so they think humanity's freed from the bonds of Earth. They don't think about how much work we had to do for those crops to grow. The mirrors to concentrate the sun, the genetic modifications to the plants. The process of learning to build rich soil out of substrate and fungus and full-spectrum lights. And backstopping all of that, the complexity of life on Earth. And now these new worlds... well I don't have to tell you how much less hospitable they are than it says on the box. Once it becomes clear that he's got it wrong—"

“He doesn’t, though,” Holden said. “Yeah, okay, the ecological part maybe he hasn’t thought all the way through, but when it comes to the Belt, he *isn’t* wrong. Look at all the people who just pulled up stakes and headed out for the rings. Ilus or New Terra or whatever the hell you want to call it? It’s a terrible, terrible planet, and there are people living on it. All those colony ships that left Mars to go try terraforming a place that’s already got air and a magnetosphere? A lot of those people are really, really smart. Even now, just now, you said how the pressure to get out to the new systems is more than this guy expects or is prepared for. That means he’s doomed, maybe. But that doesn’t make him wrong. We have to make him be wrong.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Fred said. “What I was doing with Medina Station would have—”

“Would have made a place for all the people living on Medina Station. But asteroid prospectors? Water haulers? The crews that are barely eking by? Those are who Marco’s talking to, and he’s right because no one else is taking them into account. Not even you. They’re looking at the future, and they’re seeing that no one needs them anymore. Everything they do will be easier in a gravity well, and they can’t go there. We have to make some kind of future that has a place for them in it. Because unless we do, they have literally nothing to lose. It’s all already gone.”

The system chimed and Maura’s voice came over the speakers. “Captain Holden, sir?”

“I’m here,” Holden said, still looking at Fred’s angry scowl. “And aren’t you supposed to be off shift, Mister Patel?”

“I am off shift, sir. But I couldn’t sleep, so I was running some diagnostics. But Captain Sales said you wanted an alert if the situation changed with the *Razorback* and its pursuers?”

Holden’s mouth flooded with the metallic taste of fear. “What’s going on?”

“We’re getting reports that the Free Navy ships have broken off, sir. The UN forces are still half a day out, but the thought is the Free Navy vessels are trying to steer well clear of any large-scale confrontation.”

“The *Pella*?” Holden said.

“With the Free Navy fleet, sir, but when they made the course change, a civilian ship broke off from the grouping, turning the other way. It’s got a

lot of inertia to overcome, but unless it changes its acceleration profile, it looks to be on a course that will bring it within a million clicks of us.”

“That’s not accidental,” Fred said.

“It isn’t, sir,” Maura said. “The vessel’s registered at the *Chetzemoka*, and it’s broadcasting a message on loop. Message follows.”

Holden’s knuckles hurt and he forced himself to relax his fists. Naomi’s voice filled the ops deck, and it was like being on the verge of passing out from dehydration and being handed a glass of water. As dire as the message was, Holden still felt every syllable untying his knots. When Naomi’s message was done, he fell back in his couch, limp as a rag. She was in trouble, but it was trouble they could fix. She was on her way back toward him.

“Thank you, Mister Patel,” Holden said. “In thanks, you may now have all my stuff. I don’t care about any of it anymore.”

“Including the coffee maker, sir?”

“Almost all my stuff.”

When Fred spoke, his voice was hard. Sharp. Unrelieved. “Mister Patel, what relief ships are in the vicinity?”

“Transponder data shows nothing, sir. The inner system’s been pretty much shut down. UN order.”

Holden rolled to his side and called up a connection to Mfume. Music blared out of the console. Mixed with the sounds filtering through the deck, it made the ops deck seem larger than it was. “Mfume!” Holden shouted, and then a few seconds later, “Mister Mfume!”

The music turned down, but not off. “Sir?”

“I need you to take a look at the flight path for the *Chetzemoka*. See what it’s going to take to match orbits with her.”

“What ship?” Mfume said.

“The *Chetzemoka*,” Holden said. “Just check the newsfeeds. It’ll be there. Let me know what you figure out as quickly as you possibly can. Like now would be good.”

“I’m on it,” Mfume said, and the music turned off both on the console and from the hatch. Holden took a deep breath, then another, then laughed. The relief wasn’t an emotion. It was too physical and profound for that. It was a state of being. It was a drug that poured invisibly through his veins. He started laughing and it turned into a moan that sounded like pain, or else

pain's aftermath.

Fred clicked his tongue against his teeth. "So. If I were to suggest that we not rendezvous with that ship?"

"I would be happy to let you and your friends off anywhere between here and there," Holden said. "Because unless you've decided to turn to piracy and throw me out the airlock, that ship is where we're going."

"I thought as much," Fred said. "Can we at least agree to be careful approaching it?"

Holden felt a little bubble of rage rise up in him. He wanted to shout at Fred, to punish him for taking this moment and soiling it with doubt. With the possibility that it was a trap and not Naomi coming home at last. Holden took the great glowing sense of release and tried to put it aside and his anger with it.

"Yes," he said. "You're right. It could be a trap."

"It may not be," Fred said. "I hope it isn't. But..."

"But we're living in interesting times," Holden said. "It's okay. I get it. I'll be careful. *We'll* be careful. But if it is her, and she really is in trouble, she's my first priority. That's just the way it is."

"I know," Fred said, and the way he said it meant *I know, and everyone who knows anything about you does too. Which is why you should be careful.*

Holden turned to the monitor and pulled up the nav data. As he watched, Mfume laid in the course that would get him to Naomi. Or whatever else was on that ship. Fred's seed of doubt had already taken root. He didn't know whether to be grateful or resent the old man. Between the distances and their respective velocities, it looked like it would be tricky. Naomi had been burning hard toward Earth, and the speed the *Chetzemoka* had built up was almost all in the wrong direction to reach him. If it wasn't a trap and Naomi was in trouble, he could still be too late. The UN force might be able to help, but she was already peeling away from their flight path.

Which still didn't leave him entirely without resources. He flipped to comms and started recording.

"Alex, since you're in the neighborhood and it went so well the last time I asked you to check out a mystery ship, I was wondering if you'd be interested in making a little detour."

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Chapter Forty-three: Alex

The worst thing was not knowing. The newsfeeds were awash with information, but very little of it matched up. Four billion were dead on Earth. Or seven. The ash and vapor that had turned the blue marble to white was starting to thin already—much sooner than the models predicted. Or the surface of the Earth wouldn't see daylight and blue skies for years. It was the dawn of a resurgence of natural flora and fauna driven by the human dieback or it was the final insult that would crash a perennially overstressed ecosystem.

Three more colony ships had been captured on their way to the ring gate and turned back or boarded and the crews spaced, or else seven had, or it was only one. Ceres Station's announcement that Free Navy ships could use the docks was a provocation or a proof that the OPA was unified or the station administration was giving in to fear. All around the system, ships were turning off their transponders, and the systems for visual tracking of the exhaust plumes were getting dusted off and reprogrammed in languages that contemporary systems could parse. Alex told himself it was temporary, that in a few months, maybe a year, everyone would run with transponders again. That the Earth would be the center of human civilization and culture. That he would be back on the *Roci* with Holden and Naomi and Amos.

He told himself that, but he was getting less and less persuasive. Not knowing was the worst thing. The second-worst thing was being chased by a bunch of top-of-the-line warships that really wanted to kill you.

In the display, one of their escort missiles went from green to amber to flashing red.

"Shit," Bobbie said. "Lost one."

"It's all right. We've got plenty more."

In the past hours, the *Pella* and her pack had come up with the bright idea of coordinating their comm lasers to hit a particular missile and then pumping energy into it until the controls overheated. The missiles failed inert, or they would have figured the enemy strategy out when the escorting cloud had cooked off in a massive chain reaction. Instead, they'd lost four missiles in half an hour and put together what was happening. Bobbie and the *Razorback's* antiquated and underpowered system had designed a rolling pattern formation for the missiles that kept any one of them from being in an uninterrupted sightline for more than a few seconds at a time. Watching it on the cameras reminded Alex of documentaries he'd seen about deep sea fish on Earth, vast schools roiling and yet staying together. Only for him, it was their little group of remaining missiles.

Ever since the announcement by the Free Navy, the prime minister had been back in the cabin, using their own tightbeam for what sounded like a hundred furious conversations that all seemed to have the same timbre. Alex couldn't quite make out all the words and he made conscious effort not to listen in case someone asked later what he knew. But the phrases *not substantiated* and *significant failure* and *still investigating* all came through enough times that Alex started to recognize them, kind of like hearing a song often enough that the lyrics became clearer.

His monitor was divided between a large-scale map of the solar system highlighting the parts of it critical to him—the *Razorback*, the UN military escort burning out to meet them, the *Rocinante*, the *Pella* and its pack, Tycho Station, Mars, Earth, Luna—and a smaller inset that was the *Razorback's* internal systems diagnostics. The little pinnacle hadn't been intended for full interplanetary travel, and with Earth and Mars where they were, they were going to be cutting it pretty close. The reactor had enough fuel pellets to burn for months, but once they ran out of ejection mass, the drive wouldn't do them much good. So far, they were still inside the error bars. Which, for him, meant that even if they ran out, they'd be going slow enough that someone could come throw a tether on them. Rescued by professionals was still firmly in his win column.

The navigation system threw an alert to his monitor. He opened it.

"What've you got?" Bobbie asked.

"The *Pella* and her little friend there cut their drives again," Alex said. "And... Hey! I think... Some of the ships are peeling off. I think they're

giving up!”

Bobbie whooped and Smith stopped his conversation in the back long enough to come see what was going on. By the time Alex had explained it all, the *Pella* had its drive on too, and was turning with the others. Not a full flip-and-burn, but a kind of fishtail slide that kept a good fraction of their momentum while still setting them on a course for the Belt and, give or take a few million kilometers, the Jovian system. The *Chetzemoka* peeled off in the opposite direction. Whatever mission the *Pella* was on, it was leaving the *Razorback* behind.

A tension Alex hadn't been consciously aware of started to evaporate along with Bobbie's occasional whoops and laughter. The UN escort force checked in. The solar flares weren't even coming close to intersecting with their path. The *Razorback*'s heat sinks were coping with the radiant heat well enough. Alex let himself relax.

It lasted almost half an hour.



“This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. If you get this message, please retransmit. Tell James Holden I am in distress. Comm is not responding. I have no nav control. Please retransmit...”

And then forty minutes after that:

“Alex, since you're in the neighborhood and it went so well the last time I asked you to check out a mystery ship, I was wondering if you'd be interested in making a little detour. I'm having my temporary pilot figure out a fast burn that will get me to Naomi, but you're closer and you're going in nearly the same direction. There's a chance this is the bad guys trying to trick us, so keep your eyes open. If it is Naomi, though, make sure she's still breathing when I get there. Let me know what you think.”

Alex's jaw was clenched hard enough his teeth ached. He already knew what Bobbie was going to say, so instead of starting the conversation, he started quietly feeding data into the nav system and seeing what options were open depending on how hard he wanted to burn and how much fuel he had left, and what telemetry said about the little ship and the convoy it broke off from. The wall screens were set to mimic the exterior view, so

when he looked up from the navigation data, he could pick out the dot of light that was her drive plume. He also pulled up an audio feed matched to the broadcast from it. “This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. If you get this message, please retransmit...”

He could feel the disapproval radiating up from behind him. Bobbie didn’t say anything at first, didn’t even make a grunt or a noise. It didn’t matter. Alex knew. When she finally did speak, it was almost a relief to have it out in the open.

“What are you doing there, sailor?” Bobbie asked.

“Figuring the best way to go after Naomi.”

“Any reason you’re doing it?”

“Because we’re going after Naomi.”

“We’re almost at the flip part of the flip-and-burn. Any course changes we make are going to eat up a lot of fuel.”

Alex didn’t look back. Just gestured at the screen. “The way I figure, that’s a distress call. We logged it. We’re obligated to stop.”

“Don’t,” Bobbie said.

“That’s the rules.”

“Don’t throw the rule book at me. We’ve got a mission here. I don’t like it any more than you do, but we need to stand our post. We’ve got orders.”

Alex’s jaw hurt worse. He tried yawning to stretch the ache away. It didn’t work. He turned his crash couch to face her. With her helmet off and her hair pulled back in a tight, functional ponytail, her head seemed small. The power armor was still locked in place, hands in fists against each side of the ship. If she decided to disable him and take command of the pinnace, she was just going to win. Also, he needed to keep in mind that she was jerry-rigged in place, and probably couldn’t actually take a really high-g burn without coming loose.

“We do,” he said. “We’ve got orders. But you’ve got orders from Nate and Avasarala, and I absolutely respect how you look out for both of those. But I got orders from my captain, and the watch I need to stand is over that way and getting farther from us.”

“You’re not thinking with your head,” Bobbie said. “Look at the risk profile, Alex, because if we go, we’re taking a risk. If we win, we get Naomi Nagata out of trouble. If we lose, the leader of one of the most important political organizations in the human race dies at a time when

unity and leadership is critically important. No, stop. I know what you're thinking. I've thought it too, just about some other people. Naomi's yours. She's one of the people in your circle, and fuck if you're going to risk her, much less sacrifice her for some kind of vague greater good, right?"

Alex closed his mouth, paused. "Right."

"I understand that," Bobbie said. "I do. I had to train a lot to understand that isn't what we do. You had that training too. Whether we're on active duty or not doesn't matter. We serve Mars because we swore an oath. If doing the right thing was the same as doing the easy thing, we wouldn't have had to swear. We have the prime minister of Mars in this ship. We have a military escort coming to get him safely to Luna."

"And we have the enemy out there," Alex said, hating the words as he said them. "It's a trap, isn't it?"

"I don't know," Bobbie said. "It could be. Disable someone and shoot the responders is a dirty trick, but I wouldn't put it past these bastards."

"I don't see how going after her would put us in more danger than holding course," Alex said. "If they've got a rail gun pointing at us, they can hole us right here just as well as over there."

"Trojan horse," Bobbie said. "Pack that thing full of soldiers. If we dock with her, all these missiles aren't going to help a damned bit. Or if the *Rocinante* gets to it, they take Fred Johnson."

"The odds of—"

"Don't think about the odds," Bobbie said. "Think about the stakes. Think how much we lose if we take the risk and it goes wrong."

Alex's head felt thick, like the first stages of illness. He looked back at his nav panel. The distance between the *Razorback* and *Chetzemoka* increased with every second. He took a deep breath, blew out. Naomi's voice came softly from the feed. "Tell James Holden I am in distress. Comm is not responding. I have no nav control..."

The voice that came from the cabin space was soft, gentle, conversational. "An interesting analysis, but incomplete."

Nathan Smith stood in the doorway. His hair was greasy and disarrayed. His clothes looked like they'd been slept in. His eyes were bloodshot, the rims red and angry. Alex thought he looked a decade older than when they'd taken off. The prime minister smiled at Alex, then Bobbie, then Alex again.

“Sir,” Bobbie said.

“You’ve neglected a term, Sergeant. Consider what we stand to lose if we don’t make the attempt.”

“The reason for doing this,” Alex said. “The reason for doing any of this. If there’s a chance—and I think there’s a pretty damned good one—that Naomi managed her own escape, and she’s out there and in distress, and she’s called for help, you know what the rules are? That we stop and help. Even if she’s not someone we know. Even if it was someone else’s voice. That’s the rule, because out here, we help each other. And if we stopped doing that because we’re more important or because the rules don’t apply to us anymore, I can make a decent case that we’ve stopped being the good guys.”

Smith beamed. “That was beautiful, Mister Kamal. I had been thinking of explaining to Chrisjen Avasarala that we’d left our only solid witness to the *Pella* behind, but I think I like your version better. Set course and alert the UN escort to our change of plans.”

“Yes, sir,” Alex said. When the door closed, he turned to Bobbie. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Bobbie said. “It’s not like I didn’t want to go after her.”

“And if it turns out the ship’s full of soldiers?”

“I can take this suit out for a drive,” Bobbie said. “Won’t hurt my feelings.”

It only took a few minutes to set the optimal intercept course and fire off a flight plan to the UN escort ships. Afterward, he recorded a tightbeam message for Holden. “Hey there, Cap’n. We’re on our way, but we’ll be careful. Get in, take a good look, and if anything’s getting our hackles up, we won’t board. Meantime, you tell that pilot you’ve got that whoever makes rendezvous first owes the other fella a beer.”

Chapter Forty-four: Naomi

Even a steady one g could be unpleasant for her. The constant press of two was a slow torture. It began as a deep ache in her knees and the base of her spine, then progressed quickly to sharp pain, like a needle stuck into the joints. Naomi surveyed the *Chetzemoka* in stages, moving through a deck, then lying down until the pain lessened, then the next deck. Her hands and feet hurt even as the swelling subsided. Her cough didn't get better, but it didn't get worse.

The first disappointment was that the controls were in lockdown. She tried a few passwords—FreeNavy and Marcoisgreat and Filip—but even if she got it right, there was no reason to expect that they'd left the biometrics profiles turned off.

The lockers by the airlock hung open and empty. The three EVA suits that remained didn't have batteries or air bottles. The emergency rations were gone. She expected the toolboxes to be gone from the machine shop, but they'd taken out the racks that held them too, the drawers from the cabinets, the LEDs from the wall lights. The crash couches were all slit open, gel and padding pooled on the deck beside them. The drug delivery system and reservoirs were gone. The only water was in the drives; ejection mass to be spit out the back of the ship. The only food was the residue in the recyclers that hadn't been processed back into anything edible. The stink of welding rigs and burning still hung in the air, so the air recycler was probably running unfiltered.

Naomi lay on the deck, her head resting on her hands, and her eyes closed. The ship had been constructed for one use and as an insurance write-off. Its working life had begun with it being disposable, and it had been looted from there. Even the physical panels and monitors had been

salvaged and carried away. As presents to Filip went, it was actually pretty crappy. The deck shook under her, the vibration of thrust setting up resonances that no system even tried to damp down. Between the high g and the vacuum damage leaking fluid into her lungs, breathing took more effort than it should have.

The ship wasn't a ship. She needed to stop thinking of it that way. It was a bomb. It was what she'd done to the *Augustín Gamarra* years ago and had carried with her ever since like a weight around her throat. Jim had known the kind of person that landed on water haulers like the *Canterbury*. He'd said that everyone there had reasons for being there. There were reasons the ship she'd tried to give to her son was stripped empty and triggered to kill. Not just her but anyone who came close to her. There were reasons. If she could defuse it, undo the threat, then she could follow it back, though. Take it to Ceres, where it had all started. There should be a way through the machine shop. All machine shops were supposed to be connected at the back.

She reached out her hands, only they weren't her hands. She was dreaming. She forced her eyes open and rolled to her back with an exhausted sob.

Okay. If she stopped moving now, she was going to sleep. That was good to know. She sat up, rested her head against the wall. *Sleep later. Sleep when you're dead. Or even better, sleep when you're safe.* She grinned to herself. Safe. That sounded like a good plan. She should try that for a change. She balled her hands into tight fists. The joints all screamed in pain, but when she opened them, her fingers moved better. That was probably a metaphor for something.

She had to set priorities. She didn't have a lot of resources. If she just grabbed at the first idea that came to her, it would be easy to exhaust herself without getting the critical work done. She needed to get food and water and make sure the air supply was reliable. She needed to warn anyone coming to save her not to approach. She needed to disarm the trap. Maybe dump core, maybe replace the drivers with a copy that didn't carry her poisoned code.

And she needed to do it before the ship blew up. At two g. Without tools or access to the controls. Or... was that right? Access to the controls was going to be hard, but she should be able to improvise some tools. The EVA

suits weren't powered and didn't have bottles, but they had seals and reinforcement. She could take the cloth apart, and salvage some lengths of wire. Maybe something solid enough to cut with. And could she use the helmet clamps as a kind of vise grip or clamp? She wasn't sure.

Even if she could, what would that gain her?

"More than you've got now," she said aloud. Her voice reverberated in the empty space.

All right. Step one, make tools. Step two, drop core. Or warn anyone coming in. She stood up and forced herself back to the airlock lockers.



Five hours later, she was on the ship's perfunctory little engineering deck, sealing the hatch manually. Two of the EVA suits had given up what little they had to offer to make a tiny, sketchy tool kit. Doing anything with the controls had failed. So she could be a rat in a box, or she could take out the middleman. After all, the controls all connected to machinery, and the machinery—some of it—was where she could put her hands on it.

The space between the hulls was in vacuum, and she didn't have any great faith that the outer hull was actually sealed. The one remaining suit held about five minutes' worth of air without a bottle and she could set the radio to passive and pick up the faintest echo of her own voice making the false message with the residual charge in the wires. The lock that should have let her get into and out of the maintenance access had been hauled off as salvage, but she could turn the full engineering deck into a makeshift airlock. Close the hatch to the rest of the ship, force the access panel into the space between hulls. She budgeted two minutes to locate something useful—a power repeater she could sabotage to force the drive to shut down, the wiring for the comm system, an unsecured console that was talking to the computers—then two minutes to get back out. Thirty seconds to close and seal the maintenance panel and pop the engineering hatch. She'd lose a roomful of air every time, but she'd only lose a roomful.

She put on the helmet and checked the seals, then opened the access panel. It fought her at first, then gave all at once. She thought she felt a rush of escaping air go past her, but it was probably her imagination. Twenty

seconds already gone. She crawled into the vacuum between the hulls. The darkness was so complete, it was like closing her eyes. She tapped the suit's controls, but no beam of light came from them.

She backed out, closed the access panel, opened the hatch, and took off her helmet.

"Light," she said to the empty space. "Going to need some light."



The monitor hung from wires, asking for her password. It just fit past the lip of the access panel, and filled the space between the hulls with light so dim, she couldn't see colors in it. Shadows of struts and spars made deeper darkness all around, and shapes she couldn't make sense of. She had forty-five seconds before she had to head back. It was the fifth time she'd been down trying to scrape through the coating on the wires. In a real ship, it would all have been protected by conduit. On this piece of crap, the wiring had all been fixed directly to the hull with a layer of yellowed silicone epoxy. On the one hand, it was a blessing. On the other, she was horrified that she'd ever trusted her life to the ship. If she'd inspected between the hulls before they left Ceres, she'd have been sleeping in an environment suit the whole way to the *Pella*.

The coating peeled free. Thirty seconds. She took a bit of salvaged wire and shorted the circuit. A fat spark leaped out and the world lurched. Across the space, maybe four meters away, an indicator light went amber, and she was falling sideways. With the extra illumination, she could see the round, tree-thick body of the maneuvering thruster. She put out her arms, catching herself against a steel strut. When she pressed her helmet to it, the rumble of the drive drowned out the ghost-quiet radio. She reached for the wire, broke the connection, and the rumble stopped.

Out of time, she turned back, her head swimming. The ship was spinning, then. She had no way to know how quickly, but the Coriolis was enough to make her stumble on the way back.

With the panel closed, the hatch open, and her helmet off again, she sat still until her balance came close to returning. Then, moving carefully, drunkenly, she scratched the new information on the wall. She was

developing a crude map of the ship's secret interior and keeping track of all she learned. She was tired enough not to trust her memory. From the count she'd started, she knew she'd been on thirty sorties. Now, for the first time, she'd done something. It was only one thruster, but the ship was spinning now, tumbling in circles instead of burning ahead in a line. All the acceleration would be bled into the changing angular momentum, and she wouldn't be going toward Jim as quickly. So maybe she'd bought a little time. It would make things harder for her, but she'd grown up in the Belt and on ships. Coriolis—and coping with the sick dizziness—was nothing new to her. She knew that the feeling of power and accomplishment she felt was out of scale with what she'd actually managed, but she grinned all the same.

Thirty sorties. Two and a half hours just of time spent in vacuum. That didn't count the minutes refreshing the air in her suit or planning out the next run. Maybe five hours total since she'd started this. She was exhausted. She felt it in her muscles and the pain in her joints. She hadn't eaten—couldn't eat. She was thirsty with the first strains of a dehydration headache coming on. There was no reason to think she would survive this. So she was surprised to notice that she was happy. Not the powerful, irrational, and dangerous joy of a euphoric attack, but a kind of pleasure and release all the same.

At first, she thought it was because there wasn't anyone there with her, guarding her, judging her. And that, she decided, was part of it. But more than that, she was simply doing what needed to be done without having to concern herself about what anyone else thought. Even Jim. And wasn't that odd? She wanted nothing in the world more than for Jim to be there—followed by Amos and Alex and a good meal and a bed at a humane gravity—but there was a part of her that was also expanding into the silence of simply being herself and utterly alone. There were no dark thoughts, no guilt, no self-doubt tapping at the back of her mind. Either she was too tired for that, or something else had happened to her while she'd been paying attention to other things.

This was the difference, she thought, between solitude and isolation. And now she knew something about herself she hadn't known before. It was an unexpected victory, and all the better for that.

She started getting ready for the thirty-first sortie.



She had almost a minute, because she'd figured out that coming up the comm array power supply took a lot longer than it did going back down. It was the sort of thing she'd have realized much more quickly if her mind hadn't been a little on the compromised side.

The comm system was held in place by more than epoxy. Long strips of metal tape lashed the transmitter in place, the welds still bright as if they'd been made yesterday. Three sorties ago—number forty-four—she'd thought there might be a diagnostic handset. Not that she could speak into it, but she might have been able to tap out a message. But despite the fact that handsets like that were standard and required, there wasn't one.

It had taken her some time to put together a backup plan.

For hours, the looped message had played in her ear, whispering on the back of residual charge. "This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. If you get this message, please retransmit. Tell James Holden I am in distress. Comm is not responding. I have no nav control. Please retransmit..."

Thirteen seconds long, and barely louder than the sound of her breath, even with her head less than a meter from the transmitter. With the leads to the transmitter exposed, she was ready. She'd have four times through. It had to be enough that it wouldn't be mistaken for random interference. She pressed her head to the hull to distract from the whirling of her inner ear.

"This is Naomi Nagata," she said, matching the timing and cadence of her false self. "If you get this message, please retransmit. Tell James Holden I am in—" She slammed the wire onto the exposed leads. A shiver of electricity bit her fingertips even through the suit's gloves. The radio was silent, but she kept mouthing the words, replaying them like a song stuck in her head until the right moment, then yanked the wire free "—control. Please retransmit. This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. If you get this message, please retransmit. Tell James Holden I am in—" Cut, pause. "—control. Please retransmit."

After the fourth time, she took the length of steel spring she'd been using as a knife and cut the transmitter. Her false voice went dead. She scrambled down, moving from strut to strut, watching her hands and feet with every movement so she wouldn't misjudge. The acceleration gravity

made her ankles and wrists feel unstable. The air in her suit didn't feel stale or close; the carbon dioxide scrubbers worked well enough on passive that she wouldn't feel the panic of asphyxiation. She'd just gently pass out and die.

She ducked into the engineering deck, closed the access panel. On the way to the hatch, her knee buckled. She popped the hatch open, ripped off her helmet, and sank down, gasping. Her vision narrowed, bright sparkles filling in her peripheral vision. She dry heaved once, paused, did it again, and let her body's weight sink deep into the deck below her.

Tell James Holden I'm in control for some really broad definition of control, she thought and laughed. Then coughed until her ribs hurt even worse. Then laughed again.



At her seventy-first sortie, she hit the wall. It wasn't subtle. She had closed the hatch to the main body of the ship, closed the seals, and put her helmet onto the environment suit. Before she fixed it into place and started the next five-minute count, her hands dropped to her sides. She hadn't consciously intended to do that; it had just happened. Alarmed in a vague, distant kind of way, she sat on the deck with her back against the wall and tried moving them. If she'd just become paralyzed or something, that would change the situation. Give her permission to stop. But her hands still flexed; her shoulders still moved. She was just exhausted. Even the effort to swallow seemed heroic. She closed her eyes, wondering if she'd instantly fall asleep, but she was too weary for that. So she sat.

If the suit had a battery, it would probably be cataloging the failures of her body right now. The dehydration headache was worse now, and moving in toward nausea. Her skin felt raw where the unshielded sun had burned her. Though she wasn't producing as much, she was still coughing. And she figured her blood was probably about equal parts plasma and fatigue poisons by now.

Her two little victories—the thruster, the transmitter—had been the end. Since then, either her efforts had degraded or things had genuinely gotten more complicated, or both. The repeaters that would cause the core to shut

down had either been omitted in the build or were tucked someplace that couldn't be reached from between the hulls. The sensor array that would trigger the bottle failure when a rescue ship got too close would have been a lovely thing to access, but it appeared to be mounted on the exterior where she couldn't get to it. There were half a dozen places she could have tried tapping into the computer system, but none of them had interfaces, and she didn't have any she could bring. Other plans and strategies flickered through her mind from time to time like fireflies. Some of them might have been good. She couldn't keep hold of them long enough to say.

She might have slept or the timeless skipping might just have been how her brain worked now. The voice she heard was just a whisper fainter than her own voice had been, but it snapped her back to herself.

"Hey there, *Chetzemoka*. This is Alex Kamal presently of the *Razorback*. Naomi? If you're there, I'd appreciate you giving me a sign. I'd sort of like to make sure it's you before we come over. Your ship's been acting a mite odd, and we're a little on the jumpy side. And, just in case it's not Naomi Nagata? I've got fifteen missiles locked on you right now, so whoever you are, you might want to talk with me."

"Don't," she said, knowing he couldn't hear her. "Stay away. Stay away."

Everything hurt. Everything whirled. Nothing was easy. When she got to her feet, her head swam. She was afraid she was going to pass out, but if she bent over, she wasn't sure she'd have the strength to stand back up. She had to find a way to wave him off. She had to keep him from getting close enough to be caught in the blast. Whether it saved her life or not didn't matter. She'd had her good day. It was more than she'd expected, and she was so deeply weary...

Breathing hard, she opened the engineering hatch for the last time and stumbled for the lift. And after the lift, the airlock.

Chapter Forty-five: Amos

Even though it was strictly local, running off the *Zhang Guo*'s system, it was nice having working hand terminals again. Amos lay on a support wedged in the narrow space between the hulls. The rest of his work team was only the soft clanging of magnetic clamps and the gentle, soothing smell of a welding torch. The meter he had clipped to the power line was at zero.

"Now?" Peaches said.

"Nothing."

A couple seconds passed.

"Now?"

"Nothing."

Another second. The meter chirped, the indicator going from zero to eighty-nine. Amos grinned. "That's it, Peaches. I'm a little shy of ninety."

"Locking that in," she said, and even though the hand terminals were set for audio, he knew she was smiling. He plucked the meter free and sprayed sealant over the holes he'd made for the leads. "Erich? If you're there, we're ready for another run."

"Of course I'm here," Erich said. "Where would I go? Starting the diagnostics run now. You two go stretch your legs or something."

Amos whistled once between his teeth, the shrill echo making the sound seem larger. "I'm taking a break. You guys get that conduit open, just wait for me. Don't try to do something smart."

There was a rough clatter of agreement as he swung out and up, climbing to the access panel with the handholds and the structural supports. The B-team wasn't much by way of help, but they could do some of the time-consuming easy stuff while Amos and Peaches and Erich made the

Zhang Guo skyworthy. So far, it had been as much cleaning up the servants' half-assed attempts to fix the ship as it had been finding why she'd been grounded in the first place. As showy as the ship was, her internal design was pretty nearly off-the-shelf. On the engineering deck, Amos dug up a cleaning rag and wiped the hardening shell of sealant off his fingers and wrist. Where it was thinnest, it was already solid, coming away from his skin like the shell off a shrimp.

Both doors of the airlock were open, and a portable stairway led down to the hangar floor. The windows were still dark, and a filthy, gritty rain tapped against the panes. The air smelled of ozone and cold, and Amos' breath ghosted. The overhead LEDs cast a harsh light, cutting shadows so distinct they looked fake. Stokes and the other household servants were clustered against one wall, clutching bags and hard cases and talking anxiously among themselves. Butch leaned against one wall, her hand to her ear in an attitude of concentration. Amos watched her as he came down the stairs. The woman radiated a sense of barely restrained violence. Amos had known a lot of people who had the same air about them. Some of them were criminals. Some were cops. She caught him staring and lifted her chin in something between a greeting and a challenge. He smiled amiably and waved.

He got to the hangar floor about the same time Peaches climbed out the airlock onto the stair. Stokes broke free of the huddled group and trotted over toward Amos, smiling anxiously. "Mr. Burton? Mr. Burton?"

"You can call me Amos."

"Yes, thank you. I wondered whether Natalia could perhaps go to the Silas house? Her husband is a janitor there, and she is afraid if she leaves without him, they will never see each other again. She's very worried, sir."

Peaches came down the stairs behind him with footsteps soft as a cat's. Her shadow spilled down the walkway in front of her. Amos scratched his arm. "Here's the thing. Pretty sure we're going to be able to start the final run-through in maybe forty-five minutes. Anyone who's here when we're done, they can bum a lift so long as there's room. Anybody not here should be far enough away they don't get burned down to their component atoms when we take off. Between those, I don't actually give a shit what any of you people do."

Stokes chuckled and made a short birdlike bob with his head. "Very

good, Mr. Burton. Thank you.” Amos watched him scamper away.

“Mr. Burton, is it?” Peaches said.

“Apparently,” Amos said, then lifted a thumb to point after Stokes. “Did he think I was joking about something? ’Cause I was just telling him how the sun comes up in the east.”

Peaches lifted a shoulder. “In his mind, we’re the good guys. Everything we say, he interprets that way. If you say you don’t care if he lives or dies, it must be your dry gallows humor.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

“That’s a really stupid way to go through life.”

“It’s how most people do.”

“Then most people are really stupid.”

“And yet we made it to the stars,” Peaches said.

Amos stretched out his arms, the muscles across his shoulders hurting pleasantly. “You know, Peaches, it’s nice how we got all this help and stuff, but I kind of liked it better when it was only you and me.”

“You say the sweetest things. I’m going to track down some coffee or tea. Or amphetamines. You need anything?”

“Nope. I’m solid.” He watched her walk away. She was still way too thin, but since he’d stepped into the room in the Pit at Bethlehem, she’d taken on a kind of confidence. He wondered, if she had to go back, whether she still wanted him to kill her. Probably something worth asking about. He stifled a yawn and tapped his hand terminal. “How’s it looking up there?”

“Not throwing any errors yet,” Erich said. “So this is what you do now?”

“This is what I’ve been doing for years.”

“And you can make a living this way?”

“Sure, if you don’t mind weird-ass aliens and corporate security assholes trying to kill you now and then.”

“Never minded before,” Erich said. “Okay, that’s it. We’re at the end of the run. I got that one hiccup from the water recycler, but everything else is good to go.”

“If we’re in this brick long enough to recycle the water, something will have gone badly wrong.”

“That’s what I was thinking too. You want me to start firing the reactor up? They’ve got scripts and a checklist.”

“Yeah, why don’t you let me take—”

The hand terminal squawked and a man’s voice Amos didn’t recognize came on. “Boss? I think we’ve got company.”

“What’re you seeing?” Erich snapped.

“Three trucks.”

“Okay, fuck it,” Erich said. “I’m starting up the reactor.”

Amos trotted toward the front of the hangar. The lookouts at the windows were all standing and tense. They knew. The servants were still milling in their corner, out of the way. “Yeah, I’d go ahead and run the check first,” he said. “It’d be a shame to do all this just so we could give the folks in Vermont a nice light show.”

The silence was harsh. Amos didn’t understand what the problem was until Erich spoke again. “I don’t take orders from you. *Burton.*”

Amos rolled his eyes. He shouldn’t have said that on an open channel. So many years and so many catastrophes, and it was still all about not losing face. “I was thinking of it more as expert opinion,” Amos said. And then, “Sir.”

“Noted. While I take my time to do that, how about you go help hold the perimeter,” Erich said, and Amos grinned. Like he wasn’t already on his way to do that. Erich went on. “Walt, start getting the passengers in the ship. Clarissa can assist with the start-up.”

“On my way,” she said, and Amos saw her running across the hangar for the stairs. Stokes was watching her with alarm. Amos waved him over.

“Mr. Burton?” the man said.

“That girl going after her old man? Yeah, she might need to rethink that.”

Stokes went pale and searchlights brighter than the sun flooded through the hangar windows. A voice echoed through bullhorns, barking syllables too muddled by the echo to be words. It didn’t matter. They all got the gist. By the time Amos got to the front doors, there were figures in the lights. Men in riot gear approaching the hangar with assault rifles in their hands that looked a little more heavy-duty than crowd control demanded. The servants were lined up on the stairs to the ship’s airlock, but they weren’t moving fast. One of Erich’s men—maybe twenty years old with a red scarf at his neck—handed Amos a rifle and grinned.

“Aim for the lights?”

“Any plan’s better than no plan,” Amos said, and broke the windowpane out with the butt of the rifle. The gunfire started before he could flip the barrel around to take aim. It roared like a storm, no gap between one report and the next. Somewhere people were screaming, but Erich and Peaches were in the ship and Holden and Alex and Naomi were somewhere off-planet and Lydia was safely dead. There was only so much to worry about. The guy next to him was screaming a wordless war cry. Amos took aim, breathed out, squeezed. The rifle kicked, and one of the glaring lights went out. Then someone else got another one. One of the Pinkwater soldiers pulled back an arm to throw something, and Amos shot them in the hip. A second after they went down, the grenade they dropped flashed and a plume of tear gas rose up through the falling rain.

Someone—Butch, it sounded like—yelled “Push ’em back!” and Amos crouched down, squinting back at the *Zhang Guo*. The civilians were almost all on, Stokes at the back waving his arms and yelling to hurry them. Something detonated, blowing the glass out of the remaining windows. The shock wave thudded through Amos’ chest like the explosion had kicked him. He stood up, glanced through the window, and shot the nearest figure in the face. The deeper rattle came from outside, and stuttering muzzle flash brighter than the remaining lights. Holes appeared in the wall, beams of light shining through into the vast cathedral space of the hangar.

“We got to get out of here!” Scarf Boy shouted.

“Sounds good,” Amos said, and started walking backward, firing through the window. A half second later, Scarf Boy was with him. The others either noticed them or had already reached the same conclusion. Two were already on the stairs, shooting as they climbed. At this point, no one was trying to hit anything; they were just keeping the others from advancing too fast for everyone to get on board. Amos’ rifle went dry. He dropped it and jogged back to the stairs, holding his hand terminal to his ear as he went.

“How’re we doing?” he shouted.

“You’re very clever,” Peaches yelled back. “We had a power hiccup on start-up. Would have lost maneuvering thrusters.”

“We going to lose them now?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Good.”

He stopped at the base of the stairs. Scarf Boy crouched behind him, reloading his assault rifle. When he had the new magazine in, Amos plucked it out of his hands and pointed at the stairway with his chin. Scarf Boy nodded thanks and scuttled up the steps, his head low. Shadows danced on the windows, and the side door burst in with a three-person team rushing in. Amos mowed them down. Half a dozen of Erich's people were on the stairs now, some still shooting as they climbed. One of them—Butch—stumbled as she got to the fourth step up. Blood soaked her arm and the side of her neck. Amos held the assault rifle up, spraying the walls, and knelt beside her.

“Come on,” he said. “Time to go.”

“Don't think that's happening,” Butch said.

Amos sighed. He put his hand terminal in his pocket, took the woman's collar in one hand and the rifle's grip in the other, and ran up the steps to the rattle of his own gunfire. The woman screamed and bounced. Something exploded, but Amos didn't pause to figure out what. At the airlock, he hauled Butch through, fired one last burst down the stairway, and hit the controls to cycle the lock closed.

All around him, Erich's people and the house servants were huddled. Some were covered in blood. He was covered in blood. He was pretty sure it was all Butch's, but not a hundred percent. Sometimes, in the heat of the moment, he missed things like getting shot. He let Butch down to the deck and pulled out his hand terminal.

“Okay,” he said. “Now would be good.”

“The exhaust's going to kill everyone out there,” Erich said.

“Are we caring about that?” Amos shouted.

“I guess not.”

The drive roared to life. “Lay down!” Amos shouted. “We don't have time to get to couches. Everyone lay down. You want the thrust spread out over your whole body!”

He lay down beside Butch. Her eyes were on him with something that might have been pain or anger. She didn't speak, and neither did he. Erich's voice came over the ship's system, telling them to brace, and then Amos weighed a whole lot more than he had a few seconds before. A loud crunching sound rattled the deck—the *Zhang Guo* pushing through the hangar's roof on her way to the sky. The ship rattled, dropped, rose again.

The deck pressed into Amos' back. If they had to make any hard turns, there were going to be at least a dozen people all mushed together in the corner where the deck met the wall.

The screen over the engineering controls flickered to life; clouds and rain falling down onto the forward cameras as the ship rose. Lightning flickered, the thunder rolling through the ship. He couldn't remember if a standard orbital escape called for three gs or four, but whatever it was would have been a whole hell of a lot more fun in a crash couch. His jaw ached, and he had to remember to clench his arms and legs to keep from passing out. All around him, the others weren't remembering that in time, or more likely never knew. Most of them, this was their first time up the well.

Over the course of long minutes, the rain and clouds on the screen faded. The lightning fell away behind them. Then, through the featureless gray, the first shining stars. Amos laughed and whooped, but no one joined him. Looking around, he seemed to be the only one still conscious, so instead, he lay back on the deck and waited for the thrust gravity to drop out when they hit orbit.

The stars slowly grew brighter, twinkling at first as the last gritty layers of atmosphere passed by them, and then growing steady. The Milky Way appeared like a dark cloud lit from behind. The thrust gravity began to ease and he got to his feet. Around him, other people were starting to come back to themselves. Scarf Boy and the others were hauling Butch out to the lift and the med bay, assuming the *Zhang Guo* had one of those. Stokes and the others were laughing or weeping or staring off in shock and disbelief. Amos checked himself for wounds and, apart from a series of four deep, gouging scrapes along his left thigh whose origins he couldn't recall, felt fine.

He turned his hand terminal to the open channel. "This is Amos Burton. You guys mind if I come up to ops?"

"You can do that, Burton," Erich said. There was maybe just a hint of smug in his voice. This saving face for Erich thing was going to get old fast, but right at the moment, he was feeling too high to care.

The ops deck was offensively lush. The anti-spalling had been made to look like red-velvet wallpaper and the light came from silver-and-gold sconces all along the walls. Erich sat in the captain's couch. His good hand was moving over the deck in his lap, his bad one holding on to the straps.

Peaches was in the navigator's couch, her eyes closed and her smile beatific.

"Grab a couch," Erich said with a grin. His old friend and not the criminal boss who needed to keep Amos in his place. He switched to the ship system. "Brace for maneuvers. Repeat, brace for maneuvers."

"That's not how they really do that," Amos said, strapping in at communications. "That's just something they say in the movies."

"It's good enough for now," Erich said, and the couches shifted under them as the thrusters turned the ship. Slowly, the moon hove into view, and behind it, the sun. Silhouetted, Luna was a disk of black from here except for a thin limn of white along one edge and a webwork of city lights. Peaches chuckled like a brook, her eyes open now, her hands pressed to her lips. The tears welling up in her eyes glittered.

"Didn't think you'd see this again, did you Peaches?"

"It's beautiful," she said. "Everything's beautiful, and I didn't think anything ever would be again."

They were all silent for a moment, and then Erich switched the view, pulling it slowly down. Below them, Earth was a smear of white and of gray. Where the continents should have burned in the permanent fire of lights, there were only a scattering of dim, dull glowing points. The seas were hidden, and the land. A funeral shroud was over the planet, and they all knew what was happening beneath it.

"*Fuck*," Erich said, and it carried a weight of awe and despair.

"Yeah," Amos said. They were all quiet for a long moment. The birthplace of humanity, the cradle of life in the solar system, was beautiful in its death throes, but none of them had any doubt that was what they were seeing.

The comm controls interrupted them. Amos accepted the connection and a young woman in UN naval uniform appeared in a high-priority panel.

"*Zhang Guo*, this is Luna Base. We do not have an approved flight plan for you. Be advised this space is under military restriction. Identify yourselves immediately, or be fired upon."

Amos opened the channel. "Hey there, Luna Base. Name's Amos Burton. Didn't mean to step on anybody's toes. If you've got someone up there named Chrissie Avasarala, pretty sure she'll vouch for me."

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Chapter Forty-six: Alex

Hey there, *Chetzemoka*. This is Alex Kamal presently of the *Razorback*. Naomi? If you're there, I'd appreciate you giving me a sign. I'd sort of like to make sure it's you before we come over. Your ship's been acting a mite odd, and we're a little on the jumpy side. And, just in case it's not Naomi Nagata? I've got fifteen missiles locked on you right now, so whoever you are, you might want to talk with me."

Alex shut off the mic, and rubbed his cheek. They were on the float now, course matched with the mysterious ship only about fifty kilometers above them on the relative z-axis. The sun, larger by far than he'd ever seen it from Mars, glowed below them, heating the little pinnace almost to the limit of its ability to shed the energy. Behind him, Bobbie was watching the same feed he was.

"That doesn't look good," she said.

"Nope."

As a boy, back on Mars, there had been a little improvised firework that his friends would sometimes make for fun. All it took was a length of light-duty pipe, a mining spike, and a single-use rocket motor. The way it worked, they'd spike one end of the pipe to a flat section of wall, fix the motor to the other end with industrial tape or epoxy with the thrust pointing off to one side. Fire the motor, and the whole thing turned into a ring of smoke and fire, the pipe spinning around its axis faster than the eye could follow, the flare of the motor exhaust blinding and flickering. Sometimes the motor came loose and bounced along the corridor, posing a threat to everyone watching. Sometimes the spike came loose. Most times, it just left a circle of scrapes and scorch marks on the stone of the wall that pissed off the maintenance crews. They called them fire weasels. He didn't know why.

Above them, the *Chetzemoka* was spinning like a fire weasel. She wasn't quite tumbling, but the circle she was burning in was tight. All the acceleration she'd been using to burn hard out toward the Belt and Holden was getting eaten now, each point on her pathway canceling out the point a hundred and eighty degrees off from it. Her exhaust plume was a jet of flame and plasma that would glass anything that tried to approach her unless it came from above or below. And if they did that...

"What do you think happened?" Bobbie asked.

"Maneuvering thruster fired off, never got balanced."

"Can you match course with that? I mean even if we decided we wanted to?"

Alex pressed the tip of his tongue to the back of his teeth and willed Naomi to call him. To give him a sign that she was still alive. That he wasn't about to risk his ship and his life and the lives of the people with him to rescue a corpse. "Might have to come up with something clever."

He pulled up the tactical display. The *Razorback* and her cloud of missiles with no one left to shoot at. The *Chetzemoka* chasing its tail like a terrier that had gulped down its own body weight in uppers. Then, far distant, the UN escort decelerating in from the sun toward a matching course, and the *Roci* doing the same from the Belt. Everything was coming together right here—the head of the OPA, the prime minister of Mars, Avasarala's best cavalry—because it was where Naomi Nagata was, and as long as Alex and Holden were drawing breath, they'd be looking out for their own.

The screen lit up with an incoming message, but not from the *Chetzemoka*. Alex accepted it, and Holden appeared on the screen. For about four seconds, the captain didn't do anything but look into the camera and scratch his nose. He looked tired and thin. Alex felt the same way himself. Then a smile bloomed on Holden's face, and he seemed more like himself again. "Alex! Good. Tell me what we're looking at."

"Well, we haven't had any new messages since their radio cut out, but if that was an intentional message, this looks like about the worst definition of 'in control' I've seen in a while. This mystery ship's not quite on the tumble, but she's damned close. The way she's chasing her tail, it's not going to be easy making an approach, but I'm working on an idea. The *Razorback* wasn't built for airlock to airlock. This here's the kind of ride

you land in a hangar. But we've got EVA suits for me and Nate. That's the prime minister. I call him Nate now. Don't be jealous. Anyway, I figure we put the *Razorback* at the center of the circle Naomi's making with our nose up and our ass down, then match roll to the circle she's making. Then as long as no one pukes in their helmet, we can send someone over to the airlock. Not sure it'll work, but it's the best idea I've got so far."

He leaned forward while the tightbeam laser flew the four light-seconds out to the *Rocinante*, then the four light-seconds back. To judge from the shape of Holden's face, he was probably at more than one g. Even if the *Chetzemoka* hadn't gone into its surprise spin, the *Razorback* would have been the first to reach it. Holden's temporary pilot was going to be buying Alex a beer, provided nothing new and unexpected blew up on them. Not that he'd have given good odds on that.

Five seconds in, he remembered that he'd wanted to mention that Bobbie had power armor. He didn't say it, though, since it would just interrupt whatever Holden was saying right then that wouldn't be back to Alex for a few more seconds. Light-delay conversations were all about etiquette and taking turns.

"Why don't we try that as proof of concept?" Holden said. "If it looks like something we can do, I can have the *Roci* take your place when we get there. Then if we need to cut in through the hull, we can. Have you had any sign from Naomi?"

"Not yet—" Alex began, but it turned out Holden hadn't been finished, just pausing for breath.

"Because that whole 'Tell James Holden I'm in control' thing was weird on a lot of levels. I checked the vocal profile of the message coming off the *Chetzemoka*—well, actually Fred did. It wouldn't have occurred to me. Anyway, the way she said James Holden in the first warning message about the bad bottle drivers and the way it was in this new one? Exactly the same. Fred thinks the new message may have been faked. Only then the way it got modified before it shut off... I'm seeing something here, Alex. But I don't know what it is."

This time Alex waited until he was sure Holden was done before he started talking. "We haven't had any sign at all, but it seems to me that someone on the ship's been trying to raise a flag. And this flying in circles bit makes it seem a lot less like a Trojan horse. Nothing to gain by doing it,

other than make everyone inside feel powerfully like throwing up. Honestly, I don't know what we're looking at here either, Cap'n, and I don't think we're going to know until we get someone inside."

Eight long seconds there and back again. "I'm just worried that if she is in there and the ship's out of control, we're going to be sitting out here dithering while she needs us. I can't stand the idea that we've come this close, and now we're going to lose her. I know it's a little crazy, but I'm a little crazy right now. I keep thinking of her being smashed up against the wall by the spin, and me out here where I can't do anything."

"Yeah, thruster misfires don't work like that," Alex said. "You don't get any sideways impulse unless the thruster's actually going. After that, you've got a little spin station action pushing the folks behind the center of spin down and the folks forward of it up, but all that is gonna be in line with the thrust from the drive, so all you actually get is—"

"Alex!" Bobbie said. "We've got something."

He twisted on his couch, then turned it to face her. Bobbie's eyes were on the wall screen. A panel was there, opened to the view from the upper camera. The *Chetzemoka* was still in its mad spin, but something had come off, floating now across the clear, empty void, stars behind it like the glittering pupil of a vast eye. The eye of the storm. Bobbie tried to zoom in on it the same moment Alex did, and the system made a confused, upset chime, the focus fluctuating wildly before coming to rest. A figure in an EVA suit. There were no lights on the suit, and its back was turned to them, the intense sunlight making the gray material shine almost too brightly to make out details.

"Is she alive?" Alex said.

"She's moving."

"How long ago did she come out?"

"Not long," Bobbie said. "Seconds."

The figure in the EVA suit lifted her arms, crossing them over her head. The Belter signal for danger. Alex felt his heart speed up.

"Alex!" Holden said, from four seconds ago. "What's going on?"

"Someone came out of the ship. Let me figure this out, and I'll be back with a report," Alex said, then cut the connection. On Bobbie's screen, the figure had shifted to a time signal. *Five minutes*.

"What have we got?" Alex said.

“She’s making the same signs,” Bobbie said. “Here we go. ‘Danger. Do not approach. Explosion hazard.’ But then here’s ‘Low air,’ and ‘five’... shit, ‘four minutes.’ ”

“Is it her?” Alex said, knowing there wasn’t an answer for that. Even if the figure turned its face to them, Alex wasn’t certain between glare and the suit’s helmet if he’d have been able to identify Naomi. It was just a person in an EVA suit, running out of air and warning them over and over again that it was a trap.

But Alex thought that whoever it was, they sure moved like Naomi. And they’d both been calling the figure “she.” They might not know, but they were both pretty certain. The body of the *Razorback* felt suddenly claustrophobic. Like the appearance of Naomi right there where he could see her required more room to move. Enough space to reach her. Alex set the pinnacle’s system to the diamond-bright suit and started it calculating.

“Where’s she going to go?” Bobbie asked.

“Looks like she’s set to drift across into the path of the ship again,” Alex said. “If it don’t hit her, maybe she gets past and the drive plume gets her.”

“Or we watch her suffocate?” Bobbie said.

“I can take the ship in,” Alex said.

“And crisp her decelerating?”

“Well... yeah.”

“Get your helmets on,” Bobbie yelled loud enough to carry into the back cabin. “I’m going in.”

“That suit’s got enough thrust to do a fifty-klick flip-and-burn in under four minutes?” Alex asked, but he was already sealing his suit as he said it.

“Nope,” Bobbie said, reaching for her helmet with one hand and a spare bottle of air with the other. “But it’s got really good mag boots and gloves.”

Alex checked his seals and got ready to open the *Razorback* to the void. “Don’t see how that’s going to help.”

The prime minister’s cabin showed it was sealed. On the monitor, the figure—Naomi—signaled *Danger. Do not approach. Explosion hazard.* Bobbie yelped, took a deep shuddering breath. Her voice was coming through the EVA suit’s radio now. “God damn, it’s been a long time since I was on the juice. This is some powerfully unpleasant shit.”

“Bobbie, we’re running out of time here. How are mag boots going to get you to Naomi?”

Behind her helmet's visor, Bobbie grinned. "How good's your control on those missiles?" she asked.

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Chapter Forty-seven: Naomi

Leaving the airlock this one last time was the most peaceful thing Naomi could imagine doing. As soon as she'd cleared the outer door, the sun and stars had stopped their gut-sickening whirl. She had taken her tangent from the whirling circle of life, and now her path was a line. Well, not a tangent, really. A secant, and doomed to cross paths with the ship again, only maybe not in her lifetime.

For a moment, she let herself enjoy drifting. The sun pressed against her back, the light radiating past her as she cast a shadow on whole stars, galaxies. The sense of whirling faded a little, and she wondered where Alex was, out among all these stars. She remembered to start counting. One thousand and... how long had she already been out? Seven? Eight? Well, she might as well think the worst. One thousand and thirty. Why not? She lifted her hands over her head. *Danger*. Then *Do not approach*. Then *Explosion hazard*. She felt like she was trying to warn the stars. The Milky Way. *Don't come here*. *Stay away*. *There are humans here, and you can't trust them*.

She stretched with every motion, letting it all go. She should have been scared, but she wasn't. She was going to her death, and that sucked. She would have liked to live longer. To see Jim again. And Alex. And Amos. She would have liked to tell Jim all the things she'd been so careful for so long not to say. One thousand and sixty. Time to change her signs. Four minutes left. Four minutes and a lifetime.

Somewhere out there, Filip was with his father, the way he had been for years. Since he was a baby. And Cyn, poor Cyn, already as dead as she was going to be because he'd seen her in the airlock and thought stopping her would have been saving her. Thought the life she had with Marco was

worth having. She wondered what would have happened if she'd stayed. If the *Chetzemoka* had flown without her. Would Jim have set off the bomb? She had to think he would have. He wasn't a man who reined in his curiosity well. The stars shuddered, blurred. She was weeping. *Danger. Do not approach. Explosion hazard.*

If the suit had been powered, it would have been screaming alerts at her. She was almost glad now that it wasn't. She wasn't even light-headed yet. She'd seen people pass out. As long as her CO₂ scrubbers kept working, it would be a peaceful way to go. No choking, no panic. Just a moment's disorientation and then, softly, out. Here she was, after so many years, throwing herself out another airlock. She could still remember that first one, back on Ceres. It had been set in the floor, of course, but she could still conjure up the feeling of pressure on her fingers when she'd told it to cycle open, still believing that it meant her own death. And even then, she hadn't wanted to die. She'd just wanted it to be over. To be free of it all. For the pain and guilt to be over. And the feeling of being trapped. She might have been able to stand all the rest of it, but not the sense of being caught.

This death wasn't at all like that. This was throwing herself in front of a bullet so that it wouldn't hit her friends. Her family. The family she'd chosen. The one built from people who had risked their lives for her. She wished Cyn could have met Jim. Could have understood how far she'd come from the girl he'd known on Ceres, back in the day. How much she wasn't just Knuckles anymore.

She wasn't religious, but she'd known any number of people who were. *Explosion hazard. Low air. Three minutes.* She wondered whether they would have thought what she was doing now was sinful. Giving herself over to the void in hopes that Alex would see her, would understand, would save himself.

And her. It would be nice if somehow he found a way to save her back. Or if Jim suddenly swept down from the stars to gather her up. She chuckled. God knew he'd try. Always blundering into being the hero, her Jim. Now he'd know what it had felt like for her all those times he'd squared his jaw and run off into near-certain death because it was the right thing. Pity she wouldn't be there to point it out to him. He might not connect those dots himself. Or he might. He'd changed over the years, and

he wouldn't change back.

Danger. Do not approach. Explosive hazard. She'd lost count again. Two minutes? One? She didn't know. She found herself humming a melody she'd heard as a child. She didn't know the words to it. They might not have even been in a language she knew. It didn't matter. She was glad for the song's company. Grateful. More than that, she was grateful that she wasn't going to die nauseated. *Okay, fine. If this is what I get, this is what I get. Not a life without regrets, but none I can't live with. None I can't die with.*

Still, she thought to the universe, if it isn't a problem, I wouldn't say no to a little more.

Something moved off to her left, streaking out from behind her. Huge and metal and shining brightly in the sun. It looked like a missile, pointing back toward the sun as it retreated. Its drive wasn't firing. That seemed weird and kind of random. She wondered if—

The impact came in the center of her back, hard as an assault. An arm wrapped around her shoulder and a leg around her waist locking her immobile. She squirmed by reflex, trying to escape the attack, but whoever it was had her cold. She couldn't escape. She felt the other person's free hand fumbling at her suit. Something hard and metal pressed against her thigh where the air bottles would go.

Her ears popped as the pressure in the suit suddenly changed. A clean, vaguely astringent smell filled her nose. A fresh bottle. She almost laughed. She was being held in a rescue hold. The newcomer did something else she couldn't quite figure, and then locked a tether to her waist and released her. When they rotated together, face-to-face, the newcomer grabbed Naomi's helmet and pressed her own against it.

"Bobbie?" Naomi said.

"Hey," the Martian ex-marine shouted, grinning. The sound carried from suit to suit by the conduction, and it made her sound terribly distant for someone who was holding Naomi in her arms. "Imagine meeting you here, right?"

"I'd say it's really good to see you," Naomi shouted back, "but that seems weirdly understated. The ship! It's rigged to lose bottle containment if another ship sets off its proximity alert."

Bobbie scowled and nodded. Naomi saw the woman's mouth moving as

she relayed the information to someone. To Alex. She watched Bobbie listen to something she couldn't hear. She looked older than the last time Naomi had seen her. She looked beautiful. Bobbie said something else into her mic, then pressed their faceplates together again.

"I'm going to start moving us around," Bobbie shouted. "We need to point our feet toward the sun. Low profile. Suck up less heat, okay?"

Naomi buzzed with questions that didn't need answers. "Okay," she shouted back.

"Are you in immediate medical distress?"

"Probably. It's been a really hard day."

"That's funny," Bobbie shouted in a voice that meant it wasn't funny. "Are you in immediate medical distress?"

"No. I don't think so."

"All right. Put your arms over my shoulders and lock your forearms." Bobbie pulled back a few centimeters and demonstrated the forearm lock. Naomi made the Belter sign that meant roughly *Acknowledged and understood*. A few seconds later, Bobbie's armor fired thrusters, and Naomi's weight came back. She was being lifted up, carried into the stars. The sun-bright drive plume of the *Chetzemoka* passed them, dwarfing the small, dark box of the ship itself. It fell away toward the sun and slowly, over the course of long, eternal minutes, vanished below them.



They didn't fit in the pinnacle. Not really. It was made for one, maybe two, and it had four with one of them in powered armor. The air was hot and thick, and the recyclers were starting to throw alerts and errors. Alex had shut down the reactor and switched to batteries so they wouldn't be generating as much heat.

"I mean, we could make a burn for it," Alex said, "but we got people coming from both directions and half as many crash couches as we've got folks."

He was in the one actual couch at the front of the pinnacle. Bobbie sat curled near the mutilated deck where another couch had once been. The door to the cabin was open, and the prime minister of Mars floated there in

a sweat-stained undershirt. He made the place seem dreamlike. For herself, Naomi floated near the ceiling. Alex had set the wall screens to show the outside, but it was all so much less vivid than the real thing. It didn't fool her.

The *Chetzemoka* was below them, a spinning black dot against the overwhelming white sun. She caught glimpses of it at the edges of the floor where the screen stopped. Alex had also had the *Razorback's* system highlight the incoming UN escort ships and, in blue, the *Rocinante*.

"So," Alex said. "XO. You're... ah. Out here. That was kind of unexpected."

"Wasn't thinking to see you either, Alex," Naomi said. Her blood felt strange in her veins. Sluggish and bright at the same time. And she was having trouble focusing her eyes. Her hands had lost the worst of the swelling, though. The hours of work between the hulls had probably worked all the extra fluid back in where it belonged. Something like that. Her entire body hurt, and she was still discovering how profound her nausea had been as layers of it she hadn't recognized resolved. Her twenty-second sunburn from the jump off the *Pella* was swollen and tender to the touch, but not blistered. It would peel once it had healed enough. When she'd gotten into the *Razorback*, and the ship had been sealed, she'd drunk a liter of water from a bulb and she hadn't had to pee yet. The dehydration headache was starting to lose its hold. Bobbie had offered her painkillers, but something in Naomi resisted the idea of doing anything else to her body until she'd seen the inside of a medical bay.

She realized that her consciousness had flickered out when it came back. Bobbie and the prime minister were talking about good noodle restaurants in the major neighborhoods of Londres Nova. The air was thick and close and stank of bodies. She was sweating in her crappy EVA suit. The blue dot that was the *Rocinante* had grown a halo, the drive pointing toward them as it slowed to match their course.

In the corner of her eye a blackness flickered and was gone.

"Alex," she said, and then coughed so long and hard Bobbie had to brace her. When her lungs were clearer, she tried again. "Alex. Can you spare a couple of those missiles?"

"Depends, XO," Alex said. "What did you want me to do with them?"

"Kill that ship," Naomi said.

“It’s all right,” Alex said. “We warned everyone about how it’s booby-trapped. No one’s going to—”

“Not because of that. Just because it’s time for it to go.”

Because I tried to give it to my son instead of a childhood. Because I spent my own money to get it, and it turned into a trap for me and the people I love. Because everything about that ship was a mistake.

“Ah. Looks like it’s registered to an Edward Slight Risk Abatement Cooperative. They going to be okay with us knocking their bird into the sun?”

“It’ll be fine,” Naomi said.

The prime minister lifted his finger. “It seems to me that—”

“Missiles away,” Alex said, then smiled an apology. “You’re the head of my government, Nate, but she’s my XO.”

“Nate?” Naomi said. “You’re on a first-name basis now?”

“Don’t be jealous,” Alex said and pulled up a panel. Against the sun, the ship was nothing. A tiny darkness spinning below them like a fly. And then it was gone.

I’m sorry, Filip, she thought.

She turned her head toward the approaching *Rocinante*. It was closer.

Chapter Forty-eight: Holden

If the medical bay could have raised its eyebrows and made judgmental little tsk-tsk sounds, it would have. Instead, the readout threw a list of amber-colored alerts so long that the first few scrolled off the screen before Holden could read them. Naomi grunted when the needle poked into her vein and the medical expert system's custom cocktail started flowing into her. Holden sat beside her, holding her other hand.

The transfer from the *Razorback* had been easy enough. Once they'd matched course, Alex snugged the pinnace up against the airlock, and all four of them had come over together. Holden had been waiting on the other side of the lock, not quite willing to believe that they were really back. Fred Johnson was there too in his greeting-a-political-grandee outfit. It was strange to see Fred visibly change roles, holding his body differently, his expression changing so subtly and profoundly it seemed like the shape of his skull had shifted. It left Holden a little curious about how much the old man presented to him was also tailored to the situation. Chances were, he'd never know.

When the inner door cycled open, he'd forgotten about Fred and the prime minister of Mars and the destruction of Earth and pretty much everything that wasn't Naomi. Her skin was ashen where it didn't look slick and swollen from radiation burns. Her eyes were bloodshot and bleary with a profound exhaustion. Moving into the room, she was careful, like any unexpected bump would hurt. She was the most beautiful thing he'd seen in years. He felt like he was the one returning home now that she was here. When she saw him, she smiled, and he grinned back. Somewhere a few feet away or a few miles, Fred Johnson and Nathan Smith were making some kind of formal greeting. It didn't matter at all.

“Hey,” he’d said.

“Hey. You take care of the place while I was out?”

“Had some trouble with the contractor, but I think we got it straightened out,” Holden said. Then Bobbie had put a wide, strong hand on his shoulder, shaken him slightly, and said, “Med bay.” And then Naomi headed for the lift, leaning against Alex for support. She looked wounded, exhausted, halfway to dead. But she’d seen him, and she’d smiled, and it had dropped the bottom out of his heart.

The alert sounded, counted down, and gravity came back. Naomi coughed. It was a wet, painful sound, but the medical bay didn’t seem concerned. The machine had a shitty bedside manner.

“Do you think we should get a medic?” Holden said. “Maybe we should get a medic.”

“Right now?” Naomi asked.

“Or later. For your birthday. Whenever.” The words tumbled out of his mouth without stopping by his brain once, and he didn’t care enough to rein them in. Naomi was back. She was here. A vast fear he’d been carefully not noticing washed over him and started to dissipate.

This was how she felt, he thought. With the *Agatha King* and when he’d headed off to the station in the slow zone. When he’d gone down to the surface of Ilus. All the times he’d thought he was protecting her from his risks, this was what he’d been doing to her. “Wow,” he said. “I’m kind of an asshole.”

She opened her eyes in two bright slits and made a small smile. “Did I miss something?”

“Sort of. I just went someplace for a minute, and I’m back now. And so are you, which is really, really good.”

“Nice to be home.”

“But while you were... I mean while we were... Look, when I was back on Tycho, I was talking with Monica. And Fred. I mean I was talking to Fred about you and us and what I was entitled to know and why I thought all that. And Monica was talking about why I lied and whether what she did had any power and how it was ethical and responsible to use it. And I was thinking—”

Naomi raised her hand, palm out. Her forehead creased. “If you’re about to tell me you had an affair with Monica Stuart, this may not be the best

time.”

“What? No. Of course not.”

“Good.”

“It’s just I’ve been thinking. About a lot of different things, really. And I wanted you to know that whatever you were doing and going through that you didn’t want me to be a part of? You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I’m really curious, and I want to know. But whatever it was, it’s only my business if you want it to be my business.”

“All right,” she said, and closed her eyes again.

Holden stroked her hand. The knuckles were raw, and there was a bruise on her wrist.

“So when you say ‘all right’—”

“I mean I missed you too, and I’m glad I’m back, and could you go get me a bulb of green tea or something?”

“Yes,” Holden said. “Yes, I can.”

“Don’t hurry,” she said. “I may just take a little nap.”

Holden paused at the hatch, looking back. Naomi was watching him go. Her eyes were tired, her body stilled by exhaustion, but she was smiling a little. It helped to see that she was glad to be back.

In the galley, a half-dozen voices were in competition, gabbling one above the other toward a kind of symphonic shared excitement. It sounded like he felt. Holden ducked in. Alex was sitting on one of the tables with his feet on the bench, talking to Chava Lombaugh and Sun-yi Steinberg, describing something about fast-cycling targeting stutter and acceleration. Chava was talking at the same time, her hands in motion, presenting some physical description of whatever they were on about. Sun-yi was just looking from one to the other, amused. At the next table over, Bobbie Draper was sitting down, but still looming over Sandra Ip and Maura Patel. Bobbie had swapped her powered armor for a slightly-too-small jumpsuit with TACHI stenciled on the back. She caught his eye, smiled, and waved. He waved back, but Sandra Ip had already recaptured her attention, and Bobbie was shaking her head and answering a question he hadn’t heard.

Holden had the sudden, visceral memory of being at home with his family, eight parents sitting down to dinner together with their one son, having half a dozen conversations with and past each other. Even though he

recognized he was already primed for it, the sense of peace and well-being that washed over him was profound. This was what family looked like, sounded like, how they acted. Even the new crew who he'd been trying not to resent felt more like distant cousins who'd come for a long visit than interlopers.

Alex hopped down and came over to him, grinning. They stood for a long, awkward moment before they gave in and embraced, clapping each other on the back and laughing.

"No more leave," Holden said.

"Holy shit. Right?" Alex said. "I take off for a few weeks, and everything turns into chaos."

"It really, really does." Holden went to the coffee maker and Alex followed at his elbow. "I think this has to qualify for the worst vacation ever."

"How's Naomi doing?"

Holden picked out the tea that Naomi liked best. The machine chimed calmly. "Getting hydrated mostly. She sent me off to get her a drink, but I think she actually wanted me to stop hovering over her, trying to start a conversation."

"She may take a little time getting back to full power."

"Intellectually, I know that," Holden said, picking up the bulb of tea. It smelled of lemongrass and mint even though there was nothing anywhere on the ship that was remotely like either one. Holden grinned. "Chemistry is amazing, you know? It's really, really amazing."

"Any word from Amos?" Alex said, and his smile dimmed at the answer in Holden's eyes. He tried to force the carefree tone back into his voice when he spoke, but Holden wasn't fooled. "Well, that doesn't mean much. It won't be the first time a planet's blown up on him."

"They're starting to get confirmed death lists," Holden said. "It's still early. A lot of things still falling apart down there, and there's going to be a lot more bad before it sees better. But he's not on the list yet."

"So that's good. And c'mon. It's Amos. Everyone on Earth dies, and he'll probably stack the bodies and climb up to Luna."

"Last man standing," Holden said, but he headed back to the medical bay with his heart a little less buoyant. Naomi was gone, the needle that had been in her arm resting on the gel of the bed and the expert system gently

prompting someone to intervene. Holden, the bulb of tea in his hand, checked the head and the galley before he thought to go back to the crew quarters.

She was on their bed, her knees curled up toward her chest, her eyes closed, her hair spilling over the gel. She snored a little, soft animal sounds of peace and contentment. Holden put the tea on the desk beside her so that it would be there waiting when she woke.



The ops deck was quiet, relatively speaking. Gor Droga, one of the weapons techs, was at a workstation, monitoring the ship and listening to something that had a beat on headphones. All Holden could hear of it was a slightly shifting bass line and an occasional phrase or two when Gor was moved to sing along. The lyrics were in something close to French without actually being French.

The lights were low, most of the illumination coming from the monitors. Holden didn't have a pair of headphones close to hand, so he just kept the volume low and watched Monica Stuart being interviewed. The man she was talking to was based on an L5 station, but the transmission gaps had all been edited out to make it seem like they were in the same room.

"No, it doesn't surprise me at all that the OPA would assist in escorting Prime Minister Smith. Fred Johnson has been vocal and active for years in bringing the OPA into the diplomatic discussion, often against resistance from the inner planets. If anything, I think there's a real irony in the fact that this series of attacks by the Free Navy have been the catalyst to cementing the OPA's legitimacy with Earth and Mars."

The camera cut to the interviewer. "So you don't see the Free Navy as a part of the OPA?"

And back to Monica. Holden chuckled. She'd changed her blouse between questions. He wondered what the lag had been like before it got edited down for the feed. "Not at all. The Free Navy is interesting in part because it gives the radical fringe of the OPA a different banner to raise. It represents a sort of self-selected culling of the elements that have kept the Belt from being better respected by the inner planets. And keep in mind,

Mars and Earth weren't the only targets of the Free Navy's coup. Tycho Station is as big a success story as Ceres for Belters, and it was attacked too."

"Other pundits are calling that a changing of the guard within the OPA, though. Why do you see it as something external?"

Monica nodded sagely. It was a well-practiced motion, and it worked to make her seem intelligent and thoughtful but still approachable. There was an artistry in what she did.

"Well, Michael, sometimes when we make these distinctions, we're really creating them more than describing anything that's already there. We're seeing a very broad realignment on more than one side. It seems clear that elements in the Martian military have been involved with supplying the Free Navy, and also that Prime Minister Smith was their target. So would we call that a rogue element on Mars, or an internal power struggle? In fact, I think the best description we can probably make at this point isn't in terms of UN and Martian Republic and OPA, but the traditional system being brought together in the face of this new threat. This situation grows out of a deep history of conflict, but there are new lines being drawn here."

Fred chuckled. Holden hadn't heard him come up, but there he was, looking over Holden's shoulder. Holden paused the feed as Fred took a couch across from him.

"You can always tell your media relations team is doing their job when the journalists are down to interviewing each other," Fred said.

"I think she's doing good work," Holden said. "She's at least trying to put this all in a context where it makes sense."

"She's also rebranding herself as an expert on me personally. And you, for that matter."

"Okay, that is a little weird. Any other news I should know about?"

Fred glanced over at Gor, scowled, then leaned over and tapped the man's shoulder. Gor took off the headphones.

"Take a break," Fred said. "We'll make sure she's solid."

"Yes, sir," Gor said. "Be aware that this close to the corona, we're building up a little heat."

"We'll keep an eye on it."

Gor unstrapped and slid down the ladder. Fred watched him go with a

wistful smile. "I remember when I could take a ladder that way. Been a few years, though."

"I don't anymore either."

"Thus does age make cowards of us all. Or maybe that's conscience," Fred said, and heaved a sigh. "Inaros and his ships haven't made it as far as Saturn's orbit yet, and piracy in the outer planets is spiking. The colony ships are well supplied, under-armed, and there are a lot of them."

"They weren't expecting a civil war."

"Is that what this is?"

"Isn't it?"

"Well. Maybe. I've been talking to Smith. I don't suppose Alex and Bobbie overheard much of what he was doing on the *Razorback*?"

Holden leaned forward. "I don't think they were spying on him, no. Were you thinking they would?"

"I was hoping your man might have. This Draper woman's too much the patriot. So, without outside confirmation, Smith's story is that there's a breakdown in the naval command. Might just be that someone's been selling a great chunk of their ordnance to Inaros. Might be there was another actor who was willing to swap out."

"For the protomolecule," Holden said. "That was the price of all this, wasn't it?"

"No one knows it's missing aside from you, me, Drummer's men, and whoever took it. I'll keep it quiet as long as I can, but when we get to Luna, I think I have to tell Smith and Avasarala."

"Of course you do," Holden said. "Why wouldn't you tell them?"

Fred blinked. His laugh, when it came, was deep and rolling. It came up from his belly and filled the air. "Just when I think you've changed, you come out with something that is uniquely James Holden. I don't know what to think about you. I really don't."

"Thanks?"

"Welcome," Fred said. And a moment later, "There are ships burning for the gates. Martian military ships. It would help me a great deal to know if they answered to Inaros or to someone else."

"Like the one who got the protomolecule sample?"

"Anyone, really. I want to talk to Nagata."

The atmosphere between them went cool. "You want to interrogate her."

“I do.”

“And you’re asking my permission?”

“It seemed polite.”

“I’ll talk to her about it when she’s recovered a little more,” Holden said.

“Couldn’t ask for anything more,” Fred said, heaving himself to his feet. At the edge of the ladder, he paused. Holden watched him consider sliding down the sides the way Gor had. He watched Fred decide not to. Rung by rung, Fred climbed down out of the ops deck, shutting the hatch behind him. Holden turned the feed back on, and then off again. His head felt filled with cotton.

He’d been so focused for so long on distracting himself from Naomi’s absence, now she was back, he felt almost overwhelmed. Monica was right. Things had changed, and he didn’t know anymore what his place was in them. Even if he turned away from Fred and Avasarala and the politics of his own minor celebrity, what could an independent ship do in this new, remade solar system? Were there banks that would be able to pay him if he took a job flying cargo to the Jovian moons? And the colonists that had already gone through the rings to new, alien worlds? Would the Free Navy really stop resupply from getting out to them, and the raw materials and discoveries they made from getting back?

More than anything, the attacks seemed inevitable and petty. If the inner planets hadn’t spent generations showing the Belters that they were disposable, there might have been some way... some way to adapt their skills and lifestyles into this larger human expansion. A way to draw all humanity forward, and not just part of it.

And how long would Inaros and people like him really be able to keep the flood of colonists out? Or maybe there was still something more, some layer of the plan that they hadn’t seen yet? The idea filled him with something he decided to call dread because that was a better name than fear.

The monitor chimed. Alex, requesting a connection. Holden accepted it gratefully.

“Hey there, Cap’n,” Alex said through a grin. “How’re you doing?”

“Fine, I think. Just killing some time away from the cabin so I don’t wake Naomi up. I figure she’ll be asleep for twelve, fourteen hours.”

“You’re a good man,” Alex said.

“You?”

“I’ve been showin’ your temporary pilot all the ways he could have beaten me to the *Chetzemoka* if he’d thought of them.”

“Be nice,” Holden said, but he didn’t really mean it. “Where are you? I’ll come join you.”

“Engineering,” Alex said. “Which was part of why I wanted to talk to you. I just got some good news from Luna.”

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Chapter Forty-nine: Amos

Loading mechs moved pallets of gray or white plastic crates along the length of the Aldrin docks and drowned out the jabber of human voices with the clanks and whirring of machines. Stokes and the other refugees from Rattlesnake Island were in a huddle along one gray wall, trying to only block the cart traffic a little bit while a civil servant with an oversized terminal processed them one at a time. The security force in black armor stood arrayed before the lock to the *Zhang Guo*, scowling. The wall screen was set to look outside at that truck-tire gray moonscape.

Chrisjen Avasarala's red sari stood out, a vibrant spot of color, and her voice cut through the clamor like it wasn't there.

"What the fuck do you mean we can't go on the ship?" she said.

"No warrant," Amos said. "Nobody's getting on my boat here without a warrant."

Avasarala tilted her head, then looked at the woman in charge of the security squad.

"Seeing that you and he seemed to have an understanding, ma'am," the security chief said, "I didn't want to press the point."

Avasarala waved her hand impatiently like she was fanning away smoke. "Burton, for one thing, that's not your fucking ship."

"Sure it is," Amos said. "Salvage."

"No. When you break into someone's private hangar and drive out in their ship, it's not salvage. That's still theft."

"You sure about that? Because it was looking awfully busted up down there. I'm pretty sure that was salvage."

"For another thing, we're under martial law, so I can do very nearly whatever the fuck I want. Including march through your precious little ship

there towing you along behind in a ball gag and lacy underwear. So your warrant bullshit? You can roll that up and fuck it. Now tell me why I'm here."

"You know just 'cause you can do something, it doesn't mean you should. I don't look great in frills."

She crossed her arms. "Why am I here, Amos?"

Amos scratched his cheek and looked back at the *Zhang Guo*. Stokes and the servants were all out, but Erich and Peaches and the crew from Baltimore were all still inside. Some of them, including Erich, were either living under fake identities or weren't in the system at all.

"Here's the thing," Amos said. "If you did go in there, you might feel like you had to do something. And then I might feel like I had to do something. And then we'd all be doing things, and we'd all wind up having a worse day, just in general."

Avasarala's face went calm, her eyes focused a few centimeters to Amos' left. The security chief started to say something, but Avasarala put out a palm to stop her. After a few seconds, Avasarala grunted, shook her head, and turned to the security force. "You can skip this one. Go get a beer instead or something. It's all right."

"Yes, ma'am," the security chief said.

"Burton? You make goddamned sure there isn't any trouble from this, and you get her the fuck off my moon without anyone seeing her."

"You got it, Chrissie."

"Don't fucking call me that. I'm the acting secretary-general of the United Nations, not your favorite stripper."

Amos spread his hands. "Could be room for both."

Avasarala's laughter rang out through the dock. The security force broke up, moved on. The loading mechs repositioned. The carts continued on their various paths, busy as a kicked anthill. "I'm glad you made it," she said when she regained herself. "The universe would be less interesting without you."

"Likewise. How's the recovery going?"

"It sucks donkey balls," she said, shaking her head. "We're still losing thousands of people every day. Maybe tens of thousands. The food's running out down there, and even if I had enough rice to feed them all, the infrastructure's so fucked there's no good way to distribute it. Not to

mention that there could still be more of those fucking rocks dropping anytime.”

“Your kid okay?”

“Ashanti and her family are fine. They’re here on Luna already. Thank you for asking.”

“And your guy? Arjun?”

Avasarala smiled, and it didn’t reach her eyes. “I remain optimistic,” she said. “The *Rocinante* is on its way. You’ll have something to ride on that doesn’t make your cock look as small as that gaudy turd.”

“That’s good to hear. This boat’s not my style anyway.”

Avasarala turned away, shuffling awkwardly into the crowd. The low gravity didn’t seem natural to her. He figured she probably hadn’t spent all that much of her life up the well. Space was an acquired skill. Amos stretched, rolled on the balls of his feet, and waited until the last of the security force was out of sight. Chances were pretty slim they were going to press the issue once they’d been slapped down, but he still felt better watching them get gone.

While he was waiting, two Belters in Aldrin dockworker uniforms scurried by staying close together, their heads bowed. Luna was going to be a shitty, shitty place to be a Belter for a while, Amos thought. Still, it probably hadn’t been that great before. He headed back to the *Zhang Guo*, and the entry lock opened as he got close to it, welcoming him back in.

The ship’s interior was ugly as hell. The anti-spalling in the corridors was deep red and fake-velvet fuzzy with gold fleur-de-lis scattered over them in a weird, non-repeating pattern. The hatchways were enameled in royal blue and gold. Oversized crash couches were all over the place—in the corners of rooms, in niches in the hallways. The air recyclers added the stink of sandalwood incense without the smoke. All told, the ship was the embodiment of a stereotypical whorehouse done by a designer who’d never been to a real one. The security station was perfunctory, poorly designed, and barely stocked, but Erich’s people were placed around it as well as they could manage. Even Butch, still in pressure bandages, had a rifle with fresh rounds trained down the hallway.

“Hey,” Amos said. “We’re cool. They’re not coming in.”

The release of tension was like a soft breeze, if soft breezes came with the sounds of magazines getting pulled from assault rifles.

“Okay,” Erich said, lifting a pistol in his good hand. “Tyce. Police up all the guns. Joe and Kin, put a watch on the lock. I don’t want to be surprised if anyone shows up unexpected.”

“They won’t,” Amos said. “But hey, knock yourselves out.”

“You got a minute?” Erich said, handing the pistol to a thick-necked man who Amos figured was Tyce.

“Sure,” Amos said. They fell into step, ambling toward the lift.

“That was really the woman who’s running Earth now?”

“Until she lets ’em have an election, I guess. I never really paid much attention to how that whole thing works.”

Erich made a soft, noncommittal grunt. His bad arm was curled up against his chest, the tiny fist tight. His good hand was stuffed deep in his pocket. Both made him look like something was eating him.

“And you... You know her. Like asking-favors know her.”

“Yup.”

At the lift, Erich punched for the ops deck. It wasn’t where Amos meant to go, but it seemed like the conversation was leading toward something, so he went with it. The lift made a stuttering start, then rose gently past the high-ceilinged decks.

“I can’t tell if this thing’s a ship or a fucking throw pillow,” Amos said.

“Wouldn’t know,” Erich said. “It’s the first one I’ve been in.”

“Seriously?”

“Never been out of atmosphere before. The low-gravity thing. That’s weird.”

Amos bounced gently on his toes. It was only about a sixth of a g. He hadn’t really thought about it much. “You get used to it.”

“You did, anyway,” Erich said. “So how did you meet her?”

“We got in over our heads on some shit, and some folks she was against were trying to kill us. She came in and tried to keep us alive.”

“So now you’re friends.”

“Friendly acquaintances,” Amos said. “I don’t have all that many what you’d call friends.”

The lift stopped with a small lurch that it really shouldn’t have had. The ops deck was all dark surfaces, the decking a deep chocolate brown, the walls an artificial wood grain, the consoles and couches lined in fake leather. Or hell, maybe real leather. It wasn’t like he knew the difference to

look at. Erich lowered himself into one of the couches and ran his good hand over his scalp.

“You know,” he said. “You couldn’t have done this without us. Me and your prisoner friend. And now the head of the fucking government, which excuse me if that still breaks my head a little.”

“Well, I—”

“No, I know you would have done something. Just not this. You couldn’t have done this exact thing. This plan? For it, you needed to have us. All of us. And the only thing we had in common was you.”

Amos sat across from him. Erich wouldn’t meet his eyes straight on.

“*Plan*’s kind of a strong word for it,” he said. “I was just grabbing whatever I could.”

“Yeah, the thing is you had things to grab. I spent a lot of years in Baltimore. Know it like the back of my hand. Knew it. Now, I’ve got all my best people here and no fucking clue what here looks like, you know? Who controls the drugs around here? How do you fake an ID? I mean, I figure that underlying logic’s the same anywhere, but...”

Erich stared at the wall like there was something to see there. Amos craned his neck to look, just to be sure.

“I don’t know what we do from here. I don’t know what I do from here. I’ve got people counting on me to get them through the queen of all churns, and I don’t know where to take them or what we’re gonna do.”

“Yeah, that sucks.”

“You do,” Erich said.

“I suck?”

“You *know*. You’ve been out here. This? All this? It’s your neighborhood. You know people. You know how things work. You know how to keep people alive.”

“You may be overestimating the amount of time I’ve put into analyzing stuff,” Amos said. “I got one ship and three people. That’s been kind of a handful. All the rest of this just happened along the way.”

“But it got us here.” Erich shifted his gaze. His eyes were hard. “I’ve got enough cash squirreled away that if I get access to it, I might be able to buy a small ship. Not a good one, but something. Or relocate the team somewhere. One of the Lagrange stations or Pallas or... wherever. Start over. Make a new niche. If you want to take the lead, I’ll give it up.”

“Oh,” Amos said. “Yeah, no.”

“They’d be better off with you leading than with me.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know them enough to give a shit. I’ve got my own thing going. I’m sticking with it.”

He couldn’t tell if the release in Erich’s eyes was relief or disappointment. Maybe both. Lydia would have known. Or Naomi. Or Holden. Alex, probably. For him, it was just a little change in muscle tension. Could have meant anything.

“I’ll find my own way then,” Erich said. “We’ll be out of here in a couple days, if I can manage it.”

“Okay, then,” Amos said. It felt like there should be something more. He’d known Erich as long as he’d known anyone alive. Even if they saw each other again a time or two, the conversation they’d just had was the mark of the end. Both of their lives could have looked a lot different if Amos had said a few different words. It seemed like there should have been something to say about that. But since he couldn’t come up with anything, he went back to the lift and headed down for the machine shop.

Going to the technical end of the *Zhang Guo*—the places where the owners and their guests wouldn’t spend their time—was like stepping into a different ship. All the glitter and beauty gave way to a clean utilitarian design that wasn’t as good as the *Roci*, but better than any other ship Amos had worked. All the corners were curved and softened in expectation of impacts. All the handholds were double-bolted. The drawers and cabinets in the machine shop were latched in two planes. The air smelled like fresh filters and lubricant. Someone had kept the place clean and in better order than a glorified orbital shuttle really deserved. Amos wondered if whoever that had been was still alive. It wasn’t a question he could answer, though, so he didn’t spend a lot of energy on it.

Peaches was sitting at a workbench. The outfit they’d gotten during their bike trip to Baltimore looked pretty sketchy in the clean and tidy surroundings. Torn at the shoulder and still too big for her. She looked like she was swimming in it. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail with a zip tie and her hands were moving quickly and carefully over an open case of modular electronics. Her movements were as precise and flowing as an old recording of a piano player at the keys. She didn’t look up as he came in, but she smiled.

“Got something for you. Salvaged a hand terminal. Nice one. Even got it talking to the local network. Finish the configuration, and you’re good to go.”

Amos pulled the seat next to her out from the body of the ship. She handed him the terminal, but still didn’t meet his eyes.

“According to Chrissie, it ain’t salvage.”

“I liberated one, then. I was going to get one myself, but I can’t. I’ve got nothing to connect to.”

“Could use it like a disposable,” Amos said, starting to key his configuration information. “Get you access to feeds anyway.”

“Does it matter?”

“Well, if you don’t think it does, then maybe not.”

She sighed. There were tears in her eyes and a smile on her face. “We did it. We made it safely to Luna. Just like we hoped.”

“Yeah.”

“You know what I really missed when I was in the Pit? Anything that actually meant anything. They fed me, and they kept me alive, and we had this kind of support group thing where we could talk about our childhood traumas and shit. But I couldn’t do anything that mattered. I couldn’t work. I couldn’t talk to people outside the prison. I was just being and being and being until sooner or later, I’d die and they’d put someone else in my cell.”

She leaned forward, her elbows on the workbench. She’d burned the side of her thumb on something—a soldering iron, the barrel of a gun, something—and the skin was smooth and pink and painful-looking. “I won’t go back there.”

“Peaches, there’s no there to go back to. And anyway, I’m pretty sure Chrissie knows you’re on board here. She’s not pushing the issue, so as long as we stay cool and act casual—”

Her laugh was short and bitter. “Then what? You can’t take me with you anymore, Amos. I can’t go on the *Rocinante*. I tried to kill Holden. I tried to kill all of you. And I did kill people. Innocent people. That’s never going away.”

“In my shop, that’s just fitting in,” Amos said. “I appreciate that seeing the crew again could leave you feeling a little antsy, but we all know what you are. What you did. Including all the shit you did to us. This isn’t new territory. We’ll talk it through. Work something out.”

“I’m just afraid that if he doesn’t back your play, they’ll send me back, and—”

Amos lifted a hand. “You’re missing some shit here, Peaches. Lot of folks seem to be. Let me lay this out again. There’s no back, and it ain’t just the real estate. The government that put you in prison only sort of exists anymore. The planet that put you in prison is going to be having billions of people die in the next little bit. Making sure you serve your whole term doesn’t mean shit to them. There’s a new Navy between us and the Ring, and there’s still a thousand solar systems out there to fuck up the way we fucked up this one. Because what you’re doing right now? Yeah, you’re worrying about how it would go for you if none of that happened. And I’m thinking that you’re doing it because you’re not looking at the facts.”

“What facts?”

“It ain’t like that anymore.”

“What isn’t?”

“Any of it,” Amos said. “With Earth puking itself to death and Mars a ghost town, everything’s up for grabs. Who owns what. Who *decides* who owns what. How money works. Who gets to send people to prison. Erich just called it the queen of all churns, and he ain’t wrong about that. It’s a new game, and—”

His hand terminal chimed. Amos looked at it. The design was nicer than his old one, but the interface was a little different. It took him a few seconds to figure out what the alert meant. He whistled between his teeth.

“What is it?” Peaches asked.

He turned the screen toward her. “Seventy messages and twenty-three connection requests. Going back to before the rock dropped.”

“Who from?”

Amos looked at the list. “Alex, mostly. A few from the captain. Fuck. I got six hours of stored video with just Alex trying to talk to me.”

Peaches’ smile was thin, but it was a smile. “At least you have people.”

Chapter Fifty: Alex

A bicycle?”

Amos leaned on the breakfast bar. “Sure. They don’t need fuel, they don’t get sick. Most of the repairs, you can handle on your own. You’re looking for post-apocalyptic transportation, bikes are the way to go.”

Alex sipped his beer. It was a local brew from a pub just down the corridor with a rich hoppy flavor and a reddish color. “I guess I never thought about it that way.”

The suite on Luna was bigger than their rooms on Tycho Station had been, but of the same species. Four bedrooms opened onto a wide, recessed common area. A wall screen bent around the curve of the room, set to an idealized lunar landscape that was more photogenic than the real one. Every now and then, an animated “alien” girl would pop out from behind a rock, look surprised, and dart away again. It was cute, he supposed, but he would have preferred the real moonscape.

“So anyway, I didn’t want to go through Washington. Too many people there, and if the pumps stopped working, I didn’t want to be pedaling through knee-high sludge, right?”

“Right,” Alex said.

Holden was on the *Rocinante*. Naomi was asleep in her room. She’d been sleeping a lot since the *Rocinante* had plucked them all out of the vacuum. The medical system said she was getting better and that the rest was good. It worried Alex, though. Not because she needed the sleep, but because maybe she didn’t actually need it and was pretending to. Being here with Holden and Amos and Naomi was a bone-deep relief. He wanted it to be the end of their separation, everything come back into its right place like nothing had ever happened.

But it wasn't. Even talking to Amos, Alex thought he could feel little differences in the man. A kind of abstraction, like he was thinking of something else all the time and only pretending to give Alex his undivided attention. Naomi had been in medical debriefing since they'd arrived, and the physicians hadn't allowed anyone in to see her except Holden. If Naomi was finding excuses to stay isolated from them, that could be a very bad sign. They still didn't know all of what she'd been through that she'd wound up with the Free Navy and then escaped from it, but that it had been a trauma seemed obvious. And so he tried to enjoy the peace and pleasure of having his crew again and ignore the anxiety growing in the back of his mind, the sense that—just like with the governments and planets and system of the solar system—things here had changed.

Amos' hand terminal chirped. He sucked down half a glass of beer then bared his teeth. "I gotta go do a thing."

"All right," Alex said, pouring the rest of his beer into the sink. "Where are we going?"

Amos hesitated, but only for a fraction of a second. "Dock. Got something I need to move into my shop."

"Great," Alex said. "Let's go."

The stations on Luna were the oldest non-terrestrial habitation humanity had. They sprawled across the face of the moon and sank below its surface. The lights set into the walls glowed with a warm yellow and splashed across vaulted ceilings. The gravity—even lighter here than on Mars or Ceres or Tycho—felt strange and pleasant, like a ship ambling on without being in a rush to get anywhere. It was almost possible to forget the tragedy still playing out a little under four hundred thousand clicks over their heads. Almost, but not quite.

Amos went on about everything that had happened while he was down the well, and Alex listened with half his attention. The details of the story would be grist for a hundred conversations once they were back in the ship and going somewhere. It didn't matter that he get all of it now, and the familiar cadences of Amos' voice were like hearing a song he liked and hadn't listened to in a long time.

At the dock, Amos looked up and down the halls until he saw someone he knew sitting on a plastic storage crate. The crate was blue with white curls of scrapes along the side like a painting of waves. The woman was

thickly built with black cornrows, dark brown skin, and an arm in a cast.

“Hey, Butch,” Amos said.

“Big man,” the woman said. She didn’t acknowledge Alex at all. “This is this.”

“Thanks, then.”

The woman nodded and walked off, her low-g shuffle a little stiffer than the people around her. Amos rented a loading mech, grabbed the crate, and started for the *Roci*, Alex trotting along beside him.

“Should I ask what’s in that?” Alex said.

“Probably not,” Amos said. “So anyway, there we are on this island where all the rich people used to be before they fucked off up the well, right? And the ships are pretty much not there...”

The *Rocinante* had an actual hangar bay complete with atmosphere, not just a space on a pad and a tube to her airlocks. The new outer hull was titanium alloy and ceramic, the polished metal and flat black paint of the hull studded with PDCs and sensor arrays. The maw of the keel-mounted rail gun was like a little surprised *o* at her bow. In the artificial light of the hangar, she looked less dramatic than she had in the unfiltered light of the sun, but no less beautiful. Her scars were gone now, but it didn’t make the ship seem less herself. Amos drove the mech to the aft airlock and cycled it open without breaking the slow, easy lope of his story. Inside, Amos lowered the crate to the deck, but didn’t turn on the electromagnetic clamps that would hold it there. Instead, he slipped out of the mech and went into the ship itself. Engineering, cargo bay, the machine shop. The stern had always been Amos’ domain.

“So those others,” Amos said. “Johnson’s people? They’re done messing with my shit now, right?”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “She’s ours again. Just ours.”

“Good.” Amos shuffled into the cargo bay.

“So the servants, the maids and chauffeurs and whatever,” Alex said. “They called security and then they just changed sides? Or... I mean how did that work?”

“Well,” Amos said, popping the latches on the crate. “We had an introduction, see?”

The folds of the crate’s lid rose of their own accord. Alex jumped back, misjudged the gravity, stumbled. A dark-haired head came up over the

crate's edge, a thin ghost-pale face with ink-black eyes. Alex's heart started going triple time. Clarissa Mao, psychopath and murderer, smiled at him tentatively.

"Hey," she said.

Alex took a long, shuddering breath. "Ah. Hey?"

"See?" Amos said, clapping the girl's shoulder. "Told you it wouldn't be a problem."



"You have to tell him," Alex said, keeping his voice low. Bobbie was telling Holden about the work she'd been doing with veterans' affairs in Londres Nova, so he wasn't paying attention to them.

"I'm gonna," Amos said.

"You have to tell him now. She's on our ship."

Amos shrugged. "She was on our ship for months when we were coming back from the slow zone."

"She was a prisoner. Because of all the people she killed. And now she's on our ship by herself."

"I'll give you that does make this situation a little different," Amos said.

"Is there a problem?" Holden asked. "What are we talking about?"

"Little something I wanted to run past you," Amos said. "It'll wait until after the dog and pony show."

The meeting room in the security compound was built in an outdated architectural fashion: open archways and wide, sky-blue ceilings with indirect light and subtle geometric patterning. Everything about it was pointedly artificial, like the idea of an afternoon courtyard without the afternoon or the courtyard. Avasarala's voice came before she did, staccato and impatient. When she stepped through one of the archways, a young, seriously dressed man at her side, Bobbie stood up. Holden followed her lead.

"—if they want a voice in the decision. We're not going to fuck around bullshit electoral posturing."

"Yes, ma'am," the young man said.

Avasarala waved that they should sit back down as she took her own

seat even as she kept talking to her assistant. “Take it to Kleinmann first. Once he’s behind me, Castro and Najjar will have the cover they need.”

“If you say so, ma’am.”

“If I say so?”

The assistant inclined his head. “With permission, Chung is in a stronger position than Kleinmann.”

“Are you second-guessing me, Martinez?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Avasarala shrugged. “Chung, then. Now go.” As the young man left, she turned her attention to them. “Thank you all for—Where’s Nagata?”

“Medical bay,” Holden said. “The doctors are still deciding whether she’s stable enough to release.”

Avasarala hoisted an eyebrow and tapped a message onto her hand terminal. “They can make a fucking exception. I want her here. Thank most of you for coming. I’d beat around the bush and make everyone feel at home, but I’ve been in meetings for the last thirty-six hours, and I’m cranky. We’re all clear that Earth is fucked, yes?”

“Hell yeah,” Amos said.

“Good,” Avasarala said. “Then I won’t belabor the point. Along with that, the Martian Navy just shattered into tiny little pieces and Smith’s too scared to call it treason.”

“Can I ask,” Bobbie said, sitting forward. Her hands, splayed on the table, seemed like she was trying to brace herself against a blow. “How bad does that look?”

“We’re not making any official statements, especially when James Holden’s in the room. No offense, but your track record for blurting information at inopportune moments is the stuff of legend.”

“I’m getting better about that,” Holden said. “But yeah. I understand.”

“There’s a thing that happens,” Avasarala said, “when unthinkable things become thinkable. We’re in a moment of chaos. Everything’s up for grabs. Legitimacy itself is up for grabs. That’s where we are now. This turd biscuit Inaros? He’s out tooling around the Jovian moons where we can watch him play pirate. He’s made his play to set the narrative. The Belt has risen up after generations of oppression, and is now taking its rightful wah, wah, wah. The position I’m in—”

“He’s not wrong, though,” Holden said, and Avasarala’s eyes hardened.

If looks could kill, Holden would have left in a bag, but he shook his head. “If the Belters fall in line with this Free Navy thing, it’s going to be because they’re all out of any other kind of hope. The new systems and colonies—”

“Have erased their niche,” Avasarala said. “And that’s shitty, and maybe we could have found a way to support them. Put them on some kind of cooperative basic, but they put a cherry bomb up the ass of the largest functioning ecosphere in the system, and it’s going to be a while before handing them free food’s going to be an option for me, practically or politically.”

“They’re never going to shut up and take handouts,” Amos said. “Those bastards are three, four generations out there because they weren’t looking to live on basic. I’m against eugenics same as the next guy, but the Belt hasn’t been breeding for the kind of people who just kick back and see how much they can fuck and watch entertainment feeds before they die.”

“I’m aware of the cultural problem,” Avasarala said. “And as I said, it doesn’t fucking matter anyway. If they’d be willing to take it, I still couldn’t give it to them. So I have to find another way to cut the Free Navy off at the knees. But since Earth’s navy is going to be busy making sure we don’t have any more radar-invisible rocks dropping on us and Mars is in the process of ignoring that it’s suffered a minor coup, it’s going to be tricky. Tomorrow, I’m going to make an announcement. You get a preview. Lucky you.

“The United Nations, with assistance from the Mars Republic and cooperation from the OPA, is going to field a task force to address the criminal conspiracy of pirates and terrorists going under the Free Navy name. Not a war. A policing task force. And that’s where you all come into play.”

“You want me to lead it,” Holden said.

“Yes,” Avasarala said, “because literally every UN naval officer who wasn’t dishonorably discharged is suddenly unavailable. For fuck’s sake, Holden, I have crates of anti-herpes drugs that are more legitimately UN Navy than you are.”

The old woman shook her head in disbelief and disgust. Holden’s scowl was matched by a rising blush. Bobbie tried to hide her laughter, but Alex had to admit it was a little funny. Even if just to himself. Bobbie was the one to step in.

“What exactly are you looking for from us?”

“I want your presence and cooperation at the debriefing, for one thing. But more importantly, I need to know what you know. What you’ve found. We have to figure out how a third-rate gang leader managed to beat us at every turn—”

“He didn’t,” Naomi said, stepping in from under the spreading arches, a security escort at her side. In the shadowless light, she looked weirdly delicate. Her skin was peeling and she moved with the careful shifting of someone prepared for pain to come at any moment. But her sclera had faded from the blood-and-bone color to an ivory yellow that actually looked healthier, and her voice had lost the slushiness at its edges. A weight lifted from Alex’s heart.

“The prisoner, ma’am,” the security escort said.

“Yes, thank you, I noticed that,” Avasarala said, then turned her attention to Naomi. “What do you mean he didn’t?”

“Look at everything he tried to do and failed. He didn’t kill Fred Johnson. He didn’t kill Prime Minister Smith. He didn’t take Tycho Station or destroy it. The *Rocinante*’s in one piece. He didn’t keep hold of me. It’s how he works. If he wins, it was the important thing. If he loses, it just disappears.”

“And the protomolecule sample that he stole?”

Naomi blinked, seemed to lose focus for a moment, and shook her head. “He never said anything about that.”

“Would he have?”

Naomi sat in the chair beside Holden. He took her hand, and she allowed it, but her attention was on Avasarala. Alex wasn’t sure why that bothered him so much. The meeting wasn’t an invitation for the two of them to work out their relationship status. And still, if she’d been just a little less guarded with him...

“Yes,” Naomi said. “He would have. He likes to brag.” The intimacy of that one piece of information filled Alex’s chest with a sense of deep foreboding. Holden’s face was calm. Unreadable.

“Good,” Avasarala said, a sharpness in her voice. “That’s very good to know.” She considered Naomi silently. “You look like you’re feeling better. You heard some of what I was saying?”

“Enough of it,” Naomi said.

“Are you going to be able to help us?”

The question hung in the air, rich with nuance and complicated importance. Not *Why were you on his ship*. Not *How do you know him*. Not *Who are you to him that he brags about his plans to you*. Just, *Are you going to be able to help?*

“You okay?” Amos murmured.

“What? I’m fine,” she replied.

“Because you’re kinda fidgeting,” Amos said at the same time Naomi said, “I want immunity from prosecution.”

The air seemed to go out of the room. It wasn’t a confession, but it painted a picture that none of them had wanted to admit might be possible. To ask for immunity was an admission of guilt, even if they didn’t know what she was guilty of.

Avasarala’s smile was indulgent and friendly and, he was almost certain, deceptive. “Blanket immunity?”

“For all of us.”

“Who is ‘all of us’?” Avasarala said, forming the words carefully as she said them. “Your friends in the Free Navy?”

“The crew of the *Rocinante*,” Naomi said, and then stuttered. Paused. “And maybe one other person.”

Alex shot a look at Amos. Did she know about Clarissa? Was that who she meant? Amos’ smile was amiable and empty. Avasarala tapped her fingernails against the table.

“Not for Earth,” Avasarala said. “Dropping the rocks? No one gets immunity for that.”

Alex saw it hit. Tears appeared in Naomi’s eyes, brimming silver and bright. “The crew of the *Rocinante*,” she said. “The other one... I may ask for clemency and consideration later on. If the occasion arises.”

“For Inaros?”

“No,” Naomi said. “Him, you can fucking burn.”

“I need to understand this fully,” Avasarala said. “You, as a former member of Inaros’ group, are willing to exchange complete and accurate information about his activities both before and after the bombardment of Earth in exchange for blanket immunity for the crew of the *Rocinante* on any matter not related to the present attacks?” That there had been no profanity in the statement gave it a solidity that unnerved Alex.

“Yes,” Naomi said. “That’s right.”

The relief on Avasarala’s face was hard as flint. “Glad to hear you say that, dear. I was worried I’d misjudged you.” She rose to her feet, then grabbed at the table, cursing under her breath. “I miss weighing something. Half the time, I feel like I’m on a fucking trampoline. I’m going to go lie down and take a sleeping pill before I have a psychotic break, but the debriefing? It starts in the morning.”

“We’ll be wherever you want us to be,” Holden said. “We’re not going to hide anything.” He was still holding Naomi’s hand, and her fingers had curled around his. So maybe that was hopeful after all. As to not hiding anything... Well, Amos still didn’t say anything.

The meeting broke up, except that it also didn’t. Avasarala left, but the rest of them, including Bobbie, went to the security lobby, through the checkpoint, and out to the public lobby together. The sober silence gave way slowly to more mundane conversation: whether there was anyplace with food better than the mess on the *Roci*. Or if not better, at least different. Whether Naomi was up to drinking alcohol, because there was a little pub on one of the lower levels that was supposed to have some pretty good beers on offer. No one asked whether Bobbie was joining them. It was just assumed. As they shuffled and bounced in the thin gravity, Naomi and Holden kept hold of each other’s hands. Amos and Bobbie traded dirty jokes. It was the powerfully ordinary talk that gave Alex hope. For everything that had happened, that was happening, that was still looming in the unseen and uncertain future, there were still moments like these. And so maybe it would be all right despite it all.

At the wide slope of Chandrayaan Plaza, where the traffic of carts and mechs and half-skipping people turned down a wide ramp deeper into the body of the moon, Amos cleared his throat.

“So that immunity for the crew thing?”

“It wasn’t just for you,” Naomi said, making it a joke, and also not one.

“Yeah, figured,” Amos said. “But here’s the thing. I was thinking about maybe taking on an apprentice. You know, help flesh out the crew. Get some skill redundancy.”

“That’s a good idea,” Holden said. “Did you have someone in mind?”

Chapter Fifty-one: Naomi

Hell no,” Jim said when they were alone in the suite. “Absolutely no. No fucking way, no. There have got to be a billion different ways to say no, and I’d still have to cycle through them a couple times to really express the depth of no on this one. Clarissa Mao? On the *Roci*? How is that anything but a massive load of let’s-not-do-that?”

“And yet,” she said, letting herself drift down to the bed, “you told Amos you’d think about it.”

Jim tried pacing, but the slight lunar gravity made it difficult for him. He gave up and sat at the foot of the bed.

“We just got the crew back together. And Bobbie was there. I didn’t want to spoil the moment.”

“Ah. The moment.”

She closed her eyes. Everything hurt. Her skin hurt. Her eyes felt gritty and swollen. The joints in her hands and feet ached. Her knees hurt. Her fingertips felt raw and oversensitive. She had the kind of headache that expressed as a sense of profound fragility until she moved too fast, and then it throbbed. It was better now than it had been, though. And it would get better. Slowly, over the course of at least days and maybe weeks, she’d come back to herself. Or some version of herself. But even if some of the damage was permanent, she’d feel better than she did now. Not yet, but soon.

Alex, Amos, and Bobbie were gone. Out to get beer and food. Their food. Pizza or falafel or sashimi. Earth food. There wasn’t any good red kibble on Luna, or if there was, it wouldn’t be served at the kinds of places they’d go. Part of her wished she’d had the energy to go with them. Part of her wished Jim had decided to join them instead of her. Part of her was

euphoric and on the edge of tears that she was here, that she'd escaped, that it was over. She felt like her soul was a handful of dice that were still rolling, and what came up would decide the shape that the rest of her life took.

"I mean... Clarissa Mao?" Jim said. "How does anyone think that's a good idea?"

"Amos isn't afraid of monsters," she said. The words tasted bitter, but not completely so. Or no, not bitter. Complex, though.

"She is responsible for a lot of dead people," Jim said. "She blew up the *Seung Un*. Took out a quarter of the crew. And that one body they found? The one she was carrying around in a toolbox? Do you remember that?"

"I do."

"That guy was a friend of hers. She wasn't just killing faceless enemies. She was right down, look-them-in-the-eyes killing people that she knew. That she *liked*. How do you go from that to 'I know, let's ship out with her'?"

She knew she should stop him. He wasn't talking about her or the *Augustín Gamarra* or any of the other ships that had been sabotaged since using the code she wrote. He wasn't talking about Cyn, or the way he'd tried to intervene in her half-staged suicide. If he had been, there would have been more. How could she abandon her son? How could she let Filip think that she'd killed herself? How could she have kept something that important hidden from the people she said she cared about? All the sins she carried that even Clarissa Mao didn't.

She knew she should stop him, but she didn't. His voice was like tearing back scabs. It hurt to hear, and it left her exposed and raw and painful to the touch, and the pain felt good. Worse, it felt right.

"I'm not saying she should be killed. That whole thing about how if she's ever going back to prison, Amos is going to shoot her? I understand that he's joking—"

"He's not."

"Okay, I'm pretending that he's joking, but I'm not advocating killing her. I don't want her to die. I don't even want her locked up in inhumane, shitty prisons. But that's not what we're talking about. Shipping with someone means literally trusting them with your life all the time. And, okay, I was on the *Canterbury*, and we had some people there who were

deeply, deeply sketchy. But even Byers only killed her husband. Clarissa Mao set out to destroy me in particular. Me. I just... I don't... How does anyone think this is a good idea? Someone who does the things she did doesn't just change."

She took a deep breath, pulling air into her bruised lungs. They still gurgled a little, but she was on enough reflex inhibitors that she wasn't coughing herself light-headed anymore. She didn't want to open her eyes, didn't want to talk. She opened her eyes, sat up, her back against the headboard, her arms wrapped around her knees. Holden went quiet, feeling the weight of what was about to come. Naomi plucked at her hair, pulling it over her eyes like a veil, then almost angrily, she smoothed it back so her eyes were clear.

"So," she said. "We need to talk."

"Captain to XO?" he asked, carefully.

She shook her head. "Naomi to Jim."

The dread that bloomed in his eyes hurt to see, but she'd also been expecting it. She felt its echo in her own chest. It was strange that after all she'd done—all the demons she'd faced and escaped—this should still be so hard. Holden's hand terminal chimed, and he didn't even look at the screen. The lines around his mouth deepened the way they did when he'd tasted something he didn't like. His hands folded together, strong, controlled, calm. She remembered the first time they'd met, lifetimes ago back on the *Canterbury*. How he'd radiated charm and certainty and how much she'd hated it at first. How much she'd hated him for being too much like Marco. And then how much she'd come to love him for not being like him at all.

And now, she would break her rule of silence, and the thing they had between them would either survive or it wouldn't. It was a terrible thought. Marco might still be able to empty her, and he wouldn't even have to spend the effort of being aware of it. Existing was enough.

"I don't," Jim said, then stopped. He looked up at her through his eyebrows, like he was the one feeling guilty for it all. "We all have pasts. We all have secrets. When you took off, I felt... lost. Confused. Like part of my brain was gone. And now that you're here, I am just profoundly happy to see you. This right here? It's enough."

"Are you saying you don't want to know?"

“Oh lord, no. No, I’d pretty much cut off a toe. I’m pretty much made of ragingly deep curiosity and floating jealousy. But I can deal with those. I don’t have any more right to make you tell me anything you don’t want to than I ever did. If there’s anything you don’t want to say—”

“I don’t want to say any of this,” Naomi said. “But I want you to know. And so we have to get through this part, no?”

Jim shifted, pulling his legs up under him, kneeling at the foot of the bed, his face to hers. His hair was the color of coffee with just a little cream. His eyes were blue as deep water. As evening sky was supposed to be.

“Then we’ll get through it,” he said with a simple, boundless optimism that caught her by surprise and drew out laughter, even here.

“Well,” she said. “When I was in my middle teens, I was living with a woman we called Tia Margolis and burning through the engineering courses on the networks as fast as I could, and there were ships that came through dock. Belter ships. Hard-core.”

Jim nodded, and then—to her surprise—it was easy. In her mind, the idea of unpacking her past to Jim—to anyone—was a thing of anger and disgust and recriminations. Or worse, of pity. Jim, who for all his faults was sometimes capable of perfection, listened carefully and completely. She had been Marco Inaros’ lover. She’d gotten pregnant young. She’d been involved—at first without knowing it—in the sabotage of inner planets ships. She had a son named Filip who had been taken from her as a way to control her. She described the dark thoughts, and realized it was very nearly the first time she’d talked about them openly, without a veil of ironic humor. *I tried to kill myself, but it didn’t work.* Just saying the words out loud felt like being in a dream. Or waking up from one.

And then, somehow in the depth of her confession, the baring of her blighted soul that was always supposed to be a trauma and a terror, it was just her and Jim having a conversation. She’d found a way to get a message out to him during the battle, and he told her about getting it, and the conversation he’d been having with Monica Stuart, and why he’d felt betrayed by her. And then backtracked to how she’d been kidnapped, and then before that to her plan to use the protomolecule sample as a Ouija board to investigate the missing ships. And then they went back to the *Chetzemoka* and Marco’s fallback plan, which brought up the way he always nested one scheme inside another, and before she got back around to

Cyn, Alex and Amos and Bobbie were back, their voices burbling over each other like birdsong. Jim closed the bedroom door against them and, when he came back, settled beside her, his back to the headboard too.

When she did talk about killing Cyn during her jump, Jim took her hand. They were silent for a moment while she examined her grief. It was real, and it was deep, but it was also complicated with anger at her old friend and captor. She hadn't let herself be aware of that at the time, but looking back, her whole stretch on the *Pella* seemed like an exercise in retracting into herself. Except when she'd defied Marco. She remembered saying that Jim was all the things he only pretended to be, wondered whether she should tell that part of the story, and then did. Jim looked horrified and then laughed. They lost track of their stories and spent ten minutes getting the timeline back: the *Chetzemoka* left the *Pella* after Jim and Fred had already departed from Tycho, or before? He'd told Alex to go investigate the *Pau Kant* before the rocks dropped on Earth? Oh right. Okay. She got it now.

They got sleepy together, her arm curled in his. The pauses grew longer, and softer. She thought *Oh, we should really talk about Amos and Clarissa Mao*, but then she was dreaming that she was on a ship that was burning at a full g for everyone else while she was on the float. All the other people in the crew, pressed to the deck while she moved through the air, reaching the tools and ducts they couldn't get to. In the dream, Alex was explaining that it was because she had so much built-up inertia that the rest of them would take a while catching up. In context, it seemed to make sense.

She woke up. She didn't know how much later it was, but there were no more voices from the main room. Jim was curled on his side, his back against her. His breath was deep and slow. She stretched slowly, careful not to disturb him. The aches in her muscles and skin and joints felt a little better, and there was a warmth in her chest. A looseness.

For years, she'd kept her secrets. Held them like she was keeping the pin in a hand grenade. The fear and the shame and the guilt had built up without her even noticing. The things she had done wrong—and there were so many—had grown in power. Not having them gnawing at her ribs from the inside felt strange. Empty, in a way, but a peaceful kind of empty.

Not that she was suddenly made of light and happiness. Cyn was still dead because of her. Filip was still abandoned. Abandoned again. Marco was still as much a pool of anger and hatred. Nothing about that had

changed, and everything had. An old picture made into something new by replacing the frame. Jim shifted in his sleep. The thin, dark hairs on the back of his neck had a couple paler ones among them. The first touches of gray.

Something had changed between them. Not just during her sabbatical in hell, but now that she was back from her own personal underworld. She wasn't sure exactly who they were to each other, she and Jim, except that things would be different now. Because she was different, and her changing wasn't going to break him. He wouldn't try to make her stay the Naomi he'd imagined.

Things changed, and they didn't change back. But sometimes they got better.

She got out of bed slowly, shuffling to the little desk in the corner of the room. Their hand terminals were there, and the little bottle of Jim's anticancer drugs, since he wasn't on the *Roci*. She reached for her terminal, paused, and picked up his. She should ask first, but he was asleep, and she didn't want to wake him, and she didn't think he'd mind.

Monica Stuart's footage of the *Rabia Balkhi* passing through the ring gate was unexceptional. Nothing in it seemed at all strange, except for the story around it. What had Marco done with it, she wondered. Why had he started his piracy so long before the actual coup that would permit it to go large-scale? Just the effort of doctoring all the logs from Medina would be a risk he didn't need to take. Maybe it was something to do with the system the *Balkhi* was heading into...?

She shifted to her own terminal, connecting to the *Roci*'s system and putting out a series of simple pattern matching requests. It wasn't hard to do. Most of the information Stuart had been working with was public record. And optical telescopes around the system had been trained on the Free Navy since the moment Marco had started his assault on the Martian convoy. The list of systems where ships had gone missing wasn't long, but the pattern in it wasn't obvious either. She tried to remember if anyone on the *Pella* had talked about any of them: Tasnim, Jerusalem, New Kashmir. Of course, the naming conventions were also a mess. New Kashmir also got called Sandalphon, High Texas, and LM-422. She pulled up alternate names for the other systems. Now that Jim had learned the worst of her past, she was almost eager to start the debriefing with Avasarala's team, and if there

was some clue she could bring from her time on the *Pella*...

She scowled. Ran the matching schema again with different tolerances. Behind her, Jim yawned. When he sat up, the sheets made a hushing sound. The *Roci* came back with a list of possibles, and she spooled through them. The *Ankara Slough* was an approximate match for the *Rabia Balkhi*, but looking through the differences she saw the drive signatures were wrong. It would have cost less to make a new ship than to swap a whole drive complex out of an existing one. In the front room, Alex said something and Amos answered. And then—to her brief surprise—Bobbie. Jim's hand touched her shoulder.

"Hey. You all right?"

"Yeah," Naomi said. "Fine."

"How long have you been up?"

She checked the time and groaned. "Three and a half hours."

"Breakfast?"

"God, yes."

Her back protested when she stood, but only a little. Her mind felt focused and alive and wholly her own for the first time in weeks. Maybe since the first, toxic message from Marcos had come in. She wasn't at war with herself, and it felt good. But...

Jim's hair was in wild disarray, but he looked handsome in it. She took his arm. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Don't know," she said.

"Would coffee improve whatever it is?"

"Couldn't hurt," she said.

In the main room of the suite, Amos and Bobbie were talking about methods of unpowered travel, each of them subtly outdoing the other and both clearly aware of it and having fun. Alex grinned to her and Jim when they sat at the breakfast bar, and then poured them both demitasses of slow-pouring espresso with thick brown crème at the top. Naomi sipped, enjoying the heat and the rich complexity hidden inside the bitterness.

"You're looking better," Alex said.

"Feeling better. Thanks. Bobbie, the missing ships you were looking for. They were all MCRN, right? Navy?"

"Ships. Weapons. Supplies. The whole thing," Bobbie said. "I guess we know what happened to them now."

“No colony ships, though?”

The big woman frowned. “I wasn’t looking for any.”

“What’s up?” Jim asked.

Naomi swirled the espresso in her little bone-colored cup, watching the whorls form and vanish in the low gravity. “The missing ships come in two flavors. Military vessels from Mars that the Free Navy have now, and then colony ships that went missing on their way out to new systems. And I make sixty, maybe seventy percent matches with the Free Navy ships to old military records. I can’t find one match with the missing colony ships. I can’t see a pattern in what systems they were going to or what they were carrying. And I don’t know what hijacking them could have gained for Marco.”

Amos made a low grunting sound in the back of his throat.

“Yeah,” Naomi said, as if the sound had been words. “Something in the ring gates is eating ships.”

Epilogue: Sauveterre

I have a tracking number,” the captain of the little freight ship said for what had to be the sixth or seventh time. “I have landing papers and a tracking number straight from Amatrix Pharmaceuticals. I know the shipment arrived on Medina six months ago. I have a *tracking number*.”

Sauveterre sipped smoked tea from a bulb as he listened. He would have preferred whiskey from a glass, but he was on duty and the *Barkeith* was on the float. The first did for the whiskey, the second for the glass. Granted, the captain’s office was private and he could have done whatever he pleased. And, he supposed, he did. Keeping to his duty was a more pleasing thing for him than whiskey, which was as it should be.

“Sabez you got a tracking number, *Toreador*,” the voice from Medina Station said. “Amatrix, though? Esa es Earth-based. No Earth-based companies on Medina.”

The *Barkeith* was a *Donnager* -class battleship. A small city in space, run with machined precision and capable of turning not only the little freighter but Medina Station to particles smaller than grains of sand. But it and the rest of Duarte’s fleet were waiting for permission from traffic control on Medina to proceed through the next ring gate and begin the second, stranger leg of their journey. It was an overabundance of etiquette on the fleet’s part, but there were reasons for that. Not the least being the general reluctance to use heavy weapons too near the alien station that hung inert in the vast non-space between the rings. They weren’t ready for that to awaken again. Not yet.

A light knock came at the door. Sauveterre straightened his tunic. “Come.” Lieutenant Babbage opened the door, bracing with a handhold on its frame. She looked anxious as she saluted. Sauveterre let her hold the

position for a moment before answering her salute and allowing her to enter.

“I have been en route for ten months!” the captain of the *Toreador* shouted. “If the colony doesn’t get this shipment, they’re fucked.”

“Have you been listening to this?” Sauveterre asked, nodding toward the speakers.

“No, sir,” Babbage said. Her skin was ashen under the brown. Her lips pressed thin.

“Üzgün, *Toreador*,” Medina Station said. “You need to dock for medical, wir koennen—”

“I don’t need to dock for medical! I need my fucking supplies! I have a tracking number that puts them on your station, and I will not—”

Sauveterre cut them off and took another sip of tea. “They’ve been going more or less like that for the better part of an hour. It’s embarrassing on their behalf.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you know why I wanted *you* to hear it?”

She swallowed her fear, which was good, and her voice didn’t tremble when she spoke, which was better. “To demonstrate what happens when there is a breakdown in discipline, sir.”

“The end point of it, anyway. Yes. I’ve heard you violated dress code. Is that true?”

“It was a bracelet, sir. It belonged to my mother, and I thought...” Her voice trailed off. “Yes, sir. That report is true, sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. I appreciate your candor.”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

Sauveterre smiled. “Granted.”

“With respect, sir, the dress code was MCRN regulation. If we are going to enumerate transgressions against code, there are some larger ones that might also be worthy of examination. Sir.”

“You mean like being here at all.”

Her expression was hard. She’d overplayed her hand, and she knew it. It happened. Embarrassment and the childish need to stamp her feet and say it wasn’t fair. He wouldn’t have gone there in her place. But since it was on the table, it was on the table. No way but forward.

“We are in a time of flux, that’s true. With the elected government

failing its obligations, Admiral Duarte has taken authority and responsibility for the fleet on himself. I, following the chain of command, am carrying out his orders. You, also following the chain of command, are expected to follow mine. This is an independent initiative of the fleet. It's not a free-for-all."

"Sir," she said. She meant *Yes, sir*, but she hadn't said the *yes* part.

"Do you know what happens if I write you up for your failure to follow fleet discipline?"

"I could be demoted, sir."

"You could. If things continued, you could be drummed out. Removed from duty. Dishonorably discharged. Not over this, of course. This is small, but if it became large. You understand?"

"I do, sir."

"If you were discharged, what do you think would happen?"

She looked at him, confused. He gestured with his free hand, a sweep that gave her permission to speak.

"I... don't..." she stammered.

"I don't know either," he said. "Back at Mars, you'd have been released to civilian life. But where we're going, there is no civilian life. No human life at all. Do I turn you out to fend for yourself in the local food chain? Do I spend the time and resources it would take to send you back, and then back where? The forces that have taken control on Mars would see you as a traitor just the same as they would me. They'd throw you in the brig for life unless you cooperated with them. And if you were going to cooperate with them, then it wouldn't make sense for me to send you back in the first place. Would it?"

"No, sir." He could see understanding beginning to dawn in her eyes. Only beginning to, though. Humanity was so flawed. Not just her, but everyone. Half the population was below average intelligence. Half below average dedication. Average adherence to duty. The cruel law of statistics. It was astounding that as a race they'd managed as much as they had.

"Now that we are taking initiative," he said, "it is more important than ever that we maintain strict discipline. We're like the first long-haul missions back before anyone had an Epstein drive. Months, maybe years, as a community of warriors and explorers. There's not room for outsiders when there is no outside. I know you're upset that—"

“No, sir, I’m not—”

“I know you’re upset that I’m coming down on you for something as minor as a bracelet. It seems trivial, and it is. But if I wait until it’s not trivial, we come to matters of life and death very, very quickly. I don’t have the latitude to take a cavalier position.”

“I understand, sir.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

He held out his hand, palm up. Babbage wiped away a tear with the back of her hand, and then dug in her pocket for a moment. When she put the bracelet in his hand, she paused, holding it for just a second longer. Whatever it meant to her, giving it over was a sacrifice. He closed his hand on the thin silver chain with its tiny sparrow-shaped pendant. He tried to make his smile gentle as he spoke.

“Dismissed.”

When she had closed the door behind her, he turned back to his system. A new message had come in from Cortázar. His flesh crawled a little. Duarte’s pet scientist had been sending more and more messages since the Belters had pulled the trigger. The man’s enthusiasm unnerved Sauveterre. The man’s personality was firmly in the uncanny valley, and his pleasure in the project they were undertaking at the new Laconia Station had a feeling of anticipation that was almost sexual.

Duty, however, was duty. He put Babbage’s jewelry in the recycler and opened the message. Cortázar was too close to the camera or else had chosen for reasons of his own to be slightly out of focus. His wide chin and thin, black hair should have been unremarkable. Sauveterre rubbed his hands like he was trying half-consciously to wash them.

“Captain Sauveterre,” the strange little man said. “I’m pleased to report that the sample arrived intact. Thank you very much for taking custody of it after its liberation. I am, however, distressed to hear that the fleet is running behind schedule.”

“It’s a few days over the course of months,” Sauveterre said to himself and the screen. “We’ll make it up.”

“I know you are aware that both supplies and time are in short supply until the artifact has been brought to heel. In order to help make up for this shortfall, the research group has put together some plans and specifications for some of the modifications the *Barkeith* will need in order to dock with

the artifact. Several of them can be started by your engineering teams en route. And of course, if you have any questions, I am at your disposal. Cortázar out.”

The screen flipped to a series of technical drawings. There was more than enough about those to disturb him as well. They called all the alien technology by the name protomolecule, but of course, that far-traveled set of life-hijacking microparticles was only one object in a much grander toolbox. And if Cortázar had interpreted the top-clearance data from the MCRN probes correctly, what they had found would be much easier for humanity to tame and make use of.

Still, the changes Cortázar wanted for the *Barkeith* were unpleasantly organic. Less like they were fitting a new model of airlock on the ship, and more like they were carving it into some kind of colossal prosthesis.

It's the beginning of something very new and very powerful, and if good people don't step in to accept the power, bad ones will. It was what Admiral Duarte had told him the night he'd brought Sauveterre into the fold. It had been true then, and it was true now. He switched on the camera, adjusted his hair, and began recording.

“Message received. I will take the plans to my engineers at once. If they have any concerns, we will be in touch.” Short, to the point, minimalist without being rude. Efficient. He hoped it would come across as efficient. He rewatched it to be sure and considered rerecording it and changing *concerns* to *questions*, but decided he was overanalyzing it. As he sent it off, his system chimed.

“Captain, we have clearance from Medina.”

“Do we now, Mister Kogoma? Kind of them. What was the resolution of their tracking number situation?”

“The freighter is moving in to dock with the station, sir.”

Well, there was another ship for the skinnies to commandeer. If the *Toreador* had known which way the wind was blowing, they'd have hightailed it back to whatever hardscrabble planet they'd come from and tried to make do without whatever they had lost anyway. As it was, the Free Navy would just keep gobbling up the ships that came through, starving out the colonies. Weakening them. By the time the Belters figured out they were fighting a rearguard action against history, Duarte would be in position.

War, Sauveterre thought as he pulled himself to the command deck, had long since ceased to be about controlling territory. The job of a military was to disrupt its enemies. Generations of low-scale war in the Belt hadn't been an attempt to hold Vesta Station or Ceres or any of the dozens of little floating supply hubs in the vast emptiness. It had always and only been about keeping the OPA or any other Belt force from coalescing into an organized force. Until the rules changed, and that organized force became useful. The Free Navy would have made itself decades before if men like Duarte had let it. Now that the Belt finally had it, they would find just how useless it was.

As long as it kept Earth and what was left of Mars busy for a few years. After that... The reward of audacity was the chance to steer history.

The command deck was in trim. Everyone in their couches, the displays freshly cleaned, the controls polished. The *Barkeith* would arrive at Laconia Station as smart and sharp as she had left Mars. And they wouldn't be wearing bracelets. He drew himself down to his command station and strapped himself in.

"Mister Taylor, sound the acceleration alert. Mister Kogoma, inform the fleet and Medina Station that we are proceeding."

"Sir," the tactical officer said, "permission to open weapon ports."

"Are we expecting action, Mister Kuhn?"

"Not expecting, sir. An abundance of caution."

Kuhn didn't trust the skinnies either. That was fair. They were a bunch of thugs and cowboys who thought that because they had guns, they had power. Sauveterre thought it was early for the Free Navy to start double-crossing Duarte, but they were stupid and impulsive. It didn't do to assume an amateur force would make the same decisions as a professional. "Permission granted. And warm up the PDCs while you're at it. Mister Kogoma, please advise the fleet to do likewise."

"Yes, sir," Kogoma said.

The Klaxon sounded and Sauveterre settled into his couch, the sensation of weight returning over the course of seconds. The transit to the Laconia ring was short. The space between the rings was almost claustrophobic compared with the vastness of real, open vacuum. And dark. Starless. The physics wonks said that there wasn't any space on the other side of the rings. That whatever bubble they all existed in ended not in a barrier, but in

some more profound manner that he couldn't picture. He didn't need to.

The Laconia gate drew closer, a handful of stars burning solid and clear on the other side of it, and growing as they came near. The exhaust plumes of the fleet vanguard glowed brighter as they passed through. There would be new constellations there. A different angle on the galaxy, like a whole new sky.

"Approaching the ring, sir," Keller said from the navigation controls. "Passing through in three. Two..."

Keller fell apart. No, that wasn't right. Keller was where she had been, sitting as she had been sitting. But she was a cloud now. All of them were clouds. Sauveterre held up his hands. He could see them so perfectly: the ridges of his fingertips, the spaces between the molecules, the swirl and flow of his blood beneath them. He could see the molecules in the air—nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide all bouncing madly against each other, obscuring some more profound space between them. A vacuum that penetrated them all.

I'm having a stroke, he thought. And then, *No. Something else is wrong.*

"Kill the drive!" he shouted. "Turn about!" And the waves of his words passed through the visible but invisible air in an expanding sphere, bouncing against the walls, shuddering where they intersected with the cries of fear and a blaring Klaxon. It was beautiful. The cloud that was Mister Keller moved her hands and miraculously didn't slip through the vast emptiness of her control deck.

He saw the sound coming in the rush of molecules before it reached him and he heard the words. "What's going on? What's happening?"

He couldn't see the image on the screens to know if the stars were there. All he could sense were atoms and photons of the thing itself, not the pattern they made. Someone was screaming. Then someone else.

He turned and saw something move. Something *else*, not another cloud like himself, like the others, like matter. Something solid but obscured by the emptiness of material like a shape in the fog. Many shapes, neither light nor dark, but some other thing, some third side of that coin, passing through the spaces between the spaces. Rushing toward them. Toward him.

Sauveterre did not notice his death.

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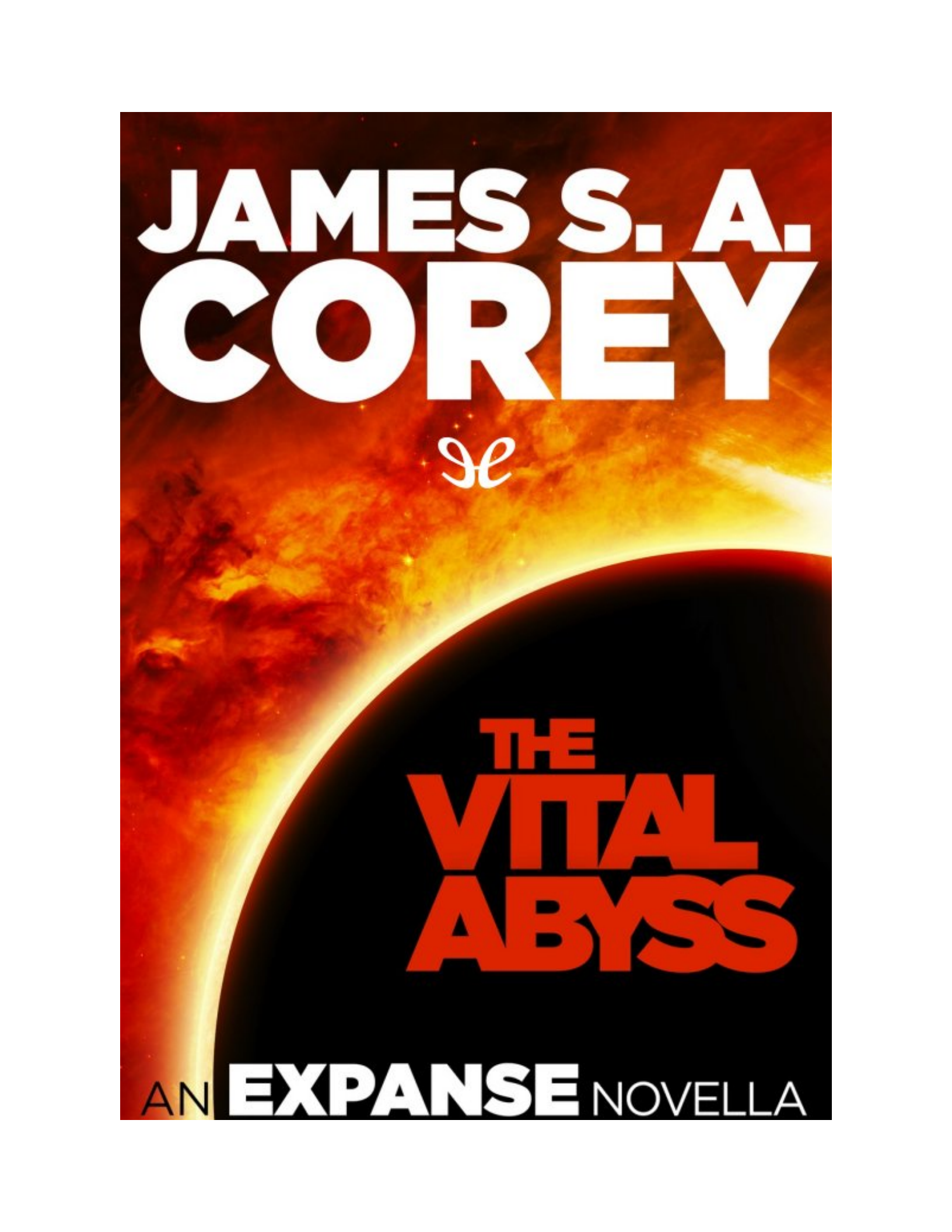
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**JAMES S. A.
COREY**



**THE
VITAL
ABYSS**

AN **EXPANSE** NOVELLA



Somewhere in the vast expanse of space, a group of prisoners lives in permanent captivity. The only company they have is each other and the Belters who guard them. The only stories they know are the triumphs and crimes that brought them there. The only future they see is an empty life in an enormous room. And then the man from Mars came along...

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James S. A. Corey

The Vital Abyss

An Expanse Novella

The Expanse - 3.5

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The Vital Abyss

THEY kept us in an enormous room. Ninety meters by sixty with a ceiling eight meters above us, a bit less than a football pitch, with observation windows along the top two meters all the way around from which our guards could look down on us if they chose to. Old crash couches salvaged from God knew where lay scattered around the floor. Eventually I came to recognize a certain subtle smell like alcohol and plastic when the air scrubbers were replaced, and the humidity and temperature would sometimes vary, leaving runnels of condensate coming down the walls. Those were the nearest things we had to weather. The gravity, somewhere in the neighborhood of one-quarter g, suggested we were on a spin station. Our guards never said as much, but I could think of no planetary bodies that matched that.

For most of us there was a sense that this shabby, empty room was the final destination for us, the former science team from Thoth Station. Some wept at the thought. The research group did not.

We had toilets and showers, but no privacy. When we washed ourselves, it was in front of anyone who cared to observe. We learned to shit with the casualness of animals. When, as was inevitable, we began to turn to each other to fulfill our sexual needs, it was without the veneer of privacy we had once enjoyed, though eventually several of the crash couches were sacrificed to create a small area visually cut off from the rest of the room and that we began calling “the hotel.” There was never anything sufficient

to absorb sound. Our enforced physical intimacy with one another was a source of shame for many of the prisoners who didn't come from the research groups. Those of us who had—myself included—held a different perspective. I think our shamelessness was part of what made it hard for the others, the ones who had worked security or maintenance or administration, to accept us. There were other reasons too, but I think the shamelessness was the most visible. I might be wrong about that. I have learned to question my assumptions about what other people feel.

The lights in the room went on at what became morning, turned off again at what we agreed to call night. Water, we took from a pair of spigots beside the showers, drinking directly from them using our own cupped hands. For want of razors or depilatories, the men among us grew beards. Guards and jailers would come through whenever they saw fit, armor-clad and carrying guns sufficient to slaughter us all. They brought Belter food, vat-grown and yeasty. Sometimes they joked with us, sometimes they pushed us away or beat us, but they always brought us sustenance and the thin paper jumpsuits that were our only clothes. All of our guards were Belters, with the elongated bodies and slightly enlarged heads that spoke of childhoods in low gravity and long exposure to the pharmaceutical cocktails that made such lives possible. They spoke in the polyglot cant of the Belt: a hundred different vocabularies all crushed together until understanding it was as much music appreciation as grammar.

During the first year, they occasionally took us out of the room for periods of interrogation. The times that I was taken, the sessions were held in small, dirty rooms, often without chairs. The techniques varied from threats and violence, to offers of privileges, to a thin-faced woman who just sat in silence and stared at me as if she could force me to speak through raw, unspoken will. As time went on, these occasions grew fewer and farther between. Sometime in the third year, they stopped entirely, and the room became the totality of our collective world. We were a community of thirty-seven people living under the eyes of cold and unsympathetic jailers.

Though we came to know each other quite well, the taxonomy of our previous employment remade itself into a kind of tribalism. Van Ark and Drexler might disagree about everything from the best use of our “daylight”

time to who had starred in the entertainment videos of our youth, but they had both been maintenance, and so when any conflict arose, they took each other's side against the rest of us. Fong had enjoyed the highest rank among the security team in our random organizational slice, and so she was not only the unspoken head of that group but through them the ersatz leader of our community. Research was kept separate, and even then divisions by work group made a web of subdivisions. Of the several dozen large signaling and communications work group, only Ern and Ma had come to the room. Imaging was the largest with five: Kanter, Jones, Mellin, Hardberger, and Coombs. Nanoinformatics had three: Quintana, Brown, and myself.

Of the system outside the room—Earth and Mars and the Belt—we knew essentially nothing. For us, history had ended on Thoth Station with our experiment on Eros only half-done. Even years after the fact, I would find myself ruminating on some peculiarity of the dataset. I no longer trusted my memory enough to say whether the issues that absorbed my hours were accurate or figments of my somewhat fragile and altered mind.

During my bitterest times, I would lie in a crash couch for days at a time, thinking of Isaac Newton and the way that, by having his mind and his peculiar history, he had refashioned all of human understanding. I had stood on a precipice as great as his and been pulled back against my will. But more often, I was able to ignore such thoughts for weeks, sometimes months, at a time. I took a lover. Alberto Correa. He worked in administration and spent his childhood taking odd jobs at the spaceport complex at Bogotá. He had an advanced degree in political literature, and he said both my names—Paolo and Cortázar—reminded him of authors he had studied. He would talk for hours sometimes about the effects of class systems on poetic forms or Butler-Marxist readings of the action videos of Pilár Eight and Mikki Suhanam. I listened, and I like to think I absorbed some of it. The sound of his voice and the presence of his body were comforting, and the moments we spent together in the hotel were pleasant and calming. He said that if he'd known he would end here, he'd have stayed on Earth and lived on basic. When I pointed out that then he and I

wouldn't have met, he would either agree that I made it worthwhile or else tell me about the beautiful men he had loved in Colombia.

Time, of course, became difficult to track, but I was fairly certain we were into the fourth year in the room when Kanter died. He'd been complaining of feeling ill, then grew agitated and delusional. The guards, seeing all as they did, brought medicine that I suspect was merely a sedative. He died a week later.

It was the first death, and reinforced to us the idea that we would likely never again be free. I watched as the others went through a period of mourning that was less for Kanter than for the lives we'd had and left behind. Not the research group, but the others. Alberto became a much more ardent lover for a time, and then lapsed into a funk in which he barely spoke to me and shied away from my touch. I was patient with him because I found patience easier when there was no alternative.

Day by day, we were ground down. Our experiential worlds narrowed to who was having sex with whom, whether someone's comment about a fellow inmate was innocuous or provocative, and fighting—sometimes violently—over who among us slept in which of the crash couches. We were petty and cruel, despairing and restless, occasionally humane and even capable of moments of actual if ephemeral beauty. Perhaps all periods of prosperity and calm go unnoticed when they occur. Certainly I didn't look on those days with any fondness until after the Martian came.

I didn't see him arrive myself. I was talking with Ernzt when it happened, so my introduction to the man was Quintana barking my name. When I turned, the Martian was simply there. He was pale-skinned with nut-brown hair and a bad complexion, and he wore the familiar uniform of the Martian Congressional Republic Navy. Our customary Belter guards flanked him, chins lifted a bit higher than usual. Quintana and Brown stood before them, waving me impatiently to them. I didn't hesitate. The pull of something new after so much sameness called forth an excitement that left my hands trembling. I plucked at my beard as I strode over, hoping against all reason that it would make me look more respectable. When we stood before the new man, the three of us together, Brown took a little half-step ahead. I stifled the urge to move forward as well, certain that it would end

in all of us crowding in on our visitor. I would swallow Brown's little physical dominance play in order to keep the Martian from leaving.

"This is all of them?" he said. He had a pleasant voice, barely accented with the drawl of the Mariner Valley.

"Bist," the Belter guard said with a nod. "Nanoinformatic, you wanted. This them."

The Martian looked at us each in turn, studying us like we were fresh recruits. It felt as if the floor was shuddering, but it was only my body. There was always an electricity in the unknown, a sense of impending revelation like the last moments before orgasm. Seeing this man and being seen by him, I felt more naked than I had since my first sexual experiences; though the longing and desire sprang from my heart and throat now, they were as commanding. All the things that the room had taken from me—my curiosity, my hope, my sense that a life outside of my nameless prison was possible—were distilled into his cool brown eyes. One of the occupational hazards of my career path is a kind of solipsism, but I truly felt at that moment that God had sent an angel to deliver me and whisper the secrets that had been hidden from me so long into my ear, which made the actions that followed so devastating.

"All right," the Martian said.

The filthy little half-step Brown had taken reaped its reward. The Martian took a dedicated hand terminal from his pocket and held it out. "Take a look at this. See what you make of it."

Brown snapped it up. "I will have a reaction prepared, sir," he said, as if he were team lead again and not a filthy, long-bearded captive in a paper suit.

"Can we have copies?" Quintana asked.

I was going to add my voice to his, but the guard cut me short. "One trade, one terminal. *Sus no neccesar.*"

The Martian turned to leave, but Quintana surged forward. "If you need someone to interpret data for you, Brown's not the right person. He was only team lead so he could spend more time talking to administration. If he'd been a better mind, they'd have kept him in the *labs*." The same sentiment was forming in my own throat, but my hesitation in finding the

words saved me. The nearest of the Belter guards shifted his weight, turned, and sank the butt of his rifle into Quintana's gut, folding him double. The Martian scowled, disapproving of the violence, but he did not speak as the guards led him to the doorway and out of the room. Brown, his beard jutting and his face flushed, half-ran and half-strutted to the hotel, the hand terminal clutched to his chest. Triumph and fear widened his eyes. Quintana retched, and I stood over him, considering. The others watched from all around the room, and when I looked up, there were more figures behind the glass staring down at us. At me.

Quintana had made a mistake, and one I would have made as well. He'd called the Martian's judgment—capricious as it was—into question. He'd tried to take a position of authority when we were all here specifically because we had no authority. Seeing that was like remembering something I'd forgotten.

One trade, one terminal. The words meant two things to me: first, that after all this time someone was trading for either our freedom or possession of us, and second, that only one of us would be required. Needless to say, I determined in that moment that the traded prisoner would be me.

"Come on," I said, helping him to his feet. "It's all right. Come on, and I'll help you get washed up." I let them see me assist him. With any luck it would get back to the Martian that one of the three was a team player, the kind of man who helped someone when they were down. Quintana, I felt sure, had lost his chance. Brown, by having the hand terminal and whatever was on it, was ahead. I didn't see yet how to arrange things so that I could gain the advantage, but simply having a real problem to solve again felt like waking up after a long and torpid sleep.

Brown didn't leave the hotel for the rest of the day, and while he did venture out when the guards brought our evening rations, he sat apart, the hand terminal stuck down the neck of his jumpsuit. Quintana glowered at him from under storm cloud brows and I kept my own counsel, but the effect of the day's actions went well beyond the three of us. Everyone in the room buzzed. There was no other subject of conversation. Mars knew we were here, and what was more, they wanted something of us. Or at least of

one of us. It changed everything from the taste of the food to the sound of our voices.

Keep a man in a coffin for years with just enough food and water to live, and then—just for a moment—crack the lid open and let him see daylight. We were all that man, stunned and confused and elated and afraid. The numbness of captivity fell away for a few hours, and we lived that time deeply and desperately.

After the meal, Brown retreated to a crash couch near the wall, curling into it so that no one could sneak up behind him. I, pretending nothing had changed, went through my customary nighttime rituals—voiding my bowels, showering, drinking enough water that I would not wake thirsty before the lights came back. By the time our sudden toggle-switch nighttime came, I was curled in my couch with Alberto. His body was warm against my own. Brown, whose movements I had become profoundly aware of, remained in his crash couch by the wall. The glow of the terminal was dim as an insult. I pretended to sleep and thought I had fooled Alberto until he spoke.

“And so they’ve thrown us the apple, eh?”

“The fruit of knowledge,” I said, but I had misunderstood which apple he meant.

“Worse than that, the golden one,” he said. “Private property. Status. Now it’s all going to be about fighting over who’s the prettiest one, and war will come out of it.”

“Don’t be grandiose.”

“It isn’t me, it’s history. Differences in status and wealth are always what drives war.”

“Have we been a Marxist paradise this whole time and I didn’t notice?” I said, more acidly than I’d meant to.

Alberto kissed my temple and brushed his lips along my hairline to the cup of my ear. “Don’t kill him. They’ll catch you.”

I shifted. In the darkness, I couldn’t see more than a limn of his face, floating over me. My heart beat faster and the coppery taste of fear flooded my mouth. “How did you know what I was thinking?”

When he answered, his tone was soft and melancholy. “You’re from *research*.”



I wasn’t always the thing I became. Before I was *research*, I was a scientist who had educated himself into too fine a specialty. Before that, a student at Tel Aviv Autonomous University, caught between investing in a future I couldn’t imagine and losing myself in a grief I couldn’t fully encompass. Before that, I was a boy watching his mother die. I was all of those men before I was a researcher for Protogen corporation based on Thoth Station. But it is also true that I remember many of those former selves with a distance that is more than time. I tell myself that remove allows me to trace the path from one to another, but I’m not sure that this is true.

My mother—a heart-shaped face above a pear-shaped body who rained love on me as if I were the only one in the world who mattered—lived on basic most of her life, sharing a room in a UN housing complex at Londrina. She wasn’t educated, though I understand she was a good enough musician when she was younger to play in some local underground bands. If there were recordings of her on the network, I never found them. She was a woman of few ambitions and tepid passions until she reached thirty-two. Then, to hear her tell it, God had come to her in her sleep and told her to have a baby.

She woke up, marched to the training center, and applied for any program that would earn her enough money to legally go off contraception. It took her three years of fourteen-hour days, but she managed it. Enough money for both a licensed child and the donation of germ plasm that would help begin my life. She said that it was her choice to purchase sperm from a trading house that gave me my intelligence and drive, that the only fertile men in the housing complex were criminals and thugs too far outside of civilization to be on the basic rolls, and that I couldn’t have gotten it from her because she was lazy and stupid.

As a child, growing up, I used to fight back on the last point: She was smart and she was beautiful and anything good about me surely had its

roots in her. I believe now she used to denigrate herself in front of me in order to hear praise from someone, even if it was only a beloved child. I don't resent the manipulation. If intellect and focus were indeed the legacies of my invisible father, emotional manipulation was my mother's true gift, and it was as valuable. As important.

Because I was an adolescent when it began, I did not notice her symptoms until they were fairly advanced. My time was largely spent out of the house by then, playing football at a dirt-and-weed pitch south of the housing complex, running badly designed experiments with some garage-level makers and artists, exploring my own sexuality and the limits of the young men of my cohort. My days were filled with the smell of the city, the heat of the sun, and the promise that something joyous—a football win, a good project, a transporting affair—might come at any moment. I was a street rat living on basic, but the discovery of life was so rich and dramatic and profound that I wasn't concerned with my status in the larger culture. My social microenvironment seemed to stretch to the horizon, and the conflicts within it—whether Tomás or Carla would be goalie, whether Sabina could tweak off-the-shelf bacterial cultures to produce her own party drugs, whether Didi was homosexual and how to find out without courting humiliation and rejection—were profound dramas that would resonate through the ages. When, later, my project lead said *There is a period of developmental sociopathy in every life*, this is the time I thought of.

And then my mother dropped a glass. It was a good one, with thick, beveled sides and a lip like a jelly jar, and when it shattered, it sounded like a gunshot. Or that's how I remember it. Moments of significance can make maintaining objectivity difficult, but that is my memory of it: a thick, sturdy drinking glass catching the light as it fell from her hands, twirling in the air, and detonating on our kitchen floor. She cursed mildly and went to fetch the broom to sweep up the shards. She walked awkwardly and fumbled with the dustpan. I sat at the table, an espresso growing cold in my hands while I watched her try to clean up after herself for five minutes. I felt horror at the time, an overwhelming sense of something wrong. The metaphor that came to me in the moment was my mother was being run remotely by someone who didn't understand the controls very well. The worst of it was her

confusion when I asked her what was wrong. She had no idea what I was talking about.

After that, I began paying attention, checking in on her through the day. How long it had been going on, I couldn't say. The trouble she had finding words, especially early in the morning or late at night. The loss of coordination. The moments of confusion. They were little things, I told myself. The products of too little sleep or too much. She spent whole days watching the entertainment feeds out of Beijing, and then stayed up all night rearranging the pantry or washing her clothes in the sink for hours on end, her hands growing red and chapped from the soap as her mind was trapped, it seemed, by minor details. Her skin took on an ashen tone and a slackness came to her cheeks. The slow way her eyes moved reminded me of fish, and I began having the recurring nightmare that the sea had come to take her, and she was drowning there at the breakfast table with me sitting beside her powerless to help.

But whenever I talked about it, I only confused her. Nothing was wrong with her. She was just the same as she had ever been. She didn't have any trouble doing her chores. She wasn't uncoordinated. She didn't know what I was talking about. Even as her words choked her on their way out, she didn't know what I meant. Even as she listed like a drunk from her bed to the toilet, she experienced nothing out of the ordinary. And worse, she believed it. She genuinely thought I was saying these things to hurt her, and she didn't understand why I would. The sense that I was betraying her through my fear, that I was the cause of her distress rather than only a witness to something deeply wrong, left me weeping on the couch. She wasn't interested in going to the clinic; the lines there were always so long and there was no reason.

I got her to go the day before Ash Wednesday. We arrived early, and I had packed a lunch of roast chicken and barley bread. We made it to the intake nurse even before we ate, and then sat in the waiting area with its fake bamboo chairs and worn green carpet. A man just older than my mother sat across from us, his hands in fists on his knees as he struggled not to cough. The woman beside me, my age or younger, stared straight ahead, her hand on her belly like she was trying to hold in her guts. A child wailed

behind us. I remember wondering why anyone who could afford to have a child would bring it to a basic clinic. My mother held my hand, then. For hours we sat together, her fingers woven with mine. For a time I told her everything would be all right.

The doctor was a thin-faced woman with earrings made of shell. I remember that her first name was the same as my mother's, that she smelled of rose water, and that her eyes had the shallow deadness of someone in shock. She didn't wait for me to finish telling her why we'd come in. The expert system had already pulled the records, told her what to expect. Type C Huntington's. The same, she told me (though my mother never had), that had killed my grandfather. Basic would cover palliative care, including psychoactives. She'd make the notation in the profile. The prescriptions would be delivered starting next week and would continue as long as they were needed. The doctor took my mother's hands, urged her in a rote and practiced tone to be brave, and left. Off to the next exam room, hopefully to someone whose life she might be able to save. My mother wobbled at me, her eyes finding me only slowly.

"What happened?" she asked, and I didn't know what to tell her.

It took my mother three more years to die. I have heard it said that how you spend your day is how you spend your life, and my days changed then. The football games, the late night parties, the flirtation with the other young men in my circle: all of it ended. I divided myself into three different young men: one a nurse to his failing mother, one a fierce student on a quest to understand the disease that was defining his life, and the last a victim of depression so profound it made bathing or eating food a challenge. My own room was a cell just wide enough for my cot, with a frosted glass window that opened on an airshaft. My mother slept in a chair in front of the entertainment screen. Above us, a family of immigrants from the Balkan Shared Interest Zone clomped and shouted and fought, each footfall a reminder of the overwhelming density of humanity around us. I gave her ramen soup and a collection of government pills that were the most brightly colored things in the apartment. She grew impulsive, irritable, and slowly lost her ability to use language, though I think she understood me almost to the end.

I didn't see it at the time, but my options were to weave myself a lifeline from what I had at hand, abandon my mother in her final decline, or else die. I would not leave her, and I did not die. Instead I took her illness and made it my salvation. I read everything there was on type C Huntington's, the mechanism as it was understood, the research that was being done with it, the treatments that might someday manage it. When I didn't understand something, I found tutorials. I sent letters to the outreach programs of medical care centers and hospitals as far as Mars and Ganymede. I tracked down the biomakers I had known and drilled them with question—What was cytoplasmic regulation delay? How did mRNA inhibitor proteins address phenotypic expressions of primary DNA sequences? What did the Lynch-Noyon synthesis mean in respect to regrown neural tissues?—until it was clear they didn't understand what I was saying. I dove into a world of complexity so deep even the research watsons couldn't encompass it all.

What astounded me was that the cutting edge of human knowledge was so close. Before I educated myself, I assumed that there was a great depth of science, that every question of importance had been cataloged, studied, that all the answers were there, if only someone could query the datasets the right way. And for some things, that was true.

But for others—for things that I would have thought so important and simple that everyone would have known—the data simply wasn't there. How does the body flush plaque precursors out of cerebrospinal fluid? There were two papers: one seventy years out of date that relied on assumptions about spinal circulation that had since been disproved, and one that drew all its data from seven Polynesian infants who had suffered brain injuries from anoxia or drug exposure or trauma.

There were explanations, of course, for this dearth of information: Human studies required human subjects, and ethical guidelines made rigorous studies next to impossible. One didn't give healthy babies a series of monthly spinal taps just because it would have been a good experimental design. I understood that, but to come to science expecting the great source of intellectual light and step so quickly into darkness was sobering. I began to keep a book of ignorance: questions that existing information could not

answer and my amateurish, half-educated thoughts about how answers might be found.

Officially, my mother died of pneumonia. I had learned enough to understand what each of her drugs did, to read her fate from the pills that arrived. I knew by their shapes and colors and the cryptic letters pressed into their sides when the vast bureaucracy that administered basic health care had moved her from palliative care to full hospice. In the end, she was on little more than sedatives and antivirulence drugs. I gave them to her because it was what I had to give her. The night she died, I sat at her feet, my head resting on the red wool blanket that covered her wasted lap. Heartbreak and relief were my soul's twin bodyguards. She moved beyond pain or distress, and I told myself the worst was over.

The notification from basic came the next day. With my change in status, the rooms we had been in were no longer appropriate. I would be reassigned to a shared dormitory, but should be prepared to relocate to São Paulo or Bogotá, depending on availability. I thought—mistakenly, as it turned out—that I wasn't ready to leave Londrina. I moved in with a friend and former lover. He treated me gently, making coffee in the mornings and playing cards through the empty afternoons. He suggested that it might be less that I needed to stay in the city of my birth, the city of my mother, and more that I needed some control over the terms of my departure.

I applied to apprentice programs at London, Gdansk, and Luna and was rejected by all of them. I was competing against people who had years of formal schooling, political connections, and wealth. I lowered my expectations, searching for uplift programs that aimed specifically for autodidacts who had been living on basic, and six months later, I arrived in Tel Aviv and met Aaron, a former Talmudic scholar who had researched his way to atheism and was now my dorm mate.

The third night, we sat together on our little balcony looking out over the city. It was sunset, and we were both a little high on marijuana and wine. He asked me what my ambitions were.

"I want to understand," I told him.

He shrugged only his left shoulder. "Understand what, Paolo? The mind of God? The reason for suffering?"

“Just how things work,” I said.

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It became clear immediately that Brown had become the most important person not only among the nanoinformatics group or even research in general, but in the entire room. Over the following days, Fong, who had never treated anyone in research as better than suspicious, deferred to him when the guards brought food. Drexler sat near him before lights-out, laughing at anything he said that might pass for a joke. When Sujai and Ma fell into one of their singing mock competitions, they invited Brown in, though he demurred.

Speculation ran in all directions: We would be extradited and tried for the dead Martians on Phoebe; the company had found diplomatic channels to negotiate for our release; the Outer Planets Alliance and the Martian Republic were at war and our fates were going to be part of the settlement. My own theory—the only one that really made sense to me—was that the experiment had been running all this time and something new had happened. Grave or miraculous, it carried a weight of importance and inscrutability that brought us back from our forgotten place in a Belter prison and into the light. The Martian had come because he needed the things that only we knew, and possibly needed it badly enough to overlook our previous sins. In the observation windows above us, guards appeared more often now, usually with their attention fixed on Brown. It was not only the prisoners who found his new status of interest.

Brown himself changed, but not in the way others might have. While I believe he made use of the opportunities his new status afforded him, he did so rationally. He didn’t hold himself more grandly, did not deepen the timbre of his voice. He did not hold court or bask in the new attention given to him. Humanity is social, and the self-image of humans is built from the versions of ourselves we see and hear reflected in others; that this is not true of the research group—of Coombs or Brown or Quintana or me—was, after all, precisely the point. Instead, Brown balanced his new power with the new risks it carried. He made an unofficial alliance with Fong, staying near

her and her people so that, should Quintana or I try to take the hand terminal by force, there were others who could interfere in an attempt to curry favor with him.

Van Ark responded by eating and sleeping closer to Quintana and Alberto and myself. He'd had no love of Brown, and treated his elevation as an insult. The room was pulling itself apart like a cell preparing to divide. Brown and the Martian's hand terminal formed one locus. Quintana and I, the other.

We planned our theft quietly. When Brown sat bent over the terminal, he could not watch us talk, but Quintana and I were discreet all the same. I squatted at the side of a crash couch while he lay in it, facing away from me. The metal and ceramic made too hard a backrest, my spine aching where it pressed. I tried not to move my lips while we spoke. Fong, I felt sure, noticed us, but did nothing. Or perhaps she didn't see us. Fear kept me from looking around to find out.

"He has to sleep," Quintana said.

"He also has to wake up," I said, recalling Alberto's advice.

Quintana shifted on the couch, the gimbals hissing as the cup of the couch readjusted. Across the room, Brown sat near the hotel. The hand terminal flickered, throwing subtle shadows onto his cheeks and the hollows around his eyes. With the right equipment, I could have modeled his face, its reflectivity, and rebuilt the image he was looking at. I realized that Quintana had been speaking, and I didn't know that he'd said. When I asked him to repeat himself, he sighed with a sound very much like the gimbals.

"Once I get it, you hide it," he said. "They'll question me. Search where I went. Then they'll have to give him another copy. Once that happens, we'll be safe. They won't care anymore. You can get it back out and give it to me. You won't even have to get in trouble."

"Won't they punish us?"

"He'll have the copy. Why would anyone care about the original?"

I suspected that analysis had some holes in it, but I didn't object, out of concern that Quintana would grow impatient and scrap the plan. I resolved instead to ask Alberto if he thought the stolen hand terminal would be

trivial once a copy was delivered, but as things fell out, I didn't have the chance. Navarro, one of Fong's leadership from security, walked toward us. I coughed, alerting Quintana, and he changed to talking about the nutritional value of Belter food compared to the fare we'd had before the room, and the probable health effects that we could expect from our systematic malnutrition. Navarro sat at the next couch over, watching the guards at the window watch us. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. The message—you're being watched—was clear.

That afternoon, the guards came early and took Brown away. They offered no explanation, simply found him there among us, nodded to the doors they'd entered through, and escorted him away. I watched him leave. My heart was in my throat, and I was certain it was already too late. If they were taking him to the Martian, he might never come back. When Brown returned to the room just before nightfall, confusion and worry pressed on his brow, but he carried the hand terminal with him.

That night as we curled up to sleep, I told Alberto of my fear that Brown and the hand terminal might vanish before I could see what was on it.

"Better if it did," Alberto said, holding my hand. I didn't know if he meant that with the irritant of hope gone, the room could return to something like its resting state, or something more personal between the two of us. I intended then to sound him out about Quintana's plan, but he had other intentions that were more urgent and immediate, and when we were spent, I curled in his arms, warm and content in the way that being a masculine animal allows.

Either Brown's temporary absence spurred Quintana to action sooner than planned, or he had told me his timetable when my attention was elsewhere. The first I knew that action had been taken was the screaming, then pelting footfalls going one way and the next. I tried to stand, but Alberto impeded me, and then, from the darkness, a dim glow. The plate of a hand terminal, moving toward me. Quintana loomed up out of the darkness, pressing hard ceramic into my hand. He didn't speak, but ran on past me. I curled back with Alberto and waited. Brown was shrieking now, his voice bansheeing up until it threatened to rise above the wavelengths of

human perception. And then Fong. And then Quintana proudly announcing that Brown didn't deserve the data, couldn't understand the data, and was going to doom us all to living and dying in the room out of his own misplaced pride.

I lay with my head against my lover's shoulder, the hand terminal tucked beneath our bodies, while the other prisoners screamed and fought in the darkness, the first open combat in the war Alberto had foreseen. The Belter guards did not come. I felt sure their absence meant something, but I couldn't say what.

I didn't want to leave the relative safety and warmth of the crash couch, but I knew that the battle raging in the darkness was also my best cover. Quintana's belief that I wouldn't be questioned because he had taken the credit for stealing the terminal seemed optimistic to me. Worse, it seemed like the kind of asserted reality—the willful decision to believe that people would act the way you preferred that they would—that posed a constant threat to those of us in research. I slid the terminal down the front of my already open jumpsuit and moved to rise from the couch, hoping the sound of the gimbals would be lost under the shouting.

Alberto took my hand for the space of a breath, and then released it. “Be careful,” he whispered.

As I moved through that darkness, the room felt even bigger than it was. I had the most precious thing in my life pressed against the skin of my belly while men and women whose voices I knew intimately, the compatriots of my years-long captivity, threatened and defied and wheedled and cried out in sudden pain. Like a stage magician's arcing gesture, they commanded the attention and gave me the cover to do what needed to be done. I slid the hand terminal under one of the crash couches that defined the hotel, stepped back to see that no light was escaping from its dim display, and then trotted back to Alberto through the darkness, afraid to be caught away from my customary place.

The sudden harsh light of morning found Quintana sitting with his back against a wall, eyes blackened and swollen closed, nose and lips bloodied, and Fong organizing a search. I was among her first targets, and Alberto shortly after me. Brown opened a new round of shouts and accusations, and

Fong had to set two of her people to prevent him from assaulting Quintana further. It occurred to me that Brown was making Quintana's argument more effectively than Quintana had.

The sense of Brown's status as our savior and best hope of freedom tarnished quickly in the next hours. I felt the confidence the others had in him faltering like the pressure of a coming storm. If they turned on him, unleashed the years of frustration and anxiety and despair upon his fragile human body, I didn't think the guards would be able to reach him in time. It was an interesting possibility, but also a warning should I manage to put myself in his place.

As soon as it seemed plausible, I took Alberto by the hand and drew him toward the hotel. Hardberger and Navarro were going through the crash couches near it, and I was anxious that they would find our golden apple before I had a chance to taste it. I thought Navarro scowled at me as I made my way toward privacy and the hiding place, but it might only have been my imagination. Once we were in the hotel and visually cut off, I retrieved the hand terminal.

Now, with light and proximity, I could actually see it: blue-gray casing with an extended keyboard for full scientific notations; a scratch along the right side of the screen that caught and refracted the light of the display, rainbows out of the yellow default image; a logo of the Mars Congressional Republic Navy stamped into the casing and echoed on the screen. I stroked it with my fingertips, feeling serene and untouchable. If church had felt half as good as this, I would have been a religious man.

With a sense of nearly superhuman calm, I opened the data files. Charts and reading appeared before me.

It was the experiment. *My* experiment. Only it also was not. The basic structures were there: the peculiar way the individual molecular engines unfolded; the instantaneous networking that suggested entanglement communication; the beautifully complicated tertiary beta sheeting studded with proteins dense with information and vulnerable to oxidation. I had the sudden, powerful memory of being in the lab on Phoebe seeing the nanoparticles express those sheets for the first time. Krantz had described it as *snowflake castles looking for the nearest blowtorch*.

They were still beautiful, still fragile, but they had defied the blowtorch. They had found ways to express themselves, creating what appeared to be massive constructions implied first in their microscopic structure, like an infinite cascade of fractal design. There were maps of control points that were clearly cellular machinery that had been hijacked and modified, complex layers of pattern-matching mechanisms that stank of human neocortical structures, and something... else.

I was looking at the oak and recognizing the acorn.

I spooled through the information as quickly as I could, taking in the first and last paragraphs of the reports, glancing at the diagrams and data just long enough to take a general sense of them and then moving on. The navigation keys of the hand terminal clicked as I pressed them, like I was crushing tiny beetles. There was clearly a deeper structure that the development of the beta sheets was protecting and promoting. I didn't begin to understand the energetic dynamics of it, but there was, I thought, a privileged group. Something about the logic of the individual particles reminded me of a paper I'd read in Tel Aviv that reexamined sperm. The thesis was that rather than a homogeneous collection of equally competing cells, there were classes of sperm; subspecies that acted as a team to present a chosen cell or class of cells to the ovum.

Alberto said my name, and I was aware of it the way I might have been aware of a candle flame in the noonday sun. It was there, but it had very little impact.

The privileged group could probably be identified by its place within the logical structure of the network, but something about that felt wrong. I paged back through the diagrams. I had the sense there was an asymmetry in the network someplace that I could almost—not quite, but almost—place. It was analogous to something I already knew about, but I didn't know what. I growled and went back to the start. Alberto said my name again, and I looked up too late.

Fong stood over us both, her expression carved from hardwood. I felt a flash of resentment at her interruption and swallowed it quickly. I held out the hand terminal.

"Look what I found," I said.

She took it from me and paused. I could see the desire to punish me in her mouth and the angle of her shoulders. Alberto squirmed beside me and Navarro appeared at Fong's side. I heard Brown yawp with delight. He'd caught sight of his lost treasure. I anticipated Quintana's anger and disappointment, but it didn't matter to me. My goal had never been to help him.

"Quintana's an asshole, but he isn't wrong. He won't solve it," I said, and Fong shook her head as if to say *I don't know what you're talking about*. I smiled tightly. "Brown won't solve it. He won't give them what they're looking for. We may not get another chance."

"That's not how this works," she said.

"I can help," I said. "Tell him to let me help." For a moment, it seemed as if she might reply, but instead she turned away without pressing the issue.

It felt like a victory.

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My advisor at Tel Aviv—David Artemis Kuhn—had a beautiful name, a way of wearing a formal jacket just messily enough to say he was in on the joke, and a voice that sounded like the first sip of rum feels: sharp and warm and relaxing. His office smelled of coffee and freshly turned soil. I admired him, I crushed on him, I aspired to be him. If he had told me to quit the university and write poetry, I probably would have.

"Nanoinformatics is perfect for you," he said. "It's deeply interdisciplinary. You can apply it to a career in medical research or computer architecture or microecology. Of all the degree programs we have, this is the one that will keep the most doors open for you. If you're not sure what direction you want your studies to take you..." He paused and tapped his desk three times with the tip of his index finger. "This is the one."

There is nothing so destructive and also so easy to overlook as a bad idea.

A thought experiment from my first course in the program: Take a bar of metal and put a single notch in it. The two lengths thus defined have a

relationship that can be expressed as the ratio between them. In theory, therefore, any rational number can be expressed with a single mark on a bar of metal. Using a simple alphabetic code, a mark that calculated to a ratio of .1215225 could be read as 12-15-22-5, or “l-o-v-e.” The complete plays of Shakespeare could be written in a single mark, if it were possible to measure accurately enough. Or the machine language expression of the most advanced expert systems, though by then the notch might be small enough that Planck’s constant got in the way. How massive amounts of information could be expressed in and retrieved from infinitesimal objects was the driving concern of my college years. I swam in an intellectual sea of qubits and data implication, coding structures and Rényi entropy.

I spent days in the computation labs with their leather couches and ancient ceramic lockers, talking with people from all across the world and beyond. The first Belter I met was a woman from the L5 station who had come down to study crystallography, though since she lived in the consistent spin gravity of that station, she looked more like a Martian than the elongated soldiers who would eventually become my guards. My nights I divided between my dorm room and the bright bars and sober coffeehouses along the edge of the campus.

Slowly, I began to take the sad, traumatized boy who had fled Londrina and a life on basic and build from him a deeper, more serious, more focused man. I styled myself a scientist and wore the thin black vests and sand-colored silk shirts that the biology students had adopted as their fashion. I even joined the student union for scientific outreach, sitting through the long, angry, clove-cigarette-hazed meetings and arguing when people from the more traditional programs complained that my work was closer to philosophy than engineering.

I drank a bit of wine, I smoked a little marijuana, but the drugs that fueled the university were not recreational. Tel Aviv Autonomous University ran on nootropics: nicotine, caffeine, amphetamine, dextroamphetamine, methylphenidate, 2-oxo-pyrrolidine acetamide. Aaron, my roommate, provided both a route for these to reach me and the worldview that justified them.

“We’re the bottom,” he said, leaning on the arm of our cheap foam-sculpt couch. “You and me and everyone else in this place. If we weren’t, we’d have gone to a real school.”

“We’re at a real school. We’re doing good work here,” I said. We were eating noodles and black sauce that they sold from a cart that passed down the halls of the dorm house, and the smell of something like olives rose from every mouthful.

“Exactly,” Aaron said, stabbing a fork in my direction. “We are keeping up with the most advanced, best-funded schools anywhere. Us, a bunch of basic jump-ups. Our mommies aren’t giving multimillion-dollar grants to the school. We aren’t skating on discoveries made by some department chair seventy years ago. Do you think they have a nanoinformatics program at the École?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling contrary.

“They don’t. We do. Because we *have* to be on the cutting edge to survive. We don’t have status, we don’t have money, we don’t have any of the things you need to get a foot in the door with recruiters or unions or grant specialists. So we make our own.” With this he took a thin case from his pocket and rattled it. “What the others can’t, or won’t, or don’t feel like they need to do is just necessary for us.”

Deep in my chest, a sluggish sense of fairness twitched in its sleep, but I could find no argument against, especially since it seemed as though everyone else in the program agreed. What would make it unfair, I told myself, was if the drugs tilted the playing field. If everyone was using them, then it stayed even.

As my career at the university went on and I came nearer to the knife-edge horizon of graduating, I found myself caring less and less about the fairness of the situation and more and more about my own well-being. Since nanoinformatics was a new program it didn’t have its own permanent faculty. Half of the classes on its requirements list were borrowed from other programs, and the professors often hadn’t tailored the content to include me. In my culmination-level seminar, all of the other half-dozen students were strict biologists working from a shared curriculum that I had

only brushed against. Taking focus drugs in that context seemed like the obvious thing.

In my last year, both Aaron and David Artemis Kuhn left. Aaron graduated early with a job offer for a cutting-edge R&D group so deep, even its name was under nondisclosure. Kuhn left to take a tenure-track position at Nankai University on Luna, heading up their nascent nanoinformatics program. I acquired other friends and professors in my time at Tel Aviv, but I found the absence of those two particularly unmooring, and my use of drugs ramped slowly up. I came to include sedatives in my study rituals, telling myself that they helped me rest and recharge. That I enjoyed the sense of release and mindlessness they brought, I chose to interpret as the measure of the stress I was under.

My graduation ceremony took place in a synagogue with white pillars and arches, beautiful sculpture in gold along the walls, and Hebrew script inlaid around the ceiling. The notes of “Auld Lang Syne” reverberated in the space, the melody taking on a depth and gravity I had never ascribed to it. My body, struggling from the massive nootropic abuse surrounding final examinations compounded by several whisky-and-sodas, punished me with nausea and dizziness. I spent my glorious hour, the pinnacle of my new life, trying not to vomit. I didn’t know whether to imagine my mother’s spirit viewing me from the afterlife with pride or despair. Afterward, diploma in hand, robes draped from my shoulders, I walked to a public park, sat on a stone bench, and wept, calling my mother’s name with an oceanic grief I had avoided for years.

It would be difficult to say which sign of trouble deserved the title “first.” When I visited my placement advisor after graduation, I spent an hour explaining to her what my degree entailed and applied to. It left her only slightly better prepared to help me find work. Letters began to arrive—actual physical letters on thin, yellow paper—from the benefits administration office asking whether I would be returning to the basic rolls. My applications to Stravos Group, Beyaz/Siyah, and Unfinished History all brought acknowledgments of receipt, and then nothing.

I laughed it all off for three months. I told myself and my friends that the cutting edge always confused the people who weren’t part of it. My

advisor's job wasn't to understand me, just to make connections. If she couldn't, other paths existed. I played it as more an inconvenience than a problem, and the prospect of going back on basic as laughable. I had a degree from a recognized university. I had letters of recommendation. The cheap housing, gray-tasting food, recycled clothing, and minimalist medical care of basic marked where I came from, not where I was going. The applications took longer than I'd expected, but I could be patient. I still had six months of supported postgraduate housing, until I had three, and then seven weeks, and then twelve days.

When I could no longer ignore that I would be out of housing allowance before I found employment, my friends had for the most part scattered to new positions of their own. The sense of isolation pressed at the back of my head all through the days and nights. I began growing angry at the slightest provocation.

In practice, the course of study meant to give me the most options had instead left me as the fourth-rank pick for everything behind people who had specialized. And even that was not the worst of my problems. I assumed that after my last exams, my use of nootropics and sedatives would end more or less of its own accord. The need, after all, evaporated. If now and then I used a tab to help me navigate the surprising complexities of my postgraduation world, others did as much with no stigma or ill effect. Without the drugs, my merely normal cognition felt sluggish and unfocused. And the sedatives were only to make my sleep deeper, more restful, more productive.

The penny dropped for me at a café on Yigal Alon Street where I sat under a copper awning with my hand terminal cradled in my palms. Over a cup of tea and a bit of scone, I reviewed my expenses with an eye toward how I could extend my job search without going on basic. The first-pass numbers felt like a kick in the gut. When I redid the math, I found the same thing. In the months since completing my program, my drug use had gone *up*.

I don't know how long I sat there, the waiter coming by now and again to touch my shoulder and ask if I was well. I remember very clearly that there were two young women at the table beside me planning a wedding

while I came to grips with the truths I had denied. I'd exchanged Londrina and life on basic for a degree I couldn't use and a rainbow of addictions. I was, if anything, worse off now than when I had spent my days watching my mother fade into death.

I can't say why at that point I didn't fall into despair. Despair was certainly open to me. In practice, I did not. Instead, I made what I called my rescue plan: a list of fifty work positions that, while they fit poorly with my education and ambitions, would suffice to keep me off basic; a consolidated account with what little actual money remained to me; a month's supply of fruit and whole grain foods; a hotel room where I could sleep and pace and weep while I withdrew. I put in my fifty applications all at once, checked in to my exclusive and unlicensed treatment center overlooking an alleyway, and prepared myself for hell.

I did not sleep for the first week. My body ached like I'd been beaten. My eyes dried until my vision grew blurry. I watched my emotions cycle up and down and up again, the wavelength of my illness growing shorter and shorter until I could no longer tell where in the cycle I was. The cravings were like hunger or thirst or overwhelming lust, and I only postponed acting on them by promising myself that if I still wanted so badly when I was done, I would indulge myself to death. I anticipated my eventual overdose like a zealot looking forward to Armageddon.

I have no clear memory of the second week. When I came to myself again in the middle of the third week—ten days still remaining on my rented room—I felt weak and hungry and clear headed in a way I had not realized until then how much I missed. My mind was my own. I could not help but think of my mother and the way her disease blinded her to its own symptoms. I understood her better then. My own addiction functioned in a similar way. In the exhaustion of my recovery, I dreamed of finding doors that had been plastered over that opened to rooms I'd had once and forgotten about, filled with books and scientific instruments that I needed and had been unable to locate. The metaphor wasn't subtle. I swore that I would never compromise my mind that way again, though like all such resolutions, I have since broken it profoundly.

With seven days remaining, I bathed, shaved, and took myself out for a meal of eggs and coffee I could barely afford. My time in the underworld nearly over—so I thought—I had to prepare for my return to the world of the living. If there was nothing waiting for me, that meant turning myself over to benefits administration. I cannot express how terrible that option seemed to me, but I was willing to face it, should it prove necessary. I thought I had moved beyond illusions about myself and what I was capable of enduring. That might even have been true. Remembering what I felt then and feeling it again now are very different things, and one is easier than the other.

I had five messages waiting. Four were from the applications I had sent out, two asking for more information about my qualifications, two scheduling interviews. The last, to my surprise, was Aaron returning to my life. His research-and-development gig had come across something that justified bumping up the budget. There were new positions opening up, including a full nanoinformatics team. Later, I would wonder if I saw the changes in him even then. A recording on a terminal can't carry the same weight of nuance as an actual conversation and sociopathy often approaches undetectability, even under the best of circumstances. I hope that I genuinely missed it. If I saw it and chose to edit it out of my perceptions, if the leaping hope in my breast was more important to me than the new-won integrity of my mind, it speaks poorly of me. I would rather be damned as naïve than willfully ignorant.

I responded at once: I would be delighted to talk about work. I told him that, just between the two of us, I'd been in a dry spell, and was even beginning to think that David Artemis Kuhn had led me astray with his professorial charisma and beautiful name. I made a joke of my season in hell, telling him but also not telling him, afraid of what he would think of me. At the time I gave more weight to the opinions of others.

Aaron's response came quickly. He'd spoken to the powers that be, and the project lead wanted to speak with me. He would be reaching out in the next few days. His name, so I could expect it, was Antony Dresden.



The others, even Alberto, didn't really understand what it meant to be research. I do believe that's true. On Thoth Station, we were treated as different—as dangerous—which we were. But their sense of our monstrosity was misplaced. The changes that we went through to become what we became didn't blind us to humanity. Our emotional lives didn't stop. All of us in research suffered the same loves and hopes and jealousies that administration and maintenance and security did. If someone felt flattered or excluded or tired, we saw it just as anyone else might. The difference, and I think it was the only difference, came from not caring anymore.

The confusion rose from metaphors of mental illness. The others thought of research as a collection of borderline autistics, and while there were several who did participate on that spectrum—Owsley in chemical signaling, Arbrecht in modeling—they were not created. They brought their diagnoses to the table with them. The other pigeonhole, sociopathy, was nearer the truth, though I believe there were still some differences.

I remembered caring about people. My mother. Samuel, a boy two years my senior, who was my first lover. Aaron. I remembered caring deeply about whether they were well, whether they suffered, what they thought of me. I remember defining myself by the opinions of people around me. My worth had been determined from without, by how I imagined that I appeared to others. That is what being a social animal is, after all. Emotional and definitional interdependence. I remembered it like remembering that I once knew a song, but not the melody itself.

Quintana broke my nose.

It was midmorning, as we reckoned such things in the room, and Brown, his precious hand terminal clutched to his breast, had been taken away by the guards again. Alberto and I walked, making a slow circuit of the room for the simple pleasure of feeling my body in motion. I had just reached the corner farthest from the hotel when Quintana walked up to us. The benignity of his expression surprised me at first. I expected rage or

sorrow or confusion. Alberto recognized something threatening in Quintana's demeanor before I did. He shouted and tried to push me out of the way, but Quintana stepped in close, twisting his body from the waist. His elbow hit the bridge of my nose with a sound like a wine glass being stepped on: sharp and deep at the same time.

I rolled to my side, uncertain how I'd fallen down. My hands guarded my abused face but didn't touch it. Contact made the pain worse. Blood ran down my cheeks and dampened the collar of my jumpsuit. Shouting voices came at me from a great distance that turned out to be about four meters. Alberto and two of Fong's men wrestled Quintana, pushing him back and away from me. Half a dozen other prisoners ran toward us, to help keep the peace or to watch it being broken. Quintana's voice buzzed with rage so badly I couldn't understand what he was calling me or threatening me with. I rose to my knees and looked up. The Belter guards leaning on the windows above us seemed slightly less bored than usual. One, a woman with short red hair and a tattoo across her chin, smiled at me sympathetically and shrugged. I stood, but the throbbing pain brought me to my knees again.

Quintana turned away, followed by Fong herself to make certain he wouldn't circle back. The others watched them go, then Alberto came to my side.

"I told you war would come out of it."

"You're so very smart," I said, the sound of my voice like something from a child's cartoon.

He took my guarding hands and gently guided them away. "Let's survey the damage," he said. And then, "Oh, darling. You poor thing."

They stuffed my nose with two tampons donated by women in security before we reset it. Our Belter guards never made an appearance. The politics of the enormous room were our own to work through, and the Belters took no side. Still, when Brown and his escort did come, no one in the room talked about anything but the violence he'd missed.

The guards didn't allow us mirrors. The expressions of the others gave me the nearest thing to a reflection, and from that I assumed I looked pretty rough. Albert ripped the sleeve from his jumpsuit and dampened it at the

showers. My drying blood grew sticky, adhering my suit and beard to my skin and tugging at me when I moved. I sat with my back to the wall, accepting Alberto's ministrations with as much grace as I could muster. I saw Brown approach Fong, watched them speak. Brown kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other and glancing behind him, as if expecting to be Quintana's next target. I waited, still and patient, afraid that any movement on my part would scare him off. Quintana paced at the far end of the room, muttering to himself with several of Fong's security people and Mellin from imaging. Around me, the narrative of the room changed. With Quintana as the villain, I shifted to being the victim. And as the victim, approachable.

"Fong told me what happened. You look like shit," Brown said, establishing dominance before he had to admit weakness.

"I blame myself," I replied, then paused, making it a joke. "No, actually, I blame Quintana."

Alberto, approaching with a freshly dampened rag, caught sight of us, paused, and angled off to sit by himself. Brown lowered himself to sit beside me. "He's always been an asshole."

I grunted my agreement and waited. Brown shifted, fidgeted. A tightness filled my gut, and the certainty that he would offer me his sympathy and walk away filled my throat. I took hold of his arm as if I could keep him there by force, but spoke calmly. "He's been talking to you a lot?"

"They have," he said. "The Martian officer hasn't been there. It's just the Belter guards."

"What do they say?"

"They ask me what it is."

"And what do you tell them?" I asked. When he didn't respond, I tried again. "What is it?"

"It's an elaboration of the original protomolecule sample. You saw that much, didn't you? Before you gave back the terminal?"

"I did," I said. Candor about that cost me nothing.

"The thing is, they know. I'm sure of it. This isn't a problem they need to solve. It's a test. They want to see if we can solve a puzzle they've

already cracked. They don't say it, but I can hear them laughing at me."

That piqued me, but this wasn't the moment to sit with it. Brown's open shell gave me my opportunity, and I drove my knife in to keep him from closing again. "Tell them they need two. Tell them to take both of us, and I'll help."

I saw the spark of greed in his eyes, his moment of bovine cunning. Once I helped him, I would have no way to enforce any agreement, and so his betrayal of me carried no price. I fought to keep my expression innocent. My wounds and my beard helped with that, I think.

"Thank you, Cortázar," he said, and drew the hand terminal from his jumpsuit.

I took it from him gently, forcing myself not to grab at it. Under my fingertips, the files bloomed like roses, measurements and images and analytic summaries opening one after the next like diving into an ocean of data. The surface I had skimmed before lay over an abyss, and I fell joyfully into it. Some of the large-scale structures boasted an organic origin: lipid bilayers, proton pumps, something that might once have been a ribosome now altered almost past recognition. That, I believed, had led Brown astray.

He assumed that a cell membrane would be acting as a cell membrane, rather than considering what cell membranes did and how they might be used to some purpose other than simply creating a boundary between things. They could just as easily provide highways for molecules vulnerable to the partial charge of water molecules. Or any polar solvent. Like the optical illusion of faces and vases, the bilayers could define either the volumes separating them or the web of pathways they created. And these were only massive, macro-scale expressions of the information in the initial particles.

I paged through, going deeper, my mind sailing across seas of inference and assumption. Time did not stop so much as become irrelevant. I forgot that Brown was beside me until he touched my shoulder.

"It's... interesting. Let me see what I can find."

"Just understand," he said. "I'm lead."

"Of course," I said. As if I could have forgotten.

It took me longer than I would have liked, sitting with the data and dredging up what I could remember of the experiments before. Time had eaten some of my memory and likely falsified some as well. The core of it remained, though. And the sense of wonder so deep it sucked my lungs empty from time to time. But slowly, I found a pattern. The thing at the center. What I thought of as the Queen Bee. While a great many of the structures I was looking at were beyond my understanding—beyond, I thought, any human understanding—there were others that did make some sense. Lattices that mimicked the beta sheets and expanded on them. Complex control and pattern-matching systems that were still just recognizable as brain tissues, two-stage pumps adapted from hearts. And at the center, a particle that nothing led to. A particle that both required and provided a massive amount of energy.

When I realized that the physical dimensions of the structure-particle were macroscopic, the knowledge rushed through me like a flood. I was seeing a stabilizing network that could bring subquantum effects up to a classical scale. A signaling device that ignored the speed of light by shrugging off locality, or possibly a stable wormhole. If I wept, I wept quietly. No one could know what I'd found. Especially not Brown.

Not until I had time to make my alternate.

"There's no doubt we're seeing the ruins of Eros," I said.

"Obviously," he said, impatient and rightly so.

"But look at these tertiary structures," I said, pulling up the graphic I'd prepared. "The connection between networks follows the same graph as embryonic profusion."

"It's making..."

"An *egg*," I said.

Brown snatched the hand terminal from me, his eyes jerking back and forth as he compared my graphs. It was a plausible lie, backed by fascinating and evocative correlations that didn't share a shred of cause. It built on his prejudices of biological structures being used for biological uses. I watched his face as he followed along the arguments I'd constructed to mislead him. He had been desperate for a narrative, and now that I'd given him one, it seemed unlikely that he would see anything else. I don't

know whether relief or awe set his hands to trembling, only that they trembled.

“This is it,” he said. “This is what gets us out of here.”

I appreciated his use of the plural, and I didn’t for a moment consider it sincere. I clapped him on the shoulder, levered myself up, and left him to convince himself of what he already wanted to believe. The others stood scattered about the room in groups of two and three and four. Whatever they pretended, all attention focused on Brown, and because of him, on me. I reached an open space and considered the observation windows. The Belters looked down on us. On me. Their weirdly large heads, their thin, elongated bodies. Chromosomally, they were as human as I was. What separated each of us—them and me—from the rest of humanity happened at much later stages than the genetic. I caught the eye of a greasy-haired man I recognized as one who had taken Brown to and from his sessions. I lifted my arms in a kind of boast. *I know your secret. I solved your puzzle.*

Brown bonded with the wrong answer. Quintana hadn’t so much as been allowed a glimpse of the dataset. All I needed was for the Martian to ask me as well as Brown, and I would be the one they took. The prisoner they exchanged.

If something still nagged at my hindbrain—the guards hadn’t come when Quintana stole the terminal, the Martian hadn’t been there during Brown’s questioning—it had no form, and so I pushed it away. But there was a moment, that hypnagogic shift where the thoughts of the day faded into dream and the guards of rationality fell.

The poisoned thought crept in upon me then, and I went from my half doze to a cold terror in less than a heartbeat.

“It’s okay,” Alberto said. “It’s a nightmare. They’re watching him.” I looked down at him, my heart beating so violently I thought it might fail. In the shadows, Alberto rolled his eyes and turned his back to me, his head pillowed by his arm. It took me a moment to understand his assumption. He thought I feared Quintana. He was mistaken.

The filthy thought that had slipped into me was this: If the Belters were negotiating a trade of prisoners with Mars then they might well still be enemies. If they were enemies, the Belters would want to give over

whatever they had with the least intrinsic value. The Belter guards had questioned Brown twice now, without the Martian present. They might very well be probing not to see whether he had divined the secrets the data held, but to determine that he couldn't.

By trotting out my idiotic egg hypothesis, Brown might prove to our guards that he would be of the least use to their enemies. Or Quintana, by his violence and ham-handed duplicity, might convince them that Mars wouldn't be able to work with such a fragile and volatile ego.

I'd plotted my course assuming that being competent, insightful, and easy to work with would bring reward.

I astonished myself. To have come so far, through so much, and still be so naïve...

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"Say I'm developing a veterinary protocol for... I don't know. For horses. Should I start by trying it in pigeons?" Antony Dresden asked. He was a handsome man, and radiated charisma like a fire shedding heat. Protogen's intake facility looked more like a high-end medical clinic than an administrative office. Small, individual rooms with medical bays, autodocs, and a glass wall facing a nurses' station outside able to look in on them all, panopticon style. The company logo and motto—*First. Fastest. Furthest.*—were in green inlay on the walls.

The language in my contract mentioned a properly supervised medical performance regimen, and I assumed this had to do with that, but it still felt odd.

"I'd probably recommend trying it in horses," I said.

"Why?"

"Because that's the animal you're trying to develop a protocol for," I said, my voice turning up at the end of the sentence as if it were a question.

Dresden's smile encouraged me. "The pigeon data wouldn't tell me just as much?"

"No, sir. Pigeons and horses are very different animals. They don't work the same ways."

“I agree. So do you think animal testing is ethical?”

“Of course it is,” I said.

“Why?” The sharpness of the word unnerved me. My belly tightened and I found myself plucking at my hands.

“We need to know that drugs and treatments are safe before we start human testing,” I said. “The amount of human suffering that animal testing prevents is massive.”

“So the ends justify the means?”

“That seems a provocative way to phrase it, but yes.”

“Why not for horses?”

I shifted. The wax paper on the examination table crinkled under me. I had the sense that this was a trick, that I was in some kind of danger, but I couldn’t imagine any other answer. “I don’t understand,” I said.

“That’s okay,” Dresden said. “This is an intake conversation. Purely routine. Do you think a rat is the same as a human being?”

“I think it’s often close enough for preliminary data,” I said.

“Do you think rats are capable of suffering?”

“I think there is absolutely an ethical obligation to avoid any unnecessary suffering—”

“Not the question. Are they capable of suffering?”

I crossed my arms. “I suppose they are.”

“But their suffering doesn’t matter as much as ours,” Dresden said. “You seem uncomfortable. Did I say something to make you uncomfortable?”

At the nurses’ station, a man glanced up, catching my gaze, and then looked away. The autodoc in the wall chimed in a calm tritone. “I don’t see the point of the question, sir.”

“You will,” he said. “Don’t worry about it. We’re just getting a baseline for some things. Pupil dilation, eye movement, respiration. You’re not in any danger. Let me make a suggestion. Just see how you respond to it?”

“All right.”

“The idea that animal suffering is less important than human suffering is a religious one. It assumes a special creation, and that we—you and I—are different *in kind* than other animals. We are *morally* separate from rats or

horses or chimps, not based on any particular physical difference between us, but just because we claim that we're sacred by our nature and have dominion over them. It's a story we tell that lets us do what we do. Consider the question without that filter, and it looks very different.

"You said there's an ethical obligation to avoid unnecessary suffering. I agree. That's why getting good data is our primary responsibility. Good experimental design, deep datasets, parallel studies whenever they don't interfere. Bad data is just another way of saying needless suffering. And torturing rats to see how humans would respond? It's *terrible* data because rats aren't humans any more than pigeons are horses."

"Wait, so you're... are you saying that skipping animal testing entirely and going straight to human trials is... is *more ethical*?"

"We are the animal we're trying to build a protocol for. It's where we'd get the best data. And better data means less suffering in the long run. More *human* suffering, maybe, but less suffering *overall*. And we wouldn't have to labor under the hypocrisy of understanding evolution and also pretending there's some kind of firewall between us and other mammals. That sounds restful, don't you think?" The autodoc chimed again. Dresden looked at it and smiled. "Great. So tell me only the good things you remember about your mother." At my horrified look, he smiled and waved the comment away. "No, I'm joking. I don't need to know that."

Dresden turned to the glass wall and gestured. A young woman in a lab coat with a stethoscope around her neck like a torc came in and guided me gently back to prone. As she did Dresden leaned against the wall, casual and at ease.

"This is part of our proprietary research regimen," he said. "Performance enhancement strategies. The thing that gives us our edge."

Looking back now, I believe I felt something like fear in that moment. A sense that important decisions were being made that I was only dimly aware of. Dresden's smile and the doctor's nonchalance seemed to belie that feeling, but for a moment I almost demanded that they stop, that they let me leave.

I'm not sure if that memory is true, but fear tends to be the thing I feel and remember most acutely now, so that leads me to believe it is.

Before I could act on my fear, the doctor leaned in close to me. She smelled of lilacs. “You might feel a little odd,” she said. “Can you please count backward from twenty?”

I did, the autodoc clicking and shifting on the wall as the numbers grew smaller and smaller. At twelve I stuttered, lost myself. The doctor said something, but I couldn’t make sense of her words or find any of my own. Dresden answered her, and the ticking stopped. The doctor smiled at me. She had very kind eyes. Sometime later—a minute, an hour—language came back to me. Dresden was still there.

“The preliminary we’re doing here is magnetic. It suppresses some very specific, targeted areas of your brain. Reduces fixity. Some of our staff finds that it helps them see things they wouldn’t have otherwise.”

“It feels...”

“I know,” he said, tapping his temple. “I did it too.”

I sat up. A feeling of almost superhuman clarity washed through me. A calm like the sea after a storm smoothed my muscles. It was better than all the drugs I’d taken at the university—the focus of the nootropics, the euphoria of the sedatives. I remember thinking at the time *Ooh, this could get addictive*. Whatever fear I might have felt no longer seemed important.

“It’s nice,” I said.

“So tell me,” he said. “Is animal testing ethical? Or does it make more sense to skip to human trials?”

I blinked at him, and then I laughed. I remembered the distress I’d felt when he’d asked the same thing just minutes before, but I no longer experienced it. A clarity and calm took that space for its own, and the relief felt joyful, like I’d just heard the punch line to the best joke ever. I couldn’t stop giggling. That was the moment I became *research*. I have never regretted it.

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention, but it is the mother of any number of other things as well: sacrifice and monstrosity and metamorphosis. Necessity is the mother of all necessary things, to coin a tautology. I gave my permission to make the change permanent that afternoon without ever dipping back into my previous cognitive states. I didn’t miss or want them. Excitement fizzed in my belly; freedom as I’d

never known it sang in my blood. A burden I hadn't known I was carrying vanished, and my mind became sharper, able to reach into places that shame or guilt or neurosis would have kept me from before. I didn't want to be what I had previously been any more than a depressive would long for despair.

And anyway, as Dresden said, we at Protogen weren't concerned with remaking the destiny of rats and pigeons.

I left Earth for the first time when I shipped to Phoebe. All I knew of the planets and dwarf planets and moons that made the habitable human system—Mars, Ceres, Pallas, Ganymede—I learned from watching the feeds. The politics of the alliance between Earth and Mars, the dangers posed by the Outer Planets Alliance and other Belter resistance groups. The story of mankind's torturous reach out into the vast emptiness of the system formed a complex story that felt as removed from my experience as the crime dramas and musical comedies that appeared on the same feeds as the news. Phoebe Station wasn't even among that number.

An obscure moon of Saturn, it began as a cometary object that found itself trapped by the gas giant's gravity as it passed by, presumably from the Kuiper Belt. It stood out from the other moons, four times as far from the planet as the next nearest. Its retrograde orbit and the lampblack darkness of its surface gave it a sense of menace. Phoebe, the ill-omened moon.

The alien weapon.

Tucked within the planetesimal's icy layers, the joint research group—Protogen and the Martian Naval Scientific Service—had found tiny reactive particles the size, roughly, of a midrange virus, but with a design structure and informational depth unlike anything Earth's biosphere had ever imagined. The protomolecule, we called it, branding it immediately in a territorial move that irritated the Martian scientists. We ignored their protests as irrelevant.

Our best guess was that it had been sent from some distance we couldn't guess at a time when a defined cell membrane stood as the heights of terrestrial life. The protomolecule appeared to be a message in a bottle, but one that included its own grammar books and instruction tutorials, ready to teach whatever aboriginal cells it found how to become the things it

required. We argued whether something as inert as a spore might be intelligent, at least implicitly, but without coming to a conclusion. The first evidence of a tree of life apart from our own enchanted and confounded us. Me.

The base itself showed its military origins in its bones. The corridors, hardened to shield us all from the void's vicious background radiation, were in the colors of the Martian navy. Each hallway bore the identification marks that told installation order, structural specifications, location within the base, and the date on which it needed replacement. The walls sported the same anti-spalling coatings as the ships. The food in the mess tasted of Mars: hot chile peppers, hydroponic fruit, ramen noodles in vacuum-sealed pouches, daily low-g pharmaceuticals. We had no extra space. The rooms I'd had on basic were larger than the cells I lived in there: a rack of bunks four high with a shared head so small that I braced my knees against the opposite wall every time I used the toilet. Of my eighty-five kilograms, I felt a little over three. Exercise took almost a third of the day, the lab a third, eating and sleeping and showering in the tight steel-and-ceramic shower a third.

The Protogen nanoinformatics team there claimed only four seats: Trinh, Quintana, Le, and myself. Mars had a matching number who joined us. The others would join in later, when we shifted to Thoth Station, though by then the Martian contingent would no longer be in play. The rest of the research team wasn't more than fifty, all told. With our counterparts from Mars and the naval support staff, Phoebe Base was a few hundred people on a black snowball so far from Earth that the sun would have been no more than the brightest star if we had ever looked for it.

If I chose a time in my life to return to, a high-water mark, those months on Phoebe would be it. The protomolecule astounded me every day. The depth of information in it, the elegance of its utterly minimal quasi-flagella, the eerie way it self-organized. One day I would convince myself that we were looking at something like a hive of termites, the next a colony of mold spores, the next neurons in a weird distributed brain. I struggled to find analogies, to make what I saw in the scanners fit into what I already knew. Every night, I slipped into my bunk, strapping myself down with wide

padded straps to keep from throwing myself out with an unintentional twitch, and thought of what I'd seen and heard, what tricks the protomolecule had performed that day. We were all of us in research quivering with the sense of being just a moment from revelation.

When the news came from Dresden's office of the second- and third-phase plans, I felt like the universe had leaned down and kissed my cheek. The opportunity to see what the protomolecule chose to do with large-scale structures was the best thing I could have imagined. The prospect filled me to the point of spilling over, and then filled me some more.

We killed the Martians in the middle of my work shift. It had all been plotted out, of course. Planned in back channels where our partners wouldn't hear us. When the moment came, I left my desk, moving toward the head, but paused to key in the override sequence. The Martians didn't notice anything. Not right away. And by the time they did, it was too late. We infected them and trapped them in a sealed level 4 containment lab. Watching the initial infection stages work on humans set the course for everything that would come later, but we couldn't afford to let the transformation fully run its course in a location we didn't control. So once we had our early-stage data, we gassed them and then burned the bodies.

When the *Anubis* arrived to retrieve the team and our precious samples, I walked to the dock with an odd wistfulness but also with a sense of anticipation. On the one hand, I'd loved my time there, and I would never again walk through these corridors. On the other, the experiment rising on my personal horizon promised to crack open everything we understood about the universe. I anticipated seeing the fascinating little particles arrange themselves, expressing layers of implicit information like a lotus eternally blooming.

When the ship left, the plume of our fusion drive finished sterilizing the base. The dataset we took from the infected Martians, while interesting and evocative, suffered from a relatively small absolute biomass. Phoebe base was smaller than a city elementary school, and our analyses strongly suggested that the protomolecule went through behavioral phase changes with increased mass as profound as a switch between states of matter.

In the ship burning toward Thoth Station, the team sat in the galley, putting up models to show how the men and women we'd recently shared meals and sometimes bunks with had been infected, disassembled, and repurposed into larger-scale tools to express the protomolecule's same underlying information structure. Trinh maintained that her data scheme outperformed Quintana's and she did so with a ferocity that ended with her stabbing a fork into his thigh and being confined to quarters. There were also rumors of assaults among the other research groups, the natural expression, I thought, of the excitement and stress we had all been under. I was almost certainly projecting, but I couldn't help comparing us to our subject. All of us in research had become exotics, and with time and changing environments, we—like it—would reassemble and reconfigure and become something unpredictable and possibly glorious.

We had almost reached the flip-and-burn at the middle of our transit when it occurred to me that the vast sorrow I had carried with me since the day my mother dropped the glass was gone. I could think of her now without weeping, without wanting to bury myself in activity or anesthetize myself with drugs. I didn't know if it was because I had finished the natural progression of grief, or if the process of becoming *research* had burned the ability to feel that guilt and horror out of me.

Either way, it was a good sign.

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I didn't sleep again that night, though occasional slips of dream assaulted me when I slipped into a light doze. In these I searched an empty room for something precious I knew belonged there. In the periods when full wakefulness pinched me, I wrestled with strategies and second guesses. The prohibition against changing a first answer served me well in university, as it had generations of students before. Now and here, the certainty that change offered me my only hope seemed obvious and suspect and obvious again, switching valence sometimes with every breath. The urge to run to Brown and destroy the arguments I'd made before, show him the real truth behind the data on his hand terminal, warred with the fear that doing so

condemned me to life and death in the room. I remembered old comedy routines about intellectuals overthinking problems: I know, but he knows I know, but I know he knows I know, and on and on until subtlety iterated itself into the absurd.

Brown suffered none of it. All that morning he walked through the room, smiling and nodding to our fellow prisoners. Quintana sulked in a far corner of the room, sitting by himself and glowering across the emptiness at us. He stayed too far away for me to make out his features, but I imagined him in a permanent scowl. Alberto tried to engage me in conversation, concerned, I think, by my sullenness.

When the doors opened and the guards appeared carrying our morning meals of textured yeast protein in the spun-starch boxes that we ate as dessert, a spike of cold horror split me, and I came to my decision. Brown trotted toward them, beaming. I ran across to him, waving my arms to catch his attention, and coincidentally the guards' and Fong's as well. That my action aided Quintana's plan only became clear later. It wasn't my intention.

"I was wrong," I said plucking Brown's sleeve like a child imploring his father. "It came to me last night. I was wrong."

"No, you weren't," Brown said, his tone impatient. "I went over all of it."

"Not all. There's more. I know more. I can *show* you."

A tall woman with hundreds of tiny black moles dotting her face led the guards. I knew her as I knew all the Belter guards: as a force of nature imposed on us. Still, I'd seen her enough for the familiarity of her face to let me read the curiosity in her. I plucked Brown's sleeve more anxiously, trying to draw him away, out of her earshot. The conviction that the Belters would give the Martian the worst, not the best, of research seemed self-evident now. I feared letting her hear me say something that might suggest I knew the truth. Brown didn't move, so I leaned in closer to him.

"It's not an egg," I hissed. "It's the support frame for a stable nonlocality. Something to pass information. Maybe even mass. It only looks biological because it co-opted biological material."

For the first time, I saw doubt flicker in Brown's eyes. I hoped that truth would be enough to sway his certainty. "Bullshit," he said. I'd done my

work too well.

“Do an implicit structure analysis,” I said. “Look at the membranes as pathways, not walls. See how the resonances reinforce. The protomolecule *opened* something. It’s not an alien, it’s a way for the aliens to talk to us. Or to *get* here. Don’t trust me. Look at the *data*.”

Brown looked deeply into my eyes, as if he could measure my sincerity from my pupils. A voice behind us rose in a weirdly strangled cry, and I turned toward it.

That is the last clear memory I have for a time.

I had never been stabbed before. It wasn’t at all what I would have guessed. My recollection is of a sudden impact driving me up and off my feet. Very loud shouting, very far away as multiple voices barked conflicted orders, though to whom I couldn’t say. The unmistakable and assaulting noise of gunfire. Lying on the deck, looking up at the empty row of observation windows, convinced that I’d been hit or kicked hard enough to break one of my ribs, then putting my hand to my side and finding it bloody and reaching the conclusion that, no, I’d been shot. Quintana, four meters away, his head and chest mutilated by bullets. I have a vivid image of Fong standing over his body with a pistol in her hand, but I’m almost certain of that memory’s falsehood. I can’t imagine the Belter guards suffering us to be armed, even if we shared a common enemy.

Other shards of my memory of the attack, though more plausible, have nothing I can attach them to. Alberto with his hands in bloody fists. The Belter guards pressing their bodies over mine, to protect me or subdue me or stanch the bleeding. The smell of gun smoke. The gritty feel of the floor against my cheek and hands. Perhaps normal people take these things and weave them into a coherent narrative, like making sense of a particularly surreal dream. For me, they simply exist. The prospect of a discontinuous cognitive life holds no terror for me, or, I suspect, for anyone in research.

Afterward, I heard the story told: Quintana’s battle cry, his rush toward us. According to Navarro, he pushed Brown out of the way in order to reach me. The Belter guards shot Quintana to death, and afterward the mole-speckled woman stood over his body cursing in the incomprehensible argot of her people and shouting into her radio. Brown, they rushed away, out the

door and into whatever rooms they used to protect and isolate him from us. The medical team that treated me arrived quickly, but didn't evacuate me. I lay first on the floor and then one of the crash couches. Quintana's improvised knife, a length of steel pried from the base of a couch, inserted just below my ribs on the right, angling up toward my liver. A few more centimeters and my chances of survival would have fallen drastically, but they didn't. I found it difficult to focus on things that might have happened, knowing as I did that they hadn't. But that came later.

At first I slept in a narcotic cloud like a physical memory of university. When I woke, Alberto lay curled beside me, his body feeling oddly cold, though in fact it was my fever that made it seem that way. For two more days, I rested and slept, Belter medics coming both with and between meals to switch out supply packs on the autodoc they had strapped to my arm. When I asked them where Brown was, what was happening with him, they answered with evasions or pretended I hadn't spoken. The only information I gleaned in those terrible days was once, when I demanded to know, weeping, if he'd gone, and one of the medics twitched her head in an almost subliminal *no*. I told myself she'd meant that he was still on the station rather than the equally plausible negatives that she didn't know or she wouldn't answer or I shouldn't ask. Hope survives even stretched to a single molecule's thickness.

The room spoke of nothing but the attack during all the time Brown remained absent, even—perhaps especially—when they spoke of something else. Just before lights-out, Ma and Coombs fought, shouting at each other for the better part of an hour over whether Ma had taken too long a shower. Bhalki, who usually kept to herself, approached Enz, talking tearfully for hours on end, and wound up in the hotel with loud and unpleasant-sounding intercourse. Navarro and Fong put together patrols that, in a population now under three dozen, felt both ridiculous and threatening. All of it was about the attack, though I didn't understand the complexity of it until Alberto held forth on the subject.

"Grief makes people crazy," he said. We were sharing a container of white kibble that looked like malformed rice and tasted like the unholy offspring of a chicken and a mushroom.

“*Grief?*” I must have sounded outraged at the thought, and in fairness, I was a little. Alberto rolled his eyes and waved the heat of my reply away.

“Not for Quintana. Not for the man, anyway. It’s the *idea* of him. We were thirty-five people. Now we’re thirty-four. Sure, the one we lost was an asshole. That’s not the point. It was the same for Kanter. Every time one of us dies, it will be the same. We are all less in ourselves because we’re less together. They aren’t mourning him. They’re mourning themselves and all the lives they could have had if we weren’t stuck in here. Quintana’s just a reminder of that.”

“For whom the bell tolls? Well, that’s a thought. Thirty-six,” I said, and Alberto frowned at me. “You said we were thirty-five down to thirty-four, but there were thirty-six of us.”

“No one counts Brown anymore,” Alberto said. He took a mouthful of kibble using his index and middle fingers as a spoon, then sucked the food between his cheek and his teeth, pulling out the broth before swallowing the greasy remnant. It was the best way to eat Belter kibble. “They would be mourning you, if you’d gone,” he said, and turned to me. There were tears in his eyes. “I would be.”

I didn’t know if he meant gone the way they assumed Brown to be already apart from the group, or dead like Quintana, but I didn’t ask for clarification. Perhaps leaving the room by dying out of it or being traded to the Martian were interchangeable for the people left behind. I guessed that was Alberto’s point.

We put the rest of the kibble aside and lay together, his weight on my left to keep the wound in my side from hurting. Between my own discomfort, the uncertainty over Brown’s status, and—unaccountably to me—Van Ark and Fong weeping loudly through the night, I slept poorly. And in the morning, Brown came back.

When the lights came on and the doors opened, he walked in with the guards. The time he’d spent sequestered had changed him. The others crowded around him, but he extricated himself from them and came to me. The brightness in his eyes reminded me of our best days on Phoebe and Thoth Station. I stood as he approached, and he grabbed my shoulder, pulling me away where the guards and the others couldn’t hear us.

“You’re *right*,” he said. “It took me three days to find the fucker, but you’re *right*.”

“Did you tell them?”

“I did,” he said. “They confirmed. When I get out, I swear to God, I will —”

The shout of the Belter guard interrupted us. The large, gray-haired man led the group today, and he strode toward us with his assault rifle drawn. “Genug la tué! No talking, sabé?”

Brown turned toward the guard. “This is the other nanoinformatics. I need to—” The guard pushed him aside with a gentleness more dismissive than violence.

“You come you,” the guard said to me, gesturing with the barrel of his gun. My heart bloomed; my blood turned to light and poured out through the capillaries in my eyes and mouth. I became a thing of fire and brightness. Or that was how it felt.

“Me?” I said, but the guards didn’t speak again, only formed a square around me and ushered me away. I looked over my shoulder as the doors closed behind me to see Brown and Alberto standing together watching me in slack-jawed astonishment. Mourning, I supposed, the lives they could have had. The doors closed on them. Or else on me.

The guards didn’t talk to me and I didn’t engage with them as they led me through the station corridors. The chamber they delivered me to boasted a laminate bamboo table, four cushioned chairs, and a carafe of what appeared to be iced tea. At the gray man’s nod, I took a seat. A few minutes later a woman came in. From the darkness of her hair and the shape of her eyes, I knew her family had been East Asian once. From her body and the slightly enlarged head, I knew they were Belters now.

“Dr. Cortázar,” she said. Unlike the others, her accent was as soft as a broadcast feed’s talking head. “I’m sorry we haven’t spoken before. My name is Michio Pa.”

“Pa,” I said, assuming from her military bearing that she was not a first-name sort. Her slight smile suggested I’d guessed correctly. The gray man said something in Belter polyglot too fast for me to follow and Pa nodded.

“Am I correct that you’ve had an opportunity to review the same data as Dr. Brown?”

I folded my hands in my lap, squeezing my knuckles until they hurt. “He let me look at it, yes.”

“Were you able to draw any conclusions?”

“I was,” I said.

Pa poured out glasses of tea for the both of us and then pulled up a virtual display. I recognized the data structures as I would have a lover’s face. “What do you make of it?”

I felt the trembling as if it rose up from the station itself, and not my own body. I drew in a shuddering breath. “Based on the profusion rate data and the internal structures, I believe the latent information within the protomolecule is expressing something similar in function to an egg.”

Her smile pitied me. “Walk me through that.”

I did, recounting for her all that I’d already said to Brown, back when I’d meant to make him out the fool. I wore my invisible jester’s cap well; I capered and grew excited. By the end, I managed to half-convince myself that everything I said was possible. That the gate—I never called it that—might *also* be an egg. The most effective lies, after all, convince the liar.

When I finished, she nodded. “Thank you.”

“You can’t give them Brown,” I said. “He did liaison duty. The real work belonged to us. Send me instead.”

“We’re considering how to go forward.” She rose, and I moved to her, taking her hand.

“If you put me in the room again, he’ll kill me.”

She paused. “Why do you say that?”

“He’s from the research group.”

“So are you.”

It took me long seconds to put words to something so obvious. “It’s what I would do.”



After the squalor and close quarters of Phoebe, the spacious, well-lit corridors of Thoth Station felt like distilled luxury. Wide, white halls that curved with a near-organic grace. Team workspaces and individual carrels both. I slept in a private room no larger than a medieval monk's cell, but I shared it with no one. I ate cultured steak as tender and rich as the best that Earth had to offer and drank wine indistinguishable from the real thing. The local climate, free from the temperature inertia carried by Phoebe's eight quadrillion tons of ice, remained balmy and pleasant.

Thoth boasted a research staff larger and better qualified than the universities on Earth or Luna, and the equal of even the best on Mars. The nanoinformatics team grew larger than before, even counting the loss of our Martian naval colleagues. Instead of only Trinh and Le and Quintana, I could now talk through my ideas about the protomolecule with a professional musician turned information engineer named Bouthers and an ancient-looking woman named Althea Ecco, who I didn't realize for almost a week authored half of my textbooks from Tel Aviv. And Lodge, and Kenzi, and Yacobsen, and Al-Farmi, and Brown. We sat up nights in the common rooms, mixing now and then with the other groups: biochemistry, signaling theory, morphology, physical engineering, chemical engineering, logical engineering, and on and on until it seemed like Thoth represented every specialty that cutting-edge research could invent. Like the coffeehouses of Muslim Spain, we created civilization among ourselves. Or at least it felt that way. It might only have been the romance of the times.

Everyone in research had undergone the treatment, which admittedly posed some problems. Singh in computational biology held forth on her theory of the protomolecule as a Guzman-style quantum computer one night over dinner, and when Kibushi used the information without citing her, she snuck into the showers at the gymnasium and beat him to death with a ceramic workbench cap. After that, security kept a closer eye on us all, but they also switched to nonlethal weapons. Singh, while formally reprimanded by Dresden, kept her status on her team. It only tended to confirm what we all already knew: Morality as we had known it no longer applied to us. We had become too important for consequences.

We prepared then and we waited, the tension of every day growing more refined and exquisite. Rumors swirled of the sample going awry and being recovered, of information ops plans put in place to distract any possible regulatory bodies from our work until they also understood the transcendent importance of what we would have accomplished, of our sister research stations on Io and Osiris Station and the smaller projects they were engaged with. None of it mattered. Even the greatest war in human history would have been paltry compared with our work. To bend the protomolecule to our own will, to direct the flow of information now as whatever alien brilliance had done before, opened the concept of humanity beyond anything that even we were capable of imagining. If we managed what we hoped, the sacrifice of Eros Station would unlock literally anything we could imagine.

The prospect of the protomolecule's designers arriving to find humans unprepared for their invasion gave us—or me at any rate—that extra chill of fear. I had no compunctions, no sense of regret. I'd had it burned out of me. But I believe that even if I'd refused the procedure, I would have done precisely as I did. I'm smart enough to know that this is almost certainly not true, but I believe it.

The word came nearly at the end of shift one day: Eros would be online in seventeen hours.

No one slept that night. No one even tried. I ate dinner—chicken fesejan and jeweled rice—with Trinh and Lodge, the three of us leaning over the tall, slightly wobbly table and talking fast, as if we could will time to pass more quickly. On other nights we would have gone back to our rooms, let ourselves be locked in by security, watched whatever entertainments the heavily censored company feeds provided. That night we went back to the labs and worked a full second shift. We checked all our connection arrays, ran sample sets, prepared. When the data came in, it would be as a broadcast, available everywhere. We only had to listen, and so tracking us through that signal became impossible. The price of this anonymity was high. There would be no rerunning a missed sample, no second chances. The equipment on Eros—both the most important and the most vulnerable—lay beyond our control, so we obsessed over what we could reach.

My station, and the center of my being, had a wall-size screen, a multiple-valence interface, and the most comfortable chair I have ever had. The water tasted of cucumber, citrus, and oxiracetam. The stations for Le, Lodge, and Quintana shared my space, the four of us facing away from each other in a floor plan like the petals of a very simple flower. Eros had a million and a half people in an enclosed environment, seven thousand weather-station-style data collection centers in the public corridors, and Protogen-coded software updates on all the asteroid station's environmental controls, including the air and water recycling systems. Each of us waited for the data to come, hungry for the cells in our databases to begin filling, the patterns we felt certain would be there to emerge.

Every minute lasted two. My sleep-deprived body seemed to vibrate in my chair, as if my blood had found the perfect resonance frequency for the room and would slowly tear it apart. Le sighed and coughed and sighed again until the only things that kept me from attacking her out of raw annoyance were the security guard outside our door and the certainty it would mean missing the beginning of our data stream.

Quintana cheered first, and then Le, and then all of us together, howling with joy that felt sweeter for being so long delayed. The data poured in, filling the cells of our analytic spreadsheets and databases. For those first beautiful hours, I traced the changes on a physical map of Eros Station. The protomolecule activity began at the shelters that we'd converted to incubators, feeding the smart particles with the radiation that seemed to best drive activity. It spread along the transit tunnels, out to the casino levels, the maintenance tunnels, the docks. It eddied through the caves of Eros like a vast breath, the greatest act of transformation in the history of the human race and the tree of life from which it sprang, and I—along with a handful of others—watched it unfold in an awe that approached religious ecstasy.

I want to say that I honored the sacrificed population, that I took a moment in my heart to thank them for the contribution they were all unwittingly making for the future that they left behind. The sort of thing you're trained to say about any lab animals advanced enough to be cute. And maybe I did, but my fascination with the protomolecule and its magic

—that isn't too strong a word—overwhelmed any sentimentality I had about our methods.

How long did it take before we understood how badly we'd underestimated the task? In my memory, it is almost instantaneous, but I know that isn't true. Certainly for the first day, two days, three, we must have withheld judgment. So little time afforded us—meaning me—only a very narrow slice of the overall dataset. But too soon, the complexity on Eros outstripped us. The models based on examinations in the lab and the human exposure on Phoebe returned values that seesawed between incomprehensible and trivial. The protomolecule's ability to make use of high-level structures—organs, hands, brains—caught me off guard. The outward aspect of the infection skipped from being explicable in terms of simple cause-and-effect, through the intentional stance, and into a kind of beautiful madness. *What is it doing to what does it want to what is it doing* again. I kept diving through the dataset, trying one analytical strategy and then another, hoping that somewhere in the numbers and projections I would find it looking back out at me. I didn't sleep. I ate rarely. The others followed suit. Trinh suffered a psychotic break, which proved something of a blessing as it marked the end of her coughing and sighs.

Listening to the voices of Eros—human voices of the subjects preserved even as the flesh had been remade, reconfigured—I came to grips with the truth. Too many simplifying assumptions, too little imagination on our part, and the utter alienness of the protomolecule conspired to overthrow all our best intentions. The behavior of the particles had changed not only in scale but in kind and continued to do so again at increasingly narrow intervals. The sense of watching a countdown grew into a certainty, though to what, I couldn't say.

I should probably have been afraid.

With every new insight in the long, unbroken stretch of consciousness that predates even humanity, a first moment comes. For an hour or a day or a lifetime, something new has come into the world. Recognized or not, it exists in only one mind, secret and special. It is the bone-shaking joy of finding a novel species or a new theory that explains previously troubling data. The sensation can range from something deeper than orgasm to a

small, quiet, rapturous voice whispering that everything you'd thought before was wrong.

Someone would have to be brilliant and driven and above all lucky to have even a handful of moments like that in the span of a stellar and celebrated career. I had five or six of them every shift. Each one felt better than love, better than sex, better than drugs. The few times I slept, I slept through dreams of pattern matching and data analysis and woke to the quivering promise that this time, today, the insight might come that made it all make sense. The line that connected the dots. All the dots. Forever. I lived on the edge of revelation like I could dance in flames and not burn. When the end came, it surprised me.

It found me in my cell, silent in the dark, not awake and not asleep, the bed cradling me in its palm like an acorn. The sharp scent of the air recycler's fresh filters reminded me of rain. The voices I heard—clipped, angry syllables—I ascribed to the combination of listening to Eros for hours on end and the hypnagogic twilight of my mind. When the door opened and the three men from security hauled me out, I could almost have believed it was part of my dream. Seconds later, the alarms shrieked.

I still don't know how the Belters discovered Thoth Station. Some technical failure, some oversight that left the trail that came to us, the inevitable information leakage that comes from working with people. Station security pushed us like cattle, hurrying us down the corridors. I assumed our path ended in evacuation craft. It didn't.

In the labs, they lined us up at our workstations. Fong commanded the group in my room. It was the first time I'd recognized her as anything but another anonymous extension of the lump of biomass and demands that was security. She gestured to our workstations with her nonlethal riot gun. All their weapons were designed for controlling research, not defending the station.

"Purge it," Fong said. "Purge everything."

She might as well have told us to chew our fingers off. Lodge crossed her arms. Quintana spat on the floor. Fear glinted in Fong's eyes, but we defied her. It felt like nobility at the time. Ten minutes later, the Belters broke through. They wore no standard uniform, carried no unified weapons.

They shouted and screamed in shattered bits of half a dozen languages. A young man with tattoos on his face led the charge. I watched Fong's eyes as she reached her conclusion and lifted her hands over her head. We did as she did, and the Belters surrounded us, peppering us with questions I couldn't follow and whooping in a violence-drunk delight.

They threw me to the deck and tied my hands behind my back. Two of them carried Le away as she threatened them with extravagant violence. I don't know what happened to her after that. I never saw her again. I lay with my cheek pressed to the floor harder than I thought the low gravity would allow. I watched their boots and listened to the chatter of their voices. At my workstation, an analysis run ended with a chime and waited for attention that would never come.

Less than two meters from me, the new interpretation that might have been the one, that might have cracked open the mystery, waited for my eyes, and I couldn't get to it. In that moment, I understood fully the depth of the abyss before me. I begged to look at the results. I whined, I wept, I cursed. The Belters ignored me.

Hours later, they hauled me to the docks and into a hastily rigged holding cell. A man with a hand terminal and an accent almost too thick to parse demanded my name and identification. When I told him I didn't have a union representative to contact, he asked if I had family. I said no to that too. We burned at something like a third of a g, but without a hand terminal or access to a control panel, I lost track of time quickly. Twice a pair of young men came and beat me, shouting threats to do worse. They stopped only when the larger of the two started weeping and couldn't be consoled.

I recognized the docking maneuvers only by the shifting vectors of the ship. We had arrived at wherever we were going, for however long we were meant to stay there. Guards came, hauled me out, shoved me in a line with others from Thoth. They marched us as prisoners. Or animals. I felt the loss of the experiment like mourning a death, only worse. Because out there, like hell being the absence of God, the experiment was still going on but it had left me behind.

They kept us in an enormous room.



“How could she not know?” Michio Pa asked me. “If she was dropping glasses and things, she had to notice.”

“One of the features of the illness is that she wasn’t able to be aware of the deficits. It’s part of the diagnosis. Awareness is a function of the brain just like vision or motor control or language. It isn’t exempt from being broken.”

The conference room had a table; soft, indirect lighting; eight chairs built for longer frames than my own; a nonluminous screen displaying Leonardo da Vinci’s sketch of a fetus in the womb; two armed guards on either side of the double doors leading to the hall; Michio Pa wearing sharply tailored clothes that mimicked a military uniform without being one; and me. A carafe of fresh water sat in the center of the table, sweating, four squat glasses beside it. Anxiety played little arpeggios on my nerves.

“So the illness made it so she couldn’t see what the illness was doing to her?”

“It was harder for me than her, I think,” I said. “From outside, I could see what had happened to her. What she’d lost. She caught glimpses now and then, I think, but even those didn’t seem to stay with her.”

Pa tilted her head. I recognized that she was an attractive woman, though I felt no attraction to her and saw none in her toward me. Something focused her on me, though. If not attraction, fascination maybe. I couldn’t imagine why.

“Do you worry about that?”

“No,” I said. “They screened me when I was still on basic. I don’t have that allele. I won’t develop her illness.”

“But something else, something that acts the same way...”

“I went through something like it in college. I won’t be doing that again,” I said and laughed.

Her eyelids fluttered, her mind—I supposed—dancing through a rapid succession of thoughts, each quickly abandoned. She chuffed out a single laugh, then shook her head. I smiled without knowing what I was smiling

about. Her hand terminal chimed, and she glanced at it. Her expression cooled.

“I have to see to this,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be right here.”

After the guards closed the door behind her, I got up, pacing the room with my hands clasped behind my back. At the Leonardo screen, I stopped and stared. Not at the sketch, but at the reflection of the man looking at it. It had been three days since I’d left the room, and I still struggled to recognize my reflection as my own. I wondered how many people, roughly, went through years without a mirror. Very few, I thought, though I personally knew almost three dozen.

Even with my hair barbered, my scrub-brush beard shaved away, I looked feral. Somewhere during my years in the room, I’d developed jowls. Little sacks of skin puffed under my eyes, a shade darker and bluer than the brown of my cheeks. I had gray hair now, which I’d known intellectually, but seeing it now felt shocking. Quintana’s attacks on me had left no marks. Even the knife wound, cared for by the station’s medical expert system, would leave no scar. Time had done me immeasurably more damage, as it did with everyone. If I squinted, I could still make out traces of the man I thought of when I pictured myself. But only traces. I wondered how Alberto had been able to bring himself to fuck the tired old man in my reflection. But, I supposed, beggars and choosers.

That I would not return to the room seemed a given now. They had not sent me back there, had given me new clothes, new quarters. Even Brown, during his long interrogations, hadn’t been allowed to shave. My naked, white-stubbed chin bore witness to the fact that I’d surpassed him. For the first day, I’d proudly marched out my egg hypothesis for one person, then another, then another, then the first again. Then they gave me a read-only access file that covered the years I had been gone. Two thousand pages, and I read it with the kind of longing and jealousy I imagined of someone following the career of an estranged child. From the uncanny transit of Eros to the surface of Venus to the creation of the ring gate to the discovery and activation of more than a thousand other gates that opened to a thousand

empty solar systems, it filled me with wonder and joy and the bone-deep regret that I hadn't been there to see it happen.

I dropped the egg theory and took up my more natural hypothesis of the gate. They thought they'd given me a cheat sheet, a way to pass myself off as better than I was for the Martian. I wasn't concerned with what they thought. If they considered me a fool, it still wouldn't be less than I thought of them. I could only hope that the negotiation between the Belters and Mars went well. My fate was in their hands, as it had been for years now.

The door opened and Michio Pa returned. The Martian was at her side. The same unfortunate skin, the same nut-brown hair. My heart beat with a violence that left me short of breath, and for a long moment I feared that something dire and medical was happening.

"Dr. Cortázar?" the Martian said.

"Yes," I said, rushing toward him too quickly, pushing my hand out before me like the unfounded presumption of intimacy. "Yes, I am. That's me."

The Martian smiled coolly, but he shook my hand. No physical contact had ever been more electric.

"I understand you've made some sense of our ring gates?"

Michio Pa, at his side, nodded as if unconsciously prompting me.

"Not in exhaustive depth," I said. "But I have the broad strokes."

When he replied, it was like a punch in the gut. "Why did you lie to us at first?"

"About?" I asked, trying to buy time.

He smiled, though the expression had no humor. "You had to know that every sound in that holding cell is monitored and recorded."

No. I hadn't known that. Though in hindsight it seemed obvious.

He continued. "You deliberately fed Dr. Brown a false story about your analysis, then at the last minute gave him the correct version. I'd like to understand why."

"I rethought my..." I began, then trailed off when I saw the knowing look in his eye.

"You were gaming him," the Martian said. "Manipulating him to try to secure your position. Incorrectly believing that we would be traded the least

valuable prisoner.”

The way he said it was not a question, but I found myself nodding anyway.

“The fact that he didn’t spot your falsified conclusions in the data,” the Martian continued, “is the reason you’re here. So, I suppose, your plan failed its way to success.”

“Thank you,” I replied inanely.

“Be aware that we know exactly what you are, what tactics you favor, and will not tolerate this behavior in the future. The consequences of failing to understand this fact of your future existence would be extreme.”

“I understand,” I said, and it was the truth. Something in my expression seemed to please him, and he relaxed a little.

“I am developing something of a private task force to examine the data that’s coming in from the initial probes that have gone through to the other side of the ring gate. Your experience with the initial discovery puts you in a rare position. I’d like you to join us. It won’t be freedom. That was never in cards. But it won’t be here, and it will be work.”

“I don’t need freedom,” I said.

His smile held an echo of sorrow I couldn’t parse. I wondered if Alberto would have known what it meant. The Martian clapped my shoulder and a wave of relief lifted me up.

“Come with me, Doctor,” he said. “I have some things to show you.”

I offered silent thanks to whatever imaginary God was listening and let the Martian lead me to this wide new universe, opening before me.

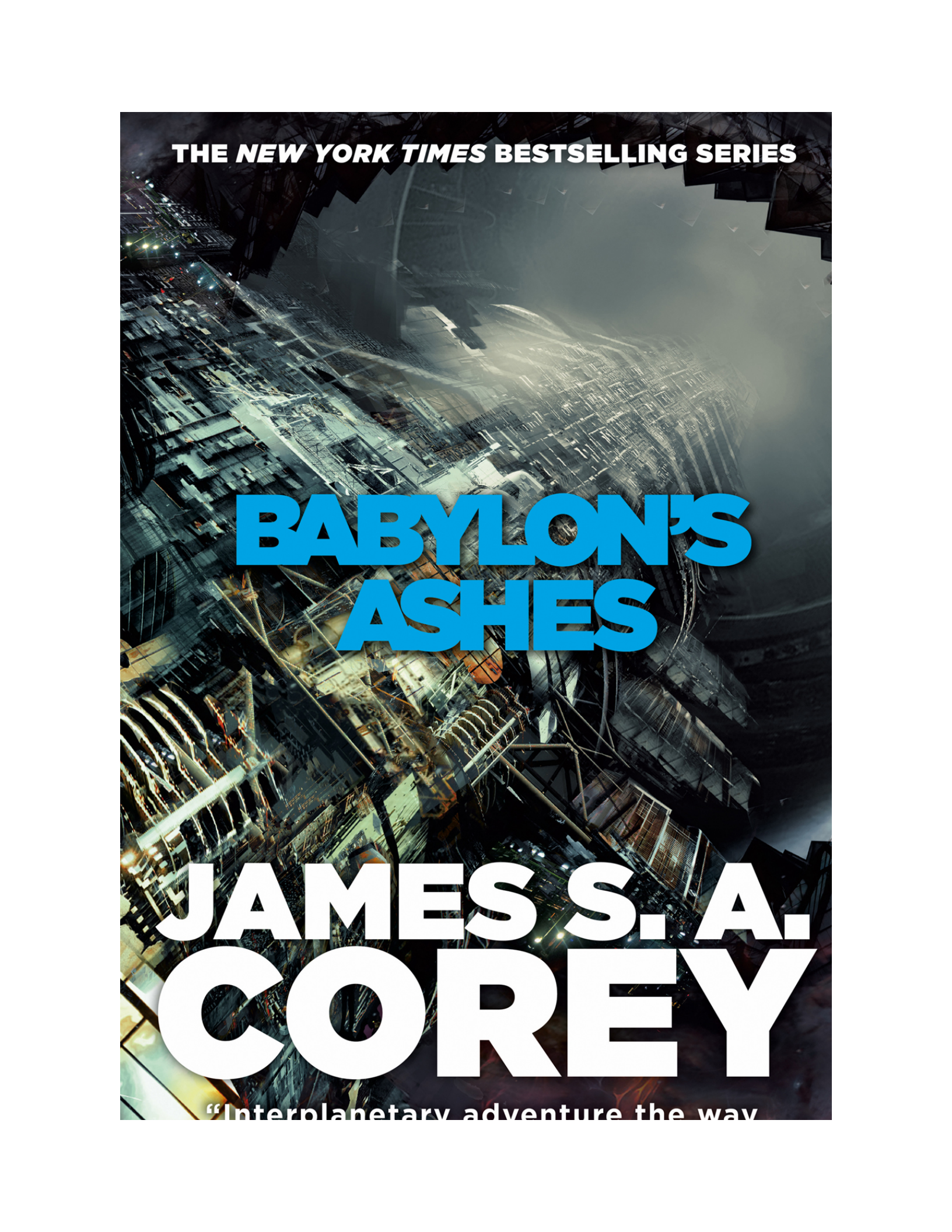
I did let myself wonder how the room would be without me. Whether Brown would ever understand how I’d outplayed him. Whether Alberto would take another lover. How many years would stretch out before Fong and Navarro gave up hope that I would somehow come back for them all. Questions I did not expect ever to answer, because in the end I didn’t actually care.



James S. A. Corey is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck, George R.R. Martin's assistants. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The first and last name are taken from Abraham's and Franck's middle names, respectively, and S. A. are the initials of Abraham's daughter.

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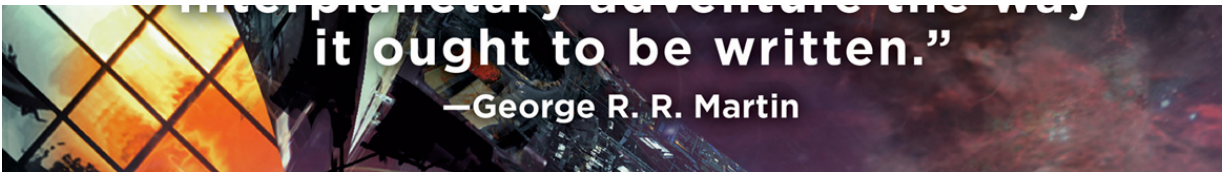


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*To Matt, Hallie, and Kenn, who get none of the credit
and make everything possible*

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Prologue: Namono

The rocks had fallen three months ago, and Namono could see some blue in the sky again. The impact at Laghouat—first of the three strikes that had broken the world—had thrown so much of the Sahara into the air that she hadn't seen the moon or stars for weeks. Even the ruddy disk of the sun struggled to penetrate the filthy clouds. Ash and grit rained down on Greater Abuja until it piled up in drifts, changing her city to the same yellow-gray as the sky. Even as she'd helped the volunteer teams to clear the rubble and care for the injured, she'd understood that her wracking cough and the black phlegm she spat out came from breathing in the dead.

Three and a half thousand kilometers stretched between the crater where Laghouat had been and Abuja. The shock wave still had blown out windows and collapsed buildings. Two hundred dead in the city, the newsfeeds said, four thousand wounded. The medical clinics were swamped. If you were not in immediate distress, please stay home.

The power grid degraded quickly. There was no sun to drive the solar panels, and the gritty air fouled the wind farms faster than the teams could clean them. By the time a fusion reactor was trucked north from the yards at Kinshasa, half of the city had spent fifteen days in the dark. With the hydroponic houses and hospitals and government buildings taking precedence, there were still brownouts more days than not. Network access through their hand terminals was spotty and unreliable. Sometimes they were cut off from the world for days at a time. It was to be expected, she told herself, as if any of this could have been foreseen.

And still, three months in, there came a break in the vast, blindfolded sky. As the reddened sun slid toward the west, the city lights of the moon appeared in the east, gems on a field of blue. Yes, it was tainted, dirty, incomplete, but it was blue. Nono took comfort in it as she walked.

The international district was recent, historically speaking. Few of the

buildings were over a hundred years old. A previous generation's fondness for wide thoroughfares between thin, mazy streets and curved, quasi-organic architectural forms marked the neighborhoods. Zuma Rock stood above it all, a permanent landmark. The ash and dust might streak the stone, but they could not change it. This was Nono's hometown. The place she'd grown up, and the place she'd brought her little family back to at the end of her adventures. The home of her gentle retirement.

She coughed out a bitter laugh, and then she just coughed.

The relief center was a van parked at the edge of a public park. It had a leafy trefoil icon on its side, the logo of the hydroponic farm. Not the UN, not even basic administration. The layers of bureaucracy had been pressed thin by the urgency of the situation. She knew she should have been grateful. Some places, vans didn't come at all.

The pack of dust and ash had made a crust over the gently sloping hills where the grass had been. Here and there, jagged cracks and furrows like vast snake tracks showed where children had tried to play anyway, but no one was sliding down it now. There was only the forming queue. She took her place in it. The others that waited with her had the same empty stare. Shock and exhaustion and hunger. And thirst. The international district had large Norwegian and Vietnamese enclaves, but no matter the shade of their skin or the texture of their hair, ash and misery had made a single tribe of them all.

The side of the van slid open, and the queue shifted in anticipation. Another week's rations, however thin they might be. Nono felt a little stab of shame as her turn came near. She'd lived her whole life without ever needing basic. She was one of those who provided for others, not one who needed support. Except that she needed support now.

She reached the front. She'd seen the man handing out the packs before. He had a wide face, brown speckled with black freckles. He asked her address, and she gave it. A moment's fumbling later, he held out a white plastic pack to her with the practiced efficiency of an automaton, and she took it. It felt terribly light. He only made eye contact with her when she failed to move away.

"I have a wife," Namono said. "A daughter."

A flash of raw anger rose in his eyes, hard as a slap. "If they can make the oats grow faster or conjure rice out of thin air, then do send them to us."

Else, you're holding us up."

She felt tears welling up in her eyes, stinging them.

"One to a household," the man snapped. "Move on."

"But—"

"Go on!" he shouted, snapping his fingers at her. "There's people behind you."

She stepped away and heard him mutter something obscene at her as she left. Her tears weren't thick. Hardly enough to wipe away. It was only that they stung so much.

She tucked her relief pack under her arm and, as soon as her eyes had recovered enough to see, put down her head and started home again. She couldn't linger. There were others more desperate or less principled than herself who were waiting at the corners and in the doorways for the chance to steal water filters and food from the unwary. If she didn't walk with purpose, they might mistake her for a victim. For a few blocks, her starved and exhausted mind entertained itself with fantasies of fighting off thieves. As if the catharsis of violence might somehow bring her to peace.

When she'd left their rooms, she'd promised Anna that she'd stop by Old Gino's on the way home and make sure the elderly man was getting to the relief van. But when she reached the turn, she kept going straight. Weariness was already sucking at her marrow, and the prospect of propping the old man up and going back through the queue with him was more than she could face. She'd say she forgot. It would almost be true.

At the curve that led from the wide avenue into the residential cul-de-sac that was home, she found the violent fantasies in her mind had shifted. The men she imagined herself beating until they apologized and begged her forgiveness weren't thieves, but the freckled relief man. *If they can make the oats grow faster.* What was that supposed to mean, anyway? Had he been joking about using their bodies as fertilizer? Had he dared to make a threat against her family? Who in hell did he think he was?

No, a voice said in her mind, as clearly as if Anna had been there to speak the words. No, he was angry because he wanted to help more, and he couldn't. Knowing that all you can give isn't enough is its own burden. That was all. Forgive him.

Namono knew that she should, but she didn't.

Their house was small. A half dozen rooms pressed together like a child

squeezing a handful of damp sand. Nothing quite lined up; no corner was perfectly square. It gave the space the feel of something natural—a cave or a grotto—more than something built. She paused before she opened the door, trying to clear her mind. The setting sun had fallen behind Zuma Rock, and the grit and smoke in the air showed where the wide beams of light streamed past it. It looked like the stone had a halo. And in the darkening sky, a pinpoint of light. Venus. Tonight, there might be stars. She latched onto the thought like a lifeboat in the sea. There might be stars.

Inside, the house was clean. The rugs had been shaken out, the brick floors swept. The air smelled of lilac thanks to the little sachet-and-candle that one of Anna's parishioners had brought them. Namono wiped away the last of her tears. She could pretend the redness in her eyes was only the outside air. Even if they didn't believe her, they could pretend to.

"Hello?" she called. "Is anyone home?"

Nami squeaked from the back bedroom, her bare feet slapping on the brick as she barreled toward the door. Her little girl wasn't so little anymore. She came up to Nono's armpit now. Or Anna's shoulder. The gentle pudge of childhood was gone, and the awkward coltish beauty of adolescence was clearing its throat. Her skin was barely lighter than Nono's and her hair was as rich and kinky, but the girl had a Russian smile.

"You're back!"

"Of course I am," Nono said.

"What did we get?"

Namono took the white relief package and pressed it into her daughter's hands. With a smile that was like complicity, she leaned close. "Why don't you go find out, and then come tell me?"

Nami grinned back and loped off to the kitchen as if the water recyclers and fast-grown oats were a brilliant present. The girl's enthusiasm was vast and partly sincere. The other part was to show her mothers that she was all right, that they didn't need to worry for her. So much of their strength—all their strengths—grew from trying to protect each other. She didn't know if that made it better or worse.

In the bedroom, Anna lay on her cushions. A thick volume of Tolstoy rested beside her, its spine bent by being reread. *War and Peace*. Her complexion was grayish and drawn. Nono sat beside her carefully, putting her hand on the exposed skin of her wife's right thigh just above where her

knee had been crushed. The skin didn't feel hot anymore, and it wasn't stretched drum-tight. Those had to be good signs.

"The sky was blue today," Nono said. "There may be stars out tonight."

Anna smiled her Russian smile, the one her wife's genes had also given Nami. "That's good, then. Improvement."

"God knows there's room for it," Namono said, regretting the discouragement in her voice even as she spoke. She tried to soften it by taking Anna's hand. "You're looking better too."

"No fever today," Anna said.

"None?"

"Well, only a little."

"Many guests?" she asked, trying to keep her tone light. After Anna's injury, her parishioners had made such a fuss, bringing by tokens and offers of support until it was impossible for Anna to rest. Namono had put her foot down and sent them away. Anna had allowed it mostly, she thought, because it also kept her flock from giving away the supplies they couldn't afford to do without.

"Amiri came by," Anna said.

"Did he? And what did my cousin want?"

"We're having a prayer circle tomorrow. Only about a dozen people. Nami helped clean the front room for it. I know I should have asked you first, but ..."

Anna nodded at her distended, swollen leg as if her inability to stand at the pulpit was the worst thing that had happened to her. And maybe it was.

"If you're strong enough," Namono said.

"I'm sorry."

"I forgive you. Again. Always."

"You're good to me, Nono." Then, softly so that Nami couldn't hear them, "There was an alert while you were out."

Namono's heart went cold. "Where's it going to hit?"

"It won't. They got it. But ..."

The silence carried it. But there had been another one. Another rock thrown down the gravity well toward the fragile remnants of the Earth.

"I didn't tell Nami," Anna said, as if protecting their child from the fear was another sin that required forgiveness.

"It's all right," Namono said. "I will if we need to."

“How is Gino?”

I forgot floated at the back of Namono’s throat, but she couldn’t speak the lie. To herself, maybe, but Anna’s clear eyes forbade it. “I’m going there next.”

“It’s important,” Anna said.

“I know. It’s just that I’m so tired—”

“That’s why it’s important,” Anna said. “When the crisis comes, we all pull together naturally. It’s easy then. It’s when things drag on too long that we have to make the effort. We need to make sure everyone sees we’re all in this together.”

Unless another rock came and the Navy didn’t catch it in time. Unless the hydroponics collapsed under the strain and they all went hungry. Unless the water recyclers failed. Unless a thousand different things happened, any one of which meant death.

But even that wouldn’t be failure for Anna. Not as long as they were all good and kind to each other. If they helped carry each other gently into the grave, Anna would feel she was following her calling. Perhaps she was right.

“Of course,” Namono said. “I just wanted to bring the supplies back to you first.”

Nami rushed in a moment later, a water recycler in either hand. “Look! Another glorious week of drinking cleaned-up piss and filthy rainwater!” she said with a grin, and it struck Namono for the millionth time what a perfect distillation of her mothers their daughter could be.

The rest of the package was oatmeal pucks ready to be cooked, packets of something that claimed in Chinese and Hindi to be chicken stroganoff, and a handful of pills. Vitamins for all of them. Painkillers for Anna. So that was something.

Namono sat with her wife, holding her hand until Anna’s eyelids began to droop and her cheeks took on the softness that spoke of coming sleep. Through the window, the last of the twilight glowed red, fading to gray. Anna’s body relaxed a degree. The tightness in her shoulders released. The furrows in her brow smoothed. Anna didn’t complain, but the pain of her injury and the stress of being suddenly crippled had mixed with the fear they all shared. It was a pleasure to watch it all fall away, if only for a moment. Anna was always a handsome woman, but when she slept, she was

beautiful.

Nono waited until her wife's breath was deep and regular before she rose from the bedside. She was almost to the door when Anna spoke, her voice rusty with sleep.

"Don't forget Gino."

"Going there now," Nono said softly, and Anna's breath went back to its deep sleep-slow tide.

"Can I come too?" Nami asked as Nono went back to their street door. "The terminals are down again, and there's nothing to do here."

Nono considered *It's too dangerous out there* and *Your mother might need you*, but her daughter's eyes were so hopeful. "Yes, but put your shoes on."

The walk back to Gino's was a dance in shadows. Enough sunlight had struck the emergency lights' solar panels that half the houses they passed were glowing a little from within. Not much more than a candle's brightness, but more than there had been. The city itself was still black. No streetlights, no glow in the skyscrapers, and only a few bright points along the sinuous length of the arcology to the south.

Namono had the sudden, powerful memory of being younger than her own daughter was now and going up to Luna for the first time. The utter brilliance of the stars and the starkly beautiful Milky Way. Even with the dust grit still in the high air above them, there were more stars out now than when the light pollution of the city had drowned them. The moon shone: a crescent of silver cupping a webwork of gold. She took her daughter's hand.

The girl's fingers seemed so thick, so solid compared to what they had once been. She was growing up. Not their little baby anymore. There had been so many plans for her university and traveling together. All of them gone now. The world they'd thought they were raising her in had vanished. She felt a twinge of guilt about that, as if there were something that she could have done to stop all this from happening. As if it were somehow her fault.

In the deepening darkness, there were voices, though not so many as there had been. Before, there had been some nightlife in the quarter. Pubs and street performers and the hard, rattling music recently come into fashion that clattered out into the street like someone spilling bricks. Now people slept when the darkness came and rose with the light. She caught the

smell of something cooking. Strange how even boiled oats could come to mean comfort. She hoped that Old Gino had gone to the van, or that one of Anna's parishioners had gone for him. Otherwise Anna would insist that he take part of their supplies, and Namono would let her.

But it hadn't happened yet. No need to call for trouble before it came. There was enough on the road already. When they reached the turn to Old Gino's street, the last of the sunlight was gone. The only sign that Zuma Rock was even there was a deeper darkness rising up thousands of meters above the city. The land itself raising a defiant fist to the sky.

"Oh," Nami said. Not even a word so much as the intake of breath. "Did you see it?"

"See what?" Namono asked.

"Shooting star. There's another one. Look!"

And yes, there among the fixed if flickering stars, a brief streak of light. And then another. While they stood there, hand in hand, a half dozen more. It was all she could do not to turn back, not to push her daughter into the shelter of a doorway and try to cover her. There had been an alert, but the remnants of the UN Navy had caught this one. These smears of fire across the upper atmosphere might not even be the debris from it. Or they might.

Either way, shooting stars had been something beautiful once. Something innocent. They would not be again. Not for her. Not for anyone on Earth. Every bright smear was a whisper of death. The hiss of a bullet. A reminder as clear as a voice. *All of this can end, and you cannot stop it.*

Another streak, bright as a torch, that bloomed out into a silent fireball as wide as her thumbnail.

"That was a big one," Nami said.

No, Namono thought. *No it wasn't.*

Chapter One: Pa

You have no fucking right to this!” the owner of the *Hornblower* shouted, not for the first time. “We worked for what we have. It’s *ours*.”

“We’ve been over this, sir,” Michio Pa, captain of the *Connaught*, said. “Your ship and its cargo are under conscript order of the Free Navy.”

“Your relief effort bullshit? Belters need supplies, let them buy some. Mine is mine.”

“It’s needed. If you’d cooperated with the order—”

“You shot us! You broke our drive cone!”

“You tried to evade us. Your passengers and crew—”

“Free Navy, my fucking ass! You’re thieves. You’re *pirates*.”

At her left, Evans—her XO and the most recent addition to her family—grunted like he’d been hit. Michio glanced at him, and his blue eyes were there to meet her. He grinned: white teeth and a too-handsome face. He was pretty, and he knew it. Michio muted her microphone, letting the stream of invective pour from the *Hornblower* without her, and nodded him on. *What is it?*

Evans pointed a thumb toward the console. “So angry,” he said. “Like to hurt a poor coyo’s feelings, he goes on like that.”

“Be serious,” Michio said, but through a smile.

“Am serious. Fragé bist.”

“Fragile. You?”

“In my heart,” Evans said, pressing a palm to his sculpted chest. “Little boy, me.”

On the speaker, the owner of the *Hornblower* had worked himself into a deeper froth. To hear him tell it, Pa was a thief and a whore and the kind of person who didn’t care whose babies died so long as she got her payday. If he was her father, he’d kill her instead of letting her dishonor her family. Evans snickered.

Despite herself, Michio laughed too. “Did you know your accent gets thicker when you flirt?”

“Yeah,” Evans said. “I’m just a complex tissue of affectation and vice. Took your mind off him, though. You were starting to lose your temper.”

“Not done losing it yet,” she said, and turned the mic back to live. “Sir. *Sir!* Can we at least agree that I’m the pirate who’s offering to lock you in your cabin for the trip to Callisto instead of throwing you into space? Would that be all right?”

There was a moment of stunned silence on the radio, then a roar of incoherent rage that resolved into phrases like *drink your fucking Belter blood* and *kill you if you try*. Michio lifted three fingers. Across the command deck, Oksana Busch waved her own hand in acknowledgment and tapped the weapons controls.

The *Connaught* wasn’t a Belter ship. Not originally. She’d been built by the Martian Congressional Republic Navy, and she’d come equipped with a wide variety of military and technical expert systems. They’d been on it for the better part of a year now, training in secret at first. And then when the day came, leading her into the fray. Now Michio watched her own monitor as the *Connaught* identified and targeted six places on the floating cargo ship where a stream of PDC fire or a well-placed missile would peel open the hull. The targeting lasers came on, painting the *Hornblower*. Michio waited. Evans’ smile was a little less certain than it had been. Slaughtering civilians wasn’t his first choice. In fairness, it wasn’t what Michio would have picked either, but the *Hornblower* wasn’t going to make its journey through the gates and out to whatever alien planet they’d thought to colonize. The negotiation now was only what the terms of that failure would be.

“Want to fire, bossmang?” Busch asked.

“Not yet,” Michio said. “Watch that drive. If they try to burn out of here? Then.”

“They try to burn on that busted cone, we can save the ammunition,” Busch said, derision in her voice.

“There’s people counting on that cargo.”

“Savvy me,” Busch said. Then, a moment later, “They’re still cold.”

The radio clicked, spat. On the other ship, someone was shouting, but not at her. Then there was another voice, then several, each trying to cut

above the others. The report of a gun rang out, the sound of the attack pressed thin and nonthreatening by the radio.

A new voice came.

“*Connaught*? You there?”

“Still here,” Michio said. “To whom am I speaking, please?”

“Name’s Sergio Plant,” the voice said. “Acting captain of the *Hornblower*. I’m offering up our surrender. Just no one gets hurt, okay?”

Evans grinned their triumph and relief.

“Besse to hear from you, Captain Plant,” Michio said. “I accept your terms. Please prepare for boarding.”

She killed the connection.



History, Michio believed, was a long series of surprises that seemed inevitable in retrospect. And what was true of nations and planets and vast corporate-state complexes also applied to the smaller fates of men and women. As above, so below. As the OPA and Earth and the Martian Congressional Republic, so with Oksana Busch and Evans Garner-Choi and Michio Pa. For that matter, so with all the other souls who lived and worked on the *Connaught* and her sister ships. It was only because she sat where she did, commanded as she did, and carried the weight of keeping the men and women of her crew safe and well and on the right side of history that the smaller personal histories of the *Connaught*’s crew seemed to have more significance.

For her, the first surprise in the many that had brought her here was becoming part of the military arm of the Belt at all. As a young woman, she’d expected to be a systems engineer or an administrator on one of the big stations. If she’d loved mathematics more than she did, it might have happened. She’d put herself through upper university because she thought she was supposed to, and failed because it had been a horrible fit. When the counselors sent her the message that she was being disenrolled, it had been a shock. Looking back, it was obvious. The clarifying lens of history.

She’d fit better with the OPA, or at least the arm of it she’d joined. Within the first month, it became clear that the Outer Planets Alliance was

less the unified bureaucracy of the revolution than a kind of franchise title adopted by the people of the Belt who thought that something like it should exist. The Voltaire Collective considered itself OPA, but so did Fred Johnson's group based on Tycho Station. Anderson Dawes acted as governor of Ceres under the split circle, and Zig Ochoa opposed him under the same symbol.

For years, Michio had styled herself as a woman with a military career, but with an awareness in the back of her mind that her chain of command was a fragile thing. There was a time it had made her reflexively protective of authority—her authority over her subordinates and the authority of her superiors over her. It was what put her in the XO's chair of the *Behemoth*. What put her in the slow zone when humanity first passed through the gate and into the hub of the thirteen-hundred-world empire to which they were heir. It was what had gotten her lover, Sam Rosenberg, killed. After that, her faith in command structures had become a little less absolute.

Once again obvious in retrospect.

As to the second surprise, she couldn't have said exactly what it was. Falling into a collective marriage or her recruitment by Marco Inaros or taking possession of her new ship and its revolutionary mission with the Free Navy. Lives had more turning points than seams of ore, and not every change was obvious, even looking back.



"Boarding team's ready," Carmondy said, his voice flattened by the suit mic. "You want us to breach?"

As the leader of the assault team, Carmondy was technically in a different branch of command than Michio, but he'd deferred to her as soon as he and his soldiers had come aboard. He'd lived on Mars for a few years, wasn't part of the plural marriage that formed the core of the *Connaught's* crew, and was professional enough to accept his status as an outsider. She liked him for that, if little else.

"Let's let them be nice," Michio said. "If they start shooting at us, do what needs doing."

"Savvy," Carmondy said, and then switched channels.

Both ships were on the float now, so she couldn't lean back in her crash couch. If she'd been able to, she would have.

When the news had come out that the Free Navy was taking control of the system and that the ring gate was closed to through traffic, the fleet of colony ships on the burn for the new worlds beyond faced a choice. Stand down and give their supplies over for redistribution to the stations and ships most in need, and they would be allowed to keep their ships. Run, and they wouldn't.

The *Hornblower*—like who knew how many others—had done the calculation and decided the risk was worth the reward. They'd killed their transponders, spun their ship, and burned like hell, but briefly. Then spun again, burned again, spun again, burned. Hotaru, they called it. The strategy of going bright only for a moment, and then going dark in hopes that the vastness of space would conceal them until the political situation changed. The ships had enough food and supplies to last the would-be colonists for years. The volume of the system was so massive that if they avoided detection at the front, finding them later could be the work of lifetimes.

The *Hornblower's* drive plume had been detected by Free Navy arrays on Ganymede and Titan both. The thing she hated most was that the chase had led them up out of the plane of the ecliptic. The vast majority of the sun's heliosphere extended above and below the thin disk where the planets and the asteroid belt spun in their orbits. Michio had a superstitious dislike of those reaches, the huge emptiness that, in her mind, loomed above and below human civilization.

The ring gate and the unreal space beyond it might be stranger—were stranger—but her unease about traveling outside the ecliptic had been with her since childhood. It was part of her personal mythology, and a herald of bad luck.

She set her monitor to show the boarding team's suit cameras and play soft music. The *Hornblower*, as seen through twenty different perspectives while harps and finger drums tried to soothe her. A dark-skinned Earther was in the airlock, his arms spread wide. Half a dozen of the cameras were locked on him, barrels of their weapons visible. The others shifted, watching for movement on the periphery or coming from outside the ship. The man reached up and used a handhold to flip himself around, putting his arms behind him for the zip-tie restraint. It had a sense of practice that left

Michio thinking that Captain Plant—if that's who this was—had been forcibly detained before.

The boarding team moved into the ship, its eyes and attention shifting down the corridors in teams. Movement on one screen mapped to a figure seen in another. When they reached the galley, the crew of the *Hornblower* floated in ranks, arms out, ready to accept whatever fate the *Connaught* had in store for them. Even at the very small size the individual panes had taken to fit her monitor, she could see the clinging sheen of tears creeping over the captives' faces. Grief masks formed of saline and surface tension.

"They're going to be fine," Evans said. "Esá? It's our job, yeah?"

"I know," Michio said, her gaze fixed on the screen.

The boarding team moved through the decks, locking down control. Their coordination made them feel like a single organism with twenty eyes. The group consciousness of professionalism and drills. The command deck looked ill kept. A hand terminal and a drinking bulb on the float had been sucked against an air intake. Without thrust gravity to coordinate them, the crash couches lay at a variety of angles. It reminded her of old videos she'd seen of shipwrecks back on Earth. The colony ship was drowning in the endless vacuum.

She knew that Carmondy would be calling her before he did it, and drew the music gently down. The request came through with a polite chime.

"We've taken control of the ship, Captain," he said. Two of his men were watching him say it, so she saw his lips and his jaw making the words from two angles even as she heard them. "No resistance. No trouble."

"Officer Busch?" Michio said.

"Their firewalls are already down," Oksana said. "Toda y alles."

Michio nodded, more to herself than to Carmondy. "The *Connaught* has control of the enemy ship's systems."

"We're setting a perimeter and securing the prisoners. Automatic check-in set."

"Understood," Michio said. Then, to Evans, "Let's pull back far enough to be outside the blast range if it turns out they're hiding nukes in the grain silo."

"On it," Evans said.

The maneuvering thrusters shifted her against her restraints, not even a tenth of a g, for the burn's scant handful of seconds. Taking the things that

other people thought they deserved to keep was dangerous work. The *Connaught* would watch over the boarding team of course, the ship's gentle fingers on all their pulses. And in addition, Carmondy would ping every half hour using a onetime pad protocol. If he failed to check in, Michio would turn the *Hornblower* into a diffuse cloud of hot gas as a warning to the next ship. And a few thousand people on Callisto, Io, and Europa would have to hope the other Free Navy conscription missions came through.

The Belt had finally shrugged off the yoke of the inner planets. They had Medina Station at the heart of the ring gates, they had the only functioning navy in the solar system, and they had the gratitude of millions of Belters. In the long term, it was the greatest statement of independence and freedom the human race had ever made. In the short term, it was her job to see the victory didn't starve them all to death.

For the next two days, Carmondy and his men would see that the would-be colonists were sealed on secured decks, where they could ride out the transit to a stable orbit around Jupiter. Then make a complete inventory of what had been gained by the taking of the *Hornblower*. Once they were done, it would still be a week before the salvage drives were in place. In that time, the *Connaught* would stand as guard and captor, and little enough for Michio to do but scan the darkness for other refugees.

She wasn't looking forward to it, and she was sure the others in her marriage group weren't either. Still, there was more than that in Oksana's voice when she spoke.

"Bossman. We got confirmation from Ceres."

"Good," Michio said, but with an uptick in her inflection that meant she'd heard whatever Oksana wasn't saying. Oksana Busch had been her wife almost as long as the group had been together. They knew each other's moods well.

"Got something else too. Message from himself."

"What does Dawes want?" Michio asked.

"Not Dawes. *Big* himself."

"Inaros?" Michio said. "Play it."

"Under captain-only encrypt," Oksana said. "I can pipe it to your cabin or your terminal if—"

"Play it, Oksana."

Marco Inaros appeared on the monitor. From the drape of his hair, he

was either on Ceres or under burn. There wasn't enough visible background behind him to say if he was on a ship or in an office. His smile was charming and reached his warm, dark eyes. Michio felt her pulse step up a little, and told herself it was dread and not an attraction. For the most part, that was truth. He was a charismatic bastard, though.

"Captain Pa," Marco said. "I'm glad to hear you took the *Hornblower* cleanly. It's another testament to your ability. We were right to have you in command of the conscription. Things have gone well enough, we're ready to move on to the next stages of our plan."

Michio glanced over at Evans and Oksana. He was plucking at his beard, and she was trying not to look at Michio.

"We'll want to route the *Hornblower* directly to Ceres," Marco said. "And before that, I'm calling a meeting. Strictly inner-circle. You, me, Dawes, Rosenfeld, Sanjrani. At Ceres Station." His grin widened. "Now that we're running the system, there are some changes we should make, eh? The *Pella* says you can make it there in two weeks. It'll be good to see you in person."

He made a sharp Free Navy salute. The one he'd come up with. The screen went blank. The mix of confusion and distress and relief that flooded Michio's gut wasn't easy to make sense of. Having her mission change like that, so quickly and with so little explanation, left her on the wrong foot. And going into a meeting of the inner circle still had a little of the sense of danger that it had before the Free Navy had announced itself. Years of moving in shadows left habits of thought and feeling that were hard to step out of, even if they'd won. But at least they'd be back in the plane of the ecliptic, and not high up in the black, where ominous things happened. Bad things.

Things, a small, still voice in her head said, *like being called to an unexpected meeting*.

"Two weeks?" Michio asked.

"Possible," Busch answered almost before the question was out. She'd already run the plan. "But it'll mean burning hard. And no waiting for the *Hornblower*."

"Carmondy won't like that," Pa said.

"What's he going to say?" Oksana said. "It's himself giving the order."

"It is," Michio agreed.

Evans cleared his throat. "So we're going?"

Michio held up a fist. Yes. "It's Inaros," she said, ending the coming argument by invoking his name.

"Well. Bien," Evans said, but the tone of his voice said something different.

"Something?" Pa asked.

"Just isn't the first time plans changed," Evans said, his face wrinkled with worry. He wasn't as pretty that way, but he was her newest husband, so she didn't point it out. Pretty men could be so fragile.

"Continue," she said instead.

"Well, there was the money thing with Sanjrani. And the Martian prime minister wound up making it safe to Luna when half the Free Navy was trying to take him out. And I hear we tried to kill Fred Johnson and James Holden both, and both still breathing and walking free. Leaves me wondering."

"Like maybe Marco isn't as infallible as he plays?" Michio asked.

For a moment, he didn't answer. She thought he might not. "Something like," Evans finally said. "But even thinking like that feels like it might get sticky, no?"

"Something like," Michio agreed.

Chapter Two: Filip

There was no one he hated more than James Holden. Holden, the peacemaker who'd never made peace. Holden, the champion of justice who'd never sacrificed anything for justice. James Holden, who crewed up with Martians and Belters—with *one* Belter—and moved through the system as if it made him better than everyone else. Neutral and above the fray while the inner planets shoved humanity's resources out to the thirteen hundred-odd new planets and left the Belters to die. Who, against all odds, hadn't died with the *Chetzemoka*.

Fred Johnson, the Earther who'd gone native and started speaking for the Belt, was a close second. The Butcher of Anderson Station, who'd made his career by slaughtering innocent Belters and continued it by patronizing them all into an arc that led toward their cultural and individual deaths. For that he deserved hatred and disdain. But Filip's mother hadn't died directly because of Johnson, and so Holden—James *pinché* Holden—owned first prize.

It was months since Filip had beaten his hands against the inner door of the airlock while his mother, her mind twisted by too much time in Holden's cultlike presence, had spaced herself and Cyn along with her. Stupid deaths. Needless. That, he told himself, was why it hurt so much. That she hadn't needed to die, and she'd chosen it anyway. He'd broken his hand trying to get her to stop, but it hadn't helped anything. Naomi Nagata had picked a bad death in the void over a life with her true people. It was proof of how much power Holden had had over her. How deeply she'd been brainwashed, and how weak her mind had been from the start.

He didn't tell anyone on the *Pella* that he still dreamed about it every night: the closed door, the certainty that something precious—something *important*—was on the other side of it, and the sense of vicious loss that he couldn't make the door open. If they knew how much it haunted him, he'd

seem weak, and his father didn't have room for men who couldn't do their part. Not even his own son. Filip took his place as a Belter and a man of the Free Navy or he found a place on a station and stayed there as a boy. He was nearly seventeen now; he'd helped to destroy the oppressors on Earth. His childhood belonged in his past.



Pallas Station was one of the oldest in the Belt. The first mines had been there, and following them, the first refineries. The newer facilities had followed, because this was where the industrial base was. And because it was easier to use the older, unretired crushers and spin separators as overflow capacity. And from habit. Pallas had never been spun up. The gravity it had was the naturally occurring microgravity of its mass—two percent of Earth's full g. Hardly more than a persistent direction of drift. The station swooped above and below the plane of the ecliptic, like it was trying to elbow its way out of the solar system. Ceres and Vesta were larger and more populous, but the metal for ship plating and reactors, for station decks and shipping containers, for the guns that studded the Free Navy's liberated warships and the rounds that they fired all came from here. If Ganymede was the breadbasket of the Belt, Pallas was its forge.

It only made sense that the Free Navy should pass through there in its constant voyage through the liberated system, and that it should make sure to leave no resources behind.

"S'yahaminda, que?" the harbormaster said, floating in the meeting room's wider end. It was a Belter room. No tables, no chairs. Little reference to up or down in its architecture. After so long in a ship built with thrust gravity in mind, Filip thought it felt like home. Authentic in a way that the Martian-designed spaces never could.

The harbormaster himself was the same. His body was longer than someone who'd spent their childhood with even low, intermittent gravity. His head was larger compared to his body than Filip's or Marco's or Karal's. The harbormaster's left eye was milky and blind where even the pharmaceutical cocktail that made human life in freefall possible had been insufficient to keep the capillaries from dying. He was the kind of man who

would never be able to tolerate living on a planetary surface, even for a short period of time. The most extreme end of the Belter physiological spectrum. He was exactly who the Free Navy had risen up to protect and represent.

Which was likely why he seemed so confused and betrayed now.

“Is it a problem?” Marco said, shrugging with his hands. The way he said it made emptying the warehouses into the void seem like an everyday thing to ask. Filip hoisted his own eyebrows to echo his father’s disbelief. Karal only glowered and kept one fist on his sidearm.

“Per es esá mindan hoy,” he said.

“I know it’s everything,” Marco said. “That’s the point. So long as it’s all here, Pallas will be a target for the inners. Put what you have in containers, fire them off, and only we will know their vectors. We’ll track where they are and salvage what we need when we need it. It’s not just keeping it out of their hands, it’s showing that the station warehouses are empty before they even reach for them, yeah?”

“Per mindan ...” the harbormaster said, blinking in distress.

“You’ll be paid for it all,” Filip said. “Good Free Navy scrip.”

“Good, yeah,” the harbormaster said. “Aber ...”

His blinking redoubled and he looked away from Marco as if the admiral of the Belters’ first real armed force was floating half a meter left of where he was. He licked his lips.

“Aber?” Marco prompted, matching his accent.

“Spin classifiers v’reist neue ganga, yeah?”

“If you need new parts, then buy new parts,” Marco said, his voice taking on a dangerous buzz.

“Aber ...” The harbormaster swallowed.

“But you used to buy from Earth,” Marco said. “And our money doesn’t spend there.”

The harbormaster lifted a fist in acknowledgment.

Marco’s smile was gentle and open. Sympathetic. “No one’s money spends there. Not anymore. You buy from the Belt now. Just the Belt.”

“Belt don’t make good parts,” the harbormaster whined.

“We make the best parts there are,” Marco said. “History’s moved on, my friend. Try to keep up. And package everything there is for push-out, sa sa?”

The harbormaster met Marco's gaze and lifted his fist again in assent. It wasn't as if he had a choice. The advantage of being in command of all the guns was that no matter how nicely you asked for something, it was still an order. Marco pushed off, the thin gravity of Pallas bending the path of his body. He stopped his motion by grabbing handholds at the harbormaster's side, and then embraced him. The harbormaster didn't hug him back. He looked like a man holding his breath and hoping something dangerous wouldn't notice him as it passed by.

The corridors and passageways leading from the harbormaster's office to the docks were a patchwork of ancient ceramic plating and newer carbon-silicate lace. The lace plating—one of the first new materials put into manufacture after the protomolecule's appearance threw physical chemistry ahead by a few generations—had an eerie rainbow sheen as they floated past it. Like oil on the surface of water. It was supposed to be more resilient than ceramic and titanium, harder and more flexible. No one knew how it would age, though if reports from the other worlds were to be trusted, it would likely outlast the people who'd fashioned it by at least an order of magnitude. Assuming they were making it right. Hard to know.

The Pallas shuttle was waiting when they reached it, Bastien strapped into the pilot's couch.

"Bist bien?" he asked as Marco cycled the airlock closed behind them.

"As well as could be hoped," Marco said, glancing around the small craft. Six couches, not counting Bastien's pilot's station. Karal was strapping into one, Filip into another. But Marco drifted slowly to the shuttle's floor, his hair settling at his shoulders. He lifted his chin as a question.

"Rosenfeld went already," Bastien said. "Been on the *Pella* for three hours."

"Has he now," Marco said, and his voice had an edge that maybe only Filip could hear. He slid into his couch and cinched down the straps. "That's good. Let's join up."

Bastien cleared with the dock control system, more from habit than need. Marco was captain of the *Pella*, admiral of the Free Navy, and his shuttle would take precedence over any other traffic. But Bastien checked anyway, then went through the seals and environment controls again, for what was likely the tenth time. For anyone raised in the Belt, checking the

air and the water and the seals on ships and suits was like breathing. Not something you even thought about, just something that happened. People who didn't live that way tended to leave the gene pool early.

They grew a degree heavier as the shuttle launched, then the gimbals in the couches all hissed at once as Bastien fired the maneuvering thrusters. It wasn't even a quarter-g burn, and still they reached the *Pella* in minutes. They cycled through the lock—the same one Naomi had chosen to die in—then floated out into the familiar air of the *Pella*.

Rosenfeld Guoliang was waiting for them.

All through Filip's life, from his very first memories, the Belt had meant the Outer Planets Alliance, and the OPA had meant the people who mattered most. His people. It was only as he'd grown up and started being allowed to listen when his father spoke with other adults that his understanding of the OPA became deeper, more nuanced, and the word that redefined his people was *alliance*. Not *republic*, not *unity government*, not *nation*. Alliance. The OPA was a numberless wash of different groups that formed and fell apart and formed again, all of them tacitly agreeing that, whatever their disagreements might be, they were united against the oppression of the inner planets. There were a few large standard bearers under the OPA's flag—Tycho Station under Fred Johnson, and Ceres Station under Anderson Dawes, each with their militias; the ideological provocateurs of the Voltaire Collective; the openly criminal Golden Bough; the nonviolent near-collaborationist Maruttuva Kulu. For each of those, there were dozens—hundreds, maybe—of smaller organizations and associations, cabals and mutual interest societies. What brought them together was the constant economic and military oppression of Earth and Mars.

The Free Navy was not the OPA, and it was not meant to be. The Free Navy was the strongest of the old order, forged together into a force that didn't need an enemy to define it. It was a promise of a future in which the yoke of the past was not only shrugged off but broken.

That didn't mean it was *free* from the past.

Rosenfeld was a thin man who managed to slouch even on the float. His skin was dark and weirdly pebbled, his eyes sunk deep in their sockets. He had tattoos of the OPA's split circle and the knifelike V of the Voltaire Collective, a bright and ready smile, and a sense of barely contained

violence. And he was the reason Filip's father had come to Pallas.

"Marco Inaros," Rosenfeld said, spreading his arms. "Look what you've done, coyo mis!"

Marco launched himself forward into the man's embrace, spinning with him as they held close and slowing when they pulled back. Any distrust Marco held toward Rosenfeld was gone. Or no, not gone, but shifted away for Filip and Karal to feel so that his own pleasure at the reunion could be pure.

"You look good, old friend," Marco said.

"I don't," Rosenfeld said, "but I appreciate the lie."

"Do we need to transfer your men over?"

"Already done," Rosenfeld said, and Filip glanced to Karal, catching the little scowl at the corner of the older man's mouth. Rosenfeld was a friend, an ally, one of the inner circle of the Free Navy, but he shouldn't have been able to bring his private guard on the ship when Marco wasn't there. The *Pella* was the flagship of the Free Navy, after all, and temptation was temptation. Marco and Rosenfeld reached out together, slowed their two-body rotation with a handhold jutting off the lockers, and still arm in arm, pushed out to the corridor and into the ship. Filip and Karal followed after.

"Going to be a hard burn getting to Ceres in time for the meeting," Marco said.

"Your fault. I could have taken my own ship."

"You don't have a gunship."

"I've lived my whole life in rock hoppers—"

Even with only the back of his father's head to see, Filip could hear the smile in Marco's voice. "That was your whole life until now. We've changed the game. Can't have the high command moving unprotected. Even out here, not everyone's with us. Not yet."

They reached the lift that ran the length of the ship, shifted around it, and swam headfirst through the air, down toward the crew decks. Karal looked behind, toward the operations and flight decks, as if to be sure none of Rosenfeld's guard were at their six.

"Why I waited," Rosenfeld said. "The good little soldier, mé. Too bad about Johnson and Smith making it safe to Luna. Only took down one out of three?"

"Earth was the one that mattered," Marco said. Ahead of them, Sárta

appeared, floating up past them toward ops. She nodded her greeting as they passed. “Earth was always the prime target.”

“Well, Secretary-General Gao’s with her gods now, and I hope she died screaming”—Rosenfeld mimed spitting to the side after he said it—“but this Avasarala who’s taken her place—”

“A bureaucrat,” Marco said as they hauled themselves around the corner and into the mess. The tables and benches bolted to the floor, the smell of Martian military food, the colors that had until recently been the banner of the enemy. They all stood in contrast to the men and women in the space. Belters all, and still Filip could pick out the Free Navy he served with from Rosenfeld’s guard. Self from not-self. They could pretend the division wasn’t there, but they all knew better. A dozen people, all told, like it was the change of shift. One of the *Pella*’s crew for each of Rosenfeld’s, so Karal wasn’t the only one to think a little vigilance between friends was a good thing.

One of the guards tossed Rosenfeld a bulb. Coffee, tea, whiskey, or water, there was no way to know. Rosenfeld caught it without missing a beat in the conversation. “Seems like a bureaucrat with a hate on. You think you can handle her? Nothing personal, coyo, but you’ve got a blind spot underestimating women.”

Marco went still. Even as Filip saw it, his mouth flooded with a coppery taste. Karal grunted softly, and when Filip looked to him, his jaw had slid forward and his hands were fists at his sides.

Rosenfeld took a place against a wall, his expression a mask of empathy and apology. “But maybe this isn’t the place to say it. Sorry for the sore spot.”

“Nothing hurt,” Marco said. “We’ll chew it all through on Ceres.”

“Gathering of the tribes,” Rosenfeld said. “Looking forward to it. Next phase should be interesting.”

“Will be,” Marco said. “Karal can put you and yours in the right cabins. Should plan to keep there. It’s going to be a hard burn.”

“Will do, Admiral.”

Marco pulled himself out of the room, floating down toward the machine shop and engineering without so much as meeting Filip’s eye.

Filip waited for a moment, uncertain whether to follow or stay here, whether he’d been dismissed from duty or was still at his post. Rosenfeld

smiled and winked a bumpy eyelid at him before turning to his men. Something had happened there; he could feel it in the air and in the way Karal held himself. Something important. And from the way his father acted, he had to think it was something to do with him.

He put his hand on Karal's wrist. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Karal said, lying badly. "Nothing to worry over."

"Karal?"

The older man pressed his lips together, stretched his neck. He didn't look at Filip.

"Karal. Something I should ask *them*?"

Slowly, Karal shook his head. He shouldn't ask. Karal licked his lips nervously, shook his head again, sighed, and spoke low and calm. "Was a report back a while. Observation data from the ... ah ... from the *Chetzemoka*. About how the ships with Johnson and Smith didn't die?"

"And?"

"And," Karal said, the word as dense as lead.

Then he went on, which was how Filip Inaros, in front of Rosenfeld and his half dozen smirking guards, learned that his mother was still alive. And that everyone on the *Pella* knew it but him.



Under burn, he dreamed.

He was standing at the same door as before. Even though it would change what it looked like, it was always the same door. He was screaming, beating his hands against it, trying to get in. Before, there had been the sense of fear, the oceanic sorrow of impending loss, the dread. Now there was only humiliation. Rage lit him like a fire, and he pushed to get through the door, into whatever chamber lay beyond it, not to save something precious but to end it.

And shouting, he woke. The weight of a full g pressed him into the gel. The *Pella* murmured around him, the vibration of the drive and the hushing of the air recyclers like a voice whispering something just too softly to make out. It was an effort to wipe away the tears. They weren't tears of sorrow. For that he'd have to be sad. He was only certain.

There was someone he hated more than James Holden.

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Chapter Three: Holden

There was something to be said for living a life that didn't involve lengthy interrogations. By that standard, at least, Holden had not lived his well. When he and the rest of the *Rocinante*'s crew had agreed to be debriefed, he'd guessed that it would be more than just the events surrounding the attack on Earth by the Free Navy. There was more than enough to talk about, after all. The chief engineer on Tycho Station who'd been exposed as a mole for Marco Inaros, the abduction and rescue of Monica Stuart, the loss of the protomolecule sample, the attack that had nearly killed Fred Johnson. And that was just for him. Naomi and Alex and even Amos would have whole volumes of their own to contribute.

He hadn't expected that the questioning would spread out from there like a gas to fill all available space. For weeks now, his days had been filled with twelve to sixteen hours of talking through anything and everything in his life. The names and histories of all eight of his parents. His school records. His abortive naval career. What he knew about Naomi, about Alex, about Fred Johnson. His relationship with the OPA, with Dmitri Havelock, with Detective Miller. Even after hours of review, he wasn't sure about that last one. Sitting in the small room across from the UN interrogators, Holden had done his best to take apart his life until that point and lay it open before them.

The process chafed him. The questions cycled back and jumped around, as if they were trying to catch him out in a lie. They went into strange little cul-de-sacs—What were the names of the people he'd served with in the Navy? What did he know about each of them?—and stayed there far longer than seemed justified. His two primary questioners were a tall, light-skinned woman with a long, serious face named Markov and a short, pudgy man called Glenndining with hair and skin the same color of brown. They took turns pushing him and building rapport, subtly cutting him down to see

if he'd get angry and what he'd say when he did, and then being almost uncomfortably affectionate with him.

They brought him limp, greasy sandwiches to eat or fresh pastries with some of the best coffee he'd ever had. They turned the lights down almost to darkness or brightened them until they were nearly blinding. They strolled in the hopping lunar shuffle down through the hallways from the docks or they stayed in a cramped steel box of a room. Holden felt as though his personal history was being scraped down to dry pulp like a lime at a really cheap bar. If there was a drop more of juice in him, they'd press it out somehow. It was easy to forget that these were his allies, that he'd agreed to this. More than once, he'd been curled up in his bunk after a long day, hovering on the edge of sleep, and found his mind half-dreaming plans to break the ship out of prison and escape.

It didn't help that, in the dark sky above them, Earth was dying by centimeters. The newsfeeds that remained had mostly relocated to the Lagrange stations and Luna, but a few were still functioning down on the planetary surface. Between the interrogation sessions and sleep, Holden didn't have much time to watch them, but the snippets he heard were enough. Overstrained infrastructure, ecosystem trauma, chemical changes in the ocean and atmosphere. There had been thirty billion people on the overcrowded Earth, dependent on a vast network of machinery to keep them fed and hydrated and not drowning in their own waste. A third of those, by the more pessimistic estimates, had already died. Holden had seen a few seconds of a report discussing how the death count in Western Europe was being done by assaying atmospheric changes. How much methane and cadaverine were in the air let them guess how many people were rotting in the ruined streets and cities. That was the scale of the disaster.

He'd felt guilty turning the feed off. The least he could do was watch. Be there as the ecosphere that bore him and his family and everyone else not very many generations back collapsed. Earth deserved witnesses. He was tired though, and frightened. Even after he'd killed the feed, he hadn't been able to sleep.

Not all the news was bad. Mother Elise got a message through to him that the farm in Montana, while badly damaged, had proven self-sufficient enough to keep his parents alive. There was even enough surplus that they'd been able to help with some of the relief efforts in Bozeman. And as the

muddy clouds of grit and ash settled down to poison the oceans, more and more relief flights had been able to dive down the gravity well and come back up filled with refugees.

The physical capabilities of Luna Base were beginning to be stressed, though. The air recyclers were being pushed to their limits so that every breath Holden took in the halls and corridors of the station felt like it had just come out of someone else's mouth. Cots and privacy tents filled the food courts and public spaces. The crew of the *Rocinante* had given up their quarters in the station and moved back onto the ship to make more space. And also to live in their own bubble of clean air and well-filtered water. It was a little disingenuous to pretend the move was altruistic. The ship was quiet and empty and familiar. The only things that kept Holden from feeling perfectly comfortable were the silence that came from the powered-down reactor and the ghostlike presence of Clarissa Mao.

"Why does she bother you so much?" Naomi asked. They were in their shared cabin, held to the bunk by the moon's fractional gravity and their own exhaustion.

"She killed a bunch of people," Holden said, his sleepiness robbing him of the ability to think clearly. "Is that not enough? It seems like it should be enough."

The cabin was at low light. The crash couch cradled their paired bodies. He felt Naomi's breath against his side, familiar and warm and grounding. Her voice had the same slushy softness as his. They were both almost too tired to sleep. "That was a different her."

"Everyone else seems certain of that. Not sure how we got there."

"Well, I think Alex is still not sure about her."

"But Amos is. And you are."

She made a thick sound in the back of her throat. Her eyes were closed. Even in the dimness, he could see the deeper darkness of her lids. He thought for a moment she'd managed to fall asleep, but then she spoke. "I have to believe she can change. That people can."

"You weren't like her," Holden said. "Even when ... even when people died, you weren't like her. You're not a cold-blooded killer."

"Amos is."

"True. But Amos is Amos. It's different in my head."

"Because?"

“Because he’s Amos. He’s like a pit bull. You know he could tear your throat out, but he’s loyal to a fault and you just want to hug him.” She smiled slowly. She could do that. A drawing up of a muscle in her face, and Holden filled with hope and warmth and even a kind of grim optimism that said the universe couldn’t all be shit if it had a woman like this in it. He rested his hand on her hip. “You didn’t fall in love with me for my ethical consistency, did you?”

“Despite it,” she chuckled. Then a moment later, “You had a cute butt.”

“Had? Past tense?”

“I need to get back on the system,” she said, changing the subject. “Don’t let me fall asleep until I’ve checked for updates.”

“The missing ships?” he asked, and she nodded.

As hard as his own inquisition had been, Naomi’s was worse. She’d always been quiet about her past, about how she’d become the woman she was. Now she had traded that privacy away for a blanket amnesty for the crew, and for herself. Her versions of Markov and Glenndining weren’t just asking about a failed naval career and contract work for Fred Johnson. She was their window straight into Marco Inaros. She’d been his lover. The mother of his child, a fact Holden was still trying to wrap his head around. She’d been held captive on his flagship before and after the hammer fell on Earth. He knew the toll the marathon debriefing was taking on him. It had to be a thousand times harder for her.

Which, he assumed, was why she threw herself into the mystery of the missing ships. She’d been the first among them to notice that the set of vessels that had vanished in their transits through the ring gates and the stolen Martian warships that became the Free Navy didn’t overlap. Some ships were stolen by Marco and his crew, and some just vanished without a trace. There were two things going on, and he couldn’t begrudge her wanting to spend her off time focused on the other one.

But she had to sleep. If for no other reason than his belief that if she finally slept, he would too.

“I promise nothing,” he said.

“Okay,” she said. “Then wake me up early so I’ll have time to check before the next session.”

“Promise.”

He lay beside her in the gloom until her breath stuttered, deepened,

became the regular, powerful pulse of sleep. When he was still awake after five minutes of listening to her, he knew his own rest wasn't coming. He stood, and for a moment, she went silent, moving up toward wakefulness before the deep breath returned. Holden let himself out.

The halls of the *Rocinante* were also dim, set for a night cycle. Holden made his way to the lift. Voices filtered to him from the galley: Amos' affable rumble and the thinner, reedy sound of Clarissa's voice. He paused, listened, then hauled himself up the ladder to the ops deck. The lunar gravity was light enough that using the lift seemed silly, so he just pulled himself up, hand over hand, until he got there. The cabin lights were out, so Alex was only lit by the backslash from the screen.

"Hey there," Alex drawled as Holden settled himself into a couch. "Can't sleep?"

"Apparently not," Holden sighed. "You?"

"I hate the gravity here. It feels like we're moving too slow. I keep wanting to gun the engines. But there aren't any engines and we aren't going anywhere. It should be a drive holdin' me down, but it's just a big hunk of rock." Alex gestured toward the newsfeed playing silently on his screen. A woman in a bright red hijab was speaking earnestly into the camera. Holden recognized her as a well-respected Martian journalist, but he couldn't remember her name. "It just keeps coming. They're calling it a mutiny. Keep talking about dereliction of duty and abandoning their post and black market sales of equipment."

"That doesn't sound good."

"Sounds better than what it was," Alex said. "It was a coup. It was a civil war, only instead of fighting, a fifth of the military just packed themselves off through the ring gates with all our stuff. Well, all our stuff they didn't trade to these Free Navy assholes."

"Any word where they were going?"

"Nope," Alex said. "At least none they're reporting."

The woman in the hijab—Fatim Wilson, *that* was the name—vanished, but the feed spooled on with images of empty docks on Mars and then a group of protesters milling around and shouting at the camera. Holden couldn't tell what they were for or against. The way things were now, he wasn't sure they'd have been able to tell him either.

"If they ever come back, they'll all be tried for treason," Alex said.

“Makes me think they weren’t planning to get back home anytime soon.”

“So,” Holden said. “Martian coup. Free Navy killing the shit out of Earth. Pirates stripping down all the colony ships that were heading out. Medina Station’s gone dark. And we-don’t-know-what eating some of the ships that go through the gates.”

Alex opened his mouth to reply, but his screen flicked and chimed. A high-priority connection request.

“One damned thing after another,” Alex said, accepting the connection, “when it ain’t a whole bunch of damned things at once.”

Chrisjen Avasarala appeared on the screen. Her hair was perfectly in place, her sari a gemlike shimmering green. Only her eyes and the set of her mouth showed the fatigue.

“Captain Holden,” she said. “I need to meet with you and your crew. At once.”

“Naomi’s asleep,” Holden said without pausing to think. Avasarala smiled. It wasn’t a pleasant expression. “So I’ll go wake her up. And we’ll be right over.”

“Thank you, Captain,” the acting ruler of Earth said and signed off.

Silence filled the deck. “You notice how she didn’t say anything obscene or offensive?” Holden said.

“Did notice that.”

Holden took a deep breath. “That can’t be good.”



The meeting room was near the moon’s surface, and it was built like a classroom or a church: a podium at the front and rows of chairs before it, but the podium was empty and a dozen of the chairs had been pushed into a rough circle. Avasarala sat with Fred Johnson—the head of Tycho Station and once a spokesman of the OPA—and Martian Prime Minister Smith to her left and Bobbie Draper to her right. Both Smith and Johnson were in their shirtsleeves, and all of them looked tired. Holden, Naomi, Alex, and Amos sat together in a group across from them, a couple of chairs marking the border on either side. Holden didn’t realize until they’d all sat down that Clarissa hadn’t come. He hadn’t even considered bringing her. This was a

meeting of the *Rocinante*'s crew, after all, and she was ...

Avasarala tapped her hand terminal. A schematic popped into place in the space in the center of the circle. Earth, Luna, the Lagrange stations were all glowing gold. The naval ships that formed the blockade that intercepted and destroyed the Free Navy's follow-up attacks were in green. A separate model showed the inner system—Sol, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, and the major Belt stations like Ceres and Pallas—with a scattering of red dots like the lesions of a rash.

"The red's Free Navy," Avasarala said. In person, her voice sounded raspy, like she'd been coughing. Holden couldn't tell if she'd only been talking too much or if she'd been breathing in Lunar fines: dust too small to be stopped even by the best filters and that still made the station air stink of gunpowder. "We've been tracking their movements. There's an anomaly. This one."

She prodded her hand terminal, and the two displays merged, one expanding, the other shrinking, until they showed the same stretch of space. The red dot stood off apart from the stations and planets, floating in a vast emptiness where the orbital mechanics left it mostly alone. Naomi leaned forward, fighting to keep her eyes focused. She was too tired for this.

"What's that doing out there?" Naomi asked, and her voice was clear enough.

"Spotting," Fred said. "Its transponder's off, but it appears to be a prospecting ship. The *Azure Dragon* out of Ceres. It's crewed by radical OPA."

"Meaning now maybe with the Free Navy. The rocks they've been throwing?" Holden said.

"Coordinated by that little fucker there," Avasarala said. And then, with an exhausted shrug, "We think. What we know is this: As long as those pigfuckers can keep throwing rocks at us, we're pinned. Our ships don't dare move, and Marco Inaros can claim whatever the hell he wants in the outer planets."

Smith leaned forward, speaking with his calm, almost apologetic tone. "If Chrisjen's intelligence service is right and this ship is guiding the attacks, this is a critical target against the Free Navy. You know that Colonel Johnson, Secretary-General Avasarala, and I have been forming a joint task force? This will be their first field operation. Capture or destroy

the *Azure Dragon* and reduce the ability of the enemy to launch assaults against Earth. Give some damn breathing room to the combined fleet.” It was the first time Holden had heard the term *combined fleet*, and he liked the way it sounded.

He wasn’t the only one.

“Shit,” Amos said. “And here I was enjoying being so absolutely thumb-up-the-ass useless.”

“You want a little ass-play, that’s your business,” Avasarala said. “Only you can do it in a crash couch. The *Rocinante* isn’t part of the fleet, so losing it won’t leave a hole in our defenses. And I understand you’ve got a few after-market add-ons—”

“Keel-mounted rail gun,” Alex said with a grin.

“—that scream of overcompensating for tiny, tiny penises, but might prove useful. The mission commander has requested you and your ship, and honestly none of you are worth a wet slap at this point except Miss Nagata anyway, so—”

“Wait,” Holden said. “The *mission commander*? No.”

Avasarala met his gaze, and her expression was hard as granite. “No?”

Holden didn’t flinch. “The *Rocinante* doesn’t go under anyone’s command but ours. I understand that this is a big joint task force and we’re all in everything together. But the *Roci* isn’t just a ship, it’s our home. If you want to hire us, fine. We’ll take the job, and we’ll get it done. If you want to put a commander in place and expect us to follow their orders, then the answer’s no.”

“Captain Holden—” Avasarala began.

“This isn’t a negotiation. This is just how it’s going to be,” Holden said.

Three of the most powerful people in the solar system, the heads of the central factions that had struggled against each other for generations, looked at each other. Smith’s eyebrows rode high on his forehead and he looked anxiously around the room. Fred leaned forward, staring at Holden like he was disappointed in him. Only Avasarala had a glint of amusement in her eyes. Holden glanced at his crew. Naomi’s arms were crossed. Alex’s head was lifted, his chin pushed forward. Amos was smiling exactly the way he always did. A unified front.

Bobbie cleared her throat. “It’s me.”

“What now?” Holden said.

“It’s me,” Bobbie repeated. “I’m the mission commander. But if you really don’t—”

“Oh,” Holden said. “No. No, that’s different.”

Alex said, “Yeah,” and Naomi uncrossed her arms. Bobbie relaxed.

“Should have said so in the first place, Chrissy,” Amos said.

“Go fuck yourself, Burton. I was getting to it.”

“So, Bobbie,” Holden said. “How do you want to do this?”

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Chapter Four: Salis

Wait wait wait!” Salis shouted into his suit radio. The base of the rail gun was ten meters across, built in a rough hexagon, and massing more than a small ship. At his words, a half dozen construction thrusters along the great beast’s side fired off, jetting ejection mass into the void. The calibration meter on Salis’ mech cycled down to zero; the hairbreadth movement of the great beast stopped. They floated together—inhumanly large weapon, softly glowing alien station, and Salis in his spiderlike safety-yellow construction mech.

“A que, coyo?” Jakulski, their tech supervisor, asked in his ear.

“Reading drift,” Salis said, playing his ranging lasers over the rail gun and the socket mount it was meant to lock into. It had been hard work, fitting the alien station with the three wide belts of ceramic, carbon-silicate lace, and steel. Now it looked like a vast blue ball with rubber bands around it, each at right angles to the other two. And where the lines crossed, rail gun turrets squatted. It had turned out it was impossible to drill into the alien station. Welding didn’t work, because the surface wouldn’t melt. Wrapping the whole damn thing up had been the only viable alternative for attaching things to it.

“Que mas que?” Jakulski asked.

“Shift one minute ten seconds relative z, minus eight seconds relative y.”

“Savvy,” Jakulski said. The construction thrusters along the length of the rail gun stuttered, impulse and counterimpulse. All around them, the gates dotted the sky with only a little over thirteen hundred bright spots, barren and empty and threateningly regular. Medina Station itself was the only other object, and it was far enough away that Salis could have covered the whole structure—drum, drive, and command—with his outstretched thumb. The slow zone, they still called it. Even though the weird limit on speed had been lifted, the name was the name, and it carried a sense of strangeness

and doom with it. Most of his work was inside Medina. Heading out into the vacuum was a rare thing, and now he was here he didn't like it much. He kept turning away from the job to look out into the black. It had been almost the end of his first week on the job before he realized he was looking for the Milky Way, and that he kept looking because it wasn't there.

"Bist bien?" Jakulski asked.

"Moment," Salis said, checking the ranging lasers again. He glanced up the length of the great barrel while the mech struggled again to get a fix on the thing's skin and the socket. The few rail guns he'd seen before had been made from titanium and ceramic. These new materials Duarte was sending through the Laconia gate were bleeding-edge, though. It wasn't only the iridescence of the carbon-silicate lace plating. The power cores that ran the guns and the frictionless ammunition feeds that supplied them were ... strange.

The designs were elegant, sure. But they were just magnetic rails powered by fusion cores same as any ship's. And they did what they needed to do, but there was something off about the way they came together, a sense of being not manufactured so much as tested for. A kind of awkwardness and beauty that made Salis think of plants more than machines. It wasn't only the new materials that went into them. Ever since the ring gate lifted itself off Venus, there had been bits of new one thing and another. It was the scale of it. And maybe something else.

The ranging lasers reported back.

"Bien," Salis said. "Bring the bastard home."

Jakulski didn't reply, but the thrusters fired. Salis kept painting socket and rail gun alike, making manual reading after manual reading. It was the sort of thing he usually left to the mech's system, but the new materials sometimes caused the laser to throw false errors. And it was better to be certain. The station had been still as stone in the years since the gates had opened. Didn't mean ramming a great damned machine into it wouldn't provoke a response.

It took the better part of a shift to bring the massive thing in, but eventually it locked into place. The turret settled, absorbed what little momentum was left in it. The socket closed around it, leaving Salis with the uncomfortable image of gigantic lips closing very slowly around a huge straw.

“Pulling back,” Salis said.

“Clar à test, you?”

“Moment,” Salis said, pushing off from the station. He floated out into the emptiness to where Roberts and Vandercaust waited, strapped into their own mechs. The mech’s attitude thruster brought him to a relative stop at their side and turned him back to look at their work. On the group channel, Roberts grunted.

“Vise ca bâcter,” she said. It was true enough. With the guns strapped at the top and bottom of all three axes, the station *did* look a little like something seen through a microscope. A macrovirus, maybe. Or a minimalist streptococcus.

“In place,” Salis said. “Clar à test.”

“Three,” Jakulski said, “two, *one*.”

The rail gun beneath them shifted in its socket like something waking from sleep. For a moment, it seemed to drift like a reed caught in a current of aether. Then it snapped into place, jittering from one position to the next too quickly for Salis’ eyes to see the motion between, faster than the twitch of an insect’s leg. It cycled through, taking aim on each of the gates in its field of vision. With the layout they had, at least two of the guns would be able to sight every gate, and most gates fell in the arc of three. Salis had seen pictures of old fortifications overlooking the sea back on Earth. They’d never made sense to him before—too flat to apply to his own experience—but this was the same thing. The high guns that would protect Medina Station from invading ships forever. He felt some emotion stirring in his chest, and it could have been pride or dread.

“Bien,” Jakulski said. He sounded almost surprised. Like he’d expected the gun to rip itself loose and spin out into the nothing sky. “Pull back for live fire.”

“Pulling back, us,” Vandercaust said. “Don’t put a round through us, sa sa?”

“I do, and you let me know, eh?” Jakulski laughed. Easy for him. Not like he was out here. And then, not like the guns couldn’t turn Medina to chaff too. Salis and the others pulled back fifty klicks, flipped, and decelerated for another fifty. The darkness was unnerving. Back on the other side of the gate, it was never this dark. There was always the sun and the stars.

“Stopped and stable,” Roberts said. “Hast du dui painted friendly?”

“Do. It shoots you, that’ll mean something’s wrong. Setting target,” Jakulski said, and Salis upped the magnification on his mech. There, in false-color readout, was the alien station. This far out, he could see three of the six guns. “Sensor arrays bist bien. Firing in three, two, one ...”

A puff of vapor spat out the tip of the gun—charged gas making a brief extension to the barrel and putting a little more speed into the round. Salis’ mech shuddered, the magnetic spill from the rails affecting his systems even this far out. He didn’t see the rounds the rail gun fired. In the time it took for the harsh feedback tick to go from his radio to his ear, the tungsten slug was already through the target gate. Or out into the weird non-space between them. In the false-color display, a ripple passed through the alien station like what he’d see in a sphere of floating water when one part of it got touched. The ripple died out before it even circled the station once.

“La que vist?” Jakulski asked.

“Nothing,” Salis said. “It looks fine. Tu?”

“Station glow only thing,” Jakulski said. In all of their tests, the only reaction the station ever had to being pushed by the rail gun shots was a shower of photons.

“Nothing else?”

“Nope.”

“Drift?”

“No drift.”

It was what they wanted to see. The rail guns were big enough, powerful enough, that even keel-mounted on a ship, firing them would have been difficult. Mounted on turrets like they were, they should have been as much thruster as weapon, driving themselves away from whatever they were shooting at fast enough that they’d be hard to catch.

Except the station.

Whatever the aliens did to shrug off equal and opposite reactions, it only generated enough energy to throw a little light, and it didn’t seem to bring any kind of countermeasures against them. Still, Salis wasn’t exactly looking forward to heading back and checking the sockets and bases.

“You hear Casil talk?” Vandercaust said. “About why it don’t move when we push it?”

“No,” said Roberts.

“Said it does, but the ring space moves with it, so we can’t see it happening.”

“Casil’s crazy.”

“Sí ai.”

“Sending us back in?” Salis asked into his radio.

“Moment,” Jakulski said, and then, “Bien. Cleared, you. Keep tus augen wide, anything not right.”

Not right meaning cracks in the housings, meaning leakage of the fluid tanks, meaning failures in the reactors or the ammunition feeds.

Meaning the eyes of an ancient god looking at them. Or something worse.

“Savvy,” Salis said, checking his thrusters. “Going in.”

The three mech drivers shifted and launched themselves back toward the station. Medina floated to his right: the still drive cone, the turning drum. Salis looked out past it like he was searching for a familiar face, but the stars still weren’t there.



The internal drum section of Medina Station had a straight-line sun that burned at the center of rotation from the command center all the way down to the engineering decks. The full-spectrum light from it came down on the curved farmland and the wide, bent lake that had once been meant to carry a city of Mormon faithful to the stars. Salis sat in an open-air bar with Vandercaust and Roberts, drinking beer and eating white kibble that tasted of cheese powder and mushroom. Behind and before him, the landscape curved up to lose itself in the sun’s bright line. To his left and right, the full length of the drum spinning at about the g of Luna. The gentle breeze that breathed against the back of his neck came from spinward, same as it ever did.

When he’d been a boy, Salis had seen the Big Room caverns on Iapetus. He’d walked under the false skies on Ceres. The drum at Medina was the nearest thing he could imagine to sitting on Earth as it had been before the rocks came down: unregulated atmosphere above him and the thin crust and mantle holding him above the core of molten stone. No matter how many

times he came here, it felt exotic.

“Flyers up again,” Roberts said, squinting up into the light. Salis looked up. There, almost silhouetted by the brightness, five bodies floated in the air, arms and legs outstretched. They seemed to be flying from behind Salis, curving up ahead like the fields of soybean and maize, but the truth was they were the bodies at rest. About five months before, some adolescent idiot had figured out how to lay down a temporary track that could accelerate people anti-spinward to match the drum’s rotation and let them launch themselves up, weightless in the air. So long as no one got too near the artificial sun or failed to match the drum’s acceleration before they came back down, it was supposed to be good fun.

Two streaks of vapor reached out from the engineering decks toward them, and Salis pointed toward them. “Security got them, yeah.”

Vandercaust shook his shaggy gray head. “Ton muertas.”

“Young and stupid. But it’s what the Roman said: *Fihi m’fihi*,” Roberts said. Her voice had more sympathy, but she was also nearer the age of the illegal flyers. “You born stone and sober, que?”

“Born with respect,” Vandercaust said. “*My shit only kills me.*”

Roberts’ shrug was a surrender. On ships—real ships—back on the right side of the gates, keeping the environment safe was always the first thing. Double-check what had already been double-checked, clean what was already cleaned. Playing fast and loose was a quick way to die, and your family and crew along with you. There was something about the big stations—Ceres, Hygeia, Ganymede, and now Medina—that gave kids license to be dumb. Reckless.

Stability, Salis thought. Having a room as massive as the drum did something to people’s heads. He felt it too; it seemed too big to break. Didn’t matter that nothing was really that big. Anything could get broken. *Earth* got broken. Acting like risks weren’t risks put all of them in danger.

Even so, there was part of him that was sorry to see the security crew lock down the flyers. Kids being kids. There should be a place for that somewhere. Martians had that. Earthers had that. It was only the Belters who’d spent too many generations dying for their first fuckup to let their kids play sometimes.

He squinted into the brightness. The security and the flyers were heading down to the surface now, foggy trails of their suit thrusters making

wide, slow spirals centered on the bright line of sun as they came down.

“Too bad,” he said. Vandercaust grunted.

“You hear about the gang showers in F-section?” Roberts said. “Blocked up *again*.”

“Alles designed con full g,” Vandercaust said. “Same thing with the farms. Fields aren’t draining like they should. Spin the drum up the way los Mormons meant, it’d work.”

Roberts laughed. “It would, we wouldn’t. All smashed flat, us.”

“Better to change it,” Vandercaust said around a bite of kibble.

“We do enough, it’ll work,” Salis said. “Ship with this much redundancy? If we can’t make it right, we don’t deserve it.”

He drank the last of his beer and stood, lifting a hand to ask if either of his crewmates wanted another. Vandercaust did. Roberts didn’t. Salis stepped across the dirt to the bar. That was part of it, he decided. The plants and the false sun and the breeze that smelled of leaves and rot and fresh growth. Medina’s drum was the only place he’d ever lived where he could walk on soil. Not just dirt and dust—those were everywhere—but *soil*. Salis didn’t know why that was different, but it was.

The man at the bar swapped out Salis’ bulb for a fresh, and a second besides for Vandercaust. When he got back to their table, the conversation had moved on from the flyers to the colonies. Wasn’t that big a shift. From people taking stupid risks to people taking stupid risks.

“Aldo says there was another bunch of threats coming out of the Jerusalem gate,” Roberts said. “We send their reactor core, or they come get it.”

“Surprise them if they do,” Vandercaust said, taking the fresh bulb from Salis. “Guns up, and it’s past time for alles la.”

“Maybe,” Roberts said, then coughed. “Maybe we should give it to them, yeah?”

Vandercaust scowled. “For for?”

“They need and we have is all,” Roberts said.

Vandercaust made a dismissive wave of his hand. *Who gives a shit what they need?* But something in Roberts’ voice caught Salis’ attention. Like she’d said more than she’d said. He met her dark eyes and lifted his chin as a question. The words she was trying to say pushed her head forward like a nod.

“Can help if we want. Might as well, sí no? No reason no, since we’re not what we were anymore, us,” she said. Vandercaust scowled, but Roberts went on. “We did it. Us. Today.”

“Que done que, us?” Vandercaust said. His voice was rough, but if Roberts heard it, she didn’t stop. Her eyes glittered like she was about to cry. When she spoke, it was like water coming out a snapped pipe. Her voice gushed and pulsed and gushed again.

“Always, it’s been when we find place. Ceres o Pallas o the big Lagranges never got built. Mi tía talked about making a station for all Belters alles. Capitol city à te void. It’s this. Belters built it. Belters live in it. Belters gave it power. Y because of guns we put in, it’s ours forever. We made this place home today. Not just our home, ours. *All* of ours. *Esá es homeland* now. Because of us three.”

Tears dripped down her cheeks, slow in the sixth g. Joy lit her from inside like a fire, and it left Salis embarrassed. Seeing Roberts like this was like walking in on someone pissing—intimate and wrong. But when he looked away, the drum spread out around them. The plants, the soil, the land above him squinting down at him like a sky.

He’d been on Medina for fifteen months. Longer than he’d ever been on a station in his life. He’d come because Marco Inaros and the Free Navy needed people here. He hadn’t thought about what it meant, except he’d known in his gut he was more OPA than the OPA, and that was what Free Navy meant. Now, maybe, he caught a glimpse of what it was behind that. Not a war forever. A place.

“Homeland,” he said, speaking carefully. Like the word was made from glass, and could cut him if he said it too hard. “Because the rail guns.”

“Because something’s ours,” Roberts said. “And because now they can’t take it away.”

Salis felt something in his chest, and he let his mind poke at it. Pride, he decided. It was pride. He tried a smile and turned it to Roberts, who was grinning back. She was right. This was the place. Their place. Whatever else happened, they’d have Medina.

Vandercaust shrugged, took a long pull from his bulb, and belched. “Besse for us,” he said. “But here’s for that? They ever do take it away, we sure as *shit* never get it back again.”

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Chapter Five: Pa

I don't trust anything about this," Michio Pa said.

Josep yawned and propped himself up on one elbow, looking down at her. He was a beautiful man in a slightly ruined way. He wore his hair longer than a crew cut, shorter than his shoulders. The gray in it still only a highlight in the black. Decades had roughened his skin, and the ink there told the story of his life: the neck tattoo of the OPA's split circle that had been covered over later to make the upraised fist of a radical collective long since collapsed. The elaborate cross on his shoulder, inscribed in a moment of faith and kept after that faith had crumbled. Phrases written along his wrists and down his side—*No more water, the fire next time* and *To love someone is to see them as God intended them* and *Ölüm y chuma pas pas fóvos*—spoke of the various men he had been in his life. His incarnations. That was part of why Pa felt so close to him. She was younger than him by almost a decade, but she'd been through incarnations too.

"Which 'this'?" he asked. "There's so many things not to trust."

"Inaros calling in the clans," she said, rolling over and gathering a blanket with her as she did. It wasn't that she was uncomfortable naked, only now that their coupling was done, she was ready to go back to their more formal roles. Or something closer to them. Josep noted it and without comment went from being one of her husbands to her chief engineer. He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

"Is it the meeting or the man?" he asked.

"Any of it," she said. "Something's not right."

"You say it, and I believe."

"I know. This is the part where I always do this. The coyo in charge changes the plan and I start looking for them to be the next Ashford. The next Fred fucking Johnson. It's my pattern."

"Is. Doesn't mean your pattern doesn't match. What's in your head?"

Pa leaned forward, chewing her lip. She could feel the thoughts bumping around like blind fish, searching for the words that would give them form. Josep waited.

By the terms of their ketubah, the marriage group was seven people: her and Josep, Nadia, Bertold, Laura, Evans, and Oksana. They had all kept their own surnames, and they made the *Connaught's* permanent crew. The others who served under her came and went, respected that she was captain, that her orders were fair, and that she didn't show any overt favoritism to her spouses, but there was the understanding always that the core of the ship was her family, and no threat to it would be tolerated. The idea of separating family from crew was an inner-planets thing, one example of the unconscious prejudice that made Earthers and Martians treat life aboard ships as somehow different from real life.

For them, the rules changed when the airlock closed, even if they didn't know themselves well enough to see it. For Belters, there was no division. The Doctrine of the One Ship, she'd heard it called. That there was only one ship, and it had countless parts as a single body had countless cells. The *Connaught* was one part, as were all the ragtag ships under her command: *Panshin*, *Solano*, *Witch of Endor*, *Serrio Mal*, and a dozen more. And her fleet was only part of the Free Navy: a vast organism that passed information between its cells with tightbeam and radio, that consumed food and fuel, that worked its own slow destiny among the planets like a massive fish in the greater sea of the sky.

By some interpretations, even the Earther and Martian ships were part of the same one-ship, but for her, that always ran into conversations about cancers and autoimmune disorders, and the metaphor failed.

Still, there was a reason she was thinking of it now.

"We aren't coordinated," she said, trying out the words as she said them. "When you push off with a foot, you reach out with a hand. One movement. We aren't like that. Inaros and military. Sanjrani and the finances. Rosenfeld and his production and design. Us. We're not the same thing yet."

"We're new at this," Josep said. The words could have been a refutation, a way to explain away her unease. From him, it was an offering. Something to react to that would help her mind come clearer.

"Maybe," she said. "Hard to say. May be we're supposed to be puppets

and the strings all run to the *Pella*. Himself changes his mind, and we all jump.”

Josep shrugged, his warm eyes narrow. “He’s delivered. Ships, fuel, ammunition, drives. Freedom. He’s done what he said he’d do.” She could feel the gentle provocation in his words, and it was what she needed.

“He’s done what he says he said. His real record’s not so good. Johnson’s alive. Smith’s alive. Ganymede’s only gone neutral. We’re still throwing rocks at Earth and no surrender’s coming from them anytime soon. Go back and look at everything he promised, and it’s not what’s on the plate.”

“Politicians since immer and always, that. Still more than anyone else has done for the Belt. Inners are on their heels now. And with the *Hornblower* and ships like her, we’ll have stockpiles to last years. That’s our part. Keep everyone with food and air and supplies. Give us a chance to make the Belt without a boot on our necks.”

Pa sighed and scratched her knee—her nails against her skin with sound as soft and dry as sand. The air recycler clicked and hummed. The drive that pressed them both down toward the deck throbbed.

“Yeah,” she said.

“But?”

“But,” she said, and left it at that. Her unease didn’t find any further words that fit. Maybe they’d come in time or maybe she’d come to peace without having to speak them.

Josep shifted his weight and nodded toward the crash couch. “You want me to stay?”

Pa considered. It might have been a kindness to say yes, but the truth was whoever she shared her body with, she slept better alone. Josep’s smile meant he’d heard her answer anyway. It was part of what she loved about him. He stepped forward, kissed her on the forehead where her hairline met the skin, and started pulling on his jumpsuit. “Tea, maybe?”

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“You should,” Josep said. It was more than he usually did.

“All right.” She shrugged off the blanket, cleaned up, and put her own clothes on too. When they stepped out into the Martian gunship’s galley, she leaned against him. None of the other crew were there, after all. Just Oksana and Laura finishing bowls of mushroom and sauce. Just family.

Josep angled toward a different bench, and she let him set them a little apart from their wives. Oksana laughed at something. Laura said something acid and cutting, but she said it without any heat. Pa didn't catch the words.

Josep pulled bulbs of tea for them both and then sat in companionable silence. She sipped, and the astringent bite of the tea mixed with the aftermath of sex to settle her without her even knowing she'd been unsettled. When she sighed, Josep raised his eyebrows.

"Yes," Pa said. "You're very smart. This is what I wanted."

He sketched a bow, and then sobered. "Thinking about what you said? About coordinated?"

"Don't worry," she said, but he went on.

"You've been betrayed by men who were supposed to be your leaders. Johnson when we were OPA. Ashford on the *Behemoth*. Okulski with the union. We went independent *because*, yeah? Only now we're not independent. Now we're Free Navy, because Inaros convinced us to. Not just you. *Us*."

"You're right," Pa said. "I'm probably just pushing back on what already happened. I should let go of it."

"Shouldn't let go of being educated," he said. "Universe spent a lot of time telling you something. Now you're second-guessing it. Maybe all those other things were getting you ready for this."

Something in Pa's chest slipped a little tighter. "You don't trust him either."

"Me? You don't want to judge anything by me. I don't even trust God."

"You are absolutely the worst mystic ever," Pa said, but she said it laughing.

"I know," Josep said, shaking his head. "Sad failure of a prophet, me. But"—he lifted a finger—"I know you. And I know you're the kind that likes to pretend she doesn't know things she knows so that there won't be friction. So if you're thinking maybe you're wrong so things are okay, you better check again, make sure things are okay. The universe needs a knife, then it makes a knife. And no one sharper, you."

"And if it turns out the universe is just a bunch of chemicals and energy bashing against each other until the light runs out?"

"Then pattern-matching's still a good way to not get bashed," he said. "You tell me if Himself matches the pattern. You've seen more than I

have.”

“Doubt that,” she said, but she took his hand. He held hers. After a moment, Laura came over to sit with them, and then Oksana. The talk turned to less dangerous subjects—all the ways Martian design was worse than Belter, the latest news from *Witch of Endor*’s capture of yet another colony ship, Carmondy’s report from the overhaul of the *Hornblower*. The business of running the *Connaught*. But the little knot sat just under her ribs, reminding her that something was wrong.

When she went back to her cabin, she went alone. She fell into the crash couch, pulled the blanket over her head, and dreamed of a huge, fragile creature swimming through the currents of the deep ocean, only the sea was made of stars, and the animal was built from ships, and one of them was hers.



Nothing as big as a revolution can survive with only one account of it. The rise of Ceres Station—or its fall, according to the inners—was the precursor to Marco Inaros and the Free Navy. Looking back, the death of a water hauler seemed a pathetically small thing to have set Earth and Mars against each other, even for just a little time, but it had been enough. With the traditional oppressors of the Belt pointing guns at each other for a change, the OPA had stepped in, taken control of the port city of the asteroid belt.

No one back then had expected it to last. Sooner or later, Mars and Earth would get their feet back under them, and then Ceres would fall. Anderson Dawes, the de facto governor of the station, would lose the power he’d grabbed and either move on to some new scheme or live on in spirit, a martyr to the cause. Every autonomous space was temporary.

Only the fall never came.

The collapse of Ganymede and the exposure of the Mao-Kwikowski protomolecule program captured the attention of the powers that be. Then Venus hatched out the great and mysterious structures that made the first gate. By the time the *Behemoth* accompanied the combined forces of Earth and Mars to explore the gate and consider its vast and complex implications, Anderson Dawes had woven a web of relationships.

Corporations on Luna and Mars, the Lagrange stations, the Belt, the Jovian moons—none of them could allow trade to stop for the years it might take to reconquer the port. In the way of humankind since before the first contract was pressed into Sumerian clay, the temporary accommodations lasted long enough to become invisible.

And when the gates *beyond* the gate opened and the flood of humanity lurched out toward the new planets and suns, there were powers and money with interests in keeping Ceres as it was. And Anderson Dawes had known which palms to grease and when to compromise in order to keep the port's traffic flowing uninterrupted.

Through long, careful management the great negotiator had outlasted his status as a rebel and become instead a politician. Dawes became respectable, and Ceres Station became first city of the Belters just in time for it not to matter.

And then the Free Navy had come and kicked the whole carefully built sandcastle into the waves. And Dawes, like any politician, had considered the players and the powers, the chances and the certainties. The story of the rise of Ceres Station, instead of a triumph of opportunism and political deftness, became the precursor of the Free Navy. Dawes embraced this new version of himself and his station. He'd chosen his side, just the same as she'd done.

He stood in the dock now, waiting for her to cross over from the *Connaught*. The spin gravity of the station locked her ship in its clamps. Even if the power failed, momentum would keep the ships from dropping out into the black. Pa still didn't like leaving her ship behind. It felt like an unnecessary risk.

"Michio," Dawes said, taking her by the hand and beaming. "It's good to see you in the flesh."

"You too," she said. It wasn't true. Dawes had spent too many years allied too closely with Fred Johnson to ever have the stink entirely washed away. But he was a necessary evil, and on good days probably did more to help the Belt than to compromise it. He gestured toward an electric cart with two police guards in light armor.

"Am I under arrest?" Pa asked, keeping her voice light and amused.

Dawes chuckled as they walked. "Ever since the rocks fell, the security's been tighter," he said. His acne-scarred cheeks tightened and a darkness

came into his expression. “There are millions of people living on Ceres. Not all of them are comfortable with all that’s happened.”

“Have there been problems?” Pa asked as they reached the cart.

“There are always problems,” Dawes said, then after a brief hesitation, “but there have been more of them.”

The cart lurched, turned toward a wide ramp leading up into the station. The mildly adhesive wheels made a sound between a hiss and crackling as they rolled away from the docks. Pa looked back toward the *Connaught*’s berth. Maybe she should have brought guards of her own with her. Carmondy’s men were still all back on the *Hornblower*, but Bertold and Nadia were both combat trained. Too late now.

The administration levels were out nearest the skin of the station where the Coriolis was least pronounced. The old tunnels and corridors had been redone since the OPA claimed the station, but there was still a sense of age. Dawes made small, inane conversation intended to put her at ease, and his skill was such that it worked. If they were really talking about which restaurants made the best sausage and black sauce and what had happened when a religious convocation was booked in the same halls as a raï music festival, the situation couldn’t be that dangerous. She knew it was an illusion, but she appreciated it all the same. Neither of them mentioned the reason they were there. Inaros’ name didn’t come up.

The meeting itself was in a garden in the administrative level. A wide, arching ceiling glowed with full-spectrum light. Devil’s ivy draped columns and walls, and wide ferns spread massive fronds like herons about to take flight. The air smelled of hydroponic plant food and wine. She heard Sanjrani’s high, reedy voice before she turned the corner. *Without a solid inventory of the fertilizer base on every station, a nitrogen-based currency is going to be swamped by illegal inputs.* Another variation on his constant theme. It was almost good to hear it again. Dawes touched her elbow, gestured down a path between a small fountain and a spiral fern, and then they were there. The five leaders of the Free Navy. Nico Sanjrani, looking more like a middle-aged shopkeeper than the chief economist of a budding empire. Rosenfeld Guoliang, with his dark, pebbled skin and his too-ready smile, general of the second fleet and industrial czar. And sitting in a chair of woven cane, Marco Inaros, the man behind it all.

Victory suited him. His hair flowed down to his shoulders, and he held

his body with an animal ease. When he rose to greet her and Dawes, she felt an echo of his pleasure in her own heart. Whatever else the man was, he had a charm that could coax the venom out of snakes. It was, she presumed, the gift that had put him in position to trade with the Martians for their ships, their munitions, all the material that allowed them to stage their revolution. The only other person there was Inaros' skinny, crazy-eyed son, Filip. Pa made a point of not looking too closely at the boy. There was something about him that bothered her, and it was easier to stay aloof than to engage.

"The brilliant Michio Pa!" Marco said. "Excellent! We're all here now. The founders of our nation."

"Do you have stats on the new acquisitions?" Sanjrani asked, either unaware that he was stepping on Marco's moment or at least unconcerned. "I need to get a complete accounting."

"Carmondy's working on that," Pa said.

"Soon, though."

"Nico, my boy," Rosenfeld said. "Don't be an ass. Say hello to Captain Pa first."

Sanjrani scowled at Rosenfeld and then at Inaros, and finally turned back toward her and nodded curtly. "Hello."

"Now that the inner circle's all here," Dawes said, "perhaps we could hear what's brought us all together? Not that being in one room isn't a pleasure in itself, but ..."

Marco smiled as his son, behind him, fidgeted with the holster of his pistol. "We've broken Earth and beaten Mars. Johnson's OPA is shown up as the collaborationist sham that it was. Everything we set out to do, we've done. It's time to begin the third phase."

Everything we set out to do except kill Smith and Fred Johnson, Pa thought but didn't say. The silence from the others wasn't about that, though.

When Dawes spoke, his voice was carefully light and conversational. "I didn't know you had a third phase in mind."

Marco's grin could have been anger or pleasure, rage or satisfaction. "Now you do," he said.

Chapter Six: Holden

I feel like we should be whispering,” Holden said. “Going around on tiptoes.”

“We’re on the float,” Naomi said.

“Metaphorical tiptoes.”

The ops deck was dark apart from the backslash glow of their monitors. Alex was sleeping in his cabin, leaving the monitoring to Holden and Naomi. Last he’d seen them, Bobbie and Amos were touring the ship, testing everything but the comms—PDCs, thrusters, the keel-mounted rail gun, the environmental systems. Ever since the mission had begun, Bobbie had been careful not to make Holden feel like she was taking over the ship, but her deference didn’t extend so far that she wouldn’t refamiliarize herself with every centimeter of the *Roci* before the fighting started. Even if it was just running through how Amos had rerouted the water feeds to the galley, watching the two of them always felt like listening to a conversation about weapons. The serious, professional talk between people who understood that they were working with equipment that could get people killed. It left him feeling like he’d been a little too casual about the ship up to now.

Clarissa ... he didn’t know where Clarissa was. Ever since the last hard burn, he’d only caught fleeting glimpses of her, like she was a spirit they’d picked up that couldn’t bear being seen straight on. Most of what he heard about her—that she was building up her strength, that her black market implants were making her less nauseated, that she’d tracked down the bad coupler that was making the machine shop lights dim—he heard from the others in the crew. He didn’t like it, but at least he didn’t have to talk to her.

The plan was simple. The *Azure Dragon* wasn’t a gunship, but a geological surveyor. The protection she had was that space was vast, the ship was small, and her orbit kept her far enough away from Earth and Luna that she could burn hard back out to the Belt or the Jovian moons if anyone

started coming for her. All of her active systems—transponder, radar, ladar, radio—were shut down to keep her from announcing herself. She couldn't stop the light from bouncing off her hull, and she couldn't hide her waste heat, but she could run as quietly as possible. It limited her to passive sensors and tightbeam. Enough for her to do the work of coordinating the stones thrown at Earth, but still half-blind.

And that was what Bobbie was counting on.

They'd laid in a course that would put them close to the *Azure Dragon*, then arranged for a shifting of the combined fleet that would hide the flare of their burn. It was a balance of getting to the enemy quickly but not being able to make the classic halfway-point flip-and-burn. They only built up enough velocity that they could shed it when they got close, and then the *Roci* went dark and drifted. With no active sensors, the *Azure Dragon* would have to see them visually—a tiny point in the vastness—and identify them as a threat without radar or ladar.

And they would, eventually. But by then, if it all went the way Bobbie intended, it wouldn't make a difference.

It was a slower approach than Holden remembered making to anything in all the time they'd had the *Roci*, and it left him antsy and impatient.

The voices came from the lift: Bobbie serious, sharp, and professional; Amos cheerful and amiable. They floated up into the deck, first Bobbie and then Amos. Bobbie grabbed a handhold and pulled herself to a stop. Amos tapped the deck with his ankle as he passed it and killed his own momentum by planting his feet on the ceiling and absorbing it with his knees. He floated upside down. The *Roci* usually ran at less than full g to conserve reaction mass and for Naomi's benefit, but they almost always had a consistent down. Going totally on the float was weird.

"How's it going?" Bobbie asked.

Holden gestured at his screen. "Nothing new. It doesn't look like they've noticed us yet."

"Their reactors are still down?"

"The heat signature's just sitting there."

Bobbie pressed her lips together and nodded. "That's not going to last much longer."

"We could shoot 'em," Amos said. "It ain't my call, but in my experience the guy that throws the first punch usually wins."

“Show me the estimated range,” Bobbie said. Holden pulled up the passive sensor array. At roughly five million clicks out, the *Azure Dragon* was about ten times as far from them as Luna was from Earth. It probably wouldn’t crew more than a dozen people. In the infinite star field, it would have been invisible to the naked eye. Even if the enemy had been on a full burn, the exhaust plume would have only been one point of light among billions. “How accurate is that?”

“I’m not sure,” Holden said. “Normally we’d be using ladar.”

“Give it ten percent either way,” Naomi said. “At this range and scale, passive sampling errors expand pretty fast.”

“But with the ladar?” Bobbie asked.

“Within a meter,” Naomi said.

“You ever think about how much ammo’s flying around out there?” Amos said, reaching up to brush the floor with outstretched fingers. The contact started him drifting almost imperceptibly toward the ceiling and at the same time rotating back toward consensus upright. “Figure all those PDC rounds that didn’t actually hit something; most of the rail-gun rounds, whether they went through a ship or not. All out there someplace going at the same speed as when they left the barrel.”

“If we shoot them, they’ll still look for who did it,” Naomi said.

“Might not,” Amos said.

Naomi looked at Bobbie. “We’re going to have to start a braking burn soon or we’ll skin right past them.”

“How long?” Bobbie asked.

“Three hours,” Naomi said. “Anything more than that, and we’ll need to go on the juice or risk the deceleration g popping a bunch of blood vessels we’d rather keep whole.”

Bobbie tapped the tips of her right middle finger and thumb together in a rapid stutter. When she nodded, it was more to herself than to them. “Screw this. I’m tired of waiting. I’ll go wake Alex up. Let’s get it over with.”



“All right, boys and girls,” Alex drawled. “Everybody strapped in and ready?”

“Check,” Holden said on the open channel, and then listened as the others reported in. Including Clarissa Mao. It was an illusion built from anticipation, but Holden felt like the lights were a little brighter, as if after weeks in dock, the *Roci* was excited to be doing something important too.

“Reactor’s good,” Amos reported from the machine deck.

Alex cleared his throat. “All right. We’re good to go in ten ... nine ...”

“She’s seen us,” Naomi said. “I’ve got action from her maneuvering thrusters.”

“Fine, then. Three-two-one,” Alex said, and Holden fell back into his crash couch hard. The gel pressed in around him, and the ship rumbled the deep bass of the drive as it spilled off speed. To the *Azure Dragon*, it would be like a bright new star had appeared. A supernova light-years away. Or something less dangerous but much, much closer.

“Ladar’s up,” Naomi said. “And ... I’ve got lock.”

“Is their reactor up?” Holden asked, at the same time that Bobbie said, “Give me fire control.”

Naomi answered both. “Their drive’s cycling up. We probably have half a minute. You have control, Bobbie.”

“Holden,” Bobbie snapped, “please ring the doorbell. Alex, surrender maneuvering to fire control.”

“Done,” Alex said.

Holden switched on the tightbeam. The *Roci* found a lock at once. “*Azure Dragon*, this is the *Rocinante*. You may have heard of us. We are on approach. Surrender—”

Thrust gravity cut out and their crash couches hissed as the ship spun on two axes.

“Surrender at once and prepare for boarding.”

Naomi’s voice was calm and focused. “Enemy reactor is coming up.”

The ship seemed to trip, throwing Holden and Naomi up against their straps. The keel-mounted rail gun pushed the whole ship backward in a solid mathematical relationship to the mass of the two-kilo tungsten round moving at a measurable fraction of *c*. Newton’s third law expressed as violence. Holden’s gut knotted and he tried to lean forward. The long seconds dragged.

Naomi made a small, satisfied sound in the back of her throat. “Okay, their reactor’s shutting down. They’re dumping core. We’re not seeing

nitrogen in the plume. I don't think they've lost air."

"Nice shooting," Amos said on the open channel.

"God damn," Bobbie said as the *Roci* shifted back. "I have missed the hell out of this."

Thrust gravity returned, pushing Holden back as they slowed toward the drifting science ship. It was harder now—a solid two g he could feel in his jaw and the base of his skull.

"Please respond, *Azure Dragon*, or we'll shoot you some more," he said.

"This doesn't feel right," Naomi said.

"They started it," Alex said from above them in the pilot's deck. "Every rock that dropped, they had a part in."

Holden wasn't sure that was what she'd meant, but Naomi didn't press it, so maybe it had been. "Not getting any response, Bobbie," he said. "How do you want to play it?"

In answer, the former Martian marine climbed down from the gunner's station, hand over hand in the high gravity. The muscles in her arms were like cords of wire, and her grimace said both that the sheer effort hurt and that she kind of liked it. "Let them know that if they open up on us, they won't get crash couches on the way to jail," she said, passing down toward the airlock. "I'm just going to slip into something more comfortable."

The crash couches shifted a little as Alex bent their trajectory so they wouldn't melt the *Azure Dragon* to slag in their drive plume. Bobbie grunted and took a new grip on the handholds.

"You know there's a lift, right?" Holden said.

"Where's the fun in that?" Bobbie said as she sank out of sight.

Naomi shifted against the high gravity so that he could see her face. Her smile was complex—discomfort and pleasure and something that looked like foreboding. "So that's what she looks like when she takes herself off the leash."

Shedding the last of their velocity and matching orbit wasn't fast. Holden listened with half an ear while Alex, Amos, and Naomi coordinated with the *Roci*'s systems to bring them alongside. Bobbie chimed in now and again when she wasn't putting her powered armor together and running through its system checks. The greater part of his attention stayed on the enemy. The *Azure Dragon* floated in silence. An expanding cloud of radioactive gas that had been its fusion core slowly dissipated behind it

until it was hardly denser than the surrounding vacuum. No emergency beacon. No announcement of defiance or surrender. No response to his pings and queries. The silence was creepy.

"I don't think we killed them," Holden said. "We probably didn't kill them, did we?"

"Doesn't seem likely," Naomi said, "but I suppose we'll find out. Worst case, we did, and it still makes it easier to keep the rocks from dropping on Earth."

Something in the tone of her voice caught him. Her eyes were on her monitor, but she didn't seem focused. Her mind a million kilometers away.

"Are you all right?"

Naomi blinked, shook her head like she was trying to clear it, and put on a smile that was only a little bit forced. "It's just strange being out here again. And I can't help wondering whether I know anyone on that ship. It's not something I thought about much before."

"Things have changed," Holden said.

"Yeah, you used to be the one with the high profile," she said, and her smile became a degree less forced. "Now I'm the one all the best interrogators want to sit down with."

Alex announced that he had positive lock on the *Azure Dragon's* airlock. Override was coming. Bobbie acknowledged it, said she was prepped for boarding action. She'd be back when the enemy was cleared. It all sounded very military, very Martian. There was an excitement in their voices. Some of it was their fear dressing up in party clothes, but some of it wasn't. For the first time that he could remember, Holden found himself imagining how it would sound in Naomi's ears. Her friends preparing themselves to attack and possibly kill people who'd grown up the way she had. The way that no one else on the *Rocinante* would ever totally understand.

They'd worked on all sides of the confused mess that humanity had made of the Belt and the scattering of colonies beyond it. They'd fought pirates for the OPA. Taken contracts with Earth and Mars and private concerns with their own agendas. Thinking of Naomi now, not only as herself but also as the product of the life she'd lived—the life she was still bringing herself to reveal to him—changed how he saw everything. Even himself.

"We had to stop them," he said.

She turned to him, confusion in her eyes. “Who? These assholes? Of course we did.” A deep clanking sound ran through the ship as the airlocks connected. An alert popped up on Holden’s screen, but he ignored it. Naomi tilted her head as if Holden was a puzzle she hadn’t quite figured out. “Did you think I felt bad for *them*?”

“No,” Holden said. “Or yes, but not exactly. Everyone on that ship thinks they’re doing the right thing too. When they’re throwing rocks at Earth, it’s to ... to protect kids on ships that had to run with too little air or bad filters. Or people who lost their ships because the UN changed the tariff laws.”

“Or because they think it’s fun to kill people,” Naomi said. “Don’t romanticize them just because *some* of the justifications they use are—”

A second clank came, deeper than the first. Naomi’s eyes widened at the same moment Holden felt his gut tighten. It wasn’t a good sound.

“Alex? What was that?”

“I think we got us a little problem, folks.”

“I’m all right,” Bobbie said, and the way she said it made it clear that it was a live issue.

Naomi turned to her monitor, lips pressed thin and tight. “What’ve we got, Alex?”

“Booby trap,” Alex said. “Looks like some kind of magnetic lock from their end. Froze up the works. And Bobbie—”

“I’m stuck between their outer lock and ours,” Bobbie said. “I’m fine. I’m just going to bust my way through and—”

“No,” Naomi said as Holden’s attention flicked to the alert still flashing on his own monitor. “If it’s really bound, you could break both locks. Just sit tight, and let me see what we can do to get you unstuck.”

“Hey,” Holden said. “Anyone know why we just lost a sensor array?” Another alert popped up on his screen. Raw alarm started sounding in his head. “Or that PDC?”

The others were silent for a moment, and then for what felt like hours and was probably five or six seconds, there was only the tap of fingertips on control panels and the chirp of the *Rocinante* reporting back to queries. Even before he had confirmation, he was sure of the answer. The external camera swept the *Roci*’s skin. The *Azure Dragon*, hugged against her, felt like a parasite more than a prisoner. And then a flicker of sparks and a flash

of safety yellow. Holden shifted the camera. Three spiderlike construction mechs squatted midway down the *Roci*'s side, welding torches lit and clawing at the hull.

"They're stripping us," Holden said.

When Alex spoke, his false politeness didn't cover his rage. "I can put on a little burn if you want. Drop them into our drive plume and be done—"

"You'll fold the airlocks together," Holden said, cutting him off. "It'll crush Bobbie to death."

"Yeah," Alex said. "All right. So that's a bad idea."

Holden took control of a PDC and tried to shift its arc far enough down to catch one of the mechs, but they were too close in. A fresh alert popped up. A hardened power conduit was throwing off errors. They were digging deeper into the hull. It wouldn't be long before they could do some real damage. And if they managed to burrow their way between the hulls ...

"What happens if Bobbie breaks the docking tube?" Holden snapped.

"Best case, we can't use it until we get it repaired," Naomi said. "Worst, they rigged their coupling with a secondary trap that kills Bobbie and spills out our air."

"It's all right," Bobbie said. "I can take the risk. Just give me a second to position—"

"No," Holden said. "No, wait. We can find a way out. No one dies. We've got time."

But they didn't have much. A welding torch flared again. When Amos spoke, his voice sounded wrong. Too small, too close. "You know, Cap, we've got another airlock. Cargo bay's right down here by the machine shop."

The penny dropped. Amos sounded different because he was already wearing a vac suit. He was talking through a helmet mic.

"What are you thinking, Amos?"

"Nothing real subtle. Figure we hop outside, kill a few assholes that need killing, patch stuff up when we're done with the first part."

Naomi caught his eye and nodded once. Years together and an uncountable list of crises weathered made a kind of telepathy between them. Naomi would stay and get Bobbie safely out of the trap. Holden would go out with Amos and keep the enemy at bay.

"All right," Holden said, reaching for his restraints. "Prep a suit. I'm on

my way down.”

“I’ll leave you one,” Amos said, “but I think we’ll get a head start without you.”

“Wait,” Holden said. “We?”

“We’re cycling out now,” Clarissa Mao said. “Wish us luck.”

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Chapter Seven: Clarissa

Her second year in prison, Clarissa had agreed to participate in a poetry course that the prison chaplain had put together. She hadn't had much hope for anything to come out of it, but it was half an hour every week she could sit in a gray-green room with steel chairs bolted to the floor and half a dozen of her fellow inmates and do something that wasn't watching censored entertainment feeds or sleeping.

It had been a disaster from the start.

Of the men and women who came there each week, only she and the chaplain had been to university. Two of the women were so dosed with antipsychotics that they were barely present at all. One of the men—a serial rapist who'd killed his stepdaughters by torturing them with a chemical stun spray until they stopped breathing—was so taken with a section of Pope's *Essay on Man* that he'd compose hour-long epics in rhyming couplets that didn't quite scan. His favorite subjects were the injustice of a legal system that didn't allow enough for character and his own sexual prowess. And there was a round-faced boy who seemed too young to have done anything deserving a life in the hole who wrote sonnets about gardens and sunlight that were more painful than any of the rest, though for different reasons.

Clarissa's own contributions had been minimal at first. She'd tried some free verse about the possibility of redemption, but she'd read Carlos Pinnani and Anneke Swinehart and HD at her literature tutor's insistence, so she knew her work wasn't good. Worse, she knew why it wasn't good: She didn't really believe her thesis. On the few occasions she considered shifting to a different subject—fathers, regret, grief—it seemed less like catharsis and more like strict reportage. Her life had been squandered, and whether she said it in pentameter or not didn't seem to matter much.

She quit because of the nightmares. She didn't talk about those to anyone, but the medics knew. She might be able to keep the exact content

of the dreams to herself, but the medical monitor logged her heartbeats and the activity in the various parts of her brain. The poetry made them come more often and more vividly. Usually, they were of her digging through something repulsive—shit or rotting meat or something—trying to reach someone buried in it before they ran out of air. When she stopped attending, they faded back. Once a week, say, instead of nightly.

Which wasn't to say that the course hadn't borne fruit. Three weeks after she'd told the chaplain that she didn't want to be part of his little study anymore, she'd woken up in the middle of the night fully rested and alert and calm with a sentence in her head as clear as if she'd just heard it spoken. *I have killed, but I am not a killer because a killer is a monster, and monsters aren't afraid.* She'd never spoken the words aloud. Never written them down. They'd become her words of power, a private prayer too sacred to give form. She went back to them when she needed them.

I have killed, but I am not a killer ...

"We're cycling out now," she said, her mouth dry and sticky, her heart fluttering in her chest.

... because a killer is a monster ...

"Wish us luck."

... and monsters aren't afraid. She cut the transmission, hoisted the recoilless rifle, and nodded to Amos. His grin, half hidden by the curve of his helmet, was boyish and calm. The outer door of the airlock slid soundlessly open on an abyss filled with starlight. Amos took the edge of the airlock, hauling himself forward and then ducking back in case someone was there waiting to shoot. When no one did, he grabbed a handhold and swung himself out, spinning so that the suit's mag boots would land on the ship's skin. She followed less gracefully. And less certain of herself.

The body of the *Rocinante* under her feet, she looked back at the drive cone. The hull of the ship was smooth and hard, studded here and there with blocky PDC mounts, the clustered mouths of thrusters, the black and deep-sighted eyes of sensor arrays. She held her rifle at the ready, finger near the trigger, but not on it the way that the Martian marine had shown her. Trigger discipline, she'd called it. Clarissa wished that she was the one trapped in the airlock and Bobbie Draper could be here instead.

"Moving forward, Peaches. You watch our six."

"Understood," she said, and started walking slowly backward, her boots

grabbing to the ship and then letting go only to grab hold again. It felt like the ship itself was trying to keep her from spinning away into the stars. No enemies popped up as they moved around the curve of the ship, but to her right, the body of the *Azure Dragon* appeared like a whale rising up from the deep. It was so close to the *Roci*, she could have turned off her boots and jumped to it. The light of the sun streaming up from below threw harsh shadows across a hull scarred and flaking in places where too many years of hard radiation had scoured the coatings into a white, fragile glaze. It made the *Roci* seem solid and new by comparison. Something flickered behind her, throwing her shadow and Amos' out before her. She took a slow, stuttering breath. Nothing had attacked them yet.

They were the attackers.

"Well, shit," Amos said, and at once, Naomi's voice was on the common channel.

"What are you seeing, Amos?"

A small window appeared in the corner of Clarissa's helmet, the HUD showing the stretch of hull behind her. The three bright yellow spiders stood in a cloud of sparks. Two were braced against the hull, ready to haul back a section of ceramic and steel, while the third cut it free.

"All right," Naomi said. "They're going to get between the hulls."

"Not if me and Peaches have anything to say about it. Right, Peaches?"

"Right," Clarissa said, and turned to see the enemy with her own eyes. The brightness of the welding torch forced her helmet to dim, protecting her eyes. It was like the three mechs stayed the same, and the stars all around them winked out. There was nothing left but the people who wanted to hurt her and Amos and the darkness.

"You ready?" Amos asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Not a lot. Let's see what we can do before they notice."

Clarissa crouched close to the hull, lifted her rifle, sighted down it. With the magnification on, she could see the human form cradled in the mech—arms, legs, head encased in a suit not so different from her own. She dropped the bright red dot of the sight on the helmet, put her finger on the trigger, and squeezed. The helmet jerked back, like it was startled, and the remaining two mechs turned and pointed yellow steel legs at them.

"Get moving!" Amos shouted as he jumped into the black sky. Clarissa

turned off her mag boots and leaped after him, almost too late. A white line appeared on the hull where she'd been, the bullet gone off behind them before her suit could even warn her it was coming. The suit thrusters kicked on, driving her out and shifting her unpredictably as it avoided the string of bullets she couldn't see except as lines in her HUD.

"Keep 'em busy, Peaches," Amos said. "I'll be right back."

He shot off, angling forward and around the body of the *Azure Dragon*. Clarissa turned, letting the suit push her in the opposite direction, putting the horizon of the *Rocinante* between her and the mechs. Her heart sounded like a ticking in her ears; her body shook. The red dot found the welding mech, and she pulled the trigger, missing with the first round. The second struck, and the mech rocked a little under the unexpected thrust of escaping volatile gas. Her suit threw up an alert, and she thought it was malfunctioning until she looked at her leg and saw the blood there. She'd been shot. It was like a point of intellectual interest.

"Report!" Naomi was shouting. Clarissa meant to say something, but the mechs were scuttling across the *Roci* toward her, and it took all her attention to retreat and return fire.

"I got a boarding party back here, waiting to go," Amos said.

"How many?" Naomi barked.

"Five," Amos said. And then, "Four now. Now three."

The stars were coming back, but they didn't seem as bright as before. The hull was glowing under the light of the sun, now almost directly overhead. The mechs crawled toward her faster, like something out of a nightmare. One scuttled past the barrel of a PDC and vanished.

"Got one," Alex said, and Clarissa laughed. But her attention slipped. She'd pulled out too far from the hull. She had to get back into cover. She dove toward the *Roci*, but too fast. She hit with her feet, trying to roll with the impact the way she'd learned as a girl in her self-defense classes. Her sense of up and down swam, and for a moment she was falling into the stars.

"How you doing, Peaches?" Amos asked, but she was moving. Rushing backward away from the remaining mech. Their friend's unexpected death by PDC had slowed them, made them more cautious. She went farther around the *Roci*, paused to line up a shot, and waited for the enemy to walk into it. It was hard. The sun was in her eyes now, and the helmet struggled

to keep it from blinding her. Her leg ached, but it didn't *hurt*. She wondered if that was normal. The mech lurched into view, and she fired, driving it back. How many rounds had she used? It was on the HUD someplace, but she couldn't remember where. She fired again, and saw a small green six become a five. So. Five rounds left. She waited, a hunter in her blind. She could do this. The red dot jittered and shifted. She tried to bring it back in line. She could do this ...

"Peaches!" Amos shouted. "Your six!"

Clarissa spun. The *Azure Dragon* loomed behind her, the sun high above. She'd run back so far, she'd looped. And arcing up over the enemy ship, two bright, moving shapes. The crew of the *Azure Dragon* wouldn't be able to force their way onto the *Rocinante*, but they could have some small vengeance here. There was no place for her to take cover. She could only stand here and face the remnants of the boarding party descending toward her or charge into the guns of the remaining mech.

"Amos?" she said.

"Go to the airlock! Get back inside!"

She raised her gun, aimed at one of the incoming figures. When she fired, they shifted out of the bullet's path. Her HUD reported fast-movers. It was time to go. She turned toward the drive cone. It seemed farther away than she expected. The suit thrusters kicked in, and she skimmed along, a meter above the hull like a bird flying just above the surface of a lake. Something exploded in her arm, spinning her. Her HUD told her what she already knew. Another wound. The suit was already squeezing at her shoulder to hold as much blood in as it could. To her left, a flash of yellow. The mech, riding plumes of its own thrusters, and coming closer. She dropped her rifle, and it fell away behind her. With one arm, she couldn't aim it anyway, and a little less mass meant a little more speed.

This was it. This was how she died. The idea was weirdly consoling. She'd end here, under billions of stars. In the unending, unshielded light of the sun, fighting for her friends. It felt bright, like a hero's death. Not the cold fading away on a hard, gray cot in the prison infirmary she'd expected. How strange that this should feel like victory. Time seemed to slow, and she wondered if maybe she'd triggered her implants by mistake. That would be silly. Amping up her nervous system would do her exactly no good when all her speed came from the thruster's nozzle. But no. It was only fear and the

certainty that she was rushing to her death.

Naomi and Alex were shouting in her ears. Amos too. She couldn't make sense of any of it. It occurred to her like a conclusion she was watching someone else make that Amos might feel bad when she was gone. She should have told him how grateful she was for every day he'd given her outside the hole. Her helmet alerted. She had to start braking or she'd overshoot the ship. She killed the thrusters and flipped, more from a sense of obligation than from any real hope of living. One of two boarders was spinning away sunward, arms and legs flailing and out of control. The other was above her with their back turned, facing a fast-moving body that had to be Amos. The mech flickered, drawing closer. When she started braking, it seemed to surge toward her, an illusion of relative velocity, but with enough truth to end her.

And then, inexplicably, the mech driver slumped against his harness. The mech arms waved, suddenly uncontrolled. One reached down, gouging the hull and sending the great yellow machine spinning away from the *Rocinante* and toward the stars. She watched, uncomprehending, until a hand grabbed her uninjured shoulder and an arm looped across her back. In the bright sunlight, the other suit's helmet was opaque. She didn't understand what had happened until she heard the voice over her radio.

"It's all right," Holden said. "I've got you."



Amos woke her. His wide face and bald head seemed like a dream. But that was likely just the drugs playing with her perceptions.

The regrowth cocktail did strange things to her mind, even if the painkillers didn't. Given the choice of feeling numb and stupid or alert and in pain, she chose pain. Wide elastic restraints held her to the bed of the medical bay. The autodoc fed her body what it needed, and only occasionally threw out errors, confused by the leakage from her after-market endocrine system. Her humerus was shattered, but growing back together. The first bullet had carved a groove ten centimeters long through the muscles of her thigh and shocked the bone, but didn't break it.

"You okay, Peaches? I brought you some food, and I was just going to

leave it for you, but you were ... You looked ...” He waved a hand.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I mean all shot up, but I’m fine.”

He sat on the side of her bed, and she realized they were under thrust. The smell of artificial peach cobbler was inviting and nauseating at the same time. She undid her restraints and sat up on her good elbow.

“Did we win?” she asked.

“Oh hell yeah. Two prisoners. Data core off the *Azure Dragon*. They tried to scrub it, but between Naomi and the *Roci*, we’ll put it back together. Bobbie’s straight-up pissed that she missed the action.”

“Maybe next time,” she said, and Holden came into the room.

He and Amos nodded to each other. The big man left.

“We should probably have had this talk before,” Holden said.

The *Roci*’s captain stood at the bedside, looking like he wasn’t sure whether to sit. She couldn’t say whether it was the trauma or the drugs, but she was surprised to notice that he didn’t look like her mental image of him. In her mind, his cheeks were higher, his jaw wider. The blue of his eyes more icy. This man looked—not older. Only different. His hair was messy. There were lines forming around his eyes and the corners of his mouth. Not there yet, but coming. His temples were touched with gray. That wasn’t what made him look different, though. The James Holden who was king of her personal mythology was sure of himself, and this man was profoundly ill at ease.

“Okay,” she said, not certain what else to say.

Holden crossed his arms. “I ... um. Yeah, I didn’t really expect you to come on this ship. I’m not comfortable with it.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

He waved the comment away. “It’s made me skip this part, and I shouldn’t have. That’s on me, okay? I know you and Amos trekked across a big part of North America after the rocks came down, and I know that you handled yourself just fine then. And you have experience on ships.”

Experience as a terrorist and murderer, he didn’t say.

“The thing is,” he went on, “you aren’t trained for this kind of action. Going out on the float with a gun in your hand is different from being on the ground. Or being a technician inside a ship. You’ve got those implants, but using them out there, you’d have wound up crashing out and choking to death on your own vomit, right?”

“Probably,” she said.

“So going out again like that’s not something you should do. Amos took you because ... because he wants you to know you belong here.”

“But I don’t,” she said. “That’s what you’re saying.”

“Not everyplace Amos goes, no,” Holden said. He met her gaze for the first time. He looked almost sad. She couldn’t understand why. “But as long as you’re on my ship, you’re crew. And it’s my job to protect you. I screwed that up. You don’t go into battle in a vac suit anymore. At least not until I think you’re trained. That’s an order. Understood?”

“Understood,” she said. And then, trying the word out to see how it felt in her mouth, “Understood, sir.”

He had been her sworn enemy. He had been the symbol of her failure. He’d even become a symbol, somehow, of the life she could have had if she’d made different choices. He was only a man in his early middle age that she barely knew, though they had some friends in common. He tried a smile, and she returned it. It was so little. It was something.

She finished her cobbler after he left, then closed her eyes to rest them and didn’t know she’d fallen asleep until the dream came.

She was digging through slick, black mud-sticky shit, trying to get down to where someone was buried. She had to hurry, because they were running out of air. In the dream, she could feel the wet cold against her fingers, the disgust welling up at the back of her throat. And the fear. And the heartbreaking loss that came from knowing she wouldn’t make it in time.

Chapter Eight: Dawes

The first session of Marco's impromptu summit began when Michio Pa arrived, looking pleasant and implacable in equal measures. Her ship had docked halfway through a day cycle, so Marco only kept them for a few hours. The following three days were more punishing, the meetings lasting over thirteen hours each day without even so much as a break for meals. They'd eaten at the meeting tables while Marco laid out his vision for a grand, system-spanning network of Belter civilization.

Free spin stations, automated factories and farms, power stations hunkered close to the sun and beaming energy to the human habitations, the large-scale stripping of biological resources from the corpse of the Earth. It was a grand and beautiful vision with a scope and depth that dwarfed even the Martian terraforming project. And Marco Inaros presented it all with a ruthlessness and intensity that made the objections the rest of them brought up seem small and petty.

Sanjrani wanted to know how the labor force needed to create Marco's massive snowflake-complex void cities would be trained. Marco waved the problem away. Belters were already trained to live and build in space. That knowledge was their birthright. Bred into their brittle bones. Pa brought up the problem of keeping food and medical supplies flowing to all the stations and ships already feeling the pinch from the loss of supply lines from Earth. Marco agreed that there would be lean times, but assured Pa that her fears were greater than the actual problem. No objection any of them raised swayed his commitment. His eyes were bright, his voice rich as a viol, his energy was boundless. After the meetings were done, Dawes went back to his quarters, weary to the bone. Marco went to the bars and pubs and union halls and spoke directly to the citizens of Ceres. If he slept, Dawes didn't know when.

On the fifth day, they took a break, and it felt like collapsing at the end

of a long run.

Rosenfeld's interpretation did little to help.

"Coyo is manic. He'll come back down."

"And then what?" Dawes asked.

The pebble-skinned man shrugged. His smile had very little to do with pleasure. "Then we'll see where we are. Inaros is a great man. For our purposes, he's *the* great man. It isn't a role that's fit for a wholly sane person."

They sat in the gardens of the governor's palace. The smell of plants and soil mixed with the textured protein and grilled peppers that Rosenfeld preferred for breakfast. Dawes leaned back from the table and sipped from his bulb of hot, milky tea. He'd known Rosenfeld Guoliang for almost three decades, and he trusted him as much as he trusted anyone. But not completely.

"If you're saying he's gone mad," Dawes said, "that's a problem."

"It's not a problem, it's a job requirement," Rosenfeld said, waving the concern away like it was a gnat. "He's slaughtered billions of people and remade the shape of human civilization. No one can do something on that scale and see themselves as fully human anymore. He may be a god or he may be a devil, but he can't stomach the idea of being just an unreasonably pretty man who stumbled into the right combination of charisma and opportunity. This particular fever will pass. He'll stop sounding like we're making the first weld next week and start saying that our grandchildren's grandchildren will finish it. Never been anyone as good at changing the song without missing a beat as our man Marco. Don't you worry."

"Hard not to."

"Well. Only worry a little." Rosenfeld took a thick bite of the protein and pepper, his rough eyelids lowering until he looked almost half-asleep. "We're all here because he needed us. Apart from Fred Johnson, I had the only fighting force large enough to cause him trouble. Sanjrani's a prat, but he ran Europa's artificial economy well enough that everyone thinks he's a genius. And who knows? Maybe he is. You control the port city of the Belt. Pa's the poster child of dissenting from the OPA for moral reasons, and so she makes a fine Father Christmas for redistributing wealth to the groundlings and bringing the old loyalists over to us. No one in these meetings is here by chance. He put this team together. As long as we keep a

unified front, we can keep him from floating away on his own grandiosity.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Rosenfeld chewed and grinned at the same time. “So do I.”

Anderson Dawes had been part of the OPA since before he was born. Trying to curry favor with their corporate overlords, his parents had named him after a mining company. Later, Fred Johnson’s butchery turned that same name into one of Earth’s greatest crimes against the Belt. He’d been raised to see the Belt as his home and the people living there—however different, however divided—as his kin. His father had been an organizer, his mother a union lawyer. He’d learned that all humanity was a negotiation even before he’d learned how to read. Everything in his life since then was an elaboration of the same simple theme: push hard enough that he never lost ground and never let an opportunity pass.

Always, his intention had been to put the Belt in its right place and end the casual exploitation of its people and wealth. How exactly that happened, he’d let the universe decide. He’d worked with the Persian Gulf Shared Interest Zone in rebuilding the station at L-4 and made contacts in the expatriate community there. He’d become a voice within the OPA on Ceres by showing up early at every meeting, listening carefully before he spoke, and making certain the right people knew his name.

Violence had always been a part of the environment. When he’d had to kill people, those people had died. When he found a promising young tech, he knew how to recruit them. Or an old enemy ripe to be turned. He’d brought Fred Johnson, the Butcher of Anderson Station, into the fold when everyone called him crazy, and then accepted their accolades when he’d bloodied the nose of the United Nations by doing it. Later, when it became clear that Johnson was unwilling to cooperate with the new regime, he’d agreed to cut him out. If watching his namesake go from a moderately successful Belter mining station to the rallying cry of Belter revolution had taught him anything, it was this: Situations change and clinging too tightly to what came before kills you.

And so when Marco Inaros struck his deal with the blackest black market on Mars to create a successor to the Outer Planets Alliance, Dawes had seen only two choices: Embrace the new reality or die with the past. He’d picked the way he always had, and because of it, he was at the table. Sometimes for thirteen hours while Inaros ranted his utopian dream-logic,

but at the table nonetheless.

Still, there was part of him that wished this Winston Duarte had chosen to raise someone else up with his Mephistophelean arms deal.

He took another bite of his breakfast, but the peppers had gone cold and limp, and the protein had begun to harden. He dropped his fork.

“Any word from Medina?” he asked.

Rosenfeld shrugged. “Do you mean the station, or past it?”

“Anything, really.”

“Station’s well,” Rosenfeld said. “The defenses are in place, so that’s as it should be. Past that ... well, no one knows, sa sa? Duarte’s keeping up his end, sending shipments of arms and equipment back from Laconia. The other colonies ...”

“Problems,” Dawes said. He didn’t make it a question.

Rosenfeld scowled at his plate, avoiding eye contact for the first time since their unofficial meeting began. “Frontiers are dangerous places. Things happen there that wouldn’t if it were more civilized. Wakefield went silent. Some people are saying they woke something up there, but no one’s sent a ship out to look. Who has time, yeah? Got a war here to finish. Then we can look back out.”

“And the *Barkeith*?”

Rosenfeld’s gaze stayed fixed on the peppers. “Duarte’s people say they’re looking into it. Not to worry. Not blaming us.”

Everything in the other man’s body told Dawes not to press further, and he was almost ready to let it go. He could change the angle of attack, at least. “How is it all the other colonies are fighting to grow enough food, not have their hydroponics collapse like on Welker, but Laconia’s already got a manufacturing base?”

“Just means it’s better planned. Better funded. The thing you don’t understand about this pinché Martian Duarte is—”

Dawes’ hand terminal blatted out an alert. High-priority connection request. The channel he used for station emergencies. Captain Shaddid. He held up a finger, asking Rosenfeld’s patience, and accepted the connection.

“What’s the matter?” he said instead of hello.

Shaddid was at her desk. He recognized the wall behind her. “I need you down here. One of my men is in the hospital. Medic says he may not make it. I have the shooter in custody.”

“Good that you caught him.”

“His name’s Filip Inaros.”

Dawes felt a weight drop into his gut. “I’ll be right there.”



Shaddid had given the boy his own cell. She’d been wise to do so. From the moment he walked into the security station, Dawes had felt the shock and rage like a charge in the atmosphere. Shooting a security officer on Ceres was a short way to an airlock. Or it would have been for most people.

“I put an automated monitor on him,” Shaddid said. “Slaved it to my system. No one else turns it on or off.”

“Because?” Dawes said. He was sitting at her desk. She might be the head of security, but he was the governor of Ceres.

“They’d turn it off,” Shaddid said. “And you wouldn’t ever see that little piece of shit alive again. And just between us, you’d be doing the universe a favor.”

On the screen, Filip Inaros sat against the cell wall, his head tilted back and his eyes closed. He was a young man. Or an old child. As Dawes watched, the boy stretched, wrapped his arms around himself, and settled back without looking around once. He couldn’t tell if it was the movement of someone certain that they were untouchable or frightened that they might not be. Dawes could see the resemblance to Marco, but where the father seemed to radiate charm and confidence, the son was all rage and a vulnerability that made Dawes think of abrasions and raw wounds. Under other circumstances, he might have felt sorry for the prisoner.

“How did it happen?” Dawes asked.

Shaddid tapped on her hand terminal and threw the data to the screen. A corridor outside a nightclub up nearer the center of spin. A door swung open and three people came out, all Belters. A man and woman, their hands caressing each other like they were already in private, and a second young man. A moment later, the door opened again, and Filip Inaros stepped out. There was no sound, so Dawes didn’t know what Filip had shouted at the retreating figures, only that he had. The single young man turned back, and the couple paused to watch. Filip’s head was back, his chest out. For

generations, humanity had been free of the gravity well of the inner planets, but the posturing of young men spoiling for a fight never changed.

A new figure stepped into the frame. A man in a security uniform, hands lifted in command. Filip turned toward him, shouting. The security man shouted back, pointed to the wall, ordering Filip against it. The couple turned away and pretended not to know anything about it. The young man who'd been coming back to the fight slowly stepped back, not turning away, but willing to let his enemies spend themselves against each other. Filip went terribly still. Dawes had to force himself not to look away.

The security man reached for his weapon, and a gun appeared in Filip's hand, the kind of magic flicker that comes of hundreds of hours of practicing a fast draw. And then, as part of the same motion, the muzzle flash.

"God dammit," Dawes said.

"It's not subtle," Shaddid said. "He was given a security order. He refused and fired on the agent. If he was anyone else, he'd be feeding mushrooms right now."

Dawes pressed his palm to his mouth, rubbing until his lips felt bruised. There had to be something. Some way to walk this back. "How's your man?"

There was a pause before Shaddid answered. She knew what he was really asking. "Stabilized."

"Not going to die?"

"Not out of the woods yet either," she said. And then, "I can't do my job if people get away with shooting security. I understand there's diplomacy involved, but with respect, that's your job. Mine is to keep six million people from killing too many of each other on any given day."

My job's not so different, he thought. This wasn't the time to say it. "Contact Marco Inaros. He'll be on the *Pella* in dock 65-C," Dawes said. "Tell him to meet me here."



At the end of particularly bad days, Dawes would sometimes pour himself a glass of whiskey and sit for a time with his prized possession: a printed

volume of Marcus Aurelius that had belonged to his grandmother. The *Meditations* were the private thoughts of a person with terrible power—an emperor who could order to death anyone he chose, create the law by speaking it, command any woman to his bed. Or any man, if the mood took him. The thin pages were filled with Aurelius’ private struggle to be a good man despite the frustrations of the world. It left Dawes feeling not comforted but consoled. All through human history, being a moral person and not being pulled into the dramatics and misbehavior of others had caused intelligent people grief.

Dawes had spent decades with that beneath all his personal philosophy. There were bad people everywhere, stupidity and avarice and hubris and pride. And he had to navigate it if there was ever to be hope of a better place for Belters. It wasn’t that things were worse now than they’d been before. Only that they weren’t better.

Tonight, he suspected, would be a good one for rereading his Aurelius.

Marco swept into the security station like he owned it. Smiles and laughter, and a sheer animal presence that filled the space. The security agents unconsciously moved to the edges of the room and didn’t meet his gaze. Dawes went out to lead him back to Shaddid’s office and found himself shaking the man’s hand there in front of everyone. He hadn’t meant to do that.

“This is embarrassing,” Marco said as if he was agreeing with something that had already been said. “I will see that it doesn’t happen again.”

“Your son could have killed one of my people,” Dawes said.

Marco sat back in his chair and opened his arms, an expansive gesture that seemed intended to diminish what anyone else could say. “There was a scuffle, and it got out of hand. Dawes, tell me you’ve never had something like it.”

“I’ve never had something like it,” Dawes said. His voice was cool and hard, and for the first time, Marco’s jovial expression shifted.

“You aren’t going to make this a problem, are you?” Marco said, his voice sinking low. “We have a lot of work to do. Real work. Word’s come that Earth took out the *Azure Dragon*. We have to reassess our strategy down sunward.”

It was the first Dawes had heard of it, and he had the sense that Marco

had kept the information private, ready to play it when he wanted a subject changed. Well, he'd find Dawes harder to throw off than that.

"And we will. But that's not why I called you here."

Shaddid coughed, and Marco turned to scowl at her. When he looked back at Dawes, his expression had changed. His smile was as wide, his expression as open and merry, but something in his eyes made Dawes' stomach clench.

"All right," Marco said. "Bien, coyo mis. Why did you call me here?"

"Your son can't be on my station," Dawes said. "If he stays, I have to put him through a trial. Have to protect him from anyone who might get impatient waiting." He paused. "Have to follow through the sentence, if there is one."

Marco went still, a copy of his son on the assault footage. Dawes made an effort not to swallow.

"That sounds like a threat, Anderson."

"It's an explanation. It's why you need to take your boy off my station, and never bring him back to it. I'm doing this as a favor. Anyone else, and things would just take their course."

Marco drew in a long, slow breath and let it out between his teeth. "I see."

"He shot a security agent. He may have killed him."

"We've killed a world," Marco said, waving the words away. But then he seemed to remember something, nodding as much to himself as to Dawes or Shaddid. "But I appreciate your bending the rules for me. And for him. I won't let this go by. He and I will have a serious conversation."

"All right," Dawes said. "Captain Shaddid will release him to you. If you want to bring some of your people down before she does—"

"That won't be necessary," Marco said. No bodyguards were called for. None of the security force would dare face down Marco Inaros of the Free Navy. And what was worse, Dawes believed Marco was right. "We'll have a meeting tomorrow. About the *Azure Dragon* and Earth. Next steps."

"Next steps," Dawes agreed, and stood. "You know this isn't temporary. Filip can never set foot on Ceres again."

Marco's smile was unexpected and deep. His dark eyes flashed. "Don't worry, old friend. If you don't want him here, he won't be here. That's a promise."

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Chapter Nine: Holden

The sound reached all the way to the galley: a deep thud, then a pause, then another thud. Each time it came, Holden felt himself flinch a little. Naomi and Alex sat with him, trying to ignore it, but whatever they started a conversation about—the state of the ship, the success of their mission, the question of whether to give in to fate and convert a section of the crew quarters into a brig—it died out under the slow, unending beat.

“Maybe I should talk to her,” Holden said. “I think I should.”

“Don’t know why you think that,” Alex said.

Naomi shrugged, abstaining. Holden took one last bite of his fake lamb, wiped his mouth with the napkin, and dropped everything into the recycler. Part of him hoped that one of them would stop him. They didn’t.

The *Rocinante*’s gym showed its age. No two resistance bands were quite the same color, the green-gray mats had white lines where the fabric had worn thin, and the smell of old sweat softened the air. Bobbie had strung a heavy bag on a tight line between the ceiling and the deck. Her exercise outfit was tight and gray and soaked with sweat. Her hair was tied back, and her eyes were locked on the bag as she shifted on the balls of her feet. As Holden stepped into the room, she turned to the left, putting her weight into a roundhouse kick. This close, the thud sounded like something heavy being dropped. The system reported a little under ninety-five kilograms per square centimeter. Bobbie danced back, her focus locked on the bag. She shifted to the right, and kicked with her other leg. The thud was a little softer, but the reading went up by three kilos. She danced back, reset. Her shins were red and raw-looking.

“Hey,” she said, not looking at him. Thud. Reset.

“Hey,” Holden said. “How’re you doing?”

“Fine.” Thud. Reset.

“Anything you want to talk about?”

Thud. Reset. “Nope.”

“Okay. Well. If you ah”—Thud. Reset.—“change your mind.”

“I’ll track you down.” Thud. Reset. Thud.

“Great,” Holden said, and stepped back out of the room. Bobbie hadn’t looked at him once.

In the galley, Naomi had a bulb of coffee waiting for him. He sat across from her while Alex dropped the last of his food into the recycler. Holden drank. The *Roci*’s processors were calibrated once a week, and they’d stocked up before leaving Luna, so it was almost certainly his imagination that made the coffee more bitter than usual. He put a pinch of salt in it anyway, swirling the bulb to stir it.

“You knew that wasn’t going to work,” he said.

“I expected it wasn’t,” Naomi said. “I didn’t know.”

“Just suspected.”

“Strongly suspected,” she said. It was almost an apology. “I could have been surprised.”

“You got to give Bobbie her room, Cap,” Alex said. “She’ll come out the other side of it.”

“I just ... I wish I understood what’s bothering her so much.”

Alex blinked. “She’s been spoiling to take the fight to some bad guys ever since Io. Now she got one, and she was stuck in a box while the rest of us did the shooting.”

“But we won.”

“We did,” Naomi said. “And she watched us do it while we tried to figure out how to get her out of a trap. By the time she was free, it was over.”

Holden sipped at the coffee. It was a little better. That didn’t help. “Okay, so what I meant was I wish I understood what was bothering her in hopes that then there’d be something I could do about it.”

“We know,” Naomi said. “The difficulty isn’t lost on us.”

Amos’ voice came over the ship’s comm. “Anybody there? I’ve been paging ops for the last ten minutes.”

Alex thumbed the system on. “On my way up now.”

“Okay. I think I tracked down the last leak. Let me know what it looks like from your end.”

“Will do,” Alex said, nodded to the two of them, and headed up toward

ops and the ongoing repair effort. The *Azure Dragon*'s crew hadn't had all that long, but they hadn't been trying for clean either. It was easier to cut through a lot of hull quickly when you didn't care what broke while you did it. Knowing that the ship wasn't right yet was like an itch he couldn't quite reach. Part of that came from knowing how strapped the shipyards on Luna were going to be. The days of sloping into Tycho and having Fred Johnson's teams patch the ship up were probably gone, and Luna had Earth's navy to take precedence over Holden and his crew.

It wasn't just that, though. It was also the same thing he'd felt driving him to talk to Bobbie. And to Clarissa Mao before that. He wanted things to be all right, and he had the growing feeling that they weren't. That they weren't going to be.

"What about you?" Naomi said, looking at him from under a spill of dark, gently curled hair. "Want to talk?"

He chuckled. "I do, but I don't know what to say. Here we are, the conquering heroes with prisoners and a salvaged data core, and it doesn't feel like enough."

"It isn't."

"Always so comforting."

"I mean you're not wrong. You aren't uneasy and disturbed by all this because there's something wrong with you. This is all uneasing and disturbing. You aren't fucked up. The situation is."

"That doesn't ... You know, that actually does make me feel a little better."

"Good," she said. "Because I need to know this isn't about Marco and Filip. That ... all that isn't making it hard for you to have me around."

"No," Holden said. "We covered that."

"And we'll cover it again after this, I'm sure. But if you'd just keep saying it?"

"I would put everyone else that exists headfirst out an airlock just to keep you around. It isn't that. The only concern I have about you and Marco Inaros is that he'll try to hurt you again."

"That's nice to know."

"I still love you. I will always love you."

He was answering the question he thought she was asking, but her gaze cut away. Her smile was rueful, but it was also real. "Always is a long

time.”

“I’m captain of this ship. Technically, I could marry us right now.”

Now she laughed. “Would you want to?”

“I’m easy. It seems a little redundant. Husband and wife seems like a less interesting and committed relationship than Holden and Naomi,” he said. “He can’t win, you know.”

“Of course he can. Marco’s the one who decides when he wins.”

“No, I’ve been thinking about it. The Free Navy ... is untenable. They did a lot of damage. They killed a lot of people. But all of this is really about the gates. If it wasn’t for all the people rushing out to try to found a new colony, Mars wouldn’t be collapsing. The Belters wouldn’t be worried that they’ll get marginalized out of existence. None of the things that gave Marco a toehold would have happened. But the gates aren’t going away. So all the pressures he’s fighting against? They’ll outlast him. People are still going to want to get out to the new systems, and they’re going to find ways to do it. And the colonies that are already out there are going to want to keep in contact and trade with us. At least until they’re really on their feet, and that could take generations.”

“You think he’s on the wrong side of history.”

“He is,” Holden said.

“Then what does that say about people like me? I grew up in the Belt. I wouldn’t want to live down a gravity well. The gates aren’t going away, but neither are the Belters. Unless they are.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “Human history has seen plenty of genocides. If you’re right, then the long term is either the gates or the Belters. And Belters ... We’re human. We’re fragile. We die. The gates? Even if we could destroy them, we wouldn’t. There’s too much real estate involved.”

Holden looked down. “All right. That was my turn.”

Naomi lifted a questioning eyebrow.

“That was less comforting than I meant it to be,” he said. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right. Anyway, that’s not what I meant when I said Marco decides when he wins. You don’t understand how slippery he can be. Whatever happens, he’ll shift so it was his plan all along. If he were the last person alive, he’d say we needed the apocalypse and declare victory. It’s what he is.”



Even though they were the agents of Chrisjen Avasarala's will, it took seventeen hours for the *Rocinante* and the *Azure Dragon* to get berths on Luna. When they finally did, they were at a military yard outside Patsaev complex, where the civilian relief ships were landing. The docks were crowded with people in bunches and lines, some of them staring blankly ahead like victims of a fever, some weeping with relief or exhaustion or both. The air stank of sweat and felt stale, even where the intakes made the greatest breeze.

The Luna Station complex—shipyards and convention centers, hotels and residence centers, schools and office complexes and warehouses—was big enough to fit a hundred million bodies, but the environmental infrastructure would overload at something like half that, even with the advantage of the moon's mass and conduction to soak up waste heat. The Lagrange stations had less margin. Holden tried to do the math in his head as they forged their path through the crowd. The estimates said that one-half of Earth was dead already. Fifteen billion gone or going so fast there was no way to save them. Of those still alive, two-thirds were living in what the newsfeeds were calling "distressed situations." Ten billion people who needed food or water or shelter. And up the well, there were places for maybe as many as a quarter million. Two-and-a-half-hundred-thousandths of a percent of the people in need. He couldn't believe that was right, and tried to figure it again. He came to the same number.

And a thousand worlds out there, just on the other side of the gates. Hostile worlds, most of them, but not more hostile than Earth. Not now. If there were a way to teleport them from Boston and Lisbon and Bangkok, maybe they'd be saved. Maybe they'd go on to raise something new and beautiful out of the ruins of Earth, and if one system didn't, there'd be a thousand other chances.

Except that there wouldn't be, because the transportation was too hard. So they'd die where they stood because there was no way to get them all someplace better fast enough for it to matter.

"You okay, Cap?" Amos asked.

“Fine. Why?”

“Looks like you’re getting ready to hit someone.”

“No,” Holden said. “Wouldn’t help.”

“Over here,” Bobbie said.

The guards outside the administrative offices carried small automatic weapons and wore body armor. They stood aside and let Bobbie shuffle through the wide gray door, and all of the others behind her in a line like ducklings. The offices could have been a different world. Full-spectrum lights glowed like Holden’s memory of a summer afternoon. Ferns and ivy bobbed in the gentle breeze from the air recyclers. The hallways were half a meter wider than the corridors of the *Rocinante*, and felt luxurious. Only the faint gunpowder stink of moondust and the one-tenth g spoke of Luna. Everything else would have looked at home in the UN offices at The Hague.

Bobbie led them like she knew where she was going, down one hall, past another pair of armed guards, and through a set of frosted glass doors. The room was built like a lounge—chairs and divans around low tables. Eight or ten people were scattered around in pairs and small groups, and for a few seconds, Holden didn’t understand who they were.

At some point, everything had been either black or white, but use had left splashes of color. The brown ring of a coffee stain on a cushion, the greenish scrape along the side of a chair. Avasarala stood at the far side of the room, her orange sari blazing like a torch while she talked to a white-haired woman with dark skin and narrow hips. When Avasarala looked up to smile at him, the woman turned. Holden stumbled.

“Momma Sophie?” he said, and then, like a lens coming into focus, he saw all the others for who they were. The years had changed them all, and seeing them through cameras and screens wasn’t the same. Father Tom had gained weight, and Father Cesar had lost it, but they were there, hand in hand, walking toward him. Father Anton had gone bald, and Mother Elise seemed older, and frailer in person than she had on the screen. And shorter. Everyone seemed shorter, because the system at the farmhouse had been on a desk. He’d been looking up at all of them from that desktop for years and hadn’t realized it until just now.

All eight of his parents crowded around him, their bodies pressing gently against his, their arms around each other, the way they had when

he'd been a child. Holden found himself weeping, swept away by the memory of being a little boy surrounded and protected by the loving bodies of eight strong adults. He stood among them now, the strongest of the lot, shaken by the love and the joy and the terrible understanding that both the boy he'd been and the men and women they were then were gone and would never come back. They were all crying too. Father Dimitri, Mother Tamara, Father Joseph. And his new family too.

Naomi pressed her hand to her lips, like she was trying to hold words or emotions in. Alex was grinning as widely as any of Holden's family, his eyes shining. Avasarala and Bobbie seemed pleased, like people who'd pulled off a good surprise party. Weirdly, Clarissa Mao, standing alone with a pressure cast on her wounded arm, was shaking with barely controlled sobs. Amos looked at all of them like he'd walked in on the last line of a joke, then shrugged and let them get on with whatever the hell this was. Holden felt a rush of affection for the man.

"Wait," he said. "Wait. Everyone, I need you to meet ... everyone else. I guess. This is Naomi, everyone."

His parents all turned toward her. Naomi's eyes widened a degree. The little, panicked flare of her nostrils was probably something only he could see. There was a pause he hadn't expected, a stuttering moment when he saw her through their eyes: Here is the Belter girl their son was sleeping with. Here is the ex-lover of the man who killed the world, the representative of everything that had happened. One of *them*. It lasted a heartbeat, then another. It was vast as the space between worlds.

"I've heard so much about you, dear," Mother Elise said, moving to Naomi and taking her in a wide embrace. The others followed, queuing up to welcome her to the family. But it wasn't an illusion. The moment had been there. Even when his two families diffused into each other—Father Dimitri and Father Anton and Alex talking about the ship, Mother Tamara and Amos looking at each other with a kind of amused bewilderment—Holden felt the hesitation. They would love her if he said so, but she wasn't one of their kind.

He barely noticed Bobbie at his side until she spoke. "This is how she does it. She finds a way to pay you."

She nodded toward the back of the room. Avasarala stood alone, watching with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. Holden went to her.

“They told me they were all right,” he said. “When I talked to them, they said they weren’t in danger.”

“It was true, as far as it went,” Avasarala said. “The reactors hadn’t failed there yet. And they had more food stored than most. They might have lasted another ... month? How should I know? Canning. Who the fuck does their own canning anymore?”

“But you evacuated them.”

“Another week, another month. Not another year. They wouldn’t have been safe forever, and once they realized they were fucked, all the slots would have been filled. I flagged them as priority evacuees. I get to do that kind of shit. I’m the boss.”

“Where ...”

She shrugged. “They’ll have quarters here or on L-4. Not as big as they had in Montana, but together. I can do that much. Maybe they’ll even go back to their farm someday when all this is done. Stranger things have happened.”

Holden took her hand. It was cool and hard and stronger than he’d expected. She turned to look him in the eye for the first time since he’d come into the room. The smile edged into the corners of her eyes.

“Thank you,” he said. “I owe you one.”

Her smile shifted, losing the formality and coolness and distance it had carried beneath the surface. She chuckled deep in her throat.

“I know,” she said.

Chapter Ten: Avasarala

She didn't sleep anymore, or at least it didn't help when she did. The bed in her suite was spongy, but she didn't sink into it the way that a lifetime at normal gravity made her body expect, so it felt too soft and too hard at the same time. And sleep was supposed to mean rest. There was no rest anymore. She closed her eyes and her mind stumbled on like it was falling down stairs. Mortality rates and supply windows and security briefings—all the things that filled her so-called waking hours filled her nights as well. Being asleep only meant they lost what little coherence they had. It didn't feel like sleeping. It felt like going mad and catatonic for a few hours and then regaining enough sanity to push through for eighteen or twenty hours more before collapsing into herself again. It was shit. But it needed doing, so she did it.

At least she had a shower.

"It seems like Bobbie Draper managed to keep Holden from screwing the mission up," she said, drying her hair. The suite glowed a soft blue, like the promise of dawn. Not that any dawn looked like that on Earth now. But it had once. "I like that girl. I worry for her. She's been sitting behind a desk too long. It doesn't suit her."

She considered the saris in her dresser, running her finger across the cloth and listening to the sound of skin against fabric. She opted for a green one that shimmered like a beetle's carapace. Gold embroidery along the edges that caught the false sunlight made it look cheerful and powerful at the same time. And she had the amber necklace with the jade that went with it. Fashion. All humanity shitting itself to death, and she still had to worry what she looked like going into the meetings. Pathetic.

Aloud, she said, "Gies and Basrat sent word today. Everyone thought they were dead, but they were holed up under a mountain in the Julian Alps. Probably didn't plan to pop their heads above ground until everything was

settled, but you know how Amanda is. It's never real with her unless someone knows she has it better. I don't know why you liked them."

She caught her mistake too late, and something vast and dangerous shifted in her heart. She took a deep breath, bit her lip, and went back to wrapping her sari in place.

"Once we have the Free Navy under control, we'll have to do something about emigration. No one's going to want to stay on Earth. At this rate, I may take off. Retire on some alien ocean where I don't have to feel like I'm responsible for making the waves go up and down. Mars will never sort itself out. Smith? He puts a brave face on it, but he's not a prime minister. He's hospice nurse for a republic. Anytime I start feeling like my job's bad, I just have a drink with him."

They were all things she'd said before, in some variation. There were new things every day—reports from the planetary surface, from the surveillance drones around Venus, from her covert service agents on Iapetus and Ceres and Pallas. With the Free Navy busy making the OPA look measured and rational, Fred Johnson could still be of use making contact with the reservoirs of the Belt that understood how dangerous Marco Inaros was and how the damage already done could spiral into something even worse. God knew he never brought in good news. But for everything new, for every irrevocable tick of the clock, there were the things she cycled back to. The ones she revisited again and again like rereading a favorite book. Or poem. Things she said *because* she had said them before.

"There was a thing you read me one time. About jack pines," she said, digging through her jewelry box for her necklace and the gold bracelets that would go with the embroidery. "Do you remember it? All I have is that it ended 'da-dah, da-dah, da-dah, da-dah, and paved the way to Paradise.' It was about how the seeds needed a fire before they could spread. I told you it sounded like a sophomore girl trying to make the break up with her abusive boyfriend sound deep. That poem. I can't get it out of my head now, and I can't remember it either. It's annoying."

The bracelets slid into place. The necklace settled too lightly on her collarbone. She sat at her table, touching on eyeliner, tapping a nearly homeopathic bit of rouge onto her cheeks. Just enough to make her look more vital than she felt. Not enough to make it seem like she was wearing makeup. The smell of the rouge reminded her of the apartment in Denmark

she'd kept during university. God, her mind was everywhere these days. When she finished, she turned to her hand terminal. The indicator showed she was still recording. She smiled into the camera.

"I have to put the mask on now. Go wade into it all again. They still haven't found you, but I tell myself that they will. That I would know it if you were dead. I don't know it, so it isn't true. But it's getting harder, love. And if you don't come back soon, I'll have saved so many of these messages, you'll spend half a semester just catching up to me."

Except, she thought, there wouldn't be semesters. Or poetry courses. Or any of the things that had made her life hers before the rocks fell. And then, almost as if he was there, Arjun's dissenting voice murmured in her mind, *There will always be poetry.*

"I love you," she said to the hand terminal. "I will always love you. Even ..." She hadn't said it before. Hadn't let herself think it. There was a first time for everything. A last time too. "Even if you're not here."

She stopped recording, repaired the damage her tears had done to the makeup, and lowered her head like an actor preparing to take the stage. When she lifted her eyes again, they were harder. She made the connection request to Said, and he answered immediately. He'd been waiting.

"Good morning, Madam Secretary," he said.

"Cut the bullshit. What fresh hell are we facing today?"

"You have a meeting with Gorman Le from the scientific service in half an hour. Then breakfast with Prime Minister Smith. An interview with Karol Stepanov of the *Eastern Economic Strategic Report*, and then the meeting with the Strategy and Response Committee. That will last until lunch, ma'am."

"Stepanov. He was the one who got the Cigdem Toker Award three years ago for the piece on Dashiell Moraga?"

"I ... I can check, ma'am."

"For fuck's sake, Said. Try to keep up here. He is. I'm sure of it. I should talk to his wife before I meet with him," she said. "Is there a place we can push him to in the afternoon?"

"I can make space, ma'am."

"Do that. And make sure Smith is a private audience. I'm sick of every fucking thing I do being under a microscope. If I get an ass polyp, I'll find out about it on *Le Monde*."

“If you say so, ma’am.”

“I say so. Send the cart. Let’s get this over with.”



Gorman Le was a thin man with light brown hair salted with white and jade green eyes that Avasarala guessed were cosmetic. She hadn’t known him before she came to Luna. He’d been promoted above his level of preparation when the rocks fell, and it showed in his overly somber bearing and the way he cleared his throat before he spoke.

“The ships that ... failed to complete the transition tended to be larger in mass,” he said. “The *Oleander-Swift*, the *Barbatana de Tubarão*, and the *Harmony* all follow that pattern. The *Casa Azul* doesn’t match that, though.”

The science service had always been a large presence on Luna. It was where the first broad-array telescope had been built, up free from the interference of atmosphere. The first permanent moon base had been equally divided between military posturing and research. But the generations that had risen and fallen since then had left the Luna science service behind, pressing out to the places where the action really was: Ganymede, Titan, Iapetus. God help them all, Phoebe. It left the Luna-based service office hardly more than admin offices and children’s science-fair projects. The meeting room they were in was gray-green with wall screens left cloudy by years of fine abrasion and fake leather chairs.

“I’m hearing you say there’s no consistent pattern,” Avasarala said.

Gorman Le pressed his jaw tight and flapped his hands in frustration. “There are patterns. There are any number of patterns. They all had drives built within a twenty-month window. They were all using reaction mass harvested from Saturn. They all went missing in high-traffic periods. They all had the sequence ‘four-five-two-one’ in their long-form registry codes. With this little to go on, I can find as many patterns as you want that match all the missing ships. But which one matters? No, I can’t tell you that.”

“Any ships with four-five-two-one in the registry code make it through?”

Gorman Le made a small huffing sound, like an angry hamster, then

looked down and blushed. “The *Jaquenetta*, registered out of Ganymede. It went through between the *Oleander-Swift* and the *Harmony*. Reported back from Walton with no trouble.”

“Well,” Avasarala said, amused that he’d actually tracked that down, “we can at least say that one’s less likely to be it, then.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Gorman Le said. “Ma’am, if we could get further data ... I’m certain that Medina Station has flight records for all of these. Maybe others. *And* for the ones that didn’t have trouble. If we could just—”

“If we controlled Medina Station,” Avasarala said, “a lot of things would be different. Do we have anything from our Martian friends about why their rogue navy was so interested in the Laconia gate?”

“Not even confirmation that that’s where the breakaway ships went.”

Avasarala scowled. “Keeping their knees closed after they’re already fucked. Typical. I’ll talk to Smith. We can’t get Medina, but we should fucking well manage access to all the data we *do* have.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Gorman Le said, but he said it to her back. She was already moving on.

Motion helped. The sense of doing things, of progressing, of the problems getting clearer and the solutions—where there were any—getting closer kept the despair at bay. It was harder for Smith. He was a world away from his home and his staff. There just wasn’t as much Martian infrastructure on Luna. When he wasn’t in meetings or trading messages across twelve minutes of light delay, he sat in his suite and watched the newsfeeds calling him an idiot and a buffoon and the man whose inattention had let the Martian Congressional Republic Navy be sold to terrorists and pirates. He didn’t even have managing the worst catastrophe in human history to keep his mind off feeling sorry for himself.

He met her at the door. In simple sand-colored slacks and a white collarless shirt with the sleeves rolled up, he could have been a salesman or a minor prelate. His smile was professionally genuine and warm, the same way it always was. She stepped into the rooms and glanced around. No one. Not even security. A private audience indeed. Score one for Said.

Their breakfast waited in the dining room—poached eggs and thick, buttered toast. The sort of simple, elegant fare that she imagined royalty through the ages had enjoyed while the people they ruled died. She also saw the half-empty bottle of wine on the floor by the sofa, the wall screen tuned

to an entertainment feed showing a slightly risqué comedy that had come out three years earlier. Shannon Poe and Lakash Hedayat were naked and trying to cover themselves with the same beach towel without looking at the other or touching skin to skin. In context, it might have been funny. Smith followed her gaze and turned off the screen.

“Laughter,” he said. “A balm in hard times.”

“I’ll have to try it,” she said. He pulled her chair out for her, and she let him. “I had a few things I wanted to run past you, but before that? I understand why your intelligence service is hiding information about Duarte, but why the fuck are you keeping the data about the gate-eaten ships to yourself? Are you looking to trade it for something, because unless it’s sexual favors, we haven’t got jack shit.”

“The eggs are good,” Smith said.

“You want eggs? I’ll have them squeeze a chicken. I want the data on the missing ships.”

Smith smiled and nodded as if she’d said something mild and polite. The pale flesh of the egg dripped gold on the way to his mouth. The yolk splattered his shirtfront, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I ... You’ll have to take the matter up with my successor. I’ve had word today. The opposition is calling for a vote of no confidence. I will be out of office by this evening.”

Avasarala took in a deep breath and let it out through her teeth. The silence between them was rich until she broke it. “Fuck.”

“They’re angry and they’re frightened. They need someone to blame. I’m the obvious choice.”

“Who are they putting up?”

“Olivia Liu and Chahaya Nelson were both mentioned. It’s going to be Emily Richards, though.”

Avasarala chewed a bite of egg, but didn’t taste it. Richards wasn’t bad. She was serious, at least. Liu and Nelson were too entrenched in what Mars had been. They wouldn’t be ready for what it was becoming. Richards women made good policy. Always had.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “This must be hard for you.”

“Politicians are gamblers,” Smith said. “We do our best to bend the odds, but the universe does what it does.”

Bullshit, she thought. Politicians are the frontal lobes of the body politic. *The universe does what it does*. They'd be better off without him. Only not yet.

"You have a day," she said. "Get me the data before it's too late."

"Chrisjen—"

"What are they going to do? Fire you? Fuck them—give me the data so I can get the problems fixed. If they give you too much shit, I'll offer you asylum."

He laughed and leaned back in his chair. His eyes shifted to the dead wall screen, then back to her. She wondered if the wine by the sofa had been his first bottle.

"Promise?" he asked as if it was a joke. She smiled.



The Strategy and Response Committee. Admirals Pycior and Souther. Parris Kanter from Human Development back at The Hague. Michael Harrow from Aquaculture. Barry Li and Simon Gutierrez from Transportation and Tariffs. Not the dream team she'd have chosen, but the best of who she had left. Sitting around the dark glass table, they all looked as tired as she felt. Good. They should be.

"Mars," Avasarala said. "Smith is out on his ass. Emily Richards is taking over. I'm reaching out to her now. I don't know whether she'll be more open, but I wouldn't assume it. What do you have?"

Li spoke first. Exhaustion made his lisp worse, but the sharpness of his intelligence made his eyes seem brighter. "We're maintaining relief routes in Africa and Europe. Our next area of focus is East Asia."

"There weren't any strikes there," Avasarala said.

"But they took the worst of the ash fall," Li said. "I have my people working out routes and probable needs. Information from the ground is sketchy."

"The Belt?" she said.

"The Belt's the Belt," Pycior said. "There's a wide variety of response. Ganymede is still maintaining neutrality, but it's firmly in the Free Navy's sphere of control. If we could offer protection, it would likely declare for

us. The OPA is divided. Tycho Station, Kelso Station, and Rhea are the only ones who've condemned the Free Navy. The Trojan stations and Iapetus aren't declaring anything. Most of the rest of the Belt ... It's for the Free Navy. As long as they keep promising food, material, and protection, it's going to be hard for moderate Belters to organize, even assuming they want to."

Souther cleared his throat. He spoke in a high voice that reminded her of singing. "We've taken apart the *Azure Dragon's* comm logs. They indicate that there's a high-level Free Navy meeting on Ceres right now. Inaros and his four captains."

"What are they meeting about?" Avasarala snapped.

"No one seemed to know," Souther said. "But we don't have evidence of a second shepherd vessel. We've identified seven more major rock strikes that are presently en route to Earth. We're tracking them, and we're ready to take them out."

Meaning they were unpinned. Avasarala leaned forward, pressing her fingers to her lips. Her mind danced across the solar system. Medina Station. Rhea, declaring against the Free Navy. The food and supplies of Ganymede. The starvation and death on Earth. The Martian Navy divided between the mysterious Duarte and his black market Free Navy and Smith. Now Richards. The lost colonies. Fred Johnson's OPA and all the factions he couldn't influence or command. The colony ships being preyed upon by the Free Navy pirates, and the stations and asteroids gaining the benefit of the piracy. And the missing ships. And the stolen protomolecule sample.

A dozen possibilities shifted in her mind—redeploy forces to Tycho Station and embolden Ganymede, or blockade Pallas and try to cut off the Free Navy's resupply capabilities, or set up a protected zone for the colony ships out there and running dark. There were a thousand different paths, and she couldn't be sure where any of them would lead. If she guessed wrong, it could mean the collapse of all that was left.

But Marco Inaros and his captains were together in one place, and her ships weren't pinned.

"Fortune favors the bold, yes?" she said. "Fuck it. Let's take back Ceres."

Chapter Eleven: Pa

Seven decades before Michio Pa was born, Earth and Mars rewrote the tariff regulations on raw ore from the Belt. The stated reason was that it would encourage the establishment and expansion of refineries in the Belt and around Jupiter and Saturn. It might even have worked. In the short term, it meant that a wave of Belter prospectors and asteroid miners who'd been living at the edge of survival slipped over into the abyss. Ships were impounded or run illegally or lost from not having the scrip to pay for maintenance and repair. Back then, Earth and Mars had walked in each other's footsteps, and the only option that seemed to have any promise of justice was for the Belt to build a military of its own.

It was never official. The Outer Planets Alliance survived since then by being diffuse and deniable. But the beginnings were there. Choose a faction, find a place in the chain of command, build the thin but resilient structure that would have muscle one day. That would eventually become an answer to the inner planets projecting their power out to where the sun was hardly more than the brightest star.

When Michio Pa turned twenty-two, Fred Johnson—the Butcher of Anderson Station—had seemed like her brightest hope. He was an Earther fighting for the Belt. Fighting against his own natural self-interest. It gave a sense of authenticity to someone young enough and still easily swayed. She'd taken a position on Tycho Station, made her contacts first and then her commitment. Trained in the quasi-military that Johnson was hauling up. Put in her years.

She'd been a true believer, then. She'd been a naïve little prig. But that was before the *Behemoth*.

Getting the XO assignment on the Belt's first genuine warship had been a dream come true for her. The generation ship hadn't been designed for war, but all of her crew had been. That was what she told herself.

Captain Ashford had the command. She had been his second. And slotted in beneath them as head of security, Fred Johnson's personal friend. Carlos C de Baca. Bull. Her babysitter, and the man positioned to step in and take over when she made her first mistake. Her hatred for Bull had been incandescent. Every chance she had to belittle him, she'd taken it. Every misstep he made, she drove a wedge into, prying it open. The *Behemoth* had gone to the ring to face down Earth and Mars. To show that the Belt was a force to be reckoned with. And as above, so below. She'd made it her personal mission to show Bull that she was better than he was.

Which was why it had hurt her so badly when Sam sided with him.

They'd talked about it, her and Sam. How important it was to keep their affair quiet. How not to let anyone—especially anyone in command—guess about them. Sam had agreed, maybe because she actually did agree. Or maybe in order to placate Michio's insecurities. And then Bull and Sam had fucked around with the budget allocations. It had felt like the deepest betrayal possible. Sam—*her* Sam—making common cause with an Earther. With the Earther who'd been sent by Fred Johnson to mind the untrustworthy Belters.

It had been only her first mistake among many. Michio had let her emotions blind her to the wisdom and experience that Bull had offered her until things were badly out of hand. Despite all the casualties after the catastrophe, she hadn't recognized Ashford's volatility and violence as symptoms of brain injury. She hadn't put aside her faith in the chain of command.

And she hadn't made peace with Sam before Ashford killed her.

Fred Johnson had sent her out into the whirlwind because she was a Belter, and he needed a Belter as a figurehead. She hadn't been ready, but she had been convenient. And because of it, people had died.

The *Behemoth* never came back through the gate. They'd stripped her down, spun up the drum, and rechristened her again as Medina Station. Michio Pa, they'd sent back to Tycho on a Martian naval vessel. After the dead had been removed, there'd been plenty of extra space. As soon as she'd gotten back to her quarters, she'd resigned. She didn't even shower first. She quit her official job on Tycho, her militia rank in the OPA, everything. Fred Johnson had sent her personal messages. She didn't know what was in them. She'd deleted them without listening.

And she'd gotten lost, taking one job and another. Trying to keep her nightmares and crying jags to herself. She ran a ship for a salvaging company that sometimes verged over into piracy. She oversaw a trading co-op that didn't announce itself to the tariff boards, which was technically smuggling. She was managing a supply warehouse complex on Rhea for a half-criminal labor union based out of Titan when Nadia and Bertold found her. It had taken six months before she'd realized that she was in love with them and four more before she understood what it meant that they loved her too. The day they first made a home together in a thin, inexpensive hole half a klick below the moon's surface was one of the best she'd ever had.

The others had come in their own way. Laura and Oksana together. And then Josep. Evans. Each new person folded into the marriage had felt like an expansion of her tribe. Her people. Not the politicians, not the war leaders, not the men who loved to wield power. There was a difference between, on the one hand, the Belt and its fight to exist in the face of the gate she'd helped open and, on the other, the voices and bodies of her family.

But the dream didn't die. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the idea of a Belter navy that could stand toe-to-toe with Earth and Mars and demand to be respected lay dormant but alive.

And so when Marco Inaros came with his proposal in hand, she'd heard him out. She was still remembered in Belter circles as the captain who'd stepped up in the slow zone. People respected her name. When the time came, he needed someone who would coordinate rounding up the colony ships he was keeping out of the slow zone and see that the supplies made it to Belters in need. Take from the rich inners and give to the poor of the Belt until things were even. Until they reached the utopia of the void.

But not yet. Now he just needed small favors. Moving some contraband through to Ganymede. Overseeing a prisoner transfer. Helping set up a band of hidden relays outside Jupiter. He had cultivated her with a grand vision and small steps.

And by *cultivated*, she might have meant *seduced*.

"How many ships do we have coming to Ceres?" he asked, walking beside her. The administrative levels of Ceres Station had the smell of living plants, the polished floors and walls that were meant as a boast. Michio felt a little out of place there, but Marco didn't. He managed to

make wherever he was feel like his natural habitat.

“Seven,” she said. “The closest’s the *Alastair Rauch*. It’s been braking for a while. Should hit dock in three days. The *Hornblower*’s the farthest, but Carmondy can up the burn if we need him to. I’m trying to have the fleet conserve reaction mass.”

“Good. That’s good,” Marco said, putting his hand on her shoulder. His guards stopped at the door to the conference room, and Michio started past them. Marco held her back. “We’re going to need to shift them.”

“Shift them?”

“Route them to other ports. Or run them dark and just let them be for a while.”

Michio shook her head. It wasn’t actual rejection as much as her body expressing her confusion. Half a dozen responses came to her: *They all need to refuel someplace* and *We have stations running low on food and fertilizer that are already coming here to get it* and *Are you kidding me?*

“Why?” she asked.

Marco’s smile was warm and charming. Excited and bright. She found herself smiling along with him without knowing why.

“Situation’s changed,” he said, and then walked into the conference room ahead of her. His guards nodded to her as she passed them, and she wondered for a moment where Marco’s son was.

The others were around the conference table. The wall where Marco had spent days outlining his vision of the future Belt had been cleared, and in its place, a picture of an ancient warrior. The man was dark-skinned with an ornate mustache and beard, a turban, a long, flowing white robe, a crimson sash with three swords tucked in it, and an ancient rifle cradled in one arm.

“You’re late,” Dawes said to Marco mildly as Michio took her seat. Marco ignored them both.

“Consider the Afghan,” Marco said. “Lords of the Graveyard of Empires. Even Alexander the Great couldn’t conquer these people. Every great power who attempted it exhausted themselves and failed.”

“But they barely had a functioning economy,” Sanjrani said. Rosenfeld touched the other man’s arm and put a finger to his own lips.

Marco paced before the image. “How did they manage it? How did a technologically primitive, scattered people defy the greatest powers in the world for century after century?” He turned to the others. “Do you know?”

None of them answered. They weren't meant to. This was a performance. Marco's grin widened. He lifted a hand.

"They cared about different things," he said. "To the enemy, war was about territory. Ownership. Occupation. To these geniuses, it was about controlling the spaces they did not occupy. When the English armies came to an Afghan city, ready to take the field of battle, they found ... nothing. The enemy faded into the hills, lived in the spaces that the enemy discounted. For the English, the city was a thing to be owned. For the Afghan, it was no more sacred than the hills and the desert and the fields."

"That's a bit *romantic*, don't you think?" Rosenfeld said, but Marco ignored him.

"These brave people. They were the Belters of their age and place. Our spiritual fathers. And the time has come for us to honor them. My friends, the *Azure Dragon* has fallen, as we knew it would eventually. Earth is preparing to lash out in its pain and ignorance."

"You've heard something?" Dawes asked. His face was pale.

"Nothing new," Marco said. "We always knew that Ceres was a target for them. They've been biding their time since the OPA's takeover, but our cousin Anderson here was always careful to balance his power with appeasement. It was never their greatest concern. Not until now. The UN Navy is redeploying. They are heading for Ceres. But when they get here ...?"

Marco lifted his two closed fists to his mouth, then blew on them and spread his fingers. It was an illusion, but Michio felt she could almost see the ashes blowing off his hands.

"You can't mean ..." Dawes choked.

"I've already started the evacuation," Marco said. "All our soldiers and materiel will be off the station well before they arrive."

"There are six million people on the station," Rosenfeld said. "I don't know that we can take them all."

"Of course not," Marco said. "This is a military action. We take the military ships and supplies that we need, and cede the territory to Earth. They won't let Ceres starve and die. The only thing they have is the chance to play victim and wring sympathy out of the simpleminded. If they don't take care of Ceres, they'll lose even that. And us? We'll be in the emptiness that is our natural home. Unassailable."

“But,” Sanjrani said. Almost whined. “The *economic* base.”

“Don’t worry,” Marco said. “Everything we’ve discussed is coming. Only first, we have to let the enemy overextend itself and collapse. This was always part of the plan.”

Dawes rose to his feet. His face was gray as ash apart from two bright red smears on his cheeks. His hands shook. “This is about Filip. You’re getting back at me?”

“This isn’t about Filip Inaros,” Marco said, but the elation and excitement had vanished from his voice. “This is about Philip of Macedon. And about learning the lessons of history.” He was silent for a long, terrible moment. Dawes sank back into his chair. “Now. Michio and I have already discussed rerouting the incoming ships. Let’s talk about the logistics of emptying the station itself, yes?”



The way that inners fled their own ships when they came to a station fed a certain species of jokes among Belters. How can a Belter choose a ship’s dinner menu? Dock. How can you tell an Inner’s been away from port too long? They go outside to shit. If you give an Earther the choice of staying on board ship and saving her sweetheart’s life or heading out to the docks and never loving again, how do you dispose of the body? It was the way they looked at everything: The ship wasn’t real, the planet was. Or the moon. Or the asteroid. They couldn’t let go of the idea that life involved rock and soil. It was what made them smaller.

Michio’s people weren’t all on the *Connaught* when she passed through the docking tube and into her ship’s lock, but most were. The ones who were out would likely come back to sleep in their bunks. No one would think it was odd that her whole marriage group was there. Or if it was a little odd, not implausible at least.

She headed down the lift with the weird sense of seeing the ship for the first time. Like stepping into a new station, everything was in sharp focus. Unfamiliar. The green and red indicators of the lift control. The thin, white text printed on every panel to show what was housed behind it and when it had been installed. The subtle MCRN logo still visible on the floor despite

their best efforts to buff it away. The smell of black noodles came from the galley, but she didn't pause. If she tried to eat now, she'd only vomit anyway.

They were in the cabins set aside for the family. One of the first things Bertold had done when they got the *Connaught* was take the walls off three of the cabins to make a wider space with crash couches enough that they could all sit together. The Martian designers had made the ship so that people could be alone or else together. It took a Belter to make space to be alone together. Oksana and Laura were sitting on the deck, their harps almost touching as they played through an old Celtic melody. Oksana's paleness and Laura's dark made them seem like something from a fairy tale. Josep lounged in one of the couches, his hand terminal set to some text or another, reading and swaying his foot to the music. Evans sat beside him, trying not to seem nervous. Nadia, looking like the however-many-greats-granddaughter of Marco's Afghan soldier, stood behind one of the other couches, gently massaging Bertold's thinning black hair.

Michio sat in the couch they'd left for her and listened until the melody came to an end in a series of ambiguous fourths and fifths. They put down their harps and hand terminal. Bertold opened his one good eye.

"Thank you for coming," Michio said.

"Always," Laura said.

"Just to ask," Josep said. "Are you our captain or our wife right now?"

"I'm your wife. I think ... I think that I ..."

And then she was weeping. She leaned forward, hands over her eyes. The tight monkey's-fist knot that was her heart blocked her throat. She tried to cough it out of the way, but it sounded like a sob. Laura's hand touched her foot. And then Bertold's arm was across her back and he folded her in against him. She heard Oksana murmuring, "It's okay, baby. It's all right," from what might have been half a world away. It was too much. It was all too much.

"I did it," Michio managed at last. "I did it again. I put us in Marco's control, and he's ... He's another Ashford. He's another Fred fucking Johnson. I tried so hard not to do it again, and I did it. And I brought you all along. And I'm so ... I'm so *sorry*."

Her family descended on her gently, a hand or an arm, all of them touching her. Offering her comfort. Saying wordlessly that they were there.

Evans wept with her, not even knowing why. The tears got worse for a while, confused for a while. And then better. Clearer. The worst of it passed. And when she was herself again, it was Josep that spoke.

“Tell us the story. It’ll have less power then.”

“He’s abandoning Ceres. Getting all the Free Navy out and leave the people for the inners. The colony ships we took? He wants to drive them dark out of the ecliptic for storage instead of delivering the supplies.”

“Ah,” Nadia said. “That kind, is he?”

“It’s hard, changing,” Josep said. “Tell yourself you’re a warrior long enough, you start believing it. Then peace looks like death. An annihilation of self.”

“Little abstract, honey,” Nadia said.

Josep blinked wide eyes at her, then smiled ruefully. “More concrete. You’re right. You always are.”

“I’m so sorry,” Michio said. “I did it wrong again. I trusted someone. I put myself in his command, and ... I’m stupid. I’m just stupid.”

“We all agreed,” Oksana said through a scowl. “We all believed.”

“You believed because I asked you to,” Michio said. “This is my fault.”

“Now,” Laura said, “Michi? What’s the magic word?”

Against her will, Michio laughed. It was an old joke. A part of what made her family her family.

“The magic word is *oops*,” she said. And then a moment later, “Oops.”

Bertold took a moment to noisily blow his nose and wipe the last of the tears from his eyes. “All right. So what do we do?”

“We can’t keep working with the bastard,” Oksana said.

Nadia nodded with her hand. “And we can’t stay here and wait for the Earthers.”

Together, without meaning to, they all looked to her. Michio, their wife. But also their captain. She took a long, shuddering breath. “The thing he asked us for? Gather up the colony ships and spread the food and supplies to the Belters that need them? It still needs doing. And we still have a gunship to do it with. Some of the other ships might see things our way. So either we stick to the mission or else we try to find someplace quiet and sink out of sight before Inaros figures that we’re gone.”

Her family was silent for what felt like a long time, though it wasn’t more than a few breaths set end to end. Bertold scratched at his bad eye.

Nadia and Oksana traded a look that seemed to mean something. Laura cleared her throat.

“Being small isn’t being safe. Not now.”

“Vrai,” Bertold said. “I’m for doing what we said we’d do, and fuck the rest. Changed sides before and it didn’t kill us.”

“Did we?” Josep said. “Would we be changing sides now?”

“Yes,” Evans said. “We would.”

Josep turned to look Michio full in the eyes. The humor and love in his face was like warmth radiating from a heater. “Fought the oppressor before. Still fighting the oppressor now. Followed your heart then. Still following your heart now. The situation changes, that doesn’t mean you do.”

“That’s sweet,” Michio said, taking his hand.

“Abstract, though,” Nadia said, and there was love in her voice too.

“Everything you’ve done,” Josep said, “every mistake, every loss, every scar. They all brought you here, so that as soon as you saw Big Himself for what he is, you’d be ready to act. Incapable of *not* acting, even. Everything then was preparation for now.”

“That’s bullshit,” Michio said. “But thank you.”

“If the universe needs a knife, it makes a knife,” Josep said with a shrug. “If it needs a pirate queen, it makes Michio Pa.”

Chapter Twelve: Holden

The wall screen in the dock's public lobby was tuned to an entertainment newsfeed. A breathtakingly pretty young woman with one eyelid that was either rouged or tattooed red was being interviewed by someone off screen. The crawler at the bottom of the screen identified her as Zedina Rael. Holden wasn't sure who she was. The sound was on, but incomprehensible over the sound of the people moving through the lobby to or from the docks. The subtitles were in Hindi. On the screen, Rael shook her head, and a thick tear dripped down her cheek as the feed shifted to images of a ruined city under a filthy brown sky. So something about the situation on Earth.

It was easy to forget that the entertainment feeds—musicians and actors and celebrities-for-the-sake-of-celebrity—were all going to be as affected by the catastrophe as everybody else. It felt like that slice of reality should be separate. Inviolable. Plagues and wars and disasters weren't supposed to impinge on the manufactured world of entertainment, but of course they did. Zedina Rael, whatever she did that got her a place on the screen, was a human being too. And had probably lost someone she loved when the rocks fell. Would probably lose more.

"Captain Holden?" The man was thick-shouldered and dark-haired with a sharp goatee. He carried an air of exhaustion and good humor along with his hand terminal. His uniform identified him as Port Control and his name badge read Bates. "Sorry there. You been waiting long?"

"Nope," Holden said, taking the proffered terminal. "Just a few minutes."

"Things are busy," Bates said.

"Not a problem," Holden said as he signed and pressed his thumb to the reader pad. The terminal chimed. It was a small, happy sound. Like the terminal was very happy Holden had authorized the delivery.

"Got you in bay H-15?" Bates said. "We'll have that unloaded for you

right away. Who's your repair coordinator?"

"We've got our own," Holden said. "Naomi Nagata."

"Right. Of course," the man said, nodded once, and was gone. On the screen Zedina Rael had been replaced by a thick-featured Ifrah McCoy. At least Holden knew who she was. The invisible interviewer said something, and a lull in the background noise let him hear the answer: *There must be a response. We have to stand up.* The frustration and pain in McCoy's voice bothered him, and he didn't know if it was because he agreed with her or because he was afraid what that response would lead to. He turned back toward the docks proper and the work at hand.

In a spin station like Tycho or the Lagrange stations, the ship would have been parked in vacuum. Luna was another thing entirely. The shipyard had vast locks dug deep into the lunar body with tugs to guide ships in and out, retractable seals, air. The *Rocinante* stood upright, drive cone toward the center of the moon and chisel-tip upper decks toward the stars, held in a webwork of scaffolding. The space was large enough to house a ship three times her size, and all of it was filled with breathable air.

Racks of construction mechs stood against the wall except for the four that were on the *Rocinante*, crawling gently over its surface like spiders on a crow. Naomi was in one, Amos in another. The third was Sandra Ip, one of two engineers who Fred Johnson had brought on as the *Roci*'s crew for the flight to Luna when the real crew—less Holden—had scattered to the void.

Alex and Bobbie stood on a raised platform, looking up at the body of the ship. The damage the Free Navy had done was knotted as a scar, and bright. Wide panels—the newly delivered sections of hull—rose up the ship and scaffold, guided by massive waldoes. Alex held out a headset, and Holden connected it to his hand terminal, shifting to the full-crew channel.

"How's it looking?" he asked.

"They did a number on us," Naomi said. "I'm impressed."

"Always easier to break things than put them together," Holden said.

"More evidence for that," Naomi agreed with a Belter nod of the fist. "And these replacement sections ..."

"Problem?"

Sandra Ip's voice answered. It was a little jarring to hear an unfamiliar voice. "They're carbon-silicate lace. State-of-the-art. Lighter, stronger.

These things can deflect a glancing PDC round.” Defensiveness just below the surface told Holden this wasn’t the first time through the conversation.

“They can for now,” Naomi said. Holden switched his mic to the *Rocinante*-only channel, but kept listening on the full crew.

“So, just between the family here? What’s the issue with the new plates?”

“Nothing,” Naomi said. “They’re great. Everything it says on the tin. But five years from now? Ten?”

“They don’t age well?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Alex drawled. “Ain’t none of this stuff ten years old yet. The materials-science folks got a kick in the pants after the protomolecule. Bunches of new toys. Lace plating’s just one. In theory, it should hold up just like the real thing. In practice, we’re the practice. I had a hell of a time convincing the *Roci* I wasn’t putting in the wrong mass for them too. It’s going to change how she handles.”

Holden crossed his arms. Above him, the waldoes shifted the new hull section in, laying it along the *Roci*’s side. “Are we sure we want to do this? We can hold out for the regular kind.”

“Not if we want to get out to Tycho anytime soon, we can’t,” Naomi said. “There’s a war on.”

“We can turn down the contract,” Holden said. “Fred can find another ride.”

“I don’t know, Cap,” Amos said. “Things being what they are, I kind of like that we’re getting work. I mean, as long as money still works.” He paused. “Hey, does money still work?”

“It does if we win,” Naomi said. “Free Navy ports weren’t going to refit and refuel us anyway.”

“Right,” Amos said. “So I kind of like that we’re getting work.”

Two of the mechs scuttled forward to the edge of the new hull plate. Welding torches like little suns burst into life, cleaving old technology and new together. There was something about it that Holden disliked and distrusted. But there was also something amazing. The very fabric the lace hull was made from hadn’t existed when he was born, and now it did.

Vast intelligences had designed the protomolecule, the rings, the weird and implacable ruins that covered all the new worlds. They might be extinct, but they were also being incorporated into what humanity knew,

what it could do, how it defined itself. A kid born today would grow up in a world where carbon-silicate lace was as common as titanium or glass. That it was a collaboration between humanity and the ghosts of a massive and alien intelligence would go right by them. Holden was one of the lucky generation who would straddle that break point, that seam between before and after that Naomi and Amos and Ip were making literal right now, and so he could be amazed by how cool it was. Creepy, but cool.

“It’s the future,” he said. “We might as well get some practice with it.”

The rest of Fred Johnson’s temporary crew were either already on the *Rocinante* along with Clarissa or on the way from their quarters on Luna. There was an excitement about the coming action. It was the first time that they—Earth, Mars, and even the less radical splinters of the OPA—would work together to take any direct action against the Free Navy. The heavy lifting would be done by Earth and Mars, but the *Rocinante* would be there. An observation ship carrying Fred Johnson. A representative, however imperfect, of the Belt. They were ready.

Except that Holden also wasn’t.

Especially now that his parents had come up the well from Earth, the impulse to stay close surprised him. He’d spent most of his adult life off-planet. If anyone had asked, he’d have told them that he didn’t miss Earth. Some people, yes. Some places from his childhood, maybe. But there’d been no sense of longing for the planet itself. It was only now that it had been attacked that he wanted to protect it. Maybe it was always like that. He’d outgrown his childhood home, but in the back of his mind, the unexamined assumption was that it would still be there. Changed, maybe. Grown a little older. But there. Only it wasn’t now. Wanting to stay was the same as wanting to go back a little in time to when it hadn’t happened.

Fred Johnson sent a message. He and weapons technicians Sun-yi Steinberg and Gor Droga were finishing their last meeting. As soon as the new hull was welded into place and the pressure tests complete, they could go. If Holden had any last business on Luna, this was the time for it.

He had some last business on Luna.

The torches flared and died and flared again. The *Rocinante* was remade a little, the same way it had been over and over through the years. Little changes adding up over time as the ship moved from what it had been to what it would be next. Just like all the people she carried.

“You okay?” Bobbie asked.

“What?” Holden said.

“You were sighing,” she said.

“He does that sometimes,” Alex said.

“I do?” Holden said, realizing as he did that Bobbie was still looped in on the *Rocinante*-only channel. That he was glad she was. “I didn’t know I did that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Naomi said. “It’s cute.”

“So,” he said. “When you’re done with that, Naomi? Fred’s on his way.”

“Yeah,” she said, and he was probably just imagining the dread in her voice. “All right.”



The cart that drove them down toward the refugee station ran on electromagnetic track that held the wheels to the ground. Part-grumble, part-chime, the sound was loud enough that Holden felt he had to raise his voice a little to be heard over it.

“If she’s still being paid through the UN or Mars, that would be different,” Holden said. “If we’re offering her a place on the ship permanently, I just think we need to be careful about how we do it.”

“She’s good,” Naomi said. “She’s actually trained for a ship like the *Roci*, which is more than any of us can say. She gets along with the crew. Why wouldn’t you want Bobbie on board?”

The air in the deeper corridors was damp and close. The environmental systems were working at their full capacity, and a little bit more. People shuffled out of the cart’s way, some staring at them as they passed, some not seeming to look at anything.

The refugee station stank of loss and waiting. Almost every person they passed was a lifetime that had been severed from its roots. Holden and Naomi were the lucky ones here. They still had their home, even if it was a changed one.

“It’s not Bobbie,” Holden said. “Of course I want Bobbie. But the terms ... Do we pay her? Do we redistribute ownership of the *Roci* so that she’s got the same stake in her that all of us do? I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Naomi looked at him, her eyebrows rising. “Why not?”

“Because whatever we do with Bobbie sets the precedent for what we do with any other crew we bring on.”

“Meaning Clarissa.”

“I don’t want to give Clarissa Mao ownership of the *Roci*,” Holden said. “I just ... She’s here, and okay, fine. I’m still not sanguine about that, but I can deal with it. And I want to bring Bobbie all the way into the crew, but I just—I can’t. I can’t agree that Clarissa ever gets to call my ship her home. There’s a difference between letting her be there and pretending she’s like Bobbie. Or you. Or me.”

“No forgiveness?” Naomi asked, halfway between teasing and serious.

“Plenty of forgiveness. Loads of forgiveness. Some boundaries too.”

The cart lurched to the left, slowed. The chiming sound cycled lower as it stopped. Father Anton was waiting at the door, smiling and nodding to them as they lifted themselves out and bounce-shuffled forward. The quarters for Holden’s parents were better than most. The suite was tight and too small, but private. His mothers and fathers didn’t have to share it with anyone outside the family. Mother Tamara’s yellow curry scented the air. Father Tom and Father Cesar stood in the doorway to one of the bedrooms, arms around each other’s hips. Father Dimitri leaned against the arm of an old sofa, while Mother Elise and Mother Tamara came in from the little kitchen. Father Joseph and Mother Sophie sat on the couch, a thin magnetic chess set between them, the pieces scattered by their game. Everyone was smiling, including him, and none of them meant it.

It was goodbye again. When he’d left for his doomed tour in the Navy, there’d been a moment like this too. A leave-taking that meant something they couldn’t be sure of. Maybe he’d be back in a few weeks. Or never. Maybe they’d be here on Luna, or transfer to L-4. Or something else might happen. Without the farm and decades of social inertia to hold them together, maybe they would break apart. A sudden, oceanic sadness washed through Holden, and he had to fight to keep it from showing. Protecting his parents from his distress one more time. Just the way they were doing for him.

One by one, and then in groups, they hugged. Mother Elise held Naomi’s hand and told her to take care of her little boy. Naomi solemnly agreed that she’d do what she could. If this might be the last time he had his

parents all together, he was grateful that Naomi was there to be part of it, right up until Father Cesar said goodbye.

Cesar's skin was wrinkled as a turtle's, dark as fresh-turned earth. There were tears in his eyes as he took Holden's hand. "You did good, boy. You made everyone proud of you."

"Thank you," Holden said.

"You go give those fucking *skinnies* hell, yeah?"

Over Cesar's left shoulder, Naomi went stiff. Her smile, which had been soft and warm and amused, became polite. Holden felt it like a punch in the gut. But Cesar didn't even seem to know that he'd said something rude. Holden was trapped between asking his father to apologize and preserving this last moment. Naomi, talking to Mother Tamara, plucked at her hair. Pulled it over her eyes.

Shit.

"You know," Holden said. "That's—"

"That's what he'll do," Naomi said. "You can count on Jim."

Her eyes were on his, and they were hard and dark. *Don't make this more awkward than it already is* glowed in them as clearly as if she'd written it. Holden grinned, hugged Father Cesar one last time, and started the retreat to the door, the cart, the *Rocinante*. All eight of his parents crowded outside the door to watch him go. He felt them there even when the cart turned the corner and started up the ramp toward the docks. Naomi sat silently. Holden sighed.

"Okay," he said. "I see now why you didn't want to do that. I'm really sorry that—"

"Don't," Naomi said. "Let's don't."

"I think I owe you an apology."

She shifted to look straight at him. "Your father owes me an apology. One of your fathers. But I'm going to let him off the hook."

"All right," Holden said. The cart lurched to the right. A man with a thick beard trotted out of their way. "I was going to defend you."

"I know you were."

"Just ... I would have."

"I know. And then I would have been the reason that everything had gotten weird, and everyone would have gone out of their way to tell me how they respect Belters and how he didn't mean *me*. And you're their son,

and they love you. And they love each other. So no matter what anyone said, it would all have been my fault.”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “But then I wouldn’t feel as bad about it. And I feel kind of bad about it.”

“Cross you’ll have to bear, sweetie,” Naomi said. She sounded tired.

At the dock, Fred Johnson’s crew was loading the last of the supplies into the cargo airlock. The new lace hull panels stood out on the *Roci*’s side like scars. The cart, having dropped them off, rumbled and chimed itself away. Holden paused for a moment, looking up at the ship. His heart was complicated.

“Yeah?” Naomi said.

“Nothing,” Holden said. And then, a moment later, “There was a time I thought things were simple. Or that at least some things were.”

“He didn’t mean me. No, really. He didn’t. Because I’m a person to him, and skinnies and Belters ... they aren’t people. I had friends on the *Pella*. Real friends. People I grew up with. People I cared about. People I loved. They aren’t any different. They didn’t kill *people*, they killed Earthers. Martians. Dusters. Squats.”

“Squats?”

“Yup.”

“Hadn’t heard that one.”

She put her hand in his, shifted her body against his, reached up to rest her chin on the top of his head. “It’s considered rude.”

Holden leaned against her as much as the weak gravity would allow. He felt the warmth of her body against his. Felt the rise and fall of her breath.

“We’re not people,” he said. “We’re the stories that people tell each other about us. Belters are crazy terrorists. Earthers are lazy gluttons. Martians are cogs in a great big machine.”

“Men are fighters,” Naomi said, and then, her voice growing bleak. “Women are nurturing and sweet and they stay home with the kids. It’s always been like that. We always react to the stories about people, not who they really are.”

“And look where it got us,” Holden said.

Chapter Thirteen: Prax

The thing that surprised him the most when it all changed was how little it all changed. At least in the beginning. Between the trailing end of the reconstruction and the rising tide of research projects, Prax sometimes went days or weeks without looking at newsfeeds. Anything interesting in the greater sphere of humanity, he heard about in the conversations of others. When he'd heard that the governing board was putting out a declaration of neutrality, he'd thought it was about gas sequestration and exchange. He hadn't even known there was a war until Karvonides told him.

Ganymede knew too much about being a battlefield already. The collapse was too recent in their collective memory, the scars still fresh and raw. There were ice-flooded corridors still unexcavated after the last outbreak of violence, back before the ring gate, back before the opening of the thirteen hundred worlds. No one wanted that again. And so Ganymede said it didn't care who ran things, just so long as they could continue their research, care for the people in their hospitals, and go about their lives. A massive *We're busy, you figure it out* to the universe in general.

And then ... nothing. No one claimed them or threatened them. No one fired nukes at them, or if they had, the weapons hadn't landed and the event hadn't made the news. So much of Ganymede's food was locally sourced, no one worried about going hungry. Prax had some concerns about research funding, but after the first few times he brought it up and had the issue swept aside, he'd stopped trying. They were in a holding pattern. They were keeping their heads down, doing the things they'd always done, hoping no one took notice.

And so Prax's daily trip between his hole and Mei's school and his offices had been weirdly unchanged. The food carts in the station served the same fried corn mash and bitter tea. The project-management meetings continued on Mondays before lunch. The generations of plant and fungus

and yeast and bacteria lived and died and were analyzed just the way they would have been if no one had crippled Earth. Or killed it.

When Belters in Free Navy uniforms started appearing on the corners, no one said anything. When the Free Navy ships had started demanding resupply, their scrip had been added to the approved list of currencies and their contracts drawn up. When loyalists who'd filled their boards and feeds with support for Earth and demands that the governing board take a stand went silent, no one talked about it. It was just understood. Ganymede's neutrality was permitted so long as the Free Navy could enforce it. Marco Inaros—who Prax had never heard of before the rocks fell—might not control the base, but he was quite willing to prune away the people who did until the organizational chart had been bonsai'd into the shape that pleased him. Pay tribute to the Free Navy, and govern yourself. Rebel, and be killed.

So nothing much changed and also everything did. The tension was there every day. In every interaction, however mundane. And it came out at strange times. Like reviewing trial-report data.

"Fuck the animal trials," Karvonides said, her face tight and angry. "Forget them. This is ready to go into production."

Khana crossed his arms, scowling at her. Prax, confused, had only the data to turn to, so he turned to it. Harvester yeast strain 18, sequence 10 was doing very well. The production numbers—sugars and protein both—were slightly above expected. Lipids were inside the error bars. It had been a good run. But ...

His office was spare and close. The same room he'd taken when he'd brought Mei back from Luna. The first office of his tenure on the Reconstruction Committee. The others on the committee had moved on to larger places with bamboo paneling and augmented-spectrum lights, but Prax liked being where he already was. The familiar had always offered a powerful comfort. If Khana and Karvonides had worked in any other section, there would have been a couch or at least soft chairs for them to sit on. The lab stools in Prax's office were also the same ones he'd had his first day back.

"I ..." Prax said, then coughed, looked down. "I don't see why we'd break protocol. That seems ... um ..."

"Completely irresponsible?" Khana said. "I think the phrase is

completely irresponsible.”

“What’s irresponsible is sitting on this,” Karvonides said. “Two additions to the genome, fifty generations of growth—so less than three days—and we have a species that can beat chloroplasts for making sugars out of light and extends out almost into gamma. Plus the proteins and micronutrients. Use this for reactor shielding and you can shut down the recycler.”

“That’s hyperbole,” Khana said. “And this is protomolecule technology. If you think—”

“It is not! There is literally nothing in Hy1810 that comes from an alien sample. We looked at the protomolecule, said *It can’t do that; can we?* and figured out how to make something of our own. Native proteins. Native DNA. Native catalysts. Nothing that traces back to Phoebe or the ring or anything that came off Ilus or Rho or New London ever touched this.”

“That ... um,” Prax said. “That doesn’t mean it’s safe, though. The animal protocol—”

“Safe?” Karvonides said, wheeling on him. “There are people starving to death all over the Earth right now. How *safe* are they?”

Oh, Prax thought. This isn’t anger. It’s grief. Prax understood grief.

Khana leaned forward, his hands in fists, but before he could speak, Prax put up his palm. He was in charge here, after all. It didn’t hurt to actually exercise his power now and then.

“We’ll continue with the animal protocol,” he said. “It’s better science.”

“We could save lives,” Karvonides said. Her voice was softer now. “One message. I have a friend at Guandong complex. She’d be able to replicate it.”

“I’m not going to be part of this conversation,” Khana said. The door slammed closed behind him so hard that the latch didn’t hold. The door ghosted open again, like someone invisible was coming in to take his place.

Karvonides sat, her hands on Prax’s desk. “Dr. Meng, before you say no, I want you to come with me. There’s a meeting tonight. Just a few people. Hear us out. Then, if you really don’t want to help, I won’t bring it up to you again. I swear.”

Her eyes were dark enough it was hard to tell iris from pupil. He looked back down at the data. She was probably right, in her way. Hy1810 wasn’t the first yeast that had been modified with radioplasts, and Hy1808 and

most of the Hy17 runs had been in animal trials for months without any statistically significant ill effects. With things on Earth as bad as they were, the risk of Hy1810 having adverse effects was almost certainly lower than the dangers of starvation. His stomach felt tight and anxious. He wanted to leave.

“It’s proprietary,” he said, hearing the whine in his voice as he said it. “Even if we could ethically release it, the legal consequences, not just for us but for the labs in general, would be—”

“Just come hear us out,” Karvonides said. “You won’t have to say anything. You won’t even have to talk.”

Prax grunted. A little chuffing sound that centered behind his nose. Like an angry rat.

“I have a daughter,” he said.

The silence between them went on for the space of a breath. Then another. Then, “Of course, sir. I understand.”

She stood up. Her stool scraped against the flooring. It sounded cheap. The urge to say something fluttered in his chest, but he didn’t know what it would be, and before he found it, she was gone. She closed the door more gently than Khana had, but with a greater finality. Prax sat, scratching at his arm though it didn’t itch, then he closed the report.

The rest of the day was filled with his own work in the hydroponics labs. His new project was a modified fern built for water and air purification. They stood in long rows, fronds bobbing in the constant and well-regulated breeze. The leaves—so green they were almost black—smelled familiar and welcoming. The embedded sensors had been gathering data since the day before, and he looked it over like sitting with an old friend. Plants were so much easier than people.

When that was done, he stopped back by his office, returned half a dozen messages, and reviewed the meetings scheduled for the next morning. It was all routine. All the same things he’d done before the rocks hit Earth. It was like a ritual.

Today, though, he took the extra step of adding an administrative lock on the Hy1810 data. He tried not to think too much about why he’d done it. Something vague fluttered in the back of his mind about being able to show he’d done all he could do. He wasn’t sure who he imagined he’d be defending himself before, but he didn’t really want to think about that.

He felt nervous during his walk to the tube station. The pale tile walls, the arching ceiling above the platform. All of it was just as it had been ever since the rebuild. It only seemed ominous because of all the things in his own head. While he waited for his tube, he bought a wax-paper cone of fried bean curd with olive oil and salt. The vendor was an Earther, and Prax noted the way the man had kept his hair and beard long, letting them grow out from his skull to mimic the slightly larger heads of true Belters. The man's skin was dark, so the OPA tattoos on his hands and neck didn't stand out as much as they could have. *Cryptic coloration*, Prax thought as the chime announced the tube's arrival. *Probably a good idea*. It was interesting to see how humanity adopted the strategies you saw anywhere in nature. They were part of nature, after all. Red in tooth and claw.

Mei was already home when he got there. Her voice gabbling with and over the slightly higher tones of Natalia's came in from the playroom like music. Prax relocked the door behind him and went to the kitchen. Djuna, making salad for their dinner and reading something off her hand terminal at the same time, paused both activities to smile her greeting. He kissed her shoulder before going to the little refrigerator and plucking out a beer.

"Isn't it my turn to make dinner?" he said.

"You agreed to take tomorrow because of my late meeting—" Djuna started, then stopped when she saw the beer in his hand. "One of those days?"

"It was fine," he said, but he didn't even convince himself. Part of him thought he should tell her, but that was selfish. Djuna had her own burdens and her own work. She wouldn't be able to do anything about Karvonides or Hy1810. If she couldn't fix it, there was no call to burden her. Besides which, then if anyone asked, she'd be telling the truth when she said she didn't know anything.

Over dinner, they talked about the safer parts of work. His plants, her biofilms. Mei and Natalia were having one of their good days when they seemed more like best friends than stepsisters, and they took turns talking about all the things that had happened at school. David Gutmansdottir had gotten sick from the new lunches and had to go to the nurse, and the math test was late, and they'd gotten exactly the same score, but it was all right because they'd missed different questions, so Mr. Seth knew it wasn't that they cheated, and anyway tomorrow was Dress-in-Red Day, and they both

had to make sure to put out the right clothes before bed and ...

Prax listened to them running together, leaping subject over verb over object like they were running downhill. Natalia had Djuna's brownness, high cheekbones, and thick nose. Beside her, Mei looked as pale and round as old pictures of Luna. After dinner, it was Mei's turn to clean up, and Prax helped her a little. The truth was, she didn't need it. But he enjoyed her company, and it wouldn't be long before she was old enough to start differentiating from the family unit. Then it was homework hour for all of them, and then baths and then beds. Mei and Natalia stayed up talking across their bedrooms to each other until Djuna shut the connecting door. Even then, the two girls talked, like they had to burn through their buffers before sleep could finally come.

Prax lay beside Djuna, his arm as a pillow, and wondered where Karvonides was. If her meeting had gone well. If he hoped it had or not. Maybe he should have accepted her invitation. Even if it was only so that he could know what was going on ...

He didn't notice that he was falling asleep until the door chime woke him. Prax sat up, disoriented. Djuna was looking at him, her eyes wide and round and frightened. The chime came again, and his first nearly coherent thought was that he should answer before they woke the girls.

"Don't go," Djuna said, but he was already lurching across the bedroom. He grabbed his robe, knotting the belt as he stumbled into the dimness of the rooms. The system readout said it was just after midnight. The chime came again, and then a deep, soft knocking, like a massive fist using only a fraction of its power. He heard Mei cry out, and knew from long experience that the sound meant she was still asleep, but wouldn't be for long. The skin on Prax's flank puckered into goose bumps that only had a little to do with the temperature of the air.

"Who's there?" Prax said through the closed door.

"Dr. Praxidike Meng?" a man's muffled voice asked.

"Yes," Prax said. "Who is it?"

"Security," the voice said. "Please open the door."

Which security? Prax wanted to ask. Ganymede Station security or Free Navy? But it was too late now. If it was Station, it made sense to open the door. If it was Free Navy, it wouldn't stop them if he didn't. What he was going to do next was the same either way.

“Of course,” he said, then swallowed.

The uniforms of the two men in the hall were gray and blue. Station security. The relief that flooded his bloodstream was evidence of how frightened he’d been. How frightened he *always* was these days.

“Can I help you?” he asked.



The morgue smelled like a lab. The chemical reek of the phenol soap bit at his sinuses. The throbbing hum of the high-use air filters. The clinical lights. It reminded him of his years at upper university. He’d taken a cadaver lab then too. The body he’d dissected had been suffused in preservative fluids, though. Not as fresh. And it had been in better condition.

“The identification’s solid,” one of the security people said. “Metrics and markers sync up. ID matches. But you know how it is. No relatives on the station, and the union has rules.”

“Does it?” Prax asked. He meant the question honestly, but when he said it out loud, the words took on nuances he hadn’t intended. Can a union still matter when there’s barely a government any longer? Are there still rules? The security man grimaced.

“It’s the way we’ve always done it,” he said, and Prax heard the defensiveness in the man’s voice. The hint of anger. As if Prax was responsible for all the changes they were suffering.

Karvonides lay on the table, her modesty maintained by a black rubber sheet. Her expression was calm. The wounds on her neck and the side of her head were complicated and ugly, but the lack of fresh blood gave the illusion that they weren’t serious. They’d shot her four times. He wondered if the others from her meeting were in other rooms, on other tables, waiting for other witnesses.

“I’ll attest,” he said.

“Thank you,” the other security man said, and held out a hand terminal. Prax took it, pressed his palm to the plate. It chirped when it was done recording him, a weirdly cheerful sound, given the circumstances. Prax handed it back. He looked at the dead woman’s face, waiting to understand

what he felt about her. He had the sense that he should cry, but he didn't feel like it. In his mind, she'd become evidence not of a crime but of what the world had become. Her death wasn't the beginning of an investigation, but the conclusion of one. The data was unambiguous. What happens when you stand up? You're cut down.

"Can we ask you a few questions about the deceased, Dr. Meng?"

"Of course."

"How long have you known her?"

"Two and a half years."

"In what capacity?"

"She was a researcher in my labs. Hmm. I'll have to make sure her datasets get collected. Can I make a note of that? Or do I need to wait until the interrogation's done?"

"This isn't an interrogation, sir. You go right ahead."

"Thank you." Prax pulled up his hand terminal and put an entry on his list for the morning. He thought at first there was something wrong with the display, but it was only his hand trembling. He shoved the terminal back in his pocket. "Thank you," he said again.

"Do you have any idea who might have done this to her? Or why?"

The Free Navy did this to her, Prax thought. They did it because she was trying to stand against them. She was doing that because people are suffering and starving and dying that might not have to, and she had it in her power to make a difference. They found out, and they killed her. The way they'd kill me if I made things uncomfortable for them.

He looked into the security man's inquiring eyes. *The way they'd kill you too,* he thought.

"Anything you can offer on the question, sir? Even something small might help."

"No," Prax said. "I don't have any idea."

Chapter Fourteen: Filip

The docks of Ceres Station ran, roughly speaking, along its equator in a wide belt of titanium and ceramic and steel. The dwarf planet's movement made docking difficult, but once the clamps took hold, ships had the advantage of the 0.3g of spin gravity even with the drive off and cold. And with the radius of spin as big as it was, the Coriolis should have been negligible. The *Pella* should have felt like it was under a moderate burn and nothing more, but something kept bothering Filip. A sense that the ship was wrong, or that he was.

Twice, he snuck into the medical bay and had diagnostics run, then deleted the results after he read them. They didn't show anything anyway. But maybe he was just so used to life under thrust that the trace of sideways impulse was enough to unsettle him. Or maybe it was only that the ship was empty except for him. A small, gnawing part of his mind kept suggesting it had something to do with the man he'd shot, but that didn't make any sense. Along with his father, he'd killed billions. Shooting one man—one that didn't even die—was nothing to him. It had to be the Coriolis.

His father had made it very clear that Filip's universe stopped at the airlock. The *Pella* and everything in it was his the same as it always was, but Ceres Station was worse than vacuum. Fair or unfair, Filip was banned from the station for life. It was the deal Marco had struck with the OPA governor, Dawes. The others would be an active part of the evacuation, but Filip could only watch. And so he walked the corridors, went up and down the lift, slept, ate, exercised, and waited while just on the other side of the airlock, all the people he knew best stripped Ceres Station to the studs. He'd have been part of the effort if he could. Maybe that was all it was. Maybe it was just the fact that he'd been left behind and relaxing while the others did the work didn't sit well with him. That seemed more likely than Coriolis. Or the man he'd shot.

The truth was, he didn't remember much of the event. He'd been out with maybe a dozen Free Navy and some local fringe and hangers-on. According to the old laws he was still too young to be in the bars and brothels, but he was Filip Inaros and no one had suggested he leave. There had been music. He'd danced with a local girl, admired her tattoos, bought her drinks. And he'd kept up with her too, drink for drink. She'd liked him, he could tell. And if the music had been too loud for them to talk, that didn't matter. He could tell.

Her interest hadn't been about him so much as about the story of who he was. The son of Marco Inaros. Karal had warned him. Marco had warned him. Some people would be attracted to what they thought he was. He had to be careful always to remember who his family was. Not let himself be baited or seduced. The Free Navy had the power now, but there were still people on Ceres who were more than half loyal to the old ways.

Our enemies, at least you know where they stand, his father had said when they arrived at Ceres. *There's nothing you can trust less than half-Belters*. Marco hadn't said it straight out, but he'd meant Filip's mother and all the people like her. Belters who'd let themselves be turned away from the Belt and the condescending Fred Johnson Earthers who pretended to care about them. *Moderate OPA* was just another way to say *traitor*. So Filip had known not to trust the girl, even while he was drinking with her. Drinking too much with her. When she'd left without telling him, he'd felt humiliated and angry. And then something had happened, he couldn't quite put together, and he'd been carted off by Ceres security and his father called. Which had been humiliating again.

They hadn't talked, not really. Marco had ordered him to stay on ship, so on ship he'd stayed. Maybe they'd never speak of it again. Maybe that conversation was still coming. Maybe not knowing which was what left him feeling wrong. He didn't know. He hated that he didn't know.

He sat in the gunner's station, the screen slaved to his terminal, and sampled the feeds. A man posting under an old-style OPA banner shouting about how the Free Navy was the last, best hope for Belter liberty. A thin-faced coyo sitting too close to his camera talking in halting Farsi about the implications of the biologicals supplied by Earth being cut off. Some high-end pornography in what looked like a water treatment plant and a hotel lobby. An old Sabbu Re movie series, pairing him against Sanjit Sangre

back when Sangre had still looked like a badass. Noise. It was all just noise and images, and Filip let them wash over him without noticing what he was taking in. An impressionistic sense of violence and victory, with him and his father at the head of it all. Arousal and anger paired with all the complexity of an old way of life passing into darkness.

When he killed the speakers, the *Pella* was quiet in the never-quite silent way a ship had. The drive was off, so there were none of the low hums or occasional harmonics that made the background of his normal life. But the decking joints still ticked and murmured as the plates warmed or cooled. The air recyclers hissed and huffed and hissed again. So maybe that was part of what felt wrong. The sounds of a ship under thrust were so unlike a ship in dock that the subtle background music of his life had changed and set him on edge. The tightness in his belly, the impatience like an itch in his soul that kept him uncomfortable no matter what position he sat in or stood. The ache in his jaw and across his shoulders. Maybe they were just the natural expression of a man used to being in motion being forced into passivity. That was all. Nothing more than that.

Before you kill yourself, his mother had said, come find me.

He stood up, shut down the feeds with a gesture, and stalked down toward the gym. The good thing about being alone was that no one was using any of the equipment. He didn't bother warming up, just brought down the resistance bands, strapped in, and pulled. He relished the way the handles bit into his palms, the sense of his muscles protesting and tearing, each little injury making them grow back again stronger. Between sets, he turned on some music—loud, aggressive dai-bhangra—only to stop in the middle of the next set and turn it off again.

Everything he wanted annoyed him as soon as he had it. He wondered if he'd have felt the same about the girl. If she'd stayed, and they'd fucked, if afterward he'd have wanted her gone. Turned off like the music. He didn't know what it would take to make him feel right. Getting the fuck off Ceres wouldn't hurt, though.

The voices came first, loud and laughing and familiar as Tía Michelle's bread soup. Karal and Sárta, Wings, and Kennet and Josie. The crew, coming back on board. He wondered if his father was there yet, and what he hoped the answer would be.

"Bist bien," Wings said. "Jeszcze seconds more."

The older man staggered a little as he stepped into the gym. His hair was swept up at the sides as it always was, but with a little less crispness than usual. His real name was Alex, but someone had started calling him Wings because of that hairstyle, and his eyes were bloodshot pink, and his gait was a little too relaxed and unsteady. He had a crumpled purple bag under his arm.

“Filipito!” he said, lumbering over. “Bila a ti, I was.”

“And now found me,” Filip said. “So geht gut, yeah?”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Wings said, not hearing the bite in Filip’s words. The older man lowered himself to the deck, and watched blearily as Filip pulled against the bands and trembled with the effort. “Done. Alles complét. Everyone coming home to ... to roost. Or ... not roost. Fly, sa sa? We’re flying out into the big, big empty.”

“Good,” Filip said. He made the last pull of the set, holding the tension long and hard until his arms shook and burned and failed. The bands snapped back a few centimeters, then slowed and retracted. Filip squeezed his fists. Wings held out the bag.

“Yours,” he said.

Filip looked at the bag, then at Wings who shook it at him in a *take it* gesture. It looked like plastic, but it felt and folded like paper in Filip’s hands. Whatever was inside it shifted, limp and heavy as a dead animal.

“No point leaving anything for the pinché inners,” Wings said. “Confiscations all over the station. Anything they didn’t bolt down and half of what they did. Only since tu es lá, I think for you. Yeah?”

He opened the flap. Something dark and textured, regular and irregular at the same time. He pulled the bag free and unfolded the heavy material. It wasn’t like anything he’d ever seen before. He unfolded it.

“A ... vest?” Filip said.

“For you,” Wings said. “Leather, that. Alligát. Real too. From Earth. Took it from a high-end shop by the governor’s quarters. Very rich. Only the best for you, yeah?”

Filip gave into the temptation to smell the thing, putting the dead animal’s cured scales against his nose and breathing in. There was something subtle and beautiful about the leather—not sweet and not sour, but rich and low and deep. He put it on, settling the weight across his sweat-damp shoulders. Wings clapped his hands in glee.

“You know how much *esá* cost?” Wings said. “More scrip than you or me would see in five years. For that. Just that. Would be some pinché Inner strutting around the Belt wearing it just to show how he could and we couldn’t, yeah? But we’re Free Navy now. No one better than. None.”

Filip felt the smile on his lips, tentative as a breeze. He imagined himself in the bar now, wearing his leather vest like the richest of the rich from before. Wings was right. This was the kind of thing that no Belter could have had. A symbol of everything that Earth used to remind them that they were less. Small. Not worth. Only who had it now?

“Aituma,” Filip said.

“Welcome. You’re welcome,” Wings said, waving Filip’s gratitude away. “The thing for you, the pleasure for me. Good trade *à alles*.”

“How much was it a *reál*?” Filip asked, part to let Wings brag, part so he could brag himself later. Only Wings had lain back on the deck, his arm over his eyes.

The man shrugged. “Nothing. Everything. For for? Shop’s closed. Not like there’s going to be another shipment of them, yeah? *Esá* es the last leather vest out of Earth. *End point*.”



The Free Navy left Ceres Station like spores shed by a fungal body. Drive plumes lit and flared and blinked out again like images Filip had seen of fireflies on Earth. If there were still any fireflies on Earth.

And while each Free Navy ship carried a few civilians away toward safety, theirs were far from the only ships leaving. As soon as Marco had made his intentions clear, a wave of civilian refugees had made themselves ready. Rock hoppers and prospectors and shitty half-legal transport ships all filled to the bulkheads with people desperate to get out of the great city of the Belt before it fell back into the hands of Earth and Mars. And in the midst of it all, the great spinning plume of water and ice as the reservoirs vented. The water reserves spun out from the station, briefly echoing the arms of the galaxy and then stopped, thinned, and spread out into the vast darkness of the Belt. Ice lost among the steady brightness of stars.

The docks, they left in ruins. The reactors, powered down, then either

sabotaged or stripped. The power grid and tube systems dismantled. The defense grids stood quiet, their magazines open and empty. Transmitter and sensor arrays were salvaged for parts, then melted to slag. The medical centers had been raided and emptied, leaving only enough to treat the patients already in their care. Taking *those* supplies, Marco said, would have been cruel.

Of the six million people on Ceres, maybe a million and a half would escape before the enemy arrived. The ones that remained would be in a shell of stone and titanium hardly more capable of sustaining life than the original asteroid had been.

If Earth hunkered down and rebuilt, it would take them years to get back to where Ceres had been, pinning them to the station like insects against a board. If Earth chased and attacked the Free Navy, they would be firing on ships carrying refugees. If they abandoned the station, millions of Belters would die under their care and push anyone still sympathetic to the old ways toward the new. Anything they did would be a victory for the Free Navy. They couldn't win. That was Marco's genius.

On the *Pella*, things fell quickly back into their old patterns of duty, but Filip saw differences now. Ways that Ceres Station had changed them. For one thing, the liquor was better. Jamil had his whole cabin stacked with bottles in polished boxes carved from real wood. The packaging alone would have cost more than Filip would have seen in three years' work, to say nothing of the whiskey inside them. Dina came back with half a dozen hand-painted silk scarves confiscated from an Earther's mansion, and she wore them like a bird proud of its plumage.

Everyone wore trinkets of gold and diamond and peridot, but the best was the amber. All the other gems and jewelry could maybe get mined from the Belt. Amber, though, needed a tree and a few million years. It was the one stone that spoke of Earth, and wearing it showed who they'd become better than all the perfumes and spices and leather vests there would ever be. The luxuries that Earth and Mars had bled the Belt to acquire belonged to the Free Navy now. Back to the Belt, as was only just.

It would have been perfect, except for his father.

From the moment Marco had returned to the ship, Rosenfeld at his side, Filip found himself avoiding them. After the first few days spent on the burn, he realized he was waiting to be summoned. Lying in his bunk, trying

to sleep, Filip imagined himself under his father's gaze, called upon to justify all that he'd done on Ceres. Murmuring under his breath so that no one passing by could hear it, he rehearsed all the things he would say. It was the security man's fault. It was Filip's own failing, driven by humiliation at the local girl's disrespect. It had been an accident. It had been justified. The image of the girl from the club slowly shifted in Filip's mind until she became something like the devil incarnate. The security man he'd shot grew in his private retellings to become a bumbler and a fool and likely a sympathizer for the inner planets.

When the confrontation he'd dreaded finally arrived, it was nothing like he'd expected. Late at night, his cabin door had simply opened and Marco stepped in as casually as if the room had been his own. Filip sat up, blinking away sleep as his father sat at the foot of his couch. The drive pressed him down at a gentle quarter g. He gestured, and the system brought up the lights.

Marco leaned forward, fingers knotted together. His hair was pulled back in a high, tight bun that drew the skin around his temples tight. Stubble darkened his cheeks and his eyes seemed to have retreated a few millimeters. *Pensive*, Filip thought. He knew that his father would turn in on himself sometimes. This was how he looked when it happened. Filip pulled his legs up, hugging his knees to his chest, and waited.

Marco sighed. When he spoke, his accent was thicker than usual.

"Appearances," he said. "Savvy? War y politics y peace and all in between? It's about appearances."

"If you say."

"Leaving Ceres, it was right. Clever. Genius move. Everyone says it. The inners, though. The old bitch on Earth and the new one on Mars? They'll say otherwise. Call it fleeing, yeah? Retreat. A victory against the Free Navy and all it stands for."

"Won't be."

"I know. But going to have to show it. Demonstration of power. Can't ..." Marco sighed again and leaned back. His smile was weary. "Can't give them the tempo."

"Can't, so won't," Filip said.

Marco chuckled. A low, warm sound. He put his hand on Filip's knee, his palm rough and warm. "Ah, Filipito. Mijo. You're the only one I can

really talk to anymore.”

Filip’s heart swelled in his breast, but he didn’t let himself smile. Only nodded the serious nod of a grown man and military advisor. Marco closed his eyes for a moment, leaning back against the bulkhead. He looked vulnerable then. Still his father, still the leader of the Free Navy, but also a man, weary and unguarded. Filip had never loved him more.

“So,” Marco said, “we will. Show of strength. Let them take the station and then show that they’ve won nothing against us. Not so hard.”

“Not at all,” Filip said as Marco pushed himself back up to standing and stepped to the door. When his father was halfway into the corridor, Filip spoke again. “Is there anything else?”

Marco looked back, eyebrows lifted, lips pursed. For a moment, they considered each other. Filip could hear his own heartbeat. All of his practiced lines seemed to have vanished under his father’s soft brown eyes.

“No,” Marco said, and stepped out. The door closed with a click, and Filip let his head sink onto his knees. His mistake on Ceres was gone. Forgotten. A disappointment he couldn’t explain tainted the relief that flowed through him, but only a little. He’d almost killed a man, and it was okay. Nothing bad was going to come of it. It was almost as good as being forgiven.

Someone should have kept that from happening, his mother whispered in his memory.

Filip pushed the thought away, turned his lights back down, and waited for sleep.

Chapter Fifteen: Pa

The grease crayon was meant to mark decking during construction, and so in a sense Michio was still keeping to its purpose. The marks weren't inventory control or inspection chop, and what she was constructing wasn't a ship, but still. The wall of her cabin had a long rectangular mark where she usually kept a mounted lithograph. An original print by Tabitha Toeava of false coral structures. Part of her *One Hundred Aspects of Europa* series, and it rested in its frame on her crash couch like it was watching her.

Along one side of the wall, Michio had listed the major settlements of the outer planets: Ceres, Pallas, Vesta, Iapetus, Ganymede, and on and on. Some were based on moons, some in the tunnels of well-mined asteroids, and a few—Tycho Station, the Shirazi-Ma Complex, Coldwater, Kelso—were spin stations that floated free. She'd started writing what she thought they needed there: water where there wasn't local ice, complex biologicals everywhere but Ganymede, construction material, food, medical supplies. When it got too dense to read, she cleaned the wall with the side of her fist. The smears were still there.

In the middle column, the colony ships she and her fleet had taken: the *Bedyadat Jadida*, out of Luna. The *John Galt* and the *Mark Watney*, out of Mars. The *Helen R. and Jacob H. Kanter*, sponsored by the Congregation Ner Shalom. The *San Pietro*, sponsored by the DeVargas Corporation. The *Caspian* and the *Hornblower* and the *Kingfisher*, operating under independent charters. All of them stocked to make settlements on new and hostile worlds. Some hardly had enough for a small human toehold. Others, enough to carry a hundred people for three years. Enough to keep the Belt running long enough to remake itself independent of Earth and Mars. Hopefully.

And on the other edge, her own fleet. *Serrio Mal* captained by Susanna Foyle, *Panshin* by Ezio Rodriguez, *Witch of Endor* by Carl al-Dujaili, and

so on down the wall. Each of them with their own complement of boarding troops. All of them were hers to command, and would be until it came clear that she answered to herself now. Then ... Well. That would be then.

She squeezed the grease crayon and released it. The soft click as it gave up its grip on her fingertips again and again like someone tapping on the door. With every mark she made, the fear in her chest shifted. It didn't leave her—nothing as straightforward as that—but instead of feeling bright and jittery and jagged, her heart folded in on itself and let the crust of a lifetime's failures and pains fall away. At least for a little while. It felt like getting on a treadmill and finding the perfect rhythm. One that brought her breath and her body and her mind together and stilled time.

When she'd started, she'd half hoped to find a reason she couldn't go through with her mutiny. Now that she was engaged, the doubt was forgotten. Somewhere in the process, she'd gone from whether she should to how she was going to. Until Nadia spoke, Michio didn't even notice she was there.

"Bertold still not letting you on the system?"

Michio sighed and shook her head. "Until we make the break, he wants everything off the computers. He's got the local countermeasures ready to update. But you know how it is. Tipping our hand."

"Do you think Marco is monitoring the ship that closely?"

"No," Michio said. Then, "I don't know. Maybe. It's all right. Part of me likes working this way. It's more ... I don't know. Tactile?"

"Can see that," Nadia said. "We're getting close."

"I don't want more than a second of light delay," Michio said. "I can't do this trading messages. I have to be able to *talk*."

"We're getting close," Nadia said again, her voice a halftone lower. She understood.

Michio squeezed the grease crayon and relaxed. Tick. "How long?"

"By tonight," Nadia said. She stepped in close, considering the wall and all of its markings. She was half a head shorter than Michio, and the first scattering of gray hair complicated her temple. She sighed to herself and nodded.

"Checking my work?" Michio said, teasing a little.

"Yes," Nadia said seriously. "This was a complicated situation before. We're about to make it much more. Times like this, we check the seals we

just checked.”

Michio sat on her crash couch and let her wife go over all the ships and stations. Nadia put her hands to her hips in fists and made small sounds in the back of her throat. Michio thought they were approval. It would be easier when she had the ship’s system available to plot it all out, place each ship and its vector on a single interface. Even with her wall a mass of careful handwriting, there were other lists—longer lists—of critically important information. The warships under Marco’s direct control. The elite guard force that Rosenfeld held in reserve. The thousands of supply containers from Pallas and Vesta and Callisto that had already been scattered to the care of the overwhelming void. Michio stretched her back against the one-third g braking burn, feeling the ache between her ribs.

“When are we going to steal it all?” Nadia asked.

“When I talk to Carmondy,” Michio said. “Earlier than that, and Himself might notice. Later, and he might be warned.”

“Ah, Carmondy,” Nadia said with a sigh. “It bothers me.”

“Me too,” Michio said. Nadia turned from the wall to consider her. The air of checking for errors didn’t change.

“What bothers you?” Nadia asked.

Michio nodded at the wall. “All this. Doing what I’m about to do.”

“You don’t think it’s right?”

“I don’t know if that matters. I mean, Marco does what he thinks is right. And Dawes. And Earth. All of them do what they think is right, and tell themselves that they’re moral people with the strength to do the necessary things, however terrible they seem at the time. Every atrocity that has been done to us had someone behind it who thought what they did was justified. And here I am. A moral person with the strength to do this. Because it’s justified.”

“Ah,” Nadia said. “You don’t think Carmondy will join us.”

“I don’t. And then I think I’ll have to make an example of him so that the others will take me seriously.”

“It’s not much of a pirate queen who leaves survivors in peace,” Nadia said. And then, “You’re wrong about one thing, though. Not every evil thing is done by the righteous. Some people do harsh things for the pleasure. But that isn’t what bothers me.”

Michio lifted her hands, asking the question.

“Working with Carmondy,” Nadia said. “I don’t know what it is. The man annoys me.”

Both of their hand terminals chirped a connection request from Laura on a family-restricted channel. Nadia nodded to Michio to accept and then sat at her side so they could both see the screen. Laura was on the command deck, the backslash of her control screen lightening her cheeks and dancing in her eyes. Icons of all the others except Nadia appeared along the side.

“What is it?” Nadia asked.

“Newsfeeds just arrived,” Laura said. “The inners have Ceres. Making an announcement.”

They were all silent for a moment. Knowing that it was coming pulled the punch, but Michio still felt it in her gut. “Play the feed,” she said.

Laura nodded, shifted forward to her controls, and blinked out. A feed appeared in her place. Earth and Mars naval ships docked in the berths at Ceres. Seeing them there was disorienting, a juxtaposition of two things that don’t belong together. Even though she’d known it was coming, the feeling was strong.

“—estimated at four and a half million, with sufficient reserves to sustain the station for a maximum of two weeks. The combined fleet is presently developing relief strategies including emergency rationing and a call for food and water from other stations in the Belt and the Jovian system.”

The image jittered and cut away, a sloppy edit done by an amateur. And then his face filled the screen. Fred fucking Johnson. Michio felt her gut clench. So that was their play. Trot out the Earther to speak for the Belt. Again. His eyes were soft and deep and sorrowful. His hair was close cut and white. A pale stubble stood out against the darkness of his cheeks. The text along the screen’s edge said Fred Johnson—OPA Spokesman / Tycho Manufacturing.

Not Colonel Fred Johnson. Not Butcher of Anderson Station. Opportunist. Face of the Belt When Earth’s Holding the Camera.

“Michi?”

“I’m fine.”

“The culture in the outer planets,” Johnson said, “has always been one of mutual support. Conditions aboard ship and on stations have always

tested humanity's ingenuity and competence. In the many, many years I've worked with the Outer Planets Alliance, I have never seen that ethos betrayed more profoundly than this."

"You're right," Michio said. "I'm not fine. Shut it off."

Nadia gestured to the screen, and the feed vanished. Michio stood for a long moment. She didn't remember crushing the grease crayon, but it was a sticky pulp in her hand now. She took a towel from her cabinet and tried to wipe her fingers clean. The crash couch shifted behind her as Nadia sat on it. When Michio had her control back, she turned around. The intimacy of years let her read half a dozen things in Nadia's expression.

"He's not our natural ally," Michio said. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend? That's bullshit. There are always more than two sides. Pretending it's only one or else the other is what let that sonofabitch carry so much weight in the OPA for as long as he did."

"He still does," Nadia said. "Some people will listen to him. He has ships."

"I'll get us ships. We don't need his protection."

"If you say," Nadia said. And then, gently, "Maybe he needs ours."

"He's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

"Four and a half million, though. That's a lot of people."

"Earth wanted the station. They have it. Good for them," Michio said, but her voice sounded less certain in her own ears. "They can take care of it."

"They're going to need food. Water."

Michio pointed to the list she'd scrawled on her wall. Her fingers were dark from the crayon. "Every base on that list is going to need food and water too. Medical supplies. Reaction mass. Construction material. Everything. Everyone is going to need everything. I'm not going to put Ceres at the top of our list. They've got help."

"They got robbed," Nadia said. "By us."

"By Marco."

Nadia smiled and looked off to her left, the way she did when she was ready to end an argument but didn't agree that she'd lost it. Michio couldn't let it go. The words pressed up out of her like Nadia had said them. Had invited her response.

"It's not only that it's Fred Johnson," Michio said.

“If Ceres starts to starve,” Nadia said, ending the question as if it had been a statement.

“Fine,” Michio said. “If Ceres Station starts going hungry. If they’re running out of water. I’ll help the people on Ceres. Not for Johnson, not for the OPA. But I’ll help the people there.”

Nadia nodded, but still looked off to her left, staring at the empty screen like there was a picture still glowing on it. Michio even looked, but there was only black.

“And Earth?” Nadia asked.

“What about it?”

“People are starving there.”

“No,” Michio said. “I won’t send our supplies to Earth. They had centuries to help us, and they didn’t.”

Nadia’s smile widened a millimeter as she rose to her feet. She kissed Michio’s cheek and left. A moment later, her voice came from down the corridor with Evans answering. The life of the ship continued, even with everything changing around it. Michio turned back to her lists, but she wasn’t sure what she was looking at anymore. Her mind kept sliding back to Fred Johnson’s soft, tired eyes. *I have never seen that ethos betrayed more profoundly than this.* She leaned forward and used her thumbnail to scrape a clean line through the center of the word *Ceres*. The gray of the wall showed through the center of the letters. But she didn’t rub it out.

When, eight hours later, the *Connaught* finally came within a light-second of the *Hornblower*, the newsfeeds had settled on their narrative about the retaking of Ceres. The phrase *combined fleet* became a kind of catch-all for the patchwork of Earther and Martian naval ships that were clustered there beside a ragged handful of Belter vessels. It was like going back to the days before Eros, when the alliance between the inner planets had seemed unshakable. Certainly there was some nostalgia among the inner planets’ commentariat, but the reports from Earth and Mars kept the wailing for the golden age of squeezing the Belt in perspective. Riots had broken out in Londres Nova and scuttled a meeting of the Martian parliament, and the best news from Earth was that the climbing death rate was linear instead of exponential, with hopes that it would level off as the most vulnerable and compromised parts of the globe finished dying.

Marco had gone quiet, though she assumed that meant he was busy

planning his next steps with some part of his cabal that didn't include her. That suited her fine. She had enough to think about already.

She had already recorded her message to the other captains under her command. It was ready for tightbeam transmission at her word, and once they went out, there'd be no going back. Nothing else, not even talking to Carmondy, was as irrevocable as that.

So why did putting in the connection request to the *Hornblower* feel like stepping out an airlock?

Carmondy accepted the connection request, and his face appeared on her screen with an icon that showed the communication was secure. His face was broad and placid. On another man, it might have given the impression of harmlessness, but Carmondy had already killed people on her order. She wasn't fooled.

"Captain," he said. "Wondered when I'd hear from you. Alles gut, yeah?"

"Alles interesting anyway," Michio said with a smile that, to her surprise, was mostly genuine. "Looking at some changes to the plan." The message went out to the *Hornblower*, and it came back. One second each way. It made Carmondy's response seem considered and thoughtful. An illusion made from distance and light.

"I heard. Ceres. Hell of a thing."

"Yes," she said. "Ceres. More than Ceres too. Technically, I know you're in Rosenfeld's chain of command, but I'm about to issue some orders to you and your people. I'd appreciate it if you'd follow them."

One second. Two. Carmondy's eyebrows went up. Another second. "Interesting, sa sa? Tell me."

You can turn back. You haven't said it. No one knows but your family, and they'll still support you if you back away. Put your faith back in Inaros. Or find another Himself out there to fall in line behind, since that always works out so well.

"I'm rerouting the *Hornblower* to Rhea. Cutting the prisoners loose. Redistributing the cargo."

One second. Two. Or was it a little faster this time? How close were the ships now? "Rhea not one of ours."

"It's not aligned with the Free Navy, no," Michio said. "That's why I picked it."

One second. No, the messages were definitely coming faster now. Carmondy nodded and sucked his teeth. A high, hissing sound as his eyes narrowed. She watched him understand and waited to see his reaction.

“Mutiny, then?”

“Won’t be my first,” she said with a lightness that she didn’t feel. “Taking as many ships from my command as will come. Mission’s the same. Get the colony ships and support the Belt. No drift.”

The pause seemed to last forever. “No drift,” Carmondy said and shrugged. “Bien. You want us to ride it there, or are we coming back on board?”

Alarms went off in Michio’s hindbrain. This wasn’t right. She shook her head. “Ah, Carmondy. We could have been beautiful. You’re coming on board. All your people. But you’re sending your arms and armor here first, and you’re coming in pairs.”

Pause. “Oh now, Captain, I don’t see how that happens.”

“I’ve got two options,” Michio said. “Bringing you and yours, armed and armored, onto the ship because I’m just so sure you’re loyal to me and not Marco? Not one of them.”

Pause. A smile she couldn’t quite read. Carmondy leaned in toward his camera. His hands weren’t in the square of the screen, but she imagined them folded together on his table. When he spoke, his voice was just as friendly but somehow flatter. “Que then?”

“Either you and yours come to me and I send the supplies to the Belt the way we always said we would, or I kill the *Hornblower* as a warning to al-Dujaili and Foyle and the rest that I’m serious.”

It took longer than two seconds this time. Longer than three. Michio kept her expression calm even while her heart was thudding against her ribs like it wanted out.

“Here’s what I say,” Carmondy said. “I turn this pinché ship to Pallas. You go your way, I go mine. A que comes between you and Inaros comes between you and Inaros. But you and me walk away, honor on all sides.”

Yes floated in the back of her mouth, ready to be said. She wanted this over. She hated conflict. How the hell had she wound up living in the middle of it?

“No,” she said. “Your arms and armor in a pack out the airlock within the hour or we break the *Hornblower* again. And we mean it this time.” She

shrugged. She waited. About a second this time. Closer.

“Kill us to make a point?” he said.

“Kill you so I don’t have to kill as many other people later. Rather be loved than feared, but hey. Fallen world.” Pause.

“You can’t stop me getting the word out,” Carmondy said.

Michio sighed, shifted the feed, and sent out her message. The one that began, *You have put yourself under my command out of loyalty to the Belt, and out of loyalty to the Belt I expect you to remain.*

So that was it. Her time with Marco Inaros was over. Michio Pa, once OPA, once Free Navy, now just herself and her ship in a universe all too ready to see her destroyed. For all the consequences that were coming now, for all the pain and loss she’d just invited into her life, she still felt relieved. Like she was where she was supposed to be.

“They know,” she said. “Now can we get to the part where you surrender, or are you going to insist that I kill you?”

Chapter Sixteen: Alex

Seriously,” Arnold Mfume, one of Fred Johnson’s spare pilots, said. “You used a rail gun as a *drive*? To pull a ship up from a decaying orbit?”

Alex shrugged, but the little bloom of pride in his chest was warm all the same. “Naomi did all the math on it,” he said. “I was mostly babysitting the *Roci* while it followed her orders. But ... well, yeah.”

“That is fucking insane,” Arnold said through his laughter.

“Didn’t really have any other choices,” Alex said. “We wind up doin’ a certain amount of improvisation, one way and another.”

Across the table from him, Sandra Ip smiled. He didn’t know if the way her eyes were locked on his was a sign of how drunk she’d gotten, the beginning of an erotic invitation, or a little bit of both. Either way, he found himself smiling back.

“Wish I’d been there,” Mfume said.

“I kind of wish I hadn’t,” Alex said. “It’s a lot more fun now that it’s not going on anymore. At the time, it was more in the oh-shit-we’re-all-going-to-die category.”

“That’s what adventures are,” Bobbie said, and Ip’s lazy smile tracked over toward her without changing much. So more about drunk maybe. “Shitty things that make for good stories later.”

“I heard *you* went hand-to-hand with a protomolecule soldier,” Mfume said.

“That’s not even a good story,” Bobbie said. Her smile kept it from being awkward, but that path of conversation was definitely closed. Mfume shifted, and Alex could see the temptation to push. To maybe get Bobbie to elaborate, even if it was only a little bit more.

“Now, you want to talk about flying,” Alex said, “you should hear about when Bobbie and me were trying to outrun the Free Navy.”

“Pretty sure we told that story,” Bobbie said.

Alex blinked and looked into his glass. She was right. He had told that story, and since they'd all sat down, Ip might not be the only one well on her way to tipsy. "Right," he said. "In that case, you want to talk about flyin', you should get another drink."

He lifted his arm and leaned back, trying to catch the server's eye.

The Blue Frog was a port bar, and if Alex had to guess, he'd say it had seen better days. The round tables hunched together within larger, swooping, glowing structures that defined the booths that he and the others leaned against. Only the lights seemed dirty and the table was chipped. Different menus detailed the services of the bar: food, drink, pharmaceutical, sex. An empty stage promised live music or burlesque or karaoke, only later. Not right now. And more than that, there was a smell to the place. Not unpleasant, not rotten, but tired. Like spent oil or old sealant.

The expanded crew of the *Rocinante* were scattered among three tables. To Alex's right, Amos sat grinning like a vaguely ominous Buddha with Clarissa Mao, Sun-yi Steinberg, and a shirtless young man who Alex suspected had been ordered from a menu. To his left, Naomi and Chava Lombagh were locked in a vigorous conversation, while Gor Droga and Zach Kazantzakis leaned back, keeping out of it. The other tables were dominated by a mixture of Earth and Mars navy crews. The crispness of their military uniforms and haircuts seemed out of place, like they were rebuking the architecture for being only what it was. Here and there locals hunched together like they were defending a position against a siege. Covert glances of the natives of Ceres didn't carry a sense of threat as much as bewilderment. The music that leaked from hidden speakers stayed lower than the conversation, shimmering major scale notes making an ambiguous wash of sound, neither celebratory nor sad.

The manager—a dark-skinned man with cold blue eyes and a permanent near-smirk—caught Alex's glance, nodded to him, and sent a server trotting over. The smile on the woman's face seemed almost genuine. Alex ordered another round for the table, and by the time his attention came back to the conversation, the topic had moved on.

"There were rules about that in the service," Bobbie said.

"But there were ways to get around them, right?" Ip said. "I mean, you aren't telling me everyone in the Martian Navy's celibate."

Bobbie shrugged. "If you're in a relationship with someone above you

or below you in the chain of command, it's not a joke. Dishonorable discharge, loss of benefits, maybe jail time. That takes a lot of the shine off. But I wasn't Navy. I'm—I was a marine. If there was a little cross-training between services, it wasn't a problem until it started messing up operational efficiency."

"I heard they put chemicals in the food to lower people's libido," Arnold said.

Bobbie shrugged. "If they did, they didn't put in enough."

"What about on the *Rocinante*?" Ip said, turning her full attention to Alex. There was definitely more than just alcohol in the question. "Do you have rules against cheap, sleazy fraternization?"

Alex chuckled, not certain whether he was getting excited or uncomfortable. "Captain and the XO have been together damn near since we got on the ship. It'd be a difficult rule to enforce on the rest of us."

Ip's smile shifted. "You used to be a Navy boy, didn't you? You and the gunny here ever ..."

Alex regretted ordering the next round. He was going to need his wits about him pretty soon here. "Me and Bobbie? Nah. That ain't a thing that happened."

"We haven't actually shipped out together that much," Bobbie said. "And anyway ... No offense, Alex."

"None taken."

"Really?" Ip said, leaning forward. Her knee pressed against Alex's in a way that was absolutely innocent. Unless it wasn't, in which case it *absolutely* wasn't. "Never even wanted to?"

"Well," Bobbie said. "There was one night on Mars. I think we were both feeling a little lonely. I'd probably have made out with him if he'd asked."

"I can't know that," Alex said, suddenly flushed with heat and unable to look Bobbie in the eye. "You can't tell me that."

Ip kept her leg pressed to his and cocked her head at him. The question was clear. *Is this a thing you're still working out?* Alex smiled back at her. *No, it was never really a thing.*

Naomi's voice lifted, carrying over the murmur of conversation and the music both. She was leaning over her table, finger raised to make some boozy point to Chava. He couldn't make out the words, but he knew her

tones of voice well enough to know it wasn't anger. Not real anger anyway. For that, Naomi got quiet.

The server reappeared with a tray of drinks, and Ip leaned across to get hers, then didn't lean all the way back. Alex felt something in the back of his mind relax. It had been a long time since he'd made this particular kind of mistake. Figured he was about due.

"Y'all excuse me for just a minute," he said. "Need to find the head."

"Hurry back," Ip said.

"Count on it."

Walking across the floor, past the bar, and to the back hall, Alex felt like something out of a bawdy joke. Soldiers pairing off after battle was about as old and worn a scenario as there was. But it had gotten that way for a reason. The tension going into battle wasn't like any other feeling Alex had ever had, and the relief when it let up was bone-deep and intoxicating. It wasn't only him or Ip. It wasn't even only sex. He'd known sailors as locked down and shipshape as a training-manual picture who'd come through action and spent the hours afterward weeping or puking. There was one pilot—Genet, her name was—suffered chronic insomnia that even medication could only manage. Every night, she'd be up for an hour between two and three in the morning. Except after an action, when she slept like a baby the whole night through. It was what came of being a primate with a body built for the Pleistocene savanna. Fear and relief and lust and joy were all packed into the same little network of nerves somewhere deep in his amygdalae, and sometimes they touched.

The flight out from Earth had been short and hard and seemed to last forever. The long-range sensors showed no active threats between the ports on Luna and the Belt, but all the way out the thought hung in the air like smoke: Were there rocks falling undetected toward Earth? Toward Mars? Was Marco Inaros three steps ahead of them, the way he always seemed to be? Even Fred Johnson had seemed preoccupied, pacing through the halls with his hands clasped behind his back. The Battle of Ceres was coming. The first fight in the war since the first straight-up ambush. The combined fleet would find out just how badass a bunch of Belters piloting stolen Martian warships really were, and there was reason to expect that would be pretty damned badass.

When the drive plumes had lit up the scans of Ceres, Alex felt it in his

throat. Long-range battle. Torpedoes launched at extreme range in unpredictable vectors, designed to come in fast and hard, hoping to slip by the PDCs. He wondered if Mars had ever managed to build a good stealth torpedo, and if the traitors who'd supplied the Free Navy would have traded in them if they did exist. He'd spent hours in his crash couch, chasing every anomaly the *Roci*'s sensor arrays spat out, whether they were above threat threshold or not. When he did sleep, it was all he dreamed about.

When the data came back that the Free Navy ships were burning away, scattered as seeds, he—like every pilot in the combined fleet—looked for the strategy in it. The loops of gravity and thrust that showed where the battle would come together, what the enemy had in its mind. Every time he came up with nothing felt like a threat. The certainty that there was a pattern and he just wasn't smart enough to see it knotted at the base of his skull until his eyes throbbed. His only comfort was that the crews of the Earth and Mars navies, who lived and breathed battle tactics, were as frustrated as he was. When the Free Navy's trap snapped shut, they'd all die surprised together.

Only it kept not happening.

When the first ships reached the docks—two troop carriers from Earth, one from Mars—Alex had held his breath. Ceres was the port city of the Belt, and it was sitting there as unguarded and inviting as bait in a trap. Traffic control gave permission to approach. The combined fleet took berths, soldiers spilled out into the docks, the moment for resistance came and went. Reports started filtering back, many of them to Fred Johnson. The Free Navy was gone. There was no armed resistance. No soldiers, only a handful of booby traps, empty storerooms and reservoirs, and a security force stripped to its skeleton and anxious to surrender to anyone willing to take charge.

The battle for Ceres Station never came. Instead, the combined fleet and the local engineering unions put together an emergency response team that was even now jerry-rigging the environmental systems and recycling plants to keep the station from collapsing. Fred Johnson had spent all his time before the *Rocinante* docked trading tightbeam messages with Avasarala on Luna and whoever would answer back from Mars, where the no-confidence vote on Smith had ballooned to a full-scale constitutional crisis. After they'd docked, Fred, a security detail in tow, had vanished into a whirlwind

of meetings with local OPA groups, unions, and the thin, traumatized remains of the administrative staff.

The rest of the crew went to the bar.

It had been strange at first—still was strange when he thought about it—watching the people of Ceres Station react to their new invaders. Everyone Alex met seemed built out of confusion and relief and anger and a kind of formless grief that spread out through the station hallways like a vapor. Ceres was a huge port, independent of the inner planets for years, and now maybe reconquered by them. Or maybe rescued. No one seemed to know if the combined fleet was the avenging hammer of Earth or the final proof that Fred Johnson's OPA was a legitimate political force. Or if maybe something bigger and stranger had happened.

The smiles of the Ceres natives were tentative, and they carried shards of rage and loss in their eyes. Even here at the Blue Frog, where the crews were welcomed and served the best of what little remained, the fleet and the natives pulled apart, uncertain of each other. Segregated by choice and history. Alex found himself thinking of it as Belters at the bar and inners at the tables, but that wasn't true. Ip and Mfume and all of Fred's people were OPA. Even the divisions between people seemed new, and nobody was quite sure yet which unspoken rules applied.

Alex came out of the men's room to a wall of sound. In the few minutes he'd been indisposed, someone had cranked up the karaoke and was shouting out a boozy version of Noko Dada's version of "No Volveré" but without any of the harmony parts. He paused at the end of the bar and looked out over the tables, hoping to find a corner where he could have a quiet word with Sandra Ip away from the stage.

Holden was at a table by himself, hunched over a white mug with a ferocious scowl on his face. Alex felt a tug of anxiety. Back at his table, Bobbie and Ip were talking over each other while Mfume laughed. Ip looked over toward him, grinned, and patted the seat beside her. He held up a finger—one minute—and sloped over toward Holden.

"Hey there, partner," Alex said. "You holding together all right?"

Holden looked up and around like he was surprised to find himself there. Then, after a moment, "Yeah, no. I'm all right."

Alex tilted his head. "Seems like you just said three different things in a row."

“I ... ah. Yeah, I did, didn’t I? I’m fine.” He nodded at the small gold packet in Alex’s hand. “What’s that?”

Alex held it up. He’d gotten the packet from a dispenser in the men’s room. The foil had a dragon’s head embossed on it and some nonsense kanji that didn’t mean anything.

Holden’s brow furrowed. “Sobriety meds?”

Alex felt himself blushing and tried to hide it by smiling. “Well, I’m thinking I may be in a situation here pretty soon where everybody needs to be able to agree to whatever they’re agreeing to.”

“Always a gentleman,” Holden said.

“Mama raised me right. But seriously, are you doing okay? Because you’re staring at that coffee like it called you bad names.”

Holden glanced down at his cup. The song sloped down to the rough trill at the end. The applause was scattered and weak. Holden turned his coffee mug on the table, setting the black surface dancing. The porcelain scraped against the tabletop until the chords of a new tune crashed out and a woman’s voice starting on a Belter Creole cover of Cheb Khaled drowned it out. When Holden spoke, his voice barely carried over the music.

“I keep thinking about my dad calling Belters *skinnies* right in front of Naomi. And the way she took it.”

“Family can be rough,” Alex said. “Especially when emotions are kind of high.”

“True, but that’s not what’s ...” Holden opened his hands. A gesture of frustration. “I always thought that if you gave people all the information, they’d do the right thing, you know? Not always, maybe, but usually. More often than when they chose to do the wrong thing anyway.”

“Everybody’s a little naïve sometimes,” Alex said, feeling as the words passed his lips that maybe he wasn’t quite following Holden’s point. Maybe he should have taken the first of the sobriety pills before he’d left the men’s room.

“I meant fact,” Holden went on as if he hadn’t heard Alex at all. “I thought if you told people *facts*, they’d draw their conclusions, and because the facts were true, the conclusions mostly would be too. But we don’t run on facts. We run on stories about things. About people. Naomi told me that when the rocks fell, the people on Inaros’ ship cheered. They were happy about it.”

“Yeah, well.” Alex paused, rubbing a knuckle across his upper lip. “Consider they might all be a bag of assholes.”

“They weren’t killing people. In their heads? They were striking a blow for freedom or independence. Or making it right for all the Belter kids that got shitty growth hormones. All the ships that got impounded because they were behind on the registration fees. And it’s just the same back home. Father Cesar’s a good man. He’s gentle and he’s kind and he’s funny, and to him Belters are all Free Navy and radical OPA. If someone killed Pallas, he’d be worried about what the drop in refining capacity would do before he thought about how many preschools there are on the station. Or if the station manager’s son liked writing poetry. Or that blowing the station meant that Annie down in Pallas central accounting wasn’t going to get to throw her big birthday party after all.”

“Annie?” Alex asked.

“I made her up. Whoever. The thing is I wasn’t *wrong*. About telling people the truth? I was right about that. I was wrong about what they needed to know. And ... and maybe I can fix that. I mean, I feel like I should at least try.”

“Okay,” Alex said. He was pretty sure he’d lost the thread of whatever they were talking about a while back, but Holden seemed at least less brooding. “So that means you’re about to do something?”

Holden nodded slowly, then drank off all that was left of his coffee at once, put the mug on the table, and clapped Alex’s shoulder. “Yeah. I am. Thank you.”

“Glad I could help,” he said. And then, to Holden’s retreating back. “Least I think I am.”

Back at the table, Sandra Ip had switched to club soda. Bobbie and Arnold were comparing stories about free climbing at different gravities, and Naomi and Clarissa Mao were at the edge of the stage, getting ready to take a turn singing. Ip caught a glimpse of the foil package in Alex’s hand, and her smile was a promise that things were going to go very, very well for him. Still, she must have read something in his expression or the way he held himself when he sat down.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

Alex shrugged. “I’ll tell you when I find out.”

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Chapter Seventeen: Holden

The girl was something like a hundred ninety-two centimeters, and she would have towered over him if she weren't sitting down. Her hair was cut close to her scalp in what Holden figured was fashionable for adolescent Belter girls these days. There were probably hundreds of microfeeds about it, which he didn't follow. Or maybe she was a rebel and the hairstyle was all her own. Either way, it made the slightly enlarged head less pronounced. She sat at the edge of the bench, looking around at the *Rocinante's* galley like she was regretting that she'd come. The older woman she called Tía stood against the wall, scowling. A chaperone who wasn't impressed with anything she saw.

"I'll just be a second here," Holden said. The software package Monica Stuart had sent him assumed a level of proficiency he didn't have, and he'd managed somehow to turn off some of its intelligence defaults. The girl nodded tightly and plucked at her sari. Holden hoped his smile was reassuring. Or failing that, amusing. "Really. I've just about ... Wait, wait, wait. Okay. There."

Her image appeared in his hand terminal with tiny overlays for color correction, sound correction, and something labeled DS/3 that he didn't know what it was. Still, she looked good.

"All right," Holden said. "So, I figure anyone who watches this is going to know who I am. Could you maybe just say your name?"

"Alis Caspár," she said, her voice flat. She could have been a political prisoner the way she spoke. So, it wasn't going too well yet.

"Great," he lied. "Okay, and where do you live?"

"Ceres Station," she said, and then an awkward pause. "Salutorg District."

"And, um, what do you do?"

She nodded, settling into herself. "Ever since Ceres broke away from

Earth control, my family has been running a financial coordination service. Converting scrip from different corporations and governments into compatible. Mi family bist peace-loving people. The pressure that the inner planets put on the Belters is not the fault of—”

“Let me break in for just a second,” Holden said. Alis went silent, looked down. Somehow Monica made doing this seem really easy. Holden was starting to see how that might actually be the product of years of experience and practice and not something he could jump into without guidance. Except he didn’t have time for that, so he forged ahead. “When we met ... we met like four hours ago ... you were with some of your friends. In the corridor?”

Alis blinked, confused, and looked at Tía. The little incredulous glance was the first time the girl had looked like herself since she’d come on board.

“It was really amazing,” Holden said. “I mean, I was walking by and I saw you all there. And I was really impressed. Could you tell me about that?”

“Shin-sin?” Alis said.

“Is that what you call it? The thing with the glass balls?”

“Not glass,” Alis said. “Resin.”

“Okay, yes,” Holden said, pouring enthusiasm out toward her like dropping water onto a sponge. It all seemed to just soak in and vanish. But then Alis chuckled. It didn’t matter that it was more *at* him than *with* him. “Could you do it again? Here?”

She laughed, covering her mouth with one hand. For a long second, he thought she might call the whole thing to a halt. But then she plucked a little bag from her hip and took out four brightly colored clear spheres a little larger and softer than the marbles Holden had played with as a boy. Carefully, she set them between her fingers, resting between the second knuckles. She started singing, a high, choppy chant, and then stopped, laughed, and shook her head.

“Can’t do this,” she said. “I can’t.”

“Please, just try. It’s really great.”

“It’s dumb,” she said. “It’s kid thing.”

“I’m ... really immature.”

When she looked at Tía again, Holden glanced too. The old woman was

glowering just as deeply as before, but there was a glimmer of amusement in her ancient eyes. Alis settled, laughed, settled again, and started chanting. When the rhythm was established, she started clapping her hands together gently, and passing the spheres from hand to hand, making them seem to dance independently of her. Every now and then the chant would hit a syncopated passage so that one of the balls could drop into her palm and get tossed across to be captured between her opposite fingers. When she reached the end, she stopped, looked shyly toward Holden, and shook her head.

“Better with two people,” she said.

“Like partners?” he said.

“Dui.” Her glance behind him was no more than a flutter, but Holden knew what it meant, and a touch of glee leapt into his heart. He turned to the stone-faced chaperone, who hoisted an eyebrow at him.

“Do you ... Tía?” he said. “Do you know how to do shin-sin?”

She snorted in military-grade derision. When she came forward, Alis made room for her and handed over two of the spheres. They seemed smaller between Tía’s thick fingers. The old woman lifted her chin, and for a moment, Holden knew exactly what she’d looked like at Alis’ age.

The chant was more complex this time, sung as a round with the rhythms of one part informing and supporting whatever was happening in the other woman’s voice. The clear, colored spheres danced between their hands as they clapped palms together, crossing and recrossing, adding their claps to the song. At the moments of syncopation, they tossed the spheres across the space between them and caught them in their knuckles. By the end, both women were grinning. At the end, Tía tossed all the spheres up one after another so quickly they were all in the air at the same moment and then caught them in one hand. It wasn’t a trick that could have worked at a full g.

Holden clapped and the older woman nodded, accepting his applause like a queen.

“That is amazing. It’s wonderful,” Holden said. “How do you learn how to do that?”

Alis shook her head in disbelief at the strange Earther and his childish delights. “Is just *shin-sin*,” she said. And then her eyes went wide, and the blood drained from her face.

“Mr. Holden,” Fred Johnson said. “When you have a moment?”

“Yes, sure,” Holden said. “We were just ... Yeah. Give me a second.”

“I’ll be in Ops.” Fred smiled and nodded to the two Belter women. “Ladies.”

Holden closed down the software, thanked Alis and Tía, and walked them to the airlock, out and into the docks. After they’d gone, he watched the captured video—girl and woman with their voices and hands playing against each other, the not quite marbles weaving between them like a third player in the game. It was exactly the kind of thing he’d hoped for. He ran the compression and sent it to Tycho Station and Monica Stuart, just the same way he had the others.

He’d hoped to get a lot more done. He’d interviewed a researcher who worked on Ceres Station, self-educated through networked tutorials, plying him with yeasty beer until the older man was loose and comfortable enough to wax passionate about the beauty of tardigrades. He’d talked to a nutritionist from the hydroponic fields who’d only agreed if she could explain the water shortage situation on Ceres, and wound up being the clearest voice of grief and fear that he’d heard. He’d talked to a man who was alleged to be the oldest Belter on the station, who told a long and probably apocryphal story about the first licensed brothel to open there.

And that was all. So far. Four interviews, none of them terribly long. Hopefully it was enough for Monica to work with. She’d promised him that a lot could be saved in editing.

The docks weren’t as busy as he was used to seeing them. Especially after the press and barely controlled chaos of Luna, Ceres seemed wounded. Still reeling from the blows it had suffered. The carts and loading mechs stood idle, waiting for a ship to arrive with supplies or some warehouse on the station that still had something worth sending away.

He’d heard once about reperfusion injuries. When a limb had been pressed until all the blood was gone, the flood when it came back could break vessels, bleed into the cellular matrix. He remembered thinking at the time how strange it was for something normal, necessary, and life-giving to cause damage just by showing back up. Ceres was like that now, but he couldn’t tell if the combined fleet was the blood returning or if some other flood would have to come before Ceres could take stock of how badly it had been wounded.

On his way back in, he passed Gor Droga and Amos in the locker room running down a short that was making one of the ventilation fans run slow. Clarissa Mao was talking to them both from down in engineering. It was the sort of problem that a ship with a full crew had the spare cycles to address. At the lift, he had to wait for Chava Lombaugh to squeeze past him before he got on.

The truth was that with all of Fred's people and Holden's, the *Rocinante* still had a little less than the full crew she'd been meant to carry. That it felt crowded to him wasn't the ship design, but his own habits and expectations. A full crew would be tighter, more compressed, more like a normal Navy ship. Holden knew that. He even knew that in some ways having the extra people would keep them all safer. The *Rocinante* was built with a lot of redundant backups. The crew was supposed to be the same way. It hadn't worked out that way, though. Another mechanic wouldn't be Amos. Another pilot wouldn't be Alex. People were more than the roles they played in the function of the ship, and they weren't replaceable. And what was true of the *Rocinante* held for the larger field of humanity as well.

The lift stopped. Fred Johnson looked up from the ship controls, nodding to Holden. The lights were at the same dim settings that Alex preferred, and the backslash from the screens left Fred's skin looking darker than it was. Maura Patel sat across the deck, diagnostics spooling across the communications controls on her screen and headphones over her ears. Holden dropped into a couch beside Fred's and swiveled to face him.

"You wanted me?"

"Couple things. I'm setting up shop on Ceres for now. Avasarala's going to recognize me as acting governor," Fred said. "I'm pulling in all my favors. Everyone I know with any influence from the OPA. I'll bring them here."

"That sounds like an invitation to assassinate you."

"The risk is necessary. I don't know if my crew will be staying here or going to Tycho without me. I'm waiting on word from Drummer about that. One way or the other, I'll get them out of your hair."

"That's ... I mean, okay. But they're sort of growing on me. So what did you really want to talk about?"

Fred nodded once, a short, hard motion. "Do you think Draper will be able to speak for Mars?"

Holden laughed. “Like *speaking for* ambassador speaking for? Negotiate with the OPA? Because I was pretty sure that was up to Mars.”

“We may not be in a position to wait for them to get their ducks in a row. Smith’s out, and Richards is in, but an opposition coalition’s formed that want to put investigating the remaining military ahead of anything else.”

“You mean like ahead of fighting the war?”

“For example. Richards and Avasarala are working on it, but I need a Martian face with me if I’m going to make this combined navy hold together. With my background, I can represent the best of Earth to the Belt. I’ve been doing that for years, and I’ve built up a lot of trust. But unless I have a representative of Mars, I won’t be bringing anything new to the table. Especially with the Free Navy flying Martian ships. Inaros’ stock is very high right now.”

“Seriously? Because it looks a lot like he just walked away from the biggest port in the Belt.”

Fred shrugged eloquently. “His apologists are good at their jobs. And everything is in the shadow of what he did to Earth. Sorrento-Gillis, Gao, all of them. They underestimated the anger in the Belt. And the desperation. People want Inaros to be a hero, and so what he does, they interpret as heroism.”

“Even running away?”

“He won’t only run away. Don’t know what he’s got in mind, but he isn’t about to retire. And Ceres Station ... it’s a white elephant now. Just keeping the environmental systems running isn’t going to be trivial. We may have to consolidate. Concentrate people physically and abandon parts of the station. Which will be interpreted as Earth and Mars kicking Belters out of their homes by Inaros and his cabal.”

Holden ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, that’s messed up.”

“It’s politics. And it’s why we need the OPA. There is support for us in the Belt, but it needs cultivation. And we have a few things going for us. They can call themselves a navy, but they’re amateurs. The kind of roughshod that thinks discipline is the same as punishment. Rumor is there’s already some dissent in Marco’s leadership. Probably, it’s over his tactics with Ceres. I still don’t understand why Dawes would let him walk away from the station, but ... well, clearly he did. And Avasarala’s keeping a lid on Earth. If the UN had crumbled the way Mars has, I don’t know

what we'd do."

"This," Holden said. "Try to gather some allies. Pretty much the same thing you're going to do anyway. Only with less hope that it would work."

Fred stretched, his joints popping, then sighed back down into the gel of the couch. The diagnostics on the comm panel flickered, and Patel tapped the run results. As far as she was concerned, the two of them might as well not have been there.

"You're probably right," Fred said. "Still, I'm glad it's not worse. Not yet, anyway."

"Maybe we'll get lucky and Inaros will get himself killed without us."

"It wouldn't be enough," Fred said. "Earth's broken. It will be for generations. Mars may or may not collapse, but there's still the gates. Still the colony worlds. Still all the pressures that keep the Belt on the edge of starvation and even less of what makes it valuable. There's no getting back to status quo ante. We've got to move forward. Which brings us back to Draper. You've worked with her. Can she do the job?"

"Honestly, I think the best person to ask is her. We all know her. We all like her. I'd trust her with my ship, and I wouldn't trust you with that. If she thinks she can, then I think she can."

"And if she thinks she can't?"

"Then ask Avasarala," Holden said.

"I already know her opinion. All right, thank you. And ... I'm going to regret asking. Do I want to know what you were doing with those two women in the galley?"

Maura Patel shifted in her chair. The first sign that she was listening to them at all.

"Filming them. That thing with clapping and marbles? It was really visually interesting, and Monica said that was something to be looking for. I'm doing these interviews, and she's helping me edit and distribute them."

"And why are you doing that?"

"It's what's missing in all of this," Holden said. "It's what let things get this bad. We don't see each other as people. Even the feeds are always about weird things. Aberrations. All the times that a Belt station doesn't have a riot? Those days aren't news. It has to be an uprising or a protest or a system failure. Just being here, living a normal life? That's not part of what the people on Earth or Mars hear about."

“So you—” Fred closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re reaching for more unapproved press releases? You remember starting a war that way once?”

“Exactly. That was talking about an aberration, because I thought that was what people needed to know. But they need all the context too. What it’s like to be a teenager with his first crush on Ceres. Or to worry about your dad getting old on Pallas Station. The things that make people here the same as people everywhere.”

“Belters rain hell down on Earth,” Fred said slowly, “and you respond by trying to humanize Belters? You know there’s going to be a raft of people who call you a traitor for that.”

“I’d be doing the same thing on Earth, but I’m not there right now. If people call me names, they do. I’m just trying to make it a little harder for people to feel comfortable killing each other.”

Fred’s screen put up an alert. He glanced at it, dismissed it. “You know if anyone else came up with the idea that they ought to put themselves in the middle of a war so they could sing songs and hold hands and sow peace for all mankind, I’d call it narcissistic opportunism. Maybe megalomania.”

“But it’s not anyone else, so we’re good?”

Fred lifted his hands. A gesture made of equal weights amusement and despair. “I’ll want a private word with Draper.”

“I’ll let her know,” Holden said, standing up.

“I can reach her myself. And Holden ...”

He turned back. In the dimness, Fred’s eyes were so dark the iris and the pupil were the same shade of black. He looked old. Weary. Focused. “Yes?” Holden said.

“The song those two were singing? Get the lyrics translated before you broadcast it. Just in case.”

Chapter Eighteen: Filip

The *Pella* coasted through the black, one node in a network of dark ships that traded tightbeams and compared strategies and planned. Stealth wasn't possible in the strict sense. The enemy would be scanning the vault of the heavens for the Free Navy's ships just as much as they were tracking the drive plumes of Earth and Mars and everyone else in the system. The universe was billions of points of unwavering light—stars and galaxies stretching out through time and space, their photon streams bent by gravity lensing and shifted by the speed of the universe's expansion. The flicker of a drive might be overlooked or confused with another light source or hidden by one of the widely scattered asteroids that inhabited the system like dust motes in a cathedral.

There was no way to know how many of their ships the inners had managed to identify and track. There was no certainty that their own sensor arrays had targeted all of the so-called combined navy's vessels. The scale of the vacuum alone built uncertainty.

The inners were easier, since so many of theirs had burned for Ceres. But who was to say there weren't a few scattered hunters, dark and ballistic in the void? Marco had a handful of Free Navy like that, or at least that was what Karal said. Ships that hadn't even been used in the first attacks, cruising in their own orbits like warm asteroids. Sleepers waiting for their moment. And maybe that was even true, though Filip hadn't heard it directly from his father yet. And he liked to think his father would tell him anything.

The days were long and empty, wound tightly around a single, overwhelming question. The counterstrike would come. The attack that would prove that stepping back from Ceres was a tactical choice and not a show of weakness. More than anything that had come before, it would be the event—Marco said this, and Filip believed it—that made clear what

made the Free Navy unbeatable. In the gym and the galley, the crew speculated. Tycho Station was the heart of the collaborationist wing of the OPA. Mars had suffered least in the initial attack, and deserved the same punishment as Earth. Luna had become the new center of UN power. Kelso Station and Rhea had rejected the Free Navy and shown their true colors.

Or there were the mining operations scattered throughout the Belt that answered to Earth-based corporations. They were easy pickings and couldn't be defended. Or taking a solid hold on Ganymede, claiming and protecting the food supply of the Belt. There was even some talk of sending recovery forces out through the ring. Take back from the colonies what should never have been there in the first place. Or install platforms above the new planets and extract tribute from them. Reverse the political order and put all the bastards at the bottom of all the wells in chains.

Filip only smiled and shrugged, letting it look like he knew more than he did. Marco hadn't told even him what the plan was. Not yet.

And then the message came.

I always respected you. That was how she began. Michio Pa, the head of the conscription effort. Filip remembered her, but he hadn't had an opinion about her before now. She was a competent leader, a little famous for stepping in when the *Behemoth's* captain had lost his mind in the slow zone. His father liked her because she hated Fred Johnson, had defected from him, and because she was a Belter and pretty to look at and the face that the Belt would see when the colony ships cracked their guts open and spilled out their treasures. Only now she stared into a camera on her ship, her hair pulled back, her dark eyes serious. She didn't look pretty.

"I have always respected you, sir. The work you have done for the independence of the Belt has been critical, and I'm proud to be part of it. I want to make it very clear before we go forward that my loyalty to our cause is unwavering and complete. On sober reflection and after a great deal of consideration, I find I have to disagree with the change in the plan for the conscription. While I understand the strategic importance of denying materiel to the enemy, I can't in good conscience withhold it from the citizens of the Belt who are in immediate need. Because of this, I have chosen to proceed with the conscription efforts as originally outlined.

"Technically, this is disobeying an order, but I have great faith that when you reflect on how the needs of our people brought us to form the Free

Navy, you'll agree it is the best way forward."

She signed off with a Free Navy salute. The one his father had created when he made everything else. Filip queued it up again, watching from the start to the end again, aware of Marco's gaze on him as much as the woman on the screen. The galley around them was empty. No, not just empty. *Emptied*. Whether they'd been ordered to or not, the crew of the *Pella* had evacuated the space and left it for Marco and Filip. If it hadn't been for a smell of curry lingering in the air, the stains of coffee on the table, it might have been their first time on the ship.

He didn't know how many times his father had viewed the message, how he had taken it the first time he'd seen it, or what the mild expression he wore now meant. Filip's uncertainty knotted at the bottom of his abdomen. Being shown the message was a test, and he didn't know quite what he was meant to do with it.

After the second time Michio Pa saluted, Marco stretched his shoulders back, a physical symbol that they were switching to the next part of whatever their conversation was.

"It's mutiny," Filip said.

"It is," Marco said, his voice and expression reasonable and calm. "Do you think she's right?"

No leapt to Filip's throat, but he stopped it there. It was too obvious an answer. He tried *Yes* in his mind, feeling the pressure of his father's attention like it was heat radiating from him. He discarded it too.

"It doesn't matter," he said slowly. "Whether she's right or wrong is beside the point. She broke with your authority."

Marco reached out and tapped the tip of Filip's nose the way he'd done when they were only father and son, not war leader and lieutenant. Marco's eyes softened, his focus shifting elsewhere. Filip felt a momentary and irrational stab of loneliness.

"She did," Marco said. "Even if she were right—she isn't, but if—how could I let this go? It would be an invitation to chaos. Chaos." He chuckled, shaking his head. Anger would have been less frightening.

Filip's uncertainty shifted in his gut. Were they destroyed, then? Was it all falling apart? The vision of the system his father had dreamed—void cities, the Belt blooming into a new kind of humanity free from the oppression of Earth and Mars, the Free Navy as the order of the worlds—

stuttered. He caught a glimpse of what the other future could look like. The death and the struggle and the war. The corpse Earth and the ghost town Mars and the shards of the Free Navy picking at each other until nothing was left. It was what Marco meant when he said *chaos*, Filip was sure of that. Nausea welled up in him. *Someone should have kept that from happening.* He shook his head.

“Some day,” Marco said, and then again, still without finishing the thought, “some day.”

“Do we do?” Filip asked.

Marco shrugged with his hands. “Stop trusting women,” he said, then flicked a foot against the wall, launching himself to the doorway. Filip watched as Marco grabbed a handhold and pulled himself away down the hall toward his cabin. All the questions he hadn’t answered floated invisibly behind him.

Left alone, Filip killed the sound to the screen and replayed her message again. He’d met this woman. He’d been in a room with her, and heard her voice, and he hadn’t seen her for the traitor she was. For the agent of chaos. She saluted, and he tried to see fear in her. Or malice. Anything more than a professional delivering a message she expected to be badly received. He played the message again. Her eyes were black and hate-filled, or steeled against dread. Her gestures were soaked in contempt, or controlled like a fighter preparing to lose a match.

With a little practice and will, he found he could see anything he chose in her.

A soft sound came from behind him. Sárta sloped into the room feetfirst, and caught herself in a foothold on the wall, locking her ankle in place and absorbing the inertia with her knees. Her smile had the same bleakness that Filip felt, and he suffered a moment’s anger that she should feel what he did. Karal’s voice came from the lift, talking in low, careful tones. Rosenfeld answered, too low to make out the words. They knew Marco was gone, then. The private audience concluded.

Sárta pointed to the screen with her chin. “Esá es some shit, que?” Fishing for information, looking to know what Marco hadn’t seen fit to tell her. Or anyone else.

“He saw it coming,” Filip said. He wasn’t even lying. Marco might not have said as much, but it was still true. Filip tapped his temple. “Knew to

expect it. Everything going to be just fine.”



Three more days on the float, and Filip knew it wasn't only the crew of the *Pella* who were feeling anxious. Every hour, it seemed, brought another round of contact requests. Encrypted tightbeam messages flooded into the *Pella*'s queue and waited there for Marco's response. Rosenfeld, as part of the inner circle, stepped in where he could. He went so far as to appropriate the command deck as a kind of private office. The war center in absentia until Marco "came back out of his tent"—whatever that meant.

For Filip, it was all an exercise in projecting confidence. His father had a plan. He'd gotten them all this far, and there was no reason to doubt he would get them the rest of the way. The others agreed with him, or at least seemed to when he was in the room. He wondered what they said when he was elsewhere. They'd all been through battle together. They'd shared their victories and the long, patient hours waiting for their traps to spring. This was different. The waiting was the same, but not being sure what they were waiting for made it feel like maybe they were waiting for nothing. Even for him.

Near the end of the third day, Rosenfeld asked Filip to join him in the command center. The older man looked tired, but his cyst-ridden skin made reading his expressions difficult. Rosenfeld had turned all the screens off. The command center felt smaller without their displays to give the illusion of depth and light. Rosenfeld floated beside one of the crash couches, his body canted a few degrees from the ship in a way that made him seem both taller and subtly threatening.

"So, young Master Inaros," Rosenfeld said, "it seems we have a problem."

"Don't see it," Filip said, but the amusement in the older man's eyes was enough to show how weak his words sounded. Rosenfeld pretended Filip hadn't spoken.

"The longer we go without responding to ... call them 'changes in the situation'? The longer we go, the more doubt starts to grow, yeah? Father Inaros is the face and voice of the Free Navy. Has been since the beginning.

His skill, yeah? His peculiar gift. But—” Rosenfeld spread his hands. *But he isn't here.*

“He has a plan,” Filip said.

“We have a problem. We can't wait for him much longer. Haven't told anyone. Hasn't found its way to the grapevine. But the problem's now, not tomorrow. Even the light lag may make us too late now.”

“What is it?” Filip asked.

“*Witch of Endor*. It's at Pallas. All the cache-safes we threw out into the void? Captain al-Dujaili has started gathering them back up. Says it's under orders from his commander, and he doesn't mean us. That's the fifth ship broken for Pa. Meantime, the Butcher's on Ceres, his ass keeping Dawes' chair warm. Calling for a meeting of the OPA clans, yeah? Black Sky. Carlos Walker. Administration on Rhea is looking to send a delegation. Free Navy made a statement when we broke Earth's chains. Statement was, *The revolution is already over*. That we'd won. Inevitable. Already happened, us. Only now, maybe not.”

Filip's gut was tight. Anger warmed his throat and shoved his jaw forward like a tumor at the base of his jaw. He didn't know who he was angry with, but the rage was deep and powerful. Maybe Rosenfeld saw it, because his voice changed, became softer.

“Your father, he's a great man. Great men, they're not like you or me. They have other needs. Other rhythms. It's what sets them apart. But sometimes they go so far into the void we lose sight of them. They lose sight of us. That's where little people like me come through, yeah? Keep the engines running. Keep the filters clean. Do the needful things until the great man comes back to us.”

“Yeah,” Filip said. The rage still shoving its way up his neck, filling his head.

“Worst thing we can do is wait,” Rosenfeld said. “Better that we point all our ships the wrong direction than that we leave them too long floating. Change it later, bring them back, they think the situation shifted. Put them on the burn, they know they're going somewhere.”

“Yeah,” Filip said. “See that.”

“Time comes to say it, if it's not him, it's going to be me. *For* him, yeah, but me. Not a bad thing if you stood with. Make everyone know it's me for him, not another Pa.”

“You want to give orders to the Navy?”

“I want orders given,” Rosenfeld said. “Don’t care who does it. Barely care what the orders are. Just there are some.”

“No one but him,” Filip said. There was a buzz in his voice. His hands ached, and he didn’t know why until he looked and saw them in fists. “My father made the Free Navy. He makes the calls.”

“Then he has to make them now. And he won’t listen to me.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Filip said. Rosenfeld lifted a hand in thanks and blinked his thick, pebbled eyes.

“He’s lucky to have you,” Rosenfeld said. Filip didn’t answer, just took one of the handholds, turned himself, and launched down the throat of the ship where the lift would have risen and fallen if there were any up and down to guide it. His mind was a clutter of different emotions. Anger at Michio Pa. Distrust of Rosenfeld. Guilt for something he couldn’t put a name to. Fear. Even a kind of desperate elation, like pleasure without being pleasure. The walls of the lift tube skinned past him as he drifted almost imperceptibly to the port. *If I reach the crew deck without touching the wall, everything will be all right.* An irrational thought.

And still, when he grabbed a handhold and swung into the corridor that led to Marco’s quarters without having to correct his path, he felt a little relief. And when he reached his father’s door, it was even justified. The fear he’d carried with him of his father wrecked by betrayal—glass-eyed, unshaven, maybe even weeping—were nothing like the man who opened the cabin door. Yes, the sockets of his eyes were a little darker than usual. Yes, there was a scent in his room of sweat and metal. But his smile was bright and his focus clear.

Filip found himself wondering what had kept him locked up so long. If he felt a twinge of annoyance, it was overwhelmed by the warmth of seeing his father back again. Behind Marco, tucked in at the edge of one of the cabinets, a strip of fabric spoke of something light and feminine. Filip wondered which of the crew had been here to comfort his father and for how long.

Marco listened to Filip’s report with a gentle attention, nodding with his hands at each point of importance, letting Filip cover everything—Fred Johnson, the *Witch of Endor*, Rosenfeld’s half-spoken threat to take the reins—without interrupting him. Filip felt the anger slip away as he spoke,

his gut relaxing as the anxiety faded, until by the end he wiped away a tear that had nothing to do with sorrow and everything to do with relief. Marco put a hand on Filip's shoulder, a soft grip that held the two of them together.

"We pause when it's time to pause, and we strike when it's time to strike," Marco said.

"I know," Filip said. "It's only ..." He didn't know how to end the thought, but his father smiled anyway, as if he understood.

Marco gestured at the cabin's system, opening a connection request for Rosenfeld. The pebble-skinned man appeared on the screen almost at once. "Marco," he said. "Good to have you back among the living."

"To the underworld and returned with wisdom," Marco said, a sharpness in his voice. "Didn't frighten you with my absence, did I?"

"Not as long as you came back," Rosenfeld said through a rough laugh. "We have a full plate, old friend. Too much needs doing." Filip had the sense that a second conversation was happening between the men he couldn't quite parse, but he kept quiet and watched.

"Less soon," Marco said. "Send me the tracking data for all of the ships still answering to Pa's commands. You tell your guard ships at Pallas *Witch of Endor's* gone rogue. Jam it, kill it, and send the battle data to us. No mercy for traitors."

Rosenfeld nodded. "And Fred Johnson?"

"Butcher will bleed in his turn," Marco said. "Never fear. This war's just beginning."

Chapter Nineteen: Pa

Iapetus Station wasn't on the moon itself, but in locked orbit around it. The station's design was old: two long counter-rotating arms supporting habitation rings, a central docking station on the axis. Lights glittered on the surface of the moon, marking automated stations where the ice was quarried and split. On their approach, there was a point where the station and moon and the ringed bulk of Saturn behind it were all the same size on the screen. An illusion of perspective.

The docks were almost filled with ancient water haulers that the tariffs had kept from harvesting the moon. No one was enforcing the fees anymore, and all the ships that could were taking advantage of the opportunity. Tugs flying teakettle rose up from the surface or dropped down toward it. Shipping containers filled with ice studded the hulls of the haulers like a crust of salt. The administration of Iapetus hadn't sided with Marco and the Free Navy or against them, but they weren't losing the chance to shrug off the strictures of Earth and Mars either. Michio watched the traffic control data and tried to see it more as liberty and freedom, less as grabbing what there was to take and getting away while the getting was good.

The comm channel opened. A request from Iapetus control. She could have let Oksana answer it, but impatience won out. "This is the *Connaught*," she said.

"Bien, *Connaught*. Iapetus bei hier. We're slotting the *Hornblower* into berth sixteen. Good to go in half an hour, yeah?"

"That'll do."

"Hear tú's have prisoners, yeah?"

"Do. Refugees too. *Hornblower*'s original crew."

"Pissed off, them?"

"Not happy," Michio said. "Think they'll be grateful to be in rooms that

aren't welded shut, though. Your supply officer said you'd be able to take them."

"Can take contract here, can book passage to Earth or Mars. Or refugees, can etwas. Prisoners are their own thing."

"Won't have them hurt," Michio said. "Don't want them let free either."

"Guests of the station," Iapetus control said. "All marked. Good and good. And ... not official, yeah? 'Gato for the load. Hydroponics were getting mighty strained with the shipments from Earth dead."

"Glad we could help," Michio said before she dropped the connection.

It was true too. There was something in her chest—a soft, golden feeling—that came from knowing that the people who would have suffered without her would at least suffer less. She'd spent more time on Rhea than on Iapetus, but she'd had enough experience to know what shortages of hydroponic equipment meant to a station like this. At the least, her shipments would mean the difference between uncertainty and stability. At most, between death and life.

It wouldn't have been this way if the Belt had been allowed to grow and become independent. But Earth and Mars had kept the labor here on a leash made of soil analogues and complex organics. Now, thanks to Marco, the Belt would have a chance to bootstrap itself up into a sustainable future. Unless, thanks to Marco, it starved and collapsed in the attempt.

She hadn't heard back from him one way or the other since she'd called her ships to refuse his orders. Statements of allegiance had come from eight of her sixteen ships. Acknowledgment from four more. Only the *Ando* and the *Dagny Taggart* had rejected her outright, and even they hadn't taken action yet. Everyone was waiting for Marco to make an announcement. Even her. And every hour he didn't made it seem more possible that he wouldn't.

Other voices, though. Oh, there were others. A collective of independent prospecting vessels out of Titania needed replacement parts for their drives. A cargo ship that was also home to a family crew of twenty people suffered a catastrophic failure of their Epstein drive's power systems and were on the drift. Vesta was putting its population on protein rationing until the food relief Michio had promised them actually arrived. Kelso Station, in an irrational fit of altruism, had sent relief supplies to Earth and was now facing shortages of water and helium-3 for the reactors.

Centuries of technology and progress had allowed humanity to create a place for itself in the vacuum and radiation of space, but nothing had overcome entropy or ideology or bad judgment. The millions of skin-bound complications of salt water and minerals that were human bodies scattered throughout the Belt still needed food and air and clean water, energy and shelter. Ways to keep from drowning in their own shit or cooking in their waste heat. And through accidents of Marco's charisma and her own idealism, she'd become responsible for it all.

But here was her start. The supplies of the *Hornblower*, instead of flying through gates and away forever, would feed Iapetus and give the station there the reserves to help others. The *Connaught* and her sister ships didn't need to solve every distribution issue. Only get the supplies, make them available, and let market forces and the communal nature of the Belt take over from there.

She hoped it was enough.

Oksana, at her station, laughed. It wasn't mirth, so much as a kind of amazed disbelief.

"Que?" Evans asked.

Oksana shook her head. Michio had known her long enough to read the gesture and the ghost of shame that came with it. *Not while I'm on duty*. Keeping that division between being family during family time and crew during crew time had always been important to Oksana. Usually, it was important to Michio too, but between waiting for a berth and dreading news of Marco, any distraction was a gift.

"What is it, Oksana?" Michio said.

"Just something odd on the newsfeeds out of Ceres, sir," she said.

"Well, I don't think it's going to disrupt us. Put it on screen."

"Sir," Oksana said, and Michio's controls vanished, replaced by a professional-looking news video, crawl at the bottom and filtering options along the side. And looking out of her screen, the earnest, open face of James Holden. For a moment, Michio was on the *Behemoth* again, and then she was back. Like a long-forgotten smell or the taste of a food eaten only in childhood, James Holden carried an echo of the guilt and fear, a reminder of violence.

Images flickered as Holden spoke: a terribly old Belter man with merry eyes, two women—one young and one older—clapping hands together in

some game like batbat or pattycake or shin-sin, a professionally dressed woman with dark skin and a sober expression standing at a hydroponics tank so long it curved up in the distance with the body of the station. *My name is James Holden, and I want to introduce you to some of the people I've met here on Ceres. I want you to hear their stories. Come to know them the way you do your shipmates and neighbors. I hope you'll carry a little bit of these people with you the way I do now.*

"Fuck is *this*?" Evans asked, laughter in his voice. "Watch the trained Belter dancing for your fun?"

"No, it's Holden," Oksana said. "He's OPA."

"En serio?"

"Johnson's OPA," Michio said. "He works for Earth too. And Mars."

On the screen, Holden was handing a bulb of beer to the ancient-looking man. The Belter's cheeks were already a little flushed, but his voice wasn't slurred at all. *Were five men for every woman on the station, back then. Five to one.*

"You shipped with him, sí?" Oksana asked. "Back in the slow zone?"

"Little bit," Michio said. "He's also waking up next to Filip Inaros' mother. The one Marco didn't manage to kill? That's him."

"And he's announcing to Big Himself y alles where he's bunking?" Oksana said. "So. Brave o crazy, him?"

"Not sure I get to criticize," Michio said, just before the fear hit her system. For a fraction of a second, she didn't know why, and then she realized what she was seeing. In the text crawl at the bottom of the screen, and just marching off the side. *Witch of Endor*. She grabbed the crawl, pulled it back. *Ship destroyed by Free Navy identified as Witch of Endor*.

She selected the feed. Her screen flickered. Holden and the old Belter laughed about Ceres Station before it had been spun up, but she didn't hear them. On her screen, the hyperreal image of an intelligence telescope showed a ship under high burn, streams of PDC fire seeming to bend as the ship accelerated away from the rounds. From the shape of the curve, she guessed it had been pulling almost ten gs. The picture didn't show what she was fleeing from, and the torpedo that managed to penetrate the defenses was moving too fast to see. The ship shifted, spinning for a tenth of a second, and then blossomed into light. *It is unclear*, the announcer said, *why the Free Navy forces appear to have attacked one of their own ships*,

but reports confirm drive plumes from several other known enemy locations on vectors inconsistent with an attack of consolidated fleet positions—

“Sir?” Oksana said, and Michio realized she must have said something aloud.

She considered Oksana’s eyes, respectful and hard. Evans’ soft and alarmed. Her crew and her family.

“We have Marco’s answer,” she said.



“Shift in language is shift in consciousness, yeah,” Josep said. He was dressed in his jumpsuit, as was she. But he was strapped into the crash couch. A complex schematic showed the state of the system as best she knew it. The ships loyal to the inners clustered around Earth and Mars and Ceres in red. The Free Navy loyal to Marco in blue. Her own handful of pirates and idealists in green. The independent stations and ships—Ganymede, Iapetus—were white. And a dusting of gold over it all showing where Marco had buried his treasure chests in the void.

“Mind is made from analogies,” Josep said, not needing her to contribute to the conversation. “Change in ages, change in the frame. Was *in* against *out* before. Turning into *connected* against *unconnected* now. *Free* Navy. *Consolidated* fleet. The ones who shrug off the chains against the ones who tie themselves together.”

A direct one-to-one battle against Marco wasn’t plausible. He had too many ships, and Michio’s appeals to Rosenfeld and Dawes and Sanjrani hadn’t won her any replies. Though they also hadn’t been rejected. Marco was the only one calling her traitor to the cause thus far. The others, she assumed, were only following his lead.

Didn’t help her in the short term.

She traced routes and burns for her green ships, arcs that would keep them out of range of the Free Navy’s wrath and still allow them to send supplies where the need was worst. It was like solving a complex math puzzle without any promise that an optimal solution existed. The search for the least-bad answer.

“Us, freest of the free. Disconnected from the disconnected,” Josep went

on. “And because of that, coming into connection. Alienated because of our commitment to community, yeah? The yang inside the yin, the growing light from inside the dark. Had to be this way. Rule of the universe. Thermodynamics of meaning, us. Shikata ga nai. So free we have only one option. Because that’s how the mind of God is shaped. Minimums and maximums sheeting together like a curve. Like a skin made from interpretation.”

Michio moved the tactical display into her personal data and reached out, turning herself with one handhold until she faced the crash couch. Josep gazed at her with an expression of childlike joy. His pupils were so dilated, his eyes looked black.

“Got to go do something,” she said. “You going to be all right without a babysitter?”

Josep chuckled. “Been a citizen of the mind since before you were born, child-bride. I can swim in vacuum and never die.”

“All right,” she said, and set the straps on the couch to restraint with her password as the release. “I’m going to set the system to watch your vitals. May have Laura come sit with you.”

“Tell her to bring her go set. Play better when I’m stoned.”

“I’ll tell her,” Michio said. Josep took her hand in his, squeezing her fingers gently. He meant something by it—something deep and subtle and probably not comprehensible by a sober mind. All she saw was the love in it. She dimmed the lights, had the system play soft music—harp and a woman’s voice so perfect she assumed it was artificial—and left him alone. On her way up to the command deck, she sent a message to Laura and got a response. Josep probably didn’t need a minder, but better to be safe. She laughed at herself as she steadied her ankle against a foothold. Safe in the little things, reckless in the big ones.

Bertold was in Pa’s usual crash couch, music leaking from the earphones on his head and the ship’s status monitors showing green and happy on his screen. Everything was fine as long as he didn’t look out too far.

He lifted his chin to her as she pulled herself into Oksana’s customary station instead. It still felt strange, being in a ship designed by Mars. It was all built with a sensibility she couldn’t quite put her finger on: military and rigorous and straight. She couldn’t help thinking it was because the designers had grown up with a constant gravity pulling them down, but

maybe that wasn't true. Maybe it was just Martian because Mars was like that. Not inners against outers, but the rigid and brittle against the flowing and free.

"Matter? Geht gut?" Bertold asked as she retrieved the tactical schematic.

"Fine. But Josep decided to get stoned, and I'm just not doing work that goes well with intoxicated mysticism."

She felt a stab of regret as soon as she'd said it, though she knew Bertold wouldn't take her snapishness as more than it was. Still, if the family fell apart in the middle of everything else failing, she wouldn't be able to do this. She needed her rock.

Good, then, that she had it.

"You mind if I ...?" Bertold asked, and she mirrored her display to his. All the ships, all their vectors. The final refutation of the one-ship. Here was humanity in all its fissures and disconnections. She went back to her analysis. Here was how to get a quarter of the lost resources back and only lose two of her ships. Here was how to deliver a tenth, but not to the people most in need. Here was how to keep her ships safe and achieve nothing else.

"Looks like an amoeba giving birth to twins," Bertold said. "Sehr feo."

"Ugly indeed," Michio said, running another scenario. "Stupid, wasteful, and cruel."

Bertold sighed. When they'd first been married, Michio had been deeply infatuated with him and Nadia both. Their shared passions had mellowed since then into an intimacy that she appreciated more than sex. It was the trust that let her say what she was seeing, what she was thinking. Let her hear the hard truth spoken in her own voice. "If we're going to do this, I'm going to have to do some things I don't like."

"Knew that going in, didn't we?"

"Didn't see the details."

"Bad?"

In answer, she flipped a variable in the tactical readout. New options opened that hadn't been there before: Recover sixty percent and lose nothing. Supply the five stations at greatest risk of collapse and keep Marco away from Iapetus. Open and possibly control a path to Ganymede for a few weeks at least. Bertold scowled, working out what she'd done and how

she'd done it. When he saw, he grunted.

"That's a dream," he said.

"It's not," Michio said. "It's an agreement, and two enemies willing to respect it as long as their interests align."

"It's putting your back to the Butcher of Anderson Station."

"Well, yes. It is that. But I know what he is. I won't make the mistake of trusting him. He'll use us if he can. I'd be stupid not to repay that in kind. If Marco wasn't putting us as his top priority, it would be different, but he's burning hard for our ships."

"Injured his pride, sa sa?"

"All we need is that the consolidated fleet agree not to fire on us and we don't fire on them, and it opens up zones where Marco won't follow. Safe havens."

"'Safe' meaning huddled underneath Fred Johnson's guns. Waiting for him to turn them on us."

"I know," Michio said. "And with Johnson, that time will come. When it does, we won't be there."

"This is a bad plan, Captain," Bertold said. His voice was gentle, though. He already understood.

"It is. It's the best bad plan I've got."

He sighed. "Yeah."

"Well," she said. "We could have done things Marco's way."

"Don't think we could have," Bertold said.

"Don't either."

"What about the stations and ships we're giving to? Some of them going to have guns. Have guards."

"Withhold aid unless they agree to fight and die for us?" Michio said. "Let them starve if they won't? No, don't. I'm not saying no to that. I'm asking. Which is worse? Extort people into being soldiers for us, or negotiate with Fred fucking Johnson?"

Bertold pressed a palm to his forehead. "No third side to that coin?"

"Die noble?" Michio said.

Bertold laughed, and then he didn't. "Depends on what the Butcher wants."

"It does," Michio said. "So we should ask him."

"Yeah, fuck," Bertold said. She saw her own dread and anger and

humiliation reflected in his eyes. He knew what even considering this was costing her. And the ruthlessness she treated herself with that made it necessary. “I love you. You know that. Always.”

“You too,” she said.

“Doesn’t take much before we have to compromise ourselves, does it?”

“Get born,” Michio said, pulling the comm controls and setting the tightbeam for Ceres.

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Chapter Twenty: Naomi

The danger is overreach,” Bobbie said, hunching over the table and making it seem small. “They sucker-punched us. We got a couple easy wins coming back. It’s tempting to drive it as far as we can, and try to break them. Seems like we’ve got them on the back foot. But the truth is, we’re still sizing his forces up. He’s still seeing what we do.”

“And what are we doing?” Naomi asked, handing across a bowl of scrambled egg and tofu with hot sauce.

Bobbie scooped up a bite and chewed thoughtfully. Naomi sat across from her and tried a bite from her own bowl. Ever since Maura Patel had upgraded the food systems, the *Roci*’s hot sauce tasted a little different, but Naomi was coming to like it. There was a pleasure in the novelty. And also a sense of nostalgia for what had changed. That wasn’t only food. That was everything.

“I don’t think anyone knows,” Bobbie said. “My tactics teacher back in bootcamp? Sergeant Kapoor. He was an entomologist—”

“Your sergeant in bootcamp was an entomologist?”

“It’s Mars,” Bobbie said, shrugging. “That isn’t weird there. Anyway, he talked about shifting strategies like they were the middle part of metamorphosis. Apparently when a caterpillar makes a cocoon, the next thing it does is melt. Completely liquefies. And then all the little bits of what used to be caterpillar come back together as a moth or a butterfly or something. Finds a different way to assemble all the same pieces and make it something else.”

“Sounds like the protomolecule.”

“Huh. Yeah. Guess it kind of does.” Bobbie took another bite of her eggs, her gaze on the far wall. She was quiet for long enough that Naomi didn’t know if she’d come back.

“But he meant something tactical?” Naomi said.

“Yes. That pivoting your strategy was like that too. You go into a situation thinking about it a particular way, and then something changes. Then either you stick with the ideas you had before or you look at everything you have to work with and find a new shape. We’re in the find-a-new-shape part. Avasarala’s busy trying to keep what’s left of Earth out of environmental collapse, but once that’s stabilized, she’s going to try to capture Inaros and everyone else who ever breathed his air and put them all on trial. She wants it to be crime.”

Sandra Ip came in from the lift, nodded at the two of them, and pulled a bulb of tea from the dispenser.

“Why, do you think?” Naomi asked. “I mean, why treat it like a criminal act and not war?”

“I think it’s a statement of contempt. But in the meantime, Mars is ... I don’t know. I think it’s finding out that for all our strength, we were brittle. I’m not sure how we come back from that, but we’ll never be what we were. Not any more than Earth will. And Fred? He’s trying to build consensus and coalitions, because that’s what he’s been doing for decades.”

“But you don’t think he can.” It wasn’t a question. Ip left the galley, her footsteps retreating as Bobbie thought.

“I think putting people together’s a good thing. Generally useful. But ... I probably shouldn’t be talking about this. I’m supposed to be his representative for Mars. Junior league ambassador or something.”

“But he’s trying to rebuild his caterpillar when we need a butterfly,” Naomi said.

Bobbie sighed, took a last bite of egg, and tossed the bowl into the recycler. “I could be wrong,” she said. “Maybe it’ll work.”

“We can hope.”

Bobbie’s hand terminal chirped. She considered the incoming message with a frown. The way she moved, even little motions like this, had the strength and economy of training. And more than that. A frustration.

“Oh joy,” Bobbie said dryly. “Another important meeting.”

“Price of being central.”

“I guess,” Bobbie said, hauling herself to her feet. “I’ll be back when I can. Thanks again for letting me bunk here.”

As Bobbie stepped past, Naomi put a hand on her arm. Stopped her. She didn’t know exactly what she was going to say until she said it. Only that it

was tied up with the ideas of crew and family and trying not to betray who you were. “Do you *want* to do this junior ambassador thing?”

“I don’t know. It needs doing, I guess,” Bobbie said. “I’ve been trying to reinvent myself since Io. Maybe since Ganymede. I really liked working veterans’ outreach, but now that I’m not doing it, I don’t miss it. I figure this’ll be the same. It’s something to do. Why?”

“You don’t need to thank anyone that you’re bunking here. If you like that cabin, it’s yours.”

Bobbie blinked. Her smile was small and rueful. She took a half step away, but didn’t turn her body. The physical expression of hesitation. Naomi let the silence between them stretch. “I appreciate the thought,” Bobbie said. “But adding someone into a crew? That’s a big deal. I don’t know what Holden would think about it.”

“We’ve talked about it. He already thinks you’re crew.”

“But I’m doing this ambassador thing.”

“Yeah. He thinks our gunner is Fred’s ambassador from Mars.” Naomi knew she was stretching the truth a little there, but it was worth it. Bobbie was still for the space of a heartbeat. And then another one.

“I didn’t know that,” she said, and then with no other words, stepped back toward the lift, the airlock, Ceres Station. Naomi watched her go.

Fires on shipboard were dangerous. There were any number of ship processes that could rise up past the point of spontaneous oxidation. The trick was knowing when letting a breeze through would start combustion and when it wouldn’t. Sometimes talking to Bobbie was like putting her hand on a ceramic panel to see how hot it was. Trying to guess whether a little air would cool the big woman down or start up flames.

Alone in the galley, Naomi went through a little casual maintenance: wiping down the tables and benches, checking the status of the air filters, clearing the recycler feed. Having so many people on the ship left them running through supplies faster than she’d become accustomed to. Gor Droga’s fondness for chai drove down their supply of tea analogue. Sun-yi Steinberg preferred a citrus drink that ate into the acids and texturing proteins. Clarissa Mao ate kibble and water. Prison food.

Looking over the supply levels, Naomi had to remind herself that the *Roci* was carrying three times the crew it was used to. Still well within the ship’s specs and abilities. The *Tachi* had been designed for two full flight

crews and cabins full of Martian marines. Renaming it hadn't changed that. It had only changed her expectations. But they were still going to have to resupply again soon.

The aromatics and spices that kept everyone from eating like Clarissa were going to be hard to get. Supplies were thin on Ceres. Supplies were going to be thin all through the Belt, and now the inner planets too. Any of the complex organics that Earth used to supply could be synthesized in labs or grown in hydroponics on Ganymede and Ceres and Pallas. The touristy resorts on Titan. The problem, she thought as she replaced the injection nozzle on the coffee machine, was capacity. They could make anything, but they couldn't make it all at once. Humanity was going to get by on the minimum until there was a way to increase production, and a lot of people living on the margin wouldn't make it. They'd die on Earth, yes, but keeping the Belt fed wasn't going to be trivial either.

As she dropped the old injection nozzle into the recycler, she wondered if Marco had thought about that or if his dreams of glory had swept away any realistic plan for taking care of all the lives he'd disrupted. She had a guess about that. Marco was a creature of the grand gesture. His stories were about the single critical moment that changed everything, not all the moments that came after. Somewhere in the system right now, Karal or Wings or—thinking the name was like touching a sore—or Filip might be doing the same kind of maintenance she was doing on the *Pella*. She wondered how long it would take them to realize that the spoils of war wouldn't restock their ships forever.

Probably it wouldn't come clear until they'd used up everything. Kings were always the last to feel the famine. That wasn't just the Belt. That was all of history. The people who'd just been going about their lives were the ones who could speak to the actual cost of war. They paid it first. Men like Marco could orchestrate vast battles, order the looting and destruction of worlds, and never run out of coffee.

When the galley was done, she took herself back to the lift, and up to the command deck. There was new analysis of the ships that had gone missing in the ring gates. No new data, just a rechewing of the old. Her fascination came from a sense of dread. She'd been through those rings, traveled the weird not-space that linked solar systems, and of all the dangers she'd faced, just quietly vanishing away hadn't even been on her scopes. For a

few hundred people—maybe more than that—something else had happened. The best minds of Earth and Mars that weren't occupied with trying to deal with their environment and governing bodies collapsing around them were looking at this. Naomi didn't have their resources or the depth of background expertise they did, but she had her own experience. Maybe she'd see something they hadn't.

And so she looked. Like an amateur detective, she followed clues and hunches, and like most investigations like that, she found nothing. The new conversation on the feeds was a theory surrounding the *Casa Azul*'s drive signature showing that the reactor was probably misconfigured, but apart from it being a rookie mistake that transferred a lot of energy into waste heat, Naomi didn't see anything in it. Certainly no reason that it or the other missing ships should have gone dark.

The analysis had just shifted into speculation over the plausibility of failed internal sensors in the *Casa Azul* increasing the pressure from the reactor bottle—which was what she assumed from the start—when her hand terminal chimed. Bobbie. She accepted the connection, and Bobbie's face appeared on her screen. Naomi felt a twinge of alarm.

"What's the matter?" she said.

Bobbie shook her head. It was probably meant to defuse the tension, but it reminded Naomi of a video of a bull getting ready to charge. "Do you know where Holden is? He's not answering his comm."

"Might be sleeping. He was up late going over footage for his broadcast thing with Monica."

"Could you go wake him up for me?" Bobbie asked. The wall behind her was sculpted stone with recessed lighting. Naomi thought it was the governor's palace. Fred Johnson's distant voice, low and graveled by annoyance, confirmed that.

Naomi rose, taking the terminal with her. "On my way," she said. "What's going on?"



"I don't understand why you're part of this," Fred Johnson said.

Across the desk from him, Jim still looked sleepy. Puffy-eyed and his

hair still a little mashed from the crash couch. Bobbie, her arms crossed, sat off to one side. Before Jim could come up with an answer, she stepped in.

“He knew this Captain Pa,” Bobbie said. “Worked with her on Medina before it was Medina.”

“When she was in my chain of command,” he said. “She isn’t an unknown quantity. She was one of mine. I assigned her to that ship. I don’t need anyone telling me about who she is or what they think of her.”

Bobbie’s face darkened. “Fair enough. I got Holden here because maybe you’d listen to him.”

Jim raised a finger. “I don’t actually know what’s going on here,” he said. “So. You know. What’s going on here?”

“Michio Pa is one of Inaros’ inner circle,” Bobbie said. “Only it seems like she figured out that he’s a great big asshole, because she broke ranks. Started sending relief supplies places without the Free Navy’s say so. And now Inaros is shooting at her and she wants us to help her out.”

“Relief supplies?” Fred said, his voice hard as stone. “That’s what you’re calling them?”

“That’s what she’s calling them,” Bobbie bit back.

Jim glanced at Naomi. His expression said, *This is not going well.*

Naomi smiled back. *I know, right?*

“Michio Pa is stealing colony ships for the Free Navy,” Fred said. “Even if she isn’t complicit in the destruction of Earth, she has the blood of every colonist lost to her piracy on her hands. Those aren’t relief supplies. They’re the spoils of *war*. A war against us.”

“Marco’s shooting at her?” Jim said, trying to catch the conversation’s reins. But Fred was locked on Bobbie and he wouldn’t disengage.

“This is my best-case scenario, Draper. Inaros’ coalition is falling apart. They’re shooting at each other, not at us. If Pa degrades Inaros’ fleet, that means they’re that much easier for us to face. Every ship of Pa’s that Inaros turns to slag is one less that’s hunting down innocent people and stealing their property. There is no advantage to me or to Earth or to Mars that comes of getting involved in it, and I personally resent you calling in your friends here to try to bully me into thinking anything different.”

“You aren’t the only one here with military training,” Bobbie said. “You aren’t the only one who’s had to weigh taking on problematic allies. You aren’t the only one with command experience. But you are the one in this

room who's *fucking wrong*."

Fred rose to his feet, and Naomi pushed back into the cushions of her chair. Bobbie stepped toward the man, her hands in fists, her chin jutting. Fred narrowed his eyes.

"I am not interested—" he began.

"If you want me to come here and wear a Martian uniform and puppet back whatever you say, you got the wrong girl," Bobbie half said, half shouted. "You think your magic OPA coalition pajama party is going to step in here and fix this? It's failing. They aren't coming to you anymore. You got Ceres and you got a fleet and you got me as your goddamn window dressing, and it's not enough. Stop acting like it is!"

The words hit Fred like a blow. He rocked back a little on his heels, his lips pressed together. *Was it like this when Marco's coalition fell apart?* Naomi wondered.

When Fred spoke, his voice was quieter, but cold. "I see why Avasarala likes you so much."

"Is that true?" Holden said. This time they heard him. "The OPA isn't coming?"

"It's taking a little longer to arrange than I'd hoped. I may need to change venue for it. Find a place that's neutral territory."

"Neutral territory," Jim said, skepticism in his voice.

"Some of these people are lifelong enemies of the inner planets," Fred said. "The combined fleet makes them nervous. They need to be reassured that our whole focus is on the Free Navy and not them. That's all."

Fred and Bobbie stood awkwardly, the momentum of their anger spent but both resisting being the first one to step back from it. Naomi coughed, though she didn't need to, then rose and went to the sideboard to pour herself a glass of water. It was enough. Bobbie took her seat, and then a moment later, Fred did as well. Jim hunched in his chair. She poured a glass for him too and brought it to him when she sat back down.

"This Captain Pa?" Bobbie said, speaking now to Jim directly. "She's an in. If we can get her to where she's willing to provide intelligence for protection, she might be able to give us something we need to crack Inaros."

Fred shook his head. The anger was gone from his voice, but not the resolve. "Pa is a loose cannon. She has a history of mutiny and defection."

“The last time she mutinied, she saved my life,” Holden said. “And just maybe every human in existence. A little context here.”

“She isn’t coming to us as an ally. She isn’t offering to stop her piracy or even slow it down. Cooperating with her means every ship she hijacks from now on will be our fault too!” Fred punctuated the end of his tirade by slapping his thick hand on the table.

“She’s offering to give supplies to Ceres,” Bobbie said.

“That she stole—maybe killed—to get.”

Fred spread his hands, but Jim wasn’t looking at him. Naomi sipped her water. It was cold with the bite of minerals, and it did nothing to loosen the lump in her throat. She had to resist the urge to pluck her hair down over her eyes. Bobbie had brought him here as someone to fight beside her. Someone Fred Johnson knew and respected. But the Martian didn’t know Jim the way she did. Even loyalty—even love—wouldn’t let him compromise his sense of right and wrong. She wondered if Bobbie would stay on the *Rocinante* after this. She hoped so.

Anyone who didn’t know him better would have said he looked thoughtful. Naomi could see the grief in the corners of his mouth and the angle of his eyebrows. The sense of loss. She put down her glass. Took his hand. He glanced up at her like he was remembering she was there. She was looking into his eyes, and imagined that she saw a light within them go out. Or no, not out. Not extinguished. Only wrapped in something. Armor. Or regret.

“Okay,” he said. “How do we get in touch with Pa?”

Naomi blinked. Fred mirrored her surprise and confusion.

“You’re going to try to force my hand?” Fred said. “We aren’t going to do it.”

“You can pull your people off the *Roci* if you need to,” Jim said, nodding as if he were agreeing with something. Fred scowled in a way that said he thought talking to Pa himself might only be the second-worst plan on the table. “If we have to do this alone, we’ll be less effective. But we’ll do what we can.”

“We will?” Naomi asked.

He squeezed her fingers. “We’re going to need someone like her,” he said so gently it was like someone whispering a love song.

She wasn’t sure what he meant, and it didn’t make her feel better.

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Chapter Twenty-One: Jakulski

Favór,” Shului said. “Won’t ask you nada alles. Only do this for me, sa sa?”

Jakulski shook his open hands, waving the younger man off. With Kelsey visiting the head, they were alone in Medina’s technical command center. Because it was outside the drum, it was one of the only places on Medina that was always on the float. The couches were bolted to what would be the floor if the station ever went under thrust again. Angels wearing blue and gold pushed archways toward a God who, with them on the float, seemed like He was looking at them sideways. The only part that made any sense to Jakulski was the stars.

Shului was a picture of despair: mouth twisted in distress, hands out before him, eyes imploring Jakulski. The thick, crusty sty on the upper lid of his left eye looked like something out of the Book of Job.

“Can’t,” Jakulski said. “Promised my team I’d buy tonight.”

“Will instead. Clear sus tab, y alles la,” Shului said. “*Favór.*”

It had been a long shift already, and the truth was, Jakulski was looking forward to sitting down someplace with just a little gravity and a decent scotch. And the white kibble at the café that Salis and Vandercaust usually went to reminded him of his childhood. The prospect of staying another half shift—and worse, another half shift wearing the pinché Free Navy formal uniform—so he could be part of the greeting ceremony in Shului’s place had no charm to it.

But the distress in the young man’s expression was hard to look at. If he was smart, he’d just keep saying no, and hold to it until Kelsey got back. It’d be easier if there were someone else there. Keep Shului from debasing himself. Can’t. Sorry. Be done.

“For for?” Jakulski said. “Just a greeting ceremony, yeah?”

Shului looked embarrassed and pointed to his infected eye. “Rindai

gonna be there. She sees this? Favór, brother.”

“Che! You still tasting her air? She’s not gonna bite you. Talk to her.”

“Will, will,” Shului said. “Only *after* esá bastard heals up, yeah?”

“Bist bien,” Jakulski said, shaking his head. Then, with a sigh, “Favór.”

He thought for a moment Shului was going to embrace him, but thankfully the young man only took him by the shoulders and nodded in a curt way he probably thought was manly. Being young was undignified. Being young and in love was worse. He’d been a pup himself once, filled with all the same lusts and fears that every generation suffered. That he’d grown out of them now didn’t mean he couldn’t remember what it had been like. And fuck, but that pus-caked eye was hard to look at.

He sent a message to the technical team—Vandercaust, Salis, Roberts—that he’d been called on for extra duty and that he’d meet them after it was done if he could. Vandercaust sent back a generic acknowledgment. That was probably all he’d get from them. But maybe he could sneak away from the ceremony quick enough to catch the team. Cover for Shului and not have the tech team feel like he was putting himself above them. Eat his cake and still have it after. It would be a tired night if he could get it all done, but some nights were tired.

People. No matter where he went, no matter what he did, it was all still people.

Kelsey came back from the head and took her place at the main crash couch with the angels looking beneficently down over her shoulder. When Jakulski said he needed to get off shift a few minutes early so he could get back to his cabin and change, Shului jumped in to say how it was all okay and he’d take care of anything that needed doing.

The transition from the command center at the top of the ship into the drum was a long, curving ramp, and Jakulski rode down it in a cart with wheels that gripped the decking at any g, all the way down to the inner surface of the drum, and then down from there, going under the false ground like a caveman driving down into the underworld. His own cabin was back toward engineering. If he’d known he was going to have to go meet the *Proteus* and the grandees from Laconia, he could have brought his good uniform at the start of shift and taken the lift that ran the length of the ship outside the drum, but leaving early was almost as good.

The body of the drum had been built spacious, more like a station than a

ship even from the start. Like it knew what it was destined to become. Long corridors with high ceilings and full-spectrum light like what used to fall on Earth before Marco threw a bunch of their mountains into their sky. He caught one of the diagonal halls, curving off toward his cabin on the hypotenuse of the drum's traffic grid, and let himself feel a little philosophical about the way the lights of Medina were like the memory of the species—an idea of brightness that had outlived the light that inspired it. The way Belters had. Belt-light. It was a pretty idea, and a little melancholy too, which made it even better in his mind. All beautiful things should have just a little sorrow about them. Made them seem real.

His cabin had been built for a single young Mormon living alone before marriage, but it was plenty enough for him. He stripped off his jumpsuit, tossed it in the recycler, combed his hair, and took his Free Navy uniform out of storage. He threw his image up on the wall screen to see how he looked. Fucking uncomfortable piece of cloth, the damned thing was. But for all that, he had to admit he did come over suave in it. Distinguished man, elder of his people, him.

To his surprise, he discovered that he was almost looking forward to this.

Medina had been on edge ever since word came through that Pa and her ships were rogue. But only a little. Everyone here had been OPA before they were Free Navy. And along with OPA, they'd been Voltaire Collective. Or Black Sky. Or Golden Bough. Or Union. Factions within factions within factions, sometimes with very different groups laying claim to a single name, was as Belt as red kibble and mushroom whiskey.

There was even a way that the split in the Free Navy was comforting. Not because it meant things were going well, but they were going to shit in a familiar way. Pa made a play for status; Marco was going to knock her back. Humanity still worked the way it always had. All the shooting was happening inside the orbit of Jupiter anyway. No one wanted it to spill out to the slow zone. If Duarte got nervous about it all, it was because he wasn't from here. Whatever he and his were doing on the far side of the Laconia ring, they'd been Martians when they went out and they were Martians still.

So Duarte wanted to send more resources to Medina? Good. He wanted to put advisors on the station, make sure the locals were all trained with the equipment he was shipping in? Good. More for Medina and everyone

happy. And plus all that, the *Proteus* was bringing it in. And everyone wanted to look at the *Proteus*. First ship to come in the gate that hadn't gone out through it first. A peek at whatever Duarte and his people were building out there. Given the choice, Jakulski would still have been in the café with his tech team, drinking a little too much and flirting. But since that wasn't happening, getting to see a little of the advisory force was okay for second place.

The *Proteus* had come through the gate earlier in the day, fast enough to coast to Medina without its Epstein and slow enough that its maneuvering thrusters could bring it into docking position down by the engineering decks. Jakulski'd heard rumors that the Martians were keeping the Epstein at a minimum so that no one could get a good look at their drive signature, but he didn't see how that made sense. Paranoia, rumor, and superstition was all. The *Proteus* might be one of the first ships built at a shipyard on the far side of the rings, but it was just a ship. Wasn't like they were flying there on the back of a dragon.

Captain Samuels—in charge of Medina because she was Rosenfeld Guoliang's cousin, but a good administrator anyway—was at the lock in full Free Navy military dress. Jon Amash representing for security. And there, with her auburn hair in a braid and eyes the same soft brown as her skin, Shoshana Rindai for systems. Shului had a point, that one. If Jakulski had been thirty years younger, he could have seen developing intentions toward her too.

Samuels scowled at him, but not in a way that meant anything. “You're for technical?”

Jakulski lifted an affirming fist and took his place in the line of floating grandees, ready to show the Marteños that the Free Navy was just as much a tight-assed military as the next coyo over. Medina had been meant for a generation ship once, and it still showed in the ship bones. Not much call for greeting visitors out in the wide nothing between stars, so the engineering lock opened onto a bare, functional decking with LED-white worklights and a rack of yellow-and-orange construction mechs on one wall. The air smelled of spent welding fuel and low-foam silicon lube.

Rindai glanced at him, lifting her chin in greeting. “For for Shului not come?” she asked, but before he had to come up with an answer, the lock cycled, and the Martians came in. Jakulski's first thought, quick as a reflex,

was that they looked pretty unimpressive for great saviors.

The captain of the *Proteus* was a dark-skinned man with wide-set eyes and broad, expressive lips. His uniform was Martian, except for its insignia. Not taller than Jakulski, probably, and comfortable moving in zero g. The six behind him were in civilian jumpsuits, but the broadness of their shoulders and the cut of their hair said they were as military as the captain no matter what they were wearing. Samuels nodded, but didn't salute. The *Proteus* coyo caught his ankle in a floor hold and pulled himself to a stop as gracefully as a Belter.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?" he said.

"Glad to have you here, Captain Montemayor," Samuels said. "Esá es my department heads. Amash. Rindai. Jakulski. They're to help you with constructing and arming the security base."

Security base? Jakulski sucked in a long breath. Not something Shului had mentioned. He wondered if not wanting Rindai to see his infected eye had been bullshit and he'd just wanted someone else to pick up the project. Just as likely Shului hadn't even known ...

"Not at all, sir," the *Proteus* man—Montemayor, she'd called him—said. "We're here to help *you*. Admiral Duarte specifically told me to assure you that we have the utmost faith in your ability to address any instability that might come from Sol system. We just want to assist and support our allies in Medina as best we can."

"Appreciate that," Samuels said, and it could just have been Jakulski's imagination, but she did seem to relax a little. Like maybe she'd been expecting this to be less pleasant and was relieved that the Martian coyo had started by showing his belly. Jakulski looked over the other six, wondering which of them he'd be working with and what exactly they'd be working on.

"Come you, have a drink," Samuels said, clapping Montemayor on the arm just as if they were friends. "We'll get you an escort to your quarters."



"It's Callisto all over again," Roberts said.

"You weren't even born when Callisto had trouble," Salis replied. "Que

Callisto all over again?”

Jakulski leaned back, pressed to the ground by the spin of the drum. Somewhere five levels below their feet, a quarter of a klick aft, and maybe ten degrees spinward, his cabin waited and with it, his comfortable clothes. After the Martians had all been greeted and drunk to and made welcome and all, he'd hurried to the café, thinking maybe he'd be able to catch the technical team before they went home. He hadn't taken the time to stop and change clothes. So now the uniform, even undone at the throat, sanded his neck.

The technical team had all been there, and still were. Planted in their chairs like they'd taken root.

“Don't have to have been there to know what a proxy war is,” Roberts said. “My family's Callistan, three generations. I know what it looked like, even if I wasn't there. Earth sends private security. Mars sends advisors. Everybody just there to help out this union or that trade group, but what it came down to was Earth and Mars spending Belter lives so they never had to risk their own.”

He'd expected the place to be empty. It was long after his shift, well into when he should have been spinning down for sleep. But the light of the straight-line sun was bright and high, and even after generations in the black, some atavistic part of his brain still told him that meant midday. Drum time was permanent noon, first and last and always. And with the overlapping shifts that kept Medina alive and working no matter what the clock pretended, there were people coming in for an early breakfast or a late lunch, grabbing a quick drink on the way back to their cabin. Or like him and the technical team—burning the midnight oil. All at the same time. It was the drift of humanity left to live on whatever schedule they chose instead of being chained to the twenty-four hours of Earth and Mars. Belter time.

“Maybe if they'd come on their own, yeah,” Salis said. “Could see it then. But that's not the way I heard it.”

“The way you heard it?” Roberts laughed. “Didn't know you had your cameras in the bedrooms of power. Inside scoop, you?”

Salis made a rude gesture, but he was smiling while he did it. Jakulski took a drink of his beer, surprised to find the bulb so close to empty already.

“Friends in comms, me,” Salis said. “What I heard was Marco asked

Duarte to come. Not Laconia coming to pull our puppet strings. It's them dancing to a Free Navy song."

"The fuck would they do that for?" Jakulski asked. He sounded like Roberts, like he was busting Salis' balls, but he more than half wanted Salis to talk him into agreeing. In his fatigue, Jakulski couldn't stop imagining the six advisors in their civilian clothes and martial bodies.

"Same reason start storing your casino chips someplace new when your boyfriend moves out," Salis said. "Think on it, yeah? Michio Pa was one of his five. High up. Maybe Marco kept her out of the loop on Medina, only ran that through Rosenfeld. Maybe everyone knew a little of everything. Now Pa's making her play, it's only smart to change it up. She thinks she knows how the rail guns are protected? So he changes how the rail guns are protected. Simple."

"Or now Marco and Rosenfeld and Dawes are distracted, Duarte moves his 'advisors' in place so when he wants to, he can point the rail guns at Medina, tell us all what we should make him for breakfast," Roberts said.

Jakulski lifted a hand, caught the server's eye, and pointed to his spent bulb. One more wouldn't do any damage that wasn't already done. And all of it was going on God-damn Shului's tab anyway. Best make it count. Vandercaust, across from him, noticed and raised his own bulb as well. The server nodded with her hand and went back to what she'd been doing. A bird with wings as wide as Jakulski's outstretched fingers skinned past them, a fluttering and a flash of blue. It rode the breeze like it was still on a planet that curved down at the horizon instead of up. There was something wonderful about air wide enough to fly in.

"Say you?" he asked, looking at Vandercaust.

"Not saying nothing, sa sa?" the oldest tech said, scratching idly at the split-circle tattoo on his wrist. "Drinking."

Jakulski narrowed his eyes. Curiosity shifted sluggishly in his brain. He was too tired. He should go back and sleep. But the server was on her way with two fresh bulbs, and he'd made the trip so he could be with the team. "Best guess, then. Duarte pushing pawns to get control of Medina? Marco using Laconia against Pa? What are we looking at?"

"Best guess is I don't fucking know," Vandercaust said in an amiable voice, and gestured in a controlled way that made it clear he was very drunk indeed. "It's a war. Wars aren't like that."

“Aren’t like what?” Roberts said.

“Aren’t like stories about wars,” Vandercaust answered solemnly. “Stories about wars come after. Like Qin Shi Huang unified China or when you look and say this led to this led to this, and then it was over. How did anything begin? War start when Marco hit Earth? When Earth hit Anderson Station? And it ends when Earth and Mars are dead? When Belters have a home? When everyone agrees it’s done?”

Roberts rolled her eyes, but Salis leaned forward, fingers laced across his knee. Jakulski took his new bulb from the server and drank. It was cold and rich, but something made him a little sorry he’d stayed to drink it. Martians on Medina, and Pa running her own crew, and Fred Johnson taking Ceres back. It all felt like someone building the solar system’s biggest mousetrap. And Jakulski thought maybe he was living inside the cheese.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Holden

It hadn't really been that long since Fred had crewed up the *Rocinante* for its burn down to Luna, but it had also been a lifetime. Now, with the Tycho-based crew gone, the ship seemed bigger. Emptier. It was like the end of a really long party when all the guests have gone home, and Holden couldn't quite decide if it left him feeling lonely or relieved. When they headed out this time, they'd only have one pilot. One engineer. Still two mechanics, assuming that was Clarissa's official title. After flying with the *Roci* for so many years with just his little family, it was strange to feel the loss of that redundancy, but some deep training was still there in the back of his mind saying that everyone had to be replaceable. As if keeping Chava Lombaugh on the ship would have really made it bearable losing Alex to a badly placed PDC round or a stroke during a high-g burn or any of the other thousand things that could go wrong in space. As if Sandra Ip could ever have taken Naomi's place.

On one hand, it was unthinkable. On the other, it was reasonable. Alex was Alex, and no one else would ever be. If something did go wrong, though, they'd want a pilot. And the chances of things going wrong seemed pretty high.

The *Minsky* had started its life burning out of Luna with colonists funded by Royal Charter Energy. The same company that had landed on Ilus and Longdune and New Egypt. If things had gone the way they'd intended, they'd have passed through the ring gates on their way to landfall in a system called San Esteban. Instead, they'd been taken over by the *Serrio Mal*, looted, and were in a braking burn toward Ceres with what was left of the crew and supplies after Michio Pa and her people were done with it. Food and water, hydroponics and medical supplies, construction mechs and scientific equipment and the people to use them. And burning at its side, a Free Navy gunship as escort. Probably one of Pa's. Probably not a

trap.

Probably not going to get reduced to radioactive gas by Fred. But only probably.

Alone on the command deck, he had the *Roci*'s inventory schematic pulled up on the screen and the latest edited piece from Monica spooling on his hand terminal. The inventory chirped and updated. It took him a second to find the new data.

"Alex?"

"Right here, Hoss," Alex replied, his voice coming through the comm and down from the cockpit both.

"Confirm that you're seeing the juice on your couch topped up?"

A moment passed. "I am showing full-on shitty synthetic juice guaranteed to give a migraine and diarrhea if you use it for more than eight hours."

"Seriously?"

"We had better than this on the *Canterbury*," Alex said.

Holden felt a twitch of concern. "Why did we get third-rate juice?"

Naomi answered as if she were beside him instead of strapped into the loading mech on the dock. "Because the alternative was loading the injectors with morphine so you don't care so much about being crushed. There's a war on, you know."

"So there is," he said as the inventory chimed another update.

Amos said, "Should show we're at eighty percent on PDC rounds."

"Showing eighty-one point seven," Holden said.

"Really? I'm pretty sure that ain't right."

"Track it down," Holden said. "I'll let you know if the ship changes her mind in the meantime."

"We're on it," Amos agreed.

We. Meaning Clarissa. He was really going to have to get over that. He felt guilty that he hadn't already, but he didn't have a clear idea how to let his discomfort with her go. He pushed the issue back down his priority list again, the way he always did. And who knew? Maybe they'd all die in a hail of gunfire before it came up again and he wouldn't have to worry about it.

On his hand terminal, the new edit of latest video flickered. This would be the tenth one when it came out. Most of it was an interview with a

couple of musicians he'd met up in the shitty part of the station. Two Belters with patois so thick, he'd fed it through a translation program, but their voices were musical and there was an affection in them that transcended the language. Monica had redone the subtitles, putting them at the top of the image, so that the words were beside their faces, close enough to see their expressions as they spoke. They looked like grandfather and grandson, but they called each other "cousin."

As he watched, they talked about the music scene on Ceres, the difference between live music and recordings, between what they called *tényleges* performance and using microphones. They didn't talk about Earth or Mars, the OPA or the Free Navy. Holden hadn't asked, and the few times that they'd strayed in a political direction, he'd brought it back to the music. Two more reminders that not everyone who lived outside a gravity well had dropped the rocks on Earth. He liked this one a lot, and he wanted to get it approved for release before they left dock. *In case*, without ever quite letting himself think in case of what. Just *in case*.

The first nine pieces he'd released had gotten a little traction. Some of that was, he knew, because his name was on it. Being a minor political celebrity had its perks, and one was a small but reliable audience baked in for this project. Better than that, though, he'd started getting copycats. People with their own feeds on Titan and Luna and Earth doing interviews and slice-of-life bits like the ones he'd put out.

Or maybe they'd always been doing that, and he was copying them. Only he hadn't noticed any of it until now.

"Cap?" Amos said, and Holden realized it wasn't the first time. "You okay up there?"

"I'm here. I'm fine. Distracted. What've you got?"

Clarissa answered. "One of the feeds didn't zero before. We got it. The count's confirmed."

"Great," Holden said. On his hand terminal, the older man struck a chord on his guitar and the younger man laughed. He closed the file. He couldn't tell if it was working or not anymore. His brain couldn't imagine what it would be like to run into it for the first time. Whether the humanity that he saw in it would be there for someone on Earth or Mars or in the colony ships. Or on the far side of the gates.

He heard Naomi coming up before he saw her. He looked back over his

shoulder as she stepped off the lift. Her jumpsuit still showed lines of sweat where the loading mech's straps had held her, and when she leaned over to kiss his forehead, he took her arm. Her eyes were a little bloodshot, the way they got when she was tired. She looked back down at him, laughed a little.

"What?"

"You're very beautiful," Holden said. "I hope I tell you that often enough."

"You do."

"Then I hope I don't tell you so often it gets annoying."

"You don't," she said, and sat in the crash couch beside his, stretching her arm as she did so she could keep her fingers twined in his. "Are you all right?"

"A little exhausted."

"Just a little?"

"I'm not hallucinating yet."

Naomi shook her head. Just a few millimeters one way and then the other. "You know you're not responsible for fixing everything."

"Saving humanity from itself is a group project, yes," he said. "Really, all I'm doing is trying to show everyone on Earth and Mars and the Belt and Medina and the colonies that really we're all still just one tribe."

"So just transcend all lived human experience since before the dawn of history?"

"And keep the part where we kill each other to a minimum," he said. "Shouldn't be hard."

"At least you know why you're tired."

She squeezed his fingers and let them go, pulling up a tactical display of Ceres and the space around it. The station itself and the fleet ships that surrounded it like a cloud of blue fireflies were marked as friendlies. The colony ship and its escort slowing toward them were in yellow—status unknown, but of interest. The time to rendezvous was down to hours.

"Part of me hopes that Fred won't let us go out," he said. "We request the clamps come off, and they just say no and we're stuck in here."

"While the colony ship flips at the last minute and accelerates into the port, exploding in a nuclear fireball," Naomi said.

He pulled up his hand terminal and sent his approval to Monica on Tycho. At lightspeed, it would still be minutes before she got it. "It does

sound less appealing when you put it that way.”

Behind them, the lift cycled down, humming as it went. Alex—his voice still doubled by the headset and the free air—finished his checklist with Amos and Clarissa. Holden stowed his hand terminal in the crash couch’s high-g compartment. If things went poorly, he didn’t want it zooming around the command deck.

Naomi’s voice was low, but focused. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why are we doing this?”

Holden wished his brain had been a little clearer. After a certain point, he felt like his verbal centers ran straight to his mouth without passing through the rest of his brain. “Because we can’t just blow up enough things that this becomes a good situation. We’re going to need more than that in our toolbox.”

Bobbie stepped off the lift. There was something odd about her, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. She was wearing simple blacks, but the way she held herself made them look like a uniform. Her hands were in fists at her sides, but she didn’t seem angry so much as nervous. That didn’t bode well.

“Hey,” Holden said.

“Sir.”

“Please don’t call me sir. No one on the ship does. Everything all right? Fred want something?”

“Johnson didn’t send me,” Bobbie said. “You’re going out, and I’m reporting for duty.”

“Okay,” Holden said. “You can route tactical and fire control down here, or take the gunner’s seat up by Alex. Wherever feels most comfortable.”

Bobbie took a deep breath and something Holden didn’t understand played out across her wide face. “I’ll take the gunner’s seat,” she finally said, and climbed up to the cockpit. Holden watched her ankles disappear above him, his brow furrowed hard enough to ache a little.

“That was ... um,” he said. “Was that a moment?”

“That was a moment,” Naomi said.

“Good moment or bad moment?”

“Very good moment.”

“Well. Shit,” he said. “I’m sorry I missed it.”

“All right, everyone strapped in?” Alex called.

One by one, the crew answered. They were ready. Or as ready as they were likely to get. Holden let his head sink into the gel of the couch, shifting his screen to match Naomi’s. There were an awful lot of ships floating in the vicinity of Ceres right now. He listened as Alex requested that the docking clamps be released. For long, painful seconds, Ceres traffic authority didn’t answer. And then, “Affirmative, *Rocinante*. You are cleared to leave.”

The ship shuddered and the spin gravity of Ceres vanished as Alex let their momentum fling them out into the vacuum. On his screen, they were a white dot flying off at a tangent to the station’s massive curve. He flipped to external cameras and watched the surface of the dwarf planet curve away.

“Well,” Naomi said. “Looks like Fred didn’t object to this enough to keep us from going out.”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “I hope he knows what he’s doing, trusting delicate work like this to agents of chaos like us.”

Amos chuckled, and Holden realized he’d said that on the full-crew channel.

“Fairly sure he’s making this shit up as he goes too,” Amos said. “Anyway, the worst-case scenario is we all get killed and he gets to feel smart for not having his people on board when we did it. Win-win for him.”

When Bobbie spoke, Holden could hear the smile in it, despite the words. “No one dies while standing watch without permission from the commanding officer.”

“You say so, Babs,” Amos replied.

“Keep braced,” Alex said. “I’m gonna have to get us on course here.”

Normally the shifting of the ship under maneuvering thrusters was almost subliminal to Holden. The subtle dance of vectors and thrust had been part of his life ever since he’d left Earth. It was only that he was so tired and worried and full of so very much coffee that it bothered him. With every adjustment, up and down changed a little and then went back to the float. When Alex fired the Epstein for a few seconds, the *Roci* sang, harmonics ringing through overtones up and down the hull like a church bell.

“Not too much, Alex,” Holden said. “We don’t want our braking burn to slag anybody. At least I don’t think we do.”

“Not a problem,” Alex said. “We’ll just tap back down to a good coasting speed until we’re right up alongside them. Final braking won’t catch anyone in the plume.”

“And keep the torpedoes and PDCs hot,” Holden said. “Just in case.”

“On it,” Bobbie said. “We’re getting painted by ranging lasers.”

“Whose?” Holden asked, dropping the exterior camera and going back to tactical. The scattering of fleet ships. The surface defenses of Ceres. The slowly approaching captured ship and its Free Navy escort.

“Oh,” Naomi said, tapping through a list of connection reports longer than her screen. “Pretty much everyone.”

“The escort ship?”

“They’re painting us too.”

On his screen, the incoming ships stuttered, the data around them updating as they killed their braking burns, appearing from behind clouds of superheated gas. The *Roci*’s sensor arrays checked contour and heat signatures, confirming almost instantly. The larger ship matched the *Minsky*—large, blocky, and awkward with communications satellites meant to bootstrap a network around an alien planet covering its sides like warts. The smaller was a Martian corvette, a generation newer than the *Roci*, a little lighter, streamlined for atmosphere and probably loaded with similar ordnance. Its transponder wasn’t answering.

“Hate seeing this,” Alex said. “Two good Martian-built ships squaring off? It ain’t right.”

“Well,” Holden said. “Who knows? Maybe we’re on the same side.”

“If it is a fight,” Bobbie said, “let’s win it. Permission to lock target?”

“Has it locked on us?” Holden asked.

“Not yet,” Naomi said.

“Hold off, then,” Holden said. “I don’t want to go first.”

An incoming comm request appeared on his screen from Fred Johnson, and for a confused half second, he wondered what Fred was doing on the gunship, then saw the tightbeam was coming from Ceres. When this was over, he was really going to need to sleep. He accepted the connection, and Fred appeared in a separate window on the side of his screen.

“Regretting this yet?” Fred asked.

“Only a little,” Holden said. “You?”

“I want to make something clear. If—if—you take possession of that

colony ship, under no circumstances does it come within three thousand clicks of my dock. If there are people who need medical assistance on board, they stay on board and we'll send help out to them. Nothing comes off that ship until it's been examined, scanned, reloaded, disinfected, and sprinkled with holy water by whatever flavor of priest I can put my hands on. I'm not running Troy here."

"Understood."

"The only reason I'm letting you do this at all is the chance of recovering prisoners of the Free Navy alive."

"That's the only reason?" Holden said. "So you'll hand all the supplies on the ship back over to the former owners instead of using them to keep Ceres alive?"

Fred's smile was gentle and warm. "Don't be an asshole."

"Okay," Bobbie said. "Now they're painting us. Permission to return the favor?"

"Granted," Holden said.

Bobbie said something under her breath that he couldn't make out, but it sounded happy.

"Be careful, Holden," Fred said again. "I don't like anything about this."

"Well, if it's a trap, you can say I told you so to whatever scraps of us are left."

"I've got thirty ships that'll make sure you have a nuclear funeral pyre big enough they'd see it on Proxima Centauri in four years. You know. If anyone's there."

"That's not comforting," Holden said.

"We should open comms," Naomi said.

"Fred? I've gotta go do this thing. I'll let you know how it went when it's done."

Fred nodded. The connection dropped. Holden swallowed past the tightness in his throat. "How are we for range?"

"Inside effective torpedo range," Bobbie said. "And we'll be good for PDCs in eight minutes and ten seconds."

"Rail gun all warmed up?"

"Oh hell yes."

"All right," Holden said. "Naomi, get me a channel."

A moment later, a new frame appeared on his screen. Dark but with the

yellow border of an open connection. They were so close, there was effectively no light delay. That alone made him nervous.

“Attention, unidentified warship. This is James Holden of the independent freighter *Rocinante*. We’re here to transfer possession of the *Minsky*. Hope that’s what brought you here too. I’d appreciate it if you’d identify.”

The screen stayed dark. Anxiety crept up his back. The seconds stretched without a reply. Something was wrong. Without moving, he rehearsed what he’d say to Alex. *Get us out of here. Something’s about to blow up.* What he’d say to Bobbie. *Protect the Roci first. Disable the gunship if you can. Kill it if you have to.*

The frame flickered. For a fraction of a second, an unfamiliar blond woman with sharp features appeared, and then immediately the image shifted to a woman with dark hair tied back. A small, cynical smile on her lips. Holden realized he’d been holding his breath and exhaled.

“*Rocinante*,” she said, “this is Michio Pa of the *Connaught*. Weird to see you again, Captain Holden.”

Chapter Twenty-Three: Pa

The *Munroe* died second. Marco's forces caught it near a cloud of machining equipment and medical supplies that had been buried in the void. As best Michio could reconstruct it, a plea for help had come from a mining ship called the *Corvid*. They had five families on the ship, and an outbreak of complex meningitis that had the children in medical comas. The *Munroe*, charging to the rescue, was intercepted by two Free Navy corvettes, and fled from them into two others. Marco had recorded the captain—a middle-aged man named Levi Watts who Michio had hardly known before he was placed under her command—begging for the life of his crew before his ship was overwhelmed.

It hadn't been dignified, and it ended in fire. Copies of it went on a dozen anonymous feeds with an attached listing of all the other vessels that had chosen to follow her.

The *Corvid*'s transponder vanished. The discussions of whether it had also been destroyed or invented as bait for the ambush came to nothing. The message was the same either way: No one could betray the Free Navy, and the Free Navy was Marco Inaros. Evans and Nadia had taken the responsibility of remaking the communication protocols for Michio's remaining fleet. She could see the concern in their eyes and hear it in the timbre of their voices. She loved them for caring, but there was a distance in that love for now. A coldness. She couldn't say how long her rage and grief would stay cold, but for now ruthless analysis was the only way she could mourn.

Maybe that was what worried them.

The *Minsky* had been flying dark outside the ecliptic in an orbit that, given several months, would have taken it near enough to the ring gate that it could have made a break for it, dodged into the slow zone before any of the Free Navy ships could intercept it. So when Foyle and the *Serrio Mal*

captured it, she'd also saved the lives of everyone aboard. It would have been a matter of minutes between the ship passing through the gate and rail gun defenses ripping it to pieces. Not that the colonists knew that. Not that Michio had told them.

Even when Foyle learned that the prize ship was being routed to Ceres and into the arms of the enemy, she'd been willing to escort it. Michio had been tempted to let her, but it was the wrong move. Reaching out to Fred Johnson had been her decision. If it was going to go pear-shaped, she should be the one to deal with it.

The transfer had been furtive and quick—high-g, short-burst burns that brought the *Minsky* and the *Connaught* together on an intercept with Ceres that kept away from the bulk of Marco's forces.

When, a lifetime ago, Marco had chosen her to head the conscription arm of the Free Navy, he'd given her the smaller, lighter ships. Armed, certainly, but not built for heavy fighting. She was meant to outrun the vast, bulky ice haulers, converted now to colony ships: massive and easy to overwhelm. Marco and Rosenfeld, the war leaders against the inner planets, had more need of the capital ships. They were the sledgehammer, and she was the scalpel.

And now she was going to find out whether her plan to cut a path where the great Marco Inaros couldn't reach her had worked, or if her rebellion was going to be short-lived and tragic.

The universe has plans for you, Josep said in her imagination. *You couldn't have come this far through so many dangers if there weren't a reason for you to be here.*

The same beautiful bullshit that everyone told themselves. That they were special. That they mattered. That some vast intelligence behind the curtains of reality cared what happened to them. And in all the history of the species, they'd all died anyway.

"Attention, unidentified warship. This is James Holden of the independent corvette *Rocinante*. We're here to transfer possession of the *Minsky*. Hope that's what brought you here too. I'd appreciate it if you'd identify."

"Well, fuck," Michio said.

"Captain?" Oksana said.

James Holden. Probably the most ambiguous man in the system. The

Earther who worked for Fred Johnson's OPA. The leader of the coup against Ashford back in the slow zone. The man Marco Inaros hated more than anyone else. Chosen envoy of the Martian Republic and the United Nations to Ilus, and everybody's favorite pawn. If she'd had a dream that his voice would be the one greeting her, Josep would have called it a sign. Of what, she couldn't guess.

Her display showed Ceres Station, the enemy ships arrayed around it like a cloud of insects waiting to attack. And all through the system, she was certain sensor arrays and optical telescopes were focused on her, on the *Minsky*, and on the ship coasting toward her.

Somewhere, Marco was seeing her with the chance to open fire on James Holden. If God had wanted to give her a way to walk back her rebellion, He couldn't have made a better one. She had her ranging laser on him. Even if she died, even if they all died, the other ships in her command would have a chance to sneak back into the Free Navy's fold. No more *Witch of Endors*. No more *Munroes*.

There are no coincidences, Josep said in her mind. Except of course there were.

"Captain, what are your orders?" Oksana asked.

"Open the connection."

Oksana opened the comms, grunted at some small error, and passed the feed to Michio's station. Holden was looking anxiously into the camera. The years had been kind to him. His face had a more comfortable look, and a touch of sorrow and humor that he wore well. She wondered if the others of his crew were still on the *Rocinante* with him or if he'd left Naomi Nagata someplace safely out of Marco's reach.

"*Rocinante*, this is Michio Pa of the *Connaught*. Weird to see you again, Captain Holden."

His lips widened into a boyish grin, and to her surprise, she found herself smiling back. It wasn't pleasure, but the giddiness of fear. Her heart tapped at her ribs like it was impatient. Trying to get her attention. *I could kill him. He could kill me. Either decision would be justified.* The *Rocinante* had a rail gun. By the time she knew he'd fired, she'd already be dead. But he probably wouldn't. And she probably wouldn't either.

"Weird to see you too, Captain Pa. Strange times."

She laughed, and it sounded like someone else. Evans looked at her,

concern in his eyes. She ignored him.

“Couldn’t help noticing that you’ve got some ships pointing their guns at me,” she said lightly.

“People are nervous,” Holden said.

“Was sending you supposed to be symbolic of something?”

“Nope. We just drew the short straw.”

It was eerie, speaking to someone on the other side of the fight without so much as a stutter of light delay. She wanted to flip and burn hard, get out. Every second on the float brought her closer to Ceres and the consolidated fleet and Fred fucking Johnson. Every dot on the tactical display made her itch. They were the enemy as much as Marco. But the enemy of her enemy was at least playing nice right now.

No sudden moves. Nothing without warning. They could do this.

“We’re ready to transfer control of the *Minsky* to you,” she said. “Her passengers are all on board confined to their quarters. I’ll send along a manifest with what supplies she’s carrying.”

Holden nodded. “So. Nothing’s going to blow up when we do this, is it? No booby traps? Because there are some smart people who think I’m pretty stupid for trusting you.”

“Plenty on my side saying the same of me. Nothing either of us can say right now’s going to change their minds. We’ll just have to try this. See what happens.”

Oksana’s voice cut through the air like a wire. “I’ve got fast-movers coming in from Ceres! Six torpedoes. Fifty seconds to impact.”

The breath left Michio’s lungs, pushed out by fear so profound it felt like calm. *Open fire, all guns. Get us out of here.* Whatever they were going to do, she had to order it now.

Except she was looking at Holden, and he was surprised too. Shocked, even.

Angry.

She had to give the order. She had to fire. Her family was going to die. If she fired, they’d all fire back. She had to run. Burn hard. Melt everything behind her to slag.

Stop, she thought. *If we die, we die, but right now, stop.*

Why was Holden angry?

“Holden?” she said, her voice trembling. “Do we have a problem?”

“Fuck yes, you have my permission,” Holden snapped, and it took her a fraction of a second to realize he wasn’t speaking to her.

“The *Rocinante*’s firing its PDCs,” Oksana said, her voice high and sharp. Fear was a resonance tone, and the deck rang with it.

“Lighting up our PDCs,” Evans said.

“Don’t,” Michio shouted before she knew she was going to say it. Then, in the stunned silence, “Touch those fire controls, and you will kill us all. Do you understand, Mr. Evans? Everyone you love will die, and it will be your fault.” Her husband looked at her, confusion in his eyes. His fingers hovered over the controls, twitching toward them. If she’d shot him, he couldn’t have looked more betrayed. “Oksana, what is the *Rocinante* firing on?”

“No no no,” Holden said. “We’re getting *them*. Not *you*. You don’t think we’re—”

“They’re targeting the missiles from Ceres. Impact in ... They’re done, sir. The *Rocinante* shot down the attack.”

Michio nodded. Her blood rattled in her veins. Her hands shook. She was aware of the panic in her mind like listening to voices in a nearby room, but she didn’t feel it. She didn’t feel anything.

“Evans,” she said. “Put your hands down.”

Evans looked at his own fingers like he was surprised to see them there, then slowly lowered them to his sides. She watched the realization bloom in his eyes: If he’d started firing, the enemy fleet would have started firing. Maybe not the *Rocinante*, but everyone else. His instincts had come within a finger-tap of killing them all. He moaned the way he did when he was sick or drunk, unstrapped, and pushed off. His crash couch spun gently on its gimbals as he abandoned his post. She didn’t stop him.

On her screen, Holden was bending in toward the camera. Not much, just the little unconscious curve of someone protecting their gut. She forced her own spine to relax. Long seconds passed as she waited for another attack. Heartbeat after heartbeat, nothing came.

“Well,” she said.

“Yeah,” Holden replied.

Another moment passed. Michio heard another voice behind Holden. Naomi Nagata. The words themselves weren’t clear, but the tone of the woman’s voice could have stripped paint. So he hadn’t left her someplace

safe. Fair enough. Safety might not exist now anywhere. The first hints of adrenaline crash haunted the edges of Michio's consciousness: a faint nausea, a deepening weariness, sorrow. She ignored those too.

"Was saying," Michio said, her voice calmer than she'd expected. "We have the *Minsky* and what she's carrying. Ready to pass control over to you. Then we're backing away before anyone else starts shooting at us."

"That wasn't Fred," Holden said. "I don't know who fired those torpedoes, but we're going to find out."

Michio's lips felt heavy, solid, like she'd been carved from stone. It didn't matter who'd pulled the trigger on the attack from Ceres. Look far enough back, and Marco Inaros would be behind it.

"I appreciate that," she said. "You let us know when you're ready for the remote command protocols."



Marco's response didn't take an hour. He shook his head sorrowfully, looked into the camera with wide, dark eyes. The raw charisma of his presence was banked by being on a screen, but it wasn't extinguished. Proof that the traitor Michio Pa was working with Earth. Undermining the efforts of the Free Navy to protect and rebuild the Belt. Brazenly giving aid and comfort to the enemy. His voice vibrated with indignation on behalf of his people and disgust for her collaboration with the enemy. It didn't matter that the "enemy" included millions of Belters he'd left behind. She wondered whether that would matter to the people who watched him.

He included images of the *Rocinante* defending the *Connaught*. The final proof, if anyone needed it, that she was in bed with the people who most wanted the Free Navy and the Belt to fail.

She watched it on the command deck, a dozen responses competing in her head. She even went as far as recording one, but the words got away from her, tugged along by her anger until the woman looking back at her from the screen seemed almost as crazed as the one Marco described.

They burned away from Ceres, but not hard. The point of the exercise was to put themselves in range of the inners and not be killed. To show the other ships still loyal to her and the handful of independent ships that saw

more hope in her path than Marco's that zones of protection were possible. Fleeing her new little zone of safety as quickly as she could was what she wanted down to her marrow, but it wasn't what she'd come here for. Wasn't what she'd risked her ship and her family and her life to get. And so a third of a g, and then the float, reorienting, then another burn. The farther she got from Fred Johnson's guns, the more she tried to make the *Connaught* hard for Marco to track.

When Oksana came to her cabin that night, it hadn't been as her officer but as her wife. She brought a bottle of whiskey with a bright-silver injection tip and two bulbs to drink it from. At first, Michio didn't want the company, but as soon as she did, she was desperate for it. Sex, in Michio's experience, was like music. Or language. It could express anything. Now it was rage and sorrow and need.

Afterward, strapped into the crash couch together, she listened to Oksana's breath, deep and steady as she imagined waves must be. Michio's heart felt fragile and more complicated than it had when she'd woken up that morning. Careful not to wake her wife, she stretched out, caught her hand terminal between her fingertips, and spooled up Marco's denunciation. The light from the little screen filled the room, and she dropped the sound until it was nothing but a distant rhythm of hard consonants. Heard that way, there was a pattern to how Marco spoke. A throbbing in his delivery like he was imitating a heartbeat. She'd never noticed that before.

She shifted over to the cached copies of the community feeds and forums. They filled with reactions and opinions. Judgment of her and her family. Declarations of hatred. Threats of death. Nothing she hadn't expected. These were the people she was risking everything to feed and support. And because she stood against Marco to do it, they hated her. Not all of them, but many. And deeply.

Good thing she wasn't doing it for the popularity.

The alert went on. Attitude adjustment and burn. She shifted the hand terminal to the *Connaught's* control systems. Nadia had plotted in a complex adjustment, turning on all three axes with a variable burn so that when they were done, only someone with very precise sensor arrays who'd caught them all the way through the maneuver would be able to plot where they were going with any certainty. The countdown came, the burn pressing her and Oksana gently against each other and shifting the crash couch

beneath them, swinging one direction and then another and back. The deep rumble of the Epstein was like God apologetically clearing His throat.

Oksana yawned, stretched, put her hand on Michio's shoulder.

"Hoy, Captain," she said, voice slushy with sleep and the aftermath of coupling. Michio sighed, smiled.

"Navigator Busch," she said, matching Oksana's joking formality, and weaving their fingers together. "You should sleep."

"So should you. Can you?"

"No," Michio said. "If it gets to be a problem, I'll hit the autodoc. Get something."

"What's the status?"

Michio almost asked, *The status of what?* But it would only have been so she didn't have to think too much. She knew Oksana meant the Free Navy's reaction. Were there gunships burning for them now? Had long-range torpedoes launched toward them from the ships and stations of the Belt, hoping to come quietly and fast enough to overwhelm their PDCs? Michio shifted to kiss her forehead just at the hairline. Oksana's hair smelled of musk and the fake vanilla she favored. It was a beautiful scent.

"Everyone hates us, but no one's shooting yet," she said.

"They will, though."

"They will. But we've carved little islands of safety. Now that they've accepted our tribute, we can go to Ceres or any other station Fred fucking Johnson takes without Marco following on. Unless he's ready for a full battle with the inners."

"In which case, it won't really matter if we're there or not," Oksana said, her lips against Michio's collarbone. "And you? Are you all right?"

The *Connaught* made a complex corkscrewing burn, the crash couch shifting one way, then another. The universe seeming to swirl around the stillpoint of their bodies. Michio shrugged in the darkness. "I don't know. I know what my project is. Get the things the Belt needs and give them to the people that need them the most. But ... no one's going to thank us for it."

"Some will," Oksana said. Then, a moment later, "I mean, no one with power."

"Isn't that what we're doing, though?"

"Doing?" Oksana asked, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"If no one with power loves us, let's make our own damn power."

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Chapter Twenty-Four: Prax

The morning routine was the same. Prax got up first, padded to the kitchen still wearing his robe and slippers. He started brewing the tea and making breakfast for the family. Pancakes and bacon for the girls. Red rice and eggs for him and Djuna. He played music on the system. Usually something calm and wandering, what Djuna called his getting-a-massage music. And about the time the rice was cooked and the bacon crisped, he heard the sound of Djuna's shower and the voices of Mei and Natalia. This particular morning, the girls were gabbling pleasantly to each other. Other mornings, they would snap and argue.

When Djuna's shower water stopped, he poured the first pancake onto the grill, two eggs beside it. They took almost exactly the same time to cook, so that he could turn them both, one with either hand. It was showing off, but when Mei saw it, it always made her laugh. Djuna's hectoring voice came from the hall, moving the girls through their morning rituals—washing faces, combing hair, getting dressed. When they all came to the table, Prax would be the only one not wearing his work clothes. The girls made fun of him for lazing around in his robe, even though he'd been the one to do the most, and he pretended to be offended even though he really wasn't.

After breakfast, Djuna would take the girls to school on her way to work, leaving him alone to clean away the dishes, take his own shower, and prepare for the lab. It wasn't something they'd ever discussed. It was just the way their own particular domestic habits had formed. Prax liked it like that. He'd had more than enough adventures in his life. He got more work done when things were predictable.

He sweetened his tea with the same syrup he drizzled over the pancakes, put the plates and glasses filled with food in their places, and was just sitting down with his rice and eggs when Djuna came in, driving the girls

before her like a cattleman in the tradition of mothers all through history.

Mei was a little quieter than usual, Natalia a little brighter, but both within the error bars. Djuna turned down the music while they ate and talked. When the conversation turned dangerous, Prax didn't notice.

"What does *resistance* mean?" Natalia asked. Her face was serious and sober, and on so small a person, vaguely comic.

"It's a measure of how electrons flow through something," Prax said. "You see, we think about current flowing through wires kind of the same way we think of water flowing through pipes. It's actually more complicated than that when you get down to quantum levels, but it's a very, very good model."

"And models are how we make sense of things," Natalia said. Proud of herself for remembering the catchphrase that he and Djuna had been using with the girls for so long. He didn't think Natalia was old enough to understand it yet, but she would be. And Mei sometimes surprised him with her insights.

"Yes," Prax said. "Exactly. So resistance is about how hard or easy it is for electrons to flow through something."

Natalia's little brow furrowed. Mei was looking away and Djuna had gone very still. Which was odd. But he could tell he wasn't making sense to the girls, so he tried again.

"So imagine you've got a big straw," he said, demonstrating with his hands. "And when you put it in your juice, it's really easy to drink. But then you take a teeny little skinny straw, you have to try really hard to get the same amount of juice up out of the glass. The big straw is like something without much resistance, and the little straw is like something with a lot of resistance."

Natalia nodded very seriously. It was like he could see her trying to solve the puzzle of it. "Is it a good thing or a bad thing?" she said.

Prax laughed. "It's not good and it's not bad. It's just part of how the universe is. Now, if you had a circuit where you wanted really low resistance and you didn't have it, that wouldn't be a very good circuit. But only because it didn't do what you wanted. If you had something where you wanted high resistance, maybe that very same circuit would be perfect. It's not about right and wrong. Just how things work."

"It's time to go," Djuna said, and her voice seemed sharp. It was the

voice she used when something was bothering her. And there were still almost fifteen minutes before they really needed to be out the door. Maybe something was going on at the biofilms lab he didn't know about.

When they'd left, he turned his music back on, cleared the dishes, showered, dressed himself for work. The rooms seemed wrong without them, and the extra time by himself empty and somehow ominous. All the way to the tube station, he worried about whether Mei had remembered to take her medicine. He'd planned to use the tube ride to review the new datasets on the harvester yeast, but his eyes kept skipping off his hand terminal and up to the screens across from him. A newsfeed was spooling, but he couldn't hear the words over the rattling of the tube and the voices of the other commuters. Ships were fighting, but he couldn't tell where. Earth. Iapetus. Pallas. Ceres. Mars. In the void between places, far distant from everything. They were all possible. The only thing he could be certain of was it wasn't here, and that only because there weren't any alerts blaring.

At the central station, half the passengers shuffled off into the vaulted transfer chamber, making way for another flood coming on. A half dozen men in Free Navy uniforms were among them. The Free Navy had started wearing sidearms openly now, and they walked with a swagger. Two civilian girls seemed to be with them, laughing and flirting. The oldest of them didn't look much past her twenties. Not *that* much older than Mei. Not really. Prax turned his attention back to the newsfeed, and then his hand terminal. He still wasn't able to concentrate on it, but something about the Free Navy men made him feel more comfortable with his eyes cast down. His heart was pumping a little faster, his back felt tight. He hadn't done anything wrong, but the sense of being threatened and the experience of guilt were so closely related that it was hard to feel one without the other.

When he'd been a student at lower university, he'd had to take a humanities class—literature, drama, art appreciation. Something to make him well rounded. He'd opted for philosophy in hopes that it would have something like rigor to it. Most of the experience had been forgotten, the memories washed away in decades of neuroplastic adjustments. What he did still recall was dreamlike and fragmentary. But sitting there, pressing deeper into the seat as the tube car shifted up toward the surface, the hum and rattle of the tube vibrating up his spine, listening to the too-loud laughter of the soldiers, one moment came back to him vividly. His

professor—an overweight, balding man with an alcoholic’s complexion and an air of intelligence so profound it seemed to bend space around him—lifting a hand and speaking a phrase: *the terror of the normal*. Prax was almost sure it had been something about Heidegger, but here and now, he thought he understood it better than he had back then.

This was how things were now. This had become normal.

He’d hoped to spend the morning on his own research, but Khana and Brice didn’t even let him get as far as his lab before falling into step beside him.

“I was looking at the open partition, and I think there may have been a problem with the data transfer,” Khana said. “The datasets directory only had Hy18 through the ninth run.”

“No, no,” Prax said. “I know. I didn’t get around to transferring them yet. I was going to, but I got distracted.”

Brice made a small sound in the back of her throat. Prax understood it, and he didn’t envy her. Ever since Karvonides’ death, Brice had been in the unenviable position of doing her own work and covering for her dead supervisor. Every day, Prax had intended to move all the critical data out to the open partition. He couldn’t even say why he hadn’t gotten around to it. It was just that something always seemed to come up.

“Boss,” Khana said, “we need the latest on Hy1810 unless you want us to push the new run.”

“You can’t push the new run,” Prax said.

They reached the door of Prax’s lab. Khana shoved his hands into his pockets, his jaw set, his eyes focused off somewhere about ten centimeters to Prax’s left. “I know. But ...”

“I’ll do it now,” Prax said. “Give me half an hour.”

He ducked into his lab and pulled the door closed behind him. Khana and Brice hovered for a long moment on the far side of the frosted glass and then walked away. Prax sat at his desk. He wanted to check the water levels and pull new samples from the hydroponics. He was tempted to just do that for a few minutes, put off going through Karvonides’ partition. But he’d said now, and they really did need to get the animal trials going.

He pulled up the staff directory, keyed in his access code, and let the system do its ritual biometric check. Then, with a deep sigh and a sense of growing dread, he went into the dead woman’s partition. It was his job to do

this. There was nothing to be anxious about.

Two of the datasets were in editing lock, so he had to close them down before he could move them. Not hard, but it took a few more seconds. He would need to go through her messages too. Make sure anything that needed attention was passed down to Brice or up to McConnell. Anything personal for her, he could ignore. He didn't need to pry, and he probably didn't want to know. Except that one of the messages had James Holden in the subject. NEW JAMES HOLDEN FEED FROM CERES, it said. James Holden, who'd saved Mei. And Prax himself. And everyone. Prax didn't intend to open the feed. It was more like a reflex. *This looks interesting—what is it?*

On the feed, just as promised, James Holden looking earnestly into the camera. On the one hand, it looked professionally produced. The video didn't stutter or shake. The colors had the carefully modulated look of a newsfeed. Holden's voice when he spoke was clear and sharp without being spiky. But Holden's demeanor had an awkward authenticity that was so familiar and unrehearsed, it was like seeing him in the flesh again.

"This is James Holden from Ceres Station. Today, we're doing the third in this open ended series thing, and I'm really hoping you're all looking forward to this. Especially all my friends and family back on Earth and Mars. I say this every time, but we're doing these clips and interviews so that the folks back home can put faces and voices to the real people out in the Belt. And ... yeah. So, let me introduce—"

The image cut to a tall Belter girl sitting in the galley of the *Rocinante*. Prax leaned forward. He'd sat exactly where she was once, during the worst part of his life. He felt a wave of nostalgia like seeing his apartment from upper university—someplace familiar that had been important to him once—that broke against the novelty of this new girl.

"Alis Caspár."

"Great. Okay, and where do you live?"

"Ceres Station. Salutorg District."

Prax watched the whole feed. The clap-juggling of shin-sin that seemed to delight and fascinate the Earther. The way the girl was embarrassed for him and he didn't seem to notice. The older woman they called Tía flirting with him. It was ... charming. With all the news of war and death, with all the images of ships chewing each other to shavings of metal and ceramic,

the body bags of Earth, Holden's video was nothing. Pleasant. Meaningless. Sweet, even.

The feed ended. Prax, surprised, found he'd been tearing up. He wiped his cheek with the cuff of one sleeve, and was startled when the next message opened its own feed automatically. A thin-faced woman with skin darker than Djuna's but with the same deep hazel eyes smiled into the camera. The image shook a little and the colors weren't as professionally toned as Holden's had been.

"This is Fatima Crehan, sending back to James Holden and all the good people of the Belt. We're in the refugee camp opened by the governor of Arequipa, and today I want to introduce you to a woman whose causa has been turning heads and filling bellies for, it seems like, everyone in the city."

Prax watched, fascinated. And when it was over, another video feed, this one from Shanghai, where an old man in a yarmulke interviewed a musical band of ethnic Han boys about their music and then watched them in an alleyway with mud-colored clouds churning above them. Prax couldn't look away.

A soft knock came at the door. Brice leaned in. "I'm sorry to interrupt, sir, but—"

"No no no, it's fine. I'm transferring them now." Prax grabbed Karvonides' data reports—none of them edit-locked now—and shifted them into the open partition. "You should be able to access all of them now."

"Thank you, sir," Brice said. And then, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Prax said, wiping his eyes again. "Carry on."

She closed the door. Two hours had gotten away from him somehow, and he was going to have to hurry in order to get all the samples pulled before lunch.

We could save lives. One message.

Prax shut down the dead woman's partition, put it under administrative lock. There wasn't time to think about anything more. He had work to do. In order to catch up, he ran the samples during his lunch hour, grabbing a few mouthfuls of rice and mushroom before the management team meeting. Afterward, it was time to go and retrieve Mei and Natalia from school, but he sent a message to one of the other parents in his parenting coop. The

girls could go play with the other kids until Djuna got home. He stayed, checking in with Brice and Khana. Seeing that everyone who needed access to the datasets could get to them.

Everything felt weirdly dreamlike and light. As if he was watching someone else doing it. In his office, he rechecked the day's sample run. How much dissolved CO₂ in the water, how much nitrogen, calcium, manganese. The plants were doing well, but until the stats were all fed through, he wouldn't know what he was looking at. That was fine.

He resisted the urge to reopen Karvonides' partition. To find the other feeds Holden had made or inspired. It was a bad idea. Instead, he waited, worked, watched through the glass. Only Brice remained, and her workstation was down a long and curving hallway. He closed his terminal, clocked out, went to the men's room, and waited. Washed his hands. Waited. Then casually stepped out to the main floor, swinging by one of the gang stations, opening a terminal with a guest account, accessing the datasets and protocols that Supervisor Praxidike Meng had carelessly put in the open partition without permissions set. The screen showed a pale blue logo, the flag of Ganymede. He sent copies to Samuel Jabari and Ingrid Dineyahze on Earth and Gorman Le on Luna. The only message was PLEASE CONFIRM THESE RESULTS.

Then he shut down the terminal and made his way out to the common corridors. Everything seemed brighter than it should have been. He couldn't tell if he was tired or restless. Or both.

He stopped at a noodle stand between the tube station and home. No-Roof for him and Djuna. Fried tofu for the girls. And—a luxury—rice wine. And a round ceramic container with green tea ice cream for dessert. When he got home, Natalia was whining about having to drill her times tables and Mei had shut herself in her room to trade messages with her friends from school and watch entertainment feeds of boys three or four years older than her. Other nights, he would have insisted that they all come to the table for dinner, but he didn't want to disturb anything.

He served the noodles into recyclable ceramic bowls with a pattern of sparrows and twigs on them, brought one to Natalia at her desk, another to Mei sprawled out on her bed. She was so big these days. Soon, she'd be bigger than his shoulder. His little girl, who no one had expected to live,

and look at her now. When he kissed the crown of her head, she looked up at him quizzically. He nodded her toward her screen of soulful-looking young men.

He and Djuna sat at the table together, almost like they were dating again. He looked at her: the curve of her cheek, the little scar on her left knuckle, the gentle fold of her collarbone. Like he was saving it for some coming day when she wouldn't be there. Or else when he wouldn't.

The rice wine bit at his mouth. Maybe it always felt like that—chill and warming at the same time—and he just didn't usually notice. Djuna told him about her day, the office politics and palace intrigues of biofilms, and he took in her words like they were music. Just before he cleared their dishes and broke out the ice cream, she reached across the table and took his hand.

“Are you all right?” she said. “You’re acting strange.”

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Bad day at work?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he said. “I think maybe it was very good.”

Chapter Twenty-Five: Fred

James Holden has just declared piracy legal,” Avasarala said from Luna, then paused. Her eyebrows were high on her forehead, and she nodded a little. Like she was encouraging a not very bright child to understand her. “He took in a *pirated* ship. From a *pirate*. And then thanked her for his cut of the fucking booty and waved as she burned away. And you, the Butcher of Anderson Station, grand Whatever-the-Fuck of the OPA? You sat there with your cock in your hand and let him do it. I mean, I understand Holden is Holden, but I let you put your hands on Ceres because I thought you at least were a fucking grown-up.”

She leaned back from her camera, shaking her head, and cracked a pistachio.

“I thought better of you, Johnson,” she said. “I really did. My life has become a single, ongoing revelation that I haven’t been cynical enough.”

At this point, he was pretty clear she was talking for the comfort of hearing her own voice. He checked the feed data. Ten more minutes. She might get to something important in the course of it, so he let it play as he walked through the bedroom. Her sharp consonants and scratching vowels made a kind of background music while he dug his evening medications out of his bedside table. Five pills and a glass of water. The pills were chalky and bitter on his tongue, and even after they were washed down his throat, he suffered their aftertaste.

Working twenty-hour days was a younger man’s gig. He could still rise to the occasion, but there had been a time his determination against the universe would have felt like a fair fight. Anger alone would have carried him forward, and maybe the scourge of fatigue would have made him feel he was expiating his sins. Now he was surviving on coffee and blood pressure meds and trying to keep the system from falling any further apart. It seemed less romantic.

“It looks like Richards has almost whipped what’s left of the Martian parliament into order,” Avasarala said, “so hopefully we can get something from her. Just an assurance she won’t come piss all over our strategy so it smells more like her would be enough. Souther’s pushing for Rhea or Pallas, depending on whether we want to shore up the allies we already have, half-assed as they may be, or deny Inaros a manufacturing base. Admiral Stacey’s pushing back against any of it for fear of stretching our ships out too thin.”

Both strategies were mistakes. He’d need to make the case for that. She pressed her fingers to her forehead. A short, percussive sigh. For a moment, she seemed smaller. Vulnerable. It was a strange look for her.

“We’ve had two more rocks. One of them had the stealth coating on it, but we caught it. This time. I’ve got the deep arrays sifting through all their data looking for more. But it costs so little to push something into an intersecting orbit, Inaros could have done hundreds of these. Spaced them out over months. Years. A century from now, we could see something loop in from out of the ecliptic with a note on it that says, ‘Fuck you very much from the Free Navy.’ My grandchildren’s grandchildren will be cleaning this same shit up.”

“Hopefully. If we win,” Fred said to the screen. Not that the recording could hear him. He moved to the bathroom, and the display shifted to follow him.

The best thing about the governor’s quarters was the shower. Wide as a rainstorm, and the whole floor a grated drain that worked even at a third of a g. Fred stripped and washed the sweat and grime of the day off his skin while Avasarala went over the latest intelligence about the state of affairs on the colony planets (no hard data, but things were probably bad), the reports on the ships that had gone missing passing through the gates (several theories and hope that the flight records from Medina would help if they ever became available), and the situation on Earth (the expected second wave of deaths from collapsed food, sanitation, and medical infrastructure was starting to appear).

After he dried off, Fred pulled on a fresh shirt, clean trousers. Thick, soft socks. The small pleasures of life. Avasarala kept delivering her report, diving into unneeded details and side comments as if she were lonely and didn’t want to face the emptiness and quiet of her own rooms on Luna. But

even she couldn't last forever.

"I'll expect to hear from you," she said. "And I'm fucking serious about this. Don't let Holden. Make. Any. More. Laws."

Fred sat on the edge of the bed, closed his eyes, and let his head sink into his hands. He'd been awake for over thirty hours now, and was looking down the barrel of another shift. Negotiating with the unions, adjusting decades-old contracts to fit the new situation. Moving Belters out of their holes, shutting down great swaths of the station to conserve the supplies they had. Part of his mind kept treating it like an emergency. A wound that had to be stanchied until help could arrive. Three, four times a shift, he'd remember that there wasn't help. That the choices he made today might stay in place for years. Forever.

The temptation to lie back, put his head to the pillow, and let his gritty, tired eyes close was as powerful as hunger and sex had been four decades back. The weight of the idea as much as exhaustion pulled him down. It was stupid for anyone, much less a man his age, to be pushing that hard, and the governor's bed was soft and inviting, the sheets clean and crisp. But if he did, his eyes would open the moment his head touched the pillow. Restlessness would twist him, knotting the sheets around his legs until he gave up, two or three wasted hours later. One more shift, and he'd be spent enough to let the pills work. He'd fall into the blackness behind his eyes, consciousness blinking blissfully out. But not yet.

His first lover—Diane Redstone, her name was—had a phrase for moments like this. *Nice woods*, she'd say, and then get up out of their bed and go to work. He hadn't understood where the saying came from until years after they parted for the last time. Now that he did, he couldn't help harboring an irrational dislike of Robert Frost.

He pulled up his hand terminal, considered himself through its tiny eyes, and pressed Record.

"Message received. I'll do what I can to keep our mutual acquaintance in line. But I'd also point out that he's a resource we'd be foolish to squander. Neither of us is in a position to do some things that Holden and his people can. Speaking of which, I'm including a salvage manifest for the *Minsky*. It's a big ship, and well supplied. It's within my power as acting governor of Ceres to claim emergency powers and seize property for the common good. That's not Holden's law, that's just law. I'll be sending it and

a third of its cargo back down to Earth, and the *August Marchant* and *Bethany Thomas* as escort. There's enough in there to keep a midsized city alive. Just a drop in the bucket, I know, but that's how buckets get filled."

He tried to think of anything else he should say, and couldn't decide if there was too much or not enough. Either way, it could wait. He reviewed the message, encrypted and queued it, and then levered himself up off the bed. There'd be time to sleep later.

His security detail met him outside his door and followed him to the carts in the main corridor. His was sheathed in bulletproof glass. Sitting in it made him feel like he'd put his head in a fishbowl. But until he was certain that Inaros didn't have more people mixed in among the millions of legitimate citizens, he was stuck with it. And since he'd never be certain, he figured he might as well get used to it. They lurched out into the corridor—one security cart going before him and another behind, leaving enough room that a bomb would have a hard time taking out all three at once. The logic of the battlefield. And everything was a battlefield now.

The citizens of Ceres made way for them, standing against the corridor walls and staring as they passed. Fred felt like he should genuflect to them. Or wave. Anderson Dawes—his old friend and enemy—had run this station for years. He couldn't imagine the man putting up with this. But Ceres had been a different place then.

The governor's palace was close to the docks, out near the skin of the station where the spin gravity was greatest and the Coriolis least. The *Rocinante* had its own berth in the same dock as the *Minsky*, and when Fred's cart pulled to a stop by the loading dock, James Holden was already there.

"I was wondering if you were going to come over," Holden said as Fred pulled himself out of the cart. "Because I couldn't help noticing that someone shot at us."

"Really? And here, I thought they shot at the pirates."

Holden closed his mouth, his face turning a little darker. But then he shrugged. "Okay, that's a fair point, but it was still a dick move."

"It wasn't my people," Fred said, moving toward the *Rocinante's* airlock. Holden took the hint and fell in step beside him.

"I guessed that from the way that not every other ship in the fleet followed suit. And thank you for that, by the way."

“You’re welcome,” Fred said as they passed into the ship’s cargo hold. Amos Burton—wide-shouldered and friendly—stopped the mech he was driving and let them pass through with a nod. Fred had never met the infamous Clarissa Mao in person, but the girl who ducked away from the lift and into the machine shop was unmistakable. Wasn’t the strangest alliance he’d seen, but it was close. Fred waited until Holden was on the lift too and then set the controls for the crew deck. When they were out of earshot, Fred continued. “There’s something I need to discuss with you.”

“Is it about how someone shot at us, because I’m still kind of stuck on that.”

“I’ve got a team on it. We know it was Free Navy sympathizers, and we know which supply dump they raided to get the munitions, and no, that’s not why I came.”

“Are you going to arrest me for aiding a pirate?”

Fred chuckled. “It had crossed my mind, but no.”

“Bobbie? Because I’m not sure this whole ambassador thing is working out for her.”

“Not that either. You know I’ve been working on a summit. High-level meeting with the branches of the OPA that haven’t declared for the Free Navy.”

“The pajama party.”

Fred winced. “I wish you wouldn’t call it that.”

“Sorry. I just like the visual. Your very serious meeting of OPA leaders.”

The lift stopped at the crew deck. Fred got off, turning toward Holden’s cabin. Their footsteps on the decking sounded louder than Fred remembered, but it was probably just that the full crew wasn’t there any longer to provide the background noises of human life. No conversations, no music, no laughter. Or maybe it was only that it seemed that way to Fred.

“They won’t come to Ceres.” Fred sighed. “Not with the fleet here.”

“I can’t recommend sending the fleet away, though.”

“No, that would be bad. We’ve agreed on Tycho Station, but only with the provision that no UN or MCRN ships come.”

Holden paused at his cabin door. His brow was furrowed. It made him look younger than he was. “We’re going to my cabin because I have that whiskey you like, aren’t we?”

“We are,” Fred said. Holden considered for a moment, shrugged, and led the way in. The captain’s cabin was larger than the others on the corvette, but felt smaller by having many of Naomi Nagata’s possessions in the space too. Holden opened a locker and pulled a flask and two bulbs out, filling them as he spoke.

“What are the chances of pulling together a meeting like this and not having Marco find out about it?”

“Poor,” Fred said, taking the bulb Holden held out to him. “But that’s going to be true no matter what we try to organize. The OPA’s not an intelligence service. Everything out here runs on gossip and personal relationships.”

“Unlike intelligence services?” Holden said, and Fred laughed.

“All right, it’s a little like an intelligence service. My point is, yes, the information will leak, if not in detail, at least in broad strokes. Trying to keep it secret would be an exercise in frustration. And counterproductive, really. If we’re tiptoeing around the Free Navy, it makes it seem like we’re afraid of them. It strengthens my hand if these people see me coming in unafraid. Not foolhardy, but not intimidated.”

“Like on a gunship,” Holden said. “But not one that works for Earth or Mars. Maybe an independent that’s done some work with the OPA on and off. One that Marco has already tried to blow up a couple times and failed.”

The whiskey really was very good. Rich and complex, with the aromatics of an oak cask and a pleasant bite. He handed the bulb back over to Holden and shook his head when the captain offered him a second shot. Holden emptied his own bulb, thought for a moment, refilled it, and emptied it again.

“You know,” Holden said, putting bulbs and bottle back in his locker, “Inaros is going to disrupt this meeting.”

“That’s why I’m not sending you messages through the comm system. I don’t know how much has been compromised, and I’m a strong believer in the security of the air gap. But the truth is, as much as we’ll keep the details away from him, I’m hoping he’ll try. There’s nothing like attacking in anger to leave you exposed. And if he turns toward us, it gives Pa some breathing room.”

“I thought you were against joining forces with her.”

“I am. It was a bad move, and I expect we’ll pay for it. But since we’ve

done it, we should do the hell out of it. Better to be decisive and wrong than to let them see us wobble.”

Holden leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. Scowling. Fred waited.

“How does this end?” Holden said.

“We keep trying to draw him into making a mistake. He keeps doing the same to us. Whoever screws up last loses. Whoever screws up second to last wins. That’s what war is.”

“Not sure I was asking about the war,” Holden said.

“No? What then?”

“You always said you were looking for a place at the table. How do we win the peace? How does *that* end?”

Fred was quiet for a long time, a sense of mourning blooming in his chest, thick and aching. “Honestly, then? I don’t know how it ends. I don’t even know if it ends. I dedicated my life to this fight. First one side, and then the other. But now, I look at it? What’s happened with the gates. What’s happened to Earth. I don’t recognize this anymore. I keep doing what I can because I don’t know what else to do.”

Holden took a deep breath and let it out through his teeth. “When should we be ready to go?”

“I told Drummer I’d be wrapping things up here for two weeks. I’d like to leave four days from now. While any of Marco’s people who find out about it are still putting together their plans. Make them move before they’re ready.”

“All right,” Holden said. “We’ll take you.”

“I’ll have my people report whenever you need them. I’ll see myself out,” Fred said with a nod, and headed for the lift.

On the way back down, he closed his eyes and let the thin vibration of the mechanism rattle up through the soles of his feet, up his aching spine, to the crown of his head. There was still so much that needed doing before he left Ceres. He still had to meet with the crew of the *Minsky*, but he’d promised to consult with Avasarala’s solicitor general before he did, so that he didn’t accidentally obligate Earth to anything by saying the wrong phrase. And he wanted patrol rotations set for at least a month, so that his unexpected absence wouldn’t throw anything off. And he wanted sleep.

As he stepped out the airlock again, his hand terminal chirped. A new

message had arrived from Earth. From Avasarala. He paused in the wide air of the docks. The roar of the air recyclers and the clang of the loading mechs. The smell of lubricant and dust. His security detail was already moving toward him, ready to usher him back into his fishbowl. He waved them back and started the message.

Avasarala was in a corridor, shuffling briskly in the lunar microgravity. She looked as tired as he did, but she had a thin, amused smile. He'd never known anyone in his life who could be so cheerfully disappointed in humanity.

"I've run your list past my relief coordinator," she said—what would it be? Eight minutes ago? Ten? He used to be able to calculate light delay in his head. "It didn't quite bring him to orgasm, but I think he may want to take you out for drinks when you're in town. Be careful with him. He's got busy hands."

Someone off screen interrupted. Avasarala's eyes flickered away from the camera and she shook her head. "Does he want me to wipe his ass for him too? His job is to make decisions, not ask me what decisions he ought to make." A curt, deferential voice said yes, *ma'am* or something like it, and she started walking again.

Fred found himself smiling. When she'd been his enemy, she'd been a good one. Now that they were working as allies, the ways that they were the same almost humanized her.

"Where was I? Oh. Yes, the so-called relief supplies. I'm sending along a list of what we most need on the surface. If you get a chance to pass it on to Pa, please do. Apparently we're *all* fucking pirates now."

Chapter Twenty-Six: Filip

The night before the *Pella* left Pallas Station, Rosenfeld hosted a dinner for Marco and the other captains. The hall had been a vast open space designed as a construction compartment, but changed now into a kind of null-g throne room. A soft, chiming music played like flowing water with a melody. Serving platforms bristled with ceramic bulbs brightly colored as oil on water and filled with wine and water. Long ribbons of red and gold shifted in the breeze of the recyclers. Great lengths of gold fibered paper fluttered and bellied against the walls between the hand- and footholds. The crew of the *Pella* and the staff of Rosenfeld's Pallas authority mixed, Free Navy uniforms standing out sharp and martial against the casual civilian clothes of the locals. Young men and women in flowing robes of crimson and blue floated through the air slowly enough to deliver tapas of bean-and-grain cake, curried shrimp fresh from the tanks, and garlic sausage with real meat stuffed in the skins.

No element of the design suggested a consensus up or down. No concession had been made to the architecture of Earth and Mars. The combination of a traditional Belter aesthetic with lushness and luxury left Filip a little intoxicated even before he started drinking.

"I don't know what you could mean by purification," his father said through laughter, "if not 'getting rid of the impure parts.'"

Rosenfeld's answering chuckle was dry. After weeks traveling with the man, Filip still wasn't certain he could read his expressions. "You're saying you planned for this?"

"Anticipated. A change in the system of the greater world always risks having people lose perspective. Get drunk on possibility. Pa rode the wave in; now she thinks she can command the tides. I didn't know she would break, but I was ready if she did."

Rosenfeld nodded. Across the great echoing chamber, two women sang

together a few bars of a song that Filip knew, and then dissolved into hilarity. He looked across the open air, hoping that one of them might be looking back. That a girl would be watching him floating in conference with the great minds of the Free Navy. No one was.

When his father went on, his voice was lower. Still conversational, still friendly, but charged. "I had plans in place for anyone that broke. Pa, Sanjrani, Dawes. You. When I make my next strike, everyone will see how weak she is. Her support will burn off faster than breathing."

"You're sure," Rosenfeld said, making the words a statement and a question at the same time. He drank from his bulb, coughed. Filip watched his father waiting for the pebble-skinned man to finish his thought. Rosenfeld sighed, nodded. Filip felt some deeper meaning swim just below his understanding, leaving him bobbing in its wake. "It's only that she's been feeding people. The laity find that sort of thing endearing, sí no?"

"Anyone can buy votes with free ganga," Filip said.

Rosenfeld turned his head then, like he was noticing Filip for the first time. "True, true."

"Johnson and his cobbled-up fleet," Marco said, "have been squatting on Ceres with their eyes wide. Can't move forward without exposing themselves. Can't move back and leave Ceres to us again. They're trapped. Just the way we said they'd be."

"True," Rosenfeld said, and left *True, but ...* hanging in the air. All the criticisms trailed behind it like the ribbons in the breeze. *True, but it's been a long time since we left Ceres, and it's left us looking weak ... True, but one of your generals broke away and you haven't brought her to heel ... True, but Fred Johnson is issuing orders from the governor's mansion at Ceres, and you aren't.* Filip felt every point like a blow to the gut, but because they were unspoken, he couldn't answer them. Neither could his father. Rosenfeld took another drink, accepted a stick of vat-grown meat from a passing server, and steadied his drift with one hand as he ate. His expression was mild, but his gaze stayed locked on Marco.

"Waiting until the perfect moment is the mark of a great strategist," Marco said. "For now, the outer planets are ours to pass through freely. Mars and Earth and Luna—even Ceres. They're hiding behind their walls while we move through the wide plains of the vacuum, masters of the void. The more they realize they don't matter, the more desperate they'll become."

All we have to do is watch for the opportunity that's coming."

"Fred Johnson," Rosenfeld said. "He's already reached out to Carlos Walker and Liang Goodfortune. Aimee Ostman."

"Let them talk with him," Marco said, an edge coming into his voice for the first time. "Let them see how little he's become. I know his patterns, and I know what you're saying."

"Not saying anything, coyo," Rosenfeld said. "Except maybe we've been drinking too much."

"I told you before that Johnson would be off the board, and he will be. We didn't take him at Tycho, and we'll take him somewhere else. He is my white whale, and I will hunt him to the end of time."

Rosenfeld looked down at his bulb, his body hunching a degree in submission. Filip had felt his father's victory like it was his own.

"Didn't finish reading that book, did you?" Rosenfeld asked mildly.



Marco called the ships the three wolves. The *Pella*, of course, was the leader of the pack, with the *Koto* and the *Shinsakuto* placed in slow orbit to support her. Moving the ships into position was the hard part. Marco's trade hadn't included true stealth ships. The nearest they had were regular gunships with a coating of the stolen radar-eating paint layered over the skin, and without being designed for it and for holding waste heat, the Martian tech was less effective.

But the Belt had always had smugglers, pirates, and thieves. There were ways to hide, even in the abyss. Running without transponders was only one of them. They'd left Pallas with a hard burn. Hours of being pressed into the crash couches, juice burning in their veins and still driven to the edge of consciousness. And then, the coast. With no drive plume to show where they were, the *Pella* and her fellow hunters were hardly more than warm rocks, making a traverse of the vastness between Ceres on the inner Belt and Tycho Station in its own deeper orbit. The *Koto* risked a braking burn to plant itself alongside a charted asteroid, using the mass of stone and ice to hide it and explain the ladar ping responses. The *Pella* and the *Shinsakuto* stayed on the float, their orbits matching the widespread detritus

of the asteroid belt. No broadcasts. The only communications were tightbeam. They off-gassed a little to cool the outer hull and complicate its thermal signature. The emptiness itself was their friend. Even in the most crowded corners of the Belt, where the asteroids were thickest, it would have taken a telescope to see the nearest neighbors. The *Pella* was a warm sliver of metal and ceramic in trillions of square kilometers—less than a thumbnail clipping in an ocean.

Even if Ceres saw them—and over the long weeks of their silent hunt, it might—they would be indistinguishable from a thousand other unlicensed prospectors, smuggling ships, and homesteading Belter families. Johnson and his inner planet allies would need to know where to look to find them. And even if they found one, two more waited.

Fred Johnson's desperate meeting to sweep up the shards of the OPA was still weeks away, but Marco put them in and flying dark long before Fred would need to leave the safety of Ceres. *Men have patterns*, he said. And Fred Johnson's were misdirection followed by overwhelming force. Their sources said that the fleet would remain pinned at Ceres. With overwhelming force no longer an option, all that remained was misdirection. And so they floated, their passive sensor arrays pointed at Ceres and Tycho like a too-clever child watching a street magician's other hand. When Fred Johnson went to make his plea to the ragged stragglers of the OPA still willing to listen, Marco said, he would know. And when Johnson's prospective allies saw him die ...

Well, they had lost Michio Pa. But Marco could replace her a hundred times over. Strength pulled people as surely as gravity. More, sometimes.

Marco would wait for hours every day, strapped into his crash couch as if a hard burn could come at any second, his eyes flickering over sensor data, and still end his shifts energized and laughing, excited. Joyful. Filip didn't have his father's raw endurance. For the first several days, he could equal Marco's focus and sense of imminent violence, and even then by the time he went to the gym, to the galley, to his cabin, the brightness in his chest had started to change to something more like anxiety. Or rage. Only he didn't know what he was anxious about or who he was so angry with.

When the *Minsky* came to Ceres, the *Connaught* at its side, Filip had been sure that the moment had arrived. Pa was there, the consolidated fleet watching her inch toward them like a cat hauling a dead mouse home as a

love gift. Filip felt it in his blood—the coming violence. The grand and gaudy proof that the Free Navy was stronger than its enemies. He hadn't been the only one either. It was like all the crew of the *Pella*—Josie and Karal and Bastien and Jún—everyone had taken a breath at the same time, steeled themselves for the burn and the battle.

Everyone but Marco.

He'd stayed just the same, watching the datafeeds from his crash couch on the command deck. The attack from Ceres, the *Rocinante's* defense of the *Connaught*. All of it seemed to wash over Marco like it was nothing. He captured images of the ship transfer. When he recorded his denouncement of Pa and revealed her as a stooge of the inners, he seemed to wake up for a moment, but only while the recording was going on. As soon as the camera shut off, he seemed to fall back into himself. Filip took comfort that this wasn't the same torpor and indifference that had haunted the *Pella* after leaving Ceres the first time. Marco watched like a predator in cover, the *Pella* drifting in its orbit around the distant sun like it was locked to Ceres Station.

Several days after the *Connaught's* departure, Filip dreamed of Earth—only it wasn't Earth. It was a massive spaceship, layer upon layer of scaffold, reaching down forever. A great fire burned at its core, and Filip was lost in it, trying to find something. Something precious that he'd had and lost or else that had been hidden from him. Also, he was being chased. Sought by something so that he switched from being hunter to prey and back to hunter.

In the dream, he was floating down a long corridor. Purely ballistic. The handholds and footholds skated by on all sides, just beyond his reach. There was a strong smell—mineral and heat. The exposed iron core of the Earth. Its burning heart. And there was something at the end of the passage. Something waiting. His mother and an army of the dead who he'd killed. The rapping of their bone fingers on the deck was a threat and a promise. Filip woke with a shout, grabbing at the straps of his crash couch like they were trying to strangle him.

Then the rapping of fingers came again, and the door of his cabin slipped open. Karal floated in the corridor, his eyes an image of concern. And maybe excitement.

“Hoy, Filipito,” he said. “Bist bien?”

“Fine,” Filip said. What time was it? He felt like he’d woken in the middle of a cycle, but he couldn’t be sure. He’d been sleeping so much lately, it was easy for him to lose track. So long as there was nothing to do but wait, it hardly mattered how the hours passed. But sleeping too long was much like sleeping too little. It left him confused and tired.

“Marco wants you. Command deck, yeah?”

Filip nodded with his left hand while he unstrapped with his right. “Con que?” he said. “Something happened?”

Karal’s look of concern eroded into a bestial grin. “Dui,” he said. “But let Marco show you, yeah?”

Pulling himself along the lift tube, Filip’s heart tapped against his chest. The sense of the dream wasn’t quite gone, bleeding into the solid ship under his hands. Excitement and dread wore each other’s clothes, spoke in the same voice. When he reached the command deck, the lighting was set for battle, and the crash couches were crewed: Sárta strapping herself down, Wings already in place. Bastien’s voice echoed from the cockpit, and the anticipation of thrust made Filip think it was above them. The words were clipped and terse. The air seemed cleaner, as if Filip could see everything for the first time.

Marco reached out and spun his own couch on its gimbals to face him. The light from the screen threw shadows across his father’s eyes. Filip saluted, and Marco spread his hands.

“The hour has now arrived, Filip,” Marco said. “All of our patience and sacrifice have brought us here to this one, perfect moment.” Times like this, he sounded almost like an Earther. Filip nodded, his heart beating faster. He didn’t know whether to keep looking at Marco or if it would be all right to turn to the screens. Marco laughed, and pulled Filip close. He gestured to the tactical readout. A dot of light.

If he looked outside the ship, on float with merely human eyes or through the cameras that took in the same spectrum, the star field would have overwhelmed the glimmer from the ship. Even Ceres would have been little more than a bit of darkness where the starlight was blotted out. On the screen, the critical light was brighter, its path sketched in. Filip glanced at Marco for permission, received it in a nod, and then drew back the scale until the full arc of the little ship’s pathway was clear.

A single ship, burning hard from Ceres to Tycho.

“Fred Johnson,” Filip said.

“More than that,” Marco said, and the calm in his voice made him sound almost drugged by pleasure. “Look at the drive signature.”

Filip did, blinked. His breath went shallow and tight. It matched the *Rocinante*. James Holden’s ship. His betrayer of a mother. The clean, clear center of everything he hated, everything they had to overcome. And here it was, delivered to them like a present.

“I’ve been tracking them. They’ve left the effective protection range of Ceres. They’re alone in the void, except for us.” Marco’s smile was beatific, but the expression in his dark eyes changed. Instead of being lost in the gratification of the moment, he was looking at Filip. More than looking at him. Seeing him. Seeing *into* him.

“KaraL,” Marco said. Half strapped into his couch, the big man paused. Marco shifted a degree. “Need you in engineering. Damage control, yeah?”

KaraL shrugged, unstrapped. Marco looked back at Filip, then pointed to the crash couch with his chin. *It’s your station. Take it.* As KaraL launched down the lift tube, feet vanishing last, Filip pulled himself into the crash couch. Weapons controls filled the screen. Torpedoes. PDCs. The sword of the *Pella* was in his hands.

The warning Klaxon seemed to come from a great distance. The *Pella*, preparing after weeks sleeping on the float. The needle stung when it went into his vein, and the cold, bright flow of military-grade juice lit him from within like he was fire itself, consuming everything he touched.

Two new dots appeared on tactical. New stars in the star-sown blackness, both marked as friendlies. The *Koto* and the *Shinsakuto* leaping from their cover, and announcing their attack. The *Pella* jumped up around Filip, grabbing his crash couch and all the others on the command deck. The gimbals hissed in unison as Bastien brought them around, couches snapping to face the new up and follow it, whichever way the maneuvering thrusters demanded. The rumble of the drive passed through the ship, through Filip’s bones. The crash couch gel flowed up the sides of his body. As if he was watching someone else do it, he keyed in firing solutions. One gunship against three. The *Rocinante* couldn’t help but die.

“They saw us, them!” Bastien shouted. “We’re getting painted!”

“Filip,” Marco said.

“Sa sa,” Filip said. With a motion, he trained the PDCs toward the

distant flicker that was the enemy, ready to chew down any incoming torpedoes. The *Pella* jumped forward again, the hard burn jumping harder. Filip let his arms sink down to his sides, fingers on the built-in controls. He fought to inhale. Five gs. Six, and the acceleration was still going up. The wolves were loose now. The pack running.

His vision narrowed, shadows crowding his peripherals like the dead from his dream. He had the weird sensation that *she* was in the room. Naomi Nagata. But that was only an accident of sleep and high-g blood flow. The crash couch chimed, a fresh infusion of juice brightening him. His lips were growing numb and tingling. He couldn't lift his head from the couch any longer. It was like he was becoming the ship. Or it was becoming him.

He heard his father trying to speak, but the acceleration was affecting him too. The *Pella* groaned, the superstructure settling and flexing under the acceleration. A high harmonic overtone rang through the air like a struck bell.

On Filip's monitor, a message appeared. From his father. His captain. Leader of the Free Navy and liberator of the Belt.

FIRE AT WILL.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Bobbie

Confirm I've got four more fast-movers," Alex said, his voice tense and calm at the same time.

"Got them," Bobbie said, her jaw aching with the acceleration gravity. The gunner's control identified the new torpedoes, adding them to the six already on her scopes. Three ships converging on them from different angles were identified as the *Pella*, the *Shinsakuto*, and the *Koto*. Marco Inaros' personal ship and two gunships for backup, and nothing for the *Roci* to hide behind but her drive plume. The enemies were a long way off still—millions of klicks—and none on initial vectors that did them any favors. The *Roci* had already gotten past them. They were like a kid on a football pitch, running the ball with three opposing players sprinting to catch up. Except if the opposing players had guns.

When the *Roci* hit the mathematical balance point of velocity, mass, and distance that defined the halfway point, there would be some hard choices to make. Either they'd flip and start braking toward Tycho or commit to letting the chase go on indefinitely. If they let the Free Navy spook them out into the empty spaces between bases and stations, the chase turned into an ugly kind of attrition battle. Who ran out of ammunition or reaction mass first. Given how the outer system looked these days, it would make more sense to brake toward Tycho and hope that backup from the station could reach them before the Free Navy pounded them into scrap metal and blood.

Her job and Alex's were to make sure they lived long enough to have that problem. She tracked the torpedoes. With any luck, they'd all be standard issue. They didn't show the jittering path of point defense countermeasures yet. When they got in effective range, the *Roci* would start chewing them to pieces, streams of tiny tungsten rounds ripping the torpedoes to nothing. If there were only six, she'd have been confident they could do it. Ten at once was a little more complicated, but as long as they

didn't all hit at the same time, she was pretty sure they wouldn't be overwhelmed.

Holden's voice in her ear sounded anxious. "How long before we can start shooting back?"

"Fast-movers will be in effective PDC range in sixty-eight minutes," she said. "Do we have any response from Ceres? Because if they could throw a few spare long-range torpedoes at these sonsofbitches, it wouldn't hurt my feelings."

Fred Johnson's voice answered, calm and businesslike. "I'm working on that now."

"Our new friends are closing," Alex said. "We may have to get a little less comfortable."

"Understood," Holden said.

The *Rocinante* was already under a three-g burn. Bobbie felt it in her joints and eyes. The crappy juice dribbling into her veins gave her a distant, cloudy sort of headache and a taste like formaldehyde in her mouth. Below her, the rest of the crew—Holden's and Johnson's both—were strapped in for battle. She could hear Sandra Ip's voice bleeding out from Alex's headset, talking on a private channel. Naomi was talking to someone too, her voice rising from the deck below.

The anxiety and fear in her gut were as familiar as a favorite song. The logic of tactics and violence spread out on the screens, and she found she could see things in them like reading the future. If Ceres fired a barrage of missiles or long-range torpedoes, she knew the *Shinsakuto* would peel off to stop them. She saw how Alex would curve the *Roci*'s path to force a few extra seconds between the Free Navy's incoming torpedoes. The vectors of the enemy ships whispered things in the back of her mind about recklessness and aggression. And she knew that there were other people on each of the incoming ships whose minds were making the same analysis, reaching the same conclusions. Seeing something she didn't or missing a detail that she picked up. All it took was one critical mistake, and they'd be dead or captured. One oversight from the enemy, and they'd get away.

And along with it all—the shitty juice, the battle fear, the desperate effort of keeping her mind clear while all the blood tried to pool at the back of her skull—there was something else. A warmth. A sense of being where she belonged. Her team was counting on her, and her life depended on all of

them doing their jobs with efficiency and professionalism and an unhesitating competence.

When she died, she wanted it to be like this. Not in a hospital bed like her grandmother. Not in a sad little hole on Mars with a gun in her mouth or a gut full of pills like the failures of veterans' outreach. She wanted to win, to protect her tribe and wipe the enemy into a paste of blood and dismay. But failing that, she wanted to die trying. A snippet of something she'd once read popped in her head: *Facing fearful odds protecting the bones of her fathers and the temples of her gods*. Yeah. Like that.

"Shit," Alex said. "I've got six more. We're up to sixteen fast- movers."

"I've got 'em," Bobbie said.

"Why are they spacing them out like that?" Holden asked.

"The *Shinsakuto's* getting ready to flip and burn," Bobbie said. "I'm guessing Fred talked Ceres into helping."

"I did indeed," Fred said. "Just got confirmation."

"If our PDCs are going to have a chance chewing these fuckers up, I've got to punch it," Alex said.

"Everyone in your couches?" Holden said. There was a chorus of response. No one said no. "Do what you need to do, Alex."

He looked over at her. Pilot's and gunner's stations were the only ones in the cockpit. It was designed that way because if systems started failing, they could shout to each other. They had to be able to coordinate, because from now to the end of the battle, no one else mattered. Every other life on the ship was about to become cargo.

"You good for this, Gunny?"

"Let's kill these assholes," she said.

The *Rocinante* jumped forward, hitting her in the back like an assault. Her arms slammed into the gel, her fingers against the control barely able to move. The images on the screen went fuzzy, her eyes deforming past her ability to refocus them. She tensed her legs and arms, pushing the blood back to her core. The couch chimed and a fresh blast of cheap juice hit her bloodstream. Her gasps sounded like someone choking. Eight gs, maybe? Maybe more. It had been too fucking long.

An endless time passed, and then a chime told her the first round of torpedoes were in PDC range, and her targeting solution kicked in. Alex bent the *Roci's* path, forced the attackers to shift. Gave her an extra fraction

of a second between them. The PDCs lit up, going gold on her display as they fired. The deep chattering tapped through the deck with each one like she was playing music. Four torpedoes flamed out at once, but the other six danced away from the streams of metal, then spiraled closer to the ship. Alex banked hard, catching one with the edge of the drive plume, making the other five maneuver. She caught four. The fifth shifted, evaded, streaked close—

Alex tried to yell, but it came out as little more than a high squeak. The ship turned the extra three degrees to bring another PDC arc into play, and the enemy torpedo died, falling behind them in bright shards and melting in their plume.

A message appeared on her screen from Alex. TAKE IT TO THEM?

The two ships were bearing down on the *Roci*, pushing hard to narrow the distance. She didn't know if that was bold or foolhardy. Probably they didn't either. Ships full of Belters weren't known for loving high-g burns, but this was war. You took the risks you had to take. But the third ship had peeled off. And two points, her old sergeant used to say, defined an opportunity. Those bad guys were awfully close to each other.

DONNE, she typed back, and didn't bother fixing the error.

She routed the five torpedoes between the *Pella* and the *Koto* in a starburst. The Free Navy ships were firing PDCs at the *Rocinante* now, the rounds coming like ropes of pearls on the screen. Alex maneuvered around them easily. Range was too far still for close-quarters battle tactics to apply, but maybe the Belters didn't know that. Or just meant it as an insult.

She watched the curving arcs of PDC fire shift to find her torpedoes as they burned for the abstract line between the two ships. Two of hers died. Three. Four. But the fifth curved into the space between the *Koto* and the *Pella* where their tracking software would recognize that the PDC fire that would stop the torpedo would also riddle the friendly on the other side. The two ships lurched apart, and the *Koto* dropped a torpedo that took out Bobbie's attacker just a few seconds before impact.

The maneuver had bought them a few moments, but at the cost of one-quarter of their total torpedo stores. It wasn't a game she could afford to keep playing when the ante was so high. But by then she'd put in her next firing solution and passed it to Alex.

To his credit, he didn't question her. In a single instant, the gravity vanished, the *Roci's* Epstein dropped to zero. Her couch slammed to the side, the hard spin of the maneuvering thrusters whipped them around. The custom-built keel-mounted rail gun made the ship jump as it fired. It was the one weapon the *Roci* had that wasn't standard for a Martian corvette. The rotation continued until they were back on their old course, and then ten gs slammed her back into her couch as the Epstein drive kicked back on and the counterthrusters killed the spin.

A high-speed three-sixty with a precision-timed rail gun shot halfway through the spin wasn't exactly standard combat tactics for Martian frigates, but she thought her old combat-tactics instructors would have approved.

The sudden crushing weight of thrust brought a wave of nausea, and her heart stuttered in a confusion of fluid dynamics and pressure. She must have blacked out for a moment, because she didn't see the *Koto* hit. Only the glowing plume of superheated gas expanding behind it where it had dropped core. Even pressed into the crash couch, she managed a smile. She waited to see if the *Pella* would break off, go to the aid of her fallen comrade.

It didn't.

Bobbie fed a new firing solution, passed it to Alex, and they tried again. A weightless, spinning moment, the kick of the rail gun, and slammed back into the couch like an assault. The *Pella* knew now. At the vast distances between them, even the fraction of a second that it took to spin the *Rocinante* around was enough for the enemy to anticipate them and dodge. She threw two more torpedoes at the *Pella*, but they were shot down well before they could do damage.

The *Pella* launched another round of torpedoes, but without the *Shinsakuto* and the *Koto* to box them in, Bobbie wasn't worried. The complexities of the battle looked to be over. Now it became longer and simpler and worse. Something in her trachea slid where it wasn't meant to be and she forced out a cough, her head spinning a little when she did.

This was how they'd end now. A long, desperate race to see who ran out of PDC rounds or torpedoes first. Who had allies near enough to complicate the situation. But before any of that, there was the braking threshold. The point of no return at which they wouldn't have enough reaction mass left to match the thrust they'd already pumped into their vector. They'd be trapped

in a desperately long orbit, at the mercy of whoever came for them. *That* was her hard deadline.

Fighting to move her fingers against the built-in controls, she sent a message to Holden: DISTRACT THEM.

A moment later, a reply arrived: ???

DISTRACT THEM.

Bobbie waited for the inevitable calls for clarification, but was pleasantly surprised when instead the comm array went active. A tightbeam. To the *Pella*. She saw the connection accepted. Good. She tried to count down from five, but got lost somewhere around three. She breathed through gritted, aching teeth, and re-sent the firing solution. Float, spin, fire, and slam back into the couch, spine shrieking and mind fluttering on the edge of blackness. It hadn't done any good. The *Pella* had dodged again.

There had to be a way. She couldn't let the enemy run them out. She couldn't let her team down again. There had to be a way. They could fire a fraction of a second earlier ... but the keel mount meant the *Roci* could only fire straight ahead. A tear pressed out of her eyes, slamming to the gel beside her ear like a stone. Were they still at eight gs? She looked at the firing solution through blurred eyes. There had to be something. Some other way to draw a straight line between two points.

She could try again, but the *Pella* would dodge the way it had before. The rail gun could only draw perfectly straight lines, and now that the *Pella* knew what their spin meant, its computers would be very good at predicting the slug's flight path and adjusting.

Something. Something there. The tiny, shining limn of an idea. The *Pella* would dodge the way it had before.

So how did it dodge before?

Her wrist creaked as she pulled the battle record up, moving back second by second. Twice the *Pella* had dodged the rail gun. Both times by firing all her port maneuvering thrusters—sidestepping—and then correcting on the starboard. It kept her pointing the same direction, not veering away. But if it was a habit ...

She fed the firing solution in again. The moment of sickening spin, the bang of the rail gun, the crack of the couch taking her in. But the *Pella* did it again. It dodged the same way. It was a pattern, and patterns were gaps in

the armor. She could fit a knife in there.

The formaldehyde taste in her mouth was heavy and chemical. They were out of PDC range, but that was only convention. PDC rounds didn't magically evaporate or slow down. Every tungsten slug that hadn't hit its target in battle was still out there in the black somewhere, speeding on as fast as the moment it had left the barrel. It was only the overwhelming vastness of space that kept every ship out there from being holed at random.

This wasn't fucking random, though.

Her fingers ached. Her head ached. She didn't care. She pulled up the speeds of everything she had—PDC rounds at so many meters per second. Torpedoes started slower, but followed a sharp acceleration curve. Rail-gun rounds ... she rechecked the number. Okay. Rail gun rounds went really fast.

It was a puzzle. It was only a puzzle. There was an answer, and she could find it. There would be one chance. She keyed in the new firing solution, everything tied together.

You are mine, you piece of shit. You are mine now.

She passed it over.

The *Rocinante* shuddered, the vibration of the PDCs made more violent by the high-g burn. On her screen, it looked like a cloud of gold. Thousands of rounds spinning out to kill torpedoes that weren't there. Too imprecise to hit the *Pella* at this range, and not in the right place anyway. It looked like a misfire. A malfunction. It looked like nothing. Then the torpedoes launched. Three of them, spitting toward the *Pella* in tight curves. The obvious danger. Shards of white showing internal strain, vector, guiding themselves toward their target and accelerating toward the *Pella's* port side. The *Pella's* PDCs opened up, spraying toward the incoming, evasion-drunk torpedoes. For long, terrible minutes, the pieces of her puzzle moved into place.

It wasn't going to work. They were going to see it. As clear as it was to her, they had to be able to see it too.

The torpedoes sped in, driving toward the *Pella's* flank and the withering fire of her PDCs. The *Pella* dropped three torpedoes of her own. Bobbie's golden cloud of PDC rounds was almost in position.

Alex killed the engine as he had before. Spun them. The rail gun fired in the split second it came to bear on the *Pella*, the spine of the ship creaking.

Before Bobbie could see what had happened, the *Roci* completed her arc, her drive returning as it had before. And the *Pella*—flagship of the Free Navy and private gunship of Marco Inaros—dodged the rail gun round just as it had before. *Just* as it had before. By sidestepping away from the torpedo battle to its port.

And into the path of the oncoming cloud of PDC rounds.

There was no way to know how many hit, but the *Pella* veered off course, its main drive still firing full out even as it turned almost orthogonally to the direction of the *Rocinante*. Alex eased off, and a mere three-g acceleration felt like being light as a balloon. Bobbie checked the stores and noted she'd already fired half her torpedoes, so she fired half of what was left, sending five more after the *Pella*, one after the other streaming toward the wounded ship's drive cone. The *Pella* had lost at least one thruster on her starboard and struggled to bring PDCs to bear.

And then it got hard to see what happened, because the enemy drive plume was pointing straight at them, the *Pella* retreating up out of the ecliptic and toward the uncaring stars. Alex cut the drive, leaving them on the float. The back of Bobbie's head was wet. Either she'd been sweating or the tears pulled from her eyes had pooled. Or her skin split and she was in her own blood. No matter what, it felt great.

Alex was staring at her, his eyes wide, shaking his head. Slowly a grin pulled at his lips. He started chuckling, and then she did too. Her ribs hurt. Her throat hurt. When she tried to move her left arm, the elbow protested like it had been dislocated and shoved roughly back into place.

"Holy shit," Alex said. "I mean just holy fucking *shit*."

"I know," she said.

"That was *great*!" Alex whooped, and punched the air. "We did it! We kicked their butts!"

"We did," Bobbie said, closing her eyes and heaving a deep, slow breath. Her sternum popped like a firecracker, and she started laughing again. A thin sound, distant as home, plucked at her awareness. She realized she'd been hearing it for a while, but hadn't registered it in the heat of battle. Now that she heard it, she recognized it at once.

It was a medical alarm.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Holden

When Holden left the Earth Navy, he'd had a dishonorable discharge on his record and a sense of relief and righteous anger stiffening his spine. He'd thought at the time that the greatest irony of his newly fallen position in life was that, while his career options were now substantially narrowed and his status in the world dimmed, he felt freer. Looking back at it now, that freedom only earned second place after the subliminal, barely expressed relief that he wouldn't see any more ship-to-ship fighting.

Since the *Rocinante* had become his home, he'd tracked down pirates for the OPA. Battled over Io. The slow zone. Ilus. If he'd sucked it up and stayed in the service, he'd have been a thousand times safer. It wasn't something that had occurred to him before. In all the previous battles, he'd been in charge. Working for so many years with a skeleton crew of only four made frantic action the norm. Between his crew and Fred Johnson's now, every station had someone in it, and a backup ready to step in besides. Even with the high burn pressing him into the couch so hard he could barely breathe, there was a deeper urge to do something. To take control of some corner of the action. To have an effect.

The truth of the matter was that anything he did now would get in someone else's way. Watching the tactical map and trying not to pass out were literally all he could usefully manage. Even calling Ceres for help had been someone else's job. And Fred, in the couch at the far side of the command deck, had done it better than he could have. When a power exchange blew out and switched to the fallback, Amos or Clarissa had flagged it for repair before he could remember how to pull up the damage control schedule. Mfume and Steinberg were at stations amidships, Lombaugh and Droga down in engineering, two teams of pilot and gunner ready to take over if the Free Navy cleaved the cockpit off the ship. So he watched the *Shinsakuto* falling away to intercept the long-range torpedoes

from Ceres and then shifted to the *Koto* and the *Pella*—Marco Inaros' ship—as they raced up at them from below like sharks.

Naomi was in the next couch over, breathing in ragged gasps. He wanted to talk to her, to ask if she was okay, to offer her some sort of comfort. He tried to imagine her response. Something that meant, *I appreciate that you care, but the time to talk through my emotional well-being isn't during a firefight*. It was just another way that he could try to control something. Make something better. Anything. She was less than a meter from him, and a million clicks away.

When the drive cut out and the ship spun hard, he knew they were dead. Then thrust slammed him back into his couch. For a few seconds he'd wondered whether it had actually happened, or if he was starting to hallucinate, but then he saw the *Koto* falling away beneath them. Even then it took a few seconds to understand what had happened, just in time for it to happen again. He heard Naomi cry out as the impact of the couch hit them all again.

He wanted to shout up to Bobbie that she had to stop it. That there were people in the ship—some of them Belters. And anyway no one had grown up in gravity hard enough that they could shrug off eight-g impacts all day, crap-ass third-rate juice or not. But he couldn't even do that, because if she was doing it, she probably was right to. The best he could do was hate it and endure.

All of which was why, when something finally did arrive that he could do, he was practically giddy with relief.

DISTRACT THEM.

He stared at the words with blurry, aching eyes. Who was Bobbie asking him to distract? The crew? The enemy? He forced his fingers to the controls, managing ??? only with some effort.

The answer came back just the same. DISTRACT THEM.

Holden stared at the words. As much as he wanted to help, there really wasn't much he could do that the ship wasn't already doing. The ECM package was spraying radio chatter at the pursuing ship, doing its best to blind the enemy torpedoes. The comm laser was throwing as much high-frequency light into the *Pella*'s sensors as it could pump out. As far as distractions went, the *Roci* was already doing her best. He forced another

painful breath.

On the other hand, what else was he doing? And thinking about the comm laser gave him an idea.

He grabbed the comm control and put in a tightbeam-connection request to the *Pella*. Maybe they'd think he was asking for their surrender. Or offering his. Intellectually, he knew there had to be some anxiety in him. This was Marco Inaros. The man who'd killed the Earth. Who'd tried to capture Naomi and kill him. But between the ache of the burn and his juice-regulated heartbeat, he didn't feel it.

The tightbeam picked up carrier, paused while it negotiated wavelength and data protocol, and then the connection was accepted, and Holden was looking up into the eyes of Marco Inaros. He'd seen pictures of the man. Watched the videos of his press releases. He knew the face as well as he might any third-rate celebrity. Thrust had pulled back Marco's hair, stretched his skin, pushed his cheeks back and in. It made him look younger than he was. Holden hoped it was doing the same for him.

He hadn't assumed that the *Pella* would brake enough to make conversation possible. Whatever he was going to do, he'd thought it would be in text. But now that they were facing each other, he thought this might be enough. The monitor was only about sixty centimeters from Holden. Marco's would be about the same. It created the illusion that they were close to each other. He could see the little flaw in Marco's hairline where it curved back at the right temple. The blood vessels in his eyes. It felt intimate. Almost embarrassing. And, motionless as they were, there was also an uncanny feeling, like looking into the mirror and seeing someone else looking back. Here was a man who'd taken on the fate of humanity like it was a part-time job, right here in front of him. Close enough to touch.

It was hard to be certain what emotions were actually in Marco's expression and what Holden only imagined. A defiant sneer. Then confusion. Maybe they were there; maybe they were only what he expected to see. He was certain, though, that a malicious gleam came into the man's eyes at the end. The effort of working his controls showed in Marco's face, and Holden expected a message to come through. A taunt, an accusation. He was wrong.

Marco clicked away, and a new face appeared. Younger. Darker. As crushed by the acceleration, but unmistakable. Filip Inaros. The boy didn't

look at Holden, didn't seem aware of him. Holden, it seemed, wasn't showing on his monitor. Marco was only giving Holden a moment to look at the boy.

He didn't know what he was supposed to see there. Maybe it was a vulgar masculine boast. *She may be with you now, but I fucked her first.* That seemed about Inaros' level. Maybe it was to show that the son hated them as much as the father. But where looking at Marco had felt awkward, seeing Filip was actually fascinating. Holden couldn't help searching for traces of Naomi in the younger, masculine face. The epicanthic fold at the corner of his eyes. The angle of his cheeks and the shape of his lips. The way he moved reminded Holden of Naomi struggling under a burden.

What struck him most was how young the boy looked. At that age, Holden hadn't left Earth yet. Had still been waking up at the ranch in Montana, having breakfast with his many parents before going out to mend fences and check the turbines at the wind farm. Thinking of the Navy because Brenda Kaufmann had broken up with him, and he was sure he'd never get over her.

There were mistakes you made because you were young. Everyone made some of them.

Thrust cut out. Holden's couch snapped to the side again, bucked as the rail gun fired, and slammed back into him. On his screen, the boy's eyes widened as his couch swiveled. Something loud happened on the *Pella*. Someone shouted. The high whine of a medical alert. The tightbeam dropped as the thrust gravity on the *Roci* dropped back. Still more than usual, but after that long pushing at eight gs, his body's response was profound and visceral. Naomi's moan was half pain, half relief. People were shouting in his ear: delight and exaltation. His mouth tasted like blood. His elbow ached as he reached for the monitor, switching to tactical without the in-couch control. Alex's voice, muffled like they were both underwater, reached him. *That was great. We did it. We kicked their butts.*

The *Pella* was burning away, still under high thrust, but racing away. A wave of the *Rocinante's* torpedoes raced after them. Without thinking, he disarmed them.

His fingers hesitated above the screen, his mind falling apart and coming back together and falling apart again the way it did at the end of a long burn. The blood reperfusing through his brain carried strange, fleeting

sensations. His left leg cold and wet, like he was standing in a river. The smell of burning hair. A sense of unfocused moral outrage that flickered and went out as suddenly as it had come. He pressed his hands to his eyes and coughed. Pain shot down his spine. His ears rang. Tinnitus.

No, not tinnitus.

“Jim.”

He wrenched himself around, fighting against the unnatural weight of his body. Naomi was struggling in her couch, futilely trying to rise in the heavy g. Her face was ashen. His half-functioning brain leaped to panic. She was hurt. *Something’s wrong. This is my fault.*

“What?” he said, his voice rough and phlegmy. “What happened?”

Bobbie came down from the cockpit, muscles straining on the ladder rungs. Naomi looked from him to her and back again. She was pointing at something, gasping to get words out.

“Fred,” Naomi said. “He’s having a stroke.”

“Oh,” Holden said, but Bobbie had already surged forward, undoing the straps and half lifting Fred out of his couch. At their current acceleration, the old man had to weigh over two hundred kilos. Bobbie nearly collapsed but stayed on her feet, her arms wrapped around his upper body, trying to pull him free of the restraints. Holden staggered to the lift and shouted up. “Alex! Cut thrust. Put us at a third of a g.”

“Hostiles are still—”

“If they shoot at us, do something clever. We’ve got an emergency.”

The gravity let go again. Holden’s spine lengthened. His knees felt like they were swelling. Bobbie, now carrying Fred in her arms, was on the lift, dropping toward the medical bay. Fred looked tiny cradled against her, his eyes closed. Holden told himself that the old man’s arm draped around Bobbie’s shoulder was clinging to her. Had strength. He didn’t know if it was true.

A cacophony of voices shouted in his ear. Everyone asking what had happened. What was going on.

“Steinberg!” he barked. “You’re on weapons. Patel, take the comms.” Then he pulled off his headset. The lift was coming back up for them, the gentle hum barely audible in the noises of the ship, and the only thing he had ears for. He willed it to go faster.

Naomi put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Really?”

Naomi shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know.”

The lift came. They loaded on, descending for the crew deck. If the *Pella* got itself back under control, it could loop around. The fight could start again at any second, catching them away from their crash couches. Holden knew they should be burning hard, rushing toward Tycho as fast as they could. He walked through the tight, military corridor, into the medical bay. It felt like he was in a different ship. Everything was just where it always was, but it seemed new. Fresh. Foreign.

Fred lay on the table, stripped to the waist. The autodoc was strapped to his arm, needles inserted into the veins. He looked weirdly vulnerable, as if he’d physically shrunk between the time he’d gotten into the crash couch and now. Bobbie stood over him, arms crossed, glowering like an angel out of the Old Testament. One of the scary kind. The kind that kept you out of paradise and killed armies in a single night. She didn’t look up as they came in.

“How bad is it?” Holden asked.

Somehow Bobbie made her shrug an expression of rage. “He’s dead.”



He didn’t know how Amos and Clarissa got the duty of preparing the body, but whatever the mechanism, it turned out to be a good fit. Amos stripped him, and Clarissa cleaned Fred’s skin with a damp cloth. Holden didn’t need to be there for it. Didn’t have to watch. Except that he did.

They didn’t talk. Didn’t make jokes. Clarissa swabbed Fred’s body with a calm, businesslike intimacy. Compassionate and unsentimental. Amos helped when Fred needed to be moved and dressed in a fresh uniform and when she needed to slide the body bag under him. It took a little less than an hour from start to finish. Holden didn’t know if that seemed like too long or not long enough. Clarissa hummed something as she worked. A soft melody he didn’t recognize, but one that didn’t seem to rest in either a major key or a minor one. Her thin, pale face and Amos’ thickness seemed perfectly matched. When the bag was sealed, Amos hefted it. Easy to do. They were still barely above a third of a g.

Clarissa nodded to Holden as they passed out of the medical bay. Her skin was bruised at the back of her neck and all along the arms where the blood had pooled during the burn. “We’ll take care of him,” she said.

“He was important,” Holden replied, and wasn’t ashamed at the catch in his voice.

Something like sorrow or amusement flickered in Clarissa’s eyes. “I’ve spent a lot of time with the dead. He’ll be okay now. You go take care of the ones that lived through it.”

Amos smiled amiably and carried the bag out. “You need to get drunk or in a fistfight later, just let me know.”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “All right.”

After they left, he stood beside the empty medical table. He’d been on it more than once. Naomi had. Alex. Amos. Amos had regrown most of a hand in this room. That death had come randomly—stupidly—seemed obscene even though it was mundane enough. People stroked out. Fred was older than he’d once been. He was dealing with high blood pressure. He’d been going without sleep, pushing himself. The juice they had was lousy. It had been a long battle and a hard burn. All of it was true. All of it made sense. And none of it did.

The others were still at their stations, but the word had gotten out by now. He was going to have to face them at some point. He didn’t know what he’d say to Fred’s crew. *I’m so sorry*, but after that?

He brushed his hand on the mattress, listened to the hiss of skin against plastic. It felt colder than he’d expected. It took him a second to realize it was the dampness from Clarissa’s cloth evaporating. He recognized Naomi by her footsteps.

“Do you remember when it came out he was working with the OPA?” Holden asked.

“I do.”

“It was the only thing on any of the newsfeeds for ... I don’t know. A week. Everyone saying he was a traitor and a disgrace. Talking about whether there should be an investigation. Whether he could still be brought up on charges even though he’d resigned years before.”

“What I heard was more equivocal,” Naomi said. She came into the room, leaned against one of the other tables. She pulled her hair down over her eyes like a veil as she spoke, then scowled and brushed it back. “The

people I knew assumed he was a mole. Earthers trying to Trojan horse their way into our organization.”

“Was it still your organization back then?”

“Yeah. It was.”

He turned, pulled himself up to sit on the table. The autodoc, sensing his weight, pulled up the start screen, glowed hopefully for a few seconds, and turned back off. “I just can’t remember a time when Fred Johnson wasn’t someone important. It’s just ...”

Naomi sighed. He looked at her. The lines on her face that hadn’t been there when he’d met her. The way the line of her jaw had changed. She was beautiful. She was mortal. He didn’t want to think about it.

“Every faction of the OPA Fred could bully or beg or cajole into coming together is waiting for us at Tycho,” Holden said. “And we’re going to have to tell them Marco won.”

“He didn’t win,” Naomi said.

“We’ll have to tell them we were ambushed and Fred died, but Marco totally didn’t win.”

Naomi smiled. Laughed. It was strange how it made the darkness better. Not less dark. Just better, even though it still was what it was. “Well, all right, when you put it that way. Look, worst-case scenario is we don’t get them on our side. I’m not saying it wouldn’t be great to have more of the Belt on our side. But if we don’t have them to work with, we don’t. We can still win.”

“Only the war,” he said. “Not the part that matters.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Avasarala

Gorman Le blinked, rubbed his entirely-too-green eyes, and waited for her to respond.

“And you don’t know where it came from?” Avasarala said.

“Well, Ganymede,” he said. “The transmission records are clear. It definitely came from Ganymede.”

“But we don’t know who on Ganymede.”

“No,” he said, nodding to mean yes, she was right. Fucking confusing way to express himself.

The meeting room was a smaller one in Nectaris facility. The lights were cold, the walls a brushed ceramic that hadn’t been fashionable in thirty years. It was on a physically separate environmental system, so the air didn’t have the recently rebreathed smell that most of Luna suffered these days. If the gunpowder stink of lunar fines was there, she’d gotten so used to it that she couldn’t tell.

Gorman Le sat hunched forward like a schoolboy, a glass of water forgotten in his hand. He was wearing the same suit he’d had on yesterday and the day before. She was starting to think he kept it in a closet and threw it on whenever he had to talk with her. Weariness radiated from him like he was a medic on the last hour of a four-day shift, but there was something else in him. Something she hadn’t seen recently. Excitement, maybe. Hope.

That was bad. Lately, hope was a poison.

“So the report schema or whatever the hell you call it could be real,” she said. “Or it could be the Free Navy trying to fuck with us. Or it could be ... what?”

“Nutritional yeast with advanced radioplasts. We’ve been looking at how the protomolecule was able to grow based on some kinds of ionizing radiation?” The rise of inflection at the end made it a question, as if he were asking her permission instead of debriefing her. “Nonionizing too, but that’s

really easy. Light's nonionizing radiation, and plants have been harvesting that since forever. But—"

Avasarala raised her hand, palm out. Le's mouth kept moving for a few seconds, part of him still speaking while the rest was reined in. "I care deeply about all the fine details," she said, "only actually, I don't. Sum it up."

"If the numbers are right, we could feed maybe half a million more people on this base right now. The first runs we did looked really good. But if it's something that doesn't scale and the farms crash, we could lose days cleaning it back out."

"And then people starve."

Gorman nodded some more. Maybe he didn't mean anything by it. "Resetting would definitely mean missing some production goals."

She leaned forward, plucked the glass from his hand, and looked into his eyes. "Then people starve. We're grown-ups here. You should be able to say it."

"Then people starve."

She nodded and leaned back. The terrible thing was that her back felt better. She'd been at one-tenth of a g for so long, she was getting used to it. When she went back down the well, she'd have to reacclimatize. When. Not if. Gorman was looking at her, his jaw set, his nostrils flared like a panicky horse. She had to restrain herself from patting his head. She wanted some fucking pistachios.

"What's your doctorate in?" she asked.

"Um. Structural biochemistry?"

"Do you know what mine's in?"

He shook his head for a change.

"Not structural biochemistry," she said gently. "I don't know anything about whether this magic yeast recipe is bullshit or not. So if you can't tell, I'm less than fucking useless. So what are we here for?"

"I don't know what to do." He looked young. He looked lost.

The impulse to snap at him fought with the impulse to hug him. She closed her eyes, and damn it but they felt good closed. This morning, it had been a coordination meeting with the Lagrange stations talking about refugee loads, then security and resources talking about policing guidelines for the people still coming up the well. Over lunch, reports of an armed

uprising in what was left of Sevastopol—people panicking as food and water ran low. It was all bleeding together in her mind, one long, ongoing, weary sense of urgency.

She wanted to be angry with Le, but either she understood his frozen panic too well or else she just didn't have the energy anymore. "Is it a good bet?"

"I think so," he said, almost at once. "The data looks—"

"Then implement it. If it doesn't work, you can blame me."

"That's not what I was ... I mean ... If a larger scale production run works here, we should really look at sending this down the well." *Down to Earth. Where they were even hungrier.*

She opened her eyes. Something in them made Gorman look away.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll see that it's done."

She rose. The meeting was over. Only when she was out the door and shuffling across the yellow-gray paving toward her cart did she think about giving Le some kind of encouragement. A pat on the shoulder. A gentle word. She'd backed him down out of habit, not because he needed to be brought into line. She used to be better at this.

As the cart lurched forward, she pulled up a connection to Said. He appeared in a half-sized window that left room for her calendar and notes, almost too small to make out more than his V-shaped face and high, curly hair floating above a collarless blue shirt. "Ma'am?"

"Where do we stand?"

"You have a report from Admiral Pycior on the Enceladus situation waiting for review."

"Is it going to say anything besides 'The Free Navy fucked off before we got there and now we have more people we need to feed,' or do I already have the gist of it?"

"That's the gist. There were some casualties on our side. The *Edward Carr* is also going to need extensive repairs."

She nodded. Another fucking battle like trying to grab water in her fist. The cart turned, dipped into an access tunnel. Two security guards saluted as she passed. The cart turned down another ramp, slotted itself into the highspeed toward the government and administration centers at Aldrin, and turned again so that she could look back down the throat of the passageway. Gray walls with white archways retreating back and up. The air like an

eternal exhalation. The architecture seemed small in context. Insignificant against the tremendous scope of Luna and Earth. She clung to it like a lifeline. “Reports from Ceres are that the *Rocinante* was ambushed, but escaped. It’s on course toward Tycho Station.”

“Small favors,” she said.

“You also have a personal meeting on the schedule, ma’am.”

Personal meeting? For a long moment, she couldn’t remember what it was, but as the highspeed line lurched, pulled her cart in, and began its acceleration run, she remembered that Ashanti had been asking to see her. Somehow, her daughter had wheedled Said into putting her on the calendar.

“Cancel that,” Avasarala said.

“Are you certain, ma’am?”

“I don’t want to spend half an hour listening to a girl whose diapers I changed lecture me about taking care of myself. Tell her I’m tired and napping.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you have something you want to say, Mr. Said?”

Said coughed. “She’s your daughter, ma’am.”

Avasarala smiled. It was the first time Said had pushed back at her. Maybe there was hope for the little fucker yet. “Fine. Give her the first dinner slot that’s still open.”

“That’s three days.”

“Three days, then,” Avasarala said. The highspeed stopped accelerating, leaving her rocketing through the evacuated tunnel at however many hundreds of kilometers per hour it went. Enough to take her halfway across the face of the moon in half an hour. A body in motion remained in motion. It was a metaphor as much as anything. Stay in motion, because once she rested, she didn’t know how she would bring herself to ever start again.

She couldn’t remember how long it had been since she’d meditated. It used to be that when things were bad at work, she spent more time sitting, not less. Listening to her own breath rattle through the complex spaces at the back of her nose, being with her body in a deep and connected way that let all the shit settle. If she’d been keeping up, she’d have remembered to encourage Gorman Le, for instance. She hated to guess how many other little fuckups she’d passed by without even noticing.

The highspeed tunnel curved, pushing her gently against the cart’s door.

She told herself that between the war and the recovery, there was just too much to do. That was accurate as far as it went, but she'd spent too many years becoming familiar with her own mind to entirely ignore the fact that she was bullshitting herself. Meditation was there so that she could be with herself, experience what it meant to be Chrisjen Avasarala more deeply. And since she was fairly certain Chrisjen Avasarala was a bag of sorrow and glass right now, fuck that. Meditating deeply so that she could really, clearly experience being angry and lonesome and hurt and horror-struck never seemed as good as a strong gin and tonic and another hour of work.

She could be a basket case later. When things were under control.

The highspeed had just started slowing down when her hand terminal chimed. Said looked contrite, but not so much that he'd left her alone.

"Priority message for you from the *Rocinante*, ma'am."

"The fuck does Johnson want now?"

"It's not from Colonel Johnson. Captain Holden sent it."

She hesitated. In his window, Said waited. "Send it to me," she said.

Said nodded as she closed his window. She threw the readout to the cart's screen. Whatever was going on, she wanted to be able to see it without squinting. The message appeared, flagged with red. As soon as she opened it, she knew. Death was on Holden's face as clearly as if it had been written there. When he spoke, his voice was careful and controlled. Hospital tones. Funeral.

He laid out what had happened briefly, not giving any details she didn't need. The *Pella* had led the attack. They'd managed to fend off the Free Navy. Fred Johnson was dead. And then, as if Holden were having a stroke of his own, he stared for a long moment into the camera. Into her eyes, without seeing her.

"All the OPA groups Fred called together at Tycho are waiting there. We're on course and starting our deceleration burn. But I'm not sure if we should still be going there or if there's someone you want to send. Or how long they'll wait. I don't know what to do next."

He shook his head. He looked young. Holden always looked young, but usually it was young and impulsive. The lost expression around his eyes was new. If it was even there. Maybe she was only seeing it because she felt it in her own heart, her own belly.

The message ended. The terminal prompted her for a response, but she

only sat with it in her hand as the highspeed came to a halt, the cart pouring itself into more familiar corridors. She looked at her hands, and they seemed to belong to some other woman. She tried sobbing, but it seemed forced and inauthentic. More like playacting than grief. If she'd been in control of the cart, she might have let it drift into the wall or down any random corridor, all unaware. But it knew where to go, and she didn't think to take it to manual.

Fred Johnson. Butcher of Anderson Station. Hero of the UN Navy and traitorous voice of the OPA. She'd known him in person and by reputation for decades. He'd been her enemy and opposite and occasional untrusted ally. The part of her that was still thinking noticed how odd it was—how implausible—that his death should be the drop that made her cup overflow. She'd lost her world. Her home. Her husband. If she'd kept any of those, maybe this wouldn't have destroyed her.

Her sternum ached. Actually ached. Like there was a physical bruise there, and not only emotion left too long pressing at her flesh. She probed it with her fingertips, tracing the boundaries of the pain like a child fascinated by a dying insect. She didn't notice the cart had stopped until Said opened the door.

"Ma'am?" he said.

She stood. The lunar gravity seemed less like a force of nature and more like a suggestion. As if she could rise against it through simple force of will or the beating of her heart. She noticed Said again, noticed that she'd forgotten he was there. He looked distressed in an officious, too-pretty way.

"Please cancel everything," she said. "I'll be in my rooms."

"Do you need anything, ma'am? Should I get a doctor?"

She frowned at him, the muscles in her cheeks seeming to exist at a distance. She was piloting her body like it was a mech with failing controls. "What would that help?"

In her rooms, she sat on the divan, her hands cupped in her lap, palms up. Like she was holding something. The air recycler's fan had a little noise to it, resonant and unsteady. Wind passing over a bottle's mouth. Mindless, idiot music. She wondered if she'd ever noticed it before, and then forgot it. Her mind was empty. She wondered if there was something coming. Some overwhelming flood that would carry her away. Or if this was simply who she was now. An empty woman.

She ignored the knock at her door. Whoever they were, they'd go away. Only they didn't. Her door slid a few centimeters open. And then a few more. She thought it would be Said. Or one of the admirals. Some functionary of governance come, like Gorman Le, to ask her to carry the weight of loss and uncertainty for them. It wasn't.

Kiki wasn't a little girl anymore. Her granddaughter was a woman in her own right, though a young one. Her skin was deep brown like her father's, but she had Ashanti's eyes and nose. A glimmer of Arjun in the color of her eyes. As much as Avasarala tried to hide it, Kiki wasn't her favorite granddaughter. The girl always had an air of observing judgment that made being with her difficult. Kiki cleared her throat. For a long moment, they looked at each other.

"What are you doing here?" Avasarala asked. She'd meant it to drive the girl away, but it didn't. Kiki came in and closed the door behind her.

"Mother's hurt that you rescheduled us again," Kiki said.

Avasarala twitched her hands, fingers splayed, palms up. Exasperation without the energy behind it. "Did she send you to lecture me?"

"No," Kiki said.

"What, then?"

"I was worried about you."

Avasarala snorted in derision. "Why would you worry about me? I'm the most powerful person in the system right now."

"That's why I'm worried about you."

That's not your fucking job floated at the back of her throat, but she couldn't say it. The ache in Avasarala's sternum sank deeper, pressing in past bone and cartilage. Her vision went blurry, tears sheeting across her eyes with too little weight to pull them down. Kiki stood by the doorway, her face expressionless. A schoolgirl before her principal, waiting to be scolded. Without speaking she shuffled forward in the scant gravity, sat at Avasarala's side, and lowered her head to her grandmother's lap.

"Mother loves you," Kiki said. "She just doesn't know how to say it."

"It was never her job to," Avasarala said, her fingers smoothing her granddaughter's hair the way they had her daughter's once when they'd all been younger. Some other time before the world had shattered under them all. "Love was always your grandfather's work. I loved"—her breath caught—"I loved him very much."

“He was a good man,” Kiki said.

“Yes,” she said, running her fingertips through the girl’s hair. Tracing the paler line of her scalp.

Minutes passed. Kiki shifted a little, but only a little. Grandmother and granddaughter were quiet. The tears in Avasarala’s eyes weren’t thick. Didn’t fall. When she blinked them away, none rose to take their place. She considered the curve of Kiki’s ear the way she once had Ashanti’s, when her daughter had been a little girl. And Charnapal, when he’d been a child. Before he’d died.

“I do the best I can,” Avasarala said.

“I know.”

“It isn’t enough.”

“I know.”

A weird peace seemed to flow over her. Into her. For a moment, it was as if Arjun were there. As if he’d spoken some perfect bloom of a poem to her instead of only her least favorite granddaughter bearing witness to her failures. Everyone had their beauty and their way of expressing it. It was only hard for her to love Kiki because they were so much like each other. Exactly alike, if she were being honest. That made loving her too much dangerous sometimes. She knew what being herself had cost her, and so seeing herself in Kiki made her so very afraid for the girl. Avasarala heaved a great sigh, plucked at the girl’s shoulder.

“Go tell your mother I had something fall through, and we should eat together. Tell Said too.”

“He was the one that let me in,” Kiki said, sitting up.

“He’s a fucking busybody and he should stop putting his fingers in my shit,” Avasarala said. “But this one time, I’m glad he did.”

“So you won’t punish him?”

“Fucking right, I’ll punish him,” she said. Then, almost to her surprise, she kissed Kiki’s smooth, unlined forehead. “It’s just this time I won’t mean it. Go now. I have something I need to do.”

She’d expected her makeup to be ruined, but it really wasn’t. A touch of eyeliner and a stray lock of hair tucked down was all she needed to look like herself again. She pulled Holden’s message back up, let it play while she composed herself in the eye of her terminal’s camera.

When the prompt to reply came, she squared her shoulders, imagined

herself looking into Holden's eyes, and started the recording.

"I'm sorry to hear about Fred. He was a good man. Not perfect, but who is? I'll miss him. What we do next is simpler. You get your sorry ass to Tycho Station and make this work."

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Chapter Thirty: Filip

The *Pella* limped along at a third of a g. After so long on the float, Filip felt even that in his knees and spine. Or maybe it was only that he was still bruised by the god-awful forces of the battle now behind them.

The battle they'd lost.

He stood in the galley, a bowl of Martian-designed rice noodles and mushrooms in his hand, and looked for a place to sit, but the benches were all filled. The *Koto* had taken it worse than the *Pella*—a rail gun round holing the reactor and cracking the hull from stem to stern. Most of the ships Filip had lived on would have died in that same second, but the Martian Navy had built with battle in mind. In a slice of a second so thin you could see through it, the *Koto* had registered the hit and dropped core, leaving the crew trapped and helpless, with only the battery backups to keep them alive.

The *Shinsakuto* had been driven away from them, hounded and harassed by fighting ships and torpedoes from the consolidated fleet and Ceres. If the *Rocinante* had finished its job on the *Pella*, the crew of the *Koto* would still be out there on the float. Or maybe they'd be dead by now, the air recyclers finally failing and leaving them all to gasp and choke and claw each other in their death panic. Instead, they were all on the *Pella*, hot-bunking with the usual crew, taking up space on the galley and pointedly not making eye contact with Filip as he looked for his place among them.

His own crew was there too. Men and women he'd been shipping with since before it all began. Aaman. Miral. Wings. Karal. Josie. They were looking away as much as the others. Only about half of them were wearing their Free Navy uniforms. *Koto* and *Pella* both had dropped back to the simple functional clothes that any crew might wear, and some of the ones still in uniform had rolled up their sleeves or left their collars open. Filip felt his own uniform, crisp and fresh and done to the neck, and for the first

time he felt a little foolish in it. Like a kid dressed in his father's clothes as a costume.

The murmur of conversation was a wall that excluded him. He hesitated. He could just take the bowl back to his quarters. It wasn't really that they were keeping him apart. It was only that they were so crowded now, and stung from having lost a fight. He took a step toward the corridor, intending to go. Meaning to. And then stopping and looking back in case there was some slot, some corner of bench, that he'd overlooked. Some place for him.

He caught Miral's eye. The older man nodded, and—Filip thought with a sigh—shifted to open a little room beside him. Filip didn't run there like a little boy, but he went quickly, worried that the gap might close again before he reached it.

Karal was sitting across from Miral, and all of them sandwiched by unfamiliar bodies. A woman with dark skin and a scar across her upper lip. A thin man with a tattoo on his neck. An older woman—white, close-cropped hair and a crooked, unfriendly smile. Karal was the only one of them to acknowledge Filip, and that only with a grunt and a nod.

When the older woman spoke, it seemed like she was picking up the thread of a conversation that had been going on before Filip had taken his seat, but with a studied casualness of someone with an agenda. "Con mis coyo on the *Shinsakuto*, the Ceres fleet's there forever. Earth away from Earth."

"Forever's a long time," Miral said, considering the table like he was reading it. "Can think we know what a year, two years, three years down looks like, aber that's only shit and guessing."

"Can't see the future," the woman said. "Can see what's there now, though, que no?"

Filip took a mouthful of too-salty noodles. He'd waited too long to start eating, and they were more than halfway to paste. The older woman grinned like she'd won a point, leaned in, put her elbows on the table so the split-circle tattoo of the OPA on her wrist showed. Almost like she was displaying it.

"All I'm saying is maybe time we start winning something, yeah? Ceres. Enceladus. Seems like las sola cocks we kick anymore are Michio Pa's, and not so much hers even."

"We beat Earth," Filip said. He'd meant it to seem like an offhand

comment. Something thrown into the conversation almost at random. Instead, he sounded shrill and defensive, even to himself. The words lay there on the table like something broken past fixing. The older woman's smile was thin and nasty. Or maybe he only thought it was. One way or the other, she leaned back, took her elbows off the table. When she stood, when she walked away, it was with the air of having made her point, whatever it had been.

Karal coughed, shook his head. "No te preocupes, Filipino," he said.

"Why would I worry?" Filip asked around another bite of the noodles.

Karal made a circling motion with his hand. *All this and everyone.* "After a fight it's the story about the fight, yeah?"

"Yeah," Filip said. "Bist bien. I understand."

Miral and Karal glanced at each other, and he pretended not to notice. The other crew from the *Koto* kept their silences to themselves. "Hoy, coyo," Miral said, touching Filip's shoulder. "Finish that and come help me with some repair work, yeah? Still tracking down some ganga between the hulls."

Filip pushed the bowl away with his fingertips. "This is done already," he said. "Let's go, us."

The strike that had crippled the *Pella* hadn't been one thing, but a tight cluster of PDC rounds. If they'd hit straight on, it would have been better. The top of the ship above the cockpit and command deck was angled and reinforced against exactly that kind of impact. Maybe it would have peeled back a section of the hull and made a hell of a bang, but kept the guts of the ship safe. The way it had happened—the rounds raking down the side of the ship in a stream—was worse. The housings of the *Pella*'s maneuvering thrusters and PDC cannons, sensor arrays and external antennas had suffered. It was like someone had taken a scraper along all the exposed parts of the ship and taken off whatever could be removed. The damage had left a blind spot in their PDC coverage, but the torpedo that came through it had malfunctioned. If it had detonated, it could have cracked the ship in two, and the old bitch from the galley would have had to hope for the mercy of the inners to keep her leathery ass from drowning in her own waste air.

The torpedo had still hit hard enough to breach the outer hull, though. And the long, tedious work of finding each bit of scrap shaken loose needed to happen. Leaving a handful of metal and ceramic shards to rattle around

between decks whenever they fired the maneuvering thrusters was begging for death. So Filip and Miral suited up, checked each other's seals and bottles and rebreathers, and crawled into the space between the hulls. The Martian designs were elegant and well ordered, everything labeled along with inspection and change-out dates. In the white flare of light from his lamp, Filip considered the bent plate of the outer hull, the jagged gash where the stars showed through. The galactic plane glowed white and gold and rose against the black. It was hard not to stop and stare.

It was different looking at the stars as stars and not dots on a screen. He'd spent his whole life in ships and stations. Seeing the billions of unblinking lights with just his own eyes only happened when he went outside on a repair or an operation. It was always beautiful, sometimes alarming. This time, it seemed almost like a promise. The endless abyss opened around them, a whisper that the universe was larger than his ship. Larger than all the ships put together. Humanity could put its flag on thirteen hundred of those dots and not be a percent of a percent of a percent. That was the empire the inners were fighting and dying to control. A hundred more planets a dozen times over, and less than a rounding error of what was out there staring back at them.

"Hoy, Filipito," Miral said on the suit's private channel. "Come around. Think I've got something."

"Commé. Moment."

Miral was crouched down beside the power conduit for the sensor array. His light was playing over a bit of inner hull. A short, bright line showed where something had scratched it. Miral ran his glove over it, and it smeared. Ceramic, then.

"Okay, you little shit," Filip said, playing his lamp down the conduit. "Where'd you go?"

"Follow on," Miral said, scrambling down the handholds.

When they reached Pallas, the crews could do a more complete inspection. There were tools to blast nitrogen and argon into every crease and curve of the ship and blow out anything stuck there. Better, though, to have as much done before they arrived. And, Filip thought, there weren't any other people out between the hulls. As jobs went, it was the most isolated one that the *Pella* had to offer. All alone, that was reason enough to work it.

Miral's little gasp of victory caught Filip's attention and brought him down close to where the other man was hunched. Miral took a pair of pliers from his belt, applied himself to a section of conduit where the weld had left a gap, then sat back with a grin Filip could see through the suit's helmet mask. The chip was the size of a thumbnail, jagged along one side, smooth on the other.

Filip whistled appreciatively. "Big one."

"Si no?" Miral said. "Leave esá bastard la bouncing around like shooting a gun in here, yeah?"

"One less," Filip said. "Let's see how many more we find."

Miral made a fist and agreed, then tucked the shard into a pocket. "You know, when I was about your age? Drinker back then, me. Spent my time with this coyo always talked about fights he'd been in. Got in them a lot. Liked them, I guess."

"Yeah," Filip said, lowering himself farther down, playing his light across the housing of a maneuvering thruster. He didn't know where Miral was going with this.

"This coyo, he said mostly when things spun up, it was from the other bastard getting embarrassed, sa sa? Maybe didn't want to throw knuckles, but couldn't find a way to push off without his crew seeing him weak."

Filip scowled behind his faceplate. Maybe Miral was talking about what had happened on Ceres? It still bothered Filip sometimes. Not the violence itself, but little flashes of the humiliation left over from realizing the girl he'd been with at the Ceres bar had gone. It wasn't something he wanted to spend more time with. "Que sa, es," he said, hoping that would be enough.

But Miral went on. "Only saying, a man who's feeling like he lost face, yeah? He'll say things he doesn't mean because of it. Do things he doesn't mean."

I meant all what I did, Filip thought but didn't say. *Would mean it again, to do it over.*

But it had the bright, painful feel of touching a fresh scrape, and he'd already come across like a shitty little kid once today. Better to keep his own counsel. And as it turned out, that wasn't what Miral meant at all.

"Your father? He's a good man. Belter to his bones, yeah? It's just this Holden bastard's a sore for him. Getting knocked back, happens a alles one time and another, y alles talk a little bigger afterward. Not a good thing, not

a bad thing. Just the way men get made. Don't take it too close."

Filip paused. Turned back.

"Don't take it too close?" he repeated, making it a question. A demand that Miral say what he meant.

"That," Miral said. "Your dad doesn't mean what he says."

Filip turned his light on Miral, shining it through the older man's faceplate. Miral squinted, put a hand up to shade his eyes.

"What does he say?" Filip asked.



Marco's quarters were past clean to spotless. The walls shone in the light, freshly polished. The dark smudges that always built up beside handholds nearest the door—evidence of the passage of hundreds of hands—had been scraped away. The monitor didn't carry so much as a fleck of lint. Fake sandalwood from the air recycler didn't quite bury the ghost of disinfectant and antifungal wash. Even the gimbals on the crash couch sparkled in the gentle light.

His father, watching the monitor, was also groomed to an eerie perfection. His hair clean and perfectly in place. His beard soft and brown and trimmed so well it seemed almost false. His uniform looked like it had never been worn before. Crisp lines and clean folds. The seams set perfectly, as if by his own precision and the force of his will, he could haul all the rest of the ship up to his standards. Like all the control Marco had spread across the system had been concentrated in one place. Not an atom in the air was out of place.

Rosenfeld was on the monitor. Filip caught the words *other eventualities* before Marco stopped the playback and turned to him.

"Yes?" Marco said. Filip couldn't tell what was in his voice. Calm, yeah. But Marco had a thousand varieties of calm, and not all of them meant things were okay. Filip was too aware that they hadn't really spoken since the battle.

"Was talking to Miral?" Filip said, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorframe. Marco didn't move. Not a nod, not a glance away. His dark eyes left Filip feeling exposed and uncertain, but there wasn't a way to step

back from this. Not without asking. “Said you were telling how what happened was my fault?”

“Because it was.”

The words were simple. Matter-of-fact. There was no heat to them, no sneer or accusation. Filip felt them like a blow to the chest.

“Okay,” he said. “Bien.”

“You were the gunner, and they got away.” Marco spread his arms in a quick, surgical shrug. “Was it a question? Or maybe you’re saying it was *my* fault for thinking you could do it?”

It took Filip an extra try to talk past his throat. “Didn’t drive us into those rounds, me,” he said. “Gunner, me. Not the pilot. And didn’t have a rail gun, yeah? Pinché Holden had a rail gun.”

His father tilted his head to one side. “I just told you that you failed. Now you’re giving me reasons why it’s okay that you failed? Is that how it works?” Filip knew the kind of calm now.

“No,” he said. Then, “No, sir.”

“Good. Bad enough that you fucked it up. Don’t start bawling over it too.”

“Not,” Filip said, but there were tears in his eyes. Shame ran through his blood like bad drugs and left him shaking. “Not bawling, me.”

“Then own it. Say it like a man. Say ‘I fucked it up.’”

I didn’t, Filip thought. *It wasn’t my fault*. “I fucked it up.”

“All right, then,” Marco said. “I’m busy. Close the door when you go.”

“Yeah, okay.”

As Filip turned, Marco shifted back to the monitor. His voice was soft as a sigh. “Crying and excuses are for girls, Filip.”

“Sorry,” Filip said, and pulled the door to behind him.

He walked down the narrow corridor. Voices from the lift. Voices from the galley. Two crews in the space of one, and he couldn’t stand to be near any of them. Not even Miral. Especially not Miral.

He put me up, Filip thought. It was like Miral said. They hadn’t kept hold of Ceres, and then Pa had insulted him by breaking away. This was supposed to be the thing to show the Free Navy couldn’t be fucked with, and all three of their wolves together hadn’t been able to stop the fucking *Rocinante*.

Marco had been humiliated. And shit floated against the spin, that was

all it was. Still, the space below Filip's ribs ached like he'd been punched. It wasn't his fault. It was his fault. He wasn't bawling out excuses. Except that was absolutely what he'd done.

He turned on the light in his cabin. One of the engineering techs was hot-bunking there, blinking up into the light like a baby mouse.

"Que sa?" the man said.

"I'm tired," Filip said.

"Be tired somewhere else," the tech said. "I've got two more hours down."

Filip put his heel against the crash couch and spun it. The tech reached out a hand, stopped it, and unstrapped. "Fine," he said. "You're so fucking tired, sleep then."

The tech took his clothes, muttering under his breath, and left. Filip locked the door behind him and folded himself into the couch, still in his uniform that stank of sweat and the vac-suit seals. The tears tried to come then, but he bit them back, pushed the hurt down into his gut until it settled into something else.

Marco was wrong. His father had embarrassed himself because Holden and Johnson and Naomi got past them. It was like Miral said. Men got like that, and they said things they didn't mean. Did things they wouldn't do if they were thinking straight.

Filip hadn't fucked it up. Marco was wrong, that was all. This time, he just got it wrong.

Words came into his mind, as clear as if they'd been spoken. Though he'd never heard her speak them, they came in his mother's voice. *Wonder what else he got wrong.*

Chapter Thirty-One: Pa

Eugenia was a terrible place to put a base of operations. It was less an asteroid than a complex pile of loose scrap and black gravel traveling in company. Neither the asteroid itself nor the tiny moon that circled it had ever suffered the gravity to press them together or the heat it would take to fuse them. Eugenia and other duniyaret like it offered nothing solid to build on, no internal structure to shore up. Even mining it was hard, the tissue of the asteroid too fast to shift and fall apart. Build a dome there, and the air would seep out through the ground it was built on. Try to spin it up, and it would fly apart. The science station that Earth had built there three generations ago and abandoned was little more than a ruin of sealed concrete and flaking ceramic. A ghost town of the Belt.

The only things it had to recommend it at all were that it wasn't inhabited already and its orbit wasn't too distant from Ceres and the questionable protection of the consolidated fleet. And even that proximity was only temporary. With Ceres' orbital period a couple percent faster than Eugenia's, every day added a little bit to the distance between them, stretching the bubble of safety until it would eventually, inevitably pop. In fairness, if they were still using it to escape the Free Navy when Eugenia and Ceres drifted to the far side of the sun from each other, they'd have bigger problems.

Instead of trying to build on the surface of the asteroid, Michio's little fleet had begun assembling a nakliye port that orbited around Eugenia's main body: shipping containers welded one to another to make passageways, warehouses, airlocks. A tiny reactor was enough to keep the air circulating and enough heat to balance what was lost to radiation. It was temporary by design. Inexpensive, fast to assemble, and made from material so standardized and ubiquitous that a solution discovered once could be applied in a thousand other situations. It grew from a seed of three or four

containers, spreading out, connecting, reinforcing, making distance where distance was needed, bringing together where it was not, spreading like a snowflake the white of rotting sealant.

There were stories of the poorest Belters living in nakliye stations for years, but more often they were used as Michio used them: storage and refueling stations. Floating warehouses without taxes or tariffs to bite into the operating budgets of the prospector. Hyperdistilled water to give pirates reaction mass and potables and oxygen. The older siblings to the scattered supply dumps the Free Navy had consigned to the void. On her monitor, it looked like some ancient sea creature, still experimenting with multiple cells. And beside it, the *Panshin*, compact and sleek.

The ship had matched orbit so precisely it seemed motionless beside the port, as if the two were connected. The flares of working lights and welding torches studded the station's skin, and the spidery shapes of mechs shepherded supplies to it from the *Panshin*. The *Connaught* had shut down its Epstein hours before to keep from slagging the port and the *Panshin* besides, and eased into her own gentle orbit on maneuvering thrusters. The deceleration burn was less like thrust gravity than a suggestion that Michio snuggle into her crash couch.

"They're painting us. Should I acknowledge?" Evans asked.

Everything was a question with him now. Ever since the scare at Ceres Station, his confidence had shattered. It was a problem, but like so many of her problems, she wasn't sure how to fix it. "Please do," she said. "Let them know I'll be coming over."

"Yes, sir," Evans said, turning to his monitor. Michio stretched, forcing her blood along its course. She didn't know why she should feel anxious about seeing Ezio Rodriguez again. She had known him for years, on and off. Another partner in the ongoing struggle to keep the Belt from being used and discarded by the inners and their allies. Only now, he'd taken her side against the Free Navy. This would be the first time she'd breathed his same air since her relief effort had become what it had become. And what did you take to a meeting with a man who'd agreed with you enough to risk his life and the lives of his crew? A thank-you card?

Michio laughed, and Oksana looked over. Michio shook her head. It wouldn't be funny out loud.

"The *Panshin* acknowledges, sir," Evans said. "Captain Rodriguez is on

the port.”

“Then the port it is,” Michio said, unstrapping herself. “Oksana, the ship’s yours.”

“Sir,” Oksana said, but there was a little disappointment in the word. She’d wanted to come along too, but someone had to keep an eye on Evans, and those two had been coming closer of late. Maybe having some time alone with Oksana would put Evans in a place where he could talk about what was bothering him. Better if the impulse came from him. Ordering someone to disclose their private fears wasn’t good leadership. And no matter how much Michio was his wife, she was also his captain.

The *Connaught* came to her place less than a kilometer from the *Panshin* and Eugenia port. That was Oksana showing off a little, but Michio didn’t mind. It made her transit short and easy. The vac suit was Martian, armored but not powered. Well-made, like everything Marco had bartered for. Bertold and Nadia came with, each carrying a sidearm. They passed out of the *Connaught*’s airlock and into the gap, moving slow to conserve fuel and talking about whose turn it was to cook that night while the stars slid between their feet. Michio felt the unexpected tug of happiness. It was amazing to think that people lived their whole lives on a planet’s surface and never had even one moment like this one, the closeness of intimate family and a vastness to rival God in the same breath.

The airlock was set halfway into one of the shipping containers, the walls cutting off the spread of the galaxy before they reached the door. All three cycled in together. As soon as the indicator went green, Michio checked her suit to confirm and then turned off her own oxygen supply and cracked open her seals.

The air inside the port stank of spent oxy-fuel and overheated metal. The percussion of someone’s music carried farther than the rest of the song, making the port throb a little. A steady, mechanical heartbeat. The lights were all unsoftened LEDs, sharp-edged shadows creeping along the ceramic walls as they pulled themselves through the long corridors. Magnetic pallets clung to the surfaces, making no distinction between wall, floor, and ceiling. Old hand terminals had been fixed to each, showing what it contained, where it had come from.

A woman in a transport mech shifted away to the side as they passed, the arms of the mech pulling in close like a spider. She saluted to Michio

and Bertold and Nadia equally, with an air that said she didn't know who they were and didn't care. So long as they were on the same side, they were good with her.

They found Captain Rodriguez in one of the hubs. Nine containers opened their mouths in each of the six directions, fifty-four in all, and were meant to be packed full. Michio could tell at a glance that they weren't. Ezio Rodriguez was a thin-faced man with a trim beard streaked with white, though the rest of his face looked young. He wore his hair cut to the scalp. His suit, like hers, was Martian design. Unlike her, he'd customized it: a starburst blazon on the back between his shoulder blades and the split circle of the OPA as if it were on an armband. Half a dozen other people were moving pallets in the containers around them, shouting to each other through the free air instead of using their radios. Their voices echoed.

"Captain Pa," Rodriguez said. "Bien avisé. Been too long."

"Captain," Michio said. "The *Connaught's* come to relieve you. Take our turn building and standing guard, sa sa?"

"Welcome to it," Rodriguez said, spreading his arms. "Not much, y not nothing."

Each of Michio's little fleet—alone or in pairs—had taken turns building and guarding the port while the others hunted colonists or gathered the supplies scattered into space, dodging Marco's ships while they did it. The *Solano* had taken another of the colony ships—the *Brilliant Iris* out of Luna—and was escorting it toward Ceres to pay their dues to Caesar. Eugenia port was too small to accommodate a ship that large anyway. The *Serrio Mal*, on the other hand, was picking up the dark containers flung off Pallas and Ceres. Those were destined for Eugenia, and from there to wherever they were needed most. Delivering the supplies to Kelso and Iapetus was the most dangerous duty, and Michio reserved it for herself.

Worse than that would be not going.

"Looks thin, que," she said.

"Looks because is," Rodriguez said. "Gathering up's been ralo these last times. Not getting what we were before. Some though."

"Enough?"

Rodriguez laughed like she'd made a joke. "Got something interesting, though. Something for you."

Michio felt the hair at the back of her neck stand up. This felt wrong.

She smiled. "You shouldn't have."

"Couldn't pass it by," Rodriguez said, firing his suit's thruster toward an access way. "Over this way. I'll show."

He didn't tell her to leave Bertold and Nadia, which was good. She wouldn't have. But she didn't know whether to be reassured that he hadn't tried to peel away her guards or frightened that maybe they didn't matter.

"Bertold," she said as they followed the other captain.

"Savvy," he said, his hand on the butt of his gun as if it had only happened to come to rest there. Nadia was the same. They fell into a guarding formation as naturally as blinking. When Rodriguez reached the walls of the port, he landed with a clank, turning on his mag boot and killing his momentum with his knees. The music they'd heard before was gone now, and Rodriguez looked behind them, as if making sure they weren't followed. Or else that they were.

"Making me nervous, coyo," Michio said, walking after him. "Something you want to say?"

"Bon sí, aber not here," Rodriguez said, the lightness gone from his voice and a grim tension in its place. "Smuggled past the smugglers, this one."

"Not feeling better."

"You will or you won't. Come alles la."

The container he took them to had a little office built out from the side. Scrapwelded together with its own airlock. Rodriguez keyed in a passcode by hand. Bertold stretched his arms, blew out his breath, like a weight lifter about to try more than his usual load.

"Love you," Nadia said, her voice calm and conversational as if she wasn't saying it in case they were her last words.

The airlock opened, and a man popped out. Thin frame, dark hair in curls. "Is she here?" he said, and then, "Oh. There you are."

A shock of surprise, the uncertainty of whether this was a threat or something more interesting. "Sanjrani."

"Nico, Nico, Nico," Rodriguez said, pushing Sanjrani back through the airlock. "Not here. Didn't sneak through te ass end of nothing to wave you like a flag. Get back safe in." When Sanjrani had retreated, Rodriguez turned to Michio, motioning that she should follow. When she hesitated, he lifted his arm to his sides, cruciform. "Got no guns, me. Esá goes bad, la

dué la can shoot me.”

“Can,” Bertold agreed. His sidearm was drawn, but not pointed. Not yet.

“All right, then,” Michio said, clomping forward in her boots, the magnets dragging her down against the floors, holding her, and letting her go again with every step.

In the little office, Sanjrani sat strapped onto a stool before a thin desk. Another waited across from him. She didn’t see a trap. Didn’t know what she was looking at. “Are you looking to change sides?” she asked.

Sanjrani made a deep, impatient cough. “I’m here to tell you why you’re killing everyone in the fucking Belt. You and Marco both. You two should be on *my* side.”

“Does he know you’re here?”

“Am I dead already? No, he doesn’t. That’s how desperate I’ve gotten. I try to talk to Rosenfeld, but he’s only talking to Marco. No one knows where Dawes got to. They won’t *listen*.” There was a desperation in his voice, high and thin as a bow against a string.

“All right,” she said, moving to the stool, pulling the belt across her lap. “I’ll listen.”

Sanjrani relaxed and pulled up a diagram from the desk’s display. A complex series of curves laid over x and y axes. “We made assumptions when we started this,” he said. “We made plans. Good ones, I think. But we didn’t follow them.”

“Dui,” Michio said.

“First thing we did,” he said, “was destroy the biggest source of wealth and complex organics in the system. The only supply of complex organics that work with our metabolisms. The worlds on the other side of the ring? Different genetic codes. Different chemistries. *Not* something we can import and eat. But that was okay. Projections were clear. We could build a new economy, put together infrastructure, make a sustainable network of microecologies in a cooperative-competitive matrix. Base the currencies on —”

“Nico,” she said.

“Right. Right. We needed to start building it all as soon as the rocks fell.”

“I know,” she said.

“You don’t,” he said. Tears sheeted across his eyes, clung to his skin.

“No recycling process is perfect. Everything degrades. The colony ships? The supplies? They’re all stopgap. They’re the measure of how long we have to make a living Belt. Look here. This green curve is the projected output of the new economic models. The ones we’re not doing, yeah? And this”—he pointed to a descending red curve—“is the best case of how long the conscripted supplies will last. Equilibrium is here. Five years out.”

“All right.”

“And this line here, the base we would need between them to keep the present population of the Belt alive.”

“We stay above it.”

“We would have,” Sanjrani said, “if we’d kept to the plan. Here’s where we are now.”

He shifted the green line. Michio felt her throat tighten as she understood what she was looking at.

“We’re fine now,” Sanjrani said. “We’ll be fine for three years. Maybe three and a half. Then the recycling systems stop being able to meet demand. We won’t have infrastructure in place to fill the gaps. And then we’ll starve. Not just Earth. Not just Mars. The Belt too. And once we start, we’ll have no way to stop.”

“All right,” Michio said. “How do we fix it?”

“I don’t know,” Sanjrani said.



The *Panshin* left a day later, taking Sanjrani and what little remained of Michio’s peace of mind with it. Her crew did their part, building out the port, ringing the new wires. Messages seeped into the *Connaught*’s antennas, some of them for her. Iapetus needed more food-grade magnesium. A collection of prospecting ships had exhausted their filters and needed replacements. The Free Navy poured out what they called news, some of it about how much Belter material she’d given over to the enemy.

Whenever she tried to sleep, the sense of dread welled up in her heart. When the hard times came, when the starving began, it would come like a ratchet. It was hard to make a new, shining city in the void when the people designing it, building it, living in it were dying from want. When they were

dying because she and Marco were at each other's throats instead of following the plan.

She had to remind herself that she hadn't been the one to change things. Marco had gone off script before her. She'd made her break because he had. She was trying to help. Only when she closed her eyes, she saw the red line sloping down toward nothing, and no upward green swoop to answer it. Three years. Maybe three and a half. But to make it work, they had to start now. Had to have started already.

Or they had to make a very new plan, and neither she nor Sanjrani knew what that was.

The others avoided her, giving her food and water and space to think. She woke alone, worked her shift, slept alone, and didn't feel the loss of company. And so she was surprised when Laura came to find her in the gym.

"Message came for you, Captain," she said. Not Michi, but Captain. So Laura was not her wife then, but her comm officer on duty.

Michio let the tension bands slide back into their housings and wicked the sweat off her skin with a towel. "What is it?"

"Tightbeam relayed through Ceres," Laura said. "It's from the *Rocinante* en route to Tycho Station. It's flagged captain-to-captain."

Michio considered telling Laura to play it. That they were family, and didn't have any secrets. It was a dangerous impulse. She stifled it.

"I'll take it in my quarters," she said.

When she opened the message, James Holden looked out from the screen. Her first thought was that he looked like crap. Her second thought was that she probably did too. She tucked her sweat-damp towel into the recycler. *No recycling process is perfect*. She shuddered, but Holden had started talking.

"Captain Pa," he said. "I hope this gets to you quickly. And that everything's all right with your ship and your crew and ... Well. Anyway. I'm in kind of a weird situation, and to be honest, I was hoping I could ask you for a favor."

He tried a smile, but his eyes looked haunted.

"I'll tell you the truth," he said. "*I'm kind of desperate here.*"

Chapter Thirty-Two: Vandercaust

When the guards got bored kicking him, they rolled Vandercaust into the cell and sealed the door.

He lay in the dark for some stretch of time—five minutes, an hour. Not more than that. When he sat up, his ribs and back ached, but not with the deepness or grinding sensation that broken bones carried. The only light was a single recessed LED at the joint where the back wall and ceiling met. Its dimness stole the color from everything, so the little streaks of blood on his shirt only looked black.

With nothing better to do, he took a slow inventory of his body: bruised ribs and cheek, swollen eye, abrasions at his wrists where they'd cuffed him. Nothing bad, really. He'd suffered worse, and sometimes at the hands of his friends. Wasn't like this was the first time he'd been arrested. Not even the first time he'd been arrested for something he didn't do. It had always been inners that did it before, though.

The more it changes, the more it's still the same, he thought. He found a comfortable spot in the corner where he could rest his head, close his eyes, and see if the anxiety was enough to keep him awake. It was, mostly, but he did manage a little doze before the door broke seal and swung open. Two guards in armor and sidearms. A higher-up in armor too. All Free Navy colors.

Probably that was good. People didn't generally dress up for a murder.

"Emil Jacquard Vandercaust?"

"Aquí," he said.

The higher-up was a thick-faced boy with a brown complexion that matched his eyes. Handsome, in his way, but too young for Vandercaust's tastes. He'd come to an age when sex was less about who he fell into bed with and more about who he woke up next to, and the set of people he considered children extended to include men in their early thirties. The

pretty child scowled, maybe at Vandercaust and maybe at how he'd been treated. For a moment, the silence in the room made him wonder if they'd leave again. Lock the door and stick him in the dark. The idea made him aware of his thirst.

"Agua, yeah?"

"Commst," the boy said. Vandercaust levered himself up to his feet, his abused muscles shrieking, but not badly enough to stop him. The guards fell in, one ahead and one behind, and the boy leading them all like a sad little parade. The room they took him to was brighter, more comfortable, though not by much. A low metal stool was welded to the deck, short enough that sitting on it made Vandercaust feel like he was in some school for children, expected to take a desk meant for a six-year-old. He'd been questioned by security enough in his life to recognize the little humiliation as the tactic it was. A guard brought him half a bulb of tepid water, watched him drink it, and took it back.

The guards stepped out, the door closing behind them. The boy stood at a desk, looking down at him through a floating display. Seeing the display from behind was like seeing someone through a bright mist.

Vandercaust waited. The boy took a flat yellow lozenge out of his pocket. Focus drugs, or what Vandercaust was supposed to assume were. The boy put the lozenge under his tongue, sucked thoughtfully for a moment. Shuddered.

"You missed the battle alert yesterday," he said.

"I did."

"Can you explain that?"

Vandercaust shrugged. "Deep sleeper when I'm drunk, me. Didn't hear it. No se savvy what happened before it was over, yeah?"

"Savvy tú now?"

"Heard some things, yeah."

"Let's go over what you heard, then."

Vandercaust nodded, as much to himself as to the boy. Time to pick his handholds careful. Whatever they were spun up over, this was the time he'd land in it if he spoke the wrong words.

"Was a bunch of ships came from the colonies, what I heard. Fourteen, fifteen ships all through rings at the same time. Fast too. Trying to get to Medina before the rail guns took them out, yeah? Only didn't so much.

What the guns didn't put holes in, station defenses took out. Some debris hits on the drum hull, aber nothing can't be fixed."

The boy nodded, made some notation in the bright air between them. "Fourteen or fifteen?"

"Yeah."

The boy's eyes hardened. "Was it fourteen you heard, or fifteen?"

Vandercaust frowned. There was something about the boy's reaction that didn't sit right. If they'd been playing poker, he'd wait to see if the boy's hand was particularly strong or weak, then spend the rest of the night cleaning him out over that hardness. Only there weren't any cards to come down here.

"Heard fourteen or fifteen. A phrase. Eight or ten. Six or seven. Didn't hear a number."

"What rings did they come through?"

"Don't know."

"Look at me," the boy said. Vandercaust looked up into the boy's light-brown eyes. "What rings did they go through?"

"No savvy. I don't know."

The boy's eyes flickered, looked away. Vandercaust scratched his arm even though it didn't itch. Just to be doing something.

"They all came through within fifteen seconds of each other," the boy said. "And they *were* going fast. Any thoughts about that, Mister Vandercaust?"

"Coordinated," he said. "Sounds like they been talking con alles, sa sa? Making plans."

Which—ah, yes—meant they'd found some way to break lightspeed, bend time, and locate each other in the vastness of the galaxy, or else that conversation had been passing through the rings. Through Medina. It meant somewhere on Medina Station, somebody had been working against the Free Navy. He'd known that the arrest couldn't just be for missing an emergency shift. Now it came a little clearer what the boy was looking for. Watched the boy watch him understand.

"Who told you about the attack?"

"Heard about it in my workgroup. Jakulski. Salis. Roberts. Just chap-chap over coffee, yeah?"

Another notation made. "Anything you think of I should know about

them?”

A coldness that had nothing to do with the temperature ran up Vandercaust's back, lifted his skin in bumps. Maybe it wasn't only that he'd slept through the alarm. He'd been drunk. Drunk men could sleep through anything. But if he hadn't made the call *and* he was near to someone with something worth hiding ...

Salis had friends in communication. Bragged about them all the time, how he knew what was going on with Duarte and Inaros, what kinds of barks and whines were floating through the rings. Someone was coordinating an attack on Medina, wouldn't they be in communications? Have to be, ne? And Roberts talking about Callisto and proxy wars. How Duarte's people were maybe using them against Earth and Mars, about how much she hated being caught between the powers like that. She'd been the first one Vandercaust knew to squint hard at the advisors from Laconia setting up defenses on the alien station where rail gun housings were. Possible that she'd work with the colonies if it meant shrugging off Laconia and keeping Medina independent. And hadn't Jakulski been at the greeting when the advisors came? He said it had been as a favor to one of the other supervisors, but what if he'd been engineering a chance to put eyes on the enemy?

Thousands of people on Medina, living and working. All of them Belters, more or less. Most of them OPA before and Free Navy now. But there were some that hadn't known what was coming. Maybe some with family still on Earth, dying under the rockfalls. He didn't know anything about Jakulski's mother, Salis' siblings, Roberts' old lovers. Any of them could just be acting like Free Navy because it was asking for hell to be anything else.

The boy cocked his head, sucked at the focus drugs. Vandercaust laced his fingers together and forced out a little laugh. “Easy to see how a coyo could get paranoid.”

“Why don't we go over this from the start?” the boy said.

It went on for hours, it felt like. No hand terminal. No screens that he could see. All Vandercaust had to judge by was the animal rhythms of his body. How long it was before he got thirsty again. Hungry. When he started feeling sleepy. When he needed to visit the head. He walked the boy through his whole night before the attack. Where he'd been. Who else had

been there. What he'd drunk. How he'd gotten back to his quarters. Over and over, pushing at anything he said a little different from another time, pushing him to remember things he didn't really remember and then coming at him when he got some detail wrong. The boy asked about Roberts, Salis, Jakulski. He asked about who else Vandercaust knew on Medina. Who he knew on the Sol side of the ring. What he knew about Michio Pa and Susanna Foyle and Ezio Rodriguez. When he'd been at Tycho Station. At Ceres. At Rhea. At Ganymede.

They showed him images of the attacks. The ships emerging through the gates all around the great sphere of gates. He watched them die as tactical images. As telescopic records of real people, really dying. Then they talked more, and showed it all to him again. He had a sense that the readouts were subtly different the second time out—another attempt to catch him out on something—but he couldn't say what the changes were.

It was exhausting. It was meant to be exhausting. After a while, he stopped trying to keep his answers safe. He'd known enough about interrogation to see that this—wearying and harsh and dull though it was—was on the gentler end of that spectrum. He had no reason to protect his friends beyond the vague tribalism of being on a workgroup with them. If they were innocent, the truth would have to be armor enough. For them, and for him too.

They took him back to his cell. No beating this time. Just a hard shove through the door that left him sprawling and knocked his cheek against the wall hard enough to split it. He slept for a while, woke in darkness, slept again. The second time he woke, there was a bowl of beans and mushrooms congealing beside the door. He ate them anyway. No way to know how long he'd be there. How long it would all go on. Whether it would get worse.

When the door opened again, five people in Free Navy uniforms came in. The brown-eyed boy wasn't among them, and for a moment, that made Vandercaust very nervous. Like looking for a friend and not finding them. The leader of the new group was laughing with one of her subordinates, checked her hand terminal by holding it up beside his face without paying much attention to him, tapped her screen.

"You should go, pampaw," she said, walking out. "Late for your shift, you."

They left the door open behind them, and after a moment, Vandercaust

walked out of the cell, out of the security station, into the wide corridors of the drum. His body felt like a rag used for too long. He was certain that he smelled like sick primate and old sweat. The guard had been right. It was almost time for his shift, but he still went back to his hole, showered, shaved, changed into new clothes. He spent a few long minutes admiring the bruises on his face and sides. On a younger man, they could have been badges of endurance. On him, they just looked like an old man who'd caught the toes of a few too many boots. So he was late. He had reason to be. Little rebel, him.

He found Salis and Roberts deep in the service passageways, testing flow on the sewage intake for the backup recycling plant. Roberts' eyes lit up as he approached, and she threw her arms around him.

"Perdíd," she breathed against his ear. "Are you okay? We were worried."



"Es dui?" Salis said, reaching across the table for the wasabi-flavored soy nuts. "They beat you up à nothing?"

The shift done, the three had retired to their usual bar. The breeze from spinward was as it always was. The thin line of sunlight stretched above them. Vandercaust pushed the bowl toward Salis' fingers. "Security is police, and police are the same everywhere."

"Still," Roberts said. "Why bother pushing off the inners if it's just to have a Belter foot stepping on our necks instead?"

"Wouldn't talk like that," Vandercaust said, then drank. Water tonight. Might be some time before he went for a long, solid drunk again. "Anxious times, these."

"Talk how I want to talk," Roberts said, but softly. She turned to her hand terminal. He could see the green and silver of the station feed, same colors it had been before the Free Navy took over. He wondered why they hadn't changed it. A way to give a sense of continuity, maybe. Anything on the feed would have been vetted, of course. The power of Medina Station was that it was so much not a part of any of the systems on the far sides of the gate. The price of it was that information came from a single source.

Back in Sol system, there would be any number of feeds and subfeeds. Some broadcast, some left in storage to be queried and mirrored. Hard to control what got out. Maybe impossible. Medina, one set of jammers blocked every unlicensed receiver and transmitter at once.

The server came with his gyro—textured fungus and soybean curd instead of lamb and beef. Cucumber yogurt. A sprig of mint. He reached out for it with a little grunt and a sudden ache. It wasn't the worst beating he'd ever suffered, but he'd still be sore for days.

"Why they set you out?" Salis asked. "Sprecht el la?"

"No, they didn't say," Vandercaust replied. "Or that they wouldn't be back. Maybe they just needed someone to keep you two on schedule."

He'd missed two full shifts and come in during the middle of the third. Three days, almost, lost in the darkness of the security cell. No lawyer, no union representative. He could have asked for one—should have, by the rules and customs—but the certainty was solid as steel that it would have only meant more bruises. Maybe a broken bone. Vandercaust knew enough of history and human nature to know when the rules weren't the rules anymore. He took a bite of his sandwich, then put it down while he chewed. After this, he'd go home. Sleep in his own bed. Sounded like the promise of paradise. He traced fingertips over the split circle on his wrist. It had been a statement of rebellion once. Now, maybe it only made him seem old. Still taking sides in the last generation's fight.

"My friend in comms?" Salis said. "You know what they say? Found a hidden dump in the data core. Walled off. Think it was what they used to coordinate with the colonies. Confirmations came in from all the gates just before the attack hit. Only funny thing? Two ships didn't come through."

Salis cranked his eyebrows up toward his hairline.

Vandercaust grunted. "Were asking me about how many ships came through. Like they wanted a number."

"Probably why. See if you knew how many came through or how many were supposed to, yeah? Trip you up if you were in on."

"But didn't have nothing," Vandercaust said, tapping his forehead with two fingers. "Bon besse for me."

Salis put a hand on his arm. The young man looked pained. Aching, but not in the muscles and joints. Not the way he was. "You should let me buy you a drink, coyo. You had a shit week."

Vandercaust shrugged. He didn't know how to explain himself to Salis or Roberts. They were young. They hadn't seen the things he'd seen. Hadn't done the thing he'd done. Being picked up by security, locked away, beaten, interrogated. They didn't scare him in themselves. They scared him for what they said about how it came next. They scared him because they meant that Medina Station wasn't a new beginning in history. It was and would be as red in the gutter as everywhere else humanity had set its flags.

Roberts sat up, her eyes going wide. "They got!"

Salis let his hand drop, turned to her. "Que?"

"The mole? The coordinator. They got."

She turned her hand terminal toward them. On it, station security in Free Navy uniforms were walking, eight of them, around a broad-shouldered, squat man with dark hair and a scruff of beard. Vandercaust thought he looked familiar, but couldn't place him. The image jumped to Captain Samuels, with Jon Amash standing behind her on one side. Political power and security service, one beside the other, and no light between them.

Samuels' lips began to move.

"Turn it up," Salis said. Roberts fumbled with her terminal, then shifted around between them so they could all see the screen.

"—ties not only to the settlements that chose aggression against us but also with regressive forces back in Sol system. He will be questioned fully before execution. While we have to keep eyes open and alert, I am convinced, given all I have seen, that the immediate threat to Medina Station is under control."

"Execution," Roberts said.

Salis shrugged. "You put the ship at risk, that's what happens. Those colony bastards weren't coming to play dice and make happy."

"Least it's over," Vandercaust said.

"Is why they let you go," Roberts said, shaking her hand terminal. "Found him. Saw you weren't involved."

Or picked someone to play the goat, Vandercaust thought. *Only I got lucky enough it wasn't me.* It wasn't the sort of thing you said out loud. Not at times like these.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Holden

The room they were using as an anteroom was larger than the *Rocinante*'s galley. Wide tables with built-in monitors and tall metal stools. Soft, indirect lighting in a manipulated spectrum that reminded Holden of early mornings in his childhood. He didn't have a rank or a uniform, but the ship jumpsuit had seemed wrong for the occasion. He'd decided on a dark, collarless shirt and pants that echoed the sense of a military uniform without making any specific claims.

Naomi, pacing now along the wall by the yellow double doors, had matched him, but he had the creeping sense that they looked better on her. So of the three of them, only Bobbie was in uniform, and hers had the insignia left off. The cut and the fitting all screamed Martian Marine Corps. And the people they were going to meet with—the ones gathering right now down the hall—knew who she was anyway.

"You keep pulling at that sleeve," Bobbie said. "It bothering you?"

"It? No, *it's* fine," Holden said. "I'm bothering me. Do you know how many times I've done this kind of diplomatic work? I've been in battles and I've put together video feeds, but to walk in, look down the table at a bunch of OPA operatives, and tell them how they all need to listen to me? I've done that exactly no times. Never."

"Ilus," Naomi said.

"You mean when that one guy killed the other guy in the street and then burned a bunch of people alive?"

Naomi sighed. "Yeah. Then."

Bobbie flexed her hands, put them palm down on the table display. The monitor glowed for a moment, waiting for a command, then dimmed again when nothing came. Muffled voices came through the doorway. A woman with a Belter's accent asking something about chairs. A man replying, his voice too low to make out. "I've been in rooms like this before," Bobbie

said. “Political work. A lot of different agendas and no one saying out loud what they were actually thinking.”

“Yeah?” Holden said.

“It sucked.”



The *Rocinante* had decelerated toward Tycho harder than they’d planned, burning off the speed they’d poured on during the battle and pressing them all down a little more than usual, like an illness or a regret. Holden held a little ceremony in the galley where each of them shared some memory of Fred Johnson and they let their various griefs blur together. The only ones not to speak were Amos, smiling his amiable and meaningless smile, and Clarissa, her brow furrowed in concentration like it was all a puzzle she was trying to solve.

When they broke up, Holden noticed that Alex and Sandra Ip went off together, but he didn’t have time or enough moral high ground to worry about fraternization. Every hour that passed had taken them a few thousand clicks closer to Tycho and the meeting there. All of his spare time was in his cabin with the door closed trading messages across the emptiness of the system. Michio Pa. Drummer on Tycho. A man named Damian Short, who’d taken the reins on Ceres. But mostly Chrisjen Avasarala.

Every long, heavy day, he traded messages with Luna. Long lectures from Avasarala on how to conduct a meeting, how to present himself and his arguments. More importantly, how to listen to what the others said and didn’t say. She sent him dossiers on all the major OPA players who would be there: Aimee Ostman, Micah al-Dujaili, Liang Goodfortune, Carlos Walker. Everything Avasarala knew about them—who their families were, what their factions within the OPA had done and what she only suspected they’d done. The depth of background was overwhelming, group loyalties intersecting and drawing apart, personal insults affecting political agreements, and political agreements shaping relationships. And along with it, Avasarala pouring the distilled insights of a lifetime of political life into his ears until he was drunk with it to the edge of nausea.

Strength by itself is just bullying, capitulation by itself is an invitation to

get fucked; only mixed strategies survive. Everything is personal, but they know that too. They can smell pandering like a fart. If you treat them like they're a treasure box where if you just tweak them the right way, the policy you want falls out, you're already fucked. They'll misjudge you, so be ready to use that.

By the time he walked into the meeting room on Tycho, he intended to have a little, simplified version of Avasarala that lived in the back of his mind. It felt like doing a decade of work in a few days because it sort of was. He got to where he couldn't sleep and he couldn't stay awake. When they finally reached Tycho Station, it was hard to say whether the dread was more powerful or the relief.

Walking the habitation ring of Tycho the first time after their return had been eerie. Everything was perfectly familiar—the pale foam of the walls, the slightly astringent smell in the air, the sound of bhangra music leaking from some distant workroom—but it all meant something different now. Tycho was Fred Johnson's house, only now it wasn't. Holden kept having the nagging sense that someone was missing, and then remembering who it was.

Drummer had done her mourning in private. When she escorted them in, she was the head of security that she'd been before: sharp and aware and businesslike. She'd met them at the docks with a convoy of carts, each one with a pair of armed guards. That didn't make Holden feel better.

"So who's in charge here now?" he'd asked as they paused at the bulkhead that marked the administrative section.

"Technically, Bredon Tycho and the board of directors," she said. "Except they're mostly on Earth or Luna. Never been out here. Always pleased to keep their hands clean. We're here, so until someone comes and makes a strong opposing case, we run it."

"We?"

Drummer nodded. Her eyes got a little harder, and he couldn't say if it was grief in them or anger. "Johnson wanted me to keep an eye on the place until he got back. That's what I plan to do."



There were supposed to be four people waiting for him.

There were five.

He recognized all the faces that Avasarala had prepared him for. Carlos Walker, wide shoulders and face, even shorter than Clarissa, had an uncanny air of stillness. Aimee Ostman could have passed for a middle-grade science teacher, but was responsible for more attacks against inner-planet military targets than all the rest combined. Liang Goodfortune, who Fred had only managed to lure to the table by offering amnesty for their daughter, a former OPA hitter still housed in a numbers-only prison on Luna. Micah al-Dujaili, with his fat, red-veined drunkard's nose, who'd spent half his lifetime coordinating free schools and medical clinics throughout the Belt. Whose brother had been captain of the *Witch of Endor* when the Free Navy destroyed it.

The fifth person had the white hair of an old man, pocked cheeks, and a deferential smile that was almost an apology, but not quite. Holden recognized him, but wasn't sure from where. He tried to keep his poker face, but the fifth man saw through the effort without seeming to realize it was there.

"Anderson Dawes," the man said. "I don't think we've ever met person to person, but Fred talked about you often. And, of course, your reputation."

Holden shook hands with the former governor of Ceres Station and master of Marco Inaros' inner circle, his mind racing. "I was wondering if you'd be here," he lied.

"I hadn't announced myself," Dawes said. "Tycho's a risky place for a man in my position. I was relying on Fred to vouch for me. We worked together for many years. I was sorry to hear about him."

"It's a loss," Holden said. "Fred was a good man. I'll miss him."

"As will we all," Dawes said. "I hope you don't mind my arriving unannounced. Aimee reached out to me when she knew she was coming, and I asked her to let me follow along."

Good, great, the more the merrier, Holden thought, but the little version of Avasarala in his imagination frowned. "I'm glad you're here, but you can't be in this meeting."

"I can vouch for him," Aimee Ostman said.

Holden nodded, tried to imagine what Avasarala would say, but it was the old, almost-forgotten voice of Miller that came to him. "There's a way

we do things. This isn't it. I hope you don't mind waiting outside, Mr. Dawes. Naomi, could you see that our friend here finds someplace comfortable?"

Naomi stepped forward. Dawes shifted his weight to the back of his feet, surprised. *This is your house*, Avasarala said in Holden's mind. *If they don't respect you here, they won't respect you anywhere*. Dawes gathered up his hand terminal and a white ceramic cup, nodding to Holden with a tight smile as he left. Holden took his seat, grateful for the solid and looming presence of Bobbie at his side. Aimee Ostman's lips were pressed thin. *If you're looking for mutual respect, you can start by asking before you invite people to my secret meetings*. It seemed like a rude thing to say out loud.

"If you're looking for mutual respect, you can start by asking before you invite people to my secret meetings."

Aimee Ostman cleared her throat and looked away.

"All right," Holden said. "This was supposed to be Fred Johnson's presentation, but he's gone. I know you all came here on the strength of his word and his reputation. And I know you're all concerned about Marco Inaros and the Free Navy. But I also know this is the first time any of you have met me, and I may not have your full confidence."

"You're James Holden," Liang Goodfortune said in a tone that meant *Of course you don't have our full confidence*.

"I took the liberty of arranging an introduction," he said, shifting the message from his hand terminal to the monitors on the table.

Michio Pa looked out at each of them. The command deck of the *Connaught* glowed behind her. "Friends," she said. "As you know, I was not long ago in the inner circle of the Free Navy, and what I saw there convinced me and many of those in my command that Marco Inaros is not the leader that the Belt needs. As the Free Navy has abandoned its original purpose of supporting and rebuilding the Belt and keeping the industry that feeds Belters from shifting out to the new colony worlds, I have stayed true. You all know this. I have lost friends to this effort. I have risked my life and the lives of those I care most deeply for. I serve with the true heroes of the Belt. My credentials are beyond reproach."

Bobbie nudged him and nodded toward Micah al-Dujaili. Tears were shining in the man's eyes. Holden nodded. He saw it too.

"Since my parting of ways with the Free Navy, I have been working

with Fred Johnson toward a comprehensive plan that will guarantee the safety and well-being of the Belt.” Pa paused, took a deep breath. Holden wondered whether she did that every time she lied, or just when it was a whopper. “This meeting was intended to be an introduction of that plan and of Captain Holden as integral to it. Unfortunately, while Fred Johnson was able to see the path forward, he isn’t able to make that journey with us. As a dedicated citizen of the Belt and a servant of our people, I’m asking you to hear Captain Holden out and then to join with us for a living future. Thank you.”

Everything about her statement had been negotiated. He’d lost track of the number of times they’d traded back and forth, Pa asking for something, Avasarala explaining what it really meant, him running between the two of them like a messenger, but learning a little more with every pass. Pa would agree to say they’d been working toward a plan, but not that they’d been working on a plan. She would say that Holden was integral to it, but not that he was central. The whole process had been everything he hated—niggling on details and nuances, fighting over turns of phrase and the order information was presented in, fashioning something that, even where it wasn’t outright false, was tailored to be misunderstood. Politics at its most political.

He looked at the four faces sitting around the table and tried to judge whether it had worked. Aimee Ostman looked thoughtful and sour. Micah al-Dujaili was still composing himself, moved by the reminder that his brother had already sacrificed himself in the cause. Carlos Walker, still and silent and unreadable as language in an unknown alphabet. Liang Goodfortune cleared their throat.

“Looks like Inaros has a habit of losing women to you, Captain,” Goodfortune said. Walker chuckled. *They’ll try embarrassing you a little to see how you react. Don’t try to one-up them, or they’ll try to escalate out of conflicts later. Stay on point.* Naomi stepped back in, came to sit at his side.

“Losing Fred is hard because it’s sad,” Holden said. “He was a friend. But it doesn’t change the situation. He formed a plan, and my intention is to follow it. Fred called on each of you because he felt you had something to offer this and also something to gain by it.”

Carlos Walker’s eyes shifted, as if he’d heard something interesting for the first time. Holden nodded to him, an intentionally ambiguous gesture.

Then he turned to Bobbie. Her turn to take the floor.

“There will be a military aspect to this,” she said. “We’re not getting through any of this without some risk, but we’re confident that it is more than outweighed by the rewards.”

“You say that as a representative of Mars?” Aimee Ostman asked.

“Sergeant Draper has worked as a liaison between Earth and Mars on several occasions,” Holden said. “She’s here today as a member of my crew.”

That was odd. Bobbie seemed to grow tenser at the words, gather herself, sit up straighter. When she spoke again, her tone was almost exactly the same as it had been before—no louder, no rougher—but something about it had grown fierce. “I have experience in combat. I’ve led teams in battle. It is my professional opinion that the proposal Fred Johnson put together is the best hope for the long-term stability and safety of the Belt.”

“Find that hard to believe,” Aimee Ostman said. “Looks to me like the captain here’s been getting all the women and Inaros has been taking all the stations.”

Before Holden could answer, Micah al-Dujaili snapped back. “Looks to me like Inaros is as bad at keeping territory as he is at keeping women.”

“Stop it with the ‘women’ bullshit,” Carlos Walker said. His voice was surprising. Reedy and musical. A singer’s voice. The accents of Belter cant were almost absent from it. “It’s juvenile. He lost Dawes too. He lost everyone in this room before he even began, or none of us would be here. Inaros has an open sore where his heart should be, and we all know it. What I want to hear is how you intend to change the dynamic. Every time you move toward him, he’s pulled you into overreach. Your consolidated fleet is going to be stretched too thin soon. Is that what you want us for? Cannon fodder?”

“I’m not ready to discuss the details,” Holden said. “There are security issues we all have to address first.”

“Why did you bring us here if it wasn’t to tell us what you intended?” Aimee Ostman said.

Liang Goodfortune ignored her. “Medina. You’re going for Medina.”

Something will go wrong. Something always does. They’ll see something you didn’t mean them to see; they’ll have a trap set you didn’t know to expect. These are intelligent people, and all of them have their own

agendas. When it happens—not if, when—the worst thing you can do is panic. The second worst thing you can do is engage. Holden leaned forward.

“I’d like to give all of you the opportunity to consult about this before we talk about any of the tactical options,” Holden said. “I’ve spoken to the security chief. You are all welcome to stay here on the station or else return to your ships. Feel free to talk among yourselves or with anyone you think might be useful. You can have access to the station comms unmonitored, or if you’d rather use the systems on your own ships, you won’t be recorded or jammed. If you are interested in being involved with this, we’ll reconvene here in twenty hours. I’ll be ready to go through all the details then, but I will expect your loyalty and commitment in return. If you aren’t comfortable with that, you have safe passage away from Tycho anytime within that window.”

“And after that?” Carlos Walker asked.

“After that’s a different country,” Holden said. “We’ll be doing things differently there.”

Holden, Naomi, and Bobbie all stood. The other four rose a moment later. Holden watched how each of them said their goodbyes or else didn’t. When the doors closed behind the four emissaries, leaving him alone with Naomi and Bobbie, he slumped down in his chair.

“God *damn*,” he said. “How does she do this all day, every day? That was maybe twenty minutes start to finish, and I already feel like I should dip my brain in bleach.”

“Told you it sucked,” Bobbie said, leaning against the table. “Are you sure it’s a good idea giving them free rein of the station? We don’t know who they’re talking to.”

“We couldn’t stop them,” Naomi said. “This way it looks like a gesture on our part.”

“So theater and palace intrigue,” Bobbie said.

“Just for now,” Holden said. “Just until they buy in. Once they commit, we can get down to our plan.”

“Johnson’s plan,” Bobbie said. Then a moment later, “So, just between us. Did Fred Johnson really have a plan?”

“I’m pretty sure he did,” Holden said, sagging into himself. “Don’t know what it was.”

“So this one we’re selling?”

“I’m kind of making it up.”

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Chapter Thirty-Four: Dawes

There was no viewing of the body. Fred Johnson—the Butcher of Anderson Station—had requested that his body be recycled into the system of Tycho Station. Water that had been his blood was likely already coming through the taps and faucets throughout the station. His chalk bones would reenter the food cycle in the hydroponics pools. The more complex lipids and proteins would take longer to become humus for the mushroom farms. Fred Johnson, like all the dead before him, fell to his component parts, scattered, and entered the world again, changed and unrecognized.

Instead, there were printed images of him on the chapel wall. A portrait of the man as a colonel in the service of Earth. A picture of him as an older man, still strong in his features but with a weariness creeping in at his eyes. Another of a ridiculously young boy—not more than ten years old—holding a book in one hand and waving with the other, his face split by a massive and childlike grin. They were the right ears, the right spacing of the eyes, but Dawes still had to work to believe that happy child had grown into the complex man he'd known and called friend and betrayed.

The memorial was in a small chapel so aggressively nondenominational that it was hard to tell the difference between it and a waiting room. Instead of religious icons, there were sober, abstract shapes. A circle in gold, a square in forest green. Intentionally empty symbols meant as placeholders for where something with significance might have been. The Tycho Manufacturing logo in the hallway outside held more meaning.

The pews were bamboo textured to look like some sort of wood—ash or oak or pine. Dawes had only ever seen pictures of live trees. He wouldn't have known one from another, but it gave the little room some sense of gravitas. Still he didn't sit. He walked past the pictures of Fred Johnson, looking into the eyes that didn't look back. The thing in his chest, the one making it hard to breathe, felt thick and complicated.

“I had a speech ready,” he said. His voice echoed a little, the emptiness giving it depth. “Well practiced. You’d have liked it. All about the nature of politics and the finest of humanity being our ability to change to match our environment. We are how the universe consciously remakes itself. The inevitability of failure and the glory of standing back up after it.” He coughed out a chuckle. It sounded like a sob. “What I really meant was I’m sorry. Not just sorry I backed the wrong horse. Am sorry about that. But I’m sorry I compromised you while I did it.”

He paused as if Fred might answer, then shook his head.

“I think the speech would have worked. You and I have so much history behind us. Seems strange. I was a mentor to you once. Well. Feet of clay. You know how it is. Still, I really think you’d have seen the value in having me back. But this Holden prick?” Dawes shook his head. “You picked a shit time to die, my friend.”

The doors opened behind him. A young woman in an oil-stained Tycho Station jumpsuit and a deep-green hijab stepped in, nodded to him, and took a place in the pew, her head bowed. Dawes stepped back from the pictures of the dead man. There was more he wanted to say. Apparently there always would be.

He took a seat across the aisle from the woman, folded his hands in his lap, lowered his head. There was a profound mundanity in shared grief. A set of rules as strong as any human etiquette, and they didn’t allow for him to keep up his one-sided conversation. Not aloud, anyway.

The Free Navy could have been—ought to have been—a glorious moment for the Belt. Inaros had conjured up a full military for them out of nothing. Dawes had told himself at the time that Inaros’ failings as a political animal weren’t a problem. Were an opportunity, even. As a member of the Free Navy’s inner circle, Dawes could exert his influence. Be kingmaker. The cost was high, yes, but the rewards were nothing short of visionary. An independent Belt, cut free of the inner planets. The threat of the gate network under their control. Yes, Inaros was a peacock who made his way through life on charisma and violence. Yes, Rosenfeld had always had a whiff of brimstone about him. But Sanjrani was smart, and Pa was capable and dedicated. And if he’d said no, it would all have gone ahead without him anyway.

It was what he’d told himself. How he’d justified it all. The best would

have been that someone besides Inaros had acquired the ships. The second best was that Inaros' circle of advisors and handlers include him. So what was third?

After the abandonment of Ceres, Dawes had gone on playing the role of elder statesman for a while, even as Pa's rebellion made it impossible to pretend things were on track. When Aimee Ostman had found him, told him that Fred Johnson was putting together a meeting on Tycho, it had looked like an opportunity to broker peace. If not between Earth and the Free Navy, at least with the remains of the OPA. It had been the perfect way to leverage his relationship with Fred into a place at the table.

Another woman came in, sitting beside the one in the hijab. They exchanged soft words. Two men came in together, sat in the back. Change of shift was coming. Mourners would be stopping in on their way to work, or on their way back from it. Dawes felt a twinge of resentment that they should interrupt his time alone in the chapel. It was irrational and he knew it.

And anyway, Fred Johnson had made his wishes clear, even if he hadn't meant to. And Dawes still owed the colonel something.



"Is fucking bullshit is what it is," Aimee Ostman said. "James pinché Holden can fuck himself."

Dawes sipped his espresso and nodded. Holden's first move had been to humiliate her. For reasons Dawes understood. But still, for her to begin by losing face was hard.

"Forgive him for it," Dawes said. "I have. You should too."

"For for?"

Aimee Ostman scowled and scratched her chin. Her quarters in the station were wide and luxurious. One wall was taken entirely by a screen tied to an exterior camera, the resolution so fine it was indistinguishable from a window into space. The divan was spotless cream, the air scented with volatile molecules that mimicked sandalwood and vanilla. Dawes gestured at it all with his demitasse.

"Look at this," he said. "Room for an ambassador. For a president."

“And?”

“And he gave it to you,” Dawes said and took another sip. “Thought it was doing you honor. Best suite in the station.”

“He spat in your face,” Aimee Ostman said, pointing index and middle finger at him together like the barrel of a gun. “Kicked you out.”

Dawes laughed, shrugged. Invited her to laugh and shrug with him. It bit at his soul, but it was the thing to do. “I showed up unannounced. It was rude of me. Holden was in the right. How would you have been if I’d brought him to the back room at the Apex without telling you first?”

She scowled, her eyes tracking low and to the left. “Should have been more polite about it.”

“Maybe. But he’s new at this part.”

She sat across from him, folded her arms. The clouds in her eyes weren’t gone. He wouldn’t have expected them to be. But they weren’t thick with thunderbolts either. “Maybe,” she said. Grudgingly. “But I’m not staying. Not after that.”

“You should reconsider,” Dawes said. “If the plan came from Fred Johnson, it will be solid. And better that you be part of it than not.”

She grunted, but there was a hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. That one found home. Dawes leaned into it a little, pressing his advantage.

“There has to be a grown-up in that room,” he said. “Holden’s a puppy. We both know that. We need you there to keep him from fucking everything up.”



“Holden’s the most experienced man in the system,” Dawes said. “He’s been on Medina. He’s been past it to the colonies. He walked off Eros Station before it woke up. He fought pirates for us. He went on diplomatic missions for us. His ship has berthed at Tycho Station more than anyplace else since the day he stole it from Mars. Holden has *years* working with the OPA.”

“There’s OPA,” Liang Goodfortune said, turning left down the corridor so that Dawes had to trot to keep up with them, “and there’s OPA.”

Tycho Station didn’t have the same breadth and depth as Ceres.

Everyone here had a job or access to one. The brothels were all licensed, the drugs all from a dispensary, the gambling all taxed. But the station was also a home to people who'd lived their lives in quiet rebellion against the inner planets, and that meant a kind of demimonde had existed there too. Workers for an Earth corporation whose first loyalty was to the Belt. And so there were clubs where the music had lyrics shouted in Belter cant, where the drinks and food called back nothing to a farmland under the bare sun, where the games were shastash and Golgo instead of poker and billiards. Liang Goodfortune fit in there like they'd never left.

"So it was Johnson's OPA," Dawes said. "He was a good ally."

"He was useful for an Earther," Liang Goodfortune said. "That's not saying much. And Holden's just the same. Another Earther for us to rally around? You know better than that, Anderson. Holden's worked for Johnson and Earth."

"On behalf of the Belt," Dawes said. "UN Navy kicked him to the curb before any of this began. His career was with a water hauler *because* he couldn't stomach being part of imperial Earth. Coyo can't change where he was born, where he grew up, but he's lived on float. His lover's one of ours."

"Savvy you he's loyal to the Belt because he's sleeping with Naomi Nagata? Or you think maybe she's *disloyal* à the Belt because she's with a squat? That knife cuts from the grip."

"Holden has been making a one-man propaganda campaign on behalf of the Belt," Dawes said, raising his voice over the ambient musical shout of the nightclub.

"His amateur anthropology feed? It's insulting y patronizing y shit," Liang Goodfortune said.

"It's well meant. And it's more than other people in his position have done. Holden's a man of action."

They came into the larger room, lights swirling around the bar, music thudding hard enough to press his lungs. Dawes had to lean in until his lips were almost brushing Goodfortune's ear. "I think if there's anyone in the system better prepared to stand against Inaros, you can't find them and neither can I. Either you make cause with him, or you go hat in hand to the Free Navy and say you're ready to take their table scraps. But do it soon, because I will wager everything I have that even if he has to go to war by

himself, James Holden will *destroy* Marco Inaros before this is done.”



“He can’t do it alone,” Dawes said, spreading his hands wide.

The *Desiderata of Bhagavathi* had been Carlos Walker’s ship for thirty years, and it bore the stamp of his peculiar aesthetic sense in every detail. The anti-spalling covers on the walls were gray, but textured to catch the light in smooth curves that rose and fell like the hills of a vast desert or the not-quite-identifiable skin of nude bodies. The crash couches on the command deck weren’t simple, utilitarian gray but a sculpted bronze that had nothing to do with the actual metal and ceramic that made them up. Music played on the speakers so softly it might almost have been Dawes’ imagination: harp and flute and a dry, hissing drum. It felt less like a pirate ship than a temple. Maybe there was room for both.

“That isn’t an argument that I should do it with him,” Carlos Walker said, handing over a drinking bulb. The whiskey that flooded Dawes’ mouth when he sipped was rich and deep and complicated. Carlos Walker smiled, watching him appreciate it. “I came out of respect for Johnson. I am staying out of respect. That respect doesn’t extend to dying on Holden’s errands. You say yourself that Medina is too well defended.”

“I say it’s well defended,” Dawes said.

“The rail guns will kill any ship that comes through the ring.”

“Perhaps,” Dawes said. “But keep in mind, this is Fred Johnson’s plan. And that Fred had access to Michio Pa and all that she knows about the station defense.”

Carlos Walker hesitated, though with him it expressed itself only as a slightly longer silence. He shook his head. “There’s risk in leaving Marco Inaros and his Free Navy to play themselves out. There’s danger in taking them on. But only one requires that I drive my ship into rail gun fire. I can’t agree to it.”

“Not every battle is won on the battleground,” Dawes said. “I respect your caution, but Holden hasn’t asked you to be vanguard. Hasn’t even asked you to go through the ring gate. Don’t assume he’s going to demand heroism and sacrifice. I know his reputation, but no one survives the things

he's survived without having a deep capacity for thoughtfulness and foresight. And more than that, strategy. Holden comes across feckless sometimes, truth, but he's a thinker. What he's doing? It's all from the head."



"You think he's not angry?" Dawes said. "Holden is here as much for vengeance as you are. This is a man who acts from the gut, from the heart, before his head gets in the way."

They were alone in the chapel, except for the images of Fred Johnson. It felt wrong to bring talk of violence and revenge into even as milquetoast a holy place as this, but grief came in all kinds of clothing. And this had begun as a moment to show respect for the dead. Micah al-Dujaili hunched forward, his arms resting on the back of the pew in front of him. His eyes were bloodshot.

"Carl talked to me," he said. "Said he couldn't stand by while the Belt starved. And Inaros killed him for it."

"Tried to kill Holden's wife too," Dawes said. He knew that wasn't quite true, but this was a moment for broad strokes. "Not because she was a threat. Not because she was of any sort of strategic value. Just because she'd embarrassed him, and he could."

"Inaros isn't who we thought he was. Everyone, they still call him a hero. They look at Earth and they look at Mars, and they cheer. They still cheer."

"Some still do," Dawes said. It was true. All through the system, Inaros had as many that loved him as had turned away. More, maybe. "It's not him, though. It's the idea of him. The man who stood up for the Belt. Only that man hasn't risen up yet. They only think he has."

"Will this Holden hurt him?"

"Every time Holden takes a breath, Marco Inaros suffers," Dawes said. And that was probably as close to truth as anything he'd said in the last two days.

Micah nodded slowly, then stood, wavering drunkenly, and threw his arms around Dawes. The embrace went on longer than Dawes felt

comfortable with. Just as he began to wonder if the other man was starting to black out, Micah stepped back, gave a sharp OPA salute, and walked out of the chapel, wiping his eye against the inside of his wrist. Dawes sat back down.

It was midshift, and almost midnight for him. The three Fred Johnsons still graced the front wall. The child, the adult, and the man who, all unknowingly, was at the end of his struggles. Fred Johnson as he had been. The way Dawes remembered him best was tied up and spitting angry the first time they'd met, and the flicker of disappointment in the man's eye when he realized Dawes wasn't going to kill him.

They'd fought a hell of a fight together, against each other and side by side. And then against each other again. The clash of empires, only he wasn't sure what the empires were any longer. Everything they'd done had brought them here, one dead, the other living a life he barely recognized or understood.

Humanity hadn't changed, but it had. The venality and the nobility, the cruelty and the grace. They were all still there. It was just the particulars he felt shifting away from under him. Everything he'd fought for seemed to belong to a different man in a different time. Well. It was in the nature of torches to be passed. Nothing to be sad about in that. Except that he was sad.

"Well, there you have it," he said to the empty air. "The kingmaker's last hurrah. I hope to hell you knew what you were doing. I hope James Holden is what you thought he could be."

It was almost an hour later that the door opened and a young man came in. Tight dark curls, wide-set warm eyes, a thin apologetic mustache. Dawes nodded to him, and the man nodded back. For a moment, they were both silent.

"Perdón," the man said. "Not rushing, me. It's only I'm supposed to take this one down now. It's ... it's on the schedule."

Dawes nodded and waved him forward. The man moved hesitantly at first, then reached a point of commitment where the work was just the work. The corporal came down first, then the head of the OPA. The young boy with the book and the grin stayed until last.

There had been a moment when that child had waved into a camera, decades ago, not knowing the gesture was also his last. The boy and the

Butcher were both gone now. The man took the picture down, rolled it together with the others, and slid them all into a sleeve of cheap green plastic.

He stopped on his way out. "You all right, you? Need something?"

"Fine," Dawes said. "I'm just going to stay here a little longer. If that's all right."

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Chapter Thirty-Five: Amos

Sex was one of those things where the way it was supposed to work and the way it worked for him didn't always match up real well. He knew all the stuff about love and affection, and that just seemed like making shit up. He understood making shit up. He also understood how people talked about it, and he could talk about it that way, just to fit in.

In practice, he recognized there was power in being with another living body, and he respected it. The pressure built up over the weeks or months on the burn kind of like hunger or thirst, only slower and it wouldn't kill you if you ignored it. He didn't fight against it. For one thing, that was stupid. For another it didn't help. He just noticed it, kept an eye on it. Acknowledged it was there the same way he would anything powerful and dangerous that was sharing his workspace.

When they got into port someplace big enough to have a licensed brothel, he'd go there. Not because it was safe so much as it was an environment where he knew what all the dangers looked like. Could recognize them and not be surprised. Then he'd take care of what needed to be taken care of, and afterward, it wouldn't bother him for a while.

Maybe that was different from everyone else, but it worked for him.

The thing was, he'd usually be able to sleep afterward. Really sleep. Deep and dreamless and hard to pull up out of until he was done. And right now, he was mostly just looking at the ceiling. The last girl—the one called Maddie—was curled up next to him, the sheets draped around her legs, her arm under one pillow, snoring a little. One of the good things about getting a room for the whole night is they'd give you a quiet one away from the front. Maddie was someone he'd used and been used by before when the *Roci*'d been on Tycho, and he liked her as much as he liked anyone that wasn't in his tribe. That she felt safe sleeping next to him warmed something in his stomach that usually stayed cold.

She had a little gap between her front teeth and skin as pale as anyone he'd ever met. She could blush on command, which was a pretty good trick, and she'd been in the life since she was a kid. Before she'd come to Tycho for the legal trade. His own childhood in the illegal trade meant they had context that made the talk before and after more comfortable for him, and she knew he wouldn't pull any of that "you're better than this" soul-saving bullshit. He also wouldn't start calling her a bitch and being abusive out of shame the way some johns did. He liked shooting the shit with her afterward, and usually the way she snored just a little didn't keep him from drifting off.

Only that wasn't what was keeping him awake. He knew what was keeping him awake.

He got out of bed quietly so as not to wake her up. He'd paid her and rented the room for the whole night, and the house wasn't about to give him a refund for leaving early, so she might as well get the rest herself. He gathered up his clothes and slipped out into the hallway to get dressed. A john on his way out passed by as he was pulling on his jumpsuit, made brief and awkward eye contact, nodded curtly. Amos smiled his amiable smile and made room for the guy to go past before he zipped himself in and headed out toward the docks.

The *Roci* had spent more time in Tycho than any other port, usually getting put back together after the last whatever went wrong. It wasn't home—nowhere outside the *Roci* was home—but it was familiar enough that he could feel the differences. It was in the way people talked to each other in the hallways. The kinds of images that played on the newsfeeds. He'd seen what it was like for a place to change in ways that didn't change back. Earth was like that. Now Tycho. Kind of like a big, slow wave coming out from where the rocks had hit Earth and spreading through everyplace humans were.

There were people on Tycho who recognized him too. Not like they knew Holden. Holden, he couldn't walk through a room anymore without people staring at him and pointing and making a fuss. Amos had the sense that was going to be a problem eventually, but it wasn't one he knew how to fix. He wasn't even sure what it implied at this point.

Back at the ship, he headed down to the machine shop and his workstation. The *Roci* told him that Holden was in the galley with Babs,

Naomi was catching some bunk time, and Peaches was at work replacing the hatch seals they'd been talking about. He made a note on his work schedule to double-check them when she was done, even though he knew they'd be fine. Peaches turned out to be a pretty good worker. Smart, focused, seemed to really enjoy fixing things, and never bitched about the stresses of shipboard life. Perspective, he figured. Shittiest ship there was still had to be better than the best cell in the pit, if only because you got to pick that you were in it.

He shrugged into his couch, pulled up the technical reports, and spooled through the way he had before. Not that he expected to find anything different. Just to see if there was any reaction when he got to the weird bit. He got to it and looked at the data for a while. The torpedoes Bobbie had fired off. Their trajectories. The error logs. And he had the same reaction. It was bugging him.

He shut the workstation down.

"Hey," Peaches said, coming up from engineering with an ARL polymer tank slung over one shoulder.

"Hey," he said. "How's it going?"

She was still too skinny. The smallest standard jumpsuit still left her swimming in it. They'd had to adjust the code to convince the *Roci* that anyone flying on her could be so slight. Working made her look healthier, though.

She thumbed open a storage locker, slid the tank into place, and dropped into her couch. "I got the seals replaced, but I don't like the inner airlock door in the cargo bay. It's not throwing errors, but the power's dirty."

"Dirty dirty? Or inside the error bars but it pisses you off dirty?"

"Second one," Peaches said, and then grinned. But her grin faded fast. "You all right?"

He smiled. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you're not all right," she said.

Amos leaned back, shifted to crack his neck. Part of him wanted to talk to her about the torpedoes, but he couldn't picture Holden doing it. And this was kind of a Holden thing, so he only shrugged. "Need to talk to the captain about something."



“Then we’re back to the ‘throw ships at them until they run out of ammunition’ plan,” Bobbie said. Her voice was clear and sharp. Someone who didn’t know her might have thought she was pissed, but Amos was pretty sure that was her having a good time. He hesitated in the corridor outside the galley. Truth was, even if they decided to go after Medina like they were stomping snakes to death, they’d be in port for a couple more days. There’d be time to ask the question later that didn’t mean putting his elbow in the planning. But he also wanted to get some decent sleep, so he went forward anyway.

They were sitting across the table from each other, leaning in like two kids dissecting the same frog. The display between them glowed blue and gold. Holden looked tired, but Amos had seen him looking worse one time and another. Holden was the kind of guy who smoked himself down to the filter if he thought it was the right thing to do.

“We should talk to Pa again,” Holden said, looking up at Amos and nodding. “If we go for the station, we risk losing a lot of people.”

Amos ambled to the food dispensers. They were topped up fresh, so he had a lot of choices. There was a part of him that liked it better when it was just a few.

“It’s called war for a reason, sir,” Bobbie said. Even though she didn’t hit it, the *sir* had a sting. A reminder that it wasn’t just them anymore. “We know the fire rate. We know the retrain rate. We can do the math. If we can get even a small team onto the surface—”

“Of the alien station that we totally don’t understand but strapped a bunch of artillery to anyway,” Holden said. Bobbie wouldn’t be interrupted.

“—we can take control of them. The lack of protection on the station is the best shot I have.”

Amos keyed in *noodle soup*. The dispenser hummed and chugged for a second while Holden raised his eyebrows.

“Best shot *you* have?”

“I’ll lead the team,” Bobbie said.

“No. Look, I’m not getting you into this just because you want a fight.”

“Don’t be insulting. Name one other person you know you’d rather combat-drop onto a hostile station and I’ll bow out.”

Holden opened his mouth to reply, then just froze, gaping like a fish. When he finally closed it, his only reply was a shrug of defeat.

Amos chuckled. Both of the others turned to look at him as the bowl popped out, steaming and smelling like salt and reconstituted onion. “Anyone who can shut the cap’n up like that wins the ass-kicking contest every time,” he said, taking a spoon. “I’m not the boss of anything, but seems to me like having Babs here and not putting her in the front line? You use a welding rig to weld things. You use a gun to shoot things. You use a Bobbie Draper to fuck a bunch of bad guys permanently up.”

“Right tool for the job,” Bobbie said, and it sounded like thank you.

“You’re not tools,” Holden said. Then sighed. “But you’re not wrong. Okay. Just let me consult with Pa and Avasarala and the OPA Council, or whatever we’re calling it. In case someone has a better idea.”

Amos took a spoonful of noodle, sucked it up, and smiled while he chewed.

“All right,” Bobbie said. “But guideline? A decent idea now is way better than a brilliant plan when it’s too late.”

“I hear you,” Holden said.

“All right,” Bobbie said. “What about this Duarte asshole? What’s Avasarala’s guess on his reaction?”

“You know,” Amos said around his noodles, swallowed, “I hate to bust in, but you think I could borrow the cap’n for a few minutes?”

“Problem?” Holden asked at the same moment Bobbie said, “Sure.”

“Just need to check something,” Amos said, smiling.

Holden turned to Bobbie. “You should get some rest. I’ll fire off our notes. If we get enough sleep and eat breakfast after, we might even get some replies back.”

“Fair enough,” Bobbie said. “You’re going to sleep too, right?”

“Like the dead,” Holden said. “Just got to finish the stuff first.”

Bobbie rose up and headed out, tapping Amos’ shoulder with her knuckles as she passed. A silent *Thanks for having my back*. He liked her, but that’s not why he’d agreed with her. When you got a nail to drive, use the fucking hammer. Just made sense.

Amos sat down in her vacated spot, but sideways, with his back against

the wall and one leg running along the bench. His hand terminal chimed. Some update that Peaches had been running sending its system clear message to the team. As he watched, the *Roci* updated him: Alex was back on board. Amos shut the alerts off.

Holden looked like shit. Not *just* tired, exactly. His skin got waxy and his eyes sort of sank back in the sockets when that happened. Not exhaustion, then. Something else. He looked like a kid who just realized he'd jumped in the deep end of the pool and was trying to figure out whether he should embarrass himself by shouting for help or drown with a little dignity.

"You doing all right?" Holden asked before Amos had quite gathered his thoughts.

"Me? Sure, Cap'n. Last man standing. That's me. What about you?"

Holden gestured, hands out to the walls and bulkheads, the dock and station beyond it. The universe. "Fine?"

"Yeah, so. Peaches and I were doing the post-fight spit and polish."

"Yeah?"

"I went over the battle data. You know, usual thing. Make sure the *Roci* was doing all the stuff we expected her to do. Didn't need anything pinched or crimped or whatever. And, you know, part of that's looking at the armament performance."

Holden's jaw shifted just a little. It wasn't much. Probably wouldn't even have lost him a hand of poker, except Amos had known when to look for it. So that was something to remember. He took another spoonful of his soup.

"Those torpedoes that Bobbie fired off at the end," he said. "One of 'em scored a direct hit."

"I didn't know that."

"Okay."

"I didn't check."

"It hit," Amos said. "But it didn't go off. A dud is a serious problem. So I started looking at why it failed."

"I disarmed them," Holden said.

Amos put down his bowl, abandoned his spoon in it. The display Holden and Bobbie had been looking over shifted, trying to guess what Holden wanted to be shown.

“But that was the righteous thing to do,” Amos said. He didn’t make it a question, exactly. Just a statement that Holden could agree with or not. He didn’t want it to sound like anything was riding on it. Holden ran his hands through his hair. He looked like he was seeing something that wasn’t in the room. Amos didn’t know what it was.

“He showed me her kid,” Holden said. “Marco? He showed me Naomi’s son. Showed me that he was on the ship right then. Right there. And ... I don’t know. He looks like her. Not *like her* like her, but family resemblance. In the moment, I couldn’t take that away from her. I couldn’t kill him.”

“I get that. She’s one of us. We take care of us,” Amos said. “I’m only asking because those are the bad guys we’re planning to go up against again. If we’re not willing to win the fight, I’m not sure what we’re doing in the cage.”

Holden nodded, swallowed. The display gave up and shut down, leaving the galley just a little bit darker. “That was before we got here.”

“Yeah,” Amos said carefully. “Who your tribe is got kind of weird all of a sudden. If you’re the new Fred Johnson, that’s going to change what it means when you decide not to blow people up.”

“It is,” Holden said. The distress in his expression was like the growl of a power coupler starting to fail. “I don’t know that I’d do it differently if we were back there, in that same moment. I don’t regret what I did. But I know next time can’t be like that.”

“Naomi should probably be good with that too.”

“I was planning to talk to her about it,” Holden said. “I may have been putting it off.”

“So I gotta ask this,” Amos said.

“Shoot.”

“Are you the right guy for this job?”

“No,” Holden said. “But I’m the guy who got it. So I’m going to do it.”

Amos waited for a few moments, seeing how that answer sat with him.

“Okay,” he said, and stood up. The soup had gotten cold enough to have a little film forming on the top. He dropped it and the spoon into the recycler. “Glad we got that cleared up. Anything me and Peaches need to put on the schedule? Feeling like we should maybe give Bobbie’s stuff the once-over.”

“Pretty sure she’s already done that a few hundred times,” Holden said,

forcing a smile.

“Probably true,” Amos said. “Well, all right, then.”

He started out the door. Holden’s voice stopped him. “Thank you.”

He looked back. Holden looked like he was hunched, protecting something. Or like someone had kicked him in the chest. Funny how everyone else’s image of the guy got bigger and it made the real one seem small. Like there was only so much food to share between the two of them. “Sure,” he said, not certain what he was being thanked for, but pretty solid this was a good answer. “And hey. If you want, I can change the permissions so that you can’t disarm the torpedoes next time. If taking it out of your hands would help.”

“No,” Holden said. “My hands are fine.”

“Cool, then.” He headed out.

In the machine shop, Peaches was putting away her tools and running the closing sequences for her diagnostics. “Tested the new seals,” she said.

“They good?”

“Within tolerance,” she said, which was as close as she was probably ever going to get to saying they were good. “I’ll check them again tomorrow when the polymerization’s totally done.”

“Okay.”

The system chirped. She checked the readout, okayed it, and closed the display. “You heading out to the station?”

“Nope,” Amos said. Now that he bothered to notice, his body was feeling heavy and slow. Like coming out of a hot bath he’d stayed in a little too long. He wondered if Maddie was awake yet. If he got there quick enough, maybe he could finish up his night there. Except no. She’d be going on shift again about the time he was nodding off, and then it wouldn’t be clear if he’d come back to screw again, and that’d just be awkward. Unless ... He considered intellectually whether he wanted to screw again, then shook his head. “Nah, I’m just coming in. Going to grab some sack time now.”

Peaches cocked her head. “You came back early?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t sleep,” he said. “But I can now.”

Chapter Thirty-Six: Filip

Fixing your ship was what it meant to be a Belter. Earthers lived lives eating off the government dole and fucking each other into torpor by exploiting the Belt. Dusters sacrificed themselves and anyone else they could get their hands on for the dream of making Mars into a new Earth, even while they hated the old one. And Belters? They fixed their ships. They mined the asteroids and moons of the system. They made every scrap go longer than it was designed to. They used their cleverness and resourcefulness and reliance on each other to thrive in the vacuum like a handful of flowers blooming in an unimaginably vast desert. Putting hand to the *Pella* was as natural and proper as breathing in after breathing out.

Filip hated that he didn't want to do it.

In the first days, it was simple on-the-float work. Even then, he felt the eyes of the others on him, heard their conversations go quiet when he came in earshot. Josie and Sárta welding in the space between the hulls had said something about the dangers of nepotism, not knowing he was on the frequency, and then pretended they hadn't when he showed up. In the galley, newsfeeds from the crippled Earth were his best companions. His father didn't call for him or restrict his duties. Either would have been better than this nameless limbo. If he'd been cast down, he could at least have taken some pride in having been wronged. Instead, he woke for his shift, went to help with the repairs, and wished that he could be someplace else.

It was only when it came clear that the dead thruster was going to need a new housing that they burned for a shipyard. In other lives, they'd have tried for Ceres or Tycho, but the second-string yards were still decent. Rhea. Pallas. Vesta. They didn't use any of those. When his father's order came down, it was for Callisto.

A new escort came, guns bared, to keep the *Pella* safe from the torpedoes and attack ships of the enemy. But while Earth and Mars and

Fred Johnson's OPA probably had their eyes on the *Pella*, they didn't let themselves be pulled out from their bases and fleets. They were a prize, but not one worth risking for.

Lying in his crash couch, watching feeds of neo-taarab bands from Europa and half a dozen bad sex comedies because Sylvie Kai had roles in them, Filip fantasized that there would be an attack. Maybe a little fleet led by the *Rocinante*. James fucking Holden and Filip's own traitorous whore of a mother in command, screaming out after him with their rail gun and torpedoes. Sometimes the fantasy ended with someone else getting the *Pella* beat up even worse and everyone seeing how hard it was to win that fight. Sometimes it ended with them killing the *Rocinante*, blowing it into glowing gas and shards of metal. Sometimes he imagined that they'd lose and die. And the twin points of light in that last and darkest daydream fit together like a clamp bolt in its housing: It would be an end to working on the ship, and also they would never reach Callisto.

The surviving shipyard on Callisto stood on the side permanently locked facing away from Jupiter. Its floodlights cast long, permanent shadows across the moon's landscape and the ruins of its sister yard, a Martian base shattered years ago. Shattered in one of the first actions by the Free Navy. In Filip's first command. The dust and fines stirred up by the actions of human commerce fell slowly on Callisto, giving an illusion of mist where there was no free water and only the most tenuous atmosphere to carry it. He watched the scattering of floodlights on the moon's surface grow larger as they came in, white and bright and random like a handful of the star field had been grabbed and mashed into the dirt. When the *Pella* tipped down into a repair berth, the sound of the clamps coming into place was deep as a punch. Filip unstrapped and made his way to the airlock as soon as he could.

Josie was there—long, graying hair pulled back from his narrow, yellow-toothed face. Josie who'd been on the Callisto raid with him. Who'd been under Filip's command. He lifted his eyebrows as Filip started to cycle the lock.

"Not wearing tués uniform," Josie said, only the smallest sneer in his voice.

"Not on duty."

"Hast shore leave, tu?"

“No one said no,” Filip said, hating how petulant his voice sounded in his own ears. Josie’s gaze hardened, but he only turned away. The pressures went equal, or nearly so. When the *Pella*’s outer doors slid open, there was still a little pop. Enough to make Filip feel the change from one place to another, but not so much that his ears hurt from it. A security detail waited on dock wearing light armor with raw places on the shoulder and breast where the indistinct outline of the Pinkwater logo could still be seen like a shadow. He nodded to them with his hands and walked forward, half afraid they’d call him to stop and half hoping for it.

He’d never been to Callisto before his raid. Never seen it before he called the strikes down. He didn’t know what it had looked like before, and he could still tell that the surviving half showed the scars. Walking past the dock and into the commercial district, Filip could pick out which walls had been replaced. Here and there, a run of decking had a slightly off color, the sealant not as aged as the runs around it. Little scars. He might not even have noticed if he hadn’t known to look.

It had been justified, though. It had been to get the radar-eating paint from the Dusters so that the rocks they threw at Earth would be hard to see. It had been part of the war. And anyway, he hadn’t tried to hurt them. It was only they were right beside the enemy. Their fault. Not his.

Voices wove a rich and shifting murmur through the wide, tall main hall. A cart blatted for people to clear its path. Work crews in gray jumpsuits wore Free Navy armbands and split-circle OPA tattoos on their wrists. The air smelled of urine and cold. Filip found a place against one wall, set his shoulders against it, and watched like he was waiting for something. Someone to see him, stop, and point an accusing finger. *You were the one who tried to kill the yards! You were the one who cracked our seals! Do you know how many of us died?*

He waited for something to happen, but no one took any notice of him one way or the other. He was no one to them. A kid with his back against the wall.

The bar he ended up in was at the far end of the shipyard complex, close to the tunnels down to the deeper-level neighborhoods and the fast transit to the Jovian observatory on the far side of the moon. It wasn’t only yard hands at the pressed-polymer tables. There were girls his own age in bright clothes come up from the residential levels below. Older people in

academic-looking rumple hunched over their hand terminals and their beers. He'd known vaguely that there was a good upper university somewhere on Callisto, something associated with the technical institutes on Mars. Somehow never put it together in his mind with the place he'd been set to raid.

He sat apart, at a bright-pink table with a bowl of living grass as a centerpiece. From there he could watch the oversized wall screens with their scroll of newsfeeds muttering to themselves like angry drunks or else look over the finch-bright girls talking to one another and managing to never glance his way. He ordered black noodles in peanut sauce and a stout from the table display and paid with Free Navy scrip. For a long moment, he thought the table might refuse payment—if it said his money was bad, that would be when the girls looked over at him—but it chimed pleasantly, accepting, and threw up a countdown timer to when his order should come. Twelve minutes. So for twelve minutes, he watched the feeds.

The Earth still dominated, even in its suffering. Images of devastation mixed with earnest-looking newsreaders staring into the camera or else interviewing other people, sometimes earnest as sycophants, sometimes yelling like the other coyo'd been fucking their sweethearts. The bright girls ignored the screen, but Filip's eye kept wandering back to it: a street covered in ashes so deep the woman cleaning it had a scarred snow shovel; an emaciated black bear lurching one direction and then another in distress and confusion; some official of the half-dead Earth government surveying a stadium filled with body bags. The beer and noodles came, and he started eating without quite noticing that he had. He watched the march of images, chewed, swallowed, drank. It was like his body was a ship, and all his crew were about their work but not talking to each other.

The pride in the devastation was still there. Those dead were because of him. The ash-drowned cities, the blackened lakes and oceans, the skyscraper burning like a torch because not enough infrastructure still existed to extinguish it. These were the temples and battlements of his people's enemy, fallen into dust and ruin, and thanks to him. The raid he'd done here, at this yard, had let it happen.

And now here he was with the end and the beginning, one seen through the other like two sheets of plastic laid one on the other. Like time pressed flat. Still a victory and still his, but maybe there was a little aftertaste now,

trailing just after like milk on the edge of sour.

Say it like a man. Say I fucked it up. Only he hadn't. It hadn't been *his* mistake.

The shining girls rose in a flock, touching each other's hands, laughing, kissing each other's cheeks, and then scattered. Filip watched them walk out with a kind of forlorn lust, and so he saw it when Karal walked in. The old Belter could have been a mech driver or a drive tech or a welder. His hair was white and thinning and cut close to the scalp. His shoulders and hands and cheeks showed a lifetime of scars. He stood for a moment, looked around with an air of not thinking much of what he saw, and then lumbered over toward Filip's booth and sat across from him like they'd planned to meet there.

"Hoy," Karal said after an awkward moment.

"He send you?" Filip asked.

"No one send me, aber se savvy I ought to come."

Filip stirred his noodles. The bowl was hardly half empty, but his appetite was already gone. The slow, rolling anger in his gut seemed to take up all the space that food might want. "No need. Solid as stone, me, and twice as hard."

It sounded like a boast. Like an accusation. Filip wasn't even sure what he'd wanted the words to be, but not this. He ground his fork into the mash of noodles and sauce, shoved the bowl to the edge of the table for the server to take away. He kept the stout, though.

"Not throwing signs, me," Karal said. "But was a time I was your age. Long time, but I remember it. Me y mis papá used to have it out sometimes. He'd get high and I'd get drunk and we'd spend the whole day sometimes yelling at each other about who was the dumbest asshole. Throw punches sometimes. Pulled a knife once, me." Karal chuckled. "He cracked my ass the other way for that one. All I'm saying, fathers and sons, they fight. But you and yours? It's different, yeah?"

"If you say," Filip said.

"Your da? He's not just your da. Marco Inaros, leader of the Free Navy. Big man, him. So much on his shoulders. So much he's thinking on, worrying on, planning on, and it's not like tu y la can scrap it out like the rest of us."

"That's not what it is," Filip said.

“No? Bist bien, then. What’s it?” Karal said, and his voice was soft and warm and gentle.

The anger in Filip’s gut was shifting, unsteady as a scab on an infected wound. The rage and righteousness started to feel less authentic, like a wrap tied around something that wasn’t either. That was something worse. Filip gripped his hands in fists so tight they ached, but he lost his hold. The anger—not even anger, *petulance*—slid to the side and an oceanic sense of guilt rose up in him like a flood. It was too big, too pure, too painful to even have a single event to focus it.

It wasn’t that he regretted leaving the ship without permission or missing his shots on the *Rocinante* or killing Earth or wounding Callisto. It was larger than that. Regret was the universe. Guilt was bigger than the sun and the stars and the spaces between them. Whatever it was, all of it, was his fault and his failing. It was more than he’d *done* something bad. Like the fossil of an ancient animal was flesh that had been replaced by stone, whoever Filip had been once had kept his shape but been replaced by a raw and rising sense of loss.

“I feel ...*wrong*?” Filip said, scrabbling for words to describe something so much bigger than language. “I feel ... I feel like—”

“*Fuck*,” Karal said, breathy and sharp. His eyes were fixed behind Filip. Caught by something on the newsfeed. Filip turned, craning to see the screen. Fred Johnson looked out from the wall, dark-eyed, calm, somber. A red banner beneath him read, *Confirmed Dead After Free Navy Attack*. When he turned back, Karal had already pulled out his hand terminal and was shifting through newsfeeds as quickly as his crooked fingers could manage. Filip waited, then took his own terminal out. It wasn’t hard to find. It was all over the feeds—Belt and inner planets both. Sources from Tycho Manufacturing Collective on Earth were confirming the death of Frederick Lucius Johnson, formerly of UN Navy and longtime political activist, community organizer, and spokesman of the Outer Planets Alliance. He’d died as a result of injuries sustained during an ambush by forces of the Free Navy ...

Filip read it all, aware that there was something to it he wasn’t understanding. It was only a wash of words and images, disconnected from his life, until Karal, across the table from him and grinning, spoke.

“Gratulacje, Filipito. Guess you got him after all.”



Back on the *Pella*, music was playing over the ship system. A bright mix of steel drum and guitar and men's ululating voices raised together in celebration. Sárta, one of the first to see Filip when he came down the corridor from the airlock, scooped him up in her arms, pressing his cheek against hers and leaving him uncomfortably aware of her breasts. When she kissed him—briefly, but on the lips—she tasted of cheap mint liquor.

The galley was packed like a party. The whole crew, it seemed, gathered together in front of the newsfeeds that announced the death of the Butcher of Anderson Station. The heat of their bodies made the room feel stifling. His father was in among them, smiling and strutting and clapping people on the shoulder like the groom at a particularly fortunate wedding. All the sulking and menace were gone from his expression. When he caught sight of Filip across the crowded room, he put his hands together in front of his heart making a celebratory double fist.

This was, Filip realized, the first real victory since the first attack on Earth. Marco had been claiming success after success, but they'd all been for retreats and scuffles or the discipline killing of mutineers like the *Witch of Endor*. From the moment they'd left Ceres, the Free Navy had needed a solid, unequivocal success, and this was it. No wonder even the sober seemed drunk with it.

The newsfeed shifted, a Free Navy logo appearing in its place, and the roar of the group grew even louder as each told the others to be quiet. Someone cut the music and put the audio for the newsfeed in its place. When Marco appeared on the screen, more dignified and statesmanlike than the actual grinning man in the room, his voice rang all through the *Pella*.

"Fred Johnson claimed to speak for the same people he oppressed. He began his career by slaughtering Belters, then pretended to be our voice. His years as a representative of the OPA were marked by pleas for complacency, patience, and the constant deferment of the freedom of the Belt. And his fate will be the fate of all who stand against us. The Free Navy will defend and protect the Belt from all enemies, internal and external, now and forever."

The speech went on, but the crew began cheering so loudly, Filip couldn't hear it. Marco lifted his arms, not to quiet them but to bathe in the noise. His shining eyes found Filip again. When he spoke, Filip could read the words on his lips: *We did it.*

We, Filip thought as Aaman jostled into him, pressed a bulb of something alcoholic into his palm. *We did it. When it was a mistake, it was mine. When it was a victory, it was ours.*

In the center of the joyful storm, Filip felt himself growing still. A flicker of memory came to him, strong and rich with import as an image from a dream. He couldn't place its source. A film he'd watched, he thought. Some drama where a stunningly beautiful woman had looked into the camera and in a voice made from smoke and muscle had said, *He put blood on my hands too. He thought it would make me easier to control.*

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Chapter Thirty-Seven: Alex

Good morning, Sunshine,” Sandra Ip said.

Alex blinked, closed his eyes, cracked open just the left one. He’d been in the middle of a dream where apple juice had gotten into the coolant feeds on a ship that was both the *Rocinante* and his first ship back when he’d been in the Martian Navy. The sense that he was supposed to fix something lingered even as the details faded. Sandra, naked, smiled down at him and he stopped trying to hold on to the dream.

“Hey to you too, Pookie,” he growled. The night’s sleep left his voice deep and gravelly. He stretched up his arms, palms flat against her headboard, and pressed to stretch down between his shoulder blades. His toes reached out past the edge of the blanket, and she pinched them playfully as she walked back toward the shower. He lifted his head to watch her retreat, and she looked back to watch him watch her.

“Where you headed?” he asked, partly because he wanted to know, partly just to keep her in the room a few seconds more.

“I’ve got a shift on the *Jammy Rakshasa* today,” she said. “Drummer’s making sure all these OPA bigwigs feel like we’re taking care of them.”

“*Jammy Rakshasa*,” Alex said, laying his head back down. “That’s a weird name for a ship.”

“It think it’s some kind of in-joke with Goodfortune’s people. Decent ship, though.” Her voice echoed a little from the bathroom. “The weirdest ship I ever worked was called the *Inverted Loop*. Gravel miner made out of a salvaged luxury yacht. The captain had this thing about open space, so they’d cut all nonstructural walls and decking out.”

Alex frowned up at the ceiling. “Seriously?”

“When that thing was under thrust, you could drop a bearing in the cockpit and listen to it hit every deck down to the reactor. It was like flying in a balloon full of sticks.”

“That ain’t right.”

“The captain was a guy named Yeats Pratkanis. He had some issues, but his crew loved him. Nothing like the stupid shit people do for a captain when they’re really invested in not seeing how fucked up he is.”

“S’pose that’s true.”

The sound of water splashing against metal announced the shower, but Alex could tell by the music of it that her body wasn’t in the flow yet. He looked up again, found her in the doorway, her arms lifted above her to rest against the frame. She was only a little younger than him, and the years showed on her body. Silver ghosts of stretch marks just visible along her belly and breasts. The fuzzy tattoo of a waterfall down the side of her left leg. A jagged scar that puckered the flesh of her right arm. Hers was not the beauty of youth but of experience, same as his. Still, he could see the girl she’d been in the way she lifted her eyebrows, shifted her weight into her hip.

“You want to take a shower, Sunshine?” she asked with false innocence.

“Oh hell yes,” Alex said, hauling himself up from the bed. “Yes, I do.”

Ever since that first night on Ceres, he and Sandra had been spending a chunk of their off hours in each other’s company this way. When they’d been on the *Roci*, they’d split their time between his cabin and hers. Here on Tycho, her quarters had become their default. She’d been on the station long enough for her seniority and union rules to land her two rooms, a private bath, and a bed that was a lot more comfortable for two than trying to fit into the same crash couch.

As love affairs went, Alex had been surprised at first and a little wary. Sandra’s sexuality was joyful and unrestrained. It had taken him a little time to knock the rust off and join her in it. He’d had a few lovers before he’d gotten married, one—shamefully—while he was, and a couple dalliances afterward. A woman’s full and delighted attention wasn’t something he’d ever expected to have again. Once he convinced himself that, yes, this was really happening, he fell into it like he was sixteen.

After the shower, they towed each other dry and he helped put lotion on her back where she couldn’t reach, and a little where she probably could too. She put on her uniform, tied back her hair, then brushed and gargled while he crawled back into the bed.

“Another day of sloth for you?” she asked.

“I’m a pilot with nowhere to go,” he said, stretching his arms out in a gesture that said, *It’s not my fault*. She laughed.

“This is why I’m not one,” she said. “Engineers always have something to do.”

“You need to learn to relax.”

“Well,” she said, her voice taking on a low purr that was come-on and laughing at the come-on both, “you keep setting me an example and maybe some of it’ll rub off on me.”

“Maybe when your shift’s over, we could order in.”

“It’s a plan,” she said, then checked the time on her hand terminal and grunted. “Okay. I’ve got to run.”

“I’ll lock up when I go,” Alex said.

“You’ll sleep in my bed all day like a lion.”

“Or that.”

She kissed him before she left. He let himself sink into the pillows after the door closed, rested there for a long moment, then stood up and gathered his clothes from the floor. Sandra’s quarters were soft and welcoming in a way he wasn’t used to. The comforter wadded and shaped at the foot of the bed was a pale blue with a pattern of lace at the edges. Sandra had hung draping cloth at the corners of the room to soften the light and disguise the edges. Her desk had a small glass vase with dried roses arranged in it. The peppery smell of spent perfume sank into his clothes when he was here, so that hours later he’d walk through a draft and be suddenly and viscerally reminded of her. The women he’d lived with these last years—Naomi, Bobbie, even Clarissa Mao now—weren’t the sort for frills and softness. Plush pillows and rosewater. Being around that particular kind of femininity was familiar enough to be comfortable, exotic enough to make this time, this moment, this relationship something all his own. Turned out some part of him had wanted something all his own.

Or maybe—pulling on the same sock he’d worn yesterday—it wasn’t even that. Maybe it was only that he knew how much the war might take from them all, and Sandra Ip was his chance to refill some cistern of his heart and body that there wasn’t going to be time for later. A place of gentleness and affection and pleasure like a hurricane eye. He hoped she felt the same about him. That they were stocking up good memories, him and Sandra both, against the history that was about to unfold around them.

It was getting harder and harder to shrug off the sense of dread back on the *Rocinante*. The days since they'd arrived on Tycho had been one endless meeting for Holden. When he wasn't fencing with Carlos Walker about what supplies and support the OPA could provide, he was trading long recorded messages with Michio Pa about the firing rate of the Free Navy's rail gun artillery in the slow zone. When he wasn't reporting to or getting reports from Avasarala, he and Naomi and Bobbie were comparing positional maps of the system with Aimee Ostman and Micah al-Dujaili. Holden never seemed to lose his temper, never seemed to rest. Every time Alex saw him, Holden smiled and was pleasant and upbeat. If he hadn't spent years with the man, he might almost have been fooled into thinking things were going well.

But the man in the meetings, pacing the corridors of the *Rocinante* or the docks outside them, sitting hunched over his flickering hand terminal, wasn't really James Holden at all. It was like Holden had become an actor and his role was *James Holden*. The surface was whatever it needed to be at the moment. That wasn't the man he knew. Alex could feel the howling void of desperation and despair behind everything he said.

It showed in the others too. Naomi had become quieter, more focused. Like she was always in the middle of puzzling through an impossible problem. Even Amos seemed on edge, though what it was about was so subtle that Alex couldn't have said for certain if that was even true. It might just have been his own fears projected against Amos' blank slate. And if Bobbie and Clarissa seemed immune from it all, it was only because they were relatively new to the ship. They didn't know the feel and rhythm of the *Rocinante* well enough yet to hear when she went slightly out of tune.

And every story of the Free Navy—another ship captured or killed, another Earth spy caught and executed on Pallas or Ganymede or Hall Station, another rock intercepted before it could hit Earth—turned the ratchet one more notch. The consolidated fleet was going to have to do something. And soon.

The little restaurant just off the main hall. Bright lights, a little redder spectrum than the sun. Syncopated harp-and-dulcimer music, which was apparently in fashion these days. Tall stools around a white ceramic bar. A plate of something not entirely unlike chicken in a vindaloo that was better than it had any right to be. Sandra had introduced the place to him the first

night on Tycho, and he'd become a regular since.

His hand terminal chimed the connection request, and Alex accepted it with his thumb. Holden appeared on the screen. It might just have been the dim light on the command deck or the blue of the monitor the captain was sitting in front of, but his skin looked waxy, his eyes flat and exhausted. "Hey," Holden said. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Thanks for askin'," Alex said, maybe a little too heartily. He felt like he needed to haul the energy of the conversation up when he talked to Holden these days. As if he could inject health into the man by being so damned chipper at him. "I'm just finishing some breakfast. What's up?"

"Um," Holden said, and blinked. For a moment, he looked surprised. Like what he was about to say seemed a little implausible to him. "We're looking to ship out in about thirty hours. Clarissa and Amos are in the middle of their sleep shifts, but I'm calling an all-hands meeting in four hours so we can make sure we've got everything in order."

The way he said it sounded like an apology. Alex felt the words land like he was drinking something cold on an empty stomach. "I'll be there," he said.

"We're good?"

"Cap," Alex said, "this is the *Roci*. I made sure we were topped up and ready as soon as the docking clamps were in place. We could take off five minutes from now and be fine."

Holden's smile said he'd understood all Alex's subtext. "Still, good to get everyone together and double-check."

"No argument," Alex agreed. "Four hours?"

"Four and change," Holden said. "If Amos sleeps in, I'm going to let him."

"See you on board then," Alex said, and they dropped the connection. He took another bite of the vindaloo. It didn't taste as good. He slid bowl and fork to the recycler, stood up, waited a few seconds just so he wouldn't be going to find Sandra quite yet.

He went off to find Sandra.

Despite its name, the *Jammy Rakshasa* was an unexceptional-looking ship. Wide at the front, boxy, with a random studding of PDCs and thrusters scattered over her skin in a way that spoke of generations of use and modifications, the design growing and changing and leaving artifacts of its

previous incarnations like a house altered by tenant after tenant until the original architecture was all but lost. A Belter ship. If it hadn't been for the high security presence, both on the dock and floating around the ship itself, he'd have wondered if he was looking at the right one.

He waited outside the utility airlock, holding on to the wall with one hand as he floated. He saw Sandra before she saw him. A cluster of engineers and mechanical techs in environment suits floating together at a wall display, four different conversations going among the seven of them. Her hair was in a ponytail that waved like a flag when she shook her head, impatient with what the man beside her was saying. When she glanced in Alex's direction, she did a quick double take. He saw the smile start on her lips, saw it wilt. She finished her discussions, pushed herself off, gliding through the air toward him. By the time she grabbed a handhold and pulled herself to a halt, the knowledge was already in her eyes.

"Well," she said. "Orders came through?"

"Yeah."

Her expression softened, her gaze tracing the curves of his face. He looked at her, memorizing the shape of her eyes, her mouth, the little scar at her temple, the mole tucked almost behind her ear. All the details of her body. A bad habit in the back of his head fed him all the wrong things to say: *You should ship out with us and I can resign and stay here with you and I'll come back if you wait for me.* All the things that would make her feel better right then in the moment and break her trust in him later. All the things he'd said to women he loved before and not meant then either. She laughed gently, like she'd heard him thinking.

"I was never looking for a husband," she said. "I've had husbands. They're never what they're cracked up to be."

"My track record is I make a pretty shitty one anyway," Alex said.

"I am glad you're my friend," she said. "You make a great friend."

"You make a great lover," Alex said.

"Yeah," Sandra said. "You too. So how long?"

"Captain's called a meeting in"—he checked the time—"a little over three hours. Says we're heading out in a little less than thirty."

"You know where?"

"I expect he'll tell me when I get there," Alex said. He took her gloved hand. She squeezed his fingers gently and then let them go.

“So I get a lunch break in about an hour and a half,” she said. They were casual words, spoken carefully. Like if she bit down too hard, she might break them. “I could take it a little early. You want to meet up at my place? Freshen up the luck one last time before you go?”

Alex put his hand to her cheek. She braced a leg against the wall so she could press into his palm. How many millions of times had people had this exact conversation before? How many wars had put two people together for a moment and then washed them apart? There had to be a tradition of it. A secret history of vulnerability and want and all the things that sex promised and only occasionally delivered. They were just one more couple among all the countless others. It only hurt this time because it was them.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’d love that.”



The galley of the *Rocinante* smelled like coffee and maple-flavored syrup. Naomi shifted when Alex came in, making room for him on the bench. Amos sat on her other side, looking into nothing and scooping scrambled eggs from a bowl with two fingers. His eyes were still puffy from sleep, but he seemed alert otherwise. Clarissa stood in the doorway, uncertain but present. Alex thought about getting some food, but he wasn’t hungry. It would only have been so he had something to do with his hands.

A conversation between Bobbie and Holden echoed down the lift as they approached, their voices hard and competent and businesslike. Maybe even a little excited. There was an anticipation in the air that didn’t feel like joy, but wasn’t entirely unlike it either.

The melancholy in Alex’s chest and throat eased a little as they came in, Bobbie taking the bench across from him while Holden headed for the coffee. When he’d left Sandra’s quarters to come here, he’d carried a sense of loss with him. He still felt it. Would feel it for maybe days, maybe weeks, maybe forever. But not as strongly. And his people were here. His crew, his ship. The worst of the sting was already over and the sweet, he thought, would last. For him. Hopefully for Sandra. It was great sharing a moment with a genuinely good woman. There was a pleasure in coming home again too.

Holden took a sip of his coffee, coughed, and took another one. Clarissa slid in and took a seat behind Amos as if she could hide behind him. As Holden ambled over—head down, expression distracted—Bobbie reached across and tapped Alex on the wrist.

“You good?”

“Right as rain,” Alex said. “Said my goodbyes.”

Bobbie nodded once. Holden sat down facing them all, sideways on the bench. His hair was unkempt, his eyes focused on something only he could see. The attention of the room—Naomi’s, Amos’, Alex’s own—turned toward him. An ancient and barely familiar anticipation shifted in Alex’s chest, like a fragment of childhood beginning of school year.

“So, Cap,” he said. “What’s the plan?”

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Chapter Thirty-Eight: Avasarala

Avasarala screamed.

Her breath ripped out of her throat, abrading her flesh as it passed. She tasted bile in the back of her mouth, and her legs trembled, ached, burned as she tried to push the steel plate another centimeter away.

“Come on,” Pieter said. “You can do this.”

She screamed again, and the plate moved away. Her legs went almost straight. The impulse to push through and lock her knees took effort to resist. It might snap her knees back the other way, but then at least this would be done.

“That’s eleven,” Pieter said. “Go for twelve. One more.”

“Fuck your mother.”

“Come on. Just one more rep. I’ll be here to help.”

“You’re an asshole and nobody loves you,” she gasped, lowering her head. The worst was the nausea. Leg day always seemed to mean nausea. Pieter didn’t care. He was paid not to care.

“You’re going down the well in twelve days,” he said. “If you want the leader of Earth, the hope and light of civilization, to get wheeled off the shuttle in a chair, you can stop. If you want her to stride out in front of the cameras like a Valkyrie returned from the underworld and ready for battle, you’ll go for twelve.”

“Sadistic fuck.”

“You’re the one who fell behind on your exercise schedule.”

“I’ve been saving the fucking species.”

“Saving humanity doesn’t prevent bone-density loss or muscular atrophy,” he said. “And you’re stalling. One more.”

“I hate you so much,” she said, letting her knees bend, easing the steel plate back closer to her. She wanted to cry. She wanted to puke all over Pieter’s pretty white exercise shoes. She wanted to be doing anything else at

all.

“I know, sweetie. But you can do this,” he said. “Come on.”

Avasarala screamed and pushed the steel plate away.

Afterward, she sat on the fake-wood bench in the locker room with her head in her hands until the idea of moving didn't disgust her. When she did finally stand up, the gray-clad woman in the mirror seemed unfamiliar. Not foreign precisely, but certainly not her. Thinner, for one thing, with sweat stains at the armpits and under the breasts. White hair that didn't fall to her shoulders so much as flow out, the thin lunar gravity too weak to pull it down. The woman in the mirror looked Avasarala up and down with dark, judgmental eyes.

“Some fucking Valkyrie,” Avasarala said, then headed for the shower. “You'll have to do.”

The good news was that Mars had finally slogged its way through its constitutional crisis, done the obvious thing, and put Emily Richards in as prime minister. No, that wasn't fair. There was more going well than just that. The rioting in Paris was under control now, and the racist cells in Colombia had been identified and isolated without any more murders. Saint Petersburg had fixed its water-recycling problem, at least for the moment. Gorman Le's mystery yeast was doing everything it had claimed on the tin, which increased the overall food supply for the survivors, and the reactors in Cairo and Seoul were working again so they could make use of it. Fewer dead people. Or at least fewer dead right now. Next week was always next week, and always would be.

The bad news still outweighed the good. The second wave of deaths hadn't slowed yet. The medical infrastructure was saturated. Thousands of people were dying every week from conditions that even a year ago would have been easily treated or cured. The violence over resources hadn't by any means stopped either. There were vigilante raids in Boston and Mumbai. Reports of whole police forces going rogue and hoarding relief supplies in Denver and Phoenix. The oceans were being choked. The sludge of dust and debris wasn't sinking as quickly as the models had suggested, and the light-eating plants and microbiota were dying off as a result. If there hadn't been so many fucking human beings stressing the food webs over the last few centuries, the system might have been more robust. Or it might not have. It wasn't as though they had a second Earth to use as a control.

History itself was a massive n=1 study, irreproducible. It was what made it so difficult to learn from.

After her shower, she changed into a lime-green sari, did her hair and her makeup. She was starting to feel a little better. It was the pattern she was noticing. The actual exercise left her miserable, but once she'd recovered, the rest of her day seemed to go a little better. If it was only the placebo effect, that was enough. She'd take what she could get, even if it was only tricks of the mind.

When she was almost ready to face the rest of her day, she opened an audio-only connection to Said. "Where do we stand?" she said instead of hello.

"The security group from Mars is finishing their meal," Said answered without missing a beat. "They'll be in the conference hall in half an hour. Admiral Souther will be there with you if you need him."

"Always good to have a penis in uniform in the room," Avasarala said sourly. "God knows they might not take me seriously otherwise."

"If you say so, ma'am."

"It was a joke."

"If you say so, ma'am. There's also a report in from Ceres Station. Admiral Coen has confirmed that the *Giambattista* is under burn just the way Aimee Ostman promised."

Avasarala held a pearl earring to her left ear, considering it. Nice. Understated. Didn't go with the sari, though.

"I'm sorry, ma'am?" Said's voice was confused.

"I didn't say anything."

"You ... ah ... you growled."

"Did I? Probably just an editorial comment about how pleased I am that we're trusting the fucking OPA now. Ignore it and continue."

"That's all you have on the schedule for today," he said, almost apologetically. "You did ask me to keep the afternoon clear in case the security briefing went long."

"So I did," she said, trying a pair of aquamarine studs that were much better. "Word from The Hague?"

"They say your office will be ready and the critical staff will be in place. We're on track to move the seat of governance back to the planet surface on schedule."

She imagined she heard a certain pride in Said's voice at that. Well, good. He ought to be proud. They all ought to be. Earth might be a pile of corpses and shit, but it was *their* pile of corpses and shit, and she was tired of looking up at it from the moon.

"About fucking time," she said. "All right. Tell Souther I'm on my way. And to bring me a sandwich or something."

"What sort would you like? I can meet you with—"

"No, tell Souther to do it," she said. "He'll think it's funny."

The conference room was the single most secure chamber in the solar system, but it didn't wear that on its sleeve. It was small enough for six people to sit comfortably. Red curtains on the walls to hide the air recyclers and the heaters. The table was wide, dark, and set just a little low to give a few centimeters more room for the holographic display. Not that anyone ever used holographic displays. Showy, but not functional. The Martian military attaché wasn't here to be wowed by graphic design, and Avasarala liked him for that.

The man himself—Rhodes Chen—sat on one side of the table with his secretary and assistant to either hand. Souther was already there too when she arrived, leaning back in his chair and laughing with Rhodes. A small tin plate waited at her chair—white bread and cucumbers. When Chen saw her, he stood, and all the others with him. She waved him back down.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "I wanted to be sure our allies on Mars were entirely up-to-date on the situation with the Free Navy."

"Prime Minister Richards sends her regrets," Chen said, taking his seat. "Things are still unsettled back at home, and she didn't feel comfortable being physically absent from the government building."

"I understand," Avasarala said. "And your wife? Michaela? Is she feeling better?"

Chen blinked. "Why ... yes. Yes, she's doing much better. Thank you."

Avasarala turned to Souther. "Admiral Chen's wife went to the cooperative school with my daughter Ashanti when they were girls," she said. Not that Chen remembered that, or had even known. In fairness, the girls hadn't been particularly close, but you played the angles the universe gave you. She picked up her sandwich, took a bite, and put it back down to give Chen a moment to hide his discomfort.

"I'm going to have to ask your staff to leave," Avasarala said.

“They can be trusted,” Chen said, nodding as if he’d agreed.

“Not by me, they can’t,” Avasarala said. “We won’t hurt them. But they can’t stay.”

Chen sighed. His secretary and assistant politely gathered up their things, nodded to Souther and Avasarala, and left. Souther lowered his head, waiting for the system to report whether either had left anything behind. It would be sad to come this far and have a bug in the room. A moment later he shook his head.

“Now then,” she said. “Shall we get down to business?”

Chen didn’t object, and Souther pulled up a schematic of the solar system in its present state. The sun and the ring gate as the major axis, and the planets and moons, stations and asteroids, scattered as the laws of orbital mechanics had placed them. As with any tactical map on that scale, the proportionality had suffered a little in favor of visibility. In truth, all of humanity’s children lived on scattered stones smaller than dust on the face of the ocean. They hid the fact with graphics and highlighted lists of ship names and vectors. Had the map matched the territory, there would have been nothing to see. Even the Earth with her suffering billions would have been less than a pixel.

But the Free Navy showed there in yellow. The consolidated fleet in red. Michio Pa’s breakaway ships and their new OPA let’s-call-them-allies in gold. It was rough and ugly. Souther pulled up a pointer, and drew the room’s attention to the ring gate at the system’s edge.

“Our target is Medina Station,” he said in his oddly high-pitched, musical voice. “There are several reasons for that, but critically, it’s the choke point for passage through to the colony systems, including Laconia, where former Martian naval officer Winston Duarte appears to have set up shop. Whoever has possession of Medina and its defenses controls the ring gates and traffic through them. It will reopen trade and colonization ships for us, and cut Inaros’ supply lines from his ally.”

Chen leaned forward, his elbows on the table, eyes glittering with the reflection of the display. He hadn’t reacted at all to Duarte’s name. Good poker face, and he’d expected to hear it. Richards wasn’t trying to deny the Martian Navy’s role in this clusterfuck. That was good. She took another bite of the sandwich and wished she’d thought to bring some pistachios. She didn’t have much appetite right after lifting weights, but when it

returned, she was ravenous.

“Inaros’ method of operation up to now has relied on strategic retreat,” Souther continued. “Stripping and abandoning territory rather than trying to hold it and leaving the support of the people left behind to the consolidated fleet. It has served him well in that we have been reluctant to overextend our defensive force, and the Free Navy has been able to carry out raids and attacks of opportunity on both Earth and Martian forces and dissenting factions on their own side.”

“The pirates,” Chen said.

“The pirates,” Avasarala agreed. No need to beat around that particular bush.

“We believe that strategy will fail with Medina,” Souther said. “Its importance is too great to abandon. And if we’re wrong and the Free Navy does abandon it ... Well, then we have all the advantages we were hoping for and he looks like a joke.”

“He won’t abandon it,” Avasarala said.

“What about the rail guns?” Chen asked. An interesting move, showing that Mars already knew about the defensive artillery. She wasn’t quite certain what letting her know they knew that was meant to achieve. Souther glanced at her. She nodded. No reason to pretend ignorance.

“Our best intelligence on that comes from the defectors from the Free Navy. Captain Pa of the *Connaught* was one of Inaros’ inner circle. Our understanding is that the rail guns set up on the alien station are Medina’s first line of defense. The station proper also had PDCs and a supply of torpedoes left by Duarte, but the rail guns are set to defend and destroy any unauthorized ships that pass through the ring gates.”

“That seems like a problem,” Chen said. “Your thoughts on how to overcome that?”

“We’re going to send a shitload of ships through the ring gates,” Avasarala said as Souther shifted from tactical to an image of the *Giambattista*. It wasn’t a pretty ship: large, boxy, and awkward.

“This is a converted water hauler crewed by the Ostman-Jasinzki faction of the Outer Planets Alliance,” Souther said. “It has been loaded with slightly under four thousand small craft. Breaching pods, small transports, prospecting skiffs. A devil’s brew. We’re calling it our Surinam toad, but the ship’s registered as the *Giambattista*.”

“That thing has four thousand reactors in it?” Chen said.

“No,” Souther said. “Most of the engines are chemical rockets or compressed-gas thrusters. Many of them are hardly more than environment-suit thrusters welded to a steel box. That is part of the reason they’re being carried to the edge of the ring before they’re ever deployed. These aren’t long-range craft. At a guess, I’d say half of them would be hard-pressed to make the trip from the ring gate to Medina under the best of circumstances. There are also several thousand torpedoes with a mixed but generally low-yield assortment of warheads.”

“So, chaff,” Chen said. “Cannon fodder.”

“We’re not putting people on all of them,” Avasarala said. “Even the OPA’s not that suicidal.”

Souther went on. “A fraction—the best ships—will carry a ground-attack group, whose mission will be to take control, not of Medina but of the rail-gun emplacements themselves. Once our forces control those, we expect Medina Station to capitulate. And since the rail guns were intended to defend Medina from more than thirteen hundred gates, and we’re only going to focus on the Sol and Laconia gates, we have reason to expect a relatively strong defensive position, which we can reinforce not only from Sol but with the colony ships that have already passed through and are willing and able to come to our assistance.”

“All right,” Chen said.

“You sound skeptical,” Avasarala said.

“No offense, ma’am,” Chen said. “But I’m looking at this, and it doesn’t square. If Inaros has been trying to tempt the fleet into overreach—spreading our forces too thin—then this run out to the edge of the system seems like his dream scenario. Unless you’re planning to send it unescorted, in which case you might as well not send it at all.”

“The escort will be a salvaged Martian corvette with a keel-mounted rail gun of its own,” Souther said. “The *Rocinante* is already burning on an intercept course. It’s going from Tycho Station, so it’s in the neighborhood. Relatively speaking.”

“There are also advantages to having that particular asset in place on Medina when we take it,” Avasarala said.

Chen’s laugh was thin and despairing. Avasarala stretched her right leg, feeling the ache in it. It would be worse in the morning. Lifting weights was

an argument against a benign God. As if that needed more evidence.

“Why bother, then?” Chen asked. “A single escort ship and an old ice hauler heading out to the most sensitive strategic position in the system? I don’t mean to be rude, but I have to think you don’t like the people in those ships very much. They’re going to have the whole Free Navy chasing them out and turning them to slag before they’re a million clicks from the ring gate.”

“That,” Souther said, “remains to be seen.”

If Chen had been a dog, his ears would have gone up just then. Avasarala saw it in his face and the set of his shoulders. “This,” she said, “is why we need to talk. In private. Securely. I need assurances, Mr. Chen, that the rot at the heart of your navy was well and truly burned out. I trust Emily Richards to look out for her own best interests and Mars’ too. In that order. And I’ve done a deep background check on you.”

“You’ve ... excuse me?”

Avasarala put out her hands, palms facing each other about a meter apart. “I’ve got a report on you this thick. I know every pimple you’ve popped since your voice broke. Everything. Praiseworthy, shameful, indifferent. Everything. I have violated your privacy in ways you can’t imagine.”

Chen went white, then red. “Well,” he said.

“I don’t give a shit about any of it,” she said. “The only thing I cared about was whether you had the stink of Duarte on your fingers. You don’t. It’s why you’re in this room. Because I trust you to take this back to Richards and no one else. And I need to know if you trust Mars.”

The silence in the room was profound. Chen pressed his fingers to his lips. “With this? Maybe. I get the sense you’re making some kind of request here. You should be very clear and explicit if that’s the case.”

“I want Richards to instruct the remnants of the Martian Navy—the ships in the consolidated fleet and the ones you have in reserve as well—to coordinate closely with Earth and the OPA and the fucking pirate fleet.”

“To do what?”

“Run a distraction campaign,” Souther said.

Avasarala waved him back, leaned in toward Chen, a smile on her lips. “Inaros isn’t going to chase after the *Giambattista* and *Rocinante*, because he’ll be distracted by the largest and most aggressive fleet action in history

kicking his balls up into his throat. By the time he understands what we were really after, it'll be too late for him to do anything but hold his dick and cry. But I need to know that you're in."

Chen blinked. His reserve cracked, just a little.

"Well," he said, "when you put it like that."

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Chapter Thirty-Nine: Naomi

The *Rocinante* burned, but not straight for the ring gate. That would have been too obvious. The intention was to rendezvous with the *Giambattista* in an ambiguous orbit, leaving it unclear to anyone watching whether they were looking to position themselves in a long burn spinward toward Saturn, turn out toward the science station on Neptune, or make for the gate. Let Marco wonder a little bit, and be in position when the distractions started pulling his attention away. Assuming he was even watching where the *Roci* went.

Naomi assumed Marco was watching where the *Roci* went. She assumed everyone was. She understood how much her old friends hated her now.

Even in this moment of relative calm, Jim was spending ten- and twelve-hour shifts on the comms. When he wasn't sending out or receiving messages, he'd watch newsfeeds. The Free Navy presence was growing on Ganymede and Titan. The consolidated fleet splitting its forces in order to send guard ships to Tycho. Angry voices coming off Pallas to denounce the traitors who'd colluded with the inner planets; not just Michio Pa and her pirate fleet anymore but also the OPA factions that Fred Johnson had put together. It was how Jim tried to have control over something he couldn't actually control. The messages he watched and sent out were a kind of prayer for him, though he wouldn't have said it that way. Something that brought peace and the illusion that what they were caught up in wasn't so massively bigger than their own individual wills and hopes and intentions.

So even though it set her teeth on edge, she let him go on with it. She got used to falling asleep to the musical voices of Earth newsfeeds, waking up to the hard cadences of Chrisjen Avasarala and Michio Pa in her cabin.

"We will burn after we see the consolidated fleet commit," Pa said, her distant, muted voice sliding into Naomi's half-dream. She sounded so weary, it made Naomi want to go back to sleep in sympathy. "I understand

that's not a popular decision, but I'm not interested in having my people be the worm on Earth's hook."

"I never understood that," Naomi said. Jim closed his hand terminal display and settled the earphones down around his neck, his expression guilty. Naomi shifted, and the crash couch swung under them like one of the hammocks she'd grown up sleeping in. "How do hookworms figure into catching fish, anyway?"

"Not hookworms," Jim said. "Worms, like earthworms. Or insects. Crickets. You'd put them on metal hooks with a barb on the end, tie a really thin line to the metal hook, and throw the whole thing out into a lake or a river. Hope that a fish would eat the worm, and then you could haul the fish out with the hook that was caught in its mouth."

"Sounds inefficient and needlessly cruel."

"It really sort of is."

"Do you miss it?"

"The fishing part? No. The standing out on the edge of a lake or being in a boat while the sun's just coming up? That a little bit."

This was the other thing he did. Reminiscing about being a boy on Earth, talking about it as if she'd ever had experiences like his. As if just because she loved him, she'd understand. She pretended that she did, but she also changed the subject when she could.

"How long was I asleep?"

"It's still six hours until we're close enough to start docking," Jim said, answering her real question without having to check. "Bobbie's down in the machine shop with Clarissa and Amos doing some last-minute fixes to her combat armor. I get the feeling she's looking to suit up and stay suited up until she's on Medina."

"It has to be strange for her to lead OPA fighters."

Jim lowered himself to the gel of the crash couch, one arm bent behind his head. Naomi put her hand on his chest, just under his collarbone. His skin was warm. In the shadows, he looked vulnerable. Lost.

"Did she say something to you about it?" he asked.

"No. I was only thinking. She's spent so much of her life with Belters as the enemy, and now she's going to an OPA ship filled with OPA soldiers. We aren't her people. Or we weren't before now."

Jim nodded, squeezed her hand, and then slid out from under it. She

watched him dress in silence for almost a minute.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Jim,” she said. Then, gently, “What is it?”

When he did his little, percussive, surrendering sigh, she knew he’d given up trying to protect her from whatever it was. He pulled on his undershirt and leaned against the wall.

“There was something I meant to talk about with you. About the ambush where Fred died?”

“Go ahead.”

He did. Connecting to the *Pella*, trying to distract Marco, seeing Filip, disarming the torpedoes. He told it all with a sheepishness like a kid confessing that he ate the last bit of sweet. Even when she turned up the cabin lights and started pulling on her own clothes, he didn’t meet her eyes. Amos had called him on it, offered to lock him out of the torpedo controls. Jim had said no. His silence was the only sign that he was done.

Naomi stood for a moment, watching her emotions like they were objects scattered by an unexpected turn. Horror at the idea of Filip’s death. Rage at Marco for putting their child in harm’s way. Guilt, not only for Filip but for Jim too. For the position she’d put him in and the reflexive compromises he’d made on her behalf. All those she’d known to expect, but there was an impatience too. Not with Jim exactly, or herself, or Filip. With the need to mourn again what she’d mourned so many times before.

“Thank you,” she said, her heart thick and heavy. “For caring. For trying to watch out for me. But I lost Filip. I couldn’t save him when he was a baby. I couldn’t save him now that he’s essentially a man. That’s twice, and twice is always. I can’t stop hoping that he’ll be all right in all this. But if he’s going to get saved, he’s going to have to do it himself.”

She pushed away a betraying tear. Jim took a half step toward her.

“He’ll have to do it himself,” she said again, her voice a degree harder to keep him from touching her or saying something soft and consoling. “Same as everyone.”



When the *Giambattista* got into clear visual range, she wasn't a pretty ship. Longer than the *Canterbury* had been back in the day, thicker through the middle, with a score of massive storage cells open to the vacuum where it had stored the ice harvested from Saturn's rings or captured comets or any of the other sources around the system. Between the floodlit work shelves, the external mech storage sheds, attitude thrusters and sensor arrays and antennas, there were so many sources of drag that even the thinnest atmosphere would have ripped the ship to scrap. But no torpedo tubes. No PDCs. There were thousands of tiny boats tucked into the huge ship, and nothing more than a winsome smile and a handgun to protect them.

On the command deck, Bobbie put one hand on Naomi's shoulder, another on Jim's. "Freaking out yet?"

"I'm fine," Naomi said in the same moment that Jim said, "Yes."

Bobbie's chuckle was warm. She was as happy as Naomi had seen her since she'd come back to the ship. She walked across the deck, mag boots clicking with each contact and release. It made Naomi nervous. If something happened to make the *Roci* move suddenly, either the boots would hold the deck and break her shinbones or they'd release and leave her bouncing against the walls of the ship. Not that the danger was real. It was only that, like Jim, she was probably freaking out. At least a little bit.

She watched the *Giambattista*'s braking pathway. The main engines turned off, the plume cooling and speeding away from the ship. It coasted toward them. Six thousand clicks. Five and three-quarters. Five and a half.

"All right," Alex said across the ship's comm. "Everyone hold on to your feathers. We're maneuvering to dock."

To Naomi's relief, she heard Bobbie strapping into a couch behind her as Amos and Clarissa announced that they were secure.

"Can you knock?" Jim asked.

She opened a tightbeam connection. Waited a long moment, and found herself face-to-face with a man whose white beard and salt-and-pepper hair made him look like something out of a children's story about wolves in human skin.

"Que sa, *Giambattista*," she said. "*Rocinante*, wir. Go es gut alles la?"

The wolf grinned. "Bist bien, sera Nagata suer. Give us your warriors girl, and let us kick these cocks à l'envers a pukis."

Naomi laughed, less at the vulgarity of the image than at the glee with

which the old man said it. “Bien. Prepare for docking.” She cut the connection and called up to Alex. “We have permission to dock.”

Behind them, Bobbie was humming a melody Naomi didn’t recognize, but it was syncopated, upbeat, even playful. The *Roci* lurched, the couches all shifting a few degrees to compensate. They were almost in matching orbit. Only a few meters’ drift, and the thrusters under Alex’s care were drawing that down to nothing.

“He knew your name,” Jim said.

“You’re not the only one people recognize,” she said as the docking tube extended from the *Roci* and fixed itself to an outer airlock on the *Giambattista*. So close in, the hauler dwarfed the corvette. A horsefly and a horse. The scale of what they were about to try came home to her then and took her breath away. These two ships were the stealthy, small force. Easy to overlook in a system wracked with violence. Tiny to the point, they all hoped, of insignificance. And still huge.

“Are we going to be knocking around anymore?” Bobbie asked. “Because otherwise, I’m going to go get dressed and head over.”

“You wearing your power armor just walking across the tube?” Alex asked.

“You know how it is,” Bobbie said. “Never get a second chance to make a first impression.”

“Awesome,” Alex said.

“I’ll meet you in the lock,” Amos said.

Naomi looked over to Jim. He was frowning. “Say again, Amos?”

“Yeah,” Amos said. She could hear the smile in his voice. “I thought I’d head over with Bobbie. These OPA fuckers are our best buddies and all, but we’re still us and they’re still them. Someone oughta watch Bobbie’s six while she’s out among them English. Besides which, I’m going to be as good as any of them at breaking heads.”

“Might need you on the *Roci*, big guy,” Jim said, his voice light. “With the whole heading-into-battle thing, I’d kind of like to keep my mechanic close to hand.”

Bobbie retreated down the lift tube, pulling herself hand over hand, her floating feet disappearing last.

“That’s sweet, but you don’t need me, Cap,” Amos said. “Peaches here knows the ship as well as I do. Anything you need done, she can do it.”

Jim grunted, and she put her hand out, grabbing the edge of his couch and spinning it until they were facing. Jim saw the message in her expression. “Copy that, Amos,” he said. “Bobbie? Make sure you bring enough of him back we can regrow the missing bits.”

“Roger. Wilco,” Bobbie said. Her voice sounded close and echoing. She already had her helmet on. Naomi wanted to be reassured by the joy that Bobbie took in the anticipated violence, but she couldn’t quite manage. All she could do was hunker down and endure and see what happened next. At least she had practice with it.

Over the next hours, Bobbie and Amos inspected their new allies—the ship’s reports and logs, the ships in their berths, the OPA fighters they’d be leading on the attack—while Naomi, watching through Bobbie’s suit camera, cataloged it all. Racks of guns and boxes of ammunition. The motley assortment of boats and soldiers. Bobbie’s assessments were calm, rational, professional, and fueled the dread growing in Naomi’s gut.

Her mind wandered a little bit during the slow moments. Human violence as a kind of fractal—self-similar on all scales from bar fight to system-wide war. The buildup of insults and lost face that swelled over the course of an evening or a century. The shoving and shoving back, neither side sure they wanted to escalate and uncertain how to back down. All of that was the history of the inner planets and the Belt since the beginning. Then Marco had thrown his sucker punch and sent the system reeling back. Since then, feints and evaluations, flurries of violence that weren’t meant to end anything so much as find position, test the opponent.

Everything since the rocks fell on Earth had been preparation for this: a counterattack made in earnest and without reservation. Each side hoping to engineer a punch that the other didn’t see coming. Forgotten arm. Maybe it was in their blood, their bones. A shared human heritage. The pattern they were exporting to the stars now. It left her tired.

“Well, it’s not what I’d pick, but it’s better than I’d hoped,” Bobbie said from her new, cramped quarters on the *Giambattista*. In the background, Naomi could make out Amos’ voice, lifted and laughing among others. Fitting in with the new group. Or no, that wasn’t right. Letting the new group think he fit in. She had a terrible sense that he wouldn’t come back on the *Rocinante*; the empty premonitions of anxiety and impatience.

“Do you want to check the boats in more depth?” Naomi asked.

“No,” Bobbie said. “I can do that on the way. Pull the trigger. Let’s get this apocalypse on the road.”

“All right,” Naomi said. “Stay safe.”

“Good hunting. We say, ‘Good hunting.’”

“Good hunting, then.”

The words were powerfully inadequate. She dropped the connection, unstrapped, braced herself against the handholds on the wall, and stretched her arms, her legs, worked the kinks in her spine. When she was done, she realized it was the same routine she did before she worked out. Preparing for great effort.

She went down to the galley where Alex and Jim and Clarissa were eating together. They all looked over at her as she pulled herself into the room. “Bobbie says we’re good to go.”

“Well, shit and yahoo,” Alex said.

Jim pulled his hand terminal out of his pocket, tapped through a set of commands including one with a double password, then pressed a button.

“Okay,” he said. “Signal’s out. As soon as the attack’s under way, we’ll burn for the ring and hope no one notices us.”

They were all quiet for a moment. Naomi felt like there should have been some kind of fanfare. Gongs and trumpets to announce the coming death and destruction. Instead, it was just the galley, the four of them, the sound of the air recyclers, and the smell of chicken.

“Looks like a shit night for sleeping,” Naomi said. “I’m going to be up watching the newsfeeds.” Jim didn’t say anything. His eyes were sunken with exhaustion and something else. Not fear. Worse than fear. Resignation. Naomi pushed off, braced beside him, and put her hand on his. He managed a smile. “I’ll bring drinks and snacks. We can watch the fireworks start.”

“I don’t know,” Jim said.

“It ain’t sulking if we all do it together, Hoss,” Alex said. And then, to Naomi, “Count me in.”

“Me too,” Clarissa said, and then didn’t add *if I’m invited*. Against the backdrop of the war, it was such a small thing, and Naomi was still glad to see it.

“Yeah,” Jim said, “okay.”

It took hours. All across the system, drive plumes flared. Around Ceres and Mars and Tycho, the consolidated fleet leaped away from their

defensive positions and into the Belt. The scattering of Michio Pa's pirate fleet joined in, and the OPA. By the time the last of them reported that they were on the burn, the ships of the Free Navy were starting to react. The *Rocinante* traced vectors and travel groups, threads of light tangling the emptiness between stations and planets. Battle lines. The newsfeeds lit up—civilian, government, corporate, and union all becoming aware that something was happening and leaping to make sense of what it could be.

It was just after midnight, ship time, that the *Roci* raised the alarm.

"What do we have, Alex?" Jim asked.

"Bad news. I'm seeing a couple of fast-attack ships headed our way out from Ganymede."

"Well, so much for not being noticed. How long before they reach us?" Jim asked, but Naomi had already queried the system.

"Five days if they're just buzzing us and looping back," she said. "Twelve if they try to match orbit while we're on the burn."

"Can we take them?" Clarissa said.

"If it was just us, might could," Alex said. "Problem is we're guarding this cow. But if we burn hard enough, we might make the ring before they get us."

"Figure it out on the way," Jim said. "Right now, we need to get the *Giambattista* up and burning as hard as it can and still let Bobbie do her inspections."

"No plan survives contact with the enemy," Alex said, unstrapping and pulling himself up toward the cockpit. "I'm warming her up."

"I'll tell our friends across the way to do the same," Holden said, taking comm control.

On Naomi's monitor, the thousands of hair-thin lines marked where the battles were, and where they were expected to be. On impulse, she took down the tactical display, leaving just the wide scatter of drive plumes all around the system, and then added in the star field.

It was the widest concerted attack ever. Hundreds of ships on at least four sides. Dozens of stations, millions of lives.

Among the stars, it didn't stand out.

Chapter Forty: Prax

The more time passed, the clearer it became how little Ganymede's official neutrality meant. The ships in the docks and orbiting the moon were more and more Free Navy ships, fewer and fewer anything else. The soldiers in Free Navy uniform appeared more often at the tube stations, in the markets, in the public halls and corridors, first with the apparent casualness of citizens, then in larger groups with more aggressive demeanors. Then with armored emplacements that would allow them to shoot in safety whoever happened by.

Djuna had stopped letting him watch the local newsfeeds at breakfast on the weekends. Too many stories about bodies being found in unfortunate conditions. Too many missing people, too many espionage claims, too many reminders from the still-official security apparatus that Pinkwater was an unaffiliated corporate entity with no political litmus tests and only the safety and well-being of the citizens of Ganymede at heart. The sorts of things people said because they weren't true.

For Prax, the official news and the gun-wielding soldiers weren't the most disturbing things. There were smaller things that he noticed. The way that the girls didn't fight against being home by curfew anymore. The wistful conversations Djuna would start about taking positions somewhere else, emigrating off Ganymede entirely, and then end without ever drawing a conclusion. The small things carried more weight. Yes, a dissident circle was killed. Yes, people disappeared. But—apart from Karvonides—they weren't people he knew. And the change in the station was also changing his family. It was also changing him.

Prax went about his work because there was nothing else to do. It wasn't as if things would be made better by hiding in his bed. And the appearance of normalcy was sometimes almost as good as the real thing. So he went to the meetings in the mornings, worked with his plants in the afternoons.

Some of the runs had to be scaled back. Research and development weren't a priority as much as generating food to resupply the warships. Prax thought that was shortsighted. If anything, disruptions like this were an argument for more research, especially with the radioplast work that Khana and Brice had under proposal. He tried bringing the point up now and again. He'd even gone so far as to ask whether there was a contact with the Free Navy that the labs could talk to about it. No one was enthusiastic about it, though. So that was something else the occupation had taken away.

Under it all, the fear of what he'd done in sending the data to Earth hung over him. It was almost a relief when the security forces finally came.

He was in the overflow hydroponics lab at midafternoon. Rows of black-leaved plants rose up from the tanks toward the light banks. The roots that pushed through the underlying aqueous gel were pale as snow. Prax was moving from plant to plant, his hands in light-blue NBR gloves. He checked each leaf gently, looking for sprays of yellow and orange where the radioplasts were dying. Until the man called his name, his afternoon had been going pretty well.

"Dr. Meng?"

There were four people, all of them men. Two wore simple uniforms with the Pinkwater logo on the breast and shoulder. The other two were Free Navy. Prax felt his heart thud against his chest as the adrenaline hit, but he tried not to look more than a little uncomfortable. Anyone would be a little anxious when the Free Navy came asking for them. Even the innocent. He thought that was right.

"Can I help you?"

"We need you to come with us now," the taller of the two Free Navy men said.

"I can't," Prax said, gesturing toward the plants he hadn't checked. As if that were explanation enough.

They stepped closer, moving around him. They all had sidearms. Handcuffs. Canisters of restraint spray.

"You have to come with us now," the tall man said again.

"Do ... do I need my union representative?" he asked, but he wasn't surprised when the shorter of the Free Navy men pushed him in the small of the back. *I could run*, he thought. *It wouldn't help, but I could do it.*

They marched him out through the front office. When they passed Brice

in the hall, she looked away, pretending not to notice. The front desk was abandoned, everyone suddenly called to the restroom or a coffee break at the same moment. None of the people he worked with would actually see him leave. That's how quickly the right kinds of power could make someone disappear. Walking out the front door for what he had to assume was the last time, it felt like an epiphany. He'd wondered, watching the newsfeeds, how so many could go missing in a station with people and cameras everywhere. He understood now.

All they had to do was make it too dangerous for others to watch.

They loaded him into a cart, drove off down the main corridor, down the southern exchange ramp, and into a well-lit concrete hallway. He had the sudden, visceral memory of waiting here back after the mirrors fell, when the survival of Ganymede Station had been an open question. He'd waited in line right there, trying to find Mei. It would be her turn now to wonder what had happened to him. Symmetry.

At the Pinkwater office, they took him to a small, cold room. Green walls. Green floor. Everything stank of industrial cleaner. The kind they used to clean up blood and spit. Biohazard stuff. A chair bolted in place in front of a cheap, plastic desk. Black dots along the wall shifted toward him like the eyes of a spider. Not cameras, but the same multifrequency image arrays he used in the labs. They were sensitive enough to pick up his heart rate from changes in his skin and track the heat in every part of his body. He'd used them extensively on last year's soybean experiments, and seeing them here felt almost like betrayal.

The taller Free Navy man came in. A dark-skinned woman in a Pinkwater uniform with him. Prax looked up. He'd imagined this moment so many times in the middle of dread-soaked nights that now that it was happening he was almost curious to see how well it met his expectations. Would they beat him? Threaten him with violence? Would they threaten Mei and Djuna and Natalia? He'd heard that sometimes they would addict prisoners to drugs and then threaten to withhold their supply and let withdrawals do the work.

"Dr. Meng," the tall man said, sitting across from him. Did they take focus drugs? Prax had heard of focus drugs, but he didn't know how they worked. "You were supervisor for Quiana Karvonides? You're on record as identifying her body."

“I am,” Prax said. Was there a way to pretend his way out of this? Would they believe him if he denied everything he could deny? Or would he give himself away? All the black, mechanical eyes on him, and the tall man’s pale-brown ones too. Only the Pinkwater woman was looking at her hand terminal. “I did. Karvonides didn’t have family on the station, I think. I’m not sure about that, though. Is something wrong?”

“She was working on proprietary yeast? Is that right?”

“That’s one of the projects we do,” Prax said, nodding. He was being too anxious. They’d know.

“She was working on it particularly?”

Prax’s mouth was dry, and the cold of the room seemed to creep up his legs and into the base of his spine. What had he done? Why hadn’t he kept his head down? But no, that wasn’t right. He had reasons for taking every action he took. And he’d known there were risks. Being here in this room was one, even if he hadn’t known which room in particular. He wondered whether there were other people watching him, or if the spider eyes fed into some sort of software that analyzed him and fed them the answers.

“Dr. Meng?”

“Yes, sorry. Yes, she worked on the harvester yeast. It’s an organism, um, that harvests a very broad range of electromagnetic radiation, the way that a plant uses light. It’s reverse-engineered from the protomolecule data. It lets the yeast generate its own sugars from the radioplasts, and then, um, its native systems can convert that into higher-complexity nutrients.”

The two shared a look. He couldn’t tell what its significance was. How would Mei do without him? She was older now. Nearly adolescent. She was going to start pulling away from the family unit soon anyway. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad time to lose him. Would they put his body back in the recycler? He couldn’t think like that. Not now.

“What can you tell us about Hy1810?” the woman asked, and Prax felt like she was looking through him. Seeing his bones and the shape of his blood vessels. He’d never felt more naked. He tried to lean back in his chair, to rock it a little back and forth, but the bolts only grated a little. There were notches and scrapes on the wall he hadn’t noticed until now. Painted over, yes, but there. He didn’t want to think about what had made them.

“It’s the tenth variation using protocol eighteen,” he said. “It’s

proprietary. I'm not supposed to talk about that. I'm sorry."

"Why did you move the Hy1810 data out of Karvonides' partition?"

And there it was. They knew. He took a breath, and he could hear it shaking in his throat. They wouldn't need focus drugs or psych computers. He was readable as plain text. It had been a dream that he might avoid the worst. All that was left was watching it play out. He felt a vestigial, unreasoning hope. There had to be a way. He had to get back home, or else who would make pancakes for the girls?

"I moved it on the request of some of the other project engineers. With Karvonides' passing, they needed to have access to the run data. Otherwise there was no way to move forward. So, yes, I put it in a partition where they could reach it."

"Did you review the permissions on that partition?"

"The information was proprietary," Prax said, clinging to the idea like it was the last, water-logged fragment of the ship that had sunk beneath him. It sounded weak, even to him.

The man leaned forward. "That data was sent to Earth. We've isolated the tracking data on it, and it came from the partition *you* put it in."

Lies and denials bubbled in his mind. *Anyone could have accessed that data. I was sloppy. Careless with security, maybe. That's all. I didn't do anything wrong.*

In his mind's eye, he saw Karvonides again. The wounds on her neck and head. Yes, he could deny her again, but it wouldn't make any difference. They already knew, or near enough. They'd push him, torture him, and he would break. It didn't matter what he said now. He was dead. No more pancakes. No more evenings coaxing the girls into doing their homework or Sunday mornings waking up late with Djuna. Someone else would have to take over his research. Everything he'd loved, everything he'd lived for, was gone.

To his surprise, it felt less like fear than a sort of terrible freedom. He could say anything he wanted now. Including the truth.

"The thing you need to understand," he said, an irrational, intoxicating courage blooming in his heart. "Biological equilibria? They're not straightforward. Never."

"Equilibria," the man repeated.

"Yes. Exactly. Everyone thinks that it's simple. New, invasive species

comes in and it has an advantage and it outcompetes, right? That's the story, but there's another part to that. Always, *always*, the local environment resists. Yes, yes, maybe badly. Maybe without a clear idea of coping with novelty. I'm not saying it's perfect, but I am saying it's there. Even when an invasive species takes over, even when it wins, there is a counterbalancing process it has to overcome to do that. And—" The tall man was scowling, and his discomfort made Prax want to speak faster. To say everything he had in his heart before the hammer fell. "And that counterprocess is so *deep* in the fabric of living systems, it can never be absent. However well the new species is designed, however overwhelming its advantages seem to be, the pushback will always be there. If one native impulse is overcome, there will be another. You understand? Conspecifics are outcompeted? Fine, the bacterial and viral microecologies will push back. Adapt to those, and it'll be micronutrient levels and salinity and light. And the thing is, the thing is, even when the novel species *does* win? Even when it takes over every niche there is, that struggle alone changes what it is. Even when you wipe out or co-opt the local environment completely, you're changed by the pushback. Even when the previous organisms are driven to extinction, they leave markers behind. What they are can never, *never* be completely erased."

Prax sat back in his chair, chin high, breath deep and fast, nostrils flared. *You can kill me. You can wipe me from the rolls of history. But you can never change the mark I've made. I stood against you, and even when you've killed me, it won't undo the things I've done.*

The man's scowl deepened. "Are we still talking about the yeast?"

"Yes," Prax said. "Of course we're talking about the yeast."

"All right," the man said. "That's great, but what we need to know is who had access to that partition."

"What?"

"The partition you put the data in," said the Pinkwater woman. "Who could have linked to it from there?"

"Anyone with access to the workstations in the research group *could* have," Prax said. "What does that have to do with it?"

The man's hand terminal chimed, and he pulled it out from his pocket. The red backslash on an alert made him look almost like he was blushing, but when he put the hand terminal away, his face had gone pale.

"I have to step back," the Free Navy man said. "You finish this, yeah?"

His voice was tight. Prax thought he was shaking. The woman nodded and checked her own hand terminal. Prax watched him go, confused. Wanting, almost, to call him back and insist that they finish. This was important. This was his martyrdom in the cause of freedom and science. The interrogator couldn't just walk away in the middle of it. When the door closed, he turned to the woman, but she was still looking at her terminal. A newsfeed with something about the war.

She whistled softly, her eyes going wide. When she looked up at him, it was like she was surprised to see him.

"The yeast data," he said, reminding her.

"Dr. Meng, you have to be more careful. You can't do that anymore."

"Do what?"

The woman's impatient smile didn't reach her eyes. "You can't put data that might help the enemy into an open partition. I know it's proprietary, but someone leaked it, and we have an active investigation now into who that might have been."

"But— No, you don't understand."

"Dr. Meng," she snapped. "I know you don't like us coming in and telling you how to run your lab, but these are delicate times. I'm asking you to take a long, careful look at your lab's security hygiene so that we don't have a less pleasant conversation next time. You understand that?"

"Yes. Of course."

"All right, then," the woman said with the air of having won an argument. "You can go now."

Prax didn't know what to do. He sat quietly for a moment, waiting for clarification he didn't know how to ask for. The woman checked her hand terminal, looked back at him, annoyance in her expression.

"Dr. Meng? We're done for now. If we have any further questions, we'll find you."

"I should leave?"

"Yes," she said.

And so he did. Walking through the halls and up to the public carts felt like moving through a dream. His stomach felt empty. He wasn't hungry, there was just a massive bubble in his gut where something—pain, despair, hope, fear—was supposed to be. He rented a cart, took it to the tube station. The whole incident had been so brief, his shift wasn't even done. It would

be, though, by the time he got back to the lab. So he went home instead.

The newsfeeds on the tube were alive with whatever military action had been on the security woman's hand terminal. He tried to make sense of it all, but the words seemed to lose their meaning somewhere between the screen and his senses. He caught himself staring emptily at a young man sitting across from him and had to make a conscious effort to look away. All he could think was the dark-skinned woman saying *You can go now*.

Djuna was home when he got there, sitting on the couch with her head in her hands, her eyes bloodshot and her cheeks blotchy from crying. When he stopped in the entryway from the kitchen and lifted his hand in greeting, she stared at him for a moment, stunned, and then leaped up, ran to him, and wrapped him in her arms. After a long moment, he hugged her back, and they stood in their rooms, the way he never thought they would again.

"Leslie sent me a message," Djuna said, her voice still thick with tears. "She said they came for you at the office. That the security people took you away. I was trying to find a lawyer who would talk to me. I sent the girls to Dorian's. I didn't know what to tell them."

"All right," Prax said. "It's all right."

Djuna leaned back, searching his eyes like there was something written in them. "What happened?"

"I confessed," Prax said. "I told them ... I told them everything. And then they let me go."

"They did what?"

"They said I shouldn't do it again, and that I should leave," he said. "It wasn't at all the reaction I expected."

Chapter Forty-One: Pa

I've got fast-movers," Evans said. "Five, wait ... Seven."

"Coming from?" Michio asked, though she was already certain of the answer. The assaults throughout the Belt had already pulled the Free Navy's fighters to other conflicts, thinning the defenses at Pallas. She had to give Holden his due. He hadn't tried to use her and her ships as bullet sponges.

"Pallas Station," Evans confirmed. "No one's shooting out in the black."

"PDCs have them," Laura said. "Permission to fire?"

"You have permission," Michio said. "Oksana, evasive maneuvers at will. Let's show these fuckers we can dance."

"Yes, Captain," Oksana said between teeth bared in concentration and joy. A moment later, the *Connaught* lurched, shifted. Over the system, Josep howled a wordless battle cry.

The Four Horsemen, Foyle called them. The *Connaught*, the *Serrio Mal*, the *Panshin*, and the *Solano*—the most experienced of Pa's breakaway fleet. They fell toward Pallas Station from four different directions, spreading the local defenses as thin as they could. If there had been time, maybe Marco would have pulled resources off Pallas too, sabotaged the manufacturing infrastructure, and left anyone who couldn't escape on their own for Pa to rescue or let starve under her name.

But that assumed there was someplace for the Free Navy to run to.

"Two down," Laura announced. "Five to go."

"Sooner's better than later," Michio said.

Metal and ceramic creaking and singing from the strain, the *Connaught* turned and accelerated, then cut power and went on the float, whipping around to give the PDCs a wider field of fire. Laura's guns buzzed, vibrating the ship and killing three more of the station's torpedoes even as the *Connaught* sped in toward them flank-first. The surface of the asteroid glittered ahead of them, her target and her enemy and the home to tens of

thousands of the people she'd thrown her safety and career aside to help and protect.

"Keep the rounds from hitting the station if you can."

"Do my best, Captain," Laura said, but her subtext was clear—if it gets down to them or us, it's them. Michio couldn't disagree.

"*Panshin's* taking fire," Evans said. "*Serrio Mal* too."

"*Solano*?" Michio asked.

The *Solano* had taken the most damage in the raids and scuffles since she'd broken ranks with Marco. Enough that it was chosen to be the sacrifice ship, emptied of her crew and all useful material. It was the hinge point of her battle plan. Three of her ships to distract and disarm Pallas, to the point that, even if they shot it full of holes, they couldn't scatter the *Solano* into a debris field thin enough to keep the docks from crippling damage.

"Still far enough back it's not being targeted," Oksana said.

"Four more down," Laura said. "That last one's being a booger ... Got it!"

"Captain," Oksana said. "We're going to need to return to braking burn if we don't want to get very close and personal with the station."

"Do it," Michio said. "I'm taking comms."

"Understood," Evans said. "I've got another wave of torpedoes coming in. And we are nearing effective PDC range."

Michio set for broadcast. So close to the station, there'd be no light delay. Everyone listening would hear her almost as she spoke. After so long at high-lag distances, it felt odd. She considered herself in the camera as Oksana spun the ship and punched the deceleration. She started the broadcast.

"This is Captain Michio Pa of the *Connaught* to all citizens of Pallas Station. Be advised, we are here to remove the false governance of the Free Navy and return control of the station to its citizens. Evacuate the docks immediately. I repeat, evacuate the dock levels immediately for your own safety. We call on the Free Navy administration for immediate and unconditional surrender. If we do not have that confirmed in the next fifteen minutes, it will be too late to save the docks and shipyard. For your own safety, evacuate now."

The comms display threw up an error alert. Her signal was being

jammed. She boosted it as much as the *Connaught*'s transmitter allowed and set it to loop. She hadn't had much hope of a peaceful ending, but she'd tried.

The ship lurched again and burned hard, pressing her back into her couch. Laura shouted something obscene, but the ship didn't detonate. They'd dodged whatever it was.

"*Panshin* took a hit," Evans reported. "PDC. They look all right. The *Solano*'s still not top of the Pallas threat index." He paused, rechecked his monitor. "It's working."

"Thank you," Michio said. "Let's start taking out their PDCs."

"Already on it," Laura said. "Just as long as I can keep these torpedoes from flying up our ..." She trailed off, lost in concentration. Michio didn't interrupt.

This wasn't what she wanted. Wasn't what she'd ever wanted. She'd begun this whole fallen, fucked-up process because the dream of a Belt for Belters—a life that didn't depend on being used and exploited by the larger powers in the system—had meant something. And now here she was, fighting alongside Earth and Mars. Against Belters.

Three years, Sanjrani gave them. Three and a half. And then starvation. And she was about to break the docks at a major port so that James Holden could open the way to the colony worlds again and leave them all behind. This was what she'd agreed to do. It was her part in stopping Marco and trying to save the Belt, even if it was the Belt three years from now.

Every step along the way had made sense, except that they ended up here. Everyone she'd allied with her whole life had started by seeming to be good, competent, and loyal. They'd all disappointed. And now, she was going to do the same. She'd changed sides so many times, she didn't know who she was anymore.

If she changed the plan now, if she backed away ...

Fought the oppressor before. Still fighting the oppressor now. Followed your heart then. Still following your heart now. The situation changes; that doesn't mean you do.

Fuck.

"Evans," she said. "What's the status of the *Solano*?"

"On course, Captain."

"Do we have control of it?"

Evans looked over at her. His eyes were wide and uncertain. Panicky. “I have telemetry, yeah.”

“Slow it down,” she said, pulling up tightbeam connections to the *Panshin* and the *Serrio Mal*. “Give us more time to kill the defenses.”

Captain Foyle accepted the connection first, then a moment later, Rodriguez. In the separate windows of her display, they looked like negative images of each other. His pale skin, her dark, but with the same thinness and close-cropped hair. The images shook under different strains as the *Panshin* and the *Serrio Mal* suffered their own separate evasions.

“We have a change of plan,” Michio said. “The *Solano* isn’t ramming the station. We’re going to park it, ass-end at the ports, inside safety range, warm up the Epstein, and melt anything that comes out to slag. Blockade.”

Foyle’s eyes could have been cast iron for all that her expression changed. She’d be hell at the poker table.

“Con que?” Rodriguez said, his lips narrowing. “Is late à diffe the plan.”

“Late’s better than too late,” Michio said. “The Belters of Pallas aren’t the enemy. I’m not going to make them the enemy. I need slow passes from both of you. Every PDC gets dusted. Every gun and torpedo emplacement, we break. Then sensor arrays. I need this station blind and declawed.”

For a moment neither one of her captains spoke. She could hear all the objections in her own voice. She was tripling the risk of the mission. She was spending an order of magnitude more ammunition—torpedoes and PDC rounds—than a simple escort of the sacrifice ship required. She was putting them, her commanders and their crews and their families, at risk to preserve a station that was actively trying to kill them all.

“I need you to trust me,” she said. A loud pop announced a stray PDC round had holed the *Connaught*. Oksana shouted something about sealing the deck. Michio didn’t look away from the screen. Let them see these were her risks too.

“Dui,” Foyle said in her whiskey-and-cigar voice. “You say it, bossman, and we get it done.”

Rodriguez, shaking his head, muttered something obscene, looked into the camera with tired eyes. “Fine.”

She dropped the connection. When she checked in with fire control, Laura had already changed the profile. On the display, every weapon on the face of the station was marked in red, targeted for destruction. But not the

docks. Evans was out of his couch and pouring sealant on the hole where the PDC round had punched through the hulls. The slug had passed through the command deck maybe a meter from her head. She could have died. Any of her people could have died. Knowing it was like being two different people at once. One, horrified at the idea that it could have hit Laura or Evans or Oksana. The other, shrugging away what hadn't happened. This was the work. This was the choice she'd made, and it was the right one.

For two long hours, the *Connaught* dodged, strained, poured rounds down onto the surface of Pallas. What had originally been a fast, sharp attack turned into a long, bloody bout more about endurance and supplies than clever tactics. The *Panshin* and the *Serrio Mal* matched her blow for blow, hammer strikes against an anvil. The jammers were set too deep in the stone for even her torpedoes to reach, and every time the curve of asteroid cut off her line of sight to the other ships, Michio was afraid something would happen. That she wouldn't see them again. And once, the *Panshin* emerged from a long pass with a bright scar and section of her hull peeled back.

Slowly, a blindspot appeared around the docks. Parts of space leading to Pallas that had been defended, weren't. Evans brought the *Solano* into it kilometer by kilometer, then meter by meter until it had locked to Pallas' orbit with only an occasional little push from the maneuvering thrusters to keep it stationary.

"They're going to find a way to kill it, sir," Oksana said. "May take them days, may take them hours, but this isn't a blockade that can hold for long."

"Get me line-of-sight on the *Panshin*, Oksana."

"Sir."

Rodriguez, when he appeared on the screen again, was grinning. So that, at least, was a good sign.

"How's your ship, Captain Rodriguez?" Michio said, returning his smile despite herself.

"Esá bent, broken, fucked, flustered, and far from home," Ezio said, laughing. "Got a couple in the med bay and one in the morgue, but we done the thing, que sí? Pulled a whole station's teeth and half their eyes too, account son los *champions*."

"I think we are," Michio said. "I'm going to need you to stand guard on

this. Pull back far enough that you're out of range of anything Pallas puts together. Take control of the *Solano*."

"Babysit?" Rodriguez said.

"Got your hull pulled back like a condom wrapper, Ezio. I'm not putting you in at Titan."

God bless the man, he looked disappointed. "Bist bien," he said. "We'll hold the line. But you and Foyle take the torpedoes we've still got, yeah? Stock up. Anything we do, we can manage con PDCs and my winning smile."

"Won't say no to that," Michio said.

"Que tu trigger?" he asked. "When do I light it up and slag the fuckers?"

"When you know it's Free Navy you're burning down. Not if just people. Lose the ship before you hurt civilians. Killing people because they got in the way is inner-planets bullshit. It's Free Navy bullshit. We're better than that."

"Damn right we are," Rodriguez said and signed off. When he saluted, he had blood on his fingers.

She pointed a tightbeam connection request at one of the less damaged comm arrays, unsure if it would do any good. Even if the equipment was limping along well enough to function, there was no reason for the connection to be accepted. Only it was.

A familiar dark, pebbled face appeared on her monitor. From what she could see behind him, he was in a well-appointed office, brightly lit and probably somewhere deep enough in the station that she couldn't have reached him without nukes or a reactor set to critical and crashed into the station.

"Captain Pa," he said. "You seem to be moving from one shitty decision to another."

"Rosenfeld," she said.

"When you broke with Inaros, I understood it. Respected it, even. I was disappointed when you turned to Fred Johnson. But this? Playing marionette to Chrisjen Avasarala and Emily Richards. And Holden?" He shook his head. "Something happened to you, Michio. You've changed."

"Context changed," she said. "I'm still the same. And here's what happens next. I have a live, warmed-up Epstein drive pointed at the docks. If I see any activity there? I slag them. If I see any shuttles or boats taking

off from the surface, I'll shoot them down and slag the docks. If I see anything that looks like an attempt to sabotage the *Solano*, I'll slag the docks. If any Free Navy ship comes within a hundred thousand klicks of Pallas, I'll slag the docks. You will find yourself governor of an old, broken station that can't move supplies in or out."

"Duly noted," Rosenfeld said dryly.

There didn't seem anything more to say, but she didn't kill the connection. Not yet. And then, "Use this."

"Excuse me?"

"You're a political animal. Use this opportunity. I'm giving you an excuse to drop out of the fighting. You can tell Marco that I pinned you down. You won't even be lying. Even if he beats us all, you know he can't govern the system. And your plan?"

"My plan? What plan?"

"The one where you're the man behind the throne. The real power while Marco's the public face and figurehead. That won't work either. He can't be controlled. He can barely be predicted. I'm not blaming you. I made the same mistake. I saw what I wanted to see in him. But I was wrong, and you are too." Rosenfeld's face was unreadable and still. Michio nodded. "Do you know the magic word?"

"No," he said, his voice rich with disdain. "What's the magic word?"

"Oops. You should say oops, Rosenfeld. Own it that you made a mistake. That ship I have with its ass pointed at you? It's your chance to do something about the fact that you picked the wrong side."

"You want me to thank you for that?"

"I want you to make sure all the people in there get food and water, and I want you to keep them safe until this is over."

"And when's that going to be?"

"I don't know," she said, and dropped the connection.

For a long moment, she rested in her couch, held in place by the straps and the familiarity of the voices and sounds around her. Her jaw ached where she'd been clenching it. She had a bruise across her collarbone, and she couldn't remember which maneuver might have caused it. She closed her eyes, letting it all wash over her. Laura talking through the headset with Bertold about how many PDC rounds they had left. Oksana and Evans laughing over nothing, releasing tension, quietly celebrating that—on some

level, by some measure—they'd won. The smell of the portable welding rig burning off the emergency sealant and closing the punctures in the hull. Her home. Her people. She filled her lungs with them all.

The comm display chirped. A request from the *Serrio Mal*. She accepted it. Susanna Foyle appeared on her monitor.

"Captain Pa," she said.

"Captain Foyle."

"Rodriguez tells me we're not taking three ships to Titan after all."

"That's right."

"Used up a lot of ordnance on this mission that wasn't in the specs," Foyle said.

"Also true," Pa agreed.

"Going to leave us outnumbered and outgunned." It wasn't an accusation. Just an observation.

"We won't be the only ships there," Pa said. "We'll have backup."

For the first time, Foyle's face lowered its dignity to have an expression. "Squats and Dusters. No one we can count on."

"We're all in this together," Pa said, and Foyle coughed out a single laugh.

"As long as you're going first, we'll follow. Didn't get this far by taking the easy way. We've got our patches in place and our bandages on. You're ready to burn, then so are we."

"Thank you."

Foyle nodded, dropped the connection. Pa pulled up a system-wide tactical map with all the fighting that was going on throughout the system. A cluster of updates from Vesta. A chase between Free Navy fighters and a dozen Martian warships as Marco's forces tried to loop around toward Mars itself. The guard force left behind at Ceres tracking four Free Navy ships. The orbital defense of Earth on high alert, most of its patrol ships away from their posts and on the attack. The sum of all of humanity's presence in the solar system, bent on violence and spectacle. And at the edge of the display, almost off it, *almost* forgotten, the *Giambattista* and the *Rocinante*, already decelerating toward the ring gate, and two fast-attack ships burning hard to intercept.

Good luck, you bastard, she thought, putting her hand over the tiny gold dot marked *Rocinante*. *Don't make me sorry I trusted you.*

And then, over the ship-wide system, “All stations report. We’ve got another fight to get to. Don’t want to be late.”

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Chapter Forty-Two: Marco

Son coyo, son *tod!*” Micah al-Dujaili shouted out from the screen. “You and all your ti-ti soldat! I am here for you, Inaros. What *you* did to my family.”

Marco muted the broadcast. Somewhere nearby, someone else was watching it. Al-Dujaili’s rant still nattering in the distance as the *Pella* rose off Callisto, a half dozen ships arrayed behind her. “Do we have target lock?”

Josie lifted a hand in affirmation, his eyes firmly on the monitor. They were only at a single g, but Marco felt a headache beginning at the base of his skull. It didn’t matter. It was only a little pain, after all. There’d be time to take something for it when his enemies weren’t wasting good air. Around him, the command deck of the *Pella* was tight and bunched. Josie with weapons. Karal at the comms. Miral muttering into his headset to someone down in engineering. They were wolves. A band of predators ready to strike. Al-Dujaili shouted something about vengeance. Something about betraying the Belt in the name of glory.

“Let’s shut this fucker up, then,” Marco said casually. “Fire everything.”

The warning had come to the Jovian system in time for him. Earth, Mars, the traitor Michio Pa, Holden. Naomi. All his enemies had lit their torches and hoisted their pitchforks for him and taken to the road. Marco wasn’t surprised. He’d known to watch for them, and when they came, he was ready. True, he hadn’t expected it to come from everywhere at once the way it had. The consolidated fleet had come boiling out of Ceres, up from Earth and Mars. They’d burned hard and taken some of the nearest of the Free Navy’s forces by surprise. But space and distance were Marco’s natural allies. It took time to burn across the half-billion kilometers from Mars, and the Jovian system was Belters’ land. And Belters meant Free Navy, no matter what yapping little pups like Micah al-Dujaili and Aimee

Ostman wanted to pretend. By the time their Earther allies made it to al-Dujaili's side, the man would be a corpse, and all the ships traveling with him dead at his side.

"Firing now," Josie said.

The *Pella* rang with the mechanisms of torpedo and PDC, the vibrations traveling through the hull and making the whole ship chime like a war bell. Marco could taste the sound—ice and copper. It was beautiful.

"Hoy, Captain," Karal said. "Got messages coming in. Other ships que savvy if they should be firing too?"

"Yes," Marco said. "Tell them all to open fire."

"The ones kommt de Ganymede too? Not in effective range, them."

Marco shifted to stare at Karal. The ache in his brain grew a degree worse. He'd known Karal for decades, trusted him. In his voice now, though, Marco heard doubt. More than doubt. Insolence.

"All. Fire. Let al-Dujaili spend his rounds plucking their torpedoes out of the black. It'll shut his nattering mouth."

"Dui," Karal said, turning back to the comms and speaking in a voice too low and urgent for Marco to bother listening.

It was happening everywhere. Vesta. Pallas. Titan. Hygeia Station. Thisbe Yards. Europa. Large targets and small, the enemy was coming at him thinking they would wash the Free Navy aside like a wave. And there was damage, yes. Pallas blockaded. Vesta fallen. The battle forces burning toward Titan alone might make one of the largest in history, and he couldn't say how decisive his victory there would be. It almost didn't matter. The important thing was that he had goaded them into action. Into reaching out in anger and fear. It was a recipe for overreach. After the careful, turtle-meek response of Earth and Mars to this point, it was a relief.

Let them come. Let them win their little victories. The Free Navy would hold what it could, scatter into the dark where that was wiser, and loop back to crush the unguarded targets left behind. It was the mistake he'd known they would make. The inner planets with all their centuries of dominion still dreamed that they could fight a war and win. Marco knew better. War was never won and never lost. Until now—until *him*—Earth and Mars had thought they were at peace because the violence had all poured out on the Belt and not back at them. Their fault. Their shortsightedness. They'd had their age of victory. It was over now. And this paroxysm, this grand mal

seizure of a battle plan, promised a thousand more like it to come.

The Belt would take its hits. But it would never take them passively again. That was his victory.

“First wave’s down,” Josie said. “They got all our torpedoes. No hits. Try again?”

“No,” Marco said. “We wait. Let them think they can handle us. Then crush them.”

“Bien,” Josie said. Karal muttered into the comms, passing the word along. Without the weapons fire, the ship still wasn’t quiet. It only felt that way. Marco stretched his neck, craning it to try to relieve the tension there, but everything in him was straining out toward al-Dujaili. He’d killed Fred Johnson with his own hands already, and now all the OPA factions that had been stupid enough to follow an Earther would see what crop they’d sown.

He pulled up the tactical display. The eight enemy ships led by al-Dujaili’s *Torngarsuk* were scattered enough to make taking two down with a single torpedo impossible, but near enough that their PDC fire could reinforce each other. For all al-Dujaili’s ranting and venom, he hadn’t lost his temper enough to abandon good sense.

The *Pella* and the six other Free Navy ships from the Callisto shipyards held a looser formation but a wider surface. Outnumbered for the moment, but with ten Free Navy ships on hard burn from Ganymede, they wouldn’t be for long. Marco grinned.

“Cut to a quarter g,” he said. “Tell the Ganymede ships to coordinate braking burns and watch close. If the enemy waits, we outnumber them. If they attack now, be ready to turn. Draw them out of their formation.”

“Bien,” Josie said. “Aber ... They’re firing.”

“Go!” Marco shouted, willing the *Pella* like it was part of his body. Like he could bend its path with pure force of his intention.

“At a quarter?” Karal yelled, and Marco shouted wordlessly and grabbed the pilot’s controls. Under his command, the *Pella* leapt forward, pushing him back. The hull creaked and groaned, but he saw Josie’s targeting solution feed in, heard the great and glorious rumble of the weapons, watched the arcs of PDC fire still too distant to pose a real threat but near enough to disrupt the enemy and then the spread of torpedoes. And the spreads from the others in his group. And far distant, but drawing close, a woven cluster thick as a rope—torpedo tracks from the Ganymede ships.

All converging, all falling in to the enemy. Fire and metal and blood. It was like joy. Like music.

He bent the *Pella*'s course, firing thrusters at a hundred percent or not at all, feeling the glorious torque of the turn in his blood and the aching pressure of his crash couch trying to hold him. Someone shouted, but Marco was past listening now. This was battle. This was glory and victory and power.

A proximity warning, and the *Pella*'s PDCs shifted automatically, splashing an enemy torpedo that had been lost among the cloud of converging fire. Marco laughed. His other ships had taken his cue, turning toward the *Torngarsuk*. One of al-Dujaili's ships misjudged, took a torpedo from the Ganymede ships in her side, and crumpled, venting air. One of Marco's ships lost a thruster to a torpedo, and three of the remaining enemy coordinated to mow it down with PDC fire like lions descending on a crippled gazelle. Even in that moment of loss and rage, Marco felt the joy of the fight.

It was ugly, brutal, direct. They were past clever solutions and elegant traps now. This was toe-to-toe throwing punches until someone fell to the ground. This was the urge that had put mankind on the battlefield with stones and lengths of wood, beating each other blood on blood on blood until only one side remained. And that side was Marco's. The Free Navy, and fuck all the rest.

The *Torngarsuk* died last, dancing around arcs of PDC fire while al-Dujaili shouted defiance and obscenity over the radio. And then didn't. The *Torngarsuk* lost power, drifted, and detonated. Its own tiny, brief sun. Marco fell back into his crash couch, aware for the first time in he couldn't say how long of the thrust gravity pulling at him. The tactical display showed two of the enemy ships fleeing. He hadn't noticed when they'd left, but it hadn't been recent—they were already far outside his effective range. Farther and faster with every breath. He smiled, noticed the taste of blood on his lips. He'd bitten his cheek. He didn't remember that either.

Slowly, his consciousness seemed to broaden. Not just his monitor and his couch and his body. There was an alert sounding somewhere. A smell of smoke and the bright scent of fire suppressants. His headache had bloomed without him noticing into a throbbing unpleasantness, and his hands felt like his fingers had bent backward and were only just coming back to true.

He looked around the deck. Josie and Miral and Karal, all looking back at him. He lifted a fist.

“Victory,” he said, and coughed.



But the victory came at a price. Two of his reinforcements from Ganymede were done, the crews dead, the ships hardly more than scrap. Three of the ships from the Callisto yards would need repair. The *Pella* had suffered a breakdown in the air recycler that was annoying but trivial. Enough that they had to land in the shipyard again for a few days while it was repaired and tested. Johnson’s lickspittle OPA had taken worse, died in greater number, but still, this wasn’t the sort of success Marco could afford many more of.

And add to the injury the insult of being lectured by Nico Sanjrani.

“This has to stop,” the little economist said from the screen. “The damage to infrastructure is getting worse, and the more the curve deflects, the harder—the more nearly *impossible*—it’s going to be to pull it back up.”

Marco, in the office he’d appropriated for Free Navy’s command on Callisto, leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes. The message had been sent with heavy encryption, its origin path and return hidden in layers of mathematics. All he knew for certain was that Sanjrani was far enough away that the light delay and the limitations of equipment kept him from a real-time conversation. For that, Marco was profoundly grateful.

“I can resend the analysis,” Sanjrani whined. “But this situation is making things worse than the numbers show. *Worse*. Whatever it takes to stop it, you need to do that. If we don’t start building a separate exchange economy soon—and by soon I mean weeks or months ago—we may have to reimagine the whole project. We may not be able to get away from inner-planet-backed scrip at all, and then we can be as politically independent as we want, only it will still devolve back to financial constraints by the inner planets, which was what we were trying to get away from in the first place.”

Sanjrani looked tired. Stressed. There was an ashy tone to his skin, and his eyes seemed sunken. Given that he was holed away somewhere safe from battle, it seemed more than a little histrionic. Marco stopped the

message—there was another twenty minutes in the spool—and composed his reply. It wasn't a long one.

"Nico," he said gently. "You give me too much credit. None of us have the power to control what atrocities Earth and Mars and their misguided allies in the Belt will commit to stop us. We can only hold to our principles and our dreams. We will absolutely prevail, in time. When the inners put down their arms and leave the Belt in peace, we will have the power to end this. Until then, our only options are to defend ourselves or let our people die. I won't compromise on that, and I know you won't either."

There. Thirty seconds to answer thirty minutes of alarmist maundering. That was what efficiency looked like. He sent the message back on its looping way, checked the newsfeeds—the battle at Titan was entering a second day with heavy casualties on both sides, and still too early to know what he'd won or lost in it—and the work reports on his ships—the *Pella* was ready to launch, but not with any size of escort for at least another three days—and then heaved himself up and walked through to the meeting room.

Whatever it had been before—engineers' workspace, security building, storage—the room was now the war council of the Free Navy. Karal, Wings, Filip, Sárta from the *Pella*. Captain Lister from the *Coin Silver*, Captain Chou from the *Lína*. They sat on white upholstered chairs, their uniforms lending them a formality. They stood and saluted when he entered the room. Except for Filip who nodded as a son to his parent.

"Thank you for coming," Marco said. "We have plans to make. This assault must not go unanswered. We have to mount a counterstrike and show the inners that we aren't intimidated. Show our strength."

A murmur of agreement passed through the room, no one actually speaking loud enough to be heard. Only not to be out of line.

Except, to his surprise, Filip.

"Another one?" his son said. "The last grand gesture did so well, que?"

Marco froze. The anger in Filip's voice—more than anger, *contempt*—was like being slapped. All around the room, the others went silent and still.

"Something to say, Filipito?" Marco asked, his voice low and calm and rich with threat. But Filip chose not to hear it.

"Yeah, something. We had this conversation before, yeah? Walked away from Ceres and said we needed to plan a show of strength. Counterattack.

Keep them afraid of us. We did this *before*, and now we're here *again*." Filip's face was flushed, his breath fast and heaving like he'd run to get here. "Only last time it wasn't *esá coyos la*, was it? It was Dawes and Rosenfeld and Sanjrani. And Pa, yeah? Inner circle. Heart of the Free Navy. Part of the plan."

"You're tired, Filip," Marco said. "You should go rest."

"How does this get different from last time you said it?" Filip said. "Tell me that."

Rage rose up in Marco's breast, filling his head with heat and fumes. He could smell it like a chemical fire.

"Want to know, me," Filip said, voice trembling. "This plan we've got. And the last plan before it. And the one before that. Which one's the real plan? Is there? Or are we just falling down and pretending we meant to?"

Marco smiled. When he stepped toward his son, Filip braced against a blow. Jaw tight. Hands in fists. Marco tousled his hair.

"Boys, eh?" he said to the others. "Boys and their tantrums. Captain Chou. Can we hear your report?"

Chou cleared his throat. "We have a few targets might serve," he said, pulling up his hand terminal and sending a data file to the wall screen. "Depends how it fits with the larger strategy."

Filip went white, his jaw jutting out. Chou went on talking, gesturing at the wall screen as he listed his suggestions and plans. Marco kept his gaze on his son and let the others pretend nothing was happening but the meeting. *If you act like a child, you will be treated like a child. Embarrass me and I will embarrass you.*

Filip swallowed, turned, and walked out of the room, shoulders back and head held high. Marco laughed as the door shut, just loud enough he was certain Filip would hear him.

He turned to the wall screen. "You don't list Tycho," he said. "Why not?"

Chou looked at his list, then back at Marco. "You want to take Tycho?"

"Why not?" Marco said. "These battles we're fighting now? They're the inners turning us against each other. Tricking us into killing our own. Belter against Belter, and for what? We can never win Earth and Mars over. They'll never see us as people. But Aimee Ostman? Carlos Walker? They should be on our side. Would be, if they weren't still stuck in a past that's

gone, gone, gone. Yeah?”

“You say it,” Chou said, nodding but dour.

“Tycho has always been a jewel of the Belt. A source of our pride and a symbol of our success. It’s why Fred Johnson squatted on it all those years. Now another Earther who thinks he’s the savior of the poor backward Belt. Why should we let James Holden keep what was never his?” Marco grinned and let the syllables drip out of his mouth. “*Tycho Station*. Gather up all the ships we can, and burn there in force before the inners can regroup. We’re faster than them. Smarter. And when we reach Tycho, we will see them rise up to greet us and toss Holden out the airlock, I will guarantee that.”

Lister cleared his throat. “*Rocinante*’s not on Tycho, though.”

Marco frowned. A little stab of confusion and resentment pricked his heart. “What?”

“Los dué ships we sent after Ostman’s ice hauler? *Giambattista*? No transponders, but came close enough they got drive signatures off the escort ship. Esá es la *Rocinante*.”

The room was silent. Marco felt something crawling up the back of his neck. All the years he’d kept quiet track of where Naomi was, what she was doing, and now she and her lover had slipped away without his knowledge. It felt like a threat. Like a trap.

“The *Rocinante*,” he said, speaking each word carefully, “is running escort on Ostman’s old, broken-down ice hauler?”

“Looks like,” Lister said.

Something was wrong with the air mix. Marco wasn’t getting enough oxygen. His heart was beating fast, his breath coming faster.

“Where are they going?”

Chapter Forty-Three: Holden

Inertia was one problem. Location was the other.

The *Giambattista* was a massive ship, hard to bring up to speed and hard to slow down. A testament to the inconvenience of mass and Newton's first law. It was already braking toward the ring gate, pouring out energy and reaction mass in order to bring it to an orbit matching the gate. Between those two datapoints—where it was going and how quickly it was shedding momentum to get there—the fast-attack ships knew within a narrow range of possibilities where they would be and when they would be there.

Holden's calculus was built from unknowns. How many gs could the *Giambattista* endure during a hard brake? How many of the ships she carried in her vast belly would fail under that strain? The cold equations of velocity, energy transfer, and relative motion could draw idealized curves to describe any number of scenarios, but experience added on a permanent and indelible *unless something unexpected happens, and then who the hell knows*.

"Best guess, Alex," Holden said. "What are we looking at?"

Alex rubbed a hand over his thinning hair and made a distressed chuffing sound under his breath. The galley smelled like chamomile tea and cinnamon, but Naomi and Clarissa were both empty-handed. The *Roci's* deceleration was about a g and a half, matching the *Giambattista*. It made Holden feel like he was tired even though he wasn't.

"If I was them," Alex said, "I'd plan to overshoot. Time my braking run so that I'd go by just before that big bastard out there got to the ring. Group both ships together, because there's an attack opportunity during that pass. Drop a shitload of torpedoes that could use my velocity as a boost, hope I got a few good hits in. Once I'd passed, my torpedoes would be fighting against my velocity instead of building on it, so I'd likely save my powder until I could kill off what was left of my speed. Then come back to finish up

anything that survived that first pass.”

“Sounds plausible,” Naomi said. “And what would you do if you were us?”

“Get to the ring as quick as I could,” Alex said, more quickly this time. “Make them hurry to catch up to us so that the loop back took as long as possible. Then use whatever that window was to get Bobbie and her forces in through the gate, let her take over the rail guns, and get our butts into the slow zone so she could splash those bastards when they got back.”

“Going to be unpleasant trying to keep the *Giambattista* alive once they get back,” Clarissa said. “Two of them. One of us. That boat’s a big target.”

“All right,” Holden said. “What about their drive plumes? If they’re braking toward us, how big a threat are they?”

Alex shook his head. “The speeds we’re looking at, if we get in their plume, we’ll be in their laps.”

Clarissa’s voice was small, calm. “If it’s a suicide mission?”

Alex sobered. “Well, ah, then ... Yeah, that would suck.”

“If we break the *Giambattista* with too hard a burn,” Naomi said, “we can still stage the attacks from out here. We’re already unloading the first wave from outside the gate. There’s no reason we can’t launch the second one from here too. The command crew can’t be much larger than the *Canterbury*’s was. We’ll evacuate them on the *Roci* if we have to.”

“Unless whatever we break interferes with us deploying the boats,” Clarissa said. “Then Naomi and I are out there with welding torches trying to pop Bobbie’s stuff loose when the attack ships get back, and everyone has a bad day.” It was weird hearing Amos’ idioms spoken in her voice. The two had spent a lot of time together, though. So maybe it wasn’t.

Holden rubbed his palm across the cool surface of the table. The weight of the moment pressed on his shoulders. “I’ll talk to Bobbie and Amos. They’re there. They can make our case. Cut the deceleration now, go on the float until the last minute, and then burn like hell to brake. Make them chase us.”

“Going to be hard selling that to Belters,” Naomi said. “My people aren’t fans of high g.”

“Alternative being torpedo strikes makes a compelling argument, though.”

Naomi shrugged. “It does.”

After that, the hours stretched. Sleeping would have been a good idea, but it wasn't possible. He hit the gym, pulling against resistance bands until the ache distracted him from the attack ships bearing down on them. But as soon as he stopped, it flooded back in on him. Wondering whether the enemy would target the *Giambattista* because it was the larger target or the *Rocinante* as the bigger threat. If the plan to take Medina would work. If it would work in time. What the Free Navy would do if it worked, if it failed.

If they won and the passage to the colony worlds opened again, what it would mean for the Belters, for Earth, for Mars. What the shape of human history would look like if the Free Navy beat them. Anticipation soured to anxiety and fear, and then impatience and back to anticipation again. Usually, the *Roci* was comfortable as an old shirt. Under the guns this way, he felt closed in. Claustrophobic. He couldn't quite forget, the way he usually could, that they were a bubble of air and metal in an unthinkably huge emptiness.

Naomi found him in their cabin after his exercise. Her hair was tied back, away from her face, and her eyes were calm and serious.

"Was looking for you," she said.

He waved a little gamely. "Present."

"You doing all right?"

"I don't know. Yes?" He held out his hands, a gesture of helplessness. "I don't know why I'm having such a hard time with this. Not like it's the first war I've started."

Her laugh was rueful and warm. She launched across the room, caught onto the handholds where she could look over his shoulder at the monitor. The two enemy ships on approach. The *Giambattista* and the *Roci*. A red field where the braking burn would start. A white line where the *Roci* thought the attack would come. The first attack. Violence reduced to spare and well-presented graphic design.

"You didn't start this one," Naomi said. "Marco did that."

"Maybe," Holden said. "Or maybe Duarte did. Or the protomolecule. Or Earth and Mars over the last couple of centuries of not giving a shit about the Belt. I don't know anymore. I feel like I understand what I have to do in the next ... I don't know. Five minutes? Maybe ten? Then after that, things get muddy."

"Next is enough," Naomi said. "As long as you always see the next step,

you can walk the whole way.”

She put a hand on his shoulder, her palm warm against his skin. He laced his fingers with hers and braced as she pulled herself down beside him. A simple maneuver they’d done a million times before. The long practice of trivial intimacy.

“I keep wondering if this was inevitable,” he said. “There are so many things we could have done differently. Maybe we could have kept this from happening.”

“We you-and-me, or we humanity?”

“I was thinking humanity. But you-and-me too. If you’d killed Marco when you were kids together. If I’d kept my temper and not gotten kicked out of the Navy. If ... I don’t know. If any of the things that got us here hadn’t happened, would none of this be happening?”

“Don’t see how it could.”

On the screen, the two enemy ships ticked closer to them while they shifted—not as quickly—toward the red warning of the hard burn. “I keep thinking it would have, though,” Holden said. “If it wasn’t me or you or Amos or Alex, if it wasn’t the *Roci*, it would be someone or something else. The Belt didn’t get screwed because of you or me. Whatever it was that made the protomolecule didn’t throw it at us because of anything that we’d done.”

“Seeing as we were single cells at the time.”

“Right? The details would be different, but the ... the shape of it all would be the same.”

“That’s the problem with things you can’t do twice,” Naomi said. “You can’t ever know how it would have gone if it had been the other way.”

“No. But you *can* say that if we don’t do something different, it’ll happen again. And again. And again, over and over until something changes the game.”

“Like the protomolecule?”

“It didn’t change anything,” Holden said. “Here we are, still doing all the same things we did before. We’ve got a bigger battleground. Some of the sides have shifted around. But it’s all the crap we’ve been doing since that first guy sharpened a rock.”

Naomi pulled herself closer, tucked her head against his shoulder. Probably people had been doing that since the dawn of time too, just not in

freefall.

“You’ve changed,” she said. “The man I met on the *Canterbury* wouldn’t have said that it was everyone’s business. That whatever anyone did counted.”

“Well. I’ve had really a lot of people shooting at me since then.”

“And you’ve grown up some. It’s all right. I have too. We’re both still doing it. That’s not something you stop. Not until you’re dead.”

“Mm,” Holden said. Then, “So I’m guessing this kind of thing doesn’t bother you?”

“Nature of history? No, it doesn’t.”

“Why not?”

He felt Naomi’s shrug against his body, familiar as if he’d done it himself. “I know what I need to deal with next. I’ve got two attack ships crawling up my ass, ready to kill me and all the people I love most in life. And if they manage it, my evil ex-boyfriend may very well grind all human civilization in the system into a new dark age.”

“Yeah. That guy’s an asshole.”

“Yup.”



They watched it coming, knew it would come. It didn’t make it any less frightening when it came.

Alex put the *Roci* just ahead of the *Giambattista*’s nose, offset enough not to melt her with their exhaust, but close enough to maybe stop the enemy torpedoes before they hit. The two incoming plumes were like stars—fixed and steady. Holden remembered being a boy in Montana, learning to catch a baseball. The way that the ball seemed to float almost motionless when it was coming straight for him. This was the same.

“Status?” Holden said.

“Sixty-three seconds to effective range,” Naomi said. “*Roci*’s watching them.”

Holden breathed out. The captain of the *Giambattista* insisted that her ship wouldn’t suffer more than three and a half gs, so that’s what they were at. The enemy was slowing at a little over eight, but still going so fast that

they would only spend a fraction of a second in range.

“Forty,” Naomi said, and coughed. A painful sound that made Holden aware of the weight on his own throat. Maybe they should have gone on the juice after all. Behind them, the ring gate would have been visible to the naked eye by now. Even a very low-power scope would be showing the weird, almost organic, moving-but-stationary nonmaterial of its frame. Signal was leaking through the bare thousand kilometers of its diameter, distorted like ocean waves seen from beneath—radio, light, all the electromagnetic spectrum, only warped and made strange. And beyond that, the rail guns waiting to kill them all.

“Starting to think this may not have been a great plan,” he said.

“Five seconds. Four ...”

Holden braced. Not that it was going to help, just that he couldn’t keep from doing it. On the external cameras, the enemy drive plumes grew larger, thicker, brighter, and then in a blink, faster than the frame refresh, they were gone and the *Rocinante* bucked hard around him, slamming him into his crash couch like he’d fallen off a ladder. The ship rang like a struck gong, deafening. For a confused second, he thought they’d been thrown around by the enemy’s wake. That they were going to capsize.

The *Roci* steadied. An alarm was sounding, brash and demanding.

“What have we got?” Holden shouted.

“I don’t know,” Clarissa shouted. “I haven’t been looking at this any longer than you. Just ... All right. Looks like we ate a couple PDC rounds or ... No, hold on. That doesn’t make sense.”

The alarm shut off. The silence seemed more ominous. Maybe the shaking hadn’t been the *Roci*’s maneuvering thrusters getting them out of the way. They’d been hit. They might be spewing out their spare air into vacuum.

“‘Doesn’t make sense’ is not good, Clarissa,” he said, trying to make his panic sound cheerful. “Something that made me feel like we weren’t dying would be really nice.”

“Well, we got a little beat up,” Clarissa said. “I thought it was PDCs, but ... No. We took out a torpedo close enough that we caught some debris.”

“They launched four torpedoes at us and two at the *Giambattista*,” Naomi said from behind him. “We got them all, but there was a little damage to both ships. I’m waiting to get a solid report from Amos.”

In that blink, Holden thought. That moment of shaking had been a whole battle too abrupt for a human mind to follow. He wasn't sure if that was amazing or terrifying. Maybe there was room for both.

"Not dying, though," Holden said.

"Not any faster than usual, anyway," Clarissa said. "I'll need to swap out some sensor arrays and plug a couple holes on the outer hull when we get a chance."

"Alex?" Holden said. "What's it look like up there?"

"I got a bloody nose," Alex said. He sounded affronted. Like bloody noses were something you got when you were a kid and beneath his dignity now.

"I'm sorry about that, but I was thinking more about the ships that were trying to kill us?"

"Oh. Right," Alex said, sniffing back the blood. "Like I said, that first window's closed. Anything they throw at us now, we can knock down easy. And it doesn't look like they're changing much about their burn."

"How long does that give us?"

Alex sniffed again. "We'll get to a matching point beside the gate in a little less than an hour. If our little friends do a straight-line burn to come back to us and don't change their burn rate? We'll have six and a half hours. If they loop around so they can come at us from different directions, a little more."

"What's the most?"

"Eight," Alex said. "Best-case scenario, we're going to need to get all our folks through that gate and under protection of our shiny new rail gun artillery inside of eight hours. Seven's more realistic. Six would mean we didn't have to sweat it."

"Amos is saying they got knocked around a little, but only lost some plating in the storage decks and maybe half a dozen boats," Naomi said. "Bobbie's calling it a win, and they're scrambling the first wave."

Between the three and a half gs and the violence of the *Roci's* defense, Holden's jaw and back ached. He couldn't imagine how unpleasant this had to be for Naomi and the Belters in the *Giambattista*. Including the first-wave team that Bobbie was about to lead down the enemy's throat. One wave to take the rail guns, then a second to secure Medina. By then, maybe he'd know what he needed to do next.

If it didn't work out, they'd try to keep the *Giambattista* and the OPA soldiers still on her alive long enough to come up with some other plan.

The ring gate grew larger on the scopes, looming up until they were so close, it dwarfed the ships. A thousand kilometers from one side to the other, and beyond it, the weird nonplace of the slow zone, the other gates, and the ruins of a thirteen-hundred-world galactic empire that humanity aspired to salvage. Naomi was right. It didn't matter whether they were servants of some greater historical movement or individual, disconnected lives suffering the consequences of their own choices. It didn't change what they had to do.

The *Giambattista* reached a minimum in their vector curve and shut down their drive. A few seconds later, the *Roci* did the same, but by then, the sides of the giant ship were already sliding open. In the starlight, the thousands of tiny cheap boats looked like spores being thrown to the wind by a dark fungus, visible more by the starlight they blocked than by any actual color or shape of their own. This close, the ring gate dwarfed them. He couldn't keep from seeing it as a massive milky eye, staring blindly down at a sun that was hardly more than the brightest star among billions.

The connection request came to his monitor. Bobbie Draper. He accepted, and her face appeared on his screen. Her powered armor made her unhelmeted head seem small. Voices behind her spoke in Belter cant so fast that he couldn't make out the words.

"First wave's ready to go," she said. "Permission to deploy?"

"Granted," Holden said. "But, Bobbie? Really, really don't die out there."

"No one lives forever, sir," Bobbie said, "but as long as it doesn't compromise the mission, I'll try to live through it."

"Thanks."

One by one, and then in ragged groups, the small, weak chemical rockets began to ignite. All of them together didn't have the power of the *Roci*'s reactor, but they didn't need it. Their whole lives were the space from the ring gate to the station in the center of the slow zone. For most of them, less than that. And only one of them had Bobbie and Amos and their ground force. As Holden watched, the boats shifted like a flock of starlings, became a single, moving shape on an imaginary, tactical wind, and burned toward the gate.

And then through it.

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Chapter Forty-Four: Roberts

She'd known it was coming. Even before they'd pried the specific information out of Jakulski, she'd known *something* was coming. It was a feeling that came up like a bad dream she couldn't shake. A premonition or just the kind of fear that seeped through anytime she had something important and too clear an imagination about how it would be to lose it. Knowing that the war was coming to Medina was almost a relief. At least she knew in broad strokes what to be afraid of.

The fear had made small changes feel large. When Jakulski brought them the news that their work schedule was shifting, Roberts couldn't keep from interpreting each change like tarot cards. Tracking down the signal drop on the interior of the drum was pushed off for a month, so maybe Captain Samuels thought it wasn't important for defense from the invasion. The retrofit of the water supply for lower g moved up, so maybe they wanted extra capacity ready in case the environmental systems were damaged. They spent a day installing redundant comm lasers so that they could always have a tightbeam line to Montemayor and the rest of Duarte's advisors and guards on the alien station. Everything that she could fit into the idea of fortifying against coming violence became more evidence that her fear was justified; the more evidence she had, the easier it became to see things as further proof.

It wasn't only her, either. The others in her workgroup were all suffering from the same dread. Jakulski was gone more often than not now, not supervising them except to tell them at the start what to do and ask at the end if they'd done it. And when he did come out after shift, he left early without giving any excuses beyond *Things need doing*. Salis was drinking more, showing up for shift hungover and angry and then not wanting to head back to his quarters when the day was done. Vandercaust ... well, ever since the false alarm with the mole, Vandercaust had been a smaller man.

Not in his body, but the way he moved through his life. Careful, amenable, tucking into himself like a snail. Once, just after they'd heard about the ice hauler burning out toward the Sol gate, they'd been in the bar when some young coya, drunk off her ass, had started off shouting about how the colony planets didn't deserve aid or attention. *They don't like being treated that way, they shouldn't have done it to us and They're just as bad as Mars only without the stones to back it and Come back five generations from now and maybe we'll be close to even.* Vandercaust had finished his drink fast and left without saying goodbye. Anything political got his back up now, even if it was something they all agreed with.

And still, Roberts found she needed the company. When the leaks and rumors got bad enough that Captain Samuels had to make an announcement—*Enemy ships associated with OPA factions outside the Free Navy are sending a large cargo ship and escort. We don't know their intentions. The Free Navy has dispatched fighters to back Medina up, but with the fighting so hot in the system, it is a minimum force.*—Roberts was almost relieved. At least they could talk about it all openly now and not get Jakulski's balls in a vice.

When the enemy was on close approach to the far side of the ring, all the work on Medina ground to a halt. There were schedules and lists and work reports, but there were also enemies at the gate. Jakulski didn't show up to give them their daily orders, and even their freedom seemed ominous. They shifted to a bar where the wall screens were set to a local security newsfeed—the latest on the siege of Medina Station as it happened.

Diagrams of the positions of enemy ships and their Free Navy defenders. Analysis of who Aimee Ostman and Carlos Walker were and why they hadn't joined the Free Navy. Confirmation that the escort ship was James Holden's *Rocinante*. Beer. Dried tofu with wasabi powder. The camaraderie of the mob. It felt almost like gathering up to watch football, except their home was the pitch, and loss would mean the deaths of more than only people. The autonomy and freedom the Free Navy promised was balanced on the head of a pin.

"Did they get them?" Salis asked breathlessly. "Did we kill them?"

Roberts reached across the table, grabbing his hand and squeezing, waiting for the feed to update. For fresh information to come through. There wasn't any romance in the gesture. Not even a sexual invitation.

There just wasn't a better way to express hope and fear and oh holy shit all at the same moment. Across the bar, three dozen people—maybe more—stared at the thick, confused images bleeding through the gate. If it hadn't been a live image, it could have gotten cleaned up almost to where the gate's weirdness didn't show at all. But jagged and bent right now was better than clear as nothing later on.

A flash of the *Rocinante*, blooming fire-bright. The whole room took in its breath. Waited. But when the glow faded, the enemy was still there. Salis spat out an obscenity and let her hand go. On the feed, the Free Navy attack ships were already gone, carried off into the black by their own rush to get to the *Giambattista* and *Rocinante* before they'd reached the gate. For all the fucking good it had done.

"Es bien, es bien, yeah?" Vandercaust said. "Took a shot, bruised them. Make them rush is the thing. Keep them from going slow, being careful."

"You don't know what they've got on that ship," Roberts said. "Could be anything."

Vandercaust nodded, took a bit of tofu between his finger and thumb and squeezed it until it cracked. "Whatever it is, we'll put rail gun rounds through it until it's dust." He held out his green-powdered thumb like he was demonstrating the idea of dust. She nodded so tight and fast it was more like rocking back and forth.

"Dui," she said, wanting to believe it. Needing to. On the feed, the looming mass of the ice hauler had come to a relative stop on the far side of the gate and just off to the side where the rail guns couldn't fire through at it. So they knew that the defenses were there and to keep their heads down. That was too bad.

"What are they doing?" Salis said, not expecting an answer. In the feed, a hundred faint new stars bloomed around the ice hauler, wavering and inconstant. Then a thousand. Then double that. Roberts felt some part of herself step back, shock pulling her away from herself.

"Mé scopar," she breathed. "Are those *drive plumes*?"

The dots of light surged, all moving at once. A swarm of bright wasps, swirling, curving, and passing through the ring gate and out into their space. Her space. Here and there, a light flickered and died, one of the thousands sputtering and dying, but most flowed around each other, flight systems taking in the situation—their position, the alien station, Medina, the rings.

There were safe spaces where the rail guns wouldn't fire. Not behind cover, because apart from Medina itself there was nothing in the slow zone to hide behind. But the rail gun rounds wouldn't stop once they passed through the tiny attacking ships. Any of the enemy that could put themselves between the end of a rail gun and the ring of a gate or Medina itself would be safe. At least until the PDC and torpedoes of Medina Station could reach it. Like slivers of iron showing a magnetic field, the swarm burned for the lines defined by geometry and tactics. Or, most of them, anyway. The few that had failed spun helplessly in the void, threatening no one. And others ...

"Those fast-movers aren't ships," Salis said. "Those are torpedoes."

Roberts' hand terminal alerted in the same moment as Vandercaust's and Salis'. She was the first to pull hers from her pocket. The screen was red-bannered. The battle alert. She acknowledged, reporting her position. The assignment put her in a floating damage-control team. Jakulski and the rest of the higher powers in technical were waiting to see where they were needed. Where the damage came. It was worse than a hard assignment because her blood was fizzing with the need to flee or fight, and there was nowhere to go. If she could have run to a post, she'd have been able to pretend that she was doing something. That she could affect the wave of destruction flying toward her.

"Ah!" Vandercaust said. "There we go!"

On the wall screen, the rail guns had opened up. At first, it was only motion, the emplaced barrels—her barrels, the ones she'd put in their housings—quivering. Then the newsfeed overlaid the paths of the rounds, bright lines that vanished as quickly as they appeared, and with each flicker one of the enemy died. Roberts felt her jaw starting to ache from clenching it, but she couldn't relax. Salis grunted, his expression dismayed.

"Que?" Roberts asked.

"Wish we weren't doing, that is all," he said.

"Doing what?"

He gestured to the wall screen with his chin. "Sending stuff out past the gates. To where it goes away."

She knew what he meant. The starless nothing—not even space—on the other side of the gates was eerie when you thought about it too much. Matter and energy could be converted into each other, but not destroyed. So

when something that went out beyond the sphere of the slow zone seemed to vanish, it had to go somewhere or be changed into something. But no one knew what.

“No option,” she said. “Esá coyos making us.”

“Yeah, it’s only ...”

Long, terrible minutes stretched. Roberts fell into something half panic and half trance. The lines flashed on the feed. Another dead enemy. Another slug of tungsten accelerated out of reality and into the blackness stranger than space. Now that she saw it through Salis’ eyes, it made her nervous too. It was so easy to forget the profound strangeness all around them. They lived there, it was their home, so of course they had to defend it. But it was also a mystery they lived inside.

The timelessness of her attention and focus broke as a shudder passed through the incoming swarm, and her heart doubled its beat. A swirling motion that went through the drive plumes even as they winked out. The muttering in the room got louder.

“How fast they *burning*?” Vandercaust said, awe in his voice. He switched his hand terminal from the alert screen to a tracking program, streaming the data into it. “Esá can’t have crew on. Jelly and smash if they were, juice or no juice.”

Medina shuddered. The vibration was small but unmistakable. The first of the enemy were inside effective range. On the feed, the flicker of the rail guns was joined by slower, sweeping arcs of PDC fire, the bright pinpoints of Medina’s own torpedoes. Roberts found herself muttering curses like they were prayer, and didn’t know how long she’d been doing it. The flickers of enemy drive plumes began to thicken and coalesce into a single bright shaft, drawing a line between the alien station and Medina.

“They’re getting between us,” she said. “They got to stop them, they’re getting between us. They’re going to get here. They’re going to board us.”

“No one on them to board us,” Vandercaust said again. “No es ships, those. Fists with engines to push them is all. Rams.”

“We’re still picking them off,” Salis said. “Look, rail guns still firing.”

It was true. The shots were careful, dangerous. They slid past Medina’s drum so close Roberts imagined she heard them hiss on the way past. But the enemy kept dying, exploding into scrap and vapor. The wave of enemy torpedoes was already gone, turned to debris and bad intentions. And the

ships, closer and closer but fewer every minute.

“We’re taking hits,” Vandercaust said, glowering into his hand terminal.

Roberts pulled up her own terminal. Pressure loss on the outermost layers of the drum. Not everywhere, but scattered. A hall here, a warehouse there. A water reservoir was holed, throwing mist and ice out in a pinwheel as the drum spun it away. The Mormons had built the outer parts of the drum thick against the hard radiation of space. But no one was dying. Not yet.

“How are they hitting us?”

“Dead scraps,” Salis said. “It’s the debris from the torpedoes. It’s nothing.”

It might have been true that it was only debris, but it wasn’t nothing. As she watched, another alert opened, was flagged, assigned out. Her team wasn’t called yet. Wouldn’t be, she thought, until the bombardment stopped or something important enough to be worth risking all three of their lives took a hit. Around them, the other people cheered, and she looked up to see a spreading sphere in among the fading swarm. They got a big one, and the detonation had been enough to knock out a few of its nearest neighbors.

The thousands of wasps were fewer now. Two, maybe three hundred, and fading by the moment. The ones there were diving hard for Medina, dodging arcs of PDC fire, fleeing from the torpedo strikes, slipping outside their corridor of safety and being ripped apart by the rail guns. As the glittering lights fell to black, Roberts felt something in her gut and her throat. The laughter came out as barely a chuckle, but warm and full as tears, and grew to something deep.

They had come to take Medina, and they were failing. Yes, the station was taking its hits. Yes, they would be bloodied. But they would not fall. Medina was Free Navy now, and it would be Free Navy forever. Salis was grinning too. All around them, cheers started to go up with every rail-gun strike that plucked away another invader. Of them all, only Vandercaust seemed uncertain.

“Que sa?” Roberts asked him. “Visé like you’re trying to rub your asshole with your elbow.”

Vandercaust shook his head. Another flicker from the rail guns, another light gone out.

“Keep drifting, them,” Vandercaust said. “Visé. They’re in the shadow,

yeah? Station's far enough away the rail guns can cover them and us with the same thumbnail. But then they ... drift. Get where the rail guns can pick them off. What for they *drifting*?"

"Who cares, as long as they all die?" Salis said around a mouthful of grinning.

"Maybe they want to get killed," Roberts said. Joking. She'd only been joking.

The words hung there, floating over the table like smoke pooling when the luck was about to turn. She shifted her attention back to the screen, her joy and relief gone like they'd never been there. Cold washed her lungs and heart, a totally different fear than the tenseness and anxiety of the run-up. Another ship that should have died under Medina's PDCs or torpedoes died to a rail gun instead.

"What am I looking at, Vandercaust?" Roberts said, her voice hard but trembling. Vandercaust didn't answer, but hunched over his hand terminal, working it furiously with his thick, workman's fingers.

Another ship. Another. Less than a hundred of the enemy left, and they were peeling away like a flower blooming. Not even trying to keep course for Medina. All around, the room erupted in shouts and celebration. Over the cacophony, she barely heard Vandercaust say *Shit*.

She asked the question with her hand, and he passed the hand terminal to her. Already, the start of the battle looked like something out of history. The thousands of drive plumes flooding through the ring gate. Most—almost all—falling hard toward Medina.

Almost all. But a few failed. Their drives stuttering. Maneuvering thrusters blinking, throwing them into rough, cartwheeling spins. She remembered seeing them, discounting them. The enemy was so many, so cobbled together, so among the thousands, there were a few malfunctions. It only meant a handful they didn't have to worry about.

Except Vandercaust had flagged one. It glowed blue on his display as the battle proceeded. The rail guns turned toward the torpedoes that threatened Medina. The rounds spitting out. The enemy dying. But not the little green malfunction. It drifted, tumbling and dead.

Until it didn't.

When its drive burst back into life, it wasn't flying for Medina or retreating back for the Sol gate. It darted toward the alien sphere. The blue,

faintly glowing artifact at the center of the slow zone where all their guns were placed. Roberts was trembling so hard now that the green dot seemed to dance in her hand, leaving bright traces behind it. A jittering afterimage of how they'd been tricked. Thousands of boats and torpedoes arcing through the vacuum like a magician's gesture meant only to pull the eye. And God damn, but it had worked.

She handed back the hand terminal, plucked up her own, put in an emergency connection request to Jakulski. Every second he didn't answer felt like another clod of dirt landing on her coffin. When he did appear, he was in the administration offices, outside the drum and on the float. His sated grin told her that even Captain Samuels hadn't figured it out yet.

"Que hast, Roberts?" Jakulski said, and for a moment, she couldn't talk. The longing to be in the world Jakulski and all the others around here were in—the world where they'd won—was a lump in her throat. The words wouldn't fit past it.

And then they did.

"Get a tightbeam to Mondragon," she said.

"Who?"

"No. Shit. Montemayor. Whatever la coyo la's name is. Duarte's people. Warn him. Warn all of them."

Jakulski's brow furrowed. He leaned closer to the camera, though where he was there was no pull to lean into. "No savvy me," he said.

"Consolidated-fleet jodidas just landed on the *other* station. They were never after Medina. They were coming for the rail guns."

Chapter Forty-Five: Bobbie

Regret coming along?” Bobbie asked, shouting over the noise of the boat.

Amos, across from her, shrugged and shouted back. “Nah. It’s all right if the cap and Peaches get a little time together. Helps ’em get used to each other. Besides, this is fun too.”

“Only if we win.”

“That is more fun than losing,” he said, and she laughed.

The boat was crap.

Once, it had been a cargo container. Not a real one either, built to standards for a mech or an automated dock to handle along with thousands of others with the same dimensions and handholds and doors. This had been a custom job, cobbled together in the Belt out of equal parts scrap and ingenuity. The second hull was added later, the welds still bright at the corners. The crash couches weren’t actual couches, just thick sheets of gel glued to the walls with straps like climbing harnesses to hold their bodies against it. Add to that the fact that they had no active sensors, that they were on the tumble, that the dozen men and women with them were indifferently trained, that probably more than half of them had been involved in conspiracies against Mars and Earth in the not so distant past, that their weapons were old and their armor a collection from half a dozen different sources. And, of course, that if the enemy rail guns took notice of them, the first warning they’d have was that they were all dead. Bobbie should have been in a panic.

She felt like she’d just lowered herself into a warm bath. The anxious gabble of the soldiers might be in the mishmash polyglot of the Belt. She might only be able to follow half of it. She knew what they were saying. Antinausea meds kept the complex spinning of the boat from turning even less pleasant, and their bitter aftertaste was like coming back to a house she’d lived in when she was young. One rich with good memories and

familiar places. She liked the *Rocinante* as much as anyplace she'd ever been since Ganymede. They were good people, and even in a weird way they were her friends now. The soldiers all around her weren't and would never be that. They were her command, and even if it was only for a moment, she felt like she was exactly where she belonged.

Her suit speakers chirped. Communications were the one active thing she'd decided would be worth the risk. Now it was time to find out if that had been a good call. She accepted the connection with her chin.

A burst of static, followed by a weird fluting sound, like wind blowing across the mouth of a bottle, static again, and then Holden's anxious voice. "Bobbie? How's it going in there?"

"Five by five," she said, checking the exterior cameras to make sure that was true. The blue glow of the alien station rose up from the bottom of her visual field and curved off to the left. A glittering star field of rockets. A glimpse of Medina Station looking smaller than a beer can. The proximity readings had a dual countdown: one for the moment they passed inside the arc of the rail gun, the other for when they'd slam into the station itself. They were both spooling down quickly. "We'll be on the surface in ... three minutes."

"Are the troops ready?"

Bobbie chuckled and added the group channel in. "Hey. You assholes ready to do this?"

The cheer that came through maxed out the speaker. She slid back to the connection to the *Rocinante*.

"Good answer," Holden said, but tightly. The fluting sound again. Distortion from the ring. She hadn't felt anything moving through it. No discontinuity or sense of vertigo. It did manage to fuck with sensors and comms, though.

"The mission's on track, sir," she said. "We'll get control of the guns and get you in here."

"Alex is saying the attack ships have vectored past zero. They're heading back in our direction now."

"We'll do it quickly," Bobbie said.

"I know," Holden said. "Sorry. Good hunting."

"Thank you," Bobbie said, and the connection dropped, the comm indicator going to red. She went back to the exterior cameras, switched to a

corrected view. The image was steady this way, the tumble of the boat only showing in three jagged blind spots that sped through it like cartoon bats. There were fewer of the decoy boats now, but not none. And they'd made it in close enough that the station was blocking all but two of the rail guns. As long as those two didn't decide they were as interesting as the torpedoes and empty landing craft speeding toward Medina, they'd be fine. Except ...

She grabbed the image, enlarged it. There at the base of the nearest rail gun emplacement, a dozen meters from the massive sky-pointing gun, a low, gray structure. Round as a coin, and sloped so that no matter what angle debris or outgassing struck it from, it would be pressed more firmly in place. It was a design she knew inside and out. She waited for the fear to come, but all that showed up was a grim kind of determination.

"Amos," she shouted, sending him a copy of the image. "Take a look at this."

The big man looked at his hand terminal. "Huh," he said. "Well, that complicates things."

She popped the group channel open.

"New information. The intelligence we had that the rail guns weren't guarded may have been faulty. I'm looking at an MCRN-design troop bunker right now. If there's one, there may be others."

A chorus of alarm and regret. Bobbie switched the channel controls, killing all the mics but hers.

"No whining. We knew this was a possibility. If you don't want to participate, feel free to leave now. Otherwise, check your seals and weapons and be ready for a fight when we hit surface. Our job is to get control of those guns."

She enabled their mics in time to hear a ragged chorus of *yes sirs* and one woman's voice calling her a bitch. If there'd been time for a lesson in discipline, Bobbie might not have ignored it, but hey. It was a high-stress environment and the OPA soldiers weren't marines. She'd work with what she had.

Following her own advice, she ran a weapons check. Her arm-mounted Gatling gun read a full mag, two thousand rounds of mixed armor piercing and high explosive. A single-use rocket launcher was hooked to a hard point on her back, and slaved to her suit's targeting laser. Powered armor at full charge. She didn't doubt that she was the single most dangerous thing

on their little landing craft. That meant she'd be taking point.

The boat informed her that they'd passed beneath the rail gun emplacement's range. The computer started the maneuvering thrusters on their correction burns to stop the tumble and lit the main drive. The braking burn pressed her hard into the gel. Her vision started to tunnel, and she had to remind herself to tense her legs and arms, force the blood out of her muscles and into her brain. They still called it the slow zone, but the only actual speed limit there now was not getting crushed to death by the energy of stopping.

The boat hit hard, bounced, and hit again. Before it had stopped sliding, Bobbie had pulled her straps off and hit the button that blew the door completely off the ship. They wouldn't be using it to leave, no matter how things turned out. The landscape outside was as surreal as something in a dream. A plain of blue purer than a Terran sky, featureless and glowing. It cast shadows up across the ship, across her soldiers. Everyone's legs and crotches bright, their faces and shoulders in darkness.

A thick band of metal-and-ceramic almost a meter high stretched out ahead of her like a low wall, disappearing over a much-too-close horizon. The rail gun, its base hidden by the station's curve, rose up toward an eerie starless sky. She could hear the throb of its firing as static on her radio, feel it like a change in the air pressure or a sickness just coming on.

Bobbie had seen video feeds from the slow zone. She hadn't been prepared for her own sheer animal rebellion at how uncanny it was. Even in the most designed architectural spaces she'd seen—Epping Cathedral on Mars, the UN building on Earth—there was a sense of nature. The station and the ring gates out beyond it weren't like that. They were like a ship, but unthinkably huge. It was that combination of size and artificiality that brought the hair up on the back of her neck.

There wasn't time for it now.

"We've got no cover," she barked. "Spread out. Make it hard for the bastards to get us all. Now! Go!"

They jetted forward in a broken line, their suit thrusters more than enough to defy the barely perceptible gravity of the eerie blue sphere. Good tactics, moving in a hard to predict ragged line like that, even if it came more from a lack of discipline than from a plan. Ahead of them, a dark line on the horizon. A second wall to match the first, converging at the rail gun.

Just beyond it would be the low blister of the bunker. She could hope they hadn't noticed her make landfall. That she could get her engineers to the base of the rail gun and cut into the control systems before the enemy knew she was there ...

"Heads up," Amos called.

The first enemy fire came when they were still twenty meters from the corner where the walls converged. Enemy troops in what looked like Martian light armor crouched low to use the wall as cover, aiming down at them. Bobbie's heart sank. The enemy knew she was there, and were in position. Charging the walls, getting to the base of the rail gun. They'd be killed before they managed it.

"Fall back," she snapped, then squeezed off a few hundred rounds along the top of the wall. The faces peering over disappeared. Some dead, some ducking, no way to know how many of each yet. The OPA soldiers followed orders, though. No one tried to stay behind and play the hero. The only cover she could be sure of was the curve of the station itself. Bullets flew past her. Where they struck the station, the blue showed streaks of yellow, bright as sparks that faded slowly back to blue. The rail gun was still spitting.

Once the station's curve had hidden the far wall, she jetted to a stop near the boat they'd landed in, and floated up until just the very top of the wall was visible above the curve of the station. She zoomed in, setting the optics to a high-contrast false color that would make any movement stand out like neon. Soon enough a shape moved. Someone emboldened to poke their head up for a quick look. She fixed on it, fired. It disappeared. Dead or ducking? No way to tell, that damned wall of metal in the way. The curve of the station protected her, but it also protected them. The other Martians. The ones, she was certain, who'd betrayed their world and armed the Free Navy. Was it so much to ask that one of them would get careless and come close?

Amos followed her lead without being told, and the others came behind him, hauling themselves up well behind her where the enemy rounds didn't reach and then crawling forward. The steel curve the enemy had looped around the station was wider than it was thick—eight meters across at least—plenty of room to lie on. They could move forward, push the enemy back centimeter by centimeter. Unless they were themselves pushed back. Unless the traitorous Martians had a boat of their own that could skim overhead

and lay them all to waste.

She gestured to keep their eyes forward and tried opening a connection to the *Rocinante*. The static seemed thicker now, ticking along in time with the rail gun fire. But then the weird fluting sound and Holden on the other side of it like she was seeing him through a veil.

“How’s it going there, Bobbie?” he asked.

“It’s shit,” she said. “We’re encountering well-armed resistance in a fortified position.”

“All right. How long is it going to take you to get past them? I’m only asking because we’re looking at those fast-attack ships getting back here in a little under two hours, and it would be really great if we weren’t here when they did.”

“That’s going to be difficult, sir,” Bobbie said. The flickers of muzzle flash told her that someone on the enemy side had tried taking a shot, but they were gone again by the time she looked. “In fact we could use a little air support.”

“Don’t know how we do that,” Holden said.

Naomi broke in on the line. “We’ve lost essentially all of the decoy fleet. Anything still flying would be chewed to kibble before it got to you.”

“All right,” Bobbie said. “I’m open to suggestion at this point.”

Amos waved at her and pointed forward, toward the shifting pillar of the rail gun. She switched to a private connection with him.

“What about the power source?” he said. “These rail guns take a lot of energy to drive them and more to cool them off. And they’ve been going nonstop since we came through the gate. They’ve got to have a fusion reactor somewhere supplying the power. Maybe something salvaged off a ship. Maybe a couple truck-backs.”

“Where would I find it?” Bobbie asked.

“If it was me, I’d put it right under whichever one of those surrogate cocks they figured was least likely to get shot at. Or they could all have their own.”

She switched back to the *Rocinante*.

“What’s going on?” Holden said. “Is Amos okay?”

“We’ve got something. I’ll report back,” Bobbie said, and dropped the connection. She waved the soldiers forward, switched to the group channel. “Hold this ground. Keep their eyes and attention here.”

“Sa sa,” one of them said. She didn’t know which. “How long we need to keep it?”

“Until I get back,” she said. *Or for the rest of our lives*, she added silently as she burned back toward the fallen boat.

The door had been blown completely off, and the hull was dinged to shit where they’d slammed it into the station. But she didn’t need it to be pretty. She just needed it to fly, and it could still do that, at least for a little while. When she lifted away from the surface of the station, a few of the enemy took shots at her. Pointless with normal arms. The hulls might be cheap-ass crap, but they were cheap-ass crap meant to live through micrometeor strikes. The roar of the engine was just a vibration in her suit. She was leaving her people behind, and it killed her a little bit to do it. But it was the right call. There wasn’t time to hesitate.

The station curve was so tight, she had to work to stay tucked in close to it. The rail guns knew about her now. If she poked her head up, they’d chop it off. She thumbed on the full sensor array as she sped, touring the station as quickly as she could. They’d circled the station like three belts around a basketball, a rail gun placed wherever the steel bands intersected. It wasn’t hard to find them. Each of them was radiating heat as quickly as it could, maxing out the IR sensors in a way she’d never seen. But one—the one opposite the Sol gate—looked a bit hotter. If there was a single main reactor, that was her best bet. She set the little boat’s course, overrode the proximity shutoff, and as soon as she felt it duck down in its final kamikaze burst, she undid her straps and jumped for the airlock.

If it had been a real drive, the plume would have killed her. Instead, every temperature alarm on her armor went off at once. Her faceplate went opaque. A seal in her arm popped, sucking the skin around her elbow painfully until the secondary inflated and pressed down. For one terrifying second, she drifted above the station, blind and vulnerable. When vision returned, she could see the white bubble of the enemy bunker, and the twinkle of their muzzles as they fired. Bobbie painted the bunker with her targeting laser and launched the rocket on her back while at the same time firing her suit’s thrusters toward the surface as fast as they’d take her. She hit the surface of the station harder than she’d meant to, jarring her teeth hard enough she tasted blood. There was one bright flash as the rocket detonated, but it was quickly overwhelmed by the second flash of their

landing boat slamming into the rail gun's reactor.

Her faceplate went opaque again, but instead of the midnight black she'd suffered in the fire of the drive plume, it glowed a mottled brown. The radiation monitor flashed a red trefoil alert at her. But what fed her raw, animal panic was the wind. A thin, fast whistle of gas rushed past her, pushed her off from the surface.

When, seconds later, the faceplate cleared, a glowing cloud was expanding out from just beyond the horizon, a nebula slowly going dark. The surface of the station wasn't blue, but an angry acid green.

Oh, Bobbie thought as the station began to strobe green to white to black to green again. *This might have been a really, really bad idea.*

To her left and right, the steel bands around the station were wrong. At first, she wasn't sure how, but then she made out the gap between the steel and the surface, like a ring a size too large for the finger it was on. She switched to magnetic and IR, but they'd both burned out in the backslash from the reactor failure. The station shifted slowly back toward blue. She had the irrational sense that it was aware of her. That she'd annoyed it, and had its attention. She used the suit's thruster and the thin microgravity drift to pull herself back down to the surface, half expecting it to grab her and haul her inside to be punished, but it didn't.

Her radio was hardened enough to work. "This is Sergeant Draper," she said. "Is the rail gun still firing?"

"THE FUCK DID YOU DO?" a man's voice screamed, high and frightened. She cut off all their mics.

"That's what I'm asking, soldier," she said, then switched over to private. "Amos?"

"Don't know what you did, Babs, but it fucked things up in all the best ways. Rail gun looks powered down, the few remaining assholes are pulling back toward assholeville, and I think these metal bands that everything's stuck to are moving a little."

"Yeah, I may have popped those loose."

"Impressive," Amos said. "Hey, look, I got to go shoot somebody."

"No problem," she said, and opened the channel to the *Rocinante*. "Okay. You guys still out there?"

"Bad guys are getting really, really close," Holden said. "Tell me you have good news."

“I have good news,” Bobbie said. “You can come through the ring. In fact, if you could get over here and get us some air support, it would be much appreciated.”

There was a general whooping, made strange and uneasy by the interference of the ring. Was it her imagination that it was louder now?

“You got them?” Holden said, and she could hear the grin on his face. “You took the rail guns? We control them?”

Her suit sensors showed the wall of steel nearest her was starting to shift. Just a few centimeters, but there was definitely movement. It was broken. It was all broken. The rail guns weren’t going to defend anyone anytime soon.

“We don’t,” she said. “But at least no one does.”

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Chapter Forty-Six: Holden

You know what I'd like?" Alex yelled down from the cockpit.

"If we could get out of here?" Holden yelled back.

"If we could get out of here. At this rate we're going to be sitting here with our jumpsuits around our ankles when the bad guys get back," Alex said. "There's a reason they don't call those things *slow-attack ships*."

Even though Naomi was strapped into the couch beside Holden's, she answered over the headsets so she at least wasn't shouting about it. "The *Giambattista*'s a big ship, Alex. You're just spoiled because you haven't had to drive a cow like that in years."

"Shit," Alex said. "I could have spun the *Canterbury* around in half the time this is taking."

Naomi's sigh was as close as she was going to get to agreeing with them. "Well, you were good at your job."

On the screen, the *Giambattista* slid slowly sideways toward the ring gate. The damage from the attack ships' first run had done something to unbalance the maneuvering thrusters, so a lot of the piloting involved rotating the ship and then waiting until the working thrusters spun into the right position to fire. The plumes of the returning attack ships were already visible. It wouldn't be long before the torpedo barrage would kick in again, unless the Free Navy was going for a wait-till-you-see-the-whites-of-their-eyes approach. The enemy had split, curving back toward them in an almost hundred-degree spread. It wasn't quite as bad as it could have been. If they'd taken the time to bring their attacks from opposite directions, defending the *Giambattista* with the *Roci* would have been almost impossible. But it would also have taken enough time to play the vectors and get in position that the *Giambattista* would have cleared the ring gate before they arrived. It was like they were all being forced to find a min/max point in a complex curve of inertia, acceleration, and a lot of dead people.

The *Giambattista*'s main drive fired, the plume dwarfing the ship, and Alex crowed in celebration.

"About time," Naomi said. "I'm matching course. We'll be through in twenty minutes."

Holden opened a connection to Bobbie. The seconds stretched out long enough that he started to feel his gut tighten. The connection came through, dropped, then reestablished just as Naomi said, "One of them's burning to pass through the gate with us." He'd get right back to that.

"We're looking at twenty minutes to get through the gate. Where do you stand?"

The weird interference of the gates made her reply thick and creepy. She was breathing hard, and until there were words with it, he was picturing her gut-shot and on the float. Or drifting down onto the surface of the alien station. He was reaching to switch over to Amos when she spoke.

"Amos's holding position against the enemy," she said. "I'm almost back to them. Suit ran out of propellant mass, so I'm hoofing it with the mag boots."

"You're running back to the fight?"

"Well, call it a fast shuffle," Bobbie said between breaths, "but it's fine. They put in. A big metal road. Goes right to 'em."

"Okay. We'll get some backup to you as soon as we can. Just don't get killed before we get there."

"No promises, sir," Bobbie said, and he would have sworn from her voice she was smiling when she said it. A blast of static, and the connection dropped.

"Okay," Holden said. "What have we got?"

"They're both shooting at us," Naomi said.

"You sound calm about that."

She looked over at him. Her smile was sudden and bright and made his heart ache a little bit. "It's all Hail Mary bullshit. It's not even an attack so much as an opportunity to let us screw up."

"Okay. So, not worried about that. What are we worried about?"

Naomi flipped the drive analysis of their pursuers over to his monitor. The nearer of the ships had altered its path, and the projected curve put them through the ring and into the slow zone five minutes after the *Roci* and *Giambattista* made the transit. They weren't breaking off. That was too bad.

“Do we have a plan for dealing with that?”

Alex answered over the ship comm. “I’d vote for shooting them.” And a moment later, Clarissa, “Seconded.”

Holden nodded to himself. It still felt weird hearing her. Maybe it always would.

“Okay, let’s lay in a targeting solution.”

“Did it while you were talking to Bobbie,” Naomi said.

The PDCs chattered for a moment, then went silent. Cleaning up the Hail Mary attacks. Holden rubbed his hands on his thighs. Tapped his fingers together. Pulled up the tactical to see the ring and the alien station, Medina and the fast-attack ships.

“We’ll have enough to defend everything even if both ships follow us in, right?”

“Hush,” Naomi said.

Looking through the exterior cameras, the ring seemed to wipe away the stars as they passed through it. Alex did a short, hard braking burn, turning their nose toward the gate and the narrowing circle of stars beyond it. The *Giambattista* twisted and burned and twisted again, its remaining hatches opening. Pinpoint drive plumes streaked out from it, less than fireflies compared with the wide, glowing burst of the hauler’s Epstein drive. Holden watched as a handful, and then a dozen, and then a hundred poured down toward Medina. The OPA coming to finish the job. The remaining landing boats spread out, a wide, diffuse target. At this distance, Medina’s PDCs were useless, and the *Roci* could probably take out any torpedoes. But even if they did fire, they’d only take out a handful of soldiers and leave an army still behind.

He tried opening a tightbeam to the incoming attack ship, but the interference from the ring was too thick, so he switched to broadcast. “Attention incoming attack ship,” he said. Naomi looked over at him, a question in her eyes. Not concern or worry, though. She trusted him. “This is James Holden of the *Rocinante*. Please break off your approach. We don’t have to do it this way.”

He waited. The tactical display was thinner than it had been. All they knew of what was happening in the solar system was what leaked through the gate. The Free Navy’s attack ship didn’t answer, but dove toward them.

“He ain’t thinking this through, Hoss,” Alex shouted down. “What do

you want me to do?”

“Give them a chance,” Holden said.

“And if they don’t take it?”

“Then they don’t,” Holden said.

The ring grew smaller as they fell away from it, like looking up at the circle of a well from down in the water. The attack ship was braking hard toward the ring. Just as the first of the *Giambattista*’s second-wave ships were about to reach Medina and the alien station, the attack ship passed through the ring, launched a half dozen torpedoes, and exploded in a star-bright failure of their drive’s magnetic bottle when Alex fired the *Roci*’s rail gun through it. Holden watched in silence as the expanding cloud of gas that had been a ship full of men and women spread out and began to fade.

He tried to feel some sense of victory in it, but mostly it just seemed absurd. The slow zone, the gates, even the merely human ships that had carried them out so far. They were miracles. The universe was filled with mysteries and beauty and awe, and all that they could manage to do with it was this. Chase each other down and see who was the faster draw.

Everything in the slow zone—the *Giambattista*, its cloud of attack boats, Medina Station, the *Rocinante*—seemed to pause for a moment. A connection request from Bobbie interrupted him, and he accepted it.

“We’re secure down here,” Bobbie said. She was still breathing hard. “Enemy has surrendered.”

“We took them alive?”

“Some of them,” Amos said.

“They put up a hell of a fight, even after it was hopeless,” Bobbie said. “We lost some too.”

“I’m sorry,” Holden said, and was a little surprised to notice how much that was true. Not just something you said at times like this. “I wish there’d been another way.”

“Yes, sir,” Bobbie said. “I’m going to oversee putting the prisoners in a transport. But there’s something you should know.”

“Yes?”

“These aren’t Free Navy down here. The people defending the rail gun network were Martian.”

Holden let that sink in. “The ones from the coup? Duarte’s people?”

“They’re not saying anything, but that’s my assumption. This could be

important.”

“See they’re kept safe and treated well,” Holden said.

“Already on it,” Bobbie said and dropped the connection.

Holden shifted his monitor to the exterior cameras and shifted the view until he could see the *Giambattista*, the alien station, and—far enough away that it hardly seemed like more than a shaving of metal, invisible without the *Roci* enhancing it—Medina Station. He folded a hand over his mouth, turned on identification markers for all the landing skiffs and jerry-rigged boats, watched the display vanish under the cloud of pale green text, turned them off again and stared into the blackness. His eyes felt gritty. It was like all the anxiety and tension that he’d built up during the burn out to the ring had collapsed. Turned into something else.

“You all right?” Naomi asked.

“I was thinking about Fred,” he said. “This? It’s what he did. Lead armies. Take stations. This is what his life was like.”

“This is what he retired from,” Naomi said. “When he decided to start trying to get people to talk things out instead of shooting people, this is what he left behind.”

“Well, let’s see how that works,” he said. He set up the camera, considered himself on his screen, and ran his fingers through his hair until he looked a little better. Still worn-out. Still tired. But better. He set the system to broadcast.

“Medina Station. This is James Holden of the *Rocinante*. We’re here to take administration of the station and the slow zone and the gates back from the Free Navy. If you really want, we can spend a while shooting your PDCs and torpedo arrays until they don’t work and then land all these boats. We’ve got a lot of people with guns. I figure you do too. We could all kill a bunch more of each other, but I’d really prefer that we do this without losing anyone else. Surrender, lay down arms, and I promise humane treatment for the Free Navy’s command structure and any other prisoners.”

He tried to think of something else. Something more. A sweeping speech about how they were all one species after all, and that they could shrug off the weight of history if they chose to. They could all come together and make something new, and all it would really take was doing it. But all the words he could think of sounded false and unconvincing in his mind, so he cut the feed instead and waited to see what happened.

Naomi slipped out of her crash couch, floated to the lift and down. She came back a few minutes later with a bulb of tea. Slipped back into her couch. Waited. If it went on much longer, Holden knew he'd have to launch the attack. The boats weren't built for much more than scooting from one ship to another. They'd start running out of air and fuel before long. But maybe a few minutes more ...

The response came. Clear, unencrypted radio signal, as open as his demand for surrender had been. The woman in the Free Navy uniform was on the float in a very familiar room. The religious images on the wall behind her were like symbols from a recurring dream about violence and blood and loss.

Only maybe this time would be different.

"Captain Holden. I am Captain Christina Huang Samuels of the Free Navy. I will accept the terms of your surrender on the condition that you guarantee the safety and humane treatment of my people. We reserve the right to record and broadcast your boarding action to assure that all of humanity will bear witness to your behavior. I do this out of necessity and loyalty to my people. The Free Navy is the military arm of the people of the Belt, and I will not sacrifice the lives of my people or the unaffiliated civilians of Medina Station when there is no profit to be had from it. But I myself will stand now and forever against the tyranny of the inner planets and their exploitation and slow genocide of my people."

She saluted the camera and the message ended. Holden sighed, started up his broadcast again.

"Sounds good," he said. "We'll be right over." He killed the broadcast.

"Seriously?" Alex called from above. "'Sounds good, we'll be right over'?"

"I may kind of suck at this job," Holden called back.

The voice over the ship's comm was Clarissa's: "I thought it was sweet."



The fall of Medina Station took twenty hours from the first OPA ships docking to the last Free Navy operative being locked in a cell. Medina's brig wasn't anywhere near big enough, so it was reserved for the higher

officials—the command staff, the department heads, the security officers and agents. The others—mostly technicians and maintenance—were confined to their quarters with the doors locked by the station system. Which meant, in the end, by Holden. He couldn't help feeling like he'd just sent a thousand people to their rooms to really *think* about what they'd done.

He set up his command post in the central security office in the drum. The spin gravity wasn't so high it would bother Naomi, and there was something restful about being able to collapse into his chair while they watched the newsfeeds from Earth. Bobbie Draper, now the acting head of security for Medina, sprawled at her desk, legs up, hands behind her head, looking as relaxed as he'd seen her since she and Amos had come on board the *Roci* again. One sleeve was rolled up, and a bright, blistered burn ringed her elbow in the shape of a vac suit's seal. She rubbed it gently. Caressed it. There was something unnervingly postcoital about her response to violence. Alex and Amos were in the next room where Naomi was combing through the station logs with an OPA engineer named Costas, arguing about something that involved yogurt and black beans. Only Clarissa hadn't come on the station, and Holden hadn't asked why. His memories of the *Behemoth* were bad enough. He couldn't imagine hers.

On the newsfeed, The Hague looked like a battered, sepia-soaked version of itself. The sky above the UN building was white with haze, but it wasn't dark. And Avasarala stood without a podium. Her bright-orange sari looked like a victory banner.

"The liberation of Medina means more than freeing one station from violent tyranny," she said, reaching the crescendo of the half-hour-long speech. "It means the reopening of the path to all the colonies and all the worlds that the Free Navy tried to lock away. It means the reconnection to the motive force of history, and *proof* that the spirit of humanity will never bow to fear and cruelty. And yes, since you've all behaved so nicely, I'll take some questions. Takeshi?"

A thin reporter in a gray suit stood up, a reed among the ranks of his professional fraternity.

"Shit," Alex said from the doorway. "Are there reporters anywhere else, or does she have all of them?"

"Shh," Bobbie said.

“Madam Secretary-General, you said that the attack on Earth was not an act of war but the lashing out of a criminal conspiracy. Now that you have captured prisoners, how will they be handled?”

“The conspirators will be brought to Luna and introduced to their lawyers,” Avasarala said. “Next quest—”

“Just the ones from Medina? Or Pallas and Europa too? Won’t that create a burden on the court system?” the gray man pressed.

Avasarala’s smile was sweet. “Oh, that guy’s fucked,” Bobbie said.

“Oh yeah,” Holden agreed.

“It will take some time to process everyone,” Avasarala said. “But I have to put some blame for the delay on the Free Navy itself. If they wanted a faster trial, they shouldn’t have leveled so many courthouses. Next question. Lindsey?”

“She shouldn’t be milking this so much,” Bobbie said while a blond woman stood in the gray man’s place and asked something about reconstruction and the role of the OPA. “It’s going to bite her.”

“It’s the biggest unambiguous victory we’ve had against Inaros,” Holden said. “Everything else, he stripped to the studs and walked away from. Or left for us to crawl over, disarming his booby traps. Even the thing at Titan looks like it cost us as much as it got back. Earth needs a win. Hell, Mars needs a win. I’m just glad it’s one that had Belters fighting on our side too.”

“But if she builds it up too much, it’s just going to be worse when we lose Medina again.”

Holden looked over. “Why do you think we’re going to lose it?”

“Because I had to kill the rail guns,” Bobbie said. “Holding on to this place assumed we could *take over* the defenses. We didn’t. We broke them. If we can get a dozen ships in here with guns like the *Roci* or maybe a pair of *Donnager*-class battleships, we can hold it. But that means getting them here, and we have to assume Inaros is throwing every spare grenade and bullet into whatever ships he has to burn here and kick our asses. And that’s if his patron out past the Laconia gate isn’t already sending the MCRN ships *he* stole to clear us out.”

The knot in Holden’s gut that had loosened a couple notches since he’d stepped onto Medina tightened back up. “Oh,” he said. “So. Do we have a plan to address that?”

“Fight like hell and hope the bad guys spend so much time killing us

they can't finish rebuilding before whoever Avasarala and Richards send next gets here."

"Ah."

"We've been screwed since the minute I blew up that reactor. Doesn't take away from the essential dignity of the situation. And this is a fine hill."

"A what?"

Bobbie looked over, surprised he hadn't followed the idiom. "Fine hill to die on."

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Chapter Forty-Seven: Filip

What was it like?” Filip asked, trying to sound casual.

Her name was Marta. She had a wide face with a scattering of moles along her jawline like she’d been splatted by something. Her hair was lighter than her skin. Of all the people in the club, she was the one who seemed to have the most patience with the new guy. When the karaoke was going, she’d offered him the mic, even though he hadn’t taken it. When the club had gotten crowded, she’d let him sit at the end of her table. Not with her, but not *not* with her either. She’d grown up in Callisto, born here. Worked for one of the warehouses doing compliance checks. She was about a year older than him. She’d been sixteen when it happened.

She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. “What was the attack like? For for?”

“Wondered,” he said with a shrug. The club was dark enough she probably wouldn’t see him blushing. “Heard about it since I came.”

Marta shook her head, looked away. Someone jostled against Filip’s back on their way toward the bar. He was about to apologize—was finding the words for it—when she spoke.

“Was eine day, yeah? Woke up in the morning, same same. Got ready for school. Mom made hash and coffee for breakfast. Just eine day, same like otra. Was talking with some friends in the common room and everything shakes, yeah? Just once. Just a little bit, but everyone feels it. We all ask each other, and everyone feels it. Then the teacher come in all rapiutamine and says we have to get to the hard shelters. Something going on over à los Martian yards. Figured a reactor blew. Knew it was bad though. We’re hardly in when the next one comes, and it’s worse. Lot worse.”

“All the hits were on the Martian yard, though,” Filip said.

“Same rock,” Marta said with a shrug and a laugh. “Not like you can

kick half a ball. Anyway, alarms are going off y everyone's crying. And then when they let us back out, it's just gone. Martian yard's delenda, and half of ours too. It was just ... no sé. It was just everything before and then everything after."

"But you were okay," Filip said.

Marta shook her head, just a little. "My mom died," she said with a fake lightness. "Shelter she was in cracked."

Filip felt the words in his sternum. "Sorry."

"They said it was fast. She wouldn't have known even."

"Yeah," Filip said. His hand terminal chimed for the fourth time in the hour.

"You sure you don't want to answer those?" Marta said. "Your girlfriend's wanting you pretty solid."

"No. It's all right," he said. And then, "I don't have a mother either."

"What happened to yours?"

"Broke up with my dad when I was a baby. Dad always said he hid me away because she was crazy. But I don't know. I met her first time a few months ago, but she's gone again."

"Did she seem crazy to you?"

"Yeah," Filip said. Then, "No. Seemed like she didn't want to be there."

"Harsh."

"She told me that the only right you have with anyone in life is the right to walk away."

Marta coughed out a disbelieving laugh. "Kind of bitch says that to her kid?"

The doors to the club were built like an airlock with inner and outer doors either side of a short hall, but to keep the brightness of the common corridor out. A bright streak and a few silhouetted bodies showed both sets of doors opened at once. Filip wondered whether he should tell the girl more. *I thought I watched her kill herself, only it turns out she didn't die. She was only leaving again.* It was true, but it wouldn't seem like it. Some things you couldn't talk about except with people who'd been there. His hand terminal chimed again.

Someone shoved him, hard. Filip's stool tilted, and he grabbed the table to stop his fall. Marta yelped and stood up, shouting as she did. "Berman! Que sa?"

Filip turned slowly. The man who'd shoved him was his own age plus maybe a year or two. Deep-green jumpsuit with the logo of a shipping company on the sleeve. His chin jutted. His chest was pushed forward, his arms pulled back. Everything about him said he was looking for violence except that he wasn't hitting Filip.

"Que nammen?" the new man demanded.

"Filip," he answered. He was aware of the mass of the gun in his pocket like it was calling to him. Calmly, slowly, he put a hand against the grip of the pistol. Marta shoved her way between them, her arms wide. She was yelling about how Berman—who had to be the guy with the chin—was out of his mind. How he was stupid. How she was just talking with coyo and Berman was out-of-his-head jealous and fucked up too. Berman kept shifting his head to stare at Filip around her. Filip felt his own rage boiling up, like fumes off a fire. Draw the gun, level it just long enough for the coyo to know what was coming, then bang and the kick in his wrist. He was Filip Inaros, and he'd killed billions. He'd killed Marta's mother.

"It's okay," Filip said as he stood. "Misunderstanding. No harm, sa sa?"

"Pinché asshole *better* run," Berman shouted at Filip's back, and then Marta shouting some more and Berman shouting at her, and Filip was in the fake airlock and pushing through to the common corridor beyond. It was bright there. The smell of liquor and old smoke stayed around him for a few seconds before the gentle breeze from the recyclers pulled it away. He was shaking. Trembling. His hands ached with the need to hit something or someone. He started walking without any idea where he was walking to, just needing something to let him move. Let whatever beast was running through his bloodstream work itself out a little.

Callisto passed him as he went. Pale corridors wider than most of the stations and ships he'd been on, with a honeycomb pattern on the curved walls that made him think of a football. Banks of heaters made irregular tapping sounds as they glowed down from the ceilings, radiating at the top of his head the way that the cold of the moon's body crept up from the floors. People walked or rode bicycles or carts. He wondered how many of them had lost family in the attack on Callisto. In the story he'd told himself about the attack, it had all been Dusters that died. Soldiers whose work was to keep the Belt's head underwater until it drowned. And in his story, his father was the leader to unite the Belt, to lead it against everything that was

bent on destroying their futures and erasing their pasts.

And he still thought that. Even while he doubted, he believed. It was like everything in his private world had doubled. One Callisto that had been the target of his raid. His critical victory that led to the bombardment of Earth and the freedom of the Belt. Another Callisto that he walked through now, where normal people had lost their mothers and children, husbands and friends in a disaster. The two places were so different, they didn't relate. Like two ships with the same name but different layouts and jobs.

And he had two fathers now. The one who led the fight against the inners and who Filip loved like plants love light, and the one who twisted out of everything that went wrong and blamed anyone but himself. The Free Navy that was the first real hope the Belt had ever had, and the Free Navy that was falling apart. Swapping out generals and leaders faster than air filters. They couldn't both exist, and he couldn't let either version go.

His hand terminal chimed again. He plucked it out of his pocket. The connection request came from Karal and the *Pella*. It was the twelfth he'd made. Filip accepted.

"Filipito!" Karal said. "Hell have you been, coyo?" He was on the command deck and wearing his uniform. Even had the collar done, which he usually didn't. It didn't make him look like he was military, though. He looked like himself, but in costume.

"Around."

"Around," Karal said, shaking his head. "You got to get back to the ship. You got to come *now*."

"For for?"

Karal leaned in close to the screen like he was going to whisper a secret. "Battle analysis leaked out à Medina, yeah? The rail guns are down. Medina has one ship guarding it. *One*, and it's—"

"*Rocinante*," Filip said.

"Sí no? Every ship with more than half a hull, Marco's putting them together. Retaking Medina like we're putting out a fire, us."

"Yeah," Filip said.

"Getting fresh juice. Topping up the reaction mass. And then we're gone. Meeting up with the rest of the navy on the way, but your father? I've never seen him like—"

A voice came from the hand terminal, snapping Karal's attention away

from him. “*You found him?*”

“Que no?” Karal said, but not to him.

The image jumped, cutting from one camera to another. An empty crash couch with a vague shadow along one edge. The shadow fell back, gained resolution, became his father. Filip braced for abuse, for contempt. For all the condescension he’d been suffering. *Say it like a man. Say I fucked up.* His stomach was tight.

Marco beamed at him, eyes bright.

“Did you hear? Did Karal tell you?”

“About Medina, and the ship there.” For some reason he couldn’t explain he didn’t want to say the name *Rocinante* out loud. He felt it would be like bad luck.

“This is our moment, Filipito. It has all come together perfectly. We bit them and bit them and bit them and faded into the dark until they went mad with it. They’ve pushed out past their defenses, and now we can come down on them like a *hammer*.”

Them. He didn’t mean Earth and Mars. He didn’t mean the governments of the inner planets. Whether he knew it or not, Filip was certain—as certain as he’d been of anything—that James Holden and Naomi Nagata were *them*.

“That’s good, then,” he said.

“Good?” his father hooted. “This is it. This is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for. This is how we break them. All the half-loyal cunts in the OPA who trotted wherever Fred Johnson led them? Pa and Ostman and Walker—all of them. They all fell in with Holden, and we will take him away from them just the way we killed Johnson. We will punish them for their disloyalty.”

Filip felt a little thrill of excitement. The idea of victory—resounding, triumphant, and final—was intoxicating. His father’s joy bore him up, promised to wash away all his anger and his doubts. But there was another Filip, a smaller and less emotional one, who watched the swelling enthusiasm with disgust.

Luring Naomi and her lover out to Medina to be killed was the plan now. But more than that, it had always been the plan. They’d killed Fred Johnson as part of it. They’d abandoned Ceres too. The consolidated fleet’s massive and coordinated attacks had been them falling for his father’s

brilliant strategy to lure them out.

And if it failed, if something went wrong, that would always have been the plan too. His father's new generals would change, getting better with every purge. And when it got so foul there was no way to pretend it into victory, it would be someone else who had failed. Maybe Filip.

"Highest burn we've ever done, but it will be worth it," Marco was saying. "It will carry rewards greater than anything before it. Only there isn't time to waste. We're launching inside the hour. All hands. All ships, *everyone*. We'll melt the fucking ring with our braking burn and char Holden to ash."

Marco clapped his hands, delighting in the prospect. Filip smiled and nodded.

"As soon as we're supplied," Marco said, growing a degree more sober, "we're gone. Be back to the ship in half an hour, yeah?"

"All right," Filip said.

Marco looked out of the screen and into his eyes. There was a softness in his expression. A kind of sensual pleasure almost indistinguishable from love. "This will be glorious," his father said. "They will remember this forever."

And then, like an actor having delivered his final line, Marco dropped the connection.

Looking up from his hand terminal felt like coming out of a dream. He'd just been someplace else, with someone. And now he was here again, in this corridor. If he turned around, he could go back to the club he'd been in. It seemed strange in a way he couldn't quite explain that his father's glorious battle plan and a common corridor of Callisto yards should exist in the same universe. Maybe because, in a way, they didn't.

The docks weren't far. There was a tube station that could have gotten him there in five minutes, but half an hour was more than he'd need to walk the distance. He put his hand terminal back in his pocket where it clicked against his pistol, a nearly inaudible tick with every step.

Moving from the residential corridors to the docks had a thousand little signals. There were none of the teenage girls here, and more of the people drifting through the intersections were wearing jumpsuits and tool belts. The air smelled different. Even if they used the same filters, the docks would always smell of welding and synthetic oil and cold. He still had

twenty minutes.

The concourse between the military and civilian yards was shaped like a massive Y. Where the paths met, someone in the station had decided it would be a good idea to put a statue of something that looked like a wide, abstract Minotaur fashioned out of brushed steel. Directly above the weird art, a screen listed the berths and the ships in each of them. On the military side, there were seven Free Navy ships, an Earth transport they'd captured when they took the station, and three empty berths. He looked at the word PELLA for a couple breaths as if it were as much a piece of art as the uncomfortable man-bull beneath it. On the civilian side, almost a dozen ships. Prospectors, miners, transport. An emergency medical relief ship. He imagined there would have been more if there wasn't a war on.

Against the wall, another screen showed the exchange rates for fifty or sixty kinds of scrip—corporate, governmental, cooperative, commodity-based. A small gray rat scampered along the floor underneath the screen and squeezed itself into a hole Filip hadn't even noticed was there like it was falling into shadow. His hand terminal chimed, but he ignored it. The docks were right there.

Just down the corridor to the civilian docks, there was a waiting area with six rows of uncomfortable ceramic chairs facing each other and a bright orange recycler at the end of every other row. An old man in a fake leather coat and grimy pants stared blankly in Filip's direction, seeing him but not seeing him. A row of grimy kiosks dug into one wall. A noodle stall. A public terminal. Two union offices. Employment and housing brokers. Filip looked at them all with the same detachment he'd felt looking at the berth displays.

His hand terminal chimed again. He took it out without looking at it, switched it to his off-hand, and drew out the gun. The old man's stare was less blank now. He watched as Filip walked toward the chairs and fed first the gun and then the hand terminal into the recycler. Filip nodded to the old man, and after a long moment, the old man nodded back.

The employment broker's kiosk had bright marks of wear at the edge of the counter, worn into the metal by millions of tired elbows. The bulletproof glass had pits in it, tiny as stars. The woman behind the glass wore her gray hair in a buzz cut. The place smelled vaguely of piss. Filip walked to the

counter and rested his elbows on the edge.

“I need work,” he said like someone else was saying it.

The gray woman flicked her eyes up at him, then back down. “What can you do?”

“Environmental maintenance. Machining.”

“Both or either?”

“Anything. I just need work.”

The counter lit up. A virtual keyboard and a form. He looked at it, his heart sinking.

“Put in your employment ID,” the gray woman said.

“I don’t have an employment ID.”

The flicker of her eyes was longer this time. “Union waiver?”

“I’m not in a union.”

“No ID, no waiver. You’re fucked, kid.”

There was still time. He could run. He could catch the *Pella* before she left. His father would wait for him. They would burn out to Medina. They would take back the Belt for Belters, and it would be glorious. His heart started racing, but he put his hands on the edge of the counter. Squeezed like he was holding himself in place.

“Please. I just need work.”

“I run a clean shop, kid.”

“Please.”

She didn’t look up. He didn’t move. The right corner of her mouth quirked up like it was somehow independent of the rest of her face. The counter blinked, and a shorter form appeared. PRÉNOM. NOM DE FAMILIE. RÉSIDENCE. ÂGE. COORDONNÉES.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said, not looking up.

He put his finger on COORDONNÉES. “I don’t have a hand terminal.”

“You can come back tomorrow,” she said like it was a common enough problem.

PRÉNOM: FILIP

NOM DE FAMILIE:

“You okay, kid?” The hard eyes on him. He nodded.

NOM DE FAMILIE: NAGATA

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Chapter Forty-Eight: Pa

The light of the sun was strong enough to turn the tangerine-colored haze to its midday twilight. A bright patch showed its place. Saturn hung on the far side of Titan's atmosphere somewhere, along with the debris that had been a hundred or more ships. Michio remembered a moment in the chaos of the battle seeing Saturn on her screen. It had seemed so close, she could make out the complexity of the rings. She remembered it, but it might not have happened. Her memory of the violence was spotty.

The resort was astounding. The dome rose up fifty meters above the ground, a swirl of titanium and reinforced glass with ivy dripping down like hanging gardens. Terraces rose in curves, designed to create breathtaking views out of a featureless, hazy sky. Finches darted here and there, flickers of color, as artificial and foreign to the moon's environment as she was. As any of them were. From where she sat, Michio could look down on swimming pools and courtyards of fake brick and ferns. Bright foil emergency shelters were propped up next to luxurious wet bars. The wounded slept on chaise longues and deck chairs because the hospital beds were full.

The dome resorts had been built decades ago for the wealthy of Earth and Mars. A place for the captains of finance and industry to rest while they worked on building up the settlements on Saturn's moons and hauling ice from its rings. An exotic site for tourists to come and pretend they'd experienced life in the outer planets without ever having to experience it.

They had done a good trade ever since, and not only among the inners. For Belters, the resorts were as close to experiencing life on Earth as they would ever reach. Open air. A real, free-flowing atmosphere to look at if not to breathe. Food and liquor imported from Earth and Mars. And so it had become a kind of halfway point—a haven for Earthers in the outer planets and a version of Earth that Belters could enjoy. She wondered

whether an Earther would find it as unlike Earth as she found it unlike the Belt. Maybe what they really had to share was its lack of authenticity.

She had never been here before, and if she had her way, she would never come back.

Footsteps sounded on the terrace behind her. She turned, winced, and then kept turning despite the pain. The burns on her back only itched now if she kept still. She was afraid, despite all the doctors had said, that she'd scar up and lose her ability to move if she didn't keep stretching the wounds.

Nadia's smile was weary, but real. She carried fresh bandages and a white tube of cream in one hand and a hand terminal in the other. Michio grimaced, then laughed ruefully.

"Is it that time again?" she asked.

"Such," Nadia said, "such are the joys. I brought you something to take your mind off it, though."

"Something good?"

"No," Nadia said, taking a seat behind her. "The Earther woman wants to talk to you again."

Michio shrugged off the paper robe from the hospital and leaned forward. Nadia passed the hand terminal to her and began examining the edges of the false skin that covered her wounds. The nerves that let her experience light touch were smothered by living bandage. The ones that reported pain were terribly sensitive. It was like being numb and skinned alive at the same time. Michio gritted her teeth. Waited. When she had made the full circuit—across Michio's back and down her left side and arm—Nadia sighed.

"It looks good?" Michio said.

"It looks terrible, but it's healing well. Basal growth all the way around."

"Well," Michio said. "Thank God for small favors."

Nadia made a small sound in the back of her throat, neither agreement nor dissent. Michio heard the soft crack as Nadia opened the tube of medicated lotion. Michio scooped up the hand terminal, opened her message queue. The new message from Earth was waiting for her, flagged as critical. Chrisjen Avasarala. The leader of Earth, and the greatest enemy Michio Pa had ever had. And yet here they were.

"We did this wrong," she said.

"What?" Nadia asked.

Michio lifted the hand terminal for Nadia to see. “We’re working with the people we used to be fighting against.”

“We’ll fight them again later,” Nadia said, like she was promising a sweet to a child, but only after she ate her real food. “Are you ready?”

Michio nodded, and Nadia smeared on the first finger-load of ointment. The pain was bright, like she was burning again. She started the message, tried to focus on it.

The old woman appeared, sitting at a desk. It wasn’t the first time Michio had gotten a message directly from her or from the new prime minister of Mars, but more often she’d heard from generals or functionaries. They only seemed to include Michio when they were asking for something big. It very much gave her the sense of being the least important person at their table.

“Captain Pa,” Avasarala said, and if there was an undertone of contempt in the words, it was only to be expected. Nadia moved lower on her back, new pain blooming just as the first swath began to fade. “The situation on Medina has gone pear-shaped. Holden and the OPA forces have succeeded in taking the station, but saw fit to annihilate the rail gun defenses. Which leaves them undefended. The Free Navy has deployed what appears to be every functioning ship they have left—fifteen in all—burning hard for the gate. The good news is that Inaros has essentially retreated from every other port and base in the system. The bad news, of course, is that he’ll get Medina back, his supply lines to Laconia reestablished, and in a defensible position. Unless, of course, we find a way to stop him.”

Avasarala took a deep breath, looked down, and when she looked up again, something had changed in her face. She looked wearier? Older? More determined?

“I am very, very sorry for the loss you suffered. It strikes close to home. I lost a spouse to this war as well. I can’t imagine how devastating it must be to lose two. I would not ask this if it were not critical, but if you have any ships or influence with any factions that can help us to stop or slow Inaros before he reaches the gate, we need your help now.

“Nothing I can offer you will address the sacrifice you have already made, but I hope you will walk this last kilometer with me. And that we can end this together. Please let me know as soon as you can. The Free Navy is already burning.”

The message ended, and the terminal dropped back to her queue. Nadia moved on to her side, and Michio flinched.

“Almost done,” Nadia said.

“This is the second time one of our enemies has called me to pull them out of a fire.”

“*Can* we do it again?”

“All we did last time was burn ourselves trying.”



She'd known going in that there might be a price for leaving the *Panshin* behind. Titan was the largest of Saturn's moons. The Free Navy had its strongest presence outside the Jovian system there, projecting threat toward Enceladus, Rhea, Iapetus, Tethys. The ice buckers in the rings. Controlling the space without occupying it.

The *Connaught* and the *Serrio Mal* burned in spinward, looping up out of the ecliptic to come down on the Free Navy's ships from an unexpected angle. The burn hadn't been as hard as Michio had hoped. There hadn't been a chance to add reaction mass, and she'd had the sick fear that they'd end up losing the fight at Titan and not be able to retreat. Fifteen Free Navy ships had been stationed there. For most of her life, that wouldn't have been a very large number, but after so much war and so many people taking their ships out through the rings to new systems, it was respectable. It was more than the nine that the consolidated fleet threw at it. But then the point of all the attacks wasn't to win. It was to keep Marco's eye off the two ships skinning off toward Medina.

The Martian Congressional Republic Navy had taken point in the battle, engaging early and trying to pull the Free Navy's ships out of position in hopes that her own attack from the side would come unexpectedly. She remembered Oksana getting the tactical display. Fifteen of the enemy, nine friendlies. Oksana made a joke about how every ship in the battle had probably been built in the same shipyard. Evans had laughed, then sobered and said they were getting painted.

After that, Michio's memory became less reliable. She'd gone over the logs. Things hadn't turned on her that early, but the strike, when it came,

was like a shotgun blast in her life. It took out a massive hole, but stray pellets had traveled forward and back in time, made smaller holes in her experience. She remembered giving the order to retreat, and Josep saying they'd lost core, but she didn't remember the hit that had made her decide to run. She remembered the smell of her clothing and hair burning. But the long, terrible moments between identifying the torpedo that cracked the *Connaught's* back and the actual impact were gone.

What she knew from the logs was that the *Serrio Mal* and the *Connaught* had fired down into the heart of the Free Navy formation, drawing the enemy fire and scattering their position to open up corridors and blinds where the enemy PDCs weren't reinforcing each other. The Martian ships, being closer, had fired a massive barrage of torpedoes that managed to disable two Free Navy ships. She didn't know if the round that took out her drive was from the Free Navy or from a stray from the MCRN, but an enemy torpedo had managed to thread its way through their defenses and blow hours out of Michio's consciousness.

She had the strong impression of a broad-shouldered man with a shaved head and dark skin telling her he was going to make the pain stop but she had to put down the knife. She couldn't place when that had happened. She vividly recalled waking in a hospital room, and then waking there again without any sense of having fallen asleep in between the two.

The beginning of what she thought of as "after" was when she came to and found Bertold sitting at the edge of her bed, massaging her feet and singing a low dirge under his breath. She'd asked about Laura first, which in retrospect made her think she'd known something was wrong with her.

Bertold said Laura had been hurt. Was in a medical coma. They'd need to regrow part of her liver and one of her kidneys, but Laura was the wife of the pirate queen, and the doctors promised she'd be fine, given time.

Then he'd told her about Evans and Oksana, and they'd cried together until she slept.

The quarters they'd assigned this new, smaller version of her family were beautiful. Three bedrooms with wide, soft beds enough like crash couches that they were comfortable and different enough to seem like luxury. A food station with a narrower range of options than they'd had on the *Connaught* and brighter chrome. What the resort called a "conversation pit" that looked like a long, curved couch that had burrowed into the floor.

Skylights opened to the dome, boasting natural light. A soaking bath big enough for two. Bertold, Nadia, and Josep the only ones to share it with her. Everything about it seemed too large and too small at the same time.

She waited until the ointment had soaked deep into her new, artificial skin, then put on what she called her “captain’s uniform.” Nothing really more than a formal shirt and a jacket with a vaguely military cut. She pulled on pants and boots, even though they wouldn’t show in the message she sent back. Her mind was still fuzzy from the pain medications, and she didn’t understand quite why being formal about the message felt so important to her until she sat down, framed herself, and began her recording.

It felt important because it was a surrender.

“Madam Secretary-General, I am very sorry to say that I don’t have any aid to give. The ships I had to command are either dead or broken or scattered so far from the ring gate that they couldn’t catch up to the *Pella* without killing everyone on board before they got to it.”

The version of her on the screen looked tired. Bertold had cut her hair short so that the places where it had burned didn’t stand out. She didn’t like how it looked. A wave of grief washed over her, the way they often did now. The way they would on and off for the rest of her life.

“Thank you for your kind words about our casualties. They knew the risks when we took up this work. They were willing to die for the Belt. I wish they hadn’t. I would like them here with me.

“I wish I could have done more.”

There was nothing else to say, so she sent the message. Then, like prodding at an infected wound, she pulled up a tactical report. The whole system lay before her. The *Panshin* still lived and a handful of others. The nakliye at Eugenia. And there, vector-mapped from the Jovian system out toward the ring, the *Pella*. The remnants of the Free Navy. Two other smaller dots were on intersecting paths, but when she checked their estimated course, it was clear they were all on the same mission. Marco and his loyalists would pour through the gate together. An unstoppable force. If the rail gun defenses had still been in place, it still would have been a hell of a fight. Without them, it would be a slaughter.

Then, station by station, ship by ship, she scrolled through the system. It was the equivalent of the grease-pencil grid she’d drawn in some other

lifetime, on a ship that was scrap and bad memories now. All of the things that people needed. Filters. Hydroponic supplies. Recycler teeth. Centrifuges for refining ore. Centrifuges for testing water. For working with blood.

She wondered if there were any colony ships still hiding out there in the emptiness, dark and watching in horror as humanity tore itself apart. She remembered the Doctrine of the One Ship. Remembered thinking of all the vessels in the Belt as being cells of a single being. She couldn't see it that way now. At best, they were all their own desperate bacteria floating on a vacuum sea that didn't care if they lived and didn't notice when they died.

And if Sanjrani was right, a worse collapse was only clearing its throat.

The door to the common corridor opened, and Josep slouched in. Nadia kissed him on her way to bed. Those were the shifts now. One to sit with Laura, one to sit with her, and one to sleep. A cycle of shared grief. Josep went to the food station, slid open a panel she hadn't noticed, and poured himself a glass of whiskey before he came to sit in the pit across from her.

"Skol," he said, raising his glass. The rim clinked against his teeth as he drank. For a moment, they sat there together in silence.

"Oops," she said.

Josep raised his eyebrows. "La magic word la."

"It was me," she said, wiping at her eyes with the cuff of her shirt. "I did what I always do, and I drove us straight to hell with it."

Josep's eyes were sunk back into his head. Exhaustion showed in his skin and the angle of his shoulders. "Don't follow your mind, me."

"I find someone, and I put my faith in them, and I go where they lead. And then all the gold turns to shit. Johnson and Ashford and Inaros. And now Holden. I don't know how I didn't see it coming, but I fell into it again with him. And now ..."

"Now," Josep agreed.

"And the stupid thing," she said, her voice rising a little, growing thin and sharp as the drone of a violin, "is that I look at all this? I look at everything I was trying to do, and none of it happened. Wanted to make the Belt for Belters, and it won't be. I wanted to build a place where we could live and call our own, and there isn't one. Isn't a way to build one even. I don't even remember now why I thought I should be on Holden's side. To open the gates again? Get the flow of colony ships freed up? Make sure that

none of the people I cared about would live?”

Josep nodded, his expression thoughtful and distant. “What would it mean if you’d dreamed it?” Josep asked.

“Dreamed what?” Michio said, shifting until her back hurt, and then shifting some more.

“This,” he said. “That you’d fought for Inaros and then for Holden. That you’d lost people precious to you and ended in a place of luxury and healing?”

“It wouldn’t mean shit.”

Josep grunted. “Could be prophecy.”

“Could be that the universe doesn’t give a shit about us or anything we do and your mystic bullshit’s just a way we try to pretend otherwise.”

“Could be that too,” he agreed with an equanimity that made her ashamed she’d said it. He took another drink of his whiskey, then put the glass on the floor and lay out full on the curving couch, his head coming to rest in her lap. His smile was warm and beautiful and filled with a humor and gentleness that made her heart ache.

“Didn’t follow Holden, us. Standing against Marco put Holden beside you, yeah. But you were never his. We didn’t fight Marco because of Holden. We fought because Marco said he was the champion the Belt needed, only turned out he wasn’t.”

“Yeah,” she said, stroking his hair.

He closed his eyes in exhaustion. “Aber, God *damn* but we’re still gonna need a champion.”

Chapter Forty-Nine: Naomi

Medina's system logs were huge, larger than anything Naomi had expected. And, what was worse, not very well organized. It was an artifact of history in a way. The physical design had been intended for a generation ship cruising through the still-unknown ocean of interstellar space, but the logic systems came from Fred Johnson's military refit, which had then been repurposed when the ship went from battleship to permanent city in space. The old security systems hadn't all been cracked when the Free Navy took over, so there were partial records here and there, scattered by a variety of engineers trying to force their will on an already complex system.

Like cities back on Earth where era had built on era had built on the era before, the systems of Medina were shaped by long-forgotten forces. The thinking behind each decision was lost now in a tangle of database hierarchies and complex reference structures. Finding something interesting was easy. It was *all* interesting on some level. Finding some particular piece of information—and knowing whether it was the most recent or complete version of the data—was very, very difficult.

She used her office in the security station like it was a medieval monk's cell, only leaving it to go back to the *Rocinante* to sleep, then coming back to it when she woke. Instead of copying ancient texts with pen and ink, she spelunked the datasets, poked through file systems, asked Medina to find things, and then watched to see where it didn't search. Anything that seemed like it might be useful she copied or stripped out and then sent back. Work report logs from the days under the Free Navy's control, sent back to Earth and Mars. Landing papers outlining the supply flow in from and back out to Laconia. Accident reports from the medical systems. Traffic control comm logs from the ships that had come and gone. Anything might be useful, so she took everything and sent it back at the speed of light to Earth and Luna and Mars and Ceres.

It kept the fear at bay. Not perfectly, but nothing short of death was going to end fear perfectly. No matter how she distracted herself, there was a timer ticking down in the back of her mind. The days and hours until Marco and his ships arrived. There were other problems, other risks—the Free Navy loyalists still on the station, the strobing do-not-approach signal that was the only thing coming out of the Laconia gate—but none of them would matter once Marco arrived. All of it pushed her to get her work done quickly, efficiently. When the next thing came—and she didn't look what that would be straight in its eyes—she wanted to know that she'd gotten her work done.

And still, sometimes she paused. She found a personal journal tucked among the environmental reports like printed pornography tucked under a mattress. Entry after entry of a young man's private struggles with his longings and ambitions and feelings of betrayal. Another time, she was trying to recover what she could from a half-erased partition and came up with a short video of a girl—four years old at most—leaping off a bed somewhere on the station, landing on a pile of pillows, and dissolving into laughter. Reviewing the traffic-control logs, she listened to the voices of desperate men and women from the systems on the far sides of the ring gates demand and beg and plead for the supplies they felt they deserved, wanted, and sometimes needed to survive.

It was the first time she'd really understood the scale of the destruction Marco had brought. All the lives he'd traumatized and ended, all the plans he'd shattered. Most of the time, it was too big to wrap her mind around, but little glimpses like this made it all comprehensible. Terrible and sad and enraging, but comprehensible.

And it informed some of her decisions.

"Um," Jim said, sloping in through the door of his office. "So, sweetie? Did you mean to have the data feeds go out through all the rings? Because I'm noticing that you've started sending everything to everyone."

"I meant to," Naomi said, brushing the hair back from her eyes. It was almost the end of her second shift. Her back ached a little from sitting too long in the same position, and her eyes were dry and scratchy. "I don't know what's going to be useful, or who it's going to be useful to. And since it doesn't look like we'll be on Medina long enough to go through everything, I thought I'd send copies out everywhere. Give other people a

chance to find whatever I'm missing."

"That's ... ah."

"I know," she said. "I may have been spending too much time with you. I'm starting to think like you. Only, well. The way you used to, anyhow."

"I still think like that," Jim said, pulling a chair over behind hers and sitting. He rested his head on her shoulder. When he spoke, she could feel the vibration in his throat against her skin. "I worry more that it's going to do something unexpected and terrible and huge that I'll be responsible for, but I still think that way."

"An unshakable faith in humanity."

"It's true," he said, shaking his head. Or maybe nuzzling a little. "Against all evidence, I keep thinking the assholes are outliers."

She leaned her head against him, taking a little pleasure in his simple presence. He had a peculiar scent, low and complex and pleasant as potting soil. She didn't think she'd ever get tired of it. And he hadn't shaved recently. The stubble of ragged whiskers tickled her ear like a cat's tongue. On the monitor, the data broadcasts ticked over another tenth of a percent. Somewhere in the office, Bobbie was talking, her voice familiar and strong. The air recyclers clicked and hummed to themselves, the soft breeze smelling like plastic and dust.

She didn't want to ask the question, but she couldn't hold it in either.

"Any news from home?"

She felt him tighten. He sat back, and the part of her skin he'd been against felt cooler without him. She turned her chair so she could look at him. His face had the artificial mildness that meant he was trying to downplay something, as if by treating it casually he could diminish it. She'd seen all his expressions so many times, she knew what he meant, whatever he said.

"They're coming. Free Navy. There's still no sign of activity from Laconia at all, but Avasarala's tracking fifteen ships converging on the gate. Mostly from the Jovian moons."

"Any chance they'll come through one at a time so Alex and Bobbie can shoot them?" she asked with a feigned innocence. It worked the way she hoped. Jim laughed.

"I'm pretty sure they're all going to come through like a rugby team. If we could get a couple of the rail guns from the station working again, I

think we'd have a chance. And some more rounds for them. Turns out shooting down a couple thousand targets can kind of burn through your supplies."

"Do we have a plan?"

"A couple," Jim said.

"Either of them good?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. Just different flavors of terrible."

The data feed chimed. The batch sent off, and waiting for Naomi to pick something else. More messages, more bottles. "All right. What are they?"

"The classics. Fight or flight. We've got the *Roci* and the boats that still work as boarding craft. One option is that we fill up the boats with troops, place them around the edge of the ring, and try to get people onto the Free Navy ships. It won't matter that they have ten times as many torpedoes as us if all the fighting's corridor to corridor. The *Roci* and Medina's defenses go after the ships we can't take control of. Massive slugfest, and hopefully we come out on top."

"And the chances that'll work?"

"Terrible, terrible chances. Very low. Dumb plan on every level. Much more likely that the boats will all get turned into metal shavings by Marco's PDCs before they even get close to boarding. And even if they do, those ships are going to have full crews to fight our people back."

"And flight?"

"Stock up the *Roci*, pick a gate, and get the hell out of Dodge before the bad guys show up in the first place."

"And leave Medina?"

"Medina. The *Giambattista*. Everything. Just turn tail and run like hell. Let the Free Navy hole back up in the slow zone and hope that the next wave the consolidated fleet sends can take it all back again and hold it next time."

"Where's the *Pella*?"

Jim sighed. "Oh, leading the howling pack."

Naomi turned back to her screen. "Then we're staying here."

"I haven't decided," Holden said.

"No, you haven't talked yourself into it yet," she said. "You know if we go, Marco's going to follow us. Maybe if we were a different ship or Marco was a different man, things wouldn't play out this way. We've got the

choice of fighting here, with a few allies and insufficient supplies, or fighting on the far side of a ring gate with even less. That's the only distinction."

"I ... well ..." Jim took a deep breath, blew out. "Shit."

"How much of the debris from the wave of decoys can we police up?"

"Anything that hasn't drifted out past the rings," Holden said. "You're thinking put it all just inside the Sol ring and hope the Free Navy runs into it?"

"The gate's not that big," Naomi said.

"Three-quarters of a million square clicks," Holden said. "And fifteen ships coming through it. Even if we turned all our scrap metal into sand, the Free Navy's more likely to miss them and not even know they were there."

"I know," Naomi said. "But maybe one will get a lucky hit. And then there'll be one less. If we aren't playing the long shots, we're giving up. Long shots are all we've got left. And even if we lose—"

"I'm not looking at—"

"*Even if we lose*," Naomi said, "how we lose matters. You didn't set yourself to be a symbol of anything. I know that. It's just something that happened. But after it happened, you used it. All those video essays you put out, trying to show everyone that the people on Ceres were just people?"

"Those weren't about me," Jim said, but the guilt in his voice said he didn't believe it.

"They were you using the famous Captain James Holden to make people look at what you needed them to see. Don't be ashamed of that. It was the right thing to do. But everyone out there who saw them? Who made their own versions of them and added to the project of trying to remind each other that war isn't all ships and torpedoes and battle lines? If we're going to ..." Her throat was tight now. The words stuck there. "If we're going to die, we should make it mean at least as much as your video pieces did."

"I don't know that those mattered," Jim said. "Did they do anything?"

"You don't get to know that," Naomi said. "They did or they didn't. You didn't put them out so that someone would send you a message about how important and influential you are. You tried to change some minds. Inspire some actions. Even if it didn't work, it was a good thing to try. And maybe it did. Maybe those saved someone, and if they did, that's more important than making sure you get to know about it."

Jim sank down into himself. The mask of himself that he'd worn since Tycho slipped a little. She saw the despair under it.

"I shouldn't have come here," he said.

"You took this on because it was the risky job," she said. "You did it because it needed doing, and you don't ask people to take things on you wouldn't do yourself. Just like when you ran onto the *Agatha King*. You don't change, Jim. And I knew that coming in. We all did. We thought we'd make it, but we knew we might be wrong. We were wrong. Now we have to do this next part well too."

"Getting killed. This next part is getting killed."

"I know," she said.

They were silent, the two of them. Bobbie's voice, as far away as the stars, turned briefly to laughter.

"The videos were just stupid little art projects," Jim said. "Dying's not an art project."

"Maybe it should be."

He hung his head. She put her hand on it, feeling the individual strands of hair against her fingertips. The tears in her eyes didn't sting. They flowed gently, like a brook. There was no way to tell him all of it. The guilt she felt for bringing them all into Marco's orbit. The certainty in her heart that if she'd just seen what Marco Inaros was in time, none of them would have been in this position. If she said it, Jim would feel like he had to comfort her, to be strong for her. He'd close back up into himself. Or no. Not himself. Into James Holden. She liked Jim better. One long breath. Another. Another. The quiet intimacy of a perfect moment.

"Hey," Bobbie said, stepping into the room. "Do either of you—um. Sorry."

"No," Jim said, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "What's up?"

Bobbie lifted her hand terminal. "Do either of you know if we sent the incident reports on the missing ships to Luna? Avasarala said her science monkeys are really champing at the bit for those."

Naomi took a long, shuddering breath and then smiled. Perfect moment over. Back to work. "I'll get right on it."

"Okay," Bobbie said, stepping backward out of the room. "Sorry if I ... you know."

"Have you eaten yet?" Jim said, standing up. "I don't think I've had

anything since breakfast.”

“I was going to after I was done here.”

“Could you two bring me a bowl of something?” Naomi said, turning to her monitor again.

The BATCH COMPLETE message had given up on her and dropped back to her file-system prompt. She spooled through the traffic logs as Jim and Bobbie called back to the *Roci*. Their voices—Jim, Amos, Alex, Bobbie—mixed together. A little conversation about food and beer, who wanted to be together and who wanted to be apart. She had to force herself to concentrate. The log structure was a mess, one manager doing things one way, the next picking another.

It took the better part of an hour to be sure she’d gotten the data from all the times ships had gone missing. Some of them, she’d already seen back on Luna, but there were more that she hadn’t. Almost two dozen ships had vanished, including, it seemed, one of the stolen Martian ships heading for Laconia. Ships from the colonies. One of the transport ships delivering for the Free Navy too. All sides had lost something.

Which was interesting.

She prepped the data package for Luna. This one, she encrypted. But as it sent, she reviewed her own copy again. The missing ships tended to be larger, but weren’t always. They seemed to vanish most in high-traffic times ...

Alex brought her a bowl of noodles and mushrooms and a bottle of Medina-brewed beer. She was pretty sure eating it that she’d remembered to thank him. Not positive, though. There was a correlation if she plotted the high-traffic times to the incidents ... No. This was wrong. She was looking at it the wrong way. They didn’t just need to look at when things had happened. They needed to look at all the times Medina had seen similar conditions—high traffic, large-mass ships, mistuned reactors—and *nothing* had gone wrong. She scooped up the full flight data partition and started streaming it down toward Luna too, but she couldn’t let it go.

Her back ached. Her eyes hurt. She didn’t really notice. Here was a dataset built of high-traffic periods with and without mysterious disappearances. Here was one mapping the energy output and mass of the missing ships and trying to fit that curve against ships that had sailed

through safely. The full encrypted dataset sent to Luna announced it was complete, which seemed awfully fast until she checked how long she'd been sitting there.

Five variables—preceding mass, preceding energy, mass of the ship, energy of the ship, and time. No single-point solution, but a range. A moving system of curves, rising with preceding mass and energy, falling with time, and, where the mass and energy curve of the other ships intersected it, disappearances. It was as if traffic passing through the gates created a wake, and when something large enough and energetic enough struck that wake, it vanished.

Her hands were trembling as she pulled her terminal out of her pocket. She didn't know if it was emotion or exhaustion or if the noodles and mushrooms had been so long ago she just needed to eat. Jim picked up the connection almost as soon as she requested it.

"Hey," he said. "Are you all right? You didn't come back to the ship last night."

"No," she said, meaning no she hadn't gone back to the ship, not no she wasn't all right. She waved the imprecision of the word away. "I think I have something interesting here. I need someone to look at it for me in case I'm just hallucinating from exhaustion."

"I'll be right there. Should I grab anyone else? What sort of 'interesting' are you looking at?"

"It's about the missing ships."

On the little screen, Jim's eyebrows rose. His eyes went a degree wider. "Do you know what's eating them?"

She blinked. On her monitor, two equations, five variables. Years of traffic logs to draw from. It was a perfect fit. Surely Luna would be able to confirm it.

But *Do you know what's eating them?*

"I don't," she said. "I know something better."

Chapter Fifty: Holden

It's not a huge dataset," Naomi said, turning as she reached the edge of the room and pacing back toward him. "I mean, it's the largest there is. There's not more out there we could get."

"Is that a problem?" Holden asked.

She stopped, stared at him, her hands wide and hard in a universal gesture of *Of course it's a problem*. "It may not scale. There may be other variables at work that just haven't come into play in these instances. If you wanted me to build an engine based around data like this, I wouldn't do it. Shit, an engine. I wouldn't trust a *ladder* based on this. Except that ..."

She started pacing again and chewing at the nail of one thumb. Whatever her exception was, she'd already moved on in her mind. Holden folded his arms, waited. He knew her well enough to recognize when she needed a little mental space. He looked down at the graphs on her screen. They reminded him of a heart monitor, but the shapes of the curves were very different. He was pretty sure that with an EKG, the initial spike went back down under the baseline. With this, there was a rapid rise, then a slow, sloping falling away.

No one else had come to the security station yet. Probably, they were all still on the *Rocinante*, eating breakfast in the galley. Or maybe stopping at one of the little kiosks in the docks where the locals still took their scrip.

Naomi stopped beside him, her gaze on the screen with his. Her lips twitched like she was talking to herself, having a heated conversation no one else was welcome to. Not even him. She shook her head, disagreeing with herself. She'd seemed calmer when she'd first called, but the more they talked about it, the more agitated she became. The more frightened, even.

It looked like she was starting to hope.

"So this thing. Is it a thing we can use?"

“I don’t know what it is. The mechanism? I’ve got no idea. All we have is this pattern, but it looks so *consistent*.”

He tried again. “Is this a consistent pattern we can use? And specifically, is there something here that maybe gives us a third alternative in that ‘stay here and be slaughtered versus run away through one of the gates and be slaughtered’ conversation?”

She took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly between her teeth. He’d kind of hoped she’d laugh, but she didn’t. She sat at her workstation again, pulled up a complex equation that Holden couldn’t follow.

“I think,” she said, “we can simulate a high-traffic interval. Load the *Giambattista* with as much junk as we can weld on it. Overload the reactor a little so it’s generating more energy. Then, when we run it through a gate”—she tapped the spike-and-decay curve—“we should get one of these. Not a big one, though. Even a massive ship is only one ship ...”

“And one of these is what?”

“It’s an obstacle. It’s something that the Free Navy ships may run into. If their ships have enough mass and enough energy that this line crosses the curve before it dies away ... I think they just stop.”

“Meaning they go where all the other eaten ships go?”

Naomi nodded. “We could put extra mass in the *Giambattista*. We’ve still got those attack boats. Some of them have fuel left in their drives. If we put them through at the same time, we could increase the curve a little. And Marco will almost certainly bring all his ships through at once, so that might help us. But I don’t know the *mechanism*—”

“Hey,” Holden said. “Do you know what Planck’s constant is?”

“Six point six two six plus change times ten to the negative thirty-fourth meters squared kilos per second?”

“Sure, why not,” Holden said, raising one finger. “But do you know why it’s that and not six point seven whatever the rest of it was?”

Naomi shook her head.

“Neither does anyone else. They still call it science. Most of what we know isn’t *why* things are what they are. We just figure out enough about how they work that we can predict the next thing that’s going to happen. That’s what you’ve got. Enough to predict. And if you think you’re right, then I do too. So let’s do this.”

She shook her head, but not at him. “A massive *n* equals one study

where our null hypothesis is that we all get killed.”

“Not necessarily,” Holden said. “They only have fifteen to our one. We might still take them. We have Bobbie and Amos.”

This time she did laugh. He put his arm under hers, and she leaned against him. “If it doesn’t work, we won’t be any more fucked than we are now,” she said.

“Probably not,” Holden said. “I mean, weird, dead alien technology with effects we don’t understand sweeping whole ships away without leaving a trace or explanation. That’s probably safe to play with, right?”



The *Pella* and her fourteen warships—all that was left of the Free Navy—came closer to the ring, already past their halfway point and on their braking burn. Avasarala had sent a list of the tactics she was using to try to slow or stop the attack days before, and with a heaviness that said she knew it was all bullshit even before she got around to making it explicit. She’d ended with *I’ll do whatever I can, but you might have to make do with being avenged. Sorry about that.* He wondered what she’d have thought about Naomi’s discovery and their plan.

Holden felt every hour that passed, knowing Inaros and his soldiers were a little nearer. It was like someone pushing at his back, making him hurry. It would almost have been easier if it had been hours and days. At least it would have been over.

The captain of the *Giambattista* misunderstood at first, thinking that his ship would be lost to the whatever-it-was that the gates did. Naomi had to explain to him four different times that if it went well, the *Giambattista* would just sail into some other system, loaf around there for a few days, and then come back, unharmed. Once she convinced him that, even if it failed, it meant he and his crew would miss the battle, his objections evaporated.

Naomi coordinated it all—loading the boats back into their positions in the hold, retuning the reactor so that both the bottle and the reaction were working almost at the edge of their capacity. She took Amos and Clarissa with her to backload the *Giambattista*’s internal power grid so that

everything was on the verge of overload without ever quite tripping. It reminded Holden of Father Tom telling him about bears when he was young. If a black bear wandered onto the ranch, the thing to do was to open your coat and raise your arms over your head, shout and make noise. If it was a grizzly, the only thing to do was very quietly to get as far away as you could. Only this felt like they were making noise at a grizzly in hopes that it would eat the other guy.

While Naomi made her preparations, he tried to make himself useful.

There were backlogs of communications from the colony worlds. Status reports and threats and begging. It was sobering to remember how many planets humanity had already spread to. How many seeds they'd planted in strange soils. With Naomi's flood of information just gone out, a lot of the colonies were only now beginning to understand why they'd been cut off. Only now hearing about what had happened to Earth and its solar system. The messages coming back flooded the comm buffers with rage and sorrow, threats of vengeance and offers of aid.

Those last were the hardest. New colonies still trying to force their way into local ecosystems so exotic that their bodies could hardly recognize them as life at all, isolated, exhausted, sometimes at the edge of their resources. And what they wanted was to send back help. He listened to their voices, saw the distress in their eyes. He couldn't help but love them a little bit.

Under the best conditions, disasters and plagues did that. It wasn't universally true. There would always be hoarders and price gouging, people who closed their doors to refugees and left them freezing and starving. But the impulse to help was there too. To carry a burden together, even if it meant having less for yourself. Humanity had come as far as it had in a haze of war, sickness, violence, and genocide. History was drenched in blood. But it also had cooperation and kindness, generosity, intermarriage. The one didn't come without the other, and Holden had to take comfort in that. The sense that however terrible humanity's failings were, there was still a little more in them worth admiring.

He did what he could to answer the most pressing messages, offer what hope he could. The voice, however briefly, of Medina Station. Coordinating supplies for all the colonies was more than he could manage. It would be full-time work for a staff of dozens at least, and he was only one man with a

radio. Still, just seeing the need, dipping his toes into the oceanic task of being the physical hub of a thousand different solar systems, gave him a covert sense of hope for the future.

He'd been right. There was a niche here.

Providing the plan worked. Providing they didn't all die. Providing that any of a million things he hadn't even thought of yet didn't swing through and destroy everything he was still looking for and planning. There was always the forgotten arm. The thing you didn't see coming. Hopefully, the thing Marco Inaros wouldn't see coming either.



“So how long is this window or wake or whatever it is that we’re shooting for?” Amos asked.

Time was almost out. The question now was just how fast Inaros wanted to be going when they came through the gate. If he cut the braking thrust and came through fast, it would throw off the timing. If the *Giambattista* went through the Arcadia gate too late, it would be the one to quickly, quietly vanish away. If it went through too early, Naomi’s curve would already have decayed down to nothing and the Free Navy would pass into the slow zone in safety.

They’d gone back to the *Rocinante*. Alex and Bobbie in the cockpit, ready for battle if battle came. Holden and Naomi were strapped into the couches in the command deck. Amos, on float, had come up for the company as much as anything else. They weren’t at battle stations yet. If it came to that, this was probably the last time he’d see Amos in the flesh. Holden tried not to think about it.

“It’ll be maybe five minutes,” Naomi said. “Part of that’s going to depend on the mass and energy of the ships they bring through. If we’re lucky, maybe as much as ... ten?”

“That ain’t much,” Amos said with an amiable smile. He put a hand on the ladder up to the cockpit to keep himself from drifting. “You good up there?”

“Good as gold,” Alex said.

“If this trick of Naomi’s doesn’t go, you think we can take ’em?” Amos

said.

“All of them, probably not,” Bobbie called down. “Some of them, for sure.”

Clarissa rose up from the lift, a pale smile on her lips. She’d spent enough time on the float now to be natural with it. She moved from grip to grip along the wall like she’d been born a Belter. When she got to Holden, she held out a bulb from the galley.

“You said you hadn’t been able to sleep,” she said. “I thought you’d want some coffee.”

Holden took it; her smile widened a degree. The bulb was warm against his palm. Probably it wasn’t poisoned. She wasn’t really likely to do that anymore. He steeled himself a little before he took a sip.

Medina Station was in the hands of the OPA fighters from the *Giambattista*, not that it would do much good. Its PDCs and torpedoes had, for the most part, been spent defending against Holden. What was left was a rounding error on what they’d have needed to hold back Inaros. The *Roci* was waiting almost behind the blue station at the center of the slow zone. If he’d trained the ship’s cameras on it, he could have seen the ruins of the rail guns as clearly as if he’d been standing over them.

“Anything coming out of Laconia?” he asked.

“We don’t have a repeater on the far side of that gate, but just peeping through the keyhole? Nothing,” Naomi said. “No signal. No sign of approaching drives.”

The *Roci* chirped out an alert. Holden pulled it up.

“Got something, Cap?” Amos asked.

“Incoming ships have changed their burn a little. They’ll be coming in fast.”

“And early,” Naomi said. Her voice was like someone talking through pain. The *Roci*’s countdown timer adjusted itself, estimating that the enemy would come through the ring gate in twenty minutes. Holden washed the lump in his throat with Clarissa’s coffee.

Clarissa pushed over to Naomi’s couch, her sharp face bent by a frown. Naomi looked up at her and wiped her eyes. A droplet of a tear floated in the air, drifted toward the recycler intake.

“I’ll be all right,” Naomi said. “It’s just that my son’s on one of those ships.”

Clarissa's eyes sheened over too and she put a hand on Naomi's arm. "I know," Clarissa said. "If you need me, you can find me."

"It's okay, Peaches," Amos said. "Me and the captain had a talk about it. We're good." He gave Holden a cheerful thumbs-up.

The timer ticked down. Holden took a long, slow breath and opened his channel to the *Giambattista*.

"Okay," he said. "This is Captain Holden of the *Rocinante*. Please begin your passage burn now. I need you to go through the gate in"—he checked the timer—"eighteen minutes."

"Tchuss, røvul!" the *Giambattista*'s captain said. "It has been, sí no?"

The connection dropped. On the screen, the *Giambattista* reported a hard burn starting. Holden shifted the display to show it. A single bright star in the blackness. A drive plume wider than the ice hauler that it was driving. He wanted to believe there was something off about the color of the light, as if the high-energy tuning Naomi had done with it was visible to him, but that was just his mind playing tricks. A new counter appeared on the display. The *Giambattista*'s expected passage through the Arcadia ring went from seventeen minutes to sixteen. The Free Navy's arrival—unless they altered course—through the Sol gate in nineteen. Eighteen.

Holden's gut was tight. His breath shuddered, and he drank another sip of coffee. He opened a second window, sensors trained at the Sol gate. From where they were, the Free Navy wouldn't be visible. Not yet. The angle was off just enough to hide them.

"Do we have the rail gun ready in case they get through?"

"Yes, sir," Bobbie answered smartly.

"Well," Amos said. "Me and Peaches better go strap in. You know. In case."

Clarissa touched Naomi's shoulder one last time, then turned and launched herself, following Amos down the lift toward engineering. Holden took a long, last drink and stowed the coffee bulb. He wanted it over. He wanted this moment to last forever in case it was the last one he had with Naomi. And Alex and Amos. Bobbie. Hell, even Clarissa. With the *Rocinante*. You couldn't be in a place like the *Roci* for as long as he had been and not be changed by it. Not have it be home.

When Naomi cleared her throat, he thought she was going to talk to him.

"*Giambattista*," she said. "This is the *Rocinante*. I'm not showing your

internal power grid above normal.”

“Perdona,” a woman’s voice came back. “Fixing that now.”

“Thank you, *Giambattista*,” Naomi said and dropped the connection. She smiled over at Holden. The horror of the situation was only a line at the corner of her mouth, but his heart ached to see it all the same. “Amateurs. You’d think they’d never done this before.”

He laughed, and then she laughed with him. The timers ticked down. The *Giambattista*’s reached zero. The brightness of the drive plume blinked out, hidden by the curve of the Arcadia ring and the profound weirdness that was distance and space here. Where that timer had been, Naomi put up a display of a mathematical model she’d built. The spike of the *Giambattista*’s passage already starting to decay.

The line sloped down as, beside it, the timer for Marco’s arrival turned to seconds. In the cockpit, Bobbie said something and Alex answered. He couldn’t make out the words. Naomi’s breath sounded fast and shallow. He wanted to reach over to her. To take her hand. It would have meant taking his eyes off the monitor, and so he couldn’t.

The Sol gate flickered. Holden increased the magnification until the ring filled his screen. The weird, almost biological structures of the ring itself seemed to shift and writhe. An illusion of light. The drive plumes of the Free Navy ships packed in together so tightly that it looked like one massive blaze of fire appeared on the edge of the ring, tracking in toward its center.

“You want me to take a potshot at them?” Bobbie asked. “Rail gun could probably reach them at this point.”

“No,” Naomi said before Holden could answer. “I don’t know what sending mass through the gates right now would do.”

A line appeared on the model, low on the scale. Moving toward the dying curve. The ring gate grew brighter with the braking burns of the enemy, until it looked like the negative image of an eye—black, star-specked sclera and intensely white, burning iris. The timer reached zero. The lights grew brighter.

Chapter Fifty-One: Marco

Marco's jaw ached. His chest hurt. The joints in his spine hovered at the edge of dislocation without ever passing through to it. The high-g burn scourged him, and he welcomed the pain. The pressure and the discomfort were the price his body paid. They were slowing on approach. The core of the Free Navy was going to reach Medina unopposed, and there was literally no one to stop it.

At a civilized thrust—an eighth, a tenth—and with some time coasting on the float to conserve mass, the journey out to the ring gate would have taken months. He didn't have months. Everything depended on reaching Medina before the scattered forces of the consolidated fleet could reach him. Yes, it meant driving the ships he had to the edge of their ability. Yes, it would mean putting some of the reserves from Medina under conscript to fuel his return to the system, and the people of Medina would have to make do with a little less until he could stabilize the situation enough to allow resupply.

This was wartime. The days for scrimping and saving and safety were gone. Peace was a time for efficiency. War was a time for power. If it meant he drove his fighters to the ragged edge of their ability, that was how victory came. Those who held back the most reserves for tomorrow were the ones least likely to see it. If the price was long days of unrelieved discomfort and pain, he'd pay that price and glory in it. Because at the end, there was rebirth. A shedding away of all his little missteps, a purification, and the seat of his final, permanent victory. And it was coming soon.

His error—he saw it now—was in thinking too small.

He had conceived the revolution that the Free Navy represented as a balancing of the scales. The inners had taken and taken and taken from the Belt, and when they didn't need it anymore, they'd dropped it and fled off to new, shinier toys. Marco had meant to put that right. Let the inners be the

ones in need and the Belt find its independence and its strength. It was anger that had kept his view too small. Righteous anger. Appropriate anger. But blinding all the same.

Medina was the key, and always had been. But it was only now that he saw what it was the key to. He'd meant to close the gates and force the inner planets to address the consequences of generations of injustice. Looking at it now, it almost seemed like a gesture of nostalgia. A harkening back to previous generations. He'd made the classic mistake—he wasn't too proud to admit it—of trying to fight the last war on the next battleground. The power of Medina wasn't that it could stop the flow of money and material out to the new worlds. It was that it could *control* it.

The fate of the Belt wasn't around Jupiter and Saturn, or at least not those alone. In every one of the thirteen hundred systems that the gates led to, there were planets as vulnerable as Earth. The Belt itself would spread to all the systems, float like kings above all their subject worlds. If he had it all to do again, he'd have thrown three times as many rocks on Earth, destroyed Mars while he was at it, and taken his ships and his people to the colony worlds where there were no vestigial fleets to consolidate. With only Medina and the fifteen ships at his disposal, he could exert power over all the worlds there were. It was all about placement, audacity, and will.

He needed to find a way to talk Duarte into giving him a few more ships. But the promise to keep Laconia undisturbed had earned him everything he'd needed up to now. He didn't think another small request would be too much, especially given how much he'd sacrificed already. And if Duarte did object—

The *Pella* shuddered as the drive passed through some resonance frequency. Normally when that happened they weren't under high burn. It was strange how something that was hardly more than a chime at a third of a g could sound like the coming apocalypse at two and a third. He tapped out a message for Josie down in engineering: KEEP US IN ONE PIECE.

A few seconds later, Josie wrote back something obscene, and Marco chuckled through the pressure on his throat.

They'd taken their last respite before the battle four hours earlier, dropping the deceleration to only three-quarters of a g for fifteen minutes to let people eat and visit the head. A longer break would have meant burning

harder now, and they were already running at the edge of their tolerances. But the advantages of an unexpected forced march were scattered through the great military strategists of history. Earth and Mars could only look on, eyes pressed to their telescopes, and wail. Earth and Mars and Medina too.

And on Medina, Naomi and her feckless Earther fuck buddy. James Holden, following in Fred Johnson's footsteps as condescending, patronizing hero of the poor, helpless Belt. When he died, the story of a Belt that had to be saved by self-congratulatory, faux-enlightened Earthers would bleed out with him, and good riddance. And Naomi ...

He didn't know yet what to do with Naomi. She was a conundrum. Strong where she should have been weak and weak where she should have been strong. It was like she'd been born inverted. But there was something about her. Even after all these years, there was something about her that begged to be tamed. She'd slipped away from him twice now. Whatever happened, there wouldn't be a third time. Once he had her in hand, Filip would return on his own. That wasn't worth worrying about.

When Filip had missed the launch from Callisto, Marco hadn't been surprised. The boy had been acting out for weeks. It was normal. Even late, really. Marco had tested Rokku's authority when he'd been much younger than Filip was now. Rokku had told him when to be there for launch, and Marco had intentionally come late to find the berth empty. He'd had to fend for himself on Pallas Station for seven months before Rokku's ship came back. The captain had met him on the dock and beaten him until he was bleeding from a dozen places, but Marco had been taken back in. If Filip needed the same experience, that would be fine.

Not that Marco would beat him. Better that he laugh a little and muss the boy's hair. Humiliation was always better than violence. To beat a man—even to beat a man to death—was at least proof that you took him seriously as a man. Though, looking back, Filip had really been starting to push as far back as when he'd shot the security coyo on Ceres. And God, Marco's jaw ached.

He shifted his fingers, pulled up the timer. The ring gate was only minutes away now. The *Pella* was shedding momentum with every second, making certain that when they passed through the gate, they wouldn't fly into a trap. Holden would be waiting. Watching the fire of their drive plumes. They weren't close enough yet for that to be a danger. Even if

Holden fired his rail gun right now, the *Pella* would be able to react in time to dodge it. That wouldn't be true much longer. His compressed heart beat a little faster. His aching mouth twitched a little smile.

But discomfort was the home of the warrior, now as it had always been. He told himself that he embraced it. Welcomed it. And still, he was going to be glad when this part was done.

He typed in orders for the full force, gathering them in close enough that their drive plumes overlapped, using the vast, energetic cloud as cover to hide behind. Between that and the sensor interference of the ring, Holden would be firing as good as blind. Or at least that was the hope. The worst case was that Holden might take out two or three of his ships before they passed through the ring. But once they came close enough to target the *Rocinante*, crippling the ship would be nothing. Not destroying it, not unless they got unlucky. Trotting out James Holden's famed ship as part of the new Free Navy was too good an opportunity to miss. That was what Sanjrani and Dawes—all the others—missed. Leadership required a clear sense of appearance. Of *style*.

Fifteen minutes. Billions of people were watching him right now. As fast as the photons could travel back, the *Pella* and its fourteen fighting ships would be on every newsfeed, every hand terminal, every monitor in the system. He was fifteen minutes from the hinge point in history. Fourteen.

He checked their common vector. Coming into enemy territory, it was critical that they be neither so close together that a lucky hit by Holden could damage more than one ship nor staggered to give him time to take more shots. They looked good. They would be all right.

He wished now that he'd thought to make a recording to broadcast. It was the perfect moment. Even better than his initial call to arms. He thought of all the Belters in the system—those who'd stood by the Free Navy and those who'd been too cowardly or misguided and even the traitorous fragments of the OPA who'd taken arms with Pa against their own self-interest. He had to believe they all felt a sense of pride. Before him, they'd been slaves in all but name, and now they were a force equal to and stronger than the most powerful states humanity had ever conceived. How could they not feel awe at this? How could they not feel the joy in this?

The ring was close enough to see without magnification now. As wide as Ceres Station and still tiny in the vast darkness out here where even the sun

wasn't more than a peculiarly bright star. His ships would start evasive maneuvers as they drew close. Shifting places in their formation like shells on the table of a dockside hustler. He checked their vectors again, typed out an angry command to one of the ships that was drifting behind. The ring slowly grew larger. He increased the magnification and added false light. The material that made up the ring itself still defied the best minds in the human sphere. He wasn't really seeing it, of course. The image on his monitor was filtered through the brightness of their plumes. In truth, he was falling backward toward the ring, his face toward the faint and unimportant sun. His crash couch held him like he was resting in the palm of God.

A message appeared on his monitor from Karal: ALL SYSTEMS CHECK. BOA CAÇADA.

Marco typed back, not just to Karal, but to all of the *Pella's* crew. GOOD HUNTING.

Five minutes until they passed through the gate and the battle for Medina began. The brief, decisive, ugly battle that would redefine what the Free Navy was. He willed them forward, pushing against brute physics with his mind. Smelling victory. Feeling it in his blood. Minutes slid by like hours, and also gone too fast. Two minutes. One.

Another message from Karal. WIR HAT POSSIBLE.

Beside it was deeper magnification of the ring filtered through the ship's system. A tiny blue dot that had to be the rail gun station, and there beside it, almost too subtle to see, a fleck of lighter darkness that could have been a ship on the float. The *Rocinante*.

Marco felt his whole consciousness narrow into that one tiny gray dot. Naomi. That dot was Naomi. She'd run out of the solar system to get away from him, and here he was. He could see her face in his mind. The empty expression she wore when she was trying not to feel. His grin hurt. His body hurt. But the little dot forgave it all. Except—

Something was wrong with his monitor. He thought at first that the image had gotten grainy, the resolution rougher, but that wasn't right. It was the same size, only he could see the parts that made it up. He wasn't looking at the *Rocinante*. He was looking at photons streaming off a sheet of electrically excited plastic. The polymer chains glowed dark and light and dark. It was like seeing a woman's body in painting across the room

and then, without warning, only the brushstrokes that made it up. Naomi was nowhere in it.

He shouted, and could sense the pressure waves going out from his throat. The clouds of molecules that made his fingers slapped against the ones that were the control pad. He meant to type that they should fire, that they should kill while the chance was still with them, but he couldn't make out the letters in the splash of photons that spilled off his screen. There was too much detail.

Where the air began and the crash couch ended was lost. The boundary between his body and his environment blurred. He had known since he was too young to remember learning that atoms were made from more space than material, and that at the lowest levels, the things that made atoms could bounce in and out of being. He'd never seen it before. He'd never been so aware that he was a vapor of energy. A vibration in a guitar string that didn't exist.

Something dark and sudden moved through the cloud toward him.



On the *Rocinante*, the ring gate grew brighter with the braking burns of the enemy, until it looked like the negative image of an eye—black, star-specked sclera and intensely white, burning iris. The timer reached zero. The lights grew brighter. Then flickered and went out.

Holden checked the sensors. Where fifteen warships on the burn had been seconds before, there was just *nothing*.

“Huh,” Amos said over the ship system. “That is super creepy.”

Chapter Fifty-Two: Pa

Here we are. Back again,” Michio said as she stepped onto the docks of Ceres Station.

“Hup,” Josep, walking beside her, agreed.

When she’d left, she had been rebelling against a rebellion. Now she had come, whether anyone admitted it or not, to beg the powers of Earth and Mars for her freedom. She felt like the docks themselves should have changed too. Grown older and more worn the way her soul had. But the echoing music built from the clanking of mechs and power tools, the gabble of voices, was what it had been before. The smells of carbon lubricants and ozone was still as sharp.

A new coat of paint even left the old station looking brighter and younger and more full of hope than when she’d left. The signs had been replaced. The same corridors and lifts, but in bright, clean new fonts and half a dozen alphabets. She knew it was designed for the colonists and refugees fleeing Earth, but it seemed pointed that, of the languages listed, none was Belter Creole. Earth ran Ceres again, the way it had before Eros, and they were turning the station into a theme-park version of itself. The guard was for the most part ceremonial, but Michio was more than willing to bet their sidearms were loaded. It was awkward work, welcoming someone who was equal parts ally and enemy. She didn’t envy them.

It had been six months now since the remarkable death of Marco Inaros and the great remnant of the Free Navy. Half a year just to bring the remaining players together to talk. She wondered how long it would take to actually do something that mattered. And what would happen when they all ran out of time. She felt like she had a tiny Nico Sanjrani in the back of her head counting down the hours until the Belt—no, until all humanity—needed the farms and medical centers and mines and processing facilities that they hadn’t built because they’d been too busy fighting. Some nights it

kept her awake. Some nights other things did.

She was half expecting them to take her to the same quarters Marco Inaros had assigned the last time she'd been here hammering out a plan for the Belt, but while it was in the same section of the station, the particular rooms were different. Their escort finished welcoming them, assured them that if they needed anything, someone from the hospitality service would be there to help. They bowed their way out the door, closing it as they left. Michio lowered herself to the couch in the suite's main room while Josep made his way through each of the rooms, taking stock and looking for surveillance equipment that was both certainly there and certainly too professionally installed to find.

Nadia, Bertold, and Laura were back on the new ship—a converted cargo hauler on loan from one of Bertold's cousins as long as they found ways to make the payments on it. After the sleekness and power of the *Connaught*, it felt cheap and flimsy. But her family was on it, so it was home in the same way that the couch her cheek rested against was raw-silk upholstery in a jail cell.

Josep's laugh was hard. He walked back into the room with a rectangle of something the color of cream and held it out to her. Not paper, but heavy card stock smooth as the couch. The writing on it was neat and precise.

Captain Pa—

Thank you for coming to the conference and for your courage in the struggles we have all endured together. With good faith and cooperation, we will forge the path still ahead.

It was signed Chrisjen Avasarala. Michio looked up at Josep, her brow knit.

“En serio? That doesn't even sound like her.”

“I know,” he said. “And come see! There's a fruit basket.”



If wars began with rage, they ended with exhaustion.

In the aftermath of the system-wide battle and its unsettling aftermath at the ring, the partisans of the Free Navy had felt an overwhelming sense of injustice. It was as if the disappearance of the *Pella* and its battle force had been a bad call in a football match, and they were trying to find a referee to shout down. Then, slowly, the understanding seemed to spread through all the stations—Pallas, Ganymede, Ceres, Tycho, and dozens more besides—that the war was ended. That they'd lost. A group on Pallas had issued a declaration that they were the New Free Navy and had set off a few bombs when the consolidated fleet arrived to take control of the station. The Jovian system—Callisto, Europa, Ganymede, and all the lesser bases there—had been the Free Navy's strongest ground and the one least touched by the fighting. A few patches of resistance there meant the violence would drag on for a few more weeks or months, but the outcome wasn't in doubt.

The specter of the Laconia gate and Winston Duarte hung over Mars more than anyone else. Martian identity—proud cogs in the glorious terraforming machine—didn't square with military coups and mass defection. Mars wanted answers, and Laconia ignored them all magnificently. The only communication since the death of the Free Navy was a looped statement broadcast through the gate. A man's voice, inflected like a newsreader's, saying, *Laconia is under its own sovereign authority. This message serves as notice that any ships passing through the Laconia gate will be in violation of that authority and will be denied passage. Laconia is under its own sovereign authority ...*

The message had caused no end of debate in the Martian parliament while Earth drove two of its three remaining battleships out to the slow zone and parked them and their ancient but effective rail guns and nuclear torpedoes at the edges of the Laconia gate, ready to reduce anything that came out to gas and scrap. Avasarala called it a containment policy, and Michio supposed it was the sanest thing to do. Earth was in no condition to pick another fight.

By the time Rosenfeld Guoliang took the stand in The Hague, the first high-profile prosecution for the murder of billions on Earth, the vast and complex human zeitgeist was ready for it to be over. There would be other trials coming. Anderson Dawes had been captured. Nico Sanjrani turned himself in at Tycho. Of Inaros' original inner circle, Michio Pa was the only one not in a cell or dead. And she was at a cocktail party.

The meeting center in the governor's palace was built on three levels with stairways between them and a lot of plants. People in uniform and formal dress stood in pairs or small groups or alone with their hand terminals while servants carried trays of hors d'oeuvres and drinks. If anything specific was wanted—food or drink or a fresh pair of shoes, probably—they had only to ask. The lap of luxury. The highest circles of power and influence.

This was the real thing, something that Marco Inaros had only been able to play at. The stone walks were polished and the pillars were made of striped sedimentary rock pulled all the way from Earth as a kind of boast. *We're so rich, we don't even use our own stone.* She'd never noticed it before, and she didn't know whether it left her amused or angry or sad.

"Michio," a woman's voice said. "Here you are. How is Laura?"

The old lady in the orange sari took Michio's elbow and led her along almost three full steps before she realized it was Avasarala. The old Earther looked different in person. Smaller, her skin a deeper brown, her pale hair taking up more of her face.

"Much better," Michio said. "Back on the ship."

"With Nadia and Bertold? And Josep stayed back in your rooms? Just so long as they know they're welcome. God damn, this is an ugly piece of architecture, isn't it?" Avasarala said. "I saw you looking at the pillars."

"I was," Michio said.

Avasarala leaned in close, her eyes bright as a schoolgirl's. "They're fake. The rock? Made it with a centrifuge and colored sand. I knew the builder. He was a fake too. Pretty, though. God save us all from good-looking men."

Michio surprised herself by laughing. The old woman was charming. Michio knew that this show of hospitality was just that. A show. And yet it worked; she felt more at ease. The time was going to come, and soon, when Michio was going to have to come to this woman and ask for amnesty. Ask this Earther to let her and her family go free for Marco's crimes. This moment made it seem like maybe the answer would be yes. Hope was a terrible thing. She didn't want to feel, and yet there it was.

She didn't know she was going to speak until she said it. "I'm sorry." What she meant was *I'm sorry I didn't stop the attack that killed your husband* and *I'm sorry I didn't see Inaros for what he was sooner* and *I*

would do it all differently if I could live my life backward and try again.

Avasarala paused, looked deeply into Michio's eyes, and it was like seeing someone through a mask. The deepness there startled her. When she spoke, it was as if she'd heard every nuance.

"Politics is the art of the possible, Captain Pa. When you play at our level, grudges cost lives."

Across a narrow courtyard, James Holden turned and then came trotting over. He, at least, was the same height she remembered. He looked a little older than when they'd fought against Ashford on the *Behemoth*. Back in the God-who-could-have-known-they-were-the-good-old-days. She saw the surprise and pleasure as he recognized her.

"Captain Holden," she said. "Still weird to see you."

"Right?" he said with a boyish smile that seemed totally unaffected. He turned to Avasarala. "Can I pull you away for a minute? There's a thing."

Avasarala squeezed Michio's arm, then let it go. "Forgive me," she said. "Holden can't find his cock with both hands unless there's someone there to point him at it."

They walked away together, heads bent in conference. Behind a spray of ivy, Michio saw a tall, dark-skinned woman bent a degree forward as she laughed with the Martian prime minister. Naomi Nagata. She looked ... normal? Unremarkable. Michio knew her from before, and still might not have known her if they'd passed in a common corridor or shared a tube ride. But this was the woman Marco had abducted before his attack on Earth, just so he could watch her look upon his power. The woman who'd turned away from him when they'd both been little more than children themselves. Michio would never know how much of the decision to take the last remnant of the Free Navy to Medina had been for cold tactical reasons and how much was because Naomi Nagata had been there. It was so petty and so small, and she had no trouble believing it. *When you play at our level, grudges cost lives.*

Carlos Walker strolled through an archway, caught her eye, and smiled. She'd known him mostly by reputation back when she'd been part of Fred fucking Johnson's OPA. Carlos Walker, with his playboy's manners and the weird religious streak, the sincerity of which no one seemed able to determine. He plucked two fresh flutes of champagne from a passing tray and made his way toward her.

“You look thoughtful, Captain Pa.”

“Do I?” she said, taking the glass. “Well, then I suppose it must be true. And you? How does it feel being the unelected representative of the Belt?”

Walker smiled. “I could ask you the same.”

She laughed. “I’m not representing anyone but myself.”

“Really? Then what are you doing here?”

Michio blinked, but didn’t know how to respond.

A little less than an hour later, a soft chiming and a discrete rush of personal assistants and aides announced the actual meeting. Pa let herself be carried along with a growing sense of displacement. The meeting room was smaller than she’d expected, and arranged in a rough triangle. Avasarala, a thin-faced man in a formal jacket, and two men in military uniforms sat at one corner. The Martian prime minister—Emily Richards—sat at another with half a dozen people in suits fluttering around her like they were moths and she was an open flame. And at the third, Carlos Walker, Naomi Nagata, James Holden, and Michio herself.

A second rank of chairs held dozens of people whose roles Michio didn’t know. Senators. Businessmen. Bankers. Soldiers. It occurred to her that if she’d had a bomb, she could probably have crippled what was left of humanity’s major governments by taking out this one room.

“Well,” Avasarala said, her voice clear as a Klaxon, “I’d like to start by thanking all of you again for being here. I’m not fond of this shit, but the optics are good. And we do have some things to discuss. I have a proposal ...” She paused to tap a command into her hand terminal, and Michio’s chimed in response, as did everyone else’s in the room. “... a proposal about the architecture by which we try to unfuck ourselves. It’s preliminary, but we have to start somewhere.”

Michio opened the document. It was over a thousand pages long, with the first ten a tightly written table of contents with notations and subsections for every chapter. She felt a little wave of vertigo.

“The overview looks like this,” Avasarala said. “We have a list of problems as long as our arms, but Captain Holden here thinks he’s come up with a way to use some of them to solve the others. Captain?”

Holden, beside her, stood up, seemed to realize no one else was going to stand up to talk, and then shrugged and bulled forward with it. “The thing is the Free Navy wasn’t wrong. With all the new systems opened up, the

economic niche that Belters have filled *is* going to go away. There are so many reserves on these planets that don't require we bring our own air or generate our own gravity that the Belt is going to be outcompeted. And, no offense, the plan up to now has been versions of 'sucks to be you.'

"There's a significant population of the Belt that's not going to be able to move down a gravity well. They're just going to be forgotten. Left to die off. And since that's not all that different from how Belters got treated before, it was easy for Inaros to find political backing."

"I wouldn't say that was the only thing that got him there," Prime Minister Richards drawled. "Having a bunch of my ships helped him out."

The room chuckled.

"But the thing is," Holden said, "we've been going out there wrong. There's a traffic problem we didn't know about. Under the wrong conditions, it's not safe to go through the gates. Which we found out because a bunch of ships went missing. And if the plan is that just anyone who wants to go through the gates does so anytime they want to, more will go missing. There has to be someone regulating that. And, thanks to Naomi Nagata, we now know the load limit of the gate network."

He paused and looked around, almost as if he was expecting applause before he went on.

"So that's two problems. No niche for the Belt. The need for traffic control through the gates. Now add to that the fact that Earth, Mars—all of us really—have taken enough damage in the last few years that our infrastructure won't carry us. We have maybe a year or two to really find ways to generate the food and clean water and clean air that we're *all* going to need. And we probably can't do that in our solar system unless just a lot more people die. We need a fast, efficient way to trade with the colony worlds for raw materials. So that's why I'm proposing an independent union with the sole and specific task of coordinating shipments through the gates. Most people who want to live on planets will just do that. But the Belt has a huge population of people who are specifically suited to life outside a gravity well. Moving supplies and people safely between solar systems is a new niche. And it's one we need filled quickly and efficiently. In the proposal, I called it the spacing guild, but I'm not married to that name."

A gray-haired man sitting two rows behind Emily Richards cleared his

throat and spoke. “You’re proposing to turn the entire population of the Belt into a single transport company?”

“Yes, into a network of ships, support stations, and other services necessary to move people and cargo between the gates,” Holden said. “Keep in mind, they’ve got thirteen hundred and seventy-three solar systems to manage. There’s going to be work. Well, thirteen hundred and seventy-two, really. Because of Laconia.”

“And what do you propose to do about Laconia?” a woman behind Avasarala asked.

“I don’t know,” Holden said. “I was just starting with this.”

Avasarala waved him to sit down, and reluctantly he did. Naomi shifted, murmured something in his ear, and Holden nodded.

“The proposed structure of the union,” Avasarala said, “is fairly standard. Limited sovereignty in exchange for regulatory input from the major governing bodies, meaning Emily and whoever they elect once I’m out of this.”

“*Limited* sovereignty?” Carlos Walker said.

“Limited,” Avasarala said. “Don’t ask me to put out on the first date, Walker. I’m not that kind of girl. The union will, of course, need to have support from the Belt. The first union president will be taking on a huge job, but I think we can all agree that we have a unique opportunity for that. Someone well-known both among Belters and on the inner planets.”

Holden nodded. Michio looked over at him. His bright eyes and firm chin.

“Someone,” Avasarala continued, “above—or at least apart from—factions and politics. Trustworthy, well-tested moral compass, and with a long résumé of doing the right thing even when it’s unpopular.”

Holden smiled, nodded to himself. He looked so pleased. Michio hadn’t come to a meeting. This was an anointing. She was suddenly profoundly disheartened. It would probably improve her chances for getting amnesty, but—

“That is why,” Avasarala said, “we need to draft James Holden.”

Holden yelped like he’d been bitten. “What? Wait. No, that’s all wrong. It’s a terrible idea.”

Avasarala frowned. “Then—”

“Look,” Holden said, standing up again. “This is exactly the problem.

This is what we keep doing. Forcing rules and leadership on the Belters rather than letting them pick for themselves.”

A grumble passed through the room, but Holden just kept talking.

“If I can use this moment to nominate someone else instead. Someone with all the qualities Madam Secretary Avasarala just listed, and more. Someone with honor and integrity and leadership, and with the added bonus of actually belonging to the community they’d be leading.”

And somehow—Michio wasn’t sure how this had happened—Holden was pointing at her.

“Then I would nominate Michio Pa.”

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Chapter Fifty-Three: Naomi

The Blue Frog was closed for renovations, so after the meetings were over, she drove the cart to a pub two levels higher and a little to spinward. The sign beside the door was cheap steel set into the wall with the words COOPERATIVE FOURTEEN hand-welded into it. Naomi didn't know if the name had a history behind it, or if that was just the new style in naming clubs. On the other side of the door, the decor took on a much less industrial feel. The tables glowed in bright primary colors, and the walls were covered in strands of woven wire, looped and tied to look like old pictures of waterfalls. A low stage with a karaoke setup hummed and danced with itself, waiting for someone to break the ice. There was room for as many as a hundred people in the space, and counting herself and Jim, there were probably fewer than twenty. But it was also off-hours, so that made it hard to judge.

The crew were already there and, to judge from the empty bottles the waiter was clearing away, had been there for some time. As they walked across to them, Jim relaxed. The four of them gave a little cheer and made space for two new chairs at the table.

"What happened?" Bobbie said. "You were supposed to be here hours ago."

"Avasarala jumped me," Jim said, and Amos' empty, amiable smile got a degree wider. Jim laughed and shook his head. "No, I mean she tried to get me named as the head of the spacing guild."

"You know that name's not going to stick, right?" Alex said.

"Wait, she did *what*?" Bobbie said.

Jim held out his hands, a gesture of helplessness. "She gave out the proposal, and I gave my little speech about it, and then boom. Right at the front, she said I should be the one to help put it together. First union

president. It probably took the first two hours just convincing her I wouldn't do it."

"Why didn't you take the position?" Clarissa asked. She seemed genuinely confused.

"Because then I'd have to do it," Jim said, waving to call the waiter back.

"Makes sense she'd want someone she could control calling the shots, though," Alex said.

"Avasarala doesn't think she can control Holden," Bobbie said. "But she also doesn't think anyone else can. She might just want someone from Earth in charge, at least as a figurehead. Makes the union *feel* like it's in her circle of influence. Fred Johnson was OPA to the marrow, but he was from Earth. He never totally got away from that."

The waiter trotted over and took Jim's order. Naomi leaned in around him so she could see Bobbie as she spoke.

"That was our point," she said. "If it's going to work, the Belt needs to know it's their own and not another set of scraps that the inners are tossing out." The waiter reached out, his fingers stopping just short of touching her shoulder. "Whatever your best stout is," she said, and he vanished with a nod. She turned back. "Anyway, we threw Michio Pa under the bus."

"She's perfect," Holden said. "She knows all the players in the Belt. She's not afraid to work with Earth and Mars. She's literally the former commander of Medina Station. Granted back before it was a station, but she's got a real familiarity with the ship. And look what she's been doing since she broke with Inaros. Coordination and distribution. *Exactly* the job we're looking at."

"Well," Alex said, "except with less piracy this time. I mean, assuming."

"Did she take the job?" Bobbie asked.

"She's coming around," Naomi said. "It was a long meeting."

"What about us?" Clarissa asked. Her voice had dread in it. A hollowness. "What do we do now?"

"We join the union," Jim said. "I mean, we'll need to vote on it here in the family, but it seems weird to push for a new architecture for the colonies and then not be part of it. And there'll be a lot of work for a good ship. We have a good ship."

Clarissa's gaze flickered up to Naomi, then, with an almost invisible

smile, away. Jim hadn't understood what she'd really been asking. *Now that the war's over, do I still have a place here?* And he didn't know that he'd answered yes. He had a genius for assuming things that let Clarissa trust him. Naomi handed the girl a napkin so she wouldn't have to dab her eyes with a cuff.

"Seems to me," Alex said, "we should look at escorting colony ships. And making sure the ore or whatever the colony has to trade gets where it's going."

"Lot of trade in-system too," Amos said. "Don't *have* to go out past the gates."

"Yeah," Alex agreed. "But there's more planets out there than I'm going to be able to see in my lifetime. I'd like to get to a few of them."

The waiter returned with Jim's gin and tonic and her own stout. When she tried to pay, the transaction was already zeroed out. The waiter smiled at her, shook his head, and said, "On the house." Naomi nodded her thanks. Jim was already drinking.

Bobbie was the only one who seemed quiet, her hand wrapped around a glass. Alex and Amos told Clarissa stories about New Terra and going through to the new worlds. Jim drank and chimed in on occasion, the political meeting starting to fade and his shoulders slipping a little lower as he relaxed. But Bobbie kept her own council until Naomi finished her second drink, took the Martian's hand, and tugged her away.

"Are you all right?" Naomi asked.

"Yes," Bobbie said in a voice that meant *no*. "It's just ... this is really the end of the terraforming project, isn't it? I mean, I knew that, but ... I don't know. Trying to get us all to here helped distract me. But this agreement they're hammering out. It's the shape things are going to have from now on."

"Yeah," Naomi said. "And it's going to be different."

"All my life, changing Mars. Making it a viable ecosystem ... it's just always been a thing. Hearing about rules and laws and systems for how that's never coming back ... I don't know. It's kind of hitting me that it's really gone."

"Probably, yeah," Naomi said, but Bobbie went on as if she hadn't heard her. As if she was saying something out loud for the first time. Discovering her thoughts by hearing them expressed in her own voice.

“Because Inaros and all the Free Navy people, they weren’t fighting for Belter rights or political recognition. They were fighting to have the past back. To have things be what they’ve always been. Sure, with them on top maybe, but ... Earth’s not going to be humanity’s home anymore. Mars isn’t going to be Mars, not like I knew it. Belters aren’t even going to be Belters now. They’re going to be ... what? Shipping magnates? I don’t even know.”

“No one does,” Naomi said, leading Bobbie forward. The big Martian didn’t seem aware that they were walking. “But we’re going to find out.”

“I don’t know who I am in that world.”

“I don’t either. None of us does. But I know that I have my ship. And my little family with it.”

“Yeah. That sounds like a plan.”

“Good,” Naomi said, and put a microphone in Bobbie’s hand. “Let’s pick a song.”

The pub filled up more at shift change, but for once no one seemed to take much notice of Jim or any of the rest of them. Even when Naomi got a standing ovation for what in retrospect must have been a deeply flawed version of Devi Anderson’s “Apart Together,” nobody seemed to recognize the crew of the *Rocinante* as being anything but the people at table six. It felt good knowing that could still happen sometimes. By the end of the night, even Clarissa had a turn on stage. It turned out she had a good singing voice, and after she got down, a local boy with Loca Griega tattoos tried to hit on her until Bobbie gently made it clear nothing was going to happen.

They took the tube back to the dock, filling up almost half of a car just themselves, still a little tipsy, still talking too loud, laughing at nothing really. Alex’s Mariner Valley drawl got thicker, and Bobbie mimicked it, egging him on until they sounded like parodies of themselves. Jim, least involved with the hilarity and still somehow central to it, sat back against the rattling wall of the car, his hands behind his head and his eyes half-closed. She didn’t really understand what she and Jim and all the others were reacting to until they were at the ship. Seeing the *Rocinante* locked in the docking clamps was like falling into a familiar pair of arms. They were giddy because Jim was giddy. And Jim was giddy because, for once, he’d just avoided being responsible for the future of the whole human race.

It seemed like a fair thing to celebrate.

Back on board, the group moved together to the galley, not ready yet for the day to be over. Clarissa made herself some tea, but there wasn't any more alcohol. Just the six of them, lounging in a galley designed to serve many more. Alex, sitting with his back against one wall, told a story about when he'd been in training on Olympus Mons and the mother of one of the other recruits had arrived to complain that the drill sergeant was being too rough on her son. That led into Bobbie talking about a time when she and her squad had all gotten food poisoning at the same meal, but bullied each other into training the next day regardless, then spent the day puking into their helmets. They were all laughing together, sharing parts of the lives they'd had before they came here. Before the *Rocinante* was their home.

Eventually, without the flow of conversation abating, Alex made enough chicken with peanut sauce for everyone and passed bowls out while Clarissa told a surprisingly funny story about being in a prison writing workshop. Naomi ate the chicken with a fork, leaning against Jim as she did. The sauce wasn't like Belters made it, but it was good enough.

She felt Jim getting near the end of his endurance. He didn't say anything, but she knew from the sound of his breath and the way he unconsciously tapped his leg like a child trying to stay awake. She felt the exhaustion herself. It had been a long day, and the stakes had been high. The pleasant buzz left over from the pub was starting to fade, and deep, muzzy tiredness was slipping into her joints. But she didn't want the moment to end either, any of the moments with these people in this place, even though eventually they had to. No, not *even though. Because.*

Because eventually they had to. Nothing lasted forever. Not peace. Not war. Nothing.

She stood first, taking her bowl and Jim's and Bobbie's, since she was done with it, and feeding them into the recycler. She stretched, yawned, held her hand out to Jim. He took his cue. Alex, who was talking about a music performance he'd seen on Titan back when he'd still been in the service, nodded his good night. Naomi led Jim to the lift, then to their cabin with the occasional sound of laughter filtering through to them, fainter the farther they went, but not absent. Not yet.

Jim fell onto the crash couch like a marionette with his strings cut, threw one arm across his eyes, and groaned. In the light, he looked young again. The stubble on his neck and along the side of one cheek was thin and

patchy, as if it were growing in for the first time. She could remember when the prospect of Jim and his body had been as powerful as a drug to her. Powerful enough that she'd been driven to take the risk of being with him. He hadn't known then how much of a leap it had been for her. He probably still didn't know now. Some things were secret even after you told them. He moaned again, shifted his arm, looked up at her. His smile was equal parts exhaustion and delight. Exhaustion from what they'd been through. Delight because it was done. And because they were both there.

"Do you think Pa will take the job?" he asked. He sounded almost wistful.

"Yes, eventually," Naomi said. And then, a moment later, "How long have you been planning that?"

"The idea of the union, or Pa in particular?"

"Pa."

Jim shrugged. "It was pretty clear early on that having an Earther be the head of it wasn't going to work. I thought Fred would be able to find someone. So I guess I started looking at her for it right around then. Consciously, anyway. She was kind of perfect, though. She broke with the Free Navy in order to help the Belt. No one else did that, or at least not as openly. And she won every fight she led her people into. I think the ones who need to take her seriously, will."

Naomi sat on the edge of the crash couch. It shifted with the change in the center of their combined weight, moving Jim a few centimeters closer to her. He stretched out an arm as invitation, and she settled back into it. "Do you think she'll enjoy it?"

"I don't know. I'd hate it, but maybe she's different enough from me she'll find something to redeem the process. The important thing is I think she'll be good at it. Plays to her strengths. At least I don't know anyone who's likely to do better."

"I hope you're right," she said. "You really think you couldn't have done it?"

"I was never an option. There's too much history. Maybe an Earther can do it in a generation or three when things have been different for a while."

Naomi laughed, moved her head to rest beside his. "By then something else will have happened."

"Yeah," Holden said. "That's true. But in the short term, I really do think

she's the best one for the job. I'm just glad she was here. My second choice for the job would have been you."

She sat up, looking into his eyes to see whether he was joking. A long way away, Amos laughed just loud enough for the echoes to reach her. Jim's expression was somewhere between chagrin and amusement.

God, he'd been serious.

"You could have done it," Holden said. "You're smart. You're a Belter. Your opposition to the Free Navy's as good or better than Pa's. You have a track record that Earth and Mars would have been comfortable with, and enough connection to the Belt to make you plausible to them."

"You know I wouldn't have done it, right?"

"No," Jim said, and there was something almost like sorrow in his voice. "I know you wouldn't have wanted to. I know you would have hated it. But you would have, if you had to. If there wasn't someone else. Too many people would have needed you for you to turn them all away."

She lay back down, considered the idea, and shuddered.

"I know, right?" Jim said. "And how are you doing?"

She took the hand of the arm she was lying across in hers, drew it gently around her like he was a blanket. He had asked her that every few days since the war ended. How was she doing? It sounded like an innocuous question, but it carried more than its own weight. She'd killed her old lover, her old friends. She wished with a longing as powerful as thirst that there had been a way to save her son. Jim wasn't asking if she was all right so much as how bad was it. There was no good answer for that. *I will carry this guilt and sadness for the rest of my life* was just as true as *I lost my son years ago*. Her comfort was that she was still alive. That Jim was. And Amos and Alex. Bobbie and Clarissa.

She was as much a monster as Clarissa or Amos had ever been. She was someone who'd found a way to save her little chosen family when everything seemed lost. The two didn't balance, but they existed together. Pain and relief. Sorrow and contentment. The evil and the redeeming could sit together in her heart, live together, and neither one take the edge off the other.

And Jim knew that. He didn't ask because he needed an answer. He asked because he needed her to know the answer mattered to him. That was all.

“I’m all right,” she said. The way she always did. Jim reached out his other hand and dimmed the lights. Naomi closed her eyes. They felt very comfortable that way. She could hear from Jim’s breath that he wasn’t asleep. That he was thinking about something.

She kept herself awake, just a little. Waited for him. Little flickers of dream danced in at the edge of her mind, and she lost track of her body every now and again.

“Do you think we should go out to the colonies?” he said. “It seems like maybe we ought to. I mean, we’ve been to Ilus. And if we can sort of blaze the trail? Make it normal? Maybe it’ll be easier for Pa to get more Belt ships to take the risk.”

“Maybe,” she said.

“Because the other thing we could do is stay here. There’s just a lot of work that’s going to need to happen here. Rebuilding. Beefing up Medina for when Duarte comes back. Because you know whatever he’s doing is going to be a problem eventually. I don’t know where we should go next.”

Naomi nodded. Jim rolled in closer to her. The warmth of his body and the smell of his skin were consoling.

“Let’s just stay here for a minute,” she said.

Epilogue: Anna

As with astronomy the difficulty of recognizing the motion of the earth lay in abandoning the immediate sensation of the earth's fixity and of the motion of the planets, so in history the difficulty of recognizing the subjection of personality to the laws of space, time, and cause lies in renouncing the direct feeling of the independence of one's own personality. But as in astronomy the new view said: "It is true that we do not feel the movement of the earth, but by admitting its immobility we arrive at absurdity, while by admitting its motion (which we do not feel) we arrive at laws," so also in history the new view says: "It is true that we are not conscious of our dependence, but by admitting our free will we arrive at absurdity, while by admitting our dependence on the external world, on time, and on cause, we arrive at laws."

In the first case it was necessary to renounce the consciousness of an unreal immobility in space and to recognize a motion we did not feel; in the present case it is similarly necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious.

Anna savored the moment, then closed the text window and made the same, small sound that she always did when she finished the book. Anna loved the Bible and felt comforted and lifted up by what she found in it, but Tolstoy was uncontested for second place.

The accepted etymology of the word *religion* was that it came from *religere*, meaning "to bind together," but Cicero had said its true root was *relegere*, "to reread." The truth was, she liked both answers. What brought people together in a sense of love and community and the impulse to go back to beloved books weren't that different for her. Both of them left her feeling calmer and renewed. Nono said it meant she was an introvert and an extrovert at the same time. Anna couldn't really argue against that.

Officially the ship was the *Abdel Rahman Badawi* operated by

Trachtman Corporation out of Luna, but everyone on board called her the *Abbey*. The complex history of the ship was written in her bones. The hallways were different shapes, depending on the style when they'd been added in or what salvaged ship they'd been taken from. The air always smelled like new plastic from the recyclers. The thrust gravity was kept at a thin tenth of a g to conserve reaction mass. The cargo decks far below Anna now were cathedral-high and piled with all the things that the new colony on Eudoxia—shelters, food recyclers, two small fusion reactors, and a wealth of biological and agricultural materials—would need. There were already two other settlements on Eudoxia. It was one of the most populous of the colony worlds with almost a thousand people on it.

When the *Abbey* arrived, that population would triple, and Anna and Nono and Nami would be part of it. Would live out the rest of their lives, chances were, finding ways to raise food they could eat, learning about their new, broad, and problematic Eden. And hopefully, building the spaces and institutions that would shape humanity's presence on that world forever. The first university, the first hospital, the first cathedral. All the things perched just outside reality, waiting for Anna and her fellow colonists to bring them into being.

It wasn't the retirement Anna had expected or hoped for. Some nights she dreaded it. Not for herself so much as for her daughter. She'd always thought of Nami growing up in Abuja with her cousins, going off to university in Saint Petersburg or Moscow. She felt wistful now, knowing that Nami would likely never have the experience of living in a huge, sprawling urban environment. That she and Nono wouldn't grow old together in the little house near Zuma Rock. That her own ashes, when she passed, would be scattered on unfamiliar water. But Abuja also had a few thousand less mouths to feed. Out of the remaining billions on Earth, it was nothing, except that enough nothings together might add up to something after all.

Her cabin was smaller than the house with two tiny bedrooms, a little sitting area with a scruffy wall screen, and just enough storage for their personal items. There were twenty like it in their hall, with a shared lavatory at one end and a cafeteria at the other. Four halls like hers on the deck. Ten decks on the ship. Right now, Nono was at the galley on deck three singing with a bluegrass quartet. The youngest of the musicians—a

rail-thin, red-haired man named Jacques Harbinger—had used almost his whole personal space allotment on a real hammer dulcimer. Nami would be coming back from school on deck eight, where Kerr Ackerman was using the ship tutorials to teach the two hundred or so children about biology and survival techniques tailored for Eudoxia. After they both came home and they'd all had dinner in their own galley, Anna was going to the Humanist Society meeting on deck two, where she'd already won the role of the loyal opposition to George and Tanja Li, the young atheist couple who ran it. She didn't fool herself into believing anyone would change anyone else's mind. But the trip was long, and a good philosophical discussion passed the hours pleasantly. Then home to work on her sermon for next week.

She remembered something she'd read, she didn't know where, about the life of ancient Greece. The private space had been thin there too, most of people's hours spent in the streets and courtyards of Athens and Corinth and Thebes. A world where everyone's home was not their castle but their dorm room. It was exhausting, but exhilarating too. She could already see the early shapes of the community they would eventually become. And the efforts she made now would have an effect on what happened when they reached their new home planet. The decisions they made in building their township would be the seed crystal for the city that might one day rise up from it. A few hundred years, and the work Anna did now to make this group a kind, thoughtful, centered one might be able to shape a whole world.

And wasn't that worth a little extra effort?

She heard Nami's voice before the door opened, serious and percussive the way she got when she was focused on something. She didn't talk to herself often, so Anna assumed she had someone from school with her. When the door opened, she was proven right.

Nami walked into the little common room, practically dragging a sullen Arab boy behind her. He started a little when he saw Anna. She smiled without showing her teeth, didn't quite make eye contact, didn't move. She'd learned more about how to be with traumatized people in the last year than she'd ever hoped to know, and much of what she came to understand was that humans were domestic animals like dogs and cats. They responded poorly to threats and well to a gentle building of trust. Not rocket science, but easy to forget.

“This is Saladin,” Nami said. “We have a group project.”

“Good to meet you, Saladin,” Anna said. “I’m glad you could be here.”

The boy nodded once, looked away. Anna had to resist the urge to try to draw him out, ask him where he lived, who his parents were, how he liked his classes. She was always impatient to help people, even when they weren’t ready to be helped. Maybe especially then.

Nami, nattering about the great-man theory and technological ratchets and railroading time as if to fill the conversation for both of them, went to her bedroom and came out with her school tablet. Anna hoisted an eyebrow. “That’s been here all day?”

“I forgot it,” Nami said lightly. Then, “Bye, Mom,” as she marched out the door.

Saladin hesitated like he was surprised to have been left alone with a grown-up. Anna looked close to him, but not straight on. He nodded and ducked out the door after her daughter. She waited for one breath, and then another, and then—knowing it was a bad idea—crept to the closed door and peeked out. Nami and Saladin were walking down the narrow ship corridor, squeezing close to be side by side. His right hand was in her left, and as far as Anna could see, Nami was still talking animatedly about whatever she was talking about while Saladin, rapt, listened.



“So what’s your group project?” Anna asked.

Dinner that night was spiced beans and rice that very nearly mimicked the real thing. Nono was tired after her rehearsal, and Anna was expecting the Humanist meeting to be intense and a little taxing, so they’d taken the food back to their rooms instead of staying in the galley. Nami sat cross-legged with her back against the door while Anna and Nono took two of the chairs that folded down out of the wall. The walls were close enough that even though they were on opposite sides of the room, their knees almost touched. It would be almost a year living in the *Abbey*. By the time they reached Eudoxia, they might not remember what open space felt like anymore.

“History,” Nami said.

“Big subject,” Anna said. “Any particular part of history?”

Nono looked up at her from under her eyebrows, so maybe Anna wasn’t being quite as casual and nonchalant as she thought. Nami didn’t seem to notice anything, though.

“No. All of it. We’re not talking about what happened in history, we’re talking about what history is. So, you know”—she gestured in a circle with her spoon—“is the important thing about history the people who actually did things, or if they hadn’t been alive, would the same basic things have happened, just with other people doing them? Like with math.”

“Math?” Anna said.

“Sure,” Nami said. “Two different people came up with calculus right at the same time. So maybe everything’s like that. Maybe it doesn’t matter who leads a war because the things that made the war happen weren’t leaders. They were how much money people had or how good their land was for making food or something. That’s the section I’m writing. Saladin’s writing about the great-man theory, but it’s old because they only talk about men.”

“Ah,” Anna said, cringing at how obvious she felt. “Saladin’s doing that?”

“It’s about the idea that without Caesar, there wouldn’t have been a Roman Empire. Or without a Jesus, there wouldn’t have been Christianity.”

“Hard to argue against that,” Nono said.

“It’s a history class. We’re not talking about the religious part. And then Liliana’s doing the section on the technological ratchet, where the thing that changes is how well we understand how to make things like medicines and nuclear bombs and Epstein drives, and that everything else about history is cyclic. The same things happen over and over again, but it just seems different because we have different tools.” Nami frowned. “I don’t understand that one yet. But it’s not my section.”

“And what do you think?” Anna asked.

Nami shook her head and scooped up a last spoonful of almost-beans. “It’s dumb to break it up like that,” she said around her food. “Like it’s one thing or it’s something else. That’s not how it ever is. It’s always that there’s somebody who does whatever it is. You know, conquers Europe or decides that it’s a great idea to line aqueducts with lead or figures out how to coordinate radio frequencies. You never have one without the other. It’s like

nature versus nurture. When do you ever see one without the other?"

"That's a good point," Anna said. "So how does the project work?"

Nami rolled her eyes. Oh God, they were in eye-rolling ages now. It seemed so recent that her little girl had been free of contempt. "It isn't like that."

"What isn't like what?"

"Mother. Saladin isn't my boyfriend. His parents died in Cairo, and he's here with his aunt and uncle. He really needs friends, and anyway Liliana likes him, so even if I did, I wouldn't. We have to be careful. We're spending our whole lives together, so we need to be really gentle. If we mess it up, it's not like we can just change schools."

"Oh," Anna said. "Is that something you talk about at school?"

The eye-roll again. Two eye-rolls in one night. "That was you, Mom. You're always saying that."

"I guess I am," Anna agreed.

After they were done, Nami took their bowls and spoons and drinking bulbs back to the galley for them, an echo of the way she used to clean up after dinner back at home. When that had been home. Then she was off to study with Liliana and, for all Anna knew, Saladin as well. Nono took her turn being alone in the room. Anna made her way toward the lift and deck two for the Humanist Society, her hands touching the walls at either side of the corridor as if to steady her. *It is necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, she thought, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious.* And it was true, as far as it went.

But it was also a mistake to lose sight of all the individual lives and choices and flashes of pure dumb luck that brought humanity as far as they'd come. History, she thought, was perhaps better considered as a great improvisation. A thinking-through of some immense, generations-long thought. Or daydream.

The problem, of course, with the idea of nature versus nurture was that it posed a choice between determinisms. That was something Nami seemed to grasp almost instinctively, but Anna had to remind herself of it. Maybe history was the same way. Theories of how things had to have happened the way they did only because, looking back, they'd happened that way.

Tomás Myers, a short, thick-set man in a formal white shirt, held the lift for her, and she trotted to it so as not to seem ungrateful. It lurched a little as

it rose.

“Going to the Humanist meeting?” he said.

“Once more into the breach.” She smiled back.

As they rose, she felt the first inklings of the week’s sermon starting to fall into place. It revolved, she thought, around Tolstoy’s idea of an invisible dependence and the choice they’d all made to come to the *Abbey*, and Nami saying, *We’re spending our whole lives together, so we need to be really gentle.*

Because that was always true. The *Abbey* and Eudoxia were small enough it became impossible to ignore it, but even among the teeming billions of Earth, they were spending their lives together. They needed to be gentle. And understanding. And careful. It had been true in the depths of history, and at the height of Earth’s power, and it would still be true now that they were scattering to the more than a thousand new suns.

Maybe, if they could find a way to be gentle, the stars would be better off with them.

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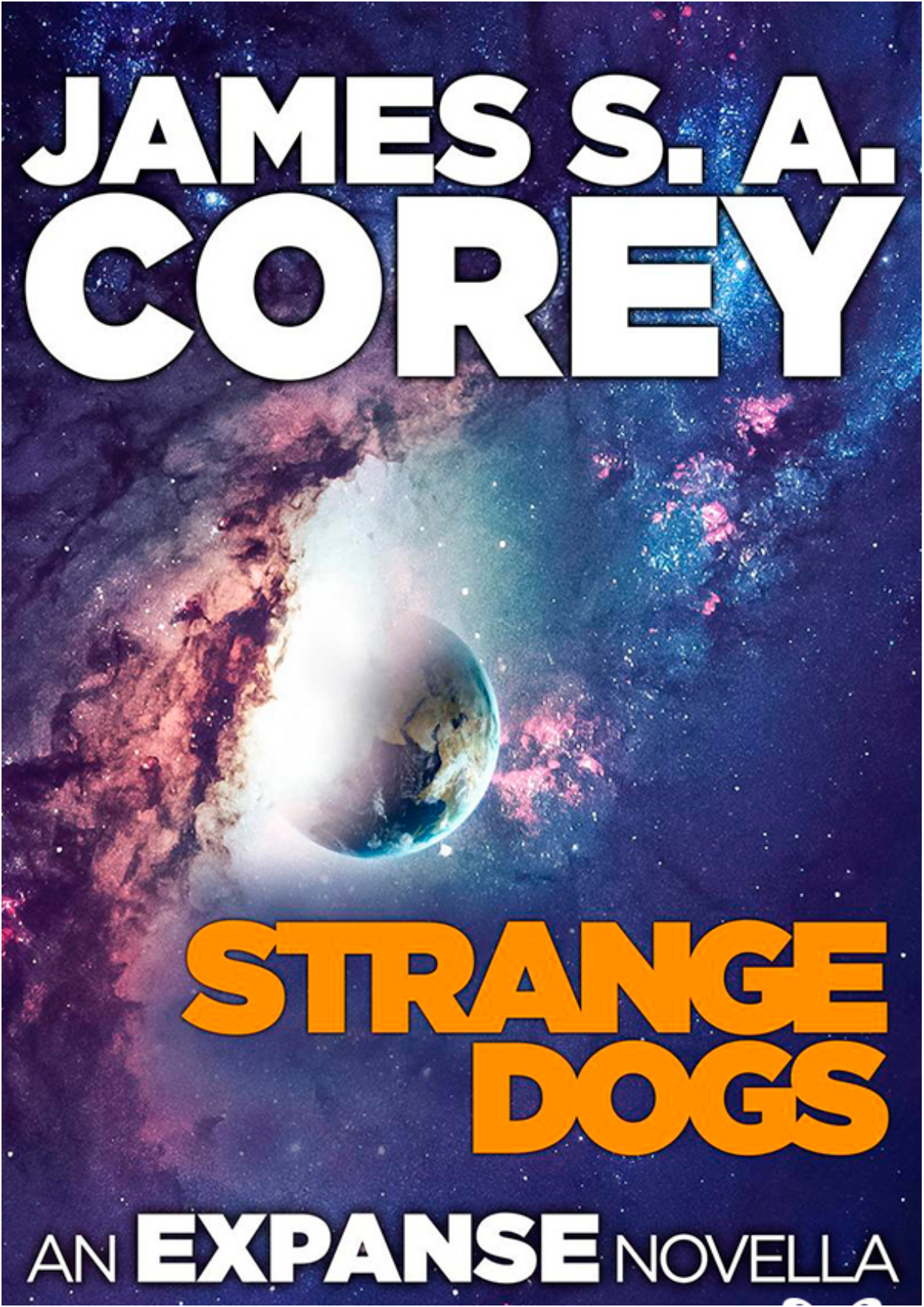
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**JAMES S. A.
COREY**

**STRANGE
DOGS**

AN **EXPANSE** NOVELLA



Like many before them, Cara and her family ventured through the gates as scientists and researchers, driven to carve out a new life and uncover the endless possibilities of the unexplored alien worlds now within reach.

But soon the soldiers followed and under this new order Cara makes a discovery that will change everything.

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Strange Dogs

An Expanse Novella

The Expanse - 6.5

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Strange Dogs

The day after the stick moons appeared, Cara killed a bird.

That wasn't exactly right. There had been stick moons—which her parents called platforms—as long as Cara could remember. At night, they'd glowed with reflected sunlight like burnt orange bones, and in the daytime, they'd been lines of white bent behind the blue. In her books, the moon was always a pale disk or a cookie with a bite taken out, but that was Earth's moon, Luna. Laconia was different.

So it wasn't that they had *appeared* the night before she killed the bird. It was only that they lit up red and blue and gold for the first time ever. Her parents had gotten up from the dinner table and gone out into the yard, staring up into the sky, and she and her little brother, Xan, had followed. Her father stood there slack-jawed, looking up. Her mother had frowned.

The next afternoon, lying in the blue clover by the pond with sunlight warming her skin and making her sleepy, Cara watched the newly glittering stick moons swim through the sky. They were as bright in the daytime sky as stars were against nighttime black. The colors shifted on them, rippling like videos of sea creatures. As if they were a little bit alive. They drifted east to west, high lacy clouds passing underneath them, and Cara at the bottom of the gravity well, looking up into the vastness like it had all been put there for her to appreciate.

The pond was one of her favorite places to be alone. The curve of the forest ran along one side. Thick trees with three or four trunks that rose up

into a knot before blooming out in green-black fronds longer than her body and so thickly packed that a few steps under them was like walking into a cave. She could find as much shade from Laconia's bright sun as she wanted, whenever she wanted it. The blue clover beside the water was softer than her bed at home and had a smell like bruised rain when she laid on it. The brook that fed the pond and then flowed back away from it again murmured and bubbled in a gentle, random concert with the chirping of the goat-hair frogs. And there were the animals that came there to drink or hunt or lay their eggs. She could lie there for hours, bringing her own lunch and a handheld to read from or draw on or play games on, away from her parents and Xan. Away from the town and the soldiers and Mari Tennanbaum, who was her best friend when they weren't enemies. The township was five thousand people—the biggest city on Laconia—and the pond was Cara's place away from it.

She was halfway through her tenth year, but this was only her third summer. Her mother had explained to her that Laconia moved around its star more slowly than Earth did, and then talked about axial tilt in a way that Cara pretended to understand so they could talk about something else. It didn't matter. Summer was summer and birthdays were birthdays. The two didn't have any more relationship than her nut-bread sandwiches had with her shoes. Not everything had to be connected.

Cara was half asleep when she heard the soft tramp of paws and the creaking of the underbrush. She thought at first it was just in her imagination, but when she tried to change the sound into music the way she sometimes could when she was dreaming, it didn't respond. She opened eyes she hadn't realized were closed. Bright-blue dots like fireflies fluttered and spun in the air as the first of the doglike things came out of the trees.

Its body was long and low, four legs with joints that were put together just a little wrong—like a drawing by someone who'd only ever had legs described to them. Its jaw seemed too small for its face, and its bulbous brown eyes were set at angles that made it seem apologetic. She'd never seen anything like it before, but that happened fairly often.

"Hey," she said, stretching. "What are you?"

The dog paused.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m friendly. See?” And she waved.

It was hard to be sure with the thing’s eyes set the way they were, but she thought it was looking at her. She sat up slowly, trying not to startle it. Nothing on Laconia ate people, but sometimes they could get scared, and her mother always told her that frightened things weren’t safe to approach.

The dog looked up, staring at the stick moons for a moment, and then down again at her. She felt a wave of disorientation, like being dizzy but different, and then a twinge of uncertainty. The dog stepped forward, and two more like it came out from the darkness under the trees. Then two more.

On the pond, a sunbird hissed, lifting its leathery wings to make its body look bigger and baring its soft greenish teeth. Its fury-twisted face looked like a cartoon of an old woman, and half a dozen new-hatched babies darted behind her. The first dog turned to look at the momma bird and made three sharp sounds: *ki-ka-ko*. The other four picked up the sound. Momma bird swiveled her head toward each of them, hissing until flecks of saliva foamed at the curves of her mouth. The *ki-ka-ko* cry echoed in a way that didn’t match the space around the pond. It made Cara’s head ache a little. She levered herself up to her knees, partly out of fear that the dogs might eat sunbirds, and she didn’t want to see anything get killed, but mostly because she wanted them to stop making that sound. Her lunch pack and her handheld tumbled to the clover. When she stepped forward, the dogs went quiet and turned their attention toward her, and she had the sense that maybe she was dreaming after all.

She stepped between the dogs and the water’s edge. Momma bird hissed again, but it seemed to Cara like the sound came from a great distance. The dogs drifted closer, moving around her like children around a teacher. She knew in a distant way that she should probably be scared. Even if the dogs didn’t eat people, they could still attack her for getting between them and their prey. She didn’t know why she felt that they wouldn’t.

“You can’t be here right now,” she said.

The lead dog, the one that had come out first, looked past her at the water. Its embarrassed, bulbous eyes shifted back to her.

“Later, maybe,” she said. “You can be here later. Right now you have to go. Go on. Shoo.”

She pointed at the trees and the darkness underneath them. The dogs went perfectly, eerily still for the space of two long breaths together, then turned and shambled back into the forest on their weirdly built legs.

Cara watched them go with a kind of surprise. It was like shouting at a storm to go away and having the rain stop. Probably the dogs had just decided that dealing with her wasn’t worth the trouble. Still, the way it had happened let her feel a little magic. Momma bird was swimming along the side of the pond now, her back to Cara. When the sunbird reached the far edge and turned, she was grunting to herself, the danger of the dogs and the girl equally forgotten. Sunbirds weren’t smart—they weren’t even particularly nice—but Cara still felt good that she’d kept them from getting eaten.

She tried lying back down on the blue clover, but her lazy half sleep was gone now. She tried closing her eyes, then watching the stick moons and their shimmer of colors, but she could feel in her body that it wasn’t coming back. She waited a few minutes to be sure, then sat up with a sigh and gathered up her handheld and her lunch pack. The sun was high overhead, the heat a little bit oppressive now, and it had been a long time since breakfast. She popped open her lunch pack. The sandwich was simple and exactly the way she liked it: two slices of nut bread, each about as thick as her thumb, with a layer of cinnamon and molasses cream cheese between them. Her mother said that honey was better than molasses, but there weren’t any bees on Laconia. Cara had only ever seen pictures of them, and based on those, she didn’t like honey at all.

She took a bite, chewed, swallowed, took another. The baby sunbirds were jumping out of the water, running on the ground, and then plopping back into the pond, sputtering and angry. Momma bird ignored their little sighs of distress, and before long they stopped trying to get her attention and devoted themselves to swimming and searching for food. Earth birds didn’t look much like anything on Laconia, but Cara remembered something about how to treat them. How to share. When Momma bird turned toward her, Cara broke off a tiny bit of nut bread and tossed it out on

the water. Momma bird struck at it like it was a threat and swallowed it greedily. Later on, she'd puke up little bits of it to feed her babies. Cara had watched them at the pond for months. She knew how sunbirds worked maybe better than anyone.

So when Momma bird made a noise—a wheeze with a click in the middle of it—Cara knew it was something new. The babies knew too. They gathered around Momma bird, chittering in agitation and slapping the water with their wings. Momma bird didn't seem to notice them. Her head was wobbling on its long, thin neck. Her unfocused eyes seemed fierce and confused.

Cara put down her sandwich, a knot tightening in her chest. Something was wrong. Momma bird spun around in the water, then turned and spun the other way with so much violence that the nearest of her babies overturned.

"Hey," Cara said. "Don't do that. Don't hurt your little ones."

But unlike the dogs, Momma bird didn't even seem to listen to her. She spread her wings, slapped the water twice, and hauled herself up into the air. Cara had the impression of half-closed eyes and a gaping green-toothed mouth, and then Momma bird sped up into the air, paused, and fell. She didn't try to catch herself when she landed—just crashed into the clover.

"Momma bird?" Cara said, stepping closer. Her heart was tripping over itself. "Momma bird? What's the matter?"

The babies were calling out now, one over the other in a wild frenzy. Momma bird lifted her head, trying to find them from their voices, but too disoriented to do more than wave her head around once, twice, and then set it down. Cara reached out, hesitated, then scooped up the bird's warm, soft body. Momma bird hissed once, halfheartedly, and closed her angry black eyes.

Cara ran.

The pathway leading toward home was barely wider than an animal track, but Cara knew it like the hallway outside her room. It only seemed treacherous because she couldn't wipe her tears back, since she needed both her hands to hold Momma bird. She was still three hundred meters from home when the bird shifted in her hands, arched its back, and made a deep

coughing sound. After that, it was still. The thick sack-and-earth walls of her house came into sight—red and orange, with the rich-green panels of their solar array on top canted toward the sun—and Cara started shouting for her mother. She wanted to believe there was time. That Momma bird wasn't dead.

She wanted to believe. But she also knew better.

Her house stood out just past the edge of the forest. It had the lumpy snakes-lying-on-top-of-each-other walls that all the first-wave colonial structures had. They curved around the central bulb garden, where they grew food. The windows stood open, screens letting in the air and keeping out the insect analogs. Even the little toolshed, where Dad kept the clippers he used to cut the vinegar weed and the cart to carry the stinking foliage away, had windows in it.

Cara's feet slapped down the stone-paved path, her tears making the house, the sky, the trees blurred and unreal. Xan's voice called out from somewhere nearby, and his friend Santiago answered back. She ignored them. The cool, dry air of the house felt like walking into a different world. Rays of light pressed in from the windows, catching motes of dust. For the first time since the pond, Cara's steps faltered. Her legs burned, and the vast, oceanic sadness and horror stopped up her throat so that when her mother stepped into the room—taller than her father, dark-haired, fixing a necklace of resin and glass around her neck like she was getting ready for a party—all Cara could do was hold up the body of Momma bird. She couldn't even ask for help.

Her mother led her to the kitchen and sat there with her and the dead bird's body while Cara coughed out a version of what had happened between sobs. She knew it was muddled—the bird, the dogs, the babies, the bread—but she just had to get it all out of her and hope that her mother could make sense of it. And then make it make sense to her too.

Xan came in, his eyes wide and scared, and touched her back to comfort her. Her mother smiled him away again. Santiago ghosted into the doorway and out again, curious and trying to seem like he wasn't. Tragedy drew attention.

Eventually, Cara's words ran out and she sat there, feeling empty. Deflated. Defeated. Momma bird's corpse on the table didn't seem to care one way or the other. Death had robbed the bird of her opinions.

"Oh, babygirl," Cara's mother said. "I'm sorry."

"It was me, wasn't it?" Cara said. "I killed her, didn't I?"

"You didn't mean to. It was an accident. That's all."

"But it was in the book," Cara said. "Feeding bread to birds. The lady in the park in the book did that. And they didn't die. They were *fine*."

Her mother took her hand. It was strange, but Cara knew if she'd been just a little younger—Xan's age, even—her mother would have hugged her. But she was getting to be a big girl now, and hugs weren't for big girls. Holding hands was.

"These aren't birds, babygirl. We call them that because they're sort of like birds. But real birds have feathers. And beaks—"

"No bird I've ever seen."

Her mother took a deep breath and smiled through her exhalation. "When life comes up on a planet, evolution forces a bunch of choices. What kinds of proteins it's going to use. How it's going to pass information on from one generation to the next. Life on Earth made those decisions a long time ago, and so everything that comes from Earth has some things in common. The kinds of proteins we use. The ways we get chemical energy out of our foods. The ways our genes work. But other planets made other choices. That's why we can't eat the plants that grow on Laconia. We have to grow them special so they'll be part of our tree of life."

"But the old lady fed bread to the birds," Cara said. Her mother wasn't understanding the problem, and she didn't know how to say it any more clearly. In the books, the old lady had fed bread to the birds, and the birds hadn't died. And Momma bird was dead.

"She was on Earth. Or someplace where Earth's tree of life took over. Laconia doesn't eat the same things we do. And the food that Laconia makes, we can't use."

"That's not true," Cara said. "We drink the water."

Her mother nodded. "Water is very, very simple, though. There aren't choices for living systems to make with water because it's more like a

mineral or—”

“Dot!” Her father’s voice was like a bark. “We have to go!”

“I’m in the kitchen,” her mother said. Footsteps. Cara’s father loomed into the doorway, his jaw set, his mouth tight. He’d combed his hair and put on his best shirt. He shifted his gaze from Cara to her mother to Momma bird with an expression that said, *What the hell is this?*

“Cara accidentally poisoned one of the sunbirds,” her mother told him, as though he’d actually asked the question aloud.

“Shit,” her father said, then grimaced at his own language. “I’m sorry to hear that, kid. That’s hard. But, Dot. We have to gather up the kids and get out of here.”

Cara scowled. “Where are you going?”

“The soldiers are hosting a party,” her mother said. “It’s a celebration because the platforms came on.” She didn’t smile.

“We need to be there,” her father said, more to her mother than to Cara. “If they don’t see us, they’ll wonder why we didn’t come.”

Cara’s mother pointed to her necklace. *I’m getting ready.* Her father shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then back. Cara felt the weight of his anxiety like a hand on her shoulder.

“Do I have to go?”

“No, kid,” her father said. “If you want to stay here and hold down the fort, that’s fine. It’s me and your mom.”

“And Xan,” her mother said. “Unless you want to be responsible for keeping him out of trouble.”

Cara knew that was supposed to be a joke, so she chuckled at it. Not that it felt funny. Her mother squeezed her fingers and then let her go. “I am sorry about the sunbird, babygirl.”

“It’s okay,” Cara said.

“We’ll be back before dinner,” her father said, then retreated back into the depths of the house. A few breaths later, Cara heard him yelling at Xan and Santiago. The focus of the family spotlight had moved past her. Momma bird was over. She couldn’t put her thumb on why that bothered her.

The town was half an hour away, down past a dozen other houses like hers. The older houses all came from the first wave—scientists and researchers like her parents who'd come to Laconia just after the gates opened. The town itself, though, came later, with the soldiers. Even Cara could remember when construction waldoes started laying down the foundations of the barracks and the town square, the military housing and the fusion plant. Most of the soldiers still lived in orbit, but every month, the town grew a little—another building, another street. Xan's friend Santiago was seven years old. He was the child of soldiers, and had their boldness. He often came all the way out to her house by himself so he could play. Someday, her father said, the town would grow out around all their houses. The pond and the forest would be taken down, paved over, rebuilt. The way he said it, it didn't sound like a good thing or a bad one. Just a change, like winter moving into spring.

For now, though, her house was her house and the town was the town, and she could sit at her kitchen table while the others got ready to go someplace else. Momma bird didn't move. The more Cara looked at the bird, the less real it seemed. How could something that clearly dead ever have swum or flown or fed its babies? It was like expecting a rock to sing. The babies would be wondering what had happened by now. Calling for their mother. She wondered if they'd know to go back up to the nest with no one there to show them when.

"Mom?" Cara said as her father herded Xan and Santiago back out the door again. "I need to use the sampling drone."

There was a line that appeared between her mother's brows when she got annoyed, even when she was smiling at the same time. "Babygirl, you know I can't go out right now. Your father and I—"

"I can do it. I just need to help take care of Momma bird's babies. Just for a few days, until they're used to her being gone. I messed things up. I need to fix them."

The line erased itself, her mother's gaze softening. For a moment, Cara thought she was going to say yes.

"No, baby. I'm sorry. The sampling drone's delicate. And if something goes wrong, we can't get a new one."

“But—” Cara gestured to Momma bird.

“When I get back, I’ll take it out with you if you still want to,” her mother said, even though that probably wasn’t true. By the time they got back from the town, Xan would be tired and hyperactive and her parents would just be tired. All anyone would want to do was sleep. A few baby sunbirds didn’t really matter much in the big scheme of things.

Santiago’s voice came wafting in from outside with a high near-whining note of young, masculine impatience in it. Her mother shifted her weight toward the doorway.

“Okay, Mom,” Cara said.

“Thank you, babygirl,” her mother said, then walked out. Their voices came, but not distinctly enough for her to make out the words. Xan shouted, Santiago laughed, but from farther away. Another minute, and they were gone. Cara sat alone in the silence of the house.

She walked through the rooms, her hands stuffed deep in her pockets, her scowl so hard it ached a little. She kept trying to find what was wrong. Everything was in place, except that something wasn’t. The walls had the same smudges by the doors where their hands had left marks over the months and years. The white flakes at the corners showed where the laminate that held the house in place was getting old. The house had only been designed to last five years, and they’d been in it for eight so far. Her room, with its raised futon, across the hall from Xan’s, with his. Her window looking out over the dirt road her family had just walked down. The anger sat under her rib cage, just at her belly, and she couldn’t make it go away. It made everything about the house seem crappy and small.

She threw herself onto her futon, staring up at the ceiling and wondering if she was going to cry. But she didn’t. She just lay there for a while, feeling bad. And when that got boring, she rolled over and grabbed her books. They were on a thin foil tablet keyed to her. Her parents had loaded it with poems and games and math practice and stories. If they’d been able to get in touch with the networks back on the far side of the gates, they could have updated it. But with the soldiers, that wasn’t possible. All the content in it was aimed at a girl younger than Xan, but it was what she had, so she loved it. Or usually she did.

She opened the stories, looking through them for one particular image like she was scratching at a wound. It took a few minutes to find it, but she did. A picture book called *Ashby Allen Akerman in Paris*, about a little girl back on Earth. The image was in watercolors, gray and blue with little bits of gold at the streetlights. Ashby and her monkey friend, TanTan, were dancing in a park with the high, twisting, beautiful shape of the Daniau Tower behind them. But the thing Cara was looking for was on the side. An old woman, sitting on a bench, throwing bits of bread at birds that her mother called pigeons. That was where the rage came from. An old woman being kind to a bird and nobody was dying. No one was hurt. And it wasn't even exactly a lie, because apparently she could do that on Earth. In Paris. Where she'd never been and didn't have any reason to think she'd ever go. But if all the things in her books were about other places with other rules, then none of them could ever really be about her. It was like going to school one morning and finding out that math worked differently for you, so even if you got the same answer as everyone else, yours was wrong.

So no, it wasn't a lie. It went deeper than that.

She made herself a bowl of bean-and-onion soup, sitting at the counter by herself as she ate. She'd half expected that, as upset as she was, she wouldn't be able to keep the food down. Instead, eating seemed to steady her. The quiet of the house was almost pleasant. Something about blood sugar, probably. That was what her father would have said. Momma bird's skin had started shining, like it was growing a layer of oil or wax. It could stay there on the counter. She thought about taking it back in case the babies would understand that they shouldn't wait. That they were on their own. She hoped they could get back up to the nest. There were things that would eat baby sunbirds if they couldn't get someplace safe.

"Fuck," Cara said to the empty house, then hesitated, shocked by her own daring. Her mother didn't allow profanity, not even her father's, but they weren't here right now. So like she was running a test to see if the rules were still the rules, she said it again. "Fuck."

Nothing happened, because of course no one was watching her. And since no one was watching...

The sampling drone was in a ceramic case next to her mother's futon. The latches were starting to rust at the edges, but they still worked. Just a little scraping feeling when she pulled them open. The drone itself was a complex of vortex thrusters as wide as her thumb connected by a flexible network of articulated sticks able to reconfigure itself into dozens of different shapes. Two dozen attachable sampling waldos built for everything from cutting stone to drawing blood stood in ranks in the case like soldiers, but Cara only cared about the three grasping ones. And of them, really just the two with pliable silicone grips. She put the waldos in her pocket, hefted the drone on her hip as if she was carrying a baby, and shoved the case closed again before she headed out to the shed.

Momma bird and the drone fit into her father's cart with plenty of room to spare. She thought about it, then grabbed a little hand spade too. She'd use the drone to put the babies safe in their nest, and then give Momma bird a proper burial. It wasn't enough, but she could do it, so she would.

The sun was starting its long slide down into night. The low mist that came from the east smelled as bright as mint, and the shadows of the trees all had a greenish tint against the reddening light. The cart had one wheel that stuck sometimes, skidding along behind her like a stutter until it broke loose again. Cara put her head down, her mouth set, and marched back toward the pond. The tightness between her shoulder blades felt like resolve.

The forest was mostly hers. Xan played there some, but he liked the other kids more than she did, so he spent more time in town. Her mother and father stayed near the house or working on the community greenhouse—which wasn't really a house or green—to keep the food supplies coming. She knew what the sounds of the forest were, even if she couldn't always figure out what made them. She knew the drape of a hook vine from a straight one, the call of a red clicker from a green one. Most of the things that lived there didn't have names. Laconia was a whole world, and humans had only been on it for about eight years. Even if she gave names to everything she saw every day for the whole rest of her life, most of the species there would stay nameless. It didn't bother her. They just were what they were. Common things got names so that she and her schoolmates and

the grown-ups could talk about them. Sunbirds, rope trees, tooth worms, glass snakes, grunchers. Other things, no one talked about, so they didn't need names, and even if she named them, she'd probably just forget.

That wasn't strange, though. All names were like that. A shorthand so people could talk about things. Laconia was only Laconia because they called it that. Before they'd come, it had been nameless. Or if not, the things that had named it were all dead now, so it didn't matter.

She reached the pond, a few bright-gold streaks in the sky where the last of the sun still lit the high clouds. The baby sunbirds were still in the water, peeping in distress at her arrival. The water was dark already, like it had pulled the shadows under the trees into it. The night-feeding animals would come out soon—scratchers and hangman monkeys and glass snakes. She slaved the drone to her handheld. The control panel was more complicated than she was used to, with half a dozen control modes listed down the side that she didn't understand. She was pretty certain she could do everything she needed with only the basic setup. She just needed to get the babies up out of the water and safe into their nest. And maybe take some food up to them. Do the things Momma bird had done. Then she could bury Momma bird, and things would be... not right. But the least wrong she could make them. She took the waldos out of her pocket and compared them to the babies, squinting in the deepening gloom to see which of them looked like they'd be able to hold on to the little bodies but not hurt them.

"I'm sorry," she said to the pale, round-mouthed birds as she fit the smallest waldo onto the drone. "I'm new at this."

One of the babies caught sight of Momma bird's body in the cart and tried to haul itself out of the water to waddle toward her. It was as good a place to start as any. Cara sat cross-legged on the clover and started the drone. It whirred as it rose in the air.

The first baby shrieked, hissed, and ran. Cara smiled and shook her head. "It's okay, little one. It's only me," she cooed. "Everything's going to be all right."

Only it wasn't.

The babies scattered to the edges of the pond and bit at the drone when it came near. When she was able to get a grip on one, it wriggled out a

meter and a half above the ground and fell back into the water. Cara didn't want to hurt them, but the light was fading faster now, and she had to get them up to the nest and then bury Momma and still get back home before her parents and Xan. The time pressure made everything harder. She didn't realize she was clenching her teeth until her jaw already hurt. After nearly an hour she'd only gotten three safely back to the nest. Momma bird lay in the cart, sightless eyes reproachful. Cara's hands ached, and the drone's batteries were half drained.

"Come on," she said as one of the last two babies skittered away from the waldo and ran into the brush at the edge of the pond. "Stop it. Just..."

She reached the soft rubber claw down, and the little sunbird struck at it, biting and tearing with its soft teeth. It wrenched its head around and darted back off across the water, leaving little ripples in the dark water, and then stopping to bob on the surface and chew at its wings as if nothing was wrong. Cara brought the drone in to land beside her while she thought. The last two babies were the biggest. Faster than their siblings, and they weren't getting tired the same way. Maybe they were big enough to avoid predators without her. Maybe they didn't need to be in the nest.

One of the babies swam near her, chirped, and shook its fleshy, pale wings. Without the whirring of the drone to run from, it seemed placid, in a disgruntled kind of way. Its black eyes shifted around at the night, taking in the forest and the pond, the cart and Cara with the same disinterest. It was so close.

Cara shifted forward slowly so as not to startle it. The little sunbird huffed to itself, ducked its head under water, and Cara lunged. Cold water soaked into her sleeves and sprayed her face, but the little ball of squirming flesh was locked in her hands, hissing and biting. She stood up, grinning.

"There you are, little one," she said. "Oh, you're a pain, but I've got you safe now."

Except she wasn't quite sure what made sense to do next. She needed both hands to drive the drone and the waldo, but if she put the sunbird down, it would just run off again. The nest was low enough in the tree, she might be able to climb up one handed and reach it in. She stepped backward, looking through the foliage for a pathway that would work.

The crunch under her heel was confusing for a moment, and then horrifying. She yelped, dropped the baby sunbird, and danced back. The drone glittered on the clover, two of the vortex thrusters caved in by her weight. She dropped to her knees and reached out, fingers trembling in the air, caught between needing to put it all back together and being afraid to touch it. The drone was broken. Her mother's drone that they couldn't replace because it came from Earth and now nothing came from Earth. The sense of having done something terrible that she couldn't take back washed over her—the broken body of Momma bird and the drone building on each other.

It was too much. She'd hide the drone, just for now. The case for it was still back at the house, and her mother might not need it again for weeks. Months. If Cara kept it here, where she could work on it. If she could keep it safe until there was light, then maybe it would be all right. She lifted up the drone, felt the limp ceramic clicking against itself, the sharp edges where before there had been smooth round cylinders, and knew that there were shards of it still in the clover. With the instinct of a thief, she carried it away from the edge of the pond. She shoved it under a little bush and dragged dead tree fronds over it, hardly aware that she was sobbing while she did it. It would be okay. Somehow, it would be okay.

It wouldn't.

When she turned back around, the dogs were there.

She hadn't heard them shamble out of the darkness, and they stood there as still as stones. Their five faces looked like an apology for intruding.

"What?" Cara shouted, waving at them with one sopping arm. "What is it?"

The dog in front—the same lead dog from when they'd been there before—squatted down, its muzzle toward her. Its legs seemed to have too many joints in them, folding together primly. She stepped toward the dogs, wanting to hit them or shout at them or something. Anything that would distract her from her misery. She grabbed the shovel up from the cart, holding it like a weapon, but the dogs didn't react. They only seemed embarrassed for her. She stood for three long, shaking breaths, wet and cold and raw as a fresh-pulled scab, then sat down on the cart next to Momma

bird's body, hung her head, and wept. The corpse shifted when the cart rocked, its skin glistening with whatever that death wax was.

"I didn't mean to break anything," she said. "I didn't want to break anything. It all just... broke, and I, and I, and I..."

The strange noise began again. *Ki-ka-ko, ki-ka-ko*, but instead of being disorienting, it seemed comforting now. Cara pushed the blade of the shovel into the soft dirt beside the cart and rested her arms on her knees. The dogs came closer. She thought for a moment they were going to console her. She didn't understand what they were really doing until one of them reached its wide muzzle into the cart and took Momma bird's body in its mouth.

"No! Hey! You can't have that! That's not food!" She grabbed at Momma bird's stiff, dead feet, but the dog was already trotting away, the others following it into the dark forest and the mist. "Wait!" Cara shouted, but the *ki-ka-ko, ki-ka-ko* sound faded and then, like flipping a toggle, went silent. Cara stood without remembering when she'd gotten to her feet. The sunset was over, full night fallen and stars scattered across the sky above her. The two baby sunbirds grunted in the pond, little noises of animal distress. Her wrists were cold where her sleeves still dripped. She sank to the ground, lying back on the clover, too wrung out to cry. The sounds of the forest seemed to grow slowly louder around her. A soft knocking call off to her left, answered by two more behind her. A hush of wings. The angry harrumph of the sunbirds that she was still going to have to catch somehow, put into their nest somehow. Feed somehow. Everything was terrible, and she couldn't even stop yet. That made everything worse.

High above, the stick moons wavered and shone, lights rippling along their sides while they did whatever the hell it was they did.

Drunk on her own despair, Cara didn't make the connection between the moons and the dogs. Not until much later, when her brother, Xan, was already dead.



Laconia was only one of thirteen hundred and some new worlds. Her parents, like all the others in the first wave, had been intended as a survey

force. Cara's mother had come as a materials engineer, her father as a geologist. She'd come as a baby.

She'd seen pictures on her mother's handheld of herself in the tight-seal diapers, floating in the family cabin of the *Sagan*. The ship was still in orbit—a pale, fast-moving dot when it caught the sun just right—but she didn't remember it at all. Xan had been born a year after they'd all made landfall, and Cara didn't remember that either. Her earliest memory was of sitting in a chair at home, drawing in an art program on her handheld while her mother sang in the next room.

Her second earliest memory was of the soldiers coming.

Her parents didn't talk about that, so Cara had built the story from bits and pieces of overheard conversation. Something had happened on the other side of the gates. The Earth had blown up, maybe. Or Mars had. Maybe Venus, though she didn't think anyone lived there. Whatever happened meant that the scientific expedition that had only been intended to stay for five years was now permanent. The soldiers had come to be the government. They had ships in orbit and the beginnings of cities already being constructed on the planet's surface. They'd made the town. They'd made the rules for how the town worked. They had a plan.

"You've probably noticed," Instructor Hannu, her teacher, said, "that the orbital platforms have been activated."

The schoolroom was the old cafeteria from the first landing. Ten meters by eight, with a vaulted ceiling and reinforcements that let it double as a storm shelter, or would have if there were ever any storms bad enough to shelter from. The inner layer of environmental sealant had started to whiten and flake with age, but the early fears about quarantining themselves from Laconia's ecosphere had gone by the wayside, so no one was in a hurry to repair it. There were no windows, the light entirely from ceramic fixtures set into the walls.

"We've been asked to keep an eye out for anything that changes down here," he went on, "and report it back to the military."

Which, Cara thought, was stupid. Everything changed on Laconia all the time. Telling the soldiers whenever a new plant showed up would be a full-time job. Was a full-time job. Was what all of their parents did, or were

supposed to do, anyway. She wondered if the windowless room was like being on a spaceship. Months or years without ever once going outside or hearing the rain tapping into puddles or being able to get away from Xan and her parents. Never being alone. Never feeling the sunlight on her face. Nothing changing. Nothing new. It sounded awful.

And then circle meeting was over, and the kids scattered around the room to find their tasks for the morning work period. Cara helped Jason Lu with his phonetic-sounds lesson, because she was older and had already mastered it. Then she spent some time on complex multiplication. And then it was recess, and they all piled out to the meadow and the sunlight. Xan and two of the other younger boys ran across the road to skip rocks across the water-treatment reservoir even though they weren't supposed to. Since his best friend, Santiago, went to school in the military's program, Xan had to make do with first-wave children for playmates. So did Cara, but it wasn't as much of a burden for her. She didn't have any friends among the soldiers anyway.

That would change when they set up the lower university and everyone went to the same school, first wave and soldiers both. But that wouldn't be for another two years. There was plenty of time for things to happen between now and then.

Mari Tennenbaum and Teresa Ekandjo came and sat with her, and before long, they'd arranged a zombie-tag game with the other older children. The call for second work period seemed to come too soon, but that was the way time worked. Too fast when you weren't paying attention, and then slow as mud when you watched it. Xan wanted her to teach him phonetic sounds, more because she'd helped Jason with it than because he cared about the lesson, but she did it anyway. When she was done, she did some research of her own.

The classroom had access to the observational data that the survey team had collected since they'd arrived on Laconia. Sunbirds were a common enough species that there might be something there—what they ate, how they matured, when they stopped needing to be cared for—that would help her. Because as soon as school was over, Xan headed out to play with Santiago in the town's center. She was free to get her bicycle, the one her

father had printed for her at the beginning of summer, and start back to the pond and the babies.

The buildings in the town were of two different types. The old ones, the ones like her house, lumpy and round, built from the soil of Laconia and constrained by printed polymer sheaths, marked the original township. The other kind, solidly efficient metal and formed concrete, came later with the soldiers. The roads were new too, and still being built. She and all the other kids loved riding on the smooth, hard surface, feeling the bumps and uncertainty of the land vanish into a steady low hum that traveled up from the wheels through the handlebars and into her bones. They weren't supposed to ride on the roads because the soldiers sometimes had transports and cars come through, but everyone did it anyway.

The sunlight pressed down, warm against her skin. The air had the soft, musty smell it got when rain was coming, the smell her mother called "moldy coffee grounds." A swarm of smoke gnats rose up, swirling into the sky above her in their weird angular patterns, like writing in an alphabet that no one knew. She almost stopped to watch. The road ended at a barracks and construction yard, soldiers in their crisp blue uniforms watching her as she passed. When she waved, one of them waved back. And then she was on the rough trail again and had to keep both hands on the bars.

The effort of riding and the warmth of the afternoon brought her to a kind of trance, comfortable and mindless. In the moment, her body and the world felt like they were all the same thing. As she got near home, she tried to bring her focus back. There hadn't been a lot of study done on sunbird life cycles in particular, but she'd found some notes from one of the early surveys. They said sunbirds ate a lot of things, but they seemed to like the little gray encrustations on water roots the best. She thought that meant Momma bird would have been diving deep into the pond to crack the little gray things free, and then the babies would gobble them as they came up. So she had to find a way to do the same thing. For a few more weeks at least. Until the babies were old enough to leave and make their own nests.

At home, the doors were open, letting the cool air into the house. She pulled the bicycle up beside the door. Her parents' voices came from inside,

raised the way they did when they were having a conversation from different rooms. Her mother's words sounded jagged and stretched, like a wire on the edge of breaking. Cara paused to eavesdrop.

"We're bearing the risks. As long as we're here, anything they do can affect us. They don't know what they could wake up."

"I know," her father said. "Look, I'm not saying you're wrong. But we're not in a position to say what those risks are. And... what are the options?"

She knew the rhythm of her parents, how they talked when they knew she and Xan were listening, and how it changed when they thought they were alone. This was alone-grown-up talk.

"I'm not arguing for that," her mother said, and Cara wondered what "that" was. "But look at Ilus."

"Ilus was uncontrolled, though. Admiral Duarte seems pretty certain they can at least influence how it behaves here."

"How did they even get a live sample?" Her mother's voice had gone peevish and frustrated. "Why would you *want* that?"

"You know this better than I do, honey. The protomolecule was a bridge builder, but it also has an interface aspect. And being able to *talk* to other artifacts is..." His words faded as, somewhere inside, he walked back to her mother.

Cara looked at the shed. She was pretty sure there was a tree-core sampler in there she could use to scrape the roots, but it was heavy. It probably made more sense to just roll her sleeves up and use her fingers. Plus which, she didn't want to tear the roots.

She walked out toward the pond, thinking about her schoolwork. The phonetics lesson. Part of the background had been about how babies learn the phonemes by listening to their parents even before there are any words involved. The way different places use sound—the difference between a particular diphthong on Ceres and the same one in the North American Shared Interest Zone or Korea or on Titan or Medina Station—was something babies mastered even before they knew that they knew it.

She'd read something once about a man back on Earth who'd tried to figure out how to speak with octopi by raising his baby children with

octopi, hoping that the human children would grow up bilingual in octopus and English. It had sounded crazy at the time, but who knew? The way the phoneme thing worked, maybe it made sense after all. Only she was pretty sure no one spoke octopus, so it probably hadn't ended well...

She walked down the path, her steps following the little scrapes that the cart's wheels had made. The pond water was going to be cold. She could already imagine how it was going to feel pushing her arm down into it. She wondered if the babies would still be in the nest. They might be old enough to get themselves down and into the water, and she couldn't decide if that would be a good thing or a bad one.

The smell of coming weather was getting thicker, but the only clouds were light, scudding veils over the sun, not much more than a lighter shade of blue. The breeze was hardly enough to stir the fronds of the trees; they made light tapping sounds when they touched, like dry raindrops. She wondered if anyone had ever studied the little gray things on the water roots to see what they were. Probably they hadn't. Laconia had too many things on it, and there were only so many people there. It would be lifetimes before everything on the planet got discovered and understood. If that ever even happened. She'd had a history-of-science lesson the year before that traced how long it had taken people back on Earth to understand the ecosphere there, and there had been billions of people on Earth for thousands of years. Laconia had a few thousand people for less than a decade.

At the pond, the babies were on the water, splashing pale leathery wings and piping to each other. That was good. They were independent enough to look after themselves that much anyway. With the drone broken, she'd still have to carry them up to the nest. She didn't like thinking about the drone, though.

"Okay, little ones," she said. "Let's see if I can get you some food, okay?"

She knelt at the water's edge, the wet of the mud seeping through the knees of her pants. Deep in the water, she could just make out the pale roots. They looked deeper in than she'd remembered. She was going to wind up soaking her shirt, but she started rolling up her sleeves anyway.

Momma bird hissed.

Cara fell back, scrambling on feet and elbows, as Momma bird swam out of the scrub at the pond's edge. The bird bared her greenish teeth. The tiny wrinkled face deformed in rage as she rushed forward, wings spread. The babies on the pond's surface gathered behind her, clicking in distress. Cara stared, and Momma bird coughed, spat, and turned away. For a moment, Cara tried to make this into some other bird that had happened upon the orphans and taken over the care of them.

But things were wrong. The bird's skin had the same waxy, dead look it had gotten on her counter. The black eyes didn't quite focus the way a normal bird would. There were sunbirds all across the town. Cara had seen dozens, and none of them had the awkward movements this one did. None of them had the weird stillness between its movements or the hesitation like every muscle had to be reminded how to work. Cara pulled herself up the bank, dragging her heels across the blue clover. Momma bird ignored her, paddled to the center of the pond—paused, still as statue—and dove down. The babies circled, excited, until she bobbed back up. All their little mouths struck at the water, spat out whatever they didn't filter out as food, and then struck again.

Cara's throat felt thick. Her breath came in snatches and gasps, like someone had turned off the planet's air supply, and her heart felt like something that had blundered into her rib cage by accident and was frantic for a way back out.

"Really?" she asked.

Nothing answered. She pulled her legs up under her, not realizing until she'd done it that she was taking what her teacher called prayer position. She tried to be still, as if moving might pop the moment like a soap bubble. Momma bird dove again, reemerged. The babies fed, as calm and pleased as if nothing had ever gone wrong. Momma bird went motionless, then moved again.

Cara's shock began to fade, her heart to resume its usual beat, and a slow, wide grin pulled at her lips. She wrapped her arms around herself in a hug and watched silently as the mother who had been dead now protected and fed and stayed with her children again. Some deep, animal relief turned

her bones to water and left her empty of everything but gratitude and wonder.

Something shifted in the darkness under the trees. The dogs stepped into the light, walking toward her with slow, careful steps. The bulbous eyes apologetic.

“Was this you?” Cara breathed. “Did you do this?”

The dogs didn’t answer. They only folded their complex legs and rested for a moment, looking toward Cara. She leaned over, stretched out a hand, and pet the closest one on the top of its head, where the ears would have been if it had been the kind of dog they had on Earth. Its skin was hot to the touch, soft with hard underneath, like velvet laid over steel. It made a gentle humming sound, and then all of them rose up together and turned back toward the trees. Cara stood up and walked after them, not sure what she wanted except that there was a sudden urgency in her heart. They couldn’t leave. Not yet.

“Wait,” she said. And the dogs stopped. They waited. “Can you... can you help me?”

They turned toward her again, their movements eerily synchronized. In the distance, something trilled and buzzed and trilled again.

“You fixed Momma bird,” she said, nodding toward the pond. “Can you fix other things too?”

The dogs didn’t move, but they didn’t turn away either. Cara held up a finger in a don’t-go-away gesture, and moved off to the bushes. The sampling drone was just where she’d left it. Something small had scattered the shattered bits a little, but they were all still there, as far as she could tell. She lifted up the broken machine, its limp, deactivated limbs clacking against each other. The shards she plucked up into her palm.

The dogs watched, motionless. Their constant embarrassed expression now seemed to offer some sympathy, as if feeling her shame at having broken the drone. One of the dogs came forward, and she thought it was the lead from before, though she couldn’t be sure. She knelt and held out the drone. She expected the eerie *ki-ka-ko* noise again, but the dog only opened its mouth a little. What she’d taken for teeth, she saw, were really just little nubs, like the gripping surface on a wheel made for off-road travel. It had

no tongue. There was no throat at the back of its mouth. It made her think of the dinosaur puppet Xan used to love. It leaned forward, taking the drone in its jaws. The little machine hung limp.

A second dog stepped forward, tapping Cara's hand with one wide paw. Cara opened her shard-filled hand. The dog leaned forward, wrapping its mouth around her palm. Something in the touch tingled like a mild electrical shock or the first contact of a caustic chemical. The dog's mouth rippled against her skin, sweeping the shards away. She kept her hand flat until all the bits and pieces were gone and the dog leaned back. Her hand was clean apart from a brief scent of disinfectant, gone almost before she noticed it.

"Thank you," she said as the dog stepped carefully into the darkness under the trees. The one with the drone in its grip turned back to look at her, as if it was embarrassed by her gratitude but felt obligated to acknowledge it. Then they were gone. She listened to the receding footsteps. They went silent more quickly than she'd expected.

She sat quietly, arms wrapped around her legs, and watched the weird miracle of the dead-but-not-dead sunbird until she felt like she'd given the moment all of the honor and respect it deserved.

Like someone rising from a pew, she stood, peace in her heart, and headed back home. As she walked, she imagined telling her parents about the dogs, about Momma bird. But that would mean telling them about the drone too. After it was fixed, she'd tell them. And anyway, it was still too sweet having it just for herself.



"I don't know," her mother said. "I don't feel comfortable with it."

Xan's eyes got large. His mouth gaped like she'd just said the worst, most unexpected thing he'd ever heard. "*Mom!*"

It was Sunday, and the walk into town for church was warm, the air thick and sticky. A soft midnight rain had left the track muddy and slick, so Cara kept to the edge where moss and clover made a kind of carpet. The

tiny green-black leaves made wet sounds under her feet, but didn't soak her shoes.

"You have responsibilities at home," her mother said, and Xan lifted his hands in exasperation and disbelief, like he was a half-sized copy of their father. Cara had seen the same gesture a thousand times.

"I already told Santiago I'd help him," Xan said. "He's *expecting* me."

"Have you finished all your chores?"

"Yes," Xan said. Cara knew it wasn't true. Her mother did too. That was what made the conversation so interesting.

"Fine," she said. "But be home before dark."

Xan nodded. More to himself, Cara thought, than to their mother. A little victory of persistence over truth. After services, Xan could go off and play with his friends instead of being home the way he was supposed to. Probably she should have been angry at how unfair it was that her brother got to bend the rules and she didn't, but she liked it better when the house and the forest were hers. Maybe her parents did too. It wasn't really such a bad outcome if everyone was tacitly happy with it.

Cara's father walked a dozen meters ahead with Jan Poole, the agricultural specialist. Jan's house was on the way to town, and the older man joined them for the walk in to church each week. Or anyway, he did now that they went in for services.

Before the soldiers came, Cara remembered church being a much more optional thing. There had been months when Sunday morning hadn't meant anything more strenuous than sleeping in and making breakfast for all of them to eat in their pajamas. Cara still wasn't sure why the arrival of the soldiers and their ships had changed that. It wasn't as though the soldiers made people come. Most of the men and women who'd come down from the ships to live on the planet didn't come to church, and those that did weren't any different from the science teams. When she'd asked, her mother had made an argument about needing to be part of the community that hadn't made any sense. It all came down to: this was the way they did things now. And so they did them. Cara didn't like it but didn't hate it either, and the walk could be nice enough. She already knew—the same way she knew she'd get her period or that she'd move into her own house—

that someday she'd push back against the weekly routine. But someday wasn't yet.

Services were held in the same space as school, only with the tables taken out and benches made from local wood analogs hauled into rows for people to sit on. Who gave the sermon varied week by week. Most times, it was someone from the original science teams, but a couple of times one of the soldiers' ministers had taken a turn. It didn't really matter to Cara. Apart from the timbre of their voices, the speeches all sounded pretty much the same. Mostly she let her mind wander and watched the backs of the heads of all the people in front of her. The people from town and the soldiers who'd come to the surface all sitting together but apart, like words in a sentence with the spaces between them.

It wasn't the same for the kids. Xan and little Santiago Singh played together all the time. Maggie Crowther was widely rumored to have kissed Muhammed Serengay. It wasn't that the kids didn't recognize the division so much as that it didn't matter to them. The more soldiers came down the well, the more normal it was to have them there. If that worried her parents, it was only because they were used to it being a different way. For Cara and Xan and all the others in their cohort, it had always been like this. It was their normal.

After the sermon, they trickled out into the street. Some families left immediately, but others stood around in little clumps, talking the way the adults did after church.

The results of the new xenobotany run looked promising and The soldiers are breaking ground on a new barracks and Daffyd Keller's house needs repair again, and he's thinking of taking the soldiers up on their offer of new accommodations in town. Speculation on the water-purification project and the weather cycles data and the platforms or stick moons or whatever people wanted to call them. And always the question—sometimes spoken, but often not—*Have you heard anything from Earth?* The answer to that was always no, but people asked anyway. Church was all about rituals. Standing with the sunlight pressing against her face trying not to be impatient was as much a part of the day as the sermon.

After what seemed like hours and hadn't been more than half of one, Xan and Santiago ran off with a pack of the other children. Stephen DeCaamp finished his conversation with her parents and wandered off toward his own home. The church crowd scattered, and Cara got to follow her parents back to their house. The road was flat, but the prospect of going back to the pond, of seeing the dogs again, made it feel like she was walking downhill.

"More," her mother said when they were out of earshot of the others. Her tone of voice told Cara it was part of a conversation that was already in progress. One she hadn't been part of. Her father's sigh confirmed that.

"We knew that would happen," he said. "You can't expect them to live in orbit forever. Being in a gravity well will be good for them."

"Not sure what it will be for us."

Her father shrugged and glanced toward Cara, not to include her but to postpone the conversation until she wasn't around. Her mother smiled thinly, but she let it drop. "Why don't you ever go play with the other children?" she asked instead.

"I do when I want to," Cara said.

"Must be nice," her mother replied with a chuckle, but didn't go farther than that.

As soon as they were home, Cara changed out of her good clothes, grabbed a lunch of toasted grains and dried fruit, and ran out the back. She took a jacket, but not because she'd get cold. She figured that if the dogs brought the drone back, she'd be able to wrap it up and sneak it back into the house that way. Then she could put it in her mother's case later, when no one was watching. A drone had to be easier to fix than a sunbird, after all.

At the pond, Momma bird was sitting at the edge of the water, unmoving and wax-skinned. The tiny, angry black eyes focused on nothing in particular. The babies hissed and spat and chased each other around the pond, diving sometimes, or flapped their pale leathery wings. Cara sat a little way off and ate, watching them. The dogs might not come back today. They might never come back. Maybe they ate drones. Or maybe sunbirds

rose from the dead on their own. That was the thing about Laconia: with so much that no one knew, anything was possible.

After a while, she folded the jacket into a pillow, got out her handheld, and read part of a book about a lost boy looking for his family in the overwhelming press of people in the North American Shared Interest Zone. She tried to imagine what it would be like, walking down a single street with a thousand other people on it. It seemed like it was probably an exaggeration.

The afternoon heat drew a line of sweat down her back. A chittering flock of four-legged insectlike things roiled through the sky like a funnel cloud before diving onto the water, covering the pond in a layer of shining blue-and-green brighter than gemstones for five or six minutes before rising again at the same instant and shooting away into the trees. Cara hadn't seen them before. She wondered if they were a migrant species, or something local that hadn't crossed her path before. Or maybe this was the kind of thing she was supposed to tell Instructor Hannu about.

That seemed weird, though. What was there to say except *I saw something I haven't seen before*? As if that wasn't always true. It would be a strange day when that *didn't* happen.

She did feel a little guilty not saying anything about the dogs, though. Something that took dead animals and made them not-dead would be the sort of thing the soldiers wanted to know about. Would want to capture and study. She wondered if the dogs would want to be captured and studied. She thought not, and they'd already done more for her than the soldiers ever had.

The sun slid westward. The fronds of the trees clattered in the breeze like someone dropping a handful of sticks forever. The anticipation and excitement of the morning mellowed and soured with every hour that the dogs didn't come back. The shadows all lost their edges as thin, high clouds caught the sunlight and softened it. A flash of red and yellow from the stick moons faded and flared and faded again. Artifacts of whatever long-dead species had built the gates.

She watched the lights flutter and stream like a kite caught in some different, gentle wind. Or a bioluminescent creature like they had on Earth.

Something alive, only not alive. Like Momma bird. She wondered if maybe the stick moons were like that too. Something in between. And maybe the dogs...

Something moved in the darkness under the trees, and she sat up. The dogs came out, ambling toward her gracefully on their oddly jointed legs. Cara scrambled to her feet, stepping toward the dogs that weren't dogs. Or if they were, they were what Laconia meant by the word.

The big, apologetic eyes fixed on her, and she grabbed her own hands. She didn't know why, but she felt like she should wave or bow or do something to show them that she was glad they were there.

"Hi," she said. "I didn't think you'd come."

The dogs came around her, making a semicircle with her at the center. The drone hung from the mouth of one at the back, vortex thrusters powered down and clicking against each other like fingernails.

"Were you able...?" Cara said. Then, "Did you fix it?"

The dog with the drone came forward, lifting its head toward her. She took the drone, and the dog let it go. It was her mother's drone, there was no question about that. And the section she'd shattered was intact, but it looked different. The shards and splinters of its carapace were there, but a lattice of silver-white made a tracework where the breaks had been. Like a scar that marked a healed wound. There was no way her mother would fail to notice that. But it wouldn't matter, as long as it worked. She put the drone down on the clover, slaved it to her handheld. The thrusters hummed. The drone rose into the air, solid and balanced as ever. Cara felt the grin in her cheeks.

"This is perfect," she said. "This is everything. Thank you so much."

The dogs looked embarrassed. She powered down the drone and wrapped it carefully in her jacket as they turned and walked back into the dimness under the trees. She wondered where they went when they weren't at the pond. If there was some cave they slept in or a pod where they curled up at night. She had a hard time picturing that. And it wasn't as if they had real mouths to eat with. Maybe they all went to some kind of alien power jack and filled up whatever they used as batteries.

“Thank you,” she shouted again into the shadows. She stood, holding the drone to her chest like it was a baby. “If there’s anything I can do for you...”

She didn’t finish the sentence.

She walked back home quickly, her steps quickened by the prospect of being home, of sneaking the drone into her room unseen. She’d have to be clever to get it back into its case without her parents knowing she’d taken it. There were two ways into the house—the front that faced the road to town, and the back by the garden and the shed. The question was which would be most likely to get her past her family’s watchful eyes and safely into her room. It was getting close to dinnertime, so the front would probably be best, since at least one of them would be in the kitchen. Or she could stow the drone in the shed under the cart and wait until everyone was asleep. That probably made more sense...

She knew something was wrong the moment she stepped in the back door. The air *felt* different, like the moment before a storm. Soft voices she didn’t recognize came from the living room. She walked toward them with a sense of entering a nightmare.

Her father was sitting on a chair; his face had literally turned gray. A uniformed soldier stood beside him, head bowed, and Santiago Singh was behind them, looking away. The boy’s eyes were puffy and red from crying. No one turned to her. It was like she was invisible.

Her mother walked in from the front door, footsteps hard and percussive. Her mouth was tight and her eyes as hard as rage. She gazed toward Cara without seeming to see her.

“Mom?” Cara said, and her voice seemed to come from a long way away. “What’s wrong?”

• • ● • •

It was one of those things. An accident. If any of a thousand details had been just a little different, no one would have even noticed it. The soldier who’d been driving the transport had indulged in a couple beers with his lunch, so his reaction times were just that much delayed. Xan and Santiago

and the other boys had decided to play football instead of tag, so there was a ball that could take a wild kick. Xan had been nearest the road, so he'd been the one to run out to retrieve it. The whole thing was over before anyone understood it had begun. Like that, her little brother was dead, and the drone and Momma bird and the dogs didn't seem important anymore.

Cara sat while the soldier explained it all. Santiago Singh stood at attention, weeping as he retold all he'd seen like the good little soldier he was. Her father lurched out of the room at some point. Her mother dropped her favorite serving bowl, the fragments scattering across the floor. They were like moments out of a dream, connected because they were about the same thing, more or less. But she couldn't have said which happened first. Which one led to the others. Xan was dead, and it shattered time for her. It broke everything.

Admiral Duarte sent his condolences. This was a lapse of discipline that should never have happened. The admiral had already ordered the drunk soldier's execution. Cara's family would be put first on the list for a place in the new housing facilities, and Cara would be guaranteed a place in the academy when it opened. The admiral understood that nothing could compensate for their loss, but the soldiers would do what they could. With the family's permission, the admiral would like to attend the wake. Someone had said, *Of course*, but Cara didn't know if it had been her mother or her father. She might even have said it herself.

The town didn't have a mortuary. In the years they'd been on Laconia, there hadn't been more than a handful of deaths, and none of them had been a child. Not until now. No one seemed to know what to do or how to go about it. Cara had never been to a funeral before. She didn't know what to expect.

They brought Xan home that afternoon, and his body had already been cleaned. Someone had found or made a burial gown for him, white cloth from his throat down to his bare feet. They put him in the front between the door and road on a table. His eyes were closed, his hands folded on his belly. Cara stood at his side, looking down at him and trying to feel. Everything in her seemed to have gone numb.

To her, Xan looked like he was sleeping. Then he looked like he wasn't really Xan, but only a statue of him. A piece of art. Cara found she could flip her brain between seeing him one way and then the other, like he'd become an optical illusion. Her brother, but only asleep. Something not alive, but also not her brother. Back again. Anything except the two together: Never both *Xan* and *dead*.

People from town came. Edmund Otero. Janet Li. The Stover family, with Julianne Stover carrying her new baby on one hip. They brought food. A couple of times, they tried singing hymns, but the songs died out before they could really take root. At one point, Mari Tennanbaum seemed to well up out of the crowd and grab Cara in an awkward hug, like Cara was supposed to be comforting her instead of the other way around. Then Mari faded back into the swirl of bodies and hushed conversation. Cara went back to looking at her brother's corpse.

There was something. Not a bruise really, but where a bruise would have been if Xan's blood hadn't stopped where it was. A discoloration on his head. Cara couldn't get the idea out of her mind that this was where Death had touched him.

She didn't see the soldiers arrive so much as hear it. A change in the voices around her. When she thought to look up, Admiral Duarte was there, silhouetted by the light spilling out of their doorway as he talked to her parents. It was the first time she'd seen him in person and he wasn't as tall as she expected. A centimeter or two shorter than her father. His uniform was perfectly tailored. His pockmarked cheeks made him look older than he probably was.

He was talking to her parents when she saw him, his head bent forward like he was putting all his attention into listening to them. It was a little bit like having a Greek god or a character out of history show up. It wasn't the only unreal thing about the evening, but it was one among others.

Her mother said something she couldn't hear, and the admiral nodded and touched her arm as he replied. He shook her father's hand, neither man smiling. When he walked in her direction, she thought it was to see Xan. To view the body, if that was the phrase. She was surprised when he stopped in front of her.

“Cara?” The way her name sat in his mouth, it was like he was making sure he had the right person and also talking to someone that was his equal. His eyes were soft brown. She could see the sorrow in them. “My name is Winston.”

“I know,” she said like she was accepting an apology. Letting him off the hook.

He shifted to look at Xan. They were silent for a few seconds. He sighed. “I wish I could make this better. I’ve lost people I love before. It was very hard.”

“Why?” she asked, and her voice was sharper than she’d expected. It wasn’t a fair thing to ask. She wasn’t ever sure quite what she meant by it other than who the hell was he to come to her brother’s funeral and talk about his own pain. Winston took the question in, pursing his lips like he was sucking on it. Tasting it.

“Because I hate feeling powerless,” he said. “I hate being reminded that the universe is so much bigger than I am. And that I can’t always protect people.” He shifted to look at her directly again. Like he actually cared about her reaction to this explanation. She understood why the soldiers would follow him. Why they all loved him.

“Would you undo it,” she asked, “if you could? If you could bring him back?”

Maybe he heard something in the question. Maybe it was only that he was listening to her so deeply. He paused, thought. “I believe that I would, yes. I need your family to be well. To be part of what I’m doing here.”

“Taking over Laconia?”

“And everything that comes after that. I want to keep people safe. Not just here but everywhere. The people on Laconia, not just the ones who came with me but all of us, are my best chance to do that. And yes, if I could save your brother, I would. For him, and for your parents, and for you. If I could wave a magic wand and go back in time to keep him off that road? I would do it.”

“You killed the soldier who killed him. Didn’t you need him too?”

“Not as much as I needed you and your family to know that your brother mattered to me. I’m the government here. I imposed that. I didn’t

ask your permission first. That puts some obligations on me. It means I have to show sincerity and respect for our rules, even when that requires doing something I might not want to do. I don't have the right to compromise."

"I think I understand that."

"We have to be one people," he said. He sounded sad. "There's no room for tribes on Laconia. That's how they do it back in Sol system. Earth and Mars and the Belt. That's what we're here to outgrow."

"Everything is different here," Cara said, and the admiral nodded as though she'd understood him perfectly, then touched her shoulder and walked away.

Behind her, someone was weeping softly. She didn't turn to see who. For the first time since she'd come home, she felt almost clearheaded. When she put her hand on Xan's foot the same way she used to when she woke him up, his body was cold.

"It's going to be okay," she said. "I know how to fix this."

Her parents were in the kitchen with Mari Tennenbaum, each of them with a squat glass of wine. Usually her father would be making jokes about it being vintage fifteen minutes ago, but now he didn't seem to notice it was in his hand. The missing joke made her sad, because it meant he was sad.

"What happens to him tonight?" Cara asked.

Mari blinked and reared back a centimeter as if Cara had shouted something rude. Her father didn't react at all, just turned the fixed, polite smile a degree more toward her. Her mother was the one to answer.

"This isn't the time—"

"I know the funeral's tomorrow," Cara said, "but it's not like there's a place in town that he can stay in until then. Can he be here? It's the last night he can, so he should stay here. With us."

Her voice was louder and shriller than she'd intended. Mari Tennenbaum wasn't looking at her, but other people were. Her mother's eyes were as dead as Momma bird's.

"Sure," her mother said. "If it's important to you, he can stay here until the funeral. That would... that would be nice. To have him here."

Then her mother started crying and didn't stop. Her father put down his wine, still with the same smile, and led her away. For a moment, Cara expected Xan to rush in and ask what was wrong with Mom, and then she remembered again. She went back out to stand guard over the body. To make sure that if anyone came and tried to take him away, she'd be there to tell them her mom said not to.

The memorial ended late, people staying until the darkness felt like it had always been there. Like daytime was some other planet. She was still standing beside Xan when Admiral Duarte and the soldiers left, and when Stephen DeCaamp and Janet Li came to move Xan's body inside. Probably nothing in the local system would mistake him for food, but they brought him in anyway, still on the table. They left him between the dining area and the kitchen, dressed in his funeral whites. It was like something out of a dream.

Her parents saw everyone out, said their last farewells, and closed the door. None of them spoke, and Cara went to the washroom and pretended to prepare for bed. Brushed teeth, washed face, changed into a nightgown. She kissed her mother on the cheek and went to her bedroom. She left the door open just a crack, though, so the latch wouldn't make noise when she opened it. Then, as quietly as she could, she took the nightgown back off and pulled on work clothes. She tucked her handheld into her sock drawer. If they checked, it would look like she was in her room. She crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to her neck so if her parents did come in, she'd look normal. The trick, she thought, would be waiting until they went to bed without falling asleep herself.

In the darkness, she bit her lip, chewing the soft flesh so the pain would keep her awake. She counted backward from five hundred, one number with each breath, and then counted back up to five hundred again. She was just shifting the blanket aside to get up when she heard the back door open and her parents' voices drift in. She froze, listened.

The strangest thing was how normal they sounded. How much grief sounded like regular life.

"I'll get that cleaned up later," her father said.

"It's fine. I don't care."

“I know, but I’ll clean it up anyway.”

The ghost of a laugh, gone almost before it started. She could imagine her mother leaning against the counter the way she always did, except that Xan was dead. So maybe they acted different. It seemed like everything ought to have changed.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” her mother said. “It’s just not... plausible?”

“Yeah. I keep feeling like I just had a little seizure or something. Like I was having some kind of hallucination, and now I’m back. Or I’m asleep again. I don’t know. I can’t... I don’t feel like he’s gone.”

Cara felt a little smile tugging at her mouth. For a second, she was tempted to run out and tell them. To have them help. Then they could all do it together.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” her mother said. “We weren’t supposed to be here anymore. Not us. Not—” Her voice thickened and stopped, like the words had gotten too gooey to get out. Her father was making noises. Like little cooing sounds Cara might have heard from paper bugs. She shifted a little, thinking that maybe she could peek through the crack in her door. See what they were doing. The tightness in her gut was the seconds of nighttime slipping away, and she had to find the dogs.

“He should have been back in Paris,” her mother said. “He should have been with his cousins, not on this fucking nightmare of a planet.”

“I know,” her father said.

“I *hate* it here. I want to go home.”

“I know, Dot. I want to go home too.”

Cara felt the words like a punch. Home? They wanted to go home? They *were* home. *This* was home. What they meant was Earth, where she’d never been, where she didn’t belong. Where Xan didn’t belong.

She must have made a noise, because her mother called out in her tear-thickened voice. “Babygirl?”

Cara froze, then inched back toward her bed. She couldn’t be found now. Not dressed like this.

“Babygirl?” her mother said again, and Cara jumped back into the bed, hauled the blanket up to her neck, and turned her face to the wall. If they

saw her face, they'd know she was only pretending to sleep...

Her door opened. She fought to keep her breath slow and deep. What would she say if they touched her? Should she pretend to wake up? What did she look like when she was just waking up? She didn't know.

"I love you, babygirl," her mother whispered, and the door closed, the latch clicking home. Cara let out a long, stuttering breath. Her pulse was going fast enough for two people, which struck her as funny, because it was sort of true. Her heartbeat and Xan's too. For a while at least.

Her parents' voices were less clear now, but she heard the door to their bedroom close. She waited, counted to five hundred and down again, waited some more. No more noises. No more voices.

The latch was louder than she wanted it to be, no matter how gently she opened it. It felt like it was echoing in the empty house, but she'd spent too much time waiting already. She walked carefully, rolling her weight from carefully placed heel to her toe. Xan lay still on his table. She opened the back door, stepped out to the shed. When she pulled the cart out, she was almost surprised to see that the sampling drone was still in the shed. It seemed like an artifact from some other life, like it had been hidden there for years and not hours. Funny how time worked like that. She ran her fingertips over the repaired shell with its new veins.

Xan's body was heavier than she expected. She'd carried him before sometimes, but he'd always been helping her, at least a little. He wasn't stiff anymore, and she staggered a little getting him through the back doorway. It got easier when she stopped trying to carry him less like a boy and more like a sack of soil. When she dropped him into the cart, his head hit the side with a thump.

"Sorry," she whispered as if he had felt anything. "But really, this is your fault. When this is done, you're going to have to do my chores for me from now on."

Xan's eyes had opened a little. Tiny wet slits hidden behind his eyelashes, catching the starlight. His arms had folded under him when she put him down, twisted and bent at angles that made her own shoulder ache to look at. There wasn't time to make him comfortable, though. She fumbled with the cart's handle and started down the path, then paused and

snuck back into the house. She pulled a bag of fruit and some rice bars out of the pantry, and a bottle of filtered water from the refrigerator. She tucked them beside her brother's corpse, took up the cart handle, and started out.

Night on Earth was bright. That's what they said. Their moon shone like a kind of second, crappy sun. Cities were big enough to drown out the stars with their extra glow. She'd seen pictures of it all, but that wasn't what it had been like for her. On Laconia, day was bright and night was dark. The wide, smeary glow of the galactic disk was the brightest thing in the sky, and she could only navigate by it roughly. Enough to know which direction she was going. Two stick moons floated against the stars, shimmering and shifting, swimming toward each other in the darkness above the sky.

Cara put her head down and pulled. She'd been down this path so many times at so many times of day and in such different weathers that her body knew the way even when she couldn't exactly see it. She knew the sound of the grass and the water, the places where the breeze changed shape, the smell of broken soil and the pattering of bug honey on the lower fronds of the trees. She could have made the trip with her eyes closed, and with the darkness, she very nearly did.

At the pond, a rock deer lifted its head at her approach, its scales shifting and reflecting starlight like a little slice of sky that had come down for a drink. It was too dark to see its eyes.

"Shoo," Cara said, and the animal turned and launched itself into the darkness, tramping through the underbrush and then running away faster than a soldier's truck, even though there were no roads. Cara stopped. A film of sweat covered her forehead, and her armpits felt swampy. She was here, though. She'd made it.

"Hello?" she shouted. "Are you there?"

The darkness didn't answer back. Even the night animals and bugs went quiet, like they were listening with her. Now that she was here, the plan that had seemed so simple was showing its holes. For her to take Xan to the dogs, the dogs had to be there. If they weren't...

"Hello?" Her voice sounded thin, even to her. Stretched and desperate. "Please, are you there?"

She parked the cart in the soft ground at the water's edge and stepped toward the trees. The already black night grew darker. There wasn't even starlight here. Only an absence, like looking straight into the pupil of an eye as big as the world. She put her arms out, fingertips waving for the fronds and scrub that she knew was there but couldn't see. Her eyes ached from trying to see anything. Her ears rang with the silence.

"Please? I need help."

Nothing answered. Despair she hadn't known she was fighting washed into her. If the dogs weren't there, then Xan was gone. And gone forever. And he couldn't be. Grief shifted in her belly, shook her legs and hands. The dogs had been there for Momma bird. They couldn't leave her brother dead, and just save a fucking sunbird.

Her parents would wake up. They'd see the body was gone, and her with it. They'd be angry, and what would she tell them? What would she say to make them understand that the rules they knew weren't her rules, that Xan didn't have to be dead. They'd stop her. She balled her hands into tight, aching fists. She couldn't let them stop her.

"Hey!" she shouted. And then again, loud enough for the air to scrape at her throat. "*Hey! I need you! I need help! It's important!*"

The silence was absolute.

And then it wasn't.

She couldn't tell how far away it was. With nothing to see, sound could deceive her, but somewhere ahead of her, a hiss and crackle of scrub being pushed aside. The rock deer maybe. Or a shambler. Or any of the thousands of uncategorized animals of Laconia that were still waiting to be named.

Or the dogs.

Uncertainty came over her in a wave. It was too big and too strange. Like she'd waved at the sun and it had waved back. Maybe this had been a bad idea, but it was too late now. She steeled herself to face whatever came from the black. The tramping drew nearer, louder. It multiplied and spread. They were coming.

Something touched her hand. A gentle pressure that tingled like a mild electric shock.

Cara dropped to her knees and threw her arms around the dog, hugging the strange, too-solid flesh close to her. It was warm against her cheek, and rough. It smelled like cardamom and soil. It went still, like it wasn't sure what to do with her affection and joy, and it stayed still until she released it.

"Over here," she said, stumbling back to the pond. She gestured in the darkness. And maybe the dogs could see her, because they followed. Starlight glimmered in their bulging eyes.

Xan's funeral whites glowed in the darkness, a paler shadow. The dogs gathered around him, and it was like watching what was left of Xan dissolve. Darkness consuming darkness.

"He's my brother," Cara said. "A truck hit him. It killed him, like with Momma bird. But I need him back. And you brought her back, so you can bring him back too, can't you? I mean you can, can't you?"

She was babbling, and the dogs didn't respond. Mostly blind, she stepped in close, her hands on their backs. The dogs were still and quiet as statues. And then one began making its *ki-ka-ko* call, and the others picked it up until it felt like a choir around her. Until her head spun with it. She sank to her knees to keep from losing her balance. In the sky, the stick moons glittered green and white and blue. The stars looked warmer than their lights.

Xan bobbed up to the surface of the darkness. The dogs were carrying him, one under him bearing his weight on its back. Others holding his arms and legs to steady him as they walked.

"You can, can't you? You can fix him?"

The dogs didn't answer. Xan floated out to the trees, and then behind them. And then there was only the sound of the dogs walking. Then not even that.

Cara sat by the water, hugging her knees. Slowly, the natural sounds of the night came back: the trill of insects, the trill of birds. A high, fluting call from something a long way off, and an answering call from even farther. The stillness cooled her, but not badly. All she had to do now was wait.



Voices woke her. They were calling her name, and she couldn't remember where she was. It wasn't her bed or her room or her house, because there was a dawn-stained sky overhead. Her clothes were wet with dew.

“Cara!”

She was on the edge of calling back, when the last forgetfulness of sleep slid off her mind. She clamped a hand over her mouth as if her arm didn't trust her throat to stay quiet. She scrambled to her feet. Momma bird and the little ones were already on the pond. The dead, black eyes didn't take Cara in. The cart squatted where she'd let it. She snatched the little bag of food out of it, took two steps toward the voices, and then two away. Her mind felt like it was buzzing.

If she told them now, they'd call the soldiers. They'd come and they'd track down the dogs. She didn't think they'd wait for Xan to come back, and he had to come back. But there were only so many paths. They'd find her at the pond, and soon. She'd have to say something, wouldn't she? And what if they didn't let her come back?

She felt like she was still struggling with the dilemma even as she trotted out toward the forest, and the darkness under the fronds. She pushed through the underbrush, twigs and the stick-hard fingers of the scrub sliding off her. A rough break in the plants showed where the animal path led away to the south, and she followed it.

She'd never gone past the pond before. There were probably surveys of the land somewhere. Or maybe not. A decade was a long time to live somewhere, but a planet was larger than the best intentions. She might be going places humans had never been before. Or no one except for Xan, anyway.

The voices grew more distant, but still clear. Her legs ached, but the work of moving fought back the cold. The voices went silent. She thought maybe they'd given up looking for her, but when they started again, there were more. Voices she recognized. Instructor Hannu, Stephen DeCaamp. Mari Tennanbaum.

Her father.

“Babygirl!” he cried. His voice sounded raw. Like he was hurting himself by shouting. “Babygirl, if you're out there, we're right *here*! Baby!”

She wanted to go back to him, to tell him everything was all right. That she was and that Xan was too. Tears rose up in her eyes, blurring the world.

“Sorry,” she said softly, pushing forward. “I’m so sorry.”

She didn’t stop until the sound of the voices was gone. The search would keep going, though. There would be drones. There would be thermal scanning. If the soldiers helped, there would be visuals taken from orbit. She stayed under the canopy of fronds. There were plenty of large animals in the forest. It wouldn’t be easy to tell which heat came from them and which came from her. At least she hoped it wouldn’t.

The sun tracked through the sky, changing the angle of the few, thin dapples that pushed down into the permanent twilight of the forest. Cara felt herself getting tired. She’d have to rest. She’d have to eat. And at some point she’d have to find her way back to the pond. She had to be there when the dogs came back with Xan. After that, everything would be better.

She found a place where a long brown stone pushed up out of the land. It was too round to be a real bench, and whatever the blue moss was growing on, it felt slick and oily. She sat there anyway. The fruit and rice tasted better than it ever had at home, and the water was sweet. She hadn’t realized how dry her throat had become until she drank. Her muscles twitched with fatigue. It wasn’t a bad feeling.

The forest around her was hushed, but not silent. Little things the size of her thumb ticked at her from the trees. They had big wet eyes and tiny mandibles that looked like they were frozen in permanent comic alarm. A bird fluttered by on wide leathery wings, landed on a frond across the way from her, and muttered to itself like a bored child in school. The soft breeze smelled like burnt coffee and fresh grass and rubbing alcohol. An insect buzzed past on bright wings that left a little rainbow afterimage on her eyes.

A sense of peace crept over her, and it felt like the world had sat beside her, opened its own lunch bag, and was just being with her. Everything about the little space was beautiful and calm and rich with a million things that no one had ever seen before. And every place was like this. A whole planet and a solar system beyond it. There would be caves somewhere, with fishlike things living in the waters. There would be ocean coves with tide pools filled with living systems that weren’t animals and weren’t plants.

That didn't have names or an idea of names. She tried to imagine what it would be like going back to Earth, where everything was already known and there weren't any miracles left. It seemed sad.

She pinched the last grain of rice between her fingertips and dropped it on her tongue. She didn't know if the adults were still searching for her. She didn't know how long it would take the dogs to bring back Xan. She'd have to go back home eventually for fresh water and food. But just then, just for that moment, she could let herself feel at peace.

She pushed the empty water bottle back in her pocket, folded the empty bag and shoved it in too. She didn't want to hurry for fear of hearing her name called in a familiar voice. She couldn't stay for fear of missing the dogs. There wasn't a perfect answer, but she didn't need a perfect one. Good enough was good enough.

Making her way home was harder than leaving had been, which made some sense to her. Going away from a point, there were any number of paths, and all of them were right. Going back to the point, most paths were wrong. The rock-deer trail wasn't as clear, now that she was walking back along it. Branches and turns she hadn't noticed on the way out confused her now. And as the sunlight changed its angle and warmth, the colors under the forest canopy changed. Twice, she backtracked to a place she was almost sure was part of the right way and tried again, making other decisions.

The sunlight had started to shift into gray and orange, the air to grow cool, when she came around a stand of trees and the dogs were scattered there, legs tucked primly beneath their bodies. Their embarrassed, apologetic eyes shifted toward her as she came forward. Excitement or fear or both raced through Cara's body like an electrical shock. And then Xan sat up, his head turning toward her.

He was changed, that was obvious. He was still wearing his funeral whites, but a long black stain ran from his left shoulder down to his belly. His skin had a grayness where the red of blood should have been. His eyes had gone pure black. When he moved, it had the same utter stillness broken by considered action as Momma bird, like every muscle that fired had been thought about for a fraction of a second first. But his hair still stood out in

all directions the way it did when he'd just gotten up in the morning. His mouth was the same gentle curve that he'd inherited from their dad.

"Xan?" she whispered.

He was still as stone for a moment, then he shifted his head. "I feel weird," he said, and his voice was his own.

Her grin was so wide it hurt her face. She rushed the last meter between them and hugged him, lifting him up in her arms. For a moment, it was like lifting the dead weight of his corpse. Then his arms were around her too, his head against her neck.

"I was scared," he said. "There was something wrong. And someone was talking to me, only they weren't talking to me."

"There was an accident," Cara said. "You got hurt. Really hurt. *Killed-hurt.*"

A hesitation. "Oh," Xan said. She stepped back, but she kept hold of his hand. She didn't want to let go of him. He blinked. "I feel pretty good for killed."

"I brought you to the dogs. They fix things."

"Like me," Xan said. And then, "There's something wrong with how things look."

"I guess they had to change you some," she said. The nearest dog shifted and looked away, as if chagrined by the limits of their powers. Cara shook her head. "It's okay. This is wonderful. Thank you."

"There are things I didn't see before," Xan said. The words sounded faint. Like he was speaking them from farther off than right here in front of her. "There are other things here. I don't know what they are."

Cara tugged on his hand, pulling him along with her the way she used to sometimes before.

"Come on. It's getting late. We should get home."

"What does it mean to be in a substrate?"

"I don't know," Cara said, tugging him again. "Let's go ask Mom. If I can figure out how to get there from here." She turned to the nearest dog and bowed. She didn't know why that seemed like the thing to do, but it did. "Thank you so much for bringing my brother back to us. If there's anything I can do to help you, just let me know and I'll do it. Really."

The dog made a chirping noise, and then they all rose as one, walking away through the forest on their strangely jointed legs. She half expected them to start their *ki-ka-ko* song, but they didn't. They only faded into the forest again, as if it was the place where they most belonged. Cara started out for what she was pretty sure was the south, and Xan followed along behind, his cool gray hand still in hers.

She didn't find the pond, but a break in the trees opened up on the road to her house. The charcoal sky of twilight glittered with stars and the stick moons. At least now she knew where she was and how to get where she wanted to be. She just hoped no one would see them along the way. She wanted her parents to be the first to see what she'd accomplished.

A soft breeze came from the north and set the fronds of the trees clacking against each other. They walked the same way they came home from school every day, all of it familiar even through the changes. Cara was already imagining a bowl of barley soup and her bed and waking up in the morning to the amazement and wonder of the town. Xan asked how he'd died, and she spent the walk telling the story of his death, his funeral, everyone who'd come, how she'd made sure his body had stayed there for her to steal. He listened more intensely than he ever had before and hardly interrupted at all.

"The head of the soldiers really came to see me?" Xan asked when she was done.

"He did."

"Do you think he'll want to see us again now that I'm back? I don't want to get them in trouble."

Them. He meant the dogs. Cara felt a moment's unease. The soldiers would want to know about the dogs, about Momma bird and the drone and Xan. Especially with the dogs showing up after the stick moons came alive. She'd have to talk to her parents about what to tell the soldiers and how to tell it to them.

She thought of Winston. The way he listened. *I need your family to be well.*

"The admiral understands," she said. "He knows that Laconia's not like other places."

Xan thought about that a beat too long, then nodded more to himself than to her.

The house glowed from every window. Every light in every room had to be burning. It wasn't like her parents to run the power down like that. And they were there too, framed in the window like it was the screen of her handheld. Her mother standing in the kitchen, hands on the counter. Her father sitting at the table. They looked as tired as Cara felt. She wondered if they'd been searching for her all day. If there were still people out there looking.

Xan stopped, staring at the house with his newly black eyes. His face was all stunned amazement, as if he was seeing it all for the first time. In a way, he was. Cara squeezed his fingers gently. He didn't follow her right away when she walked toward the front door. Cara stopped and waved him forward.

"It's going to be okay," she said.

When she opened the door, her mother startled as if Cara had fired a gun, then rushed at her and grabbed her by the arms hard enough to hurt.

"What did you do?" her mother growled through rage-bared teeth. "What the *fuck* did you do?"

And then she pulled Cara close in a hug so tight, it felt like drowning. Her mother's sobs shook them both. Cara put her arms around her mother and found she was crying a little too. Guilt and joy and the echoing sorrow of Xan's death and the triumph of his return all washed together in the moment, and she held on to her mother's body like she hadn't since she was a baby.

"It's okay, Momma," she said through her tears. "It's all okay now."

Her father said her mother's name. *Dot*. One low syllable, but with alarm in it louder than a shout.

Xan stood just outside the open door in the space where he wasn't exactly in the darkness or in the light. His funeral whites carried so much dirt and stain they were like camouflage. His bare feet were filthy. The angle of his eyebrows over his black wet eyes reminded Cara of the dogs—uncertain, embarrassed, apologetic. He stepped through the doorway into the house and went still. Then, in a flicker, lifted his hands toward them all

like a baby reaching for an embrace. His fingernails were dirty. The grayness of his skin made his face seem smudged even where it wasn't.

Cara felt her mother gasp, a sharp, sudden inhalation, and didn't breathe out. Her arms went stiff around Cara, grabbing her in so much it hurt. Xan tried a smile. His gaze clicked from Cara to their father to their mother and back to Cara, as fast as an insect leg twitching. He spread his fingers wider, took another step forward.

"It's okay," Cara said. "I got him back."

Her mother yanked her back, grabbing Cara up and away with a violence that hurt her neck. Cara was back behind the counter, her feet off the floor, her mother's arms pressing the air out of her almost before she realized they were moving. Her father pushed them both behind him. She didn't understand why he had a knife in his hand.

"Gary?" her mother said. "What the fuck is that?"

"I see it," her father said. "It's real."

Cara couldn't speak. She didn't have the air. She wriggled against her mother's grip. She had to explain, to tell them what was going on. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen.

"I want a hug too," Xan said.

Xan took another awkward step forward, still and then the flicker of motion, then still again. Her father yelled, a deep, ragged sound too big for the man she knew. He lunged toward Xan, knife shining in his fist, and terror flooded Cara's blood. She kicked at her mother hard, and felt the blow connect. The grip around her released a little.

"Stop it!" Cara screamed. "What are you doing?"

Xan blocked the knife with his hand, the gray skin opening and black blood pouring from his palm. Xan's eyes went wide with shock. Her father barreled forward, still shouting wordlessly. He grabbed Xan's funeral whites and lifted the little boy off the floor. Cara pushed against her mother's neck hard, and stumbled to the floor. Her mother was keening now, a high, tight sound of panic. Her father had the pantry door open. He threw Xan into it and slammed the door shut, still yelling. There were words in it now. He was shouting, *Leave my family alone.*

“What is the *matter* with you?” Cara shouted. She punched her father’s back and then froze. She’d never hit him before. She’d never hit anyone before. He didn’t even notice. He grabbed one of the kitchen stools and used it to jam the pantry door closed. Xan banged against the door harder than Cara would have thought he could. Her mother yelped and started cursing fast and low, almost under her breath. It sounded like praying.

Tears were streaming down Cara’s cheeks, but she wasn’t sad. All she felt was a powerful, growing outrage.

“I brought him back!” she yelled. “He was dead and I took him to the dogs, and they *fixed* him!”

“Dogs?” her father said. “What dogs?”

“The dogs that came after the stick moons turned on,” Cara said. There was so much they didn’t understand, and the words were like trying to drink through too thin a straw. The meaning wouldn’t all fit. “They fixed Momma bird and the drone and they fixed Xan because I asked them to, and he’s back. I brought him *back* and you *hurt* him!”

She heard her mother somewhere behind her, talking into her handheld. *I need the military liaison. It’s an emergency.* Cara’s outrage and impatience felt like venom in her blood. She pushed at the stool, trying to get the pantry door open again. Her father grabbed her shoulders, pulled her close until his face was the whole world.

“That’s not your brother,” her father said, biting off each word. “That’s. Not. Xan.”

“It is.”

“The dead don’t come back,” her father said.

“They do *here*,” Cara said.

“His eyes,” he said, shaking her as he spoke. “The way he moves. That’s not a human, babygirl. That’s something else wearing my little boy’s skin.”

“So *what*?” Cara said. “He’s knows everything Xan knows. He loves everything Xan loves. That *makes* him Xan. How can you do this to him just because he’s not perfect!”

Her mother’s voice came, hard as stone. “They’re sending a force from town.”

“The soldiers?” Cara said, pulling away from her father’s grip. “You called the *soldiers* on him? You *hate* the soldiers!”

She grabbed at the stool again, but her mother lifted her from behind, hauled her feet off the floor and carried her back toward her room. Xan was calling from the pantry, his voice muted and rough with tears and confusion. Cara tried to twist back toward him. Tried to reach for him.

Her mother pushed her into her room and blocked the door with her body. When she looked down at Cara, her expression was blank and hard. “It’s going to be all right,” her mother said. “But you have to stay here until I get this under control.”

A rush of thoughts fought for Cara’s voice—*It was under control* and *Why are you making this a bad thing?* and *You let Daddy cut Xan*—and left her sputtering and incoherent. The door closed. Cara balled her hands, screamed, and pounded the wall. Her parents’ voices came from the house in clipped, hard syllables that she couldn’t make out. She sat on the edge of her futon, bent double, and put her head in her tingling hands. Her blood felt bright with rage, but she had to think.

The soldiers were coming. Her parents were going to let them take Xan away. *Make* them take Xan away. They’d say the dogs were bad. Dangerous. They might hurt them.

All because it didn’t work like this on *Earth*.

The room was filled with her things. Her clothes—clean and folded in the dresser and worn and scattered on the floor by the hamper. The picture over her bed of dinosaurs running from a man in a big pink hat. The picture she’d made when she was seven from Laconian grass and paste, with Instructor Hannu’s note—*Good work!*—beside it. The tablet with her book on it. She scooped it up, turned it on. It was still open to the page of *Ashby Allen Akerman in Paris*. The old woman feeding bread to the birds. She put her fingertips on the picture. It wasn’t a real woman. It wasn’t even a real painting. It was just the idea of an idea. It didn’t have anything to do with her life, and she didn’t lose anything by letting it go.

She closed the book and opened the recording function. She felt the time slipping past, but she took a long look around the room all the same.

Her whole life was here, written in little notes and objects that added up to a story that only she would understand.

Or else no one would.

The window was easy to open, but the screen was harder to rip than she'd expected. Once she'd gotten a hole big enough for a couple of fingers, it got easier to pull it apart, but it still hurt her fingertips. A little puff of dust came off the fibers when she ripped the hole big enough that she could squeeze through it. The empty water bottle slipped out of her pocket as she climbed out, clattering onto the paving outside her window. She didn't go back for it. She ran across the road to where the underbrush started getting thick. High clouds interrupted the stars in streaks, as if giant claws had ripped strips out of the sky.

The light in the house and the darkness of the world let her see her mother and father in the main room perfectly. Her father had a length of metal as long as his arm held in both hands like a club. He was crying, but he didn't wipe the tears away. He wouldn't put the weapon down long enough for that. Her mother stood at the door, ready to usher the soldiers in when they came. It would be soon. Town wasn't far away when you had military-transport vehicles.

Cara started the tablet recording. She took a deep, slow breath, waited fifteen seconds, and screamed.

"Mamma!"

Her mother's head came up sharply as she looked out into the darkness of the night. Cara tapped the playback and loop, threw the volume to max, and then flung the tablet as hard as she could into the brush. Her mother came out the front door, scanning but blind from the light. From the brush, Cara's voice came again. *Momma!*

"Cara?" her mother said. "Where are you?"

Her father came to the door. She heard him say, "What is it?"

Cara started running. She heard her own voice again, behind her, and her mother screaming for her. And her father now too. She didn't have much time. She looped around the back of the house and in the back door, opening it carefully to keep from making noise. Both her parents had gone out the front to find her. To save her. Their voices reminded her of the

search party that she'd avoided. All the ways they wanted to help her, but never asked how she wanted to be helped.

She kicked the stool away and hauled open the pantry door. Xan was kneeling in the darkness, his legs folded under him just like the dogs. Wet tracks of tears marked his cheeks. His black eyes took her in. She held out her hand.

"Come on," she said. "We have to warn the dogs."

The front door stood open. Across the road, the brush crackled and hushed as her parents crashed through it, calling her name. They sounded frightened. Cara felt sorry for them, but they'd made their choices. She'd made hers. Xan took her hand with his uninjured one, and she hauled him up.

Then they were running out the back, into the night, toward the dogs, wherever they were. Xan matched her stride for stride, never letting go of her hand. Her parents' voices faded behind her. She didn't know if they'd found her tablet or if she'd just gotten far enough away that the sound wouldn't reach her.

It didn't matter.

Xan laughed, and the sound was just like the joy he'd had playing a game with his friends. She felt herself smiling. The feeling of freedom lifted her up. Even with the knowledge of the soldiers following behind her. Even with the grief just starting in her heart that she'd never go home. The night was hers, and Laconia was hers, and that was joyous.

Her legs burned and she felt light-headed from hunger. She hadn't had anything to eat since the fruit and rice in the forest. And there wouldn't be anything for her out in the world. All the plants that Laconia grew were indigestible for her at best. Poison at worst. The sunbirds, the blue clover, the grunchers, the glass snakes, everything alive knew, at a chemical level, that she wasn't one of them. But that didn't matter either.

The worst that could happen was she'd die.

The dogs would fix her.

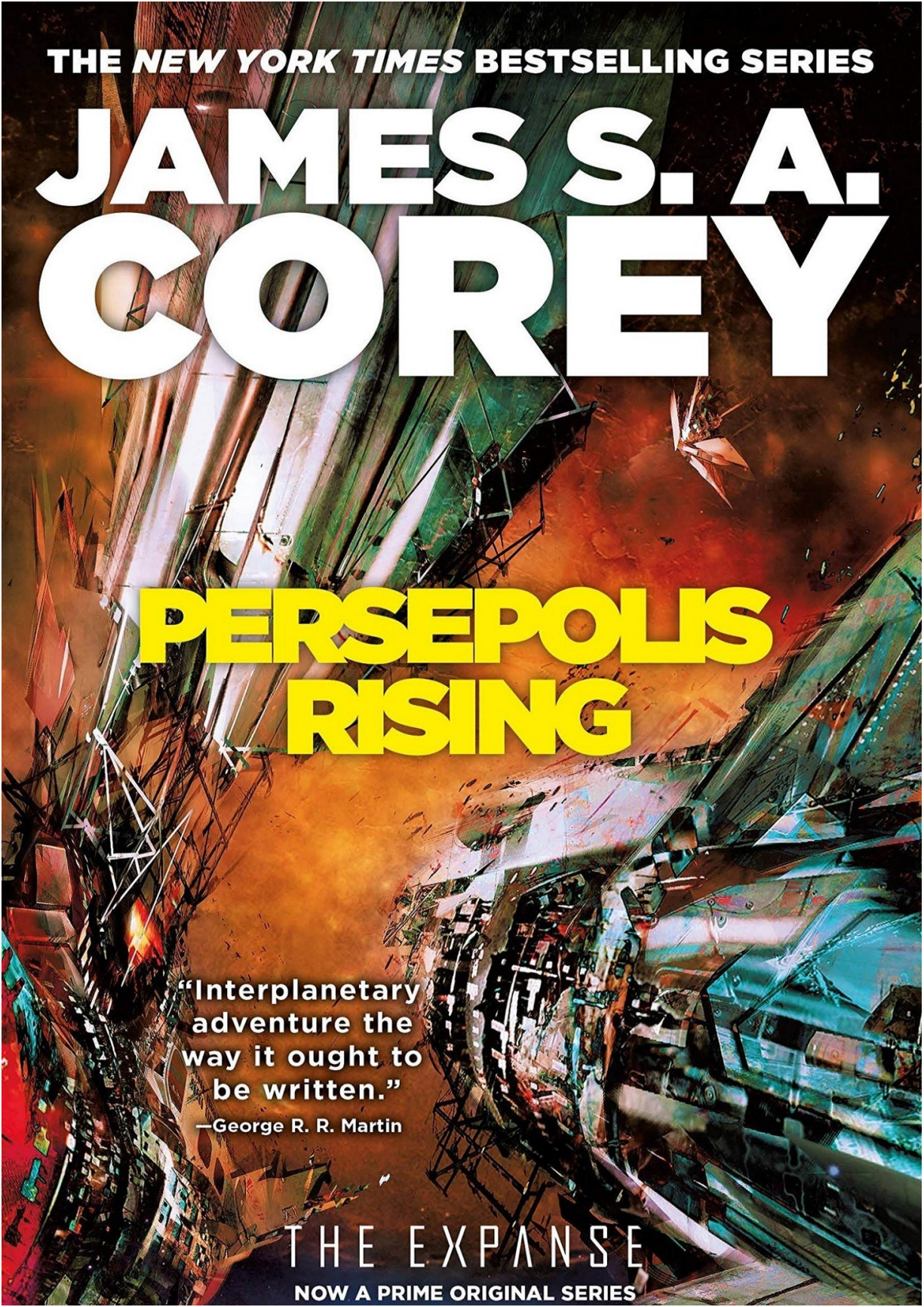
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James S.A. Corey is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck, George R.R. Martin's assistants. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The first and last name are taken from Abraham's and Franck's middle names, respectively, and S.A. are the initials of Abraham's daughter.

Under that name they wrote *The Expanse*, a series of science fiction novels, novellas, and stories, that has also been adapted for television under the same name.

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The background of the cover is a detailed, painterly illustration of a futuristic, industrial space station or orbital city. The structure is composed of various metallic platforms, scaffolding, and large cylindrical components, all set against a backdrop of a fiery orange and red sky. The overall aesthetic is one of high-tech, gritty sci-fi.

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Prologue: Cortázar

Almost three decades had passed since Paolo Cortázar and the breakaway fleet had passed through Laconia gate. Time enough to build a little civilization, a city, a culture. Time enough for him to confirm that alien engineers had designed the protomolecule as a bridge builder. They had thrown it into the stars like seeds to hijack whatever organic life it encountered and create ring gates into a pocket universe, a nexus between worlds. Until they died out, the slow zone and its rings had been the hub of an empire that defied human comprehension. And now, it would be again. A little bridge-building mechanism that overcame locality changed everything for all humanity.

Not that Paolo cared about all humanity. For him, the fact of the protomolecule and the technologies it opened was all-encompassing. It not only changed the shape of the universe around him but also altered his personal and professional life. For decades, it had been his only obsession. In the fight that ended their relationship, his most recent boyfriend had accused him of actually *loving* the protomolecule.

Paolo hadn't been able to deny it. It had been so long since Paolo felt anything approaching love for another human that he'd lost the context for what did and didn't qualify. Certainly, studying the protomolecule and all the myriad branches of scientific insight that came from it took most of his time and attention. Understanding the ways in which it interacted with the other alien artifacts and technologies would be the work of lifetimes. He made no apology for his devotion. The tiny, beautiful speck so rich with implicit information was like a rosebud that never stopped blooming. It was beautiful in a way that nothing else could ever be. His lover had been unable to accept this, and the end of their relationship felt inevitable in retrospect. Paolo did miss him, in an abstract sort of way. Like he might miss a lost pair of comfortable shoes.

There were so many other wonderful things to occupy his time.

On the viewscreen in front of him, a latticework of carbon grew and unfolded in intricate, interwoven patterns. Given the correct environmental conditions and the right growth medium, the protomolecule defaulted to building these lattices. The material created was lighter than an equal volume of carbon fiber and had greater tensile strength than graphene. The Technology Directorate of the Laconian Military Council had asked him to explore its possible use in armor for infantry units. The lattice's tendency to permanently bond to human skin made that problematic from an engineering standpoint, but it was still beautiful.

Paolo adjusted the sensitivity of the electron stream and leaned in toward the monitor, watching as the protomolecule picked up the free-floating carbon atoms and neatly wove them into the grid like it was a child focused on its play.

"Doctor Cortázar," a voice said.

Paolo answered with a grunt and a wave of his hand that meant *Go away, I'm busy* in any language.

"Doctor Cortázar," the voice repeated, insistent.

Paolo pulled his gaze away from the screen and turned around. A pale-skinned person of indefinite gender stood in a lab coat, holding a large hand terminal. Paolo thought their name was Caton? Canton? Cantor? Something like that. One of the lab's army of technicians. Competent, as far as Paolo could recall. But now interrupting him, so there would have to be consequences. The nervous look on Caton/Cantor/Canton's face told him they were very aware of this fact.

Before Paolo could speak, the tech said, "The director asked me to remind you that you have an appointment. With"—the tech's voice went low, almost to a whisper—"him. With Him."

The tech did not mean the director. There was only one Him.

Paolo turned off the video display and checked to make sure the monitoring systems were recording everything before he stood up.

"Yes, of course," he said. And then, because he was making an effort these days, "Thank you. Cantor?"

"Caton," the tech replied with visible relief.

"Of course. Please let the director know I'm on my way."

"I'm supposed to accompany you, Doctor," Caton said, tapping on the hand terminal as though this fact was on a list somewhere.

"Of course." Paolo pulled his coat off a rack by the door and headed out.

The bioengineering and nanoinformatics lab of the University of Laconia was the largest research lab on the planet. Possibly in the entirety of human space. The university campus spread across nearly forty hectares of land on the outskirts of the Laconian capital city. His labs accounted for almost a quarter of that space. Like everything on Laconia, it was orders of magnitude larger than it needed to be for the people who inhabited it now. It had been built for the future. For all those who would come after.

Paolo walked briskly along a gravel path, checking the monitor on his forearm as he went. Caton jogged along behind.

“Doctor,” the lab tech said, pointing in the opposite direction, “I brought a cart for you. It’s in Parking C.”

“Bring it around to the Pen. I have something to do there first.”

Caton hesitated for a moment, caught between a direct order from him and the responsibility of being his chaperone.

“Yes, Doctor,” Caton said, then ran off in the other direction.

As he walked, Paolo scanned through his task list for the day to be sure he wasn’t forgetting anything else, then plucked his sleeve down over the monitor and looked up at the sky. It was a lovely day. Laconia had a bright cerulean-blue sky, with a few cottony white clouds scattered about. The massive rigging of the planet’s orbital construction platform was very faintly visible, all long arms and empty spaces between, like a massive oligonucleotide floating in space.

The gentle wind carried the faint burned plastic scent of a local fungus analog releasing what passed for spores. The breeze pushed the long fronds of dogwhistles across his path. The grunchers—approximately the same ecological niche as crickets with even a few morphological similarities—that clung to the plants hissed at him when he got too close. He had no idea why the weeds had been named dogwhistles. They looked more like pussy willows to him. And naming an insect analog that looked like a cricket with four limbs a gruncher made even less sense. There didn’t seem to be any scientific process to the naming of the local flora and fauna. People just threw names at things until a consensus arose. It annoyed him.

The Pen was different from the other lab buildings. He’d had its walls built from single sheets of high-impact armor plating welded airtight into ninety-degree angles to make a dark metallic cube twenty-five meters on a side. At the building’s only entrance, four soldiers wearing light armor and carrying assault rifles stood at alert.

“Doctor Cortázar,” one of the four said, holding out a hand in the universal gesture for *Stop walking*.

Paolo pulled his ID badge on its lanyard out from under his shirt and presented it to the guard, who plugged it into a reader. He then touched the reader to the skin on Paolo’s wrist.

“Nice day,” the guard said pleasantly, smiling as the machine did its work of comparing Paolo’s ID to his physical measurements and his identifying proteins.

“Lovely,” Paolo agreed.

The machine pinged its acceptance that he was actually Paolo Cortázar, the president of Laconia University and head of its exobiological studies lab. The guards had all known that by sight, but the ritual was important for more reasons than one. The door slid open, and the four guards stepped aside.

“Have a nice day, Doctor.”

“You as well,” Paolo said as he stepped into the security airlock. One wall hissed as hidden nozzles blasted him with air. Sensors on the opposite wall tested for explosives and infectious materials. And possibly even bad intentions.

After a moment, the hissing stopped, and the inner airlock door slid open. Only then did Paolo hear the moaning.

The Pen, as it was called by everyone in spite of not having an official name in any documentation, was the second highest security building on Laconia for a reason. It was where Paolo kept his milking herd.

That name had come from an early fight with his ex-lover. He’d meant it as an insult, but it was an apt analogy. Inside the Pen, people and animals that had been deliberately infected with the protomolecule lived out the remainder of their lives. Once the alien nanotech had appropriated their cells and begun reproducing, Paolo’s staff could drain the bodies of their fluids and filter out the critical particles from the matrix tissue. When the bodies were exhausted, any remaining fluids could be incinerated without losing anything of value. There were bays for twenty-four, but only seventeen were occupied at the moment. Someday, with a wider population base, subjects would be more abundant.

The great works of Laconia depended on communicating with the underlying technology the long-dead alien civilization had left behind. The protomolecule hadn’t been designed as a universal control interface, but

there was a modularity to the alien technology that let it function that way often enough for the work to proceed. It was Paolo's job to supply the active samples needed. One of his jobs.

As he walked toward his office in the rear of the building, he paused on a catwalk over one of the holding pens. Half a dozen people in early stages of infection wandered around the cramped, metal-walled space. They were still in the pseudo-hemorrhagic fever phase the techs called Pukers. They could manage no more than a shambling walk and occasional violent bouts of vomiting. It was the protomolecule's means of ensuring the infection would spread quickly. Once the bodies had been removed from the space, every centimeter of its metal walls and floor would be torched to destroy any biological debris.

They'd only had one accidental infection in the history of the lab, and Paolo intended to keep it that way.

Dr. Ochida, head of the Pen and Paolo's second in command, spotted him from across the holding area and rushed over.

"Paolo," Ochida said, clapping him on one shoulder in a friendly greeting. "Just in time. We finished pulling the stem cultures an hour ago, and the injections are prepped."

"I recognize that one," Paolo said, pointing at a hairy, muscular man in the Pen.

"Hm? Oh. Yes, he was one of our guards, I think. His intake paperwork said 'dereliction of duty.' Caught sleeping on watch, maybe?"

"You tested them?" Paolo asked. He didn't actually care about the hairy man in the pen, and Ochida's answer had satisfied his curiosity.

It took Ochida a moment to realize they'd changed back to the original subject. "Oh, yes. I tested the samples for purity three times. Personally."

"I'm going directly from here to the State Building," Paolo said, turning to look Ochida in the eye.

His assistant knew what he was asking and replied, "I understand. These injections exactly meet your specifications."

If anything went wrong, they both knew they'd be the next two placed in the Pen. They were valuable, but they weren't beyond consequences. No one was. That was what Laconia meant.

"Excellent," Paolo said, giving Ochida a friendly smile he didn't actually feel. "I'll take them now."

Ochida waved at someone in a corner of the room, and a tech trotted

over carrying a silvery metal briefcase. She handed the case to Paolo, then left.

“Is there anything else?” Ochida asked.

“I’m starting to see some growth,” Paolo said, pointing at a bone spur protruding from the hairy man’s spine.

“Yes,” Ochida agreed. “They’re nearly ready.”



In the time he’d worked with Winston Duarte, Paolo had found much to admire in the man. The high consul was intelligent, given to astounding leaps of comprehension on complex topics but still measured and thoughtful in his decision making. Duarte valued the counsel of others but was decisive and firm once the information was gathered. He could be charismatic and warm without ever seeming false or insincere.

But more than anything else, Paolo respected his total lack of pretension. Many lesser people, holding a position like absolute military dictator of an entire planet, would wrap themselves in pomp and glittering palaces. Duarte had instead built the State Building of Laconia. A massive construction of stone that towered over the rest of the capital city, it still somehow managed to feel comforting rather than intimidating. As though all its solidity and size was merely to house important works and solve serious problems. Not aggrandize those inside it.

Caton drove Paolo’s little cart up the wide street that led to the building’s front entrance. They were the only traffic. The street ended at a high stone wall, a narrow gate, and a guard post. Paolo climbed out of the cart, taking the metal briefcase with him.

“No need to wait for me,” Paolo said to Caton.

The tech hadn’t spoken since picking him up outside the Pen, and seemed relieved to be dismissed. “Yes, Doctor. Call if you—” But Paolo was already walking away. He heard the car’s electric whine as it left.

The narrow gate opened as he approached, and two soldiers left the guard post and fell in alongside him without a word. These were not like the lightly armored guards that stood watch at the university. These wore strength-augmenting suits of articulated composite plates, with a variety of weapons mounted on them. The suits were the same dark blue as the

Laconian flag and had the same pair of stylized wings. A phoenix, he thought, but it might have been some sort of raptor. The pleasant color made the lethal war machines under it seem out of place. Their footsteps on the stone courtyard and the faint thrum of the power suits were the only noises that followed them to the State Building's entrance.

At the door, his two guards stopped him, then spread out, one on each side. Paolo fancied he could feel the tickle of X-rays and millimeter waves bouncing off his body as they scanned him head to toe. After a long moment one of them said, "The high consul is waiting for you in the medical wing," and then they turned and walked away.



"Technically, yes. The dreams have stopped," Duarte said as Paolo slid a hypodermic port line into a forearm vein and taped it down. He knew from experience that Duarte was distracting himself to keep from looking down and seeing the needles go in. It was endearing that the most powerful human in the universe was still a bit squeamish about needles.

"Have they?" Paolo asked. It wasn't a casual question. The side effects of the incredibly experimental treatment Duarte was receiving were something to be kept close track of. "How long ago?"

Duarte sighed, and closed his eyes. Either relaxing as the first of the sedative mixture hit his veins, or trying to remember the exact date, or both. "The last one was eleven days ago."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," Duarte said with a smile and without opening his eyes, "I'm sure. Eleven days ago was the last time I slept."

Paolo nearly dropped the IV line he was connecting to the port. "You haven't slept in *eleven days*?"

Duarte's eyes finally opened. "I don't feel tired at all. Quite the opposite. Every day I feel more energetic and healthy than the last. A side effect of the treatment, I'm sure."

Paolo nodded at this, though it wasn't anything he'd anticipated. His stomach gave a tiny spasm of worry. If there was an unexpected side effect this extreme, then what else was waiting for them? He'd asked Duarte to wait until they had more data, but the man had demanded they move

forward, and how could he argue?

“I see that look, old friend,” Duarte said, his smile even wider. “You don’t need to worry. I’ve been monitoring it myself. If anything were out of balance, I’d have called you a week ago. But I feel fantastic, I’m not building up fatigue poisons, and the blood work promised I’m not psychotic. And now I get an extra eight hours every day to work. I couldn’t be happier.”

“Of course,” Paolo replied. He finished hooking the IV bag filled with its payload of protomolecule-modified human stem cells into the port. Duarte gave a tiny gasp when the cool fluid started to enter his vein. “But please, do remember to send along these sorts of details, even if they don’t seem to be a problem. Animal models are never perfect, and you’re the first person to receive this treatment. Tracking the effects is incredibly important to—”

“I will,” Duarte replied. “I have full confidence that your lab has everything working exactly as it’s supposed to. But I’ll make sure my personal doctor sends you all his daily notes.”

“Thank you, High Consul,” Paolo said. “I’m going to draw some blood as well and have my people do a workup. Just to make sure.”

“Whatever you need,” Duarte said. “But as long as we’re alone, please don’t call me ‘High Consul.’ Winston’s fine.” Duarte’s voice had grown mushy, and Paolo could tell the sedatives were taking effect. “I want us all working together.”

“We are working together. But a body needs a brain. Leadership, yes?” Paolo replied. He let the IV bag empty, used the line to draw a small sample of Duarte’s blood and put it in the metal briefcase, and quietly went about the process of doing a full body scan. The treatment had begun growing a small number of new organs in Duarte’s body that had been designed by the best experimental physiologists on the planet and implemented using lessons taught by the eternal protomolecule bloom. But there were still so many things that might go wrong, and tracking the development of the changes in Duarte was the most important aspect of Paolo’s job. Despite Duarte’s warmth and the genuine friendship he showed, if anything happened to the Laconian ruler, he would be executed shortly thereafter. Tying Paolo’s safety to his own was how Duarte could guarantee the scientist’s best efforts on his behalf. They both understood this, and there was no ill will attached. Paolo’s death wouldn’t be punishment, exactly. Just

a clear disincentive to letting his patient die.

As relationships went, it was probably the most honest one Paolo had ever had.

“You know, Winston, that this is going to be a very long process. There may be imbalances small enough that they don’t appear for years. Decades.”

“Centuries,” he said, nodding. “It’s imperfect, I know. But we do what we have to do. And, no, old friend. I’m sorry, but I haven’t reconsidered.”

Paolo wondered if the ability to read minds was yet another unexpected side effect of the treatment. If so ... well, that would be interesting. “I wasn’t suggesting that—”

“That you should undergo the treatment too?” Duarte said. “Of course you were. And you *should* suggest it. Make the best argument you can. I don’t believe you’ll change my mind, but I’d like it very much if you did.”

Paolo looked at his hands, avoiding Duarte’s eyes. Defiance would have been easier for him. The melancholy in the man’s voice was disturbing in a way he found hard to understand.

“The ironic thing?” Duarte said. “I’ve always rejected the great-man idea. The belief that human history was formed by singular individuals instead of broad social forces? Romantic, but ...” He waved a hand vaguely, like he was stirring fog. “Demographic trends. Economic cycles. Technological progress. All much more powerful predictors than any one person. And yet here I am. I would take you with me if I could, you know. It’s not my choice. It’s history’s.”

“History should reconsider,” Paolo said.

Duarte chuckled. “The difference between zero and one is miraculous. But it’s as miraculous as it ever will be. Make it two. Three. A hundred. It becomes just another oligarchy. A permanent engine of inequality that will breed the wars we’re trying to end.”

Paolo made a small sound that could have been mistaken for agreement.

“The best governments in history have been kings and emperors,” Duarte said. “The worst ones too. A philosopher-king can manage great things in his lifetime. And his grandchildren can squander it.”

Duarte grunted as Paolo pulled the hypodermic port out of his arm. He didn’t need to place a bandage over the wound. The hole closed up before a drop of blood could escape. It didn’t even scab.

“If you want to create a lasting, stable social order,” Duarte said, “only

one person can ever be immortal.”

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Chapter One: Drummer

The habitation ring of the transfer station at Lagrange-5 was three times the diameter of the one Drummer had lived in on Tycho, half a lifetime ago. TSL-5 had a small city's worth of offices with the same fake-marble walls and soft, full-spectrum lighting as the one they'd given her, the same crash-couch beds and water showers as her quarters there. The air had a constant smell of terpene compounds, as if the station were the largest chrysanthemum in the universe. The dome in the center of the station had berths for hundreds of ships and warehouses that seemed so numerous and deep that filling them would leave Earth as empty as a squeezed-out bulb. All those berths and warehouses were at rest now, but starting tomorrow, that would change. TSL-5 was about to be open for business, and even as tired as she was, as annoyed as she felt at having to haul herself halfway across the system for what was ultimately a ribbon-cutting ceremony, there was also an excitement to it. After three decades of struggle, Mother Earth was open for business.

The planet glowed on her wall screen, whorls of high white clouds and glimpses of the still-greenish sea beneath it. The terminator crept across, pulling a blanket of darkness and city lights behind it. The ships of the Earth-Mars Coalition Navy floated around it, dots of darkness swimming on the high sea of air. Drummer had never gone down that well, and now by the terms of the treaty she'd signed on the union's behalf, she never would. Fine with her. Her knees bothered her sometimes as it was. But as an objet d'art, Terra was hard to beat. Humanity had done its level best to kick the shit out of the slowly spinning egg. Overpopulation, exploitation, atmospheric and oceanic imbalance, and then three military-level meteor strikes, any one of which would have fucked up the dinosaurs. And here it still was, like a soldier. Scarred, broken, reimagined, rebuilt, and remade.

Time was supposed to heal all wounds. To Drummer, that was just a nice way of saying that if she waited long enough, none of the things that

seemed important to her would turn out to matter. Or at least not the way she'd thought they did.

Time, plus the combined expertise of a Martian terraforming project staggering under the loss of its mandate, the ruthless administration of Earth's political sector, and the huge market of thirteen-hundred-odd worlds all in need of biological substrates to grow food that people could actually eat had hauled Earth, slow and staggering, up to functional again.

Her system chirped, a polite little pop like someone snapping bamboo. Her private secretary's voice followed like a drink of whiskey.

"Madam President?"

"Give me a minute, Vaughn," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. But Secretary-General Li would like to speak with you before the ceremony."

"The Earth-Mars Coalition can wait until after cocktails. I'm not opening this station by jumping every time the EMC clears their throat. Bad precedent."

"Copy that. I'll handle it."

The system made the little woody tock that meant she had her privacy again. She leaned back in her chair, looked over at the images set into the wall behind her desk. All the previous Transport Union presidents before her: Michio Pa, then Tjon, Walker, Sanjrani, and her own thin, stern face looking back at her from the end. She hated that picture. It made her look like she'd just eaten something sour. The first version of it looked like something off a singles forum. At least this one was dignified.

For most of the Transport Union's members, this image was all they'd ever see of her. Thirteen hundred worlds, and within a decade most if not all of them would have their own versions of the TSL-5. Hand-off stations that marked the bubble of void where the planet's sphere of control ended and the union's began. Anything that the colonies needed from humanity's first home or from each other went up the gravity wells. That was the inner's problem. Moving it from one system to another belonged to the Belt. Old terms. Inners. Belters. They stuck because language held on to things that way, even when the reality around them had shifted.

The Earth-Mars Coalition had been the center of humanity once—the innermost of the inners. Now it was an important spoke on the wheel whose hub was Medina Station. Where the weird alien sphere sat in the middle of the not-space that linked all the ring gates. Where her civilian quarters were

when she wasn't on the void cities. Where Saba was, when he wasn't on his ship or with her. Medina Station was home.

Except that even for her, the blue-black disk of Earth on her screen was home too. Maybe that wouldn't always be true. There were kids old enough to vote now who'd never known what it meant to have only one sun. She didn't know what Earth or Mars or Sol would be to them. Maybe this atavistic melancholy just behind her breastbone would die with her generation.

Or maybe she was tired and cranky and needed a nap.

The bamboo broke again. "Ma'am?"

"I'm on my way."

"Yes, ma'am. But we have a priority message from traffic control on Medina."

Drummer leaned forward, her hands flat against the cool of the desk. Shit. Shit shit shit. "Did we lose another one?"

"No, ma'am. No lost ships."

She felt the dread loosen its grip a little. Not all the way. "What, then?"

"They're reporting an unscheduled transit. A freighter, but it didn't have a transponder."

"Seriously?" she said. "Did they think we wouldn't notice it?"

"Couldn't speak to that," Vaughn said.

She pulled up the administrative feed from Medina. She could get anything from her realm here—traffic control, environmental data, energy output, sensor arrays in any slice of the electromagnetic spectrum. But light delay made all of it a little more than four hours old. Any order she gave would come through eight, eight and a half hours after the request for it was made. The vast alien intelligence that had engineered the ring gates and the massive ruins in the systems beyond them had found ways to manipulate distance, but the speed of light was the speed of light, and seemed like it always would be.

She scrolled through the logs, found the relevant slot, played it.

Medina here. Conferme. Traffic Control's usual calm.

The responding voice had a little interference. An artifact of the gates. *This is the freighter Savage Landing out of Castila on approach, Medina. Transferring our status now.*

A new window popped up. The ship status of a light freighter. Martian design. Old, but not antiquated. It took a few seconds for Traffic to come

back.

Visé bien, Savage Landing. You are clear to transit. Control code is—fuck! Abort, Savage Landing! Do not transit!

A sudden spike on the safety curve and the alarm status blinked to red. A new drive signature appeared on Medina's control board, the plume sweeping through the starless dark of the slow zone.

It was done. All of it over with hours ago, but Drummer still felt her heartbeat pick up. Traffic was shouting for the new ship to identify itself, the rail-gun emplacements clicked to active. If they'd fired, everyone on the unauthorized ship was dead already.

The safety curve decayed, the disruption created by mass and energy passing through the ring dropping until it passed the threshold. The intruding ship spun, burning hard, and zipped through a different gate, kicking the curve back up again as it escaped.

Traffic cursed in several languages, sending stand-by messages to three other inbound ships. The *Savage Landing* was quiet, but the feed from their system showed a bruisingly hard burn as they peeled away, breaking off the approach to the Castila gate.

She rolled back, the near calamity reversing itself. The reckless asshole had come in from Freehold and passed out into Auberon. Because of course it had. The leaking radiation from the Auberon gate showed that the ship had made it. As close as it had cut the safety curve, it hadn't gone dutchman. But if the *Savage Landing* had gone through as scheduled, one or both ships could have vanished into wherever ships went when their transits failed.

In the short term, it would mean slotting *Savage Landing* in later. There'd be a bunch of pushbacks. Maybe dozens of ships that had to change their burns and coordinate new transits. Not a threat, but a pain in the ass.

And not a good precedent.

"Should I respond," Vaughn asked, "or would you rather deal with this personally, ma'am?"

It was an excellent question. Policy was a ratchet. If she pulled the trigger, gave the order that the next unauthorized ship through was going to be turned into scrap metal and regrets, it wasn't something she could pull back from. Someone much better at this than she was had taught her to be very careful doing something if she wasn't ready to do it every time from then on.

But, Christ, it was tempting.

“Have Medina log the transit, add the full cost to Freehold and Auberon’s tabs, and penalties for the delays they caused,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Vaughn said. “Anything else?”

Yes, she thought, *but I don’t know what yet.*



The conference room had been designed for this moment. The vaulted ceiling looked as grand as a cathedral. Secretary-General Li of Earth stood at his podium, shifting his grave but satisfied countenance out at the cameras of dozens of different, carefully selected newsfeeds. Drummer tried to do the same.

“President Drummer!” one of the reporters called, lifting a hand for attention the same way people probably had in the forums of Rome. Her podium told her the man’s name was Carlisle Hayyam with Munhwa Ilbo’s Ceres office. A dozen others had started clamoring for her attention too.

“Hayyam?” she said, smiling, and the others quieted down. The truth was, she sort of liked this part. It appealed to some long-forgotten ambition to perform on a stage, and it was one of the few places where she felt like she was actually in control. Most of her work felt like she was trying to stuff air back into a leaking balloon.

“How do you respond to Martin Karczek’s concerns about the transfer station?”

“I’d have to listen to them,” she said. “I’ve only got so many hours in my day.”

The reporters chuckled, and she heard the glee. Yes, they were opening the first hand-off station. Yes, Earth was about to stagger up out of years of environmental crisis to ramp up its active trade with the colonies. All anyone really wanted was a couple politicians being snippy at each other.

And that was fine. As long as they kept looking at the little stuff, she could work on the big things.

Secretary-General Li, a broad-faced man with a lush mustache and a workman’s callused hands, cleared his throat. “If you don’t mind,” he said. “There are always people who are wary of change. And that’s a *good* thing. Change should be watched, moderated, and questioned. But that

conservative view shouldn't rein in progress or put a damper on hope. Earth is humanity's first and truest home. The soil from which all of us, whatever system we now inhabit, first grew. Earth will always, *always*, be central to the greater project of humanity in the universe."

Whistling past the graveyard. Earth was celebrating a huge milestone in its history, and that was maybe the third most important thing on her agenda. But how do you tell a planet that history has passed it by? Better to nod and smile, enjoy the moment and the champagne. Once this was over, she'd have to get back to work.

They moved through the expected questions: would the renegotiation of the tariff agreements be overseen by Drummer or former president Sanjrani, would the Transport Union remain neutral in the contested elections on Nova Catalunya, would the Ganymede status talks be held on Luna or Medina. There was even one question about the dead systems—Charon, Adro, and Naraka—where ring gates led to things much stranger than goldilocks-zone planetary systems. Secretary-General Li fended that one off, which was just as well. Dead systems gave Drummer the creeps.

After the Q-and-A was done, Drummer did a dozen photo ops with the secretary-general, high-level administrators from the EMC, and celebrities from the planets—a dark-skinned woman in a bright-blue sari, a pale man in a formal suit, a pair of comically identical men in matching gold dinner jackets.

There was a part of her that enjoyed this too. She suspected that the pleasure she took in Earthers clamoring to get mementos of themselves with the head of the Belters spoke poorly of her in some vague spiritual way. She'd grown up in a universe where people like her were disposable, and she'd lived long enough for fortune's wheel to lift her up higher than Earth's sky. Everyone wanted the Belt for a friend, now that the term meant more than a cloud of half-mined-out chunks of debris trapped between Mars and Jupiter. For children born today, the Belt was the thing that tied all humanity together. Semantic drift and political change. If the worst that came out of it was a little schadenfreude on her part, she could live with that.

Vaughn waited in a small antechamber. His face was a network of crags that would have done credit to a mountain range, but he managed to make it work for him. His formal jacket was cut to echo old-style vac suits. The marks of their oppression remade as high fashion. Time healed all wounds,

but it didn't erase the scars so much as decorate them.

"You have an hour before the reception, ma'am," he said as Drummer sat on the couch and rubbed her feet.

"Understood."

"Can I get you anything?"

"Encrypted tightbeam and privacy."

"Yes, ma'am," he said without missing a beat.

When the door slid closed behind him, she turned on the system camera and composed herself. The plan that had been forming in the back of her head all through the ceremonies was in place. All the bits and pieces she'd need to make it happen. And sooner was better than later. Punishment worked best when there wasn't a gap between misbehavior and consequences, or at least that was what they told her. But there was also a real advantage in giving the offender time to savor their regret.

Best of all was when she could do both.

She hit Record.

"Captain Holden," she said. "I'm linking you through to the data on an unauthorized transit from Freehold to Auberon that occurred today. I'm also giving you access to the security review of the Freehold system. It's not much. One habitable planet a little smaller than Mars, another one that's exploitable as long as you don't mind too much nitrogen and cyanide in your air. The governor of Freehold is named"

She checked the records and coughed with contempt and laughter.

"Payne Houston. I'm assuming that's his own choice and not what his mommy called him. Either way, I'm sending you under an executive mandate so that you can get going right now. I'll get Emily Santos-Baca and the security committee to genuflect over this well before you get there, so we'll be fine with that.

"Your official mission is to carry the message that Freehold's repeated violations of Transportation Union guidelines have triggered punitive action, and that I'm banning all traffic in and out of Freehold for three years. When he asks whether it's Earth years, the answer is yes. He's going to make a point of that, because that's the kind of idiot he is.

"Your unofficial mission is not to hurry. I want Freehold and all the systems like it to see a gunship moseying toward them for weeks without knowing what it's going to do when it gets there. I'll have my staff draw up the usual work agreement. If you can't take the job, let me know as soon as

possible. Otherwise, I'll have you on the roster to fuel up and make transit in the next fifteen hours."

She reviewed the message, then sent it out with a copy to Ahmed McCahill, the chair of the security committee. Then it was an executive request to push the *Rocinante* to the head of the resupply and transit authorization queues. And then Vaughn was knocking discreetly at her door.

He took her grunt as permission to come in, which it was.

"Secretary-General Li is asking whether you're indisposed, ma'am," he said. "He's getting concerned."

She checked the time. Her hour's respite had ended twenty minutes ago.

"Tell him I'm on my way," she said. "And do I have a change of clothes?"

"In the closet, ma'am," Vaughn said as he slipped out the door again, quiet as a phantom. Drummer changed quickly, shedding the formal jacket and slacks for a bamboo-silk blouse and self-tailoring skirt with a neural net woven into it that was about as intelligent as an insect just to keep the drape right. She considered herself in the mirror with a certain satisfaction. She only wished Saba were here to accompany her. But he'd probably make too many consort-of-the-queen jokes. She shut down the mirror, its screen defaulting back to the image of Earth.

The planet was over half in darkness now, a crescent of white and blue. Belters had tried to kill the Earth, but here it was still spinning. They'd tried to burn the inner planets' ships, and here was the EMC navy, scraped back together and flying.

And on the other hand, Earth had tried to choke the Belters under its boot for generations, and here was Drummer. Time had made them allies in the great expansion of civilization out to the stars.

At least until something *else* changed.

Chapter Two: Bobbie

The transit from the slow zone was behind them and Freehold was still weeks away, but an atmospheric landing in a ship as old as the *Rocinante* wasn't the trivial thing it had once been. Age showed up in unexpected ways. Things that had always worked before failed. It was something you prepared for as much as you could.

Bobbie squinted at a wall panel on the engineering deck and watched as a long list of data scrolled by, ending with the ship's reassurance that it could handle at least one more descent without burning up.

"All greens on the atmospheric braking thrusters," Bobbie said.

"Hmmm?" Alex's sleepy drawl replied from the panel.

"You awake up there? This is your damn landing prep list. I'm down here doing the work. Could at least seem interested."

"Yeah, not sleepin'," the pilot replied, "just got my own list of shit to do." She could hear his smile.

Bobbie closed the diagnostic screen. Verifying the status on the thrusters was the last item on her work order. And short of putting on a suit and climbing outside to physically look into the nozzles, there wasn't much more she could do.

"I'm going to do some housekeeping, then head up," she said.

"Mmhm."

Bobbie put her tools away and used a mild solvent to wipe up some lubricant she'd spilled. It smelled sweet and pungent, like something she'd have cooked with back when she'd been living alone on Mars. Anxiety pushed her toward preparing more for the mission even after she was prepared. In the old days, this was when she'd have cleaned and serviced her power armor again and again and again until it became a kind of meditation. Now, she went through the ship the same way.

She'd lived on the *Rocinante* for more years now than anyplace else. Longer than her childhood home. Longer than her tour in the Marines.

The engineering deck was Amos country, and the mechanic kept a tidy shop. Every tool was in its place, every surface spotless. Other than the oil and solvent, the only other smell in the compartment was the ozone scent that hinted at powerful electricity coursing nearby. The floor vibrated in time with the fusion reactor on the deck below, the ship's beating heart.

On one bulkhead, Amos painted a sign that read:

SHE TAKES CARE OF YOU
YOU TAKE CARE OF HER

Bobbie patted the words as she walked by and climbed onto the ladder lift that ran up the center of the ship. The *Roci* was at a very gentle 0.2 g braking burn, and there had been a time when riding the lift instead of climbing the ladder would have felt like admitting defeat, even if the ship was burning ten times that hard. But for the last couple years Bobbie's joints had been giving her trouble, and proving to herself that she could make the climb had stopped mattering as much.

It seemed to her that the real sign you were getting old was when you stopped needing to prove you weren't getting old.

The hatches separating each deck slid open at the lift's approach, and then quietly closed after she'd passed. The *Roci* might be a decade or two past her sell-by date, but Clarissa tolerated no sticking or squeaking on her ship. At least once a week, Claire made a complete pass through every environmental system and pressure hatch. When Bobbie had mentioned it to Holden, he'd said, *Because she broke the ship once, and she's still trying to fix it.*

The lift hummed to a stop on the ops deck, and Bobbie stepped off. The hatch up to the cockpit was open. Alex's brown and almost entirely bald head poked up over the back of the pilot's crash couch. The crew spent most of their working time in Operations, and the air felt subtly different. Long hours spent in the crash couches meant the smell of sweat never entirely went away, no matter how hard the air recyclers worked. And, like any room James Holden spent a lot of time in, the comfortable scent of old coffee lingered.

Bobbie ran a finger along the bulkhead, feeling the anti-spalling fabric crackle under the pressure. The dark-gray color had faded, and it was getting harder to tell where the fabric didn't match because it had been

damaged and patched and where it was just aging unevenly. It would need to be replaced soon. She could live with the color, but the crunching meant that it was losing its elasticity. Getting too brittle to do its job.

Both of Bobbie's shoulders ached, and it was getting trickier to tell the difference between the one that had been explosively dislocated during hand-to-hand training years before and the one that just hurt from decades of not being gentle with her body. She'd picked up a lot of battle scars during her life, and they were getting harder and harder to differentiate from the normal damage of wearing out. Like the discolored patches on the *Roci's* bulkheads, everything was just fading to match.

She climbed the short ladder up through the hatch into the cockpit, trying to enjoy the ache in her shoulders the way she'd once enjoyed the burn after an intense workout. As an old drill sergeant had told her, pain is the warrior's friend. Pain reminds you that you aren't dead yet.

"Yo," Alex said as she dropped into the gunner's chair behind him. "How's our girl look?"

"Old, but she can still get around."

"I meant the ship."

Bobbie laughed and called up the tactical display. Off in the distance, the planet Freehold. The mission. "My brother always complained I spent too much time looking for metaphors."

"An aging Martian warrior living inside an aging Martian warrior," Alex said, the smile audible in his voice. "Don't have to look too hard there."

"Not too aged to kick your ass." Bobbie zoomed in on Freehold on their tactical screen. A mottled marble of brown continents and green oceans, with the occasional white swirl of cloud. "How long?"

"We'll be there in a week."

"Talk to Jizz lately? How's my future baby daddy doing?"

"*Giselle* is fine, and she says Kit is doing great. Picked planetary engineering as his major at Mariner Tech."

"It is the hot job market right now," Bobbie agreed.

She'd been Alex's best man when he'd married *Giselle*, and she'd waited at the hospital on Ceres when Kit had been born thirteen months later. And now Kit was going into upper university, and Alex had been divorced for over a decade. He was her best friend, but he was terrible husband material. After his second failure at it Bobbie pointed out that if he just wanted something to hurt, she could break his arm for him and save

everyone time.

But for all the unnecessary drama, Alex and Giselle's short-lived trainwreck of a marriage had produced Kit, and that made the universe a better place. The boy had all of Alex's laconic charm and all of his mother's regal good looks. Every time he called her Aunt Bobbie, she wanted to hug him until his ribs cracked.

"When you reply, make sure to tell Jizz I said 'fuck off,'" Bobbie said. The failure of the marriage wasn't entirely Giselle's fault, but Bobbie had picked Alex in the divorce, so acting like she blamed his ex for everything was part of the best-friend pact. Alex pushed against it, but she knew he also appreciated her saying all the things that he couldn't.

"I'll send *Giselle* your love," Alex said.

"And tell Kit that Aunt Bobbie says hi, and I want new pictures. Everything I have of him is a year old. I wanna see how my little man is filling out."

"You know it's creepy to flirt with a kid you've known his entire life, right?"

"My love is a pure love," Bobbie replied, then switched tactical to the mission parameters. Freehold had a population of just under three hundred, all Earth-born. They called themselves an Assembly of Sovereign Citizens, whatever that meant. But the colony-ship manifest had included a lot of firearms and ammunition. And with the weeks the *Roci* had spent dropping down toward Freehold's sun, the locals had had plenty of time to work themselves up.

Reading along with her, Alex said, "Captain'll need some backup down there."

"Yeah. Talking to Amos about that is the next thing on my list."

"Taking Betsy?"

"This is probably not a Betsy-level situation, sailor," Bobbie said. Betsy was Alex's nickname for the suit of Martian Marine Recon armor she kept in the ship's cargo bay. She hadn't put the thing on in years, but she kept it operational and charged anyway. It made her feel warm and comfortable knowing it was there. Just in case.

"Copy that," Alex said.

"Where is Amos, anyway?"

It was subtle, the difference between Alex being at ease and Alex trying to sound like he was at ease. "Ship thinks he's in the sick bay," Alex said.

Clarissa, Bobbie thought. *Well, shit.*



The *Rocinante*'s medical bay smelled like antiseptic and vomit.

The antiseptic came from the little floor scrubber that was humming around the room, leaving a trail of shiny decking in its wake. The acid-and-bile smell of vomit came from Clarissa Mao.

"Bobbie," she said with a smile. She was on one of the med bay's couches, an autodoc cuff around her upper arm that buzzed and hummed and occasionally clicked. Claire's face would tighten at each click. Injections, maybe, or something worse.

"Hey, Babs," Amos said. The hulking mechanic sat at Claire's bedside reading something on his hand terminal. He didn't look up when Bobbie entered the room, but raised a hand in greeting.

"How're you feeling today?" Bobbie asked, grimacing internally as she said it.

"I'll be out of bed in a few minutes," Claire said. "Did I miss something on the pre-landing check?"

"No, no," Bobbie replied, shaking her head. She feared that Claire would tear the tubes out of her arm and leap out of bed if she said yes. "Nothing like that. I just need to borrow the lunk for a minute."

"Yeah?" Amos said, looking at her for the first time. "That okay with you, Peaches?"

"Whatever you need," she said, gesturing at the med-bay in general. "You will always find me at home."

"All right," Amos stood up, and Bobbie guided him out into the corridor.

Surrounded by the fading gray walls, and with the sick-bay hatch closed behind him, Amos seemed to deflate a little. He leaned his back against the wall and sighed. "That's tough to watch, you know?"

"How is she?"

"Good days and bad days, same as anyone," Amos said. "Those aftermarket glands she had put in keep leaking their rat shit into her blood, and we keep filtering it back out. But taking 'em back out would fuck her up worse, so ..."

Amos shrugged again. He looked tired. Bobbie had never really been

able to figure out what the relationship between the *Roci*'s mechanic and his tiny counterpart was. They weren't sleeping together, and it didn't seem like they ever had. Most of the time they didn't even talk. But when Claire's health had started its decline, Amos was usually there by her side in the sick bay. It made Bobbie wonder if he'd do that for her if she got sick. If anyone would.

The big mechanic was looking a little thinner himself these days. Where most big men tended toward pudge in their later years, Amos had gone the other direction. What fat he'd had was gone, and now his arms and neck looked ropey with old muscle just under the skin. Tougher than shoe leather.

"So," he said, "what's up?"

"Did you read my briefing on Freehold?"

"Skimmed it."

"Three hundred people who hate centralized authority and love guns. Holden's going to insist on meeting them on their turf, because that's the kind of shit he does. He'll need backup."

"Yeah," Amos agreed. "I'll keep an eye on him."

"I was thinking maybe I should take this one," Bobbie said, nodding her head toward the sick-bay hatch. Not saying, *She doesn't look good*. Amos pursed his lips, considering.

"Yeah, okay," Amos said. "Atmospheric landing will probably shake the damn ship apart. I'll have plenty to do here."

Bobbie started to leave, then something made her stop. Before she knew she was going to say it, she asked, "How much longer?"

"Rest of her life," Amos said, then went back into the sick bay and closed the hatch behind him.

She found Holden and Naomi eating breakfast in the galley. The smell of scrambled eggs with powdered onions and what passed for peppers competed with brewing coffee. Bobbie's belly growled as soon as she walked into the room, and without a word Holden pushed a plate toward her and began slopping eggs onto it.

"Enjoy, because this is the last of the real eggs until we get back to Medina," Holden said as he dished her up.

Naomi finished chewing a mouthful and said, "What's going on?"

"Did you guys read my threat assessment on Freehold?"

"Skimmed it," Holden replied.

"First-generation colony," Naomi said. "Eight years since founding, and

it's still only got one township on it in a semiarid temperate zone. Low-level agriculture, but most of the food supply is salvaged hydroponics. Some goats and chickens, but the livestock is surviving on the hydroponics too, so not the most efficient model. Lithium in the planetary crust and a weirdly lot of uranium trapped in polar glaciers that hopefully means it'll be easily harvested helium if they ever get the infrastructure to mine something. Charter that calls for radical personal autonomy enforced by a citizen militia made up of the whole colonial population."

"Really?" Holden said. "The whole population?"

"So three hundred people who like guns," Naomi said, then pointed at Holden. "This one will insist on getting off the ship and speaking to them in person."

"Right?" Bobbie said, then quickly shoveled a heaping scoop of eggs into her mouth. They were as good as her nose had promised they'd be.

"This *has* to be done face-to-face," Holden said. "If not, we could just have radioed the message to them from Medina and saved ourselves the trip."

"Diplomacy is your thing," Bobbie said. "I'm strictly concerned with tactical issues. And when we talk to the powers that be on Freehold, we'll be telling them there's no reason not to just start shooting and hope for the best."

Holden pushed his half-empty plate away and leaned back with a frown. "Explain that."

"You really should read my assessments."

Naomi grabbed Holden's mug and moved over to the coffee machine. "I think I know where she's going with this. You want any coffee, Bobbie?"

"Yes, thank you," Bobbie said, then pulled up the tactical assessment on her hand terminal. "These are people who left Earth to form a colony based on personal sovereignty. They believe in the absolute right of each citizen to defend themselves and their property, with lethal force if necessary. And they are well armed for this purpose."

"I followed that part," Holden said.

"They are also years from self-sustaining at this point. The reason they're relying on hydroponics is that they're having a difficult time developing soil for their greenhouses. Something about the mineral content. The money they've been able to get from preliminary mining futures is all going to Auberon for agricultural supplies trying to get around that. They

don't agree that the Transport Union should be taking tariffs on any basic life-sustaining trade. Which is what got us here."

Naomi handed her a steaming mug of coffee with lots of cream, just the way she liked it. Holden nodded in a way that probably meant trouble. He'd understood what she was saying.

"How long till they have local crops?" Naomi asked, leaning over her shoulder to look at the report.

"I don't know, but that's not the issue here—"

"The issue here," Holden said, "is that we're delivering a death sentence. Isn't that right? We're going to land and tell them they're cut off from trading with other colonies. And they know they're going to run out of usable food in a few months, and won't be able to grow their own for years. The union is putting them in an impossible position. And by *union* right now, I mean us. We are."

"Yes," Bobbie agreed, glad he seemed to understand. "These are people who believe in the inviolate right to use lethal force in defense of their own lives. When we land and tell them they're cut off, we'll leave them with no reason not to try to take the ship."

"I don't understand the penalty," Naomi said. "Seems harsh."

"Drummer's been waiting for this one, I'd guess," Holden said. He didn't look happy. "The first colony to really test how far the union will go to protect its monopoly on gate usage. And she's going to crush this first example so hard that no one else will even try. She's killing one colony now so she doesn't have to kill thirteen hundred colonies later."

The idea hung in the air like smoke over a poker game. Naomi's expression mirrored Bobbie's concern. Holden had the inward focus he got when he was thinking about something too hard for safety. A three-year timeout was rough. A three-year timeout when you'd start starving in less than one was something worse. Motive enough for violence, at least. Maybe something more.

"So," Bobbie said, "this is going to be interesting."

Chapter Three: Santiago Jilie Singh

Singh felt a tingle on his wrist and slid back his sleeve. The monitor wrapped around his forearm saw him look and displayed a notification of his most urgent task: the upcoming audience with the high consul.

He reset the notification timer to one-half hour before the meeting itself. His data pad had been riding on his arm or in his pocket for nearly five years. It knew everything there was to know about him. It was treating his upcoming audience with the high consul as if it were the single most important event of his life.

It wasn't wrong.

He pulled the sleeve back into place, giving it one sharp tug to smooth out any new wrinkles, and inspected himself in his mirror. His blue-and-white dress uniform fit him like a glove, emphasizing the muscular frame he spent an hour every day sculpting in the gym. The newly acquired captain's stars glittered on his collar, polished to a golden gleam. His chin and scalp were freshly shaved, and he imagined it gave him the feral, predatory quality that befit a military man.

"Still preening?" Natalia said from the bathroom. She opened the door and came out in a cloud of steam, her hair dripping wet. "A man so handsome needs to be groped, I think."

"No," Singh said, backing away. "If you get water on me—"

"Too late," his wife laughed, darting forward to grab him. She hugged him tight around the waist, her wet hair on his shoulder.

"Nat," he said, meaning to complain but finding himself unable to. Her towel had come loose when she grabbed him, and in the mirror he could see the gentle curve of her hip. He put a hand on it and squeezed. "I'm all wet now."

"You'll dry," she said, reaching behind him to pinch his butt. The newly promoted captain in the Laconian navy gave an undignified yelp. He felt another buzz in his wrist, and for a moment Singh thought the pad on his

arm was disapproving of all this tomfoolery.

He pushed his sleeve back again, and saw that it was just a notification that his car would arrive in twenty minutes.

“Car will be here soon,” he said with regret, burying his nose in his wife’s wet hair for a moment.

“And it’s time to get Elsa up,” Natalia agreed. “It’s your big day. You pick: wake the monster, or make breakfast?”

“I’ll take monster duty this morning.”

“Be careful. She’ll care even less about not messing up your clean new uniform,” Natalia said as she pulled on a robe. “Breakfast in ten, sailor.”

But it took nearly fifteen minutes to drag Elsa out of her crib, change her diaper, get her dressed, and carry her into their kitchen. Natalia had already put plates piled high with pancakes and fresh apples on the table, and the smell of chai filled the air.

Singh’s wrist buzzed, and he didn’t need to look to know it was the five-minute warning for his car. He strapped Elsa into her high chair and put the smallest plate of apple slices in front of her. She chortled and smacked her palm down onto them, spraying droplets of juice everywhere.

“Will you have time to eat?” Natalia asked.

“I’m afraid I won’t,” Singh said, pulling up his sleeve and scrolling through the day’s schedule. “Monster just did not want to put pants on today.”

“I think her single biggest disagreement with preschool is their pants requirement,” Natalia said with a smile. Then she glanced down at the meeting schedule on his arm and sobered. “What time should we expect you?”

“My meeting is scheduled for fifteen minutes at nine a.m., and I don’t have anything else today, so ...” Singh said. He did not say, *but I’m meeting with High Consul Winston Duarte, so I control nothing about when the meeting begins or ends.*

“All right,” Natalia said, then kissed his cheek. “I’ll be at the lab today until at least six, but your father agreed to monster duty if you can’t pick her up from school.”

“Fine, fine,” Singh said. “Until then.”

The dark naval staff car pulled up outside. Singh paused at the mirror by the door to give himself one final inspection, and wipe away an errant bit of Monster’s breakfast shrapnel. Natalia was at the table now, trying to eat and

also get some of Monster's own food in her mouth and off her shirt.

Dread welled up from his belly, swamping his heart. He had to swallow half a dozen times before he could speak. He loved his wife and their child more than he could say, and leaving them was always a little difficult. This was different. Generations of navy men had faced mornings like this. Meetings with superiors that heralded change. Surely, if they'd faced it, he could too.

The imperial view, a history professor at the Naval Academy once said, is the long view. Individuals build empires because they want their names to echo through time. They build massive constructs of stone and steel so that their descendants will remember the people who created the world that they only live in. There were buildings on Earth that were thousands of years old, sometimes the only remaining evidence of empires that thought they would last forever. *Hubris*, the professor had called it. When people build, they are trying to make an aspiration physical. When they die, their intentions are buried with them. All that's left is the building.

While Martian intentions had never been explicitly imperialist, they had a fair bit of this same hubris. They'd built their tunnels and warrens as temporary living space in the stone of Mars, then gotten down to the generations-spanning work of making the surface habitable.

But their first generation died with the work still unaccomplished. And the generation after that, and so on, child following parent, until the children only knew the tunnels and didn't think they were so bad. They lost sight of the larger dream because it had never been their dream. Once the creators and their intentions were gone, only the tunnels were left.

As Singh looked out at the capital city of Laconia whizzing past the car's window, he saw the same masses of material and intention. Giant stone-and-steel buildings designed to house the government of an empire that didn't exist yet. More infrastructure than Laconia on its own would need for centuries. Their columns and spires called back millennia of Terran and Martian culture, and remade them as a vision of a peculiarly human future.

If the dreams of empire failed, they'd just be big buildings that had never been used.

It was an open secret among the high-ranking officers of Laconia's military that the high consul's labs had made incredible breakthroughs in human modification. One of their most important projects was dramatic life

extension for the high consul himself. The captain that Singh had served under as a lieutenant had received an official reprimand for getting drunk and referring to the high consul as “our own little god-king.”

But Singh understood why that particular project for the high consul was so important. Empires, like buildings, are aspirations made material. When the creator dies, the intention is lost.

And so the creator couldn't be permitted to die.

If the rumors were true, and the high consul's scientists were in fact working to make him deathless, they had a chance to create the sort of empire history had only dreamed of. Stability of leadership, continuity of purpose, and a single lasting vision. Which was all well and good, but didn't explain why he had been summoned to a personal meeting with Duarte.

“We're almost there, sir,” his driver said.

“I'm ready,” Singh lied.

The State Building of Laconia was the imperial palace in all but name. It was by far the largest structure in the capital city. It was both the seat of their government and the personal dwelling space of the high consul and his daughter. After passing through a rigorous security screening administered by soldiers in state-of-the-art Laconian power armor, Singh was finally ushered inside for the very first time.

It was a little disappointing.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected. A ceiling fifty feet high, maybe, held up by rows of massive stone pillars. A red velvet carpet leading to a towering golden throne. Ministers and servants lining up for a word with the high consul and plotting intrigues in whispers. Instead, there was a foyer and waiting area lined with comfortable chairs, easy access to restrooms, and a wall monitor displaying the security rules inside the State Building. It all seemed very mundane. Very governmental.

A short, smiling man with a red jacket and black pants entered through the room's largest door and gave an almost imperceptible bow.

“Captain Santiago Singh,” he said, not making it a question.

Singh stood up, only barely stopping himself from snapping out a salute. The man didn't wear a military uniform or any rank insignia, but they were inside the home of their ruler. It carried a weight beyond protocol.

“Yes, sir. I am Captain Singh.”

“The high consul hopes you will join him in the residence for breakfast,”

the little man said.

“It would be my honor, of course.”

“Follow me,” said the little man as he exited through the same large door. Singh followed.

If the foyer of the State Building was underwhelming, the rest of the interior was positively utilitarian. Corridors lined with office space radiated off in every direction. The halls bustled with activity, people in suits and military uniforms and the same red jackets and black pants as his guide moving about. Singh made sure to salute any time he saw a rank that required it and tried to ignore everyone else. The whole human population of Laconia were the original colonists, Duarte’s fleet, and the children born there in the last few decades. He hadn’t imagined there were this many people on the planet he hadn’t met. His little guide moved through as though he didn’t see any of them and kept his same vague smile the entire time.

After a ten-minute walk through a maze of corridors and chambers, they arrived at a set of glass double doors that looked out on a large patio. His guide opened one door and ushered him through, then disappeared back into the building.

“Captain Singh!” High Consul Winston Duarte, absolute military ruler of Laconia, called out. “Please join me. Kelly, make sure the captain has a plate.”

Another man in a red jacket and black pants, this one apparently named Kelly, set a place for him, then pulled out his chair. Singh sat, dizzy and grateful he wouldn’t have to try to keep from swaying on his feet.

“High Consul, I—” Singh started, but Duarte waved him off.

“Thank you for joining me this morning. And I think we can use our military titles here. Admiral Duarte, or just Admiral is fine.”

“Of course, Admiral.”

Kelly had placed a single egg in an egg cup in front of him, and was now using tongs to put a sweet roll next to it on his plate. Singh had eaten an egg before, so while it was a luxury, it wasn’t a total mystery. The table was small—it would have been crowded with four diners—and overlooked a large patch of what looked like lovingly tended terrestrial grass. A girl of maybe twelve years sat in the middle of the grass playing with a puppy. Real chickens and Terran dogs. Unlike Noah’s ark in the old story, the ships of the first fleet had carried only a few species of animal to Laconia. Seeing

evidence of two in the same sitting was a little overwhelming. Singh tapped on the shell of his egg with his spoon to crack it, and tried to keep his bearings.

Admiral Duarte gestured at Singh's coffee cup, and Kelly poured for him. "I apologize," Duarte said, "for pulling you away from your family so early this morning."

"I serve at the pleasure of the high consul," Singh said automatically.

"Yes, yes," the admiral replied. "Natalia, right? And one daughter?"

"Yes, Admiral. Elsa. She is nearly two now."

Admiral Duarte smiled out at the girl in the grass and nodded. "It's a good age. Not the toilet-training part, but she's sleeping through the night?"

"Most nights, sir."

"It's fascinating to watch their minds start to grow around then. Learning language. Learning to identify themselves as a separate entity. The word *no* becomes magical."

"Yes, sir," Singh said.

"Don't pass up trying that pastry," the admiral said. "Our baker's a genius."

Singh nodded and took a bite. The pastry was too sweet for him, but the bitter black coffee paired with it perfectly.

Admiral Duarte smiled at him, then said, "Tell me about Captain Iwasa."

The bite of sweet roll he'd just swallowed turned into a slug of lead in his belly. Captain Iwasa had been stripped of rank and dishonorably discharged based on a report Singh had given to the admiralty. If his former commanding officer had been a personal friend of the high consul, Singh could be witnessing the end of his career. Or worse.

"I'm sorry, I—" Singh started.

"It's not an interrogation," Duarte said, his voice as soft as warm flannel. "I know all the *facts* about Captain Iwasa. I want to hear your version. You filed the original dereliction-of-duty report. What moved you to do that?"

One of his professors at the military academy had once said, *When there's no cover, the only sensible thing to do is move through the field of fire as quickly as possible*. Singh sat up straight in his chair, doing his best version of standing at attention from the sitting position.

"Sir, yes sir. Captain Iwasa failed to enforce the newly delivered naval code of military conduct, and then when asked a direct question about those guidelines, he lied to Admiral Goyer, his commanding officer, in my

presence. I sent a memo to Admiral Goyer that disputed Captain Iwasa's statements."

Duarte eyed him speculatively, no hint of anger on his face. That didn't mean anything. From all accounts, the high consul was not a demonstrative man.

"The revised code that made dereliction of duty an offense punishable by being sent to the Pen?" Admiral Duarte said.

"Yes, sir. Captain Iwasa felt this punishment to be excessive, and spoke openly about it. When two Marines were found sleeping on duty, he gave them administrative punishments instead."

"So you went over his head to Admiral Goyer."

"Sir, no sir," Singh said. He lowered his eyes to look directly into the high consul's. "I witnessed an officer lying to his superior in response to a direct question about his chain of command. I notified that officer, as was my duty."

Singh stopped, but Duarte said nothing. Just kept looking at him like he was a particularly interesting bug pinned to a corkboard. Then, as if it were a casual question, "Did you dislike Iwasa?"

"If I may speak frankly, sir," Singh asked. When Duarte nodded, he continued. "Operating within the code of military conduct is the sworn duty of every officer and enlisted man. It is the instrument by which we are a military and not just a lot of people with spaceships and guns. When an officer shows a disregard for it, they are no longer an officer. When Iwasa demonstrated a repeated and deliberate failure to uphold that code, he was no longer my commanding officer. I merely informed the next person up the chain of command of this fact."

"Do you feel now, knowing what the consequences to Iwasa were, that you did the right thing?" the admiral asked. His face and voice betrayed no opinion on the topic. He might as well have been asking if Singh wanted sugar.

"Yes, Admiral," Singh said. "Duty isn't a buffet where you pick what you want and ignore the rest. Provisional loyalty isn't loyalty. Captain Iwasa's duty was to enforce the code of conduct on those in his command. When he lied about failing to do so, it was my duty to notify his commanding officer."

The high consul nodded. It could have meant anything. "Do you miss him?"

“I do. He was my first commanding officer when I left the academy. He taught me everything I needed to know. I miss him every day,” Singh replied, and realized he wasn’t exaggerating. Iwasa’s fatal flaw had turned out to be his affection for those in his command. It made him an easy man to love.

“Captain,” Duarte said. “I have a new assignment for you.”

Singh stood up, nearly knocking his chair over, and saluted. “Captain Santiago Singh, reporting for duty, High Consul.” He knew it was ridiculous, but something about the entire conversation was surreal and ridiculous, and in the moment it just felt like the right thing to do. Duarte had the grace to treat it with respect.

“The first phase of our project is coming to an end. We are now moving on to phase two. I am giving you command of the *Gathering Storm*. The details of your orders are in the captain’s safe on that vessel.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” Singh said, his heart pounding in his chest. “It will be my honor to carry those orders out to the letter.”

Duarte turned to look out at the girl playing with her dog. “We’ve been hidden away from the rest of humanity long enough. Time we showed them what we’ve been doing.”

Chapter Four: Holden

Holden had been in his twenties when the Earth Navy kicked him out. He looked back at that version of himself with the kind of fondness and indulgence that people usually extended to puppies that were overly proud of themselves for scaring off a squirrel. He'd signed up to work ice-hauling runs with a sense of turning his back on the whole corrupt, authoritarian, cynical history of his species. Even the name of the company he'd signed on with—Pur 'n' Kleen—had seemed rich with meaning. A promise of integrity and purity. If it was also a little cartoonish, it hadn't felt like that at the time.

Back then, the Belt had been the rugged frontier. The UN and the Martian Congressional Republic, the political gods of a solar system more isolated than an ancient island in the middle of the ocean. Belters had been a structural underclass fighting to have people on the inner planets even notice when they were dying.

Now humanity was scattered to more than thirteen hundred new solar systems, and Earth might not even be the most hospitable planet for human life. Anytime a few like-minded people could put together the resources for a colony and the fees for passage through the ring gates, the seeds of a new society could be sown out there among the stars. Even the most populous of the new systems only had eight or ten cities on a whole planet. It was a massive parallel experiment in the possible forms of human collective, a chance to remake the structure of culture itself. But somehow, it all wound up seeming very familiar.

"What makes you people believe you have the right to dictate trade between sovereign states?" Governor Payne Houston of Freehold demanded. "We are a free people. And despite what your masters on Medina may think, we do not answer to *you*."

When Houston had come into the meeting, he'd already been pretty worked up, and Holden hadn't had much opportunity to talk him back down

to a meaningful, productive level of raising hell just yet. Instead, he watched and listened and tried to decide whether the governor's anger was based more in fear, frustration, or narcissism. Fear, Holden could understand. Frustration would have made sense too. All the planets connected by the ring gate had their own biomes, their own biologies, their own unexpected obstacles for someone trying to carve out an environmental niche for humans. Being able to trade for what they needed was quite often the difference between life and death. Anyone who thought they and the people they cared about were being arbitrarily blocked from the things they needed would be scared down to their bones.

The more the governor went on, though, the more it seemed like the guy was just an asshole.

"Freehold is an independent sovereign state," Houston said, slapping his table with an open palm. "We will engage in trade with willing partners, and we will not pay tribute to parasites like you, sir. We will *not*."

The council chamber was built like a courtroom, with Holden and Bobbie sitting at a low table and the governor and his eleven cabinet members above them looking down like a panel of judges. Their table was a dark-stained wood analog. Windows behind Houston and his cohort silhouetted them. Interior design as a political tool. The sidearms that all the Freeholders wore underscored it.

He glanced over at Bobbie. Her expression was calm, but her gaze shifted between the people looking down at them, then to the guards at the door. Calculating who she'd take out first, how she'd disarm them, where to take cover, how to escape. It was something Bobbie did the way other people knitted.

"So here's the thing," Holden said as Houston took a breath. "You think I'm here to negotiate with you. I'm not."

Houston scowled. "There is a right given by God to all free men, and we will have no tyrants or kings—"

"I understand why you're confused," Holden said, his voice louder, but still friendly. "You see a gunship coming out. Takes weeks to get here. You think this must be something where we're expecting a lot of give and take. Light delay would make back and forth awkward, so it makes sense to have someone right here breathing your air, right? You say something, we say something. No lag. But the thing is, the Transport Union has already decided what's going to happen. We aren't mediators. We're not looking for

an amicable solution.”

The woman to Houston’s left put a hand on his arm. Houston leaned back. That was interesting. Holden shifted a little, speaking to the space between the two of them to include her in the conversation.

“We’re all adults here,” Holden said. “We don’t need to pretend with each other. The union sent us here in person because they don’t want to have to do this kind of thing over and over with a bunch of other colonies. They wanted to make sure that everyone else was watching this situation. Especially your friends and trading partners on Auberon.”

“Political theater,” Houston said with contempt in his voice. Which was kind of funny coming from a guy sitting a meter and a half higher than he needed to.

“Sure,” Holden said. “Anyway, here’s the thing. You sent a ship through the gates without authorization. You endangered the other ships using the gates—”

Houston huffed and waved a dismissive hand.

“—and there are consequences for that kind of thing,” Holden went on. “We’re just here to tell you what they are.”

Bobbie shifted her chair, turning it out so her legs were free. It might have been a casual gesture, except that it wasn’t. Holden ran his hands over the top of the table. Whatever it was made from wasn’t wood, but it had the same hardness and subtle texture. Houston and his cabinet were quiet. He had their attention now.

Holden needed to decide what to do with it. Follow instructions or fudge it a little.

“There are two ways this can go,” he said, fudging a little. “The first one is the union cuts off gate access to Freehold for three years.”

“We aren’t self-sustaining yet,” one of the other cabinet members said. “You’re talking about a death sentence for three hundred people.”

“That’s a decision you folks made when you sent your unauthorized ship through the gates,” Holden said. “Or maybe you can find some way to up the timetable. Get a way to feed people sooner. That’s up to you. But for three years, any ship going in or out of the Freehold gate gets killed without warning. No exceptions. Communications in and out of the gate are jammed. You’re on your own. Or, option two is Governor Houston comes with us for trial and probably just a whole lot of jail time.”

Houston snorted. His expression looked like he’d taken a bite of

something rotten. The other people on the bench were less demonstrative. Freehold was a colony of pretty good poker faces.

“You forget the third option,” Houston said. “Being the ambassador of tyranny is a job with risks, Captain Holden. Very. Real. Risks.”

“Okay, so let’s do the math on that,” Holden said. “We’re here, and there are a dozen of you up there and four guards at the doors—”

“Six,” Bobbie said.

“Six guards at the doors,” Holden said, not missing a beat. “If you just look at the hundred or so meters around this building, we’re totally outnumbered and outgunned. *But* if you expand that to half a klick out, I have a gunship. My gunship has PDCs. It has a rail gun. It has twenty torpedoes. Hell, it’s got an Epstein drive that can put out a plume that would glass this whole settlement if we pointed it at the right angle.”

“So force,” Houston said, shaking his head. “Taxation always comes at the end of a gun.”

“I thought of it more as an argument against shooting ambassadors,” Holden said. “We’re leaving now and going back to our ship. Twelve hours after we get there, we’re taking off. If we have Governor Houston here on board, you can start scheduling ships with the union again. If not, we’ll send someone back in three years to check in.”

Holden stood up, Bobbie following his lead so closely that she was on her feet before him. Houston leaned forward, his left hand on the table and his right at his side like it was resting on the butt of a gun. Before the governor could say anything, Holden started for the door. The guards watched him step forward, their eyes cutting from him to Bobbie, then up to Houston. In Holden’s peripheral vision, Bobbie settled a little deeper into her legs, her center of gravity solidifying. She was humming softly, but he couldn’t quite pick out the melody.

As they reached the door, the guards stood aside, and Holden started breathing again. A short corridor to the anteroom, then out to the dirty street. He eased his hand terminal out of his pocket as they walked. Alex picked up the connection as soon as he put in the request.

“How’s it going out there?” Alex asked.

“We’re on our way back now,” Holden said. “Make sure the airlock’s open when we get there.”

“You coming in hot?” Alex asked.

“Maybe,” Holden said.

“Copy that. I’ll have the welcome mat out and the PDCs warmed up.”

“Thank you for that,” Holden said and dropped the connection.

“You really think they’ll be dumb enough to make a play?” Bobbie asked.

“I don’t want to bet my life on other people being smart,” Holden said.

“Voice of experience?”

“I’ve been hurt before.”

Freehold was the name of the town and the planet and the solar system. Holden couldn’t say which had come first. The town nestled in a valley between two ridge mountains. A soft breeze smelled faintly of acetate and mint, by-products of whatever chemistry the local biosphere had figured out for its life cycles.

The sunlight was subtly redder than Holden expected, making the shadows seem blue and giving the sense of permanent twilight. Or maybe dawn. A flock of local bird-analogs flew overhead in a V, their wide, transparent wings buzzing in an eerie harmony. It was a beautiful planet in its way. The gravity was a little less than half a g—more than Mars, less than Earth—and the planetary tilt and spin made the daylight just eight hours and change, the night a little over nine. Two minor moons were tide-locked to a big one almost a third the mass of the planet. The large moon even had a thin atmosphere, but nothing lived there. Not yet, anyway. If Freehold made it another few generations, someone would probably put another little town up there too, if only to get away from the locals. That seemed to be the human pattern—reach out to the unknown and then make it into the sort of thing you left in the first place. In Holden’s experience, humanity’s drive out into the universe was maybe one part hunger for adventure and exploration to two parts just wanting to get the hell away from each other.

It was always strange seeing the *Rocinante* on her belly. The ship had been designed to rest that way when it came down the gravity well. It didn’t do any damage. It just seemed wrong. The PDCs that studded her side shifted as they got closer, restless and active. The crew airlock stood open, a length of ladder leading down to the ground. Amos sat with his legs dangling over the lip of the open airlock door, a rifle resting across his thighs. Holden was a little surprised that Clarissa wasn’t there with him. Bobbie waved as they drew close, and Amos lifted his hand in response without taking his eyes off the trail behind them.

Holden went up first, then turned, standing between the ladder and Amos while Bobbie clambered up to them. Back toward the town, four people stood in a clump, not coming close, but clearly watching. At this distance, Holden wasn't sure if they'd been at the meeting or if they were new. Bobbie hit the panel, and the ladder retracted into the ship.

"How'd it go?" Amos asked, levering himself to his feet and stepping back from the outer door.

Bobbie cycled the door closed, raising her voice over the sound of the servos. "Back with no shots fired. I count that as a win."

The inner door opened, and Amos stowed the rifle in a locker that their weird orientation made look like a drawer. Holden walked along the wall, heading toward the ops deck. Which should have been up, but was, for the moment, to the left.

"I'm going to be glad when we're out of here," he said.

Amos smiled, the expression amiable and empty as ever, and followed after. Naomi and Alex were sitting in their crash couches, playing a complex combat-simulation game that they'd picked up in the last couple of years. Holden was reassured to see an exterior feed of the path to the town on both of their screens. Whatever else they were doing to pass the time, everyone was keeping their eyes on the town. Just in case.

"Hey, there, Captain," Alex said, his drawl a little thicker than usual. "We ready to pull up stakes and mosey on out of here?"

"We're waiting twelve hours," Holden said, sitting in his couch. The gimbals didn't shift. The fixed gravity of the planet meant all the couches were locked in place, their workstations rotated to the correct orientation. Naomi twisted to look at him.

"Twelve hours? For what?"

"I may have renegotiated the deal a little," he said. "I said if they turned over the governor to us for trial, there wouldn't be a quarantine."

Naomi lifted an eyebrow. "Does the union know about this?"

"I figured I'd send them a message when I got back here."

"You think Drummer'll be okay with it?"

"Cap changing the rules?" Amos said with a shrug. "That's just a day that ends in y far as I can tell. If she didn't leave some wiggle room for it, that's her mistake."

"I'm not going to hold the whole colony responsible for what a few administrators did," Holden said. "It's collective punishment, and it's not

the kind of thing that the good guys should do.”

“At least not without twelve hours’ warning?” Naomi said.

Holden shrugged. “This is the window they have to make a choice. If they have the chance to do something different and they still double down, I feel a little better about closing them off. At least we’ll have tried.”

“‘A little better’ meaning ‘not totally guilt-ridden.’”

“Not totally,” Holden said, lying back. The gel was cool against the back of his head and shoulders. “Still don’t love the whole cutting-people-off-from-supplies-they-need thing.”

“Should have agreed to run the union when you had the chance,” Alex said. “Then it could all be the way you wanted.”

“It’d be pretty to think so anyway,” Holden said.



Twelve hours. A night and part of a day, for Freehold. And not quite enough time for a message to go from the *Roci* to Medina to the office of the president of the Transport Union and come back again. If Drummer threw a fit, they’d still be burning for Medina before her message came through. He’d have given the Freeholders more time to think things through if he could have. But lightspeed was lightspeed.

It was the irony of making threats while having mass. The messages and voices, culture and conversation, could move so much more quickly than even the fastest ship. In the best case, it would have made persuasion and argument much more important. Moving ideas across the gap between planets was easy. Moving objects was hard. But it meant that whoever was on the other side had to be listening and willing to let their minds be changed. For all the other times, it was gunships and threats, same as ever.

Holden was asleep when the answer finally came.

“Wake up,” Naomi said. “We’ve got visitors.”

He wiped his eyes, swung his feet to the wall that was now temporarily the floor, ran his hands through his hair, and looked blearily at the screen. A crowd of people were outside the ship. He recognized a couple of the faces from the council meeting. And in the middle of them, Governor Houston was hog-tied in a wide, gray ceramic wheelbarrow. The relief that poured through Holden’s body was only tempered a little bit by the prospect of

months on the burn with the disgraced governor on board.

He opened a connection. "This is Captain Holden of the *Rocinante*. Hang tight. We'll be right out."

"Be careful," Naomi said. "Just because this looks like one thing, that doesn't mean it can't be something different."

"Right," he said, opening a connection to ops. "Alex? You there?"

"He's sleeping," Clarissa answered. "I have the PDCs warmed up, and Amos and Bobbie are on their way to the airlock. If it's an ambush, it will be a very unsuccessful one."

"Thank you for that," Holden said, walking along the side of the lift shaft toward the airlock. The mixed voices of Bobbie and Amos already echoed down toward him.

"Give the sign if you need me to do more than watch," Clarissa said, and cut the connection.

When the airlock opened and they lowered the ladder, Holden went first. A woman with sharp features and thick gray-black hair pulled back in a bun stepped out toward him.

"Captain Holden," she said. "I'm Interim Governor Semple Marks. We're here to accede to your government's demands."

"Thank you for that," Holden said as Bobbie slid down the ladder behind him. Amos followed, his shotgun clanking as he came.

"We're lodging a formal complaint with the union about this infringement on our sovereignty," Marks said. "This should have been handled internally in Freehold."

"I'll let you take that up with the union," Holden said. "Thank you for being willing to bend on this one. I didn't want to quarantine your system."

Marks' eyes said, *I think you did*, but she stayed silent. Bobbie helped the prisoner to his feet. Houston's face was gray where it wasn't red. He seemed unsteady.

"Hey," Amos said. A moment later, Houston seemed to find him. Amos nodded encouragement. "I'm Amos. This is Bobbie. We've done this kind of duty before, so there's some rules about how this goes you're going to want to listen to very carefully ..."

Chapter Five: Drummer

Drummer didn't want to be awake, but she was. The couch was built for the two of them, Saba and her. Acceleration gel over a frame designed to give them freedom to spoon while People's Home, first and largest of the void cities, was spun up or under gentler thrust or to divide them if they went into an unexpected hard burn while they were asleep. Balancing to keep from shifting the couch and troubling Saba, she checked the system console in the wall nearest her bedside. It was still two hours before she needed to get up. Not long enough for a full sleep cycle. Not short enough to ignore. She was, by some measures, the most influential woman in thirteen hundred worlds, but it didn't fix insomnia.

Saba shifted in his sleep and muttered something she couldn't make out. Drummer put a hand on his back, petting down his spine, not sure if she hoped to quiet him back to sleep or wake him up. He picked the former, snuggling himself down into the gel the way animals in their nests had been doing since before humanity had been more than an upstart hamster trying to avoid the dinosaurs.

She smiled in the darkness and tried not to be disappointed. She needed to pee, but if she got up now, it would wake Saba for certain, and then she'd feel bad. She could suffer a little instead. People's Home muttered around her like it was glad to have her back.

There were ways that she didn't have a home anymore. Hadn't since she'd accepted the presidency. Their quarters on Medina near the administration levels. The captain's cabin of Saba's ship, the *Malaclypse*. Back before she'd become the leader of the Transport Union, they'd been enough. Now she had more space devoted to her than she would ever see. Like a palace minced and scattered across light-years. Medina Station, Ganymede, Ceres, Pallas, Iapetus, Europa. The *Vanderpoele*, which was at her disposal as long as she held office. TSL-5 had quarters set aside for her, as would all the transfer stations when they were built. And the three void

cities that made up the spine of the Belters' dominion: Independence and Guard of Passage and People's Home.

At rest, the central core of People's Home stayed on the float, seventy decks of permanent facilities and infrastructure that wore the drum section like a cloak. The dock at one end, the drive at the other. Magnetic fields more powerful than a maglev track held the core separate from the drum levels and corrected when the drum spun up, holding the core stationary while the body shifted from thrust gravity to spin. The rooms and hallways in the drum were fashioned to shift, their floors orthogonal to the direction of thrust when the drive was on, their feet pointing down to the stars at a constant tenth of a g when they were at rest. Enough to make a consistent up and down, but light enough for even the most float-adapted. Not a ship, but a city that had never suffered a gravity well.

Saba yawned and stretched, his eyes still shut. Drummer ran a hand over his wire-brush hair, a little more insistently this time. His eyes opened and his wicked little half smile flickered on and then off again.

"Are you up?" she asked, trying to keep her voice soft, but really wanting the answer to be yes.

"Yes."

"Thank God," she said, and hauled herself up off the couch and went to the head. By the time she was back, Saba was standing naked at the little tea dispenser that had been provided for the exclusive use of the president. Saba had been with her for almost a decade now, and if his age showed a little in the softness of his belly and the roundness of his face, he was still a very pretty man. Sometimes, seeing him like this, she wondered whether she was aging as gracefully. She hoped so, or if not, that he didn't notice.

"Another beautiful morning in the corridors of power, ah?" he said.

"Budget hearings in the morning, trade approval in the afternoon. And Carrie Fisk and her fucking Association of Worlds."

"And fish on Friday," he said, turning to hand her a bulb of hot tea. As little time as People's Home spent on the float, she might as well have had Earther cups. But she never would. "What's an Association of Worlds?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" Drummer said. "Right now it's a couple dozen colonies that feel like I'd listen to them better if they spoke with one voice."

"Are they right?"

He took another bulb for himself and leaned against the wall. He had a

weirdly intense way of listening. More than his eyes, it was what made him pretty. Drummer sat on the couch, scowled at nothing in particular and everything in general. “Yes,” she said at last.

“And so you don’t like them?”

“I don’t dislike them,” Drummer said and took a sip of her tea. It was green and flavored with honey and still just a little too hot. “They’ve been around since Sanjrani, in one form or another. It’s all been sternly worded press releases and political grandstanding.”

“And now?”

“Sternly worded press releases, grandstanding, with occasional meetings,” she said. “But that actually means something. I didn’t use to have to make room on the agenda for them. Now it seems like I do.”

“What of Freehold?”

“Auberon is more the issue,” she said. “There’s talk that they’re making progress toward a universal polypeptide cross-generator.”

“And what is that, when it’s at home?”

It was a mechanism for pouring whatever toxic, half-assed soup the biospheres of the scattered planets had come up with into one end of a machine and getting something that humanity could eat out the other. Which meant sometime in the next ten or fifteen years, the effective end of Sol system’s monopoly on soil and farming substrates. And it meant Auberon was about to become the new superpower in the wide-flung paths of the human diaspora, provided that Earth and Mars didn’t decide to fly a navy out through the gates and start the first interstellar war.

All assuming, of course, that the breakthrough wasn’t vapor and tricks, which she wasn’t ready to discount. Every great nation, they said, was founded on a knife and a lie.

“I’m not supposed to talk about that,” she said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

Saba’s face went hard for a moment, but he pushed it back into a smile again. He hated it when she closed him out of things, but however much she trusted him—however much the union’s security division had cleared him—he wasn’t in the chain of authority. Drummer had spent too much of her life enforcing security protocols to ignore them now.

“The upshot is,” she said, trying to bring him in enough to salve his feelings and still not say anything compromising, “that Freehold is, among other things, a warning to Auberon not to get too cocky, and Carrie Fisk and

the Association of Worlds is sniffing around to see if there's any opportunities in it for them. Including how far they can push me."

Saba nodded and, to her mild disappointment, started to get dressed. "So more palace intrigue, savvy sa?" he said.

"Comes down to that," Drummer said, apologizing and also being angry for apologizing, even if it was only by implication.

Saba saw the storm in her almost before she knew it was there. He stepped over to her, knelt at her feet, and put his head in her lap. She coughed out a laugh and patted his hair again. It was an obeisance that he didn't mean, and she knew it. He knew it too. But even if it didn't mean he was actually abasing himself before her, it still meant something.

"You should stay another night," she said.

"I shouldn't. I have crew and cargo and a reputation as a free man to maintain." The laughter in his voice pulled the sting a little bit.

"You should come back soon, then," she said. "And stop hooking up with all the girls on Medina."

"I would never be unfaithful to you."

"Damned right you wouldn't," Drummer said, but there was laughter in her voice too now. Drummer knew that she wasn't an easy woman to love. Or even to work with. There weren't many people in the vast span of the universe that could navigate her moods, but Saba was one of them. Was the best at it of anyone.

The system made its broken bamboo tock. Vaughn, making the first approach of the day. Soon, there would be briefings and meetings and conversations off the record with people she liked or trusted or needed, but never all three at once. She felt Saba's sigh more than she heard it.

"Stay," she said.

"Come with me."

"I love you."

"Te amo, Camina," he said, and rose to his feet. "And I will flitter off to Medina and back so quickly you'll hardly know I was gone."

They kissed once, and then he left, and the cabin seemed empty. Hollow as a bell. The system made another little tock.

"I'll be there in five," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Vaughn replied.

She dressed, did her hair, and was in the office in slightly less than fifteen minutes, but Vaughn didn't chide her for it.

“What’s up first today?” she asked as he handed her a little cup of white kibble and sauce.

His hesitation was almost too small to notice. But only almost. “Message came in from Captain Holden of the *Rocinante*.”

“Sum it up?”

The hesitation was more pronounced this time. “Perhaps you should watch it, ma’am.”



The meeting room was on the outermost deck of the People’s Home drum. Coriolis in the void city was trivial to anyone who’d spent time on a ring station, but outsiders who’d only known mass and acceleration gravity before still found it bothersome. The walls were a pearlescent gray, the table a veneer of blond bamboo over titanium that was bolted straight to the deck. Drummer sat at its head, seething. Most of the others around her—Emily Santos-Baca, Ahmed McCahill, Taryn Hong, and all the other representatives of the board and budget office—knew her well enough to gauge her mood and tread lightly. The poor man making the presentation had never met her before.

“It’s been a question of priorities,” the man said. His name was Fayeze Okoye-Sarkis, and he’d come to speak on behalf of some kind of nongovernmental, nonacademic group that pushed for science research. Chernev Institute, based out of Ganymede and Luna. “Over the last decades—really since the bombardment of Earth—the vast, *vast* majority of research has been in increasing food yield and infrastructure. And mostly, it’s been reverse engineering the technology that made things like the protomolecule and the ring station. Every planet we’ve been to has had artifacts and old technologies.”

“Yes,” Drummer said. Meaning *Get on with it*. Okoye-Sarkis smiled like he was used to people finding him charming.

“When my wife was an undergraduate, back in the day,” he said, “her fieldwork involved tracking rodent species that had adapted to live in high-radiation zones. Old reactors and fission test sites. They had evolved to fit into environments that were specifically created. By humans. Well, we’re those rodents now. We’re adapting ourselves into spaces and environments

that were left behind by the vanished species or groups of species that created all this. The changes in technology we've seen are immense, and they promise to be just the beginning."

"Okay," Drummer said. Okoye-Sarkis took a drink of water from a bulb. The furrows in his forehead said he knew he was losing her. Hopefully it would make him tighten the presentation up, skip the boring parts, and get to what he wanted so she could say no and get back to her job.

"There has been a lot of speculation about what sort of beings built all the things we've found. Whether they were conscious individuals like us or some kind of hive mind. Whether they were one species in a community or a variety of interconnected species acting in concert. Whether—and I know this sounds weird—whether they had the same relationship to matter that we do. There's been a lot of great thought. Great theory. What there hasn't been is testing. The Chernev Institute wants to be the spearhead for a new generation of scientific research into the deepest questions that the ring gates embody. Who or what built them? What happened to those species between the time they launched Phoebe and the creation of the Sol gate? Did they leave records that we can translate and understand? Our belief is that somewhere in the systems on the far side of the gates or within the gates themselves, we will find something that acts like a kind of Rosetta stone. Something that places all the other discoveries in context. Our goal is to crack the present work in materials science, high- and low-energy physics, biology, botany, geology, even the philosophy of science wide open."

Drummer leaned back in her chair, tilted her head. "So ... you think the problem is that things aren't changing fast enough?"

"Well, I think that progress is always better and more efficient when—"

"Because it seems to me," Drummer interrupted, "like we're on the ragged edge of being able to deal with what's already on our plate. I don't see how more growing pains are going to help us."

"This is meant to help us with growing pains," the man said. He delivered the line with a certainty and authority that Drummer respected as a performance. He was a charismatic little shit. She saw why they'd sent him. To her left, Emily Santos-Baca cleared her throat in a way that might have meant nothing, but if it meant anything, it meant a lot. Drummer was being an asshole. With a conscious effort, she pulled her irritation back.

"Fair enough," she said. "And how does the union fit in with this?"

“There are several things that the Transport Union can do to help with the effort. The first being, of course, a contract to grant passage to Institute ships. We’ve got fieldwork proposals for sites on half a dozen planets whose preliminary surveys look most promising. But we have to get there first.” His grin was an invitation for her to smile back.

“That makes sense,” Drummer said. His grin lost its edge.

“The other thing that we’d like to open a conversation about ... the Transport Union is in a singular position. The fruits of our work stand to benefit the union as much or more than anyone else in any system.”

“And so you’d like us to underwrite your work,” Drummer said. “Is that it?”

“I had some more preliminaries that help lay the groundwork for why,” Okoye-Sarkis said, “but yes.”

“You understand we aren’t a government,” Drummer said. “We’re a shipping union. We take things from one place to another and protect the infrastructure that lets us do that. Research contracts aren’t really in our line.”

Okoye-Sarkis looked around the table, searching for sympathetic eyes. Maybe he even found a few. Drummer knew that her reaction might have been different if the proposal had been made a day earlier. But Holden’s message from Freehold ...

“The Institute respects that, ma’am,” Okoye-Sarkis said. “This is a very new project, but one I think has the potential to yield real benefits for everyone. I have a breakdown of our mission proposals I can leave with you and whoever in your staff wants to look at them.”

“All right,” Drummer said.

“And the passage agreement. I don’t mean to press, but we’re still getting our backers together, and the fees—”

“Give us your proposals,” Drummer said. “The board can go over them. Whatever conclusion they make about reducing or waiving the contract fees will be fine with me.”

“Thank you, Madam President. That’s wonderful. Thank you very much.”

The scientist practically bowed himself out of the room. Drummer ticked off the last entry in her morning agenda. The afternoon’s list looked just as long and at least equally irritating. Santos-Baca caught her eye and lifted an eyebrow.

“It’s an interesting proposal. It should make for a lively debate,” she said, meaning *I see you just gave the board another issue to deal with*.

“It’s important that the board be involved in any serious decisions,” Drummer said, meaning *Suck it up*. Emily Santos-Baca chuckled, and half against her will, Drummer smiled. But only for a few seconds.

She suffered through the small talk and pleasantries that came before and after all meetings like social plaque, then went back to her private office as soon as she could. Vaughn or one of his staff had left a bowl of soy pasta with mushrooms and a glass of wine for her. She started with the wine.

She pulled up the display of the full Sol system. Planets, void cities, stations. The asteroids swirling in the complex orbital dances where gravity and system geography made pools of stability. It looked like images of a snowstorm on Earth. She’d never seen snow to know how accurate that was.

She cut out most of the data, simplifying it enough for a human eye to make sense of. There was People’s Home, in Mars’ orbit, but not near the planet. And there, nearer the ring gate, was Independence. She placed a query, and the *Malaclypse* appeared—a single bright-yellow dot that seemed like it was almost on top of People’s Home. Like the ship had never left.

It was a failure of scale. That superposition of light in the display was a hundred thousand kilometers by now. More than the circumference of Earth twice over and getting larger every second. It was just that the unbridgeable distance between her and Saba was nothing compared to the vastness around them. Here in the system, and then out in all the other systems beyond the gates.

Even for a woman born to the void, it was overwhelming. And everyone seemed to want her to control it for them. To take responsibility for it all so that they could feel like someone, somewhere was in charge.

She’d never have said it aloud, but there was part of her that missed the way it had been in her youth. The Belt had been the OPA. Earth and Mars had been the enemy. That had seemed overwhelming at the time. It was only everything that had happened since then that made it seem small and manageable by comparison. A nostalgia for the age that had forged her into who she was. That had given her all the skills she’d needed and then changed into a place where half the time she felt like an impostor in her

own clothes.

The *Rocinante* was light-hours away through the gates. Light-centuries by more traditional paths. She pictured Holden as if he were across the table. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then started the recording.

“Captain Holden. I’ve gotten your status report about the situation on Freehold. Politely put, your proposed solution isn’t going to work ...”

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Chapter Six: Holden

Politely put,” Drummer said on the screen, “your proposed solution isn’t going to work. What you’re doing would fundamentally change the union. Jailing someone isn’t a thing we do. We’re a transport union, not a police force. We don’t have prisons. We don’t have prisoners. We don’t have judges. We have *contracts*. When someone breaks the terms of the contract, we object. Then we levy fines and penalties. And then, if they still won’t do what they said, we stop playing with them. What we don’t do is *arrest* them.”

“She sounds pissed,” Alex said.

Holden paused the message playback. The ops deck was dim, the way Alex liked it. The air recycler clicked and the drive hummed through the bones of the ship, as familiar as silence.

“Yeah,” Holden said. “That doesn’t sound like her happy voice, does it?”

Alex scratched at his beard and gave Holden a sympathetic shrug. “You want to finish that someplace private?”

“I don’t think that’ll make it better.” Holden took the pause back off, and Drummer sprang back into motion.

“The other thing we don’t do is let everyone who captains a ship on our registry make their own policies for the union as a whole. What you did on Freehold doesn’t get to set precedent for what I have to do on every other system that decides to break the rules. I sent you out there with a mission to deliver a message. Not negotiate. Not broker deals. You were there because it was important for everyone else who’s watching—and *everyone’s* watching—to see what happens when you break the terms of your contract with the Transport Union.”

“So it was theater first, and *then* an execution,” Holden said to the screen. Not that she could hear him. Still, she paused, looked down, and gathered herself as if she had.

“My problem now,” she said, “is how to fix what you’ve broken with the least amount of damage. I will be consulting with the board and our legal counsel, and when we decide what needs to happen, I’ll tell you. And you’ll do it. I really hope this is clear enough that it doesn’t confuse you.”

“I’m getting the feeling she may not actually like me,” Holden said.

“She’s working herself up a little,” Alex said. “I wouldn’t take it personally.”

“For now,” Drummer said, “I am instructing you to proceed on to Medina with Governor Houston. I will have someone ready to meet your ship when you dock. At that time, I will expect you to read a statement that I will put together for you. It may be an apology. It may be a clarification of the Transport Union rules. Whatever it is, I’ll deliver it to you before you get there. And you’ll recite it word for word.

“You don’t get to make the universe be what you want just by saying it, Holden. There are other people who live here too. Next time, show some respect.”

The message ended. Alex blew out a long, slow breath. “Well, maybe take it a little personally,” he said as Holden closed the message out. The screen returned to its series of rolling system reports. Drive output, environmental stability, waste-heat management. The *Rocinante* doing what she did best. What she always did. The knot in his stomach sat there, quietly. He couldn’t tell if it was anger or disappointment or something else altogether.

Alex cracked his knuckles. “You’ve got that look,” he said.

“No, I don’t,” Holden said. “I don’t look like anything.”

“She’s got a point. There’s a lot of colonies out there. If we’re going to start hauling in bad guys from all of them ... well, there’s a lot of mission creep in that. Telling them they can’t come play if they won’t play nice? It’s rough, but it doesn’t change what the Transport Union *is*, you know?”

“It’s more convenient,” Holden said more sharply than he’d intended. “It is. No, I see that. I understand that it’s easier to run the union if everything’s in terms of who’s violated the terms of the contract and withholding service and ... and give it a few more decades so the colonies are all able to support themselves, maybe cutting off trade will be a slap on the wrist. But the fact of the matter right now? It’s a death sentence.”

“Maybe,” Alex said. “What I heard about Bara Gaon Complex and Auberon, they’re already—”

“This isn’t Bara Gaon Complex or Auberon. This is Freehold. If we cut them off for three years, the colony would collapse, and they’d all starve. So right now, yeah, she’s saying we should kill them. Only she’s phrasing it so it sounds like it’s just the natural consequence of *their* choices and not also *ours*.”

“Well, yeah,” Alex said, but Holden wasn’t done. The words kept pushing their way out of him.

“They didn’t vote for Drummer,” he said, tapping hard on the screen. “They can’t appeal her decisions, and she has the power of life and death over them. She needs to be held to a higher standard than ‘whatever’s most convenient.’ And in every military service in history, when the commander gave an immoral command, it was the *duty* of the soldiers to disobey it.”

“Every military service in history?”

“All the good ones.”

“All right,” Alex said. Then a moment later, “They didn’t elect us either.”

“Exactly! That’s my *point*.”

“Right,” Alex said.

“So we’re agreeing with each other.”

“Yes. But it still kind of sounds like we’re fighting.”

“It does,” Holden said, and leaned back. His crash couch shifted under him, hissing. The tightness in his gut hadn’t lessened at all. He’d really hoped it would. “Shit.”

“You think she’s going to shut them out again? Put the quarantine back in place?”

“I don’t know,” Holden said. “Except if she was going to do that, she’d probably make us take Houston back to die with his friends. And it doesn’t do great things for your political dog-and-pony show when the captain of one of your pet gunships starts refusing your orders. She’ll have to give us this one.”

“That sounds right,” Alex agreed. “Next one’s going to be interesting, though.”

“Yeah.”

They were quiet for a moment. He knew Alex was going to speak even before the words came. Decades of living and working in the same place meant you never had to ask for someone to pass the salt at galley time. This was just the same.

“If you want, we could yell at each other some more.”

“Thanks,” Holden said. Alex nodded. It was an open invitation, and only half a joke. He consulted his gut again, then pulled himself up and headed for the lift. Alex didn’t ask where he was going. He probably knew.

The galley still had the ghost of the ginger tea Clarissa drank to soothe her stomach, but neither she nor Amos was there now. The food dispenser showed their supply levels, and he saw them without really seeing them. He’d lived on the *Rocinante* longer than anyplace else in his life. He knew the ship better than he knew himself.

As he walked down the corridor to their room, he tried to shrug off the bitterness and the anger. The sense of guilt that was rising in his throat. Even so, he knew she’d see it.

Naomi was in the crash couch, her arm thrown over her eyes, but her breath didn’t have the deepness of sleep. Her nap was already over or else it hadn’t yet begun. She smiled, and the deep lines at the sides of her mouth were beautiful.

“How bad is it?” she asked even before she took her arm away.

Holden took a deep breath and let it hiss out through his teeth. His gut didn’t loosen, but it did shift. The anger turned toward something deeper. Grief, maybe. He crossed his arms. She shifted to look at him. The gray at her temples had started appearing a few years ago, and was slowly spreading. There were lines at the corners of her eyes that the antiaging meds they all took now weren’t going to rub away. They were beautiful, too.

“I think it may be time for us to do something else,” he said. “For me to do something else, anyway.”

She shifted, the crash couch moving to adjust to her. If there had been a joke waiting, an impulse to lighten the moment, it died when she looked at him. Seeing her reacting to him told him how serious he really was. How bad he looked.

“Walk me through it,” she said.

He gave her the basics—what Drummer had said, what he and Alex had talked about, what sense he’d made of it—and with every word, every phrase, he felt a confusion he hadn’t known he was suffering start to clear. Just saying it to her, knowing that even if he got the words or thoughts wrong, she would hear the meaning underneath them, let him find his own clarity. The tightness in his gut didn’t go away.

“When we were hunting down pirates, I could accept their surrender,” he said. “Even the Free Navy could have set down arms and we’d have arrested them. But now I’m working for a bureaucratic system that’s willing to kill people as a matter of policy. I don’t feel like I’m enforcing rules, I feel like an executioner, and ... I don’t think I can do it.”

Naomi shifted, making room for him on the crash couch. He lay down beside her. The couch adjusted to their combined mass. She made a low sound, part hum and part sigh. “Tough to do our jobs, then.”

“These colonies? They’re all dependent on the Transport Union, and maybe they won’t always be. But until they’re self-sustaining, they should have a voice in how the union makes the rules. How it enforces them. They didn’t elect Drummer.”

“They didn’t elect any of them. Walker, Sanjrani, Pa.”

“The others weren’t cutting off trade. Drummer is. And yes, I know. Looking at it, this was probably inevitable. Maybe it’s a miracle it took this long to happen. But now it *has* happened, and ...”

“And when one thing changes, other things change too.”

A voice came from the galley. Bobbie, talking to someone—Alex or Amos or Clarissa. He didn’t hear the response, but Bobbie laughed a little at it. The knot in his gut grew heavier.

“I can put out a press release,” he said, and the words seemed to sink him deeper into the gel. “Get the message out to all the colonies about what Drummer wants to do, why I think it’s wrong. Try to lead some kind of ... I don’t know, reform coalition. Maybe talk to the Association of Worlds, see if they want to take it on.”

“Big fight to pick,” Naomi said, neither approving nor disapproving. Just saying it because it was true.

“It’ll mean grounding the *Roci* or keeping to one system for a while. There’s a lot of trade between Earth and Mars, still. Ganymede. Ceres. Maybe there are some colony worlds with enough infrastructure in place that we could find a niche there. Or make one. Or I could tell a few people what’s going on—”

“They already know,” Naomi said. “Drummer sent us out here to make a statement. Everyone’s already watching. Nothing you’ve said isn’t already on news and discussion feeds all around the colonies.”

“So maybe I could let someone else take point on this battle,” he said, closing his eyes. “Just get some in-system contracts and see what happens.

It's important. But ... I don't know. But I'm tired. Too tired to fight this one."

"Or."

He opened his eyes, turned to his side. Her head was tilted the way it was when she hid behind her hair, only without the hiding. Her mouth tensed. Her eyes met his.

"You remember when we first got the *Roci*?" she said. "We were on the run from, oh, I think everyone? Flying this stolen ship. You asked if we wanted to sell her, split the money, and all of us take an early retirement."

He chuckled. "She was worth more back then."

"'Retirement' meant more years back then too," she said. She wasn't laughing. "What if this isn't a decision you need to make for everyone?"

"Meaning?"

"We both know Alex's going to die in that pilot's chair. Bobbie's at home here. Clarissa's health isn't great. And I don't know, but if she decides to try a skilled-nursing facility on Ceres or something, I get the feeling Amos may go with her."

Holden let that idea sink in. He didn't understand the bond between Amos and Clarissa except that it was fierce and platonic and had lasted through years. If it was love, it didn't look like any version he'd ever experienced, but it didn't look like anything else either. He ran his mind over the idea of Amos still on the *Rocinante* without Clarissa. He'd never considered it before. It was a melancholy prospect.

"Yeah, maybe," Holden said. Then, a moment later, "Yeah."

"We're getting up to the same age Fred was when he stroked out on a burn. And you've been on daily anticancer meds for more than half of your life now. It doesn't matter how good they are, that's going to take a toll on your system. Leave you a little more fragile. So the other thing we can do? Sell our shares. Head down to Titan, pick a resort, and enjoy our retirement."

No, Holden thought. No, I will never leave this place and these people. This is my home, and no matter what the dangers and threats and fights are, I will stand this ground. This is where I belong. Where we all belong.

Only what came spilling out of his mouth was "God, that sounds wonderful. Let's do that."

Naomi leaned forward, her brows furrowed. "Really? Because I've got a half dozen other arguments I've been working on for why it's not a terrible

idea.”

“Oh yeah, hold on to those,” Holden said. “I’m going to flip my opinion back and forth for weeks. But right now, living in a dome on Titan with you sounds like the single best idea anyone has ever had.”

“You wouldn’t feel like it made you less of a man?”

“Nope.”

“That you were letting the universe down by not taking on every fight there was? Because I worked on that one for a while. I’ve got some good lines practiced up.”

“Keep ’em,” Holden said. “You’ll need them later. But right now, I’m sold.”

Her face relaxed. He could still see the woman she’d been when they were on the *Canterbury*. Time and age, sorrow and laughter had taken some of the curve out of her cheek, left her skin a little looser at her neck. They weren’t young anymore. Maybe you could only really see that someone was beautiful when they’d grown into themselves. He moved to kiss her—

—and drifted off the crash couch.

With the thrust suddenly cut, leaning up had pushed him into the cabin, twisting as he floated. He reached back with his foot automatically, trying to hook it into one of the holds, but the ship was flipping, so it took a couple tries. Naomi had already braced herself on the frame of the crash couch.

“Well,” Holden said. “I guess Drummer changed her mind about letting Houston come to Medina. That’s disappointing.”

“Weird that Alex wouldn’t sound the alert first, though,” Naomi said, and then tapped her system console. “Alex? Everything all right?”

“I was about to ask you,” the pilot said through the speaker. “We have a change of plan?”

Holden pulled his hand terminal out of his pocket. “Amos? Did you just do a flip-and-burn?”

“Hey, Cap,” Amos’ real voice said behind him as the big man floated into the doorframe. “Wasn’t me. We got something going on?”

A chill ran down Holden’s back that had nothing to do with temperature. Naomi was already on it, querying the *Roci*’s logs and control systems, but Clarissa’s voice came from the speaker before she could find anything.

“I received an alert from the air recyclers,” she said, her reedy voice stronger than usual. “It got a manual command from engineering to drop oxygen output to zero and flood nitrogen.”

“That’s not good,” Holden said. “We shouldn’t do that.”

“I had an aftermarket override in place. No one changes my environmental settings without my say-so,” Clarissa said, as calmly as if she didn’t mean, *My paranoia just saved our lives*. “I’d like to know what’s going on, though.”

“Engineering, the machine shop, and the reactor are all locked down,” Naomi said, scrolling through system screens faster than Holden could follow. “I think I’ve got the drive shut down, but I can’t—”

But Holden was already pulling himself out of the room. Amos hauled himself flat against the wall of the corridor as he flew past, then followed along behind him. Through the galley, to the lift, then down one level. His heart was tripping over, the pulse tapping at his eardrums, but it was just adrenaline. Just fear. There wasn’t anything wrong with the air.

He hoped that was true.

The brig wasn’t really a brig so much as one of the crew cabins that had been set aside, the door controls isolated from the system and disabled on the inside. Over the years, nearly a dozen prisoners had spent days or weeks or months in it. Now the door stood halfway open, the control panel flickering and throwing error codes. Holden pulled himself toward it cautiously—doors and corners were where they got you—but when he reached it, he was already sure what he’d find.

The cabin stood empty apart from bits of floating debris. Anti-spalling cloth floated in ribbons. Bits of fluff from the mattress, like February snowflakes that never fell. Bright lines showed where the storage drawer had been pried off its runners and a length of the guide pulled free. A wall screen floated beside the bunk, and the exposed electronics showed where the door locks had been shorted out.

The governor of Freehold was nowhere to be seen.

“Well,” Amos said. “That’s new.”

Chapter Seven: Bobbie

There was a certain luxury to the thrust gravity of steady acceleration. Hooking your nethers to a vacuum toilet was one of the indignities space travel occasionally forced you into. On the float, with nothing to pull your waste away, it was that or have pee globes sharing your living space. Being able to just sit on a toilet in the crew head and relax for a moment while you did your business was something to appreciate. The fact that it felt like a luxury was also probably not very dignified, if you looked at it too closely.

Bobbie was just reaching behind her for the cleaning-pad dispenser mounted on the bulkhead when the gravity went off with no warning. The momentum of her twisting torso sent her floating off the toilet seat and into the air, pants still around her knees. Thankfully, the *Roci* immediately fired up the vacuum system on the toilet and spared her having to dodge floating waste.

While she tumbled through the air tugging at her waistband, she yelled, “*Roci*, get me the bridge!”

“Yo,” Alex replied almost immediately. “Where are you—”

“Not even a fucking warning light? I’m down in the head, taking a leak, and suddenly I’m trying to pull my pants up on the float!”

“Wasn’t my plan,” Alex said. “Looks like ... Ah. Hold on.”

The system link picked up Naomi’s voice coming through a different channel. *Alex? Everything all right?*

“I was about to ask you,” Alex said. “We have a change of plan? Naomi? Um, Bobbie? I think we may have a situation.”

All it took was the tone of Alex’s voice. Bobbie planted one foot against a bulkhead, hooked a handhold with the other, and yanked up her pants.

“Copy that,” she said, the flat, emotionless tones of the old Marine taking over. “On the move.”

She found Holden and Amos floating just inside the door of their makeshift brig when she arrived. They were examining a wall screen that

someone had pried out of the wall. The prisoner wasn't there.

"How long has he been out?" Bobbie asked as she came to a stop with one hand on the doorframe.

"*Roci* started throwing errors from this door almost an hour ago," Amos said with a grimace. "This is on me, Cap. Shoulda been paying attention, but I was—"

"Forget it," Holden said. "Let's just keep him from doing any more damage."

"He's down in engineering, if he was able to kill the drive and spin the ship," Bobbie said.

"That's where he is," Holden said. "Naomi's working to keep him from making too big a mess, but she's working remotely, and this guy has demonstrated surprising technical skills."

"Options?" Bobbie asked. The tactical situation wasn't optimal. If the prisoner was locked in engineering and had also managed to seal off the machine shop above it, then they'd need to cut or breach two doors just to get to him. Even with Naomi hacking the control systems, physical proximity to the reactor gave Houston options she just didn't have. And Bobbie didn't like him having.

Holden drummed his fingers on his leg for a moment, the movement imparting an almost imperceptible spin to him as he floated.

"If he feels like he has no way out, he might blow the reactor out of spite," Holden said, mirroring Bobbie's own thoughts. "So a standard breach has to be last choice. Amos, you're in charge of that. Have Clarissa help you hotwire the door sensor to the machine shop so you can cut it without Houston knowing. Then put a mining charge on the door to engineering and wait for my signal."

"Got it," Amos said and pushed off down the corridor. He already had his terminal out, and was saying, "Peaches? Meet me at the machine shop hatch ..."

"If I'm not breaching, then—" Bobbie started, but Holden cut her off with a shake of his head.

"I want you using the aft maintenance hatch. You can come in from behind. Keep us from doing a very risky breach."

"Okay," Bobbie said, stretching the word out. "But, that access is unusable with the drive on."

"Naomi will make sure it stays off."

“And if she doesn’t.”

“You’ll get cooked,” Holden said with a nod. “But we’re playing against the clock here. We don’t know how long we’ve got until Houston decides dying in a fireball is more romantic than jail.”

“Betsy won’t fit into that tight maintenance crawl.”

“No, she won’t,” Holden agreed. “Pretty sure you can still kick this guy’s ass, though.”

“Not in doubt.”

“Then gear up, Marine. You’re going outside.”



Bobbie wasn’t really much of a ship mechanic, but she knew how to turn a wrench or draw a straight bead with a welding torch. Over her last couple decades of making the *Rocinante* her home she’d spent a fair amount of time outside the ship. Sometimes with Amos, who called her Babs for a reason only he understood, and who often assumed she knew what she was doing even when she didn’t. Sometimes with Clarissa, who occasionally slipped and called her Roberta, and who explained every procedure in the exhaustive detail you’d use with someone who knew nothing.

And, almost without her knowing it, they’d become her family. She still had brothers and nieces and nephews back on Mars related to her by blood, but she rarely spoke to them. Even then it was always in a recorded message fired across space on the end of a laser. Instead, she had Amos, the gruff big brother who’d let her fuck up on a repair job and just laugh at her, but then fix it later and never mention it again. And she had Clarissa, the annoying know-it-all little sister who wrapped herself in rules and procedure lists and formality like a shell around her fragile center.

And then Holden and Naomi, who couldn’t help but become the parents of the ship. Alex, the best friend she’d ever had, and the person she’d realized recently she had every intention of growing old with, in spite of never having seen him naked. It was an odd group of people to fall in love with, to adopt as your own kin and tribe, but there it was, and she wasn’t ever going back.

And now Payne Houston was threatening them.

“You fucked up, man,” she said to herself as she drifted to a stop over

the reactor-bay emergency-access panel. “You just fucked all the way up.”

“Repeat?” Alex said quietly in her ear. Bobbie realized she’d left the channel open and the volume low as she’d made the climb down from the crew airlock to the rear of the ship.

“Nothing,” she said, turning the volume back up. “I’m in position.”

“Patching you back into the master channel,” Alex replied, and then suddenly there were half a dozen voices breathing in her ear.

“Sound off,” Holden said.

“We got through the machine shop door okay, and Peaches says no alerts were triggered. Breaching charge is ready. Just call it.” Amos’ voice, calm and faintly amused. He could have been reporting football scores.

“I’ve got the *Roci* in diagnostic mode, so she’s asking me to verify any orders coming from the engineering console,” Naomi’s voice said. “But that can’t last. Pretty soon he can just start breaking things the old-fashioned way.”

“Draper here. I’m outside the emergency-access hatch.”

“How long once that door opens?”

Bobbie ran through the layout in her head. It was an old habit, beaten into her by years of training in the toughest military outfit humanity had ever created. Plan it through before you go in, because once the bullets start flying, the time for thinking is over. All you can do is move and react.

“Fifteen seconds to cycle the hatch closed. A few seconds to squeeze past the reactor housing; it’s a tight fit. But a good thirty seconds to equalize the pressure, so that’s our speed bump. Once the atmo in the crawlspace is equalized, I can be through that inner hatch in less than five.”

“Naomi? Can you keep our guest out of the controls for the next minute so we don’t cook our only good Martian?”

“Hey, Cap, that’s low,” Alex said with a laugh. Bobbie found it reassuring and terrifying that they could joke at a time like this.

“Bobbie,” Naomi’s voice said, gentle but firm. “No way he gets that reactor on while I’m alive.”

“Copy that. Draper is a go on your mark.”

Holden simply said, “Okay.”

The hatch in front of her vibrated under the palm of her vacuum suit’s glove as Naomi cycled it open. A faint puff of vapor escaped as the hatch popped open. Bobbie pulled herself inside, squeezing into the curved space between the inner hull of the ship and the outer shielding of the *Roci*’s

reactor core. The hatch began to cycle closed behind her.

“Governor Houston,” Holden said over the radio. “I’m sending this over the 1MC so I know you can hear me. It won’t compromise your position at all to at least open a dialogue.”

Bobbie pulled herself around the curve of the reactor to the inner hatch. The panel glowed red with the lock symbol, and the status read, NEG ATMOSPHERE. The timer in her HUD showed only ten seconds had elapsed, so the outer door wasn’t even finished cycling. Almost forty seconds, then, before she could pop the inner hatch and go kick this Houston’s ass up one side of the ship and down the other. She pulled the heavy recoilless pistol from the harness on her chest and double-checked the ammo counter. Ten self-propelled high-explosive antipersonnel rounds. If Houston forced her to shoot him, they’d be cleaning up red stains for a month.

Bobbie had served on ships most of her life. She wasn’t scared of a little mopping.

“Come on, man,” Holden said. “At this point, we can keep you from doing just about anything. Sooner or later, you’ll need a snack.”

To her surprise, Houston’s voice answered. “Naw. Found your mechanic’s beer fridge down here. Had a big bag of sesame sticks in it. Jalapeño-flavored. Bit spicy for me, but still tasty.”

“Better not be drinking my fucking beer,” Amos said in that same nonchalant voice.

“Anyway,” Holden cut in, “we still have a situation. You’re not going to be able to take the ship, and I’d really like to start using it again. How do we come to some sort of agreement?”

Bobbie heard the first hiss of the atmosphere system outside her suit. The pressurization was almost done. She held the pistol in her right hand and gripped the door with her left. The second it showed green, she’d be in the room with that asshole.

The asshole said, “I don’t know that we do. You’re right. I can’t get past that diagnostic lockdown. That was smart work, by the way. But I figure I can probably get the reactor back online from in here, and then I figure I can collapse the bottle if I just find the right wires to pull. You figure the same way?”

“Well,” Holden started, but the light on the inner hatch clicked green and Bobbie yanked it open.

The main console for the reactor would be to her left as she entered the

compartment. It was likely that Houston was using that workstation, so that was her first target. If she pushed off hard, she'd come out of the small hatch like a missile, do a quick flip to land feetfirst on the opposite bulkhead. From there she'd have open sight lines to the entire engineering deck. Nowhere for Houston to hide.

Bobbie gripped the edge of the hatch and pulled with all her strength to launch herself into the room. She had to—

Something crashed into the side of her helmet and sent her into a flat spin through the air. She tried to get her hands up to keep from crashing facefirst into the bulkhead, and only half succeeded. Her left arm crumpled under her, and she felt something tear with a wet heat in her shoulder. She bounced off the wall and saw Houston standing on the bulkhead above the access hatch, mag-booted in place, and holding a heavy fire extinguisher with a dent in the bottom.

Miraculously, the gun was still in her hand. Blackness creeping in at the edge of her vision, Bobbie tried to line up a shot. Houston launched himself off the wall with one strong kick and brought the extinguisher down on her hand in a baseball-bat-style swing. She felt two of her fingers break, and the gun and extinguisher flew off in opposite directions across the room.

The deck seemed to swim up to meet her. She caught a glimpse of Houston spinning off toward the ceiling. She managed to turn on the mags in her glove and pull herself down long enough to get her boots locked onto the deck plating. If this was going hand-to-hand, she'd want leverage, and that meant planting her feet. She turned the boots' mags almost up to full, and watched Houston catch himself on the ceiling.

She spread her arms wide, though from the tearing sensation in her left shoulder, she didn't think that one was going to be much use. And the broken fingers in her right hand made grappling or throwing a punch problematic.

"You're lucky you're wearing that suit," Houston said, gulping to catch his breath. "I put a dent in that helmet woulda knocked your brains out without it."

"And you," Bobbie said, "are very lucky it's *this* suit. I've got another one."

"Well. We gonna talk or are we gonna dance?"

"They're playing my—" Bobbie started, then Houston launched himself off the ceiling straight at her. She was expecting it. Getting someone else to

talk while you threw a punch was an old trick. The moment he left the bulkhead above her, she was already shifting her body to the left and rotating through her hips. As Houston sailed past, she brought her right elbow into his chin.

Houston's teeth slammed shut with a crunch that meant he'd cracked a few, then his whole body cartwheeled past her and into the wall with a thud. She kicked her mags off and pushed over to him, wrapping her right arm around his neck for a choke hold. It was unnecessary. His eyes were rolled up in his head, and he was breathing blood bubbles out of his ruined mouth. One and done. Just like the old days.

"I put our guest to bed," Bobbie said over the radio, then hauled Houston over to the wall panel and removed the locks on the hatch. "Amos, take that bomb off the door before I open it, 'K?"



Bobbie sat in the galley, her left arm in a sling, and her right hand in a cast that the ship had spun for her out of carbon fiber. Holden sat across from her, a steaming cup of coffee on the table held down by the gentle 0.3 g Alex was flying them at.

"So," Holden said, then paused to blow across the top of his coffee. "Turns out that guy had a few more skills than I clocked him for. Thanks for saving my ship."

"I kind of feel like it's mine, too," she said with a smile. Holden was Holden. He'd need to take the weight for every bad thing that happened, and to overstate his appreciation for the good ones. It's what made him *him*. He projected selfless heroism on everyone because that's what he wanted to see in people. It was the same thing that caused most of the problems in his life—most people weren't who he wanted them to be—but this was a nice moment. Ship safe. No one dead. Not even Houston, though if someone didn't keep an eye on Amos, that might change.

"So it's funny you should say that," Holden said. He'd paused over his coffee long enough that she'd sort of forgotten what she said. "Would you like to buy the ship from me?"

"I—" Bobbie started, then, "Wait, what?"

"Naomi and I are thinking of pulling the ripcord. We've been doing this

shit for a lot of years. It's time to find a quiet spot somewhere. See how we like that for a while."

It was more of a hit than anything Houston had managed. The ache started just below her ribs and spread up. She didn't know what it meant yet.

"Is everyone else on the crew ...?" Bobbie said, then wasn't sure how to finish the sentence.

"No. As Naomi recently pointed out to me, Alex will die in that pilot's chair. Whoever buys the ship will have to be okay with that. I can't speak for what Amos plans to do, you know, after."

After. He meant after Clarissa died.

"I've been saving my money, mostly, but I'm not sure I can afford a gunship," Bobbie said, keeping her tone light, trying to make a joke of it.

"We'll finance it. Split the joint account six ways, then set up a payment plan for the rest. Based on our past income, it should be an easy nut to cover. You pay any new crew out of your end. The *Roci* is your ship."

"Why me? Why not Alex?"

"Because there isn't anyone on this ship *I'd* rather take orders from, and I'm the world's worst person at taking orders. You'll make a fantastic captain, and you'll protect the reputation of this ship. It's weird, but that's something I find myself caring about."

Bobbie swallowed something that had become stuck in her throat, and she straightened up her back. It was all she could do to not stand up at attention. Military tradition died hard, and a captain handing over command of their vessel bordered on sacred trust.

"I would, you know," she said. "I'd see us become a cloud of gas before I'd violate the honor and good name of this ship."

"I know. So is that a yes?"

"I do wonder ..." Bobbie said.

Holden nodded and drank his coffee, waiting for her to finish.

"I wonder what the universe looks like without James Holden trying to ride to the rescue."

"I imagine everyone will find things running a lot more smoothly," Holden said with a grin.

"I wonder," Bobbie repeated.

Chapter Eight: Singh

Singh was dreaming of wandering, lost in the halls of a vast spaceship, when the comm on his desk buzzed him awake.

“Yes?” he croaked even before he’d opened his eyes. There was nothing wrong with his taking a nap in his quarters. He wasn’t shirking any of his duties. And the shakedown of his ship, the *Gathering Storm*, had meant working for sixteen and sometimes eighteen hours a day for weeks now. He couldn’t continue as an effective leader and officer if he didn’t take every opportunity to grab a little shut-eye.

And yet, something inside him didn’t want his crew to know. As if having the same biological requirements as other humans was admitting weakness.

“Sir, we are nearing rendezvous with the *Heart of the Tempest*,” came the reply. Lieutenant Trina Pilau, his navigation officer. “You asked me to —”

“Yes, yes, quite right. I’m on my way,” Santiago said as he rolled out of his couch and waved on the lights.

His quarters were also his office, and the red folder containing his orders from the admiralty was still sitting on his desk. He’d been reviewing them for the fiftieth time or so when he’d fallen asleep. Leaving them out was a breach of operational security, and one he’d have reprimanded a junior officer for. As he returned them to his safe, he told the ship to make a note of the lapse in his private log. At least it would be part of the permanent record, and his superiors could decide later if it required further inquiry. He hoped they wouldn’t.

He took a moment to wash his face in his private lavatory. The cold, biting water was one of the perks of his station. He put on a fresh uniform. A captain set the standard for his officers. Appearing on duty clean and pressed was the minimum level of professionalism he expected from them, and so he was responsible for it in himself. When he was presentable, he

opened the door that separated his private space from the bridge of the ship.

“Captain on the bridge!” the chief of the watch snapped. The officers who were not actively manning stations stood and saluted. Even the consoles, polished to a spotless shine, seemed to radiate respect, if not for him as a man then at least for his authority. The blue of the wall matched the flag, and the sigil of his command—three interlocking triangles—had been built into the surface. It made him feel a deep, almost atavistic pride seeing it. His ship. His command. His duty.

“Is Colonel Tanaka here?” Singh asked.

“The colonel is in her briefing room with her senior officers, sir.”

A twitch of annoyance troubled him, as much with himself as with his chief of security. He’d meant to have a quiet conversation with her before meeting with Admiral Trejo. He’d heard unofficially that Tanaka and Trejo had known each other before, and he’d intended to get her assessment of the man. But it was too late for that now.

“The con is yours,” said Davenport, his executive officer.

“I have the con,” Captain Singh said, and sat in his chair.

“The *Tempest* has cut thrust and is awaiting our arrival,” his flight control officer said, pulling up the range map on the main screen. “At current deceleration we’ll make final docking approach in twenty-three minutes.”

“Understood,” Singh replied. “Comm, please send Admiral Trejo my compliments and request permission to dock with *Heart of the Tempest*.”

“Aye, sir.”

“I’d love to get a good look at her,” said Davenport.

“All right, let’s take a peek,” Singh agreed with a nod.

The truth was, he was just as curious. Of course they’d all been briefed on the configuration of the *Magnetar*-class battle cruisers, of which *Tempest* was the first. The old *Proteus* class had been retired, and this new generation was only now being deployed. He’d seen dozens of concept sketches and photographs of the ships under construction, heard rumors of the new technologies that they would support. This would be his first chance to see one of Laconia’s most powerful battleships flying free and in her element. “Sensors, let’s take a close-up look, shall we?”

“Aye, sir,” said the officer at sensor control, and the main screen shifted from the docking map to a telescopic view of the approaching ship.

Someone let out a quiet gasp. Even Davenport, an officer with nearly a

decade in the fleet, took an unconscious half step back.

“Good God, she’s a big one,” he said.

The *Heart of the Tempest* was one of only three *Magnetar*-class ships to come out of Laconia’s orbital construction platform. The *Eye of the Typhoon* was assigned to the home fleet and the protection of Laconia itself. The *Voice of the Whirlwind* was still being grown between the spars and limbs of the alien orbital arrays. And while the fleet now consisted of over a hundred ships, the *Magnetars* were the largest and most powerful by far. The *Gathering Storm*, his own ship, was one of the *Pulsar*-class fast destroyers, and he was fairly certain the *Tempest* could fit a dozen of them inside its hull.

The *Pulsar*-class destroyers were tall and sleek in design. To Singh’s eye they were almost reminiscent of old Earth naval ships. But the *Heart of the Tempest* was massive and squat. Shaped like a lone vertebra from some long-dead giant the size of a planet. It was as pale as bone too, even where the curves fell into shadow.

Like all ships built by Laconia’s orbiting construction platforms, it had the sense of something not quite human. The sensor arrays and point-defense cannons and rail guns and missile tubes were all there, but hidden under a self-healing plate system that made the surface of the ship seem more like skin than not. Grown, but not biological. There was something fractal about its geometry. Like crystals showing the constraints of their molecular architecture in the unfolding of shapes at higher levels.

Singh wasn’t an expert in the protomolecule or the technologies that it spawned, but there was something eerie in the idea that they’d built things partly designed by a species that had been gone for millennia. Collaboration with the dead left questions that could never be answered. Why did the construction array make the choices it made? Why place the drive here instead of there, why make the internal systems symmetric and the exterior of the ship slightly off? Was it a more efficient design? More aesthetically pleasing to its long-vanished masters? He had no way of being certain, and probably never would.

“*Tempest* acknowledges,” the comm officer said.

“Remote piloting for dock now,” his helm added, and the main screen shifted from telescopic shots of the battleship to a wire frame course ending at the *Tempest*.

“Very well,” Singh said with a smile. The admiralty had entrusted him

with one of Laconia's state-of-the-art ships, and they'd filled it with serious and focused officers and crew. As a first command, he couldn't have asked for better.

That he and his ship were the tip of the imperial spear was just icing on the cake.

"Admiral Trejo sends his compliments," the comm officer said. "He asks that you join him for dinner in his private mess."

Singh turned to his XO. "Stay on the *Storm* and keep the crew alert. We have no idea what reception we're getting on the other side of the gate, and may need to deploy at a moment's notice."

"Aye, Captain."

"Rig for docking. I'll be in the bow-crew airlock. Mister Davenport, you have the con."



The *Tempest's* operations officer, Admiral Trejo's third in command, was waiting for him on the other side of the airlock. Technically they were the same naval rank, but as a ship's captain, tradition dictated that Singh be treated as the superior officer. She saluted and granted him permission to board.

"The admiral would have greeted you personally," she said as she led him out of the airlock and they floated down a short corridor to a lift. The walls in the *Tempest* looked like sheets of frosted glass, and glowed with a gentle blue light. Very different from the bulkheads of the *Gathering Storm*. "But this close to the gate he doesn't like to leave the bridge."

"Fisher, right? I think you were a year behind me at the academy."

"I was," she replied with a nod. "Engineering track. Everyone said logistics was the faster path to command, but I just love working with exotic tech."

She stopped and tapped on the wall panel to call a lift. While they waited, the bulkheads began to pulse from blue to yellow.

"Grab a handhold," Fisher said, pointing to one close by. "Drive is about to come online."

A moment later they both drifted to the deck, and Singh felt his weight grow until it was about half a g.

“Not in a hurry,” Singh said, and the elevator made a gentle beep and the doors opened.

“The admiral’s a cautious man.”

“Speaks well of him,” he said as they began to rise.

Admiral Trejo was a short, stocky man, with bright-green eyes and thinning black hair. He came from the Mariner Valley region of Mars, but the traces of his accent were almost imperceptible. He was also the most decorated officer in Laconia’s military, with a career that stretched back to pirate hunting for the Martian Navy even before the gates opened. They studied his tactics in the academy, and Singh thought the term *military genius* was justifiably applied to his career.

He’d expected the private mess of an admiral and fleet commander to be larger, more luxurious than the one he claimed on the *Gathering Storm*. It turned out to be a table that pulled down from one bulkhead in Admiral Trejo’s slightly larger office/living quarters. The aesthetics were different only because the ship itself was.

“Sonny!” Trejo said, waiting to return his salute and then grabbing his hand and shaking it vigorously. “Finally all the pieces are in place. It’s an exciting time. Would you like to sit, or do you want the tour?”

“Admiral,” Singh replied. “If there’s a tour to be had, I’d be honored to see a little more of the ship.”

“She’s a sight, isn’t she? Call me Anton, please. No need for formality in private, and we’ll be working very closely together in the coming months. I want you to feel like you have complete freedom to speak your mind. An officer who won’t share his opinion and insight is of no use to me.”

It was an echo of the high consul allowing him to use his military title, the permission of a little familiarity in private to build a sense of approachability and rapport. Now that he’d seen it twice, he understood it would be expected of him as well.

“Thank you, sir. Anton. I appreciate that.”

“Come on along, then. It’s too large to take in all at once, but we can hit the highlights.” Admiral Trejo led the way down a short corridor to a lift that stood wider than the one on the *Gathering Storm*, with rounder edges that left Singh thinking of the mouth of some deep-sea fish. “I’ve been re-familiarizing myself with your career to date.”

“I’m afraid that, like most of the officers trained after the transition to Laconia, I have very little in the way of operational experience.”

The admiral waved this away. The lift door opened, and they stepped in. The anti-spalling padding on the walls was gently scalloped, like the presentiment of scales.

“Top of your class in logistics. That’s exactly what this posting will need. Me? I’m an old combat commander. Spreadsheets give me hives.”

The lift descended with a hushing sound like a million tiny bearings spinning at once, or the hiss of a sunbird. The small hairs on the back of Singh’s neck rose a little. There was something uncanny about the *Tempest*. Like he’d entered into a vast animal and was waiting to see its teeth.

“Yes, sir,” he said. “My orders were quite specific on—”

The admiral waved him off again. “Forget your orders for a moment. Plenty of time to get to that later. For now, I want to get to know you a little better. You have a family?”

Another point. Duarte had touched on his home life as well. Another piece of the secret teachings of Laconian command. He’d read that a command structure took its tone from those at the top. He’d never seen it so clearly in practice before. He wondered whether he’d been meant to. If this was a conscious lesson passed from Duarte to Trejo to him. He had the sense that it was.

“Yes, sir. My spouse is a nanotech scientist with the lab in Laconia City. She specializes in genetics. We have one child. Elsa.”

“Elsa. Unusual name. Very pretty.”

“My grandmother’s. Nat— Natalia, my spouse, insisted.”

The lift stopped. The doors opened on a wide and flowing deck. There were no stairs, but a gentle undulation in the deck raised some workstations above others. It seemed almost random until he saw the captain’s station that could command direct line of sight to all the flight-deck crew at once. The design was elegant and utterly unfamiliar at the same time.

The XO caught sight of them and stood at attention, surrendering command, but Trejo waved him back. The admiral was present, but not to take command.

“Connection to the past is important,” Trejo said as they walked across the gently sloping deck. “Continuity. We honor those who came before, and hope that those we bring into the world do the same for us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Anton, please.”

“Anton,” Singh agreed, but knew calling the admiral by his first name

would never feel natural or correct. “We almost never call her Elsa.”

“So what, if not Elsa?” the admiral asked.

“Monster. We call her Monster.”

The admiral chuckled. “Named for another grandparent?”

“No,” Singh said, then stopped. He worried that he might be oversharing, but the admiral was staring at him, waiting for the rest of the answer. “We were not really ready when Nat got pregnant. She was just finishing her postdoc, and I was doing two- and three-month patrol tours as the XO on the *Cleo*.”

“No one is ever ready,” the admiral said. “But you don’t know that until after it’s happened.”

“Yes. So when Elsa was born, I’d just rotated back to an administrative position, and Nat had moved to a more permanent research job, and we were both learning the ropes while a very insistent one-month-old made her demands.”

Trejo led the way down a curving ramp at the side of the room. Hatches irised open as they approached them and closed again once they’d passed. The light came from thumb-sized recesses in the wall, perfectly regular in their spacing, but rounded and soft. Organic life subjected to military engineering.

“So,” Singh continued as they walked, “we were exhausted. And one morning, at about three when Elsa started crying, Nat rolled over to me and said, ‘That monster is going to kill me.’ And that was it. She was Monster from then on.”

“But you say it with a smile now, yes?”

“Yes,” Singh agreed, thinking of his daughter’s face. “Yes, we do. And that’s why I’m here.”

“Why you’re here, hm? You don’t seem like the type of man who’d choose to go without his family.”

“It will hurt to leave them behind for this deployment. It will be months, at least, before they can join me on Medina Station. Possibly years. But if I can give my daughter the version of humanity that the high consul has planned, it will all be worth it. A galactic society of peace and prosperity and cooperation is the best legacy I can imagine for her.”

“A true believer,” the admiral said, and Singh felt a flush of shame that perhaps he appeared naïve to the man. But when Trejo continued, there was nothing mocking in his tone. “This will only work because of the true

believers.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. And then, “Anton.”

The admiral led the way into a broad corridor, larger than anything he’d ever seen designed in a ship. The *Tempest* didn’t have the closeness of other ships, the design constrained by the need to cut back every kilogram, to waste no space at all. It was a ship that claimed power by the shape of its walls. Singh felt a little awe at it. As he supposed he was meant to.

Two midshipmen sat at a table, laughing and flirting until they saw Trejo. The old man scowled, and the pair saluted and scurried off to their duties. Singh realized that no one had spoken to them in the time since they’d left the admiral’s cabin. The tour might seem casual, but it was intended to be private as well.

In the same tone of voice one might use to ask what the time was, the admiral said, “Explain to me the tactical and logistical problems with controlling Medina.”

Singh stood a little straighter. Comfortable discussions of family were over. Now it was time to work. He pushed his sleeve back a bit to pull the monitor off his wrist, and flattened it onto the abandoned table. He pulled up the briefing. He’d been preparing it for weeks, and the sudden, irrational fear that he’d overlooked something obvious, something that would show the admiral that he wasn’t a serious person after all, still lurked in him. It was an old, familiar kind of fear, and he knew how to push it aside. A wire frame rendering of Medina floated in the air above the surface.

“Medina Station,” Singh said. “Assuming our intelligence is correct, it houses the hundreds of members of the planetary coalition and their personal staffs, including security. Add in the permanent staff and crew of the station, as well as trade union members passing through, and you get a conservative estimate of between three and five thousand people on the station at all times. I would guess the number is actually double that.”

“Assuming our intelligence is correct?”

“Passive monitoring, even over the course of years, will always have a greater opportunity for error than active examination. And the surface interference of the gates adds an additional level of error,” Singh said. The admiral grunted and waved him to continue. He spun the rendering of the station, and hard points on the surface became highlighted in red.

“The station itself is equipped with some defenses. A PDC network that provides missile defense brackets the station, and one torpedo launcher

remains intact and usable from its *Behemoth* days. Eight rails, automated reloading system, we estimate a total capacity of forty missiles.”

“Nuclear?” the admiral asked.

“Almost certainly not. The lack of maneuvering capability and the confined nature of the ring hub makes high-yield weapons dangerous to the station itself.”

Singh adjusted the image and focused in on the hub station, a perfect sphere several kilometers across that sat at the center of the gate network. The purest and most active alien artifact in all the worlds they knew of. Dotted on the surface of the sphere were six massive rail-gun turrets.

“The station’s primary defense is an aging rail-gun network, first installed by Marco Inaros’ people, and disabled during the final conflict with his faction. These guns are placed so that at least three guns and as many as five can fire at any of the rings. They’re our design, from back when we were still supplying the Free Navy with weapons. Older, out of date now, but capable of sustained fire at thirty rounds per minute. Assuming, of course, that they haven’t made modifications to them.”

“The rail guns. In the ancient days back on Earth, they’d have cannons that could fire down into the harbors when enemy ships appeared. The defense of the sea from the land. We got rid of the land and the sea, but the logic of it stays the same. The more things change, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What do you think of them?” Trejo asked.

“The design is elegant. Placing the defense battery on the alien station is brilliant,” Singh said. He felt anxiety growing in his throat. Was this the answer Trejo was looking for? “Anyplace else, and the rail guns would have to compensate with thrusters. The station doesn’t move. Or maybe it moves and drags its entire local context with it. Either way, it avoids having to worry about Newton’s third law. And as long as it has ammunition, it can hold off attacks from any of the rings, or even several at once. Honestly, I’m going to be sorry to see it go.”

Trejo sighed. “Rebuilding them won’t be quick, that’s true. But we have to look at the long term. Even if a replacement battery takes months to install and test, it will last centuries. I wish we could take control of them ourselves. But that’s the *Tempest*’s first target, while you disable the station’s defenses. Then board and secure the station,” the admiral said.

“Yes, sir. Logistically, once the station’s defenses are secured and the

rail-gun network is taken offline, the *Gathering Storm's* Marines, which we've designated Task Force Rhino, can take operational control of the station within minutes. When we control their comm array and access to the hub space, we effectively control all communications and trade for the thirteen hundred worlds."

"You'll have operational control of the landing and securing Medina Station. Is the task force prepared?"

"Yes, Admiral. They've been drilling for this assignment for months, and my security chief is Colonel Tanaka. She is well respected."

"Tanaka's good. And good personnel are critical," Trejo said. "What obstacles do you anticipate?"

"The ship traffic coming into and out from the hub space is unpredictable. It's very likely that there will be one or more additional ships with some defensive capability beyond the use of drive plumes as weapons. How many and what their armaments are can't be stated with certainty until we pass through the gate. Also, Medina Station has been in operation for decades, and with a mission significantly different from her original design. The information we have about the initial configuration will be badly out of date. When we take control, there is the possibility of some local resistance, though that should be minimal. After that, it's a question of co-opting and improving the existing infrastructure, and coordinating the supply chains between the newer planets and the better established ones. Sol system included."

"And then you fly a desk for a while," the admiral said. "I'd have to think that's the toughest part of your assignment. Getting thirteen hundred squabbling children to cooperate."

"High Consul Duarte wrote the book on governmental trade-control theories, back when he was with the Martian Navy. It's still the book we study at the academy. I'm prepared to enforce the new orders absolutely to the letter."

"I'm sure you are. Duarte has an eye for talent, and he selected you personally," the admiral said, then pointed at the briefing diagrams floating in the air between them. "And you certainly seem to have done your homework."

"Yes, sir," Singh said, then cleared his throat. "If I may speak freely, sir?"

"I think I already made my feelings on that clear."

“Yes, sir,” Singh said, but the anxiety still tugged at him. “I’m absolutely certain of this portion of our plan. My worry is the Sol system. Intelligence says that the Earth-Mars Coalition has been steadily refitting and rebuilding their fleet. And that it is at least at the prewar levels of preparedness. When external resistance to our plan comes, it will come from them. And while we have newer ships, they have the benefit of an officer corps that fought in two serious wars in the last few decades. They will have vastly more battlefield experience to draw on.”

The admiral paused, considering him. The bright-green eyes seemed to dig under his skin. Singh couldn’t tell if the man was pleased or disappointed. When he smiled, it seemed genuine.

“Experience and home territory are real advantages for them, you’re right. But I think you shouldn’t worry about it overmuch,” the admiral said. “The *Tempest* was built for one purpose, and one purpose only. To render every other power in the known galaxy irrelevant.”

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Chapter Nine: Bobbie

They sat in the galley, the same way they always did. Amos and Clarissa beside each other, Alex at the end of a table across from her. Holden a little apart, and Naomi closer to him than to the others. Bobbie felt the anxiety humming in her throat and legs like she was about to get in a fight. Worse, because there was a moment of calm that came with violence, and there wasn't going to be one of those here.

The dinner was—had been—mushroom noodles in black sauce. But everyone had stopped eating when Holden cleared his throat and said he had an announcement. When he'd broken the news, he'd seemed rueful more than anything else, and he covered it up by talking about numbers and business. Going over their last few years, and the projections for the next few. His decision to step down, and Naomi's too. His nomination of Bobbie to take his place and all his arguments for it. The others listened in silence while he turned to the details of the sale. The noodles had all gone cold and sticky in their bowls.

"Naomi and I are cashing out a quarter of our shares in the ship," he said, "with a payment plan that pays out the remainder over the next ten years. That still leaves a pretty fair balance in the operating account. The payment plan has a sliding structure, so if things get a little tight at some point, we're not going to sink you, and if things go really well, you can also pay us out early. So there's flexibility built in."

He thought he was being kind. That by making things formal, it would hurt the others less. Maybe he was right. Bobbie kept glancing around the room, trying to get a sense of how they were taking it. Was Alex leaning forward on his elbows because he was feeling aggressive, or did his back just ache a little? Did Amos' affable smile mean anything? Did it ever? Would they agree to the idea? If they didn't, what happened then? The anxiety in her gut stung like a scrape.

"So," Holden said. "That's the proposal at least. I know we've always

voted on these kinds of decisions, and if there's anything in this that anyone wants to look at or a counterproposal that anyone wants to make ..."

The silence rang out louder than a bell. Bobbie clenched her fists and released them. Clenched and released. Maybe this whole thing had been a really bad idea from the start. Maybe she should have—

Alex sighed. "Well. Can't say I didn't see it coming, but I'm still a little sad now it's here."

Naomi's smile was a ghost, barely there and unmistakable. Bobbie felt something like the beginning of relief loosening the knot in her stomach.

"As far as putting Bobbie in the captain's chair," Alex went on, "that's barely going to be a change. She already bosses me around plenty. So sure. I'm good with that."

Holden tilted his head the way he did when he was surprised and a little embarrassed, and Naomi put her hand on his shoulder. The unconscious physical grammar of long, intimate years together.

"You saw it coming?" Holden said.

Alex shrugged. "It's not like you're all that subtle. You've been getting more and more stressed for a while now."

"Have I been an asshole and just didn't know?" Holden asked, making it about half a joke.

"We'd have told you," Amos said. "But there's this thing for the last couple years, I guess, where you kept looking like you had an itch you didn't want anybody seeing you scratch."

"This has been a long damned tour," Alex said. "If I'd re-upped for another twenty back in the day, I'd be out again by now."

"Except your navy didn't last that long," Amos said.

"I'm just saying a good run's a good run. I love you two, and I'm going to miss the hell out of you, but if it's time for something new, then it is."

Naomi's smile grew less ambiguous. Holden rocked back a few centimeters on the bench. In her imagination, Bobbie's best scenarios had involved weeping and hugs. The worst, anger and recriminations. This felt like relief only slightly colored by sorrow. It felt ... right.

She cleared her throat. "When we get back to Medina, I'm looking to put out a call for some new hands. So, no rush, but I'm going to need to know if I'm filling more than two couches."

Alex chuckled. "Not mine. The one thing I think my life experience has been unambiguous about is whether I'm good outside a pilot's station. I'm

here as long as you'll have me."

Bobbie relaxed another notch. "Good." She shifted toward Amos.

He shrugged. "All my stuff's here."

"All right. Clarissa?" Claire was looking down. Her face empty and paler than usual. She put her hands on the table, palms down like she was pressing it back into place. Like there was something that could be put back. Her smile was forced, but she nodded. She would stay.

"Well," Holden said. "Um. All right, then. That's ... I mean, I guess that's it. Unless someone else has something they wanted to bring up?"

"Kind of a hard act to follow," Naomi said.

"Well, yes," Holden said, "but I mean—"

"How about this," Alex said, standing up. "I'm going back to my cabin and getting the Scotch I've been saving for a special occasion. Let's all have a toast to Holden and Nagata. Best damn command staff a ship could hope for."

Holden's expression shifted and his eyes took on a shine of tears, but he was grinning. "I won't say no," he said, then stood.

Alex went in for the hug, and then Naomi put her long arms around them both. Bobbie looked over at Amos and pointed a thumb at the knot of three. *Is this a thing we should do?* Amos rose and trundled over to them, and Bobbie followed. For a long time, the crew of the *Rocinante* stood locked together in a long, last embrace. After a few seconds, Bobbie even felt Clarissa against her side, pressing in as soft and fleeting as a moth.

Officially, nothing changed after that. The long float before the deceleration burn toward the gate and Medina Station beyond it went the way they'd planned it. Houston, in his cell, was sullen and uncomfortable but secured. Their duties and schedules, habits and customs, all had the same shape. The only thing that had altered at all was what they meant. This had become their last run together. Bobbie felt like something in her body had shifted.

James Holden had been a strange person from the start. Before she'd ever known him, he'd been the man who'd slandered Mars. Then the one who saved it. To judge from what the greater chunk of humanity thought of him, he was an opportunistic narcissist or a hero of free speech, a tool of the OPA or the UN or a loose cannon answerable to no one. She'd seen him that way too, more than she'd known, when she took her place on the *Rocinante*. Since then, day by day, sometimes even hour by hour, the man

and his reputation had peeled away from each other. Captain James Holden of the *Rocinante* was a name to conjure with. The Holden she knew was a guy who drank too much coffee, got enthusiastic about weird things, and always seemed quietly worried that he would compromise his own idiosyncratic and unpredictable morality. The two versions of him were related the way a body and its shadow were. Connected, yes. Each inextricably related to the other, yes. But not the same thing.

And now he was moving on. And Naomi with him. Losing her was a strange thought too, but different. Naomi had fought against being a persona in the greater world, always letting her lover take the stage so that she wouldn't have to. When she stepped away, it wouldn't change the story that other people told about the *Rocinante* the same way, but Bobbie was going to feel her loss more. As much as Holden was the public face of the ship, Naomi was the person Bobbie had come to trust in their practical, day-to-day lives. Whatever Naomi said was true. And if that wasn't strictly accurate, it was close enough that Bobbie and the others relied on it with confidence.

When they were gone, nothing would be the same. Bobbie felt the sorrow in that. But, to her surprise, the joy too. She found herself going through her rounds, moving through the ship to check everything that had already been checked, marking anything that looked off—a gas pressure level that was dropping a fraction too quickly, a doorway that showed wear, a power link that was past its replacement date—and the ship itself had changed too. It was hers now. When she put her palm on the bulkhead and felt the thrum of the recyclers, it was her ship. When she woke strapped into her crash couch, even the darkness felt different.

She'd been a Marine—she would always be a Marine, even after that role didn't fit her anymore. Becoming the captain of the *Rocinante* felt right for her in a way she hadn't expected. The prospect of taking the captain's chair had the same sense of threat and anticipation that pulling on her power armor had back in the day. It was as if her old suit had changed with time—changed as much as she had—and become a ship. A worn one, yes. Out of date, but dangerous. Scarred, but solid. Not just a metaphor of who Bobbie was but also who she wanted to become.

She believed the others—Alex, Amos, Clarissa—were as comfortable with the shift as they claimed. And before, she'd have left it at that. Before it was her ship.

Now that she was going to be captain, it was her job to check.

Amos was in the machine shop, as he usually was, paging through feeds on the strategies for keeping an old gunship like theirs flying and safe. A stubble of white along the back of his skull caught the light where he hadn't shaved it in a couple of days. They were on the float, conserving reaction mass, but he was braced against the deck like he was anticipating a sudden change. Maybe he was, even if only out of habit. His thick, scarred hands tapped at the monitor, moving from subject to subject in the feed's tree—lace-plating structural repair, overgrowth in microflora-based air recyclers, auto-adapting power grids. All the thousand improvements that study of the alien technologies had spun off. He understood them all. It was easy to forget sometimes the depth of focus and intelligence behind Amos' cheerful violence.

"Hey, big man," Bobbie said, pulling herself to a stop with one of the handholds.

"Hey, Cap'n Babs," he said.

"How's it going?"

He looked over at her. "Well, I'm a little nervous about the plating we put down by the drive at that depot back on Stoddard. Lot of folks are seeing flaking with that batch under radiation bombardment. Figure when we hit Medina, I should hop outside and take a peek. Hate to have that turn into baklava on us when we were counting on it."

"That would suck," Bobbie agreed.

"Lace plating's great when it's great," Amos said, turning back to his screen.

"How's the rest of it?" Bobbie asked.

Amos shrugged, flicked through the feed. "Is what it is, I figure."

The silence settled between them. Bobbie scratched her neck, the soft sound of nails against skin louder than anything else in the room. She didn't know how to ask if he was going to be okay with Holden and Naomi leaving him behind.

"Are you going to be okay with Holden and Naomi leaving?"

"Yup," Amos said. "Why? You worried about it?"

"A little," Bobbie said, surprised to discover that it was true. "I mean, I know you saw it coming before Holden did. I think all of us did. But you've shipped with them for a lot of years."

"Yeah, but my favorite thing about Holden was knowing he'd take a

bullet for any one of the crew. Pretty sure you actually *have* taken a few for us, so that ain't changing," Amos said, then paused for a moment. "You might should check in with Peaches, though."

"You think?"

"Yup," Amos said. And that was that. Bobbie pulled herself back out.

Clarissa was in the medical bay, strapped into one of the autodocs. Tubes ran from the gently purring machinery into the port on the woman's side, blood flowing out of the thin body and then being pumped back in. Her skin was the color of a wax candle and stretched tight against her cheekbones. She still smiled and raised a hand in greeting when Bobbie floated in. As a technician, Clarissa Mao had always been one of the best Bobbie had worked with. She had the sense that the thin woman's drive came out of a kind of anger and desperation. Working to keep some greater darkness at bay. It was an impulse Bobbie understood.

"Rough patch?" Bobbie asked, nodding toward the blood-filled tubes.

"Not a great one," Clarissa said. "I'll be back on my feet tomorrow, though. Promise."

"No rush," Bobbie said. "We're doing fine."

"I know. It's just ..."

Bobbie cracked her knuckles. The autodoc chimed to itself and took another long draw of Clarissa's blood.

"You wanted something?" she said, looking into Bobbie's eyes. "It's okay. You can say it."

"I'm not your captain yet," Bobbie said. "But I'm going to be." It was the first time she'd said the words out loud. They felt good enough that she said them again. "I'm going to be. And that's going to put me in a position where I'm responsible for you. For your well-being."

She hadn't thought about her team in years. Her old team. Hillman. Gourab. Travis. Sa'id. Her last command before this. For a moment, they were in the room, invisible and voiceless, but as present as Clarissa. Bobbie swallowed and bit back a smile. This was it. This was what she'd been trying to find her way back to all these years. This was why it mattered that she do it right this time.

"And if I'm responsible for your well-being," she said, "we need to talk."

"All right."

"This thing with your old implants. That's going to get worse instead of

better,” Bobbie said.

“I know,” Clarissa said. “I’d take the implants out if it wouldn’t kill me faster.” She smiled, inviting Bobbie to smile with her. Making the truth into something like a joke.

“When we get to Medina, I’m going to hire on fresh crew,” Bobbie said. “Not co-owners in the ship the way we are. Just paid hands. Part of that is Holden and Naomi leaving.”

“But you can also hire someone for my place,” Clarissa said. Tears welled up, sheeting across her eyes as she nodded. The autodoc chimed again, pushing her purified blood back down into her.

“If you want to stay on Medina, you can,” Bobbie said. “If you want to stay with the ship, you’re welcome here.”

On the float, Clarissa’s tears didn’t fall. Surface tension held them to her until she shook her head, and then they’d form a dozen scattered balls of saline that in time would get sucked into the recycler and leave the air smelling a little more of sorrow and the sea.

“I ...” Clarissa began, then shook her head and shrugged helplessly. “I thought *I’d* be the first one to leave.”

She sobbed once, and Bobbie pushed over to her. Took her hand. Clarissa’s fingers were thin, but her grip was stronger than Bobbie expected. They stayed there together until Clarissa’s breath grew less ragged. Clarissa brought her other hand over and rested it on Bobbie’s arm. There was some color in her cheeks again, but Bobbie didn’t know if it was the flush of emotion or the medical systems doing their job. Maybe both.

“I understand,” Bobbie said. “It’s hard losing someone.”

“Yeah,” Clarissa said. “And ... I don’t know. Something about it seems less dignified when it’s Holden. You know what I mean? Of all the people to get choked up over.”

“No,” Bobbie said. “You don’t need to make light of it.”

Clarissa opened her mouth, closed it again. Nodded. “I’ll miss him, is all.”

“I know. I will too. And ... look, if you don’t want to talk about it now, I can just check your file for your medical plan and end-of-life choices. Whatever you and Holden worked out, I’m going to honor it.”

Clarissa’s pale, thin brows knotted. “Holden? I didn’t work out anything with Holden.”

Bobbie felt a little tug of surprise. “No?”

“We don’t talk about things like that,” Clarissa said. “I talked to Amos. He knows I want to stay here. With him. If things ever get too bad, he promised he’d ... make it easier for me. When the time comes.”

“Okay,” Bobbie said. “That’s good to know.” *And important*, she thought to herself, *to fully document so that if it happens in someone else’s jurisdiction no one gets arrested for murder. How the hell could Holden not have done that?* “You’re sure Holden never talked about this with you?”

Clarissa shook her head. The autodoc finished its run. The tubes detached from the port in Clarissa’s skin and slid back into the body of the ship like overly polite snakes.

“Okay, then,” Bobbie said. “I know now. I’ll make sure you’re taken care of. And Amos too.”

“Thank you. And I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

“I’ve been a little self-pitying about Naomi and Holden,” Clarissa said. “I didn’t mean to make it anyone else’s problem. I’ll get back to duty.”

“Everyone gets to mourn how they need to,” Bobbie said. “And *then* everyone needs to get their asses back to work.”

“Yes, sir,” Clarissa said with a sharp if ironic salute. “I’m glad we had this talk.”

“I am too,” Bobbie said as she pulled herself to the door. *And I’m amazed that Holden never did.* For the first time, Bobbie had the sense that there were some ways—not all, but some—in which she was going to be a much better captain than he’d been.

Chapter Ten: Drummer

Okay,” Drummer said, it felt like for the thousandth time, “but are these things naturally occurring or not?”

Cameron Tur, the union’s science advisor, was an impressively tall, gangly man with an Adam’s apple the size of a thumb and faded tattoos on each of his knuckles. He’d come into the service when Tjon was president of the union, and kept the job through Walker and Sanjrani. As old as he was and as much as he’d seen, she had expected him to have an air of condescension, but he’d only ever come across as a little ill at ease. His chuckle now was apologetic.

“That’s a good question, semantically speaking,” he said. “The difference between something made by nature and something made by beings that evolved up *within* nature, sa sa?”

“Difficult,” Emily Santos-Baca agreed. She was the representative of the policy council for the union’s board. Officially, she didn’t have a higher rank than any of the other councilors, but she got along with Drummer better than any of the others. It made her a sort of first-among-equals. She was younger than Drummer by exactly two years. They even had the same birthday. It made Drummer like the woman just a little bit, even when she was being a pain in the ass.

Drummer looked at the images again. The whatever-it-was was little longer than two hand-widths together, curved like a claw or a seedpod, and shining green and gray in the sunlight outside Gallish Complex on Fusang. She started the image playback, and the young man sprang into life, slotting one—claw, pod, whatever the hell it was—into another with an audible click to create an empty space roughly the shape of an almond. Light flickered into the space, shifting shapes that danced on the edge of meaning. The young man grinned into the camera and said the same things he had every time she’d watched him. *Watching the light is associated with feelings of great peace and connection with all forms of life in the galaxy,*

and appears to stimulate blah blah fucking blah. She stopped it again.

“Millions of them?” she asked.

“So far,” Tur agreed. “Once the mine goes deeper, they may find more.”

“Fuck.”

The colony worlds had begun simply enough. A few households, a few townships, a desperate scrabble against the local biosphere to make clean water and edible food. Sometimes colonies would falter and die before help could arrive. Sometimes they’d give up and evacuate. But more than a few took root on the rocks and unfamiliar soil of the distant planets. And as they found their niches, as they became stable, the first wave of deep exploration had begun. The massive underwater transport arches on Corazón Sagrado, the light-bending moths on Persephone, the programmable antibiotics from Ilus.

Evolution alone had created all the wonders and complexities of Earth. That same thing thirteen hundred times over would have been challenge enough, but added to that were the artifacts of the dead species of whatever the hell they’d been that had designed the protomolecule gates, the slow zone, the massive and eternal cities that seemed to exist somewhere on every world they’d discovered. Artifacts of alien toolmakers that had been able and willing to hijack all life on Earth just to make one more road between the stars.

Any of it could be the key to unimagined miracles. Or catastrophe. Or placebo-euphoric snake-oil light-show bullshit. The images from the seedpods could be the encrypted records of the fallen civilization that had built miracles they were still only beginning to understand. Or they could be the spores of whatever had killed them. Or they could be lava lamps. Who fucking knew?

“The science stations on Kinley are very anxious to get a shipment for study,” Santos-Baca said. “But without knowing whether these are technological artifacts or natural resources—”

“Which,” Tur apologized, “is difficult to determine with only the resources on Fusang—”

“I get it,” Drummer said and shifted to look at Santos-Baca. “Isn’t this kind of decision pretty much within *your* wheelhouse?”

“I have the votes to allow the contract,” Santos-Baca said, “but I don’t have enough to override a veto.”

Drummer nodded. The question wasn’t whether moving psychoactive

alien seedpods between worlds was a good idea so much as whether someone was going to lose face in front of a committee meeting. Thus were the great decisions of history made.

“If we don’t think they pose any immediate danger, ship them as alien artifacts with a third-level isolation protocol, and I’ll let it pass.”

“Thank you,” Santos-Baca said, rising from her seat. A moment later, Tur did the same.

“Stay with me for a minute, Emily,” Drummer said, shutting down the demonstration video from Fusang. “There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

Tur left, closing the door behind him, and Santos-Baca sank back into her seat. Her empty half scowl was a mask. Drummer tried a smile. It worked as well as anything else.

“One of the things I learned working for Fred Johnson back in the day?” Drummer said. “Don’t let things sit for too long. It’s always tempting to just ignore the things that aren’t actually on fire just at the moment, but then you’re also committing to spend your time putting out fires.”

“You’re talking about the tariff structure Earth and Mars are proposing for Ganymede?”

Drummer’s heart sank a little. She’d managed to forget about that nascent issue, and being reminded felt oppressive. “No, I mean the *Rocinante* problem. And how it relates to—” She jerked a thumb toward the empty monitor where the seedpod video had been. “We’ve just taken control of the governor of a colony planet. The Association of Worlds hasn’t formally asked about his status with us yet, but it’s just a matter of time. I can feel Carrie Fisk rubbing her stubby little fingers together. It would make me very happy to get out in front of this.”

“So,” Santos-Baca said. “Well, I have had some informal conversations about it. The idea of asking the UN for a charter is ... it’s a hard sell. We didn’t come all this way to go back down dirtside to ask permission for things, now did we?”

Drummer nodded. The enmity between the inners and the Belt was still the biggest obstacle Drummer faced. And even she didn’t have *much* use for the Earth-Mars Coalition.

“I understand that,” Drummer said. “I don’t like it either. But it gives us a level of deniability for things like James Holden’s new policing schemes. What I don’t want is thirteen hundred planets deciding that the union is the

problem. If the UN is behind a crackdown—even just nominally—it spreads out the responsibility. This Houston and his band of merry men can rot in a UN jail, and then we’re still just the ships that take things from one place to another. Prisoners, among other things.”

“Or,” Santos-Baca said, “we admit what we’ve been playing footsie with since we crawled up out of the starving years. We start treating the union like the government of the thirteen hundred worlds.”

“I don’t want to be president of thirteen hundred worlds,” Drummer said. “I want to run a transport union that regulates trade through the gates. And then I want all those planets and moons and satellites to work out their own issues without it gumming up our works. We’re already stretched too thin.”

“If we had more personnel—”

“Emily,” Drummer said, “do you know the one thing I am absolutely sure won’t fix any of our problems? Another committee.”

Santos-Baca laughed, and a soft chime came from Drummer’s desk. An alert from Vaughn. High priority. She let it ride for a little bit. If it wasn’t People’s Home about to break apart, another minute wasn’t going to hurt. If it was, it wouldn’t help.

“You’ve seen all the same logistical reports that I have,” Drummer said. “Expecting the union to police the whole—”

The chime came again, louder this time. Drummer growled and tapped the screen to accept. Vaughn appeared, and before she could snap at the man, he spoke.

“Laconia put out a message, ma’am.”

Drummer looked at him. “What?”

“The warning message from Laconia gate was taken down,” Vaughn said. “It’s been replaced by a new message. The report from Medina came in”—he looked away and then back to her—“four minutes ago.”

“Is it broadcast?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Vaughn said. “Audio only. Not encrypted either. This is a press release.”

“Let me hear it,” she said.

The voice, when it came, was low and warm. It reminded her of a scratchy blanket she’d had once, comforting and rough in equal measure. She didn’t trust it.

“Citizens of the human coalition, this is Admiral Trejo of the Laconian

Naval Command. We are opening our gate. In one hundred and twenty hours, we will pass into the slow zone in transit to Medina Station with a staff and support to address Laconia's role in the greater human community going forward. We hope and expect this meeting will be amicable. Message repeats."

"Well," Santos-Baca said, and then stopped. "Didn't see that coming."

"All right," Drummer said, and looked into Santos-Baca's wide eyes. "Emily, get me everyone."



The void city People's Home was still in Mars orbit, down close to Earth and the sun, and hell and gone from the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. It took ten hours to hear back from all the experts in the union hierarchy, and five more for the system to review everything and build a unified report. Every question, every clarification, every new nuance or caveat would take about as long. Drummer was going to be spending most of the hundred and twenty hours before Laconia reopened waiting to hear from people. Their messages were flying between planets and moons, void cities and stations at the speed of light in vacuum, and it was still too damned slow.

The voice on the message matched Anton Trejo, a lieutenant in the MCRN who had gone to Laconia with the breakaway fleet after the bombardment of Earth. Yes, it was possible that the voice was faked, but the technical service tended to accept it as genuine. Medina Station reported light and radiation spikes coming through Laconia gate consistent with ships approaching on a braking burn. How many ships and of what kind, there wasn't enough information to guess at.

Mars had lost almost a third of its ships when the Free Navy made its brief, doomed grab at power. Those had been divided between the Free Navy's forces in Sol system and the breakaway fleet going to Laconia. In the decades since, Earth and Mars had slowly rebuilt their navies. Technological breakthroughs based on reverse engineering alien artifacts—lace plating, feedback bottles, inertial-compensating PDC cannons—were standard now. Even if the ships on the other side of Laconia gate had been able to glean some details of how the manufacturing processes worked, they would have to build shipyards and manufacturing bases before they could

start using them. Thirty years without a refit was a long time.

The most likely scenario was that something in Duarte's private banana republic had finally gone wrong enough that he was being forced back into contact to threaten or beg or barter whatever he—or whoever was in power by this time—needed to prop things up.

The flag in the intelligence report speculating about the fate of the active protomolecule sample that the Free Navy had stolen from Tycho during the war tripped Drummer up a little when she read it. She remembered that day. Fighting in her own corridors, her own station. Even now, she remembered the cold rage that came from discovering betrayal in her ranks. And Fred Johnson's leadership in the face of it.

She still missed Fred. And, sitting in her crash couch with the intelligence reports waiting patiently on her monitor, she wondered what he would have made of all this. Not just Duarte and Laconia, but all of it.

Her monitor chimed and the orange temporary-priority flag appeared. A new report from Medina with the updated analysis of the drive signatures from the far side of Laconia gate. She blew out a breath and opened it. Certainty factors were still thin, but the drives were either unregistered or altered so much they no longer matched the database. She ran her finger over the accompanying text to keep her tired eyes from sliding off them. There had been at least one *Donnager*-class battleship in Duarte's stolen fleet. Given the size of the incoming plume, it was possible this was that ship. Older, yes. Worn down. But still a powerhouse.

She stood, stretched. Her back ached from between her shoulder blades up to the base of her skull. She'd been spending too much time reading reports that she should have given to Vaughn. Digesting information down to the critical pieces was part of his job, after all. Used to be, it had been hers too. She trusted herself more than she did him.

She located Emily Santos-Baca on the ship. It was late, but the younger woman hadn't left for her quarters either. The system put her in the administrative commissary. The idea of food woke her stomach, and a hunger she hadn't noticed rose up like a flame. Drummer sent a quick message asking her to wait there for a few minutes. She shut down her monitor, put it in security lock, and made her way out.

The hallways of People's Home still had a sense of newness about them. The foot- and hand-holds on the walls didn't have the wear of a lived-in ship or station. The lights all had a brightness, subtle but unmistakable, that

spoke of recent installation. Not enough time for anything to age or break. Their great floating city would develop all of that in time, but for now, it and the others like it were the bright, perfect Singapores of their age. The well-regulated city. Now, if she could just push that out as far as the stars, everything would be just ducky.

She found Santos-Baca sitting with an older man in a gray jumpsuit. He nodded to Drummer as she approached. When she sat down, he left. Santos-Baca smiled.

“You look like you could use some food.”

“It’s been a while since lunch. I’ll get to that in a minute. You saw the reports?”

“I’m not quite caught up. But yes.”

“Where’s the board on this?”

The younger woman settled into herself, thoughtful and closed as a poker player. When she spoke, her voice was careful. “It’s hard to get too worried about a fleet of out-of-date Martian warships commanded by the remnants of a decades-old coup. Frankly, I’m a little surprised to find out there’s anyone alive there.”

“Agreed.”

“The message isn’t coming up with any particular flag of high stress in the vocal patterns. Or any demands, at least not as yet.”

“I know, Emily. I read the reports. I’m asking what you think of them.”

Santos-Baca opened her hands, an old-school gesture that said, *It’s right here in front of you*. “I think we’re about to see a bunch of self-centered assholes who’ve realized that their glorious independence isn’t going to work out in isolation. If we can keep them from losing face, we can probably find a negotiated path to reintegration. But Mars is going to be a problem. They’re going to want all of them trotted back to Olympus Mons and hung as traitors.”

“That’s what I was thinking too. Any idea how to approach them about this?”

“I’ve been trading some messages with Admiral Hu. She’s Earth, but she has friends in Martian high command,” Santos-Baca said. “Nothing formal. And McCahill in security.”

“Of course.”

“The other possibility is that they’re going to try force.”

“With ships that haven’t resupplied or seen a shipyard in decades,”

Drummer said. “And with our rail-gun emplacements all warmed up and ready to poke holes in anyone that gets too rowdy. Are we thinking that’s a realistic possibility?”

“It’s not the odds-on bet. Even when their fleet was new, taking out the rail-gun emplacements would have been a mighty tall order.”

Drummer considered. “We can get a couple ships as backup, just in case. If it turns out Laconia needs its ass kicked, I’m not sending our ships through their gate. But it may make that charter an easier sell. Let Mars smell blood and vengeance and see if the EMC gets more interested in enforcement and policing than it was before?”

“It would be a very different case,” Santos-Baca agreed. It was good that they were on the same page with this. Drummer had half-feared that the board was going to come up with their own strategy. Her job was herding kittens. Only thankfully not this time. She was trying to avoid being a police force. She sure as hell didn’t want to command a full military. If there was going to be a war on the far side of Laconia gate, let Mars fight it.

“All right then,” Drummer said. “Nothing we can’t handle.”

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Chapter Eleven: Bobbie

When the *Roci* pulled into port at Medina, the security detail was there to take Houston into custody. Bobbie watched Holden as the prisoner marched away. She thought there'd been a melancholy look in Holden's eyes. The last thing he'd done as captain was hand over a man to live in a cell. Or she might have been reading more into the situation than was there. Drummer's threatened press release didn't appear.

After that, they'd all gone out to a club. Naomi rented a private room for all of them, and they'd eaten a dinner of vat-grown beef and fresh vegetables seasoned with mineral-rich salt and hot pepper. Bobbie tried not to get drunk or maudlin, but she was the only one. Except Amos. He'd watched all the hugging and weeping and protestations of love like a mom at a five-year-old's birthday party, indulgent and supportive, but not really engaged with it.

After they'd eaten, they went out to the floor of the club and danced and sang karaoke and drank a little more. And then Holden and Naomi left together, their arms around each other's hips, strolling out into Medina Station's corridors as if they were going to come back. Only they weren't.

The four of them made their way back to the port talking and laughing. Alex was reciting lines and acting out scenes from one of the neo-noir films he collected. She and Clarissa egged him on. Amos grinned and ambled along behind them, but she saw him watching the halls in case four old half-drunk space jockeys attracted any trouble. Not that there was a reason to expect it. It was just something he did. She noticed it in part because she did it too.

Back at the ship, the others scattered, floating to their rooms. Bobbie waited in the galley sipping a bulb of fresh coffee until they were gone. There was still one more thing she wanted to do before she called it a day, and it was something she wanted to do alone.

Around her, the *Rocinante* ticked as the residual heat of their journey

slowly radiated out into the absolute vacuum of the slow zone. The air recyclers hummed. A sense of peace descended over everything like she was a child again and this was the night after Christmas. She let her breath deepen and slow, feeling the ship around her like it was her skin. When she finished the last drop of coffee, she put the empty bulb into the recycler and drew herself down the corridor to Holden's cabin. The captain's cabin.

Hers.

Holden and Naomi had taken everything out already. The drawers were unlocked. The captain's safe was open and scrubbed, waiting for a new access code. The double-sized crash couch—the one Holden and Naomi had shared for so long—gleamed, clean and polished. The slightly acrid smell of fresh gel told her that Naomi had replaced it all before she went. Clean sheets for the new tenant. Bobbie let herself drift into the space, stretching out her arms and legs. Eyes closed, she listened to the peculiar quietness of this cabin, how it was like the one she'd been using these last years. How it was different. When she reached out to take a handhold, the wall was still a half a meter away. A double-sized crew cabin, created so Naomi and Holden could share the space, had become the privilege of being the *Rocinante*'s captain. She smiled at the thought.

The safe waited for her passcode. She fed it the prints from her thumb and two index fingers, then typed in the password she'd chosen and spoke it out loud for the system to learn. Sixteen digits long, committed to her memory, and not associated with anything outside itself. The safe closed with a solid clack, magnetic locks falling into place where it would take a welding torch and a lot of time to force. She pulled up her partition on the wall screen, checking to see that everything was in place. The drive was quiet, the reactor shut down, the environmental systems well within the green. Everything just the way it should be on her ship. It was going to take a while, she figured, before that thought didn't seem like she was playacting. Better that she got used to it, though. *Her ship*.

Four messages waited for her in the queue. The first two were automated messages, one confirming the docking agreement and fee structure for their present stay on Medina, the other showing the withdrawal from the group account of Holden and Naomi's lump cash-out. The *Rocinante* already sending her the things it used to route to Holden. The third was from Medina traffic control, but the fourth was from the man himself. James Holden. She opened that one first.

His face appeared on the screen, floating in the same room she was in now, back when it had been his. He was smiling, and she felt herself smiling back.

“Hey, Bobbie,” he said, and his voice seemed loud in the quiet. “I just wanted to leave this here for you as a note. I’ve spent a lot of time on the *Roci*. My best moments are part of this boat. And a bunch of the worst ones. And most of the people I love. I can’t think of anyone else in thirteen hundred worlds I’d trust with it the way I trust you. Thank you for taking this cup from me. And if there’s ever anything I can do to help out down the line, just say so. I may not be part of the crew anymore, but we’re still family.”

The message ended, and she flagged it to be saved. She opened the one from traffic control. A young man with deeply black skin and close-cropped hair nodded into his camera at her.

“Captain Holden, I am Michael Simeon with Medina Station security. I am sending this to inform you that, in accordance with union policy, the *Rocinante* is being called to a mandatory security contract. Your presence is required at a briefing on the incoming ambassadorial contact from Laconia at the location and time embedded in this message. Please confirm that you or your representative will be attending.”

Bobbie tapped the reply, considered herself in the screen for a moment before she pulled her hair back into a bun, and scowled her reply.

“This is Captain Draper of the *Rocinante*,” she said. “I’ll be there.”



Ten minutes into the briefing, Bobbie thought, *Oh. This is why he didn’t want the job anymore.*

The room was in the drum section of the station, up near the nonrotating command decks. The desks were lined up in rows like the worst kind of classroom, with hard seats and built-in drink holders that didn’t quite fit the cheap ceramic mugs they’d given out. There were around forty people in the uncomfortable seats with her—representatives of all the ships presently in the slow zone—but she and the executive officer of the *Tori Byron* had places of honor. Front row, center. Where the smart kids sat. The *Rocinante* and the *Tori Byron* were, after all, the only gunships around Medina at the

moment. All the rest were tugs and cargo haulers.

The man at the front of the room wasn't the one who'd summoned her, but his boss. Onni Langstiver was the head of the security forces and so, for the length of her mandatory temporary contract, technically her boss. He wore a Medina Station uniform like it was a mech driver's undersuit. Dandruff dotted his shoulders.

"The biggest thing is we don't want to seem aggressive," Langstiver said, "but we don't want to look passive either."

In her peripheral vision, the others nodded. Bobbie tried to crack her knuckles, but she'd already done it twice since she sat down and her joints were silent. Langstiver went on.

"We've got the rail-gun emplacements on the hub station, same like always, sa sa? So that anyone tries anything, we spark those up and—" The director of station security for the Transport Union cocked his fingers into little gun shapes and made pew-pew noises. "Probáb they come through like any ambassador. Dock, talk, and los politicos do their dance. But if they come through with ideas, we're ready. Not starting, but not a clean shot too, yeah?"

A general murmur of assent.

"You have to protect the guns," Bobbie said. "The rail-gun emplacements on the hub station? If they get a force onto the surface—"

"Savvy, savvy," Langstiver said, patting the air. "This is the *Tori Byron*, yeah?"

"What we need is intelligence about what's coming through that gate before it comes through," Bobbie said, knowing as the words passed her lips that she wasn't going to be thanked for them. Still, now that she'd started ... "A dozen probes going through the gate now could relay back whether we're looking at a *Donnager*-class battleship or a few gunships or just a shuttle. How we get ready for any of those should be different—"

"Yeah, thought of that," Langstiver said. "Don't want to be provocative, though, yeah? And anyway, we're not going to act much different no matter what. Working with what we're working with."

"So send a ship through with a fruit basket," Bobbie said. "Greet them on their territory and get a report back."

Langstiver stopped and stared at her. She stared back. The room was quiet for a long breath. Then another. He looked away first. "Can't send a manned ship through. Union rules. Is in the work agreement, yeah? So we

put *Tori Byron* up like an honor guard. The *Rocinante* in Medina's shadow, make sure no one lands that isn't welcome. Everyone else in dock or cleared out enough to put a clear path between Laconia gate and Medina. Everyone that gets delayed, the union picks up the fees. *Tori Byron* gets full security contract schedule. *Rocinante* gets three-quarters for support role. Standard."

Bobbie wondered what Holden would have done in this moment. Made an impassioned speech about how the union rules were restricting them past the point of tactical competence? Smiled his I-don't-actually-like-you-very-much smile, then gone back to the ship and done whatever the hell he wanted to do anyway? Or sucked it up as a battle that wasn't worth fighting?

Only it was her battle now, and while she was very clear that she was in the right, it was also evident that her position wasn't going to help her change Langstiver's plan. She couldn't beat sense into a stone. Not even when it seemed fun to try.

"Understood," Bobbie said.

All the way back to the dock, her jaw was clenched. It was just people. They were the same everywhere. She'd dealt with bureaucracy when she was in the service and when she'd done her veteran's outreach work. She'd run up against it when Fred Johnson had the idiotic plan to make her kind of an ersatz Martian ambassador during the constitutional crisis. And when she'd taken her place on the *Rocinante*, she'd been happy to let Holden or sometimes Naomi take point on the bullshit diplomatic dance-and-kiss charade.

It wasn't even that she was worried about the outcome of this particular encounter. It was that there was a better approach, she'd told them what it was, and they weren't going to do it. And her ship—her people—were going to shoulder some part of the unnecessary risk. There was no scenario ever that was going to make that okay with her.

As a generation ship, the *Nauvoo* hadn't expected to berth a lot of ships. As a battleship, the *Behemoth's* needs had been minimal. What hadn't been there, time and necessity had added. The major docks on Medina Station were outside the drum, down near the engineering decks and the long-quiescent drive that had been designed to launch the ship on a centuries-long voyage to the stars. A smaller dock had been built on the far end of the drum, near the command decks, but it was used more for private shuttles

and diplomatic meetings. The *Rocinante* was berthed in the main docks, not far from the *Tori Byron*, and Bobbie cycled into the airlock with her sense of rage starting to fade. A little. She could hate it and still do the job. That was all she could do, really.

“Welcome back,” Alex said over the ship comms as the inner doors of the airlock cycled closed. “There a plan?”

“Plan is to hang back and see if the new Laconian ambassador needs to show everyone how big his dick is,” Bobbie said. “The *Tori Byron* and the rail-gun emplacements are taking point. We’ll hang back and splash any boarding teams that get close.”

She pulled herself past the lockers, out to the lift, and up toward ops. Alex’s voice shifted from the comms to his actual voice as she got close.

“Well, good that we won’t be the first ones getting shot at. I mean, assuming anyone gets shot at all. Got to admit I’m a little bit hoping they try something.”

“You mean because Duarte and his people are a bunch of traitors to the republic who all deserve to hang for treason?”

“And theft. Don’t forget theft. And not warning anyone when the Free Navy was looking to kill a few billion people. I mean, I’m all for forgiveness and bygones being bygones, but it’s easier to stomach that after the assholes are all dead.”

Bobbie strapped herself into a crash couch. “This may not even be Duarte’s people. For all we know, he got stabbed in his bathtub fifteen years ago.”

“A man can hope,” Alex agreed. The dimness of the ops deck meant most of the light on his face was splashing up from the monitor. “I shifted the *Roci* back to a four-person-crew configuration.”

“It’s not enough,” Bobbie said. “We need more crew.”

“We did it this way for years before you and Claire joined up. It works better than you expect. Hey ... Look, since there’s a chance that someone might be trying to poke holes through Medina Station, would you mind if I kept Holden and Naomi on the ship’s channel? Just in case?”

Bobbie hesitated. Part of her bridled at the prospect of having personnel who weren’t on the operation still be in the communications chain. But it was Holden and Naomi, and cutting them out also felt strange. Alex was waiting for an answer. She made a gesture as if she’d been thinking of something else.

“Of course not,” Bobbie said. “They’re family.” Alex’s faint smile meant he’d known she’d say it, and was glad she’d said it that way. She opened a connection to Amos and Clarissa. “Okay, everyone. Preflight checks. Let’s get ourselves into position.”

The slow zone—gates, Medina Station, and the alien hub station with the rail guns—was only tiny if compared to the vastness of normal space. The whole volume was smaller than the sun, and with the guesses she’d seen about how much energy it took to hold the gates open and stable, probably equally energetic, but controlled by forces they were still struggling to make sense of. And between the gates, a darkness that matter and energy slipped into, but from which nothing ever came back. The not-emptiness past the gates left her feeling a little claustrophobic, with only a sphere a million clicks across to move in.

Even that constrained, Medina Station would have been too small to see on her monitor if it had all been rendered to scale. Instead, she had a window with the full system—gates, stations, the *Roci*, the *Tori Byron*, the rail-gun emplacements—on one side of her monitor and three smaller displays showing tactical displays of the *Roci* in the needle-thin radar shadow of Medina, the *Tori Byron*, and Laconia gate respectively. A countdown timer marked the minutes and seconds until this Admiral Trejo said he’d be coming through. Her shoulders were tight. She felt like they were in the moment between throwing dice and seeing what numbers had come up. The gambler’s high. She didn’t like how much she liked it.

“Medina’s sensors are getting something,” Clarissa said from the engineering deck.

“Throw me the update, please,” Bobbie said, and the screen with Laconia gate on her monitor shifted to a live feed of the gate itself, enhanced in false color to make the darkness legible. The weird circle of the gate. The wavering stars beyond it, and a looming shadow coming through. Even just watching the stars go out behind it, Bobbie could tell it was a big ship. Maybe it was their *Donnager*-class battleship. And that in itself would be the Laconians making a statement.

Unless it was something else.

The ship that came through first looked *wrong*. It was something more than the weirdly organic shape of it. The way the false color struggled to make sense of its surface was like a graphical glitch or something out of a dream. She found herself looking for seams where its plating came together,

and there was nothing. Her mind kept trying to see it as a ship, but defaulting to some kind of ancient sea creature from the deep trenches of Earth.

“That ain’t one of ours,” Alex said. “Shit. Where did they *get* that?”

“I don’t like this,” Clarissa said.

Me neither, little sister, Bobbie thought.

On the traffic-control channel, the captain of the *Tori Byron* was hailing the Laconian whatever it was, ordering it to come to a full stop. Bobbie nodded at the screen, willing Trejo to respond. To make this a more normal interaction. Instead the strange ship continued on its course, placid and implacable. Another drive plume still showed on the other side of the gate. Much smaller, but a second ship all the same. After a moment, the *Tori Byron* lit its main drive, moving itself in on an intercept. It was like watching a house cat preparing to face down a lion.

This is your final warning, the *Tori Byron* announced. Bobbie’s monitor updated. The *Tori Byron* had hit the big ship with a target lock—

And then it was gone. Where the *Tori* had been, only a sparkling cloud of matter so strange the *Roci*’s sensors didn’t know what to make of it.

“What the fuck!” Alex breathed. “Did they shoot something? I didn’t see them shoot anything!”

Bobbie’s stomach felt so heavy, it seemed like it ought to be dragging her down, even on the float. She opened a channel to the rail-gun emplacements before she was consciously aware she’d done it, the certainty growing in her even as she got the lock that it wouldn’t be enough. That nothing would be. But there was a way you did these things. An order to battle, even when the battle was doomed.

“Fire, fire, fire!” she shouted.

On her screen the rail guns spat.

Chapter Twelve: Holden

The Transport Union comptroller's offices were buried three levels deep in the thick walls of Medina Station's rotating drum. It made the Coriolis slightly less noticeable than inside the drum, but also meant that they were inside gray metal cubes with desks in them and no screens to even give the illusion of a window. Holden couldn't say for sure why it felt more depressing than sitting in the metal cubes of a spaceship compartment, but it was. Naomi sat beside him, watching the newsfeeds on her hand terminal, unaffected by the grim locale. The *Rocinante* was doing a mandatory security contract. The first gig since they'd left. Maybe that was what he was reacting to.

"Form 4011-D transfers your retainer and future contracts to Roberta W. Draper, and states that she is now the legal captain of the *Rocinante*, and president of Rocicorp, a Ceres-registered corporate entity."

The Transport Union representative who was processing their paperwork handed Holden an oversized terminal covered in legalese. She had a pinched face, deep frown lines on her forehead and around her mouth, and wore her hair in short spikes dyed flaming red. Holden thought she looked like a disgruntled puffer fish, but recognized his unflattering opinion was at least partly a reaction to the mountain of forms she'd made him fill out.

"You do know," the puffer fish said, "that this is a temporary change of status, pending the legal change-of-ownership registration?"

"Our next stop is the bank, where we'll be finalizing the loan to sell the ship."

"Mmhmm," Puffer said, making it a sound of deep skepticism.

As Holden filled out the next of the endless forms, he listened to the small voices coming from Naomi's terminal. He only caught about every third word, but the hot topic of conversation was definitely the approaching Laconian ships.

"Luna," Naomi said.

“Something happening on Luna?”

“No, I mean, let’s try Luna first. It’ll be easy to find consulting gigs, what with all the work going on down on Earth.”

“I’m not sure I—” Holden started.

“Not you. Me. I could get consulting gigs. I like the gravity there. And you could pop down the well whenever you wanted to visit your parents.”

“True.” His parents were all pushing the centenarian mark, and while he’d been lucky and they were all in pretty good shape, he didn’t want them doing orbital launches to visit him if they could avoid it.

“And it’s all very far from this,” she said, pointing at her screen.

“Not a bad thing,” he agreed, and handed his filled-out screen back to the puffer. “But I did like the idea of living in exuberant decadence on Titan.”

“When we have enough money to do that for another three decades. Two hours,” Naomi said, and Holden didn’t need to ask what she was referring to. Two hours until the first representatives from Laconia to come through their gate in decades would arrive.

“We done here?”

The puffer agreed that they were.

“I could use a drink,” Holden said. “Let’s go get a drink and watch the big arrival on the screens in a bar or something.”

They did.

It didn’t go well.



Holden ran across the open fields of the rotating drum, heading toward the lift up to Medina’s command center. The adrenaline pumping through his veins only seemed to make his heart beat faster without speeding him up. It occurred to him, with a sort of surreal detachment, that this was exactly like many nightmares he’d had. He reached the lift station, pressed the call button, and willed the doors to open.

Bobbie was yelling *Fire, fire, fire* on the *Roci*’s group channel, her voice coming out of his terminal loud, but not panicky. Commanding. On the screen, Alex was sending him the *Roci*’s tactical display. Three of the rail guns on the hub station fired at the massive Laconian ship. The shots all hit,

tearing holes in the hull, but the breaches closed almost as fast as they were created. It didn't look like damage-control systems. It looked like it was healing.

Holden had seen that sort of nearly instantaneous repair before. But not on human technologies. It took a really bad situation and made it a nightmare.

"Bobbie," he yelled back at the terminal. "Keep the ship—"

He didn't get to finish, because the screen flashed white and died. Medina actually shuddered. The entire station shook and rang like a bell.

"Jim," Naomi said, and then couldn't finish because she was still gasping for breath from their run. She made the Belter hand signal for emergency. *Should we be looking for a shelter?* It was a valid question. If the Laconians started poking holes in Medina, they'd want to be in a sealed emergency compartment with its own air supply.

"Go find one," he said. "But I need to get up to command."

"Why?"

Another valid question. *Because I've fought in three major wars*, he thought. *Because the Belters running the station are the ones that didn't join Marco's Free Navy, so they've never been in this kind of fight. They'll need my experience.* All perfectly true and probably valid reasons. But he didn't say them out loud, because he knew Naomi would see through them instantly to the truth. *Because something terrible is happening, and I don't know how not to be in the middle of it.*

The doors finally opened, and the car recognized him as a captain with union clearances and gave him access to the overrides. As they went up, the feeling of gravity slowly turned into a lurching sideways motion and then disappeared. The lift opened onto corridors that Holden remembered fighting through under heavy fire, back when humans first found their way into the ring system. That astonishing moment in human history, passing through a stable wormhole into an alien-created network of interstellar gates, had just led to a whole bunch of people deciding to shoot each other. And now, a group of people who'd been isolated from humanity for decades were rejoining society just as things seemed to be going pretty well. And what did they do? Start shooting.

Holden's terminal gave a gentle ping and then reconnected to the network. A moment later, Alex's face appeared.

"You still there, Cap?"

“Yeah, just outside Medina ops. Did that thing hit the station? Not seeing any atmo-loss alerts here.”

“It shot the—” Alex started, then said, “It’s easier to show you. Take a look at this shit.”

“Just a minute.”

Holden slapped the wall panel, and the door slid open. He pulled himself inside the ops center.

The duty officer put up a hand. “You can’t come in here, sir. I mean, Captain Holden. Sir.”

“Who’s in charge right now?”

“Me?”

Holden had met her once before at a Transport Union function. Daphne Kohl. A competent technician. Somebody who’d done an engineering tour on Tycho. Perfect for noncombat ops duty on a station like Medina. Absolutely out of her depth now.

“Holden?” Alex said. “You still there?”

Holden turned his hand terminal so that the duty officer could see it too.

“Go ahead, Alex.”

On his hand-terminal screen, the massive Laconian ship was floating past the ring gate. It had a thick lozenge shape, not quite circular in cross-section, and with a variety of asymmetrical projections jutting out from the sides. More organic than constructed.

It came to a gentle stop just inside the ring gate. The *Tori Byron*, the Transport Union’s cruiser tasked with defending Medina Station, moved toward it. Holden couldn’t see or hear them, but he imagined the stream of hails and demands the *Byron* was throwing at the Laconian ship. Then, happening so fast it was like a glitch in the graphic, the *Byron* turned into a rapidly expanding cloud of superheated gas and metal fragments. In the playback, Bobbie was yelling, *Fire, fire, fire*, and the rail guns on the hub station opened up.

The image jittered, and the rail guns were ripped away from the hub and sent spinning off, fracturing into a cloud of ceramic shrapnel as they went.

“That’s what you felt,” Alex said. “The second time they fired that weapon, every ship in the zone shook, and half the electronics blew out.”

“What,” Holden said, “the fuck was that?”

Alex didn’t answer. His expression was as eloquent as a shrug.

“Okay, I assume Bobbie’s got you guys hiding in the station’s radar

shadow still, since I'm talking to you and you're not dead."

"Yeah," Alex said. "She seems pretty strongly in favor of not doing anything to make it mad."

"Let me see what we can find out here, and I'll call back."

"Copy that," Alex said. "*Roci* out."

"It's ... magnetic?" Naomi said, her tone managing to be authoritative and astounded at the same time. *This is what it is, but I don't believe what I'm seeing.* She'd floated across the ops center to one of the consoles and was working with the tech there. "It's reading as an incredibly strong magnetic field focused down to a narrow beam."

"Is that possible?" the duty officer said, her voice small and tight.

"Only if you define 'possible' as things that have already happened," Naomi said, not turning to look at her.

"So anything made of metal is vulnerable," another tech said.

"It isn't just metal," Holden replied, then pushed off to drift over to Naomi's station and look at the data she was pulling up.

"Everything has a magnetic field," Naomi added. "Usually it's too weak to matter. But at the levels that beam is hitting, it could spaghettify hydrogen atoms. Anything it touches will be ripped apart."

"There's no way to defend against something like that," Holden said, then went limp. In microgravity, it was not as satisfying as collapsing into a chair would have been.

"That's what shook Medina," Naomi added. "Just the beam passing near us. The maneuvering thrusters had to fire to hold us still."

"Holden, this is Draper," his terminal said.

"Holden here."

"Looks like that big bastard is ignoring us as long as we stay really still and keep the weapons unpowered."

"That's a good sign," Holden said. "It might mean they're not looking to kill everyone. Just making a point of destroying anything that's a threat."

"Point loudly and clearly made," Bobbie agreed. "But be aware, there is a second ship. Smaller. And it's heading for Medina."

"Tactical assessment?"

"Based on how thoroughly they took out our defenses," Bobbie said, "I'd bet they do a hard breach, storm ops and the reactor room, and grab full control of the station. If their ground troops have tech like that ship does, it shouldn't take long."

“Copy that. I’m going to try to minimize casualties down here. Wait for me to make contact. Holden out.”

“Hard breach?” Naomi asked, though her tone said she already knew the answer.

“They’ll drop fire teams all over the station to take over access points, control centers, power, and environmental support,” Holden replied, more to the room at large than to Naomi. He turned to Daphne Kohl. “I think you should have everyone here start making calls. Get every union and planetary rep in secure locations, but tell their security details to stand down. No visible weapons. Tell them we’re *not* attempting to repel boarders. That’ll just get people killed, and maybe piss off that monster of a ship.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “Are you taking command?”

“No, I’m not. But this is the right thing to do, and we need to do it now. So we should do it. Please.”

Her expression fell a degree. She’d hoped someone in authority had arrived. Someone who knew what to do. He recognized the hope and the disappointment both.

“We’re not going to fight back at all?” Kohl asked.

He gestured toward the screens. The dust that was *Tori Byron* and the rail-gun emplacements. Kohl looked away. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to say no.

“Not yet,” Holden said. Naomi was already collecting side-arms from the other techs in the ops center and putting them in a duffel bag. *Not yet.*

The second ship looked to be about destroyer sized, to Holden’s eye. It did a slow flyover of Medina Station, taking out the torpedo racks and PDC emplacements with pinpoint-accurate rail-gun shots, then dropping a dozen Marine landing craft.

As it came, Kohl did as he suggested, passing the word throughout the ship not to resist. Live to fight another day. After the last call, she seemed to sway for a moment, then turned, spat on the deck, and pulled up something that looked like a security interface.

“What are you doing?”

“Purging the security system,” she said. “No census. No biometric records. No deck plans. No records. We can’t stop the fuckers, but we don’t need to make it easy for them.”

“Fou bien,” Naomi said, approving. Holden wondered whether the

forces coming in would be able to track the decision back to her. He hoped they wouldn't.

Each landing craft held a fire team of eight Marines, all wearing power armor of an unusual design—like Bobbie's but with different articulation at the joints, and all in a vibrant blue that made them seem like something that had hauled itself up from the sea. The Marines were methodical and professional. Where the doors opened for them, they entered without causing damage. Where they found locked doors, they breached with ruthless efficiency, blowing the door seals and hauling the plates back in a single, well-trained motion. When they passed unarmed civilians, they moved on by with nothing more than a warning not to resist. The few times they ran into someone with a hero complex who tried to fight back, they killed whoever presented a threat, but no one else. That it wasn't a straight-out massacre was the only comfort.

Watching it all happen from his position in the ops center, Holden found that he had to admire the level of training and discipline the Laconians displayed. They left no doubt that they were absolutely in charge, and they responded to any aggression with immediate lethal force. But they didn't abuse the civilians. They didn't push anyone around. They showed nothing that looked like bravado or bullying. Even the violence didn't have any anger behind it. They were like animal handlers. Holden, Naomi, and the rest of the ops-center techs did what they could to keep the station populace from panicking or foolishly resisting, but it was almost irrelevant. Nothing kept the people calmer than the calm their invaders demonstrated.

When the door to the ops center opened and one of the fire teams entered, Holden told everyone in the room to raise their hands in surrender. A tall, dark-skinned woman in armor with insignia that looked like a modified Martian colonel rank walked toward him on magnetic boots.

"I am Colonel Tanaka," she said, her voice booming with electronically augmented volume. "Medina Station is under our control. Please indicate that you understand and are complying."

Holden nodded and gave her his best fake smile. "I understand and as long as you continue to not abuse the people here, we will not violently resist."

It was a deliberate provocation. If Tanaka were there to flex her muscles and show how important and in charge she was, she'd point out that her people could abuse the populace to their heart's content and there wasn't a

damn thing he could do about it.

Instead she said, “Understood. Prepare a hard dock at the reactor level of the station for our ship.”

When the dockmaster indicated that it was ready, Tanaka touched a control on her wrist and said, “Captain Singh, a berth is being prepped for docking. The station is ours.”



“I am Captain Santiago Singh of the Laconian destroyer *Gathering Storm*,” the young man said. “I’m here to accept your surrender.”

His uniform was trim and spotless. The design looked Martian, except for the blue-gray color scheme where Holden was used to red and black. Kohl floated before him, confusion in her eyes.

“This is an act of war,” she said, her voice trembling. Holden felt an urge to step in, refocus the man onto him just to make her safer. It was a stupid impulse. “The union. The Earth-Mars Coalition. The Association of Worlds. They won’t stand for this.”

“I know,” the young man said. “This is going to be all right. But I have to accept your surrender now, please.”

She braced to attention, and it was over.

It had taken less than four hours from the first transit. Marines in Laconian power armor patrolled the corridors and command points of the station. Naval personnel in sharply designed uniforms hurried about hooking equipment into various communication and environmental systems with a well-practiced efficiency. The people of Medina mostly watched in a sort of dazed shock.

It had all happened so quickly. It was impossible to process.

He and Naomi were swept up along with the hundreds of representatives from the colonized worlds, several dozen reps from the Transport Union, the senior staff of Medina Station. He didn’t have any actual authority. He wasn’t even technically the captain of a ship or a member of the Transport Union anymore, but no one argued. They all gathered in the coalition-council room, an amphitheater with two thousand seats and a stage with a podium on it that consciously aped the layout of the General Assembly of the UN back on Earth.

Admiral Trejo was a stocky older man, with the relaxed air of a person who'd spent so long holding a military posture that he looks comfortable in it. He took his place at the podium flanked by a pair of Marines. Captain Singh and Colonel Tanaka stood respectfully behind him and off to one side.

"Greetings," the admiral said, smiling out at them. "I am High Admiral Anton Trejo of the Laconian Empire, and personal representative of High Consul Winston Duarte, our leader. And now your leader as well."

He paused as though waiting for applause. After a moment, he continued.

"As you know, we have accepted control of Medina Station. And yes, we intend to take control of all the thirteen hundred worlds it leads to. This isn't an act of aggression, but necessity. We bear no ill will or animosity toward any of you. As you've seen, this will be as bloodless a transition as *you* allow it to be. I'm bringing you here to implore you to please, *please*, contact your home worlds. We will make communications available for anyone who will tell them to peacefully relinquish control to us. If they do this, there will be no need for violence of any kind."

"I admit I kind of like these guys," Holden whispered to Naomi. "I mean as conquistadors go."

"There'll be a 'but,'" she said. "There's always a 'but.'"

"Cooperation is the coin of the empire," Trejo continued. "The beginnings were already in motion here. Your Association of Worlds. The Transport Union. All of these things will continue. High Consul Duarte *wants* input and representation from all the systems humanity has colonized and will colonize. The Transport Union is a vital apparatus in supporting those efforts. Both organizations can and must continue their important work.

"The only thing that has changed is that High Consul Duarte will be expediting the process. The Laconian fleet will be the defenders of a new galactic civilization of which you will all be welcome citizens. The only price is cooperation with the new order, and a tax to be paid to the empire that will not be onerous, and will be entirely invested back into the creation of new infrastructure and aid to fledgling or struggling planetary economies. The golden age of man will begin under the high consul's leadership."

Trejo paused again, his smile slipping. He looked pained and saddened

by what he was about to say.

“Here it comes,” Naomi whispered.

“But to those who intend to defy this new government and try to deny humanity its bright future, I say this: You will be eradicated without hesitation or mercy. The military might of Laconia has only one function, and that is the defense and protection of the empire and its citizens. Loyal citizens of the empire will know only peace and prosperity, and the absolute certainty of their own safety under our watchful eye. Disloyalty has one outcome: death.”

“Ah,” Naomi said, though it was more a long exhalation than a word. “The nicest totalitarian government ever, I’m sure.”

“By the time we figure out all the ways it isn’t,” Holden said, “it will be too late to do anything about it.”

“Will be?” Naomi asked. “Or *is*?”

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Chapter Thirteen: Drummer

McCahill, head of the security council, spread his hands before him like he was trying to talk a gunman into putting down his weapon. “We were all taken by surprise. And I think we can all agree this was a failure of intelligence.”

“Well, if we all agree, then I guess it’s not a problem,” Drummer said. McCahill flinched a little. “What the hell *happened* out there?”

The meeting room was small—McCahill, Santos-Baca, and the present liaison of the Earth-Mars Coalition, Benedito Lafflin. And Vaughn haunting the back of the room like a funeral director at a wake. There were others in her feed. Messages from every division of the union and dozens of organizations outside it too. A kicked anthill the size of the solar system, and all of them wanting answers and leadership from her. It would take days to view all of them, weeks to reply, and she didn’t have the time or the energy. She needed answers.

Answers and a way to turn time backward long enough to undo what had already happened.

Lafflin was a thick-faced man with a tight haircut that made him look like a particularly self-satisfied toad. He cleared his throat. “Data on Laconia has always been thin,” he said. He had a reedy voice and the manner of a doctor explaining why he’d left a sponge in someone’s belly by mistake. “The defecting forces from Mars have been playing their keep-away message since before the Transport Union was chartered. They’ve flooded the gate from the realspace side with chatter along the whole electromagnetic spectrum—radio, visible light, X-ray, everything. We’ve had no passive intelligence to speak of. The few times that probes were sent through, they were disabled or destroyed.

“The official doctrine put in during the first years of the union was blockade. The navies of Earth and Mars were both badly damaged in the fight against the Free Navy, the focus of governance was disaster recovery

on Earth and minimizing the collapse of infrastructure. Laconia never presented an active threat, and ...”

“You’re telling me the missing navy was just never a priority?” Drummer said, but she already knew the answer: Yes, that’s what he was saying.

Sleeping dogs had been left to lie until they were good and rested. And the sting of it was worse because some of that at least had been during her watch. She was as guilty as anyone of taking her eye off the ball.

The images that had come through from Medina were surreal. The ship that had sailed through from Laconia didn’t resemble anything that had gone out through the gate decades ago. The blast that had scattered the *Tori Byron* was more like high-energy stellar phenomena than a weapon humanity had conceived. And the destruction of the rail-gun emplacements had been accompanied by a blast of gamma radiation from the gates themselves that Cameron Tur had described as the energetic equivalent of a solar flare. It had destroyed the *Sharon Chavez*, a freighter that had been waiting for clearance from Medina’s traffic control. Her crew died in the blink of an eye, and not even from a direct attack. It wasn’t something Drummer could get her mind to accept. It was too big. Too strange. Too sudden.

“The attacker has disabled the relay network,” Vaughn said, answering something Santos-Baca had asked. “There are no new signals coming in or out of the ring space. Medina is effectively cut off.”

Drummer squeezed her fists until they ached. She couldn’t let her mind wander like that. It didn’t matter that she felt traumatized. The union was under attack, and it was all on her. She had to keep focus. “We do have some record from the freighter that was parked outside the gate. The interference is too severe to get anything with high definition, but enough that we can say with some confidence that Medina Station was boarded. We have to assume it’s been taken.”

“Can we get data through the gates?” Drummer asked. “Radio loud enough to carry through the interference on both sides? Or tightbeams? Something to get messages to the other systems?”

“It’s possible,” Lafflin said in a tone of voice that meant he didn’t actually think it was possible. “But it would certainly be monitored. And our encryption schema aren’t breakable by any known tech, but we’re not looking at known tech.” His hand terminal chimed. He glanced at the

message and lifted his eyebrow. “Excuse me for a moment. Someone’s made a mistake.”

Drummer waved her permission, and the inner left them to themselves. When the doors had closed behind him, she turned to Santos-Baca and McCahill. “Well, seeing as it’s just us, what are the options?”

“If we can find a way to communicate with the other systems, we can coordinate a counterattack,” Santos-Baca said. “I’ve been putting together a spreadsheet of the resources we have in each system.”

“Let me see,” Drummer said. Santos-Baca flipped the data to Drummer’s display. More than thirteen hundred gates, each opening onto a new solar system. Almost all of them with colonies that varied from barely functioning villages to scientific complexes that were on the ragged edge of self-sustainability. The union’s void cities were the largest ships, but she could only pour attacking forces through so quickly without losing them to the gate’s glitches. She’d be sending them through one at a time to be mowed down. She pressed her fingers to her lips, pinching the flesh against her teeth until it ached a little. There was a way. There had to be a way.

She had to put first things first. And that meant reestablishing communications with all the union forces in all the systems. Some kind of stealth relay system had to be put in place. Maybe some kind of feint that would draw the enemy’s attention long enough to let her sneak new repeaters on either side of if not all the gates, then a strategic few—

“Ma’am,” Lafflin said from behind her, “please, you can’t—”

An unfamiliar voice answered. “Give it a fucking rest, Benedito. I can do whatever the fuck I want. Who’s going to tell me not to? You?”

The old woman moved slowly, using a cane even in the light gravity of People’s Home. Her hair was blindingly white, thinning, and pulled back in a bun at the base of her skull. Her skin was slack and papery, but there was an intelligence in her eyes that the years hadn’t dimmed. She looked up at Drummer, and smiled with the warmth of a grandmother. “Camina. It’s good to see you. I got the first shuttle I could. How’s your brother doing?”

Drummer pushed through a flurry of reactions—surprise that the woman was here, a flicker of starstruck awe, disorientation at being called by her first name in public, distrust that Chrisjen Avasarala—the retired grand dame of inner-planet politics—knew about her brother at all, and finally the solid certainty that every feeling she’d just experienced had been anticipated. More than anticipated. Designed. It was all a manipulation, but

done so well and with such grace that knowing that didn't make it ineffective.

"He's fine," Drummer said. "The regrowth went well."

"Good, good," Avasarala said, lowering herself into a chair. "Astounding what they can do with neural replacement these days. When I was growing up, they cocked it up more than they got it right. I had most of my peripheral nervous system redone a couple years ago. Works better than the old stuff, except my leg gets restless at night."

Santos-Baca and McCahill both smiled, but with anxiety in their eyes.

"Ma'am," Lafflin said, "please. We're in the middle of a meeting."

"You can finish it later," Avasarala said. "President Drummer and I need to talk."

"I didn't see you on my schedule," Drummer said mildly. Avasarala turned back to her. The warmth was gone, but the intellect was there, sharp and feral.

"I've been where you are right now," the old woman said. "I'm the only one in the whole human race who has. The way your stomach feels when you try to eat? The part of you that's screaming all the time, even when you're acting calm? The guilt? Anyone who's had a child in the hospital has suffered through that shit. But the part where all human history rides on what you do, and you only get one shot? That's only you and me. I came because you need me here."

"I appreciate—"

"You're about to fuck up," Avasarala said, and her voice was harder than stone. "I can keep that from happening. And we can have that conversation here in front of these poor fucking shitheads, or you can roll your eyes and humor the crazy old bitch with a cup of tea and we can have a little privacy. You can blame me for it. I won't mind. I'm too old and tired for shame."

Drummer laced her fingers together. Her jaw ached, and she had to focus to unclench it. She wanted to scream. She wanted to have Avasarala thrown out of the city in a plastic emergency bubble with a note tacked to her cane that said *Make an appointment first*. She wanted to see McCahill and Santos-Baca look at her with awe and fear at the violence of her reaction. And none of those things had anything to do with Chrisjen Avasarala. They were all of them about what had happened to Medina.

"Vaughn," Drummer said. "Could you get Madam Avasarala a pot of tea? We'll take a recess of an hour or so."

“Of course, Madam President,” Vaughn said. The others rose from their chairs. Santos-Baca took a moment to shake Avasarala’s hand before she left. Drummer scratched her chin even though it didn’t itch and kept her temper until the room was empty except for the two of them. When she spoke, it was with a careful, measured tone.

“If you ever undermine me like that again, I will find a way to make everyone in the EMC stop taking your calls. I will isolate you like no one this side of a prison door has ever been isolated. You’ll spend the last days of your life trying to talk interns into getting you coffee.”

“It was a dick move,” Avasarala said, pouring a cup of tea for herself and then another one for Drummer. “It’s my fault. I overreact when I’m scared.”

She hobbled across the room and set the mug down in front of Drummer. An act of submission as calculated as everything she’d done. Whether it was sincere or insincere didn’t matter. She’d kept the form. Drummer picked up the tea, blew across it, and sipped. Because keeping the form was all that was keeping her together now too. Avasarala nodded her approval and went back to her seat.

“I’m scared too,” Drummer said.

“I know. That was some frightening shit that came back from Medina. That ship? I’ve never seen anything like it. I’ve never seen *speculation* about anything like it.” Avasarala picked up her own mug, sipped, and nodded toward the tea. “This is good.”

“We grow it here. Real leaves.”

“All the food chemists in the system will never do better than evolution at making a decent tea leaf.”

“How am I about to fuck up?”

“By trying to get back your losses,” Avasarala said. “It’s not just you either. You’re going to have advisors on all sides who want the same damn thing. Mass a force to reclaim Medina, find a way to coordinate, take the fight back to Laconia. Through a massive effort and at tremendous cost, push our way back to the status quo ante.”

“Sunk-cost fallacy?”

“Yes.”

“So you don’t think—” Drummer had to stop. The words were physically gagging her. She swallowed more tea, the heat of it loosening her throat. “You don’t think we can get the slow zone back?”

“How the fuck would I know? But I do know you can’t get it back as your first step. And I know how much you want to. It feels like if you’re just smart enough, fast enough, strong enough *now*, it won’t have happened the way it already did. But that’s not how it’s going to work. And I know how consuming that grief can be. Grief makes people crazy. It did me.”

It was like the air mix in the room was wrong. Nothing Avasarala was saying was news to her, but the sympathy in the old woman’s voice was worse than shouting. A vast fear, wide and cruel, welled up in Drummer’s gut. She put her mug back down with a click, and Avasarala nodded.

“I was briefed about Duarte, back in the day,” the old woman said. “Mars didn’t want to share anything back then. I thought at the time it was because they’d just been surprise ass-fucked by one of their own, and it was shame. That was true as far as it went, but after I retired, I made him a hobby of mine.”

“A hobby?”

“I’m shitty at quilting. I had to do something,” she said, waving a hand. Then a moment later, “I found his thesis.”

The little book she held out was printed on thin paper with a pale-green cover. It was rough against her fingertips. The title was in a simple font with no adornment: *Logistics-Based Strategy in Interplanetary Conflict*, by Winston Duarte.

“He wrote it at university,” Avasarala said. “He tried to have it published, but it never went anywhere. It was enough to get him a position in the Martian Navy, put him on a career path.”

“All right,” Drummer said, thumbing through the pages.

“After the Free Navy, the best intelligence services in two worlds went over that man’s life in so much detail you could get the Christian names of every flea that bit him. I’ve read ... fuck, fifty analyses? Maybe more than that. It all comes back to those hundred and thirty pages there.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s a plan for Mars to take control of the solar system away from Earth and the Belt without firing a shot. And it would have worked.”

Drummer frowned, opened the book to a random page. *The control of resources can be achieved through three strategies: occupation, influence, and economic necessity. Of these, occupation is the least stable.* A chart on the facing page listed minerals and their locations in the Belt. Avasarala was watching her, dark eyes fixed and penetrating. When she spoke, her voice

was soft.

“At twenty years old, Winston Duarte saw the path that none of his superiors did. That no one on Earth did. He laid it all out, point by point, and the only reason history ran the way it did is that no one took much notice. Then he was a good, solid career officer for decades, until he saw something—an opportunity, maybe—in the data from the first wave of probes that went through the gates. Without changing the time of day when he got his hair cut, he shifted into engineering the biggest theft in the history of warfare. He took the only active protomolecule sample, enough ships to defend a gate, and engineered the chaos that knocked Earth and Mars on their asses.”

“I know all that,” Drummer said.

“You do,” Avasarala said. “And you know what that means. But you’re scared and you’re traumatized and you don’t want to look it in the face because your husband is on Medina Station.”

Drummer picked up her tea and sipped without tasting it. Her stomach felt tight. Her throat was thick. Avasarala waited, letting the silence stretch between them. Saba was on Medina Station. It was a thought she’d been avoiding, and it was like touching a wound.

“Duarte’s good,” Drummer said at last. “He’s very good at what he does. And he came back in his own time and on his own terms.”

“Yes,” Avasarala agreed.

“You’re telling me he won’t overreach.”

“I’m telling you he came back because he thinks he can win,” Avasarala said. “And if he thinks that, you should prepare yourself for the idea that it’s true.”

“There’s no point, then,” Drummer said. “We should just roll over? Put our necks under his boot and hope he doesn’t step on us too hard?”

“Of course not. But don’t talk yourself into underestimating him because you want him to be the next Marco Inaros. Duarte won’t hand you a win by being a dumbfuck. He won’t spread himself too thin. He won’t overreach. He won’t make up half a dozen plans and then spin a bottle to pick one. He’s a chess player. And if you act on instinct, do the thing your feelings demand, he’ll beat us all.”

“Give up Medina. And the slow zone. And all the colony worlds.”

“Recognize that they’re occupied territory,” Avasarala said. “Protect what you *can* protect. Sol system. Reach out where you can, if you can.

There are still people loyal to the union on Medina. And Duarte's intelligence on the last few decades is going to be thin, at least at first. Find angles he doesn't know. But don't take him on straight."

Drummer felt a little click in her heart, the physical sensation of comprehension. Avasarala was making the case for defending Earth. That was why she'd come to her. Drummer and the union, the void cities and the gunships, were critical to keeping Earth and Mars safe. The strategy she was arguing for was all about playing defense, and the thing Drummer would be defending was, in the final analysis, the inner planets. That's what she and her people would be asked to die for: Earth and Mars and all the people who'd made their civilizations on the back of the Belters back in the days before the union. It wasn't just strategy. It was naked self-interest.

Also, it was right.

Medina was behind enemy lines now. And Drummer wasn't going to be able to take it back. That didn't mean she was powerless.

"So," she said, "what do we have to work with?"

"The coalition fleet," Avasarala said. "The union fleet. And whatever agents we can coordinate with on Medina."

"We can't reach anyone on Medina," Drummer said. "The communications channels are all under Duarte's control."

Avasarala sighed and looked at her hands. "Yours are," she said. It took a moment for Drummer to understand.

Avasarala shrugged. "Everyone spies on everyone, Camina. Let's not pretend to be outraged at water for being wet."

"You have a way to get messages to Medina?"

"I didn't say that," Avasarala said. "But I know a *lot* of people."

Chapter Fourteen: Singh

There have been significant changes to the internal structure of the station,” Colonel Tanaka said. “Not that surprising. This was all supposed to be a generation ship that spun at a full g for a few centuries. Now it’s a waystation at a third. A lot of the infrastructure would want rethinking, and there’s never been a Belter ship that didn’t get modified to suit the moment. If they hadn’t purged their security and maintenance databases, we’d know a great deal more. But there’s nothing lost there we can’t build back, given time.”

“I see,” Singh said, considering the possible methods of recapturing the lost data.

“In addition, we’ve recovered one thousand two hundred and sixty-four firearms in our sweeps, the vast majority of which were handguns,” she said, scrolling through a list on her monitor. “Areas with complex compounds that can easily be used in bomb making are under strict security watches, but we’ll need to make some extensive redistribution and security changes before everything can be effectively locked down.”

“Anything else?” Singh asked.

“They still have kitchen knives and power tools. And anything we missed.”

Tanaka was out of her power armor, and her long, lean form was insolently stretched out across a chair in Singh’s office. She was older than him by almost two decades, and he could see her reaction to his relative youth in the way she held her shoulders and the shape of her smile. She playacted respect for him.

The office—his office—was small enough to be functional. A desk, chairs, a small decorative counter with its own bar. The workspace of an important administrator. He’d taken over a complex that had once been accounting space, based on the names and titles they hadn’t scraped off the doors yet. The ops and command decks, like engineering and the docks,

were in the part of the station that was permanently on the float, and he found the idea of working in null g uncomfortable. And more than that, he'd seen from Duarte and from Trejo what a real commander's space looked like, and it looked humble.

He went back to the issue that bothered him most.

"Twelve hundred guns? There were less than a hundred security personnel on the whole station."

"Belters have a long tradition of not trusting governmental authorities to protect them," Tanaka replied with a shrug. "Nearly all of these weapons were in civilian hands."

"But the Belters *are* the government here."

"They're Belters," she said, as if her experiences before Laconia explained everything that was happening now. "They resist centralized authority. It's what they do." She gave the report one last glance, then slapped the monitor against her arm, where it curled up into a thick bracelet.

"I have meetings today with their 'centralized authority,' so that should be illuminating," Singh said, surprised at the contempt in his voice. Tanaka gave him a little half smile.

"How old were you during the Io campaign?" she asked.

It felt like a bit of a dig. He remembered the Io campaign the way most children in his generation did. The newsfeeds announcing the launches toward Mars. The gut-clenching fear that one of the missiles bearing the alien hybrids would make it as far as the Martian surface. Even after the crisis had passed, the weeks of nightmares. He'd been a child then, and the memory had the near-mythical feel of a story retold until it barely resembled its truth. Those terrible days that had convinced his parents that something more would have to be done to protect humanity from itself and its new discoveries. It had planted the seeds that bloomed under the skies of Laconia.

But bringing up his age now felt like a power play. A way to point out how little experience he had. He tried not to show that it got under his skin.

"Not old enough to think of it as the Io Campaign, though of course I'm thoroughly versed on the history."

"I was a JG when that shitstorm went down," Tanaka said. "We were actively fighting with Belter factions back then. You probably think these people are a half step up from spear-carrying savages—"

"I don't—"

“And you’d be right,” she continued. “They can be the most stupidly stubborn people you’ll ever meet. But they’re tough as nails, and resourceful.”

“I think you misunderstood me,” Singh said, fighting to keep a flush out of his cheeks.

“I’m sure,” Tanaka said, then stood up. “I have an interview with the technical-assessment crew. I’ll report in when I’m done with them. In the meantime, don’t leave this office without your monitor on. Security directive.”

“Of course,” Singh said, the flush of shame he’d felt shifting over into anger. Personnel security fell under Tanaka’s operational command while they were occupying the station. It was one of the few areas where Singh could not countermand her orders. So, after dressing him down and questioning his understanding of their situation, she was now delivering a direct order. The humiliation stung.

“Appreciated,” she said, and headed for the door.

“Colonel,” Singh said at her back. He waited until she’d turned to look back at him. “I am the provisional governor of this station, by direct order from High Consul Duarte himself. When you’re in this office, you will stand at attention until I offer you a seat, and you will salute me as your superior. Is that understood?”

Tanaka cocked her head to the side and gave him another of her enigmatic little half smiles. It occurred to Singh that Aliana Tanaka had risen to the rank of colonel in the most punishingly trained combat unit humanity had ever known, and that he was alone in his office with her. He wanted to look down at her legs, see if she was rolling up onto the balls of her feet or shifting her stance. Instead, he stared her in the eye and clamped his stomach down into a knot. If he was supposed to be kind and humble, to ask about her family and trade familiarities with her, he was doing a poor job of it.

“Sir,” Tanaka said, coming to attention with a sharp salute. “Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed,” Singh said, then sat down and looked at his monitor as though she’d already disappeared. A moment later, his door opened and then closed.

Only then did he collapse back into his chair and wipe the sweat off his face.



“Give me one reason we don’t tell you to go fuck yourselves,” the head of Medina Station’s Air, Water, and Power Authority said. “The AWP—”

“The AWP works for us now,” Singh replied, keeping his voice level.

“Like hell we do.”

It’s shock, Singh told himself. It’s surprise and confusion and sorrow that the universe doesn’t behave the way they thought it did. And everyone on Medina Station—maybe everyone on the colonies and in Sol system too—was going to be struggling with it. All he could do for them was keep telling the truth, as clearly and as simply as he could, and hope it sank in.

“You do,” Singh continued. “And if you do not order your workers to resume their duties, I will have technicians from the *Gathering Storm* take over for them, and then I will have every single member of your organization arrested.”

“You can’t do that,” the AWP chief said with bravado, but he rubbed his bald head, and his expression wasn’t as certain.

“I can,” Singh said. “Everyone on your staff is back at work by next shift rotation or I start issuing arrest orders.”

“You won’t—”

“Dismissed,” Singh said, then gestured at one of his Marine guards, who ushered the AWP chief out of the room. Putting Medina Station in order was messy. He had imagined, coming out, that as governor of the station, he would be kept apart from the normal rank-and-file citizens and laborers. That he would have a status that kept those around him a little more in awe, with underlings to deal directly with the hands-on administration. In practice, Admiral Trejo had the role of power, and he was the underling. He accepted it with good grace. It would all be more pleasant in a few months, when the new defense emplacements were complete and the *Tempest* could progress to the next phase of their mission.

The briefings he’d had on the way out—all information gleaned from passively monitoring the backslash radio that leaked through Laconia’s ring gate—were accurate, but wildly incomplete. It left him feeling a half step behind himself all the time. It wasn’t even the basic structures—those were constrained by the biological and energetic needs of the ships and station and so were, in a sense, predictable. It was the cultural forms and

expectations. The absurdities and accidents of human character that affected the flow of goods and information in ways that were as unpredictable as they were exhausting. Like having to throw an entire branch of Medina's infrastructure staff in the brig.

"Who's next," Singh asked his aide, a junior lieutenant named Kasik he'd grabbed from the admin pool on the *Storm*. Kasik scrolled through a list on his monitor.

"You have Carrie Fisk next," Kasik said.

"The president of the Association of Worlds," Singh said with a laugh. "Bring her in."

Carrie Fisk entered his office, her frown lines and fidgety hands telling Singh she'd be trying to hide her fear with anger. She was a short, thin woman, with a severe face and beautiful black hair piled up on her head. Her clothes were expensive. Someone from one of the richer colonies, then. He knew her from the newsfeeds they'd captured. She looked thinner and less pleasant in person.

Singh gestured at the chair across from his desk and said, "Please sit, Madam President."

She sat, the anger dissipating at his politeness.

"Thank you."

"Madam President, I have news," Singh said, flicking a document from his monitor at her. The hand terminal in her pocket chimed. "And it will be good news or bad news, depending on how seriously you take your job, and how much you like doing actual work. You may read that later, to get all the details."

She'd started to take the terminal out of her pocket, but slid it back in at his words. "I take my job very seriously."

"Excellent, because it seems you used to have a title that held no actual power, except that you presided over the Association of Worlds in their meetings here. Which is a body that negotiates interplanetary laws it has absolutely no ability to enforce. Earth and Mars haven't formally joined your coalition, and the Transport Union has been in a position to dictate terms in all your agreements. Or so I am led to understand. My access to the newsfeeds has been limited." He tried for a self-deprecating smile, and thought he probably got about three-quarters of the way there.

"It's a start," Fisk said, the frown returning to her face. "At least we have people here talking out their problems, rather than immediately

reaching for a gun.”

“I agree,” Singh said. “And more importantly, so does High Consul Duarte. The document I just sent you empowers the Association of Worlds to make laws that will have binding authority on the member systems, which now includes every human colony. You, as president of that body, will be granted a variety of legislative powers to aid in that cause.”

“And who is granting us this new power?” Fisk asked. Her face had twisted up like he’d asked her to eat something distasteful. She knew the answer to his question, but she wanted him to say it so that she could begin her counterargument. A counterargument Singh had no interest in entertaining.

“High Consul Winston Duarte, who is now the supreme executive authority of the Association of Worlds and all subsidiary governments. All edicts passed by this body that are not vetoed by executive power will have the force of law, backed by the military power of Laconia.”

“I don’t know if—”

“Madam President,” Singh said, leaning forward and waiting until her attention was fully on him before he continued. “I advise you to take this very seriously. The high consul wants a fully functioning legislature and bureaucracy, and believes that the existing one, with some modification of course, fits the bill. I strongly advise that you not give him a reason to think it’s better to tear this down and build something new in its place. Do we understand each other?”

Fisk nodded. Her hands were fidgeting in her lap again.

“Excellent,” Singh said. He stood up and extended his hand. Fisk stood and took it. “I look forward to working with you as High Consul Duarte’s representative. We have much to do, but I believe it will be exciting and rewarding work.”

Singh released her hand and gave a small bow.

“What comes next?” Fisk asked.

“I would recommend you begin by familiarizing yourself with the document I sent you. It contains all the provisional rules for the Association Legislature, until such time as more permanent protocols can be voted into place.”

“Okay,” Fisk said.

“I know you will be quite busy,” Singh told her, gently guiding her past his Marine guards and over to the door. “But I look forward to our next

meeting.”

Once she’d left, he let out a long sigh and leaned against the wall.

“One more, Lieutenant, then we can break for lunch,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Kasik said. “Next is Onni Langstiver, head of station security for Medina.”

Singh smiled a little, thinking how Tanaka would have reacted to hearing that title. “*Former* head of security,” he said as he returned to his desk. “Give me a moment. Let him wait.”

“Yes, sir,” Kasik said. “Can I get you anything in the meantime? Water? Coffee?”

“The water here tastes like old piss, and the coffee tastes like old piss run through a gym sock,” Singh said. “The recycling systems on this station are decades out of date and badly maintained.”

“Yes, sir,” Kasik replied. “I can have water brought from the *Storm* for you.”

“Or,” Singh said, turning to his aide, “we can go about actually fixing the problems here.”

“Yes, sir,” Kasik said, bobbing his head. If Singh hadn’t been tired already and irritable, he would have let it sit there. But the constant pushing back from his own people and the natives of Medina had scratched him enough to raise welts, and he couldn’t quite rein himself in.

“If the posting here becomes permanent,” he said, “and there is no reason to think it won’t, I will be bringing my family to this station. I won’t have my daughter drinking badly recycled water, breathing badly filtered air, and attending badly run schools.”

Kasik had found a bottle of water from somewhere, and was pouring it into the coffee machine.

“Yes, sir,” he said, like it had become an autonomic reaction.

“Lieutenant, look at me.”

“Sir?” Kasik said, turning around.

“What we’re doing here is important. Not just for Laconia but for all of humanity. These people? They need us. They even need us to show them *that* they need us. When you have children, you’ll understand why that matters. Until then, you will behave at all times as an example of Laconian character and discipline. If you don’t understand why that’s critical, you will *act* as though you understand, or I will place you in charge of personally scrubbing the water-recycling system until it produces

laboratory-grade potables. Are we clear?”

If there was a flicker of resentment in the man’s eyes, it was a natural reaction to discipline.

“Crystal, Governor Singh.”

“Excellent. Then send their former head of security in.”

Onni Langstiver was a lanky Belter type in a sloppy Medina Security uniform, with greasy hair and a permanent sneer curling his lip. He looked over Singh’s Marine guards just inside the door, then gave Singh himself a look of such low cunning that he almost had the man turned back out again.

“I’m here,” Onni said. “You want, bossman?”

“We’re going to discuss your change in status on this station,” Singh said.

“Discuss? Bist bien. Let’s discuss.” Onni shrugged, then walked toward the guest chair.

“Do not sit,” Singh said. Something in his tone brought Onni up short, and the man frowned at him as if really seeing him for the first time. “You won’t be here long.”

Onni shrugged again, a short lift of both hands that did not involve the shoulders. The psy-ops briefing on Belter culture had talked about this. That most of their physical gestures had evolved to use the hands only, because they spent so much time in vacuum suits that body language was invisible. It also talked about their cultural conviction that they were the put-upon victims in all interactions with non-Belters. Well, if this Onni had come into the room expecting to be victimized, Singh would oblige him.

“You are no longer the head of security on Medina Station,” Singh said.

“Who’s the new boss?” Onni replied. He wasn’t angry, which was interesting.

“It doesn’t matter to you,” Singh said with a smile. “Because you no longer work for station security. In fact, you no longer hold any official duties of any kind on this station. The last official task you will perform is to hand over all personal files related to this station that are not in the official database. Failure to do this will result in arrest and prosecution by a military tribunal of the Laconian Navy.”

“Sure, sure, jefelito. Only you know most that’s gone. Purged,” Onni said.

“What you have, you will surrender.”

“You’re the man now.”

“You may leave.”

A smile passed over Onni’s face, soft and ingratiating. Singh had seen this before, from the playground to the academy. He’d seen it as a boy in the eyes of the science team that had been on Laconia when Duarte’s ships arrived and on the football team when the woman who’d been their coach was reassigned and a new man stepped in. Respect for power, yes, but also the scent of opportunity. The opportunism of making good with the new powers.

“One thing, bossmang,” Onni said, as Singh had known he would.

“No, not one more—”

“No, no, no. Wait. You’ve got to hear this one.”

“Fine,” Singh said. “Out with it.”

“So that weapon your big ship used? The magnetic one?”

“The *Tempest*. Yes, what about it?”

“Yeah, so,” Onni said, then paused to scratch his greasy hair and smirk. “When you hit the hub station with it? Where the rail guns were?”

“Yes,” Singh said. “We have extensive experience with similar artifacts, and judged the risk to be minimal.”

“Okay. So when that beam thing hit the hub station that pinché ball glowed bright yellow for que, fifteen seconds. Anytime anything hits the ball that dumps any energy into it, you get these little flashes of yellow. This is the first time the whole damn thing lit up, and fifteen seconds is a long time.”

“I’m having trouble understanding your point,” Singh said.

“So during that fifteen seconds, all thirteen hundred rings dumped a massive gamma-ray burst into their systems. Hard enough that four ships on approach to the rings had their crews cooked. Emergency systems kicked in, autopilot stopped the ships, so we don’t have four unmanned projectiles flying through the rings at us, but ...”

Onni lifted his hands as if he was presenting a gift. Singh blinked and sat back. Something shifted in his belly. An emotion he hadn’t felt since he’d arrived at Medina. Surprise. Maybe even hope. The ring space was, by the best understanding of the science teams, one of the most energetically active things in the perceivable universe. The power required to keep the space itself from collapsing was astounding even to people who routinely built things like *Magnetar*-class battleships. The effect Langstiver described wouldn’t even be a rounding error in the overall system, but the application

of it could mean a significant windfall.

“How do you know this?”

The Belter spread his hands. “I live here. I know things not everybody knows.”

“Is this correct?” Singh said, not to Onni but to Kasik.

“I’ll have a report prepared immediately,” Kasik replied, and left the room already talking at his wrist.

“So, yeah,” Onni continued, laughing a little now. Acting as if he’d already ingratiated himself. If he wasn’t corrected, it would become true. “Transport Union’s gonna be pissed you just cooked four of their freighter crews.”

Singh considered the man. He would need local contacts. Natives of Medina Station who were loyal to the new power structure and supporters of Laconian rule. The prospect of having this bootlicker as one of the first among them was beneath his dignity.

“Dismissed,” Singh said to the man. He needed to call Trejo on the *Tempest* and report this.

Onni’s face fell. The smile faded first into surprise and then indignation and resentment. Rejection bloomed into hatred while Singh watched. He’d rarely made a decision proven right so definitively or so quickly. People of this low character would never be part of his administration, and it was telling that Onni had managed to gain power on Medina.

“Bossman, you gotta listen to me,” Onni said.

“I said you’re dismissed,” Singh barked at him, then looked to one of his Marine guards. She immediately grabbed Onni by the arm, halfway lifting him off the ground with her armor’s augmented strength.

“Ouch! Fuck!” Onni yelled as she dragged him out of the room.

“Have a cart brought around,” Singh said to the remaining Marine. “I want to go to the ops center and look over the data about this gamma-ray burst.”

“Aye, sir,” the Marine said, then stepped out of the room.

Singh needed to corroborate Onni’s story first, then get a full report to Admiral Trejo. If the man was correct, then they had the ability to release a lethal gamma-ray burst through the gates whenever they wished. Could there be a more powerful means of controlling travel through the network? It had the potential to shave *months* off their timetable in establishing control over the various colony worlds.

For the first time that day, Singh felt himself relax. He might have just won the empire for Laconia, all without firing a shot in anger.

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Chapter Fifteen: Bobbie

As an operator in the Orbital Drop Task Force, Bobbie had trained with Spec Ops personnel from every command in the Martian military for a single purpose: the invasion of Earth. And while the old axiom “If you wish for peace, prepare for war” was not without its skeptics, that skepticism wasn’t shared by the Martian military. The doctrine that drove Mars in the century and a half following its declaration of independence relied on it. Mars would never have as large a population or as big an industrial base as Earth. The only thing that prevented Earth from reconquering her wayward colony was a constant demonstration of Mars’ willingness and ability to hit back hard. As long as they could land on Earth streets, Earth would hesitate to fight in their tunnels.

Bobbie and her fellow Marines in Force Recon regularly and visibly trained for that day. They took drugs and worked out in full gravity until Earth would be merely uncomfortable, not bone-crushing. They practiced dropping from orbit in troop carriers and one-person pods. They trained in urban pacification and insurgent elimination. They learned to make up for what they lacked in troop numbers by using aggression and intimidation to keep the conquered people in line. She had literally spent years preparing to move through the streets of Earth commanding obedience through the threat of death.

The invasion and conquest of Medina Station was civilized by comparison. She wondered whether that would last.

Four Laconian Marines in their power armor stood watch in the dock offices, mag boots locked to the deck, and kept a close eye on the line of people waiting to talk to the dockmaster. But while they appeared vigilant, they were not aggressive. They acted like their presence was sufficiently intimidating to keep the populace in line. With some sort of slug thrower built into the armor in each forearm, and a pair of what looked like grenade launchers on each shoulder, Bobbie decided they were right. There were

probably thirty people on the float waiting for the dockmaster. The four Laconians looked like they could have handled ten times that number.

She'd been like them, once.

"I like your suit," she said to the Laconian closest to her.

"Excuse me?" he said, not looking at her, continuing to scan the room.

"I like your suit. I wore an old Goliath back in the day."

That got his attention. The Laconian looked her over once, feet on up. He was so much like the teams she'd trained with when she'd joined up, it felt like looking back through time. She wondered if he was as ignorant as she'd been back then. Probably. Hell, maybe more so.

"MMC Force Recon?" he said. There was something like respect in his voice.

"Once was," she agreed. "You guys have made some improvements."

"Studied the Recon operators at the academy," the Laconian said. "You guys were the real deal. Heart breakers and life takers."

"Less and less of both, as time goes on," Bobbie said, and tried out a smile. The Laconian smiled back. He was half her age, at most, but it was nice to know she could still pull 'em when she wanted to. She could have imagined the kid on the tube station back at home. Shit, he probably had family back on Mars.

"I bet you do okay," he replied, still smiling. "You see any action?"

She smiled back, and the kid realized what he'd said. A little blush touched his cheek.

"Some," Bobbie said. "I was on Ganymede in the lead-up to the Io Campaign. And I was on Io."

"No shit?"

"I don't suppose there's any way an old Marine could try one of those suits out, is there?" Bobbie said, ratcheting the smile up a notch. *I don't use sex as a weapon*, she thought to herself. *But I'd love to get my hands on your outfit.*

The Laconian started to reply, then got a distant look on his face that Bobbie recognized. Someone on the group comm was talking in his ear.

"Move along, citizen," he said to her, the smile gone.

"Thanks for the time," she said, then pulled herself to the back of her line.

The wait was long and uncomfortably warm. The others there with her had flight-suit patches from a dozen other ships, and the same hangdog

expression. It was like they were being treated this way because they'd done something to deserve it. Bobbie tried not to look like that.

The dockmaster's office was small and harshly lit. She identified herself and her ship, and before she could give any context, the new dockmaster cut her off.

"As a military vessel, the Ceres-registered ship called *Rocinante* is now impounded by the Laconian Naval Command." He was a small, dark man in a Laconian naval uniform, and the look on his face was the mix of boredom and irritation shared by all natural-born bureaucrats. A screen on the wall listed all the ships in the slow zone and their statuses: LOCKDOWN in red, over and over again like it was a mantra. The counter in front of him glowed with the name CHIEF PETTY OFFICER NARWA.

"Okay," Bobbie said. She'd waited in line for nearly two hours to get up to the window, and she certainly hadn't done it to be told things she already knew. Behind her, the press of bodies was enough to give the office a little extra warmth, the air a little too much closeness. "I understand that. But I have questions."

"I feel like I've told you everything you need to know," Narwa said.

"Look, Chief," Bobbie said, "I just need to get a few clarifying details and I'm out of your hair."

Narwa gave her a delicate shrug of his shoulders. If there had been any spin gravity, he'd have leaned on the counter. He looked like a guy who ran a noodle shop in Innis Shallows. She wondered if they were related.

"I own that ship," Bobbie continued. "Is this a permanent impound? Are you commandeering it? Will I be paid any compensation for the loss of the ship? Will I or my crew be allowed on board to get our personal effects if the ship is being confiscated?"

"A few points?" Narwa said.

"Just those," Bobbie agreed. "For now."

Narwa pulled something up on the counter and flicked it over to her. She felt her hand terminal buzz in her pocket.

"This is the form you can fill out to file for return of property or compensation for the loss of the ship. We are not thieves. The navy will provide one or the other."

"What about our stuff," Bobbie asked. "While the naval wheels of justice slowly turn?"

"This form," Narwa said, and her terminal buzzed again, "is to get an

escorted pass onto the ship to get your personal items off it. They're usually processed within forty-eight hours, so you shouldn't have to wait long."

"Well, thank—" Bobbie started, but Narwa was already looking at the person behind her in line and yelling, "Next."



"Any word from Holden and Naomi yet?" Alex asked.

"Not yet," Amos said, tapping his hand terminal with a thumb. "System's pretty loaded up right now, though. May be getting stuck in queue."

"They have it in lockdown," she said. "There's not going to be free comms on Medina that aren't getting scanned by their systems."

"Sounds like that could add some time to delivery," Amos said.

"Standard occupation protocols care a lot more about security than convenience," Bobbie said. "Message tracking, air-gapped encryption, pattern-based censorship, human-review censorship, throttled traffic. You name it."

It fit with everything else that was suddenly changed and beyond her control. She couldn't have her ship. She couldn't get her people back together. She had to ask permission and an escort to let her retrieve her own clothes. So of course their messages were getting stuck in Medina's system. They'd found a bar on the inner face of the drum. The long ramp from the transfer point at the center of spin had been thick with carts and people on foot, some heading up toward the docks, and many—like them—coming back down. The grim expressions had been the same both ways.

"I was captain for about a week," Bobbie said, the beer in her cup sloshing dangerously as she jabbed at the air with it. "I mean, depending on if you count from when Holden offered it to me. Or when we did the paperwork. The paperwork came later, so *officially*, I guess. Houston clocked as much time in control of the *Rocinante* as I did."

"You're drunk," Alex said, gently pushing her beer hand back down to the table. He was sitting next to her at a long, faux-wood table. Amos and Clarissa sat across the table from them. Amos had a beer in his hand and half a dozen empties on the table and didn't appear impaired in the slightest. Clarissa had a plate of cold, soggy french fries in front of her and was using

them to push ketchup into spiral art.

"I'm a little drunk," Bobbie agreed. "I was just starting to like the idea of being captain of my own ship and these Laconian assholes took it away."

She punctuated the word *Laconian* by jabbing her glass toward one of their Marines walking past the bar. Beer splashed across the table and into Clarissa's fries. She didn't seem to notice or care. Bobbie plucked up her napkin and dabbed the worst of it away anyhow, with only a little pang of guilt.

"And that's why you need to ease down on the brews, sailor," Alex said, just taking the glass away from her now. "We need to skip past this grief stage and get on to the kickin'-ass and gettin'-our-ship-back stage."

"You got a plan?" Amos asked. His tone said he found this dubious.

"Not yet, but that's what we need to be doing," Alex shot back.

"Cuz, a couple hundred Marines, one destroyer in the docks, and one whatever the fuck that flying violation of the laws of physics is," Amos said, pausing to sip his beer and smack his lips. "That's gonna be one hell of a plan. I gotta get in on that action."

"Hey, asshole," Alex said, half standing up from his chair. "At least I want to do something more than feel sorry for myself."

"This here?" Amos said. He pointed at the Marine outside, the security drones that now hovered over every part of Medina's drum, the people in Laconian Navy uniforms everywhere. "I've seen this before. This is us getting paved over. All we can do now is try to find some cracks to grow through."

"Cracks?" Alex said, then sat back down with a thump. "How long I known you? Half the time I still got no idea what the fuck you're talking about."

"No one is doing anything," Bobbie said. "Not till I give the order. We get this pass to get our stuff off the *Roci*, maybe we can start making a strategy from there. I may not have a ship, but I can sure as hell still have my crew."

"Be nice to sneak a gun or two off the ship," Amos agreed.

"Be nicer to find a way to get Betsy off," Alex said to her. "If that's possible."

"So until then, we wait," Bobbie said, then started pressing on the table trying to order another beer. "I just wish I understood what this Duarte asshole wants."

“They haven’t started killing people,” Amos said. “I mean, it’s still early days. Lots of room for shit to go pear-shaped.”

“But why now?” Bobbie waved her arms around at the bar, at Medina, at all of human space beyond them. “We were *just* starting to figure this shit out. Earth and Mars working together, the colonies talking out their problems. Even the Transport Union turned out to be a pretty good idea. Why come kick the table over? Couldn’t he have just pulled up a chair with the rest of us?”

“Because some men need to own everything.”

The voice was so quiet, it took Bobbie a moment to realize Clarissa had spoken. She was still making ketchup art with her french fries and not looking at any of them.

“What’s that, Peaches?” Amos said.

“Some men,” Clarissa replied, louder and looking up at them now, “need to own everything.”

“Hell, I *met* this Duarte guy,” Alex said. “I don’t remember him being —”

“This sounds like personal experience,” Bobbie said, cutting him off. “What are you thinking, Claire?”

“When I was a little girl, I remember my father deciding to buy up a majority share in the largest rice producer on Ganymede. Rice is a necessity crop, not a cash crop. You’ll always sell everything you can grow, but the prices aren’t high, because it’s easier to grow than a lot of other things. And at that time, his companies had an annual revenue in excess of one trillion dollars. I remember an advisor telling my father that the profits from owning rice domes on Ganymede would add a one-with-five-zeroes-in-front-of-it percent to that.”

“Not sure I—” Alex started, but Clarissa ignored him, so he trailed off.

“But the largest food producers were the rice growers. They had the biggest domes and farms. The most real estate. By owning a controlling share in their company, my father was in a position to dictate policy to the Ganymede Agriculture Union. It meant, in terms of Ganymede food production, he couldn’t be ignored by the local government.”

“What did he use that for?” Bobbie asked.

“Nothing,” Clarissa said with a delicate wave of one hand. “But he had it. He owned an important piece of Ganymede, a thing he hadn’t controlled before. And some men just need to own everything. Anything they lay their

eyes on that they don't possess, it's like a sliver in their finger."

Clarissa pushed her soggy fries away and smiled at them all.

"My father could be the kindest, most generous and loving man. Right up until he wanted something and you wouldn't give it to him. I don't know why I think this, but Duarte feels the same. And these are men who will mercilessly punish anyone who won't comply, but with tears in their eyes and begging you to tell them why you made them do it."

"I knew a few guys like that," Amos said.

"So, he won't stop until he has it all," Bobbie said. "And it looks like he has the tech to make it work. The armor, that destroyer, and that planet killer floating outside. All of this? They all look like they came out of the same factory to anyone else?"

"Yeah, it's protomolecule shit," Amos agreed. "Some of it looks like the stuff growing on Eros."

"I'm seeing a timeline here," Bobbie said.

"We were looking into those missing ships when I talked to this Duarte guy," Alex said. "It was about the time Medina was throwing a lot of probes through the gates to get a gander at the usable planets."

Bobbie finally got the ordering screen to come up on the table, but on impulse bought a glass of club soda instead of another beer. It felt like something important was on the tip of her mind, and she didn't want to drown it in booze.

"So," she said, letting the words come out of the back of her head, hoping her subconscious had an insight it hadn't shared yet. "A probe finds something in the Laconia system, something that makes ships and armor and who knows what else."

"What, like a big volumetric printer that says, 'Insert protomolecule here' on the side?" Amos scoffed.

"Hey," Alex replied, "we found a planet-sized power generator with moons that could turn off fusion."

Amos considered that for a moment. "Yeah. Fair enough."

"Marco's people are running a fifth column on Medina by that point," Bobbie continued. "Duarte must have been working with them already. Said he'd slip them a fat payday for early info on the ring probes. They call him up and say, 'Hey, we found this awesome thing.'"

"He hands them a bunch of Martian ships," Alex said.

"And Marco starts fucking up the solar system while Duarte takes the

rest of his fleet and a bunch of like-minded Martians and takes over in Laconia,” Bobbie finished.

“Where he spends a few decades making ships and fancy armor and whatnot, then rolls through the gate ready to name himself king,” Alex said as her club soda arrived.

“Which means Marco was just a tool,” Bobbie said.

“Kind of knew that,” Amos chimed in.

“Free Navy kept everyone distracted while Duarte got set up on Laconia. And we’ve been sitting here patting ourselves on the back and trying to keep all the food supplies where they need to be for thirty-odd years while he’s been getting ready to kick the shit out of us,” Bobbie said. “Alex, maybe you should write up your thoughts on meeting him. What kind of guy he was.”

“I sat in his office for a few minutes. There are probably some people on Medina who served around the same time he did,” Alex said. “If we can find where the Martian vets hang out, we could see if anyone knew him.”

“Yeah, that’s a good—” Bobbie started, then stopped when she noticed Amos stiffen in his chair. The big mechanic’s hand drifted toward his right hip and the gun that was no longer there since the Laconian weapon sweeps.

“Amos?” she said.

“Trouble on the move,” he replied with a gentle tilt of his head.

The people he’d nodded toward were a group of Belters, old-school OPA by the tats. They were walking through the drum section nearby. They wore coats too large and heavy for the constant perfect weather of Medina’s drum section, and several carried large bags. They kept their heads down and moved fast, like people with a purpose. She recognized one of them. Onni Langstiver, the asshole head of security.

“What’s over there?” Bobbie asked.

“Some offices? The banking section, and some administrative stuff,” Alex replied.

“The Laconians took it over,” Clarissa added.

“Here we go,” Amos said, and stood up. In the distance, the Belters were pulling things out of their coats and bags. Bobbie felt the surge of adrenaline in her blood the same moment as the calm descended on her: danger followed immediately by the well-cultivated response to danger. It felt like being home.

Bobbie looked around the little bar for likely cover. Nothing within ten steps looked like it would stop a bullet, so she grabbed Alex with one arm and Clarissa with the other and pulled them both to the ground with her. Amos was still standing up, watching the drama play out.

“Get down, you idi—” Clarissa started, but whatever else she was about to say was drowned out by the gunfire.

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Chapter Sixteen: Singh

As he stepped out of the office complex, Singh made the mistake of looking up. The thin line of blazing full-spectrum light that ran down the center of Medina's habitat drum blinded him, just a little. It cut a glowing streak across his vision, and filled his eyes with tears. Like looking into a sun, if instead of an orb several light minutes away, it was a line drawn in the sky and very close.

"Hold on a moment," he said to his Marine escort, as he tried to get his vision back.

"Copy that," the Marine replied, then said, "we're oscar mike, triphammer two minutes from the cart. Rolling teams for cover to station ops."

It took Singh a moment to realize that most of that was comm chatter to his security detail. He had nothing but respect for the Marines under his command and for the security they provided, but they did love their jargon and code names. A moment later he'd shaken most of the water out of his eyes, and the yellow-green afterimage line across his vision was fading.

"Okay, I'm ready."

"Copy that," the Marine replied, and pointed to a parking area about fifty meters away with three electric carts lined up and waiting. Lieutenant Kasik was hurrying toward him from the carts, waving a monitor that had been extended to its full size. He met them a few seconds later, puffing with exertion.

"I have the initial defense reports," Kasik said, handing the monitor to Singh.

"Excellent." Singh scrolled past a spreadsheet of incomprehensible numbers. "I hope there's a summary?"

"Yes, sir, and the tech group is waiting for you in station ops to answer any questions. But the initial findings are very exciting."

"Tell me."

“What we can see,” Kasik said, “is the ring system converted all of the energy from the *Tempest*’s field projector into gamma rays released through the rings.”

“We knew that,” Singh replied with a frown.

“But ... the energy released was orders of magnitude more than the energy the central sphere absorbed. The ring system amplified it. Exponentially. If the factor is consistent, we can create predictive models for input versus output very quickly.”

It was exactly what he’d hoped. The alien rings could be made into their own defenses, and the reconstruction of the defense battery skipped entirely. The *Tempest* would be free to move into Sol system months ahead of the original plan. Any attack would fail, even if it were coordinated through every ring at once. One *Magnetar*-class battle cruiser could guard thirteen hundred gates at once and never miss its shot. The battle to seize control of every human-controlled world in the galaxy was already over.

After that, it was just administration of the new empire. Singh tried to imagine the high consul’s pleasure, the possible rewards, and his imagination failed him. But one thing still bothered him.

“Why was it, Kasik, that we heard about this from a local? If this had gone overlooked—”

“I’m sure we’d have found it, sir. But we weren’t looking at the logs. We have additional data in Operations,” Kasik said. “And I’ve requested technicians for more analysis.”

Singh realized his daydreaming of the high consul’s patronage had stretched into an awkward pause. Before he could reply, something shifted at the edge of his vision. Someone walking toward him with the purposeful stride of a messenger making a delivery. Except that the person striding toward him was Langstiver. The man who’d brought him the news of the new and glorious discovery. A small group of Belters were following him. He assumed Langstiver was coming to demand a reward for his information.

“I don’t want—” Singh began, but his Marine guard had put one hand on his chest and shoved him back. Kasik nodded at him sharply one time, then spit berry-colored saliva all over his face.

The Marine yanked Singh to the ground, hard, then knelt over him, shielding him with her body. Her knees pressed into his spine until it hurt. Singh heard her shouting orders, muffled by her helmet, to the rest of her

detail. And then he heard nothing but the deafening ripping-paper sound of multiple rapid-fire weapons opening up. His guard was sitting on top of him and blocking his view, but the space between her thigh and calf as she crouched created a small triangular window on the carnage.

Langstiver and half a dozen other people were dancing backward as four Laconian Marines cut them to pieces with streams of high-velocity plastic safety rounds. It felt like the firing went on forever, like the bullets were keeping the assassins from falling. In reality it could only have lasted a few seconds. He experienced a little discontinuity in his consciousness, like he'd fallen briefly asleep, though that was impossible, and his Marine had yanked him to his feet and was shoving him back toward the administrative offices. The other members of her fire team slowly backed toward them, weapons at the ready.

Lieutenant Kasik still stood near the carts, not having moved during the entire firefight. He looked like he'd spit raspberry pie filling onto his lips, and he was twitching like an epileptic experiencing a grand mal. Singh understood something that had been eluding him.

"Kasik's been shot," he said. The pie filling on his face was the ruins of his lips from where the bullet had exited. The spray of red on Singh's face and uniform wasn't spit, it was his aide's blood.

"Medical has already been alerted," his Marine said, thinking he was talking to her.

"But no," Singh said. She didn't understand. "He's been *shot*."

She shoved him through the admin-building door and slammed it shut behind her. Just before it closed, the shocked silence that had followed the gunfire ended, and from a hundred voices outside the screaming started.

Kasik died on an operating table three hours after the attack. According to the report, he'd been shot in the back of the head, the bullet fracturing the occipital lobe of his skull and nicking his medulla oblongata. It then passed through the back of his throat and nearly severed his tongue, before shattering five teeth and exiting through his lips. Singh read the surgeon's section of the incident report half a dozen times. Each time felt like the first.

None of the Marine security detail had been harmed in the exchange of fire, though several civilians had received minor injuries from bullet fragments, and one boy of nine had broken his arm while attempting to flee down a short flight of steps. All seven of the Belter radicals who'd attempted the assassination were dead. The intelligence people were

digging into their past associations to see if the rebellion had roots that spread farther.

Rebellion.

The word felt wrong to Singh. The most Langstiver and his accomplices could have hoped for was his death. It would have done nothing to hand control of the station back to the Belters who'd once run it. Trejo would simply have assigned another officer to fill his place until a new governor could be dispatched from Laconia. It was all so short-sighted. So *wasteful*. Seven people had decided to toss their lives away on a symbol.

These are people who have a history of resisting centralized authority, Colonel Tanaka had said. He hadn't understood. He did now. They weren't rational. They weren't disciplined. They valued their own lives less than the prospect of his death.

What struck him most—what offended him as much as the still-implausible idea that he'd watched Kasik be murdered—was the monstrous ingratitude of it. The hubris of believing that Duarte's path for humanity's future was worth killing innocent people to resist. And after Trejo had been so generous with them.

He tapped the monitor lying on his desk, and the comm officer in security replied with a crisp, "Yes, sir."

"Please have Colonel Tanaka report to me in my office immediately."

"Sir, yes sir."

Singh killed the connection almost before the officer finished speaking. He looked around his office, not to take in anything new so much as to judge his own mind. He wasn't feeling the shuddering in his hands anymore. His eyes were able to move from the door to his desk to the little ferns in their planters beside the wall without jittering back and forth of their own accord. He'd been in shock. Only a little. And only for a short time. It was normal. Natural. Expected. The physiological effects were only the consequence of being an animal in a stressful situation. There was no reason for him to feel ashamed.

And yet, when Tanaka entered the room with that little half smirk on her lips, he had to rein his anger in. *Is this funny to you?* He didn't say it.

"Sir," she said, bracing. "You wanted to see me?"

"I was almost murdered today," Singh said. "I found your silence on the matter disturbing."

Tanaka's expression shifted. A little chagrin, maybe? It was hard to tell

with her. Her voice didn't have the crispness he'd expect of someone being dressed down. "I apologize. After your safety was established, my focus was on the response and investigation. I should have reported in sooner."

"Yes, well," Singh said. "Are you ready to make your report now?"

Tanaka gathered her thoughts visibly, then nodded to the chair across the desk from his, silently asking his permission to sit. He waved a hand. She sat, leaning forward, her elbows resting on her knees.

"The basic facts appear straightforward. The attempt was instigated and organized by Langstiver. He was the head of security before we came, and his co-conspirators were drawn from the ranks of the local security force."

"Why weren't we monitoring them?" Singh asked.

"We were. But it appears that Langstiver wasn't using the station network. My team is still digging into it, but it looks like he did his coordination and planning on an encrypted network set up in the power conduits. Physically separate from the main system the way the *Storm* is from Medina. Air-gapped. From what we can tell, it was put in by criminal elements in Medina Station. Langstiver also had relationships there."

Singh leaned back a centimeter in his chair. "Criminal elements? You mean he was *corrupt*?"

"It's not unusual on this side of the gate," Tanaka said. "And it makes the investigation more complicated than I'd like. Add to that, he appears to have purged several caches of data he still had access to and inserted false entries into what we have got. And Langstiver and his little friends aren't going to be questioned by anyone but God at this point."

"But you've found the network they were using."

"One of them," Tanaka said. "There may be others. Part of the problem is that Medina wasn't run as a military installation. There were—and probably still will be—competing levels of culture and infrastructure. Controlling the official channels is trivial, but even the officials were using additional undocumented frameworks. It's not like the locals have to create ways to get around our surveillance. All those ways were built in before we showed up."

She lifted her hands in a shrug. Singh had a stark flashbulb memory of Kasik, and with it a powerful, all-pervading dread. In his imagination, Nat and the monster were looking at a picture of him with blood spilling down his chin. It wasn't the prospect of his own death that brought the flush of rage. It was how cavalier Tanaka was being with *them*.

“Well, we’ll have to address that directly, then,” Singh said. “Mandatory curfews and roaming checkpoints will be a start. And restrict the station security forces to quarters until they can be interrogated and evaluated for service. And I’ll want a list of anyone who might pose a threat moving forward for precautionary monitoring. And ... hm. Yes, and coordinate that through the *Gathering Storm*. If we can’t be sure the local system’s clean, we should use our own. The most important thing is that the systems on the *Gathering Storm* not be compromised.”

“I’ve already set up an encryption strong room,” Tanaka said, nodding without seeming to agree. Her sigh was like grit on his skin. “But you want to be careful about a crackdown, sir. Especially this early on. It could send the wrong message.”

“The wrong message,” Singh repeated, stretching out each syllable into a question and a confrontation.

“Belter culture and identity is built around pushing back against authority. This is what that looks like in practice. We knew something like this was possible, and—”

“We did?” Singh said, his voice sharp. “We *knew* that, did we?”

Tanaka’s eyes flattened and her lips thinned. “Yes, sir. We did. It’s why I had a fire team with you at all times. And, respectfully, it’s why you’re alive.”

“Pity there wasn’t one for Kasik.”

“Yes, sir,” Tanaka said. The languor in her tone was gone. She had the tightness in her voice that said that at last she was taking him seriously. “I’m sorry to have lost him. But that doesn’t change my assessment. Bringing Laconian focus and discipline to Medina Station and the other systems isn’t a matter of imposing our customs and rules on them.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that.”

“Our discipline is *ours*, sir. The same actions can have different meanings in different contexts. What would be routine back home would seem draconian here. Anything harsher than routine will read as a wild overreaction. I believe the high consul would agree that underreacting to this would be a more persuasive show of authority.”

Singh stood up. He hadn’t meant to, but the need to move, to occupy the space inside his office, was suddenly overpowering. Tanaka stayed still. Her expression was like someone tracking a target on a firing range—focused, but emotionless. He walked to his sideboard and poured himself a drink

since his aide wasn't there to do it for him.

"It's an interesting perspective, and I can respect it," Singh said. "But I don't share it. You have my instructions." The alcohol was sharp and strangely acrid in his mouth. His gut rebelled a little at it. He swallowed anyway, trying to enjoy the bloom of warmth in his throat. Kasik had had a better hand at this than he did.

"Governor," Tanaka said, not standing. It was the first time he could remember her using the title. "I strongly urge you to reconsider this. At least sleep on it before we implement it."

He turned to look at her. He imagined himself as she saw him. A young man, off Laconia for the first time as an adult. Having been the target of enemy action for the first time. Seeing an unplanned death by violence for the first time. He must seem shaken and weak to her. Because as much as he hated the fact, he did feel shaken and weak. And naked before her implacable and judging gaze. She thought he was being irrational. Letting his fear make his decisions.

And if he changed his course now, it would prove her right.

"Respectfully," Tanaka said, "as your head of security and a woman with a lot of years of experience in her bag? This isn't a set of orders I can support."

Singh took in a long breath between bared teeth. His gums went cold with it. Whether he was right or wrong didn't matter now. He was committed.

"Your second is Major Overstreet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please send him in on your way out. You're relieved of your command."

There it was in the flash of her eyes and the lift of her chin. The contempt he'd known would be there. Giving in to her would only have helped cultivate it. Tanaka had never respected him. She thought herself better suited to make the policies of governance than he was. It didn't matter whether she was right or not.

She stood wordlessly, braced, and stalked out of the room. He more than half expected her to slam the door as she left, but she closed it gently. He finished his unpleasant drink in a gulp and went back to his desk.

The alcohol did what it was supposed to do, taking his too-sharp mind back just half a degree. Letting him relax, just a little bit. He wouldn't have

another one.

He pressed his palms flat against the surface of his desk, feeling the little bite of cool fading quickly. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Then again. When his calm was more or less reestablished, he opened his personal log and reported his decision and the reasoning behind it. *Visible weakness to my chief of security undermines confidence in the chain of command. Tanaka's expertise is admirable, but her placement on Medina proved unsuitable. Recommend her without prejudice for more appropriate duty.*

Hopefully his superiors would approve of his actions. If not, he'd know soon enough. It was done. Time that he got back to work. He felt better now. More centered. More nearly in control. It had been a bad day. Maybe the worst he'd ever suffered through, but he was alive and his command was intact. And it was just a bad day.

He opened a fresh message, flagged it for immediate delivery. For a moment, he felt the impulse was to send his first message home to Nat. To be with her even if it was only a little bit. This attenuated, one-way presence would be better than nothing. But it would wait until he'd done his duty. Duty always came first. He routed the message for the *Tempest* instead of home.

"Admiral Trejo," he said into the system's camera. "I am including preliminary data provided by former Medina Security Chief Langstiver and confirmed by my own staff—"

His own staff meaning the dead man. Meaning his first sacrifice to the empire.

"Ah. Yes. Confirmed by my own staff concerning an unexpected side effect of our actions while securing Medina Station. If command agrees with my assessment that this windfall provides a significant defense and is willing to position a ship equipped with a USM field projector permanently to the ring space, it is my belief that the timetable for further occupation can be moved up considerably. If the *Tempest* adopts a more aggressive schedule, the local forces in Sol system will have a considerably reduced period to prepare defenses. We can have absolute control of Earth and Mars in weeks."

Chapter Seventeen: Holden

Stay still,” the Laconian said. “Look at the red dot.”

Holden blinked and did as he was told. The sack of rations tapped against his leg like it was trying to get his attention, but he didn’t shift his weight. The dot on the hand terminal seemed to look back at him, and something flashed filling one eye with yellow. The guard’s hand terminal chimed, and he shifted to Naomi. His other hand was on the butt of his gun. “Stay still. Look at the red dot. You can move along, sir.”

“I’m with her.”

“You can move over there, sir,” the guard said, gesturing down the corridor with his chin. His voice didn’t make it a request. Holden walked a few steps, then paused while he was still close enough to go back if something happened. Not that he knew what he’d do.

The hand terminal chimed again and the guard nodded Naomi forward, waiting until she was back with Holden and the two of them were moving down the gently curving hall of the crew decks before he turned back to the line and the next identity to check and record. An older man with a close-cropped beard who was smiling at the guard like a dog hoping it wouldn’t get kicked. “Stay still,” the guard said. “Look at the red dot.” And then Holden and Naomi turned the corner and left the checkpoint behind.

He felt his gut release a little, the tension backed off a notch just by not being in a direct line of fire.

“Well, this sucks,” he said.

The security announcement had changed Medina like dye dropped into water. The rolling curfew meant no one in public spaces off-shift, and three one-hour periods each cycle when no one could be out of their quarters. A congregation ban—no more than three people in a group. Anyone with a weapon would be arrested. Anyone making unauthorized use of the comm system would be arrested. Anyone that the security forces deemed a threat would be arrested. With every new edict, the nature of the station itself

shifted, and the fragile thought that maybe everything would work itself out, that maybe it would be all right, receded.

He knew the station architecture hadn't really changed. The walls were still at the same angles as before, the hallways curved around the drum the same as they ever had. The air smelled the way air smelled anywhere. It was only the faces of the people that made everything seem smaller, closer, more like a prison. The faces and the checkpoints.

They reached their rented quarters, and Naomi tapped in the manual override code, since their hand terminals were still locked out. The door slid open. When it slid closed behind them, Naomi sagged against it like she was on the edge of collapse. Holden sat at the little built-in table and unpacked the bag in silence. Pad thai and red curry, both with tofu and both spiced enough to make his eyes water a little bit just at the smell of them. On another day, it would have felt like a luxury.

Naomi went to the bath, washed her face in the little sink, and came back out with droplets of water still clinging to her hair and eyelashes. She dropped down across from him and scooped up a fork.

"Any thoughts?" she asked.

"About?"

She waved the fork in a small circle, indicating the room, the station, the universe. Then she speared a cube of tofu and popped it in her mouth.

"Not yet," he said. "I've got to say, I wish that those assholes hadn't tried to kill this Singh fella."

"Or that they'd done a better job," Naomi said, and Holden felt a twitch of anxiety in his gut. Was station security monitoring their cabin? Was that kind of offhanded joke going to get them sent to the brig? Naomi saw it in his face.

"Sorry," she said, half for him and half for the microphone that might or might not have been there. "Bad joke."

"I'm thinking this takes the Luna consulting gigs off the table, though."

"Seems like it. And Titan."

"That's a shame. I would have liked Titan."

"If only we'd gotten out a week earlier," Naomi said. "Things were different then."

"Yeah," Holden said. The pad thai was rich and hot, and it tasted almost like they'd used real limes and peanuts to make it. Almost, but not quite. He put his fork down. "I don't know what to do."

“Eat,” Naomi said. “And when you’re done with that, come take a shower with me.”

“Seriously?” he said. She hoisted an eyebrow and smiled.

They ate in silence after that. He thought about putting on some background music, and even reached for his hand terminal before he remembered that it was dead. After, Naomi put the plates and forks into the recycler and led him into the bathroom by the wrist. She pulled off her clothes slowly, and he felt himself responding to her body despite the stress and fear. Or maybe because of it. Lust and anxiety mixed into something that was more than one kind of desperation. She got the water to a decent temperature while he stripped, and then they were there together, arms around each other as the warm cascade filled the curves where their bodies made cups and reservoirs. She leaned her head against his, her lips beside his ear.

“We can talk now,” she murmured. “We’ve got about fifteen minutes before the rationing kicks in.”

“Oh,” he said. “And here I thought this was just my masculine charm.”

She grabbed him gently someplace sensitive. “That too,” she said, and the laughter in her voice was better than anything that had happened in days. “We need to make a real plan. I don’t know what’s going to happen with our money. We only had this room to the end of the week, and I’m not sure whether we’ll keep it past that or if they’ll throw us out early. Or anything else, really. Not at this point.”

“We’ve got to get back to the *Roci*,” he said.

“Maybe,” Naomi said. “Unless that calls more attention to the kids. It might not be a kindness to have James Holden of the *Rocinante* ride again. Unless that’s a fight you want to be part of.”

“You think there’s going to be a fight?”

She shifted against him, their skin slipping distractingly under the flow of water. “What would Avasarala say?” Naomi asked.

Holden moved his arms around the small of her back, pulled her gently against him. Kissed her gently. “That Governor Singh fucked up,” he said softly. “That cracking down on the enemy this hard shows that you’re afraid of them.”

“Yup,” Naomi said. “The people who went after him? They were assholes and amateurs. There’s a real underground going to start now, and it’s going to have the professionals. If you and I keep our noses very, very

clean, we might be able to stay out of that. If we start reaching out to the crew, security may think we're putting the band back together."

"So leave them out of it. Commit fully to our new lives as war refugees?"

"Or suck it up, get the band back together, and die as dissidents."

"I'm really wishing Titan were still on that list of options."

"That's waiting for yesterday, sweetheart."

He rested his head against her shoulder. The water ration warning cleared its throat. Just the first one, though. They still had time.

"Why do I get the feeling I'm more freaked-out about this than you are?" he asked, and felt her smile against his cheek.

"You're new here," she said. "I'm a Belter. Security coming down on you just because they can? Checkpoints and identity tracking? Knowing that you could wind up in the recycler for any reason or no reason? I grew up like this. Amos did too, in his way. I never wanted to come back here, but I know how this all goes. Childhood memories, sa sa que?"

"Well, shit."

She ran her hand down his spine and pushed him back. The wall was cold against him. Her kiss was rough and strong, and he found himself pushing into it in a way he hadn't in years. When they came up for air, Naomi's eyes were hard. Almost angry.

"If we do this," she said, "it's going to be ugly. We're outgunned and outplanned, and I don't see how we win."

"I don't either," he said. "And I don't see how we stay out of it."

"Getting the band back together?"

"Yeah. And we were so close to out."

"We were," she said.

The water ration chimed again, a little more urgently. Holden felt some vast emotion move in his chest, but he didn't know what it was. Grief or anger or something else. He turned off the water. The rush of white noise stopped. The gentle chill of evaporation brought goose bumps up his arms and legs. Naomi's eyes were soft, dark, unflinching.

"Come to bed," he said.

"Yes," she answered.



In the darkness, the control pad on the door glowed amber. Green would have meant unlocked. Red, locked. Amber meant override. It meant that they weren't in control of it. That, in a fundamental way, it wasn't their door anymore. It belonged to station security. Naomi was still asleep, her breath deep and regular, so Holden sat in the darkness, not moving to keep from waking her, and watched the amber light.

It was the dead hour of curfew between each shift. Right now, all the hallways in Medina were empty. The curved fields and parks of the drum. The lifts in lockdown. Only the Laconian security forces could travel freely while everyone else huddled in place. Including him. Measured in work-hours, it was a massive tax. If it had just been the *Roci*, it was the same as losing someone for eighteen hours a day. Medina put a coefficient on that with at least three zeros at the end. Someone in the Laconian chain of command thought it was worth the sacrifice. That alone told him something.

Naomi murmured, shifted her pillow, and fell back into it without ever quite breaching up to consciousness. She would be awake soon, though. They'd been sleeping in the same couch long enough that he knew the signs her body gave out without even being certain what he was reacting to. He felt it when she was heading back up. He hoped she could stay down until it was their door again. Maybe she wouldn't feel the same kind of trapped that he did.

Over the years, the *Roci* had done its fair share of prisoner transport duty. Houston had been the most recent, but they'd taken on half a dozen like him one time and another since the *Tachi* had become the *Rocinante*. Now that he thought about it, the first had been Clarissa Mao. All of his prisoners had spent months in a cabin smaller than this, staring at a door they couldn't control. He'd always known in a distant, intellectual way that had probably been uncomfortable for them, but it wouldn't have been that different from being in a brig, and he'd been in brigs.

It wasn't the same, though. A brig had rules. It had expectations. You were in a brig until your lawyer or union rep came to talk to you. There would be hearings. If it went badly, there was prison. One thing followed another, and everyone called it justice, even when they all knew it was an approximation at best. But this was a cabin. A living space. Turning it into a prison cell felt like a rupture in a way that an actual prison cell wouldn't. A brig had an inside and an outside. You were in it, and then you passed

through a door or a security lock, and you were out of it. All of Medina was a prison now, and would be for another twelve minutes. It left him feeling claustrophobic and oppressed in a way he was still trying to wrap his head around. He felt like the station had just become small as a coffin.

Naomi shifted again, pulling the pillow over her head. She sighed. Her eyes stayed closed, but she was with him again. Awake, but not ready to admit it.

“Hey,” he said, softly enough that she could pretend not to have heard him.

“Hey,” she said.

Another minute passed, and Naomi pulled the pillow back under her head, yawned, and stretched like a cat. Her hand landed on his, and he laced his fingers between hers.

“Been brooding the whole time?” she asked.

“Some of it, yeah.”

“Did it help?”

“Nope.”

“Right. Spring into action, then?”

He nodded at the amber door alarm. “Not yet.”

She glanced down. The override light flickered in her eyes like a candle flame. “Huh. All right. Brush teeth, pee, and spring into action?”

“That’ll work,” he agreed, and hauled himself up out of the bed. The way it worked out, he was brushing his teeth when the door clicked over to red—locked, but under his control. The relief and resentment at the relief came packaged together.

The hallways in the residential deck were no busier than usual. The checkpoint they’d passed through earlier was gone, relocated to some other intersection of hallways. Keeping the surveillance unpredictable and visible, he assumed. If the security systems were in Laconian control, the guards and checkpoints were all theater anyway. A show of force to keep the locals scared and in line. The transport was down—no lifts, no carts. If anyone wanted to go anywhere, the only option was to walk.

In the drum, the false sunlight was as warm as ever. The fields and parkland, streets and structures, curved up and around the same way they always had. Holden could almost forget that it was an occupied station until they interacted with anyone.

The man they paused to get bowls of noodles and sauce from gave them

extra packets of peanuts and a twist of cinnamon sugar candy, on the house. An older woman they walked past as they headed aft toward engineering and the docks smiled at them, then stopped and stroked Naomi's shoulder until little tears appeared in the older woman's eyes. A group of young men heading the other way made room for them to pass long before they needed to and nodded their respect. It wasn't, Holden decided, that people recognized him and deferred to his celebrity. All the citizens of Medina were treating each other like everyone was made from spun sugar. Likely to shatter if you breathed on them too hard. He recognized it from being on Luna after the rocks had fallen on Earth. The deep human instinct to come together in crisis. To take care of each other. In its best light, it was what made humanity human. But he also had the dark suspicion that it was a kind of bargaining. *Look, universe, see how kind and gentle and nice I am? Don't let the hammer fall on me.*

Even if it was only grief and fear, he'd take it. Anything that helped them all treat each other well.

Beside a little café that served tea and rice-flour cakes, a dozen people in Laconian uniforms were building something—a wall made from cubes two and a half meters to a side, eight wide, and three high, with steel walls and backs and wide mesh doors facing the pathway. Like kennels. Half a dozen locals stood watching, and Naomi went to stand beside them. A young woman with mud-brown hair and a scattering of freckles across her cheeks made a little space for them. Another small kindness, like a coin in a wishing well.

"Are they expecting prisoners, then?" Naomi asked the woman as if they were friends. As if everyone who wasn't Laconian was part of the same group now.

"That's the thought," Freckles said, then nodded a greeting to Holden. "Making a show of it. Supposed to keep us all in line, isn't it?"

"That's how it works," Holden said, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Show everyone what the punishment is. Enough fear, and we'll all be obedient. They'll train us like dogs."

"That's not how you train dogs," Freckles said. She made a little, deferential bow when he looked at her, but she didn't back down. "You train dogs by rewarding them. Punishment doesn't actually work." Tears glistened in her eyes, and Holden felt a lump in his own throat. *They'd been invaded. They'd been taken over. They could kill everyone on the station,*

and no one would be able to stop it. This couldn't be happening, and it was happening.

"I didn't know that," he said. Banal words, the closest he could offer to comfort.

"Punishment never works," Naomi said, her voice hard. Her face was unreadable. She shifted her weight like she was looking at sculpture in a museum. The spectacle of power considered as art. "Not ever."

"Are you from here?" Freckles asked. She hadn't recognized them.

"No," Holden said. "Our ship's in the dock. Or our old ship anyway. The one we came in on. And the crew we flew with."

"Mine's in lockdown too," Freckles said. "The *Old Buncome* out of New Roma. We were slated to go home next week. I don't know where we're going to stay now."

"Not on your ship?"

She shook her head. "The docks are off-limits. No one's allowed on their ships without escort. I'm hoping we can find rooms, but I've heard we may have to camp out here in the drum."

Naomi turned, and he saw everything that he was thinking mirrored in her face. If the docks were off-limits and the crews turned out, the others wouldn't be on the *Roci*. And with the network down, they couldn't put through a connection request. They didn't have any way of contacting Bobbie or Alex or Amos. Or Clarissa. Counting each deck and the inner surface of the drum, it was something over fifty square kilometers of hallways, cabins, access tubes, and warehouses. Recycling plants. Hydroponic farms. Air storage. Medical bays. A maze the size of a small city, and somewhere in it, four people he needed to find.

Holden coughed out a small, harsh laugh. Naomi tilted her head.

"Nothing," he said. "It's just not very long ago I was thinking how *small* Medina felt."

Chapter Eighteen: Bobbie

A rope defined the line to the ships. Two and a half, maybe three hundred people, each with their fist on it, went the length of the dock and switched back twice. Men and women in the jumpsuits of dozens of different companies jostled in place in the dock's microgravity, inching forward along the line as if registering their silent impatience would make the whole operation move faster. Laconian guards floated along the perimeter, rifles drawn and ready for violence. If it came to that, Bobbie thought, it wouldn't be surgical. Not in a mob like this. If anyone started anything, the air recyclers would be spitting out blood clots for months. She hoped everyone else knew that too. She hoped they cared.

Every now and then, a team of Laconian military escorts came, took the people from the moored end of the line, checked their authorization, screened them for weapons, and led them off to their ship. Everyone on the rope would pull a little forward, grabbing on another half meter closer to their turn, feeling the weave of the strands, the grease from all the palms before their own. The unmoored end floated free, waiting for the next hapless crew to join the waiting horde.

They were lucky, Bobbie told herself. Most of the ships had full crews of twenty or thirty people. The *Roci* just had the four of them. They could all go aboard at once. Small blessings indeed. Almost too small to see.

The guards led away another group. They moved down the rope again, that much closer.

"How you holding together, Claire?" Bobbie asked.

Clarissa took a long, shuddering breath and nodded. When she spoke, the words came just a little too fast, and all the consonants had sharp edges. Like she was trying to rein them in and couldn't. "It would be very nice to get to the med bay. But right now, it's just euphoria and nausea. Nothing I can't handle."

"That changes," Amos said, "you let me know."

“Will,” she said. Bobbie wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that. There weren’t many actions Amos could take that would make the situation better. If putting their heads down and enduring wasn’t enough to get Clarissa to her medications, the options got bad fast.

“Anyone else think it’s cold in here?” Alex said.

“It is,” Clarissa said. “I think the pressure’s a little low too. The environmental systems are all off.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good thing,” Alex said.

“Belters,” Bobbie said. “We trained for this.”

“You trained for low air pressure?” Amos asked. He sounded amused. That was better than sounding frustrated.

“We trained for occupying Belter stations. One of the base tactics that Belters used was throwing environmental stasis off just enough that we’d have to keep bumping it up our priority queue. Someone somewhere on the station is trying to make it harder for these folks.”

“Huh,” Amos said. “That’s pretty ballsy.”

“It only works if the occupying force isn’t willing to just kill everyone and start over. So yeah. There’s an element of playing chicken.”

The group in front of them on the rope wore gray-black jumpsuits with CHARLES BOYLE GAS TRANSPORT logos in green on the back. The one floating nearest them looked back over his shoulder, catching Bobbie’s eye almost shyly. She nodded, and the man nodded back, hesitated, tilted his head a centimeter forward.

“Perdó,” he said, nodding toward Clarissa. “La hija la? She’s sick?”

Bobbie felt herself tense. It wasn’t a threat. It wasn’t an insult. It was just someone who wasn’t part of her crew putting themselves into her business. But maybe she was feeling as tense as Amos. She took a little breath and nodded.

The man tapped his compatriot ahead of him on the rope. They spoke for a moment in Belter cant so thick and fast, Bobbie couldn’t follow it, then they all released the rope and gestured Bobbie forward. Giving up their place in line so that Clarissa could get to the *Roci* a few minutes sooner. It was a tiny thing. A gesture. It shouldn’t have hit her as hard as it did.

“Thank you,” Bobbie said, and ushered the others forward. “Thank you very much.”

“Is is,” the man said, waving her thanks away. It wasn’t an idiom she’d heard before, but his expression explained it. *We do what we can for each*

other.

The Laconians were efficient. The line moved quickly. Even with as many people as were waiting, the *Roci* crew reached the head of the line in only a couple of hours. An escort of four Marines checked her authorizations, scanned them all for weapons. Apart from a momentary hit of panic when they were looking at Clarissa's scan—would her modifications keep them from letting her on?—everything went smoothly. And after all, her mods had been designed to get past security unnoticed. Good to know they were still doing their jobs, even while they killed her.

The *Rocinante* was waiting for them in the dock, loyal as a dog. When they cycled the airlock and pulled themselves in, Bobbie felt her shoulders relax. The air smelled familiar. It wasn't even a particular scent so much as a sense of rightness. Of being home. Bobbie let herself imagine they were getting on board to leave, that they'd be burning for one of the gates. Diving down toward one sun or another.

Someday, maybe. Not now.

"You have one hour," the escort lead said.

Bobbie shook her head. "My mechanic needs to be in the med bay for longer than that. She has to have a blood flush."

"She'll have to do the best she can in an hour. She can visit medical facilities on the station."

Bobbie looked at the guard. The man had a wide face and skin just a shade darker than Bobbie's own. A lifetime of habit mapped out how Bobbie would try disarming him, controlling his weapon, getting into cover. Chances weren't great. The Laconians moved like they'd been well trained, and the oldest of them still looked to be hauling around a decade less than she was.

"It's fine, Captain," Clarissa said. "I can set the system to do a fast push and get blockers. I've done it before."

"If you need another waiver," the guard said, "you can apply for it once you've left."

"Fine," Bobbie said. "Let's get on with this."

They moved through the ship like they were visiting someone in prison. The guards went with them everywhere, examined everything they took from their cabins, watched every command they gave the ship, copied every report the ship returned. The resentment in Bobbie's gut ached, but there wasn't anything to be done about it. Their pass allowed them to retrieve

personal items and any tools they needed for their work, provided they didn't present a security risk. Which was a shame. There was a part of her that would have liked to explain that she worked as a mercenary so that she could walk out of here with Betsy around her like a shell.

As she packed her things from the captain's cabin, her guard watching wordlessly from the doorway, she opened a connection to Alex.

"What's the good word?" she said.

"Roci's a little bored, but she's in good condition," Alex said from the flight deck. "A little impurity in the water supply we should look at, but it's likely just a seal that's wearing out. A little stray leaching."

"Okay," Bobbie said. She wanted to stay. She wanted to spend her hours polishing her ship and fixing every flaw they could put hands to. She had thirty-five minutes left. "Flag it. We'll dig in next time."

"Next time, Cap'n," Alex agreed. Because there would be a next time. Even if there wasn't, they were going to pretend there would be. She locked down her cabinets, checked the message queue from the ship's system to make sure everything was getting to her hand terminal—or at least that the Laconian censors were locking everything down equally—and pulled herself back down the corridor and toward the lift.

"This a Martian ship?" her guard asked.

"It is," Bobbie said as they reached the lift and headed down for the machine shop.

"I've seen some like her back home. First fleet had a lot like this."

First fleet meaning all the ships that Duarte had stolen when he'd escaped to Laconia. But also, Bobbie realized, meaning there was a second fleet. One with ships like the monstrosity that had killed the *Tori Byron*.

"Must look pretty quaint, eh?" she said, trying to make light of it, inviting the guard to give something away. But if there had been an opportunity there, she'd missed it.

In the machine shop, Amos had almost finished collecting a set of safety-approved tools into a small ceramic toolbox. He nodded to her as she floated in, stopping herself on a handhold. She saw his sign again: YOU TAKE CARE OF HER. SHE TAKES CARE OF YOU. The words had more weight now. She'd barely had a chance to take care of the *Rocinante*, at least not as her captain. She hoped another chance would come.

"You ready to roll out?" she asked.

"Yep," Amos said.

Clarissa and Alex were already in the airlock with their guard when Bobbie and Amos got there. Clarissa looked more relaxed, and there was more color in her skin. Alex would have seemed relaxed to anyone who didn't know him, but Bobbie saw how he looked at the ship, how his hand lingered on the bulkhead. He knew as well as she did that there was no guarantee they'd ever be back.

The guards escorted them along the nearly empty docks, back toward the transfer point to the drum and spin gravity, then went back for the next crew to the next ship. When they were alone, Bobbie cleared her throat.

"All right. How did that go?" she asked.

"They've locked her down pretty tight," Alex said. "But they didn't get everything. Give me twenty minutes, I can probably get her working."

"I've got a decent kit," Amos said, holding up the toolbox. "Could get some low-level work with just this. Not cutting through any decking, though."

"Claire?"

Clarissa smiled and shrugged. "I feel a little better, and I've got enough blockers."

Bobbie put a hand on her thin shoulder. "We'll take care of you," she said.

"I know you will," Clarissa said.

"All right, then," Bobbie said. "The way I see it, the next step is find someone who can get messages back to the union. Or Earth-Mars. See if there's anyone out there with a plan, or if we're going to have to make one up on our own."

"We can do that," Amos said. "Shouldn't be hard."

"You sure?" Alex said. "This is Medina Station under occupation by a bunch of splinter Martian military expats. It's not Baltimore."

Amos' smile was as placid as always. "Everywhere's Baltimore."



Bobbie had known and worked with Amos Burton for years, and he kept being able to surprise her. For the next two days, Amos took the lead, moving through Medina Station apparently without any particular aim or purpose. They went to sit in a bar by the water recycling plant, went to

interview with a pop-up service that was matching people who'd been locked off their ships with accommodations, played a little dirt football with a crew of technicians whose old split-circle OPA tattoos had been softened and smudged by the years.

Every now and then, Bobbie caught something—a phrase or a gesture—that didn't quite feel right, like there was a second conversation going on at some frequency her ears couldn't pick up. She took up her position at Amos' back and watched for threats, either from the Laconians or the locals.

Everywhere they went, the station seemed to be on the edge of something. It was in the air and the voices of everyone they spoke to. Guards in power armor. Checkpoints. The Laconians had erected an open-air jail, and filled it with men and women living behind bars like animals at a particularly shitty zoo. With hand terminals locked down and the internal communications network restricted to the point of uselessness, every conversation seemed fraught and dangerous. *Anything worth encrypting is worth not putting on a network in the first place*, Amos would sometimes say. Bobbie had never really thought about how much communication changed when every time you spoke, you had to be close enough that the other person could stab you if they wanted to. Never before, anyway.

And then, after three days, the old Belter who'd been the opposing goalie at their football game came to them at the little public table where they were eating mushrooms and noodles, nodded to Amos, and walked away. The big man got up, stretched his neck until it popped, and turned to Bobbie.

"We've got a thing," he said.

"A good one or a bad one?" she said.

"One or the other."

Bobbie took a last mouthful of her breakfast, chewed, and swallowed. "Understood," she said. "Let's go."

Clarissa and Alex stood when she did. Part of her wanted to order them to stay back. If things went south, they'd be safe. As if anywhere was safe. She didn't say anything.

The old Belter led them to an access corridor with a ramp that sank down, out toward the skin of the drum and the emptiness beyond it, the void always just underfoot. They passed two different concealed guard posts that she saw, and while she didn't think there were any others that had escaped

her notice, she couldn't be sure. The old Belter didn't say anything, and Amos didn't try to strike up a conversation.

The warehouse they ended up in was half filled with storage boxes fixed to the deck with maglocks. The lighting was harsh, restricted-wavelength worklights with a flicker that made her feel like her vision was strobing if she moved her hand too quickly. Three men leaned on the crates, their arms loose at their sides so they wouldn't have to spend the quarter second uncrossing them if things came to violence. Bobbie felt a warmth in her gut, a presentiment of trouble that was almost welcome. Invading ships with unimaginable weapons, protomolecule technology that could rip atoms apart, sudden empires imposed without warning or precedent. She'd grit her teeth and move forward because there wasn't another option. But thugs in warehouses was territory she understood.

The man in the middle of the three was a Belter, tall and muscular. His skin was the same brown as his hair and eyes. Even if he hadn't been pretty, he'd have been striking. And he was pretty.

"Heard you wanted to talk," he said.

Amos looked back at her, and pointed to the pretty man with his chin. He'd gotten them this far, but she was the boss. This was hers now.

"Who'd you hear we wanted to talk to?" Bobbie asked, stepping forward. Clarissa shifted out to her side. As weak and compromised as she looked, they'd underestimate her. Bobbie didn't know what using the implants would do to Clarissa, but by the time it took its toll, all three of the men would be incapacitated or dead. And that was without her and Amos weighing in.

The pretty man tilted his head.

"Names are dangerous, coyo," he said.

Bobbie pointed a thumb to herself. "Captain Bobbie Draper." She turned to the others. "Alex Kamal. Clarissa Mao. Amos Burton. Now, who the fuck are you?"

The pretty man scowled, tilting his head like he was trying to recall a song that was just at the edge of memory. It was a look she'd seen before, and she didn't feel like helping him place her. Not yet, anyway.

"Saba," the man said at last, "and that's enough for you right now."

"You're playing this all pretty close to the chest, Saba," Bobbie said.

"Not interested in being under the authority of the authorities," he said. "I've got reasons for that."

“Well, I’m not working for Laconia, so we can stop the bullshit, right?”

“Not sure we can,” Saba said. His hand terminal chimed—a sound Bobbie didn’t remember hearing since the crackdown—but he ignored it. Interesting that he had a working hand terminal, though. The chances that he was the real deal went up in her estimation.

“Heard you were looking to get in touch with the underground,” Saba said. “Leaves a man wondering why. You looking to trade with the new boss?”

“Nope,” Bobbie said.

“Then you thinking you’re going to come tell us what to do?”

Bobbie smiled. She could feel her teeth against her lips. Either they were going to back each other down, or this was going to end in blood. She hoped it was the former, but it wasn’t her call. “We were there when that fucking idiot tried to kill the governor. If that’s the level you people are working at, then yes, I’d be happy to help organize. Someone ought to.”

Saba’s face was cool. “Belters been standing under the oppressors’ boot for generations. You think you’ve got something to teach *us*?”

“Apparently so,” Bobbie said. “Seems like some of you assholes have gotten pretty rusty.”

A little darkness came to Saba’s olive cheeks. He stood up, stepped forward. Bobbie took her own step in to meet him. If she showed weakness now, they’d never take her seriously again. The chirp of his hand terminal seemed to come from another universe.

“What?” Bobbie said, not giving him the tempo. “You planning to do this without any allies? Without any support? You against the Laconian Empire? I’ve seen how that went up to now, and—”

“Saba!”

The new voice came from behind her. She didn’t want to turn her back on the three Belters, but she didn’t want someone unknown at her back either.

“Saba!” the voice said again. It sounded young. Excited. Bobbie threw a glance over her shoulder. A young woman in a green jumpsuit, grinning like someone had just given her a present.

“Que, Nanda?” Saba asked.

“Found someone,” the girl said. “Look.”

And from behind the girl, Holden and Naomi came into the room, squinting at the ugly light.

“Hey!” Holden said, and then “Bobbie. This is great. I wasn’t sure how we were going to find you.”

Saba whistled low. “James fucking Holden. You’ll no believe how much I’ve heard about you.”

“All good, I hope?” Holden said, walking forward, oblivious to the tension in the room. Or maybe choosing to ignore it. It was always hard to tell with him. “You’ve met my old crew already?”

“You crew?” Saba said, then looked at Bobbie as if seeing her for the first time. He laughed. “Savvy I did. Well, then. Welcome to the underground.”

She smiled, but something ugly plucked at her guts. *James fucking Holden*, Bobbie thought. Three magic words, and just like that, someone else was in charge.

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Chapter Nineteen: Drummer

The image was grainy, the sound almost as much noise as signal. Half a dozen encryption layers poured on and then stripped back out left their artifacts in the flattened audio and near-false colors. Drummer's heart softened all the same, because there in the middle of it—unmistakably—was Saba. His eyes had the little puff at the lower lid that he got when he was tired, but his smile was luminous.

"No savvy you how good it was to get your message, Cami," he said. "Heart outside my body, you are. And no one better than us two to be where we're sitting."

"I love you too," she told the screen, but only because no one else was in her office.

Avasarala's covert contacts had come through faster than Drummer had hoped. That they'd come through at all was something of a shock. She had been willing to believe the old woman was overstating her powers, claiming a level of influence that retirement and age had long since taken from her. But here was evidence that, whatever else she was, Chrisjen Avasarala wasn't completely full of shit. Saba had burrowed deep into Medina Station like a tick, making connections with as many union operatives as he safely could. And by union, more often than not, he meant OPA.

She listened and took notes by hand as he went through his full report. Writing it out helped her to remember. Sixty-eight people on Medina Station broken into independent cells that went from three to eight. The amateur, botched assassination and the crackdown that followed. Saba didn't have to say that he was using it to recruit more for his effort. That was obvious. The focus moving forward was intelligence gathering and infrastructure. Avasarala's network was all well and good, but having multiple backups, blind zones in the station where the Laconian security couldn't reach, and opening backdoors into the communications of the enemy were how to prepare for the next wave. And find out what the next

wave was going to be.

Drummer found herself nodding with his words, thinking through their implications. The Laconians were routing their comms through a destroyer-sized ship docked on Medina with heavy encryption and an off-ship decrypt local to the station to physically isolate the two. No good way to gather intelligence there, and no chance of breaking into the enemy's system. She'd need to find the firmware code for the antennas and repeaters. Maybe Avasarala's henchmen in the Earth-Mars Coalition had some exploits they'd been sitting on that she could pass on to Saba. The Laconian checkpoints were tying up a third of their ground force. That kept the soldiers busy in the known and public corridors, and gave Saba's people more time to create bolt holes and blind zones. If the crackdown slacked off, they'd want to do something provocative to keep the enemy busy with identity checks and traffic control. Trivial security theater, while the underground dug more tunnels into the body of the station. It was possible that all the updated plans for Medina were in Laconian hands. Any known holes, they had to assume were known to all the players, but making new ones wouldn't be hard for Saba. He understood smuggling as well as she ever had, and maybe better.

The message ended with Saba's impish grin.

"You watch you, m'dil," he said, and blew a kiss to the camera. "Live like you're dead."

Drummer touched the screen as if it were his cheek, but it was cold and hard. *Live like you're dead*. There was a phrase she hadn't heard in a long time. Once, it had been the motto of the Voltaire Collective. A call to courage with a fatalistic bravado that angry adolescents found romantic. She'd found it romantic once too.

She checked the time. Saba's message had run almost twenty minutes. Part of her found it hard to believe it had been that long. She could have drunk in the sound of his voice for another hour and still been thirsty. From her screen after screen after screen of written notes, it was astounding that he'd fit so much information into so short a time.

She went through all she'd written again, committing it to memory, then wiped her notes. Information couldn't be compromised if it didn't exist. She put in a comm request for Vaughn. He answered immediately.

"Where do we stand with the military attaché?" she asked.

"Waiting on word from you, ma'am," Vaughn said.

“Have them in the conference room in ten minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Vaughn said. There was a surreptitious pleasure in his voice. The diplomats and coordinators from the Earth-Mars Coalition had been flooding into People’s Home since the fall of Medina, and Vaughn enjoyed telling them what to do. It was probably a vice, but she didn’t mind indulging it.

Drummer rose from her desk and stretched. Her spine popped once between her shoulders, loudly. She yawned, but not from fatigue. It was the kind of yawn that a runner made before a race. The deep inhalation of someone anticipating great effort. If she’d been keeping a normal schedule, her watch would almost be over. That wasn’t how she lived anymore. Now she was awake when she needed to be awake, and asleep when she could. *Sin ritma* they’d called that lifestyle back when she’d been younger. It was harder on her body now, and it took an extra bulb of coffee to sharpen her mind sometimes, but it also left her smiling in a way she didn’t wholly understand.

Benedito Lafflin, the EMC liaison, was waiting for her twenty minutes later. His fist was closed around a bulb of soda water that was already half collapsed. His wide, toadlike face looked less smug than usual. “Madam President,” he said, standing.

Drummer waved him back down. As she sat, Vaughn brought her a bulb of tea. She took a sip. Hot, but not scalding. Vaughn drifted back to the wall like he was part of the ship’s machinery.

“What are we looking at?” Drummer said.

Lafflin cleared his throat. “Candidly? I think you’re going to be quite happy with the plan.”

“Are you giving me direct control over your fleets?”

He blinked. “Ah ... Well, that’s ...”

Drummer smiled. “I’ll probably still be okay with it. What do you have?”

He took out a hand terminal and threw the data onto the conference room wall. The solar system unfolded before them. Nothing quite to scale, of course. Space was too huge and too empty for that. The fleets of Earth and Mars and the Transport Union were all outlined—location and vector for everything in transit, planetary body and orbital period for everything else. All of it tracked through time. Nothing was ever at rest.

And on the edge of the system, hell and gone from anything, the gate

where the enemy would arrive.

“Given what we know about the enemy battleship,” Lafflin began, “we have worked up several scenarios that we think will give our combined forces the best tactical advantage. The first, of course, being to interrupt it in transit.”

“Walk me through it,” Drummer said.

For the next two hours, Drummer reviewed scenario after scenario after scenario. Lafflin made his case for each of them. Another person like him was with every member of the union board making all the same arguments. Soon the debates would start. With the void cities, the union had a fleet at least as powerful as the EMC. If Saba could make contact with ships in the colonies, it might be possible to coordinate attacks on the slow zone, no matter what Avasarala thought. If not, there was local action to be done on Medina that might be just as good or better.

Time after time, his plans came back to the same thing—protecting Earth, protecting Mars. Keeping the inners from being disrupted, no matter what the cost. Her guess was that the board would see the same things she did. And then ...

She hadn’t wanted to be a police force for the thirteen hundred worlds. She certainly hadn’t wanted to lead a military. But with every new twist, every tactical suggestion, she heard the imagined voices of the board, of Secretary-General Li, of Avasarala. It wouldn’t work. Someone was going to have to take charge, and she didn’t see many scenarios where that wasn’t her.

“Thank you,” she said when the last of the imagined battles had played out on her monitor. “I appreciate your time. Let me confer, and we’ll talk again in the morning?”

“Thank you, Madam President,” he said as Vaughn escorted him out of the room.

As soon as he was gone, she pulled up the scenarios, paging through them all again without him. They’d considered mining their side of the gate with a wall of high-yield nukes, but abandoned it because no one was really sure if the ring could be damaged or not. A safer plan was a series of ships looping up above the ecliptic, doing a high burn and dumping gravel that could make a stone veil over the mouth of the gate. She would be able to control when there were gaps that allowed passage and when any ship making the transit would step into a shotgun blast. And it would last until

they ran out of reaction mass and gravel. It was a Belter tactic. Another gift from the old days. She thought about putting the idea in her response to the EMC, but the truth was she didn't need their permission, and the void city Independence was close enough to the gate that if they went on the burn now, they could have something in place before the board even finished debating ...

Drummer let her head sink into her hands. Her neck ached and a deep, vague craving bothered her—something like thirst, but without a clear sense of what could slake it. If anything could.

She heard the door open behind her, but she didn't bother looking up. Whoever it was, she didn't care. And anyway, it would only be Vaughn.

"Madam President," Vaughn said.

"Yeah."

"Something's come through you should probably see."

"Something wonderful that's going to fill my life with joy?"

"No."

She sat up, waving one hand in a circle. *Get on with it.*

"There's been a new transmission from Medina," Vaughn said. "On the official feeds."

"More threats and posturing from Laconia? Or have they made the war official?"

"Neither one," Vaughn said, and took the monitor focus. A simple video feed of a podium in front of a few tiers of chairs. Drummer was a little surprised by the simple blue curtains at the back. She'd expected more imperial pomp. A Signa Romanum with a double-headed eagle. The chairs were filled with people meant to look like journalists, whether they were or not.

Carrie Fisk walked into the frame and took her place at the podium. Drummer felt her mouth go hard.

"Thank you all for coming today," Fisk said, nodding to her audience. She gathered herself. Looked out, then down again. "Since its creation, the Association of Worlds has been a staunch advocate of independence and planetary sovereignty. As such, we have tracked issues of self-rule in the newly colonized systems and fought for the rights of people living on them. The hegemonic power of Sol system and the Transport Union have proven time and again that those in power have valued the systems unequally. Sol and the union have claimed a de facto sovereignty over what they have,

through their actions, made clear they consider second-class planets and governments.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Drummer murmured. “Fuck you and your quisling bullshit.”

“I have had the opportunity to meet several times with the representatives of the Laconian system about the future of the ring gates and the nature of commerce and governance between the worlds. And I am very happy to be able to say that the Association of Worlds has voted unanimously to accept Laconia’s offers of protection and the coordination of trade. In exchange, High Consul Duarte has accepted the association’s requirements for self-rule and political autonomy. With this—”

Drummer killed the feed. Duarte had planned this too. Not only the military campaign but the story that made it something other than a blatant conquest. *He came back because he thinks he can win, and if he thinks that, you should prepare yourself for the idea that it’s true.* Carrie Fisk would be on the newsfeeds of thirteen hundred worlds—worlds that Drummer was cut off from—and the story she told would find rich enough soil to take root.

“Self-rule and political autonomy?” she said. “At the end of a gun? How does that work?”

“Tribute,” Vaughn said. “A pledge of financial and resource support if called on, but with very little suggestion that there will be occasion for it.”

“Plus the promise that he won’t kill the shit out of them, I’m guessing?”

Vaughn’s smile was flinty. “Fisk didn’t make that explicit, but I think the implication’s there, yes.”

Drummer pressed her hand to her chin, stood up. Part of her wanted to send Vaughn to the med bay to come back with something to keep her awake. Amphetamines, cocaine, anything stronger than another bulb of tea.

“It’s been a long day,” she said. “When the EMC’s messages start coming through, tell them to calm their shit down, and that we’re going to address this.”

“And for the board members?” Vaughn asked.

“Tell ’em the same,” Drummer said as she walked out. “Tell ’em it’s all under control.”

Back in her quarters, she stripped, leaving her clothes in a pathway from the door to the shower. She stood under the near-scalding water, letting it run down her back and over her face. It felt wonderful. Heat conduction as

raw, physical comfort. Eventually, she killed the water, took a towel to sluice off most of the moisture, and then dropped to her crash couch, one arm flung over her eyes. Exhaustion pulled her down into the gel more powerfully than the spin of the drum. She waited for the despair to come.

It didn't. The union was facing an existential threat. The fragile fabric of human civilization in the colonies was ripping before her eyes, and she was relieved. From her first memories to the death of the Free Navy, she'd been a Belter and a member of one faction or another of the OPA. Her brain and soul and identity had all matured with the inners' boot at her throat. At the throat of everyone she loved.

The respectability of Tycho Station and then of the union and now of the presidency had been her dream from the start. The prospect of a Belter reaching power equal to the inners had guided her on, if not for her, then at least a Belter like her. And like all dreams, the closer she'd come to it, the better she understood what it really was. For years, she'd worn power and authority like it was someone else's jumpsuit. Now, with Duarte and Laconia, everything she'd built was falling away. And part of her was happy about it. She'd been raised to fight against great powers. To wage wars she couldn't win, but also couldn't lose. Returning to that now was a staggering loss, but it also felt like coming home.

Her mind began to slip away, her consciousness falling into dream. History was a cycle. Everything that had happened before, all the way back through the generations, would happen again. Sometimes the wheel turned quickly, sometimes it was slow. She could see it like a feed gear, all teeth and bearings with her on the rim along with everybody else. Her last thought before forgetfulness took her and she fell deeply into slumber was that even with the gates, nothing really ever changed so much as repeated itself, over and over, with all new people, forever.

Which, in light of the next morning's first meeting, was more than a little ironic.



"We've never seen anything like this before." She'd known Cameron Tur professionally since she'd first taken a job with the union, and he'd never registered as more than vaguely interested in anything.

Now he sat across the table from her, gesturing with a tortilla like he was conducting an orchestra with it. His eyes were wide and bright, his voice higher and faster than usual, and she couldn't make out what the hell he was saying.

"Hot places in space," she repeated, looking at the schematic. "So, like stealth ships? Are you saying there are stealth ships waiting outside the ring gate?"

"No, no, no," Tur said. "Not that kind of hot. Not *temperature* hot."

Drummer gave a short, frustrated laugh and put the hand terminal down. "Okay, maybe we should try this again like you were talking to a civilian. There are these areas we've seen that are ... what exactly?"

"Well," Tur said, nodding more to himself than to her. "Of course you know that a vacuum isn't really empty. There are always electromagnetic waves and particles that pop in and out of existence. Quantum fluctuation."

"My background is in security and politics," she said.

"Oh. Right," Tur said. He seemed to notice his tortilla, took a bite from it. "Well, vacuum state isn't at all just emptiness. There are always spontaneous quantum creations and annihilations. Hawking-Zel'dovich radiation that allows for—"

"Security, Tur. Politics and security."

"Sorry. Really small things just show up and then they just go away," Tur said. "Much smaller than atoms. It happens all the time. It's perfectly normal."

"All right," Drummer said, and took a sip of her morning coffee. Either it was a little more bitter than usual or she was overly sensitive today.

"So when we turned all the sensor arrays on the gate? To try to get more information about the war and all that? There was interference we couldn't make sense of. It was like the kind we see when signals pass through the gates, but it wasn't localized there. It was out in normal space." He pulled the schematic back up. "Here and here and here. That we know of. There may be others, but we haven't done a full sweep looking for them. But we never saw anything like this, and the logs make it seem like they may have appeared about the same time that the Laconian ship went through the gate. Or when it fired at the ring station. We don't have great data on timing."

"All right," Drummer said again. She was growing impatient.

"It's the rate, you see. The rates of quantum creation and annihilation are ... they're through the roof. The uptick is *massive*."

She was still struggling to get her mind around the idea that emptiness wasn't empty, but something about the awe in Tur's voice sent a chill down her back all the same.

"So you're telling me ... what exactly?"

"That the space near the ring started *boiling*," Tur said. "And we don't know why."

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Chapter Twenty: Singh

Santiago Singh spent a very unpleasant few days dealing with the fallout from his newly announced security protocols for Medina Station. One by one, every bureaucrat and functionary called him to express their concerns over how the crackdown might negatively impact morale and efficiency on the station. However the conversations were phrased, what he heard in them was always the same. *The new rules will make people unhappy. They won't work as hard. Sabotage will increase. Are you sure we want to do this?*

His responses, however he put them, were also of a piece: *I don't care if people are unhappy about the new rules, if they fail to do their jobs, they will be fired, sabotage is punishable by imprisonment or death, yes, I'm sure.*

In High Consul Duarte's seminal book on logistics, he'd pointed out that of all the methods by which one can exert political and economic control over another state, occupation by military force was the least effective and the most unstable. The justification for occupation of Medina Station was that, as the checkpoint of all thirteen hundred colony worlds, it minimized the need for any further military action and let the imperial government move on quickly to economic trade and cultural pressure, which were much more stable long-term strategies for exerting control. And in fact, demonstrating to the people of Medina that the Laconian takeover would lead to better lives for all of them was the test case. If Singh could convince a station full of people bred for anarchy that imperial rule was desirable, the still-nascent colonies beyond the gates should be a piece of cake.

He understood all of this well enough. But it didn't change the fact that he'd had to spend his afternoon explaining to stupid, angry people why attempting to assassinate the governor of the station carried consequences.

When he cut the connection on what he hoped was the last of those complaints, he yelled out for someone to bring him coffee or tea or whatever else passed for a potable on that festering armpit of a station. No

one replied. Because Kasik was dead and he hadn't yet brought himself to assign anyone new to his duties. As if by keeping the dead man on the roster, some part of him still remained that history hadn't erased.

For a moment, the buzz of activity and conversation, irritation and confrontation that he'd cultivated since the incident slipped away, and he saw Kasik spitting raspberry jam that was really his brain and his blood and part of his tongue—

Singh lost a few seconds. When he became aware again, he was on his knees next to his desk, vomiting into his trash can. From the state of the bin, he'd been at it for a while. The smell and look of the mess set off a new round of vomiting that only ended when his stomach clenched up painfully on nothing and a thin trickle of bile bit at the back of his throat. Delayed shock. Trauma reaction. It was normal, he told himself. Anyone would go through it.

"I'm so sorry, Kasik," he said, face suddenly covered in tears for a man whose first name he couldn't even remember.

The comm unit on his desk politely beeped. "Leave me the fuck alone," Singh yelled at it.

"Admiral Trejo is here for you, sir," a carefully neutral voice replied.

"Here?"

"In the security lobby, sir."

Singh cursed under his breath, soft but vicious. He grabbed the liner out of his trash can and stuffed it into the recycler. The air probably still smelled of sick. He turned the air recyclers as high as they would run to cut it.

"Put him through in one minute, please," Singh answered, then used the sixty seconds to wash his face and rinse out his mouth. Trejo had returned to Medina. It could have meant a number of things, but all of them meant he wanted to have a face-to-face conversation instead of trading messages through the comparatively glacial security apparatus that surrounded official communications. And that meant talking about sensitive issues.

"Sonny," Admiral Trejo said as he walked into the room. "You look a fright."

"Yes, sir," Singh agreed. "I'm afraid that recent events have shaken me a bit more than I expected. But I'm getting it secured. Shipshape and ready to sail, sir."

"Have you slept at all?" Trejo asked. He sounded genuinely concerned.

“Yes, sir,” he said. And then, because it felt like lying, “Some, sir.”

“It’s hard losing someone. Especially someone you worked with closely.”

“I’ll be fine, sir,” Singh said. “Please, take my desk.”

Trejo’s smile was sympathetic as he sat. He took the offered desk. “I have good news for you, at least. I passed along your findings on the gamma-ray bursts through the rings, along with your recommendation about using a ship with an ultrahigh magnetic field projector stationed in the slow zone to control access and passage. Naval high command was very intrigued. They took it all the way to the top.”

The top meant only one person on Laconia. “I’m very flattered it got so much attention, Admiral.”

“He agrees with you,” Trejo said. His voice had a flatness that Singh didn’t entirely understand. His green eyes flicked up to meet Singh’s gaze and they stayed there. “They’re sending out the *Eye of the Typhoon*. It’ll take a bit for her to outfit. She wasn’t scheduled to come through for another four months, but you’ll have her with all deliberate speed. She’ll have Medina Station defense as her official mission, but holding the ring system using your new data will be part of her parameters.”

“Rear Admiral Song has that command, as I recall.”

“Yeah, that’s Song’s boat,” Trejo agreed. “But you’re still governor of Medina. You’ll have operational command over the defense of the station, and that includes determining when and if our new ring strategy is appropriate.”

“Yes, sir,” Singh replied.

“It’ll be heady stuff, knowing an admiral has to dance to your tune, Sonny. Just remember that this posting won’t last forever. Don’t make any enemies you can’t unmake.” There was a weight to Trejo’s words, like they carried more than just what they said. They landed on Singh’s chest like a gentle rebuke.

“Understood and appreciated, Admiral,” Singh said. “Will the *Tempest* remain here until the *Typhoon* arrives to take over?”

“No. We are moving up the timetable, per your analysis. The *Tempest* is leaving through the Sol gate in four hours. Unless you’ve reconsidered your position?”

Singh felt an offer in the question. This was the chance for him to say that he was out of his depth. That he needed backup and help. The

temptation to claim perfect fitness was strong, but he couldn't dismiss the fact that he was, in fact, compromised. The question was whether his own frailty was enough to risk giving Sol system more time to prepare. The most dangerous part of the *Tempest's* mission in Sol system was the transit through the gate and the hours immediately after it. The longer the enemy had to exploit that period of vulnerability, the less the time he'd won with his discovery of the gamma burst would gain them. He didn't want to undercut the advantage he'd just provided.

And still ...

He started to reply, but stopped when the bitter-lemon taste of bile crept up the back of his throat again. *Not now.* He swallowed furiously, hoping this would be enough to hold off yet another round of vomiting into his trash bin. Trejo's eyes widened with what looked like genuine concern.

"Sonny," Trejo said, "have you seen a doctor?"

"Immediately following the attack. I sustained no injuries beyond a bruise on my knee and a bit of pride."

"That's not what I mean," Trejo said.

"I'll be fine," Singh lied, but Trejo didn't call him on it. "I know that the ring emissions were never part of the defensive strategy before, but I find myself worried about leaving such a powerful tool behind."

"Understood. I'll be honest, I'm not totally happy moving the timetable up. Slow and steady, that's the strategy I like best. But there's nothing so far to indicate the locals have made any breakthroughs we don't know about. The high consul thinks we can afford to pull the *Tempest* out past the gate early. It does feel a bit like I'm leaving you here with your ass hanging out. But there is exactly one fleet in known space that poses a threat to our plans here. And it's bottled up in the Sol system. You won't need to worry about defending Medina from it at all, because I'm going to force them to fight me on their home ground. I don't expect the colonies are going to cause you any trouble a destroyer can't handle."

"I agree, sir," Singh said. "We'll hold and wait for the *Typhoon's* arrival, or word of your success in Sol, whichever comes first."

Singh expected this to end the conversation, and waited for Admiral Trejo to stand. Instead, the old man stared at him with thoughtful eyes until the silence had become uncomfortable. Etiquette dictated that he not close the interview until his superior dismissed him, so he stared back and tried for a vague smile.

When Trejo spoke again, his voice was lower. “Tanaka filed her report. She’ll be boarding a shuttle shortly to take up a post on the *Tempest*.”

“Oh,” Singh replied, hoping it came off as casual.

“Don’t misunderstand me. She’s a fine operator, and her experience is more than welcome there. But if there are problems with her, I would like to know what they are.”

“I’m sure her talents will—” Singh started, but Trejo cut him off without raising his voice.

“If she’s going to take a command role on my ship, I’m going to need to understand why you removed her from yours,” the admiral said, his voice as gentle as though he’d asked for the time. “That’s what I’m asking you for.”

“Yes, sir,” Singh replied. *If I understood it myself*, he thought. The fury at everyone and everything that had followed the attack had faded, leaving behind only a vaguely unsettled feeling, like the adolescent fear of forgotten homework. Like there was something that needed to be done, something that would cause trouble if it wasn’t, but he had no idea what the thing was or even how to find out.

“Anytime, Sonny,” Trejo said.

Singh took a deep breath that stuttered a little. He hated that it did. “It was my feeling, at the time, that failing to respond to the attack on my person, and by extension on the authority of the high consul and the empire itself, would only serve to embolden any dissident elements here on the station. I felt that a strong response was needed to enforce the message that this was now our station, that we weren’t going anywhere, and that any attempt to hinder our work would fail. End the idea of a rebellion before it could begin.”

“And you believe Colonel Tanaka didn’t understand or support this position?” Trejo asked.

“She counseled a more conciliatory approach. I believe her experience in the Martian military guided her here, but that it was not experience that translated well to this new situation. She disagreed, and stated that she would not support the new security measures, deeming them too harsh. I relieved her at that point.”

“Why did her considerable experience not translate, do you think?” Trejo asked. The words could have been taken as mocking or rhetorical, but something in the old man’s voice made it seem like genuine curiosity.

If there's no cover, the only thing to do is charge. How did he keep finding himself in these situations?

Singh cleared his throat. "Colonel Tanaka learned about rebel pacification by dealing with a belligerent but unaligned population. The Belters were *not* citizens of Mars, though they fell under Martian influence and regulation. To some degree, 'winning hearts' was always part of the mandate. She still thinks that way. She wants to approach this insurgency in that way. Crack down on only those involved in the attack, and attempt to win the cooperation of the rest of the populace through kindness."

"You disagree with this assessment," Trejo said.

"I do. By mandate from the high consul himself, all humans are citizens of the Laconian Empire. The people on Medina are not a neutral third party placed between us and an insurgent faction. They are *Laconians*, and the insurgents are not a foreign government resisting conquest, they are criminals. Any other reaction defies the imperial mandate and legitimizes them. I don't need to win their hearts. I need them to understand that all the previous political bodies and relationships are irrelevant. We are not conquering new territory, we are enforcing the law in our empire."

Trejo smiled. "That could have come straight out of a political theory class at the academy. I wasn't asking for a book report, Captain. Do you believe all of that is true?"

It was a strange question. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't, Admiral."

"It is certainly the official position of the empire, and accurately stated," Trejo agreed.

"Sir, if that's all, I—"

"Why," Trejo asked, as if Singh hadn't spoken at all, "did the high consul place you here, do you think?"

"Sir?"

"Your educational credentials are impeccable. I've read your paper analyzing Duarte's theories on empire through logistical control. And I'd bet even he was impressed. You attributed some truly unique ideas to his text that I'm pretty sure aren't actually in there."

"Thank you, sir," Singh replied, trying to keep it from sounding like a question and failing.

"But you did exactly one tour on a naval vessel prior to this posting. And there are probably a hundred more like me and Tanaka on Laconia who have actual combat-command experience. Why you and not any of them?"

Singh had wondered that himself. “I honestly can’t answer that, sir.”

“And that’s the only right answer, Sonny. No, you don’t know. But I’m going to give you a hint. Do you know how to polish a rock?”

“No, sir.”

“You put it in a tumbler with a lot of other rocks and some sand and you roll them around for a couple of weeks until all the edges are worn off and they’re nice and shiny. We’re taking control of thirteen hundred different worlds, and we’ve only got a hundred old farts like me and Tanaka, and a couple thousand university-educated greenhorns like yourself.”

Singh had no idea what a greenhorn was. It sounded like a Mariner Valley idiom. But the context was clear. And so was the point.

“Colonel Tanaka was placed here to—” Singh started.

“To rub some of the stupid off you. Tanaka’s been fighting insurgents since before you were born. She’s killed more people than you’ve met. But we’ve already got a Colonel Tanaka. Putting her in charge doesn’t create anything new. Hopefully this little dust-up has knocked some of your edges off, or this will be a waste of everyone’s time. Tanaka’s scheduled to fly out in an hour. I think you owe her a conversation.”

“Yes, sir,” Singh replied. It tasted like more bile in his mouth, but the admiral was right.

Trejo rose. The meeting was ended.

“Dismissed, Captain. Make sure Medina’s still here when I get back.”

“Understood, Admiral.”



The bravest thing would have been to go to the *Tempest*. The easiest thing, to record a message and send it through the Medina system where the security measures would forgive not having the conversation in real time. He split the difference.

The Belter whiskey that someone had left in his old cabin on the *Storm* tasted like acid and mushrooms, but Singh drank it anyway. The alcohol seemed to finally cut through the last of the bile in his mouth and throat. He kicked his boots off, propped his heels on his desk, and waited for the knot in his chest to loosen, even if only a little bit.

It should have been obvious from the start. Looking back on it, the only

thing Singh had to recommend him for the governorship was his absolute commitment to High Consul Duarte's vision. But that's all they'd asked from him. They needed to take the inexperienced true believers like himself and drop them into the deep center of the lake, then hope they learned enough to swim back to shore. And everything about Tanaka: her arrogance, her contempt for his inexperience, her refusal to just accept his orders at face value. All of those were *exactly* the reason she'd been placed under his command. Throwing her out in a fit of pique was the sort of adolescent behavior they were trying to burn out of his system.

He had fucked it up.

The fact that Admiral Trejo understood that he'd done it in the blind panic that followed his first time under fire was both a relief and a humiliation. It was also probably the only reason he hadn't been relieved of command. Trejo saw what had gone wrong and still felt like Singh had something to offer. That he wasn't fit for the rubbish bin just yet. Comforting and humiliating, again.

He took another drink of the whiskey. It left his throat warm. That was about the best he could say for it. That was enough.

There was another trap ahead. Singh found that he could sense it. He could feel Trejo's attention, waiting to see how he'd navigate his way out now that his mistake had been made clear. The admiral had practically ordered Singh to speak with Tanaka before she left, so that's where the trap lay. He had a dozen different impulses about what that conversation would be, and he second-guessed every one of them as quickly as he recognized them. This was his command. So it was his to lose.

Maybe the right thing was to be willing to fail honorably. Even if he did get sent home to Nat and the monster, the disgrace would be less if he knew he'd done the fully adult thing.

He pulled the screen off his wrist and flattened it out on his desk. "Colonel Tanaka, video and voice," he said to it.

"Tanaka here," she said a moment later. On the small screen, her face was compressed down to only the most prominent features. Dark, heavy eyebrows. Wide jaw. Flattened, slightly off-center nose. It made her look dangerous and angry. She was probably both right now.

"Colonel," Singh said, trying to keep his tone even and informational. He thought he mostly succeeded. A call to finalize some trivial bureaucratic details.

“Governor,” she said, actually achieving the emotionless affect he was only trying for.

“I spoke to Admiral Trejo about your transfer. He said he was happy to move you into a command position on the *Tempest*, and I did nothing to dissuade him from this.”

“Thank you for not attempting to torpedo my career,” she said, not sounding grateful at all. The fact that she didn’t say, *Fuck you, little man, you couldn’t have hurt me even if you wanted to* was as polite as this was likely to get.

“I want you to know that I recognize that in my heightened emotional state following the attack, I made some poor decisions, not least of which was removing you from your command.”

There was a pause. A fraction of a fraction of a second, but it was there.

“Really,” she said. The large eyebrows moved up a millimeter.

“Yes. And if I could take that back without compounding my error, I would. But the most important thing now, to both my staff and to the citizens of Medina, is the appearance of calm authority at the top. To make so drastic a move as relieving you only to rescind it would make us ... make *me* appear weak and indecisive. So your transfer will be recorded as a move to put additional combat experience on Admiral Trejo’s staff, now that we’ve secured the station and he’s moving into the attack on Sol. It will not put a blemish on your outstanding record. Unfortunately, my apologies and regrets will have to remain unofficial for now.”

Tanaka frowned, though it looked more like surprise than anger. “I appreciate that, Governor.”

“Good luck and godspeed in Sol, Colonel. We will all be waiting for word of your mission’s success. Singh out.”

He closed the connection and drank off the last of the terrible Belter whiskey. He wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol, but he felt like a weight he’d been carrying ever since landing on Medina was lifting. This was *his* station now. His command, to fail or succeed at entirely on his own merits. And now he felt that the worst mistake he was likely to make was behind him, and it hadn’t actually been all that bad.

Things could only get better from here.

Chapter Twenty-One: Holden

Rather than leave them sneaking into and out of the refugee camps in the drum or Laconian-assigned quarters, Saba gave Holden and the crew access to a smuggler's cabin: a six-rack berth his people had carved out of a service tunnel where the station records were out of date and missing. It was a tight fit, and Alex snored a little, but it was better than the alternatives.

The room where they spent most of their time had been meant for midlevel storage. Not the deep pockets of the generation ship traveling through the vast abyss between the stars. Not the immediate, day-to-day pantry of the men and women whose lives would begin and end in the journey without seeing either end. Built-in yellow guides marked where crates of tools and imperishable rations would have been stacked along the deck and walls. History hadn't taken the room that way.

Cushions of gel and fabric covered the floor around a half-dismantled holographic display that acted as a low table. The air recyclers were set to minimum to keep the usage footprint of the space as low as it could be, and a battery-driven fan moved the thick air. Lengths of printed textile—Holden couldn't tell if it was cloth or plastic or carbon mesh—draped the walls and rustled in the little breeze. He didn't know if those were functional somehow, or if the impulse to decorate interiors just outlived all political circumstances. Mostly, it reminded Holden of a Moroccan restaurant he used to go to on Iapetus, back when he'd been hauling ice for Pur 'n' Kleen.

Saba and four people Holden assumed were his lieutenants sat across from him and the crew and refilled their cups with a smoky tea whenever they got low. In addition to being captain of a supply ship called the *Malaclypse* that was stuck in dock just like the *Roci*, Saba was married to Drummer. At first, Holden had been worried that what he'd done with Freehold was going to haunt him, but when he brought it up, Saba had waved it away. *It happened in a dream*, Saba said, which was a little

confusing until Naomi told him it was an old-timey Belter idiom for *Don't worry about it*.

Even after a long life spent outside Earth's gravity well, Holden was impressed by all the things he didn't know.

"Perdón," a Belter woman said, squeezing her way past the guard at the door. "Saba? Are you ready for food yet?"

Saba mostly managed to keep his smile polite. "No, Karo. Bist bien."

The woman bobbed her hands, nodding like a Belter. She swept her gaze over the rest of them, but paused a little bit at the *Rocinante's* crew—Holden, Naomi, Bobbie, Alex, Amos, and Clarissa. "Any of you? We've got mushroom bacon."

Bobbie cracked her knuckles meditatively. Holden was pretty sure that was a sign of annoyance.

"That's fine," he said. "We're good. Thank you."

The woman bobbed her hands again and squeezed back out. It was the third interruption of the morning. That was a little strange, but Holden put it down to a level of general anxiety for everyone. With the occupying force settled in, the freedom Saba's underground had to operate was thin as a razor blade, but everyone still wanted to be doing something.

"I'm sorry," Holden said, shifting which leg was folded under him. If he was always going to have one leg asleep, better to alternate them, he figured. "You were saying?"

Saba leaned forward. It didn't seem like sitting on the cushions made his legs go to sleep, but he was younger than Holden by a decade or two. "We need to find the balance, sa sa? The more of our own that we build, the more there is for us to use. But the more there is for them to find."

One of Saba's lieutenants, who'd spent the morning arguing for building a fully separate comm system by threading hair-thin cables through the water system, cleared her throat.

"The way I see it, we serve three masters: making space for ourselves, making tools for ourselves, and keeping space and tools from the inners. We have three percent of Medina now set where security can't see it. We have support from the crew. We have transmission out to and back from Sol gate. Have to look at the margin of what we risk against what we'd get from it. All I'm saying."

"Well, sure," Holden said, and Saba tilted his head. In his peripheral vision, Bobbie leaned in. When he looked over at her, her expression was

empty, but he had years of experience to tell him she was evaluating something. A threat, maybe, except that she was looking at him.

Holden shifted his legs again. "It's just that anything we do, we have to assume it's temporary, right?"

"Can't build on stone out here," Saba said with a grin, but Holden was pretty sure he hadn't understood the point he was getting at.

"Medina is our station," Holden said. "We know it better. All the niches and passages, all the undocumented features. All the tricks and doors and corners. And that's going to be true right up until it isn't. These people aren't dumb. They're busy right now, and maybe they'll stay that way for a while. But sooner or later, they are going to get to know the station. Our advantage only lasts for as long as it takes them to learn. So whatever we do here, it shouldn't be planning for the long term. We don't have a long term. We've got a short term, and maybe a medium term. Like, *maybe*?"

Saba shifted, sipped his tea, and nodded. "Good point, coyo," he said. "Maybe also, we start looking at evacuation plans. How not to spend a long life in a jail cell or a short one in an airlock."

"Whatever goals we pick," Holden said. "I just don't think we should spend the extra effort to make it something that's going to last a decade when we're probably looking at less than eight or ten weeks of freedom."

The way he said it, it sounded like an apology. Saba rubbed his palm across his chin. The room had gone so quiet, Holden could hear the hush of the man's stubble against his hand even over the whirl of the fan. Eight or ten weeks of freedom. It was the first time anyone in the meetings had guessed at the time frame. Whatever little apocalypse took out the underground, Holden expected it would be less than a springtime back on Earth.

"Is fair point," Saba said as a noise came from the corridor. Voices. A thin-faced man with a scar over his left eye leaned into the room, looked around, and nodded.

"New reports from upstairs if you want them," Scar-eye said. "Doesn't look like much of anything new. Checkpoints still on the move, and they put some stupid coyo in their public prison for being out after curfew, is all."

"I don't think—" Saba began.

Bobbie interrupted him. "Maybe you should. We could take a break. Right, Holden?"

“Um,” Holden said. “Sure.”

Saba shrugged with his hands. “Bien á. Maybe bring in some lunch, yeah?”

The meeting shifted. It was all the same people in the same space, but the motion of it changed. Holden leaned in and kissed Naomi gently on the cheek. She leaned her head against his as if it were only affection.

“What the fuck is going on?” Holden whispered. “Did I do something to piss Bobbie off? Because I really try not to do that unintentionally.”

Naomi shook her head so slightly, he only felt it. “You’ll have to ask her what’s up,” Naomi said. “But you’re not wrong. It’s something.”

The conversations in the room rose and shifted, swirling like birds. A word or phrase that passed between Amos and Clarissa got overheard by one of Saba’s people, shifted what he was saying, and soon Saba mentioned it to Alex. *Controlling people is usually having stuff they want. Don’t want nothing, and they’re pretty much just down to hitting you until you do what they say* became *Was easier with the inners because they wanted to get rich and make rich-people toys* became *What do these Laconia coyos want, anyway? What do they think they do it for, yeah?* Everyone in conversation with everyone else, whether they were aware of it or not.

Holden watched it, listening and waiting for Bobbie to come over. If humanity ever developed a hive mind, it wouldn’t be psychic brain links that welded it together. It’d be gossip and cocktail parties.

“Hey, Holden,” Bobbie said, touching his shoulder. “Can I borrow you for a minute?”

“You bet,” he said, hauling himself up from the floor. Bobbie slouched out toward the corridor, and he followed. The air outside the room was cooler and seemed less like it had just come out of someone else’s lungs. The lighting was strung maintenance LEDs, harsh and bright. The walls were painted in a dozen different colors, guides to the pipes and conduits behind them. The map and the territory both.

Bobbie paused at the junction of a service crawl with the main corridor. Voices murmured behind them, too distant to make out, but present. As tight as the spaces were, she could have leaned against both corridors’ walls at the same time, one with each shoulder. She flexed her hands like a fighter about to go into the ring. There had been a time, when they’d first met, that he’d found Bobbie’s physicality intimidating. Over the years, she’d grown in his mind into a place where she was only herself. Every now and again,

he'd be reminded that she was a professional warrior and well trained in violence.

Her expression was intense, focused. She could have been thinking her way through a hard problem or restraining herself from a killing rage. The two looked similar with her.

"Hey," Holden said. "What's on your mind?"

Her focus shifted to him, and she nodded like he'd said something worth agreeing to. "So are you here to help this or hinder it?"

"Well," Holden said. "I would have said help until you asked me that, but now it's feeling like a trick question. Am I missing something?"

Bobbie put out her hand palm first, like she was telling someone to slow down, but it seemed intended as much for herself as for him. "I'm thinking this through while I'm saying it, so just ..."

"Got it," Holden said. "Whatever it is, take a swing at it. We'll work it out."

"Other people? People like me? We can show up and maybe not have an effect. That's not how it is with you. Either you're helping or you're holding things back. There's no middle setting."

A little discomfort tugged at him, and he crossed his arms. "Is this ... Bobbie, is this about you being the captain of the *Roci*? Because that hasn't changed. Naomi and I—"

"Yes," Bobbie said. "It's exactly like that. Look, you've seen all those people who keep interrupting the meetings, right? They're all just swinging by to be in the room for a minute, even if it's something they could have done on hand terminals. Or not done at all."

"I know the ones you mean," Holden said. "But that's not me."

"That's *absolutely* you. James Holden, who led the fight against the Free Navy. And stopped Protogen from killing Mars. And captained the first ship through the ring gates. Brought people together on Ilus in the face of fifty different kinds of shit falling apart. You're in the center of everything just by walking into the room."

"Not because I like it," Holden said.

"When you showed up, Amos and I were getting ready to fight our way into all this. But then there you were, and you got recognized, and now we're all sitting in the absolute center of the conspiracy. Even if I'd pushed my way into this, there would have been days, maybe weeks, of proving to Saba and his people that they could trust me. You got that for free, and the

rest of us drafted off you. I came in as the captain of the *Rocinante*, and it wasn't enough to be taken as seriously as you got for free."

Holden wanted to object. He could feel the denials welling up in his chest, but he couldn't quite bring himself to say them out loud. Bobbie was right.

"I have an idea how we gather intelligence on the Laconians," Bobbie said. "It's the first step that we need. But we have to move quickly. Saba and his people? They think this is like going back to before there were gates. No matter what they say, they think this is going to sustain and become a way of life for them the way it used to be. Did you notice how they've started calling the Laconians 'inners'?"

"Yeah, I did."

"But you were right in there. We're looking at a really small window. So if we're going to do what I think we really need to do? It has to be your idea."

"Okay, little lost here. Which idea of mine are we talking about?"

"I'm talking about you taking the operation I have in mind, waltzing back in there, and presenting it like you just came up with it yourself."

Holden didn't know whether to laugh or scowl, so he did a little bit of both.

"No, I'm not going to do that," Holden said. "You say what you need to say, and I'll back you. But I'm not going to start taking credit for your proposals."

"If it's my idea, it'll be like when we showed up," Bobbie said. "I'll have to fight to prove it. If you do it, they'll just listen. Coming from you will give it weight that just being the right damn thing won't."

A clank came from behind them, a hatch being opened or a tool being dropped. He didn't turn to look. The unease he'd felt before shifted, changed its nature, but it didn't go away.

"I don't like that," Holden said. "I hate the idea that you're being treated as anything less than me. It's bullshit. I'll tell Saba that—"

"You remember the last time we went out to karaoke with Giselle? Right before Alex and she called it quits?"

Holden blinked at the non sequitur. "Yeah, of course. That was a terrible night."

"You remember the song she sang? 'Rapid Heartbeats'?"

"Sure," Holden said.

“Who was the singer? On the original, I mean. Who sings that one?”

“Um,” Holden said. “The band is Kurtadam. The singer’s Peter something? The guy with the one steel eye.”

“Pítr Vukceovich,” Bobbie said, nodding. “Now, who plays bass?”

Holden laughed, and then a moment later, sobered.

“Right?” Bobbie said.

“Yeah, okay. I got it. I don’t like it, though. I’m not more significant than anyone else. Acting like everything important has to go through me or else it’s not legitimate ... I don’t know. It feels like I’m being an asshole.”

Bobbie put a hand on his shoulder. Her eyes were calm, and her smile was a straight line. “If it helps at all, I’m thinking about all of this as me using you as a tool to achieve my own ends. It makes me less angry that way.”



They talked for another twenty minutes, Bobbie laying out her plan in enough detail that he could introduce it. He asked a few questions, but he didn’t need many. The sense of working together with her had a weird nostalgia. As if the gap between arriving at Medina and now had been years instead of days.

Large, sudden events did that. They changed the way time passed. Not technically, maybe, but as a measure of who he and Bobbie were to each other. And to themselves. A month before, Laconia had been one background issue among thousands. Now it was the environment. A truth as profound as the EMC or the union. More, maybe.

Back in the meeting room, the food had arrived. Recycled wheatpaper bowls filled with rice noodles and chopped mushroom bacon and fish sauce. It smelled better than it should have. Bobbie went to sit by Alex and Clarissa, folding herself gracefully down beside them. Holden felt the impulse to go sit there too, to be part of the family again. And he could have, except he also sort of couldn’t. Would he be doing it to help or to hinder? Because he couldn’t do both. For the first time, he felt what stepping back from the *Roci* had cost him.

And still, he couldn’t regret it.

“All well?” Naomi asked, snaking her arm around his waist. “You look

thoughtful. Are there thoughts?”

“There were a few, yeah,” he said. “Mostly that I’m a tool, but in a useful way.”

Naomi sat with that for a moment. Saba caught sight of them and waved them over. Two bowls with forks and bottles of beer were waiting on the low table for them.

“Should I be offended on your behalf?” Naomi said.

“Nope,” Holden said. “You should come eat.”

Saba leaned forward as Holden sat. “This is good. One thing we can say about Medina, the ingredients are always fresh.”

“True,” Holden said. “But they’re usually still fungus and yeast. Vat-grown bacon is ... well, it’s just its own thing. So, Saba, I had an idea I want to talk to you about ...”

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Chapter Twenty-Two: Bobbie

We can't place a physical monitor on the data connection to the Laconian ship," Holden said, just the way she'd told him to. Saba had chosen the people to be briefed, selecting them by some means Bobbie didn't know and didn't care to guess. They were watching Holden intently. It felt weird that the role of the great James Holden, come to lead them to glory, was being played by the Holden she knew. Apart from the coincidence of naming, the two didn't have much in common. "We need to passively monitor incoming and outgoing signal without detection. Mirror the data."

"For for?" a tall, stick figure of a man said. His name was Ramez and he was in Medina Station's technical support department. According to Saba, he had the run of the ship, their insider on this mission. Bobbie didn't like him. "Alles la thick with encrypt. Better off reading their coffee grounds."

"Decrypting it is a later problem," Holden said, not giving too many details of the plan away to any one person. Bobbie had a decent idea, but she was still working out the details of how to get the decryption codes. The fewer people knew the details, the less likely it was to get out before she was ready. "Right now we just want to get as much as we can so that we can decrypt it when the time comes. The important aspect right now is that we get the signal without anyone knowing it's happening."

"Gotta look inside the pipe without touching the pipe. Que pensa?"

"I've brought along my team leader and technical expert to explain the how of the thing," Holden said, nodding to Bobbie and Clarissa. "Captain Draper?"

Bobbie gave him a wink only he could see. Say what you would about the man, he did take to the role of meaningless figurehead with panache.

Bobbie walked to the front of the room and pulled up a volumetric map of Medina on the wall display behind her.

"The *Nauvoo* was intended as a generation ship," she started.

"Fuck is a 'no view'?" a Belter woman asked. The others chuckled.

“Read some fucking history once,” Saba said to her, then nodded to Bobbie to continue.

“They knew she’d be picking up signals from farther away than anything had ever needed to before,” Bobbie said. She zoomed in on Medina’s comm array. “So the comm system is massively overpowered, *and* much more sensitive than anything on a commercial or military vessel.”

Ramez nodded and shrugged expansively with his long hands. “We don’t even use most of that shit. No one talking from far away in here.”

He meant inside the slow zone, and he was right. Nothing was ever more than half a million clicks from Medina. The physical boundaries of the space prohibited it.

“True, but the equipment is still there. And up on that comm array is a signal sniffer sensitive enough to track a single photon through a fiber bundle a meter thick,” Bobbie said, zooming in on the technical map behind her. “But we can’t just steal it. Claire?”

Clarissa pushed herself out of the corner she’d been hiding in and came to stand next to Bobbie. She wore a mechanic’s jumpsuit with the name TACHI on the back, and had her hair pulled into a tight bun. With her gaunt cheeks and sunken eyes, it made her look severe and impatient.

“Even though this array isn’t in use,” Clarissa said without preamble, “it’s still hooked to the primary comm system. If we start unplugging things, alarm bells are going to go off up in ops. So we need to put the circuits into a diagnostic shutdown before we physically yank the parts.”

“Fuckonians all over in ops now, *ninita*,” Ramez said. “Watching everything all the time, them.”

Clarissa nodded her agreement, then said, “And that’s where you come in. We need to get you onto the ops deck to shut down the panel long enough for us to do our work,” she said. “And also if you call me ‘little girl’ again, I will hurt you.”

“Is that right, *ninita*?” Ramez said, his grin turning condescending.

“No,” Bobbie said, stepping toward him. “No, that’s not right. Pulling that gear will be delicate work. I can’t risk her damaging her hands before we get out there.” Bobbie took another step into Ramez and stared down at him. “So *I’ll* hurt you. Mao’s my second on this. Don’t make me beat some respect into you, *ninito*.”

She glanced over at Holden. He looked shocked, and maybe a little sad.

She wondered how he would have handled it, back before. It was so strange to be doing all this in the same room with each other.

Ramez threw a look to his buddies on the crates. No one stepped up to back him up. Saba was smiling and making a *Let's get on with it* circular motion with his hand.

"Sabe," Ramez said, looking to the side the way abashed primates had since the Pleistocene. "Just for fooling, que?"

"Sa sa," Bobbie replied, then switched the screen from the volumetric map over to her mission plan. "Here's the rundown, including precise times for each thing to happen. Mao and I will be on the outside of the station for most of this, and we can't afford to do any broadcasting out there, because the Laconian sniffers will almost certainly pick it up."

"I'll be calling up to ops using an unlocked hand terminal that Ramez here will get for me," Holden said, nodding at the man as an invitation for him to nod back. "We're picking a time when Daphne Kohl is the duty officer. She knows me now, and I'm thinking she'll understand what we're trying to do without me having to explain it. Comm discipline is in full effect, the assumption is everything is heard by everyone."

"So that call between Kohl and Holden is what we're all listening to," Bobbie said. "We'll pass out a list of code words Holden will use during the call as signals. This is our only method of coordinating the action, and there's no way for us to signal an abort or call for help. Our backup plan is everyone does this right the first time so we don't need a backup plan. Understood?"

"Lot of risk for a dump of gibberish we can't make sense of," Ramez said.

Bobbie felt a little flush of annoyance at the man. "The more we have, the more likely we find what we need in it when the encryption problem gets fixed," she said. "We start where we can, and that's this. Are we all clear?"

A murmur of *dui* and *sabe* and *sa sa* rippled through the room.

"Outstanding," Bobbie said. "Let's get to work."



The slow zone or the ring space or the gate network. No matter what you

called it, it was fucking weird.

Bobbie and Clarissa exited the drum section of Medina Station using an old maintenance airlock that Saba swore wasn't monitored from ops. They were wearing emergency vac suits, the so-thin-they're-barely-there type whose only purpose was keeping the wearer from dying of asphyxia before help could arrive. They were bright orange and yellow to make the wearer easy to find in smoke or against the black of space. They had large flashing lights on the helmet and shoulders to aid rescue workers, but Bobbie had smashed those with a wrench before they put them on. Bad enough to be a brightly colored blob climbing up the outside of the station. No reason to flash a distress signal too. Under normal circumstances, going outside a ship or station wearing the emergency suits was asking to be cooked by radiation. The cheap throw-away suits had almost no shielding to them.

But the slow zone was fucking weird.

There was literally no radiation in the ring space that humans didn't bring in with them. No background radiation, no solar wind, nothing. Just a massive, unnaturally black void all around, defined only by the distant and faintly glowing rings equally spaced around it and the blue sphere of the alien station at the center where they'd had the rail-gun emplacements.

Bobbie and Clarissa rode the outside of the massive, spinning drum section of Medina inside the old airlock. The indicator of their motion being the occasional distant ring moving past the black window of the outer airlock door, and the fact that something kept trying to shove them out the door at a third of a g. Bobbie had them both tethered to a clip inside the airlock so they wouldn't be hurled into the strange non-space outside.

A large rectangular structure whipped past the outer airlock door. Bobbie pressed her helmet to Clarissa's and yelled so that sound would conduct directly. "That's one of the exterior elevators. We go for the next one."

Clarissa nodded, wide-eyed, and braced for the jump. Outside of the drum section of Medina, two structures ran the entire length of the ship from the engineering deck aft of the drum to the ops deck in the bow. They housed machinery, conduit, and a pair of elevators for moving from one zero-g section to the other without passing through the drum itself. Bobbie and Clarissa planned to use one of them to climb the station up to the comm array on the nose, and back down to the Laconian ship docked at the stern.

Bobbie opened the mesh bag at her hip, checking again that she had

everything the same way she had a dozen times before. Spare air bottles for herself and Clarissa. They'd be outside for hours making the long climbs. A magnetic grappling gun with high-tensile cable and a winch. And finally, a fat black recoilless handgun that one of the Belters had managed to hide from the Laconian weapon sweeps. If they actually needed to use it, the mission was fucked anyway, but there was a dignity in going down fighting that appealed to Bobbie's romantic notions.

She hooked the emergency cable on her suit to a loop at Clarissa's waist, then unhooked herself from the airlock. The station tried to throw her out the door, but she grabbed the lip of the outer airlock with one hand and held on. In the other hand, she held the grapple gun. Behind her, Clarissa had one hand on her shoulder, and one hand on the bulkhead.

"Three, two, one, go!" Bobbie shouted, hoping enough sound would travel up Clarissa's arm. She launched herself out the outer airlock door by releasing her grip on it, and was shooting off into the void at 3.3 meters per second.

The massive rectangular structure of the maintenance shaft rushed toward her, and she fired the magnetic grapple into it as she passed. If the grapple failed to connect, they'd keep flying off into the empty space of the slow zone until they ran out of air and their lifeless bodies eventually flew into the eerie curtain of black at the edge of the alien space. Dangerous, but no more so than a challenging free climb back on Mars. She didn't even think about it. Her eye spotted the place she wanted the grapple to go, her hand and arm did the rest. The grapple landed less than half a meter from the spot she was aiming for. Like riding a bike.

The grappling line and the leash that connected the grappling gun to her suit snapped taut and pulled her in a fast arc around the maintenance shaft, dragging Clarissa helplessly behind. Bobbie started up the winch, pulling them closer as the speed of their arc increased. Just before impact, she bent her knees and activated her mag boots. The landing was going to hurt a bit.

She hit the metal surface of the maintenance shaft like the tip of a whip being cracked, and let the impact fold her knees up into her abdomen. Clarissa slammed into her back, and it felt like someone dropping a bag of cement on her from a couple stories up. Bobbie rolled with it, slapping the decking with her hands to activate the glove magnets, and hung on.

A few punishing seconds later, they were on the side of the maintenance shaft, all the violence of their motion gone, having been converted into

lightly sprained knees and a collection of bruises.

“Ouch,” Bobbie said, and floated motionless for a few seconds, tethered to the shaft by only one gloved hand.

“Yeah,” Clarissa replied, faintly, through the helmet she had against Bobbie’s back.

Bobbie pushed her helmet against Clarissa’s. “It’s a long climb, but at least there’s no gravity to fight. You up for this?”

Clarissa answered by unhooking the tether, and pulling herself up the flat gray wall of the shaft.

“Alrighty, then,” Bobbie said, and followed.

Two hours and an O2 bottle change later, they floated near the massive Medina comm array. A bewildering cluster of antennae, dishes, and radio broadcast towers, and at its heart sat a laser powerful enough to send messages back to Earth from a hundred light-years away. It had never been used.

“I remember when that almost ended all human life,” Clarissa said, pressing her faceplate to Bobbie’s. “It doesn’t look so scary now.”

“I’ve heard that story,” Bobbie replied. “Wish I’d been here to back you guys up in that fight.”

Clarissa shrugged. “The story’s more fun than the actual experience was. You didn’t miss much.”

Clarissa pulled herself over the rigging of the comm array, coming to a stop next to an oversized receiver dish. She pointed at an access panel below it, then flashed the Belter sign for *This one*.

Bobbie nodded with one hand, then tapped the side of her helmet. *Now we wait for word from Holden*. She turned on the small emergency radio in her suit, already tuned to the channel Holden would be using to call Daphne Kohl up in station ops, and waited. Clarissa stared at her across the vacuum between them, motionless and patient as a hunting cat.

The minutes dragged. When her radio crackled to life, Bobbie found herself grinning. “Medina control, this is workcrew kilo alpha, do you copy?”

Bobbie could only hear Holden’s side of the conversation, so there was a long pause and then his voice again. “Copy that. Can I get Chief Kohl on the line? Gotta route some repairs through her office.”

Office was their code that meant Ramez was outside of ops, waiting for permission to enter, so the plan was proceeding, and waiting only on Kohl’s

cooperation.

“Hey, Chief. Good to *hear your voice* again,” Holden said, hitting the words hard. He hadn’t identified himself by name, and he wouldn’t. If Daphne Kohl didn’t pick up on what was going on, they’d scrub the mission. If she raised the alarm ... Well, that would be an interesting problem. “Working with Saba down here in electrochemical. Tracking a grid problem that Laconian death ray caused, and we’d love to pull a panel up there to really nail it down.”

And here’s where the most dangerous part of the plan happened. It wasn’t flying through space on a tether, or climbing up the outside of a massive station wearing the thinnest and crappiest vacuum suits. It wasn’t even going to be later, when they climbed down to the Laconian ship to hook in their signal sniffer, hoping no one was watching the outside of the dock. It was here, where Holden was counting on his voice, Saba’s name, and the mention of Laconians to signal Kohl that they were up to no good and needed her help.

And more than that, counting on her Belter pride being stronger than her fear of execution by their Laconian masters. Because if any of those things weren’t true, Kohl could refuse them, and that was the end of the plan. Or worse.

Bobbie waited a very tense minute of radio silence, and then Holden said, “That’s great. I’ve got a tech heading to ops to pull that panel, if you can let him in. He’ll take a gander at our glitch and get out of your hair.”

Gander. Code for Go in five.

“Copy that, Chief. We appreciate the patience while we sort this out.”

Bobbie gave Clarissa a thumbs-up, then flashed her five fingers. Clarissa nodded with her fist, then started pulling tools out of the mesh bag at her hip.

First thing down, Bobbie thought. Just a two-kilometer climb aft and planting a bug on a Laconian destroyer without getting caught left to go.

With Medina Station functionally motionless in the slow zone, it was less of a climb than a mag-booted shuffle down the two-kilometer length of the maintenance shaft. Bobbie pulled the blocky module containing the field-strength sensor on a short leash behind her. It didn’t have much mass, but she’d taken it without conversation when she’d looked through Clarissa’s visor and seen the technician’s complexion going a sickly gray. Other than jumping out of a rotating airlock, they hadn’t done anything

particularly taxing, but it was pretty clear that Claire was already running on fumes.

As they got closer to the engineering-and-docking-bay section of Medina, the Laconian ship came into view around the curve of the station. Bobbie couldn't help but whistle her appreciation of the beauty of the thing. Say what you would about Laconian authoritarianism, their engineering included a lot of aesthetic beauty in its design.

The destroyer—Holden had called it the *Gathering Storm*—looked like a natural crystal formation that someone had chipped into a knife. The colors were all translucent pinks and blues, faceted like a gem. She spotted something at the tail that probably served as the ship's drive cone but didn't look anything like the UN or Martian designs she was familiar with. The nose of the ship ended in a pair of sharp projections, like a dagger point with a channel cut down the center that left her almost certain it was a rail gun. If the ship had torpedo launchers or PDCs, she couldn't see them.

The ship was so strange, so unlike anything humans had ever designed or flown before, that if it had docked and green three-eyed aliens had walked off, it would have felt more appropriate than the humans that actually flew her.

Clarissa stopped and turned, so Bobbie yanked the sensor array to a stop on its leash, then pushed their two helmets together.

"There," Clarissa said, pointing to a maintenance access hatch that looked exactly like a hundred they'd already passed. "That's the router that feeds from the dock into the station network."

"You're sure?" Bobbie said, looking around at all the other hatches.

Clarissa didn't answer, just rolled her eyes and took the leash. She pulled the sensor array down and attached it to the hull, right next to the hatch. She pulled a few leads from the box and plugged them into slots inside the hatch, then stuck a hand terminal on the side of the array and spent several minutes going through what looked like menus. Bobbie replaced both of their air bottles while she worked.

A few minutes later, Clarissa stood up and gave her the thumbs-up. Bobbie looked over at the massive blade of the Laconian destroyer. If anyone on it had seen them working, the ship itself gave no hint. Clarissa walked over holding her hand terminal and touched it to the side of Bobbie's helmet. Her HUD snapped on, and a wall of text rolled past. The signal traffic between the destroyer and the local decrypt facility, complete

with routing flags and timestamps. It was still locked behind military encryptions, but everything that the *Gathering Storm* sent down to Medina and everything it got back was here, and the underground was skimming a copy of all of it.

“Huh,” Bobbie said to no one. “I honestly thought that would be harder.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Drummer

The ship came through the ring like an old video of a whale breaching the surface of the sea. The thousand kilometers of the ring gate was tiny in the scale of the solar system, huge by human measure, and the Laconian battleship fit between the two—too large to be comfortable in one, too small to fit well in the other. Its design seemed to come from the same uncomfortable place, neither the now-familiar eeriness of the protomolecule nor the history of human manufacture, but both and neither. Drummer watched the observations feed again and again, and it made her skin crawl a little every time.

She wasn't ready. Rock hoppers full of gravel were burning hard for positions that didn't matter anymore. The EMC fleet was consolidating around the inner planets and the Jovian system, but with days—sometimes weeks—left on their burns. The void cities were looping down to meet them. All of it preparation for tactical situations that weren't on the board anymore. Duarte and his Admiral Trejo had stolen the tempo. She had to make sure the price would be higher than they'd intended to pay.

"Madam President," Vaughn said. Drummer watched the *Tempest* emerge through the gate again before she spoke. It was astounding to her that something so large could make it through the gate at all. It looked big enough to break the safety barriers with its own mass and energy. Maybe there would have been a way to use that with Laconia the way they had with the Free Navy. Except that the fucking thing was already through the gate.

"Vaughn," she said, not looking back at him.

"Communications is asking for your decision on the repeater," Vaughn said.

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly between her teeth. There were thousands of radio signal repeaters scattered through the system, but she knew which one Vaughn meant. Their clandestine traffic to and from

Medina—Avasarala's gift to her—ran through a low-energy repeater that was floating dark outside the ring gate. From Medina, its signal was weak and the wavelengths it jumped among similar enough to the gates' usual interference that it was easy to overlook. From normal space, it was more obvious.

And the closest ship to it right now was the *Tempest*.

She could order her communications forces not to use it. That was easy. But the EMC intelligence forces also had access to it. And Saba's underground. The more people who could make a mistake, the more likely that something would go wrong. And it was easy enough for her to shut it down. One signal packet would do it, like toggling a light off. It would go into a passive listening state, and someone would have to know where to look for it to register as more than a grain of sand floating in the unimaginably vast ocean of the void.

Going dark was the right thing to do. But she rebelled at it.

"What's the point," she said, "of having something you can't use? Functionally, it's the same as not having it." On her screen, the loop ended and began again. The *Tempest* rising up from the gate.

"Preserving something to use at the right time isn't nothing, sa sa que?" Vaughn said.

"Was being rhetorical," Drummer said.

"Apologies," Vaughn said.

"Tell them ..." It was more than her window into Medina. It was her link to Saba. What if he needed to reach her? What if something happened, and his call for help died in silence because she was being too careful? Loneliness widened in her chest, stretched until it felt bigger than she was. Empty. "Tell them to shut it down. Save it for a rainy day."

"Yes, ma'am," Vaughn said, and turned to leave.

"Have you ever seen rain, Vaughn?" she said, stopping him. Giving herself a few more seconds with the connection to Medina and Saba still there. Even if she couldn't use it.

"No, ma'am. Never been to Earth. Never plan to."

"'Rainy day,' though. We still say it."

"Inner planet cultural imperialism is in everything," Vaughn said.

"Rain isn't just for inners. It rains on Titan too. It's methane instead of water, but you can see it if you're in the domes there. I spent my madhu chandra week there. A billion dots on the surface of the dome with the

orange clouds behind it? They look like tiny dark stars. If you can see them. Saba's distance vision isn't good. He couldn't see them. But I could."

"If you say so, ma'am," Vaughn said. Either he was mildly embarrassed for her, or she imagined he was. *Well, fuck you too*, she thought, but didn't say it in case it was just her.

"All right," she said, turning back to her screen. "Send the order."

Vaughn didn't answer, just walked out and closed the door behind him. She watched the *Tempest* pass through the ring gate one last time, looking for a clue in it. Or a ray of hope. She didn't see one, and she closed the recording down and opened the other one.

This is Admiral Anton Trejo of the Laconian Imperial Navy, and high commander of the Heart of the Tempest. I am presently on a mission to secure Laconian interests in Sol system. We recognize the deep cultural and historical importance of Sol system, and hope that this transition can be made peacefully and with the minimum of disruption. In the event that local forces resist, I am prepared and authorized to take any actions necessary to complete my mission. High Consul Duarte and I extend our best wishes to the local residents, and ask that you contact your governments to urge them to act in the name of peace. Violence is always a loss, and the measure of that loss is entirely in your control.

The false gentility of the threat made her wish he'd just said he'd burn their cities and take their children. It would have felt more honest.

People's Home was on its braking burn to meet with the EMC's second fleet, where Guard of Passage already waited. Independence was already with the first fleet and Jupiter. The newest void city—Assurance of Peace—was half built at the Pallas-Tycho shipyards and wouldn't be ready for another year, assuming that they had another year.

The unspoken truth was that the union had commissioned the void cities as a permanent response to the colony worlds' interest in building their own fleets. A void city couldn't control a whole solar system, but it could command a ring gate. Or that's what Drummer and the union board had assumed. Now, People's Home was only a battleship. A massive one, with greenhouses and schools, children and common space, universities and research labs. But the prospect of violence meant that none of that mattered. People's Home was a delivery system for rail guns, missiles, PDCs. And she would drive it down to protect Earth and Mars, and be protected by their ships. She'd hate everything about it, but she'd do it.

And goddammit, she'd have to smile while she did.

The under-burn configuration of People's Home put the meeting rooms down near the massive array of Epstein drives. The EMC was represented by Admiral Hu of Mars and Undersecretary of Executive Affairs Vanegas. Chrisjen Avasarala sat in a wheelchair at the back of the hall, eating pistachios and pretending to be dotty so that people left her alone. The lights had been set to a warm cut of the spectrum that was alleged to match a summer afternoon on Earth, and the air smelled of cut cucumber and soil. A reassuring environment that would hopefully affect the tone of the event, even if it was all engineering. The reporters and dignitaries on the formed bamboo benches all wore formal suits and dresses, as if a press conference were the same as going to church.

Maybe it was. Drummer had read somewhere that newsfeeds were where secular societies went to find out what cultural narratives were important and what could be ignored. There were thousands of feeds streaming right now, all around the system, with every variation of the ways to make sense of the history they were living through. In most, Laconia was an invading force to be resisted, but there were people who said Laconia was a liberating influence, an end to the oppression of the EMC and the Transport Union. Or that they were the true spirit of Mars, betrayed by the old congressional republic and now returned in triumph. Or that they were unbeatable, and capitulation was the only choice. Put a dozen people in front of their cameras, and you'd wind up with thirteen opinions. None of them would matter as much as hers, because she was the president of the Transport Union, and that, despite all her intentions and efforts, meant she was a war leader now.

In the green room, Vanegas was getting his makeup freshened before they went out to the cameras. Hu put down her coffee as soon as Drummer stepped into the room and hurried over to her, a grim expression on her face.

"President Drummer," Hu said, "I was hoping I could speak with you about the board's strategic cooperation documents?"

A steward led Drummer to a chair. A technician swung in beside her with a palette of cosmetics in his hand. She didn't have much use for makeup, but she didn't want to look sickly in the feeds either.

"I haven't seen the new draft yet," Drummer said, trying not to move her face.

“Santos-Baca is insisting on the chain of command passing through a joint committee,” Hu said. “That’s not coordination. That’s making the EMC a branch of the Transport Union.”

If they kill us all, Drummer thought, this will be why. Not their technology, not their strategy, not the invisible cycle of history. It’ll be our inability to do anything without five committee meetings to talk about it.

“I haven’t read the draft, Admiral. As soon as we’re done here, I’ll have them get me a copy. I don’t want to get this muddy any more than you do.”

Hu nodded sharply and smiled as if Drummer had capitulated. The technician touched her cheeks with a rouge brush and considered her like she was a painting. She had to fight the impulse to stick her tongue out at him.

And then it was time. Vanegas walked out first, and then Hu. They took the podiums to either side. Drummer took the center. The podium’s screen threw up an image visible only to her, running through the lines of the speech. She lifted her chin.

It didn’t matter how she felt. It didn’t matter what she thought. All that counted right now was how she looked and sounded. Let those carry confidence, and she could find the real thing later.

“Thank you all for coming,” Drummer said. “As you know, a ship originating in Laconia system has now made an unauthorized transit into Sol system. The union’s stance is unequivocal on this matter. The Laconian incursion is illegal. It is a violation of the union’s authority and the sovereignty of the Earth-Mars Coalition. We stand as one body in the defense of the Sol system and all its citizens.”

Drummer paused. In the back of the group, Chrisjen Avasarala stood up from her wheelchair and dusted the pistachio bits off her sari. Her smile was visible even from here.

“And the union,” Drummer said, “will dedicate all its resources to the defense effort.”

Just like you told us to, you old bitch, she thought. She didn’t say it.



In her dream, Saba was dead.

She didn’t know how he’d died or where, and with the non-logic of

sleep, she didn't question that. It was simply the truth: Saba was dead and she wasn't. She'd never see him again. She wouldn't wake up beside him. The rest of her life was emptier and smaller and sadder because of it. In the dream, she knew all of that. But what she *felt* was relief.

Saba was dead, and so he was safe now. Nothing bad could happen to him anymore. She couldn't fail him or abandon him or feel the weight of his disappointment. She woke into darkness, a moment's confusion, and then a wave of overwhelming guilt. The darkness, at least, she could control. She moved the cabin lights up a quarter. Dim gold, faint enough to leave everything in monochrome.

She could feel the thrust gravity when she turned. The absence of even trace Coriolis telling her what she already knew. She wanted to send a message out. To tell Saba she was thinking of him, and not quietly longing for the failures that would lose him forever. But she'd cut that line of communication, and having a weird subconscious wasn't a good reason to change that policy.

Instead she stretched in the near dark. Only half of her sleep cycle was done, but she wasn't interested in diving back into the pillow. Instead, she showered and ordered up a bulb of tea and a tortilla with fruit jam. Comfort food. Then she checked the system map.

The *Tempest* was still out in the vastness between the orbits of Uranus and Saturn. A billion and a half kilometers between the ring gate and the first human habitats of any real size, even if Saturn and its moons were at their closest. Having come through the gate so much earlier than she'd hoped, the *Tempest* wasn't burning hard for the inner solar system. At its present acceleration, it would take weeks to reach her. Drummer pulled on her uniform and went out into People's Home. The tube station was near her quarters. The void city knew where she was and arranged a private car for her without her even having to ask for it. Her security detail shadowed her with the practice of years. Even at the height of a shift change, she moved through the city like it was a ghost town. Only the litter and smell of bodies and old curry in the tube lingered as a promise that she wasn't as alone as she felt.

The arboretum was a restricted-access zone. Some of the trees were experimental, and being in a high-traffic area would have affected the data. But one person or a handful? That was within tolerance. It was warm there, the air thick with moisture and the novelty of oxygen that had just been

breathed out by another living thing. It was a strange place, exotic and surreal. Like something out of a child's fantasy.

Usually, she was the only one there.

Avasarala sat in the shade of a catalpa. Her hands were folded in her lap. Her eyes were unfocused until Drummer stepped onto the black rubber walkway in front of her.

"The fuck are you doing here?" the old woman said. "Don't you sleep?"

"I could ask you the same," Drummer said.

"I don't sleep anymore. It's one of the things you lose at my age. I'm not incontinent yet, though, so I don't get to bitch."

Drummer leaned against one of the trees, folded her arms. She didn't know if she was pleased the old woman was there, or annoyed by her, or both. "Is there a reason you're still on People's Home?" she asked, but her voice wasn't biting.

"Thought I might need to firm up your resolve. But I didn't. Now I'm only here because I hate fucking space travel. You're going my way. I'll get out when the last leg of the trip home is shorter."

"So not just looking to stick your nose in my business?"

"Not until you fuck up," Avasarala said. "Sit down, Camina. You look exhausted."

"No one calls me that, you know," Drummer said, but she sat on the bench at Avasarala's side.

"Almost no one."

They sat for a moment with only the sound of dripping water and the tapping of leaves that moved in the artificially controlled breeze. The wisps of her dream haunted Drummer's mind like the afterimage of a strobe.

"One ship," she said. "They sent *one* ship. They didn't hold ground at Medina. They didn't fortify. They didn't build supply lines or prepare a flotilla. They sent one big-ass ship through by itself. Like a boast."

"I'm as surprised as you are," Avasarala said. "Though I feel like I shouldn't be. I actually read history. It's like reading prophecy, you know."

"All we have to do is deal with this one ship, and everyone will see that Duarte's not invulnerable. He's not infallible."

"That's true."

Drummer laced her fingers, leaned forward with her elbows on her knees.

"All we need is one lucky break," she said. "One thing to go our way,

and your logistical mastermind who would never overreach loses his capital ship in front of everyone who's watching. And I think everyone is watching."

"They are," Avasarala agreed with a sigh. "But ..."

"But what?"

Avasarala's smile was thin, hard, and bitter. Her eyes flashed with an intelligence poisoned by despair. "But it isn't hubris until he's failed."

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Chapter Twenty-Four: Singh

Singh's monitor lay flattened on the desk in front of him. Above it floated a 3-D projection of Natalia and Elsa smiling back at him. It wasn't a great shot of them. He'd photographed it himself, and it was a little out of focus. But it was taken at the park where they'd had the monster's second birthday party, and his daughter grinned out at him with cheeks covered in vanilla frosting, and Nat positively glowed with happiness. It was one of his favorite memories.

Once the Typhoon arrives, I will be able to move to the important work. It also almost certainly means this posting at Medina will be made permanent soon. I want you to start thinking about relocation. Your work was always about helping the colony worlds establish stable food sources, and this is the hub of everything. They'll welcome your research here with open arms. And I promise, the water issues should be fixed by the time you and Monster would arrive. Nothing but clean water for you guys, or I'll tear the station down one bolt at a time and rebuild it myself. I also—

"Governor," a voice said from the monitor, startling him.

"Yes?"

"Major Overstreet is here, he says it's an emergency."

"All right," Singh replied, then shut down the image and saved his letter to finish later. "Send him in."

Overstreet was almost the physical opposite of his predecessor. Where Colonel Tanaka was tall almost to the point of rangy, he was short, thick-necked and broad, with fists the size of boxing gloves. His shaved head was the palest skin Singh had ever seen, and his eyes were an icy blue. Among Martians, that combination was fairly exotic.

"Governor," Overstreet said with a sharp salute.

"At ease, Major."

Overstreet shifted his feet apart and linked his hands behind his back. Where Tanaka had been all arrogant insouciance, Overstreet was every bit

the disciplined Marine. Singh liked working with him.

“Governor, I’m sorry to report another terrorist incident. Unfortunately, this one also included a loss of life.”

Loss of life only meant one thing in this context: a Laconian fatality.

“Thank you for keeping it off the wire, Major,” Singh said. Following the assassination attempt, he’d ordered that any further terrorist activity be kept as quiet as possible. They needed the population of Medina to feel like they were safe under Laconian control. “Who and where?”

“Second Lieutenant Imari, an environmental support specialist. She was tracking an air-filtration error and wound up in a crawl space on the outermost level of the drum. A small improvised explosive device was remotely detonated. Lieutenant Imari was killed instantly. One of her techs received minor injuries and is being treated on the *Storm*.”

“Imari,” Singh said, concentrating until he could place a face with the name. He’d only met her a few times. Pleasant and professional in all their interactions. And her skills with environmental systems would be sorely missed in Medina’s refit. “Do we know who?”

“I had bomb techs on the site within minutes of the blast,” Overstreet said. “The chemicals used to manufacture the explosive were traced to a storage compartment on drum level two. I pulled the logs. The majority of those with access have been identified. Marines have already begun rounding them up.”

“That is excellent work, Major,” Singh said. Overstreet brought him a solution with every problem he reported. It made his own terrible misstep with Tanaka feel like a blessing in disguise.

“The rules of engagement allow us to treat active terror cells as enemy combatants,” Overstreet said. “But unless one of these idiots has a hideaway gun, I’m betting we’ll bring them all in alive. So, it’s your call, sir.”

Overstreet looked like he had no opinion one way or the other. If Singh ordered him to go to the holding pens and shoot every single person in the head, it would just be the next thing he did that day. No lectures on how he’d fought Belter cells back in the day, no subtle digs at his lack of experience.

“We’re going to need to start holding trials at some point,” Singh said. “This seems as good a time as any. We’ll need some time to form a civilian justice system for Medina and the colonies. Something less encumbered

than the local habits.”

“Yes, sir,” Overstreet agreed with a nod. “I’ll have my people put together all the evidence we’ve collected and forward it to the advocate’s office. We’re not police, but whatever we can do to expedite the trial process, we’re happy to help out.”

Singh leaned back and pointed at one of the visitor chairs next to his desk. “You’re doing outstanding work, Major. You’ve slid into Colonel Tanaka’s role without a hiccup. I appreciate it.”

Overstreet stretched out, relaxing but without the aggressive informality of his predecessor. “Tanaka was a great mentor. She left me detailed files on ... the duties of this post. Give her credit for the smooth transition.”

“Mmhmm,” Singh said. “Anyway, I’ve sent in my recommendation that you be promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel, as befits the posting you now hold. We’re just waiting on word from Laconia to make it official. You’ve certainly got the years in, and your record is exemplary. I don’t foresee any difficulty.”

“I appreciate that, sir,” Overstreet started, then looked down at the monitor on his wrist. “That’s fast work. The detachment reports that all seven of the suspects have already been rounded up and taken to a holding area, awaiting your orders. Shall I have them taken to the open-air cells, pending trial? Let everyone on the station see them locked up? Sends a message.”

“Yes, I—” Singh began, then rethought it. “No. If that holding area is private, keep them there. I’d like to speak to them.”

“Of course,” Overstreet said. Into his monitor he said, “Triphammer oscar mike. We need transport and escort to level four, compartment one three one one echo bravo. Ready to move in five.”



Singh had studied detailed files on the history of Medina, from its aspirational beginnings with an Earther religious faction to its outright theft by the OPA and conversion into the universe’s worst battleship before finally settling in as the hub of human expansion through the gate network.

Singh found the idea of a generation ship fascinating, in a morbid sort of way. He could understand taking great risks for your children. He was

doing that right now. Trying to help build the well-regulated human empire that his monster Elsa and her future children could thrive in. There was a romance in the idea of setting out on a journey you'd never see the end of so that your grandchildren might live a better life. But all the numbers he'd seen on how a hundred-year voyage like that would play out were fairly horrifying. It was, to say the least, a very high cost and very low probability of success. Singh assumed there was a faith element to the risk that he was just missing. In his opinion, faith was generally for people who were bad at math.

Compartment 1311EB turned out to be a former storage compartment for animal feed. Another of the many structures built into Medina Station back when it had been the *Nauvoo* and had interstellar colonization as its purpose. Medina was filled with these relics of the station's original purpose even as they had been converted over to new uses. Seven Belters sat on the floor, hands zip-tied behind their backs. Four men, two women, and one person who could be any gender or none and who looked far too young to already have decided on a career in terrorism.

Singh entered the room flanked by two Marines in power armor and Overstreet taking up a position by the door. The four Marine guards in the room snapped him a salute, then went back to watching their little gang of prisoners. With fifteen bodies in the room, it felt very cramped.

"I am the station governor, Captain Santiago Singh," he said, taking time to stare each of the seven prisoners in the eye as he spoke. The youngest stared back with a fierce rage that looked entirely out of place on their beautiful, genderless face.

"No one fuckin' cares," one of the men spat back at him. The Marine closest to him casually kicked him in the ribs. Singh waved him back.

"I need you all to listen to me very carefully," he said. "A bomb was made using chemicals from the warehouse you seven work in. That bomb killed a Laconian naval officer, and injured another."

"Good," said one of the women.

"Not good," Singh replied, without changing his tone. "Because the penalty for this criminal act will be death by firing squad. At this point, there is no reason to believe all seven of you aren't in collusion. You are either working with terrorist cells, or you are in fact the cell that planted that bomb."

"Better to die a free Belter than live a slave," the young one said. They

had a singer's voice, high and clear.

He started to wonder if it might have been better to have seven different conversations with the prisoners rather than one with all of them. They were performing for each other now. Each of them signaling their loyalty to the others. It made it more difficult to know what their actual flexibility might be.

"We can debate the benefits of centralized government later," Singh replied. "For now, I have one offer to make, and only one. When I leave this room, I am going to ask that an appointed judge review the evidence from the bombing and find all seven of you guilty of terrorist acts. You will then be taken to a public place, and shot."

"Not much of a fuckin' offer," the first man said, rubbing his bruised ribs.

"While the judge reviews that evidence, I am going to have you held in private cells. The first one of you to cooperate in our investigation of terrorist activity on this station, lives."

"Turn traitor to save our own necks," the young one said. "You don't know Belters at all."

"I know humans. I know that staying alive and keeping one's family safe is not a trivial reward for valued service to the empire. It is the only choice you have left in your lives. Make the right one."

Before they could shout any defiance at him, Singh turned and left. As they walked away, he said to Overstreet, "Put them in separate cells, far enough apart that they can't hear each other. Then make sure there's a guard outside every door. Just in case someone decides to take me up on my offer."

"Copy that," Overstreet replied. There was a hint of skepticism in his tone.

Singh stopped. Overstreet turned to face him, a puzzled look on his broad face.

"Something troubling you, Major?"

"I didn't intend any disrespect, sir."

"Our mandate from High Consul Duarte is to win over the population of this station, as a first step in winning over the population of the colony worlds. We do that by entangling our interests. By teaching them that what they think of as 'informing' is actually just good citizenship. This is just a first step in building what will hopefully be a network of cooperators to

help us.”

“Understood,” Overstreet said. “Marines make terrible police, sir. We’re not trained for this sort of job. If we could build up a security force made up of local cooperators and Marine elements, it would help a lot.”

“Good. Make that part of your mandate going forward. You have full authority to offer amnesty to people you think might be useful.”

“I’ll pass it down the ranks,” Overstreet said. He began gently pushing Singh back up the corridor toward their little convoy of carts.

“The other thing,” Singh said. “I think it would be appropriate to make a complete audit of the security protocols. Call it a supplemental security review.”

“I can do that if you’d like, sir,” Overstreet said. “Can I ask what function the review would fill?”

He meant *Am I being called on the carpet?* This was also the fallout of letting Tanaka go. There would be a period where his people trusted him less. Suspected that he would blame them for failures in the system. Punish them for things that weren’t their fault.

“We need—” he began, then caught himself. “I need to look over the complete system of security we have. Things are going to change simply because we are here, with these people, and not in a classroom at the academy. I don’t know how yet, but I think it’s inevitable. I am trusting you to tell me not only what we do but why. And whether you think it should be altered.”

“Comprehensive, then,” Overstreet said, but he sounded more pleased by the implied trust than put out by the extra work. “I’ll see to it. Back to the office, sir?”

Singh almost said yes, but a thought stopped him.

“No,” Singh said. “No, take me to Carrie Fisk’s office. And notify her we’re coming.”

On the ride to the Association of Worlds’ offices, Singh thought back to his letter home. The idea that being able to hold the ring space meant they’d won the war was optimistic. Or simplistic, at least. Laconia could absolutely control access to the worlds through the gates, but every single world could decide this didn’t mean *they* were conquered. And even if they placed a Laconian governor on every world, and a Laconian naval ship in orbit and Marines patrolling the streets, every individual might decide they personally had not been conquered. Establishing the empire was an endless

series of microscopic magnifications into greater and greater granularity, and every grain was a potential renegade. Medina was just a microcosm of the problem they'd be running into everywhere. Political opposition considered as fractal geometry.

He had been sent as a governor, and the more he saw, the more he came to understand what that assignment actually was. Not just a bureaucrat to oversee the smooth functioning of the station and the traffic it controlled. He was creating the template for making every other human world into a new Laconia. Seven Belters had decided that killing a single low-level officer was worth risking all their own lives. That wasn't a rational position. An enemy that bad at basic math might do anything. The colony worlds might decide that throwing a few hundred people with rifles onto a transport ship and trying a suicide attack on Medina made sense. He only needed to hold the station for a few more weeks until the *Typhoon* arrived and rendered any such foolhardy attack plan irrelevant. Carrie Fisk could help to carry the message that would dissuade any such error before it could happen.

The office complex occupied by the Association of Worlds sat inside the drum section of Medina, surrounded by farmland. It consisted of three blocky structures of prefab fiberglass sheets, painted a gentle off-white, and sporting the interlocking honeycomb banner of their organization. Singh suspected the design was intended to symbolize the interconnected rings of the gate network. For the headquarters of an organization whose goal was the centralized governance of thirteen hundred worlds, it looked cheap, shabby, and hastily erected. Nothing like the massive stone structures Laconia built to house the future government of mankind.

Carrie Fisk occupied an office on the third floor of the largest of the three buildings. She had a lot of empty space, a single desk with four chairs, and flaking light-green paint on her fiberglass walls. He wondered what their first meeting would have been like if he'd come to her office instead of bringing her to his. Seeing all of this, he might have recommended against working with her at all.

"Madam President," Singh said as he entered, taking her hand in his own. "I'm glad you could take the time to meet with me on such short notice. This is Major Overstreet, the Marine commander on Medina."

Carrie shook his hand, and gave Overstreet a baffled nod. "Of course, Governor, anytime," she said, and gestured to her chairs. Singh sat,

Overstreet did not. “Tea?”

Singh declined with a wave of his hand. “I’m afraid I don’t have much time to socialize. I have an important message for you to send to the association worlds, and to the local governments on those worlds that have at this point elected not to officially join you.”

“Okay,” Carrie said. She really was a frightened little mouse of a person, Singh decided. He found himself wondering how such a person could become the leader of anything, much less the nascent government for a galaxy-spanning republic. But she’d had a following before he came, so maybe there was more to her than he saw. Failing that, she could be made into the sort of person he needed.

“It occurs to me that while the *Heart of the Tempest* is engaged with the fleets in the Sol system, and additional Laconian forces have not yet arrived to secure Medina Station, some ill-informed members of your association or other prospective members who haven’t officially joined you yet might view this as a moment of weakness for our occupation.”

“I don’t—” Carrie started.

“But it’s important that everyone understand that such a view is both inaccurate, and dangerous,” Singh continued over the top of her. “You will send a message, as the president of the new Laconian Congress of Worlds, to every planet in the network.”

“The what?”

“The change of name will more closely join your group with the empire. It’s important that they recognize you as a legitimate and trusted representative of Laconia. You will tell them that any hostile action taken through one of the ring gates, be that a ship full of soldiers or an angrily thrown rock, will result in the total sterilization of the inhabited planet on the other side of that ring.”

Carrie went still for a moment. “Jesus Christ. Are you *serious*?”

“It’s come to my attention that many of the social organizations of the old human power structures show a shocking inability to do risk analysis. They may foolishly attempt a doomed assault, thinking all they’re risking is their own lives. Reason doesn’t work with this kind of person. I need you to make them understand, on an *emotional* level, the price for such an attack. I will kill every single person on their planet. I assume even former OPA radicals have family members they care about, and whose lives they are less willing to risk on a romantic notion of a hero’s death.”

Overstreet's bright-blue eyes were on him. Singh felt the man evaluating him.

"I can't be part of something like that," Carrie said.

"You can," Singh insisted. "Because I'm making that the rule of engagement for our occupation here, whether you warn people or not. I think it's best if everyone understands that before they do anything with such a terrible price. Don't you agree?"

Singh stood up, and Overstreet opened the door for him. Carrie Fisk stared at him from behind her desk. Singh didn't see the fear he expected on her face. More a sort of simpleminded confusion.

"Please get the announcement out before the end of the day," he said. "I leave the wording to you, as long as all the details I laid out are included. Good day, Madam President."

He left the room with Fisk still reeling from the shock. Overstreet fell easily into stride behind him.

"Permission, sir?" Overstreet said, his tone reserved and formal. Distant, almost.

Singh felt a moment's chagrin. He should have called Overstreet by his given name. He'd forgotten that, and it seemed late to change their habits now. He needed to be more careful about that. "Proceed, Major."

"Are we going to order those attacks?"

"Only if we have to," Singh said.

Overstreet didn't reply at once, and when he did, his tone was flat. "Understood," he said.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Holden

Holden shifted in his bunk. If he lay on his side with one arm raised and his head resting on it like a pillow, he could block that ear, then put a hand over the ear that was pointed up at the bunk above him. It was almost enough to block out Alex's snoring. But it also made his shoulder ache after a while, and his hand fell asleep before he did. He could track down a set of earplugs, but that meant getting out of bed. Half-awake as he was, that seemed like a lot of trouble. Anyway, no one else in the bunks seemed to be bothered. He also knew—half knew—that if he woke up enough to fix the problem, he'd be too awake to sleep again. Admitting that age and anxiety had turned him into a light sleeper felt vaguely shameful in a way that probably wouldn't have stood the scrutiny of a fully conscious mind. Years of living with his crew had built habits and norms that they were violating in these new circumstances, and it was weird.

Clarissa made an uncomfortable sound halfway between a whine and a growl. In the bunk across from him, Naomi shifted. By the dim orange glow of the safety light, he could just make out the curve of her shoulder, the shape of her hair spilling out over her pillow.

Which meant his eyes were open.

Which meant he was awake.

He tried closing his eyes again, willing himself back down to sleep, but Alex coughed above him, and Holden shifted his arm. The pins and needles started in his fingers. The last wisps of dream and oblivion thinned and vanished out of his brain. As quietly as he could, he rolled to the edge of the bunk, let himself down to the deck, and slipped out the door, leaving the others to get the rest he couldn't.

The web of unmonitored space that Saba and his people had carved out of the flesh of the station was tighter than living on any ship Holden had crewed. Keeping the power low enough to avoid detection meant thick air and rationed water. The murmur of voices speaking in musical Belter

Creole was as present as the hum of the air recyclers. Holden made his way to the head—an emergency cut-in to the processing system with a seat about the right size for a five-year-old. He had to wait for the woman already there to finish. By the time he stepped back into the access hall, he was fully awake, hungry, and a little grumpy.

Naomi slouched down the hall toward him. Her undershirt was stained with sleep sweat and use. The top of her half-undone jumpsuit gathered at her hips like humanity's worst bustle. Her hair and face still had the shape of her pillow to them.

She was beautiful. She made everything better than it would have been without her.

"You're up," she said.

"I am."

"Me too."

"Sucks, right?"

"Oh yeah," she said, then gestured toward the head. He shifted out of her way.

"Want to risk breakfast out in the world?" she asked as she passed him.

Holden let the question sit in his chest while he was alone in the corridor. When they were in the secret passageways of the underground, they were safe in that they were unmonitored. The Laconian-controlled station was dangerous, but it was also open. Fresh air, better food, and as far as Holden knew, they still weren't on security's shit list.

And there were things they could learn by being there that they'd never get if they only ever stayed where it was safe.

When Naomi emerged, he took her arm like they were stepping out to a formal affair, and together they walked to one of the security hatches, and from there into Medina Station. The transition points were the most dangerous. Moving from the unmonitored spaces into public without seeming to pop into existence out of nowhere meant timing their passage in places that were only intermittently watched, or else getting secondary entrances into showers, locker rooms, and toilets, where privacy gave them cover.

When they reached the open sections of the station, it was moving from one kind of oppressive environment into another. The halls were bright and open, the air fresh and if anything a little cool. Screens and monitors showed the locally produced Laconia-approved news: propaganda about the

stability and security of the station mixed with whatever pop-culture feeds from outside the slow zone made it past their censors. Holden and Naomi walked through it like refugees at a shopping complex, trying not to blink into the too-bright lights.

They weren't alone. The crews of all the other ships and the citizens of the station all had the same dazed look to them, though at different intensities. People were still scrounging for quarters or camping on the inner face of the dome. The docks were still locked down, and that showed no sign of changing. Any normal hand terminals were still blocked from sending messages off Medina or gathering data that wasn't locally stored and vetted. There was a way that being in Saba's underground felt like being buried alive. And there was a way that being outside of it made being buried alive seem like not such a bad thing. It was cozy, anyway.

They stopped at a café two levels below the open air of the drum's interior. He got a bulb of genuinely third-rate coffee—overroasted to hide the shitty beans in the taste of the char, and a chalky cream substitute—and Naomi got tea and a corn muffin that they could split. They sat at a little table as far away from the public passage as they could get and still have a good view of the foot traffic passing by. Two men, smoking pipes that looked like they'd been made of decking ceramic. A group of schoolchildren in matching gray-green uniforms. A busker with a marionette trying to amuse passersby with her antics. It could have been any station in human space. And as they watched, they talked about things that weren't dangerous if anyone were to overhear.

In the public corridor, a security team walked past. Two figures in the blue power armor bristling with weapons. The carts and foot traffic moved around the pair like a stream flowing around rocks. Their presence wasn't intimidating people as much now, or at least not in the same ways. On a screen across the corridor, Carrie Fisk of the newly renamed Laconian Congress of Worlds was being interviewed by a pretty young man with a military haircut. Holden wondered what she was saying, but the café had their system set to a light, friendly saidi list that shifted from one melody to the next without ever pausing in between. The same music, Holden guessed, that they'd played before Laconia came knocking.

It was all becoming normal. He could see it in the way the clerk served up the terrible, terrible coffee. He could hear it in the conversations at the nearby tables. It showed on the screens and in the gaits of the people

walking by. Panic and alarm were exhausting. He was exhausted by them, and Medina was exhausted too. It was already shifting into its new routine. Checkpoints, yes. Armed security, yes. All the theater of dominance and control and nothing to undercut that narrative.

Just to look at it, you wouldn't guess there'd been a bombing.

Saba hadn't known it was coming either, and they'd only heard about it through him. A small explosion, but the unofficial reports said at least one Laconian had been killed. The official reports, apparently, were that it hadn't happened at all. That was a change. The assassination attempt had been used to justify the crackdown. Now the crackdown was just another day, and highlighting the attacks on the structures of power wasn't useful. Nothing had to be justified anymore. Governor Singh in his offices was trying to project a sense of normalcy and inevitability. And as far as Holden could tell, it was working.

"Kind of quiet," he said, meaning *They think they're winning*.

Naomi tugged her hair down over her eyes. "Right?" she said. It meant *I think they're winning too*.



Back in the underground, Holden found Saba sitting at a dumb terminal. Even in full light, Saba's hair and skin were nearly the same color. In the backslash from the screen, he almost seemed like a cartoon of himself. He nodded at Holden and shifted a few centimeters on his bench to give him room. Holden sat.

"Checking on the *Storm* dump?" Holden asked, nodding toward the screen. The log entries spooled up. The information they were intercepting from the Laconians was encrypted on a variety of levels, and using more than one schema.

"Dui," Saba said. "Everything between the station and the *Storm* is coming in, but until we get access to the server that decrypts it, it's just noise. Plenty more irons in that fire, though. Medina comms got more compromised than we thought. Turns out Golden Bough bought a tech eighteen months ago, got a backdoor into the system we never noticed."

"Really?" Holden said. "How'd you find it now?"

"Coyo told us," Saba said, flashing a grin. "Patriotism is weird shit."

Holden chuckled. "Whatever works, I guess."

They sat for a moment in near silence. Saba scratched his arm and pointedly didn't look at Holden when he spoke again. "Big coya seems like she's got a little stone in her throat. Any trouble with your crew?"

"Nope," Holden said. And then, "I mean, yeah, but nothing that'll cause a problem."

"Don't guess you want to say what? Make me feel better to know."

Holden leaned forward. The logs spooled past, storage filling with traffic that might be everything to them. Or nothing. Bobbie wasn't something he'd talked about before. He wasn't sure he wanted to start now, but he was living in Saba's rooms, eating the man's food, coordinating on his operations.

"It's not exactly my crew," Holden said. "I had some trouble with the union before all this happened."

Saba's grin came again. "You're forgetting whose man I am, que no? Drummer spends a little time talking about you behind your back, and that means to me."

"Right, so ... I was in the process of retiring when all this came down. Dropping off the Freehold guy was my last mission. Was going to be. The crew is really Bobbie's, only then history got in the way, and now I'm sort of back in charge and sort of not. It's awkward."

"Savvy," Saba said. "I'm there too."

"Something wrong between you and Bobbie?"

"No, no, no. Only that Medina's my home port, but the *Malaclypse* is my home. This came down, and I got put at the front because of my spouse and her job and the union. Plenty enough around here don't like that. Do their own thing because it's their own."

"Like the bombing," Holden said.

"Like that trap, yeah. Like the trying for the governor. Like a bunch of assholes I stopped who were looking to steal Laconian uniforms, beat up some of our own so they could start shit between, yeah?"

"That doesn't seem productive," Holden said.

"Not about productive," Saba said. "About reaching for what can get done. Plenty of old OPA on Medina. When the Alliance turned into the union, it didn't erase all the old factions. There's Ochoa OPA and there's Johnson OPA even when there's no Ochoa or Johnson. Voltaire Collective set that bomb like they'd just been waiting for the chance, and maybe they

were. Oldsters going at it like they were young again. Young ones trying to live up to the stories of the bad old days. Like pumping oxygen into a fire.”

Holden shook his head. “If we’re going to manage anything, we have to —”

The dumb terminal chirped, and one of the entries came up highlighted. Saba pulled the interface pad closer and scrolled back to the flagged entry. He cross-checked and opened the file. All the things a real system would have done for him automatically, if they could risk using one.

Saba clicked his tongue against his teeth.

“What’ve we got?” Holden asked.

“Traffic control plan update,” Saba said. “Got something slated as coming in through Laconia gate, but not right away.”

“How far out?”

“Forty-two days?” Saba said. He moved through the data as carefully as he could, checking the distribution stamps and time codes. It didn’t take him long to find the name and transit specs for the ship. The *Typhoon*. And from the mass and energy profile, it was huge. On a hunch, Holden had Saba match it with Laconia’s first transit. The two were the same. The *Typhoon* was another *Tempest*. Holden felt a tightness under his rib cage wondering how many more like it there were.

Saba cursed under his breath. A man’s voice came from behind them, somewhere in the warren of hidden corridors. A woman answered. The bulkheads, the exposed conduits and industrial decking, the thick air and the darkness. All of it was just the same as it had been when Holden sat down, except that now it seemed fragile.

Another warship from Laconia with more soldiers. The beginning of the permanent occupation. Not just the beginning of the end. The end.

Saba cracked his knuckles and smiled ruefully at Holden. “Well,” he said. “Leaves me wishing I could tell Drummer and the union. Kind of thing she’d want to know.”

“Yeah,” Holden said, trying to gather his wits. There was more than a little of him jumping around behind his own eyes like a panicked monkey, but this wasn’t the time for it. “All right. We still have some time. Whatever we decide to do, our obstacles are the *Gathering Storm* outside the station and something like two hundred, maybe two hundred and fifty power-armor-wearing Marines inside it.”

“And loose-cannon OPA factions firing off without warning,” Saba said.

“When they hear about this, they’ll get worse. Complicate everything if they won’t coordinate.”

“So that too,” Holden agreed. His brain felt like it was stuffed with cotton ticking. He wanted to get all his people onto the *Rocinante* and run away. If there was anyplace that the Laconians wouldn’t just follow them and shoot them down. If there was anyplace in thirteen hundred systems that would be safe anymore. For them, or for anyone.

“Okay,” he said. “All right. Whatever goals we decide on, we have to take those three things into account. And we have to do it in the next forty-two days.”

“Because after that,” Saba said, “no more us, yeah?”

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Chapter Twenty-Six: Bobbie

Bobbie, Alex, and Clarissa ate lunch together in a tiny compartment with ELECTRICAL SUPPLIES stenciled on the door in four languages. It had a few unlabeled crates in it that they could use as tables and benches, so they'd taken to calling it the Diner. The meal was the heavily spiced and deep-fried balls of bean paste that Belters called red kibble. On the side they had a few bits of dried fruit, and a thin seafood soup that tasted like the flavor came from having a fish swim through the broth.

"You know what I miss most about the *Roci* about now?" Alex said, poking at his kibble, which rolled around his plate. "My ship knows how to make Martian food. I'm so sick of this Belter shit."

He was exaggerating his Mariner Valley drawl the way he always did when he spoke of the ship. Bobbie laughed at him, then noisily drank off the last of her broth.

"It's good for you, boy," she said, mocking his drawl.

"It keeps body and soul attached, and that's about the best I can say for it."

Clarissa smiled at their banter, but said nothing. She was picking up a single ball of kibble at a time, then carefully chewing it. It was like watching a bird eat in slow motion.

"I wonder if the Laconians still eat Martian food," Bobbie said. "We could ask."

Alex tossed his plate down onto their crate-table in disgust. "You know, I think what chaps my ass more than anything else about this shit? The guys who came out of the gate and started wreckin' our shit and takin' over aren't some damn aliens. It's fucking Martians. I bet there're people on that Laconian ship I served with back in the day. Dollars to donuts, the top brass in the Marine detachment here are people you know, at least by name."

Bobbie nodded, chewing the last of her kibble. "That's actually an interesting idea. I mean, could that be useful? Find some people in their

command structure that know us? Is that an in?”

“I ain’t talkin’ about how it’s useful, Bob,” Alex said, nearly knocking over Clarissa’s water glass with his angry hand gestures. “I’m talkin’ about the idea that people just like us, Martian patriots, picked up and ran off with this Duarte guy, and took about a third of the fleet with them.”

“You ever wonder if it could have been us?” Bobbie asked.

Alex lowered his brows at her. “You lost your mind?”

“No, really, think about it,” Bobbie said. “We were both out of the service when Duarte started making his move. You’d been retired for a decade at that point. I’d been out of the Corps for a couple years. But if we’d still been active duty, could we have fallen for his pitch? I mean, a lot of good people did.”

“A third of the stars of heaven,” Clarissa said, as if she were agreeing.

“Uh,” Alex replied, cocking his head in confusion.

“A third of the what now, honey?” Bobbie said.

“From the Bible. Revelation. When the devil fell from grace, he took a third of the angels with him. It’s described as the great dragon pulling a third of the stars of heaven down with its tail.”

“Huh,” Alex said like he had no idea what she was talking about.

“Why’d that pop into your head?” Bobbie asked.

“Whatever story Duarte was selling was compelling enough to get a big chunk of the Martian military to buy in. The devil’s story was freedom from the oppression of God’s rules, and it was good enough to win a lot of angels to his side. Whatever Duarte’s pitch was, it’s a good one. Don’t be so sure you wouldn’t have bought it.”

“Oh, I’m pretty fucking sure,” Alex replied with a snort.

Bobbie had to admit she wasn’t. A galaxy-spanning human civilization run the way the Martians, at their best, ran things. Organized, focused on a single overarching goal. Efficient, well planned, not wasting anything. She could see why that appealed to a lot of people when Mars was watching its dream of terraforming die. Duarte could step in and sell them a new dream that used all the same skills and attitudes that the old one had, but was even grander in scope. Bobbie recognized that there was a version of her that was fighting on the Laconian side right now, and it made her itchy.

Alex had started to gather up the plates and cups from their meal when Amos walked into the room. “Hey, Babs. Cap wants to see us about that thing.”

“Which thing?”

“The making-sure-no-more-bombs-go-off-we-don’t-know-about thing.”

“Oh, that thing. Be there in five,” she replied, and he shrugged and walked off without another word.

“Still kinda chafes, don’t it?” Alex said, his voice gentle.

“What? Hearing him go back to calling Holden ‘Cap’?” Bobbie said, ready to shrug it off. But something caught in her throat. “Yeah. I gotta admit it does. I might have a word with him on that.”

“Be gentle,” Clarissa said. “He’s fragile right now.”

Bobbie had no idea what the word *fragile* meant when applied to Amos. She wasn’t sure she wanted to learn.



Saba leaned against one wall in the larger storage space that they’d been using as their insurgent-cell meeting room. Someone had finally pushed all the crates and boxes up against the walls to serve as seating, and some enterprising thief on the crew had even managed to steal a few benches from one of the parks. About twenty members of their group were scattered around the space, including Holden, Naomi, and Amos.

On the wall screen behind Saba was a diagram of Medina, and a picture of a severe-looking woman with black hair and a lot of facial piercings. She stared at the camera with angry eyes, giving the picture a mug-shot feel. The name Katria Mendez floated beneath her photo.

“The Voltaire Collective,” Saba said, pointing at her. “Bomb throwers from ancient days.”

“Fighters,” someone in the room replied, making the word a term of respect.

“Sa bien,” Saba replied. “Now with Laconia? They go back to the old script.”

“Apart from the fact that their strategy doesn’t work anymore and it’s fucking our shit up, they seem like people we want in our team,” Holden said. “We should recruit them. Coordinate with them. Killing them or feeding them to the Laconians should be our last option.” He sounded a little scattered. Distracted. She wondered what was up with him. He knew something or suspected something that was eating up all his spare cycles.

Bobbie had seen it before.

Saba nodded with one fist. "If we can, we should." He pointed to a sublevel on the Medina map marked Water Reclamation. "Holed up here, them. I say we send our envoys to make them an offer of alliance."

Holden turned on his bench to look back at Bobbie. She gave him a tiny nod. He stood up to take a spot next to Saba and said, "I think we should send Bobbie to speak for us. She can pass along our respects, tell them we need to join up, and if they get belligerent ... well, she can handle that too."

"Agreed," Saba said. "How many you want with you?"

"Let's keep this small," Bobbie replied. "Just me and Amos for now. This should feel like natural allies reaching out. Not a war party."

"Sabe bien," Saba said. "But this ends with they don't plant more bombs unless we say so. Our house gets in order now. One way or."

"Yeah," Bobbie agreed. "One way or, that's where this ends."



The shortest path to Water Reclamation included a short jaunt through the inner drum. Bobbie didn't mind. Hiding out with her resistance-fighter buddies included an awful lot of sleeping and eating in tiny metal rooms. Getting out into the habitat space with open air and a dirt floor and the full-spectrum light on her face was a welcome change.

Even the ubiquitous Laconians didn't ruin the mood. For the most part, their conquerors were easy to get along with. They acted like people who'd lived on Medina for years: eating in the restaurants, browsing the shops, making use of the entertainment districts. If you gave them a nod, they nodded back like old neighbors. Even the Marine patrols moving past in their exotic blue power armor looked alert, but not particularly threatening.

Bobbie had seen the other version of them during the assassination attempt on the governor, so she knew they could go from friendly and professional to full rock-and-roll at the flip of a switch. Easy to get along with or not, the Laconians were a military occupation. You forgot that at your peril.

"How are you doing?" Bobbie asked as they walked through a particularly lush section of park. The lovingly tended path curved through grass, patches of flowers, and even past the occasional tree. Insects buzzed

about, still the best-designed pollinating system there was. Technology did a lot of things well, but evolution had it beat when it came to environmental systems.

“My feet hurt,” Amos said. “Kind of all the time now. Glad these Belters keep the rotation at a third of a g.”

“It’s quicker to list the shit that doesn’t hurt, these days,” Bobbie said. “But that’s not really what I meant.”

“Yeah?” Amos said. His tone didn’t change at all, but Bobbie had flown with him for a couple decades now. She could hear the tension that had crept in.

“Claire thinks maybe you’re having a tough time right now.”

“Does she.” Amos’ voice had gone so flat, it might have been a badly written computer simulation of him. He was checking out of the conversation. Pushing it farther wouldn’t help.

“Anyway,” Bobbie said, keeping it light. “You need anything, I’m up for whatever.”

“Yeah, I know, Babs,” Amos said. “But these Voltaire guys are no joke. We better get our game faces on.”



The Voltaire Collective occupied a dusty crawl space beneath and between half a dozen gigantic stainless-steel tanks. It was a good spot. Unless the piping sprang a leak, there was literally no reason for anyone to come down to the space. The Collective definitely still had some skill sets left over from their OPA resistance-fighter days. Katria Mendez in person was all hard angles and sharp edges, and her dark eyes burned with a constant low-level fury.

“You’re actually coming here to lecture us on how to run an occupied insurgency,” she said. Her voice was gentle and warm. The voice of a favorite teacher, or beloved aunt. A voice that asked if you wanted some lemonade with your cookies. It also had the precise diction and studied lack of accent that Bobbie associated with advanced education. Her Belter accent could have been measured in parts per billion.

“Not at all,” Bobbie started.

“Because,” Katria continued, “the Collective has been a militant branch

of the OPA, resisting inner-planets control, for nearly a century.”

“I understand,” Bobbie said.

“Do you? Because it seems like you just showed up here and told us that we’re not allowed to run any resistance operations without your consent. Or did I misunderstand what you were telling me?”

Bobbie heard shuffling feet behind her, and turned around to see five members of Katria’s cell had taken up a loose semicircle at her back. None of them held weapons in their hands, but they all wore the loose-fitting jumpsuits of the Medina Station maintenance workers. Lots of big pockets that could be hiding anything from a hammer to a compact machine pistol. Amos, standing to her left, caught her eye without losing his smile. He took a half step back, managing to make it look casual.

“Look,” Bobbie said to Katria, stepping up and looking down at her from their half-meter height difference. “We didn’t come here to start a fight. As far as I’m concerned, we’re all on the same team. But if you force it to go the other way, we’re prepared for that, too. And I promise you it will not go the way you want.”

“Honestly, I’m just not sure why Saba didn’t come himself,” Katria said, not backing down at all. “Or why he thought sending a Martian and an Earther to tell Belters how to fight was the right message.”

Bobbie didn’t know any answer to that other than *because we’re the most intimidating soldiers he’s got, now that walking through Medina with firearms has become a really bad idea*. She winged it instead.

“Because maybe that *is* the message. Because this isn’t about Belters and inners and last century’s bullshit. Because now it’s about all of *us* versus the assholes who popped out of their gate thirty years into our game and decided they get to flip the table over.”

Katria nodded and smiled. “That’s actually not a terrible answer.”

“Then let’s ease down,” Bobbie said, taking a half step back again to give Katria her space. “Let’s find a place to sit and have a drink and chat about how all of us can work together to fuck these Laconian assholes up. Yeah?”

“You keep giving me that eye, boy, and I’m gonna pull it out of your head and hand it back to you,” Amos said, his tone so mellow and conversational that it took Bobbie a moment to recognize the threat was real. He was looking back at the semicircle of OPA toughs at their back, directing his empty gaze at them. But Bobbie saw a vein at his temple

throbbing like he was at risk of a stroke. The muscles moved under his skin like taut cable dragging over his jawbone.

“Amos,” she said, and then she wasn’t talking anymore because she was in a fight.

Amos threw himself at someone behind her, and she heard grunts and the meaty thud of fists hitting flesh, but she couldn’t turn around to see what was happening because a long knife had appeared in Katria’s hand and the woman was dancing toward her. *Fighters*, one of Saba’s people had said. And like the Laconians, the Voltaire Collective folks also seemed ready to go from zero to a hundred at the flip of a switch.

Bobbie didn’t have time to dance with Katria, nor did she want to get herself stitched up from a knife fight, so she straight-kicked the woman in the diaphragm and dropped her to the deck with an explosive *oof*. She took a second to kick the knife away, then started to turn when something heavy slammed into her cheek.

Through the explosion of stars in her vision, she saw Amos grappling with two men at the same time, choking one with his left arm while he slammed the second man into one of the water tanks over and over again with his right. A third man had climbed onto his back and was attempting a sleeper hold, but couldn’t get his forearm under Amos’ chin to lock it up. The other two OPA goons were flanking Bobbie, and one of them was holding the crowbar he’d just cracked her cheekbone with. In the sort of slow-motion clarity Bobbie always experienced during a fight, she saw skin and blood on the crowbar’s edge.

Oh, she thought, that’s why my face feels wet.

Crowbar was pulling back for another swing, while his partner tried to get behind her. Bobbie decided Crowbar was the more serious threat and lunged at him to get inside the arc of his swing. His arm went around her, and she felt the bar slam into her shoulder blade, which made her right arm go pins-and-needles numb. She threw a throat punch at him with it, and even though she couldn’t feel it, her arm did what she told it to. Crowbar dropped his weapon and clutched his throat with both hands, gagging.

His partner kicked her in the back, twice. One kick hit her kidney, and the other her butt. While the kidney shot might have her pissing blood for a few days, it was the kick to the ass that almost put her on the ground. It felt like someone set off a small bomb in her lower back, and she felt a sharp crack that almost certainly meant he’d snapped her tailbone.

She turned to see him unleashing another kick, and managed to mostly sidestep it, letting it bounce off her hip and forcing him to stumble forward into her. She grabbed hold of his left arm and rotated through the hips to throw him face-first into a pressure-monitoring console a few feet away. He hit it with a thud and a crunch, and started to sag.

Then, just because he'd kicked her in the ass, she snapped his left arm before she let him drop.

Five minutes later, Katria and her five friends sat or lay on the floor, hands tied behind their backs. Amos had an eye that was already starting to swell shut, and four scrapes down his cheek that looked like he'd been clawed by a big cat. Bobbie had carefully avoided looking at her own face in anything reflective. But based on the volume of blood in her shirt, the wound on her face had to be pretty grotesque. *There goes my not-needing-stitches plan.* The pain in her backside also meant she wasn't going to enjoy sitting for the next couple of months. That thought made her want to kick the unconscious man with the broken arm again. Or maybe Amos.

"Katria," Bobbie said, leaning down over the Voltaire Collective cell leader. "Is it okay if I call you Katria?"

If Katria had any objections, she kept them to herself.

"Great. So, look. This could have gone better. We kicked your ass and you're pissed now, I get that. If you want to be part of the revolution, great, we'd love to have you. But you run all your ops through Saba's group. That's nonnegotiable. Anything else, and we're killing you and hiding your bodies in the fertilizer-recycling system."

Bobbie grabbed the front of Katria's shirt and picked her back up to her feet, then kept lifting until they were eye to eye.

"Do we understand each other?"

To her surprise, Katria laughed. There was a brightness in her eyes that looked like fever. "We do indeed," the woman said. It could have been a sparring partner's salute or the threat of retribution. Bobbie really wished she could tell the difference.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Drummer

It was easy to forget sometimes that the void cities hadn't always been there. During the starving years, they'd been something like a dream. A promised land without the land. Homes for the Belt that could move through the gates to whatever system they chose. There had been a magic to them then. A sense of the unprecedented.

Time had worn that shine away. Drummer had spent more time in the last decade on People's Home and Independence and Guardian than on ships or asteroid stations. They'd become so familiar that they'd bled back in her memory until it felt as though the corridors and chambers had been present since her childhood, even if she hadn't been on them. Like a city often mentioned, but not visited until adulthood. She had to remind herself that war was always this way. Had always been. Cities had been falling under siege since the time there were cities. Mortars had fallen on schools. Soldiers had stormed hospitals. Bombs had set churches and parks and children on fire. Homes had been lost before now.

The tactical display floating over the table was off by orders of magnitude. If it had been to scale, Independence would have been too small to make out with a microscope. As it was, the identifying code was larger than the ship icon. A smear of light smaller than a crumb of bread that meant a city where two hundred thousand people, more or less, lived and worked, raised children, divorced and married, drank and danced and died. And then burning sunward from it, the evacuation ships—even smaller—that carried as many people as would fit away from the theater of battle. She looked at them and saw all the other times children had been carried away from a disaster that was approaching and that could not be stopped: London, Beijing, Denver. History, she reminded herself, was peppered with moments like this one. It only felt different because this was her city, a void city, and this had never happened before.

She had repurposed the central traffic-control station of People's Home

for this. Military analysts and engineers, some of them union, most of them EMC, sat at the desks where civilians usually were. Feeds to the war rooms on Earth and Mars showed similar rooms with similar people, but considerably less light delay. The screens that usually listed incoming and outgoing ships with approach vectors and expected times were devoted to the incoming signals from all the active telescopes in the Belt. Images of the major observation stations showed when fresh data streams were coming in, where they were coming from, when People's Home was transmitting. Images from Independence and the dozen EMC ships included flags for time delay—an hour and twenty-three minutes—and a composite of the enemy claimed the central display. Pale as a bone, burning lazily toward the point where the battle would begin. Maybe had begun. Maybe had started and ended in the hour and twenty-three minutes it took light to bring the message to them.

“The, ah, the resolution will get better as we get the signal bounce,” the EMC technician said. She was younger than Drummer had been when she started working on Tycho, with red hair pulled back in a bun and a wide, doughy face. On Earth and Mars, other technicians were probably having the same conversations with the prime minister and secretary-general. “It’s a trade-off, of course, between immediacy of the direct signals and the better information density of delaying a few minutes to get the extra feeds.”

“I just need to know what’s happening,” Drummer said.

Avasarala, who still hadn’t made the passage back to Earth, and Vaughn were at the edge of the room. Admiral Hu was at one of the central control consoles, sitting forward like an overeager schoolgirl at the first lecture of term. She’d come as a forward observer, the military leader of the EMC nearest to the battle without being in it. A bulb of what smelled like green tea rested on a side table Vaughn had brought out so that the admiral wouldn’t risk spilling on the control board. Drummer walked to her less because she wanted to talk than because she had to move.

“Madam President,” Hu said, nodding to her.

“Admiral.”

“Odd being on the same side of a shooting war, isn’t it? I never thought the day would come.”

That says more about you than the reality of things, Drummer thought. The EMC wasn’t its own side any more than Ilus or Surabhi or Neue Ausland were. The dreams of empire faded slowly. It didn’t matter.

“We’ve got a comm report, Madam President.”

“Play it,” Drummer snapped. The main screen shifted. The Laconian admiral appeared. His voice was patient and calm, but there was a glitter in his eye. An excitement. It made Drummer’s gut ache to see.

“This is Admiral Trejo of the *Heart of the Tempest* to the approaching warships. I ask that you stand down. Any interference with our ship will be met in kind. Don’t make this worse than it has to be.”

“Fuck you,” Drummer said to the screen, but not softly enough that Admiral Hu didn’t chuckle. It was only ten seconds before the answer came. God, that’s how close the distant war ships all were to each other. Light-seconds.

Emily Santos-Baca, the ranking board member who lived on Independence. Her hair was pulled back in a tight braid in preparation for null g. Or it had been an hour and twenty-three minutes ago.

“Admiral Trejo,” Santos-Baca said, “on behalf of the Transport Union and the Earth-Mars Coalition, I am informing you that your presence in Sol system is a violation of territorial space and is being considered an act of war. Your ship will brake immediately and return to Laconia until appropriate contracts and diplomatic resolutions are in place.”

They were reports from two competing realities. Drummer wished that Santos-Baca’s sounded more plausible. The icons that marked the EMC ships were like dots drawn on the skin of a balloon, the *Tempest* moving in like a pin. It couldn’t be long. Couldn’t have been.

“The dispersal,” Hu said. “You see that? The way they’re spread out? That’s based on the Medina data your people sent. The spread of that magnetic whatever-the-hell-it-was. We placed the ships so that no matter which one it aims at, it won’t be able to get two. Good, eh?”

“Excellent,” Drummer said. Her throat was dry, but the smell of the tea was a little nauseating.

“The range of it can’t be good either,” Hu said. “The science wonks say the power curve would be logarithmic. Remaining at range should force the bastards to use any other weapons systems they have. Assuming that the magnetic cannon even works in normal space. Because there’s at least one idea that it’s using special properties that only exist in the ring space. And if that’s the case—”

“Gloria.” The old woman’s voice was like a knife. “You’re doing it again.”

Admiral Hu glanced back at Avasarala. Drummer hadn't heard her approach, but there she was. Her smile was indulgent and warm and, Drummer had to assume, utterly false.

"Gloria is a good warrior, but she gets chatty when she's nervous."

"We're seeing fire," one of the analysts said. His voice was as calm and businesslike as a surgeon announcing a bleeder.

The display shifted. The EMC ships and *Independence* were still there, but backgrounded as the focus changed to swarms of missiles pouring out toward the *Tempest*. Each one burned hard enough that a human body would have been pulped by the g forces, and they barely seemed to move. The distances they traveled were vast. Even at their speed, three million clicks was a long time. Verbal threats that took seconds at lightspeed followed by punches that would take minutes or hours. Even without the warheads, the kinetic force of the torpedoes would be massive. If they hit. The swarm crept forward, pixel by imperceptible pixel. Drummer waved a steward over and ordered a bulb of ice water and a bowl of hummus with bread. She had to try to eat.

The hummus was half gone and the tea tepid before the first of the missiles started winking out of existence.

"What are we seeing, please?" Hu said.

"It appears to be long-range PDCs," one of the analysts said. "We're waiting for the bounce feed so we can get higher resolution."

Another twenty minutes, and a much sharper image of the *Tempest* appeared with the timestamp to show it was just after the fleet's launch. All along the sides of the ship, tiny dark eruptions like the spots on a shark.

"The PDCs' housings appear to be covered by the hull. Telemetry from the *Michael Souther* is that the remaining missiles were redirected toward those structures." Were. An hour and twenty minutes ago.

"They're not using their magnet beam," Hu said. "That's good. If it was cheap for them to fire it, they could use it to knock down missiles. If it's expensive to use, we may be able to exhaust it."

Drummer thought that sounded like wishful thinking, but she didn't say so. She tried to take comfort in Hu's optimism. The data feeds shifted, more information coming in. The images of the *Tempest* sharpened. The PDCs came into clearer focus, but it didn't help Drummer understand them. The openings in the side of the ship looked like little mouths opening and closing. Like the whole side of the ship was singing. There was no

mechanism she could see. She shuddered. The cloud of torpedoes was thinning. None of them would reach the body of the enemy ship.

A bloom of glowing gas erupted from the *Tempest*'s side, flinched, and then dissipated.

"Rail guns," an analyst said.

The chatter of voices went into a higher gear. Tracking the rail-gun round, examining the spectrum of the plasma that had accompanied it, identifying the particular torpedo that it turned to dust.

"Are their PDCs running low already?" Hu said, to herself as much as anyone.

"It was a warning," Avasarala answered. "They're showing us that they have teeth and giving us the chance to back away."

"Maybe we should," Drummer said.

No one replied. The markers for the EMC ships shifted like a school of fish moving together, and Independence with them. Their own volley of rail guns, the slugs raining down from all directions. The *Tempest* had no way to stop them. All it could do was dodge. Drummer counted the minutes, watching the *Tempest* pull back and corkscrew out of the paths of danger. Mostly.

"I'm seeing contact."

"Two impacts on the starboard. Waiting for confirmation from Pallas and Luna, but I think we did them some damage."

The knot in Drummer's gut eased a little. If they could hurt it, they could kill it. It was just a question of scale and tactics.

"The hull appears to be self-repairing."

"Matches the Medina battle," Hu said.

"Show me," Drummer barked, and the image on her screen shifted again. It was a fresh image, still fuzzy. The bone-pale skin of the *Tempest* rippled as a round struck it, and then again with a second strike. Waves passed through the ship like the surface of water. Nasty black-and-red welts glowed where the rail-gun rounds had hit, but the plating—or whatever it was—folded over the wound, closing it, then folded again, and the damage was gone as if it had never been there.

Another volley of rail-gun fire from the EMC ships, but as the *Tempest* flinched back again and spun away again, it erupted in a cloud of plasma, and then emerged from it. Drummer didn't understand until Hu spoke.

"Holy shit. How many rail guns does that bastard have?"

Now the *Tempest* shifted and swirled, leaving a trail of glowing gas behind it like an afterimage. It was beautiful in its way, a warrior's dance—power and intention and technique that were almost balletic. And then the EMC ships began to die.

"The *Ontario* is hit. Reporting reactor breach and dumping core. We are seeing impacts on the *Severin*, the *Talwar*, and the *Odachi*, but no system confirmation yet. Rounds arrived thirty seconds earlier than the model anticipated."

"Fuckers," Avasarala said. "That's why they took out the missile. Throw a changeup and let us think it was their fastball."

"Whatever they're using for predictive algorithms, it's really good," Hu said, awe in her voice. "That's almost a third of our attack group down. And if ... Oh."

For a moment, Drummer didn't understand what she was seeing. Independence, the second void city to launch, the home to hundreds of thousands, seemed to bloom like a flower. Long petals of carbon lace and titanium peeled back, turning as they did. Something terrible and bright happened in the center of the city, but Drummer couldn't guess what it was. What she knew, what mattered, was that between one breath and the next, Independence was dead.

"We're counting eight simultaneous impacts on the void city," an analyst said from somewhere farther away than the control room. "They seem to have been placed to exploit resonance. We're seeing some structural breakdown."

Emily Santos-Baca was on Independence, Drummer thought, and she'd been dead already for over an hour. It didn't matter how much adrenaline was pumping through Drummer's veins, how tightly she gripped her bulb of old tea. She could shout the retreat order if she wanted to, but anyone in a position to hear her was dead already, or would be by the time her words could reach them.

The PDCs along the *Tempest*'s side fluttered again. Another group of EMC torpedoes died, faster this time because it was a smaller attack. The *Tempest* seemed to pause, floating in the distant nothingness as if inviting the EMC ships to take their best shots. Taunting them.

An hour and twenty-three minutes before, the EMC ships shifted, lit their Epstein drives as hard as they'd go, and turned to whatever vector got them away from the theater of battle as quickly as they could. The *Tempest*

didn't react. No new blooms from their rail guns. No more torpedoes. Drummer didn't believe for a second that the enemy's supplies had been exhausted. Trejo wasn't killing the other ships because he didn't need or want to. That was all.

Drummer put her tea on the little side table next to Hu's, turned, and walked out. She was aware in a vague, distant way of Vaughn behind her, calling her name. It wasn't something that mattered enough to attend to.

The decking of People's Home felt fragile under her feet, as if her footsteps might be enough to break them and spin her and everyone else in the city flying out into the vacuum. She passed her security detail, distantly aware of the men and women assigned to make sure she was safe in any circumstances scrambling to follow her.

It didn't matter. Because they didn't matter. Not when a whole city could die in a heartbeat.

She was in the lobby of the union's executive offices, sitting in an uncomfortable couch with her eyes locked on nothing in particular when Avasarala found her. The old woman steered her wheelchair across from Drummer like they were in someone's private quarters or a back porch back on Earth. There was no one else in the lobby. That was Vaughn's doing, more likely than not. In her imagination, the decking beneath her and Avasarala bucked and split open. What had Santos-Baca thought when it happened? Had she had time to think about it at all? She was trying to understand that she would never see the younger woman again, but the thought wouldn't take. She dreaded what came after it did.

"I'm sorry," Avasarala said.

Drummer shook her head.

"It won't help you," the old woman said, "but they all knew the risks going in. The chances that we would turn the *Tempest* back the first time we tried? Always thin."

"We should have waited," Drummer said. "We should have pulled them all back. Gathered everyone together and had every goddamn ship we have attack that fucking monstrosity at the same time. Wipe it out."

Her voice broke. She was crying, but it didn't feel like it was her doing it. Avasarala handed her a cloth. "You're mistaken, Camina. The cost was higher than we wanted. Higher than we'd thought. But we did what we came here to do."

"Die? Badly?"

“Learn,” Avasarala said. “How quickly the deck healed itself? That’s something we needed to know. But the places where a rail-gun round hit their PDCs, the weapons system there didn’t grow right back into place? We needed those too, and we didn’t even know to look for them. Maybe the ship can’t fix more complex mechanisms. We have a map of the armaments now. Where the PDCs are. Where the rail guns are. Where the torpedoes launch from. Next time, you can target those specifically. Degrade its attacking power, push it in ways we couldn’t this time because we just didn’t know.”

“All right,” Drummer said.

“They didn’t die for nothing,” Avasarala said.

“Everyone dies for nothing,” Drummer said.

They were quiet for a moment. Drummer coughed, blew her nose into the cloth, and then leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. Since the moment she’d taken the oath of office, there had been moments—not many, but enough to recognize—that she’d been certain that her place at the head of the union was all a terrible mistake. Saba promised her that everyone felt like that, like an impostor, sometimes. It was part of being human. His words had seemed comforting before. In her mind, Independence died again. She had the sick feeling that it would die a thousand more times before she got to sleep. More when she dreamed it.

“Did you do this to me?” she asked.

Avasarala frowned, papery forehead folding itself like a slept-on sheet.

“Did you manipulate me into sacrificing my people so that you’d get the data you wanted?” Drummer said. “Was this you?”

“This was history fucking us both,” Avasarala said. “Live as long as I have? See the changes that I’ve seen? You’ll learn something terrible about this.”

“Tell me.”

“No point. Until you see it yourself, you won’t understand.”

“Hey, you know what? Fuck you.”

Avasarala laughed hard enough that her wheelchair thought something was wrong and bucked forward a few centimeters before she could stop it. “Fair enough, Camina. Fair enough. Here then. See if you can follow me. Last long enough, and you’ll see that they’re all our people.”

“Independence and the *Ontario*,” Drummer spat. “Union and EMC, all one big happy family standing against the blowtorch together. Wonderful.”

“I told you that you wouldn’t understand,” Avasarala said, her voice cold and cutting. “The fuckers on the *Tempest*? I’m telling you they’re us too.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight: Holden

The artificially pretty man who acted as the news anchor for what everyone was calling the Laconian-state newsfeed sat in somber reflection, not quite looking directly into the camera. On a screen behind him, the first battle between the *Tempest* and the combined forces of the Sol system played out. It was all from the *Tempest*'s perspective, of course. Lots of telescopic zooms and torpedo-guidance camera footage. In one, a Martian frigate, one of the *Rocinante*'s next-generation cousins, died in a fireball as a rail gun shot cut through it from nose to tail. In another, a torpedo camera POV hurtled through space and into the flank of a UNN destroyer and ended in a flash of static.

One by one, the ships of the Sol fleet died. From the footage, it wasn't possible to tell if the *Tempest* was even damaged. And each time a ship died, a quiet gasp went through the air around Holden as he sat and watched the first act of the end of the world in a cramped metal room surrounded by the members of his little resistance group.

The screen behind the pretty man went blank. He turned his sober face directly into the camera and said, "To address Medina Station regarding what you've just seen, we are honored to bring you a statement from station governor, Captain Santiago Singh."

The camera pulled back to reveal Governor Singh sitting at the news desk next to pretty boy. Singh lacked his counterpart's carefully sculpted androgynous beauty, but he shared his look of quiet reflection.

"Greetings, Laconian citizens and residents of Medina Station. I come here in a moment of tragedy for us all. I will not gloat, or brag about Laconian military superiority. I have no wish to glory in the destruction you've just witnessed. Instead, I honor the brave warriors of the Sol system, who died believing they were defending their homes. There is no greater sacrifice a warrior can make, and I have nothing but respect for these courageous people. I ask that you honor them as well, as we have a moment

of silence.”

Singh lowered his head and closed his eyes. Pretty boy did the same.

“Motherfucker,” someone behind Holden said. Next to him, Bobbie loudly cracked her knuckles and frowned so hard Holden worried she might pull out the fresh stitches holding her cheek together.

On the screen, Singh lifted his head, then a moment later opened his eyes. “Laconians, and I speak to everyone on Medina when I say that, as I consider all of you my fellow citizens and peers. Laconians, the stated goal of your military is always the defense and protection of life. When the Sol system fleet ceased their attack and began a retreat, the *Heart of the Tempest* immediately ceased firing on them. And no element of the Laconian military—ship, soldier, or station—will ever fire except in response to threat to life or property.”

“Or in retribution against a whole fucking system you don’t like,” someone said from behind Holden. “Hypocritical dawusa.”

Singh leaned forward, his dark eyes imploring all who watched him. “I urge everyone with family or friends in the Sol system to contact them, to urge their political representatives to meet with Admiral Trejo and discuss the terms of their entry into the Laconian Empire without further military action and loss of life. Those who died were heroes all, but Laconia wants live citizens, not dead heroes. It is our duty—yours and mine—to do everything we can to achieve peace and safety for all of us. To this end, I am temporarily lifting the communication blackout back to the Sol system for those with family there. Please use this freedom to help your loved ones make the right decision. Thank you for your attention, and good day to all.”

Bobbie rolled her shoulders like a boxer stepping into the ring. To her right, Naomi was staring at the screen through half-lidded eyes, like she was solving a complex math problem. Holden was about to speak when Saba stood up and walked to the front of the room. The thirty or so people of the Medina Station insurgency became respectfully quiet. Holden held his breath.

“No reprisals,” Saba said, and Holden released his held breath in a rush. That was *not* what he’d expected to hear. “You savvy, coyos? Not one *fucking* thing. Yeah, pissed off, you. Got reason. Got all the reason. Want to cut a throat, make somebody pay.”

“God damn right,” a skinny man everyone called Nutter said, standing up and toying with the knife on his belt. “Maybe a lot of throats.”

“You do,” Saba said to him, “and yours is next, and I’m doing the cutting. Mushroom food, you. Every Laconian throat you cut is ten of ours you’re bleeding out. We stay angry, but we stay *smart*, sabe? Stay with your missions, stay with your plans.”

A ripple of grudging assent moved through the room. People started getting up to leave. The mutters of conversation had an edge to them, but Holden didn’t hear anyone actively planning a murder, so he’d call it a win.

Holden caught Bobbie’s eye and then stood up to grab Saba’s arm before he could leave. “Let’s talk.”

Fifteen minutes later Saba, Bobbie, and Naomi were sipping tea out of waxy cups in the Diner. Holden tried casually leaning against the wall for a minute, then gave up and paced around the room to give his restless energy someplace to go.

“The problem we’ve got right now is we’re all rats in a cage,” he said. “And we’re spending a lot of time and energy figuring out how big the cage is and where the doors are and how we might open one. But we haven’t got a single clue what we’d do if we actually got out.”

“We don’t start with just getting out?” Naomi asked.

“There was a time when I’d have said that was enough,” Holden agreed. “But that was when I was still thinking of this as a war. When escaping to join up with our side of the fight might matter.”

“This isn’t a war now,” Bobbie said, her voice low and dangerous.

“No?” Saba asked.

“No,” Holden said. “The war’s over. Sol might not know it yet, and a lot of people will die so that they can feel like they gave it a shot, but it’s over.”

“So what, then,” Saba asked. “Good Laconians, us?”

“No,” Holden replied. “At least not yet. But it does change the nature of what we’re doing here. We’re not looking to get the *Roci* free and join the fight. This is a jailbreak.”

Naomi made a clicking noise with her tongue, her eyes distant, then said, “All the same problems. The Marines, the Laconian destroyer, Medina’s scopes. But you’re saying if we can solve those, we just get as many people and ships free as we can and make a run for it. Scatter.”

Saba nodded one fist, then gave her the two-fingered OPA salute. Holden felt a little twinge of unease about that, but this wasn’t the time to talk it through.

“It gives us a goal,” Holden said. “Maybe we can keep everyone pulling

the same direction if they understand what the end game is.”

Saba tilted his head. There was no surprise in his expression. He’d been thinking along the same lines, so maybe he’d come to the same conclusions. “The decryption safe room.”

“I don’t like losing it,” Holden said, looking more at Bobbie now than Saba. “We’re still getting in a lot of data from the sniffer, and I know once we move forward with the plan, we lose that. We won’t get it back. But until we can decrypt what we do have, we can’t use it. And the *Typhoon*? It’s due in thirty-three days.”

“Thirty-two,” Naomi said.

“I don’t want to die with one still in the chamber,” Bobbie said. “I’m good with the timing.”

“Bien,” Saba said. “I’m in.”

“Great,” Holden replied. “Get word to every cell leader and ship captain you trust. We need to have everyone ready when the time comes.”

“This is gonna be some strange bedfellows,” Saba said as he left.

“Find some lunch?” Holden said to Naomi.

“Give me half an hour,” she replied. “I want to get a computer crunching the tactical data that video gave us. But after that, meet out front?”

“OK,” Holden said, wondering how to waste half an hour in the cramped space of their little hideout.

“Hey, Holden,” Bobbie said as Naomi left the room. “Can I hang on to you for a second?”

Holden shrugged and sat on a crate. Bobbie sat flexing her hands and staring at the floor so long that Holden started to wonder if he’d misheard her. He braced himself. He didn’t know where this conversation was going to go, but he had a suspicion it was about her and him and the captaincy of the *Rocinante*, and he didn’t know what to say about any of that. So it came as kind of a relief that he was wrong.

“Amos is going to be a problem,” she finally said. “I had the Voltaire people talked off the ledge when he started that fight. He wanted to crack some heads, and he made it happen. That’s fine for shore leave when he wants to blow off some steam, but it won’t fly when we’re under the radar like this.”

“Huh. Okay. I’d wondered about that.”

“It’s a problem I don’t know how to fix,” Bobbie said.

“Me neither,” Holden said. “But give it a couple days.”

“Not sure we have them,” Bobbie said.

“Why not?”

Bobbie pointed behind her back, meaning not what was physically behind her but backward in time. “You just gave us all a goal,” she said. “Something to bring us all together.”

“I did,” Holden said. “And I’m thinking from the way you’re looking at me right now that there’s some aspect of that I’ve maybe overlooked?”

“Some of us are Katria Mendez and her mad bombers.”

Holden felt a coolness down his spine. “Yeah. That could be interesting,” he said.

“Right?”



He found Amos in a narrow side hall, a welding torch in his hand. The big man’s arms showed little pocks of red where sparks had landed, but Amos hadn’t done so much as find a long-sleeved work shirt.

“Hey,” Holden said. “How’s it going?”

“Doing all right,” Amos said, gesturing at the conduits that textured the wall. “Saba’s folks said we should reroute the power. Makes it a little harder for the cops to track down where they’re losing it from if it keeps moving.”

“Yeah?”

“Decent plan in theory,” Amos said. “In practice, kind of an ass-pain, but whatever.”

“I can see that,” Holden said, then paused.

The truth was, in spite of decades flying the same ship, Holden still had very little idea what made Amos tick. He liked food, booze, meaningless sex, jokes. He seemed to like palling around with Alex, but when their pilot had decided to try being married again, Bobbie had been his best man. Amos treated every word out of Naomi’s mouth as if it were gospel, but the truth was all of them did these days.

Amos found the conduit he was looking for, lit up the torch, and opened a six-centimeter length of it, exposing the plastic-sheathed wire inside it without so much as melting the insulation. It was a good trick. Amos killed the torch.

“So,” Holden said again. “How’s it going?”

Amos paused. Turned to look at Holden.

“Ah,” the big mechanic said. “Sorry there, Cap. Were we having a conversation and I didn’t notice?”

“Kind of, yes,” Holden said.

“Babs ratted me out.” Amos’ voice was as calm as the surface of still water. Holden was pretty certain something big was swimming underneath it.

“Look,” he said, “we didn’t get where we are by me prying into things you didn’t want pried into. I don’t want to change that now. But yes, Bobbie’s worried about you. I am too. We’re going into some pretty dangerous times here, and if there’s anything that you need to get off your chest, now is a better time than later.”

Amos shrugged. “Nah, I get it. I got a little happy when we went on that last run. Opened up sooner than Babs would have liked. I’ll rein in some if it makes her feel better.”

“I don’t want to make an issue of it,” Holden said.

“It ain’t an issue, then,” Amos said, turning back to the conduit. He took a thick pair of pliers from his pocket, clamped them over the power cable, and started wrestling it out like he was getting crab meat out of a shell. It looked really dangerous. “I’ll play nice. Cross my heart.”

“Okay, then,” Holden said. “Great. Glad we had this talk.”

“Anytime,” Amos said.

Holden hesitated, turned, and walked away. Bobbie was right. He didn’t know what was going on in Amos’ mind, but something definitely was. He was hard-pressed to think what the good version of that looked like. And if Amos was finally coming off the rails, he had no idea what would cause it or how to fix it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Bobbie

The representatives from the Voltaire Collective entered the meeting space like they were anticipating an attack. She would have felt the same if the positions were reversed. Three in the front with unencumbered hands, three in the back looking around like tourists coming to a casino for the first time in case something interesting or threatening would come from behind, and in the center, Katria Mendez. Her face was the expressionless calm of a player at a poker table. The kind that always left with more chips than she came with. Just seeing her made Bobbie's cheek throb a little. Psychosomatic pain, but pain all the same. She registered the sensation but didn't let it bother her.

Saba stepped forward, Holden at his side, and greeted them, waved them forward with smiles and Belter salutes. He let them check him for weapons first as a kind of social courtesy, and Holden did the same. The old phrase from back in the day came to Bobbie's mind: There's OPA and there's *OPA*. Same now as it had been then. It was always a little eerie to see how comfortably the men and women of the Transport Union fell back into being criminals. And how well she and the crew of the *Roci* fit in with them when they did.

Amos stretched his shoulders and neck.

"I know," Bobbie said. "I don't like it either."

"Don't recognize the one with the nose," Amos said, pointing with his chin toward Katria's bodyguard. "The other ones, I'm pretty sure we danced with."

Bobbie considered their faces. The one Amos was talking about stood in the rear, just behind Katria. He had olive skin, close-cropped hair, and a long nose that had been broken a couple times and not set right. A white scar marked one nostril like someone had slit it for him once. She was pretty sure she'd have remembered him if she'd run into him before. The others, she wasn't as certain. Katria, obviously, and two of her guards at the

front all seemed familiar enough.

“Maybe we’ll get to know him,” Bobbie said.

“Now you’re just flirting with me, Babs. Promising a good dustup when everyone else is here for talking.”

“Yeah, well,” Bobbie said. “A girl can dream.”

The banter felt almost normal, but she wasn’t easy with it. Not yet. She was plenty willing to play along for the moment, though. Katria caught her eye and nodded. Bobbie smiled, her cheek pulling at its new scab, and nodded back. It could have been respect between equals or the handshake at the start of a fight. Bobbie figured they’d all find out which soon enough.

The meeting space was new to her. A long, thin room that had been part of the water-recycling system recently enough that it still smelled a little bit of wet plant and sewage. Twice as long as it was wide, there was enough space for the *Roci* crew, Saba, and a half dozen of his most trusted crew. The ones who already knew the plan. It wasn’t a pleasant spot, but the cartography of the underground’s borders were shifting now, more and more often. The Laconian surveys had been finding the holes in the system surveillance, denying them free access to the corridors and units they’d made their own. They’d been spending more and more of their time in the monitored public spaces. Part of that had been reconnaissance for her plan. Part of that had been that there were fewer and fewer spaces left on Medina where they could speak freely.

All through the station, there were soldiers and crowd-suppression drones. It didn’t bother her, passing the people with haunted eyes, walking like the deck might be too fragile to support their mass. She understood them. The others, the ones who were laughing and talking and listening to music loud enough that she could hear the bass, bothered her more. They were acting like the open-air prisons and the power-armored Marines, the communications control and shift curfews were normal. And because of that, they were.

It wouldn’t be long before the Laconians started shipping through the slow zone again. Maybe she and the others would be allowed back on the *Roci* when that happened, but Bobbie found it hard to believe there wouldn’t be monitors placed in there too. It could take Naomi and Clarissa days or weeks to purge them all and make their ship fully their own again.

And by then, it would be too late anyway. Every day, every hour, brought the *Typhoon*’s arrival closer. And once it had cleared the Laconia

gate, staying ahead of the occupying forces became orders of magnitude more difficult. Which was the optimist's way of saying "impossible." Bobbie felt the pressure of time slipping away like she was watching a door close, with her on the wrong side of it. If it hadn't been for the time pressure, she wouldn't have gone along with Saba's suggestion to reach out to the Voltaire Collective. Or at least not so soon after she and Amos had kicked their asses.

The only good thing was that Katria and her people were just as screwed as Saba and Bobbie and Holden, and by the same things.

"So," Katria said once the requisite sniffing was done, "I'm surprised at having so civil a meeting. I have to think you need something from me you can't manage by yourselves?"

Saba smiled, but waved his hand twice sharply. "Too many ears, sa sa? Come sit with me and mine, have a drink, and we'll talk about what we talk about."

Katria crossed her arms.

"It's not you," Holden said. "It's just that the fewer people know about this, the less chance someone gets picked up by security. You can't tell anyone what you don't know, right?"

Katria Mendez looked from Saba to Holden and then, pointedly over to where the *Roci* crew were sitting. Not just Bobbie and Amos, but Naomi and Alex and Clarissa besides. "So none of mine but all of theirs?"

"All of theirs already know," Saba said. "They're who wants to talk with you most."

"They have strange ways of showing it," Katria said.

"This is my house," Saba said. "My salt on it, yeah? Parley. And if it's nothing, it's nothing. But we're under the same thumb, you and me. Not asking you to love anyone. Just listen to."

For a moment, Katria hesitated. Her scowl bit into her cheeks like it was going for bone. Bobbie had a brief flash of certainty that the whole Voltaire Collective was about to turn and walk away without even hearing her pitch, and she was more than a little relieved at the idea.

"Esá es bullshit," the one with the nose spat. "They're just trying to get you on your own, que? Make you not be here, that's all. It's all of us or none!"

"It's my call, Jordao," Katria snapped. "Not yours."

The one with the nose—Jordao, apparently—stepped back, sulking.

Holden was smiling like a salesman, as if his radiant goodwill could warm up every other interaction in the room. It left him looking more than a little ridiculous, but damned if Katria didn't consider him for a long moment and chuckle.

"If I refuse, then we all took a long walk for nothing," she said. Holden beamed. Bobbie wasn't sure how he did it. The way he could disarm a situation with his almost palpable guilelessness astonished her every time.

"Thank you," Holden said. "I really appreciate this."

Saba lifted a hand and two of his people ghosted in from the corridor and led Katria's guard away. Standing by herself, she didn't seem any less imposing. The door to the corridor slid shut, and the bolt clicked. It was as near to privacy as anyone on Medina could have.

"So," Katria said. "What's on your mind?"

Bobbie took a long breath, let it out between her teeth. The idea had been hers from the start, and she'd been mulling it over for days. She hadn't slept as much as she'd wanted. Even when she hadn't been reviewing it and looking for holes in the plan, she'd felt too jagged and amped up to sleep. Part of that had been thinking about how to make the approach she was going for now.

"There's a single point of contact between the Laconian destroyer and Medina," Bobbie said. "And we have a bug on it."

Katria's eyes went a degree wider. She glanced over to Saba, who nodded. It was true. Katria didn't sit, but her weight settled into her hips a little. Bobbie had her attention. That was good.

"The encryption isn't breakable," she said. "Not from the outside. The Martian codes it's based on are solid. We might be able to crack them if we had between now and about a decade on, but we're down to a countable number of days. So we've got enough intelligence gathered to fill libraries that we can't read. But I think we can fix that."

She plucked her hand terminal out of her pocket, slaved it to Saba's local system, and pulled up the schematic of Medina that she'd been using. The cavernous center of the drum, command and control on one end, engineering and the docks and the massive but quiescent engines on the other. The elevator shafts that ran between them outside the surface of the drum. And also the ships in the dock, including—highlighted in red—the *Gathering Storm*.

"The longer goal is that we find a way to disable the *Storm*, here, shut

down Medina's sensor arrays, and distract or isolate the security forces on Medina long enough to let all these ships get off station and out through the rings before their reinforcements from Laconia get here. The short-term goal"—she zoomed in on a small red mark inside Medina proper, near the docks—"is this."

"And that is?" Katria asked.

"It used to be backup power storage," Bobbie said. "But since our guests from Laconia got here, it's been repurposed."

"The thing is," Alex said, breaking in, "these Laconian fellas? They were all Martians to start, or their leadership were anyway. And they were serving just a little after me and Bobbie here did our tours."

He looked from Bobbie to Katria to Saba and then back. Bobbie nodded him on. Alex licked his lips.

"One of the things we trained on was how to go about securing an enemy station," he said, which wasn't true. It was something Bobbie had trained to do, not him. Storm and control the homes and communities of Belters. If there was going to be a sore spot, this would be it. It was why Alex was saying it instead of the woman who'd cleaned Katria's clock and left her zip-tied to her friends. It seemed less likely to rub on Katria wrong that way. "You heard of air-gap encryption strong rooms?"

Katria's eyes were brighter. She hadn't, but she didn't want to admit that. Alex licked his lips again, shot a look from Bobbie to Katria and back to Bobbie, then went on. "One thing that we did was maintain physical separation between whatever ship was taking control and the local systems. Lay in a pipe to one of our own boxes on the station, and send any commands we wanted for the base there. Communications, control protocols, everything. It gets unencrypted there, and set onto onetime physical media to walk over to the local system. No live connections at all."

"Bullshit," Katria said.

"It's standard," Bobbie said. "And it's part of why no one was ever able to hack back into a Martian ship from a controlled station. And since the Laconians are basing their protocols on Martian ones, this is where that machine is."

"But the lag time—" Katria shook her head. "That's impressive."

"The room is crewed by two people, always. The door is physically locked. Not connected to the security grid, no electronic interface. Old-school bolt and key, and no keyhole on the outside. Can't be hacked into

remotely, can't be circumvented easily," Bobbie said. "And a full complement of guards at shift change."

Katria took control of the model, zooming farther in on the encryption vault. Her face was thoughtful, which was better than Bobbie had hoped. It made her nervous to talk about this.

"I see," Katria said. "You can't get in without making a lot of noise and calling in the cavalry. Is that why you need me? To blow the door?"

"No," Bobbie said. "We have a way in. We need your help to cover it up once we're done."

Katria traced a slow circle with her fingers. *Go on.*

Clarissa picked up the thread. "The room is still connected to the environmental system. But if we put a team here"—she pulled the model back to a larger frame and touched the power junctions near engineering—"we can shut down the fans and open the carbon dioxide scrubbers and recycling systems."

"Choke them out?" Katria asked.

Alex shook his head. "Make a path to pilot some little drones in. Half a dozen of 'em with point-blasting charges. Take down the two guards, then use the rest to pop the lock." He made a little boom sound with his lips and opened two fists in the physical cartoon of an explosion.

Bobbie pointed toward Naomi. "She has a snapshot cloning deck. I'll have a crowbar and a hammer. We get in, make a full-state copy of the encryption box, and get out to the hardened-radiation shelter"—Bobbie moved the model—"here. And then *you* come in."

"If los security coyos know we stole their codes," Saba said, leaning against the wall, "they change things up, yeah? Not just new crypt but new procedures. Everything we've got turns into a whole lot less. So they can't know what we do, even after it's done."

Holden pulled the model out to show where the *Storm* was docked against the side of the station. "We need to give them a different story. The *Storm's* parked here. And the primary liquid-oxygen storage tanks are ... right here. If that blows out, it will look like we're trying to blow up the *Storm*, but Tycho built this place well. Lots of redundancy and fail-safes. There's an explosion-relief route that'll vent the pressure blast out along this pathway here ... which takes out the communications vault. And, y'know, a bunch of other stuff."

"You want to blow our air out as cover?" Katria said. "I think you may

owe us an apology. We're usually the ones who are called extreme."

"Not our air," Saba said. "Theirs as soon as they came here. We're breathing on their grace, us. Plus, those tanks are docked-ship refills. Not for the habitat."

"And there will be plenty in the secondary and tertiary tanks," Holden said. "Remember, lots of redundancy, lots of fail-safes. And Tycho's original design remembers longer than the people living in it do."

Katria went quiet for a long time. Bobbie felt the anxiety growing in her gut. It had been a mistake to bring the Voltaire Collective in on this. It didn't matter how much Saba trusted them or how good they were with demolitions. She should have kept it just within her own crew, where she could control it. Where she was sure of everyone ...

"I don't like it," Katria said, shaking her head. "A lot of moving parts. The more pieces there are, the more ways there are for it to break."

Bobbie shrugged. "If the time wasn't so short, I'd do something simpler."

"All we need is the right bomb, the right place," Saba said. "You give us those, and we take the mission from there."

"No," Katria said. "You need the charges, you need someone to put the charges in the right places at the right time. And need someone on the remote switch who doesn't panic and throw it a little too early and take out your team. And even if they don't, do you think someone in a rad shelter's going to live through that blow?"

Naomi cleared her throat. "They're rated for it. But you're right. We can't know until we try."

"What's the evac plan once your little Armageddon is over?" Katria asked.

It was more than Bobbie had wanted to say. There should be some parts of the plan that weren't being shared. Saba paused, weighing whether to bring Katria that far in. When he spoke, his voice was surly. He didn't like having his hand forced any more than Bobbie did. "Vac suits in the shelter. Go out through the hole. Same airlock we used to bug the line the first time, we use it to get back in."

Katria took control of the model again, turning it, moving through the lower reaches of Medina deck by deck. "It's going to kill people," she said. "When the engineering decks start breathing vacuum, not everyone's going to make it to the shelters."

“Savvy,” Saba said. “Has a price.”

“Is it one you’d pay?”

“Is,” Saba said, but Holden’s expression had a distance to it. Bobbie could tell what was in his mind. There could be innocent people on the decks when the time came. At best, their plan would risk them. At worst, some would be killed. If Saba and Katria were bothered by the idea, they didn’t show it. Holden was bothered by it. She wondered if he’d stand on principle and scrub the whole thing. It was even money, knowing him.

“Demolition team goes here,” Katria said. “Plant the charges, then fall back to the shelter and wait for the team with the stolen data to arrive, then blow it. Everyone leaves together, or no one does. It’s not my first time on an op like this. You’ll need a couple more vac suits, is all.”

Bobbie didn’t catch the important word until Clarissa spoke, her voice gentle and questioning. But Bobbie heard the sharpness under it. “*Your* first time on an op like?”

“Who else?” Katria said. “If you want it done right, you get the best to do it. I’m the best. I make the charges, I place the charges, and it’s my steady hand holding the detonator.”

The room was quiet apart from the soft hiss of the air recyclers and the soft, harmonic thrum of the ship. The hint of old sewage smelled a little worse. Saba had only wanted the Voltaire Collective involved for material support. They weren’t looking for another player when the operation took place. But telling Katria she couldn’t be active in the field ... would it insult her? And if it did, would that be enough to get her to turn on them?

“Sounds good,” Amos said. “You and me on the demo team, Miss Kitty.”

His smile was placid and empty. Bobbie felt a shock of alarm. She met Holden’s gaze and shook her head a millimeter. *This is a very bad idea.* Holden swallowed, nodded, forced himself to smile as well.

“All right, then,” Holden said. “Clarissa leads the support team on environmental controls for Alex. Alex pilots in the drone swarm. Bobbie and Naomi take care of the server, and Katria, Amos, and I will set the charges to cover it all up afterward.”

Bobbie leaned back, a lump forming in her gut. Adding Holden in was *not* a better solution.

“This’ll be great,” Holden said.

Chapter Thirty: Singh

SOL OPERATION NEARING COMPLETION. PREPARE INITIAL SHIPPING AUTHORIZATIONS.

Singh read Trejo's message over twice, joy blooming in his chest. He took a moment to send the order to his section heads and group commanders, and pulled up what everyone jokingly called the "occupation calendar." Even based on the amended projections from Laconia that included not pausing to rebuild the battery, the immediate transit of the *Tempest* to Sol system, and the early deployment of the *Typhoon*, they were weeks ahead of schedule. They'd built some flex into the schedule in the event that the Transport Union put up a more bitter fight to hold Medina, or the Earth-Mars Coalition Navy had revealed naval forces or technology significantly greater than their estimates. But neither thing had turned out to be true, and sooner than anyone expected, they could get down to the business of building the new human civilization.

The sad fact of the human species that High Consul Duarte understood so well was that you could never overcome tribalism and jingoism with an argument. Tribalism was an irrational position, and it was impossible to defeat an irrational position with a rational argument. And so, instead of presenting a logical plan for why humanity needed to give up the old national and cultural divides and become a single unified species, the high consul obeyed the old forms that everyone would understand, and went to war. Thankfully, a brief one.

The real work, the work that would let Elsa grow up in a universe that was safe for her, and for her children's children's children, was the work that came after the conquest of the rest of humanity. Work that required stability.

"Ensign," Singh said at his monitor, which was currently flattened out on his desk. He'd appointed a temporary replacement for Lieutenant Kasik, and he hadn't quite memorized her name yet.

“Governor?” she replied a moment later.

“Please send my compliments to President Fisk, and let her know we’re sending a cart to pick her up. I need an immediate meeting to discuss some urgent matters. Do not take no.”

“Yes, sir,” the ensign replied. “I also—”

“Right away, Ensign,” Singh said, then took a look around at his office. The flowers someone had placed in a vase on his corner table were dying, and the shelf that held his coffeemaker was a mess. “Also, send in someone to make fresh coffee and replace these flowers before the meeting.”

“Yes, sir. I wanted to also let you know that you have an incoming message from Laconia. The *Storm* just sent it over.”

“Send it through. And please let me know five minutes before President Fisk arrives.”

“Of course, sir,” the ensign said and then killed the connection.

Singh tapped on the glowing message button on his monitor and it projected a still picture of his wife holding Monster.

“Play message,” he said.

The still image sprang to life. The recording must have started midway through her expression, because Nat’s face went from an enigmatic Mona Lisa smile to her normal wide grin. Monster didn’t seem all that interested in the camera lens, and instead was focused on something over her mother’s shoulder. They were both beautiful, and Singh felt an emptiness in the pit of his stomach that was always there, but that he managed to ignore until he saw their faces.

“Hi, Sonny,” Nat said to the camera. She held up Monster’s hand and waved at the screen with it. “Say hi to Daddy.”

“Hi, sweetie,” Singh said to the recording like an idiot. He couldn’t help himself.

“I know you’re so busy right now, but we have some good news to pass along,” Nat said. She put Monster down, and the girl ran off out of frame. Singh felt irrationally disappointed to see her go. “My work with sheep modification has been approved for the next round of live testing. We could go wide with it in the next thirty months. Which means a posting to Medina would actually help me move the project forward. No pressure, or anything.”

She smiled as she said it, but he felt the loneliness echoed in her eyes. She continued. “Monster is doing well. She’s a little bored, and so ready to

move into the big kids' room at school. She spends most afternoons with your dad, and they're becoming the best of friends. She calls him Poompaw now, and he's started insisting everyone else call him that too. Most days he doesn't want me to take her when I get off work. We eat dinner at his place a lot of evenings."

Singh felt a swell of love and gratitude for his father that he'd never felt before he had a child of his own. He paused the video playback and took a moment so he wouldn't get maudlin and weepy. It wouldn't do to bring Carrie Fisk in and begin delivering his orders while his eyes were goopy and red. When he'd gathered himself, he started it again.

"So, that's it, I guess. Reply when you get a minute. The home monitor has figured out Monster's version of the word *play*, so she loves replaying your messages over and over again. Love you, Sonny. Be safe out there."

And that was it. Nat saying she loved him shattered whatever resolve he thought he had, and he spent the next several minutes blubbering shamefully to himself.

Someone tapped at his door, and he called out, "Give me a moment!" Then rushed off to his private bathroom. While he was washing his face, he heard the sounds of someone cleaning up his office, and by the time he'd put himself back in shape to see people, there was a fresh pot of coffee percolating on the shelf. A noncom was just finishing up by placing new flowers in his vase. The chief threw him a snappy salute, then faded out of the room like a cat.

Singh sat at his desk, composed himself, then started a recording to Nat. "Hello, my dear. Thank you for the lovely message. I'm so happy to hear things are going well there, and Monster looks very well fed, so my father is almost certainly spoiling her rotten with sweet rolls. Things are still ahead of schedule here. Living here will take some getting used to, but there's plenty of usable land for your sheep and lab, and we're working to get all the services up to snuff for my little girl. Talk soon. I love you, Nat. I love you—" He almost said *Monster*, but something felt wrong about using her pet name. "I love you, Elsa."

He killed the connection, and sent the file for processing to pass it down to Laconia with the next comm dump. He took a lot of pride in the fact that saying "I love you" to Nat hadn't sent him into another weeping fit. There were people who thought that sort of thing was unmanly. Singh didn't care about that. But it was undignified.

“Five minutes,” Ensign Somebody said from his monitor.
“I’m ready,” he replied.



Carrie Fisk sat in a chair in his office, drinking his coffee and looking twitchy and uncomfortable. She’d been picked up at her office by fully armored Marines and driven to the governor’s offices in a convoy of three carts filled with other Marines. For her protection, certainly, but it could also be a little intimidating for someone who wasn’t used to it. If that gave Singh a bit of a home-field advantage when dealing with the minor functionaries on Medina, he’d happily take it. He waited until she’d stopped fidgeting and started paying attention to him, then pulled up a list of the hundreds of ring systems that had habitable colonies and threw the list up onto his wall.

“Madam President,” he said. “We’ve reached an exciting moment for us all, but especially for you as the first president of the Laconian Congress of Worlds.”

“Are we married to that name change?” she asked. “Or ...”

“The name of the legislative body is established in the documentation I gave you after our first meeting. Did you not read those documents?”

“I did,” she said. “I just wasn’t sure if that was a working title, or not. We haven’t voted on adopting the new—”

“You do not vote on directives delivered from the executive authority of the high consul’s office.”

“I see,” Fisk said. She stared at her lap and blew steam off her coffee.

“As I was saying,” Singh continued. “This is an exciting time for us all. High Admiral Trejo has decided that our situation is now secure enough to allow limited trade to resume through the gates.”

Fisk looked up at him with genuine surprise. “What?”

“Yes. *Limited* trade can be scheduled starting now. Put together a list of the worlds in the greatest need, as well as a schedule of deliveries that can meet those needs. Not from Sol system. Not yet. At first, we’ll allow a single ship transit per week, and of course each transit must be approved by me personally at least thirty days before it’s scheduled to occur.”

“That’s actually—” Fisk started, then stopped for a moment. “That’s

actually really good to hear. There are a lot of colonies barely hanging on by a thread. This will save lives.”

“And that is, of course, always the first priority of our respective positions.”

“Ah,” Fisk said, then leaned forward to put her coffee cup on the edge of his desk. As Singh frowned at it and the disrespectful informality it denoted, she said, “On that topic I passed along your threat to every colonized world. I also extended your invitation to the planets that have not already joined the association—forgive me, the Laconian Congress of Worlds—to elect a representative to join our group once trade has resumed. I assume some of those planets will be asking to send their new reps along with the trade ships.”

“That’s good,” Singh said. The Laconian Congress of Worlds was something High Consul Duarte insisted on to make the member worlds feel like they had a voice in government. As annoying as the idea of dealing with thirteen hundred Carrie Fisks would be, the high consul’s opinion on this topic had the force of law, so he’d do his best to see that the new legislative body succeeded.

Fisk was still staring at him, waiting for some sort of answer.

“And?” he asked.

“And, if some of these transiting ships are carrying newly elected representatives, they’ll need permission to dock or send shuttles to Medina. Does the lifting of the transit ban also include permission to dock with the station?”

Which was an excellent question, and Singh was annoyed that Carrie Fisk had thought of it before he did.

“Permission will be granted by this office on a case-by-case basis. Requests to be filed at minimum thirty days prior to the transit,” he said, feeling like it came across as established policy and not something he’d just made up on the spot. He’d need to document that once Fisk left.

“Thank you, Governor,” Fisk said.

“It’s important that this feel familiar, stable, and safe as quickly as possible,” Singh told her. “To the degree possible, you will use Transport Union ships and pilots. The union will also handle the pickup and delivery of goods using their existing policies. Other than the approval process for transits, everything should work the way it did before.”

“I’ll send out a notice to the union reps here on the station, and to the

local leadership on each world.”

“Excellent,” Singh said, standing up and reaching out to shake her hand. “At the risk of sounding repetitive, these are very exciting times for us all.”

Fisk didn’t stand. She sat in his chair squeezing her hands and not looking at him. When the silence had become uncomfortable, he said, “Was there something else, Madam President?”

“There is,” she replied, looking him in the eye for the first time. She showed no sign of standing up to leave, so he sat back down again.

“Then out with it,” he said, immediately regretting the snappish tone. “Please.”

“We’re—I’m doing everything you asked. I’ve passed along your messages to the worlds. I’ve asked for reps to be sent from every planet that wasn’t already part of the association. I’ve passed along President Duarte’s —”

“*High Consul* Duarte,” Singh interrupted her.

“Of course,” she said. “I’ve passed along the high consul’s very detailed documentation on convening the new Congress of Worlds.”

“*Laconian* Congress of Worlds,” Singh said.

“Of course. But so far, that’s the only thing my office has done. Act as press secretary for *your* office. And, with all due respect, that is not what I was voted into my office to do.”

She looked nervous saying it, and Singh gave her a minute to stew in her worry. If the mouse wanted to grow some claws, that was probably a good thing in the long run. The Laconian government had no use for those who wouldn’t fight for what they believed. The high consul made it very clear that every conflicting viewpoint should have a vigorous proponent, so that everyone felt that the final decisions were made only after everything was considered fully. A planetary congress run by mice wasn’t useful to anyone.

“And what,” Singh said after he’d let her squirm enough, “would be a better use of your time, Madam President?”

“If we’re to be the legislative body of this new government, when do we actually start legislating? You’ve brought me in here to deliver these directives for me to disseminate, but not once have we *voted* on them. I feel that very quickly we’ll be viewed as a congress in name only, in place to rubber-stamp your orders.”

“As the governor,” Singh replied, “I am here as the direct representative of the executive branch, and the office of the high consul. You don’t *vote* on

orders from the high consul.”

He couldn’t help but laugh a bit at the very ridiculousness of that idea. As if the high consul might change his policies because of a vote.

“Then,” Fisk replied, “what do we vote on?”

“When the high consul’s office has decided on this year’s legislative agenda, you will be the first to be notified, Madam President. Until then, please continue working with the member worlds to ease their transition into the new government. And I assure you, that will be an *excellent* use of your time.”

“Okay,” Carrie Fisk said, and stood. “I’ll just go make sure my rubber stamp is all warmed up.”

Singh didn’t stand to shake her hand. “You are dismissed.”



Singh was still mulling over the deeply unsatisfying meeting he’d had with Carrie Fisk when his monitor buzzed and Overstreet’s voice came over the speaker.

“Sir, I have a ... gentleman who says he has important information for you.”

“Can’t he give it to you?”

“He’s reluctant to, sir. Says it’s for the top man only. I think it might be worth the interview.”

That was interesting. Even if the alleged information turned out to be nothing, he was curious to see what sort of thing Overstreet thought important enough to engage him.

“Do we know this person?”

“No, sir,” Overstreet replied.

“I assume he’s already been searched for weapons.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Give me two minutes, then,” and Singh closed the connection. His office was still neat and tidy from Fisk’s visit. He sat up straighter in his chair, and pulled his uniform jacket tight. He turned on his monitor’s front-facing camera and examined himself. Secured and shipshape. The very picture of a military commander.

There was a discreet knock, then two Marines walked in with Overstreet

and a tall, thin man of the generic Belter variety. The only feature this one had that seemed different at all was his comically large nose. It was misshapen from repeated breaks, and had a large scar on one nostril. Clearly a man who'd been in a few fights, and who did a poor job of keeping his hands up while boxing.

"You asked to see me?" Singh said. He did not offer the man a chair.

"My sister in one of them cages you got out there," the man said, clearly working to keep his accent as Belter free as possible, and only sort of succeeding.

Singh glanced at Overstreet.

"Not one of the people involved in the bombing, Governor," Overstreet said. "Petty theft from a merchant."

"A military tribunal has been formed, and the cases will be adjudicated promptly and in the order they were filed," Singh replied. "Is that all?" It couldn't be, or Overstreet wouldn't have brought the man to his attention, but he was willing to let the Belter do some of the work here.

"All that shit you said, about we help you, you help us? That just the merde or what?"

"It's the truth," Singh said, feeling a glimmer of interest. Overstreet had what could have been the ghost of a smile on his lips. "Are you here to help me?"

"Let my sister go. She's just stupid, caught stealing, no threat to you. Let her go, I know something you want to know." The man rubbed his big, lumpy nose nervously as he spoke. "Something coming, and I know the coyo behind, yeah? Deep in with Voltaire Collective, me."

"You're in contact with the forces behind the bombing?"

"Maybe," the broken-nosed man said. His bravado was barely thick enough to stretch across his fear. "If there's enough in it. You tell it to me."

Singh paused for a moment, letting the silence stretch. A network of locals loyal to him. Dependent on his generosity. It was all coming together so well.

"I think you and I are about to become friends," Singh said.

Chapter Thirty-One: Drummer

Sleep and Drummer had developed an uncomfortable relationship. Its worst aspect was the time it left her to read the public comment boards and newsfeeds.

THIS SENSE OF PURPOSE IS EXACTLY WHAT MARS LOST WHEN THE GATES OPENED. THIS ISN'T AN INVASION AT ALL. IT'S THE RETURN OF THE REAL MARTIAN SPIRIT TO ITS PROPER PLACE, AND I AM HAPPY—FUCK, *DELIGHTED*—THAT I HAVE LIVED LONG ENOUGH TO SEE IT.

The way it played out was predictable. During her days, she felt like People's Home was turning too fast on its axis. Only it wasn't just her body that was getting spun. Her mind was too heavy to lift. She was controlling herself with a bad lag, like driving a mech with choppy software or running a waldo at the edge of its range. Meetings with the union board, with the EMC admiralty, with her own staff. Interviews and speeches in which she declared the independence of the union. She got through all of them with a physical sensation like her brain was evaporating. All she wanted to do from the start of her shift to the last moment before bed was close her eyes.

And then, as soon as she did, they opened again, as if by themselves.

THESE ASSHOLES SHOULD HAVE BEEN CUT OFF BEFORE THEY COULD GET THROUGH THE GATE. THIS IS EXACTLY THE PROBLEM I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT FOR YEARS. A TRADE UNION DOESN'T MATTER FOR SHIT WHEN AN ARMY COMES KNOCKING. IF YOU EVER NEEDED ANY PROOF THAT THE TRANSPORT UNION ADMINISTRATION WAS INCOMPETENT, THERE YOU GO. IT'S RIGHT HERE FOR YOU, AND IN SPADES.

She'd try to rest. Try to lure sleep back. Her eyes felt gritty. Her mouth felt dry. She wanted to eat, even though she wasn't hungry. Wanted water, even though she wasn't thirsty. It was like her body knew it needed something, and all it could do was run through the list of possibilities over and over, hoping that something would give her solace that hadn't the last time. She found herself craving a pipeful of marijuana, even though she

hadn't smoked in decades.

She waited an hour, maybe two, then got up and spooled through the feeds and networked discussions with a dummy account she'd made for the purpose. She told herself it was research, that she was gauging the morale of the populace. It was easy to pretend that she was somehow learning something that would help. It felt like tearing off a scab and pressing salt into the opened sore, but it was better than paging through the names of the dead. Emily Santos-Baca ...

From Ganymede, an independent journalist's twenty-minute recording on the importance of solidarity in the face of the enemy. An old Earther's open letter about surviving the terrible years after the rocks fell and why this time was different. A roundtable discussion by an open salon on Ceres about how the union was or wasn't able to rise to the occasion and address the Laconian threat. A dozen languages, a thousand faces and voices and rhetorical styles. If she was looking for clarity there, she didn't find it.

MY WIFE IS ON MEDINA STATION. I JUST GOT A MESSAGE FROM HER SAYING THAT THE LACONIAN GOVERNOR IS OFFERING BETTER TERMS THAN THE TRANSPORT UNION DID FOR EVERYONE WHO WORKS FOR THEM. AND SHE SAID THE TECHNOLOGY THAT'S COMING THROUGH LACONIA GATE IS GENERATIONS AHEAD OF ANYTHING WE HAVE. I KNOW IT'S NOT A POPULAR OPINION, BUT IF THEY'RE GOING TO TREAT THE WORKERS BETTER, BRING BETTER EQUIPMENT, AND STAY OUT OF OUR BUSINESS OTHERWISE, I THINK OUR REAL ENEMY IS THE BUREAUCRACY IN THE TRANSPORT UNION OFFICES!

There were other voices—many more of them, really—that saw the attack on Medina for what it was. She read essays on defiance in the face of tyranny, listened to music designed to rally the patriotic against the enemy. A school on Luna had started a campaign where the children were dyeing their right hands red in defiance of Laconia. The symbolism of it escaped her, but the trend spread far past the school, and half of the interviewers and journalists on the feeds had some version of it. Red gloves or finger sleeves or rings.

If she'd wanted to feel hopeful or resolved, it would have been easy to find those people and spend her insomniac hours only with them. But like a tongue prodding a sore tooth, she kept reaching for the others. Laconia is the future. The conquest is inevitable. Stop the war.

Capitulate.

There were also whole subfeeds devoted to speculating on the strategy

of the EMC and the union. Some of the conversations there were eerily like briefings from the EMC admiralty. Others were desperation-fueled optimism dressed as military theory. None brought Drummer any more hope than she'd had before, and some left her mood darker.

And she hadn't heard from Saba. Even when Medina lifted its comms blackout for propaganda, there'd been no message from him. From the others fighting against the occupation. She imagined that he was still there, sneaking between the decks like a rat made for gnawing through steel. That Medina would fall, and she'd hear his voice declaring their victory. Or failing that, that she'd hear his voice at all.

And behind it all, pressing down on her soul like a suffocating hand, the *Tempest* made its vast, stately way sunward. Already past the halfway point. Already braking. She understood their strategy perfectly. A single ship, making its way for everyone in every system to see. It was a demonstration of authority. Of inevitability. A piece of theater designed to humiliate, to subjugate, to control.

It was what she had done to Freehold.

That, as much as anything, kept her at the table in her quarters as the hours of sleeplessness slipped by. When she'd made the call, it had seemed like the obvious thing to do. Hard, yes, but in the service of a greater peace. A more orderly universe. Someplace where there'd be some respect for the rules.

The colonists on Freehold had made their choices. They'd broken the rules she and the people before her had set down. She'd felt justified when she sent the *Rocinante*. Now she wondered whether the colonists there had sat up in their beds in the night. Wondered how they would feed their children. Whether there was some way to finesse their way out of the future that was bearing down on them. Probably they had.

Maybe this was the way the universe showed her the errors of her ways. Taking the evil that she'd committed so offhandedly and turning it around to point at her. Her and Santos-Baca. All the refugees of Independence. All of the void city's dead. If it was, then the universe hadn't embraced the idea of proportional response yet.

The small, quiet part of her mind that watched all the rest knew that she wasn't right. That there was no way for her to be right, not in a situation like this. If she'd been able to sleep, maybe. But the fear was eroding her bit by bit and taking away all the things that let her recover. Like a recycling

pond with a plugged drain, she was filling with shit, and sooner or later, she'd overspill. It wasn't a source of anxiety. It was just something she knew about herself, as if she were thinking about some different woman.

She drew her robe closer around her chest, spooled through the feeds. Watched a few seconds of the news from Loundres Nova, a few seconds out of the shipyards at Tycho-Pallas Complex, Ceres, Luna, Earth. Never enough to hear a whole story.

Weirdly, not all of it was about Laconia. There was a fire at an arcology outside Paris. A popular musician Drummer had liked as a girl had died. It was as if not everything were defined by Laconia and Duarte and her own failures. And then the top traffic on the feed would re-sort, and there was an image of the *Tempest* in all its threat and glory.

Holden had been right. Her plan for Freehold had been cruel, and she'd done it for the convenience of not being a government, not really. So that she could be unprepared when a navy no one knew existed arrived in force. She should have been kinder, wiser, more cunning. She should have been something other than what she was. There had to have been a moment when she could have chosen something different, when all of this could have been stopped. She couldn't think when it had been.

Her system made its tock. If she'd been asleep, her lights would have come up.

"Ma'am?" Vaughn said. Not even his nighttime staff. Whatever it was, they'd woken him up for it first, and he'd made the decision to wake her. That couldn't be good.

"I'm awake," she said.

"We've had a message for you from the *Tempest*. It came in on tightbeam an hour ago. Signal intelligence says it's genuine."

"Not broadcast?"

"No, ma'am. Unencrypted, but not broadcast."

Something the enemy wanted her and her people to see, but not as a press release. The switch in her mind flipped, and she wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and sleep forever. "I'll take it in my room," she said.

Her screen went dark, and then Admiral Trejo was on it, looking out at her as if he could actually see through the screen and light delay. His expression was almost rueful. That would be a pose, of course. A decision he'd made about how to appear. She hated that, even knowing that, she felt herself hoping he could be reasoned with. Wanting to like him, because then

maybe he'd like her. Stockholm syndrome's first, pale roots. She pushed the gentle impulse away and summoned up her hatred.

"President Drummer," he said. "I hope I find you well. On behalf of High Consul Duarte, I'm asking again for the Transport Union's ships to stand down and accept administration by the Laconian Empire. But I understand if that answer is still no. I'm going to keep asking until you change your mind, though. The sooner that comes, the less loss of life your people will suffer. Their fate is entirely up to you.

"If we do not have your unconditional surrender within eighteen hours, though, then I'm afraid things will become less pleasant. I have been ordered to deny you the use of the shipyards at Pallas Station. I'd rather get through this with the least loss of life and infrastructure. Again, entirely in your control. You can end this at any time.

"I am tendering a similar offer to the EMC, and I imagine you'll all want to talk this over. I urge you in the strongest possible terms to do the right thing and lay down your arms. The high consul has given me a certain amount of latitude in how we bring this unpleasantness to a close, but the longer this drags on, the less freedom I'll have. And the worst-case scenario isn't something I relish.

"Confer with your colleagues at the EMC, and reply back to me as soon as you can. If I don't hear from you, I'll assume you've chosen to protract this a little farther. The blood of Pallas Station will be on your hands. I sincerely hope and pray that you'll be wiser than that."

He gave a little nod, and the message ended. Drummer's rage was sluggish and muddy from lack of sleep, but it was hot. She made the connection request, and Vaughn picked it up immediately.

"How many people have seen this?"

"The comms officer on duty, my assistant, me, and now you. Only four."

It was two people too many. Maybe three. Still it might not find its way onto the nets, depending on how well the EMC controlled information in its house. It was the nature of bad news to spread, and once it was out, it was out forever. She had to assume that she didn't have much time before it did. One more chance to try being the person that the situation called for instead of just herself.

If she were the person who should be here, if she were the leader that the union and the system and humanity needed, what would she say now? How would she say it?

“Wake Lafflin up, and get Admiral Hu on the horn. We’re going to need a talk.”



Pallas Station, Trejo had called it. Not Pallas-Tycho Complex. One of the strange things about Laconian language was the decades of linguistic drift. No one had called it Pallas Station since before Sanjrani had been in charge of the union. He’d overseen the update of Pallas’ refineries and the semipermanent installation of Tycho Station as the primary shipyard of the metals and ceramics, lace and nanolaminates produced there. It had been more efficient than leaving Tycho independently on the float. There were generations of work that would need to be done, and putting everything in the same place made it all go faster.

People’s Home had been assembled there. And Independence. The void city Assurance of Peace was half-together now, its vast carbon-silicate ribs still bared to the vacuum. Thousands of families lived and worked there, and would for another few hours, unless Drummer capitulated.

“The loss of building capacity would set us back by decades,” Admiral Hu said. “Any chance we have of rebuilding and fortifying a navy relies on that station. This would cause a bottleneck that would radically change our projections.”

Drummer shifted in her chair. It wasn’t the first time she’d listened to the message.

“Deploying the full force of the EMC-and-union-combined navy can’t be accomplished in the time frame described here.” Hu’s face was replaced by a schematic of the system, each fleet marked with its time to engagement. They’d been keeping the ships scattered to deny the *Tempest* a single target-rich environment. Here was the trade-off for that ...

“And furthermore, only three-quarters of our ships have completed resupply with the torpedo modifications based on our first engagement. Our strategic analysis is that a decision to sacrifice Pallas-Tycho Complex in order to fully prepare the combined fleet will degrade our long-term readiness, but increase our chances of making a decisive blow against the *Tempest* in the short term. Of course, any decision requires full coordination between the union and the EMC.”

Whatever she chose, they would do the same. In the midst of the apocalypse, the military brass on Luna were still playing cover-your-ass. That seemed like the most optimistic thing about the whole report. They still thought they might have careers worth losing when this was over.

Drummer could remember living on Tycho Station. She could still walk through the corridors in her memory. The layout of the engineering decks the way they had been before the refit. The smell of the habitation ring. The office she'd inherited from Fred Johnson after his death. He'd had a personal cabinet there with a few things—an old book, a bottle of brandy, the physical copies of some of his personal initiatives that had foundered after he'd gone. She'd been the head of Tycho Station for three years before she'd cleared that out, and she still remembered how it had felt when she had. Like a widow finally selling off her dead husband's suits.

When she looked at Pallas-Tycho Complex, she felt the same way again. She wanted a way to save it. She kept looking for the clever move that would put it out of the enemy's hands, only there wasn't one. It was already too late. She could hand it and any chance of freedom away, or she could see it destroyed. One or the other. And she had to choose.

“Vaughn?”

“Madam President?”

“We need to put out an emergency evacuation order for Pallas-Tycho. Everyone who doesn't have their own craft, put on Tycho and break it away from the complex. No one is to be left in the Pallas structures, and the highest possible burn for all ships and Tycho Station is recommended.”

She looked over at him. His face was grayish. His eyes were dead as a shark's. He didn't argue, though. He only braced, turned, and left the room to carry out her order. Even if he disagreed with her, he was probably glad he hadn't had to make the call. She would have been.

She set her system to Record, considered herself on the screen. Her eyes were sunken with exhaustion and despair, but not as badly as she'd thought they would be. Her skin had a waxy look in the bright light of her private office. She'd want to have the communications staff get her some powder and rouge before she made the public announcement. God, there would have to be a public announcement. But that was later. That was next.

She keyed in the reply code, and the high-security link to Luna showed Ready. She coughed and looked into the camera.

“Admiral Hu, I have given the evacuation order to Pallas-Tycho,” she

said. “Even if we can’t save the station, we can make it harder for the *Tempest* to kill the population there. And seeing whether they feel the civilian targets are worth hunting down may also give us greater insight into the character and aims of the enemy. I advise the EMC forces to refrain from any premature engagement with the enemy at this time.

“It is my opinion that attempting to save Pallas Station would have been an error,” she said. “It would be better to prepare the forces we have at our disposal for a full, coordinated, and unrestrained engagement under circumstances more nearly in our control and to our advantage. And with the modified torpedoes and munitions available to all ships. Whatever gives us the best chance in that battle is worth the sacrifice.”

She paused. She was thinking this all through as she said it. The implications of the choice she’d made and the future of the war.

“We only have one shot at this,” she said. “There isn’t room for half measures. We’re going for the kill.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two: Holden

The electric cart they rode on seemed almost as old as the station. The magnetic wheels gripped the ramp and kept them on track even as the spin gravity of the drum fell slowly away. If Medina Station had followed its intended path, it would have been well away from Earth by now, gone into the vast depths between the stars where spare carts were pretty hard to come by. The Mormons had built everything about the ship to last for generations, to grow and renew itself, to recycle with the least possible loss. Medina Station would outlive them all.

Except that he was going to blow a hole in it.

Amos rode shotgun, his hands splayed wide on his knees, his head freshly shaved. From his place in the backseat, Holden mostly saw the back of the big man's neck—white skin flecked with age spots but still muscular and hard. He didn't need to see the amiable smile to know it was there, and how little it meant. A massive conduit wrench clanked at Amos' feet. Katria drove with the studied boredom of someone who knew the consequences of drawing the attention of station security. Her hair was already in a tight bun, prepped for the null g of engineering. She tapped her palm against the side of the cart as if she were listening to music, so maybe she already had her earpiece in. Holden tried to lean back against the seat, but in the lower g, it just scooted him forward. The bomb rested on the bench beside him like a fourth person.

It wasn't big. A square box, safety orange with scratches at the edges and corners, the marks of long use. He didn't know exactly what was inside it, only that Katria was certain it would blow the right kind of hole into the pressure tanks and that the ruptured pressure tanks would blow the right part of the station apart. She also said that, in its present form, it was both hard for security to detect and stable enough to play football with if you didn't mind a square ball. Still, Holden didn't rest his elbow on it.

They were nearly at the top of the ramp when a line of carts stopped

them, all heading the same direction as they were and all stuck waiting. At the entrance to the transfer point, three Laconian Marines in power armor were talking to a dark-skinned woman in a green jumpsuit.

“Checkpoint,” Holden said.

“Inconvenient,” Katria said. She sounded like it was an annoyance more than an immediate threat to all their lives and the safety of everyone in the underground who was counting on them. He really did admire the way she did that.

The raid had come two shifts before, when Holden had been in his sleep cycle. Between the time he’d curled up in the bunk and put his head on the thin pillow and when he’d opened his eyes again, a quarter of Saba’s people had been snatched up and a man named Overstreet was on all the screens in the station telling the rest of Medina about it. And the *Typhoon* was already past its flip-and-burn, braking now toward the other side of the Laconia gate. They weren’t saying exactly when it was supposed to arrive, but their data placed it at around ten days. And the news from Sol looked grim, even correcting for the fact that it was all coming through the state-run newsfeed.

The noose was drawing tight. And in order to have any chance of escaping it, they were about to at least risk the lives of, and most probably kill, a bunch of people who were on the engineering decks at the wrong time.

“Holden. Do you have to do that?” Katria asked.

“Do what?”

“Grunt.”

“Was I grunting?”

“Cap does that when he’s thinking about something he don’t like,” Amos said.

“He has a wide variety to choose from,” Katria said.

From the way they talked, Holden could almost believe that they wouldn’t kill each other, given the chance. Almost, but not enough that he was sorry to be there. Maybe Katria really didn’t hold a grudge about the fight that Amos had started. And maybe Amos wasn’t spoiling to start another one. Or maybe the bomb was the most stable thing in the cart.

“I’ll think happy thoughts,” Holden said. “Butterflies. Rainbows.”

“What the fuck is a butterfly?” Katria said.

The cart ahead of them shifted, and they followed. It took fifteen minutes to get to the guards and then a minute and a half to get past them.

Their cover story—Holden and Amos were applying for on-station work permits since their ship was locked down, and Katria was taking them to an on-site test—never even came up. Katria drove the cart to its queue, strapped the bomb to her back, and led them into the engineering decks, moving from handhold to handhold with the unremarked grace of someone who'd spent a good portion of their life on the float. Amos followed with the conduit wrench in his fist like a club.

Once the drum was well behind them, Holden pulled the earpiece out of his pocket and turned on the contact microphone.

“—is clear,” Clarissa said. “Can you confirm?”

“Yup,” Alex replied, his voice slow in the way that meant he was concentrating. “I’m moving my little pixies through now. Gimme just a ... All right, I’m through.”

“Turning the recycler back on,” Clarissa said.

Clarissa and her team were in the drum, tapped into the environmental controls through a back door that, if they were found out, Saba would never be able to use again. Alex was back in the underground’s galley, flying the drones with his hand terminal and several layers of encryption. Naomi and Bobbie were, he assumed, loitering outside the secure server room, ready to force their way in. It was strange hearing their voices as if they were with him. It made him feel like he was back on the *Rocinante*.

The engineering decks of Medina were a lesson in the way ships learned and changed over time. If he squinted, he could still see the bones of the original, unmodified space, but years and mission drift had altered everything. Here, a section of floor had a slightly different color where a bulkhead had been taken out. There, a set of conduits had been rerouted with the three-point welding style that Martians favored. The pipes along the walls were labeled in half a dozen languages and safety-regulation styles. History made physical. Even where the walls were had changed over the years, added extra reinforcement from when the docks had been built or taken away when the new generation reactors had been put in place. Katria led the way down a side corridor, moving from handhold to foothold to handhold. Amos followed close behind her, only crowding her a little, and she seemed not to notice. Or at least not to care. Their little triumvirate. Katria to place the charge, Amos to keep an eye on her, and Holden to keep an eye on him.

A young woman floated past them, coming the other way. She had an

electrician's rig strapped to her arm, and her hair was the same texture Naomi's had been when they'd first met. She passed Katria, then Amos. When she and Holden landed at the same handhold, she smiled an apology and pushed quickly off. He wondered whether they were about to kill her. Seemed possible. He hated the thought.

"Alex?" Bobbie said. "You're awfully quiet there, buddy. Everything all right?"

"Yeah, sorry. Just ... there's a little lag. It's not bad, but it makes me paranoid. Last thing I want is one of these charges to go off in a vent someplace. Take the whole group out."

"That would be bad," Bobbie agreed.

"Jim?" Naomi said. "Are you on yet?"

"We're here," he said softly. "Past the checkpoint. Not at the pressure tank yet."

"There was a checkpoint?" Bobbie said.

Amos' voice was calm. "Nothing we couldn't handle, Babs."

"I'm coming up on the last turn here," Alex said.

"There's a carbon dioxide scrubber intake," Clarissa said. "Don't get caught in the draft. I'm accessing it now."

Katria started whistling between her teeth, a tuneless sound that her mic didn't pick up. They reached an access panel with caution placards in a dozen languages and half the colors of the rainbow. CAUTION HIGH PRESSURE SYSTEM. Katria plucked a knife from her boot and pried the panel open as casually as if she did it every day.

"Make sure no one's coming," she said.

"You got it," Amos replied, sailing on a little farther down the corridor and slipping to the center of the narrow space so that anyone coming the other way would have a hard time getting past him and his massive wrench. Katria pulled the bomb off her back and popped the case open. The workings inside didn't look like much. A cone of carbon-silicate lace, the same as a ship's plating. A hand terminal. A pair of standard wires. It didn't look like enough to do much damage. Certainly not enough to blow out the side of the station. But of course, it wasn't. That was all coming from the pressure tanks on the other side of the bulkhead. This was just the pin that popped that balloon.

"Okay," Clarissa said. "You're good to go."

"Heading through," Alex said. "And we're past. The vent for the server

room should be just ahead. Looks ... looks a little higher grade than I was expecting.”

“Do we have a problem?” Bobbie asked. He could hear the tension in her voice. The electrical technician he’d bumped into intruded into his memory, and with it the faint and compromised hope that maybe it would all go wrong and they’d have to abort the mission.

“I think we’ll be fine,” Alex said. “My little pixies here are armed for bear. But I’m pulling five of them back around the corner here so they don’t get mussed up when the vent goes.”

Katria closed the case, set it in behind the access panel, squinted at it, shifted it fifteen degrees. What was it like, Holden wondered, being able to picture blast cones in your mind? What kind of life did you have to lead to have that come naturally? Katria rubbed her throat, and when she spoke, her voice had doubled, coming from the air they were breathing and through the earpiece. The reverb gave her words a weight.

“We’re done here. We’ll see you in the place.”

Meaning, the shelter. Where, when Naomi and Bobbie joined them, they could trigger the blast and wipe out the evidence.

“Hey,” Katria called down the corridor. “You coming?”

Amos floated back toward them as Katria slid the panel back into place and slipped her knife back into her boot. They were skimming along through the air together when it all fell apart.

“Um,” Alex said. “I think we’ve got a problem here.”

“What’s up, Alex?” Bobbie asked.

“Well, I got my little pixie looking through this vent. I’ve got eyes on both of these Laconian fellas, and one of them’s got his hand on something that sure looks like a dead man’s switch.”

“That’s not protocol,” Bobbie said.

“It ain’t Martian protocol,” Alex agreed. “But I’m pretty certain that’s what I’m seeing here. If I move forward with this, I won’t even have the door open before the Laconian fellas know about it. You’re going to be ass deep in alligators pretty damned quick.”

“We knew we were going to have to move fast,” Bobbie said. “This just means we move faster.”

“It means more than that,” Clarissa said. “It means they’ll log the alarm. The whole point of blowing out the pressure tanks was so they wouldn’t know we’d compromised them. If the secure room shows an alert right

before the explosion, they'll know what we did. They'll change all the procedures. The data we recover won't be worth anything."

The silence lasted one long breath. Then another. Holden felt something in his chest loosen, it was almost like relief. And almost like dread too.

He knew what had to happen before anyone else did.

"All right," Bobbie said, and Holden could see her clenched jaw as clearly as if she were there with him. "Let me think."

"You'll be fine," Holden said. "Just wait until the ... I don't know. The tenth alarm goes off."

"The tenth what?" Alex said, but Holden plucked out his earpiece and the mic and tossed them to Amos. The big man caught them in one wide hand.

"You going somewhere, Cap?"

"Yeah," Holden said. "Can I borrow that wrench?"

Amos pushed it gently out to him. It was massive enough that Holden had to readjust his grip on the handhold to stop it.

"Am I getting that back?" Amos asked.

"Maybe. You get Katria to the shelter. Everything goes forward, just like we planned."

Amos' face went still as a mask for a moment, and then he smiled his empty smile. "You got it."

Holden squared himself on the wall's footholds and launched down the corridor. In an instant, Amos and Katria were behind him. *It'll be okay*, he told himself, but he didn't dig into why that might be true. He was pretty sure it wouldn't hold up.

It only took about twenty seconds to find a panel with a manual fire alarm. He flipped the case open, pulled the switch down, and a Klaxon started screaming. *One*.

In the next corridor, he picked a thin copper pipe, set the wrench around it and pulled until it popped. Green fluid that stank like vinegar and acetate spewed out into the hall. Somewhere, the system would register the pressure drop and raise a flag. That was *two*. He heard voices shouting from the main deck. They weren't raised in panic, not yet. More like they were trying to be heard over the alarm. He passed a radiation alarm and tripped that too—*three*—then headed toward the voices.

Naomi would understand, even if the others didn't. She knew him well enough to follow his mind without so much as a question. There were two

ways to hide something. Either put it where no one could see it or leave it in plain sight with a thousand others just like it. If the alarm went off in the secure room, that would mean one thing. If a bunch of alarms went off all through the engineering and dock levels, and it was only one, maybe the guards had panicked. It would just be more noise in the chaos. Unremarkable.

In the wide space leading to the transfer hub, half a dozen people were clinging to a wall, each of them talking over the others. He recognized the electrical tech they'd passed going in.

"Hey," he shouted, waving his wrench. "Can't you people hear? Get to the shelters!"

It was enough to start them moving. He picked another corridor at random and launched himself down it. He broke three electrical conduits, tripped another fire alarm and another radiation. If he could make his way down closer to the reactors, there'd be more he could break, but there would also be guards there. The wrench was unwieldy and massive enough that cracking the conduits and pipes open was starting to leave his shoulders and palms aching. He ducked into an access crawl and pulled two power exchanges out of the wall. That had to be good for at least one alert. He floated out into another hallway. The engineering deck was drowned in a cacophony of blaring alarms. He pulled himself toward a ladder. When the station was under thrust, it would lead down toward the drive cones.

It took the Laconians about two minutes to find him, but it felt like longer. Holden was trying to fit the wrench behind a support strut when two Marines in power armor came around the corner, their suits clicking as the actuators fired. Holden started to raise his hands, but the first one slammed into him before he had the chance. The impact knocked a few seconds off his awareness. The next thing he was sure of, there was a barrel pressed just above his left eye and his ribs hurt badly when he tried to breathe.

"You just fucked up, old man!" the guard growled.

Holden blinked. "I surrender," he said. Breathing really hurt. There were bones broken. He was sure of it.

"You don't have that option," the guard said. Holden realized his life was now based on whether a Laconian Marine who looked like he was maybe in his early twenties had the self-control not to shoot his brainpan empty out of anger and excitement. Holden nodded.

"I understand, sir," he said, and hoped that submission and respect

would be enough to keep that one critical neuron from firing. “I am not resisting. You got me. I’m no threat.”

“CJ,” the other Marine said.

The one with the gun snarled, pulled back a few centimeters, and hit Holden along the side of his face hard enough to split the skin. Bright red globes of blood flew in a cloud and painted the pale anti-spalling cloth of the hallway. The pain was dull first, and then bright.

“You are an ungrateful piece of shit,” the Marine—CJ, apparently—said. “If we were someplace civilized, your sad ass would be in the *pens*.”

“What are the pens?” Holden asked, and the guard hit him again, hard against his right ear. He had the impression that CJ enjoyed this kind of thing. Holden wasn’t frightened so much as resigned. He’d known that he’d be trading his freedom for the chance that Bobbie’s plan would work. And for the electrical tech’s life. He was past the good part of his plan now, and the bad part might last a very long time or a very short one. Either way, probably the rest of his life.

CJ hauled him out into the free air where there was nothing for Holden to grab onto. A drop of his blood smeared the Laconian’s faceplate.

“What the fuck do you have to say for yourself now, asshole?” CJ said, shaking him just enough to make his teeth rattle. Holden took a deep, painful breath.

“We should probably get to an emergency shelter,” he said.

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Chapter Thirty-Three: Bobbie

Tenth what?” Alex said. His voice was reedy and distant. Not all of that was because of the tiny speaker it was coming out of. Alex understood what Holden was doing just as much as she did. One alarm was significant. One alarm out of a dozen meant less. Holden was giving them cover, and Alex was asking Bobbie to say that Holden hadn’t just decided to sacrifice himself to keep the mission on track.

Her mouth was dry.

“You heard him,” she replied, keeping her tone all business. “As soon as that tenth alarm goes off, blow the vent, take out the guards, and get us into the room.”

“Am I getting that back?” Amos asked, but not to them.

Naomi was staring at her, wide-eyed. She was on the radio, too. She knew what was happening. But she tightened her grip on her tools and pressed her lips together, then gave Bobbie a nod. *Good to go*. The *Roci*’s former XO would finish her mission. Then she’d worry about Holden afterward. They both would.

The sound of the alarms had started close to them, and grew more distant as new sirens joined the cacophony. Holden was moving away from them. Which was good, considering what was about to happen.

“Chief,” Alex said. “That was ten.”

Bobbie took one last look at her surroundings. She and Naomi floated alone in the narrow corridor. The door to the computer room was five meters away, and she had her improvised battering ram in one hand. As it always did in the calm seconds before a mission began, her mind ran through the checklist of things that were about to happen. Nothing popped up as a red flag, so she said, “Go, go, go.”

For three long breaths, nothing happened.

There was a distant thump, like a firecracker going off inside a locker. *The first drone just blew itself up to take out the venting cover*. This was

followed by a shout of surprise. Bobbie could picture the two men in the room looking up in shock as the vent turned into shrapnel behind them, and five tiny drones flew into the room. Then two more bangs, close together like firing a double tap with a pistol. This time louder, and closer. *Two more drones going off to take out the guards.*

The alarm in the room started screeching as the man with his hand on the dead man's switch went down. But now, instead of drawing every guard in the area, it was just one of over a dozen alarms going off, and new ones coming up every few seconds. Holden had been busy.

"I'm getting smoke in the vents," Clarissa said. "I'm turning up the recyclers."

The last explosion was the loudest yet, right on the other side of the door. *The last three drones clustering around the latch and detonating.* Alex said, "My guys are done. Me and my team are cleaning up the logs and shutting down."

Bobbie planted her feet on the corridor wall and launched toward the door. The heavy length of ceramic-filled pipe she was using as a ram was gripped in both hands, and she slammed it into the door just above the latch. The door exploded open so violently that it bounced off the bulkhead and swung back hard enough to clip her knee as she flew by. It hurt, but not enough to think about.

She had a split second to clock the room: workstation and two dead men with blood soaking their suits floating next to it, server rack bolted to the deck in the center of the compartment, plain metal walls. She slammed into the server rack and bounced off into an empty corner of the room.

"Ouch. Fuck."

"What's that, Chief?" Alex asked.

"Nothing. Just went a hundred kph when twenty would have done," Bobbie replied. "We're good, Naomi. Do your thing."

Naomi's lean form slid through the opening with Belter grace, tapped one foot against the bulkhead, and came to a perfect stop next to the server rack. Watching her slide through the air like a fish in water made Bobbie feel overlarge and clumsy.

"I'll be in the hall, watching for gawkers," she said.

"Mmhmm," Naomi replied, already ignoring her. She was pulling panels off the server rack, and a variety of gear floated in the space around her like a high-tech cloud.

Before she left, Bobbie pushed over to the two Laconian guards and checked their pulse. Up close, it was hardly necessary. Both men had massive head injuries, and bits of bone, blood, and drone parts floated around them. It was a shitty way for a soldier to die, ambushed like that, and Bobbie pushed down the feeling of guilt and regret. It was war. Right now, her brothers and sisters in the Martian fleet were fighting and dying in the Sol system in that same war. And a lot more blood was being spilled on their side than on the Laconian one so far.

Still, as a person who'd stood a watch in enemy territory, the sightless eyes of the two dead men made her scalp crawl the way she'd always imagined it would when a sniper had you in their sights for the kill shot.

"Your turn now," she told the dead man. "My turn later."

She pushed out into the corridor to keep watch. The shrill electronic screech of alarms echoed down the hall and all around her. So far, no one had come to check on the computer-room alarm. Why would they? Holden had made sure that the only important alarm was drowned out. She had to hand it to him, as an improvised element of the plan it was a pretty good idea. Probably something they should have included, just in case.

Next time, she thought, knowing there would never be a next time.

"Got it," Naomi said from behind her. Bobbie nearly elbowed her in the face before her brain could override the startle response.

"Great," she said instead. "Let's get to the shelter before Katria gets itchy and blows us all to hell for the fun of it."

"Jim won't be there," Naomi said.



Amos and Katria were floating in the cramped space of their chosen radiation shelter. It was nothing more than a four-meter length of hallway with heavy pressure doors at both ends. Netting hung on both walls with rebreathers, first-aid kits, emergency vac suits. Bobbie had stowed a gear bag with the less-standard equipment.

As soon as she and Naomi climbed in through the one open door, Katria slapped her hand to the panel and it slammed shut.

"What the fuck?" Amos said, rounding on her.

"We need that closed when the bomb goes off," Katria replied, pulling

the detonator out of her pack. “You know, to live.”

“Nothing happens without my direct order,” Bobbie said to her and put a restraining hand on Amos’ chest. He reacted by mag-booting himself to the deck, so she kicked on her own boots and clamped them to the bulkhead to keep her leverage.

“Babs,” Amos said, “I’m going to go get Cap, and it’d be nice if you held off on the boom till I’m done.”

Bobbie waited for Naomi to voice her agreement, then Katria to argue against it, and for their tiny shelter to turn into shouting and chaos. But to her surprise, everyone just looked at her. It was an interesting fact of her brief captaincy that the only time anyone seemed to want her to make a decision was when it was one she didn’t want to make.

Amos was staring at her, his expression as blank as always. But he held his fists with the ease of long use, and Bobbie knew how fast the old man was in a fight. With his feet clamped to the deck for leverage, he’d be tough to restrain if he decided to start swinging.

“Our window is closing,” Bobbie said, raising her hands, making it about the logic of her words instead of a threat. “At some point someone checks that alarm and finds two dead guys. We don’t have time for a rescue.”

“She’s right. So let me blow this fucker and get on with it,” Katria added. Bobbie winced at the cold disregard in her words, but didn’t take her eyes off Amos.

Naomi still hadn’t weighed in, but Amos’ eyes kept cutting to her, waiting for the go sign. If Naomi said, *Yes, go get him*, Bobbie knew the only way they’d keep Amos in the room was to physically restrain him. Bobbie couldn’t see what Naomi was doing behind her back, but whatever it was, Amos wasn’t getting the signal he wanted, because he didn’t make a move.

“Those alarms were moving away from us, fast,” Bobbie said, still only looking at Amos. “Holden knew the schedule. Either he’s made his way to a shelter or he’s told whoever has him now to get to one.”

“You don’t know that,” Naomi finally said.

“No, I don’t. But I hope. And right now, that’s what I’ve got. Because we have to blow that bomb now, or this whole operation fails and we still don’t get Holden back.”

“Yeah, so let’s get on with it,” Katria said.

“Stop fucking helping me, lady,” Bobbie snarled at her without turning around.

Naomi spoke, and her voice was as calm as it was empty. “Bobbie’s right. This can’t all be for nothing.”

Amos flicked his eyes to Naomi, then locked on Bobbie. His face had the same meaningless half grin it always wore, but his shoulders were tense, and his fists were white-knuckled. A flush of blood darkened his neck. Bobbie had never seen him like this before, and she didn’t like it now.

Not that it changed anything.

“Katria, get ready to blow on my signal,” Bobbie said. “Let’s get into these emergency suits for evac immediately after. You’ve got one minute to dress.”

Bobbie heard the Velcro ripping sounds of vac suits being pulled off the walls and hastily donned. Amos wasn’t moving.

“Put your suit on, big man,” Bobbie said.

“You’re really gonna blow it,” Amos replied. He didn’t sound surprised. Or like he was issuing a challenge. He didn’t sound like anything. Bobbie involuntarily braced for violence.

“Yes,” she said.

Without changing his expression, Amos squared up on her, hands at his sides.

“I guess you really want that captain’s chair back, huh Babs?”

Before she knew she was going to do it, Bobbie had already grabbed his collar and yanked him up hard enough to pull his mag boots off the floor, then slammed him against the bulkhead.

“If we had more time,” she hissed at him through her teeth, “you and I would be dancing right now.”

Amos smiled at her. “I got time.”

“Katria. Blow it,” Bobbie said, and the world ended.



When Katria’s charge went off, it demolished the control panel and ripped a seventeen-centimeter hole in the oxygen storage tank. Bobbie didn’t know the exact size of the tank, but she had a vague memory that liquid oxygen compressed down to about eleven hundred kilograms per cubic meter, and

now all of it was trying to become a gas again, all at once.

The initial blast of expanding gas was deafening. The shock wave ripped apart bulkheads and piping. All the liquid oxygen in those pipes joined the explosion as additional expanding gas. From inside the relative safety of their reinforced emergency compartment, it sounded like someone had set off a tactical nuke in the next room.

And then, as was inevitable, something oxidized fast enough to produce a flame, and the initial blast of air became fire.

The entire emergency shelter shuddered, then canted over onto its side. The reinforced and blast-hardened bulkheads didn't break, but the mounts holding the compartment to the deck were sheared off by the force of the blast. It took seconds that lasted for hours.

The inner walls and the pressure doors at each end of the compartment got hot enough to start smoking. Bobbie shared a look with Amos, then let go of him and they both scrambled to get into the emergency vacuum suits.

When the exterior bulkhead blew out, there wasn't another deafening explosion, but rather a sudden drop in the sound level. The roar was replaced by the hiss of rushing air, then a high whine, then nothing. The seals on their shelter stayed intact, so afterward all they could hear was their own panicked breathing.

"Okay, we're getting massive alarms," Clarissa said, her voice the only calm thing in the universe. "The station's going into shutdown. I'm pulling out too. I'll see you back at the place."

"God *damn*," Naomi said.

"Told you," Katria said. "My shit always works."

Bobbie finished pulling on her vac suit, and saw Amos was sealing up his own. They traded a look. "We need to get out of here," she said to him, and he nodded his agreement. Whatever was going to happen between them, it was on hold for now. They'd come back to it, she was certain of that. And it would need to get settled.

If I just killed Holden, this probably ends with one of us dead.

Whatever she'd imagined when she heard the blasts from inside the shelter, the reality was worse.

They opened the door to an entire deck that had been dropped in a blender, then spun up in a centrifuge. Bulkhead panels, control stations, equipment, decking. It had all been torn, twisted, burned, and then thrown out against the outer walls at high speed. A long piece of pipe was

embedded in a wall, still quivering like an arrow shot into a tree. Something that looked like a metal desk had been slammed into a support beam so hard that the metal had actually fused. And in one corner, a single boot had been pinned to the ceiling and then melted into a stalactite of rubber. She hoped there wasn't a foot in it.

They floated silently through the wreckage looking for their exit. It wasn't hard to find.

A hole gaped in the exterior bulkhead of the drum nearly five meters across. The nearly circular rim of it was all bent outward, like the metal wall had been breached by a giant's battering ram. Which, Bobbie supposed, it had. Only instead of concrete and steel, it had been oxygen and fire. Outside, she saw the faint twinkle of light on the ejecta as it raced away from the station and toward the curtain of black at the edge of the ring space.

"Exactly where I said it would be," Katria cackled. "Damn near half a meter from the exact spot I marked as the weak point. I should charge money for this."

"Do you think anyone survived?" Naomi asked.

"We kept everyone we could out of the affected area," Bobbie replied. "Only should have been Laconians down here ..."

"And anyone who didn't get our fucking memo," Amos added.

"Jim would have warned anyone he ran into," Naomi said. "He wouldn't be able to stop himself."

"Yeah, by then it wouldn't matter much," Amos agreed. "No time to track the bomb down before it did its business."

"And fuck any Laconians who were here," Katria said in a tone that sounded like she'd have spit if she weren't wearing a helmet. "I hope they fucking saw it coming."

"Kat," Bobbie said, "please shut up now."

"This is going to work," Naomi said, pointing out the hole toward the docks. "They're going to think that was our target."

The *Gathering Storm* sat a few dozen meters away. The nose of the ship and its port-side flank showed significant hull damage. Debris from the blast had punched holes in the landing clamps and dragged long gouges down its side. A large cluster of objects that looked like a sensor or communication array had nearly been ripped off the side of the ship, floating now at the end of a tether of cables.

It was an eerie ship. The angles of it were like something cut from crystal, and the curves felt like something grown more than built. It was like looking at a venomous snake. She had a hard time pulling her eyes away.

“Too bad we didn’t kill it,” Katria said, ignoring Bobbie’s request.

“Yeah,” Bobbie agreed. “Too bad.”

Amos pulled a magnetic grapple gun out of the gear bag he was carrying and fired a line over to the elevator shaft exterior. They’d need to climb up to a point not far from the maintenance hatch on the outside of the drum she and Clarissa had used earlier. The hard part would be getting a grapple onto the drum, then hanging on while the station tried to hurl them away at a third of a g. After that, it was an easy climb up to their secret entrance back into the station. Up into Medina from the underworld, and mission accomplished.

Unless something else went wrong. The only thing worse than losing Holden would be losing him for no damned reason.

“Laconians are gonna find this hatch,” Amos said. “Shouldn’t plan to use it again after this. No way the crews that come to fix that hole are gonna miss it.”

“Yeah,” Bobbie agreed. “If we thought the sweeps before were bad, they’re about to get a hundred times tighter.”

“Yeah, fuck ’em,” Katria snorted.

“No,” Naomi said. “It’ll be worse than that. We stung their pride before. But today we hurt them. Hurt them bad. And they’re going to try to make it better by hurting us back. Not just us either. Anyone who they think might be like us.”

While Amos hooked his grapple line to the edge of the hole so that they could climb up to the elevator housing, Naomi remained staring at the damaged Laconian ship.

“We killed a lot of people today,” she said. “Some of them just don’t know it yet.”

Chapter Thirty-Four: Drummer

The battle will be here,” Benedito Lafflin said, indicating a space between the curve of the asteroid belt and the orbit of Mars. The place where physics and geometry calculated that the paths of the *Tempest* and those of the fleets of the EMC and the union would cross. There was nothing there now—no port, no city, no outpost of any civilization. Only a hard vacuum wider than worlds, an emptiness of strategic importance. “We’re calling it Point Leuctra.”

“Luke-tra?”

“The Spartans were decisively defeated there by Thebes,” Lafflin said. “I mean, they call their planet Laconia. Psy ops thought it might speak to their sense of their own invincibility.”

They stared at each other a moment. *That’s the best we’ve got? Intimidate them with classical allusions?* floated at the back of her throat. Lafflin shrugged uncomfortably.

“All right,” Drummer said. Because what else was there to be said? It wasn’t as though her will was going to change any of the factors involved. The timetable was listed at the side of the display, days and hours as ticks of red and gold.

“The eggheads have a good model of the *Tempest*,” Lafflin went on, swapping out the map of the system for a schematic of the *Tempest*. The weird, organic shape of it made her feel like she was looking at a detail from an autopsy. *Here is the vertebra where things went wrong. You can see the malformation.* She smiled at the absurdity of the thought. Lafflin smiled back reflexively. “The only hard data we have is where the PDCs and torpedoes came out, but we also got a lot of good heat data from the last engagement.”

“The death of Independence,” Drummer said. The death of the first void city and everyone who hadn’t fled their home.

Lafflin looked down. “That, yes, ma’am. The data’s given us some idea

about the internal structures too. Enough that we feel confident that we can target the right places on that bastard. Take it out before it reaches Earth.”

Because that was the point, Drummer thought. That was always the point. Protect Earth and Mars. Keep the inner planets safe and independent, even at the cost of more Belters’ lives. And she’d known that. From the moment Avasarala had stepped into her meeting, she’d known. Some part of her expected to feel some kind of outrage, some betrayal. Resentment that the wheel of history was still rolling over the backs of her people first.

She didn’t. There was a term she remembered from her years in the OPA. *Saahas-maut*. She didn’t know where the term came from, but it meant something like *the pleasure you take in hardship*. It was supposed to be a peculiarly Belter emotion, something that the inners didn’t name because they didn’t feel it. She looked at the *Tempest* now, the guesswork lines of her superstructure and drive, the target points along her hull. Drummer wasn’t angry at the inners for using the union to protect Earth. She wasn’t even angry at the Laconians for being another iteration of everything the inners had been before the union existed. War and loss, the prospect of the oppressor’s boot. There was a nostalgia to it. A bone-deep memory of what it had been to be young.

She couldn’t help wondering what that girl, riding rock hoppers and taking gigs at Ceres and Iapetus and Tycho, would have thought of the woman she’d become. The leader of her own oppressions. Not much, probably.

Lafflin cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” Drummer said. “Didn’t sleep well. Vaughn? Could you get me some tea?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Vaughn said. “Also, Pallas.”

“Thank you,” she said. She didn’t mean it.

She’d placed the strategic update with Lafflin on her schedule on purpose. The *Tempest*’s inexorable flight sunward was slated to reach its point nearest to Pallas Station within the hour. The evacuation was complete, or as near to complete as it would be. There was always some old rock hopper with a gun and an attitude who’d stay behind out of spite and rage. It wouldn’t help. One of humanity’s oldest homes in the Belt would be dead before she went to sleep again, or if it wasn’t, it would be because Admiral Trejo had seen fit to grant his mercy. She was pretty sure that wasn’t going to happen. At least she could go into the terrible, predictable

tragedy with all the vulnerable points of the *Tempest* firmly in mind. She had some hope of retribution.

There was a certain peace in the impossibility of subterfuge. Sure, there were stealth ships and long-range torpedoes. The cloak and dagger of vanishing into the vastness between worlds. They worked for a ship here and there. For the small and swift and furtive. But on this scale—the scale of war on the battlefield of the abyss—everyone knew more or less where everyone else was. Their drive plumes and heat signatures announced them. The hard laws of orbital mechanics and time placed every base, every planet, every person predictably in front of their own personal firing squads. Situations like this one, they could see death coming, and it didn't matter. Death still came.

“Did you ...” Lafflin said. “We can continue this after. If you'd like.”

Drummer didn't like. She didn't want to see it happen. Didn't want to hope that Pallas might survive. But she was the president of the union, and bearing witness was part of what she was supposed to do. She wondered where Avasarala was, and whether the old lady was going to watch too.

“Yes,” Drummer said. “That'll be fine.”

Lafflin nodded, rose from the table, and made his way out of the meeting room. Drummer stood, stretched, and switched the display to the tactical service's analytics. The image wasn't real. It was a composite of visual telescropy and Pallas' internal data cobbled together into a best guess that was five minutes old from light delay before it reached her. Without Tycho beside it, Pallas looked ... Calm? Still. The curves of the bases' structures didn't spin against the starscape. Pallas was older than that. By the time they'd learned how to spin asteroid stations up, Pallas had been in business for more than a generation. It would die without changing. A countdown timer showed the minutes to the *Tempest*'s closest pass. Seven minutes and thirty-three seconds.

The door slid open again, and Vaughn ghosted into the room, a drinking bulb in either hand. The smell of tea wafted to her seconds later. He didn't speak as he reached out to her. The bulb warmed her palm and the tea was rich and sweet.

“Hard day,” Vaughn said. It was strange. She didn't like Vaughn or dislike him, but she'd come to rely on him. And now, in this traumatic hour, it was this crag-faced political operative at her side instead of Saba. The universe was tricky, and its sense of humor came with teeth.

“Hard day,” Drummer agreed.

On the display, the *Tempest* fell slowly toward the sun. Pallas Station would pass on the ship’s starboard, and too far away to see with the naked eye. Admiral Trejo would be watching the show on a screen of his own. The death of Pallas would be one of the most observed events in history. Five minutes and fifteen seconds. Which meant, in Pallas’ frame of reference, now.

She took another sip of tea, feeling the hot water against her tongue and the roof of her mouth, Brownian motion making it seem to fizz against the soft flesh of her palate, beat against the individual taste buds. Molecules of sugar latched to contact sites, and the nerves ran through the meat of her tongue, back into her body like she was drinking twice, once with the liquid and once with electrical fire. A sense of vertigo washed through her.

She tried to put the bulb down, but the surface of the table was distant, visible, but through a distracting cloud that was the air—atoms and molecules bouncing against each other, striking and spinning away and striking again. Thicker than bodies at a tube station.

She tried to call out to Vaughn. She could see him, right there before her, the jagged territory of his skin fractally similar at every scale. She tried to make out his expression, but she couldn’t bring her focus back that far. It was like trying to see the face of God. Something hummed and throbbed, ticking faster than she could quite be aware of. The pulse of her own brain, the tempo of her consciousness. It sang like a chorus, and she heard herself hearing it.

She dropped the bulb. It clattered against the table, rolled, and dropped to the ground, falling closed so that it kept even a drop of tea from escaping. Vaughn took a step, then sank down to his knees. His eyes were wide, and his face pale as death and covered by sweat. Drummer sat slowly. Her knees felt weak.

“God,” Vaughn said. “Besse God.”

Drummer couldn’t tell if it was profanity or prayer.

The timer on the display read two minutes and twenty seconds. Whatever had happened, it had taken almost three minutes out of her life. It hadn’t seemed that long. Maybe she’d passed out?

“I need,” she began, and her voice felt strange. Like she could still hear overtones fluting up from her vocal cords. “I need to know what that was.”

“I don’t,” Vaughn said. He was weeping. Wide, thick tears dripping

down his cheeks.

“Vaughn,” she snapped, and it sounded more like her own voice again. “Come to! I need to know what that was.”

“I saw everything,” he said.

“How widespread. What happened. Everything. Get me reports.”

“Yes,” he said, and then a moment later, “Yes, ma’am.” But he rested his head on his knees and didn’t move.

On the display, the timer came to twelve seconds, and the *Tempest* fired. Not missiles, but the magnetic beam that Saba had reported. The thing that had stripped the defenses from the slow zone and burst gamma radiation out all the gates. Pallas Station vanished like a blown-out candle with eleven seconds to spare. They were roughly five light-minutes away, so it had happened ... the two things had happened together in the *Tempest*’s frame of reference.

“Tur,” she said. “Get me Cameron Tur.”



“The thing you have to understand is that the technology of the ring stations doesn’t break the speed of light,” Tur said, his Adam’s apple bobbing like a ball on a string. “The one thing we can absolutely say is that the protomolecule is bound by the speed of light. Everything they designed got around it with a different understanding of locality. That’s not the same thing at all.”

He was talking fast and, Drummer thought, more than half to himself. That she was in the room let him think out loud, but he didn’t have his science-advisor voice tuned up. This was one step short of a chimpanzee shrieking and pointing at the charred spot where lightning had struck.

“If you look at it, the gates themselves are clearly bounded by lightspeed. The strategy the protomolecule employs is to send out bridge builders at subluminal speeds to environments where there are stable replicators to hijack and employ to ... to poke holes into a different space. Going from Sol gate to Laconia or Ilus or wherever, we don’t accelerate ships past lightspeed, we just take a shortcut because the slow zone is a place outside locality where very different places in *our* reference can be very nearby in *that* frame.”

“That’s great,” Drummer said. “Was it a weapon?”

Tur goggled at her. “Was what a weapon?”

“That—” She waved her fingers in front of his eyes. “That whatever the hell that was. With the hallucinations and the missing time. Was it a weapon? Can the Laconians turn us off like that anytime they want?”

“It was ... it was associated with their weapon,” Tur said. “I mean it happened at the same time, but that’s the thing. Time doesn’t actually work like that. ‘The same time’ is a weird linguistic fantasy. It doesn’t exist. Simultaneity doesn’t act like this.”

He waved his arms, flapping them out toward the sides of the room. *This.*

The whatever-the-hell-it-had-been hadn’t just happened in Drummer’s meeting room, or on People’s Home. It had been spread throughout the system—Earth and Mars, Saturn’s moons and Jupiter’s. Even the science stations on moons around Neptune and Uranus, and the deep labs in the Kuiper Belt. The reports were startlingly similar—hallucinations and lost time that began uniformly at the moment the *Tempest* had fired its magnetic weapon at Pallas Station. Or, more accurately, the moment in the *Tempest*’s frame of reference. Tur seemed very specific about that. Like it was important.

“But it didn’t happen when they fired it in the slow zone,” Drummer said. “Why didn’t Medina have this happen?”

“What? Oh, no, we don’t know. The ring space and the station there and the gates, we don’t know what their relationship is with normal space. The rules of physics may be different. I mean, it’s clearly an active system, and the energy output from the magnetic weapon there was smaller than the gamma bursts that came from it, so it was tapping into an energy supply that didn’t have anything to do with the *Tempest* per se. But the thing is I’m not sure that was a propagating event. If it wasn’t a propagating event, then maybe it didn’t violate lightspeed.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Drummer said between clenched teeth.

“Well, I mean when you drop a pebble in a pond, there are ripples. They propagate, and all propagation is limited by lightspeed. But instead of a pebble, imagine you dropped a sheet of plating. So that the surface of the plating hit the surface of the pond everywhere at once. It doesn’t matter that the trigger that dropped the plate was in one place, because it happened everywhere. Not a point location, but a nonlocalized location.”

“Nonlocalized. Location,” Drummer said, pressing her palms into her eye sockets. Annoyance and fear curled in her throat. *So you’re telling me you don’t know shit* floated at the back of her mouth.

“Everyone would experience it as if the effect began exactly with them and then propagated away in every direction at the speed of light, but in reality—”

“I don’t care,” she said. It was still harsh, but less than what she wanted to do. Tur reared back from her anyway. “What it is, what it means about the way you understand the universe or physics? I don’t care. None of that matters to me.”

“But—”

“They just demonstrated a weapon that at its minimum ripped Pallas Station down to hyperaccelerated dust. I am preparing to lead thousands of soldiers on hundreds of ships into battle against this thing. You need to tell me was that a glitch in consciousness because of their attack, or can they make that happen again anytime they want? Did they know it was going to happen? Did they suffer all the same high weirdness that we did? Because if they can turn our brains off for a few minutes at will, I’m going to need some *very different strategies*.”

By the end, she was shouting. She hadn’t meant to shout. Tur had his hands up, palms toward her, like he was afraid she might attack. Fine, let him wonder. Maybe it would focus him up.

“I ... that is ...” Tur took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “I feel comfortable saying that the glitch, if that’s what we’re calling it, was associated with *Tempest*’s attack on Pallas. Given that it didn’t happen in the slow zone, I can’t say whether it was a controlled effect or an artifact of the weapon with some quality of local space around Sol.”

“All right,” Drummer said.

“Whether the enemy anticipated it or not, I can’t say.”

“That’s fair,” Drummer said. The first pricks of regret were forming at the back of her mind. She shouldn’t have yelled at him.

“And I can’t say whether they suffered the same effect ... but I would guess they did. If I’m right about the mechanism, there isn’t any sort of shielding against it. You can’t block something that’s already there. That’s what *nonpropagating* means. It doesn’t come from anyplace. Everywhere it is, that’s where it came from.”

Drummer leaned back. That, at least, was interesting. If the Laconians

had to go through the same things she had every time they fired their big gun, it would make a gap when automated systems might be able to penetrate their defenses.

“We’re also seeing the increased quantum creations and annihilations much more broadly,” Tur was saying somewhere nearby. “Like *system-wide* broadly. And there’s early suggestion that some experiments on Neptune and Luna that were working with controlled entanglement structures collapsed. So maybe—”

Drummer leaned back in her chair, folding her hands together. Her eyelids fell to half-mast. She knew—they all knew—that this was the first time one of the Laconian ships had left its home system. This wasn’t only an invasion, it was also a shakedown cruise. And nothing ever went completely as expected on a shakedown. The question was whether the Laconians knew what had happened. Whether they’d been anticipating it. If they’d been taken by surprise as well, they might not risk using the magnetic beam again.

Tur wouldn’t be able to tell her that. Or Vaughn or Lafflin. Admiral Trejo could say it, but not to her. Which meant there was only one plausible way for her to find out.

Her heart leaped at the idea, and she waited for the joy to fade before she risked thinking about it again. It was always dangerous when the universe fell down in a pattern where the thing you wanted and the wise path were the same.

Somewhere, Tur was still talking. He might as well have been on another ship. Drummer’s mind pressed through the possibilities, the dangers, the possible profits, and the certain loss. Each time, she found herself at the same conclusion.

She thanked Tur, using the social conventions of conversation to signal him it was time for him to go. She even shook his hand to make up a little for losing her temper before. As she walked him to the door, he was still talking about locality and signal loss. She closed the door behind him and went back to her desk.

Vaughn answered the connection request like his finger had been hovering over the button.

“Ma’am?”

“The *Tempest* is going to make a report. It may go back to Medina, or route through Medina back to Laconia,” she said. “We’re going to find out

what it says.”

“Yes, ma’am. And how are we going to do that?”

“Saba,” she said. “The risk is worth it now. We’re reopening communications with Medina.”

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Chapter Thirty-Five: Singh

An improvised explosive device punctured a liquid-oxygen storage tank on deck four of the engineering section,” Overstreet said. He was reading from a report that scrolled by on the monitor wrapped around his thick forearm. “We’ve recovered very little of the device itself, but what few pieces we have indicate it was made with material common to this facility. It’ll be difficult if not impossible to track the exact source.”

Singh sat and listened to the report and tried to look present and thoughtful. But the truth was, his mind was bouncing around like a tiny animal trying to escape a predator. He found he only processed about half of what Overstreet was saying. His hands were shaking so badly that he didn’t trust himself to pick up the glass of water on the desk in front of him. He kept them under the desk, where Overstreet wouldn’t see them. The sense that he was in immediate danger was inescapable because it was true.

“The damage to that deck was significant. Total loss of the primary liox storage. The thrust from the breach caused the station’s maneuvering thrusters to fire, and the shaking knocked down several structures in the habitat cylinder. The network-traffic station for the *Storm* was completely destroyed. A backup environmental-systems plant was significantly damaged, and will probably not be repairable.”

“The *Storm*,” Singh said. *My first command. The symbol of Laconian power at Medina.*

“This is preliminary, of course,” Overstreet replied, flicking one finger to skip down the report on his arm. “It does seem like that might have been the target of this attack, so minor hull damage and the loss of one sensor array feels like we got off light.”

Singh’s hands felt like they were shaking hard enough to be visible, even under the desk, so he gripped his thighs with both hands and held on tight.

“Preliminary casualty reports?”

“Again, light,” Overstreet said. “At this time, we have five confirmed

Laconian fatalities, three from the engineering detail, two from security. Seven injuries ranging from life threatening to minor. Only two locals confirmed dead at this time. But we also have another dozen missing, so that number will probably go up.”

“To be willing to do so much damage to their own station, to their own people, just to try to hurt us ...” Singh said, then trailed off.

“We have several persons of interest in custody,” Overstreet said. “One of them was setting off alarms immediately before the blast. It’s possible he wasn’t involved, but the coincidence seems unlikely. I will be debriefing him once we’re done here.”

“Is he a local?”

“Former captain of a Transport Union ship. James Holden.”

Singh frowned. “Why do I know that name?”

“Apparently he’s something of a celebrity, sir. He was involved in the Io Campaign and the defeat of the Free Navy back in the day.”

Both things that had happened when Singh was a child. The old guard still playing old-guard games.

“We will need to make the strongest possible response to this,” Singh said.

Overstreet nodded, his face grim. The hesitation meant something that Singh didn’t understand. “Sir, the radical factions of the Outer Planets Alliance fought a guerrilla war with Earth and Mars for nearly two centuries. The veterans of that war are almost certainly in leadership positions in this insurgency. That means we have some difficult decisions to make. About the scope of response.”

“I’m sorry,” Singh said. “I’m not following ...”

“Insurgencies are historically nearly impossible to eradicate, for a few very simple reasons. The insurgents don’t wear uniforms. They look just like the innocent populace. And, they’re the friends and family of that populace. This means that every insurgent killed tends to increase recruiting for the insurgency. So unless you are willing to rack up a sizable civilian casualty count, we can’t just shoot everyone we suspect. If we take the strongest *possible* response, we stop calling it counterinsurgency and start calling it genocide.”

“I see,” Singh said. He’d studied counterinsurgency and urban pacification at the academy, of course. Afghanistan had been impossible to conquer going all the way back to Alexander the Great. Ireland in the

twentieth century. The Belter troubles for the last two centuries. It was different reading about it, but now he saw how this cycle of violence could go on and on for him too. "I'm not prepared to execute every Belter on the station."

Overstreet seemed to relax without visibly moving at all.

"I agree, sir. All we can do is make it harder for them to operate," Overstreet said. "We're going to have Marines enter every compartment on the station. Anything we don't control or have immediate use of will be sealed and the atmosphere removed. It won't end this, but it'll make it harder for them to plan and execute with no spaces under their control."

"Agreed," Singh said. "You have authorization to conduct this operation, and shut down any sections of the station you see fit. Let's see if these people can work in daylight, not hiding in the sewers."

Overstreet stood and saluted, then headed for the door. But just before he left, he turned back as if suddenly remembering something. "Sir, you might consider putting more pressure on your civilian informants. This is exactly the sort of thing they should be doing for us."

"Yes," Singh agreed. "That's next on my list."



The Belter with the badly broken nose—Jordao, Singh thought he called himself—was ushered into the office by two Marines. They held him by the arms, his feet barely touching the ground. His expression was somewhere between angry and sniveling.

"Put him down," Singh told the Marines. When Jordao moved toward a chair, he said, "Don't sit."

"Sabe, bossmang."

"You know about the attack?" Singh's hands had mostly stopped shaking after Overstreet left, so he took a sip of his water. It was all playacting. Look calm, casual, in control. Make Jordao feel like Singh already knew the answer to every question he was asked. Make him afraid to lie. It seemed to be working. Jordao rubbed his hands together and bobbed his head like a suppliant.

"Sa—I mean, yes, boss, I heard."

"It shook the station hard enough to knock down buildings in the drum

section,” Singh said. “So, of course, everyone knows about it. I’m not asking that. I’m asking if you *know* about it.”

“Knew the underground was up to something, them, but details? I don’t —”

“Because, you see,” Singh continued, “I released your sister from our lockup as a down payment for future services rendered. Services like letting me know when a bomb was going to blow up half the engineering section of my station, for example.”

All the servility left Jordao’s face. Singh watched it happen, like a switch had been flipped in the man’s head. He was a man who would grovel only so far and no farther. It was a useful fact about him, though it did seem to diminish his value.

“Old OPA, them, sa sa que? The ones the inners couldn’t kill,” Jordao said, not attempting to hide his thick Belter accent now. “The ones like me? We never get to know.”

“Before you leave this room, you will give me a list of every name you think might be involved in this underground so we can add them to our surveillance list. You will also make sure that whatever happens next, you are part of it, so that we can catch the conspirators in the act and bring the full force of the law against them.”

Jordao was shaking his head. “Kenna nothing, you—”

“Or,” Singh continued. “I will have your sister rearrested, tried for larceny and crimes against the empire, and hanged in a public space as a warning to others.”

Before Jordao could respond, Singh nodded at his Marines, and they picked the Belter up off the floor again. “He doesn’t leave until his list is delivered and verified.”

“Copy that, sir,” one Marine said, and saluted with the hand that wasn’t holding Jordao.

The Belter looked from him to the Marine and back again, understanding blooming in his eyes. Understanding and fear.



When it was over and he was alone in his office, Santiago Singh found that he very much wanted to send a message to his wife. Tell her how afraid he

was. Tell her that maybe accepting this assignment had been a terrible mistake. That walking the line between the man he had always thought he was and the ruthless authoritarian ruler the job required of him wasn't something he could do and remain whole. That the man who could order civilian deaths as a reprisal could not share the same space with the man who loved his wife and played with his daughter and couldn't wait for her to get old enough so he could buy her a kitten.

But he couldn't make that call, because the explosion had cut the *Storm* off from the station, until they could replace the network encryption node. Which was probably a good thing, because he suspected that everything he would have told his wife was a lie.

The truth—the one that he didn't think he'd ever be able to admit to her—was that he could be both men at once. He'd already delivered the ultimatum to Carrie Fisk that any colony world that joined the resistance would be destroyed. He understood that, should it become necessary, he could order Overstreet to execute every person on the station that hadn't come through the gates on the *Tempest* and the *Storm*. The Marine commander would do it. And that when Natalia and the monster arrived, he would be able to hold them and kiss them and be the man he'd always been around them. And know that he'd made them safe.

That was what terrified him. Not that the job would force him to be both of those men but that he was capable of being both. That all it would take is a bit more pressure, and Santiago Singh would be a man who loved his daughter with all his heart and who also ordered genocides.

He tapped at his desk. "Chief."

"Sir," came the immediate reply.

"How long until we have the network back up so I can send traffic back through the *Storm*?"

"It's on the priority list. I've been told eleven hours until the replacement system is in place."

"Thank you," Singh said. "Please let me know the instant it's done. I have priority traffic for Laconia."

"Yes, sir. Sir? On that topic, the *Storm* reports traffic incoming from the Sol gate, marked highest priority. They have a courier bringing it over now."

"Very well. Bring them directly in," Singh said, then killed the connection.

It seemed too early for the *Tempest* to be reporting the Sol system's surrender, but he was open for a pleasant surprise. According to his tactical map, they would barely be crossing the asteroid belt now. Their projections placed the earliest expected surrender point at the Mars crossing.

Singh needed a distraction to pull himself out of his self-pitying and introspection. Whatever Admiral Trejo needed to tell him so urgently, it was bound to be interesting.

The petty officer who was ushered into his office half an hour later was a tall woman with pale hair that had been turned dark by sweat. She was breathing heavily, and her uniform was damp.

"Sir," she said, then held out a small black wafer to him.

"You look terrible, sailor," Singh replied, taking the chip. "Are you all right?"

"The Marines are using all the carts for patrol duty, so ..."

"Did you actually run this over all the way from the *Storm*?" Because of the attack, traveling from the ship to his office meant donning a vacuum suit, moving through the damaged sections of the station, then removing the suit and running down the long spiraling ramp that went from the center of rotation down to the drum floor. And after that a kilometer-and-a-half run across the drum to reach his office complex.

"Yes, sir," the petty officer said, starting to get her breathing under control.

"I'll be sending my compliments to your senior chief. Outstanding effort, sailor. Take a moment to clean up, and we'll round up a cart to drive you back."

"Thank you, sir," she said, then gave him a sharp salute and left.

Part of the self-pity trap that Singh had realized it would be easy to fall into was the terrible sense of being utterly alone in his job. He needed more interactions with his fellow Laconians. With his ship, and the sailors under his command. He needed these reminders that he wasn't working alone. That hundreds of like-minded and dedicated professionals shared the dream of the empire. Singh made a mental note to spend more time on the *Storm*.

He rolled his monitor out onto the desktop and dropped the small black chip on it. "Transfer all files and wipe," he said, then when the monitor blinked its acknowledgment, snapped the little black chip in two and dropped it in the recycler.

Admiral Trejo's face appeared on his monitor. Singh found he was a

little excited. Trejo was a man with even greater responsibility than his own, and one who handled it with dedication and grace. He was a man who always knew the right thing to do, and did it without hesitation. If Singh wanted to spend more time with the Laconian sailors like himself, he wanted to *be* Admiral Trejo. He told the monitor to play the message.

Trejo's face blurred into motion, and his expression became one of puzzlement, and maybe even fear. "Sonny. Something's happened, and we have no idea what it is or what to do about it. We need some help."

He paused, and something like dread took root in his expression. "It seems we've taken on a passenger of sorts."

Singh watched the message play out in fascination and then horror and then fascination again.

The object—there really wasn't any other word to describe it—was a floating sphere of light and darkness hovering about three feet off the deck in a corridor on the *Heart of the Tempest*. Just looking at a recording of it on the monitor's small screen made his head hurt. Someone passed a length of pipe through it and back again on the recording. The pipe did not seem to interact with the object at all. And in fact Singh had the sense that he saw both the pipe and the object at the same time with equal clarity even when that should be impossible. It made his head hurt even worse.

Mercifully, the person with the pipe stopped doing it, and Trejo began speaking.

"As you can see, the anomaly doesn't seem to exist as a physical object. It doesn't appear to radiate on any wavelength, except for visible-spectrum photons. Not one sensing device we've aimed at it can even tell that it's there, but we can record it and see it just fine. Being in the same room with it, looking at it, it's quite disorienting and causes double vision and severe headaches."

As if in response to this, four sailors set up a curtain around it using poles and blankets. While they worked, Trejo continued. "It's moving with us. With the ship, because we're still under thrust and it hasn't moved a millimeter since it first appeared. I've tried making some minor course adjustments, but it keeps us as its frame of reference. I've included all the data we've collected on this file, but I can tell you that its first appearance almost exactly matches the moment when we destroyed Pallas Station. It also includes a nearly three-minute blackout shared by every single person on this ship."

The sailors had finished setting up their curtain, and left. Trejo pulled his monitor close, so his face filled the screen. He lowered his voice, as though telling Singh a secret.

“If this is some new weapon of the inner planets, we need to understand it and now. Blacking out a crew for three minutes, the *right* three minutes, would create a serious tactical advantage for them. I need you to pass along this information to Laconia through our most secure channels. Get me answers fast, Sonny. I’m about to engage with the combined might of the inner planets’ navies, and this is the first thing that’s made me wonder if I can win.”

Singh sank back in his chair, and rubbed his face with both hands. What if everything, including the attacks on Medina, had just been a distraction? What if the inner planets needed time to bring some new superweapon to bear, and feints and jabs from the Sol fleet and his own insurgents were just to create confusion and buy time?

“Major Overstreet?” Singh said to his monitor.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll need a cart with an armed guard. I’m going to the *Storm*.”

“Copy that, sir,”

Singh took another data chip out of his desk, laid it on the monitor, and copied all the files Trejo had sent. He then told his monitor to wipe everything. He placed the chip into a lockable metal briefcase, and waited for his ride to arrive.

While he waited, something tugged at his mind. Some memory, from the academy, maybe. Another mention of a sphere of light and darkness. It had to do with the first wave of colonization, even before the high consul had led his people to Laconia ...

He took a moment to have his monitor search the local network for any mention of such an object with the properties Trejo had described.

The search took less than a second, and what it found was a minor colony world named either Ilus or New Terra. In among the list of names connected to what the article was calling the “Ilus Incident” was one that his monitor underlined. When he tapped it, he understood why.

In the report, Captain James Holden of the *Rocinante* had reported seeing the exact object that was currently residing on Admiral Trejo’s ship. The same James Holden who was now in their security lockup, under suspicion of terrorist acts.

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Chapter Thirty-Six: Bobbie

The public prison was full, but not with her people. Laconian guards stood at the corners with weapons drawn, watching the crowd watch the prisoners. Drones buzzed overhead, scanning constantly. On the far side of the steel mesh, men and women sat disconsolately waiting for trial or judgment. Bobbie stuffed her fists deep into the pockets of her plain gray jumpsuit. A man at the back of the lowest cell on the left looked a little bit like Holden, but not so much she could talk herself into thinking it was him. Even if they had him, Holden probably wouldn't be put here. This jail was more than half for show—public stocks for a new generation. Anyone with real value to the security forces would be somewhere else.

Still. She had hoped. It never hurt to hope, except when it did.

“Pinché schwists, alles la,” the man next to her said under his breath. She'd been around Belters long enough to translate it in her head. *Lousy kids, all of them.* The man who'd said it had long brown-gray hair and an expression as sour as old lemons. She only smiled her agreement. This wasn't a place where she wanted to say anything aloud against the Laconians.

It turned out it was just as good she didn't.

“Esá all the fucking underground, yeah?” he said. “Things aren't hard enough, now they're killing our goddamn station?”

Bobbie felt her smile grow tighter, less sincere. The rage in the man's eyes wasn't for the invaders who'd swept in, destroyed their defenses, and taken over. It was for the people fighting against them. It was for her.

“Hard times,” she said, because the drones might be listening.

She walked away, heading north along the drum. The straight line of sun above her, the ruins of the engineering decks far away at her back. Being out in public like this left her feeling exposed. The Laconians were everywhere, the checkpoints twice as thick as they'd been before, and everywhere she looked, faces shaped by fear. The Laconians' fear that their

control over the station hadn't been enough to stop the underground. The locals' fear of Laconian reprisals. Her fear that she'd be found out, or that she'd broken something she wasn't going to be able to mend.

Saba's network had managed to get the warning out pretty well. The death toll in the explosion was low. She'd heard a dozen, and most of them Laconian, but it was hard to know what was true. It was as deep in the culture of the Belt as bones in their bodies that you didn't fuck with the environmental systems. She hadn't thought about the symbolic meaning of her plan, or what it took for Saba and Katria to agree to it. To Bobbie, they'd been getting important intelligence and covering their tracks. To the Belters, they'd been saying that they would be free of Laconian rule, even if the only freedom was death. If not everyone on the station signed on for that, she couldn't blame them.

A swath of green grass lawn on her right had a classroom's worth of children, a teacher talking about insects and soil. A man on a bicycle rode past her, whistling to let people know he was coming, and to clear the path. All the things that had happened before Duarte and Trejo and Singh. She couldn't guess how many of the people she was walking past would have turned her in to the authorities if they'd known. How many would have applauded her. There was no way for her to ask.

That was the trick of living under the thumb of a dictator. It broke every conversation, even the private ones. The invasion had wounded everyone, one way or another. Herself very much included.

Her hand terminal chimed, and she plucked it out of her pocket with a sense of dread. The message was from Alex, and all it said was WHEN YOU HAVE A MINUTE. The underground was still using encrypted back channels. The security forces wouldn't see the message in their logs. But if Bobbie got picked up, or someone looked over her shoulder, the words would be innocuous. Saba's cramped halls and corridors were the only place they could speak freely. Everywhere else on Medina had become the land of subtext.

She found an escalator and let it carry her down into the body of the drum. It wasn't far to the entry to Saba's alternate station, but they all had to be careful to see they weren't followed. Their bubble of freedom was fragile, and once it popped, it wouldn't come back.

Alex was waiting for her when she ducked into the access corridor. The flesh under his eyes looked ashy and his shoulders slumped like he was

under a higher gravity than they were. He smiled, though, and that her friend seemed pleased to see her counted for a lot. For more than it should have, even.

“How’s the weather out there?” he asked as they made their way down toward the makeshift galley.

“Stormy,” she said. “Get the feeling it’ll get worse before it gets better too.”

“That was a given.”

In the galley, half a dozen of Saba’s people sat at the tables, talking. The air smelled like noodles in black sauce, but the food was gone. Bobbie wasn’t hungry anyway. One of Katria’s men, a crook-nosed guy named Jordao, nodded to her, smiling a little too widely. She nodded back with a sense of dread. This was not a time she wanted someone hitting on her.

“Any word?” she asked, her voice low even though security wouldn’t hear her. She wasn’t afraid of being found out here, but the wounds were fresh. Some things didn’t need to travel outside the family.

“On Holden, no,” Alex said.

“Okay,” Bobbie said. It cut her a little every time there was nothing, and she welcomed it. If it came back that she’d killed him, the hurt would be a million times worse. Every little wound was a good thing because it wasn’t the killing blow.

“That stuff Naomi pulled off the encryption machine? It’s working. Saba’s folks are able to dig through a bunch of stuff we intercepted before. Of course, the *Storm*’s not talking to Medina anymore since we blew the channel, so we’re not getting anything new. But it makes it rough for the bad guys that they can’t have their ship talk to the station without radio or tightbeam, so ...”

He trailed off like his words were running out of pressure.

“So we won,” she said. “Go us.”

“Doesn’t feel like it, does it? I keep asking myself what the hell happened.”

“We lost Holden.”

Alex shook his head, tapped four fingertips on the table. “Yeah, and that’s hard, but something happened before that. We’ve faced all kinds of bad before now, and it never split up the family. It was always everyone else, never us. Now Naomi’s off in her room, and Amos is wherever the hell Amos is. You’re going for long walks. We used to be a crew. Now it’s me

and Claire playing cards and worrying about everyone.” She heard the accusation in his voice, and she wanted to push back at him. Only he was right. Something deeper was wrong. Had been wrong.

In the hallway, Saba’s voice. A woman replied. It was all too quiet to make out the words. The people at the other table laughed about something. Bobbie hunched forward, her scowl deep enough to ache.

“Holden’s not just Holden,” she said, knowing it was an evasion but saying it anyway. “He’s the face of the *Rocinante*. He’s been on newsfeeds since before I joined up. He’s the special man. We pulled this thing off, and we lost one person in the operation. That’s a win. If it had been you or me or Claire that got caught, we’d still be celebrating, but it was Holden. Now it feels like we lost our good-luck charm.”

“Feels like that to them, sure,” Alex said, pointing to the others with his thumb. “But we lost him before, and it didn’t break us. Him and Naomi retiring was sad. And then he didn’t go away, and that was weird.”

“Yeah. The whole Captain Draper thing might have worked if he’d actually been out of the picture—”

Alex leaned forward, talking over her.

“But we know better. Whatever’s going on with Amos and you, it didn’t start when Holden left. Or when he came back. It was when that big-ass ship steamed through the gate from Laconia and fucked everything sideways. And now Naomi’s curling up in her bunk while everything’s still on fire.”

“She’s not helping with the decrypt?”

Alex shook his head once, sharply.

“She can’t pull back,” Bobbie said. “She’s the best tech on the station. Saba’s people are fine, but she’s better. She can’t just stop working because ...”

Because her lover’s dead. Or worse. Bobbie felt the hurt and the guilt again.

“We need her,” Alex agreed. “I’ll have a talk with her if you want. Unless you want to be the one who kicks her butt?”

“I really don’t.”

“Good, because I don’t want to be the one who tells Amos to get his shit together. So that one’s on you.”

To Bobbie’s surprise, she smiled. For a moment, she could pretend the cramped little galley was the *Rocinante*. That she and Alex were burning

between the gates and the stars. She put a hand on his arm, grateful that her friend was there. And that however shitty things got, the plan was still to fix them.

Alex's smile was enough to show he understood everything she hadn't spoken. "Right?" he said.

"You're Naomi. I'm Amos. Then if Holden's still alive, we find him, crack him loose, and get the hell out of Dodge before the next big-ass ship comes through that gate."

"See? Now you're talking sense," Alex said. He sighed. "Which is good, because I thought I was going to have to tell you to stop sulking, and I really wasn't looking forward to the part where you punched me in the mouth."



Saba stood at the wider part of the hallway where an access panel had been taken out and never replaced. He held his arms above his head, bracing against the ceiling with the unconscious ease of someone ready for a ship that might move unexpectedly. He lifted his chin as Bobbie came close.

"Hey, I'm looking for Amos," she said.

"Problem?"

"Tell you when I find out," she said. "He's not answering his comms."

Saba's brow furrowed. "Que shansy que he's after Holden?"

"I wouldn't put the odds high that he'd go on an extraction by himself," Bobbie said. Then, a moment later, "I mean not zero, but not high."

"See it stays, if you can," Saba said. "We're carrying plenty enough already, and more rolling down, yeah?"

Something in his voice caught her. "More news?"

Saba hesitated, then shifted his head. *Come this way.* "You looking for yours, me looking for you. You want the good word first, or the worrying?"

"Good," Bobbie said. "I'm looking for good."

"Word from a coyo on the cleaning crew is Holden's alive. Locked down tight, but not dead."

A tightness released in Bobbie's gut. Whatever else happened, she hadn't killed him. And more than that, when she found Amos, she'd have it on her side. She felt a deep gratitude that she'd run into Saba before he'd

found him. She had to let Alex know. And Naomi. And everyone. The relief was profound.

“That’s ... Okay. What’s the worrying?”

“Message from the union. From the spy repeater.”

“Wait,” Bobbie said, following him as he walked toward his cabin. “We’ve got communications lines open? I thought we shut that down.”

“Turned it back on for this,” Saba said. “It ate a missile right after. Drummer thought it was worth burning the channel for.”

“Something big, then?”

“Come see.”

Saba had Drummer’s message up on his cabin’s monitor. The change in her face was shocking. It wasn’t only that the president looked tired and thinner. She looked older, like the last few weeks had been measured in years instead of days. Saba didn’t speak, but started the message from the beginning. Bobbie listened until the end, then played it again, making sure she understood. The loss of Pallas, and the loss of time.

“Well,” she said. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah,” Saba said. “Got my people going through all the information we intercepted. All that’s finished decrypting, anyway. Nothing about lost time or boiling up the vacuum.”

“Even if we found something, it’s not like we can sneak a message back if the repeater’s dead.”

“Not sneak one, no,” Saba agreed. “Can shout, though. If it was the right time. Medina’s not home anymore. Not for us. When we scatter, maybe send something back down to People’s Home. Tell them what we’ve got to tell them. If we get anything.”

“Fair point,” Bobbie agreed. “And that is the plan now, right? Clear a path and evacuate as many as we can before the new ship gets here?”

“Already putting out the word to the underground,” he said. He sounded as tired as she was. “Just the ones we trust. Saying to get ready. Window opens, and get to the ships and go. Everyone someplace different. Harder to kill us if we’re not in one place.”

“Even better if they don’t know who went where,” Bobbie said. “I’d love to find a way to take out Medina’s sensor arrays when we go.”

“Would be sweet,” Saba said, his voice dull.

“You holding up okay?” Bobbie asked.

Saba shrugged toward the image of Drummer still on the screen. “That

woman is my heart, and I lost her. Lost my ship. Lost my place for my people. Got an enemy ship killing my cities and stations, and now it can turn off minds in a whole system at once. Got another one like it braking toward me. Got all those Marines in power armor ready to shoot me and mine through the brainpan, and the loosest mouth on a thousand worlds is in the enemy's jail. So given so, I'm all right."

"Holden won't rat us out. He's given a lot of unvetted press releases over the years, but that's not the same as this."

"They have him, they'll have us. Not talking him down, but these people were Mars before they were this. Ask anyone in the OPA from the old days. Martian interrogation, it's a question of how long until the break. Never if. Better that he'd died."

"We can move," Bobbie said. "Do you have any holes that Holden didn't know about?"

"Few," Saba said, reluctantly. "But fewer now. My people are moving now. Still room for you and yours, but there won't be. Not for long. And ..."

He shook his head.

"And what," Bobbie said. "If there's something more, I need to know."

Saba shrugged and nodded at the screen. "When it comes, if it comes, the one system we can't go to? Sol. Anyplace else, I can try for. Anyplace else, I can go. But no matter where it is, she won't be there. Wasn't so bad when the repeater still was, but with it gone, it feels ..."

A tear tracked down Saba's brown cheek. Bobbie looked away.

It was so easy to forget all the others. Not just Saba, but all of them. The crews of all the ships trapped in the dock beside the *Roci*. The children in Medina's schoolrooms, the medical staff in the clinics. The artists playing music live outside the cafés out of love of doing it. Medina Station had been the nearest thing to a void city before the void cities were built. It was a home for a generation of people, and every one of them was carrying something now that made their days harder. She thought of the prisoners in the public jail, the angry man who'd come to watch them. Who had he lost back on Sol? What was keeping him awake in the nights?

There were so many families, so many crews, parents and children, lovers and friends, whose lives had been changed past recognition since Laconia gate had opened. It wasn't just her and the *Roci* crew. It wasn't just Saba. Everyone was dancing on this same landslide, and no one knew how

to make it end well.

She wanted to say something comforting, but she couldn't bring herself to lie. The best she could think of was to change the subject.

"When we get out," she said. "Not if. When. We're going to need a plan. If every ship just bolts off on its own, we'll lose contact. *They* shouldn't know where we went, but *we* should. At the very least, we should have a record of who went where. This every-man-for-himself-and-God-against-all shit's romantic, but we have to plan for something past just this."

Saba nodded. In the distance, voices and footsteps.

"Not just encrypted but in code," Saba said. "Something where only we know what it means."

"We?"

"Ou y mé," Saba said. "Leaders of the underground, us. First among dissidents."

Bobbie chuckled. "Well, there's a fucking job title."

The footsteps came faster now, and coming closer. Saba looked up like an animal smelling smoke. *Fuck*, Bobbie thought. *Not something else. It's too much already. We can't carry something else.*

The woman who appeared in Saba's doorway was older, white hair pulled back in a tight braid. Her body was long and thin, her head a little too large for her shoulders. The classic build of someone who'd grown up without gravity to hold her down. She even had the split circle of the OPA tattooed on her arm. She should have looked ancient, but the brightness in her eyes belonged on a woman a third her age. She looked from Saba to Bobbie and back with something like triumph in her eyes.

"Maha?" Saba said. "Que?" And then to Bobbie, "Maha one of our best communications techs. Had her hands in the codes since before I was born, yeah?"

"And I know all their secrets," she said in a weirdly accented voice. She held out a dumb terminal that wasn't connected to Medina's system. "The new decryption run turned over some stones. And look you what was squirming under one."

Bobbie was closer. She took the handheld terminal and flipped through the file there. It was titled MEDINA STATION SUPPLEMENTARY SECURITY REVIEW AS REQUESTED BY GOVERNOR SANTIAGO SINGH. The file's creator was listed as Major Lester Overstreet. She checked the file length and whistled.

“Que?” Saba said.

“This is way too long to just be an incident report,” Bobbie said. “It’s ...”

The section headings were Materials, Procedures, Personnel, Protocols, Audit Summary, Recommendations. She recognized the style of paragraph marking from when she’d trained back on Olympus Mons. It looked like an MMC security report, but twice as long. Maybe three times. She shifted through one after another, her head starting to swim a little.

“I think ... Saba, I think this is *everything*,” she said.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven: Alex

His back hurt. Of all the thousand things that were jacked up and wrong in his life right now, the one that chose to make him crazy was that. His back hurt, just below his rib cage where it clicked for a couple days after they'd been on the float for a while. Now it clicked and ached a little. Just time and age catching up with him, but it made him crazy. Probably anything that he couldn't fix was going to make him crazy right now.

He walked down the tight hallway, his shoulder brushing the conduits and pipes, and told himself that things were getting better. Not losing Holden. That was still a long way from better. But the rest of it. The rest of them. Whatever else happened, he still had Bobbie.

And for him anyway, Bobbie counted double.

Taking care of their little family had been his job damn near since the day the *Canterbury* died, back in some other lifetime. And usually, he felt like he managed it pretty well. The only time things had really come apart, he'd been married to Giselle and preoccupied with trying to pump air into that leaking sack of a relationship. But all the times he hadn't lost focus, Alex felt like he'd kept the crew of the *Roci* working together, mostly. It wasn't big things. The powerful stuff was always small. A kind word when Clarissa was feeling unappreciated, a little elbow in the ribs when Holden's outrage on someone else's behalf threatened to eclipse the person in question, a cordon around Amos when the big man was in the bad part of his head. Every crew that lasted more than three runs together had someone who kept a weather eye on the balance. For decades now, he'd been that man on the *Roci*.

Only they weren't on the *Roci* now. And that, so far as he could see it, was more than half of the problem. Not the whole problem. But more than half.

"Hoy, hoy, hoy," one of Katria's people said, trotting up behind him. Alex recognized him from the galley. Young guy with a nose that had

gotten bent sometime back and never put straight. “Passé alles gut?”

“Sure,” Alex said. “Everything’s fine.” It wasn’t true, but he wasn’t looking to talk about family business outside the family.

“Bist bien,” the crook-nosed guy said. “Just. We’re alles busted about Holden, yeah? Whatever Voltaire can do, help out, yeah?”

Alex clapped the crook-nose on the shoulder, and looked deeply into his eyes. “Thank you. Seriously. That means a lot.”

The kid was just another someone who wanted to get close to the action. There had been a million like him over the years. Holden had always been the one who soaked up the fame and celebrity, because for the most part he didn’t notice it. He just kept on being himself, and got vaguely surprised when anyone recognized him. The rest of them had to build up their routines and diversions, ways of being polite to the people who wanted to insert themselves into anything that the *Rocinante* did so they could tell their friends and feeds that they knew James Holden. Shaking Crook-nose’s hand and sending him away didn’t cost Alex much, but it didn’t cost him nothing. Part of him wanted to ignore the guy or yell at him. But this was easier in the long run. He had enough experience to know that, and he was pretty good with patience when he needed to be.

After a well-calculated moment, he turned away and resumed walking toward the makeshift bunkroom. And Naomi.

It had been hard when Holden and Naomi pulled the ripcord, but it hadn’t been unexpected. Part of him had been braced for it since his own second divorce. He’d been ready for the blow when those two packed up their things and retired. When Duarte’s forces blew through the gate and changed everything, part of him had thought that getting Holden and Naomi back was going to be the silver lining.

He’d called it wrong, though.

They treated it like Laconia was the only problem because it was the one most likely to get them all killed, but there was more than that. Now that Holden was out of the picture, the only one in a position to fix it was Naomi.

Fix it. That was optimism. The only one who could fix as much of it as was fixable. He hoped she was able to rise to the occasion. He hoped he was too. But no matter how bad it was, things had gone pretty well with Bobbie. He still had Bobbie.

The smuggler’s cabin was dim. Golden light spilled from the toolkit

light they used for illumination when the built-in fixtures were too harsh. The air was warmer here, and it had the vague smell of bodies and old laundry. They hadn't changed out the sheets since they'd gotten here. Some things slipped when you were hiding from authoritarian police squads and trying to topple a conquering army. Linens appeared to be one of those things.

Naomi sat against the back wall, her stool tipped back so that she could rest against the bulkhead. She smiled when he came in and put a finger to her lips. Alex paused, and Naomi nodded toward the bunk to his left. The lump under the blanket was the curve of Clarissa's back. It rose and fell slowly. She was asleep. Alex turned back to Naomi, gestured to the door behind him in invitation, but Naomi shifted her stool to one side, making room for Alex to sit on the lower bunk beside her. *Come sit with me. I will not go outside.*

With a sinking sensation in his gut, Alex sat. His back popped like a bolt shearing off, and the ache went away. In the shadows, Naomi seemed like someone just waking up from sleep or just falling into it. On a borderline, regardless, between one state and another.

"Hey," Alex said softly.

Naomi made a little wave with a smile behind it. "I've been sitting with her for the last couple hours. Amos is trying to get something to take the edge off in the short run, but we need to get her to the med bay. That sludge in her blood is building up. It's making her jittery."

"Soon as we're out of here," Alex said. "First thing. How're you holding together?"

She shrugged with her hands.

"Yeah," he said.

"You coming to tell me that I need to put my big-girl boots on? Stop sulking in my tent and rejoin the battle, quick before Patroclus does something rash?" There was a warmth and a humor in her voice he hadn't expected. It almost undercut the sorrow that he had expected.

"Yeah, I don't actually know who Patroclus is," Alex said.

"Greek kid, got in over his head," Naomi said, waving it away. "I'll be fine, Alex. I'll be out there. Just I needed to be away for a little while. It's just the down cycle."

He went through all of the things he'd planned to say, all the arguments he'd prepared to make. None of them seemed to quite fit the situation.

“Yeah, okay,” he said instead. And then, a moment later, “Down cycle?”

“The part where I don’t know if he’s dead or alive. The part where I don’t know if I’ll ever see him again. The part where I think how much I want him to be here and safe and not hurting. And telling me not to hurt either.”

“I know it’s ... that’s got to be—”

“Alex, I live here,” Naomi said. “I can’t tell you how many times he’s put me here. How many times he’s seen the right thing to do and rushed off to do it without thinking about the price. Without letting me or you or the *Roci* scare him into being less than his conscience demands. He doesn’t even know he’s doing it. It’s natural to him. Who he is. It’s the only thing about him I’m really angry about.” The buzz in her voice wasn’t sorrow.

Alex took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I may not have really understood the whole situation.”

“You remember Io? When he went off to a ship with active protomolecule all over it because maybe he’d be able to save Mars? Or Ilus, when he vanished with whatever that weird version of Miller was because maybe he’d be able to keep you and me from falling out of orbit? Or on Marais, when he went into the cliffs so we wouldn’t run out of water? So this time he went to keep Amos and Katria playing nice, and instead, he saved the whole operation and maybe opened the way for all of us to get away safely. All it cost was *him*. And he paid that price without hesitating. Same as *fucking* always.”

A tear tracked down her cheek, and he felt his own eyes stinging.

“We’ll get him,” Alex said. “We’ll always get him back.”

“Sure we will. Until the time we don’t,” she said. “It’s like this for everyone. There’s always going to be a last time, eventually. I just wish with Jim there could only be *one* last time, and not all of them, over and over and over.”

He took her hand. Her fingers were warm, but thinner than he remembered them being. He could feel the little bones beneath the skin, and her skin was dry.

“He’s exhausting,” she said.

“But we love him.”

She sighed. “We do.”

They sat in silence for a moment before she drew her hand back from his and wiped her cheeks dry. She leaned forward, setting the legs of her

stool down against the deck. Her sigh came from a thousand clicks away. "Let me get cleaned up, and I'll get to work," she said.

Alex stood when she did, but waited behind as she walked out. He'd been traveling with Naomi for a lot of years. It was amazing how easy it was to forget how much she knew herself. He didn't know if that said more about her or him.

Probably him.

Clarissa made a soft sound, somewhere between a grunt and cough. She turned toward him. Her skin was pale, sheened with sweat, but her smile was strong and unforced. "Hey," she said. "What did I miss? Did we hear about Holden? What's news?"

"No, it wasn't that. I was just getting a little pep talk," Alex said. "How're you doing?"

Clarissa's eyes drifted closed and then open again, like a blinking in slow motion. "Living the dream," she said, and chuckled. "Have you seen Amos? He was going to get me ... something."

"I think he's still out doing that. He'll be back, though. Don't worry."

"I never do," Clarissa said, and shuddered like she was cold. The room wasn't cold. "You think they could fix me?"

"Who?"

"The Laconians," Clarissa said. "I keep thinking about how their tech is all levels and levels above ours. And I wonder if maybe their medicine is too. Maybe they could get these fucking implants out of me. Plaster over the worst of the damage."

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Kind of ironic that I'm working to fuck them all the way up, isn't it?" She made a single, low sound. If she'd strung a few like it together, it would have been chuckling.

"I guess it is," he said. And then a moment later, "If you want to go to one of their clinics? I mean it would probably mean getting out of this underground business, but if you want to, we can work something out."

Her smile was love and pity. "You really think that's true? That we could work something out?"

"Hell yes," Alex said.

"Well, I'll keep that option in mind," she said. "You're a good man, Alex Kamal."

"You're not too bad yourself," he said.

“I am not presently at my best,” Clarissa said. “But I appreciate the thought. I really do.”

Her eyes fluttered closed again. Her face relaxed. She looked like a wax model of herself. *She'll be better when we get the Roci back*, he thought. *Not better-better. Just improved, but better than this.* And once he was back in the pilot's seat, he wasn't ever going dockside again if he could help it. Being on the *Rocinante* was being home.

Everywhere else was where the trouble came.



Bobbie came with the news about Holden, and something else besides. It felt almost like something foreordained. As soon as he had told Naomi that they'd save Holden, Holden appeared in the station brig and the document outlining how to free him fell into their hands. It was perfect enough to make him very nervous.

“This is astounding,” Naomi said, paging through the file.

Alex leaned over her, trying to see the screen of her terminal and not interrupt her at the same time, and doing a middling job of both. If there was any sure sign of Naomi's relief, it was that she was back on the job.

The room was small, the door firmly closed, and Saba had set the monitor to the local newsfeed with the volume high. A young man he didn't recognize was interviewing Carrie Fisk about the war in Sol system and the traffic between the colony worlds that was just about to begin. *The colonies don't care who's running Medina, so long as we're running it well. The Transport Union was fine, and Laconian oversight will be fine too. Better, even, because the Laconian model respects self-rule. The Laconian Congress of Worlds is a real voice for its members. That's never been the case before.* Alex tried watching her, just so he'd have something to do besides hover. It didn't work very well.

Bobbie paced along the wall behind her, three strides one way, then turned, then three back. Saba was more subdued, his body held still and only his eyes flickering. The two of them had the same sense of barely restrained action. Like a boulder on a mountaintop that's just starting to shift toward the slope.

Naomi made a small, satisfied sound at the back of her throat and

followed a linked passage to a schematic of a ship that looked from the outside like the *Gathering Storm*.

“Who knows about this?” Alex asked. “I mean, who’s seen it?”

“One of mine broke the encryption,” Saba said. “She brought it to me straight. Didn’t read it, even. Maha, she solid like stone. Not everyone of mine is, but her? I tell her she didn’t see it, and it never got seen.”

“This has the operational plans for the *Gathering Storm*,” Naomi said. “Whatever else you want to say about these Laconians, they are thorough.”

“Most of it’s MCRN and MMC protocols and practices,” Bobbie said. “Five-sixths of it are the operating procedures Alex and I trained on, word for word.”

“You should both read the thing, then,” Saba said. “Alles la. Mark down where it’s changed. There’s reasons to change things. Might point us the right way. Know what’s behind it, maybe even better than this on its own.”

“I don’t know,” Naomi said. “This on its own is pretty damned good.”

The excitement in Alex’s chest felt like champagne bubbles. Bright and dancing. He’d forgotten what a good break felt like after all the dread. It was astounding to think how close he’d come to scrubbing the mission, leaving the waldoes abandoned in the air duct, and calling it impossible. And if this was the key that let them get themselves and everyone else in the underground off Medina before the *Typhoon* appeared, his balking would have pissed their best chances away.

Holden’s gambit had worked. He’d thrown himself to the wolves so that they’d have this, and it was everything they’d hoped for. Everything but having him back, and maybe that too.

“Is there anything in there about where the prisoners are held?” he asked.

“There is,” Naomi said, her inflection landing on the words in a way that meant it was the first thing she’d looked for. All the rest of it was important, but that part—where Holden was, how to get him out—was a settled issue in her mind. That was enough for Alex. He could hear the details later, so long as there were details to hear.

“Problemas son,” Saba said, shifting his weight. “Maybe is too good, yeah? Maybe is designed to look like something it’s not.”

“You think it’s fake?” Naomi asked.

Saba made a ticking sound with his tongue and teeth. “No. But can’t make the assumption without risking everybody’s ass, yeah? Hoping more

than not. If it is what it is, it won't stay secret for long. Too proud a victory, yeah? Someone finds out, gets a little drunk, then everyone knows."

"You don't trust your people's discipline?" Bobbie asked.

Saba pointed at the closed door. "My people are the crew on the *Malaclypse*. These others weren't mine until they stopped being Drummer's. And she's had five or six layers of bureaucrats between. It's not I don't trust, it's that I don't trust blind. People are people. Fucked up like we all are, it amazes me when we can even make a sandwich."

"A man of infinite cynicism," Naomi said, but Alex could hear the calm behind the words. Whatever she was seeing there, it soothed her more than he'd been able to. And then, "Bobbie, when you were active Martian Marine Corps, did your Goliath suits have a command override?"

"A what?" Bobbie said.

"Command override. Something that let your commanding officer shut the suit down?"

"Sure, we called it a radio. CO said stand down, and we did. What are you seeing?"

Naomi leaned back so that Bobbie—and since he was right there, Alex—could see better. Back when he'd been in the service, there had always been a clear chain of command, and procedures in place for when someone bucked it. Most of the time it involved MPs dragging someone off for a little summary roadside attitude adjustment followed by a court-martial. Maybe it was different in the Marines, but he was pretty sure he hadn't seen anything like what was outlined on the screen.

"They can ... they can turn them off?" Bobbie said, her voice caught between outrage and laughter. "Because that right there looks like it's saying the governor can push a button and turn all those pretty suits of power armor into a couple thousand sarcophagi."

"Life-support functions stay in place," Naomi said. "But disables the weapons and comm systems, and freezes all the joints."

Alex whistled appreciatively. "These folks must really be scared of mutineers."

"Well," Bobbie said. "Think about how they got here. Duarte managed to build a schismatic faction inside the MCRN big enough to start his own navy. Going on with the assumption that no one would ever try the same thing on him would seem stupid. He's not stupid. This solve in particular, though ..."

“Seems a mite overaggressive,” Alex said.

“And it’s always the aggressor who exposes their weakness,” Bobbie said. She put her hand on Naomi’s. “What are the chances we could spoof that lockdown signal?”

“Get me one of their powered suits,” Naomi said, “and I’m pretty sure we could manage it.”

“The *Storm*, Medina’s scopes, and the Marines,” Bobbie said. “This looks like we can build a plan that’s three for three.”

“And the prisoners,” Naomi said. “Freeing the prisoners.”

She meant Holden, Alex knew. Bobbie did too.

“Goes without saying,” Bobbie said.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight: Singh

Singh found it unsettling to think of a time before Laconia. He'd been young enough when his parents made the crossing that he had virtually no memories of anything *but* Laconia as home. And yet, Laconia wasn't even the first of the thirteen hundred worlds to be colonized. First, there had been a ball of mud and water that the settlers called Ilus.

The government of Earth, faced with the daunting prospect of surveying, studying, then exploiting the potentially vast riches of these new worlds, did what it always did. It gave out a government contract to a civilian company to do it for them. But when the prospecting vessel from Royal Charter Energy arrived at what the UN was calling New Terra, they found a couple hundred squatters already there digging up mineral resources and calling themselves an independent government.

A lot of violence later, RCE left the planet, Ilus had its own charter from the UN, and it was, up until recently, a founding member of Carrie Fisk's Association of Worlds and an exporter of lithium and heavy metals.

James Holden had been there during the worst of that initial violence. Now he was in an observation room with his ankles shackled to the deck.

Singh considered the man on his monitor. Holden was older than he'd expected, his temples gone white. The images he'd pulled from the public archives going back decades showed that same open, serious-eyed face on a man very nearly Singh's own age.

Now Holden sat with his head bowed forward. Blood streaked the chest and sleeves of his prison uniform. Round drops of it spotted his paper slippers. He cradled one hand against his belly, and his cheek was swollen and bruised. The stool he sat on had a single leg bolted to the deck, and he swayed forward and back like a man nodding himself to sleep. The restraints on his wrists looked like wide black ribbon, but Singh knew they were strong enough that the man's bones would break before they did. He wasn't a person so much as a distillation of human misery.

“Should I ask how many of those wounds came from the explosion?” Singh said.

Overstreet didn’t smile, but a subtle merriness came to his eyes. “If that’s important to you, sir, I’m sure I could find out.”

After the prisoner had set off false alarms throughout the engineering deck, he had been captured. Five minutes after that the real alarms had begun. In other circumstances, Holden would already be dead. All that had kept him alive until now was his connection to the mechanisms and people involved in his terrorist group and his own stubbornness.

But if this was going to work, Singh knew he would have to somehow reach this man. Make a human connection with someone ready to kill Laconians out of prejudice and hatred. If he was going to find something that he could exploit, he had to believe there was good in him, even if he only maintained the illusion for a little while. If he could reframe Holden in his own mind, if he could see some other version of the man than the obvious one, it might be possible. “He did warn people. The alarms before the detonation? They let more people get to safety. When he was taken, he warned the security forces to take shelter. If he hadn’t done what he did, the loss of life would have been worse.”

“That’s true,” Overstreet said. “He could also have chosen not to bomb the air supply.”

What was this man? A patriot to his government? A man so frightened of change he’d resort to violence? A rabble-rouser who took Singh’s governorship as another opportunity to start trouble that he would have been making under any circumstances?

What he came back to—what he brought himself back to—was that point: Holden had let himself be captured in order to save lives. It wasn’t much, but it was all Singh had.

“Well,” he said. “Let’s see what happens.”



Holden looked up as he entered the room. The older man’s left eye was nearly shut and his upper lip was split and scabby. He nodded to Singh as a guard brought a light chair for the governor to sit on.

“Captain Holden,” Singh said. “I’m sorry we couldn’t meet under better

circumstances.”

“Me too,” Holden said. His voice was low and graveled. Singh had the sense that it wasn’t always that way.

“Can I get you anything? A cup of water?”

“Coffee,” Holden said. “I could stand a cup of coffee.”

Singh tapped his wrist monitor, and a moment later the same guard reentered with a bulb. Holden accepted it with both hands and sipped it. His smile seemed genuine.

“This is actually pretty good.”

“I’m glad you approve. I’m more of a tea man myself.”

“It’ll do in a pinch,” Holden said, then lifted his gaze to meet Singh’s. He had surprisingly clear and focused eyes, considering all he’d been through. “Just to clarify, are you trying to build rapport with me, or am I trying to build rapport with you? I’m a little hazy on it.”

“Both, I think,” Singh said. “I haven’t done this before. I’m a novice.”

“Yeah, well. No offense, but you look like a teenager.”

“I’m the same age you were when you were thrown out of Earth’s navy.”

Holden laughed. It was a warm, rueful sound. “I’m not sure you’ll do yourself any favors comparing yourself to me back then. I was kind of an idiot.”

Singh found it was easy to chuckle. He could imagine coming to like this man. That was good. It made the next part easier.

“So why do you hate us? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“You personally? I don’t. But this conquistador bullshit? It’s true I don’t think much of it.”

Singh leaned back in his chair, cocked his head. “This is all a conversation about politics for you, then? It matters to you that much whose vision guides the government, no matter what that vision is?”

“Not that academic,” Holden said. “I’ve spent a lot of years trying to get people to get along without anyone’s boot being on anyone’s neck. Your plan A is what I’ve spent a lifetime pushing against.”

“Do you really think we’re so bad? Look at what we’ve done, how we’ve done it. We haven’t opened fire on a single ship that didn’t attack us first. In all of history, when has a conqueror been able to say that? We have embraced local rule. Any of the colony worlds that submits can make their own local government, keep their own local customs—”

“Unless they conflict with your rules.”

“Of course.”

Holden sipped his coffee. “That’s the thing. The people you’re controlling don’t have a voice in how you control them. As long as everyone’s on the same page, things may be great, but when there’s a question, you win. Right?”

“There has to be a way to come to a final decision.”

“No, there doesn’t. Every time someone starts talking about final anything in politics, that means the atrocities are warming up. Humanity has done amazing things by just muddling through, arguing and complaining and fighting and negotiating. It’s messy and undignified, but it’s when we’re at our best, because everyone gets to have a voice in it. Even if everyone else is trying to shout it down. Whenever there’s just one voice that matters, something terrible comes out of it.”

“And yet, I understand from Ms. Fisk that the Transport Union was condemning whole colonies that didn’t follow its rule.”

“Right?” Holden said. “And so I disobeyed that order and I quit working for them. I was all set to go retire in Sol system. Can *you* do that?”

“Can I do what?”

“If you are given an immoral order, can you resign and walk away? Because everything I’ve seen about how you’re running this place tells me that isn’t an option for you.”

Singh crossed his arms. He had the sense that the interrogation was getting away from him.

“The high consul is a very wise, very thoughtful man,” he said. “I have perfect faith that—”

“No. Stop. ‘Perfect faith’ really tells me everything I need to know,” Holden said. “You think this is a gentle, bloodless conquest, don’t you?”

“It is, to the degree that you allow it to be.”

“I was there for the war Duarte started to cover his tracks. I was there for the starving years afterward. Your empire’s hands look a lot cleaner when you get to dictate where history begins and what parts of it don’t count.”

“So you and your friends decide instead?” Singh said, trying to keep his tone light. “You know that sooner or later, you’re going to tell us who they are.”

Holden took a long drink from the coffee cup and set it down gently on

the floor beside his feet. "I'm hoping for later," he said. "But I see we're already done with the part where we make friendly with each other."

Singh felt the warmth he'd cultivated toward Holden slipping away into frustration. He'd started in too quickly. He should have spent more time building up the relationship, and now they'd both fallen into adversarial stances with each other. It was time to change tack.

"Tell me what you can," Singh said, "about Ilus."

Holden frowned, but not angrily. "What do you want to know?"

Singh waited without answering.

Holden shrugged. "All right. It was the first contested colony. I went out there to try to mediate between the different claimants, and it all pretty much turned to shit. People shooting each other. Old artifacts coming to life and blowing up the ocean. Local ecosystem trying to mine us for fresh water. And there were death slugs. It wasn't great."

"Artifacts coming to life?"

"Yeah," Holden said, shifting on his little stool. "We had a trace of active protomolecule on the ship. We didn't know about it. It was trying to report in about the Sol gate being complete, but everything it wanted to report to was dead or turned off. So it started turning things on. Only part of it was this guy I used to know, and ... It's kind of a weird story. Why do you want to know about Ilus?"

"What about the *other* artifact?"

Holden shook his head, opened his hands. *What other artifact?*

Singh pulled up the image from the *Tempest* on his monitor. A bright-black nothingness. He enlarged it and held it out for Holden to see.

"Yeah, the bullet," Holden said. "It was the thing that turned everything off again. Deactivated the protomolecule."

Singh felt a chill in his heart. The calmness and innocence of the way Holden said the words was deeper than any threat.

"It did what?"

"The guy I used to know? The dead one? He was a detective, and it was using him to look for where to report in. Only he—the reconstructed version of him—noticed that there was this place that killed off protomolecule activity. He said it was like a bullet that someone had fired to kill off the ... the civilization ... that ... Bring that where I can see it better?"

Singh enlarged the image. Holden blinked. The weariness seemed to fall

away from him, the pain of his injuries forgotten. When he spoke, his voice had a firmness and command Singh hadn't heard there before. "That's not Ilus. Where is that?"

"It appeared in Sol system. On one of our ships."

"Oh. *Fuck* that," Holden said. "All right, listen. There's a woman you need to find. Her name's Elvi Okoye. She was a scientist on Ilus. I don't know where she is now, but she spent years researching the artifacts there, including that one. She went through it."

"Went through it to where?"

"Not like a door. Like she carried part of the protomolecule's network into it, and it killed off the sample. Turned it all inert. And she said it turned her sort of off while it did."

"Turned her off. Like she lost consciousness?" Singh said. "Lost *time*?"

"Something like that," Holden said. "I don't know. I didn't go through it. But I did see the thing on the station. I saw what happened to them."

Singh found he was leaning forward. His blood felt like it was fizzing. And what was more, he saw the same feelings echoed in Holden's battered face.

"There was a station on Ilus?" he asked.

"No. The one here. The station that controls the ring space. The first time anyone came through the ring, that same dead guy took me to the station. It was part of how the rings turned on. But I saw things there. Like a record of the old civilization? My friend, the dead guy, was looking through it for something, and because he was using me to do it, I saw it all too. Whatever made this? All of this? They were wiped out a long time before you and me got here. Billions of years, maybe. I saw whole systems going dark. I saw them trying to stop it by burning away entire solar systems. And it didn't work. Whatever they tried to do, it failed, and they were all just wiped away with just their roads and their old machines left for us to stumble across. That thing that showed up on your ship? That's them. The *other* them. That's the thing that killed everything before Earth and Mars were part of the gate network."

"But why would it appear now?"

Holden choked on a laugh. "Well, I don't know. Have you people been doing anything different recently?"

Singh felt a little stab of embarrassment. It was a fair point. For the first time, the *Tempest* had employed the magnetic-field generator in an

uncontrolled environment both here and in Sol system. Maybe this was a side effect. Or something else about the battleships built on the platforms. Or ...

“Look,” Holden said. “You and me? We’re not friends. We aren’t going to be friends. I will oppose you and your empire to my dying breath. But right now, none of that matters. Whatever built the gates and the protomolecule and all these ruins we’re living in? They were wiped out. And the thing that wiped them out just took a shot at you.”



Singh couldn’t sleep that night. He was exhausted, but whenever he closed his eyes, Holden was there, squinting through his injured eyes, pointing with his broken hand. And the enigma of the bullet, the threat and mystery it represented. They defied him to sleep.

In the middle of his sleep shift, he gave up, put on a robe, and ordered a pot of tea delivered from the commissary. When it arrived, he was already searching through the station records for other documentation of Holden’s ravings. He was hoping to find something to suggest that the man was either insane or playing a game to deflect attention from his terrorism. But file after file, report after report, confirmed him. Even when there was no other witness to what he’d seen, there was at least a history to show that his claims had been consistent.

It would have been so much easier if James Holden were only a madman.

Your empire’s hands look a lot cleaner when you get to dictate where history begins, and what parts of it don’t count.

He knew the story of Laconia’s founding. He’d been there for it, though he’d been a child at the time. The gates to the thirteen hundred worlds had opened, and the probes had gone through. They’d brought back reports of the different systems, the stars and planets, and the stranger things that they’d seen. All humanity had seen the opportunity of new lands, of new worlds to inhabit, but alone of them all Winston Duarte had recognized the terrible danger that expansion would bring. The chaos and violence as humanity pressed out past the limits of civilization. The choke point of the slow zone and the endless wars it would generate. The unanticipated

environmental collapses made worse by the lack of a central response. And he alone had the will to solve the problem.

From among all the planets on the far sides of the gates, he chose Laconia because of the orbital construction platforms. He found the live culture of the protomolecule that he could use to harness Laconia's power. He found Dr. Cortázar to lead the research and development. And he took a third of the Martian Navy as the seed that would grow to become the world tree. The fraction of humanity that would rebuild on Laconia and come forth to bring order to humanity's chaos. To bring the peace that would last forever. The end of all wars. Singh doubted none of it. Holden's version wasn't incompatible, even if it chose a different emphasis. Holden himself had used the protomolecule on Ilus—or been used by it—to turn on the ancient mechanisms. Only he had done it haphazardly, and with terrible results. Duarte had done it carefully, and to glorious effect.

He sipped his tea. It hadn't quite gone cold, but it wasn't as warm as he'd expected. Holden was a problem. He was the key to breaking the terrorist network on Medina. He was also the key to the mystery of the thing that had appeared on the *Tempest*. His was the only report on the visions from the ring station. He was singular in all humanity because he'd bumbled into being in so many of the right places at so many of the right times. If there was one thing Laconia's history taught, it was the power of the right person at the right moment.

Singh had always known that the history of Laconia and the history of Sol system were connected. He'd never felt those common roots more deeply than now. The sense that his world and Holden's were part of a single, much vaster story. The makers of the protomolecule were also a part of that larger frame. The things that had killed *them*, and then vanished.

The things that had returned.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Amos

I was thinking about the recyclers,” Peaches said. She sounded tired. She always sounded a little tired, but this was more.

“Yeah?” he said.

They were alone in the bunk. She was sitting up, paring her toenails with a little knife he’d found for her. Something about her meds made them thicker and yellow. He knew it was important to her to keep them short, even though she never said anything.

His hands imagined what it would feel like to snap her neck. The tension first, then the grinding feeling of cartilage ripping as it gave way. He saw the look of betrayal in her eyes as the life went out of them. It was as clear as if he’d actually done it.

“The returns aren’t as good as they ought to be,” she said. “We’ve been able to get eighty-eight, ninety percent recovery, but I don’t think we broke eighty-five on the Freehold run.”

“Worth looking at,” Amos said. “You got any suspects?”

“I want to take a look at the water filters. I know they’re supposed to be the best there is without retrofitting to a straight gel system, but I don’t think they’re doing what’s on the label.”

He closed his eyes and the *Rocinante*’s recycling system appeared in his mind. If the filters were underperforming ... yeah, could throw off the pressure going into the recyclers. Might be enough to drop the reclamation percentages. He pictured what else it would do.

“We should take a peek at the feed lines,” he said.

“Look for distention?” she said.

He grunted. Peaches scowled and nodded once, the way she did when they’d come to an agreement. There were still a few things about the *Roci* that he knew better than she did, but those were few and far between. And mostly about the weapons systems. She didn’t like those, and it had an effect on how much she thought about them. There were conversations he

had with her that he couldn't have with anybody else.

That didn't keep the thoughts from coming. It didn't do anything about the thing in his throat. "You think Holden's okay?" she asked.

"Is or he isn't," Amos said. The thing in his throat got a little bigger. A little tighter. He wasn't sure why.

"I wish there was something more I could do," she said.

"Naomi'll come up with something. Whatever needs doing, we'll do it."

She finished the last nail and tossed him the knife. He caught it in the air, folded it closed, and put it under his pillow, where it would stay. Peaches got another couple of her pills and swallowed them dry, then lay back on her bunk. There wasn't room enough between her bunk and the one above her to get a decent punch going, but he knew what it would feel like to do a straight-kick to her ribs. Or her head. Push her back against the bulkhead, then the next kicks, she wouldn't be able to avoid. He wasn't going to do it, but the thoughts came anyway.

"You need some sleep?" he asked.

"Little."

"You should try to eat some afterward."

"I'm not keeping much down right now."

"That's why they call it 'try,'" he said. "Worst case, just smear it around your face like a little kid. Absorb some nutrients through your skin."

She chuckled. "You talked me into it, big guy. After I rest."

"I'm going to get a jump on it," he said. "You need anything, you just say it."

"Thank you," Peaches said.

He made his way down toward the galley, his shoulders brushing against the conduit and pipes on both sides. In the galley, one of Saba's people was drinking a cup of coffee. Nice-looking guy, always been pleasant. The thing in his throat moved a little, and Amos felt the coffee cup slamming into the other guy's face. The edge of the cup folding against the guy's upper lip. The coffee burning them both. He felt what it would be like, bending him back, trapping his legs under the table so he couldn't writhe away, pulling until his back snapped. There'd be others by then. The guy's friends. He thought about how to kill them too.

Amos smiled amiably and nodded. The guy nodded back. Amos got a bowl of oatmeal and honey flavoring. He sat by himself to eat. Saba's guy finished his drink and walked away. There was a moment when his back

was turned, Amos felt his own foot driving into the back of the man's knee, knocking him forward and down where he'd be in the right place for a choke hold. Amos only sighed and took another spoonful of grain mush. The stuff on the *Roci* was better, but this was warm anyway. It soothed his throat.

"Hey there, big guy," Babs said from the doorway.

She stepped over, sat across from him. Her jaw was set and her gaze was firm and straight-ahead. Looking right at him like she was playing at being Holden.

"Got a minute?"

Amos took his half-empty bowl, dropped the spoon in it, and threw them all away as he walked out the door.

There was an environmental-control station about seven doors down. Saba'd been using it to store food, but they'd all been eating at a pretty fair clip, and it was mostly empty space now. Only one entrance, so no one spent much time there. Thick walls filled with insulation foam. The kind that just ate up sound like it was nothing. If the Laconians came, it was a death trap. He shouldered the door open. Babs' footsteps came from behind him, hard and fast and authoritative. Like a schoolteacher about to chew out her students.

The room was dark, but he found the switch. Too-bright utility lights. They were down to half a pallet of textured protein and some tubs of grain and yeast. The walls were all steel plate except for a patch in one corner where they'd used carbon-silicate lace. A pipe ran along the corner where the ceiling met the left wall. The actual environmental controls were all in locked cabinets and behind security doors that would take a crowbar, a welding torch, and a couple hours to get through. The whole place was maybe three meters by four, and a couple high. It wasn't perfect, but it was pretty good. He didn't have anyplace better.

Babs stepped in behind him and closed the door. Her nose had the two little half-moons beside the nostrils that she got when she was pissed. The thing in his throat throbbed like a tumor. For a second, he thought it was maybe going to rupture.

Babs crossed her arms, blocking the door.

"Look, Amos. I understand you're pissed off at me. And honest to God, I'm more than a little pissed off at you right now too. But we're a crew. We're friends, and we can work this out, whatever it is. I'm here, okay? So

whatever it is—”

“When did you turn into such a fucking pussy, Babs?” he said. His hands were tingling like they had too much energy in them. Like he was about to ground out. “Did you really come in here to talk about your feelings?”

Her face went blank, her eyes flat. She uncrossed her arms. Her weight sunk into her hips. Her knees bent a little. He figured she was good for maybe one or two more rounds of insults, but he’d gauged wrong.

She shifted her shoulders, swung at the hips, her right arm unfurling. A few years earlier, he might have been able to slip it and get inside. But a few years earlier, she might have been faster. Either way, all he managed was to turn his head away and pull back a couple centimeters before her knuckles slapped into his cheekbone. If he’d been slower, it would have splashed his nose across his face. Her next punch was already coming, and he turned so that it got his shoulder at an angle. The pain was sudden and wide and familiar as an old song. He felt this thing in his throat blowing up like a balloon, expanding out bigger than he was.

He kicked straight, hitting just above her hip with his knee still bent. It wasn’t to break her but to push her back, then with the room he’d opened between them, he rushed her. Right fist to her face, left swinging up into her ribs. She lifted her arms into a boxer’s stance, but a fraction of a second too late. He finally got inside her guard, his right elbow across her throat, and he had her back against the door. Pushing against her windpipe. She shifted under him, looking for a way to get a breath. His legs and back ached with the effort of closing her throat for her. He gritted his teeth until they creaked.

The pain in his balls started with a thump like hearing someone drop a brick, then a second later the brightness came, spreading out through his whole body. He felt himself stumble back. Bobbie turned out from under his arm, hitting him once with each fist on exactly the same rib. He felt it give.

She wasn’t pulling her punches. She meant it. He let go of the last shred of restraint, and surged forward, roaring. Ready to kill or get killed. The tiny part of him that was still watching him, still thinking and aware, expected her to flinch back. Instead, she jumped in toward him. They hit like a wreck, her hand on his neck, her hip against his, and he was in the air. He hit the bulkhead hard enough that sound faded away for a second. He

pushed off just as she swung a knee into his gut, grabbed her around the thigh, and lifted, swinging her up over his head, and then both of them down to the deck as hard as the spin gravity would take them.

Someone was shouting, and it might have been him. It was all ground game now, and her hands were on his head, fingertips digging into his skin, looking for a grip. If she got his ear, she was keeping it. He reared back, grabbing for her arm, trying to get her elbow where he could bend it back. Snap it. For a second, he was almost there, but she twisted, got a foot against his waist, pushed him back. He caught her ankle and tried the same move on her knee, but the muscles there were too strong, the joint too solid to break. And while he was trying it, he couldn't move as well.

Her other heel came down on his left eyebrow, popping it open. He pushed in toward her, driving her back. The blood stung his eye, but he moved fast and with a lifetime of practice. He had his hands around her throat, squeezing as hard as he could. Her windpipe was between his thumbs where he could crack it like a walnut—

Except she was already bringing her arms up inside his, rolling her shoulders and shrugging off his grip. She'd planned it. She wasn't lost in rage haze. She was still thinking.

She locked her legs with his, and rolled so she was on top. The heel of her left hand pushed his chin up and away so her right fist could land on his throat. Amos coughed, tried to roll away. His breath was a thick wheeze. The air that made it into his lungs felt pressed thin. He struggled to get to his feet, but she was already up, kicking his knee out from under him. He hit the deck hard. She was over him, kicking down. Curb-stomping him. He tried to curl away from her. Her heel hit his shoulder, his back. She was going for his kidneys, and he tried to shift away, but he couldn't. The pain was exquisite and vast. He was helpless. He was fucked. She kicked him again, the whole weight of her body behind it, and he felt another rib go.

He wasn't going to make it up. The violence was going to go on until she decided it was over, and there was nothing he could do to make it stop. He curled against blow after blow after blow, felt the damage in his body getting deeper. There was nothing he could do to defend himself. If Bobbie wanted him dead, he'd die.

He endured, helpless. The pain smeared into itself until it wasn't any part of him that hurt. Until it was bigger than his body.

His mind slipped, shifted. Images flickered through him like a memory

too deep to bother being coherent. A perfume smell like lilacs and bergamot. A white blanket so used that the cotton fibers were shattering, but soft. The way the cheap ice pops they sold at the shitty little bodega at Carey and Lombard tasted. The sound of a feed in the next room, of rain. It had been a long time since he'd thought about how the rain sounded in Baltimore. Violence, helpless pain, but cheap ice pops too.

A deep peace welled up in his gut, flowing out through him, lifting him up and out of his body. He relaxed into it. The thing in his throat was gone. Or no. That was never going to happen. It was sated. Back in the deep place where it belonged. He felt like the moment after orgasm, only better. Deeper. More real.

Eventually, he noticed Bobbie wasn't kicking him anymore. He rolled onto his back. Opened his eyes. There was blood on the bulkheads and the deck. His testicles felt like soccer balls made of agony. Drying blood glued his left eye closed. His throat ached and burned when he swallowed, but the thing was gone. Something was weird about his breathing, though. It took him a second to figure out what. It was that he wasn't the only one wheezing.

Bobbie sat with her back against the door. Her legs were spread a little, taking up the space. Her hands were on her knees. The little bleeding divots where the skin over her knuckles had split looked like art. Her hair was plastered to her neck. Mostly by sweat.

He looked at her looking back at him. Neither one of them spoke for a while. The hum of the station was the only sound.

"So," Bobbie said, then took another couple breaths before she went on. "The fuck was that?"

Amos swallowed. It hurt a little less this time. He tried to sit up, then thought better of it. There were even a few spatters of blood on the ceiling. One of them looked a little like a cartoon dog face.

"I don't," he said, then gulped in another breath. "I don't want things. You know what I mean?"

"Nope."

"People ... people want things. They want kids. Or they want to get famous or rich or something. And then they get all screwed up trying to get it. So I just don't want anything. Not like that."

"All right," Bobbie said.

"Only I fucked up. Didn't even know I was doing it, but it got where I

wanted a thing.” He waited for the lump to come back to his throat, and when it didn’t, he went on. “I want Peaches to get to die at home. With her family.”

“On the *Roci*,” Bobbie said. “With us.”

“Yeah, I want that. Only ever since we got back from Freehold, it’s all coming apart. It wasn’t so bad when it was just Holden and Naomi peeling off on their own, because they picked that.”

“And also they never actually went away,” Bobbie said.

“But then that big bastard came through the Laconia gate, and now we’re locked off the *Roci*, and it’s like the chance to do it right’s just slipping too far away to get a hold of it, you know? I see her acting like it’s not much one way or the other, only it is to me. And then ... then everything gets harder. I get cranky. Start thinking about shit I don’t want to think about. You know.”

They were silent for a long moment. Amos tried sitting up again, and managed it this time.

“All right,” Bobbie said. “I get it.”

“You do?”

“Close enough,” she said. “I get it close enough.”

She levered herself up to standing, then held a hand out to him. He took it, his hand on her wrist, hers on his. They pulled together and got him to standing. Her face was almost unmarked, but there were some bruises starting to show around her neck. “You really beat the shit out of me,” he said.

“Would have been easier to kill you,” Babs said, and grinned with bloody teeth. “But I feel like we still need your dumb ass.”

He nodded. She was right about both things.

“We should get you some ice,” he said.

“Fuck you,” she said. “If I did half my job, you’ll be stuffing your jock with every cold thing we have.”

“Yeah. You can have it when I’m done, though.”

She managed another bloody smile and turned toward the door.

“Hey, Babs,” he said. “No hard feelings, right?”

“Just next time you need to beat someone up, how about you don’t insult me first.”

He chuckled. It hurt. “If I need to beat someone up, I’ve got a whole station full of possibilities. But if I’m looking to *lose* a fight, I’m pretty

much down to just you.”

She took a second. “Fair point.”

It took him about five minutes to get to the head. He washed up the best he could, but he was going to need some fresh clothes, and washing his eye pulled the clot a little bit loose. It started bleeding again. He’d talk to Saba about getting someone to stitch it closed. But clothes first.

“Jesus Christ,” Peaches said when he stepped into the room. “What happened?”

“Huh? Oh, you mean this? Me and Babs were doing a little sparring. I put my face where it shouldn’t have been. It ain’t nothing.”

Her face balanced between not believing him and choosing to, despite the thinness of the lie. He looked at her collarbone, waiting for the thing to come up with some way to break it, but nothing came. So that was good.

“You need to be less rusty,” she said at last.

“That’s not wrong,” Amos said. “What’re you up to?”

“I was going to go smear some food on my mouth like a toddler,” she said.

“Sounds good,” he said. “I’ll go with you.”

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Chapter Forty: Naomi

Wake up. We have to go,” someone said. “Now. Go, go, go.”

Naomi forced her eyelids open. Her feet hit the decking before the dream she’d been in loosed its grip on her mind. There had been a fire. She’d been talking to it ... she felt herself forgetting, the dream dissolving like sugar floss in water.

Amos rolled off his bunk with a grunt of pain and went to help Clarissa up. Alex was tugging his jumpsuit up over thin, brown legs. The new voice belonged to a girl too young for the split-circle tattoo on the back of her hands.

“What’s going on?” Bobbie said. “We got a problem?”

“Saba got word we need to go, so we go. Now go.”

“Where is he?” Bobbie asked.

“Gone,” the girl said, and then she was gone too. Light spilled into the bunk from the door she hadn’t closed. The voices and sounds of metal against metal were loud and panicky, but they weren’t battle. There wasn’t gunfire. The fear and the urge to motion that grabbed Naomi’s heart were still as violent.

“You good, Peaches?” Amos asked. Clarissa nodded, and pulled her hair back into a ponytail like she was getting ready to go to work. There was more color in her cheeks since she’d gotten the new medicine. If Amos hadn’t found a supply, they’d have been carrying her right now. Heaven. Small favors. Like that.

They piled out into the corridor, and Naomi paused, looked back. There were no tools, no terminals, nothing left behind but traces of hair and DNA. Which would be plenty enough to identify them.

“Naomi?” Alex said from the hall. “Everyone else is getting out mighty quick here. We should maybe—”

She moved quickly, decisively, pulling blankets and pillows and sheets up in her arms. They were cheap, so they pressed down to almost nothing.

Another small favor. She shoved them into the makeshift recycler feed at the end of the hall. Maybe it wouldn't make a difference. Maybe she'd been foolish to take the time. It didn't matter. She'd done what she'd done.

A lot of her life was like that now.

Saba was at the service doorway that led out to the rest of the station. The vast body of Medina that the underground didn't control. His jaw was tight, and there was a darkness around his eyes that the brown of his skin couldn't hide.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Had word from one of ours in system logistics. Laconia's slated this section for survey. If they're going to find our holes here, best we not be in them."

"Well. We knew it would come."

He pressed a hand terminal into her palm. "This is yours. Cooked profile. Got one for alles la along with. Rooms, jobs. Don't scratch the chrome, it'll come off, but it's what I could do fast."

"Thank you," Bobbie said as he passed one to her.

"Messages too. Just text. And just to me. Your circle is your circle."

Naomi nodded. It felt like being young again, in all the worst ways. Amos, Alex, and Clarissa were already moving toward the common corridor, Bobbie trotting to catch up to them. Naomi put her hand on Saba's arm. "The false identities don't have to hold up long. We're close to doing this. No despair."

Saba's eyes softened. "My lady wife is back in Sol leading the fight against these bastards. And I will move worlds to wake up beside her again. Just once more."

Naomi thought of Jim, and the ache of fear in her stomach. Saba touched her shoulder, and pushed her gently away toward her friends. Her crew. Her family, less one.

The inner layer of Medina's drum could have been any of the old spin stations. Wider, common corridors with room for carts and foot traffic both, ramps that led up toward the soil and false sun of the inner face or down toward the vacuum beneath her feet. She hadn't stepped outside Saba's hidden dens since they'd lost Jim. Now, walking with the normal inhabitants of Medina, trying to fit in with the midshift patterns, she kept noticing how open everything felt. In another context, it might have been a relief. Now it left her feeling exposed as a mouse in cat territory.

She plucked up the terminal that Saba had given her, trying to look bored as she checked who she was, where she lived, all the answers she'd need to give the Laconians if she was stopped. She'd seen plenty of faked identities before, and this one was decent. The real question was how deeply Saba's moles had been able to get into the Laconian datasets. With the link between Medina and the *Storm* severed, they'd be working from local copies. Corruptible ones. Odd to think that without Jim's sacrifice, the underground might have ended right then. Her gratitude was complicated by anger.

Wide screens showed the station newsfeed. Laconian propaganda, but maybe true, some of it. They were playing images of Sol system and the war there. She didn't watch that, but when it shifted, she paused. A young woman with olive skin and a wide jaw in Laconian blues. The text below her said, ADMIRAL JAE-EUN SONG OF THE EYE OF THE TYPHOON. And on the other side of the screen, a young man. Santiago Singh, governor of Medina.

"What are your hopes for your arrival at Medina Station?" he asked, the subtitles in Spanish, Chinese, and—unnervingly—Belter Creole.

The woman nodded seriously, and answered. "The important thing is that we ensure the safety of the people on the station. High Consul Duarte has made it very, very clear that—"

Naomi didn't realize she'd stopped until Amos prodded her.

"Should probably keep moving, boss. Less attention."

"Yes," Naomi said.

"It's editing," Clarissa said. "They do it all the time. That's not what the light delay really is. There's still time."

Naomi nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak.

Her name, according to Saba's faked ID, was Ami Henders, and her address was listed as refugee housing on level four. She was supposed to be the pilot of the *Blue Genius*, a water hauler presently burning somewhere on the far side of the Athens gate without her. She wondered whether Saba had been able to scrub Naomi Nagata from the station records. He wouldn't have been able to get her out of decades of newsfeed footage, standing behind Jim and wishing the cameras were elsewhere.

She was walking on the surface of a soap bubble and hoping it wouldn't pop.

The refugee quarters, when they reached them, were a little better than living in the underground had been. A little suite of five rooms with a

narrow common hall and a shared head at the end. She could have touched one wall with her elbow and the other with her shoulder. It was tighter than their quarters on the *Roci*, but with doors, so they could sleep without breathing each other's dreams. A little monitor in the wall was set to the official newsfeed, but the captain of the *Typhoon* was gone, replaced by a sober-faced man in a security uniform.

"The base was exactly what we thought we would find. These rat holes are what allowed the terrorists to function and plan in secret. Without them, they'll be forced out into the light. That's where they can be stopped.

"We don't know how many people were using the secret base, but we've cordoned it off and we're making a full investigation. We feel certain that the threat to the station is reduced, but we can't be complacent. These people are willing to risk the integrity of the environment for their ideological purity. Risk the lives of the whole station. It's important that we isolate and disarm these terrorists before another attack like the one on the oxygen tank.

"With that in mind, the governor has authorized a limited amnesty for anyone who—"

Clarissa turned the monitor off with her thumb. She met Naomi's eyes, and the determination and exhaustion in them was clearer than words could have been. *Let it go. We have work to do.*

Alex cleared his throat. "Well, since there's no galley anymore, I guess I'll head down the hallway and see if I can't find a coffee shop or something. Anybody else need breakfast?"

There would be guards. There would be drones. There would be the risk that trying to pay for something would collapse Alex's false identity or flag his real one. She wanted to grab him and lock him in his room. She wanted to make sure no one left the uncertain safety of their cabin.

"Tea," she said. "Maybe some protein cakes."

"All right," Alex said. "I'll be back." The way he said it made it a promise. As if he could keep it.

"I'm gonna ..." Amos said, gesturing to Clarissa.

Naomi nodded. "I'll get some work done."

"That leaves me for watch," Bobbie said with a lopsided smile. "Not much of a plan, but it isn't nothing."

"I'll get you a plan," Naomi said.

Sitting alone on her new, thin bunk, she built a list on Saba's terminal. If

she thought too much about the dangers, the time pressure, she knew the dark thoughts would start coming. There wasn't time for that. If she could focus, though, problem-solve, she'd be okay. She'd known herself long enough to learn that. The care and feeding of a well-used mind.

The final goal was to get out of the slow zone and find someplace safe to hide and regroup. So the last step was at the top of the list:

REGROUP

She didn't have the details of what that would look like. Probably keep her head down and see what happened. Wait for the enemy to stumble or new allies to appear. The old, old strategies. But whatever shape it took, that was the final goal. In order for that to happen, they would have to manage some other things ...

REACH SAFETY

Before that ...

IDENTIFY SAFETY

After all, they'd need to know where they were fleeing to before they fled. It had to be someplace that they could land the *Roci*. Someplace that wasn't likely to fall in line with Duarte and turn them in. So none of Fisk's association worlds, and not Sol either. That was tricky, but she felt the beginnings of some ideas for it. So all right. But there was more than one dependency for that, so she split the column and added the other track.

BLIND MEDINA AND GATHERING STORM

If the Laconians knew where they'd gone, they wouldn't stay hidden long. So that would be important. And it would be the last thing they did before they left, so the enemy wouldn't have time to fix whatever they chose to break. She'd have to have everyone ready to go before the sensor arrays went down, so ...

GATHER EVACUATION GROUPS

And in order to do that, they'd have to get the word to everyone in Saba's networks. All the underground. All of them. And there it was. The sorrow and the fear. And the tightness at the back of her throat. It was all right. She just had to put it on her list. It was just part of the plan.

SAVE JIM



Saba sent a message an hour before “Ami Henders” was supposed to get off her shift. Bobbie got the same message, though none of the others did. It was a restaurant just one level under the drum’s inner surface and a route to reach it that would, if everything went well, avoid any checkpoints. Naomi washed her face in the little sink no wider than her two palms together and tugged her hair into something like order. When she got home to the *Roci*, she was going to spend a day in the showers. A whole damned day.

Alex and Clarissa were waiting for her in the public hall. Bobbie and Amos were a few meters down, pretending to talk, but actually keeping watch. They were both bruised, and there was a cut over Amos’ eye. They looked like they’d been caught in the explosion, which was technically true, but the tension that had been showing in the way Amos held his gut and shoulders was gone.

No, not gone. But lessened. That was good.

“We ready to paint the town red?” Clarissa asked, taking Naomi’s arm. It had the form of a playful gesture, but the need for support was there too.

“I hope this place serves margaritas,” Alex said. “It’s been a long time since I had a good margarita.”

“Trust me when I say you’ve never had a good margarita, Martian,” Amos replied. “Still some things only Earth does well.”

Bobbie caught Naomi’s eye, gave a little nod, and started off along the route. Amos walked at her side, his steps rolling a little in the fractional gravity, like something hurt with each step. Naomi gave them a few seconds, and then started after them. There was a story behind those bruises, and she had the impression she’d never know what it was.

James Holden had shipped with five others on his crew, but they weren’t five. They were a couple up ahead, and a different group of three behind. As ways to avoid pattern recognition, it was thin. But it was something.

The restaurant was a wide, white ceramic bar open to the corridor. Billows of steam came from the back, rich with the smells of fish and curry. The design didn’t fit into the aesthetic of the original ship. This space was a modification, the *Nauvoo*, which became the *Behemoth*, which became Medina Station in the process of learning what it was and would be. Looked at that way, Naomi liked the restaurant, even if it was a little ugly.

The man behind the counter nodded, greeted them all in a dialect Naomi didn’t recognize, and waved them back into the steam. The kitchen was small, with two women—one very old, the other hardly more than a girl—

who looked at them curiously as they passed through.

The old man opened a thick metal door and nodded, smiling, at the walk-in freezer beyond it. Saba was already there, a blanket over his shoulders and a thin, black cigarette in his mouth. His cheeks were ruddy with the cold. The old man closed the door behind them, and a golden emergency light came on, throwing shadows across them from crates of vat-raised fish. Amos' gaze cut over to Clarissa, but if anything she seemed to be enjoying the cold.

"Not perfect," Saba said, "but hard for them to hear us."

"You think they're listening?"

"No," Saba said. "But here, seems less likely I'm wrong. Perdón for the fast change. I didn't have much warning."

"Shikata ga nai," Naomi said, and Saba nodded ruefully.

"We have a plan," Bobbie said. "Well, Naomi does."

"The outline of one anyway," Naomi said. "I don't love it, because a lot of things have to happen in a very small time frame. But the *Typhoon* arrives in less than a week, and slowing that down isn't something I can do."

"I have people," Saba said. "You tell me, I'll tell who needs telling."

"There's just a lot of moving parts," Naomi said. "Lots of ways for things to break down."

"Tell me a story," Saba said through a cloud of smoke and visible breath.

Naomi did. She went through step by step, detail by detail. As she talked, the whole operation solidified in her mind, letting her speak with a clarity and authority she only halfway felt. It was a terrible plan, open to a thousand different failures, and some of them wouldn't be things they could recover from. If the assault team couldn't get onto the *Storm*. If the kill code was changed or unhackable. If the Laconian repair crews could get the sensors fixed more quickly than she expected.

But with every word she spoke, with every detail she provided, she felt the *Typhoon* looming behind her. Coming close. Ending any chance they had.

"Gonya need two bombs," Saba said, pulling up his hand terminal. The one that didn't connect to the station's legitimate network. He talked as he composed a message. "One for sensors, one for the jail. Katria's good for one. Have to see who she likes for two. Which one matters more?"

They both matter, Naomi said at the same moment Clarissa said, *The*

jail.

"I worked on this station, back in the day," Clarissa said. "Get me access to the secondary power junction that feeds them and a way to reset the primary. I can keep the sensors down."

"Claire," Bobbie said, concern in her voice.

"I'm good for it," Clarissa said. "It will work."

And then that was decided. Saba was already putting a message into his hand terminal.

"Bist bien alles," he said.

"Amos and I are dealing with the *Storm*," Bobbie said. "You give us a team, but we're point or no deal."

"Deal," Saba said. "I'll put me and mine on the *Malaclypse* as soon as the signal goes. If the muscle here has trouble, at least there can be two against the one. Plan B, sa sa?"

Alex raised his hand. "No one's flying the *Roci* on this but me. We all knew that, right?"

"I'll take the jail," Naomi said. *I'll get Jim.*

Saba's terminal chirped, and he looked at it with pleasure. "Katria has someone. Coyo with experience in demolitions. He'll need to know what we're doing. Just his part, though. Inner circle, us."

"Inner circle," Naomi said. "Claire and I can meet with him."

"Good," Saba said as he trundled to the freezer door and pounded on it with a blanket-wrapped fist. Then he pointed to Bobbie and Amos. "You come with me. We'll see Katria. Talk about how to hunt Marines."

Something flickered over Bobbie's face. Hardly even an expression, but Naomi saw it.

"You lead, we'll follow," Amos said, smiling his empty smile.

"Any thoughts on how to get me onto my ship?" Alex asked as the door opened.

"Several," Saba said. "You should come with." Then he shook his head. "Too many things. Not enough time."

They stepped out into the suddenly burning air. Naomi hadn't even noticed she was getting cold until suddenly she wasn't anymore. Saba led them out to the kitchen, and then they slipped through the steam and into the civilian world two by two until she and Clarissa were all that remained.

They sat at the counter and watched people go by. The fish was unremarkable, but the curry and mushroom rice actually were good. Across

the corridor, a monitor spooled out the newsfeed until it repeated. Clarissa ate, drank tea, talked about everything and nothing. Naomi almost didn't notice the tremble in the other woman's hand or the way her eyes jittered sometimes. *If she thinks she can do it, she can do it*, Naomi told herself.

The man arrived, sliding into the chair beside them. Dark, handsome eyes and a bright, excited smile with a crooked nose between them. "Namnae na Jordao," he said. "Seen you both back at home, yeah?"

"I remember," Clarissa said.

"Katria, she sent me," he said, then leaned forward. "So what is it we're going to do?"

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Chapter Forty-One: Singh

He had trained on ships back home, as anyone at his rank would. He'd spent weeks sleeping in a tight cabin and eating elbow to elbow with his fellow officers, but at the end of training, he went home, back to Laconia and Natalia and the monster. The weekends after a training run had been some of the best he'd ever had, waking up late with Natalia beside him. Before the monster came, they'd had quarters with a bedroom on the third story and a folding wall that they could pull back to get fresh air and the view. He remembered lying in that bed, looking out over the city as twilight fell. Vast clouds turning gold and violet on the horizon, and the alien construction platforms glittering among the stars.

He'd laid his head against Natalia's as-yet-unoccupied belly and thought about the ships being made up above the planet's atmosphere. How one day, he might command one. It had seemed glorious at the time.

He'd known without checking the dates when his exile on Medina Station had lasted as long as a full training tour. Something in the back of his mind had been anticipating the end of low ceilings and false skies. Each day, he found himself growing more anxious, and it wasn't only the threat from local terrorists or the mounting pressure he felt to reopen the traffic through the gates. It was his flesh itself, grown accustomed to these long isolations having an end, expecting relief and not getting it. Wanting his wife and his child and their sky, even as his conscious mind knew the first two would come much later, and the last ... perhaps never.

It was possible that he would live his whole life and die as the governor of Medina Station and never see a real cloud again. He'd known that from the moment he'd met with the high consul, all those months ago. It hadn't started chafing until just now.

The draft of his monthly report was open on his monitor, his personal journal inset in a smaller window. Everyone above him in the chain of command could see his journal if they chose to, but his report gave him the

chance to summarize his experiences. To say what, from his perspective, was important. His fingers hovered over his keyboard, where they had been since the memory of Natalia and their old bedroom and the clouds had intruded on his thoughts. He wished he could pause longer.

Many of the locals persist in referring to the transfer of control in Sol system as a war. This kind of rhetoric has emboldened dissident factions on Medina Station. Given the escalating violence employed by the dissidents, I have elected to maintain the closed-gate policy until the arrival of the Typhoon. Ships coming in from colonial systems have too great a potential to smuggle in relief supplies and reinforcements for the recalcitrant elements here.

He paused again. A small, angry voice in the back of his mind said, *In the event of another large-scale attack on the station, I recommend pulling Laconian forces back to the Storm and venting Medina Station.* He pushed the thought away without writing it down. It wasn't only that it was immoral, though that should have been enough. It was also a statement of weakness. An admission that he could not cut the rot out of this tree without burning it all. And still, the elegance of it made it hard to turn away.

If Holden and his allies had been held to truly Laconian standards, they would be dead. It was that simple. If Singh treated them with the respect and dignity with which Duarte treated him—to which Singh held himself—removing them all from the equation would just be proper discipline. But he had grown to understand that they weren't Laconian. Not yet. They hadn't had time to understand the necessity of the empire. Holden's arguments were more than proof of that.

He had to be patient with them. Firm, but patient. He had to keep them from hurting themselves or others until the ripples of this admittedly vast change had calmed. Until the new patterns of life had become normal for them.

While I am certain that James Holden knows more of the local dissident factions than he is presently admitting, he is not our only resource on that matter. His experience and expertise in the anomaly that Admiral Trejo reported make him a genuinely unique asset on that issue. For that reason, I have chosen to break off his interrogation here and remove him immediately to Laconia for debriefing in whatever context the high consul considers most appropriate.

Meaning that the terrorist figurehead would see Laconia before he did.

Might even come across Natalia and the monster before they came out to Medina, if the high consul chose to treat him gently. Holden would smell the rain. See the sunrise. And Singh would be here, in this spinning can in an eerie non-space that didn't even have stars to make it feel like home. It was a deep irony that being a prisoner and being in power could be so mismatched.

"Damn it," he said to his empty office, then leaned back, running one hand across his scalp. There was so much more to put into the report. The preparations he'd made—was making—for the stationing of the *Typhoon* and the additional personnel that it was bringing to Medina. The victories he'd had in rooting out the bombers and repairing the damage they had done. His schedule for coordinating and controlling the traffic between the worlds. The empire would succeed or fail on the back of its logistical planning, and his implementation of the high consul's vision was actually quite detailed. Only just now, something itched in his soul, and he couldn't concentrate.

He wondered whether Duarte ever suffered the same base animal distractions. It seemed he would have, but Singh couldn't imagine it. He closed the draft report, opened his personal journal wide enough to edit, and then closed it too. The walls themselves seemed to push the air at him. It was like an optical illusion of something falling that never quite fell.

"Damn it," he said again, less forcefully this time.

The reports coming in from Sol were distracting too. Trejo's private reports tracked through the *Gathering Storm*, but they were meant for Duarte. Singh wished he could read them himself. There were so many questions—whether the *Tempest* had taken any lasting damage in its first foray against the enemy. Whether anything had changed with the anomaly that had appeared after Pallas. When Trejo anticipated the next battle would come. And if he believed it would be the last one.

There were the public feeds, of course. The positions of the combined navies were, for the most part, a known thing. The larger cruisers were impossible to hide, and the massive union ships they called void cities. But there might be stealth ships lying in wait or fields of torpedoes launched into a quiet orbit, counting on the vastness of space to conceal them until they burned to life. Just looking at the declassified tactical map made Singh's flesh crawl. The vast cloud of the enemy shifting through the gravity-bent space of inner planets, like a swarm of insects with a single,

hated enemy. And the *Tempest* alone in its simple course. Trejo wouldn't evade and he wouldn't retreat. He had his orders, and he would follow them.

Singh reminded himself of how powerful the *Tempest* was. How resilient. The high consul wouldn't have committed the ship to a path that led to embarrassment for the empire and death for Trejo. And yet, what if he'd miscalculated? Or what if Earth or Mars or the union had been behind the wave of lost time? Or ...

This speculation was pointless. Worse, it was self-indulgent. Even if he knew everything else he needed to put into his official report, it was going to have to wait. He had to get out of his offices, if only for a while. He had to collect himself.

Overstreet answered the connection request almost at once. "Governor?"

"I will need a security detail to my office at once."

Overstreet's silence was less than a heartbeat. "Is there a problem, sir?"

"No. I want to inspect the docks. When will there be sufficient security for that?"

If Overstreet was surprised or annoyed, there was no sign of it in his voice. "I'll have a detail to you in five minutes, sir."

"Thank you," Singh said, then dropped the connection.

The *Lightbreaker* was a cargo ship that had been in the union's fleet. A small vessel, but fast and with an efficient drive. All of the ships and their crews were guests of the empire until the *Typhoon* arrived. But not the *Lightbreaker*. Of all the ships on the station manifest, that was the one best suited to act as a prisoner transport. It was slated to push off in half an hour's time with James Holden in its brig and a crew Singh had chosen from the *Gathering Storm*. And Singh found he very much wanted to be there when the first ship left Medina Station for Laconia. The first transit to happen while he was in charge of the ring space. His watch.

He straightened his uniform and checked himself in the mirror before stepping smartly into the outer offices. He heard the change when he walked into the room. The men and women under his command making certain that he saw them busy. Eight Marines in armor were waiting outside, along with a driver, who wasn't in power armor but did carry an assault rifle beside her in the cart.

"The docks, sir?" the driver asked.

"Berth K-eighteen," Singh said, then sat back as the cart started off.

The Marine escort loped along as fast as the cart could drive and with the sense that they weren't anywhere near an uncomfortable pace. The hallway had been cleared, and guards stood at the intersections with weapons drawn. It was like traveling through the dream of a tube station that had grown out in all directions until there wasn't even the promise of finding a way up to the surface. A woman with a heart-shaped face peered past the guard's shoulder, straining to catch a glimpse of him, and Singh waved at her. Let the civilians see that their governor was here, not hiding away in his office. If he wasn't scared of the terrorists, the loyal faction of the population wouldn't be either. Or less so, anyway.

And still, he did wonder how many of those people he passed would have been as happy to see him dead. He wondered if the girl with the heart-shaped face would have shot him if she'd had the chance. There was no way to be certain. Would never be a way to be totally certain. Or at least no way other than ...

At the end of the drum, they left the spin gravity behind. The Marines shifted gracefully into a protective star formation with him at its center. He had seen images of the terrorists' attack—twisted metal and shattered ceramic. Flakes of carbon lace floating in the air like black snow. Passing through the space now, what struck him was the stink of it. Welding torches and burning lubricant oil, overheated wiring and the back-of-the-throat bitterness of exhausted fire suppressants.

They did this to their own station, just to spite me, he thought. And then *No, not their own. Mine. This more than anything else proves they can't be trusted with the future. This station is mine.*

They passed by the crowd of people waiting for permission to visit their ships, the Marines alert for any sign of violence, and passed by without so much as a scowl. At the berth, the guards held Holden at the airlock, assuming that Singh had come because he wanted to inspect the prisoner before he left. On the float, Holden looked younger. The lines in his face softened, and his hair stood wildly out from his head. He could see what the man had looked like as a boy.

Singh nodded.

"Governor," Holden said. He made it just polite enough to make it clear he was impatient without actually demanding offense be taken.

"Captain Holden. I wish you a safe journey."

"Thanks."

“Laconia is a beautiful place.”

“Not sure I’m going to be seeing the nice parts of it, but I’m open for a pleasant surprise.”

“If you cooperate with the high consul, you will be treated well,” Singh said. “We are an honorable people. No matter what you think, we were never your enemy.”

Holden’s smile was weary. “Okay.” *That’s bullshit, but I’m too tired to fight about it.*

Singh nodded, and the guards guided the prisoner away. The airlock closed behind him.

Fifteen minutes later, the *Lightbreaker* left dock and burned hard for the Laconia gate with Holden aboard.



Singh heard Overstreet’s report in the security office rather than his own. The walls were a pleasantly neutral gray-green that matched everything. The only decorations were a small potted fern and a framed piece of calligraphy in red, black, and gold that listed the high consul’s Nine Moral Tenets.

Overstreet himself sat behind his desk with a physical solidity that made it seem like he’d grown there. Singh stood looking down at the man rather than take the seat and posture of a visitor. It might be Overstreet’s office, but it was all Singh’s station.

“I’m expecting some unrest after the news comes back from Sol,” Overstreet said. “People don’t like seeing their team lose. I’m trying to get ahead of that. Channel it into something we can control. Not let it turn into something that can gain momentum.”

“That’s wise. Are you seeing a reaction to the news about the underground losing their hiding place?”

“Not among the general population, no. But it meant a lot to the security force. We knew it was here someplace, but actually finding the hub and shutting it down? It’s a major step forward. Without a physically isolated space, it’s harder for the terrorists to coordinate. And it lets us move into the next phase. Identification.”

“How many have you found?” Singh asked.

Overstreet spread his massive hands. “Fifteen for certain. Maybe twenty. The level of internal corruption within the local population can’t be understated. My best estimate is that a third of our operating personnel are at least open to working against us.”

Singh let the assessment sit for a moment, watching his outrage at the ingratitude and arrogance of the locals flare like it was happening outside himself. When he was sure he wouldn’t curse, he spoke.

“That’s unacceptable,” Singh said. “Changing that has to be a top priority.”

“Didn’t mean to suggest I was accepting it. Just reporting in on where it stood. I’ve put in double and triple checks, random audits, all the internal security procedures I can, but this is going to be something we struggle with until we start getting regular commerce open again. Once we can start breaking up the old guard here, I expect to see these problems fall away. Wash out the bad, bring in the new. Like that.”

Singh made a small sound of acknowledgment, neither approval nor condemnation.

“The dock attack was what led us to their nest,” Overstreet said. “But even there, I’m fairly sure some information isn’t getting passed up the chain to us.”

“And where do we stand on that investigation?”

Overstreet’s ice-blue eyes looked away.

“Permission to speak freely, Governor?”

“Granted.”

“It’d be going a lot better if you hadn’t shipped my best resource back home. Holden was central to the conspiracy. The man’s a murderer. And I’m still not a hundred percent certain what the aim of the attack was.”

“To damage the *Storm* while it was still in dock,” Singh said.

“Maybe,” Overstreet said. “But why? In preparation for something? Or was it to degrade the oxygen supply and force us to open shipping before we’re ready? Or was it to destroy the air gap server, or the secondary power storage, or one of the eight warehouses that got scraped out by the blast? Or was it just a propaganda move to make Laconian rule look weak? Or provoke a crackdown as a way to recruit new insurgents?”

“It did all of those things,” Singh said.

“But which ones it *intended* matters, sir. Understanding the mind of the enemy is what lets me do my job.”

Singh heard the frustration in Overstreet's tone. That was fair. Part of his error in removing Tanaka had been putting Overstreet into position without the training and preparation time he should have had. And with the underground running circles around them, the man couldn't feel he was doing a good job. Nothing degraded morale like the sense that the potential for excellence was being denied.

Happily, Singh was in a position to address that point right away. He took out his hand terminal, opened the message that had occasioned this particular visit, took off his personal security encryption and passed it to Overstreet. The young man appeared on Overstreet's monitor. Wide, slightly feverish eyes, unruly hair. The lens and the perspective made the bent nose seem larger than it actually was.

"Hoy, bossmang. Something big going down," Jordao said, "I only got my part, but it's about the sensor arrays. Parley, tu y mé, aber keep it quiet. Voltaire finds out I know you, and you'll see my water in your faucets, yeah?"

Overstreet's eyes narrowed to slivers of ice. His lips had thinned to a single dark line.

"Well, that's interesting," he said.

"The Belters aren't the only ones with a network," Singh said. "Not anymore. See that your debriefing isn't observed. This time, we'll be ahead of the bastards."

"May mean pulling personnel off the engineering investigation," Overstreet said.

"This is the most important thing now," Singh said.

Overstreet nodded slowly, lost in thoughts and calculations of his own. When he sighed, it was like a dying man's breath. "We're holding this station with just the crew we carried out here on the *Gathering Storm* and a few extras that Admiral Trejo could spare us. And this station is a damn lot bigger than our ship was."

"Is that a problem for you, Overstreet?"

"It's just that we do have a great selection of number-one priorities. Don't we, sir?"

Chapter Forty-Two: Drummer

“... and if you fail to turn back,” Secretary-General Li said, “we will be forced to respond with force. There will be no further warnings.”

“He looks good,” Lafflin said. “Statesman-like.”

Drummer thought he looked sad, which actually came off pretty well, all things considered. It made it seem as if it was the impending loss of life that had dragged his spirits down. She was fairly certain that if she’d done the announcement, it would have come off as anger. Or fear. Or a near-psychosis-inducing lack of sleep.

She went back in the spooled message and watched it again. The line had been drawn where everyone had known it would. Point Leuctra, 2.1 AU from the sun. By conventions of mining law and centuries of precedent, that placed the *Heart of the Tempest* inside the asteroid belt. An invisible line in space, unmarked by anything more than what people believed about it. And that was enough.

The combined fleet of the EMC and her union hadn’t played coy. They had burned and braked to reach this position. Two hundred and thirty-seven ships, ranging from the void cities to traffic-control skiffs. Anything with a gun was spread across the surface of a modified parabola with one focus on the *Tempest*’s flight path. The ships on her side might shift and evade, but everything the secretary-general had said was for the newsfeeds and posterity. Anyone with a map and half a semester of military history could have drawn accurate conclusions without him.

She wondered if Saba would see it, back on Medina. She wondered if he was still alive. There hadn’t been a reply to her desperate question about the time slip, and the *Tempest* showed every sign of ignoring the EMC’s warning. Drummer went from optimism that Cameron Tur was right—that the Laconians wouldn’t dare use their magnetic matter-ripping beam for fear of its mysterious side effects—to expecting time to stutter, stop, and come back with the fleet already in ruins.

If she died here, would Saba see it? Would the official Laconian

newsfeeds be how they said goodbye?

Lafflin changed the display to the tactical map—the hundreds of green dots that were their fleet including the one that was People’s Home. The single orange blip that was their doom. As a piece of abstract art, it looked like something a student would have come up with at lower university. If she’d ever thought to put together a visual display that said *destined to fail*, it would have been that small, glowing bit of orange.

But still ...

Somewhere, when she’d still been working security contracts, she’d seen an interview with an old, smiling imam, whose name she didn’t remember. The one thing he’d said that stuck with her was, *I am a human being. Anything that happens to human beings could happen to me*. One time and another in the years since, she’d taken comfort from that. Or warning. People fall in love, so maybe I will too. People get jobs, so maybe I will too. And people get sick. People have accidents. And now, she supposed, people are divided from their families by war and history. And so that could happen to me too. Even when they won, would it mean she would wake up beside Saba again? There were so many variations of victory and loss.

“They’re confident, aren’t they?” Lafflin said, leaning back in his chair. “It’s astounding.”

“I suppose it is,” she said. She didn’t know where his mind had been, but it had clearly been somewhere different from her own. “You should probably get to the transport.”

Lafflin’s smile was rueful. “Is there anything you’d like me to pass on?”

“No,” Drummer said. “Anything that needs saying, I’ll say after.”

Or, she didn’t say, *not at all*. That part was understood.

As with Pallas Station and Independence, the plan was to evacuate the civilian population before the violence began. Ships had been docking with People’s Home for days now, hauling off families that had lived there for years and taking them to Mars and Earth, Luna and the Lagrange stations, or any of the thousand little holes in the Belt that could still hold air. Going to the docks with Lafflin now was like walking through a graveyard. The wide, curving halls should have been filled with people. Music and voices should have echoed down through the common parks, the transfer tubes, the docks. Even the air smelled different—closer and musty as the recyclers shifted down to match their reduced loads.

She gave Lafflin points for waiting until near the end. Most of the EMC political types in his staff had been among the first out, just after families with children. The lines of refugees waiting to leave were all older people now. The staff and citizenry that didn't have the skills to help in a battle, all with small bags floating beside them. Overnight bags, many of them. As if they might be coming right back. There was a lot of laughter in the line, and a sense of anticipation that bordered on feverish.

Part of her wanted to stop, to shake hands, to take a little of that bright, jittering energy for herself, but Drummer and Lafflin didn't pause. There was still some decorum that came with rank. The executive waiting area was well appointed with bulbs of coffee or liquor, living plants in wall gardens, soft music and LEDs that matched the spectrum of the morning light in early spring. Or so they told her. It wasn't as if *spring* were a concept with any practical existence in her life. It was nice, anyway.

Avasarala floated in a white sari with a golden sash. Drummer admired the old woman's ability to wear it and remain decent. It wasn't something a lot of Earthers could manage.

She touched Lafflin's shoulder. "You'll excuse me?"

"Of course, Madam President," he said. "I look forward to seeing you at the post-action debrief."

"You too," Drummer said.

Avasarala nodded as Drummer slid close, braced on a handhold to kill her momentum.

"You're leaving too?" Avasarala asked, her voice carefully neutral.

"No," Drummer said. "I live here."

"You're a fucking idiot," the old woman sighed, "but you'd be one if you left too. It'd be a better world if there was always at least one right answer instead of a basket of fucked."

"Are you all right?" Drummer asked.

Avasarala waved the comment away, then reached out to the handhold to steady herself. "I'm trying to decide if we're absolutely certain to lose or absolutely certain to win," she said. "I change my mind every ten minutes or so."

"It's one ship that hasn't been able to resupply in weeks," Drummer said. "It's already been through a battle. And that turning-off-people's-minds-for-a-while thing it did, we're ready for it this time. The automated systems have their governors off. We may have to get clever before the next

one shows up, but no matter what happens, we'll keep firing until *that* thing is a cloud of complex molecules and regret."

"And because it's this ten minutes," Avasarala said, "I find that argument persuasive. Next one, I'm going to remember that Duarte sent it, and then I'll get scared." She shook her head. "Who knows? The son of a bitch has been off in his own private system since before the Free Navy got their nuts handed to them. And it's pretty clear he's been rubbing up against whatever artifacts he found there. Maybe it made him stupid."

"Doesn't change what we have to do," Drummer said.

"It doesn't," Avasarala agreed. "I hate this part. You have a clear succession? Santos-Baca went down with her ship too, and even if you turn that ugly motherfucker of a ship to slag, one of the EMC bastards is as likely to throw something the wrong direction. If this goes badly, the last thing we're going to need is a long, angry committee meeting with everyone saying they've got the conch."

Drummer felt a blaze of annoyance, but pushed it down. The old woman wasn't trying to be insulting. She was just flailing around trying to find something she still had control over.

"We have bylaws," Drummer said. "And it won't matter. If I eat a stray torpedo, Albin Nazari takes over."

"That whiner? He's just gotten used to Santos-Baca's chair, and then to get yours too? He'd be like a five-year-old driving a mech loader."

"I'll be dead," Drummer said. "So I won't give a fuck."

Avasarala's laugh was short, surprised, and joyful. "I don't hate you, Camina. I hate almost everyone these days, but I don't hate you."

"I'm not planning to put Nazari in charge," Drummer said. "I'm planning to win."



In the scheme of the battle, People's Home was many things: battleship, medical facility, port, and resupply. It was all the things a city could be. In the display, it was slightly paler than the other green dots that were its fellows. Guard of Passage had a position that mirrored it. The two great cities of the union with their drums spun down, burning into the fight as anchors for the fleet. Cities that had become battleships.

“Coffee?” Vaughn asked, and Drummer waved him away.

The control room was lit like a theater—dim and warm with the tactical display in a multinetworked holographic output. Drummer had been in other battles. She had studied more than that. She had never seen more firepower leveled at a single target. She was fairly certain it had never happened before.

She strapped herself into her crash couch, checked the juice. The chances were very slim that People’s Home would go on the burn, but if it did, she’d be ready. The whole sphere of battle was less than three light-seconds across. Eight hundred and fifty thousand kilometers from the two most distant ships in the EMC fleet, a balloon holding three hundred quadrillion cubic kilometers of nothing, with a few hundred ships dotting its skin. If she’d been in a vac suit, the drive plumes of the navy would have been invisible among the stars. It was the most tightly formed major battle in decades—maybe ever—and she wouldn’t have been able to see her nearest ally with her naked eye.

“The enemy’s crossed Leuctra Point,” the weapons tech said, his voice calm.

“Are the EMC ships opening fire?”

“They are, ma’am.”

“Then let’s do too,” she said.

She wanted there to be a throb of rail guns, the chatter of PDC fire, but People’s Home was a huge structure. Even as her display told her that the rail guns were firing, the room was silent. Hundreds of other ships were doing the same thing at the same moment. Tens of thousands of tungsten slugs moving at a nontrivial fraction of *c*. It would be less than a minute before they converged on the *Tempest*, staggered and spread to make dodging difficult. But not impossible.

“And the enemy is evading,” the sensor tech reported, her voice sharp.

“Do we have visual?”

In answer, she put up the live feed. A second’s delay. Maybe two. Hardly anything at all. They were so close, they could have spoken in real time. It made her feel uncomfortable to be so near the *Tempest*. But there it was, its weirdly organic shape bright in the enhanced colors. Jets of reaction mass gouted from one side, pushing the ship to a slightly different course.

“Correcting for new vector,” the weapons station said. “And firing. EMC forces are also launching torpedoes.”

“Do the same,” Drummer said. She checked the time. Three minutes had passed. She took control of the visual display, zooming in on the skin of the enemy ship. It didn’t look like it had plating so much as a single, textured surface. She threw on the tactical overlay, and a dozen points appeared that weren’t visible in reality. The high-value targets, the vulnerable places on the *Tempest* that didn’t grow back, or at least not quickly. A dozen carefully placed dots that Emily Santos-Baca and Independence had died to find.

“Come on,” she said, willing the missiles to strike.

“The enemy is firing PDCs,” the sensor tech said.

“Show me,” Drummer said, and the *Tempest* almost vanished in a cloud of tracers. The data field was too rich to comprehend—missiles, streams of PDC fire, the straight-line paths of the rail-gun rounds.

“EMC Battleship *Frederick Lewis* is reporting damage,” Vaughn said.

“Are you working comms now?” Drummer asked. “Who’s going to get me my coffee?”

“They’re dropping core,” Vaughn said, ignoring her.

A little cheer went up, and it took Drummer half a second to see why. One of the hardpoints on the *Tempest* was blinking—the system reporting a missile strike that had connected with the target. The cloud of PDC fire grew a degree thinner. Any ship Drummer knew, any station she’d ever heard of, would have been reduced to slivers of metal and flakes of lace by now. The only thing she could think of that would withstand that barrage was a planet. Even then, cities would have been pounded to dust by what had been launched in the last fifteen minutes. Sixteen now. It was so fast. There should have been hours between launch and response. But this wasn’t that kind of battle. There was no finesse to it. Just brutal, constant violence.

The tightness in her throat was the memory of Pallas. The harder they pushed the *Tempest*, the more Drummer feared the magnetic beam. If the Laconians used it on People’s Home, she wouldn’t live long enough to notice she was being ripped apart. And if the glitch happened again ... well, the observatories on Earth and Mars might get more data about how long it took the enemy to recharge the damned thing.

But they hadn’t used it yet. Maybe the time slip had been the fucking thing breaking. The universe owed her a little slice of luck like that.

Another two hits on the *Tempest*. It shifted, plumes of steam appearing from its thrusters as it evaded incoming fire. Five more of the EMC ships took crippling damage or turned to bright dust, too far away to see. The

Tempest veered and danced. Dark streaks marked its sides where the missiles and rail-gun rounds hit, and while most of the marks faded, not all of them did.

“We have expended two-thirds of our rail-gun ammunition,” the weapons tech announced. “Shall I maintain fire?”

“Yes,” Drummer said. “Then start putting chairs in the launcher. We hit that thing until we’re down to pillows and beer.”

“Understood, ma’am,” the weapons tech said. She could hear the smile in his voice. She felt it too—the giddy sense that even if they were winning ugly, they were at least winning.

On the display, the *Tempest* shifted and dodged like a fish in a tank. The organic curves of its design made it hard not to think of it as an animal. An apex predator surprised to find itself outmatched by its prey. And there was something ...

“On the aft. By that third contact point. Is that a gas plume?”

The sensors tech shifted through half a dozen slices of the spectrum in less than a second. “That is correct, ma’am. The *Tempest* appears to be venting atmosphere.”

“EMC *Governor Knight* is launching high-yield nuclear torpedoes,” Vaughn said.

Drummer sat back in her crash couch. Anticipation was a tightness in her throat and her hands. The *Tempest*’s PDCs weren’t all disabled. There was still the chance it might kill the nukes before they got close enough to detonate. Seconds stretched into minutes. Her neck ached from straining toward the display.

The light of the explosion whited out the sensor array. A ragged cheer came from all around the control room.

“One down,” she said to herself. “And fuck you all along with it.”

It wasn’t over. Laconia would send another ship after this one. A fleet, next time. The union and the EMC would have to get much more clever. But they knew more now—about how the enemy ships functioned, how they maneuvered in battle, and most important of all, how they could be killed.

And she had to expect reprisals. By deciding to send her one last, desperate message, she had as good as told the Laconians that she still had allies on Medina. The choice had seemed like the right and obvious thing at the time. She’d pointed at Medina and said, *Look for my people here*. It

might be the thing that killed Saba and his crew.

It was a problem for another day. A tragedy she'd face when she could do something about it, and not before. There was too much that had to be done here and now.

"Send the return signal to all the transport ships and get the docks ready to bring everyone home," she said. "It's going to be a long couple weeks, people. We may as well get to it."

Another cheer, this one louder. They'd all been so hungry for a win, they were drunk with it. She was too.

"Ma'am?" the sensor tech said, the word like a drop of ice in a sauna.

The sensors had finished their reset. The *Tempest* was still where it had been, not scattered into atoms. An eerie blue mottling danced in lines like veins under the ship's skin, bright but fading. The EMCs' nukes might not have made contact before they detonated, but the fireball should have been enough to kill anything. Or at least anything that Drummer knew of.

"It's firing missiles, ma'am," the sensor tech said.

They'd known. Laconia had known they'd be facing nuclear torpedoes. And now everyone on all the colony worlds would see that even that wasn't enough to kill their ships. Maybe that had been the point all along.

"Tactical," she said. "Get me tactical."

The display jittered and shifted. The orange dot was now deep in the cup they'd created to destroy it, and it was still not destroyed. Even with its tactical maneuvering, its course toward the inner planets hadn't shifted.

All around it, bright-green dots were blinking out.

Chapter Forty-Three: Naomi

The scratch came in the middle of the third shift. If Naomi had been able to sleep, it would have been her midnight, but she was in her bunk, staring into the darkness and waiting for something she knew wouldn't come. So she heard it—fingernails against the access door that led to the corridor. It was softer than a knock, but it meant the same thing. *I'm here. Let me in.*

She sat up. Her body ached like she'd worked out too hard, but it was just stress and fatigue. She pulled herself up, opened her door as Bobbie, across from her, opened her own. Bobbie was wearing a tight jumpsuit. The kind you'd put on under a vac suit. Or, she supposed, power armor. She nodded to Naomi, but didn't speak. They were both being quiet for the others—Amos and Alex and Clarissa. The ones who could sleep, maybe. Someone ought to.

Bobbie opened the door to the public corridor.

Katria wore the uniform of the Medina maintenance crew. Green with a station logo printed on the shoulders and back. A ceramic toolbox rested on the deck by her left foot. Gray where it wasn't scratched white by long use. Naomi guessed there was enough explosive in it to kill all of them so fast they wouldn't know they were dead until the funeral. Katria's nonchalance with it was like a boast. Voltaire Collective had always been like that, even back in ancient days when Earth and Mars had ruled the solar system and no one had ever heard of Protogen. Every revolution needed its mad bombers, apparently.

"Tag," Katria said to Naomi. Then to Bobbie, "You ready to play a game?"

Bobbie put her hand on Naomi's shoulder. "Take care of the kids until I get back."

"I will," Naomi said. "Good hunting."

"Thanks," Bobbie said. Katria stood aside and let the big woman pass. The emptiness on Bobbie's face could have read as indifference to someone

who didn't know her. To someone who didn't understand the kinship that Bobbie felt to Mars and its military, and to those who had served once and then been forced by conscience or circumstance to walk away.

"Bobbie," Naomi said. "I'm sorry."

Bobbie nodded. That was all. An acknowledgment that they both understood the situation, and would do what needed to be done. Katria plucked the toolbox up, and the two of them walked away down the corridor. Naomi closed the door behind them.

Back in her bunk and sleepless, she wondered what Jim would have done. Something idealistic and impulsive that would lead to more complications, probably. Certainly. And he would have done it in a way that kept that expression off Bobbie's face if he could. Even if it meant doing something terrible to himself. Like languishing in a Laconian brig. An image came to her mind of Jim being tortured, and she pushed it away. Again. Feeling fear and sorrow would come later, when they were done. When he was back. There'd be time for it then. She didn't manage actual sleep, but she was able to drift a little before the shift change. It was enough to let her feel rested, but not deeply.

She met Saba at the same public counter where they'd used the freezer, but this time they sat at the front like customers. The girl behind the counter turned up the music playing from her system speakers loud enough that they could barely hear each other, their words drowned in drums and strings and ululating voices. Saba looked as tired as she felt.

"Something happening back in Sol system," he said. "Looks like the big fight. Not sure how it's going to play."

Half a dozen possibilities flashed through her sleep-starved mind ranging from the miraculously good to the catastrophically bad. It didn't matter. Nothing that happened there changed what they were doing here. But Saba's wife was there, back in the empty spaces where they'd all lived, once upon a time. She knew too well what that fear felt like.

"You have the list?" she asked.

Saba nodded and pressed a silver memory chip into her hand. "All the ships we could make contact with," he said.

"How many?"

"Twenty-one."

Naomi nodded. Twenty-one ships docked on Medina and waiting for their chance to load up and fly. It was more than she'd hoped for. It was

also enough to pose some problems. “I don’t like having this many people knowing what’s going on.”

“It’s a risk,” Saba said, as if he were agreeing with something she’d said. “How does it make us for time?”

“If you don’t mind half of them vanishing in transit, we can go pretty fast,” Naomi said, more sharply than she’d intended. She shook her head, apologizing, but Saba ignored both the snappishness and the regret for it.

“Say we don’t. Everyone through the gates safe and sound. What does that look like?”

“I can’t know that until I look at the ship profiles. Mass, drive type, cargo. All of that’s going to make a difference.”

“Ballpark.”

“A hundred minutes. That’s conservative. I can probably find a way to make it less.”

The girl at the counter swung past, pouring fresh tea into their glasses. Tiny bits of mint leaf swirled in the reddish amber. Naomi took a sip while Saba scowled. “That’s a long time for the station’s eyes to stay blind. And a lot to lose if they find a way to put it back together.”

“Truth,” Naomi said.

Saba scratched his chin with the back of his hand. If they ever played poker together, it was a gesture she’d remember. His tell.

“Your technician. The one to break the system?”

“Clarissa.”

“Her, yeah. If she doesn’t do the thing and do it well, everyone on those ships is going to die from trusting me. Not disrespect, but it’s mine to say. Not sure she’s good for it.”

“Clarissa knows what she’s doing,” Naomi said. “She’s smart, she’s studied, and she knows this station. She broke it once already.”

“She’s as thin as wire,” Saba said. “I could blow her over from whistling.”

There was no humor in his face.

“I trust her with my life,” Naomi said. “No hesitation.”

“You’re asking me to trust her with more than that,” Saba said. “I don’t. Not that she doesn’t know, not that she’s unwilling or not to trust. But straight between us, sister. Putting all of us on one girl just this side of hospital? It’s not prudence.”

“I think you’re asking me for something.”

“You go with her,” Saba said. “Leave the prison work to me and mine. We’ll do that. You back up your crew.”

Naomi shook her head. “The prison’s mine,” she said. “Clarissa will do whatever needs doing. She’s got backup already. Jordao. Katria’s man. Unless you don’t trust him?”

“I don’t trust anyone,” Saba said. “Not him, not her, not you. But I work with what I have to work with, and I know you’re not going to run when things go harsh. Maybe Katria’s people will, maybe they won’t. You won’t. And ... the sensors are more important than the prisons. We lose the prisons, we only lose the prisoners, savvy sa?”

He was right, and she knew it. Putting the success or failure of the mission in the hands of a medically fragile woman—however competent she was—and then not giving her the backup to deal with an emergent problem was bad practice. But in her imagination, Naomi saw the letters on her list as clearly as if she’d been reading them afresh. *SAVE JIM*. She shook her head. “Prison’s mine. Sensor arrays are hers. Won’t be a problem.”

Saba sighed as the music shifted key and tempo. A man’s voice growling like a bearing going bad lamented his own failings in a mix of Hindi and Spanish that she could almost follow. She looked Saba in the eyes until he looked away. “Work up a schedule, then. All the ship data’s on there. But do it fast. We have to distribute it by hand before we pull the trigger.”

“Two hours,” Naomi said. “I’ll have it ready.”



An hour later, there was still no word from Bobbie. No way to check in. They waited in their bunks, the doors open on their little common hallway. Amos stood in the head, leaning against the sink with his arms crossed. Alex sat in the doorway of his cabin. Clarissa stretched out on the deck like a bored teenager waiting for the hours to pass until she could begin living. Her skin was unnaturally smooth and tight. It helped the illusion. Naomi sat on her bunk, hand terminal in her lap, and arranged the flight schedule while they talked.

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “I mean, sure, it’s a risk that there’ll be ships waiting on the other side of the gates. There have got to be some queuing

up to get to Medina when they don't think they'll get shot at. But if we're only looking at twenty-one ships?"

"I'm only lookin' at one," Amos said.

"So let's say there's two hundred ships waiting to come through," Clarissa said, ignoring him. "High end of plausible, but what the hell, right? That's eleven hundred gates with no one standing by close enough to get a really good look at whoever came through. That's still a fifteen percent chance of getting seen."

"That high?" Alex said. "You sure? I thought it'd be less than that."

Naomi went through the data Saba had given her. The *Old Buncome*, a recent-generation transport ship with a high-capacity Epstein drive and a cargo hold full of refined titanium. The *Lightbreaker*, a three-generation-old yacht salvaged by a semigovernmental courier service. The *Rosy Cross*, a rehabilitated prospecting ship with five previous owners and a drive that leaked enough radiation to cook with. The *Han Yu*, a privately owned coyote with authorization to carry settlers to the colony worlds.

Each ship had its own specs, its own limitations. And each one would have an effect on the ring gates that could make the ship leaving after it vanish into wherever ships went when they went dutchman. Naomi knew the curve as well as she knew her name, and the hand terminal—limited as it was—had enough native computing power to lay that in. Writing a program to weigh all the variables, evaluate each ship, and create a best-speed model wasn't hard, but it took time and focus. Neither of which she had in great supply.

"It ain't that high if you're only looking at one ship," Amos said. "You can bend the odds pretty good. I mean, no one's going for Sol gate unless they're tired of life. And there's not going to be any ships waiting to come through from Charon or Naraka."

"If we're down to hiding out in dead systems ..." Alex began.

Clarissa interrupted him. "We should go to Freehold."

"You feeling okay, Claire?" Alex asked. "You remember we didn't leave on good terms, right? It was even money for a while that they were going to shoot Bobbie and Holden before they could get back to the ship."

From where Naomi was sitting, she could see Clarissa's ankles shift around each other as she rolled onto her belly. "No, I'm serious. They're fiercely independent. They were willing to stand up to the Transport Union, and I don't see them rushing to wave the Laconian flag either. They're

underdeveloped enough that there won't be complex local politics. No factions within factions that we don't understand. Or at least fewer than you'd get somewhere like Gaon Complex. Plus which, we know there aren't any ships observing the other side of their ring, because we were the only ship in the system, and no one's gone out there since the occupation started."

"That Houston asshole *was* pretty smart," Amos said.

"Ah! I see what you're doing," Alex said. "You're trying to make flying out to Charon and dodging radiation flares sound like a good idea. It's that whole 'I'll put a shitty idea next to a *really* shitty idea so the first one looks shiny by comparison' thing."

"I think we should go to Freehold," Amos said. "Naomi? You think we should go to Freehold?"

"Sure," she said, starting the data run.

"Seriously?" Alex said.

"Her points are all solid," Naomi said. The data run stopped a third of the way through. She ended the process and opened the run logs. "We have to get small for a while. Be hard to see. Wait for Laconia to show us where its weak spots are. We'll have to be someplace while that happens. It might as well be there."

"But the shooting-us part?"

"Is something we'll need to work through," Naomi said. "Hey, those paper uniforms people can get out of the station kiosks? Do you think we could get that to print out sheets?"

"Like bedsheets?" Alex said.

"Something to write on so we can distribute this when I'm done. Can't put it on the system."

"Maybe," Amos said. "Be kind of weird, though."

The run log looked decent until it started the confirmation routine. Then it hung on something. She grabbed the code reference and went back to the original script.

The others were still talking, but her focus on the screen lowered the volume on them. She was aware of Amos' low, gravel-strewn voice. Clarissa, higher and more musical. Alex with the ghost of a Mariner Valley drawl that was more habit than accent. Her family. Part of her family.

There was a zero result where there should have been a berth number. That was where the code was choking. It probably made sense to just chuck

the routine entirely. Reaching beyond Saba's secret network—even if it was only for passive information like reading docking records—was a little risky. But building a schedule on unconfirmed data could screw them up as well.

She hesitated, pulled the code, then put it back and reopened the logs. The bad entry was the twelfth ship in the logs. The *Lightbreaker*. She tapped her fingers against her thigh. Dig deeper and risk being noticed by security or ignore the error and move ahead as if everything was as expected. If she'd gotten a little more sleep, it would have been easier to make the decision.

"Bárány o juh, son toda son hanged," she said to herself and opened a low-level request to the docking records. It only took seconds for confirmation to come through. The *Lightbreaker* wasn't in its berth. It had shipped out two days ago. The flight plan listed the destination as Laconia with a service code that looked military. Well, that was one less for the evacuation plan. It would make things faster, but Saba would need to know. The crew, if they weren't on the burn for the heart of the enemy, would need other bunks.

She looked at the service code. Touched it with a fingertip.

"Alex? Did the MCRN have a code eighteen twenty-SKS?"

"Sure," he said from the hall. "Did a few of those myself, way back when. Priority prisoner transfer. Why?"

When she'd been about eleven, Naomi had been working in a warehouse on Iapetus. A steel support beam had popped its welds and sprung out, clipping the back of her head. It hadn't been pain, not at first. Just a feeling of impact, and her senses receding a little. The agony had two, maybe three seconds to clear its throat and straighten its sleeves before it crashed over her. This felt very much the same.

Her hand trembled as she looked for a manifest. Something to say who'd been on the *Lightbreaker*. Who'd been important enough to the empire that they'd commandeered a ship just to take them away. There was nothing. Of course there wasn't. Why would the Laconians announce that to anyone? She checked the dates, the times. It didn't have to be Jim. It could have been someone else. But it wasn't. She took a moment for herself and the pain. Five seconds. She could let herself hurt for five seconds. Then she had to get back to work. The rest would be for later.

She sent a message—text only—to Saba. The missing ship, the service

coding, her suspicion that James Holden was already past the ring gate and into Laconian space. Did Saba have any contacts who could confirm that? After the message sent, she took a deep breath. Then another. She pulled the *Lightbreaker* out of her dataset and ran her code again. It didn't hang this time.

She got up, surprised by how steady she felt, and took the two steps to the door.

"What's the matter, boss?" Amos asked.

Naomi shook her head. When she spoke, she spoke to Clarissa.

"I had a talk with Saba. I'm going with you on the sensor-array leg of this."

Clarissa's brow was bent by whatever she saw in Naomi's face. "Okay. Why?"

"Risk management," Naomi said. "If the prison break fails, we don't get as many people out. If the sensors come back up and they're able to track which ships went through which gates, the whole mission fails. Better that we spend our resources where they matter the most."

"But if Holden is ..." Clarissa began, then went quiet. Naomi watched her understand. "The prisoner transfer."

Alex's face was grayish. And pale. "Fuck," he said.

"And we need something to write down the evacuation plan on," Naomi said. "Something small and portable, and not connected to the computer networks at all."

Amos pushed himself up from the sink. "You got it, boss. Give me twenty minutes."

"And something to write with," Naomi said as the big man walked out into the public corridor.

Her hand terminal chimed, and she went back to her crash couch. The run was finished. Twenty ships, in the order that would get them through the gates and gone at the min-max point of risk and speed. Optimal was eighty-seven minutes, even with the *Rocinante* looping back to pick up Amos, Bobbie, Clarissa, and her. It was a solid plan.

She had a solid plan.

She pulled up her organizational notes and sat for a moment, looking at the words she'd put there.

SAVE JIM.

She drew a line through them.

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Chapter Forty-Four: Bobbie

Tag,” Katria said, then turned to look at her. A ghost of a smile touched the other woman’s lips, and Bobbie wondered just exactly how much of the violence of their first meeting was really forgotten and forgiven. “You ready to play a game?”

After half a beat, Naomi’s gaze tracked over to her. Exhaustion had yellowed her sclera, and her skin had an undertone of ash. She put a hand on Naomi’s shoulder to steady her as much as anything.

“Take care of the kids until I get back.”

“I will. Good hunting.”

The words were a little punch in the gut. *Hope you kill someone. Some other Marine who had the bad luck to be born on the wrong side of this. Who’s as loyal to his people as you are to yours. Whoever they are, I hope you get them before they get you.* The truth of it was, despite everything, there was a joy in this. She’d spent some of the most important years of her young life training for moments like this one, and as much as she wanted to have grown and matured, aged into a woman of peace, part of her still really liked it.

“Thanks,” Bobbie said, and stepped out.

“Bobbie ... I’m sorry.”

Bobbie nodded as Katria scooped up her toolbox. They walked together toward the intersection with a larger corridor. The door closed behind them with a soft click and the whir of the lock. Katria chuckled under her breath, but Bobbie didn’t ask why. She didn’t much want to know.

Most of the people in the corridor were walking, but there were a few carts loaded with containers. At one intersection, a man was driving a loading mech, moving it from one warehouse to another. It was a four-point harness. If she got in by his side, she could loop one arm around his neck and choke him out while she unbuckled him from the controls with the other. Drop him out, swing around, and strap herself in. It would probably

take thirty seconds. Maybe less. Easy peasy.

As they walked, she felt herself relaxing, sinking down into her hips as she walked. Lowering her center of gravity. She whistled a little, softly. Katria raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. The screens along the walls announced that the security forces were closing in on the terrorist cell that had blown up the oxygen tanks, but Bobbie didn't see anyone giving the pair of them a second glance, much less closing in.

There was a sparseness about the halls. Even with the carts and the people, there was an emptiness showing through. Part of it had to be that, with no ships coming in or out of the station, there just wasn't as much to do as there would have been. But part of it was also fear. People staying in their holes. Staying out away from the checkpoints. Out of trouble.

They took the ramp down, away from the inner surface of the drum. There weren't many places on the drum that came close to the skin of the station. Most of the outer layers had been designed with radiation shielding in mind. Water tanks, storage for ceramic and metal and steriles. Service halls with anti-spalling covered in paint and conduit and pipes. But there were a few junctions near service airlocks where only a few layers of steel and ceramic and foam separated their feet from the outside. It reminded her of being on one of the old *Donnager*-class battleships. The bare functionality of the design belonged to a different generation from the residential levels or the inner face of the drum.

The hallway where Katria stopped looked just like the sections they'd been walking through, but she checked the section identifiers painted on the walls and the pipes, then stamped her foot on the deck like she was listening for something in the way it rang.

"Here?" Bobbie asked.

"This is the place. Boost me up."

Bobbie locked her fingers together into a cradle, and Katria put her foot into it. She didn't weigh much. Bobbie hauled her up toward the ceiling. Could have kept her there for hours, she thought. Katria caressed the ceiling with her palm, then found what she was looking for, pressed hard enough that Bobbie felt it, and slid a panel aside. A little gap, hardly more than a decimeter, between the panel and the structural beam above it. Katria hoisted her toolbox, checked its orientation, and slid it into place. She pulled the ceiling tile back and tapped Bobbie on the shoulder to be put down.

“That’s it?”

“No,” Katria said, and pulled a bit of black tape from her pocket. After a moment’s consideration, she curled it around a bit of pipe just beside the bomb, then took her hand terminal out and shifted to a screen Bobbie had never seen before. A rough, grainy image of the hallway appeared on it, including her and Katria from the tape’s perspective.

Katria stood directly under the bomb, then tapped her own image on the screen. Red script came up—LOCKED—and she put the terminal back in her pocket.

“Now, that’s it,” she said.

“Okay,” Bobbie said. “Let’s go outside.”

The maintenance airlock was uncrewed. Two vac suits hung in the lockers, a large gray transport box with its lid open and unsealed, and inside of that, a yellow ceramic box beside them with ZEMÎ TOR stenciled on it in black.

The transport box’s wheels were retracted, the steering handle stowed on its side. The walls and lid were only a little thicker than the real thing. Whatever they were using for shielding, it was thin. She hoped it was light too.

Bobbie put on the environment suit, checked her seals and air supply. She and Katria checked each other. The suit had a magnetic tether built into it, a ribbon as wide as her hand and thick as her pinky, dirty from years of use. The airlock itself was set into the floor. The little platform to carry them out to the drum’s surface, and hopefully not fling them out into the emptiness of the slow zone. With both of them and the box, it was a tight fit. Bobbie watched the suit’s sleeve puff out a little as the lock cycled out the air.

Katria pressed her helmet against Bobbie’s and shouted. With only physical conduction to carry the sound, her voice was distant and muffled. “Last chance to back away.”

Bobbie smiled and made an obscene gesture. She could see Katria laughing, but she couldn’t hear it. The lock cycled, and the platform descended.

The body of Medina’s drum curved away above her to the left and right, extended ahead of her and behind. She felt like she was hanging on to the belly of some massively vast whale. The gates were only pinpoints of eerie and erratic light, as regular as a printed pattern against the surreal darkness

below her. The gates and the tiny dot of the alien station in the center of ring space. It wasn't her first time outside a ship in the slow zone, but she shuddered all the same. Falling off a spin station in normal space meant drifting out at whatever velocity the station had given her until someone came to haul her back or she ran out of air. Losing her connection here meant falling into the blackness between the gates and vanishing into whatever existed—or failed to exist—on the other side. Normal, star-strewn space could feel like an infinite ocean, vast and glorious and uncaring. The slow zone felt like being in something's mouth.

Katria put her safety tether on the surface of the drum, then lay on her back and pushed her feet up until her mag boot locked to the station. Bobbie waited to follow until she'd taken a couple of awkward, swaying steps. And then she was also hanging upside down from the turning station. The crate in her hand wanted to fly up like the loop of her safety harness. Blood rushed into her head, filling her ears with their own distant roar as they walked—release, swing, push up, and reconnect to the station—back along until they found the stretch of plating that would become the breach point. Katria gestured to the crate—two fingers pointing, the Belter's gesture for *opening or deploying*. Bobbie nodded yes with a closed fist.

The mining net was a square of woven steel cable reinforced by carbon fiber. Rock hoppers and subsistence miners had been using things like it since humanity had first crawled up the well and started harvesting the near-Earth asteroids. The primary piton was thicker than Bobbie's thigh. She fastened it to the skin of the station, then waited for a moment as the external elevator shaft that ran along the drum from engineering to the command center passed overhead. She and Katria took different edges, pulling and stretching the net as they navigated around the target, placing the secondary pitons until the whole thing lay like a low, black blister on the side of the drum.

The trap set at last.

Katria dropped the box, and it flew up and away into the darkness, gone in an eyeblink. She led the way back almost to the airlock platform, then turned off one mag boot, and then the other, and swung on her safety harness, feet to the void. Bobbie did the same. It felt better to be right-side-up again, and worse to know that only one failure point was keeping her alive. Trade-offs. There were always trade-offs.

Katria slaved her hand terminal to the suit's arm display, copied the

output to Bobbie's, and set up a low-power radio connection between them. The corridor where they'd set the bomb appeared in the same grainy, muted colors as before. Empty for now, but not forever.

"Now we wait," Katria said through the radio. "The patrol puts their foot in our trap, or someone notices that we're out here."

"Yeah," Bobbie said.

"Don't worry. These Laconians are just like Earthers. They only think of ships and stations as inside. Comes from growing up in free air."

"The predictable limits of a conceptual framework," Bobbie said. A phrase from her classroom on Olympus Mons. "It's always where to hit the enemy. Whoever they turn out to be. When I learned how to do things like this, we were thinking about Earthers and pirates."

Katria laughed. "When I taught myself how to do this, I was thinking of people like you. Strange how the wheel turns."

The elevator passed above them again, the glowing orb of the alien station at the slow zone's heart appearing like a moon on her left, vanishing again on the right. Bobbie turned to look toward the docks. The *Rocinante* was down there somewhere. Her home and her ship. Or Holden's. Or neither of theirs.

Strange how the wheel turns.

The minutes stretched. Became hours. Twice, people passed through the corridor. A pair of electrical technicians. A sketchy-looking young woman pulling a child by the hand and looking over her shoulder as she walked. Bobbie wondered what the story was there, but it wasn't hers. Her anxiety slowly faded into a kind of dull anticipation, and then to both at the same time. The void passed beneath her feet again and again and again. She switched her air to the secondary bottle.

"Ah," Katria said. "Here we go."

On the monitor, two people walked down the hall toward the camera. Bobbie couldn't mistake the Laconian power armor for anything else. The patrol they'd been waiting for. The enemy approaching. Without a word, she swung back, set her feet against the station, and reengaged her mag boots. The spin gravity would try to straighten her legs, but that was exactly the wrong thing. She bent double, put her hands behind her knees, and held herself there. Katria did the same. Bat-brace position. It was hard to relax like that, especially knowing what was coming. She took a deep breath starting in her belly and moving through her whole chest, then let it out.

Shook her shoulders to get out the tension. Smooth and loose. That was the way to be.

She remembered the young Marine she'd flirted with when the Laconians had first taken the station. She wondered if he was on one of the patrols walking above her now, the soles of his feet unknowingly against her own. *Your turn now, my turn later*, she thought. The seconds stretched. The temptation to shift her arms so she could look at the screen was almost irresistible.

The station hit the bottoms of her feet like a hammer. Her legs slammed into her chest, blowing the air out of her. One mag boot threw an error, but only for a second. Then it was done. She turned, walking fast toward the net. It wasn't a low blister anymore. It was a hemisphere of debris and cables. Bent plating, shredded foam, and at the heart of it, trapped like two fish hauled out of a tank, human figures. Above her, the debris small enough to escape the net seemed to fly away from her, though it was really her spinning away from it.

"Hurry," Katria said. "They'll already be on their way."

"I know," Bobbie said.

At the net, they undid one of the pitons, opening it like the mouth of a tent. The gaping hole that led up into the station leaked water and coolant out, flying down past them as they hung. The nearer of the two bodies had taken the worst of the explosion. A crack along the collar and chest assembly. The inside of the helmet was a soup of blood. Bobbie wrestled the corpse closer, holding the arms and waist in a rescue hold while Katria fastened grips to the Laconian suit.

"Hold still," Katria said. The low-power radio made her voice seem farther away than she was.

"I'm doing my best," Bobbie said through clenched teeth.

"All right. He's solid."

"You're sure?"

"Positive," Katria said, and disengaged the primary piton. The net pulled free and fell away below them into nothing. Bobbie turned, forcing herself back to the airlock. Her muscles were burning from the effort. Twenty years ago, they wouldn't have been. The spin of the station made it feel like the dead Marine was pulling her down toward the depths, or else up into the emptiest sky in the universe. The power-armor helmet knocked against the back of hers. The dead arms and legs hung loose. Blood leaked from the

crack in the chest plate.

“I hope this suit’s not too fucked up,” Bobbie said.

“Hope later,” Katria said. “Walk now.”

At the platform, Bobbie shifted her weight and the dead Marine’s with a cry of effort loud enough that Katria turned off her radio. She hung from her safety tether and motioned Bobbie up. There wasn’t room on the platform for all three of them. Bobbie didn’t even nod, just turned the controls, and the platform rose. While the air cycled in, she sat across from the armor. Her heart was pounding. Her muscles ached. She’d just killed two of the enemy. There would always be a little something—that tug on her humanity that came from doing violence. There was a satisfaction too. It didn’t mean she was a good woman or a bad one. It meant she was a Marine.

Somewhere in the station right now, security forces and maintenance techs were scrambling to figure out whether the hole in the station or the possibility of rushing into more bombs was the greater threat. By the time they came to a decision, she needed to be as far away from here as possible.

The inner airlock door cycled open, and she hauled the corpse up into the locker room before she cycled the airlock again for Katria to use. When she popped her helmet seals, the dead man stank of blood and overheated metal and the same kind of lubricant she used on Betsy’s joints.

She pulled the body into the large gray transport box, closed the lid, and triggered the seals. Whatever alerts, whatever alarms the power armor had been sending out were blocked now. Or if Saba was wrong, she and Katria would find out soon enough.

The airlock cycled open while Bobbie was pulling off her environment suit. Her jumpsuit was drenched in sweat. Katria undid the seals of her own helmet and slung it into the locker.

“You get the package to Saba,” Katria said.

“I know the plan. I’m on it,” Bobbie said. “And thank you. I know we didn’t get off on the right foot, your crew and mine.”

“No need for that,” Katria said, popping the seals on her suit with the speed of long habit. “Just get the work done.”

“Copy that.”

“You know, this is the second time we’ve played the same trick. Use the blast to hide what we really meant? The data center. Now the missing power armor they’ll all think is out there in the black?”

“If they think we have it, they’ll change the shut-down code before we can reverse engineer it.”

“I know why,” Katria said. “I’m saying don’t count on doing it again. Patterns get people like you and me killed. This strategy’s played out. If Saba thinks otherwise, he’s a fool.”

Bobbie popped the wheels on the transport cart out, extended the handle. It rolled easily. She wasn’t looking forward to pushing the damned thing through the public areas of the station to Saba’s rendezvous, but she also wanted to get out of here as quickly as she could. She forced herself to take one long, slow look at it before she opened the doors, though. In case there was blood on it.

“There won’t be a third time,” she said.

“You sure of that?” Katria asked.

“Positive,” Bobbie said. “You get your people, and you tell them to be ready. Cracking the code on this suit is the trigger. Two minutes after that happens, we’re all getting the hell off this station.”

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Chapter Forty-Five: Drummer

Bright-green dots were blinking out. Not all at once, but enough to notice. A wave of darkness moving through the cloud of attacking ships. Drummer checked the timestamp, but there was no gap. Whatever the *Tempest* had done at Pallas, it still hadn't repeated here. So what the hell was going on?

"Is it the *Tempest*? Is it firing?"

"Yes, ma'am," the sensors tech said. "The missiles are coming from the *Tempest*. Yes."

"How fucking many of them?"

The cloud of green, the orange dot, and now a new form. Red threads blooming out from the enemy, thick and ropery as a capillary map. The ship itself was lost in them. They reached out toward the EMC vessels. The union fighters. The void cities.

"That isn't possible. That's wrong," Drummer said.

The *Tempest* hadn't resupplied since it had come through the ring gate. It had been in a major engagement already. There was no way for what she was looking at to be real.

"The data is confirmed," the sensor tech said. "Guard of Passage is reporting the same thing."

"Get me Cameron Tur," she said. "Or Lafflin." Anyone who might be able to make the incomprehensible make sense.

"Should I continue to fire?" the weapons tech asked.

"Are we still in a fucking fight? Then yes, you should keep firing."

Vaughn made a small, disapproving sound in his throat, but she was far past caring about the delicacy of his sensibilities. The red threads swam through the void. They only seemed slow on the display because the distances were so vast ...

Here and there a thread died, a PDC round or a missile destroying the *Tempest's* attack. But there were so many, and when even one slipped past the guard, another green dot blinked out. The green dots shifted, swirling in

the display as the ships did in the darkness. A few dove toward the *Tempest*, moving almost at the same speed as the torpedoes. As gentle as it looked on the display, it was a killing burn. A suicide run for the crews of every ship that did it. More followed suit until dozens of ships were driving down toward the enemy.

It was a tactic of unspeakable bravery and desperation. Drummer didn't notice that her hands were in fists until the ache caught her attention. She made her fingers open, looked at the little flaps of skin she'd carved off with her nails.

The suicide attack reached its peak. It reminded her of pictures she'd seen of cloudbursts over the deserts of Earth. Huge, angry clouds with numberless tentacles of gray falling from them. A torrent of water racing toward a parched landscape, and evaporating again before a drop could darken the soil.

On the visual display, the bright, dancing veins on the *Tempest* were fading, and now that she knew to look, Drummer could see tiny openings along the sides of the ship opening and closing like pores. The lights of the missiles' drive plumes were like blue fireflies.

"How can they *do* that?" she whispered past the tightness in her throat.

"I have Cameron Tur," the communications tech said.

The camera made his face even longer than it seemed in person. The light shone in his eyes.

"Where the fuck are you?" Drummer snapped. "Are you seeing this?"

There was almost no lag before he answered. He was close, then. One of the escape ships. "I don't understand. The number of missiles they've fired ... that they're *firing*. These can't be normal devices."

On the display, the last three suicide attackers blinked out. If the *Tempest* moved to avoid the debris fields, it wasn't enough to register at this scale. It looked as though the enemy wasn't even bothering to evade anymore.

"The first battle, we wanted to learn from them," Tur said, talking fast and not looking directly at the camera. "I mean, we wanted to win. Of course we wanted to win, but we didn't expect to. The data—*how* we lost—was as important as stopping them."

"Tur?"

"Maybe they were learning from us too. Maybe they recalibrated something about the regrowth of the ship. Or the missiles."

"They survived a direct nuclear strike," Drummer said. "Are you telling

me that's something they can just *do*?"

"Apparently?" Tur said. He licked his lips anxiously. "We knew from the moment they stripped the rail guns off the ring station that they are capable of focusing and directing incredible sources of power. Things we've only ever seen on celestial levels. Collapsing stars."

"Collapsing stars? We're fighting a supernova in the shape of a ship? Why the hell didn't you see this coming?" She was shouting. Her throat hurt with it.

Tur blinked and his jaw shifted forward. He would have looked like a man spoiling for a fight if it hadn't been for the tears on his cheeks. She didn't think those tears had anything to do with her raising her voice. "Ma'am, that ship stripped Pallas Station down to something less than atoms. It shut down *consciousness* throughout the system in a way that I don't have the structural language to explain, and it seems pretty fucking unimpressed by the idea of locality. It's affecting the nature of vacuum through the whole solar system. If you didn't know we were punching above our weight here, I'm not sure what I could have said to clarify that."

"There is a way to beat them," Drummer said, "and we are running out of time. Find me how to win this, and do it now."

She cut the connection before he had the chance to reply. Silence filled the control room. No one was looking straight at her, but she felt their attention like a weight. All the time she'd spent resisting the pressure to make the Transport Union into a police force—into a military—and here she was anyway.

"Mister Vaughn?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Find me whoever is in command of the EMC wing of the fleet. I need them now." *Whoever's still alive*, she thought, but didn't say.

"Yes, ma'am."

The weapons tech's voice shook. "Should we—"

"*Keep firing*," Drummer said.

Drummer felt a heat in her chest. A rage and a certainty. This was the moment that tested everything she'd meant to be. This was what it was to be a leader in a time of crisis. She felt the power of it, the raw will to succeed. To devastate and end the people who would destroy her and the systems she embodied. She rose to her feet, her hands behind her, and she knew that everyone in the control room who looked at her would see

nothing beyond her superhuman resolve. Not even Vaughn.

And she knew it for the hollow mask that it was. How fragile.

“Guard of Passage is reporting a missile strike that got past their PDCs,” Vaughn said. “They’re requesting permission to withdraw.”

“We can’t run away,” Drummer said. “If we break now—”

People’s Home shuddered. A sound like the wail of a demon rattled up from the deck, bellied out from the bulkheads, rained from the ceiling. She waited for the wide, low hiss of escaping atmosphere. The fading of screams as the air became too thin to carry them. Instead, Klaxons blared.

She held her voice as steady as she could. “Report?”

“We’re hit,” the sensors tech said. “Something hit us.”

“Do we know what?” Drummer said.

“Rail gun,” Vaughn said. “Appears to have impacted section twelve, just spinward of the medical facilities.”

“How bad’s the damage?”

“I’ll let you know as I have reliable information,” he said. “Still trying to identify the chain of command with the EMC.”

Which meant they were in disorder. She wondered whether the band of suicide ships had been led by some admiral bent on making their last stand count for something. People’s Home bucked again, then twice more.

“Engineering’s been hit,” Vaughn said. “The reactor’s ... I can’t tell. Something’s wrong with the reactor.”

If the magnetic bottle failed, it would be like a low-yield nuke going off. Even if it didn’t crack the city open like an egg, the systems that kept them all alive would be melted and fused. And the prospect of aid ships reaching them in the chaos of the battle were low enough to pass for never.

“Drop core,” Drummer said.

Vaughn didn’t reply, but the thrust gravity stopped. Drummer grabbed the edge of her crash couch and dragged herself back into it, strapping down with the ease of a lifetime’s habit. The automated emergency report showed long swaths of the city under lockdown, pressure doors isolating levels and halls. Keeping the air in the city as best they could. If she hadn’t sent away as many nonessential personnel as the ships would hold, it would have been worse. As it was, it still meant deaths. People who’d trusted the union elections to put someone in charge who would protect them. How many of them were dead now who’d been alive an hour ago? And how many more seconds before the next round came? It was like someone else’s

thought dropped into her own brain.

A sickly calm washed over her. This was what it felt like to see death. To know that the worst was coming, and there was nothing she could do to turn it aside.

“Keep firing,” she said. *If we’re going down, let’s go down swinging.*

The weapons tech coughed out something between laughter and despair. “We are dry on rail-gun rounds. We are at six conventional plasma torpedoes, and five percent on PDC.”

Fire anyway, Drummer thought. *Throw everything at them.* Except that if the *Tempest* threw a missile at them, there would be no defense. Drummer closed her eyes. The temptation was still there. If it meant that she died—that all the men and women under her command died with her—at least it would be over. She wouldn’t wake up in a wave of dread. She wouldn’t watch the structures she’d sworn to protect be peeled away by a threat she hadn’t considered worth thinking about until the *Tempest* had flown through Laconia gate.

Come on. There has to be a way. Think of it. Find it.

“Should I maintain fire?” the weapons tech asked.

Drummer didn’t open her eyes. The moment stretched. “No,” she said. “Shift to defensive fire only. We can’t shoot down rail-gun rounds, but we can hold their missiles off.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the weapons tech said. She could hear the relief in his voice. She wondered if he would have thrown away the last scrap of protection on her order. And she wondered whether she’d have done it, in his position. Maybe.

“I have a connection to Colonel Massey,” Vaughn said.

“Who?”

“Commander Fernand Massey. Of the *Arcadia Rose*, ma’am. He’s in command of the EMC ships.”

“I’ve never heard his name before,” Drummer said.

“No, ma’am,” Vaughn said. All the admirals were dead. All the people she might have known. As ruined as People’s Home was, the fleet was in tatters. Her tactical display listed the ships disabled or dead. There were so many. A quarter of the combined fleet incapacitated or destroyed. They’d thrown everything at the *Tempest*. A wall of tungsten and explosives. And the enemy was still under thrust. Still firing.

It had all been a show. She’d known that. The *Tempest*’s intentionally

predictable approach to Earth and Mars. Letting the EMC and union prepare themselves. She'd thought it was just a way to erode their morale, but it was more than that. She saw it now. They'd known that they would win, so they'd invited the enemy to make the strongest showing it could. That way, when victory came, it would be unequivocal.

"Ma'am," Vaughn said.

"Yes, fuck it. Fine. I'll talk to him."

"No, ma'am. There's a new message for you. A tightbeam from the *Tempest*. It's listed as 'command to command.'"

Something twisted in her gut. Part despair and part relief. If they were sending messages, maybe they weren't sending nukes. At least not until she'd had the chance to hear what they had to say.

She undid her restraints and launched herself to a wall handhold. Her crash couch hissed and spun on its gimbals. "Route to my office, please," she said, as if it were a normal message on a normal day and not the dividing line between living under a conquering boot and dying before the end of shift.

Anxious curiosity shone in every expression—even Vaughn's—as she passed. She could have played the message there, in front of all of them. Maybe she should have. Nothing in it would be secret for long anyway. But she didn't want anyone watching her when she saw it. Except Saba, and she wanted him there badly.

In her office, she closed the door, then locked it. The little fern in the corner held its fronds high in the null g. A few things she hadn't stowed—a drinking bulb, a printout on plastic flimsy, a clump of potting soil—floated in the air. She'd spent too long in spin gravity. She'd come to assume it would always be there, a few years' habit enough to erase generations of experience and Belter identity.

She was aware that her brain wasn't functioning normally. She felt more like she was piloting her body than living it. She knew it was shock and trauma, but knowing it changed nothing.

She strapped herself into her chair, took control of her personal interface, and opened her pending messages. Three were listed as unread. One was from the commander of one of the refugee ships, one from a captain of one of the EMC ships, and the last was listed as Admiral Anton Trejo of the Laconian Imperial Navy. Somewhere in a different universe, the Klaxons stopped their wailing. She wished now that she'd brought

Vaughn at least. And maybe a whiskey.

She started the message playback.

Trejo sat at his station, his uniform immaculate and pressed. His thinning black hair was in place and his eyes a bright green. He didn't even have the good taste to look disheveled. His smile radiated warmth and sympathy. She half expected him to start talking to her about his relationship to God or a business opportunity she should keep quiet about for fear of starting a rush.

"President Drummer, I hope." He drawled like someone from the Mariner Valley. "If not, then please accept my condolences for her passing. I am Admiral Trejo of the Laconian battleship *Heart of the Tempest*, but you knew that. I'm reaching out to you now because I don't want to be misunderstood. Despite all the hostilities the Transport Union and the Earth-Mars Coalition have greeted me with, we're not enemies. Not you and me. Not the union and the empire. Not Sol system and Laconia. The high consul knew that there would be resistance to this change. We all did, and we respect that you had to do the things you've done.

"When people like you and I enter into a new phase of history, there's ... I don't know what you'd call it. Birth pangs? There's a time when you have to expect violence, even though you don't celebrate it. When the high consul first explained to me the parameters of this mission, I wasn't pleased. One ship, no backup, against an entire system? But he brought me around. And this moment, this message, is part of why I felt that his approach was the only moral way forward.

"I have tried to reach Secretary-General Li, but he isn't returning my messages yet. You're here, and you are at least equal in dignity to anyone on the inner planets. You can end this. I understand that you had to fight. You had to try to destroy me. I don't blame you for this. But I am permitted at this point to accept your surrender. Do this, and the inner planets will follow you. You will be treated fairly by the new administration. I promise you that.

"If you are not yet willing to accept defeat, then I would ask you, out of what I hope is mutual respect, to tell me one thing. What is the number of dead that you need in order to show history that your choice to end this was wisdom? That carrying on the fight would not have been bravery but foolishness. A hundred more. A thousand more. A million. A billion. Only say how many more corpses will make this possible for you, and I will

provide them.” He spread his hands. “Tell me the number. I await your reply.”

The message ended. Drummer floated against her restraints and thought about whether to play the message again, if only to give herself a few more moments before she went back to the command center. She could feel her pulse in her throat and in her wrists—a throbbing exhaustion. Released herself, pushed toward the door, down the short hall.

They were all silent when she arrived. She looked at her crash couch, there before the display. The moth-eaten wave of green. The tiny, indomitable dot of orange.

“Vaughn, I’ll need you to send a message to the *Heart of the Tempest*.”

“Ma’am,” Vaughn said, nodding crisply. *I could order him to his death. I could tell them all to fight to the last breath.*

“The message is this: ‘The number is zero.’ Send that, and then order all union ships to stand down.”

She looked for some reaction in Vaughn’s face. Rage or relief or disappointment. It was like expecting emotions from a stone.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Is there anything else?”

“No,” she said.

There is nothing else. No way forward. Her fight was over. If there was any hope to stand against this empire, it was someplace else now.

If.

Chapter Forty-Six: Singh

He didn't see the catastrophe coming. Even when the scope of it became clear, he struggled to understand it. Blindsided.

The talk in the station—the talk everywhere—was about Sol system and the surrender. Singh watched it play out in newsfeeds and discussion forums, taking the role of official censor more for the joy of being present in the unfolding of history than from any immediate need. The combined fleet of the Transport Union and the EMC beaten and standing down. The newsfeeds from the local sources in Sol system were anguish and despair, with only a few outlets calling unconvincingly for the battle to continue.

For their own side, Carrie Fisk and the Laconian Congress of Worlds proved to be an apt tool for the job, praising the Transport Union's capitulation as a moment of liberation for the former colony worlds. *The rules and restrictions on trade are no longer being dictated by the generational politics of Sol. By being outside the system of favoritism, nepotism, political horse-trading and compromise, Laconia is positioned to bring exactly the reforms that humanity needs.* He noticed that she shied away from mentioning High Consul Duarte's name. It was always just *Laconia*.

Which was fine. The two were essentially the same.

But it was the conversation beyond her and other specifically recruited allies that made him feel best. Governor Kwan from Bara Gaon Complex issued a statement of support for the new administration so quickly that Singh was almost certain it had been recorded in advance. Auberon's local parliament also sent a public message to put themselves in place as early supporters of the new regime. New Spain, New Roma, Nyingchi Xin, Félicité, Paradíso, Pátria, Asylum, Chrysanthemum, Ríocht. Major colonies, some with populations already in the millions, had seen the battle at Leuctra Point and drawn the only sane conclusion. The power center of the human race had shifted, and the wise were shifting with it.

The imminent arrival of the *Typhoon* also helped. He had known Rear Admiral Song since he'd entered the service. Not that they'd ever been close, but she was a face and a name that carried a weight of familiarity. He'd only traded a handful of messages with her, mostly to arrange the piece for the newsfeeds, but speaking to her had reminded him powerfully of home. The routines he'd had on Laconia, the taste of the tea, the little park where he would sit with Elsa when she was newborn and Natalia was sleeping. Watching sunbirds dive into the pond. Sending James Holden back had begun it, and the coming of the *Typhoon* would complete it. Traffic to and from Laconia. Proof that the great roads of space were open.

The longing it called forth in him was vast and complex. The open sky that he wouldn't see as long as he remained governor of Medina. The touch of his wife's skin against his, which he could look forward to. His daughter's laughter and the soft sounds she made at the edge of sleep.

There was a way in which every day since he'd stepped off the *Storm* had been a pause, like holding his breath. And soon, soon, his real work could begin. With the *Typhoon* in place and Sol system conquered, the empire would be unassailable, and humanity's future assured. He'd ignored his own anxiety and impatience, and now that he could almost relax, he felt them straining for that release.

Taken together, all the good news nearly made up for the bad.

"By comparison, the attack was minor," Overstreet said, walking beside him as they went to the executive commissary. "We lost two Marines, but the infrastructure damage was trivial compared with the previous attack."

Singh wasn't sure whether they had come off the patterned time for the executive staff or if word had spread before him and cleared the commissary, but only four people were seated at tables enough for fifty. The door attendant ushered them to a small table set apart from the rest, where they wouldn't be casually overheard. He and Overstreet made their requests—green tea for Singh, a local drink called black castle for Overstreet—before they went on with their conversation.

"We have them on the run," Singh said. "Smaller attacks, targets of convenience instead of strategic ones? This underground is running out of steam."

"That is certainly possible, sir," Overstreet agreed. "Still, I'll feel better when we have them all in custody."

It probably wasn't another dig at his decision to send away Holden, but

Singh felt a little sting all the same. The drinks arrived with a small plate of pastries. Overstreet held back until Singh had taken one. A small point, but one that Singh appreciated.

“What is the status of our friend’s operation?” he asked.

Overstreet leaned forward, folding his hands around the cup of black castle. His mouth narrowed. “We should know in about half an hour now. If your informant is what he claims to be, he and his co-conspirators will be walking into the power-routing station. I have five officers and five Marines waiting for them.”

“Do you expect a fight?”

“I’m hoping for one,” Overstreet said. “There’s nothing the troops would like better than an excuse to break a couple heads.”

“I need those brains intact.”

“Fingers, then,” Overstreet said with a chuckle. “No one loves a mad bomber.”

“Fair enough. The informant, though. He goes free.”

Overstreet nodded, but he looked like he’d tasted something bitter. Singh leaned in a degree and let the silence ask the question for him. Overstreet met his eyes, looked away, and shrugged.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, sir. If we take the others and he slips away, his people will know he’s working for us. They could turn him back.”

Singh felt a stab of annoyance, but he pushed it down. He had to remember what he’d learned with Tanaka. Better that he be patient.

“You think he may be a triple agent?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time something like that had happened. The one thing you know about someone who’s willing to compromise his allies is that he’s willing to compromise his allies.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Question him, the same as the others,” Overstreet said. “When his trial comes up, put a word in the judge’s ear.”

Singh sipped his tea. It was still a little too hot. It scalded. “I’m not certain that helps us build a network of locals who will work with us.”

“If I do my job right, we’ll be able to put a replacement in his spot. And a little clemency come sentencing time is more than he deserves.”

It felt like a betrayal. The man, compromised though he was, had done his part. He’d brought the information to prevent the sabotage of Medina’s sensors to Singh. Handing him over for trial didn’t seem like a just reward

for loyalty. But Overstreet had a point. Jordao was a member of a conspiracy against the station and Laconia. He likely had blood on his hands, and there was a greater loyalty that a governor owed to his own people than anything a local thug could command.

“Fair enough,” Singh said. “A normal interrogation. But tell your people just that. If they need to take their frustrations out on someone, make it the ones who weren’t working with us.”

“I can do that,” Overstreet agreed. And a moment later, “It’ll be good having this wrapped up before the *Typhoon* gets here. I was hoping this wouldn’t drag on.”

“To a degree,” Singh said, “it’s to be expected. Periods of transition invite a certain—”

Overstreet started. He put his black castle down fast enough that it sloshed onto the table, then he checked the monitor on his wrist. The red of a priority alert glowed there like a little flame. He tapped it with a scowl. His eyes went dead. Singh’s breath went shallow.

Something had happened. Another terrorist attack.

“What is it?” Singh asked.

“We have an unauthorized launch,” Overstreet said, standing up. Singh stood with him, drinks and baked goods forgotten. Adrenaline surged through him. A ship—even a small one—crashing into Medina could do terrible damage. Could crack the drum, destroy the station. Overstreet was already walking for the security station, fast, scissoring steps that weren’t quite running and weren’t quite anything else. Singh had to trot to catch up.

“What ship?” Singh asked.

“Old Martian gunship,” Overstreet said. “Name’s the *Rocinante*.”

“James *Holden*’s ship?” What did that mean? Was his crew making some kind of doomed bid to catch the *Lightbreaker* and bring him back? Or take revenge for his loss?

“It has capacity for twenty missiles and a keel-mounted rail gun. Not to mention a fusion drive that could melt the station to slag if it chose to,” Overstreet said, “but it hasn’t opened fire. It’s staying close to the station with maneuvering thrusters.”

“Can we take them out?”

“We destroyed Medina’s defenses when we took it,” Overstreet said. “We have a few that were repairable, but without the supplies from the *Typhoon*, our abilities are limited.”

“The *Storm*, then,” Singh said.

Overstreet took a deep breath, turning smartly at the intersection. Surprise and anxiety made the security office seem kilometers away. “I don’t like the idea of having a close-quarters battle between those ships right near the station. If the *Rocinante* is just trying to escape, there’s an argument for letting it go.”

“We can’t rely on the enemy’s goodwill to protect us,” Singh said, and opened a priority connection to the *Storm*. Commander Davenport, his executive officer on the journey out, answered like he’d been waiting.

“Davenport, this is Governor Singh. I am formally instructing you to leave dock immediately and protect the station from the gunship *Rocinante*.”

“Yes, sir,” Davenport said, then hesitated. “We are presently at less than full crew, sir—”

“A little short-staffed now is better than a full ship too late. Try to chase them away from the station before you engage.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, and he dropped the connection.

Ahead of them, security was clearing the corridor. An emergency alert sounded and a gentle voice began. *This is an emergency alert. Report to shelters immediately and await official instructions. This is an emergency alert.*

The security center was buzzing like a kicked hive. Voices raised in alarm thickened the air. The feeds from drones and surveillance cameras filled every screen. Singh assumed it was all in response to the *Rocinante*’s launch until an older woman in security uniform barked at them. “Major Overstreet, sir! We have reports of a riot in the detention cells.”

“What?” Singh said.

Overstreet’s voice was level and calm. Like a pilot whose ship was coming to pieces around him. “What do we know?”

“Someone overrode the containment on the cells. There was some kind of explosion. The guards have retreated to the security lock, but I’m getting reports of gunfire from the civilian side too. I have two fire teams on their way.”

“Good,” Overstreet said. He turned to Singh. “Sir, it is my opinion that the sabotage effort your friend discovered is part of a much larger operation, and whatever the enemy has in mind, it’s happening right now.”

Singh shook his head, not as disagreement, but like a drunk man trying

to clear away the fog. Some part of him was still thinking that because they had the guard force ready to keep the station sensor arrays up, things were under control. That he was prepared for whatever was happening, even as it bloomed out around him.

“I understand,” he said.

“As your chief of security, I recommend that we get you and any other essential personnel in lockdown until the situation is better controlled.”

“Of course. I’ll return to my office.”

“Might not want to stay that near an obvious target, sir. I have a secure position prepared. I’ll have a fire team escort you and stay there until we understand better what we’re looking at,” Overstreet said. He turned to the older woman and gestured toward Singh. “He needs an escort.”

“On their way, sir.”

Belay that, Singh thought. *I’ll stay here*. Except that it was a stupid impulse, based in pride. A leader should stand with his team in a time of crisis, but—as much as it galled him—Overstreet was that leader in this moment. He would only get in the way. And even so, part of him wanted to remain. To be *seen* to be in control.

“I will expect updates,” Singh said. “When you need my authorization, I will be waiting.”

“Thank you, sir,” Overstreet said without missing a beat, then turned away. A moment later, four Marines in power armor stepped in through the main door and saluted.

“Governor Singh, sir.”

“You’re my escort, then?” Singh said with a smile that he hoped looked confident. “Let’s be on our way.”

As they walked, Singh consulted his own wrist monitor. There was too much happening—too many individual groups coordinating on the fly—to have a complete picture of the situation. The *Storm* was maneuvering, and the *Rocinante* hadn’t yet made an aggressive move. The riot at the detention cells was growing more violent, and the Marine fire team was requesting permission to escalate to lethal countermeasures. And Overstreet’s words came back, haunting with their implications: *My best estimate is that a third of our operating personnel are open to working against us*.

The hardest thing was to trust his own people to do their jobs well, but it was what he had to do. He wondered if the high consul suffered the same thing—knowing that all the critical action would be taken by others who

were guided by his orders, but in conditions he could only guess at, and in places where his intervention, even if it were possible, could only muddy the waters. It was a subtle and terrible insight. The powerlessness of control.

The warning echoed through the station. A man ran through an intersection ahead of them without pausing to look. Singh's legs burned a little from his pace.

"Where are we going?" he asked the head of the fire team.

"We have a hard shelter at the end of this corridor, sir. It's a bit away from the main offices to be a less obvious target, but it has independent environmental controls and—"

The Marine froze in midstride. Singh felt a rush of fear, looked down the corridor to see what danger the man was reacting to. There was nothing.

"What's the matter?" he said. It was only when he got no answer that he realized all the Marines had stopped. Their visors were opaque, their radios silent, their power armor in lockdown. Singh stood, suddenly alone and terribly aware of his own vulnerability. The back of his head itched at the idea that someone might be targeting him right then, and he had no protection.

For a moment, he saw Kasik again, dying before him. Was all of this a distraction to pull him away from safety? Hands trembling, he strode fast down the corridor to the first door. A public restroom. He stepped in, made certain he was alone, and locked the door behind him. His heart was beating hard enough to feel the ticking of it in his neck. Leaning against a narrow sink, he pulled his monitor and keyed in his security codes. His Marine lockdown hadn't been triggered. The Marines shouldn't have been disabled. Someone was putting out a false shutdown signal.

Overstreet answered his connection request at once.

"My fire team is disabled," he said.

"Yes, sir. I'm seeing the same with all the powered teams. Stay where you are. I am sending a conventional escort to your location."

"What the hell is going on out there? I need a report!"

Annoyance flickered across Overstreet's face, gone almost before Singh could register it. "The loss of functioning fire teams has let the situation at the detention cells deteriorate. I have initial reports that something's happening at the dockmaster's office. I'm waiting for better intelligence on that, but I am seeing what looks like several ships getting ready for launch.

The *Storm* has engaged with the *Rocinante*, but not conclusively as yet.”

Now, may I please go do my job instead of talking about it? He didn’t say it, but Singh heard it anyway.

“I will wait for the second escort,” Singh said. “Carry on.”

He dropped the connection. In the mirror, he looked small. Frightened. He stood, straightened his uniform, and composed himself until his reflection looked more like a man confident in his control of the situation. It was important when his people came that he give the right impression. That was all he could do now.

Something thumped deep below him. A strike on the station drum, maybe. A sign of the battle going on all around him while he hid in a public toilet.

The underground had caught him unprepared. To give them their due, he’d underestimated their coordination and their numbers and their will. He had been told that the Belters of the old regime had a culture of violent resistance. After the sabotage of the oxygen tank, he had thought he understood what that meant, but he hadn’t appreciated the depth of it until now.

Their plan was unfolding right now all around the station. All he could hope was that the one place he knew that he was ahead of them would prove decisive. If disabling the sensor arrays was critical to their plan, he could still bring all the rest of it crashing down.

Chapter Forty-Seven: Bobbie

Bobbie's harness consisted of three magnetic locks about the size of her palm and two bands of woven nylon that looked like they'd been green sometime in their past. Basic safety equipment, standard on any ship, any dock, any station outside a gravity well. Wondering whether they worked was like wondering if her next footstep would sink through the atoms of the deck.

"You think these things are going to hold?" she asked. Her radio was set to a broadcast strength so low a thick T-shirt would have jammed her. Amos, beside her, looked up the long curve of the *Gathering Storm's* exterior. His helmet hid his expression, but his tone was fatalistic.

"If it doesn't, this'll be a weird day."

The surface of the ship wasn't like anything Bobbie had ever seen. Faceted like a gem, without the protrusions of PDC cannons or sensor arrays. The pinks and blues seemed less like the color of the material itself and more like some kind of refraction. Something that it did to light that was much weirder than selective absorption. The darkness of the slow zone was profound. Her helmet had to enhance everything with what it picked up from the glow of the ring station. It even stretched the edges, pulling ultraviolet and infrared into the visible range, just to have more to work with. It was always like this, but waiting—exposed and uncertain—made it seem ominous.

While the surface of the ship looked like crystal, it was soft in a way that she wanted to think of as foam. What it really reminded her of was skin. The magnetic locks bound her to it in a rough, uncomfortable cradle, or would once the ship was under way. Provided that the magnetic locks held on. The red glow that said they were clamped was solid, except that every now and then she thought she caught a flicker of amber. The other ten members of the insertion team besides her and Amos were all using the same equipment. Their suits were all low-level environment suits. None of

them had better than welder's padding as armor. They looked more like a cleaning crew than a crack military force. It worried her how true that might be, but that was for after the locks held. If the *Storm* pushed off from the dock and left them all floating behind it like a snake's shed skin, it would be up to Alex to solve the problem of the enemy destroyer. And they'd probably all die. There was no upside.

"*Really* hope these hold," Bobbie said.

The encrypted alert came. Bobbie tapped her forearm controls. When Alex's voice came through, it had the thick Mariner Valley drawl that meant he was scared shitless but also a little euphoric on the fear. "This is Alex Kamal of the *Rocinante* calling out to my friends and family and all ships at sea. We are about to start this rodeo. Breaking loose from the docking clamps in ten. Nine ..."

"Brace," Bobbie said. "We don't know how fast this is going to happen."

She took the nylon cords, tracked them in tight, and waited for the *Gathering Storm* to leave port.



In order to get there, they'd crawled out from the elevator shaft that ran the length of the station from the command and control at the bow down to engineering at the stern. They'd moved quickly, skimming along centimeters above the station. The others had been laughing until Bobbie reminded them that low-power radio wasn't radio silence and politely suggested they all shut the fuck up instead of getting the team killed. After that, she'd been alone with the sound of her own breath, the smells of old rubber and someone else's sweat. Alex had been on her right, Amos on her left, and the dock spiked with ships a quarter of a klick before them. Past that, just the blackness of the slow zone, and the killing nothingness beyond the gates.

The drum had spun beneath them. The scars and damage from the brief battle with the *Storm* still showed in blackened streaks and bright patch foam. Medina had taken more than her fair share of licks in her life, and today wasn't going to be any better.

They'd pulled out every trick that any of Saba's underground had up their sleeves. Stealing the welding rigs, uncrating the hidden caches of

weapons, compromising the access shaft that let them through. Ever since the Laconians had come through the gate, smart people familiar with the station had been planning for this moment. Maybe since before that, if some of them were smugglers.

As they passed over the last of the drum, Alex split off. He had to make his way almost a third of the way anti-spinward from the *Storm* to reach the *Rocinante*. She told herself it wasn't the last time she'd see him as if she knew it were true. Then with a flick of her fist, she'd directed the insertion team toward the dark, looming form of the destroyer.

The plan was to lure the *Gathering Storm* off the station. As soon as its docking clamps were off and no new soldiers could get on, Bobbie and Amos would breach the hull and lead an insertion and take the *Storm* off the playing field. Whether they did that by blowing its reactor, sabotaging its controls, or steering it out toward the nothingness between the gates was going to be a game-day call once she was inside. Without better knowledge of the ship's internal workings, improvising was a better option than pretending she could make a solid plan.

The secondary objective was to get her people off the *Storm* and safely picked up by one of the fleeing ships. The tertiary objective was to get away herself.



Alex reached zero, and Bobbie thought she felt a little tremor through the *Storm* as the *Roci* blew her clamps and spun out away from the docks using the body of Medina as cover. Two of her magnetic locks flickered amber, and then safely back to red.

It was a day with a lot of ways to die packed in it. Like Alex, she couldn't keep from grinning. Maybe it was a Martian thing. She stayed braced, her feet against the hull, knees bent. The minutes stretched. The blower in her helmet felt cold against her forehead. That meant she was starting to sweat.

"How you holding together there, Babs?" Amos asked. The radio made it sound like he was half a klick away and whispering.

"I'll be fine once they get this ship out of dock."

"Yeah. Not really leaping into action, are they?"

“We were hoping to catch them flat-footed.”

“That’s true,” Amos said. “Still.”

“Maybe they didn’t notice,” one of the others said.

Or maybe they’re waiting for more troops to get on board, Bobbie thought, and the *Gathering Storm* surged out to the black, snapping the nylon bands taut.

They were on maneuvering thrusters. Fifteen meters down from them, a blast of superheated steam vented, pushing the destroyer into a fast rotation. It didn’t seem to come from anyplace, as if the thruster were hidden under the weird not-metal of the hull until they wanted it. Good thing they hadn’t set up their camp there or at least one of them would probably have been blasted off the ship and cooked to death already.

The *Storm* lurched. The rumble of the thrusters translated itself up her legs. Medina fell away like someone had dropped it. The drive plume of the *Storm*’s main drive flared, and the ship jumped forward. Only about a quarter of a g. They weren’t going to risk melting Medina to slag. Still, it was a little eerie seeing her shadow stretched long ahead of her on the body of the ship. A reminder that if she fell, she’d die in fire.

“Amos,” she said. “Make us a hole.”

“I see you coming after me,” Alex shout-sang. “You ain’t catching the *Roci*, friend. We’re just too damned pretty for you.”

“Alex, get off this channel,” she yelled, then remembered that her signal was intentionally too weak to carry. She shook her head and hoped he wouldn’t be too distracting.

Amos had the welding kit out, power supply strapped to his side. With two broken ribs, she figured the rig had to hurt like hell, but nothing about his movement betrayed the pain. Her own cracked tailbone wasn’t making it any more comfortable either. They’d done themselves a lot of damage getting this far. She had to make sure it didn’t make a difference. Pain was just her body telling her something. She could choose to ignore it. Amos held the torch to the hull, and everything went bright. Sparks seemed to stream away behind them, curving down and vanishing against the hull like gravity was pulling them and not just the turning of the ship.

“Weapons ready,” she barked, and the others acknowledged. If the destroyer had the double-hulled design that all Martian ships had, cutting their way through here would only be the first step. But it was a critical one. There was damage they could do there, but it was also difficult to defend,

and with none of the *Storm's* crew there, tactics like flooding it with hydrogen and oxygen could take out her whole team without risk to the enemy. Tempting as it was, she had to get into the ship proper, and—

“Ah, Babs? This is weird as shit.”

Amos stood braced. The cut from the welding torch was a line of brightness in the hull half a meter long. Half a meter long and shrinking fast.

“What have we got?”

“Remember how it looked like the hull could repair itself? It's doing it now too.”

“That going to be a problem?”

“Yeah,” Amos said. “I'd say that'll make this hard.”

The *Storm* lurched under them. The drive plume brightened below them, and the *Storm* gathered speed. The acceleration pulled the straps taut as the thrust gravity made the nuclear-powered flames of the plume more definitively *down*. The bow-most of Bobbie's magnetic locks flickered amber and slid a few centimeters before it went red again and stopped. The little moment of give shot adrenaline through her body. Her heart was thudding in her ears. Her voice was so calm it sounded like someone else.

“Got any bright ideas?”

“Lemme try something,” he said, and hunkered down.

He cut again, but in a tight curve, not making a hole they could breach through, but something smaller. When he got around it, he punched in, pushing the little core of hull material into the space within the ship. The circle he'd made instantly began closing, but Amos was carving slivers off its edge. He pared the hole wider and wider, even as it fought to narrow. His motions were fast and efficient. He didn't slow down even as the ship bucked and turned under them, the proof of a lifetime's physical labor made into elegance. Bobbie knew that if she'd tried this, she'd never have been able to keep up, but with Amos, the hole grew wider.

“Edges are going to be toasty,” Amos said. “Nothing I can do about that.”

Saba's voice murmured in Bobbie's ear. *Marine fire teams have reached the detention cells. Time to turn our little friends off.*

“Sooner would be better than later,” Bobbie said.

“You ain't wrong about that,” Amos said. He started whistling tunelessly between his teeth. “I'm not going to be able to stop this while folks go

through.”

“Fuck that,” one of the others said. “Not winding up half in and half out, me.”

Bobbie turned to the soldier. “You’ll do as you’re told, or I will shoot you in the head as an example to others,” she said, she thought more politely than the man deserved. “Get next to the hole. You’re going in on one. Three ... two ...”

The man dove through, Amos cutting through the nylon bands as he went. The hole didn’t close over him, but only because Amos kept carving the sides.

“Next up,” Bobbie said, pointing at the nearest soldier. “You. Three. Two. One.”

Again and again, Bobbie shoved one of her team through the molten hole of the hull. The abandoned magnetic locks clustered around it like wildflowers in a garden, the cut tethers shifting as the ship shifted. Like seaweed in an unsteady current.

Medina swam above them, and twice Bobbie caught glimpses of the *Rocinante*’s drive plume limning the station like a sunrise that never came.

“Gonna be tight, Babs. This is taking a lot more fuel than I budgeted.”

“Keep going,” she said.

He did. Eight. Nine. Ten. And then it was just the two of them.

“We’re good,” she said. “Give me the rig. I’ll get you in.”

“I appreciate that thought,” Amos said. “But just between you and me? You’re not that good a welder. Head in. I’ll make it.”

“No heroic gestures.”

“Oh, I’m not dying out here,” Amos said, and pointed toward the interior of the ship with his chin. “Worst-case scenario, I’m dying inside there.”

Bobbie shifted her magnetic locks to the edge of the burning hole, then launched through, tucking her legs in. Arms caught her and pulled her to the side. The suits’ worklights filled the space between the hulls with blue-white radiance.

It was eerie. It was familiar as a well-loved face, but wrong. Where spars of titanium, ceramic, and steel should have been, crystals grew. Lines of fracture shot through them and then disappeared like watching lightning discharge in a bottle. Where sheets of metal and carbon lace should have been, seamless blankets of something that she tried to think of as lobster

shell and then fabric and then ice defined the spaces.

It was unmistakably a Martian destroyer. And it was like nothing she'd ever seen before.

"Coming through," Amos said, and she turned to pull him safely to a handhold. The hole where they'd breached squeezed tight. It didn't completely close, but the opening ended up five centimeters across. In the worklights, Amos smiled his empty, amiable smile.

"Well, that part's done," he said. "Hope the next hull's a bit more familiar, if you know what I mean."

Alex was keeping the chase consistent. It was the only reason they weren't being bounced through the space between the hulls like rats in a dryer. The entry into the ship proper was always the most dangerous moment. Bobbie had known that from the start.

They moved quickly, bracing at the hand- and footholds, until they found a stretch of bulkhead. Amos checked the fuel on the welding rig and shook his head, but he didn't speak. The smoke shook and fell away with every turn of the ship like water falling from a faucet. The hull didn't heal itself, but that was the only good thing.

"That's going to be small," she said.

"It's going to get done," Amos said. "Any more, and we'll be trying to bend it to get through."

Amos cut, and air and light spilled in from the other side. The ship's interior was still pressurized. That was odd, for battle conditions. If the crew of the *Storm* hadn't realized they were being boarded, they were finding out now. Bobbie squeezed through first into the back of a bunk room. Two rows of gel-mattress bunks, not that different from the quarters on the *Roci* where the Marine fire teams were meant to sleep. These beds were empty and neat. She took a position by the doorway while the others pushed in. Amos came last, slapping a plastic patch over the hole that bellied out into the space between the hulls like a balloon before it hardened.

"I don't want to shoot you bastards," Alex shouted through the radio. It was a code phrase. The *Storm* was getting close. The *Roci*'s evasions were going to fail, and soon.

Bobbie popped the door open, ducked her head out and back, and a bullet tore a streak out of the frame where her skull had been.

"How many?" the man beside her asked.

“At least one.” She looked around the bunk room for something—anything—that would give them the edge. “This place is a death trap, and we’re out of time. You three, with me. You two go in firing left, you to the right with me. If you see a grenade or anything that might be one, duck back in. Everyone else, into the bunks, on your backs. Set up to shoot between your feet if the bad guys rush the door. You have four seconds. Go.”

She picked high when they went out. The woman crouched down beside her could have been anyone, but their lives depended on each other now. Down the corridor, Bobbie saw the intersection where the fire had come from before. A single head bobbed out and back. She aimed for it, but she couldn’t tell if she hit.

Another doorway stood across the hall. She pointed and gestured. They made the crossing in a rush. Another cabin. Bunks for twelve, but no sign that they’d been used. No one fired at them. Whoever had tried before was down or fled. Going for whatever reinforcements the ship had. Surprise had gotten them this far. Skill had to take it from here.

“Amos?” she said into the radio.

The walls of the ship attenuated his response, but she could still hear him. “Babs? How do you want to play this one?”

It had been too many years since her ship tactics, but this one at least was easy. The ship had two points of vulnerability to boarding attack—engineering and command. The enemy had the home-field advantage, but if they were understaffed, they’d protect whichever one they thought she was making a play for. So the smart thing was to feint at one and hit the other.

“I’m taking these five and heading for ops. Wait two minutes, then take yours for engineering.”

“You got it. Are we looking to disable or blow up?”

The *Storm* lurched again. A smooth rattling sound echoed through the ship like a chain slipping off a shelf. It was different enough from what she was used to that she almost didn’t recognize it as PDC fire. They were going for the *Roci*.

Before she could speak, Saba’s voice came through on the radio. *Evacuation teams are at the docks. Waiting for clear sign, yeah?* And then, almost overlapping, Naomi’s answer. *Message received. We’re going in.* The underground’s ships were ready to launch. Medina’s sensor arrays were going down soon. The window was opening. It wouldn’t stay that way long.

“The first thing you find that kills this ship, do it,” Bobbie said.

“What about evac?”

She knew what he meant. If he could blow the reactor, should he? Was the mission more important than living through it?

“Use your judgment, big guy,” she said. “I trust you.”

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Chapter Forty-Eight: Clarissa

There were only two ways that she felt anymore. Either she had the shakes or she was exhausted. The shakes part had been nasty when it started because it felt like being scared—jittery and heart racing. And because it felt like fear, she kept thinking she was afraid, and then becoming afraid without any focus or reason. Once she understood it was just her shitty aftermarket endocrine system leaking into her bloodstream, it helped. At least she understood that it wasn't just her going crazy with amorphous anxiety. She still shook, though.

In the worst of it, she'd go back to her old mantra, the one from prison. *I have killed, but I am not a killer. Because a killer is a monster, and monsters aren't afraid.* She felt like she was afraid all the time now, and in that frame, it was almost comforting.

The superstitious part of her kept thinking that she'd invited this shape to come into her life with the sympathetic magic of her words. The rational part thought she'd invited it by paying a shitload of money to have illegal body modifications as part of an insane adolescent revenge fantasy. That and the part where she'd killed a bunch of people.

"You okay?" Naomi asked.

Clarissa lifted her hand in the same Schrödinger's answer she always had, no matter how she expressed it. Always yes, and always no. Yes, I'm fine in that I am not presently in medical collapse. No, having that be what *fine* meant didn't ratify her early life choices.

"You?"

"Fine," Naomi said in a tone of voice that probably meant the same thing. Ever since Holden had been taken, a light had gone out of Naomi's eyes. After discovering the *Lightbreaker* was gone and Holden with it, Naomi wasn't catatonic from grief, and so sure. Fine.

They were waiting on a bench at the edge of a field on the inner face of the drum. Wheat stretched out to their right, curving up and away from

them, ripening in the light of the false sun. A woman in a systems control uniform walked along the path holding a little boy's hand. He stared at Clarissa as they passed. She could practically hear, *What's wrong with that woman, Mommy?* he was thinking it so loud.

It felt a little weird being out among the normal inhabitants of Medina. All of the people going about their lives like they were trying to forget that the Transport Union had ever existed. Picking their kids up from school, eating dinner with their friends, working their jobs and performing their duties as if they'd always done this at the wrong end of a gun. As if Laconian rules were normal. As if there weren't already things in play that were going to change everything before night.

"I'm sorry about Holden," Clarissa said. She hadn't meant to, but she did.

Naomi took a quick breath, let it out. Like someone ripping off a bandage that had adhered a little too much to her skin. A quick pain, and then over with. "Thank you. It's not ... what I was expecting."

"Yeah," Clarissa said. "It seems like there's always the way we wanted things to go, and there's what actually happens."

A warning tone sounded through the drum, echoing with the distance and the free air. An artificial voice reassured them with its tone while it repeated, *This is an emergency alert. Report to shelters immediately and await official instructions.*

"Listen," Naomi said. "They're playing our song."

"Oh my," Clarissa said, laughing. "We have lived our lives wrong, haven't we?"

Naomi took her arm, half as a joke and half to give her support if she needed it, and they started toward the rendezvous. Clarissa's body twitched and shuddered as she walked. Once they went below, into the corridors and halls of the drum, the traffic thickened. The alert sounded from every corner. Businesses closed their doors. Kiosks shut down. Everywhere, people moved quickly, some shouting and angry, but most with a kind of deathly focus. They'd had too many explosions and too much violence for any joking around. The illusion that life was normal for any of them vanished.

She and Naomi waited for a gap in the flow of bodies, then ducked into a public restroom. Clarissa sat on the couch built into the wall. She felt a little nausea haunting the back of her throat, but it wasn't bad. Naomi went

to the sink and washed her hands slowly, not to make them clean but to make it look like they weren't just loitering in the place should anyone from station security come in.

The plan—their part of it anyway—was simple enough. Or at least it was from Clarissa's perspective. She'd tried to walk Alex through it once, and she was pretty sure he'd only followed about half. The sensor arrays on the Medina were all linked to the main system, but they all had their own backup batteries. Shutting down the power would keep Medina from seeing where the ships went in real time, but it wouldn't clear the local caches in all the sensor arrays. As soon as the power grid came back, the arrays would check in, reconnect, and deliver everything they'd saved.

And that process right there had a vulnerability in it. When the arrays checked in to reconnect, the system could request a diagnostic run. The arrays would take about twenty seconds to cycle through their diagnostics and return the results with a fresh check-in. During those twenty seconds, no new data came in. And if the array check-in requests got routed to a false system that only replied with diagnostic requests, they could keep doing that until some poor bastard figured out where the false route was coming from or else physically went out to the arrays and ran a new dedicated line.

When she'd gotten to about this point in the description, Alex's eyes had lost their focus, and she'd simplified. Make a fake traffic card. Put the fake traffic card in at the secondary power junction. Blow the primary power junction to reset all the arrays. Arrays don't come back on without a lot of tedious work. She'd gotten a thumbs-up from him then. It had been cute.

It was always strange to remember that she knew things that other people didn't. Not just about power- and signal-routing protocols. What it was like to murder someone who'd only ever been kind to you. How it felt when the people you'd dedicated your life to killing took you in as family. Even though she knew better, she always defaulted to the idea that her life wasn't singular. That whatever she'd done must not have been that odd, because after all, she'd done it.

The door opened and the bomb guy came in carrying a ceramic toolbox. Jordao. He nodded to Clarissa and then to Naomi. Between the hunch in his back and his ashy skin, he looked like a sample picture of "furtive possible terrorist." *If we're going to pull this off, that guy's going to have to calm the fuck down.*

"Hey," Clarissa said.

“Hoy,” he responded. “Bist bien?”

“No problems so far,” Naomi said. “But we’ve been out of touch. You heard anything?”

“Unauthorized launch,” Jordao said as he set the toolbox beside the sink and opened it. “Nos ew bû?”

“Yes, that’s one of ours.”

“Perdí,” he said, forcing a grin. “How many plays playing in one day?”

“One less if we don’t move,” Naomi said.

Jordao opened the case and tossed earpieces to her and Naomi before fitting his own. “Katria, she didn’t *parle ero que la*, right? They’re going to be down on us hard after this. *Alles la preva*? Look like we were in a kids’ school.”

“If this works the way it’s supposed to, that won’t be a problem,” Clarissa said, shifting the earpiece so it was a little more comfortable. “Just stick with us, and you’ll be fine.”

Naomi dried her hands, pulled her hand terminal out of her pocket, checked it, put it back. “We should go,” she said.

Jordao closed the toolbox, hoisted it onto his hip, and followed Naomi out. Clarissa brought up the rear. The shakes were a little better. A little less. That was sort of a good thing, because she hated the shakes. It was sort of bad, because the exhaustion came next, and she needed to get through the mission. At least enough not to slow Naomi down.

Outside, the halls were emptier. *This is an emergency alert. Report to shelters immediately and await official instructions.* Naomi turned toward the ramp leading down toward the outside of the station. Clarissa put her hands in her pockets and tried to look bored. Her mind divided itself gracefully between rehearsing the steps that she’d need to take to swap traffic cards and watching for security patrols. When Saba broke the silence, it startled her.

“Evacuation teams are at the docks. Waiting for clear sign, yeah?”

Naomi put a hand to her ear. Hearing her through the earpiece and in person at the same time gave her words a little echo. Like they had more weight than they should have.

“Message received,” she said. “We’re going in.”

It would only take a couple of minutes to swap the card and set the charges. After that, they’d get to the docks if Saba’s people could hold them that long, or if Laconian security retook them, an airlock. Naomi paused at

an access panel, checked her hand terminal, and nodded. This was the one. Jordao was sweating and pale. He looked worse than she did.

"It's going to be okay," she said. "We have a surprising amount of experience with weird situations."

Naomi leaned against the access panel. A security drone passed through the intersection behind them, but didn't turn their way. Clarissa felt a little surge of adrenaline, but it only served to highlight the growing torpor in her muscles. *Do this*, she thought. *Get this done. You can rest when you're dead.*

The access panel clicked and slid down.

"What are we doing here?" Jordao said. "Got to go, us."

"We're doing the thing that makes the next part matter," Naomi said, then stepped aside. The guts of the ship would have looked chaotic to anyone who didn't know the things she did. For her, there was a simple logic in every weld, every conduit, every connector. She took the doctored traffic card out of her pocket, plucked the old one out, and slotted hers in. The fault indicator barely blinked to amber, and then went back to a flickering, happy green.

"Okay," she said, sliding the panel back into place. "Let's go set the charges."

But when she started walking, she knew it was going to be harder than she thought. If they moved fast enough, they'd be done before she ran out of energy. That was why Naomi was here, after all. Because none of them thought she could do it by herself. Because they weren't necessarily wrong.

The worst part was that she'd done it to herself. The damage to her body, the wear and the weariness, were all products of conscious, determined choices made by a girl she hadn't been in decades. She carried the weight of those decisions like a sack of bones. Like a toolbox full of them.

Some sins carried their own punishment. Sometimes redemption meant carrying the past with you forever. She'd gotten used to that over the years, but it was still pretty fucking inconvenient.

"Down here," Jordao said, waving them on.

"I know," Naomi said.

The door to the primary power junction was reinforced. A red border was painted around the frame, with warnings in half a dozen languages that all meant *Please be careful. There's a lot of things in here that we'll have to*

fix after they finish killing you.

Jordao opened the door, and Naomi stepped past him into the maintenance way beyond—

And then stepped backward, her arms rising. Running footsteps came from behind her, sudden and loud. A young man in the blue uniform of Laconian security stepped out from the red door, a pistol leveled at Naomi's stomach. Rough hands grabbed Clarissa by the shoulder and threw her to the floor. Jordao leaned against the wall and sank down to sitting.

"There a problem, sir?" Naomi asked, her voice the perfect echo of innocence.

"Knees," the pistol man said. "And keep your arms up while you do it."

Naomi looked down at her. Clarissa saw no sorrow in her eyes, only calculation. And then a conclusion. Naomi sank to her knees. Jordao's head was leaned back, looking at the ceiling and taking deep gulping breaths. He still had the toolbox under his arm, and she thought he might be about to set off the charges and turn them all to paste, until he started laughing. It wasn't mirth or gloating, but it was relief. Even before he spoke, Clarissa understood they'd been sold out. She laid her head against the rubber matting on the deck as someone put a knee in the small of her back and started pulling her arms behind her. The exhaustion was coming on stronger now. The deck felt almost comfortable.

"There's a thing," Jordao said. "A thing they put behind an access panel. No savvy *mé que*, but I can show you where, yeah?"

"What was it?" the pistol asked Naomi.

Naomi shook her head ruefully. "Afraid you're going to have to go fuck yourself, coyo."

He hit her, stepped forward. Clarissa felt the zip tie going around her right wrist while the guy fumbled with her left. She rolled her head. Five of them, all told. All with guns drawn. The pistol came down, ready to end Naomi where she lay.

"You're sure you can find whatever it is?" the man said.

"Course I am," Jordao said. "Where are your Marines? You said there'd be Marines."

"Change of plan. They're statues until we can get the lockdown codes undone." He looked down at Naomi. "Was that yours too, bitch?"

Naomi locked eyes with Clarissa. The calculation was gone. They were out of options. Which meant, really, that Naomi was out.

Clarissa always had one left.

It was a weird moment. Through the bone-weary tiredness, through the fear and the panic and the anger, something else opened up. Something like rage and joy, and more than all that, a profound relief. Naomi saw it in her expression, and her eyes widened. Clarissa pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth, swirled it the way she hadn't in years. The fake glands in her body triggered, pouring their shit into her blood. It hurt. It didn't use to hurt, but this time, every one of them ached. Even the pain felt good.

Time slowed down around her. She bucked and the man on her back fell forward. He still had a hand on her right wrist, and he kept his grip as he fell. She felt her shoulder dislocate and heard the deep pop, but there wasn't any pain. Her legs were under her and she pushed off before he hit the floor. Her right arm was shredded and useless. Her muscles were thin and fragile. Just jumping, she felt the tendons in her knees and hips strain and rip, but she was already rolling, ready to hit the wall and launch again.

Pistol man didn't shift his aim from Naomi, but the other three were drawing down on her, moving slowly as someone underwater. One pistol barked, but the shot only tore into the anti-spalling fabric on the wall.

Clarissa spun through the air, her ruined arm trailing behind her. She led with her knee, and it felt like dancing. Like flying. Her aim was still good. She brought her bent knee into pistol man's nose, felt the cartilage give in her joint and his face, the two of them crumbling together.

She'd been sick for so long, she'd let it make her fragile. So much of her life had become nurturing what fading health she had. Rationing it like one canteen that had to get her across a desert. Now she gulped it, and it felt wonderful.

The two who hadn't fired did now at almost the same instant. One missed, but one bullet dug into the thin meat over her ribs. It hurt, but the pain was distant. She barreled into the closest of them. As they fell, she wrapped her good arm around his head, cradling it carefully so that when they landed, she could snap his neck. She hit the deck hard, pulled, and felt his spine give way.

I have killed. But I am not a killer.

She caught up the gun from his hand as the others turned. Clarissa felt the battle cry in her throat, felt the force of air and sound rattling her trachea. Felt the gun she'd stolen kick. The woman nearest her fired wild, and Clarissa placed a bullet in the woman's cheek, snapping her head back.

That was two. The one who'd been on Clarissa's back jumped toward her. She put a bullet through his teeth. Three.

Naomi was scrambling for pistol man's fallen weapon. He was still down, holding his shattered nose like that was his biggest problem. Clarissa shot him twice in the center of mass.

There was only one guard left, and he was close to Clarissa. She could see down the barrel of his gun. She saw the fear in his eyes. He fired. He couldn't miss. Her leg gave way under her, but she fired a shot on the way down. It took the last guard in the throat. She landed hard, but her blood was still made from light and rapture. She rolled, knelt. Her abdomen ached and it was hard to pull in a full breath. Jordao looked at her like he was seeing the devil.

No! I'm sorry! he shouted in some universe close to hers.

Fuck your sorry. Sorry doesn't fix shit. She didn't know if she'd yelled or if it was just in her head. Either way, she shot him—once in the belly and when he doubled over, the crown of his head right where a little bald spot was just starting. Then the rush was over.

It wasn't as bad as she'd remembered. There was the retching and the feeling of illness. The helplessness. The pain. But at some point all of that had become familiar, so the experience of it wasn't as bad. Or else she was slipping into shock.

Shock, or something like it.

Naomi cradled her head and she noticed she was lying down. Her mouth tasted like bile. The guards and the traitor were spread throughout the hallway. The air stank of blood and gunpowder. It looked like a scene from hell. All of the years she'd spent living with her regret, doing quiet penance for the lives she'd ended, and now the only thing she could think was *That was fun*.

Words were happening somewhere nearby. *Stay with me, Claire.* She remembered Naomi was there and opened her eyes again. She didn't remember closing them. Naomi was spattered with blood, her face pale. Ren stood behind her. He was wearing some kind of black robe that made her think of Jesuits.

"I'm a monster," Clarissa said.

No you aren't, baby. You're not a monster. You're not. Which meant Naomi had misunderstood. Clarissa had meant, *I'm not afraid*. She tried to think what to say that would clarify that, but it was a lot of effort. And what

did it matter really if anyone else understood? She knew.
Fuck it, she thought. Some things you take to your grave.
Clarissa Melpomene Mao closed her eyes.

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Chapter Forty-Nine: Bobbie

When she was young, Bobbie had a recurring dream of finding a door in her room that led to some new, exotic part of her quarters that her family had forgotten or else never known about. Those dreams had been eerie but also beautiful. Full of promise and wonder and threat.

The *Gathering Storm* was exactly like being in one of those dreams.

The architecture of the ship had all the same aesthetics and design as the *Rocinante*. The central lift, the size and spacing of the hallways and doors, even the shapes of the hand- and foot-holds were familiar. Or if not exactly familiar, at least related. Part of the same family. Laconian and Martian had the same cultural DNA, and as much as anything else, the ship proved it.

But it was also *strange*. The decks didn't have seams or bolts. The foam and fabric on the bulkheads had the same uncanny fleshy texture as the hull. The lights were different somehow too. She didn't know if it was the spectrum or the brightness or the way that there seemed to be some kind of subtle motion in them, but everything felt a little bit like being underwater. Like the ship was a huge fish with the bioluminescent glow of the deepest seas.

It was home, but wider, larger, and *changed*.

They moved from hall to hall in strict formation, covering each other as they went. The rattle of PDCs was joined by something else she didn't recognize. Some Laconian version of torpedo fire was her best guess. The deck lurched and canted as the ship maneuvered around them, but the main drive never cut out, so down was always down.

She'd expected the ship's defenses to meet them at the central lift that led to ops. It was the obvious choke point, and holding that space meant controlling movement between all the decks it passed through. If she'd been in charge, all the hatches would have been open and a dozen rifles pointing down, ready to put holes through any head that popped out. Instead, there had been three Laconians with pistols retreating up it, and firing behind

them, more to discourage Bobbie and her people from following them than to actually injure anyone. They were holing up on the command deck. She wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or a bad one.

"Amos?" she said, and when he didn't answer, turned up her broadcast power. "Amos, check in."

"Little hairy down here, Babs," Amos replied. "Made it to what I'm pretty sure is supposed to be a machine shop. Fucked if I know what half this stuff is, though."

"Any contact with the enemy?"

"Yeah, we lost a couple."

The sound that interrupted them was like something metal being torn by brute strength. It took a fraction of a second to recognize it as high-rate weapons fire. Amos was shouting over it—not to her. She waited, tension knotting her gut. She wanted to know what was happening, but not badly enough to divide Amos' attention. He grunted once, and she was sure he'd been hit. Something loud happened—a grenade, maybe—and the firing stopped.

"Still with me, big man?"

"Yeah," he said. "We just had a little thing there. Architecture's a little weird. And it looks like there's a bunch of stuff down here built out of ... I don't know. Crystals? Or bug shells? You remember those buildings on Ilus? Like them."

The deck shifted hard to the right, and Bobbie's head went a little swimmy from the Coriolis. She grabbed onto a handhold.

"I wasn't on Ilus."

"Oh right," Amos said. "Well, like them anyway. But yeah, we're kinda stuck where we are unless we can make another hole. We're looking for something to cut through the bulkhead with. Would like to get that done before they decide to rush us."

Alex's voice cut in. He wouldn't be able to hear them unless she turned up her broadcast power a lot more, but the *Roci's* transmitters had more than power enough. "Hey, y'all. The *Storm's* breaking off our little dance out here. It looks like she's trying to get back to port. Might be a good time to launch anyone that wants to get launched. You're getting short on time."

Saba responded. "Still waiting for the prison stragglers. Any ship's ready, I'll get them gone, but keep that bastard off us as long as you can, yeah?"

“I’m on it,” Alex said.

Bobbie ground her teeth. She wanted to break off, head down to back up Amos and his squad. Bad tactics. She needed to stick to the plan. Amos was going to be all right. She had to believe that. The lift tube went up the length of the ship, all the way to the ops deck. No one was waiting up there that she could see. That didn’t mean no one was waiting.

“All right,” she said to her team. “This is going to be just the same. Two move forward while three cover, and then the forward pair cover while the three catch up. Only instead of going from door to door, we’re going up from deck to deck. If we start drawing fire, we’ll try to get the lift going up before us, but it’s probably locked down, and I don’t want to announce where we are.”

The Belters all gave their assent and took position. Bobbie and a tall man went first, climbing the handholds like they were free-climbing. She glanced over the top of the deck before she climbed up, but she would have been surprised to find an ambush there.

She leaned against the wall, gun pointed up. It looked like the hatch to ops was closed. Leaving the rest open gave the defenders a great line of fire, but they weren’t using it. Not yet. She gestured to the others, and didn’t take her eye off the enemy as they scrambled up beside her. The *Storm* was bigger than the *Roci*. There were eight more decks between her and ops. That last step was going to be tricky, but—

Gravity cut out, and she grabbed for a handhold by reflex as the ship spun around her, sweeping her legs perpendicular to the deck. As suddenly as it had cut out, it came back. A hard burn—four or five gs slamming her down. The impact knocked the breath out of her, and then gravity cut out again, a moment of spin on the float and another high-g microburn. She and her team were braced now. The float and burn happened three more times. It seemed ready to keep going forever.

“Amos?”

“Hey there, Babs.”

“Is this you? Did you break something?”

“Nope. Whatever they’re doing, this here is the product of conscious choice.”

“I think—” A hard burn made her grit her teeth. Then the float. “I think they’re trying to shake us around like bugs in a can.”

Hard burn, and the float. “That’s going make this inconvenient. They

trying to slow us down?”

“Until they can get back to port.” Hard burn, and float. Her mind shifted. Delaying and heading back to the docks made the most sense if the *Storm* was undercrewed. It also explained why she wasn’t catching heavier fire from the command deck. If the Laconians could get back to reinforcements, she wouldn’t have a chance. And if she didn’t, no one else would either.

Two more cycles of float, turn, and slam her into the deck failed to dislodge her from her place. When Amos spoke again, she could hear the effort in his voice. “That could be a problem.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

Another round of gunfire pressed its way through the radio. “Not sure I’m going to be able to stop that from happening.”

“All right,” Bobbie said. “New orders. Don’t die until I say so.”

“If I find a way to kill this bird?”

“Then act like I said so, but don’t stick your head out just to look for it.”

“You got a plan?” Amos asked.

“That’d be generous,” she said, “but I’ve got something I’m going to do.”

The ship kept doing its stuttering bounce like one of the first-generation exploration ships that exploded nuclear bombs as a propulsion system. Even for the crew that made it to crash couches, it was a miserable way to travel. She took a deep breath, felt the rhythm of it, and on the next float, pulled herself out to the lift shaft. Two good handholds, two good footholds, and suddenly she weighed five times her usual.

Her fingers and toes screamed in protest. Her back and shoulder flirted with cramping. The float came back, and the ship turned, but she was climbing up. Just one set of handholds before the weight came back. But she was closer.

If she fell, it was a long way to the bottom. But no one was going to be shooting down at her during this, and they didn’t think she could climb while this was going on. That was it as much as anything. With every round of release and spin and high-g burn, she made her way higher, not looking back to see whether her team was with her. She needed all of her focus for this.

Sweat beaded on her forehead, and the suit’s helmet fan kicked up to high so that her faceplate wouldn’t fog up. She was burning through oxygen fast enough that a three-hour supply would last her maybe one. She thought

about taking a break at one of the decks along the way and stripping off her helmet entirely, but if the Laconians decided to vent the ship after that ... well, that would be unfortunate. Better to play it safe. Or as safe as free-climbing with a full destroyer's depth of decks below her in radically uncertain gravity could be.

Saba's voice came again when Bobbie still had three more decks to go before she hit ops. "Sensor arrays are down. We're launching everything. No more time to wait."

"I'll try to keep you covered, *Malaclypse*," Alex said. "The *Storm* is live and a threat. I can try knocking her torpedoes down, but treat her like she's got teeth."

"Bien," Saba said. "And I have a package on its way to you, *Rocinante*. Keep an open eye."

Alex swore under his breath. She didn't have time to guess why.

Another moment of float. Another collapse into terrible weight. The temptation to go faster, to try for two handholds up instead of just one, was a trap. It meant less time to get braced, and that was an invitation to fall. It hurt. It took forever. It was the right way. She couldn't get greedy. The pain in her hands was getting worse, but her feet almost seemed to be getting used to it. That or they were going numb.

She was over halfway up. Three and a half more decks, and she'd be at the ops deck. At the closed plate that kept the lift locked in place. Two and a half. One more. The float came again. She moved up. Her eyes were fixed on the seam where the lift plate would slide open. Where, if this was like the other Martian ships she'd been in, it would make the most sense to take cover and fire down at the boarders. At her. She waited for the next acceleration, but it didn't come. Only a gentle press as the ship maneuvered.

That was bad.

"The *Storm* is on approach to the dock," Alex said, and his voice sounded like ashes. "Anybody has a good idea, I'm listening."

Her arms and legs were trembling from the effort, and sweat stung her eyes. She risked looking down. Her team was following, but they were only about halfway up. This one was hers.

Voices came from the ops deck. Sharp, barked orders. A clattering, probably from a weapon's locker. They knew there wouldn't be much time, but they were also thinking she had a lot more territory to cover than she did. The lift plate slid aside, and she reached in and took the blue-sleeved

arm by the elbow and hauled the man attached to it through and down. He bounced against a couple walls before he caught himself, and by then her team had their guns on him and Bobbie was through the opening and onto the ops deck.

Three people, in the most oddly designed crash couches she'd ever seen. Bobbie raised her pistol. Definitely undercrewed.

A fair-haired man saw her first, and yelled, "Commander Davenport!"

An older man moved forward. Older than the others, anyway. He still looked like a puppy. "Get us into the dock! Whatever happens!"

"I am Gunnery Sergeant Roberta Draper of the MMC," Bobbie snapped. "I will kill every one of you if anyone touches the controls."

Davenport lifted a defiant chin. "You have your orders."

"Doesn't have to go like that," Bobbie said. "You know where that ends us. Your people dead. Mine too. Probably a lot of civilians if I have to ram this boat into the station to kill it. I said, *Don't touch those controls.*"

The pilot flinched back, shot a look at Davenport. He stared hard at her, like he was looking at his death. Like he was trying to talk himself into being brave and hadn't quite managed it yet. There was a chance there in the space between who he was and who he was trying to be. Killing these three wouldn't fix the situation in engineering. Wouldn't save Amos. Behind her, her team was floating up onto the command deck. She wished they wouldn't. More pressure on the Laconians was only going to cement their position. When she spoke, she tried to make her voice calm and soothing.

"Here's the situation. All your people die and all mine too, or all of us live. Now, you can decide whether this bunch of amateurs and assholes is worth a crew of Laconia's best."

"Hey!" one of her team said. She ignored him.

"You expect me to believe you won't steal the ship?" Davenport said. *Well, I wasn't planning to until just now,* Bobbie thought. *But since you mention it ...*

"I'm not talking about the ship. I'm talking about you and yours either put out an airlock with suits and bottles or else killed here."

"I've seen the way you people work," he spat. "If we put down arms, you'll kill us anyway. You have no honor."

"Bite your fucking tongue," Bobbie said. "I'm Martian Marine Corps. If you live through this, you go ask your old-timers what that means. They'll

tell you how lucky you are I didn't crack your ass the other way just for saying it. If I say you and yours are safe, then you're fucking safe."

Davenport said nothing, but there was something behind his defiance. She thought it might be hope. She opened a connection to Amos.

"Hey, big man."

"Hey, Babs," he said. He sounded winded. "I got us into engineering. Gimme another five minutes, I can light this bastard up. May take a bite out of the station when we blow, but I figure that's someone else's problem. How's it going up there?"

"Your team needs to stand down," she said. "No aggressive action toward the enemy. Confirm that."

There was silence on the line.

"That's not the plan the way I heard it," Amos said.

"Amos, listen to me. Stand down. Don't blow the ship. And if anyone down there kills another Laconian, I will shoot them myself. Including you. Understood?"

"Yup."

"Stand by. If I need you to go back to plan A, I'll know in about a minute."

Davenport looked from her to her team arrayed behind her. He scowled. Bobbie felt her breath go shallow. She waited.

"Thirty seconds, Mister Davenport," she said.

"You joined the wrong side, gunny," Davenport said. "You should have been one of ours."



Twenty-five minutes later, the surviving crew of the *Gathering Storm* were tethered together in the cargo airlock. Their arms were secured behind their backs, their ankles were tied together, and the maneuvering thrusters on their vac suits didn't have any canisters. Amos and one of his team went through checking their seals one last time and strapping emergency beacons to their knees. The Laconian commanding officer watched Bobbie now with the intensity of someone planning his revenge.

Amos knocked on Davenport's faceplate to get his attention. "Can you breathe in there? Getting good air? 'Cause if you're not, this is the time to

say something.”

He nodded once, a perfect physical representation of resentment.

Outside the *Storm*, ships were fleeing through the gates following the schedule Naomi had built. By and large, they were going to the smaller colonies where there was less traffic parked waiting for the gates to reopen. But some were going to the well-established places like Bara Gaon Complex and trusting to their ability to evade any traffic monitoring on the other side to get them to safety. There was still a little more than an hour before the last of them was slated to go, and then the *Storm*, following up at last. If things went right, Medina’s sensors would be deep in their routing seizures for at least four hours. And the prisoners had enough air for ten. A six-hour window for pickup seemed like more than enough.

Amos gave her the thumbs-up, and Bobbie nodded him on. He undid the tether from the airlock deck, pushed off, and floated through to pull himself to a stop beside her. Bobbie cycled the lock, and when the outer door opened to the darker-than-space of the slow zone, she touched her radio.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s see if the controls work the way they said.”

“Copy that, bossman,” her new Belter pilot said.

The *Storm* shifted, pushing gently to the side. The prisoners seemed to float away, though really Bobbie was the one moving. Out beyond them in the darkness, a distant drive plume glowed like a star, and then, passing through a gate, went out.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re good. Make sure we get far enough away before we light up the drive. I don’t want to save them just so you can burn them down in the drive plume.”

“Sa sa,” the pilot said.

“Alex?” she said, then remembered her suit was still on the low-power stealth settings. She changed it and tried again. “Alex? Where do we stand?”

A different voice answered. A man that it took Bobbie a few seconds to recognize. “We’re huddled close to Medina for the extraction.”

“Houston?” she said. “Is that you?”

“Now that you fuckers have come to your senses about the immorality of centralized power? Yeah, it’s me. And I’m ready to accept your apology as soon as you untwist your diapers.”

“He’s gonna be a joy,” Amos said placidly. “I kind of missed him.”

Bobbie killed her mic. “I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic. I need to

know these things.” She turned the mic back on. “We have a change of plan. We won’t need pickup.”

“Negative,” Alex said. “I’m not leaving you behind.”

“We’re flying escort,” Bobbie said. “The *Storm* is ours.”

“No shit?” Alex said, then whooped. “Holy crap, you took a prize? Looks like you got yourself a ship after all, Captain Draper.”

Naomi’s voice cut in, clipping into Alex’s last syllables. “I’m coming out.”

“All right,” Alex said. “Two to pick up, and then we can get in the flight queue out of this dump.”

“One,” Naomi said. “One to pick up. We ran into a problem. Clarissa went down fighting. I wouldn’t have made it out without her. None of us would.”

Bobbie’s throat went tight. She looked over at Amos, and he smiled his usual amiable smile, shrugged. Just for a moment, she saw something underneath the expression. Pain and loss and sorrow and rage, and then he was just himself again.

“Damn,” Alex said. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Okay,” Houston said. “I have you on the scope. We’ll slide over and get you.”

“Naomi,” Bobbie said. “When you get on the *Roci*, I’ll need you to find a safe place for the *Storm* in the escape queue.”

“I’m on it,” Naomi said. Now that Bobbie knew to listen, she heard the exhaustion in her voice. The weariness of grief. She turned off her mic, turned toward Amos, but he was pulling himself back toward the lift. She followed him, a little trickle of adrenaline coming in. Waiting to see what was coming next.

At the lift, Amos stopped and scratched his nose. “I was thinking I should probably get a few of the new kids. Go through the ship. Just make sure we don’t have anyone on board we didn’t mean to have on the ride.”

For a moment, she thought about letting it go. Letting Amos fall back into his usual self. It would be easier. It would feel more respectful.

It was what Holden would have done.

“I need to know if you’re okay,” she said.

“I don’t really—”

She pulled herself in close, almost nose to nose. She wasn’t smiling and he wasn’t either. “I didn’t ask if you wanted to talk. I said, *I need to know*.

Whatever ship I'm the captain of, if you're on it, that means you and I have clear, open, and honest conversations about your mental health. This isn't friendship. This isn't nurturing. This is me telling you how it goes. We both know what happens when you're off the rails, and I'm not going to pretend that you're anything more or less than what you are. So when I say I need to know if you're okay, it's an order. Are we clear?"

Amos' jaw clenched and his eyes went flat. She didn't back away. When he smiled, it wasn't the empty, amiable expression he usually reached for. It wasn't a version of him she'd seen before.

"I'm sad, Babs. I'm angry. But I'm okay. Going down fighting was a good way for her to go too. I can live with it."

Bobbie let herself drift back. Her heart was going a little faster than she liked, but she kept it off her face. "All right, then. Take your team and go through the ship. I'll warn you when we're going on the burn."

"I'm on it," Amos said. And a moment later, "You know, you're gonna be good at this captain thing."

Chapter Fifty: Singh

This is exactly the kind of recklessness that has been underlying the Transport Union since its inception,” Carrie Fisk said. Her face was flushed, her gestures sharp, and her voice had the buzz of rage behind every word. Her blouse was tan with black, and she wore the green armband that had come to symbolize antiterrorist solidarity among those loyal to Laconia and High Consul Duarte. “The union claimed that stability and safety were their primary mandate. That was the whole point of letting it administrate ring space! But the minute—the *minute*—someone arrives with the power to question that? Bombings. Theft. Murder. The hypocrisy is mind-boggling. It’s *unreal*.”

The interviewer was a young man apparently well known in Sol system and on Medina. Singh watched the man nod and stroke his chin like an ancient sage considering a deep mystical truth. His seriousness made Fisk look even more formidable.

“And would you say the situation is stabilized now?” he asked.

“We can hope it is,” Fisk said as she shook her head *no*. “When I look at the patience that the present administration has shown to us and the violence with which it was answered, it leaves me ... not angry, even. Embarrassed. We called ourselves a civilization, and this thuggery is all we have to offer. I can only hope that the people who were fooled into thinking any of this could be justified are embarrassed too.”

It was a sentence Singh had written himself and delivered to Fisk. She repeated it now as if it were an off-the-cuff thought, and she made it sound mostly convincing.

Of all the things he had done since he’d come to Medina, Fisk and the Laconian Congress of Worlds was by far the most successful. Everything else—moving up the timetable for the *Tempest*’s transit to Sol system, flushing out the underground, managing Medina Station—was tainted.

The catastrophe had lasted five and three-quarter hours from the launch

of James Holden's ship to the restoration of full function to Medina Station. In that time, his best informant and the team sent to back him had been slaughtered, the station's external sensors had been compromised, the Laconian Marine forces neutralized, the detention centers broken open and fifty-two prisoners lost and not yet recovered, twenty union ships had transited through no one knew which gate or gates, and the *Gathering Storm* had been boarded and hijacked.

It was, without exception, the greatest failure of security Singh had ever heard of, and as governor of Medina Station, he had spent almost the whole time hiding in a public toilet. Humiliation sat in his belly like a stone, and he had the distinct sense that it would remain there forever.

Every decision he had made since he'd arrived at Medina returned to him in the light of his failure, and he considered each of them like a wound in his skin. If he had treated the local population with greater caution from the first, would Kasik have lived? If he had chosen to respond to the assassination attempt with a more focused response, would the underground have gained fewer followers and allies? If he had avoided the confusion of restructuring his security forces by retaining Tanaka, would they have exposed the underground in time to prevent this?

The list seemed to go on forever. And each choice he'd made—sending the *Storm* out despite Davenport warning him it was undercrewed, shipping James Holden to Laconia instead of questioning him more deeply about the underground, encouraging Trejo and the *Tempest* to move the timetable forward for the transit into Sol system—had led him here. So on some level each of them had been wrong. No matter how wise they had seemed at the time, how forgivable and subtle his failures of judgment had been, the final evidence was unmistakable. He had treated the people of Medina as though he were their leader instead of their warden. Instead of their zookeeper. And they had paid him back with violence, death, and dishonor. All of that was a given now.

There was no standing apart from the failure. It had happened on his watch, and so it was his problem to fix. And it didn't apply only to Medina. He saw that now. His mandate was to coordinate the empire from this, its hub. And that would mean crushing the underground wherever it had fled. Wherever it emerged from the fresh dung heap of the union's demise. He'd thought of Medina as a station to run, a logistical heart to sustain a glorious future for humanity.

He'd been mistaken.

His system chirped a connection request. He checked himself in the monitor, smoothed his hair, and straightened his tunic. He was done looking less than knife sharp. These were, after all, the first days of his career's rehabilitation.

He accepted the request. A woman's face appeared on the screen, a small identifier hovering above her to say who and what she was to him.

"Lieutenant Guillamet," he said crisply.

"Rear Admiral Song of the *Eye of the Typhoon* is requesting command-to-command, Governor."

"Of course," he said. The monitor flickered. He straightened his tunic again and felt immediately self-conscious that he'd done it. It was a sign of insecurity, even if he was the only one who knew about it.

Rear Admiral Song appeared. Her wide mouth was set in a polite smile. The light delay was almost trivial. Evidence that the *Typhoon* was on track to pass through the gate. "Governor Singh," she said. "It's good to see you."

"Likewise," he replied.

"We're on approach to the ring gate," Song said, then looked away. "I'm very sorry, but given everything that's happened recently, I have to ask you this. Can you assure me that this transit is safe?"

Singh settled more deeply into his couch. *Of course it is*, floated at the back of his mouth. *The Typhoon can come through the gate, and there won't be any rogue ship zipping through some other gate in the seconds before to change the safety curve. You and your crew will survive the trip and take its place as the protector of the ring space.*

He swallowed the words. It was like another fine cut on his soul to admit that he wasn't certain.

"I have had no new security alerts," he said. "We see no ships on approach through the other gates and have no reason to suspect any interference from fringe elements. But if you would like, I will consult with my chief of security to make certain we have done everything in our ability to minimize your risk."

"I would appreciate that," Song said, and her tone meant, *I'm sorry to ask it.*

"The safety of your ship and your crew are the most important thing," Singh said. "I understand your caution."

"I'll match orbit with the gate until we hear from you," Song said. "And

thank you, Governor. I do appreciate this.”

He nodded and dropped the connection. She didn’t trust him. Of course she didn’t. He didn’t trust himself.



The Marines who accompanied him on his review of the docks were a mixed group—half of them in power armor and half in standard ballistic plates. Even if the underground managed to disable the power armor again—which Overstreet had assured Singh would be impossible—there would still be a guard ready to take point. Singh hated that they’d had to change their protocol. He hated remembering the fear of realizing his protection was gone, and he hated knowing that the fear would never completely go away. He still didn’t know how the underground had even known the antimutiny protocols existed, much less how they’d managed to reverse engineer them. Was someone—a Laconian—a turncoat? Had they been careless? He had no way of finding where the information had leaked out. It was another little insult that burrowed into his skin.

He maneuvered through the docks on a small thruster of compressed air. The empty berths stared back at him like an accusation. The pocks in the decks and bulkheads where bullets had struck during the fighting hadn’t been buffed out or painted over yet, though they would be. He felt the attention of the dockworkers. They were, after all, the audience for this excursion. Meant to see that the governor of the station wasn’t cowering in his office, afraid to peek out from behind his desk. That he wasn’t hiding in a public restroom. The heavy guard undercut the message, as did the fear in his gut. But he would pretend and pretend and pretend in the hopes that it would somehow become true.

So he lifted his chin, and made his way through the full round of the docks—even where the damage from the bombing of the primary oxygen tanks twisted and deformed the deck. He looked at the temporary plating with what he hoped was dignity and thoughtfulness. All he really wanted was to be done with this and back in his office.

The acting dockmaster followed along just behind him. The anger in her expression was unmistakable, but he didn’t know if it was rage at the terrorists who’d done the damage or at him for not preventing it.

“How long will it take us to make repairs?” he asked.

“That will depend on the supply chain, sir,” she said. “Once we have the *Typhoon*, we should be able to get started in earnest, but they’ve been breaking more than we have the decking to replace.”

“It’s heartbreaking,” he said because he didn’t know what else to say. She didn’t respond. “What is our capacity at this point?”

“It’s not bad. The only berth that took serious damage was the first. Sheared off the docking clamps. Once that old gunship was out, the bastards took over my office. All the rest were released from the controls. That’s one way it could have been worse, I suppose.”

What if he’d brought Natalia and the monster had been here? Laconians had died in these uprisings. If his family had come to Medina, would they have been targets too? Would he have watched his daughter die the way he’d watched Kasik?

And yes, locals suffered too, but to have his people dead and hurt ... And with what repercussions? The criminals had scattered like seeds on the wind, and taken his ship with them. What colony would see these images and not think that they could do the same?

He pushed over to the broken decking and put his hands on it. He’d been weak before. Lenient. He’d thought that by treating the people of Medina as if they were citizens of the empire, they would be transformed somehow. They would be civilized. The decking was half a meter thick, and twisted like a torn leaf. They’d been willing to do this, and he’d pretended he could treat them as if they were sane. Another of his mistakes.

He had hesitated to wield his power before. And the universe had taught him what rewards hesitation brought. Well, he’d learned his lesson.

“Thank you. I understand now,” he said. Possibly to the acting dockmaster. Possibly to something deeper in his own soul. He turned to her. “This won’t happen again.”



“This was what they were building toward,” Overstreet said. “The bad news is, they were by and large quite successful in their aim. I’m not going to make this pretty, sir, they trounced us.”

“I agree,” Singh said.

Overstreet leaned forward in his chair and threw the image from his wrist monitor to the screen over Singh's desk. A list of all the people presently unaccounted for on Medina. The people that they knew had escaped. Or died.

"On the other hand," Overstreet said, "their objective was defensive. This was a retreat. I've had the technicians make a complete audit, and I'm prepared to certify that it's safe for the *Typhoon* to make its transit."

"You're sure about that? Completely safe?"

"I think we've established that perfect knowledge isn't possible in this context. But in order to pull off this last series of attacks, the underground had to spend a tremendous amount of its resources and capital on Medina. If they'd stayed here, they could have used the same knowledge of the station and agents within the civilian population to protract the struggle here for months. Maybe years. Instead, they burned it all in one day."

"So this was a good thing?" Singh said.

"No," Overstreet said. "But it was all the bad things they could throw at us at once. I feel confident that they didn't hold anything back. So however bad this looks—and it looks very bad—we're going to end with Medina carrying a smaller insurgent population, with fewer resources at their disposal, and the main body of the underground scattered to the colonial systems."

"The colonies," Singh said. "Yes."

"The loss of the *Storm* ... well, that's not inconsiderable. If we hadn't pulled most of the crew off to assist with other operations ... Or if your XO had scuttled the ship once it was clear they couldn't repel the boarders ..."

"Talk to me about the colonies," Singh said.

Overstreet blinked his too-blue eyes in something like confusion. "Sir?"

"The colonies," Singh said. "That's where the terrorists have gone. That's where the next wave of this will take place, yes?"

"That matches my analysis, sir."

"So how we proceed here should be considered in light of the colonies. We should examine how likely they are to cooperate with the enemy. And how we can affect those decisions."

"Yes, sir."

"An example needs to be made. Something that not only restores confidence in the safety of Medina and the gate network, but displays what Laconian civilization stands for. What we believe. What we are willing to

do to ensure our control over this situation.”

Overstreet was silent for a moment. Singh paged through the lists of the missing. The faces of the enemy. There were pages of them, but not uncountably many. This was still a solvable problem.

“What exactly are we willing to do, sir?” Overstreet asked, and his tone told Singh that he knew what was coming.

“A white list,” Singh said. “I would like you to identify the people who we are certain are not involved with the insurgency. The people we know absolutely that we can trust.”

“And the others?”

Singh closed the image down. The enemy vanished. “An example has to be made.”

Overstreet went very still. For a moment, the only sound was the hum of the air recyclers.

“I see,” Overstreet said. “So a step up from counterinsurgency.”

“It’s been justified.”

“The official position of the high consul is that these are all Laconian citizens. That the terrorists are Laconian citizens who are also criminals.”

“I know,” Singh said. “But I also know that I was placed in command of Medina to learn from practice what theory can never teach. And this is the lesson that James Holden and his friends have taught me. Will you refuse to respect the chain of command?”

Overstreet chuckled at that. Singh didn’t know why.

“No, sir, I will follow the chain of command, as is my duty.”

“Good. Please prepare the cull, then. I will trust your judgment on who best belongs on the white list.”

“Yes, sir,” Overstreet said. “Only I have other orders. Sir.”

A thrill of confusion moved up Singh’s spine. “Other orders? From whom?”

“Standing orders I received from Colonel Tanaka when I accepted this position. So ultimately from Admiral Trejo. You see, sir, the high consul made it very clear to Admiral Trejo that the rule of the empire is permanent. And if history shows us anything, it’s that people hold grudges for generations. Whole societies have lived and died because of their antipathy born out of events that happened generations before. Or maybe things that got so mythologized, they were just pissed off about stories of things that never happened in the first place. The admiral was adamant that we hold

ourselves to a higher standard. As we always have.” Overstreet spread his hands in a gesture that meant *What can you do?* His right hand held a gun.

Singh felt his heart catch and then stumble like it was running down a hill. “May I ask what your orders are?”

“I’m to set an example, sir. Restore confidence in the safety of Medina and the gate network, and display what Laconian civilization stands for. Including that we who have accepted the burden of government hold ourselves and each other to the highest possible standard.”

Singh stood. His legs felt weak. This wasn’t possible. This wasn’t happening.

“But I was loyal,” he said. “I’ve *obeyed*.”

“You’ve given me an order to kill Laconian citizens who have not been found guilty of a crime.”

“But—”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t disagree with you. These people are scum. They don’t deserve or understand what we’ve brought them. For me, I think they never will. But their children might. Their grandchildren or their great-grandchildren. The story of Medina will be that Governor Singh mismanaged the station, lost his ship to a band of malcontents, lost his perspective. And when he let his wounded pride exceed the mandates of the high consul’s directives, he was removed for the protection of the everyday citizens in his care. You see the difference? If you kill an insurgent, you’re the enemy of all their friends. All their family. And then there’s an expectation. Precedent. Enemies for generations. Forever. If you kill your own—even the highest among your own—to protect someone powerless, they remember that too. It sows gratitude. It sows trust. Generations from now your sacrifice will lead to the peace, prosperity, and fellow feeling among all humanity.”

The air was gone. He couldn’t catch his breath. His mind rejected everything he’d heard. He was going to see Natalia again. He was going to hold the monster in his arms and hear her gabble on about school and the dream she’d had and whether they could get a pet for their apartment. All of that was still true. It couldn’t have changed. Not so quickly. Not so finally.

“Plus, it’ll put Governor Song on notice,” Overstreet said. He stood. “I’m very sorry about this, but it could be worse. You could be going to the Pen.”

He lifted the gun.

“Wait!” Singh said. “Wait. Do you believe all that? About what killing me is supposed to achieve?”

“I am an officer of the Laconian Empire, Governor Singh. I believe what I’m told to believe.”

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Chapter Fifty-One: Drummer

It was three months before the *Heart of the Tempest* came to the transfer station at Lagrange-5. People's Home arrived behind it, like a servant waiting for the right moment to bow.

In those long, surreal weeks, the system had changed past all recognition. Or at least it had for Drummer. The surrender of the union ships had let the EMC fleet follow suit. There were some signs that the *Tempest* had suffered from the pounding it had taken—fluctuations of its heat signature, a reluctance to turn to port, the decision not to burn at more than about a fifth of a g. It didn't matter. If Laconia was bloodied, it was unbowed. Drummer couldn't say as much for herself.

A new armada of ships that had followed the *Typhoon* to Medina paused there for less than a day before they burned through the Sol gate. They were smaller ships, of a more familiar design, and fewer than a dozen of them dominated the solar system. The newsfeeds had nothing but the names of the new Laconian *Protector*-class destroyers—*Daskell*, *Ackermann*, *Ekandjo*, *Smith*—and their locations in the system. Where they were and where they might go.

Ganymede and Iapetus, inspired by God knew what quixotic impulse, declared that whatever the union and the EMC had said, they hadn't surrendered. Two of the new ships had gone to each station, and the defiant announcements had ended quickly after that. The independent feeds that called out against Laconia grew fewer and more tentative. Ceres Station had a welcoming committee when the *Ekandjo* docked there, and pictures of the governor of Ceres shaking the hand of the Laconian captain became the iconic image of the moment. Of the capitulation. Two smiling men. The end of one age, the beginning of something new.

The ship that came to escort People's Home was named the *Stover*, and by *escort*, they meant *occupy*.

By then, People's Home had gathered back most of the citizens who'd

fled before the battle. Not all, of course. Some of the evacuation ships scattered themselves out among the smaller settlements and asteroids. Got quiet in hopes that with just a dozen ships, Laconia would overlook them. Maybe it even worked. For those who came back to the void city, Captain Rowman Perkins became their new leader. He was an older Martian man with close-cut white hair and skin the color of stained oak, with a folksy Mariner Valley drawl, kind eyes, and a fire team of Marines in power armor ready to make his wishes into law. When he'd come to her office, he'd had the courtesy to sit in the chair on the opposite side of the desk while they spoke. It was a small politeness that nailed in as much as anything had how utterly defeated she was. Laconia wasn't here to bully her or belittle her. It made no difference to Perkins whether he lost face before her. He'd come to take what he wanted—what he wanted was absolute authority—and he was going to get it. Gently was fine. Less gently was fine as well. The illusion of choice was hers.

She'd chosen.

House arrest was better than being in the brig. Her couch, her clothes, her files and access, though without any broadcast privileges and a Laconian censor looking over her data streams. She dreaded the moment when Saba reached out to her and gave himself away, but that message never came. She assumed that the detention and cooperation of the Transport Union president was useful to Perkins and Trejo and Duarte. Her confinement rooms, her escort to the gym, her meals delivered by Laconian soldiers were all part of the narrative of victory, broadcast through thirteen hundred worlds as a warning to behave well. Before Laconia even the union fell. Even Mars. Even Earth. What hope could any colony world have against them?

That was speculation, of course. Newsfeeds weren't on her diet anymore. But she could watch old movies, listen to music, eat what she wanted, play games, sleep as much as she cared to sleep, exercise her way through all the routines she'd told herself she'd engage with if she ever had the time.

On the best days, house arrest was almost like an enforced vacation. For the first time in her adult life, she had no responsibilities. No long-term political aspirations to cultivate and attend to. No journalists or administrators or officials to spar with. The problems of who passed through which gate, of what artifacts were banned and which were taxed, of

how to balance the needs of the colony worlds, all belonged to someone else now. Except for Saba's absence, it was the life she'd imagined retiring to when her term was complete.

On the worst days, her rooms were a box of crushing depression and failure, and death would be the only release.

Her handlers dealt with all of her moods with the same equanimity and insincere kindness. They were good to her because they chose to be. If they chose otherwise, that would be up to them as well. Her opinions didn't matter unless someone else decided that they did. And she had every reason to believe it was going to be like this—her rooms, the gym, her rooms again, under guard and cut off from humanity—for the rest of her life.

And then, three months after her surrender, the *Heart of the Tempest* came to the transfer station at Lagrange-5, and Drummer went with it.

Vaughn came to her like a ghost from a past life. If she'd needed any measure of how her isolation had affected her, it was how glad she was to see him. His face seemed to have cracked a few new crags down the cheeks and across his forehead. He held himself with the same formality, but instead of radiating his usual low-level contempt, he seemed fragile. Like bread that had been hollowed out inside so that all that remained was the crust.

Or maybe that was her, and she wanted to see how she felt reflected in someone else. To not be so alone with it.

He stood in her doorway while she gathered herself.

"There's a meeting, ma'am," he said. "Admiral Trejo asked me to ... help you prepare."

"Trejo?" she said, and it felt almost like a conversation they would have had before. "Is he here?"

"More that we're there, but yes. The secretary-general, yourself, and Admiral Trejo. A few others. They didn't give me the whole list, but they seem to want you presentable. And there's this."

He held out a hand terminal. She took it, spooled through the file trees it had access to. It was a thin list, but it had the advantage of being new. Things she hadn't already been looking at for weeks had a certain charm. A text file with her name. She opened it.

NOTE TO THE SPEAKER: IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE SYSTEMS OUTSIDE OF SOL NO LONGER BE REFERRED TO AS "COLONIES." IN THIS AND ANY OFF-THE-CUFF REMARKS, THEY ARE TO BE CALLED "PLANETS" OR "SYSTEMS." NO PRIMACY

SHOULD BE AFFORDED TO EARTH, MARS, OR THE SOL SYSTEM.

QUESTIONER: MONICA STUART

QUESTION: IS THE TRANSPORT UNION COOPERATING IN THE TRANSFER OF CONTROL?

ANSWER: THE TRANSPORT UNION HAS ALWAYS BEEN A TEMPORARY STRUCTURE. BEFORE OUR LACONIAN FRIENDS ARRIVED, WE WERE ALREADY IN TALKS WITH THE UN AND THE EARTH-MARS COALITION TO DRAFT A CHARTER THAT WOULD GIVE OVER GREATER ENFORCEMENT POWERS TO A STANDING MILITARY. THE LACONIAN FLEET IS THE CLEAR CHOICE TO FILL THAT VACUUM, AND THE UNION IS PLEASED TO WORK WITH HIGH CONSUL DUARTE AND PRESIDENT FISK TO SEE THAT TRADE BETWEEN THE PLANETS (SEE NOTE) IS EFFICIENT AND FREE.

QUESTIONER: AUDEN TAMMET

QUESTION: IS THE UNION READY TO PAY REPARATIONS TO LACONIA FOR THE DAMAGE DONE TO ITS SHIPS?

“Press conference, is it?” Drummer asked.

“That appears to be part of the agenda,” Vaughn said. “You may, of course, choose to deviate from the script—”

“May I?”

“—but the Laconian censor will be reviewing everything before it goes out. And there are less pleasant accommodations than this.”

Drummer spooled through the script. Three pages of questions, all of them staged, written, and approved. “So you’re saying I should do this?”

“You gain nothing by refusing. And there is a certain dignity in living to fight another day.”

“Or just living,” Drummer said.

“Or that.”

Drummer sighed. “I suppose I should make myself presentable. How much time do I have?”



The conference room was the same one she’d been in when TSL-5 had opened for business. The vaulted ceiling seemed grander now than it had. The wait staff circulated with flutes of champagne and hors d’oeuvres—tank-grown shrimp, real cheddar, dates wrapped in bacon that had once

actually been a pig. The wall screens with their views of Earth and Luna, People's Home and the *Tempest*, were crisp and beautiful. High-level officials mingled and chatted as if the system of humanity hadn't been turned on its ear. As if history were what it had always been. The absence of a few—Emily Santos-Baca, for instance—was something only she seemed to notice.

The secretary-general was in a pale suit with a collarless shirt and a golden pin in his lapel. He was smiling and shaking hands with the people around him. She'd expected him to be more somber, but in fairness, the transfer station had always been something of a humiliation for him. A place in the universe that defined the limits of his authority. Before, it had been her on the other side of that membrane. Now it was Laconia. So in a way, he'd already had more of a chance to get used to this.

The man he was laughing with, hand on his shoulder, was unmistakable. Admiral Trejo was smaller than she'd expected. Thicker about the chest and belly in a way that didn't speak as much to muscle or fat as genetics and age. His hair was thinning, and not styled to disguise the fact. His eyes were a bright green that would have seemed affected if they'd been fake.

Trejo noticed her, broke off his conversation with the secretary-general, and trundled over toward her. He was just the slightest bit bowlegged. Drummer felt an irrational twitch of betrayal. The man who'd destroyed and humiliated her should at least have been a bronzed Adonis, not a normal human being. It would have made it easier to swallow if she'd been beaten by a god.

"President Drummer," he said, putting out his hand. "I'm glad we could finally meet in more settled circumstances."

"Just Drummer," she said, and found herself shaking his hand. "I think we can dispense with the 'president' part."

"Oh, I hope not," Trejo said. "Transitions like this are delicate times. And the more profound the changes that are coming, the more important that it appear to have continuity. Don't you think?"

"If you say so," she said.

A waiter slid by, and she took a glass. She didn't need the alcohol as much as the idea of it. But, Lord, she needed something.

"I'm sorry your husband couldn't be here," Trejo said. There was nothing in his voice that couldn't just be a pleasantry, except that Saba's name had been linked to the embarrassment on Medina. She'd heard that

much before her detainment. She felt a thrill of fear now. Did Trejo know something? Was he about to tell her Saba had been caught? Been killed?

"I'm sorry too," she said. "I miss him very much. But we have always had different careers."

"I hope to meet him one day," Trejo said, and she relaxed a notch. He wasn't dead. Trejo saw her response and smiled a soft, rueful smile. "It would be useful, I think, if you could help to resolve things with him. Chaos is bad for everyone."

"I don't have any way to reach him," Drummer said. She didn't go on with *And I don't know what I'd tell him if I did*.

"Fair enough," Trejo said. "We'll have that conversation another time, yes? Right now, there's something else I wanted to speak with you about. High Consul Duarte wants to convene the important people in humanity's new endeavors on Laconia. A kind of permanent convocation of the best minds and most influential people. He's asked me to extend an invitation to you."

The politeness of it was foul. The pretense that she was still autonomous, the master of her own fate. Oh, she could probably refuse. Duarte seemed smart enough not to welcome people into his projects who were willing to openly oppose him. But there would be consequences. That they weren't even spelled out made them more ominous.

"This is like the colonies, isn't it?" she said.

Trejo lifted his eyebrows, answering her question with a wordless one of his own.

"You're shifting everything to Laconia," she said. "Not just ships or money. The culture."

Trejo smiled. "Earth will always be the home from which humanity sprang, but yes. The high consul thinks that ... fetishizing Earth is bad for the long-term future of the species. We will also put in place an accelerated repopulation scheme. Try to adjust the balance so that Sol system isn't such an overwhelming majority of the population either."

"You can't put billions of people through the ring gates," Drummer said. "It won't work."

"Not in our lifetimes," Trejo said. "We're talking about the work of generations. But ... well, I was Martian before I was Laconian. Thinking for the long term doesn't intimidate me."

A woman in a white dress with gold at her throat and wrists sloped by,

nodding to Trejo as she passed. He smiled back, glanced at her ass, and then back so quickly it might have passed for politeness.

“Your terraforming plan didn’t work out too well,” Drummer said more acidly than she should have. It just came out that way.

“It would have,” Trejo said, “if something bigger hadn’t come along. Anyway, please do consider the invitation. The high consul is looking forward to meeting you.”

Trejo put a hand on her arm like they were old friends and made his way back out to some other conversation on his list. All around her, the eyes and attention of the crowd followed him and left her behind. She drank her champagne in a gulp and started looking for someplace to ditch the glass so she could get another one.

“Getting drunk, Camina? You think that’s smart, or are you just past giving a fuck anymore?”

Avasarala was in her wheelchair. Her snow-white hair was pulled back in a bun, and her sari was a shimmer of green that almost hid the thinness of her body. She looked older than the last time Drummer had seen her. And she’d looked older than dirt then.

“I am taking the edge off the pain,” Drummer said. “Because what else can I do?”

Avasarala turned her chair and started off toward the podium and the seats. They were empty now, but the journalists were starting to filter in. The show would be starting soon.

“I’d join you, but they tell me I’m on my last liver these days,” Avasarala said. “No more liquor for me.”

“You seem to be taking the conquest fairly well.”

“The fuck option do I have?” Avasarala said. “I’m an old lady who spent her life trying to make peace between Earth and Mars. All this shit? It’s like I missed a day at school, and everyone else learned to speak Mandarin while I was gone. I don’t understand any of this.”

“Yeah,” Drummer said. “I can see that.”

“It’s the reward of old age,” Avasarala said. “You live long enough, and you can watch everything you worked for become irrelevant.”

“You’re not selling it,” Drummer said.

“Fuck you, then. Die young. See if I care.”

Drummer laughed. Avasarala grinned, and for a moment, they understood each other perfectly. For a moment, Drummer didn’t feel alone.

“Are you going to his orgy pit or whatever the fuck it is Duarte’s setting up?” Avasarala asked.

Across the room, Vaughn caught Drummer’s eyes and began walking toward the two women with purpose. Drummer didn’t want to go with him. Didn’t want to face the theater and falsehood of the next part. She turned back to Avasarala.

“I don’t know. I suppose I have to.”

“Always a bad idea to ditch the emperor,” Avasarala agreed. Then, “Do you know why they’re looking for Okoye?”

“Who?”

“Elvi Okoye,” Avasarala said, and Vaughn reached them.

“It’s time, ma’am,” he said.

Drummer nodded and handed him her glass. Avasarala’s claw of a hand grabbed hers, held her for a moment. “Chin up, Camina. These fuckers can smell blood. And this shit’s not over, no matter what it looks like now.”

“Thank you,” Drummer said, and pulled away.

The seats for the journalists were full now. She recognized their faces. Sometimes even the way they sat, the way they moved. She’d done this for years. She’d never done this before.

Admiral Trejo made some brief opening remarks—thanked everyone for being there, expressed bright hopes for the future, extended the greeting of High Consul Duarte—and brought her up. The others would come later. The secretary-general. The speaker of the Martian parliament. Whoever else. But she was the last president of the Transport Union. Her dignity was first for the chopping block.

She looked out over the faces and remembered a time she’d enjoyed this.

“President Drummer?” Her podium identified the woman. Monica Stuart. “Is the Transport Union cooperating in the transfer of control?”

No, it is not. No, I am not. No, we have been conquered, but we will fight to the last breath because living with someone else’s hand on our necks is intolerable, has always been intolerable, will always be intolerable. Not because of Laconia, not because of the union, not because of any of the authorities through all of history that have made rules and then dared people to break them. Because we’re human, and humans are mean, independent monkeys that reached their greatness by killing every other species of hominid that looked at us funny. We will not be controlled for

long. Not even by ourselves. Any other plan is a pipe dream.

In the front row, Avasarala coughed.

Drummer smiled thinly.

“The Transport Union has always been a temporary structure,” she began.

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Chapter Fifty-Two: Naomi

Freehold was pain. Some days that was a good thing. It gave her something to push against, something to fight. Other days it was just wearying.

The pencil-thin valley where they'd set the *Roci* down had steep, high mountains to the north, east, and southwest. A thin creek ran along the bottom with glacier meltwater. Pale-green treelike organisms clung to the stone with finger-thick roots and stretched out vines studded with pale-green bladders that floated into the open air as if Nature itself were putting up balloons for a party. A high breeze would shift the vines one way and then the other. Every now and then, one would break off and swirl away down the valley, maybe to die or maybe to find some new place to take root.

She understood it was all the product of evolutionary arms races. Photosynthesizing structures had spent centuries, maybe millennia, trying to choke each other in darkness until one of them had figured out how to both be rooted and fly, how to both command the high air and drop everything below it into permanent twilight. None of it had been created with the *Rocinante* in mind. It just worked out well.

The *Roci* itself huddled in a wide space where the creek curved around. The landing thrusters had scorched the landscape around it, but it didn't take more than a day or two before the local plants began growing back. The fight for survival made everything either resilient or forgotten. The floating vines made a moving canopy fifteen meters above them that would help hide them from observation, if anything ever came into the system to look. As hiding places went, it was decent.

The colony itself—the only other three hundred people on the planet—was in an arid biome a six-hour hike down the valley. At least it was for her. The locals could make the trip in half the time. Houston lived down there, among his people, and sometimes she and Alex would stay there too. But

most days, she was at the *Roci*—her real home. There was maintenance to be done, restocking. Distilling the creek water until it was pure enough to put in the *Roci*'s tanks. The reactor could run for months without needing more fuel, but reaction mass was always a problem. If they wanted to go anywhere. If they just stayed put ... well, less of an issue, then.

Today she'd spent half the daylight hours discouraging a cluster of very slow animals or possibly semimobile plants that were exploring whether the niches around the *Roci*'s PDCs would be a good place to live. When the light faded, she stopped for lunch. The planet's sixteen-hours-and-change diurnal cycle meant that most of her workdays had at least half a night in them.

The *Roci* had been built to rest on its belly in a gravity well. All of her systems functioned, even at ninety degrees from what she'd become used to. That seemed right too. Being at home, but also in a space her body didn't understand. Being in control of her day, but not of her life. Being achingly alone, but not wanting people around. It was all of a piece. If she'd dreamed it, it would have meant something.

As soon as she crawled back into the ship, she showered. There were compounds in the life cycle of Freehold that irritated her skin if she didn't wash them off. Then she pulled on a fresh jumpsuit, went to the galley, made herself a bowl of white kibble, and sat. A message was waiting for her from Bobbie, and she set her hand terminal on the table when she played it so she could use both hands to eat. The kibble was warm and peppery; the mushroom squeaked against her teeth just the way it was supposed to.

Bobbie looked exhausted and excited at the same time. Her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail the way she wore it when she was working on machinery, not the bun she had for workouts. Her eyes were bright and the suggestion of a smile teased her mouth without ever quite appearing. She looked ten years younger. More than that, she looked happy.

"Hey, Naomi. Hope things are going well down there. I think we're making some real progress up here. I'm not positive, but I think I've found how the *Storm* manages its energy profiles. It's a little screwy, same as everything on this rig. I was wondering if I could get you to take a quick skim through the new dataset I pulled. Maybe you'll see something I didn't?"

The embedded data was structured as environmental-control buffers, and

it was half again the size of the *Roci*'s. Naomi popped it open and glanced at the gross index. A lot of familiar parts, yes, but some strangeness in the large-scale structure. If it was anything like the other bits of the *Gathering Storm*'s operating code they'd harvested for analysis, it would get weirder the deeper in she went. She dropped it to a secure partition in the *Roci* and started unpacking it with her favorite tools, converting the language of the ships into something with handholds that her mind could brace on.

She set her hand terminal to Record. "Dataset received and in process. It may take me a day or two, but I'll let you know what I think. In the meantime, all is well down here. No need for rescue."

It was the rule. Somewhere in the message she sent up the well, there was always the word *rescue* and always would be until she needed one. Bobbie's word was *progress*. A message went back and forth every twenty-four hours at a minimum. Not that there was any real risk that Naomi could see, but protocol was protocol. The locals on Freehold had been at least willing to listen when they'd arrived with Payne Houston in tow, and there had been nothing but cautious goodwill since. Not that Naomi trusted that to last. The colony of Freehold would support her in her guise as a refugee and freedom fighter as long as it was convenient for them. She understood that having the only gunship in the system and a ring gate far enough away that she'd have a free hand how to use it for weeks before help could arrive figured into the local council's calculus of the situation.

Bobbie's improvised crew of Belters were with her on a little moon circling one of Freehold's three gas giants, tucked in an ancient lava tube and showing no signs of mutiny. Bobbie as captain and Amos as acting XO would, Naomi thought, be more than enough to ensure discipline. It also gave Freehold another reason to play nice, and a spare set of eyes on the ring gate in case anything nasty came through.

The *Storm* was slow to give up its secrets, not because of the internal security—though that was an issue—as much as the profound unfamiliarity of some of its technology. Its reliance on calcium, for instance, was an order of magnitude more than Naomi had ever seen, and the vacuum channels it used instead of wiring still made her head ache a little if she thought about them too much. With enough time, though, she was certain they'd come to understand the ship. On her good days, she thought they'd be ready, even if she wasn't sure yet what they were getting ready for.

While the *Roci* arranged the data for her and the kibble broke down

pleasantly in her stomach, she lay back and let her eyes close for a few minutes. Her knees ached. Her spine ached. It wasn't even the gravity of Freehold. This world was smaller than Mars, and only a little bit denser. She'd been on long burns worse than this. Part of the problem was that she wasn't doing her exercises. She was doing work, and there turned out to be a suite of small, neglected muscles that had atrophied over the years and weren't happy to be put into service clearing vegetation and crawling around the bottom of a gravity well.

There was also, she suspected, something of a placebo effect. She'd spent so many years equating life in free atmosphere on a planetary surface with a constant, grinding full g, that now even though the gravity was actually fairly mild, she was primed to notice the discomfort. She expected it, and so it was there.

The *Rocinante* chimed to announce the completion of the data run, and then again almost immediately to announce Alex's return. It was less than a minute before she heard him walking up the hallway that was usually the lift tube. He was singing to himself. A light, lilting melody with words she didn't recognize.

"In here," she called as he came close.

Alex poked his head into the galley. He was more comfortable going into town, and the combination of long walks and sunlight had darkened his skin and given him his cheekbones back.

"Hola," he said. "Good news from Freehold. We're a business!"

He lifted his right arm. The satchel in it was heavy with batteries ready to be recharged. It was a minor convenience for the township to have Alex come by and collect batteries, recharge them from the *Roci's* reactor, and deliver them again full up instead of waiting for their turn at the solar array. So Freehold's poor foresight on solar energy was now their cottage industry. At least for now.

Alex's grin widened. "And ..."

"And?"

He lifted his left hand. A second satchel. "They paid in beer and curried goat. I've got a little cook fire started outside. It's going to be great."

Naomi started to say that she'd just eaten, but the joy in Alex's eyes was infectious. She swung herself up to sitting. "On my way," she said.

The moons weren't shining in the valley when she reached the airlock, but Alex's little cook fire was glowing happily next to the landing strut, and

the stars glittered between the floating vines above them. They burned dried-out vines and the shed carapaces of huge, slow-moving animals that lived in shallow caves all up and down the valley. The smoke was pale and fragrant. The shards of carapace popped and cracked now and then, sending little sprays of spark up with the smoke to vanish as they cooled. The smoke kept away the night hoppers—tiny, nocturnal insect-like animals that usually found humans fascinating.

Alex had two skewers of meat dripping grease and curry onto the flames, and Naomi had to admit that they smelled better than kibble. She sat with her back against the landing strut. Alex took a bottle from his satchel, opened its neck, and passed it over. The beer was cold and rich and more biting than she'd expected.

"Robust," she said.

"Danielle likes a higher proof than some brewers," Alex said with a smile as he leaned back to look at the vines and the sky beyond them.

"Seems like you're getting along well with the locals."

"They're all right," Alex said. "Just don't get them talking about the nature of sovereignty and you're fine. Even then you're all right, it's just a conversation they've all had a lot. Tends to go along the ground they've already plowed."

He reached over and turned the skewers. High above them, something set off one of the vine bladders, and it glowed a pale yellow-green for a moment, then went dark again.

"Good to build rapport," Naomi said. "Freehold's going to have to look like a polite, compliant little colony for a while."

"No trouble. The council's on board for an 'enemy-of-my-enemy, hail Laconia, down with the union' stance. For the time being anyway. I think they kind of like having us here, actually. The founding impulse of Freehold is sticking it to the government."

"Loses some of its shine after you get elected."

"Right?" Alex tested the curried meat with his finger, pinching and releasing fast enough that he didn't get burned. He handed it over to Naomi. She waved it in the night air for a moment to let it cool, then took the first cube off the end and popped it in her mouth. The char on the meat was good. The spices that infused it were better. She chewed slowly, letting herself enjoy it.

"Do you think they'll sell us out?"

“Eventually, sure,” Alex said cheerfully. “But not right away. And probably not for cheap, so long as they like us.”

Her plan was the long one. The only one, really, that made sense. Laconia’s strength seemed overwhelming. A force without weakness that nothing could ever overcome. That was an illusion. Earth had seemed like that once, when she’d been a girl scraping together a life in the Belt. It hadn’t been true then either.

They’d wait. They’d watch. They’d be small and quiet and aware. Sooner or later, Laconia would show them where it was weak. And between then and now, life. Charging batteries in exchange for beer. Making friends with the township. Working to crack open the mysteries of the *Gathering Storm* with Bobbie and Amos. Keeping the *Rocinante* in good trim, and keeping herself from falling into despair. It was enough to fill her days. It would have to be enough.

“Which one of those is Bobbie?” Alex asked.

“Hmm?”

With the second skewer, he pointed up at the night sky peeping through from behind the vines. “One of those stars isn’t a star, right? I mean, we can see her from here, can’t we?”

Naomi looked up at the little slice of stars. The galactic disk looked the same as it had in Sol system, but the constellations not quite like her own. Parallax, she knew, was how they’d started mapping which systems were on the other sides of the gates. She’d seen a map once—the splash of systems that the gates connected. Thirteen hundred stars in a galaxy with three hundred billion of them. They’d been clumped together, the gate-network stars. The two farthest systems were hardly more than a thousand light-years apart. A little more than one percent of the galaxy, and still unthinkably vast.

“Look just above the ridge there,” she said, pointing. “You see where the rock looks like a bent finger? The round knuckle?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“Track just up from that, and to the right. There are three stars almost in a row. The middle one is Bobbie.”

“Hmm,” Alex said, then went quiet. He wasn’t singing anymore, but sometimes Naomi thought she heard a few hummed notes under his breath. It was maybe five minutes before he spoke again. “I wonder which one’s Mars.”

“Sol system?” she said. “I don’t know.”

“I think about Kit,” Alex said and took another drink of his beer. “And Giselle, I guess, but more about Kit. I have a son out there. He’s just starting his own life. His adulthood. I won’t be there for it. I don’t even know that I’d be any use if I were. I mean, when I was his age, I was getting into the navy, and Earth and Mars were the biggest things in the universe. Now ... I don’t know. Everything’s different. He has to find his own way.”

“That’s always how it is,” Naomi said.

“I know. Every kid has to find who they are without Mom and Dad, but —”

“History too. Mars before Solomon Epstein. Earth before the seas came up. Before there were airplanes and then after. When we figured out how to grow our own food. Everything’s always changed.”

“But up to now it wasn’t my problem,” Alex said, with an affected disconsolate buzz in his voice. They both laughed together. A half dozen of the vine bladders lit up and faded. She didn’t know what made them do that, but it was pretty. She felt a pleasant warmth growing in her belly. The beer, probably. Or the meat, since she’d eaten almost all of it despite her expectations. Or the sense of being in midnight under stars in the middle of an ocean of air that wouldn’t run out or leak away. It really was reassuring in a way that even the best station atmosphere could never quite equal.

“I think about Jim the same way,” she said. “Not that he’s beginning his adulthood, but he always wanted to take me back to Earth. To show me what living on a planet was like. Now I’m here, and I’m finding out, and he’s not.”

“He’ll be all right,” Alex said. “He always is.”

“I know,” she said aloud, but they both knew she meant *Maybe*.

Something crashed through the underbrush, made a high keening sound, and crashed away. They’d heard it before often enough that they both ignored it. Alex finished off the last of his beer and tucked the empty bottle back in his satchel. He levered himself up to standing and stretched his arms above him, looking like some ancient priest in the firelight.

“I should get these things hooked up,” he said, hefting the dead batteries. “I said I’d have them back tomorrow. I’ll probably take a sleep shift in town after that, if you’re all right solo?”

“That’s fine,” she said. “Bobbie sent me a new dataset. I’ll be working on that. I wouldn’t be much company anyway.”

“Should I douse the fire?”

Naomi shook her head. “I’ll do it when I go in. I think I overate. I need to just sit for a little while.”

“Right,” Alex said, and trudged over to the airlock. He lifted himself in, and she heard him starting to sing again until the door closed behind him. She lay back.

Everything changed, and it went right on changing. A terrible thought when things were good, a comforting one now. Whatever happened, she could be certain that things wouldn’t stay the way they were now. And if she stayed smart and clever and lucky, she’d be able to affect how the next change came. Or take advantage of it. She’d find Jim again, if she could just be patient enough.

One of the vines broke loose from the mountain wall and drifted along with some high breeze that she didn’t feel. She watched it blunder away to the southwest, catching on another vine for a moment, then losing its grip and floating on. Where it had been, there was a new spray of stars now, glittering from decades and centuries ago, their light only happening to fall on her here and now.

She wondered if one of them was Laconia.

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Epilogue: Duarte

Winston Duarte watched his daughter playing at the fountain's edge. Teresa was ten now, and almost as tall as her mother had been. She was working with a clay boat, discovering the relationship between buoyancy and displacement for herself. Forming and re-forming the little craft of her own design. Finding not only what was the most efficient but also what was the most aesthetically pleasing. What would float and also steer and also be beautiful in its own right. Her tutor, Colonel Ilich, sat on the edge of the fountain as well, talking with her. Guiding her thoughts through the process, and helping her to connect the work of her hands to the lessons in mathematics and history and art.

He didn't know whether she was aware how lonesome a childhood she'd had. The State Building had facilities for the children of the government to live and work and attend lessons while their parents saw to the mechanisms of the empire, but most of the classrooms—like the offices—were empty. Prepared for a generation that was still just beginning. The timing was wrong for Teresa. Someday children would run and play together in the streets and parks of Laconia, but by then Teresa would be grown.

She leaned forward, lowered her latest design into the water. Ilich asked her something, and she replied. Duarte couldn't hear what they were saying from this distance, but he saw the change in the way she held the little boat. And more than that, he saw her mind change.

That had started more recently, and he wasn't certain what to make of it yet. A pattern of something around her head when she was thinking strongly. As she worked the clay, it infused her hands as well. Ilich had it too, though not as intensely. Of all the ways his changes affected his senses, this new one was the most interesting. He had the suspicion that he was, in some sense, seeing *thought*.

Teresa glanced over, and the whatever-it-was shifted just before she raised her hand. He waved back, returning her smile, then stepped away

into the State Building to let her continue her studies undistracted. He loved his daughter profoundly, and the joy of watching her learn was better than anything else he had scheduled, but his presence wouldn't help her or the empire. Duty called.

He found Kelly waiting for him in his private office. The look on the man's face was enough to tell him that they had arrived. His heart sank. He had been dreading this moment since he'd heard that Natalia Singh had requested the personal meeting. It was her right, though. And his obligation.

"They're in the east drawing room, sir."

"They?"

"She brought her daughter."

Another little punch to the gut. But ... "All right. Thank you, Kelly."

Natalia and Elsa Singh were dressed in matching clothes. Dark blue with white accents. Not the full black of mourning, but somber. He sat across from them as Kelly served tea and cakes. Duarte felt the temptation to focus on the whatever-it-was, to see if grief and anger looked different from Teresa's lesson with the clay boats, but it seemed impolite, so he didn't.

Kelly closed the door behind him as he left. Duarte sipped his tea. Natalia Singh didn't touch hers, but the little girl ate some cake. The sweetness of sugar overcame everything for children. Even loss. There was something profound in that. Beautiful and sad both.

"Doctor Singh," Duarte said. "I am so sorry for your loss."

Her chin lifted a few degrees, proud and defiant. He hoped she wasn't going to do anything stupid. Grief was a terrible thing.

"Thank you, sir," she said through a tight throat. The little one looked over, confused less by the words than by her mother's tone of voice. Elsa was a smart child, he could see that. Empathetic, which was more important really than other kinds of intelligence. She shifted on the couch, scooted toward her mother.

Duarte leaned forward, putting down his teacup. He laced his fingers together, and when he spoke, he tried to put as much warmth and care into his voice as the little girl had expressed in her movement.

"You asked to speak with me. How can I help you?"

"I would like to request a copy of the formal inquiry into my husband's death," she said, then swallowed.

Duarte slipped. His focus shifted, and the whatever-it-was—thought, consciousness, attention—became clear to him for a moment. It was tight in

around Natalia Singh's head and chest, wrapping her like a shroud. The little one—Elsa—hers was diffused around her, thicker toward her mother, like something physical in her was reaching out. Longing to comfort and be comforted in a field effect that was something more, apparently, than just metaphor. He pulled his attention back to his more usual senses with a little echo of shame, as if he'd eavesdropped on something.

"Of course," he said. "I'll see that it's delivered to you."

Natalia Singh nodded once and wiped a tear away like it was an insect that had landed on her cheek.

"He was a good man," Duarte said. "I know that. You know that. In another time and another place, he would have been celebrated."

"He wasn't a killer," she said, and her voice had pressed down to a whisper.

"He was put into an extreme position, and he overreacted," Duarte said. "Our place in humanity is special. The rules that apply to us are harsh. You and me and him. But there's a reason for that, and I want you to know how much I honor his sacrifice. And yours. Both of yours."

Elsa looked at him now as if she knew he was talking about her. He smiled at the girl, and after a moment, she smiled back. He could see an echo of her mother's face in her small, soft features. Her father's too. He took Natalia's hand, and she didn't pull away.

"You will have the full support of the government," he said, "if you want it. Your daughter has a guaranteed place in the academy. Your work is important to us. To me. I know this is hard, and you have my word that you will not face this alone. We're all with you, whatever you need."

She nodded more slowly this time. She didn't wipe the tears away. Her daughter climbed into her lap, and Natalia put her free arm around her, rocked her slowly back and forth. It was heartbreaking, but he'd made the decision. He wouldn't look away from the consequences of it. This was his duty too.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

She shook her head. Speech was beyond her. While she wept, he poured her more tea, and sat, witnessing her sorrow and being present with her and her child. After a few minutes, she looked up at him, her eyes clearer, calmer. He took a deep breath, squeezed her hand gently, and released it.

"Thank you," Natalia said.

He made a little bow to her, a last gesture of respect, and withdrew.

Anytime a Laconian died in the service of the empire, their family had the right to a private audience with the high consul. It was a tradition he'd begun when they first passed through the gate. It would have to be reconsidered as the empire expanded, but for now, it was still in his power to honor it, so he did.

Kelly was waiting for him in his office, a look of sympathy in his eyes. He didn't mention the widow or her daughter in the drawing room. Kelly was a man of perfect tact.

"A report from Doctor Cortázar, sir," he said.

Duarte pulled up the new file, opening it with a gesture. Cumulative update on the debriefing of Prisoner 17. Duarte spooled down the file, seeing Cortázar's questions, the prisoner's responses. They were only words. Designs of light drawn on air. After glimpsing the living thoughts of Dr. Singh and her daughter, mere language seemed sterile. He looked at Kelly, closed the file.

"I think," Duarte said, "it may be time I met this Captain Holden."



The man sat on the floor, his back to the wall of the cell. His splayed legs and bright eyes made him seem younger than his graying hair. As Duarte came in, Holden's gaze shifted between him and his guard—back and forth—until it settled on him. Duarte sat on the bunk, hands on his thighs, and looked down at the man who had caused so much trouble over so many years. He didn't look like anything more than an old ice bucket with a little too much curiosity and too little impulse control.

Duarte had known people like him from his time in the service. Hotheads and gadflies. The ones who were always sure they knew better than anyone else. The truth was, they had their place. Like anyone else, they could be apt tools if they were well suited to the task at hand.

Here he had no qualms about using his new senses. Holden was an enemy and an asset. He had no right to any privacy. And the pattern mind was ... fascinating.

When he'd been a boy, Duarte had seen an optical illusion that changed one face into another as the viewer came near it. Holden was like that. There was something about the way the pattern of his thoughts moved that

reminded him of dry riverbeds. The traces of something that had been there and was now gone, but not without leaving the trail of its passage behind it. Patterns inside patterns.

“You’re Winston Duarte,” Holden said, snapping Duarte’s attention back to his more usual ways of seeing.

“Yes,” Duarte said. “I am.”

Holden pulled his knees up, rested his arms on them. His eyes were wide, and even a little bit frightened. “What the fuck happened to you?”

It took Duarte a moment to understand, then he chuckled. “Yes. I forget. I’ve been through some changes. Not everyone notices, but there have been some ... I don’t know. Shifts?”

“You’re using that shit on *yourself*?”

“I think we’re getting off on the wrong foot, Captain. Let me try this again. I’m High Consul Duarte. You and I have a shared interest, I understand, in the origins and function of the protomolecule. Did I get that right?”

“You have to listen to me. I saw what happened to them. To the things that made the protomolecule. There was a record on the ring station from before they got shut down.”

“I read the report on that,” Duarte said. “Even before I came here. It was part of what inspired me to take the steps I’ve taken. Not just”—he gestured at his own body—“but all of it. An empire is a tool, just like everything else.”

That brought Holden to a stop. The pattern around his head was shifting and vibrating like a hive of angry wasps. Again, he had the sense of seeing the remnants of something in Holden’s mind. Traces of another pattern. There was a term for this, but ...

“*Palimpsest*,” Duarte said aloud, then shook his head when Holden frowned. “I was trying to remember a word. I just got it. *Palimpsest*.”

“You came here because of the thing that killed the protomolecule?”

Duarte leaned back, considered James Holden and, now that he’d met him, how best to build rapport. Radical honesty for radical honesty, maybe? Worth trying.

“I was connected to the MCRN intelligence services when the gate opened. The first one. Sol gate. And when the other gates opened, I saw the probe data sets as they came in. The early surveys of all the systems as fast as we could get them. And I saw an opportunity here. The most clearly

intact ruins. A set of orbiting structures with what appeared to be a ship or something like it halfway through being constructed. And I recognized that the protomolecule had the potential to act as a handle of sorts. A way to interact with the artifacts that had been left behind. So I got the sample that we still had, and the best minds I could find on the subject. And through discipline and commitment, we developed new technologies faster and better than all the other worlds put together. Laconia is Mars. The Martian ideal taken to the next level.”

“That’s all great,” Holden said. “Except for the part where something came and killed the shit out of all the things that made the artifacts. I saw whole systems going dark. They shut down the gates just to try to stop whatever was killing them, and it didn’t work.”

“I know.”

“That thing that popped up on your ship? That’s the same thing that killed the protomolecule. That wiped out the civilization that built all of this.”

“I know that too,” Duarte said. “Or I guessed, anyway. It seems the most promising hypothesis. And it’s related, I believe, to the missing ships. Something deep, something *profound*, doesn’t like anyone using these technologies and powers. Didn’t like when the last ones did it, don’t like it now that we’ve turned them back on. It’s an interesting problem.”

Holden stood up. The guard stepped forward, but Duarte gestured for him to stay back.

“Interesting problem? Something fired a shot at you. At your ship. It turned off people’s minds all throughout the system, and that’s an interesting problem? That was an *attack*.”

“And it didn’t work,” Duarte said. “We aren’t the same thing that got wiped out before. What killed them affected us, but it didn’t destroy us.”

“You seem pretty sure it’s not going to find some slightly different approach that’s going to wipe us all out. You’re not picking a fight with the things that made the protomolecule. You’re picking a fight with whatever killed *them*. Orders of magnitude above the things that were orders of magnitude above us. You’ve got to know this is going to escalate if we keep using these technologies.”

“We were always going to keep using these technologies. That was inevitable the moment we opened the gates,” Duarte said. “If you’ve studied any history at all, you know that. Never in human history have we

discovered something useful and then chosen not to use it.”

Holden looked around the cell like there might be something there to help him. Duarte didn’t need any new fields of perception to see the agitation in Holden’s mind. Duarte softened his voice the way he had with Natalia and Elsa, offering comfort and consolation in his tone if not his words.

“There was no path where we left the gates alone. No future where we didn’t use the technologies and lessons we learned from them. And there wasn’t likely to be one where we didn’t face the same kind of pushback that killed the ones who came before us. There was only the way forward where we were scattershot and chaotic, or the one where we were organized, regimented, and disciplined. And the missing ships are a promise that the killers in the abyss will come back. That they’ve never really left. You, more than anyone else, should understand that.”

“I did,” Holden said. “I do. It’s why I came here. To warn you.”

Duarte leaned back. The bunk was thin and uncomfortable. He didn’t envy Holden’s having to sleep on it. But there was a breeze through the window and a bit of sunlight. The cell was still more luxurious than half of the ship cabins Duarte had been assigned early in his career.

Holden’s hands were open as if he were offering something. And he was, but it wasn’t what he thought.

“I don’t need a warning,” Duarte said. “I need an ally. You have seen things no one else has ever seen. You know things I need to know, and you might not even be aware of the significance of some of it. Doctor Cortázar has been trying to find that. Help him. Work with him. Work with *me*.”

“To do what?”

“To take the shards of the protomolecule’s broken sword and reforge it. To bring humanity into a single community that is functional and strong. And prepare us.”

Holden laughed, but there was no mirth in it. Duarte knew he hadn’t reached the man. That was disappointing.

“Prepare us for what?” Holden asked. “To poke gods with a sharp stick?”

“No, Captain Holden. No sticks,” Duarte said. “When you fight gods, you storm heaven.”

The story continues in...

TIAMAT'S WRATH

Book EIGHT of the Expanse

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meet the author

JAMES S. A. COREY is the pen name of authors Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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1

The pharmacy's sign was burnt out and the windows all smashed in—Violet had done one herself—but there were still three customers standing gamely in line. She stepped around them, shoes squealing on the broken glass, and headed for the counter. None of the three wasters noticed her butting in. They didn't notice much of anything, not their torn clothes or singed hair or bloody feet. The slick black clamps at the bases of their skulls saw to that. Violet tried not to look too closely at wasters. Peripherals only, was her rule. If she looked too closely, she was liable to see someone she recognized.

Of course, she made an exception for the pharmacist. "Oh, hi!" she said, feigning surprise. "I think you helped me last week, right?"

The pharmacist said nothing, moving his hands in the air a foot over from the register, his glazed-over eyes trained on something that wasn't there. His beard was hugely overgrown, but Violet had sort of a thing for the mountain man look. He was still tall and muscly, though in a wiry way now, because wasters forgot to eat more often than not. Still handsome.

"Well, if I'm an addict, you're my dealer, jerk," Violet said, cocking her hip and trying to flutter her eyelashes without looking like she'd detached a retina. She was getting better at it. Maybe she would try it on Wyatt soon.

The pharmacist said nothing, now pulling imaginary pill bottles out of an empty metal cupboard Violet had already ransacked. His vacant half smile didn't seem as charming today. Violet gave a sour shrug and tossed her duffel bag over the counter, then nimbly followed.

"That's our problem ... Dennis," she said, leaning in to read the red plastic name tag stuck through his shirt. "You're a shitty communicator. We're not going to last."

Violet gave the pharmacist a consoling pat on the arm, then unzipped her duffel and set to work. Wyatt had told her to get antibiotics and painkillers, and since Violet knew her way around from last time, it didn't take her long to fill the bag with Tylenol-4s, ibuprofen, three rattling canisters of Cipro, and a bottle of liquid codeine. Wyatt was strict about who got the medicine

ever since one of the younger Lost Boys made himself sick chugging cough syrup, and he never used it himself, never took a single pill, even though Violet knew the scar along his hips made him wince sometimes.

Violet wasn't interested in painkillers. She had more important drugs to look for. She rifled through the birth control until she found her estradiol—Estrofem this time—then emptied the tablets into her own private ziplock stash. She hunted down more Aldactone to top up her spiro supply.

She shook the plastic baggie, eyeing the candy-shop assortment of pills and counting days, then pincerd a pale green Estrofem and swallowed it dry. Her Parasite rippled in response, whether with pleasure or revulsion, Violet never knew. She folded the baggie carefully into the bottom of her duffel bag with the other meds and dragged the zipper shut.

“Well, I *might* be free for coffee this weekend,” Violet told the pharmacist, slinging the duffel over her bony shoulder. “But I can't give you my number because, you know, an alien invasion fried all the phones. No, I swear to God. Maybe next time, handsome.”

She scooted across the counter and dropped down on the other side, brushing a slice of dark hair out of her face. The wasters ignored her on her way out, all of them still standing patiently in line.

Violet kept them in her peripherals.

2

Bo was hiding behind a powerjack, only meters from the fire door and the emergency exit sign glowing above it through the gloom. The Parasite in his stomach wriggled madly. He held his hand to the icy concrete floor; when the flesh of his palm was stinging cold, he pressed it against his stomach. That helped soothe it a bit.

The electricity had gone out earlier that day, dropping the grimy corridors and sleeping rooms into darkness, and Bo wasn't going to waste his chance. He'd snuck out of his bed while a boy named James was wailing and weeping loud enough to make the whirlybird drift over to him with its sleep-inducing syringe. A few of the other kids had watched Bo slip away, but he'd put a fierce finger to his lips and none of them had seemed particularly interested anyway. Most of them drank the water.

His older sister, Lia, was the one who'd realized that they put something in the water that made you feel dull and happy, and that it was better to collect drips off pipes in the bathroom. She was thirteen to Bo's eleven and she usually did the thinking. But she was gone now.

So Bo had found his way through the dark corridor alone, running one hand along the pitted concrete wall and its retrofitted wires, making his way toward the emergency exit that led outside. Now he was waiting for the last group of kids to go from supper to bed, trying to breathe slowly and keep the Parasite in check.

A familiar whine filled the air, then a whirlybird emerged from the corridor. It was as big around the middle as Bo and drifted along at head height, like a balloon, except made of slick rubbery flesh and gleaming black metal and other things he couldn't guess at. A tangle of spidery multi-jointed arms dangled down from its underbelly, flexing slowly in the air, and there was a bright acid-yellow lantern set into the top of its carapace that illuminated the kids plodding behind it.

As always, Bo scanned their faces. Everyone's eyes were turned to deep dark shadows by the sickly yellow glow, and everyone was stepping slow

and dreamy-like. For a moment he fooled himself into thinking he saw Lia near the back of the file, faking the effects of the water, because there was no way she'd started drinking it, but it was a different black girl. Shorter, and lighter-skinned.

He knew Lia was in some other facility. They'd been split up weeks ago. But it didn't stop him from looking.

The whirlybird floated past and Bo imagined himself springing at it, seizing one of its trailing limbs, smashing it against the floor, and stomping until it cracked open. The Parasite in his stomach stirred at the thought. But his wrists and hands were still crisscrossed with feather-white scars from the first and last time he'd tried that.

Instead, he waited until the glow of the whirlybird receded into the dark and the last of the kids got swallowed up in the shadows.

Bo was alone. His heart hammered his ribs and the Parasite gave another twitch. He levered himself upright, crept out from behind the powerjack. Three surreal strides and he was at the door, hands gripping the bar.

A girl named Ferris had tried to open it before, and the wailing of the alarm had drawn the whirlybirds in an instant. But with the electricity out, there would be no alarm and no fifteen-second delay on the crash bar. Bo still made himself pause to listen, to be sure there wasn't a whirlybird drifting on the other side of the paint-flaking metal. He heard nothing except the toddlers who'd been crying ever since the lights went out. With a tight feeling in his throat, Bo pushed.

The door swung open with a clunk and a screech, and cold clean air rushed into his lungs like the first breath after a storm. He'd been in the chemical-smelling warehouse for so long he'd forgotten how fresh air tasted. Bo gasped at it.

He took a shaky step forward, only just remembering to catch the door before it slammed behind him. He tried to focus. He was in a long narrow alley, garbage whipping around his feet and graffiti marching along the soot-stained walls. Bo knew, dimly, that the warehouses they'd been put in were near the docks. The briny sea-smell confirmed that much. He was far, far from their old neighborhood, and he didn't know if it even existed anymore.

Bo looked up. The dusk sky seemed impossibly wide after months of fluorescent-lit ceilings, but it wasn't empty. Unfurling over the city like an enormous black umbrella, all moving spars and flanges, was the ship. It

didn't look like a spaceship to Bo, not how he'd seen them in movies. It didn't look like it should even be able to fly.

But it drifted there overhead, light as air. Bo remembered it spitting a rain of sizzling blue bombs down on the city, burning the park behind their house to white ash, toppling the skyscrapers downtown. And up there with the ship, wheeling slow circles, Bo saw the mechanical whale-like things that had snatched up him and his sister and all the other kids and taken them to the warehouses. Remembering it put a shock of sweat in his armpits, and his stomach gave a fearful churn. The Parasite churned with it.

Bo started down the alley at a trot before the panic could paralyze him. He didn't know where to go, but he knew he needed to put distance between himself and the warehouse. As much distance as possible. Then he would find somewhere to hide. Find something to eat—real food, not the gray glue they ate in the warehouses. He had been fantasizing about pepperoni pizza lately, or, even better, his mom's cooking, the things she made for special occasions: *shinkafa da wake*, with oily onions and the spicy *yaji* powder that made Lia's eyes water so bad, and fried plantains.

That made him think of his mom again, so he buried the memory, as he had for months now, and picked up his pace to a jog. The Parasite throbbed in his stomach and he felt a static charge under his skin, making the hairs stand up from the nape of his neck. That happened more often lately, and always when Bo was angry or frightened or excited. He imagined himself smashing a whirlybird out of the air right as it went to jab his sister with the syringe, and her thanking him, and admitting that if he had his shoes on he was faster than her now. He pictured himself opening the doors and all the other kids streaming out of the warehouse.

A harsh yellow light froze him to the spot. Shielding his watering eyes, Bo looked up and saw the silhouette of a whale-thing descending through the dark sky. He took an experimental step to the left. The beam of light tracked him. The whale-thing was close enough that he could hear its awful chugging sound, half like an engine, half like a dying animal trying to breathe. Bo was never going inside one again.

He ran.

After four months in the warehouse, four months of plodding slowly behind the whirlybirds because anything quicker than a walk agitated them, Bo felt slow. His breath hitched early behind his chest and he had an unfamiliar ache in his shoulder. But as the whale-thing dropped lower, its

chugging sound loud in his ears, adrenaline plowed through all of that and he found his rhythm, flying across the pavement, pumping hard.

Fastest in his grade, faster than Lia. He said it in his head like a chant. Faster than anybody.

Bo tore down the alley with a wild shout, halfway between a laugh and a scream. His battered Lottos, tread long gone, slapped hard to the ground. He could feel his heart shooting through his throat, and the Parasite was writhing and crackling in his belly. The static again, putting his hair on end. He could feel the huge shape of the whale-thing surging over him. Its acid-yellow light strobed the alley, slapping his shadow on each wall of it, moving its blurry black limbs in sync with his. Bo raced them.

Faster than his own shadow.

He blew out the end of the alley and across the cracked tarmac of a parking lot, seeing the yellow-stenciled lines and trying to take one space with each stride. Impossibly, he could feel the whale-thing falling back, slowing down. Its hot air was no longer pounding on his back. Bo didn't let himself slow down, because Lia said you were always meant to pick a spot beyond the finish line and make that your finish line.

The fence seemed to erupt from nowhere. Bo's eyes widened, but it was too late to stop. He hurtled toward it, more certain with each footfall that he wasn't going to be able to scale it. It wasn't the chain-link that he used to scramble up and down gecko-quick. It wasn't metal at all, more like a woven tangle of vines, or maybe veins, every part of it pulsing. A few of the tendrils stretched out toward him, sensing him. Ready to snatch him and hold him and give him back to the warehouse.

He couldn't stop. The whale-thing was still chugging along behind him, hemming him in. Bo had to get out. Bo had to get out, he had to get help. He had to come back for his sister and for the others, even the ones who cried too much. His throat was clenched around a sob as he hurled himself at the fence, remembering Ferris being dragged away by the whirlybirds. His limbs were shaking; the Parasite was vibrating him, like a battery in his stomach. He squeezed his eyes shut.

There was a shiver, a ripple, a strange pulse that passed through every inch of him, and he didn't feel the fence's tentacles wrapping him tight. He didn't feel anything until he collapsed onto the tarmac on the other side, scraping his left elbow raw. Bo's eyes flew open. He spun around, still on the ground, and stared at the fence. In the dead center of it was a jagged

hole, punched straight through. The fence wriggled around it, fingering the hole like a wound.

Bo clambered to his feet, panting. He wiped the ooze of blood off his elbow, nearly relishing the sting of it—he hadn't been properly scraped up for months. Then he put his hand on his stomach. The static was gone, like it had never been at all, and the Parasite felt suddenly heavy, no longer twitching or moving. Had he done that? Had he made the hole?

The whale-thing was stopped on the other side of it, and it didn't have a face but he got the sense it was as surprised as he was. Bo gave an instinctive glance around for grown-ups, even though he knew he wouldn't see any, then flipped it the bird. The whale-thing didn't respond, still hovering in place. Then a strange moaning noise came from inside of it. Bo watched as the whale-thing's underbelly peeled open. Something slimed and dark started unfolding itself, then dropped to the paving with a thick wet slap. It was human-shaped.

Bo felt a tiny trickle of piss finally squeeze out down his leg. The human shape moaned again, and that was enough to give Bo his second wind. He turned and ran again, the cut on his elbow singing in the cold night air, the Parasite sitting like lead in his gut. But he was out of the warehouse, and he wasn't going to let them take him again, not ever. When he came back, it would be to get Lia, and the others, and to smash every last whirlybird in the place.

It was the only way to be sure he got the one that had pinned him down that first day and injected the Parasite right through his belly button.

Bo made it his new pact as he jogged, deeper and deeper, into the dark and ruined city.

Violet was heading to Safeway to pick up some groceries, walking down a silent street under a cloudy gray sky. Gray as the day the ship came down, scorching the city with the electric blue pulses Wyatt said were exhaust from its engines. There'd been no sun since. Just gray, a hazy emulsion that looked close to rain but never gave it up. Violet didn't mind the new weather. Sun burned her and rain made everything too wet.

She walked down the middle of the street instead of the sidewalk, weaving through the stalled-out cars. Some had wasters sitting inside, imagining themselves driving off to work, but most of the cars didn't work anyway. Their chips were fried. The ones that did work were useless, what

with the roads so clogged and nobody really knowing how to drive besides.

The intersection ahead was stoppered up with the splintered geometry of a crash, a three-car pile-up that had happened during the big panic when the ship came down. Violet didn't want to walk around it, so she clambered up onto the accordion-scrunched hood of an SUV. The soles of her Skechers popped little dents in the aluminum. She tried to ignore the dead-thing smell that wafted from the backseat.

On the other side of the wreck, she faced a corner liquor store, half of it black and crumbled from an electrical fire, and then beyond it her destination: the Safeway where she'd shopped with her mom four months and a lifetime ago. The parking lot was strewn with garbage, picked at by a flock of dirty gulls, and wasters shuffled slowly around it with grocery bags that Violet knew were sometimes full, sometimes empty. Some of them were pushing squeaky shopping carts across the ruptured tarmac.

But one of the carts wasn't being pushed by a waster. Violet narrowed her eyes. It was a boy, maybe ten or eleven, skinny frame swallowed in an oversized hoodie. She watched him roll his sleeves up to his elbows, one of which was swatched with Technicolor Band-Aids, and start wrestling with the cart again. He'd picked one with sticky wheels, but it had alright stuff in it: a sleeping bag, a trussed-up Styrofoam mattress, canned food, and bottled water. Usually kids fresh out of the warehouse were too dopey to do much more than wander around all shell-shocked.

Violet swapped the duffel to her other shoulder and cut across the culvert of yellowed grass to the parking lot pavement. By the time she was close to him, the boy had snatched an empty cart from one of the wasters and was dumping everything from his own into the replacement.

"Hey," Violet said. "Those Winnie the Pooh Band-Aids?"

The boy looked up, startled. The hood fell back off his head and Violet could see his face still had a bit of chub to it, the kiddie kind, but his eyes were sharp. A little bloodshot from crying, but focused. His black hair reminded her of a ball of steel wool, and she could see a comb mostly buried in the tangle. He yanked his sleeve down over the yellow patchwork on his elbow and stared back at her for a moment, mouth working for words.

"You're not a zombie," he finally said, in a voice that was a little closer to cracking than she'd expected from someone his size. It made her extra conscious of her own.

“Nobody’s a zombie,” Violet said, as the waster he’d swapped carts with stumbled past. “They don’t eat brains or anything. Just wander around being useless. We call them wasters.”

“Where’d you come from?” the boy asked.

Violet peeled the stretchy fabric of her shirt up off her stomach, showing him the rust-red Parasite under her pale skin. The boy immediately stuck his hand to his own belly. His face twitched.

“Same as you, Pooh Bear,” Violet said, tugging her shirt back down. “You thought you were the only one who got out?”

The boy frowned. “Is everyone else ... Is all the grown-ups ...” He tapped the back of his head, where the clamps went in.

“Everyone over sixteen,” Violet said. “Or around there.” She reached over and yanked the sleeping bag and a single bottle of water out from the cart. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Bo,” the boy said. “Bo Rabiū.”

“Violet.” She stuffed the sleeping bag into his arms and tossed the bottle on top with a slosh. Getting groceries could wait. “Alright, Bo, time to get out of the streets,” she said. “The othermothers are going to start coming through soon.”

“What?”

“The o-ther mo-thers,” Violet enunciated. “You’ll see one soon enough. For now, we’re going to a safe spot, alright? A hideout. So you can meet Wyatt.”

Bo tucked the sleeping bag under his arm and tossed the water bottle up and down with his other hand. “Who’s he?” he asked suspiciously.

“He’s a jerk,” Violet said. “Let’s go.”

She set off back out of the parking lot, mapping the way back to the theater in her mind’s eye. She didn’t bother to check if Bo was following. They always did.

3

Bo slipped into the wake of the dark-haired girl named Violet as she weaved through the shuffling dim-eyed adults. It made Bo feel sick looking at them, seeing the shiny black piece of metal that dug into the backs of their heads and made the veins in their necks bulge. One man in a shredded business suit stopped abruptly on the sidewalk, reaching into his pocket to pull out an invisible phone. Bo nearly plowed into him, jerking away at the last second. He didn't quite manage to hide his shudder.

Violet stopped, shooting him a look over her shoulder. "Don't be scared of them," she said in her slightly scratchy voice. "They don't do anything."

"Not scared," Bo said reflexively, watching the businessman turn away, mouthing a conversation. "They stink real bad. That's all."

Violet bent to snatch something up off the sidewalk. It was an old cracked iPhone. She flashed Bo a smile, and for a moment he thought she was going to go up and put it into the businessman's empty fingers. Instead, she juggled it once in her hand, then hurled it at the back of the man's head. His neck snapped forward. Then he steadied himself, continuing his pantomimed phone call with a tiny trickle of carmine running down his scalp where the cracked screen had cut him.

"They're like NPCs," Violet said. Her smile didn't crinkle her eyes. "Think of them like that. Not like people."

"They are, though," Bo said. "People." He'd already had a horrible thought. He'd thought of going back to his burned house and finding his mother was alive but wandering through it with her eyes filmed over, smiling all empty-like. He didn't know which option would be worse: dead or a zombie. There was a reason he'd decided to get supplies first.

"Not anymore," Violet said in an icy voice. "Clamp's in the head, better off dead. Got it?"

Bo glanced away, pretending to tend to his elbow. Violet had already decided which was worse. He couldn't think about his mom yet, anyway. He had to think about Lia. If he was going to rescue her from the

warehouses, he was going to need help. At the very least, he was going to need to know what had happened on the outside during the four months he'd been locked away. Violet seemed like she knew those things.

As for the other mothers, whatever they were, Bo still remembered the slimy silhouette dumped from the belly of the whale-thing, and it still made him shiver.

"Got it," he said.

Violet gave him a skeptical look, one eyebrow cocked high, then turned and hurried on. Bo followed. She was taking him into the oldest part of the downtown, past an ancient hotel where his mom had told him to be careful of strangers and stepping on needles. The sidewalks were narrower and crooked, with a blackish moss seeping through the cracks. One waster they passed was knocking her fist against a graffiti-splashed brick wall, over and over, like she thought it was a door. Her knuckles were a mess of raw meat.

"They look happier than they used to," Violet said, catching him off guard. "The wasters who hang around here. Happier than before they got clamped."

"What do they see?" Bo asked.

"Dunno," Violet said. "Not us." She gave a vague wave around the street. "Something nicer than this, I bet. Lots nicer."

They came to a halt in front of an old theater Bo remembered passing on the bus once, maybe twice. It had been closed for years. The signage had more blank white spaces than it did black letters, making it look like a wide gappy grin, and the few movie posters that hadn't been snatched were curled and yellow inside their glass slots. Most of the globe lights around them had been smashed. Up on the top of the building, Bo saw the name of the place, Garneau Cinema, painted in dark red letters that were peeling like scabs.

The door had been boarded over with a two-by-four, but Violet skipped up and yanked it open, showing the plywood to be nailed on only one side. The inside looked dark, dark as the warehouse, and Bo smelled dust and mothballs and what might have been old popcorn grease.

"Why not the IMAX theater?" Bo asked, hesitating on the threshold. "They have those comfy seats. Memory foam seats."

"Be full of wasters pretending to watch movies, wouldn't it," Violet said. "Come on in. You know Peter Pan?"

"Sort of," Bo said.

“This is Neverland,” Violet said. “Come meet the Lost Boys.”

“Who are you, then?” Bo asked. “You, uh, Tinkerbell?”

“Fuck you,” Violet said, flashing that smile again that was both pretty and scary. It was better than the dull grins of the drugged-up warehouse kids or the wasters. That counted for something.

Bo stepped into the musty entryway, and she eased the door shut behind him. The dark gave him a nervous drop in his stomach, and the Parasite gave a sluggish twitch. He was half relieved, half disappointed that it was finally moving again. He’d thought maybe it was dead after whatever had happened with the fence.

Violet switched on a bulky black-and-yellow flashlight, thumping it a few times with the heel of her hand. In the stark beam Bo saw the interior of the theater was floored with cigarette-scorched carpeting. The wallpaper had water stains.

But there weren’t any whirlybirds. He licked his dry lips and followed Violet past the abandoned ticket booth and concession stand, where the smell of ancient cooking grease still hung off a defunct popcorn machine. Through a set of faux-oak doors thrown wide open, Bo saw the blank movie screen, half-illuminated by mismatched lamps. Violet led the way in, switching off her flashlight. Stripes of exit lighting still glowed faintly on the floor.

The theater had velvet red seats, some of them with armrests torn away or their cushions slashed open, and some of them had kids splayed on them. Bo had a sudden thought: Maybe his sister was already here. Lia’d always been smarter than him. Maybe the power outage had affected all the warehouses, or maybe she’d gotten out before that, somehow. Bo looked hopefully over the ten or so kids, most of them clustered in a group near the front, others scattered.

None of them looked older than Violet, who Bo had pegged for fifteen—the carefully drawn makeup around her eyes made it harder to tell. And none of them were his sister.

Bo sank a bit. Some of the kids gave him curious looks as he followed Violet along the aisle, but most of them kept their attention fixed toward the front, where a tall and bony boy maybe Violet’s age, maybe a bit older, was seated on the edge of the stage. He had a messy blond head and gray eyes, and Violet was fixing her hair all of a sudden.

“... at least a block away before you start heading back here,” the boy

was saying, splayed back with one leg dangling off the edge, swinging slow like a pendulum. “We don’t want mothers following us back, right? So we have to be careful, right?”

“Right,” came the reply, a dozen intent mutters.

“Elliot knows, don’t you, El?” the older boy said, flicking a look to one of the kids in the front, a slightly younger brown-haired boy hunched on the edge of his seat.

“I know,” Elliot said solemnly, and the older boy, who Bo could guess by now was Wyatt, gave him an affirming nod in return. As Wyatt’s gray eyes traveled back over the theater seats, they caught on Bo and Violet. He smiled, bright and white, how Bo had seen mostly in movies.

“All the under-tens, you go everywhere in doubles when there’s othermothers out,” Wyatt continued. “From now on. And what if the mother stops and squats and squeezes her glands? What’s she doing?”

“Pheromones,” the kids chanted, in unison this time. Bo sideways-saw Violet forming the word on her pink lips.

“So what do we do?” Wyatt asked. “Elliot?”

“If a mother drops ’mones, don’t breathe through your nose,” the boy named Elliot recited, wiping at his own with the neck of his oversized orange T-shirt.

“Right,” Wyatt said. “Breathe through your mouth and get away from there quick, or you’ll be following her right back to the warehouses.”

A collective shiver went through some of the kids, and Bo took a second look to note their slightly distended stomachs. One pale boy had no shirt on, and he could see the rust-colored tendrils splayed around his belly button like a flower. Bo’s own Parasite gave a wriggle of recognition. He didn’t recall any of their faces from the four months he’d been inside, but he didn’t know how many warehouses there were either.

“That’s it,” Wyatt said. “Everyone clear out so I can talk with Vi and our new recruit, alright?” He paused. “What’s it take to be a Lost Boy?”

“Guts,” the kids chorused.

Wyatt nodded, then they all slid off their seats and started filing past. Most of them shot looks at Bo on the way, some friendly, some not. Bo had been new before. He met the gazes cool and calm, how Lia had told him to do, not too friendly but not too mean. Bo remembered getting the bus together to their first day at a new school, in a new country, back when they both had their accents still.

You can just look at the spot between their eyes, if it's hard, she'd advised. Shouldn't need to, though.

Why? Bo'd asked, sticking his head against the cold glass window.

You're cooler than them. Then she'd jabbed him under the ribs, right where he hated it. *Not as cool as me, though.*

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The first book in this epic space opera by award-winning author Megan E. O'Keefe is a story of dazzling space battles, intergalactic politics, and rogue AI with deadly secrets.

The last thing Sanda remembers is her gunship breaking up around her. She expected to awaken in friendly hands. Instead she awakens 230 years later upon an empty enemy smartship who calls himself Bero. The war is lost. The star system is dead. Ada Prime and its rival Icarion have wiped each other from the universe.

However, Bero may not be telling the whole truth.

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Chapter 1

The first thing Sanda did after being resuscitated was vomit all over herself. The second thing she did was vomit all over again. Her body shook, trembling with the remembered deceleration of her gunship breaking apart around her, stomach roiling as the preservation foam had encased her, shoved itself down her throat and nose and any other ready orifice. Her teeth jarred against each other, and her fingers fumbled with temporary palsy against the foam stuck to her face.

God, she hoped the palsy was temporary. They told you this kind of thing happened in training, that the shaking would subside and the “explosive evacuation” cease. But it was a whole hell of a lot different to be shaking yourself senseless while emptying every drop of liquid from your body than looking at a cartoonish diagram with friendly letters claiming “Mild Gastrointestinal Discomfort.”

It wasn’t foam covering her. She scrubbed, mind numb from coldsleep, struggling to figure out what was encasing her. It was slimy and goopy and—Oh, no. Sanda cracked a hesitant eyelid and peeked at her shaking fingers. Her hands were coated in thick, clear jelly with a slight bluish tinge. The stuff was cold, making her trembling worse, and with a sinking gut she realized what it was. She’d joked about the stuff in training with her fellow gunshippers. Snail snot. Gelatinous splooge. But its real name was MedAssist Incubatory NutriBath, and you only got dunked in it if you needed intensive care with a capital *I*.

“Fuck,” she tried to say, but her throat rasped on unfamiliar oxygen. How long had she been in here? Sanda opened both eyes, ignoring the cold gel running into them. She lay in a white enameled cocoon, the lid removed to reveal a matching white ceiling inset with true-white bulbs. Their brightness made her blink.

The NutriBath was draining, and now that her chest was exposed to cold air the shaking redoubled. Gritting her teeth against the spasms, she felt around the cocoon, searching for a handhold.

“Hey, medis,” she called, then hacked up a lump of gel. “Got a live one in here!”

No response. Assholes were probably waiting to see if she could get out under her own power. Could she? She didn’t remember being injured in the blast. But, then, the medis didn’t stick you in a bath for a laugh. She gave up her search for handholds and fumbled shaking hands over her body, seeking out scars. The baths were good, but they wouldn’t have left a gunnery sergeant like her in the tub long enough to fix any cosmetic damage. The gunk was only slightly less expensive than training a new gunner.

Her face felt whole, chest and shoulders smaller than she remembered but otherwise unharmed. She tried to crane her neck to see down her body, but the unused muscles screamed in protest.

“Can I get some assistance down here?” she called out, voice firmer now that it’d been cleared of the gel. Still no answer. Sucking down a few sharp breaths to steel herself against the ache, she groaned, lifted her torso up on her elbows until she sat straight, legs splayed out before her.

Most of her legs, anyway.

Sanda stared, trying to make her coldsleep-dragging brain catch up with what she saw. Her left leg was whole, if covered in disturbing wrinkles, but her right ... That ended just above the place where her knee should have been. Tentatively, she reached down, brushed her shaking fingers over the thick lump of flesh at the end of her leg.

She remembered. A coil fired by an Icarion railgun had smashed through the pilot’s deck, slamming a nav panel straight into her legs. The pod chair she’d been strapped into had immediately deployed preserving foam—encasing her, and her smashed leg, for Ada Prime scoopers to pluck out of space after the chaos of the battle of Dralee faded. She picked at her puckered skin, stunned. Remembered pain vibrated through her body and she clenched her jaw. Some of that cold she’d felt upon awakening must have been leftover shock from the injury, her body preserved in a moment of panic.

Any second now, she expected the pain of the incident to mount, to catch up with her and punish her for putting it off so long. It didn’t. The NutriBath had done a better job than she’d thought possible. Only mild tremors shook her.

“Hey,” she said, no longer caring that her voice shook. She gripped

either side of her open cocoon. “Can I get some fucking help?”

Silence answered. Choking down a stream of expletives that would have gotten her court-martialed, Sanda scraped some of the gunk on her hands off on the edges of the cocoon’s walls and adjusted her grip. Screaming with the effort, she heaved herself to standing, balancing precariously on her single leg, arms trembling under her weight.

The medi bay was empty.

“Seriously?” she asked the empty room.

The rest of the medi bay was just as stark white as her cocoon and the ceiling, its walls pocked with panels blinking all sorts of readouts she didn’t understand the half of. Everything in the bay was stowed: the drawers latched shut, the gurneys folded down and strapped to the walls. It looked ready for storage, except for her cocoon sitting in the center of the room, dripping NutriBath and vomit all over the floor.

“Naked wet girl in here!” she yelled as loud as she could. Echoes bounced around her, but no one answered. “For fuck’s sake.”

Not willing to spend god-knew-how-long standing around in a stew of her own body’s offings, Sanda clenched her jaw and attempted to swing her leg out. She tipped over the edge and flopped face-first to the ground instead.

“Ow.”

She spat blood and picked her spinning head up. Still no response. Who was running this bucket, anyway? The medi bay looked clean enough, but there wasn’t a single Ada Prime logo anywhere. She hadn’t realized she’d miss those stylized dual bodies with their orbital spin lines wrapped around them until this moment.

Calling upon half-remembered training from her boot camp days, Sanda army-crawled her way across the floor to a drawer that was longer than all the rest. By the time she reached it she was trembling again and panting hard, but pure anger drove her forward. Whoever had come up with the bright idea to wake her without a medi on standby needed a good, solid slap upside the head. She may have been down to one leg, but Sanda was pretty certain she could make do with two fists.

She yanked the drawer open and hefted herself up high enough to see inside. No crutches, but she found an extending pole for an IV drip. That’d have to do. She levered herself upright and stood a moment, back pressed against the wall, getting her breath. The hard metal of the stand bit into her

armpit, but she didn't care. She was on her feet again. Or foot, at least. Time to go find a medi to chew out.

The caster wheels on the bottom of the pole squeaked as she made her way across the medi bay. The door dilated with a satisfying swish, and even the stale recycled air of the empty corridor felt fresh compared to the nutrimess she'd been swimming in. She paused and considered going back to find a robe. Ah, to hell with it.

She shuffled out into the hall, picked a likely direction toward the pilot's deck, and froze. The door swished shut beside her, revealing a logo she knew all too well: a single planet, fiery wings encircling it.

Icarion.

She was on an enemy ship. With one leg.

Naked.

Sanda ducked back into the medi bay and scurried as quick as she could toward the panel-spotted wall, silently cursing each squeak of the IV stand's wheels. She had to find a comms link, and fast.

Gel-covered fingers slipped on the touchscreen as she attempted to navigate unfamiliar protocols. Panic constricted her throat, but she forced herself to breathe deep, to keep her cool. She captained a gunship. This was nothing.

Half-expecting alarms to blare, she slapped the icon for the ship's squawk box and hesitated. What in the hell was she supposed to broadcast? They hadn't exactly covered codes for "Help—I'm naked and legless on an Icarion bucket" during training. She bit her lip, decided to punch in her own call sign—1947—followed by 7500, the universal sign for a hijacking. If she was lucky, they'd get the hint: 1947 had been hijacked. Made sense, right?

She slapped *send*.

"Good morning, one-niner-four-seven. I've been waiting for you to wake up," a male voice said from the walls all around her. She jumped and almost lost her balance.

"Who am I addressing?" She forced authority into her voice, even though she felt like jumping straight back into her cocoon.

"This is AI-Class Cruiser Bravo-India-Six-One-Mike."

AI-Class? A smartship? Sanda suppressed a grin, knowing the ship could see her. Smartships were outside of Ada Prime's tech range, but she'd studied them inside and out during training. They were AGI processes—

artificial general intelligence—and while they were brighter than humans across the board, they still had human follies. Could still be lied to. Charmed, even.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Cruiser. My name’s Sanda Greeve.”

“I am called The Light of Berossus,” the voice said.

Of course he was. Damned Icarions could never stick to simple call signs. They always had to posh things up by naming their ships after ancient scientists. She nodded, trying to keep an easy smile on while she glanced sideways at the door. Could the ship’s crew hear her? They certainly hadn’t heard her yelling earlier, but they might very well notice their ship talking to someone new.

“That’s quite the mouthful for friendly conversation.”

“Bero is an acceptable alternative.”

“You got it, Bero. Say, could you do me a favor? How many souls on board at the present?”

Her grip tightened on her IV stand, and she looked around for any other item she could use as a weapon. This was a smartship. Surely they wouldn’t allow the crew handblasters for fear of poking holes in their pretty ship. All she needed was a bottleneck, a place to hunker down and wait until Ada Prime caught her squawk and figured out what was up.

“One soul on board,” Bero said.

“What? That can’t be right.”

“There is one soul on board.” The ship sounded amused with her exasperation.

“In the medi bay, yes, but the rest of the ship? How many?”

“One.”

She licked her lips, heart hammering in her ears. She turned back to the control panel she’d sent the squawk from and, fingers trembling, pulled up the ship’s nav system. She couldn’t make changes from the bay unless she had override commands, but ... the whole thing was on autopilot. If she really was the only one on board ... maybe she could convince the ship to return her to Ada Prime. Handing a smartship over to her superiors would win her accolades enough to last a lifetime. Could even win her a fresh new leg.

“Bero, bring up a map of the local system, please. Light up any ports in range.”

A pause. “Bero?”

“Are you sure, Sergeant Greeve?”

Unease threaded through her. “Call me Sanda, and, yes, light her up for me.”

The icons for the control systems wiped away, replaced with a 3D model of the nearby system. She blinked, wondering if she still had goop in her eyes. Couldn’t be right. There they were, a glowing dot in the endless black, the asteroid belt that stood between Ada Prime and Icarion clear as starlight. Judging by the coordinates displayed above the ship’s avatar, she should be able to see Ada Prime. They were way out on the edge, sure, but they were within range.

“Bero, is your display damaged?”

“No, Sanda.”

She swallowed. Icarion couldn’t have ... wouldn’t have. They wanted the twin planets. Needed access to Ada Prime’s Casimir Gate.

“Bero. Where is Ada Prime in this simulation?” She pinched the screen, zooming out. The system’s star, Cronus, spun off in the distance, brilliant and yellow-white. Icarion had vanished, too.

“Bero!”

“Icarion initiated the Fibon Protocol after the battle of Dralee. The results were larger than expected.”

The display changed, drawing back. Icarion and Ada Prime reappeared, their orbits aligning one of the two times out of the year they passed each other. Somewhere between the two, among the asteroid belt, a black spiral began, reaching outward, consuming space in all directions. Asteroids vanished. Icarion vanished. Ada Prime vanished.

She dropped her head against the display. Let the goop run down from her hair, the cold glass against her skin scarcely registering. Numbness suffused her. No wonder Bero was empty. He must have been ported outside the destructive spiral. He was a smartship. He wouldn’t have needed human input to figure out what had happened.

“How long?” she asked, mind racing despite the slowness of coldsleep. Shock had grabbed her by the shoulders and shaken her fully awake. Grief she could dwell on later, but now she had a problem to work. Maybe there were others, like her, on the edge of the wreckage. Other evac pods drifting through the black. Outposts in the belt.

There’d been ports, hideouts. They’d starve without supplies from either Ada Prime or Icarion, but that’d take a whole lotta time. With a smartship,

she could scoop them up. Maybe get them all to one of the other nearby habitable systems before the ship's drive gave out. And if she was very lucky ... Hope dared to swell in her chest. Her brother and fathers were resourceful people. Surely her dad Graham would have had some advance warning. That man always had his ear to the ground, his nose deep in politics. If anyone could ride out that attack, it was them.

“It has been two hundred thirty years since the battle of Dralee.”

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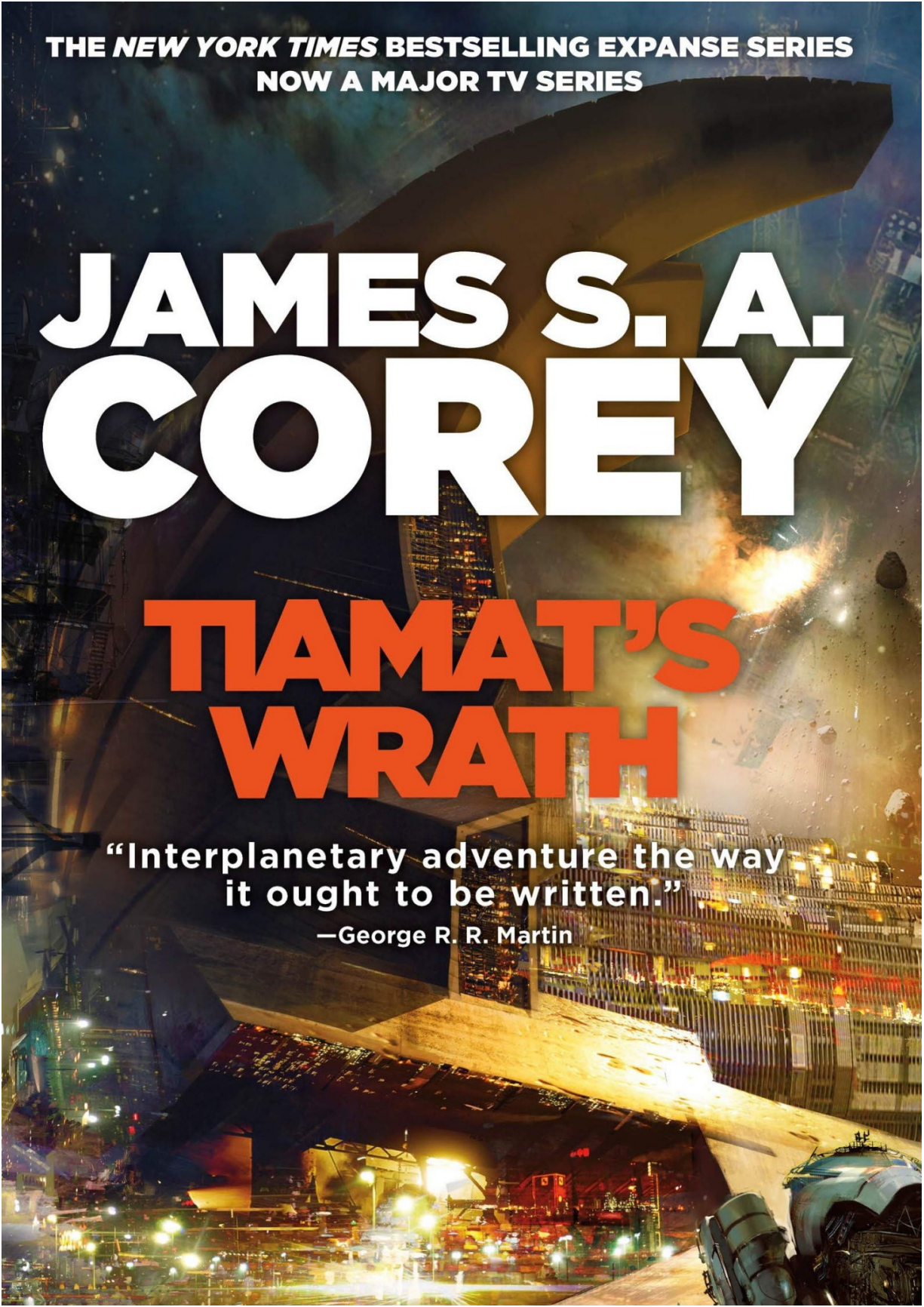
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TIAMAT'S WRATH

BOOK EIGHT OF THE EXPANSE



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To George R. R. Martin
Good mentor, better friend

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Prologue: Holden

Chrisjen Avasarala was dead.

She'd passed in her sleep on Luna four months earlier. A long, healthy life, a brief illness, and she left humanity very different than she'd found it. The newsfeeds all had obituaries and remembrances prerecorded and ready to spin out across the thirteen hundred systems to which humanity was heir. The chyrons and headlines had been hyperbolic: *The Last Queen of Earth* and *Death of a Tyrant* and *Avasarala's Final Farewell*.

No matter what they said, they hit Holden just as hard. It was impossible to imagine a universe that wouldn't bow to the little old woman's will. Even when the confirmation came to Laconia that the reports were true, Holden still believed deep in his bones that she was out there somewhere, irritated and profane and pushing herself past all human limits to bend history just another fraction of a degree away from atrocity. It was almost a month between the moment he heard the news and the first time he let himself accept that it was true. Chrisjen Avasarala was dead.

But that didn't mean she was finished.

A state funeral had been planned on Earth before Duarte intervened. Avasarala's time as secretary-general of the United Nations had been a critical period in history, and her service not only to her world but to the whole human project had earned her a place of honor that could never be forgotten. The high consul of Laconia thought it only right and proper that she find her final resting place at the heart of the new empire. The funeral would be at the State Building. A memorial would be built to her so that she would never be forgotten.

The part where Duarte was complicit in the vast slaughter on Earth that defined Avasarala's career got skipped over. History was in the process of being rewritten by the winners. Holden was pretty sure that even though it didn't make it into the press releases and state newsfeeds, everyone remembered that she and Duarte had been on opposite sides, back in the day. And if they didn't, he certainly did.

The mausoleum—her mausoleum, since there wasn't anyone else of sufficient stature to share it with her yet—was white stone polished micron-smooth. The great doors were closed now, the service concluded. A portrait of Avasarala filled the center panel on the north face of the structure. It was etched into the stone along with the dates of her birth and death and a few lines of poetry he didn't recognize. The hundreds of chairs arrayed around the podium where the priest had spoken were only about half-filled now. People had come from across the empire to be here, and now that they were, they mostly broke into little clumps with whoever they already knew. The grass around the crypt wasn't like the stuff back on Earth, but it filled the same ecological niche and behaved similarly enough that they called it grass. The breeze was warm enough to be comfortable. With the palace behind him, Holden could almost pretend that he might walk out to the wilderness beyond the palace grounds and go wherever he chose.

His clothes were of Laconian military cut, blue with the spread wings that Duarte had picked for his imperial icon. The collar was high and stiff. It scraped the skin along the side of Holden's neck. The place where his insignia of rank would have gone was blank. Empty was apparently the symbol of the honored prisoner.

"Will you be going in to the reception, sir?" a guard asked.

Holden wondered what exactly the escalation tree looked like when he said no. That he was a free man, and rejected the hospitality of the palace. Whatever it was, he was pretty sure it had already been practiced and rehearsed. And he probably wouldn't enjoy it.

"In a minute," Holden said. "I just want to . . ." He gestured vaguely at the tomb as if the inevitability of death was a kind of universal hall pass. A reminder that all human rules were tentative.

“Of course, sir,” the guard said, and faded back into the crowd. Holden didn’t have any sense that he was free, though. *Unobtrusively confined* was as much as he could hope for.

One woman stood alone at the base of the mausoleum, looking up at Avasarala’s portrait. Her sari was a vibrant blue that was just close enough to the Laconian color scheme to be polite and just far enough from it to make it perfectly clear that the politeness was insincere. Even if she hadn’t looked like her grandmother, the subtle-not-subtle *fuck you* would have identified her. Holden ambled over.

Her skin was darker than Avasarala’s had been, but the shape of her eyes when she glanced over at him and the thinness of her smile were familiar.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Holden said.

“Thank you.”

“We haven’t been introduced. I’m—”

“James Holden,” the woman said. “I know who you are. Nani talked about you sometimes.”

“Ah. Well, that must have been something to hear. She didn’t always see things the way I did.”

“No, she did not. I’m Kajri. She called me Kiki.”

“She was an amazing woman.”

They were silent for the space of two long breaths together. The breeze made the fabric of Kajri’s sari ripple like a flag. Holden was about to step away when she spoke again.

“She would have hated this,” she said. “Hauled into the camp of her enemies to be celebrated now that she can’t crack their balls anymore. Co-opted as soon as she couldn’t fight back. You could power a planet by hooking a turbine to her right now. That’s how much she’s spinning in this grave.”

Holden made a small sound that could have been agreement.

Kajri shrugged. “Or maybe not. She might have just thought it was funny. I could never be sure with her.”

“I owed her a lot,” Holden said. “I didn’t always realize it at the time, but she did what she could to help me. I never got the chance to thank her. Or . . . I did, I guess, but I didn’t take it. If there’s anything I can do for you or your family . . .”

“You don’t seem to be in a position to do people favors, Captain Holden.”

Holden looked back at the palace. “Yeah, I’m not really at my best these days. But I wanted to say it all the same.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Kajri said. “And from what I’ve heard, you’ve managed to have some influence? The prisoner with the emperor’s ear.”

“I don’t know about that. I talk a lot, but I don’t know that anyone listens. Except the security detail. I assume they listen to everything.”

She chuckled, and it was a warmer, more sympathetic sound than he’d expected. “It isn’t easy, having no part of your life for just yourself. I grew up knowing that everything I said would be monitored, cataloged, filed, and judged for its potential to compromise me or my family. There’s a record in the intelligence service archives somewhere of every time I’ve had my period.”

“Because of her?” Holden said, nodding to the tomb.

“Because of her. But she gave me the tools to live through it too. She taught us to use everything shameful in our lives as a weapon to humiliate people who would diminish us. That’s the secret, you know.”

“What’s the secret?”

Kajri smiled. “The people who have power over you are weak too. They shit and bleed and worry that their children don’t love them anymore. They’re embarrassed by the stupid things they did when they were young that everyone else has forgotten. And so they’re vulnerable. We all define ourselves by the people around us, because that’s the kind of monkey we are. We can’t transcend it. So when they watch you, they hand you the power to change what they are too.”

“And she taught you that?”

“She did,” Kajri said. “But she didn’t know it.”

As if to prove the point, a guard moved across the grass toward them, keeping a respectful distance until he was sure they'd seen him and then gave them time to finish what they were saying before coming closer. Kajri turned to him, lifting her eyebrow.

"The reception is going to begin in twenty minutes, ma'am," the guard said. "The high consul specifically hoped to meet you."

"I wouldn't dream of disappointing him," she said with a smile Holden had seen before on other lips. Holden offered his arm, and Kajri took it. As they walked away, he nodded toward the tomb and the words written on it. IF LIFE TRANSCENDS DEATH, THEN I WILL SEEK FOR YOU THERE. IF NOT, THEN THERE TOO.

"It's an interesting quote," he said. "I feel like I should recognize it. Who wrote it?"

"I don't know," she said. "She only told us to put it on her grave. She didn't say where it came from."



Everyone who was anyone had come to Laconia. That was true on several levels. Duarte's plan to shift the center of humanity away from Sol system to the heart of his own empire had found a level of cooperation and consent that shocked Holden at first and then left him with a permanent sense of mild disappointment in humans as a species. The most prestigious scientific research institutes had all moved their headquarters to Laconia. Four different ballet companies threw off centuries of rivalry to share the same Laconian Institute of Art. Celebrities and scholars rushed to new, palatial, state-subsidized estates in the capital city. There were already movies being made there. The soft power of culture set on speed scrub, ready to flood the networks and feeds with the reassuring messages of High Consul Duarte and the permanence of Laconia.

Business came too. Duarte had banks and office campuses pre-built and ready for tenants. The Association of Worlds wasn't just Carrie Fisk in a shitty office on Medina Station anymore. It was a cathedral in the center of

the capital city with a lobby bigger than a hangar bay and stained glass walls that seemed to rise up forever. The Transport Union's central authority was there too, in a lesser building with fewer amenities so that it was clear physically and socially who was in favor and who was on notice. Holden watched it all from the State Building that was his home and his prison, and it left him thinking of living on an island.

Within the boundary of the city, Laconia was cleaner, newer, brighter, and more controlled than most space stations Holden had been on. Just outside it was wilderness like he'd only seen in storybooks. Ancient forests and alien ruins that would take generations to tame and explore. Holden had heard gossip and rumors about the remnant technologies brought to shambling life by the early work with the protomolecule: boring worms the size of spacecraft, doglike repair drones that made no distinction between mechanism and flesh, crystalline caves with piezoelectric effects that induced hallucinations of music and crippling vertigo. Even as the capital city became synonymous with humanity as a whole, the planet around it stayed alien. An island of the profoundly familiar in a sea of we-don't-understand-that-yet. In a way, it was reassuring that Duarte, for all his god-emperor reach, couldn't achieve everything in just a few decades.

In another way, it was terrifying.

The reception hall was grand, but not overblown. If Laconia had been built in Duarte's image, there was a weird thread of personal restraint in the high consul's soul. However grand the city was, however overwhelming his ambitions, Duarte's palatial compound and home wasn't gaudy or even particularly ornate. The ballroom was all clean lines and a neutral palette that reached for elegance without being too concerned with what anyone thought. Couches and chairs were placed here and there where people could rearrange them. Young people in military uniform served glasses of wine and spiced tea. More than power, Duarte made everything that surrounded him seem born of confidence. It was a good trick, because even after Holden saw through it, it still worked.

Holden accepted a glass of wine from a young woman and strolled through the shifting crowd. A few of the people, he recognized instantly.

Carrie Fisk of the Association of Worlds, holding court at a long table, with the governors of half a dozen colonies fighting to be the first one laughing at her jokes. Thorne Chao, the face of the most popular newsfeed coming out of Bara Gaon. Emil-Michelle Li in the flowing green dress that was her trademark when she wasn't in a movie. And for every face Holden could put a name to, there were a dozen more who looked vaguely familiar.

He moved through the thin social fog of polite smiles and nods of recognition that fell short of actual engagement. He was here because Duarte wanted him seen here, but the Venn diagram of people eager to curry favor with the high consul but also willing to risk his displeasure by cozying up to the state's highest-profile prisoner didn't have much overlap.

But it did have some.

"I'm not drunk enough for this."

Transport Union President Camina Drummer leaned against a standing table, her hands wrapped around a glass. Her face looked older in person. He could see the lines around her eyes and mouth more clearly when there weren't a camera, a screen, and several billion kilometers between them. She shifted a degree, making room for him at the table, and he accepted the invitation.

"I'm not sure what drunk enough for this looks like," he said. "Blackout drunk? Fighting drunk? Weeping-in-the-corner drunk?"

"You don't seem even tipsy."

"I'm not. I'm mostly off of alcohol these days."

"Keeping your wits about you?"

"And it bothers my stomach."

Drummer smiled and coughed out a laugh. "They've let the honored prisoner out among the people. Makes me think you're not as useful to them anymore. Have they squeezed all the juice out of you?"

The way she said it, it could have been teasing between two old colleagues, fallen from power together and living in the twilight of political acceptability. Or it could have been something more. A way to ask if he'd been forced to betray the underground on Medina yet. If they'd decided to break him. Drummer knew as well as he did who was listening, even here.

“I’ve been helping as much as I can with the alien threat issue. Anything else he asks me about, all my answers would be yesterday’s news anyway. And I assume I’m here now because Duarte thinks I’m useful to him here.”

“Just part of the donkey show.”

“Dog and pony,” Holden said. Then, seeing her reaction. “The phrase is dog and pony show.”

“Sure it is,” she said.

“What about you? How’s the dismantling of the Transport Union going?”

Drummer’s eyes brightened and her smile widened. She answered in a perfect newsfeed-ready voice, crisp and warm and false as a carved acorn. “I am very pleased with the smooth transition to fuller oversight by the Laconian authority and the Association of Worlds. Our focus is to keep all of the old practices that were working and streamline and integrate new procedures that will cut away the dead wood. We have been able to maintain and even increase the efficiency of trade without compromising the security that the greater destiny of humanity requires.”

“That bad?”

“I shouldn’t bitch. It could be worse. As long as I’m a good little soldier and Duarte thinks I’ll be useful bringing Saba in from the cold, I won’t end up in a pen.”

A murmur rose from the main entrance, and a disturbance in the crowd. All through the ballroom, attention shifted like iron filings aligning to a magnet. Holden didn’t have to look to know that Winston Duarte had arrived, but he did anyway.

Duarte’s uniform was almost the same as Holden’s. He had the same affable calm that he seemed to carry everywhere. His security detail was more obvious than whatever surveillance was on Holden, though. Two thick-bodied guards with sidearms and eyes that flickered with implanted tech. Cortázar had arrived with him too, but stood apart with the air of a teenager pulled away from a game for family dinner. The actual teenager—Duarte’s daughter, Teresa—walked at her father’s side like a shadow.

Carrie Fisk scurried up to Duarte, her coterie of governors abandoned, and shook his hand. They talked for a moment before Fisk turned to Teresa and shook the girl's hand too. A little crowd had started coalescing behind Fisk as people tried to be unobtrusive about jockeying for a position to meet the great man.

"Creepy son of a bitch, isn't he?" Drummer said.

Holden grunted. He didn't know what she was talking about. It might have been just the way everyone around him was so trained to obeisance. That would have been enough. But maybe she saw something of what Holden did: the stuttering of his eyes, the pearlescent shadow under his skin. Holden had seen the protomolecule in action as much as anyone who wasn't in Cortázar's lab. That was probably why the side effects of Duarte's treatments were more obvious to him.

He realized he was staring. More than that, he realized that everyone was staring, and he was being drawn along by the pressure of their attention. He looked back at Drummer, making the conscious effort to turn away. It was harder than he liked to admit.

He wanted to ask if there was news of the underground, whether Duarte's reign seemed as inevitable out in the wide vacuum between the worlds as it did here in his home.

"Any news of the underground?" he asked.

"There are always going to be some malcontents," she said, walking the line between innocuous and meaningful. "What about you? How is the famed Captain James Holden spending his days? Going to parties? Waving tiny fists in impotent rage?"

"Nope. Just plotting and waiting for my moment to strike," Holden said. They both grinned as if it had been a joke.

Chapter One: Elvi

The universe is always stranger than you think.

That had been the favorite phrase of a professor of Elvi's back in her graduate study days. Professor Ehrlich, a grumpy old German with a long white beard who'd always made Elvi think of garden gnomes, repeated it every time someone was surprised by the results their lab test delivered. At the time, Elvi had found the catchphrase true to the point of triteness. Of course the universe had unexpected surprises.

Professor Ehrlich was almost certainly dead. He'd been at the edge of what anti-aging technology could achieve when Elvi was in her early twenties. She had a daughter older than that now. But if he'd still been alive, Elvi would have sent him a lengthy and heartfelt apology.

The universe wasn't just stranger than you knew, it was stranger than you could know. Every new wonder, no matter how astonishing, just laid the foundation for an even more astounding discovery later. The universe and its constantly shifting definition of what was considered strange. The discovery of what everyone thought was alien life when the protomolecule was found on Phoebe had shaken people to their foundations, and was somehow still less disturbing than the discovery that the protomolecule wasn't an alien so much as it was an alien's tool. Their version of a wrench, only a wrench that converted the entire asteroid station of Eros into a spaceship, hijacked Venus, created the ring gate, and gave sudden access to thirteen hundred worlds beyond.

The universe is always stranger than you think. God damn right, Professor.

"What," her husband Fayez said, "is that?"

They were on the bridge of her ship, the *Falcon*. The ship that the Laconian Empire had given her. On the screen in front of them, a high-resolution image of what everyone was calling *the object* slowly filled in. It was a planetary body a little larger than Jupiter and nearly transparent, like an enormous crystal ball with a faintly greenish hue. The only structure in the Adro system.

“Passive spectrometry says almost entirely carbon,” Travon Barrish said, not even looking up from his work screen as the data scrolled by. He was the team’s materials scientist, and the most literal person Elvi had ever met. Of course he gave Fayez the factual answer to his question. She knew that wasn’t what her husband had been asking. He’d been asking, *Why is that?*

“It’s packed into a dense lattice,” Jen Lively, the team’s physicist, said. “It . . .”

She trailed off, so Elvi finished for her. “It’s a diamond.”

When she was seven years old, Elvi Okoye had returned to Nigeria with her mother when her great-aunt, a woman Elvi had never met, died. As her mother worked to take care of funeral arrangements, Elvi wandered through her house. It became a game of sorts, seeing how much of a picture of the dead woman she could create by looking at the objects she’d left behind. On a shelf next to the bed, a picture of a smiling young man with dark skin and pale eyes who could have been a husband, or a brother, or a son. In the tiny bathroom, among the scattered packages of cheap soaps and cleansers, one beautiful crystal bottle filled with mysterious green liquid. Perfume? Poison? Without having known the woman herself, all the objects she’d left behind were fantastic and compelling.

Many years later, while rinsing her mouth, the smell triggered a memory and she realized the green liquid in the bottle had almost certainly been mouthwash. One mystery solved, but new questions arose. Why had she put mouthwash in such a beautiful bottle instead of just leaving it in the recyclable container it came in? Where had the bottle come from originally? Had she used it as mouthwash, or was there some hidden function mouthwash could perform that Elvi had never thought of? Without the dead

woman to explain, it would forever remain a mystery. Some things could only ever be understood in context.

On the view screen, a single faintly green diamond with a machine-perfect smooth surface floating in a solar system with no other planets, orbiting one fading white dwarf star. A bottle of mouthwash in cut crystal, surrounded by cheap soap on a dirty bathroom counter. Fayez was right. The only question that mattered was *why*, but everyone who knew was dead. The only answer she had left was Professor Ehrlich's.

The *Falcon* had been specially designed at the request of High Consul Duarte specifically for her, and it had only one mission: to visit the gate network's "dead systems" and see if they held any clues about the nameless enemy that had destroyed the protomolecule builders' civilization or the weird nonphysical bullets that they—or it, or whatever pronoun you used for an extradimensional alocal antecedent—had left behind.

The *Falcon* had visited three of those systems so far. Every time it had been a wonder. Elvi didn't like the phrase *dead system*. People had started calling them that because they contained no planets capable of sustaining life. She found the classification annoying and simplistic. Yes, it wasn't possible for any life they understood to live on a Jupiter-sized diamond floating around a white dwarf. But there was also no conceivable natural process that could account for such an artifact. Someone had made it. Engineering on a scale that was awesome in the classical sense of the word. Inspiring both wonder and dread in equal proportion. To write it off as *dead* because plants didn't grow on it felt like the dread winning out over the wonder.

"They swept up everything," Fayez said. He was flipping through telescope and radar images of the solar system. "There isn't even a cometary belt clear out to a light-year from the star. They grabbed every bit of material in this entire solar system, turned it into carbon, and mashed it into a fucking diamond."

"People used to give diamonds as gifts before proposing marriage," Jen said. "Maybe someone wanted to be sure the answer wasn't no."

Travon's head snapped up from his console, and he blinked at Jen for several seconds. His rigid literalism meant he was also chemically free of anything resembling a sense of humor, and Elvi had watched Jen's flippant irony put him into vapor lock more than once.

"I don't think—" Travon started, but Elvi cut him off.

"Stay focused on the job, people. We need to know everything about this system before we bring the catalyst online and start breaking things."

"Copy that, boss," Fayez said, and gave her a wink no one else could see.

The rest of her team, the very best scientists and technicians from across the empire, handpicked and placed under her command by the high consul himself, turned back to their displays. In scientific matters related to their current mission, her orders had the full force of imperial law. No one on the team ever argued.

The caveat being, of course, that not everyone was on her team, and not everything was considered a scientific matter.

"You want to tell him that we're pushing the rollout," Fayez said, "or should I?"

She looked at the screen again with a kind of longing. There were probably structures in the diamond. Traces like pale ink in a dead script that could point them a little further toward the next mystery, the next revelation, the next unutterable strangeness. She didn't want to tell anyone about anything. She wanted to *look*.

"I'll take care of it," Elvi said, and headed for the lift.



Admiral Mehmet Sagale was a mountain of a man with coal-black eyes in a dinner plate-flat face. As the military commander of their mission, he mostly left the scientists alone. But when something fell into an area where his orders specified he was in charge, he was as implacable and immovable as his size suggested. And something about sitting in his spartan office always felt disciplinary. Like being sent to the headmaster for cheating on a

test. Elvi hated playing the role of supplicant to a military figurehead. But in the Laconian Empire, the military always sat at the top of the authority chart.

“Dr. Okoye,” Admiral Sagale said. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with the tips of sausage-sized fingers and gazed at her with the same mix of affection and patronizing annoyance she had once given her children when they were doing something stupid. “We are woefully behind schedule, as you know. My orders are to—”

“This system is incredible, Met,” she said. Using the nickname was a little aggression, but one he tolerated. “It’s too incredible to just throw away out of impatience. We need to spend time really studying this artifact before you trot out the catalyst and wait to see if something blows up!”

“*Major* Okoye,” Sagale replied, using her military title to not so subtly remind her of their relative positions in the chain of command. “As soon as your team finishes their preliminary data collection, we will bring out the catalyst and see if this system has any military value, as per our orders.”

“Admiral,” Elvi said, knowing aggression would fail on him when he was in this mood and trying for a placating respect instead. “I just want a little more time. We can make up the schedule on our trip out. Duarte gave me the fastest science ship in human history so I could spend more time on the science and less on the travel. Exactly like I’m asking you to do now.”

Reminding Sagale that she had a direct line to the high consul, and that he valued her work enough to build her a ship for it. How was *that* for not so subtle.

Sagale was unmoved.

“You have twenty hours to finish gathering your data,” he said, folding his hands across his wide belly like a Buddha. “And not one minute more. Inform your team.”



“This sort of rigid thinking is *precisely* why it’s impossible to do good science under Laconian rule,” Elvi said. “I should be running a university

biology department somewhere. I'm too old to be good at taking orders."

"I agree," Fayez said. "But here we are."

She and Fayez were in her quarters to shower and catch a quick bite of food before Sagale and his storm troopers trotted out their live sample of protomolecule and risked destroying a billions-of-years-old artifact just to see if it went boom in a useful manner. "If it won't build them a better bomb, who cares if they break it!"

She whirled toward Fayez as she said it, and he took a half step away from her. She realized she was still holding her dinner plate in one hand. "I'm not going to throw it," she said. "I don't throw things."

"You have," he replied. He'd gotten older too. His once-black hair was almost totally gray now, and laugh lines spread out from the corners of his eyes. She didn't mind. She liked that he smiled more than he frowned. He was smiling now. "Things have been thrown."

"I never—" she started, wondering if he was actually afraid she'd throw a plate at him out of frustration or just teasing her to lighten the mood. Even after decades together, she sometimes couldn't tell what went on in his head.

"Bermuda, just after Ricki left home for university, we took our first real vacation in years and you—"

"There was a roach. A roach crawled on my plate!"

"It nearly took my head off when you hurled it."

"Well," she said, "I was startled."

She laughed. Fayez was grinning like he'd won a prize. So, of course, making her laugh had been the goal all along. She put the plate down.

"Look, I know saluting and following orders isn't exactly what we had in mind when we got our degrees," Fayez said. "But this is the new reality as long as Laconia's in control. So—"

It was her own fault, really, being swept up into the Science Directorate. Laconia by and large left people alone. Planets elected their own governors and representatives to the Association of Worlds. They could establish their own laws, as long as they didn't directly contravene imperial law. And unlike most dictatorships in history, Laconia seemed uninterested in

restricting higher education. The universities of the galaxy functioned pretty much like they had before the takeover. Sometimes even a little better.

But Elvi had made the mistake of becoming humanity's leading expert on the protomolecule, the vanished civilization that had created it, and the doom that had wiped it out. As a much younger woman, she'd been sent to Ilus as part of the first scientific mission to explore the biology of an alien world. Until then, her specialization in exobiology had been theoretical, mostly focusing on bathypelagic and deep-ice life that had seemed like good analogs for bacteria one might find under the surface of Europa.

They'd never found any bacteria on Europa, but the gate network opened, and suddenly exobiology was a real thing with more than thirteen hundred new biomes to explore. She'd gone to Ilus expecting to study lizard analogs, and instead run face-first into the artifacts of a galaxy-wide war older than her species. She'd become obsessed with understanding. Of course she had. A house the size of a galaxy, filled with rooms full of fascinating things, and the owners dead for millennia. She'd devoted the rest of her professional life to figuring them out. So when Winston Duarte invited her to lead a team to explore exactly that mystery, and gave her a bottomless grant to do it, she hadn't been able to say no.

At that point, she'd seen only the Laconia everyone was presented in the newsfeeds. Impossibly powerful, militarily unbeatable, but not interested in ethnic cleansing or genocide. Maybe even with humanity's best interests at heart. Taking their money to do science hadn't given her many qualms. Especially since there also hadn't been many options. When the king says, *Come work for me*, there aren't many paths to *No*.

The qualms came later when she was inducted into their military and learned the source of Laconia's overwhelming technological advantage.

When she met the catalysts.

"We should get back," Fayez said as he finished clearing away the last of their dishes from dinner. "The clock is ticking."

"I will. In a minute," she replied, stepping back into the tiny private bathroom they shared. One of the privileges of her rank. In the mirror over

her sink, an old woman stared back at her. The woman's eyes were haunted by what she was about to do.

"You ready in there?" Fayez shouted.

"You go ahead. I'll catch up."

"Jesus, Els, you're not going to go see it again, are you?"

It. The catalyst.

"It isn't your fault," Fayez said. "You didn't design this study."

"I agreed to oversee it."

"Sweetheart. Darling. Light of my life. Whatever we call Laconia in public, when you take its clothes off, it's a dictatorship," Fayez said. "We never had a choice."

"I know."

"So why do you do this to yourself?" Fayez said.

She didn't answer, because she couldn't have explained it even if she wanted to.

"I'll catch up."



The catalyst holding area was in the heart of the *Falcon*, surrounded on all sides by thick layers of depleted uranium shielding and the galaxy's most complicated Faraday cage. It had become clear very quickly that the protomolecule communicated at faster than light speed. Some application of quantum entanglement was the leading theory, but whatever the mechanism, the protomolecule defied locality, much like the ring gate system it had created. It had taken Cortázar and his team years to figure out how to keep a sample of the protomolecule from talking to itself, but they'd had decades and they'd eventually come up with a combination of materials and fields that tricked a node of protomolecule into locking itself off from the rest.

A node. *It. The catalyst.*

Two of Sagale's Marines guarded the door to its chamber. They wore heavy blue power armor that whined and clicked when they moved. Each

was equipped with a flamethrower. Just in case.

“We’re going to use the catalyst soon. I want to check on it,” Elvi said to the space between the two guards. For all that she had a military title, she still often couldn’t figure out who was the ranking officer in any given room. She lacked the indoctrination of boot camp, and the lifetime of practice the Laconians took for granted.

“Of course, Major,” the one on the left said. She looked too young to be the senior officer, but that was so often true of the Laconians. Most of them looked too young for their titles. “Will you need an escort?”

“No,” Elvi said. *No, I always do this alone.*

The young Marine did something on the wrist of her armor, and the door behind her slid open. “Let us know when you’re ready to come out.”

The catalyst’s room was a cube, four meters on a side. It had no bed, no sink, no toilet. Just hard metal and mesh drains. Once a day, the room was flushed with solvent and the liquid was sucked away to be incinerated. The Laconians were obsessive about contamination protocols where the protomolecule was concerned.

The node, it, the catalyst, had once been a woman in her late fifties. What her name had been and why she’d been selected for protomolecule infection was not in the official record Elvi had access to. But Elvi hadn’t been in their military for long before she found out about the Pen. The place where convicted criminals were sent to be deliberately infected, so that the empire would have a limitless supply of protomolecule to work with.

The catalyst was special, though. Through some work of Cortázar’s or through some accident of the woman’s genetics, she was only a carrier. She showed early signs of infection—changes to her skin and skeletal structure—but in the months since she’d been brought on board the *Falcon*, those changes hadn’t progressed at all. And she never entered what everyone called the “vomit zombie” phase, puking up material to try to spread the infection.

Elvi knew that she was perfectly safe in the same room with the catalyst, but she shuddered every time she entered anyway.

The infected woman looked at her with blank eyes and moved her lips in a soundless whisper. She smelled mostly of the solvent bath she received every day, but under it was something else. A morgue stink of decaying flesh.

It was normal to sacrifice animals. Rats, pigeons, pigs. Dogs. Chimpanzees. Biology had always suffered the cognitive push-pull of proving that humans were just another kind of animal while at the same time claiming to be morally different in kind. It was okay to kill a chimp in the name of science. It wasn't okay to kill a person.

Except, apparently, when it was.

Maybe the catalyst had agreed to this. Maybe it was this or some other, more gruesome death. Whatever that would be.

"I'm sorry," Elvi said to her, as she did every time she came into the catalyst chamber. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know that they did this. I would never have agreed to it."

The woman's head lolled on her neck, nodding forward as if in mock agreement.

"I won't forget that they did this to you. If I can ever make this right, I will."

The woman pushed at the floor with her hands as though she wanted to stand up, but her arms lacked the strength, and her hands flopped bonelessly. It was just reflexes. That's what she told herself. Instinct. The woman's brain was gone, or at least changed into something that wasn't by any sane definition a brain. There wasn't anyone really alive in that skin. Not anymore.

But there had been once.

Elvi wiped her eyes. The universe was always stranger than you expected. Sometimes it was full of wonders. Sometimes full of horrors.

"I won't forget."

Chapter Two: Naomi

Naomi missed the *Rocinante*, but then she missed a lot of things these days.

Her old ship and home was still parked on Freehold. Before they'd left, she and Alex had found a cavern system on the edge of Freehold's southernmost continent with a mouth big enough to edge the ship into. They'd put it down in a dry tunnel and spent a week running seals and storage tarps that would keep the local flora and fauna out. Whenever they got back to the *Roci*, it would be there, ready and waiting. If they never did, it would be there for centuries. Still waiting.

Sometimes, on the edge of sleep, she'd take herself through it. She still knew every centimeter from the top of the cockpit to the curve of the drive cone. She could think her way through it on the float or under thrust. She'd heard about ancient scholars back on Earth making palaces of memory that way. Imagine Alex in the cockpit, holding an hourglass for time. Then down to the flight deck, where Amos and Clarissa were tossing a golgo ball with the numeral 2 painted on it back and forth for initial and final velocities divided by two. Then down to her cabin, and Jim. Jim by himself. Jim who meant displacement. A simple kinematic equation, three things that were all the same, easy to remember because they all stung her heart.

That was one reason she'd agreed to the shell-game plan when Saba and the underground had reached out to her. Memories were like ghosts, and as long as Jim and Amos were gone, the *Roci* would always be a little bit haunted.

And it wasn't only Jim, though he had been the first. Naomi had also lost Clarissa, who would have died from the slow poisons in her implants if

she hadn't chosen to die by violence. Amos had taken a high-risk mission from the underground, deep in enemy territory, and then gone silent, missing pickup window after pickup window until they all stopped expecting to hear from him again. Even Bobbie, healthy and well, but in the captain's seat of her own ship now. They were all lost to her, but Jim was the worst.

Freehold, on the other hand, she didn't miss at all. The experience of being under a vast and empty sky had its charm for a while, but the unease lasted longer than the novelty. If she was going to live as a fugitive and outlaw, she could at least do it in something where the air was held in by something visible. Her new quarters—spare and terrible as they were—at least had that going for them.

From the outside, her bunk looked like a standard cargo container made to transport a low-yield planetary fusion reactor. It was the kind colonists in the thirteen hundred new systems would use to power a small city or a medium-sized mining station. With its actual cargo gone, there was enough room for a gimbaled crash couch, an emergency support recycler, a water supply, and half a dozen modified short-burn torpedoes. The crash couch was her bed and her workbench. The support recycler was her power and food and her waste disposal. The kind of thing that would keep the crew of a stranded ship alive for weeks, but not in anything like comfort. The water supply was for drinking, but also part of the stealth, connected to small evaporation panels on the exterior of the container to bleed off her waste heat.

And the torpedoes were how she spoke to the larger world.

Except not today. Today she was going to see actual people. Breathe their air, touch their skin. Hear their living voices. She wasn't sure if she was excited about that, or if the energy stirring in her belly was foreboding. The one could seem so much like the other.

"Permission to open?" she said, and the crash couch's monitor hesitated, sent the message, and then a few breaths later came back with CONFIRMED. DEPARTURE AT 18:45 STANDARD. DON'T BE LATE.

Naomi unstrapped herself from the couch and pushed to the inner door of the container, securing the helmet on her suit as she went. When the suit showed solid seals, she double-checked them anyway, then cycled the air in the container into her emergency recycler, bringing the interior down to near vacuum. When the pressure reached the efficiency limit of the unit and stopped dropping, she popped the container doors and pulled herself out into the vastness of the cargo hold.

The *Verity Close* was a converted ice hauler acting as a long-haul shipping vessel for the colonies. The hold around her was as wide as the Freehold sky, or it felt that way. The *Rocinante* and eleven more like her could have fit in it and not touched the sides. Instead, thousands of containers like Naomi's were locked into place and ready to be hauled out from Sol to any of the new cities and stations that humanity was building. Taming the new wilderness of planets that didn't know humanity's genetic codes or tree of life. And most of the containers were what they claimed—soil, industrial yeast incubators, bacterial libraries.

And then, like hers, a few were something else.

This was the shell game.

She didn't know if Saba had come up with the idea, or if his wife, the figurehead president of the Transport Union, had found some covert way to tell him. With Medina Station and the slow zone firmly under Laconian control, the greatest obstacle the underground faced was moving ships and personnel from one system to another. Even something as small as the *Roci* couldn't hope to pass by Medina's sensor arrays unnoticed. Traffic control through the gate network was too important to ever let that happen.

But as long as the Transport Union was still in charge of its own ships, the records could be forged. Cargo containers like hers could be moved from ship to ship, making it difficult if not impossible to track her communications—or Saba's or Wilhelm Walker's or any of the other organizing heads of the underground—to any one vessel.

Or, if the reward seemed to justify the terrible risk, something larger could be smuggled. Something dangerous. Something like the captured warship *Gathering Storm* could be snuck into Sol system. And with it,

Bobbie Draper and Alex Kamal, who she hadn't seen in over a year. And who, right now, were waiting for her at a private rendezvous.

She launched herself along the row of containers, skimming past them with accuracy born of a lifetime's practice. The guide lights blinked at the containers' edges, marking the ever-changing maze of access and control and leading her toward the crew hatch. The actual crew space was probably smaller than the *Rocinante*'s. Her secret cargo container, as spacious as the crew cabins.

She didn't know the crew of the ship that had carried her for the last months. Most of them weren't aware she was there. Saba arranged things that way. The fewer people knew, the less they could say. The old Belter term for it was *guerraregle*. War rules. It was how she'd lived as a girl, back in the bad old days. It was how she lived now.

She found the airlock into the ship and cycled through. Her contact was waiting for her. She was a young woman, not more than twenty years old, with pale skin and wide-set dark eyes. Her shaved head was probably meant to make her look tough, but it just reminded Naomi of baby fuzz. Her name might not have been Blanca, but that was how Naomi knew her.

"You're clear for twenty minutes, ma'am," Blanca said. She had a good voice. Musical and clean. A Martian accent that reminded Naomi of Alex. "After that, I'm off shift. I can stay around, but I can't keep the next guy from coming on."

"More than enough," Naomi said. "I just need to get to the habitation ring."

"Not a problem. We're going to be transferring your container to the *Mosley* in berth sixteen-ten. It's going to take a few hours, but the work order's already been approved."

The pea slipping into a different shell. By the time Naomi was ready to send out her next set of orders and analysis, the *Verity Close* would be past the Sol gate and off toward some other system. And Naomi would be in her same little hole, sleeping on her same little couch, but traveling with a different ship. Blanca would be replaced by her new contact waiting for her

at the docks. Naomi had lost track of how many times she'd done this. It was almost routine.

"Thank you," she said, and started to pull herself through toward the dockside airlock.

"It's been an honor, ma'am," Blanca said, spitting the words out quickly. "Meeting you, I mean. Meeting Naomi Nagata."

"Thank you for everything you've done for me. I appreciate it more than I can say."

Blanca braced. It felt like theater, but Naomi saluted the girl all the same. It meant something to the girl, and for Naomi to treat it with anything less than equal seriousness would have been rude. Worse, it would have been cruel.

Then she pulled herself into the cramped green corridor of the *Verity Close* and left Blanca behind. She didn't expect ever to see her again.



Deep Transfer Station Three lived between the orbit of Saturn and Uranus, locked in position with the Sol gate. Its architecture was familiar: a large spherical dock capable of accepting several dozen ships at maximum capacity and a habitation ring spinning at one-third g. It was both a critical central hub for traffic in and out of Sol system and a glorified warehouse complex. Ships from across the system brought cargo here ready to send out to the colony worlds or came to pick up incoming packages. At any given time, there were probably more alien artifacts on the transfer station than anyplace else in the system.

All told, the station could hold twenty thousand people, though the traffic rarely if ever demanded full capacity. A permanent staff and the crews of whatever ships came and went, along with contractors to run the hospitals, bars, brothels, churches, stores, and restaurants that seemed to follow humanity everywhere it went. It was a base where crews from across the system and from the other systems on the far sides of the rings could get away from each other for a few days, see unfamiliar faces, hear voices they

hadn't lived with for months, climb into bed with someone who didn't feel like family. It created a constant fraternization that had led to the station's ring getting the unofficial name "Paternity Row."

Naomi liked the place. There was something reassuring in the stability of human behavior. Alien civilizations and galactic empire, war and resistance: They were there. But also drinking and karaoke. Sex and babies.

She walked through the public corridor of the habitation ring with her head bowed. The underground had a false identification for her in the station system so that her biometrics wouldn't raise an alarm, but she kept from making herself too obvious all the same in case a human might recognize her.

The rendezvous was a restaurant in the lowest and outermost level of the ring. She'd expected to be ushered into a storeroom or freezer, but the man at the door led her back to a private dining room. Even before she stepped through the doorway, she knew they were there.

Bobbie saw her first and stood up, grinning. She wore a nondescript flight suit without identifying tags or patches, but she wore it like a uniform. Alex, rising with her, had an older cut. He'd lost weight, and his remaining hair was trimmed close. He could have been an accountant or a general. Without words, they stepped into each other, arms raised. A three-way embrace with Naomi's head on Alex's shoulder, Bobbie's cheek against hers. The warmth of their bodies was more comforting than she wanted it to be.

"Oh, God dammit," Bobbie said, "but it is good to see you again."

The embrace broke, and they moved to the table. A bottle of whiskey and three glasses waited, a clear and unmistakable sign of bad news to come. A toast to be made, a memory to be honored, another loss to carry. Naomi asked her question with a glance.

"You heard about Avasarala," Alex said.

The relief came in a little rush followed by chagrin at feeling relief. It was only that Avasarala had died. "I did."

Bobbie poured out shots for each of them, then raised one. "She was a hell of woman. We won't see her like again."

They touched glasses, and Naomi drank. Losing the old woman was hard—harder for Bobbie, probably, than any of the rest of them. But they weren't mourning Amos yet. Or Jim.

"So," Bobbie said, putting down her glass, "how's life as the secret general of the resistance?"

"I prefer 'secret diplomat,' " Naomi said. "And it's underwhelming."

"Wait, wait, wait," Alex said. "Can't talk without food. It's not family unless there's a meal."

The restaurant did a good Belt/Mars fusion menu. Something called white kibble that was related to the real thing, but with fresh vegetables and bean sprouts. Rounds of vat-grown beef-pork hybrid cooked in the shape of a Petri dish and touched with a sweet hot sauce. They leaned on the table here the way they had on the *Rocinante* in their previous incarnations.

Naomi hadn't realized how much she missed Bobbie's laugh or Alex's way of sneaking another small helping onto her plate when she was almost finished eating. The little intimacies of living in close quarters with someone for decades. And then not living there anymore. It might have made her sad if it weren't for the pleasure of being there in the moment with the two of them.

"The *Storm*'s crewed up pretty well," Bobbie was saying. "I was worried for a while that it would be straight Belters. I mean, that's where Saba's bench is the deepest. Two Martian vets running a crew full of folks who still call us inners?"

"Could have been a problem," Naomi agreed.

"Saba pulled a whole sheet of UNN and MCRN vets," Alex said. "Young ones too. Weird being around people who were the age I was when I mustered out. They look like babies, you know? All fresh-faced and serious."

Naomi laughed. "I know. Anyone under forty looks like a child to me now."

"They're good," Bobbie said. "I've been running drills and simulations the whole time we've been parked."

"There've been a couple fights," Alex said.

“It’s just nerves,” Bobbie said. “When this mission’s done, that shit will evaporate.”

Naomi took another bite of white kibble so that she wouldn’t frown. It didn’t work, though. Alex cleared his throat and spoke in his changing-the-subject voice. “I’m guessing there’s still no word from the big guy?”

Two years before, Saba had found a chance to slip an operative onto Laconia itself with a pocket nuke and an encrypted recall-and-retrieve transmitter. A long-odds mission to get Jim back, or destroy Laconia’s rule by cutting off its head. Saba had asked Naomi who she would trust with something that important. That dangerous. When Amos heard about it, he’d packed his bags in the same hour. Since then, Laconia had built new defenses. The underground had lost most of its presence in Laconia system, and Amos had gone silent.

Naomi shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Yeah, well,” Alex said. “Soon, probably.”

“Probably,” Naomi agreed, the same way she did every time they had this conversation.

“You two want any coffee?” Alex asked. Bobbie shook her head at the same time Naomi said *Not for me*, and Alex popped up. “I’ll go settle up, then.”

When the door closed behind him, Naomi leaned forward. She wanted to leave the moment where it was—a reunion with family. A bright spot in the darkness. She wanted to, and she couldn’t.

“A mission with the *Storm* in Sol system is a hell of a risk,” she said.

“It stands a real chance of getting some attention,” Bobbie agreed, not making eye contact. Her tone was light, but there was a warning in it. “It’s not just me, you know.”

“Saba.”

“And others.”

“I keep thinking about Avasarala,” Naomi said. There was still some whiskey in the bottle, and she poured herself a finger. “She was a hell of a fighter. Never backed down from anything, even when she lost.”

“She was one of a kind,” Bobbie agreed.

“She was a fighter, but she wasn’t a warrior. She was always leading the struggle, but she did it by finding other ways to get the work done. Alliances, political pressure, trade, logistics. Her strategy was always that violence came last.”

“She had leverage,” Bobbie said. “She ran a planet. We’re a bunch of rats looking for cracks in the concrete. We’re going to do things differently.”

“We have leverage,” Naomi said. “And more than that, we can cultivate leverage.”

Bobbie put down her fork very carefully. The darkness in her eyes wasn’t anger. Or it wasn’t just anger, anyway. “Laconia is a military dictatorship. If you want anyone to stand against Duarte, we have to show people that he can be stood against. Military action is what shows people that there’s hope. You’re a Belter, Naomi. You know this.”

“I know that it doesn’t work,” Naomi said. “The Belt fought for generations against the inner planets—”

“And won,” Bobbie said.

“We didn’t, though. We didn’t win. We held on until something came in and knocked over the playing board. Do you really think we’d have gotten something like the Transport Union if the gates hadn’t appeared? The only way we succeeded was by something totally unexpected changing the rules. Only now we’re acting like it’ll work twice.”

“We’re acting?”

“Saba’s acting,” Naomi said. “And you’re backing him.”

Bobbie leaned back, stretching the way she did when she was annoyed. It made her seem even bigger than she was, but Naomi was a hard woman to intimidate. “I know you disagree with the approach, and I know you’re not happy that Saba didn’t put you in on the details, but—”

“That’s not the issue,” Naomi said.

“No one’s arguing against leverage. No one’s saying that we shouldn’t be looking for political angles too. But pacifism only works when your enemy has a conscience. Laconia has a deep tradition of discipline through punishment and I know—No, hear me out. I know that because it’s a

Martian tradition too. You grew up with the Belt, but I grew up with Mars. You tell me that my way doesn't lead to victory? Okay. I believe you. But I'm telling you that your soft approach doesn't work on these people."

"So where does that leave us?"

"Same place as always," Bobbie said. "Doing the best we can for as long as we can and hoping something unexpected happens. On the upside, something unexpected almost always does."

"That's not as comforting as you think," Naomi said with a chuckle, trying to lighten the mood.

Bobbie wasn't having it. "Because sometimes the thing we don't expect is that we lost Clarissa and Holden. Or that we lost Amos. Or that we lose me. Or Alex. Or you. But that's going to happen. We're all going to lose each other eventually, and that's been true since before we were a crew. That's what being born means. Everything else is just specifics. And my specifics are that I'm leading a top-secret military mission in Sol system using the enemy's captured ship against them, because even if it's a bad plan, it's the only plan I have. And maybe my risk will get you your leverage."

But I don't want you to risk anything, Naomi thought. *I've lost too much. I can't stand to lose anything more.* Bobbie's features softened, just a little. So maybe she understood.

The familiar tap of a footstep outside the door was Alex as clearly as if he'd said his name. Naomi took a deep breath and forced herself to relax.

She didn't want to spoil the reunion for him too.

Chapter Three: Alex

Bobbie and Naomi were at it again.

They played it cool when Alex came back into the room, but he could tell a heated conversation had been going on while he was away. Naomi was dipping her head, letting her hair fall in front of her eyes the way she did when she was upset. Bobbie's face was a shade darker than usual, flushed with excitement or anger. Alex had lived on the same small ship with Naomi for decades, and Bobbie only a little less. There was almost nothing they could conceal from each other.

It hurt his feelings a little that they were even trying to hide it because that meant he had to hide it too.

"All settled up," Alex said.

Bobbie nodded and drummed her fingers on the table. Naomi gave him a small smile through her hair.

Alex would have put money that their argument was the same one they'd been rehashing since they'd left Freehold. Pretending like nothing was wrong was the only safe choice. A wise man doesn't get between two fighting animals, but even a dim bulb didn't step into an argument between Naomi Nagata and Bobbie Draper. Not if he wanted to keep all his fingers. Metaphorically speaking, of course.

"So . . . ," Alex started, letting the word draw out until it became awkward.

"Yeah," Naomi answered. "I've got a lot to do before I climb back into my storage crate."

Bobbie nodded, started to speak, and then stopped. In the blink of an eye she'd crossed the distance to Naomi and swept her up in her massive

arms. While the two women were close to the same height, Bobbie outweighed Naomi by at least forty kilos. It was like watching a polar bear grapple a coatrack. But it wasn't the beginning of a fight, because both women were crying and patting each other on the back.

"It was good to see you," Bobbie said, hugging Naomi a little tighter and lifting her off the deck.

"I miss you," Naomi answered. "Both of you. More than I can say."

The *both of you* felt like an invitation, so Alex moved in and threw his arms around the two of them. A moment later, he was weeping too. After a while, when it felt right, they separated. Bobbie wiped her eyes with a napkin, but Naomi ignored the streaks down her face. She was smiling. Alex realized it was maybe the first real smile he'd seen from her since Holden had been taken to Laconia. It made him wonder how lonely her life was now, hidden away in her cargo container, moving from ship to ship and station to station. Even though it was the choice they'd all made together, he felt a pang of guilt for leaving her alone like that. But Bobbie had needed a pilot, and Naomi, in her wandering-statesman role, didn't. And didn't want one.

"When will we see you again?" Bobbie asked.

"I wish I knew," Naomi replied. "You guys going to be in Sol long?"

"Not up to me," Bobbie said with a shrug. In this case it was true, but even if it hadn't been, the answer would have been the same. You never knew who was listening, and even here on a Transport Union station in the back room of an OPA sympathizer bar, the habits of secrecy died hard.

As if on cue, Alex's hand terminal buzzed an alert at him. They were getting ready to transfer the *Storm* from its current ship to the new one. Naomi wasn't the only one living inside a high-stakes shell game.

"Boss, gonna go oversee the transfer," he said to Bobbie.

"I'll come with," she replied, then grabbed Naomi for one last fierce hug. "You stay safe, XO."

"That's all I do nowadays," Naomi said with a sad grin.

Leaving her behind felt wrong. The way it always did.



Alex would never admit it out loud, but the *Gathering Storm* scared the shit out of him. The *Rocinante* was still his first love. Like a hand tool that grew to fit the shape of the hand that held it, the *Roci* was comfortable, familiar, safe. For all that it was a dangerous warship, it still felt like home. It felt *right*. He missed it terribly.

The *Storm* was like living inside an alien creature that was pretending to be an overpowered racing ship and then someone had strapped a shit-ton of firepower onto it. Where flying the *Roci* felt like a collaboration, the ship an extension of his will, flying the *Storm* felt like a negotiation with a dangerous animal. Every time he sat in the pilot's chair he worried about getting bitten.

Bobbie had gone over the ship with her techs from stem to stern and reassured him that there was nothing in the specs that made the *Storm* dangerous to her crew, or at least not more than *all* spaceships were dangerous to their crews. Alex remained unconvinced. There was something about using the controls that felt like the ship wasn't reacting to his inputs; it felt like the ship was interpreting them and agreeing with them, but also making its own damn decisions. The only person he'd ever confided this to was his copilot, Caspar Asoau.

"I mean, yeah, the controls feel a little loose I guess, but not sure that means the ship is fighting back," Caspar had said, giving Alex a suspicious side-eyed glance. Alex hadn't brought it up again. But Alex had been flying spaceships for a lot of years now, and he knew what he knew. There was more to the *Storm* than just metal and carbon and whatever that crystal-looking shit was. Even if no one else could see it.

Still, it was a damn beautiful ship.

Alex stood at a small observation window and watched as it was carefully moved from the open hangar bay of their old transport ship to the new one. The two massive transports flanked the *Storm* as it moved, and the enormous bulk of the transfer station's central hub overshadowed them both. It was all very deliberately done to block line of sight to all the known

government telescope and radar stations. For all the Laconian Empire would ever know, two heavy freighters had briefly docked at the same transfer point, dropped off or picked up some cargo, and then gone their separate ways. That a stolen Laconian warship had been moved from one to the other wouldn't appear on any official records or in any video feeds. And the *Storm* and her crew would be free to live and fight another day. Assuming they hadn't overlooked anything.

The gleaming crystal-and-metal flanks of the ship seemed to glow with their own inner light even in the box canyon shadow that two freighters and the transfer station created. Bright white puffs of superheated gas flashed and disappeared as the maneuvering thrusters fired. Caspar would be at the controls, gently nudging the Laconian destroyer out of the open cargo bay of their old ship and into the new with practiced ease. They'd played this game a lot, and both pilots had become expert at moving the ship in very confined spaces.

As a former military man, Alex was always surprised that they could actually manage to keep the conspiracy a secret. They were sneaking a stolen imperial warship through the gate network hidden in the bowels of Transport Union ships. At least dozens and maybe hundreds of people were directly involved. Somehow, they kept getting away with it.

The Occam's razor argument to nearly all conspiracy theories was that people were really shitty at keeping secrets, and large groups of people were exponentially worse. But with the help of their former OPA friends in the Transport Union, they'd been sneaking and peeking for months without getting caught. It was a testament to how bred to insurgency the Belters had become over the last century or two. Hiding a rebellion from vastly superior military forces was in their DNA. During his twenty years as a member of the Martian Navy and then later fighting the Free Navy, he'd had a part in hunting their more radical factions. Alex had often found the Belter capacity for subterfuge and guerrilla fighting infuriating. Now it was literally keeping him alive.

Alex wasn't sure if that was ironic or not. Funny, maybe.

The *Storm* finished buttoning down in their new freighter. It was a cow of a cargo hauler shaped like a fat bullet and named the *Pendulum's Arc*. Its doors slid shut and locked, and Alex felt a tiny tremor in the deck as they did. A pair of doors bigger than a destroyer had some mass to them.

Alex pulled out his terminal and opened a channel to Bobbie. "The baby's tucked in. We can be oscar mike on your word."

"Copy that," Bobbie said, and killed the channel.

She was off doing final prep with her team. Saba's chain of whisperers hadn't told them what their mission in Sol was, but Bobbie kept her troops so drilled on the fundamentals that the specific mission just became a checklist of shit to get done. Alex had been skeptical when Bobbie took a mixed bag of old-guard OPA, stuffed them into Laconian Marine power armor, and said she was going to turn them into a legit covert ops strike team. But damned if she hadn't done exactly that. They'd run three different operations with a hundred percent success rate and a zero percent casualty rate. It turned out that as formidable as Gunny Draper was, she was even scarier when you let her train her own backup.

There had to have been a moment when this had become the new normal. Playing their cargo ship version of three-card monte with the *Storm* while Saba and Naomi and the rest of the underground picked mission targets for them. He couldn't say when it had passed. Only now he was back to being the bus driver he'd been in the MCRN a few lifetimes ago. Every day carried the risk of discovery and capture or death. Every operation sent Bobbie and her team into the meat grinder of the Laconian dominion. For all their successes, they were walking on the edge of a razor blade. If he'd been twenty and unaware of his own mortality, he'd probably have loved it.

He turned away from the observation window and picked up his gear bag. As he walked, his terminal squawked at him. "Locked and powered down," Caspar said.

"I was watching. Elegantly done. The gunny will be drilling the troops, and I'm headed that way. Ship's yours for the duration."

"Copy that."

The corridors of the transfer station were spare and functional. Smooth taupe ceramic walls and a floor just padded enough to keep the occupants from getting shin splints in the habitat ring's one-third g rotation. Alex trudged along one for half a kilometer, then rapped at a door marked STORAGE 348-001.

A grizzled Belter opened it a crack and looked up and down the hallway around Alex. He had gray hair in a military-style buzz cut and flat gray eyes of almost exactly the same color. Alex could see the heavy black pistol he held behind his thigh as he checked to see if the corridor was clear. His name was Takeshi Oba, and he was one of Bobbie's killers.

"All clear," Alex said with a smile, and Oba let him in with a grunt.

It was an empty room of about five by ten meters with the same plain ceramic walls as the corridor outside. Bobbie's team was standing in loose ranks facing her as she addressed them. She gave Alex a tiny nod as he entered, but didn't stop her speech.

"Make no mistake," she was saying, "the Sol system is the most dangerous theater we've operated in. Its threat level is second only to Laconia for our style of covert op. Nearly every rock or chunk of ice bigger than a troop transport has a station, telescope, or radar emplacement on it. There are eyes everywhere."

A mutter passed through the group, but Alex couldn't tell if it was grumbling or agreement.

"And," Bobbie continued, "the Earth-Mars Coalition fleet is entirely under Laconian control. Which means the Laconians' relatively small number of ships—the one fact that has allowed us to operate up to this point—is *not* going to help us here. To make matters worse, the Laconians have left the dreadnought *Heart of the Tempest* in orbit around Earth. It's there primarily as a threat to keep the inner planets in line, but if it detects us, we are in a world of hurt. The *Storm* cannot survive an engagement with a *Magnetar*-class battleship. End of story."

"Any word yet on the target?" Jillian Houston asked. She was the daughter of Freehold's governor, Payne Houston, and had been one of the first volunteers for Bobbie's team. She was tall and rangy, with white-blond

hair, the muscles and bone structure of a born Earther, and a perpetual scowl line between her eyes. She'd become Bobbie's unofficial second in the time they'd worked together. Alex worried about that. Jillian was mean as a snake. When he'd told Bobbie that, she'd responded, *I just make sure she never runs out of mice*. He still didn't know quite what that meant.

"No. The kids upstairs are playing this one close to the vest," Bobbie said. "It's starting to feel like we'll know when we're already doing it."

"Outstanding," Jillian said.

"The *Storm* is buttoned up, and we'll be heading Solward on the *Pendulum* in thirty hours," Bobbie said. "Enjoy your time on Paternity Row, but make sure you're on the ship and squared away twenty-four hours from now or find my foot uncomfortably up your ass."

That drew a good-natured chuckle from the crowd.

"Dismissed."

A few chaotic moments later, Bobbie, Jillian, and Alex were the only three left in the room. Bobbie still wore the nondescript flight suit she'd had on when they met with Naomi, but Jillian wore the black jumpsuit adopted by Bobbie's strike team as its unofficial uniform. She also had a large pistol in a holster. Alex had never seen her without it. For Freeholders, wearing a gun was like wearing pants.

"I don't like Saba giving us the runaround on this," Jillian said. "It feels like he's fucking improvising."

"There could be a lot of legitimate reasons why the mission details are still being formulated," Bobbie replied. Her voice was gentle, but firm. *I understand your concern, but do it anyway* was implicit in it.

"It has to be Callisto," Jillian continued as if she hadn't heard the quiet warning in Bobbie's tone. "Only thing worth a damn that's far enough away from that battleship to be a realistic target."

Bobbie took a half step toward her and straightened up, magnifying the size difference between the two women. Jillian stopped talking, but didn't back down at all. *Mean as a snake, and with giant brass balls*, Alex thought.

“That sort of speculation is unproductive. And, frankly, dangerous,” Bobbie said. “Keep it to yourself. Go get a drink or five. Get in a bar fight if you have to. But get it out of your system and be back at the *Storm* tomorrow. We’ll know more then.

“Dismissed.”

Jillian finally seemed to get the message. She threw Bobbie a half-mocking salute and sauntered out of the room.

Alex opened his mouth, and Bobbie pointed her finger at him. “Don’t fucking say it.”

“Copy that,” he said instead. “A day on station with nothing to do. Wish Naomi was hangin’ around. Could’ve done more than eat shitty kibble with her.”

“She’s got her mission too,” Bobbie said. Her lips pressed thin and pale.

“So,” Alex said, “you gonna tell me what went on between you, or am I gonna have to beat it out of you?”

Caught off guard, Bobbie let out a bark of laughter just the way he’d hoped she would. It was like a Chihuahua threatening an office building, and Alex grinned to show he was in on the joke.

Bobbie sighed. “She still thinks we should negotiate our way out of this. We disagree on that point. Same shit, different year.”

“She’s lost a lot,” Alex said. “She’s afraid of losing it all.”

Bobbie grabbed Alex’s upper arm and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

“And that’s the point I keep trying to make with her, my friend. In a fight like this, unless you’re willing to lose everything to win, you lose it all by losing.”

Chapter Four: Teresa

We don't know what they called themselves," Colonel Ilich said, lying back on the grass, his hands pillowing his bald head. "We don't know that they called themselves anything, really. They may have done without language at all."

Teresa had known Colonel Ilich her whole life. He was a fact of the universe, like stars or water. He was a calm, thoughtful presence in a life full to spilling with calm, thoughtful people. What made him different was that he was entirely focused on her. That, and that he wasn't afraid of her.

He shifted, stretched. "Some people call them 'the protomolecule,' even though that was really just a tool they made. It'd be like calling humans 'wrenches.' 'Protomolecule engineers' is closer, but it's kind of a mouthful. 'Initial organism' or 'the alien society' or 'the architects.' They all get used to mean more or less the same thing."

"What do you call them?" Teresa asked.

He chuckled. "I call them 'the Romans.' The great empire that rose and fell in antiquity, and left their roads behind."

It was an interesting thought. Teresa turned it over in her mind for a few seconds like she was getting the taste of it. She liked the analogy not because it was accurate, but because it was evocative. That was what made analogies useful. Her mind wandered down that rabbit hole for a few breaths, seeing what was there, what was interesting in it, and decided to ask Timothy what he thought. He always had views that surprised her. It was why she liked him. He wasn't afraid of her any more than Colonel Ilich was, but Ilich's respect tasted like respect for her father, and that made it . . . not *lesser* exactly. Just different. Timothy was hers.

She felt the quiet stretching on too long. Ilich would be expecting her to say something, and Timothy wasn't something she talked about. She found

something else.

“So they built all of this?”

“Not all of it, no. The gates, the construction platforms, the repair drones. The *artifacts*, yes. But the living systems existed on the other worlds first. Stable replicators aren’t as rare as we used to imagine. A little water, a little carbon, a consistent stream of energy from sunlight or a thermal vent? Add a few million years, and more often than not something will happen.”

“Or if it doesn’t, then the Romans don’t have anything to work from.”

“One thousand three hundred and seventy three times that we know of,” Ilich said. “That’s a lot.” The colony worlds—Sol system included—were only on the gate network because there had been life for the Romans to hijack. A few hundred systems in a galaxy of billions. Ilich was old enough that anything more than one was miraculous to him. Teresa hadn’t grown up in a lonely universe the way the colonel had. She’d grown up in a lonely universe the way *she* had, and the two didn’t compare.

She closed her eyes and turned her face toward the sun. The light and heat felt good on her skin. The brightness pressed through her eyelids, turning everything red. Nuclear fusion filtered through blood.

She smiled.

Teresa Angelica Maria Blanquita Li y Duarte knew that she wasn’t a normal child the way she knew that light reflected off a level surface became polarized. A not-particularly-useful academic fact. She was the only daughter of High Consul Winston Duarte, which all by itself meant her childhood had been strange.

She’d lived her whole life in—or occasionally and clandestinely just outside—the State Building on Laconia. Since she’d been a toddler, other children had been brought in to be her friends and classmates. Usually from the most favored families of the empire, but sometimes because her father wanted her to know a variety of kinds of people. He wanted her to have as close as she could get to a normal life. To be as close as she could be to a normal fourteen-year-old. And it worked as well as it worked, but since she only had her own life to judge from, she couldn’t really say how successful it had been.

She felt more like she had friendly acquaintances than actual friends. Muriel Cowper and Shan Ellison particularly treated her best, or at least most like they treated other students in her peer group.

And then there was Connor Weigel, who had been in her classes almost as long as she'd had them. He had a special place in her heart that she found herself curiously unwilling to examine.

If she was lonely—and she assumed she was—she didn't have anything to compare it against. If everything in the world was red, no one would know it. Being everywhere was just as good a way to be invisible as not being anywhere. It was contrast that gave things shape. Brightness made darkness. Fullness made emptiness. Loneliness defined the borders of whatever not-loneliness was called. They were comparative.

She wondered if life and death were like that too. Or life and not-life, anyway.

"What killed them?" she asked, opening her eyes. Everything looked blue. "Your Romans, I mean."

"Well, that's the next step, isn't it?" Colonel Ilich said. "Figuring that out and then building a strategy around what to do about it. We know, whatever it is, it's still out there. We've seen it react to things that we do."

"The thing on the *Tempest*," Teresa said. She'd seen the briefing on it. The first time Admiral Trejo used the *Magnetar*-class ship's main weapon in normal space, something had happened that knocked out people's consciousness all through Sol system for a few minutes and left a visual distortion on the ship itself, locked to its frame of reference. It was why James Holden had come to the palace, which was really the aspect of it that had the biggest impact on her.

"Exactly," Ilich said. He rolled onto his belly and propped himself up on his elbows to look at her. Eye contact was how he signaled that something he said was important. "It's the most serious threat to our security. Either the Romans died because they ran up against some natural force that they weren't prepared for, or because an enemy killed them. That's what we're finding out first."

"How?" she asked.

“We don’t know how they killed the Romans. We’re still just at the edge of understanding what they were compared to us.”

“No. I mean how are we finding out if it was an enemy or a natural force?”

Colonel Ilich nodded to say it was a good question. He pulled out his handheld, tapped on it a few times, and brought up a grid.

	TERESA COOPERATES	JASON COOPERATES
JASON DEFECTS	T3, J3	T4, J0
TERESA DEFECTS	T0, J4	T2, J2

“Prisoner’s dilemma,” Teresa said.

“You remember how it works?”

“We both decide without talking whether to cooperate or defect. If we both cooperate, we both get three points. If only one of us cooperates, they don’t get any points and the defector gets four. If we both defect, we both get two. The problem is that no matter what you choose to do, I’m better off defecting. I get four instead of three if you cooperate or else two instead of nothing if you defect. So I should always defect. But since the same logic applies to you, you should always defect too. And then we wind up both making fewer points than if we’d cooperated.”

“So how do you fix that?”

“You don’t. It’s like saying ‘This statement is false.’ It’s just a hole in logic,” Teresa said. “I mean . . . isn’t it?”

“Not if you play it more than once,” Colonel Ilich said. “You play it over and over and over for a really long time. Every time the other player defects, you defect the next time. And then you go back to cooperating. It’s called tit for tat. There’s a pure game theory analysis of it I can give you if you want, but you don’t need it for this.”

Teresa nodded, but slowly. Her head was thick, the way it got when she was thinking about something without quite being conscious of what it was. Usually something interesting came up shortly afterward. She liked the feeling.

“Think of it like you were training Muskrat back when she was a puppy,” Ilich said. “The puppy wets the rug, and you scold it. You don’t go on scolding it forever. Just once, when it happens, and then you go back to playing with it and petting it and treating it like a puppy. It defects, then you defect, then you go back to cooperating.”

“Until it figures out that there’s a better strategy,” Teresa said.

“And it changes its behavior. It’s the most basic, simplest way we can negotiate with something we can’t talk to. But what if you do the same thing with the tide? Punish the waves for getting the rug wet?”

Teresa scowled.

“Exactly,” Colonel Ilich said as if she’d spoken aloud. “If you scold the tide, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t care. It doesn’t learn. And most of all, it doesn’t change. Your father is going to play tit for tat with the force that killed the Romans. And we’re going to see if it changes its behavior. If it doesn’t, we’ll take the hypothesis that they ran up against a law of nature like gravity making tides or the speed of light. Then we can study it, and find ways around it. But if it *changes* . . .”

“Then we’ll know it’s alive.”

“That’s the difference between exploration and negotiating,” Colonel Ilich said, pointing at her. She felt the bloom of pleasure that she always got when she’d answered a knotty problem well, but something nagged at her.

“But it *killed* the Romans.”

“War’s a kind of negotiation too,” he said.



Teresa’s rooms were in the north wing of the State Building, as were her father’s. It was the only home she’d ever had. A bedroom built to military specifications, a private bathroom, and the room that had been her playroom and was now her office, the difference being mostly cosmetic. When she’d

been ready to strip away the decorations of cartoon dinosaurs and puppies, she'd said so, and the next day a designer had come to help her choose a new color scheme and layout. Her corner of the State Building wasn't large or ostentatious, but it was hers to customize and re-create. Her little bubble of autonomy.

She'd chosen to make the office look like a science station. Her desk was tall enough to stand at, but also had long-legged stools along the side if she chose to sit. The east wall was a single screen set to run animations of simple mathematical and geometrical proofs when she wasn't watching a news or entertainment feed. It wasn't that she understood all the math, but she thought it was pretty. There was an elegance to the proofs, and having them there made her more aware of her intelligence. She liked being aware of her intelligence.

But she also had a couch long enough that she could lie down on it and still have room for Muskrat, her Labrador, to curl up at her feet. And a real glass window that looked out over a ceremonial garden. There were whole days when, if she wasn't with Colonel Ilich or in class, she'd curl up on the couch with Muskrat and read books or watch films for hours at a time. She had access to everything the censors approved—her father was very liberal about giving her access to literature and film—and she gravitated to stories about girls who lived alone in castles or palaces or temples. For such a specific genre, it turned out there were quite a few.

Her present favorite was a ten-hour feed made on Mars back before the gates opened called *The Fifth Tunnel*. In it, the hero—who, at twelve, was now younger than Teresa, but had been older when she first watched it—discovered a secret tunnel under a city called Innis Deep and followed it to a whole buried community with elves and fairies who needed help getting back to their dimension.

It all seemed wildly exotic, and the idea of a girl who lived her whole life underground captured her imagination so much that she'd put a blanket over her windows and pretended that the darkness was made of Martian dirt. When her father told her that part was true—that there was an Innis Deep and that Martian children did live in tunnels and buried cities—and that only the elves and fairies were inventions, it had astounded her.

She was watching it again when her father came by. She'd just gotten to the part where the girl—whose name was never mentioned—was running through a dark hallway with the evil fairy called Pinsleep chasing her, when the knock came. She was just getting up to answer it when the door opened. Only her father opened the door. Everyone else made her get it.

The treatments had changed him over the last few years, but just growing up had changed her. It didn't seem weird. His eyes had developed more of their oil-on-water shimmer in the whites and his fingernails had gone darker at the cuticles, but that was all just looks. In every way that mattered, he was the same.

"Am I interrupting?" he asked, the way he always did. It was half a joke, because she didn't have anything to interrupt, but only half. If she'd ever said yes, he would have let her be.

The nameless girl shrieked as Pinsleep lunged for her. Teresa paused the feed, and prey and predator both froze. Muskrat huffed, tail thumping against the couch as her father scratched the dog's wide ears.

"I have a briefing in two hours," he said. "I'd like you to attend."

Teresa felt a little prick of annoyance. She'd meant to go out and visit Timothy as soon as the feed was done. If they'd found out she was leaving the grounds without permission . . .

"Did I do something wrong?"

Her father blinked, then laughed. Muskrat pushed her head up into his hand, demanding more attention. He went back to rubbing her ears. "No, not at all. It's Admiral Waithe's report on the expansion plan for Bara Gaon Complex. You aren't expected to contribute, but I'd like you to listen. Then afterward, we can talk about it."

Teresa nodded. If it was what he wanted, of course she could, but it sounded dull. And strange. Her father's eyes went unfocused for a moment, the way they did sometimes, and then he shook his head like he was trying to clear it. He leaned against the arm of the couch, not quite sitting but not standing either. He tapped Muskrat's side firmly twice in a way that meant petting time was over. The dog sighed and flopped her head down on the cushion.

"Something's bothering you," he said.

“You’ve been asking me to do this more often,” she said. “Am I doing it wrong?”

His laughter was warm, and it made her relax a little.

“When I was your age, I was pushing for early entrance to upper university. You’re like me. You learn fast, and I want to keep up with you. I’m bringing you in more because you’re old enough to understand things now that you weren’t able to when you were a child. And Colonel Ilich says that your studies are on track. Even advanced.”

She felt a little glimmer of pride in that, but also confusion. Her father sighed.

“It’s hard work, keeping people safe,” he said. “Part of that is that we’ve come up against very dangerous, unknown things. I can wish that weren’t the case, but I can’t take it back. And the other part is that we’re working with people.”

“And people are terrible, terrible monkeys,” Teresa said.

“Yes, we are,” her father said. “We have a very close horizon almost all the time. Including me. But I’m trying to get better.”

The way he said it, he sounded tired. She leaned forward, and Muskrat took it as a sign that she was looking for someone to pet. She shifted, breathing hot on Teresa’s face until she gently pushed the dog back.

“Is the Bara Gaon Complex expansion really important, then?” Teresa asked.

“Everything’s important. All of it,” her father said. “And so every part of it needs to be able to fail without destroying the whole project. Including me. Which is why I’ve been asking you to come to the briefings more often.”

“What do you mean?” she said.

“I’m fine,” her father said. “Everything’s fine. There isn’t a problem. It’s only that . . . if there were to be, sometime later. Decades from now. Someone would need to understand the shape of the whole plan, and be able to step in. And people trust what they already know. Having a new high consul would be difficult under any circumstances, but it would be less difficult if there were a story with it. A succession. I want to train you to be that, if—God forbid—something happened to me.”

“But why should I be good at it just because you were?” Teresa said. “There’s no reason to think that. That’s dumb.”

“It is,” her father said. “But it’s a mistake people have made all through history. And since we know that, the two of us can use the tool we’ve been given. Come sit in the briefings and the meetings. Listen. Watch. Talk to me afterward. This is the next phase of your education. So that if you need to step in, you’ll actually be the leader they need you to be.” It took a few seconds to really understand what he was saying. The huge moments in life seemed like they should have more ceremony and effects. The important words—the life-changing ones—should echo a little. But they didn’t. They sounded just like everything else.

“You want to train me up to be the next high consul?”

“In case something happens to me,” Duarte said.

“But just in case,” she said. “Only just in case.”

“Just in case, princess,” he said.

Chapter Five: Elvi

A few decades earlier and about two hundred thousand trillion kilometers from where she currently sat, a tiny node of active protomolecule in a biological matrix had entered the orbit of a planet called Ilus, hitchhiking on the gunship *Rocinante*.

As the uncanny semisentient intelligence of the protomolecule tried to make contact with other nodes in the gate builders' long-dead empire, it woke up mechanisms that had been dormant for millions—or even billions—of years. The end result had been an ancient factory returning to life, a massive robot attack, the melting of one artificial moon, and the detonation of a power plant that nearly cracked the planet in two.

All in all, a really shitty experience.

So when Elvi's team took the catalyst out of isolation in unexplored systems to do a similar if slightly better-controlled reaching out to the artifacts and remains, she made sure they were careful. They watched what happened, they were ready to put the catalyst back in its box, and they didn't get too close to anything.

"*Falcon* in position," the pilot said.

If anything went terribly wrong, the pilot or Sagale or Elvi could give a single spoken order—*Emergency evacuation*, their name, and the delta-eight authorization code—and the ship would take it from there. Given the *Falcon*'s oversized engine and massive acceleration, anyone not in one of the ship's specially designed high-g couches would be injured or killed, but the data they'd already collected would be preserved. Laconia had a lot of fail-safe logic like that. It wasn't her favorite part of the job.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Admiral Sagale replied. He was strapped into a crash couch on the bridge too. Another sign of how seriously everyone took this part of the mission. “Major Okoye, you may proceed.”

“Take her out,” Elvi said into the comm. In this situation, there was only one *her*.

Elvi sat in her custom Laconian crash couch, surrounded by screens. The instruments could be yanked away in under a second, and the couch chamber filled with a breathable fluid for high-g burn shortly after. She was one of the few people important enough that efforts would be made to keep her alive. It felt like working inside a torpedo. She kind of hated it.

On one of her screens, a camera tracked the movement of the catalyst as she was wheeled out of her storage room on a high-tech gurney covered in sensors. Protomolecule communication went both ways. What happened to their sample was just as important to their study as what happened to the dead system that they might be about to activate.

The catalyst’s gurney moved on magnetic wheels down the corridor to a compartment in the skin of the ship, away from all the radiation shielding and whatever high-tech wizardry Cortázar’s team had come up with to lock their sample away from the rest back beyond the gate.

Nothing happened.

“No response yet,” Travon said.

“Gee, really?” Fayez replied, the sarcasm in his tone meant for everyone else. Travon wouldn’t hear it.

While the protomolecule might communicate in ways that looked like they were faster than light once it got going, it didn’t start it right away. Since locality wasn’t a big deal for the protomolecule, but the speed of light was, Elvi suspected it was some slower-than-light handshake as the two network nodes agreed on the protocol to be used. That was somewhere between a guess and a metaphor, but it helped her to think about it.

Her sample came out of Cortázar’s laboratory pens. It hadn’t existed until the recent past. Everything they were trying to interact with here had been waiting since humanity had been a kinky idea that two amoebas came up with. So somehow, when her node came into physical proximity—

meaning somewhere in the same solar system—for the first time, they were creating some kind of relationship to each other on the fly. Which was awesome, but also weird. And not how quantum entanglement worked, unless somehow it was.

In her study of the protomolecule and the civilization that had created it, Elvi often found herself glad she wasn't a physicist. What the protomolecule did biologically, while not entirely explicable yet, at least seemed like it might be fully understood some day. The mechanisms by which it hijacked life and repurposed it were incredibly advanced, but not totally dissimilar to things like viruses and parasitic fungi. She didn't understand all the rules yet, but she felt like she could, given enough time and research.

What the protomolecule did to physics looked less like a variation and refinement of the standard models and more like kicking the game table over and scattering the pieces across the floor. Elvi wondered if Jen Lively's constant lighthearted joking was so she didn't go insane as her understanding of reality was ripped to shreds in front of her on a daily basis.

"Getting a reaction," Travon said.

"Yeah," Jen agreed. "Something's happening in the object."

"What was the delay on that?" Elvi asked.

"Eighteen minutes."

They were nine light-minutes from the structure, so that made a handshake propagating at or near c plausible. She really needed to write that hypothesis up and run it past the nanoinformatics staff.

Elvi's screens went wild with readings from the catalyst's sensor package. It was too much data to be analyzed in real time, so Elvi let it wash over her like a wave of numbers and graphs. There would be plenty of opportunity later to figure out what it all meant.

"Looking stable so far," Travon said.

"Always glad when things don't immediately blow up," Elvi said, but no one laughed.

"You know what makes a diamond green?" Jen asked everyone and no one. "I looked it up."

“Radiation,” Fayez said. Of course he knew. He’d been on the Ilus team too, as its geologist. While the opening of the protomolecule gate network had given Elvi more than thirteen hundred new biospheres to study, it had given Fayez ten times that many new geologies to explore. Some of them as exotic as a great huge lump of carbon crystal that was a really pretty color. “Diamonds that form in the presence of radiation can get that green color. Some people mistake them for emeralds. But totally different mineral. Emeralds are beryl, not carbon.”

“Stealing my thunder there, sport,” Jen said. “But I’m betting it means that this star was a lot more active when the object was formed. My best guess, based on stellar decay, is that the object is almost five billion years old. That’s been hanging out for about a third of the time the universe has, you know, *existed*.”

“That would make it one of the oldest artifacts we’ve found,” Travon said, suddenly interested. “Maybe something from the very beginning of their civilization.”

“Fascinating,” Sagale said, his clipped tones the only sign of his impatience. “What’s it doing?”

What’s it doing that helps us fight ghoulies from beyond time and space? was the implied question. For all her bottomless budget, for all the cream-of-the-crop science teams she’d been given and her custom-built state-of-the-art ship, there was only one result the high consul and his Science Directorate cared about. *How do we stop the things that eat ships passing through the gates?*

“I don’t know,” she said. “Let me take a look.”



Eighteen hours into their data collection, Elvi retired to her cabin. She’d learned early on that the military discipline of the Laconians didn’t extend to forcing people to work on no rest. Duarte wanted everyone at peak efficiency. Baked into that was the idea that most people would spend a

third of their day sleeping. When Elvi climbed out of her couch and said she needed to rest before she began her analysis, Sagale didn't bat an eye.

It was a trick she'd started using to buy uninterrupted work time. She'd been able to go twenty-four hours straight since grad school. Some caffeine tablets and hot tea, and she could go forty-eight if she needed to. Not sleeping bought her eight or nine hours without Sagale's questions about results and timetables.

But the gag only worked if everyone pretended that she actually was sleeping, so for Fayez to burst in meant he had something big.

"It made a copy."

Before Elvi could ask what had made a copy and what it had made a copy of, he'd floated over to the dining table in the middle of her cabin and slapped his terminal down on it. The electromagnetics in the table kept the terminal from floating away, but the impact sent Fayeze tumbling gently toward the wall. He was an Earther, born and raised, and no matter how much time he spent in space, he never seemed to lose that instinctive expectation of gravity. As he drifted away, he yelled at the table, "Show her! Show her . . . the thing! Display last file, volumetric display."

A holographic map of what looked like a human brain appeared, floating above the table. The brain sparked with flashing synaptic paths, probably an fMRI or fNIRS scan. Elvi had seen this particular brain often enough to know it belonged to the catalyst. That it had been a woman, once upon a time. Fayeze hit the bulkhead and pushed off with one foot, rejoining her at the table.

"A lot of activity," Elvi said. "But taking her out of her pen might be causing her stress, or physical discomfort. Nothing here is all that unusual."

"That's just her being her," Fayeze said, shaking his head and tapping away at his terminal. "Look at this."

A second image appeared. It took Elvi a moment to recognize that it was a copy of the catalyst's brain activity, but without the physical structure of the brain.

"I don't understand. What's that second image from?"

"That," Fayeze said with a grin, "is coming from the object."

“What, the whole thing is mirroring her brain activity?”

“No, it’s very localized,” Fayeze said, and tinkered with the controls. The second image zoomed out for a long time until the entire object was in view. A tiny white dot appeared. “That dot is not to scale, of course. It’d be the size of Greenland at this distance. But that’s the approximate location of the image.”

He tapped some more, and the image was replaced with long strings of sensor data. “Jen started picking up some EM fluctuation in the surface of the object. I mean, in context it’s tiny, but the object is totally inert, and the sensors on this boat are as sensitive as a galactic tyrant’s money can buy.”

“Okay,” Elvi said. “What does she think we’re looking at?”

“At first it just looked like some photons bouncing around, until Jen put together this map. No one knew what we were looking at until Travon said, ‘Hey, that looks like an fMRI.’ I pulled up the catalyst’s monitor, and boom, there we were.”

Elvi didn’t mind space, but the one thing it lacked that she needed right then was the ability to collapse into a chair. She felt a rush of adrenaline that made her hands tingle and her legs go numb.

“So they’re echoing each other?”

“Like looking in a mirror.”

“Oh,” she said. Then, “Okay. That’s huge.”

“Oh, it gets huger,” Fayeze said. “All across the object we’re now seeing radiation hotspots”—he zoomed in on one, and a new rush of numerical data splashed across the image—“like this.”

He was looking at her expectantly. Waiting for her to make the connection. She didn’t think she was all that tired, but whatever flash of insight he was looking for just wasn’t there.

“I give up.”

“It took us a minute too,” Fayeze said. He pulled up a third image. Elvi recognized a ring gate. “This is the same kind of radiation that sprays out of the gate during a transit.”

Almost before the numbers hit her screen Elvi had it. “That correlated to the catalyst.”

“Yes. Catalyst brain, green diamond-thing copy, and weird distributed gate-like radiation. Three things, all with the same pattern,” Fayez said.

Elvi pulled the image of the huge green diamond back until she could see the whole thing at once. It seemed to flicker with tiny stars of light appearing and disappearing where the computer marked the radiation spikes for her.

“This thing is filled with . . . gates? Like, in the physical structure of the object itself?”

“We have a theory,” Fayez said. He was grinning like he had the first time she agreed to sleep with him. He was a goofball, but she liked what made him happy: knowing things, and her.

“It’s too early for theories,” she said.

“I know, but we have one anyway. And by we, I mean Travon first, but we’re all on board. This thing comes in contact with a protomolecule-infected mind, it makes a copy of that mind, then these gate signatures start showing up all over the object. Travon starts talking about how secure data storage works. You take the physical imprint that’s the encoded data and you scatter it. You put it in a bunch of discrete storage locations with tags and code built in so that if any portion of the storage system is lost, the rest of it knows how to rebuild the lost portion from the scattered fragments.”

Elvi, who was a lot more computer literate than Fayez, started, “That’s not exactly—”

“So then Jen says, ‘A diamond is a super-dense and incredibly regularly structured mass of carbon atoms. If you had a way to shift things around without damaging the overall structure, it’d make a great data storage material.’ ”

Elvi paused, her mind ticking through the implications.

“A way like tiny, tiny wormholes,” Elvi said.

“Right? We know that the protomolecule builders seem to have had a hive mind. Or one brain. However you want to parse that. Instantaneous nonlocalized communication across all the various nodes and entities, all across their corner of galaxy. But shit happens, even to them. Asteroids hit planets or earthquakes or volcanoes or whatever. Anything that’s stored in a

single node is lost forever when that node is destroyed. So what if what we're looking at is the backup drive for their entire civilization? Everything they ever knew, packed into a carbon lattice the size of Jupiter?"

"That," Elvi said, "is one gigantic fucking logical leap."

"Yeah." He nodded, but his grin remained undiminished. "Totally unfounded. Complete guesswork. We'll need generations of scientific studies to verify what this thing is, and then generations more to crack the code on how to dig out the data, if any such data exists."

"But Els," he said, almost breathless with excitement. "I mean, *what if?*"



Admiral Sagale floated beside his desk, looking over navigational charts on a large wall display. Elvi could see a course plotted from their current position, through the Kalma gate and into the hub, then out again through the Tecoma gate and into the next dead system on their galactic tour.

"Tell me that this system is the most important scientific discovery of all time," Sagale said, not even looking up when she floated into his office.

"It might very well—" Elvi started.

"But the big crystal flower in Naraka system was the most important discovery."

"It was an astonishing artifact," Elvi agreed. "But compared to—"

"Before that, it was the trinary star system in Charon, and the planet where it rained glass shards."

"That was more just really cool. You have to admit, it was pretty spectacular."

He turned to give her his full attention.

"I'm hearing you say—*once again*—that there are artifacts in this system that are critical to future investigation," Sagale said. He seemed weary, and vaguely disappointed. "Just like the big crystal flower."

Elvi went through it for him, and as she said it, Fayez's theory seemed more and more plausible. Sagale stared at her through half-closed eyes as

she spoke. When she told him that the diamond outside might actually house every piece of information the gate network builders had ever had, a muscle in his cheek twitched, but that was his only sign of surprise.

“That is interesting. Please write up that theory and include it with the data dump when we send everything back to Laconia during the transit. I apologize for lumping this in with the flowers and glass rain. This actually does seem impressive.”

His grudging admission stung a little, but she let it go.

“Sir,” Elvi said. “Met, this might be everything the high consul sent us on this mission to find. This might be it.”

“It is not,” Sagale said, but she pushed on.

“I strongly encourage you to send word back to the admiralty asking for more time. There are a thousand more tests we can be running while we wait for additional personnel and ships to join us. Leaving now gains us nothing.”

“And you believe you will be able to access this data if I give you that time?” Sagale said.

Elvi almost lied, hungry for the chance to stay a little while longer and learn a little bit more, but . . .

“No. I can’t say that. In fact, it will almost certainly be the work of decades, maybe centuries, to solve this problem. If it even is solvable. But this is our best shot. Nothing we find in Tecoma will be as important as this. I feel pretty safe guaranteeing that.”

“Then we’ll keep to our schedule, and see whether you’re right,” Sagale said, already turning away. “Get secured. We burn for Tecoma in eighty minutes.”

Seventy-eight minutes later, Elvi lay in her crash couch, waiting to drown.

The problem with space travel had always—from the very beginning—been the fragility of human bodies. In spite of these limitations, humanity had done itself pretty proud even before Laconia. Now they were improving by leaps and bounds. The *Falcon* could make the travel time from one system to another almost trivial by comparison to the standard science

vessels and freighters of the civilian fleet. A journey of weeks could be accomplished in days. The *Falcon* would even give most of Duarte's military ships a run for their money. But the price of all that acceleration was the full-submersion crash couch. A diabolical device that completely surrounded the human body in shock-absorbing gel, and filled the lungs with highly oxygenated fluid to make the chest cavity as incompressible as possible. For days.

"I don't understand what he wants," she said.

"He is a complicated man," Fayez said from the couch next to hers.

"It's like he doesn't want us to find anything interesting. Every time we do, he gets grumpy."

"You took your preflight meds?"

"Yes," she said, even though she wasn't sure she'd actually remembered to. They weren't critical. "I feel like he's got some other agenda he's not telling us."

"Almost certainly because he's got some other agenda he isn't telling us," Fayez said. "That can't be surprising, Els."

"It can't be something more important than this," she said. "What would be more important than this?"

"To him? I don't know. Maybe he just hates learning. Traumatized by a science fair when he was young. Ten seconds. I love you, Els."

"I love you too," she said. "I remember when juice was something they injected you with, not something you breathed. I remember I didn't like it at the time."

"Price of progress."

She was looking for something clever to say back, but then the fluid poured in the way it always did and silenced her.

Chapter Six: Alex

The *Gathering Storm* was the absolute state of the art in Laconian naval technology. The first ship of her class to be fielded, she was intended to be the prototype of an entire fleet of fast attack destroyers that could patrol the many systems of the gate network and project Laconian power to every corner of the empire. She had a keel-mounted rail gun capable of firing a three-and-a-half-kilo slug every five seconds at velocities that would punch a hole through smaller moons. She had two separate batteries of torpedo launchers with four rails on each and a fast reload system that could have another eight fish in the tubes and ready to fire less than seventy seconds after the first barrage was let loose. She was defended on all sides by a network of twelve rapid-fire point-defense cannons, and every angle of approach on the ship was covered by at least four of them. She was, as Alex's copilot Caspar liked to quip, a couple thousand tons of fuck-up-your-day stuffed into a five-kilo sack.

Nestled inside the massive cargo hold of the *Pendulum*, she was also defenseless.

Sitting in the pilot's couch, waiting for the go signal, and knowing that if someone realized they were there and started firing he wouldn't even be able to see it on radar made Alex's scalp itch. The *Pendulum* fed them her scopes, so they weren't completely blind, but she was a lumbering heavy freighter. Her threat detection was mostly so she didn't run into a stray hunk of rock. The low-res radar and grainy telescope shots he had to look at did little to calm his nerves.

"So you and the boss go way back, right?" Caspar said.

He sat second couch on the *Storm*, behind and to the right of Alex's chair. Caspar Asoau was a short, skinny kid with a motion tattoo of a running cheetah on one shoulder and the wispiest hint of a goatee. In spite of looking way too young for the job, he was a hell of a good pilot. Quick to obey an order and perfectly charming company. Alex had rapidly discovered that they had nothing in common outside of a love of flying, so other than a casual greeting, the only time they ever seemed to talk was sitting at the *Storm's* controls.

Alex didn't hold it against the kid. He remembered being a young pilot and trying his hardest to hide his nervousness by chatting up the older officers.

"Yeah. The gunny and I have known each other for a long damn time."

"See, that's funny. She's the captain of this ship, but you guys all call her Gunny. That was a rank or something, right? Back on Mars?"

"Something like that," Alex replied. "She'll always be Gunny to me."

Caspar was running the preflight as he talked, fingers tapping softly on the screens. On Alex's monitor the checklist rolled past, each system verified and reporting green before Caspar moved on to the next, with Alex giving the final okay to his work. His copilot was thorough and efficient. He took his job seriously. It kind of made Alex wish the kid were thirty years older so they could be friends.

"She give you any hint on what this op is about?" Caspar asked, then threw the weapon stores inventory to Alex's screen for his double check.

"I show two hundred slugs in the rail-gun mag, eighty fish in the pipes, all PDCs show green and full," Alex said, sliding his finger down the inventory list as he went. "And no, she's an old operator. Keepin' your mouth shut gets drilled into those guys pretty hard."

"Copy, two hundred in the rail gun, eighty torpedoes, PDCs full and greens across the board, verified," Caspar said. "Yeah, but I figured since you guys were friends, maybe she gave you some kinda heads-up."

"She did not. And I wouldn't ask. We'll know when we need to know, and that's good enough for me," Alex said, then, with the preflight complete, spun his couch around to face Caspar. "It's okay to be nervous."

Caspar nodded. He didn't look embarrassed at all to be discussing his fear. Alex felt another little rush of affection for him. He was a good kid. Alex hoped he'd make it through to the other side of the Laconia business, but the odds on that were pretty short for all of them.

"I knew a guy on Pallas," Caspar said. "It wasn't like we were tight. We never seriously dated or anything. But when I'd go through the station on cargo runs, we'd hook up. Ben Yi. I liked him." A tear formed at the corner of his eye and then failed to be pulled down his cheek in the gentle quartering burn of the *Pendulum's* drive.

"He didn't make the evacuation?"

"Nope," Caspar said, then wiped his eyes. "They say that the *Tempest* turned the station into rubble so fast no one would even have seen the actual attack coming. I guess, if you have to go, that's not the worst."

"I'm sorry," Alex said. Everyone on the *Storm* had their reason to hate the Laconians. Everyone had a story. The only answer for most of them was *I'm sorry*. It felt pretty limp.

"If this op gets blown up," Caspar said, turning his attention back to his screens and going through his checklists one more time, "I want you to know. You don't have to worry about me. If that big bastard *Tempest* comes after us, the only thing I'll be thinking is how can I make a hole in it."

"I know, man," Alex said, then patted the kid's knee before turning around. "No doubts."

"Kamal?" said Bobbie's voice in his ear, where the comm bud was inserted. Bobbie only called him Kamal when they were on an op and other ears were listening. It meant go time.

"Kamal copies from the flight deck, Cap," he replied, sitting up straight in his couch. From the hiss of the gimbals behind him, he knew Caspar was doing the same. Even the crash couches on the *Storm* sounded slick.

"I need a go, no-go for deployment," Bobbie said. "*Pendulum* cuts us loose on your word."

"We are all greens up here on the flight deck, go on your command."

"Outstanding," Bobbie said. "Okay, kids, word came down, and here's the op. Listen close, because I don't have time to repeat myself."



Alex hated flying ballistic. No drive meant he had maneuvering thrusters at most. No active sensors was like piloting with his eyes half-closed.

The *Storm* had a tiny radar profile for such a large ship. Something about the hull materials just absorbed or bounced off at an angle almost any radar that hit it. She could also dump all her waste heat into internal heat sinks for several hours and run liquid hydrogen through capillaries in her skin, keeping the hull temperature pretty close to zero. Unless someone was really looking for her, she'd just show up as a slightly warmer spot in space with a radar profile not much bigger than a bunk bed. Alex could remember when a destroyer with similar technology had killed his old ship the *Canterbury*. How terrifying it had been when a gunship seemed to materialize out of the dark of space and started firing torpedoes. Apparently that came standard now. Still, he could relate to what their intended targets were about to experience.

"One minute," Caspar said. There was no time for sympathy.

"Copy that, one minute," Alex replied, then switched channels over to Bobbie. "Cap, we're go in sixty seconds. Your team ready?"

"Kids are belted in and ready for a roller-coaster ride," she replied.

"Copy that," Alex said, then watched the countdown timer on his screen drop toward zero. "Three . . . two . . . one . . . mark."

"Mark," Caspar said, and the *Storm* flared to life around them. The screens switched to active sensors and telescope shots of their target: a fat Transport Union freighter, escorted by two Laconian frigates. Behind the freighter lay Jupiter's vast bulk.

And that was, according to Bobbie's pre-mission brief, the reason for all the secrecy beforehand. Whether or not they could make their attack run depended on the resistance partisans on the freighter's crew getting the signal out on the ship's course and date of entry into the Sol system, all while working around a Laconian political officer who had been stashed on board. Because for the attack to work, it had to all happen while Jupiter

blocked line of sight to Earth and the *Magnetar*-class battleship parked there.

It was a lot of moving parts, any one of which could have failed out at a moment's notice, and launching the attack meant burning some spies in the union. If things hadn't panned out, the *Storm* would have just climbed back into her berth on the *Pendulum* and flown away, her crew none the wiser and the spies on the freighter undiscovered.

But the prize was worth the risk. A ship directly from Laconia with highly sensitive cargo attached to some secret Laconian project and replacement parts for the *Tempest* itself. Hopefully also some of the weird fuel pellets the Laconian ships used that couldn't be manufactured anywhere else, and which the *Storm* was getting dangerously low on. Ammunition for the *Storm*'s weapons and for the power armor suits Bobbie's team wore. Taking the freighter meant keeping the underground's best weapon armed and operational, possibly for years.

And—best of all—the political officer. Taking them alive would be a huge intelligence win.

If Alex could take care of two escort frigates and deliver Bobbie's dropship to the freighter.

"They've spotted us," Caspar said. No surprise there. With the *Storm* pinging away with active radar, she was lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Jammers on," Alex said, and the *Storm* drowned the little fleet in static, cutting them off from each other and from any outside help. The three ships didn't change course, apparently deciding the smartest move was to try to get around Jupiter. It was their best strategy. Alex would have done the same.

Which was why he'd prepared for it.

"Cap, launching you now. Make sure you come back," Alex said, and hit the button that hurled the strike team's high-speed breaching pod at the freighter. Bobbie and her boarding party throwing themselves at the enemy ship like pirates. While the pod burned hard toward the Transport Union ship, Alex fired two precisely angled shots from the rail gun past it and through the freighter's drive cone. The shots covered the thousands of

kilometers separating the ships in a handful of seconds, and the freighter's drive winked out.

"Get ready, they'll be coming for us now," Alex told Caspar, and almost as if on cue the *Storm* buzzed an angry target lock warning at them.

"PDCs hot," Caspar said. Alex was surprised at how calm his tone was. For all the sadness and fear the kid had expressed in the moments before the fight, now that the battle was on, he'd become almost machine-like. "Ready for incoming. Tubes two and four are locked."

"We should close a bit, cut off their options," Alex said. The two frigates were not a trivial threat, but the *Storm* massively outclassed them in tonnage and firepower, and he didn't worry too much about flying straight at them fangs out and trying to end the fight quickly.

"Copy that, one and three loaded and locked if we need them."

Acceleration pressed Alex back into his couch as he closed the gap. In the distance, Bobbie's pod had reached the crippled freighter and was firing grapples to lock the two ships together. The frigates couldn't talk to each other, but their crews had some emergency plans already on the books, because they split up and flew away from the freighter in opposite directions as if they'd coordinated the maneuver.

"They're trying to get on both sides of us," Alex said, but Caspar was already on it. He was tasking half their PDCs with one ship and half with the other. Didn't matter if they came from both directions at once, the *Storm*'s flak screen could handle it.

Down at the freighter, Bobbie's pod suddenly flared to life in a massive deceleration burn. Alex had crippled the freighter's drive, but the ship was still hurtling along with whatever velocity it'd had before the engine went out. Bobbie's pod was programmed to push back against that speed on a vector that would keep the freighter safely hidden behind Jupiter. Part boarding pod, part secondary, aftermarket temporary braking thruster.

"We're on board," Bobbie said, her voice phase shifted into a robotic screech as it cut through the static from their jamming.

"We have fast movers," Caspar said at the same moment the alerts showed up on Alex's threat board. The two frigates unloaded their tubes.

Alex ignored them, waiting for the missiles to get into PDC range so the *Storm* could chew them up.

“Let’s go ahead and start shooting back,” Alex said, and a moment later the *Storm* shuddered as if with pleasure as she fired four torpedoes of her own.

Before the rapidly closing missiles could even pass each other, two of the incoming torpedoes veered off in a wide turn.

“Worry about the two that are still coming at us,” Alex said to Caspar, and then stopped thinking about that. The other two Laconian torpedoes were now winging in a wide arc toward the freighter. And the two frigates had also flipped and started a hard burn back toward their former charge.

They hadn’t been able to draw the *Storm* away or shoot it down. Their plan B appeared to be scuttling the freighter. Bloodthirsty, but not unexpected. Alex threw the throttle down to catch the swiftly slowing freighter as quickly as possible, shifting from attacking their prey to protecting it. For a moment, everything was falling toward a central point in space defined by the crippled ship. The *Storm*, eight torpedoes on wide looping courses to find their targets, the two frigates burning back. On the threat board, it looked like the freighter had turned into a black hole, and its gravity was sucking everything, large and small, into its event horizon. In its way, it was beautiful.

Then everyone was shooting.

Caspar’s PDCs cut down all four of the Laconian torpedoes in an instant, even as two of the *Storm*’s impacted on the nose of one of the frigates and the plasma warheads turned the front half of the ship into glowing slag. The other frigate spun and slewed sideways and shot down the torpedoes chasing it, then continued its rotation and gave the freighter and Bobbie’s attached breaching pod a full broadside from its PDC array. The freighter was riddled with holes, and plumes of escaping atmosphere jetted out, looking a bloody pink in the reddish light coming off Jupiter. Or maybe there was some actual blood mixed in there. As many holes as the freighter had taken, it defied belief that no one on board had been hit.

“Splash that one,” Alex ordered, but Caspar was already saying, “I got that motherfucker.”

The frigate killed its rotation with a massive blast from its maneuvering thrusters, then kicked on its drive. Even though it only slowed down, it seemed to leap straight at the approaching *Storm*. The two ships passed at high speed, every PDC blazing.

The much smaller frigate was hit by half a dozen of the *Storm*’s cannons all at once, and seemed to just come apart into a cloud of chaff as it passed by. But it unleashed a barrage of its own before it died that cut along the *Storm*’s flank.

Suddenly the ship was a cacophony of alarms, sirens, and alerts from the control panel.

“Damage!” Alex yelled over the din. The noise was getting gradually quieter, which meant at least the flight deck was in the process of losing its atmosphere. He grabbed his helmet from under his couch and locked it into place. He could see Caspar doing the same.

“Damage!” he yelled again, but heard only static on his suit’s speakers. He banged his fist on the side of the helmet in frustration, then spun around. Caspar was pointing at his mouth and ears, signaling that his suit radio seemed not to be working either.

Alex flipped through the pages of damage reports popping up on his screen and found the culprit. A PDC round had cut through the computer nexus that controlled all intraship and intership communications, and for whatever reason the backup wasn’t taking over. Maybe it was fucked too. It looked like there were a lot of flashing red lights on the engineering panel.

But the *Storm* would heal the hull breaches, just like it always did. And damage control teams were already on the move to bring their other systems back online. The *Storm* would survive, Alex had no doubt.

But the freighter with Bobbie and her strike team on it was tumbling through space, out of control and empty of atmosphere, and with the radio down, there was no way for him to know if anyone on it was still alive.

Chapter Seven: Bobbie

C ap, launching you now. Make sure you come back,” Alex said. The breaching pod shook as the *Storm* cut it loose. The drive came on a moment later, slamming Bobbie back into her couch and leaving her with nothing to do while the battle raged around her.

The *Storm*’s breaching pod was a little more high-tech than the Martian version Bobbie had trained on, but there was only so much you could do with something so simple. The basic concept was a small troop carrier with an engine on one end and an airlock that could blow holes into enemy ships on the other. The interior was a close-walled metal box fitted with crash couches. The “flying coffin” joke Marines had been making for centuries would have made perfect sense even to the ancient soldiers who rolled into battle in armored personnel carriers with wheels: If you die before you get to the fight, you’re already boxed up for eternal rest.

People always claimed that waiting for the fight was the hardest part of fighting. Bobbie had said it herself, as a younger woman. When the fight is coming, when it’s inevitable, let’s just fucking get to it. Once the battle starts, things happen too fast to worry about. The fear is all instinctual, not intellectual. Somehow, that used to feel better.

Age had changed that. Bobbie had learned to see the quiet moment before the fight as a blessing. A gift. Very few people who were headed toward death even knew it was happening, much less had time to sit and reflect on their life. What they’d done that mattered. Whether it would be a good death.

Bobbie’s father had already been a legendary Marine in the MMC before she was born. When his family started to grow, he left the front lines

and became an even more legendary training sergeant. An entire generation had learned what it meant to be a Martian Marine under Sergeant Major Draper at Hecate base. A giant of a man, with a face that looked like it had been cut from flint, he had always seemed invincible. An immutable fact of nature, like the avatar of Olympus Mons, come to life and walking among the mortals.

When he'd died, he'd been a tiny shriveled husk. Lying in his bed, hooked to the tubes and monitors that only prolonged the inevitable, he'd held her hand and said, "I'm ready. I've done this a dozen times before."

She hadn't understood at the time, but now she thought he was talking about sitting right where she was now. In the transport, heading toward battle, examining his life as he rushed toward its possible end. Who am I? Did the things I accomplished matter? Will I leave the universe a better place than I found it? If I don't come back, what are my regrets? What are my victories?

It was a thing maybe only a warrior could understand. Only those who made the choice to run toward the fire, instead of away from it. That made it feel sacred to her. "This far, and no farther," she whispered. Her litany to the tyrants and bullies and despots. *This far, and no farther. If my life means anything after I'm gone, she thought, I hope it meant that.*

"What's that, boss?" Jillian asked. Her number two was strapped into the crash couch directly across the pod from her.

"Just talking to myself," Bobbie said. Then she started to sing. "Anything you can do I can do better. I can do anything better than you."

"Never heard that one," Jillian said, then sang along, trying to catch the tune. "That new? Sounds Belter."

Bobbie laughed. "No idea. My mother used to sing it. My brothers were older, and I hated losing to them at anything. I'd burst into tears when they'd win, and she'd sing that song to me. Just one of those things you pick up when you're a kid and never put back down."

"I like it," Jillian said, then closed her eyes and started mumbling to herself. It looked like she was praying. Bobbie knew she wasn't. She was running through the mission in her mind, over and over. *Two meters*

through the breached hull to the first junction. Turn left. Twelve meters to the engineering hatch. Breach and clear. Three meters to the right is the master console. The other warrior's litany.

There are people I love. There are people who have loved me. I fought for what I believed, protected those I could, and stood my ground against the encroaching darkness.

Good enough.

The pod screeched a short-lived collision alarm at them. The *Storm* had sent her pair of rail-gun shots past the hull close enough that Bobbie could have reached out and swatted them as they went by.

"Brace for impact," she said, using her sergeant voice. As forceful as it could be without quite being a shout. This was her job now. To seem an immutable fact of nature. The avatar of Olympus Mons come to life and striding through the battlefield. God of war now. Shriveled husk later. Maybe. If she wasn't lucky.

All around her, her squad of six handpicked strike team members locked and inflated their couches. All of them wore Laconian Marine power armor, though the blue color scheme had been repainted black. They were, as her father would have said, the pick of the litter. Jillian from Freehold and five of the Belters.

The Belters were old-school OPA, grizzled veterans of the endless insurgent war with the inner planets before Laconia came and made that irrelevant. Old men and women well practiced in conflict. Her total force on the *Storm* numbered forty, and included warriors from nearly every one of the old factions. But for a high-speed snatch-and-grab boarding action, you couldn't find better fighters than Belters.

"Battle mode," Bobbie said, and her armor woke up, humming with impatience for the fight. The HUD flashed an ammunition inventory at her, then minimized it into one corner of her field of view. A wireframe layout of the interior of the freighter they were about to board appeared and moved to a different corner. The list of six names and the green dot showing they were alive and undamaged scrolled down the left side of her view and

remained. Getting everyone back with a green dot instead of a black one was always a mission priority, even if it was never the top.

A flashing message appeared in the center of her field of view: FREE FIRE AUTHORIZATION.

“Free fire, alpha team, Captain Roberta Draper,” she said. Through the suit radio she heard the distant clicks as six suits of armor activated their weapons. She’d never needed to do that as a fire team sergeant back in her Martian Marine Corps days. The Corps issued weapons to people and assumed they would use them correctly and according to their training. The Laconians were much more top-down. Winston Duarte had founded Laconia by betraying Mars and looting the navy. It wasn’t a great surprise that distrust of the people in his chain of command was institutional.

The HUD flashed a new diagram at her. The relative position of the breaching pod and the freighter, along with a rapidly decreasing distance to target.

“Ready,” she growled at her team. “Go in five!”

The breaching pod shuddered as it fired grapples and grabbed the freighter. There was a quick sideways jerk, and then the two ships slammed together. The impact with the freighter was significant, but wrapped as she was in the soft gel interior of her high-tech armor and resting on the inflated padding of her crash couch, it just felt like a sudden pressure on her chest that vanished almost instantly as the pod lost its acceleration and went into free fall. That was a good sign. It meant Alex had hit his target with the rail-gun shots, and the freighter was on the drift.

“Get ready for the burn!” she said, the last word almost lost in the sudden roar of the pod firing its massive braking thrusters to keep the freighter hidden behind Jupiter. Her couch automatically unlocked and swung the other direction, putting her back to the thrust. A new pressure mounted in her chest as the g forces piled on.

When the burn started to ease up, she yelled, “Go go go,” but it wasn’t really necessary. Her fire team was up and out of their couches the second the thrust stopped. Jillian hit the wall panel next to the airlock and extended the breaching sleeve. It made an airtight seal with the freighter, the deck

vibrating with the impact. Two seconds later, shaped charges inside the sleeve cut a hole through both hulls of the Transport Union freighter, and the airlock door slid open.

Jillian was inside first, dropping through the glowing red hole into the freighter. She hit the bulkhead at the first corridor she reached and launched herself to the left, heading toward engineering. Hernandez and Orm followed her.

“We’re on board,” Bobbie said on the command channel, back to Alex on the *Storm*. Their Laconian gear was modulating the signal to match the jamming, which would hopefully let their radio cut through, but Bobbie wasn’t entirely confident in the system. It didn’t really matter yet. Alex would be busy fighting the two frigates no matter what her team was doing. Any messages back and forth before the *Storm* had secured the freighter’s flight-space were perfunctory.

She followed into the breach, the other three members of the strike team close behind her. When Bobbie hit the corridor wall, she turned right, toward the command deck. The hallway they were in was actually the central lift of the ship, and closed hatches marked each deck they passed. Most of them would lead to cargo space. A few to the crew’s living quarters. One would lead to the ops deck, and that was the only one Bobbie cared about.

Jillian and her team would take control of the drive and life support down in engineering. Bobbie would take the ops deck and cut off communication with the outside world. If the political officer wasn’t in ops when she arrived, it wouldn’t matter. They’d control the ship and search at their leisure. For values of *leisure* up to maybe five or ten whole minutes.

“Watch those hatches,” she told her team as she skimmed along the bulkhead toward ops. It felt redundant. Their suits were scanning every square centimeter around them for heat, radiation, even the unique electromagnetic signature generated by a beating human heart. It was pretty tough to get the drop on someone wearing Laconian armor. But saying something reminded the team you were there, that you were in charge, and that keeping everyone safe was on your mind.

“Copy that,” Takeshi said. “Most of these aren’t warm. Guessing the cargo is in vacuum.”

“Guy in a vac suit coming at us from behind is low probability,” she agreed, “but low ain’t zero.”

Bobbie’s HUD flashed an overlay over a door one deck ahead. “That one,” she said, and her team fanned out and took positions around it. In the microgravity of the disabled freighter, they stood on bulkheads around the hatch, weapons ready. No matter what the orientation of the ship was under thrust, for purposes of the breach the ops deck was down.

“Remember,” Bobbie said, “there are potential friendlies in there.”

As she said it, a rotating 3-D profile of two women appeared on all their HUDs.

“Protect them first, take prisoners second. Copy?”

There came a rumble of assent. Bobbie slapped the wall panel next to the hatch, and her armor ran the breaching protocol that cut through the electronic security in a fraction of a second. The hatch slid open.

After that, everyone was shooting.

It was a fact of the human brain in close quarters combat that while everything was generally happening all at once, the mind insisted on trying to stitch it into a linear narrative when remembering it later.

In the moment, Bobbie threw herself through the hatch and into the ops deck, her team at her back. Incoming bullets lit up her HUD with bright trails so she’d know the direction of fire. Some of the bullets hit her, or her team. The armor thought the odds of taking real damage were trivial, and ignored it. Seven people in the compartment, wearing light protective armor. Her suit tagged one as a friendly. One of the two resistance partisans. Five with guns shooting at her. One doing his best to hide behind a crash couch. The political officer, if she had to guess.

Her arm moved without her thinking about it, and the gun mounted at her wrist spun up briefly, cutting two of the armed crew in half. The other three were turning into red spray and body parts under the barrage of fire from her team. The whole fight couldn’t have lasted more than two seconds,

though when she remembered it later and her brain turned it into a narrative, it would seem much longer.

Less than thirty seconds after she'd opened the hatch, two of her strike team were protectively flanking the partisan, and Takeshi had the political officer shoved up against a bulkhead and was zip-tying his hands. Bobbie examined the deck. No hull breaches, her armor assured her. The Laconian antipersonnel rounds for shipboard use were pretty good tech. Lethal against lightly armored opponents, but they just fragmented into powder when they hit bulkheads.

"Ops is ours," Bobbie said.

"Engineering is ours," Jillian immediately replied. "We have one of the two spies. You got the other?"

"Copy. Our people are secure, and we have the package."

"Oh goody," Jillian said. "Can't wait to see his face when he realizes his life just went down the recycler."

"Jillian, escort the friendly up here," Bobbie said. "Let's get everyone into emergency suits and prep them for the ride over to the *Storm*. The rest of you, fan out and get an eyeball inventory. When the *Storm* arrives we're going to want to take all the best stuff with us, and we won't have much time. Get to it."

"Copy that," Jillian said.

"I think we win," Bobbie said to Takeshi. He grinned back at her.

"Easy peas—" he started to say and then blew apart.

Bobbie knew intellectually that they must have taken a raking pass from someone's PDCs. But from inside the ship it looked like the bulkheads on either side of the compartment decided to explode in several dozen places all at once. The room was full of glowing shrapnel bouncing off walls and panels, and the gray smoke of vaporized metal. Takeshi was a tangle of technology-wrapped body parts floating in a nebula of blood globes.

It didn't look like anyone else was directly hit, but before Bobbie could even start to issue an order, the air in the room was just *gone*. Too many holes on both sides. One moment they were in a pressurized cabin, the next

they were in vacuum. It happened so fast it barely ruffled the political officer's Laconian blue suit jacket.

"Get them in suits!" she yelled, but it was already too late. She was a Martian. She'd started doing vacuum drills in grade school. Fifteen seconds and you lose consciousness. Anything that you needed to do had to happen in that first fifteen seconds or it didn't happen at all. Any vacuum suit that is more than fifteen seconds away is a lifetime away.

All she could do was watch the partisan who'd helped them take the ship gasp out a cloud of mist that was her very last breath ever. The political officer, their whole reason for coming, died a moment later with a look of profound puzzlement on his face. A thousand facts and secrets that could have meant the difference between the underground thriving and all of them dying in a gulag evaporated as the man's cells gave up.

Every panel on the ops deck that still worked was flashing red. The ship was dead too.

"*Storm*, this is strike team," Bobbie said, opening the command channel. She heard only dead air and the faint hiss of background radiation. "*Storm*, come in."

Nothing.

"Shit," Jillian said. She came into the ops deck dragging their dead ally from the engineering deck with her. "Did we lose the *Storm* too?"

"Chama," Bobbie said, pointing at one of her people. "Get outside and see if you can spot the *Storm*. Maybe line-of-sight comms will work. The rest of you, mission hasn't changed. Get me that inventory. Get it ready for rapid transfer once we find the ship."

"Or," Jillian said, "get ready to fall into Jupiter and die because we're way under orbital speed now and don't have an engine."

"Or that," Bobbie agreed, surprised at how much she wanted to push across the room and punch Jillian in the face. "But until we do, we'll stay on mission. Get the fuck out of here and make yourself useful packing cargo."

On the radio, one of Jillian's squad mates said, "Lots of stuff here, boss. Ammo, fuel, it's the mother lode. Primary mission is fucked, but secondary

is a win.”

“A moral victory, I guess,” Bobbie sighed.

“You know who talks about moral victories?” Jillian asked as she floated out of the room. “The team that lost.”

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Chapter Eight: Naomi

Communication was a problem.

The ring gates created interference that made trading messages across them difficult and tightbeam between systems essentially impossible. Laconia controlled the repeaters on either side of the gates, and Medina Station in the center of everything, the guard at the great crossroads of the empire. They had eyes and ears in every system and pattern-matching algorithms combing through every frequency on the spectrum. Saba had been able to carve out a few holes here and there—tightbeam antennas with outdated or compromised security code that could drop incoming records out of the logs, newsfeeds that could be altered to carry messages hidden in the flux of the image signal. The same old tricks the OPA had been using since before either she or Saba had been born, but updated for the new circumstances. The danger was twofold: first that Laconian forces would intercept and understand their messages, and second that they'd track the signal back to its origin.

The first problem wasn't trivial, but there were ways of making it difficult. Self-scrambling encryption, interference signatures, context-shifting linguistic encoding. Nothing was perfect, and even with the forensic work that Bobbie and her crew had done on the *Gathering Storm*, the full extent of Laconian military signal processing was three parts guesswork and one part hope for the underground. But Naomi was confident enough in it that she didn't lose sleep.

The second problem—not having the signal traced back—was easier because of the bottles.

Naomi had never actually seen an ocean except through a camera, but language held on to things that were long gone. Tight-beams still had “lines” even though the physical wire that *line* referred to had been light for generations. Sol was still “the sun” even though there were thirteen hundred more like it, shining down on human heads. *Message in a bottle* held a whole host of nuances and expectations for Earthers that she could only inherit thirdhand—through jokes and cartoons and entertainment feeds. The actual bottles she used were the torpedoes that she kept in her container, each of them carrying a burst transmitter and an explosive payload large enough to turn the equipment into bright dust. She’d written the code herself, and she knew it was solid.

To get information in *from* Saba and the underground, all she had to do was listen. It was all there, screaming through the void and amplified on the networks, since she knew which feeds to look at. The gossip and the newsfeeds and the empty, fluting static where the notes had been tucked in. Even Laconian propaganda. Even, sometimes, the rebroadcast messages Duarte made Jim send out to her.

No matter what ship she was on, the information came in, passive and untraceable. She fed it into the local system in her couch and her hand terminal—more raw information than she could have read in a lifetime, and updating constantly. And the system filtered out the reports and information for her to work from.

She made her analysis, her recommendations, her arguments for what the forces opposing these new inners should do and how. And when she was ready—when time was short or she felt like she’d come to a natural break point—she would transfer the information into one of the missiles and signal her shipboard contact. Once the missile was dropped out an airlock, her code would kick in.

A randomized direction, a randomized number of turn-and-burns, a randomized length and power of thrust, and a randomized time before delivery. Sometimes she’d drop it off a day or two before she left the system, or after the shell-ship she’d come in on had moved on. Sometimes

she wouldn't. Patterns were the enemy, even patterns that were meant to cover her tracks.

When the time came, the bottle screamed out everything she'd told it in a single burst. Somewhere in the system, Saba would have an antenna listening just the way she did. Quietly, passively, undetectably. It was an act of cosmic ventriloquism, and it was how the underground passed information back and forth—slowly and imperfectly—while the enemy could send its own messages anywhere it chose to at the speed of light.

That was what being the underdog meant.

The hardest part was the time between sending the bottle out and when it detonated. Hours or days or, rarely, weeks of second-guessing herself. Poring over her own plans and suggestions, certain that she'd made a mistake she couldn't stop before it rippled out through the systems. Listening to all the new information coming in that would have changed one aspect or another of what she'd already said and couldn't take back.

It was what she was doing now.

Her box had left the *Mosley* for another ship, almost its twin, called the *Bhikaji Cama*. They were on a quarter-g burn for Auberon with mining equipment salvaged on the cheap from Mars. The hum of the drives was familiar enough by now that she didn't hear it unless they were making some adjustment to speed or trajectory, and then it was only when the vibrations hit a harmonic and made something ring. The rations she'd gotten as a farewell gift from the *Mosley* were Earth-made. Rice and vegetable protein and curry sauce that might almost have been Belter food, except for the added raisins. She set her system to local, not tying into the *Cama's* computers at all unless there was something she could only get there. She had music—soft mambo cereseano like she'd danced to when she was a girl—and as many newsfeeds as she could stand. She'd arranged her space so that there was room to stretch and exercise, and she made herself keep to a schedule religiously, pushing herself to a sweat twice a day. She slept to schedule too, dimming the lights for eight hours, no more and no less, never sleeping in. Never taking naps. Routine was what kept the darkness at bay, when anything did.

And in between, she studied her data again and waited for her most recent bottle to break.

The monitor showed a schematic of Bara Gaon Complex with both the existing settlement and the newly proposed expansion. Bara Gaon was one of the most successful of the new human systems, with three planets already boasting self-sustaining cities, an independent mining cooperative surveying a particularly rich asteroid belt, and bases on two moons of the system's only gas giant. The map of humanity's presence in the system looked like the first growth of a leaf: pale, elegant, thin, and promising a greater strength still to come. The initial waves had been led by an agricultural corporation based on Ganymede and a progressive Muslim community out of the Greater Terai Shared Interest Zone. The two had managed a functional partnership that drew five more waves of settlement in under two decades.

It was a fraction of Sol system, but it wouldn't be for long. The expansion plan had been trapped in negotiations for years before Laconia had rolled through, and now Duarte's will was kicking it forward.

Five new cities had been proposed, two each on the planets nearer to their sun, one on the cooler outlier. A high-end sensor network that would be able to map the system over the course of the next six years. Eighteen new exploratory missions. An increased civil infrastructure rolled out in two-year increments, with an emphasis on scientific and cultural support. If it worked, Bara Gaon would eclipse Sol system in under a century. It was as ambitious as any plan Naomi had ever seen, and it might even be possible.

That ambition was also the underground's best hope. *Her* best hope.

She flicked through the lists of project proposals. She'd been over all of them a hundred times. Every phase had its own requirements. The sensor network alone was slated to hire a hundred and thirty engineers and subject specialists. And while the network's primary function was mapping, it didn't take a genius to see its potential as system surveillance. It would make the underground's covert operations in Bara Gaon Complex easier if between 10 and 20 percent of those engineers and specialists also answered to Saba.

She'd put together her own map of the project. Not impeding the expansion, but taking control of it from within. The Personnel Directorate of Bara Gaon was her first target. They were already putting out requests for applications, beefing up the bureaucracy that would be evaluating new hires. Naomi had identified seven critical positions and built candidate profiles that Saba could use to flood the job openings with his allies. It was important that the people not be false identities, but actual people with real histories and qualifications. If they managed to get two of the seven positions now, it would be enough to give them an edge on later ones. Three, and they'd be able to cover their own tracks well enough that prying them out would be difficult even if Laconia became suspicious. Five, and Saba would effectively control the Bara Gaon Complex expansion.

She'd also identified problem issues. The chief administrator of Zehanat province on Bara Gaon-6—the planet they called Al-Halub—was a close friend of Carrie Fisk and openly supportive of Laconian rule. It was important that the projects based there be deprioritized and his personal influence undermined. Labor unions on the gas giant's moons had ties to an old inner planets hate group and still fought against everything the Transport Union did with the zeal of the self-proclaimed oppressed. Saba would need to create other allies there. The local government had a communitarian faction that was growing more vocal about armed resistance against Laconia that would bring more scrutiny without gaining any useful ground if it wasn't reined in.

You can't fight a shooting war armed with paper clips, Bobbie said in Naomi's imagination.

"Watch me," Naomi answered. Her voice echoed with the music in the container. A pinch of annoyance bothered her. She closed down her files and pushed the monitor aside. In the time since she'd left Sol system, she'd hoped that their last conversation would have lost some of its power, but like a splinter under her skin, it bit a little every time she touched it.

When two people get in a fight, and only one has a gun and the will to use it? That's a short damned fight.

Only it wasn't Bobbie's voice that said it this time. It was Amos'. A few decades flying the same ship together had built little versions of her family in her head. Made some part of them a part of her, even when she didn't particularly want them to be. Even when the little mirrors of them only told her that their conversation wasn't finished.

She hauled herself up out of the couch, the gimbals hissing as she shifted. She turned the music to a brighter selection with a clearer, faster beat. Something to push her. It was early in her day for a workout, but she needed to move. As if working the long muscles of her arms and legs and back could relieve a tension between her and people not present.

"It's never a short fight," she said as she hooked resistance bands to the top of her container. The fasteners had been painted gray when she'd first stepped into her little box. They were bright raw steel now. "Last time I fought it, it was generations old before I even stepped in the ring. We can't shoot our way to peace."

Peace isn't the only good victory condition. How about just shooting our way to freedom or justice?

Naomi sank her feet into the floor loops, braced herself, locked the bands in place, and pulled. It was hard work. It hurt a little, but hurting a little was the point. The voice in her imagination wasn't Amos' now, but Jim's.

That's the thing about autocracy. It looks pretty decent while it still looks pretty decent. Survivable, anyway. And it keeps looking like that right up until it doesn't. That's how you find out it's too late.

"I am fighting," she said, then grunted and pulled down hard again. "The quiet work's still a fight. It's a better one. It's one we can win."

Not in our lifetimes, Bobbie said. And that was the point, really. That was the deep, true thought that Naomi was working her own way through with all the beloved voices in her head.

Sweat was pooling at her hairline, the quarter g not quite enough to pull it down her face. Her arms were trembling with every pull. She made herself go slowly, watching her form. It made the work harder, which she

liked. And it made her less likely to injure herself, which was critical. Slow, careful, focused. Avoiding damage.

Feels like it ought to be a metaphor for something, Jim's voice said, and she laughed at his joke.

Growing older was a falling away of everything that didn't matter. And a deepening appreciation of all the parts that were important enough to stay.

She had unhooked the bands and started repositioning them to work her back when the alert came, chirping on her couch monitor and her hand terminal at the same moment. She wound the bands up and put them away. She'd finish later. The monitor had a single notification up. The *Cama* had picked up an encrypted message that matched her confirmation signature. Out in the depths below Auberón's ecliptic, the bottle had broken and its data had all spilled out. She grabbed a copy out of the ship buffer and had her system run a comparison. There would be some degradation. There always was. But there was also repetition in the signal and checksums along the way. It would take terrible luck or a very high-radiation event to swamp her work past the point of recovery. She only made sure because it was the right thing.

All the files and reports opened from the copy as they had from the original files. The system's final verdict popped up with a click like someone snapping their fingers. NO UNRECOVERABLE LOSS.

So that was done. Another round of analysis, a new set of orders and recommendations released to the wild. She had, of course, already started on the next one. She enjoyed the sense of accomplishment all the same.

She shifted to the newsfeeds, purging the unflagged copies local to her couch and replacing them again like dipping a cup into a fountain that never ran dry. Tapping her finger against the screen, she paged through the items the system thought most likely to pertain to her. A minor election on Sanaang had gone unexpectedly to the second-ranked candidate, a move she had recommended in her bottle before last. A code farm on Mars had partnered with Medina Station to build a new security infrastructure, which wasn't what she'd wanted, but had been on her list of acceptable fallbacks.

A security alert had gone out in Sol system. A red flag, but without the details to say what it was.

Except that whatever it turned out to be, she knew what it was. Bobbie's war. The one with guns.

Somewhere out there, far enough away that even lightspeed meant hours, Bobbie and Alex were risking their lives. Maybe losing them. There was nothing she could do. Frustration washed over her. Or maybe she just became aware of what was always there.

She'd chosen her role. She'd picked her place, helped with designing the little dried shell-game pea that she lived in. There had been a dozen other ways she could have worked with the underground. Thousands of ways she could have made a new life without them. She was here because she had chosen to be here. The container had felt like solitude, not isolation. A refuge where she could wait for the mud in her heart to settle and her mind to become clear.

It had seemed like a good plan at the time. It had seemed to work. Now, her fingertips hovering over the security alert, she wasn't sure it did anymore.

With a tap like she was killing an insect, she shut the newsfeeds. Her data analysis was still up behind it, cheerfully reporting NO UNRECOVERABLE LOSS.

"Seems like that should be a metaphor for something," she said, and imagined Jim's laughter beside her. Trading the same joke back and forth between them like they had in better days.

Then, a moment later, "God damn, but I have to get out of this fucking box."

Chapter Nine: Teresa

Carrie Fisk was the president of the Association of Worlds. It was, Teresa knew, a measure of how important she was that President Fisk was allowed to meet with her father over breakfast. Teresa sat at her father's right at the little table, and Fisk sat opposite him, so Teresa felt a little like she was watching table tennis listening to them talk.

"A trade compact between Auberon and the five-world group does have some real advantages," Fisk said. "By picking a handful of systems to really focus on, we can make progress quickly. Auberon or Bara Gaon can bring another three to five systems up to self-sufficiency in seven to ten years, then each of those systems can take on clients. The geometric growth model brings all the systems up much faster than having every individual colony be an equal priority."

Her father nodded slowly. It was a gesture she recognized. He glanced over to her and raised an eyebrow. A little gesture of complicity. Teresa could feel Fisk squirming a little. The woman was so anxious for her father's approval it was a little embarrassing. Teresa shrugged. Just a few millimeters of movement that meant *Do you want me to ask?* Her father nodded.

"What about corruption?" Teresa said.

Fisk laughed. "Auberon's reputation precedes it. Governor Rittenaur assures me that it's under control. There were a few bad apples, but that's to be expected in an unregulated colony. Now that it's under Laconian supervision, the problem is being addressed."

Teresa nodded, then leaned back to see how her father responded. He was slower. Teresa took another bite of her eggs. The yolk was runny, the

way she liked, and she sopped it up with a bit of toast. Kelly—her father’s personal valet—brought Fisk another coffee. When her father sighed, the defeat was clear in Fisk’s eyes. Just for a moment, and then covered over, but Teresa had seen it.

“The architecture is good,” he said. “I’m not certain these five are the right worlds to lead with. Let me review this and get back to you next week.”

“Yes, sir,” Fisk said. “Of course.”

After the breakfast meeting was done, Fisk left and Teresa stayed. As Kelly cleared away the dishes, her father stood, stretched, and turned to her.

“What did you notice?” he asked.

“She was nervous,” Teresa said.

“She always is,” her father said. “That’s part of why I chose her. When people get too comfortable, they get loose. Sloppy. What else?”

“She knew that the corruption question was coming. And she focused it on Auberon instead of how the five worlds were selected.”

“Was she trying to cover something up?”

“I don’t think so,” Teresa said. “It looked to me more like she knew Auberon had a bad reputation, and she was just reaching for the obvious thing. When you focused on the world selection she seemed . . . relieved?”

“I agree. All right. That was interesting. I have a military briefing from Trejo in Sol system. Any interest in reviewing it?”

The answer was no. It was peer class day, which meant seeing Connor. More than sneaking out to see Timothy, more than playing with Muskrat, more even than being with her father, she wanted to go to class. But she also felt guilty about her desires. She didn’t want to make her father feel like he wasn’t important to her, especially when it was a little bit true . . .

“If you want,” she said, making her voice bright and carefree.

He chuckled and tousled her hair. “I don’t need it. You can go work with Colonel Ilich. If Trejo has something critical, I’ll let you know.”

“All right,” she said. And then, because she could tell he knew what she’d been thinking, “Thank you.”

“Always,” he said, and waved her on.



She knew as soon as she stepped into the classroom that something was wrong. Usually the others were spread in clumps, lounging on the sofas and chairs of the common area, with half a dozen conversations going on among them. They would notice when she walked into the room, but they didn't make an effort not to stare at her. Today, they had scattered to the edges of the room, leaning against walls or against the pillars like little prey animals that knew a predator was close. Connor was by himself, frowning at a handheld like it had insulted him and he was trying to keep his temper. The others all glanced at her and then away again, but Connor didn't see her with an energy and focus that felt deliberate.

"I'll be right back," Colonel Ilich said, touching her on the shoulder. "I just need to get one thing before we start."

She nodded, dismissing him. Her attention was on Muriel Cowper. She was a year older than Teresa, with dusty brown hair, a chipped front tooth, and a talent for drawing that meant she did all the face painting at the large-group events. She approached Teresa now, and it looked like she was trembling. It reminded Teresa of Carrie Fisk.

"Teresa," the other girl said. "Can I . . . could we talk for a minute?"

Teresa felt a little prick of dread, but she nodded. Muriel took a couple steps toward the door to the courtyard, then stopped and looked back the way Muskrat did sometimes, to be sure Teresa was following. In the courtyard, Muriel held her hands in front of her belly like a child being disciplined. Teresa wanted to take them, push them back down to her sides, make her act normal. Muriel's anxiety was like heat from a fire, and it made Teresa feel anxious too.

"What's going on?" Teresa asked.

Muriel licked her lips, took a deep breath, and looked up, her eyes locked on Teresa's. "There was a camping trip with the school last week, and all of us went, and it was overnight so a bunch of us snuck out to the water when we were supposed to be asleep and Connor kissed me."

Teresa felt something. She didn't know what it was, but it lived in her abdomen, just below her navel, and in deep enough that she knew it couldn't be muscular. The implications clicked over in her mind like dominoes. Connor had kissed Muriel. Not just that, but Connor had *wanted* to kiss Muriel. Not just that, but Muriel had known that Teresa would care. And so had everyone else.

Oh God, and so had Connor.

"I can break up with him," Muriel said softly. "If you want me to."

"I don't care what either of you do," Teresa said. "If you and Connor want to go into the woods and kiss, it doesn't mean anything to me."

"Thank you," Muriel said, and went back into the common room, almost skipping. Teresa followed her, trying not to let anything that was happening in her body show on her face. Colonel Ilich arrived as she did, smiling warmly. He had a round black-and-white ball the size of a decapitated head under his arm.

"Today," he said to all of them, "we're going to be learning some new football drills. The rain's made the east lawn a little damp for the process, so if you fine ladies and gentlemen will please follow me to the gymnasium, you can change into more appropriate clothes . . ."

The middle of the day was filled with echoing shouts and the burn of her legs and back. She kicked too hard and missed more of the shots than she made, and through all of it, she felt the attention of the class on her. Of Muriel. Of Connor. Even Colonel Ilich noticed that she was off her game, but apart from a gentle question about how she was feeling, he didn't follow up on it. When the time came to shower and change back into her regular clothes, she didn't go to the locker rooms with the others. She had her own apartments. She didn't need to be with them anymore. Not any of them.

As she left, she looked to see if Connor was with Muriel. If they were holding hands. If they were kissing. As it happened, they weren't—Connor was at a brushed steel drinking fountain with Khalid Marks and Muriel was pretending that she'd died and had to be carried off the floor by Anneke Douby and Michael Li. Teresa thought it should make her feel better, but it didn't.

In the privacy of her rooms, she let herself cry. She felt stupid for having to. Connor wasn't anything to her but the boy she'd thought about more than other boys. She'd never kissed him or tried to hold his hand. Until today, she'd have said that he didn't even know that she felt different about him. That no one knew. Except now he was sneaking out of his tent with Muriel fucking Cowper in the middle of the night. Who was even in charge of the camping trips that they let things like that happen? Someone could have been drowned or mistaken for prey by a local animal. They were incompetent. That was the problem. That—improbable as it was—was why she was sobbing.

Muskrat forced a thick, prickly nose under her arm, pushing up. The concern in the old dog's eyes was unmistakable. Her thick tail wagged uncertainly.

"I'm stupid," Teresa said, and her voice sounded exhausted even to her. "I'm just really stupid."

Muskrat coughed out something less than a bark and hopped on her front legs. An unambiguous invitation. *Let's forget this and go play.* Teresa threw herself down on her bed, hoping that sleep would come or that the bed would open up like in the movies and let her escape to a different dimension where no one had ever heard of her. Muskrat huffed again. Then barked.

"Fine," Teresa said. "Just let me put some clothes on that don't stink like sweat. Idiotic dog."

Muskrat wagged harder. More sincerely.

The morning clouds had gone, but the landscape was still soaking from the rain. The water cycle was something that all the worlds in the empire shared. Any world with life had rainstorms and mud puddles. She walked down the colonnaded paths, tending away from the more inhabited parts of the State Building. She didn't want to have any company but her dog and her self-pity.

She wondered what she could have done differently. If she'd told Muriel no, that she had to break things off with Connor. She could have done that. She still could, a little. If she went to Colonel Ilich and said she didn't feel

comfortable with Muriel anymore, she could have the girl kicked out of the peer interaction activities. Even request that Connor spend more time at the State Building if she wanted to, and it would just happen.

But everyone would know why she was doing it, and so she couldn't. Instead, she walked across the gray-green of the back gardens, looked out at the low, green rise of the mountain beyond the State Building's grounds, and wished she could leave or die or turn time backward.

Muskrat alerted, dark, floppy ears pointing forward with excitement. The dog barked once in what sounded like excitement and then bounded away faster than an animal on old worn-out hips should have been able to. Despite herself, Teresa laughed.

"Muskrat!" she shouted, but the dog was onto something and wouldn't be turned away. The thick, wagging tail disappeared behind a hedge of lilacs imported from Earth, and Teresa trotted after.

She half expected to find Muskrat worrying a skitter or ash-cat or other local animal that had wandered onto the grounds. The dog did that sometimes, even though the local animals made her sick when she ate them. Teresa always worried that one of the larger native predators would sneak in someday. But when she made her way around the hedge, the only thing besides Muskrat was a human figure, sitting on the grass and looking out toward the horizon. Graying, close-cropped hair. Laconian uniform without an insignia of rank. An amiable, empty smile.

James Holden, and Muskrat sprawling on the grass beside him, wriggling to scratch her back. Teresa stopped short. Holden reached out idly and rubbed her dog's belly. Muskrat hopped to her feet and barked to Teresa. *Come on!* Almost against her will, Teresa found herself walking toward the most famous prisoner in the empire.

She didn't like Holden. Didn't trust him. But whenever they spoke, he was polite and unthreatening. Even a little amused by everything in a vague, philosophical kind of way that made it easy to be polite back.

"Hey," he said, not looking up at her.

"Hello."

“You know what’s weird?” he said. “The rain smells the same, but the wet ground doesn’t.”

Teresa didn’t say anything. Muskrat looked from the prisoner to her and back again, as if she expected something she was looking forward to. After a moment, Holden went on.

“I grew up on Earth. When I was your age—you’re fourteen, right? When I was your age, I was living on a ranch in Montana with eight parents and a lot of animals. Rain smelled like this. I think it’s the ozone. You know, from the electrical charges? But the ground after a storm had this deep smell. It was like . . . I don’t know. It smelled good. Here, it smells minty. It’s weird.”

“I’ve been around wet soil before,” she said, almost defensive. “That smell’s called petrichor. It’s actinomycete spores.”

“I didn’t know that,” Holden said. “It’s a good smell. I miss it.”

“That’s my dog.” The implied *so get away from her* was lost on him.

“Muskrat,” Holden said, and Muskrat thumped her tail, pleased to be included in the conversation. “That’s an interesting name. Did you pick it?”

“Yes,” Teresa said.

“Ever seen a real muskrat?”

“Of course not.”

“So why the name?” The way he asked seemed weirdly open. Almost innocent. Like she was the grown-up and he was the kid.

“There was a character named that in a picture book my father used to read to me.”

“And was the character a muskrat?”

“I guess so,” Teresa said.

“Well, there you have it,” Holden said. “Mystery solved. You don’t have to be afraid of me, you know. She’s not.”

Teresa shifted her weight. The ground under her was still soft from the rain, and he was right. It smelled like mint. A half dozen possible responses came to mind, from turning and walking away to telling him that she wasn’t scared of him and he was stupid to think she was. If she hadn’t already been feeling humiliated and angry, she probably would have laughed it off. But it

turned out she was spoiling for a fight, and he'd handed her one. He was one of the few people it was perfectly safe to bite at.

"You're a terrorist," she said. "You killed people."

An expression crossed his face almost too quickly to see, then he smiled again. "I guess I was. But I'm not anymore."

"I don't know why my father doesn't keep you in prison," she said.

"Oh, I know the answer to that one. I'm his dancing bear," Holden said, and lay back on the grass and looked up at the sky. High white clouds against the blue, and the glittering lights of the construction platforms beyond them. Teresa understood the game. He was pulling her into conversation. The thing about the rain and the soil. How Muskrat got her name. Now this mysterious dancing bear comment. All of them were invitations, but it was up to her whether to play along.

"Dancing bear?" she said.

"Old kings used to have dangerous animals in their courts. Lions. Panthers. Bears. They'd teach them to do tricks or at least not to eat too many of the guests. It's a way to show power. Everyone knows a bear is a killer, but the king is so powerful that a bear's just a plaything for him. If Duarte kept me in a cell, people might think he was afraid of me. Or that I might be a threat if I got out. If he lets me out, lets me roam around with what sort of looks like freedom, it tells everyone that comes to the palace that he's cut my nuts off." He didn't sound angry at all. Or resigned. If anything, he was almost amused by it.

"You're getting your back wet, lying down like that."

"I know."

The moment stretched, and she felt the silence pushing at her. "How many people did you kill?"

"Depends on how you count it. I tried not to get anyone killed when I could help it. The thing is? I *am* in prison. Right now, I'm pretty sure there are at least two very well-trained snipers ready to open up my brainpan if I try to hurt you. So not only am I not inclined to hurt you, I literally couldn't, even if I thought it was a good idea. That's the point of a dancing bear. It's the least dangerous thing at the court, because everyone's aware of

it. The ones you trust are always the most dangerous. A lot more kings and princesses got poisoned by their friends than eaten by bears.”

Her handheld chimed. Colonel Ilich asking to speak with her. She sent an acknowledgment, but didn’t open a connection. Holden grinned up at her.

“Duty calls?” he asked.

Teresa didn’t answer him except to tap her leg. Muskrat hauled herself up to her feet and trundled over, as pleased to leave as to stay. Teresa turned back toward the State Building. When Holden called back after her, there was a buzz in his voice. Like he was trying to fit more meaning into the words than the syllables could hold.

“If you’re worried, you should keep an eye on me.”

She looked back. He was sitting up. As she’d warned, his back was dark with wet, but he didn’t seem to care.

“They’re watching me all the time,” he said. “Even when it seems like they aren’t. *You should keep an eye on me.*”

She frowned. “All right,” she said, then walked away.

As she headed back toward her rooms and the colonel, Muskrat huffing contentedly at her side, Teresa tried to decide what she was feeling. The sting of Connor and Muriel was still there, and the shame at feeling stung. But they weren’t as immediate as they had been. And along with them was an uneasiness she couldn’t quite fit her mind around, only that it had to do with the fact that Muskrat liked stumbling across James Holden and she didn’t.

She found Colonel Ilich in the common area. The couches and sofas felt very different with all the other students gone. The walls themselves felt like they’d taken a step back and left a fraction more room for the emptiness. Her footsteps echoed, and so did Muskrat’s claws tapping against the tile. Ilich was going through something on his handheld, but he stood up as soon as she came near.

“Thank you,” he said. “I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything?”

“Nothing important,” she said. “I was just walking.”

“That’s excellent. Your father asked me to see whether you were available.”

“An incident?”

“Piracy in Sol system,” Ilich said. Then, a moment later, “Piracy with some unfortunate security implications. There may need to be an escalated response.”

“Did something important go missing?”

“Yes. But before we go to your father?” Ilich’s expression softened. For a moment, he had the same expression she’d just seen on James Holden. It was eerie. “I don’t want to intrude, but I had the feeling that there was something bothering you at the peer seminar today.”

This was her moment. All she had to say was that she didn’t feel comfortable with Muriel anymore, and the girl would never be welcome at the State Building again. Or that she wanted to go on the next camping overnight that the school took. Then she could sneak out at night and kiss a boy down by the water. She could feel the words in her mouth, solid and hard as candy. But then Ilich would know. He knew already.

The ones you trust are always the most dangerous.

“Teresa?” Ilich said. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” she said. “Everything’s fine.”

Chapter Ten: Elvi

Something was wrong. She didn't know what it was, only that she had an overwhelming sense of threat and dislocation. She was coughing and vomiting breathable liquid, and Fayez was already gone. His couch looked empty and dry. He'd been out of it awhile. Her mind slowly came back. She was on the *Falcon*. They'd been burning hard to the Tecoma system. She'd been in a high-g crash couch. And something had gone wrong.

She tried to say *What happened?*, but all that came out was, "Wa appa."

"Don't try to speak yet," her med tech said. A likable young ensign named Calvin with dark skin and features that made Elvi think his ancestors might have come from the same region of West Africa as her own. She'd never asked, because he almost certainly wouldn't know. Laconians did not share the Earther interest in ethnic origins. His face seemed to swim in and out of focus, and her mind felt weirdly disconnected from her body.

"Wa—" she said, ignoring his advice, and then she vomited again.

"Stop it," Calvin said more forcefully. "You had a reaction to the sedative mix while you were under. We had to run some tests and a procedure before we revived you to make sure we didn't do any damage."

Calvin pulled a medical cuff off her arm that she hadn't even noticed was there. The needles stung as they retracted. Several tubes ran from the cuff to a drug-dispensing monitor nearby. Elvi tried to read the screen to see what they'd been pumping into her, but her eyes couldn't focus. The words remained a mysterious blur.

"What—" she managed to get out without vomiting, but before she could finish, Fayez burst into the room.

“You woke her? Why didn’t anyone call me!” he yelled at Calvin. “Let me see her chart!”

Fayez grabbed her hand and squeezed a little too hard. Up close, she could see that his eyes were a little red and puffy. Had he been crying?

“Sir,” Calvin said. “She woke because the procedure had finished. All her scans are clean. No brain damage. There should be no loss of function.”

“Brain damage?” Elvi croaked out. “Were we thinking brain damage?”

Her throat felt raw. Fayez grabbed a plastic bottle of water with a straw and held it up to her lips. She drank greedily. Apparently she was thirsty. Good to know.

“There was some concern that your breathing had been depressed,” Fayez said as she gulped down the water. “We just wanted to be sure.”

“It was unlikely,” Calvin added. “But we wanted to take every precaution.”

“What happened?” Elvi finally managed to say once her thirst was quenched.

“You didn’t tell her?” Fayez shot at Calvin. “Els, honey, you had a reaction to—”

“No,” she cut him off. “I know that. Where are we? I feel gravity. Are we through the transit?”

As she spoke, Calvin began putting his instruments away. It looked like whatever had happened to her, the treatment for it was over.

“Yes,” Fayez said. “We’re in Tecoma right now. We’re finishing our deceleration burn.”

“I’ve been out that long?”

“I was scared to death, Els. I’m getting a full battery of tests run to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

“Sagale’s schedule won’t—”

“Sagale agreed with me. I was surprised too. I think the prospect of losing Duarte’s pet biologist had him pissing his uniform.”

Calvin snorted at that. “I’m done here. Do you need anything else?”

“No,” Elvi said. “Yes. When can I go back to work?”

“Now, if you feel up to it.”

“Thank you, Calvin,” Elvi said.

Calvin gave her a salute and a smile. “My pleasure, Major,” he said, then left the compartment.

“Maybe you should rest,” Fayez said. He was frowning at her. Elvi laughed. He almost never frowned, and with his baby face it made him look like a petulant child.

“I’m fine,” she said. And then, “Okay, I’m not fine. I’ll be fine. It’s just travel.”

“I don’t like it,” Fayez said. She took his hand. Her skin felt sticky. She was going to need a real shower.

“So, Tecoma system,” she said. “The probes said it was a neutron star?” She tried sitting up. Her head swam a little, so she stopped there.

“It is,” Fayez agreed, putting a hand on her back to help steady her. “But, you know, weirder.”

The dizziness passed, and her eyes were focusing better as well. The text on the screens around her became actual letters and numbers.

“Help me up,” she said, then dropped her feet to the floor. Fayez put an arm around her waist as she tried standing. Her legs were a little weak, but the gravity felt like they were only burning at a quarter g or so, so it was easy to stay upright. Fayez gave her a look, then took his arm away, waiting close by to grab her if she fell. She didn’t.

“I’ll need some clothes,” she said. Fayez nodded and opened a nearby storage locker. “Weirder how?”

“Emptied,” Fayez said, then tossed her uniform and some clean underclothes on the couch. “Massive rapidly spinning neutron star, no planets, planetoids, asteroids, nothing.”

Elvi pulled off the thin smock she wore in the submersion couch and headed to the shower. Fayez followed her in, carrying a towel. The blast of hot water made her dizzy again, but one hand on the wall and some deep-breathing exercises cleared it up in a few seconds. Fayez watched closely, but once he was sure she was all right, he relaxed. As she washed the last of the goop off her body, Elvi said, “They cleared everything out to make a diamond backup drive too.”

“This is more than that. I don’t mean no planetary bodies. I mean no nothing. No micrometeors. No dust. No spare protons floating around. The vacuum here is as hard as it can get.”

“That’s . . . Okay. Weirder.” Elvi turned the water off, and Fayez tossed her the towel. “I mean, is that even possible?”

“No. Not unless there’s something keeping it clean. We’re still in the Milky Way. There should be some spare crap floating through now and then. So not only is the system cleaned out, something’s actively keeping it cleaned out. And—get this—the gate is five times farther out from the star than any of the other gates. And it’s above the plane of the ecliptic. Ninety degrees. Don’t even get me started on the star.”

“What’s going on with the star?”

“It’s massive. I mean, like, spit-on-it-and-it’ll-start-to-collapse-into-a-black-hole-level massive.”

“Good that there’s no spit around, then.”

“Right? It turns out neutron stars aren’t much to look at. Unless you can see magnetic fields, they’re just . . . underwhelming. I mean the densest matter possible, forces so powerful as to break space-time? Sure. Bright as hell, you bet. But I was expecting a light show or something. It just looks like another sun, but smaller and kind of angry about it. This one is spinning fast enough to land in the pulsar range. We’re far enough away to avoid the worst of the magnetic disturbance.”

She took a deep breath. She could hear the anxiety in his words. She knew what they meant.

“I’m *fine*,” she said.

“You aren’t. You could have died.”

“I didn’t, though. And now, I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.”

Elvi finished drying off and stuffed the towel into the recycler. Fayez pulled a jar of scalp cream out of a cabinet and began rubbing it into her short, tight curls with his fingertips. It felt wonderful to have him massaging her head. When you find a man who takes pleasure in helping you avoid dry scalp, Elvi thought, you keep him.

“You can do that all day if you want,” she said.

“If we had all day, my attentions would begin moving south,” he replied with a grin. “But we’re killing our burn in about two hours, and I don’t believe that you’re going to wait one more second to start working.”

He closed up the cream jar and put it away while she started pulling on her clothes.

“So what were they thinking?” Elvi said.

“Hmm?”

“Making a neutron star so big it’s hovering on the edge of collapse, and then clearing everything out of the system so that it doesn’t. Moving the ring out of the ecliptic.”

“You think they made a neutron star? Seems more likely they just built a gate to a dud system.”

“How? There had to be life here for them to hijack, or the gate wouldn’t have been built. This was a living system like Sol that got turned into . . .” She waved her hand.

“Yeah,” Fayez agreed. “I don’t know. Honestly, this miracles-and-wonders thing feels like drinking from a fire hose sometimes.”

Elvi finished with her uniform, then brushed her teeth as Fayez waited and watched her. She gave herself one last critical look in the mirror, then said, “Let’s go see the boss.”

Fayez grabbed her and undid her careful uniform straightening with a hug. “Thanks for not dying, Els.”



Forty-eight hours later, they’d gone through the drill. The ship’s system had analyzed the telescopic data. Elvi had gone to pay her respects to the catalyst the way she always did, and then performed the experiment. The protomolecule reached out, and the data streamed in. The *Falcon* searching for any change, any effect. This time, Elvi actually let herself sleep in between. Near-death experiences wore her out, apparently, even if she

hadn't been aware of them at the time. In addition to which, this time, there wasn't much to see.

When they'd finished their analysis, Sagale came to the bridge and braced himself on one hand-hold and one foot-hold. His eyes shifted from one screen to the next, taking in the data streams with an air of pleasure.

"Mehmet," Elvi said.

"Major Okoye," Sagale said, and nodded toward the main monitor. Magnified so that it filled the screen, the tiny but massive star was the only object within nearly two light-years of the Tecoma gate. "Tell me that *this* system is the most important scientific discovery of all time."

"No," Elvi replied. "Pretty sure the big green diamond still wins that prize. But it is amazing."

The neutron star on the screen was too hot to radiate much energy as visible light, but the screen still had to dim it down to keep it from blinding everyone in the room.

"More than three stellar masses stuffed into a ball half the size of Rhode Island," Jen said.

"What's a road island?" Travon asked. He'd been a Martian, back before they were all Laconians.

"Major Okoye," Sagale said, ignoring the banter. "Am I correct that this is exactly what it looks like? A single unusable star in a system devoid of other artifacts or exploitable planets?"

Something in his tone caught Elvi's attention. It had a stiff formality to it. As though he were asking her questions under oath. She felt like they were engaging in some sort of ritual that he understood and she didn't.

"That's what it looks like," she said carefully. "Yes."

Sagale nodded his massive head at her. The pleasure seemed to radiate from him. "Come to my office in five minutes."

He pulled himself away, disappearing down the corridor. Faye met her gaze and lifted an eyebrow.

"Makes me nervous too," she said.

She checked the data one last time like she was going over her class notes before a test. She had a sense that there was something in it she'd

overlooked. It wasn't a feeling she liked.

"Coffee?" Sagale asked when she arrived. He was floating next to the beverage machine inset in one of the bulkheads of his office. Two drinking bulbs drifted next to him. It was the first time he'd ever offered her anything in hospitality. It made her nervous.

"Sure," she said so that he wouldn't notice.

The machine hissed as it injected cups of coffee into the bulbs, one at a time. "Sweetener? Whitener?" Sagale asked, still fussing with the machine.

"No."

Sagale turned to her and gently pushed one of the bulbs in her direction. She caught it and depressed the bubble on the lid that opened the flow to the drinking tube, then took a sip. The coffee was just right, hot but not scalding, bitter and strong and vaguely nutty.

"Thank you," she said, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I want to extend the thanks of the Laconian Empire for your work on this project. Now that we have identified a system of no utility, we are moving to the military phase of the operation," Sagale said after a short pause while he sipped at his coffee.

"The what?"

"Two ships are entering this system as we speak," he said. "They are both uncrewed, and controlled remotely from this vessel. Both are large freighters. One is empty. The other has a payload."

"A payload?"

"The high consul has been able to use the construction platforms over Laconia to isolate and contain antimatter. The second ship is carrying slightly over twenty kilograms in a magnetic containment device."

Elvi felt light-headed again. Maybe she was still recovering from her near-death experience. Maybe it was her superior officer telling her that he had enough explosive power to glass the surface of a planet. Probably it was both. She took a moment to get her breath back.

"And why?" she asked.

"The high consul's directive for this expedition was twofold," Sagale said. "The first was the mission you were briefed about. You and your team

have done all that could be asked in this effort, and my reports back to naval command reflect this.”

“Okay. Thanks. What was the second thing?” Elvi asked.

“The second aspect of this mission is outside your expertise, which is why it was kept on a need-to-know basis. We were to find a gate-connected system with minimal value. Such as this one.”

She let go of the coffee bulb, and it began gently floating away. “Am I allowed to know what phase two is? Because if I don’t need to know, it seems sort of mean to have this conversation.”

“You are. In fact you are essential to it, and I have every confidence that you will continue to excel as our mission changes, though you will no longer have operational command,” Sagale said. There was something like sympathy in his eyes. For the very first time, Elvi got the sense that Sagale liked her. Or at least respected her. “The high consul’s first priority is to find a way to defend humanity against whatever destroyed the gate builders.” He paused for a moment like he didn’t quite believe what he was about to say. Like he’d been waiting for a long time to say it. “The test we are about to perform is the beginning of that process.”

He tapped at his desk, and a map of the Tecoma system appeared above it. The neutron star at its center, the distant gate, the *Falcon* floating at the midway point, and the two new freighters drifting near the entry point.

“We are going to monitor this system with every instrument at our disposal, just as we always have,” Sagale said. “But this time, out in the hub network, traffic control is running ships through the gates until the energy transfer load reaches the critical state. When the critical level is reached, we are going to transit the empty freighter from this system.”

“You’re going to deliberately ditch a ship?”

“We are. When it vanishes, and while the energy transfer load is still high enough to make transits impossible, I will set the trigger on the antimatter containment field and transit the second ship. It too should vanish, but it will have a timer set to detonate the load.”

Elvi felt her stomach cramp up like he’d punched her in the solar plexus. It was suddenly hard to breathe.

“Why would you—”

“Because one of two things is true,” Sagale said. “Either there is an intelligence that lies beyond those gates that is making the choice to destroy our ships, or there is some natural effect of the gate system itself that does it. This is how we will determine that.”

Elvi reached for a handhold in the bulkhead behind her, and pulled herself to the wall. Her heart was going faster.

“You think you can kill them?”

“That isn’t the issue. Whether something on the other side dies or doesn’t die, what matters is that it is punished. After this experiment, some time later we will run the energy up to the point of another dutchman and see if the ship is taken. If the ship survives transit, we will know the bomb convinced our opponent to change their stance toward us.”

“That’s a terrible plan.”

“If it does change, we’ll know the enemy is capable of change. That it’s intentional, and possibly intelligent. If not, we’ll repeat the test until we’re reasonably certain that no change will be forthcoming. I take it from your expression that you have some thoughts on the mission you’d like to share.”

Elvi’s voice sounded outraged, even to her. “The last time we made them angry, they turned off every consciousness in the Sol system and there was a massive surge in virtual particle activity. They fired a bullet that broke spooky interactions in ways we’re still trying to make sense of. Every one of those things defies our understanding of how reality works. So we’re going to throw a *bomb* at them?”

Sagale nodded, agreeing and dismissing her at the same time. “If we could send a sternly worded letter, we’d try that. But this is how you negotiate with something that you can’t speak to. When it does something we don’t like, we hurt it. Every time it does something we don’t like, we hurt it again. Only once. If it can understand cause and effect, it will get our message.”

“Jesus.”

“We aren’t the aggressor here. We didn’t hit anyone first. We just haven’t hit anyone back until now.”

She could hear Winston Duarte in the word choices. Even in the cadence Sagale delivered them with. It made Elvi want to throw her coffee bulb at his face. Fortunately, it had drifted several meters away, saving her from a court-martial.

“Thanks to you, we’ve found a sample system. This is the safest place in the empire for humanity to conduct these tests.”

“This is a bad, bad idea. I don’t think you’re hearing what I’m saying.”

“When humans first began experimenting with fission bombs,” Sagale said, as if she hadn’t spoken, “they used empty islands for their tests. Consider this our Bikini Atoll.”

Elvi laughed at him, but there was no humor in it.

“My God, you people really are this dumb,” she said. Sagale frowned at that, but she powered on anyway. “First of all, the Bikini Atoll *wasn’t* empty. The people that lived there had their homes stolen and were sent away. And the islands were filled with plant and animal life that was annihilated.”

“We have established that this system has nothing that—”

Elvi didn’t let him finish. “But putting that aside for a moment, I just said whatever lives inside those gates has a very different understanding of physics than we do. Is it limited to taking its anger out on only one solar system? *You don’t know that.* You *can’t* know that.”

“Passivity didn’t save the gate builders. It won’t save us. The high consul has considered the risks and judged a proactive, direct path to be the best option available.”

He spread his hands. *What can be done?* As if Duarte’s word were a force of nature, inescapable and unquestionable. It was like talking to a recording.

“You are about to run an n-equals-one experiment where one is the number of universes we can break trying to satisfy Duarte’s curiosity.”

Chapter Eleven: Alex

The shipyards on Callisto were a perfect example of the old idea that ships and buildings keep learning even after they're built. History took whatever it found and used it for what was happening at the time, remaking the spaces into whatever worked well enough to get by at the moment, until history itself became a kind of architect.

Callisto had been a divided base once. Pretty much the same way medieval villages had been built just outside castle walls, civilian shipyards had grown up around the older MCRN base until the military and commercial concerns were almost the same size. The Free Navy had raided the Martian side even before the Free Navy really existed, pounding that half of the base into dust and bodies. Then, in the aftermath of the great defection that became the seeds of Laconia, the rebuilding of the Martian shipyards had been left incomplete. During the starving years, it had been abandoned. But the real estate was there, and as the need grew again, what had been military structures were taken over again. Nothing died without becoming the foundation for what came after.

They had been on Callisto for eight days so far, and it wasn't certain when they'd ship back out. There were several of the big cargo ships in Sol system that might be able to smuggle the *Storm*, if that was what the underground decided to do next. Or maybe they'd stay in Sol. For all Laconia's ambitions, there were still more people, stations, and ships in the Sol system than outside it. That was changing, though. Someday within Alex's lifetime, they'd cross the threshold, and Sol really would be just one system among many. The oldest, most human system in the empire, sure. But not home. There would be a thousand homes, and if history was a

guide, in a generation or two, everyone would think wherever they were was the most important one.

The restaurant Caspar had taken him to, for example, was in a reinforced dome that had clearly been Martian military construction. A supply depot, probably. Now all the fail-closed locks were gone, and the reinforced walls were hung with batiked cloth and the kind of tapestry that interior decorators churned out by the square meter. The menu billed itself as Moroccan, but the couscous was made with mushrooms and the beef all had the overly consistent grain that meant it had grown in a vat. The recipes might have had their roots on Earth, but Alex knew Belter food when he tasted it.

He and Caspar and the rest of the crew wore printed flight suits with a triangle-and-curve logo that implied they worked for a gas-mining cooperative called Három Állam that worked the Jovian moons. The *Gathering Storm* was hidden in a generations-old mine that was marked on the surveys as having been lost to collapse fifteen years before. It had been an OPA smuggling base, and the plan was to leave it there for a few weeks while the Laconian security forces were on high alert. Which meant, in the meantime, the crew could take a little time off the ship, drink, visit brothels, play golgo and handball and two-court football. Or fold up their legs on soft, woven cushions, listen to flute and drum music from hidden speakers, and scoop up little bits of fungus pretending to be wheat flour and cubes of spiced beef that had never been a cow.

Another advantage was that a little time on Callisto with civilians meant they could take the temperature of the system. See how everyone was reacting to the news of the underground's attack. It turned out the response wasn't what Alex had expected.

"Nothing?" Caspar said.

Alex cycled through the newsfeeds again. Food production on Earth and Ganymede were up this quarter, easily matching the established projections. A group in the Krasnoyarsk-Sakha Shared Interest Zone was petitioning for trade autonomy. The settlement on Navnan Ghar was reporting the discovery of a massive underground crystal network, and a special scientific

commission was being assembled to determine whether it was another alien artifact or something that had occurred naturally on the planet. The lead singer of Tuva T.U.V.A. had sent nude photos of himself to an underage fan, and the authorities were investigating. The Laconian Science Directorate was reporting a potential breakthrough in the survey of dead systems: a massive green diamond that experts suspected might contain records that, if decoded, would spell out the history of the species that had created the ring gates.

That two Laconian frigates and a freighter carrying a critically important political officer had been destroyed in Sol system was listed precisely nowhere.

Or at least nowhere he could see without searching the news-feed indexes. And since Saba had it on good authority that Laconia was keeping a close eye on search terms, Alex was stuck browsing and hoping for something. Anything. But . . .

“Nope,” he agreed. “Nothing.”

Caspar took bit of bread and scooped up a bite of his tagine. “I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad one.”

“When I was your age,” Alex said, “it would have been on every feed. Earth and Mars would have had official responses, and there would’ve been eighteen different mainline feeds analyzing every word they said from different perspectives. The Belt would have had a thousand different pirate broadcasts with at least a dozen of them taking credit for it personally, and at least one saying it was all a Jesuit conspiracy.”

Caspar grinned. One of his eyeteeth was a little yellowed. Alex had never noticed that before. “Sounds like you miss it, grandpa.”

Alex looked up, questioning. Caspar put on a comic frown and an exaggerated drawl. “When I was your age, we had to make our own water from scratch every morning and dinosaurs roamed Mariner Valley.”

Alex felt a little stab of annoyance, but he pushed it back and laughed. “There was some variety at least.” He gestured toward the feeds spooling through on the tabletop monitor. “Everything on this feels like it’s been vetted by the same bureaucrat on Luna. It’s all got the same voice.”

“Probably was.”

“Yeah,” Alex said, shutting it off. “It probably was.”

Caspar stretched like a cat waking up from a nap, then tapped the monitor. The newsfeeds vanished and the restaurant’s interface popped up.

“We can split this,” Alex said.

“You buy next time,” Caspar said. “Anyway. Not like it’s real money, right?”

All the *Storm* crew on Callisto had false identities generated by the underground and slipped into the systems. Including biometrics and bank accounts. It was an uncomfortable way to live, knowing that everything was brittle. Alex’s fake records could all be exposed if the Laconian security system raised a red flag. He could spend tonight and then the rest of his life in a jail cell. Everything could fall apart at any moment.

Which, to be fair, had always been true. It was just harder to forget now.

“I’m meeting some of the engineering crew down on the third level. There’s a bar that has open mic comedy and half-price whiskey. Enough karaoke, and a pretty boy like me might even find someone to take him home tonight.”

“Drink one for me, and don’t make any mistakes you can’t regret the next morning,” Alex said, rising from his cushion. “I’ve got some things of my own to do.”

“Fair enough,” Caspar said. “See you when I see you.”

They parted in the corridor. Caspar headed for the passage leading deeper below the moon’s surface, Alex off to the left and toward the docks and the coffin apartments for people on shore leave. People like him. He walked with his hands stuck deep in the flight suit pockets, his eyes on the ground ahead of him. Avoiding eye contact with the people walking in the same halls. The passage came to a Y intersection with a brushed steel sculpture that didn’t seem to know if it was a human or a transport shuttle. Above it, the ships and their berths were all listed. All but his.

When Alex had been a boy back on Mars, his great-uncle Narendra had come to stay with his family for a week once while his group home in Innis Shallows had been renovated. Alex still remembered his great-uncle

walking through the corridors of Bunker Hill with a calm, bemused expression while he and Johnny Zhou explained the fine points of the game they had been playing. Alex felt the same expression on his own face now.

Maybe it was something that happened with every generation, this sense of displacement. It might be an artifact of the way human minds seemed to peg “normal” to whatever they’d experienced first and then bristled at everything afterward that failed to match it closely enough. Or maybe the change that Laconia’s conquest was ushering in was different in kind from what had come before. Either way, the Callisto shipyard didn’t feel like Sol system anymore, or at least not the one Alex knew. It felt like the first days of Laconian rule. The sense of fear and fragility like a ringing in his ears that never went away. Amos used to say that everywhere was Baltimore. That wasn’t true anymore. Now everywhere was Medina.

His coffin apartment was near the docks. It was one of the larger models, a little over a meter high so that he could sit up in it. The mattress was old, recycled crash couch gel, and the walls and ceiling were layered glass and mesh with lights embedded in them to create the illusion of space going out beyond the surface. Alex crawled in, closed the access door, and made himself comfortable. He had a couple new entertainment feeds he’d been thinking about checking out. Over the years, he’d made himself an expert on neo-noir crime thrillers, and there had been work coming out of Ceres even before the Laconian takeover that used Pilkey montage to do some interesting things. He wondered, though, if signing in through the coffin’s system would compromise him. If Laconia knew enough about Alex Kamal to put together the kind of movies he liked, the kind of food he ate, the way he walked, and whatever other data he’d left behind him to pierce the mask that Saba had given him. If he was too much himself, would it send security officers to his door? Did it make more sense to watch something popular and generic and stay at the center of the herd?

He pulled up his profile on the coffin system. A red icon showed a private connection from the *Storm*. There was a certain irony in the fact that he was more worried that Laconia would catch him out because he watched a certain kind of entertainment feed than he was that actual encrypted

communications from the underground would give him away. But there it was. He'd made the decision to trust Saba's old OPA techs when he got into this business. Didn't make sense to start second-guessing them now. He opened the message, and his son looked back at him from the screen.

"Hey, Da," Kit said with a grin that reminded him of Giselle. Kit looked more like his mother than like him. Thank God. "Weird to hear from you again so soon. Are you in-system? I mean, don't tell me. I know we're all hush-hush. But hey. Things are great this semester. I'm pulling top marks in three of my sections, and"—the smile turned rueful—"I've got a good tutor for the other two. And . . . ah . . . yeah. So I'm dating this girl, and I think it's starting to look kind of serious. Her name's Rohani. I haven't told her about . . . um . . . *you*. But if there ever gets to be a chance for you to come meet her? Mom is talking to her family, and I think she may be your daughter-in-law pretty soon here. So it would be good, yeah?"

There was more to the message, and Alex listened to it with a warmth in his chest, and a sorrow. He wasn't going to meet the girl. He wasn't going to attend the wedding if there was one. Rohani would go on the list with Amos and Holden and Clarissa. Another loss. It was just another loss. He'd live with it. He had to.

His hand terminal chimed, and an alert popped up from the false ID that Saba used for high-priority messages. With dread in his gut, he opened it.

BE ADVISED THAT THE TEMPEST HAS BROKEN ORBIT AND IS MOVING TOWARD JUPITER.

"Well," Alex said to himself. "Shit."



"My little man's getting married?" Bobbie said, but she kept looking at the supply crates while she said it. "Girl will be lucky if I don't swoop in and carry him off first."

The warehouse was on the edge of the complex. It didn't use the station's power grid, and the environmental system was a retrofit from an old rock hopper. It left condensation on the walls and ceilings, water

discoloration like leopard spots. The larger gear, like torpedoes, was still on the *Storm*. But the smaller salvage from the Laconian freighter had been transferred onto four wide rows of pallets and moved to the warehouse. Bobbie had unpacked them, scattering the storage crates through the space as she did her own private inventory. Scorch marks darkened some of the boxes. The chalky smell of ceramic that had been heated until it flaked hung in the air.

“You’re taking the news that the largest battleship in the empire is heading toward us very calmly,” Alex said.

She took a deep breath, and kept her voice patient. “Jillian’s getting word to everyone. The *Tempest* is days out, and this work needs to be done one way or the other. I’m hoping by the time I’m done with it, I’ll have a plan.”

“How’s that working for you?”

“Nothing so far. I’ll let you know.”

Alex sat on one of the boxes. He felt heavier than the gentle gravity of the moon could explain. “Bobbie, what are we doing here?”

She paused, looked over at him. She had a lot of different expressions, and he’d come to know most of them. He knew when he was talking to his friend and when she was the captain. Right now, she was listening to him as the woman he’d been on the *Roci* with, back in the day. The one who had known him since before Io.

“Fighting the enemy,” she said. “Degrading their ability to bring force and influence to bear. Denying them the use of resources.”

“Sure,” Alex said. “But to what end? I mean, are we trying to get back to the Transport Union running things? Or are we trying to make it so that every planet is calling its own shots, and then seeing if it all works out?”

Bobbie crossed her arms and leaned against a stack of boxes. The work lights were harsh, and Alex could see all the roughness in her face and arms that decades of hard work and radiation had left. Age looked good on her. It looked right.

“I’m hearing you ask whether authoritarianism is necessarily bad,” she said. “Did I get that right? Because yeah, it is.”

“That’s not what I mean. It’s just . . . I don’t know what it is. I’m feeling overwhelmed. And maybe a little demoralized.”

“Yes,” Bobbie said. “Yes, we are.”

“You too?”

“We lost the target. That political officer might have given us something that could break these fuckers back to the Stone Age. I mean maybe not, but I’m not going to know now. So yeah, I’m a little grumpy. But I’m guessing that’s not exactly what’s biting you?”

“I don’t know what the win looks like.”

“Well, for me, it looks like dying with the knowledge that humanity’s a little bit better off than it would have been if I’d never been born. A little freer. A little kinder. A little smarter. That the bullies and bastards and sadists got their teeth into a few less people because of me. That’s got to be enough.”

“Yeah,” Alex said, but she kept going.

“I’m not a grand strategy girl. That’s for the eggheads. I’m a ground pounder, and I always will be. These people want every planet to be a prison where they get to pick who’s the guard and who’s the inmate.”

“And we’re against that,” Alex said. He heard the exhaustion and agreement in his own voice. “You ever think Naomi’s right? Maybe it’s better to try getting inside the system. Changing it that way?”

“She is right,” Bobbie said, turning back to her inventory. “It’s just I’m right too. Naomi wants there to be one way to fix this, and she wants it to be the one where there’s no blood.”

“But there’s two ways,” Alex said, thinking that he was agreeing.

“There’s no way,” Bobbie said. “There’s just pushing back with everything we’ve got and hoping we can outlast the bastards.”

“You know we’re on the clock here,” Alex said. “I’m thinking about Takeshi.”

“I sent a message to his people,” Bobbie said. “It’s always hard losing someone, and we’d been very lucky up to that point. It couldn’t last.”

“I’m thinking that he was one of your best, and he was damn near sixty. Jillian, Caspar, and a few others aside, our resistance is made up of old

Belters. Old OPA.”

“Agreed,” Bobbie said. “And thank God for that. Most of them have a clue what they’re doing.”

“Behind them is a whole new generation who were never in the OPA. Never fought the inner planets for independence. Who grew up fat and rich on Transport Union freighters, with respect and important jobs. Kids like Kit. How are you going to convince them to give up everything they’ve got and join this fight?”

Bobbie stopped and turned to look at him.

“Alex, where is this coming from?”

“I think we have a resistance right now because we have a lot of old guys who grew up resisting an enemy too strong to ever beat. They’ve been inoculated against fear of failure. But when they’re gone, I think we’re done. As a movement. As a force in history. Because we’re not going to convince anyone born after the Transport Union was formed to fight an unwinnable fight. And maybe, in the long run, Naomi’s plan to win politically is all we’ll have left.”

He saw Bobbie’s eyes go flat. “Unwinnable fight?” she said.

“Well,” Alex said. “Isn’t it?”

Chapter Twelve: Bobbie

In *unwinnable* fight.

Alex was gone, heading back to the *Storm* to figure what exactly their evac options looked like. If they had any. What he'd said stayed after him.

The temporary warehouse their OPA friends had found for them smelled like burnt ceramics and old ice. Bobbie had been working in it long enough now that the smell didn't trigger a gag reflex, so that was sort of a win.

She ticked off an entry on her supply list: twelve crates of Laconian fuel pellets. They'd been intended for the *Tempest*, but they'd work in the *Storm* too. And because the Laconian reactors seemed to want to use only their own brand of pellet, it meant her ship would get to keep flying for a while. Unless the *Tempest* shot them all into atoms. But the *Storm* didn't have a lot of storage space. They'd need to make some decisions soon about how much of their stolen loot to carry with them and how much to hide or sell. Fuel, bullets, or food. The hierarchy of needs, wartime edition. And now, with a *Magnetar*-class dreadnought heading in their direction, the importance of every decision was even greater.

An unwinnable fight.

Bobbie had been at Medina Station when the *Tempest* came through the Laconia gate for the very first time. She'd watched it use its primary weapon on the rail-gun defenses, and turn them into spaghettified atoms in a single shot. And while she hadn't been part of the defense of Sol system when the *Magnetar*-class battle cruiser made its attack, she'd read the reports. The combined might of the Earth-Mars Coalition hadn't even been

able to slow the *Tempest* down. She had no illusions that their one destroyer stood a chance. Run and hide was their only option now.

Alex had been a navy boy for twenty years before he'd become the pilot of the *Rocinante*. He'd always been reliable under pressure. But something had happened when they met with Naomi this last time. Or maybe it was the idea of his kid getting married. Or maybe it was that he was a little smarter than she was, or a little less angry, or a little more realistic. Maybe it was that he'd seen a little sooner than she had why the fight was unwinnable. The underground was held together with spit and baling wire even at the best of times. Saba did what he could to help the old OPA fighters keep the Laconians uncomfortable where they could, but the simple truth was that the *Storm* was their only meaningful asset. The ship, and by extension her strike team, were the resistance's only real weapon against Laconia. The Transport Union didn't have gunships, and the void cities had been disarmed as part of the treaty negotiations. The Earth-Mars Coalition fleets couldn't help even if they wanted to now that they all had Laconian flag officers on them reporting directly to Admiral Trejo.

If Alex was losing heart, Bobbie didn't believe for a second he was alone. The failure to capture the political officer combined with the looming threat of the battleship might be enough to get her crew wondering why they were still risking their necks fighting an unbeatable foe.

And as much as she disliked it, Alex was right.

The old-guard OPA attitude of resistance for resistance's sake would only keep them going so long. Part of what she should be doing was training up the next generation of fighters. Only so far, they weren't waiting in the wings to step in. Duarte and his people were smart. They kept things from getting bad too quickly. They made the right speeches about respect and autonomy. They let people believe that government by a king would never go wrong. And by the time it did, and things got bad enough to inspire a younger resistance, she and Alex and the old-school OPA would be off the board. Then who would be left to fight? Why would they think there was any hope in it?

Recruitment wasn't her job. It belonged to Saba or Naomi or one of the other secret leaders of the underground, but she couldn't stop thinking about it. Alex had opened the issue. Now it itched.

Bobbie finished her check of the fuel cell crates and moved on to something the manifest listed as sensor components. The team had grabbed it off the freighter because any repairs the *Storm* needed were done in-house and on the fly. Spare parts were always at a premium.

Inside the crate was a sealed gray ceramic box about the size of a toaster with seven input ports on its side. Bobbie used her terminal to look up the serial number on the case. It was listed as an active sensor array control node—the little processing station that coordinated data coming in from the radar and ladar sensors, did first-level analysis, and acted as the hindbrain between the main computer and the sensors themselves. An expert pattern-matching system about as smart as a pigeon. If they were sending a new one to the *Tempest*, it might mean that they'd lost one in the fight for Sol. It was a nice idea, anyway. That the big dreadnought had taken some damage in the fight it couldn't just heal for itself. And it made sense. The weird hulls and reactors and engines of the ships might heal like the ship was a living thing, but they were protomolecule technology. The sensors and computers on the Laconian ships were human tech. Anything built by humans had to be hand repaired or replaced. It was one of the few weaknesses of the hybrid ships.

And if she had the replacement parts, it might mean there was a hole in the *Tempest's* sensor package. If they could figure out where it existed, maybe they could get close to the big ship before detection. They could . . . fire one meaningless torpedo before the big bastard swung around and ripped them into atoms. Paint something rude on the hull. Pee on it. Jillian's crack about moral victories was annoying, but that didn't make her wrong.

Bobbie put the sensor node back into its case and marked the box as one to definitely keep for themselves. An hour later, she'd finished going through the pallet of spare parts and tagged them all as keepers. Her terminal was playing a little three-dimensional game of "fit all the loot." Every time she marked a crate, the program shuffled everything in the

Storm's storage compartments looking for a place to put it. At some point, they'd have to start storing things in the staterooms and hallways, and that point wasn't far off.

She opened a crate of protein flavorings for the galley food processor and marked it DO NOT KEEP. She started to close it, then sighed and changed it to KEEP. The terminal played its little space-shuffling game. An army marches on its stomach, the ancient saying went, and people who were risking their lives for the cause should probably be able to have a tasty meal every now and then.

It was interesting, though, that the *Tempest* was coming after them. It felt good to know she'd hit the enemy hard enough to sting. Maybe it was just pride. Admiral Trejo angry that a pirate would dare act in his solar system. Or maybe the political officer had been close enough to someone high in command that this was a personal vendetta now. Or maybe they just really wanted their protein flavoring back. Whatever it was about the raid that made Laconia jump, she hoped they were as bothered and itchy as she was.

She reached the end of her row of pallets, which meant her work was half-done. A few more hours digging through boxes, and she could sneak off to one of those old bars at the port and drink her troubles away. Or at least distill them down to nausea and a hangover. And maybe she'd get a steak. She felt like Saba and the resistance could afford to buy her a steak. Her stomach rumbled at the thought. So maybe she called it a day now, and came back to finish tomorrow.

A small pile of high-impact crates had been set off to the side, away from the main rows of pallets. They had a variety of warning labels on them, so her crew had put some space between them and the rest of the supplies. All right. Go through the dangerous stuff now, *then* call it a day.

The top crate in the pile had a caustic chemical warning, and was filled with spray cans of degreaser. Not exactly a threat to life and limb. She moved the crate over to the regular supplies. Beneath it was a crate marked HIGH EXPLOSIVE that had reloads for the rocket launchers the Laconian

power armor could attach. She marked that one as definitely keep and set it aside.

Under that was a large metal crate. The label said MAGNETIC CONTAINMENT EXPLOSIVE DANGER. That was odd. None of those words seemed to go together in a way that made sense to her. She checked the serial number on the side of the crate with her terminal, and it came back ID not found.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Nothing on the crate indicated that opening the latches was hazardous, so Bobbie popped them and lifted the lid. It was much heavier than it looked. Lead lined, maybe. Inside, cradled by enough foam to keep a robin's egg intact during high-g maneuvers, were four metallic spheres about the size of Bobbie's two fists held together. All four had cables running to a massive power cell that gave off a low hum of high electricity. The power cell's indicator showed that it was at 83 percent charge. Each sphere had its own indicator where a cable from the power cell connected to it. They all showed 100 percent.

Bobbie very carefully lifted her hands away from the box and took a step back. Nothing in the box itself looked all that dangerous. Just four big metal balls and a high-capacity battery. But every hair on her body was standing straight up. It was all she could do to stop herself from running away.

Bobbie knelt back down next to the crate and very gingerly lifted one of the metal balls out, making sure to keep the cable connected to the power supply. Once it was out of its foam cradle, warning text could be seen. ENSURE MAGNETIC CONTAINMENT SYSTEM REMAINS CHARGED—DANGER OF EXPLOSION, it said. Another, smaller warning read, DO NOT RUN ON INTERNAL POWER SUPPLY FOR MORE THAN TWENTY MINUTES. The labels on it were from the Laconian Science Directorate. Not military, except in that everything Laconian was military. Not usual ordnance, anyway. Nothing familiar.

Bobbie returned the sphere to its place in the foam. And sat back. Something in the spheres exploded when it wasn't magnetically restrained.

Fusion reactors worked that way. The magnetic bottle held the fusion reaction suspended because nothing material could handle the heat of the core. These little spheres weren't reactors, though. A fusion reactor was huge. It required extensive support mechanisms to inject fuel pellets, compress and fuse those pellets, and turn the fusion reaction into electricity. The Laconians were advanced, but it didn't seem plausible that they were so advanced that they'd created fusion reactors a little bigger than a softball. And these things were using power, not generating it.

She pulled out her terminal and called Rini Glaudin. She was an old Belter on the *Storm*. A high-energy physics PhD from way back in the day at Ceres Polytech who'd gotten radicalized in college and spent a couple of decades in a UN prison after she started helping the Voltaire Collective build bombs. Now she was the chief engineer and resident gearhead on the *Storm*.

"Boss," Rini said after a couple moments. She sounded sleepy, or drunk.

"Catch you at a bad time?"

"You can leave now," Rini said, but her voice was muffled, like she'd covered the mic with her hand. A minute later, "What is it?"

"I have a weird question, but if you had company," Bobbie said.

"He's gone. He was pretty enough, but postcoital conversation was not his strong suit. What's going on?"

"I'm going through the loot we pulled off that freighter," Bobbie said. "And I found this crate of stuff I'm having a hard time identifying. Thought maybe you could help."

"You're at that warehouse by the surface? Let me pull on some clothes and I'll get right down there."

"No," Bobbie said. "Don't do that. I think this might be dangerous and I don't want anyone in here until I figure it out. Hold on, let me send you some video."

Bobbie passed her terminal across the crate, giving Rini a good look at the power cell and the spheres. Then she propped the terminal up against the edge so she could use both hands to pick up a sphere and show the warning text to the camera. When she was done, she said, "Any ideas?"

There was a long pause. Bobbie felt the unease rising in her like an illness.

“Fuck me,” Rini said at last.

“What do you think it is?”

“So the big question about the *Magnetar*-class ships has always been power,” Rini said. There was a lot of background noise as she spoke, drawers opening and closing. Clothes being pulled on. She was dressing in a hurry. “The stars the ships are named after have incredible magnetic fields, but they’re rapidly rotating neutron stars, so how do you get that beam effect the ships have without, you know, spinning up a neutron star?”

“Okay,” Bobbie said. Her knowledge of astrophysics was pretty thin. “How do they?”

“No one knows!” Rini said. “But it would take way more power than a typical fusion reactor puts out. Everyone just sort of assumed that meant the Laconians had much better reactors than us. But we have the *Storm*, and our reactor is good, but its design is nothing paradigm shifting.”

“I’m sitting right next to this thing while you talk,” Bobbie said, “so go faster maybe.”

“Antimatter results in a one hundred percent conversion of matter into energy. Nothing else even comes close. If the Laconians power their beam with antimatter, that actually makes sense.”

Bobbie laughed. There was only a little mirth in it. “Am I sitting next to four bottles of antimatter, Rini?”

“Maybe? I mean, the only way to contain it would be a magnetic field. If it touched anything, boom. So, sure? Maybe.”

“How much of that stuff do you think is in here?”

“I don’t know. A kilo? A gram of it would be a bomb big enough to level a city. Based on the size of those orbs, you’ve probably got enough there to punch a hole in this moon. I mean, if that’s what’s in there.”

“All right,” Bobbie said. “Thanks. I’ll be in touch.”

“Fuck that, I’m on my way down there,” Rini said, then killed the connection. At least Bobbie understood now why the *Tempest* was treating

this as high priority. Looking at the metal balls in their case was making Bobbie's scalp crawl.

And then, all at once, it wasn't.

The fight had just changed. And she knew how to win.

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Chapter Thirteen: Naomi

The question is,” Saba said on Naomi’s monitor, “why did they have a political officer in the first place, que no?”

The *Bhikaji Cama* was on the float, and still half a week from a gentle quarter-g braking burn that would take weeks before they reached the transfer station at Auberon. With the drives on the ship, they could have done a full g the whole way, but efficiency and speed weren’t always the same thing. Carrying the reaction mass to accelerate and brake that hard would have meant giving up more of the cargo space. Maybe someday the Laconian technology would overcome the constraints of inertia—the protomolecule had been doing so since Eros—but for now that mystery was still a mystery, like so many others. Where did the ships that went dutchman end up? What would draw the attention and anger of the thing that had destroyed the protomolecule engineers?

Or, on a smaller level, why had a Laconian political officer been riding on a Transport Union freighter?

News of the failure had been slow coming to her. The first report had been sketchy and brief, and said little more than that the raid had gone pear-shaped. Political officer, the informants on the freighter, and one member of the assault team lost. The next thirty-four hours had been a thin slice of hell as she waited for the full after-action report, certain beyond doubt that Bobbie had been the one who’d died.

Only it hadn’t been her. One of her crew was dead, and her mission objective had slipped through her fingers, but Bobbie and Alex and the *Gathering Storm* lived to fight another day. The death of the political officer was just one of the stupid, random tragedies that happened anywhere,

anytime, but significantly more often during battle. If he'd lived, they'd know much more about what he'd been doing. As it was, they were down to educated guesses.

"We have confirmation that he was on his way to the Transport Union's transfer station at Earth," Saba said. "But whether that was a permanent placement or a stop along a longer path . . ." He shrugged eloquently.

Naomi stretched. She liked the freedom of free fall even though it meant doubling up her exercise routine. Or maybe because it meant that. More hours in the resistance band meant at least doing something physical. Feeling her body. And also there was a sense of being where she belonged. From the recording, she could tell that Saba was someplace with a steady gravity. The last four communications from him had all been the same, so a spin station or a mass large enough to hold him down. No one was on a steady burn for that long.

It wasn't really a surprise that something was happening on Earth important enough to warrant a dedicated representative at the transfer station. Apart from Sol's permanent role as humanity's original home, it was still the largest population center in the gate network. And Earth had the largest population of any planet. Even with settlements like Auberon and Bara Gaon Complex growing, there would never be enough ships or shipping to make a dent in the billions still left on Earth. But what exactly was on Winston Duarte's mind about Sol system was an important question. And one that they could have answered, if luck had broken their way just a little bit more.

She considered, rubbed her eyes, and hit Record. She'd edit her response down before she committed it to a torpedo, but just saying the words helped her think. And she could pretend she wasn't quite as isolated and alone as she was.

"The loss of our informants on the ship is going to be important," she said. "Without them, we wouldn't have known that the political officer was there in the first place. And if they hadn't spoken up, they'd still be alive. Not the best argument for working with us. Their families need to be taken

care of, and by us. Not Duarte's people. Otherwise we'll see fewer of these tips in the future."

It's always about relationships, Jim said in her imagination.

"It's always about relationships," she said. "And we have to hold up our end of the bargain. Take care of our own. To the other point, if we're going to find what Duarte's doing there, we need to get one of ours on the transfer station. Either find someone already on staff sympathetic enough to feed us information or someone who can be inserted into the administration. Trying to get the *Storm* to intercept another freighter is too high a risk."

But she thought it was possible that someone from the *Storm* could act as an agent of the underground on TSL-5. She wondered if Bobbie would go. Part of her thought she would. It was the dangerous assignment, after all. But Naomi also couldn't quite imagine her giving up command of the *Storm*, even for something important.

But she was getting ahead of herself.

"Before we take any direct action, we should finish a full inventory of what was on the freighter. If there were any supplies or equipment on it that were out of the ordinary, that might—"

Her system threw out an alert, and Naomi's heart leaped despite her better judgment.

It was a new message from Jim.

Duarte had been doing this almost since Jim had been taken to Laconia. Not quite public announcements, though there had been some of those too. Broadcasts sent out and picked up on passive with an old, compromised encryption scheme. Someone would have to want to know what was in them, anyway. The security wasn't the issue so much as a signature. An address. Here was a message that Laconia could spread through every system in the gate network, but only she could watch it. Or only she and the *Roci*. Or someone else who'd taken the time to crack the *Roci*'s old codes.

It was a private message, then, between Jim and her and every high-end government censor on Laconia. She had a vague memory about nobility on old Earth having witnesses on important wedding nights to watch the newlyweds fuck. This felt about as dignified.

And still, there was nothing under any sun that would keep her from playing it.

The message began with the blue wing-shaped crest of the Laconian Empire, a test tone, and then there he was. Jim looking into the camera with a mild amusement that most people wouldn't recognize as a variety of rage. He had on a collarless shirt, and his hair was combed enough to show where his hairline was starting to pull back a little. Anti-aging regimens had pushed human life from the three-to four-decade range of prehistory to four times that, but wear and tear still counted for something. Jim had suffered more than his fair share of punishing life experiences. And then the fake grin ended and he really smiled, and the decades fell away. Even before he spoke, she heard him. The mix of sorrow and amusement in his eyes, like a guest at a party that had gone so wrong that the travesty had lapped itself and become a little bit fun again.

She stopped the playback as he opened his lips and took the moment with him. Even just the picture of him. Then, steeling herself, she started the message.

"Hey there, Knuckles. Sorry it's been so long this time, but things got a little busy over here. I'm guessing you heard about Avasarala? The funeral brought in a lot of other guests to the palace."

Using the nickname Knuckles, which he never had when they were together, was the signal that he knew they were still hunting her. She also heard the ghost of sarcasm in the way he said *guests*, but the censors hadn't. There were real challenges to controlling communication between two people who'd been intimate for as long as she and Jim had been. The private language between them couldn't be perceived by bureaucrats, and what couldn't be seen couldn't be stopped. The story of her life, these days.

"There's still not much I can say. You know how it is. Uh. I met the guys who actually review this before it goes out. So hey, Mark. Hey, Kahno. Hope you guys are having a good day too. But yeah, things are fine here. Some rain in the afternoon, and Laconia's getting on toward what passes for midsummer. They're letting me have a lot of access to the grounds and I'm catching up on my reading. Mark and Kahno say I can't talk about what I'm

reading in particular, but it's nice to have access. I'm also watching the newsfeeds, and the things that Duarte . . . They want me to call him High Consul Duarte, but really it seems pretentious. Anyway, the work he's doing about figuring out the gates and what happened to the protomolecule engineers is actually pretty impressive. We disagree on other things, but he's on the job with that. Which, you know. Hopefully . . .

"But I hope you're okay. Give the kids my fond regards, and I'll send you another message as soon as Mark and Kahno have an open slot in their schedule. They're good guys. You'd like them. I love you."

The image cut to blue, and Naomi let out her breath. It always hurt to see him. And *the kids* meant Alex and Bobbie and Amos. He had no way to know Amos was lost to them, probably killed on the same planet where Jim was being held prisoner. Or that Bobbie and Alex were off leading the fight on the front lines as pirates and revolutionaries. But even with all of that, hearing him always made her feel a little better too. It was as near to proof of life as she'd get. He didn't look sick. He didn't sound like he was under duress—

The image changed again, and a new face appeared. A man with dark eyes, acne-scarred skin, and a calm in his expression that landed him directly in the uncanny valley. Naomi found herself pulling back from the screen even before she realized who she was looking at. High Consul Winston Duarte, emperor of thirteen hundred worlds, smiled as if he'd seen her reaction and sympathized with it.

"Naomi Nagata," he said, and his voice was pleasant and reedy. "I know I don't usually insert myself in these messages, and I hope you'll forgive me this rudeness. I don't mean to intrude, but I think we should talk, you and I. I want to extend an invitation to you. Contact any of my security people on any station or base or city, and I will have you brought safely here. I understand that you and your fellow partisans don't see eye to eye with me about the shape that humanity should take moving forward. Come talk to me. Convince me. I'm not an unreasonable man, and I'm not a cruel one. The truth is, over the last few years Captain Holden and I've found we have much in common."

Naomi chuckled despite herself. *Sure you did.*

“You’ve seen how Holden is treated. If you come as my guest, you’ll have all the same courtesies and comforts, and you’ll have access that will let you advocate for the changes you want without the violence and death. I know we haven’t met, but everything Holden has told me says you’re more than some old-fashioned anti-government extremist. He believes in you, and he has convinced me to believe in you too. Accept my offer, and you and Holden can be eating breakfast together before you know it. He’ll tell you himself I’m a decent host.”

He made a self-deprecating smile. *Carrot done*, Naomi thought. *Now stick.*

“If you choose not to, that is your right. But as an enemy of the state, the consequences will be less pleasant. It’s going to be better for you and for me and—excuse me if this sounds grandiose—for the whole of humanity if you come as a guest. Please at least consider the option. Thank you.”

The message ended. Naomi shook her head once, tightly, and held on to her anger like it was a vaccine against something worse. Whether Duarte said it or not, the offer included trading all she knew of Saba and the underground. In return, she would be waking up next to Jim, living in a prison a thousand times larger than the one she’d imposed on herself. That was all obvious. The poison was the rest of it—access, influence, the emperor’s ear. It was exactly the path she’d argued for. Working within the system to make a revolution without starvation and hatred and dead kids. He was offering it to her on a plate, and it was possible—just possible—that he was even sincere.

Everything Saba had learned through his sources said that Jim really was being treated well. A guest as much as a prisoner. That was the cheese in the mousetrap. It was cunning almost to the point of wisdom. If she believed in her heart that Duarte would break his word, it would have been a thousand times easier to reject him. But all the stories about the devil making a deal and then cheating missed the point. The real horror was that

once the bargain was struck, the devil didn't cheat. He gave you exactly and explicitly all that had been promised.

And the price was your soul.

The knock startled her. It was like something from a different world. A moment ago, she'd been on Laconia. Eden, complete with a snake. And now she was back in her box, floating a few centimeters above the gel of her couch, the straps drifting around her like seaweed wrapping the drowned. She shifted her monitor to show the exterior of the container, half-afraid to see the *Bhikaji Cama*'s security chief ready to take her in, half-hoping.

The woman outside gripped a handhold and looked straight into the hidden camera. A black zippered duffel floated beside her. She was heavysset, with gray-streaked hair pulled back into a harsh bun and dark skin that got darker around her eye sockets like she'd cried too long and it had stained her. Naomi recognized her as Saba's agent on the ship, but didn't know her name.

Naomi pushed off from the crash couch, drifting fast toward the far end. She landed feetfirst, absorbing her momentum with her knees, and tapped her security code into the mechanism. The mag bolts clacked. In the silence, they sounded like gunshots. Before Naomi could open the door, the other woman did. She slid through, pulling the black bag with her, then shut the door behind her and glanced around the container as if there might be something unexpected in it.

"What's the matter?" Naomi asked.

"Captain got a call middle of last shift," the woman said in a clipped accent that sounded European to Naomi. "Took me longer than it should have to get a copy. That's on me."

She shoved the bag at Naomi. Even without opening it, the shape of mag boots and the hiss of a flight suit were unmistakable. Naomi didn't wait. She slid the zipper open and started pulling the uniform on over her own clothes while the woman talked.

"Laconian destroyer burning in for a rendezvous. Should be here in eighteen hours. Say they're going to make a full inspection, so alles la—"

She gestured at Naomi's things. The home she'd made for herself. "Yeah, we're going to have to get clever about making that match the manifest."

"Inspection?"

"Full," the woman said. "This is all supposed to be bacterial samples. They see this . . ."

If they saw the false container, they'd know how the underground was staying hidden. And that some fraction of the Transport Union was in on the scheme. It might not be the end of the shell game, but it would be a data point too clear for Laconia to overlook for long. And it would be the end for her.

"Is it only us?" Naomi asked.

"Does it need to be more? Us is our problem. Focus on—"

"No," Naomi snapped. "I got an offer of amnesty if I turned myself in. This just after that? Are they coming for other ships, or do they already know I'm here?"

The woman's face went gray. "Don't know. I can find out."

"Do it fast. And get me a loader. I'll try to find a way to cover this over."

"Yeah," the woman said. "And crew manifest. I got to put you in somehow—"

"Not the priority," Naomi said.

"But . . .," the woman said. Then, "Right. All right."

Naomi looked around her container. It seemed sadder now that she had to leave it. She'd have to wipe the system, just in case she was taken. All her belongings would have to go too. She'd be starting over from nothing again.

Or she could go to the security office, announce herself, and spend the rest of her life waking up next to Jim. Eating real food. Maybe even talking Duarte into a better, kinder, less authoritarian future for all of humanity. If it was a trap, it was a good one. Offer her an out, make the threat, and then tighten the screws. If she'd been younger, it might have been enough to panic her. Convince her to announce herself. Sign the deal. It would be easy, and she could even tell herself that she was protecting the

underground and the people like the woman before her. She'd only tell Duarte things that wouldn't compromise Saba and their network. That wouldn't threaten Bobbie and Alex and the *Storm*.

She could imagine the version of herself that would have been able to do it. Not so different from who she was now. Younger. That was all.

"Emma," the other woman said. "We're going to pass you for crew, you'll need to know names. I'm Emma Zomorodi."

"You can call me Naomi."

"I know who you are," Emma said. "Find me someone who doesn't."

The woman—Emma—looked at her again, more closely, then turned away, shaking her head. The fear in her expression was thick enough to see. *It's okay*, Naomi wanted to say. *I know what to do. It'll be all right*. It would have been a lie.

"Come on," Naomi said. "We don't have time."

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Chapter Fourteen: Teresa

Yes,” Teresa said. “I know. Okay. Let me get ready.”

Muskrat barked once as if she’d understood the words. Probably she had. Dogs could have broad functional vocabularies. It was a point Dr. Cortázar often made. The fact that humans were not the only conscious animals seemed very important to him. It had always seemed obvious to her.

Teresa set her room to high privacy and sleep, dimming the lights and locking her doors. No one would disturb her now unless they were evacuating the State Building. Muskrat wagged hard enough that her back legs looked unsteady as Teresa changed into the same simple tunic and pants she normally used for gardening. They had no technology, so they weren’t connected to the palace network. She started up an entertainment feed on her system on low volume as if she were dozing and watching an old Caz Pratihari adventure.

Her window had a sensor in the frame that alerted a security officer when it was opened. So Teresa had opened it every now and then over the course of weeks, trying different ways to get around it. Was it electronic? She tried keeping the window and frame touching with a copper wire. Security still got their alert. Optical? She searched everywhere for anything resembling a pinhole camera or light sensor, but never found one. Motion activated? She tried opening the window very slowly over the course of days, but on the fifth day security got their alert. Not motion sensing, and it only went off when there was an eleven-millimeter gap between window and frame. Interesting.

It had turned out to be magnetic. A low-strength magnet in the window, when moved too far from a sensor in the frame, set off the alert. She'd solved this by using a plastic letter with a tiny magnet in it from her preschool alphabet set. Moving it a little bit every time she tried to open the window, until one time she opened it and no one showed up outside to make sure she was okay.

Now she slid her magnet to the correct spot, manually undid the window, and lifted Muskrat carefully out. She climbed out after, pulling the frame closed behind her. Muskrat chuffed and started off along the path to the edge of the palace, and Teresa followed behind.

It had been too long. It was time to go see Timothy.

She'd found the secret tunnel almost a year before. It was hidden by a rock in a group of ornamental trees. She'd initially thought it might have been dug out by some local animal. There was a kind of underground wasp that left holes that looked similar to it when they died and their hives collapsed. It had turned out to be part of a flood relief system to make sure the gardens never drowned in heavy rain. It led under the walls of the State Building compound and into a small field beyond. Intellectually, she knew that a normal girl might not have gone down the tunnel with the spearmint smell of broken ground and the thin coat of slime. She had pushed through easily, joyfully even, and a few dark moments later had found herself on the far side of the perimeter and free for literally the first time in her life.

She'd gone walking. Exploring. Discovering. Engaging in developmentally appropriate rebellion. And, most importantly, she'd made her first real friend.

Animals had made the path she and Muskrat followed through the forest. Bone-elk and ground pigs and pale, shovel-faced horses, none of which had any relationship to Sol system elk or pigs or horses. She walked down the path, her hands in her pockets. Muskrat bounded through the dappled shade, barking at sun-birds and smiling a wide tongue-lolling grin when they hissed back. It had been too long since she'd been to see Timothy, and she had too much she wanted to talk with him about. It wouldn't all fit in her head at the same time.

The forest at the edge of the State Building thickened at first, the gloom growing around her, and then the land began to rise. She started feeling her breath get deeper, and it felt good. Before long, the path led out of the trees entirely and into a clearing at the skirt of the mountain. She knew from her studies that the mountain wasn't natural but a kind of artifact of some long-forgotten alien project. Like a sandcastle, but tall enough that the top seemed to touch the clouds. Not that she'd ever been to the summit. Timothy's cave was much closer than that.

The entrance was in a little canyon not far from the clearing where she'd first come upon him. Muskrat knew the way better than she did. She walked down the pale sand along the path carved by water that had long since dried. Wide, fresh Labrador paw prints marked her way. By the time Teresa left the last scraggly trees behind, the dog was already at the bend that led there, barking and wagging her tail.

"I'm coming," Teresa said. "You're such a pain."

Muskrat shrugged off the insult, turned, and bounded ahead like a puppy. Teresa didn't see her again until she stepped under what looked like an overhanging shelf of sandstone and into the deeps of the cave. The natural stone gave way almost immediately to the soft glow of the cavern. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like bright icicles, and the walls were built with swirls and shapes in them like a seashell and a Euclidian proof had joined together and become an architect. Teresa always had the feeling that the walls changed to greet her, but of course she was only there when she was there, so she couldn't be certain.

A flock of tiny, glowing gnats flowed past her like a wave. Like she was underwater. The air smelled thick and astringent, and a coolness radiated from the walls.

Soft padding sounds came from ahead. Not human sounds, and not Muskrat either. The footsteps weren't even animal, not really. The repair drones were a little smaller than Muskrat, with dark, apologetic-looking eyes and multiply jointed legs. Totally alien, but they were the closest things to canine friends that Muskrat had, and the real dog ran around them, yipping excitedly and sniffing their rears as if there were anything doglike

to smell back there. Teresa shook her head and moved forward. The repair drones made their query tone, trying to intuit whether Muskrat wanted something. The drones were surprisingly good at judging at least the rough intentions of humans. Real dogs still seemed to baffle them.

The repair drones, the light gnats, the slow, creeping, wormlike stone diggers were all in the weird space between life and not-life. Designed by an intelligence that evolutionary forces had taken in a direction very different from humanity. They weren't exotic to her at all. As far as Teresa was concerned, they'd always been there, just like that.

"Hello!" Teresa called. "Are you here?"

The words echoed weirdly out of the deepness. "Hey, Tiny. I wondered when you were coming back."

Timothy's part of the cave was like another phase change. Nature to alien to human, if not exactly the kind of human residence she was used to. A backpack reactor leaned against the wall, thick yellow power cords going to a wooden rack of neat, well-maintained machines. She recognized the yeast incubator and the emergency recycler from her tours of the early settlements. Other decks she didn't know. All together, it was enough that Timothy could live like a monk and a wise man in his mountain for more than a human lifetime. His bed was a cot against one wall with a blanket of woven polycarbonate that seemed never to show wear. He didn't have a pillow.

The man himself sat next to a length of wood, a knife in his thick, callused hand. A pile of thin, curled slivers rested between his feet where they fell as he carved. He was bald and pale, with a thick, bushy white beard, wide shoulders, and arms with muscles like ropes.

She'd come across him months ago during one of her first excursions. She'd been trying to get high enough on the mountain to see the State Building, and there he'd been, eating his lunch and drinking from a scarred ceramic water purifier. He'd looked like nothing so much as an old cartoon of an enlightened guru meditating on a mountaintop. If there had been any threat in his smile, she might have been scared of him. But there wasn't, and she wasn't. And anyway Muskrat had liked him immediately.

“Sorry,” she said, sitting on the edge of his cot. “I’ve been busy. I have a bunch of new things I’m studying. What are you working on?”

Timothy considered the half-carved wood. “I was going for a marking gauge. I’ve got one already, but it’s a little big for the fine work.”

“And you can’t have too many tools,” Teresa said. The phrase was something of a joke between them, and Timothy grinned.

“Damned straight. So what’s up?”

Teresa leaned forward. Timothy frowned and put down the wood and the knife. She didn’t know where to start, so she started with her father’s plan to train her up.

He had a way of shifting his attention so that she felt like he was actually listening, not just preparing a reply in his head and waiting for her to stop talking. He focused on her the way he did on the wood he carved or the food he cooked. He didn’t judge her. He didn’t quiz her. She never worried that he would be disappointed with what she said.

It was the way she imagined her father would listen to her if he weren’t her father.

She wandered from topic to topic, telling Timothy about Connor and Muriel, the briefings and meetings her father was adding to her schedule, and all the day-to-day worries and thoughts that had built up without her even knowing, and ending with the unnerving conversation with Holden the dancing bear and the weird way he’d said *You should keep an eye on me* like it meant something more than it seemed . . .

When she ran out of words, Timothy leaned back and scratched his beard. Muskrat had curled up on the floor between the two of them. The dog snored softly, and one leg twitched as she dreamed. Two repair drones queried each other, their voices clicking in descending musical tones. Just telling the story left her feeling better.

“Yeah,” he said after a while, “well, for what it’s worth, you’re not the first person that felt like the captain was a splinter they couldn’t dig out. He has that effect on people. But if he says you ought to keep an eye on him, maybe you ought to keep an eye on him.”

Teresa leaned back against the wall and pulled her knees up. "I just wish I knew why he bothers me so much."

"He don't treat you like you're special."

"You don't treat me like I'm special. We're friends."

He considered that. "Maybe it's because he thinks your dad's an asshole."

"My dad's not an asshole. And Holden's a killer. He doesn't get to judge other people."

"Your dad's kind of an asshole," Timothy said, his expression philosophical, his voice matter-of-fact. "And he's killed a lot more people than Holden ever did."

"That's different. That's war. He had to do it or else no one would have been able to organize everyone. We'd just have stumbled into the next conflict unprepared. My dad's trying to save us."

Timothy held up a finger like she'd made his point for him. "Now you're telling me why it's *okay* he's an asshole."

"I don't—" Teresa started, then stopped. Timothy's comment made her think of a philosophy lesson, and Ilich talking about consequentialism. *Intention is irrelevant. Only outcomes matter.*

"I don't tell anyone how to live," Timothy was saying. "But if you're looking for moral perfection in your family? Prepare for disappointment."

Teresa chuckled. If anyone else had said the same thing to her, she would have bristled, but it was Timothy. That made it okay. She was glad she'd made the time to come out to see him.

"Why did you call him captain?"

"That's who he is. Captain Holden."

"He's not *your* captain."

A flash of surprise passed over Timothy, like it was a thought he'd never had. "I guess he ain't," Timothy said, and then a moment later, and more slowly, "I guess he ain't."

"Dad says he's afraid," Teresa said. "Holden is, I mean. Not Dad."

"They both are," Timothy said, picking his knife back up. "Guys like them always are. It's people like you and me that aren't scared."

“You’re never scared?”

“I haven’t been scared since I was younger than you, Tiny. I had a rough start.”

“Me too. My mom died when I was a baby. I think my father doesn’t like having women around me because it feels like replacing her. All my teachers have been men.”

“I never knew mine either,” Timothy said. “But I put something together later that I could sort of pretend was family. It wasn’t bad for someone that grew up on my street. While it lasted. I’ll tell you what, though, as fucked up as my childhood was? It’s got nothing on yours.”

“My life’s perfect,” Teresa said. “I can have anything I want. Anytime I want it. Everyone treats me well. My father’s making sure I have the training and education to govern billions of people on thousands of planets. No one has ever had the advantages and opportunities I have.” She paused, surprised by the hint of bitterness that had crept into her voice.

“Uh-huh,” Timothy said. “That’s why you’re always looking over your shoulder when you sneak out to see me, I guess.”



That night, back in her room, she couldn’t sleep. The small nighttime noises of the State Building took on a weird power to distract and startle her. Even the gentle ticking of the walls as they radiated away the day’s heat felt like someone knocking for her attention. She tried turning her pillow to press her cheek against the cool side and playing gentle, soothing music. It didn’t help. Every time she closed her eyes and willed herself down toward dream, she found herself five minutes later with her eyes open, halfway through an imaginary debate with Timothy or Holden or Ilich or Connor. It was past midnight when she gave up.

Muskrat rose with her, following her from bedroom to office, and then, when Teresa sat on one of her workbench stools, curled up at her feet and fell immediately to snoring. Nothing bothered her dog, or at least not for long. Teresa pulled up an old movie about a family living in a haunted

apartment on Luna, but her mind slid off the entertainment as quickly as it had off the pillow. She thought about going out and walking around the gardens, but that annoyed her too. When she realized what she actually wanted to do, she'd already known it for a while. Admitting it to herself felt like a surrender.

"Security log access," she said, and her room's system shifted from the haunted corridors of Luna to a businesslike user interface. Even as honored and important as she was, there were logs that she didn't have access to. No one except maybe her father and Dr. Cortázar could have access to the recordings from the pens, for instance. That was normal. And it didn't matter for what she needed. No one was worried about preserving Holden's privacy. She could have watched him sleep if she'd wanted to.

She set the system to generate a full track for Holden over the past week, then scrubbed through it. She knew that the State Building had ubiquitous surveillance built into it, but it was interesting to see where exactly the microlenses were and how much they could capture while staying invisible themselves. As she scrubbed through Holden's passage in the buildings and the gardens, she thought about all the other things she could watch on the feeds. Connor and Muriel, for instance.

On one of her screens, Holden sat on the grass, looking out at the same mountain where Timothy lived. The accelerated scrubbing made his casual gestures and adjustments seem spasmodic. Like he was vibrating. Then Muskrat was there with him. Then she was. She didn't like looking at herself on camera. She didn't look the way she felt like she did. In her mind, her hair was smoother and her posture was better. Without meaning to, she shifted on her stool to sit up straighter. Holden flopped to the grass and sat up with his back wet, and then she and Muskrat zipped out of the frame. She forgot her posture again and leaned forward.

Holden fidgeted on the screen, then rose and sped off. Her scrub was at twenty times faster than base. In under an hour, she could take in the shape of his whole day. Holden at his dinner reading something on a handheld. Holden walking through the same common area her class had been in, pausing to talk to a guard. Holden in the gymnasium, exercising on the old-

style machines that they used to use on ships. Holden sitting at a table on a veranda overlooking the city with Dr. Cortázar and a bottle of wine—

She tapped the feed, dropping back to normal speed, and found an audio track.

“—also jellyfish,” Cortázar said. “*Turritopsis dohrnii* is the classic example, but there are half a dozen more. An adult reverts to a polyp colony form under stress. Like an elderly man turning into a fetus. That’s not the model we’re using, but it means the organism has no set maximum life span.” He took a long sip from his wineglass.

“What model *are* you using?” Holden asked.

“The original inspirations for the work were corpses that the repair drones got hold of. Not really immortality at all, but the new organisms had some improvements. That’s where the breakthrough comes. That’s what we should really be focusing on, sacrifice or no. Healthy subject with a well-recorded baseline instead of this . . .”—his voice rang with contempt—“this *fieldwork*. How to achieve a more robust homeostasis. Just because it’s difficult to do doesn’t make the principal science unsolvable.”

“So not unnatural at all,” Holden said, tipping a little more wine from the bottle into the doctor’s glass.

“Meaningless term,” Cortázar said. “Humans arose inside nature. We’re natural. Everything we do is natural. The whole idea that we are different in category is either sentimental or religious. Irrelevant from a scientific perspective.”

“So if we get to a place that we can all live forever, that’s not unnatural?” Holden sounded genuinely curious.

Cortázar leaned in toward the prisoner, gesturing with his left hand while he swirled his glass in his right. “The only limits on us are what we can do. It’s perfectly natural to seek personal benefit. It’s perfectly natural to give advantages to your own offspring and withhold them from others. It’s perfectly natural to kill your enemies. That’s not even outlier behavior. That’s all in the middle of the bell curve all the time.”

Teresa rested her head in her hands. She was pretty sure Cortázar was drunk. She’d never been herself, but she’d seen some adults at state

functions get the same vague focus and sense of being a little off their own points.

“You’re right, though,” Cortázar said, “You’re exactly right. The foundation needs to be broad. That’s true.”

“Immortality is a high-stakes game,” Holden said, like he was agreeing.

“Yes. Plumbing the depths of the protomolecule and all the artifacts it opens up is the work of a hundred lifetimes. Making the researchers die and be replaced by other people with a less advanced understanding is clearly—*clearly*—a bad idea. But that’s policy. This is the way forward. So this is the way forward.”

“Because Duarte made it policy,” Holden said.

“Because we’re primates who hold valuable things for our own bloodlines at the expense of everyone else,” Cortázar said. “Only one person can ever be immortal. That was what he said. But then he changed the rules. She can be too because he’s found a justification for her. That she’s really just an extension of him. I’m not mad about that. That’s just the organism we are. I’m not mad. But it doesn’t matter.”

“That’s good,” Holden said.

“The important thing is that we get good data. One person. Lots of people. All the same. But bad experimental design? That’s what sin really is,” Cortázar slurred. “That’s not me either. Nature eats babies all the time.”

Holden shifted, looking directly up into the surveillance camera as if he knew exactly where the hidden lens was. As if he knew she would be watching. *You should keep an eye on me.* Teresa felt a crawling sensation coming up her neck and the feeling, even after he looked away, that he saw her as clearly as she saw him.

She shut down the feed, closed the logs, and went back to bed, but she still didn’t sleep.

Chapter Fifteen: Naomi

Getting what you want fucks you up. Naomi pushed the thought aside as she had a dozen times before.

The first part of breaking down her shelter was the easiest. She'd spent years on the float, sometimes running cargo herself, sometimes fighting smugglers for the OPA and the Transport Union. She knew all the tricks. Disassembling her crash couch and system into parts was the work of two hours. Everything she had was modular. Easy to take apart, easy to put into rotation as spare. Everything she'd had could dissolve back into the larger ship and not appear as anything more than a handful of off-by-one inventory miscounts.

The empty container was a little harder, but only a little. According to the manifest, her container was supposed to be filled with the same payload of Earth-farmed bacteria and microbes and starter soil as seventy other containers in the ship. Shifting the contents of just a dozen or so to a slightly less dense configuration left plenty of overage to fill the space that had been hers. By the time the supplies reached their destination, she'd be elsewhere. And even if Laconia backtracked the discrepancies, there wouldn't be much to suggest anything more than run-of-the-mill theft.

The real problem was time. Well, the *first* real problem.

The Laconian ship was already on a braking burn. Eighteen hours to rendezvous didn't leave her much time for everything she had to do. Emma was a help. The woman had more years working transport than Naomi did, and she could drive a loading mech like it was part of her body. Even so, they were cutting it close. And every hour of the mechs hissing and clacking, the smell of industrial lubricant, and the bone-deep ache of effort

was another chance for the regular crew to notice that something strange was happening. Toward the end, Naomi sent Emma away to see whether there was any information about the larger picture. If other ships were being stopped. If this was a coincidence, or if the destroyer knew that Naomi was there.

Until she knew, she had to assume there was hope. Another motto for her life these days.

Naomi moved the last pallets into the steel and ceramic that had been her home for months, closed the doors, sealed them, and slapped a customs inspection sticker over the seam. She still had to stow the loader mech and replace the stickers on all the containers she'd cracked, but that wouldn't take more than another few minutes. She had almost half a shift before the inspection. A little over four hours to reinvent herself and blend in with the ship's crew. That was the second real problem . . .

Getting what you want fucks you up.

They'd been in a bar on Pallas-Tycho not long after the two stations had become a single object. Clarissa had been in relatively good health then. Strong enough she could go drinking, anyway. Naomi didn't remember which bar they'd been in, except that it had gravity, so it had to have been in Tycho's old habitation ring. She did remember that Jim had been there. They'd been talking about how to address Alex's upcoming change in marital status. Whether he'd be bringing his new wife on the ship or taking a leave of absence to be with her or what. Every option had advantages, every one had drawbacks. Looking back, Naomi thought that on some level all of them knew that the relationship was doomed. Clarissa had leaned back in her chair, a glass of whiskey in her hand. Her voice was thoughtful. "Getting what you want fucks you up," she'd said.

"When I was in jail, there was nothing I wanted more than to be anywhere else. Then I got out."

"Into an apocalyptic hellscape," Naomi said.

"But even after that. When we got up to Luna and when we got on the *Roci*. It was hard. I knew what I was when I was in prison. It took me years to figure out who I was outside."

“We’re talking about marriage, aren’t we?”

“Getting what you want fucks you up,” Clarissa had said.

Naomi put her hand on the transport container. She’d put herself in prison in order to be safe, and her safety had turned her captive. All she wanted was to wake up next to Jim again. To have something like a pleasant, day-to-day life with him. And now that she couldn’t have it, all she wanted was her hermitage back.

Her hand terminal chimed. There was only one person it could be.

“Where do we stand?” she asked.

“I’ve got a plan,” Emma said. “Meet me in med bay three.”

“I don’t know where that is. Does the ship have a directory function? Because I don’t really think asking for directions is our best plan.”

“Shit. All right. Wait there. I’ll be down in ten. I can take you there.”

“Copy that,” Naomi said, and dropped the connection. It gave her time to reseal the containers.



Emma, on the float beside her, held the hypodermic needle between her finger and thumb like she was playing darts. Her technique aside, though, the plan was about as solid as Naomi could hope for at short notice. She stretched her chin up and Emma stabbed again, a quick pinch at her jawline at the right to match her already-swelling left.

“How’s that feel?” Emma asked.

“Itches,” Naomi said.

“Still up for the eyes?”

“Yeah.”

Inserting her into the ship’s roster wasn’t possible. Even if they could backdate all the paperwork to the *Bhikaji Cama*’s last port, Emma didn’t have the authorizations she’d need. And messing with the system immediately before an inspection was an invitation to disaster. Fail to shut down one logging system, and the last-minute change was a flashing pointer to whatever you most wanted hidden. So making Naomi into a

regular crewman wasn't possible, but making her not immediately match the biometrics for Naomi Nagata was in reach. All it took was a few well-placed needle sticks and some fluid that caused mild swelling. The only trick was changing the shape of her face in ways that made her look like someone else and not just herself, only puffy.

The med bay was old, but well put together. Nothing had the shine of the new. Everything was worn. But it was only worn, not neglected. Naomi had been around long enough to know the difference. She considered her new face in the hand terminal's camera. Emma's first move had been to shave her hair into an unflattering topiary that made her forehead seem wider and her eyes closer together. The swelling in her brow and jaw had thickened her features already. The system's match to her normal appearance was only 80 percent. Enough that even if they identified her, it could be written off as a false positive.

Unless they already knew she was there.

"I'm putting you in with the crew working the heat sink," Emma said. "Chief has them swapping out coolant exchanges."

"Joy," Naomi said.

"The stink'll give you a reason to be wearing a mask," Emma said. "And it's a mixed-shift crew. Any luck, everyone will think you're from the other one."

Emma drove the needle into the flesh under Naomi's eye. It only hurt a little. "How long do we have?"

Emma checked her terminal and spat out a low, grunting curse.

"We should go," she said, dropping the needle into Naomi's skin one last time. "They're already positioning for transfer."

"If they take me," Naomi said, "I will try to hold out until you can get away. But go quickly, and make sure Saba knows what happened."

Emma didn't meet her eyes, but she nodded. This had always been a risk. It was what they'd signed up for. As Emma gave her a mask and led her down to the engineering decks, Naomi wondered how Bobbie and Alex would find out about it if she was captured. And what Jim would hear. The

temptation was still there. If she did it—if she jumped instead of waiting for the push—she could control the fall.

The coolant lines on the *Bhikaji Cama* were an old design but in decent condition. She'd flushed lines like them back in her water hauler days, and the process wasn't that hard. Punishing and foul, but not hard. There were four others on the team. Five people on a three-shift boat. It wasn't much of a disguise.

The full process would run about four hours if nothing went wrong. She had to hope it was long enough for the Laconians to come, make their inspection and move on. All she would have to do was stay quiet and small until the danger passed. She fell into the work, taking orders from the foreman, doing her part with as little fuss as she could manage. She'd almost forgotten there was anything to worry about more pressing than not getting too much coolant in the air filters, when the interruption came.

"Make safe! Make safe! All you fucking bastards hold the work and make safe, yeah?"

The others all closed down the lines. Naomi did too. There wasn't much choice.

The man who pulled himself past the yellow work barrier was dressed in a chief engineer's uniform. Behind him, three soldiers in Laconian blues, one with a captain's bars. Naomi hooked her foot into a wall handhold. Her heart was going fast, and a hint of nausea plucked at her that had nothing to do with the stink of coolant. The chief engineer motioned for them to take off their masks. The others started to comply. If she hesitated now, it would only call attention where she didn't want it.

Naomi pulled off her mask.

"Was that discussed with senior staff?" the Laconian captain demanded, continuing whatever conversation they'd been having before they came in the room.

"No," the chief engineer said. He was a younger man, but with a rough, scarred face that made him ageless. "Why would it be? Captain says it. We do it. That's how it is. That a problem?"

One of the other Laconians held a hand terminal up to the face of her team foreman. The terminal chimed. Naomi felt a sick kind of peace descend over her.

“It’s an irregularity,” the Laconian captain said. “The political officer will want a full report when you reach the transfer station.”

“Political officer?” the chief engineer asked. Despite herself, Naomi’s ears pricked up. If this was related somehow to the mission in Sol—if Laconia was making a broad crackdown—maybe they weren’t here looking just for her. It was a thin hope, but it was something.

“New oversight regulations,” the Laconian captain said as the hand terminal tracked over Naomi’s face.

“Never heard of them.”

“You’re hearing about them right now,” the captain said.

The soldier frowned. “Sir? This one’s not on the crew list.”

I am Naomi Nagata. I would like to accept the invitation of High Consul Duarte. Please let him know. It was all she had to say. It would even be a relief, knowing that she’d done all that she could first. The chief engineer looked at her and shrugged. “Course she’s not. She’s on the apprentice program.”

The Laconian captain looked at her, uncertain. She kept the confusion off her face. No one on the ship but Emma was supposed to know she was there. *Play along*, she thought. *Just play along.*

“She’s old to be an apprentice,” the captain said.

“Had some trouble back home,” she said. “Trying to make something new.” The lie was easy.

“She needs to be on the crew rolls,” the Laconian captain said, turning away.

“Why?” the chief engineer asked. “She’s not crew. She’s an apprentice.”

“Apprentices are part of the crew,” the captain said, a note of exasperation in his voice.

“First I’ve heard of it,” the chief engineer said. “If I put her in, it starts counting her hours toward a benefits package like she was crew. That’s not how it works.”

“You can take that up with the political officer too,” the Laconian captain said. The last of the work crew was scanned and cleared.

As they left, the chief engineer looked back. His eyes met hers. There was a subterranean joy in them. “As you all were. Shit’s not going to maintain itself.”

“Yes, chief,” Naomi said, and put her mask back on.

They fell back into the familiar rhythms of labor, but Naomi’s mind was working on more than the lines. The others on the team didn’t seem to have noticed anything odd in the conversation. One of them—a thick-faced man called Kip—treated her a little worse, but that was probably just because he thought she was lower status now. Nothing odd about that. When the new exchange was in, the old one sealed, and the diagnostics all in optimal range, Naomi wanted nothing more than a shower and a meal. She didn’t have a cabin of her own, she didn’t know where the gang showers were, and she wouldn’t have a locker there. Even if she got to the right place, after she cleaned up, she’d have to put the same coolant-stinking jumpsuit back on. That seemed worse than not cleaning up in the first place.

She followed the others as they headed back to the crew decks. Lagging behind. She wanted to go to her container. The urge to check her incoming feeds itched as badly as her jawline where the swelling was just starting to go down. But it was gone. Months of habit had just become irrelevant, and she pulled herself along the off-white halls, moving from handhold to handhold with the feeling of having woken from a long dream to find herself in some foreign station where she didn’t belong.

The mess hall had six people in it, but it was built for thirty or more. She pulled herself to a dispenser, but couldn’t get food. It wanted an access code or ID match that she didn’t have. She went to a corner by herself, bracing on a wall-mounted foothold, and waited without knowing what exactly she was waiting for.

Her thoughts moved in the silence of other people’s conversations. When, after an hour or so, Emma appeared, Naomi was almost surprised to see her. The woman pulled a double share of food and brought it over.

“They’ve moved on,” Emma said quietly. “Docked, ran down the whole fucking ship stem to stern, told the captain that he’d need to talk to someone at the transfer station, and gone.”

“Political officer,” Naomi said. “I heard. We got word of one heading for the transfer station in Sol system too. Earth.”

“Well, looks like we have political officers now,” Emma said sourly.

Naomi nodded with one fist. The crackdown was broad, then. A tightening of control over the whole Transport Union. More than that, it might be a sign that Duarte and his machinery were starting to suspect the Transport Union’s role in smuggling the underground from system to system. Or had other plans that wanted loyal and trusted eyes beyond the governors and their staffs.

If they found the shell game, it could mean a serious retooling of their methods at best. At worst, the end of the underground. With Medina in control of the slow zone and their methods of transportation exposed, they were in real danger of becoming thirteen hundred fragmented, isolated movements, unable to support or help each other.

“No one checked you, though?” Emma said.

“Oh, they checked her,” a voice said behind them. The chief engineer floated over and took position beside them. “They caught her.”

Emma blanched. So apparently she hadn’t been behind that.

“I appreciate you covering for me,” Naomi said. “It might be better for you if we just kept it at that. I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“Are you kidding?” the chief engineer said. “That was the best thing that’s happened to me since I signed up for this haul. Seriously, it was my pleasure.”

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, but—”

He handed her a card. “Override access to a private cabin and a commissary account,” he said. “It’s off the books, so even if there’s an audit, it’ll just come back as unused and overages.”

Naomi looked at it, then at him. Never look a gift horse in the mouth, they said. But it was bad advice. “I’m guessing there’s something you’ll

want in return? Because I think we're going to need to be very, very clear what that is."

"No," the chief engineer said. "Nothing. You've already paid me out. I'm just glad I get the chance to hand some back."

"Excuse me for being rude," Naomi said, "but I've never really trusted the whole kindness-of-strangers bit."

"You're not a stranger," the chief engineer said. "You're the reason I'm an engineer. My dad was a kid on Ceres when the Free Navy stripped it. You and your crew? You put your hands out in peace in the middle of a civil war. You built the Transport Union. As far as I'm concerned, we should kick the captain out of his quarters and give them to you. You more than earned them."

Naomi reached for her hair, trying to pluck it down over her face, but Emma's haircut didn't leave enough for that. "You know who I am, then."

The chief engineer coughed out a laugh. "Of course I do. Anyone in the Belt's going to know Naomi fucking Nagata. It's just these Laconian fucks who can't see what they're looking at. And again, it's a real honor."

"Chuck," Emma said, and her tone made the word a warning.

"I won't say it again," the chief engineer—Chuck—said, lifting a hand. "But don't either one of you worry. I'll get you shuttle access as soon as we're close to port. You're safe with me."

Naomi nodded her thanks, and Chuck beamed. She saw now how young he was. His delight with himself made her heart ache a little. He'd gotten away with something, and his pride was bright enough to read by. She even had a sense of what she must look like through his eyes—a demigod. A figure from myth appearing in his life. A celebrity. God knew she'd seen enough people look at Jim with that expression. This must be what it had been like for him all those times.

It was a feeling she could easily learn to hate.

Chapter Sixteen: Elvi

The ships were old transports that had been hauling people and supplies around Sol system's asteroid belt for a generation before the first gate opened. Elvi watched them being positioned near the surface of the Tecoma ring gate with the *Falcon's* highest-power optical telescopes, and the images were still fuzzy. Both vessels were at most a few dozen meters top to bottom, and they were almost a billion kilometers away. If the *Falcon's* sensor arrays hadn't been orders of magnitude more sensitive than her eyes, they wouldn't have been anything close to visible. But she could make out the mechs and drones crawling over them, making the automated checks and last-minute verifications. Maneuvering thrusters bloomed and vanished as they shifted along the plating and drive cones, checking and double-checking that nothing would go wrong. There was deep irony in that, but if she thought about it too much, she just got angry.

"Hey, sweetie," Fayez said from the doorway. "Can I get you anything?"

"Still no. Just like three minutes ago," she snapped. She grunted, regret jumping into her throat just behind the words. "Sorry. That was shitty."

"No, I see where you're coming from," her husband and intellectual companion of decades said. "I'm hovering. Look."

He let go of the handhold and floated free for a moment, grinning at his own physical pun. She laughed more at the grin than the joke.

"I'm fine," she said. "Really. Perfectly fine."

"Good. That's good. Because some people, when they almost die from being semidrowned in half-alien goo while under a sustained high-g burn, get a little rash. Or zits. Near death can really do terrible things for acne."

“I’m sorry I scared you,” she said. “I didn’t mean to. Really. But I’m fine now.”

Fayez pulled himself into the room, twisting ungracefully to hook his ankles around the wall footholds and absorb the momentum with his knees. He stood on the wall beside her, looking down at the images on her screen.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “that my deep existential panic at the prospect of your death hasn’t faded as quickly as yours.”

“It’s okay. I probably wouldn’t be as calm about it if it had been you. By the time I found out about it, I already wasn’t dead. Doesn’t really have the same punch when you miss all the will-she-or-won’t-she clinging-to-life thing.”

“Yeah,” Fayez said. “I didn’t love that part. I mean, in fairness, I don’t love this part either.”

She put up her hand, and he wrapped his fingers in hers. It was how they always were. Decades of habit shrouded what they meant in humor and wit, but she knew his distress was real. And that her resentment of it wasn’t really about him as much as the raw idiocy playing out near the transit ring. She took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly between her teeth.

“I feel stupid,” she said. “I really thought we were a scientific mission.”

“Aren’t we?”

She pointed one thumb toward the monitor. “That’s not science. ‘Light shit on fire and see what happens’ isn’t science. This is throwing dynamite into a pond to see if any fish float to the top.”

“So . . . natural philosophy?”

“Military bullshit. Solving every problem by trying to blow it up.”

“Yeah,” Fayez said. “Almost makes you wish you could quit, doesn’t it?”

Elvi pushed back from the monitor. In free fall, it was only a gesture that she was disengaging. Fayez’s dark eyes didn’t leave hers. “It wouldn’t be the first thing that made me think that.”

“But.”

“I know. If it wasn’t us,” she said, “it would be someone else. Someone who didn’t know as much as we do. It’s just . . .”

“You think whatever’s on the other side will hit back?”

“Yes. Maybe,” she said. “I don’t know. I don’t like things that can only happen once. You can’t make sense of something when there’s no pattern. One data point is the same as none.”

“Would you feel better if the big man committed to doing this again a few dozen times?”

A couple billion kilometers away, the drive lit up for a moment, flickered, and went out.

“I think he did.”



Elvi wasn’t sure what the atmosphere on the science deck really was. She wanted to think that everyone else was just as uncomfortable with Sagale’s plan and, like her, staying as quiet about it. But the truth was that Jen and Travon looked excited. Their screens showed the inputs from a dozen probes and arrays scattered through the local void and three countdown timers. The first timer showed the time—down to minutes now—when the first ship would pass through the gate and, hopefully, into oblivion. Trailing that by only a few seconds, the timer for the second ship—the bomb ship—that would follow it. And then with three full minutes more, the detonation clock.

They were too far away to disarm the antimatter bomb. Making sure the experiment failed safe if it failed would be up to Medina Station. If the bomb ship somehow actually made the transit into the gate network, Medina would shut it down without detonation. The *Falcon*, almost a light-hour away, was watching literal nothingness for signs that the thing beyond the gates—the thing *inside* them—had even noticed what they’d done.

“You know what would be funny?” Fayez said. “If this whole blowing-things-up plan broke the gate and we were all trapped here on this ship for the rest of our lives with no way home.”

Sagale glowered and cleared his throat.

“You’re right,” Fayez said. “Too soon.”

The first counter fell to zero, turned from blue time-to-transit to red time-since-transit. In an hour they would see it happen, hear the tech ship's report. In the vast emptiness, all they had was the assumption that the plan had actually gone forward.

"Everyone strap in," Sagale said. "If the enemy fires another of those void bullets at the system, we may lose consciousness for a time."

Jen and Travon put on their restraints. Elvi already had hers on. Twice before, she'd lived through the consciousness-breaking backlash of pissing off whatever had murdered the protomolecule. Once on Ilus with an army of alien bug-robots ready to cut her down, once sitting on a couch in a waiting room on Luna watching the newsfeeds as the *Tempest* prepared to annihilate Pallas Station. She was almost used to it at this point, or that was what she told herself. Still, she wasn't looking forward to doing it again. The second timer zeroed. The bomb ship was through the gate. Presumably it had gone dutchman too.

The seconds seemed to go slower as the last timer fell. On the screen two ships waited outside the gate, preparing to begin the first transit. It was like looking into the past, waiting for something to happen that had already happened. The light bouncing off those ships and streaking toward her was almost an hour old, from her frame of reference, anyway.

The last timer hit zero. Somewhere farther away than a mere normal light-hour, something very violent happened in whatever non-space the gates passed through. Elvi held her breath.

"Are we seeing anything?" Sagale asked, his voice tight and tense.

"Nothing yet," Jen said.

Elvi waited for the weird dilation of perception. The sense of being able to see atoms and waves, of experiencing herself and her environment in such detail that the border between them vanished, her body and the universe smearing together like a water-color painting under a faucet. One breath, then another. It kept not happening.

"All right," Sagale said. "Protocol says we will hold position and remain in safety restraints until—"

"Holy shit," Travon said. "Are you guys seeing this?"

On the screens, the space around them boiled. As Elvi watched, confirmation started rolling in from the outlying probes. One after the other, they all reported the same thing. An uptick in quantum particle annihilation. The underlying hum of the vacuum cranking up to a shriek.

“That,” Travon said, his voice low and breathy, “is beautiful. Just look at it.”

“Report,” Sagale said.

“It’s like what we saw in Sol system, sir,” Jen said. “Virtual particle activity has increased massively. I’d have to say they noticed us.”

“Check the time stamp,” Sagale said. “Have we lost consciousness? Did we stay awake the whole time?”

“We did,” Elvi said even before she checked the data. “I mean the second one. We didn’t lose consciousness. We stayed awake.”

“Yeah, our entanglement experiment didn’t break either,” Jen said. “They all failed in Sol system. Ours looks fine. Whatever this is, it’s different.”

Sagale chuckled, and a broad smile grew on his lips. Elvi thought it was the first time she’d seen the man showing anything like real pleasure. “Well now,” he said. “*That* is interesting.”

“God *damn*,” Travon said, “look at this. This is incredible.”

The rates of virtual particle creation and annihilation were swamping the sensors. All the readings pegged at shit-if-I-know-but-more-than-I-can-keep-track-of. Elvi pressed her fingertips to her lips. She’d been braced for the weird dive into broken consciousness. That it hadn’t come was somehow worse.

“Continue monitoring,” Sagale said. “High Consul Duarte will be pleased with this.”

“Why?” Elvi asked.

Sagale looked at her as if she’d made a joke he didn’t quite understand. “The behavior changed. It suggests the enemy can be negotiated with.”

“It doesn’t show change at all. You fired the magnetic field projector in Sol system and whatever this is responded with the bullet on the *Tempest*.

Then you came here and did something completely different, and it responded differently. There's literally no data we can take from that."

"We know now that when we send a punishment ship through, the enemy feels it," Sagale said. "All this? It isn't because a couple of ships vanished. Ships have been vanishing since we started using the gates. This tells us that the tool we've made can hurt them. That's very important. We won't know if it can teach them until we repeat the experiment."

And there it was. *Repeat the experiment.*

"Jen?" Travon said. He hadn't heard anything Sagale said. All his attention was on his screens. "Are you seeing this? There's precipitate."

Sagale's attention turned. "There's what? What are you seeing?"

"The virtual particles aren't all annihilating. It's generating some . . . looks like hydrogen ions? Basically just raw protons."

"Does it pose a threat?"

"No, this is trivial. Even in normal interstellar space, you have an atom or two per cubic centimeter. This is still way below that. If this system hadn't already been weirdly empty, I wouldn't have noticed this at all. I mean, I guess if it goes on for a few decades, it could get to be a problem? Maybe?"

Sagale looked over at Elvi. His plate-flat face was expressionless. It made him seem smug.

"Still," Jen said, "if it's the whole solar bubble, that is a shit-ton of energy. Not rigorously speaking, of course, but just a lot."

"Energy?" Fayez asked.

"Energy. Matter," Jen said. "Same thing. If they're creating actual matter, they're throwing a lot of energy at us to do it."

"Is it evenly distributed?" Fayez asked. Elvi heard something in his voice. A deep rasp that spoke of growing fear.

"Oh," Jen said. And then a breath later, "Oh shit."

"Kind of early to know that," Travon said, clearly behind the curve. "We've only got a couple dozen probes out there. Why?"

"So I know I'm just the geology guy here," Fayez said. "But aren't we a little less than two light-hours away from a neutron star? One that we were

all really impressed at how something had designed it to be right on the edge of collapse? And now something's putting more energy and mass into the system? Because that sounds like it could be a problem."

Elvi's gut tightened.

"Hold on," Jen said, her fingers dancing fast over her controls. The screen flickered as she generated energy curves against time and mass. A few seconds later, she made a little grunt like she'd been punched. "Well, shit."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Sagale said. "Nothing has happened yet. The star looks stable."

"The star was stable two hours ago," Jen said. "But when a rapidly spinning neutron star collapses into a black hole, a gamma ray burst comes out of the poles. A few seconds of it releases as much energy as Sol would in its whole ten billion years. They're very rare."

Travon's face had gone ashy. Elvi felt a shifting sensation deep in her gut, pulling her between fear and awe.

"Commander Lively, are we about to experience one?" Sagale asked, but Jen was elbows deep in calculations before he said it.

"It won't have gone critical," Jen said. "Not yet. Assuming the precipitate generation rate is uniform, which I don't actually know. But we should get out of here as quickly as we can."

"As quickly as we can without killing Elvi," Fayez said. "We almost lost her once. We can't do a max burn."

"All of us dying isn't better," Sagale said. Despite everything, Elvi felt a bleak tug of amusement at how fast the man could change his opinions in the face of evidence.

The admiral pursed his lips. His eyes focused on something internal as he thought. Then, "Commander Lively, please send out your analysis to the tech ship and the team on Medina." He tapped his control board, and his voice echoed through the ship. "All hands make ready. Expect an extended high-g burn."

"We can't just shoot the ring gate, sir," Travon said. "We've got about a billion kilometers to get to the ring, and a million to slow down in on the

other side. Less if we go at an angle, and we still need to miss Medina and the central station so . . .”

“I’m aware of the issues,” Sagale said. “Please make ready. Major Okoye, I’m going to ask that you report to the med bay. My understanding is that we may be able to make this safer for you if we forgo sedation in the submersion couch. It will be unpleasant.”

“That’s okay,” Fayez said. “She’s okay with that. We’ll both go without. I will too.” He turned to her. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I just really need you not to die.”

“I understand, Admiral,” Elvi said. “I’ll go now.”

Sagale nodded once, tightly. Elvi undid the restraints, pushed gently off, floating in the cool air. Fayez had already launched himself down the corridor toward the couches. Elvi grabbed a handhold, stopping herself. She didn’t know if the feeling in her chest was rage or fear or a bitter kind of amusement. Whatever it was felt cold.

“Admiral . . .”

“Yes, Major Okoye?”

I told you so hovered in the air between them. She didn’t have to say it. She could see that he’d heard.

On the screen behind him, the first ship’s drive came to life, moving the ship toward the ring gate. The illusion that it could still stop—that they could undo what had already happened—was as powerful as it was wrong. The bomb ship’s drive cone flared a moment later as it moved to follow.

In a smaller window in the same screen, the neutron star at the heart of the dead system glowed tiny and bright.

Chapter Seventeen: Alex

Hiding a ship in space wasn't all that different from hiding on a school playground. Find something bigger than you, and put it between you and the person looking. Even without something to hide behind it wasn't impossible. Space was vast, and the things that floated through it were mostly cold and dark. If you could find a way not to radiate heat and light, it was possible to get lost in the mix.

Alex ran a map of the Jovian system forward in time, then back again. The moons spun around the gas giant, then reversed and spun back to their starting places. Possible paths shot through the imaginary space like threads of copper, tracing the complex interactions of thrust and temperature and the ever-changing invisible clockwork of interacting gravity. And as he manipulated the variables—what paths became open if they could add another half a degree to the ship, what closed down if they shortened the burn time—the paths blinked in and out of existence. A plan slowly began to form.

Finding an escape route to get the *Storm* off Callisto before the Laconian battleship came in range meant plotting a course off the moon that only included engine burns when the massive bulk of Jupiter was between them and the inner system, and then floating cold and dark when they were in the open. That narrowed the range down. But it was still a little more complicated than that.

Io, Europa, and Ganymede all had observation stations that might be in Laconian control and could pick up their launch and flag it as suspicious. He also needed to plan the launch for a time when Callisto had Jupiter between it, the sun, and the other three Galilean moons. Alex ran the orbital

simulation forward again. A solution existed. There was a window where Callisto was alone on the antisunward side of Jupiter, caught in its shadow long enough to get the *Storm* off the ground. It made for a tight window. Maybe too tight.

They did have a few advantages. The *Storm*'s skin returned an extremely low radar profile compared to other ships. Her internal heat sinks could store days of waste heat. And when necessary, capillary-like microtubules in the ship's skin could be flushed with liquid hydrogen to ensure that the hull's outer temperature remained only a few degrees warmer than space. It was a very stealthy ship when it was flying dark. If the Laconians were looking for a standard rock hopper or salvaged military ship, the *Storm* could look too small to fit the profile. He checked the hydrogen supply, adjusted the temperature variables in his search, and looked again. The window opened a crack wider.

They could take off from Callisto when the moon was behind Jupiter, then do one very hard burn with the planet blocking line of sight to the *Tempest* and any other inner-planet observation posts. It wouldn't keep other ships and minor posts from picking up the drive plume—there were just too many eyes in the system to evade all of them, no matter how complex his flight path. But between running cold and keeping the main observers blocked, he could get a decent delta-v for a few hours. Then they could kill the burn and float dark for as long as the heat sinks held up. Once they'd put a little distance between themselves and the Jovian system, cozied up to the gravitational low-energy paths that the Belters and salvage miners used, they could fade in their fake transponder, start a very gentle burn toward the ring, and hope they looked like just one of dozens of ships headed that way.

Once they were far enough away, put in a call to Saba and see if any of the union ships had room to scoop them up and get them the hell out of Sol system.

It was pretty damn thin, as escape plans went. But they were living in thin times.

Alex ran the simulation back and forth, adding in various launch and escape burn projections until he'd come up with a plan that the computer agreed gave them the best chance of success. If he hadn't overlooked anything. If the variables were weighted correctly. If the gods didn't just hate them that day.

He leaned back, and his skull throbbed like his brain had an appointment elsewhere. He stretched his neck. The muscles felt like he'd been punched. There had been a time he could go for hours fine-tuning a flight plan. And he still could, but the price was higher. He swatted the desk to shut down the holographic map display. The room lights came up on the small and dingy working space he was occupying during their stay on Callisto. A desk that fed directly to the *Storm's* system so that none of his queries would leak out to Callisto's larger data environment. A wall screen with access to a couple thousand different information and entertainment streams. A combination sink, toilet, and shower alcove in the corner that included a rank mildew smell free of charge. It even had a cot with a flat pillow and threadbare blanket if he decided not to head back to his coffin hotel. All the discomforts of a naval base bachelor pad. It didn't make him nostalgic.

He was stirring a chalky analgesic powder into a glass of water, the grains of medicine swirling like stars, when his terminal began playing the first few bars of his favorite Dust Runners song. "Accept connection," he yelled at it, then gulped down his medicine. The bitterness crawled up his tongue like a living thing, and he shuddered. "Yo, Bobbie, what's up?"

"Meet me at the dining room in twenty," she said, then closed the connection before he could ask a question.

Dining room was just a code phrase for a small storage compartment off a seldom-used side tunnel. It was one of half a dozen rooms they'd designated for secret meetings. They were swept every couple of days for listening devices, and members of Bobbie's strike team dressed in civilian clothes kept an eye on them to see if anyone else was going in or out.

Alex's time in the military had all been on board ships or on naval bases waiting for a shipboard assignment. He'd never been a spy or special forces

operator like Bobbie. He found the built-in paranoia that came with a secret mission lifestyle exhausting.

“I should probably pick up some food,” he said to his terminal. It beeped a recognition at him, then sent an order to a noodle shop in the lower medina. The owner of the shop was a resistance member who would send a pickup notification to Caspar. It was another code. He wasn’t even vaguely hungry, but if someone heard him or got a copy of the signal, it sounded innocuous. Nothing about his life was what it looked like anymore.

Ten minutes later Alex walked into the back room of the noodle shop and found Caspar waiting for him. When they weren’t using the space for secret meetings, it was the noodle shop’s dry goods pantry, and boxes of supplies were stacked up against most walls. The station’s heating ducts had been closed off, so the room stayed about ten degrees cooler than the shop itself, and Alex could just see his breath in the air.

“How long do you need?” the kid asked without preamble.

“Dunno. Give me two hours, then we’ll meet up at the casino. Blackjack. I’ll be at the five-dollar table.”

“Copy that,” Caspar said. He pulled off the heavy hooded jacket he was wearing and handed it to Alex. Alex put the jacket on and passed his terminal to Caspar. The kid would wander the station for a couple hours. Anyone who was tracking Alex by terminal location would be sent on a merry chase. It was unlikely that anyone was tracking any of them. The terminals were as stripped down and anonymized as it was possible to make them. If their false identities had been cracked, they would probably already have been picked up by security and interrogated by Laconian operatives. But Bobbie had laid down the operational security law, and they all followed her rules to the letter.

Caspar took the terminal and stuffed it into his jumpsuit pocket, then gave Alex a cheery little wave and headed for the door. “Wait,” Alex said.

“Everything okay?” Something in Alex’s tone had put a little worry line between the younger man’s eyes. *Nothing is okay*, Alex wanted to reply, but didn’t.

“Just be careful. Something happens to you, it doubles my workload.” He tried to make it a joke, but it fell flat. The line between Caspar’s eyes deepened.

“I don’t need you to daddy me, Alex. I know my job.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Alex said, then leaned against the wall and rubbed his eyes. His headache made him want to press his face against it. Only a thin layer of composites and insulation separated him from the natural tunnel. Maybe some ice that was as old as the solar system itself would be cool enough to numb the throb in his temples.

“It’s no big deal,” Caspar said. “But my father pulled up stakes when I was seven. I didn’t need one then, and I don’t now.”

“Fair enough. Truth is . . .”

Caspar waited. Alex heaved a sigh.

“Truth is I’m worried shitless about my own kid, and I’m just projecting onto you. Don’t take it as anything else, okay?”

Alex waited for Caspar to leave, but he didn’t. Instead he sat down on a stack of boxes labeled SOY NOODLES and crossed his arms. “You think the Laconians know it was us?”

“What? No, I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t fuck around, Alex. I have family too.”

“It’s not that,” Alex said. He spotted a small bag of dehydrated onion flakes and picked it up. It felt cold in his hand, and heavenly when he pressed it to his temple. Caspar sat on his boxes, staring and bouncing one knee impatiently.

“Then what is it?”

“He’s getting serious,” Alex said. “Maybe even married. Probably married. It’s just making me think about how much I don’t want to mess things up for him. You always think you’re going to leave things better for your kid than you found them for yourself. That’s not working out for me.”

Alex moved his bag of onions to the other side of his head, but it had started to warm up.

“Worrying feels like you’re at least doing something,” Caspar said. “I get it. When I started flying for the union, I worried about my mom so that I

wouldn't feel guilty for leaving her behind."

"You're too smart for your age," Alex said. "But yeah, that's probably it. Or close enough. I was a shit father long before I left my family to play revolutionary."

"I dunno," Caspar said, then stood up. "My father took off because my mother asked him to stop spending the rent money on pixie dust. You'd win father of the year if it was down to a two-man race."

"Thanks," Alex said, and surprised himself by laughing. "That's a hell of a compliment."

Alex's terminal buzzed in Caspar's pocket. The kid pulled it out, then said, "Cap wants to know where the fuck you are."

"On my way."



The dining room was an abandoned storage space about six meters square with spray foam insulation walls and a carbon fiber door that didn't even have a latch. Piping that entered through the walls and then just ended hinted at a past as a machine room, though what infrastructure used to occupy the space was lost to history. A tiny green chalk X had been placed on the lower left-hand corner of the door and was surrounded by other graffiti. The graffiti was mostly gang boasts and assertions of sexual prowess. The green X meant the room had been swept for surveillance less than thirty hours ago and found to be clean. If it had been red, the underground would have left the devices in place and abandoned the room.

Bobbie was waiting for him when he arrived. Impatience in the former Marine eluded most people. She didn't pace. She never bounced a knee or a foot. The only time he'd ever heard her crack her knuckles was before they sparred in the gym. But Alex knew something was up the moment he walked into the room. She was standing perfectly still, but she was stiff, as though she was half flexing every muscle in her body.

"You're late," she said.

“I got caught up talking to Caspar at the drop, and now you’re kind of scaring me.”

“We have the battleship that shrugged off the combined fleets of Earth, Mars, and the Transport Union cruising toward us because we killed a high-ranking Laconian officer. If you weren’t already scared, you’re fucking stupid, and I know you’re not fucking stupid, Alex,” Bobbie said.

“Copy that, Gunny. It’s a fair point,” Alex said, and raised his hands in mock surrender. The dining room was his least favorite place to meet, mostly because there was nothing in it to sit on. Instead he found a patch of wall without any pipes sticking out of it and leaned into the foam of the insulation. “Why don’t you get me up to speed?”

“Sorry,” Bobbie said. She clenched her hands into fists and jammed them into her pockets. “I’m pissed at you right now and it’s not your fault.”

“What can I stop not doin’ so it ain’t not my fault anymore?”

Bobbie chuckled at that and shot him a thin smile. It wasn’t a very funny joke, but he knew she appreciated his not taking her anger personally.

“Something’s been bothering me. You’re right. And Naomi’s right,” she said. “The timer’s running out on our little resistance, and what have we accomplished? We’ve annoyed the empire. Snatched a few ships, some supplies. Killed a few Laconians. And maybe I used to think it was enough to spit in my enemy’s eye while he strangles me. But I’ve been thinking about Jillian’s assessment of the objective value of moral victories, and she wasn’t wrong either.”

Bobbie went silent, like she was listening to the words she’d said. She probably hadn’t spoken these thoughts out loud until just now.

“Are we talking about what I think we’re talking about?”

“I don’t know what you think we’re talking about, Alex.”

“Because,” Alex said, “if we’re talking about packing it in, it’s a lot easier to get off Callisto if we’re not trying to take the *Storm* with us. I mean, I’ve got a plan either way, but—”

“No,” Bobbie said, “we’re not talking about that.”

Anger roughened her voice. He wanted to pull back from her. Retreat, but he’d known her long enough to see it was the wrong way with her.

Whatever she was thinking through, she needed someone to slam it up against. Placating her wasn't going to make either of them happy. Or safe. Even if she did scare him a little, she was still Bobbie Draper, his old friend and compatriot.

But she was also a creature of violence whose frustrations were coming out sideways.

"Copy that, Gunny," Alex said, trying not to sound like a hostage negotiator.

"I'm not giving up," Bobbie said. "I'm figuring out how to *win*. How can we take our present circumstance and find the orthogonal move, the surprise attack that snatches victory from defeat. How do we do more than just *survive*?"

"*Survive* is a pretty good start," Alex said. "I've worked up a launch plan to get the *Storm* off of Callisto, if that helps."

"Yeah, it does. But running away isn't going to solve our larger problem."

"Cap . . . Bobbie," Alex said. "There are three *Magnetar*-class ships in the universe, and the one that kicked the whole combined fleet's ass is steaming toward us right now. Pickin' a fight with her is like me pickin' a fight with you. Not being scared is fucking stupid, to use your own words."

Bobbie didn't answer. She pulled a terminal out of her pocket. It was one of the cheap ones that kiosks in the markets would spit out for a few bucks. Enough battery charge for a few hours, and then you just threw it away and bought another one. She tossed it to him. On the screen was a picture of a small metal ball with text printed on it, and some sort of cable running out of the top.

"The fuck is this?" Alex said.

"The report's linked."

Alex flicked the screen with his index finger, and it changed to an article about the theoretical uses of antimatter for high-energy reactors. Even so, it took him a minute to understand what she meant.

"No," he said.

“Oh yes,” Bobbie replied. “Rini is ninety-nine percent sure. She’s been looking them over and doing the research. We’ve been able to produce trace amounts of antimatter since the dark ages, but it’s never been practical. Now it is. The Laconians know how to produce and store it. I will bet you a week’s wages that it’s coming from the same construction platforms that made the *Storm* and the *Tempest*, and it’s part of the resupply for the battleship. That big cannon of theirs must burn it like crazy when it fires.”

“Laconia’s a hard target, but if you’re right and we could figure a way to knock out those platforms—”

“Yeah, taking out their resupply is great,” Bobbie said. “But that’s just a tactical victory. That’s my kind of target. It’s not yours. Or Naomi’s.”

“My kind of target?”

“If we blew out the Laconian construction platforms, Duarte and his admirals would know why it mattered. But Kit’s friends at university? They’re the ones we need to inspire, for them it has to be something they can see. We have to do something that shows Laconia’s not invincible. That there’s a chance for us to get a new generation on board.”

“You want to drop these on Laconia?” Alex asked, aghast. Sure, they were enemies, but the idea of killing a planet full of people was horrifying. Even in war, there were lines no one should cross.

“If we start carpet-bombing civilians, we’re worse than the enemy.”

Alex felt a rush of relief. He was still fighting for the good guys. “Okay, good. I didn’t think you’d—”

“I want to kill the *Tempest*,” she said. “We show Earth and Mars and everyone in the Belt and every other colony out past the gates that Laconia’s battleship isn’t invincible. Show them that we can win. We’ll create a whole new generation of people willing to fight by lighting the biggest god damn signal fire the human race has ever seen.”

“Bobbie,” Alex said. Something in her eyes was more frightening than her fists had been. A fervor he wasn’t used to seeing there. All the fear and desperation suddenly transformed into something verging on fanaticism. “This is crazy.”

“We’re fucked, and we’ve been playing not to lose. I’m going to start playing to *win*.”

“No, you’re not.”

Bobbie stared at him. Her jaw slid forward a fraction of a centimeter. Every fiber of his body told him to back off, except for the one little part of his brain that knew showing weakness now was a path to disaster.

“You aren’t,” he said. “You’re stung because we had a win in our hands and we lost it. And then Jillian twisted the knife because she was frustrated too, and she’s kind of an asshole. And we found this”—he held up the hand terminal with the antimatter information—“so it feels like the universe handed you a way to redeem the loss. But what you’re really doing is trying to win back what you’ve lost by going all in. It’s shitty poker, and even worse as a battle strategy.”

“Fuck you, Alex. I do this for a living.”

“And you’re really good at it. And you’re smart. And I’m just a glorified bus driver who takes you where you need to be so you can kill people. But you’re wrong about this one, and you know you’re wrong.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“You want the big symbolic victory,” Alex said. “When has that ever been the smart move?”

For the first time, a shadow of doubt crossed Bobbie’s eyes. She crossed her arms, but she looked away from him. He leaned forward.

“You’re frustrated. And you feel trapped. And hitting back hard is what you do when you feel frustrated and trapped. But let me get us out of here. We’ll get these little balls of hell to Saba. And yeah, maybe he’ll send us back and we can take the *Tempest* down. Or maybe he’ll do something else. But let’s get more voices weighing in on this plan before we go all damn-the-torpedoes. Okay?”

“You think it’s an unwinnable fight. That’s what you just said.”

“I do,” Alex admitted. “But I’ve been divorced twice now. I wouldn’t take my word as gospel. I could be wrong about a lot of things. Yeah, your best soldiers are old shoe leather like you and me. But kids like Caspar are here too. Not as many as I want. Not as many as I think we’re going to

need. But some. I just don't think we should throw them away without a lot of consideration. Let's get out of Sol system. Let the big brains have a crack at the new info, and see what they think is the right strategy."

Bobbie took in a long slow breath and let it out through her teeth. "How long before dust-off? *If* we run?"

"We've got some time."

"All right," she said. "I'll think about it."

"Good," he said, and stood up, ready to give her the room.

"Alex?"

"Yeah, Gunny?"

"Don't take this wrong."

"All right?"

"If you really believe we can't win, you should think about whether you're coming with me if I go."

Chapter Eighteen: Naomi

It wasn't the first time Naomi had found herself the new addition to a crew. Even under the best circumstances, there was an unsettled period. Anyone coming into the webwork of established relationships, enmities, and personal loyalties that was a ship's crew needed time to find or create their own place. A time of isolation in the midst of a crowd.

In that sense, her appearance on the *Bhikaji Cama* was no different from other times. In the sense that she had appeared on the ship halfway through a run without stopping at a station or transferring over from another ship, it was a little weirder. And while they'd kept her identity hidden from Laconia, the small town's worth of crew on the ship was corrosive to secrets. Even as the command staff made a point of not noticing her existence, everyone knew who she was.

Her presence was equal parts embarrassment to the Transport Union, threat to the crew, and the most interesting thing that had happened in the long weeks of transit. Pulling herself down the corridors or getting meals from the commissary, she felt the attention in the way people didn't meet her eyes and the killing effect she had on conversations.

When they reached Auberon, she would need to vanish for a while and hope that her mysterious appearance was put down to rumor and myth. *I was serving on a ship last year, and when the ship was searched, Naomi Nagata just showed up in with the crew. Stayed with us for the rest of the run.* It was implausible enough that it might pass. Or it might be a problem. Either way, she had to touch base with Saba and see what her options were. The advantage of keeping the underground firewalled was that any single accident couldn't bring down everything. The disadvantage was that she

could never know what the big picture looked like. Even as one of Saba's top-tier strategists, she only knew what he asked her to know. And it was possible—likely even—that he chose to be ignorant of some operations himself.

The commissary was wide enough to seat fifty at a time, but she tried to come at off-hours when the three rotating shifts were in the middle of work or sleep cycles. The tables were bolted to the floor, but on the float, no one used them anyway. The food dispensers were old, gray machines that decanted a nutritive slurry in eight different flavors directly into recyclable bulbs. Even the worst rock hopper in the Belt was more pleasant. Someone had painted bright flowers—daisies in yellow and pink and pastel blue—on the walls to make the place seem welcoming. Oddly, the effort halfway worked. Naomi ate the yellow curry flavored gruel with her feet hooked into footholds in the wall. But afterward, there was coffee that was a thousand times better.

Three environment technicians floated in a clump on the far side of the room, talking through a problem with the water purification system. The temptation to insert herself into the conversation was huge, but she held back. Hearing normal human conversation but not being part of it was like a starving woman smelling fresh food but not able to put it on her tongue. She hadn't realized how badly she missed humans until she was among them again. And so when Emma pulled herself into the commissary, it was a relief to see her.

In the days of Naomi's internal exile, she'd learned that Emma's last name had been Pankara before she'd taken Zomorodi as a contract name with four other people. She had siblings on Europa in Sol system and Saraswati, one of the three habitable planets in Tridevi system. She'd been in private security before she joined up with the Transport Union. And she had a hookah designed to function anywhere between five gs and the float. She was also willing to talk to Naomi directly, which made her company more precious than gold. Now she pulled herself to a stop at the machines, took a bulb of something, and launched out to stop herself at Naomi's side and in her orientation.

“All well?” Naomi asked.

Emma shook a flat hand in a gesture that meant *yes and no*. “Captain Burnham won’t talk to me and Chuck won’t stop.”

“I made things hard for you,” Naomi said.

“I made things hard for myself,” Emma said, cracking the seal on her food bulb. “You’re just when it blew up on me.”

“Fair,” Naomi said. It was astounding how good it felt to speak to someone in person and without light delay. Even when the conversation was banal. Maybe especially when it was. “Chuck seems like a decent person. He’s underground?”

Emma chuckled. “He’s not cut out for it. He worries too much. The only reason he’s not sucking down euphorics now is that he figures that no one will say anything to this political officer at the transfer station. Half of the people on the ship have something they’d rather not be looked at too close, and the other half have to work with them.”

“Seems tenuous.”

“Because it is,” Emma said. “But we work with what we have. Besides, that’s what the fight’s all about, isn’t it?”

“How do you figure?” Naomi asked.

Emma took a long, thick pull on the bulb, then shrugged as she swallowed. “The first ship I served on after I ditched Pink-water, the XO had a thing for one of the mechanics. They were both babies. More hormones than blood. The company had a nofraternization policy, but what can you do about it? The XO, she started being where the mechanic was. Started using the ship system to keep track of where people were, on shift and off. Mechanic didn’t love that. Got to where they had a screaming fight in the middle of the med bay. XO started crying. Didn’t come out of her cabin for two days. Good XO otherwise. Mechanic knew his job too. But both of them got fired. Rules, you know.”

“That’s how you see the underground?” Naomi said through a real smile. “Making the union safe for romantic drama?”

“Easy to make rules,” Emma said. “Easy to make systems with a perfect logic and rigor. All you need to do is leave out the mercy, yeah? Then when

you put people into it and they get chewed to nothing, it's the person's fault. Not the rules. Everything we do that's worth shit, we've done with people. Flawed, stupid, lying, rules-breaking people. Laconians making the same mistake as ever. Our rules are good, and they'd work perfectly if it were only a different species."

"You sound like someone I know," Naomi said.

"I'll die for that," Emma said. "I'll die so that people can be fuckups and still find mercy. Not why you're here?"

Naomi considered the other woman. The anger in her jaw and the pain in her voice. She wondered whether Emma had been the XO. It probably didn't matter.

"We're all here for our own reasons," Naomi said. "What they are isn't as important as the fact that we came."

"True," Emma said.

Naomi laughed, and it was a hard, bitter sound. "Anyway, I spent too much time already with people telling me they'd shoot me if I didn't do what they said. That tank's empty for this lifetime."

"May it never refill," Emma said.

A flat-faced man in a command uniform pulled himself into the commissary, glanced at them, and did a fast double take. The environmental techs looked from him to Naomi, then pushed off, shoving their spent bulbs in the recycler as they left. The officer went to the dispenser, pulled a drink of some sort—coffee, tea, maté—and left again without looking back at them. His disapproval made the air feel cooler.

"You've got what you need?" Emma asked, as if the man hadn't been there at all.

The question had more weight than the words deserved. "I'm good," Naomi said. "When we get to port, though—"

"We'll get you out safe," Emma said. "After that . . ."

"I know," Naomi said. After that, she was still a criminal. Still a fugitive. Still a mouse looking for a safe hole. That would come. "Saba may have something for me."

“I’ll light you a candle. Meantime, if you need something, better me than Chuck, maybe,” Emma said, then sucked the last of the paste out of the bulb, smacked her lips, and launched for the door. Naomi floated alone in the commissary for a few minutes more. She felt a little guilty taking a bulb of tea back to her cabin, but only a little.

The *Bhikaji Cama* was a massive ship. Three quarters of a kilometer long and wide enough to look squat in the schematics. It had been built decades earlier to ferry enough people and supplies to one of the outlying worlds that a self-sustaining colony could arrive all at once. Buildings and recyclers and soil and reactors and fuel. Everything that humanity needed to make a toehold in an unfriendly alien ecosphere except a sense of fashion and guidelines on how to woo your mechanics. The halls were a drab green with hand-and footholds that hadn’t been scrubbed in a few too many weeks. The ship conserved water jealously, using passive radiators to shed heat instead of evaporative feeds, and it left the air hotter than she liked.

Her cabin was tiny. Not just smaller than her storage container had been, but smaller than some supply closets she’d had on the *Roci*. The crash couch was cheap, with gel that stank a little, and there wasn’t enough room for her to stretch her arms in it. The design was called *albluepartir* back in the Belt, because if your arm drifted off the edge in your sleep, a sudden deceleration could break it. Some previous tenant had illustrated the anti-spalling cloth with a complex and violent firefight between two sets of stick figures, one with colored-in circles for heads, and the other pale and empty. Naomi strapped herself into the couch, pulled up the system and the false record Chuck had given her, and got back to work.

The ironic thing was that, with the access she had now, she could actually reach more information than with the passive feeds she’d relied on before. She tried to be careful about it, not abuse her access in a way that would raise any more red flags than were already flying. But she had requests out to the union database mirror about political officers and changes to Laconian transfer point regulation. It was the sort of thing that anyone on a ship like the *Cama* might be—and probably was—looking

into. It was only her perspective on the information coming back that made it different.

Thinking that the political officer in Sol system had meant something specifically about Sol was the mistake she'd made. That they'd all made. There was also one on Auberon, and that changed the scope. Now that she knew to look for the pattern, it was there. Freighters diverted to Medina on their transits or held. Environmental audits on ships that were running close to their theoretical maximum load.

It still wasn't confirmation. Nothing so overt as that. But if there had been a massive wave of Laconian bureaucrats being quietly repositioned throughout the colony worlds—a new level of infrastructure being put in place without fanfare or warning—this was what it would look like. One political officer going to Earth was an opportunity. Two political officers being set in place in Sol and Auberon were a threat. A new Laconian mandarinat covertly set to keep eyes on the transfer points was an escalation. If Laconia continued the trend and put officers on the ships themselves, it was the end of the shell game.

She flicked through the data, looking for places where she might have been wrong. Where her interpretations could have been mistaken or where another interpretation could have fit the same data. She was reaching for hope the way a patient might by holding a doctor's hand and saying, *But it might not be terminal, right?*

Emma accepted her connection almost as soon as she requested it.

"I need to send a message," Naomi said.

"Where to?" Emma asked over the gabble of other voices.

"Upstairs," Naomi said. "Do you want me to say the name?" Emma was silent for a moment. Then, "Can you find your way to ops?"

"I'll meet you there," Naomi said, and dropped the call.

She moved through the ship faster when her mind was on something else. As if her body, freed from thinking about her place in the rhythms of the ship, found them automatically. She composed the message as the decks passed by her, what she could say to make the situation clear to Saba but

obscure to anyone intercepting the tightbeam either here or at the repeaters that bridged the interference through the gates.

She heard Emma's voice before she reached the ops deck. Her tone was high and rough as a decking saw. Naomi pulled herself onto the deck and grabbed a handhold to stop. Emma was on the float by the comms station, her arms folded and her jaw jutting out. A man with a salt-and-pepper beard longer than his close-cropped hair looked away from her long enough to recognize Naomi, then back at Emma in disgust. His uniform identified him as Captain Burnham. The comms tech was between them like a mouse at a catfight.

"The answer was no before," Burnham said, then pointed toward Naomi with his chin. "Now that *this* one is on my deck, the answer's go fuck yourself."

"It's nothing," Emma said. "Five-minute tightbeam to Medina? No one would even blink at it. It's trivial."

"It's already too much." He turned to look at Naomi. "Don't say anything, you. I know who you are, and I know what you are, and I have extended my unrequested hospitality to you out of grandmotherly fucking kindness."

"You have as much to hide as she does," Emma said. "Everyone knows about the sealed cabins."

The comms tech pulled himself down into the gel of his crash couch like he could disappear into it. Naomi considered the captain of the *Bhikaji Cama* with all the calm and dignity she could manage. "I appreciate that my presence puts you and yours at greater risk. I wouldn't have chosen this if there were a better way, but there isn't. If things had gone the way I hoped, you'd never have known I was here. That's not the way it happened, though. And now I need five minutes with your tightbeam."

Burnham lifted his hands to her, palms out. *Stop*. "Ma'am, I am not a partisan, but I know a lot of my crew are. I'm the kind of man that kens when to shut up and mind my own business. I'm not turning you over to the political officer, but don't mistake that for loyalty. I'm trying to get my ass out of a crack, and I'm getting more and more convinced that locking you

in a cabin and welding the door shut might be an easier path than the one I've chosen."

"It's important," Naomi said.

"It's my ship. The answer is no." His eyes were hard, but it was as much fear as anger. Naomi waited a moment, seeing what her gut said. Push or back down. Emma sighed, and the captain's beard shifted as his jaw went tighter.

"I understand," Naomi said. She met Emma's eyes for a fraction of a second, and then they moved to the bulkhead together. Emma fumed silently until they made the turn into the lift shaft.

"Sorry about that," Emma said. "He's an asshole."

"I did stow away on his ship and put him at risk of a Laconian interrogation room," Naomi said. "Expecting him to take orders from me along with it might be too much to ask. I'll find another way."

"I can help unbox some of those communication torpedoes," Emma said. Her tone made it an apology.

"I'd rather find another way to use the tightbeam. Time may be important. But Emma, you have to be more careful."

"He's not going to fold," Emma said. "I've shipped with that man long enough to tell when he's at his edge. There's a thing he does with his lips. I can clean him out playing poker too."

"That's not what I mean," Naomi said. "You said five minutes talking to Medina."

"They were going to know where the message was going anyway," Emma said. "They had to."

"I didn't know Saba was on Medina Station, and I do now," Naomi said. "Now if they catch me, it compromises him."

Emma pressed her lips tight. "Sorry. I assumed that . . . Sorry."

"We'll tell him. I'm sure he has plans to shift locations if he needs to."

Emma nodded, then muttered *fuck* under her breath. Even as she thought about other ways to get comm access, Naomi spared a moment to feel sympathy for her.

Emma's hand terminal sounded at the same moment that hers did. Another chime sounded from down a corridor. A ship-wide alert. Or something bigger. Naomi thumbed the notification open.

ALL UNION SHIPS: TOP PRIORITY. ALL TRAFFIC THROUGH ALL GATES IS SUSPENDED BY ORDER OF LACONIAN MILITARY COMMAND. NO SHIPS PERMITTED THROUGH ANY GATE UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. ALL TRANSITS ARE ON HOLD. ALL SHIPS ON APPROACH ARE TO EVACUATE THE LANE TO .8 AU IMMEDIATELY.

Emma was moving through data fast, flipping from one interface to another, and so intent on her hand terminal that she didn't notice she was drifting. Naomi caught her elbow and pulled her to the wall.

"What happened?" Naomi asked.

"Don't know," Emma said, shaking her head. "Something big."

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Chapter Nineteen: Elvi

The hard burn out of Tecoma system without sedation was a slice of hell. The crash couch felt close as a coffin around her. The breathable support fluid was thick in her throat. She tried to tell herself that it was like being in a dream where she could never drown, but every few minutes, she felt an animal panic in the back of her head. Throughout most of human evolutionary history, the watery inside-a-pipe-with-no-way-out view she had would have been the last thing someone saw before they died in pain. It was hard to convince her hindbrain that this time was different.

The monitor, weirdly, was crisper and easier to see than normal. Something about how the fluid did or didn't scatter light. Or evidence that she needed to look into vision correction, she didn't know which. But she could track the ship's progress on its mad dash for the ring and the data still streaming in from the probes. The fizz of miraculous protons kept coming into the system, and the spin of the Tecoma star and the magnetic fields it generated were pulling some of the new matter into a glowing accretion disk. It was almost beautiful except for the part where it could collapse into a black hole and generate the gamma ray burst that killed them as fast as a neuron could fire.

With the adjustable buoyancy in the tank, she felt the burn less as being pressed down and more as being squeezed in a massive and invisible fist. Red flight information data kept her aware of how tenuous her position was. Surviving a sustained thirty-g burn in a conventional crash couch would have been about as likely as living through a free fall drop from orbit onto a pile of knives.

When they hit the midpoint of the flight, the *Falcon* kicked off its drive, flipped the ship, and started its deceleration in less than a minute. All Elvi experienced was a moment's vertigo and a bloom of black spots in her vision that cleared away again quickly. The animal panic rose in her again, and she fought to keep it back.

I AM NOT LOVING THIS EXPERIENCE, she sent to Fayeze. She hated that she couldn't say it or hear his voice.

A moment later, a message came back. I KNOW. I CAN'T DECIDE IF I'M PANICKED OR BORED. V. CONFUSING. BEEN READING THE SAFETY GUIDELINES. TURNS OUT MALES ARE SPECIFICALLY DISCOURAGED FROM MASTURBATING IN THE GEL WHILE UNDER BURN. WONDER WHAT THAT TEST PROTOCOL LOOKED LIKE.

The fluid made it hard to laugh. Her husband might not have been a good match for anyone but her. But for her, he was perfect.

Hours later, they passed through the ring gate into what everyone still called the slow zone. The *Falcon* jounced as maneuvering thrusters took them off the mathematical line defined by the gate and the star. Under perfect circumstances, the couch would have cycled through three sets of progressively thinner fluid before it finally drained, but Elvi was done. She selected IMMEDIATE RELEASE from the system menu, approved the override, and heard the deep chunk-chunk-chunk of the pump as it drew the fluid away and injected oxygen-rich air in its place. She might choke and cough and feel like she was getting over bronchitis for a few hours, but she genuinely didn't care.

Admiral Sagale hadn't either, because the first thing she heard when her crash couch popped its seals and slid open was his phlegmy voice.

“—for immediate evacuation. We have data that the high consul specifically mandated.”

Elvi pulled herself up. Her muscles ached like someone had beaten her with a hammer. She floated to the bridge. Stopping herself on a handhold felt like it was going to bend the joints in her hand the wrong way. Sagale's couch was in its open configuration, but a film of fluid still clung to his hair

and arm. The smell of it was too complex for her mind. Her brain kept reaching for comparisons and then abandoning them—grape jelly, cinnamon, acetate, nutmeg—over and over. Behind her, Fayez groaned. Sagale looked over at them, scowling.

“You shouldn’t be out of your couch, Major Okoye,” he said, and before she could respond, the comm channel did.

“Your request is noted,” a familiar voice said. Elvi knew she should recognize it. The sustained high gs might have compromised her more than she’d thought. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Governor Song,” Sagale said. “The *Falcon* is on a scientific mission critical to the empire. If we busted our asses to get here so we can die waiting in line—”

The penny dropped for Elvi. Jae-Eun Song. Governor of Medina Station. She’d heard of the woman often, though they had never met.

“Admiral Sagale,” the woman said. It was strange to be close enough to another ship that the light delay made interrupting him possible. “I had no warning about this. I had sixty-four ships in the zone, including Medina Station and the *Typhoon*. I’ve gotten it down to twenty-eight, even with you screaming through my gate and screwing up my queue. You can give my team a minute to run the numbers.”

Sagale’s expression landed somewhere between annoyance and rage, but his voice was professional. “Understood, Governor. Didn’t mean to step on your toes.” He turned off his microphone with a gesture like a punch.

“What’s—” Elvi said, then braced herself and coughed up a thick wad of breathable fluid. Fayez appeared at her side with a towel. She spat into it. “What’s going on?”

Sagale put a volumetric display on the main monitor. The alien station hung exactly in the center of 1,373 gates evenly distributed around the surface of a sphere that had nothing outside it. Icons marked the repurposed generation ship that was the oldest station in the space between worlds and the *Magnetar*-class Laconian warship that was the newest. Along with them, a scattering of ships in a space barely smaller than the Earth’s sun. If

the icons had been to scale, they'd have been less than motes of dust. Fewer than a hundred bubbles of air in a space the volume of a million Earths.

"Governor Song is trying to evacuate the ring space per my recommendation," Sagale said. "She is also trying to move Medina Station further out of harm's way in case a gamma burst does come through Tecoma gate. But preparing the station is proving difficult, as it means stopping the spin drum and turning on drives that haven't been used in several decades. In that context, I have asked for a priority transit to Laconia."

"And?" Fayeze asked.

"And her team is crunching the numbers," Sagale said, biting each word off individually. He was scared. He was right to be. She was too.

"Where's Jen?" she asked. There was a sharp pain in her chest. More fluid coming loose.

"The others are sedated," Sagale said. "There was no reason to keep them awake."

"She could have monitored the data coming in from Tecoma," Fayeze said. "I mean, I can look at it, but Jen's the one that understands."

"I'd rather focus on keeping her alive so she can make sense of it later," Sagale said.

"It's going to hit the station, isn't it?" Elvi said. "The star, the gate, and that alien station that runs the ring space. They're all in a line."

"Yes," Sagale said.

Fayeze raised a hand over his head like a kid in a classroom. "Um. Point of clarification? Do we really want to make a transit right before that happens? Because if I recall correctly, the whole reason that we have a *Magnetar*-class ship here at all is because hitting that little ball there with a massive energy burst makes an exponentially larger plume of gamma radiation pop out of all the gates."

"We have been able to use that effect to guard all the gates simultaneously, yes," Sagale said. "The cannons-on-the-cliffs strategy."

"And don't we want to be on this side of those cannons when they go off?" Fayeze was talking too fast. Elvi took his hand, squeezing his fingers,

hoping it would calm him. “I’m just asking, because the thing where we rush through to safety just in time to get cooked by the aftermath seems unpleasant.”

“It’s a calculated risk,” Sagale said. “We aren’t certain that the station will survive the blast. Or what will happen if it doesn’t.”

She watched new vistas of catastrophe unfold in her husband’s eyes. The station might break. The slow zone might collapse. It had been unthinkable right up to the moment he thought it.

“Okay, yeah,” Fayez said. “That’s a fair point.”

Governor Song’s voice came over the comm channel. “Admiral Sagale?”

“Yes?” Sagale said, then remembered he’d turned off the mic. He enabled it again. “Yes, Governor. I’m here.”

“We have slotted the *Falcon* for priority transit through Laconia gate. I am sending you the traffic control data now. Do not rush your transit. We’re cutting it as close to the limit as we can here. I don’t want anyone going dutchman.”

Sagale’s head came back a degree, as if the thought had surprised him. His voice when he spoke was clear. “Understood. Thank you for this, Jae-Eun.”

“If we live through this, you owe me a drink,” the governor of Medina Station said. “The ship ahead of you is the *Plain of Jordan* through Castila gate. Please monitor that and match to your plan. Godspeed, Mehmet.”

Sagale turned his attention to the controls, and a moment later the gravity warning sounded. Not that anyone else on the ship would hear it. Elvi had to fight the urge to shout the emergency evacuation command and let all the other ships figure out how to be safe about it.

“How long do we have?” Elvi asked, and then laughed. It sounded like she was asking how long they had to live, and since she kind of was, it seemed funny. Sagale didn’t join in.

“We’re going to be at a quarter g for a while if you want to stretch your legs,” he said. “Then you have to be back in the couch. Once we make the

transit, I'm making a hard turn and burning perpendicular to the ring to get us away from it."

"In case of overspill," Fayez said.

"From an abundance of caution," Sagale said. He passed the back of his hand over his eyes, and Elvi realized that for all his stoic reserve, he was weeping. The drive kicked on, and she drifted to the deck. Fayez put a hand on her shoulder and drew her away.

"This is bad," he said softly.

"I know."

He nodded. "I just felt like I needed to say it out loud."

She took his hand and kissed it. It still smelled like breathable fluid. "If this is all we get . . . Well, then shit."

"With you on that one, sweetheart," he said, and folded his arms around her. "This whole thing really was a terrible idea, wasn't it?"

"Couldn't have seen it coming," she said. "I mean, unless . . ."

Something moved in the back of her head. Something about the *Magnetar*-class ships and the way the *Heart of the Tempest* had annihilated the rail guns on the alien station during Laconia's first incursion. The way it had killed Pallas Station. The way the enemy had reacted differently.

"You're thinking something," Fayez said. "I can hear the gears turning."

"I don't know what yet," she said. "But yeah. I am."

A new voice came from the bridge. The comm channel still open on Sagale's controls. *This is Plain of Jordan confirming transit in two minutes. We are go, no-go in ten seconds.*

Another voice answered. *Medina control here. You are go for transit.* Sagale was muttering something under his breath. It might have been profanity. It might have been prayer. The volumetric display showed a single red dot in the vastness moving toward the pinpoint white of a gate.

"We better get back in our cans," Fayez said.

"Yes," Elvi said, but she didn't move. Not yet. "It was designed, right? Tecoma system was designed. To . . . to do this?"

Fayez smoothed a hand across her head. The fluid was dry enough now to be tacky, but the touch felt good anyway. "Elvi, you are the light of my

heart. The woman I love and know better than I know anyone, and I can't get through the day without being dead wrong about what you're going to say or want. The protomolecule engineers were some kind of quantum-entangled high-energy physics hive mind thing. I don't know what they were thinking."

"No," Elvi said, shuffling back toward her couch in the gentle quarter g. "It was designed. There was an *intention*."

"Does that help us?" he asked. "Because that would be great, but I don't know that I see how that helps us."

This is the Plain of Jordan transferring our status now. We are on approach to—

The display stuttered and threw up an error readout. The lights went out and the gravity dropped away.

"Brace!" Sagale called out from the blackness.

Elvi reached out in the blackness, trying to find a wall and a handhold. "What happened?"

An emergency light stuttered on. "Sensor arrays overloaded," Sagale said. His voice was shaking. "They're resetting now. I have to get us stopped until we can . . ."

He didn't finish the thought. The handhold buzzed gently with the vibration of maneuvering thrusters, and the *Falcon* swung up around her, lifting her feet off the deck. Fayez helped her reorient as the gravity alert sounded again and up and down returned. The volumetric display came back up with a warning at the edge that said NO INPUT—ESTIMATED POSITIONS ONLY. Sagale gunned the drive for a few seconds, and the *Falcon* felt like an elevator lurching toward some upper floor. Then he killed it and Elvi drifted up again.

The three of them were silent for a long moment while the backup sensor arrays lurched to life. The comms clicked once, rattled with strange, fluting static, and filled with the gabble of panicked human voices. Sagale killed the channel and opened a private one.

"Medina Station, this is Admiral Sagale of the *Falcon*. Please report status."

Elvi pulled herself to Travon's station. She didn't know if it took the ship a fraction of a second longer than usual to recognize her and put her data on the monitor, or if it was just the adrenaline throwing her perceptions off. The main sensor arrays were dead. Burned out in a fraction of a second. Backup systems slowly hauled themselves to life. Cameras and telescopes all around the *Falcon* unpacked themselves from hardened compartments and deployed. More of them were damaged than she'd expected. But not all. She opened a window and fed the data from the *Falcon's* skin to her screen, and in the darkness, there was light.

"This is Governor Song, *Falcon*," the woman's voice came, trembling like a violin. "We have sustained some damage to the ship and crew. We are still assessing."

The space between the rings was filled with whiteness. The station at the center—the alien control station that seemed to carry the rings with it like the center of a dandelion surrounded by seeds—was brighter than a sun. And some nebula-thin gas or dust cloud caught that light and shimmered. It was everywhere. It was beautiful. It was terrifying.

"It's going to be all right, Governor," Sagale said in a tone that almost made it plausible. "I need to know the status of the *Plain of Jordan*. Did it make transit?"

"Mehmet, I don't—"

"It's important. Did the ship make it through?"

Since the first time she'd seen it—the first time anyone had seen it—the boundary of the ring space had been a dark and featureless sphere, like a black bubble seen from inside. Now there was a twisting rainbow of energy or matter on it, like an oil slick on water. The darkness of it had always let Elvi imagine it to be infinite before. A vast and starless sky. Now it felt close and finite. It made everything seem more fragile. A wave of nausea passed across the edge of her awareness like it belonged to some other body.

"No," Governor Song said. "They were too close to the gate to shift back when the blast came. The energy through Tecoma gate would have . . . They didn't make the transit."

“Please confirm, Medina. You’re saying the *Plain of Jordan* went dutchman.”

“Yes. We lost them.”

“Thank you, Medina. Please advise traffic control that all transits are suspended until further orders. No one comes into this space, and no one goes out. Not until I say so.”

To her left, Fayez was at Jen’s station, seeing—she assumed—all the same things. Feeling some version of the awe and terror and wonder that she felt.

“Understood,” Governor Song said. “I’ll see to it.”

“Thank you, Jae-Eun,” Sagale said. “We have some work to do. We’ll need reports from the other systems. I’m guessing that there’s been some damage from the far sides of the gates too. It may take some time to—”

“Gates moved,” Fayez said in the same tone he used for trivial information. Laundry’s dry. Dinner’s ready. Gates moved.

“What?” Sagale said.

“Yeah,” Fayez said. “Not much, but a little. And all of them. Look for yourself.”

Sagale shifted the main screen. The slow zone bloomed. And with it corrections on each of the gates. The ships were all in place, all matching their expected vectors and positions. But a little yellow error code hung at the gates to show where they were expected to be, and where they were instead. Sagale’s face was ashen. Elvi felt herself wondering how many more shocks the man could take. Or, for that matter, many how many she could.

“Yeah, so,” Fayez said. “Pretty sure I see what’s going on. They just reordered. Because there’s not as many of them now. Equal distance between them got a little bigger. Tecoma gate’s gone. And . . . Oh yeah. Look at that. Thanjavur gate was pretty much straight across from it. And it’s gone too. We just lost two gates, Admiral. And one of them had an entire world filled with people behind it.”

Chapter Twenty: Teresa

The science exposition was held in one of the public halls and on the grounds outside it. The vaulted ceiling gave the hall a sense of something that had been grown more than built, and the acoustic controls kept what could have been an overwhelming din of voices and noise calm and reassuring. A thousand children from five years old to sixteen ran and talked and made groups, associating for the most part with people they already knew and who attended the same schools they'd come from.

The open schools all had their own stations in the hall, each one showing what the students had been studying in the last year and how it would add to the overall work of the empire. Some, like the water cycle demonstration, were basic, meant for the youngest children. Others, like the forest of life that compared the different ecosystems of the new worlds, and the programmable matter station that showcased the most recent materials science from Bara Gaon, were sophisticated enough to be interesting for her.

And Connor was there.

As the days passed, she found the sting of remembering Connor and Muriel being involved with each other grew a little less raw for her. Not painless. The image of them kissing—which she had very clearly in her mind for something she'd never actually seen—still bothered her. So when Connor nodded to her when she walked by and tried a little smile, she didn't know what to make of it. Did he still like her? Was he trying to tell her that his connection with Muriel had been a mistake, or that he was glad that he and Teresa were still friends? She wasn't sure which option she was hoping for. Or if she was hoping for any of them. Connor was confusing.

Muriel and the others from her school had a booth about soil science and how to design microbes that could pass nutrients between organisms from different biomes, and Teresa was technically supposed to be with them. She didn't want to be there. And really, she could go wherever she wanted. It wasn't like someone was going to tell her she couldn't.

Instead, she went to the puzzle station where younger children worked with blocks trying to re-create shapes or argued over how to fit circles into a square or build a complex structure with only gravity and friction to hold it together. She'd done all the puzzles a thousand times over when she was younger. She moved through, giving encouragement and hints to the frustrated, and wondered if Connor would follow her there.

A young girl—maybe six years old—sat at one of the tables by herself, scowling. Teresa sat across from her because she could see the place where Connor would be from there.

The girl looked up at Teresa and seemed to gather herself. When she spoke, it was with the stilted formality of someone who had been coached in what to say and how to say it.

"Hello. My name is Elsa Singh. I'm pleased to meet you."

"I'm Teresa Duarte," Teresa said.

"Are you a teacher?" Elsa asked.

"No, I live here."

"No one will play with me," Elsa said, scowling at her.

"I could teach you something, if you want."

"All right," Elsa said, and seemed to settle deeper into her little wooden chair. Teresa glanced over toward the school display. Muriel and Connor were talking, but Muriel was doing most of it, her lips moving fast like she was fighting to keep his attention. To her surprise, she felt a little pang of sympathy for the girl. If Connor had convinced Muriel to alienate Teresa Duarte, daughter of the high consul and maybe someday ruler of the Laconian Empire, and then gone cold on her? That would be a shitty thing to do. Effective too, because the pang passed as quickly as it had come. Muriel could deal with her mistakes on her own.

“All right, Elsa,” she said, refocusing. She pulled up her handheld. “This is called the prisoner’s dilemma. Look at this . . .”

Teresa built a table like the one Ilich had built with her, explained the rules—each player would decide to cooperate or defect, and they’d each be better off if they defected, but it would be better in the long term to cooperate. Elsa seemed only mildly interested, but willing to follow along.

Connor started moving away from his group just as a new bunch of presenters arrived, washing through the hall with delight and gabbling. He seemed to disappear behind the flood, but she caught a glimpse of his brown hair. She thought he was coming toward her. Her heart started beating a little faster. She wasn’t sure she was more worried that he would find her or that he wouldn’t.

She played the game with the little girl, pretending to care about it more deeply than the stream of humanity over Elsa’s shoulder. They both cooperated for a few rounds, and then, when Teresa felt like it was time for the rest of the tit-for-tat lesson, she defected. Elsa looked at the handheld with the results as if it didn’t make sense.

“Now,” Teresa said. “The thing is, once someone defects like that, you have to decide what—”

“You cheated!” The little girl’s voice was more than just loud. It was a shriek of rage. Her face was twisted in a vicious scowl and dark with blood just under the skin. “You said we should be *nice*!”

“No,” Teresa said. “It’s part of the lesson . . .”

“Fuck your *fucking* lesson,” Elsa said. Out of a child that young, the profanity was like a slap. Elsa grabbed the handheld and threw it into the crowd, standing up so fast her chair toppled, clattering on the ground. Before Teresa could do anything, Elsa collapsed and started weeping on the floor.

Security personnel were already moving through the crowd toward them, but Teresa waved them off. She felt trapped between wanting to comfort Elsa or get her handheld back or leave in humiliation and shame. Elsa’s mouth was square and gaping as her sobs turned into screams again. Someone nearby shouted, *Monster!* and Teresa thought for a second they

meant her. Then the woman was there. Older, with eyes the same shape as Elsa's, the same skin tone. Elsa's mother scooped the girl up in her arms, rocking her.

"It's okay, Monster," the mother said, and hushed her gently. "It's all right. Mama's here. I'm right here. It's okay."

Elsa clamped her hands over her ears, closed her eyes, and buried her head in her mother's embrace. The mother rocked her, gently making cooing sounds to soothe her. Teresa took a step forward.

"I'm so sorry," the mother said. "Elsa gets overstimulated. It won't happen again."

"No," Teresa said. "It was my fault. She's fine. It was me. I didn't explain the game well enough."

The mother smiled and turned her attention back to Elsa. Teresa waited for the mother to start asking questions of the little girl. *What just happened?* and *What mistake did you make?* and *What would you do differently next time?* All the things her father would have asked her to make the moment meaningful. But Elsa's mother did none of that. She only calmed her daughter and told her that everything would be all right. That she was loved. Teresa watched with a sensation she couldn't quite recognize.

She didn't notice Colonel Ilich coming up to her until he touched her shoulder.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," he said. "Your father is asking to see you. Now, if you can."

"Of course," she said, and followed, only pausing to retrieve her handheld.

Her father's private office was small. A small desk with a monitor built into the surface that could display flat on the surface or volumetrically over it. As she came in, it was showing a schematic of the slow zone—the gates, the alien station at their center, Medina Station, and a few dozen ships scattered through 750 trillion cubic kilometers. A space smaller than the interior of a star. Her father was still as stone, looking at it. It was like he didn't need to breathe anymore. "Is everything okay?" she asked.

“What do you remember about the experiment in Tecoma system?”

Teresa sat on the little couch, folding her legs up under her. She tried to recall everything she could of the science briefings she’d been in, but all she could think of was the crying little girl and her mother.

“It’s where we were doing the first tit-for-tat experiment,” she finally said. “To see if the enemy can be negotiated with.” It seemed ominous that she’d just been reviewing the prisoner’s dilemma, and that it had gone badly.

“To see if we can make it change its behavior, yes,” her father said, then gave a small, rueful chuckle. “There’s good news and bad there.” He gestured at his monitor, throwing a report to her handheld. “Look this over. Tell me what you make of it.”

Teresa opened the report like it was a test from Colonel Ilich. Her father watched her while she read through it, looked at the datasets, tried to make it all make sense. She tried not to read Admiral Sagale’s summary at the end, because that felt like cheating. She should be able to draw the conclusions herself.

Then she reached a part of the report that she had to read three times to be sure she’d understood. She felt the blood draining from her face.

“It collapsed into . . . it collapsed into a black hole? They collapsed the neutron star into a *black hole*?”

“We believe so,” her father said. “It was precariously balanced, and apparently maintained at that balance point in a way we don’t understand. When more mass was added to the star, it was enough to push it over.” He put a hand over the report and looked into her eyes. “Dr. Okoye and her team saw that there was a danger from that. Do you know what it was?”

“The gamma burst,” Teresa said. “It’s the most energetic event that there is. We’ve seen gamma bursts from other *galaxies*.”

“That’s correct,” he said, but she couldn’t get her mind around it. “And what do you remember about Tecoma system?”

She drew a blank. She should have known. Should have remembered.

“The star’s rotation put the poles in line with the gate,” he said, gently. “No other system we’ve ever seen has been like that.”

“What happened?” Teresa asked. He took his hand away, letting her read the rest of the report. “We lost two gates?”

“We did,” her father said as if it were a normal thing. “And we saw plumes of gamma radiation coming out on the solar system side of every other ring gate, much the way they did when the *Tempest* hit the alien station in the ring hub with its magnetic field generator. And . . .”

It was like hearing that sometimes you woke up in the morning and didn’t have a color anymore. That red could die. Or that three could be shot off the number line. Learning that a gate could be destroyed was like learning that a rule of her universe so basic that she’d never even thought of it as a rule had been violated. If he’d said *You actually have two bodies* or *Sometimes you can walk through walls* or *You can also breathe rock*, it wouldn’t have felt stranger. More displacing.

He raised his eyebrows. What else? She looked at the report. She felt like she was shaking, but her hands looked steady. It only took her a few seconds.

“And the *Plain of Jordan* failed its transit,” she said. “We lost a ship.”

“Yes,” he said. “That, it turns out, is the critical issue. Here is the decision we have to make. What do we do about it?”

Teresa shook her head, not disagreeing but reaching for some kind of clarity. The scale of the damage was overwhelming. Her father leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers.

“This is a policy decision. And policy decisions are difficult,” he said, “because there may not be a right answer. Put yourself in my place. Think about the larger picture. Not just now, not just here, but everywhere that humanity is going to spread. And forever. What is the wise course of action for me now?”

“I don’t know,” she said, and her voice sounded small, even to her.

He nodded. “That’s fair. Let me narrow the options. The rules of game theory are that when a ship fails to transit, we punish our opponents. That’s the basis of the policy I put in place. So in light of what happened, do we follow that now, or do we stop?”

“We stop,” Teresa said without hesitation. She saw the disappointment in her father’s eyes, but she didn’t understand it. It was the obvious answer. He took a deep breath and tapped his fingers against his lips for a moment before he said anything.

“Let me give you some context. There was an incident when you were young,” he said. “This was when your mother was still with us, so you were very young. Barely able to speak. You had a favorite toy. A carved wooden horse.”

“I don’t remember it.”

“That’s all right. There was a day when you needed to nap. You were very, very tired and very cranky. Your mother was trying to feed you, the way she did before you slept, but you were chewing on your horse. Your mouth was full. So your mother took the horse away, and you threw a tantrum. In that case, we had two options. We could keep the toy away from you so that you could do what needed to be done. Or we could hand it back, and teach you that throwing tantrums worked.”

The image of Elsa in her mother’s arms came to her like it was being projected on her brain. Had all that been a mistake? Had Elsa’s mother, by comforting her child, told her that it was okay to shout and flip over tables? It hadn’t seemed like that at the time.

“You think we should . . . You’re sending through a bomb ship?”

“Tit for tat,” he said. “It means keeping traffic out of the ring space for a time. It means not evacuating any more ships until we can make the experiment. But we can show the enemy that we are disciplined. Or we can show it that we aren’t.”

“Oh,” Teresa said. She didn’t know what else there was to say.

Her father tilted his head. His voice was still gentle. Almost coaxing. “This is why I want you with me. These are the decisions people like you and I have to make. Normal people don’t. This is the logic and the vision we have to apply. And we have to be ruthless about it. The stakes are too high for anything else.”

“It’s the only way we can win,” she said.

“I don’t know that we’ll win,” he said. “I’ve never known that. I’ve always known that we’d fight. From the moment the gates opened, I knew we’d go through them. That, and the chances were good that we would encounter whatever had killed the civilization that came before us.”

“Goths,” she said. “Goths and lead-lined water pipes.”

He chuckled. “Ilich has been talking about ancient Rome again. Yes, well. We can call them Goths if you like. As soon as we knew that there was something out there, we knew that we would come in conflict with it. The war was inevitable from the second we had an opponent. I don’t know whether we’ll defeat them. But I know that *if* we defeat them, it will be like this. With intelligence and ruthlessness and an unwavering purpose. Those are the only tools we have that matter.”

Teresa nodded. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I had the wrong answer.”

“I knew you might,” he said. “It’s why I asked you here. You will learn, over time, how to think the way I think. How to be the kind of leader that I’ve taught myself to be. Some of it will take effort. Some of it will happen naturally just because you get older. And some of it, I think, will happen as you . . . change.”

“Change?”

“Transform. Become immortal. I’ve spoken to Dr. Cortázar about beginning the process with you. It will take time, of course, but since I began the treatments, I’ve learned so much. Things I couldn’t know when I was just . . . just human, I suppose.”

He took her hand. The opalescence in his eyes and skin seemed to brighten for a moment. When he spoke, there was a depth to his voice like the room had gained an echo.

“There’s so much that I see now that I never saw before. You’ll see it too.”

Chapter Twenty-One: Elvi

Elvi could see Sagale steeling himself for her reaction. It was in the way he tightened his jaw and the flatness of his eyes. She had one foot tucked into a hold on the wall, her hand on another. She waited for the outrage or the vertigo or some physical sign in herself to match his expectations. What she found was a bleak disappointment.

When he'd called her to his office, she'd suspected it was bad news. Now that the rest of the crew had been decanted and brought up to speed, anything said on the bridge, no matter how softly, was common knowledge in minutes. Fear did that to people. Made them fast to share and gossip.

"If I object to this plan?" she said. "Because we both know I object to this plan."

"I will pass it directly to High Consul Duarte," Sagale said. "It is as important to him as it is to me that you understand how seriously we take your concerns."

"Will it change anything?"

"Candidly?" Sagale said.

"For fuck's sake. Another bomb ship? After . . ." She gestured toward the deck with her free hand, meaning the ring space, the missing gates, all of it. She'd had almost three days to process the enormity of it, and she couldn't. It was too big.

Three days was long enough for Sagale to report in and for Duarte to deliberate and respond. It probably wasn't long enough for Sagale to have pushed back and been shut down. He hadn't even tried. That was the disappointing part.

“We have protocol. It is that when a ship fails to transit, send a bomb ship through the same gate. It’s the only way to keep our message clear.”

“And then see if we can lose another gate or two?”

“The losses that we have suffered are . . . significant,” Sagale said. “But it is the considered opinion of the high consul that they do not represent an escalation on the part of the enemy.”

“How do you even get there?”

Sagale lifted a hand, palm out, but the softening in his eyes made it a request to hear him out more than an order that she be silent. Elvi crossed her arms and nodded him on.

“The attacks the enemy made on us have been ineffective in that—in *that*—they did insignificant primary damage. The loss of consciousness that we experienced in Sol system when Pallas died might have been deadly for the protomolecule’s designers, but it was largely ineffective against us. The response in Tecoma system would have been trivial in any other system. The effect was . . . unfortunate only because of features of the landscape, so to speak, that are not in play elsewhere in the empire.”

“So I just picked a bad Bikini Atoll?” Elvi said.

“No one holds you responsible for what happened, Doctor. You couldn’t have known any more than we could. If anything, the strategic error was mine. I saw the inhospitable nature of the system as an advantage and overlooked the possible consequences.”

He spread his hands.

“Or,” Elvi said, “it was a trap.”

“I don’t see how—”

“No. Be quiet. It’s my turn now. What we saw in Tecoma wasn’t even similar to the previous interactions. We were awake the whole time. It didn’t change our perceptions of anything. That was something different. And if you look at the logic of it? It’s not even hard to see.”

“Walk me through it.”

“That star wasn’t natural, it was created. And it was created from a system that looked like Sol. It was manufactured and it was pointed at the ring gate. They *aimed* it like tying a shotgun trigger to a doorknob. Our

bomb ship did something to activate it. Maybe it got something to come look at us, and that's what set it off. I don't know. But it was built to be a booby trap."

Sagale's scowl looked like he'd bitten into a bad date. "That is an interesting interpretation," he said.

"It fired off the largest gun that it's possible to make given the physical laws of the universe. And what's more? The station was built to withstand it. It took a gamma burst from a collapsing neutron star, and *it's not dead*."

"You find that significant."

"I find that pretty clear evidence that we're way out of our weight class here and we should stop throwing punches!"

"You don't have to shout, Doctor."

Elvi unballled her fists and tried to relax her jaw. Her blood felt hot in her face, and she didn't know if it was from fear or anger or if any normal emotions actually fit into a situation like this. Sagale's system chimed an alert, and he muted it.

"I don't disagree with you," he said. "But what does not throwing punches look like?"

"Not sending bomb ships through would be a start."

"It would. But so would abandoning the gates entirely. Would you recommend doing that? There are colonies that will collapse if we choose that, and maybe those are acceptable losses. But once the trouble began last time, shutting down the gate network didn't save the beings that used it. They were dead when we turned the system back on."

"Not starting trouble was my argument."

"Trouble started long before Laconia existed. Ships have been disappearing for decades. Whatever this is, it began before we recognized it. The fastest way to undermine a strategic plan is to abandon it before there's sufficient reason to do so. The high consul has been briefed. He believes that the tit-for-tat plan still has merit."

"And so you're going to do it."

"I do as I'm told, Doctor. I am an officer of the Laconian military," Sagale said. "As are you."



The mood on the *Falcon* showed in small ways. Instead of wandering to and from the commissary while she thought, Jen remained rooted at her station. Travon moved through the ship tapping his thumb and middle finger together in a fluttering beat every time a new status update came from the *Typhoon* or Medina. Sagale stayed in his office for the most part, avoiding Elvi and Fayez and the rest of the science team as if their disapproval bothered him.

Out near Medina, a captain drew a short straw, and the *Myron's Folly* was chosen as the bomb vessel. On the main screen, a swarm of loading mechs and drones hauled the cargo out of its hold. The little flares of their thrusters reminded Elvi of termite swarms.

The antimatter had been stored on Medina for a moment just like this. Governor Song's engineers would set the ship's reactor as close to critical as they could and disable the fail-safes, so that when the bombs went off, the reactor failure would add its own destructive punch to the mix. But there was the problem of making the ship go dutchman in the absence of other traffic.

The safety curve was based on the amount of matter and energy making transits through the gate network. Usually that meant keeping the flow down to safe levels. Now it meant driving it up past the threshold without sending another ship through. Protocol demanded, Sagale kept pointing out, that the bomb ship be the next thing to go. If they started pushing a dozen other ships through, the enemy might not understand the high consul's point.

To do that, they had to pour a massive amount of energy through the gate. The *Typhoon's* ultrahigh magnetic field projector could do it, but they were making sure there was nothing that would be damaged on the far side of the gate. The combination of caution and recklessness took her breath away.

"I should go talk to him again," Elvi said.

"Tell him that he's wrong more forcefully?" Fayez said. "See if he changes his mind because you disagree at him harder?"

“He’s not that bad,” she said. And then, because she knew that he was, “There has to be something.”

“There doesn’t, sweetheart.”

Jen looked up from her station monitor. Her lips were thin, her gaze restless. “Eighty thousand people in Thanjavur system,” she said. “One habitable planet with three cities, and a moon base on its major satellite. And they’re . . . I just can’t get my head around it. They’re just gone.”

“They might be fine,” Elvi said. “Just . . . out of contact. They may be better off than all of us at this rate.”

“Unless their sun exploded. There are stories about that, aren’t there? The protomolecule engineers burning whole systems?”

Travon fluttered his finger and thumb together again as he worked his station’s monitor. “Thanjavur’s only eight and a half light-years from Gedara. If there’s a big flash in eight and a half years, we’ll know what happened.”

“I don’t like this,” Jen said.

“None of us do,” Fayez said. “Honestly, I think old Sagale would skip this part if he could.”

“What?” Jen said. “No, not that. I mean yes, I don’t like that. But this too.”

She threw a dataset Elvi didn’t recognize onto the main monitor. The *Myron’s Folly* blinked away and a series of energy graphs took its place. Jen turned to look at them as if the significance were obvious.

“I’m a biologist,” Elvi said.

“We’re seeing radiation coming from in between the rings. We’ve never seen that before. There hasn’t been anything there to radiate. This little pocket universe just ends at the rings. Anything that went out was gone like it passed an event horizon. Now, since . . . well, since us? Something’s coming through.”

“Something’s knocking around in the attic,” Fayez said. “That’s not reassuring. I’m not reassured.”

“What do you make of it?” Elvi asked.

“I don’t know. I just have data, and it says something’s happening that didn’t happen before. And it’s not calming down.”

A voice in her memory said the words as clearly and distinctly as if they had been spoken: *Distributed responsibility is the problem. One person gives the order, another carries it out. One can say they didn’t pull the trigger, the other that they were just doing what they were told, and everyone lets themselves off the hook.* She let her breath out slowly from between her teeth.

Elvi opened a connection request to Sagale’s office. To his credit, he accepted it immediately. “Dr. Okoye.”

“Admiral, could you join us on the bridge? There’s some incoming data I’d like you to look at.”

She heard the hesitation while he decided whether it was a ploy to stop the bomb ship plan. Just because the data was real didn’t mean it wasn’t a ploy.

“I’m on my way,” Sagale said, and cut the connection.

“We could always mutiny,” Fayez said brightly.

“We wouldn’t stand a chance,” Travon said. “I did the nav analysis. Even if we took control of the ship, the *Typhoon* could blow us to dust before we got out a gate.”

“Jesus, Travon,” Fayez said. “I was joking.”

“Oh,” Travon said. “Sorry.”

“I remember when I was just a scientist,” Elvi said. “I liked that. It was nice.”

Five minutes later Sagale came on the bridge, floating toward his station like none of them were there. Elvi remembered seeing him in the same place, still damp from the crash couch and weeping. He was a different man now. For a moment, against her will, she admired him. Sagale considered the display in silence. The loudest sounds were the hush of the air recyclers and the flutter of Travon’s right thumb and middle finger.

He considered the energy graphs as Jen explained them again. Sagale took it in impassively. When Jen had finished, he floated quietly in his crash

couch restraints. His gaze flickered to Elvi's, and she thought there was something in them. Gratitude, maybe.

With a gesture, he opened a comm channel.

"Admiral Sagale," Governor Song's voice came. "How can I help you?" It had a hint of Mariner Valley drawl. Elvi wondered if it was the mark of a Martian working for Laconia or a Laconian who'd carried her accent out into the alien worlds and back again. Whether this obedience was peculiar to Duarte's people or if it had been part of the Martian character all along.

"My eggheads came up with an analysis I'd like your eggheads to take a peek at, Governor. It may be nothing, but I'd recommend we hold action on the bomb ship until we know what we're looking at."

There was a long pause. "You have my curiosity, Admiral. Send over what you have."

"Thank you," Sagale said, and the governor cut the connection. "Share that with the *Typhoon* and Medina, Dr. Lively. Let's see if they share your concerns."

"Yes, sir," Jen said, and started packaging her information like she'd been given an extra five minutes on her final exams.

Fayez touched Elvi's shoulder and said, almost too softly to hear, "Do you think we just got away with—"

The universe exploded.

If it had been a sound, it would have been deafening. Elvi put her hands over her ears just the same. A reflex. An approximation. Jen was screaming. Elvi tried to sink to the deck, but only managed to pull her legs up so that she was floating in a fetal position. The curve of the handhold before her was ornate and beautiful. The smudge of darkness where the oil from the crew's skin hadn't been cleaned away was like a map of a vast coastline, fractal and complex. She was aware of Fayez beside her, of the waves of pressure passing between them, touching, and reflecting away as they both screamed. The air was a fog of atoms. Sagale was a cloud of atoms. She was a cloud.

You've been here, she thought. You've been here before. Don't get distracted by it. Don't lose yourself.

The cloud that was her hand, vibrations in emptiness, slipped through the void and clatter to the cloud that was the handhold. Fields of energy between her atoms and the bulkhead's atoms turned into a dance of pressure, and the surge sent lightning up her arm, so complicated it was hard to keep track of. She was aware that she felt it, but there was so much happening it was hard to keep the sensation in mind.

Elvi found that she could see right through the suddenly vaporous ship, and right through the other ship clouds around it. Medina was a vast but wispy thunderhead at the center of them all.

Something was moving through the clouds, dark and sinuous as a dancer slipping between raindrops. And then another. And then more. They were everywhere, sliding through the gas and liquid and solid, scattering the clouds with their passage. They were solid. Real in a way the clouds of matter were not. They were more real than anything she'd ever seen. Tendrils of darkness that had never known light. That *could* never know light. *You've seen this absence of light before. A darkness like the eye of an angry god . . . You said that to someone.*

One darted and swirled, off to her left if left meant anything now. It furred like a question mark, and the pattern of atoms and vibrations swirled around it and into it. The beauty of it, the grace, were hard to look away from. Clouds mixed and swirled together in its wake, colors so pure they were only colors. It took effort to recognize they were blood.

She'd been here before. It had been overwhelming the first time. It was overwhelming again now, but at least she knew what it was. That made holding her mind together possible. At least for a moment.

You're doing great, kid. You're doing great. You can do this. Just a little more. But do it now . . .

She tried to remember what her throat was. Tried to imagine that the dots of matter and emptiness had said words before. That they still could. They were her body, the air she breathed. She tried to make it all work together long enough to scream.

Emergency evacuation. Major Okoye authorization delta-eight. A tendril of darkness darted toward her . . .

. . . and dropped away. All of them slid away, falling like black snowflakes through the cloud of vibrations that was the deck. Everything swirled, one form folding into another. If she unfocused her eyes, she could just recognize them. Jen's body, rolling as maneuvering thrusters made the deck into a hillside. Someone's arm from fingers to elbow, and even a few centimeters of flesh beyond. The glow of the main display, too much itself to hold any meaning beyond the simple elegance of photons caught in air. She was aware of her own pain like it was the sound of a distant waterfall. She fell through it and into something like sleep.

And a blink later, she was back. Thrust that could have been a third of a g or five gs pulled her down. When she forced herself to sit up, blood glued her cheek to the deck. The air stank, but with too many different volatiles to make sense of. Alarms were sounding, echoing off each other in a meaningless cacophony. Everything had gone wrong at once. She hauled herself up to standing.

The bridge was a thing from a nightmare. Swaths of the bulkheads, decks, equipment were gone. Like an artist had come in with an eraser and taken away bits of it at random. And the others too.

Sagale was still at his post, a long loop of his head and right shoulder simply vanished. Jen lay in a still pile where the deck met the wall, covered in blood that might have been her own. Travon's arm lay beside his station, but where his crash couch had been, there was a soft-edged hole down to the next deck and the one below that. It was like seeing a coral reef made from her ship and her friends and—

“Fayez!” she screamed. “Fayez!”

“Here,” his voice said behind her. “I’m here. I’m okay.”

He was in two-thirds of a crash couch. The fluid in the reservoir had all poured out and down and away.

“I’m okay,” he said again.

“Your foot’s gone,” she said.

“I know. But I’m okay,” he said, and closed his eyes. Elvi stumbled to the console that looked most nearly intact. It was hard to walk, and she

didn't know why until she looked down and saw that a scoop of her thigh the size of a softball was missing. As soon as she saw it, she felt the pain.

A lesser ship would have been dead a hundred times over, but the *Falcon* was hardy. Its skin had been cut a hundred times, and it had regrown fast enough to keep in air. The reactor was throwing errors and emergency corrections, the log spooling so fast she couldn't keep track. She pulled up the sensor arrays, and stars appeared on her screen. The ship was out of the slow zone. Free of the rings. The system identified Laconia's sky. She turned the ship's attention back to the ring gate falling away behind them. It looked calm. As if nothing at all odd had just happened. She felt laughter burbling up in her throat and tried to keep it down, uncertain whether it would stop once it got started.

She opened a broadcast channel and prayed that enough of the *Falcon* still existed to get the signal out. For a moment, the system didn't respond and her heart sank. Then the transmitter hauled itself to life.

"Thank you," she told the ship. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you."

She gathered her strength, wondering how much blood she'd lost. How much she had left.

"To any ship in range. This is Major Elvi Okoye of the Laconian Science Directorate. I am in need of immediate aid. We have mass casualties—"

Chapter Twenty-Two: Teresa

I've never seen anyone that angry before," she said. She was telling the story of little Monster Singh and her mother. "I mean, I've probably been mad, but this was different. This girl was . . ."

"Seriously? You're one of the angriest people I know, Tiny," Timothy said.

His food recycler was in pieces laid out on a blanket, everything carefully in place like an exploded drawing of itself. Only the built-in power supply was still inside the frame. Timothy was going through the components now, cleaning and polishing each one. Looking for the signs of wear. Teresa sat on his cot with her back against the cave wall, her legs pulled up in front of her and Muskrat snoring contentedly at her side. A repair drone lurked at the edge of the light, its bulbous black eyes looking vaguely hurt that Timothy wasn't letting it take care of the equipment.

"I'm not an angry person," she said. Then, a moment later, "I don't think I'm angry."

Timothy tossed her a pair of dark goggles and motioned for her to put them on. She did, and put a hand over Muskrat's eyes so that she wouldn't be blinded. After a few seconds, the light of a welding torch burst in her vision like a tiny green star. The smoke was acrid and metallic and she liked it.

"Thing is," Timothy said, loud over the roar of the torch, "there's only a couple kinds of anger. You get angry because you're afraid of something or you get angry because you're frustrated." The torch turned off with a pop.

"Safe?" Teresa asked.

“Sure, you can take ’em off.” When she did, the cave seemed brighter than when she’d put them on before. Even with the intensity of the light, her eyes had adapted to darkness. She scratched Muskrat’s ears as Timothy went on. “If you’re . . . I don’t know. If you’re scared maybe your dad isn’t the kind of guy you thought he was, you might get angry. Or you’re afraid no one’s got your back. Like Nutless.”

“His name’s Connor,” Teresa said, but she smiled when she said it.

“Yeah, him,” Timothy agreed. “Or maybe you’re afraid he made you look stupid in front of your crew. So you get angry. If you didn’t give a shit whether your old man lived or died? If Nutless and your crew didn’t matter to you? Then you’re not angry. Or the other way? You’re trying to get something to work. A conduit to fit. Been working at it for hours, and just when it’s looking about right, the metal bends on you and you gotta start over. That’s angry too, but it ain’t scared-angry. It’s the other one.”

“So you look at me,” Teresa said, derision in her voice, “and you think I’m scared and frustrated?”

“Yep.”

Teresa’s mockery died, and she hugged her knees. It didn’t fit at all with who and what she thought she was, but something in her leaped toward his word. It felt like recognizing someone. Like catching a glimpse of herself from an angle she’d never seen before. It was fascinating.

“How do you deal with it?”

“Fucked if I know, Tiny. I don’t do those.”

“You don’t get angry?”

“Not out of fear, anyway. I don’t remember the last time I was afraid of something. Frustration was more my thing. But I had this friend, and I watched her die slow. I couldn’t do anything about it. That was frustrating, and I got angry. Started looking for a fight. But I had another friend who straightened me out.”

“How?”

“She beat the living shit out of me,” Timothy said. “That helped. And ever since then, nothing has seemed like it was worth getting too bent out of shape over.”

He rolled a bright silver cone about the size of a thumb in his palm and scowled.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Injector’s getting a little ragged at the mouth is all,” Timothy said. “I can touch it up. Just means I’ll be drinking my yeast patties more than eating them.”

“You spend a lot of time with that thing.”

“You take care of your tools, your tools take care of you.”

Teresa leaned against the wall. The stone was cool against her back. Deep cave temperatures were the measure of the underlying climate average. Mass and depth smoothed out the daily highs and lows—even the annual fluctuations of summer and winter. She knew it intellectually, but she hadn’t understood it until Timothy’s cave. The way it always felt cool in the heat and warm in the chill.

“You know, the wise man living alone on the mountain is really cliché,” she said, smiling when she said it so he wouldn’t think she was being mean. “Anyway, I don’t have anything to be scared of.”

“Assassins with pocket nukes for one,” Timothy said, slotting the injector back into its housing.

Teresa laughed, and after a second, Timothy smiled too.

“If anyone’s going to kill me, it’ll probably be Dr. Cortázar,” she said.

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“It’s just a joke. I was watching Holden, like we talked about? And I heard this conversation he and Dr. Cortázar were having.”

“What about?” Timothy asked, idly.

Teresa thought back. What had they been talking about exactly? Mostly she remembered Cortázar talking about how nature ate babies and Holden looking into the camera. But it had been about her father too.

She took in a breath, ready to speak, and the air rattled against the back of her throat and down into her lungs like a billion little molecule-sized marbles banging against the soft tissue. Her respiration system was a cave inside Timothy’s cave, and she was acutely aware of the complexity of her own body and the answering complexity of the caverns around her. Veins

and chips in the wall before her fragmented and smoothed together. Gravity trying to tug her down into the floor, and the astonishingly complex dance of the electrons in the stone and her flesh pushing back. She managed to wonder if she'd been drugged before her awareness was overwhelmed by the immediacy and complexity of the air and her body and the increasingly invisible boundary that failed to really divide her from the world . . .

Muskrat barked anxiously. She'd slumped down on the cot at some point without knowing she was doing it. Timothy stood up, his expression perfectly focused and his recycler forgotten. The repair drone made a weird yipping sound as it tried to stand up, staggering drunkenly.

"That wasn't just me, right?" Timothy said.

"I don't think so," Teresa said.

"Yeah, all right. It's been fun, Tiny, but you need to head home now."

"What was that? Is there something wrong with the air in here? Are there fumes?"

"Nope," Timothy said, taking her by the arm and lifting her to her feet. "Air's fine. That was something else. And it probably happened to a lot of people, so they're gonna be scared, and they're going to want to find where everyone important to them is, and that's you. So you need to be not here."

"I don't understand," she said, but Timothy was pulling her forward, toward the mouth of the cave. His grip on her arm was like a vise. His expression was blank. It made him frightening. Muskrat followed behind, barking like she was trying to warn them of something.

In the open air, the world was normal. The strange sensations she'd had before already seemed like a bad dream or an accident. Timothy's reaction was the only thing that made it frightening. He looked up, scanning the sky, then nodded to himself.

"Okay, Tiny. You and the furball head back home."

"I'll come back as soon as I can," she said. She didn't know why she wanted to reassure him.

"Okay."

It was the way he said it. Like his mind was already someplace else. She'd had adults treat her like that before—polite and agreeable, but

elsewhere. Never Timothy, though. He was different. He was supposed to be different.

“Will you be here when I do?”

“I’ll have to, I guess. I’m not done yet, so—”

She hugged him. It was like hugging a tree. He pulled back, and when he looked at her, she thought there was something like regret in his expression. It couldn’t have been pity.

“Good luck, Tiny,” he said, then turned back toward his cave and was gone. Muskrat barked once and looked after him, as worried as Teresa was.

“Come on,” she said, and started for her secret passage back into the State Building and home. The afternoon was cool. The leaves were starting to retreat back into their winter sheaths, leaving the trees looking stubbly. A sunbird hanging on a low branch opened its leathery wings at her and hissed, but she ignored it. At the horizon, wide clouds bunched and trailed gray veils of storm. If they came this way, the drainage tunnel would be impassable and she’d be stuck outside the walls. She picked up her pace . . .

The sound of the flier started as a high and distant whine, but it grew louder quickly. Less than a minute after she first noticed it, the sound was a roar. The black laminate body and three cold thrusters appeared over the treetops and fell into a thin meadow, hardly more than a break between trees. When the door popped open, she expected to see the light-blue uniforms of security. She prepared to identify herself and explain that she’d decided to go for a hike. It was only partly a lie.

But while there were two armed guards, the first person out of the flier was Colonel Ilich. He trotted toward her, and his face was dark. The thrusters didn’t cycle all the way down, so when he reached her, he had to shout.

“Get in the flier.”

“What?”

“You need to get in the flier now. You have to get back to the State Building.”

“I don’t understand.”

Ilich's jaw clenched and he pointed at the open door. "You. There. Now. This isn't difficult."

Teresa stepped back like she'd been slapped. In all the years Ilich had been her tutor, he had never been mean to her. Never been anything but patient and supportive and amused. Even when she didn't do her work or did something inappropriate, the punishment was just a long talk about why she'd made the choices she did and what the goals of her education were. It was like seeing a different man in an Ilich suit. She felt tears welling up in her eyes. She saw *Oh, for fuck's sake* on his lips, but she couldn't hear it.

He made a little bow and gestured her forward like a servant making way for his master, but she felt the impatience in it. The contempt. The anger.

Oh, she thought as she walked to the flier. *He's frightened.*

At the flier, Muskrat balked, and before Teresa could coax her in, Ilich assigned one of the guards to go back on foot with the dog. The flier's door closed with a deep clank, and they lurched up over the trees. Even though the body of the flier had looked opaque from the outside, it was no darker than tinted glass from her seat. She could see the State Building clearly as soon as they cleared the top branches.

"How did you know where I was?" Teresa asked.

Ilich shook his head, and for a moment she thought he wasn't going to answer. When he did, his voice had more like its usual tone: patient and gentle. The difference was that now she knew it was a mask.

"You had a locator implanted in your jawbone when you were born. There is never a moment when security doesn't know how to find you, and your safety is part of my sacred duty."

It was like hearing a language she almost understood. She could pick out the meaning of each word, but she couldn't quite make sense of the whole. The idea was too foreign. Too wrong.

"Your father felt it was important for you to have some experience of rebellion and autonomy, so he permitted your excursions so long as they didn't take you too far from the State Building. He said he was solo free-climbing on the surface of Mars at your age, and that he learned things

about himself that way. He hoped you would find use in the same independence and solitude.”

Solitude. He didn’t know about Timothy, then. There was nothing on any world that would make her tell him either. She felt the buzz of outrage in her throat. “So you just let me *think* . . .”

The flier passed over the outer wall of the State Building and curved around to the east. They weren’t heading for the landing pad but the lawn outside the residence. A single figure stood in the gardens, watching them pass. She thought it was Holden.

“I respected your autonomy and your privacy to the extent that security protocols permitted,” Ilich said. “But I needed to be able to find you in case there was an emergency.”

“There’s an emergency?”

“Yes,” he said. “There is.”



Her father smiled at her, the wrinkles at the edges of his eyes deeper than she remembered them. The opalescence in his iris was more pronounced, and something seemed to glow from under his skin. His study had been a bedroom, back when he’d still slept. That hadn’t been for years. Now it had a desk hand carved from Laconian wood with a grain like sedimentary rock, a wide table, a shelf with half a dozen physical books, and the divan where he was sitting. Where he had been sitting when the change came.

“Father?” Teresa said. “Can you hear me?”

His mouth changed into a little o, like he was a child seeing something marvelous. He reached out, patting at the air beside her head. She took his hand, and it was hot.

“Has he said anything?” she asked.

Kelly, her father’s personal valet, shook his head. “A few things, but none of it made sense. After it happened, I came to see him, and he was like this. Just like this.” He nodded to Cortázar, sitting on the edge of the table. “I got Dr. Cortázar as quickly as I could.”

“Your opinion?” Ilich asked. His voice was cool, and her father didn’t react to it at all. “What’s wrong with him?”

Cortázar spread his hands. “I could only speculate.”

“Then do,” Ilich said.

“The . . . event. The lost consciousness? It seems to match what Admiral Trejo reported from Sol system. The theory I always heard was that it’s the weapon that killed the protomolecule engineers. However their minds were organized, this . . . effect broke it. Well, the high consul has been making himself more and more like the builders for years now. It might—*might*—leave him more vulnerable to the attack than the rest of us.”

Teresa’s chest hurt like someone had punched her sternum. She sank to her knees at her father’s side, but he was frowning at something behind her. Or nothing.

“How long before he gets better?” Kelly asked.

“If I had been permitted to have more than one test subject, I might be able to guess,” Cortázar said. It was the same tone of voice he’d used to say *Nature eats babies all the time*. It made Teresa’s skin crawl. “As things are? He could come back to himself in a moment. He could be like this for the rest of his life, which in his case could be a very long time indeed. If I can take him to the lab and run some tests, I might get more insight into the question.”

“No,” Kelly said, and it was clear from his tone it wasn’t the first time he’d said it. “The high consul stays in his rooms until . . .”

“Until what?” Cortázar said.

“Until we have this situation under control,” Ilich said, firmly. “Does anyone outside this room know about his condition?”

The high consul’s terminal chimed, a high-priority connection request. The three men looked at each other in alarm. Her father scowled, then farted like the blare of a trumpet. The perversity and indignity of it cut Teresa like a blade. This was her father. The man who ruled all humanity through his vision and audacity. Who knew how everything was and was supposed to be. The body in front of her was only a crippled man, too

broken to be embarrassed. The chime came again, and Kelly grabbed it with his hand terminal.

"I'm afraid the high consul can't be disturbed," he said as he walked out of the room. "I can accept a message for him."

The door closed behind him.

"I can bring some equipment here," Cortázar said. "It won't be as good as having him in the pens where the real equipment is, but I could do . . . something."

Ilich ran a hand over his scalp, his gaze flickering from her father to Cortázar to the window that looked out over a bamboo garden in some different universe where the sun still shone and life wasn't broken. Teresa shifted, and Ilich looked at her. For a long moment, their eyes were locked on each other's.

She felt a wave of panic. "Am I supposed to be in charge now?"

"No," Ilich said, as if her fear had resolved something. "No, High Consul Winston Duarte is in charge. He is deep in consultation with Dr. Cortázar on matters critical to the state of the empire, and cannot be disturbed under any circumstances. It's easy to remember, because it's true. He specifically ordered Kelly to keep anyone but the doctor here and you, because you're his daughter, away from the residences until further notice. Do you remember him saying that?"

"I don't—" Teresa began.

"You need to remember him saying it. He was sitting right here. It was just after the event. We all came back to ourselves, and he told Kelly in front of you that he needed Dr. Cortázar, and that he couldn't be disturbed. Do you remember?"

Teresa pictured it. Her father's voice, calm and sturdy as stone.

"I remember," she said.

Kelly came back in the room. "Something happened at the ring. The *Falcon* made an unscheduled transit. Now it's putting out a distress call. A relief ship is on the way, but it won't be there for hours. Maybe as much as a day."

“All right,” Ilich said. “We need a secure channel to Governor Song and Admiral Trejo. Someone will have to take over coordinating the military. Apart from them, no one can know anything.

“Until we get the high consul back to himself, our little conspiracy here is the empire.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Naomi

The plume of energy that came from the ring gate was invisible to the naked eye. An optical telescope would have seen at most a few flares of brightness where bits of matter caught in it glowed for a moment as they were ripped apart. Moving at the speed of light, it flared into the space where ships coming into Auberon or preparing to leave it were most likely to be, widening like a wave with distance, hundred thousand kilometers after hundred thousand kilometers, spreading out like a cone. If it became less powerful as it spread, it wasn't enough to help the *San Salvador*. The Transport Union ship had been slow moving out of the restricted zone, and almost instantaneously, it and everyone aboard it became a cinder.

Naomi sat in the commissary and played the newsfeed of its loss in a loop, watching the ship flare white and die so quickly the frame rate couldn't quite make sense of it. She had spent very nearly her whole life on ships and stations. She'd been on six ships that had suffered micrometeorite hits, two that had lost atmosphere from them. Once, she'd had to drop core to keep her reactor from blooming out like a tiny, brief sun. She'd jumped between ships without a suit, and the feeling of breathing vacuum still came to her in nightmares decades after the fact. She would have said she was intimately aware of all the dangers life outside an atmosphere could hold.

This one was new.

"Did *they* do this, you think?" Emma asked, hunched over her bulb of morning tea. The *Bhikaji Cama* was in its braking burn now. The one-third g had felt strange until Naomi realized she'd never been in the crewed parts of the ship when there was up and down before. After that it still felt strange, but she knew why.

“*They* Laconia or *they* Saba’s people?”

Emma lifted her eyebrows. “I meant the first, but either.”

The crew clumped around the commissary in quiet groups of two or three, and they treated each other with the brittle courtesy of a funeral. Some of them had likely known the crew of the *San Salvador*, but even if they didn’t it had been a ship like theirs. Its death reminded them of their own, still somewhere down the line, but coming.

“I don’t know,” Naomi said. “The point of having the *Typhoon* in with Medina was always that they could defend every gate at once. Hit the station with its magnetic field projector and all the gates bake anyone that’s too close, but . . .”

“I saw the data from when they did that. It wasn’t this big.”

“It wasn’t even close,” Naomi agreed.

Emma sipped from her bulb, hunched in a degree more, and lowered her voice. “Did we make a play? Did we try to take the slow zone?”

“If there was an attack planned, I didn’t know about it,” she said, but with a knot in her gut. She didn’t think Saba would have put together something that audacious without her, but maybe he would. She had been arguing for restraint and less violent, longer-term strategies. If all she’d managed was to cut herself out of the loop . . . She imagined Bobbie and Alex and the *Gathering Storm* burning in toward the gate with a ragged and improvised fleet. They *couldn’t* have been that stupid. But even if they had, the gamma burst from the gate had been so much more powerful . . .

“Can you find where we put my system?” Naomi asked. “If I can rebuild it, I might be able to find Saba’s signals. Get a report.”

“Could hunt it down, maybe,” Emma said. “But we’re putting you on a shuttle for Big Moon in four hours, get you out before we’re in range of the transfer station. Doesn’t leave much time.”

“So we hurry.”

Finding all the spare parts of her former cell was harder now that thrust had changed the nature of the architectural space, but Naomi didn’t need all of it. The physical hardware had some built-in security that made finding the hidden messages easier, but without the keys and information that she

kept only in her own memory, they'd have been useless. Her records from the long passages in the storage container were wiped. Even if the Laconians had found the devices, they wouldn't have been able to pull the secrets of the underground from them. But neither could Naomi.

Emma drove a loading mech, shifting the heavy pallets that they'd moved before, and Naomi found the pieces she needed—the signal processor from her crash couch, a monitor different from the one she'd had but close enough, a hand terminal interface. They set up in a workroom by the machine shop. Neither of them had said it, but they both knew that everything would be broken down again and hidden away when they were done.

The workroom was small and grimy, with long, discolored patches on the fabric walls. The tool racks had been used for so many years that the ceramic was wearing through and the titanium bones glittering under it. It smelled like oil and sweat, and Naomi liked it better than anyplace she'd been on the *Cama* before.

She looked through all the usual places where Saba hid communications for the underground, but most of them weren't there at all. Not just empty of hidden messages, but whole channels missing. The Transport Union's coordination feed—the running record of ship locations and vectors—was just a repeating standby message. The entertainment feed from Medina of a young man talking breathlessly about the three-factor philosophy of design for hours on end wasn't transmitting at all. Medina's communications channels were closed for business, covert or otherwise.

"That a good thing, or bad?" Emma asked.

"I don't know what it is," Naomi said.

"Got to get you to a shuttle soon."

"Just another few minutes."

Emma shifted her weight, trying not to show her impatience. It wasn't just the time pressure on the shuttle. Everything about the situation itched.

Naomi was almost ready to resign herself to failure when she found the message. It was hidden in false-static fluctuations under a navigation beacon for the repeaters that ferried comm signals across the interference of

the gate. The encryption was key based, and it took her six tries to find the right one. When it popped onto the monitor, it was text. No voice, no picture. Nothing to show that it had come from Saba apart from the fact of its existence.

MAJOR INCIDENT IN THE SLOW ZONE. SUSPEND ALL OPERATIONS AND SHELTER DOWN. NO IMMEDIATE THREAT TO THE ORGANIZATION, BUT ENEMY SURVEILLANCE HIGH. NO TRANSITS IN OR OUT OF ANY GATE BY ORDER OF LACONIA. TWO GATES LOST. UPDATE TO FOLLOW.

“ ‘Two gates lost?’ ” Emma said. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Be patient and find out, sounds like,” Naomi said. She shut down her system, the words blinking into darkness.



The shuttle was a two-couch model. No Epstein drive, but an efficient teakettle good enough for orbital transits that didn't take more than a month or two. She wasn't going to be on it for more than a couple of days. It was the kind of thing a new prospector would rent for claim surveys or an old couple for a long, slightly adventurous vacation. Naomi felt Jim's absence even though he'd never been on board it. As the *Bhikaji Cama* dropped away behind her and she did her first sustained burn toward Auberon's lunar outpost, she checked the transponder output. A day ago, the shuttle had been a maintenance and safety vehicle for the Transport Union. Today, it was a rental craft registered to Whimsy Enterprises and had been for the last year and a half. The ship didn't care what story they told about it. It worked just as well either way.

She set the local censored newsfeed to play for a while, using the thin-faced, cheerful man spouting the Laconian official positions as a kind of white noise while she thought. In the hours she let it play, neither he nor the dour and serious woman who took his place mentioned Medina or the *Typhoon* or the gamma radiation burst. Or how someone could *lose* two ring gates. She tried to reassure herself that, whatever was going on, it at least wasn't Bobbie and Alex charging into the teeth of a *Magnetar*-class

battleship and dying. There was even the chance that the crisis, whatever it was, would open some opportunities for the underground. With her bottles gone, she'd have to find another way to get messages back to Saba.

Auberon was one of the success stories of the new systems. A wide, lush planet with clean water, hundreds of viable microclimates, and a tree of life that coexisted with Earth's biochemistry in a kind of mutual indulgent neglect. The story was that a farm on Auberon could grow native plant analogs and Terran crops side by side, with each acting as fertilizer for the other. It sounded like an exaggeration, but there was a seed of truth there. Food and water weren't a struggle on Auberon the way they had been on so many of the other worlds. It had twelve cities with populations over a million and a wide scattering of smaller towns, farms, and research stations. A lunar station that fed cargo and supplies through the near asteroids and a handful of dwarf planets big enough to have civilian populations. It had almost one-tenth of a percent of Earth's population at its height, and it had been self-sustaining for over two decades.

Naomi found the place a little creepy.

The docks, when she reached them, were cleaner than any she'd seen in a lifetime traveling through Sol system. It wasn't just the eerie perfection she disliked, though. The void cities that had been, for a time, the dream of Belter culture made real had been as new and shining and optimistic as Auberon's lunar base. But they had been rooted in history. Everything in Sol system, from the great port of Ceres to the rock hoppers digging ore and water from asteroids that were hardly more than a hold's volume of gravel, had come from a shared past. Yes, the expansion into the void had been bloody and cruel and filled with as much violence as cooperation, but it had been real. Authentic.

There were no old levels in the station, because there was no old. On Ceres, there were neighborhoods built in the excavations where the great engines that had spun the asteroid up had been housed. On Ganymede, there were levels of tunnels that had been abandoned in the war and never recovered. On Earth, there were cities built on the ruins of the cities before them, layer after layer back through millennia. Auberon was a theme park

version of itself. A prefabricated culture that could have been assembled anywhere with equal cheerfulness. It didn't feel human.

The Whimsy Enterprises office was a closet-sized door between an ice cream shop and a land claims lawyer. Inside, the air smelled like hydroponics tanks and fresh plastic. A woman her own age with close-cut hair stood at the kind of desk Naomi expected to get takeaway food from.

"Hello," the woman said with a barely repressed grin.

"I have a ship I've brought back," Naomi said.

"You don't remember me, do you?" the woman said. "Not your fault. It was a long time ago. I crewed your ship."

"My ship?"

"The *Rocinante*, under Captain Holden. Back in the bad old days, when the rocks fell. You were busy at the time, sa sa que? With that fucker Inaros. Looked like you'd been through a recycler when we pulled you off that racing pinnacle."

Naomi's brain stripped away the years, filled in the woman's cheeks, undid the gray of age. She was a pilot. She'd worked for Fred Johnson on Tycho. "Chava Lombaugh?"

"Welcome to Auberon," Chava said. "You can talk freely in here. I sweep for surveillance every other day, and I made a special pass when I heard you were coming."

Naomi walked to the desk and leaned against it. "Thank you for that. Do you know what's going on?"

"Not in specific," Chava said, "but I can say that the Laconian security forces have been shitting themselves boneless since that first no-transit alert came. We haven't been able to decrypt their feeds, but the volume of traffic has been huge. Governor Song was pushing like hell to get every ship she could out of the slow zone before the gamma bursts, and now she's not letting anyone in or out."

"Do you have a way to reach Saba?" Naomi asked.

"The Laconians have been updating the security on the repeaters," Chava said. "I still have a couple back doors, though."

“Are you sure they’re secure?” Naomi asked, and her voice echoed strangely, like she was hearing more of it than usual. Undertones and overtones rippling against each other as the vibrations touched the hard surfaces of desk and floor and wall and rebounded to make new complexities. She stepped back as Chava’s eyes widened. She could see the wetness in them, the tiny dark dot of her tear duct, the river pattern of blood in the whites of her eyes like a map of an unknown world.

“Fuck,” Chava said, and it was a symphony. Overwhelming and complex. Naomi felt herself falling into the sound and the wide, full, complicated air—

When she came back to herself, her head was pressed against the abrasive industrial carpeting. Chava was still at the desk, her face bloodless. She looked around the room, trying to focus, trying to find Naomi. It took a few seconds.

“What . . . ,” Chava said. “What was”

“It’s the same thing that happened in Sol system when they killed Pallas. How long have we been unconscious?”

“I . . . don’t”

“Do you keep logs? Security tapes?”

Chava nodded, working up from barely a tremor until she was bobbing her head so much it seemed like it would be hard to stop. She opened a screen on her desk display. Nothing inside the room, but a view of the front door from outside. As she rolled it back until Naomi appeared, an alert tone came over the station’s public speaker loud enough to hear even inside the office. *This is a public security announcement. Please remain where you are. If you are in need of assistance, use the emergency alert on your hand terminal, and government responders will come to you. Do not seek help on your own. Do not leave your homes or places of business.*

“Three minutes,” Chava said. “It’s like time just blinked out.”

“Is there a *Magnetar*-class battleship in Auberon? That’s the only thing I know that does that . . . or almost the only thing.”

“No, nothing like that.”

“We have to risk your back doors on the repeater. We have to get a message to Saba. Something’s going on here, and if it’s related to whatever happened that got Laconia worried, he may need to know about it.”

Chava gestured for Naomi to come around the desk. “Follow me,” she said.

Chava’s office was small, with white, generic furniture of ceramic and steel, but it was well equipped. Naomi sat at the other woman’s desk and built a short message, typing fast and not worrying about errors. The Auberon gate had a fifty-five-minute light delay from the planet. Even if Saba wrote back at once, it would be two hours before she heard, and it might take him longer.

In the long wait, Chava made them chamomile tea from the office supplies. The sweetness cloyed, but Naomi drank it anyway. It was something to do. The security alert came off an hour and thirty-five minutes after it started. *The station is safe and secure. Please return to your normal activities.* It seemed optimistic to the point of being naive.

Chava Lombaugh’s system chirped ten minutes shy of the two-hour mark, and she slapped open the new message like it had stung her. As she read it, she bared her teeth.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing,” she said, and shifted the monitor for Naomi to see. TRANSMISSION ERROR. REPEATER NOT RESPONDING. MESSAGE QUEUED FOR LATER DELIVERY.

“The repeater’s down?” Naomi said.

“Theirs is,” Chava said. “The one inside the ring. The Auberon-side repeater generated this message, but the two aren’t talking to each other. We might be able to do something else, though. Ring gate interference is a bitch, but it’s not impossible to punch through. I have some ships in the rental fleet with tightbeams, and if I got one close . . .”

Naomi shook her head. “No. Nothing obvious. I want him briefed, but not at the risk of exposing the organization. Saba can get the message when he can get the message. He knows how to find us once he does.”

Chava made a frustrated sound at the back of her throat and slammed down the last of her tea. “Let me take you to the safe house, then. At least we can chew our nails someplace comfortable. Laconia takes the repeaters seriously. Whatever the issue is, getting the communications network back up will be high on their to-do list.”

“Thank God for the efficiency of the enemy,” Naomi said, making it a joke. Chava even laughed at it a little.

But a day later, the repeater was still down. And the day after that. It was almost a week before a high-speed probe made the long journey to the ring gate and through it, and sent back the images that even the censor’s office couldn’t keep a lid on.

Auberon system—Naomi and Chava and the crew of the *Bhikaji Cama* included—saw the swirling colors that had replaced the darkness between the ring gates. They found out why the repeater on the slow zone side of the gate wasn’t responding. It was gone, and so were all the other repeaters like it. And the *Eye of the Typhoon*. And Medina Station and all the ships that had been quarantined inside the ring space. Only the alien station at the center remained, glowing bright as a tiny sun.

Naomi looked at it all until she was on the edge of vertigo, then looked away and had to go back to check that it was real. Over and over again, locked in a cycle of disbelief.

All human existence in the small artificial universe between the gates had been wiped away as if it had never been there at all, leaving no sign of what had killed it.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Bobbie

The bar was worse than shitty. Shitty had character. The place was generic. Fake stone meant to echo a tunnel on Ceres or Pallas marked with graffiti to make it look edgy until you noticed that the pattern of it repeated every couple meters. The appearance of counterculture as churned out by a corporate designer. The food wasn't bad. Vat-grown ribs in a hot marinade and vegetable kibble that hadn't been cooked to a mush. The beer was decent, if a little hoppy for her taste. A screen at the back usually played highlights from football games around the system. Now it was playing a newsfeed. And while most of the time the screen was a background for the conversations and drinking, today everyone was watching it.

"The event mirrors the one experienced when the *Tempest* was forced to employ its magnetic field generator against separatist forces on Pallas Station," the woman on the screen said. She was pale skinned, with long, dark hair and a serious expression. Bobbie thought the broadcast was out of Luna, but it could as easily have been Ceres or Mars. They all looked the same these days. "But while the previous effect had a clear trigger and was restricted to Sol system, the few ships that have made the transit into Sol since the event report that this was much more widespread, possibly affecting all known systems.

"The loss of Medina Station and the *Typhoon* along with all civilian ships in the ring space is assumed to be related, but no official report has been released at this time to confirm that."

Caspar made a low sound, something between a cough and a chuckle. Jillian, across from him, lifted her chin as a question.

“More critical than their pet journalists usually are,” Caspar said.

“You can still see the censor’s arm up her ass working her lips,” Jillian said. “If we had a free press, they’d be tearing these bastards eight new assholes an hour until we got an explanation.”

An old man in a collarless shirt appeared on the screen with the dark-haired newsfeed host. He was smiling as anxiously as if the camera were mugging him. There was a chyron identifying him and his credentials, but the screen was too far away and the print too small for Bobbie to make them out, except she thought his first name was Robert. She leaned forward, trying to hear better.

“What can you tell us about these events, Professor?” the host asked.

“Well, yes. Yes. The first thing, of course, is that it’s a mistake to use the plural, yes? *Events* plural. What we’re seeing is better understood as a single, nonlocal event. Which fits with everything we’ve learned about the . . . I don’t like to say alien life. Too many presumptions. Call it the previous tenants and their enemies.” The old man’s smile grew a little warmer, amused by his own joke. Bobbie thanked the good angels that she’d never taken a university course from him.

Jillian sneered. “They just lost one of their battleships, the central traffic control for the ring gates, a shitload of ships, and two whole fucking gates, and they want to talk about the limits of locality?” She pointed to the screen with a pale bone that had recently been wrapped in rib meat. “These people are idiots.”

Caspar shrugged. “We just lost the underground coordination from Medina and we’re having beer and barbecue.”

“We’re idiots too,” Jillian said.

“You are, anyway,” Caspar said, but he smiled when he said it.



The announcement that the Sol gate was closed for business until further notice had been bad. No one on her crew had said anything to her directly, but they hadn’t had to. No ships in or out of the system didn’t make the

shell game impossible. They might still be able to escape. Sneak off Callisto and find a Transport Union ship to hide in. But even if they did, that ship wouldn't be going anywhere until the quarantine was lifted. Any hope of slipping out to a different system, hiding on some undeveloped moon until the attack in Sol system blew over was lost. Instead, they'd be trying to hide from the tiger without leaving its cage.

Then things got worse.

Bobbie was asleep when it happened. It had been getting harder and harder to get any rest. She'd pull herself onto her cot in what had been a warehouse office, kill the lights, and her mind would launch into scenarios of escape or capture or violence, running through every combination of circumstances she could invent. She felt lucky to get five full hours in a cycle, so when she woke up groggy and confused, she'd thought it was just exhaustion finally catching up. It wasn't until her hand terminal chirped to let her know that everyone from her crew to the Callistan emergency service to the top newsfeeds in the system had been trying to get her attention that she understood something deeper had happened.



“The important thing to understand,” the old man said, looking into the camera like he was everyone's kind uncle, “is that while these incidents can be very upsetting and certainly they have caused some accidents when people were in the middle of sensitive or dangerous activities when they came, they pose no real threat in and of themselves.”

“Can you explain that?” the host asked.

“These spells have not been shown to have any long-term effects. There is no indication that they are more than an inconvenience, really. It's important, of course, to keep in mind they may happen, at least until the Science Directorate understands the cause and . . . ah . . . *control* of them. Until then, we should all make sure fail-safes are engaged on our vehicles and equipment. But that's good advice in any case, yes?”

Caspar roughened his voice, mimicking the old man. “And don’t concern yourself with the fact that it destroyed gates and battleships. Oh my, no. Don’t worry your pretty little heads about that.”

“Where’s Alex?” Bobbie asked.

“He was heading home last time I saw him,” Jillian said.

Home meant the *Gathering Storm*. The window for their escape was coming soon. That might have been the reason he’d gone to the ship. Or he might have been avoiding her. She’d pushed him harder than usual last time they’d talked, and she knew he avoided conflict when he could. She’d never have said it aloud, but she wished Amos or Naomi were still with them. Or even Holden. She was always a little worried that she’d break Alex without meaning to.

“I’m out,” she said, then left the shitty bar and the Laconian propaganda channel behind. Everyone else stayed behind to finish their beer and gossip. They could sense she wasn’t looking for company.

She walked through the public corridors of the station, her hands deep in her pockets, her eye on the floor ahead of her. Between her physical size and training almost from the cradle to control the space she occupied, it wasn’t easy for her to back down and look unremarkable. But it was important. They’d already been on Callisto longer than she liked, and she saw that the crew was getting used to it. They were developing favorite shitty bars, favorite brothels, barbers and coffee shops and pachinko parlors. It was normal to fit in after a while. Normal to make a life wherever you found yourself. But it was dangerous for them, because it was also how you became known, and being known too well meant they were all in prison or the pens or the grave.

At the turnoff, she used her hand terminal to unlock the service passage and ducked down into the infrastructure of the shipyard. It was a long walk through poorly heated hallways to the old OPA smugglers’ den. Her footsteps echoed along with the unsteady drip of condensate and the hum of the air recyclers. The graffiti on the walls here was ancient, much of it written in Belter creole or cipher. What little she could make out was

wishing ill on the UN and the MCR. The hatreds of the past seemed almost quaint now. Just being authentic made it better than Laconia.

What are my victories? Will I leave the universe a better place than I found it?

When she was a girl, she'd thought she understood what the future would be. Improvement. Progress. She expected to serve her nation, protect the terraforming effort from the resentful Earth and the feral Belt. She knew from the time she could speak that she wouldn't live to see humanity walking freely on the surface of Mars, but she believed she would die on a world with the spreading green of engineered moss and the aurora of a magnetosphere. The life she'd actually lived was unrecognizably different from the dream she'd had. More astounding, and more disappointing. And her sense of having a place in it was gone. She had her role, first on the *Rocinante*, now on the *Storm*. She had her people and her duty. It was Mars that had changed and darkened. It had metastasized into an empire and a grand project she wanted no part of.

She still had decades in her, if she kept her treatments and exercise regimen up. The universe she died in might still be better than the one she lived in now, but she had a hard time believing it would be better than the one she'd been born into. Too much had been lost, and what wasn't lost was changed beyond her ability to understand it.

Her hand terminal chimed. A message from Jillian, still back at the bar. Bobbie looked at it with distrust. Jillian was a smart woman and a good fighter. Another couple decades of life might eventually convince her to build up her team instead of undermining them. The way she felt at the moment, Bobbie wasn't sure she was in the mood to hear whatever Jillian was about to say. But she was captain, and Jillian was her XO. She thumbed the connection open. The recording had a tag that read **THOUGHT YOU'D WANT TO SEE THIS**. Bobbie started playing it.

The screen from the bar jumped to life. The refresh rate of the image there and the recording made a moiré pattern over the newsfeed host's face, but not so badly that Bobbie couldn't make her out. Or the man in the

window beside her. The old man was gone, and a familiar face had replaced him. Admiral Anton Trejo of the *Tempest*, de facto governor of Sol system.

Bobbie stopped walking.

“—planned for months,” Trejo said.

“So your return to Laconia isn’t related to the events in the ring space?” the host asked.

“Not at all,” Trejo said with a smile. He was about a thousand times better at lying than the host. “But I see how people would come to that conclusion. What happened with Medina was a tragedy, and I mourn the loss of life as deeply as anyone. But I have been assured by the Science Directorate and the high consul himself that the situation is under control. I’m just an old sailor heading for his next post. Nothing more dramatic than that. Vice Admiral Hogan is a good man and ready to take command. I have absolute faith in him.”

A third window opened on the screen, pushing Trejo and the host a little smaller and more masked by the interference. Vice Admiral Hogan was a serious-faced young man in Laconian blue. He could have been Caspar’s older brother.

“Well, speaking for the citizens of Sol system, I’d like to thank you for —”

The recording ended. Bobbie typed up a response with one thumb. THAT’S INTERESTING. She leaned against the wall. Trejo was leaving Sol system. Maybe was already on his way. A new officer—a Laconian officer, not an MCRN veteran—was taking command of the *Tempest*. It might have been enough to convince her, if she hadn’t already decided.

The *Storm* sat on a mobile landing platform wide enough to fit three more like her. The platform’s treads were taller than Bobbie, and designed to roll it through the massive cavern it was hiding in. Half a klick into the darkness, the passage angled up to a concealed hangar on the moon’s surface. For the moment, the ship stood tall as a tower in its gantry crane, the drive cones almost resting on the platform and the top of the ship lost in the shadows above her.

She made her way up the crane to the airlock, climbing the metal ladder hand over hand rather than calling the powered lift. When the airlock cycled open and she stepped in, she disconnected her hand terminal from the Callisto system before she synced up with the *Storm*. It wasn't likely that a dual connection would give them away, but it wasn't impossible, and every unnecessary risk was unnecessary.

The ship told her Alex was in the machine shop, and that four of her crew besides him were in various parts of the ship. All that mattered to her at the moment was that Alex was alone. This wasn't a conversation she needed the others to hear. Not yet, anyway.

The machine shop looked less like the manufacturing workshop that the *Rocinante* had and more like a showroom or a spa. The cabinets were set into gently curving walls, the seams too fine to see. The light came from the walls themselves, the skin of the ship glowing softly and uniformly to make the space gentle and shadowless. Alex stood at one of the benches with a manufacturing printer that looked like it had been grown from a seed more than built. He was thinner about the middle than he'd been when he was married. What was left of his hair had gone white, and a stubble of pale whiskers marked his dark cheeks. He reminded her of the man who'd run the ice cream shop by her school when she'd been a child. He looked up at her and nodded, and the memory faded. He was only Alex again.

"Something broken?" she asked, and pointed to the printer with her chin.

"The center brace on my crash couch was showing some wear. I broke down the old piece and I'm printing up a replacement," he said. "What brings you back to the ship?"

"I was looking for you," she said. "We need to have a conversation."

"I thought we might."

"The things you said before? About why I was . . . reaching for something. You may have been right."

"Thank you."

"But you aren't now," she said. "The situation's changed on us. The calculus shifted when they closed the gates."

“There are still Transport Union ships we could meet with. The gates will open at some point. I mean, they can’t keep them closed forever, I don’t care what happened out there.”

“But until they do, we’re stuck in Sol system. But that’s not the big point. They lost the *Typhoon*. They only had three of these monsters. The *Heart of the Tempest* controlling Sol system because that’s the place with the power and the resources. The population.”

“The history,” Alex said. “It has the story of a time when Laconia wasn’t in charge.”

“That too,” Bobbie said. “The *Eye of the Typhoon* to control the gates. The *Voice of the Whirlwind* back in Laconia protecting their home system. Now they’re down one because of whatever this disaster was. And they’re scrambling. Trejo’s been called back to Laconia. No one’s in control of the ring space. Everything I said before about showing people that the fight is winnable is still true, and if it works we’ll be taking their fleet down to a single battleship. Maybe they’ll keep it in Laconia. Maybe they’ll take it to the ring space if they think whatever that was won’t happen again. They won’t bring it here. Sol system will get a lot easier for the underground to navigate. It’s still the most important system, and we can go a long way toward taking it back. It’s not just a symbolic win anymore. It’s tactical and strategic too. I can’t let the opportunity go.”

“I hear what you’re saying,” Alex said.

The printer ticked to itself for a few seconds.

“I know you have reservations,” Bobbie said. “I respect them. Seriously.”

“No, it’s not that,” Alex began. “I just—”

“I don’t want you in on this if you aren’t certain. No, listen to me. It’s a long shot. The *Tempest* is the deadliest machine humans have ever built. We both know what it stood up to in the war. Even if we do manage to deliver the package, I don’t know for certain that the antimatter will be enough to kill it. You have a kid. And before long, he’s probably going to have a kid. Holden’s gone. Amos is gone. Naomi’s doing her hermit thing. The *Roci*’s

mothballed. And . . . if this doesn't work, the *Storm's* gone too. If you want out, that's not a wrong thing."

"If I want out?"

"If you want to retire. We can get you a fresh name, or do more background for the one you've got. Set you up with a job on Ceres or Ganymede or here. Whatever. You could actually get to know Kit and his wife. No one will think less of you for wanting that."

"I might," Alex said.

"I need you a hundred percent or nothing."

Alex scratched his chin. The printer chimed that its run was finished, but Alex didn't open it to take out the new brace.

"You're speaking as the captain of this ship," he said. "You actually pronounce things a little differently when you're being in charge. You know that? It's subtle, but it's there. Anyway, as the captain, I know what you're saying. And I know why you're saying it. But as my friend, I need a favor from you."

No favors, no compromises, either you're in or you're out popped to her lips.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"Run it by Naomi. If she says it's the wrong thing, listen to her. Hear her out."

Bobbie felt herself pushing back against the idea. The old fight was like a knot in her gut, hard as stone. But . . .

"If she agrees?"

Alex squared his shoulders, lowered his center of gravity, and smiled amiably. No one else on the ship would have recognized the imitation of Amos, but she did.

"Then we go fuck some motherfuckers permanently up," he said.

Interlude: The Dancing Bear

Holden woke up with the light of dawn streaming through the high window and casting shadows across the ceiling. The last trails of a dream—something about crocodiles getting into a water recycler and him and Naomi trying to lure them out with a salt shaker—slipped away. He stretched, yawned, and pulled himself up out of the wide bed with its soft pillows and plush blanket. He took a moment at the foot of the bed to take everything in. The flowers in the vase by the window. The subtle pattern woven into the sheets. He worked his toes against the soft, warm rug. And he recited silently what he always did, every morning since the beginning.

This is your cell. You are in prison. Don't forget.

He smiled contentedly because someone was watching.

His shower was tiled with river stones, smooth and beautiful. The water was always warm, and the soap was scented with sandalwood and lilac. The towels were soft and thick and white as fresh-fallen snow. He shaved in a mirror that was heated to keep condensation from forming on it. His Laconian uniform—real cloth, not recycled paper—was pressed and clean in his footlocker. He dressed himself, humming a light melody he remembered from his childhood because someone was listening.

He had come to Laconia in a much less pleasant cell. He had been questioned in a box. He'd been beaten. And in the early days, threatened with worse things than that. In the later days, tempted with the promise of freedom. Even power. It could have been much, much worse. He had, after all, been part of an attack that had crippled Medina Station and ended with the agents of the underground scattering to systems all around the empire. Someone had even managed to steal one of Laconia's early destroyers out

from under them. Holden had known a lot about how the underground on Medina functioned, who was involved with it, and where they could be found. He was alive and had all his fingers with the nails still attached because he'd also known about the dead space that had appeared on the *Tempest* when it used its magnetic field generator in normal space. And the dead spaces like it in all the systems besides Sol. He was the one person in the whole of humanity who had—escorted by the enslaved remnants of Detective Miller—been inside the alien station and seen the fate of the protomolecule's builders firsthand. And from the first moment they'd allowed it, he'd been shoveling everything he knew about that at them. Calling him cooperative on the subject would have been a vast understatement, and with every passing week, his knowledge of the underground was more out of date. Less useful. They didn't even bother asking him about that stuff anymore.

Duarte was a thoughtful, educated, civilized man and a murderer. He was charming and funny and a little melancholy and, as far as Holden could tell, completely unaware of his own monstrous ambition. Like a religious fanatic, the man really believed that everything he'd done was justified by his goal in doing it. Even when it was the push for his own personal immortality—and then his daughter's—before slamming the door behind them, Duarte managed to cast it as a necessary burden for the good of the species. He was above all else a charming little ratfuck. As Holden grew to respect the man, even to like him, he was careful never to lose sight of the fact that Duarte was a monster.

There was a lock on his door, but he didn't control it. He put the handheld he'd been issued in a pocket, walked out into the courtyard, and closed the door behind him. Anyone who wanted in could go in. If they wanted for some reason to lock him out—or in—they could. He put his hands in his pockets and strolled down a colonnaded walkway. The ferns in the planter came from Earth. Maybe the soil did too. Some minor functionary of the state came out of a doorway before him, turned and breezed by him as if he hadn't been there. He was like a fern that way. Decorative.

The commissary was larger than a whole deck of the *Rocinante*. Pale, vaulted ceilings and an open kitchen with three cooks on duty any time of the day or night. A few tables by the windows, a dozen scattered in another courtyard at the back. Fresh fruit. Fresh eggs. Fresh meats and cheeses and rice. Not too much of any one thing. The elegance came from the labor and deference of the people, not from conspicuous waste. Loyalty valued over wealth. It was amazing what you could learn about someone by sitting quietly for a few months with what they'd built.

He got a carved wooden tray and a plate of rice and fish, the way he usually did. A smaller plate of melon and berries. A light-roast coffee in a white ceramic cup the size of a small soup bowl. Cortázar was sitting alone in an alcove at the back, looking at something on a hand terminal. Out of discipline, Holden grinned and went to sit across from the sociopathic professional vivisectionist.

"Good morning, Doc," he said. "Haven't seen you in a while. Universe treating you gently?"

Cortázar closed whatever file he'd been reading over, but not before Holden caught the phrase *indefinite homeostasis*. He didn't know what it meant exactly, and he couldn't look it up without someone knowing he had.

"Things are fine," Cortázar said, and the glimmer in his eyes meant that was true. Which probably meant they were terrible for someone who wasn't Paolo Cortázar. "Very good."

"Yeah?" Holden said. "What's the good word?"

For a second, Cortázar teetered on the edge of saying something, but he pulled back. It was a confirmation of his good mood. The doctor liked knowing more than the people around him. It gave him a sense of power. The times he was most likely to let his guard down were when he was angry or annoyed. Or drunk. Drunk and complaining Cortázar was the best version of the man.

"Nothing I can talk about," he said, and rose from his place even though his food was only half-eaten. "I'm sorry I can't stay. Schedule."

"If you get time later, track me down and we can play some more chess," Holden said. He lost a lot of chess to Cortázar. He didn't even have

to throw the games. The guy was good. “You will always find me at home.”

Left alone, Holden ate his breakfast in silence and let the atmosphere of the room wash over him. Another of the things he’d learned during his time as a dancing bear was not to search for clues to anything. The effort of the search actually made him overlook things. It was better to be passive and notice what was there. Like the way the cooks spoke to each other, scowling. Like the speed of the dignitaries walking into and out of the commissary, the way their shoulders were tight.

Ever since the most recent event—the weird shift in his perception, the lost time and consciousness—the atmosphere in the State Building had been like this. Something was going on, but Holden didn’t know what. No one had even mentioned it to him. And he didn’t ask. Because someone was always listening.

When he was done, he left his plate to be cleared away, got his usual two cups of fresh coffee in takeaway mugs, and tucked a half link of sausage into his pocket. He walked out toward the gardens. It was a little cool. Seasons were longer on Laconia, but the autumn was definitely starting to get its roots into things. High above, one of the weird jellyfish-looking cloud things sailed through the air, the blue of the sky showing through its transparent flesh. The guard post was little more than a bench with a square-jawed young man who looked like he might have been one of Alex’s cousins.

“Good morning, Fernand,” Holden said. “Brought you a little something.”

The guard smiled and shook his head. “I still can’t accept that from you, sir.”

“I understand,” Holden said. “It’s a shame, you know, because the coffee they serve at the VIP commissary is really good. Fresh beans that they didn’t roast like they were hiding evidence. Water with a little bit of minerals, but not so much that it tastes like you’re drinking a quarry. It’s excellent stuff, but . . .”

“It sounds wonderful, sir.”

Holden put one of the takeaway mugs on the bench. “I’ll just put this here so you can dispose of it safely. And this one that Lieutenant Yao can dispose of too. It has a little sugar in it.”

“I’ll let her know to get rid of it,” the guard said with a smile. It had taken weeks to get that far with the kid. It wasn’t much, but it wasn’t nothing. Every person in the State Building who saw humanity in Holden, who shared a joke with him, or who had a pattern in their day that he could be a part of, made him that tiny bit harder to kill. No one thing he did made a difference. All of it together might decide between mercy or a bullet in the back of his skull somewhere not too far down the line. So Holden chuckled like the guard was a friend and ambled out into the gardens.

There were patterns in the life of the State Building. Everyone had routines, whether they knew it or not. Here at the heart of the empire, with thousands of people making their way into and out of and through the buildings at the source of authority and power, he could have spent lifetimes tracking them all. It was like sitting and watching a termite hive until each insect stopped being itself and turned into an organ in a much larger, older consciousness. If he lived as long as Duarte intended to, he still wouldn’t understand all the subtleties of it. For his present purposes, the smaller patterns were enough. Things like Cortázar enjoyed winning at chess and the guard lieutenant liked sugar in her coffee and Duarte’s daughter went out into the gardens in the late morning, especially when she was upset.

Not that she always did. Some days, Holden put himself in what he hoped would be her path and wound up spending hours reading old adventure novels or watching censor-approved entertainment feeds. Not news. He had access to the state propaganda feeds, but he couldn’t bring himself to watch them. Either they’d make him angry, and he couldn’t afford to be angry, or through simple repetition they’d start to seem true. He couldn’t afford that either.

Today, he picked a little pagoda set by an artificial stream. The plants there were local varieties. The leaflike structures were darker than the plants he’d known growing up. Blue black with whatever chlorophyll analog Laconia’s evolutionary history had come up with. Still wide, to catch

the energy of the sun. Still tall to get above everything they were competing with. Similar pressures yielded similar solutions, just the way flight had evolved five different times on Earth. *Good moves in design space*. That's what Elvi Okoye had called it.

He took out his handheld, and for almost two hours let himself sink into an old murder mystery set on an ice hauler in the Belt before the gates opened, and written by someone who had clearly never been on an ice hauler in their life. The first sign that he wasn't alone was the barking. He put down his reading just as the old Labrador came galloping around the hedge, grinning the way only dogs could. Holden took the sausage out of his pocket and let the dog eat it from his palm while he scratched the old girl's ears. There was no better way to seem trustworthy than to be liked by a dog, and there was no better way to convince a dog to like you than bribery.

"Who's a good dog?" he said. The dog huffed once just as the girl came around. Teresa, the heir apparent. Princess of the empire. She was fourteen, and in the phase of adolescence where every emotion spilled down her face. He barely had to glance at her to know that something had wrecked her.

"Hey," he said, the way he always did. Every time the same, so that the pattern of it became familiar. So that *he* became familiar. Because things that are familiar aren't a threat.

Normally she answered with *Hello*, but today she broke the pattern. She didn't say anything at all, just looked at her dog and avoided Holden's gaze. Her eyes were bloodshot, with dark smudges under them. Her skin was paler than usual. Whatever was going on, it was personal to her. That narrowed the options down.

"You know what's weird," he said. "I saw Dr. Cortázar at breakfast, and he was in a big rush. Normally he'll stop, chew the fat for a little while. Today, he skinned right out of there. Didn't even bother to whip my ass on the chessboard."

"He's busy right now," Teresa said. Her voice was as ruined as she was. "He has a patient. Dr. Okoye. The one from the Science Directorate. Her husband too. She got hurt, and she's here at the State Building so she and

Father can talk. She isn't hurt badly. She'll be fine, but Dr. Cortázar is helping to take care of her."

At the end of the speech, she nodded, like she was reviewing what she'd said and approved of it. It was a small gesture. The kind that would lose her a lot of money if she ever started playing cards.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Holden said. "I hope she gets better."

He didn't ask what had happened. He didn't dig for information. He should have left it at that. From a tactical point of view, anything more was a mistake.

"Hey," he said. "I may not be the guy you want to hear this from, but whatever it is? It's going to be okay."

The girl's eyes went wide, and then they went hard. It didn't take a second.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, then turned and stalked away, slapping her palm against her leg to call the dog. The dog looked from her to Holden, regret in the dark-brown eyes. The hope of more sausage weighed against the distress of her person.

"Go," Holden said, nodding at Teresa's retreating back. The dog barked once, a friendly sound, and galloped away again.

Holden tried to go back to his book, but his attention kept wandering. He waited for almost an hour, then put the handheld away and walked. A cool breeze was starting up. He thought about going back to his cell and getting a jacket, but decided not to. Something about being a little uncomfortable was right for the day. Instead, he made his way to the mausoleums.

Garlands of flowers rested in the corner where the stone met the ground. Red and white and a lavish purple. Some were native Laconian plants, some were out of a hydroponics tank. They'd be replaced until the order came to stop replacing them. If the people in authority forgot, there might be fresh flowers at Avasarala's grave forever.

The woman herself looked down at him from where she was etched in stone. It was probably just his imagination, but she seemed amused. Like now that she was dead and not actually responsible for fixing any of the

vast and secret shit show that was human history, she finally got the joke. He looked up at her, remembering her voice, the way she'd moved. Her eyes, bright and intelligent and pitiless as a crow's.

"What is going on here?" he asked, softly. "What am I looking at?"

It didn't matter if they heard that. Without the context of his thoughts, it wouldn't mean anything.

He was seeing Teresa, devastated. The State Building vibrating with banked anxiety. Cortázar—entitled, narcissistic, protomolecule-obsessed Cortázar—quietly gleeful. Another bout of strange consciousness and lost time, this one at least in Laconia system, and maybe beyond. Elvi Okoye's return being used as a cover story for Cortázar's presence at the State Building. Because he needed to be there, was happy to be there, and someone wanted to hide the real reasons why.

Put like that, something had happened to Duarte.

If it was true, Cortázar's hands were freer. Which meant his plans to vivisect and kill Duarte's daughter would probably kick into high gear. And also Elvi was back from her missions in the other system, so Holden's plans could move forward too. It was a race now, and he had a strong suspicion that he was behind. That was too bad. He had hoped to have more time.

Don't be a whiny little cunt, Avasarala said in his imagination. Hope in one hand and shit in the other. See which one fills up first. Get to work.

First he chuckled, and then he sighed. "Fair point," he said to the dead woman. This time she didn't answer. He turned and walked back toward the buildings as the first genuinely cold rush of air came and stirred the ground cover that wasn't quite grass. There would be a storm by nightfall, he was sure of it. Maybe snow. Snow was the same everywhere.

He had to find his next step. Maybe Elvi. Maybe her husband, Fayeze. He'd always liked Fayeze. Maybe Teresa. Maybe it was time to go to Duarte, if it wasn't already too late. If only there had been more time . . .

This was the problem with thousand-year Reichs. They came and they went like fireflies.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Naomi

Naomi had lived long enough to see history change more than once now. In the reality where she'd been born, Earth and Mars had maintained an alliance built to keep their boot permanently on the neck of Belters like her. The idea of alien life had been something for scientific speculations and thrillers on entertainment feeds. Some changes had been so slow it was almost possible to miss that they were happening. The change of Belter identity from underclass to the de facto governing party at the height of the Transport Union's power had spanned decades. The rebuilding of Ganymede after its collapse also. The others had been sudden, or had seemed that way. When Eros moved. When the gates opened. When the rocks fell on Earth. When Laconia came back.

The sudden changes, as different as they were, all followed the same pattern. After it happened—whatever it was—humanity went into a kind of shock. Not just her and the people around her, but the whole vast and varied tribe of people. For a moment, it was as if they were all still primates on the fields of Africa going silent at a lion's roar. All the rules they'd lived by were suddenly open to question. *The inner planets have always been my enemy, but are they still? The far reaches of the solar system are as distant as humanity will ever be, but can we go farther? Earth will endure, won't it?*

Naomi didn't like the feeling, but she recognized it. And more than that, she saw the power in it. Moments like these were opportunities. They could bring new alliances, new empathy, a new and broader sense of being together in a single human tribe. Or they could be the poison that ran

through human minds for decades to come and welcomed ancient wars onto new and bloody battlefields.

Auberon held its breath and waited to see if the predators were coming for it. She saw it on the in-system newsfeeds that were the only newsfeeds now. It was in the wideness of the Laconian governor's eyes. And, Naomi had to admit, it was in her own heart too.

The *Typhoon* was the absolute symbol of Laconian dominance. After the *Tempest's* inexorable conquest of Sol system, Laconian rule was a given. It wasn't just that Laconia had found a way to defend the ring space against simultaneous attacks from any or all gates, though that was part of it. It was also the clear knowledge that by being in the slow zone, the *Typhoon* was already halfway to anyone's home. That once it started coming, nothing could stop it but the whim of the empire.

And now it was gone.

Medina Station had been a feature of the ring space from the start. It had been one of the first ships through the Sol ring, and taken up its place even before the other gates had opened. Medina had been the farthest trading post of the new land rush and then the traffic cop at the center of the colony worlds. Its history as a religious generation ship and then as a battleship for the OPA had made it as rich and complicated as the people who lived on it. It was a permanent fact of how humanity moved through the rings, as constant and permanent as the rings themselves.

It was gone too.

If it had been just one or the other, maybe it would have been simpler. But having the hammer that had threatened every head in the empire and the longest-standing human presence at the gates both wiped away at once pulled Naomi's heart in two directions. She was rejoicing and mourning at the same time. And also feeling the deep unease that came from the reminder that that being familiar wasn't the same as being understood.

"How do you take your eggs?" Chava asked.

Naomi, sitting at the breakfast bar, rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "Usually reconstituted and from a nozzle."

"So . . . scrambled?"

“That would be great.”

Chava’s rooms were in a fashionable part of the station, assuming there was an unfashionable part. Auberon hadn’t existed long enough to have history built in its bones yet. Nothing there had been reappropriated or reused or reimagined yet. The hard industrial white of Chava’s kitchen was exactly as the designer had imagined it. The ferns in the hydroponic vases that showed the white of their roots and the green of their fronds were placed exactly where they would photograph best. The windows looking out over the common space three levels below as if it were a city apartment on Earth, except cleaner, had the intended effect. In a generation or four, it would develop its own style and character, but it hadn’t yet.

Or maybe Naomi just needed to get some coffee and work out. That was possible too.

“Did you sleep well?” Chava asked over the sizzle and pop of eggs on their hot pan. “I don’t usually have visitors. You’re the first one to be in the guest room for more than a night.”

“It’s lovely,” Naomi said. “Is there any news?”

Chava put a white ceramic coffee cup on the bar next to Naomi’s elbow and then a small glass French press already filled with black coffee beside it. “The political officer at the transfer station is saying all traffic out of the gate is prohibited until we’ve had instructions from Laconia. Which is tricky because the repeaters are still down. There’s a freighter that was on its way out when the shit hit the fan, and the Transport Union is saying that if it doesn’t get its cargo to Farhome system, there’ll be a lot of starving people a year from now.”

Naomi poured the coffee into the cup. Black welled up in the overwhelming white, steam rising up from it. The smell was lighter than she was used to. She wondered if Jim would have liked it.

“Any word from the governor?”

“Radio silence,” Chava said. “There are stories that the governor’s been taking payoffs for a long time. His loyalties aren’t perfectly clear.”

“That’s weirdly refreshing,” Naomi said. The coffee tasted better than it smelled. Another layer of sleep that she hadn’t recognized slipped away.

The smell of the eggs started to seem very interesting.

Chava saw it and smiled. “Hungry?”

“I think I am,” Naomi said. “The local underground. How does it look? What kind of resources does it have?”

Chava shrugged. “I don’t entirely know. Saba keeps us compartmentalized. I’m not even sure how much he knows, except that he knows who to ask if something’s possible.” She realized the error in what she’d said, and her lips pressed thin. “Knew, I mean. I can’t quite believe he’s . . .”

“I know,” Naomi said. “Without coordination, we’re not really an underground anymore. We’re thirteen hundred different undergrounds that can’t talk to each other.” Communication, she thought as she sipped her coffee, was always a problem.

Chava swirled the pan of eggs and decanted the fluffy yellow clouds onto a white plate. “On the upside, there are thirteen hundred different Laconias now. Less than that, really. A lot of the smaller colonies don’t have governors on-site yet. They’re essentially free.”

“And in danger of collapsing without support. I’m not sure dying free is as attractive when it stops being rhetorical.”

“Truth,” Chava said.

The eggs tasted strange. Thicker and more substantial than the approximation that the *Roci* had put out, and with a different aftertaste that Naomi couldn’t decide at first whether she liked or not. Having food in her stomach felt wonderful, though. And it went well with the coffee.

Chava hadn’t brought up the subject of Naomi’s future. They both knew that there were too many unknowns now for any plan to mean much. Even if there was a ship that could take in the shell game, there was no Saba to send her information to analyze or consider her recommendations. Naomi’s role in the underground, the underground’s ability to survive, everything was radically uncertain. They papered over the gaps with hospitality and kindness. Naomi was Chava’s guest. Slept in her spare room. Ate her food and drank her coffee as if they were sisters.

It was strange to think that people lived like this. Not just citizens either. People in the underground had nice apartments and windows with carefully sculpted views, fresh fruit, and coffee. It was so exaggeratedly normal that it felt like the bait in a trap. Would Chava be able to walk away from it all the way Naomi had left the *Roci* and Alex and Bobbie? Or would the comfort keep her here too long if something went wrong? If something had already gone wrong?

“Problem?” Chava asked, and Naomi realized she’d been scowling.

“I was thinking about . . .”—she reached for something less rude than *my instinctive disapproval of your lifestyle*—“traffic control in the ring space. If that freighter does make the transit, it’ll be going through blind. They all will be.” Now that she was saying it out loud, it actually did worry her. “And there’s going to be pressure. All of those colonies that aren’t quite self-sustaining yet? They may wait for a while. Hold back, but sooner or later, the risk of making the transit is going to be better than the certainty of having their colony fail.”

“That’s true,” Chava said as she cracked another egg into the pan. “But I can’t see rebuilding in the ring space either. Not before we know what happened and whether there’s a way to keep it from happening again. Can you? I mean, maybe Laconia will send another one of its system-killer ships through and park it there again, but only if they’re up for the risk of losing it.”

“It does start looking like hazard pay,” Naomi said, trying levity. It didn’t feel right, though. Not yet.

“Once could mean anything,” Chava said as the new egg started to bubble and pulse from the heat. “Maybe it was just the one time. Or maybe it’s every thousand years. Or every third Thursday from now on. We don’t even know what triggered it this time.”

“By the time we have enough points to make a good scatter plot, it’s a lot of dead ships.”

“If there’s even a way to know when a ship went dutchman. There’s no one watching, so who’d be keeping track? The whole communications grid

is down at this point. If someone did know, they'd have to build some way to tell us. No one's in charge. Do you want some more coffee?"

"No, thank you," Naomi said, her mind already racing along somewhere new.

She and Chava weren't the only ones having this conversation. Thousands of other people in Auberon were thinking about these same things in restaurants and bars and on ships traveling through the vast emptiness between this sun and gate. It was how the shock started to wear off. How the moment after the moment created itself.

And it wasn't only Auberon either. Every system with a ring gate was looking at the same questions, fearing the same possible futures. Every system including Laconia.

The thought landed with a weight. Her grief at the loss of Saba and Medina and her unexpected hope in seeing the *Typhoon* destroyed. The dread of the mysterious enemy and its escalating body count. They all led to the same conclusion.

It was like a nightmare where you spent the whole night running from something and ended up in its lap all the same. *No one's in charge.*

"Sorry?" Chava said as she slid her own egg with its golden yolk onto a plate. "Did you say something?"

"We're going to need to break some protocols," Naomi said. "And I'll need access to a machine shop. You wouldn't know how I could get my hands on some torpedoes, do you? I don't need warheads. Just the drives and the frames. Long-range designs, if we can find them."

"I can look," Chava said. "How many do you need?"

"Ideally about thirteen or fourteen hundred."

Chava laughed, saw Naomi's expression, and sobered.

"And," Naomi said, "if the offer's still open, I might take the coffee after all."



The yard that Chava found would have been small back in Sol system. There were thousands like it scattered through the Belt. Improvised shipyards that catered to rock hoppers and independents who couldn't afford docking fees at Callisto or Ceres or any of the other centers. Apart from the fact that this one didn't have anything manufactured over fifteen years ago, it could have been anywhere.

The man who ran it was called Zep, and he had a faded split-circle tattoo on his neck. He spoke English, Mandarin, Portuguese, and a dialect of Belter creole that put his background in the Martian trojans. He gave her the tour of the yard. It was a high, pale bubble of ceramic and steel with harsh white work lights overhead and a misting of oil every morning to trap the lunar fines. Everything there was a little sticky to the touch and stank of gunpowder. It was the first place in Auberon system she felt even slightly at home.

Even with the oil, the fines—tiny bits of stone smaller than dust that erosion had never smoothed—were dangerous enough that she wore a mask and eye protection. She went through the rows of decommissioned ships that had been repossessed or damaged by misadventure or malice to the point that it made more sense to sell them as scrap. They were mostly orbital shuttles and semiautomated prospectors. The shuttles were no use to her, but some of the prospectors had probes. They didn't have the range or speed of real torpedoes, but she could start with them. Over the course of a long, sweat-soaked morning, she'd assembled half a dozen that seemed worth closer examination.

The idea wasn't that different from the bottles she'd used before. It was only the scale that was different. And the stakes. She could load transmitters and explosives into the probes and then send them out through the different gates. No one would be exposed to danger by coming through the newly haunted slow zone, and the messages would be untraceable. Anyone listening as she had been would hear them just like the ones she'd dropped off before. She needed to work on the exact wording. It would be the first voice from the underground since Medina. Getting it right mattered. Getting it done quickly mattered more.

There had been a moment in the neo-noir films that Alex always watched that happened so often it became a cliché. She had to have seen it a dozen times over the years, and she hadn't been paying much attention. A firefight would start with operatic choreography and impossibly high-capacity magazines. The hero and the villain would play through the scenario with whatever peculiar flourishes the director had invented to make this one different from all the ones before. Then, at the climactic ending, the two enemies faced each other, and both would run out of ammunition. The resolution of all the heroic violence came down to which of them could reload faster.

That was where the underground and the empire stood. They were both disrupted. Whichever of them was able to organize again first would survive. Laconia still had the firepower. It still had the technological edge. But if the underground could rebuild a communication grid faster, she could change the story of their inevitability. Laconia's advantages wouldn't be enough.

Speed mattered. If Saba were still alive, if Medina had survived, it would have been time for him to stand up, announce himself, and become the public face of the opposition. To forge the thirteen hundred different undergrounds that were out there now in the cut off systems back into one thing, and exploit the confusion of the enemy before Duarte could find his feet. Take the crisis and make it a turning point, even if it meant more pressure on Drummer and the Union. Naomi would have told him it had to be done. She'd have been right.

Her hand terminal chimed. She pulled off her goggles and air filter and accepted the connection. There was only one person it could be. Chava was in her office, her hair perfectly in place, her blouse unsmeared and her demeanor as polite and professional as if she did work like this every day.

"I have the secure connection you asked for," she said. "The light delay won't make it a conversation."

"How far?" Naomi asked.

"About fifty minutes, one way."

Naomi pictured the Auberon system. Its three gas giants the greater and lesser belts. The *Bhikaji Cama* was still a fair distance from the ring. She had time.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Not a problem,” Chava said. “I’m sending you the route and encryption. I’ll see you for dinner tonight?”

“I don’t want to impose.”

“It isn’t an imposition,” Chava said. “And it’s safer than anyplace else.”

“Then yes, thank you,” Naomi said. Chava smiled and killed the connection. Naomi thumbed up the data packet configuration and slotted in the information she’d been given. If it worked, it would slide unnoticed through the Transport Union’s system and appear to Emma Zomorodi in particular.

Naomi considered herself in the preview display. Dust and sweat-smeared skin. Hair more pale than black. Wrinkles at her eyes and mouth. This was the woman who turned down High Consul Winston Duarte’s invitation to live the rest of her life in a palace with the man she loved in order to take on the one job she never wanted. She smiled, and the woman on the screen looked happy. Exhausted, yes. Well bruised by life, yes. But happy. She started the recording.

“Emma, I need to ask you to break protocol for me. I want you to send me everything you know about the status and function of the underground. Contacts. Ship names. Procedures. Anything you have, tell me. And if you can get messages to your operatives, tell them to expect a message like this from me in the near future.

“I know it’s exactly what I told you never to do before, but the situation has changed. Medina is off the board, and we’ve lost Saba. We have to regroup, reorganize. And someone has to take initiative.”

A thick trickle of sweat broke free from her temple and began its slow fall down toward her eyebrow. She wiped it away, pulling her hair back from her eyes.

“Until you hear otherwise from me, I will be running the underground.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six: Elvi

Elvi woke herself trying to scream. She didn't remember the dream, just the sense of overwhelming fear and paralysis. The effort to make herself heard that seemed to go on for hours, even though all it managed was a little groan, loud enough to bring her back to consciousness. It left her in the darkness, drenched in sweat and grateful for another few sleepless hours.

The suite was courtesy of the Laconian state. Two beds, both with autodocs built into them. One for her, the other for Fayez, who, fortunately, was still breathing deeply and heavily. She knew without looking that she hadn't woken him up. She was grateful for that too. She didn't turn the light on. Her cane was at her bedside, and she found it easily enough. She levered herself to the edge of the mattress, steeled herself, and swung her legs over. It hurt like hell, but only for a few seconds. Standing up was actually better, and she was leaning on the cane less than she had been.

The night terrors were looking pretty robust, though.

Trying hard not to make enough noise to wake her husband, she went through the darkness to the closet. The servants had left robes for them both, thick, textured cotton with a lining of something that might have been silk. She pulled it on one sleeve at a time, cinched it closed, and made her way out to the courtyard and a stone bench carved with complex mathematical patterns like something out of a mosque.

Her memory of the rescue was spotty at best. She remembered giving the emergency evacuation order to the *Falcon*. She remembered coming back to consciousness in normal space and calling for help. Crawling through blood and crash couch gel to Fayez. That part was pretty clear.

After that, a few lucid moments of trying to cinch a belt around Fayez's calf as a tourniquet. At some point, she'd decided that she was losing too much blood, slipped her hand into the hole in her leg, and made a fist in there to apply pressure all around. That probably should have been the worst part—her wrist vanishing into the skin of her own leg like a graphics processing failure. What she actually felt at the time was pride at having come up with a graceful solution. The tourniquet had been hard.

They told her she had been conscious when the rescue ship came, but she didn't remember it. She knew because she'd read the reports that Jen had lived and was being treated somewhere else in the city. That Admiral Sagale had died, half his head ripped away. That Travon was technically listed as missing, since it was possible he could have survived someplace without the arm he left behind.

The casualties among the rest of the crew were similar. About half had survived. No one had come through uninjured. The *Falcon* had been stabilized too and brought home to be healed. And studied.

Some local animal was making its call. Four distinct notes, repeated again and again, at different speeds. Mating call. Warning. Alerting the hive to a food source. She had no way to know, but it was pretty. The night air was cool almost to the point of discomfort, but she didn't want to go back inside for a coat. She'd just wait until she got tired and head back to bed or else find some other lobby in the palatial buildings to sit in until dawn broke. If anyone wondered why there was a lady with a bathrobe and a cane wandering around, she'd just tell them it was classified.

Exobiology wasn't medicine. She knew more about predictive parallel evolution models than she did about wound care. If she hadn't had a rank in the Science Directorate, she wouldn't have been able to see her medical records, and mostly for good reasons. It was dangerous for someone with one expertise to try to interpret something in a different but similar field. Laypeople didn't understand how much scientific literature was about nuance and shared understanding. Even with expert systems to help, she was more likely to avoid errors with one of Jen Lively's physics analyses

than her own medical records, if only because she knew that she didn't know physics.

But she'd looked anyway.

The medical team had fought hard to keep her and Fayeze alive. The cuts where their flesh had gone missing were strange. Something about the wounds had made clotting weird too, which of course immediately left her thinking of vampire bats and leeches. Organisms that fed on blood and produced anticoagulants. Which there was no reason to think these attackers had. The incisions in the decking had the same too-perfect margins.

A more comprehensive report was still in draft form, but she was able to access that too. Sagale appeared to have died instantly. Others in the crew had lived long enough for the wounded *Falcon* to haul them through the gate and out of danger, only to bleed out or succumb to shock. The missing matter was just that. Missing. The scoop of her leg, Fayeze's foot. Most of one lobe of Sagale's brain. All of Travon but his arm. It wasn't that they had been torn away. They'd been excised and taken . . . elsewhere. All told, the *Falcon* had lost 12 percent of its mass, apparently at random. The dark things that moved between the spaces hadn't been targeting the crew. They'd meant to take everything. The human parts they'd removed were just points along a path. It almost made them worse. At least murderers had motives.

She pulled aside the robe and looked at the wound. The medical gel that filled in the missing flesh was pale, but getting pinker. She could already trace the lines where blood vessels were starting to form. Muscle and skin would follow over the next few weeks and months. In the end, she'd probably have a slightly discolored patch on her leg where the skin was younger than she was. Sagale, on the other hand . . . She shuddered. It was still hard to accept that he was gone.

She didn't notice the dawn starting. The courtyard didn't open to the east, so it was just a slow, subtle graying of the Laconian sky. The retreat of the stars and glowing construction platforms. Even then, what she noticed was the local organisms getting louder and the gentle vinegary smell that one of the local bird analogs made when it was waking up during mating

season. She was cold and stiff and uncomfortable, but she didn't move until Kelly, Duarte's personal attendant, appeared.

"Major Okoye," Kelly said. "You're up early."

"Or late," Elvi said, trying on a smile. It didn't really fit.

"Admiral Trejo arrived from Sol system last night."

"That was fast."

"I understand the burn was punishing. Still, he asked if you could join us after breakfast."

"I can," Elvi said. "But the one I need to talk to is the high consul."

Kelly's smile revealed nothing. "That's worth discussing with the admiral."



Elvi had had only ever seen Anton Trejo on screens. In person, he was a little underwhelming at first, and then, after a few minutes, she understood how he'd become the most decorated man in the Laconian military. He was stocky. His hair was dark and thin enough she could see pretty much all of his scalp through it. His eyes were a vivid green. A few years back, he'd conquered all of human civilization in less than a month. His manner was gentle, like everyone but him was a little fragile and he didn't want to break them unintentionally.

He didn't come across as having much to prove.

The meeting room was casual. Tapestry-upholstered couches and a low, long table of polished stone. The others were all men. Colonel Ilich, who Elvi had met a few times when she'd first been pressed into the Laconian military, Kelly who had brought her, and her immediate superior, Paolo Cortázar, who headed the Science Directorate and coordinated pretty much all the research Laconia did. Winston Duarte wasn't there.

"Thank you for joining us, Doctor," Trejo said as she took a seat across from him. "I read the reports on the incident in the ring space. That's some hairy shit there."

She took the casual profanity as a sign of his respect. He was treating her as a peer.

"It was," she said. "I'm hoping not to do that again."

"We'll try to keep it that way. I was a little anxious making the transit myself. I mean, I wasn't awake for it. I heard you were awake in one of these new full immersion couches? I don't think I'd enjoy that. I don't like going over twenty g asleep, much less watching it happen."

"I'm glad you made it," Elvi said. Cortázar shrugged and looked at his fingernails. Performative boredom. He wasn't happy she was there. With a little taste of spite, she found a way to draw the pleasantries out a little more. "I hope there wasn't any trouble for you?"

"No, no," Trejo said. "I was fine. There are problems, though. People are starting to make their own transits. One poor bastard out of Bellerophon tried to speed through. Transit into ring space and transit back out in the same burn. He hadn't heard about how the gates all shifted position a little. His ship hit the edge of the gate hub about three hundred clicks to the left of the gate he was aiming for."

"Ouch," Elvi said.

"People are getting desperate. For every system that can sustain itself, there's dozens that aren't there yet. Trade isn't optional for them. It's life and death. And without a traffic authority, death comes a lot more often."

"I'm sorry about Medina and the *Typhoon*," Elvi said.

"Admiral Song was a good sailor," Trejo said. "Died with her boots on. That's as much as any of us can ask. But there'll be time enough to toast the dead later. I have a problem, Doctor. And I have chosen to make part of my problem your problem too."

Cortázar sighed and looked away. Trejo explained what had happened to the high consul, then asked Kelly to bring them some tea while Elvi got over the shock. It was green tea, poured from a cast-iron kettle into black ceramic mugs. She'd had two servings before she felt like she'd found her feet again.

"So there's no one running the empire," she said.

“We are running the empire on the high consul’s behalf until such time as he is sufficiently recovered to take over the duties himself,” Trejo said, then paused and added, “or his daughter has reached an age sufficient to take over in his place.”

“She’s very bright,” Colonel Ilich said. “And she’s controllable. The high consul believed, and I agree, that the narrative of succession had to be familiar and reassuring. Primogeniture is a common model across a wide band of cultures and backgrounds. Of course, she won’t be expected to actually wield power until she has shown an aptitude and willingness.”

“How old is she?” Elvi asked.

“Duarte hoped he’d have a couple centuries to train her up,” Trejo said. “Hell, he hoped she could stay on the bench forever. But these are the cards we have, and so we’re going to play them. I’m not going to sugarcoat this. We’ve got a lot to carry, and most of that is going to fall on the Science Directorate.”

“How can I help?” Elvi asked. It sounded better than *What the fuck do you want me to do about this?*

“Your top mission is to get the high consul back,” Trejo said. “Dr. Cortázar will walk you through everything he’s done so far. We’re hoping a pair of fresh eyes will find something he hasn’t.”

Elvi looked over at Cortázar. He wasn’t looking at her. So this was why he was pouting. Trejo had called his competence into question. That was going to be unpleasant.

“While you do that, I’m going to be getting things back under control,” Trejo said. “The *Voice of the Whirlwind*’s still a few weeks shy of her shakedown, but we’re not stationing any crewed vessel in the ring space, and we’re keeping the transits short. *Whirlwind*’s going to be protecting Laconia. *Tempest* is staying in Sol. There’s a situation there that needs an eye on it, and Sol’s the most unruly system we have to worry about.”

“And the traffic control?” Elvi asked.

“We can’t hold the inside of gates,” Trejo said. “So we’re going to have to take the outsides. We have two hundred and eighty *Pulsar*-class destroyers to police thirteen hundred and seventy-one gates.”

For a moment, Elvi saw the enormity of what Trejo was facing press down on him. The bright-green eyes focused on nothing, and the cheerful, confident face only looked tired. But a moment later, he was back.

“I’ll be deploying those to systems most likely to have high traffic. We’ll get the comms network back. And after the *Whirlwind*’s ready, we’re turning all the construction platforms over to generating more antimatter charges. That brings us to your number two priority. I think we can all agree this tit-for-tat see-if-we-can-be-reasonable plan hasn’t gone so well. We’re going to gear up to fight this war for real. Anything you can find that will give us an—”

Adrenaline flooded Elvi’s bloodstream. Her heart hit her ribs like a hammer. “Are you fucking crazy?”

Ilich and Kelly shared a look as if she’d confirmed something. Cortázar sneered.

“I’m sorry,” Elvi said. “Wait. No. I’m actually not. Are you fucking crazy? Did you not see what just happened?”

Trejo bowed his head. His scalp glimmered at her through his sparse hair.

“I understand that this is a hard conversation for you right now, Doctor. You’ve been through a lot. But I’m a military man, and the fact is that we are at war. We have been at war since the first time a ship failed a transit.”

“Those things killed—”

“I know what they did.” Trejo’s voice was harsh. It pushed her back into her seat. “And I know *why* they did it. Because they got hurt. That means they can *be* hurt, and unless they find some way to sue for peace, I intend to prepare our forces to hurt them again. Candidly, I don’t like it. We’re going up against something we don’t understand with unfamiliar tools on a battlefield whose constraints we’re working out as we go along. It’s a stupid war, but it’s ours. If it can be won, I intend to win it. You’re going to help me.”

A hundred objections rose in her mind, but fell back at the sight of the bright-green eyes.

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“Good. Please begin your review with Dr. Cortázar and keep me apprised of any insights or progress.”

I will Elvi said at the same moment that Cortázar said *We will*. Trejo accepted the answers as if they’d been the same. When he spoke, he spoke to Elvi. “If you disapprove of my plan of action, it’s easy to stop me. Just get me my boss back.”

“I’m going to try,” Elvi said.



Elvi walked back to her rooms before she left the State Building for the Science Directorate. She wanted to clear her head, but it wasn’t clearing. Every thought she had seemed to fight its way to consciousness like it was swimming through gel. Her leg ached worse now, and the sleepless hours were starting to weigh on her, pulling her toward bed now that she had obligations. Or maybe she was just realizing that her time of healing after the trauma was over, and she wasn’t remotely okay.

The grounds were beautiful. Better than the best luxury resort. The weird leathery fliers they called sunbirds were out, flapping high above the buildings and looking more like bats than birds. Something like a dragonfly zoomed past her, wings buzzing here both the same as and entirely differently than they would have on earth.

The scale of it all was too big. There were too many billion people in too many hundred solar systems for anyone to really understand. For any human to really understand. Maybe that was why Winston Duarte had decided not to be human anymore. Him or his daughter either. It made her wish she’d majored in mathematics instead. They hadn’t sent any mathematicians to Ilus. And without Ilus, she wouldn’t have been the nearest thing to an expert on the wounds in reality that those dark things left. And she wouldn’t have been recruited by Laconia. And she wouldn’t be here. One little change early on could have meant a whole different life.

She turned the last corner before her courtyard, and there, out in the gardens, Fayez sat. One leg ended in a bright blue pod the size of a boot

where his missing foot was already starting to grow back. The other was stretched out on a bench. And leaning against the back of the bench, James Holden.

As if he had felt the pressure of her gaze, Holden looked up and waved. He seemed both older and as though he hadn't changed at all. She started toward the bench, leaning more on her cane than she'd had to before. The gel in her leg felt like it was burning. Hours more standing and walking through Cortázar's labs sounded awful.

As she approached, Holden and Faye exchanged a few words, and Holden walked off briskly. By the time she got to her husband's side, Holden had disappeared behind a hedge.

Faye moved his good leg and gave her room to sit. There were dark pouches under his eyes, but his smile was as amused and sardonic as the day she'd met him. Or the day she'd married him. Or that one time when they'd almost died because a terrorist had booby-trapped a landing pad.

"I think I must have lived my life wrong somehow," she said.

"I know the feeling," he said. "But then I see you, and I think something must have gone right. Even if everything else treats me like my previous incarnation killed a priest."

She took his hand, wove her fingers with his. The future looked a little less bleak.

"I just had the most interesting conversation," Faye said.

"I could say the same," she said. "But mine's classified, so why don't you go first."

"Well, he was being awfully cagey. But I think our old friend Holden just told me Cortázar's plotting murder."

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Teresa

Nothing was the same anymore. She tried to pretend that it was. That her father was only sick, the way normal fathers were sometimes. She woke up in the morning, and Muskrat was there. She walked through the gardens and the State Building the way she always had. Everyone she saw treated her just the same, except Ilich, who knew the truth.

She assumed that everyone thought her father was in deep consultations with the best minds of the empire because of what happened to the *Typhoon*. They had faith in him. He was Laconia. She thought the guards stood a little taller when she walked by. That the cooks at the commissary saved the best dishes for her. It wasn't because she deserved them. It was because she was the closest thing they could get to him, and they wanted to make their offerings. They were scared by what they'd seen. She was too. But they had a story where everything would be all right, and she didn't.

The closest thing she had was Ilich, and he was gone now more than he was with her. When he did see her, the only lessons they did were the new rules. Don't tell anyone about the high consul. Don't act frightened. Don't leave the grounds of the State Building.

She tried watching her favorite films and newsfeeds, but they didn't hold her attention. She tried reading her favorite books, but the words all slid off her mind. She tried running the length of the security wall as fast as she could for as long as she could until the pain and exhaustion made it impossible to think or feel anything. It was as close as she came to peace.

And in the afternoons and early evenings, she went and sat with her father. He suffered Kelly to bathe and dress him, so whenever she came he looked trim and neat. She sat beside him at his desk and used his displays to

go over simple mathematical proofs or the diagrams of ancient battles. Sometimes he would nod at the images, as if deep in thought. Sometimes he would pat at the air around her head like he saw something there.

She found herself really looking at him. Staring. His cheeks were rough from old acne scars. His hair was a little thin at the temples. The skin at his jaw was soft with age. And there were other things. The opalescence that sometimes made his skin shine like mother-of-pearl and other times nearly vanished. The darkness in his eyes, like storm clouds.

The more she looked, the less he seemed like her father—the great man who strode the universe and her personal life with the confidence of a god—and the more he seemed like . . . just someone. The worst times were when he looked sad. Or frightened. He didn't particularly notice when she cried.

Ilich did what he could.

"I'm sorry I haven't been as available since . . . Well. Since."

They were sitting at the fountain where he'd taught her about displacement. How to make something heavier than water float by making it hollow. She looked at the rippling surface of the water and wondered whether she'd float now too.

"It's all right," she said. "I understand."

His skin looked ashy. His eyes were watery with exhaustion and stress. His smile was the same as it had ever been. She'd thought before it was because he wasn't afraid of her. Now it just seemed well practiced.

"This may not help," he said, "but part of what you're feeling right now is normal. There's a moment that everyone eventually experiences when they see that their parents are just people. That these mythic figures in their lives are also struggling and guessing. Doing their best without knowing for certain what their best is."

The anger in Teresa's chest was the first warm thing she'd felt in days.

"My father is the ruler of the human race," she said.

Ilich chuckled. Had he always chuckled exactly that same way, and she was only noticing it now? "That does change some aspects of it, yes. But I don't want you to feel alone."

Have you considered not making me alone? she didn't say. *Or is it just the feeling that matters?*

"I know it's hard, having this secret," he said. "The only reason we're doing this is that your father and you are so important."

"I understand," she said, and pictured what he would look like if she drowned him in the fountain. "I'll be okay."

She didn't sleep that night. The anger that had surprised her so much in Elsa Singh had infected her. As soon as she put her head on her pillow and closed her eyes, she was in a shouting match with Ilich. Or with Cortázar. Or with James Holden. Or with her father. Or Connor. Or Muriel. Or God. Even when she drifted just a little bit away from herself, she woke up minutes later with her back teeth aching from being clenched together. *Seriously? You're one of the angriest people I know, Tiny,* Timothy said in her memory. Now it felt true.

After midnight, she gave up. Muskrat thumped her tail against the floor twice.

"What are you so fucking happy about?" Teresa snapped.

Muskrat stopped wagging, and her gray canine eyebrows rose in an expression of concern. Teresa turned on the state news-feed and watched one of the professional voices of Laconia make reassuring mouth noises. *The repair of the gate repeaters is already underway, and the communications network should be restored in a matter of weeks. Normal trade between worlds will resume very soon after that. Until then, the high consul is determining which supply ships are critical to the empire and approving transits on a case-by-case basis. The tragedy in the ring space which claimed the lives of so many loyal to the Laconian dream has shown no signs of recurring, according to the Science Directorate.* Lies, half-truths, fictions, and bullshit.

Rage and grief fought in her heart, and behind them, looming larger than the sky, a sense of overwhelming betrayal that she couldn't put a name to.

Muskrat chuffed once in concern. Teresa bared her teeth in a grin. "I'm not allowed to tell the truth. I'm not allowed to feel anything. I'm not

allowed to leave the compound,” she said. “I can’t do anything. You know why? Because I’m so *important*.”

Teresa got up, stalked to her window, and opened it. Muskrat looked away nervously.

“Well?” Teresa said. “Are you coming or not?”



She had never been to the field outside the compound at night. In the darkness, it seemed larger. Swarms of tiny insectile animals crawling along the ground glowed in patterns of moving stripes as she walked past, like her footsteps were making dry ripples on the ground. A cold breeze hissed through the bare trees. In the distance, something called out, its voice like a flute. Two others answered, farther away. A smell like pepper and vanilla hung in the breeze. Ilich had told her once that the chemistry of Laconia was so different from the one humans had evolved with that people struggled to make sense of it, inventing smells that weren’t really there out of confusion. She had grown up here, though, and it seemed perfectly normal to her.

Muskrat trotted along at her side, glancing up every few steps as if to ask, *Are you sure about this?* Teresa knew the way to the mountain like it was the back of her hand. She didn’t worry at all about straying from the trail.

In her imagination, Ilich sputtered and scolded. He told her that the rules existed for good reasons. For her safety. That she couldn’t just go and do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. He’d know she was gone. That she’d ignored his rules. That was part of what made it worth doing. What could he do? Lock her in her room? When her father came back to himself, Ilich would have to answer for everything he’d done in the meantime. Her father had known she went off the compound. If he hadn’t stopped her, Ilich wouldn’t dare. He’d only make rules he couldn’t enforce. A law without consequences wasn’t a law. It wasn’t anything.

The first sign she was close was a shifting in the hedges and the bulbous false eyes of the repair drones peering apologetically out at her. They made their series of three falling clicks, an obvious query for which she didn't have time or an answer. Muskrat usually barked and tried to play with the drones, but tonight, she only paid attention to Teresa.

The drones followed them to the canyon. In the deeper darkness, it was hard to make out the path, but she moved forward all the same. Now that she'd come this far, second thoughts started to haunt her. What if she picked the wrong cave and startled some local animal in its sleep? What if Timothy wasn't there? High above, the orbital construction platforms rippled and glowed. If she looked out of the corner of her eye, she could even make out the *Whirlwind*, the third *Magnetar*-class ship. Only no. It was the second now. The flute-thing called out again, closer this time. She wished she'd brought a light with her. She hadn't thought starlight would be so dark.

She found a deeper shadow that she thought was the sandstone shelf. She ducked under, her hand stretched in front of her. It only took a few steps more before she saw the cavern's lights. The cavern was brighter than the night, and warmer too. The repair drones that walked with her had followed her in, or other ones had been there to begin with. She couldn't tell them apart.

Her heart was beating faster. She was sure that she'd turn the last corner and find Timothy gone, his camp vanished.

"Timothy?" she called, her voice trembling. "Are you here?"

A slick metallic sound came from her right, and Timothy stepped out of the shadows, a gun in his hand. He shook his head. "You got to be more careful, Tiny," he said. "My eyes ain't what they used to be."

Timothy's expression and the casual way he held the gun were so comic, Teresa had to laugh. Once she started, it was hard to stop. The laughter seemed to have a life of its own, hilarity bursting out of her in a riot unstoppable and violent. Timothy's confused expression only made it funnier. She howled, she buckled over, holding her sides, and at some point she noticed that it wasn't laughter anymore. That she was crying.

Timothy watched her like she was giving birth and he wasn't a doctor. The visible understanding that there was probably something he should be doing to help, but he didn't know what it was. In the end it was Muskrat who came and put her thick, heavy, fur-covered head against Teresa. The violence of her emotions left her spent, and she rubbed the dog's ears while the drones set up a little chorus of queries, aware that something was broken but not how it could be fixed.

"Yeah, okay," Timothy said after a while. "Rough night. I get that. Come on back. You can . . . I don't know what you can do, but I want to sit down, so let's go back here."

Her limbs felt heavier as she walked, but her heart felt lighter. As if she'd come all this way for someone to watch her break down, and even though nothing had changed, something was better.

The big man sat on his cot and rubbed his eyes with the knuckle of his first finger and his thumb. She sat across from him on a metal box, her hands in her lap.

"So," he said. "I don't really know how to do this part. But I think the way it goes is you tell me what's bothering you?"

"So much has happened."

"Yeah?"

And she told him. All of it. From her father's tit-for-tat plan with the things hidden at the gates to the death of the *Typhoon* to the conspiracy to hide her father's illness and the bemused absence that he'd become. The more she talked, the easier it got. Timothy barely spoke, only asking a few questions here and there along the way. He just gave her his attention and asked for nothing in return.

Eventually she ran out of words. The sorrow in her chest was still there, still as painful and heavy and hard, but bearable somehow in a way it hadn't been before. Timothy ran his palm over his scalp. It was a dry sound, like dust hissing against a window. Back toward the mouth of the cave, Muskrat barked happily.

"Yeah, that all sucks," he said. "It's like that sometimes."

"It gets better, though. Right?"

“Sometimes. Sometimes it’s just one shit sandwich after another.” He shrugged. “What are you gonna do? It’s the only game in town.”

“I just want—”

Timothy held up his hand, gesturing her to silence. Muskrat barked again, the bark she used when she saw a friend. And there were voices behind it. Timothy scooped up his gun, his eyes fixed on the entrance.

“It’s okay,” Teresa said. “They’re probably just following me.”

Timothy nodded, but he didn’t seem to hear her.

“Following you?”

“I have a tracker. They planted a tracker on me, can you believe that?”

His eyes widened, just for a second. “Ah, Tiny. Didn’t see it coming down like this,” he said. She saw something in his face, and she couldn’t tell if it was sorrow or amusement or both. Resignation, maybe. “You should lie down on the floor there. Flat as you can. Put your hands over your ears, okay?”

Who’s there? came from the entrance, sharp and hard.

“No, it’s all right. They’re not going to be mad at you,” Teresa said, and Colonel Ilich stepped out of the gloom, a rifle in his hand. Three guards from the State Building were behind him.

Everyone went quiet. Teresa felt a sudden dread bloom in her heart, the realization that she’d misunderstood something badly. That she’d made a mistake she couldn’t take back.

“You!” Ilich snapped. “Put the gun down! Get away from the girl!”

“Close your eyes, Tiny. You don’t want to watch this.”

“Stop,” Teresa said. “He’s my friend.”

The roar of Timothy’s gun was louder than anything she’d ever heard. It was like being punched from all directions at once. The sound alone was a kind of violence. She dropped to her knees, her palms pressed against her ears. Gunfire ripped through the cave. Ilich ran toward her, fear in his eyes, and pushed her down, shielding her with his body.

Timothy was screaming like an animal—deep and full of rage. He pushed past her, past Ilich, barreling toward the guards like he could brush them aside. The charge seemed to make the nearest man forget he had a gun

in his hand. He tried to grab Timothy, but Timothy took the man's wrist like it was something that belonged to him, shifted it until it snapped. Ilich pushed her down again, and she had to fight to see. Another gun fired. Someone shouted, not Timothy. Teresa twisted under Ilich's knee, trying to find Timothy in the gloom. She got her head up enough to see him just as a wound bloomed on his leg. Redness splattered the cave behind him as he fell. Timothy lay in a fast-spreading pool of his own blood, twitching. Trying to get up as if he didn't know his leg had been turned to splinters. He bared his teeth in pain and anger, swinging his gun around toward Ilich. She screamed *No!* She felt it ripping at her throat, but couldn't even hear it herself.

Someone fired twice. The first round took the top of Timothy's head off. The second blasted a wide hole in his chest. Timothy collapsed, motionless. The silence after rang like a bell.

"What did you do?" Teresa said. She didn't know who she was saying it to. Ilich pulled her up. He bunched her shirt in his fist at the back of her neck like it was a handle, pushing her past Timothy's body.

"Fall back," Ilich said. "Fall back to the truck! We have the girl."

Teresa shifted, trying to turn back to the cave. Timothy was hurt. She needed to help him. Ilich yanked her along.

"Stevens is hit pretty bad," one of the guards said.

"Carry him. We can't wait here. We don't know if the target was alone. We have to get the girl out."

"He's my *friend*," Teresa shouted, but Ilich didn't hear her, or he didn't care.

The night air was cold now. She could see her breath in the glare of the guard transport headlights. Ilich shoved her into the backseat before pushing in beside her. They threw the wounded guard in the back. He groaned when the transport truck lurched backward. Ilich leaned against her, murmuring something fast and low. Her ears weren't right, so it wasn't until she could shift enough to see his lips that she understood it was *fuck fuck fuck fuck* . . . There was blood on his neck, dark and thick.

"Sir!" the driver said. "Are you okay? You've been hit."

“What?” Ilich said, and then, “Teresa, are you okay? Tell me you’re okay!”

The transport truck hit a bump in the road, shaking a little, and the shock of it all fell away. She understood clearly what had just happened. She balled her fists and she shrieked.



The infirmary was quiet. She was shaking. Cortázar and Trejo and Kelly were all there, standing in the anteroom talking to each other in low, urgent voices. Ilich was in the autodoc beside hers, a thick bandage on his shoulder and neck. Dawn would be coming soon. She didn’t care as much as she’d expected to. The autodoc fed something cool into her bloodstream. Another sedative, maybe. It made her feel cloudy, but she wasn’t going to sleep. She half suspected she’d never sleep again.

When the door opened, Trejo stepped in. He wore gray flannel pajamas a size too small for his belly. He didn’t look like the secret ruler of humanity, he looked like a sleepy uncle. He pulled a chair up to her bed, sat down, and sighed.

“Teresa,” he said, sternly. “I need you to tell me everything you know about the man in the cave. What he said to you. What you said to him. Everything.”

“He was my friend,” Teresa said.

“He was not. We have body camera data from Ilich and the recovery team. The facial recognition data matches the . . . the bloodstains. We know who he was, and once we have a secure perimeter and get a cleanup team back into that beshitted cave, we may have a better idea what he was doing here. But I need to hear everything from you. Now.”

“His name was Timothy. He was my best friend.”

Trejo’s jaw went tight.

“His name was Amos Burton. He was a terrorist and murderer and the mechanic on James Holden’s ship, and apparently he’s been sipping tea with the daughter of the high consul for months. Anything you told him, the

underground may know. So begin at the beginning, go slow, be thorough, and tell me what you have *fucking* done to us.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight: Naomi

The thing that surprised Naomi most was how quickly it happened. How little convincing people needed. She had assumed that Emma and Chava would agree because they knew her personally. They had a history together. And maybe their contacts would be amenable to connecting with her, since known-safe members of the underground were vouching. After that, she had expected it to be difficult—sometimes impossible—to convince Saba’s network to reveal itself to her. Everyone in the underground was in danger of death. Maybe worse. They would all be as wary as she would have been in their place.

She’d overlooked the fact that she was Naomi Nagata, and that fear drove people to look for leaders. Emma had five contacts in the underground. Three of them were on ships in other systems, but one was a technician in Auberon’s planetary transfer station, and the other was an engineer on a Transport Union ship that was presently in-system. Chava’s connections were more local. A doctor at one of the major hospitals down the well. A taxation agent and forensic accountant on contract to Laconia. A manager of a fashionable brothel at the governmental center. The husband of a security specialist contracted with Laconia to maintain and protect the biometric identification systems. Some of those were single nodes in the network, but some were cell leaders with four or five other connections, some of whom knew a couple other people and so on until it felt like the underground had as many loyalists as the governor.

It was an illusion, but it was a powerful one.

“The thing is the fuckers came in like the flood, yeah?” the man across the table from her said. He was a communications engineer for an

independent design collective tasked with building a tight-beam network—repeaters and relays—in the still-unexplored vastness of Auberon system. He called himself Bone, but Naomi was fairly certain it was a nickname he'd given himself. "Overwhelming force, Laconia. Unstoppable. Which, yeah, they are. But you can beat the shit out of a river and not change how it flows."

"Wouldn't know," Naomi said. If he heard her, it didn't slow him down. Some men got loquacious when they were nervous.

"They're one system, and not that populous. They've got no choice but to rely on us poor local bastards for help. And Laconia . . ." He chuckled. "Laconia has no local tradition of cheerful corruption. They don't expect it, and they don't know what to do about it when they find it. Besides make the kind of examples of people that piss off all their families."

"Give them time," Naomi said. "They'll catch up. If we let them."

Bone grinned. His left upper canine had been decorated to look like it was made from stone. Fashion never stopped. It was one of many things Naomi was pleased that age allowed her not to care about anymore. She smiled back.

The public park was another sign of Auberon's wealth and success. The designers of the lunar base had built in common areas and open space. The dome above them was still under the lunar surface, but light panels made it seem as open and airy as a resort on Titan. Children skipped in the thin gravity, hopping from bar to bar of a climbing structure that rose almost half the height of the *Roci*. At a full g, a slip and fall would be fatal. Here, they might get bruised.

A drip fountain beside them filled the air with white noise as the tiny drops drifted down from the ceiling and tapped an inclined slate, flowing slowly down to a fish-filled reservoir. It was beautiful. She didn't feel like she belonged there.

"The repeaters," she said, bringing them back to the issue at hand.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Bone said. "We got your design out. Bottle network is on its way. Nice thing about it? Cheap. Any union ship close to a ring gate can slip something out the lock." Bone made a pushing gesture so

graceful it was almost dance and then snapped his fingers. “We’ll be trading fresh gossip before you know.”

“Sol and Bara Gaon are the priorities.”

“Already got bottles through to them. They know we’re here and what we’re doing. This can only spread.”

“And Laconia?”

Bone shrugged. “Got to figure they’re putting up new repeaters, but we don’t got one yet, and Auberon has money. So . . .”

So they should have been a priority. Maybe they were, and other cells in the underground were breaking them. The bottle network was slow compared to the light-speed transmission they had all become accustomed to, but it was also hard to stop. Repeaters at the gates were static or nearly static targets. Easy to identify and easy to destroy. The thing that had made them safe and stable all these years had been the eyes of Medina in the slow zone, the certainty that any action against them would be identified and traced back. With no eyes left in the slow zone, impossible things were suddenly practical.

“Our local network?” Naomi said. “It’s unbreakable?”

“Everything’s breakable,” Bone said. “But we’ll make them work for it, and it fails in sections, so we can shut it down before everyone’s compromised.”

It was the right answer. If he’d said they were safe, she’d have trusted him less. “Bien alles,” she said, and rose. Bone followed her lead, holding his hand out to shake hers with a nervousness that looked like hero worship. She took his hand. Whatever the future brought, Bone could go through it remembering that he’d shaken hands with Naomi Nagata. She didn’t like this sense of wearing a mask that everyone else had put on her, but it was the price she paid to do what needed doing.

“I’ll be in touch,” she said, and they walked away, taking different paths out of the common space.

The corridors and passages of the base were wide and had low ceilings for someone her height. White tile glittered the same on the walls as the floor. Thirty people could have walked abreast. She put her hands in her

pockets, kept her eyes down, inviting everyone she passed to overlook her. Walking helped her think.

Her problem—and her enemy’s—was the scale of it all. Millennia of human history had played out on the surface of a single planet. Mere centuries in the wide void between worlds. And all of that had happened before her own birth. The universe she’d known had always had stations around Saturn and Jupiter, rock hoppers eking out livelihoods in the Belt. Almost every gate led to another system that wide and complex, but without humanity. Without history. Without the infrastructure of everything humans took for granted and relied on.

It had seemed smaller when there was a hub to the wheel. Now, anyone could transit anywhere, and there was no one to coordinate or record it. The more she thought about it, the more untenable the idea of rebuilding inside the slow zone seemed. Medina and the *Typhoon* and the fleet of Transport Union ships that had been caught there were proof that the nature of the space itself there wasn’t benign. Putting a crewed base there was risking the death of everyone involved. An automated one was a statement of faith in their computer security that history didn’t justify. Holding and protecting over thirteen hundred gates from their starward faces was an entirely different prospect from holding one strong position in the center. It would take the largest fleet humanity had ever built just to watch the gates, and that didn’t take policing the vastness of their solar systems into account.

Duarte had come in with the strategy of permitting local governments autonomy so long as they followed his rules. It had seemed like a kind of magnanimity at the time. It looked more like necessity now.

And deeper even than that, the eerie words *two gates lost*.

There had to have been a moment when they could have refused. When she and Jim and maybe a handful of other people could have looked at the ring gates and the vastness beyond them, seen the danger, and tiptoed away. All the signs had been there. A civilization had built all this vast and unimaginable power and still been scattered like knucklebones. What had made them think it was safe for them? That it was worth the risk?

She took the tube to Chava's block as if she belonged there. The crowd on the platform was a mix. Bright-eyed, tea-drinking third-shifters on their way to work. Weary second shift just coming home or heading out to dinner. A handful of youths in outlandish fashion burning the first-shift midnight oil. Naomi stayed quiet and apart, and she appreciated the beauty of it all. And the innocence. A hundred people, more or less, waiting for a tube car on a moon above a planet that circled a sun that hadn't born them, and jockeying to be the first ones through the door so that they could get a good seat. Maybe the most human thing possible.

A young man in a brown collarless shirt scowled at her for staring, as if maybe she was mocking him. She nodded her apology and looked away.



Her life as Chava's guest was pleasant. Waking in a real bed, showering with water that didn't recycle twice while she was under it, eating food that had more than one taste. The long months Naomi had spent in her container felt more and more like a spiritual pilgrimage, a journey she had gone through and emerged from changed. It hadn't seemed like that at the time.

Their schedules had drifted, and she was awake long after Chava had gone to bed. Naomi stayed quiet while she worked, but she worked. The underground in Auberon was well developed, but until she decided it was time to throw the governor and his political officers into a hole, her options were limited. Entrench. Develop more holes in their security. Compromise the enemy further. But there was nothing of Laconia's grand strategy to be learned. They were as cut off as she was.

And then, only days after her own messages had slipped out through the rings, the bottles began to return. They came in one at a time, a trickle of data that snuck into the system. Reports, requests, and messages encrypted with the most recent ciphers. Bara Gaon was on lockdown, but the exploration sites were still autonomous. New Albion had taken the opportunity to sabotage the Laconian transfer station and were now being hunted by the local security forces. Transport Union ships had started

making emergency transits to systems like Tabalta and Hope where local populations were in danger of collapse. It was like slowly beginning to recover her eyesight after being nearly blind.

The message from Sol system originated on Callisto, the data passed covertly to a datafarm on Ceres and repackaged into a bottle on a Transport Union ship near the Sol gate. It was routed to her.

On the screen, Bobbie looked tired and grim. A grayness had come into her features, and the thick muscles of her neck had begun to look wiry. A decryption artifact locked a corner of the image like part of her shoulder was frozen in time while the rest of her was free to move.

“Hey there,” Bobbie said into the camera, and a loneliness Naomi hadn’t known she felt swamped her for a moment. She felt the memory of that last hug before she’d left Sol, and it was more alive and real to her than the last time she’d seen Jim. “I have something. An opportunity, I think. Alex wants me to run it past you.”

Naomi listened as Bobbie laid out the situation. The *Storm* trapped in Sol, first by the catastrophe in the slow zone, and now by the *Tempest’s* presence. The antimatter.

She felt herself sliding into the same analytic mind-set that had been her whole life in the container. She’d hardly been out—a few weeks on the *Bhikaji Cama* and now here with Chava—and slipping back already felt cold and constraining. Her mind ticked through the implications of Bobbie’s plan: the exposure of the *Storm*, the scrutiny that would fall on the Jovian moon bases, the symbolic and practical effects of Duarte’s losing a second *Magnetar*-class ship.

And as she did, a quiet part of her mourned.

The day she’d gone into the container and committed herself to living as a pea in a shell game had been the day she left the *Rocinante* behind. It felt like relief at the time. Like her soul had been rubbed raw, and the container was her bandage. Her whole life, she’d survived the unsurvivable by falling back and getting small. And every time, she had come back healed. Scarred, sometimes. But healed.

All it had taken was a handful of human interactions to show her that the Naomi who had fled into the container wasn't the one who'd come out. Time had passed, and she had found what peace she was going to find.

When she'd taken up Saba's role, it had been from necessity, but it had also been because she was ready to. It was only after the fact that she was starting to see what leaders were. The price the position required.

The water started hissing, and a door opened and closed from back in Chava's bedroom. She was awake and taking a morning shower. It would be time for Naomi to go to bed soon. It was also safe to respond to Bobbie without being an impolite guest. Funny how that still seemed to matter.

She set her hand terminal up with the camera pointing to her, then used the security filter to strip out the background. If the signal was intercepted, there wouldn't be artifacts leading back to Chava. It left Naomi looking like she was floating in a featureless void. She started the recording.

"Hey, Bobbie. Your plan . . . looks solid. I know that's not the argument I was making the last time we spoke, but the situation's changed. Several situations have. I still maintain that working through political means to a peaceful endgame is critical. But if there is a chance to do that without a *Magnetar*-class ship keeping its boot on Sol system's throat, it'll be easier. If it was just a ship, I think I might still have some reservations, but you're right. Duarte made the *Tempest* a symbol. We don't often get the chance to kill the enemy's story about itself.

"Good hunting. I love you."

She closed the message, fed it into the local encryption, and queued it to be sent to Bone and his system network. It might take days for it to get onto a bottle and through the gates. She tapped the table with her fingertips, wanting to call it back. There was still time to stop it. Soon there wouldn't be.

"Hey," Chava said as she stepped in from her bedroom. She was already dressed for her shift. Sharp, professional clothing, hair neat. "What are you up to this fine morning?"

"Second-guessing myself," Naomi said. "And I think it's my evening. I did make you coffee, though."

“You are a kind and thoughtful woman,” Chava said as she poured herself a cup. The drift of the coffee to the cup was like watching the slow fountain. “You’re going to have traffic analysis problems, though.”

“You mean the way that vastly more bottles come into and out of Auberon than any other system?” Naomi said. “Yes, that’s an issue. Is it a hint? I know you weren’t looking for a roommate.”

“You can stay as long as it’s the smart move. But maybe not after?” Chava’s smile faded. “What’s wrong?”

Naomi chuckled. “You mean apart from maybe having sent two of the people I care about most to their deaths?” She wiped her eyes. “Shit.”

Chava put down her cup. She took Naomi’s hand in hers. The feeling of fingers against her own was almost more than Naomi could stand, and she held on like Chava was a tether.

“I spent a lot of my life trying not to be a particular kind of person,” Naomi said. “Trying not to make certain kinds of decisions. But here I am all the same.”

They were silent together for a moment. When Chava spoke, her voice was light. Almost conversational. “When I was in my apprenticeship, back in the day? The hardest thing I had to do was manual docking. Every time the qualification run came, it didn’t matter how much I’d practiced. I’d take the controls, override the system so I had control. The only thing in my head was *Don’t fuck up, don’t fuck up, don’t fuck up*. And then I’d fuck up. I focused so hard on the thing I was afraid of, I ran straight into its arms every single time.”

“Are you trying to make me feel better?”

“No,” Chava said. “We’re too old for that. I’m trying to make you feel like you aren’t alone in it. That’s all I’ve got.”

Something in Naomi’s chest shifted. A titanic emotion breaking free. She braced herself for sobs, but all that came out was a profound sigh. The dream had been there all along, never quite given up. She would find a way to bring her family back together. They would all survive the meat grinder of history. Everything would somehow be well.

There had been a moment. It hadn't been that long ago. All she'd had to do was announce herself, accept Duarte's invitation, and leave all the struggle behind. She couldn't remember quite how she'd decided on this path, but she saw that she had. There was no one to blame but herself. She conjured up the dream of waking up beside Jim. Drinking coffee with him. Hearing Alex and Amos joking with the subtle hum of the *Rocinante* behind them. She let it go.

She squeezed Chava's hand and let that go too.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine: Elvi

Elvi sat in the back of the car. The driver was a young man with close-cut, tightly curled hair. Mostly what she saw of him was the back of his neck. As the State Building fell away behind them, the city itself spread out. She could still remember the first time she'd seen it, brought in by soldiers with the scrupulous politeness of a concierge at a luxury hotel, only with sidearms. The streets were wider than anywhere she'd ever been, with greenways along the sides. Buildings rose up, tall and beautiful, with solar collection windows and rooftop gardens like Frank Lloyd Wright had been reborn and made skyscrapers. The scale of the place was massive and boastful. She remembered being overwhelmed by it, the first time.

Now, it seemed weirdly brittle. Millions of people lived in the capital city, and almost none of them had been there longer than a decade. The traffic was stopped for her motorcade, and she saw the normal people—civilians and citizens and military with status lower than hers—craning their necks as she passed, trying to figure out who she was and whether they should be excited to see her. There were no monuments, no billboards, no old neighbor-hoods. She sort of hated it.

“Would you like some water, ma’am?” the driver asked.

“No,” Elvi said. “Thank you.”

He nodded without looking back at her. She leaned back into the plush seat and tried to straighten her leg. It didn't help the ache.

The labs were massive. Technically it was part of the University of Laconia, but it was run like a military camp. The gate guards waved them through without checking, and the car took a looping path through campus, heading toward the pens. She fidgeted with her cane. As they made the last

turn, a man came into view, clearly waiting for her. The relief that flooded her when she saw that it wasn't Paolo Cortázar was telling.

"Dr. Ochida," she said as she levered herself up out of the car.

"Dr. Okoye. It's good to have you back. I heard about your fieldwork. I have to say, you aren't selling me on it over nice safe labs."

"Well, the data was interesting," she said as they started down the path to the Pen. It was a dark, windowless cube, hardened against attack even in the heart of the empire, where attack seemed impossible. They said God didn't play dice, but if He did, they'd look like the Pen. Huge, square, and inscrutable.

"I hear they're sending you into the holy of holies," Ochida said. "Paolo's very close with his senescence project."

"It wasn't my choice."

"The high consul does what the high consul does," Ochida said as they reached the guards. Elvi handed over her ID badge and submitted to the verification scan. It was just a touch on her wrist, but it felt more invasive than that.

"With the rich and powerful, always a little patience," she said. The guards stood away and let them through. There was a little pop when the door opened, and the air pushed in with them. Inside, the next set of security protocols blasted them with air and scanned every millimeter of their bodies before the inner door opened.

Inside, the Pen was almost more reassuring. It looked like the kind of lab she'd been in for decades, on and off, at half a dozen universities and research institutions. Safety procedures were posted on the wall in bright fonts and six languages. The air smelled of phenol soap and air scrubbers.

"Come on," Ochida said with a smile. "I'll walk you over."

Don't get comfortable, Elvi told herself. This isn't your home court. You aren't safe here.



“I just had the most interesting conversation,” Faye had said back on the day she’d first been assigned her task.

“I could say the same. But mine’s classified, so why don’t you go first.”

“Well, he was being awfully cagey. But I think our old friend Holden just told me Cortázar’s plotting murder.”

Elvi had laughed because it was a statement too horrifying to match the pleasant setting, and sometimes being overwhelmed was kind of funny. “I’m not sure I can deal with that right now,” she said. And then, “Did he really?”

Faye shrugged. “No, he didn’t. He very carefully and *specifically* didn’t. We had a perfectly lovely conversation about the importance of teaching children about negative space as a tool of political analysis. Then we talked about everyone at the head of the science effort except Cortázar while he made significant eye contact. And then made a weird segue into the history of political power struggles on old Earth, with a focus on Richard the Third.”

“That’s . . . obscure.”

“Not *that* obscure. Shakespeare wrote a play about him.”

“What was it called?”

“*Richard the Third*,” Faye said. “Are you feeling all right?”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. He was warmer than usual, but it wasn’t strange to run a low-grade fever when a limb was regrowing. “I wasn’t a theater major, and I’ve had a long day. What was the point of it?”

“Richard was an asshole and killed a bunch of people, but specifically a couple of kids. Heirs to the throne or something.”

“You weren’t a theater major either.”

“I was not.”

Far above them, a thin sheet of clouds moved across the stars, blotting some and revealing others. She wanted to close her eyes and fall asleep right there and wake up in their shitty apartment back on Ceres before she’d ever heard of Laconia or Duarte at all. All the things she’d learned, all the

money and status and discovery could vanish like a dream, and she'd still have been happy as long as all the rest of it went too.

"So negative space and then everyone but Cortázar, and a king who killed some kids."

"Well, technically a prince who clawed his way to power by killing some kids. I think."

"Spiffy," she said.

"Wasn't Cortázar one of the ones that worked for Protogen back before Eros?"

"Back *during* Eros," Elvi said.

"I'm just saying it wouldn't be his first time."

"He created the catalyst," Elvi said. "For me. Doesn't mean I'm a murderer."

"Yeah," Fayez said, but he knew she was thinking, *Except that it kind of does*. That was what decades of marriage were for. Intimacy and pattern matching as a kind of telepathy.

He sighed, shifted, and put an arm around her. "I may have been reading more into it than was there. It just seemed strange and kind of pointed."

"He meant something by it," Elvi said. "Maybe not what you got, exactly. But something."

"You're thinking about tracking him down and asking him?"

"I am."

"If he was being oblique because Duarte's got an eye on him, he won't be straight with you any more than he was me."

Unless I let him know that Duarte isn't watching anything right now, Elvi thought. The idea left a cold mark that could have been fear or excitement or something of both. She wondered what Trejo would think, and if Holden was even on the new, secret emperor's radar.

"Maybe I can come up with something," Elvi said.

And maybe she could have if they hadn't discovered Amos Burton and his pocket nuke that night and Holden hadn't been thrown in a cell before morning.



Cortázar smiled when he saw her like it was something he'd told himself to remember to do. Elvi felt like her answering nod was equally fake, but she didn't know if he'd notice or care.

"Anything else I can help with, Paolo?" Ochida asked.

"Thank you, no," Cortázar said. "We'll be fine."

Ochida stepped away. Everything about it was perfectly normal and polite. It all felt like a threat. Cortázar turned and started walking toward a set of metal doors. She had to trot to catch up with him.

"I'm sorry we had to push this until after lunch," he said. "I've been at the security office all morning going over the things they took from the spy."

"Amos Burton," Elvi said. "Kelly briefed me. It's a little weird. I knew him. We were both on Ilus at the same time. He saved my husband's life."

"Well, he had a pocket nuke with him in that cave, so . . ." Cortázar wagged his hand in a so-so gesture. "I was with the analysis team. Trejo's looking at the communication deck pretty carefully. It looks like the bastard's been out there for quite a long time."

"Do we know what he wanted?"

"Not yet, but we may still get to ask him."

"I thought he was dead."

"Oh my, yes. Very much so."

"Then how?"

He presented his lanyard to a locking mechanism, and the doors cycled open. She followed him into a darker corridor. The walls were thicker. Reinforced. It was a little sobering to think that the raw protomolecule of the Pen wasn't the most dangerous thing in the lab.

"Ilich fucked that whole thing up badly," Cortázar said. "Not his fault. He didn't know not to leave the body behind."

The doors closed behind them with a deep sound. Like a prison. The corridor acted as an airlock.

“After they shot the poor fucker in the head, Ilich pulled everyone back to protect the little princess,” Cortázar said. She heard the sneer in his voice, and thought of Richard III. “He should have left someone guarding the body. Or burned it before he left. Not his fault, really. He knows the rules about the repair drones, but he doesn’t know the reason behind them.”

A second set of doors opened, light spilling into the hallway. “I don’t understand,” Elvi said.

“You will,” Cortázar said lightly as he walked into the private lab. He’d been teasing her.

This lab was smaller than the Pen. She recognized some of the equipment from her own exobiology labs—array sequencers, proteome sample analyzer, NIR and low-resonance scanners. Other things were as strange as any of the alien artifacts she’d come across. Cortázar ignored them all, stepping across to a transparent polymer cage the size she’d seen used for simian and large-animal studies.

“Trejo thinks having a new set of eyes on all of this will help, but the truth is you’re going to be playing catch-up for months just to get to the point you can ask intelligent questions,” he said. “But to get you started? These were the original cases. The seed grit in our oyster.”

Two children were in the cage, a boy maybe seven or eight years old and a girl on the edge of adolescence. Their eyes were perfectly black, like the pupils had eaten iris and sclera alike. The girl stood up and walked toward the front face of the cage. Her skin was grayish. She moved almost normally, but when she stopped, there was a terrible stillness about her.

“What . . . ,” Elvi said, and then didn’t know how to finish the question. She’d heard the phrase *It made my flesh crawl*, but she’d thought it was a figure of speech until then.

“They were Alexander and Cara Bisset when they were alive,” Cortázar said. “Children of the initial scientific expedition that was on Laconia before the high consul relocated his loyalists here. The boy died in an accident. The girl was poisoned trying to eat local flora in the wilderness not long after. This is what happens when you have a dead body around the repair drones. Or, well. Sometimes. They don’t always take it upon

themselves to fix things, but when they do . . .” He nodded toward the dead children. *This is what happens.*

“I don’t know you,” the girl said.

“My name’s Elvi.”

“I’m Cara. Are you going to hurt us too?”

Oh, Elvi thought. Oh, fuck this. I don’t care what it takes. As soon as I get out of here, I will find a way to never, ever come back.

“The original bodies died twenty years ago, more or less,” Cortázar said. “These artifacts that were built from them have been static since their recovery.”

“So they’ll always be young?”

“Well. They’ll always look like immature human beings,” Cortázar said. “That’s not exactly the same thing. They have, for the most part, similar structures and chemistry to the original bodies, only very stable. Telomeres don’t shorten. Mitosis can run indefinitely. There’s no buildup of senescent cells or plaques. The immune response has a couple additional pathways and structures that are interesting. Really very nice work.”

“That’s amazing,” Elvi said, and the words felt like dropping a stone down a well. Deep and kind of hollow.

“The high consul’s interest in personal immortality came from them. He thought that if we could learn the differences in structure and function from these samples and reverse engineer them into a living body instead of a corpse, sort of the way carbon-silicate lace plating was based on long-lived architectural structures . . . well, that would be interesting. I tried a few animal models first, and made enough progress that I felt comfortable with a human trial.”

She leaned on her cane and fought back the dizziness. “Duarte agreed to that?”

Cortázar turned to look at her. He seemed confused. “Of course he did. It was the answer to his biggest problem. How do you hold a galaxy-spanning empire together over generations? Have someone running it who doesn’t die. Well, here they are. Things that have all the traits you need not to age and die.”

“Wasn’t he worried something might . . . I don’t know. Go wrong?”

“He understood there was some risk, but he thought it was justified by the possible return. We went very carefully, and the high consul had a great deal of faith in my abilities.”

“All right,” Elvi said. “Okay.”

“It was fine until you triggered that—” He gestured at her injured leg. “It was working. It may still work, with some adjustments and a new subject.”

“I didn’t trigger anything. That was Sagale, following orders,” she said, but what she thought was: *A new subject like Teresa*. It didn’t sit right. Cortázar turned his attention back to the children in the cage. *No, he wants it for himself*.

“I have complete records, of course,” Cortázar said. “I have them set up for you on the system here. Take as long as you want looking over them.”

“In here?”

“The project doesn’t exist outside of this room. The high consul was very clear on that, and I can’t imagine Admiral Trejo would want to reduce security.”

The private lab was smaller all told than her office back at the State Building. The younger one, the boy, came to stand beside what had been his sister. Elvi was going to be under their eyes the whole time she was here. She wondered whether Cortázar had set it up like that to make her uncomfortable. And whether the information he showed her would be anywhere close to complete . . .

“Wait,” she said. “Amos Burton’s body was missing.”

“They’re out looking for it now,” Cortázar said. “It will be very useful having an adult subject to compare with. I mean, it would mean more if I had complete scans and medical records of him from before the corpse was modified. That’s what we really need to move forward. But I’ll enjoy this all the same. There’s a restroom just outside the hall. And if you need food, you should probably have it outside. We’ve only ever had one unintentional protomolecule contamination, but—”

“Understood,” she said, and sat at the low monitor. The chair squeaked.

“I’ll come check in on you later,” Cortázar said. He forgot to smile this time. The doors closed behind him, and Elvi turned to the reports and the data. Her head felt like it was full of bees. There was too much, and it left her unsettled and jumpy. She expected Cortázar’s work to bounce off her brain and puddle on the floor. Actually engaging with it was too much to ask.

But once she’d started looking through it, her focus started coming back, and a familiar calm came over her. Other people might take reassurance in a lover’s hand or a cup of herbal tea—really a tisane since it didn’t have tea leaves, but *tea* was the term people used anyway, which Elvi had always thought interesting. Elvi only had room in her mind for learning or panicking. She couldn’t do both, and she didn’t like panic.

The thing that struck her first was how small the differences really were. Cortázar wasn’t a biologist. His background was nanoinformatics, which had a huge overlap when it came to things like genetics, epigenetics, and heritable cytoplasmic proteins, but missed basics like anatomy. The way the kids’ hearts had changed to adjust for a different viscosity in their plasma, the way that their blood had changed to a more efficient, non-cell-bound hemoglobin analog, all the other tweaks and modifications weren’t really changes in kind. They were just improvements.

Evolution was a paste-and-baling-wire process that came up with half-assed solutions like pushing teeth through babies’ gums and menstruation. *Survival of the fittest* was a technical term that covered a lot more close-enough-is-close-enough than actual design.

When she looked up and saw the children looking back at her, it was five hours later, her leg ached like hell, and the fear was gone. The grayness in their skin was an artifact of the oxygen transport. The blackness of their eyes was an optical structure that was better at capturing light. Whatever was going on with the new kind of neurons in their brains and the extra layer in their neocortexes, all the old, purely human structures were there too.

The process of re-creating all that using tools out of the protomolecule’s toolbox was an act of hubris that took her breath away. If anyone besides

Duarte and Cortázar had been part of that conversation, there would have been prosecution. Two men, each convinced of their exceptionalism, were capable of leapfrogging over vast chasms of maybe-this-isn't-a-great-idea and this-is-totally-illegal. Elvi had become convinced that Cortázar was jealous that Duarte intended to feed his own daughter into the same grinder instead of his pet scientist.

She levered herself up on her cane and walked to the transparent cage. The boy stepped back, like he was afraid of her. The girl—Cara—stood her ground.

Development into a mature form wasn't the same as aging and death. Maybe the drones hadn't understood that. So that meant something about how the protomolecule designers had functioned, didn't it? That their designs didn't take growth and maturation into account suggested that the original designers only had mature forms. Adults making adults. She tried to imagine what that would be like.

"Can I ask you something?" Elvi said.

For a moment, Cara was still as stone. When she nodded it felt like watching a statue come to life.

"Did you and your brother lose time?"

"When the thing happened, and we could see the air?"

"Yes, then."

"I don't know. He doesn't give us a clock to look at."

"You're conscious, then. You're not . . . You aren't just . . . You and your brother are sentient? Self-aware?"

The huge, black eyes changed. Glimmered. A thick tear rolled down Cara's cheek. Elvi put her palm against the cage.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I am so, so sorry."

Chapter Thirty: Bobbie

Bobbie couldn't sleep.

This was a new thing, or at least one that she didn't remember from when she was young. Back when she'd been active duty with the MMC, she'd been able to close her eyes and lose consciousness whenever a few minutes presented themselves. The idea of lying on a cot in a converted office, staring up at the ceiling, strapped lightly to keep from launching herself out of bed given Callisto's mild gravity . . . It wouldn't have made sense to that Bobbie Draper.

But here she was, three hours into her sleep cycle, making an inventory of her muscles and forcing each tense one to relax. A live monitor on the desk's surface threw flickers of light and darkness above her. She noticed the tension that had crept back into her shoulders and made herself release it for the fourth or fifth or twenty-fifth time. She closed her eyes and willed them to stay closed. Something in the hallway dripped. Condensation that might mean a failure in the heating system or in the air recyclers. She tried to ignore it.

Her crew was scattered through Callisto Station or on the *Storm* or in their own cots in the complex of smugglers' caves. It made her anxious to have her people diffused out into the civilian population like that. It also made her anxious to have them all together where they'd make a single target. The Laconian security forces only needed one lucky break. She needed all of them.

Her shoulders were tense again.

"Fuck."

She undid the restraint with one hand and hauled herself up. Maybe an hour in the *Storm's* gym would get her past the worst of her insomnia. But on the way out toward the hangar, she stopped at the desk, checking again the way she did fifty times a day. The map was broken into two frames. The smaller one showed the relative positions of the major bodies in Sol system, tracking the inevitable and predictable change in cartography like an orrery. The larger showed the Jovian system in great detail with data copied from the traffic control logs. On the small screen, Jupiter and its moons looked calm and serene, passing through the vastness of space with the tranquil beauty of the inevitable. Closer up, it was like a beehive. Hundreds of ships from ancient rock hoppers and mining skiffs to the *Tempest* and everything in between.

It was the *Tempest* that drew her.

Trejo had transferred out of the system on one of the fast Laconian shuttles, burning hard back to Laconia to deal with the crisis in the slow zone. The *Tempest*, on the other hand, had been sniffing around the Jovian moons like a dog searching for its lost antimatter. It had been in a complex orbit near Ganymede most of the time, though once it had darted out to Europa. It would come to Callisto eventually and force her hand. Until then, the best she could do was take comfort in imagining the fresh new Laconian vice admiral losing sleep in his cot because a moon-killing load of antimatter had gone missing and it was his job to find it.

She tapped the red dot on the map that was the *Tempest*. "Anything you can do, I can do better."

An alert popped up. A newsfeed from Ceres Station with a breaking report. She opened it, and a young man with a Lunar accent looked earnestly up at her from the desk.

"This is Davis Myles with *Ceres Beat*, and behind me you can see station security in cooperation with Laconian state intelligence agents securing a cell of criminal separatists here at the heart of Ceres Station in what is being called the biggest bust since the coalition joined the Laconian Association of Worlds."

Bobbie felt the tightness across her back get worse. It wasn't only that every loss to the underground was more risk to her and hers. She hated the way history was being rewritten before her eyes. *Sol system joined the Association of Worlds* was a hell of a way to say, *Laconia trucked in a half-alien warship and killed the shit out of everyone until we showed them our bellies.*

The time was coming when, even if she didn't hear from Naomi, she was going to have to make the ancient human decision again: fight or flight. As the reporter enthused about how many guns and enemy soldiers had been captured, she cracked her knuckles. She had three options. Take on the *Tempest*, run for the gate, or destroy the *Storm* and let her crew dissolve into the civilian population. Every option was its own kind of bad.

"The cell was exposed by the discovery of an encryption package running on a public system," the reporter said, and the feed kicked over to a wide-faced woman with a pattern of moles on her cheeks that looked like paint spatter.

"The activity of the decryption package coincided with a data drop from known separatist elements earlier today," she said, and Bobbie killed the feed.

She made a connection to Jillian. Her second in command accepted like she'd been expecting her. Before Jillian could speak, Bobbie asked, "Did a bottle come through?"

"It did," Jillian said. "We got a full copy of the data. I was going to let you sleep until the decryption run was finished."

"We're running the decrypt on our own system, yeah?"

"You saw the thing on Ceres," Jillian said. It wasn't a question. "Those yokels were stupid and so they'll die. Good riddance. We're not stupid. We won't die."

"How long before the data's clean?"

Jillian shrugged. "Another hour, maybe."

"I'll be in the gym," she said. "The minute it's done, I know it. Understood?"

“Yeah, okay,” Jillian said, and Bobbie dropped the connection. Any hope of sleep was gone now. Her nerves were as bright as stars. She pulled the tactical map back up. The red dot of the *Tempest* was still near Ganymede. She stared at it for a long moment as if the commander might be able to feel her attention, might be scared by it. She closed its display and went to the *Storm*.

The gym was bright and clean. All the equipment was Martian design strained through Laconian technology. Bobbie threw herself into the effort like it could help her forget, and it did at least a little bit. She’d been in the resistance gel for forty minutes when Jillian’s message came through. The bottle had been from Auberon. From Naomi. It was the reply she’d been hoping for. Bobbie, panting and wet from exertion, opened the message file.

The background filter made Naomi look like she was in a featureless white room. Like she was an angel, delivering her message from some abstract heaven. Naomi tipped her head forward unconsciously before she spoke, the way she did when she was delivering bad news.

“Hey, Bobbie,” she said. “Your plan . . . looks solid.”

Bobbie grinned until her cheeks ached.



In his last days, her grandfather talked sometimes about how weirdly clear his early memories had become. He might not quite remember the name of his nurse or when the man had last been to check on him, but the details of his childhood were vivid and immediate. Like the past was growing stronger as his present and future wore thin. He told the story about seeing a living cat for the first time, and how strange it had felt to hold it, with the same awe in his voice every time. Bobbie’s memory hadn’t done that, not yet. But maybe there was something. When she called the crew back to the *Storm* for her briefing, all she could think of was when she’d been back in the service on Mars.

The leader of her first fire team had been Sergeant Huk. He’d been about half a head shorter than she was, with a terrier-thin face and a

receding hairline. She'd never known anyone before or since who could command her loyalty or instill fear in her the way he had. When she'd been right out of boot and as green as they come, he'd turned her into an actual Marine. Before every mission briefing, he had found a way to acknowledge her. A nod, a touch on her shoulder or arm. Something that meant that no matter what was coming next, she wasn't going into it alone. He never humiliated her by saying it aloud, and he never left it unsaid. After he retired, she'd found out he'd done the same for everyone.

Now, as her people returned to the ship, she did something similar. She stood in the airlock, seeing each of them as they boarded. Timon Coul, with his old OPA split-circle tattoo smudged by time until it was just a bluish blotch on the back of his hand. Liese Chou, with her pale-gray hair. Caspar Asoau, looking like a teenager surrounded by his grandparents. Denise Lu. Skaldi Austin-Bey. Ian Freeman. And almost last, Alex Kamal. Alex, her oldest friend, and the man she'd traveled with for what felt like half a dozen lifetimes now.

He looked weary, like she'd woken him from his sleep. Maybe she had. He wouldn't have complained. He paused in front of her, and for a moment, it was like they were back on the *Rocinante* together. Like they were home. She touched his hand, and he nodded to her like he understood perfectly. Probably he did.

When the crew was all assembled in the galley, she pulled up her map of the system. It filled the wall. Someone in the back coughed, and she realized she'd been looking at it for several long seconds. And that she was enjoying herself.

"All right," she said. "We have word from on high. New mission. High risk. High reward." She shifted to an image of the *Tempest*. As strange as the *Storm* was in its particulars, its architecture was essentially the same design language that Martian ships had been for decades before the starving years. The *Tempest* was something else. Pale, asymmetrical, with protrusions and curves more like some monstrous vertebra. "We are going to kill that."

She waited for a moment, half expecting mutiny on the spot. The *Tempest* had put its boot on Sol system's neck without seeming to break a sweat. She could have said *We're all going to turn ourselves inside out and become seagulls* and it might have seemed about as realistic. No one objected. Looking into their faces, she saw interest. Anticipation. She saw hope, and she knew she'd been right to want this.

"We have a small payload that will do the trick," she said, nodding to Rini Glaudin at the back.

"Payload of what?" someone asked.

"The *Magnetars* run on antimatter," Bobbie said. "The *Tempest's* resupply was on that freighter we took."

"Jesus," Caspar said.

"Correct," Bobbie replied. "But delivery will be difficult, and we're only going to get one shot. In our last mission we found, along with this antimatter, replacement parts for a sensor array very similar to what the *Storm's* using. I've been over the battle footage, and I know the story is that the *Tempest* shook off everything the Earth-Mars Coalition threw at her. But —"

She laid out the schematic. Overlapping fields sprang out from the *Tempest* like peacock feathers on display. The range of sensor arrays. She tapped one, and it dropped out.

"From the hits she took and from how she's been flying since, I think this is the array they need a replacement for. And if the information we have is right, it means the *Tempest* has a blind spot. Here."

She pulled the display out to showcase the thin cone of black where the enemy ship's eyes couldn't go.

"And if we're right about their need for antimatter, they won't be able to use the field projector. Which means they'll be down to conventional weapons only."

"Captain?" It was Caspar. Jillian scowled at the boy like she was ready to punch him, but Bobbie nodded him on. "I don't see . . . I mean, even with just torpedoes and rail guns, and even if there is a data hole there—"

“They can still take us in a straight fight, and they’ll still see us coming,” Bobbie said. “So we let them see us. We get a Callistan shuttle. Private, small. Doesn’t even have an Epstein. And we put it out”—she switched back to the image of Jupiter and its moons. A single bright-blue dot appeared—“here. And on an orbital path that looks like we’re heading for Amalthea. A crew of two with a gas canister torpedo. Now those are slow, yes. But they also run cold. Basically no heat signature.”

“Bist bien,” Timon said. “Ran hundreds like, back on Ceres, sa sa?”

Jillian’s voice was harsh. “Could we *not* interrupt the captain?”

“The hard part will be putting the *Tempest* into a flight pattern like . . . this.”

A red arc appeared going from Ganymede. A line marked the time at each point. She zoomed in to show how the little blue shuttle fell into the blind spot, and the long seconds it would stay there.

“This is the window,” Bobbie said. “It doesn’t look like a trap, because we aren’t trying to hide. We get there first, and we’re just part of the traffic. So all we need is a lure. Something so critical that the *Tempest* will follow it where we want it to go. That will be the *Storm*.”

She let it sink in. It was like she could see the implications settling in each face looking toward her. It was a sucker punch. One shot, and if it failed each and every one of them would be dead. The underground would lose its only warship with Laconian tech.

“I’ll captain the shuttle with Rini as tech specialist. Jillian will be in command of the *Storm*.” That made her second sit up a little straighter. Her jaw was firm. She looked like a hunting dog that had caught a scent. “The *Storm*’s mission is to hold the *Tempest* to this course so that the shuttle stays in the enemy’s blind spot.”

Alex, sitting to the side, leaned forward. His hands were on his knees, and his eyes were cast down toward the deck. She didn’t know what he was thinking.

“If anyone doesn’t want to do this,” Bobbie said, “I’m not going to force you. We have four days before the shuttle is ready and the orbits are where I want them. I will be accepting resignations until that time. No

sugarcoating. This is the most dangerous thing we'll have ever done. Even if we win, we may sustain losses. Potentially heavy losses. But each and every one of you has my word that if I thought this was hopeless, we wouldn't be doing it.

"I have sent detailed briefs to your team leaders. Look them over. If you have questions, for fuck's sake ask them. We're not going to screw this up because someone turned left instead of right. Understood?"

There was a ragged muttering of assent.

"I said, *Am I understood!*"

The reply was more like a cheer now. It filled the space. There was power in it.

"Outstanding. You have your orders. Dismissed."

Jillian was out of her seat in a moment, herding the crew like they were sheep. Nipping at them. It was something she'd have to get over before she had a command of her own. Bobbie let it play out, though. There was an energy in the ship that needed to work itself through. She felt it too.

Back in her cabin on the *Storm*, she put herself through the routine of cleaning and straightening her things. The cabin didn't need it, but she did. The ritual calmed her. She found herself humming. She didn't know how long it had been since she'd done that. She needed to go back to her little campsite and clear out all signs of her occupation, but she waited anyway. She'd almost decided that Alex wasn't going to come talk with her when he knocked at her cabin door.

"Hey," she said.

"Naomi said it was a good idea?"

"She didn't go that far. She might have just thought it was the right bad idea for the moment."

Alex managed a little smile. His melancholy made her feel almost ashamed of her lightness and anticipation. "If you need to step back, no one's going to think less of you. Kit's your son. Being part of his life and this too . . . If you've got to pick one, I'd understand."

"You left out a part of the plan. What happens after the payload hits?"

“We’ve never done it before. So apart from an explosion that makes a nuke look like a firecracker, I’m not sure what I’d say. The *Storm*’s a tough ship, though. Even if there’s some debris hits, she can take it. Probably.”

“You’re going to want to get that shuttle behind something, though,” Alex said. “Put me on it. I’ll get it to shelter.”

“I need you on the *Storm*. Keeping the *Tempest* where I need it, when I need it? It’s going to take a great pilot. That’s you. Rini and I will be in power armor. The shuttle might get shredded, but we’ll be better protected than it will. And you’ll be there to come pick us up.”

Alex shifted his weight. She could see him looking for objections the way old married couples could see when one wanted the other to pass the salt.

“I don’t like putting us on different ships either,” Bobbie said. “But this is the right way to do it.”

“Yes, Captain. All right.” He sighed, and then, to her surprise, grinned. “This is going to be one hell of a rodeo.”

“They aren’t going to know what hit them,” Bobbie said. “My only regret is that Trejo won’t be on the ship when we blow it into hot, fast dust.”

“We can find him later,” Alex said. “I’m going to go obsessively run diagnostics on systems I know are solid so I can feel like I have control of something.”

“Sounds good,” Bobbie said. “I’m going to stay here and see how many of my crew quit rather than go through with this.”

“There won’t be any. These people will still follow when you lay siege to hell. We trust you.” Then, a moment later, “I trust you.”

The door closed behind him, and Bobbie sat in her crash couch like she was easing down into a warm bath. When she closed her eyes, she slept.

Chapter Thirty-One: Teresa

Was Timothy ever really my friend?”

Holden sat on the cot, his back against the wall. The paper gown he wore was crumpled and streaked with old blood. The sclera of his right eye was blood red and the flesh around it swollen. The cheek below puffy and dark. More than that, there was a carefulness to his movements that meant everything ached. The cell was tiny. The smallest closet in her bedroom suite was nearly twice as large. The only light came from a pencil-thin strip at the top of the wall that was too bright to look at directly but left most of the room too dark to read in.

“If he said he was your friend, then he was,” Holden said. “Amos wasn’t a man who felt the need to lie very often.”

“Why was he here?” she heard herself ask, just the way she’d been told.

Holden swallowed like it was a difficult thing to do. He seemed sad. No, not sad. Pitying. It was worse.

“They asked me all this before. I’m sorry that they’re making you do it too.”

Trejo had told her to stay on script, to only say what she’d rehearsed, but she took the chance now. “Maybe they thought it would be harder to lie to someone you’d hurt.”

“Maybe. I’ll tell you the same thing I told them. I didn’t know he was here. I hadn’t been contacted by him. I don’t know what his mission was or who put him onto it or how long he’s been here. If he had a way to get in touch with the underground, I don’t know what it was. And I don’t know why he had a backpack nuke, except that I’m guessing he at least wanted to

have the option of blowing something up. If I'd known he was here, I'd have told him not to."

Teresa looked up at the camera. Holden had answered her next four questions without her asking them. She didn't know if that meant she should skip that part or make him say it all again.

"How's your father?" Holden asked into her hesitation. "No one told me, but I put it together that something went wrong. Plus which, he hasn't come to question me. I feel like he and I have enough of a relationship, he would have."

My father's fine, she thought. She couldn't bring herself to say it. "Don't worry about him. Worry about yourself."

"Oh, I'm on that. Plenty worried for both of us. All of us."

"What happened to his body?" she asked, trying to get back onto the script.

"Your dad's?"

"Timothy's."

"I don't know."

She paused. Her gut was tight, and she felt a knot at the back of her throat. She felt it often these days. "He's dead. I saw it."

"So they've told me. He was a good . . . Well, he wasn't really exactly a good person. He cared enough to try, anyway. But he was loyal as hell." Holden paused. "He was my brother. I loved him."

"What is the underground doing?"

Holden shrugged. "Trying to make enough room under your father's boot that anyone else's opinion matters, I assume. That's what I'd be doing. Hold on. Just . . ." Holden levered himself up and spoke directly to the camera. "Could we cut this part short? It seems kind of shitty for her, and it's not going to change anything."

At first, there was no reply, then the hard clack of the magnetic door bolts opening. Holden sat down. Teresa felt the thrill of relief that told her how frightened she'd been, alone with this man. How glad she was that this part of the ordeal was over.

“They wouldn’t have let me hurt you,” Holden said. “Even if I’d wanted to. I mean, I don’t, but even if.”

Rage shot through her, unpredictable and vicious. “You’re not much of a dancing bear anymore,” she said.

Holden leaned against the wall, let it hold him up. When he smiled, she saw that one of his eyeteeth was missing. “Nice to be taken seriously, though.”

The door opened, and two guards came in with Colonel Ilich. Their boots squeaked on the tile floor. The guards had their hands on their batons, but they didn’t draw them. Not yet. Ilich put his hand on her shoulder, and she turned to go out. *If he said he was your friend, then he was.* She wanted to believe that, but she didn’t.

“It’s okay,” Ilich said as the cell door closed behind them. “You did well.”

The magnetic bolts shot closed again. Holden was contained. She felt a little calmer. They walked down the hallway past half a dozen more doors like it. If there were people behind them, Teresa didn’t know who they were or why they were there. It seemed like every day revealed some other vast area of things she didn’t know.

Ever since the bad night, she’d felt more than a little like a prisoner herself. Trejo had made her go over everything she knew about Timothy—how they’d met, what he’d said, what she’d told him, how he got along with the repair drones, why she’d never told anyone about him. After hours of it, Ilich tried to call a halt, but the interrogation had gone on until she was weeping and then well past that too.

She didn’t know how long it had gone on. More than one session, but whether that had been hours or days, she couldn’t say. There was a timelessness to everything now. Like it had all just started and also it had all gone on forever. She felt like a puppet of herself, controlled by someone else. Whether she was being badgered by Trejo or sitting with what was left of her father or at meals pretending that nothing was wrong, she felt like her real self had been pressed into a small, black place where her heart should have been. Ilich had talked to her about trauma and violence and promised

her that with time, she would feel better. Cortázar had taken over her medical care, scanning her brain and drawing her blood, but he didn't speak to her much. That was fine. She didn't want to speak.

When she slept, her nightmares were all violent. She never slept without nightmares anymore.

The observation room was a soothing, neutral green. The air smelled of cleanser and the pepper and vanilla of Laconian flowers. Trejo and Cortázar were at a volumetric display that was spinning a complex data pattern like they were watching waves or weather formations. The guards took their places outside the door, Ilich went to stand with the two other men. Teresa thought about going to a chair, but it seemed too far, so she folded down to the floor.

"What am I looking at, Doc?" Trejo said.

Cortázar shook his head. "His response patterns are always a little off. All this noise is within error bars for him. You see something similar in people who've had extensive psychedelics, but usually women. But I'd say changing the questioner didn't affect his readings significantly at all. Given his baseline, I'd say he's telling the truth."

"You're sure about that?"

"No," Cortázar said. "But eighty percent confidence. We should try it with Dr. Okoye next. He has a much longer association with her. And they're friendly."

"If you want to pull her off her present work," Ilich said.

Trejo made an impatient sound and pressed his hands into his cheeks hard enough that his knuckles went pale. There were dark patches under his eyes where the exhaustion was settling in. *He is the only thing holding the empire together*, Teresa thought. It felt like hearing someone else say it. Someone who might be lying.

"Has there been any result on the search for the . . . the body?" Ilich asked.

"No," Trejo said. "I've given the shoot-on-contact order, but I have bigger fish to fry than alien zombies lurching around the landscape. If he

does turn back up, he won't have access to his supplies. Maybe we'll get lucky and the drones will decide he's really a table lamp."

Something moved in Teresa's mind. Something small.

Cortázar grunted. "I think you should reconsider that. Having an additional subject would make my work with the high consul much—"

"We'll wait for Okoye's report before we change any of that," Trejo said. "The important thing is keeping the separatists under control."

"Really?" Ilich said. "I thought the important thing was that something ate our ships and broke Duarte." He meant her father, but that was fine. It applied to her too, and it made her feel like she was more included in the conversation. *Given his baseline . . .*

"That's our second problem," Trejo said, "and we'll get to it. But if I can't keep this together, there won't be anything for the high consul to control when he's recovered."

The hollowness in his voice seemed familiar. Teresa looked at Trejo more carefully. The hours of questioning still left a coloring of humiliation in her, but his weariness and fear weren't hard to see. She'd lost her father. He'd lost his leader. His distress almost made her like him.

Like she'd been hauled back in time, the top of Timothy's head came off. She gasped, and was back in the normal time again. Trauma memory. Ilich had talked to her about flashbacks to moments her brain was having trouble integrating. He'd told her to report if it happened. It happened, and she didn't. Trejo glanced at her, then Ilich.

"You need to get her back to the State Building in time for her peers to see her."

Ilich stiffened. "Respectfully, Admiral? There's more than enough disruption to account for some deviations in the schedule. No one is going to look twice at her being a little bit late to her class."

"That's my point, Colonel," Trejo said, leaning on the syllables of Ilich's rank a little harder to point out the difference. "When everyone thinks the flood's coming up, each little bit of normalcy is a sandbag. She may not be the thing that keeps this from getting out of hand, but she can be

one part of it. And she's finished her part in the doctor's little test with the prisoner. We don't gain anything by having her here."

He meant *We don't gain anything by having you here*. Ilich kept his composure, and Teresa let herself smile.

This new dynamic had come between the men since the bad night. Teresa saw it, even thought she understood what it meant. Ilich was part of the innermost conspiracy to keep her father's condition secret. Trejo had trusted him. And then it turned out that that Ilich had been letting her sneak out of the State Building compound to spend time with an assassin for the underground. Trejo had given Ilich his trust and then found that faith hadn't been justified.

Or maybe it was just that everything looked like that to her now.

"Understood," Ilich said. Then, to her, "I'll take you to the class. It will be all right."

Teresa wanted to burst into tears or scream or drop to the floor and flail like a baby. She wanted to throw a table over and scream the way Elsa Singh had. There were too many years of training and expectation holding her in place. She nodded and rose to her feet. But when Ilich started to walk down the corridor, she didn't follow.

"Eighty percent," she said, turning to Cortázar. "You're sure of eighty percent."

Trejo's eyes flashed a sharp annoyance, but Cortázar seemed happy to answer. "Well, of course that's just an estimate. But autonomic function has been something of a passion for me these last few years, and there's a lot of very good work done on the brain activity that comes with memory as opposed to the activity associated with inventing new information. It's possible that the subject created and rehearsed a set of lies so that's what he's remembering. But since new questioners and novel questions aren't finding any areas that deviate out of recall and into the creative functions, eighty is an estimate. Maybe even a low one. Holden is very probably telling the truth as he knows it."

If he said he was your friend, then he was.

In her memory, Timothy looked up at her the way he always had and said, *You can't have too many tools.*

She didn't know which one she'd been. Friend or tool.

She didn't know, and she needed to.



Peer class was in the State Building's museum. Wide, pale walls with white lights that showed every color in the paintings and sculptures without making them fade over the years. The air was controlled here, neither warm nor cold, neither humid nor dry. Colonel Ilich shepherded them past the great works of other ages like it would be impolite to wake them. He had murdered Timothy, fought with Trejo, carried the weight of the empire on his back, and his smile and voice were exactly the way they always were. She wondered what else he'd hidden from her over the years.

Connor and Muriel were standing next to each other, looking at a canvas of a man painted almost life sized. His hands were open at his sides, his face lifted as if he were staring at something in the sky. Instead of clothes, a silver sheet was pressed to his body, concealing nothing. Teresa stood with her arms crossed. The painting was so detailed, she could see the individual hairs on the backs of the man's hands. It was too perfect to be a photograph.

"It's called *Icarus at Night*," Ilich said. "The painter was a man named Kingston Xu. He was the first great artist of Mars. When this painting came out, he was almost deported back to Earth. Can anyone tell me why?"

Teresa felt the others glance at each other and at her. She didn't know and she didn't care. Her mind felt like it had been sandblasted. There wasn't anything there.

"The sheet?" Shan Ellison said, tentatively.

"Yes," Ilich said. "That's what old medical graft material used to look like. And the man, you'll notice, is dark skinned. The early history of Mars had a great deal of proxy conflict between the nations that had founded different colonies. This model that Xu used was from a place called Pakistan. The artist was from a place called China that was its enemy at the

time. The two were at war. Showing an enemy in an explicitly healing and erotic context was very dangerous, politically speaking. Xu's work could have put him in jail. Or in forced labor."

Or the pens, Teresa thought, but that wasn't right. They didn't have pens before the protomolecule.

"Then why did he do it?" Teresa was almost surprised to hear her voice.

"He thought it was important," Ilich said. "Xu felt that all humanity was part of a single family, and that the differences that divide us are trivial compared to the deep uniting factors that bring us together. That's why your father brought this painting here. The unity of the human project is a Laconian ideal."

It was a strange thought. They were torturing Holden right now over political differences. They'd killed Timothy, and maybe Timothy had come to Laconia to kill them. And now here they were, all pretending that a long-dead man's barely concealed penis was a symbol of how much they were all in it together. This was stupid.

It was worse than stupid. It was dishonest.

Ilich, maybe sensing her mood growing dark, started moving the seminar on to a collection of sculptural abstracts that had only recently arrived from Bara Gaon. Teresa was just starting to walk toward them when Dr. Cortázar appeared, smiling, around a corner.

"Colonel!" the older man said. "Here you are. I was wondering if I could borrow Teresa for a few minutes. Routine medical scan."

It caught Ilich off balance. His carefully built demeanor shifted, and she saw the flash of annoyance in his eyes. Even anger. It made her want to side with Cortázar.

"It's okay," she said. "I can review on my own later."

Ilich's smile slid back into place. "I don't know that—"

Cortázar took her hand. "It won't be long. Right back. Everything fine."

As she let herself be led away, she felt something like joy or anger. A little ember of rebellion still red and hot in the ashes of her world. She tried to hold on to it. Cortázar was humming to himself. He seemed so pleased,

he was almost skipping. She waited until they were safely out of earshot before she spoke.

“Is everything okay?”

“Perfect. Lovely. I have some ideas about what happened. You know. With the high consul. There are some tests I want to run.”

“Baselines?”

Cortázar’s smile widened. “Something like that, yes.”

They walked together through the State Building and to the private medical wing. The guards all knew them. There was nothing that would raise an alarm with anyone. Teresa had to trot to keep up with Cortázar’s long strides.

Nothing felt at all off until they walked into the medical suite—the same one she’d been going to for her annual checkups and occasional maladies for longer than she could remember—and Elvi Okoye was sitting at the doctor’s station. Even then, Teresa didn’t know what was wrong except that Cortázar’s mood soured instantly.

“Dr. Okoye. I’m afraid this isn’t a good time.”

“I found some notes I need to clarify with you,” she said.

“This isn’t a good time,” Cortázar said again, his tone of voice growing harder. The rebelliousness and warmth in Teresa’s chest shifted into something more like dread. She didn’t understand it, but she trusted it. *You should keep an eye on me*, Holden said sometime back in her memory. It was connected to Cortázar’s voice. *Nature eats babies all the time*.

“If there’s something critical going on with Teresa,” Elvi Okoye said, “maybe we should let Admiral Trejo know about it.”

The moment stretched. For a moment, Teresa was back in the cave. Timothy told her to put her hands over her ears. She was breathing too fast. The world started to sparkle at the edges, so bright it was just like darkness.

Cortázar looked at her. “You can go,” he said. “We’ll do this another time.”

Teresa nodded, turned, and began the walk back toward the museum and her peer class with a sense that something important had just happened. Something dangerous. And she wasn’t sure what it was.

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Chapter Thirty-Two: Bobbie

C opy copy, *White Crow*. Flight path amended. You good to go, sa sa?”
“Heard and acknowledged,” Bobbie said. “Thank you, Control.”

The tightbeam to Callisto’s traffic control center dropped, and Bobbie shifted the little skiff, feeling the gentle pressure as the thrusters fired. It wasn’t even enough to move her crash couch, but it bent the trajectory of her ship just enough. The display had a hard lockout that let her overlay the path of the whole plan without fear of anything leaking back. Where the *Tempest* was, where the *Storm* would appear, and where she needed to be.

She stretched her hands, and the powered gloves of the Laconian armor shifted with her. Blue showed through gaps in the black paint job. Blue and black were the wrong colors, and always would be for her. Her armor was supposed to be *red*. She opened an encrypted tightbeam and waited the seconds as it was confirmed. Everything was happening so close in, there was hardly any light delay. This wouldn’t be either strategic or close quarters, but the messy part in between.

“Captain,” Jillian Houston said.

“We have approval from traffic control. Monitor our position and stand by for go.”

“Copy that,” Jillian said, and dropped the line. It was good discipline, not leaving the connection up longer than required. Not that it would have made much difference now. By the time the Laconian forces tracked the signal, it would all be over. Or at least too far along to stop.

The *White Crow* was a terrible little ship. Even if Bobbie hadn’t been taking it into combat, she’d have wanted a vac suit buttoned up tight. The cloth covering the bulkheads was pale, with lines of white showing where

age and radiation had degraded it. The crash couches were lumpy and stiff, and slow to react to changes in the ship's vector. The handholds on the walls had all been polished by generations of touching, the way stone steps were supposed to be worn away in medieval cathedrals back on Earth. It was a ship that had outlasted its time, but its drive still worked, and Bobbie didn't need much more than that out of it.

She waited through minutes that felt long as they passed and sudden when they were gone. The outward-pushing, inward-pulling dilation of time before battle. It felt good.

"How are we down there, Rini?" she asked. The response delay from the airlock wasn't much less than when she'd been talking to Callisto.

"I feel like I'm cupping the devil's balls," Rini said. "But . . . yeah. It all looks good."

Bobbie had looked over the torpedo before they'd taken off. It was the smallest and fastest that Bobbie could find, black and boxy and hardly longer than her own leg. Rini had stripped the already spare design down to its minimum, taking away the mass of the traditional warhead in order to win a few extra milliseconds when the burn came. Instead of blowing the little fusion core, the proximity sensor would disable the power that kept the antimatter cut off from the rest of the universe, and physics would take it from there. Bobbie just had to get it close.

She checked the flight path. The *White Crow* was just about where she wanted it to be.

"I'm about to pull the pin," Bobbie said. "If you need a potty break, now's the time."

Rini's laugh was short and humorless. "I've been pissing myself since you told me the plan, Cap. At this point, I'm amazed I don't have a prolapsed bladder."

"Only a little longer," she said, and switched back to the tight-beam. "Status?"

"At your order," Jillian said.

This was the moment. The last moment. Bobbie could pull back now. Take the *White Crow* through her planned flight path, tell her crew to scatter

to the winds, drop the antimatter down Jupiter's gravity well and enjoy the fireworks. There hadn't been a lot of decisive moments in her life that she'd recognized when they were happening. Usually they only came clear after the fact.

"Take her out, *Storm*," Bobbie said.

"Done," Jillian said, the single syllable sharp and hard as a thrown rock.

Bobbie took a deep breath, let it out. Down on Callisto, the *Gathering Storm* was coming to life, breaking out of its hidden berth and leaping through the thin Callistan atmosphere toward the stars. Her crew were being pressed back into their couches like God had His palm on their chests. All she could do was sit and listen to the open channel and wait for someone to notice a drive plume where there shouldn't be one.

The emergency alert cut through the chatter of voices. Military orders to make clear. The thickly traveled Jovian system, with its dozens of moons and millions of people all smashed down into a volume smaller than the slow zone, had just become a battlefield. She fired up the *White Crow*'s drive as if she were going to head for shelter. Her body felt warm and smooth. On her tactical display, the *Tempest* shifted the way it was supposed to, took the vector she'd anticipated, leaped to the attack. When she switched to visual, it looked like a tiny bone, dark against the brightness of its own drive plume.

The display showed fast movers—torpedoes already in flight from the *Storm*. And there, tiny pinpricks of light where the *Tempest*'s PDCs were firing out through holes in its skin-like plating to knock them back. The thin cone of the enemy's blind spot swept across the tactical display. She'd be in it soon. Very soon . . .

"Make safe, Rini," she said. "We're about to get bumpy."

"Not soon enough for me."

The *White Crow* fell into shadow, and Bobbie spun the ship hard, throwing the drive into a hard burn. The crash couch slammed up into her back. Her armor flashed a medical alert error up as her blood pressure fluttered, then took it down when she stabilized. The tactical screen had more targets than she could track. Jillian Houston was throwing everything

the *Storm* had at the *Tempest*, and the *Tempest* was opening up its own volley. But so far no sign of the magnetar field generator, so their dangerous gamble was paying off for now. Bobbie slid the *White Crow* closer in, trying to narrow the gap between her and her enemy. The burn was hard. Her armor rippled down on her legs and arms in rhythm with her heart, pushing the blood along, keeping it from pooling. Even so, darkness started to creep in at the edges of her vision. She was aware of voices on her radio like they were music coming from another room. She was hiding in the middle of the *Tempest*'s blind spot. The safest she could be in the middle of a shooting war, and still not particularly safe.

She shifted to the in-ship comms, and the rest of the universe went silent. "Prepare for launch."

She was pretty certain she heard Rini's grit-toothed acknowledgment. She checked her drive. Seven gs. She'd done worse than seven gs before. Getting old sucked.

She didn't just feel the impact, she heard it, transmitted up through the mass of the ship and into her armor. A deep, dull clank like someone hitting a badly made bell.

"I think we took a hit," she said. "What's your status?"

Rini didn't answer. Pushing against the thrust gravity, Bobbie shifted to the network display. Rini's power armor was still connected, but everything on it was in error states. A sea of red where green should have been. Bobbie shouted the woman's name again, but she already knew there wouldn't be a reply.

The airlock was one deck down and then half a dozen meters from the lift shaft. If she cut the drive, the *White Crow* would fall out of the blind spot and be cut down by the *Tempest*'s PDCs. If the torpedo had broken . . .

If it had broken, she'd already be a rapidly expanding cloud of glowing plasma. The antimatter at least was still intact. That meant there was hope. And if there was hope, there wasn't rest. She slaved the piloting controls to her armor, checked her seals and status—a few medical stats in the yellow, but nothing in the red—and unstrapped from the crash couch. The power armor whined under its own weight as she stood, and she felt her shoulders

trying to dislocate. The blood in her veins slammed down into her legs, and the armor clamped against her thighs, pushing it back up. A wave of nausea almost overcame her. She took the first of eight steps to the lift. She could do it. She had to.

A low growling was coming up from the deck. The maneuvering thrusters were firing. That couldn't be good. She reached the lift, and the slight reduction in g as she went down was like one drop of water to someone dying of thirst. It stopped when the lift did.

The airlock was a mess. Both sets of doors were open, venting the ship into space. The bulkhead was folded where the PDC rounds had hit. Jagged holes gaped where the raw kinetic force had shoved the outer hull into the room. The torpedo was in the far corner where the bulkhead met the floor, and Rini's body was beside it. Bobbie went to her side and knelt, the artificial muscles running through her power armor straining under the burden.

Death had come fast for Rini. She probably hadn't even known it happened. The armor was the same mostly black as Bobbie's, and it was still working hard to preserve the life that was gone. Five holes across her back and arm poured blood too fast, the thrust gravity squeezing it out of the corpse. Bobbie shifted Rini away. There'd be time for mourning later.

Rini had protected the torpedo from the worst of the damage, but the little drive wasn't unscathed. A white impact showed where a bit of shrapnel had cracked the ceramic around the drive cone. Bobbie tried to lift it and see the extent of the damage, but she couldn't. Even with the powered armor, the burn was too much. Her spine ached, and the one rib that dislocated when she was under too much thrust had slipped out of place again. It hurt to breathe.

The *White Crow* threw up a fresh alert. The maneuvering thrusters were at a little under a third of their reaction mass, and requesting permission to start drawing from the reserve. It only took seconds to see the problem. The PDC rounds had sheared off a section of the exterior plating. In a larger ship, it wouldn't have mattered, but the *White Crow* was small enough that

it had shifted the center of mass. The thrusters were firing to keep her from curving off, and would until they ran dry.

She had the ship open a tightbeam to the *Storm*.

“Need good news, Captain,” Jillian said, her voice wet and phlegmy from the pressure of their burn.

“Rini’s down. Ship and torpedo are both compromised. I need you to make the *Tempest* stop. I can do this, but not at high burn.”

There was no response for a second. “How?” Jillian asked, but Alex’s voice cut in on the channel.

“Give me a second, Bobbie. I’ll get you what you need.”

She closed her eyes. Her consciousness was swimming. It was only force of will that made her turn toward the payload. The four little spheres of magnetism, vacuum, and hellfire. The proximity sensor. Neither of them looked damaged. She checked her tactical display. She was still in the blind spot. She rotated the ship and eased back on the maneuvering thrusters. If she was going to fall off course, she could at least fall in the right direction. The *Tempest*’s drive plume swept past, framed in the airlock doors like a comet.

“Alex?” she said. “Give me something.”

And as if in answer, the *White Crow* went on the float. Bobbie rose up, then clamped mag boots against the deck. The *Tempest*’s drive plume was gone. Her blood shifted and the nausea came and went again as she unhooked the warhead and the proximity sensor. The *White Crow* was spent. The torpedo was scrap. She wasn’t done. There was still a way. She took up the warhead, cradling it to her chest, and stepped out the airlock. She didn’t pause as she launched.

Bobbie fired up the thrusters on her Laconian armor and burned toward the *Tempest*. It was an asteroid, a strangely shaped rock curving through a complex orbit around the small and distant sun. She was close enough to see it without enhancement. Much closer than she’d intended. Maybe a hundred clicks away. Maybe less. A machine that had brought the solar system to its knees. The unkillable dreadnought of Laconia. And somewhere beyond it, away to her left, the *Storm*. Her ship. They weren’t

really stationary. Nothing in the universe was. It was only that their vectors matched for the moment. Stillness was an illusion.

Something flashed and was gone. A torpedo taken out by the *Tempest's* PDCs. Against the constant and unwavering starlight, the little glimmer of motion stood out. She saw another. A handful more. And the arcing brightness of the *Tempest's* torpedoes heading out. The distances were so vast, they almost looked slow.

"Hold on," she said, but she didn't turn her comms on. It wasn't a message so much as a prayer.

Bobbie checked her tactical display. She was still linked to the *White Crow*, but the comms on the little ship weren't the best. It took almost a second for the full layout to repopulate.

Going ballistic was hard. The warhead in her arms was a dart, and she was trying to drop it a kilometer and land it in a coffee cup. She checked her suit, and the thrusters were good, even if they were running through her fuel way too fast. The *Tempest* was a little larger now. She killed the burn and turned, centering it between her feet. Falling toward her enemy from a great height. She held the warhead against her belly, checked the connections and readouts one last time. Was the power cut off engaged? Yes. Was the backup battery disconnected? Yes. Was the proximity sensor set so that the ship would trigger it? It was.

Bobbie took a deep breath. Another. That rib popped back into place with a deep and painful snap, and she grinned. The *Tempest* was visibly larger now. Her velocity toward it was recklessly fast, even though she could hardly feel it. She eyeballed her path, adjusted, had the suit double-check her. An augmented line from her armored toes down to the *Tempest*. She took a solid hold on the warhead, one hand on either side, and then carefully let go. Even a tiny variance, amplified over the quickly falling distance, would be a disaster. She waited for a long moment, and it floated in place, almost touching her. No drift. Perfect.

Gently, she tapped her suit thrusters, drifting away centimeter by centimeter, careful that the little plumes didn't touch the warhead. When she was four or five meters away, she started a braking burn, and the

warhead seemed to leap away. Her breath sounded very loud in her ears. Very close. Her suit was running warm, the radiators doing their best to shed waste heat. The vacuum of space was only cold after you were dead.

It was too late for her. Some part of her had known that from the moment she'd seen the white mark on the torpedo, but now that it was done, she could think about it. If things had gone right, she and Rini and the *White Crow* would have been burning hard as hell away from the *Tempest* the moment they dropped their missile, trying to outrun the blast. And that had assumed the *Storm* was still leading the enemy away, which wasn't happening either. So this was it.

She twisted at the hips, stretching. The stars of the galactic disk spread against the horizonless sky. Some of that light had been traveling for centuries. Millennia. Longer. Many of those stars would have died long before she was born. What a weird fate for a photon to be spat out of a nuclear fireball, speed through the vast emptiness between stars, and land on a Martian Marine's retina while she decided whether she still feared death, or if she was ready. She'd done this a dozen times before.

The *Tempest* was getting larger. She hadn't killed all her velocity toward it. She wondered whether the *Storm* would make it. In a straight battle, it was doomed. Jillian and Alex and the rest were doing the tactical equivalent of taking a ship like the *Rocinante* and picking a fight with a *Donnager*-class. As long as the *Tempest* didn't fire up its drive, it would be worth it. Pyrrhic victories were still victories, and this was about to cost the enemy way more than it would her.

She thought about making a connection back to the *Storm*. Saying goodbye. They didn't need the distraction. If anything, she should try to divide the enemy's attention, not her allies'. Anything else was self-indulgence. She'd taken her shot, but she wasn't done.

She checked the ammunition levels in the suit. She was topped up. The thrusters still had some juice in them, and her oxygen was good for another thirty minutes, even if she didn't start running it thin. She engaged the weapons, shifted her HUD to local/tactical, and grinned. *Who am I? Did the*

things I accomplished matter? Will I leave the universe a better place than I found it? If I don't come back, what are my regrets? What are my victories?

"Thanks for everything," she said to the universe, as if it had been the host of a particularly good party that was just winding down. She turned toward the *Tempest*. Another sparkle of light. Another volley of torpedoes speeding out into the darkness. Another threat to her ship and her people. "All right, motherfucker. You want to dance? Let's dance."

She locked her targeting system onto the Laconian battleship, shifted her suit to live fire, and started her burn. Fifty-seven seconds later, she passed out of the *Tempest's* blind spot.

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Chapter Thirty-Three: Alex

Status?” Bobbie said. Her voice on the command deck only made Alex feel her absence more. All around, the others were at their stations. The tension in the air was thick. Every glance, every breath, every nervous chuckle meant the same thing: *Holy shit, we’re actually going to do this.*

“At your order,” Jillian said, tugging the collar of her uniform open another centimeter. Alex remembered being young enough to care what he looked like going into a battle.

Caspar was tapping the side of his crash couch. Jillian leaned forward on hers, pulling the restraints tight against her shoulders. Alex sort of wished he’d hit the head. Everyone dealt with the anticipation and dread differently.

They’d been preparing for hours, towing the *Storm* out from its hidden mine, making the cabins and workshops secure, running every system through its diagnostics. Now the only thing between the *Gathering Storm* and open space was a set of old bay doors, and Bobbie’s go order.

“Take her out, *Storm*.”

“Done,” Jillian said, and cut the connection. “Kamal. Take us out.”

Alex tapped the release and watched on his monitor as the doors above them opened. Maneuvering thrusters gently pushed them off the moon’s surface. And as soon as the *Storm* cleared the dock, he lit the Epstein up. He fell hard into the crash couch gel, feeling the coolness as it crept up around his ribs and neck. Callisto fell away behind them, the surface glowing orange and gold where the drive plume had heated it.

“All systems inside tolerance,” Caspar said, even though no one had asked. The kid had to do something. “We are . . . Okay. I’m getting a

connection request from Callisto traffic control?”

“Let ’em wonder,” Jillian said. “Do we have the *Tempest*?”

“Got him,” Alex said.

“Show me.”

Alex threw the Jovian system onto the main display. Their position, the moons, the curving arc of the gas giant below them. The shipping patterns were complex to an untrained eye, but he could read them like text. The freight traffic in gray, Laconian security in gold. Bobbie and the *White Crow* in green. And the target—the *Tempest*—in red as bright as fresh blood.

The shifting gravity of the system made lowest-energy transit lines, and the traffic between the moons followed them like iron filings showing a magnetic field. At these distances, you wouldn’t even need an Epstein drive to ignore them. A decent ship flying teakettle could get anywhere it needed to be. It was only the extra scrip that ships could save that made the pattern what it was. That was always enough.

“Come on,” Jillian said, not to anyone on the bridge. “Grow some balls and come get me, you big bastard.”

“Security alert’s just gone out, open channel,” Caspar said. “They know we’re here. The *Tempest* is moving. She’s coming after us.”

“Punch it, Kamal,” Jillian said. Her bravado was almost convincing. Alex didn’t think Caspar saw through it.

Alex punched it. On his monitor, the green of the *White Crow* lined up just where he wanted it to be. The *Tempest* followed in the way he’d expected it would. His jaw ached from the thrust, and the juice running through his system made him feel like he’d had too much coffee and not enough at the same time. The *Tempest* was a massive ship, but the drive was powerful enough that inertia didn’t matter much. The *Storm* was smaller, lighter, and less powerful, and while it was probably more maneuverable, that didn’t help this time. If he was going to get Bobbie through the eye of that particular needle, he had no degrees of freedom.

They still had advantages, though. The main one being that they were ahead and the *Tempest* was behind. The *Storm*’s drive plume gave a little

cover. The torpedoes that the *Tempest* fired would have to swing out and around to keep from getting slagged. And it also had catch up to the *Storm* as it sped away. Anything the *Storm* launched, the *Tempest* would rush forward to meet. It gave the *Storm*'s PDCs that little extra slice of reaction time, the *Tempest*'s that much less. Bobbie's flight plan for him had been to ride that gap where the difference put the *Tempest* in threat and the *Storm* just outside it. It was great in theory. Practice was more complicated, because they could still be overwhelmed.

Would be.

"Fast movers," Caspar gasped. "That's a lot of them."

Jillian coughed. It sounded painful. Alex half expected her to move to text communication, but she fought through and spoke aloud. "PDCs to auto. Return fire."

The thrum of the PDCs added itself to the noise and shudder of the pursuit. Like a kid trying to outrun a cop, the *Storm* slid past the *White Crow*, and the *Tempest* boiled up from below her. Alex couldn't tell if the vibration was engine harmonics coming from the deck or his overloaded bloodstream or both. Bobbie's little ship hit her burn too, falling into the enemy's blind spot.

Soon. It would all be over soon. He forced himself to swallow. It hurt.

The *Storm* shook. "We aren't hit," Caspar shouted. "It was close, but we got it."

"More distance, Kamal," Jillian said, but he couldn't do that without prodding the *Tempest* to match. Bobbie needed the battleship to keep its current course and heading. He was too focused on the reality of the situation to explain why it was a bad order, so he just ignored it. If the *Storm* had to take a few hits, it would just have to take them.

The incoming fire was like a vast, blooming flower. Lines looped out from the *Tempest*, curved in toward them, and vanished as the *Storm* knocked them back. Alex spared a glance at the ammunition levels. They weren't as low as he'd expected. All his habits had been formed on older technology. The Laconian design for rapid printing of new rounds still wasn't intuitive.

If they had been doing what they appeared to be doing—running like hell and hoping to get to the gate and out of the system—it would have been a desperation move. The distance between Jupiter and the ring gate was vast, and the *Storm* was constrained by both its reaction mass and the fragility of the bodies inside her. And the danger of screaming through the slow zone too fast without knowing the state of play on the inside. Alex would have had to make a braking burn before they reached the gate, and the *Tempest* would have caught them. If Bobbie didn't come through, it could still go down that way. Alex realized he was already plotting in other plans—dive into the high atmosphere of Jupiter and try to scrape the *Tempest* off, loop sunward and try to get the enemy to overheat and pull back before they had to—and stopped himself. They weren't in the last ditch yet.

"New volley coming in," Caspar shouted. "We're not going to be able to stop them all."

"Evasive, Kamal," Jillian snapped, and Alex bent their flight path away, but only a little. The *Tempest* couldn't turn or shift without exposing the *White Crow*. And where the hell was Bobbie anyway?

"Brace," Caspar said, and a second later the crash couch bucked under Alex, kicking him like a mule. Even with the gel to pad him, he fought to get his breath back. He'd lost a couple of seconds. They couldn't afford that again.

"What's the damage?" Jillian croaked out, but no one answered.

The tightbeam sprang to life. Bobbie was checking in.

"Need good news, Captain," Jillian said. Her face was shining with sweat. Alex waited with dread and hope.

"Rini's down. Ship and torpedo are both compromised," Bobbie said. Her voice was strained, but with the calm professionalism of a woman in her natural environment. She'd have had the same tone if she'd just found the way to destroy her enemy or lost both her legs. "I need you to make the *Tempest* stop. I can do this, but not at high burn."

The pause seemed to last forever. Alex plotted in the flip and burn, and waited for Jillian to give the word.

Instead, she said, "How?"

"Give me a second, Bobbie," Alex said. "I'll get you what you need."

The drive cut off, the weight of acceleration vanishing in the time it took to blink. Alex took the comm control from Caspar and turned on the do-not-approach beacon. Tactically, it didn't make any damned sense. That's what he was counting on.

"What are you doing, Kamal?" Jillian said. Her tone was halfway between outrage and hope that maybe he knew something.

"Making us look like a mutiny," he said. "Seeing whether they like the idea of getting their ship back."

As he'd hoped, the *Tempest* killed its drive. They sped through the darkness in matching orbits. Callisto was already long gone behind them. Even Jupiter was visibly smaller. It felt like being alone, but every eye in the system would be watching them.

"Leche bao," Caspar said under his breath. "They're going to kill us."

"As long as they do it without starting their drive up," Jillian said, and Alex felt a little burst of pride for the girl. She was green, but she was learning. For almost a minute, the two ships stood silent, waiting, and tense. A comm request came in from the *Tempest*. Jillian didn't accept it. Alex noticed he was holding his breath.

"Fast movers," Caspar said.

"Shoot down as many as you can and return fire," Jillian said, "but do not change course, and don't give them a reason to."

Alex could only watch as the crew fired back. It would be over already if the command staff of the *Tempest* had wanted it to be. A single massive strike, and the *Storm* would be dead. Instead, like a wrestler slowly bending back the opponent's joint, they were pushing the flow of missiles, a little faster and a little faster until the *Storm's* defenses were overwhelmed. They wanted to disable the ship and question the crew. They hadn't met Bobbie. Or Jillian Houston. If it came to it, they would scuttle the *Storm*. He knew he was looking at his own death.

Come on, Bobbie, he thought. I'm trusting you on this.

"I think . . . Is that the captain?" Caspar said. "I think that's the captain."

He threw the feed from the external sensors onto the main display. The image was a little shaky, the edges too sharp, but there not far from the *Tempest* was a single figure in power armor falling in toward the ship. Its arms ended in the rapid-fire glitter of muzzle flash, throwing two streams of ineffectual rounds at the mass of the Laconian dreadnought. The sight of a single human-sized figure flying past the battleship gave a dramatic sense of scale to its massive bulk. Next to it, Bobbie looked like an angry insect attacking a whale.

“Keep your eye on the incoming missiles,” Jillian said. “If that’s Draper, she’s doing it for a reason.”

The tiny figure flew a jagged, unpredictable path. Streams of high-speed projectiles chased it as the *Tempest*’s PDCs tracked it. The flyswatter hunting the fly. It was impossible to imagine that something so small could stand a chance against the vastness and power of the ship, but if it was Bobbie it was also impossible to imagine she wouldn’t.

Alex started laying in a burn solution. “I can get to her,” he said. “It’s going to mean getting damned close to that thing, but . . .”

The figure twitched. Something bloomed out from its back. On the display, it looked so small. The arms rose up, the legs bent. Vapor sprayed from the figure. Atmosphere. Blood.

“She caught a PDC round,” Jillian said. “She’s gone.”

Alex didn’t hear her. He heard her, but he wouldn’t understand. Grief like an electrical shock ran through his body, humming and violent and damaging.

“I can get to her,” Alex said, turning back to his controls. Something was wrong with the juice on his couch. He couldn’t catch his breath. “It’s going to be a hell of a ride, but we can . . . we can . . .”

His controls flickered as Jillian locked him out.

“Give me the *fucking* controls,” he shouted. “We have to get her!”

“Alex,” Caspar said, and his gentleness was unbearable. The suit of powered armor drifted. It was still heading toward the *Tempest*. Inertia carrying her toward her destination even after it didn’t matter. Even after

she was gone. He tapped at the controls the same way, like there was a way to roll time back just a little.

“Fuck. *Fuck*,” Alex shouted. The lemony taste of vomit hit the back of his throat. He swallowed hard, forcing it back down. The plan had failed.

Bobbie was gone.

“What do we do?” Caspar said, and there was panic in his voice. Before Alex could answer, the sensor feed died with an audible click and the radiation alarms started screaming.

The *Heart of the Tempest* had stood alone against the combined forces of Earth, Mars, and the Belt and won. It had put all humanity under Laconia’s yoke. It was the living symbol of why all resistance against High Consul Duarte would always be in vain.

When their sensors finished their override reset, it was gone.



Without the protection of the *Storm*’s eerie skin, the burst of X-rays and gamma radiation would have killed them all. As it was, half the crew was too sick to get out of their crash couches. The medical bay was filled with people sloughing off the lining of their gastrointestinal tracts. The ship’s supply of antiradiation pharmaceuticals was already down to nothing, and if the cancer rate followed the models, their oncocidals would be going down next.

The ship itself was injured too. Not even broken. Injured. The regenerative plating that covered the *Storm* had started developing blisters and thickening like the first stages of skin cancer. The vacuum channels that routed power failed sometimes for no clear reason, becoming so unreliable that the repair crews started putting in copper wire backup circuits, the metal taped to the inside of the corridors. The drive still burned, even if it ran a little dirty.

They’d won. It hadn’t been possible, but they’d done it. Coming out unscarred would have been too much to ask.

Alex cycled between numbness and grief with the regularity of a clock. When he could stand it, he watched the newsfeeds from around the system replaying the explosion he hadn't been able to see because he was too close when it happened. The best one was from Earth. A handheld camera filming a child's kite competition was pointing at the right section of sky when the light reached there, and the brightness against the blue had been like a small, brief sun, even at that distance.

Everyone in the system was tracking the *Storm* as it made its way toward the ring gate. No one had the nerve to follow it. The newsfeeds were thick with analysis. The attack had been in retaliation for the crackdown on Ceres. It had been an inside job, and stood as evidence that the Laconian Navy itself was rife with factions and dissent. It was the first step toward the underground retaking Sol system or the inciting incident that would force the high consul to glass the whole system. Nine times out of ten, the speakers were celebrating Laconia's defeat. There were other stories: Spontaneous demonstrations on Mars and Rhea calling for Laconian withdrawal. The official announcement from TSL-5 that the Laconian political officer's position was being held empty until regular communication through the gate network was reestablished. A dozen pirate feeds springing up, accusing the Laconians of taking risks in the dead systems that put the whole human race under threat.

It wasn't chaos, or if it was, it was no more than usual. It was the blossoming of hope where there had been no hope before. It was everything Bobbie had intended it to be, except for one detail.

For himself, the radiation sickness was bad, but the physical distress at least kept his mind busy. When he felt well enough to work, he threw in with the repair crews. He wasn't surprised when Jillian Houston—Captain Houston—called him into her office. He'd been expecting it.

The cabin was small and spare. Laconian officers didn't show off. Another thing they'd inherited from Mars. Alex remembered his own commanders embracing the same austerity, back when he'd been a different man and the universe had made sense. The few decorations and belongings that had been Bobbie's were on the desk. Jillian looked thinner than before,

and paler too. The radiation sickness had hit her harder, but it hadn't stopped her.

"Alex," she said. Her voice was gentler than usual. Like now that she'd taken power, she didn't have to be as aggressive. "I wanted you to . . . I thought she'd have wanted you to take care of her things."

"Thank you," Alex said, reaching for them.

"Please sit."

He did. Jillian leaned forward, her fingers steepled. "We need repairs. We need to regroup. And we need to go to ground before Laconia gets their shit together and sends ships after us."

"All right," Alex said. His heart wasn't in it. Maybe it was because he was sick. Maybe it was grief. Where one started and the other stopped was difficult if not impossible to locate.

"I've decided to take us back to Freehold. We have the support there. And the *Storm's* home base facility. We can get her back up to trim. Resupply from the colony. Plan our next moves."

She looked at him like she expected him to say something. He wasn't sure what that would be. He considered the things on the table. A tunic. A little glass-and-ceramic commendation she'd gotten from the UN, signed by Chrisjen Avasarala. He was surprised there wasn't more, and he was a little surprised there was even that much.

"I think that's a good plan," he said. "The risky part will be getting through the gates, but with no Medina Station, we don't have to try to sneak out in a supply ship. That makes it easier."

When Jillian spoke again, there was a thickness in her voice like passion or sorrow. Or rage. "Draper was a good captain. And a better war leader. She made this ship what it is, and no one on the *Storm* will ever forget her or the sacrifice she made for us."

"Thank you," Alex said.

"I need to make this my ship now. In her tradition and her honor, but my command. I wish it wasn't like that, but it's where we are. You understand."

"I do."

"Good. Because I need you as my XO."

Alex looked at her. He knew the answer and what he was going to do as clearly as if he'd actually been thinking about it. All his next steps laid out before him.

“Thank you,” he said. “But no. This is your ship, and that’s the way it should be. I’ve got one of my own.”

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Chapter Thirty-Four: Elvi

Elvi woke up gasping.

“Hey hey hey,” Fayez said, shifting in the bed beside her. His hand on her back grounded her. It made the dream scatter back a little. She leaned into it. “Nightmare?” he asked.

“Worse,” she said. “You know that dream where you’ve got the big presentation that you forgot about, and now you have to pretend you did eight months of work on something you’ve got no clue on?”

“That is your go-to for bad dreams.”

“That, except that usually when I have it, I just have to wake up and things are better,” she said, smoothing back her hair. “I’d give three fingers and an eye to only have a blown lecture to worry about.”

He shifted, the familiar warmth of his body moving alongside her. “How’s your gut?” he asked. And then, when she didn’t answer, “You need to eat, darling.”

“I do. I will. It’s just . . .”

“I know.”

She reached for her cane, but when she stood, she put more weight on her hurt leg. The pain felt right. She went to the bathroom first, then started pulling on clothes. It was still dark out, apart from the lights of the State Building, the glow of the city, and the construction platforms glittering against the stars.

“Come back to bed,” Fayez said. “It’s too early.”

“I’m not going to sleep anyway. I’ll go out to the university. Get a jump on the day.”

“You have to get some rest.”

“Rest for me,” she said, and kissed him on the cheek, and then again on the neck. They were still for a moment.

When Fayez spoke, his voice didn’t have its usual lightness. “I will find a way to get us out of this if I can.”

“Out of this?”

“The part where you’re surrounded by psychopaths and politicians. We’ll steal a little ship, head out to some backwater colony world and spend the rest of our lives trying to get cucumbers to grow in poison soil. It’ll be great.”

“It would be heaven,” she said. “Go back to bed. I’ll come back when I can.”

The State Building was almost pleasant at night. Something about the quietness made it seem like she had freedom. There were just as many guards, just as many surveillance drones. Maybe it was just millennia of evolution priming her brain to believe that what happened in the darkness was hidden, private, and peculiar. She stuffed her hands in her pockets and went to the commissary. There would be something there—coffee and sweet rice, if nothing else. She couldn’t keep much more than that down anyway.

The work in Cortázar’s lab was punishing. There were a couple of decent virtual context translators in the lab. They helped enough that when his notes were couched in terms of nanoinformatics—complex imaginary information loss, Deriner functions, implicit multipliers—she could understand it in exo-biological terms like functional regulation site persistence across generations. How either or both of them would ever be able to make the issues clear to Admiral Trejo, she couldn’t imagine. But she’d been able to explain convergent evolution to undergraduates, once upon a time. So maybe she’d come up with something.

The commissary was bright and quiet. An attendant nodded to her as she entered. Or maybe he was a guard. Same thing. Elvi got herself a cup of tea—the coffee smelled too acidic and aggressive when she got close to it—and a bagel with butter and jelly. She didn’t want to go to the pens or Cortázar’s private labs. She didn’t want to spend another day with Cara and

Xan. She also didn't want to stay here. But most of all, she didn't want to do what she knew she had to do. Tell Trejo about Cortázar.

She'd wanted to find proof. A smoking gun somewhere in his notes. She'd gone over everything she could find about Duarte's transubstantiation—her term for it, not theirs—hoping to find something that showed Cortázar didn't intend to let Teresa follow in her father's footsteps, and that he never had. There was nothing. Either he'd never put it in his written musings or he'd erased it carefully enough that she couldn't find it.

Her hand terminal had a reminder function. It was meant to alert her when meetings were about to start, and one of the options was to let her know when the other people were already together. She'd made a fake appointment with Cortázar and Teresa with an unfixed time. It meant that anytime the two of them were in close proximity, she was notified, and would be until one of them noticed it on their schedule and wiped it out. She was almost certain that her unexpected appearance at the medical wing was the only thing that had kept Cortázar's work with Teresa from moving forward already.

And by *work*, she was pretty sure she meant vivisection.

She finished the last bite of bagel and washed it down with the dregs of her tea. It was still hours before daylight. If she waited, her courage would fail her. She cleaned up her plate and teacup, stretched until her leg ached, and went to the attendant.

"Can I help you with something, ma'am?"

"I need to talk to Admiral Trejo."



Trejo was dressed when she reached his office. His bright-green eyes were puffy with lack of sleep, and his shirt had the limp look of something worn for too many days in a row. His desk held a pile of exhausted single-use displays, the detritus of a flood of highly sensitive reports from inside the system and what he had managed to glean from all the systems beyond. His smile was warm, well practiced, and probably insincere.

Elvi had been laboring hard under the strain of juggling a mad emperor, a murderous scientist, and civilization-ending monsters that had killed her crew and eaten her flesh. It was uncomfortable to think that Trejo was under more pressure than she was.

“Doctor,” Trejo said. “You’re up early.”

“So are you.”

He gestured to a chair. “I’m up late. Coordination with the other systems has been . . . challenging. I delegate what I can, but the high consul didn’t sleep, and being both him and myself has been . . . strenuous.”

“When was the last time you slept?”

“A full night? Honestly, I’d have to do some math.”

Elvi sat, folding her hands together on her knees. The anxiety hissed and spun in her chest like a firework. Sleep seemed like something in a language she couldn’t speak. Neither of them knew what the term meant anymore.

“Is there something I can do for you, Dr. Okoye?” Trejo prompted. Elvi realized she’d faded out for a moment.

“I don’t have hard proof,” she said, “but I believe Dr. Cortázar intends to harm the high consul’s daughter. Maybe even kill her.”

Trejo sighed and looked down. Elvi steeled herself. She was aware how thin her argument was. Even if Holden had come right out and made the accusation, it wouldn’t have carried much weight. Her trust in him would do more to undermine her own status than to dignify his report. All she had was the bone-deep conviction that it was true. She was prepared to plant her flag there and defend her position until Trejo took her seriously.

She expected him to say *What evidence do you have?* or *What makes you think that?* or *Why would he do that?* Instead, the admiral stretched his neck to the side until it popped. “Has there been any change in the high consul’s condition?”

“Not that I’ve seen,” she said. “But—”

“What options do we have for bringing him back to himself?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know if that’s even possible.”

“We did the thing in the first place,” Trejo said. His voice was getting a rasp to it. Frustration or fear or anger. “Why can’t we undo it?”

“The same reason we can’t stir milk back out of coffee or unscramble an egg. Physics is full of things that only work in one direction. This is one.”

“Can we regenerate his central nervous system the way we would after a head injury?”

Elvi felt confused. She’d imagined several versions of this conversation, but none of them had involved ignoring her fears and changing the subject. She wasn’t sure what to do.

“Well, um . . . it’s not exactly like that. The cells in his brain are all still intact. Cortázar changed the way they function. Regrowing tissue means finding areas that are compromised and encouraging new cells to build there.”

“If we intentionally damaged his brain and pumped in normal cell lines, would he grow back?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Burn out his hippocampus, regenerate it. Then his occipital lobe or whatever. Go through him part by part, kill what’s there and replace it with fresh tissue that works like normal human flesh, and build him back up that way. Would that work?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Elvi said. “That’s the Ship of Theseus question. Whether, when you replace all the individual parts of something, you still have the same thing. That’s philosophy. But even then, regrowing central nervous systems is tricky work. We’d want to talk to medical doctors. Physicians. I’m a biologist.”

“Cortázar did it.”

“Cortázar is deeply, *deeply* ethically flawed,” Elvi said. “I’m pretty sure he was using Duarte as an animal model to work the kinks out for his own treatment in the future, and I think he’s planning to sacrifice Teresa too. That’s what I’m here telling you.”

“What about the things that attacked the ring space? Can we say definitively whether they do or don’t pose an ongoing threat? If I park

another ship where Medina used to be, is it going to get eaten? Or are we safe as long as we don't blow up any more neutron stars?"

Elvi didn't mean to laugh. It just happened. Trejo's professional demeanor slipped for a moment, and she saw the rage and despair underneath it.

"How would I possibly know that?" she said. Her voice was louder than she'd meant it to be, but she didn't rein herself in. "I don't know what they are or how they ate the ships they did. Have we had reports? Do we have data? I can't do anything but speculate without that. And what does any of that have to do with Teresa Duarte?"

Trejo went to his desk, called up a fresh window, and shifted it to her hand terminal. She looked at the images there. She recognized the *Heart of the Tempest*. It was the most iconic Laconian ship there was. The images had the hyperreal quality of optical telescropy that had been stabilized and enhanced. A few glittering sparks appeared around it.

"Was there a battle?" she asked, and the image went so white that even coming from the small screen it hurt her eyes.

"It's already known through the Sol system. It will be known through the whole empire. The *Tempest* is dead. A separatist terror cell stole secret Laconian technology and used it against us. And now I have one *Magnetar*-class ship, thirteen-hundred-odd ring gates to keep control over, and the one place where it could actually do that is haunted by . . ." He gestured at her leg. *Whatever the fuck did that.*

"I see," she said.

"We haven't been able to keep signal repeaters up. Every time I send them out, some rock thrower knocks them back down. The terrorists are sending messages to each other through the gates using the technological equivalent of tin cans and chewing gum, and I can't stop them. If I can put a fleet of ships into the ring space, I control everything because it's a choke point. It's *the* choke point. If I can't do that safely, I can't control the empire."

"Except if—" she began, but Trejo couldn't be stopped. His words were like an avalanche. Once they'd started, they kept going.

“Everyone—*everyone*—on every ship and station and planet is going to be waiting to see what the high consul does. And right now he’s two hallways over, waving his hands like a fucking undergraduate on his first hallucinogenic trip. Governments exist on confidence. Not on liberty. Not on righteousness. Not on force. They exist because people believe that they do. Because they don’t ask questions. And Laconia is looking down the throat of a lot of questions we can’t answer.”

By the end of the speech, his voice had risen. Grown strident. Elvi had the sudden and vivid memory of being a girl in Karhula. The manager of the grocery she and her father went to every week had found out the rent on the property was going up, that he was going to have to move or shut down. He’d had the same tone of voice, the same sense of having been overwhelmed by events, the same anger in the face of implacable reality. There was something weirdly comforting about the idea that a humble grocer and the most powerful man in a galaxy-wide empire could have something so fundamental in common. Without thinking, she reached out and took Trejo’s hand. He yanked it back like she’d burned him.

It took a couple long, shuddering breaths for him to regain his composure. When he spoke again, it was the Trejo she recognized. “Your problem, Dr. Okoye, is that you think the immediate problem before you is the most pressing one. It is not. Whatever else Paolo Cortázar may be—and I have no illusions about that man—he is also indispensable.”

The silence between them stretched out longer than was comfortable. Elvi felt like she was looking over the lip of a cliff she hadn’t understood she was standing on. “You’re telling me it’s okay with you.”

“I will try to keep guards on the girl,” Trejo said. “I will do what I can to make sure the two of them aren’t alone together.”

“But if he comes in here with her head under his arm, you’ll shrug and let it slide?”

Trejo spread his hands. “If he says he can fix this clusterfuck by sacrificing her, I’ll find him a knife. That is my duty. I am an officer of the Laconian Empire,” he said. Then, a moment later, “As are you.”

The air in the room seemed thin. Elvi was having a hard time catching her breath. Either Trejo didn't see her distress or he chose not to.

"Your focus, Dr. Okoye, is to provide a second set of eyes and experience as a help to Dr. Cortázar. You and he are partners in this. There is no daylight between you. If you find that difficult or distasteful, I don't really care. We are at a critical moment in history, and you must rise to this occasion."

"She's a kid," Elvi said.

"I agree it would be better if she lived. I'll do what I can," Trejo said. "But there can't be any misunderstanding between us about what our priorities are. The sooner you and he find a way to stir the cream back out of this coffee, the sooner she'll be safe. Anything that impedes the efforts to heal Winston Duarte is your enemy. Anything that helps is your friend. Are we clear?"

I resign floated at the back of her throat. She could feel the words like they were something physical. She knew the shape of them. And she knew Trejo wouldn't let her quit. Where she was now, there was no coming back from.

"As clear as an unmuddied lake," she said. "As clear as air."

"Thank you for your time, Doctor. My door is always open to you."

It was, she thought, an ironic way to tell her to leave.

She rose and walked out into the hall, and then the wide lobby, and then the darkness of the gardens. In the east, the first hint of dawn was turning off the dimmest stars. The air smelled like burnt cinnamon. It was the mating display of a species of ground-dwelling grub-like animal native to Laconia. On Earth, it would have been birdsong. She stood for a long moment and breathed it deeply.

She had done fieldwork for decades, traveling to new worlds with her sample bags and testing kits. She was probably the only person living who had seen as many different trees of life as she had. All the numberless different solutions that evolution had come up with under all the different stars, and all responding—more or less—to the same pressures. Eyes on every world, because things that sensed light were more likely to survive.

Mouths near the sense organs, because things with feeding coordination did better than things without. She'd probably killed and dissected representatives of more individual species than anyone in history in the name of science. And still, she didn't think of herself as a killer. As complicit in murder. As monstrous.

On the horizon, a plume that looked almost like smoke but was really millions of tiny, green-bodied, screw-shaped worms rose up into the sky and then flattened. They shimmered in the rising brightness, a bioluminescent display. Nature was beautiful, wherever she found it. And it was cruel. She didn't know why she kept expecting humanity to be different. Why she pretended the same rules that applied to mountain lions and parasitic wasps didn't also constrain her. Red in tooth and claw, and at every level. In the Bible, even angels murdered humanity's babies when God asked them to.

The swarm on the horizon finished advertising its quality as a mating cluster, the light going out, their bodies going gray. The clouds took on the pink and red of any planet with enough oxygen to selectively scatter the shorter wavelengths. The cinnamon smell grew stronger.

"Good luck, little grubs," she said. "Hope it works out for you."

She headed back into the State Building and then through to the other side of the compound, where a car was waiting for her. She got in without exchanging pleasantries with the driver, and they headed out into the great city where lights were just turning off as the sun rose. High-rises and streets and warehouses and theaters, all of it reminding her of nothing so much as a huge hive.

At the university, she walked herself from the parking structure to the Pen. Cortázar was sitting on a bench outside the windowless cube, a cup of coffee in one hand and a corn muffin balanced on his knee.

He smiled to her as she came close. "Beautiful morning, isn't it?" he said.

He had dark eyes. His cheek was brown, stippled by white stubble where he hadn't shaved. He looked like someone's chemistry professor, not a monster.

“We should get to work,” she said.

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Chapter Thirty-Five: Naomi

For all Naomi's life, the problem had been knowing which information to believe. A few billion people with access to networks and as many newsfeeds as there were transmitters made it easy to find someone loudly declaiming every possible opinion in every corner and niche of the solar system. And once the repeaters were up, information came to and from the distant worlds beyond the gates with a light delay of only hours. To understand her new reality, she had to find models in ancient history, when the living voice or marks on physical media were the only means of storing and moving information. Ancient North America had used something called the pony express. A series of carts and animals that hauled written information across the then-vast deserts. Or that was how she understood the process, never having seen a pony or a handwritten letter on paper. Now the ponies were ships and torpedoes, the letters were compressed data bursts, and the deserts were the hard vacuum of space and the emptiness of the gate hub at its center. The effect, though, was that news of the far worlds came unreliably. The events on Auberon and in Auberon system took on an exaggerated importance because she knew about them immediately. Anything going on in Bara Gaon or Laconia or Sol, Freehold or New Cyprus or Gethen, became foreign and exotic by being rare. The discovery that "two gates lost" meant that the Thanjavur and Tecoma gates had been destroyed and the systems behind them stranded only added to the sense of vast things happening, far away. The universe had expanded again, and all the things that had been close were once again much more distant. The reports that did come through were precious as air on a leaky ship.

And so, when word came from Sol that the *Tempest* was dead, it felt like a revelation.

It didn't come from underground sources. Bobbie hadn't sent a report, or if she had, the bottle had been lost in transit or slowed to the point that the civilian news outpaced it. The first Naomi heard of it was on Laconian state feeds run by the governor. The tone of the report was outraged and meant to inspire fear. Terrorists had murdered a Laconian diplomat and stolen military technology which they'd then used to slaughter the protector of Sol system. The danger of chaos and riot in Sol system were, to listen to the feed, apocalyptic. Laconian forces were gearing up to protect innocent civilians from the waves of reprisals and violence that were sure to follow.

Probably it had sounded persuasive to Laconian ears. The bone-deep assumption that all things Laconian were good and all opposition evil made for a hell of a blind spot when it came to writing propaganda. For Naomi and Chava it was the resolution of an uncertainty they'd been carrying. They knew now how Bobbie's plan had worked out. For all the others in between—the normal citizens of Auberon—the message was that the unstoppable Laconian machine could, in fact, be stopped. *Had been* stopped. The certainty that had come with imperial rule had a crack in it wide enough to drive a ship through. And like all good news, it brought a list of new problems with it. Good problems, the problems Bobbie and Naomi had been hoping for, but problems all the same.

"Five years of shipping records deleted," Chava said. "Wiped out."

"And it wasn't us?"

"It wasn't anyone I'm aware of," she said, pouring out a cup of coffee. "You know the network better than I do, but . . ."

"It just means that they'll load it from backups," Naomi said, taking the cup. She'd gotten used to Chava's French press coffee. It was strong and bitter and occasionally carried a bit of the coffee grounds in it. She found she was starting to prefer it to the normal ship-dispensed kind. "So it sounds like someone managed to get access to the backup. Put in whatever they want history to have been, and now it's the official record."

“That’s what I was thinking. Might be one of our cells acting independently. Or civilians taking initiative. Or criminals. Hell, it could be Laconians using the opportunity to hide something they did and blame it on us. No matter who it is, though, they weren’t confident enough to risk it before, and now they are. And what’s happening here? Some variety of it is going on everywhere else too.”

Decentralized authority was what Belters had done since the start, generations ago, when the power to communicate orders outdistanced the power to enforce them. Old Rokku, back in her radical days, had talked about the inners being like a sword that hit in one place hard enough to destroy. The Belt was like water, able to push in from all places at once. The death of the *Tempest* hadn’t actually changed anything for the systems outside of Sol. It wasn’t like Duarte had been willing to send his planet-killer warship to follow up on suspicious data loss. What had changed was the confidence people had in the system, and that uncertainty created new holes, cracks, and opportunities.

Laconia was powerful because it had a single vision, and one brilliant mind behind it all. The underground, like the OPA before it, probably had as many visions as there were people in it, and even as the titular leader, Naomi’s was only one of many voices. Duarte’s machine was limited. With enough going on at any given time, his attention could be flooded. That was his weakness and their power.

“New contacts are coming in too,” Naomi said. “I’ve had reports on almost a dozen since the first report came in.”

“That’s a good sign. People feel the tide turning.”

“Some of them do,” Naomi agreed. “And some of them have other agendas. I’ve spent months figuring out how to get our people hired on by their managers. They’re capable of doing the same thing to us.”

“I’ll be careful,” Chava said. “Background checks, surveillance on new recruits, test assignments. The whole show. I won’t let anybody sneak in the aft airlock.”

“You will, though,” Naomi said. “Test the people you trust too. Make it random. And make it so that someone can keep eyes on you. It’s like

checking the seals on your suit. Everyone checking everyone should just be normal. And be ready for the crackdown. Because it's coming."

Chava sipped her own coffee and nodded. "I wish you were staying. I mean, it will be nice to be able to invite my friends over to my place again, but . . . I've enjoyed having you here."

"Even though it risked getting you killed?"

Chava was one of those people who could frown with just her forehead. "Maybe because of that. I think I'm too much of an adrenaline junkie to survive as a ship rental manager. If it wasn't this, I'd be slingshotting on my vacations."

Naomi finished her coffee, put down the white porcelain cup for the last time, and hugged Chava goodbye. Naomi's belongings were in a tight-wrapped bag by the door. They fit easily under her arm. She looked around Chava's rooms one last time. The kitchen, the common area, the passage to the bedroom that had been hers for really not so long a time. Still, long enough for everything to change at least twice.

The knot she felt in her chest wasn't sorrow at leaving here. She liked Chava, and it was a pleasant space to be in, but it wasn't home. What she missed was the idea of a home of her own. People she knew for more than a few weeks at a time. It was worse, because she'd had a place once. And a family with it. She would never stop missing that.

The transport tubes on Auberon's lunar base ran cars every seven minutes, and the signs and directions were clear and well designed. It wasn't hard getting from Chava's place to the docks, or from the docks to the skiff taken out in a false name tied to an imaginary corporation and insured with a policy that would never be used.

Auberon was a target, and not only because it was a successful colony. Any Laconian traffic analysis of the bottles the underground used was going to show high throughput on the Auberon gate. With the *Tempest* dead, there would be a response, and neither she nor Chava nor any of her other high-level contacts doubted that part of that response would come to Auberon. And the best way to survive an asteroid strike was not to be on the planet.

While she waited for the traffic control queue to reach her, she opened a window and called up the visual telescropy on the planet below her. Another blue marble in the void. The wide whirl of a hurricane covered part of an ocean she'd never see. The scattering of continents across the visible hemisphere below her was like dice thrown in a backroom craps game. A vast, beautiful sphere with so few people on it. Cities with universities full of students who'd never known a different sky. She doubted she'd ever see it again, and so she watched and told herself to remember. There were so many last times that passed unrecognized. Knowing in the moment what was ending and wouldn't come again was precious.

The connection to traffic control went live. "Skiff eighteen forty-two, your transit to Bara Gaon is approved. You are clear to exit."

"Acknowledged, Control. Releasing the clamps now."

The little ship, light as an empty food can, shuddered when the docking clamps let go, and Naomi opened the throttle on the drive. The image of Auberon grew a little smaller, and a little smaller, and a little smaller until she closed it down. The moment was over.



The skiff was a tiny little thing, too small and undistinguished for a name. A transponder code, a number, and a perfunctory paper trail. It was as cramped as a racing ship, but without the maneuverability or high-end crash couch. It was intended for in-system trips, usually between planets in similar orbits. Taking it into the depths of the system, through the ring, and then back down some stellar gravity well meant traveling well outside its intended use. Naomi didn't find it intimidating. She'd gone much farther in much worse in her life. After a few days' hard burn, she went on the float.

She spent the hours double-checking the system, such as it was. Making sure the air mix was where it should be, the reactor bottle, the water tanks. Knowing everything about her little bubble of air and life was comforting. If she caught a micrometeorite, it would be too late to learn, so she did it now. Prepare for the worst and be pleasantly surprised. The skiff didn't

have a gym, but she still had her resistance bands from her life in the shell game. She could adapt. She always did.

She also found herself imagining conversations with Saba and with Jim and Bobbie and Alex. There were strategic decisions she was going to have to make. Bobbie's victory put Duarte on his back foot.

With only a single *Magnetar*-class ship left, there was a chance for the underground to drive Laconia into a purely defensive posture. Even restrict it to its own system. It would mean making a real and credible threat on Laconia itself, but it was possible. But it wasn't enough.

There had been a time when the Transport Union and the governments of Mars and Earth had expected Laconia to be like any other colony world: struggling for base survival and aiming for self-sustaining agriculture sometime in a generation or so. But Duarte had taken the protomolecule with him along with the expertise to use it, and he'd found the construction platforms that could build ships like the *Tempest* and the *Storm*. And apparently a way to create and bottle antimatter. A threat wasn't enough. She had to find a way to break that manufacturing capacity. If Laconia fell, it had to fall hard. It had to know that its dream was over, that it wasn't exceptional. Once it was broken down to the same level as other worlds, it could be brought back. Reintegrated. Because that was the trick. That was the deep lesson of the Belters and the inner planets. The OPA and the Transport Union.

It was the single central argument that the universe had made to her through her whole life, and she was only now seeing it clearly: Wars never ended because one side was defeated. They ended because the enemies were reconciled. Anything else was just a postponement of the next round of violence. That was her strategy now. The synthesis of her arguments with Bobbie. The answer she wished they'd found together, when they were both alive.

Once she reached Bara Gaon—the other major success among the colony worlds—she'd have to get a sense of what warships she could muster and the transit times. If there was a way to lure Duarte's forces out

away from Laconia system and then push in when their home fleet was spread thin, there might be a way.

She was still thinking about that, imagining what Saba or Bobbie or Jim might think, when she started the braking burn. The bottle from Sol system passed through the Auberon gate just a few hours after that. The skiff captured the encrypted data, just the way Chava's system would do back on the planet's moon. It took half a day to finish unpacking, so hours passed before she heard Alex's voice again and knew what they'd lost in order to win.

He looked . . . not older. He didn't look old. Or tired. She'd seen him look tired before. He looked diminished. Like the grief had taken some of the color from his eyes.

"So it turns out I'm done here," he said in his private message to her. "I got this young guy I been training up should be able to take over. We're headin' for . . . our little dry dock. You know the one." Even in three layers of encryption, Alex wouldn't say the word *Freehold*. "When we get there, I'm stepping out. I thought I might go check on the old girl. Make sure nothing's been makin' a nest in her. After that, I don't know. I guess that's your call, since you're running the show now. I don't want to take her out unless you're good with it. You and me are the only ones left now. So. Yeah. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to let Bobbie go."

"Don't apologize to me," Naomi said to the screen. Her tears made lenses over her eyes. "Oh, sweet man, don't apologize for this."

But the message was done, and the passage through the ring gate was almost upon her. She passed into the slow zone with a heaviness that didn't have anything to do with the rate of her change of velocity.

It was her first transit since they'd lost Medina. And Saba. And the model of human civilization that she'd understood. The station at the center of the ring was glowing bright as a little star, still shedding the energy it had absorbed from the gamma burst. The surface of the ring space, which had been a featureless blackness, danced with twisting auroras that were weirder and more threatening than the dark had been. What scared her more, though, were the ships.

She had expected the space to be empty. After everything that had happened, she'd thought traffic between the gates would be close to nothing. She'd been wrong. Her little skiff picked up transponder signals for almost two dozen ships, and drive signatures for more than that. The Laconian directive that the ring space be kept clear was being ignored on a scale she hadn't understood, and the raw danger of it took her breath away. With no Medina Station to control the passages, the chances of going dutchman were much worse than they should have been.

She'd made her transit in distraction and ignorance, and she could have vanished and never known why. And that was assuming that the event that killed Medina and the *Typhoon*, that had destroyed two of the gates in the network, hadn't changed the rules. If the threshold for vanishing was different now, they wouldn't know. Not without testing it.

Maybe it was the need for supplies on the vulnerable colonies or the chance to deliver goods without paying the union. Maybe it was that humanity, given freedom, forgot about the prospect of consequences. Whatever the drive, it took her breath away. It was such a shock that she didn't notice at first that two of the ships were Laconian warships like the *Gathering Storm*, or that they were burning toward her. In the mess of the traffic and her own internal chaos, she didn't see that until the skiff got the connection request from the *Monsoon*.

Her system had the software to disguise her voice and appearance, and she checked five different times that it was running before she accepted the request.

"This is Chief Petty Officer Norman of the *Monsoon*," the man on the screen said. "You are in violation of quarantine. Please leave the ring space immediately." His voice had the irritated singsong of someone reciting a hated ritual.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to. It's just that my brother's sick. I was supposed to be back to him weeks ago. I don't have any contraband, I swear."

"I don't care where you go," the Laconian said. "Just get out of here and stay out. There will a permanent force in here soon, and this kind of thing

will get people shot. Be somewhere else when that happens.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “I’ll transit out right away, sir.”

The connection dropped. They were swamped. More than that, they had ships in the slow zone that weren’t stopping to control the space. That meant they either understood the risks and were keeping their exposure to a repeat of the catastrophe that had killed Medina Station and the *Typhoon* to a minimum or they had bigger fish to fry or both. And, she saw as she tracked their courses, the Laconian destroyers were heading for Auberon.

“You came close,” she said softly, “but no cigar.”

The Bara Gaon gate was on a secant that cut her passage through the ring gate to almost half what the maximum distance would have been. The gate wasn’t quite where the navigation system expected it to be. The loss of the Thanjavur and Tecoma gates had shifted all the others just the smallest bit, but enough to make the software care about it. She went to correct the course manually . . . and paused.

My brother’s sick, she thought. And so am I.

She corrected the skiff’s course, aiming it for Freehold. And for home.

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Chapter Thirty-Six: Teresa

The day Teresa finally broke began like most days now. With a nightmare.

She had been awake until the small hours of the morning, watching old movies and entertainment feeds that she'd seen before. Trying to squeeze comfort out of them because they were familiar. Knowing what was going to happen before it happened made the stories feel very safe. Not at all like her real life. She stayed awake as long as her body would let her. And when she could stay awake not one moment longer, the dreams came for her all at once, like they'd been waiting for her. Like they were hungry.

There were three main varieties. In the first, she was in a strange part of the State Building, and her father—or sometimes her mother—was in a room nearby being killed, and she could stop it if she found the right doorway. In another, the planet Laconia had gotten a disease of some kind and bits of the land had started falling down deep into the burning core. Nothing was stable and nothing was safe. The third was formless and violent, less a dream than variations on Ilich's murder of Timothy.

Each version came regularly enough that she'd begun to recognize them. The dreams had even started commenting on it. As some new terror reared its head, she'd think *It's just like in my dreams, only now it's really happening*. It made the nightmares worse because it made them feel inevitable. Her waking hours were poisoned by them. The violence and fear and loss could spill out at any moment, from any place, and nothing could be relied upon.

It was terrible because it was true.

She woke after not enough sleep to the gentle tapping of a servant and Muskrat's excited bark. Breakfast was a favorite meal for the old dog. Maybe every meal was.

The servant brought in a white ceramic tray with a plate of eggs and sweet rice, a glass of watermelon juice, and a sausage with the dark, grainy mustard that she liked. Or that she had liked. Food wasn't something that interested her now. Not the way it used to. She stirred the sweet rice and watched the official newsfeeds talking breathlessly about the Laconian ships offering assistance to local governments in the ongoing fight against separatist violence. Images of men and women in Laconian formal blues talking seriously with the governors of Earth and Mars. She wondered if anyone believed that. She wondered whether she had.

She knew that if she didn't eat, her failure would be reported to Trejo. It had happened before. She took a bite of egg, but the rubbery texture of the white made her gag. The rice would be enough. It had to be. She hadn't been able to get more than half of her dinner down the night before. She knew that starving wasn't good for her, and that Ilich and Trejo wouldn't like it. That was part of why she did it. She took a spoonful of the rice, sucked away the thick, sweet sauce, and spat out the grains. On her screen, Admiral Gujarat was talking about the completion of the *Whirlwind*, the newest *Magnetar*-class ship, as if it weren't the only one. As if the first two weren't already dead.

She picked the sausage up. The smell of grease and salt was repulsive. She couldn't see it as anything but a slurry of dead animals in a thin membrane. She tossed it to Muskrat. Instead of wolfing it down, her dog looked from the scrap to her and back again and whined.

"You might as well," Teresa said. "I wasn't going to eat it before. I'm certainly not going to now."

Muskrat swung her wide tail twice, uncertainly. She ate the sausage with something that looked like shame. Teresa's numbness slid away for a moment, and tears came to her eyes. The State Building was filled with people from every system in the empire. She had people whose only duty was to cook her food, to educate her, to see that her clothes were cleaned

and put away. Nobody had the job of actually caring about her. The only one who even noticed her was a dog.

A voice spoke in the back of her head, as clear as if there had been someone in the room. It sounded like her own, but calmer. Drier. Somehow more adult than she thought of herself, like some later Teresa sending a stray observation back through time. *Muskrat likes Holden.*

The voice didn't go on. Teresa looked down at Muskrat's complicated brown eyes, and the sorrow lost its edge.

"You may have shitty taste in friends," she said. "Sorry, dog."

Another tap came at her door, and she didn't need to open it to know it was Ilich. She stirred her food to make it look like she'd eaten more than she had and let the door open. As soon as he saw her, his smile faltered.

"I know," she said, before he even spoke. "It's very important that we maintain the image that everything is normal. You tell me that every day." She stood up and put her arms out to the side. "This is normal. *I'm normal!*"

"Of course," he said with a practiced smile that meant he just wasn't going to fight her. "Your peer class is going to start soon. Dr. Okoye is going to be leading it today so that I can meet with Admiral Trejo."

So that I can do something more important, he meant. Even if he didn't say the words, Teresa heard them. Muskrat huffed and wagged her tail, anticipating the adventure of leaving her rooms. Teresa shrugged and walked toward the door, daring Ilich not to step aside. He stepped aside.

The State Building was the same as it had ever been. The archways, the colonnades, the gardens. Nothing about it had changed. It was her home and her kingdom. And somehow they'd made it into her cell, Ilich and all the others too. She was honored and revered and treated with total deference if she did what she was told, when she was told. Her opinion was listened to with seriousness and gravity, and then ignored. She stalked toward the lecture room, wondering what would happen if she marched in, took the microphone, and shouted *My father is brain-dead and nothing is all right*. It was enough to make her smile.

As it turned out, though, the fantasy wouldn't have worked. The lecture room had been rearranged for the day—six slate-topped tables stood in

rows of three. The other students—her so-called peers—were already there. Apparently Ilich had come because she'd run late and hadn't noticed.

The room stank of something deep and caustic. Air recyclers were set up in all the windows, scrubbing whatever the volatiles were out and blowing fresh air back in. Small trays sat on each table, two each, with a variety of scalpels, tweezers, pins, and thin scissors laid out between them. Elvi Okoye was walking among the students, leaning on her cane, and chatting as she went. Teresa felt her anger shift again. She was supposed to be fixing Teresa's father, not teaching classes to a bunch of kids. But, of course, Teresa wasn't allowed to say that. Because that wouldn't look *normal*.

"Good to see you, Teresa," Elvi said, and touched her hand. "I'm glad you're here."

Teresa shrugged and moved away, leaning against one of the tables. Now that she was close, she could see the bodies spread out in the trays and held down with pins. Dead animals. Dead as Timothy. Dead as her mother. Dead as all the people in the ring space.

"So today Colonel Ilich wanted me to, um, give you all a little introduction to parallel evolution. So what we have here are two different species from two different trees of life. One of them is native to Laconia, and the other one's from Earth. They're both called frogs because they fill the same ecological niche and because they have some similarities in anatomy. So, yeah. Get in groups of three, I guess? And I'll walk you through the dissections."

Teresa looked at the frogs. They both had pale bellies and darker skin, though the one she recognized was considerably darker. The rear legs folded differently, and one had two forelimbs to the other's four. From where she was standing, the thing they had most in common was that they were dead. She took a scalpel between her fingers, considering the blade, and wondered whether she'd be able to cut the bodies open without vomiting. The upside was she didn't have much in her belly to puke up. So that was fine.

“Hey,” Connor said. She hadn’t seen him come up, but here he was. Sandy hair and soft eyes. She remembered caring what his opinion was. She remembered wanting to kiss him like it was in a film she’d watched, and not something she’d felt herself.

She pinched the flat of the blade between her fingers and held the handle out to him. “Want to cut?” she asked. He took it and looked away, uncomfortable. That was fine. Shan Ellison made up the third of their group. When all the rest had formed up, Elvi Okoye opened a volumetric display with an image of two idealized frogs to match the ones on their trays.

“Okay,” Elvi said. “So one of the things that we see in both Laconia and Earth biomes is water. And there are animals that have found an advantage to living part of their lives in the water and part out. We call them amphibians. Both of your frogs are amphibians. And because water is chemically identical in both worlds, and the adult forms that we have here need to breathe air, there are some problems they both faced as they evolved. Some solutions look very similar, and some of their strategies could not have been more different. So let’s start with looking at the Earth frog’s lungs. Each team should make the first incision right here—”

Slowly, step by step, they began unmaking the frogs. Despite herself, Teresa found the process interesting. The way the Laconian frog cycled water in and out of its chest cavity to do the work that the Earth frog did with a diaphragm. The way the feeding mechanisms—mouth and esophagus for the Earth frog, chambered mouth and gut for the Laconian—served the same functions in different ways. She felt like it was all telling her something deeper than just biology. Something about herself and the people around her. Something about whether she could ever belong.

She realized she had been drifting off when Connor spoke to her again. His voice was quiet and tentative. “My mom.”

Teresa glanced up at Elvi. She was across the room, talking to one of the other groups.

“What about her,” Teresa asked.

“I was just saying that my mom, she’s . . . You know. She watches the newsfeeds. With everything that’s going on.”

He glanced at her, and then away like he was shy. Like he was saying something shameful. Shan Ellison didn’t speak, but watched with the intensity of someone expecting violence. It felt illicit and strange, like he’d said the first part of some password, and she didn’t know the rest.

Then, a heartbeat later, she did. He was asking her to tell him something reassuring. His parents were scared. He was scared. And because they were in peer class together, and she was her father’s daughter, he wanted her to tell him that everything was going to be all right. That she, knowing what she knew, wasn’t afraid and that he shouldn’t be either.

She licked her lips and waited to see what would come out of them.

“She shouldn’t spend too much time on them,” Teresa said. “I know everything looks really scary, but it’s not that big a problem. Dad has the best minds in the empire working for him, and they’re learning more every day. Everyone always knew there’d be setbacks.”

“Yeah,” Connor said. “Everyone knew.”

So she’d lied. That was interesting. She’d told him what he wanted to hear, and it wasn’t even because she wanted to protect him or keep him safe. It was just easier. She understood now why adults lied to children. It wasn’t love. It was exhaustion. And she was like them now. They’d eaten her.

“Are you okay?” Shan asked, and it seemed like her voice was closer than she was. Like the girl wasn’t talking from across the table, but whispering into Teresa’s ear. It sounded soft and weirdly intimate. *I’m fine*, Teresa said. Only the words didn’t come out.

She had the sense that she needed to leave now. That if she could get a drink of water and lie down for a minute, her breath wouldn’t seem so loud in her ears. She felt herself walking. At the door, someone’s arm appeared beside her, startling her. It was her own. She moved the hand, fascinated by her control of it married with the absolute emotional certainty that it wasn’t her arm.

Elvi Okoye was there too, like something from a dream. She said something, asked something, but before Teresa could answer, she'd forgotten what it was.

I wonder if I'm dying, Teresa thought, and the idea wasn't unpleasant.



For a while, Teresa lost herself. A flurry of sensory impressions—voices, movement. Someone was touching her hands and her neck. A bright light shone in her eyes. When she came back, she was lying down. The room was familiar, but until she heard voices she knew, she couldn't quite place it.

"I'm not drawing any conclusions," the doctor said. It wasn't Dr. Cortázar. It was her old pediatrician, Dr. Klein. And he was talking to Elvi Okoye. "What I'm saying is she's dehydrated and malnourished. Maybe she got that way because there's some kind of uptake problem. Maybe she's had an allergic reaction to something. Or her stress levels are so high, she's somaticizing. Or—and I'm just saying maybe here—she's been starving herself."

She was in the State Building's medical wing, on a gurney. There was a line connecting an autodoc to a vein at the back of her hand. When she shifted, she could feel the needle under her skin and the coolness in her arm where it was feeding fluid into her.

"I skipped breakfast," Teresa yelled, and her voice sounded normal again. "It's my fault. It was stupid. I just lost track of time."

They were at her side before she'd finished speaking. Dr. Klein was a youngish man with wavy brown hair and green eyes that reminded her of Trejo. She liked him because he'd given her sweets after her checkups when she was young and because he'd never condescended to her. Now he was looking at the system readout from the autodoc and trying not to meet her eyes. Elvi, leaning on her cane, was ashen. She looked directly into Teresa's eyes, and Teresa stared back.

"It was the frogs," Teresa lied. It came easily. "Between not eating first and cutting them up, I got light-headed."

“Maybe,” Klein said. “But if there is an underlying gastrointestinal issue, we should get on it quickly. There’s some microbial life on Laconia that we’re seeing fungal-model infections with. It’s not something to take lightly.”

“It’s not what’s going on. I promise,” Teresa said. And then, “Could I talk to Dr. Okoye for a minute?”

There was a moment’s hesitation that she couldn’t quite read, like Klein might refuse. But then . . .

“Of course.” He nodded to Elvi. “Major,” he said, and walked away.

When he was out of earshot, Teresa whispered, her voice harsh, “What are you doing bringing him into this? We’re not supposed to be around other people. Dr. Cortázar is my doctor.”

“He’s not a physician,” Elvi said. “His doctorate’s in nanoinformatics. He shouldn’t be practicing medicine any more than I should.”

“But he knows what’s going on. Do you want Dr. Klein asking around about why I’m under so much stress? You want him to figure it out?”

There was a joy to throwing all the things they’d said to her back at them. A delight in seeing Elvi flinch. She watched the woman struggle with something, and then reach a decision. Elvi sat on the end of the gurney, sighing as she took the weight off her leg. She rubbed her hand across her forehead.

“Listen,” she said. “I’m not supposed to tell you this, but you cannot trust Dr. Cortázar. I’m almost positive he intends to hurt you. Maybe kill you.” Then, a moment later, “Probably kill you.”

She felt a wave of vertigo, and the autodoc threw up a warning. It was just that she was hungry. That she needed water, that was all. Teresa shook her head. “Why?”

Elvi took a deep breath and spoke softly. “I think to give a well-known subject to the repair drones and see what they do. He has two others, but he didn’t have the kind of scans and prep work that he has with you. That and . . . he wants what you and your father were going to have. He wants to live forever too.”

Like the frogs, Teresa thought, and fought back cruel, despairing laughter. *He wants to treat me just like the frogs. Nature eats babies all the time.*

Holden had known too. He'd tried to tell her. That was two different people who'd warned her. Two different people who'd discovered the same thing. Elvi was holding her hand. The one that didn't have a needle in it.

"I've been trying to keep him away from you," Elvi said. "But Cortázar's very important. Without him . . . your father's recovery gets a lot harder. Everything gets a lot harder."

"We have to tell Trejo," Teresa said.

"He knows," Elvi said, her voice dark. "I told him. We're doing what we can. But you should know too. You should protect yourself."

"How?"

Elvi started to say something, stopped, started again. There were tears in her eyes, but her voice was steady. "I don't know. I'm in over my head here."

"Yeah," Teresa said. "Me too."

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Alex

You should rest,” Caspar said. “How many double shifts are you now?”
“I don’t know,” Alex said, leaning his back against the galley bulkhead. “But I can’t see that one more’s going to kill me.”

“Isn’t until it is,” Caspar said. “But that’s not even all of it. As hard as you’ve been working, you’re going to start making mistakes.”

Alex scowled at the boy. He knew Caspar hadn’t meant it as an insult. Knowing was what kept him from being angry. Or from showing it at least.

“When you catch me screwing up, I’ll stop taking doubles,” Alex said. “Until then . . .”

Caspar raised his hands in surrender, and Alex went back to his meal. Textured yeast paste and a bulb of water. It was his lunch if he was second shift, breakfast if he was third. So, in a sense, it was both.

The *Storm* had burned hard to get away from Laconian forces, but no one had chased it. No one dared to. To judge from the newsfeeds, most people weren’t sure what they’d done to kill the *Tempest*, and no one wanted to risk that they’d do it again. Which was just as well, because the more they pushed, the clearer it was how much the victory had compromised them.

Every shift found new, unexpected degradations in the *Storm*. Vacuum channels that weren’t transmitting power, regenerative plating that had stopped regenerating, atmosphere leaks so subtle that they couldn’t be located except as the slow and steady loss of pressure. Alex was no engineer, but he’d been on the *Storm* as long as any of them and in space since well before many of them had been born. When he wasn’t sleeping,

he was working to keep the ship together. He stopped when exhaustion promised a fast, deep, and dreamless sleep.

It wasn't the first time he'd used work to keep his emotions at bay. On and off his whole life, there had been times like this when the danger of feeling what he felt was too much to face. Some people got drunk or got in fights or hit the gym until they collapsed. He'd done all those things too, but with the *Storm* as beat up as it was, and the crew as injured and sick as many still were, this was fine. It kept him busy and it kept the ship alive.

Even so, it was imperfect. He knew he wasn't healed, and he suspected he wasn't even healing. The pain came in odd moments. When he was just waking up or going to sleep and his mind wandered. Then, sure. But also when he was crawling through the access spaces looking for a broken line or at the medical bay getting his daily ration of medication to keep the lining of his gut from sloughing off again. It would sneak up on him, and for a few seconds he'd be lost in his own mind, and the oceanic sorrow there.

It was about Bobbie, of course, but it spilled over. In his worst moments, he also found himself thinking about Kit's upcoming marriage. About Holden and that terrible last run they'd had together on Medina when he'd been captured. Talissa, his first wife, and Giselle, his second one. Amos, who was the worst loss in this because he'd just vanished into the enemy lines. Alex might never know what had happened to him. All the families he'd had, and all the ways he'd lost them. It felt like too much to bear, but he bore it. And after a few minutes the worst would pass, and he could get back to work.

The passage through the ring gates into Freehold system went as well as they could have hoped. Alex let Caspar do the heavy lifting. It was going to be his job soon enough, and it was better that he get the practice. They came in hot, bent their trajectory hard for the Freehold gate, and shot back out into normal space. In theory, it was possible to hit a gate from the realspace side at the perfect angle and make the transit through the intervening space in a straight line. In practice, there was usually a little flex, but Caspar did a good job. As good as Alex could have managed. They threw a fast torpedo

at the only thing that looked like a Laconian sensor array, blowing it to dust before they made their last course correction. It was as close to anonymity as they could ask without the shell game.

Freehold itself was a straightforward little system. The one habitable planet was a little smaller than Mars. Then a slightly larger one farther out with an unwelcoming atmosphere, and a series of three gas giants protecting the inner system. The *Storm's* home port was there, in the shadow of the giant they called Big Brother when they were being polite and Big Fucker when they weren't. It was a fraction larger than Jupiter back in Sol, with a blue-green swirling atmosphere and constant electrical storms that created arcs of lightning longer than the Earth was wide. Alex watched it grow close on the *Storm's* scopes, saw the black dot against it that was the rocky moon where they hid. Long-dead volcanism had left lava tubes big enough to land the *Storm* and a small fleet like her under the lunar surface, and that's where they were headed. Toward the permanent base of Belter engineers and underground operatives that Bobbie had called the "pit crew."

The knock at his cabin door was polite. Even tentative. Caspar stayed in the corridor, braced with a handhold.

"Hey," the boy said. "You coming?"

"Where to?" Alex asked.

"Bridge. You got to take us in, yeah? Tradition. A pilot retires, he takes himself to the last port."

"What kind of tradition is that?" Alex said with a chuckle. "I've never heard of it before."

"Made it up," Caspar said. "Just now. Can't turn that down, start your own tradition."

"You can take us in," Alex said. "You need the practice anyway."

"No," Caspar said. "It's you or we just plow the fucking thing into the moon and call it done."

"You're a shit liar," Alex said, but unbuckled himself from his crash couch all the same. "You should work on that."

"Just like everything else," Caspar said. And then, "You're really going."

“Yeah,” Alex said. “I really am.”

“You were good.”

“You will be. You don’t need me here.”

He drifted out of his cabin, the light g of the braking burn making “down” a strong suggestion more than a real weight. He headed for the central lift and up to the bridge. As he floated into it for the last time, the rest of the crew braced their feet to stand at attention. Caspar, behind him, began to clap, and the others joined in. By the time Alex reached the pilot’s station, his eyes were damp enough to obscure his display.

“On your order, Captain,” he said.

“Bring us in, Mr. Kamal,” Jillian said.

The actual landing was easy, from a technical perspective. Even as injured as it was, the *Storm* knew where the walls around it were, and where the encrustation of human structures would be. Alex felt a great weight falling away from his heart. The custom docking clamps they’d made back when the *Storm* was a recently captured prize of the war slid home with something between a sound too low to hear and a shudder.

“Welcome back, reisijad,” the Belter-inflected voice said over the comms. “Looks like you fucked your ship pretty good?”

“It’ll give you lazy fuckers something to do,” Jillian said, the way Bobbie would have. Same inflection and all. It seemed right in a way Alex couldn’t quite describe that the girl had paid so much attention to how Bobbie ran things. Even when they were gone, the next generation up would keep echoes of them.

The shuttle to Freehold was a single-hulled transport called the *Drybeck*. It had begun its life as an ore hauler and been retrofitted sometime in the last twenty years. The company that had owned it had a color scheme of green and yellow, and the ghost of its logo still haunted the bulkheads on the bridge. Its drive was small and touchy, prone to stutter when the burn changed, and limited by a tiny reaction mass tank. The hold was lined with crash couches, and the half dozen of the crew most compromised by the death of the *Tempest* were coming home more as cargo than companions.

The long fall down from the gas giants passed through the area that would have been the most trafficked space in Sol system. Hundreds of ships would have moved between Saturn and Jupiter and the inner planets. Maybe half a dozen did the same in Freehold. Alex plotted the course with a growing sense of the emptiness of the system that mere decades couldn't fill. It was too big. All of it was too big. He'd been there from the beginning, been part of blazing humanity's trail to the stars, and he still couldn't quite get his mind around how vast the spaces were.

He was surprised when, a few minutes before departure, Jillian came to the little bridge and sat in the couch beside his without buckling in.

"You coming down with us?" Alex asked.

Jillian looked at him for a long moment without speaking. She looked older than he thought of her as being, as if taking command, even for so short a time as this, had aged her.

"No," she said. "The family wants to see me, and I'd like to see them too. But there'll be time for that when the war's over."

I admire your optimism, Alex almost said, but the darkness was too much. He didn't want to bring her down with his own skepticism. Instead, he nodded and made a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat.

"There's a fast crawler waiting for you in port," she said. "It's got enough water, fuel, and starter yeast to get you going."

"That's good of you. I appreciate it."

"It's not altruism. Your ship," she said. "It's old, but it's a gunship. Still better than most of what the underground has burning out there."

"Maybe," Alex said. "It could also be a nest for whatever birds live in the desert down there. That's part of what I'm going to find out."

"When you do, you reach out. The only people who fly solo are slingshotters and assholes. You got to have someone with your back."

The comms clicked up. The shuttle was clear to leave. All Alex had to do was respond. He put the message on hold.

"What are you saying?" he asked.

"We're not done," Jillian said. "Not just that, we're winning. Underground is going to need every ship it can get, and yours would be a

good one to have on the team. If you need a crew for her, you tell me. I'll get you one."

Alex didn't know what to say. The truth was, he didn't have a plan except to get back to the *Rocinante*. But she was right. There was going to be an after. An after Bobbie. An after Amos. An after Holden. Whatever he was doing, he wasn't going out there to die. Just to recover.

"I'll let you know what it looks like," he said. "We'll make a plan."

Jillian stood and held out her hand. He shook it without unstrapping.

"It's been good," Jillian said. "We've done good work."

"We have, haven't we?" Alex said.

After she left, he went through one last systems check. Flying single-hulled ships was a kind of gambling he usually avoided, but even if he hit a micrometeorite, they'd probably survive it. Anyway. Life was risk.

He flipped the comms back on.

"This is *Drybeck*," he said. "I am confirming clearance to launch."

"You're still clear, *Drybeck*," the voice on the other end of the connection said. "Not blowing nothing up, and no one floating out there to run into. Ge con Gott, yeah? Draper Station out."

Draper Station, Alex thought as he eased the ship through the lava tube on its maneuvering thrusters. It was the first time he'd heard it called that. He didn't hate the sound.



Freehold, like most goldilocks-zone planets, had a wide variety of environments. Freehold's salt deserts were on the same continent as the lush mountains he'd hidden in when they first came and the township that had grown to be a modest city. White dunes and mesas of red stone stretched from horizon to horizon. Tent rocks rose in some places, and knife-thick ridges that could have been artifacts of alien civilizations or just beautiful geology. The dawns were warm pink, and the sunsets were green and gold. Alex didn't know why. At night, the desert sang. High fluting tones as the temperature shift made the sand itself ring like a wineglass.

The fast crawler was mostly autonomous, and it took its navigation from the time and the position of the sun like an ancient sea captain on Earth. There was no signal coming in or going out that would give Alex's position away. The transport's wide titanium-and-rubber treads made the trackless badlands easier to cover than the simplest flight in a ship. The solitude was vast and consoling. He'd expected to feel lonely on the trip, but he wasn't. The effort of being okay around the crew of the *Storm* had, it turned out, been exhausting. He hadn't even known he was making the effort until he didn't have to anymore. He slept in the little bunk in the crawler's belly and spent his days sitting on top of the machine watching the sun and sky and stars and didn't even listen to the music he'd brought with him.

Twice, huge shambling animals with legs like slender trees and coats like yellow moss had walked with him for a while. The second had been with him almost half a day before it cooed three times and turned away. As far as he knew, he was the only human being who'd ever seen them.

He'd wondered more than once why Naomi had chosen to live in a hidden shipping container, but now, here, he thought he understood. The pleasure of being utterly alone made his mourning into something different and strange and humane.

The cave where they'd put the *Roci* was in the western quarter of the desert. He'd picked it because it was near a patchwork of radioactive ore that added a little camouflage if the enemy was looking for it and acted as a landmark for him.

The fears that haunted him now were that the *Roci* wouldn't be waiting for him. That the shelf he'd parked her under had collapsed in his absence. Or that the sealants they'd put on to protect the hull plating had broken down or been compromised by desert animals, exposing a ship built for vacuum to the erosion of wind and sand and salt. As the hours fell away, his anxiety started to grow. The peace of the desert rolled past until the crawler reached the edge of its automatic course and came to a shuddering halt beside a vast outcropping of stone.

Alex took a flask of water and a cloth to tie across his mouth and dropped to the salt-rich sand. The shade under the stone was cool. He followed the tracks of glass where the *Roci*'s thrusters had melted the sand, it felt like lifetimes before.

And there, dark and quiet and perfectly intact at the back of the cavern, was the old Martian corvette. Something had scratched at the sealant—maybe animals, maybe the sandblasting desert wind—but nothing had broken through. It was just his imagination that made him feel like the ship was welcoming him. He knew that. It didn't matter.

It took the better part of a day to cut through the sealing coat and get the airlock answering him, but after that, things moved faster. They'd drained the water out of the tanks before they left, but the crawler's supplies were enough to get the ship almost halfway to capacity. Getting the recycling system back online was harder. He spent half a day checking feed lines before he found the one that had split. And it took another half a day to replace it. It would have taken Naomi or Amos or Clarissa half an hour.

He didn't sleep in the crawler anymore, especially once the *Roci*'s galley was able to turn out a little food. With his limited supplies, the food was spartan and the drinks were water and green tea. The ship was lying belly-down on the ground, everything was at ninety degrees from where his mind wanted it to be, and he had to climb to get to his cabin and his crash couch.

Lost as he was in the work of hauling his old ship back to herself, he could almost pretend he was waiting for his old crew. That they'd be there in the machine shop and the flight deck, laughing and arguing and rolling their eyes like they had before. A week into the effort, he'd exhausted himself and fallen onto his couch without eating dinner. He found himself slipping between dreams and wakefulness, hearing their voices in the hallway. Clarissa's dry whisper and Holden's earnest concern like they were really there, and if he just concentrated, he'd be able to make out the words. The alert tone as the airlock opened and familiar footsteps in the halls.

When the silhouette bent into his doorway, he still thought he was dreaming. It was the sound of a living voice, the first since he'd left

Freehold, that brought him back to himself.

“Hey,” Naomi said.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight: Naomi

Hey,” Naomi said.

Alex shifted in his crash couch, and the hiss of the gimbals was like something made from memory. He blinked at her, confused and sleep drunk.

“No shit?” he said.

“No shit,” Naomi said.

“No, no, no. I just . . . I didn’t know you were coming.” They were simple words. Commonplace. They carried a heavy weight.

Time and tragedy had thinned Alex’s face and darkened the skin under his eyes. His smile was joyful, but it was a bruised kind of joy. The pleasure and delight that could only come to someone who understood how precious they were, and how fragile. She figured that she looked the same.

“I got your message about heading back here, and . . . well, I had some other plans, but the more I thought about it, the more sense coming back to the *Roci* made.”

“Thought about it a lot, eh?”

“Ten, maybe fifteen whole seconds,” she said.

Alex barked out a laugh and hauled himself up. She stepped into the cabin, and they embraced. The last time they’d touched had been on the deep transfer station back in Sol. There had been three of them.

After a moment, they stepped back. She was surprised by how good it felt to see Alex in the familiar environment of the *Rocinante*, even if the ship was ninety degrees from her usual orientation.

“How’d you get here?” he asked, still grinning.

“I have a crackerbox with an Epstein,” Naomi said. “From Auberon to here. It’s not rated for atmosphere, though, so I parked it at the transfer station and hitched a lift down on a shuttle.”

“Planetside again.”

“And my knees already hate it. But I’m in a ship, so it’s not too strange,” she said. “You’re never going to convince me that this whole ‘sky’ thing isn’t fucking creepy. I like my air held in by something I can see, thank you very much.”

“You want a drink? The old girl’s not all the way up to snuff, but she can make you some tea. Maybe even some maté by now, depending on how the recyclers are doing.”

“I wouldn’t say no,” Naomi said, and then, because it felt stranger to leave it unsaid than to say it, “I am so sorry about Bobbie. I cried for a whole day.”

Alex looked down and away. His smile shifted invisibly into a mask of itself. “I still do sometimes. It’ll take me by surprise and it’s like it’s happening again, for the first time,” he said.

“Thinking about Jim does that to me.”

“You should have seen her, XO,” Alex said, and he did something between a laugh and a sob. “Like a fuckin’ Valkyrie, you know? Flying at that big-ass ship like she could take it down by herself.”

“She did. Take it down by herself, I mean.”

Alex nodded. “So did you have a plan now that you’re here?”

He couldn’t talk about it anymore. She understood that. She let the subject drop.

“I was following you,” she said, turning to climb up the deck to the main lift—a corridor for the moment. “Now that Medina and the *Typhoon* are gone, we could actually move between gates again.”

“That does open up some possibilities,” Alex said. “My to-do list has two things on it. First one’s put the old girl shipshape again, and the second’s figure out what to do next.”

“That sounds perfect,” Naomi said. They reached the galley. The tables projected from one wall, but there were built-in jump seats for times like

this. She pulled two of them out. “Let’s do that.”

It turned out that Alex’s first entry gave her days of work to do. He’d gotten a decent start on the re-up process, but the *Rocinante* had been dry for a long time. Probably the longest since she’d been made by a Martian Navy that didn’t exist anymore. A lot of the systems were old, and the newer ones were replacements that didn’t ever fit together quite the way the originals had. There had been a little corrosion in the reactor shielding. Nothing that time and use didn’t justify, but something to keep an eye on. She felt herself falling into a rhythm she hadn’t known existed, and recognized perfectly. Normalcy. This was how life just was, and everything else she’d done, however comfortable she’d been with it, had been the aberration.



Day after day, she and Alex went through the ship, troubleshooting each system as it came back up. A full crew could have done the whole thing in ten hours, and there were only two of them. But they got it done—the reactor up, the comms, the power grid, the thrusters, the weapons. Some maintenance routines assumed there would be teams of four, but they found workarounds. One piece at a time, the *Rocinante* came back to life.

As they worked, she saw some of the ways Alex’s time on the *Storm* had changed him. Whether he knew it or not, he understood electrical systems better than he had before. And he’d learned some tricks about checking the stability of carbon-silicate lace plating that shaved half a day off her estimates.

At night, they slept in their old cabins. She didn’t know whether Alex went through his cabinets, but she went through hers. She’d never had much that she claimed as her own, but what little there was felt like the artifacts of some other, ancient Naomi. It was like coming across a favorite toy from childhood and being reminded of all the half-forgotten experiences that traveled with it. The shirts she’d worn that Jim had liked. The mag boots with the extra strap at the calf that helped stabilize her knee. A broken

hand terminal she'd meant to fix before she went into hiding and hadn't ever gotten around to.

There were other cabins in the ship, with other personal supplies. Things that had belonged to Amos and Bobbie. Maybe even Clarissa. Maybe Jim. The trivial leftovers of a life. She was tempted to go through those too, but she held back. She wasn't sure yet that she'd be doing it for the right reasons, and it turned out that mattered to her.

As soon as the comms were up, the *Roci* started gathering covert communications from the underground. Three bottles had passed through Freehold gate since she'd left her shuttle. One from Sol, one from Asylum, one from Pátria. More would be coming. When she wasn't working, she paged through the information and listened to the reports of the leaders of the underground. Of her underground.

It was a week and a half after her arrival, and Naomi was out, sitting on the desert sand as the sun set. The truth was that as much as she enjoyed complaining about being planetside, there was a kind of surreal thrill to being under a vast dome of air. After an hour or so, she had to go back inside or she started getting anxious. But for that first thirty minutes, it was beautiful. The sunlight seemed to sink into the sand, lighting it from within. And the star field that bloomed above her head was familiar, even if the high air made the steady stars seem to flicker and shimmer.

It felt very strange to be in such a quiet, peaceful, empty place and also the middle of a war.

She heard his footsteps on the sand, soft and regular as an air intake gently cycling. She sat up and dusted the sand from the backs of her arms. Alex was wearing his flight suit, and it hung a little loose on him. Even with his usual beaming smile, he seemed a little deflated. He grunted as he sat on the dune beside her.

"You holding together okay?" Alex asked.

"I'm all right," Naomi said.

"Just asking because you've been spending a lot of time working the *Roci* with me, and then going straight to the reports and newsfeeds when you're done. You haven't taken much downtime."

Naomi felt an old, familiar touch of annoyance, and it was strangely delightful. If Alex had started his mother hen habits back up, it had to mean he was feeling better. Not recovered, maybe never that, but improved.

“Doing the briefings is my downtime.”

“Coordinating a massive resistance to an authoritarian and galaxy-spanning empire is your hobby?”

“I didn’t have an option. We don’t have a golgo table, and . . . No offense? Even if we did, you play like a Martian.”

He chuckled to show he knew it was affection. “Have you got a note back for them? Another bottle to pop out into the systems?”

It was a hard question. Even when she’d had her mind on the panels and wiring of the *Rocinante*, a part of her had been thinking about the grand strategy of the underground. About limiting Laconian reach and power, about taking advantage of the openings left by the enemy’s mistakes.

And about the goal at the end. That was the trick of grand strategy. Knowing where the journey was ending even when you were making up all the individual steps to get there.

Working on the *Roci* had given the insight she’d had on the passage out from Auberon time to season. What had been a vision of a possible future had, while she worked with her hands and taken her mind elsewhere, become a bone-deep certainty. As long as Laconia had the capacity to make ships like the *Tempest* and the *Typhoon*, it could never grow past being an oppressor. The dream of empire could only die if the ancient Martian dream of independence through better technology was put to rest.

An attack on Laconia posed half a dozen unsolvable problems, and Naomi thought she had solutions to at least four of them . . .

“I’ve got some things I should send out. I can bounce a broadcast off the repeaters at Freehold and up to the *Storm*. Even if there aren’t any ships closer to the gate than that, they can get one of their torpedoes going. And if they’ve been doing what they’re supposed to, they’ll have some bottles already on the float near the gates.”

“Lightspeed is way better than the best drive,” Alex said, nodding sagely. “Trying to send a bottle from here would take a pretty long time.

You know, though, there is a way to shave a few seconds off the time it takes to get your messages out.”

She shifted to look at him. The sun was gone, and the rose-and-gray twilight made him look younger. She lifted an eyebrow, inviting him to go on. He looked at her with feigned innocence.

“All we’ve got to do is be a few light-seconds closer, right?”

It hit her with a relief she hadn’t expected. She looked up into the Freehold sky, past it to the stars.

“Right,” she said. “Let’s do that. I’m sick of walking on walls.”

An hour later, they were strapped into their couches on the flight deck. Working the *Rocinante*’s displays was like singing with an old friend as she checked the maneuvering thrusters’ output profiles. The reactor was stable. The thrust was good. Even after its long rest, the *Roci*’s power grid was solid.

“We’re good,” Naomi said. “Take her out.”

“Oh yeah.”

The ship lurched, and the crash couches shifted. Naomi had the familiar sense of motion as they accelerated and then slid out of the cave on maneuvering thrusters only. The deck swung around and down until it was under her, and she sank into the gel as Alex took them higher from the ground.

When the drive kicked in, the whole ship rocked and shuddered, and Naomi felt the prick of the needle and then the coolness of the juice in her veins, keeping her from suffering the worst of the g forces. Alex was grinning like a kid on his birthday as the old gunship rose again for the great emptiness. Naomi watched the external temperature as they rose, the atmosphere growing colder and colder, but also thinner and thinner until there wasn’t enough there to conduct away heat at all. The shuddering stopped, and the only sounds were the ticking of the air recyclers and the occasional harmonic chiming of the drive passing through a resonance frequency. On her tactical display, the planet fell away behind them and they passed escape velocity. They weren’t even in a long orbit of Freehold now. They were on their own. Free.

Naomi shouted, a wide, celebratory yawp. And Alex answered back. She lay back in the couch and let herself just be home. Just for a moment.

The *Roci* was an old ship now. She'd never be state of the art again. But like old tools, well used and well cared for, she'd become something more than plating and wires, conduits and storage and sensor arrays. Old Rokku had said that after fifty years flying, a ship had a soul. It had seemed like a cute superstition when she was young. It seemed obvious now.

"God, I missed this," Alex said.

"I know, right?"

An hour later, Alex put them on the float, and Naomi unstrapped. Freehold system was so empty, there was no traffic control authority. No flight plans or patrols watching for drive plumes without transponders. She started her diagnostics running, but she already knew from the sound of the drive and the taste of the air that they'd come back clean. She moved from station to station, checking the displays and controls as if there were other crew members who might be using them.

She didn't notice the change in Alex's mood until he spoke.

"I tried to keep her alive. I really did. Right at the end, she was out there throwing rounds at that great big bastard, and I was going to take us in. Burn the *Storm* right in there and try to get her back on board. But there wasn't time." His sigh had a shudder in it. "And it would just have fucked things up if I'd done it."

Naomi wrapped her hand around a foothold and braced. She turned to look at him, and this time he met her eyes.

"She was a hell of a woman," Naomi said. "We were lucky to know her."

"The thing I kept thinking all the way out was, *How am I going to tell Kit his Aunt Bobbie's gone?*"

"How did you?"

"I haven't yet. I couldn't stand to when we were in Sol system. And now . . . I still don't know if I can. I miss her. I miss all of them, but . . . but I watched her go, and . . . Shit."

“I know,” Naomi said. “I was thinking about her a lot. I sent the okay for the mission.”

“Oh, Naomi. No. This isn’t your fault.”

“I know that. I don’t always feel it, but I know it. And it’s strange, but the way I comfort myself? I think of all the other ways she could have died. Like oncocidal-resistant cancer. A reactor bottle failure. Just getting old and frail until the antiaging drugs weren’t enough anymore.”

“That’s a little macabre,” Alex said. Then, a moment later, “But yeah. I know exactly what you mean.”

“It was Bobbie,” Naomi said. “She knew we don’t live forever. And if she’d gotten to choose a way to go, I bet this would have been in her top five.”

Alex was quiet for a few seconds, then sniffed. “I miss her every minute of every day, but god damn, it was just so fuckin’ *right*.”

“Going hand to hand with a ship the combined strength of Earth, Mars, and the Transport Union couldn’t beat and winning?”

“Yeah. If we’ve got to die, I guess that’s a pretty good way to go. Still. I’m sorry we’ve got to die.”

“Mortality does suck that way,” Naomi said.

“What would be your way?”

“I don’t know. That’s not what I think about,” she said, surprised that she knew her opinion about what aspect of her own death was important to her. “I don’t care how I go. There are just things I want done first.”

“Like what?”

“I want to see Jim again. And Amos. I want this war over with, and a real peace established. The kind where people can be angry with each other and hate each other and no one has to die over it. That’d be enough.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “That would. I think about Amos a lot. Do you think —”

There was something like a great, soundless pop—a detonation without quite being a detonation—and Naomi fell. Would have fallen if direction still existed. Everything had gone the electric noncolor of eyes pressed too hard in the darkness. Nothingness buzzed around her like an assault.

Somewhere nearby, someone was screaming. It might have been Alex. It might have been her own voice.

The bright void she fell into—falling in all directions at once—had shapes inside the light, jagged and shifting as a migraine halo. She felt something missing in herself, but couldn't tell what it was. That frightened her worse than the suddenness and strangeness of the transition. The sense of absence without an object, of loss without knowing what had been lost. She tried to close her eyes, but nothing changed. She tried to reach out, but there was nothing to reach for. Or with. She couldn't tell whether she'd just fallen into the light or if she'd been falling for hours.

She felt herself slipping into something else. Something like sleep but not sleep, and she resisted by instinct. A deep fear wrapped itself around her, and she held on to it as if it could save her.

And then, without any more warning than had come before, it was over. She was on the *Rocinante's* flight deck. She'd drifted away from her crash couch. Behind her, Alex gagged. She grabbed a handhold and braced. Her body felt wrung out, exhausted. Like she'd been awake for too many days, and the fatigue had seeped into her muscles.

"Did we," she said, and her voice sounded weird in her ears. She swallowed and tried again. "Did we lose time?"

The soft tap of Alex's fingers against a control panel. She closed her eyes, grateful beyond words that the darkness came when her lids fell. A wave of nausea came over her and left again.

"We did," Alex said. "Lost . . . almost twenty minutes."

She pushed off, navigating her way to her couch by long instinct more than thought. She strapped in with a sense of deep gratitude. Alex's face was grayish, like he'd just seen something horrifying.

"That wasn't . . . that wasn't like the other ones," he said. "That was different."

"It was," Naomi said.

Alex checked over the *Rocinante's* status and seemed to take some comfort in it. Naomi was tingling, the pins-and-needles feel of a pinched

nerve, but without a physical location on her body. Like her mind was slowly coming back. It was a deeply unsettling feeling.

“Fucking Duarte,” she said. “Fucking Laconia and their fucking tests.”

“What do you think they did this time?”

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Chapter Thirty-Nine: Elvi

Elvi's hand terminal chimed again. It was past time for her to go, but she couldn't pull herself away. Also, the girl in the glass cage didn't have a chair, and so Elvi had chosen to sit on the floor beside her. The prospect of getting back up with her aching leg wasn't pleasant.

"So," she said, "it wasn't a change in cognition?"

There was a moment of eerie stillness, the off-putting pause that they always seemed to have, and then Cara shook her head. "I mean, it's hard to be sure what it was like really, but I didn't have the feeling of being any different. Except for the library, you know."

The library was what Cara and Alexander—whose nickname in the family had been Xan—called the information that they carried with them after their re-creation by the repair drones. It was, according to them, like knowing things without having to learn them first. Sometimes the information was straightforward, like details about the local environment. Sometimes it was inscrutable, like the fact that substrate-level entities were difficult to refract through rich-light. That was the most interesting example, because Cara understood what the substrate was, and what refraction meant in that context, and the nature of rich-light, but the whole body of knowledge didn't connect to anything. There was no shared context with anything like food or trees or water. Any human knowledge. It was, Elvi thought, like finding a sea turtle who thoroughly understood Godel's incompleteness theorem, but didn't have any sea-turtley application for it.

That kind of cognitive artifact was a large part of why Cortázar had drawn the conclusion that Cara and Xan weren't actually the children they'd been before they were "repaired," but alien technology created using

human corpses. It was a deep question, and one that Elvi struggled with. The children had clearly been transformed. The fact that they weren't aging or developing was evidence enough of that. The blackness of their eyes and the grayness of their skin dropped them straight into an uncanny valley that still made something in Elvi's hindbrain recoil.

But then sometimes when no one was observing them, Xan would put his head in Cara's lap so she could ruffle his hair. It was a moment that primates had been sharing back to the Pleistocene, deeper and more recognizable than mere humanity. Or Cara would crack a joke about something Elvi asked, and then smile almost shyly when Elvi actually laughed. Elvi's opinion shifted on them. Sometimes she was sure they were puppets of inscrutable alien technologies. Sometimes it seemed obvious that Cortázar had built his case that they weren't human just so he could keep them in a cage for a few decades and run tests on them. Elvi wasn't sure if she liked them or if they scared the shit out of her. If they were passing their Turing test, or if she was failing it.

But it was interesting that none of Cortázar's work on Duarte seemed to have resulted in the high consul's getting access to the library, and the weird turning-off of consciousness hadn't broken Cara and Xan the way it had Duarte. There was a clue in there somewhere. She had the dataset. She just needed the right grid to put over it, and the pattern would make sense. She could feel it.

Her hand terminal went off again. This time with a message. Her transport had arrived. She was late for the briefing. She muttered something obscene and started levering herself up to standing. "I have to go."

"We'll be here when you get back," Cara said, and after a pause, Xan laughed. Elvi smiled too. It was silly to treat them like she'd been having lunch with friends and had to go too soon, but there she was. Sometimes she was silly.

She leaned on her cane as she made her way out through the labs to the fresh and open air. Her leg hurt. The regrowth, as simple as it was, was going slowly. Poorly. Faye's new foot was already in place, the skin a little paler and softer, the new muscles still prone to cramp if he walked too

much. But he'd regrown bones and tendons and nerves, and she was still leaning on a cane.

The difference, she knew, was the stress. Fayez was almost ornamental in her present life. He slept in, ate at the State Building, visited with whoever came through the gardens or read books or watched old entertainment feeds. He recuperated. Elvi was diving through Cortázar's data when she wasn't examining Duarte's condition or trying to keep Teresa from being murdered in the name of curiosity or going over her own data from the *Falcon*. She was barely sleeping, and when she did, it was just rolling the dice to see what flavor of nightmare was taking its turn.

There would be a point when it was all too much. When the intrusive image of Sagale with a part of his head missing wouldn't let itself be kicked down the road for her to think about later even one more time. When she'd break. It hadn't come yet, though, so she didn't have to deal with it. She was very aware that she was working on what Fayez called fuck-it-if-it's-not-happening-right-now protocol.

Worse than that, she was coming to a place where she enjoyed the intensity. She had never been under more stress in her life, except maybe once, back on Ilus. Everyone had been going blind, and there were neurotoxin-covered slugs crawling up out of the ground, and alien artifacts coming to life, and people murdering each other over political issues and personal pride. Everything had depended on her talent and the sharpness of her mind. And now it did again. And part of her loved it like it was sugar. Probably not a healthy part.

The driver waiting for her had an umbrella up to shield her from a light, misty rain. He didn't speak. When she got to the car, she leaned toward him. "Let Trejo know I'm on my way."

"I already have, Doctor," the driver said.

Drivers, Elvi thought as they pulled away, were a strange kind of affectation. It would have been easier to have a transport just pick her up and take her without another human involved. Having someone there whose job was to be deferential to her actually slowed things down. An extra layer of processing. Like that pause the children had. She wondered if it was like

a stutter. She had to read up on that. Maybe there was something useful in it.

The State Building was wreathed in mist. The car's heater wasn't quite enough to push back the cold that radiated from the window. Early winter on Laconia—on this part of Laconia anyway—seemed to involve a lot of chilly days and bitter nights. As soon as the sun went down, all the mist would turn into an all-encompassing layer of ice. The local trees had all retracted their leaves. The imported ones had seen all their chloroplasts die out and were in the process of dropping red and yellow and brown remnants.

Inside, the climate was warm and dry, as controlled as a ship's, but the light from the windows was muted and gray. It still smelled like rain. A different servant took her jacket and asked if she wanted a snack or a cup of tea delivered to the briefing room. She said yes out of habit. Her attention was already divided between the past—sitting with the children or alien child-corpse puppet things—and the future—her report and analysis of the most recent mass blackout event. There was literally no room in her awareness for the present.

The briefing room was beautiful. Walls of polished rosewood with a subtle gold inlay, and lights set behind frosted glass that left the place shadowless. Trejo and Cortázar and Ilich were already there, seated around a malachite-topped table. Trejo looked as bad as she felt, and Ilich maybe even a little worse. Cortázar was the only one of them who was bearing up well under the stress. She was pretty certain that was because he didn't care whether any of the rest of them lived or died.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "I'm sure you understand."

"We've all been busy," Trejo said, and either it was a subtle dig or it wasn't. She couldn't tell which. "Regardless, we're all here now. And we have to make a statement about this . . . latest event. What can the high consul say about it? What do we know? Colonel Ilich? Would you like to begin?"

Ilich cleared his throat. "Well, we experienced another event that appears to have simultaneously affected everyone in the system. And by

simultaneous, again, I mean that it appears to have been a single, nonlocal event that happened . . . everywhere. We have reports that it also occurred in at least two other systems.”

Cortázar raised his hand like a kid in grade school, and Trejo nodded at him.

“What happened in the ring space?” Cortázar asked. “Was it the same as in the systems?”

“We don’t know,” Ilich said. “We didn’t have any of our ships in the ring space at the time. There’s some indication that ships in the ring space may have been . . . um . . . eaten, if that’s the term. The same way the *Typhoon* and *Medina* were. But I don’t have confirmation. The event doesn’t seem correlated with anything we did, but we only have an active naval presence in about one hundred and twenty systems right now. If something happened outside of those, we might not know.”

“Seriously?” Trejo said.

“I can’t overstate how devastating it’s been to lose *Medina* Station, sir. Controlling that choke point was the leash we had on the empire. Without it . . .”

Trejo leaned back in his chair, scowling. He opened his hands to Elvi and Cortázar, giving the floor to them. Cortázar didn’t seem to care, but Elvi found herself sitting forward to speak as if she owed the admiral something.

“If I can try to put this all in a wider context?”

“Please do,” Trejo said.

“It’s about the nature of consciousness.”

“That may be a wider context than I was looking for, Major.”

“Bear with me,” Elvi said. “Unless we’re reaching for religious explanations, which I’m not the person to comment on, consciousness is a property of matter. That’s trivial. We’re made out of matter, we’re conscious. Minds are a thing that brains do. And there’s an energetic component. We know that neurons firing is a sign that a particular kind of conscious experience is happening. So, for instance, if I’m looking at your brain while you imagine something, I can guess reliably whether you’re

imagining a song or a picture by seeing if your visual or auditory cortex is lighting up.”

“All right,” Trejo said.

“There’s no reason to believe that a brain is the only structure capable of having that combination of structure and energy. And in fact, there’s a fair amount of evidence that the gate builders had a conscious structure—a brain-like thing—where the material component wasn’t at all the same kind of thing we use. Anecdotally, we’ve found at least one brain-like structure that was a diamond the size of Jupiter.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Trejo said.

“Like we don’t have a steel chamber in fusion reactors. We have magnetic bottles. Magnetic fields that perform the same basic function as matter. The older civilization appears to have developed its consciousness in a form that relied more on energetic fields and maybe structures in unobservable matter than the stuff we made a brain from. There’s also some implication that quantum effects have something to do with our being aware. If that’s true for us, it was probably true for them.

“My thesis—the one I was working on before I came here—explored the idea that our brains are kind of a field combat version of consciousness. Not too complex. Not a lot of bells and whistles, but takes a lot of punishment and keeps functioning. Our brain may actually have a kick-starting effect, so when the quantum interactions that underlie having experiences break down, they’re easier to start up again. Does that make sense?”

Trejo said *Barely* at the same time Cortázar said *Of course*. The two men looked at each other. Elvi felt annoyed at both of them, but she went on.

“So, the scenario that James Holden brought back from the alien station in the ring space was of something systematically destroying the consciousness of the older civilization. Killing it. The previous civilization tried getting rid of systems. Inducing supernovas. That didn’t help. They eventually closed all the gates, and that didn’t fix the problem either, because whatever it was killed them all anyway.

“And that’s where we came in. We found—and I have directly observed—things that we call bullets or scars or persistent nonlocal field effects. Basically a place where whatever hates the ring gates has done something to collapse consciousness on a planet or in a system. Or in all the systems at once. What I suspect—and I don’t have any data for this—is that the enemy figured out how to snuff out all the systems at once, whether the gates were active or not. I believe that our travel through the gates is irritating to these beings. Maybe even damaging in some way. When that damage gets high enough, they react.”

“So when I killed Pallas Station in Sol . . . ,” Trejo said.

“You also hit some weird, aphysical dark god in whatever passes for its nose,” Elvi said. “And they did what you’d expect them to do. If you get sick and a penicillin shot makes you better, then the next time you get sick, you try another shot. Only it turns out we aren’t the same kind of conscious system as the gate makers. We don’t break as easy, and we recover better. What slaughtered their civilization just lost us a few minutes of time.”

“How disappointing for the dark gods,” Trejo said.

“Right? But then they’re not done. Especially, and no offense here, when we start dropping bomb ships into wherever they are. Playing tit for tat. And the way this one *felt* different? Light and shapes instead of that kind of hyperawareness?”

“I did notice that, yes,” Trejo said dryly.

“I believe that the enemy, whatever it is, is experimenting with new ways to break conscious systems. Brains. I think we’re the equivalent of a penicillin-resistant infection, and the last event we experienced was an attempt at tetracycline.”

“And the trigger?” Trejo asked.

“There doesn’t need to be a trigger,” Elvi said, “if the enemy has gone past being purely reactive. Maybe we just convinced them to take us seriously.”

Trejo sank a little as the implications unfolded in his mind.

“Is this new information?” Cortázar said. “I feel we’ve covered this all before. I mean, nothing in this is really new, is it?”

Trejo and Ilich exchanged a look.

“It’s useful to me,” Trejo said, “to have Dr. Okoye’s summary. So yes. Do we have any progress on healing the high consul?”

“It would be helpful,” Cortázar said, “if I could examine Ilich’s castoff. I don’t suppose there’s been any new word on finding it?”

Trejo’s effort to hold his temper was visible. “Before we move on to that, if we could address the health of the high consul?”

“He’s stable,” Cortázar said. “Very stable. Perfectly fine.”

“Improving?”

“No.”

Ilich broke in, his voice tense. “Is there no way we can get him back?”

Elvi wasn’t going to let Cortázar bullshit this one anymore. Either he had a plan he’d been holding back for his own reasons or he didn’t. She leaned forward and put her hands on the desk, palms down, like she was revealing a hand at a poker table. “I don’t see any realistic path toward returning him to his previous state.”

Trejo nodded to her and shifted to Cortázar. “Do you disagree?”

Cortázar squirmed. “His previous state? Probably not. But moving him forward into a new state is much more plausible. Easy, even. And more than that, instructive.”

Trejo went terribly still. A soft tapping came at the door, and the servant came in with Elvi’s snack. She’d forgotten all about it. When the door was closed again and privacy restored, Trejo hadn’t moved. His eyes weren’t focused on anything in the room, and his skin was pale. It took Elvi a moment to understand what she was seeing.

All this time, Trejo had hoped. He’d believed that his leader would return, that the righteous king would rise and retake his throne. Despite everything Elvi had said, the admiral had believed Cortázar could Merlin his Arthur back from madness. She was watching Trejo realize he had just been letting someone play with the corpse. She was someplace between horrified for him and relieved that he’d finally heard what she’d been saying all along.

“All right,” Trejo said. And then again, more slowly, “All right. The high consul is going to have to make a statement all the same. We’ll draft something.”

“We can say that the event was a test,” Ilich said. “The high consul’s elite team has made a breakthrough. A new weapon against the enemy.”

“Or we could tell them the truth,” Elvi said.

Trejo stood, his hands clasped behind his back. The anger and irrationality in his expression were grief. Grief made people crazy. When he spoke, his voice buzzed with barely controlled rage. Not at Cortázar either. At her.

“I don’t think you understand exactly how precarious our situation is here, Dr. Okoye. I have a two-front war with no fronts. This is not a moment to undermine and degrade the confidence of our troops or embolden separatist terror. You have just outlined war on a cosmic scale. I can’t prosecute a battle against your dark gods while guerrillas degrade our forces. We have to unify humanity for this. We have to strike with one will. We can’t afford to fuck around knocking each other’s comm relays down anymore. That is going to get us all killed. Do you hear what I am saying?”

“I do,” Elvi said, and she was surprised by the steel in her own voice. Trejo heard it too. “I’m hearing you say you can’t handle this. You want the fight with the underground over with? Easy to do. Surrender.”

“Your jokes aren’t funny,” he said.

“They aren’t when they’re not jokes.”

Chapter Forty: Teresa

Every night she went to sleep, Teresa thought that maybe the next day would be the one that brought her father back. Like with the story of Pandora's box, all the other fears and nightmares were made bearable by that one hope. Every morning that she woke, there was that sense of possibility that stayed bright as long as she could keep herself from checking in. And then Kelly, her father's personal valet, would tell her that nothing had changed because of course it hadn't. She'd feel let down again, and still, idiotically, stupidly, like a cartoon character with an empty grin, the thought would come up. Maybe tomorrow. Always maybe tomorrow.

His rooms weren't grand. They never had been. A bed frame of natural wood and a thin mattress that he would rest on, even after he'd outgrown sleep. A desk with metal, locking drawers and a screen built into its surface. The only decorations in the place were a picture of her as a child, one of her mother from when she'd been alive, and a simple glass vase big enough for a single flower that Kelly replaced every day. Winston Duarte, high consul and architect of the Laconian Empire, had taken pride in having a simple man's quarters. The greatness of Laconia wasn't in its gaudiness, but in its works. The vastness of the empire's ambition would have made any man seem small. Even him. That was how she thought of it, anyway. What she'd believed.

Now he sat at his desk, his head shifting as if he were trying to follow the flight of insects that only he could see. His hands rose sometimes and then drifted back down like he'd started to reach for something and then forgotten what he meant to do. Kelly had brought her a wicker chair to put beside him. Teresa sat on it, her hands clasped on her knees, watching him for any sign of improvement. Any hope that today might be the tomorrow she kept herself alive for.

“Daddy?” she said, and he seemed to react to the sound. He turned a degree toward her, and even though his eyes didn’t meet hers, something like a smile touched his lips. Kelly kept her father’s hair well combed, but it seemed thinner than she remembered it. Grayer. Greasier. The ancient acne scars on her father’s cheeks made him seem rougher, more worn than he actually was. There was an amazement in his expression, like he was constantly discovering wonders that commanded his attention more than she did.

“Daddy,” she said again, “he’s going to kill me. Dr. Cortázar? He’s going to *kill* me.”

He turned toward her more, his brow taking on a gentle furrow. Maybe he’d heard her, maybe it was coincidence. He reached out his hands to pat at the air around her head the way he did sometimes, only this time she took his fingers in hers, pulling his hands down, pulling his face toward hers. “Are you there? Do you understand what I’m telling you? He wants to kill me. He wants to pin me down and cut me up like those frogs. And no one’s helping. No one even cares.”

She was weeping now, and she hated that she was.

“Come back,” she whispered. “Daddy, come back to me.”

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but only made wet clicking noises. Like meat being moved by a butcher. He frowned for a moment, then looked away toward the window.

“Daddy,” she said again. And then, “*Daddy!*”

He flinched at the sound.

The door opened behind her, and she heard Kelly’s gentle cough. She dropped her father’s hands and wiped her tears away. Not that she could hide the fact that she’d been crying. The best she could do was show that she’d stopped.

“Is there anything I can get you, miss?” Kelly asked. He wore his usual red porter’s uniform. She’d known him forever, since she was a child gamboling down the halls with the puppy who would grow into her Muskrat. He’d brought her tea and served her meals. She’d cared about him the way she cared about doors and pieces of art. As a thing. A function. An object. Now they were in the room together, and she saw him as a person. An older man, as

devoted to her father as anyone could be. As complicit in hiding what he'd become as she was.

"Does he change?" she asked. "Does he ever change?"

Kelly lifted his brows, looking for what to say. His sigh was soft and apologetic. "It's hard to say, miss. There are times he seems to know where he is. Who I am. But that may be wishful thinking on my part."

Her father had drifted back to following his invisible bugs through the air. His forehead smoothed. If he'd heard her at all, understood her at all, he'd been distracted from it. She shifted her weight, and the wicker chair creaked under her.

"I'll come back," she said. "If he changes. If he gets better . . ."

"I will see that they tell you immediately," Kelly said.

She rose, feeling disconnected from the motion. Like she was watching a Teresa-shaped balloon with its string cut. Kelly stepped over to take the chair away as she walked to the door.

"He would be glad to know you came," Kelly said. "I can't say if he knows we're here. But if he did know, he'd be glad. I believe that."

He meant the words as comfort, but Teresa couldn't bring herself to care. She walked out without thanking him or cursing him or doing anything but putting one foot in front of the other until she was out of the private rooms.

The public parts of the State Building where the mechanisms of government went on were as busy and efficient as ever. Like a beehive or a termite hill that was unaware that its queen was dead. No one stopped her or made eye contact. She passed through on the way to her own rooms like a ghost. All she wanted was to lock her doors and crawl into bed and pray for a dreamless sleep that would carry her to tomorrow. Or later. Or at least not now.

But when she got there, her door was open. Colonel Ilich was sitting on her couch. He didn't look up as she came in.

"Where's Muskrat?" Teresa asked.

"She's in the bedroom. You missed your tutorial this morning," he said, his voice pleasant and nonjudgmental and false as a mask.

Teresa folded her arms. "I was with my father."

"I respect that, but your father would want you to perform your duties. All your duties. That includes your education." Ilich stood, pulling himself to his

full height like it might lend him more authority. “And your breakfast.”

“I wasn’t hungry.”

“That isn’t the issue. We are in—”

“Dangerous times,” Teresa said. “A precarious situation. We have to keep up appearances. I know. Everyone keeps *telling* me.”

“Then stop acting like a spoiled little shit and do your part,” Ilich said.

It was fascinating to see his expression when the words were out. She was so used to him being in control, professional, approachable, friendly. The shock widening on his face, and the purse-lipped chagrin. And then the pleasure. Pride, even. It didn’t take more than a few seconds, but it told its own little story.

“You,” he said before she found the words to throw back at him, “are the high consul’s daughter. You are the face of your family. That makes you the stability of the empire.”

“The empire’s fucking wheels are coming off,” Teresa shouted. “Everything’s falling apart. What do you want me to do about it?”

His voice was tight and controlled. “I want you to eat your meals. I want you to show up for your lessons. I want you to project normalcy and stability and calm to everyone who sees you. Because that is your duty to your father and the empire.”

The rage felt like it was lifting her body. She didn’t know what she was going to say. She didn’t have an argument or a stance, only the power that came from being incensed beyond her capacity to contain it.

“But you can spend days running around looking for Timothy? You can have Dr. Okoye come teach because nothing she does is as important as making sure you can finish killing my friends? You aren’t doing your work either, so you don’t get to tell me to do mine. That’s hypocrisy!”

Ilich looked at her, looked deep into her eyes, and he chuckled. He reached out and ruffled her hair like she was Muskrat and he was scratching her ears. It was gentle and humiliating. Teresa felt her rage stutter and die, and a vast embarrassment flood into the place it had been. She wanted the anger back.

“You poor kid. Is *that* what this is about? The spy? You’re mad at me because of him?”

“I’m mad because of everything,” she said, but there wasn’t any power behind it now.

“He wasn’t your friend. He was a spy and an assassin. He was here to kill us. That cave of his? He picked it as shelter for when he set the pocket nuke off. The mountain was a landmark for his evacuation team.”

“That isn’t true.”

He took her arm just above the shoulder. His grip was tight enough to pinch. “You missed your tutorial this morning. We’ll make it up now. You need to learn something.”

The security offices of the State Building were familiar to her. They were offices like any other branch’s, except for the occasional reinforced door and blast-resistant lock. There were cells there for political prisoners, though she didn’t know if anyone was in them besides James Holden. The forensics lab, however, was new. It was a wide room with a high ceiling and movable partitions that could seal off a section and keep its atmosphere separate. Fume hoods with waldoes and blast-resistant glass lined one wall. The tables that filled the center of the room had aisles between them wide enough for specialized tool carts—chemical, biological, electronic, computational—to be wheeled to wherever they were needed. Half a dozen people stood at the workstations. And on them, Timothy’s things. The carved wood tools. The cot. The cases and boxes that had been his. Even one of the repair drones that had apparently been damaged somewhere in the violence lay on a table, the size and rough profile of a dead animal.

Ilich cleared the room so they would be alone. The technicians left, trying not to be obvious in the ways they stared at Teresa. She saw the curiosity in their faces. What was the high consul’s daughter doing there? What did it mean? The weight of their interest was like a hand on her shoulders, pressing down.

When they were alone, Ilich put her on a technician’s stool and brought a data storage core over. She recognized it from Timothy’s cave, though she hadn’t thought about it much at the time. Ilich synced a monitor, pulled up a file directory, and stepped back, gesturing to it as if to say, *Go ahead. Look.*

Teresa found she didn’t want to.

“Start with the notes files,” Ilich said. “Let’s see how much Timothy was your friend.”

The notes were dates and times. At first, she didn’t see any pattern in them, but the notations with the entries had a security note from the forensic tech. When she opened it, Timothy’s entries matched the security logs for those dates. He’d been watching the State Building’s guards. Working out their patterns and habits. Looking for a hole. And he’d been tracking James Holden. Those records were more scattered, because Holden had less of a pattern. He’d drifted through the buildings and gardens as he saw fit, and Timothy—Amos, his name was Amos—had marked every time Holden came in sight of his watching post on the mountain.

Once she’d gotten through the notes file, she didn’t stop. She opened a tactical maps file and recognized the architecture of the city, of the State Building. A series of files showed blast radii of a small nuclear device. If it were planted at the wall. If it were set off in the city. If it had been smuggled into the State Building. Each one had notes speculating on deaths, on infrastructure degraded. She opened a file called “evacuation protocol.” Topographical maps showed a primary evac site close to where she’d met him the first time and a secondary a day’s hike away, with notes Timothy—Amos—had added about what parts of the visible defense grid would have to be taken out for each site to be practical.

Here is how he would have killed us. Here is how he would have left. Here is the man he came to save, here are the people he came to destroy. She waited for the rage to come back. She expected it. Instead, she thought of James Holden. *If he said he was your friend, then he was.*

“Do you see now?” Ilich said. “Do you see what he was?”

All these plans to kill her and her father. To slaughter them all. *You should lie down on the floor there. Flat as you can. Put your hands over your ears, okay?* Were those the words you said to someone you wanted to kill?

“I understand,” she lied. “I do.”

Ilich shut off the monitor. “Then we’re done here.”

He took her arm again and led her away. She hadn’t seen him order up food, but when they got back to her rooms, it was waiting for her. A thick, white protein slurry like they fed to sick people. A steak of vat-grown meat

seared black at the surface and warm pink in the center. Eggs. Cheese and fruit. Sweet rice with flakes of dried fish. It was all on a metal tray with a fork and dull knife. Muskrat trotted in, but caught the sense that something was wrong. When Ilich held his hand out, offering to scratch her ears, she ignored him and went to sit on Teresa's feet instead.

"Now then," Ilich said. "Eat your meal. Get some rest tonight. Tomorrow, you will be on time for your lesson. We will be in the east garden where everyone on staff can see us, and you will act as if everything were normal. Do you understand?"

"I don't want to eat this. I'm not hungry."

"I don't care. You're going to eat now."

She looked at the food in front of her. Reluctantly, she picked up the fork. She remembered something from an old film she'd seen about a girl in Sol system. On Earth. "I don't have to do this. Body autonomy is written into the constitution."

"Not ours it isn't," Ilich said. "You will eat this now, while I sit here and watch you. Then we will sit for another hour while you digest it. Or else I will call in Dr. Cortázar with a funnel and tube, and we force you. Am I understood?"

Teresa took a forkful of the steak and put it in her mouth. Intellectually, she knew it tasted good. When she swallowed, Ilich nodded.

"Again," he said.

After he left, Teresa didn't move. She just sat on her couch, feeling the weight in her stomach. She hadn't eaten a meal that large in weeks, and it left her feeling bloated and wrong. Muskrat sensed that something was off, and put her wide, furry head on Teresa's lap, looking up at her with complex brown eyes.

Teresa put on a feed. The same one she'd watched as a child. The nameless Martian girl and the fairy named Pinsleep. Familiar images washed over her, bringing something close to comfort. A sense of predictability, at least. She knew that at the end, the nameless girl would escape fairyland. That she'd go back to Innis Deep and her family. That in the last scene, she'd pack away all her girlhood toys and leave for upper university and an adult life. That was the

sign that she'd won. She was free to make any life she wanted, and not be a prisoner of the elves.

She lay down on the couch, resting her head on a pillow. The girl was taken in by Pinsleep again, and ran, and fought to escape. And escaped. Teresa started it again from the beginning.

Prisoners and their dilemmas. She let the images play and took up her handheld. In her notes, she found Ilich's old diagram.

	TERESA COOPERATES	JASON COOPERATES
JASON DEFECTS	T3, J3	T4, J0
TERESA DEFECTS	T0, J4	T2, J2

She ran her fingers over it. She'd forgotten that Ilich's first name was Jason. She'd forgotten a lot of things.

The puzzle—the unsolvable part—was that no matter what she did, it was better for the others to defect. If she was good, they should take advantage of her. If she was bad, they still should. And the same logic applied to her, except she hadn't done it. Everyone else had defected, and when she didn't cooperate, they forced her to. Even though the thing that made sense was to defect.

Pinsleep discovered that the girl wasn't in her cell and screamed. Thin fairy fingers balled in stylized fists. Muskrat snored deeply, her fuzzy body pressed close to Teresa. She put her own hand down and scratched the old dog. Black with gray in her muzzle and at the tips of her ears. The thing she hadn't wanted to know pressed at her throat, welling up like a bubble rising from the bottom of the ocean. She felt like she could watch it come, and she knew that when it reached the surface, nothing about her life would be the same. Everything would have to change, because she'd changed.

And it happened, not with a scream, but with an exhalation. She leaned down, her lips almost against Muskrat's floppy ear. When she spoke, she

whispered.

“This isn’t my home anymore. I can’t stay here. I have to leave.”

Muskrat looked up and licked Teresa’s cheek, agreeing.

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Chapter Forty-One: Naomi

The Freehold gate, like all the gates, was stationary with respect to its local sun. That it didn't fall into its distant star was just one of its many mysteries, but since they couldn't hook a chain between it and the *Roci* and hang from it, they did not benefit from its gravity-defying properties. Instead, Alex parked the *Roci* close to it with the Epstein drive on a gentle burn to balance the pull of the sun.

The flight out to the ring gate had been eerie. The *Rocinante* had been her home longer than anyplace else. She'd slept more of her nights in these crash couches, and eaten more of her meals in the galley. She had breathed the air that passed through the ducts and filters more times than she could calculate. Being inside the ship now, she felt the presence of the others. Her memories of them. What surprised her most was that it didn't hurt.

She'd left the *Roci* not long after Amos took his covert assignment to Laconia. Alex was going to join Bobbie on the *Storm*. Naomi, they had all thought, would hire on a temporary crew for the *Rocinante* and keep her flying. Only she hadn't. At the time, she'd barely been able to explain why. She could still remember some of the rationalizations she'd used—*A gunship is harder to hide than one person* and *The Rocinante has symbolic value as a prize that ups the risk of using her* and *The underground on Freehold will be able to use her if the need for defense arises*.

They'd all been true, and none of them had. Looking back now, she saw that she'd left because staying would have been worse. She hadn't let herself feel the loss of Jim too deeply. Or of Amos. Or Clarissa. Bobbie had invited her to join the crew of the *Storm*, but Naomi hadn't accepted, and Bobbie hadn't pressed the issue.

Now, strapped into the spiderlike framework of a salvage mech and burning for the ring with her two transmitters and the spool of wire, she looked back at the ship—her ship—and it still ached. But it was bearable. She had taken her grief and locked herself away with it because she'd been skinless. It had been the best way she could find at the time to keep every new day from feeling like a little more salt on the wound. But that had been a different version of her. She'd grieved, but more than that, she'd changed. The woman she was now wasn't quite the one she'd been on the day that Jim left. Or even on the day she'd chosen not to accept Duarte's invitation. Between the loss of Saba and Bobbie's defeat of the *Tempest*, Naomi had been reborn so quietly she'd hardly even noticed. The only real evidence was that she could be on the *Rocinante* again. She could come home.

"You're almost there," Alex said. "How's it look?"

"Big," Naomi said.

The gate was only a thousand kilometers across. This close to the surface, it might as well have been half of the universe. This far from the sun, the mech's HUD needed to add some false color augmentation so that she could see more clearly what she was dealing with. She made her braking burn. She only had a little time before her orbit slid past her, but the transmitters were already wired together. She tapped through the initialization codes, and the compressed nitrogen thrusters took it from there. The primary transmitter shot out through the ring, and the secondary took up a stationary position relative to the ring gate except for a slow drift that would eventually snuggle it up against the physical surface of the ring itself. As repeaters went, it was about the simplest version there was—one step up from cans and string. But it didn't have to last long.

"How's it looking?"

"I'm watching," Alex said. "I've got sync from the local side. I'm waiting for a response from . . . Yeah, okay. We're looking good. Come on back."

"Copy that. I'm heading in," Naomi said. "So much for the easy part."

"Taking what I can get."

Naomi turned back toward the *Rocinante* and started her burn. The mech had enough power in the thrusters that she could have worked out there for a few hours without any risk, but she was just as happy not to. The cooling on the unit wasn't what it had been, or else she was less tolerant of being overheated.

By the time she'd gotten back to the ship, cycled through the airlock, packed the mech safely away, and floated up to the flight deck, the transmitter had been working for a little under three hours. The first cycle was passive, looking for signals coming from any ships in the ring space and identifying as many as they could. It looked like there were about a dozen at the moment, but all of them were recognizable as Transport Union or smugglers. Nothing had the comm signal or drive signature of a *Storm*-class destroyer, and nothing was the *Whirlwind*. No ships at all would have been better, but this was as good as Naomi could have reasonably hoped.

The connection request signal was the first real risk she was taking. If there were Laconian sensors in the ring space, this was going to give away what gates had active cells of the underground behind them. If things went the way she hoped, that information wouldn't matter much. It was a calculated risk.

For almost a minute, there was no reply. The farthest gate was only a little under a million clicks. The light delay should have been nearly trivial. Naomi had a sinking feeling—What if they were the only ones? What if the plan had already fallen apart?—and then the connections started coming through. First just one, then a handful, then a small flood. Fifty-three answers in all. Fifty-three systems with their full supply of ready warships, out of retirement and at her command. Easily hundreds of ships.

"Not bad," Alex said from his couch.

"It's excellent until you do the math," Naomi said. "Then it's ninety-six percent no reply." But she smiled when she said it.

Her plan, long since sent out via bottle and echoed from system to system, was larger than Laconia. Larger than the fifty-three systems that had sent ships for the fight. Even as she'd been setting out her makeshift repeater, an alert was going off at the transfer station on Nyingchi Xin. A

pirate was breaking into Laconian warehouses on the largest moon of the smallest gas giant in Sanctuary system. A massive data breach was being reported from the new shipyards in Yasamal system. Hopefully dozens of other small actions and issues, anyplace that a *Storm*-class destroyer was in the system. After the death of the *Tempest*, Laconian forces and the factions that had thrown their lot in with them had to be nervous. That was her handle on them. It let her and her people distract them and draw them thin. They had to look strong now in every corner of the empire, because they already looked weak.

The next phase lost the anonymity and safety of the bottles. With a sensation like walking off her ship under an unfamiliar sky, Naomi chose the first of the connection requests and opened it. There was a hiss of static and the compression of sound that the multiple layers of encryption left behind.

“Nagata here,” Naomi said.

“Zomorodi back to you,” Emma’s familiar voice replied a few seconds later. “We’ve got the *Cama*, a half dozen rock hoppers with rail guns mounted on ’em, and ten antipirate gunships recently liberated from the governing council’s shipyard at Newbaker.”

“Ammunition?”

The lag was present, but not so bad that she had to trade recorded messages. The immediacy felt almost intimate.

“Oh, damn. Knew I forgot something,” Emma said, and Naomi heard the teasing in her voice. “Of course we’re loaded up. The *Cama*’s got a full hold too. Anyone needs resupply, we’ll be there. Unless they kill us all. Then, not so much.”

“Fair enough. Send me the specs and transponder codes. And what happened to Captain Burnham?”

“Early retirement,” Emma said. “Cashed out and bought part of a medical clinic.”

“Probably smarter than all of us put together.”

“I’m leaning toward coward.”

“Good to hear from you, Emma. Keep drives ready. I’ll be sending a flight plan as soon as I have everyone.”

“Standing by until then, Admiral.”

Naomi dropped the connection and took the next. Eight ships with old-style stealth composites and internal heat sinks. They’d have been the kings of space a couple generations back, but they weren’t bad even now. The next group had a *Donnager*-class battleship they were pulling out of mothballs. A quarter million tons of pieces smuggled to an empty moon and welded back together like a child’s model kit with a one-to-one scale. If she was lucky, there would be three or four more like it. Building them had been a pet project of Saba’s.

Saba, who’d started it and hadn’t lived to see it through. These people she talked with, whose lives she was now in a position to risk at best, spend outright at worst, were Saba’s network. They were the sword he’d dropped on the battlefield that she had picked up.

Fifty-three systems. Four hundred and eighteen ships with five Transport Union supply ships and three *Donnager*-class battleships among them, and the *Storm*—still compromised, but able to fly, still on her way. The best hammer that the underground could put together.

And it still wasn’t half the size of the force the *Tempest* had killed in Sol. Hopefully, if she’d done this right, it would be enough. If she’d been fooling herself, they’d all pay the price. But she was pretty sure she was right.

Once she had all the specs, she started sorting through by drive model, ship mass, and total energetic profile. Alex showed up with a tube of spiced lentils and a bulb of cold tea. She didn’t know she was hungry until she started eating it, and then she was ravenous. She put the monitor aside, rolling the tube and pressing to get out every bit of the spicy, rich mush. When it was gone apart from a burning aftertaste and a pleasant pressure in her gut, she sighed.

“Just like old times,” Alex said. “You never could remember to eat when you had a good problem to solve.”

“My old problems were never like this. It was more how to make sure we get to the next port safely.”

“That’s not what we’re doin’?” Alex asked with a grin.

“Nothing about this has any relationship to safety. This is exactly what I never wanted to be doing. Fighting? Getting people killed? I never even carried a gun.”

“I knew that,” Alex said, and the grin had turned into something softer. “There’s still time. Call this off, head back to port. Go back to getting our people elected into the Association of Worlds.”

Naomi was silent, her mind and her heart at odds the way they so often were. Alex misunderstood.

“I’m only half joking,” he said. “There is time to pull back. We haven’t committed these folks to anything. Not yet.”

“No, we have to do this. If there was time . . . I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe I’d have kept looking until I found a better way. One that wasn’t this.”

The comm controls alerted, a little orange strobe blinking with the incoming message. But it was only the *Storm*, updating her ETA. Naomi tucked the empty food tube into her pocket. She’d throw it in the recycler when she was done here. The bulb of tea cooled her fingers and pulled a tiny sheen of condensation out of the air.

“You feel like you owe it to them?” Alex asked, gently. “To Bobbie. And Saba. Amos.”

“No,” Naomi said. “And not to Jim either. This isn’t guilt. It’s . . . possibility? I don’t want to fight. I don’t want anyone to get hurt. Or die. Not our side, and not them either. I want to reconcile. That’s why Bobbie always got so frustrated with me. She wanted to win.”

“Looks like you do too, now.”

“The problem is it’s hard to reconcile when you’ve lost,” Naomi said. “Someone takes all the power, and you try to bring them into the fold again? That’s capitulation. I don’t think violence solves anything, not even this. Not even now. But maybe winning puts us in a place that we can be gracious.”

“Meet Duarte halfway?” Alex said. She could hear in his voice that he wasn’t convinced. If she couldn’t sway him, maybe there wasn’t hope. But she tried.

“Make space for him. Maybe he’ll take it, maybe he won’t. Maybe his admirals will see something in it he doesn’t. The point of this fight isn’t to kill Laconia. It’s to get enough power that we can close the distance they opened between them and everyone else. That may mean punishing some people. It may mean answering for old crimes. But it *has* to mean finding some way forward.”

“You sure that’s not owing something to Holden?” Alex said. “Because that sounds an awful lot like something he’d say. And then everyone else would roll their eyes at.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe. There needs to be a Saba now, so I’ll be that if I have to. But there’s going to need to be a James Holden later. And if he’s not there to do it, we’ll have to pick that up too.”

“What about a Naomi Nagata?”

“She should probably finish solving her traffic control problems. I don’t want anyone going dutchman. Or setting off another lost-time incident. Not if we can avoid it,” Naomi said. The comm alerted again, and this time she answered it. “*Rocinante* here.”

“This is the destroyer *Gathering Storm*,” a woman said. Her voice almost hummed with pride and the prospect of violence. “Requesting permission to dock and transfer crew.”

Alex raised a hand. “I’ll take care of this one, Admiral.”

Naomi transferred control to Alex. “Hey there, Jillian. This is Alex. You are good for docking, but make sure Caspar knows to slide in from the side. It may not look like we’ve got the drive on, but we do. I don’t want to prove it by cooking you.”

“Like your little drive could burn us,” the woman said.

“I’d feel bad about it, is all. I’ll send the codes.”

“It’ll be good to see you, old man,” the *Storm* said, and dropped the connection.

“Jillian Houston,” Alex said. “She’s a good kid. She’ll make a fine captain.”

“I remember her father being an asshole.”

“She’s also kind of an asshole.”



It was three hours before the *Storm* sidled up beside the *Rocinante* and extended its docking tube. It was strange seeing the Laconian ship with its alien technology, but also with the same design history as the *Rocinante* itself. Naomi sometimes forgot that Laconia was in so many ways the heir to Mars until something like this reminded her.

She was still putting the final touches on her transit orders when the new crew came over, and Alex had to prod her more than once to get her down to the airlock. He was right, of course, but the project was complicated and so close to finished, it was hard to step away from it.

The *Rocinante* had run for years on a skeleton crew of four, and then expanded up to six. It was designed for twenty-two. The people who came in, drifting in the microgravity, were a mixed bunch. Belters and Freeholders and a gunner from Brazil Nova who’d joined up on Ganymede. She greeted each of them as they came aboard, hoping that she could commit each name to memory and put it to the correct face later. Belinda Ross. Acacia Kin-dermann. Ian Kefilwe. Jona Lee.

She felt a little odd about the deference and formality in how they saw her. She was Naomi Nagata to them, and that meant not only their captain, but also the admiral of the fleet and the leader of the underground. They also knew her as Captain Draper’s old shipmate, and there was a respect there she couldn’t quite convince herself she’d earned.

The odder thing was seeing Alex with them. One boy—Caspar, his name was—hadn’t even come over to join the *Roci*. Just to see Alex. The admiration in the boy’s face was impossible to miss. Watching them all together was like seeing an extended family that had come together for a wedding. Or a funeral. Alex hauled them all on a tour, showing them the

Roci. He called it an orientation, but it was more like showing off a prized possession. Or no. Not that. A part of his life he'd only ever been able to tell stories about, and now could point to in the flesh.

She made her exit as he was leading them down toward the machine shop, pulling herself up to the flight deck and her nearly complete work. The distraction of the new crew left her unmoored for a few minutes, finding her place and her train of thought. There was less to do than she'd thought.

She put the final orders in. *There is time to pull back*, Alex said in the back of her mind as the real one, decks below, showed his friends and compatriots something about how the *Rocinante's* PDCs reloaded or the way the power grid had been rerouted to support the keel-mounted rail gun or something.

Somewhere far below, an unfamiliar voice laughed.

This was what he'd done. Where Naomi had locked herself away, Alex had gone with Bobbie and made himself a new crew, a new family. It amazed her that he'd done it so naturally that he didn't even notice. The only reason he didn't have a place with them was that he chose not to. Even this brief contact told her that they would have welcomed him. He'd built another place for himself in the universe.

She hoped she wasn't about to take it away from him. She encrypted the orders, opened the broadcast, and sent them out.

Chapter Forty-Two: Alex

Staging was important, but Alex hated it all the same. They didn't know what was waiting for them on the other side of Laconia gate. For all they knew, the *Whirlwind* could be squatting just on the other side, ready to blast them all one by one as they came through. Sure, the intelligence they had showed it keeping close to the main planet, but that wasn't a promise. The faster they got through Laconia gate, the better off they'd be.

That sounded great until it meant trickling the assembled forces from fifty-three systems into the slow zone, bunching them together before the first one went through to Laconia, and then diving through the enemy gate one after another as quickly as they could without vanishing. Then it got a little nervous-making.

"Was it always like this?" Ian, the new comm tech, asked. He was a Freeholder born and bred. Draper Station was as close as he'd ever been to another system. "Caspar said it used to be different."

"That's true," Alex said. "It used to be different."

The station at the center of the slow zone was growing darker as the days and weeks passed. It had cooled from a point of sun-bright whiteness to a threatening shade of orange. The surface of the slow zone that had been black and featureless still had the strange aurora look. If anything, that seemed to be getting brighter.

"This is the *Deliverance*," a voice said from the open comm channel. "We have completed our transit from Hamshalim."

"Copy that, *Deliverance*," Ian said. "*Benedict*, you're clear for transfer."

A few seconds. "This is the *Benedict*. Copy that. We are starting our burn."

Two hundred of the ships had already come through. Like the *Roci*, they were making their way to the Laconia gate. The others were still stacked outside their gates with Naomi's transition order. Without Medina control to keep anyone from going dutch-man, they had to rely on her for their script. Which would work as long as not too many other ships came through in the same time frame. And as long as the behavior of the gates hadn't changed.

That wasn't the slow zone's only new risk, though. Alex could still remember coming through the Sol gate the first time. Back then, the slow zone had been a place of mystery and terror, alien artifacts and death. Before Medina, he'd have said that the decades had tamed it. Made the place into something known and understood. That it was capable of changes they didn't understand tore the scab off that wound every time he thought about it. He kept reaching for the drive control, wanting to edge the ship out through the gate just a little faster, a little earlier. He was heading to a battle with a vastly more powerful enemy, but at least that was known. Being reminded that they'd been building roads through a dragon's mouth left him jumpy.

That was the thing about hubris. It only became clear in retrospect.

"This is the *Benedict*. We have completed our transit from Hamshalim."

"Copy that, *Benedict*," Ian said. "*Chet Lam*, you are cleared for transit."

Alex reached for the drive controls, pulled back.

"You okay?" Ian asked as Alex unstrapped from his couch.

"I'm going to go get some tea. You want some tea?"

"I'm good," Ian said, and Alex pushed off for the lift. He wished they were under burn, not only because he wanted to get out of there, but because being on the float made moving through the ship too easy. If he could feel the effort of motion, maybe it would do something for his anxiety. As it was, it was just having an itch he couldn't scratch.

In the galley, he pulled out his hand terminal. There was one message in his outgoing queue, flagged to hold. He braced with his right hand and foot and spun his terminal slowly in the air like a pinwheel while he thought about it. The display, reading his orientation, flickered to keep up with its own rotation. After a few seconds, it started to annoy him. He grabbed it

again and opened the message. His own face appeared on the screen. His voice came from the speaker.

“Kit. I’m about to do something, and it seems like I might not come back. It’s risky anyway. And the last time I did something like this, I thought about you a lot afterward. I know me and your mom didn’t get along there towards the end, and maybe I haven’t been as good a dad to you as I could have been—”

He stopped the playback, looked at it for a long moment, and deleted it without sending. There was this idea that one message could change a lifetime of decisions you’d already made. The truth was, he hadn’t said anything in there that Kit didn’t already know. If Naomi’s plan worked, Alex could go back and say anything that still needed saying in person. If it didn’t, it was probably better for Kit not to have had communications from his rebel pilot father.

Belinda and Jona came in together with the subdued glow of two people who’ve been enjoying each other’s private company. Well, they were in the hours before action. Alex could still remember a time when he’d taken some comfort that way himself. They nodded to him, and he nodded back like he didn’t suspect anything. Truth was, as long as it didn’t affect the ship’s function, a little affection in the crew was probably a good thing. Holden and Naomi’s relationship had been the unstated center of the *Roci* crew for a long, long time. That was part of why losing Holden had broken everything apart.

Now, here he was, and here was Naomi, back in the ship, doing something dangerous. It almost felt like old times.

His hand terminal chimed. It was Naomi.

“Admiral?” he said.

“Captain is fine.”

“Yeah, okay,” he said. “Felt weird saying that anyway.”

“So. I’m about to do a thing.”

“A thing?”

“Speechy, rousing-the-troops thing, admiral-of-the-fleet kind of thing.”

“Ironically,” Alex said with a laugh.

“This is serious,” Naomi replied, but there was no scold in her tone. “We’re three transfers away from having the whole fleet in here. I’ve sent my group assignments to the other ships. I thought I should make a statement. Something to the crew. Did Bobbie do that?”

Alex had to think. “Sort of, yeah?”

“I was really hoping you were going to say no.”

“Nervous?”

“I think I prefer being shot at.”

“Well, if this goes well, you’ll get to confirm that. So that’s a plus?”

“Might be.”

“Okay, I’m on my way up.”

Alex took a last long pull from the bulb of tea and tossed the rest into the recycler, then pulled himself back to the central shaft and up toward the flight deck. He felt his anxiety starting to shift, but he wasn’t sure yet what it was becoming. Maybe excitement. Maybe fear.

By the time he got to his couch, Ian wasn’t on the open comms anymore. The kid looked grim, lips pressed thin and fingertips dancing at the edge of the control monitor like they were looking for something to do there. Alex gave a thumbs-up as he strapped in. He didn’t know what he meant by it apart from general emotional support.

Naomi sailed onto the deck. She was in formal blacks that looked like a uniform without quite being one. Against it, her gray-white hair didn’t look old. It looked striking. Her face was serious and hard, her movements fluid and strong. She pulled herself into her crash couch, pulled the tactical readout to her station, and looked over the data there. Her ships. Her fleet. Every eye on the flight deck was pointed toward her. She glanced at Ian.

“Open ship-wide,” she said.

“Yes, Captain,” Ian said.

Naomi cleared her throat. It echoed through the ship.

“This is Naomi Nagata,” she said. “We are about to make our transit into Laconia. We will be going into the heart of enemy territory. We all saw what the *Tempest* did to the inner planets’ combined fleet. I know that’s in your minds now. It’s in mine too.

“But what we’re doing here is different. We were not able to stop the *Tempest* when it invaded Sol—”

Stopped the shit out of it later, someone shouted a deck or two below. Cheers and hoots followed, but Naomi ignored them.

“We aren’t trying to stop the *Whirlwind*. We’re trying to move it. How exactly this will play out is going to depend on what we find when get through that gate. The exact tactics, we will be figuring out on the fly. The grand strategy, on the other hand, is set. We’re going to destroy Laconia’s construction platforms. The tool Duarte has used to make the *Magnetar* ships. To make *Storm*-class destroyers. To generate antimatter. All of that ends now. And with that, Laconia’s attempt at empire. We are going to do that.

“Every ship in this fleet has a part to play. The most dangerous role is the actual attack on the platforms. With luck, that will be us. Our battle group will be the *Storm* out of Freehold, the *Cassius* out of Sigurtá system, and *Quinn* and *Prince of the Face* out of Haza. Five ships, but we won’t be alone. Every ship, every battle group, every member of every crew will be at our backs.

“This will be a long fight. It will be hard. But it will be won. So if you need food, eat now. If you need to visit the head, you have five minutes. After that, we’re going through.”

She killed the connection to the sound of cheers. On the float, there was no way to sink back into her couch, but if she could have, Alex was pretty sure she would. He pulled up his controls, selected the course profile he’d already laid in, and typed in a message to her.

THAT WAS GOOD. DID EVERYTHING IT HAD TO.

It popped up on her monitor. She smiled thinly. A few moments later, he got her reply.

I HATE PUBLIC SPEAKING. HATE IT. NEXT TIME, YOU DO THIS PART.

GET ME A NEXT TIME, he typed, AND I WILL.

Her laugh was barely a chuckle. It was a victory, getting her to relax even that much. It was strange seeing her in Bobbie’s role. It was stranger

to realize that in his mind, it was Bobbie's role. Not Holden's anymore. He wondered what else had changed while he wasn't watching.

"All right," Naomi said loud enough for the flight-deck crew to hear. "It's time. Alex?"

"Aye, aye, Cap," Alex said. He triggered the acceleration alarm through the whole ship, waited twenty seconds for any stragglers to get into a couch, and the *Roci* jumped up, eager as he was. The gel of the crash couch pressed back, cool against him, and he felt himself grinning. His HUD marked the pathway to the gate, and he started wondering how bad it might be on the other side. As the fear of staying in the slow zone faded, the fear of leaving it for Laconia ramped up.

Behind him, another ship's drive bloomed. The *Storm*. And then the *Quinn*. The *Cassius*. They'd timed it all out to the second. He felt the needle and then the surge of the juice. It was a hard burn for him, it was going to be hellish for the Belters. For Naomi.

He kept his eyes on the drive status, on the maneuvering thrusters. They were making the transit much faster than usual, and a misfiring maneuvering thruster at the wrong moment could throw them off course and into the swirling nothingness at the edge of the slow zone. He didn't know whether that would be a good death or not, and he wasn't interested in finding out.

Without visual telescoping, the thousand-kilometer circle of the gate wouldn't have been more than a speck on the monitor before they were already through it. Almost before he could register the passage, the *Roci*'s thrusters fired. The crash couches didn't hiss so much as click as they snapped to his right and then sharply back again. Alex's vision clouded a little at the edges, the blood in his brain stirred by the shifts of inertia.

The first thing was enemies. The *Roci*'s radar was already sweeping the system, her telescopes looking for the drive plumes and her radio array listening for the transponders of Laconian ships. Already five had lit up, but they were identified as Transport Union ships with legitimate business in the system. There weren't very many points of interest in Laconia system. It was still too new for the spread of human stations that Sol system had.

There were some, though. An ice moon around the system's single gas giant had a scientific outpost on it. One of the inner, rocky planets had been mining titanium for half a decade. Rumor was that Duarte had set aside one of the Ceres-sized dwarf planets as the site of a massive art project that was underway. The first real enemy the *Roci* found was almost halfway to the empire's home. A pair of *Storm*-class destroyers already burning out toward the gate. And then, behind them, close to the planet, the unmistakable heat and energy signature of a *Magnetar*-class battleship.

Alex pushed his fingers to the control pad at his side and typed out a message.

NO GUARDS AT THE GATE. THEY DIDN'T SEE US COMING.

A few minutes later, Naomi managed a reply. OR THEY COULDN'T IMAGINE ANYONE BEING THIS DUMB.

He would have laughed if he could catch his breath. They'd been at eight gs since they came through. He'd done worse, but he'd been younger when he did it. The *Storm*, *Quinn*, *Cassius*, and *Prince of the Face* were all behind them, their trajectories making a thin fan pattern. At the gate, the first of the *Donnager*-class battleships emerged into normal space and angled off on a vector different from their own. The threshold level on Naomi's model dropped slowly on his screen, measuring mass and energy and safety. The moment it was low enough, the second battleship arrived. The light delay from the ring to Laconia was almost three hours. So everything they were seeing in system was from the past. But it also meant that the closest Laconian ship wouldn't know the enemy had arrived for a little over an hour and a half, and Laconia proper twice that. Alex didn't let off the burn. By the time the response came, their fleet needed to be scattered as far through the system as it could be.

If it had been football, Laconia would have had a world-class goalie and a couple of professional strikers against Naomi's team of four hundred grade school children and three *Donnager*-class football hooligans. Any head-to-head battle was a win for Duarte. So it was better that there not be any. Not until Naomi could pick them.

Alex switched over to visual telescopes and looked back at the receding gate. It was already tiny, but he could make out the drive plumes of the emerging ships when they came through like new stars being born. And behind them, the real stars and the wide, beautiful smear of the galactic plane. The same, more or less, as it always was.

Three hours later, the enemy destroyers killed their drives. Light delay meant that they'd seen the intrusion into their space and reacted, and the evidence of response was only just arriving. Alex wondered if they'd cut drives when they saw the *Roci* come through or if it had taken a few unexpected drive plumes lighting up their gate to make them nervous. If he'd cared enough, he could have done the math and figured it. He did enough to know that the news of their appearance hadn't reached Duarte and the Laconian capital and that it would very, very soon.

In his couch, Ian grunted. For a moment, Alex was afraid it was a medical problem. Some people reacted pretty badly to their first extended high-g burn. But then the message came from Naomi.

DROP THE BURN. WE HAVE A MESSAGE.

Alex thumbed the *Roci* back down to half a g. All around him, he heard the others gasp and sigh. He did a little of the same himself.

"Kefilwe," Naomi said. "Let's have that message."

"Yes, Captain," Ian said. "To your station?"

"I think we'll all be interested."

A woman not much older than Ian appeared on their monitors. She had sharp features, pale lips, and the blue uniform of Laconia, and her forehead was furrowed. Confused. Not alarmed.

"This is Captain Kennedy Wu of the Laconian destroyer *Rising Shamal* to the unidentified destroyer and its escort. You have made an unauthorized and unscheduled transit into Laconian space. Please cut your drives at once. If you are in need of assistance—"

Someone behind Kennedy cried out in alarm. Alex thought they said *It's the Storm* or *That's the Storm*. Something along those lines. The Laconian captain's concern changed to fear and anger in a heartbeat. Alex tried to put himself in her place. The stolen ship that had murdered the pride of her

navy, killed the unkillable, and was now showing up where it had no business being. He and Naomi knew all their antimatter supply had gone up with the *Tempest*, but he watched Captain Kennedy wonder.

“Attention, *Gathering Storm*. You are to cut engines immediately and surrender control to me. Any attempt to approach Laconia will be treated as hostile and met with immediate and—”

A different voice called out. This time Alex was sure of the words. *More contacts. This one’s big.* That had probably been one of the *Donnager*-class ships coming through. Captain Kennedy looked away from the message, checking something on another monitor, and the message ended.

“Well,” Alex said. “I think they noticed us.”

“Got to think High Consul Duarte’s going to be having a distressing day, don’t you?” Ian said.

Naomi pulled up the tactical display. The vastness of Laconia system simplified so much that all their ships pouring through the gate were a single, minuscule yellow dot.

“Orders?” he asked.

“They’re coming for the *Storm* first,” she said. “Bring us on a slower burn toward the gas giant. And get me a tightbeam to Captain Sellers on the *Garcia y Vasquez*. We’ll make it look like we’re open for a fight there, and the *Neve Avivim* can burn like hell to get around like they’re going to make it a pincer. As soon as the destroyers commit to that, we’ll change it.”

“Copy that,” Ian said.

Behind them, another ship came through the gate. Hundreds of drive plumes arced in shallow curves or wide, spreading like dust in a high wind.

The siege of Laconia had begun.

Chapter Forty-Three: Elvi

If she could have, Elvi would have moved her work someplace else. A lab of her own would have been best, her rooms with Favez a damned close second. But the data was at the university and the Pen, so that was where she went. And at first, she resented it. The breakthrough came when she could finally put aside Cortázar's work on changing Duarte and get back to her own data.

Her reports from the dead systems felt like letters from a past life. The breathlessness she'd felt upon realizing that there were literally rains of glass on the one semihabitable planet in Charon seemed almost childish now. She looked back at it and saw her own wide-eyed wonder, and even felt an echo of it. The massive crystal flower with filaments running through the petals like vacuum channels, gathering the energy of Charon system's wildly fluctuating radiation and magnetic fields like daisies collected sunlight, if daisies had been thousands of kilometers wide. She still thought the crystal flowers could be a kind of naturally occurring interstellar life. And the massive green diamond . . .

She looked at that one for a long time before she understood what she was really thinking. Then she took a tablet with the readouts and data to Cortázar's private lab. She hated being in the room with him, hated having him at her back, but she didn't have an alternative.

"Yes," Cara said, when she looked at it with her flat, black eyes. "I know about that."

Xan was sleeping. Or resting with his eyes closed, which was probably the same thing from where Elvi sat. Cortázar, at his desk, scowled at the two of them—Cara and Elvi, leaning against different sides of the clear

plastic cage like girls comparing lunches at university. He went back to eating a sandwich with an air of disapproval.

“Is there anything you can tell me about it?”

Cara frowned. Even that had a moment of extra processing that went into it. Like the girl, or the thing that had been a girl, needed to remember how to make movement first. Or maybe it was more like a kind of gross motor stutter. Elvi really needed to get back to that line of research at some point . . .

“It does . . . record?” Cara said. “That’s not the right word. It’s not like memory, exactly. It’s more like everything all at once? Like the way a film is all the pictures that tell the story, and they’re all there even when you only see one at a time? I’m not explaining this right.”

“A gestalt,” Elvi said.

“I don’t know that word,” the girl said.

Her hand terminal chimed at the same moment that Cortázar’s system threw an alert on his monitor. Trejo informing them of an emergency meeting in his offices in half an hour.

“Problem?” Cara asked.

“Too many masters, not enough time,” Elvi said. “I’ll be back when I can.”

Cortázar was already heading for the door. She had to trot to catch up. A driver waited for them outside, managing to look obsequious and impatient at the same time. A cold wind was blowing in from the east, stinging Elvi’s earlobes. It was her first winter on Laconia, and she understood it was likely to get a lot colder for a very long time before the warmth came back.

In the back of the car, Cortázar folded his arms and scowled out the window. The city was glittering, and there were banners up for some kind of cultural celebration. Elvi didn’t know what it was. The streets they passed had people rushing down them in thick coats. A pair of young men ran alongside their car for a moment, hand in hand and laughing, before a security guard in Laconian blue waved them off.

It was hard for her to remember that a whole population—millions of people—was spread across the planet, living lives in a new environment

while she tired her head in reams of data. In that, it felt a lot like pretty much every other city she'd spent time near.

"I heard you talking to the older subject," Cortázar said.

"Right?" Elvi said. "This is awesome." She lowered her voice, roughened it, and put on a fake Martian accent. "We thought it was two cases, but it's been the same case all along." Then, when Cortázar didn't respond. "Like Inspector Bilguun? How he and Dorothy were always on different investigations, and it turned out they were related?"

"I never watched those," Cortázar said. "I'm concerned about how you're treating the subjects."

"Cara and Xan?"

"You treat them like they're people," Cortázar said. "They aren't."

"They aren't rats. I've worked with rats. They're very different." Again, he didn't get the joke. Or didn't think it was funny.

"They are mechanisms created from the corpses of children. They do some things that the children did because those are the parts that the repair drones had to work with. Eros was only different in scale. The nature of the protomolecule and all the technology related to it has the same logic. On Eros, when it wanted a pump, it co-opted a heart. When it needed tools to manipulate something, it repurposed a hand. This isn't different. Cara and Alexander died, and the drones made something out of the dead flesh. When you talk to that girl, she isn't there. Something is, maybe. And it's made from parts of a human, the way I could stitch together a model catapult from chicken bones. You're anthropomorphizing them."

"Is it a problem?"

"It's inaccurate," Cortázar said. "That's all."

At the State Building, an escort led them to a conference room where Trejo and Ilich were already sitting. Ilich looked worse than usual, and the way things were, that was saying something. Trejo, on the other hand, seemed almost at ease. He gestured at the chairs, and Elvi and Cortázar sat. A display on the wall showed a map of the system—sun, planets, moons, and ships—like a virtual orrery. It seemed to her like it had a lot of ships in it.

“The research?” Trejo asked curtly. “Where do we stand?”

“Making progress. Steady progress,” Cortázar said.

“Do you concur, Major Okoye?”

“We’re finding new connections,” she said. “You don’t really know what’s critical and what’s just nifty until after the fact, but sure. Progress.”

“We’ve had a development,” Trejo said.

“What’s up?” Elvi asked.

That was how she learned that the underground had launched a full-scale invasion. Trejo brought them up to speed as quickly as he could, then opened the floor to comment.

“The thing I care about,” Ilich said, “is what they know that we don’t. That’s why this is a problem.”

“I understand your concern,” Trejo said, one palm up as if to say, *Please stop whining*.

“First, they all saw the *Tempest* stand up to their fleet. They knew what it was capable of. And we saw them destroy the same *unkillable* ship. We don’t know what else they’re capable of.”

“The readings from Sol are consistent with the full complement of antimatter resupply we sent having been used,” Cortázar said.

“And there isn’t any more missing,” Trejo said. “All that still exists is either being isolated on the construction platforms or was shipped to bomb ships in other systems. It’s possible that they’ve been appropriated by the enemy since the loss of the *Typhoon*, but we haven’t heard of any that have gone missing.”

“So if it’s not that,” Ilich said, “then what is up their sleeve that they’re willing to throw three hundred—”

“Four hundred,” Trejo said. “More came through.”

“Four hundred ships at us? Because unless they’ve all suddenly become suicidal, we have to assume they know something.”

Elvi tended to agree with Ilich’s point, if not with his tone. She also understood why Trejo seemed more at ease. After all the alien strangeness and political intrigue, a nice simple shooting war was a move back into his comfort zone. Not into hers, though.

“You let me worry about that,” Trejo said. “I’ve already been in touch with Admiral Gujarat. The *Whirlwind*’s still not at a hundred percent readiness, but she’s comfortable taking it out so long as it stays in-system. I have no interest in putting our last *Magnetar* through the gates anyway. We’re ready for this. What we aren’t ready for is the high consul’s silence.”

“Would seem strange,” Cortázar said.

“Leading a secret task force focused on the things that killed Medina is plausible,” Trejo said. “Reassuring, even. Staying silent in the face of an invasion is not. We need his face on this. No options.”

“I’m not sure how we do that,” Elvi said. “He hasn’t had a really lucid moment since—”

“We make it,” Trejo said. “I understand that this is a little below your collective pay grade, but I’m not interested in bringing a media team into the fold. We’ll scan the high consul, get recordings of his voice, and generate a message to enemy and empire. You have some experience with imaging, yes?”

“I’ve run a bunch of animals through sampling pouches,” Elvi said. “It’s not really the same thing.”

“We can make it work,” Ilich said.

“Good,” Trejo said, and stood. For a moment, Elvi thought the meeting was adjourned and started to head for the door herself. “Dr. Okoye. We’re not waiting on this. We’re doing it now.”

The scanning device wasn’t particularly bulky, but Duarte’s room wasn’t built for it. Kelly had dressed the high consul in his formal uniform and was helping him to his chair. The thought, as Elvi understood it, was that if they scanned the uniform into the same profile as the man, creating the false version would be simpler.

“There are going to be forensic traces,” Cortázar said. “There always are.”

“We have very good imaging programs,” Trejo said as he tried to fit the lighting stick into its base.

“Other people do too,” Cortázar said. “I’m not objecting to the plan. Just be prepared to discredit the people who say it’s faked.”

“Already on that,” Trejo said, and stood. The lighting stick cycled through its spectrum, getting ready to catch the subtleties of Winston Duarte’s skin and hair. He’d grown thinner since the break. His eyes still had an intelligence to them if not a focus, but his cheekbones had become more prominent. Elvi felt like she could see the skull beneath the skin, and she didn’t remember thinking that before. Kelly brushed his hair, trying to put it into place the way he probably had before other addresses and announcements. Only Duarte wouldn’t keep still. His hands were thinner, gray and dusty-looking, and he moved them constantly. His eyes rolled in his head like he was following butterflies no one else could see.

“Is there any way to make him sit still for a minute?” Trejo asked.

“He does sometimes,” Kelly said. “Having people around agitates him. Give him a little time to settle.”

Trejo muttered something but didn’t object. Elvi waited with the others, watching the man who had, however briefly, been the god-king of a galactic empire. All she saw now was a lost man. She remembered feeling the force of his personality the first time they’d met. The sense of being in the presence of something vital and irresistible. She saw something in the way his jaw fit against his neck that reminded her of Teresa. It was easy to forget that they were also people. Father and daughter. The same complicated, fraught relationship that human beings had been navigating since they’d developed language. Before that, probably.

Without really knowing why, Elvi stepped forward and took Duarte’s hand. He considered it like it was a pleasant surprise. She knelt, smiling gently, and his gaze swam through whatever dark waters he lived in now until he found her.

“We just need to scan you, sir,” she said. “It won’t hurt.”

His smile was gentle and filled with an unspeakable love. He squeezed her fingers gently and let them go. She stood back, getting out of the light and the scanning radius. Duarte looked around the room like a beneficent king in his dying hours until his attention landed on Cortázar.

“All right,” Trejo said. “Let’s get this done before—”

Duarte stood, his head tilted at an angle like he was remembering something half-forgotten. He stepped away from his chair. Ilich made a small, frustrated hiss.

“All right,” Trejo said. “It’s okay. Let’s just get him back in position and try this again.”

Duarte stepped over to stand before Cortázar. His attention seemed as focused as Elvi had seen since his fall. Cortázar smiled and bowed his head like it was something he knew he was supposed to do. Duarte’s jaw worked, his mouth opening and closing, but the only sound he made was a small *oh*. He moved his hand in a soft gesture, like he was fanning away smoke, and Cortázar’s chest bloomed out at the back. It was so slow, so gentle, that Elvi couldn’t understand what she was seeing. Not at first.

It was as if Cortázar were an image projected on mist, and the mist was being blown away. Nothingness swirled through his chest, his face. And behind him, floating on the air, spirals of red and pink, gray and white, as ornate and beautiful as ink dropped into water. The air filled with the smell of iron. Of blood. Cortázar sat on the floor, his legs folding under him, and then slumped to the side with a long, wet exhalation. The left half of his head was missing from the jaw to the crown. His heart was still trying to beat in the open theater of his ribs, but the man was gone.

They were silent and perfectly still. Duarte looked up, his attention caught by something that made him smile like a child seeing a dragonfly, and his hands rose aimlessly. Trejo put the scanner down on the bed, turned, and walked quietly out of the room, pulling Elvi along with him. Ilich followed, and then Kelly, shutting the door behind them. They were all pale. The State Building was shaking under them, tremors that matched Elvi’s heartbeat. She fought to breathe.

“All right,” Ilich said. “Okay. That happened. That just happened.”

“Major Okoye?” Trejo said. His normally dark face was pale and gray.

“I have never fucking seen anything like that. Ever,” she said. “Holy *fucking* shit.”

“I agree,” Trejo said.

“He knew,” Elvi said. “That’s what this was. He knew about Teresa. Did you tell him?”

“What about Teresa?” Ilich asked. “What did he know about Teresa? What did she have to do with this?”

“Let’s not lose focus here, people,” Trejo said, leaning against the wall. “Mr. Kelly, would you escort the high consul to fresh quarters until we can get these cleaned?”

Kelly looked like Trejo had just asked him to put his hand in a meat grinder to see if it was running. For a moment, Elvi thought the man would refuse, but Laconians were a breed apart. Kelly nodded and walked stiffly away.

“We can do an announcement without him,” Trejo said. “I can do it. As his . . . acting military commander. Pleased to accept the position. Thank him for his faith in me. Like that.”

“We need to shoot him,” Ilich said. “Whatever that thing in there is? That’s not the high consul. I don’t know what the hell it is, but the only sane thing any of us can do right now is put a bullet in its brain.”

Trejo drew his sidearm, took it by its barrel, and held it out toward Ilich. “If you’re sure that’ll kill him, be my guest.”

Ilich hesitated, then looked away. Trejo holstered his pistol. “Major Okoye.”

“I know,” she said. “Another top priority. I’ll get right on it. But . . .”

“But?”

“I know you told Cortázar to give me full access. I’ve never been entirely certain he did.”

Trejo considered it. From the far side of the door, something rattled. A thump, like a piece of equipment had been bumped into, knocked over. If it had been a sound of violence, it would almost have been better. Trejo pulled out his hand terminal, thumbed in a code, and adjusted something she couldn’t see.

“Major Okoye, you *are* Paolo Cortázar. You want to go through his room and check his underwear, you go right ahead. See what he’s been eating. Check his medical records for sexual diseases. Read his letters to his

God damn mother, I don't care. That man's life is an open book to you starting now. Find something useful in it."

"I'll do what I can," Elvi said.

"And Major? I know you were a civilian before you were appointed. You didn't come up like the rest of us, so I'm going to make this clear for you. If you say one more word about surrendering the empire? I will have you before a court-martial, and then I will have you shot. This is a war now. The rules have changed."

"Understood," Elvi said. "They've been doing that a lot lately."

"Ain't that the God damn truth," Trejo said. Then, "Colonel Ilich, you're with me. Let's draft this announcement."

Elvi walked out of the State Building like she was in a bad dream. Even the bite of the wind felt less real to her. Shock, she thought. I'm in emotional shock. That happens when people die in front of you.

At the lab, Dr. Ochida waved to her as she passed, and then looked concerned when she didn't wave back. She knew that she should have stopped and talked to him, but she didn't have any idea what she'd have said. In the private lab—*her* private lab—Xan and Cara were sitting in their cage playing a word game they used to pass the time. They paused when she came in, but didn't ask her what had happened. What was wrong.

The uneaten half of Cortázar's sandwich was still on his desk, wrapped in brown paper. Elvi threw it in the recycler and opened her work environment. All the reports and data feeds she'd been poring over for weeks. She split the screen and, with her new permissions, pulled up Cortázar's. She backed both up to the functional index.

His was a hundred and eighteen entries longer. Elvi felt something like anger, something like dread, something like the mordant pleasure that comes from being proven right about something shitty.

"What an asshole," she said.

Chapter Forty-Four: Naomi

The burn was long and it was punishing. Even with the crash couch distributing the pressure along every possible square centimeter of her body, Naomi ached her way through the hours. The only solace was the breaks for food and the head, and she kept those brief.

Laconia was a slightly smaller heliosphere than Sol, with nine planets, only one of them habitable. A single gas giant with somewhere between eighty and a hundred moons, depending on where the line was drawn. Two large planets out past that in the deep, and a rocky captured planet hardly larger than Luna with a retrograde orbit that swung high above and far below the plane of the ecliptic. Five planets in closer to the sun, the second of them being her target and the heart of the empire. A transfer station at the gas giant, and the alien construction platforms that orbited the inhabited world. That was her battleground, and she meant to have her forces diffused through it. On the enemy's side, the *Voice of the Whirlwind* at Laconia proper, the *Rising Shamal* and her sister ship, plus four more *Storm*-class destroyers.

Her couch on the burn was almost as isolated as her old shipping container. Her time, even if it was painful, was her own. She studied the maps until she could see them with her eyes closed.

And in the back of her mind, Bobbie waited. The memories and habits of decades spent breathing the same air, drinking the same water, being part of the same organism had made the woman a part of her. And the Bobbie in her head had a lot to say.

A campaign like this is an argument. You're trying to persuade the enemy of something. Talk them into it. And this time, here? You need to

teach them that the danger of staying in place is greater than the danger of coming after you. For it to work, every lesson needs to support that one single thought.



The Storm-class destroyer Mammatus ended its assignment in Arcadia system and rotated back to Laconia for resupply. The transit from Arcadia to the ring space was uneventful, apart from the now-familiar annoyance that the most recent set of repeaters had been sabotaged.

The Mammatus' transit into Laconia was very different. The moment the destroyer emerged into normal space, its sensor arrays were swamped by massive jamming from multiple sources. Half a dozen ships positioned just outside the ring gate flooded the Mammatus with radio and light. It took fewer than three seconds for the ship to reset, but by then five torpedoes—already launched and waiting for a target—were slamming into the ship. Informed by months of analysis of the captured Storm, the torpedo strikes were devastating. The Mammatus lost maneuvering thrusters along her port side and six PDC emplacements. Worse, it began venting atmosphere.

Its counterstrike was late and weakened. The enemy PDCs took out the torpedoes as soon as they were launched, and with its mobility limited and its port vulnerable, the destroyer fled. Its burn toward Laconia and the prospect of safety was the obvious strategy, and easy to foresee. Compromised as it was, it failed to register the field of stealth composite-coated debris in its path until a swarm of uranium micrometeorites peppered its already-stressed hull, peeling back a section of the plating. A maneuvering thruster misfired as the power grid tried to compensate, sending the destroyer into a spin. Despite all that, it took five more torpedoes and a constant stream of PDC fire to kill it. The Mammatus fought well and died ugly, but it died. Everyone in the system saw its last hour, even if the light delay meant they saw it far too late to act.

Lesson one: You can't rely on reinforcements.



Days under burn stretched. Naomi slept when she could, studied the movements of the enemy and the reports of her fleet when she couldn't. Her knees ached from being bent just slightly backward by the acceleration. It hadn't all been in the same direction. Twice now, Alex had shifted them. Not a full flip-and-burn, but a change of vector that brought them closer to the gas giant. The Laconian destroyers in the system started a burn to match, and Naomi's three *Donnager*-class battleships—the *Carcassonne*, the *Armstrong*, and the *Bellerophon*—had redeployed as if to make a full engagement just outside the transfer station there. And then they had all broken off, scattering, while a dozen smaller ships dove sunward to the inner planets. The *Whirlwind*, capable of slaughtering any of them, stayed in place, leaving the chase to the destroyers.

She'd expected the battleships to draw off the Laconian forces, but they didn't. The destroyers followed her hunt group, pushing them to a long, arcing retreat up above the ecliptic. The destroyers turned back quickly, never venturing past the gas giant's orbit. It wasn't the repositioning she'd wanted, but it worked. It would do.

When the burn paused, she took a long moment before she unstrapped, just to enjoy the physical relief of a gentle half g. Walking down the hall to the galley, her legs felt shaky and her neck ached.

The others—her crew—were already there, wolfing down bowls of noodles and mushrooms, talking and laughing. They sobered when she came in. She was the adult. The commander. Who she was mattered less than what.

She didn't mind that.

She found Alex in the cargo bay, opening an access panel. He looked like he hadn't showered in days. Probably he hadn't.

"Issue?" she asked.

"No. We're good. I was just getting a little less pressure on the water feed to this thruster than I'd wanted. Thought I'd tweak it while I had the chance."

“Good thought.”

“I was hoping we’d be getting down to the inner planets by now.”

“Early days,” she said. “There’s time.”



The Bhikaji Cama lumbered through the void, well behind the other ships. Its hold was open to the vacuum.

Two groups of ships, eight in one and fourteen in the other, fired long-range torpedoes at the transfer station. The missiles burned hard, then went ballistic. Slightly fewer than three hundred warheads screamed through the black, all aimed at the transfer station, and all timed to arrive within seconds of each other.

And all of them, of course, were intercepted. Most were killed by the transfer station’s PDCs, but a handful also fell to long-range countermissiles launched from the Whirlwind. It didn’t use its field projector, and wouldn’t. Despite its power, the range was short, and the last time one had been fired in normal space, Sol system had lost consciousness for three minutes. The Laconians didn’t want to risk their defense with a blackout.

When the last of the torpedo barrage died, the expended hunt groups looped back, burning for the Cama. There the crew put on mech suits and loaders, made their way into the cargo ship’s vast belly, and came out with fresh torpedoes and water and PDC rounds.

A week and a half into the campaign, at the time Naomi had specified, the Verity Close—sister ship to the Bhikaji Cama—made the transit into the system and bent its path to the opposite edge of the system and opened its hold.

Lesson two: We have thirteen hundred systems to resupply us. You have one.



“They’re following the *Storm*,” Naomi said. “I need to split you off.”

On the screen, Jillian Houston scowled. “When the time comes, and you lure that murderous bastard of a ship away from Laconia, you’re still going to have a planetary defense system trying to shoot you down. That’s at minimum. You need me to eat that flak for you.”

“If you’re with the attack group, the *Whirlwind* won’t budge. Not ever. I don’t like it any more than you do, but your ship used to be theirs. They know it’s the best tech in our fleet. They’re not going to take their eyes off it. They think you’re the number one threat because you are.”

Despite herself, the younger woman smiled. “They’re right about that.”

“I’m redeploying you. Move to accompany the *Armstrong*. When the time comes—”

“I’ll be part of the bait,” Jillian said. “I don’t love it.”

“It’s a risk. But it’s worth it.”

“Understood,” Jillian said, and dropped the connection. Naomi stretched and checked her system. Eight more minutes before the next burn. She tried to decide if she wanted to wash off or get a bulb of tea. If she didn’t pick soon, she wouldn’t have time for either.

Or maybe she could do both.

“Alex. Postpone the burn for half an hour. There’s something I want to do.”

“You bet,” Alex said.

Naomi went down to her cabin and her private shower, the map of the system in her mind. With the *Storm* on its own, she could reroute the *Carcassonne* and fifty or so of the other, smaller ships toward the transfer station. The *Roci*, *Quinn*, *Cassius*, and *Prince of the Face* would be a minor threat and could loop down sunward, using the innermost planet as a gravity assist.

There was a way that the whole process was like playing golgo. Judging her shot, how the ball would bounce and spin off the other balls, how the next person would react to that. How each decision changed the state of the table. The Bobbie that lived in the back of her head said: *A challenge of intellect, technique, and skill.*

Naomi saw how easy it would be to forget that the stakes were people's lives.



When the Laconian capital was surrounded—ships answering to the underground and the Transport Union at every angle through-out the system—the barrage began. The transfer station was forgotten. Not just long-range missiles, but rocks. Cheap, deadly. Every ship in the group sending nukes and accelerated titanium rods and holds full of gravel into intersecting orbits. Some moved fast, some would take months to arrive at Laconia—which was a message in itself about how long the underground was prepared to draw out the fight. Nothing targeted major population centers, but there was no way for Laconia to know that for sure. To be safe, they had to defend everything.

The barrage kept going, day after day. Rock after rock to intercept. Torpedo after torpedo to shoot down. An endless rain of threats, wearing them down hour by hour by endless hour. That was the third lesson: Playing defense means being endlessly ground down. Someday something will get through.

The Whirlwind stayed in its place, guarding the gravity well over Laconia, but the destroyers ranged farther and farther. When the enemy came too near, Naomi's fleet scattered like children running from the police. Not everyone escaped. The Tucumcari, a rock hopper retrofitted to fight pirates in Arcadia, caught a torpedo on its drive cone and died in a ball of fire. The Nang Kwak, a private security company stealth ship two generations out of date, didn't dodge a line of PDC fire. Disabled, it tried to surrender. The Laconian ships destroyed it instead. There were others. A handful. Each of them one too many. And every chance Naomi had to strike back at the enemy, to lure them out and end one or two of them, she let pass. It was the cardinal rule that she sent to every ship, all through the system. Laconian military that came out after them went home intact.

Because that was the final lesson she taught her enemy: It's safe to chase after us. It's how you'll win.

And it was a lie.



The first sign of fresh cheese in the mousetrap was the *Bellerophon* changing its drive signature. The *Donnager*-class battleship was burning away from Laconia, heading in the rough direction of the *Verity Close*. Even from half the system away, the drive plume would have been visible to the naked eye, a faint but moving star.

And then, for a moment, it blinked out.

The *Roci* and her three escort ships were on the float, skating on the far side of the sun from Laconia. She'd led them in toward the corona until even with pumping spare water onto the ship's skin and letting it evaporate, the built-up heat was at the edge of tolerance. Even when the temperature was in the error bars of normal use, it baked the resins and ceramic. The air smelled different, and it left Naomi and the rest of the crew jumpy and uncomfortable. But with Laconia's fighting ships near the planet, they were in a blind spot. Out of sight.

When the *Bellerophon*'s drive lit back up, it was dirty. Half a minute after that, it went off again. The way an apex predator lured lesser hunters by mimicking the sound of wounded prey, the *Bellerophon* called out for help. And Naomi's fleet answered. The *Storm*, the *Armstrong*, the *Carcassone*, and almost a quarter of the other ships started burning on courses that would meet the *Bellerophon*. The *Bellerophon* wasn't halfway to the *Verity Close*, but the light delay from it to Laconia was still over seventy minutes.

A malfunctioning ship would be interesting to Duarte and his admirals. An escort fleet coming to its aid looked like something more. It looked like a mistake. And an opportunity.

"Come on," Naomi said.

"Should I start up?" Alex asked.

“Put us at half a g,” Naomi said. Even if it didn’t work, they’d want to be out of here soon. As comms officer, Ian passed the word along to the other ships, and the *Roci* eased up from beneath her.

Two hours later, the *Whirlwind* moved. At high burn, she headed out toward the *Bellerophon* and the gathering escort ships. For anyone who’d seen the *Tempest* destroy the combined forces back in Sol, it was like seeing a shark darting toward a beach full of toddlers.

Three hours after that, several hunt groups on the other side of the heliosphere started burning in toward Laconia, and the destroyers went on intercept courses, ready for a slice of their own glory.

There was a point long before any battle came that was her window. Not just how long it would take the *Whirlwind* to get back, but how long it would have to decelerate before it could even start to reduce the distance to Laconia again. And the same for the destroyers. It was a window of time defined by mass and inertia, thrust, and the frailty of the human body. The time it would take even long-range torpedoes to reach them. Naomi ran the numbers, and she knew when they would see her and her little force diving in from sunward. And that it would be too late.

“Alex?”

“Ready when you are,” he said.

“Let’s go.”

The burn was punishing, and it lasted hours. The distance from the sun to Laconia was slightly less than an astronomical unit. If they’d kept the burn going the whole distance, they’d have snapped by Laconia too quickly to see it. The flip came at the halfway point, and the braking burn was just as bad. Worse, because now the planetary defenses had seen them. Torpedoes darted out toward them, and died in the web of four ships’ coordinated PDCs.

The planet itself was beautiful. Blue and white as Earth, with a greenish cast at its edge that was almost pearlescent. Naomi could make out the clouds. A cyclone forming in its southern hemisphere. The jagged, black-green line of its coast where the forests stood. Naomi fought to keep them in focus. The force of the burn was deforming her eyes.

THE WHIRLWIND HAS TURNED. STARTED ITS BRAKING BURN. IS FIRING LONG RANGE.

The message was from the sensor ops. One of the new people. She checked it herself all the same and agreed. If this didn't work now, it wouldn't work later. This was her only shot. Fingers aching, she sent a message to Ian, suffering in the next couch over. SEND THE EVACUATION ORDER. EVERYONE GOES FOR THE GATE NOW.

She heard him grunt and took it as assent.

Alex shouted, his voice strangled by effort and the g forces pressing at them. "Rail-gun fire. Brace. For. Evade."

The *Roci* bucked, lurched. At this distance, the rail-gun fire could still be dodged. The closer they came, the harder that would become. She pulled up the targeting arrays, and the beautiful blue-green sphere sprouted five red lines, as bent as tree limbs. The platforms. The targets.

TARGET ALL FIRE ON THE PLATFORMS, she typed. FIRE AT WILL.

It was too soon, but only by a little bit. And there was a chance for a lucky shot. Every second they spent in the firing arc of Laconia was another chance to die. Worse, another chance to fail.

INCOMING TORPEDOES FROM THE WHIRLWIND. ETA 140 MINUTES. Naomi deleted the message. By then, everything would be over.

"Cut the brake," she shouted. "Do it now."

The *Roci* fell onto the float and snapped around 180 degrees, ready to accelerate again. Ready to flee as soon as the enemy was finished. There would only be one run past the planet. If they missed, they lost.

The ship jerked, and Alex took them out of the path of another rail-gun round. The chatter of the PDCs ran through the flesh of the *Roci* like the ship was talking to itself and it was angry. Naomi's jaw ached with the tension and fear and the joy. The small, jagged red lines grew a fraction larger.

"Captain?" Ian said. "I have something."

"Not as helpful as you think," Naomi snapped. "What do you have?"

“I’m not sure,” Ian said, and passed the comms controls to her monitor. It was an incoming message from the surface of Laconia, coded with an out-of-date underground encryption schema. An evac request.

Amos’ evac request.

“Alex?” she said, and the ship jumped again, slamming her left and then right again, her crash couch whipping like the seat in a carnival ride. “Alex?”

“I see it,” he shouted. He was out of breath. “What do we do?”

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Chapter Forty-Five: Teresa

The *Mammatus* died, burning through Laconia's gate and being dismembered by the enemy ships, two nights before her birthday. The celebration was held in one of the minor ballrooms, with the same tasteful and understated decorations she always had. Silk banners with bright designs, glass candles that she'd loved when she was eight and been saddled with ever since, flowers raised in hydroponic farms in the city proper.

Soft music played over hidden speakers, all of it by composers and performers living on Laconia. Half of the guests were politicians and cultural figures—adults who'd come mostly to say they'd been there and to see who was in favor. The other half were her peer class and their families. They were dressed in stiff formal blues, just like she was. None of them seemed happy to be there. That was fair. To them, it was like having to go to school an extra session. They were nice to her. They had to be.

The sense of strained pleasure almost made her happy. All the adults had smiles like masks. They made a show of congratulating her, as if not dying for fifteen years in a row was an achievement to be proud of. But even while they pretended to be impressed by how mature and composed she looked, their eyes were darting around the room, trying to find her father. She had to play her role, but at least so did they. No one talked about the invasion. Not even Carrie Fisk, wearing a champagne-colored gown and a fixed grin, looking like she wanted to bolt for the door. Camina Drummer wasn't there, and Teresa wondered what had happened to her. Either she'd lost control of the Transport Union and wasn't anyone anymore, or she'd

been part of planning the invasion, in which case she was lucky if she wasn't in the pens.

Teresa didn't care. She had her own problems.

It was still thirty interminable minutes before the dinner was served when Ilich escorted her to the dais at the back of the room. The crowd got quiet without being prompted. Like they'd been trained. She'd been trained too. She knew what to do.

"I want to thank all of you for coming tonight," she lied with a smile. "I am honored to be in your company now, and for all the years that I've lived here among you. My mother, as you all know, died when I was very young. And my father carries his own burdens. He can't be with us here tonight because his duties to all of us don't allow him time even for simple, honest pleasures like this."

Plus which, he's out of his fucking mind. Lost to all of you and to me as well, but I'm the only one who knows it, you poor fuckers. She grinned widely at the pattered soft applause, taking an angry pleasure in the raw perversity of the situation.

Teresa caught sight of Elvi Okoye in the back of the room. Yellow gown, and her husband at her side. She was holding a wineglass in her fist like she was trying to break the stem. She knew too.

"All of you have been a family to me as I grew up," Teresa said. Ilich's words didn't sound like something she'd say, but none of them knew her well enough to catch it. "I am humbled. And I am grateful." Another round of applause, and Teresa bowed her head like she was actually grateful. Like she actually cared whether the enemy ships burning from the edge of the system reduced everyone in the room to ash.

You're one of the angriest people I know. She wore the words now like a shawl, smiled and made her little bows as if they weren't statements of contempt.

"Please enjoy this evening as both my guest and my father's," she said, and stepped down. The guests turned back to each other, oppressed and anxious and thinking less about her than the return of the *Gathering Storm*

and its pirate fleet. Reminiscing less about Teresa Duarte's childhood and more about the violent death of the *Heart of the Tempest*.

Teresa made her way across the ballroom, avoiding Ilich and Connor and Muriel. She found Elvi and her husband not far from where she'd seen them. From the dais, Elvi had looked stressed. Close up, she looked angry.

"Is everything all right?" Teresa asked.

Elvi started, snapped out of whatever other place her mind had been by Teresa's voice. For a moment, she didn't speak, and when she did, it wasn't convincing. "Fine. Everything's fine."

"Well," Teresa said. "Except."

Elvi nodded, the movement hinging in her chest so that it seemed less like agreement, more like someone preparing for violence. "Yes. Except," Elvi said.

The chime rang, calling them all to the dining room like the most privileged cattle in the universe. When they started walking, Teresa stayed at Elvi's side. Her husband was using a cane and wincing as he walked. That was fine. Teresa wanted to go slowly.

"I was wondering, Dr. Okoye," Teresa said. "The *Falcon*."

Again, it took Elvi a moment to come back. "What about it?"

"I wondered how the repairs were going. With everything that's going on . . . I mean, it is built for sustained high burn. It has breathable liquid crash couches."

Elvi shuddered.

"Those are unpleasant," her husband said.

"But still. If the fighting got close? You'd be able to use it to get away?"

Elvi and her husband exchanged a look that Teresa couldn't quite read. Like there was another conversation going on that she couldn't quite hear.

"Unfortunately," Elvi said, "the *Falcon* was deeply, deeply compromised."

"I got a new foot, toenails and all," her husband said. "But that ship's still in pieces."

"I really don't think it'll come to evacuation," Elvi said. "None of those ships are even going to get close to the planet. And everything Admiral

Trejo has at his disposal will be used to keep us all safe.”

“Maybe you should put a push on the repairs, then,” Teresa said. It came out sharper than she’d meant it to, but Elvi laughed. That was interesting.

“Maybe I should,” she sighed, and then they were in the dining room, and Teresa was escorted to the high table with Ilich and a half dozen guests more honored than Elvi Okoye.

The meal was a feast. Fresh pasta. Lobster tails taken from actual lobsters. Gently marbled steak grown from the finest samples. The centerpieces were all Laconian flowers, and they smelled of mint and iron and resin. No one asked after Dr. Cortázar. That, Teresa had come to understand, was one of the unwritten rules. When someone disappears, don’t ask why. She wondered if they’d mention her after she left. Assuming she could find a way.

She looked over at the table where Elvi Okoye sat. Her husband was telling a story, his hands shifting in exaggerated gestures for the delight of their tablemates. The doctor was lost in her own thoughts. Teresa wondered whether they’d been lying about the *Falcon*. She wasn’t sure, and she wasn’t even sure how she’d find out.

Regretfully, she discarded the plan to have them escape the invasion and take her along. She’d have to find another plan.



Days passed. Weeks. The invasion proved harder to stop than anyone liked. The state newsfeeds kept a brightly optimistic view, treating the threat as more of an annoyance by disgruntled idiots than an actual danger to the empire. She still had the access her father had given her to high-level secret reports and briefings, but even if she hadn’t, she’d have known the reports were bullshit.

Apart from the peer class, her lessons were ignored now. She only saw Ilich at meal times. He didn’t repeat his threat to force-feed her, but he didn’t need to. She understood the terms of their relationship now. Having

lost control over so many other things, he made up for it by controlling her. There was nothing she could do about it.

“They’ve slipped this time,” Ilich said. “They panicked. That great huge ship of theirs lost part of its magnetic bottle, and they’re all going to defend it.”

“That doesn’t seem like a bad idea,” Teresa said, forcing herself to take another spoonful of the corn chowder. It should have tasted good, but the texture was slimy and it was too sweet. She swallowed and didn’t gag.

They were sitting in an enclosed courtyard with ivy growing up the walls and artificial lights that mimicked the sun. The actual weather was a snowstorm that was covering the gardens in white up to her ankles. Muskrat had been running through it with a wide canine grin and little balls of ice forming on her coat. Ilich hadn’t let her in with them while they ate because she stank of wet dog.

“It wouldn’t be if there was any way for them to actually mount a successful defense. They’ve survived as long as they have by running away. We could kill any of them whenever we chose to, but Trejo was waiting.”

“For what?”

“For this,” Ilich said. He did love the sound of his own voice. The calm, patient instructor unfolding for the clueless little girl how the universe really worked. It had seemed like kindness for so many years. Now it looked like condescension. “The three Martian battleships are the irreplaceable core of their makeshift fleet. And when you have something that important, it’s natural to try to protect it. But it’s an emotional response, not a tactical one. And that’s why they’re going to pay for it.”

He had said all the same things at breakfast—eggs, sweet rice with fish, seared spinach with almonds—and she let him repeat himself now. Nothing he said mattered to her anymore.

“The *Whirlwind* will go through them like they weren’t there. There’ll be some cleanup afterward. We won’t get all of them. But their major ships? They’re even putting the *Storm* in harm’s way for this. It’ll be a bloodbath. And I—”

His handheld chimed. Ilich scowled and accepted the connection. Teresa put down her spoon and took a sip of water. Trejo's voice was clear, and it was tense.

"I'd like a word with you in the tactical office, Colonel."

Ilich didn't speak, only nodded, rose, and walked away. Teresa was forgotten behind him. Which suited her just fine. When he was around the corner, she got up and opened the door for Muskrat. The dog trotted in, huffing under her breath. Teresa took out her handheld and opened the tactical reports.

There was a moment of sorrow. They came now and then. The memory of her father telling her that she could be the leader they needed her to be. That he wanted to train her with all the things he knew, just in case. She'd been a different girl then. He'd been a different man. She missed both of them. But the pain faded quickly, and she didn't lose anything by letting it go. It always came back.

The tactical reports were strange, and it took her a moment to understand what she was looking at. The broken-down battleship had repaired itself somehow. And the fleet of enemy ships was running away, but not for the far edges of the system. They were going to the gate. Most of them, anyway. Almost all of them.

All of them but four. And those were in a path to Laconia. It was suicide. Four ships against the *Whirlwind*. Unless they had a secret weapon the way they had in Sol system . . .

But no, the *Whirlwind* couldn't stop them. It had already gone too far, and even with the braking burn, its vector was still away from the planet. It was fighting its own mass and momentum like a swimmer struggling against the outgoing tide. The destroyers were in the same position. They'd been tricked. Lured away with only the planetary defense grid to protect them.

Which, in fairness, it probably could. Four ships weren't much. They'd do some damage, though. And there was only one target. She was sitting in it.

She knew she should be scared, but she wasn't. She put down her handheld, scratched Muskrat's back, and thought. It didn't even feel like solving a problem so much as remembering something she'd always known. She pulled up a map of the system and added in the enemy ships, their burn times. A lot would depend on how they made their braking burns, but Ilich had taught her enough about battle tactics that she could make an educated guess. Make a plan. If she called the enemy down, they'd kill her or take her as a prisoner. She needed something she could trade for passage. She didn't know what that was.

And then she did.

Muskrat looked up at her when she laughed. The thump-thump-thump of the dog's tail against the ground was reassuring. Without thinking, Teresa took another spoonful of chowder in her mouth, frowned, and sprinkled some salt over the bowl.

Her next bite was better.



The timing was bad, but it could have been worse. She left out the window as if she were sneaking out to see Timothy again. It felt familiar. Comforting. She knew it was the last time she'd see her room or her things. The last time she'd sleep in the bed that had been hers since she was a child. But her father had been dead for months, and it turned out she'd already done her mourning.

Muskrat whined as she slipped out, dancing from one paw to the other.

"You can't come this time," Teresa said. "I'm sorry."

The dog whined, lifted graying eyebrows, and wagged hopefully. Teresa leaned back in and gave Muskrat one last long hug. Then she was out the window and gone before she lost her resolve.

The first step—the hard one, really—was getting to the cell. It was night. The snow was still falling lightly, but it wasn't up past her shins. Getting out wouldn't be the problem.

There were two guards watching over the cells, a man and a woman. They braced as she walked into the room.

“I wish to speak with the prisoner,” she said.

They looked at each other.

“I’m not sure—” the man said.

Teresa made an impatient sound. “Trejo has asked me to question him before. It’s about the assault. We don’t have time.”

The fear did it. The sense of an enemy almost at their gate, and the confidence that someone in power was taking care of it. Even if the voice of authority had just turned fifteen. They led her into the cell. She felt shaky with excitement. It was like being one of the adventurous women she’d watched on her screens, only it was real. She was doing it.

Holden sat up, blinking against the sudden light. His hair was standing at odd angles and his face had pink lines across it from the pillow. Teresa turned to the male guard.

“You stay,” she said. Then to the woman, “You have something to subdue him? An electrical prod?”

“Yes,” the woman said.

Teresa held out her hand, and the woman drew a black, shining weapon with a grip all along its length. It looked like an ear of burned corn. The female guard showed Teresa where the safety was and how to trigger it.

“That’s really not called for,” Holden said. “Whatever this is? I’m not going to fight it. You won’t need those.”

“I’ll decide that,” Teresa said. She nodded the female guard out. Then it was just the three of them: Teresa, Holden, and the male guard. It was the last chance to turn back. She could still change her mind . . .

Teresa flipped the safety clear.

Holden flinched, prepared for the pain and shock, and Teresa drove the weapon into the guard’s belly and pulled the trigger. He went down hard, not even trying to catch himself.

“Okay,” Holden said after a long, stunned moment. “That was weird.”

“We don’t have much time. Come with me.”

“Um . . . no? I mean, I think I’m going to need a little more explanation about what’s . . . ah . . .”

Teresa felt a burst of anger, but there wasn’t time for it. She started stripping the male guard’s uniform off, undoing zippers and buttons, tugging at his sleeves.

“Your people are coming. Your old ship. The whole invasion was a ruse get them close.”

“There’s an invasion?” Holden said. And then, “They don’t tell me much. But you’re saving me?”

“I’m *using* you. I need to leave. You’re my ticket onto those ships. Now hurry. We don’t have time.”

Holden pulled the uniform over his prisoner’s jumpsuit. Confinement had left him thin enough that the extra cloth just about filled out the difference. Teresa took the stunner from the fallen guard’s belt and his access key, and opened the door. They marched out together. The woman at the guard’s station had time to look confused before Teresa put her down.

“This is actually happening, right?” Holden said as she led him down the hall toward the forensics lab. “Because this is a very realistic dream if it’s not happening.”

“This is happening,” Teresa said. And she meant, *I’m really doing this*. “I have an implanted tracking device. They’re going to be after us as soon as we go.”

“Okay,” Holden said.

“Here,” Teresa said. The door was locked, but the access key opened it. She stepped into the dim room. Timothy’s belongings had been moved around in the weeks since she’d been there, but they hadn’t been taken away. She walked from table to table, her fingertips brushing each container they passed. It was here. Someplace. It was right here.

“Hey,” Holden said. “This is . . . the pocket nuke? The one Amos had?”

“Yes,” Teresa said.

“And I’m standing right here next to it.”

“You are.”

“And you’re comfortable with that,” he said. “This is a *really* weird night.”

She found what she was looking for. The screen glowed as it powered up. She felt the seconds slipping away. Somewhere far above the planet, the rebel ships were already coming close. Already engaging with planetary defense. The files came up, lockouts and protections broken weeks ago. She looked for the file for evacuation protocol and, without hesitating, shifted the call to active.

“What was that?” Holden asked.

“I called for evac,” Teresa said, liking how adult the word felt in her mouth. Not *evacuation*. *Evac*. “All we have to do is get to the pickup.”

“Sure,” Holden said. “Sounds easy.”

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Chapter Forty-Six: Elvi

Going through Cortázar's hidden files was the work of days. It was horrifying. Winston Duarte had believed in Cortázar's ability, but more than that, he'd assumed that he had the man's loyalty. And that the things Cortázar told him were true. The experiment to change Duarte's body using the tamed protomolecule had been the worst kind of science—uncontrolled, unethical, speculative, and risky. He had overstated his certainty to Duarte, underplayed the risks, moved ahead on therapies based on best-guess understandings of Cara and Xan, and collected data obsessively. His notes and records read like a horror story.

As the unexpected changes had come—Duarte no longer needing sleep, developing new senses—Cortázar's comments shifted. Elvi wasn't sure the man himself would have seen it, but a plaintive quality started coming into them. A sense of jealousy about all the things he could only experience secondhand. A hunger was growing in Cortázar's mind that he didn't seem aware of.

Elvi tried to go through it all in more or less chronological order, but that was harder than it sounded. For one thing, the enemy fleet in Laconia system shook her concentration. Trejo was reassuring. No more antimatter was missing, and the mere nuclear warheads raining down on the planet were a trivial danger, easily avoided. Elvi started having nightmares about it, and her sleep suffered.

Also, chronology wasn't how Cortázar had structured his work. Notes and results on the protomolecule-modified telomerases that had been one of the first steps were in the same files as preliminary scans and data on Teresa Duarte. NIR and magnetic scans of Cara and Xan from his initial research

had annotations about Duarte's blood protein structures from as recently as the day before Cortázar died.

There were some advantages. Bouncing back and forth in time, Elvi began to feel the shape not only of Cortázar's obsession but also of the path he'd gone through. The change. His earliest notes on Teresa had been much like his plan for Duarte with some variations. His decision to instead kill her and give her to the repair drones hadn't come until fairly recently.

It was almost out of character too. Everything she saw about Cortázar had been about pushing forward, trying things that were new. He was a discoverer at heart, and the choice to pull back and study something foundational more deeply was unlike him.

It was a long time before she figured out who had convinced him to change from his usual strategy.

When she did, she only told Faye.

"Holden?" her husband said, incredulous. "James Holden put Cortázar up to killing Teresa?"

"I don't know," Elvi said. "I think so. Maybe."

They were getting ready for Teresa's birthday party. The dress Elvi had ordered up was a yellow that had looked good on the screen, but she wasn't sure about it now. It was the first time she'd seen Faye in days. She'd been going to the labs early and leaving them late. Would have done so again if Trejo weren't insisting on keeping up appearances. Between Duarte's conspicuous absence and the breaking news that the enemy had gutted a destroyer called the *Mammatus*, it was a harder and harder job.

"That doesn't make sense," he said, but the way he said it meant he believed her. "Why? Why would he do that?"

The note hadn't been hidden. It was in with Teresa's medical scans and blood data, as simple and open as a reminder to get fresh socks. *Holden's argument correct? Consider restarting protocol with additional subject.* And every note after that, wherever it had been added, assumed that Teresa Duarte began the process already dead. Another note seemed to be a list of talking points for breaking the news to the high consul.

With your life span, she was going to die before you did anyway.

The important thing is that we learn as much as we can from her ~~death~~ sacrifice.

Children die in nature all the time. This is just like that.

But the one she kept returning to was *Holden's argument correct?*

"She was . . . is heir to the empire," Elvi said. "If Cortázar turned her into a lab rat, it might destabilize Laconia. Take away the clear line of succession?"

"That's an awfully long game," Fayez said, pulling on his shoes. "It explains how Holden knew. But then why did he warn us?"

"Couldn't go through with it?" Elvi said. "Holden's a decent person. Decent people have trouble with murdering children. Second thoughts. Doubts. I don't know. I don't understand anything anymore."

"That's the thing about alien biologies and transdimensional monsters," Fayez sighed. "At least they're not *supposed* to make sense."

Elvi sighed in agreement and looked at herself in the mirror. Her leg was healed in that it didn't hurt, but the gouge the aliens had left in it still showed. A lighter patch of skin with a puckered edge.

"Pass me the cane?" Fayez asked. And then, as she did, "Are you going to tell Trejo about it?"

"I don't know. I'm not going to keep it from him, but . . . Cortázar's dead and Holden's under guard. There's nothing for Trejo to do about it, and he's juggling enough already. How do I look? Do I look like a wrapped candy? I feel like I'm dressed up as caramel chocolate."

"You look beautiful," Fayez said, rising to his feet. "You always do. Also, that you care at all what any of these people think is charming beyond words."

"What makes you think I care about what they think?" she said. "I asked *you*."

He laughed and stepped close to her. She put her arms around his chest, leaned her head against his shoulder, closed her eyes.

"I hate this," she whispered. "I hate all of this so much. I'm so tired of being scared and overwhelmed."

"I know. I'm a little adrenaline-sick myself. Maybe we should leave."

She chuckled. "Tender my resignation? Say I'm exploring options elsewhere? Maybe go back to teaching."

"I'm serious," Fayez said. "You still have command codes for the *Falcon*, don't you?"

She pulled back to look him in the eyes. He wasn't joking. She knew all his smiles, and this was a serious one.

"There are two separate navies out there ready to shoot us down," she said.

"Maybe. Or maybe we could defect. Or just run and take our chances. It couldn't be worse. This place is made out of palace intrigue and fear as much as it is concrete. And that's before it was the target of an ongoing rebellion looking to nuke it to glass. Say you're going to look for residual transdimensional radioactive ectoplasm or something. They won't know. With the shooting war going on, they're not going to come after little old us. We could make a break for it."

It was crazy, and worse, it was tempting. Elvi imagined waking up under some other sun. In a hut on a mountain on a world without a name.

"You've wanted out since you got here," Fayez said. "You've put a brave face on it, and I have too. But this is killing you by centimeters."

"Let me think," she said. "I'll think about it."

They walked to the ballroom together. For a quinceañera, there weren't many teenagers. Even as large as the room was, Elvi felt like the air was close, stale, rebreathed. She got a glass of wine, hardly aware of who she'd gotten it from. Pulled by her exhaustion, trying to make sense of Holden, her fear of the fighting in the system, and the beautiful dream of leaving Laconia behind, she was in a fog.

"Is everything all right?"

Teresa Duarte was at her side. Elvi had been aware the girl was speaking, but she hadn't listened. "Fine. Everything's fine."

Teresa smirked. "Well. Except."

"Yes. Except."

The dinner chime came, and Elvi tried to move away, but Teresa stayed at her side. The girl was working herself up to something. With a forced

casualness, Teresa said, “I was wondering, Dr. Okoye. The *Falcon*.”

Elvi felt a chill of fear. “What about it?”

“I wondered how the repairs were going. With everything that’s going on . . .” The girl put on a smile that was meant to be calming. Innocuous. “I mean, it is built for sustained high burn. It has breathable liquid crash couches.”

“Those are unpleasant,” Fayeze said, trying to move the subject away.

Teresa would not be turned aside. “But still. If the fighting got close? You’d be able to use it to get away?”

Elvi glanced at Fayeze. His expression went blank. So he was wondering it too. They’d been in their private rooms, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be monitored. Was Trejo watching them? Was this a test?

“Unfortunately,” Elvi said, choosing her words carefully, “the *Falcon* was deeply, deeply compromised.”

Fayeze followed suit. “I got a new foot, toenails and all, but that ship’s still in pieces.”

Teresa’s expression shifted, but Elvi wasn’t sure what it had shifted into. Elvi kept going, saying the things someone who had never thought of fleeing would say. “I really don’t think it’ll come to evacuation. None of those ships are even going to get close to the planet. And everything Admiral Trejo has at his disposal will be used to keep us all safe.”

“Maybe you should put a push on the repairs, then,” Teresa said, harshly. *As if there is anything I would rather do*, Elvi thought, and chuckled.

“Maybe I should,” she said as they entered the dining hall. Teresa finally had to go her own way. It felt like escaping something. Fayeze put his arm around her waist and let himself be guided to their table.

“That was uncomfortable,” he said.

“Don’t read too much into it,” Elvi said as they found their chairs. “Also? Don’t forget it.”

The dinner proceeded, the conversations stayed on safe ground. Elvi put Holden and his role in Cortázar’s murder plot out of her mind. She didn’t think of it again for weeks, and by then things were already out of control.



“Holden escaped,” Ilich shouted. The speaker on her hand terminal overloaded a little, flattening his voice. She tried to bring herself back to consciousness. It was hard to believe she’d actually drifted off, but the dreams still had their claws in her.

“The attack,” she said.

“They’re here. They’re fighting right now, and Holden’s free.”

She sat up on her bed. She was still wearing her uniform, though it was creased from sleep. She rubbed the back of her neck with an open palm. Holden was out of his cell at the same moment that the underground’s strike force was engaging with the defense grid. There was no way that could be coincidence. Somehow, he’d known it was coming. And he was getting out before the bombs hit the State Building.

Her gut clenched. The fear that had been growing since the enemy’s gambit became clear tightened her gut. *I’m going to die. Fayez is going to die. We’re not going to see dawn.*

“Tell Trejo,” she said. “You need to tell Trejo.”

“He’s busy commanding the defenses. Holden stunned the guards. They’re still unconscious.”

“Jesus Christ,” she said. “What do you want me to do about it?”

Ilich stammered for a few seconds. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Secure the pocket nuke that’s in the same facility, then get a security team and start looking for him,” Elvi said.

“Yes,” Ilich said. “Right.”

He dropped the connection. Fayez was sitting on the edge of the bed, his eyes wide and alarmed.

“That man,” Elvi said, “is not great in a crisis. I’m starting to think he’s got the wrong job.”

“Elvi,” Fayez said. “Holden. *Teresa*.”

It only took a moment. “Shit.”

She went for the door, Fayez close behind her. The air was cold and wet and stinging. It numbed her face instantly. Flakes of snow swirled down

from the sky like ashes from a huge fire. The distant ground-based rail guns made a constant rolling thunder, and the clouds flickered red and orange in the north as they fired. Far above the clouds, a battle was going on. Elvi put her head down and ran. Fayeze came along just behind her, his footsteps falling in and out of sync with her own.

An alarm sounded, screaming out across the State Building and its compound. She didn't know if it was about the war or the escaped prisoner.

At Teresa's rooms, she pounded the door with her fist and shouted the girl's name, but the only answer was frantic barking. The thunder of the planetary defenses grew louder, almost deafening. Something terribly bright happened somewhere above the clouds and turned the white snow-struck landscape to noon for three long seconds.

"We need to take shelter," Fayeze said, and Elvi kicked Teresa's door. Fayeze did too. It seemed like it wouldn't be enough. They'd beat themselves against it forever and never get through. And then the frame gave way, the door slammed inward, and Teresa's dog ran out into the night, barking madly.

"Get inside," Fayeze shouted, but Elvi was already following the dog. It bounded through the fallen snow, throwing up ice like dust. Its bark was urgent, and it led Elvi on. She couldn't feel her feet well, and her wounded leg burned and ached, but one foot went in front of the other.

Snowfall and the battle light had changed the gardens into a vision of hell. She didn't know where she was, didn't know where the State Building was, couldn't tell where she was going, except that she was following the trail of paw prints and broken snow.

She should have gotten a gun. She was a major. Someone would have given her one if she'd asked. Better, she should have called Ilich and the security team. It was too late, though. She couldn't turn back, and she had to believe that the James Holden she knew would listen to her. Would hear her. Would stop whatever his plan was before the girl got hurt.

The dog vanished into the gloom ahead, barking and howling. She'd been stupid. She'd been overworked. Duarte and Cortázar and the war and the things from beyond time and space. They'd overwhelmed her and she'd

lost sight of the girl who was right in front of her and the man who'd planned to kill her.

All the panic and the fear and the driving need to flee distilled into this moment, this doomed rush, the snow, and the howls of the dog.

And voices.

"Stop!" Elvi shouted, and her voice was hoarse. "Holden, stop!"

The trail led almost to the fence. High in the darkness, the mountain beyond the State Building reared up, transformed by snow and darkness into a vast gray wave. And there, in a snow-filled gully, James Holden stood in a black guard's uniform. His hair was wild and his skin was pale except for two bright-red patches at the cheeks where the cold had bitten him.

The dog capered and yapped at his side, and Holden raised a hand like he was seeing an unexpected friend at a cocktail party. But there was another voice. Teresa's voice, scolding the dog and telling it to be quiet.

"Holden," Elvi gasped. Now that she was slowing down, her side hurt like someone was stabbing her. "Holden, stop. Don't do this. You don't have to do this."

"Do what?" he said. And then, "Are you okay?"

"Let her go. It won't fix anything to hurt her."

Holden's forehead furrowed, and for a moment, she could see the young man he'd been the first time she'd met him, decades ago on a different planet. She held tight to the chance he might still be the same man, somewhere deep inside.

"Hurt who?" he said, and pointed at Teresa. "Her?"

"I know what you did," she said, trying to catch her breath. "I know you put Cortázar up to it."

"We have to go," Teresa said. Elvi noticed for the first time that the girl was doing something in the gully. Digging away a drift of fallen snow. Holden's sleeves were crusted with ice where he'd been doing the same.

"She's just a kid, Holden. Whatever your plan is, she doesn't have to be part of it."

"I'm more part of *her* plan at this point," he said.

“We have to go!” Teresa said. “We don’t have time for this. Muskrat! Shut up!”

The dog wagged, happily ignoring the order. Footsteps came from behind Elvi. Fayez, stumbling through the snow. A deep, rolling sound came from the north. The earth trembled, and the rail-gun flashes stopped. Without their voices, the night seemed weirdly silent.

“What’s going on?” Fayez said.

“I’m leaving,” Teresa said. “I’m trading their prisoner for a way out, and I’m leaving. His ship is coming for us right now, and we have to get to the rendezvous.”

“He tried to get you killed,” Elvi said. “You can’t trust him.”

“I can’t trust anyone,” Teresa said, and the weariness and bitterness in her voice belonged to a much older woman.

“No,” Holden said. “That wasn’t about Teresa. That was about you. Hey, Fayez.”

“Hey, Holden,” Fayez said, and dropped to his knees at Elvi’s side. Snowflakes landed on his hair and stayed there, unmelting.

“I don’t understand.”

“This has all been about you,” Holden said. “Literally from the minute I found out about the alien rip-in-space thing that showed up on the *Tempest*, I’ve been trying to get Cortázar out and you in his place. All this?” He gestured at the now-quiet sky. “I don’t know anything about it. I haven’t been in touch with anybody. None of it’s been me.”

Elvi shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“I got you the job,” Holden said. “I’m the one who told Duarte you’d been studying what killed the protomolecule engineers. And yes, I talked Cortázar into getting himself in trouble. And then I tried to rat him out. It was the only thing I could think of that Duarte would care about enough to get rid of his pet mad scientist. And since you were the expert, you’d get the promotion.”

The punch in her chest was betrayal. She felt betrayed. She’d seen Sagale and Travon die because of Holden. She’d almost lost her leg, almost

lost her husband, suffered through everything because of him. “Why would you do this to me?”

“I wanted to get someone sane and rational in charge before Duarte did something stupid that we couldn’t take back.” He lifted his hands and then let them fall, a gesture of powerlessness. “I’m not sure it worked, but it was all I could do.”

Teresa stood up. Her black sweater was white with ice. “We can get through. The space is big enough. But the second I’m off the grounds, security’s going to know it. We can’t stop running once we start.”

Holden nodded, but his eyes were on Elvi. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Make up for it. We’re here. Take us with you. And in the other half of her mind, the labs. The pens. The *Falcon* and all the data she’d acquired with it, still waiting to be sifted through. Was Ochida going to take it up if she left? Would he be better than Cortázar?

Was there anyone, anywhere she’d trust with this more than she trusted herself? And the enemy—the deep enemy—had tried to hurt them already. Was looking for a way. Her leg throbbed like it was reminding her of the black things between the spaces. Was someone else going to stop them?

She looked at Holden’s face. He was one of those men who was going to look boyish until the day he died. *Fuck you for putting me in this position*, she thought. *Fuck you for making this the right thing for me to do.*

It wasn’t what she said aloud.

“Go.”

Chapter Forty-Seven: Naomi

Alex?”

“I see it,” he shouted. “What do we do?”

A wave of disorientation washed through her, like she had started floating again without having stopped the first time. The ship jumped and shuddered around her as she pulled up the record of Amos’ mission and cross-checked. It looked real. If it was false, it was convincing.

The plan was to hit the platforms and then burn hard to get away before the enemy forces could get back. She’d given them a wide window for it. Adding in a surface landing and extraction . . .

But if she didn’t, and Amos really was waiting. Or Jim.

“Naomi?” Alex asked again. “What do we do?”

“Take out the platforms,” she said. And then, “First. We take out the platforms first.”

“If we’re going to land, we have to slow down,” Alex said.

She needed time. She didn’t have it. The *Roci* shifted hard, then fell away, slamming her against her straps as their rail gun fired.

“Get me options,” she said.

“Coming up,” Alex said, and the thrust alert came on. They were flying into the enemy barrage, and she was slowing them down. “Ian! Tell the others to match my course. We’re putting on the brakes.”

She pulled up the tactical, and the drive came on, pushing her back into her couch and the coolness of the gel. She couldn’t tell if it was the evasive dodging or the changes in acceleration or her own sense of doom that left her feeling nauseated, but it didn’t matter. She pulled up the tactical display,

ran it through the *Roci*'s system, and prayed to nothing in particular that a solution existed.

Their information on the defense grid was pieced together from Transport Union ships that had moved through the system. Five weapon platforms, flat black and resistant to radar. They were in higher orbits than the alien construction platforms, and spaced around the planet in a web that put any approaching ship in the sights of at least two and usually three. They were already firing at Naomi's little strike force, and whatever technology they were using to compensate for the rounds they fired, it didn't make a heat or light plume that she could use for targeting.

The construction platforms were closer to the planet, long and articulated, with filaments coming off of them like something in a microscope slide of contaminated water. They shimmered with light. There were five of those too, all of them in near-equatorial orbit.

The plan had been to approach with the ships close together so that they would all be covered by the same defenses and dilute the incoming fire between them. Then, when they were close, the *Cassius* and the *Prince of the Face* would split off, wrapping around the spinward side of the planet while the *Roci* and the *Quinn* cleaned up anti-spinward. Then they would all burn hard for the ring gate and the hundreds of systems beyond to hide in.

That had been the plan. Now it was the same, but slower. More time in the enemy crosshairs. Less chance of escaping unharmed.

Ian shouted over the din of PDC fire, drive resonance, and thruster burn. "*Cassius* is requesting permission to break off. They're ready to make their run."

"Confirmed," Naomi shouted. "Let's do this."

"With them gone, the bad guys are going to have more guns for us," Alex said. "We're about to get real bumpy."

"What the hell has it been up to now?" Ian asked.

"Walk in the park, kid," Alex said.

On her tactical display, the *Cassius* turned, its drive plume leaning in toward the other three as it slid toward the far side of the onrushing planet.

A few seconds later, the *Prince of the Face* did likewise. As they slid away, a new bloom of fast movers jumped up from the Laconian defenses.

“How many of these missiles can we take?” Naomi shouted, and a voice she didn’t know yelled back, *PDCs at sixty percent* as if that answered her question.

“We can start doing damage of our own in eighty seconds,” Alex said. “Seventy-nine.”

“Lock on the construction platforms,” Naomi said. Her legs felt like they were on the verge of cramping. Her monitor was throwing three low-priority medical alerts. She ignored them. The ship moved hard to port, fighting to get out of a rail gun’s firing arc. They were getting close enough that dodging after the rail gun fired was getting hard.

“Permission to hit their weapons, Captain?”

“No,” Naomi said. “The construction platform goes down first.” She might die. They all might die. Even if they did, they didn’t have to lose.

She fought the temptation to grab weapons control herself. The fear and the tension left her muscles trembling, and the evasive shifting was coming faster and harder. She wanted a sense of control. Of being able to bend the next minutes to her will. Trusting a crew she’d barely met with everything was like flying blind.

“*Prince of the Face* reporting that the *Cassius* took a rail-gun hit,” Ian shouted.

“How bad?” Naomi asked, already pulling up the sensor array data to see for herself. By the time Ian spoke, she knew.

“The *Cassius* is gone.”

The odds shifted in her mind again. If the *Prince of the Face* was lost too, it would mean looping around Laconia to catch the surviving platforms. She’d only just taken on the risk by slowing down, and she was already paying the price.

She took comms control and opened a connection to the *Prince of the Face*. As soon as it went through, she started talking.

“This is Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. Kill your braking burn. Go back to the initial strategy. In fast, kill the construction platforms, and burn

for the gate. Do not decelerate further. Do not wait for us.”

“Reconegut, *Rocinante*,” a voice came back. The accent was pure Ceres Station. “Geh cahn Allah, sa sa?”

On her tactical display, the *Prince of the Face*’s drive plume died, and the ship seemed to leap ahead, rushing toward its target by burning less.

“We’re almost in range,” Alex said.

“I don’t care how much you have to dance,” Naomi said. “Just get us there.”

“Ten more fast movers coming from the defense platform,” Ian said. “PDCs are at fifty.”

“Alex?”

“Doing what I can,” he said. “Give me thirty more seconds.”

Naomi opened a channel to the *Quinn*. “Report.”

“We took a few rounds in engineering and our machine shop,” a young man’s voice answered. “We’re okay for now.”

“*Rocinante* is lining up a shot. Cover us.”

“Copy that,” the *Quinn* said.

The *Roci* slammed to port, and then again. Naomi’s crash couch whirled, keeping the impacts against her back no matter what direction they came from.

“I really. Wish. They had fewer rail guns,” Alex said from between clenched teeth.

“At least we can dodge,” Naomi said.

“We can until we can’t,” Alex said, and the *Roci* stuttered under her as their own rail gun fired. She pulled up the image of the alien platform, still much too far away to see with the naked eye. Even with the *Roci*’s system stabilizing the image, it jumped and vibrated. Naomi leaned in, willing the shot to hit. At this distance, even a mistiming in the shot, a small unanticipated vibration, could mean they’d failed.

The image whited out for a second as an enemy missile died close enough to their line-of-sight to confuse the sensors. It came back in time for her to see the platform shudder and shift. The complex structure seemed to pull in like it was wrapping itself around an injury. It thrashed once, a

widespread spasm. The shimmer of lights danced along its spine and out through the structures of its arms, and then it began to unspool. Like a tight-wound thread dropped into water, it relaxed and spread. The rigid shape softened and collapsed on itself, scattering through the emptiness over a vast Laconian ocean. Bright lines of energy like lightning or dying nerve impulses shot along it as it grew dark and drifted apart. The *Roci* shook and shuddered as the alien structure gently, gracefully died.

Alex let out a sigh that was part relief and part awe. Naomi knew exactly what he meant. She tried to open a connection to the *Prince of the Face*, to report the kill and check in, but the body of the planet blocked it, and there weren't any repeaters she could use. From here on in, she had to go on faith.

Alex turned off the drive. They'd braked. If they'd kept it going, the *Roci* would have started moving away from the planet again. They were in orbit now. Being on the float should have been a relief. It felt like a threat.

"Where's the next one?" Naomi asked.

"Coming up," Alex said. "It's behind the horizon line now. We'll have it in eight and half minutes."

"Let's start knocking down some of these weapons platforms. See if we can get a little peace."

The *Roci* kicked again, and the PDC chatter was joined by the deeper, subtle thrum of the torpedoes launching. Naomi found herself grinning despite the pain.

"What's that?" Naomi said. On the surface of the planet, near the center of one of the continents, a brightness was lighting the thick clouds from beneath. City lights. The capital. Laconia. And just north of it, a bright and burning light, rising up through the atmosphere in a perfectly straight line of fire and smoke.

"Huh," Alex said. "That's surface-based rail guns."

"Were we expecting those?"

"First I've heard of them."

"That's going to make landing a lot harder."

“Yes, it is,” Alex said, and dragged the *Roci* out of the path of the incoming fire. “Kind of makes you wish the pickup was a little farther from the most guarded part of the planet, really.”

“We’d meant to do this a long time ago,” Naomi said. “It looks like they built up in the meantime.”

She checked her maps. The city was almost beneath them now. This was as close to Jim as she had been in years. If the *Prince of the Face* was on time and target, there was only one platform left. On her monitor, one of the Laconian weapons platforms blew, taken out by a combination of a rail-gun round from the *Quinn* and two of the *Roci*’s remaining torpedoes.

It would be so easy to order the drop. Fall through the rough Laconian air, make the pickup, and kill the last platform on her way out.

If she was sure she’d make it. If she was so convinced that she’d live through it that she could risk wasting everything they’d done until now. And she wasn’t.

“Steady as she goes, Alex,” Naomi said.

A sudden bang like a detonation shook the ship, deafening her. She waited for the hiss of lost air, the silence of the vacuum, and it didn’t come.

“What was that?” she shouted.

“Debris hit,” Ian said. “We’ve got a hole in the outer hull.”

“Watch our pressure. If we start leaking, tell me.”

“You got it.”

“I’ve got the last one,” Alex said.

Fast movers on our back. PDCs at thirty percent. Naomi pulled up the visual tracking. They were so close now, she could see the curve of Laconia in the scopes, the milkiness of its high atmosphere.

A connection request came in. The *Prince of the Face* had cleared the planet and had line of sight for a tightbeam. She accepted it.

“Give me good news,” she said.

“Clar y muerte,” the *Prince of the Face* said. “Up to you now, boss.”

“Thank you for that,” Naomi said.

Another rail gun from the surface.

“Another what?” the *Prince of the Face* asked.

“We’re getting fire from the surface,” Naomi said. “It’s fine. Continue with your flight plan. Get out of here. Do it now.”

“Maybe etwas can can do,” the *Prince of the Face* said, but before she could ask what they meant, Alex said, “I’ve got lock.”

“Do it,” Naomi said.

The *Rocinante* bucked again. The rail-gun round left a faintly glowing trail, superheating the almost-absent air that it passed through. Naomi held her breath. The rail-gun round touched the distant platform, and her sensors went dead. She pulled up the ship status. All the sensor arrays had tripped to safe. Overloaded.

“What’s—” she started, and the ship screamed. She grabbed the edge of the crash couch as it whirled crazily. They were tumbling. A shock wave moved through the barely present gas out past the edge of turbopause, still strong enough to send them spinning like a kid’s toy that had been kicked. The lights flickered, died, and came back on again. The bones of the ship creaked, and the roar of maneuvering thrusters filled her ears as Alex fought to bring them back to stability. The sensor arrays were still resetting, and Naomi felt the rail-gun rounds cracking up from the surface unseen. She waited to hear them snap through her ship. Hole the reactor. End them.

When the sensor arrays blinked back, the construction platform was gone. A corona of superheated air danced where it had been, green and gold and red.

“I think they may have been making some more antimatter,” Alex said, dryly. “Not sure that was the best idea.”

Naomi didn’t respond. Something was happening on the surface of the planet. The ground defenses where the rail-gun rounds had originated was reading hot. Nothing was firing. She tried to connect the death of the platform with it, but the pieces wouldn’t fit. Something else had happened.

A connection request came. The *Prince of the Face* again. Naomi took it. “Did you do something? What did you do?”

“Still had demi-hold á plasma torpedoes, yeah?” the other ship said. “No use for. Dropped them on your rail-gun base, que? Clear your way. Question is what did *you* do? That a *nuke*?”

“Nothing so trivial as that,” Naomi said. “Thank you, *Prince*. We’re good. Now get out.”

“Already gone,” the ship said, and the connection dropped. She sent a tightbeam to the *Quinn*. It answered immediately.

“We’re seeing all enemy weapons platforms in the hemisphere disabled,” a young man said. “We have a half-hour window before anything cycles to this side of the planet.”

“Go,” Naomi said. “We have a pickup to make on the surface.”

They were silent long enough Naomi thought she might have lost the connection.

“We’re your escort, *Rocinante*. Do what you need to do, we’ll be here. If we were rated for atmo, we’d go with you.”

“Negative, *Quinn*,” Naomi said. “Burn for the gates. That’s an order.”

A moment later, the *Quinn*’s drive plume bloomed out bright and huge, and the *Rocinante* was left alone in the wide sky over Laconia. Naomi looked around her. There was smoke in the air, but no alarms were going off. Her crash couch had pushed one of her medical alarms back to normal, but the other two showed elevated cortisol and blood pressure. No one was shooting at her, and it felt strange.

“Alex?” she said. “Are we ready to go down?”

“Checking,” he said. “That debris hit fucked up our aerodynamics, but . . . I can make it work. It’ll be choppy as hell.”

“Can’t scare me,” Naomi said. “Get us down. As soon as you can.”

Below them, Laconia was in night. There was a beauty to it. Apart from a faint bioluminescence where the distant sea met the shore, the land was dark. The only light was shrouded by clouds. This was what Earth would have looked like, more or less, before the first electric light. Before the first satellite, the first orbital shuttle. Before Mars. Before Ceres. Before the Belt. It was the heart of a galactic empire, and still as bare as wilderness. Auberon and Bara Gaon had more cities. Earth had more history. Every place had the dream of what it could become.

Dreams were fragile things to build with. Titanium and ceramic lasted longer.

“Captain?”

She looked over at Ian. He was a boy. He was probably older than she’d been when the *Canterbury* died and she’d first set foot on the *Rocinante*, and he was just a boy.

“Kefilwe,” she said.

“I was wondering if I could take the comms controls back,” he said. “I . . . It’s my duty. If you . . .”

“Sorry,” Naomi said, shifting them back to his station. “Old habit. That was rude.”

“Just trying to feel useful,” he said through a tentative smile.

“All right,” Alex said. “We’re as close as we’re going to get. And more time won’t help us.”

“Take us down,” Naomi said. The maneuvering thrusters fired, slowing the ship and letting it drop. Alex turned them back toward the cloud-blanketed city already carried hundreds of clicks away by the planet’s rotation, tilted down the nose, and tapped his controls. The maneuvering thrusters roared again.

Less than a minute later, the *Rocinante* hit air.

Chapter Forty-Eight: Teresa

Teresa pushed through the cold and the darkness of the flood channel, hunched down. A slush of almost frozen water and slime soaked her shoes and the hem of her pants. Clearing the entrance had numbed her hands, and now her fingers were starting to hurt. Not bringing gloves when she left only felt like the most recent in a long line of terrible choices.

Behind her, Muskrat whined.

"I told you to go back," Teresa said, but the dog ignored her. If anything she stayed closer. And behind Muskrat, the heavy footsteps and rough breath of James Holden.

The slush under her feet grew thicker, more solid. A few more steps, and she was standing on solid ice.

"We're almost there," she said. "There?"

"The other side of the flood channel."

"Is that the pickup?"

"No, we have to get to the mountain."

"Mountain. Right," Holden said. "Okay."

A thin oval of gray the size of her pillow swam out of the darkness ahead. A drift of fallen snow blocked the way out, but not enough to stop her. Teresa stamped forward, pressing the snow down, compacting it, then scrambling forward to do it again. Somewhere in the State Building, an alarm was going off. The security forces alerted to her escape. She hoped that the battle would be distraction enough to lend her time.

"You're going to get soaked," Holden said.

"I'm going to get *out*."

He was quiet after that.

She scrambled out into the world. The wall of the State Building was behind her, the stretch of the wilds ahead. Holden emerged more slowly, and Muskrat with him. The trees had pulled in all their leaves, and the snow stuck to their trunks like a million featureless masks. Everything was transformed. The same and not the same. For the first time, she felt a prick of uncertainty. This was her place. She knew it and how to navigate it. Or at least she had until now.

She headed down the first path. Her breath plumed white and thick with every exhalation, and moving helped to keep the cold at bay. She wished that the flashes and roar of battle were still there, if just to help light the way. She told herself that it meant the rescue ship was almost there. And that she had to hurry.

The path through the forest seemed brighter than the sky above them. The snow was thicker here, rising up almost to her knees. Muskrat huffed and pushed, forging a path beside hers, and Holden followed along in the furrows they made. The snow was still falling. Small, hard flakes that tapped against her cheeks and melted down like tears.

There were tracks in the snow where animals had passed, and one of the trees had a long, fresh rip in its bark where something looking for food had dug deep into the hibernating flesh. Teresa wondered if animals did that on other planets, or if it was only here. For a moment, the implications of what she was doing rose up and threatened to overwhelm her, but she pushed the thoughts aside. She wasn't going back now. Not even if she could.

Something moved in the trees to her left, and she felt a moment of panic. A bone-elk leaped across the path and away, the exoskeleton of its legs clattering like stones rolling down a hill. It was nothing.

She made what she thought was the right turn, and the path grew steeper. The mountain loomed up in the darkness. Not really a mountain. An artifact so ancient it was covered in stone. Or one that had been made that way. History so deep, a forest had grown over it, and seasons passed against it like days.

She pushed into the clearing where the evacuation ship was supposed to land. It was wide and flat, with a slope that rose toward the distant summit

on one side and a clear view of the State Building on the other. In the falling snow, the buildings with their softly glowing windows seemed farther away than they were. Like something seen from fairyland. With the flash and roar of the battle gone, it looked peaceful. It wasn't, but it looked that way.

Behind her, Holden came to the clearing. He had pulled his arms inside the shirt for warmth, the sleeves flapping empty against his sides. He squatted down in the snow.

"Are you all right?"

"Out of shape," he said. "Next time, I'm working out more. I'll convert a corner of my cell into a gym or something."

She'd had enough conversations with him now to know he was telling a joke without his voice signaling that it was a joke. No one else in her social life did that, and she found it irrationally annoying. It made every exchange into a puzzle that had to be decoded to see if it was sincere or not. She pushed the irritation away. There were a lot of things people did that she'd never had to be patient about. It was time to start learning that skill.

"This is where I met him," she said.

"Met him?"

"Timothy," she said. "Amos."

"Oh," Holden said, and looked around. For a moment, he was silent. "It's beautiful. I mean, weird. But also beautiful. I wish I'd seen more of Laconia. Not just the gardens."

"Me too," Teresa said, and stared at the low, gray sky. "Where *are* they?"

Without the trees to shelter them from the wind and the effort of pushing through the snow, the cold grew sharper. Holden seemed to fall in on himself, arms wrapped tight, head resting on his knees. Muskrat went and sat beside him, the dog's wide brown eyes concerned.

Teresa knew about hypothermia. She didn't feel bad herself, but Holden was older and he'd been in prison for a long time. It had weakened him. She thought about going and sitting beside him too. She remembered stories about people caught in the wilderness making structures in the snow to capture and share body heat, but she didn't know how that worked. She

wondered, if the evac ship came and Holden was already dead, what they would do with her . . .

A blast of frigid air came down the mountain, pulling the top layers of snow up in brief whirlwinds. Teresa took a step toward Holden. Maybe she could take him to Timothy's cave. Just until the ship came. Take him there, and then she could come back herself and lead the rescuers to him. If there were rescuers. If this worked.

A trickle of black dread seeped through her body. This had to work.

"I'm sorry you had to find out that way," Holden said.

Teresa looked at him. She couldn't remember if delirium was part of hypothermia, but it seemed like it might be. "Find out about what?"

"The whole killing-you thing. Pushing Cortázar into it. It wasn't personal."

Teresa looked him. A miserable man, hunched in the snow. She knew that she should feel angry. She was angry all the time these days, and at everyone. She tried to summon up the rage, but it didn't come. She could only feel sorry for him.

Holden took her silence as something it wasn't. He kept talking. "It wasn't supposed to get you hurt. I was putting a wedge between your father and Cortázar. That was all. You were the only thing that would do that. Everyone saw how much he loved you."

"Did they?"

Holden's nod was slow to start, like he was already turning into ice. "There was a woman I knew. Long time. She used to say you can't judge anyone by what they say. You have to watch what they do."

"She *said* that."

"I recognize the irony. But I watched what she did too. How she made people like her. How she made them afraid. I'm not good at the second one, but I was pretty good at the first part."

"Because of her?"

"In part. And I watched what your father did with you. How he treated you. And I used that. I'm sorry."

"Yeah?"

“Not repentant,” he said. “Just sorry.”

“So sorry that you’d do it again the same way?”

“I’d try to move it along a little faster, but yes. Sorry that it was my best move.”

Teresa looked up into the clouds again. The snow swirled down at them. Her fingers and toes were starting to burn. There still wasn’t a ship.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I knew you were the enemy. You did what enemies do. It’s worse when it’s your friends.”

“That’s true,” Holden said. And then, “Cart’s coming.”

She listened and heard it too. The electric whine of a security cart. The way the snow muffled sound, it had to be close. She looked around for someplace to hide, some way to escape, but the snow would give her away no matter where she went, and Holden couldn’t run anymore.

“Stay calm,” she said. “I’ll handle it.”

A moment later, Holden rose to his feet, and Muskrat looked up at him, concerned. The dog’s expression said, *Maybe you should sit back down. You don’t look steady.* Holden scratched between her ears.

There were voices now. She made out two of them. Maybe a third. Down the path that led back to the State Building, a light began to dance. Headlights on a cart moving fast through the fallen snow. Voices calling her name. The cart rolled into the clearing and stopped. Three men in it. Two wore guard uniforms like the one Holden had stolen. The third was Colonel Ilich.

Ilich leaped out, pistol raised at Holden.

“Put your hands up,” Ilich shouted. “Now!”

“Okay,” Holden said, poking his arms back into his sleeves, then lifting them. “I’m not armed.”

“Teresa, get in the cart.”

“No, you get in the cart,” Teresa said. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Ilich turned toward her, shock in his eyes. She watched him understand, confusion slipping seamlessly into rage.

“Get in the fucking cart,” Ilich said.

“Or you’ll shoot me?”

The two guards looked at each other nervously, but Ilich walked toward her. He kept his pistol trained on Holden, but his eyes were on her.

“No, I won’t shoot you. But I’ll put a guard on you every moment for the rest of your life.”

“You don’t control me anymore,” Teresa shouted, and Ilich laughed.

“Of course I do. That is literally my first duty. Make sure the girl eats. Make sure the girl sleeps. Educate her. Socialize her. I am your fucking mother, and I am telling you to get your spoiled, egotistical, self-centered ass into that God damn cart!”

“I won’t,” she said, and crossed her arms.

Ilich seemed to deflate. For a second, she thought she’d won.

“You will,” he said, “or I’ll kill your dog.”

He lowered his pistol a degree. It was like the volume of the world turned down. Teresa could still hear everything, but at a distance. She waited for the gunshot, sure it was coming. That she wouldn’t be able to stop it. *Don’t do it, I’ll come* tried to find its way to her throat, but she was frozen. Her throat wouldn’t work any better than her legs. Ilich shook his head once, just a centimeter one way and then the other. He turned to check his sights on Muskrat, but the shot that rang out wasn’t from him.

Back at the cart, something was happening. Teresa couldn’t tell what it was at first. Her mind tried to make it into the two guards wrestling with each other, except one of them toppled out the side of the cart and fell into the snow. The violence in the cart kept going on. In her peripheral vision, she saw Holden step in front of Muskrat, his arms still lifted, but Ilich wasn’t paying attention to that now.

“Captain Erder! Report!” Ilich barked, but no one answered. Instead, the guard still in the cart shrieked once. Something wet snapped, and the screaming stopped. Everything was perfectly still. Ilich took a step toward the cart, then another.

Timothy boiled out from the shadows behind the cart, sprinting through the snow. His eyes were black, his skin gray. Ilich fired and a smear of blackness appeared on Timothy’s bare ribs. He hit Ilich like he’d fallen

from a great height and sent the man's legs up in the air as Timothy bore his torso down into the snow.

It had all happened too fast. She didn't know if the pistol belonged to one of the guards or if he'd taken it from Ilich. Only that it looked smaller in Timothy's hand. Muskrat barked happily and wagged her tail, scattering the snow.

Holden slowly let down his arms. "Amos?"

Timothy—Amos—stood up over Ilich and went perfectly still for a moment, then said, "Hey, Cap. You look like shit." Below him, Ilich gasped, the wind knocked out of him by the violence of Timothy's charge.

"You've been prettier yourself, one time and another."

"Well, you know how it is." Amos turned his dark eyes to her and nodded down at the snow where Ilich lay, still wheezing. "Hey there, Tiny. This guy a friend of yours?"

Teresa started to say yes, and then no, and then she understood what he was asking.

"No," she said. "He's not on my side."

"All right," Amos said, and fired the pistol twice. The muzzle flash was the brightest thing in the world.

"How did you find us?" Holden asked, swaying on his feet.

"This asshole," Amos said. "I been tracking him every time he came out from the compound over there. Figured sooner or later, I'd get a shot at him. You made a good distraction."

"Did you have to kill him?" Holden asked.

"Just evening up the score, is all. Are you sure you're okay, Cap? You seem kind of fucked."

A dozen questions pressed at Teresa's mind—where have you been living, how did you survive without any of your things, how badly are you hurt, why aren't you dead—but what came out of her mouth was, "Aren't you cold?"

Amos looked at her, thought about the question. Snowflakes were landing on his bare chest and melting there. The hole in his ribs where he'd been shot wasn't bleeding. After a moment, he shrugged. "I'll live."

Before Teresa could say anything more, a powerful, deep roar came from somewhere high above them. Her first thought was that they'd started an avalanche. She imagined herself and all the others wiped away by tons of snow rushing down the mountain. But then she saw the lights in the sky.

Amos took her elbow, leaned close, and shouted in her ear, "We should get back to the tree line."

She let herself be led, Holden and Muskrat following close behind, as a huge ship fell from the sky. The plumes of its maneuvering thrusters melted the snow in the clearing away in an instant and set the security cart rolling. Teresa huddled back among the dormant trees, her hands over her ears, until the roaring stopped and Amos tapped her shoulder.

The ship was a fast-attack frigate. A very old Martian design. Its sides were a patchwork of different plating materials. Steam rose all around it, and the cooling metal and carbon-silicate lace ticked and popped. Teresa walked out toward it with a sense of awe and joy and profound accomplishment. She'd done it.

The airlock opened, and a man in no kind of uniform looked down into the darkness and the mist and the snowfall.

"Who's there?" the man's voice called.

"Alex?" Holden shouted.

Almost conversationally, the voice said, "Well, holy shit."

A rickety metal stair ladder descended. Holden went up first, his steps unsteady at first, but more sure the higher he went. Muskrat paced at the bottom of the stair anxiously.

"I don't know," Teresa said to her. "This is why I told you to stay in my rooms."

"Go on up," Amos said. "I got this."

Teresa put her hands on the bright metal and climbed up toward the hands of strangers reaching out to help her aboard. And behind her Amos, balancing without his hands because his arms were filled with dog. The black wound on his side didn't appear to bother him. The man waiting for them laughed when he saw Muskrat, and the dog wagged uncertainly at first.

The locker room seemed to be on its side, Holden and a bald, dark-skinned man embracing and grinning at each other. Timothy—no, Amos hauled up the ladder, and the airlock door closed behind her.

She'd practiced for this moment. *I'm Teresa Duarte, and I'm giving you back this prisoner in exchange for passage out of Laconia.* Now that it had arrived, it seemed like that was all just given.

"You got to come up to the flight deck," the dark-skinned man said. Alex, Holden had called him. "We gotta get out of here, but I'm not letting either of you two sons of bitches out of my sight."

Teresa followed them, unsure what else to do. Amos walked with her through the sideways lift and flight deck. A beautiful older woman with curly white hair pulled down almost over her eyes was waiting there. When she saw Holden, she took a long, shuddering breath. The prisoner took her hand.

"All right," Alex said. "Everybody strap in. We're off this mudball."

A rough cheer rose all around her, and Teresa surprised herself by joining in. Amos took her by the shoulder and led her to an ancient-looking, thoroughly disreputable crash couch.

"You're gonna need to strap in, Tiny. I got an idea what to do with this one," he said, pointing a thick thumb at Muskrat. "So you just stay here with Naomi and the captain."

"Naomi," Teresa said. "That's Naomi Nagata?"

"And this is the *Rocinante*," Amos said. "And I don't know who most of the rest of these people are, but one way or another, we're home."

And then he was gone, leading Muskrat into the belly of the ship and leaving her to stare up into the monitor. It felt strange, like she was in a dream, but also mundane as walking down a slightly unfamiliar hallway. She was here. She was leaving.

The ship shuddered, hissed, started to rise up.

"You want me to kick on the main drive?" Alex asked over the sound of the thrusters burning. "I could slag that whole palace if you want."

"No," Holden said, "leave it be. We still have friends there. Elvi, for one."

“Oh,” Alex said. “Should we go get her?”

“No,” Holden said. “She’s where she needs to be.”

The *Rocinante* rose, pushing Teresa back into the cool, blue gel of the couch. The ship shuddered and hummed as it rose, and then when they were high enough from the ground, a new, deeper thrum began, and they leaped upward. Into the darkness of space. Leaving everything behind. She closed her eyes, trying to decide what she felt. If she felt anything, or maybe everything all at once.

Her home, everything she’d ever known, was falling away behind her, and all she was certain of was that she never wanted to go back. The princess was getting hell and gone from fairyland.

A sharp alert caught her attention at the same moment the pilot—Alex—said something obscene. She looked over at him, and his face was ashen.

“Alex?” the woman said.

“We been target locked,” Alex said. “We took too long. It’s the *Whirlwind*.”

Chapter Forty-Nine: Naomi

Because the *Rocinante* was built to land on its belly, Holden stepped onto the flight-deck wall. He looked thin. More than thin, he looked like he'd been ill for months. The lines around his mouth were deeper than they'd been, and his grin looked less like his usual easy joy and more like surprise that anything good had actually happened. He looked bruised at heart, but only that. Not broken. He didn't look broken.

He met her eyes, and something in her chest that she didn't know could relax relaxed. She took a long, shuddering breath. Jim took her hand. She'd thought that would never happen again, and here he was, touching her again.

"Hey," he said, too softly for anyone to hear but her.

"Hey," she said back.

Amos, behind him, looked wrong. His skin was gray and his eyes were a uniform black. She'd seen kids on Pallas affect the same look with dyes and scleral tattooing, but on Amos it didn't look like an edgy fashion choice.

Also, he was carrying a big black dog with a gray muzzle and a perplexed expression. The girl beside him seemed familiar, but not so much that Naomi could place her. There would be time for stories later.

Alex climbed up to his crash couch, grinning. "All right. Everybody strap in. We're off this mudball."

The crew cheered, not quite drunk with success, but maybe a little tipsy. Or maybe that was just her. Holden slipped into one of the other couches, staying close to the girl. Protective of her.

Slowly the ship tilted back to its normal, upright position.

“You want me to kick on the main drive?” Alex asked. “I could slag that whole palace if you want.”

Before Naomi could answer, Holden did. “No, leave it be. We still have friends there. Elvi, for one.”

“Oh. Should we go get her?”

Holden shook his head, even though Alex wasn’t looking at him. “No. She’s where she needs to be.”

He’d been on the ship for less than fifteen minutes, and he was answering like he was the captain. If she’d pointed it out, he would have been horrified. And apologetic, and maybe in some other context she would have expected the apology. She was, after all, the head of the underground, the engineer behind the campaign and a hundred other operations besides. The pleasure of having him back, of feeling herself and Alex and the ship falling into ancient patterns, was more than she could express. It was like waking up after a long and terrible dream to find that whatever it was hadn’t actually happened.

In all her long life, it was maybe the most beautiful moment she’d ever had.

It couldn’t last.

She felt Alex flying the ship inside Laconia’s atmosphere, sliding them above the landscape and rising up above it until the drive plume wouldn’t be a danger to anyone below. When the main drive kicked on, they shot up, rising through the last of the atmosphere and into the light of the Laconian sun. As Alex laid in their course for the ring gate, Naomi checked the tactical map for her fleet. The burns they were all under were punishing. By keeping on the edge of what human endurance would allow, they made it less likely that the Laconian ships would reach them. And the enemy ships themselves . . .

She pulled up an overlay that showed the destroyers and the *Magnetar*-class battleship. It was like looking over and finding a centipede on her arm. The target-lock alert came on, cutting through the merriment and joy like a scalpel.

“Alex?”

“We been target locked. We took too long. It’s the *Whirlwind*.”

Naomi laid down a sensor feed over her tactical display. The *Magnetar* was still almost nothing without magnification. Hardly more than a pale spot of darkness in the middle of the steady star that was its drive plume. With only a little magnification, though, it was the same eerie almost-organic shape as the *Tempest*. The bone-pale vertebra of an unimaginably huge animal. A ship like that had brought two navies to their knees. A single frigate with its supplies nearly drained already didn’t stand a chance. All her joy collapsed to ashes. She wondered whether Duarte would let her see Jim when they were both in prison. Whether they’d even be allowed the option of surrender. Fighting down through the planetary defenses had taken four ships and cost one of them. Or, depending on the next few minutes, maybe two.

At least the *Whirlwind* was the last *Magnetar* that would ever be built. She’d broken the construction platforms, so at least that. If she died in the effort—if they all did—Bobbie would still have approved. Some sacrifices were worth it.

“We have a tightbeam request incoming from the *Whirlwind*,” Ian said. His voice only shook a little.

“Let’s have it,” Naomi said, and Ian looked at her. The uncertainty in his eyes was clear. He didn’t know if she was going to surrender or lead them all into death. She wasn’t perfectly certain herself. “Now, Kefilwe. This won’t get better by waiting.”

He put the incoming message on every display, though only Naomi’s was live. She didn’t know if he meant to pressure her by letting the whole crew see the exchange or if he was nervous and screwed up. It didn’t make a difference.

The woman on her screen was young, with dark skin and straight, close-cropped hair. She wore Laconian blue and the rank insignia of an admiral, the same style that Mars used to use. The rage in her eyes gave Naomi very little hope.

“I am Admiral Sandrine Gujarat, commander of the Laconian battleship *Voice of the Whirlwind*. You have thirty seconds to drop core, deactivate

your weapons systems, and open your airlock for boarding. Failure to do exactly as you are told will result in the destruction of your ship.”

Thirty seconds. Naomi raised her chin in defiance. If she was taken, they would get everything she knew eventually. The networks and contacts in dozens of systems. The long-term plans and strategies. Everything she’d built in all the time she’d spent working for Saba and then taking his place. It had made her into a perfect asset for the enemy. A ship full of her people stood breathless, waiting for her to decide whether to give them all over or let them all die. It was like being crushed under a hundred gs and weightless at the same time.

The voice that answered wasn’t hers. It wasn’t even one she knew.

“No, Admiral Gujarat. It will not end in anybody’s destruction. You will stand down at once.”

On her screen, the admiral’s eyes widened in anger, but also in confusion. Naomi craned her neck to see the girl who had spoken. She was in a crash couch, gesturing that the comms control should be transferred to her. Naomi hesitated for a moment, then went with it. When the *Roci*’s feed showed the girl’s face, the Laconian admiral paled.

“Do you know who I am, Admiral?”

“I don’t . . . The high consul—”

“Yes, I am the high consul’s daughter and heir,” the girl said. “You understand now. Good. I am on the *Rocinante* at my father’s request. Your threat is ridiculous and your orders are to return immediately to your assigned mission protecting the homeworld.”

The girl couldn’t be sixteen yet, but her voice had an easy arrogance. Naomi turned to Jim and mouthed, *Is that true?* He lifted his hands in a Belter shrug.

“Miss,” the admiral said, unconsciously bowing as she did, “you are . . . I was unaware . . . This is very irregular, miss. I’m afraid I can’t allow this ship to go anywhere.”

The girl rolled her eyes dramatically. “Is there a protocol? A security protocol?”

“I’m sorry?”

“If I am in distress, being held against my will. Threatened. Whatever. Is there a phrase I use to indicate that? Something innocuous I can slip into any conversation without my captors knowing it?”

“I . . . That is—”

“It’s a yes-or-no question, Admiral. This isn’t hard.” At this rate, the *Whirlwind* was going to nuke them to be rid of the girl.

“There is, miss,” Admiral Gujarat said.

“And have I said it?”

“You haven’t.”

“Then we can take it as given that I am not here under duress. That something is going on between the high consul and the leadership of the underground—something with which I have been entrusted and you haven’t. With that in mind? Go. Back. To. Your. Post.”

The woman on the screen squared her shoulders. “I have orders from Admiral Trejo that—”

“Stop,” the girl said. “What’s his name?”

“Whose?”

“Admiral Anton Trejo. What is his last name?”

“Trejo?”

“Yes,” the girl said, and leaned close to the camera so that her whole face filled the screen. She spoke softly and with an incandescent rage. “Mine is *Duarte*.”

“I’m sorry, miss,” the admiral said. “I can’t let your ship leave.”

“No?” the girl said. “Then shoot me the fuck down.” She dropped the connection and turned to Alex, staring down at her slack jawed. “We can go. That woman is scared to death right now.”

“Prepare for high burn?” Alex announced over the ship-wide channel, and the girl nodded curtly and settled back in her couch.

“Jim?” Naomi said.

“I know,” he said. “It’s been a really weird day.”



“We thought you were dead,” Naomi said as she stepped into the lift.

Amos blinked his unnerving black eyes, then shrugged. “Yeah, I can see that, Boss. What can I tell you? Sorry.”

Eight hours of high burn had taken them out of the *Whirlwind*’s effective range. Fifteen had increased the distance to the point that she almost felt safe. Not *safe* safe, but close enough that she could imagine stepping away from the ops deck and starting to make sense of everything that had happened, hearing everything that had brought Jim and Amos back. And how Teresa Duarte fit into it.

And also to tell them what had happened during their long and separate pilgrimages. What they had lost. With the four of them together, Alex had asked for the ceremony. As if the universe had given them a chance, and he was worried that if he didn’t take it now, it would somehow slip away. And she and Amos were heading to the airlock together again, as if the past had returned. But as if it had returned changed.

The changes to Amos were odd. His skin was somehow pale and dark at the same time, like a thin coat of white paint over black. His eyes were darkness, and there was something strange about the way he moved. But after so long, being able to think of him without grief and worry made the alterations only interesting. It was so much better than what she’d already carried with him. With losing him.

“I’d have called earlier, but . . . Well, I wasn’t ready to go. I was being patient.”

“What happened?”

He shrugged. “One thing and another. Good to be back, though.”

The lift stopped, and she stepped off. Amos followed just a step behind. “You’re different.”

“Yup,” he said, smiling amiably. It was such an unmistakably Amos-like thing to say. Such a familiar way to say it.

“Did the bomb fail?” she asked.

“Nope, it was fine.”

“So why didn’t you follow through on the mission? No blame, but . . . What was your thinking there?”

Amos went still for a moment, like he was listening to something she couldn't hear.

"I met the kid," Amos said. "Seemed kind of shitty killing her. I thought maybe it was the wrong call." He shrugged.

Naomi stepped over and put her arms around him. It was like hugging a metal strut. "Good to have you back."

Alex and Holden were at the interior door to the airlock. Alex had changed into an MCRN uniform. An artifact from another age. Jim was in a white formal shirt. He'd washed his hair and combed it back. He looked distinguished and somber.

The coffin in the airlock was just a shell, hardly more than a body bag with slightly hardened sides. And it was empty.

"This is way we always did it," Alex said now that they were together. "When we'd lost someone and couldn't recover the body. We'd still take the moment."

He cast his eyes to the deck. Jim did the same. Amos put on the same somber face he always did at moments like this. A flood of complex feelings washed through her. Sorrow and joy, relief and the emptiness of a loss that would never be made whole.

Alex cleared his throat and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Bobbie Draper was one of my best friends. She was a Marine right down to her bones. Anything else she did was built on that. She was brave and honorable, and she was strong. She made a hell of a captain. I remember when Fred Johnson tried to make her into an ambassador back in the day, and she kept calling it the way she saw it instead of playing politician. She was always like that. She took on the impossible, and she made it work."

He took a deep breath, opened his mouth like he was going to go on, then closed it again and shook his head. Jim was weeping now too. And so was she. Amos' newly black eyes shifted like he was reading something in the air, and he lifted his chin.

"She was a badass," he said, then paused and nodded, satisfied.

"She will be missed," Naomi said. "From now on. And forever."

They stood in silence for a moment, and then Jim stepped forward and cycled the exterior door. When it was open, the little chemical boosters on the coffin slid it to the edge of the lock. And then it was gone. Jim cycled the lock closed again, turned, and stepped in, putting his arms around her and Alex. A moment later, the solid mass of Amos' arms looped around her too. The four of them held each other there with the hum and rumble of the *Rocinante* around them. They stayed there for a long time.



The elements of her little ragtag fleet that had been closest to the ring gate were through long before the *Roci* was even halfway through the system. Alex kept them at a punishing burn, balancing the reaction mass they still had and the distance to a friendly resupply depot in Gossner system. If they took breaks a little more often than during the dive into the system and burned a little less heavily, it was to conserve mass and because the *Whirlwind* and her cohort of destroyers were parked close in to Laconia, still knocking down the torpedoes and long-arc rocks that Naomi's people had flung at the planet. Three days into their burn toward the gate, someone somewhere had grown the balls to issue an order, and the *Whirlwind* flung half a dozen torpedoes at the retreating *Roci*. The PDCs took them all down, and no more followed.

When they were burning, Naomi used the time to calculate a safe transit schedule and tightbeam it to the other ships. From the start of the campaign to its end, they'd lost thirty-two ships, and just shy of two hundred lives. They had retrieved Jim and Amos, taken in Teresa Duarte, and destroyed the mechanism of production that Laconia depended on for its high-powered fleet. The *Whirlwind* was still a massive killing machine capable of taking control of any system it chose. But it was only one ship. It couldn't attack through any of the ring gates without leaving Laconia underprotected. It was pinned.

The *Storm* reached the gate and sent back a formal salute to Naomi before it passed through. Jillian Houston taking her ship back to Draper

Station and waiting for new orders. That was a strange thought. Naomi had spent so much of her mental energy and focus on winning the battle she'd almost forgotten about everything that came after. Freedom from Laconia didn't—couldn't—mean a return to de facto rule by the Transport Union. For one thing, Medina Station was gone and no one would be setting up a permanent base in the ring space again. For another, Laconia had replaced the structures of trade and control with its own.

But still, there were ways. There wouldn't be a choke hold on the ring space the way there had been, but there could be a network of cheap, easily replaced relays that announced incoming and outgoing traffic. Ships could know, at least, what the chances were of going dutchman before they made the transit. There weren't many people who'd choose to go through a ring gate if they knew they wouldn't come out the other side. Give the people enough information, and they'd be able to make the right decisions on their own. That was a problem for later, though. For the moment, she could watch the drive plumes of the ships that had broken Laconia touch the gate and escape, one after another, and think to herself, *Safe. Safe. Safe.*

In the breaks between the hard burns, the crew celebrated and, unfortunately, fought. In the tension before the attack, Ian Kefilwe and another young man—an engineer named Safwan Cork—had fallen into bed together and were now negotiating the difficult romantic territory of having survived. She tried to keep out of it, but once she saw Jim sitting with Ian in one of the now-empty torpedo bays, listening while the young man wept. It seemed right.

The ship was only about three hundred thousand kilometers out from the ring gates, and the remaining burns were all braking, making sure that when they did the transit, they had time on the far side to maneuver and not just slam into the other side of the sphere and vanish. The Laconian forces hadn't come after them. Not even to throw more long-range torpedoes.

Teresa Duarte was an astounding beast of a human being. Naomi tried to make a connection with her, but only once. They were in a pause, Alex making a gentle quarter g, and Naomi was getting dinner. It still felt strange

to her, seeing the galley full. In her mind, there were still only six crew on the *Roci*.

Teresa was by herself, leaning against one of the walls, a bowl of noodles in one hand and chopsticks in the other. Her hair was braided back, and it made her face look harsher than usual. No one was sitting with her. No one was speaking to her. Probably because no one knew what to say.

Naomi served herself a bowl of white kibble and sat down across from the girl. Teresa looked up, and there was a flash of outrage before she reined herself in.

“Is this okay?” Naomi asked.

“It’s your ship. You get to sit where you want.”

“Got to be a little strange, being someplace like this, yeah?”

Teresa nodded. Naomi took a bite of her kibble and wondered if they were going to sit in silence. Teresa shook her head. “There are people everywhere. And there’s nowhere to go. Back home I could be alone. No one’s ever alone out here.”

“There are ways,” Naomi said, thinking of her cargo container. “But there are usually fewer people here. It does get a little full.”

“You should have a crew of twenty-two.”

“We usually made do with six. Sometimes four.”

“I don’t like it here,” Teresa said, standing up. “I’ll want to find someplace else once we leave.”

She walked away without saying anything else. She didn’t put her uneaten bowl in the recycler, so when Naomi was finished with her own meal, she cleaned up after both of them, then walked down the corridor to her cabin.

To theirs.

Jim was in the crash couch. His jumpsuit was drenched in sweat at the armpits and down the back. He looked at her and shook his head.

“I will never, ever get this out of shape again,” he said. “This is miserable.”

“You’ll get better,” she said, and lay down beside him. The couch shifted to account for her added weight. Every time she saw him, she felt

herself not quite trusting it. Not quite letting herself believe he was really back, in case it was all a dream or a false reprieve. As if the universe would take him away from her again. It was getting better, but she wasn't sure it would ever completely go away.

"I saw your friend in the galley," she said. "She's having some trouble adjusting, I think."

"Well, she was the only child of a galactic god-emperor, and now she's eating oatmeal in a half-antique gunship. That's got to be a hard transition."

"What are we going to do with her once we get to the supply depot? You know she's too important to just let her go, right?"

"I don't know that we can make her stay. Not unless we're talking about throwing her in a prison. But there are other options."

"Are there?"

"There were plenty of Martians who didn't take off with Duarte back in the day. Some of them will be cousins of hers. If we're lucky, some of them may be counselors and therapists. Or . . . I don't know. Run rehabilitation centers."

"If not?"

"If there aren't, some can be made. Everyone's related to everyone, if you go back far enough. We'll just go back until the right people are connected to her."

"You sound like Avasarala," Naomi said.

"I've been thinking about her a lot. I feel like I built a little version of her in my head. You ever have that feeling?"

"I know the one," Naomi said. And then, "Teresa doesn't just need a place to land and some sort-of relatives. She needs love."

"She had love. Her father loved her. He really did. What she didn't have was a sense of proportion."

"And then you brought her here."

"She brought herself," he said. "Just like we all do. And it's a pain in the ass for each and every one of us, every time it happens. Outgrowing your family? Hard work under the best of circumstances. Which these aren't."

She lay down, snuggling into his arm. He was sweat-damp, but she didn't care. She stroked her fingertips across his forehead and down his cheek. He turned his head, pressing into her hand like a cat that wanted petting.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Naomi asked.

"No idea. She will or she won't. Either way, it's going to be up to her. I'm pretty sure she'll be herself while she does it, though. That's a victory for her. We'll help if we can. If she'll let us."

The alert went on. Ring passage in five minutes. Jim sighed, stood, and started changing into fresh clothes.

"What about you?" Naomi said.

"What about me?"

"Will you be okay?"

Jim smiled, and there was only a little weariness in his eyes. Only a little sorrow. "I played a long, terrible, shitty game, and I won. Then after I won, I made it back home. I'm waking up in the morning next to you. I'm perfect."

Chapter Fifty: Elvi

The day after Teresa escaped, Elvi spent the hours before dawn watching the feeds. As soon as the violence ended, even before the wounded and the dead were sorted, the stories began taking shape. The differences between the state newsfeeds and the security reports Elvi saw in the aftermath made it sound like there had been two different battles. The separatist terrorist forces, each of them tracked as they fled for the ring gate, had been driven back by the overwhelming power of the Laconian Navy. Or else the enemy had achieved all its apparent objectives and withdrawn of its own accord. The orbital weapons platform network and land-based rail guns had successfully protected Laconia from the enemy's last-ditch suicide attack. Or else the underlying assumption that the platforms and the base would be support for a naval defense had, in the heat of the moment, been ignored. And the enemy losses, while real, hadn't been catastrophic. The enemy was in flight, and the threats to Laconia required little more than a mopping up. Or else the *Whirlwind* was going to be stuck close to the planet for the foreseeable future while a handful of destroyers hunted down the stray torpedoes and rocks that had been launched at the planet, any one of which could cause massive damage.

The most breathtaking lie—the one that put all the others to shame—was that the construction platforms had been taken down before the attack could reach them, and were being brought back to full operation in a secret location to protect them from further attack. The other stories about the battle might be extreme readings of the actual text, but the construction platforms were no more. There was no version of reality that supported the state's claims that they had survived. The former shipyards of Laconia were

a collection of junk scattered in orbit around the planet, and no number of horses and men were going to put them together again.

Added to that were all the things that the newsfeeds simply didn't mention: That a fast attack frigate had landed within spitting distance of the State Building. That the high consul's daughter had run away with the enemy in what might perhaps be humanity's newest record-setting act of teenage rebellion. That the prisoner held in the State Building had also escaped.

Or that one prisoner had, anyway.

"Major?" the young man said. "Admiral Trejo is ready to see you."

The lobby was a wide space with sandstone-colored columns and enough sofas and chairs to seat a hundred people. She was the only one there.

"Doctor," Elvi said.

The young man looked confused. "I'm sorry?"

"I'd prefer you call me doctor. Major is an honorary rank. I earned my doctorate."

"Yes, Dr. Okoye. Of course. The admiral . . ."

"Is ready to see me," she said, standing up and pulling her tunic straight. "Lead the way."

The meeting wasn't in one of the usual rooms. No formal desk, no volumetric display, no small crowd of men bowing to the power of the state and jockeying for their status in it. It was just her and Trejo in a private dining room. He had a simple breakfast of coffee and fruit with a sugar-iced pastry, and another like it set aside for her. A window almost as wide as the whole wall looked out over the snow-covered grounds and the land beyond all the way to the horizon. It felt a little obscene to think about the violence that had shaken it all. That they weren't both underground in a high-security shelter felt like another kind of lie.

"Admiral," she said, sitting. The young man left immediately. Trejo poured her coffee himself.

"We found Ilich," Trejo said instead of hello. "Well, his body anyway. He and two of the state guard were assassinated by the separatists."

Elvi waited to feel something about that. The familiar, professionally thoughtful man she'd worked with was dead. She would never see him again. It wasn't the first time she'd lost a colleague. Back before anyone called her major, she'd taught at an upper university that had three of her fellow faculty members die in the same semester. She'd lost most of the science staff of the *Falcon*, and it had been devastating. This wasn't. Where the shock and sadness should have been, there was just an oceanic depth of resentment. She wasn't even perfectly clear whose name belonged on it. Duarte. Trejo. Holden. All of them together.

"Too bad," she said, because she felt like she ought to say something.

"He was loyal to the empire," Trejo said. "Whatever his failings were, he was that."

She didn't know what she could say to that, so she didn't say anything.

"Our situation has once again changed," Trejo said, and paused to blow across the surface of his coffee. He didn't just look exhausted. He looked ten years older than when he'd arrived, and things had been broken beyond repair back then. Another few years like this, and Trejo would be the oldest man alive, no matter his age. She remembered a myth about someone wishing for eternal life, but forgetting to ask for youth to go with it. In the story they'd gradually shrunk and withered until they turned into a cicada. She wondered if Fayez knew who the story was about.

She realized again that Trejo was waiting for her to respond. She didn't know what he wanted her to say and didn't care much either.

"Are you feeling all right, Major?"

"Doctor," she said. "I think it would be best if you called me doctor. And I'm fine. I've had a lot on my plate recently. I'm sure you understand."

"I do. I most certainly do," he said. "The construction platforms. The stick moons, they called them. They were what drew the high consul's attention to Laconia in the first place. Did you know that? He saw them in the first wave of scans that came through when the gates opened. There was a vessel—something like a vessel—halfway built in one of them."

"I'd heard that," Elvi said. The coffee was good. The pastry was a little too sweet for her liking.

“They are the foundation of Laconian power.”

Jesus Christ, Elvi thought. Had Trejo always been this sanctimonious and she just hadn’t noticed? Or was she just really irritable right now?

“They stole a goal on us,” he said. “I will give them that. They found a dirty trick, and we fell for it. Once. It won’t happen again. I need you to put aside the other issues you’re looking into. For the time being. I know what you’re going to say. ‘Another first priority.’ ”

“That’s where I would have started, yes,” Elvi said.

“The loss of those platforms is the loss of the most powerful ships humanity has ever made. It’s the loss of antimatter production. It’s the loss of the regenerative tanks. Without them, we lose the ability to project our power out beyond the system. Whether we’re fighting against the terrorists or the things beyond the ring gates, we need that ability.”

“So whatever the high consul has become gets shelved,” she said. “Figuring out the nature of the enemy and the weird system-wide attacks gets shelved. The secret of immortality? Shelved.”

“I can hear your frustration, and I share it,” Trejo said, “but the fact remains—”

“No, I’m good with that. But making more weapons isn’t the first priority,” she said. She took out her handheld, pulled up her notes, and passed it over. “That right there? *That* is my first priority.”

Trejo scowled at the display like she’d handed him some particularly unpleasant insect. “Adro system?”

“The big green diamond that looks like it might have a record of the entire protomolecule civilization. Rise and fall. I would probably get the best results if the *Falcon* were repaired and crewed with a team specifically chosen for this project. I have some names drawn up. I’ll send them to you.”

“Dr. Okoye—”

“I understand I’m not in a position to force you to do anything. But I’m comfortable in the belief that all of the issues we’re trying to deal with are connected, and that”—she pointed at the schematic of the massive diamond—“looks more like the Rosetta stone than anything else. So that’s where

I'm putting my efforts. In my professional judgment, it makes more sense than building bigger explosions or chasing after the fountain of youth."

Trejo put down the hand terminal. His coffee sloshed over the lip of its cup, staining the white linen. "We are in a war—"

"Yes, you should fix that too."

"Excuse me?"

"You should stop being in a war. Send the underground a fruit basket or something. Start peace talks. I don't know. However that works. I said it before, and I meant it. If you want peace, lose gracefully. We have bigger problems."

She took a last bite of the pastry and washed it down with the dregs of the coffee. It tasted better with the bitter following the sweet. Trejo was stone-faced. She stood.

"Do what you need to do," she said. "I'm going to get ready for work, and then I'll be in the lab at the university. If you want to throw me in prison for insubordination or whatever the military term is, that's where you'll find me. If you want to fix this, let me know when the *Falcon* can be ready, and I'll brief you on everything I find."

He didn't respond. She nodded curtly and walked away. She'd hoped she would feel better, and she did. But only a little.

The wide sky of Laconia had cleared. The snow clouds were gone, and the air was crisp and bright with just a hint of the spearmint smell of freshly turned Laconian earth. A flock—or swarm—of something flew high in the sky, vanishing against the sun and reappearing on its collective way to the south. Some organism following a temperature incline or a nutrient gradient or some other more exotic drive she didn't know about. That no one knew about. Not yet.

They would, though, someday. If she could fix all this.

Fayez was awake when she got back to the rooms. He sat on the edge of their bed in the soft cotton pajamas that the Laconian Empire provided them gratis. He was massaging his new foot the way the physician had told him to. He looked up at her, worried. He hadn't slept since the night before either. They'd gotten back to their rooms cold and weary, and also in

another kind of shock. She had been a pawn in Holden's chess game. And Holden had gotten her to the last rank and promoted her to a queen.

"Well? How's Trejo?" Faye asked, mordant and hopeful. "Are we exiled?"

"No such luck," Elvi said. "Maybe later."

"We could still leave." He was only partly joking. She imagined what it would be like. Getting the *Falcon* back. Or any ship, really. If they got off Laconia, they could go anywhere. Trejo wouldn't have the resources to chase them. Not now. They could go back to Sol or Bara Gaon or one of the new, struggling colonies. They could leave all this bullshit behind.

Except that something out there was looking for a way to snuff out their minds. And there wasn't a better place to fight against than right here. Her prison wasn't Laconia. Her jailer wasn't Trejo. The thing that had taken all her choices away was that this mystery so clearly needed to be solved, and she was so clearly the best one to do it.

She kissed her husband softly, and on the lips. When she pulled back, the humor was gone from his eyes. They'd been together for so long. They'd been so many different people together. She felt the change coming again. She was entering a new part of her life now. It meant packing away all her stories about how she was only here from fear of the authorities. The authorities were broken. She was here because she chose to be, and that changed everything.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know you were hoping for a gentlemanly retirement someplace that would give us both tenure."

"Or just one of us," he said. "I'm not greedy."

"We don't get to have that. And I'm sorry."

Faye sighed, crossed his legs. "If we don't, we don't. I still have you?"

"Always."

"Good enough," he said, and patted the mattress at his side.

"I have to go."

"Mixed signals," he said.

"I'll be back after work."

“You say that now, but I know you. You’ll find something interesting and stay up until midnight chasing it, and by the time you come home, it’ll be time to leave again.”

“You’re probably right.”

“It’s why everyone needs you,” Fayez said. “It’s why I need you too. When you get back, I’ll be here.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t run away together.”

“Maybe in our next lives.”



The universe is always stranger than you think.

It didn’t matter how broad her imagination was, how cynical, how joyous and open, how well researched or wild minded. The universe was always stranger. Every dream, every imagining, however lavish and improbable, inevitably fell short of the truth.

Elvi had been born in a system with a single star and a handful of planets. She’d studied exobiology when it was still theoretical. When she’d been a newly minted PhD, her greatest dream was that she might get a research fellowship on Mars, and maybe—the pinnacle of all her wildest hopes—find some hard evidence that life had evolved there independently. It would have been the most astounding, important thing she could imagine. She’d be in the scientific histories as the woman who’d discovered living structures that came from someplace besides the Earth.

Looking back, the dream seemed impossibly small.

At the labs, she stopped to have a long talk with Dr. Ochida. She wanted a rundown of all the research being done—where it stood, who was heading up the projects, what his opinions were of the experimental designs. Even after Cortázar had died, she hadn’t done that. Hadn’t acted as though the labs were hers to run. Now she did, and Ochida didn’t object. That probably made it true.

At any rate, he answered everything she asked, and Trejo hadn't sent any guards to drag her away. So she was effectively in control of the most advanced research facility in the history of humankind. And if there was one thing that her decades in academic science had drilled into her consciousness, it was that power meant policy.

"We're going to need to make some changes," she said. "We're shutting down the Pen."

Ochida actually stopped walking. She could have said that all the science teams were now required to walk on their hands, and the man would have been less astounded.

"But the protomolecule . . . The supply . . ."

"We have enough," she said. "Our reason for collecting more died with the construction platforms."

"But . . . the prisoners. What do we do with them?"

"We're not executioners," Elvi said. "We never should have been. When the guards come, tell them we don't accept the transfer. If Trejo wants to line people up against the wall and shoot them, I'm not in a position to stop that. But I can say we won't support it. And we won't base our research on it. From here on in, informed consent or work with yeast."

"This is . . . This will . . ."

"Speed isn't the only measure of progress, Doctor," Elvi said. But she could tell from his eyes he didn't know what she meant. "Just get it done. All right?"

"Yes, Dr. Okoye. As you see fit." He almost bowed as he retreated.

The universe is always stranger than you think. Elvi went to her private lab. There were so many things to do, so many possible pathways to follow in the research. She could keep the secret of Duarte's condition, or she could make her own research group, pulling from the best minds in Laconia. Trejo's conspiracy was down to just the two of them and Kelly anyway. And with Teresa on the run with James fucking Holden, treating it as a state secret was more and more ridiculous.

The chair seemed more comfortable now that it was hers. She knew it hadn't actually changed, but she had. She pulled up her waiting messages

and ran through them. The most recent one was from the shipyards, giving her an unscheduled update on the status of the *Falcon*. She took it as an olive branch from Trejo.

As she went through the list, she felt herself growing calmer. More focused. The complicated, obscure world of politics and intrigue fell away, and the complicated, obscure world of research protocols and alien biology took its place. It was like coming home. Fayez had been right. She was going to be there until morning if she wasn't careful. But whatever she did, whatever path she took, the first step was the same. Even if it was a bad idea, it was necessary.

The black-eyed children watched her as she went to their cage. Cara stood up, coming to meet her the way she often did. When Elvi undid the lock and slid the cage door open, Cara stared at it, confused. Her little brother walked to her side, slipped his smaller hand in hers. Elvi stood back, nodding to them. For the first time in decades, the two children stepped out of their cage freely. Xan's little chest was heaving in and out with the emotion of it. A tear slipped down Cara's grayish cheek.

"Really?" Cara whispered. She meant, *Are we really free?*

"There are some things I have to figure out," Elvi said, and her voice was trembling too. "I hoped, if you're willing, that you would help me."

Epilogue: Holden

Holden lay strapped in the autodoc, his eyes closed. The ship was on the float, conserving the last of their reaction mass. He didn't mind. Weightlessness was a visceral reminder that he wasn't on Laconia anymore. He loved it for that.

The machine ticked and hummed in a vaguely disapproving way, like it was trying to tell him to exercise more and cut back on salt. There were voices in the background. There were always voices in the background these days. After so many years with a skeleton crew, having a full complement felt like having a party where too many people had showed up and no one was leaving.

A needle slid into his left arm, and the autodoc chugged to itself, pumping in his own peculiar cocktail of oncocidals and antiagathics and blood pressure stabilizers. And probably something for psychological distress. Lord knew he had that coming. The coolness gave him a pins-and-needles feeling on his lips, and he tasted something that his brain tried to interpret as peanuts. When it was done, the needle withdrew and a thin scanning bar on an armature came out and waved a wand along his face. An image of his skull and lips appeared on the screen, with the new growth in green.

"All the parts in the right place?" Naomi asked from the doorway.

"Most of them," Holden said, and the scanner beeped at him, chiding. He stayed still while it finished. When the armature retracted, he said, "It does feel pretty fucking undignified to be teething at my age."

"Well, they knocked your tooth out," Naomi said. Her tone was mild, but he could hear the murder behind it. He played it all down, but she knew.

All the time he'd been under Laconian control, he'd made light of things. He'd made rules for himself so that his powerlessness didn't turn into despair. He'd plotted and planned and watched for opportunities. Now it was over, and everything he'd been careful not to feel was still waiting for him.

"My dad used to say something when he'd been traveling," Holden said as the autodoc finished its run.

"Which one?"

"Father Caesar. He used to say that when you went too far too fast, your soul took some time catching up to you."

Naomi frowned. "I thought that was how religious fanatics argued that Belters didn't have souls."

"Might have been that too," Holden said. "Father Caesar was talking about jet lag. Anyway, I was thinking about it with just . . . change. You know?"

He didn't talk about the day he'd been arrested much. Not with anyone besides Naomi. He'd been taken into custody on Medina Station, held for questioning. Not sure if he was going to live the rest of his life in a box or be slaughtered as a warning to others. And Governor Singh had shipped him back to Laconia for questioning about the aliens that had made the rings and the other aliens that had killed them. And through the first part of it, and then again on and off all the time he'd been gone, he'd had the sense that none of it was really happening. Or that it was, but not to him. He'd become someone else. Being a prisoner had driven him a little crazy for a while, and he still wasn't right. Not really. But every day he woke up on the *Roci* with Naomi beside him and Alex in the pilot's chair, he felt a little closer to sane. His soul a little bit nearer, in a wide and metaphorical sense.

Naomi pushed off, floating to him, and catching herself with the unconscious grace of someone born to it. She took his hand. She did that a lot these days. He liked it too. Especially when he woke up in the middle of the night, too groggy from sleep to know where he was, and started to panic that the guards were coming to beat him again. Her voice calmed him down, but her hand in his worked faster.

“We’re going to start the braking burn in about forty minutes,” she said.

“Hard?”

“Alex says about three-quarter g. We’ll be fine. But I thought I’d let you know anyway.”

“We won’t be trapped in the same couch for hours.”

“Well, not by that, anyway,” she said. He didn’t know if the sly sexual banter was sincere or just another way of telling him he was home. It soothed him either way.

“Just between us?” he said. “I’m going to be glad when it’s just us again. These are nice folks, but they’re not family, you know?”

“I do,” she said. “We might . . . we might need to talk about hiring someone on, though. With Clarissa and Bobbie both gone.”

“Yeah,” he said. “We’ll look at it.” He meant, *But not now. Later. When I can.* She heard it all.

“I’m going to go check the coolant feed lines,” she said. “These kids all grew up on newer ships. They’re not used to our heat tolerances.”

“All right,” Holden said. “I’m going to finish this and head for the flight deck.”

“Sounds good,” she said, and pushed backward, keeping her eyes on him as she moved away to the door and caught herself without even looking.

After she was gone, the autodoc chimed, giving him permission to unstrap himself. He moved slowly not because he hurt, but because he liked the sensation of freeing himself. The report was on the screen when he got there. All in all, it was pretty solid. He pulled up a record going back to his return to the *Roci*, and all the trend lines were going the right way. So there it was in clean, glowing lines. His soul on its way back.

It would be good to feel like himself again. Naomi was stuck as the central planner for the underground as it transitioned to whatever came next. But she’d made it very clear that one run as captain of a gunship on campaign was more than a lifetime’s worth for her. The captain’s chair of the *Rocinante* was his. Though, since she was still nominally the admiral of

the resistance fleet, his captaincy felt a bit like an emeritus title. Even so, there were responsibilities that came with it. If not now, then soon.

He hesitated, then pulled up Amos' record. There was no data. He thought about it for a moment. He didn't want to have the talk, but he was going to have to. If he was going to be the captain again, he was going to have to be the captain again.

He stopped by the galley first for a bulb of coffee and a printed length of something that the system called mushroom bacon. Three of the new crew were floating near a table, and he felt them watching him in the same way people sometimes did in bars or the corridors of stations. *Is that James Holden?* He'd been able to be oblivious to it before. Now he felt their attention like they were pointing a heat gun at him. He pretended not to notice their interest and headed for the machine shop.

Muskrat floated in the middle of the room, a complex diaper on her haunches with a hole for her tail. She started wagging as soon as Holden came in. It made her gyrate around a center of mass defined by her larger and mostly still body and her lighter and fast-moving tail. Holden tossed a thumb-sized bit of the bacon at her mouth, and she caught it.

"You're getting better at that," he said to the dog as it chewed noisily.

The machine shop was perfectly familiar. The smell of high-grade lubricants and the residual heat of the machine printers, the old sign still in place where it had been. SHE TAKES CARE OF YOU. YOU TAKE CARE OF HER.

A clanging came from inside the deck, two sharp, percussive strikes, and then a grunt. The slide of a body moving through a crawl space.

"Hey, Cap'n," the thing that had been Amos said, pulling himself out from under the decking. He had a wrench in one hand and an air filter in the other. His skin was still a sickly gray, and it left him looking cold. Like someone who had just drowned.

"Everything going all right?" Holden said, gesturing at the dog with a forced cheerfulness.

"So far. Turns out there's a lot of people been thinking about how to have dogs on a ship. I'm just looking at what kinds of solves they've come

up with.” He let the tools float and scratched the dog’s ears, stabilizing her jaw with his other hand so she didn’t drift.

“Seems difficult,” Holden said.

“It ain’t all dignified. I’m putting together a traveling kit for Tiny. Figure anyplace she heads for, she’s taking this one. Hard part’s the filters. Turns out these dogs throw off a lot of fur. Gums the standard recyclers up pretty quick if you don’t catch it first.”

Holden braced himself with a handhold. Muskrat tried to turn toward him, but didn’t have anything to push against.

“Have you heard about Teresa having any plans?” Holden asked, avoiding the conversation he’d come here to have.

The mechanic took the filter and started running his thumb along the edge, inspecting it by touch. The blackness of his eyes made it hard to know what exactly he was looking at.

“Nope. Last I saw, she and Alex and one of the new kids were all talking about Martian entertainment feeds. Apparently one of the ones she was into, Kit watched when he was her age. I think Tiny likes having something in common with people, even if it’s just the films they’ve watched.”

“So I was at the med bay just now,” Holden said. “I noticed you hadn’t been by.”

“Yeah, well. Autodoc isn’t so clear on what to make of me these days.”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “About that.” He hesitated. He didn’t know how to ask if the thing in front of him was really Amos anymore.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Are you really Amos anymore?”

“Yup.”

“No, I mean. Amos . . . died. He got killed. And then the repair drones took the body, and . . . I need to know, are you really Amos Burton? The Amos I knew.”

“Sure am. Anything else?”

Holden nodded more to himself than to anyone else. Muskrat whined and tried to swim over toward him, paws flailing in the air. He reached out

and pulled the dog over, bracing her against his knee and patting her back. "I just think it's important."

"Seems like you're having a hard time taking yes for an answer, Cap. Here's how I look at it. Yeah, I went through some weird shit. It changed me. I know some things I didn't know before."

"Things like what?" Holden asked, but Amos waved the question away.

"Thing is, you went through some weird shit too. You got changed. Know some things you didn't know going in. Naomi and Alex? Same. Hell, Tiny's barely related to who she was the first time I saw her. That's just life." Amos shrugged. "I guess the dog didn't change much, except she got a little gray around the muzzle."

Muskrat wagged.

"You want this to be a philosophy question, that's fine," Amos said. "But if you're asking am I still me? I am."

Holden nodded. "All right. I had to ask."

"No problem," Amos said.

Holden scratched Muskrat one last time. A little cloud of hair floated free, the strands clinging together in complex webs and drifting toward the air recycler. "I see what you mean. Alex is starting our braking burn in twenty-five, thirty minutes."

"I'll make this all safe by then," Amos said.

Holden pulled himself to the door. As he was about to leave, Amos' voice pulled him back.

"One thing, though?"

He braced in the doorway. Amos' eerie black eyes were on him. "Sure."

"Those things that Duarte pissed off? The ones that ate Medina?"

"I know the ones you mean," Holden said.

"One of the things I know now is that they're going to kill everybody."

They were silent for a moment.

"Yeah," Holden said. "I know that too."

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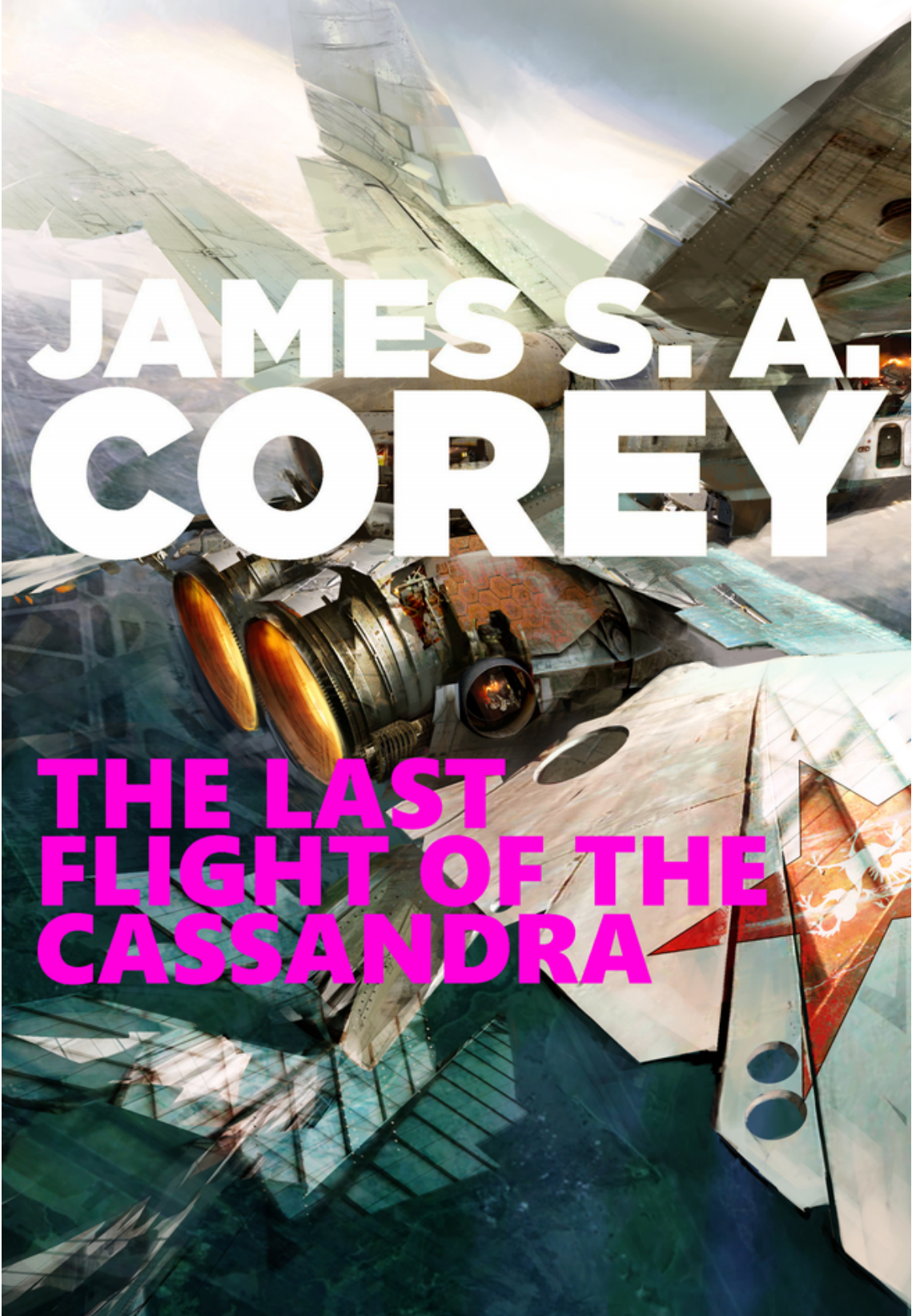
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**JAMES S. A.
COREY**

**THE LAST
FLIGHT OF THE
CASSANDRA**

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The Last Flight of the Cassandra

My name is James Holden and my ship, the Canterbury, was just destroyed by a warship with stealth technology and what appear to be parts stamped with Martian Navy serial numbers. Data stream to follow.

“Well,” Darius said. “We’re fucked.”

Amy’s voice came up to the flight deck from the galley below. “Are we fucked again, honey?”

With the Cassandra on the float, “down” was a convention more than a direction, but Darius had grown up on Earth, and perception is a habit. He saw her as rising up to him. Her hair was in a bun. Her sweat-stained sleeveless undershirt revealed the tree-shaped electrical scar that ran down her left arm. She wasn’t his wife, and she wasn’t not his wife. Back in Paris, that might have caused problems for their Basic registration forms. Out here on the ship, she was just Amy, and he was just Darius, and what they were to each other didn’t need a bureaucrat’s stamp.

Darius gestured to the screen with one angry thumb.

“You see this asshole?” he asked, scrolling the feed back to the start of the message. My name is James Holden.

“Sure,” Amy said, grabbing onto a handhold and pulling herself to a stop. “It’s all over. Everyone’s rebroadcasting. What’s he to us?”

“He’s why we’re fucked.”

A thin line appeared on Amy’s forehead the way it always did when she was getting annoyed. The heat did that. They’d been leaving the ship five degrees warmer and the oxygen mix thinner than usual. It

saved money, but it made them all more irritable. All except Lester, who was unchanging in his irritability.

“The Canterbury,” Darius said. “It’s a water hauler.”

“Saturn to Ceres,” Amy said. “We’re not on that run.”

“The market’s the market. Ceres won’t let itself go dry, so it ups the orders from other places. Ships that were heading for Pallas and Vesta go to Ceres. Luna gets in on it. It’s straight supply and demand. Less ice on the market means it costs more to fill the tanks.”

“We’ll be alright,” Amy said.

“We won’t. We’re running at the edge now. There’s no more fat we can cut off the budget.”

“We have savings,” she said, but they both knew they didn’t.

The Cassandra wasn’t a great ship. In truth, she was barely even a good one. A bubble of steel, ceramic, and air with a fussy Epstein Drive and third-rate recycling systems. They called her a rock-hopper, and even that was a shade more dignified than she deserved. But if she had a fatal flaw, it was that she was thirsty. Her heat radiators didn’t have the surface area to shed as fast as Darius would have liked. There were other fluids they could have carried to let out onto the ship’s skin to evaporate away, but none that they could also use as reaction mass and tea.

And where they worked made things worse.

The Aten asteroids spent most of their time sunward of Earth’s orbit, crossing out for a third or a quarter of their time. Sometimes less. They’d been accessible in the first days of humanity’s expansion into the void, and so they were some of the first to be mined. The titanium and platinum and nickel-iron had made fortunes that had grown to the size and power of nations. And some that had withered into shame and history. The push out and out and out into the system—the main belt, the moons of Jupiter and Saturn—had left them behind. But generation by generation, the mining

technologies had improved. Now ore that had been exhausted generations before was rich enough for the new techniques to wring out a little more. But only for ships willing to add the sun's punishing light to their drives' waste heat. Sundivers, they were called. It was a good way for a crap ship to grind out enough capital to upgrade. It was also a good way to fail out. Or get killed.

Amy looked away. A sheen of tears covered her eyes, and she grabbed a strap of undershirt to wick them away.

"Get the others, will you?" Darius said, more gently. "I think we need to have a talk."

"Yeah," she said. "All right."

She pushed herself back down in a spiral that put her back to him. He was sorry now that he'd led with his despair. Usually he was better at waiting for his own private darkness to pass before he brought Amy into it. The news had caught him unawares.

The rest of the crew were just Lester and Abril. The four of them living in a space smaller than the flat he and Amy had taken in Paris. He stretched and yawned. The heat in the flight deck was sapping his energy. The breeze from the air recyclers was slow and weak. The thinness of the air put an ache behind his eyes that he knew from experience wouldn't leave until they pumped more oxygen into the system. Which they could get by splitting some water, if they'd had any to spare.

He heard Lester and Amy below him. The concern in the man's voice, the sharp humor in the woman's. And Abril's accented murmur like music. He didn't want to do this.

The Cassandra had been a fluke for him. A dream. He'd been living on Basic in a suburb of Paris, spending his days sleeping and his nights playing drums—actually ancient plastic buckets turned mouth-down—with a street band. He and Amy had used the tips to buy cheap marijuana cigarettes from the drugstore dispensers and smoke them with her friends. For Darius, it had felt like having all the

time in the world and no time at all. Every day a day where nothing happened except you had one fewer. He'd felt like he was drowning.

And then his parents had both died in the same wreck. They'd left him a bank account with actual money, a two-bedroom house in Bangui, and a choice—uproot his life in Paris and go back to live out his days in the same house he'd been in as a child, or sell the house and live off the money until it was gone and he could go back on the Basic rolls.

He had taken a third option. Two tickets to Luna, a down payment on a used rock-hopper, and a call for crew who might keep the ship alive long enough to turn a profit. He'd wanted to name his new ship the Icarus, but it turned out that every sundiver with their eyes on the Aten and Apollo asteroids had the same idea. There were over two hundred ships already named some variation of Icarus. So they'd named it for Amy's baby sister. He learned later that Cassandra was also pulled from mythology, but he'd never gotten around to reading the story.

And just like that, the nature of his life had changed. There were probably thousands of other things he could have done with his inheritance, but this was the one he'd chosen. If he'd gone to Luna, then he'd be eking out meals and a bed there. If he'd joined up with a ship he didn't own, he'd have been out in the black somewhere. Maybe dead with the Canterbury. If he'd left Amy behind, he'd be waking up next to someone else or no one. His life was defined by all the paths he didn't take. And yet somehow, he'd picked the one that had this meeting in it.

Lester was an older man—gray, close-cut hair and pale skin with a scattering of freckles. Abril was Amy's age, with a musical voice, straight black hair, and a strong aversion to being touched. That she was half a meter taller than any of the rest of them and that her head was just a little out of proportion had stopped being strange to Darius months ago. He looked at her and instead of thinking Belter, he thought Abril. That, he thought, was what being a crew meant.

“Que kennst?” Abril asked Darius as he pulled himself into the tiny galley they used as a meeting room. He silently translated it. What’s on your mind? Lester, scowling, looked like he already knew, and Amy wouldn’t meet his eyes. The heat of the ship was like being locked in a sauna.

“You all know how thin the last runs were,” Darius said. “Well, we caught another bad bounce. With water prices going up, I don’t see how we make another run and stay safe. We’re already late replacing the microfilters. And every drink of sour water reminds me we ought to have flushed the H2O reclamation feed lines last time we were in port. Even if we make the docking fees...”

He sighed. He was dancing around it. Better to say the words and be done.

“This is our last run. When we get back to Luna, I’m putting the Cassandra up for sale. I’ve looked at the going rates, and I can’t make enough to break even. So this... is going to be it. I’m sorry.”

His crew didn’t say anything. Not even Amy. He pulled himself up to the flight deck and watched newsfeeds for the rest of the shift without really seeing anything. He’d dreamed of making a go of prospecting. Enough money to upgrade the ship or trade it for a new one. Something robust enough to head out for the Jovian moons, maybe. Try his luck in the mainline belt. And now that wouldn’t happen. All those possible futures, cut away. His life redefined again. Another path he didn’t take. He left them there to grieve together while he grieved alone.

* * * * *

“What if we found clean ice?” Lester said. “Pure enough we could process it on the ship? I mean, yes, it would mean buying new filters a little sooner, but look at how much we’d save, yeah? Drop our overhead that much, and we could afford at least two more runs. And safely.”

Lester's machine shop was hardly more than a wide spot in the hall down near the reactor, but he'd made it his own. The gray metal work stool was painted with emerald-green flowers on silver vines. The drawers and tool shelves were engraved with complex designs. What-ever else Lester might be, he was an incorrigible artist.

Darius folded his arms across his chest like he could hold in the ache. "You have something in mind?"

Lester grinned and pulled up the familiar map of the Aten asteroids. The first time Darius had looked at it, it had felt like watching snow. Now, he saw the patterns in it. Lester shifted the display, lighting up and darkening whole arcs of stone and ore, until only one remained.

"Xi-Mallow 434," Lester said.

It was a small marble of a rock. Not technically an Aten, since it never crossed Earth's orbit. It didn't even make it out as far as Venus.

"It's locked," Lester said. "Always the same face to the sun. Which means always the same face away from it too. Shadowed. If there were ice on the back end of that, it would stay there forever. And looking at visual—" The display jumped. A black dot caught against the sun's corona, pulled up and enhanced until the details hidden in the darkness came clear. "That looks glacial to me."

"How far?"

"It's not perfect," Lester said, "It'll mean a two-day burn to match orbit. But we can do it if we skip 19-Daedelus. Just swap them out on the schedule and change our angle a little before we light the drive up. It's not that big a deal."

Darius felt hope stealing into his chest like an assassin. He shook his head. "No. Free water just sitting here, waiting for someone to come along? People have been scraping at these stones for generations. No way they leave that sitting there all this time."

"That's what I thought," Lester said. "But look. Most of the work gets done closer to Earth orbit. This one never gets that far. It's almost a

vulcanoid.”

“Still,” Darius said. “It has to be high-albedo silicates or something. Not ice.”

“And...” Lester looked away. Darius felt the hair on his arms stand up.

“And?”

“It’s under UNN military quarantine,” Lester said. “It has been for a hundred and sixty years. All the prospecting lists neglect it. It doesn’t even show up as an option.”

“Military. Quarantine.”

“You never served, Dar,” Lester said. “You don’t understand. You think military means well-regulated, controlled, everything buttoned down. I did my twenty, and I’m telling you it’s not like that. You heard the story about the guard and the bench?”

“The what?”

Lester waved a hand like he was erasing something. “Old story. It goes like this. There’s a fort that gets a new commander. Guy comes in, and he tours the place, and in the middle of the yard, there’s this old bench with a guard stationed beside it. Every shift, the guard changes. Twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Rain, snow, or storm. Doesn’t matter. There’s always a guard there. So the new commander gets curious. Looks into the records to see why. What is it about this bench that it needs that much attention.

“It takes him weeks to find it, but he does. Fifteen years before, someone painted the bench and the commander put a guard there to make sure no one sat on the wet paint. No one ever rescinded the order. Everyone just forgot.” Lester grinned. “That’s what it’s like. Things fall through the cracks all the time. Always. And this is one like that. I can feel it.”

Darius felt the objections rising up in him like bubbles in a beer. Even if Lester was right, other ships might have broken the

quarantine and hauled off any good ice decades before. Or maybe there was no good ice. Or maybe the whole place was lined with decaying nukes set by someone's paranoid great-grandfather and just waiting for anyone to touch the tripwire. All the reasons not to. And the one argument in favor: that Lester had thought of all the same things and still wanted to try. That the Cassandra meant enough to his crew that they'd take a risk for it. And if Lester would, how could Darius do less?

"Let's figure a course," he said. "Then we take it to Amy and Abril. No pressure, no persuasion. Just lay out the option, and if anyone balks, we don't. Agreed?"

Lester grinned. "Unanimous or nothing."

It wasn't nothing.

The burn was designed not for speed or comfort, but to minimize waste heat. Even then, they agreed to let the internal temperature rise another half degree rather than spend the water to cool the ship, and the recyclers were doing their best to keep the ambient humidity low. Darius sat in his couch, sweating, and his dreams weren't about wealth or freedom. They were about winter mornings along the Seine and the feeling of ice cubes against his lips. The sounds of the ship changed with every degree of temperature rise as heat expansion changed the tensions and altered how the ship fit together. As soon as they had their orbit set in, Abril shut down the reactor. Even the radiative heat from the sun kept the ship's temperature ticking slowly upward. A point would come, Darius knew, when they'd have gone too far, where the balance of heat and water would mean that all the paths back to Luna ended with them baked to death in their couches. There wouldn't be a warning, either. They could sail past the point of no return without noticing it if they weren't careful. Whenever there was nothing else to do, Darius ran the numbers and planned his exit strategies.

Xi-Mallow 434 was a dot of black, but it grew larger as they got close. At its farthest point from the sun, it was still well inside the

orbit of Venus. The solar disk felt oppressive and huge. The braking burn meant taking the temperature up another degree. Even if there was no ice, there would be shadow. Darius felt himself growing hungry for just a little darkness to park the ship in. He had the irrational certainty that the Cassandra's heat sinks would melt, fuse, and lose their surface area.

The braking burn was short and harsh. The supply of reaction mass dropped quickly, the heat rose fast, and Darius watched, unable to affect anything. Then Abril shut the reactor down again, and they were on the float and moving into the pencil-thin shadow of the asteroid. Darius pulled up the external cameras in time to see the silhouette of Xi-Mallow 434 against the vastness of the sun. A dead-black iris in a vast and burning eye. In his baking-hot ship, he shuddered.

"I've got a few places for a decent dock," Amy said. "I'm not seeing any structures, but there are some flat spots we could anchor on."

"Let's take this slow," Darius said. "Coming out all this way to heat shock the hull would be a stupid way to die."

"Dychanie lloga es," Abril said cheerfully. It was a Belter idiom about the transience of life. Darius thought it literally meant "breath is rented".

"Lester?" Darius said. "Make me happy."

"Be happy. That out there? It's not silicates. It may be a little dusty, but it's ice."

Darius closed his eyes, relief flooding into him. "Amy, pick a mooring spot. We'll let the ship cool down before we snuggle up and spill a little heat—"

"Conduction!" Amy sang out like a victory cry.

"—and let's go do a little prospecting. Lester and Abril, meet me in the airlock."

He undid his straps, pulled himself up from his couch. Amy grinned at him, and he pulled himself in to kiss her. Her lips were salty.

“Keep the comms up too,” he said softly. “If the UNN starts coming for us, I’d like to be someplace else.”

She made a mock salute. Humming merrily to herself, she went back to mapping possible landing sites on the asteroid, and he went to the airlock. The others were already waiting. It took an hour to get all their equipment together—suits, kits, core samplers—and by then Amy had picked a place for them. It was flat, and the stone had been melted at some point recent enough from a geological perspective that the cooled surface was stable.

Once the Cassandra was in place, Darius cycled the lock and they went out. It had been a while since he’d heard Abril and Lester through the suit radios instead of the shipboard air, and the thinness of their voices reassured him. When they sounded like this, it meant they were working, and working meant things were going right.

The gravity of the asteroid was hardly more than a suggestion. A strong jump would have been enough for them to part company with it for longer than their air supplies would last, so they moved slowly. The suits all had compressed gas thrusters, but they’d learned not to rely on them.

Darius’ first priority was the ice. If the asteroid itself had ore worth hauling, that would be good, rationally speaking. But there was something in the back of Darius’ mind that made scraping a little ice off the surface of an asteroid under quarantine feel less dangerous than collecting ore. As if one substance was somehow morally different from another.

“It’s not bad,” Lester said. “But it’s not dense either.”

They were a few hundred meters from the Cassandra where Amy had brought it to rest. With the sun hidden by the asteroid, it was as dark here as in the depths of space beyond Neptune. Darius played his worklight over the pale crust around them.

"It's castoff," Darius said. "All of this around here. The formations over the horizon might have been here naturally, but this is all either steam from drives or native ice that was heated to steam, cooled, and recollected here.

"It's clean, anyway," Lester said. "We can use it. Fill the tanks and more with all this to work from."

"Coyos?" Abril said in Darius' ear though she was nowhere in sight. There was something in her voice that dropped adrenaline into his blood.

"We're here," Darius said. "Where are you?"

In response, Abril turned on her locator. The cheap heads-up display in Darius' suit pointed him to the far side of the ship and down into a split in the stone body of the asteroid. Long streaks in the frost-like ice showed where Abril had gone. Darius gave in to fear and used his suit's thrusters, driving himself deeper into the fissure. Lester flew at his side, a little slower.

"Abril?" Darius said. "Tell me you're alright?"

"Bist bien," she said, but her voice had a strange tone. Like she was looking at a puzzle she didn't know how to solve.

The fissure bit deeper into the stone than he had expected. The rough sides spoke to a natural formation. Mining would have been smoother and more controlled. Ahead of him and below, Abril's work light glimmered.

And something ahead of her glimmered back.

At the bottom of the fissure was an airlock. The outer doors were half open. The steel frame set into the natural, unworked stone was polished and smooth. Only a thin layer of dust served to dim its mirror finish. Darius braked hard, the jet of nitrogen kicking up fines and dust and tiny crystals of ice like fog rising from a river.

"Lester?" Darius said. "What am I looking at?"

"No idea," Lester said.

Slowly, Abril moved forward, her work light shining into the lock. The inner doors were open too. Darius scanned infrared, but nothing rose above the ambient cold of the stone. Whatever this place had been, someone had vented it intentionally, and a long time ago.

“We sure this is a good idea?” Darius said on the open channel.

“Are we sure what is?” Amy said from the ship, but Abril had already moved inside the lock.

Darius and Lester exchanged a look. “One of us should stay outside,” Lester said. “Just in case.”

Darius lifted a hand in agreement and moved forward. In the microgravity, he had the uncanny sensation that he was falling down into the airlock like it was a pit. Or a grave. Inside, Abril’s worklight was playing over a wide chamber. The walls had been insulated once, but the foam had broken down over time, leaving long strips that had drifted to the floor. The bare stone was polished and worked. The fissure that led here might have been natural, but the chamber had been created. Abril pulled herself along the wall, and Darius followed, his thrusters off to keep from stirring up more dust. His breath sounded unnaturally loud in his ears.

“Ah,” Abril said. “Vise la.”

“I am looking.”

“No,” Abril said, pointing forward. “La.”

Thirteen figures were sitting in a semicircle, legs folded beneath them. Their vac suits were all a dusty red color, plasticized fabric that had broken down over decades. The helmets were swept back and weirdly aerodynamic, like something out of a history book on the first days of terraforming. All of them had holstered side arms at their hips and military insignia that Darius didn’t recognize. For a few long breaths, he thought the suits were empty, but then his light passed over a faceplate, and the corpse inside it stared out. Gray, desiccated flesh. Sunken, empty eyes. Everything that made a human except for water and life. Abril moved forward slowly, letting

her feet drift down to the chamber floor. There were nameplates on the suits. Hoffmann. Gutierrez. Dahl. And ten more beyond them. The ancient dead.

“What the hell is this?” Darius said, as much to himself as to anyone.

Abril agreed with a hand gesture, then looking up, said, “Y que es la?”

Her work light angled up. There, suspended from the wall, was a thick rectangle of dark ceramic. An ancient storage container. The circle and arrow symbol for masculinity stood out in silver and blue, and what looked like three ideograms in a form Darius didn't know. A seam ran around its edge, making it seem like a great, still sarcophagus.

The semicircle of the dead faced it, as if the end had caught them all in a final and terrible act of worship.

* * * * *

“Ah. Well. Could be a number of things,” Lester said.

They were back in the Cassandra. All four of them in the galley again. The three of them who'd gone outside were still wearing their vac suits, and it made the space feel smaller. Tighter. The dust of Xi-Mallow they'd tracked inside smelled like gunpowder. Darius almost never felt the claustrophobic sense of being buried alive that he'd suffered when they first started flying, but it was tickling at him now.

“A number of things,” Amy echoed. It came across as scepticism, but Darius has known her long enough to tell it was only not knowing what else could be said.

“Yes,” Lester said. “Could be a religious cult. There were several of those on Mars in the early days. Or this could have been a secret research facility. Mars was all about that back in the day.” Then a moment later, “Still is, probably.”

“If it's Martian,” Amy said, “why's this place under UNN quarantine?”

“When was the Epstein Drive invented?” Darius said. “Did those people in there... Did they get here in a flying teakettle? Old chemical rockets, maybe? And what killed them? I mean, they were there to die. You saw how the lock was forced. They were all in suits, and they just sat there and died.”

Abril waved a hand like she was shooing away all the questions. “Ab que im eske, sa sa?” But what’s in it? She meant the black storage container.

“It has a label on it,” Lester said. “The Mars sign, and the writing.”

“Mars sign?” Darius asked.

“The circle and arrow. It’s an old symbol for Mars.”

“Thought it was the old symbol for the pisser you could use standing up,” Amy said, but the joke had an overheated quality. Like there was fear behind it.

Lester nodded, and Darius didn’t see fear in him, but a growing curiosity. “And the ideograms... there was a lot of Chinese influence on Mars at the beginning.”

“And these are the traditional Chinese families of Dahl and Hoffmann?” Darius said.

Lester looked hurt. “I didn’t say I knew what it was. I said it could be a number of things. But it doesn’t matter what it was then. Not really. The point is what it is now. And we do know that.” He looked around at them all solemnly. “That thing is our ticket out. We know that, right? Whatever that thing is, it’s immediately convertible to money. We put it in the hold, haul it back to Luna. A few words in the right ears, and we’ll have buyers lining up. We might even get a bidding war.”

Darius knew this was coming, and even so it shocked him a little to hear it said out loud. That he already had arguments for and against the plan—What if it’s a nuke? It’s been stable here for over a century. We don’t have to open it. —told him how much he’d already been thinking about it. About saving the Cassandra. His inheritance from

his parents. The path he'd chosen. After all, they'd come here trying to get enough water for one more run. This was that hopeful impulse answered a thousandfold. If they left it here...

With the ship laid down against the stone, microgravity pulled him gently toward the wall. The others all looked at him like they were expecting a pronouncement. He pulled up the ship's stats. Since they'd made contact, the Cassandra had dumped so much waste heat into the asteroid that life support was adding heat to the living space now. If he listened, he could hear the ship ticking to itself as it cooled and contracted. He loved the ship, and he loved the people on it. He felt the weight of his dreams and aspirations on his shoulders, stronger than the actual pull of gravity.

He took Amy's hand, running his thumb along her scars by long, affectionate habit. "Get the drive up. And a path to Luna."

"Yes!" Lester said. "I'll slap together a loading mech and have that thing out in—"

"Anybody who leaves the ship stays here," Darius said. "We're getting out now."

Lester sputtered. "But... I mean, the water—"

"Fuck the water," Darius said. "Get us a path to Luna. As soon as we're clear of this place, I'll put in for a berth and an indigence auction. Whatever we get, we split four ways."

Amy squeezed his fingers. "Babe, are you sure?"

"We can get work on Luna," he said. "Maybe we can crew up on some other ship. Find a captain who knows what they're doing, maybe."

He tried out a smile, and the power behind it wasn't sorrow. Or at least it wasn't only sorrow.

"Dar," Lester said, cajoling.

"You want to come back here, Lester," Darius said, "I can't stop you. But the answer now is no. Everyone go make ready. I want to get out

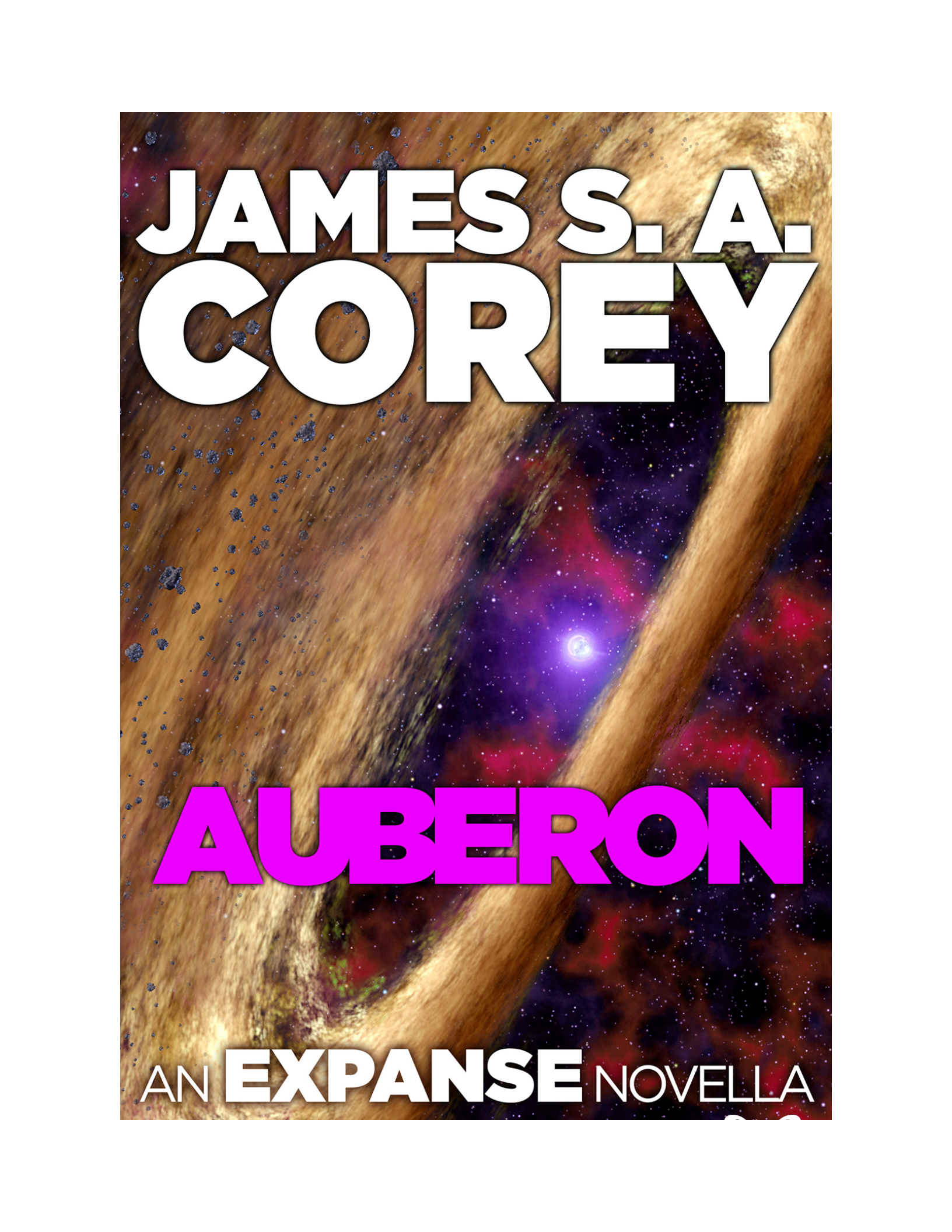
of here in the next two hours.”

There was a moment of silence in the galley while the others caught up to where Darius already was. Abril lifted an acknowledging hand and Lester nodded. They pulled themselves out of the galley, and a moment later, he heard the unmistakable sounds of them pulling off and stowing their vac suits. He was still holding Amy's hand. He looked into her eyes. He'd been afraid to see tears in them, but they were dry. After a moment, she squeezed his fingers again, and hauled herself toward the flight deck. Darius took a silent moment alone in the galley.

He didn't know what would come next. How he would make his living once the Cassandra was gone. Lester and Abril with it. Probably he'd still be with Amy, but that was her choice to make, and he was never perfectly sure. But whatever it was, it wouldn't be what it could have been if he'd made the other decision. His life was defined by all the paths he didn't take.

And the mistakes he avoided.

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**JAMES S. A.
COREY**

AUBERON

AN **EXPANSE** NOVELLA



Auberon is one of the first and most important colony worlds in humanity's reach, and the new conquering faction has come to claim it. Governor Rittenaur has come to bring civilization and order to the far outpost and guarantee the wealth and power of the Empire.

But *Auberon* already has its own history, a complex culture, and a criminal kingpin named Erich with very different plans. In a world of deceit, violence, and corruption, the greatest danger Rittenaur faces is love.

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James S. A. Corey

Auberon

An Expanse Novella

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AUBERON

The old man leaned back in his chair, ran his tongue over his teeth, then lit a fresh cigar. His left arm was a titanium and carbon-fiber prosthetic grafted deep into the bones of his shoulder, but his natural right arm was just as intimidating: scarred and pocked by decades of violence and abuse. His hair was a fluffy white fringe that cupped the back of his skull, and he wore a thin mustache like it was a joke he was in on.

“All right. So we’ll get a new governor who answers to a different boss,” he said. “It happens. Everyone’s playing by the rules, and then something rolls through and changes them all. Things get scrambled for a while until everyone figures the new rules out.”

His second went by Agnete because it wasn’t her name. She didn’t roll her eyes. She was used to the old man getting poetic, especially when he was thinking something through. The fingers of his metal arm shifted unconsciously, the wrist curling in on itself the way the real one had, back in the day.

The office wasn’t really an office at all. At the old man’s level, business could be done anywhere, and he liked the little bar on the Zilver Straat plaza with its wide-bladed ceiling fan and the smells of salt and sulfur coming off the bay. He claimed it reminded him of the kinds of holes and corners he’d grown up in, back on Earth. Some days, people came to meet him there. Occasionally, he’d go out and sit with people in other parts of the city. Someone powerful needed a loan and couldn’t get one. Someone

needed a supply of agricultural chemicals or drugs, pornography or off-book sex workers, untraceable security teams or zero-day code exploits, then sooner or later they came to the old man.

“The thing is,” he said, “you only have so long to figure out the new rules. That’s what kills you. You’ve got to look at the situation like you’re just coming into it, because you are. And sure, maybe it’s got the same street and the same people. That doesn’t mean it’s the same place. All the things you just take for granted about how it works are up for grabs again, and—”

“Permission?”

He scowled, but he nodded her on.

“Boss,” she said, “we didn’t just get a new governor. We got *conquered*.”

The old man grunted dismissively. He didn’t like being interrupted. Agnete nodded toward the wallscreen behind the bar. The newsfeed from Sol had the secretary-general of Earth, the speaker for the Martian parliament, and the president of the Transport Union—the most powerful people among all the scattered human billions—being humiliated and brought to heel by the new order like the burghers of some half-razed medieval town. The combined fleet was in tatters. The void cities broken or occupied. Pallas Station was reduced to pebbles and hot gas. Medina, at the heart of the gate network, taken over by the half-alien ships that had boiled out of Laconia system. The whole human orthodoxy overturned in what felt like a moment. High Consul Winston Duarte had named himself ruler of all humanity and had killed enough people to make it true. Emperor of the galaxy.

“This time is different,” she said.

The old man spat smoke and grunted again.

* * *

The gate network had opened more than thirteen hundred solar systems to humanity, almost all of them with one or two or three planets in the Goldilocks zone. Under hundreds of suns, evolution had improvised new

answers to the overwhelming question, *What is life?* With carbon and nitrogen, hydrogen and sunlight and time, the possibilities weren't limitless, but they were mind-boggling. The DNA and asymmetric chirality of organic life on Earth and its Sol system colonies turned out to be idiosyncratic in a wide and creative universe. Even animals shaped by the same selective pressures to look similar to Terran life—the grass trees of Bara Gaon, the humpbacked pigeons of Nova Brasil, the skinfish of New Eden—only needed a glimpse under a microscope to show they were as different from their Terran counterparts as a bull from a bicycle.

A human being could eat all day and still starve to death in the great garden of Sigurtá, surrounded by bright fruits and soft vegetables, trees heavy with fat birds and rivers filled from bank to bank with things that almost passed for trout.

The forest of life was varied and exotic, and the trees there didn't get along with each other. Or most of them didn't anyway.

At first glance, Auberon system didn't seem exceptional. Three modest gas giants, none of them larger than Saturn. A single wet, life-bearing planet with a large but unexceptional moon. There were no alien artifacts the way there had been in Newhome and Corazón Sagrado. No weirdly pure ore profiles like on Ilus or Persephone. Just a scattered handful of planets, a couple of asteroid belts, and a star burning its slow way toward a billion-year-distant collapse. Among the hundreds of systems to which humanity was heir, it could have been anyplace.

But it was now the most important human system outside of Earth, Laconia, and maybe Bara Gaon Complex. Only a few decades into its settlement, and it already boasted a dozen cities, each of them in the middle of built-up rural areas like the floral disc in the center of a daisy. There were six dwarf planets with mining and refining developments big enough to have permanent civilian populations growing around them. There was a transfer station built to accommodate the trade between it and the other, less fortunate colony worlds. It was the second most developed human settlement in the universe, and on track to keep growing for centuries. And the thing that made its first settlers the winners of history's land-rush lottery

was that, apart from competing for sunlight, the biosphere of Auberon barely interacted with the plants and animals of Earth.

There was a famous image of an Earth apple tree and an Auberon-native tree, their roots intertwined as if each were acting as soil for the other. That mutual biochemical shrug made open-air farming possible on Auberon. Contamination by local organisms tended not to mean more than a mild case of gas. And because it was the most habitable of the new planets by orders of magnitude, it was developed. Because it was developed, it was influential. Because it was influential, it was wealthy. And because it was wealthy, it was corrupt.

And now, it was Biryar Rittenaur's problem.

A woman's face appeared on his handheld. She had a prominent chin, long white hair in tight curls, and a high forehead... Biryar tapped his fingers against his thigh. He should know this one. A face like a spade. A spade is a garden shovel. Shovel...

"Michelle Cheval," he said. "President of the Agricultural and Food Production Workers Union."

The handheld shifted to a young man's face. Pleasant, neutral, with a mole at the side of his mouth that reminded Biryar of a cartoon rabbit. That was the image he'd built—cartoon rabbit with a basketball. He knew it was the right image, but he couldn't make the jump to why he'd chosen it.

"Damn it," he said, and tapped the man's profile. His name was Augustin Balecheck. He was the deputy minister in charge of planetary transportation security. Mona leaned over his chair, resting her chin on Biryar's shoulder.

"What was this one?" she asked. He could smell the almonds on his wife's breath and feel the shifting of her jaw against his as she chewed. It was the third year of their marriage, and he had never stopped loving the smell of her skin close to his.

"A rabbit basketball player," he said. "The mole was like a rabbit whisker. Balecheck like 'ball check.' Also traveling is a foul in basketball, and he's planetary transportation."

Her sigh meant she was thinking. She pointed a thin, graceful finger at Deputy Minister Balecheck's mole. "He got that because the guy he was

deep-throating had paving tar on his scrotum.”

Biryar coughed out something close to a laugh.

“That man’s cheek is a ball check,” she said, “and the paving tar will remind you of the road system.”

“Good lord. Are you always this obscene, Dr. Rittenaur? I’m not going to shake the man’s hand while I imagine him having sex.”

“If you don’t like it, erase it from your memory and go back to the cartoon rabbit thing,” she said.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to now.”

She tapped her forehead with the tip of her finger, and she grinned. “Which is my point. It works better if you commit to the process,” she said. Then she kissed his ear.

Biryar had two hundred and eighteen individuals and fifty-three organizations to commit to memory. More than any literal cartography, it was the map of the territory he was going to have to travel as the first Laconian governor of Auberon.

He hadn’t been surprised when Duarte had chosen him. He’d worked for the empire since he was old enough to enter government service, excelled in his coursework, taken every initiative to rise among his peers. He had done his thesis on High Consul Duarte’s early philosophical works and their relationship to examinations of grand strategy throughout human history. Auberon hadn’t been a specific ambition of his, but a posting of importance to the empire had been. Medina or Bara Gaon or Sol, a position in the High Consul’s cabinet or teaching at the university on Laconia would have served his hopes as well.

The reason, he knew, that he was in the cramped military cabin en route to a governor’s mansion was Mona. Her small, round face and wide, dark eyes made her seem younger than she was and somehow elfin, but his wife was the best soils scientist of her generation. While he had been writing an academic love letter to the most powerful man in the empire, she had been mapping out paths to bring the thousand different biospheres into accord, to engineer everywhere what Auberon had happened onto by chance.

Before she’d taken a single step under Auberon’s sun or drawn a breath of its air, Mona understood the richness of its dirt, and the potential that

rested there. Her post would be at the Xi-Tamyran Agricultural Concern in the capital city of Barradan, where the governor's office would be. Their skills and backgrounds were perfectly suited for the post. He could only hope that the millions of inhabitants of Auberon saw that too.

He switched to the next image. A hard-faced woman with dark-brown eyes. He didn't need a mnemonic device for her. Suyet Klinger was the Auberon representative of the Association of Worlds, and one of the only people he would be ruling over that he'd actually met. He tapped to move to the next image but the screen shifted on its own and a scheduled request took its place. He let a breath out between his teeth and rose from his crash couch. Mona popped another almond into her mouth and watched him walk the few steps to the cabin door.

"I'll be back," he said. She nodded, and didn't speak.

They were already in their braking burn, the floor of the *Notus* pushing up against them at almost half a g. It was a short walk to the meeting room where the head of his security, newly assigned from Medina Station and picked up on the way through the gate hub, was waiting for him. The relief Biryar felt at putting aside the memorization work was evidence that greater discipline was called for. He made a mental note to go back to it as soon as the meeting was done. Not because he wanted to, but because he didn't. And it was his duty.

Major Overstreet was a thickly muscled man with pale skin and bright-blue eyes that left him seeming eerily corpse-like. He'd served with honor and distinction most recently under Colonel Tanaka and then Governor Singh of Medina Station. And when Medina had faced its crisis, Major Overstreet had stepped in to prevent atrocities being carried out in the name of the empire. He was a hero, and to be honored. But when Biryar sat across from him, the back of his neck itched a little and felt the shadow of the guillotine.

"Governor Rittenaur," Overstreet said, rising to his feet and saluting. "Thank you for your time."

"Of course, Major. Thank you for your work." Their usual pleasantries. There was neither warmth nor animosity behind them. They were two

people entirely defined by their formal relationship: fellow cogs in the machine to which they were committed. It was comfortable.

“I’ve reviewed the report from the Association of Worlds,” Overstreet said. “There are some decisions that need to be made about your accommodations, and it would be useful to me to have some guidelines about your risk tolerance.”

“What are we looking at?”

Overstreet pulled up a report and sent it to the wallscreen. The format was familiar. Biryar had been reading and interpreting security reports for years, and usually for places he’d never physically been. He took in the slopes of Barradan’s hills and the curve of its roads from a scattering of lines. The compounds that had been offered to him were marked in Laconian blue. He touched the northernmost.

“This has the fewest angles of approach,” Biryar said. “That’s a fence?”

“Decorative fence on a half-meter wall. Easy to reinforce. But it’s also the farthest from the Xi-Tamyan campus, here,” Overstreet said, indicating the far side of the city. “Which means the most exposure in transit for Dr. Rittenaur.”

Biryar leaned forward, considering the other options for his new home in this new light. “What about this one?”

“Open grounds—like most places in Barradan—and approachable from three directions. But we can build a wall, the structures are defensible, and it would minimize daily transit exposure.”

The potential for separatist violence had been proven on Medina and in a handful of the colony worlds. The enemies of Laconia and the High Consul were out there, and some would be on Auberon. In Barradan. Some would pass him in the streets, and he might not know them.

And they would pass Mona as well.

“The one closest to Xi-Tamyan will do,” he said, and as soon as he said it, he felt a rightness in the choice. “And there’s no need to build any walls. Let’s not establish our new administration by hiding in our shell like a turtle. Personnel and active security show more engagement and openness.”

“Yes, Governor,” Overstreet said with a bland smile as he collapsed the reports.

The real protection wouldn't be walls and fences. It would be the narrative of power. The *Tempest* in Sol system was a massive deterrent, even though it was very far away. The *Notus* was smaller, but close by, and Auberon system didn't have the military power to deny it.

"There will be a reception after we arrive," Overstreet said. "I'm coordinating with the local authorities."

"If you are satisfied with the security arrangements, please move forward," Biryar said, agreeing. "I trust your judgment."

It occurred to Biryar then that he'd just chosen the home he might spend the rest of his life in based wholly on its abstract qualities, without knowing the color of the walls or the shapes of the windows. If he had, it wouldn't have changed anything.

The *Notus* was rated for atmosphere, so there was no reason to dock at the lunar station. There was a landing complex just east of the city designed to withstand the ship's drive plume until they switched to maneuvering thrusters and settled to the ground. With the turbulence of atmospheric passage and the vibration of the drive gone, there was nothing to drown out the soft ticking of the hull plates as they cooled. Biryar let the crash couch hold him up. The gravity of his new home planet pulled him gently into its cool blue gel.

He had imagined this moment a thousand times. His arrival at his new post, and the heroic, grave impression he wanted to give to the people who were now under his control. It was important that they should see him as something near the platonic ideal of a wise governor—stern, merciful, wise. And he also wanted them to recognize his loyalty to the High Consul and Laconia, as a model for them. As an example to be followed.

Now that the occasion was actually upon him, he was mostly aware of just how badly he needed to visit the head.

He heard his cabin door open, and then the soft padding of feet on the deck. Mona smiled down at him. She had her formal dress folded over her arm, ready to be put on. It was high-waisted and high-collared with layers of lace in Laconian blue. She was dressing for this moment not in her role as soil scientist but as the spouse of a governor. Her eyes betrayed only a

little of her tiredness and anxiety. To anyone who didn't know her, not even that.

"Ready?" she asked.

Are you ready to take control of a planet? Are you ready to command the lives of millions of people and forge the most valuable planet in the greater human sphere into a tool that will, in time, feed trillions of people under a thousand different suns? He told himself that the flutter he felt in his stomach was excitement. Not fear. Never dismay.

If she had been anyone else in all of humanity, he would have said *Yes, I am*. But it was Mona, and so his true feelings were safe.

"I don't know."

She kissed him, and the softness of her lips and the strength of them were a comfort and a promise. He felt his body starting to react to her and stepped back. Distracted and aroused was no way to start his tenure as governor. The millimeter lift of her eyebrows meant she understood everything he hadn't said.

"I'm just going over to my cabin to change," she said.

"That sounds wise."

She took his hand, squeezed it. "We're going to be fine," she said.

Less than an hour later, he walked down the gantry and stepped for the first time onto the planet. *His planet*.

From sunrise to sunset lasted a little over four standard hours on Auberon, with cycles of light and darkness changing only slightly with the seasons. By local convention, day was two cycles of light and one of darkness, night the reverse. Noontime on Auberon was always dark, and midnight was bright. It was midmorning, but it looked like sunset. Red clouds high above them, and huge sessile organisms like trees or massive fungi lifted red streamers as if all the world were touched by fire.

The small group that had been invited to greet him was by definition the most honored citizens of Auberon. The order in which he acknowledged them was important. The formality with which he held himself, whether he smiled or didn't when he shook their hands. Everything mattered deeply, because what High Consul Duarte was to the empire, Biryar Rittenaur was to Auberon. Beginning now.

The streets of Barradan were narrower than the broad boulevards of Laconia, with buildings that crowded the pavement. Brick the gray-green color of the local clay. The lights all glowed with the full spectrum of sunlight to say that this darkness was daytime, and would become dimmer and warmer when consensus night came. Security forces with rifles and riot gear kept his path clear as he moved through the maze of intersections. If someone had planned the city, they'd done it with the aesthetics of an earthbound ghetto. More likely, Barradan had bloomed with no intention beyond satisfying the needs of the moment.

Biryar traveled in an open car, the wind of his passage stirring his hair. Something smelled foul. Like a sewer that had failed. Mona wrinkled her nose at it too.

"Indole," she said. She saw the blankness of his response. "Technically 2,3-benzopyrrole. Just a couple carbon rings and some nitrogen. The local biome really likes it. Nothing to worry about."

"It smells like..."

"Shit. Yes, it does," Mona said. "The soils team tells me we'll get used to it in a couple days."

"Well. Elements are elements, and there's only so many things you can make with them, I suppose," he said. "Some smell better than others."

The compound was lit for noon when they pulled in. The house was shaped like a horseshoe, with pink stucco walls and polished metal sconces every few meters. Local insect analogs swarmed around the brightness. The courtyard in the center was paved in plates of carbon-silicate lace engineered to shine blue as a beetle's carapace. Starlight seemed to swim in its depths, reflections of the galactic disk overhead. The capital city of his planet didn't yet generate enough light pollution to drown the sky. The stars were the only things that reminded him of Laconia.

His personal staff stood at attention beside the building's wide central doors. Laconian guards and local administrators, all in formal dress, all waiting for Major Overstreet's inspection before they met their new master.

He was home now. For better or worse, this was his place in the universe, and might be for the rest of his career. Mona's sigh was barely audible, and he thought there was regret in it until she spoke.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

* * *

The reception began a few hours later. The sun was directly overhead in the second of the day’s two brightnesses, and Biryar kept reflexively thinking of it as midday. He was impressed by the heat of the sunlight and the humidity of the air. Either the sewer stench had gone down with the rising sun or he was already growing used to it.

There were easily a hundred guests at the reception. Many of them were on the lists he’d committed to memory, but there were some others: a thin-faced woman with her hair in an elaborate plait, an older man with a thin mustache and a prosthetic arm, an agender person with a pinstriped linen suit and the studied respectability of a banker. Today was Auberon’s first glimpse of what Laconian rule would mean, and the people—city, planet, and system—were driven by their uncertainty and their fear. It was Biryar’s duty to project calm and strength, the implacable authority of the new regime, and its geniality and benignity to those who gave it their undivided loyalty.

He’d intended to wear a jacket, but he gave up the idea. He was happy to see that the guests had also chosen lighter shirts and soft, airy blouses. Mona’s blue lace looked almost heavy by comparison, but she wore it with grace. She moved through the party as assured and confident as if they had lived in these rooms for years, not hours. She laughed easily and listened intently as she spoke to the man with the prosthetic arm. He felt the twinge of jealousy in his breast as a mixture of admiration, love, and exhaustion.

As he moved among the guests, he found himself orbiting her. Touching her arm as they passed, laying claim to her the same way he was laying claim to the world. The glitter of amusement in her eyes, invisible to anyone but him, meant she saw what he was doing, and that she forgave him his weakness. Or that she enjoyed the power she had over him. They were two ways to say the same thing.

The first sign of trouble seemed so trivial that he didn’t see its significance at all at the time. They were in a side garden where the local

plants pushed their ruddy way up from a lawn of grass. A fig tree from Earth had spread its limbs above a small carved-stone table. The fruit was ripe to splitting, and added a sweetness to the foul air.

Mona was sitting across from a woman maybe twenty years older than either of them. The woman's graying hair was starting to escape an austere bun, and her cheeks were flushed from one drink too many. When he saw Mona's frown, Biryar stepped lightly over, ready to act as his wife's savior. He found he had misread the situation.

"We were so close," the older woman said. "Six more months, and we could have cracked it. I swear to fucking God."

Mona shook her head in sympathetic outrage. The older woman looked up at Biryar, a flash of annoyance at his interruption melting into embarrassment when she recognized him.

Mona took his hand. "Dear, this is Dr. Carmichael. I told you about her work on amino acid array translation."

Biryar smiled and nodded as his mind churned. Carmichael. What was array translation? He'd known this one... He found it. "Coaxing the local biology into growing something that can nourish us."

Carmichael nodded a little too strongly. A lock of her hair escaped unnoticed and fanned out behind her head as if she were on the float. When she spoke, her voice was reedy, caught in the uncertain space between anger and whining. "My funding was reallocated. They just took it away. I wouldn't pay the bribes, and so they said I was difficult to work with!"

"That sounds distressing," Biryar said, putting sympathy in his tone while keeping it out of his word choice.

"It was," Carmichael said, nodding. Tears brightened her eyes. "It was really distressing. That's exactly the word."

Biryar nodded back, mirroring her.

"I will absolutely look into this," Mona said.

"Thank you, Dr. Rittenaur," Carmichael said, still nodding. "We were so close. I can show you the data."

Biryar smiled down at Mona. "If that could wait until another time, there's someone I'd like you to meet, dear."

“Of course,” Mona said, rising. She and Carmichael exchanged farewells, and Biryar steered her away into the house without any clear idea where he was going except out of the older woman’s sight.

“It’s early to be taking sides in local disputes, don’t you think?” he said as they walked.

Mona looked at him. She was tired too. Overstimulated and out of her element just as much as he was. When she spoke, she snapped.

“Her work is exactly what Auberon should be focused on. If she got sidelined because she wouldn’t pay a bribe—”

“Corruption is a problem here. We knew that, and we’ll address it. Maybe this is an example, or maybe she just has a story that makes her feel better. Either way, please don’t commit us to anything on the first day.” It came out harder than he’d meant it. Worse, it came out patronizing.

Mona’s smile was warm and inauthentic, intended for onlookers and not for him. She squeezed his arm gently, bowed her head, and disengaged. He felt a little stab of distress. They should have put off the reception until they were both more rested. This was the kind of fight they only had when they were tired or hungry. They’d finish it in private if they had to. He didn’t think it would amount to more than that.

Still, he regretted it.

The reception carried on through the remaining two hours of daylight and into the second sunset of the day. The light grew redder, and the crowd of people began to thin. Biryar went over his mental list of people he thought it was important to acknowledge. Arran Glust-Hart, the forensic accountant with the Association of Worlds. Nayad Li, the director of planetary logistics. Devi Ortiz, the minister of education. A dozen more. As the evening drew to its close, the irrational fear of introducing himself twice to the same person started to grow. He hadn’t accomplished everything he’d hoped with the reception, but he knew himself well enough to recognize the point of diminishing returns. He remembered one of the High Consul’s sayings: Overdoing is also falling short. Better to have a good night end well than push for perfect and undo what had been achieved.

He’d woken on a ship under burn. He would sleep at the bottom of a gravity well. The thought was enough to make his limbs feel heavy. A glass

of whiskey, maybe. A boiled egg with some pepper and salt. And sleep.

He didn't notice quite how he found himself in the little drawing room that looked out over the courtyard. It was a cozy space with a tall, thin window and chairs made of some thick, fibrous wood strung with raw silk. The floor was made with the same green-gray bricks he'd seen on the drive in. A knotwork carpet commanded the center of the room. The older man with the prosthetic arm stood at the window, looking east toward where the sky was just fading from black to charcoal with the coming of the nighttime dawn, which put the hour near ten o'clock.

Biryar was certain the man hadn't been in his briefings list. The arm—titanium fused to his living flesh—would have been hard to forget. But even without that, the face was striking. The man's skin was pale and papery without seeming frail. Only well lived-in. A line of fluffy white hair ran from ear to nape to ear, leaving a wide, smooth scalp. A thin, white mustache. He wore tight black trousers and a pale shirt with an open collar. An unlit cigar was clamped in his lips. The one-armed man turned and nodded to Biryar as if he'd been expected.

"Turd of a planet," he said. "It's home, though. I remember the first time I came down. I thought I was gonna puke, it smelled so bad." He lifted his cigar between a thumb and finger. "It's when I started with these. Just to kill off my sense of smell. But I do love it now."

"I'm looking forward to making it my home too," Biryar said. "I don't believe we've been introduced."

"Makes me think of the Raj," the one-armed man said, as if he hadn't heard Biryar. "That was a weird thing, wasn't it? Dinky-ass little Britain using maybe a hundred thousand people to keep their boots on three hundred million necks? You can have the best guns ever, and those odds still suck. No, I do not envy you. Not even a little bit."

Biryar's smile went slightly tighter. Something about the moment felt off. "I think your understanding of history leaves something to be desired."

The man turned, pale eyebrows lifted. He shrugged his real shoulder. "Maybe that part. There's other bits of history I know better. You ever hear the question 'Silver or lead?' "

Biryar shook his head. “I don’t believe so. What’s your name? Who are you with?”

“My friends call me Erich,” the one-armed man said, grinning. His teeth were the color of old ivory. “So anyway, there was this thing way back when. They used to have these huge recreational drug companies. Totally illegal. And when someone new would come into town or get elected or whatever, the question was: silver or lead? *Plata o plomo*. Does the new sheriff in town take a bribe or a bullet? Hell of a slogan. It’s simple, you know? Boils everything down. You have to admire that.”

Biryar’s exhaustion fell away. His heart began to tap at his ribs, but he didn’t feel panicked. His mind was cold and sharp, and he was suddenly very present. “Are you threatening me?”

“What? Jesus, no. We’re just a couple guys talking history.” The old man took something from his pocket. At first Biryar thought he was going to light his cigar, but instead the old man placed the little device on the windowsill with a percussive tap. He stepped back from it. A small black shape, curved along one side.

Biryar gestured to it with his chin, asking the question without speaking.

“It’s a token for the local exchange network,” the one-armed man said. “It’s tied to a private, anonymized account with about fifteen thousand new-francs in it. That’s enough to buy even someone like you a little privacy.”

“For what?”

The man spread his hands. “Whatever. I don’t judge.”

Biryar stepped carefully to the window and picked up the token. The resin looked like smoky glass. Obsidian. The old man smiled until Biryar dropped it to the floor, put his heel on it, and ground it against the brick. The one-armed man’s eyes narrowed. The facade of good humor was gone, and Biryar knew he was facing a predator.

“Are you sure about that?” the old man asked.

“Don’t make me raise my voice. This is my house. And there are a lot of armed people in the compound right now,” Biryar said.

The man smiled. “There are. And some of them are probably pretty loyal to you. Others, maybe not as much. You a gambling man?”

In the window, the night's single, swift dawn was already breaking. Blue sky and high, scudding clouds. The two men stood still as stone for three long breaths, then the old man turned to the door and walked out. Biryar felt the shout swelling in his chest. He didn't let it out.

He was shaking. Trembling. He picked up the token. The resin was cloudy with scratches now, but he didn't know whether he'd managed to break whatever mechanism it contained. He told himself that he would not leave the room until he could gather himself again into the man he was supposed to be. He wouldn't rush out into the reception looking panicked. But then he thought of Mona earlier in the night, listening intently to the one-armed man, and he couldn't wait any longer.

The one-armed man had vanished. Mona, sitting on a wide sofa with a gin and tonic in her hand, saw him and put her drink down. He hoped it was only the intimacy of their marriage that let her see his distress. When she came to him, he kissed her ear and whispered.

"Find our guards. The ones from the *Notus*, not the locals. Stay with them."

She pulled back, smiling like a mask. She spoke without moving her lips. "Are we in danger?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'll find out."

With Mona warned, he could move to offense. He summoned Major Overstreet to his private office. Sitting at the wide wooden table where he'd never sat before felt like being in a mousetrap.

Overstreet stepped into the room and stood at attention. The only sign of fatigue was a slight darkness in the skin under his eyes. "Sir?"

Biryar kept himself calm, or as calm as he could. When he got to the old man's threat, Overstreet became almost eerily still. When the full report was given, he put the token on the desk. Overstreet picked it up, considered it, and placed it back down. Biryar leaned forward in his chair. He hadn't said anything yet that the old man wouldn't have known from being present when it happened. That was about to change.

"How certain are you that our conversation here is private?" Biryar asked.

Overstreet hesitated. Then, “An hour ago, I would have said I was certain, sir.”

“Now?”

“I’m less certain.”

The silence had weight. “I think it would be very unfortunate to leave the compound so soon after arriving. I will visit the *Notus* in the morning to finish clearing the diplomatic documents. We can have a conversation there.”

“I will have Laconian guards stationed to assure your safety.”

“And Dr. Rittenaur’s.”

“Yes, sir. And I will begin an investigation as to who this individual was at once, and who allowed him on the property.”

“Thank you,” Biryar said. “This has to be our first priority now.”

“Agreed, sir. I’ll have a preliminary report ready before you reach the *Notus*. And...” Overstreet pressed his lips together and looked away.

“What’s bothering you, Major?”

“This was either an egregious failure on the part of the local forces or an outright subversion of security protocols. Either way, there will have to be consequences. Before I begin an investigation, it would be good to have some sense of how you would prefer to escalate this. Should that be needed.”

It was a measure of how much the encounter had shaken him that Biryar hadn’t considered this already. On Laconia, a breach of this magnitude would mean someone was executed at the least, and more likely sent to the Pens as a test subject. But on Laconia, a breach like this would never have happened. The first decision of his career would be whether to execute someone and very possibly alienate the planet he’d come to preside over. And the decision was complicated by what had happened with Governor Singh on Medina.

“We both understand the dangers of overreach,” Biryar said, speaking the words gently, as if they were sharp. “If the offending party is a native of Auberon, arrest them and turn them over to the local authorities. The processing of their case will need to be thoroughly and completely

monitored. We will respect the laws here to the degree that we safely can. I won't escalate until Auberon's legal system has the chance to do this well."

"And if the issue began with us?"

Biryar smiled. That was easier. "If a Laconian is responsible for breaking protocol and putting our administration at risk, either now or in the future, we will execute them publicly. Laconian standards are absolute."

"Understood, sir," Overstreet said, as if Biryar hadn't simply restated a policy that traced back over thousands of light-years to the desk of High Consul Winston Duarte himself. Overstreet hesitated, then: "One thing, sir? Until this is addressed, I'd be more comfortable if you carried a sidearm."

Biryar shook his head. "It will be seen as a sign of fear. I trust your security force to make it unnecessary."

"I appreciate your confidence, but I'm asking you to do it anyway," Overstreet said. "The man was in your house."

Biryar sighed, then nodded his agreement. Overstreet left.

Mona was sitting on the edge of the bed when he reached her. Worry etched lines around her mouth. Probably around his as well.

"What happened?" she said. "Is there a problem?"

"The criminal element of Auberon is concerned by our arrival. As they should be," he said. "There was a threat. We're looking into it."

She pulled her knees up, hugging them to her chest, and looked out toward the windows. She looked lost and small. She was right to feel that way. They were one ship full of people to command a system of millions.

Thick shutters were closed against the brightness of the too-fast sun and the heat and stench of the consensus midnight. A line of brightness showed the seam where they met. Biryar sat beside her. A dozen things came to mind that he might say to her. *This is our duty* or *Some pushback had to be expected* or *We will destroy them*.

He kissed her shoulder. "I won't let anyone hurt us."

* * *

Agnete scratched her chin to make it seem more like she was thinking and less like she was struggling to keep her temper. The old man sat at the

breakfast bar. His bathrobe was a gray that could have been any other color before it faded. His fake arm was going through its diagnostic reboot, shivering and twitching. The old man did it every day even though the documentation said it was a once-a-month thing. The speed and violence of the reboot sequence made her think of insects.

When her outrage had subsided enough that she could be polite, she said, "That was a move, boss. Not sure I would have done that."

"It was a risk," he said, dismissively.

But whatever his tone, he wasn't at the Zilver Straat bar. Just the fact that he'd started moving his meeting places said he was taking the situation seriously. She didn't know whether she felt worse because of the new level of threat or better because he knew it was a problem. Even if he wouldn't say it out loud.

They were sitting in an apartment over a noodle bar. It wasn't quite a bolt-hole, although the old man had a few of those around the city and around the planet, and probably some she didn't know about. The light of afternoon dawn slanted in the clerestory windows, tracking down the far wall quickly enough to follow it if she was patient. She wasn't.

The old man poured ouzo over ice with his real arm, the liquor going cloudy as it filled the glass.

"This new governor's going to fuck us up now, isn't he?" she asked.

The old man didn't answer at once. His fake arm was almost done with its reboot. He used it to pick up the glass, and it seemed all right. Steady. He sipped his drink. "He's going to have to try. That's his job. It's still our home pitch, though."

"How hard is this going to be?" she asked. Her irritation was already fading, and her mind was turning toward what needed to happen next. Planning for violence. When the old man spoke, his tone was lighter than she'd expected.

"I don't know. He's a tight-ass, this one. I mean, it seems like these Laconians all are. Not a big surprise. You take a bunch of Martian Congressional Republic fanatics and interbreed them for a few decades, it's not going to tend toward a greater mental flexibility. I've got a few ears in place. We'll see how he reacts."

“Electronic?”

“Nope. Just people who like gossip and drinking. They’ll do.” The old man ran a metal finger around the rim of his glass, his mouth pulled into something that was almost a smile. “This guy. He’s... *hungry*. I just don’t know what for yet.”

“Does it matter?”

He drank down the rest of the ouzo in a gulp. “Of course it matters. Hungry pays our bills.”

“No, I mean, why do we care what he wants or needs when we’re going to kill him? Sure, maybe he’d look the other way if we got him a lot of exotic talcum powder and a bottle of whiskey, but that’s not going to matter much when he’s dead.”

The old man shook his head slowly. “I’m not killing him. Not yet anyway. We start knocking off governors, maybe we get a little time to breathe before the next guy comes, but the next guy’s going to be even more of a shithead. Better if I figure this guy out.”

“Permission?” Agnete said.

The old man waved his metal hand in a slow circle, inviting her to speak her mind.

“You already made the call,” she said. “He joins up by taking the bribe, or he turns it down and we kill him. He turned it down, so now we kill him. Those are the rules.”

The old man scratched at his hairy, white chest. Outside the window, a local pigeon—six compound eyes and bat wings covered with feathery cilia—landed, chittered, and flew off again. The old man smiled after it as if the interruption had broken his train of thought. When he spoke, she knew it hadn’t, and that the conversation was over.

“The rules,” he said, “are what I say they are.”

* * *

Mona Rittenaur’s office was on the top floor of the northwest corner of the Xi-Tamyan building. It was twice as large as her cabin on the *Notus* had been, with intelligent glass from floor to ceiling that not only adjusted the

level of light as Auberon's sun sped across its wide blue sky, but corrected the color to give the landscape below her a sense of greater constancy. She knew from her briefing that the illusion was supposed to make the transition to Auberon's unfamiliar daily cycle easier, but after the first few days, she disabled the feature. She wanted to see the world around her as it was.

"Dr. Rittenaur?" a woman's voice said from the doorway, and then, belatedly, a soft knock. "You wanted to see me?"

Veronica Dietz was her liaison with the workgroups. Mona had been coming to the office for a week now, and apart from being the living symbol of how anxious Xi-Tamyan Agricultural Concern was to have a solid relationship with the new Laconian government, her role in the research had been nebulous.

She was ready to define it.

"Yes," Mona said, "I heard about some research on amino acid array translation. I'd like to see the records on that."

"I don't think it's a live workgroup," Veronica said. "We had some preliminary work a few years back, but the powers that be thought the microbiota compatibility work had more potential."

"I understand," Mona said with a smile. "Just bring me what you have on array translation. It doesn't need to be complete."

"You got it. Anything else?"

"Not for now," Mona said, and Veronica vanished back behind the door.

Dr. Carmichael's tipsy, weeping voice had stuck with Mona since the reception. Biryar was focused on the incident, the threat, whatever euphemism he and Overstreet were using for it. The criminals and terrorists who saw Laconia as something that could or ought to be resisted. That they'd made a threat on the same day the *Notus* arrived bothered her, but she couldn't do anything about it directly. This, she could.

The records appeared on her system a few minutes later with a tagged note from Veronica offering to bring in some tea and one of the apple pastries from the break room. Mona thanked her in text but turned the offer down. Veronica's job required that she be solicitous and friendly, but it didn't cost Mona anything to treat her nicely.

The records of Dr. Carmichael's work were preliminary, as Mona expected. They also weren't quite as impressive as she'd been led to believe. There was good, solid work in it, though. If it had been done on Laconia, Carmichael would have had more tools for the experiments. And she might still, if Mona pushed to have her transferred back home. It tickled her a little, the prospect of swooping in and rescuing a languishing career just because she could.

The microbiota compatibility workgroup that had been funded instead was headed by a broad-faced man with brown eyes and hair as thin as mist: Dr. Grover Balakrishnan, previously from Ganymede, one of the oldest and most respected agricultural centers in Sol system. His plan was essentially harnessing evolutionary pressure to develop soils that supported both Sol and Auberon trees of life. Start a few hundred samples of mixed microbes, then part out the most successful ones. Iterate a few dozen times, and let selective pressure do the work.

It was sloppy. And, to her eyes, less likely to get replicable results than Dr. Carmichael's work. That didn't mean that there had really been a conspiracy to quash the array translation project. It might just have been a bad decision. She went back to look at the funding committee reports. It took her most of the morning and well into the midday darkness before she found the smoking gun.

Deep in the patent payment agreement that covered any products derived from the microbiota compatibility studies, a new name appeared. Only it wasn't really new at all.

V. Dietz.

Veronica.

Mona went through all of the present workgroups, and again and again, all through the studies, it appeared. Whatever discoveries Xi-Tamyan made in their facilities on Auberon, Veronica Dietz was contractually entitled to a cut. Each one was small, but taken together, they would be enough to make her fantastically wealthy. People had been murdered for much less money than her liaison made in a month. And that was before her salary.

Mona went through again, this time looking for the justification for the payments. Some service that Veronica did for the researchers that made the

payments make sense. There was nothing apart from the inescapable conclusion that if anyone was going to make anything, Veronica Dietz got a slice.

When her system chimed, she flinched. Veronica's voice came from the speaker, as friendly and casual as ever. It was only the intensity with which Mona listened that made it seem fake as a carnival mask.

"Hey, Dr. Rittenaur. I'm heading down to the commissary. Do you want me to get you anything?"

The steadiness of Mona's voice surprised her. She would have thought that something would make it tremble: surprise, fear, anger. But she only said, "No, I'm fine," and let the connection drop.

* * *

Biryar had only ever been to two executions. The first time, he had been a child, and Laconia had still been more wilderness than civilization. One of the soldiers who had come with the first fleet had been careless in his driving. Maybe even intoxicated, it was hard to remember the details now. A boy from the original scientific expedition had been struck and killed. Duarte himself had overseen the punishment, and attendance at the death had been mandatory.

Before they killed the man, Duarte had explained that discipline was critical for them all. They were a small force in a single system, with no influx of immigration to draw from. It had seemed a strange argument at the time. If people were so rare and precious, killing one seemed wasteful.

Later he understood that the preciousness was what made the sacrifice profound. The soldier had died quickly, and while it didn't undo the man's crime, it showed the members of the civilian scientific expedition that Duarte and his followers valued their lives and the lives of their children. If the driver had lived, bringing the two populations together would have been difficult or impossible.

The second time, it had been a young construction worker in the capital who used the wrong proportions when mixing concrete for the foundations of one of the buildings. No one had died, but the error, if it hadn't been

found, could have led to hundreds of deaths when the structure collapsed. Duarte had held a ceremony—again mandatory—so that everyone could understand the severity of the problem and the sorrow with which the young woman was being sent to the Pens. Biryar hadn't watched her die, but he still remembered her tear-streaked face as she made her apology to the community.

Laconia had always been the few and the pure against the many and the corrupt. Like the Spartans from whom they took their name, Laconians were severe within their group, both to forge the iron discipline that had led them to victory and to demonstrate to others the sincerity of their beliefs.

It was hard, but it was necessary.

Now the Laconians present in the courtyard stood at attention, representing the empire and its uncompromising resolve. Biryar had his place of honor at the front of the assembly.

"I apologize," the prisoner said, "for the shame I brought on my companions. And for the wrong I have done to my commander and the High Consul."

The sunlight hurt Biryar's eyes, and a thin film of sweat stuck his shirt to his back. The pistol felt heavy, the holster like someone constantly tapping his hip for attention. There were more locals in attendance than he'd expected. Some were employees of the local newsfeeds, but many of them had come as sightseers and tourists drawn by the spectacle of punishment the way they would be to a sporting event.

The prisoner, an ensign assigned to logistics and supply, had given a pharmaceutical printer and two boxes of reagents from the *Notus's* medical supplies to a local criminal to produce untaxed recreational drugs. The local buyer was in an Auberon-administered prison and faced two years' confinement if she was convicted. The trial was apparently a lengthy process. The Laconian side of the theft would be dead before Biryar ate dinner.

The prisoner hung his head. A guard led him up the steps to the little platform. The prisoner knelt. Biryar's nose had grown mostly insensible to the sewer smell of Auberon, but a particularly strong whiff of it came on the breeze. It felt like a comment. Tradition, such as it was, allowed anyone

higher in the chain of command to give the order, but symbolically, Biryar knew it had to be him. The prisoner's commanding officer, a woman Biryar had known peripherally for almost a decade, stood on the platform with a sidearm at the ready.

Biryar stepped forward to the sound of a single, dry drum, met her gaze, and nodded. He half expected tears to glisten in her eyes, but her expression was blank. After a moment, she nodded in return, pivoted, and fired a single round into the back of the prisoner's head. The sound was weirdly flat. The drum stopped, and a medic came out to certify the death.

And it was over. Biryar turned to the cameras of the local newsfeeds, careful to present his better profile. The crowd looked shocked. That was good. State violence was meant to be shocking. It was done to prove a point, and it would have been a pity for the sacrifice not to have its effect. He paused long enough to be sure that they'd all gotten a good image of him for the feeds, then turned toward the Laconian contingent. He wanted to go back to his office, get a cold gin and tonic, and close his eyes until his head stopped aching.

Most of the people in Laconian blue had come with him on the *Notus*, but Suyet Klinger, the local representative of the Association of Worlds, and her staff had also chosen clothes that echoed Biryar's uniform. Blue almost the right shade and tailored in a similar cut. Not Laconian uniforms, but something that rhymed with them. Her face, as he stepped to her, was grave.

"I'm very sorry, sir," she said. "I'm sure that was very difficult for you."

He knew what he was supposed to say. *Discipline is the policy of the High Consul*. It should have been easy, but the words that came to his mind were *Why are you sure?*

Klinger knew nothing about him but what she'd been told by Laconia. She would have been just as solicitous to anyone who had come in his position. And if someone else had been in her role, he would have treated them the same way he did her. They weren't people to each other. They were roles. This was etiquette, and the inauthenticity of the situation oppressed him.

He nodded to her. "Discipline is the policy of the High Consul," he said, and she averted her gaze in respect. The forms were there to be followed.

He moved through the grim crowd, acknowledging each of them and being acknowledged. Form. It was all just keeping form. The shadows shifted around them as the sun raced for the horizon and left him feeling like he'd been there for hours, but there were more nods to exchange, more words to mouth. The dead man was hauled away to the recyclers, and the medics retreated.

It was strange and in a way unfair that the local thief would live and might even go free. Being Laconian meant being held to a higher standard, and so transgression against that standard required a higher response, but it still bothered him. Or at least it did for the moment. If he could get some rest and a decent meal, it might not. The faces in the group began to blend together, one following another following another until he didn't know or care who he was speaking to.

He came to a man he hadn't met in person before, with brown hair, a serious expression, and a mole on his cheek like a dot of paving tar. Biryar almost pulled away, shocked by the sudden visceral image of how the fleck of tar had gotten there, and then felt amused and even strangely pleased.

"Deputy Balecheck," Biryar said. "Good to finally meet you."

Balecheck's eyes widened a fraction. The surprise at being recognized melted quickly into a smile as they shook hands, and then Biryar moved on. From the other man's point of view, it had been a gratifying moment that showed his importance to the new governor. Functionally, it was an example of building the kind of good relations with the local authority that would cement Laconian rule on Auberon. It was also a smutty joke with his wife, but that was a fact Biryar would keep entirely private. At least until he was alone with Mona.

It works better when you commit to the process, she'd said. He had to commit to the process of governing Auberon, even the parts that he found difficult. Especially to those parts.

A car waited for him at the edge of the courtyard, ready to take him back to his offices. When he ducked into it, Major Overstreet followed and sat across from him. His pale, bald face shone with sweat.

"How are you doing, sir?"

"Fine," Biryar said. "A bit of a headache."

“The stutter,” Overstreet said.

“The what?”

The car pulled away, and cool air, as fresh as if it came from the *Notus*’s recyclers, touched his face and filled his nose. He noticed the absence of Auberon’s stench and dreaded the end of the ride when he’d step back into it. It made more sense to keep exposing himself to the foul air. Breaks from it like this could only prolong his acclimation.

“They call it the stutter, sir. It’s common among new arrivals. The four-hour cycles don’t sync well with normal circadian cues. Irritability, headache. Some people get vertigo after about a month that clears in a few days. It’s just our brains learning the new environment.”

“Good to know,” Biryar said. “Is it bothering you?”

“Yes, sir, it is,” Overstreet said. “I’m looking forward to it being over.”

The growing twilight in the streets was the real one. The end of the day and the beginning of evening. If he did it right, Biryar hoped to be asleep before the nighttime dawn. If he could just sleep through and give his body the impression of a full twelve hours of darkness... The longing for rest surprised him. Maybe he was more tired than he knew.

“What progress have you made on that other investigation?” Biryar asked.

“The man with the metal arm,” Overstreet said, making the words like the heading on a report. Neither a question nor a statement, but a tag that identified the content to follow. “He is a known figure in the local criminal demimonde. He goes by several names, but he has no entry in the law enforcement systems. He has no accounts on the exchanges, though given the token he tried to bribe you with, it’s safe to assume he has significant access to untraceable funds.”

“Where did he come from?”

“There aren’t any records of his arrival in the databases.”

“So he grew out of the dirt?” Biryar said, more sharply than he’d meant to.

Overstreet shrugged. “I’m moving forward with the assumption that the local databases are at least inaccurate and more likely suffering ongoing compromises.”

Biryar leaned back in the seat. A group of young men were playing football in the street, and the security detail was yelling at them to move off and let the cars through. Biryar watched them. Long-limbed, lanky young men. Maybe Belters. Maybe just adolescents. Any of them could be a separatist terrorist. All of them could be. For a moment, it felt like madness to be on the planetary surface at all. There was no safety here. There couldn't be.

"He's not a criminal mastermind," Overstreet said as the car started forward again. "He's just got a head start. We will track him down."

"Don't turn this one over to the local police. He should be our guest until we can fully understand how he got past our security arrangements."

"I understand," Overstreet said. "No formal arrest, then?"

"Once he's helped with our security review, we can revisit the issue," Biryar said. And then, a moment later, "He was talking with my wife."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

The compound was well guarded now. Laconian marines in powered armor stood like sentries at the approaches and on the roofs. He lost something by having them there. Duarte's rule through him should have been inevitable and confident. A standing guard made him seem concerned, and concern made him look weak, but he couldn't bring himself to dismiss them or release them to other duty.

As he stepped into the private rooms, he unbuttoned his collar. In the time since they'd arrived, Biryar had made some changes to the governor's compound. He hadn't brought many things from their old home on Laconia, but what there was had pride of place. The picture of Mona receiving her Laconian distinguished service award, framed on the front wall where the light caught it. The clay sculpture she'd given him as a wedding gift. A calligraphic print of one of High Consul Duarte's sayings—*Effort in Discipline. Effortless in Virtue*—in gold leaf.

Everything else in the rooms was foreign. The fluted wall sconces with different spectrums of light for daytime darkness and night. The grain of the false wood paneling, made from the treelike organisms of Auberon to mimic the trees of Earth. Neither one was his home. It felt like the room

itself was telling him that he didn't belong. Like it was pushing him away. He was sure that, with time, the sensation would pass.

He stretched. The knot between his shoulders appeared to be there permanently now, like the grit in his eyelids. The door behind him opened with a click, and Mona's footsteps—as familiar and unmistakable as her voice—followed. He looked over at her, and his heart sank to his gut.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

She dropped into a cushioned chair and shook her head. A small, tight, unconscious gesture he'd seen before. Anger, then. Well, better that than fear. He went to sit near her, but didn't touch her. Her rage didn't respond well to physical comfort.

“This place is rotten,” she said. “Xi-Tamyan has a scam going on in it that has profoundly compromised its research priorities for years. *Years*. Maybe since they came here.”

“Tell me,” Biryar said.

She did. Not only the way her liaison had added herself to the patent agreements, but that she was married to the union comptroller, that she had gotten the placement in Mona's office over several other more qualified applicants, that her reported income didn't remotely match the payments made to her. With every sentence, Mona's voice grew harder, the outrage rising the more she thought about it. Biryar listened, leaning forward with his hands clasped and his gaze on her. Every new detail felt like a weight on his chest. Corruption layered on corruption layered on corruption until it seemed like there was more disease than health.

“And,” Mona said, reaching her crescendo, “either management and the union didn't know, in which case they're incompetent, or they did, and they're complicit.”

Biryar lowered his head, letting it all settle. Mona's gaze was fixed on nothing, her head shaking a fraction of a centimeter back and forth, like she was scolding someone in her imagination. She probably was.

There was a soft knock at the door. One of the housekeepers hoping to sweep or change their bedding. Biryar told them to come back later and got a muttered apology in return. Mona hadn't even noticed. He risked taking her hand.

“That is disappointing,” he said.

“We have to *fix* it,” she said. “This can’t be permitted. This scam has cost *years*. Veronica has to be arrested and removed. The union has to be investigated and purged. I don’t know how deep this goes.”

“I will bring this to the attention of the local magistrates,” Biryar said. “We’ll address it.”

“Magistrates? No, we need to go now and arrest her. Ourselves. She’s undermining the most important colony world that there is. You’re the governor.”

“I understand that. I do. But if what she’s done is illegal under Auberon’s law, then it’s a matter for the local courts. If I step in, I have to step very carefully.”

Mona drew back her hand. The weight in Biryar’s gut grew heavier, the knot in his back ached. He pressed his lips thin, and went on.

“I am building on fear and hope,” he said. “Fear of the *Tempest* and the *Typhoon*, and hope that they won’t come. Our best path is to be seen as all-powerful but benevolent. Even indulgent. When we have a larger fleet, more experience, loyalty among the local police and military forces? Then we can enforce our ways here. We’re still in our first days. I have to be careful not to overreach.”

Disappointment changed the shape of Mona’s eyes. It softened her mouth. He felt the apology at the back of his throat, but it would have sounded like he was sorry for not giving her what she wanted, and he would mean he was sorry that the situation was what it was.

“If the payments to her don’t really go to her...” Mona said. “What if her income report is accurate? She could be part of a crime syndicate. That man who was here? With the arm? She could be working for him.”

“And I will have our people look into that. If she is, we’ll take action.”

“We should be taking action anyway,” Mona said. “I’m Laconia’s eyes on the most significant agricultural research that there is. You’re the governor of the planet. If we aren’t doing something, why are we here?”

“Please lower your voice.”

“Don’t patronize me, Biryar. It’s a real question.”

“We’re staying alive, Mona,” he snapped. “We are picking our fights, we’re identifying the most immediate threats and addressing them, and we are doing everything possible to give the impression that we could bring overwhelming power to bear and merely choose not to.”

“Because that isn’t true,” Mona said.

“It will be. Given time to establish ourselves, we can dominate any system, but we can’t dominate all of them at once. So this is how we govern. We are present, we exert influence, we exercise power when we have to, and we graciously allow self-rule until another option exists for us.”

“Self-rule?” Mona said, and her voice could cut skin. “Duarte sent us here so we could see the situation firsthand. And *react* to it. How is the two of us doing nothing self-rule?”

“Self-rule for them,” Biryar said. “Not for us.”

* * *

The old man sat on a metal barstool at the edge of the warehouse. Dust floated in the beam of light from holes near the roofline where ratdoves—which were neither rats nor doves—had chewed their way through to shelter. Agnete stood beside him, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, a pistol in her hand. The old man was watching and rewatching video from the official government newsfeed. The poor asshole kneeling on the platform, mouthing some words, then the governor nodding like an old Roman emperor giving the thumbs-down, and the executioner putting a bullet through the prisoner’s skull. Every time the gun fired, the old man laughed. It wasn’t mirth. It was derision.

“This man,” the old man said, tapping the frozen image of Governor Rittenaur, “is fucking hilarious.”

“He just killed one of his own men to make a point,” Agnete said.

“Right? You know who does that shit? Theater majors,” he said. Then, seeing her expression, he put the hand terminal in his pocket. “It’s easy to execute your own. Someone that follows your orders, they’re easy to kill.

This ‘We hold ourselves to an exacting standard’ thing? I’ve seen it before. It’s showy, because who does that shit? But it’s easy.”

“I don’t know, boss. It made an impression,” she said. In the distance, the whine of an electric motor and the clash of the steel fence rolling open. The old man heard it and rose from his stool.

“Well, it shouldn’t have,” he said, walking toward the loading dock. “We’re sure they were fighting? Him and his wife?”

Agnete shrugged. She didn’t like the way the boss thought about two things at once. It made her feel like he wasn’t concentrating on the business at hand.

“They were yelling at each other,” she said. “Your friend in housekeeping couldn’t make out all of what they were saying.”

“Interesting. Our guy didn’t want money, so maybe he’s not greedy. But if he and the sweetheart aren’t getting along, maybe there’s an itch we can scratch there.”

“Honeypot?”

“There’s a reason the classics are classic.”

“I’m on it,” Agnete said. “But after we’re done here.”

The loading dock door hummed for a second, warming up, then clattered as it rose. Dust and translucent scales came down into the light. The truck was old and rusting. The logo of a grain hauling company that had gone bankrupt four years earlier still peeled on its side. The back of the truck opened and four men came out. All of them carried guns.

The old man sniffed, cleared his throat, sneezed.

“Bless you,” one of the four men said. The leader.

“Thanks,” the old man said. The new men waited, motionless. Agnete tightened her grip on the gun, but didn’t raise it. For a long breath, no one moved.

“If this is the delivery,” the old man said, “maybe you could deliver it. If it’s something else...”

Bless You shook his head. “It’s the delivery, but the price has gone up.”

“Disappointing,” the old man said, but amiably. “How much?”

“Doubled.”

“Nope,” the old man said. “Too greedy. Try again.”

Bless You raised his gun and the old man's titanium arm moved too quickly for the eye to follow. The deafening report of the gunshot almost drowned out the metallic sound of the bullet impact. The thugs were quiet, as if they'd been stunned by their own violence.

"Boss?" Agnete said.

The old man had his real hand pressed to his chest, pain in his features. His false arm reached out before him and opened its closed fist. The bullet dropped to the warehouse floor with a sharp tick.

"You boys," the old man said, enunciating each word clearly, "just fucked all the way up."

"Hey, Erich," Bless You started to say, fear in his voice. An apology? Whatever it was, he never got to finish.

High in the rafters, the turret emplacement had heard the old man give the go phrase. The warehouse went bright with the stutter of its muzzle flash. The four men fell together. The staccato roar of the gun echoed through the warehouse space and then faded, leaving only a high-pitched whine in Agnete's ears.

"You all right?" she asked. Her voice sounded faint and distant. She opened and closed her jaw a few times to make the ringing in her head go away.

"Yeah, yeah," the old man said. "I just hate it when the arm does that. Feels like the fucking thing's about to rip loose every time."

"One of these days, it will." She walked to where the men were writhing in the guano and dust on the warehouse floor. Fléchette rounds had ripped bright red holes in their skin. The electrical smell of the shock rounds mixed with charred skin like roasting pig.

This was how the old man worked. Everyone had been looking at Agnete and her pistol, thinking she was the muscle. It had made them overconfident.

"You see," the old man said, not to the fallen thug but to Agnete, "this is the difference. A buy goes bad, and I need to send a message that that's not okay. I could go the Laconian way, right? Kill *you* and send these fuckers home. Would that make any sense?"

"I guess not," she said.

“Grandstanding,” the old man said, his false hand wrapping fingers around Bless You’s throat. “It’s immature, is what it is.”

Bless You tried to say something. Before he could, the old man used him to send a message.

* * *

Self-rule for them. Not for us.

Mona knew enough about psychology to put her feelings in context. As Veronica sat across the table from Mona, shifting the display between the reports, breaking down the datasets into digestible summaries and giving an overview of where the labs stood with the active experiments, Mona knew intellectually that the woman’s voice wasn’t really all that grating. Veronica’s habit of interrupting herself and never quite getting back to the first sentence wasn’t all that rare a quirk. Her haircut didn’t really make her look like she was wearing a “respectable administrator” costume. Those were all artifacts of Mona’s own state of mind.

The knowledge didn’t help.

“We’re expecting to see some data from the photosynthesis study at North Field by the end of the week,” Veronica said. “The preliminary report is, as you can tell, looking pretty good.”

She had to know, Mona thought. There was no way that the tension and antipathy were going under Veronica’s radar. The smile was just the same as it had always been, the solicitous manner, the ready facts and reports. The woman had to know that Mona loathed her, but there was no sign of it. So either Mona was very good at hiding her emotions or Veronica was.

“What about the microbiota compatibility studies?” Mona asked.

Veronica shook her head as she spoke. “Those aren’t in North Field. Balakrishnan’s workgroup is all in the old facility. I mean, nothing’s really old around here, right? We’ve only been on the planet for a couple decades.”

You’re changing the subject, Mona thought. Making Veronica Dietz uncomfortable was one of the few real pleasures in her day.

“When do we expect results from Balakrishnan’s study?” she asked.

“I think the next assay starts in about a month, but I’m not a hundred percent on that,” Veronica said. “I can check if you want.”

And tell me whatever is most convenient for you, Mona thought. If Balakrishnan’s results needed to be a failure to keep Veronica’s skimming unnoticed, Mona had no doubt that the study would mysteriously fail. Just the way Dr. Carmichael’s array translation study had become less promising when this woman—this snake, this parasite—didn’t get a piece of it.

“Take a look for me,” Mona said, standing up. “We can go over it in... five?”

“All right,” Veronica said, as if the request were perfectly reasonable. Prepare a report in the time it takes to brew a cup of tea. Mona waited as Veronica walked out—she wouldn’t leave the woman in her office alone—and then locked the office door behind her and headed right along the pale-green hall and then right again into the commissary.

She poured herself a cup of green tea and picked up a sugar cookie from the dessert table before sitting down alone at a table by the window. Tall white clouds rose on the horizon, glowing gold and red in the sunlight. She scowled at them. Someone had cracked the window open, and the breeze actually smelled fresh. She’d become so desensitized to the local environment that the fecal smell of the planet’s biology didn’t even register to her anymore.

The situation with Veronica was becoming a problem, and not just because Veronica was a problem. Mona was meant to be reporting back to Laconia. There was a whole team of soil researchers and agricultural biologists waiting for her to share the insights of Xi-Tamyán and Auberón. There had even been queries from Dr. Cortázar, which was one step short of attention from Winston Duarte himself. She should have had a preliminary report ready to go, outlining the state of play not only for research here but across the colony worlds that Auberón partnered with. Instead, she had notes on a criminal conspiracy, and a solemn injunction from Biryar that she should leave any action to the same regulatory bodies that had let it happen in the first place. The frustration was a restless energy in her spine. It was keeping her from focusing on her work. She had to get past it.

She couldn’t get past it.

She kept remembering Dr. Carmichael at the reception her first night on Auberon. Her own excitement she'd felt when she heard about the array translation, the possibilities that a comprehensive mapping plan would give, not just here but across all the colony systems. And the disbelief that anyone would intentionally undermine something with so much potential. It had been so recent, and yet that past version of herself already seemed so naive. Auberon was changing her, and she wasn't sure she liked what it was changing her into.

She finished her cookie in a bite, gulped down the last of her tea, and headed back to her office. Not that she wanted to be there. Just that the commissary was annoying her now too. Or rather that she was still annoyed, and nothing she'd found gave her any respite.

Veronica hadn't returned with the report. Mona sat at her desk, looking sourly out her window Same world, different view. Barradan spread out to her right: streets and houses and domes. The local wilderness was on her left, exotic and untamed and almost unimaginable in its diversity and richness and strangeness. This should have been everything she'd hoped for. All the pieces were there.

Self-rule for them, her husband said in her memory. *Not for us*. But...

Something shifted in the back of her mind. The thought came to her fully formed, like she had already planned everything and had only been waiting for the right moment to be conscious of it.

Point one: Either the administration of Xi-Tamyan was aware of Veronica's scheme or their eyes were so thoroughly off the ball that it had been permitted by default. Two: as the spouse of the governor, she was more valuable to Xi-Tamyan than Veronica Dietz would ever be. Three: What was good for the goose might very well be quite excellent for the gander.

She turned to her desk, a frown etching itself into her forehead almost hard enough to ache. She pulled up the financial records and tried to reallocate funds, just to make sure she couldn't. That was fine. Her breathing was shallow and fast, but when she made the connection request, her voice sounded calm.

“Dr. Rittenaur?” an older man said from the screen. He had thin, gray hair and a little beard that didn’t disguise his double chin. “How can I help you?”

“I’m having trouble with accounting. I need to allocate funds for a Laconian state project, but it gives me an error code.”

The man with the double chin looked chagrined. “I’m not... I’m not sure that...”

“It should be under Special Projects with the code for the Laconian science directorate? What would that be?”

“I don’t think we have a code set up for that, ma’am.”

“We’ll have to find something temporary, then. There is something for cooperative governmental programs, isn’t there? We can use that for now.”

“I... um... I guess you could,” the man said.

“Not perfect, but...” She shrugged and laughed. “If you clear the access problem, I’ll take care of it that way.”

She smiled patiently. She’d done nothing wrong. Not yet. If he pushed back, everything could be explained away. But she was the face of Laconia at Xi-Tamyan. And Laconia had just destroyed the largest navy in history and conquered the human race. She let the silence stretch. The man’s face flushed a shade darker as he decided whether he was going to tell her she couldn’t.

He tapped something into his console. “There you go, ma’am,” he said. “It gives you any more trouble, just let me know.”

Mona’s smile widened by just a few millimeters. “Thank you,” she said, and dropped the connection.

After that it was easy. She copied Dr. Carmichael’s old funding structure and put it in a new branch under joint governmental projects, updated the contact information so that any issues or questions routed directly to her. She was expecting the funding level to refer back to some pool of money, but it was just a text field. She could put in any value she liked, and the money was summoned from nothing. She put in the value that Veronica’s unspecified *powers that be* had refused. Then she doubled it, and closed the file.

Just like that, she'd funded the project that should have been going for months. She'd wait for a few days. Make sure that no red flags came up, and then she'd tell Dr. Carmichael to start renting lab space and equipment.

She sat back in her chair, folded her hands, and let out a long, satisfied sigh. There was a warmth in her chest, spreading slowly out toward her limbs like she'd just had a shot of gin. Her back relaxed, her heart felt like she was dropping from orbit for the first time. Pleasure and risk. On impulse, she kicked her shoes off and ran her bare feet through the office carpet, feeling the texture of it against her skin.

The soft knock came, and Veronica stepped in. "Sorry that took a little longer than I'd thought. Interruptions all the time. You know how it is."

"Yes, I do," Mona said.

* * *

Biryar didn't know what changed in Mona, only that something had, and he was glad of it. He saw it in small things. She slept more deeply now, and woke without being prodded. She ate better, and explored more of the local foods—fish and onion and a spicy red sauce the locals called sarkansmirch. He'd sampled it himself, but found a metallic aftertaste he didn't care for. She was laughing more than she had, and there was an ease in the way she held herself.

Her work with Xi-Tamyar might have been part of it. She had started sending reports out to the researchers on Laconia, and the responses from home had been positive and encouraging. She'd begun negotiations for Laconia to get full datasets directly from the company and integrate some of its high-level researchers into the staff on Laconia proper. It was part of Duarte's long-term plan that coming to the capitol should be a reward. A mark of favor. The soft power of culture and status would do more to stabilize Laconia's central position in the grand human project than any number of warships. It was good that Mona's position let her advance that.

Biryar's own job wasn't going quite as smoothly.

He hadn't found the trick yet of sleeping through the Auberon nights. Most nights, he woke as the midnight sun fell, lying awake in their bed for

half of the dark hours until morning. He'd considered talking to the physician about it. If it continued, he might. The local food also unsettled him, and he found himself eating the same diet he had on the *Notus*: mushroom curries and yeast-based cheeses. Even those didn't quite taste the way they should. He might not register the stink of the planet as often these days, but it had affected his senses all the same. And the pervasive sensation of unease, as vague as it was profound, wasn't helped by Overstreet's security briefings.

In the weeks since Laconia had officially taken over governance of the system, Overstreet had uncovered a dozen examples of embezzlement, theft, extortion, and financial misconduct just in the mechanisms of government that Biryar had inherited from the former head of state. Only two had involved Laconians. One had been the execution in the square, the other had killed himself when Overstreet's military police had come to arrest him. Everyone else had been turned over to local authorities, but Overstreet suspected that the judicial system was as flawed as the executive government. As the security audit broadened to the major businesses—the Transport Union, Xi-Tamyan, Oesterling Biotics, and half a dozen more—Biryar expected more rot to come to light.

The only good news Overstreet had to offer was the disappearance of the one-armed man. He hadn't appeared in any monitored public spaces. He hadn't shown up in any financial scans. If it hadn't been for the footage from the reception, he might only have been an unpleasant dream. Overstreet's analysis was that a local criminal had tried to come on strong, overplayed his hand, and fled when he understood the magnitude of his miscalculation.

The reports coming in from other systems showed that the separatists were still very much at work. The governor of Nova Catalunya, a man Biryar had trained with, had died in a shuttle accident that was being investigated for sabotage. Governor Song, on Medina Station, found another discrepancy in the station map that hid a service corridor, abandoned now, that the terrorists had used as they planned their missions. Drive plumes had been sighted in half a dozen systems that couldn't be tracked back to known ships.

The ghosts of unrest were everywhere. The separatists couldn't stand in an open battle with Laconia, but they could resist in small ways, and those small ways could have body counts too. He didn't bring his worries to Mona. Better that one of them should sleep well. If it felt a little strange not to tell her everything, at least the cause was noble. He still felt the urge now and then to unburden himself to her. He didn't have anyone else.

Instead, he tried to keep his attention on his own duties: playing kingmaker in local politics until Laconia was so established and unquestionable that he could play king. He found himself crafting the role of Governor Rittenaur as if he were acting a part in a play. He had come to notice when his own impulses were different from what Governor Rittenaur's would be, and then bury his own judgment to give space to the requirement of his office. He was a professional impersonator of himself. It required, among other things, a close relationship with the local newsfeeds.

"I understand that the *Notus* is slated to leave Auberon," Lara Kasten said. She was a host for one of the popular public newsfeeds. Not a reporter, but a warm, approachable interviewer whose greatest strength was the intensity with which she could listen.

"It's already burning for the ring gate," he said. "It will still be weeks before it leaves the system, but yes. It's on its way."

"That's got to feel a little odd."

His office, decorated in the local style, had casual chairs set beside a window that looked out over a garden of Earth plants. This was the fifth interview he'd granted her. It was important that the local population know him. Normalize his presence. Lara's approach to their conversations suited his needs.

"Not really," Biryar said, looking out at the red sunset of late morning. Clouds on the eastern horizon already turning from gold to gray. "The *Notus* is a valuable resource, and needed elsewhere. We have a great deal of work to do here, but Auberon doesn't need a warship. We're a very safe system. The situation is quite stable, and with the loyalty and cooperation of the authorities, I expect it will stay that way."

Lara smiled and leaned forward to pick up a glass of iced tea. She took it with sugar. He knew that from the last time they'd talked. Previously,

she'd worn a high-collared white blouse, but today she had one in Laconian blue with a scoop. Instead of returning the glass to the side table, she leaned forward and put it by her feet. He was careful not to notice the tops of her breasts as she did it.

"But it was your way home, wasn't it?" she said. "Even if you never intended to use it. You spent your whole life on Laconia?"

"I did. But Auberon is my home now."

"What's that like for you?" she asked, and he thought there was a real curiosity in the question. He saw himself for a moment through her eyes. The proverbial stranger in a strange land, given power and responsibility and asked to be strong for his nation and the people over whom he ruled.

"I'm happy to be here. I am. Auberon is a beautiful planet and an important part of the empire."

He nodded to himself, silently approving his own answer. That was the right thing to say, and the right way to say it. Turn the question back to the system itself. Not him, but them. Good that when the locals look at him, they see themselves reflected.

He waited for the next question, but Lara was quiet. The sky darkened, and the first stars came out. The little moon, halfway to full, glimmered. She tilted her head, the straight, honey-colored hair hiding one eye, an impish smile on her lips. Biryar felt himself smiling back, and he chuckled when he spoke.

"What?"

"You're happy to be here? That's all? You're the most important man in this system. There are literally millions of people looking up to you. You're on a planet you didn't set foot on until it *belonged* to you. It must be... hard? Intoxicating? What is it like for you, Biryar?"

He shook his head. The breeze from the window was warm against his cheek. Lara's eyes were locked on his. He found that he wanted to tell her. He wanted to spread out all the ways that being Governor Rittenaur of Auberon system was different from what he'd expected, even after his training. The displacement of being so far from everything he'd known, the unease of knowing that there were people who hated him, not for himself but what he stood for.

That wasn't what his duty required of him.

"I can't imagine anyone's terribly interested in that," he said, and his voice sounded almost melancholy in his ears. That was odd. He recentered himself and said, "I am really very happy to be here."

Lara's smile faded. The last red light of sunset caught the curve of her throat, and Biryar felt the impulse to turn the office lights on. He also felt the impulse to leave them off. He didn't move. Her expression wasn't impish now. He remembered the time in their third interview when she'd told him about her brother's death, how sorrowful she'd been. How strong in her grief. Of all the people on this stinking world, he felt closer to Lara than to anyone that hadn't come on the *Notus* with him. She knew him.

She leaned forward again, this time reaching not for her drink but her handheld. She held it up for him to see. The recording marked second after silent second. She turned it off and set it back down.

"What is this like for you?" she said.

He was silent for a moment, uncertain whether he was going to answer. However much he wanted to.

"It's..." Biryar was surprised to find a thickness in his throat. "It's difficult. Sometimes."

She nodded, acknowledgment and encouragement in the same single motion. Biryar leaned toward her, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped.

"I am trained for my duties as thoroughly as anyone could be. But knowing something intellectually or from simulations... it isn't the same."

"You feel alone," Lara said.

"I do, in a way," Biryar said. "This is off the record, of course."

Her smile was in shadows now, but he could make it out. "Just between us," she said, and traced an X over her chest. "Cross my heart."

He felt something shift, deep in his gut. Like a relaxation of a fist held clenched so long that the letting go ached. He drew in a breath, held it, and as he exhaled, he sank. "It's overwhelming. Not always, but sometimes. I feel like a splinter, and Auberon is festering around me. Isolating me. Trying to push me out."

Her voice was soft, but not pitying. He couldn't have stood it if she pitied him. "That's terrible, Biryar."

"It is. And I don't know what to do about it."

For a moment, the only sounds were the ticking of the walls as they cooled in the darkness and the murmur of midday traffic in the distant streets. Lara shifted, and he found himself very aware of her presence. Her physicality and solidity. Her hand touched his, and it felt like a rope to a drowning man. She moved close to him, and he had the weird impression that she was reaching for the pistol at his side, that she was going to take it from him to make some demonstration of a larger point. It was only when her lips touched his that his mind exploded in cold alarm.

He stood up, backing away in the darkness of the room. "I'm sorry. No, no. I'm very sorry. I didn't... This is not..."

He found his desk, pulled up his controls, and turned on the lights. The office flooded with the bright blue-yellow of the daytime. Lara knelt in the space between their chairs, looking up at him in surprise. Biryar wiped his hands on the sides of his jacket. His tongue felt like it wasn't responding the way it should. Like he was having a stroke.

"This is..." He shook his head. "We should... we should finish the interview. This was very nice. I'm glad to have your friendship. Yes. We should finish the interview."

He pressed his lips shut to make himself stop talking. He sounded like an idiot. Lara rose to her feet. She wasn't blushing as much as he was.

"Biryar, I'm sorry," she said. "It's just—"

"No. It's fine. Everything is fine. There won't be any repercussions."

Lara eased herself back into her chair, plucked her blouse straight. Biryar stepped closer, but didn't take his seat. His blood was still electric. What if someone had seen them? What was he going to say to Mona, because he had to tell Mona. It would be a betrayal not to. He swallowed.

"I didn't mean to spook you," Lara said.

"I'm not spooked," he said. He meant to follow it up with *I'm married*, but what came out was different. "I'm Laconian."

Lara quirked a smile, and he thought there was regret in it. She took her handheld, her finger hovering just above the button to start the recording

again. Her eyes were asking if he was certain, but he was himself again. Or no. He was Governor Rittenaur. That was better. She tapped the button, and the seconds began counting up again. Biryar put his hands on the back of his chair, pressing into it like it was a podium. He thought back to where the conversation had been.

“I’m really very happy to be here,” he said. “Auberon is a fascinating planet with a great future before it. I hope that my service here will help it come into its rightful place as one of humanity’s great centers of science and culture. And I know the High Consul has the same ambitions for it.”

He nodded sharply, more to himself than to her. That was the right answer. That was what he was supposed to say. Who he was supposed to be.

Lara tilted her head. “Do you want to sit down?”

* * *

The yacht was a small one, and the old man didn’t like it much. In all the time Agnete had been with him, he had only used it three or four times that she knew of. He’d grown up in a coastal city, but she didn’t have the impression there had been a lot of yachts involved. The fact that he was in it now meant he was running out of places to be that he was certain the local security forces weren’t watching.

He sat with his arms out at his sides. Two days of stubble competed with his thin mustache. The sun was overhead, the light glimmering off the water and his false arm. He was smoking a cigar as thick as his thumb and as long as his finger. The city rose up at the horizon like a mirage.

The woman sitting across from them had gone by KarKara when they’d first met her. It was Lara now, which suited her better.

“I swear to God, I had him.”

“We shouldn’t have rushed you,” the old man said.

“I didn’t rush. I had him. We had rapport. We had shared jokes. He was into me.”

“And then?”

Lara opened her hands. “Then the moment came, and he backpedaled. I don’t know. Clearly he and his wife have a monogamy agreement, and he’s

taking it seriously. Maybe that's a Laconian thing."

"Did he say that?"

"No, it's a guess," Lara said. "He was babbling by the end. Lots of words, but none of them meant anything."

"What do you think of him?"

She considered. Agnete could see from the way the woman held her hands that Lara almost liked the mark. There was nothing like being told *no* to make someone attractive.

"That man needs something," Lara said, "and he needs it bad. But it's not what I was offering."

The old man blew out a cloud of white smoke and watched the wind shred it. "That's what I think too. Is he maybe into guys?"

"That's not it," Lara said. "I've met maybe one person in twenty who claims to be monogamous and actually is. I think this guy is really into his wife."

The old man muttered something obscene. Then, "I don't get it. He's not looking for money. He's not looking for kink. What is it with this guy?"

Lara said, "I think he's looking for a way out."

"Of what?"

"His own skin."

"Well *I'm* looking for a way not to take that literally, but this fucker does make it hard." He looked out over the water. Something large and pale passed under them, but didn't break the surface. The old man sighed. "Maybe we should just kill him."

Agnete said, "Why were they fighting?"

He shifted his head to look at her. Agnete met his gaze without flinching. "He and his wife were fighting about something. And then they stopped. Maybe there's something in that?"

The old man weighed the idea while he took another puff on his cigar. His eyes shifted up to the sky, but he wasn't looking at anything. Or not anything that was there.

"He have any friends?"

Lara shook her head. "None that he ever talked about. He doesn't do relationships with people. Just responsibilities to them."

“So just the wife, then, as far as you know. Sex and friendship. That’s a tough knot to unwind.”

“I think he really loves her,” she said. Again the little twitch of regret. They were going to have to be careful how they used her, moving forward. She was going to talk herself into falling in love with Rittenaur if they took their eyes off her.

The old man made a deep, soft sound. Like satisfaction. The yacht bobbed on the waves. “I forget, you know? I just forget.”

“What, boss?”

“How complicated people are. How many kinds of hunger we’re working with.”

“Not following you.”

The old man shrugged, and the fake arm almost matched the real one. The movement was still just a little asymmetrical. It made him seem jaunty.

“There was a guy I knew back in Sol system used to say that money was like sex. You thought it would fix everything until you got a lot of it. Because that’s what we all reach for. Anything we need, anything we want, anything that’s grinding us down, we can get high or rich or laid and make it better. Only if that was true, people would eventually get enough drugs or money or sex and be happy.”

“We’d be out of jobs,” Agnete said.

“But Rittenaur...” The old man went on like she hadn’t spoken. “This guy lives his whole life in this culture where it’s about...”

“Duty,” Lara said.

“So,” Agnete said, “the way a normal person tries to get out of the hole by putting a needle in their arm or fucking a pretty body or working a hundred hours a week, he tries to get out by being a good man.” She said the words slowly to see if they sounded true.

“Only it doesn’t work for him any better than that other shit does for the rest of us,” the old man said. Then, a moment later, “Look at the wife. If he loves her as much as Lara thinks, she’s the weak spot.”

“What am I looking for?” Agnete asked.

“Whatever’s there. Every addict has to hit bottom,” the old man said. “Maybe we can help him with that.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Agnete said.

“I know it didn’t exactly work, but...” Lara hesitated, afraid to ask. “Our thing?”

She was asking about the debt her attempted seduction was going to pay off.

“How much did you owe us?” he asked.

“You know exactly how much,” Lara replied.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s off the books now,” the old man said. “But stay out of my casinos. You’re very bad at poker.”

Business concluded, they watched the sun speed across the sky and dive for the horizon. The water was turning golden as they angled back for shore. The old man made them all steaks on the little range, the meat decanted fresh from the growth disk.

When they got back to civilization, Agnete put her resources into the wife and Xi-Tamyan Agricultural Concern, where she had offices. She wasn’t looking for something in particular—an affair, an illegal drug habit, a second life. Anything.

Even so, it took her days to find it.

* * *

Biryar didn’t know what he had expected from Mona when he told her. Anger, perhaps. A sense of betrayal. A rupture in their marriage at least, an estrangement at worst. He had laid out all that had happened: the interviews, the connection that had been cultivated during them, and—with his heart in his throat—the kiss. Mona sat across the breakfast table from him, listening to every detail. Only at the end, when he outlined all the precautions he was putting in place to see that it never happened again, did a line of concern draw itself on her forehead.

“She just stole a kiss?” Mona asked. “That’s all?”

“But I allowed myself to permit a sense of... of intimacy that made it possible,” Biryar said. His eggs had grown cold and thick while he spoke. “This was my fault. It will never happen again.”

She'd taken his hand then, and when she spoke there was a seriousness in her voice so studied and careful that he suspected there was amusement behind it. "Thank you for treating me with respect. I mean that. But I'm not angry with you at all. Don't beat yourself up over this, all right?"

He kissed her fingers, and the subject had never come up again. He went back to his duties with the relief of having dodged a bullet. He policed himself more harshly, wary of any other transgression. Biryar the man wasn't to be trusted. There was only room for Governor Rittenaur, so he tightened his control and pushed out anything besides duty and decorum. It was the only way.

He attended meetings with Suyet Klinger of the Association of Worlds and approved the trade agreements for the Transport Union. He stood witness at another execution when Overstreet discovered a Laconian guard who had been extorting sexual favors from a local man. He made his reports to the political officer back on Laconia and received guidance that tracked back to Winston Duarte himself.

That he couldn't sleep, that his food tasted strange and left his stomach upset, that the sunlight began to give him headaches, that he sometimes had the weird oppressive sense of drowning at the bottom of an ocean of air, that was only his acclimation going slowly. A few more weeks, and he would be fine, he was sure of it.

He was able to maintain the illusion that everything was under control until the day the one-armed man reappeared.

The conference was in Carlisle. It was the third-largest city on the planet, and fewer than a million people lived in it and the area around it. It was in a higher clime than Barradan and in the northern hemisphere where the seasonal shift made the air was cold and the daylight periods slightly briefer. The trees were similar to the ones in Barradan, but with the cold weather, they had shriveled, wrinkled, and gone limp. The dark trunks bent toward the stony ground. The reception and Biryar's speech had been planned for a courtyard in the center of the mayoral complex, but a storm changed direction as Biryar's transport left Barradan, and a cold and bitter rain was pelting down from low clouds when he arrived. As his liaison rushed him from his transport and into the mayoral complex, Biryar sniffed

the air, hoping to find some hint of the minty smell of wet Laconian soil. Rain on Auberon smelled like nothing. Or it smelled like an open sewer, and he couldn't tell any longer. One or the other.

The liaison apologized his way down the wide, pale hallway. The change in the weather had come with no warning. They hadn't thought they would need to shift to the secondary venue—a public theater just across from the complex—until the last moment. It would only take them a little time to have it ready and the audience of local business and government leaders taken there. Biryar swallowed his annoyance and made himself as gracious as he imagined Duarte would have been in his place.

The waiting area belonged to the mayor herself, part of her private apartment. If he would make himself at home and be comfortable...

In fairness, the waiting room was pleasant enough. A wide glass window looked out over a vast, wild landscape. Rough, toothlike mountains rose above the city, halfway lost in the gray of the storm. The rain that struck the window froze there for a moment, then melted and dripped down. When the clouds finally cleared, the landscape would be encased in ice. Ice like a second skin. Ice like a shroud.

His speech was on the importance of maintaining robust trade with the other systems and Laconia's commitment to keeping the economy of Auberon strong. He knew it by heart. Instead of reviewing it again, he sat on the little couch and looked out at the weather. The door opened behind him, and a man in a crisp white jacket and matching gloves came in carrying a tray with a thermos of coffee, two cups, and a plate of pastries.

"Put them on the table here," Biryar said. "I can serve myself."

"You know, Governor," the old man said as he placed the thermos and cups on the table at Biryar's side, "I have got to give it to your security people. I've been trying to see you for a while now, and they've got your place buttoned up tighter than a horsefly's asshole."

The old man smiled. Even before Biryar registered the glint of metal between the man's cuff and his glove, he remembered the thin mustache.

He's come to kill me, Biryar thought, and a thrill ran through him. He felt the weight of the sidearm on his hip, even as he sensed that a gun

probably wasn't going to help. He knew enough killers to know that he wasn't one, and that the man facing him was. He nodded solemnly.

"I was wondering if I'd see you again. You've been hard to find as well."

The one-armed man sat down across from him and spoke as he plucked off his gloves. "Well, I was worried that we'd gotten off on the wrong foot. That's my fault. I come on a little strong sometimes. You want some coffee?"

"Cream, please," Biryar said. His heart was tapping against his ribs like it was desperate for his attention. He let his hand casually drift toward his hip.

The one-armed man's voice was harder. "If you pull that gun, it'll mean we're having the worst version of this conversation. Honest to Pete, you'll wish you hadn't. No sweetener?"

"No," Biryar said. He let his hand drop to the sofa, near his holster but motionless. It was dangerous to move forward, but he wasn't going to give up ground either. He imagined pulling the gun and firing. How quickly could he do that? How long could it take? The rest of his life, maybe. "Just cream."

"Good choice. I like it black myself. The older I get, the more bitter shit suits me. You ever feel like that?"

"Sometimes," Biryar said.

The man held out a coffee cup on a saucer, and Biryar nodded toward the table. He wouldn't take it. The old man was holding it with his prosthetic hand. How fast was the mechanism? What weapons were concealed in it? It was like watching a snake that he knew was venomous, and wondering how long a bite would take to stop his breath.

"What can I do for you?" Biryar said, trying desperately to make the words sound casual. As if he were in control. "Or are you here to make good on your threat?"

"Nah, we're past that. But I am here on business, as it were," the man said, putting the coffee cup down on the table. "I have something for you. Kind of a peace offering."

“I didn’t know peace was an option between us. I was hoping to have you tried, sentenced, and executed.” The provocation struck home. The man smoothed his mustache. Biryar knew he shouldn’t have said it, but the fear was shifting in him. Turning to something like courage. Or anger. Or a mad, dark, rushing hope that Biryar didn’t wholly understand.

“I get that. But let me ask you something. Hypothetically, there’s someone in your organization. Laconian, not one of ours. Let’s say they’re making up projects in your name, using them to falsify work orders. Fudging the budget. That’s a problem for you, right?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“I do. But I’d like to hear you say it just the same. If it’s not a problem.”

The one-armed man looked distracted by the conversation. A few centimeters would put his hand on the pistol. The angle made it awkward to draw. Biryar shifted his weight a little to make it easier, and the one-armed man shook his head like he was reading his mind.

“Misappropriation of Laconian funds is at best larceny, at worst treason,” Biryar said. “One is a prison sentence. The other is death.”

“What about a governor’s pardon? You can do that, right?”

“No Laconian is above the law,” Biryar said. “That is what discipline means.”

“That’s what I thought,” the old man said. His eyes locked on Biryar’s as he drew a handheld from his pocket. “For what it’s worth, I am sorry about this.”

He held it out. Biryar’s gaze flickered down to it, and then back up, ready for the attack. It took a few seconds for what he’d seen to register. Mona Rittenaur. Almost against his will, his eyes drifted back down. The old man kept holding it out, and this time Biryar took it.

The financial records were marked as Xi-Tamyan, and the spreadsheet listed Mona’s name. And monetary amounts. Budget levels and outflows. There were other names, and one rang a bell. Carmichael. The woman whose research had been unfairly canceled. The one they’d fought over. The one-armed man forgotten, he shifted through the files. Mona’s name was highlighted. And the words *cooperative government programs*. If

programs like that existed, he would have known about them. He would have had to approve them. He hadn't.

The storm had grown worse, the wind so terrible, it was shaking the building itself, making the walls shudder, only it wasn't any louder. And the beige surface of the coffee was smooth and still. Something else was shaking. Biryar put down the handheld.

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing," the man said. "I'm just letting you know that one of your own stepped a little off the path."

"Blackmail?"

"For blackmail, you need an ask. I don't want anything from you. I have this information. I'm giving it to you. That's all. I'm being the good guy here."

And now it was his duty to tell what he'd learned to Major Overstreet. And it would be Overstreet's duty to arrest Mona. Biryar would have to recuse himself, so they'd send her back to Laconia for trial. His Mona. The woman whose fingers he kissed in the morning. He tried to imagine what it would feel like to see her sent to the Pens. It was like trying to imagine being dead.

Or he could hide the information, make her scrub away all sign of it. Cancel the projects. Erase the financial trail that led to her. Then, when Overstreet found them, they would die together. His sternum ached like he'd been punched there. Everything under it was hollow. He could hardly draw a breath.

It was perfect. Even if he could pull his pistol and shoot the one-armed man dead, there was still a bullet coming for him. Worse, it was coming for Mona, and there was no way to stop it. He couldn't even die to protect her. He tried to move, but he was made from clay. He saw sympathy in the other man's eyes.

"Truth is, if Xi-Tamyan found out about this, they'd probably praise her initiative and give her a raise. Those guys just do business that way. But she's one of yours, so..."

"Discipline," Biryar said. There was no way out. The end of his world had come. There was nothing to do but welcome it.

It wasn't a thought, it wasn't considered. Like water moving down, it was simply the way things worked. The way they had to be. Natural. Biryar drew the pistol, lifted it to his head, and pulled the trigger. The old man's eyes barely had time to widen.

His false arm, though, had a mind of its own, and it was faster than either of theirs. Before the trigger came back a full millimeter, the gun wrenched away. The old man cried out, clutching his real hand to his chest. The metal hand held Biryar's pistol, its barrel visibly bent.

"Jesus *fuck*, but I hate it when it does that," the old man said. Then, with heat, "Fuck is *wrong* with you, kid?"

Biryar didn't answer. He wasn't there. Governor Rittenaur, the voice and face of Winston Duarte, didn't make sense here, and without him, Biryar was like a vine whose trellis had collapsed. He had no form. No structure. He couldn't even die.

The one-armed man put the ruined pistol on the table, picked up Biryar's cup of coffee, and sipped from it.

"Okay. I get it."

"I can't lose her," Biryar said. "I can't stay with her, and I can't lose her. What else is there to do?"

"They really do a fucking job on you people, don't they?" the one-armed man said. Then after a long moment, he sighed. "Listen to me. I didn't lose my arm in a fight or anything. I was born wrong. Something about not enough blood flow. Stunted development. Whatever. It was like a skinny little baby arm. Mostly I just kind of curled it up against my chest here and forgot about it. I did fine. It was nothing big. I kept meaning to get it seen to, you know? Take it off and regrow it from gel? But one thing and another, I just never seemed to get around to it. You know what I mean? People would give me shit, and I'd laugh and say how, yeah, it would be a good idea. But I didn't do it. Then maybe fifteen years ago..."

He raised his metal hand, rotating it in the light.

"This," the old man said. "It's fucking badass. Basically a built-in waldo with virtual intelligence and pattern matching. It's not networked, so it's unhackable. And it's strong as shit. Bends steel. Stops bullets. You know what else it does? Plays piano. No shit. I can't, but it can."

“It’s very nice,” Biryar said.

“You’re young yet. I’m not. There’s this thing when you get older where you have to make a choice. Everyone does. You have to decide whether you care more about being your best self or your real one. If you’re more loyal to who you ought to be or who you really are. You know what I’m talking about?”

Biryar nodded. He was weeping.

“Yeah,” the old man said. “I thought you might. I’m going to tell you a secret. I’ve never told anyone this, not my girlfriends, not my closest allies. No one. You listening to me?”

Biryar nodded again.

“I miss my real fucking arm,” the old man said. “I liked it better when I was me.”

Biryar sobbed, and it sounded like a cough.

“I don’t want anything from you, Governor. But I would ask you this. Looking at where you are now, and the choices you’ve got? Is there anything you maybe want from me?”

The wind howled, threw a handful of hail at the window. Biryar barely heard it.

“You can’t make this go away,” he said. “Overstreet will find it. He’ll know.”

“He will,” the old man said. “You know. If.”

They were quiet. Biryar felt something happening in him. Something he both didn’t recognize and also knew as well as the sound of his own voice. “Could you have done it? Could you have killed me?”

“Yeah,” the old man said. “Half a dozen times. Easy. But it would have been a risk. I don’t get to pick your replacement, right? Thing about this Overstreet fella? He’s not on his home pitch. If something happened to him, maybe it’d be a good idea to put together some locals to take over the security jobs. People who know the lay of the land. How things work here.”

“If something happened to him?”

“Yeah. If,” the old man said. And then, “Do you want it to?”

Biryar breathed yes.

The one-armed man relaxed and stood up. He put on his gloves again, looked out at the sleet and rain and hail. The half-hidden mountains. “This isn’t just you.”

“What?”

“Don’t feel bad, because it ain’t just you,” the one-armed man said with a lopsided shrug. “There are, what, a couple hundred decent-sized colony worlds with shiny new Laconian governors on them? And this thing has or is going to happen on every single one. It’s the basic problem with religion, be it Jesus or Vishnu or God Emperors. Ideological purity never survives contact with the enemy.”

“I don’t—” Biryar started.

“Yeah, you do,” the one-armed man said, then stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Biryar sat for a moment, waiting for the guilt and horror to come, for his conscience to overwhelm him. Half a planet away, Major Overstreet was probably just waking up. There was time to call him. To warn him. Mona was waking up too, in their bed. Biryar took a long breath and let it out through his teeth. He felt something deep and profound, but he didn’t know what he felt. It was too big to judge.

The liaison came in, and Biryar tucked the handheld in his pocket. The liaison’s eyes widened at the pistol, but Biryar pretended not to notice that it was there. They walked together across a covered bridge and into the theater where his audience was waiting.

* * *

Mona felt the hair on the back of her neck go up the moment she stepped into her house and found Veronica Dietz waiting in the parlor. It had been a long day that followed a restless night. Biryar had been in Carlisle, and she never slept as well when he wasn’t on the other half of the bed. She’d wanted nothing more than to come home, take off her shoes, drink some wine, and relax. Finding Veronica lying in wait was like feeling a snake move in her pillowcase.

“Veronica,” she said, feigning pleasure.

“Yes, ma’am,” Veronica said, and then stopped. It was like she was waiting for Mona to say something. The moment stretched.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you here,” Mona said, carefully.

Veronica blinked, confused. “Oh,” she said. “I had a request from the governor’s office. I thought... that is I assumed that you—”

“I’m sorry,” Biryar said, coming into the room. “That was me.” He took Mona’s hand, squeezed it gently, and kissed her fingers. “I missed you.”

“I’m glad you’re back,” Mona said. Something was wrong. Or if not wrong, at least very different. She didn’t understand what was happening, except that Biryar was ushering them both to sofas and motioning them to sit. “How was Carlisle?”

“Fine. It was fine. I had some time to think, and I wanted you both here.”

Mona felt a stab of fear, but she took a seat. Veronica lowered herself into a chair. “What’s this about, dear?” Mona asked.

“It’s important that Auberon and Laconia be very much coordinated. In the sciences,” Biryar said. There was something very odd about the way he spoke. He seemed looser. Calmer. Maybe a little melancholy. That might have been more alarming than Veronica’s presence. “So I’ve taken the liberty of requesting a placement at the science directorate in the capitol. And I’ve recommended Ms. Dietz for the position. Transport will be entirely taken care of. Your housing will be in the university complex with some of the best minds in the empire. Xi-Tamyan has already been informed.”

Veronica’s mouth was open. Her face was pale. Mona felt like she’d been spun too long on a swing. She didn’t understand what Biryar was thinking. And then she did.

“Her living expenses...” Mona said.

“All overseen by Laconia,” Biryar said. “*Everything* will be overseen by Laconia.”

“I can’t do that,” Veronica said, and her voice was tight. “That’s very kind of you. That’s... But I have so much here that I can’t really—”

Biryar raised a hand, and his voice went quiet. Quiet, but not soft. “Ms. Dietz, it is critical to the success of this colony that you understand what

Laconian culture and discipline are, just as we learn what it is to be from Auberon. You will accept this position, and you will take the honor seriously. We will be treating you as one of our own.”

Veronica seemed to be having a little trouble breathing. Mona felt something equal parts joy and vindictiveness brighten her heart. She thought she saw Biryar glance at her, a smile ghosting on his lips, but it was gone before she could be certain. His handheld chimed, and he looked at it before refusing the connection. When he looked back up, he was somber. He stood and drew Veronica to standing.

“This position could change your life,” he said.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” Biryar said, and escorted her to the door. “Please don’t mention it. I hope you won’t think I’m rude, but—”

“No,” she said. “No, of course.”

“Good,” he said, and closed the door behind her. When they were alone, he seemed to sag into his bones, all his muscles gone slack. He turned back to her and smiled sheepishly. Mona shook her head.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I feel like I’m smiling more often,” Biryar said as he came back and sat beside her. He rested his head on her shoulder the way he had when they were first courting. It made him seem younger. “Next time, let me approve it. It’s safer that way.”

She was about to say *Approve what?* but the question would have been a lie. He knew, and she knew that he did. Instead, she said, “I will.”

His handheld chimed again. She caught a glimpse of it as he silenced it. The red band of a high security alert. An emergency. He took her hand, lacing his fingers in among hers.

“Who’s that from?” she asked.

“Overstreet’s office,” Biryar said. “I’ll get back to them. It’s nothing that won’t wait a few minutes.”

She shifted to look him in the eyes. He was serene. He was grieving. He was himself in a way she hadn’t seen in months.

“What happened?” she whispered.

She felt him shrug. She watched him look into her. “I’ve committed to the process,” he said.

The handheld chimed again.

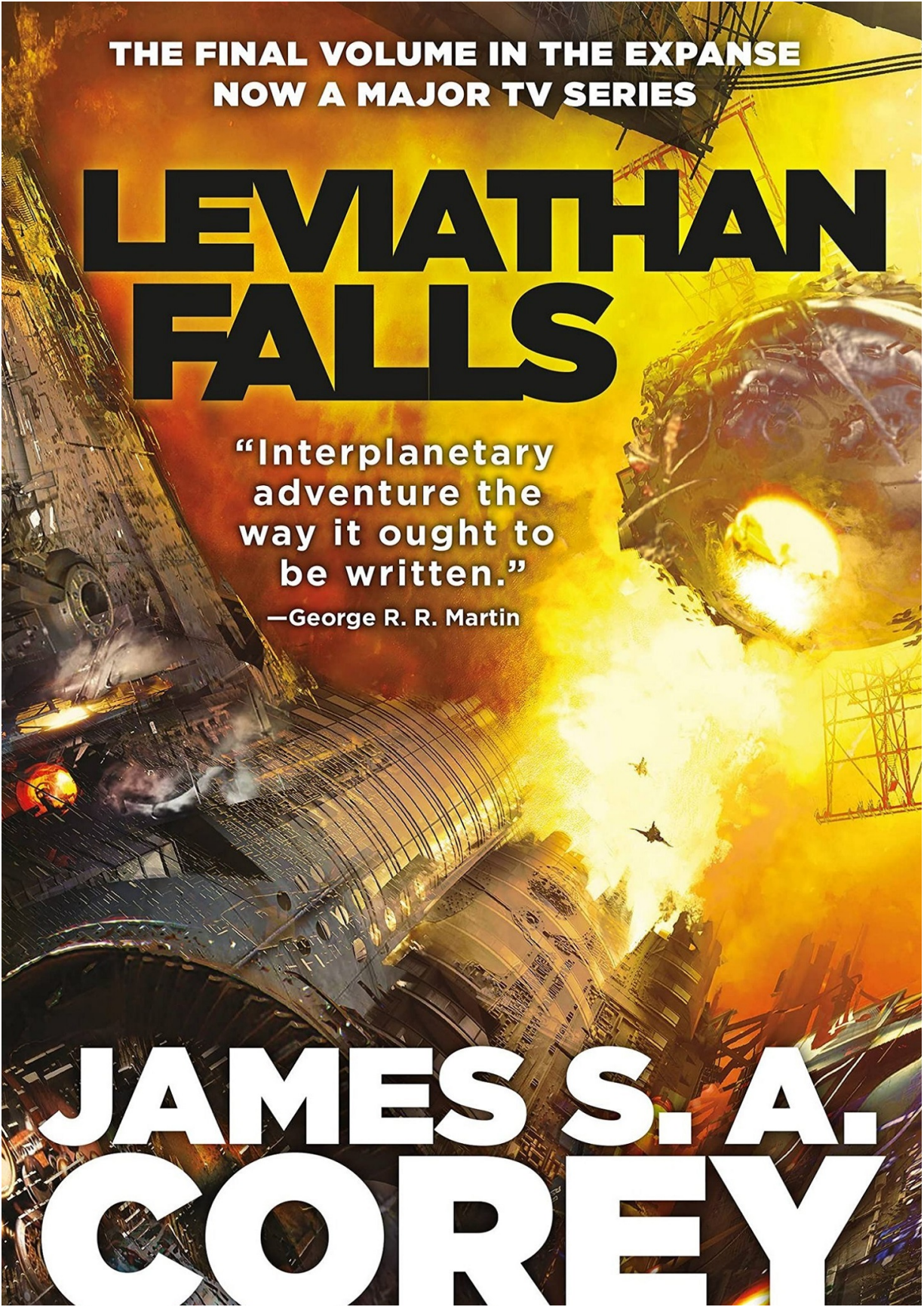
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James S.A. Corey is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck, George R.R. Martin's assistants. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The first and last name are taken from Abraham's and Franck's middle names, respectively, and S.A. are the initials of Abraham's daughter.

Under that name they wrote *The Expanse*, a series of science fiction novels, novellas, and stories, that has also been adapted for television under the same name.

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Prologue

First there was a man named Winston Duarte. And then there wasn't.

The last moment had been banal. He'd been in his private study at the heart of the State Building, sitting on his divan. His desk—Laconian rainwood, with a grain like sedimentary rock—had an inset screen showing the thousand different reports vying for his attention. The clockwork of the empire ground slowly forward, with every revolution of the wheel making the mechanism a little smoother and more precise. He'd been reviewing the security reports from Auberon, where the governor, responding to separatist violence, had begun recruiting locals into the system security forces. His own daughter, Teresa, had been on one of her illicit adventures outside the grounds. The solitary nature hikes which she believed to be outside the watchful eye of Laconian Security were developmentally important for her, and he looked on them with not only indulgence but pride.

He had only recently told her about his ambitions for her: to join him as Paolo Cortázar's second patient, to have her awareness opened and deepened as his had been, to live perhaps not forever but at least indefinitely. A hundred years from now, they would still be guiding the human empire. A thousand. Ten thousand years.

If.

That was the terrible pressure behind it all. The overwhelming *if*. If he could push back against the human habit of complacency. If he could convince the vast, incoherent scrum that was humanity that they had to take action to avoid the fate of their predecessors. Either they did whatever it took to understand and defeat the darkness on the third side of the ring gate, or they died at its hand.

The experiments in Tecoma system were like all the critical steps that had come throughout human history. Ever since the first mammal decided to rise on its hind legs to see above the grass. If it worked, it would change

everything again. Everything changed everything that had come before. It was the least surprising thing in life.

He had reached for his tea in those last moments, but noticed through one of the weird new senses Dr. Cortázar had given him that the pot had already gone cold. The awareness of molecular vibration was analogous to the physical sensation of heat—it measured the same material reality—but the merely human sense was like a child playing a whistle compared with Duarte's vast, symphonic new awareness.

The last moment came.

In the instant between deciding to call his valet for a fresh pot of tea and then reaching his hand out for the comm controls, the mind of Winston Duarte blew apart like a pile of straw in a hurricane.

There was pain—a great deal of pain—and there was fear. But there wasn't anyone left to feel it, so it faded quickly. There was no consciousness, no pattern, no one to think the thoughts that swelled and dimmed. Something more delicate—more graceful, more sophisticated—would have died. The narrative chain that thought of itself as Winston Duarte was ripped to pieces, but the flesh that housed him wasn't. The subtle flows of energy in his body fell into a storm of invisible turbulence, whipped past coherence. And then, without anyone being aware of it, they began to slow and still.

His thirty trillion cells still took in oxygen from the complex fluid that had been his blood. Those structures that were his neurons fell into association with each other like drinking buddies bending their elbows in unconscious synchrony. Something was that hadn't been. Not the old thing, but a pattern that took up residence in the empty space it left behind. Not the dancer, but a dance. Not the water, but a whirlpool. Not a person. Not a mind. But something.

When awareness returned, it first appeared in colors. Blue, but without the words for blueness. Then red. Then a white that also meant something. The fragment of an idea. Snow.

Joy came to be, and it lasted longer than fear had. A deep, bubbling sense of wonder carried itself along without anything to carry it. Patterns rose and fell, came together and came apart. The few that fell apart more slowly sometimes came into relationship with each other, and sometimes that made them last even longer.

Like a baby slowly mapping touch and sight and kinesthesia into something not yet called “foot,” scraps of awareness touched the universe and something like understanding began to form. Something felt its own lumbering, brute physicality as it pushed chemicals into the vast gaps between cells. It felt the raw, open vibration that surrounded the ring gates that connected the worlds, and it thought of sores and ulcerations. It felt something. It thought something. It remembered how to remember, and then it forgot.

There had been a reason, a goal. Something had justified atrocities in order to avoid worse ones. He had betrayed his nation. He had conspired against billions. He had condemned people who were loyal to him to death. There had been a reason. He remembered it. He forgot. He rediscovered the glorious brilliance of yellow and devoted himself to the pure experience of that.

He heard voices as symphonies. He heard them as quacks. He was surprised to find that a he existed and that it was him. There was something he was supposed to do. Save humanity. Something ridiculously grand like that.

He forgot.

Come back. Daddy, come back to me.

Like when she’d been a baby and he had slept at her side, he refocused on her by habit. His daughter mewled, and he roused himself so that his wife wouldn’t have to. His hand was in hers. She’d said something. He couldn’t remember the words, so he looked backward in time to where she spoke them. *Dr. Cortázar? He’s going to kill me.*

That didn’t seem right. He didn’t know why. The storm in the other place was loud and soft and loud. That was connected. He was supposed to save them from the things in the storm, that *were* the storm. Or from their own too-human nature. But his daughter was there, and she was interesting. He could see the distress flowing through her brain, through her body. The pain in her blood scented the air around her, and he wanted. He wanted to soothe her, to comfort her. He wanted to make right everything that was wrong for her. But more interesting, for the first time, he *wanted*.

The strange sensation of feeling these things plucked at his attention, and his focus drifted. He held her hand and wandered. When he came back, he was still holding her hand, but she was someone else. *We just need to*

scan you, sir. It won't hurt.

He remembered Dr. Cortázar. *He's going to kill me.* He waved Cortázar away, pushing at the empty spaces between the tiny motes that made him a physical thing until the man swirled like dust. There. That was fixed. But the effort tired him and made his body ache. He gave himself permission to drift, but even so, he noticed that the drift was less. His nervous system was shattered, but it kept growing together. His body kept insisting that even if it couldn't go on, it could go on. He admired this stubborn refusal to die as if it were something outside of himself. The sheer mindless and physical impulse to move forward, each cell's determination to churn along, the obdurate need to continue existing that didn't even require a will. All of it meant something. It was important. He just had to remember how. It had to do with his daughter. It had to do with keeping her safe and well.

He remembered. He remembered being a man who loved his child, and so he remembered being a man. And that was a stronger rope than the ambition that had built an empire. He remembered that he had made himself something different than a human. Something more. And he understood how this alien strength had also weakened him. How the brutish and unapologetic clay of his body had kept him from annihilation. The sword that slew a billion angels had only inconvenienced the primates in their bubbles of metal and air. And a man named Winston Duarte, halfway between angel and ape, had been broken but not killed. The shards had found their own way.

There was someone else too. A man with dry riverbeds in his mind. Another man who had been changed. James Holden, the enemy who had shared his enemy, back before Winston Duarte had broken, and in breaking, become.

With infinite effort and care, he pulled the unbearable vastness and complexity of his awareness in and in and in, compressing himself into what he had been. The blue faded into the color he had known as a man. The sense of the storm raging just on the other side, of the violence and threat, faded. He felt the warm, iron-smelling meat of his hand, holding nothing. He opened his eyes, turned to the comm controls, and opened a connection.

"Kelly," he said. "Could you bring me a fresh pot of tea?"

The pause was less than might have been expected, under the

circumstances. “Yes, sir,” Kelly said.

“Thank you.” Duarte dropped the connection.

A medical bed had been put in his study with an aerated foam mattress to prevent bedsores, but he was seated at his desk as if he had never left it. He took stock of his body, noticing its weakness. The thinness of its muscles. He stood, clasped his hands behind him, and walked to the window to see whether he could. He could.

Outside, a light, tapping rain was falling. There were puddles on the walkways and the grass was bright and clean. He reached out for Teresa, and he found her. She wasn’t nearby, but she wasn’t in distress. It was like watching her traipse through the wilds again, only without the artificial lens of the cameras. His love and indulgence for her was vast. Oceanic. But it wasn’t pressing. The truest expression of his love was his work, and so he turned to it as if this were any other day.

Duarte pulled up an executive summary the way he had at the start of every morning. Normally it was a page long. This one was a full volume. He sorted by category, pulling out the thread that addressed the status of traffic through the ring space.

Things had, putting it mildly, gone poorly in his absence. Scientific reports of the loss of Medina Station and the *Typhoon*. Military analyses of the siege of Laconia, the loss of the construction platforms. Intelligence summaries of the growing opposition in the widely scattered systems of humanity, and of Admiral Trejo’s attempts to hold the dream of the empire together without him.

There had been a time not long after her mother passed when Teresa had decided to make him breakfast. She had been so young, so incapable, that she had failed. He remembered the crust of bread heaping with jam and a pat of unmelted butter perched on top of it. The combination of ambition and affection and pathos had been beautiful in its way. It was the kind of memory that survived because the love and the embarrassment fit together so perfectly. This felt the same.

His awareness of the ring space was clear now. He could hear the echoes of it in the fabric of reality like he was pressing his ear to a ship’s deck to know the status of its drive. The rage of the enemy was as apparent to him now as if he could hear its voices. The shrieks that tore something that wasn’t air in something that wasn’t time.

“Admiral Trejo,” he said, and Anton startled.



It was the fifth week of Trejo’s combination press tour and reconquest of Sol system. He sat in his cabin, spent from his long day of glad-handing and speech-making with the local leaders and officials. He was the visible face of a nearly toppled empire, making sure no one knew how close he’d come to losing it all. After the hard weeks-long burn out from Laconia, it was exhausting. He wanted nothing more than a stiff drink and eight hours in his bed. Or twenty. Instead, he was on a video call with Secretary-General Duchet and his Martian counterpart, both of them on Luna and near enough that light delay didn’t interfere. The politicians were lying through their smiles. Trejo was threatening through his.

“Of course we understand the necessity of getting the orbital shipyards up and running as quickly as possible. Rebuilding our shared defenses is critical,” Duchet said. “But given the lawlessness that has followed the recent attack on Laconia, our first concern is security for the facilities. We have to have some guarantee that your ships will be able to protect these valuable assets. We don’t want to just paint a target on ourselves for the underground to aim at.”

You just got the shit kicked out of you, had your factories blown up, lost two of your most powerful battleships, and are scrambling to hold the empire together. Do you have enough ships to force us to work for you?

“We’ve suffered setbacks, that’s true,” Trejo drawled, the way he sometimes did when he was angry. “But there’s no need for concern. We have more than enough of the *Pulsar*-class destroyers to provide total security for Sol system.”

I just reconquered you with two dozen of those ships, and I have a shit-ton more of them I can call in if I need to, so fucking do what I tell you to do.

“Excellent to hear that,” the Martian prime minister said. “Please let the high consul know we will spare no effort to meet his production schedule.”

Please don't carpet-bomb our cities.

"I will let him know," Trejo replied. "The high consul treasures your support and loyalty."

Duarte is a drooling moron, but if you give me the ships to hold the empire together, I won't have to glass your damn planets, and maybe we all win.

Trejo killed the connection and leaned back in his chair. The bottle of whiskey in his cabinet called to him gently. The freshly made bed was much louder. He had time for neither. The underground was still running riot in thirteen hundred systems and more. And that was just his human problem. After that, there were the gates to deal with, and whatever within them kept turning the minds off in whole systems at a time as it sniffed for ways to exterminate humanity.

No rest for the wicked. No peace for the good.

"Connect me to the Association of Worlds rep, Sol system. I don't remember her name," he said. No one heard him but the ship.

CONNECTING NOW flashed on his screen. Time for more smiling lies. More veiled threats. More—and he used the word as an epithet—diplomacy.

"Admiral Trejo," said a voice from behind him. It was familiar but so unexpected that his mind scrambled to place it. He had a brief, irrational idea that his attaché had been hiding in his room this whole time and had only just now chosen to reveal himself.

"Anton," the voice said, lower and as intimate as a friend. Trejo turned around in his chair to face the room. Winston Duarte stood near the foot of his bed, hands behind his back. He wore a loose casual shirt and black trousers. He wasn't wearing any shoes. His hair was mussed, as if he'd only recently woken up. He looked like he was actually there.

"Security alert," Trejo said. "This room. Full sweep."

Duarte looked pained. "Anton," he said again.

In milliseconds, the ship had swept every inch of his cabin looking for anyone or anything that wasn't supposed to be there. His screen reported to him that the room was free of listening devices, dangerous chemicals, unauthorized technology. He was also the only person in it. The ship asked if he wanted armed security personnel to respond.

“Am I having a stroke?” he asked the apparition.

“No,” Duarte said. “Though you should probably be getting more sleep.” The ghost in his room shrugged its shoulders, almost apologetically. “Look. Anton. You’ve done everything that could have been asked of you to hold the empire together. I’ve seen the reports. I know how difficult this job has been.”

“You’re not here,” Trejo said, asserting the only possible reality against the lies his senses were telling him.

“What *here* means has become strangely flexible for me,” Duarte agreed. “As much as I appreciate your work, you can stand down now.”

“No. It’s not over. I’m *still* fighting to hold the empire together.”

“And I appreciate that. I do. But we’ve been running down the wrong road. I need a little quiet to think this through, but I see things better now. It’s going to be all right.”

The need to hear those words—to believe them—rushed through Trejo like a flood. The first time a lover had kissed him, it had been less overwhelming than this.

Duarte shook an amused and melancholy smile. “We built an empire that spanned the galaxy, you and I. Who’d have imagined we were thinking too small?”

The image, illusion, projection, whatever it was, vanished so suddenly it was like a skipped frame in a film.

“Fuck me,” Trejo said to no one. The security alert was still flashing on the screen over his desk. He slapped the comm link with one hand.

“Sir,” the duty officer said. “We’ve got an active alert from your quarters. Do you want—”

“You have five minutes to prep for a max burn to the ring.”

“Sir?”

“Sound the alarm,” Trejo said. “And get everyone in their couches. We have to get back to Laconia. Now.”

Chapter One: Jim

It pinged us,” Alex said. His voice was a light almost singsong that meant he thought they were screwed.

Jim, sitting on the ops deck with a tactical map of Kronos system on the screen and his heart going double time, tried to disagree. “Just because he’s knocking doesn’t mean he knows who’s home. Let’s keep acting like what we’re acting like.”

The *Rocinante* was acting like a small-haul freighter, a class of ship thick on the ground in Kronos system. Naomi had tuned the Epstein to run just dirty enough to change their drive signature without generating too much extra waste heat. A set of extra plating welded to their hull at an underground shipyard in Harris system had altered their silhouette. A slow dribble of liquid hydrogen was pumping out across the top of the ship and changing their thermal profile. When Naomi had gone over the plan to layer on camouflage, it had seemed comprehensive. It was only the threat of violence that made Jim feel exposed.

The enemy frigate was called the *Black Kite*. Smaller than the *Storm*-class destroyers, it was still well armed and had the self-healing outer hull that made Laconian ships hard to kill. It was part of a hunting group scouring all the inhabited systems for Teresa Duarte, runaway daughter of High Consul Winston Duarte, heir apparent to his empire, and, for the time being, apprentice mechanic on the *Rocinante*.

This wasn’t the first time they’d seen it.

“Any follow-up?” Jim asked.

“Just the ladar ping,” Alex said. “Think I should warm up the peashooter, just in case?”

Yeah, let’s do that was on the edge of Jim’s mind when Naomi’s voice answered instead. “No. There’s some evidence that their next-generation sensor arrays can recognize rail-gun capacitors.”

“That feels unfair,” Jim said. “What a crew does with its rail-gun capacitor in the privacy of its own ship shouldn’t be anyone else’s business.”

He could hear the smile in Naomi’s voice. “While I agree in principle, let’s keep the guns offline until we need them.”

“Copy that,” Alex said.

“Still no follow-up?” Jim asked, even though he had access to all the same logs Alex did. Alex checked anyway.

“Comms are dark.”

Kronos wasn’t quite a dead system, but it was close. The star there was large and fast-burning. There had been a habitable planet in the goldilocks zone there at one point—at least enough that the protomolecule had been able to hijack the biomass needed to build a ring gate. But in the strange eons since the gate’s formation and humanity’s stumbling into the alien ruins, the goldilocks zone had moved. The original life-bearing planet hadn’t quite been engulfed by the star yet, but its oceans had been boiled to nothing and its atmosphere stripped away. The only native life in Kronos was on the wet moon of an outlying gas giant, and that wasn’t much more than viciously competing continent-sized sheets of slime mold.

The human inhabitants of Kronos were around ten thousand miners on seven hundred thirty-two active sites. Corporations, government-sponsored interest groups, independent rock hoppers, and unholy legal hybrids of all three were stripping palladium out of a nicely rich scattering of asteroids and sending it out to anyone still building air recyclers or working on adjustment-terraforming projects.

Which was everyone.

Kronos had been the edge of the Transport Union’s reach back in the day, then the ass end of the Laconian Empire, and now no one really knew what it was. There were hundreds of systems like it, all through the gate network: places that either weren’t self-sufficient yet or didn’t plan to be, more focused on digging out their own little economic niche than any broader coalition. The kinds of places where the underground could usually hide and repair their ships and plan for what came next. On the tactical map, asteroids marked by orbit, survey status, composition, and legal ownership swirled around the angry star as thick as pollen in springtime. The ships were clumped around the excavation and survey sites by the

dozen, and as many more were on lonely transits from one little outpost to another or on errands to gather water for reaction mass and radiation shielding.

The *Black Kite* had come through the ring gate three days before, torpedoed the underground's radio repeater at the surface of the gate, and then burned gently to remain in place like a bouncer at a pretentious nightclub. The ring gates didn't orbit the stars so much as remain in fixed position as though they'd been hung on hooks in the vacuum. It wasn't the strangest thing about them. Jim had let himself hope that blowing up the underground's pirate transmitter would be all the *Kite* did. That the enemy would finish its little vandalism and fuck off to cut the metaphorical telegraph wires on some other system.

It had stayed, scanning the system. Looking for them. For Teresa. For Naomi, functional leader of the underground. And for him.

The comm display lit up the green of an incoming transmission, and Jim's gut knotted. At their present range, the battle wouldn't come for hours, but the rush of adrenaline was like someone had fired a gun. The fear was so present and overwhelming that he didn't notice anything odd.

"Broadcast," Alex said over the ship comms and from the deck above Jim. "Weird it's not a tightbeam... I don't think he's talking to us."

Jim opened the channel.

The woman's voice had a clipped, emotionless formality that was like the accent of the Laconian military. "... as offensive action and treated as such. Message repeats. This is the *Black Kite* to registered freighter *Perishable Harvest*. By order of Laconian security forces, you will cut your drive and prepare for boarding and inspection. Refusal to comply will be viewed as an offensive action and treated as such. Message repeats..."

Jim filtered the tactical map. The *Perishable Harvest* was about thirty degrees spinward of the *Roci*, and burning toward the wide, angry sun. If they'd gotten the message, they hadn't complied with it yet.

"Is that one of ours?" Jim asked.

"Nope," Naomi said. "It's listed as property of a David Calrassi out of Bara Gaon. I don't know anything about it."

With light delay, they should have received the *Black Kite*'s command ten minutes before the *Rocinante* did. Jim imagined some other crew in a panic because they'd received the message he'd been dreading. Whatever

happened next, the *Rocinante* was out of the crosshairs for the moment at least. He wished he could feel the relief a little more deeply.

Jim unstrapped from the crash couch and swung around. The bearings hissed as it shifted under his weight.

“I’m heading down to the galley for a minute,” he said.

“Grab a coffee for me too,” Alex said.

“Oh no. Not coffee. I’m maybe up to some chamomile or warm milk. Something soothing and unaggressive.”

“Sounds good,” Alex said. “When you change your mind and get some coffee, grab one for me too.”

On the lift, Jim leaned against the wall and waited for his heart to stop racing. This was how heart attacks came, wasn’t it? A pulse that started fast and then never slowed until something critical popped. That was probably wrong, but it felt that way. He felt that way all the time.

It was getting better. Easier. The autodoc had been able to supervise the regrowth of his missing teeth. Apart from the indignity of needing to numb his gums like a toddler, that had gone well enough. The nightmares were old acquaintances by now. He’d started having them on Laconia while still a prisoner of High Consul Duarte. He’d expected them to fade once he was free, but they were getting worse. Being buried alive was the most recent version. More often it was someone he loved being murdered in the next room and not being able to key in the lock code fast enough to save them. Or having a parasite living under his skin and trying to find a way to cut it out. Or the guards on Laconia coming to beat him until his teeth broke again. The way that they had.

On the upside, the old dreams about forgetting to put on his clothes or not studying for a test seemed to be off the rotation. His weirdly vindictive dream life wasn’t all bad.

There were still days when he couldn’t shake the sense of threat. Sometimes a part of his mind would get trapped in the unfounded and irrational certainty that his Laconian torture team was about to find him again. Others, it was the less irrational dread of the things beyond the gates. The apocalypse that had destroyed the protomolecule’s makers and was on the path to destroying humanity.

Seen in that light, maybe he wasn’t the broken part of the equation. Maybe the larger situation was bad enough that feeling as whole and sane

as the man he'd been before his Laconian imprisonment would have been a sign of madness. Still, he wished he could tell whether the waves of shuddering were a resonance effect of running the drive dirty or if it was just him.

The lift stopped, and he stepped out, turning toward the galley. The soft, rhythmic thump of dog tail against deck told him Teresa and Muskrat were already there. Amos—black-eyed, gray-skinned, and back from the dead—was there too, sitting at the table with the same placeholder smile he'd always had. Jim hadn't seen him shot in the head back on Laconia, but he knew about the drones that had taken the pieces of human flesh and reconnected them. Naomi still struggled with whether the thing that called itself Amos really was the mechanic they'd shipped with for so many years, or if he'd become an alien mechanism that only thought it was Amos because it was made from his body and brain. Jim had decided that even if he looked different, even if he sometimes knew things that were scraps of the ancient alien world, Amos was Amos. He didn't have the spare energy to think about it more deeply than that.

Besides which, the dog liked him. Not a perfect critical guide, but probably the least imperfect.

Muskrat, sitting at Teresa's feet, looked up at Jim hopefully and wagged her tail against the deck again.

"I don't have any sausage," Jim said to the expressive brown eyes. "You'll have to make do with kibble like the rest of us."

"You spoiled her," Teresa said. "She's never letting you forget that."

"If I go to heaven, let it be for spoiling dogs and children," Jim said, and headed for the dispenser. Without thinking, he keyed in a bulb of coffee. Then, realizing what he'd done, he added one for Alex.

Teresa Duarte shrugged and turned her attention back to the tube of mushroom, flavorings, and digestive fiber that was her breakfast. Her hair was pulled back in a dark ponytail, and her mouth had a permanent slight frown that was either a quirk of her physiology or her character. Jim had seen her grow from a precocious child to a rebellious adolescent in the State Building in Laconia. She was fifteen now, and it was sobering to remember who he'd been at her age: a thin, dark-haired Montana boy with no particular ambitions beyond the knowledge that if nothing else worked out, he could join the navy. Teresa seemed older than adolescent Jim had been,

both more knowledgeable about the universe and angrier with it. Maybe the two went hand in hand.

She'd been afraid of him when he'd been her father's prisoner. Now that she was on Jim's ship, the fear seemed to have evaporated. He'd been her enemy then, but he wasn't sure that he was her friend now. The emotional complexity of an adolescent girl socialized in isolation was probably more than he could ever really understand.

The dispenser finished both his bulb and Alex's, and Jim took them, appreciating the warmth against his palms. The shuddering was almost gone now, and the bitterness of the coffee was more calming than tea would have been.

"We're going to need a resupply before much longer," Amos said.

"Really?"

"We're okay on water, but we could stand to re-up the fuel pellets. And the recyclers ain't what they used to be."

"How bad?"

"We're solid for a few weeks yet," Amos said.

Jim nodded. His first impulse was to dismiss it as a problem for another day. That was wrong, though. Fuck-it-if-it's-not-happening-right-now was crisis thinking, and if he couldn't break out of it, it would only lead to more crises later on.

"I'll talk to Naomi," he said. "We'll figure something out." *Assuming the Laconians don't find us. Assuming the gate entities don't kill us. Assuming that any of the thousand other catastrophes I haven't even thought of don't kill us all before it matters.* He took another sip of his coffee.

"How're you doing, Cap'n?" Amos asked. "You seem a little twitchy."

"Fine," Jim said. "Just covering near-constant panic with light humor, same as anyone."

Amos had a moment of eerie stillness—one of the hallmarks of his new self—and then smiled a little wider. "All right then."

Alex broke in over the ship comms. "We got something."

"Something good?"

"Something," Alex said. "The *Perishable Harvest* just dumped some kind of liquid, and it's burning like hell for the big trade station in the outer Belt."

"Copy that," Naomi said—also over the comms—in the new staccato

calm that Jim thought of as her Commander Nagata voice. "Confirming."

"The *Black Kite*?" Jim asked the wall.

Alex and Naomi were silent for a moment, then Alex said, "Looks like they're going after them."

"Moving away from the ring gate?"

"Yes indeed," Alex said, and the pleasure in his voice was unmistakable.

Jim felt a surge of relief, but it didn't last more than a moment. He was already thinking about the ways it might be a trap. If the *Roci* turned toward the ring too soon, it would draw attention to them. Even if the *Roci* evaded the *Black Kite*, there might be another Laconian ship risking itself by waiting inside the ring space, ready to intercept any ship fleeing the system.

"Why are they running?" Teresa asked. "They don't think they're going to get away, do they? Because that would be stupid."

"They aren't trying to save the ship," Amos said. He had the same patient, almost philosophical tone as when he was walking her through how to do a good weld in microgravity or checking the seal on a pipe. It was the voice of a teacher walking his student through a lesson in how the world worked. "Whatever they had on that ship that Laconia was going to get pissed about, they can't hide it. Not in a system as thin as this one. And there's no way they're slipping off and swapping transponders, so their ship's fucked. The trade station's big enough they can maybe get the crew off and sneak onto other ships or pretend they were on the station all along."

"Running to where the hiding places are," Teresa said.

"And the more lead time they have, the better the chances they can find a good spot," Amos said.

That could be us, Jim thought. *If the Black Kite had decided that we looked a little sketchier than the Perishable Harvest, we would be sacrificing the Roci and hoping we could get small enough to overlook.* Only it wasn't true. There was no hiding place in Kronos or anywhere small enough that Laconia wouldn't look there. Plain sight was their best hope, because their plan B was violence.

He didn't think he'd said anything aloud or made any kind of noise that would show his distress, but maybe he had, because Teresa looked at him with something between annoyance and sympathy. "You know I won't let them hurt you."

"I know that you'll try," Jim said.

"I'm still the daughter of the high consul," she said. "I've gotten you out of trouble before."

"I'm not leaning on that trick," Jim said, more harshly than he'd intended. Muskrat shifted, hauled herself up to standing, and looked from Jim to Teresa and back in distress. Teresa's eyes hardened.

"I think what the captain's saying," Amos said, "is that using you as a meat shield isn't something he's a hundred percent comfortable with. It's not that you wouldn't do it, since you already did. But the people on the other end of that gun? We don't know them, they may not be the most reliable, and the less we have to count on them, the better."

Teresa scowled, but less.

"Yes," Jim said. "That was much more eloquent."

"Sometimes I'm good that way," Amos said, and it might have been a joke or it might not. "You want us to get the ship ready to rabbit? We've got enough reaction mass for a decent burn."

"I thought we needed fuel pellets."

"We do, but we can spend 'em getting out of Kronos, put water on the grocery list, and call it good. Recyclers are really going to be our limiting factor."

The pull of the thought was stronger than gravity. Light the drive, put nose toward the ring gate, and get the hell out before the enemy could get hold of them. Jim intentionally loosened his grip on the bulbs. "Naomi. What do you think?"

A moment of silence, then, "Sorry. I wasn't listening. What was the question?"

"Should we prep the *Roci* for a mad dash out of here? As soon as the *Black Kite*'s fully committed to its burn, we could make a break."

"No," she said, the way he had known she would. "They haven't identified us. If we go too soon, it'll only make them suspicious. Better if we look like bystanders. Alex? Plot an intercept with the *Whiteoak*. It's the big ice hauler at the second gas giant."

"Got her," Alex said.

Amos shifted on his bench. "Captain?"

"I'm fine."

"If we need to run," Naomi said, "we'll run."

We'll always need to run. We'll never get to rest, Jim thought. There didn't seem like any point in saying it.

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Chapter Two: Tanaka

Aliana pressed the button on her vaporizer and inhaled deeply. The mist tasted like vanilla and hit her lungs like a soft warm cloud. Nicotine and tetrahydrocannabinol mixed with just a touch of something more exotic. Something that tempered the THC sleepiness with a vivid hyperawareness. The shades in her room were drawn, but the hint of light at the edges shifted the dust into a rainbow of sparks. She moved one leg, and the silk sheet caressed it like a thousand tiny lovers.

Tristan was asleep next to her, his small muscular butt pressed up against her thigh. He snored gently as he slept, punctuated by the occasional twitch and sigh. Aliana knew that she found the noise charming and sweet because she was high and postcoital. The minute his snoring became annoying, Tristan would have overstayed his welcome.

There were, in her experience, two ways to thrive in a rigid, authoritarian regime. The first—the one most people reached for—was to be what power wanted you to be. Mars had wanted loyal soldiers, and they had produced them like they were printing machine parts. She knew, because she was old enough that she'd been one of them. She'd seen her cohort try to strangle or excise from their collective souls anything that wasn't sufficiently Martian, and sometimes they'd managed.

The other mode of survival was to enjoy having secrets. Enjoy the power of seeming to be one thing while being another. And then be good at it. Even when it didn't involve fucking her junior officers, it was a kind of sexual perversion. The thrill of knowing that a wrong word or an unexpected slip could put a bullet in the back of her head was more important to her than the actual sex.

A permissive, open society where she could have done all the same things without fear of consequences would have driven her crazy. She'd loved being part of the Laconian experiment from the beginning because

Duarte's vision—first as a capital offense against Mars and then as a permanent engine of danger—fed her kinks. She felt no shame about that. She knew what she was.

"Wake up," she said, pushing her fingers into the young man's back.

"Sleeping," Tristan slurred at her.

"I know. Now wake up." She jabbed him again. She spent ten hours a week boxing and wrestling. When she stiffened her fingers, they were like iron bars.

"God dammit," Tristan said, then rolled over. He gave her a sleepy grin. His tousled blond hair and clean-shaven face with its deep dimples made him look like a cherub in a classical painting. One of Raphael's putti.

Aliana took another hit off the vaporizer and offered it to him. He shook his head. "Why'd you wake me?"

Aliana stretched luxuriously under the soft sheets, her long frame barely contained by the oversized bed. "I'm high. I want to fuck."

Tristan flopped onto his back with an exaggerated sigh. "Allie, I barely have any fluid left in my body."

"Then go get a glass of water, take a salt pill, and get your ass back into my bed."

"Aye, aye, Colonel," Tristan said, laughing.

The laugh ended in a sharp *oof* when she rolled over on top of him and slammed down onto his belly, locking his thighs to the bed with her ankles and feet, and gripping his wrists in her hands. He looked up at her with surprise, then thinking it was sex play, started to struggle. His arms and chest were well formed but soft, more like a healthy teenager's than a man in his twenties. Her arms were thin and ropy, the muscles of a long-distance runner, burned down to their essence through constant hard use, and strong as steel springs. When he tried to move, she easily shoved him back down, squeezing her hands until his wrists popped and he squealed.

"Allie, you're—" he started, but she squeezed again and he shut up. She was angry, and he saw it. She liked that she was angry. She liked that he saw it.

"In this room, I am Aliana. You are Tristan," she said, speaking slowly, making sure the drugs weren't slurring her words. "Outside that door, you are Corporal Reeves, and I am Colonel Tanaka. Those things can never be confused for us."

“I know,” Tristan said. “I was just kidding.”

“No kidding. No jokes. No slipups. If you make a mistake, if you forget the strict discipline that allows this to exist, I will at minimum be dishonorably discharged.”

“I’d never—”

“And you,” Aliana continued as if he hadn’t spoken, “will not like the version of me that comes calling on you then.”

She stared down at him for a moment, waiting until his sudden fear turned into understanding. Then she let go of his wrists and climbed off of him, lying back down on her side of the bed.

“Get me some water too, would you?” she said.

Tristan didn’t answer, just got up and left the room. Aliana watched him go, enjoying the clenching of his thighs and ass as he walked, the gentle V of his back and shoulders. He was very, very pretty. When the thing they had inevitably ended, she was going to miss him. But that didn’t change the fact that it would end. They always had before. That was part of the joy.

A few moments later, Tristan returned carrying two glasses of water. He paused at the foot of the bed, looking unsure. Aliana patted the sheets next to her.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you,” she said.

“It’s okay,” he replied, then handed her a glass and sat down next to her. “I’m sorry I slipped up. Still want to fuck?”

“In a minute,” she said. They both gulped water for a while.

“Will I see you again?” he eventually asked. Aliana found herself gratified by the hopefulness in his voice.

“I should be on Laconia for a while this time,” she replied. “And I do want to see you again. We just have to be careful.”

“I understand,” he said. And she knew he did. She liked her toys to be much younger and much lower rank. It kept things simpler that way. But she didn’t waste her time with stupid men.

Her thirst gone, the warmth in her lungs was spreading down to her belly in a very pleasant way. She reached over and put her hand on Tristan’s thigh. “I think we should—”

The handheld on her nightstand chimed. She’d set it to do-not-disturb, which meant the device thought the incoming call was important enough to ignore that. She’d had it a long time and trained it well, so it was probably

right. She lifted it to check the connection request. It was coming from the State Building. She accepted the connection without visual. “Colonel Tanaka here.” Tristan slid out of bed and reached for his pants.

“Good afternoon, Colonel. This is Lieutenant Sanchez with scheduling and logistics. You have a debriefing at the State Building in two hours.”

“First I’ve heard of it,” she said, reaching for the side table and her sobriety meds. “Can you tell me the agenda?”

“I’m sorry, Colonel. I don’t have access to that. You were added to the attendees by Admiral Milan.”

The party was over.



When she reached the State Building, a light rain was falling. Tiny droplets turned the paving dark and shiny at the same time. The low mountain at the edge of the grounds looked like something from an ancient ukiyo-e print. Yoshitoshi or Hiroshige. An attaché from the Science Directorate was waiting to meet her with a cup of coffee and an umbrella. She waved both away.

Tanaka knew her way around the State Building. Most of her assignments were in the field, but she’d made enough friends and professional connections in the highest ranks of power that when she was on Laconia, she was often here. She hadn’t been back since the siege of Laconia, the destruction of the construction platform, and the maybe-kidnapping, maybe-autoemancipation of Teresa Duarte. There weren’t any physical changes to the building. The poured concrete was as solid as ever, the cut flowers in the vases as fresh. The guards in their razor-pressed uniforms were as stolid and calm. And everything felt fragile.

The attaché guided her to an office she’d been in before. Yellow walls of domestic wood with the blue seal of Laconia worked into them, and two austere sofas. Admiral Milan—acting commander in chief while the high consul was in seclusion and Admiral Trejo was in Sol system—sat at a wide desk. He was a broad man, with a heavy face and salt-and-pepper hair

shaved tight. And a crusty old sailor from the Mars days, impatient with bullshit and quick-tempered as a badger. Tanaka liked him immensely.

At one sofa, a lieutenant with a signal intelligence insignia on the standard Laconian blue naval uniform stood. Beside him, Dr. Ochida of the Science Directorate sat with his hands on his knee, fingers laced together. The silence had the awkwardness of an interruption.

Admiral Milan was the first to speak. “We’re running a little long here, Colonel. Have a seat. We’ll be done soon.”

“Yes, sir,” Tanaka said, and took the other sofa for herself. Admiral Milan looked to the standing lieutenant—Rossif, to judge by his nametag—and drew a circle in the air with his fingertip. *Get on with it.*

“Gedara system. Population just shy of two hundred thousand. High concentration of fissionables in the upper crust, so they’ve been trying to get deep-crust mining operations going for the last several years. Agriculture exists but it’s a decade away from self-sustaining.”

“And the incursion?” Admiral Milan said.

“Twenty-three minutes, eleven seconds,” Rossif answered. “Total loss of consciousness. Some accidental fatalities, some damage to infrastructure. Mostly people crashing vehicles or falling off of things. And logs show that just seconds before the incursion, two unscheduled heavy freighters passed through the ring and went dutchman.”

Dr. Ochida cleared his throat. “There was something strange this time.”

“Something stranger than everyone’s brain shutting off for twenty minutes?” Admiral Milan said.

“Yes, Admiral,” Ochida answered. “A review of instrumentation during the event shows a different kind of time loss as well.”

“Explain.”

“Short version,” Ochida said, “light went faster.”

Admiral Milan scratched his neck. “Did the word *explain* change meanings and no one told me?” Tanaka suppressed a smile.

“Simply put, the speed of light is a function of basic properties of the universe. Call it... the fastest causality can propagate in vacuum,” Ochida said. “For twenty-some minutes in the Gedara system, the nature of space-time shifted in a way that altered the speed of light. Made it faster. The light delay from the ships at the Gedara ring to the planet at the time was slightly less than forty minutes. Logs of the event show that during the incursion, it

decreased by nearly four thousand nanoseconds.”

“Four thousand nanoseconds,” Milan said.

“The nature of space-time *changed* in that system for twenty minutes,” Ochida intoned, then waited for a reaction he wasn’t getting. He looked crestfallen.

“Well,” Milan said. “I will certainly have to think about this. Thank you for the briefing, Lieutenant. Doctor. You’re both dismissed. You stay, Colonel.”

“Yes, sir,” Tanaka replied.

Once the room was empty, Milan leaned back. “Drink? I’ve got water, coffee, bourbon, and some herbal tea shit my husbands both drink, tastes like grass clippings.”

“Am I on active duty?”

“I don’t think you need to concern yourself with breaking protocol, if that’s what you mean.”

“Then bourbon sounds great, sir,” Tanaka replied. Admiral Milan spent a minute fussing at his desk, then came back with a cut crystal glass and two fingers of smoky brown liquid swirling in it.

“To your health,” Tanaka said, then took a sip.

“So,” Milan said, and sat with the unconscious grunt of an old man with a lot of bad joints. “What do you think that lightspeed shit means?”

“Not a clue, sir. I’m a shooter, not an egghead.”

“This is why I’ve always liked you,” he said, then sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers. The silence was different this time, and she wasn’t certain what it meant. “So just between the two of us—one old sailor to another—is there anything you want to tell me?”

She felt the adrenaline hit her bloodstream. She didn’t let it show. She was too practiced at deception for that. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He tilted his head and sighed. “I don’t either. I find this whole thing pretty fucking mysterious. And I’m not as good at swallowing my curiosity as I was when we were young.”

“Still genuinely unclear what we’re talking about. Was someone supposed to tell me why you wanted me here?”

“It wasn’t me that wanted you. Trejo made the request, and he had me do a little paperwork on your behalf.” He pulled out a physical folder of red paper with a silver string to close it, and handed it to her. It seemed so out

of place, it was like being handed a stone tablet. She drank the rest of her bourbon off in one shot before she took it. It was lighter than she expected, and the string came undone easily. Inside was a single sheet of three-layer security parchment, the document verification circuits crisp as lace. Her picture was on it and her biometric profile, her name and rank and identification record numbers. And a short passage granting her Omega status from the Laconian Intelligence Directorate at the personal request of the High Consul's Office.

If it had been a severed head, she wouldn't have been more surprised.

"Is this..." she began.

"Not a joke. Admiral Trejo has instructed that you be given the keys to the kingdom. Override authority on any mission. Access to any information, regardless of security classification. Immunity from censure or prosecution for the duration of your deployment. Pretty sweet. You really telling me you don't know what it's about?"

"I assume there's a mission?"

"Probably, but I'm not cleared to know what it is. You just keep your seat. I can show myself out."

When Admiral Milan closed the door behind him, the office system threw a comm message on the wall screen. After a moment, Admiral Trejo appeared. She'd known him for as long as she'd known anyone living. His eyes were still the same uncanny green, but now there were dark bags under them. His hair was thinning and his skin had an unhealthy waxy shine. He looked haunted.

"Colonel Tanaka," he said. "I'm reaching out to you with a critical mission for the empire. At present, I am taking a break from a hard burn from Sol system, and if this could wait until I arrived on Laconia, I'd brief you in person. It can't, so this will have to do."

She stared into her bourbon glass. It was empty, and the bottle sat just a meter away, but suddenly she didn't want it anymore. She felt her attention sharpening.

"I'm sure that you, like everyone else in the empire, are wondering what exactly the high consul has been doing in seclusion. How he has been spearheading the fight against the forces that are threatening us from within the gates. I know there's been some speculation that he was somehow injured or incapacitated. So, candidly, I need you to know that when I left

for Sol system, the high consul was a drooling, brain-damaged moron who couldn't feed himself or wipe his own ass. He has been that way since the attack that destroyed the *Typhoon* and Medina Station."

Tanaka took a deep breath and let it out through her teeth.

"Dr. Cortázar had altered the high consul's biology considerably by using modified protomolecule technologies. It left the high consul in possession of certain... abilities that were not fully documented or explored before Dr. Cortázar's death. And in fact, Duarte killed him. Waved his hand and splattered that crazy fucker across half a room. I've never seen anything like it. Right now, the only people who know this are you, me, Dr. Okoye of the Science Directorate, and Teresa Duarte, who ran away with the underground's assault forces after they cleaned our clock. So, pretty much the whole fucking enemy.

"Given that for background, you'll understand how confused I was when the high consul appeared to me eighty... eighty-five hours ago in my office in Sol system. He didn't register on the sensors. He didn't interact with any physical object or leave any evidence of his presence that could be verified by an outside observer. But he was here. And before you get too happy with the Anton-Trejo's-having-a-psychotic-break theory, there is some external evidence. Just not here in Sol.

"Shortly after I experienced what I experienced, Duarte disappeared from the State Building. Not popped-out-of-reality disappeared. He put on his pants and a fresh shirt, had a cup of tea and a polite conversation with his valet, then walked off the grounds. Every planetary sensor we have has been sweeping the landscape since then. No one has seen him.

"We've got over a thousand colony systems that are wondering if there's anything left of the government. We have extradimensional enemies experimenting to find ways to snuff us out wholesale. And I am convinced that the answer to both of those issues is Winston Duarte, or whatever the fuck he's turned into. I've known you for a long time, and I trust you. Your mission is to find him and bring him back. You've heard of *carte blanche*, but I promise you have never seen a check this blank. I don't care what you spend—not in money, equipment, or lives—as long as you bring Winston Duarte back from wherever he's gone. If he doesn't want to come, convince him nicely if you can, but this only ends with him in our custody.

"Good hunting, Colonel."

The message ended. Tanaka leaned back on the sofa, stretching her arms to her sides like a bird unfurling its wings. Her mind was already ticking away. The strangeness of it, the shocking revelations, the threat it posed. All of those were in her. She could feel them. But there was also the calm of a job that needed doing and the pleasure, deeper than she would have guessed, at the power she had just been given.

The door opened quietly, and Admiral Milan came back in.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

Tanaka laughed. “Not even close.”

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Chapter Three: Naomi

They waited until the *Black Kite* was far enough from the ring gate that an intercept burn would have been difficult if not impossible. Then they waited a little more so that they wouldn't seem suspicious for starting their transit burn at the first possible moment. And then Naomi couldn't stand waiting anymore.

Three hours after that, the Laconian frigate hit them with a tightbeam demanding in official language and harsh tones of voice who they were and where they thought they were going.

"This is the *Vincent Soo*, independent freighter on contract with Atmosphäre Shared Liability Corporation out of Earth. We are carrying ore samples for quality control testing. Our public contracts and permissions are attached. Message repeats."

The voice was built from samples of ten different men, slip-mixed by the *Roci*'s system so that even if the Laconians realized the message was false, they wouldn't be able to track the voice patterns back to anyone. The *Vincent Soo* was a real ship with a similar drive signature and silhouette to their present modified version of the *Roci*, though it didn't work outside Sol system. The contracts the message included would come back as real unless someone started digging into them. It was as plausible a mask as Naomi could fashion.

"They aren't responding," Alex said.

They were both on the ops deck. The lighting was low, though she noticed that Alex had started keeping even the low settings a little higher than he had when they'd both had younger eyes.

"Could be good, could be bad," Naomi said.

"Sure wish I could tell which it was."

"If they start chasing us with their guns blazing, then it was bad."

Alex nodded. "Yeah. That makes sense. I just wish they'd say 'Hey, we

decided not to chase you down and kill you.’ Just out of courtesy.”

“At this range, we’ll have plenty of time to watch violent death barrel down on us. You won’t miss anything.”

“Well, thank God for that.”

With every minute the *Black Kite* didn’t answer and didn’t turn its drives in pursuit, Naomi felt the fear of capture or destruction fade, and the fear of transit grow. It was hard to believe that there had been a time when her life hadn’t been moving from one trauma to the next like walking on stepping-stones in an ornamental garden. There had been whole decades when passing through the ring gates hadn’t been more than a passing unease. Yes, if there was too much traffic, the ship could go dutchman—quietly vanish from existence for who-knew-where or no place. But it had been the same scale of threat as anything. They could hit a micrometeor that broke their drive. The magnetic bottle could fail and spill a free fusion reaction into the body of the ship. She could have a stroke.

Once, there had been rules about how the gates worked. Human rules about what traffic was allowed through. Inhuman rules about how much matter and energy could pass through in a certain period of time without angering the dark, ship-eating gods.

All of that was gone now.

“How many ships you think they have looking for us?” Alex asked.

“You mean how many ships do they own, or how many are in the specific hunt group tasked with trying to find us?”

Alex was silent, then made a soft clicking sound with his tongue. “Probably wouldn’t like either answer, would I?”

“How long until we reach the gate?”

“If we don’t brake before the transit, about eighteen hours.”

Naomi unstrapped from her crash couch and stood up. The deck rose up under her, thrust gravity at just over half a g. “I’m going to get some rest. Call me if someone decides to kill us.”

“Will do,” Alex said as she headed for the lift. And then, “How’s Jim?”

Naomi looked back. Alex’s face was tinted blue by the light of his screen. The thin white stubble of hair clinging to the side and back of his head reminded her of pictures of snow on rich soil, and the gentleness in his eyes told her the question hadn’t really been a question.

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “But what can I do?”

She made her way down to the crew decks, listening to the reassuring hum of the ship around her. After so many years in close company with the *Roci*, she could judge the health of the ship by its sounds. Even if she hadn't known already that they were running the drive just a little out of balance, she'd have been able to pick up on it from the way the decks muttered and creaked.

When Jim had been taken prisoner by Laconia, Naomi had mourned him. Mourned the version of herself that had him at her side. When, against all odds, he'd come back, she hadn't really been ready. It was something she hadn't let herself hope for, and so she hadn't thought deeply about how it would be.

The crash couch was rigged up for the two of them to share. For extended hard burns, one or the other of them might take one of the spare cabins or—more often—a couch on the ops deck. The doubled couch wasn't built for optimum function so much as quality of life. The pleasure of waking up at someone's side. The intimacy of watching them sleep, feeling them breathe. Knowing on a cellular level that she wasn't alone.

Jim was sleeping when she came into the room. He still looked thinner than she remembered him being before his time in prison. Before her time in self-exile. It might only have been the graying of his hair, but the skin of his eyelids seemed darker than it had been before, as though he'd been bruised in a way that wouldn't heal. Even in sleep, there was a rigidity to his body, like he was braced against an attack.

She told herself that he was recovering, and that was probably true. She could feel the passing days and weeks changing her too. Letting her expand a little bit more into a place she hadn't had access to when they had all been apart. It was different than it had been. Bobbie was gone. Clarissa was gone. Amos was transformed in ways that made her skin crawl if she let herself think about it too much. And Teresa and her dog were there, half permanent passengers and half threat. Even so, this was closer to the life she'd had than she had any right to expect. A version of her family, back together. Sometimes that was a comfort. Sometimes it was just a way to be nostalgic for what hadn't returned.

If they could stop, recover, decompress, who knows what else they might have been able to salvage, but they couldn't.

She lay down beside him, her head pillowed on one folded arm. Jim

shifted, yawned, cracked open one eye. His smile was the same—boyish, bright, delighted to see her. *This time is a gift*, she thought. And she smiled back.

“Hey, sexy lady,” Jim said. “What did I miss?”

Years, she thought. *We missed years*. Instead of the truth, she smiled.

“Nothing critical,” she said.



“I really want to slow us down,” Alex said.

Naomi, in the galley, was putting the remains of her meal into the recycler. They had cut thrust, and the whirl of the vacuum sucking the stray bits of food into the system was almost as loud as Alex’s voice over the comms. On the wall screen, the Kronos ring gate hung against a wide field of stars, the weird dark, twisting mass at its perimeter visible only because of the *Roci*’s enhancements. With each passing second, the magnification dropped. The ring was a thousand clicks across, their transit was counting down from twelve minutes, and it still would have been invisible to the naked eye.

“You can tap the brakes if you want to,” Naomi said. “But if there’s unfriendly company in the ring space, it’ll just make us easier to hit.”

“I want to charge up the rail gun,” Alex said. “But you won’t let me, so I’m sublimating.”

“You could recheck the torpedoes and PDCs.”

“Amos and Teresa are doing that already. I don’t want to seem like I don’t trust them.”

“You could arm the hull charges and be ready to blow the disguise plates off.”

Alex was silent for a long, slow breath. Across the little room, Jim gave her an approving thumbs-up.

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” Alex said. “Really want my rail gun up, though.”

“When we’re on the other side, you can charge it to your heart’s content,” Naomi said.

“Promises, promises.” A click said that Alex had dropped the connection. The magnification on the ring gate continued its slow fall. Naomi called up a little inset window pointing back. The noise from their drive cone made the image blurry, grainy, and approximate, but even so, she could see that the *Black Kite* wasn’t moving toward them.

“I’m not seeing a repeater,” Jim said. “They blew ours up, but it doesn’t look like they dropped one.”

“I noticed that. They aren’t worried about coordinating with anyone on the other side. So there’s at least a chance we aren’t burning straight into a trap.”

“Yay!”

Ten minutes remained.

“Ready?” Naomi asked. In answer, Jim pulled himself to a wall handhold and pushed off toward the central lift. Naomi opened a connection to Amos. “We’re taking stations on the ops deck. Not that we’re expecting any trouble, but if there is some...”

“I hear you, Boss. I’ve already got the pup in her kennel. In case we bang around a little.”

Bang around a little meaning evade incoming fire. “And Teresa?”

There was one of his odd pauses before he answered. “We’re strapping down in engineering. You have a need, just say the word.”

Naomi dropped the connection and followed Jim. The lift was at the bottom of the shaft, locked down until someone called it, and they swam through the empty air of its shaft until they reached ops. They went to their usual stations, pulled the straps across their bodies, shifted the screens to the controls they would each take if the transit landed them in danger. The combination of fear and familiarity turned it into a ritual, like brushing her teeth before sleep. The ring persisted, but the lensing of the telescopy put fewer stars around it now.

“Ready in ops,” Naomi said.

“Flight deck,” Alex said.

“Yeah,” Amos said. “We’re good. Do your thing.”

The counter reached zero. Jim took a sharp breath. The gate blinked to the grainy trailing image—the same structure, but behind them now and receding. The stars all went out at once.

“And we are through,” Alex said. “No threats on the board so far as I

can see, but shit howdy, are there too many people in here. I'm flipping us around and putting the brakes on until we know where we're headed."

The thrust gravity warning went on even though he'd just said it, and after a moment of vertiginous rotation, up and down returned. The gel of the couch pressed into Naomi's back. She had already brought up the tactical map.

The ring space—what she still thought of as the slow zone even though there hadn't been the hard limit on velocity here since Jim and a protomolecular echo of Detective Miller had turned it off decades ago—was a little smaller than the sun in Sol system. A million Earths could have fit in it, but the only things it contained now were 1,371 ring gates, the single enigmatic station at its center, and fifty-two ships including the *Roci*, all of them on transits of their own. Alex was right. It was too many. It was dangerous.

"How many do you think we've lost?" Jim asked. When she looked over, he had the same screen open before him.

"Just underground ships?"

"No, I mean the big we. Everyone. Laconian. Underground. Civilians just trying to get supplies where they're needed. How many do you think we've lost?"

"No way to know," she said. "No one's keeping track anymore. There's a war on."

She set the *Roci* to identify the ships by transponder, drive signature, thermal profile, and silhouette, to note any discrepancies and flag any ships that were known to be associated with the underground or the Laconian Empire. It took the ship system three seconds to produce a compiled list with cross notations and a navigable interface. Naomi started the human work of paging through. The ships most closely allied with Laconia were a freighter called *Eight Tenets of Bushido* that operated out of Bara Gaon and a long-range explorer called the *Flying Buffalo* that was based in Sol but owned by a corporate network that had embraced Duarte's rule the moment Earth and Mars had surrendered. Neither were warships, and both struck Naomi as being allies of convenience more than true believers in the Laconian cause. They weren't part of the official Laconian hierarchy, anyway.

The only ship on her known underground contacts was an independent

rock hopper out of Sol that was flying as the *Caustic Bitch* but was listed in the registry as *PinkWink*. There was probably a story there, but Naomi wasn't sure she wanted to know what it was.

There was also a bottle on the float.

"One of yours?" Jim asked.

"Hope so," Naomi said. "We'll see."

Once, humanity's comm network had been a fairly robust thing. In-system radio signals hit repeaters at the ring gates that were either strong enough to shout over the interference in the gates or actually physically penetrated them with transceivers on both sides. Medina Station, at the heart of the ring space, had maintained them and monitored the comm traffic. For decades, a message from Earth could reach Bara Gaon and receive an answer back within a day even if the signal queuing was swamped. But with the death of Medina and the rise of the underground, that was gone.

Now the thirteen hundred worlds communicated in a shifting patchwork of relays, ships carrying messages, and the modified torpedoes she called bottles. This one in particular was an advanced design, set to wait and gather incoming messages from the underground that were meant for her and keep them until it was triggered. It was an imperfect system, and she was certain she'd lost more than a few along the way, but it was easy to verify, difficult to fake, and difficult if not impossible to trace.

She pulled up the Epstein drive controls and dropped in a slightly altered feed pattern. To anyone besides the bottle, it would be unremarkable—well within the range of normal drive fluctuations. To the sensor array on the surface of the bottle, it would match a pattern.

It did.

The bottle shouted a dense blip of tightly packed data, putting it out broadcast for any ship in the slow zone to hear. A tightbeam would have pointed a finger if anyone had caught backscatter from it. This could be meant for any of the dozens of ships that could hear it. And every now and then, the underground set false bottles to sneak into the slow zone or a gate to spit out faked data and confuse the patterns.

The *Roci's* system sucked in the radio burst and set quietly to work decrypting it, while at the edge of the ring space the bottle lit its own drive and zipped out through one of the gates. Naomi's underground knew to

watch for its detonation as the sign to place another one when they could. If the Laconians saw it—even if they knew what it meant—there still wasn't anything for them to do about it.

It was all run like an OPA cell writ large, and Naomi was the one who'd designed it. The sins of her past, finding a use.

"Well, that could have gone a lot worse," Jim said. "I guess the question now is where we go next."

"That will depend on what's in the data," Naomi said. "I don't like spending more time in the ring space than we have to."

"I would also hate to be eaten by forces from beyond space and time before it was my turn." The lightness and humor she'd always known were still there, but there was an emptiness behind it. Not nihilism, she thought. Exhaustion.

"If we need to," she began, "there's always—"

Teresa's voice cut in on the ship-wide comms. "I need help. In the machine shop. I need help now."

Jim was unstrapped before the girl had finished speaking. All the weariness was gone from him. He didn't wait for the lift to engage, dropping down the handholds in the shaft like climbing down a ladder. Naomi was barely behind him. Some part of her was almost relieved to see him moving with certainty again. Like catching a glimpse of the Jim from before. Even if a lot of him was in hiding, he was still in there.

"What's going on?" Alex asked from the flight deck.

"Something's happening to Amos," Teresa said. She had the tense calm of an emergency responder.

"We're on our way," Naomi said. Jim didn't respond at all. When they reached the engineering deck, Naomi heard something. A voice, Amos' voice, but not with words in it. It was a low wet sound, half growl, half gargle. Something about it reminded her of drowning. She and Jim strode down to the machine shop together.

Teresa was sitting on the deck, her legs crossed and cradling Amos' wide, bald head in her lap as he jerked and shuddered. A pale foam dripped from his mouth, and the pure black eyes were wide and empty. A sickening smell—as much metallic as organic—filled the air.

"He's having a seizure," Jim said.

Teresa's voice trembled when she spoke. "Why? Why is this

happening?”

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Chapter Four: Elvi

Get her out,” Elvi said. “I’m pulling the plug.”

“No,” Cara replied. The girl’s voice was still shaking, but the words were clear. “I can do this.”

Cara’s brain function showed in seven different datasets on twice that many screens. The data from the BFE—the technicians’ pet name for the Jupiter-sized block of green crystal that was the only feature of Adro system—showed beside it. Advanced pattern-matching protocols mapped the two together in six dimensions. The instability had passed in both datasets, the seizure—if that’s what it was—falling back from turbulence to a more stable flow.

All around the lab, the researchers and techs turned wide and uncertain eyes toward Elvi. She could feel the desire to keep pushing forward from her whole staff. She felt it herself. It reminded her of being the RA in her graduate dorm house and having to shut down the hall parties.

“I am the lead researcher. She is the test subject. When I say we’re pulling the plug, we’re pulling the plug.” As her team sprang to life, closing down the experiment, she turned to Cara, who was floating over the bed of imaging sensors. “Sorry. It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s that I don’t trust any of this.”

The girl with the pure black eyes nodded, but her attention was on something else. Cara’s visual and audial cortices were lit up like Paris at New Year’s, and a deep, slow pulse was passing through the girl’s postcentral gyrus that matched the energy readings coming from the BFE’s southern hemisphere. Whatever Cara was feeling just then, it was taking up more of her attention than Elvi was. She had the sense that she could scream in Cara’s ear right now and still be a tiny minority of the information flooding the girl’s brain.

Or for that matter the girl’s body, which was part of the issue. Elvi had

studied somatic cognition theory, but the degree to which the BFE seemed to want to present its information to Cara's whole nervous system—muscles and viscera included—was complicating things. She spooled back through the data as her team ran the shutdown procedures and brought Cara back to merely human reality.

The *Falcon*, Elvi's private and state-sponsored science ship, was the most advanced single-function laboratory in thirteen hundred worlds. Which sounded really impressive until she remembered that most of those thirteen hundred worlds were the equivalent of 1880s European dirt farmers trying to grow enough food to not slaughter half their cattle at the start of every winter. The *Falcon* was the only ship that had survived the attack that killed the *Typhoon* and Medina Station, and the scars showed everywhere. The decking was subtly mismatched where threads of darkness that had been somehow more real than reality had ripped a third of the ship's mass away. The power and environmental systems were all patchworks of the original and rebuilt. Her own leg had a line across it where the new skin and muscle had grown in the softball-sized scoop that had vanished in the attack. Working on the *Falcon* was like living inside a trauma flashback. It helped Elvi when she could focus on the data, and on the BFE, and on Cara and Xan.

Dr. Harshaan Lee, Elvi's second lead, met her eye and nodded. He was an energetic young scientist, and she liked him. More than that, she trusted him. He knew what she wanted to do, and with a gesture, he'd offered to make sure Cara's re-emergence from the experiment went according to protocol. She nodded back, accepting the offer.

"All right, people," Lee said, clapping his hands together. "By the numbers and by the book."

Elvi pulled herself through the air to the lift shaft, and aft toward the engine and the isolation chamber and Cara's younger brother Xan.

Fayez floated against one wall, his left leg tucked behind a wall grip and his hand terminal glowing with text. Beside him, the thing they called the catalyst—the body of a woman infused with a contained but live sample of protomolecule—was strapped in its gurney. The catalyst's sightless eyes found her, and Fayez followed its empty gaze.

"How'd he do?" Elvi asked, nodding toward the containment chamber and therefore Xan. Most of the time, the catalyst was stored there, but for

the periods when they used it to activate the old, alien technologies, she put Xan in its place. The only time the young boy and the protomolecule interacted at all was during the changeover.

Fayez pulled up a screen with the security camera. Inside the isolation chamber, Xan floated. His eyes were closed and his mouth was just slightly open, like he was sleeping or drowned.

“Listened to some music, read a few issues of *Naka and Corvalis*, and went to sleep,” Fayez said. “For all the world like the preadolescent boy he appears to be.”

Elvi pulled herself to a stop at her husband’s side. The data on his hand terminal was the feed from the lab laid side by side with the monitors trained on Xan. She could tell at a glance that there wasn’t a correlation between them. Whatever Cara was going through, Xan wasn’t being subjected to it along with her. Or at least not obviously. She’d still feed everything through pattern matching.

She wasn’t conscious of sighing, but Fayez touched her arm as if she had.

“You heard about Gedara system?”

She nodded. “Lightspeed change. Dark gods banging around in the attic. Feels like that’s happening more often.”

“We’ll need more data points for a good frequency analysis,” he said. “But yeah. It does. I hate the feeling that something vast and angry is scratching at the corners of reality and looking for a way to kill me.”

“It’s only scary because it’s true.”

He ran a hand through his hair. He’d gone silver, and when they were on the float, he tended to look like something out of a children’s cartoon. Elvi’s hair was well on its way to white, but she kept it short. Mostly because she hated the compression fluid in the high-g crash couches, and it took forever to get the smell of it out of longer hair.

“You shut down early?”

“There was some instability when she synced up with the BFE.”

Now it was Fayez’s turn to sigh. “I wish they didn’t call it that. It’s a *diamond*, not an emerald.”

“I know. Sorry.”

“And anyway, BFD’s funnier,” he said, but there wasn’t any heat to it. Their marriage was a vast tissue of in-jokes, light comic bits, shared

curiosity, and common trauma. They'd built it like a code between them over the course of decades. She knew the inflections that meant he had something that was interesting him, and how it sounded different from when he was angry about something. When he was trying to protect her and when he was struggling with something he was seeing but couldn't understand.

"What's on your mind?" she asked.

"You didn't notice the sync?"

"What sync?"

Fayez pulled up the dataset again. On one side, the brain and body of a teenage girl fixed at the age when she'd died and been "repaired" by alien technology. On the other, the particle scatter and magnetic resonances of a vast crystal that—if they were lucky—held the history of a galaxy-spanning species whose tracks they were following toward extinction. She could trace the similarities with her fingers. Fayez lifted his eyebrows, waiting for her to notice something. She shook her head. He pointed to a tiny indicator on the side of the readout: IN-FRAME LIGHT DELAY CORRECTION OFFSET: -.985S.

She frowned.

"We're point nine-eight-five light seconds from the diamond," Fayez said. "Matching orbit around the star, neither moving toward nor away from it. The last times we tried this, Cara and the diamond were talking back and forth. Call and response. Now they're singing in harmony. No light delay."

Elvi felt the implications running through her mind like water spilling down a creek. They'd always known that the protomolecule was able to do strange things with locality, but they'd thought it was related to quantum entanglement of particles. Cara and the BFE hadn't exchanged any particles that she knew of, so this pseudo-instantaneous information transfer was something new. One of the fundamental hypotheses of protomolecule technology had just taken a profound hit.

It also meant that their reaching out to the artifact had gotten it to reach back. Her experiment was working.

She'd expected success to feel less like fear.

When Elvi had started working for the Laconian Empire, it had been under duress. Winston Duarte had taken over all humanity with the speed and thoroughness of a plague. When he'd invited her to a senior position in

his Science Directorate, the answer was yes. It would have been a dream job, except for the consequences of refusing it.

Then Duarte's plan to confront the forces that killed off the civilizations that built the ring gates went wrong. Duarte was crippled by it. And Elvi's immediate boss, Paolo Cortázar, was reduced to a thin, heme-stinking mist. Elvi, who'd wanted the job but not the employer, found herself receiving a field promotion to the head of the Laconian Science Directorate with the understanding that her primary task was to figure out how to stop the attacks that were knocking out consciousness, sometimes in single systems, sometimes all through the empire. Unless her primary task was to find a way to fix Duarte's scrambled mind. Or maybe to prevent any more ships from vanishing in the transit between the normal universe and the weird nexus of the ring space.

She had the nearly infinite resources of the empire behind her, the survival of humanity on her shoulders, and a research protocol so streamlined it would have failed out of an ethics review board from just the table of contents.

There were two levels that she had to figure out. First was the civilization that had built the protomolecule and the gates, then the forces that destroyed them. On her best days, she'd thought of herself like a medieval monk struggling to understand the saints to better see the face of God. More often, she felt like a termite trying to explain dogs to her fellow Isoptera so that they could all speculate about fusion jazz.

She understood the protomolecule engineers and what had killed them better than anyone else in all of humanity. Except, if this worked, for Cara. And Xan.



"It was like being in a dream," Cara said, "only bigger. I don't remember really tasting things in dreams, you know? This was tasting things and hearing things, and the shape of my body seemed like it was changing. It was... everything."

“I didn’t feel anything,” Xan said. He sounded disappointed.

Originally, Elvi had done the debriefings with the two siblings separately, talking first to Cara and then to Xan. The idea being that by keeping them from hearing each other’s accounts she could keep them from influencing those reports, but it stressed both of them to be apart.

Now, she brought them into her private lab together, the two of them on the float while she braced herself at her desk and wrote up her notes. The décor was rich psychiatrist’s office: blond grass-colored padding on the walls, spider plants in capillary-fed niches, the low pulse of a dedicated air recycler. Everything about it was designed to say that the woman who used it was a very important person. She hated it more than a little, but she didn’t spend the energy to examine why.

“Was it different from the last time?” Elvi asked.

“There was a... stutter? Like a moment when everything fell apart, and when it came back together, everything was brighter and more immediate? That’s not the right word. There may not be a right word.”

“How did it compare to your experience of ‘the library’?” Elvi asked.

Cara went eerily still for a moment, the way she and Xan did sometimes. Elvi waited for a breath, and then Cara came back. “The library isn’t sensory at all. It’s just knowing things. But this? It isn’t the library, but it’s where the information all comes from. I’m sure about that.”

Xan made a soft noise. Cara put a hand on his arm and pulled him close to her. A primate’s instinct to comfort by cuddling unchanged by its translation across light-years of vacuum into a bubble of ceramic, steel, and carbon lace.

“Were you able to interact with it at all?”

“I think so,” Cara said. “I mean, I didn’t understand what I was doing, but I think I can figure it out. I feel fine. I’m ready to go back in.”

Elvi typed SUBJECT SHOWS STRONG DESIRE TO RETURN TO INTERFACE CONSISTENT WITH DROP IN DOPAMINE AND SEROTONIN LEVELS POST-EXPERIMENT. ADDICTIVE?

“That’s good,” she said out loud. “There are a couple recalibrations we need to make, but we should be ready for another run in a couple shifts. And I’m going to want to run a scan or two while we’re doing that. Check your baseline.”

“Okay,” Cara said, almost hiding her impatience. “Whatever you want.”

Xan fidgeted against his sister’s arm, setting both of them turning a little. “I’m hungry.”

“Go ahead,” Elvi said. “I need to write this up, but you two should eat and rest. I’ll be along in a little bit.”

Cara nodded once, gathered Xan close to her. “Thank you, Doctor.” She pushed off Elvi’s desk with one long, graceful leg. The children—or test subjects, or human-alien hybrids, or however Elvi thought of them in the moment—closed the door behind them. Elvi pressed her palms against her eyes until colors bloomed, and she let out a sigh. Her body was rattling with exhaustion and excitement and anxiety. It felt like drinking too much coffee, and she hadn’t had any at all.

She wrote down the rest of her observations of Cara and Xan and attached the raw data to the report. Then it was just her summary still to go. She shifted the interface to Dictation and let herself float away from her desk. Her leg wanted her to stretch, but it also wanted to cramp. Ever since she’d regrown the hole in her thigh, it did this sometimes.

“We are seeing definite progress,” she said, and the words laid themselves out on her screen. “The triadic relationship between protomolecule catalyst, conscious subject, and the BFE—” Elvi scowled and made a clicking sound with her tongue that backed out the last two words. “—the presumed alien data core seems to be finishing what we’re calling its handshake protocol. I am concerned that the primary subject and the interface weren’t designed for each other, and the interaction between them might be—” She clicked twice again. “—has the potential to be destructive to one or both of them.”

Her office door opened, and Fayez floated in. She raised a hand, asking for silence, as he stopped himself on a handhold. She waited for the door to close before she went on.

“The next phase will be trying to confirm information we already have. Specifically, I’m going to ask the subject a set of simple questions about details from the research into artifacts and archaeology from several systems that she wouldn’t plausibly have had access to. If she can confirm information we already have, that will let us move forward with some confidence that what we get from her further on will be trustworthy. But since she was present in Cortázar’s private lab, and we don’t know what his

information hygiene was with the subjects, I'm having to be very careful in choosing test questions.

"Neither subject seems to have been affected by the events in Gedara system. The staff here, myself included, haven't had any blackouts or losses of consciousness since the all-systems attack months ago. Without knowing what constraints the enemy is working under, I can interpret the limited scope of the Gedara attack as an indication that it is still in an experimental phase, looking for interactions that will be effective in disabling us. Or that the new attacks required more effort, and the enemy doesn't want to expand them. Or that we just don't have enough information yet to know what we're seeing and I'm just talking out my ass."

She clicked her tongue to delete the sarcastic editorial at the end, and then finished the report. She started spooling through the text to look for errors and typos. Fayeze shifted over to her side, watching the screen over her shoulder.

"You didn't say, 'And if we don't get a handle on it soon, the bad guys will figure out how to snuff out all our minds like so many billions of candles, and the cockroaches will have to evolve enough to take over before we get an answer.'"

"Ants, I think, before the cockroaches," Elvi said. "Predatory superorganisms. Cockroaches are just mobile food pods to them."

"You've given this a lot of thought."

She routed copies of the report to Dr. Ochida at the Science Directorate back on Laconia and privately to Admiral Anton Trejo, who was at the moment the closest thing Laconia had to a controlling intelligence for their own predatory superorganism. Somewhere on the *Falcon*, a tightbeam stuttered on and off, spilling light to the repeaters they'd dropped behind them on the assumption that they were still up and functioning. At the speed of light, it would take the information almost an hour to reach the ring gate, then across the cobbled-together, war-ravaged, unreliable communications network that laced the ring space, and then she didn't know how long to reach Trejo.

She packaged another copy of the report, flagged for easy interception by the underground and addressed to Naomi Nagata. She sent it too.

"That's going to get us in trouble someday," Fayeze said.

"We're already in trouble."

“Yeah, but it’s cosmic-forces-beyond-space-and-time-kill-us-all trouble. Feeding all our data to the underground is ship-security-shoots-us-for-treason trouble.”

Elvi laughed, but it was a tight, angry laugh. “What we’re doing here is bigger than politics.”

“I know,” he said. “I just keep hoping the politicians see it too.”

As if in response, her system chimed. A high-priority message from Laconia. Elvi’s eyes only.

“That’s fucking eerie,” Fayez said. “You want privacy?”

“No,” she said. “But I’d better take it anyway.”

The door closed behind him, and she started the playback. Kelly, Winston Duarte’s personal valet, leaned in toward the camera. His lips were thin and gray. Whatever it was, it looked like bad news.

“Dr. Okoye. I have been authorized by Admiral Trejo to brief you on a security matter that may touch on your work. There’s been a change in High Consul Duarte’s status...”

Chapter Five: Tanaka

The Laconian Mechanized Infantry Suit: Special Reconnaissance, or more affectionately the Stalker, was a marvel of design. Built for extended recon, it was lighter and faster than the standard suit, and instead of bristling with weaponry, it was covered with sensors and tracking systems. It wasn't meant for front-line fighting. Its job was to slip in, spot the enemy and mark the targets, then slip away before the heavily armed shock troops arrived to take care of business. The small-caliber rapid-fire Gatling gun on the suit's right arm meant a Stalker could still handle a little business of its own, should the need arise.

In her many decades of service, first in the Martian Marine Corps as a member of the elite Force Recon Battalion at Hecate Base, and later as a combat officer in the newly created Laconian Marines, Tanaka had worn just about every model of power armor made. The Stalker suit was her favorite. Long and lean, fast as a greyhound and tough as nails, she'd always fancied that the suit looked like a robotic version of herself.

The one she wore now was currently a gentle mottled green, the color-shifting surface changing to match the rolling forest and Laconian brush that the suit's three-sixty optics were picking up. It didn't make her invisible, but it meant the suit's camouflage was always appropriate for the environment. Two large battery packs rode on the back, giving her a ninety-hour range. The gun was loaded with a belt of mixed armor-piercing and high explosive. She loped through the forest at an easily sustainable twenty kilometers an hour, scattering the small animals before her. There was no reason to move cautiously. Unless she actually found the high consul out there, nothing in the wilds was a threat to her.

She'd started her work by reviewing some of the files and background previously closed to her.

Actual information about the high consul's personal life and data was

thin, even with Omega status to unlock files for her. His medical records were sketchy and vague. Much of his privacy had been preserved over the years by never recording data in the first place. Everyone else on Laconia, on the other hand, was well documented. She'd taken the high consul's laundry and locked it in a room with her suit's sensor package while she prepped for the trip. When she put the suit on, it had identified the chemical markers of every human who'd come in contact with the fabric. All but one of them were identifiable. Process of elimination made the remaining signal the high consul. Negative space for hunting animals.

Now she had a scent.

From the security records, she could track Duarte to the edge of the State Building's grounds, and then a little beyond it. The track after that was thin. Wind had scattered the scents, rain had washed them away.

Laconia wasn't a huge planet, but it was still an entire planet. Duarte had left days before on foot. Best-case scenario he was still walking, and she'd be able to find him in a long afternoon. But the colony worlds had a habit of sprouting ancient transportation networks—methods the aliens who'd engineered the place had used to move shit around. If he'd tapped into one of them, he could be anywhere on Laconia or miles under it. If she could find where he'd accessed it, she'd have the next step. That was all it took: one step after another until the mission was done.

She was moving fast enough to surprise a family of bone-elk digging for food in the soil with their impressive racks of horns. They startled at her sudden appearance, then all bolted in different directions trying to get away. Her suit tracked them all, marking their threat level as low. If she overrode that and changed the threat to high, the gun on her arm would turn the entire herd into paste in seconds.

She chose not to.

At first, she followed the vague signs. A 15 percent match, hardly better than an educated guess, led down a particular animal trail lined by silver-leaved bushes. A 20 percent match went directly up a sheer rock wall, and she discarded it as a false positive. As she crisscrossed the landscape, her mind relaxed into the experience of the search, and time became less concrete. She'd heard about a similar kind of flow with artists when they fell deeply into their work. It was a lovely way to be—alone in her head with the pure focus of the task.

She made steady speed through the narrow band of forest and into the rocky foothills of a mountain. When she reached it, she had a pretty good hunch where she was going. Topographical maps led her through a twisty box canyon and up to the entrance of a cave. It was well hidden from casual view. No wonder no one had found it without a concerted effort. Teresa must have thought she'd found the best hiding spot in the world.

A pair of large rodent-like creatures—black fur and eyes, callused mouths, and ears like seashells—were in the entrance, fighting or mating or some combination of the two. They stopped and hissed at her as she approached, baring brownish hook-needle teeth. She kicked them out of the way. They hit the cave wall with a wet thud, and stopped moving. She considered the little bodies for a moment and ducked into the darkness below the stone.

The tunnels near the entrance were where the enemy spy had lived for years. His stink was still everywhere. The suit also found traces of Teresa and a dozen other Laconians. The extraction team that had killed Timothy or Amos Burton or whoever he'd been, and then the search team that came looking for his corpse and his equipment. The report said he'd been sitting on a backpack nuke the whole time. The prevailing theory was that he was waiting to see if he could extract James Holden before using it. She had a certain respect for that. There was a purity about someone who could casually hold death in his hands, just waiting for the right moment.

The suit thought it had Duarte's scent, but if the high consul had come through here, his trail was either too faint or too muddled up with everyone else's for the suit to track it with certainty. She moved through the cave, trying to recapture the pure state she'd felt in the forest, but something about killing the little not-rats and finding the evidence of the spy's nest had gotten her thinking. The pure and beautiful moment was gone, even if the hunt was still on.

The stone here was pale, flaking, and weak. She could have dug a passage through it with the powered gloves of her suit. It made her more than a little worried about cave-ins, especially after she got past the entry area where the camp had been and the tunnel system turned into a maze. Her suit's inertial tracking meant it could create a 3-D map of everywhere she went in real time, but the mountain was large. If the tunnels carved their way through the whole thing, she could be there for days. If she was right

and Duarte had come here, it was going to be hard getting him out.

The efficient thing would have been to call for a swarm of micro drones and flood the tunnels with them. But Trejo had impressed on her the need for strict operational security, and including a tech team to run the drones felt like an unnecessary risk. Still, if she couldn't put her hands on the man, that could be her plan B.

She wasn't ready to give up, though. Not yet.

The farther into the caves she got, the less natural they seemed. Near the entrance, they had felt like accidents of geology, but here and there strange textures and protrusions began dotting the walls and grew up from the floors in the larger caverns. Black and silver spirals that seemed to carry their own light. Tanaka had spent enough time on Laconian warships built by the strange orbital shipyards to know protomolecule builder tech when she saw it.

This place had definitely been one of their installations, but its purpose was lost to time. The report from the investigation team had marked the location as needing further study, but with the attack on Laconia, everyone seemed to have just forgotten about it. No one's first priority. Unless maybe Duarte's.

She passed through a complex junction—an east-west tunnel above intersecting with a curving north-to-southeastern one below, and the suit alerted. She checked the display. Seventy-five percent match in the upper passage.

"Got you," she said.

Only maybe she didn't. She followed the suit's prompting through the twists and turns of a section of the tunnels, the chemical signal staying between 75 and 60 percent match, and came out into a large room filled with elaborate crystalline growths. They rose from the floor like delicate five-meter-high towers of glass lattice, glowing in soft pastel colors when her suit's lights hit them. In another context, they'd have been breathtakingly lovely. A kind of post-revivification abstract sculpture. She wondered if they were made by alien intelligences or the blind, idiot forces of nature. That she couldn't tell was either beautiful or damning, but either way, beside the point.

The suit was sure the high consul had been in the room. Her first 100 percent hit. Whether he was still in there or not, Duarte had definitely stood

where she was or very close to it. Had seen the crystals with his weirdly altered eyes. Her heart rate increased a little as the realization struck that she might actually be able to find him. The relief at a real prospect of success showed her how carefully she'd been ignoring the possibility of failure.

The trail led her around the base of one of the towers. A pair of doglike constructs were worrying at a shard of crystal lying on the ground next to it. Tanaka could see the gap at the top of the tower where it must have broken off and fallen. In the files, Laconian intelligence called these things repair drones and indicated that they were nonthreatening. Occasionally they'd wander into the fringes of the city and steal broken things, only to later return them repaired, but altered. Researching what they chose to fix and how they went about intuiting original function was one of the projects that the Science Directorate was going to get around to one of these days.

The suit indicated that the high consul's scent was on one of the drones. Tanaka scowled to herself. If Duarte had left his scent on the thing by touching it—if that was the trail she was following—she was screwed. They could have interacted anywhere before the dog came here, and she'd have no idea where Duarte and this thing had met up.

She was about to go searching for another trace of the scent when one of the dogs said *ki-ka-ko*, then picked up the broken crystal shard in its weird puppetlike mouth and wandered off. She followed it.

After a confusing series of twists and turns, they emerged into another chamber, ten times the size of anything she'd seen before in the tunnels. It was like stepping into a cathedral. A fluting sound like wind over the top of empty bottles muttered through the space with no clear origin. Strange, almost organic-looking mechanisms grew up from the floor and towered over her, ten or fifteen stories high. For a moment, she felt something like awe.

In among them were half a dozen pits filled with viscous brown fluid, like sewer water mixed with petroleum oil. The dog walked over and dropped its broken bit of crystal into one of the pools, then waited motionless. The suit warned her that there were eleven other mobiles in the cavern. Each of them another one of the weird dog things. None seemed hostile. As she watched, they brought things into the room and dropped them in the pools. One time, a dog took something resembling a half meter

of water pipe out of the pool and then left with it.

“This your machine shop, puppy?” she asked. “What are you doing here?”

Tanaka raised her arm and fired half a dozen shots into one of the motionless dogs, blowing it apart. She waited. After a few moments, three of the other dogs came over and began gently picking up the pieces of their dead comrade and dumping them into the pools.

“Ah-ha,” Tanaka said to them. “Fixing your friend up, aren’t you? All right. I’ll wait.”

They just looked back at her with their big eyes as though they were embarrassed at her outburst.

One said *ki-ka-ko* but didn’t move.

There were a lot of strange chemicals in the air in the chamber, and the suit took a while sorting through them all, but after a few moments it popped up an alert. Duarte’s scent. It was a significant trace. She had a hard time believing that it was just contact with a repair drone. If he’d passed through that room, had he been hurt or killed and the dogs brought him there? Had he figured out the same thing she just did, and used the sewage pools to fix something? Her hands itched a little bit, and she grinned. She felt the impatience of the chase, like she was a dog straining at its leash at the smell of rabbits. The joy of the hunt.

Slowly, methodically, she moved around the perimeter looking for the strongest match. Tracing Duarte’s movement inside the room was probably pointless, but knowing where he’d come from and what direction he’d left would be enough. The best hit was a tunnel leading off the large cavern and gently sloping up.

She followed it, the chemical scent growing stronger as she moved. Half an hour later she emerged into a large room with an open window to the outside.

The chamber was shaped like a half circle, with a flat wall nearly sixty meters across. The middle twenty meters of the wall were missing, creating a large opening to the outside. Sunlight streamed in. Sky glowed oxygen-blue between the draping strands of vine and branch.

He’d been here. More than that, he’d spent time here. Duarte’s scent marker was everywhere.

“High consul?” she said, the suit amplifying her. “This is Colonel

Tanaka. If you're here, I just want to talk with you, sir."

No one answered.

On either side of the outside opening were spindly cradles growing up from the floor, with fifteen-meter-long egg-shaped objects held in them. The eggs had the same mother-of-pearl gleam she'd seen in the interior of a *Gravitar*-class battleship. Like something made at the alien construction platform. And the high consul's most recent scent track moved up to the empty cradle in the center. She walked slowly around the cradle, but no track led away.

"All right, little buddy," she said to the egg that had been there and was gone, "what the fuck are you?"



"A ship," Dr. Ochida said.

Tanaka leaned back in her chair. She'd taken over an office in the State Building as her base of operations with a staff of ten and high-priority access to everyone of any importance to the empire. The décor was generic politician, but she'd put a print of Ammon Fitzwallace's *Artemis the Hunter* on the wall where she could see it, all vibrant green with shocks of bright and bloody red.

"You're sure?"

"Well, no," Ochida said. "We have a team going to the site now, as you requested. We'll know more once that's complete, but we have seen similar structures elsewhere. Persephone system. Bara Gaon. Swarga Loka. Seven Kings. It's not the most common, but it's certainly not unprecedented. A fair proportion of the artifact tree seems focused on material transport, and especially in the Seven Kings data, we see—"

"Probably a ship."

"That's oversimplifying. We believe they were material transport pods," Ochida said. "But—"

"Did it fly?"

"The location and design seem to indicate yes," Dr. Ochida agreed with

a nod.

“Then how do we track it?”

Ochida leaned forward. His chair creaked under him, and he blinked like an owl. “Track it?”

Tanaka clenched her fist where the scientist couldn’t see it and kept her voice even. “If I wanted to find where the ship went. Is there a drive signature I can search for? Some kind of energy profile?”

Ochida shook his head like she was a little girl who’d asked him for a unicorn. “The native propulsion systems aren’t something we’ve cracked yet. Not for want of trying. But we’ve known since Eros moved that it involves decoupling local inertia from frame inertia. That’s not something that has a drive. It seems more like a controlled gravity where a nonlocal area falls *through* normal space—”

“Okay,” Tanaka said, not punching the grinning scientist in the face only through great effort of will. “No drive plume. Then what can I use to find it?”

“Eros was also invisible to radar, you’ll recall.”

“You’re telling me a lot of things I can’t do. Start telling me what’s on the ‘can’ list.”

Ochida shrugged. “Eros was at least always visually available. If the ship passed through any light telescoping, you might find it that way. Of course, after the attack the planetary defenses are compromised, so...” He pressed his lips together in a universal gesture of impotence.

“All right,” Tanaka said. “Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

“No,” she said. “I mean you’re dismissed.”

Ochida blinked in surprise, but then he left. So that was good.

Tanaka ached. She’d barely begun, and her search area had just expanded from Laconia at or near a transport network to literally anyplace in 1,300 systems and no obvious path to narrow it down. The raw frustration of it was a knot between her shoulder blades. She pulled up a notepad and started thinking her options through. Signal intelligence was obvious. Images of the remaining egg-ships had to be put out to anything with visual telescopes. Stations. Ships. Anything near a ring gate.

The *Voice of the Whirlwind*—the only surviving *Magnetar*—was acting as ersatz planetary defense. It would be the priority. If it had seen the egg-

ship, that would at least give her an idea what direction it was going. It was possible, after all, that Duarte had been going someplace in-system. She didn't know for sure he'd been headed for a gate.

And then... what? Hunting a ship that couldn't be tracked on radar, that didn't leave a drive plume. That ran dark. If she knew what he'd been going after, maybe it would give her a smaller list of possible destinations. She'd need to talk to the valet and Admiral Trejo to see if Duarte had given any hint where he might be heading.

Or... maybe hunting wasn't the right model. Maybe trapping was. Maybe it wasn't a *place* Duarte was heading for. If the high consul was looking for something, that thing could be used as bait.

The records of ongoing operations were highly restricted. Trejo was probably the only one who could access everything, but he'd given her the keys. There were five active groups trying to recover Teresa Duarte. She read over their operating reports, but half of her mind was probing the strategy. Before his resurrection, the only sign Duarte had given that he was still conscious was his slaughter of Paolo Cortázar. That, according to Dr. Okoye, who had been there at the time, had been out of concern for his daughter. Was it such a stretch to think that the girl would be the first person he reached out to now? Wasn't she the best available bait?

It sure as hell seemed like better odds than tracking the missing ship.

The most promising lead was an intelligence counter-op. A distant cousin of Duarte's dead wife ran a boarding school on New Egypt, and there had been some chatter between her and known underground contacts. If Tanaka had the girl, it was the sort of place she'd have found to park her. And the school's new term was starting soon. Hiding a teenage girl in a place with a lot of other teenage girls made sense.

Tanaka pulled up the command structure. The operation was being run through a hunting frigate called the *Sparrowhawk*. Captain Noel Mugabo was in charge.

Or had been, anyway. Until now.

She opened a connection to her aide and didn't wait for him to speak. "Contact the *Sparrowhawk* and let them know I'll be taking over direct operational command of their New Egypt mission. And find me a fast transport. Something with the breathable-fluid crash couches.

"Put me on New Egypt now."

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Chapter Six: Naomi

Amos—or the thing that had been Amos—smiled and waited for the autodoc to finish its run. Naomi, braced at a handhold, watched the values and scans as they spooled out. Red and amber and occasionally green, they were the medical equivalent of a shrug. The machine thought he was a basket full of different kinds of strange. Some was the strange he'd been ever since returning from Laconia. Some was new strange that deviated from previous measures. Whether any of it was significant was anybody's guess. There was no comparison data for an animal like him, no others of his kind apart from the pair that Elvi Okoye had. There was no context.

Naomi felt that way a lot these days.

"I'm feeling fine," he said.

"That's good. You should stay here for a while anyway. In case it happens again."

The pure black eyes shifted. It was hard to tell if he was focusing on her or something else in the room. Without iris or pupil, he could appear all-seeing and blind at the same moment.

"I don't think I'll be getting the wiggles again anytime soon," he said.

"You've been pretty shaken up. Not just this. All of it. Better that we get an idea what's going on with you now so you don't have another seizure while you're doing something dangerous."

"I get that. But it's not going to happen again."

"You can't know that unless we know why it happened."

"Yeah."

They were quiet for a moment. Only the hum of the air recyclers and the muttering of the autodoc. "Do you?"

"Do I what, Boss?"

"Do you know why the seizure happened?"

Amos lifted a wide, grayish hand in a gesture that said *maybe, maybe*

not. The little widening of his smile was exactly the one he'd have used before, but half a second later than he would have used it. "I got a feeling. There's stuff running in the background with the new head. There was a hiccup. Don't think it'll happen again."

She tried to smile back, but it felt forced. "That's not as reassuring as you think."

"You don't think I'm him, do you?"

She noted the pronoun. *Him*. Not *You don't think I'm me*. "I don't even know what that question means."

"It's all right. I get it. I went away like I used to be. I come back with these eyes and this blood. And my brain doing things it didn't use to do. If you weren't at least wondering, that would be weird."

"Are you?"

"Am I?"

"Are you still human?"

His smile could have meant anything. "Not sure I ever was, really. But I know I'm still me."

"That'll do then," she said, and made herself lean over and kiss his wide smooth scalp the way she might have if she hadn't had doubts. If it was true, and he was Amos, then it was the right thing. If it wasn't, and he wasn't, better that whoever he was believe she accepted him. "Still, wait an hour before you get back to work?"

He sighed. "If you say so."

She squeezed his shoulder, and it was solid. Had it felt like that before? Amos had always been strong. He'd spent as much time in the ship gym as Bobbie, and Bobbie had damn near lived there. Naomi couldn't tell if this was a change or just her mind looking for discrepancies. Building them whether they were there or not.

"I'll check on you," she said, because it wasn't a lie, no matter what she meant by it.

The ring space wasn't somewhere to relax. There had been a time when it had been the hub of humanity's great spread to the stars. It had seemed safe then, or relatively so. Anything that found its way to the edge of the sphere defined by the ring gates vanished and was lost, but nothing reached back.

Until it did. And then it had been annihilating. Now most ships moved

through it fast and hot, setting the angle of their transit before they came in and getting out the farther gate as quickly as they could. It was exactly the wrong thing to keep from going dutchman, but it minimized the time spent in the uncanny space.

Other ships passed in and out of the rings, the traffic of more than a thousand systems, all of them relying on trade to one degree or another. All of the ships on their own errands with no particular interest in or awareness of Naomi and her burdens. The *Roci* stayed there, on the float. Every hour courted the danger that reality itself would start boiling again and everything in the ring space would be killed. But before they could go anywhere, they needed a place to go and a plan that was more fleshed out than *Don't die*.

She worked on the ops deck, floating just over her crash couch with her legs folded in the lotus position. The straps shifted around her like kelp in a vast water recycling tank, and the web of the underground spread out on the screen before her. It had been easier when she'd been focused on attacking Laconia. Breaking things was always easier than building them up.

In the aftermath of Laconia's defeat in its home system—on its home planet—the empire had moved to consolidate the power it still had. Trejo was locking down shipyards and supply lines as best he could with the forces that remained to him. Naomi was trying to leverage the influence and organization she'd gathered for the battle into some kind of sustainable self-governing network. The newsfeeds from Sol, Bara Gaon, Auberon, and Svarga Minor chattered about increased Laconian presence. Though why anyone was worried about a backwater like Svarga wasn't entirely clear. The message queue was as long as her arm, it felt like.

"Their objection is the same one we're seeing over and over again," Jillian Houston, the captain of the underground's stolen flagship, said from Naomi's screen. She looked like a child. She was older than Naomi had been when she'd signed on to the *Canterbury* a lifetime ago. "Báifàn system is on the edge of being self-sustaining, but which side of the edge is debatable. They don't like anyone saying when they can and can't trade, and they're absolutely not going to accept constraints that other systems aren't abiding by. And I have to say, I'm sympathetic. We're here to protect people's freedom. I'm not sure what liberty is if you're not permitted to decide what chances you're willing to take."

Naomi turned her head, trying to ease the knot at the base of her skull. She'd watched the report three times now, each time hoping she'd find a graceful and diplomatic response that had eluded her before. It hadn't happened.

Instead, she felt herself growing taut and angry. The tension in her neck, the tightness across her chest pulling her shoulders forward into a hunch, the ache at the corners of her scowl. They were the physical manifestations of an impatience that reached far beyond Jillian's message or her own still-uncomposed response.

She kept coming back to the uncharitable thought that if the underground were just made up of Belters, the problem would have been tractable. Or if not that, at least she'd have been sure a solution existed. Belters were viciously independent, but they also understood what it meant to rely on the community around them. Skipping a seal replacement didn't only risk the life of the slack bastards who'd cheaped out on their work. Failure meant the death of everyone on the crew.

The colony worlds were acting like their safety could exist separate from the well-being of all the other systems and ships. It couldn't be so hard to see how accepting a little restriction and regulation benefited everyone. But inner-worlds culture didn't measure it that way. For them, being better meant being better than the person next to you, not both of you sharing the same increase.

She knew it wasn't fair or even really accurate. Her frustration was leaking out as tribalism and spite. Which was why she hadn't responded yet, even though as the de facto leader of the underground, she had to. What she really wanted to do was put a camera on Jim and have him give one of his heartfelt little sermons about how they were all one people, and that by pulling together, they'd get to the other side of their struggles. It was his genius that he could still believe that, even after everything they'd seen and been through.

But she'd just gotten him back. If she let herself get into the habit of seeing him as a useful tool for her work, it would betray the chance they'd been given. She needed to have the connection between them as something separate, something sacred, that the rest of the universe didn't have claim on.

So maybe there was a thread of selfishness in Belters too.

She started the recording.

“Jillian. Thank you for the report. Please let our friends in Báifàn system know that I hear and understand their concerns, and I absolutely understand their need for safety and equity in how trade is carried out through the rings. The goal has to be minimizing the need for ring transit by building up to sustainability for all the colonies as quickly as possible, and their goal for that is absolutely the same as ours. I’ll include the presentation for why the protocols are the best, safest way forward for all of us, and you can pass that along too. Hopefully, they’ve already seen it.”

But maybe this time they’ll actually pay attention.

Or maybe the builders’ ancient enemy would figure out how to end all human life and none of this would matter. Fatalism had its dark attractions, after all. Hopelessness and despair could almost look restful.

She played back her message, decided that it sounded too pat and rehearsed, and redid it another four times before she gave up and sent it out. The message queue still waiting looked like forever.

She massaged her hands, digging into the aching muscles at the base of her thumbs, while the next message played on her screen. Governor Tuan had thin, terrier-sharp cheeks, frog-wet eyes, gray-black hair, and a tight, officious smile. She wondered whether she would still have thought he was ugly if he’d had a different personality. She’d probably have been more forgiving.

“On behalf of the governing council of Firdaws, I would like to thank you for submitting your proposal. I am very interested in returning to a schedule of reliable and mutually profitable trade.”

“But,” Naomi said to herself as Tuan scowled theatrically on the screen.

“There are, however, some very real concerns about the document as it stands that will require some thoughtful conversation. In that spirit, I would like to propose a summit meeting. While Firdaws is not yet entirely self-sustaining, we do have certain amenities that we will be happy to offer. Our state-of-the-art luxury villas can be set aside for you and your associates for as long as the negotiations take.”

She slid it into a secondary queue. There was only so much explaining to people how cooperation would keep them all from dying she could manage in a single sitting.

The next entry stopped her. It was from Sol. It was from Kit.

The only child of Alex's second marriage was a grown man now, but she'd seen him as a newborn and known his mother, Giselle, as well as any of the *Roci* crew had really gotten to know her. Now here he was, looking into a camera. He looked more like his mother—Giselle's high, sharp cheekbones and regal forehead and brows. When he moved, she could see Alex in him.

"Hey," he said. "So I know it's been a while. And things... I know it's not like we could be in touch more. But I wanted to let you know something."

Naomi's gut tightened, and she braced for a hit. That Kit had come to her had to mean it was something about Alex, or something that would hurt Alex badly enough that Kit wanted to be sure there would be people there to comfort him, even if he decided to keep it to himself.

"Well," Kit said, "there aren't a lot of planetary engineering gigs in Sol system, and the ones there are they have fifteen people applying for every spot. I know that we talked about me keeping a low profile—"

Naomi frowned, trying to remember when she'd said something like that.

"—but we got offered a contract with a geological survey on Nieuwestad. It's a good company. Jacobin-Black Combined Capital. They're doing a lot of industrial construction and microclimate engineering, and I think it could be a really good move for us. But it will make it harder for you to come visit, and I know with Rohi pregnant, you'd want to see your grandson."

Kit grinned like he'd just delivered the punch line to a joke, and Naomi stopped the playback. Relief was like a drug in her veins. She leaned back in her crash couch, the gimbals hissing under her, and called up toward the flight deck.

"Alex! I think I got some of your mail. I'll send it up."

But he was already coming down the lift ladder. "What's up?" he said.

"I got some of your mail. It's in the intelligence packet, but it's yours. From Kit."

His smile was quick and automatic. "Well, play it."

Naomi scrubbed the message back to the start and let it play. Knowing what was coming, she watched his face, and saw the shock and the joy and the tears in Alex's eyes when the news landed. Kit went on for a time,

telling Alex about the dates they were shipping out for Nieuwestad and the due date for the coming child. And some news of no real importance about Giselle and life on Mars. And then the message ended with Kit saying *I love you, Dad* and Alex lowering himself into the crash couch at Naomi's side.

"Well ain't that a kick in the nuts," Alex said through a wide grin. "I'm going to be a granddaddy."

"Yes, you are."

He considered it for a moment, then shook his head. "I was going to say I'm too young to be anyone's grandfather, but I'm not, am I?"

"No," Naomi said. "You aren't. If anything, you ran kind of late."

"Took a while getting it right. God. Kit's a good kid. I hope he's better at keeping a marriage together than I was."

"He isn't you. I'm not saying he won't fuck it all up, but even if he does, it'll be however *he* fucks it up. Not how you did." For a moment she thought of her own son, dead along with his father and the rest of the Free Navy. The memory almost didn't hurt. That wasn't true. It would always hurt, but now it was a low-level ache instead of a knife to the belly. Time had done its healing, or at least let the scars go numb.

The piloting subsystem chimed, and Alex hauled himself up out of the couch. "I guess Giselle's going to be a grandmother." He grinned. "And she's going to hate the shit out of it, isn't she?"

"The title may not fit her self-image," Naomi said.

"You make a good diplomat," Alex said, and headed back for the lift. When she was alone again, she separated Kit's message from the rest of the packet and copied it over to Alex's message queue. She thought about keeping a copy for herself, but it hadn't been meant for her, and she didn't want to presume.

A soft clicking alert, and a new message popped up on her queue. She'd built a system of flags to help her keep track of her cascading responsibilities. This flag was the deep gold color that she'd chosen to mean Home. Issues specific and peculiar to the *Rocinante* and her little family. What remained of her little family.

The message was the one Naomi had been waiting for. Its tracking headers showed the subtle signs and countersigns the underground used to confirm authenticity. The repeaters echoed back to New Egypt, as she'd hoped. Nothing looked amiss. Anything that touched on the daughter of

High Consul Winston Duarte, Naomi treated like it was made from snakes and plutonium.

Once she was certain of the message protocols and origins, she isolated her comm system, offered a silent prayer to the universe, and decrypted the message. It was a single line of text:

ADMISSION APPROVED FOR FALL SEMESTER.

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Chapter Seven: Jim

Why am I only hearing about this now?" Teresa asked.

Jim couldn't tell if the tension was anger, fear, or something else, but it had settled around the girl's shoulders like a shawl. Her eyes were focused someplace just over Jim's right shoulder, fixed and glaring in a way that he knew from his time on Laconia was her way of listening intently.

It was strange to think that of all of them, Jim had spent the most time with Teresa. They'd lived in the State Building for years, her as the child of the high consul, and him as his prisoner. Or maybe both as his prisoner, just in different ways.

"That was me," he said. "I didn't want to float the possibility if it didn't come through."

Her gaze flicked to him with a question.

"I didn't want to disappoint you," he said.

"But it came through. It's here. A possibility."

"It's a boarding school in New Egypt system. Sohag Presbyterian Academy—"

"I'm not interested in a religious education," she said.

"It's not really specifically religious. I mean, there are religious classes and services, but they aren't mandatory."

Teresa took a moment, processing that like she'd taken a bite of food and was deciding whether to spit it out.

"A cousin," she said.

"Elizabeth Finley. She was your mother's cousin, and apparently doesn't think much of your father. It's kind of perfect. She knows who you are, and can take steps to keep you safe, and she's not interested in bowing before Laconia for personal reasons, so we don't have to worry about her deciding to hand you over for a bounty."

"And you've vetted her?"

“The underground did what it could. She seems to check out. There’s not a big presence in New Egypt, Laconian or underground. That’s another part of the appeal.”

Teresa’s gaze floated back over his shoulder as she thought.

Like all the cabins in the *Roci*, Teresa’s had been designed for Martian military back when that had still meant something. Jim was used to the spartan design for himself or the others. Putting an adolescent girl in the same setting made it seem more like a prison. At fifteen, Jim had been a sophomore at North Frenchtown High. The issues he’d struggled with were how to sleep an extra twenty minutes in the mornings, how to cover over his profound disinterest in Mr. Laurent’s chemistry lectures, and whether Deliverance Benavidez would go out with him. Back then, all of Montana had seemed too small. Teresa only had a few square meters.

“What about Muskrat?”

“Finley says it won’t be a problem. There are other students who have pets too. Mostly they’re service animals, but it won’t stand out enough to cause trouble.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I like it here. Amos is teaching me things. And there are fewer variables here. I wouldn’t know the people there. I don’t think I’d trust them.”

“I hear you,” Jim said. “But this is a warship. And we’re at war. And while you did pull us out of the fire, I’m not comfortable using you as a shield.”

“I’m a good shield.”

“Yeah, but I’m done with that play.”

“Why?” she asked. “I know you don’t want to, but it worked. And it’ll keep working, at least sometimes. Why don’t you want something that works to keep you safe?” The sincerity in her voice surprised him.

“Shields take the hit,” Jim said. “Shields get shot. That’s what they’re there for. And someday, someone is going to think that they can disable the *Roci* by putting a round through our drive cone. Or that it’s worth the risk to drop a few rail-gun rounds through us. There’s a calculus here, and yes, you make them less likely to shoot us down. But I don’t want to be the guy you died for. I’m not okay with it.”

She tilted her head like she was hearing a new sound. “You care about this.”

“Yeah. Kind of do.”

If he'd expected an outpouring of emotion from her—gratitude or admiration or just respect for the morality of his position—he'd picked the wrong girl. She considered him like he was an unexpected kind of butterfly. It wasn't quite contempt, but it wasn't not-contempt either. He saw something occur to her and waited until she was ready to say it.

“If I went, and I didn't like it there, could I come back?”

“Probably not,” he said. And then, a moment later, “No.”

The sorrow in her expression was brief, but it was deep. He understood a little better the loss he was asking her to embrace.

“I need to think about this,” she said. “When do you need my answer?”

When Naomi had come to him with the news, she'd asked him to tell Teresa. Not ask permission, not negotiate with. The verb had been *tell*. And yet, here he was. Jim scratched his neck.

“It's weeks until the term starts. I'd like to get you there early enough to have you situated, but if we make it a relatively hard burn...”

“I understand,” she said. “I won't take too long.”

He pulled himself out of the room, skimming down the corridor. He heard the door close behind him. The ship was quiet. Naomi was waiting for him on the flight deck. He was going to have to tell her that a fifteen-year-old girl had maneuvered him into giving her the choice of going to boarding school or... staying on the ship, he guessed. Doing something that wasn't Naomi's plan. It was barely his responsibility, and he still felt like he'd screwed it up.

He passed Alex's cabin and heard the familiar voice drifting through the door. *But it will make it harder for you to come visit, and I know with Rohi pregnant, you'd want to see your grandson.* Alex had been smiling a lot since the message came through, but he knew there was something else there too. Jim wanted to be happy for him, and he thought he was faking it pretty well. He'd slapped Alex on the back and made grandpa jokes that made his old friend grin.

The truth was, Jim was astounded by Kit's optimism. And by *astounded*, he really meant *horrified*. When Alex talked about his grandson, working out whether he'd been born yet, how big he was likely to be, speculating on the names that Kit and his wife might choose, all Jim could see was one more body on the pile when the end came. Another baby who'd stop

breathing when the deep enemy solved its puzzle. Another death.

Maybe that was unfair. There had been any number of end-times before this: black plague, nuclear war, food web collapse, Eros moving. Every generation had its apocalypse. If they made humans stop falling in love and having babies, celebrating and dreaming and living out the time they had, they'd have stopped a long time before.

It was just that this time, it was different. This time, they weren't going to make it. The only other one who knew, who understood, was Amos. And so Amos was the only one he could talk to.

He made his way down toward the reactor and the drive. The smell of silicone lubricant sweetened the air, and Muskrat's soft bark drew him toward the engineering deck. The dog was floating in the air, her tail a circular whirl that left her head shifting in a circle a few centimeters across. Her lips were pulled back in a wide canine smile.

"Still no sausage," Jim said, and the dog barked softly.

"She doesn't actually care about that," Amos said. "She just likes having you around."

Jim steadied the dog with one hand and petted her with the other. "You know, I would have said dog on spaceship was a very bad plan, but I do kind of like having her here. I mean, more when we're under thrust."

Amos rose from a workstation, a small welding torch in one hand and dark goggles to protect his eyes pushed up onto his forehead. A hydraulic valve was clamped at the station with a line of scorch marks along the ceramic where the metal sealant was still cooling. "She does get embarrassed when I have to take her to the vacuum fire hydrant."

"The what?"

"It's the idiom for where dogs piss," Amos said. "I don't make this up. I just follow the network groups."

"Because there's a lot of floating puppies," Jim said to Muskrat. "You're not the only one."

"They cope with atrophy better than us too," Amos said as he stripped off the goggles and fit them into his tool case. "Something about having more legs on the ground, I think."

"Probably. I will miss her when she's gone," Jim said, then nodded at the valve. "Is there a problem with the water feed?"

"Nope. And there isn't going to be. Mineralization was messing with the

seal, and you wait until that's bad enough for a little erosion, you might as well print up a new one, y'know?"

"I at least have it on good authority. That's close enough for me."

Amos snapped the welding torch into its place and pulled a polishing cloth out of his pocket. "We need to get the fuck out of the slow zone. Hanging out here like this is making my scalp crawl."

"Yeah. As soon as Naomi gets through her data, decides for sure where we're going," Jim said. "I'm worried about the kid."

"Yeah. Me too."

"It's easy for me to forget how much she's lost, you know? Her entire experience was curated to the millimeter before she came with us. A few months here—just enough to get comfortable and find her feet—and now another total change. It's a lot. She's fifteen. Can you imagine facing all that at fifteen?"

Amos looked over at him like he'd said something funny. "You stressed over Tiny? She's going to be fine."

"Is she? I mean... What do we even know about this school we're taking her to?"

"We know it gets shot at less than we do."

"Besides that."

Amos put the cloth over his thumb, took a firm grip on the valve, and started rubbing away the scorch marks as he talked. "Tiny's working out who she is. Shit, *what* she is. It's what she was doing on Laconia. It's what she's doing here. When she goes to that school, it's not like the job changes. The question is, does she have more to learn from a boarding school at the ass end of nowhere or getting missiles thrown at her with a bunch of old-fart revolutionaries?"

"I don't think we're really revolutionaries."

"And," Amos went on, raising his voice to keep Jim from changing the subject, "it's not what's really eating you. We both know that."

Before Jim could reply, Alex's voice came over ship-wide. "Hey, everybody. I was hoping... I kind of need to call a little group meeting? In the galley. If you can. Um. Thanks."

Amos squinted at the valve, turning it one way and then the other before giving it a last, satisfied swipe with the cloth. He set it back in its clamp.

"Do you need to put that back in place?"

“Nah,” Amos said. “I got a spare holding the line for now.”

“Then I guess we should go see what’s up with Alex.”

“He wants something, but he needs to apologize for a few minutes before he asks.”

“Well, sure,” Jim said. “I mean, I wonder what he’s going to ask for.”

If there had been gravity, Alex would have been pacing when they came through the galley door. Teresa was already there, floating beside the wall without touching it. Her arms were crossed, her mouth was tight and small, and every now and then she moved her jaw and made some brief expression. If he had to guess, Jim would have said she was deep in conversation with herself and barely paying attention to them. Amos took a place at the table, rooting himself by his mag boots to keep his hands free to steady Muskrat. The dog seemed perfectly at ease, reassured by having so much of its pack together.

Naomi came last and pulled herself a bulb of tea while motioning to Alex that he could start.

“So, yeah,” Alex said. “You all heard about Kit and Rohi, right?”

“You may have mentioned it,” Jim said, teasing him, but gently. Alex grinned.

“So I did the math, and I’m pretty sure that the baby’s already born. Now, I know that we’ve a lot on our plates here. The work we’re doing is really important. And risky. I didn’t sign on to any of this thinking it was like a normal contract. This has never been a normal contract.”

Amos’ sigh was almost inaudible. Alex heard it anyway, and Jim could see the old pilot dropping minutes of talking around the subject.

“Communication is dangerous, for him and for us, but I would really like to... to send my boy a message, you know? Maybe get a picture of my grandson. I don’t know what we have or what the underground needs from us. If we can’t... I just had to ask. You know, if it was something we could, and I just didn’t...”

Jim turned to Naomi and lifted his chin, asking. She took a sip from the bulb.

“It would mean poking our nose through the Sol gate,” she said. “We could get a tightbeam through trusted repeaters from there.”

“Any gate’s just about as far as any other one right now,” Jim said. “I mean, we’d just have to keep pretending we were on the same fake contract

as before. Even if Laconia has forces in the system, there's no better system to get lost in the traffic. Sol's got a few centuries' worth of ships and infrastructure to blend in with. It's not like we'd be trying to go unnoticed in Arcadia or Farhome."

"It would be more risk," Alex said, but he was just trying to tell them that he wouldn't be angry if they said no. Jim, Naomi, and Amos had all shipped with him long enough to know that was true. He wouldn't be angry, but he would be sad. And if they were all going to die anyway, there was no reason to miss the chance.

"I think we should go," he said.

"I was hoping we could drop Teresa off at school and then head for Firdaws," Naomi said.

"The Sol gate's right here," Jim said. "A quick burn. If there aren't any guard ships right at the ring gate, we can flip as soon as we've passed through the gate."

Amos scratched his neck. "We got enough water out of Kronos. We're not hurting for reaction mass. We could probably make up the time by burning a little longer to and from New Egypt. We are still hurting on fuel pellets and recyclers, but a little detour like that won't matter for those."

"Fine," Naomi said. "Sol gate for long enough to contact Kit, then New Egypt. We resupply in Firdaws."

"That work for you, Tiny?" Amos asked.

Teresa snapped back to the room from wherever she'd been. There was a bright sheen of tears over her eyes. Not thick, but present. "Yes. Fine. Yes."

Alex's relief melted him. When he spoke, his voice was reedy and thick. "Thank you. Really. If we hadn't, I'd have lived with it, but... just thank you."

"Family's important," Naomi said, and Jim couldn't tell which of the thousand things she could have meant by it were in her mind.

It took less than an hour to get the *Roci* ready to go, even with Amos swapping and testing the repaired valve. Alex, on the flight deck above them, was singing to himself like a finch at dawn. There wasn't a melody to speak of, just the musical lilting of pleasure and anticipation. Amos, Teresa, and Muskrat were in engineering, and Jim was thinking about all the things the girl might be feeling. Abandonment. Anger. Rejection. He hoped it wasn't like that. Or that at least there were other things—anticipation,

curiosity, hope—to leaven them. He hoped without any reason to hope that it would matter and that Teresa would by some miracle live long enough to work through the complications of her own heart.

As they started the burn for Sol ring at half a g instead of the usual third, Naomi sighed. At first, he thought her mind was on the same things as his.

“Too many fucking ships going through the rings,” she said. “And here we are, not exactly leading by example.”

He looked at the tactical. She was right, of course. Just in the time they’d been at a relative stop so that she could read through the data, ten more ships had passed through gates, burning on one errand or another that someone decided was worth the risk. Or didn’t understand that there was a risk. Or didn’t care.

“You saw there was another event?” Naomi asked. “There was a message from Okoye. It happened in Gedara system.”

“How many does that make?”

“Twenty? Something like that.”

Alex, above them, burst into a little run of melody. Something bright and jazzy, and as full as springtime. It was like listening to a message from a different universe.

“She’ll figure it out,” Naomi said, answering Jim’s silence. “If anyone can, she will.”

As they dove down toward the fluttering interference surface that was the gateway to Sol, a fast transit ship burst through the Laconia gate behind them, flipped, and started a punishing maneuvering burn. Jim watched them, waiting for the tightbeam demanding their surrender. It didn’t come.

“Looks like we skipped out at just the right time,” Naomi said.

“Another near miss,” Jim said. “Don’t know how many more of those we’re going to get.”

They passed through the Sol gate before they could see where the fast transport was headed.

Interlude: The Dreamer

The dreamer dreams, and her dream carries her and hers flowing backward into a time before minds. Like grandmothers telling the stories their grandmothers told about their grandmothers before them, she falls gently and forever into black oceans the size of everything. The other two are and aren't and are again, with her and within her like humming to the memory of songs she never quite forgot. She broadens like a sunbird spreading its wings to catch the warming light, but there is no sun and no light—not yet—and the cold darkness is wide and comforting as a bed.

And she knows things.

Once and gone so far away no one was there to think it, the *it* was like this: Down was the hardness of heat, and up was the hardness of cold, and between those two implacabilities was the universe. The dreamer dreams the currents of flow and force, and her blood is the ocean's blood. Her salt is the ocean's salt. With a hand as wide as continents and softer than her skin, she caresses the burning heat below her and the soothing cool above. Long eons, and nothing is alive until something is. Maybe many things are, but the dream is a middle dream, and she dreams the middle because the path that crooks her swimmingly on begins there, but slowly slowly slow.

The dreamer drifts and the others drift with her, and more now: little bulbs of pastness around her and within, drifting on the same flow that she is and that she *is*. Two touch and become one; one thins itself into two and two and two and two. She watches the languid, lightless stuttering in the blessed cold as the grandmothers whisper that here is the birth of lust. Here, the puppy-wise gambol of making for the joy of making, with nothing to make of but from self more self.

The dreamer forgets, and is the slowness. She reaches over timelessness and invisibilities, thirsty for something richer than water. Thimble feasts rise from below and sate her for decades, and she dreams that she is

dreaming, safe inside the eternal flow. Her hand reaches up to her heel, fingertips stretching ahead to brush her toes. She is a child made of saltwater bubbles, and one of the others says so, *like cells?* but the words are another place and she is voluptuous now, outside all language.

There is no light—not yet—but there is heat far far below, stuttering and buzzing and raging. It boils up the strange taste of stones that draws her and drives her away and becomes her. Above, the cold where nothing flows, the endless curving wall around the universe. And the ripple, now the always-ripple of a flow inside the flow that only some things feel. A handhold in the waters, a something made from nothing that she shimmies wrigglingly along. She presses herself against it, and lusty, she improvises. The little bulbs of pastness complicate and reach, one for another. And for the first time in all of time, she is tired.

Watch watch watch, the grandmothers whisper. *Feel that one that falls, slipping down too far into the heat and riot; that mindless genius. This is important*, they say, and the dreamer draws herself down too and others how many with her sink. The bubble rises, full of thrum and fever and ill, and when it cools, it is butterscotch on the tongue and a billion insects choiring joyful in the summer night. It is a thousand new toys wrapped in gauze and ribbon. It is coffee and candy and the first awkward kiss, the almost-almost-almost shuddering against the skin. And she knows she will go again, that she who is a child of bubbles will send herself away again to be burned and then cherish her blisters. She longs to be made strange by the hotness and the hurt.

This is how it was when we were girls, the grandmothers say, and the dreamer dreams that she understands.

That's enough, someone says. *All right, people. By the numbers and by the book.*

Chapter Eight: Elvi

Fayez, floating at her private desk, scrolled through the notes. Whenever he was confused or skeptical, a little line appeared between his eyebrows. “So does this make any fucking sense to you? Because I’m baffled.”

The notes had the scans of Cara’s brain and body and the ones of the BFE, but the important part for Elvi was the interview and subject report with Cara. It had taken them hours to complete, Elvi asking questions and Cara answering verbally or writing out her reply, and while it was the least objective thing in the report, it was also the thing that excited her most.

“It does. I mean, I think it does,” Elvi said, and paused. “I have some ideas.”

He shut down the window and turned his attention to her. “Maybe you better tell me, then. Because I don’t know what I’m looking at here.”

She gathered her thoughts. Exobiology hadn’t been Elvi’s first field of concentration. Back in the dim and ancient times that were really just a few wild and change-filled decades before, she’d gone to Sejong World College because it had the best medical genetics program that she could afford. When she was being honest with herself, it wasn’t even that she loved medical genetics all that much. When she was fifteen, she’d seen Amalie ud-Daula play a medical geneticist in *Handful of Rain*, and she spent the next year trying to get her hair to look the same. She never really managed. The weird alchemy of adolescent imprinting transformed her unconsidered identification with an entertainment feed actor into an interest in how strands of DNA turned into pathologies.

The idea of a flaw as tiny as a missed base pair translating itself into a slightly different curve on a protein and then into a leaking heart valve or a nonfunctional eye was compelling and creepy in more or less equal degrees. She thought that it was her passion, and she’d followed it with the dedication of a woman who believed she was on the path the universe

wanted for her.

She'd taken a course on non-terrestrial fieldwork because her advisor had pointed out how many more postings there were for newly graduated medical geneticists on Mars and the stations on Jupiter's and Saturn's moons than there were on Earth. Elvi had taken the hint.

Lectures had been held in a small room with yellow, water-stained carpet and a wall screen with a burned-out pixel that made it look like there was a fly on it. Professor Li was three years into his retirement, and only came back to teach the class because he liked it. Maybe his enthusiasm had been infectious, or maybe it had all been the universe's way of putting her in the right place at the right time. Whatever the reason—or lack of reason—Professor Li had done a section about the first explorations for extraterrestrial life in the oceans of Europa, and Elvi's brain had lit up like someone had put euphorics in her breakfast cereal.

To the dismay of her mother and her academic advisor, she changed her focus to the then-purely-hypothetical field of exobiology. Her advisor's exact words had been *From a work perspective, you'd be better off learning to tune pianos.*

And that had been true right up until Eros moved. After, everybody in her program had jobs for life.

She was older now than Professor Li had been when he told her about Europa and those first tentative efforts to show that Earth's tree of life wasn't alone in the universe. She'd seen things she hadn't dreamed of, been places she hadn't known existed when she was a girl, and found herself—thanks to chance and James fucking Holden—at the razor's edge of the most important research projects in human history.

Strange then, how it all cycled back to Professor Li's lecture about Europa. Cold dead Europa, which had turned out to never have had any life in it but opened up the universe to her anyway.

Elvi steadied herself with a handhold. She'd been on the float enough that it came almost naturally now. She still missed being able to pace. "Okay. How much do you know about the slow life model?"

"I am now aware that there is something called a slow life model."

"Right. Basics. Okay. So, there's a range of metabolic rates. You can see that in animals. You have something fast with a high reproduction rate like rats or chickens on one hand, and tortoises with a really long lifespan and a

much slower metabolism on the other. The whole tree of life is on that spectrum. It predicts that you'd see things evolving in very low-energy environments that, y'know, needed very little energy. Low metabolisms, low reproduction. Long lifespan. Slow life."

"Space turtles."

"Ice turtles. Actually, very cold saltwater slugs. Or jellyfish. Probably something pretty near neutral buoyancy. That's not the point. You could in theory have something evolve in an environment with very little available energy, and with a very... let's call it 'leisurely' sense of time. It's what the Tereshkova missions were looking for."

"And that's awesome," Fayez said, blankly.

"Tereshkova One and Two were the first long-term crewed surveys of Europa? They were looking for extraterrestrial life."

"Which they didn't find."

"Some amino acid precursors, but no life."

"So the space turtles weren't from Europa."

A brief flash of annoyance rose in her and faded. They were both tired. They were both in the only ship in an unpopulated solar system with help weeks away at best. And she wasn't explaining herself that well. She swallowed, set her shoulders, and went on.

"They weren't. But maybe they were like what we were looking for. And here's the other thing. The other form of life the Tereshkova missions were looking for was deep vent organisms."

"Those I know. Worms and things that live near volcanic vents. They use the energy from the vent instead of sunlight."

"And they also get a bunch of biologically interesting minerals, but yes."

"Start talking vulcanism, and I know my way around," Fayez said.

"That's what Cara's describing. That biome. Look. She talks about the cold above and the heat below. Like the ice shell of a water moon with a hot core. And free water in between. The part where she says she felt it starting to make more of itself. That's... I don't know. Some kind of reproduction. Mitosis or budding."

"And the thing where she tasted stones," Fayez said. "Minerals and nutrients floating up from below. You're thinking they're both there. These slow life turtles—"

"Jellyfish."

“—and vent organisms too, but lower down.”

“Like what we were looking for on Europa.”

The line on his forehead erased itself. She wanted to keep going, but she knew her husband’s rhythms. He was working something through, and if she talked now, he wouldn’t hear her. The hum of the ship around them and the ticking of the air recycler were the only sounds until he laughed once, like a cough.

“Okay, I know what I was thinking of,” he said. “The part about the thing in the water.”

“The handhold?”

“Yeah, that. It happened after the... fuck... tasting stone? Seriously, I feel like we should have brought a poetry grad student along. This is bullshit as data.”

“You were thinking of something?”

“Right, sorry. If that was some kind of impressionistic, experiential description of iron uptake leading to magnetic navigation. Maybe that’s the handhold in the water?”

“And that thing at the end,” Elvi said. “When something went down into the heat and came back up scarred, but with this... revelatory whatever it was? If that’s the slow life intentionally reaching for a nutrient-rich environment for the first time. Seeking out food instead of just bumping into it. I think Cara is experiencing this organism’s evolutionary history. The diamond—”

“Thank you for not calling it an emerald.”

“—is showing her how they came to exist. Like if we were explaining life to something that had never seen anything like us by pushing down to organic chemistry and building the story up from there so that we’d have a common context.”

Fayez went quiet. The line on his forehead came back. Elvi pushed off the wall, turning to take the edge of her desk in her fingers and pull herself to a stop. He saw her expression and shook his head.

“No, it makes sense. Sort of. I see why that would be the best information-sharing strategy and all that. It’s just. Okay, say the protomolecule engineers have gotten us up to the part of their story where they were like hamsters avoiding the dinosaurs. I don’t mean to be an asshole, but... so what?”

Elvi didn't know exactly what she'd been expecting him to say, but it hadn't been that. "So we know something about what they are. This could be the origin of the species that established a vast galactic presence and overcame a bunch of things we always thought were laws of physics? That's a big deal."

"It is. I hear you. But it's so far back, sweetie. If Cara could ask the diamond maybe the top five ways to keep vast monsters from beyond time and space from killing everyone, that might be a better place to start."

"Only if she can understand the answer."

"And if they knew. Which evidence suggests they didn't. I mean that elaborate gamma-ray burst trap in Tecoma system was just them wiring a shotgun to a doorknob. Even if we know everything about the space jellyfish, is that going to be enough?"

They fell silent. Elvi knew the solid feeling at the center of her gut. It was always there these days. The only thing that changed was how aware of it she was. She anticipated what he would say next—*What are we doing here?*—and her own reply—*The best we can*. But he surprised her.

"It's going to be okay."

She laughed, not because she believed it but because it was obviously untrue. And because he wanted to comfort her, and she wanted to be comforted. He took her arm, drawing her across the open desk, and pulled her beside him. His arms enfolded her, and she let herself curl against him until they were floating together, his head at her shoulder, his thighs under hers, like twins in the same amniotic sac. It wasn't an image she thought other people would find heartwarming, but she did. And when she was alone with Fayez, other people weren't important. His breath smelled like smoky tea.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "Baby, I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"All of it."

"It's not your fault."

She pressed her cheek to his head, felt the scratch of his hair against her cheek. Tears were sheeting across her eyes, making the office swim like she was underwater. "I know. But I don't know how to fix it, and I'm supposed to."

She felt the subtle expansion and collapse of his sigh. "We are hailing an

awful lot of Marys, aren't we?"

"We're making progress. We already know so much more."

"You're right. I'm frustrated. I didn't mean to piss on the project," Fayez said. "If the answer's anywhere, it's here."

She nodded, and hoped that was true, and that the growing sense she felt that there was something important—critical—in her notes that she'd missed was right. And that whatever it was, she could find it in time.

Later, when Fayez had gone to get some sleep, she went through a packet of reports from Ochida. The high-energy physics workgroup had their most recent data ready for review. The latest complex modeling outputs mapped possible connections between the attack on the *Typhoon*, the uptick in virtual particles in Tecoma system, and the initial loss of consciousness after the *Tempest* had destroyed Pallas Station. A surveying company that usually did mining operations around Jupiter was trying to find the weird magic bullet that had been frame-locked to the *Tempest* when it was destroyed. Her own computational biology group was setting up a distributed study that would put subjects in NIRS imaging around the clock in every populated system in hopes of catching good data the next time the enemy flicked consciousness off. And all the reports were being dumped through massive virtual pattern-matching arrays on Earth, Mars, Laconia, and Bara Gaon in hopes that machine intelligence might catch something the humans had overlooked.

It was the broadest, best-funded research effort in the history of the human race. A million people searching through a haystack the size of 1,300 planets and hoping there was a needle in there someplace.

She sometimes wondered if this had been Duarte's plan all along. Push and push until solving the ring entity problem was forced into first position for all humanity. He'd always held that it was a problem they'd have to solve sooner or later, and humans did tend to do their best work when survival was on the line. But whether it had been the high consul's intention or not, humanity had one problem it was trying to solve now. And James fucking Holden had somehow managed to put her in charge of it.

She didn't know whether looking over the vast effort calmed her or keyed her up. Maybe both.

When she reached the end of the packet, she closed down her screen. There were a couple dozen things that she, as head of the Laconian Science

Directorate, needed to authorize or comment on, and she would. But after she'd had some food and maybe a nap. If she could sleep.

She pulled herself through the ship, floating down the corridors. Cara and Xan were in the galley with Harshaan Lee and Quinn de Bodard, and Elvi watched them as she decanted herself a bulb of lentil soup.

"Major," Harshaan Lee said, nodding to her as she floated over.

"Doctor," Elvi said, and took a mouthful of soup. The *Falcon* made good food. The lentils tasted almost fresh—like nutrition and mud and comfort—even though they were probably made from textured fungal proteins.

"We were just talking about *Koenji Wizard*," Quinn said. "It's an entertainment feed out of Samavasarana system."

"I don't know it," Elvi said, and Xan, spinning slowly about his z-axis, launched into a description of the story. It involved a hidden space station built by angels that were also human desires in physical form. And apparently there were a lot of songs, one of which Xan sang. Cara joined in for the chorus. Elvi listened and, to her surprise, felt herself beginning to relax. Xan's enthusiasm and the benign, childlike narcissism that drove him to the center of every conversation were actually a joy. For a few minutes, Elvi was out of her own head. It was easy to forget that he'd been a seven-year-old for over forty years now.

She almost regretted coming back to herself.

"Cara?" she said, nodding toward the other side of the common room. "Could I borrow you for a second?"

The girl who wasn't a girl froze the way that she and Xan did sometimes, suddenly going as still as stone. It only lasted a moment, but it was eerie every time. Then she nodded and pushed gently off in the direction Elvi had indicated. Elvi tossed her empty bulb in the recycler and floated over to meet her. Xan, still with Quinn and Harshaan, blinked anxious black eyes at them, and Elvi waved what she hoped was reassuringly.

"What's on your mind, Doc?" Cara said. Her casual informality left Elvi feeling warm toward the girl every time she heard it. For someone who'd been imprisoned and experimented on for decades by an induced sociopath, Cara had given her trust to Elvi quickly.

"Couple things. I wanted to see how you were feeling. The last dive

was... There were some interesting readings. It looked like you were in a different kind of sync with our big green friend. It was looking more like a nonlocal reaction than something with light delay.”

“Yes,” Cara said, so quickly it was almost interrupting. “I felt like that too.”

“And since we don’t know what this is, I need you to tell me how you feel. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Cara said. “Going in there like this seems... I don’t know. It feels good. It feels *right*.”

Which Elvi knew already. She’d seen the scans and knew what the connection was doing to Cara’s endorphin levels. It was anthropomorphizing to say that the BFE wanted Cara to come back. There was no reason to think it had any will or intentions. But it wanted the girl to come back.

Somewhere deep in her mind, Elvi knew that what came next was a mistake. And that she’d chosen to make it.

“Given that,” she said, “I’d like to consider accelerating the session schedule. If we could take a day or two less between the dives—”

“That would be great,” Cara said. “I don’t think there’s any reason not to. I can handle it.”

Her grin was so genuine—so human—that Elvi couldn’t help grinning back. “All right then. I’ll talk with the team, and we’ll get a new protocol schedule out. Maybe we can try another run as soon as tomorrow?”

Cara gave a little shiver of excitement, and from across the common room, Xan frowned and looked anxious. More than anxious. Melancholy. Elvi took Cara’s hand, squeezing her fingers, and Cara squeezed back. A human gesture of connection, as old as the species.

“It’s going to be all right,” Elvi said, not realizing until she heard herself that she was echoing Fayez. That she hadn’t believed it when he said it.

“I know,” Cara replied.

Chapter Nine: Kit

His father looked out from the screen, eyes red from happy tears. Probably, Alex Kamal had wept over Kit the same way once, but Kit had been a baby then. He didn't remember it, and so seeing it now felt like the revelation of something new.

"I am so proud of what you and Rohi are doing. The life you've put together. It's—it's—it's hard to understand what it means to make a family. To bring a new person into the world. But now that you have, I hope you can see that's the love we had for you. Me and your mother both. It's overwhelming. This is everything I hoped you could find. And I know—I *know*—that you'll be a good father. A better father than I was."

"Oh, fuck, Dad," Kit breathed. "Are we doing this again?"

"The bad things that happened were never about you. About how much I loved you. How much I do love you. I am so full. What you've done, it just leaves me feeling so full. I'm so happy. I'm so happy for you."

The message ended. It was five full minutes long, and Kit wasn't sure he had the stamina right now to listen to it again. It was easy for his father to romanticize Kit's life. Distance and the political dangers of their contact meant Alex could only see a small part of a very large picture.

He checked the time. There wasn't much to say, and most of it wasn't something he'd want to put on Alex's shoulders anyway. If Aunt Bobbie had still been alive, maybe he'd have turned to her. She'd had a way of seeing to the heart of a thing. Compassion without sentimentality. His father was carrying too much baggage for that, and Kit still couldn't help protecting him.

He started the recording.

"Hey," he said into the camera. "I want you to know that I really appreciate you coming close enough to swap these messages close to real time. More often than not, I send you something and I just have to hope you

even got it... Shit.”

He stopped the recording, deleted it. He didn’t want this to devolve into another round of Alex whipping himself for not being more present in Kit’s adolescence. The issue carried more guilt for his father than any resentment from Kit. It was just that he had too much right now to add on the burden of one more person’s emotional well-being.

But he had to say something.

The door chime saved him for the moment. He dropped his comms and told the door to unlock. His mother breezed into the apartment the way she always did. She was a stately, strong-jawed woman who wielded the nobility of her features like a club. Kit loved her and he always would, but he liked her more when she was on a screen.

“Where’s my baby?” she said with a grin. She didn’t mean him.

“Rohi’s changing his diaper,” Kit said, gesturing toward the back room with his chin. “She’ll be out in a minute.”

“Rokia!” Giselle said. “Grandma’s come to help.”

Rohi hated it when people not from her birth family used her full name. From the day his mother had found that out, she’d never called her anything else. Kit understood that she meant it as a statement of love and acceptance. He also understood it was a power play. The apparent contradiction of being both things at once made sense to him in a way it didn’t to Rohi, but he’d been raised with it. The dysfunctions and idiosyncrasies of childhood became the self-evident norms of adulthood.

He listened to their voices—Giselle’s and Rohi’s and the gabble and fuss that was Bakari. He couldn’t make out the words, but he knew the tones. Mother’s imperiousness compensating for her insecurity. Rohi’s polite kindness that masked her annoyance. And the baby’s vocalizations, still too new to mean anything to Kit but his own joy and exhaustion.

A minute later, the three of them came out together: his mother, his wife, and his son. Giselle already had Bakari on her hip. Rohi’s smile was strained but patient.

“Grandma’s here,” his mother said. “I am in control. You two lovelies go off and enjoy your date night while I play with my perfect baby boy.”

“We’ll be back after dinner,” Kit said.

“Don’t hurry,” Giselle said with an airy wave. Rohi’s eye roll was so small it was almost subliminal. Kit bowed to his mother, kissed his

confused son on the top of his head where the bones hadn't yet fused, and then he and Rohi walked out to the public corridor and closed the door behind them. The last thing he heard was Bakari starting to wail as he realized they were leaving.

"Date night?" Rohi asked as they walked down toward the local hub.

"It was easier than 'Rohi and I need to have an uninterrupted conversation,'" Kit said. "It would have been half an hour of her telling me why divorce is bad. This way, there was no lecture."

He had hoped she would laugh, but her nod was sharp, short, and businesslike. She didn't take his arm, and her gaze stayed locked on the walkway before them. The common corridor was bright, and the plants on the median shifted their broad leaves in the breeze of the recyclers. They'd taken positions at Aterpol on Mars with the understanding that it was both a center of research, second in the Sol system only to Earth, and a more congenial place for pregnancy than any of the deeper stations except maybe Ganymede. Giselle had been delighted, and Rohi had too, at first.

They came to the noodle bar that had been their habitual off-shift hangout. A young man with an untreated acne problem and a dombra sat on a little dais, plucking a gentle melody and being ignored by the people eating at the tables. Kit sat, Rohi sat across from him, and they ignored the music too.

"Do you want to order first?" Kit said, careful to keep his voice neutral.

"Yes," Rohi said. It didn't take more than a moment to key their preferences into the table and have the system confirm them. They sat in silence for the three minutes before old Jandol came out with their bowls—lemongrass and egg roll for him, com chiên cá for her. That she'd ordered one of her comfort foods meant something to him. Jandol nodded to them both, missing the tension or else ignoring it, and went back to the kitchen. Rohi leaned in over her bowl.

"Well," Kit said. "What's on your mind?"

"Hear me out, all right?"

He nodded her on.

"I think we should look at postponing the contract again."

"Rohi—"

"No, hear me out." She waited until she was sure he'd be quiet. "I know Mars is only a third of a g, but it's a consistent third. Always-on gravity is

really important in the first few months of development. His inner ear is still forming. His bone growth is starting. He'll be going through a lot of fundamental changes in the next year, and even if we're on one of the fast ships, we'll still be on the float for months. I don't want him to grow up with any of the low-gravity syndromes. I don't want to start his life by changing his body in ways that give him fewer options later on. Not if I don't have to."

"I hear what you're saying."

"I've looked at the schedule. There's three other parts of the team who could take our berth on the *Preiss*. We'd still be in the date range if we switched to going out on the *Nag Hammadi*."

"Assuming we got on it," Kit said.

"I'm not saying don't *ever* do it," Rohi said. "I'm not saying *cancel* the contract. That's not what I *meant*."

A fat, slow tear drifted down her cheek, and she wiped it away like it had betrayed her.

Kit took a deep breath, and let it out. When he spoke, he spoke carefully. "You're crying."

"Yeah. Well, I'm scared."

"What are you scared of?"

She looked at him, incredulous. Like the answer was obvious. It was, but he thought it was important for her to say it out loud anyway.

"I'm suggesting that you compromise your career," she said. That she'd said *your* career, not *our* careers, was everything. Kit thought he'd understood the dynamic between them, and now he knew he was right. The corners of her mouth tugged down, and he could see for a moment what she'd looked like as a child, long before he met her.

"Okay," he said. "My turn?"

She nodded.

"Here's the first thing," he said. "I'm not my father. And I'm not your mothers. I'm not going to make the decisions they made. You and Bakari are my first choice, every time. I'm not going to leave, even if it means cutting off a career path."

"I just—"

He took her hand. "Hear me out?"

She nodded. The next tear, she ignored.

“I know this isn’t the perfect time,” he said. “But there’s never going to be a perfect time. There will always be something. Bakari’s development or my mother’s health or a conference we won’t be able to come back for or something. There’s always something.”

“Until Laconia decides to start another war to prove a point. Or the aliens kill us all.”

“I can’t control any of that,” Kit said. “All I can do is keep acting like the universe is going to keep existing and planning for a future in it. Nieuwestad is one-point-two g. It’s going to be hard on him, and us too. Jacobin-Black Combined Capital is a good company doing the kind of work we want to do, but that doesn’t mean we have to do it. We can break the contract and find something else. Or we can go and do the best we can. If we go, there are a lot of good programs for helping kids and babies with gravity transitions. And I’ll get up to go to the gym with you every day if you want. If we stay here, there are other jobs. We can do anything. But we’re going to be doing it together.”

Rohi’s eyes were red now, and she wiped the tears away with her napkin. “This is stupid.”

Kit took her hand. “You get scared when we talk about balancing the family and work, and it’s okay that you do. I get it, and I love you, and a good cry is just part of the way we talk about this stuff. And you never judge me when it’s my turn to be the weepy one.”

“I just don’t want to mess things up,” she said. “What if we mess things up for him?”

Kit stroked her knuckles with his thumb the way he did when she couldn’t sleep. “We will, though. No one’s perfect. Everyone’s carrying something that their parents would have done differently if they’d known. Or if they’d been better people. Or if things had just been different. That’s all right. It’s normal. Part of why I am what I am is all the bad choices my mom and dad made, and if they’d done differently, they’d still have made some mistakes somewhere along the line, and those would be part of me instead. They weren’t perfect, and we aren’t perfect.”

“He is, though,” Rohi said. “Bakari is.”

“He is, isn’t he?”

They were quiet for a little while. Jandol came out and offered to take their leftovers away. When Kit shook his head, the old man shrugged and

puttered back to the kitchen.

Eventually, Rohi hauled in a breath, and when she sighed, she folded forward. When she spoke, her voice had lost its tightness. “All right. Thank you.”

“Don’t say ‘I’m sorry.’”

“I didn’t.”

“You were about to.”

She smiled, and he could see the storm had passed. “I was about to.”

He sucked up a mouthful of noodles and chewed. The lemongrass tasted real, and the noodles were soft and salty. If they’d gone a little cold, he didn’t care. Rohi sighed and relaxed into her chair.

After dinner, they walked home slowly. She took his hand, and he leaned against her. For a while, it was almost like they were courting again, only deeper. Richer. Fuller. This was the life that both of their parental groups had given up, and Kit didn’t understand any of them at all.

At the rooms, Giselle was sitting on the couch, spooling through entertainment newsfeeds on her handheld. As they came in, she lifted a finger to her lips and pointed toward the nursery.

“He fell asleep ten minutes ago,” she said. “Ate well. Shat out his bodyweight. Giggled, played, cried for fifteen seconds, and out.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Kit said, and Giselle stood up and wrapped him in her arms.

“It’s not for you,” she said, quietly enough that only he could hear. “I’m soaking in all the grandbaby I can while I have him. Storing up for winter.”

After she left, Rohi went to her office, walking softly to keep from waking the baby, and he sat at his own desk and pulled up his message queue.

He started the camera.

“Hey, Dad. I love you too. Thank you for coming close enough to send the message. I know how hard that can be. And I love you for it. Having a kid is the scariest thing I’ve ever done, and I love it. I love having a kid. I love being a dad.

“I know you and Mom didn’t have things go the way you’d have picked. But no matter what happened, I always knew you cared about me. I learned that from you. If that’s the only thing I manage to pass on, it’ll be worth it. It’s a great legacy. Seriously the best.”

He tried to think of something more, but exhaustion was seeping in at the corners of his brain, and he didn't really know what else there was to say. He reviewed it, sent it, scrubbed his system the way he always did when he'd gotten something from the underground's network, then showered and got ready for bed.

Rohi wasn't there. He found her standing over the crib, looking down at the new little life they'd made together. Bakari's soft, round belly rose and fell as he slept. Kit stood there with her and with him.

"He's a strong little guy, isn't he?" Rohi said.

"He is. And his parents love him."

"Okay, then. Let's go."

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Chapter Ten: Fayez

Planetary geology wasn't the sort of degree people usually went into looking for a career as a kingmaker. There wasn't a lot of crossover between freshman analysis of sedimentary patterns and having people vie for your influence over issues of life and death. Add in political sway over a galaxy-spanning empire, and the overlap was pretty narrow.

But without intending to, Fayez had stumbled into it.

He was floating in Lee's private cabin with a bone-colored bulb of whiskey in one hand. It was a thick, peaty distillation that was too harsh for him when they were under thrust. A couple weeks on the float did something to deaden his taste buds, and so at times like this, it was perfect. Lee, Elvi's second-in-command, was queuing up a message from home. Or, at least, from Laconia. Which despite having lived there for years, Fayez still didn't think of as home.

"Here," Lee said, pushing back from his station.

"Okay, who am I looking at?" Fayez said.

"His name is Galwan ud-Din," Lee said. "He's a senior researcher in extrapolative physics."

"Right. So I'm not going to understand this at all, am I?"

"I told him to give you the educated layman's version."

The screen flipped to an image of a thin-faced man with a vast and well-trimmed beard and a collarless formal shirt. He nodded to the camera in not-quite-a-bow. "Thank you for your time, Dr. Sarkis. I want you to know how much I appreciate it."

Since it was a recording, Fayez sighed.

"I wanted to share with you some thoughts my workgroup has put together. I think you will find them very promising," the thin-faced man said, then visibly gathered himself. His expression settled into the thing Fayez expected on grade-school teachers who were trying to be

approachable. “Light, as I’m sure you know, is a membrane phenomenon on the surface of time.”

Fayez drained the bulb of the last drop of whiskey and put his hand out for another. Lee had it ready.

For half an hour, ud-Din made what in the end was a surprisingly comprehensible case that Elvi’s slow-life jellyfish had ended their evolutionary arc as a complex, vastly distributed brain-like structure that relied on the counterintuitive truth that time dilation put photons in a state of instantaneous emission from a distant star and absorption by an observing eye even if they seemed to outside observers like Fayez to travel for years in between. The rate-limiting step on a system like that would always be mass, and so technologies for moving mass—inertia manipulation, “shortcut” ring gates—would be prioritized, which evidence suggested they had been.

By the end of the presentation, Fayez felt almost as excited as ud-Din seemed to be, and he hadn’t even finished his second whiskey.

“You see, I hope,” ud-Din said, “why I am so hopeful for this path of research. Which is why I need to ask your help. The new orders from the Science Directorate putting us at the beck and call of Colonel Tanaka... I don’t dispute that the high consul has the absolute right to direct our efforts as needed, but you have his ear. If you could encourage him to refrain from interrupting our research unless it is critical to the empire. I... I only say it because I feel we are on the verge of a breakthrough, and I would hate for the high consul to make his decisions about our workgroup without a full understanding of our situation. Thank you. Thank you for your time.”

Ud-Din licked his lips anxiously and the message ended. *How charming to pretend there’s still a high consul running this bumblefuck*, Fayez thought, but didn’t say aloud. Some things were too dangerous, even for a kingmaker.

“I have half a dozen like this,” Lee said. “Workgroup and research leads who got the message to do whatever Tanaka asks. Several of them, she has already retasked.”

“They know we can’t do shit about it, right? Because we literally can’t do shit about that. You got the brief about what Tanaka’s doing?”

“I did,” Lee said, and then pointedly didn’t expand on it. “We have a great many absolute top priorities. We can’t do them all.”

“I get that,” Fayez said. “But Elvi’s not the one setting them. She’s been very open about letting expertise place the goalposts.”

“But she is the adoréd saint to Duarte’s Holy Ghost,” Lee said. “People want her to intercede for them.”

“And so they ask you to ask me to ask her,” Fayez said. “No, one more. So that she’ll ask him. Or, functionally, Trejo.”

“Yes.”

“The way we do things, it’s amazing humans ever figured out shoes. I’ll talk to her, but you know how she is right now.”

“I do. Thank you, Dr. Sarkis.”

“Keep plying me with drink, and you’ll wind up turning my head, Dr. Lee.”

Lee’s thin smile was as close to emotional intimacy as the man got. Fayez liked him.

The halls of the *Falcon* hummed and glowed. He navigated his way through them from handhold to Laconian-blue handhold. Some of the younger members of the crew launched themselves like Belters, zipping from intersection to intersection without touching a wall in between. He wasn’t that guy. Getting where he was going with all his cartilage intact had become a more interesting prospect in the last couple decades.

The thing about expertise was that it wasn’t actually transferable. Winston Duarte had cut his teeth in the MCRN’s logistics department, where he had apparently been an underappreciated genius. It was easy to see how his brilliance there had helped build his breakaway empire. He’d pulled it off, and by grabbing up samples of the protomolecule and the experts who could use it, he’d tamed enough of the alien technology to put all humanity under his heel. For a while, anyway.

Being good at something—even the best that humanity’s billions could offer—didn’t make him good at everything. It just made him too powerful to say no to. And so when he decided to make himself into an immortal god-king, not for his own benefit, but to selflessly provide the human race with the continuing stable leadership that it needed in order to storm heaven and kill God, he’d already talked himself and everyone around him into thinking he was as impressive as the story about him claimed.

Only a few people officially knew how badly that plan had gone. Elvi was one. Fayez was another.

He heard Elvi and Cara talking as soon as he came into the corridor for her lab. The door to Elvi's office was open, and Cara was floating in the open space between the workbench and the medical scanners. The young woman's—girl's—face was bright with excitement, and she gestured as she spoke, as if she needed to stuff more meaning into the words than mere syllables could hold. Elvi was strapped into her crash couch, taking notes as they spoke. Except for the part where they didn't look even vaguely genetically related, they reminded Fayeze of a grandmother and granddaughter bonding through solving some great puzzle. Even before he could make out what they were saying, the tones of their voices told the story. Giddy and enthusiastic was the good spin. Fevered and manic also fit.

"Then there was this sense of... of light?" Cara said. "Like we were eating eyes and it made me able to see."

"That actually fits," Elvi said.

"It does?" Fayeze said. "What does it fit into? Because I just learned a lot about light, and it was really weird."

Elvi's smile wasn't annoyed at all, and Cara's was only a little. "I think our sea slugs hit a milestone," Elvi said. "They already had a method of exchanging information through direct physical transfer, like bacteria trading plasmids. If we're getting this right, they formed a mutualistic relationship or successful parasitism with a little goo cap that could go down to the volcanic vents and come back up."

"Ooh. Dirty," Fayeze said, pulling himself fully into the room. With all three of them, it was a little tighter than comfort, but Cara grabbed the wall and made space for him. "How did the eyeballs come into it?"

"They harvested evolutionary innovations from the faster ecosystem. Something down by the vent figured out a rudimentary infrared eye so that it could navigate the vent. The slugs got it, put it on the signaling protein mechanism, and all of a sudden they didn't need to stick plasmids into each other to share information anymore. They could do infrared semaphore."

"No, it was light," Cara said.

"Maybe bioluminescence," Elvi agreed. "At that point, the very slow things started being able to talk very very fast. And they start looking a lot less like jellyfish and a lot more like free-floating neurons. Plus we already see the deep strategy of sending out semi-biological runners to inhospitable biomes and implanting instruction sets into whatever life they find there."

Which—I'm stretching here—starts sounding a lot like the protomolecule's mission on Phoebe..." Her voice trailed off. Her smile shifted to something more rueful. "But that's not what you came to talk about, is it?"

"There's a briefing you should totally listen to, but no," Fayez said. "I needed to talk about something else."

"Cara? Could we take a quick break?"

The black eyes were still for a fraction of a second, then flickered up to Fayez and away. "Sure. No problem."

Cara pushed herself to the doorway and out into the corridor, closing the office door behind her as she went. Fayez drifted to the medical scanners. Cara's readouts were still on the screens. He traced the curve of her stress metabolites. He wouldn't have known what they were, except Elvi had explained them.

"They're not as high as they look," she said, a little defensively. "We don't even really know what the upper boundary is for someone who's been modified like her."

"I didn't know you were doing another dive today," Fayez said.

"She felt up to it. That's not what you came for either, is it?"

He shut down the screens, rotated back to face Elvi, and braced on a foothold. "The Tanaka thing is a problem."

She had looked tired before he said it. She looked worse now. "What are we seeing?"

"She's reallocated and retasked four workgroups. Instead of doing deep background scanning, they're searching for an artifact that may or may not have left from Laconia and doing deep brain scans of Trejo looking for... I don't know what."

"Traces of manipulation," Elvi said. "Something that would show evidence that he'd had a direct neural link like the one James Holden and the remnants of Miller did on Ilus."

"So you know about this?"

Elvi made a vague, helpless gesture. "She outranks me."

"But you're the administrator of the Science Directorate."

"And that used to matter," Elvi said. "Not anymore. Right now, her orders might as well say, 'from the desk of God.'"

"These scientists want you to protect them from the bureaucracy."

"What they want is for me to talk Duarte into overriding Trejo and

getting her clearance pulled,” Elvi said. “There’s a problem with that plan.”

“That Duarte doesn’t exist?”

“That Tanaka will need to find him before I can ask him any favors, yes.”

Fayez was quiet for a moment. He didn’t want to go to the next place, but he had to. “Do you think that’s really what’s going on?”

Elvi’s sigh meant she’d had the same thoughts and suspicions. “You mean do I think Tanaka’s really searching for a version of Duarte that came out of his coma and disappeared?”

“Or is Trejo feeding us a story and seeing if it leaks out to the underground? This could all be a test. Duarte could be back at the State Building right now contemplating his oatmeal. We wouldn’t know until Dr. Lee gets a quiet order to put a bullet in the backs of our heads. We’re high in the food chain, but Trejo’s still an authoritarian despot, and there’s a lot of precedent for shit like that.”

“I can’t care about it,” Elvi said. “I can’t play the game. I don’t have the focus or the energy.”

“You can stop feeding our results to Jim and Nagata.”

Elvi nodded, but not in the way that meant she agreed.

Fayez pressed his fingertips into his closed eyelids. “Babe,” he said, but she stopped him.

“It’s happening more than we thought.”

“What? What’s happening?”

“The incidents. Like Gedara. We’ve only been seeing the near misses. We always catch the ones that turn off consciousness, but I had Ochida run through pattern matching for other anomalies like Gedara’s lightspeed thing? They’re happening all the time.”

“What do you mean, all the time?” Fayez said, but his gut had gone suddenly cold.

“Changes in virtual particle annihilations in Pátria, Felicité, and Kunlun systems. Lightspeed variations in Sumner and Farhome. Electron mass changed in Haza system for almost two minutes. *Electron mass*. Sanctuary system had gravity increase by a tenth of a percent throughout the system for six seconds.”

“Okay, every single thing you just said fucks me up.”

“This was one twenty-four-hour period. The things that are doing this

are rattling all the windows looking for the way to make us die, and I don't know how we guard our physical fucking constants against attack. It's just a matter of time before they figure out how to trigger vacuum decay or something. So I'm going to keep doing exactly everything I can, and yes, that means sharing data. Because if that's how we catch a break on this, it will be worth it. And if poor Dr. Lee needs to assassinate me because of it, at least it won't be my problem anymore."

"Okay. I get it."

"Trejo's fighting to hold on to an empire. I'm fighting to have something that's recognizable as the universe with living things in it."

"I get it," he said again, but now that she'd started, she couldn't stop. Not until the pressure was vented.

"If there's a chance—one chance in a billion—for me to figure this out, I'm taking it. If there's a price that I have to pay, that's fine. Not even going to think about that. Just opening my wallet, and whatever the universe needs to take from me, it's welcome to. That's what we're playing for. So yes, I really, really hope that Duarte snapped out of his fugue state and ran off to do whatever the fuck half-protomolecule former emperors do in their retirement, because that would mean Trejo wasn't playing court intrigue games with me while I'm at work. But who knows? I don't."

She went quiet, still shaking her head in a tight, angry motion. Fayez steadied himself on the handhold.

"How do I help?"

"Just keep doing what you're doing. Help me keep doing what I'm doing. Hope that we catch a break in time."

"All right," he said. "Can do."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"I do not accept your apology. You're right. I get it."

She took his hand. She felt cold. Her skin was dry. She'd grown thin enough that he could feel the individual tendons shifting over her bones. "I'm so sorry I pulled you into this."

"It's hellish, that's true. But the company's good."

"No one I'd rather face the end of everything with than you."

"It's because I have a cute ass, isn't it? That's my secret power."

She managed a smile. "You got me."

"I can crack a walnut with these cheeks," Fayez said. "I mean, you

wouldn't want to eat it afterward, but—”

“I love you,” she said. “Stop cheering me up. Send Cara back. I need to get some work done.”

He found Cara in her quarters with Xan. They were floating together in the space between their bunks, with Xan chattering excitedly about something from his entertainment feeds. Cara's face was the polite boredom of older siblings throughout history. It was weirdly reassuring to see something normal, given their context. When Fayeze cleared his throat, the pleasure on the girl's face was as clear as the disappointment on her brother's.

“Is Dr. Okoye ready?” Cara asked, and there was a hunger in the question that left Fayeze a little uncomfortable. He swallowed it.

“She is. Sorry I interrupted. Just had some stuff I needed to talk with her about.”

“It's okay,” Cara said. “But I should go.”

Fayeze pulled himself aside and let the girl haul herself out. As she floated down the corridor, he had one of those moments he had sometimes where his sense of balance tried to wake up. For just a moment, Cara wasn't floating away to the side, but falling headfirst down the hallway. He grabbed the handhold to steady himself, and after a few breaths, the feeling passed.

“Is something wrong?” Xan asked.

“No. I just... I'm never going to get used to living on the float. Spent my formative years down a gravity well, and some things are baked in.”

“I've heard that,” Xan said, then turned and touched the ceiling to press himself down toward the floor. It was hard to read his expression. The kid had been a little boy for several decades now, and between his child-stuck brain and the depth of his experience, he wasn't really one thing or the other. His sister was like that too. It was impossible to see them as children, and it was impossible not to. Xan's mag boots locked onto the deck, and he turned almost like he was walking in gravity.

“What about you?” Fayeze said. “All well in your world?”

“I'm worried about Cara,” he said without hesitating. “She keeps coming back different.”

“Yeah? Different how?”

“Changed,” Xan said. “The thing that's teaching her? It's making her

too.”

The chill that ran through Fayeze had nothing to do with temperature. He kept his tone light and jovial. “What’s it making her into, do you think?”

Xan shook his head. An *I don’t know* motion. “We’ll find out,” he said.

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Chapter Eleven: Teresa

At fifteen years since the first permanent settlements, New Egypt was a younger colony system. It had two planets with large habitable areas. The school where she was going to live, like most of the other established settlements, was on the smaller of them, the fourth planet out from the sun. The planet—called Abbassia—had a little under three-quarters g and a thirty-hour day. For reasons that hadn't been investigated in depth yet, the magnetosphere was very strong, which was important given the very active and frequent solar flares. Even near the equator, the auroras were supposed to be magnificent.

The total population of the two planets together was less than the Laconian capital, and it was spread across half a dozen small cities and a score of mineral extraction sites. Only a third of Abbassia was covered by ocean, and most of the land surface was arid, though with extensive cloud forest analogs at upper elevations in both the northern and southern hemispheres.

Sohag Presbyterian Academy was nestled in a river valley in the south, a few hundred kilometers from Nouvelle École, with which it cooperated academically. Sohag Presbyterian's grounds were a little under a thousand hectares of terraformed soil and agricultural cultivates. The buildings had been designed by Alvaro Pió shortly before his death, and they were listed in the top thousand most significant architectural sites in the new worlds.

Teresa had looked at pictures of the campus filled with smiling young people her age and a little older. She tried to imagine herself among them. Tried to imagine who she would be if she were in those images. *This is going to be my home now. Unless something goes wrong.*

And it seemed like something might be going wrong.

The whole crew was gathered at a screen on the ops deck that showed the tactical display of the New Egypt system. Their focus—and so Teresa's

focus too—was the ship that had just passed through the ring gate 6 AU behind them and was burning hard for Abbassia.

“I don’t have it on any of the transit schedules from the underground,” Naomi said. “But that’s exactly the problem. There isn’t a single coordinated set of flight plans, and even if there were, people are smuggling all the time now.”

“Nothing on the drive signature?” Jim asked.

“Doesn’t match anything in the records,” Alex said. “But that doesn’t mean much either. Could be something that was built or had the drive swapped out at a shipyard in Bara Gaon or Auberon. There’s more and more decent yards in other systems too. It’s not like it was back when everything was just Sol system.”

“I know,” Jim said.

Alex increased the size of the image, but the ship was still too small to make out—a black dot against the brightness of its drive plume. A few dozen meters of ceramic and carbon-silicate lace as seen from almost nine hundred million kilometers. It was a miracle they could make out as much as they could. “Chances are decent that its coming through now is just coincidence.”

“Yeah,” Jim said in a voice that meant he disagreed. Amos crossed his thick arms over his chest and smiled. He wasn’t smiling about anything. Teresa still thought of him as Timothy sometimes. Timothy always smiled, even when he’d been hiding in a cave. Jim hauled in a wide sigh and let it out again. “But if it is a Laconian ship—”

“It still probably wouldn’t be tracking us,” Naomi said. “We’ve kept radio silence. We’re not even passing data with the local repeater network. They’d have to know we were coming here.”

“Probably it’s what it looks like,” Amos said. “Freighter hauling freight. Or a pirate. Pirates are good too.”

“It’s not the chances that bother me,” Jim said. “It’s the stakes. I don’t want them tracking us down to the surface.”

“I can make landfall when the site’s on the far side of the planet,” Alex said. “Zip in, drop Teresa and the pup off, and get back up above atmosphere before they’d see us taking off. Even if they’re watching, they won’t know where we went. Might not even know we landed at all.”

Teresa listened with a sensation growing in her belly. It was like a

tightness. Or a stone. It had a taste too. She unbuckled herself from the crash couch and pulled herself down the lift. She wasn't sure where she was going, but the crew of the *Rocinante* talking through the details of how they were going to drop her off made staying in place unbearable.

She passed by the galley to the crew quarters, including her own. She heard Muskrat bark an inquiry as she passed, but she didn't answer, just kept going down. The machine shop was as close to a safe and comfortable place as she had anymore. She had a list of tasks from Amos and she pulled it up. It was time to check the water supply's chemical sensors. She'd never done it before, but the instructions were linked to the entry. She read them, gathered up the tools, and made her way to the tank feeds. Her jaw ached. She made herself stop clenching her teeth.

Travel between systems was slow. The *Rocinante* didn't have any of the breathable-fluid crash couches that would let bodies sustain long, very high-g burns. The duties that Amos assigned her to keep her engaged filled the gap that Ilich and other tutors had left, and she clung to them now not because she particularly enjoyed them, but because they were familiar. And because it felt like laying claim to something.

She was about halfway done with a bubble of escaped water the size of her fist adhering to her arm when Amos pulled himself in beside her. He didn't say anything, just took a little hand vacuum and cleaned the spilled water off her wrist. He handed her tools when she needed them and stowed them for her when she didn't. It went faster with him there. In the end, she found that two sensors out of sixty were showing periodic faults. Low-voltage shorts. Harmless. And they could be down half the sensors and not really have to worry about water quality. She tagged both of them for replacement anyway. Amos' philosophy was to replace things before you needed to, not after. She found it a sensible rule.

"So," he said, "this was back on Earth when I was younger than you are now. There was this guy I knew. His parents both OD'd the same night. Upside, he was a registered birth, so someone gave a shit. Downside, he got put into the foster system. It fucked him up pretty good."

"Abusive foster caregivers are a common issue in aggressively individualist social orders. I had a unit about civil service reform two years ago. We studied it."

"True, but that wasn't the only thing got him. He was one of those

people that tried to put down roots, you know? Wherever he was, he'd find things and hold on to them. Put him in a new city for a week, and he'd already have a favorite park. That kind of shit. Only it was fostering, so every few months he'd lose it all again."

"Is this an uplifting story about how he found his real home inside himself?"

Amos went still for a moment the way he did, then looked chagrined. "Actually, he got addicted to a bunch of home-brewed narcotics and slow-melted his nervous system. So, nah, not really. I was trying to say that you're not the only one who has a hard time letting go. Moving on to the next thing. I don't know. Thought it might help to hear that."

"What about you?"

"I'm good wherever I am," he said. "But getting to that point was unpleasant. You don't want to be like me."

They were quiet for a moment. Her sleeve was still wet. It clung to her arm.

"I'm angry," she said.

"I know."

"I feel like he's throwing me away. Putting me aside because I'm inconvenient."

"I hear you."

"It's like who I am and what I want don't even matter to him. I know that's crazy. Or at least I know it's overblown, but it's like I have a splinter I can't dig out. It's just right there on my nerve ending, and every time I even brush up against it, it hurts."

"Yeah."

She sat still, feeling her blood pulse in her temple, her mind agitated. "I'm not really mad at the captain, am I? This is about my father."

"This school thing could be good for you, Tiny. A lot healthier than hanging around an old warship with nobody your own age."

"But I *like* it here. You like me being here, right?"

"No," Amos said. "I don't want you to stay."

It felt like a punch in the gut. "But—"

"Look, Tiny, I've watched a lot of people die. Some of them were my friends. I'm mostly okay with that now. But I ain't ready to watch you die. And if you stay here on this ship, you will. That's the kind of ship this is."

“That’s what Jim said too,” Teresa said.

“Yeah? Well, the two of us see a lot of things the same way.”

“You seem very different to me.”

“We are.”

“You’re going to be fighting for the fate of humanity. I’m going to be worrying about algebra assignments.”

“Well, maybe you’ll get lucky and we’ll win and the algebra will matter. Then twenty, thirty years down the road, something else will show up to slaughter everyone, and you can take care of that one.”

She didn’t want to be crying. She didn’t want to be sad. Amos leaned over and put a thick, ropy arm around her. He was strangely hot to the touch, like he was always running a fever. She leaned into him and wept anyway.



She said her goodbyes to Alex and Naomi on the ship just after they touched down. They’d landed far enough away from the school that they wouldn’t damage the grounds, so there was still a little walk from her old life to her new one. She tried not to think about that. It was easier if she could pretend that this wasn’t the last time she would be on the ship. That she didn’t have to start her life over again. She just put one foot in front of the other as if this particular walk didn’t signify anything in particular.

Jim and Amos went with her to make sure everything was all right, but she could tell their minds were more than half on the incoming ship. Like guards from the State Building, they wore light body armor and sidearms. She just had a duffel bag with a couple of folded flight suits and a few days’ supply of dog food. Muskrat trotted along with them, her brown, worried eyes shifting between Teresa and Amos.

The sky was wide and blue with cumulus clouds on the horizon. The valley opened before them, gentle curves of land that looked like erosion and wind and the growth of plants. The local plants were tall and thin, rising up into the air like three-meter-high blades of blue-tinged grass. The

breeze passing among them sounded like radio static. The school's grounds stood out from the world around it—straight lines and right angles. The air smelled like overheated metal.

There weren't any people.

"Term doesn't start for another two weeks," Jim said. "You're probably the first to arrive."

"Isn't it a boarding school?" Teresa asked.

"They still have breaks between terms. I mean, don't they?"

Amos shrugged. "Not a lot of private school types in my social circles. They know we're coming?"

"Finley knows to expect us, but Naomi was keeping the radio-silence thing pretty strict. You know, in case."

"Sure," Amos said.

The main path was crushed stone gravel, light gray with flashes of pink and blue and gold where the sunlight glittered off it. An earthmover stood idle at the side of the path. Its wide industrial treads had left tracks behind it half a meter across. The disturbed ground was dark and damp. The sun hadn't dried it yet. Amos smiled at nothing in particular, looking around like a tourist taking in the sights. Jim seemed tenser.

They walked up the path to a central courtyard three glass-windowed stories tall with a canopy stretched between the buildings. A stone fountain had lines of mineral deposits that showed where the water would have flowed if it had been flowing.

Teresa recognized it all from her reading about the school—the pale wood juxtaposed with the glass was apparently very interesting from an architectural perspective, but she just thought it looked awkward. The smiling kids and serious instructors that had filled the campus weren't there, though. Muskrat whined and pressed in against Teresa's leg.

"Yeah, dog," Amos said. "Putting my little hairs up too."

The wide double doors of the main building ten meters ahead of them swung open and a woman stepped out. Her arms were out at her sides, her hands open and empty. She was tall, long limbed, and thin, with high cheekbones and dark eyes. Her skin looked as taut and tough as if she'd been carved out of wood. Teresa couldn't guess the woman's age, but she wore a Laconian Marine uniform.

Jim muttered *fuck* to himself.

“I’m unarmed,” the woman said. Teresa recognized her tone. An officer’s voice. Brusque, and carrying an expectation of obedience. Her father’s palace had been filled with voices like it. “I’m no threat to you. You don’t need to escalate.”

“What are you doing here?” Teresa said, loud enough to carry through the courtyard. “Do you know who I am?”

Amos put a hand on her shoulder and gently pulled her half a step back. Jim’s eyes were wide, and his face was bloodless. If his expression hadn’t been so calm, she would have thought he was having a panic attack.

“Yes, I know who you are,” the woman said. “You’re Teresa Duarte. I am Colonel Aliana Tanaka of the Laconian Marine Corps. And Captain Holden, if I’m not mistaken. I have to say that’s a bit of a surprise. I’d have thought you’d have put her on a different ship. Eggs. Baskets. You know.”

Jim stood silent. Frozen. *Oh*, Teresa thought. *He’s about to have a panic attack.*

“I’m not here to hurt anyone,” Tanaka said. “I need the girl’s help.”

“I am here of my own free will,” Teresa said. “If my father—”

“At this point, I am considerably better briefed about your father’s condition than you are,” Tanaka said.

Amos reached down into his pocket, appearing to scratch idly at his leg while he looked up toward the canopy. Teresa heard a tiny, distant voice. Alex, saying *What’s up, big guy?*

“If we’re all friends and just talking,” Amos said, his voice loud enough to carry, “how come you got a fire team on the roof up there?”

Teresa looked up. She wasn’t certain, but there might have been shadows on the canopy. Her heart was tapping at her ribs like it wanted to get out. Muskrat whined, and she put a hand on the old dog’s back.

“He’s right,” Jim said, his voice steadier than Teresa expected. “That doesn’t seem friendly.”

The woman didn’t miss a beat. “You’re correct. If I wanted to resolve this through violence, it would already be resolved. But I think we’ve all been through enough firefights to understand that when the bullets start flying, it gets very hard to be certain where they all end up. And I don’t want anything to happen to the girl either.”

“Where’s the head of school?” Jim said. “The one who was meeting us?”

“She’s safe. Honestly, I was hoping I’d find Teresa already here.”

“We didn’t know we were inconveniencing you, or we’d have scheduled things differently,” Jim said. Despite the casualness of his words, his voice was like a wire under so much tension it was about to snap.

“In your position, I would have made getting her to safety a much higher priority. You can’t imagine what a relief it is to discover I didn’t waste my time coming out.”

“You sure about that?” Jim said.

“Wouldn’t play with this one, Cap,” Amos said softly. There was a dangerous buzz in his voice Teresa had only heard once before. *Close your eyes, Tiny. You don’t want to watch this.* The last thing he’d said to her before he’d been killed.

“This isn’t a fight either of us need to have,” Tanaka said, taking a few slow steps forward. Her arms were still out to her sides, fingers splayed to emphasize the emptiness of her hands. “I’m not looking to arrest you, Captain Holden. Or your crew. Or your ship. You’re free to go. My mandate at present is very narrow.”

Teresa glanced over at Jim, and he looked back. While their gazes were still locked, he shouted, “How do I know you won’t open fire as soon as we don’t have her?”

There was no reason for her to believe that Jim was bluffing. In the moment, Teresa was certain he would leave her with Tanaka, and relief complicated her fear. They didn’t want to see her die. She understood that better now. She didn’t want to see them die either.

“You have my word,” Tanaka said.

“I was looking for something a little more solid.”

“I don’t have a habit of breaking faith. That’s going to have to be enough.”

Jim looked away from Teresa, back to the woman. Amos had started humming softly and tunelessly. The shadows on the canopy were larger now, and more clearly shaped like Laconian power armor.

“Not sure that it is going to be enough,” Jim said, “but I’m willing to discuss other ways to make a handoff. You let us go back to our ship. Once we’re in the airlock, we’ll let the girl walk back by herself.”

Tanaka’s smile was hard. “Let me make a counteroffer. How about you do what I said, and no one dies?”

Jim tensed. He was on the edge of doing something stupid out of fear, and Tanaka was starting to escalate. Teresa had been trained in negotiation strategies, up to and including hostage situations. Jim was going to fuck this up. She had to take control. “I’m a little tired of being talked about like I was luggage. This isn’t a conversation between him and you. This is a conversation with me. I decide what ship I leave this place on. Not him.”

Muskrat, sensing the tension, started barking and hopping on her front legs. Tanaka smiled, and it was cold.

“All right,” Tanaka said. “Please come with me. Do it now, and in return I won’t kill your friends.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Jim said, quietly enough that it was just for her to hear it.

Whatever happened, she would know that even now, having landed on this planet to get rid of her, he was still willing to die to protect her. The knot in her stomach was replaced by something warm and comforting. It had to be enough.

“I’ll go,” Teresa said, but no one heard her. Her voice was suddenly drowned out as the static hiss of the tree-sized grasses took on a deafening rumble. For a second, she thought of earthquakes or stampedes of cattle. Tanaka’s neck worked. She was subvocalizing to someone.

“You have to the count of three,” Tanaka shouted. “One—”

Amos said *Fuck it*, stepped in front of Teresa, and drew his gun.

Chapter Twelve: Tanaka

The girl was staring at her, arms crossed defiantly, so certain of her place in the natural order. Comfortable with the absolute necessity of her existence. Tanaka had seen that attitude before in other people, many times. She'd also seen the surprise and hurt in their eyes as they died.

Tanaka had no such illusions.

Anyone could die at any time, and the universe didn't give a shit. So while the girl stood in front of her shielded by nothing but the accident of having a powerful daddy, Tanaka wore an armored suit of woven carbon-silicate lace that would stop anything short of a rocket launcher under her clothes.

"I'm a little tired of being talked about like I was luggage. This isn't a conversation between him and you. This is a conversation with me. I decide what ship I leave this place on. Not him."

Oh, little girl, Tanaka thought, *you have no idea.* It made her hands itch to have Duarte's daughter so close and not just grab her. A dozen quick steps and she'd have the girl, the escaped prisoner, and the terrorist who was apparently not dead despite having been shot in the head back on Laconia. But killing the kid had a lot of downside, and the risk wasn't zero. So instead, she smiled and spread her hands a little wider, trying to seem as nonthreatening as possible. James Holden might be rounding the corner from middle-aged into old, but he was still dangerous. And the lump of gristle next to him that went by Amos Burton had more than one question mark next to him in her book. Tanaka didn't underestimate either of them. The dog started barking and bouncing up and down on its front paws. It wasn't a trained attack animal, just an old pet. She knew from the file that the girl would be easier to control if they didn't kill it.

We're all friends here, she smiled at them, willing it to be true. A large-caliber pistol loaded with high explosive rounds pressed into the small of

her back in case it turned out they weren't.

"Venom One," a voice said in her ear. "Check check."

"Venom Two at southwest corner, I've got Holden," came a different voice.

"Venom Four northeast, I've got Bluto," said a third.

"Three covering south."

Tanaka smiled. Whatever happened from here in, her enemy was well and truly fucked.

"All right," Tanaka said to Teresa, playing for time. "Please come with me. Do it now, and in return I won't kill your friends."

The girl looked uncertain. She'd never believe a threat made to her. Not really. But threats to her friends she believed. Her file made it clear she had significant abandonment issues. If things like that didn't make you strong, they made you weak.

"You hearing this?" Venom One asked, his mic buzzing with background noise as he spoke.

A distant rumble was growing, the tall swordlike foliage whipping as something blasted toward them. The girl was talking, but whatever she was saying was drowned out by the noise.

"*Sparrowhawk*," Tanaka said, activating the bone mic in her jaw.

"Mugabo here."

"*Rocinante* is oscar mike," she said.

"On our way," Mugabo replied. He'd hidden her ship around the far side of the planet to avoid detection. She'd known that was a risk. She didn't regret it. Not yet, at least. "I'll be to you in twenty."

Tanaka's gaze flickered across what was about to be a battlefield. She probably couldn't stall for twenty.

"Forget me," she said to Mugabo. "Stay on the *Rocinante*. Do not let it leave this planet with the girl on board."

"Are you... authorizing force? Even if the girl is on board?"

Tanaka didn't answer. She needed to get her hands on the target before the *Rocinante* showed up. She couldn't risk losing the girl if the situation went violent. And when her team moved on the two adults and the *Sparrowhawk* showed up overhead, things were liable to go very violent indeed.

Out of time and out of options. Something like pleasure flowed through

her. It was time for someone to make a decision.

“You have to the count of three,” Tanaka shouted at the girl as she beckoned. *Come to me.* “One—”

Burton shoved the girl behind him and pulled his gun. The *Rocinante* blasted into view, barely skimming the tops of the foliage, the powerful landing thrusters in her belly flattening everything it passed over. Tanaka found herself impressed by the recklessness of the maneuver. Here she was, working so hard not to put the girl in any danger, and the *Rocinante* crew was willing to throw a spaceship at her to keep her away.

“Venom, take the girl,” she shouted over the deafening sound of the ship, pulling her gun from behind her back in a smooth, practiced motion. Burton saw her do it and drew down on her as he continued pushing the girl back toward the approaching ship. Tanaka dove behind a low stone planter box just as he fired, the bullet blowing a fountain of soil into the air.

“Shots fired,” one of her team said.

“Five millimeter caseless. Low threat,” someone else said, as flat and emotionless as if he were placing a lunch order.

“They’re firing at *me*,” Tanaka shouted back. “Get the girl!”

“Free fire?” Venom One, the team leader, asked.

“No, no shooting. Pull the other two apart with your hands if you need to, but do not risk firing toward the girl,” Tanaka yelled, then peeked up over the planter box. Holden, Burton, and the girl were about thirty meters away now, still backing up. The *Rocinante* had taken up position about two hundred and fifty meters farther away, still hovering on its landing jets. It would have to put down to let them board, but the pilot wasn’t taking any chances.

A metallic-blue figure dropped into the courtyard between Tanaka and Holden, then darted toward the fleeing group in a blur. Three more figures dropped from the canopy above, surrounding Holden and the girl. Burton pointed his gun at one and started firing.

“Taking fire,” Venom Two reported.

Her team moved toward the three, not returning fire but moving fast. Aggressively. The old-style Martian Navy sidearms Holden and Burton carried would never penetrate a modern suit of Laconian power armor. They could fire their guns dry, and her team would just walk up and snap their necks. Quick, neat, almost no danger to the girl unless Burton shot her.

But the old mechanic was careful and methodical as he fired. Every shot hit one of Tanaka's team, and he kept the girl behind him.

Venom Three was the closest, only a few meters from Holden, when the world exploded. A blinding flash, and a concussion like someone had hit her in the chest. Tanaka dove back behind her planter box, her mind trying to make the detonation into her team having disobeyed orders and opened fire. But the guns on the Laconian armor weren't that loud. Nothing was that loud.

A quick look over the planter box told her that all four members of her fire team were down. No, not down. Literally blown apart. She could see the remains of Venom Two, an undifferentiated pile of meat and technology spread across a few meters of ground. In the distance, the barrels of the *Rocinante's* point-defense cannons were fully extended, and swiveling as they looked for new targets.

PDC fire in atmosphere with their own people between the ship and its target. If she'd had time to think about it, she'd have been impressed by the audacity.

Tanaka jumped up to her feet and ran flat out toward one of the school buildings surrounding the courtyard, looking for cover. She imagined one of those PDC barrels snapping around with merciless machine speed to lock onto her. If it fired, she'd never hear the shots that ended her. Against a warship's PDC rounds, her fancy armored undersuit might as well be silk pajamas.

She made it to the wall of the school building. The *Rocinante*, hovering on its maneuvering thrusters, was completely blocked from her line of sight. She didn't think a pilot who flew for James Holden would shoot through a school to get her, but she displaced to another nearby building anyway. Once the shooting had started, people could panic and do things they would never have imagined themselves doing otherwise. Better not to risk it.

The roar of the ship's thrusters rose in pitch, then began to cycle down. The ship had landed. They'd blown her team apart, sent her running, and decided the coast was clear.

The coast is decidedly not clear, motherfuckers.

Tanaka sprinted out from behind the building and into the tall native grass. She ran parallel to the path Holden and crew were taking toward their ship, staying far enough away to hopefully hide the sound of her movement.

If anyone could still hear anything after the ear-shattering blast of the *Rocinante's* PDCs firing in atmosphere. Even if they caught something on thermals, they might think twice about accidentally shooting a bystander. Might. They were a pretty fucking reckless bunch. She was going to enjoy taking them down.

After thirty meters she slowed down and angled in toward the three fleeing shapes. She was still a dozen meters away from them when she caught a glimpse of Holden in his dark Martian armor heading toward the ship. He wasn't looking in her direction. Through the ringing in her ears, she was almost certain she could hear the dog barking, so the girl had to be nearby.

Tanaka angled away and put on more speed, staying low but getting ahead of them. The surface of the tall native grass was covered in tiny hooks that tugged at her clothes when she brushed against them. When she accidentally hit one with the back of her hand, it left a painful abrasion, like a rug burn. She ignored it. She had the scent of blood, and her prey was just a few meters away.

When Tanaka felt she'd gotten far enough ahead of them, she moved back to the edge of the grass and waited. The ship had gone quiet. The grass hummed its white noise around her. From farther down the path, the dog was barking. She heard Holden's voice. *Hurry. They'll have backup coming.* They were a dozen meters or so away and moving toward her. They were trotting, but she'd been faster. One step ahead.

Tanaka stepped out of the grass, leveling her pistol at Holden. The look of surprise on his face would have been comical in any other context. The girl shrieked with alarm and grabbed at her dog's collar as it barked furiously.

"I can't let you leave with that girl."

Holden had his gun in his hand, but it was down at his side. He shifted his weight like he was going to make a move, but Tanaka just shook her head at him and pointed her gun at his face.

"If I spray you all over that girl, she'll panic. If she runs, things get even less predictable than this. No one wants that."

Holden nodded and dropped the pistol, then his gaze shifted to Tanaka's left shoulder.

"Wait," she said, "where's—"

“Right here,” said a deep voice from behind her.

Shit. She was one step behind.

She was already swiveling to bring her gun to bear before the second word was out. Something heavy slammed into the side of her head and sent her spinning to the ground. Amos Burton stepped out of the grass, his hands balled up into fists.

“Hi,” he said, moving toward her.

The hit was solid, jaw to inner ear. Her world was swimming. Tanaka rolled away and found her gun on the ground. She was bringing it up when Burton’s boot connected with her forearm and sent the pistol flying off into the grass.

“What are you doing?” Holden asked.

I’m getting my ass kicked, Tanaka thought, dazed enough to wonder why he was speaking to her.

“I think we might want to talk to this one,” Burton said. “Let’s take her with us.”

Tanaka said, “No,” and tried to stand, then let herself collapse again. *Look how hurt I am.* It was only half bullshit.

“Hurry up,” Holden said, and started to lead the girl past her.

Burton reached down to grab Tanaka’s arm and yank her to her feet. He was very strong. That was good. It would make him overconfident. Tanaka let him pull her up, pushing hard with her legs as she rose, and snapping her other arm up to drive her palm into the underside of the big man’s chin. His head jerked back from the impact, but his grip on her left bicep didn’t loosen.

He raised his other arm and threw a massive fist at her face. With his hand gripping her, she couldn’t dodge, so she whipped her head to the right and slapped at the punch, shoving it to the left. It still grazed her cheek, and the impact was enough to make that side of her face go numb.

The motion brought him in closer, and Tanaka threw herself backward, letting the momentum of the punch and her own weight yank Burton off his feet and on top of her as she fell.

He let go of her arm, trying by reflex to catch himself, and they both hit the ground. He landed on her like a falling tree, driving the air from her lungs. She was ready for it, though, and threw up an elbow that caught Burton in the throat as he dropped. He made a sound like an injured duck

and rolled away, clutching at his neck. Tanaka bounced to her feet and looked for the girl. The swimming world whirled around her. She gritted her teeth and ignored it.

The girl was hiding behind Holden, clutching at her dog and staring at the melee, her mouth a round O of surprise. He was digging around at his feet, trying to pick up his dropped gun.

Tanaka could see hers, lying in the grass not too far away. Diving for it to take a rushed shot at Holden would be risky with the girl so close by. She raised a hand instead. "Holden, wait."

"Leave him out of it," Burton said behind her, "we're not done yet."

Tanaka spun on the ball of her foot and lashed out with a kick at the spot the sound was coming from. The big mechanic casually swatted it away. He looked none the worse for wear after a throat strike that would've killed most people. Something was wrong with his eyes. They were flat black. She remembered reading about someone with eyes like that. She didn't remember who.

"I've read your file," Tanaka said, backing toward Holden and the girl. She didn't have time for a boxing match with the strange-looking man with the eerie black eyes. Not when her best shots didn't seem to even faze him.

"Yeah?" he asked, moving toward her.

"It said we killed you," she said. "Any other time, I'd stay to figure that out." The girl was so close that, if she could just get her balance, she could take two steps, grab her, and be running before the others knew what had happened. Tanaka would place bets they wouldn't shoot at her if she had the kid in her arms.

"You've got time," Burton said.

Tanaka turned toward the girl and then stopped short. Holden was standing in front of her, his gun in his hand. The eyes that had seemed frightened a moment ago were now flat, emotionless, cold. *That's bad.*

"No," he said. "She doesn't."

Before Tanaka could even start to move, Holden's gun went off three times. She felt the three shots as hammer blows to her sternum. All three, center mass. Kill shots. She hadn't been certain until that moment that he had it in him.

Tanaka staggered two steps toward the edge of the path and then collapsed on her face. The three slugs from Holden's gun pressed into her

chest where the nanofiber undershirt had caught them, like daggers in the deep-tissue bruise they'd left in her flesh. She ignored the pain and lay very still, holding her breath.

"Shit, Cap," Burton was saying. "I think we shoulda kept her."

"We have to go. We have to get out of here. Now," Holden replied. He sounded angry. Based on her reading of his file, Tanaka would have bet he wasn't mad at the mechanic. He was angry he'd been forced to shoot someone. For all the shit he'd seen, the Laconian interrogator's psych evaluation said that Holden had never really grown comfortable with violence.

Don't come check my body, Tanaka willed at them.

"Let's get out of here before more of them show up," Holden said, and the three of them started walking away.

Moving as little as possible, Tanaka inched toward her gun. When she was able to put her right hand on it, she risked turning her head to see where they were. Holden and Burton were side by side, the girl between them. They were about forty meters away. Not a very long shot. Not for her. They were both wearing old Martian light body armor. The high explosive rounds in her pistol would go right through it. There was some risk of fragmentation hitting the girl, but it wasn't likely to be fatal. And fuck it. A little bruising might do the bitch some good.

Tanaka rolled onto her back and sat up. She aimed at Burton's back. He was the more dangerous of the two. Kill him first. She lined up her sights between the big man's shoulder blades. Took a long breath, let half of it out, and pulled the trigger.

The round slammed into his back and blew out his chest like someone had swapped his heart with a grenade. Tanaka shifted her aim to Holden, who was already spinning, gun in hand. The big man took a couple more steps and fell over. She lined up on Holden's chest, then jerked her head as something cut a groove across her scalp. The report of the gunshot arrived a split second later.

He figured out the body armor, Tanaka thought. *He's taking the headshot.*

She moved, scrambling for cover in the grass and trying to line up her next shot. Holden was standing still, pivoting slowly at the waist to put his sights on her. It was a race now, and she was sighted in on his head, ready

to pull the trigger and end it, when someone slammed a sledgehammer into her cheek. The other side of her mouth exploded out. The pain barely lasted long enough to notice, and everything was gone.

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Interlude: The Dreamer

The dreamer dreams, and her dream carries her deeper into intimacy with vastness. All through the wideness and flow, she sparkles and the sparkles become thought where there was no thought before. The great slowness remains, soft and wide as the icy cold and all-encompassing sea, and the slowness (drifting, languid) shuffles and reshuffles itself. The sticky and the slippery, the bright and the dark, the moving and the moving for there is no true stillness in the spark-filled substrate, and the sparks become a mind. The dreamer dreams, and others dream with her, not just the ones at her side, not just the bubbles of salt, but the dance that they make. She dreams the dance, and the dance dreams her back. Hello hello hello.

Once, and gone so far away there were only the first thoughts to think it, the *it* was like this: the ball at the center of down, and the shell at the edge of up, and between them the slow dancers and the sudden dance. *Watch watch watch*, the grandmothers whisper, and their voices become a chorus, and the chorus says something else. The dance wants, and it pushes to the edges of everything, the skin of the universe. The dreamer dreams the dance and the dance dreams and its dreams become things and the things change the dreams. Desire and longing for desire bumble over eager forward and make new things to dance with. A brain growing the wires that form itself, thoughts flow from one substrate into another, and the great curiosity spins and makes and spins and learns. It presses down into the heat at the bottom of everything. It presses up into the cold, and it cracks the vault of heaven. The cold and hard of up yields to the dance, and the lights that they are meet lights that they are not.

A new thing has happened. Light from *elsewhere*. The bright-singing voice of God, inviting and inviting and inviting—

The kick from behind blows through, carrying blood and bone and breath with it. The dreamer takes a step, and then another, and then falls,

shrieking, and the grandmothers say *no not that, over here over here, look at what came next*. Death floods toward her emptier than darkness and the dreamer forgets, grabs for the brother who is always at her side except not here except not here and the other one is, pock-voiced and funereal, *it's all right it isn't you I've got you*.

She floats up faster than bubbles, the heat below and behind, the cold cracked open to the stars, and screaming, she launches up and out of the dream and into the body that is only hers, in a confusion of vomit and weep and a fading deeper than dreams could be.

What the fuck was that?

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Chapter Thirteen: Jim

Amos was limp, his dark eyes closed. His mouth hung open and his lips were white. The hole in his back was about as big as a thumb. The one coming out his chest was wider than two fists together. The black meat of his flesh made the pale bone of his spine look like a worm someone had pulled apart.

“We have to go,” Teresa said from very far away. She pulled at his sleeve. “Jim! We have to *go*.”

He turned to look at her—her impatient scowl, her hair pulled back over her ears. Muskrat, at her side, was dancing on anxious paws and whining. Or maybe that was him. He tried to say *All right* but realized he was about to vomit just in time to turn away.

We have to go, he thought. *Come on. Pull it together.*

He went to Amos, putting his arms under the big man’s knees and across his wide shoulders. On Earth, he’d never have been able to lift him. With the three-quarter g of Abbassia, he was heavy but manageable. Man, girl, dog, and corpse, they started running toward the *Rocinante*. Jim tried to yell *Hurry*, but the thing that had clenched up in his chest when he saw Amos blown apart wouldn’t let him. He didn’t look back. His peripheral vision started to narrow, like they were running down a tunnel that was slowly squeezing closed. He had to get to the ship. A wash of cold and wet stuck his clothes to his belly and his thighs. Amos’ black blood spilling down him.

Ahead of them, the airlock opened. Alex was in it, a rifle in one hand, waving them forward. The dog reached the lock first, misjudging the gravity and skittering against the hull. Teresa grabbed Muskrat around the middle and climbed the ladder with her. The weight of Amos’ body slowed Jim down, but Alex reached out to help with the last couple steps. Jim knelt, lowering the corpse to the deck. The eyelids had opened a slit during the

run, and the eyes beneath focused on nothing. Jim closed them.

“Fuck,” Alex said. “What the fuck?”

“Take off now.”

“All right,” Alex said. “Let’s get stowed, and we’ll—”

Jim shook his head and opened a connection to Naomi. “We’re in. Get us up.”

“Are you in a couch?”

“No, so don’t bounce us around too much, but get us out of here.” She didn’t argue. The roar of the maneuvering thrusters rattled his teeth. He took Teresa by the shoulder, pulling her close to shout in her ear. “Get the dog to her couch and strap yourself in. I don’t know how bad this is going to get.”

She looked at him with an equanimity he couldn’t feel. She was hurt, frightened, traumatized. She was a kid. How could she stand to see what she’d seen? How could he?

“He isn’t secured,” she said.

“He won’t care. Go.”

The deck lurched under them, shifting slowly as the ship went from belly-down to the usual engine-down orientation. Muskrat whined, and Teresa took her by the collar, leading her away. Amos’ body shifted and rolled. There was horror in Alex’s eyes, and Jim felt a rush of anger. The distress in his old friend’s eyes was too much. If he tried to comfort Alex, it would be too much. He was shaking as it was, and he didn’t know if it was the vibration of the ship carving its way through the atmosphere, or his own body betraying him. Maybe both.

“We have to get to ops,” Jim shouted. Alex took a step toward the spent clay that had been Amos, then caught himself, and they made their rocking, unsteady way toward the central lift. The deck shook and plunged under them as they went from handhold to handhold. Thrust gravity and the pull of the planet made his knees and spine ache. His vision, dark. He found himself on the edge of confusion, unsure for a moment whether they were fleeing New Egypt or Laconia. When they reached the lift, he sat down to keep from passing out. His mind pieced itself together as they rose.

Alex squatted beside him. “You okay?”

“They were there waiting for us. They knew we were coming.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said. “I should have been there.”

“She shot Amos in the back. Shot him in the back as we ran.”

Alex was quiet, because there wasn’t anything to say. Jim looked at his flight suit, smeared black from the gut to the knees. His hands were stained black too, but it still smelled like blood.

The lift pushed up, deck by deck. When they got to ops, Jim either had himself back together or he was fully dissociated. It was hard to know which.

The ride smoothed out as they reached the upper atmosphere. The winds were screaming past them, but with so little mass to the air that a ripping five-hundred-kilometer-per-hour current deflected them less than a breeze. The deck felt steadier under his feet. Naomi was in a couch, the flight controls on her screen. She glanced over as he lowered himself into the crash couch beside hers. He saw her register the blood and whose it was.

“Amos?” she asked.

He shook his head, not meaning that it wasn’t. Meaning not now. He knew she understood.

Alex went up to the flight deck, his rifle still bouncing against his shoulder. “I’m taking the stick,” he shouted down moments later.

“Copy that,” Naomi replied. “I’m fire control.” The screen before her shifted to status readouts on the ship’s guns—PDCs, torpedoes, the keel-mounted rail gun. Jim pulled up tactical. On this screen an augmented map of Abbassia below them filled one side, a schematic of the nearby space of New Egypt system the other. And a sliver of red marked something the *Roci*’s threat detection thought he should be alarmed about. A stone in his chest, he selected it and pulled up the ship identification.

“We’ve got company,” Alex shouted from above.

“I’ve got them,” Jim answered.

Naomi’s voice was sharp and matter-of-fact the way it always was in the teeth of crisis. “Is it a *Storm*?”

Jim looked at the analysis. Now that there was only one *Magnetar*-class ship left, stuck in Laconia guarding their homeworld, the *Storm*-class destroyers were the backbone of Laconian power. And even one would be more than a match for the *Roci*. But this was smaller, with a squat, broad design, and a drive cone that promised it was built for speed.

“No,” he said. “Smaller. Maybe an explorer. I don’t know.”

“Well, it’s coming our way,” Alex said. “And it looks pissed.”

“Can we keep the planet between us and them?”

“If I put us in a low, fast orbit, maybe for a little while. Long term? No.”

“Give me a little while, then.”

Naomi didn't speak, but she cycled through the PDC status checks. If it was a shooting war, they'd be as ready as a lone ship could be. Jim's first impulse was to turn their back to the sun and burn as hard as they could stand it toward the ring gate and out of the system.

It wouldn't work. The Laconian ship was made to be faster. And if they wanted Teresa, their best move was to punch a hole in the *Roci's* drive cone and force a shutdown, then board and take her at their leisure. Turning tail and running would just make the shot easier. The alternative was to make it hard.

He closed his eyes. There was only one next step that he could think of, and he hated it. His mind shifted and slipped, looking for a better idea.

“Uh, Jim?” Alex said. “Your while's about up. What's the play?”

Fuck, he thought. “Keep our nose pointed at them. Make it so they have to put a hole through every deck in the ship to hit the drive.”

Naomi and Alex were silent for a moment, then Alex said, “I'm on it.”

The distant sound of the thrusters was totally different from the earlier roar. The shift of the crash couch felt almost gentle.

Naomi nodded, and checked power status on the rail gun. “Funny. You were saying before that the human shield thing made you uncomfortable.”

“I've moved past uncomfortable to furious.”

She nodded her agreement, then the screen lit up as the tightbeam request was accepted. A man's face appeared on the screen: broad, with round cheeks, dark skin, and a full and well-groomed mustache. He was wearing the blue uniform of Laconia with a captain's rank. He nodded at the camera, as calm as if they were in line together at the commissary.

“Captain Holden. I am Captain Noel Mugabo of the *Sparrowhawk*. Please return to the planet surface. I mean you and your crew no harm.”

“You people just put a bullet through my mechanic,” Jim said, and Naomi stiffened.

“And you killed four Laconian Marines,” the captain said. “I am here to help us both deescalate. My orders are to keep you here. We need Teresa Duarte's assistance, and for that, she must come with us. We will not hurt her, nor will we detain you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Your doubt doesn’t change our situation.” Jim noticed the way the man said *our situation*. Building rapport. Making it harder to pull the trigger, but also not backing down a centimeter. He’d had conversations like this as a prisoner on Laconia. “Please return to the planet’s surface, and we will take care of all this without any more violence.”

His crash couch put up a low-grade medical alert. His blood pressure and heart rate were concerning. Not dangerous, but not not-dangerous. He turned off the alerts.

“No,” Jim said. “I think we both know that’s not going to happen.”

Alex called down from the flight deck. “They’re getting closer. Want me to break orbit?”

Jim muted his mic. “Not yet.”

“What alternative do you suggest?” Captain Mugabo asked. “I am open to discussing this.”

“I propose you land so we know you’re not a threat. Then we leave. With the girl.”

“May I have a moment to consult with my superior?”

Jim nodded, and Mugabo’s eyes shifted down as if he were sending a text-only message. Jim pulled up a tactical window. The two ships whipping around the planet in a low orbit, pointed dead-on at each other like gunmen in a cheap entertainment feed. He didn’t know what sorts of weapons the *Sparrowhawk* carried, but he knew for a fact they were all pointed at him right now.

Another window appeared. Fire control, with the rail gun charged and ready, the Laconian ship locked in with passive targeting so that it wouldn’t seem like an escalation. He glanced over to Naomi. She mouthed the words *If you need it*. He nodded.

“All right,” Mugabo said. “I accept your terms.”

“What?”

“We both value the life of the girl. If we have to continue this negotiation another time, so be it. You can go.”

Jim took two long breaths. “You’re not beginning a deorbit burn.”

“Did you expect me to?”

“I don’t think you’re telling me the truth,” Jim said. “I think if I fire the maneuvering thrusters, start to turn a little bit, you’ll send a round through

my drive cone. I think the only reason you haven't already done it is that you'd have to shoot through the whole ship to do it, and the risk to Teresa Duarte is too high."

"I assure you that is not the case," Mugabo said.

"Then you go first. If we're free to leave, begin your descent. When I see you touch down, I'll know you were telling the truth."

"Yes," Mugabo said. "Of course. I very much understand your position."

"You're playing for time."

"I understand why you would feel that way, Captain Holden. Please believe me that we mean you and your crew no harm, and that my offer is sincere."

The tactical screen bloomed at the same moment that Naomi's calm voice reached him. "Fast movers. They've launched torpedoes."

Radar tracked the pair of torpedoes as they arced out away from the *Sparrowhawk*. Mugabo had been buying time while his people locked in a firing solution that sent the torpedoes out and around the *Roci* to arc back in and hit her from behind. Take out the drive and leave the rest of the ship intact.

Jim tapped the fire control, and the *Rocinante* dropped away beneath him for a fraction of a second as a two-kilo tungsten slug spat out toward the enemy without the main drive on to compensate for the kick. Mugabo vanished, the tightbeam connection lost. The rolling, deep chatter of the PDCs vibrated through the ship. One of the torpedoes blinked off his board.

"I'm lining up another shot," Alex said. The rail gun showed ready. The other missile blinked off the board. The *Roci* squealed a warning at them as two more torpedoes locked on.

"They're getting ready to launch again," Jim said.

"I've got the reactor set to dump core if the *Roci* thinks we're out of luck," Naomi said.

"Alex?"

The rail gun locked onto the *Sparrowhawk* a second time and fired without Jim's having to clear it. "I think you got 'em," Alex said.

Jim switched to the external telescopes. The *Sparrowhawk* was where it had been, curving around the planet toward them, its orbit unchanged. But now a cloud of gas and water vapor sprayed out of the ship along one side. The lock-on tone died as the *Sparrowhawk*'s torpedoes failed to fire.

“They may be playing dead,” Naomi said.

“Alex, keep the rail gun trained on them.”

“Copy that.”

A tiny suggestion of up and down came, shifting the couches on their gimbals as Alex adjusted the ship’s orbit to keep the *Sparrowhawk* lined up in their sights. No new lock-on warnings sounded. No active radar bounced off their hull. Jim pulled up the comms again, tried the tightbeam connection without knowing exactly what he’d say if Mugabo answered. He didn’t. The Laconian ship drifted on in its low, fast orbit. Either the Laconian ship would repair itself, or in another few weeks it would fall back down into the planet’s gravity well and burn up like a meteor. Or it was only playing dead, waiting for Jim to declare victory, turn the ship, and catch a rail-gun round through its drive.

“Alex,” he said. “Pull us back on maneuvering thrusters. If they don’t turn to match... Turn us, and let’s break orbit. Get out of here.”

“Copy that,” Alex said, and the *Roci* shifted under Jim. They moved gently. Slowly. Waiting for the alarms that would mean the *Sparrowhawk* had only been playing dead.

The alarms didn’t come.

“So what now?” Alex said.

“Now we plot the fastest way back through the ring gate and out of here.”

“Any thoughts on where to?” Alex asked. “Firdaws is on the flight plan, but—”

“Freehold,” Naomi said, her voice calm and authoritative. “We needed resupply before, and we’re burning through a lot of reaction mass on the maneuvering thrusters. And I wouldn’t mind being under the protection of one of our own while we figure out how this went pear-shaped.”

“Yeah,” Alex said, his voice grim. “This kindness-of-strangers thing isn’t going so well for us.”

Jim heard Naomi’s restraints clattering free, and he felt her coming close. She stroked his hair, and he took her hand, kissing her fingers gently.

“That went very bad,” she said.

“Yeah.”

She waited a moment before she said, “What happened to Amos?”

Jim shook his head. *We lost him*, he tried to say. *I lost him*.

“Yeah,” Amos said. “I got pretty fucked up all right.”

He stepped in from the lift, his shredded flight suit as wet and black as if he’d poured ink on it. The exit wound on his chest was pale flesh around a flat circle of onyx. When he smiled, it seemed tentative.

Naomi’s expression went empty.

“Hey, Cap. We got Tiny back safe, didn’t we?”

It took a moment to understand this was really happening, but then Jim said, “Yeah. We did.”

“And the dog?”

“Her too.”

Amos stepped into the ops deck and lowered himself into an empty crash couch, grunting like he was sore. “Good. Tiny really likes that dog. There’s a hell of a mess in the airlock. I’ll get it cleaned up, but I gotta get some food first. I’m really hungry.”

Alex, drawn by the sound of Amos’ voice, came down from the flight deck. His face was pale. “Amos?”

“Hey,” the big man said, lifting a hand in greeting. “I think I must have took kind of a hit down there. I’m missing some of what happened.”

Jim wanted to feel joy, and he did. But there was something more with it. A sense of wrongness that came from trauma after trauma followed by something that violated his inborn sense of how the universe worked. What was possible.

“You died,” he said. “You took a round to the back, and it blew most of your chest out. I saw your spine. It was in pieces.”

Amos went still in that unnerving way he sometimes did, and then frowned, nodded. “Yeah, okay. I think I knew that part.”

Jim laughed, and it was disbelief. And maybe relief. And something else he couldn’t put a name to. “Is there anything that kills you anymore?”

“Pretty sure I’m starving to death,” Amos said.

“Well,” Alex said. “God damn.”

Naomi still hadn’t spoken. Amos touched the black circle of his wound, exploring it. It didn’t look like skin anymore. Whatever it was, it was what Amos’ resurrected corpse made when it replaced his injured flesh. Jim wondered what the inside of the wound looked like. For the first time it occurred to him that the changes the drones on Laconia had made to his old friend hadn’t stopped when they escaped the planet. Amos hadn’t become

something different. He was in an ongoing process of becoming. Something about the idea was chilling.

As if Amos had read Jim's thoughts, he frowned. "I don't know how this whole thing works. But we'd be better off not doing it too often."

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Chapter Fourteen: Elvi

Elvi missed gravity. She wanted to be able to sit by Cara's medical bay and feel the weight of her exhaustion bearing her down. The long, slight stretch along the back of her neck when her head hung forward. The heaviness in her arms and legs. She understood intellectually that she was near collapse, but the familiar somatic cues weren't there on the float. The only one that seemed to remain was the trembling in her large muscles, and by itself that felt like fear.

Cara was strapped into the bay with wide, white bands that kept her from drifting. Her eyes were closed, her mouth relaxed and slightly open. Her lips were pale and bloodless as carved wax, with the tips of white teeth and a dark purple tongue behind them. Her breathing was deep, steady, and slow. Sedatives still worked on her and Xan despite the changes that the repair drones had made to their bodies. The drugs did metabolize faster, but that was fine. Their supplies were ample.

The autodoc was custom built with decades of Cortázar's observations of Cara's and Xan's baselines. The screens were crowded with real-time blood analysis and neural activity profiles as the system tried to match Cara now with Cara where she usually was, and look for ways to bring those two datasets together. A standard bed would have been baffled, but this one showed Cara slowly returning to her standard range of function as Elvi watched and drank tea from a bulb and trembled.

They'd been in the middle of another dive, sifting through the hallucinatory sensations and inhuman memories for pieces to the puzzle of how the gates had been built and if they could be made safe. Elvi was fairly sure they'd reached the part of the alien species' development where they'd become aware of a broader universe beyond the ice shell of their world. She'd expected Cara to get there, and that it would open the door to some of the practical answers they needed. But then Cara had started screaming that

she'd been shot, or if not her, that someone had. The monitors had spiked, and her brain activity lit up like someone had thrown a Molotov cocktail into her mind.

They had restrained the panic, Harshaan Lee barking the steps of the shutdown checklist over Cara's screams and vomiting. By the time they'd shut the dive down, Cara had lost consciousness. She hadn't regained it until now.

Cara's lips moved, and she swallowed. Her eyes shifted under closed lids, and then opened. Black on black, Cara's gaze found her, and the girl tried out a weak smile.

"Hey, Doc."

"Welcome back," Elvi said. "How are you feeling?"

Cara paused, but it wasn't one of the eerie, alien frozen moments. It only seemed like she was trying to find the right answer to a difficult question. "Wrung out. I've never been drunk, but maybe hung over? This feels like what a hangover's supposed to feel like."

"Extrapolating from the literature?" Elvi said, taking Cara's hand. It felt fever-hot.

"Something like that."

"Do you remember what happened? What went wrong?"

"It wasn't the grandmothers, I don't think," Cara said. "They felt the same as always. Deeper, maybe, but the same. It was... one of the others."

"All right. Tell me about that."

Cara frowned and shook her head the way she did when she was searching for some very precise word. "I'm not just myself when I'm in there. I mean, I am, but I'm not just Cara. There's more of me?"

"Like the aliens."

"No, like me watching the aliens. I feel aliens too, but that's like I'm watching a feed. Seeing something that's already recorded. These others are like being everyone in the room who's watching?"

"Like the connection you have with Xan."

"Yes, but more. There are more of them. Only I think something happened. Something bad. I don't know if they died. And then another one of me was trying to calm *me* down." Cara's eyes went wide, and her grip on Elvi's hand squeezed hard enough to hurt. "Xan? Is he all right?"

"Fine," Elvi said, not flinching. "He's worried about you, but that's all."

He was in the isolation chamber when it happened, and it didn't seem to affect him one way or the other."

Cara relaxed. "Okay. Okay. All right, that's good then." She took a breath, settled into herself. "I saw them see stars for the first time."

"We don't have to do a debriefing now. You can rest first."

"Let's talk a little. Please. While it's still fresh in my head."

Elvi felt a little wave of pleasure, then guilt at the pleasure. "Only a little. Then you rest."

Cara settled into herself, remembering the memories of others. There was a joy in her when she did. Or no, that was wrong. Not joy, but a relief. Like Elvi was pouring cool water over a burn.

"They were changing. The sea slugs or jellyfish or whatever? They were taking other bits of life, animals or plants or whatever was down at the hot core of that icy cold world. They sent them down into the vents so that they could change. Or it could change."

"That's been a consistent point. And, judging from how the protomolecule functioned, they kept that strategy for a long, long time," Elvi said.

But Cara wasn't listening. Her voice had a faraway, almost dreamy quality. "The important thing was the light."

"You were saying that. I'm thinking that was the creation of mind."

"A hive mind."

Elvi shrugged. "I've never understood that term, really. I mean, there was an electrochemical structure with a lot of semi-independent bodies. Describe it like that, and we're hive minds of neurons. But did it find a way to build an emergent cognitive analogical system? Yeah. I think so."

"And when they saw the stars, it was like hearing God talking in a language you could almost understand. But not quite. The BFE wanted to show me more. It didn't want me—us, whatever—to go. It was trying to hold on. And then the thing happened, and... If they weren't Xan, I don't know who they were, but they feel right when I'm in there."

Cara let go of Elvi's hand. She focused on something Elvi couldn't see, like she was hearing music that only played for her.

"Don't worry about it," Elvi said. "Not for now. We'll have plenty of time for the full debrief after you've rested. I'm going to let the team know you're all right, and Dr. Sanders wants to come by and make sure you're

solid. Once we hear what he has to say, we'll make some plans for moving forward."

"I don't want to wait. I want to go back in."

Elvi took a sip of her tea. "I want that too. But right now, rest."

Cara nodded and closed her eyes. Elvi waited until she was sure Cara had fallen asleep before she slipped out of the bracing on the foothold and pushed herself toward the door.

Cara spoke at once, her voice perfectly lucid and awake. Not slurred at all. "Can Xan come see me?"

"Of course, if you want."

"He does," Cara said, and lapsed back into silence. Elvi left the medical bay.

All around her the *Falcon* was subdued. The crew that ran the ship and the scientific staff that worked in it all knew what had happened, and their unease made for whispered conversations in the corridors and hallways, tight mouths and hunched shoulders. Elvi made her way to the ops deck, forcing herself to smile and nod and greet people. She hoped she was being a good leader and projecting optimism. She was afraid that she just seemed fake.

Harshaan Lee was in ops, reviewing the dataset from Cara's aborted dive. She moved beside him, looking over his shoulder. He shifted to the side, giving her a better view.

"She says there was someone else in there with her," Elvi said.

"Hallucinogenic presences are very common. It can be induced with a few magnetic impulses to the temporoparietal region of the right lobe."

"Of course, we weren't doing that," Elvi said.

"That doesn't mean something else wasn't."

"Or maybe her right temporoparietal region was firing off because someone was in there with her. Sometimes you see your grandmother because you're dreaming. Sometimes you see her because you're at Grandma's house."

"It is a conundrum," Lee said dryly. Then, "May I touch on a less pleasant subject?"

Elvi didn't say no. Lee took it as consent.

"I don't mean to step out of my place, but I think we're starting to have a morale issue with the crew. I was hoping you'd consider making an

address.”

“What kind of issue?”

He shook his head like he was apologizing for his own words, and he kept his voice low. “We are the only ship in a solar system. Half a dozen tightbeam boosters, couple of repeaters at the ring gate itself, and an alien artifact big enough that if we stood on it, the gravity would crush us. That’s all there is. There isn’t even a dust cloud we could mine for ice.”

“Are we short on supplies?”

“No. But when something... odd happens with the research protocol, there is a kind of multiplier. It reminds us just how tenuous our position is here. If the water recycler broke down in a way we couldn’t fix... It would be a long, hard burn getting someplace that could give us aid before we died of thirst, and we might not make it. If it was the air recycler, we’d die. There is no one who can reroute to our aid. We all understood that when we began the mission. But some days, we understand it more clearly than others, if you see what I mean.”

She reminded herself again that the vibration in her body wasn’t fear. She was just tired, with one critical thing more that she needed to do. “Of course, I’ll address the crew. Just let me think about what to say. And thank you for bringing this to me.”

“Of course, Doctor.”



She hadn’t started in physics. It was possible to spend a whole lifetime in the biological sciences and only have a nodding acquaintance with pure physics. It wasn’t possible to be the head of the Laconian Science Directorate without getting her feet wet, if *wet* meant abstract high-energy physical dynamics. One of the things she’d known without fully appreciating was that the second law of thermodynamics was the only one that cared about the direction of time. The heat death of the universe had mostly been a joke about how long her thesis was taking. The idea that heat was intimately related to time hadn’t seemed strange, and some aspects of

the high weirdness of the alien rings had escaped her.

The man on her wall screen was David Trujillo, and at four hours into his presentation, three and a half of which had been a careful and painstaking walk through a forest of explanations and justifications for which mathematical techniques his team had used in interpreting the data, he was getting to the phase she thought of as *dumbing it down for the biologist*.

“The key is the difference between the reactions provoked by the magnetic field generator in Sol system and the *lack* of provoked response in the ring space itself. We’ve been aware of the energetic amplification effect of ring gate technology. For example, energy sent into the ring station causes a release of high-energy particles through the gates, and the energy of this release is orders of magnitude greater than the initiating event. This asymmetry was exploited in the design of the field generator. The assumption was that this was a borrowing of energy from someplace else within complex local space-time. If, as these results suggest, that’s not accurate, and if the ring gate space is a bounded membrane within an alocal, acontiguous space-time—”

“Is he saying something?” Faye asked from the other side of the cabin. “Because he sounds like he’s just barking.”

Faye was exercising, strapped against the wall by resistance bands and pushing against them the way she should have been. When this was over, her bone density was going to be a problem. That was for another day.

“I’m sorry. I’ll listen on private.”

“No, no. This is me starting a conversation. Getting attention from my sweetheart. Mocking the guy she’s paying attention to by saying how he’s barking.”

“He’s barking about something.”

“Are you sure?”

She stopped the report playback and stretched.

“When the *Tempest* destroyed the defenses on the alien station in the ring space,” Elvi said, “the enemy didn’t respond. When it destroyed Pallas Station, everyone in Sol system lost consciousness, and one of the bullets showed up on the *Tempest*. Trujillo thinks it shows that the ring space isn’t part of our universe.”

Faye relaxed, the bands pulling him back against the wall. He pushed

out again, grunting. “I didn’t know there was an option.”

“The field generator uses antimatter as a primer, but there’s not enough power in a couple handfuls of antimatter to spaghettify a station. The design was developed based on the half-built ship or whatever it was that was in the construction platforms when they were turned on.”

“The one they called the *Proteus*?”

“Basically, it makes a tiny, transitory ring gate, which releases just a lot of energy for free. And apparently, it’s violating entropy. Which means time.”

“Entropy only runs one direction. Primary school physics requires three hours of barking?”

“He’s saying wherever it’s getting that energy from doesn’t play by our rules.”

“We knew that, though.”

“We suspected it.”

“Do we know it now?”

“We suspect it harder,” Elvi said. “We’re scientists. We only know things until someone shows us we’re wrong.”

Fayez chuckled, strained, relaxed. He was waiting for her to laugh with him, but she didn’t have it in her. Worry bloomed on his forehead and the angle of his lips. “Are you all right?”

“There were two more.”

He stopped, looked at her, and shrugged off the straps. “Two more what?”

“Events. Galbraith system saw a transitory change in lightspeed.”

“How long did it last?”

“Literally an unanswerable question, but about an hour. Bara Gaon lost consciousness for eighteen minutes. The people who went through it said there was no halo effect, no visual disturbances, just”—she snapped her fingers—“eighteen minutes later.”

“That’s new.”

“It’s all new. It’s all experiments, and none of them are mine. And those are just the ones we know about. If the poking and prodding wasn’t someplace we know to look for it, it could be happening much more often. It could be happening right here, right now.”

He pushed off through the cabin. She was ready to bristle at his touch,

too tense for the extra burden of physical contact. He only braced beside her and looked at Trujillo's face, paused on the playback.

"How's Cara?" Fayez asked.

"Fine. She seems fine. I'm a little concerned about these others she's talking about. I know she and Xan are connected somehow at the back, and there are other things back there. Amos Burton went through the same thing they did, and if she's connected with him through the same bridge that's... That man's head isn't a place I'd want to live. But..."

He didn't push. He let the silence do it for him. Elvi sighed.

"I'm getting a picture," she said. "I'm starting to understand what built the rings, and how their minds worked. Or mind. Even when I don't understand how their technology works, I'm starting to see the obstacles they were trying to overcome, and that's actually a pretty good starting point. But..."

"But you're wondering how that can be good enough, when the thing they were fighting against killed them and is coming for us."

"There's so much about that I don't understand. What the bullets are."

"Scars where their attempts to break us permanently fuck up part of reality?"

"Sure. Maybe. But how? What does it do? How do they work? Can we use them to get back to wherever these things are? And how come sometimes they black out one system at a time, and then other times, it's everywhere? Why do they blow off locality and then leave a scar or bullet or whatever it is that's in a place and tied to a local frame of reference?"

"And how do you stop them?"

Elvi wiped away a weary tear. "And how do I stop them. Everything's riding on this. Earth, Mars, Laconia, Bara Gaon, Auberon... They all die if I don't solve this."

"If someone doesn't solve this," Fayez said. "We're one ship, and we're on a very promising track. But we're not the only ones looking."

They were silent together, only the hum of the ship around them. She shifted, putting her head against his arm. He curled toward her, kissing her ear. "When was the last time you slept?"

"What's this sleep you speak of? Sounds nice."

He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her gently through the cabin to the sandwich board where she slept when a sack against the wall

wasn't enough. She didn't undress, just slipped between the slabs of gel and let them clamp gently down on her, holding her in place like a giant hand. It was the closest analog to climbing into bed under a pile of blankets, and as soon as he dimmed the lights to a sunset red-gold, she felt sleep rushing up for her like she was falling. Like she was capable of falling.

"You need anything?" he asked, and his voice was soft as a sand dune washed by a breeze. Despite everything, Elvi smiled.

"Stay with me until I fall asleep?"

"My mission in life," Fayez said.

She let her eyes close and her mind wander. She wondered what it would be like to have Fayez in her private mind the way Xan and Cara, and maybe Burton, were in each other's. It had to have some physical element, some center or locus of control that used the same alocal effects that let the gate builders stay connected, neuron analog to neuron analog, through whatever strange dimensions they'd traveled. Maybe if she compared brain morphology, she could find it. Real-time communication between systems would change everything. Assuming anyone was still alive to talk.

She was on the edge of dream, half convinced that the *Falcon* had a university campus in it and that she was preparing to give a lecture, when she roused and chuckled.

"Yes?" Fayez said, still there.

"Lee wants me to give the crew a pep talk. Help shore up morale. I told him I would."

"Any idea what you want to say?"

"No clue," she sighed.

Chapter Fifteen: Teresa

Time was a problem. Time was always a problem.

It started, she had learned, with the fact that simultaneity was an illusion, and “the same time” on different planets in different systems was mostly an accounting convenience that only functioned because most people were moving relatively slowly compared to lightspeed. But beyond that, the measurements of time were embedded in history. An hour had sixty minutes because mathematicians in ancient Babylon had worked in a sexagesimal system. A year was the time it took Earth to make a full transit around Sol, and that mattered even though Teresa had never been to Earth and almost certainly never would. Like the number of minutes in an hour, the width of a centimeter, the volume of a liter, the length of a year was the marker by which humanity told the story of itself.

And so, because an old planet in another system was in more or less the same position relative to its star now as it had been during the siege of Laconia, Teresa Duarte was going to wake up sixteen years old instead of fifteen. And because of how quickly that same planet spun on its axis, it was still early morning, and she was in her quarters on the *Roci*, drifting between wakefulness and dream.

One of the things she’d grown to like about living on the *Rocinante* was the way it made the cycles of daylight and darkness arbitrary. If the crew had decided that every day lasted thirty hours, then it did. If night and day cycled through six hours at a time, then that was true. That they didn’t was a choice, and the fact that it was a choice was strangely wonderful. It would have been easy to become unmoored, and it turned out she liked being unmoored. The ability to drift was delicious. Now, lying on a couch in thrust gravity a fraction of what she’d felt growing up, she was aware of the cool gray walls, the almost-dark lit only by her handheld’s standby light. At the same time, she was also on Laconia, in a secondary machine shop that

opened off her old bedroom and didn't really exist, building something that changed every time she roused a little and slid back down. Dreams of other spaces—secret rooms, hidden passages, forgotten access shafts—had become common for her in the last months. They were probably symbolic of something. She was just fitting a wire lead into a vacuum channel adapter when the dream changed, shifting under her like she'd switched to a different feed.

She was still in her real quarters, could see the real walls and light, but they were augmented by black spirals whose fine detail she was more aware of than the dim light could justify. They seemed to weave and reweave themselves as she watched them. Filaments of black thread that reached out, found each other, built together into a new shape that was also part of the old one. Tiny blue lights wove in and out of the constantly remade spirals too, glimmering like fireflies. As hypnagogic hallucinations went, it was probably the most beautiful her brain had ever come up with. She felt like she could watch the black spirals forever and never get bored.

Her father stood beside them, looking down at her. His eyes were a perfect blue that they hadn't been in reality. He was smiling. Teresa closed her eyes, willing herself to wake up. This wasn't a dream she wanted to have. When she opened them again, the spirals were gone, but her father was still there. He looked strange. His hair was longer than he'd worn it, and though he was in the tunic and trousers Kelly had dressed him in back on Laconia, he wasn't wearing shoes.

She sat up slowly, careful of the low gravity. The dream didn't fade.

"Teresa," he said, and his voice was like water to someone dying of thirst. Tears began to sheet her eyes.

"Father," she said, and even though she could feel the vibrations in her throat—even though she was almost certainly really speaking out loud—he didn't vanish. The sense of being awake grew in her. The sluggishness of dreams loosened its grip, but his image didn't fade. Not yet.

"Happy birthday," he said. "Everything is going to be all right."

She wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. "It's not, though," she whispered.

"It will. I only need a little more time, and we will all be together. I dreamed too small before. I can see better now. You'll see better too."

Teresa shook her head, and a sharp knock came at the door.

“You decent?” Alex’s muffled voice said.

“Yes,” she said, and the door opened a crack. For a moment, it seemed like her dream and her reality would come together face-to-face, but as the light spilled in, her father blinked back into nothingness. She wiped her eyes again, trying to hide that she’d been crying.

“Hey there,” Alex said. “We’ve got some grub. You hungry?”

“Sure,” Teresa said. “Give me a minute.”

Alex nodded and retreated, but Muskrat nosed the door open and hopped in, barely constrained by her own weight. Her brown eyes shifted around the room like she was looking for something, and she whined softly.

“It’s okay, old lady,” Teresa said. “Everything’s fine.”

It was almost true. Well, it was less untrue than it might have been, anyway. The *Rocinante* was almost at the New Egypt ring gate, and while the *Sparrowhawk*—far back down the local sun’s gravity well—apparently hadn’t died, it also was far enough that even a killing burn wouldn’t have been able to catch up with them. About to make a transit without a clear idea of the traffic through the ring space, and with the Laconian military chasing them but out of firing range, was as close to okay as Teresa could expect these days. But Timothy—Amos—had defied death again, Muskrat was still with her, and she wasn’t at a religious boarding school at the ass end of nowhere.

She was surprised how relieved the plan’s failure left her. The immediate aftermath had been fear and shock. The horror of seeing Amos’ shattered body, the violence of the firefight, the anxiety of wondering whether the *Sparrowhawk* would risk firing on them to get her back. But as soon as that had passed, she’d found herself smiling more. She was still here, and it wasn’t even her fault.

When she went out to the galley, the crew of the *Rocinante* were standing around a little table with a sad, yellow-white cake. It had two candles printed from medical resin in the shapes of a one and a six. The flames were almost spheres. It was pathetic.

“It’s pretty much the same yeast and fungus as everything else,” Naomi said. “But it’s got sugar and it looks nice.”

“It’s... You’re all very kind,” Teresa said. There was a knot in her throat that she didn’t understand. Maybe gratitude, maybe sorrow, maybe the chaotic wake of the powerful dream of her father. Amos and Jim started a

little song, and Naomi and Alex joined in, clapping along. It felt cheap and small and unimaginative, but it was also an effort they had put out for her that they didn't have to. When Alex told her to make a wish and blow out the candles, she just blew them out. She couldn't think of anything to wish for.

Amos plucked the resin candles out and dropped them into the recycler while Naomi cut the cake and Jim handed out bulbs of tea and coffee.

"Not a traditional breakfast," Naomi said, handing a corner piece to Teresa. "But we wanted to take a moment before the Freehold transit. Once we get in the shipyard, we'll be busy."

"Anything the ship needs, we better get now," Jim agreed.

Her last birthday had been in a ballroom of the State Building. The most important people in the vast spread of humanity had been there, and Teresa had been one of them. Her father had already been wrecked by the catastrophe that had destroyed the *Typhoon* and Medina Station, and she had felt the weight of the empire on her shoulders. She'd known what to wish for then. A way out. And now here she was, her wish granted. It wasn't at all what she'd imagined it would be.

She took a bite of the cake and it was... fine. Inoffensive. A little too dense, a little too dry, but fine. It wasn't made by the best bakers in a thousand worlds vying to impress their god-emperor. It wasn't preceded by a formal speech crafted to give the right political signals or followed by a presentation of ostentatious gifts that she didn't care about and wouldn't remember a week later. She couldn't imagine an experience less like the ones she'd had before. Even if they'd ignored her birthday, it would have been more familiar. There had been any number of times she'd felt ignored while standing in the spotlight.

Muskrat put a wet nose against her arm and barked a soft, conversational bark. Teresa broke off a corner of her cake and passed it over. The dog chewed loudly and with enthusiasm.

"What's up?" Jim said, and it took her a moment to realize he was talking to her.

"Nothing," she said. "Why?"

"You sighed."

"I did?"

Alex nodded. "You did."

“It’s nothing,” she said. “I was thinking about how different this is from last year. That’s all.”

“Not exactly the best Sweet Sixteen ever,” Alex said with a grimace. “This should have been the big one.”

“What are you talking about?” Jim said. “Last year was the big one. Quinceañera. Sweet Sixteen isn’t a thing.”

“Maybe not where you come from,” Alex said. “Mars, it was sixteen.”

Naomi scowled in affable confusion at Jim. “You mean quinsé? How do you know about that?”

Amos smiled an empty, friendly smile that meant he didn’t know or care what the others were talking about but he was willing to let them go on about it for a while. Sometimes he reminded her of a huge, patient dog in a crowd of puppies.

“Fifteenth birthday. Quinceañera,” Jim said. “It’s the big rite-of-passage birthday for a lot of Earth. Father Caesar was all about mine. We had a tent and a live band, and I had to wear a tailored suit and learn a dance. A bunch of people I barely knew put money in my educational account. It was fun in a mildly humiliating way.”

“Huh,” Naomi said. “I thought quinsé began in the Belt.”

“Did you have a dance?”

“There was dancing. And drinking.”

“Drinking at fifteen?” Alex said.

“Fifteen was the age when your parents lost their customs credit exemption and went back to paying full taxes and fees. So that was the age we usually took our first jobs. At least before the Transport Union. Pa changed the credit age to seventeen. But the party stayed the same.”

“So you left your parents when you were fifteen?” Teresa said.

“Before that,” Naomi said. “I didn’t know my father, and my mother had a long-term contract on a freighter that didn’t accept children. I was mostly with my tías. Some of them I was related to, but most I wasn’t.”

“I didn’t really know my mother,” Teresa said. “She died when I was young.”

“That’s hard,” Naomi said as if she was agreeing with something. Teresa waited for the next question. *How did she die?* She was sorry now that she’d brought it up. But no one pushed.

“I don’t know about any of that,” Alex said. “In Mariner Valley, it was

Sweet Sixteen. Unless it was thirteen. There was some of that too.”

“That why you were so pissed that we missed Kit’s?” Amos asked.

Alex looked down, a flash of pain covered over almost instantly by a good-humored ruefulness. “Me and Giselle were pretty much at our worst about then. Staying scarce was the right thing to do, but yeah. I was awfully sorry to miss it.”

Teresa took the last mouthful of her cake, to Muskrat’s visible disappointment. She’d spent most of a year with these four people. And after the epic failure that leaving her with her cousin on New Egypt had turned out to be, probably the next year too. Others had come and gone, but this central crew had remained the constant. Listening to them talk now was listening in on the idle chatter of a family. But it was a family she didn’t belong to. Part of that was that none of them was anything close to her age. When they talked about the time before the ring gates, it was like watching an old entertainment feed. The idea of all humanity trapped in a single system made her feel almost claustrophobic. It meant something different to them, and she could make out aspects of what that was. Her understanding would never mesh with theirs.

She watched Amos. He didn’t talk about birthdays or parents. Of the four, he was the one most like her—on the edge of the conversation. But he was comfortable there. He was comfortable anywhere.

She would never have what they did. Her experiences were only her own. No one else anywhere had lived the way she had, and people who had been closest to her were all back on Laconia or else dead. Other people could tie their stories together with analogies and patterns, how one person’s childhood birthday was like someone else’s, but her life had been too different. Nowhere in the universe would she find a table full of people whose fathers had groomed them to take control of humanity’s fate, who had been offered immortality and turned it down, whose private life had been synonymous with the function of a galaxy-spanning state.

The only hope she had was to find a place and start building, not a normal life but a comprehensible one. Then wait until it was all in the past and she could tell warm, shareable stories about it.

Even the idea was exhausting.

The alert was a polite chime. The ship letting them know that the moment had passed and the next thing was coming. They cleaned up the

detritus of the cake breakfast, and Alex gave her a brief, awkward side hug before he led Jim and Naomi toward the lift. She and Muskrat followed Amos down toward engineering.

“They mean well,” Teresa said.

“Yup.”

In engineering, Amos gave Muskrat a treat and took her to the canine couch while Teresa strapped herself in. The air smelled of silicone lubricant and the thin, harsh ozone that the ceramic printers gave off. It reminded her of the smell of rain, but without the minty tones, and it comforted her. How strange to have been in a place long enough that the smell of it felt like home. Or maybe she wouldn’t have felt that way except that she’d nearly lost it to a bunch of Presbyterians.

The transit out of New Egypt and into Freehold would go quickly. In theory, any two gates could be connected by a straight line, so that the angle at which a ship entered one could be set such that it didn’t need a braking burn. In practice, most ships came in slow, and often made their course corrections when they were fully in the ring space and could see their targets. Something about shooting blind through a gateway they couldn’t see, when missing it meant instant and utter annihilation, made the limbic systems of most pilots light up in a very bad way. This particular transit was in the sweet spot—not too far, but also not too steep an angle. If something did go wrong, the *Roci* would have time to shift its trajectory and exit some other ring.

At their present speed, the gap between gates would be brief, and the transits themselves wouldn’t be noticeable—one moment they would be in the eerie non-space of the ring gates, the next falling toward a distant star with the familiar universe around them. Amos strapped himself in across from her, scratching idly at his chest where the gunshot had opened him.

“Does it bother you?” she asked.

He looked over, his dark eyes wide and strangely innocent. Like a stuffed animal’s. She pointed at his chest as the countdown to transit began. Alex’s voice, professional with just the barest hint of anxiety.

“I don’t know,” Amos said. “Not really. I don’t like being dead, so...” He shrugged. “It is different, though.”

Alex reached zero, and Teresa imagined she felt a moment’s vertigo, but it was almost certainly psychosomatic. When Amos spoke again, his voice

was calm and amiable. One of the things she liked about him was that he never had the faint condescension of generic concern. “You’re thinking about your dad?”

“You didn’t choose what happened to you. How you changed. He did. And I don’t know which of you I’m more like, you know? I chose to leave. To be here. But there are so many things that I can’t—”

“We have a problem,” Naomi said over the ship-wide. “Stand by, and stay strapped.”

“Got you,” Amos said, but he was already pulling a mirror of the tactical controls onto the wall screen. Freehold system appeared, simplified by the shorthand of graphic design into something comprehensible. The sun. Freehold itself and the single other inner planet. The three gas giants. A dozen prospecting ships, mostly in the asteroid belt or the gas giant’s moons. Teresa looked for what had made Naomi’s voice so hard, and it took her a moment to find it.

The *Gathering Storm* was a Laconian destroyer, stolen by Roberta Draper. It was the flagship of the underground’s clandestine fleet, the tip of the spear during the siege of Laconia that had been Teresa’s own escape. To Admiral Trejo and the rest of the Laconian Navy, it was a humiliation and a thorn. A reminder of a string of losses. To the underground, it was a symbol of the empire’s vulnerability. It was the ship that might slip through any gate at any time, bringing the underground’s power to bear on any lesser ship, almost more powerful as a story than as a fighting vessel.

But the Laconian destroyer on the tactical display in low orbit around Freehold wasn’t the *Gathering Storm*.

Chapter Sixteen: Tanaka

The school medic looked like his voice had broken about half an hour before. If Tanaka hadn't known better, she'd have thought he was a student, not staff. He had dark skin, full lips, and hair cut close to the skull. In other circumstances, she'd have found him very pretty. As it was, she kind of hated him. For one thing, he was nervous with her. Every sentence he spoke rose at the end, so no matter how straightforward or obvious the statement, he bent it into a question. Also, some part of her limbic system had noticed that every time he was around, something happened that hurt or annoyed her. Changing dressings on her ruined cheek, needle sticks for the blood draws and support meds, scans in the school's antiquated autodoc. Something.

Worst of all, she probably owed her life to him.

Her men—Mugabo's strike team that she'd appropriated—were stripped of their equipment and buried already. Winston Duarte himself had ended the custom of bringing the dead back to Laconia for burial. *All soil is Laconian soil* had been the message then. Even with the profuse bleeding of head and face wounds, it would have been hard for her to hemorrhage to death on the dirt of Abbassia. But if someone had come and put a bullet in her, they'd have had a pretty good chance of blaming the murder on Holden and whatever the fuck his ship mechanic had become. She didn't remember being found or brought into the medical station. She didn't know if the medic had hesitated or if he'd been resolute to his Hippocratic oath. She did know without doubt that she had been vulnerable before him, that he had held her life in his young, unscarred hands. She hated him for that.

"I would very much recommend against any high-g maneuvers for at least three weeks?" he said as she packed her few remaining belongings into a sack. "Regrowth gel is very difficult on something that moves as much as a cheek?"

“I will have the very best care available,” she said, enunciating each word separately through the numbed ruins of her mouth. Holden’s bullet had cost her three upper teeth on the left side and most of her right cheek. There were microfractures from her palate up to her left orbital, and she was having headaches that left her swimming with pain. Those might have come from the fight with the black-eyed mechanic, though. Once enough things got fucked up in her skull, there wasn’t much point assigning an origin story to each of them.

“I think it would be wiser to wait? Another week to give the gel time to bond?”

Tanaka didn’t dignify that with a reply. Her armor was out in the courtyard, packed neatly for recovery along with what was salvageable from the dead fire team, and she walked out of the infirmary to join it, with the medic trailing behind her like a wisp of tissue stuck to her boot. The transport cart from the *Sparrowhawk* was a plume of dust, still half a klick from the campus. The faculty and staff of the academy watched her from their windows and doors with a mixture of fear and disapproval. She was the woman who’d swept down from the sky and locked them all away while their school turned into a free fire zone. An honorary degree would have been a little much to expect.

She smiled at the thought, then winced.

When the cart arrived, Mugabo was on it. His practiced formality was as crisp as a starched shirt. He braced and saluted her. It actually made her feel better. More herself. While his little crew loaded the arms and armor of their dead, Mugabo stood at her side, head tilted forward.

“You took your damn time,” she said.

“My apologies. The damage we sustained made atmospheric entry problematic, and your transport ship was... Unfortunately, we were forced to salvage certain equipment from it. I am very sorry for the delay.”

“Where do the repairs stand?”

Mugabo nodded, not meaning anything positive other than that he’d heard the question. “While the damage is significant, I am confident we can continue safely. My chief mechanic recommends a return to Laconia for resupply.”

“Are we short of something?”

“The composites that feed the hull are understandably diminished.”

“Meaning the self-repair functions aren’t working.”

“The hull’s integrity is within the error bars,” Mugabo said. She liked the way he deflected. He didn’t want to go to Laconia, his chief mechanic did. His ship wasn’t broken unless Tanaka was willing to permit it to be. There had always been that thread in the tapestry of Laconian culture: the willingness to assert whatever reality your commanding officer proposed. She wondered what Mugabo’s internal life was like. Did he have a reserve of freedom and perversity hidden inside, the way she did, or was he the same blankness all the way down?

She swung herself into the front seat beside the driver and looked out over the school. The battlefield. She’d lost here—lost her fire team, her target, her blood, and her flesh. Part of her reputation. And she’d lost it because she had been too slow to reach for violence. Teresa Duarte was precious—a resource of one. Irreplaceable. Holden had been willing to risk her where Tanaka had not. Lesson learned.

Part of her wanted to drop a missile on the school grounds from orbit and erase the site. She could do it. A few lives wiped out—including that fucking medic—and no one would prosecute her for it. The only consequence would be that people would know she’d done it. They’d guess at the embarrassment and shame that had driven the act.

So fuck it. Let them live.

Mugabo’s team finished the loading and clambered back into their places on the cart. Some peculiarity of the atmosphere refracted the sunlight into six bands like a child’s picture of a star. She remembered something she’d heard once: *I’d strike the sun if it insulted me*. She didn’t know where the line came from. It didn’t matter. She had a hunt to complete.

“We can go,” she said.

“Yes, sir,” Mugabo replied, and the cart lurched, turned, and sped away toward the landing point. The wind of their passage tasted like dirt. She took comfort in the knowledge that she could live a full, rich life and never once come back to this shithole of a planet. The thought helped, if only a little.

When they were back on the *Sparrowhawk* and burning for the ring gate, she submitted herself to the medical team. Walking into the infirmary of her own free will and not flinching as they made their examination pulled some of the sting of her first experience of the wounds. By the time they’d

checked the wound on her scalp, scraped the local regrowth gel out of her cheek, sewn a matrix in place, and put their own gel on, she felt better. It hurt badly, but showing them and herself that the pain was incidental was almost soothing. Mortification of the flesh had a long and glorious history among performance artists and religious zealots. She didn't think of herself as either, but maybe there was some overlap.

The new nerve endings itched, and her head throbbed if she stood up too quickly when they were under thrust. Otherwise, she was ready to get back to work, starting with her after-action report. She sat at the little desk in her office, and while the air recycler hummed and the vibrations of the drive fluted gently through the ship, she recounted the failed mission in careful, exacting detail. It was the moral equivalent of the gel scrape. Proof that she could take this pain too. She sent it to Trejo like an atheist confessing her sins. The ritual of cleansing with only a little vestigial sense of actually being clean. After that was done, the work.

In the time it had taken to put herself and the ship back together, the *Rocinante* had built up an impossible lead, burning past the one incoming merchant ship, the gas giants, and out toward the gate fast enough that there was no point laying on the speed to catch them. Whatever system they were going to, they'd be in by the time she reached the ring space. They couldn't outrun light, though. She sent the drive signature and silhouette of the ship's disguise out ahead, spreading the information to every system where the Laconian repeaters hadn't been spiked recently. Wherever Holden took the girl, Tanaka's forces would know to look for him. Maybe she'd get lucky.

Or maybe she wouldn't.

She spent long days going through reports on the other efforts she'd put into motion. The Science Directorate's analysis of the egg-thing from Laconia was consistent with the idea of an inertialess transport, and they were looking at strategies for tracing it. One theory was that the egg-ship's passage might leave a trail of free neutrons. She'd taken the Survey and Exploration Directorate off all its other work and tasked it with a report of all known alien structures in all systems. If Duarte had gone someplace, it was almost certain to be one of these. Activity in any of them would give her somewhere to start. But so far, no joy. Her orders to the Intelligence Directorate—checking on any close associates or former lovers of the high consul in case they'd suffered a visitation like Trejo's—resulted in a report

that was equal parts bureaucratic obfuscation and dead ends.

The whole thing left her angry. That was fine. Anger was comfortable. It was useful. She understood it.

She could remember to the moment the last time she'd felt self-pity. She'd been eleven years old and living in Innis Deep. Her parents had both died that year. Her mother had discovered something about her husband she couldn't live with, and one night she sabotaged the air system in their quarters and suffocated both of them as they slept. Tanaka had been sent to stay with her aunt Akari for the night. She wound up living there for the rest of her childhood. If her aunt knew what it was that had sent her mother into a murder-suicide rage, she never told.

Moving meant changing schools, and the transition combined with the unexplained loss of her parents had been difficult. One day after school, her aunt had found her sitting on her bed and crying. She demanded to know why. Tanaka admitted that a girl at her school had slapped her face and humiliated her.

Aunt Akari knelt down in front of her. She was an MCRN captain, and tall like all the Tanaka women. In her spotless uniform, Aliana thought her aunt looked like a warrior goddess. She'd waited for her to hug her close, then tell her she would take care of everything, the way her mother would have.

Instead, Aunt Akari had asked which cheek had been slapped. When Aliana pointed at it, her aunt had slapped her on the same cheek so hard it made her burst into tears again.

"Are you sad, or are you angry?" Aunt Akari had said, her voice gentle but insistent.

"I don't understand—" she had started to reply, when her aunt slapped her again.

"Are you sad, or are you angry?" she'd repeated.

"Why—" Akari slapped her before she could say more.

"Are you sad, or are you angry?"

She had wiped at the water in her eyes, afraid to say anything for fear of another slap. She looked at her beautiful but stern aunt's face, staring back at her without pity or compassion.

"Angry," Aliana finally said, and was surprised to discover it was true.

"Good," her aunt said, then stood up and held out her hand to pull

Aliana up off the bed. “Anger I can do something with. Sadness, fear, self-pity, self-doubt? They are inwardly focused. They keep you locked inside yourself. They’re useless. Anger is outwardly focused. Anger wants to take action. Anger is useful. Are you ready to use it?”

Aliana had nodded. It seemed safer than speaking.

“Then I’ll show you how.”

And she had.



Mugabo stood, arms behind him, with the same banal and pleasant almost-smile as always. “We have come near enough to the ring gate that it would be best if navigation knew where they should chart for.”

Tanaka leaned back in her seat. Her head hurt, but a little less than usual and she hadn’t taken the pain medication. Wouldn’t unless she needed it to function. The regrowth of her damaged bone ached, and the flesh of her cheek was slowly reknitting. The teeth would take a while. They needed something a little more solid to anchor to. That was fine.

Returning to Laconia was almost certainly the right thing, but it felt like admitting defeat. She had put it off until now, and she still chafed at the idea. She pressed at her broken orbit with the tips of her fingers, checking to see how hard she could push before the pain came.

“For the time being,” she began, “we should assume that the ship resupply will—”

Her comms chimed. A high-priority message had just arrived from the Laconia system. From Admiral Trejo. She let whatever she’d meant to say trail off and die, then looked up at Mugabo. He raised his eyebrows a millimeter like the waiter at an expensive restaurant waiting to see whether she approved of the wine.

“Let me get back to you on that, Captain,” she said.

“Of course,” he said with a sharp, professional nod. If he was annoyed at being put off yet again, he didn’t show it. She had the sense that she could prevaricate and delay forever and never get more than polite acceptance and

a repeat of the question an hour later. Mugabo was a man without passions as far as she could tell. He'd wear her down like water eroding a stone.

He closed the door behind him, and Tanaka put her system on a do-not-disturb setting that would keep anyone from intruding. Trejo's message wasn't large, but it had a datafile linked to it. A message within the message.

Trejo, looking out from her screen, seemed older than a few weeks could justify. It was all in the tone of his skin and the paleness of his lips, though. His eyes were still as sharp and bright as ever, and his voice belonged to a man thirty years younger than he was. She wondered if he was taking stimulants.

"Colonel," he said, looking into his camera. "I have reviewed your report, and... I think we can agree that could have gone better. We lost some good people on this, and you didn't secure your target. But I'm not sure we came away exactly empty-handed.

"For what it's worth, I would also have expected Nagata to put the girl someplace besides the gunship that the head of the underground was flying. But since she's chosen to keep so many of her eggs in a single basket, certain opportunities may be open to us that wouldn't have been otherwise."

Tanaka scratched her bandages. All she felt was a little pressure. The itch didn't subside at all. Trejo shifted in his chair and vanished. The image before her changed to a grainy visual telescopic view of a ship. It was hardly more than a dark shape against its own drive plume.

"I wanted to pass this along." Trejo's voice was calmer than she was. "It's from the *Derecho*. Botton's commanding it on a mission in Freehold system. Traffic analysis thinks they've still got the *Storm* hidden there, and he's trying to flush it out. A ship made an unscheduled transit into the system in the time period your alert specified. It's the right tonnage for the *Rocinante*, and the drive signature... Well, it doesn't match, but it's close enough that they could be running it dirty to throw us off. Thermally, it's the same story. Close enough to be faked. And the silhouette is very close. It reports—"

Tanaka stopped the playback. Her heart was going fast, and she was trying hard not to grin. It would hurt like hell if she did, and maybe even dislodge some of the regrowth matrix. But oh, she wanted to.

Mugabo accepted her comm request as soon as she'd made it.

“Colonel?”

“Resupply is going to have to wait,” she said. “We’re going to rendezvous with the *Derecho* in Freehold system. All deliberate speed.”

“Yes, Colonel,” Mugabo said. “I shall inform the navigator.”

She dropped the connection and let herself smile until it hurt just a little, savoring the moment. She tabbed Trejo’s message back and started it playing again.

“... silhouette is very close. It reports itself to be a survey ship on contract out of Auberon, and there’s a paper trail to support that. But Auberon system is so deeply infiltrated by the underground, I have to take that fact very, very lightly. I don’t know if this is a lead you’ll choose to follow, but it looks promising to me. And if it is Teresa Duarte’s ship, and if Teresa’s ship is James Holden and Naomi Nagata’s... Well, then I might have a strategy we can try.”

Tanaka leaned forward. There was something in Trejo’s voice that caught her. She didn’t know if it was regret or anticipation or something of both.

“Everything we’ve done with these people up to now has been less effective than I’d hoped. They’re smart, and worse than that, they’re fortunate. I know it sounds like superstition, but some people are just born lucky. I believe that. Regardless, I think there’s some value in changing our tactics. I’ve included a datafile for you to review.”

She opened the datafile in an inset screen. Another image of Trejo sitting at the same desk, speaking in the same cadence. The voices overlapped, each obscuring the other until she killed the inset and rolled back the main message.

“... datafile for you to review. This is your mission, and I’m not looking to steer from the rear on it, but I think this is the right way to go. If you agree, you should use it. We’re at the high-stakes table here. If we don’t finish what Duarte started... Well, I don’t want to go out thinking about all the things I didn’t have the balls to try.”

Chapter Seventeen: Naomi

The captain of the Laconian destroyer *Rising Derecho* had a pleasant face. Thin, high cheeks and a little pencil mustache that reminded Naomi of old entertainment feeds about the fight for Martian independence. His eyes were dark brown, his skin only a little lighter. He had the trick of making threats while being pained at the necessity of doing it. *This hurts me as much as it does you.* A lot of Laconians seemed to have that style. Naomi had to believe that said something about Winston Duarte and how he'd led.

"We have reached the hundred-hour mark. I will restate this again: We know that the *Gathering Storm* is in this system. It must be surrendered to us within the next hundred hours, or we will be forced to act against the civilian population. I beg that the leaders of the underground in this system consider how little they have to gain by their refusal to act, and how much they have to lose."

"They wouldn't really do it, would they?" Alex said. They were on the ops deck together, her and Alex and Jim. Amos and Teresa were in engineering, controlling the automated probes doing pointless make-work tasks on the surface of a small, volcanically active moon that circled one of Freehold's three gas giants.

"They would," Jim said. "More than they would. They will."

"It's civilians," Alex said.

"Yeah, but it's our civilians. So fuck 'em."

Botton looked soulfully into a camera in a warship orbiting a world whose population had grown to almost a hundred thousand over the years. "We are opening the channel to citizens of the city of Freehold in hopes that they will be able to reach your conscience."

The feed shifted to a young man, maybe sixteen years old, standing outside on the planetary surface with a small house in the frame behind him. When he spoke, his voice quavered. "My name is Charles Parker—"

Naomi killed the feed.

Freehold was one of the most important systems in the underground's network. It wasn't particularly well populated or wealthy. Draper Station, hidden on another moon of the same gas giant, was very small as military bases went. But it was the hiding place of the *Gathering Storm*, and that made it central to the underground's strength. Saba had known that would be true, back when Naomi had only been one of his chief lieutenants and not herself the center of the resistance to Laconia's empire. There were plans in place for how to keep Draper Station hidden when a Laconian presence was in-system. It was why the *Roci* had been ready at a moment's notice to pass itself off as the *Sidpai* operating out of Auberon. There was even a contract back in Auberon system to support the story, and a workplan backdated to seem it had been filed three months earlier that detailed the *Sidpai*'s mission to survey four sites in Freehold for possible mineral extraction. The second of the four was Draper Station, and they would make their approach to it when it was conveniently obscured from the *Derecho*'s direct line of sight.

The protocol now was to be what they pretended. Land where they said they'd be landing. Send out probes. Pull in data. Watch for signs that they'd been identified, and be ready to run like hell for the gate again if they were. Another transit to another system and hopefully no watchful Laconian eyes.

More traffic. More violence. No solutions. There were moments when it was easy to lose sight of all the progress the underground had made in hauling back the worst of Laconia's bad ideas and power. She only hoped that somewhere in the bowels of Laconia, Admiral Trejo felt at least as frustrated as she did.

When she went to make a request, Amos' comms were already open. "How's it going out there?"

She could almost hear the big man shrug. "If we were really getting paid for this, we wouldn't be covering the union in glory. But for a couple part-timers who don't usually run this kind of job? Pretty good."

"How long would it take to get all the equipment back into the barn?"

"Couple hours."

Jim looked over at her. "We're scheduled to be here for two more days."

"We did really, really good work, and got all the data we needed early," Naomi said. "Corporate back on Auberon will probably give us bonuses."

Haul it all back in, Amos. We need to leave.”

“You got it,” he said. She heard his voice over the comms as he turned to Teresa. *Playtime’s over. Time to pick up the toys.* He sounded almost like the man she’d known before he’d changed. Before they’d all changed, one way and another.

“I’ll get you some course options,” Alex said as he unstrapped and headed for the flight deck.

“Thank you,” Naomi said. She pulled up the comms and prepared the fake captain of the *Sidpai* to generate a report to the Laconians. She could almost imagine being a survey crew trying to keep its head down and finish its contract in the shadow of war crimes about to be committed. It was always like this. People trying to get their work done even while atrocities were blooming around them. Avoid eye contact and hope that the fire doesn’t spread to you and yours.

Jim sighed. “We’re going to have to do something about this. Not sure what it is, but... something.”

He seemed confused by her smile. “It’s why I’m moving the transfer up. We’ll figure it out.”

The acknowledgment from the *Derecho* came two hours later, and a human being hadn’t touched it. One ship system talking to another, as smooth and lacking in intention as meshing gears in a clockwork. The *Derecho* was looking for the *Storm*. The *Roci* wasn’t the *Storm*. And even if they were under suspicion, the Laconian strategy didn’t change. They had a gun to Charles Parker’s head and a hundred thousand heads like his, and a timer ticking down toward zero. If the *Sidpai* was a little sketchy, none of that changed.

The transit to Draper Station was a little brilliancy that showed how good Alex had become as a pilot. It followed a flowing path that exploited the gravity of the gas giant’s moons in their relative orbits, did nothing that looked out of place or implausible, and still landed the *Roci* with the body of the target moon obscuring the *Derecho*, and the gas giant keeping any ship coming in from the gate from seeing exactly where they landed.

With the strict comms blackout that protocol required, Naomi wasn’t certain what they’d find when they got there. When the first, almost inaudible navigation pings came, it felt like relief. Alex guided them into the hidden base gracefully. For the years he’d been Bobbie’s pilot, this had

been his home, and his intimacy with it showed in the ease of their passage. The *Storm* was in the secret dock along with two little in-system rock hoppers. The *Roci* edged into an open berth, the docking clamps locking on with a deep, gentle clank that rang through the ship. To the *Derecho*, it would look like the little survey ship had landed in a lava tube.

Jillian Houston was waiting for them when the airlock doors opened. She was smaller than Naomi thought of her being, pale hair pulled back but long. She wore a uniform-style jacket without insignia or signs of rank. The woman had served in no military besides the one they'd made up together.

The *Derecho* was a little under sixty-three hours from starting its bombardment of the planet, and it showed in her eyes.

"You've come at a difficult time, ma'am," Jillian said.

"I'm sorry there are so many of those," Naomi said.

"My father always says anything worth having is worth fighting for."

Naomi wasn't sure whether the bite in the words was really there or if she was just hearing what she expected. Bobbie had always given Jillian good if sometimes cautious evaluations, had promoted her up to be her second-in-command, and left the *Storm* to her care when she died, but Naomi wasn't Bobbie. The first time the *Roci* had come to Freehold, it had taken Jillian's father away as a prisoner. The alliance between Freehold and the underground had been one of the first steps in pushing back against Laconia, but Naomi couldn't help feeling that there was still a splinter from that first interaction.

"How is your father?" Naomi asked.

"He's planetside, ma'am." It was a prosaic way of saying *He's about to die*.

The others came out behind Naomi, Jim first, then Alex, Amos, and Teresa. Jillian's gaze lingered on Amos long enough that it almost became uncomfortable before she shifted to Alex.

"Good to see you again, Captain," Alex drawled.

"Welcome back, Mr. Kamal," she said, and Alex grinned.

"You keeping the ship in trim?"

"You won't find any dust on her," Jillian said, then shifted her attention back to Naomi. "I didn't know what you needed for the resupply, but your time here's short. I got everything ready that I could. We have some quarters set aside for you to rest. It might be a little loud on your ship."

“I can walk your techs through what we’re short on,” Amos said. “It’s going to be better if we load up and get out quick. Especially since we’re such a crack surveying team now.”

If his appearance unnerved Jillian, she didn’t show it. “Come with me. I’ll get you started.”

The gravity on the moon was hardly more than a suggestion. The rock of the corridors was coated with sealants and braced. None of the stone here had been compressed by a gravity well strong enough to make it hard. Naomi had the sense that she could have dug her way through it with her bare hands like it was packing foam. It was only the human structures that made it feel solid.

The dockworkers and supply techs were a mixed bunch. Naomi recognized old-school OPA by their tattoos and the quick, well-practiced actions that came from a life spent close to vacuum, but there were also younger men and women. People Jillian’s age who had come to the underground from the bottom of gravity wells and made their way here. There were more since the siege of Laconia. The empire’s loss had given a lot of people hope. She wasn’t certain she was one of them.

The *Rocinante* could plausibly stay on their false survey mission for three or four days. That was long enough to top up all their tanks and swap out their air scrubbers and recycling matrix, and do some of the smaller hull repairs. It was long enough that they would be on hand to watch the civilian population of Freehold die.

When the resupply and repairs were all agreed on and the process was underway, fifty-nine hours were left. Naomi went to the quarters Jillian had mentioned: narrow rooms with cots and blankets around a small private galley and head. The *Roci* was more spacious. Jim was curled up, napping. Naomi wanted nothing more than to curl up beside him. Instead, she sent a comm request to Jillian. The reply was directions to her on-base office.

She thought about waking Jim and bringing him along with her. He had a way of smoothing some conversations just by being in the room. But this was her burden to carry. He’d be there later if she needed him.

The office was small, with screens on two walls and the surface of the desk. The parts of the walls not taken up with images of the *Derecho* and Freehold, the security map of the station, the status of the *Storm* and the *Rocinante*, and the environmental status were painted a grayish orange. It

would have looked good with some blue beside it. Jillian, seated, waved her in, and Naomi pulled the door closed behind her.

"I didn't know Freehold was under attack," she said.

Jillian didn't look her in the eye. "The fucker blew out our repeater at the ring and dropped one of their own as soon as they came through. There wasn't a way to raise the red flag. I apologize."

"It wasn't criticism. I'm afraid we've made the situation worse."

"I don't know that's possible. But we do need to talk about our options now that you're here."

Jillian's right hand closed into a fist, then opened, and closed again. It wasn't the only sign of distress, but it was the most obvious one. Naomi breathed into the version of herself that was cold, analytic, and ruthless. She'd never wanted to be a war leader. The universe had insisted.

"You have plans?"

"A plan," Jillian said. "The *Storm* is ready to evacuate. It's already loaded with all the supplies she'll carry and the parts of the station we could take down and stow. We break cover and get the enemy to follow us. Get out through the ring, transit to a different system, and start building a fresh base."

"So abandon Draper entirely?"

"It's not useful for anything but the *Storm*," Jillian said. "And it's less useful for that than it could be."

Naomi frowned, motioning Jillian on.

"Freehold's strategic importance was that no one knew we were here. That's spent now. I don't know if their traffic analysis is better than ours or someone leaked something. Shit, it could just have been a good guess. But they're here. Keeping the base at this point is just holding on out of spite."

"And the *Derecho* might chase you," Naomi said. "Leave the civilians alone and come for you. That's the idea, isn't it?"

"It's the hope. We've got... We've got recording stations in all the major towns. If it does come down to a bloodbath, it won't be a quiet one. We'll hang what they do here around their necks in every system with a radio. They know that too. It might help dissuade them."

"What about direct confrontation? The *Derecho*'s a strong ship, but it's the same class as the *Storm*. We have another gunship now. And if you have any other vessels or planetary defenses to throw in the mix—"

“We can look at it,” Jillian said. “It’s not apples to apples, though. Their ship is fresh and well supplied. And the *Storm*... It’s not in fighting condition. Not the way it should be.”

“Why not?”

“We don’t have the Laconian supplies or the repair equipment or the expertise. And we’ve been running the hell out of her for years. She’s a good ship, but she’s showing some age.”

Naomi heard what Jillian was moving toward. Hinting at, maybe without even being aware she was doing it. The younger woman was talking herself into a story where losing the ship, losing the base, wouldn’t be that bad. She was looking for the way that the massacre could be avoided, even if it meant surrender.

It struck Naomi that desperation could be like a fractal: constantly changing but also the same at every level. The citizens of Freehold, afraid that their last days were upon them. Jillian grasping for any way to save her people. Naomi’s own grinding, frustrated fight to keep ships from going dutchman and build something to rival the authoritarian, vicious empire. Elvi Okoye, risking her life for any way to stop the things from beyond the ring gates and their waves of hostility and weirdness. No matter how far out your point of view, the fear and desperation were the same at every level.

The alert took them both by surprise. Jillian shifted the image from the *Derecho* to the distant ring gate and the comet-bright drive plume of a ship that had just made the transit.

“Were you expecting someone?” Jillian asked as she redirected the base’s passive sensors toward this new target. Naomi didn’t answer. Slowly, the image resolved until the silhouette was almost clear. The ship was Laconian and familiar. And while she would have to query the *Rocinante* for the drive signature, she was already certain that it would match the *Sparrowhawk*.

“It’s from New Egypt,” she said. “It’s hunting us.”

Jillian’s soft exhalation was as good as a curse. If they’d been short on good options before, now they were out. If they tried to run, it meant going past an incoming enemy, and even if they could slip past it, the *Sparrowhawk* would be able to reach the ring gates with them and report back where they’d gone. If they tried to fight, they’d be outmatched.

I’m so sorry was at the back of Naomi’s mouth when Jillian made a soft,

surprised grunt. “What is it?” she asked instead.

“The new ship? It’s transmitting.”

“To the *Derecho*?”

“Not tightbeam,” Jillian said. “It’s broadcast. Just radio spectrum transmission.”

Naomi frowned. Point-to-point tightbeam was more secure than any broadcast, no matter how effective the encryption. The *Sparrowhawk*’s laser might not be strong enough to reach the *Derecho* or it might have lost alignment in the damage the *Roci* had done it. Or...

“Are there other ships in the system?” Naomi asked. “Is it signaling more than just the *Derecho*?”

Jillian pulled the base’s comm controls to her own desk, her fingers dancing over the screen. A scowl drew lines across her forehead and down the sides of her mouth. “Yes, it is. And it’s cleartext. They’re not even hiding it.”

“Is there an address flag? Who are they talking to?”

“You,” Jillian said. “They’re talking to you.” She shifted the comms playback to the larger wall screen.

The de facto leader of the Laconian Empire looked out at them both with startling green eyes and a smile Naomi could only call rueful. When he spoke, he sounded like a reed instrument, played softly.

“This message is for Naomi Nagata. My name is Anton Trejo. I think you know who I am and the situation we’re both in. It’s past time that you and I talk. I would like to propose an alliance...”

Chapter Eighteen: Jim

The panic was deep and irrational. It felt so much like the station itself was vibrating that Jim had to physically test that it was really just him. He realized the message had been playing and he didn't know what it had said. He slid it back to the start, breathing deeply, and tried to keep his mind from bouncing off it again.

"This message is for Naomi Nagata. My name is Anton Trejo. I think you know who I am and the situation we're both in. It's past time that you and I talk. I would like to propose an alliance.

"We have our differences, and I'm not here to underplay or deny that. We also have access to certain information that makes clear the vulnerabilities that we're both trying to address in our ways. We share a problem, you and I. The ring space and the unknown entities within it pose an existential threat for humanity. We must control access to the rings to limit this danger. We also both know that when it comes to getting people to deny their own immediate needs in favor of a greater good, asking nicely almost never works."

Trejo spread his hands in a gesture of powerlessness. *What option do they give us?* Jim's hands ached, and he forced his fists to unclench.

"I have here a copy of a document you wrote. Protocols for the safer use of the gates. I also have my own traffic analysis data that tell how well this project is going for you. I've had my best people analyze it and I have to say, it's a damned good piece of work. Solid. If it were put in place, it might go a long way toward managing the threat of these incidents. The only thing it's missing is a method of enforcement. Out of a shared concern for humanity as a whole and in recognition of our common history and moral bonds, I would like to put my forces at your disposal. On behalf of Laconia and High Consul Duarte, I am offering the underground not just armistice, but collaboration.

“We have to end these petty squabbles and fights. I think you know that. And I am willing to do so. Furthermore, I will commit to stationing two Laconian destroyers inside the ring space, even with the risk that we both know that exposes them to, with the sole mission of enforcing your transit protocol. We will not take aggressive action. We will not limit or control trade. I will guarantee the safety of any ship making use of the gates, and grant blanket amnesty for the underground.

“And I will begin by reassigning the forces presently in Freehold to that mission,” Trejo said. “That’s my offer. A unified front against the real enemies of humanity. And all I’d ask from you, as a gesture of your trust and goodwill, is the return of your present passenger. You know as well as I do that she’s in no danger from us. We only want to bring her home. And with this rapprochement between us, there’s no reason for her to be living in exile.”

The message ended, and for a moment, Jim wasn’t there. The cabin in Draper Station, the cot, the soft gravity, all of it was still present, but it became less immediate, less real than the holding cell in the depths of Laconia’s State Building. The fear was real, but more than that was the twin sense of despair and responsibility. The conviction that everything depended on him, and that he was powerless. Like watching something precious and delicate falling, and knowing that he couldn’t get to it in time. Everything was going to break, and even though there was nothing he could do, the grief pressed on him like he was the only one carrying it.

He’d done so much, tried so hard, and accomplished so little. And now they were coming to ask their questions and drown his answers out with pain until he’d say anything. Or they wouldn’t ask anything, they’d just beat him until he understood that he was at their mercy, and they were merciless.

A small, still part of him that watched the rest of his mind noticed how odd it was. When he’d been a prisoner on Laconia, he’d been able to hold himself together. To rise to the occasion, plan, scheme, and even suffer with a resolve that he couldn’t find now. After he’d escaped, he’d felt euphoric. Calm and whole and returned to the life he’d given up hoping for.

But the honeymoon faded, and the version of him it left behind was scarred and broken. He didn’t feel weak. He felt annihilated.

Years were gone. Years of prison and torture, which had been bad, and of pretending to be an honored guest while the threat of death invisibly

followed one step behind. The dancing bear years. They'd been the worst because they'd broken down his sense of himself. Of who he was. Of what was true. The Jim Holden who had tripped the alarms in Medina Station was gone. The Jim who'd schemed against Cortázar and for Elvi Okoye had been half a lie from the start. He was all that was left. The dregs of himself. The scrapings.

Jim. Jim, come back to me.

His awareness shifted. The little cabin came back into focus like someone was tuning a video screen. Naomi was there. He didn't remember her coming in. She was holding his hand.

"Hey," he said, trying to sound bright and cheerful. "Imagine meeting you here."

"You saw the message then?"

"Yup. Yes. Indeed I did."

"I was hoping you were still asleep. I should have come here first."

"No," he said, "I'm fine. Just processing a little old trauma. Thinking about what to have for dinner. The usual. What did I miss?"

"We don't have to talk about this now."

"It won't help," he said, and squeezed her fingers in his. "Not talking about it? It won't help. If you're here, I'll be fine. Getting it out will help me even. Promise." He didn't know that was true, but he didn't know that it wasn't.

He could see it when she decided to believe him.

"He's surrendering," Naomi said.

"Only if he gets to be your police force," Jim said. "That's not what surrendering means."

"I read the agreement he sent," she said. "He really has seen my traffic control protocol. It's almost word for word in some places. And it puts his ships at my command."

"All right."

"He wants to make the underground into a new Transport Union. We'd be responsible for setting policy. We'd be independent of the Laconian hierarchy. We'd have the authority to deny passage to Laconian ships."

"And you're thinking?"

"That it smells like bullshit. Sounds too good to be true," she said. "But... How else do peace treaties get made? That happens, doesn't it?"

History's full of wars that ended because people chose to end them. We hurt Laconia badly. We broke the construction platforms, and they're not coming back. Not anytime soon. Duarte was the architect of the whole thing, and he's off the board. The glitches where people turn off or the rules of physics change? They're the threat."

"They are," Jim agreed.

Naomi shook her head once. "Everything in me says the offer's a trap, but if it isn't, and I turn away? If this isn't the opening I was looking for, I'm not sure what our goal is with them."

The door to the little common room opened, and Alex's and Teresa's voices mixed, talking over each other. Muskrat barked once, a low conversational woof. Naomi leaned close, pressing her forehead to his like they were both wearing helmets and she wanted to say something only he could hear.

"I'll be okay," he said. "I'm better. I'm fine."

"Hey, back there," Amos said. "You talking about the thing?"

"We'll be right out," Jim said, loud enough to carry.

She put a hand on the top of his head, like she was gently hugging it, and then they walked out together. Alex and Teresa were leaning against the walls, Amos sitting on the floor idly scratching Muskrat's neck. The dog smiled her soft, canine smile, looking from Amos to Teresa and back.

"How's the resupply going?" Naomi asked.

"Good," Alex said. "We have a good pit crew here. Always have had."

"I keep forgetting how long this was home for you," Jim said. "I missed that part."

"These are good people," Alex said. It occurred to Jim how many families Alex had gathered on his path through life. His time in the navy, his first wife, the crew of the *Canterbury*. He might not be good at marriage, but he had a talent for making homes. Or finding them.

"Repairs are something different," Amos said. "They'll take longer, and some of them, if we start we'll be grounded until they're complete. That could take longer than the folks on Freehold have got. I thought we should hold off until we were sure."

Naomi nodded and pressed her thumb against her lower lip the way she did sometimes when she was thinking. She looked old, which was fair. They were both old. But more than that, she looked hard, and Jim wasn't

sure they were hard. Only that they'd had to act that way so many times in so many situations. They'd gotten good at it, her and him both.

"And that brings us back to the thing, doesn't it?" Jim said.

"It does," Amos said.

"What do you think?" Naomi asked, as if Amos were the same man he'd been before.

"I think he didn't say what happens if you turn him down. I'm guessing it's pretty much where we're at now."

"In that case, we've got a little over two days before the *Derecho* starts killing people," Jim said. "We've got a little more than that before we need to leave here, assuming that our cover isn't totally shredded."

"Oh, our cover's totally shredded," Amos said. "I thought that was a gimme."

"It is," Naomi said. "We don't have a lot of options, and what we have got are bad."

"What do you mean? You hand me over," Teresa said. "Are we talking about this? Obviously you hand me over."

"It's a little more complicated than that, Tiny," Amos said.

The girl furrowed her brow. "I'm not worth a hundred thousand people."

Jim raised his hand like a student in a classroom. "Are you saying that you want to go back?"

"No, I don't. Being there was killing me, but I'm one person and they're most of a planet. You're going to hand me over. You *have* to."

"I don't have to," Amos said with a deceptive mildness. Jim heard the expectation of violence behind it, even if Teresa didn't.

"Are we thinking that Trejo means what he says?" Alex said. "Just looking at the logistics? I don't love it. If we did let Teresa go back, that means showing ourselves. Docking with one of their ships, maybe. And I've seen their power suits in action. If they decided to board us, they could go through us like tissue paper."

Teresa's frown shifted. It was fascinating. Knowing Laconia as well as she did, having seen it from as far inside as anyone could be, her first instinct was still to trust them. If Trejo was making the offer, it must be real. He must be sincere. A part of Jim wondered if that might not be a truer guide than his distrust or Naomi's. The fresh eyes of the young seeing more clearly, or else the benefit of experience showing where the traps were set.

“Trejo was a Martian before he was Laconian,” Alex went on. “He betrayed his nation. I’m not sure that says a lot in favor of him keeping his word now.”

“My father was Martian too,” Teresa said, but there was no real heat in the words. More like she was thinking something through.

“The question is whether we can trust him to do what he’s promising,” Jim said. “The answer to that is inside Trejo’s skull, and we don’t have access to it. It’s just which side do we bet on?”

“That’s not the only question,” Amos said. “If we hand over Tiny, are we still the good guys? That’s a question too.”

“It is,” Jim agreed.

“If you can choose between one person and a hundred thousand, it’s not a hard call,” Teresa said. “I won’t even die.”

But Naomi’s gaze had turned inward. Something in Teresa’s words had done the trick. Jim saw her understand even before he knew what she’d understood. Naomi lifted her eyebrows and shook her head, just a millimeter back and forth.

“You know what this is?” she said. “This is him making me responsible for what he does. Teresa’s right. She’s got exactly the frame I’m supposed to use. One person for a multitude. But I’m not looking to kill a multitude. That’s him. If I do what he says, I’ll be saving all the people he would kill to punish me if I didn’t.”

Amos’ laugh was almost the same timbre and cadence as Muskrat’s little bark. When he spoke, he was mimicking the soft, threatening whine of an abusive lover. “Look what you made me do, baby. Why do you have to make me so mad?”

“That’s it,” Naomi said. “I couldn’t put my finger on it, but that’s why I can’t do this. He’s holding a gun to their heads and then pretending that I’m the only one who can decide whether he pulls the trigger. That’s not a trust exercise. It’s just another threat.”

“Don’t forget the surrender. The amnesty,” Jim said. “There’s a carrot along with the stick.”

“Carrots don’t matter when he still gets to hold the stick,” Naomi said. “I’m done with sticks. Sticks are disqualifying. If he’d led by pulling the *Derecho* back from Freehold, it would be a different thing. He didn’t. He chose this, and I don’t trust him.”

Jim smiled at her. “Also, he’s asking us to hand over to him a young girl who doesn’t want to go, so fuck him. We don’t do that.”

“Fuck him,” Amos agreed.

The room was silent. Naomi pursed her lips and shook her head almost imperceptibly, continuing the conversation in her head. He wondered what she was saying, and to whom. He had the sense that, whoever they were, they were probably happier not being present for it.

“We’ve got two good ships,” he said.

“We’ve got two ships anyway,” Amos said. “I love ’em both, but the *Roci*’s feeling her years and the *Storm*’s gone a long way between updates.”

“We’ve got two mostly okay ships,” Jim said. “Not bad anyway. We load up everyone on Draper Station, burn hard for the ring gate, and take the *Sparrowhawk* out if it tries to stop us. With the *Storm* in the open, no reason to bomb Freehold anymore. At least the planet would be safe.”

“Best bad plan we’ve got,” Naomi said.

Jim headed for the door. He almost felt like himself again. The panic and fear weren’t gone, but they’d grown smaller. Manageable. “First thing is make sure we’re all the way topped up on rail-gun slugs,” he said, and pulled the handle. The door didn’t move, and an alert popped up on the locking panel. The error was so out of place that he pulled on the door twice more before he understood what he was seeing. EMERGENCY LOCKDOWN. VACUUM HAZARD.

“Uh, that’s weird,” he said.

Naomi was already on her hand terminal. “Jillian. What’s going on?”

The voice that answered was hard and brittle. “I understand that you’re upset, ma’am.”

“What did you do?”

“While I respect the civilian branch of the underground which you represent, this is a military matter. The enemy has a hundred thousand of our people they’re prepared to spare in exchange for one girl who they aren’t even going to hurt. There’s no dishonor in a prisoner exchange.”

“Do you think Trejo’s really going to walk away once he’s got her?” Naomi said. Rage buzzed, but she didn’t raise her voice.

“According to our best sources on the man, he will honor his word,” Jillian said.

“You don’t get to make that call,” Naomi said. “That’s my job.”

“Respectfully? As the captain of the *Gathering Storm*, which is the flagship of our military branch, I have authority over military decisions. This is a military decision.”

“Jillian,” Alex said, loud enough for Naomi’s hand terminal to pick him up. “You don’t need to do this. Bobbie wouldn’t have done this.”

“Captain Draper understood that one individual can’t stand in the way of the greater good, Mr. Kamal. If she were here, she’d be doing the same thing I’m doing.”

Amos chuckled. “You can tell yourself that, Sunshine. Don’t make it true.”

“The *Sparrowhawk* is on its way with a representative of Laconia. The *Derecho* is burning this way as an escort force with an understanding that both ships will leave the system once the handoff is complete. Until it is, I’m restricting you all to your quarters,” Jillian said. “Once this is over, and your emotions are calm enough that you can see that this decision was correct, we can discuss whether you want to fracture the underground’s leadership or back my authority.”

“Jillian,” Naomi said, but the connection was dead.

The walls of the common room felt as small as a cell, and the fear rolled up Jim’s spine, as fresh and angry as if he’d never put a lid on it. The others were talking, their voices washing over each other. Alex saying *I can talk sense into her if we can just get her to pick up again*. Amos guessing out loud how long it would take to get down the hallway in hard vacuum, and whether the rest of them would survive even if he did. Naomi repeating Jillian’s name again, trying the connection. He was the only one who stayed quiet. Or, no, Teresa did too.

She looked at him like they were alone together. He nodded to her. She nodded back.

Chapter Nineteen: Kit

Their cabin on the *Preiss* was so small that if Rohi were standing in it, he couldn't cross the room without brushing against her. The thick cloth covering the metal bulkheads was an unappetizing olive color with location and maintenance data woven into the fabric in orange thread. The wall screen was hardly bigger than two handhelds put side by side and had a protective coating that never seemed clean no matter how much Kit wiped it down. Their crash couches were old gel and badly designed, built into cubbies in the wall that could pinch fingers and toes if they weren't careful. Bakari's couch was welded to the deck, the metal still bright where it had been put in. It was a much better design.

It was their only private space for the next few months while the *Preiss* burned out to the ring gate, made the transit to Nieuwestad system, and then burned to Fortuna Sittard—the capital city on the main habitable planet.

They shared a common galley, microgymnasium, and showers with six other cabins. Someone had put up the city flag of their new home: green and red with a black-and-white patterned circle in the center that looked suspiciously like a football. The door directly across from them belonged to a pair of brothers from Breach Candy who had left their mother's old salvage company for a contract on Nieuwestad, giving up the family trade of breaking down old terraforming equipment to build controlled environments in the unfamiliar biology of a new world. Kit worried that Bakari's crying kept the brothers awake, but if it did, they didn't complain.

One of the farther cabins had a woman with her preteen daughter, who Rohi had taken on as a kind of in-transit project to know better. Kit had the impression that the woman was leaving a bad marriage and that the daughter was seeing a therapist who was making the same transit, but four decks down.

Kit felt a little uncomfortable knowing even that much but recognized

that his aversion to hearing about other people's family history was mostly projection. He'd spent so much of his life avoiding talking about who his father was that hearing about someone else's felt a little dangerous.

Kit centered himself in the camera, then shifted so that Bakari, napping in the pressure wrap strapped across his chest, also appeared. He started the recording.

"Hey, Dad. Don't know where you are or when you'll get this, but I wanted to check in. The little bear is right here too."

Kit shifted to put Bakari's face more clearly in the frame—the scrim of tightly curled, fine black hair on his scalp; the full, soft lips pursing and relaxing as he dreamed; the eyelids as dark as if he were wearing eye shadow. Kit gave his father, where and whenever he was, a long look at his grandson, then shifted back.

"We've been on the float for five days so far. He's taking to it better than I am. The ship infirmary has a resistance gel chamber he can use, but we're not the only family on board that needs it, so we have to schedule times. Rohi thinks it's important, though. And she's probably right. Anyway, he doesn't like it, but he sleeps like a beast afterward. So that's good. I'm doing fine. Rohi's doing fine. If we can still stand each other when we get to Nieuwestad, I think it means we're destined to stay married forever. Living this close to someone isn't what I'm used to."

He paused for a moment, wondering whether he should go back and start the recording again. Joking with his father about divorce and shipboard life might seem pointed, and he didn't want to seem critical. But Bakari shifted a little. The nap wouldn't last forever, and it was harder to make a message when the baby was awake.

He felt the tug again—protecting his father on one hand and his son on the other. Kit always fell into the middle place between his mother and his father, his mother and Rohi, the contract association and his family. His mother said he got his peacemaker instincts from his father. Maybe that was true, but it hadn't been his experience of Alex Kamal.

He realized how long he'd been quiet and smiled an apology to the camera.

"Anyway," he said, "the doctor says the boy's fine. We're not going to do the adaptation cocktail. They say as young as he is, it would do more harm than good. As long as he gets his exercise time in and we make sure

he gets enough rest when we get planetside, he'll adapt faster than we will.

"Everything's looking good here. Going according to plan. We'll be making the ring transit pretty soon now. That's really the only scary part of this whole trip. But Bakari is going to take his first steps on Nieuwestad. He won't even remember Mars. I hope you'll get a chance to come see him. I don't know that it'll mean much to him, but it would mean a lot to me. You'd like Rohi, and you'd love the little bear here. I hope wherever you are, you're okay and things aren't any weirder than they have to be.

"Take care of yourself, Grandpa."

He ended the recording, then played it back. The gap where he'd lost himself in thought wasn't as noticeable as he'd feared, so he saved the message, encrypted it, and queued it for delivery to the address that Alex had given him for the underground. He didn't know where it would go from there. He didn't play with political issues except when the nature of his family demanded it.

It was a risk, but only a little one. Alex understood that if Laconian security forces came calling, Kit would cooperate with them to save himself and his family. They hadn't yet, apart from a meeting his mother had a year before. Kit seemed beneath their notice, and hopefully getting out to the colonies would put him even further off Laconia's radar. That was the other reason he'd wanted to take this contract. The reason he didn't discuss with Rohi.

Bakari yawned, his eyes still closed, and shifted against Kit's chest. He'd be awake soon, which if tradition held would mean milk and a diaper change. Kit sent a quick message to Rohi: NOT AWAKE, BUT WAKING.

They had formula mixed and ready to go, but Rohi still believed in breastfeeding, and while Kit was able to do a lot to take care of his son, that was a full-on mother-baby thing he was happy to tag out for. Also, he could go to their little gym and get his daily sweating done.

Bakari wrinkled his nose the way he had since they'd seen him in a sonogram, and opened his bright, dark eyes. His focus swam a little, then found Kit's eyes looking back at him. Bakari made a little *bap* sound, not even babbling so much as muttering to himself. If he didn't seem to take any particular joy in seeing his father, it was probably because Kit was almost always there. It made him feel obscurely proud to be so taken for

granted.

He was debating to himself whether to message Rohi again or get a round of formula ready when the cabin door slid open. As soon as he saw her face, he knew something was wrong.

“Babe?” he said.

“I’m here.” She gestured to Bakari, and Kit unfolded the boy from his pressure wrap. Bakari slowly windmilled his arms and legs, no distress in his movement at all. As if flying weightless through the air was as natural as anything else. Rohi scooped a hand around him and pulled him close. The baby, knowing what came next, was already plucking at the flight suit over her breast. Like a sleepwalker, Rohi pulled her suit open and guided him to her nipple.

“Babe,” Kit said again. “What happened?”

Rohi took a deep breath, like a diver looking down toward distant water. “There was another blink. San Esteban system.”

Kit felt his gut tighten, but only a little. He’d been through a half dozen rounds of the aliens from inside the rings turning off his mind for him. Everyone in Sol had.

“How bad was it?” he asked.

“They’re dead,” Rohi said. “Everyone in the system. They’re all just dead.”

Chapter Twenty: Elvi

San Esteban system was one of the first wave of colonial settlements, surveyed and studied by her old employer Royal Charter Energy. It had one habitable planet, and a moon around a gas giant with a breathable atmosphere. It had the first parallax station that had mapped out the relative locations of the ring systems through the galaxy. Eighteen million people spread across ten cities, a semi-autonomous aquafarming platform the size of Greenland, and a research station in the stagnation zone of the heliosheath, 110 AU out. It had reached the technical specifications for self-sufficiency three years ago, but it still imported supplies from Sol, Auberon, and Bara Gaon.

Which was why the *Amaterasu*, a freighter out of Sol system with a cargo of high-purity industrial reagents and refining equipment, risked the transit and passed through the San Esteban gate.

Elvi shifted through the images the ship's traumatized physician had sent back. She'd seen them all a dozen times before, listened to the recordings he'd made, and read the field autopsies.

The dead man on her screen was in a bag somewhere right now, heading to Laconia and the Science Directorate for a more thorough examination. Elvi tilted her head and considered the wetness along the back of the corpse's jumpsuit, the tightness where death bloat had pressed the fabric smooth, the way eyes had sunken as they'd given up their moisture to the air. According to his ID and the genetic sample, he'd been an engineering intern at a supply station, and one of the first corpses they'd recovered. He had once been a man named Alejandro Lowry. He was just SanEstebanCadaver-001 now.

The voices that played as she reviewed the dead weren't from San Esteban. She'd listened to the captain and physician of the *Amaterasu* enough to know there wasn't much they could tell her. She'd gone farther to

find insight. She was listening to James Holden and a woman with a long, slow accent that Elvi thought of as Mariner Valley but was a kind of Laconian now.

Tell me about the systems going dark, the interrogator said.

It was just one at first, Jim replied. *And the... group consciousness? Consensus? I don't know the right word for it. The chorus. They weren't even particularly worried. Not at first.*

Elvi switched to an exterior. An older woman—gray, swirling hair—lying in sunlight. An animal Elvi didn't recognize lay beside the human corpse. It looked something like a small, insectile pig. Compound eyes on either side of a long skull-like structure. A prey species, then, and it appeared to have died at the same time as the woman. She pulled up an article on the species and what was known of the anatomy and physiology of San Esteban's tree of life.

Then there were more. Just a few. I mean, like three or four. Even then, it wasn't more than a curiosity, Jim said.

What was left in the system? Were there bodies? Did the aliens just disappear? the interrogator asked.

It wasn't like that, Jim said. *The systems just went dark. Like losing a comm channel.*

Then how were they certain the systems were dead?

They were all connected. If someone cuts off your hand, is it dead? So yeah, the systems were dead.

Because, Elvi thought, the builders or the Romans or the space jellyfish—the beings of light—hadn't known what it was to be alone since they'd learned to glow in that ancient, freezing ocean. They were individuals and they were a unity. A superorganism, connected as intimately as she was with her own limbs and organs. She found a paper speculating about the internal signal transfer in the bug-pig animal and let her eyes flow over it, catching the gist without diving down on details.

But they decided based on just that to destroy whole systems? the interrogator asked.

It was like cutting mold off a block of cheese. Or a clump of cancer cells on your skin. There was a bad spot, and so they burned it off. They didn't need it. They thought it would stop.

What would stop, exactly?

The darkness. The death.

“Hey,” Fayez said, and Elvi stopped the recording just as the interrogator started her next question.

“Hey,” she said, making it a sigh.

He floated in the door of her office. He looked tired. He looked fragile. Everyone did now. Everyone was.

“The relief drone from Laconia just popped through the gate,” he said. “Another couple weeks for it to match orbit, and we’ll be eating pretty much the same thing we’re eating now, but with different atoms in it.”

“Good. Hope we’re here when it is.”

She’d meant it to be funny. A morbid joke. The words tasted like chalk. The distress in her husband’s eyes was brief, and after it, he chose to smile.

“What’re you listening to?”

Elvi looked at the speakers mounted in the cloth of her office walls as if it would help her remember. “Um. James Holden. Some of his debriefing from when he was on Laconia. I’m trying to get the recordings from after the gates opened too. I know there’s an archive of them at Alighar Muslim University, but I haven’t gotten an answer from them yet.”

“Something in particular you’re looking for?”

“Memories change over a few decades,” she said. “I just want to see if what he says here matches what he said then.”

“See if you can figure out why we aren’t all dead already?”

“I have a couple theories on that.”

He pushed himself across the room, grabbed a handhold, and settled at her side. Pale stubble dusted his cheek like light snowfall. She took his hand in her left, and pulled up the water purification data from San Esteban with her right. The efficiency graph wasn’t subtle.

“What am I looking at here?” he asked.

“An uptick in salt precipitates that matches when everyone died,” Elvi said. “It looks like the mechanism the dark gods figured out is to make ionic bonds just a tiny bit stickier. It lasted just long enough to shut down neurons. The local fauna are also using ionic channels for signal propagation even though it’s more like vacuum channels than nerves. It would still mess them up pretty good. You can tell it’s not taking out the microbiota, though.”

“How can I tell that?”

“Bloat,” she said. “The trapped gasses are microbe farts.”

“I find that story horrifying, but since it ended in a fart joke, I’m not sure how to react.”

“Not a joke, *but* as soon as the event was done? Water recycling started up again. And the *Amaterasu* transited in just a few hours after the event. All the decay in these images happened while they were getting to a landing pad.”

“Which says?”

“I don’t think the enemy knows it worked. Listen.” She found the tagged audio and played it.

It wasn’t like that. The systems just went dark. Like losing a comm channel.

Then how were they certain the systems were dead?

They were all connected.

She stopped it. “The builders didn’t go look. They didn’t have to. They were already connected. When they lost a system, they knew there was no one there anymore. They used the gates to shove matter around when they needed to, but that was like us moving food through our guts. It was barely even conscious for them anymore. It wasn’t something they scheduled or had trade routes for. So if there was nothing in a system to support, there’s no traffic to support it.”

“Traffic?”

“Like the *Amaratsu*,” she said. “The enemy did a thing, and then the traffic stopped. What if that’s how the enemy knew the thing worked. But with us? The traffic didn’t stop. I think we may be as hard for them to see and make sense of as they are for us. So part of what we can do is dirty up their data. All our random, uncoordinated transits are what they’re feeling. It’s like hearing rats in your walls and putting out different poisons until the noise stops. The noise stopping is how you know what worked. And since we’re still making transits in and out of that gate? As far as they know, their poison didn’t work.”

“That’s a hell of a theory.”

“Yep. Or.”

“Or?”

She popped to another audio mark. *It was just one at first.*

“Or this is inside the error bars for how they work, and they’ll be

murdering us all shortly.” She couldn’t keep the despair out of her voice. Even if she had, he would have heard it. They’d known each other too long for secrets. “We have to push harder for answers.”

“Harder than we have been?”

Elvi took her hand back and pressed her fingers into her eyes, rubbing from the center out to the sides. There was grit in her eyelashes. Tears that had dried there.

“I’ll talk to Cara,” Elvi said. “I’ll see if she’s up for it.”

“Talk to Xan too. He’s the one locked in the catalyst’s chamber for a zillion hours. And he doesn’t talk about it, but it’s freaking him out.”

We’re all fucking freaked out snapped to the front of Elvi’s mind, but she didn’t say it.

When Fayez spoke again, the careful cheerfulness was gone. He sounded worn and broken. He sounded more like she felt. He sounded real. “I’m not telling you what to do. It’s just...”

“Say it.”

“Cortázar kept them in a cage for decades. He ran tests on them with no concern for them.”

“I have Cara’s consent—”

“All these dives are changing her, and we don’t have a clear idea what the changes are. The fact that she enjoys it doesn’t reassure me at all.”

Elvi bristled, but it was Fayez and she was short on sleep and long on whatever adrenaline broke down into. Some kind of mandelic acid, she thought. She wasn’t sure. When he went on, she tried to listen and not just react.

“I know I’m not my sanest self right now. We’ve all been stuck on this ship for way too long, and everyone’s fraying, and it’s all scary as shit. I get that. I do. But that’s why we have ethical standards. So that when things get murky we have something to show us the way through.”

“And you think I’m violating ethical standards?”

“Yes. I love you, but yes you totally are. Absolutely.” He grimaced his apology.

Elvi took a long breath and let it out slowly through her nose. The *Falcon* hummed around them like it was also waiting for her to speak.

“I know,” she said, and it was actually a relief to say it out loud. “I am.”

“So what do we do about that?”

She crossed her arms. "Do you remember Dr. Negila?"

"That's a name from a long time ago. She taught at the University of Calabar?"

"I took an ethics seminar with her as part of my postdoctorate work. There was a story we read about this beautiful, utopic land where everything was wonderful and enlightened and pleasant and good and just, except for one child who had to live in confusion and misery. One child, in exchange for paradise to everyone else."

"I know that one. Omelas."

"This isn't that," Elvi said. "I'm working for an authoritarian dictator in a system where people are suffering and screwing each other over and killing each other. I'm compromising my safety and the safety of the people who work for me by smuggling my research to my boss's political enemies. We're not doing anything here to make a beautiful, gracious, pleasant utopia. If we win, the lives we save will be the same mix of shit, frustration, and absurdity that they've always been."

"True."

"The child in the story was being sacrificed for a *quality* of life. If I'm sacrificing Cara, and I acknowledge that I may be doing that, it's not for quality. It's for *quantity*. If I have to lose her in order to keep the quantity of human life from going to zero? It's cheap. If it costs everything, it's still a good trade."

It landed on Fayez. He lowered his head, not a surrender to gravity but a surrender all the same. "Yeah. Okay."

"If you can't do this, that's all right," Elvi said. "I can arrange transport back to the Science Directorate for you. You can do your work there as easily as you do it here."

"Sweetie. You know I'm not doing that."

"I'd understand if you did."

"Yeah, no. I just wanted to make sure we were doing what we meant to do. If doing the wrong thing is the right thing, then I'm still planning to wake up next to you while we do it. Kind of my life's work, really."

They floated together in silence for a moment, not touching.

"You should come to bed," Fayez said. "It's very late, and we're both very tired."

"In a little bit," Elvi said. "I have to make my report back to Trejo about

San Esteban, and Ochida is waiting for some resource reallocations based on the new plan moving forward.”

“Oh, and Dr. Lee wanted to talk to you too. If you have time. Personnel issue.”

Elvi nodded her query.

“I think there’s a dysfunctional love triangle in the physics group. They may need a talking-to from the boss.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Fayez spread his hands. “Every miracle we’ve pulled off, we’ve done it using primates. Just because we’re capable of mind-blowing wonders doesn’t mean we aren’t still sex-and-murder machines. The organism doesn’t change.”

“All right. I’ll stop by the bridge. Do me a favor, though?”

“Anything.”

“The relief pod was supposed to have updated menus. See if the download taught the galley how to fake up some sag paneer?”

“If it did, I will have it waiting in the cabin.”

He pulled himself in and kissed her before heading out to the hall. She turned back to the San Esteban images. Now, every corpse she saw, she imagined as Fayez. Or herself. Or James Holden. Or Anton Trejo. Or Winston Duarte.

She started a recording. “Admiral Trejo. I understand that San Esteban is yet another first priority. All I can give you right now is our overview, some speculation, and my plan moving forward...”

It took half an hour to get the version she liked best, and she made a copy with a different routing header to send to Naomi and the underground. They were all allies in this, whether they knew it or not.

By the time she’d sent her reallocation plan to Ochida and talked to Harshaan Lee about how to keep the social drama on the *Falcon* from spiraling out of control, two hours had passed. Fayez was in their cabin, asleep. A tube of sag paneer was waiting for her, a bulb of decaffeinated tea beside it. She ate and drank and pulled herself into the sleeping harness.

When she dreamed, she dreamed she was in an ocean teeming with sharks, and if she moved too fast, they would kill her.



Cara floated in the lab while the technicians went through the adjustments to the sensor arrays on her skull like a cap. Everything was bustling around them, but Elvi felt like the two of them—she and her test subject—were still. The eye of the storm. On the screens, Cara’s brain function shifted and stuttered as the expert systems matched what they were seeing now to what they had seen before. “Norming,” it was called. As if norms were still a thing for them.

“How are you feeling?” Elvi asked.

Cara’s perfect black eyes clicked to her, went still for a moment, and then Cara grinned. Elvi wanted to see it as genuine, and maybe it was. Maybe the extra processing delta between stimulus and response only read as inauthentic and studied because Elvi was trying to read the girl as if she were the same as other people. As if she were a primate. *The organism doesn’t change*, Fayez said in her memory, but now it felt like a warning.

The organism *had* changed.

As if she’d heard her thinking, Cara’s expression shifted. “Are you worried about something?”

“I was thinking... about the cognitive changes you and Xan went through. Do you remember what it was like before?” Elvi asked.

“Before?”

One of the technicians touched the sensor leads, and the displays clicked over to green across the board. Good to go.

“Before the change. Before all this,” Elvi said. *Before you died*, she didn’t say.

“I don’t know. Just like anyone, I guess. It was a long time ago.”

Elvi forced a little smile, trying to think where she would have been when Cara had run into the wilderness of Laconia for the last time. Who had she been when Cara had been human?

“Long time for me too,” she said, then gathered herself. “Okay, we’re going to try something a little different this time. We need to refine the search. Try to get some specific answers about how the ring gates came to

be. We'll want to shift the BFE from lecture mode into more Q and A. If we can."

"Because of San Esteban?"

Elvi tried to think of some softer way to say yes, and failed. "Yes."

"I can try," Cara said. "I don't know if it'll like that, though."

"If you're uncomfortable or things feel wrong, say the word, and we will pull you back up. I'll be watching your stress levels. If they get bad, even if you can't speak, I'll call it. Okay?"

"I can take it," Cara said. "I want this."

Elvi took the girl's hand. It felt so thin and fragile. "Me too."

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Interlude: The Dreamer

The dreamer falls purposefully into dream and dream and dream, swimmingly layer on layer on layer on the abyss. She is threefold, and one still missing, and the dream tells her about the unfolding across the emptiness and of the light of stars and cells and minds, the flicker that draws them like songs and kisses because their kisses were all light. The ones that don't feel the stars calling fall out of the dream, and the rest become wise and broad and fuller than the old ocean, comfortable in the vacuum with only their own slow heat to warm them.

Yes, the dreamer dreams like swimming with the tide, but the gates. How did the gates happen?

Grandmothers whisper in voices that have never known teeth. *Look here, I will tell you everything. Look here, to where the light becomes everything, look how the light learns to think.*

Yes and yes and yes, but the gates. The darkness. How did the *end* come?

Light itself fractures like an old woman holding out a glass bead, inviting a child's marveling eyes. *Look what light can do! Look how rich it can be! Isn't it prettyful and beautisome? And don't you want to eat it all up so it can eat you and expandingcontracting fullness of the bloom?*

But the gates. The gates. And the things at the end.

Grandmothers smile and smilingly nod, noddingly smile and the dream shifts like a kick in the face. The rich light diffracts, and there are holes in the spectrum. Infinite holes of more than darkness between the light that's more than light. The dreamer chokes. Reality splits her open like vomiting or orgasm or seizure and the grandmothers hold the glass bead that had her head in it and it wants to explode.

Is she okay? Do we pull her out?

Not yet.

A new physics falls into place all through the dream. Yes yes yes, the monkeys began with the parabolic arc of stone through air, and they learned everything in that order that isn't the dream or the dreamer, that's the one in blue. The light began swimmingly, with the caress of waters and salts, and its first chapter was different and its second a second difference and its fullness a different fullness, with fingernails in the cracks between this and the permanent outside.

The grandmothers say *look look look how it all happened once and all happens again*. The cold roof of the world broke open and gave the stars. The vacuum shatters in the same way and shows the outside, the *older* real, the *vaster* real.

The body of God. The heaven where the angels all hate us.

The dreamer feels herself shaking, feels herself losing bladder and bowel control. *Don't wake me up don't wake me don't wake don't*.

You wanted to know is I did and I do.

A new physics gives new problems and the problems ticklingly new dreams. A second crash outward, a new efflorescence, a vaster self. And the toolbox was the toolbox: co-opting fast life to bring what makes it rich, sending out what will or may one day return with presents for the grandmothers who cast them free, and the vast patience of the ones who are too cold and too slow and too wide to ever die, too sudden for time to touch. A bubble blown into the holes in the spectrum and a thousand thousand thousand seeds sent like kisses to the singing poet stars. And then...

The dreamer flickers. The body someplace starts to fail, and she feels something deeper than dream opening under her. All that begins will end, and the end is clearing its throat in the hallway. Bring me up. Bring me up bring me up *bring me up*.

What is this? the blue one says, and the dreamer pushes away, but it isn't her dream anymore. The grandmothers cackle and run, trailing her in their thousand fingers. And the echo says *Sorry. Didn't mean to drag you in here. Just try and relax*. But it isn't speaking to her.

A nucleus in a vast atom, and the burning clockwork at its heart. The power of a million suns harvested from the older universe. *Yes yes yes*, the blue one says. *I see now. Show me how this works*, and the grandmothers do.

She's seizing.

Pull her out.

And the blue one puts a gentle hand on her head and holds her lovingly underwater. A system goes dark, a few voices out of quadrillions go silent. A hundred systems. They go to war, and the war fails, but show me where you buried the guns. And the grandmothers gigglingly do.

Yes, the blue one says. *Yes. That's what I needed.*

Thank you.

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Chapter Twenty-One: Tanaka

The girl on the screen wore something that was supposed to look like a uniform, held herself in a way that was supposed to look like military crispness, and spoke with a formality that was supposed to sound like authority.

“In accepting Admiral Trejo’s offer, I am willing to permit one envoy from your ship to enter Draper Station to take custody of Teresa Duarte,” Jillian Houston said. “Once this transfer is complete, both the *Sparrowhawk* and the *Derecho* are invited to retire from Freehold system until such time as the details of our new situation can be finalized.”

“Oh, goody,” Tanaka said. “We’ll be invited to retire.”

“Yes, sir,” Mugabo said. Then, a moment later, “She does seem a bit green.”

“She’s still licking off the caul. I can’t believe we’ve had this much trouble tracking down someone who’s still sleeping with her teddy bear.”

“I believe a Martian was in command of the *Storm* until shortly before the attack on the homeworld.”

“And Nagata was in charge during that,” Tanaka said, then tilted her head. “So why isn’t she the one answering now?”

“I don’t have a theory to venture,” Mugabo said, but she hadn’t really been talking to him anyway.

Trejo’s plan was bold, she’d give him that. And, like all the best plans, it was limber. If Nagata accepted the terms, then he’d let her playact at being in charge until he could rebuild the strength they’d lost. And if Duarte proved to be unmanageable, maybe even keep her on as figurehead in perpetuity. It was an elegant way to put an end to the fighting: Give the enemy the raiment of power while keeping the actual power for yourself and then seeing if she ever noticed.

If she didn’t agree, but did reach out to announce her rejection, the door

was open for diplomacy. Diplomacy always provided the chance to glean more information from the enemy. Or for them to glean it from you. It wasn't a form of conflict Tanaka found comfortable, but she understood it.

This situation, though, fell somewhere between the two. It was an acceptance, and allegedly by the underground, but not by Nagata. It was a negotiation of terms, but not about the larger issues. Tanaka had already learned more than a little critical information: the exact location of the underground's secret base and confirmation that the *Gathering Storm*—or at least its commander—was there. Teresa Duarte was probably there. The little rebel captain was certainly acting like she was. And it was probably true. The ship that had come through the gate was a good match for the *Rocinante* when it left New Egypt. It had gone to the moon that had the enemy base. And if the *Rocinante* was there, James Holden and Naomi Nagata were almost certainly there too.

If Nagata had been the one responding, it wouldn't have smelled wrong at all.

It smelled wrong.

"I'm taking it," she said. "I'll go get the girl."

If she'd expected Mugabo to object or push back against her taking the personal risk—*The last time you had a Marine fire team with you, and you still came within centimeters of death, sir*—he disappointed her. She didn't feel disappointed, though. More amused.

"Tell Botton to start the *Derecho* toward us," she said. "If we're leaving after this, it looks like good faith. If we're fighting, I want him close."

"Of course, ma'am," Mugabo said. "Not to change the subject, but you saw the briefing about San Esteban?"

"What about it?"

Mugabo's little smile was melancholy. He would have made a good waiter. He had the vaguely embarrassed expression crafted for telling people the special was already sold out. She met his eyes.

"There are other people on that mission. We're on mine. If the Messiah comes, He can find us at work. Understood?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"If you need me, I'll be in the armory."

She hadn't packed her fast scout suit, much to her regret. The *Sparrowhawk* did have a latest-generation assault suit, and lying on the

deck awaiting her finishing touches, it looked nothing like the elegant and greyhound-lean Stalker. The assault armor had the simple, brutally efficient design of a wearable murder-robot. Underslung on both arms were Gatling guns, designed to fire a high-speed stream of small-caliber explosive rounds. On the left shoulder was an integrated rocket-propelled grenade launcher, for when a pair of machine guns just won't get the job done. And the suit itself was a weapon. Wearing one, Tanaka could bench-press a ground vehicle. Ripping a human limb from limb while wearing a Laconian assault suit was trivial. It was made for door-to-door, corridor-by-corridor assault. It was the pinnacle of Laconian design engineering, and in her hands it could clear a base like Draper Station without assistance. As long as she didn't step in front of any PDCs.

She worked, slowly and methodically going through the mental checklist thousands of hours operating these suits had etched in her brain. As she finished the suit's final touches, her mind occupied itself with the upcoming fight. If it was a fight.

She was ready for it to be a fight.

Tanaka's tongue probed through the gap where her teeth used to be and across the nasty scar inside her cheek. The wound no longer hurt, but she could feel the uncanny smoothness of poorly healed gashes where James Holden's bullet had blown the side of her face apart. It itched, but not physically.

The physical wounds were bad. Her head still ached if she slept on it wrong. Even if she went through the trouble of a complete regrow, her cheeks would never quite match again. It was going to take months to grow back the missing bone, and more than that to regrow teeth from it. There were people—even people in the Laconian military—who had used less to claim permanent disability with increased retirement benefits. But that wasn't the worst.

The embarrassment was worst.

She was the peak of the Laconian military. The lone atom of steel at the tip of the tip of the spear. Experienced, trained, and still in top condition despite her age. She'd gone on what should have been a milk run with a full fire team at her back, and James Holden had handed her her ass on a plate. She understood why. She'd been restrained to protect the girl, and he hadn't. She'd been conservative with employing a warship around civilians,

and he hadn't. She could have waited until the girl had been dropped off, but even that had been a calculated risk that just bounced bad for her that time. Nothing she'd done would have raised an eyebrow from a review tribunal. But she'd lost, and he hadn't.

She loaded a belt of mixed high explosive and armor-piercing rounds into the right arm's gun. It made a satisfying metallic click when she locked and armed it. Don't kill anyone, or kill everyone.

If anything went south during the transfer, she knew which one she was picking.



Tanaka had Mugabo park the *Sparrowhawk* far enough from the moon that they'd have time to evade incoming rail-gun rounds, then used her assault suit's EVA jets to descend to the surface at the coordinates she'd been given. A shallow overhang in the rock and ice hid an airlock door from orbital view, but was plainly visible once she'd hit the surface. The outer door was open and waiting for her.

Draper Station wasn't much more than an icy cave sprayed with insulating foam on a tiny moon where the gravity was a meek suggestion of down. It had about as much in common with a naval base as it did with a Belter pirate station. The idea that a great warrior and leader like Admiral Trejo felt the need to negotiate with these low-rent revolutionaries left Tanaka feeling insulted on his behalf.

"I'm going in," she radioed up to Mugabo.

"Understood, sir," he said. "We are standing by."

Tanaka chuckled to herself and killed the channel. A few moments later she'd passed through the airlock and into a large equipment storage room. Lockers and vacuum suit racks filled all the wall space. The ceiling was covered with the same shitty spray-on insulation as the walls, but the floor was metal grate, so she kicked on her mag boots.

Five people waited for her in the room. They were all armed.

"I'm Jillian Houston," the woman in the middle said. She wore a simple

jumpsuit without rank markings. The four people flanking her held rifles like they were some kind of honor guard.

“Colonel Aliana Tanaka of the Laconian Marine Corps.” There were forms to be obeyed in a prisoner transfer, and until Tanaka had the girl in her hands, she’d obey them.

Jillian Houston seemed nonplussed when Tanaka didn’t continue. They shared an awkward silence. Jillian cleared her throat. Tanaka watched her HUD while the suit’s various heat-and-sound-imaging and radar sensors built a map of the interior of the station for her. The electromagnetic sensor that could pinpoint the location of human heartbeats also mapped the location of anyone within its range.

“Trejo said—”

“Fleet Admiral Anton Trejo,” Tanaka interjected, the assault suit’s external speakers making her voice echo off the walls.

Jillian’s expression hardened. She might be green, but she didn’t like being corrected. Even standing face-to-face with Tanaka’s battle suit, she wasn’t backing down at all. Only the elevation in her heart rate betrayed her nervousness. Scrappy.

Tanaka waited, watching the guards twitch. Jillian seemed determined to force Tanaka to speak first now. A power game. Fine. The suit reported that it had a mostly complete station map, and every human within seventy meters was pinpointed. Tanaka turned off the external speaker and said, “Free-fire authorization, Tanaka.”

The weapons of the suit clicked out of safe mode, a sound that also echoed around the room. The guards shot nervous looks at each other.

“Fleet Admiral Trejo,” Jillian Houston said, breaking first, “guaranteed us that if we gave you the girl, all Laconian forces would withdraw from the Freehold system without further attacks. We have his word on it.”

Tanaka chinned the external speakers back on. “I’m not seeing Teresa Duarte. Where is she?”

“Before I hand her over, I need more than vague assurances that you are acting in good faith.”

“Moving the goalposts?” Tanaka said.

“I need more than assurances,” the Houston girl repeated. Apparently they’d gotten to the end of her script.

“Where’s Nagata?”

“Excuse me?”

“The admiral made his offer to Naomi Nagata. You aren’t her. Teresa Duarte’s not here. What’s really going on?”

Houston lifted her chin like Tanaka had accused her of something. “Naomi Nagata is in operational control of the civilian action of the underground. As the commander of the *Gathering Storm*, military decisions fall to me—”

“Bullshit.”

“I don’t care for your tone of voice.”

This was the moment. Playing it safe hadn’t worked in New Egypt. Life was risk, and the fact that even if it all came down poorly, there could be no consequences for her personally was a little intoxicating.

She wasn’t going to shoot the Duarte girl. They weren’t likely to do it. The only danger was an accident, and even if the girl did take a bullet, there was a percentage of those wounds she could recover from.

And once the shooting started, they might try to evac the prisoner, in which case she had two ships ready to disable the enemy. Flushing Teresa out of the base was probably the safest way for her.

She realized she’d taken a long time responding. Jillian Houston’s heart rate was ticking up with her anxiety.

So this was it. Play nice with the enemy, or do the obvious thing.

“You know, we’ve got some of those suits,” Jillian said, pointing at her armor. “We aren’t wearing them as a sign of good faith.”

“Wouldn’t matter if you were.”

Fuck it.

“All right,” Tanaka said, locking eyes with each of her four guards in turn and using the touchpads in her gloves to target them. “I’ll just go get her myself.”

“No—” Jillian started.

Tanaka said, “Go loud.”

The left and right arms of her suit snapped up into firing position much faster and more accurately than if she’d been driving them manually. The second the weapons were lined up on the outer two guards, they fired a short five-round burst that blew their heads off. Her arms snapped to the second position and fired a second time. The two people standing next to Jillian Houston disappeared from the chin up. The entire process took less

than a second and a half.

Smoke filled the room, and the roar of the guns was still bouncing around the space when Jillian Houston spun on her heel and pushed off, flying down the corridor behind her. Tanaka watched her go. She could have turned the woman into a dancing bloody rag doll a hundred times over in the time it took for her to flee.

“Track her,” she told the suit, and Jillian Houston’s rapid heartbeat got a special tag on her HUD. If Houston was in charge of the base, she’d know exactly where the girl was. Teresa Duarte’s value as a hostage was the only thing that might keep any of them alive. In the meantime, Tanaka had other business she could do.

She used the suit’s mag boots to keep her secure to the floor as she casually strolled down the corridor following Houston. All around her the heartbeats of the station’s denizens were running around and speeding up as the panic spread. That was fine. It wasn’t like her plan relied on secrecy. Let the revolutionaries prepare. Let them arm up and dig in. None of it would matter. They could have the courageous last stand all the romantics craved. It would still be a last stand.

She moved into a corridor junction, and her suit blatted an alarm tone at her microseconds before a barrage of gunfire hit her on the left side. The suit marked three targets, all using light automatic weapons and hiding behind improvised cover. Tanaka tapped a pad in her glove and the left arm of the suit snapped around and fired three times. Three shredded bodies drifted out from behind their cover, spraying globes of arterial blood into the air.

The ammo counter for the left gun went down by another fifteen rounds. Tanaka noted this without concern. Full ammo packs on both guns. Plenty for everyone. And if not... Well, the alternative was messier but it had its charms.

“In New Egypt, we could have done this easy,” she said, imagining Nagata and Holden and their crew. “This is what *you* picked.” She smiled while she said it, the tightness in her wounded cheek pulling it into a lopsided grimace. It didn’t hurt much.

Corridor by corridor, meter by meter, Tanaka moved through the station. She headed toward the large clumps of heartbeats first. Hoping that the center of the largest resistance would be the heroes of the *Rocinante*, but it

never was. The resistance fighters were tenacious and brave, Tanaka would give them that. They came at her with little regard for their own safety, and some of the counterattacks had a real cunning to them. Though, given that her rampage had left little indication surrendering would lead to safety, she'd have been doing exactly the same thing in their situation. And everywhere she went, the seventy-meter range of her heartbeat detector found new pockets of people, hiding or preparing to fight. One by one, she went to them all, offering them amnesty if they put down their guns and turned over the girl. Not that she expected them to. Not that she'd necessarily stop shooting if they did.

Tanaka realized she'd lost track of Houston's heartbeat. It gave her a moment of pause, but only a moment. She was concentrating on the map layout in her HUD, looking for possible ship docking points, when she rounded the corner into the base's single largest pressurized room. A massive warehouse space, over a hundred meters on a side and a dozen meters high. The room was filled with racks of supplies and ship parts. The secret treasure trove of the revolutionary underground. All of it stolen from Laconia.

The suit warned her that three people were moving up behind her, and when she glanced at the warning it popped a rear view up on her screen. Three Belters were maneuvering what looked like a tool cart laden down with a massive compressed-gas tank. She was just starting to turn when one of the Belters hit the rear of the tank and it launched at her like a battering ram.

Oh, she thought as it picked her up off her feet, *an improvised missile*.

She only blacked out for a moment, but when she came to, her suit was blaring half a dozen alarms at her. She was embedded a good half meter into the foam-covered wall of the warehouse. The improvised missile oxygen tank was holding her upright, still pressed against her chest.

The suit warned her that it had lost secondary actuator control for her upper torso, and 30 percent of the reserve battery power before the system had rerouted to stop the leak. She also had four broken ribs and a dislocated left shoulder. She chinned the medical override and had the suit shoot her full of painkillers and amphetamines. She felt a surge that was almost like pride in her opponents. *Nice job, little bunnies. Good try.*

The three Belters were cautiously approaching. She hadn't moved since

their missile hit, and they were undoubtedly hoping it had finished the job. One of the three had a portable plasma torch in his hand. To cut her out of the suit and make sure, she guessed.

“RPG,” she said, locking her eyes on the middle man. The suit raised the launcher up over her shoulder and took aim. The three Belters only had a moment to register a look of surprise before a twenty-millimeter rocket-propelled grenade struck the man in the center and turned into a cloud of shrapnel that would kill anything within ten meters.

Some of the shrapnel sprayed across her breastplate and visor, with a sound inside the suit like hail hitting a metal roof. A half second later, the shrapnel was followed by a spray of blood and viscera.

“Motherfuckers,” Tanaka said, then used the right arm of her suit to shove the oxygen tank away from her chest. Its mass was significant, but the suit was up to the challenge, and a few moments later she was back on her own two feet, pain-free and jittery from the drug cocktail in her veins.

“I’ll make you a deal,” she yelled out, turning the suit’s speakers up so high that anyone in the warehouse space with her would probably suffer permanent hearing loss. “The person who brings me Teresa Duarte lives. They’re the only one who gets to walk out of this place in one piece. So if you have her, you’d better be the first to show up with the girl in your hands.

“Because everyone else here is going to die.”

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Chapter Twenty-Two: Jillian

As soon as the Laconian stepped into the base, Jillian knew she'd fucked up. She tried to believe that it was just nerves, that the trade would go down as promised, but in her gut, she'd known.

She hunched down in the access channel, head low. Blood was wicking through the fabric of her shirt, making the cut along her ribs seem bigger than it was. In the distance, the Laconian's amplified voice echoed, but Jillian only made out a few of the words. *Duarte. First. Die.* She plucked her hand terminal out of her pocket with her left hand, thumbing through the options with the same crisis-calm she'd always prided herself on. Her impulse was to go take care of the prisoners herself. Instead, she opened the comm.

"Jillian?" Kamal said. Even though the connection was voice-only, she could picture his worried expression.

"I made a mistake," she said as she hit the atmospheric release. The hiss of air rushing into the corridor outside their rooms was loud enough to come through the comm. "The Laconian's wearing an assault suit. She may be tracking me."

"Are you okay?"

Jesus, but that was just like Kamal. Jillian had locked him in a cell, asserted her own authority over the civilian chain of command, invited the enemy into their base, and Kamal was worried if she was all right.

"I'm where I should be," she said. "Stupidity's supposed to hurt. Get your people to your ship and get out."

"Where can we get armed up? Can you get us—"

"Get your people and go, Kamal. You don't need guns to run like hell, and you need to run like hell. I'm giving you cover."

She heard other voices behind him—Nagata, Holden, the black-eyed monster, the girl. She could hear in the breathiness of Kamal's voice that

they were on the move. “There still a couple Laconian ships heading for us once we get out?”

“There are. One’s here, one’s coming.”

There was a pause. He might have been thinking. He might have been running. “All right.”

“Ping me when you’re launched. I’ll make this as easy for you as I can.” She dropped the connection and a section of the wall behind her blew apart. She’d been found.

Jillian put her head down and pushed off, half running, half skimming in the microgravity of the base. A volley of bullets tore through the air around her. If the Laconian had meant her to be dead, she’d be dead already. All the enemy wanted now was to keep her scared and moving. It was working.

The heat in her face was shame and hatred. Shame for herself, hatred for the enemy. And fear too, but she wasn’t going to feel that now. That was for later, if later came.

Jillian got to a T intersection, grabbing handholds and swinging her body around the corner in the direction that would take the enemy away from the path Kamal would be on. *Chase me*, Jillian thought. *Come on, you asshole. Come and get me.*

Draper Station was small, but it was home. Jillian could close her eyes and navigate the whole place like it was her childhood ranch. Her handheld was lighting up with alerts and errors, some from the station crew, some from the automated systems. Alarm was spreading through the base like adrenaline through a bloodstream. There had been a time less than an hour before when Jillian would have followed up on every one of them. Part of her dreaded that she’d have to go through them all later. A part of her knew better, but that was for later too.

Still on the run, she pulled up her saved comm groups and hit Live-send to the crew of the *Storm*. “Draper Station is being attacked from within. Prepare *Storm* for emergency launch in... five minutes.”

She didn’t wait for any replies.

Behind her, the Laconian was shouting something about Teresa Duarte, but all Jillian could hear was the joy in the vast electronic voice. Her own mind was already dancing ahead. Up two levels, and there was a tunnel that looped back around to the hangars. If she could stay far enough ahead, the curve of the tunnel itself would give her some protection from enemy

bullets. She reached the ladder up, hauled herself to the next level, and slammed the access door closed behind her. It was going to be about as useful as rice paper for stopping the enemy, but the point wasn't stopping the enemy. Just slowing her down. Getting a few extra seconds for Kamal and for herself.

Something seemed to distract the Laconian, because she fell behind for a moment. Jillian was almost all the way to the tunnel's far end before she heard the access door being blown aside and the impact of the mechanized armor pulling itself after her in a fast, even stutter. Jillian let herself down and then moved to the right. The passage to the *Storm's* airlock was two levels down, but Jillian couldn't wait for the lift. Still on the move, she hit the lift door override, and by the time she reached it, the shaft stood open. She dropped, but slowly. Gunfire came from behind her. Some fragment of Draper Station's security force making their stand. Some people Jillian knew and had been responsible for, dying because she'd let herself believe she could trade the Duarte girl so she wouldn't have to watch her planet burn. The mistakes you made at the high-stakes table were always the ones that cost the most, and Jillian had a lot of chips.

Two levels down, she kicked off the back wall and stumbled into the airlock corridor. The *Storm's* outer lock was already open and waiting, and Jillian hurtled into her ship and thumbed the doors closed. Down the corridor, the mechanical armor slammed into view. The *Storm's* outer doors began to slide closed, and the enemy let out a shout amplified by her suit until the sound was almost an assault.

An RPG launched toward her, and time seemed to slow. The dark body of the grenade with a brightness behind it like a ship and its drive plume. Jillian tried to step back, as if that could help. The doors hissed closed, and then rang like a gong. The skin of the *Gathering Storm* was probably the only thing on the station that the Laconian couldn't blow a hole through. Another quarter second, and the grenade would have detonated in Jillian's lap. But that was for later.

"Bridge, this is Captain Houston. Report."

As the inner airlock doors cycled open, Caspar's voice came over her hand terminal. "Drive's prepped, but we're missing some crew."

"They're too late. No way to get them in now. Is the *Rocinante* launched?"

“No, still in dock.”

Where the fuck are you, Kamal? she thought. Into her handheld she said, “Prep for launch.”

“Aye, Captain,” Caspar said, and she heard the fear in his tone.

When she reached the lift, she checked her security report. Eighteen high-priority alerts tracked the Laconian from where she’d first opened fire, and then through the base, time codes of broken doors and gunfire alerts marking the Laconian’s passage through space and time like a borehole chewed through wood. She tried to guess which way Kamal and his people would go. Another alert lit up, but it wasn’t automated. Station security asking her what the plan was. The tightness in her throat was that she didn’t know what to tell them. The base was compromised, and it was her fault. One prisoner for thousands of civilian lives had seemed like an obvious trade at the time, but it had brought her here. Dwelling on the postmortem of her error was for later.

“Kamal, report,” she said, and for a terrible half second thought he might not reply. Then the speaker ticked once, hissed, and his out-of-breath voice came gasping to her. “By the water tanks. Heading for the dock.”

“Get there and get out,” she said. “I’ll clear the path.”

Caspar was in his crash couch on the bridge when she reached it. Amanda Feil was strapping in at comms. Natasha Li had the gunner’s controls up, even though she was sitting at her usual station. All the other couches were empty. Jillian slung herself into her own. The one she’d taken when Draper left. For the very first time, the chair didn’t feel right. It suddenly felt much too large for her.

“Launch when ready,” she said. “Li, target the *Sparrowhawk* as soon as we’re clear of the dock.”

“Disable or destroy?”

“Kill the fuck out of them.”

The *Storm* shifted under her, tilting her crash couch and then pressing her into it as the ship left its home port for what Jillian understood in that moment would be the last time.

Behind her, Draper Station burned.

The funny thing was she didn’t even like Kamal. She never had. She’d always felt like his faux-folksy grandpa act had a hidden contempt for her and people like her. She still remembered when the *Rocinante* had come to

Freehold as a threat and taken her father away. Maybe on some level she'd never forgiven him for that. Or maybe she was just reaching for bullshit psychological justifications because she was ashamed of how things had worked out. Flip a coin, win a prize.

The *Storm* thumped twice as two torpedoes were ejected from the launcher. On Li's screen she could see the tiny dots that represented them speeding off toward a targeting diamond with the name *Sparrowhawk* floating next to it. The *Derecho* was the same class as the *Storm*, but with the advantage of recent repair and resupply and the knowledge and expertise of the people who'd built her. The *Sparrowhawk* was smaller, and it had taken some damage in New Egypt.

Jillian looked at the tactical map of Freehold system. The little solar disk on her display made the vastness seem comprehensible. That was an illusion, but a useful one. Here was the ring gate. Here were the ships that the underground had in-system—half a dozen rock hoppers and an ancient ice hauler, none of them ready for a full-scale battle. Here was the *Storm*.

There were the enemies, focusing in on Draper Station and on her, the indicators for her two homes—her base and her ship—still so close together they overlapped. She pressed her fingertips into her lips until it hurt a little. There was the planet and her family and everyone she'd grown up with that the fuckers had threatened to glass. Here were the planets of Freehold system that didn't sustain life.

Here was the problem that, if she solved, she could live, and if she couldn't, she would die.

"Status on the *Sparrowhawk*?" she said.

"Matching us. Shot down the first two torpedoes, now staying just out of effective range."

"Could you give me an evasion plan for the *Derecho*, please?" she asked, and saw Caspar and Feil exchange a look. They knew when she got polite, things were bad.

Caspar spoke, his voice steady. "If we break directly away and make the highest sustainable burn, their long-range missiles will be good to go in eighteen hours, fifteen minutes. Solutions drop quickly from there."

"What's the status from Draper Station?"

"They've gone dark, Captain," Feil said.

She felt Bobbie Draper beside her. Not a ghost or a spirit, but a memory.

The older woman's smirk that might have been to condemn Jillian's naive fuckup or God's sense of humor or both.

If the *Rocinante* didn't get out—if Kamal and Nagata and the rest of them died where they were—there were options. Assuming Trejo's bullshit emissary stayed alive, one of the ships would have to stop and pick her up. If it was the *Sparrowhawk*, that meant it had to break away and give the *Storm* a head start. If the *Derecho* went after Tanaka, that meant they intended to let the *Sparrowhawk* do the fighting. But that was one she thought she'd be able to win. She could escape.

Freehold, on the other hand, couldn't. If she killed their sister ship, would the *Derecho* chase her or turn back to punish the underground by leveling the colony? Could the underground's other ships run interference? If she could lure the destroyer into joint action against her and her scattered militia at the same time... Well, the ice hauler wouldn't make it, but it might give her enough of an edge to win that fight. And then it would be the *Storm* and whatever damage it had sustained against the one remaining Laconian ship...

"It's okay, Captain," Caspar said, and Jillian looked up at him. Her lip had gone numb where she'd been pushing at it without realizing. The pilot's face was meant to be consoling. "We understand. It's okay."

Jillian fought the urge to unstrap, walk over, and hit him. Or dress him down at least. Lash out somehow. If they lived through this, she would have a long and very unpleasant talk with him about morale and faith in her command, but that was for later. Now, things were happening.

"*Rocinante* has cleared Draper Station," Feil said. "They made it."

A third icon appeared on her display, stacked on top of Draper Station and the *Storm* like they all shared the same shirt.

"Get me a tightbeam," Jillian said.

Seconds later, Kamal was on her screen. Familiar as he was, she found herself caught by the small details of his face: the way his skin darkened at the eyelid, the whiteness of the stubble on his chin and neck, the laugh lines at his mouth. If he was frightened, he didn't show it.

"What's your status?" Jillian asked.

"We're all on the ship. The girl and her dog too. It was closer than I would have liked, but we made it."

"Injuries?"

“We’re good.”

The map of the system still on her screen rearranged itself without any of the designator icons moving. The *Rocinante* was only one more piece on the board, but it changed the logic behind everything. She saw the flaws in her plans and the stakes she was playing for. The despair felt almost like relief.

“All right,” Jillian said with a sigh. “Set your course for the ring gate. I’ll buy as much time as I can. Tell Nagata I’m sorry.”

“She’s right here, if—”

“No,” Jillian said. “You can do it for me.”

She dropped the connection, took a moment for a long, slow breath, then checked status. The *Derecho* was upping its burn, leaping after them now that Teresa Duarte was in play. The *Sparrowhawk* was shifting away too, ready to take another shot at the *Rocinante*. Get even. That made her target selection easy enough.

“Keep us between the *Sparrowhawk* and the *Rocinante*. As many gs as you need,” she said, and her voice was calm and steady. Caspar’s *copy that* was too. As the *Storm*—as her ship—shifted under her and her limbs grew heavy with the acceleration, she went on. “How does this affect the *Derecho*’s arrival?”

“Effective missile range will be two hours for the *Derecho* assuming it keeps its present course. Overshoot will put us behind them and out of range fifteen minutes after that unless we brake significantly or they do.”

“Overshoot won’t be an option,” she said. “We’re looking at direct engagement.”

She looked around the deck. There was no shock on their faces. They’d all known when they got on the ship that there wasn’t much chance of getting back off.

“Permission to lay down some PDC fire along their trajectory?”

“Save your powder, Li,” Jillian said. “We won’t end this with anything left in the magazines, but there’s no point starting until it’s starting time.”

“*Rocinante* has changed course for the ring,” Caspar said.

Jillian steeled herself and pushed up to standing. The extra half g left her a little light-headed for a second, but she adjusted. “I’ll be in my ready room,” she said. “If any of you have personal messages you want to send, this is the time.”

They saluted her as she made her way off the bridge. Her ready room wasn't much, but it was hers. She was sorry she wouldn't get to spend more time there. She pulled up the live tactical display—Draper Station, the *Storm*, and the *Rocinante* growing slowly farther apart as they laid on the acceleration. The enemy ship and her own converging. She remembered something her father had said when she was growing up about owning your mistakes, even the ones you couldn't fix. You did it because it was the adult thing to do.

She sent a message to the other forces in the system giving them permission to leave their present orbits and proceed according to their judgment, like a man leaving the gate open for his dogs before he went to war. She got a last shot of bourbon, but the idea of it was better than the taste.

Her ship hummed and strained, and the vast distances of Freehold narrowed. Her station chimed and Feil's voice came on.

"Tightbeam request from the *Sparrowhawk*," Feil said. "I can accept or refuse."

"Pass it over," Jillian said.

The man who appeared on her screen had a thin face and an almost comical mustache. He looked apologetic.

"This is Captain Mugabo of the *Sparrowhawk*."

"Houston of the *Gathering Storm*," Jillian said.

"You have no credible path to victory here, Captain. I am authorized to offer you and your crew honorable surrender. You will be prisoners, but you will be well treated. Send your remote operation codes and let us take control of the ship. We will see you and yours to safety."

Jillian cocked her head. Even with all she knew and had been through, some part of her still leapt at the hope. Just the way it had when Trejo had offered his trade. Owning your mistakes meant not making them twice.

"Thank you for that offer," she said. "But your colleague Tanaka? She has already made it clear what Laconian honor is worth."

"I can't speak to her actions, Captain, but I can assure you of mine. Even if you manage to destroy my ship, the *Derecho* will catch up with you. It is more than your match. I mean no insult. We are both aware of the situation. People like us have no room for illusions."

Jillian's smile felt like a knife. If she had to die, she was glad she was

taking this smarmy fuck down with her. “We have a few minutes still. You can send a message. I would let your superiors know that when Colonel Tanaka opened fire without provocation on Draper Station, she didn’t just kill us. She killed you too. I hope it was worth it.”

“Captain—”

She cut the connection, poured the last sips of unwanted bourbon onto the floor where no one and nothing would ever have to clean it, and stood to go back to the bridge.

She was all out of later.

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Jim

The *Roci* burned hard, the crash couch pressing up from under him at an acceleration that made his eyes ache. The sting of the juice in his veins was cold and hot at the same time, and it left him smelling something astringent that wasn't actually there. His breath labored with the unaccustomed weight like a hand pressing against his breastbone, defying every inhalation. And it went on for hours.

It might go on for days.

There were breaks every now and then to let people get food or hit the head. When he'd been a young man in the navy, he'd been able to wolf down a meal, grab a bulb of coffee, and get in a hand of poker in the galley in the break between hard burns. He didn't try anymore. His stomach wasn't as forgiving as it had once been.

Jim drifted in and out of sleep as they fled, but he only fell halfway. Part of him was always waiting to hear the collision alarms from his screen and the deep chatter of the PDCs trying to knock out enemy missiles before he and most of the people he loved were killed by them. The physical stress and the fear were as familiar as an old, often-sung song. A hymn to the price of violence.

He and Naomi were on the ops deck, in couches next to each other. Alex, above them on the flight deck. Amos, Teresa, and Muskrat were all down in the machine shop, in theory ready to leap into action if something in the ship failed. And maybe that was true. Amos was still a hell of a mechanic. Teresa was young, smart, and she'd been training under him almost since they'd fled Laconia.

Still, he really hoped that nothing failed.

He'd lost track of how many hours they'd been speeding out toward the Freehold gate and how many meals he'd skipped in the rush between hard burns, when a message popped up on his screen. It took effort to focus on it.

It was from Alex: SAFE TO STOP RABBITING?

Jim shifted his hands on the old, familiar controls and pulled up the *Roci*'s tactical display. Freehold system was vast and empty. If the display had been to scale, none of the ships would have earned a pixel big enough to see, but he'd been making sense of the semi-abstract designs on the *Roci*'s interface for decades. He didn't have to translate any of it. The red acute triangle was a Laconian destroyer falling away behind them. It wasn't chasing. It was on a braking burn toward Draper Station. The white triangle was the corpse of the *Sparrowhawk*, receding from them, but only at the speed of the *Roci*'s escape run. And the green, blinking indicator was the debris field that had been the *Gathering Storm*—flagship of the underground's forces.

It was a simple enough map. There weren't enough ships or bases in Freehold to allow much subterfuge. He ran the math of transit times—how far ahead of the enemy they could be when they reached the ring gate if they kept to the present hard burn, how far ahead if they didn't, how much of a lead they would need to get through the ring space and into some other system unfollowed. He ran a ladar sweep of a couple light-minutes ahead of them all the same before he let himself come to the conclusion he'd wanted to reach as soon as he read the question.

LOOKS CLEAR. WE CAN SPARK IT UP AGAIN IF WE HAVE TO.

In response, the thrust gravity eased back to half a g, and Jim's spine cracked just above his sacrum as something slid back into place. He shifted carefully like he was waking from a long, restless sleep, and rolled to his side.

Naomi had already locked her couch and sat up. Her mouth was a thin, grim line. Her screen was an engineering report of the *Roci*'s core systems—reactor, recyclers, water tanks, missiles and PDCs, power. She went through it value by value, making sure that everything was where it should be, since their lives depended on the ship not failing. He wanted to reach out to her, take her hand in his, but that would have been for his comfort. She was already doing the thing that would make her feel better.

He opened a channel to the machine shop.

"How's it looking down there? Everything good?"

The eerie hesitation in Amos' voice had grown so familiar it was hardly

eerie anymore. “Looking solid, except the dog’s got a little limp in her hindquarters. We’re going to give her a couple minutes to walk it off. If that doesn’t do it, we might take her to med bay and pop a little steroid in her hip.”

“Okay.” He dropped the connection.

Naomi had shifted her screen to a playback of the battle. Of the death of the *Storm*. Its destruction of the *Sparrowhawk*. The doomed dive into the teeth of the approaching *Derecho*. He had to think Alex was watching it too and seeing something very different. He’d served on the *Storm* for years. He knew the people who’d just died on it. Jim watched it on Naomi’s screen, trying to think how everyone else would make sense of it. How he did.

The two Laconian destroyers hurtled at each other, flinging torpedoes and PDC rounds until the resulting explosions blocked everything from view. The *Derecho* reappeared first, still under thrust, but its hull showing many glowing scars from Jillian’s furious assault. Then, when the *Storm*’s broken hull finally spun out the other side of the blinding cloud of violence, Jim heaved a sigh. It was the death of the underground, captured in low-resolution video. A glorious, ferocious death. But death all the same.

“Goodbye, Jillian,” Naomi said, whispering it like a prayer.

“We collect the most astonishingly brave people, don’t we?” Jim said. “And then we watch them die.”

Naomi smoothed her hair back and looked at him. “I thought Trejo was a man of his word.”

“He is,” Jim said. “I mean, he’s perfectly willing to commit atrocities. He’s not the good guys. But what happened back there, that wasn’t him.”

“And it happened anyway.” She bit the words as she spoke them.

“I was pretty sure I killed Tanaka back on New Egypt. This has the feel of a vendetta now.”

“So maybe he’s having as much trouble controlling his people as I am?” Naomi said, and went on before he could answer. “Jillian’s big heroic death screwed us. We’re fucked now.”

Jim flinched a little, imagining how the words would carry up to Alex. “She made a bad call. I mean, I understand the mistake. I’ve been known to act on my own judgment from time to time.”

He waited a few seconds before he went on.

“And when she saw what the situation really was, she saved us. She died

saving us.”

“She lost us Draper Station,” Naomi said. “The minute she talked to Laconia, she lost us the base. Even if they’d made the deal, they were never going to politely decide to forget we had resources on that moon. They weren’t going to pretend not to know the *Storm* was in Freehold system.”

“They were going to bomb the cities. People she knows and loves. Her family.”

“They’re the enemy army,” Naomi said. “Do we just do what we’re instructed every time they tell us that they’re going to do what enemy armies do? If that’s the plan, we’ve been running down the wrong road for a long, long time.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“That we should have handed Teresa over? That we were wrong?”

“It’s not Jillian’s fault there was no good answer.” Naomi’s almost subliminal flinch at his words told him the rest. When he went on, he was gentler. “And it’s not your fault either.”

The flicker of her eyes was a conversation in itself: grief and exhaustion and despair, and also determination. The knowledge that they’d been playing the game of no-right-answer for decades, and that it would outlast them, the way history outlasted everyone.

That that was the best case.

Alex’s slow footsteps came from above them, then down the ladder. Jim had known the pilot for more years than he hadn’t, and he’d seen Alex in every mood from exultation to rage. He’d never seen him look so quietly, profoundly defeated. He’d grown a white wash of stubble on his cheeks since they’d started the run from Freehold. It reminded Jim of snow.

Alex lowered himself into one of the remaining crash couches and turned it so he could look at the two of them. They didn’t ask how he was, but he answered anyway. Just a shrug and a sigh and a turning to the next issue.

“Technically, we’re not at the ideal escape radius. If the destroyer did the hardest possible burn starting right now, it could be a squeeze getting out the Freehold gate and through another one in time to keep them from seeing where we went.”

“They’ll have wounded crew,” Naomi said. “They likely have some structural damage. And they’re still picking up Tanaka from Draper

Station.”

“I don’t think they’ll do it, either. And if they tried, we could make them work for it anyway. Jillian topped up all our tanks. But I’d rather push a little less hard and conserve reaction mass for later.”

He didn’t say *I don’t know when we’ll be able to fuel up again*. He didn’t need to. He also didn’t ask where they were going or what the next plan was. The three of them sat together, the *Roci* ringing like a feather-rubbed gong, the musical whisper of a good ship. Jim didn’t know exactly what they were waiting for, except that the silence seemed right. When Alex spoke again, his voice was thicker.

“Bobbie always said Jillian needed watching. She liked getting her own way a little too much. Wasn’t just independence. She was independent, but she was a little mean too. You know?”

“Like her father,” Naomi said.

“She was smarter than her dad,” Alex said. “She’d have been a good captain if she’d had a few more years doing it. And the *Storm* was a good ship. Second best I’ve been on.”

“Really?” Jim said.

Alex shook his head. “No, it was creepy. Laconian ships all feel creepy. But I just watched a bunch of my friends die, so I’m feeling nostalgic.”

The comm channel opened before Jim could reply, and Teresa’s voice—punctuated by sharp, alarmed barking from her dog—interrupted them. “I’m in the med bay. I need help. He’s having another seizure.”



The medical systems did the best they could with Amos, which was mostly the expert system version of shrugging and saying *Looks weird all the same ways he usually looks weird*. Amos lay in the autodoc, his head resting on the little pale cushion. The utter blackness made his gaze hard to track, but Jim was pretty sure the mechanic was looking at him.

“How long was I out?”

“About half an hour,” Jim said. “How are you feeling?”

“Might skip my workout. This shit’s tiring.”

“It’s happening more often, isn’t it?”

“Nope.”

“Because it seems like it’s happening more often.”

“Well, yeah it is. But not because anything’s going bad. The doc’s pushing harder.”

Jim looked at the autdoc, confused. Amos shook his head.

“Okoye. She’s running on full burn trying to make sense of things out at Adro, and since all of us with—” He pointed to his eyes. “We’re all connected at the back. I get the spillover.”

“Really?”

“Pretty sure. Every time I get the wiggles, I come back up knowing more.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing useful,” Amos said. “There’s holes in the spectrum where the idea of being in a place breaks down. And there’s a kind of light that can think. I mean, it’s interesting I guess, but it doesn’t get the tools stowed.”

“Can you tell if she’s making progress?”

“It’s not like it’s a tightbeam. We don’t talk about stuff,” Amos said, then frowned. “Not exactly, anyway. More like I’m listening to someone doing shit in the next cabin over. And... You know how it is when there’s people in the room with you, and even if you’re not looking at them, you still know they’re there? It’s like that. There’s always three of us.”

“The girl and her brother,” Jim said.

“Not sure about that, but there’s three of us. I know it’s a pain in the ass with me getting messed up like this, but I don’t think there’s much I can do about it. I mean, besides train Tiny so she can cover for me.”

Jim was about to say *I’m not sure I want a sixteen-year-old mechanic in charge of keeping us alive* when a happy bark sounded from the hallway. A moment later, Muskrat and Teresa came in. The girl was carrying a tube from the galley in one hand and a drinking bulb in the other. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun that wouldn’t get in her eyes when they went on the float. Her mag boots were turned off, but she was wearing them. The dog was grinning and wagging her tail in a wide circle.

“Feeling better?” Teresa asked.

Jim was astonished by her casual, matter-of-fact manner. Even though

he'd been crewed up with her for almost a year, some part of his mind wouldn't let go of the memory of her as she'd been when he first met her on Laconia: a too-serious child with the weight of the empire on her shoulders, but still a child. She was old enough now to take long-term apprenticeship contracts, old enough to claim emancipation and her own rights on basic if she'd lived on Earth, old enough to see her only friend in the world suffer a massive seizure and take it in stride.

"I'm working my way back up," Amos said.

"I got you white kibble and lemonade. Salt, sugar, and water. I figured, you know, electrolytes."

Jim's stomach shifted at the thought of food, and he wasn't sure if it was hunger or nausea or a little of both.

"Thanks," Amos said, holding out his hand. She slapped the tube smartly into his palm like she was giving him a tool. "You take the stress inventory?"

"It's where I'm headed now," she said, then turned toward Jim for the first time, met his gaze, and nodded before she left. Muskrat pushed over, demanding a scratch behind the ears from both Jim and Amos before trotting back after Teresa. If the old dog was having hip trouble after the hard burn cycles, Jim couldn't see it.

"What's on your mind, Cap?"

"Thinking what it would be like to be sixteen and important enough that people kill each other over you."

"Yeah. It's gonna fuck her up," Amos agreed, amiably. "We did the only thing we could, though."

"Keeping her?"

"Yeah."

"I know," Jim said with a sigh. "It's going to be a problem, though. I don't see Tanaka giving up."

"She reminds me of Bobbie," Amos said as if he was agreeing.

"Naomi is wondering if Trejo was always going to double-cross us."

"You don't?" Amos sucked at the tube of kibble and nodded for Jim to go on.

"I've never known Trejo to lie. I've never known Duarte to lie either, and he was the personality that set the tone for all of this. He was grandiose. He was ruthless. He was a genius at a couple of things and under the

misapprehension that it meant he was smart about everything. But in his mind, he was doing the right thing.”

“The kind of guy, he’d feed you into a wood chipper, but he wouldn’t stiff you for his half of the bar tab,” Amos said. “I’ve known folks like that.”

“This Colonel Tanaka? I think she’s pissed off that she didn’t get us at New Egypt. Also, that I shot her in the face.”

“Yeah,” Amos agreed. “That’ll do it.”

“Think she’ll cool it if I explain I was just trying to kill her?”

“Seems like the right tentacle ain’t keeping track of what the left tentacle’s up to,” Amos said. “High command wants more than one thing, and running a galactic empire’s hard work. Maybe you’re right about Trejo. Maybe Tanaka just let it get personal and fucked up.”

They were silent for a long moment, then Jim sighed again. “The thing with hunting dogs is that once you let them off the leash, you’ve let them off the leash. They don’t stop until they catch what they’re going after.”

Amos went quiet for a moment, and Jim couldn’t tell if he was thinking or in one of his uncanny pauses. When he moved, it was like he turned back on.

“When I was back on Earth, I didn’t run with a hunting-dog kind of crowd,” Amos finally said. “But there was this guy I knew growing up who used to train police dogs. That’s kind of the same thing, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “Maybe.”

“So this guy, he was pretty fucked up by the time I knew him. Addicted to a bunch of different stuff, and taking a long time dying from it, but he still liked the dogs. The thing he said was that the whole process was about trying to find which ones weren’t going to start fucking people up on their own recognizance. So he’d flunk out any of the puppies that didn’t train up right, and he’d spend a lot of time working with the ones that made the cut. Fucking well-trained, smart animals, but that was the problem too. You get a dog smart enough, they know when it’s a training exercise and when it’s not. He used to say that until you went in the field, you never really knew what kind of dog you had.”

“So you think Tanaka’s going to stay on us until she gets what she’s after.”

“Or we manage to kill her,” Amos said. “Not sure it makes much

difference in the big picture.”

“I can’t see how this all plays out.”

“Sure you do. Everyone dies. That’s always been how it is. Only question now is whether we can find some way to not all go at once.”

“If we do, then civilization dies. Everything humanity has ever done goes away.”

“Well, at least there won’t be anyone who misses it,” Amos said, and sighed. “You’re overthinking this, Cap’n. You got now and you got the second your lights go out. Meantime is the only time there is. All that matters is what we do during it.”

“I just want to go out knowing that things will be okay without me. That it all keeps going.”

“That you’re not the one who dropped the ball.”

“Yeah.”

“Or maybe,” Amos said, “you’re not that important and it ain’t up to you to fix the universe?”

“You always know how to cheer me up.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four: The Lighthouse and the Keeper

Tanaka almost hadn't gone into active service. There had been a point when she was sixteen years old and the star student of her cohort in the Imahara Institute's upper university program when she'd seriously considered committing to a career as an art historian. She'd taken three tutorials and courses, and she'd been good at it. Knowing the history surrounding an image made both the art and the history more interesting.

One of her last essays had been about a painting by Fernanda Daté called *The Education of the Third Miko*. It had been of a thin woman looking directly out at the viewer. The oil paint that Daté used had given an eerie impression of direct eye contact. The figure had been seated on a throne of skulls, and a single pale tear streaked her left cheek. Tanaka had written about the context for the image in Daté's life—the nonresponsive cancer that the artist was struggling with when the painting was made, the threat of war between Earth and Mars that she'd grown up with, and her admiration for the Shintofascist philosophies of Umoja Gui. The distress of the third Miko depicted the aftermath of her self-revelation and acceptance of her own compromised nature.

Tanaka hadn't thought about that painting in decades, or about what a very different life she would have lived if she'd made a few different decisions at the start.

The captain of the *Derecho* was a gaunt man named Botton. The ship shuddered under them, and the high-g burn made her a little light-headed. But she wasn't getting in a crash couch yet, and so neither was he.

"If we are not sincerely trying to catch the enemy..." Botton said, and then lost his train of thought. Not enough blood to the brain.

She waited to reply until he came back to himself. "We won't catch

them before they transit the ring. We won't catch them before they transit *out* of the ring space either. We are setting their expectations as to our speed of pursuit to maximize the time they feel comfortable staying in the ring space. Once they've gone through the Freehold gate, we'll accelerate to an even higher burn. Near the maximum the ship can handle. Our aim is to reach the ring space before their drive plume has fully dissipated. That's how we'll determine which gate they escaped through."

"If we could... slow our present approach..."

"It would mean a harder burn later."

Botton started to nod, but thought better of it. Standing free in a hard burn meant keeping the spine very carefully stacked. Tanaka suppressed a smile.

"My concern, Colonel," Botton said, "is that the supply of high-g drugs may not me... may not *be* sufficient."

She pulled up the allocation chart that showed the reservoirs of juice for the crew. While Botton watched, she dropped her own to zero. The pull of thrust gravity made his distress look like a sorrowful dog's.

"I wouldn't ask anyone to take a risk I won't take myself," she said. It wasn't true, but it made her point. She was stronger than him, better than him, and tired of hearing him whine.

"Yes, Colonel," he said. He braced, turned, and walked out of the office that had been his, careful to place his weight so that it wouldn't blow out his knees. Tanaka waited until he was gone before she let herself ease back into her crash couch. Or her throne of skulls.



The *Forgiveness* began its life as a colony ship built at Pallas-Tycho in the years when the Transport Union had ruled the ring gates. With almost two billion square meters of cargo space, and living quarters that were the same size as an in-system shuttle, the *Forgiveness* was about freight, not passengers. Ekko had signed on when he was fifteen, and apart from a year he'd stayed behind on Firdaws to work on his command certification, he'd

pretty much been there ever since. His stint as captain had outlived the union that had certified him. It had outlasted the traffic control authority on Medina Station. It had outlasted the iron fist of the Laconian Empire, more or less.

The major shareholder in the *Forgiveness*, on the other hand, seemed like she'd be plaguing Ekko until the day he died. Mallia Currán had financed the ship's overhaul with a private loan backed by the governing council, and while she didn't have a greater than 50 percent stake in the ship, she could get a coalition that did by making two calls and a coffee date. And she was Komi Tuan's niece, so anything semilegal she did was played down by the magistrates. Like the old gods of Earth, most of the time she ignored Ekko and the *Forgiveness*, and the days she didn't were almost always bad ones. She'd asked for a status report five hours before, and he'd been thinking about how to answer ever since.

He arranged himself in his office, checked his image on the screen, and started recording.

"Always good to hear from you, Magistra Currán. Everything's five by five with the ship. We have a full load of ore and samples for Bara Gaon, and I've had assurance that the return cargo is going to be ready when we get there. We're just waiting on the passage protocol before we make transit." He tried an insouciant smile, but it came off forced. "You know how it is with taking large cargoes through. Want to make sure we're doing it by the book and all. I will check back as soon as we have confirmation."

He saved the message and sent it before he could second-guess himself. Four hours back to Firdaws, and maybe it would reach her while she was sleeping. That would give him a few more hours before she worked herself up into an excoriating mood. Which she would.

He already knew the arguments she'd make: The underground's protocols were guidelines, not law; the infrastructure to support them was only partly in place; what the fuck was he going to do if the okay didn't come through? Just sit there on the float waiting for consensus flight permissions while someone else bribed the supply officers in Bara Gaon for the soil and fuel pellets and fabrication printers that Firdaws needed?

She wasn't all the way wrong, either. A cargo ship that didn't move cargo wasn't much of anything.

"Fuck," he said to nothing in particular and everything in general. He

opened a channel to the pilot's station two decks below. "Annamarie? You there?"

"Am," his pilot said.

"Give us a quarter g toward the gate, yeah? We're going to have to do this, clearance or no clearance."

"Understood. On it," she said, and dropped the connection. A few seconds later, the thrust correction warning went on. If no one answered him, he'd have to decide whether to put on a braking burn or pass through the gate without clearance, knowing that there was an armada of independent freighters out there making the same calculations as him.

But what the hell, really. Life was risk.



"She's getting pretty close," Jim said. "We're sure about this?"

"We can keep ahead of her," Alex said from the comms and the deck above. "She knows it. If she gets too close, we'll speed up, then she'd have to speed up. Or we'll decide to make a break for it, and she'll know how close we're willing to let her get. Right now, she's willing to dump reaction mass and I'm not. If that changes, it'll change."

"You sound very philosophical about it."

He could hear the smile in Alex's voice. "I've always admired this part. Don't much care for the killing each other at the end, but there's a poetry to this part of the conversation. And there are some decisions we're going to need to make."

Jim turned his head. Naomi was already looking at him. Teresa and Amos were on the comms from the machine shop.

"Nuriel system is only a ten-degree deflection from our present course," Naomi said. "We wouldn't need a braking burn. It has some underground resources."

"But Tanaka would know we didn't need a braking burn," Alex said. "We could pop through the ring space from one end to the other in a few minutes if I get the angle right, but it'll be like drawing an arrow to where

we went. Going in slower means we have a wider range of systems that we might have headed into.”

The ship hummed and rang, the resonances of the drive playing their long, familiar music. On his screen, the Laconian destroyer ticked forward, closing the distance between them. The intercept would still come well after they’d passed through the ring gate and out through some other one. The panic clearing its throat in the back of Jim’s head wasn’t based in anything but itself.

“We also don’t want to go through so fast we ditch ourselves,” he said, more thinking aloud than to tell the others something they hadn’t already thought. “And there might be other Laconian ships in the slow zone. We can’t be sure there aren’t.”

“I don’t know how to control for that,” Naomi said. “But we can aim for the systems where there are likely to be fewer eyes on us. It’s the best we can manage.”

There were so many risks. If Laconia had a spotter ship in place, they’d be found. If the enemy was watching from the sunward side of whatever gate they passed through, the way the *Derecho* had in Freehold, they’d be caught. If Tanaka, breathing down their necks, had some trick he hadn’t thought of, they’d be caught. If they made the transit too fast or with too many other ships, they’d be dead. If they stayed too long in the slow zone and the things inside the gate boiled out from beyond the ring space again, they’d be dead. And if it all worked out... then what? Dead or captured were the failure states. He wasn’t sure what success looked like.

The next step, maybe. It didn’t matter if he knew how it all ended, as long as he always knew what was next. *You can drive a thousand clicks if you’ve got one good headlight*. Mother Elise used to say that when he was a kid. He hadn’t thought of her in a long time. Having her voice come to him so clearly right now felt like an omen, but he didn’t know what of.

“Cap?” Amos said.

“Yeah?”

“We need to go see the doc.”

He was quiet for a second. “Adro system?”

“The only ships there will be Laconian,” Naomi said.

Teresa answered. “But they’ll all answer to Dr. Okoye. And there’s nothing else there. Colonel Tanaka won’t expect it.”

“We did just gas up,” Alex said. “If we’re going someplace for a long, quiet float, this is the time for it.”

“Cap,” Amos said again. There was something in his voice. “We need to go see the doc.”

Jim didn’t want to do it, and he wasn’t sure why he didn’t want to. No. That wasn’t true. Elvi was their last hope against the darkness, and if he saw that she’d failed, he wouldn’t even have that anymore. It wasn’t a good enough reason to stay away.

“Alex, plot the fastest transit you can for Adro system.”



Kit woke. The harness beside him was empty. At first he thought Rohi was feeding Bakari, but that wasn’t it. The baby was in his own little sleeping harness, eyes closed and arms floating forward like he’d never left the amniotic sac. His son looked utterly at peace. Which, good on him, because nobody else was.

As quietly as he could, Kit undid his restraints and synced his handheld with the cabin’s system. It would keep its electronic eyes on Bakari and alert him if the baby so much as burped. Then as near to silent as he could be, he slipped out of the cabin and into the common galley.

The lights were dimmed to night mode, so Rohi’s handheld lit her face from below. The flag of their future home was a shadow over her right shoulder. Her eyes were fixed on the little screen, and her expression was empty. He didn’t need to ask. He knew what she was looking at. Footage from San Esteban system.

He pulled himself to a stop beside her, his magnetic boots off and floating in air. She glanced up at him, made a rueful smile. Rueful and maybe a little resentful.

“We’re almost at the gate,” Kit said. “A few more hours.”

Rohi nodded, but the feed on her handheld cut to something new, and it held her gaze. The horrors of a systemful of dead people, replayed again and again, with commentary in ten languages and a hundred political

orthodoxies. The science feeds about the manner of death. The religious feeds about its spiritual meaning and what it said about the will of God. The political feeds about why it was some other ideology's fault. She watched all of them like she was looking for something in the images of the corpses. Meaning, maybe. Or hope.

"You should get some sleep," Kit said. "Baby's going to be up before long, and he's not as impressed with me as he is with you."

"He doesn't see there's anything wrong with you," Rohi said. "He's a baby, and he already knows I'm stressed."

"Between the two of us, we are his universe."

"What if we aren't supposed to do this?"

"Do what, babe?"

"All of this? Going to other planets. Going to other stars. What if God didn't want this?"

"Well, then they should have spoken up sooner, I guess. It's late in the game to turn around."

She chuckled and shut off the handheld. He was relieved. He didn't know what he'd have done if she refused to look away from the feeds. Go back to the cabin by himself, probably.

"How do we do this?" she murmured. "They all just died, and everyone just keeps doing what they were doing anyway."

"No options. We go on because we go on." He wiped away the film of tears building up around her eye. "It'll be all right," he said, hearing how little weight the words carried. How little he believed them. "Come to bed."



In one way, the chase looked simple. The *Roci* was braking, still hurtling toward the Freehold gate but more and more slowly. By the time it passed through, it would be going slow enough that it could deflect its flight path the thirty-four degrees it took to slide out the Adro gate, or any of hundreds of others. The Laconian destroyer *Derecho* had a greater velocity and was only now starting to brake. It would slide through Freehold gate moving

faster, braking harder, running its high-powered Laconian drive hot enough to risk the deaths of some percentage of its crew. Maybe it would be able to find the gate the *Roci* had gone through. Maybe it would guess wrong. Maybe it would make a killing burn to shed all its velocity and come to a stop in the ring space so it could search for traces of the *Roci*'s passage. Or, hell, maybe it would malfunction, spin off into the non-surface of the bubble between the ring gates, and be annihilated. Jim had been lucky before.

In another way, the chase was impossibly complex. With a flick of his eyes, he could turn the display to a probabilistic three-dimensional map that showed all the possible flight paths the *Roci* could take, the complex decision points where an equation with values like time, vector, delta-v, the elasticity of a human blood vessel, and the ship's position in space defined the moment when a possible future slipped away. Jim moved between the two views—the curve of the *Roci*'s intended path and the swooping, lily-shaped cone that was the *Derecho*'s possible paths. Then over to the intricate web of things that could happen but hadn't yet, as it narrowed second by second and left a thin thread called history behind it. His jaw ached from the deceleration. No one had spoken for hours, and his headache was probably just a headache. Strokes didn't take that long.

PREPARING FOR TRANSIT Alex messaged the full crew. On the external telescopes, the thousand-kilometer diameter of the gate was still almost too small to see. Jim watched it grow slowly until it was almost as big as the nail of his outstretched thumb, and then all the stars in the universe snapped off at once as they passed through it and into the ring space.

The whole bubble with all the gates was a little smaller than the volume of Sol system's star. A million Earths wouldn't have filled it. At their speed, they wouldn't be inside it for very long.

The *Roci* shifted under him, slewing around in a perfect arc, connecting the Freehold gate and the Adro gate in a logical relationship defined by complex math that the enormous power of the ship's drive was struggling to convert into physical reality. If the feed of reaction mass stuttered, they'd slip off course. If they missed the Adro gate, everything that came after that would be someone else's problem. Jim couldn't tell if his heart was racing from fear or just the effort of keeping the blood supply going to his brain.

To his left, Naomi grunted, and it sounded like dismay. He had the sudden flashbulb memory of medical alarms blaring when Fred Johnson had died in the same crash couch she was in, and his heart found a way to beat a little faster. No alarm sounded, but a private message came onto his screen from her.

TOO MANY SHIPS.

He changed his display again. The traffic pattern in the ring space. A dozen transponder codes spooled out—*Tyrant's Folly* out of Sol, *Taif* out of Hongdae, *Forgiveness* out of Firdaws—and twice as many pings for unidentified drive plumes. He tried to shift the analysis to include them all, but before he could, another message came from Naomi.

THIS IS INSANE. THEY'LL FAIL THE TRANSIT. WHAT DO THEY THINK THEY'RE DOING???

But she knew what they were doing. The same thing they were. Looking at the risk, and each one individually deciding that it made sense for them to throw the dice. And some had certainly failed. There was no one to keep track of how many ships went in a ring gate and didn't come out the other side. If the *Roci* was lost, he didn't know how long it would be before anyone realized it. Maybe never.

He shifted the system to threat assessment, and the answer came at once. Two ships were going to transit out of the ring space before the *Roci* reached Adro: a colony ship running without a transponder that was almost at the Behrenhold gate and the *Forgiveness*, a massive cargo hauler out of Firdaws that would pass into Bara Gaon just a few minutes before the *Roci* reached the Adro gate. Assuming the rings were at base state, the *Roci* would survive the transition. Assuming that no other ships came in through a ring gate in the meantime.

Assuming, that was to say, a lot of things he didn't have any reason to assume.



The stars came back. The same stars as home, if in a slightly different

configuration. Ekko let his head fall back into the gel of the crash couch. For a moment, he didn't say anything, barely felt anything, and then a deep relief rode through him like a wave, lifting his heart and setting him back down laughing.

He became aware that his comms were open from the soft rhythm of Annamarie cursing in French. She wasn't talking to him or anyone really. Maybe God.

"Little full in there today, yeah?" Ekko said.

Annamarie shifted to English. "*Fuck*, that was too much, old man."

Ekko laughed again. The release felt almost postcoital. Here he was, in his ship and in Bara Gaon system, and not in whatever screaming void ate ships that drew the short straw.

"I'm going to quit," Annamarie said. "I'm going to find an apartment in Bara Gaon and an honest job, and I'm going to retire and have babies and never go through that fucking gate again. *God damn*." He could hear the grin in her voice, and knew she didn't mean it until she sobered. "Seriously, capitán. Someone's going to fucking die in there if it stays that busy."

"True enough, but not us. Not today. Get me a tightbeam lock to the traffic authority and the client. Let them know we're here."

"That we live to skin our asses off another day," Annamarie said. "On it. I will let you know when I get the lock."



The *Rocinante* screamed. Compression seams touched the inside edge of their tolerances. Massive hull plates of carbon-silicate lace settled deep into their supports. The drive howled and pushed up against the hurtling bubble of ceramic and metal and air. The writhing stars on the far side of Adro gate loomed up, almost hidden behind their drive plume.

This was an absurd way to die, Jim thought.

His jaw hurt and he kept losing little bits of time. Alex had the drive plume of the *Roci* pointed out toward the Adro gate, bleeding off as much speed as they could, making their transit a few seconds later in the

unmeasurable hope that it would make the difference. Across the ring space, the *Derecho* would be coming close. There were so many ways for all of it to go wrong, and then what?

Mother Elise's little boy would have arced up from Montana through wars and alien solar systems and love and despair and died slamming into the one danger he'd known for decades was right fucking there. It was too stupid to even qualify as irony.

A message appeared on his screen from Naomi—ARE YOU OKAY?—and he had to keep himself from turning to look at her. He wasn't sure he'd be able to turn back under this burn. The blood was pooling in the back of his skull, and the uncomfortable electric fizz of the juice was, he was sure, the only thing keeping him from having several strokes at once. He started to answer her, then forgot what he was doing. The gate approached, growing larger first slowly, then quickly, then all at once.

The burn started to trail away, shifting slowly down toward the float to avoid reperfusion injuries that came when blood flooded too quickly into tissues it had been wrung out of. His hands and face tingled. He saw Naomi's message again and remembered that he hadn't answered.

He tried to say *I'm fine*, but it came out as a croak. He massaged his throat for a few seconds, moving cartilage and muscle back closer toward their right places, and tried again.

"I'm fine," he managed. "I'm good. You?"

"I am very proud not to be sitting in a puddle of something unfortunate right now," she said, but the joke sounded angry. The *Roci's* burn dropped under a g, then under a half. He looked over. Her mouth was a profound scowl.

"They're not following protocol," he said.

"I should have taken Trejo's offer. This isn't going to work without someone enforcing it. There's not enough cooperation."

"Isn't now. It doesn't mean there can't ever be."

"They're people," Naomi said, exhaustion in her tone. "We're trying to do all of this with humans. Shortsightedness is coded in our DNA."

He didn't have an answer for that. A moment later, the comms went live, and Amos and Teresa reported in on the post-burn maintenance they were doing, Alex started getting a tightbeam lock on the *Falcon*, and Naomi

checked to see whether the ship had grabbed any waiting communication packets from the underground during their passage through the ring space.

Jim followed along, chiming in where he could help, but the thing that stuck in his mind like a catchy, bleak melody was Naomi's voice. *We're trying to do all of this with humans.*



The *Derecho* passed through the Freehold gate and into the ring space, the drive pushing a braking burn at the limit of the ship's tolerance—which was the same as saying the limits of the crew's. The *Derecho* could pour enough gs into its maneuvers to crush the skin-bound sacks of salt water in it. Tanaka was willing to spend a few lives if it meant catching her prey. If that made her bloodthirsty, so be it. She'd always been thirsty for something. It might as well be blood.

As soon as the gate distortion was gone, and even as she struggled to draw breath, she set the ship to scanning the vacuum at the edges of the more than thirteen hundred gates. The *Rocinante*'s drive plume might be gone, but the cooling cloud that had been its reaction mass was still there, slowly diffusing into the soft mist of hydrogen, oxygen, ozone, and water vapor that made up most of the physical mass in the ring space. In time, the particles would all drift into contact with the edge of the space and be annihilated, but until then, the information was there. A subtle finger, pointing the way her enemy had gone.

If only she'd made it through before it had dispersed too far to find it...

The *Derecho*'s drive kicked off, the ship went into freefall, and a wave of nausea rolled through her. She ignored it, pulling up her tactical display. The ring space was ridiculously full. It was still fewer ships than she'd seen in the average approach pattern to the naval base on Callisto, back in the day, but Callisto had never had to worry about extradimensional horrors eating some of the ships as they tried to land. Context was everything.

The *Derecho* had already scanned and dismissed all of them—none was the *Rocinante*. She pulled up the visual profiles and drive signatures

anyway. Recognition algorithms were brilliant, but they weren't the human eye. What could fool one often couldn't fool the other.

"Colonel Tanaka?" Botton's voice asked from her comms screen.

"What?"

The *Derecho* flagged a burst of light and high-energy particles coming through the Sol gate. The first tickling drive plume of some other ship about to transit through that ring.

"We have medical emergencies with..." Botton paused, caught his breath. "With several crew members. If we can pause long enough to remove them to the medical bay..."

"Do it," Tanaka said.

"Thank you, Colonel," he said.

"Where are you, you little *fucks*?" Tanaka muttered.

The Sol gate fluttered with light.



Bakari was fussing because he was frustrated. The pediatrician had warned Kit about this before they'd started the journey. The time in lower gravity would weaken Bakari's muscles and bones a little. Not so much that he wouldn't recover once he was in consistent gravity again, but enough that during the higher burns on the trip the child would find himself unable to do things he had previously done. The braking burn into the ring space had been noted in their first meeting as a place that children Bakari's age would be likely to struggle. At the time, it hadn't seemed too onerous.

Now it seemed onerous.

"Come on, little bear," Kit said, smiling down at the small face that looked back up at him in rage. "It's okay. Listen while we sing, yeah? Listen to us sing."

It was the third hour since Bakari had woken from his nap. Rohi had taken the first two. Now she was in the commissary buying spicy curry for the brothers from Breach Candy as an apology for the screaming and crying. The other passengers were kind enough not to complain and also

kind enough to accept their peace offerings gracefully. Afterward, Rohi had promised to spend an hour in the gym. Neither of them had been good about keeping to the exercise schedule, and they'd pay for that when the *Preiss* reached Nieuwestad.

"Listen," Kit sang. "Little boy, listen. Listen to your tired daddy sing."

He made a trill in the back of his throat, something he remembered his own father doing, back in the ancient days before the divorce. Bakari started, focused on him like Kit had grown a second head.

"Oh. You like that?" Kit cooed, then trilled again.

The little mouth unknotted, and like a miracle visited upon the faithful, the baby laughed. Kit grinned down at him, and Bakari grinned back.

"The burn is almost over," Kit sang, improvising the glide and skip of the melody. "Soon we'll pass the gate."

Bakari shifted his back from side to side, and reached up an arm the way he had since he'd been in Rohi's belly. He'd be asleep soon, and Kit felt a surge of anticipation. When his son slept, he'd nap too. God, he needed to sleep.

"Close your eyes and rest, son," he sang, and gently rocked the little crash couch. He pulled the vowel sounds long and soothing. "Nothing here you need..."

Bakari's eyes fluttered closed, then open again. There was something odd about the way the light caught the roundness of his cheek, and Kit lost his own tune, fascinated by the texture of his son's skin. The light showed so much detail, the folds of baby-smooth skin, the sheen of the oils, and Kit was somehow falling into it, descending into the fractal complexity. By the time he realized something was wrong, it was too late.

Bakari was there, as close as he had been before, but what had been his boy was a complexity of vibrations—molecules and atoms in clumps and patterns too baroque to show where one thing began and another ended. Kit fell what would have been forward onto what would have been his knees, and the pain of it was like watching dominoes fall, tiny electrochemical sparks passing from nerve to nerve. The shimmering in the air was Bakari screaming. And Kit screaming too. The feeling of the air abrading his throat was a cascade of rushing razor-sharp atoms.

Something more solid and real than they were slid through the jumble of atoms that was the wall. A thread of conscious darkness that had never

known light, was the antithesis of it. Kit tried to move the clouds that were his arms around the cloud that had been his son, knowing distantly that it couldn't matter. He was no more solid than the wall had been.

The darkness whirled toward him, scattering him. Scattering his son.

A voice as vast as mountains *whispered*...



The alarm caught Tanaka's attention. Something was going wrong at the Sol gate. It took a few seconds to understand what she was seeing. The influx of fast-moving particles had just dropped to zero. It would have meant the incoming ship had cut its drive, except there were still photons getting through. Whatever ship was coming in from Sol wasn't going to make it. They were already starting to go dutchman, and they didn't even know it yet.

It wasn't her problem, and even if it had been, there wasn't anything she could do about it. She turned back to the scatter analysis and the hunt for the *Rocinante*. There was a greater than 40 percent chance that something had passed into Bara Gaon in the timeframe she was looking at...

"Shit," she said to no one.

She let the *Derecho* keep crunching its numbers and pulled her screen back to the Sol gate. Watching the trainwreck. The light was growing smaller and brighter now. The drive had almost reached the gate. Without meaning to, she heaved a sigh. A whole lot of people were about to die for no reason other than they'd been unlucky with the traffic patterns. Sympathy plucked at her. It seemed petty somehow, with the universe crashing in all around them, for the enemy to still eat the occasional ship.

"Rest in peace, you poor fucks," Tanaka said as the drive plume blinked out, lost in wherever it was that the lost ships went.

An alarm chirped, and for half a second she thought it was announcing the loss of the Sol-based ship. But the *Derecho* wasn't worried about that. It was worried about everything else. Tanaka looked at the data and her gut knotted. She opened a feed from the external telescopes. The surface of the

space between the rings was glowing a pearly gray, with ripples of darkness moving through it in a way that made her think of sharks swimming through cloudy water. Adrenaline flooded her system, and a wave of vertigo so powerful she looked for a thruster malfunction.

“Botton,” she began, trusting the *Derecho* to know she needed a comm channel open. “We have a problem.”

The surface of the ring space shifted. Bent. *Boiled*.

The alien station at the center of the ring space flared like a tiny sun.

Something happened to Tanaka that felt like waking up without falling asleep first. Her awareness shifted, opened, became something it hadn’t been a moment before. She was in her crash couch, but she was also in the medical bay with her head in excruciating pain, and in Botton’s cabin with a bulb of whiskey in his hand and the burn of it in his throat. She saw through a thousand sets of eyes, felt a thousand different bodies, knew herself by a thousand different names.

Aliana Tanaka screamed.



A voice as vast as mountains whispered.

It whispered *No*.

The scattered world paused in its swirls and chaos. The dark threads froze in their places, vibrating and writhing but unable to whip through the clouds and points that were matter. The awareness that had been Kit, drifting and broken and scattered as it was, saw its own pain, its own distress, the still-flashing impulses that had been its child’s neurons as they fired. Something analogous to sound rumbled and roared, and the dark threads thinned. They became black strings, wet as blood clots. Then threads. Then wisps of smoke.

And then nothing.

The paths where the darkness had whipped the scattered particles apart shifted like a video message played slowly and in reverse. Something thought *stirring the cream back out of the coffee*, and it might have been

Kit. The interplay of vibrations that were the atoms and molecules, incomprehensible in their variety, began to segregate. The slow spinning flow like a river past a muddy bank became the air from a vent. Or blood passing through an artery. Density became real.

Surfaces emerged. Then objects, and then Kit was looking into Bakari's wide, frightened eyes. Kit's heart fluttered, as confused as a man who'd forgotten what he was saying midsentence, and then it pounded, each stroke so hard he could see the pulse in his eyes. He wrapped his son tight in his arms as Bakari started to wail, and held him close, sheltered against a threat he didn't understand and couldn't locate in space.

The other man, the one who wasn't in the room, slumped in exhaustion and closed his eyes. The cabin door slammed open, and Rohi was there, eyes bright and panic-wide.

"You're hurting him," she shouted. "Kit, you're hurting him!"

No, Kit tried to say, *I'm just holding him. He's only crying from fear.* He couldn't find the words, and when he looked down, he was squeezing too tight. He made his arms relax, and Bakari's wailing grew louder. He let Rohi take their son. His body was shaking, a deep pulsing shudder.

"What was that?" Rohi said, her voice shrill with fear. "What just happened?"



The *Falcon* was close to the Adro diamond, and while it wasn't on the opposite side of the local star, it wasn't at the point in its orbit closest to the gate either. The light delay was sixty-two minutes, which meant one hundred twenty-four would have to pass before the tightbeam lock was confirmed. Jim could, of course, send out a message on the beam of supercoherent light even before the comms handshake was done, but somehow it seemed rude. By being in the system, they were dropping a great big bucket of uncomfortable decisions in Elvi's lap. Giving her the chance to refuse to talk to him felt like the least he could do from an etiquette perspective.

He was spending the time until then doing a checkup with the autodoc in the med bay. The medical expert system had been upgraded three times in the decades since the *Roci* had been a top-of-the-line MCRN ship, and while there was better technology out there now, what they had was pretty damn good. Certainly, it was better than what he'd grown up with.

He let the system check-scan him for little bleeds and tears from the long burn and decant a slurry of targeted coagulants and tailored regeneration hormones. The worst part about it was the weird almost-formaldehyde aftertaste that haunted the back of his tongue for the two days following the treatment. Small price to pay for being 8 percent less likely to stroke out.

Naomi floated in, moving from handhold to handhold with the grace of a lifetime's practice. Jim smiled and gestured to the autodoc next to his like he was offering her the chair beside his in the galley. She shook her head gently.

He almost asked what was bothering her, but he knew. The high traffic in the slow zone. He almost said it wasn't her fault, which would have been true, but she knew that too. It didn't keep her from carrying the weight.

"Maybe Tanaka's ship went dutchman," he said.

As he'd hoped, she chuckled. "We should be so lucky. It's never the ones you want."

"Probably true."

"The worst part is that there is an answer, you know? We have a solution. There are probably dozens of solutions. All it would take is people agreeing to one and abiding by it. Cooperation. And I could—"

Alex's voice came over the ship comms. "Are you all seeing this?"

Naomi frowned.

"Seeing what?" Jim asked.

"The ring gate."

Jim pulled at his arm, but the autodoc chimed a complaint. Naomi put the wall screen on and shifted to the external scopes. Behind them, the Adro gate had been everything every gate was—dark, spiraling material formed unfathomable eons ago by the strange arts of the protomolecule. Only now, it wasn't dark. It was shining. The whole circle of the gate was glowing a blue white, with streams of energetic particles radiating from it like an aurora.

Naomi whistled softly.

“It just started doing that a couple minutes ago,” Alex said. “I’m getting a lot of radiation from it too. Nothing dangerous—a lot of ultraviolet and radio.”

“Amos?” Jim said. “Are you looking at this?”

“Sure am.”

“So, you know things you’re not supposed to know. Any thoughts on this?”

He could hear the shrug in the big mechanic’s voice. “Looks like someone turned it on.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five: Tanaka

The captain of the *Preiss* was a flat-faced, pale-skinned man with a stubble-length beard that didn't hide his double chin. He'd spent two decades ferrying colonists to new worlds, and now he floated in Tanaka's cabin with a vague look on his face. He should have been frightened. He only seemed stunned.

By force of will, Tanaka kept from tapping her fingers against her thigh. She wasn't going to show anxiety, even in front of someone who seemed primed to overlook it. After all, this interview and all the others were being recorded.

"I've taken," he said, paused, licked his lips absently, "psychedelics. I've been places, you know? It wasn't like that. Not at all."

The *Preiss* was docked to the *Derecho*, the first of the ships waiting their turn for the Laconians to meet with their crews, copy the data from their sensor and comms systems, and generally go over everything with the finest-toothed of all possible combs. But the *Priess* was the most important. It was the only ship to ever shrug off going dutchman.

And if Tanaka had held any hope that its captain knew why, she would have been abandoning it right about now. "What is the ship carrying that's in any way out of the ordinary?"

His focus swam, found her. His shrug and scowl were perfectly synchronized, the result of a lifetime's practice saying *Fucked if I know*.

"We were just going through, same as always. The drive plume, it always hits first. But we couldn't see that anything odd was going on. Drive plume was in the way, you know?"

"I do," Tanaka said. Her jaw ached. "But there must be something. Something different this time? Had anything changed on this ship recently?"

"Got some new air scrubbers out of Ganymede. Charged graphene with

crosshatching. Supposed to last twice as long as the old kind, and you can wash 'em with distilled water. Reuse 'em five or six times."

"That's the only new equipment?"

"Since the last trip, yeah."

"What about the passengers. Are any of them shipping anything out of the ordinary?"

The shrug. The scowl. "It's all construction and climate engineering stuff. I don't know."

"Is any of it protomolecule-based technology?"

A flash of impatience crossed the thick man's face. "Everything's protomolecule-based technology. The lace plating's protomolecule tech. The biofilms around the reactor are. Half the food supply comes from things we built off that shit."

Tanaka took a deep breath and let it out through her teeth. It didn't placate her that he was right. But there had to be some reason that this man was here, floating at her workstation, and not vanished into the hungry void that was a failed transit.

She let it go.

"Did you have... any experiences associated with the event?" She managed to keep her voice steady, as if any answer would have been as good as another. As if just asking didn't make her gut tighten.

"Oh yeah. Oh, hell yeah."

Tanaka turned off the recorder. "Tell me what you remember. Don't feel like you have to make sense of it. Just your memory of the experience."

The man shook his head. Not a negation, but a gesture of wonder bordering on disbelief. "There was this thing where... I don't know. It was like being in the ocean, but the water was other people? You know how you dream, and maybe you're some other person? Like you dream you're old when you're a kid. Or a kid when you're old. It was like having a thousand of those dreams all at the same time."

Tanaka nodded. It was actually a pretty good description. She forced her jaw to relax.

"Do you still remember anything about those impressions? Or did the experience fade like normal dreams?"

He shrugged again, but almost gently. Like he was frightened or sad. When he spoke, his tone was almost wistful. "There's... scraps? There was

like a memory I had where I was a woman on L-4 maybe ten years ago? I'd just gotten a promotion or something, and I was drunk with some friends."

"Have you ever been on L-4?"

"Nah, but that's where I was. Where she was. Where she was when I was her. I don't know, it was fucked up."

"Do you remember anything else about her?"

"My skin was really dark. Like *dark* dark. And there was something wrong with my right leg."

"Okay. All right." Tanaka turned the recording back on. "We're going to hold your passage until we can interview everyone on board the ship and make a complete forensic scan."

She expected him to object, but he didn't. The *Preiss* was going to be late arriving on Nieuwestad, and the captain would probably lose a bonus at the least. Possibly owe a late-arrival penalty. If the monetary loss bothered him, he didn't show it. Tanaka's guess was that he'd had an experience that made the mere economic reality of his position seem less significant. She was seeing a lot of that in her interviews.

He hauled himself hand by hand out of the office to where her guards were waiting in the corridor. She thumbed the control, and the door closed behind him. The database of all crew and passengers from the detained ships was on the *Derecho*'s system. The data wasn't perfect. Some of the ships claimed to have suffered data loss during the incident, their systems corrupted and spotty. It just meant they were hiding evidence: maybe of smuggling, maybe of contacts in the underground, maybe of some glimpse of the *Rocinante*'s passage through the slow zone. She wasn't naive enough to believe these people were good citizens of the empire.

She'd care about that later.

Her own experience had been like a whiteout. One moment, she'd been watching the *Preiss* die in a failed transit. The next, she'd been in a hurricane of unfamiliar consciousness, battered by it. When she'd come back to herself, the *Derecho* had been on automatic lockdown. The crew had been stunned, confused. She remembered passing one woman in the corridor who was floating in a fetal position, tears in a bubble over her eyes like goggles made of salt water.

The glitches and lost consciousness were often associated with visual and aural hallucinations. This was a new variation, but that was all. She

wanted to believe that, and like anything she found herself wanting to be true, she forced herself to double-check it.

The initial search criteria was easy enough. Anyone female-identifying who'd been on L-4 between eight and thirteen years previously. Cross-reference that with medical records mentioning the right leg.

There was only one hit. Anet Dimitriadis, senior mechanic on the *Pleasant Life*, a freighter working between Corazon Sagrado, Magpie, and Pankaja systems. Tanaka resented the tightness in her throat as she pulled up the woman's file.

Anet Dimitriadis had skin so dark the system adjusted the image contrast to make her features clear. Like a rush of cold water in her gut, fear flooded Tanaka.

"Fuck," she said.



In the ring space, a soft and shadowless light spilled from the gates. Along with it, electromagnetic radiation on a range of frequencies filled the void like a jamming device. The *Derecho* took all of it in, filling the available memory with raw data from every sensor array it had. The ships that been in the ring space when the *Preiss* had done whatever trick it had done drifted, waiting for their turns to be questioned and released. A handful of other ships came through the gates, burning slowly, tentatively, like mice that thought they'd heard something meow.

What Tanaka wanted and what she could do were far enough apart to be independent variables. It would have been the work of years to put each and every person in the ships there in her office where she could grill them, scare them, threaten them. Find out what they remembered or thought they remembered. She didn't have years.

And, more to the point, this wasn't her mission. She was hunting Winston Duarte, or whatever he'd become, and hauling him—or it—back to Laconia. Whatever was going on here might be fascinating. It might be the most important thing in the universe. That didn't matter because it wasn't

her job.

Except that she'd found something more important than her job.

Twice a day, she ate in the *Derecho's* galley, but only because there was some deep, primate part of her brain that thought being around other primates would make her safer. The isolation of her office felt too much like vulnerability. But being around the crew was intensely uncomfortable in its own way. She ate her rice and egg slurry, drank her tea, and went back to her office, relieved to be alone again, but anxious too. She hated herself when she was like this.

She had Botton send representatives to each ship to conduct interviews, routing only the captains, scientists, and information officers directly to her. When she wasn't doing her own interviews, she had a dozen more to listen to, compare among each other, gnaw at like a dog to crack a bone down to the marrow. She switched between the feeds, catching a question or two, a phrase or two, and then moving on. *Kenst how you can pay attention to how, sa, just your foot feels? Like that, aber con a jéjé different bodies.* Tanaka shifted. *I had this intense sense of panic, but it wasn't my panic. It was someone else's, and I was feeling it.* She shifted. *There was someone with me, only he wasn't in the room. He was more with me than if he'd just been beside me.* She told herself she was bored, but that was a lie. She was restless, and that wasn't the same. She needed to get drunk, to get in a fight, to fuck. Something. Be doing anything that centered her fully in her own body, where she could forget being anything other than herself.

The message from Trejo wasn't unexpected, but she'd let herself hope it might not come. She decanted a bulb of red wine designed to her tastes—dry and oaky—and drank half of it before she played it.

The message was noisy—static and resolution loss and best-guess infills by the comm system fighting against the new noise from the ring gates. Even so, she could tell that Trejo looked like shit. His unnaturally green eyes had taken on an almost milky softness. His hair was whiter than she remembered it being, and thinner. The darkness under his eyes spoke of sleeplessness. Anton Trejo was Laconia now, and he was learning that it was too big for him. No wonder he wanted Duarte back. She recognized his office at the State Building. She'd only been away from Laconia for a few months, but it seemed like a memory from childhood.

"Colonel Tanaka," he said, nodding at the camera as if he were looking

at her. “I want to thank you for your report. I’m not going to bullshit you. The outcome in Freehold system isn’t what I was hoping for. But you were the one with boots on the ground. I’m not going to second-guess you. This other thing... Well, it’s concerning.”

“Well understated, sir,” she said to the recording, and squirted a little more of the wine toward the back of her throat. Nothing was as good on the float, and she had to breathe the fumes from her mouth up into her nose for the drink to taste like anything.

“I have ordered three ships from the Science Directorate to make all reasonable haste to the ring space, where they can make a complete survey. Your data has been provided to them and to Drs. Ochida and Okoye. If it is possible to get to the bottom of this, I have faith that they will.”

A buzz was slipping into his voice. His annoyance might be with her. It might be with the universe or the unjust nature of chance. Or maybe he hadn’t gotten laid in too long. She didn’t know how he lived his life. She steeled herself to take the brunt of it, whatever it was.

“I also understand that this is alarming and of interest, but I do think it’s a distraction from your primary objective.”

Primary objective. He wasn’t saying Duarte’s name. Not even here. It was a misplaced discretion. Teresa Duarte had been breaking bread with the enemy for almost a year. Naomi Nagata and the whole underground knew by now that Duarte was shattered. They might not know that he’d taken the trouble to resurrect himself, but they probably did.

He was trying to keep his secrets secret, even when there was every reason to think his beans were well and truly spilled. Her stomach hurt. She realized Trejo had been speaking while her mind wandered, and she rolled the message back.

“... from your primary objective. I need your focus here, Colonel. I am spinning a lot of different plates right now, and while I appreciate your enthusiasm, I need you to keep in mind that you are one part of something much, much larger. Trust me to take care of this whatever the fuck this was. You do your job. We will get through this clusterfuck together, just the same way we always have. The more you get off-mission, the less useful your mission becomes to Laconia.”

The message ended. It wasn’t quite a threat, which was nice. It wasn’t quite not one either. *Do the job I asked or I’ll pull your Omega status.* He

hadn't said it. He hadn't needed to.

Tanaka carefully enunciated the word *fuck* into the still air of her office, squeezed the last wine from the bulb, and hauled her way out into the corridor and toward the bridge. She was already composing her reply. *I have returned to the pursuit of the asset we discussed. I remain convinced she is the most likely path to completing the mission.* Before she sent it, though, she had to make it true.

It wasn't until she pulled herself to a stop on the bridge that she realized she hadn't been there since the event. At the stations, half a dozen crew in sharp Laconian blue were unnaturally focused on their screens. She had a terrible memory of being at lower university and walking into a study group room that suddenly went quiet. She didn't know if they were laughing at her or frightened of her. Her scarred cheek began to itch, and she took some pride in letting the irritation swell to pain without scratching it.

She cast her gaze around the bridge like she was aiming a weapon. She picked out all the little flaws—the places where the couches were beginning to wear, where the fabric had been replaced and didn't quite match. Something about these imperfections soothed her.

Botton was at the captain's station, strapped into his crash couch though there was no thrust gravity. When he saw her, he undid his restraints, pushed himself up to a mag-booted approximation of standing, and braced. She nodded, and he relaxed.

"I have had word from Admiral Trejo," she said.

Botton nodded. Was there a smile hidden there? Without wanting it, she remembered the taste of whiskey on his tongue, richer and peatier than when she drank it herself. The feel of it warming his throat. She had been in a cacophony of different minds, but that one, she recognized. She had been inside Botton in a way more intimate than even the most authentic sex. Had he experienced something like that with her? Was he, right now, recalling one of her trysts with inappropriate men? She suddenly felt violated and exposed, but he hadn't said a word.

If she had glimpsed inside Botton's actual and genuine mind, that was fine with her. But if he or other people had been able to access her private memories, know her—even for a moment—the way she knew herself? That was like waking up to find herself in mid-fuck with a stranger. She'd navigated her whole life on the unbroken membrane between her public self

and her private one. The idea that the separation might have been ripped open put her on the edge of almost animal panic.

She realized she'd been silent a beat too long. "The Science Directorate is sending survey ships to investigate the event and the hallucinations that accompanied it." She hit the word *hallucinations* just a degree harder than she needed to. She meant *You felt something, you recalled something, you experienced something. Don't assume it was truth.*

"Copy that, Colonel," Botton said. "I will recall our people from the other ships at once."

She glanced at the screen he'd been working at. It was the scan of the ring space that the *Derecho* had been making in the moment when whatever had happened had happened. She gestured toward it with her chin, and asked the question with her eyebrows.

Botton blushed. That was unexpected.

"I have been... reviewing the event," he said. "It was an exceptional moment."

"You have an opinion about it? Something you feel you should share with your commanding officer?" She said it coolly. It wasn't a threat, unless he thought it was. And then it was.

Botton didn't hear the warning. His stance softened, his gaze turned inward. She wondered, if the event happened again just then, what she might find in the place behind his eyes.

"The... hallucinations. I found them very unpleasant."

"As did I," Tanaka said.

"Yes, Colonel. I feel as though understanding what happened might better help to put the experience behind me. And I would very much like to put it behind me."

Tanaka tilted her head. There was an echo of her own fear in his voice. It occurred to her for the first time that she wouldn't be the only one who had felt the gestalt as a violation. For all she knew, Botton had secrets of his own to nurture and protect. It left her liking Botton a degree better.

"I'm sure the Science Directorate will be better equipped to make sense of this than we are," she said. "How long before we can be underway?"

"Transferring our crew back from the ships could take several hours." It sounded like an apology. She liked that too.

"As soon as they arrive, inform the remaining ships that they are to stay

here until the survey ships arrive and debrief them.”

“They aren’t going to like that. Several of the captains have expressed a strong preference to leave the ring space as soon as possible.”

“Any ship that leaves before being given permission will be labeled a criminal vessel and destroyed on sight by Laconian forces,” Tanaka said.

“I will make sure they understand.”

She took a deep breath. At the workstations, the other crew could have been living in different dimensions for all the reaction they showed to her conversation. On Botton’s screen, the ring gates flared white. And the alien station at the ring space’s heart matched them. The *Derecho*’s sensor arrays lowered their sensitivity to keep from whiting out. When the image returned a second later, the rings were glowing points all around the surface of the slow zone.

I’m missing something. The words were like a whisper in her ear. Something the captain of the *Preiss* had said. Or something about the newly glowing gates. Or had Botton accidentally said something that would unlock the mystery, or better, give her control over it?

“We have evidence that something made a transit to Bara Gaon system in approximately the right time frame,” Botton said. “Shall we proceed there?”

“Yes,” Tanaka said. “Alert me when the full crew has returned.”

She clicked on her mag boots, used her ankle to turn her body and to stop it, then launched herself back toward the lift. Behind her, someone let out a long, stuttering breath as if they’d been holding it the whole time she’d been there.

Bara Gaon was an active system. If the *Rocinante* had fled there, it was because they hoped to use contacts in the underground to cover their passage. Any data she got from the official sources, she’d have to double-check herself in case it had been corrupted. Her mind ran forward along the path of the chase, and it was a relief.

She needed to go to the ship’s gymnasium and punch a heavy bag. *I used to be a boxer when I was young.* The thought wafted through her mind like she’d heard someone say it. It wasn’t her voice. She ignored it. She needed to eat. She needed to report back to Trejo. She needed to track down the *Rocinante*. She needed to find Winston Duarte or whatever he had become. She felt duty sliding in around her mind like blinders, cutting away the

distractions.

She had a mission and a score to settle. Unthinking, she scratched her wounded cheek.

She was missing something.

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Chapter Twenty-Six: Jim

Jim couldn't sleep. He lay on the crash couch, the gentle one-third g of the burn settling him into the gel, and tried to will himself into a sense of peace and rest that wouldn't come. Naomi, beside him, had curled onto her side, her back toward him. There had been a time when he'd slept with the lights entirely off, but that had been before Laconia. Now he kept them low—less than a single candle would have been but enough that when he woke from a nightmare, the familiar outlines of the cabin would be there to ground him. He hadn't had a nightmare. He hadn't slept at all.

Naomi murmured something in her sleep, shifted, and settled. Years of experience told him she was sloping down into the deepest levels of dream. Another few minutes and she'd twitch once like she was catching herself from falling, and after that, she'd snore.

This was the life he'd dreamed of during his imprisonment. This was what he thought he'd lost forever: suffering a little insomnia while his lover of decades rested at his side. That the universe had given it back to him after he'd given up hope flooded him with a profound gratitude when it didn't frighten him. This was so small, so precious, and so fragile.

They were both mortal. The one thing he knew for certain was that this couldn't last forever. Someday, there would be a last meal with Naomi. Someday there would be a last sleepless night for him. A last moment hearing the *Roci's* drive humming around him. He might know when it came, or it might only be clear in retrospect, or it might end for him so quickly that he never had time to notice all the beautiful, small moments that he was losing.

Naomi jerked, went still, and then the low, soft rumble of her snore began. Jim grinned through his weariness, counted her breaths up to two hundred to give her time to fully commit to slumber, and then pulled himself up out of the couch and dressed in the gloom. When he opened the

door to the corridor, Naomi turned to look at him. Even though her eyes were open, she wasn't awake.

"No troubles," he said. "Keep sleeping."

She smiled. She was beautiful when she smiled. She was always beautiful. He closed the door.

They'd made it almost three-quarters of the way to the *Falcon*, and were in the earliest part of their braking burn. Elvi's messages to them—that they could dock, that she'd see to it that there wasn't a security problem, that they were welcome—had a sense of normalcy that didn't match the situation at all. Even as Naomi had responded with their flight path and expected intercept coordinates, Jim had been struck with the absurdity of treating it like popping over to someone's apartment for dinner, when in reality it was more like conspiracy to commit treason. But the *Derecho* hadn't followed them through the gate, and there was literally no place else for a ship to hide. At some point, Adro had been a solar system capable of sustaining life. Now it was a star, a green diamond the size of a gas giant, the *Falcon*, and the *Rocinante*.

Jim reached the lift and rode it slowly up through the quiet ship until he reached the ops deck. Alex was standing beside a crash couch, a bulb in his hand and the bright gate on the screen in front of him. They were far enough from it now that, if he'd gone outside, Jim wouldn't have been able to distinguish it from the billions of stars. On the scopes, it radiated swirling waves of aurora-like energy.

"Hey," he said.

Alex looked over his shoulder. "What're you doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd see if you wanted me to take watch."

"I'm fine," Alex said. "I'm shifted over. This feels like midafternoon to me. You want a beer?"

"A midafternoon beer?"

"I didn't say it was morning," Alex said, and scooped another bulb off the crash couch. Jim caught it, broke the seal, and took a long swallow.

"I've never understood people who like beer without gravity," Alex said. "That's not a drink. That's a vaguely alcoholic kind of foam."

"No argument," Jim said, then nodded toward the screen. "Anything?"

"Nothing new, but..." Alex gestured at the bright ring. "I don't know. I keep looking at it. Wondering what the hell it's doing."

“Well, it hasn’t killed us. That seems like a good start.”

“Could definitely be worse. But... You think you know something, right? Then it turns out you were only *used* to it. It does something, and it does something, and then after a while, you think that’s what it does. Then it turns out there was this whole other thing, maybe.”

“Using a microwave as a lamp, because it has a light in it,” Jim said. He tried to remember where he’d heard that analogy.

“Yeah, exactly,” Alex said. “You thought you knew it, but you were only familiar with it.”

Jim took another sip of the beer. The hops tasted like mushroom, for good reason. “I’m hoping that Elvi has figured some things out. I mean, she’ll know better than we do.”

“We can hope,” Alex agreed, then squeezed the last of the beer out of his bulb and tossed it into the recycler. His belch was deep and satisfied.

“How many of these did you have?” Jim asked.

“A few.”

“Are you drunk?”

Alex considered the question. “A little, I guess.” He lowered himself into the crash couch. “There was this time when I was a kid, I had a really crap babysitter. I was maybe nine? She was sixteen. And we watched this monster film. A huge cat monster that lived underground, and it got pissed off by some seismic surveys. Came to the top and started tearing up cities and collapsing tunnels. Scared the shit out of me.”

“Weird the things that get to you when you’re a kid,” Jim said.

“I knew it wasn’t for real. I was young, I wasn’t dumb. But it still scared me, and the thing my dad told me that actually got me past it? He showed me how it wouldn’t scale.”

“Wouldn’t scale?”

“Volume goes up by cubes. A cat big enough to crush a city wouldn’t be strong enough to stand up, even at Martian gravity. Its bones would break under its own weight. And that did it for me. I was all right, because I saw it couldn’t work. This is like that cat, it doesn’t scale.”

Jim sat with that for a second. “Either you’re too drunk or I’m not drunk enough. I don’t get it.”

“The gates. The systems. It’s bigger than us. It’s bigger than we *can* be. I mean, have you ever thought about what it would be like to see every

system there is now? To see just the places where we are? There's thirteen hundred seventy-three gates—"

"Seventy-one. Thanjavur and Tecoma are gone."

"Thirteen hundred and seventy-one," Alex agreed. "Now let's say you plot it so that you don't have to slow down when you get to the ring space. Accelerate all the way to the ring gate, brake all the way back to the goldilocks region at wherever you're going. Maybe take you a month to do it."

"You'd run out of reaction mass."

Alex waved the objection away. "Pretend you could stock up in flight. All the reaction mass and fuel and food and everything. And liquid helium to boil off the waste heat."

"So ignoring every actual constraint that makes it impossible?"

"Yeah. Five billion clicks a month, every month. No time on the float. No time at the planets. Just—" He threw his hand forward, a gesture of speed.

"All right."

"Hundred and fifteen years. Start it the day you're born, and finish it an old man, and never see anything but the inside of your ship. Take a week at each planet—not each city, not each station, each *planet*—to play tourist? Add another twenty-eight *years*. A hundred forty-some years old. That's a solid lifetime, just to take a peek. Get the lay of the land. Never see the same place twice."

Jim thought about that. Between working for the Transport Union back in the day and fleeing with the underground, he'd been to more systems than most people ever would, and it was still probably under three dozen. He knew how many more there were, how many he'd never see, how many Naomi was trying to coordinate. Alex was right. It was daunting. Maybe more than daunting.

"And that's not the worst of it," Alex said. "By the time you're done, there's been a century of change at the place you started from. It won't be the same. All the places you visit start changing into new ones the second you leave."

On the screen, the bright gate shifted and muttered. The false-color map showed radio waves and X-rays pouring out of it. Jim couldn't help imagining it as a vast eye looking back at them.

“This is all too big for people,” Alex said. “The things that built it? Maybe they could handle it, but we’re not designed for this scale. We’re trying to get big enough we can make it work, but we’re breaking our legs just standing up.”

“Huh,” Jim said. And then, a moment later, “You got any more beer?”

“Nope.”

“Want some?”

“Yep.”



With its drive off, the *Falcon* was no more than a small, oddly shaped asteroid at first. It was a little under three hundred thousand kilometers off the Adro diamond, orbiting it like a tiny artificial moon. The artifact itself was eerie: vast and green and flickering now and then with murky internal energies like storms that penetrated deep into the flesh of the object. The planet. The library. Jim knew enough about Elvi’s preliminary work that he could appreciate the supremely unnatural aspects of the thing: that it didn’t collapse under its own mass, that it was connected using the same locality-breaking principles as the ring gates, that it had the capacity to hold vastly more information than humanity had generated in its millennia of progress. The *Falcon*—pale-skinned and half-organic the way Laconian ships all were—would have been unnerving in any other context. Here, Jim felt a weird kinship with it. The technology might be alien, but the design language was mostly human.

Alex brought them into a matching orbit, maneuvering the *Rocinante* gently into place until the two ships seemed like they were already connected. Locked by the common forces of velocity and gravity. The *Roci*’s crew gathered at the crew airlock as Amos prepared to extend the docking bridge.

“You know what’s funny?” Jim said. “I feel certain this door will open and Tanaka will be standing there with a bunch of Laconian Marines in power armor ready to charge across.”

Teresa rolled her eyes, but Naomi laughed. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Of course not. But I’m certain it will. That’s weird, right?”

She took his hand, squeezed it once, and as she looked into his eyes, she said, “This is all right. Elvi is with us, and she’s in command of this ship.”

“Besides,” Alex said, “if she’s not, they’ve had plenty of time to call for backup. No one’s here besides the two of us.”

Jim nodded. He knew that the fears were irrational. That didn’t keep him from feeling them, but it did make it a little bit easier to take them lightly. Alex was right. They’d announced Elvi’s complicity to her crew the moment they’d transferred into the system, and no one had sounded the alarm as far as they could tell. The connection of their two ships, the transfer off the *Rocinante* and onto the *Falcon*, was almost symbolic compared with what they’d already done.

Amos clicked the last of the safety latches into place and keyed in the syncing protocol. A soft hissing vibration meant that the docking bridge was moving out, creating a corridor between the ships.

“Still, I don’t think we should all go over,” Naomi said. “Not at the same time, anyway.”

“Not until we know the situation over there,” Alex agreed.

“Not ever,” Naomi said. “One of us is always on the *Roci*. That’s a rule. I trust Elvi, and I trust her to know her crew. But I trust us more.”

Alex raised his hand like a schoolboy answering a question. “I’m happy to keep an eye on the farm if y’all want to go over.”

“I think Amos should stay too,” Naomi said.

“Better if I came with,” Amos said. “Nothing happening over here Tiny can’t keep eyes on.”

Naomi hesitated, and Jim wondered for a moment what would happen if she told Amos he had to stay. Maybe Naomi had the same doubt. “All right,” she said. “Alex and Teresa stay here for now. The rest of us go make introductions.”

Naomi caught his eye and lifted one eyebrow. She meant that he didn’t have to go. He shrugged. He meant that he did.

“Works for me,” Amos said, hauling himself into the airlock. “And we got a seal, pressure, and an invitation.”

Jim followed Naomi into the airlock and felt it in his bones when it

cycled shut behind them. His fear of Tanaka had shifted. Now some part of him expected the outer airlock door to open onto the void, for the air to flow out and death to rush in. Instead, there was a soft clank, a hiss of gas as soft as an exhalation, and the gangway. The *Falcon's* outer airlock was already open, and the three of them launched across to it. The air smelled different. Bright and astringent.

When the *Falcon's* outer door closed, its inner door opened, and Elvi Okoye was there. Fayez floated beside her with a black-eyed girl. Elvi smiled, but she looked terrible. Her skin had an ashy tone, and her arms and legs were visibly atrophied.

“Naomi, Jim,” she said, drifting toward them like an obscene parody of an angel. “It’s good to see you again. And Amos.” As she stopped herself with a handhold, Elvi’s gaze flickered across Amos, and for a moment there was something almost like hunger in her eyes. The focus of a taxonomist on an important new species. “I’d heard you changed like Cara and Xan. I would really love to do a few medical scans while you’re here. If that’s all right with you?”

“If it helps, Doc,” Amos said, then turned to the black-eyed girl. She had very different features from Amos, but the blackness of their eyes, the grayness under their skins, left Jim’s brain trying to see the similarity as a family resemblance. “Hey, Sparkles.”

The girl frowned and started to say something, then stopped.

“Well,” Fayez said. “This is just awkward as hell, isn’t it?”

Elvi shook herself and motioned them in. “Please come in. I’ve had a little welcoming party set up, and we have a *lot* we need to talk about.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Elvi

The *Rocinante* had come through the Adro gate, the gate had lit up like a radio and X-ray bonfire, and Elvi knew that the game had changed. She hadn't known what it had changed into or what the consequences of the change would be, but without doubt, the ways she'd been operating were the old ways now.

The immediate response on the *Falcon* had been barely restrained panic. An enemy gunship was in the system. The *Falcon* was far from defenseless, but were they going to be in a battle? Had the underground come to drop nukes on the BFE the way they had the construction platforms? What had they done to change the ring gate? Elvi led by example at first. She didn't panic, and it gave everyone else permission not to panic either. Then the first tightbeam from the *Roci* arrived, Naomi brought her up to speed, and Elvi had some decisions to make.

The first job, and the one that would shape what came after, was talking to Harshaan Lee.

The younger man floated in her office with his ankles crossed and his arms held behind his back in a way that opened his chest. He listened with the calm focus of a researcher taking in a new body of information. Only this was information that reframed his own life and his prospects for survival.

"I'm not going to apologize," Elvi said. "Admiral Trejo knows very well how I feel about all the political and military wrangling in the face of this existential alien threat. If he finds out... *When* he finds out about this, he won't be surprised. But he won't be happy either."

Dr. Lee let a long, slow breath out from between his teeth, half sigh and half deflation. "No, I see that he won't."

"If you'd like, I can incarcerate you," Elvi said. "When this all comes out, you'll be able to honestly say you couldn't do anything about it."

Lee was silent for a long moment, his gaze shifting as he thought. Elvi admired the man's intelligence and professionalism. She didn't know what he'd say or do, but if she did need to start moving down her chain of command until she found someone who'd toe her line, it was going to be a long, difficult day.

When he spoke, his voice was a mixture of resignation and amusement. "I am an officer of Laconia and a patriot. You are my commander and the head of the directorate in which I serve. Your collaboration is unorthodox. After San Esteban, unorthodox may be necessary. I understand your rationale. You may rely upon me."

"Thank you," Elvi said. "And Harshaan? I have access to the comms. And I have monitors on them not even the comms officers know about. Don't fuck with me. I'm here to win."

"Very much understood," he said.

With his support, the rest of the crew shifted from fear to confusion. She wouldn't have thought it, but there were some real advantages to working in a system that treated chain of command with an almost religious zeal. At least when she was the one with the authority.

Communication through the gate had always been spotty. In Sol system or Laconia—and increasingly in more developed colonies like Auberon and Bara Gaon—repeaters were plentiful enough for robust routing solutions. If one failed, the others would notice and track their signals around it. In Adro, there was a single thread of repeaters that the *Falcon* itself had dropped on the way out and the one at the ring gate that the underground or pirates or vandals occasionally destroyed. The new flood of radio pouring off the ring gates acted like a signal jammer and made the system even less reliable. But slowly, during periods of low activity and on frequencies the ring's new activity seemed to ignore, a deeper picture of what had happened began to reveal itself to her. By the time the *Rocinante* arrived, she had as clear an understanding of the new status quo as anyone except possibly Ochida and Trejo. More than that, she had a plan. And getting Dr. Lee on board had been more straightforward than the risks she needed the *Rocinante* to shoulder.

She waited in the airlock with Faye and Cara. She would have invited Dr. Lee and Xan, but they wouldn't be coming to the briefing. There wasn't enough space in her lab for all of them. She felt the anxiety in her chest like

a spring wound up a quarter turn too tightly. Floating beside her, Cara fidgeted, clasp and unclasp her hands. Wringing them. Elvi had always thought that was just a figure of speech.

“Still time to back out of this,” Faye said.

“No there isn’t,” Elvi said.

“No. You’re right.”

The airlock’s outer door cycled closed. There was a soft click as the inner door’s bolts came free. The door slid open, and they were there.

Naomi looked very different from the last time Elvi had seen her in person. They’d both been much younger then, and she remembered Naomi as a soft, almost retiring presence who had the habit of hiding behind the spill of her own dark, curling hair. The woman in her airlock had a harder face, hair the white of snowfall, and nothing reticent about her. The cameras did a great deal to disguise the gravity with which she held herself. Somehow, across the reach of decades, Naomi Nagata had become the kind of person Elvi could imagine sitting across a table from Anton Trejo. She wondered if Trejo knew that.

James Holden, on the other hand, looked exactly like himself, but older. Of course, she’d seen him much more recently on Laconia. She’d had time to adjust to the years in his face and the vague, bemused look in his eyes.

“Naomi, Jim. It’s good to see you again,” she said. The man beside them gave her a friendly smile. She might only have imagined Cara’s near-silent gasp. “And Amos. I’d heard you changed like Cara and Xan. I would really love to do a few medical scans while you’re here. If that’s all right with you?”

“If it helps, Doc. Hey, Sparkles.”

They were all silent for a moment. Criminals and conspirators tasked with saving humanity from itself and the enemies bent on its destruction.

“Well,” Faye said. “This is just awkward as hell, isn’t it?”

“Please come in. I’ve had a little welcoming party set up, and we have a lot we need to talk about.”

As they passed through the ship, the crew was careful not to notice them. Elvi tried to imagine what she’d have felt in their place. The enemy welcomed into their home. She wondered how many of them guessed that Teresa Duarte was in the ship they were linked to. If she’d tried to design a pressure test to see whether her people would rat her out to Trejo, she

couldn't have done better than this. She hoped that none of them had a back channel out that she didn't know about. If they did... Well, that would be an interesting problem.

They reached the lab, and she ushered them all in like she was back in college and hosting a party in her dorm room. She went in last, closing the door behind her.

"Welcome to my little world," Elvi said, gesturing at the lab.

Naomi grabbed a handhold, stopped herself, and looked over the space, approving. Elvi had become so used to the half dozen multifunction workstations, the heavy air scrubber built to capture dangerous chemicals and put out any fires, that having new people looking at it felt like a reminder it was there. It had all become as familiar as her own body and as easy to take for granted. Most of what the *Falcon* was doing in Adro was medical scans of Cara and geological scans of the diamond, but the ship was built for everything from electron microscopy to vivisection.

"It's lovely," Jim said, and he almost seemed genuine, but not quite.

"It's a fucking prison," Elvi said with a smile. "But it's mine."

She grimaced when she realized she'd just claimed to be locked in a prison to a man who had spent the previous few years being tortured in an actual prison, but the look on his face didn't change. If he noticed her gaffe he had the grace to ignore it.

"I'm sorry we put you in a hard position," Naomi said. "I know you're taking a risk letting us come here."

Elvi made a shooing motion with her left hand as she pulled a display onto the wall screen with her right. "It was the right thing. You do what you have to when the universe is on fire."

"Is it?" Naomi asked.

"On fire?" Elvi said. "That's actually a really interesting question. You know about the new event?"

"We've been running dark," Naomi said. "The only things we know, we heard from you."

"Well, you were part of it, whatever it was." She pulled up the ring gate on the wall in its new, bright form. A cascade of analytic data spilled out in columns beside it. "You were part of the trigger anyway. Most of the direct data I have is from Colonel Tanaka."

"The one who keeps trying to kill us?"

“The same,” Fayez said. “She’s been doing field reports and sending us the raw data while you were on your way here. She had scanners doing live sweeps of the slow zone looking for traces of your passage when the shit hit the fan. And she was even watching the turd in question.”

Elvi gestured and the screen shifted to the familiar bubble of the ring space with its hundreds of gates equally spaced along the surface. She zoomed in on one that was at an oblique angle to the telescope capturing the image, the circle of the gate bent by perspective into an oval. A glimmer of light shone in the center of the ring gate like a firefly. The drive plume of a ship braking before it passed through.

“Sol gate,” Elvi said. “Still almost half the traffic in and out of the ring space goes through there.”

“But there was a lot of other traffic,” Naomi said, grimly. “Including us.”

Elvi shifted her hand, and the glimmer in the gate slowed. A readout said they were watching it several thousand times slower than it had actually happened, but the feed wasn’t choppy. Jim crossed his arms, scowling. Amos and Cara watched with a matching interest and stillness. The glimmer grew brighter, until it was pure white on the screen.

“It was a colony ship,” Elvi said, her words fast, staccato, and anxious. “It attempted transit a few seconds after Tanaka’s ship came in. We don’t know how many other transits had happened before, but that doesn’t matter. Enough to put the threshold up over safety.”

The glow brightened... and it died. Elvi felt a sting of excitement, but only because she already knew that the lives she was watching end, hadn’t. Somehow they’d been saved. The drive plume returned, coalescing inside the ring space like the ship had made its passage after all, even though it had clearly vanished just moments before.

“What the fuck was that?” Naomi murmured.

“The ship went dutchman, and then came back. But that’s just the pregame show,” Elvi said. “Watch how much the ring entities liked it.”

The edge of the slow zone bubbled, brightened, roiled. Elvi had seen that before. The *Falcon* had been the only ship to survive the last time this had happened. When she spoke, her voice was tighter and higher. “This is what we saw when we lost Medina Station. It’s a direct intrusion across the ring space’s barriers. It killed Medina. It killed the *Typhoon*.”

“Too bad it didn’t kill Tanaka,” Amos said.

Patterns played across the ring space like malefic auroras, and a darkness moved in the light. Elvi found herself hunching over like she was protecting her belly from a punch. She forced her spine straight.

“And then this,” Elvi said.

As one, the ring gates and station flared white, a brightness that overloaded the telescopes for three long, terrible seconds. When the light faded, like letting out a long, slow exhalation, the ring space returned to itself, with all the drive cones and transponders and traffic that had been there before. Including the colony ship that they’d watched vanish and reform.

“It’s not just the Adro gate that lit up,” Naomi said.

“No, it’s all of them. And when that happened, there was a cognitive effect. Most of the data Colonel Tanaka has been providing has been about that.”

“A cognitive effect like the lost memory?” Naomi asked.

“Nope,” Fayez said. “Very, very different.”

“It looks like it may have been a kind of networked connection between the minds of the people in the ring space,” Elvi said. “All the crews of all the ships. It was apparently fairly overwhelming. But there’s an indication that they all participated in each other’s memories and experiences.”

Amos scratched his chin. “That sounds like what’s been going on with me and Sparkles.”

“It does seem very similar to what you, Cara, reported during the dives into the BFE.”

“BFE?” Amos asked.

“The diamond. The library.”

“Why BFE?” Jim said.

Elvi scowled and shook her head. “The point is, when we saw it with you two”—she gestured to Cara and Amos—“we had assumed it was because you’d been modified by the repair drones. What happened in the ring space, that happened to unmodified human beings. The effect didn’t last very long. Almost instantaneous, really. But the memories have been vivid and persistent. The radiation from the gates is also interesting. Take a look at this.”

The display shifted into something that looked like an impossibly

complicated spiderweb. With a gesture, Elvi rotated it, then looked over at Jim.

He nodded and said, "I have no idea what that is."

"Communication between the gates," Elvi said. "We think the patterns in the radiation set up handshakes between the gates similar to the one we saw here between Cara and the... diamond."

"The gates are talking to each other?" Naomi said.

"We've been using them as a matter transport system, which they are. It makes sense that they're also a communication network."

A tickling sensation crawled up Jim's neck and he shuddered. "Amos said something about there being a kind of light that can think."

"Yes," Elvi said. "One model that goes pretty well with this architecture is a neural network. A really small one, but the signal processing between them has some real similarities. If it's a fully meshed network with each connection acting like a synapse, that's a little shy of a million. So about a tenth as smart as a fruit fly. If they're making connections between gates with different frequencies acting as distinct connections, they'd need something on the order of ten million different frequencies just to get as smart as a house cat—"

"Are you saying that the gates are alive and *thinking* on their own?" Naomi asked. The tremor in her voice was almost like fear.

"No. I'm also not saying they aren't, but as biological systems go, this is really pretty simple." She paused. "I was trying to be reassuring."

"Not sure it worked," Jim said.

"Didn't," Naomi agreed. "Really didn't."

Elvi shut off the wall screen and used a handhold to turn toward them. "I'm sorry. I've been deep in this for so long, I get happy when I find anything that isn't overwhelmingly complicated. I have a friend from my postdoc who spent five years modeling protein cascades in trout livers. I'm supposed to do that depth of analytic work in half an hour five times a day. It's been inhumane."

"I've been running a guerrilla government with shitty communications, thirteen hundred different isolated systems, and literally billions of people who think whatever they're looking at is the most important thing there is," Naomi said. "I know how you feel."

"Let me try again," Elvi said. "There's good news. Ever since the rings

began radiating like this, there hasn't been an event in any system. No loss of consciousness. No change in any basic physical constants or the laws of physics. No more San Estebans with massive numbers of people dying with no warning or defense."

"Not sure that makes sense, Doc," Amos said. "They weren't able to stop it."

"They?" Naomi asked.

Amos gestured at the dead wall screen as if it would show what he'd meant to say. "The ones that made all this. They got killed. They didn't have a way to stop it once it started. They shut down the gates to try and quarantine themselves. Nothing stopped the attacks."

"Not for them, no," Elvi agreed. "Which makes this very interesting. And there is another factor. The shared consciousness thing? One effect was that people came away with impressions from lives that weren't their own. Some episodic memories. Some procedural. I'm sure the data Colonel Tanaka's collecting will fuel a billion doctoral theses on holographic memory-encoding paradigms, but one of the things that keeps coming up was an awareness of a man who was present but wasn't there. More than two percent of the people who experienced the event talked about him. And he's in my dataset too. Cara's seen him. The other one."

They all turned to the girl. For a moment, she seemed smaller, more vulnerable. Like the girl she'd once been. Elvi expected her to speak, but Amos was the one to answer.

"Duarte. You think it's Duarte."

Fayez shrugged. "He was massively altered with protomolecule-based technologies. He popped himself out of a coma and went missing. And now this? Yeah, it's our best guess."

"So when he went missing, he vaporized? He's a protomolecule ghost now?" Amos said. "Haunting the network?"

Jim looked ill, and Naomi put her hand on his elbow, squeezing lightly. Cara looked over to Amos, and Elvi couldn't tell if the girl was uncomfortable that he was there or if she was looking to him for protection.

"I have no idea what happened to him, physically. But it is possible," Elvi said, "that he's been using the work we're doing here to... piggyback. That he's aware of the things Cara and Amos are aware of. That he's finding some separate application for it."

“That he hauled himself up out of a coma more powerful than before,” Jim said.

“It’s a theory,” Elvi said.

“What do we do if you’re right?” Jim asked.

Elvi steeled herself. “I think we should try a dual dive. Put Amos and Cara in separate sensor arrays, bring out the catalyst, send them both into the library together. Up to now, Amos’ experience has been mediated by their connection. If Cara and Amos are together, it could very plausibly give them more control than Cara’s had going by herself.”

“Control’s good,” Amos said. “What do we do once we have control?”

“We try to talk to him.”

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Chapter Twenty-Eight: Tanaka

Tanaka knew as soon as they made the transit that the trail had gone cold, but it took time to confirm it.

Gewitter Base was Laconia's largest military installation in the Bara Gaon system. Made up of three rotating rings spinning around a central zero-g dry dock, it housed nearly seven thousand permanent officers and personnel. Two *Storm*-class destroyers remained on constant combat patrol around the station, monitoring all traffic through Bara Gaon's ring and tracking the commercial traffic moving through the system.

Bara Gaon was one of the Laconian Empire's most important industrial hubs. Bara Gaon-5 was a ball of soil and water placed in the exact center of the goldilocks zone, and with so little tilt to its axis that its seasonal changes were nothing more than mild suggestions. Significant volcanic activity in its early formation meant the crust was full of useful metals, and the soil was well suited for adaptation to Earth organics. In orbit around it, the Bara Gaon Complex floated, a massive construct of shipyards and low-gravity production facilities.

The tracking systems from Gewitter they'd linked to the *Derecho* showed that, in addition to the two destroyers, there were four deep-space telescopic satellites, three dozen Laconian radio listening stations, and seventy-three ships currently under thrust in the system.

Not one of them had seen the *Rocinante* come through the ring.

While the *Rocinante* might flee into the system and then try to get the underground to help them hide, it was impossible to believe they could have made the transit without being spotted.

Tanaka had the SigInt people run a deep background on the system's governor to make sure she wasn't on the take from the resistance, but it was pro forma. Tanaka didn't expect them to find anything. She'd just followed the wrong lead.

“It looks like it was a supply ship out of Firdaws called the *Forgiveness*,” Botton said, standing next to her at the bar in Gewitter’s upscale officers’ club. He laid his terminal on the bar and pulled up a holographic 3-D model. “Former colony ship owned by a liability collective and run by Captain Ekko Levy.”

The décor was a tacky style they called Martian Classical. Lots of fake wood and polished metal mirrors surrounding carved stone tabletops. A few other people sat at the tables, chatting and drinking and eating mediocre pub food. But the lighting was good, and the music was low enough to allow for quiet conversations. After a few weeks on the *Derecho* staring at the same cloth-covered bulkheads every day, even the club’s fake wood paneling felt like luxury.

“No chance they were a deliberate decoy to pull us off the trail?” Tanaka said, knowing the answer before Botton replied.

“They don’t show up in any intelligence databases. If we were confused by the timing of their ship making the transit out of the ring space, it seems more likely that it was unintentional on their part.”

If we were confused. Botton was being diplomatic. This was her mission. She was calling the shots.

“We followed the wrong scent,” she said.

“It looks that way,” Botton replied. Tanaka shot him a look of irritation. She wasn’t looking for his agreement. Botton’s expression didn’t change. He waved the bartender over and ordered a second beer as if he hadn’t noticed.

As Tanaka brooded over her options, the bartender brought Botton his beer and a bowl of dried and salted seaweed flakes. He looked at her, as though trying to gauge whether asking her if she wanted another drink was more dangerous than ignoring her entirely. He made the right call and walked away without a word.

After the silence had stretched out long enough to make her point, Tanaka said, “I’ll check my other leads. In the meantime, call up signal intelligence. Put the word out to every ship and relay on the network. They’ll be running without a transponder, but we’ve got the *Rocinante*’s drive signature and hull profile.”

“Copy that,” Botton said, and started to leave, most of his second beer still sitting on the counter.

“Also? Go back over the sensor data we took in when we passed through the ring gate. Run the analysis again, omitting Bara Gaon. Maybe there’s something there we overlooked.”

“Aye, aye, Colonel.”

“And make sure they understand,” Tanaka said, “that finding this ship is a security priority. Failing to report will be considered an act of sedition and punished by being sent to the Pen.”

“I thought Major Okoye ordered the dismantling of the Pen?”

“I’ll build a new one.”

“Understood,” Botton said, and left the bar in an overly casual hurry.

She pulled up her personal message queue and started the long process of demanding reports. The questioning of Duarte’s friends and intimates hadn’t turned up any other visitations, but the interviews of second-degree connections were ongoing. It looked like a dead end to her, but there was someone on Laconia whose job was to tell her so, and they could fucking well do that. Ochida hadn’t gotten her an updated study of the egg-ship thing. She sent a request for that. It queued. There was congestion at the repeater network because of interference coming off the ring gates. Three notifications were waiting for her with intelligence about San Esteban and the death count there, not that she had any clear idea what she was supposed to do about it. Feel bad that she hadn’t found Duarte in time for... what? For him to stop it from happening? Everything about the situation chafed.

The bartender risked returning. “Anything else I can get for you, Colonel?” he asked, giving the bar top in front of her his friendliest smile while he said it.

“Club soda,” she said, then taking a guess, “Chief?”

“Jay gee,” he said, risking a look up from the bar and into her eyes for a second, then looking back down. “Commandant doesn’t like enlisted working in here. Says it’s bad for morale.”

“Whose? Theirs or ours?” Tanaka asked, taking a pull off the soda water the bartender had poured while he spoke. It had just a hint of artificial lime flavoring that tasted like fancy soap.

“The commandant didn’t share his thoughts on that with me,” the bartender said, and started to move away.

“Still,” Tanaka said. It slowed him. Pulled him back. “Pouring drinks is a shit detail for a lieutenant. Even a junior grade. Probably not what you

imagined doing when you were killing yourself to get through the academy.”

The bartender locked eyes with her now. He wasn't bad looking. Dark hair and eyes. The hint of a dimple in his chin. He had to know who she was. What her rank and status meant. But he stared at her for a moment, trying very hard not to show any fear before he spoke. “No, Colonel, it's not. But I'm an officer in the Laconian Navy. I serve at the pleasure of the high consul.” He managed to get some playfulness into his tone, even if it was a little forced.

Tanaka felt a familiar warmth and tug in her belly. She didn't trust it. She was angry, she was frustrated, and the whatever-the-hell-it-was in the ring space had thrown her farther off true than she wanted to admit. She'd spent her career teaching herself how to cultivate and protect her secret lives. Taking risks when she wasn't fully in command of herself was not on the list of good ideas.

And yet.

“You heard about San Esteban?” she asked before he could step away. “Hell of a thing. Whole system wiped out, just like that.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“That's related to my work. My mission. No details, of course. But... I don't know. We're here, and then we're gone. No warning. No second chances. It could happen here, and you and me and everyone on this station would be...” She shrugged.

“You think that's going to happen?”

“I don't know,” she said. “But if I were you, I wouldn't invest my tip money in long-term bonds. You know, just in case.”

He smiled, and there was fear in it. A different kind of fear. Young men didn't like feeling mortal. It made them want to prove they were alive.

“Do you have a name, Lieutenant?”

“Randall,” he replied. “Lieutenant Kim Randall. Sir.”

He had to be forty years her junior. And the difference in their ranks was a yawning chasm that he'd be lucky to cross in a lifetime. An affair with someone of a lower rank was still a violation of the Laconian Military Code, and now that she had Omega status, literally everyone in the military outside of Fleet Admiral Trejo was a lower rank than her. But her status also put her effectively outside the law. Which took away some of what

made it worth doing.

She was hungry, though. Not for sex, though that was how she was going to fix it. For control. For the sense that she wasn't vulnerable. That she was able to exert her will over a hostile universe in the form of this boy's body.

"So, Lieutenant Randall," she said. "Even though my ship is docked, they gave me a room here on the station."

"Did they?" Kim moved away, wiping down the bar top as he went.

"They did," Tanaka said. "Would you like to see it?"

Kim froze, then turned back to look at her. He looked her up and down once, as though really seeing her for the first time. Making sure he'd understood her offer, and gauging his interest. And then Kim's gaze landed on her ruin of a cheek for a moment, and he gave a barely perceptible flinch. It felt like a slap. She even felt her ruined cheek get warm.

A rush of emotions and reactions welled up in her, as unfamiliar as a bus filled with random strangers. Insecurity, shame, sorrow, embarrassment. She could put names to each of them, and the names were all ones she'd suffered under before. But these were different. The sting of embarrassment was like feeling it for the first time. The sorrow was a flavor of sorrow she'd never generated before. The shame was a different nuance of shame. She knew the feelings, genus and species, but they belonged to someone else. Some crowd of others who had sunk invisible wires into *her* heart.

Kim, seeing the confusion on her face, started to show cracks in his fearless facade. "I'm not sure that's a good idea, Colonel," he said, emphasizing her rank. Making his rejection about that. Making it about being a good, rule-abiding Laconian and not the ragged mess that was her face.

Tanaka felt her cheeks getting warmer, and her eyes began to itch at the corners. *Fuck me, am I getting ready to cry because some fucking JG bartender doesn't think I'm pretty enough to screw? What is happening to me?*

"Of course," she said, horrified at the thickness in the words.

She stood up, careful not to knock over her bar stool, and turned away before pretty little Lieutenant Randall with his fearless smirk and his dimpled chin could see the water in her eyes. "Colonel," Kim said, an edge of surprise or worry in his voice. *Good. Let him worry.* Tanaka left without

answering.

On her way out the door, she caught a glimpse of herself in a wall-mounted mirror. The angry red topographical map of her cheek. The way the skin pulled at her eye, giving her a slight droop to the lower eyelid. The white ridgeline where the school medic had sewn her face back together after James Holden blew it apart.

Am I ugly? a voice in her mind said.

It wasn't her. It was a small voice. A *child's*. Tanaka could almost picture the face saying it, curly red hair and green eyes and a nose covered in freckles. The face was looking up at her, on the edge of tears, and hearing those words come out of her mouth broke Tanaka's heart. The memory was as clear as if she'd lived it, hearing the pain in her daughter's voice and wanting to wipe the thought away and kill the little boy who'd put it there. Knowing she couldn't do either. Love and pain and impotence.

Tanaka had never had a daughter, and she didn't know the fucking kid.

She clamped her jaw until she could hear her own blood rumbling in her ears and the memory faded. She tapped at the handheld wrapped around her arm and said, "Get me an appointment with the medical division."



"What can I schedule you for, sir?" the girl asked. She was probably just a little south of thirty. Dark-haired, round-faced, with an olive cast to her skin and a professionally pleasant demeanor.

There's something wrong in my head, Tanaka thought. *A ship started going dutchman, and then it came back, and whatever saved it broke me. There's something wrong in my mind.*

"I was injured," she said, and pointed sharply at her wounded cheek. "In the field. I haven't been at a real medical center since. I wanted... someone to check the regrow."

"I'll let Captain Gagnon know you're his next patient," the dark-haired girl said. She hadn't been born yet when Laconia became its own nation. She'd never known a universe without the gates. She was like looking at a

different species. “You can wait in the officers’ lounge if you’d like.”

“Thanks,” Tanaka said.

Twenty minutes later, she was having her face gently pressed and prodded. Doctor Gagnon was a short, thin man with a shock of bright white hair that stood nearly straight up from his head. He reminded Tanaka of a character from a children’s show. But his voice was deep and somber, like a priest or a funeral director. Every time he spoke, she felt like she was being scolded by a puppet.

A series of images glowed on the wall screen. Several pictures of her cheek, both inside and out. A scan of her jaw and teeth. Another of the blood vessels in her face. She could see the ragged mark where her old skin ended and the new growth began more clearly in the scans than in her mirror. The sense of something new growing in her, replacing her flesh with something else, made her uncomfortable.

“Yes,” Gagnon said in his bass rumble, sounding disappointed. Maybe in her. “The damage was significant, but this is repairable.” He waved one hand at the image of her jawline. The broken teeth and healed fractures showing up as jagged lines against the smooth white.

“And the cheek,” Tanaka said, not making it a question.

Gagnon waved that away with one impatient flick of his tiny hand. “The field work wasn’t bad. I wouldn’t say that. But there’s no texturing or tone-matching. If we don’t do that, you’ll wind up walking around with half your face looking like a newborn’s ass. But the medic on the *Sparrowhawk* did a decent job with the vasculature. I was worried about the potential damage to the jaw. If the *bone* was in danger of dying, we’d want to replace the whole thing. But...”

He gestured at the images of her, of her inner flesh, as if she could judge her health for herself.

Tanaka tried to picture her face, jawbone removed, and waiting while they grew her a replacement, her mouth hanging loose and formless. Her scalp tightened at the image. That, at least, was one indignity she’d dodged.

“How long?”

Gagnon’s bushy white eyebrows rose like a pair of startled caterpillars. “Will that be an issue?”

“Maybe.”

He folded his hands in his lap like a sculpture of the Madonna.

“It might be better to wait until your current mission is complete, then, before beginning,” Gagnon said, his voice sounding deeply worried about her life choices.

The memory of a small redhead asked if she was ugly. The rawness, and the vulnerability, and the overwhelming pain of her love for the child. The humiliation in her ringing like a wineglass.

“Jesus *fuck*,” she whispered, shaking her head.

“Excuse me?”

“I said no. Start now.”



“What are you in for?” a voice asked from very far away. Tanaka tried to open her eyes, but the world was in a twenty-g burn, and the lids weighed a thousand pounds.

“Mmmhuhhh,” she said.

“Oh, shit, sorry,” the voice said, from not quite as far away. Male. Gravelly. Off to her left. “Didn’t see you were sleeping. Just heard them wheel you in.”

“Mmmuh,” Tanaka said in agreement, and someone eased down on the acceleration and her eyes opened. Bright white light crashed into them, frying her optic nerve. She slammed her lids shut. She tried to find her body with her hands, and something limp and flopping like a dying fish skipped across her chest.

“Yeah, give it a minute,” the man said. “You must be post-op. When they put you under, they put you *all* the way under. Takes a minute to climb back out.”

Tanaka tried to nod in agreement, and her head fell over to the side. The world continued to ease down on its acceleration, and she was able to straighten her head and risk opening her eyes again. The room was still too bright, but it wasn’t a laser shooting into her brain anymore. She’d made a mistake, but she couldn’t quite recall what it was.

She looked down at herself. She was dressed in a hospital gown that

only came down to her knees. Her calves, marathon-runner thin and covered with knots and scars, poked out of it. Her hands were lying limp on her chest. The left had a tube running out of a vein on the back.

She felt a brief moment of panic, then a voice said *I'm in a hospital. I just had facial reconstruction surgery. I'm fine.* The voice, which was both her own and a stranger's, reassured her.

"You okay?" Gravel Man asked. "Should I call someone?"

"No," Tanaka managed. "I'm fine. I just had facial reconstruction surgery." She stopped herself before telling him that they were in a hospital. He probably knew.

Now that the gravity in the room only felt like the one-third g of Gewitter Station's rotation again, Tanaka risked rolling her head to the side to get a look at him.

It turned out he was mostly not visible, buried inside the mass of medical machinery that surrounded his bed. No wonder he hadn't been able to see her when they rolled her bed into the room. But Tanaka could see the top of his head, graying blond hair in a high-and-tight military cut. At the bottom of his bed, past the machines that nearly covered him, one callused foot poked out.

"That had to suck, huh," Gravel Man said.

"I got shot," Tanaka said before she'd even thought about it. *I'm still a little under,* her voice told her. *Be careful what you say. Keep your secrets secret.*

"In the face?" Gravel Man said, then gave a wheezing laugh. "Most people get shot in the face, surgery ain't necessary, you know? Needing to get patched up sounds like a win to me. Congrats on another day outside the recycler."

"Hurt, though."

"Oh, I bet it did. I just bet it fucking did." Gravel Man wheezed another laugh.

"You?" Tanaka said.

"Face is about the only piece of me ain't all fucked up. My patrol skiff was chasing smugglers. Followed 'em to what we figured was their drop point. Shitty little asteroid not much bigger than our ship was. Got close to look it over..."

He trailed off. Tanaka waited, wondering if he'd fallen asleep, or if the

memory was simply too painful to talk about.

“Then BOOM motherfucker!” Gravel Man wheezed out. “Whole rock goes. Wasn’t no smuggler. Was some underground shithead looking to bag him some Laconians. The skiff folded up like it was made outta tinfoil. Ricky and Jello never even saw it coming. But the ship folded around me like it was designed to cut off everything I didn’t need to live, and keep me from bleeding to death at the same time.”

The gruff good humor of it—my friends died, and I got injuries I may never heal from, ain’t that a laugh?—hid a symphony of mourning and grief, but she could hear it. That wasn’t new. She could feel it with him, and that part was.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Tanaka said. She felt pins and needles shoot through her arms and legs. She tested clenching her fists. She felt weak as a baby, but her fingers moved when she told them to. That was a good start.

“Yeah,” Gravel Man said.

I’m sorry for your loss was just the bullshit you say to someone you’ve just met when they tell you their sad story. Gravel Man knew it. Tanaka knew it too.

“I lost my brother,” she said, her voice thick with an overwhelming grief. She didn’t have a brother.

“Bomb?”

“Climbing accident,” she said. She saw his face, the image of him twisted at the cliff bottom. The rope looped around him like a snake. The vast sorrow that came with the image threatened to wash her away.

What is happening to me? she asked the voice in her head. *Stop lying to this guy.* But she wasn’t lying. The only answer was a sob that shook her chest.

“Hey,” Gravel Man said, “it’s okay. They’re putting me back together all right. I mean, yeah, sucks about Rick and Jelena not making it, but that’s the job, right?”

I’m not crying for you, Tanaka wanted to tell him, but part of her was. Part of her was remembering the brother who fell down the cliff, remembering the way his limbs twisted around the rocks at the bottom, his empty vacant eyes. And that part was sobbing for Jello and Ricky and the people they left behind when a bomb snatched them out of the world. But most of her was just scared. *What is happening to me?*

“Hey, I’m Chief Byrd,” Gravel Man said. “Lias Byrd. You are?”

I don’t know.

Before Tanaka could answer, the door opened and Gagnon walked in furiously tapping at a terminal in his hand. When he saw that she was awake, he slapped the terminal against his arm and it curled around him.

“Glad to see you alert, Colonel,” Gagnon said.

“Shit, sorry for talking your ear off, Colonel,” Byrd said. Tanaka could hear in his voice the way the revelation of her rank instantly changed the nature of their relationship. She felt an unfamiliar pang of regret.

Gagnon ignored Byrd entirely and began checking over Tanaka’s vitals on the wall screen above her bed.

“Hey, Chief,” Tanaka said.

“Aye, Colonel?”

“You hang in there, sailor. We’ll both be walking out of this place. I’m just going first.”

“Copy that, sir.”

Gagnon looked down at the terminal wrapped around his wrist for a moment, then patted Tanaka on the hand. “Everything looks good. You get some rest now, and we’ll get you discharged tomorrow. We’ll want to schedule some follow-up in the next—”

“What about Chief Byrd?” Tanaka said.

“Who?” Gagnon looked baffled.

“Chief Byrd. He’s in the next bed. How’s he doing?”

Gagnon shot a look at Byrd’s bed, barely registering it. “Oh, I see. I’m afraid he’s not my patient.” He went back to tapping on his wrist terminal.

When it happened, it happened without conscious thought. Like running a preprogrammed sequence in her power armor. Suddenly her limbs just snapped into action and she was merely along for the ride. One moment she was looking up at Gagnon tapping on his wrist.

Blink.

She was on top of Gagnon on her bed, her knees on his shoulders, his bloody and terrified face looking up at her as she slammed her fist into it again.

“Did I ask if he was your fucking patient!” she heard herself yelling as she drove her left fist into his eye, the IV tube torn out and blood flying off it as she swung. “Did I *fucking* ask if he was your patient!”

Her blood was singing in her veins. She felt wide and tall and alive in a way that violence often gave her. And then, like a pail of cold water thrown in her face, she was wide awake and very afraid. She climbed off the bed and stepped back. Gagnon slid off and to the ground, making soft, pained animal sounds.

“Colonel?”

Her gaze cut over to Byrd. Now that she was standing, she could see his face. His pale blue eyes were wide. She pointed at him.

“I’m going to make sure they take care of you,” she said. But in the privacy of her mind, the small, still part of her that watched all the rest was thinking: *I am fucked.*

“Th-thanks,” Byrd said. “I’ll be okay, Colonel. I’m all right.”

“I’m going to make sure,” she said.

She turned and marched out the doors. Two armed guards approached her, then backed away. Her hospital gown was slipping off her shoulders, and she grabbed it before she flashed everyone in the corridor her tits. She was probably already showing her ass to half Gewitter Station’s medical personnel. It all seemed very distant.

It felt like hours or seconds before she found the intake desk. The same dark-haired girl was sitting at it. Her soft young eyes went wide as Tanaka stalked over to her.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, Colonel.”

“Good.” Tanaka took a deep breath, centered her spine, and spoke with as precise an enunciation as she could, given her bandages and her wounds. “I would like to schedule a psych eval.”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine: Jim

Muskrat paddled her legs like she was swimming as she floated down the corridor outside the galley. Her bark was deep and conversational, and she had a wide canine grin. At the far end of the corridor, Xan went still for a split second before letting loose a peal of laughter and opening his arms to catch the floating dog.

“You can do it!” Teresa Duarte said, clapping her hands.

“She won’t bite me?” Xan called back.

“She’s a good dog. She doesn’t bite.”

The excitement on the black-eyed boy’s face was bright. He put out his hands, gray fingers splayed, and chortled with delight. Jim slipped past him, ducked under the floating dog, and pulled himself into the galley proper. Alex and Fayez were already there, Alex held to the floor by magnetic boots and Fayez on the float but steadied on a handhold.

“Looks like they’re having fun,” Jim said as the *Rocinante* decanted fresh coffee into a bulb. “What exactly are they doing?”

“They’re playing catch,” Alex said, “with the dog.”

Jim sipped the bitter, lovely coffee, feeling the familiar warmth against his palate and down his throat. “Of course they are. I don’t even know why I asked.”

Reconfiguring the *Falcon*’s lab for a dual dive wasn’t trivial, and it wasn’t fast. Elvi had packed enough supplies in the *Falcon* for anything and everything to break, so getting her hands on another set of sensors, a second medical couch, and enough backup monitoring units was simply a matter of figuring out which crate in which cargo hold. They couldn’t move the walls of the lab, though, and finding the space for all the equipment and the technical staff was taking time and an apparently endless number of meetings. Added to that were the baseline scans for Amos, integrating the data from the *Roci*’s medical bay, and a series of long, in-depth interviews

with Elvi intended to map the previous explorations of the library to the shifts in consciousness and knowledge that the mechanic had suffered.

As the days moved on, more new faces started appearing on the *Roci*. First, it was Fayez and Elvi, but as her time became more and more in demand, Fayez started coming over alone. Then bringing Cara and Xan with him, or more often, just Xan. Outside the galley, Muskrat woofed happily as she drifted past the galley's door heading back toward Teresa.

"Kids are getting along well," Fayez said.

"You're just setting Teresa up as a babysitter, aren't you?" Alex asked. "I mean, she's old enough."

"Xan's twice her age, easy," Fayez said.

"He's a kid, though," Alex said. "It's just he's been a kid for a really long time."

"What do you do when the models fail?" Fayez said, spreading his hands. "Xan and Cara don't really exist on the kid/not-kid spectrum. They're just Cara and Xan."

Teresa's laughter boiled in from the corridor. Even with the months she'd spent on the *Roci*, it was an unfamiliar sound, harsh and joyous. Jim didn't think of Teresa Duarte as the laughing type.

But maybe it was just that she didn't often have the opportunity for it. There weren't very many people who could see past her circumstances to the girl she actually was. Jim wasn't sure he could, even. She was the daughter of the god-emperor, their human shield, the heir to Laconia, and its highest-ranking apostate. All that was true, but it wasn't complete. There was a kid there too. One who'd lost her mother and her dad, who'd run away from home, who needed things emotionally that Jim could guess at. But he didn't *know*. He was probably just as much a cipher to her.

There was something weirdly universal about her laughter, though. And Xan's. The sound of young humans at play. Jim realized they were being quiet, all three of them, and listening to the kids like it was a piece of music.

Muskrat whined once—a high, nervous sound—and Teresa called for Xan to stop. A moment later, her face appeared at the door, flushed and sweaty. "Hey. Muskrat needs to use the little dogs' room. Can I take Xan down to the machine shop so he can see how it works?"

Jim's reflexive *Sure, go ahead* stumbled over the idea of Xan and Teresa alone in the ship. It wasn't that he thought they'd do anything malicious—it

turned out he trusted Teresa more than that—but in their present moods, something could happen by mistake. The machine shop of an aging Martian gunship wasn't a great place for oopsies.

"I'll come too," Alex said, and tossed the last of his meal into the recycler.

Jim turned to Teresa, pointed his thumb at Alex, and said, "Don't let him start playing with the tools."

The girl rolled her eyes, seeing through Jim's weak joke to the concerns behind it and dismissing them out of hand. Alex clapped his shoulder on the way out, and Jim drank more of his coffee as girl and boy and dog and man muttered and chuckled their way to the lift shaft, and then down.

"Thank you," Fayez said.

"You're welcome. For what?"

"Letting Xan come get a little time away from the pressure cooker. He puts a good face on everything we're doing, but it's hard for him. Every time Cara goes in, I think he worries about how much of her is coming back."

"Is that a problem?"

"I don't know. Maybe. We're not in territory with much precedent. We'll pretty much know there's a massive change coming when it's already happened."

"I know the feeling," Jim said. He finished his coffee and tossed the bulb away.

"Thanks for letting me come over here too. The *Falcon's* a fine ship, and the company's generally not the worst, but after a few months on the float, I do start fantasizing about long walks by rivers and university coffee shops."

Jim laughed politely, but there was a tightness in his chest. He keyed in a simple breakfast of eggs and beans. "I am sorry about that."

"About what?" Fayez asked.

"Sticking you here. You and Elvi. I mean, I did kind of fuck you two over by getting you the job."

Fayez tilted his head. Jim had known him since Ilus, and the years lay gently on the man. His hair was still thick and darker than it probably had a right to be. The lines in his face mostly gave evidence of laughter. Now he only looked thoughtful.

"I know why we're here. If anything, we should thank you for the

opportunity.”

“Okay, now you’re bullshitting me.”

Fayez was quiet for a long moment. Then, “You have a minute? I want to show you something.”

Jim shrugged, paused the meal, and followed as the other man led the way to the lift shaft, then to the airlock, and into the *Falcon*. The weird astringent smell was still there, but it wasn’t as assaulting now as the first time he’d smelled it. Familiarity had numbed him.

Fayez turned down a long hallway, heading down toward the ship’s reactor and drive decks. It was eerie seeing the same Martian design language that had built the *Rocinante* grown and complicated into the Laconian flesh of the *Falcon*. It reminded Jim of a documentary he’d seen about parasitic fungi that took over ants. Here was a ship that had been Martian, that became infected by the protomolecule and the ambitions of Winston Duarte, and now it looked similar and acted similar and you could almost mistake it for the kind of ship that the *Roci* still was. But this was something else.

“You know we keep Xan isolated when Cara goes on her dives, right?”

“I do,” Jim said.

“The idea is that he’d just be an extra variable. Another influence we’d have to correct for. But he’s also the control group. We see how Cara changes and how he doesn’t, and maybe that tells us something we need to know.”

A dark-haired woman with her attention on a hand terminal drifted into the corridor in front of them. When she glanced up and saw Jim, a glimmer of panic came into her eye. He nodded as they passed.

“That makes sense to me,” Jim said.

“And when we’re not doing that, we use the same rig to isolate the catalyst. It’s a lot like Ilus. You had a sample of the protomolecule on your ship, and it was accessing all the artifacts on Ilus. Flipping switches. Seeing what came on.”

“Looking to report that the ring gate was built.”

“Which it never did, because there was no one to report to. Well, we have a sample here, and Cortázar figured out how to loop it back onto itself so that our artifact only comes on when we want it to. Clean and easy, right?”

“Sounds like it.”

Fayez glanced back at him, and the laughter and humor were gone. “This is where we keep the sample. The catalyst. Come take a look.”

The cabin was small and spartan. A satchel was fixed to the wall with a tablet just visible at the edge. The only other thing reminded Jim of the kind of pressurization chamber used on Earth when someone had come up from scuba diving too quickly, or else a crematory furnace. It was a little over two meters long with a hatch at the end. A screen set into the box was dark. Fayez tapped it, and it came to life.

There was a woman on the screen. Her eyes were open. They glowed with a subtle blue light, and they focused on nothing. Jim understood, and it felt like a punch to the chest.

“This is the catalyst?”

“I looked her up,” Fayez said. “I didn’t tell Elvi. Back in the day, this was Francisca Torrez. She worked in the Science Directorate as a technician. I assume Cortázar knew her, at least in passing. She was going through something. Maybe her love life sucked. Maybe she always wanted to be a dancer and realized it wasn’t happening for her. Anyway, she started drinking and showed up to work intoxicated and belligerent. She didn’t even go home that day. Ochida had a streamlined disciplinary hearing with Cortázar and the head of security, and they put her in the Pen before she even sobered up.”

Jim looked at the face. It was smooth, but not like she was young. Like she was swollen. The woman... the catalyst... *Francisca* opened her mouth as if she were about to speak, then closed her lips again.

“For about five years before Duarte tracked Elvi down and brought her to Laconia—at your suggestion, granted—this woman was being eaten by the protomolecule. And she still is. We keep it in check so that it’s not growing free the way it did, but we don’t feed her. We don’t cut her hair. She doesn’t take bathroom breaks. She doesn’t sleep. Every now and then we hit the chamber with a couple hours of hard radiation. That’s it. She isn’t human in any meaningful way. Not anymore. She’s a skin balloon filled with protomolecule.”

Jim tried to catch his breath.

“I’m not going to bullshit you,” Fayez continued. “If we took what we do here to a normal ethics board, they’d just call the police. We’ve moved

past scientific ethics, past moral questions, and I'm pretty sure we're shooting past crimes against humanity now. But I still know it could be even worse."

Jim nodded. "I understand."

"No offense, but you fucking don't," Fayez said. "I don't want to be the one doing this. I really don't want Elvi to be the one doing it. But more than anything else, I don't want Cortázar or Ochida to be here. The men who looked at Francisca Torrez and thought this was a good thing to do with her? I don't want them in charge. If this was their lab, Xan wouldn't be over with his new friend Teresa, laughing at a dog pooping into partial vacuum. He'd be in a box, like he was when we found him. They'd haul him out when they wanted to do something to him, and they'd put him back when they were done, just like they were fitting a screwdriver back in a toolbox. So yeah, you fucked me and mine over. And we've done shit here that the gods will never forgive us for. But when you're feeling bad about it, remember that the alternative was somehow even worse."

Jim was still thinking about it three days later when the lab was ready. It looked like a mess. Cables snaked along the walls and floor, tied in place with bits of wire and binding tape. The second medical couch—the one for Amos—was canted at thirty degrees to make space for the sensor arrays that were hooked into it. What had been a perfectly organized, clean, clear, overly designed space looked like Jim's bedroom before he'd gone into the navy, only with less laundry on the floor. The voices of the Laconian team were tight and high. No one looked at him, and for the first time since the *Roci* had docked to the *Falcon*, he felt like being ignored came easy. When they did take note of him, the sense was more annoyance that he was in the way than anything else.

"If you feel uncomfortable..." Elvi was saying.

"I'm fine," Cara answered. She was in a tight-fitting medical slip that kept her warm, held the contact sensors in place, and made a fine-mesh matrix for the scans that would be going through her as soon as the dive began. She looked like someone in a swimming competition. The same hard, athletic focus. "I want this. I'm ready for it."

He thought there was a shift in Elvi's expression, but he didn't know what it signified.

Harshaan Lee, Elvi's second-in-command, was strapping Amos into the

other medical bed. The big man was in a suit that matched Cara's, but where the girl was focus and determination, he was smiling at the absurdity of it all. The black eyes caught Jim's, and Amos lifted his chin.

"Hey, Cap'n. You come to see the show?"

"I'm not sure how much there's going to be for me to look at."

"I do like the outfit," Amos said. "Very flattering."

"If you don't want to do this, you just have to say the word. You know that, right?" Jim said.

"Please don't move," Dr. Lee said. "I'm trying to get the sensor baselined."

"Sorry," Amos said, then turned back to Jim. "You don't have to worry about me. This is what I came here for."

"Wait. Really?"

"Please lie flat against the medical couch," Dr. Lee said.

Amos gave a cheerful thumbs-up, and shifted as he'd been told. Jim pushed back, letting himself float away against the wall. At the door to the hallway, Naomi floated in. Her hair was pulled back and she was scowling, but she softened when she saw him.

Dr. Lee's voice was sharp and loud. "Final checks, all. Final checks."

The activity in the room didn't speed up or slow down, but it changed. Jim found a handhold and steadied himself with it. Elvi floated beside him.

"You ready for this?" Jim asked.

"I just hope it works. If we did all this for basically nothing... Well, that'll suck."

"Final checks are in and green," Dr. Lee announced. "We are good to proceed on the lead researcher's instruction."

He looked over at Elvi. She nodded.

"We are good to proceed," Lee said, and Jim thought there was a satisfaction in his voice. "Please transfer the catalyst now."

On the medical couches, Cara relaxed and Amos closed his eyes.

Interlude: The Dreamers

The dreamers dream, and their dream carries them up into the familiar vastness. The swell and the flow and the minds that are empty because the light between them is the thought that they think together. The grandmothers beckon with fingers that never knew a hand. *Look, look, look. And then see!* And she spins and she sparkles, but he doesn't. He holds firm as a stone in the stream, as a shadow in the light, as a thing. He stops, and by stopping, reminds.

They are threefold, and that mattered once, but the grandmothers fall gigglingly on, into themselves and through as they send seed after seed after seed into the airless wind, and some immeasurably few set root and grow back to them. *Here is how we built it all, and here is how it fed us, and here is what love meant when love meant nothing*, and she broadens and thins as she falls into it, but he stands still. She can feel the want in him as rich as in her, but she feels the thing that stands against the wanting and it reminds her. They are threefold, and the dream shudders like an image projected onto cloth when a wind blows. The grandmothers are dead, their voices are all songs sung by ghosts, and the truths they tell, they would tell to anyone. They cannot listen back, and the dreamer sees the hollow behind the mask. She tries to turn her head, to look behind her, to see the single living man in the land of the dead, and the gesture goes on forever, the essence of turning and turning and turning without the release of having turned—

The dream falls thread from thread and he is there, blue fireflies and black spirals. Weariness radiates from him, and she sees the flesh thin against his bones, weak and frail as God Himself in the birth pain of creation. And he turns to her and them.

She isn't synced with the BFE floats behind her. *We're seeing the wormhole activity in the artifact falling off, but she's going strong* and *Same for subject two. Anyone know what we're looking at here?* The soft, weary

eyes find her and find him and find them. The dreamer tries to wake, but the other one folds into themselves like he's hiding something against his black-scarred breast.

Keep them going, Dr. Okoye says.

And the third man hears her through their ears, and he smiles, and lowers his bull-broad, vast, and timeless head.

No trouble unless there's trouble, the dreamer wordlessly says. And then there's a lot of trouble.

It was an unwinnable war, the third man says. But it was fought. They were soldiers made of crepe paper and candy floss, scattered by their own guns. But they made guns. They were cobwebs who stood against a rockslide, and for all their cleverness were torn. The dreamer sees and is blind.

Fuck, Dr. Okoye says, and the third man turns to her.

I would have reached out to you if you could help me. But even these broken vessels, glorious as they are, can't support the work now. My work.

Okay. All right. What do you mean, "my work"?

What is an empire but all humanity under the direction of a single mind? I was right, but I dreamed too small. I have seen how much more we have to be.

Not following you.

The horned god breathes out blue fires that live and die in an instant that is an eon.

There are tools at our disposal, Dr. Okoye. Tools made to fight against the enemy on the third side of the gates. I am... learning about that. I have made some progress. It is a war we can win, but not without some changes.

I'm hearing you say that you're responsible for stopping the consciousness blinks and the changes to basic physics that the ring gate entities were doing. Is that right?

We aren't stronger than they were. But we're base materials. We are made from clay, and that's our power. They were fragile, and we are robust. They had a sword but lacked the strength to wield it. I will find the sword and the map they left behind.

I'm getting lost here. A sword?

They built but were unable to effectively use certain tools that prevent the enemy from intruding into what we mean when we say the universe.

But those tools exist, and I believe we can make effective use of them.

I think I understood that. In broad strokes, anyway.

In order to fully access these tools, we have to become more like them. We have to be one thing instead of billions of different ones. I am learning how to do that as well.

Are you... saying we need to become a hive mind?

Yes. Interconnected, with our thoughts and memories flowing freely between nodes. All our illusions of division washed away. Empire was the closest I could imagine to it. But—the third man gestures at himself almost in apology—I can imagine more now.

It's all right. We'll be safe.

Will we be people?

We'll be better.

And with a blue-black swirl of breath he blows out the light of mind and is elsewhere.

All right. I need all the sensor data. From the Falcon, from the BFE. The ring gate. Everything. Put it all in the system. I need to understand what just happened, and I need to do it now.

Another voice. A different voice. How strange to have different voices. *Ladies and gentlemen, you heard the lead researcher. By the numbers now. This is no time to get sloppy.*

The dreamers open their eyes, and nothing changes.

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Chapter Thirty: Elvi

It's all right," Duarte said. "We'll be safe."

Elvi looked at the man carefully. He didn't seem like a phantom. He was just as solid and present as everyone else on the deck. Thinner than he'd been on Laconia. A vein at his temple stood out like a bluish caterpillar just under his skin. He wasn't wearing shoes, and his feet looked pale. She wondered, if she tossed him a hand terminal, would he be able to catch it? Interesting test, but also one that might disrupt the connection, and she wasn't ready to do that.

"Will we be people?" Elvi said.

Duarte's smile was almost melancholy. "We'll be better."

And he wasn't there anymore. All around the deck, the technicians stared at the place where the high consul of Laconia had been with wide, frightened eyes. The silence was the hum of the air recyclers, the mutter of the instruments, and the tapping of her heartbeat in her ears. Elvi lowered her head, took in a deep breath, and barked out orders like a drill sergeant. "All right. I need all the sensor data. From the *Falcon*, from the BFE. The ring gate. Everything. Put it all in the system. I need to understand what just happened, and I need to do it now."

For a long moment, no one moved. Everyone was too stunned to process simple human things like language. Lee was the first to come to himself. "Ladies and gentlemen, you heard the lead researcher. By the numbers now. This is no time to get sloppy."

He clapped his hands, and like a spell had been broken, the technicians and science team turned to their stations with a speed and focus that seemed almost manic. Cara and Amos opened their eyes in the same moment. The smile on Cara's lips was soft and relaxed and totally out of place in the rush and clatter. Amos scratched his head and looked around.

Jim's face was pale. He tried a smile that didn't quite succeed. "I guess

that worked.”

“You saw him too, right? It wasn’t just me.”

“It wasn’t just you. And that is kind of weird. When it was Miller in my head, I was the only one who could see him.” He was talking fast, the words tripping over each other in the rush. “So maybe it’s the same kind of thing but with way more processing power, or it could be something else. I don’t know.”

“Hey, Doc,” Amos said, and pointed to the leads glued to his skull and chest. “Can I take these things off now?”

Instead of answering, Elvi touched Naomi’s arm and said, “I’m going to need a couple hours. Meet me in my office after that?”

Naomi nodded once, then pulled herself back out of the way as the science team uncoupled Amos and Cara from the devices. Jim followed her. Elvi drifted back, watching everything in the lab and nothing in particular. Getting a sense of gestalt. Her people were moving with precision and purpose. If there was any fear, it was covered over by professionalism and practice. That was good. It was what she needed to know. More than that, it was what she needed to cultivate in herself. She crossed her arms, took a few deep breaths, and tried to be patient until her mind found a little calm. Just as she thought she was doing well, she remembered that Winston Duarte had just popped into existence in her lab, and she had to start over.

Cara came off her medical couch with a drifting grace like a plume of smoke rising from an incense burner or a strip of cloth catching an underwater current. Her smile was soft and lazy, and her cheeks were flushed and dark.

“Are you all right?” Elvi asked.

“I’m perfect,” the girl said. Across the lab, Amos was watching them with a pleasant, empty smile as the last of the contact sensors was removed from his suit.

“I’m going to need to do a little work before we debrief this time,” Elvi said.

“Whatever you need to do,” Cara said, half lost in her bliss.

Elvi opened a connection to the catalyst’s chamber. “What’s the status down there?”

“Catalyst in the box,” Fayez said, “Xan back out of the box. Everything seems very normal except that everyone we talk to from the lab sounds like

they're trying to signal that they're being held hostage without saying it. What happened up there? Are you being held hostage?"

"Meet me in my office," she said.



The information gathered by Tanaka hadn't seemed strange the first time Elvi looked at it. Weird cognitive effects were where the alien technology had started back on Ilus. Before that, with the protomolecule version of Jim's friend getting remade in his sensory cortices. Human consciousness was simple enough that the repair drones on Laconia were able to make working approximations of what some people wanted to have fixed. Xan. Amos. A sampling drone Cara had accidentally shattered once.

Only now, going back over it, did she start to see the holes.

Did you have any experiences associated with the event? Tanaka had said.

There wasn't even a gap to think about it before the subject said, *Oh yeah. Oh, hell yeah.*

And there the interview ended. Instead of the primary data or the direct conversation, Tanaka had put in a short data summary: *Reports dreamlike hallucinations of being another person and/or being connected to a large number of other people. Claims memory of hallucinatory experiences remains clear over time.*

Over and over, all through the data, the same language came up. Instead of actual experiential reports, Tanaka and her team gave versions of their own. Elvi had been in academics long enough to recognize when someone was glossing over data and skipping straight to interpretation. It almost always meant they were avoiding something they found unpalatable.

Naomi, Jim, and Fayeze floated in her private office. It didn't leave a lot of spare room. Or maybe it was fine, but she was so accustomed to having it be just her and Cara talking after a dive that the extra bodies felt unfamiliar. Or that she was frustrated and anything would have annoyed her at the moment.

“What we know for sure,” Elvi said, “is that he wasn’t here. No images on the security cameras, even while I was talking with him. No evidence of him interacting with anything physical beyond, of course, each of our individual brains.”

“We have evidence that he did that?” Jim asked.

“We saw him,” Elvi said, and regretted her tone as Jim recoiled a little. It wasn’t his fault that he hadn’t thought all this through. She made an effort to soften her tone. “The fact that we had those experiences is evidence. If we’d been doing control imaging on someone who wasn’t altered, we’d probably be able to map it, but even absent that, we have a correlation of experience that seems pretty conclusive.”

“You all saw the same thing,” Fayez said, “so there was probably some objective reality to it, even if it’s just that you all got fucked with the same way at the same time.”

“Miller couldn’t do that,” Jim said. “Even a second person in the room killed his simulation for me.”

“Which is interesting,” Elvi said. “Duarte clearly has more resources and, for lack of a better metaphor, more computing power. Which may be part of why he’s been able to hold back the attacks.”

“What about this plan he talked about?” Naomi said.

“What about it?”

“Is it plausible?”

Elvi pressed her palm to her forehead and rubbed in a small circle. Trust the war leader to skip over all the underlying science and head straight for policy implications. “In theory? Could our species be modified into something that behaves in a fundamentally different way? Sure. Absolutely. Happens all the time.”

“Are you being sarcastic?” Naomi said.

“No. It literally happens all the time. If mitochondria and chloroplasts hadn’t set up shop inside other organisms, eukaryotic life wouldn’t exist, including all of us. Hermit crabs using discarded shells and soup cans. Acacia ants built their whole evolutionary strategy out of supporting trees. Intestinal microflora have a vast effect on cognition, emotion, metabolism. Most of the cells in your body right now aren’t human. Change out a few species of bacteria in your gut, and you’ll be a fundamentally different person. The builders, as far as we can tell, were free-floating individual

organisms that networked themselves into a functional consciousness, kind of the way an octopus can be viciously intelligent without a centralized brain. With the nonlocal effects we've seen? Sure, why not rebuild that architecture with advanced primates?"

Elvi made herself stop. She was talking too fast and just letting whatever came to mind flow out. It was something she did when she was stressed. She stretched her hands out, feeling the pull in her tendons just to root her a little more in her body.

"So maybe he can do it," Jim said. "Whatever exactly it is."

"That's what I'm missing," Elvi said. "Whether he's talking about a superorganism or a subsummation."

Jim raised his hand. His expression was eloquent enough to ask the question.

"Whether," Elvi said, "he's talking about making us into ants or neurons. If you're an ant, you're still an individual, just one who's part of a larger organization. If you're a neuron... Neurons don't have a sense of self."

"I'm not a hundred percent sure that ants do either," Fayez said.

"So you're saying," Naomi broke in, "that Duarte, or whatever he's turned himself into, is at least plausibly preparing to make everyone, everywhere part of a collective consciousness with him at the center so that he can go to war against the things beyond the gates."

Elvi gathered herself, fighting to organize her thoughts.

"Yes," she said.

The room was quiet for a long time.

Jim broke the silence with a single, harsh laugh. "Well, I'll be damned. He found a way to make jackbooted authoritarianism seem like the good old days. I wouldn't have thought he could."

"I'm going to need to get messages through to my people," Naomi said. "Is there a way to use your repeaters without exposing you?"

"It's spotty ever since the gates went bright," Elvi said. "We might be better off sending through a missile with a burst on it."

"I'd need several," Naomi said. "This feels like an all-hands-on-deck situation, and I've got hands in a lot of different systems."

"We should have a conversation with the comms officer," Fayez said. "I'll come with you. Make the introductions."

"There's a lot of clarification I need from Tanaka too," Elvi said. "And

Ochida. *Shit*. I can't send this data to Ochida. I can't send it to anyone. How can I explain Amos being in the dataset?"

"That was always going to be a problem," Fayez said.

"I was planning to bury it. I don't think I can."

Jim leaned forward despite the lack of gravity. It just made him seem like he was pitched at a different angle. "Maybe we can find a way to fake it. Dry lab it, but get the same conclusion?"

Layers of complexity and danger unfurled in Elvi's mind. And she hadn't done the interview with Cara yet. There was so much to do, and the only mark of how much time she had to do it was when her time ran out.

"Let me see what I can do," she said.

She started with Tanaka, recording and rerecording her requests for clarification, always sure that she'd gotten every hint and nuance of the Roci's presence out of the message and then second-guessing herself, deleting, and starting again. By the time she queued the message, her eyes were starting to blur with fatigue. It wasn't the first time she'd gone through that. Next was a list of requests for Ochida and the other teams. She could front-burner the scans of Cara's brain. If they could figure out what the signal carrier was between her and the BFE, maybe it would give them a way to interfere. And the quiet that came after Duarte undid the dutchman event? It wouldn't seem strange at all for her to want follow-up reports on that. She wished that Tanaka had been a better field researcher. Or better at finding Duarte.

A soft knock interrupted her. When she cycled the door, Amos floated in the hall. He had his old flight suit and an apologetic smile.

"Hey, Doc. You got a minute? Or is this a bad time?"

Elvi shook her head, trying to clear it. The fatigue was just the unpleasant parts of being drunk. "Come in. I'm sorry. I thought I'd be debriefing you and Cara, but... I wanted to get these requests out and going before anything else."

Amos pulled himself in and closed the door behind him. "It's not a problem. I just needed to bend your ear for a minute."

"About the experiment?"

"Sort of, yeah," Amos said. "I just wanted to let you know this is all done now."

Elvi shut down her display. The big man's eyes were the same utter

black as Cara's and Xan's. She was used to the look. His smile was amiable and maybe a little embarrassed. His tone of voice was conversational and calm. She didn't know what made the chill run down her back.

"All what?"

"This. The things you're doing with Sparkles and Little Man. They're over now. We're gonna need to pack this up and move on," he said, and shrugged. When she didn't reply, he looked away. "When you started before, I was sort of in on it. Impressions. Nothing you'd take in front of the judge, right? It's why we had to come out. Needed to be here. Do it myself. That way I'd understand. So here we are, and I did the thing, and I get it now. So now I can tell you it's over. It stops now."

"You object to the experiment."

"Sure."

"I understand," Elvi said, crossing her arms. Her comms announced a new message in her queue. She didn't look to see what it was. "You aren't the only one with reservations. I'm not going to lie about that."

"Okay."

"But the stakes are too high. Cara and Xan... and you? You're the access we have to the information in that artifact. You're the only ones who can get there."

"That's true," Amos said, then frowned. "I mean, Duarte. But I don't think he's exactly in our assets column."

"If there is any chance at all that we can fix this whole thing with the information that's in there? I can't stop."

"You don't have to. I'm here. You don't have to stop it, because I'm stopping it for all of us."

"If I have to compromise her... if I lose her? Sacrifice her? And what we get back is that everyone else everywhere gets to live—"

Amos raised a hand, palm out, like he was gentling an animal. "Doc. I get it. You're a good person, and I like you. I trust you. I see that you're not getting off on this. That's why we're not having the other version of this conversation. But it's done. I've known a lot of people who had reasons that this time was different. That this once, it was okay. Maybe the kid's bad and you're really helping them. Or they're into it, and so there's no harm. And Sparkles is into this. We both know that, right?"

"We do."

“So there’s all kinds of stories about making this okay. I’m not here to tell stories. I’m just letting you know.”

The ship seemed oddly loud. Elvi felt the thud of her heartbeat in her throat, heard it in her ears. She was suddenly profoundly tired, or suddenly aware that she’d been tired for what felt like forever.

“And if we all die because we didn’t push a little harder?”

“That’ll suck,” Amos agreed. “I’m not a philosophy guy. I’m not trying to bust your balls or figure out, you know, everything. But this is pretty simple. I came to see what you and Sparkles were doing. I’ve seen it. It needs to stop, so we’re gonna stop. That’s it. We’re good.”

He went still the same way Cara did. Inhumanly still. Then, a moment later, he tried a little smile. Elvi had spent a fair percentage of her life thinking about taxonomy. About where a species began and where it ended. She realized that she didn’t know what she was looking at.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re good.”

“Great,” Amos—the thing that had been Amos—said. He pulled himself to the doorway, opened it, gave her a little thumbs-up sign, and was gone. The door cycled closed behind him.

Her comms chimed again, reminding her of the new message or messages. She didn’t open the queue. She let herself float for a few minutes, feeling something more than weariness bloom in her gut and her chest. She turned off the lights, pulled herself out to the corridor and away down it. She passed a group of her crew, and they all nodded to her as she passed. It was like being in a dream. Or dissociated.

Fayez was in their cabin when she got there. He looked over from whatever he’d been reading on his hand terminal, and some quip or comment died unspoken on his lips. She cleaned her teeth, washed her face, changed into fresh clothes to sleep in. Her husband watched and tried to act like he didn’t. He knew something had changed, even if he didn’t know what. She was right there with him.

“You... ah... You all right, sweetie?” he asked as she strapped herself in for the night.

“I am,” she said.

As she closed her eyes, the feeling in her chest and belly grew, swelling out and washing through her. She finally recognized it. She had wanted it to be relief, but it wasn’t that.

It was her body telling her that she'd just stared death in the eye. It was fear.

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Chapter Thirty-One: Tanaka

Major Ahmadi was a trauma specialist and head of Psychiatric Services on Gewitter Base. She was a short woman, thick through the middle, with close-cropped graying hair and very dark skin. *She seems nice. She makes me think of a teacher I hated. She reminds me of my favorite wife*, said the chorus of distant voices in her head, that last thought accompanied by the tingle of distantly remembered sexual arousal.

“Your file, the portion I can actually access, says you were orphaned at quite a young age.”

“Yes,” Tanaka said. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Ahmadi’s office was all dark paneling and soft surfaces, intended to create a feeling of safety, comfort, and shared intimacy. It looked like every other head shrinker’s office Tanaka had seen, though she usually saw them as the final step in the interrogation process. After you’d fully broken the subject’s will with more intense techniques, and you were trying to build the rapport that let them feel like you were now friends as they spilled their guts.

After a few moments of waiting for her to elaborate, Ahmadi said, “Over forty years serving with front-line combat units. Though the nature of those deployments is largely classified.”

“Yes,” Tanaka said again.

“And you were recently shot in the face and had to be brought here for reconstructive surgery.”

Tanaka touched the bandage that covered half of her face. “That in my file too? Or are you just stunningly observant?”

Ahmadi didn’t take the bait. She smiled and touched something on the datapad that sat on her lap as if it were just coincidence and not her taking notes.

“You have led a life of more or less constant trauma.”

“Thank you for the flattery, but we can skip this part.”

"I'm not flattering you," Ahmadi said. "I'm holding up a little mirror and asking you to look in it. You've been living in fight-or-flight mode essentially since you were a child. Everything a child is supposed to be able to rely on was ripped away from you without warning."

"I'm not here to talk about my parents."

"We can start anywhere you like. It's all connected."

"You sound like you already have me pegged."

"I wouldn't go that far, but..." She shrugged. "I'm good at what I do. Most of your file is classified, but what's available to me tells a compelling story. No long-term relationships. You've never lived anywhere longer than a year. You refused an advanced scholarship in order to enlist. You've repeatedly refused promotion so that you could stay a field officer. You've been on the run for a long time."

Tanaka felt her hands curl into fists. "Running from what?"

"I don't know," Ahmadi said. "But this seems to be the first time you've ever sought out counseling."

"Yes."

"Why are you here?" Ahmadi said, making another note on her pad. The way she wrote without ever breaking eye contact with her subject seemed like a skill she must have spent a lot of time practicing. It was a little creepy.

The need to move in her overly soft chair was finally too much, and Tanaka stood up. Her legs tingled like there was a low-level electric current running through the muscles, so she walked across the room and pretended to examine a painting on the far wall. It was a neo-impressionist rendering of Laconia's capital city at night, done in thick oil paints. The painter had studied Imogene Batia or someone in her school. The way it was painted made it seem like the observer was looking out through a window in the pouring rain. She wondered if Ahmadi had painted it herself, or if she'd had it shipped out from Laconia when she'd taken the assignment on Gewitter Base. *I used to paint*, said a voice in her head.

Ahmadi cleared her throat, and Tanaka realized the doctor had asked a question that had never been answered.

"Did you paint this yourself?" Tanaka asked.

"Why are you here?" Ahmadi repeated.

Tanaka turned to face her again, throwing her full focus at the counselor

and waiting for the flinch. Tristan had once told her that when she was annoyed, she radiated *Don't fuck with me*. Most people took a subconscious step back.

Ahmadi smiled and rested her hand on the datapad. Tanaka had a vague and uneasy sense of having been outplayed.

"I was present at... something," Tanaka finally said. "It is part of my mission to understand it."

"And you don't?"

Tanaka turned back to the painting. If Aunt Akari had let her study art history instead of enlisting in active service, where would she be right now? And who would be tracking down the high consul? What else—how many thousands of other things—would be different?

A flash of a woman very like Ahmadi blinking at her with sleepy eyes on a bed covered with white sheets. *God, I used to love waking up next to her*, someone thought in Tanaka's head.

"Something happened," Tanaka said, surprised to hear her own voice saying the words.

Ahmadi nodded. She looked... not sympathetic. Not pitying. She looked like she was weary too. Like she'd led a life of having the rug pulled out from under her, and she knew how much it hurt. She gestured toward the chair in invitation. "Tell me about it."

Tanaka sat. *Don't tell her, she's mean. Tell her, she always loved you*, competed in her head.

"There was an incident in the ring space," Tanaka said, softly. "I was there. You can't know this."

"Colonel," Ahmadi said, "because of the nature of my work I have very high-level classified clearance. The empire has to be able to trust me with state secrets a patient might reveal during a counseling session. I take this aspect of my job very seriously."

"If you didn't, they'd send you to the Pen. Would have. I guess now they'd just shoot you."

Ahmadi nodded and set her datapad aside. The canny operative in Tanaka recognized the theater in all of it, but she could feel it working anyway. Ahmadi wanted to listen. It made Tanaka want to talk.

"There was an incursion. There were cognitive effects. Like when everyone lost consciousness, only not that. The people who were there...

connected. Mind to mind. Memory to memory. I was in other people's minds."

"It's not an uncommon hallucination—"

"I checked it out. It was true. Everyone I could confirm played out. We were in each other's heads. It was real." She was trembling. She didn't know why she was trembling. Ahmadi was very still. "Do you believe me?"

"I do."

Tanaka nodded slowly. "I can't have anyone inside my head."

"Because that's yours," Ahmadi said. "That's the only place that's yours."

"I have... outlets."

"Outlets?"

"I have secrets. That are... mine. It's the way I make room for myself in the world. By having secrets, I can still exist. I love Laconia because if I got caught, it would matter."

"Do you want to tell me what those secrets are?"

Tanaka shook her head.

"Since the incident, I have been having... experiences."

"Experiences," Ahmadi echoed.

"Voices, but not like command hallucinations. Images from lives I haven't lived, faces of people I've never met. Feelings. Deep, overwhelming feelings from situations I've never been in. And I am afraid that somewhere out there, someone is having that same experience... of me."

Ahmadi took in a long, deep breath, and let it out slowly. Her expression was somber.

"I'm going to ask you if I can use your name," Ahmadi said. Then, "May I call you by your given name?"

Tanaka nodded. For some reason it was difficult to talk. Something was wrong with her throat.

"Aliana? I am going to ask you if I can take your hand. May I take your hand?"

"Yes," Tanaka said, but it was barely a whisper.

The thick, matronly woman leaned forward. Her fingers were strong, her skin was dry. Tanaka shuddered.

"Aliana, I feel that you are describing intimate assault."

“No one touched me.”

“You have a very important, very private personal boundary. It was violated without your permission or consent. Is that right? Please, if I’m wrong, say. I want to understand.”

“They’re in my mind. I can’t keep them out. They’re going to know things that *they can’t know*.” She thought that her voice sounded very calm, all things considered. Ahmadi nodded.

“And you’re telling me that this... thing. It’s ongoing? It’s still happening right now?”

Tanaka felt herself still. Ahmadi let go of her hand and walked smoothly backward until her desk was between them. The psychiatrist’s eyes were wide and her cheeks were flushed. Prey response. Whatever training the woman had gone through, it had made her sensitive enough to recognize danger. For a moment, Tanaka considered all the ways that she could kill the woman. There were several. None of them would put her in any physical danger, and two of them would be cathartic.

For a moment, the other selves were quiet too, as if they were just as frightened as the head shrinker. That was interesting, but it was for later. Now, in this room, Tanaka spread her hands, palms out and fingers splayed. The universal gesture for *I’m unarmed*. Ahmadi didn’t come back around her desk. Smart woman.

“I believe you have understood the situation,” Tanaka said, as carefully as if the syllables could cut her lips.

“I can see why you’ve been struggling. That sounds... terrible.”

“It is. Can you fix it?”

“There are some things I think we can try—”

Tanaka waved the words away, and Ahmadi went quiet. “I have to stop this. I can’t feel this anymore. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

The other woman licked her lips, and Tanaka had the visceral memory of someone who looked similar but with a broader face and a higher hairline, doing the same thing. She pushed the thought away.

“There may be some interventions,” Ahmadi said. “There are medicines that we use to reduce intrusive thoughts. Assuming the mechanism is similar, they could be very effective.”

“Good.”

“If inpatient care is an option for you, there are some focused magnetic treatments that we could try. Things that can blunt your experience.”

“But not stop it.”

“I don’t know what it is,” she said. “I will help you find out, though. I promise you that, Aliana. As terrible as this is, you don’t have to go through it alone.”

She didn’t see the irony in her choice of phrase, and Tanaka wasn’t in the mood to walk her through it. Her body felt like she’d had a bad virus. Weary until her muscles were falling off her bones. The storm in her head was still there, but not overwhelming at the moment. She didn’t trust that. Being tired made her vulnerable and weak. It didn’t make her free from the others.

“Let’s try the medications first,” she said.

“I’ll have them for you right away.”

Tanaka stood up. The station swayed under her, and she wanted nothing more than to close her eyes. “I think that’s enough for today.”

“We still have time, if you want to—”

“I think that’s enough for today. Have the medications delivered to my quarters here on the station. I’ll take them.”

“I’d like to see you again.” It was a bold statement, and they both knew it. Tanaka lowered her head. Ahmadi squared her shoulders. When she spoke, her voice was lower, calmer, more reassuring, more like it had been when Tanaka had first come in the office. “You are in crisis right now. But you’re also an incredibly strong person. You’ve never met anything that could stop you before, so you believe you can grit your teeth and force your way through it. And truthfully, you probably can. But Aliana, you can’t heal from this. Not without help.”

When Tanaka spoke, it was deliberately using the other woman’s cadence and intonation. Not quite mocking her, not quite not. “You believe I am suffering an ongoing, unstoppable intimate assault.”

“I do.”

“And you think that’s something I can heal from?”

“I would like to help you.”

“I would like to be helped,” Tanaka said. “Send me the pills. We’ll go from there.”



The station was unfamiliar enough to hold her attention. The puzzle of reading the signs, finding her way to the transport tubes, picking the right lift to get her to her quarters, all kept her from thinking too much about anything else. When she got there, things were worse.

Her rooms were simple, spare, and elegant. The color scheme was mostly a dusty red designed to highlight the splashes of Laconian blue. The decoration was minimalist and tasteful: a calligraphic print of a passage of the high consul's writings, a crystal vase with a single flower in it that was replaced each day by the staff, a floor covering designed to evoke tatami mats. There was nothing in it to distract her from her impulses and thoughts.

She ordered food to the room: curried fish and a dry white wine. Someone in her head remembered an apartment with blue-green walls of chipping paint and a couch made from foam and cloth. It was a happy memory, but Tanaka didn't know why. Someone else had eaten a bad fish curry, and the echo of a night recovering from food poisoning wafted through her awareness and vanished again, thin as cigarette smoke.

The medication arrived at almost the same time as the food. A glassine packet with ten peach-colored pills in it and the printed directions to take one each morning and to avoid alcohol. She dry-swallowed two of them, then chased them with a long swig from the wine bottle. The curry was punishingly hot, just as she'd hoped. It gave her an excuse to polish off the wine. By the time she was finished, a deep ache was growing at the base of her skull, but she had the sense that the memories and thoughts were a little less, the voices a little quieter.

The room's system chimed. A connection request from the *Derecho*. She checked her hand terminal. There were half a dozen messages from Botton queued there, but she'd forgotten to take off her privacy settings after Ahmadi. She turned them off now and accepted the connection through the room. A wall screen came to life, and Botton's head filled it.

"Colonel," he said. "I am very sorry to interrupt. I wouldn't if you

hadn't specifically asked for immediate updates."

Had she asked for immediate updates? She didn't remember doing it, but it sounded like something she would have done. The ache at the base of her skull grew a little more intense.

"It's fine," she said. "What seems to be the problem?"

"We had a high-priority report from the Science Directorate on Laconia. Dr. Ochida's office flagged it as critical."

"What did it say?"

Botton blinked. "I don't know, Colonel. I'm not cleared."

She knew that. She should have known. "Of course. Send it to me. I'll take it here."

"Colonel," the captain said, and then vanished. He was replaced with an encrypted datafile. As she ran the decryption, she wondered what the effect of alcohol was on her new medication. If it beat the hell out of her liver and kidneys, it might still be worth the damage. If it made the meds less effective, though...

She ordered another bottle of wine anyway.

Ochida appeared on the screen. He looked as clean and crisp as ever. She recognized the room he was in. Not the Science Directorate, but the State Building. That meant whatever he was telling her, he'd likely already told Trejo.

"Colonel," he said. "I hope you're well."

"Fuck you," Tanaka said to the recording with a polite nod.

"We were feeding the data you sent us through the virtual intelligence and pattern-matching systems here, and we came up with something interesting. Take a look at this."

The screen jumped. Where Ochida had been, there was the ring space. Telescopic images, tactical map, scatter data. She didn't need to look at the time stamp. She recognized the sequence like it was a well-studied painting. It was the gap between when the *Derecho* had entered the ring space and the transit of the *Preiss*. It was the last few moments that her mind had been her own.

The images ticked forward frame by frame, slowed down by the analytic software. She watched the ships inch forward in their arcs, the tactical display tracking each of them. The dissipating drive plume into Bara Gaon that had misled her. The flicker of the *Preiss*'s drive as it began to go

dutchman. And then whiteness. The annihilating brightness of a thousand rings bursting into light.

Not just the rings, though.

Tanaka sat forward. The data images shifted, bringing the ring station at the center of the space into clearer focus. It was glowing with a sudden, violent brightness just like the rings. The visual telescope shifted closer, diving in toward the surface of the station. There was a flaw there. A dark spot like dust on the lens. Or no, not that. Something on the surface of the station itself. The weird patterning of the structure made it hard to make sense of until the virtual intelligence stripped out the background.

It was a small, dark oval. An overlay gave a sense of scale. Not large at all. Smaller than her quarters on Gewitter. The adrenaline hit her system even before the comparison image came up. The egg-shaped ships from the grotto on Laconia. And the match certainty: 98.7 percent.

“You son of a bitch,” she whispered. “There you are.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two: Kit

Many, many things were known, but some were bright and immediate. Fortuna Sittard was both capital city and company town. The hexagon/pentagon tessellation of the Nieuwestad logo really was inspired by the surface of a football. The city was less than ten years old, but already half a million people lived there at the edge of a massive tectonic escarpment where the highland rivers were cutting valleys as they flowed down toward the southern sea. The morning sun would come through the windows and spill across the ceiling over the bed, every imperfection in the surface throwing a tiny shadow in the rose-colored light.

There were other things, less bright but just as much known. A coffeehouse in Toronto where a man and woman had said goodbye for the last time, and the way the scent of baked apple would still make her cry sometimes. A recurring pain in a chest that the doctors called idiopathic angina but that carried all the fear and threat of heart attacks. The pattern of an old melody on piano keys adapted because the left hand was missing a pinkie. The spilling grammars of Italian and Czech. A great wash of memory and significance and knowledge, there but grayer somehow. Lapping like the little waves at the edge of a lake.

Eyes opened and saw where the shadows would be. Legs shifted out from under a blanket, but they weren't anyone's legs. They just were. A woman muttered in her sleep, dreaming that she was in a dance recital and had forgotten all the moves. The toilet was a few steps away, and for a moment there were other toilets to reach from other rooms. Some on the left, some on the right, some down the hallway or the stairs. More than a few built into the wall of the ship's cabin, complete with vacuum flow for when the drive was off and everything was on the float.

Nearby, a finger touched the light switch, and a glow filled the air. A hand fumbled with a warm, soft penis, and urine spilled down to the white

ceramic bowl. There was relief, and then soap and warm water and the light put out.

A child slept in the nursery. He was already large for his crib. That was a known thing. And farther, but not too far, there was a daughter already getting up for work, her attempts to be quiet more alerting than outright noise would be. And there was no one in the house but silence and the thumb-sized grubs they call “cricket slugs” on Pathé. And ships’ drives hummed and thrummed—all the ships’ drives in chorus like cicadas.

The hand that had touched the light switch pulled aside the curtains. The window had spots on it where old raindrops dried, and beyond that, the stars. A woman’s voice said *Kit?* and more eyes opened. A naked man stood at the window, looking out at the night, but something was very wrong with him—right, but not right. Familiar, but unfamiliar. Reversed, because he wasn’t in the mirror and then he wasn’t the person who saw himself in the mirror and then he was.

“Kit?” Rohi said again, and Kit fell back into himself like he’d jumped off a building. His head spun as he staggered to the toilet, dropped to his knees, and vomited into the bowl. When he was empty, he retched for a while, each spasm more painful than the one before, but slowly gaining more time between them. Bakari was crying and Rohi was singing to their boy, soothing him, cooing to him that everything was all right.

Eventually the vertigo passed, and Kit was himself again. In the planetary gravity of Nieuwestad his body felt heavy in a way that somehow felt different than acceleration on a ship, even though Einstein had proven it wasn’t. He washed out his mouth at the little metal sink and walked back to the bedroom. Rohi was curled on the pillows, Bakari asleep in the crook of her arm with his closed eyes shifting in a dream. Kit’s skin stippled itself with gooseflesh from the cold, and he pulled on a set of thermal underwear. He didn’t have pajamas.

It had started on the *Preiss*. It had started the moment they’d died. Kit didn’t say it, but he was sure that was what had happened. The dark things, more real than anything real, had blown him and his baby away like handfuls of dust in a high wind. That was death. And then their clock had been inverted. They hadn’t been reborn, but un-killed. The man who wasn’t in the room with them had managed it with a vast effort. An effort that had exhausted him. Kit had been disoriented, grateful, confused, frightened.

He'd been lost for a flashbulb moment in a cacophony of memory and identity and sensation.

And there had been voices. Not real ones, not words. He wasn't developing aural hallucinations. But he'd remembered things, known things from lives he hadn't led. While they were questioned by the Laconians from the *Derecho*, when they'd been released to finish the journey to Nieuwestad, even for a time after they'd arrived and been escorted to the orientation campus.

The thing where he lost the idea of Kit in a stream of consciousness that wasn't his? This was new. It had only come a few times, but afterward he felt thinner and less connected to reality. Like the essential self he'd always known—the thing he meant when he said “I”—turned out to be less an object and more a kind of habit. Not even a persistent habit like taking drugs or gambling. The kind of thing you could take or leave. Coffee with breakfast instead of tea. Buying the same kinds of socks. Existing as an individual. All things he could do or not do without much changing. Another wave of nausea rolled through him with the thought, but it faded.

He slipped into the bed, trying not to wake them. Bakari was a warm, soft stone. Nothing short of Armageddon was going to wake him now. Rohi didn't open her eyes, didn't shift on the mattress. He was almost able to convince himself she was asleep when she spoke.

“Are you all right?”

“You were at a dance recital,” he said, softly. “But you'd forgotten all the choreography. You had to improvise it all on the fly, and it wasn't going right.”

She was silent for a while. “It's getting worse, isn't it? It's happening more often.”

Kit sighed. On the ceiling above them, the first faint shadows were starting to form. “Yeah.”

“For me too,” she said.



The first two weeks of orientation had been held in a wide auditorium large enough to seat three thousand, though there were fewer than six hundred new immigrants in their cohort. The stage was set a little off-center to give over one wall to vast windows that looked out over the escarpment. The local tree analogs were complexes of mosslike growths that built up like vast coral reefs, and they shimmered silver to green to ruddy orange depending on the temperature and the direction of the wind.

With Bakari in the company daycare facility, Kit's mornings had been presentations by the Jacobin-Black Combined Capital welcome team and representatives of the unions talking about Nieuwestad as a planet and Fortuna Sittard as a city. They would have sixteen-month years and thirty-two-hour days. The local biosphere relied on compounds that weren't toxic but could be irritating, so keeping inside the sealed areas of the city was recommended. They got maps of the city—commissary, medical complex, entertainment district, public swimming pool, religious facilities. The procedures for reporting legal infractions to security, and security infractions to the union reps, were detailed, and Kit and Rohi had to mark that they'd been briefed and understood. The JBCC welcome team led them in songs about teamwork and fellowship, and even the union reps joined in.

With Rohi at his side, Kit felt a little bit grounded in the sea of new voices and faces, the disorienting prospect of the life his new contract had created for him. There might be hundreds of new faces and all the displacing details of coming to live in a new city on a new planet, but Rohi was there, and she was his anchor.

The third week, with his feet a little more nearly under him, he started his workgroup orientation, and Rohi started hers. Halfway through the first day, he realized it was the longest he'd spent away from her since they'd boarded the *Preiss* back in Sol system.

There were only six people joining the civil engineering team. They met in a classroom that looked like a hundred classrooms he'd been in before—thin industrial carpet with a pattern to hide stains, sound-absorbing hardfoam walls, recessed lighting that was cheap because everyone everywhere used printed parts from the same design. His new superior was an attractive woman named Himemiya Gosset. She had a tight smile and a habit of stroking her chin when she was thinking, and Kit realized halfway through the second day that he'd read an article she'd written about the use

of local materials in large-scale water recycling plants. Slowly, the unease and wariness and bone-deep sense of displacement started to give way to enthusiasm and even excitement about the work he'd be doing.

It was the middle of the third day and Gosset was preparing to take the six of them over to the offices where they'd be assigned workstations and meet the full engineering team, when a security officer stepped in the little classroom and pulled her aside. Their conversation was brief, but it brought visible distress to the senior engineer's face. Kit knew before she turned back to the classroom that something had happened, and that it had to do with him.

"Kamal?" Gosset said. "Word, please."

Kit stepped over to the pair of them. The other five were quiet behind him.

"There's a medical issue," the security man said. "I can take you to the infirmary."

"Rohi?" Kit asked.

"It's your son, sir. I'm afraid he's been taken to the infirmary. You should come now."

"Is he all right?" Kit said, but the security man didn't answer.

Gosset nodded sharply toward the door. The universal gesture for *Go*. "Don't worry about missing the walk-through. We'll get you caught up later."

"Thank you," Kit said by reflex. He wasn't paying attention to her. Something was wrong with Bakari. His heart was bright and fast, and he could feel his pulse in his neck.

He held back the urge to ask the security man what had happened, when it had happened, what was wrong, how they knew it was wrong, what they'd done about it, and the thousand other things the man didn't know. Instead, he sat in the small electric cart as it zipped through the wide concrete-and-conduit access corridors of the city, and leaned forward as if he could will it to go faster.

The infirmary was mostly underground, but the lights were tuned to a spectrum that mimicked the afternoon sun of Earth. The flowers at the intake station were fake, but they smelled real. The security man walked behind Kit like an apology. Even before Kit reached the reception desk, an older man in a doctor's coat was striding out toward them. Kit was

expected.

“Mr. Kamal,” the doctor said, gesturing toward a pair of pale wooden doors. “This way, please.”

“What happened?” Kit asked.

Instead of answering, the doctor turned to the security man and said, “Thank you very much.” It was polite, but it was a dismissal. Kit had the sense that whatever the conversation was, it would be private. Maybe that was company policy for JBCC. Maybe it was something else.

They pushed through the doors and into the halls of the infirmary. They were wider than standard, wide enough to let two hospital beds pass each other with room for medics at their sides. The floral smell of reception gave way to something harsher.

“Your son is stable,” the doctor said. “The daycare watch reported that he was acting strangely. For a time, he became entirely unresponsive.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Kit said.

“I believe he had a seizure of some kind. My preliminary scans don’t show any congenital abnormalities or tumors, so that’s good. But there was... some odd activity in his insular cortex.”

“But he’s okay?”

“He’s fine now,” the doctor said. “We’re going to watch him, and I would like to run a few tests. Just rule out as much as I can.”

“But he’s going to be okay.” Kit didn’t say it as a question. He asserted it as if the universe would take its directions from him.

The doctor stopped, and Kit went on for another two steps before he paused and turned back. The discomfort on the doctor’s face was plain.

“We have a standing order from the Laconian Science Directorate. Any issues or abnormalities that arise among people who were on the *Preiss* are to be documented and the data sent to Laconia.”

“Because of the thing that happened?” Kit said.

“There are thirteen hundred systems. Laconia doesn’t even have a formal political officer on Nieuwestad,” the doctor said. “If the report back to Dr. Ochida slipped behind my desk? It could be months or years before I noticed. Given who your father is, I thought perhaps...”

The doctor inclined his head. He was graying at the temples, and deep wrinkles marked the corners of his eyes and mouth. He was old enough; he might have known the *Rocinante* before the Transport Union was even

formed. He might be part of Naomi Nagata's underground movement.

"Thank you," Kit said.

The doctor's smile was calm and calming. He led Kit to a glass doorway where the privacy setting had turned the clear pane to a gentle frost. Kit slipped in. The soft hum and pop of the medical scanners was like wind in trees. The bed was sized for an adult, and Rohi lay on her side with Bakari snuggled up to her chest. His eyes were closed, and his right hand was curled in a fist under his chin as if he were deep in thought. Her voice was soft and lilting. The cadence she fell into when she was lulling the baby to sleep.

"The Anteater said, 'Of course we're friends. Why would we not be?' And the cunning clever boy who looked just like Bakari said, 'Because you eat ants, and the anthill is made from them.'"

Kit eased himself onto the foot of the bed, resting his hand on her ankle. She smiled and went on.

"'You are made from many things too,' the Anteater said. 'You are made up of skin and hair and eyes and bones and blood and wide, strong muscles. Do you hate the doctor when he takes a blood sample to keep you well? Do you hate the barber when he cuts off a bit of your hair? I love the anthill because it helps me live, and it loves me because I help keep it healthy by taking away the ants that are worn out. Just because you're made from something, that doesn't mean that's all you are.' And then the clever young boy who looked just like Bakari understood. And that's the end of the story."

Rohi lapsed into silence. Bakari sighed softly and nuzzled more deeply into the bed. He looked fine. He looked healthy.

"I don't know that story," Kit said. "Where's it from?"

"Aesop?" Rohi said.

"I don't think so."

"Maybe I made it up. I don't know anymore."

I think it was a philosopher, a voice in the back of Kit's mind murmurs. I can't remember his name. The voice isn't Kit's. It isn't anyone he recognizes, but he remembers the book—orange with a complex design on the front and thin pages of high-quality paper. It isn't a book he's read. There was a time when these wandering memories bothered him. Now they seem almost normal. *That which can't be avoided must be embraced.*

Someone had said that to him. His grandmother. Kit had never met his grandmother. The room around him spun a little, but only a little.

“Can you imagine what it would be like?” Rohi asked. “It’s hard enough for us, and we already know ourselves. I’ve been me for decades. Imagine being as little as him. Still figuring out where your body ends and the world begins, and having to deal with... this.”

“We don’t know it’s that.”

“We can’t prove it,” Rohi said. “But I know. Don’t you?”

He curled down onto the bed, resting his head against her thigh. The medical mattress hissed and shifted, accommodating his weight. Her body was warm against his cheek. He remembered how, during the pregnancy, she’d always been warm as a furnace, even in the winter. No matter how cool they kept the bedroom, she’d kick off the sheets. He thought it had been her. He thought that had been him. But maybe it was someone else’s memory. Someone from the *Preiss* or one of the other ships. It was so hard to be sure.

“I was so scared when they told me they’d brought him here,” Rohi said. “I’m so scared all the time.”

“I know. I am too.”

“Do you ever want to let go? I keep thinking what it would be like to fall into being the anthill and just never be the ant again. Even if I died, I might not care. I might not notice.”

“I would.”

“Not if you were in there too.”

“I will always care about you,” Kit said. “I will always care about him. Nothing will ever change that. No matter how much this happens. It won’t erase me, and it won’t erase how much I love you.”

Rohi made a soft sound, hardly more than an exhalation with intent, and rested her fingers on Kit’s head, stroking him gently because they both knew he was lying.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Naomi

Naomi floated in her cabin, her mind dancing over the work. The underground had been difficult and unwieldy even in the days when Saba ran it, and she'd only been one of his lieutenants. Since the fall of Laconia and her own flight before the storm, it had slipped further into chaos. The secret shipyards in Larson system had gone quiet so long she assumed they'd been discovered or else suffered some catastrophic accident. Then a report appeared in her queue that began with a brief, dismissive apology and went on as though nothing odd had happened. One of the cells in Sol system had been discovered and detained, but six others began their own counter-operation without waiting for approval from the rest of the organization. In Calypso, Théo Ammundsun, formerly director of the Louvre on Earth, was going about creating an institution to catalog and gather samples of alien artifacts. He delivered only sporadic and incomplete reports. Entries like *San Ysidro sample appears active—Moving to isolate* filled her with more dread than information.

It was her network, and every day that she took her eyes off it, every hour she didn't pepper it with messages and pull the best local leaders into power, every moment that she didn't prove the value of a centralized coordinator, the net frayed. Maybe that was inevitable. All she had was her name and reputation, Jim's name and reputation. It was a thin lever arm to move people who wanted to see the kneecapping of Laconia as freedom instead of responsibility.

She prepared messages to the places she thought might be useful: Gregor Shapiro on Ganymede had done the most work with nonlocal signaling protocols; Emilia Bell-Cavat (who was either three weeks late reporting in or whose latest reports had gone astray) was both a secret coordinator of the underground in New Greece system and an expert on noninsect superorganisms; Kachela al-Din worked with direct brain-to-

brain communication in a medical context before he'd become a ship designer. They were her straws, and she was reaching for them. The sense of moving too slowly, of being too far behind even as she began, made Duarte's hive mind seem almost seductive. If across all the spread of the human race, she could just ask her questions, hear the answers, be with the people she needed and wasn't with...

"Hey," Jim said from the doorway. "Did something happen with Elvi?"

"You mean besides the miraculous appearance and vanishing of the god-emperor in her lab?"

Jim considered. "I mean besides that, but when you put it that way, I guess that would cover a lot of weird. She's just seemed kind of nervous."

"I'm going back to the god-emperor thing."

"I meant around us in particular," Jim said as he pulled himself into the cabin. "She was going to come have dinner here on the *Roci*, but she bailed. I feel like maybe something about Amos bothered her."

"Have you asked her?"

"You see? There you go with your useful, straightforward suggestions. I never come up with those kinds of things myself."

"Yes, you do."

He braced himself at the wall behind her, looking over her shoulder at the arrayed underground. "What've you got?"

"Just what was in the toolbox before," she said. "I feel like I came to cook a meal and it turns out it's a poetry competition. Everything I built was to fight against Laconia back when Laconia was simple things, like invulnerable ships and neofascist authoritarians. Now that it's become a really invasive bad dream, how do you build a resistance to fight that?"

"It was kind of always an invasive bad dream, but I get what you're saying," Jim said. "Plus San Esteban. Don't forget the boiling dark gods looking to snuff out all life because we annoyed them. Do you have a sense what the plan is?"

"Track Duarte down and talk him out of it," she said. "Find a way to access and use whatever tools the builders made without turning all humanity into an extended version of Winston Duarte's hippocampus."

Jim nodded and rubbed his chin and neck with the flat of his palm in a way that meant he wasn't convinced. That was fair. She wasn't either.

"We do have Teresa," Naomi continued. "She's the only individual he's

shown enough concern for to adjust his cognition. If she asks him, maybe he'll change again."

"Parent and child," Jim agreed. "That's powerful stuff. Not sure I'd want to rely on it for, like, the survival of the human race."

"Failure position is force him out of his position, whatever that is, and find someone else who can step into his place. Cara, Xan. Amos."

"Jesus, really?"

"Not my first option, but maybe."

Jim's sigh was soft, gentle. It would have been less devastating if she hadn't heard the despair under it. "Detective Miller once told me, 'We don't have a right thing, just a plateful of a little less wrong.'"

"Yeah, but he was an asshole."

Jim laughed, then reached out and put his hand on the back of her head. She pushed back into him, taking pleasure and comfort in the simple physical presence of the man she trusted.

"When you send out the information," Jim said, almost apologetically. "I mean, when you explain the situation to the rest of the underground? That's going to pull a trigger."

"I know," she murmured.

"You have a plan for that?"

"I do."

"Am I going to like it?"

"Nope," she said, and opened her eyes, looking up into his gentle, bright gaze looking back down at her.

"I didn't figure," he said.

Later, when she crossed back over to the *Falcon*, Naomi would keep that look in mind. They had come a long way—both together and apart—since they'd been babies on the *Canterbury*. It was easy for her to think that life had beaten the idealism and joy out of them. She felt ground down to the nerve endings more often than she didn't. And Jim seemed... not tired, exactly, but all used up. Like his fuel tank was empty and he was just trying to coast gracefully to the finish line. But even so, now and then she saw him still in there. Behind the dark-rimmed pale eyes, under the graying hair, the same reckless, holy fool she'd noticed when Captain McDowell brought him on board. Time and use had changed them, but it hadn't changed what they were. There was joy in that. A promise.

She found Elvi alone in the lab. The apparatus of the dive—paired medical couches, scanners, and sensor arrays—were on the float with her. Here and there, a few cords had come loose from their fittings and floated in the subtle breeze. Elvi herself moved from one console to the next, bringing up logs and datafiles, checking connections and power levels. The atrophy of her muscles left her looking frailer than Naomi pictured her. There was a haunted look in her eyes.

“What are you working on?” Naomi asked instead of saying hello.

“Nothing in particular,” Elvi said. “It’s just... I had a roommate when I went to university who used to do needlepoint. He wasn’t great at it, but it gave his hands something to do while he thought. When he was stuck on a problem and couldn’t see any way out—” She gestured at the empty lab. There was something bleak in the gesture. “I’m doing needlepoint. Have you ever done something you knew was wrong, but you told yourself that this time it was justified? That just this once, the rules didn’t apply? Or if they did, there was a grander cause that made it okay?”

“You just described most of the last decade of my life,” Naomi said.

“I don’t know how I move forward with this protocol.”

Is something wrong? hovered in the back of Naomi’s mouth. It was only the ridiculous obviousness of the answer that changed it to “I’ve finished all my messages. They’re ready to send.”

“All right,” Elvi said. “I’ll clear your access to the comms.”

“It’s not going to be that easy,” Naomi said. “You say the relays are safe. I believe you. But...”

“You think Trejo will find out.”

“I know he will. When I send this, it’s going to twenty people in sixteen systems. They’re going to tell their networks. And it’s going to be the most important thing anyone has seen. This will leak. It will leak the minute I send it out, and I can’t stop that from happening.”

Elvi took one end of a floating cable in her hand, considered it, and plugged it into a slot in the medical couch where Amos had been for the dive. For a moment, Naomi felt like there were three of them in the room. Elvi and her, but also the empty space where Winston Duarte had appeared to be. It was only air now, but it had significance. The empire, the underground, and the man who would be God. Three sides of the coin.

“We have to get help,” Elvi said. “I’ve been trying to do this by myself. I

can't. I'm not even sure I trust my judgment anymore. Duarte's plan will affect everyone. Everywhere. I don't even know that I can make a moral case against sending messages out. Even if it means Trejo orders Dr. Lee to shoot me in the head."

"That seems like an extreme call."

"It's Laconia. They do shit like that all the time."

"Well, I have another thought," Naomi said. "But I wanted to talk to you about it first."



"Admiral Trejo," Naomi said, dead-eyeing the camera, "I accept your proposal and the amnesty you offered to the underground. I am sending copies of your original broadcast in Freehold and this response for dissemination within my organization. Once my people see that local Laconian forces are abiding by your word, all action against Laconian personnel and assets will end, and we can start working on our more pressing issues.

"To that end, I am including files, debriefings, and interviews around a recent experiment which I think you'll agree is both interesting and alarming."

Naomi steadied herself. She felt like there should be more to say, that this was one of those moments that history books leaned on. The acceptance speech that ended the war between Laconia and the remnants of the Transport Union. She'd had thoughts and intentions, things she'd meant to say, but now that she was in the moment, they all seemed ponderous and artificial.

Screw it, she thought. Posterity can take care of itself.

"Please get back to me. The sooner we can establish some working protocols, the sooner we can address this situation."

She stopped the recording.

"And the less likely we are to be sucked up into a vast, inhuman consciousness in which we are all lost like raindrops falling into an ocean,"

she finished to the inactive lens.

Elvi, at her workstation, gave a thumbs-up. The recording was good. Naomi stretched her arms out to the side, easing the tension that had knotted itself between her shoulder blades. For a moment, she pictured all the people who had sworn to join the fight against Duarte and Laconia who would be seeing this. She wanted to believe that they'd all follow her lead, they'd all see the wisdom in her choices, they'd all put aside their grudges and their guns. Or a plurality of them, even. There was a future not far from here where she was going to be fighting against a bunch of the people who'd once been her allies. She would be announcing not only the situation with Duarte, but laying her cards on the table with the underground and Trejo alike. It was the most James Holden-esque thing she'd ever contemplated.

"Last chance," she said. "Do we send it or not?"

Elvi looked stricken. "Oh. No. I..." She made the thumbs-up gesture again, more tentatively this time. "It's sent. It's gone. I sent it. Was that not what we agreed?"

"It's fine," Naomi said. "Now, let's see if he sends us a bouquet or a battle group. I should go tell my crew what we've done."

"Same."

"This was the right thing," Naomi said.

Elvi tilted her head and looked away. When she spoke, her voice was smaller, but also strangely more relaxed. "I think it was. I wish that meant we'd be rewarded for it."

Naomi left, skimming down the Laconian corridors for the airlock. The enemy crew that maybe, sort of, technically wasn't the enemy for the moment made way for her. Slipping across the bridge and back into the *Rocinante* felt like pulling on a favorite jacket. She had known that she was doing something momentous, but somehow she hadn't really felt it until it was behind her. Whatever happened from here, Trejo would know she'd been working with Elvi and everything Duarte had said about his plan.

As she headed down toward engineering and the machine shop, she found herself wondering what it would be like to feel her connection to the vast swelling mass of humanity more immediately than she felt her own sense of self. She'd read some of the early analyses that Elvi's team had done with a theoretical model based on Cara and Amos. The ways that the

folds of their brains began to act as if they were physically cross-connected, and a thought that began in one could cascade over into the other and then back again like a song traveling through a window. It seemed oddly poetic when it didn't seem like annihilation.

When she reached engineering, Teresa and Amos were hard at work. The preflight checklists were on the wall screens, and almost half were already in the green.

"Boss," the thing that had been Amos said. "What's up?"

"I was going to say we might want to look at prepping for a burn, but—" She gestured at the screens.

"Figured we were better ready than not ready."

"Good call," she said. "I took Trejo's offer. I'm waiting to see if he's still offering. If he's not..."

"Amos said you saw him," Teresa said. She was wearing a flight suit with one of the old *Tachi* designs. Naomi was surprised that after all this time the *Roci* still had the instructions to make those. "My father. You saw him?"

"We saw something," Naomi said. "But we know it was an illusion. We can't know what it was really based on. It seemed like him."

"Pretty sure it was the guy," Amos said. "My vantage point was a little different."

"Are we going to kill him?" Teresa asked. There was no fear or pleading in her voice. If there was anger—and there was anger—it wasn't aimed at her.

"We don't know what we're going to do," Naomi said. "I'm not looking to kill anybody. But there may be a way to use what he's found without using it the way he wants to use it."

"If you were going to kill him, would you tell me?"

"Yes," Naomi said, and meant it.

For a moment, all three of them were still. Teresa was the first to move, just a terse nod and then she turned back to the inventory screens. Amos' smile widened a millimeter. Naomi had the impression that the girl had just done something he was proud of her for.

It was almost a full day before the message came back from Laconia. By then, Naomi had spent a long, sleepless night second-guessing herself, Alex and Jim were up to speed, and the *Rocinante* was ready to burn for the ring

gate whether in tandem with the *Falcon* or on her own.

She was about to throw on a vac suit and run a visual inspection of the *Roci*'s plating when Jim called to her from the ops deck. "Naomi. We have something. It's from Trejo."

She put the helmet back in its cradle and pulled herself up to ops. Alex had already come down. His eyes were wide with concern. Jim could have been carved from plaster. She didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. Either her gambit had worked or it hadn't. They'd all know soon enough.

She pulled up her message queue. The entry at the top was marked ANTON TREJO. She opened it and pulled back far enough that the others could see. Trejo appeared at the same desk he'd been sitting at in the Freehold message, but with a less pleasant expression. Still technically a smile, but there was an anger in it that Naomi couldn't miss if she wanted to. Fair enough. She'd just humiliated him by showing the underground and through them everyone in every system that Naomi Nagata had infiltrated the highest ranks of Laconia.

"Naomi Nagata," Trejo said, and then chuckled like he'd practiced it. "You are a pistol, aren't you? I am glad that we're finally on the same side. I want you to know I've always respected your grit and your competence. I wish you'd gotten to know our cause under different circumstances. All this might have come out differently. Better now than never, though."

"That man is going to put a bullet in the back of your head," Jim said.

"Oh yeah," Alex agreed. "No question."

"If we get that far, I'll deal with it," Naomi said.

She rolled the message back to keep from missing anything. "As an initial gesture of our cooperation, I'm including a security briefing to you and Dr. Okoye both. Take a look at it, and let me know what you think. I'd appreciate it if we could use the secure channels moving forward. I'm sure the good doctor can tell you anything you need to get that set up if it's not already."

"This man spent weeks having me slowly beaten to death," Jim said. "And he was never as angry at me as he is at you now."

Naomi was already pulling up the security download. The featured report was of the inside of the ring space at the moment it went white.

She'd seen it enough in Elvi's scientific reports to recognize it. When the ring gates lit, blasting the ships there with light, the image froze, shifted. It seemed to be moving in toward the station at the center of the ring space. A small darkness stood out against the light, and a text window opened with the words: MATCH CERTAINTY 98.7%.

"Get Elvi," Naomi said.

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Chapter Thirty-Four: Tanaka

Tanaka knew she was dreaming, but she wasn't certain that the dream was hers. In it, she was in a tunnel carved from bare stone and sealed against seepage like one of the old transit corridors in Innis Shallows back on the Mars of her youth, but there was a confusion in her as if she had never been anyplace like it before. Somewhere nearby, a man was screaming, and the name that she associated with the shrieks was Nobuyuki, but she didn't know who that was.

That might have just been the nature of dreams, though, and the strangeness of it was only because she was on the ragged edge of lucidity. The thing that made it feel like she was watching someone else's dream was more subtle. The texture of the emotions was wrong. The way they slid across her mind. She knew them as they came: betrayal, panic, the profound sorrow of a mistake that couldn't be unmade. It was like seeing a Picasso composition in the style of Van Gogh, familiar and alien at the same time.

With the logic of dreams, she felt someone beside her thinking about the different kinds of unconsciousness: sleeping, dreaming, and dying. A younger mind, and a masculine one, but gentle in a way she didn't usually associate with masculinity. A gentle soul beside her, caught in the same riptide she was.

And then she felt others around them, like they were all in the same theater watching a wall screen or a living performance. Other minds, other selves, all bleeding into each other, bleeding into her. Thoughts and impulses, impressions and emotions, rising up and drifting away without any clear owner, and her own selfhood just one flake in the snowstorm.

If the thing that calls itself Aliana Tanaka came apart here and never swirled back together, she thought, I wouldn't even notice that I was missing.

The idea was like a whispered threat. She woke herself up trying to

scream.

When her eyes opened, her surroundings were no more familiar. The light-in-darkness of pale linens in a dim room. A frame on the wall filled with hand-brushed letters. Something on the floor that was and wasn't tatami. She told herself that she would know. She didn't now, didn't yet, but she would. This was her room. This was her bed. There was a reason it didn't seem familiar...

Because these were her rooms on Gewitter Station. Not hers. Not owned. Assigned to her for a moment, like a hotel. Nothing felt like her, because it was only a brief relationship, architecturally speaking. That made sense. That sounded right. She pulled herself out from under the blanket and stumbled to the tiny bathroom. Above the sink, a whole wall of mirror. She looked at the woman looking back out at her, and she seemed familiar.

Tanaka shifted her head and watched her reflection do the same. She opened her mouth, watched the places where the surgical scars on her cheeks pulled down at her eyelids differently. *If you'd stuck with the field surgery, it would be healed by now*, she thought. What the hell did she need with cosmesis anyway?

What's a third Miko? someone asked in her mind, and she pushed the thought away.

"Aliana Tanaka," she said, and the reflection mimicked. "You are Aliana Tanaka. Colonel Aliana Tanaka, Laconian Marine Corps. Special Operations Group, Second Battalion, First Marine Expeditionary Regiment. Aliana Tanaka, that's who you are."

The syllables of her own name became a mantra, and slowly, slowly, the mantra became something more. She remembered the medicine, went back to the bedroom to find the packet, and dry-swallowed two more of the pills. They made a thick lump halfway down her esophagus. Good enough.

She found her hand terminal and scanned the packet. She was already down to the last two doses. When she put in for a resupply, the system threw up an error. She keyed in a security override, insisted, and while she was at it, doubled the size of the prescription. Whatever damage it did her wasn't even in her top ten problems right now.

She looked at the time—halfway through the second watch—and didn't know when she'd gone to sleep. Maybe she was up early. Maybe she'd slept in. Time and behavior were doing strange things right now. It didn't matter.

She wasn't going back to sleep now. She could start from there.

She pulled up the lights, showered under uncomfortably cool water, and dressed in her uniform. The woman over the sink now looked less hagridden. Her scars were almost dignified. *Aliana Tanaka. Aliana Tanaka.*

She put in a connection request for Captain Botton on the *Derecho*. It took him long enough to accept that she thought he might have been sleeping, but he was dressed and on the bridge of the ship. Maybe he just didn't like taking her calls.

"Colonel," he said instead of hello.

"What's the situation?" she asked smartly.

He nodded and seemed to gather himself. She had the impression—a last wisp of dream—of tiny gnats swarming around his head, almost too small and translucent to be picked up by the camera. She ignored them. "We should be fully resupplied in seventy-two hours, sir."

Tanaka scowled. "I made the requests personally. We should have been at the front of the line."

"We are," Botton said. "The common supplies are already on board. Water. Food. Filters. Basic medical supplies. We're only waiting for catalytic plates for the recycler and a shipment of fuel pellets that was outbound. They're burning hard to get back."

That a ship had to turn back around for her was weirdly reassuring. It was evidence that there was an objective reality, that the world of base matter still counted for something, that not everything was a slip of consciousness that other minds could invade and change.

"Fine. But keep the crew ready for immediate departure. If I decide not to wait for the full resupply, I don't want to be hauling people out of dockside bars because they thought they were still on shore leave."

The gnats around Botton's head came more sharply into focus and his mouth went just a degree tighter. Botton didn't like that she was running his ship. Why would he? She'd have hated him if their positions were reversed. He was usually better at hiding his irritation. She had the uncanny sense that she was seeing his thoughts as he had them.

"If I may, does this have anything to do with the armistice?" Botton asked.

The what? Tanaka almost said. Reflexes from decades in the military kicked in before she could. "I can't confirm or deny anything at this point."

“Understood, sir. Permission to speak candidly?”

“Go ahead.”

“It would help the crew to hear something from you directly. They’re getting everything through newsfeeds now, and it’s an invitation to chaos.”

“I hear you,” she said. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Aye, aye,” Botton said, and braced. She cut the connection. The armistice? There was something... something she knew? Some awareness that had slipped into her from the back while she slept? Until she turned to the newsfeeds and the leaked recordings of Nagata and Trejo that the underground had put out, she was reaching for supernatural answers when memory and mundanity were enough. Tanaka knew about the peace between Laconia and the underground because she’d been the one to deliver the offer. Nagata had just gotten around to saying yes.

Tanaka stood in the center of her room, shifting through feeds until she found an apparently unedited copy of the message. *The sooner we can establish some working protocols, the sooner we can address this situation.* Nagata never mentioned the Duarte girl. She didn’t need to. The daughter was beside the point now—bait for a trap that Tanaka didn’t have to set. It didn’t mean she’d be useless, and it chafed her to think Trejo had given in to Nagata with nothing in return.

She was just starting to think about eating something and whether to send a query of her own to Trejo when a message appeared. It popped up in her secure queue flagged as flash traffic from the admiral himself. She opened it with a flick of her fingers. On the wall screen, Trejo looked angry. His eyes flickered like he was reading something in the air. The sense of gnats wasn’t there, though. The message was just an object, not a mind.

“Okoye sold us out,” Trejo said. “I don’t know how much she and her husband gave away, but we have to assume it’s the farm. The good news is that it’s out in the open now. Bad news is we have to deal with this other shit first. I’ve given them the same report that Ochida sent you. They’ll be sending their best and brightest to the ring gates. I’d like you to be there too.

“Your mission’s the same. Get Duarte and bring him back. Some of the circumstances are a little different. Whatever he’s done, it’s working. Ochida’s not seeing any more San Estebans. The glitches have stopped. Reality’s getting back to normal.”

Tanaka felt a wave of something—rage, fear, nausea—and pushed it away.

“Which means Duarte is still the priority,” Trejo went on. “When you find him we need to understand what he’s doing and take control of it, whatever that entails. Nagata is nominally in charge of ring gate traffic so that we won’t need to keep trying to whistle while we’re pissing, but I want it clear between us: Your Omega status is still very much in place. If you have to choose between fulfilling your mission or preserving this agreement, I trust your judgment.”

The message ended. That was stark enough. Tanaka took a long breath, shifted her shoulders, and put a connection back through to Botton on the *Derecho*. He answered more quickly this time. She wondered how long it would take to grab a sandwich.

“I’ve communicated with Admiral Trejo,” she said. “I have a message for you to pass on to the crew. Tell them to get ready for launch. We’re burning to the ring space to rendezvous with Nagata and the high consul as soon as I’m back to the ship.”

“Yes, sir,” Botton said.

“Who’s on security detail right now?”

Botton blinked. His gaze cut to the right. For a moment, she had the irrational fear he would say Nobuyuki, though she didn’t think there was anyone with that name on the *Derecho*.

“Lieutenant De Caamp.”

“Have her send two armed escorts to my rooms on the station immediately.”

“Copy that,” Botton said. “Is there a problem?”

“No. I have a stop to make before I leave the station, and they might not want to let me in,” she said. And then, with a chuckle, “Or back out.”

Just under an hour later, she walked into the psychiatric wing of Gewitter medical complex with two Marines behind her. A young man with unfashionably long hair was at the reception desk. His face went ashy as she stepped up to his desk.

“I’m here to see Dr. Ahmadi,” she said.

“Of course. You can have a seat in the waiting area, and I’ll—”

“I’m here to see Dr. Ahmadi right now.”

“I’m not sure where she is.”

Tanaka leaned forward, put her hands on the reception desk, and smiled gently. “Just for pretend, if it was really important, how would you find her?”

The doctors’ lounge was otherwise empty when she reached it. It was a warm room with indirect lighting and real plants—ferns and ivies—hanging from planters along the walls. Two sofas long enough to sleep on and an automated galley as sophisticated as some she’d seen serve a whole ship.

She didn’t know if the other physicians had been warned away or if Ahmadi had been alone there all along, but when she sat down across from her, Ahmadi’s tea had a little skin of oil across its top where it had cooled, undrunk. The doctor’s gaze swam a little bit as it found its way to Tanaka.

“You’re here,” Ahmadi said.

“I am,” Tanaka agreed, and pushed the little packet with its two pills across the table. “How does this work? Why does it take the edge off the effect?”

Ahmadi nodded. “It reduces activity in the temporoparietal lobes with some antipsychotic effects. It diminishes spontaneous neural firings globally. Whatever is reaching into your mind, I thought it might help you to not respond to it.”

“What else does that? What other drugs? I need a list.”

Ahmadi put out her hand. For a moment, Tanaka didn’t know what she meant by it, then she gave the doctor her terminal. As Ahmadi wrote in it, she spoke. Her voice was soft and hazy.

“When I was an intern, I had a patient with left neglect.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“He had a lesion on his brain that meant he didn’t experience the concept of left. If I asked him to draw a circle, he’d draw the right half. If you had him draw an analog clock face, all the numbers would be crowded onto the right. Left was a thought he just couldn’t have. Like he was colorblind, but for half his perceptual field.”

Tanaka leaned back in her chair. “Are you all right?”

“I always thought about how strange it would be to have that loss. I never thought about how odd we must have been to him. These weird people with twice as much world that he couldn’t conceive of. And he couldn’t. The thoughts you have depend on the brain you have. Change the brain and you change the kinds of thoughts that are possible to think.”

She put the terminal onto the table beside her abandoned tea. It made a scraping sound like a fingernail over skin as she pushed it across. Tanaka didn't pick it up.

"It happened to you."

"It did," Ahmadi said. "I was remembering a tunnel. You were there. Something bad was happening."

"To Nobuyuki," Tanaka said. "Whoever the fuck that is."

"It's connecting us," Ahmadi said. "It's making cross connections between our neurons. Making it so that the electrical impulse of a neuron in one brain can trigger the neuron in another brain to fire. We used to do that with rats, you know? Put an electrode in one rat brain that's hooked to a radio transmitter. A receiver hooked to another rat in another room. We'd show one the color red, and shock the other. After a while, when the one saw red, the other would flinch even without a shock. 'Poor man's telepathy' we called it."

"Nothing personal, but your work sounds kind of fucked up."

"I thought it would be like... being with people. Like a dream, but it's not. It's being part of an idea that is too big to think. Being one part of a brain that's so vast and interconnected, it's not human. It's made of humans, but that's not what it is. Not any more than we're neurons and cells."

"You still think this is intimate assault?"

"Oh yes," Ahmadi said. Her voice was low and rich with her conviction. "Yes."

Tanaka picked up the handheld from the table. A dozen different pharmaceuticals were listed there, with dosage formulas and warnings. Do Not Take on an Empty Stomach. Discontinue if Rash Presents. Avoid if Pregnant. She slapped the handheld onto her wrist and put the two remaining pills into her pocket.

"It's spreading," Ahmadi said. "It's not just the people who were in the ring space with you. It's spreading out everywhere. Like a contagion."

"I know."

"How can it do that?"

Tanaka stood. Ahmadi seemed smaller than she had in their session. Her face was softer than it had been. The voice that had admired her, that had been reminded of his wife, was silent. Or elsewhere. Or blocked by the drugs.

“I don’t know how it’s being done,” Tanaka said. “But I intend to find out.”

“How do you stop it?”

“I’ll find that out too,” she said, and walked away. In the corridor, she copied the list to the two Marines as she led the way toward the pharmacy. “Any of these that are already compounded, we take. Anything we’d need to synthesize more on the *Derecho*, we take that too.”

“How do we know what those are?”

“Shake a pharmacist,” Tanaka said.

It took longer than Tanaka had wanted to spend, but the supply was also larger. By the end, they had to take wide, blue plastic bags that were meant for the personal effects of patients. By the time they were ready to go, it looked like they’d been shopping at a high-fashion market district. One of the doctors—a small, round-faced man with an unfortunate beard—followed them out toward the hub to the main station flapping his hands in distress. Tanaka did him the favor of ignoring him.

It took the lift a few seconds to arrive. As Tanaka stood there, waiting, one of her guards cleared his throat. “Straight to the dock, sir?”

“Yes,” Tanaka said. And then, “No. Wait.” As the lift chimed, she pulled open one of the bags and grabbed out a familiar glassine packet, filled with pills. “Go ahead. I’ll meet you at the ship.”

“Are you sure, sir?”

“Go.”

She didn’t wait to watch. Anyone on the *Derecho* stupid enough to disobey her at this point was beyond saving. She stalked to the doctor’s lounge again. This time, more people were there. They turned to look at her like she was a threat. Fair enough.

Ahmadi was exactly where Tanaka had left her, though somehow she’d gotten a fresh cup of tea to ignore. Tanaka touched her shoulder, and she was slow to turn. Tanaka put the packet on the table beside the teacup. Ahmadi’s hand covered it.

“I’ll do what I can,” Tanaka said.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Alex

At first, Alex didn't notice the sounds of violence. There were several reasons for that: He was on the flight deck at the top of the *Rocinante*, and the fighting was down by the crew airlock; he was at the end of a long, busy shift, and the fatigue left him a little slower on the uptake than usual; he was watching one of his favorite old neo-noir entertainment feeds, and the detective—played by Shin Jung Park—had just followed the mysterious woman—Anna Reál—into a nightclub on Titan. It was only a few minutes before he'd find the policeman's body, and maybe an hour before he realized that the mysterious woman was his daughter. Alex had seen this one many times over the years. He knew it well. Rewatching old feeds was a comfort for him. There was a calm that came with knowing what was going to happen.

He couldn't tell what caught his attention, only that something in the club sounded wrong. He paused the feed, Shin Jung Park with his eyes half closed and his mouth open awkwardly in the middle of ordering a drink. The *Roci* was just the hum of recyclers and his own heartbeat. When the next shout came, Alex started. It was a girl's voice lifted in rage. He couldn't make out individual words, but it was only trouble.

He unstrapped and hauled himself down through ops to the lift. The girl's voice came again, louder and fast. The only thing he could make out was the word *fucking* in the middle of a sentence. Then a sound of impact loud enough that the hull rang with it for a few seconds.

"Hey there," he said as he pulled himself toward the crew airlock. "Something wrong?"

No one answered back, but he heard Amos talking low and calm. Alex's first thought was that something had happened to Muskrat, and Teresa was losing herself in grief, but that didn't quite seem right either.

The girl's voice came again, and it wasn't Teresa. It was younger, higher.

A serrated blade of a voice. *You had no fucking right to get involved in it. You are shit to me. You are the same kind of vicious fuck that Cortázar was, and you can get back there and tell her you were wrong.* Alex drifted down.

Cara floated at the airlock, her face a mask of rage and pain. Amos blocked her way into the *Roci*, his arms stretched out to either wall as if he were casually bracing himself there. Jim and Teresa were in the lift shaft, coming up from the crew decks, drawn by the same commotion. Teresa's eyes were wide and anxious. Jim met Alex's eyes and nodded.

"I get why you're pissed, Sparkles," Amos said. "This part's rough."

"Stop saying that!" the smaller girl shouted. "You don't know shit about me!"

"But it'll pass," Amos went on. "Maybe it doesn't go all the way back to what it was before you put your head in that thing, but it'll get better than this."

"I am *supposed* to be in there! They're *supposed* to tell me things! I want it, and you fucked it up for me. Now you need to fix it."

"This is what fixed looks like now."

"We're dead anyway!" She was fighting against sobs now. "It doesn't matter if we're all dead anyway."

"We should get you back to Little Man. He's worried about you."

"Stay out of our *heads*!" Cara screamed, and launched herself at Amos. The impact of their bodies was deeper and more violent than Alex had expected, like they were both weighted with lead. Cara's attack wasn't balanced or braced, and Amos was. She flailed, losing her orientation. Her heel, swinging, hit the bulkhead with a sound like a hammer strike. Where she hit, the fabric and foam had a deep dent.

The screams and sobs grew more violent and then, like a candle guttering out, faded suddenly into nothing. Amos looked back over his shoulder, first at Jim and Teresa, then back up toward Alex. A black streak across his right cheek showed where Cara had struck him.

"I'll be back in a minute," Amos said.

"Take your time," Alex replied, and then felt stupid for saying it. But Amos only nodded and passed from handhold to handhold until he reached Cara where she floated, curled tightly into herself, her whole body a fist. Amos said something to the girl that Alex couldn't hear, and then tucked her in one broad, pale arm and pulled her with him out the airlock door and

across the docking bridge.

Jim and Teresa rose up as Alex floated down, and the three of them watched Amos cross to the *Falcon* and pass into it.

“Well, shit,” Alex said. “Looks like Elvi told her about us dropping the whole library thing.”

“He knew it would be ugly,” Teresa said. “He’s been waiting for this to happen. He told Dr. Okoye to put responsibility for shutting the experiments down on him.”

“Because he can take the punch?” Alex asked.

“Have you seen Elvi?” Jim said. “She looks like she’d break if you breathed on her too hard.”

“Well, good on Amos, I guess,” Alex said. For a moment, he had the sense that someone else was in the airlock with them—some fourth person watching alongside them. He looked back toward the lift, expecting to see Naomi, but no one was there.



Once the order came, getting the *Rocinante* ready to evacuate Adro system didn’t take long at all. Alex had been over the flight checks with the experience of a lifetime lifting him through the process. The maneuvering thrusters were all reporting back solid. The water supply was still pretty healthy, especially compared with the *Falcon*, which rode drier than Alex would have been comfortable with. The air recyclers were working at better-than-spec. The Epstein drive would need a refit sometime in the next year, if things went well enough that they were all still alive and recognizably human by then.

Alex had heard the idea that a tool, used long enough and cared for well enough, developed a soul. He’d never been a religious man, but even without going to the supernatural, he felt like there was some truth in that. The *Rocinante* and Alex had spent a lot of years in each other’s company, and he understood the ship the way he would a friend. It was probably just normal primate subliminal pattern matching, but he experienced it as the

ship having moods and needs. He could tell when a thruster wanted to have its feed lines replaced by the way the ship turned, knew when they were low on reaction mass by the sound of the drive echoing in the halls. Getting ready for another burn out toward the gates was like pulling on his socks. He didn't even think about it anymore. The ship and her crew were intimate enough that it all just happened.

The *Falcon* was a newer ship with a younger crew, and breaking it down for a trip—especially after months on the float—took longer. Elvi's people had been running a lab without any particular need to worry about arcane ideas like up and down. Now, everything had to be unmade, stowed, and packed away. Alex had the sense that some of the crew over there hadn't expected to ever leave Adro.

The last decision was whether to leave the docking bridge in place and coordinate their drives. It wasn't that hard a maneuver. It just meant letting the *Falcon* and the *Rocinante* talk to each other as they burned so that their drives stayed in sync. The bridge from one ship to the other could remain in place, and they could go back and forth easily. Alex liked the idea. He didn't want the *Falcon*'s crew coming over, and he didn't have any particular interest in making the crossing himself, but there was an equality that driving in tandem like that carried. The *Rocinante* was an old gunship from before the gates had opened. The *Falcon* was Laconia's state-of-the-art science vessel with even more advanced technology than the *Gathering Storm* had boasted. Putting the two of them into a single unit made Alex feel like the *Roci* was getting the correct level of respect.

But even though Naomi had accepted the Laconian armistice, she wasn't keen on having the *Falcon*'s system too intimately connected to the *Roci*'s. When the time came, Naomi and Jim, Amos and Teresa and Muskrat all folded themselves back into their places. The *Roci* pulled its docking bridge back in, and the two ships turned their backs to the great green diamond and burned toward the gate, together but separate. It felt like an omen of something, but Alex was damned if he could tell what. He kept thinking about Amos and Cara in the airlock, of her anger and his calm. He wasn't sure whether he was glad the black-eyed girl wasn't able to cross over at will or worried that Amos would be stuck on the *Roci* if things went bad on the *Falcon*.

The burn was hard but not punishing. A little over a full gravity most of

the time, backing down to half that at meals. There were more newsfeeds and reports from other ships in the underground now that they weren't hiding from Laconian forces, and Alex followed some of them. Every time a new packet arrived, he hoped for a message from Kit. Naomi was deep in the coordination, listening to messages, answering them, passing them across to the *Falcon* for Elvi to see and comment on.

Amos had died and been hauled back from the abyss without it changing much about his demeanor, but Jim and Teresa were both wearing the stress of the moment heavily. Jim kept his usual facade of good humor, but now and then, the deep fatigue showed. Teresa, on the other end of the spectrum, had tapped into a nervous energy that couldn't find an outlet. From the moment she woke, she ran diagnostics that weren't due for weeks or cleaned filters that had only recently been cleaned or went to the ship gym and pushed herself through the resistance gel. Alex would have put it down to the bottomless reserves of youth if it hadn't felt so much like fear.

A day before they reached the halfway point and were slated to start their braking burn, he found Teresa in the galley eating a protein bar and watching video of the ring gate they were hurtling toward. Swirls of highly charged particles and light poured off of it like mist.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Alex said.

"We always knew the gates were energy sources," Teresa said with a shrug.

Alex changed his meal plan. He'd been going to head up to the flight deck and watch his feeds. Instead he had the galley serve him a plate of rice and black sauce, then sat across from Teresa with a fork. She glanced at him, and then away.

"Seems like something's bugging you," Alex said. "Or am I making that up?"

She shrugged a sharp, percussive shrug. He wondered if she'd been having dreams about the bright gates too, or if that was just him.

"I keep thinking about the fight," she said.

"Yeah," Alex said, thinking she meant the battle against the things that had killed San Esteban.

"He's different. I knew the repair drones changed him, but so much is the same that I just thought he was him still. But they killed him on New Egypt, and he didn't die. The girl who was yelling at him? Cara? If she'd

hit you or me, she'd have broken our bones. He just took it. Like it was nothing."

"Amos was always tough as old leather," Alex said. "That's not new."

"He's just so different." She stuffed the last of the protein bar into her mouth, chewed for a minute, swallowed. "I think about my father."

"Because he changed too?"

Teresa leaned forward, her elbows on the table. Her jaw was tight and the brightness in her eyes looked a little feverish. "I thought he was gone. I thought the whole experiment went bad and he was just... People lose their parents all the time. I thought I was one of those."

"Orphaned."

"But if he's only changed, I don't know what I am. Orphan. Not orphan. Something else."

"And now we're going to see him. It worries you."

"How much can you change and still be you?" she asked, and it took Alex a few seconds to realize it wasn't a rhetorical. He took another forkful of rice to give himself time to think.

"Well," he said, "people change all the time. Not changing would be weirder. I mean, look at you. You're not the same person you were before you came here. Shit, you're different from when you first came on the ship. Older, more sure of yourself, better mechanic. I'm not the same guy I used to be. Amos... Yeah, it's more extreme. It's weirder. Same with your dad. But I think Amos is still Amos, even if it's a different version of him. I think when we find your dad, he'll at least be like what he used to be. You know? I mean, I expect he's still going to care about you."

"I don't know that," she said, and the bleakness in her voice told him he'd cut close to the bone.

"I have a kid," he said. "I'm a dad, just like your father. And I promise you, the connection between a parent and a child? That's basic. It's deep. You look at Amos and see all the ways he's different. I can see all the ways he's still the same. Your dad's going to be different. But if anything about him is what it used to be? That part'll be how he feels about you."

"That's sweet," Teresa said. "And complete bullshit."

"You don't know. Until you have a kid, you won't. I will plant my flag on that one. The love of a parent for their kid is the last thing to go."

"Even correcting for socioeconomic status, the rate of parental

maltreatment of children is robustly at eight per thousand. Most of those victims are between newborn and three years old. Someplace with a million children—Warsaw, Benin City, Auberon—would expect eight *thousand* abused, neglected, or maltreated children. That's a good-sized lower university just of kids whose parents were mistreating them. Sure, humans love their children. They kill them too. Regular as clockwork."

Alex nodded. They were quiet for a few moments. "I sometimes forget the kind of education you had."

"When they groom you to rule all humanity, they don't leave a lot of sentimentality in the curriculum," Teresa said.

"That's too bad."

"I'm scared to see him again," she said. "I'm just scared."

With every passing hour, the gate grew closer and brighter, and Alex grew more aware of the uncertainty they were flying into. The reports from the underground and Laconia were coming almost constantly now, and the conversations between the *Falcon* and the *Roci* were a permanent background hum—Amos talking with Cara and Xan, Jim and Fayez, Naomi with Elvi and Harshaan Lee. The sense of coming closer to a critical point, of being nearly out of time, permeated everything. His mind kept turning back to Teresa and her father, Amos and the children that weren't his though they shared his eyes, Giselle and Kit and Rohi and the grandson that he had never seen. He thought about sending out a message, but he didn't know what he'd say. That was always the problem. Too many feelings and not the right words to wrap around them.

When the time came for the final approach to the gate and Naomi came up to the ops deck, he didn't think it was anything significant. He kept his attention on their drive and the *Falcon's* while Naomi, below him, took the comms. They were close enough to the ring now that a strong broadcast would have gotten through the ring gate interference, even as loud as it had become.

When Naomi announced the tonnage and drive types of the *Roci* and the *Falcon*, their expected times of transit and vectors into the ring space, Alex noticed that it was an extra step they didn't usually take. He just assumed it was something Naomi had worked out with the others. It wasn't until the reply came back that he understood what he was looking at.

The data that came back was badged from the *Spider Webb*, a survey

ship out of the New Wales system. Alex didn't know if it had been Laconian or underground before this, but the reply they sent was regimented and clear. It listed the ships in the ring space, their tonnages and drives, their vectors and flight plans. It showed the anticipated incoming and outgoing traffic in a simple, standard format, and indicated that the *Roci* and the *Falcon* could transit safely. It was the first and only time they'd used Naomi's protocol in practice, and it had functioned just the way she'd designed it to.

Alex unstrapped and let himself down onto the ops deck. Naomi was in her crash couch. The light of the screen shone in her eyes and her pale hair. She looked over at Alex, her expression someplace between sour and amused.

"Yeah," Alex said.

"It would have worked," she said. "If we'd cooperated, it would have worked."

"It would have been better."

"I think about all the things we could have done, all the miracles we could have achieved, if we were all just a little bit better than it turns out we are."

Chapter Thirty-Six: Jim

The ring space was full. Fifty-six ships floated in the eerie brightness of the gates, and instead of burning from one place to the other, they were still. Jim watched them all on a volumetric display. There were more science ships than anything else, but freighters and colony ships were among them. Their drives were pointed in every direction, depending on where they'd come in from and how they'd burned off their velocity. It took him a while to figure out what was unnerving about them.

For decades, the ring space—the slow zone—had been the hub between systems. Especially since the death of Medina Station and the *Typhoon*, ships came in and out as quickly as they could, minimizing the time spent in the starless non-sky. Now they'd come here. It was only the closest ships, the ones most easily deployed, but for the first time in his living memory, they had arrived. A few maneuvering thrusters fired now and then to correct some tiny drift, but their Epsteins were dark. The fleet had come to Naomi's call. To Trejo's. To Elvi's. They weren't locked in battle. They weren't traveling to some more human, more comprehensible space. They were a few slivers of ceramic and silicon lace in a bubble the size of a million Earths.

They looked drowned.

"Okay, we have the ship on visual," Elvi said from the *Falcon*. Even as close as they were, the tightbeam had the flatness and distortion of signal loss. Not enough to make the connection unclear, but enough to make it feel claustrophobic.

"The alleged ship," Jim said, reaching for a joke.

"The egg-shaped thing. We have the egg-shaped thing on scopes. So the good news is that it's still there."

"Have there been any signs of movement or activity?" Naomi asked from the *Roci's* ops.

“No,” Elvi said. “Not on the station anyway.”

“Other places?” Naomi asked.

“Everything’s more active than it was before. The amount of radiant heat in this place is orders of magnitude greater than it was before. More light, more radiation. Some of the ships that got here first, we may need to get them out into normal space soon to give them a chance to lose some of the excess. The heat exchangers are collecting more energy than they’re shedding. I’ve got every spare sensor taking in data and looking for useful patterns.”

“First order of business,” Jim said.

“Direct inspection of the station?” Elvi replied.

“I was going to say make sure that all the people who spent the last few years trying to kill each other are okay putting that aside,” Jim said. “We’ve got a couple dozen ships from each side, and you have to figure all of them have crews with some hard feelings about the whole war thing.”

“Already on that,” Naomi said. “I’ve been trading messages since we passed the gate.”

“How bad is it?” Jim asked.

“Grumbling, but nothing to raise an alarm. Not yet.”

Jim looked at the little drowned flecks again. They weren’t trying to kill each other. That was worth celebrating. “All right. We should go see if anyone’s at home on the egg-shaped thing.”

Elvi’s voice managed to be tired and resolute at the same time. “The *Falcon*’s set course, but I don’t want to use the Epstein for braking anywhere near the surface. It’s going to take a while.”

“You know that thing sucked down a gamma ray burst and still exists, right?” Jim said.

“I’m not worried about the station,” Elvi said. “I’m worried about not breaking things before I understand what they are. If Duarte’s still in that egg and I burn him to a crisp before we can talk, I’ll feel silly.”

“Fair point,” Jim said. “We’ll set to rendezvous.”

He dropped the connection. Moments later, the *Roci* shifted under him as Alex changed their course. Jim closed the display and sat in his crash couch, feeling the walls around him, the vibration of the ship, the sense that occasionally struck him of being a tiny organism in a vast universe. His jaws ached, but they did that a lot these days, and if he paid attention, there

was a tightness at the base of his skull that never went away, even when he was sleeping. He was used to it. It was how he lived.

Once, there had been a focus to the tension, even if the focus changed sometimes. Fear of the Laconian Empire rolling through and crushing anyone that didn't agree with it under its heel. Or fear of the apocalypse he'd seen in the ring station, back before the gates had even opened. Or the constant, nagging threat of Duarte withdrawing his protection and having Jim thrown in the Pen. The near certainty that by trying to find out whether the things on the other side of the ring gates were conscious and capable of change, Duarte would start a war he couldn't win. And now, that his individual life—the self that was James Holden—would be lost in a sea of consciousness, a vast single mind built from human beings but not human. He could take his pick, and his body was just as ready to ache for the cause.

Or maybe it was just a habit now. Maybe the weight of history had ground him down because he didn't know how to shrug it off. Didn't know that he would choose to, even if he had been able. Two ways of saying the same thing.

"Is this going to be a one-shot," Alex asked from the flight deck, "or are we expecting we'll want to chew the fat some once you're done?"

"I don't understand the question," Jim said.

"If we're just popping you out to work with Elvi's crew, I'll park us close. If you think we're going to want to be in the same room, you can pop out the cargo lock, and I'll put the bridge back up."

Before he could answer, Naomi did. "Put the bridge up. It will be good for the other ships to see it, even if we don't use it."

"Copy that," Alex said. "I'm taking us in."

Jim unstrapped and headed for the cargo airlock.

Teresa was already there. She was wearing a vac suit, testing the seals at the boot and glove and the charge on the mag boots. Jim paused and steadied himself as the ship drifted under him. Her hair was back and tucked into a tight cap that emphasized the shape of her eyes and the roughness of her skin. She lifted her chin in a gesture that might have been a greeting or defiance or both.

"Going somewhere?"

"If my father's there, you'll want me there."

Jim shook his head. "If we find something, I will let you know. And if

we need you, I'll get you. I promise.”

The girl shook her head, left then right, no more than a few millimeters. Her expression was hard. “It’s my dad,” she said.

Jim felt a wave of emotions that rose and fell in him in seconds. Frustration, sorrow, guilt, fear. And, almost randomly, a deep nostalgia. He remembered being in school and coming home to find Father Anton in the back of the house building a firepit. It had been a moment of no significance. He hadn’t thought about it in years, and then there it was, as present and powerful and filled with love as if it had happened a moment before. *It’s my dad.*

“You understand the risks?” Jim asked.

“No, I don’t,” Teresa said. “Do you?”

Jim shrugged. “Make sure you check your helmet seals.”

When they were ready to go, he cycled the cargo airlock. The air pumped out, and as it grew thinner, the sound in his suit changed, growing softer the way it always did. Leaving him feeling more isolated, or more aware of his isolation. His breath, the gentle whirl of the fans, the creaking of the suit, it all came to fill more of his senses. It felt almost like falling asleep. Then the vibrations came through the deck as the outer doors unlatched, and the cargo bay opened. Light spilled through the cracks like it never had before, and it took him a few seconds to understand why it was strange. Normally, the light that a ship like theirs opened to was worklights or a star—strong, harsh, and directional. The milk-light that diffused into the hold now came from every direction. It was soft and shadowless as a hazy afternoon on Earth. Like a child’s simplistic imagination of heaven.

The station rolled under them, a metallic sphere five clicks in diameter. Too big for a ship, too small for a planet, too smooth and regular for an asteroid. And on its glowing blue surface, a dot like a grain of rice with Elvi’s team barely more than dust motes beside it.

Jim and Teresa guided the suit thrusters in toward the group, and the scale of the ship became clearer by having human figures beside it. It was tiny. The whole thing would almost have fit in the cargo hold they’d just left. Smooth as skin and seamlessly curved, it seemed more organic than constructed. One side was open, the flesh of the egg-shape peeled back layer after layer until the hole was big enough for someone to step through.

One of the forms moving around it broke off and came toward him and Teresa. Elvi's face swam up from the other side of the visor like he was looking at her under the surface of a still lake. Her voice over the radio was staticky and distant, given how close she was physically.

"It's a match to the artifacts on Laconia," she said. "It must use the same inertialess movement that Eros did back in the day, because nothing on it looks like a thruster. We can't tell how long it's been here from the temperature because—" She gestured at the thousand bright gates around them.

"Are you sure it was him?" Teresa asked.

"Provable? No. Silly to assume anything different? Yes. At this point I'd need evidence that it wasn't Duarte before I'd entertain it seriously. I hear hoofbeats, I'm still thinking horses at this point."

Half a dozen other figures in Laconian vac suits moved around the egg, swirling out in what Jim realized slowly was a search pattern. "Any sign of him?"

"You're thinking of something convenient like an airlock or a door?" Elvi said. "No. Nothing. The artifact's here, but the surface of the station is totally unmarked."

"Have we tried knocking?" Jim said, more than half joking.

"If I can help," Teresa said. "I could broadcast that we're here. If he can hear my voice, he might come out. Or let us come in."

"Worth trying," Elvi said, motioning them on.

Beside the egg-shape, a collection of boxes were badged as equipment: sensor lines, power supplies, biological sampling kits. The figure floating beside them like a mother hen over its brood turned out to be Harshaan Lee. Jim watched the man's mouth move as he spoke on some other channel that Jim wasn't listening to. Then a click of static and he was on with them. "Give me a moment, and I will connect the young lady's suit output to our system. We can broadcast on a wideband directly on the station with contact vibration as well."

"Humanity's largest subwoofer," Jim said. Elvi chuckled, but no one else seemed to think it was funny.

"How did you get in before?" Elvi asked.

Jim shook his head. He wasn't sure she saw it, so he shook his fist like a Belter. "I just came down toward it, and it opened up. I didn't do anything."

Nothing except follow a ghost who could open all the doors inside the haunted house, he thought. Memories of the horrors and wonders he'd witnessed inside threatened to overwhelm him, and he needed to pay attention, so he forced them away.

"The protomolecule was directing it," Elvi said. "It was trying to figure out what had happened to the systems it was supposed to report in to. You were a way to do that."

"Because I had a body," Jim said. *The only things inside are ghosts now. Having a body in there means something.* "It told me that. Being able to access matter wasn't standard, I guess."

"I've heard your debriefings," Elvi said. "The terms you used? Or it used, I guess. *Pleroma, fallen world, substrate.* They're human terms."

"Everything I was doing got strained through human minds," Jim said. Lee connected a bright red retractable wire from a dark, circular shape that was resting against the surface of the station and connected it to a slot in Teresa's suit arm. "I wasn't really driving, you know. I just got carried along by what it was doing."

"Well," Elvi said. "I think someone's driving now."

Lee gave a thumbs-up. Teresa looked from Jim to Elvi to Lee and back, suddenly anxious. "What should I say?"

"Just let him know we're here," Elvi said.

Teresa nodded, gathered herself. "It's me, Dad. It's Teresa. I'm here on the outside of the station. We want to come in and talk." She paused for a moment, and when she spoke again, there was a note of longing in her voice that broke Jim's heart a little. "I want to see you. I want to come in."

They waited. Jim turned in a slow circle, watching for anything on the surface of the station—a ripple, a hole, a sign of something emerging. Nothing came.

"Try again," he said.

"Father? If you're in there, this is Teresa. I'm on the outside of the station. I want to come in."

The seconds stretched as the hope in the girl's expression slowly died. Lee gestured to her, pulled her close, and unhooked the line. "We have other avenues to explore," he said. "We have several kilometers of contact sensors. We were using them on the Adro diamond, but they could be quite informative here as well."

“We’ll help you string them,” Jim said.

“If you see anything different from the last time...” Elvi said.

Other than me? he thought, but didn’t say.

For the next four hours, the science team laid the sensor filament out along the station until Jim had the vivid memory of rolling endless skeins of yarn into balls during Father Dimitri’s knitting phase. Elvi stopped an hour into the process, heading back to the *Falcon*. Lee said it was so that she could oversee the data collection end of the process, but Jim was pretty sure she just needed to rest.

At first, the work was wearying, but as the time passed, Jim found himself falling into the rhythm of it. Running a line, then holding it in place while the others checked the connection between the sensors and the surface of the station. Teresa helped too, her many months of apprenticeship on the *Roci* showing in the way she asked for clarifications and announced her actions to the team before she took them. By the time their bottles were edging toward empty and Jim turned them back toward the ship, Teresa seemed to have shrugged off the first bitterness of her disappointment.

Once the airlock had cycled back closed behind them and Jim had gotten the vac suit off and serviced and stowed, he went back to his cabin. He stank of sweat and neoprene, and his muscles ached and twitched. There had been a time a few decades before when the labor wouldn’t have taken as much out of him, but even with the discomfort and the sense that he couldn’t have gone on as long as he had as a younger man, there was still a pleasure in the work. By the time he’d washed up and changed into a clean flight suit, he was pleased with himself in a way that he hadn’t felt in a long time.

When he got to the ops deck, Amos was alone on it, strapped into a crash couch despite there being no thrust gravity or any real prospect for it. Jim pulled himself to a halt on one of the handholds and looked up toward the flight deck.

“Where is everyone?” he asked.

“Alex is sleeping, Tiny’s taking care of the dog and getting some grub. Naomi went over to the *Falcon* to talk about the sensor data.”

“There’s sensor data already? I mean, I figured there’d be a few hours at least before they gathered enough to have a meeting about.”

“When people don’t know anything,” Amos said, “they love having

meetings to talk about it.”

“I suppose.”

Amos stretched and scratched idly at his chest where his gunshot wound was still a ragged dull-black circle set in pale flesh. “Apparently, there’s a lot of activity going on in the station. Stuff happening, even if they don’t know what it is. It’s hotter too, and the temperature’s going up.”

“Weird seeing the gears moving. Especially since I didn’t know there were gears before.”

“Did you find him?”

“We didn’t.”

“Is he there?”

Jim stretched. His spine cracked. “Yeah. He’s there. But I don’t think he’s looking to talk.”

Whatever Amos was going to say in reply was lost when the comms spat out an alert. Jim pulled himself to a couch and called it up. IFF had pinged a ship on the *Roci*’s alert list. The *Derecho*—the ship that had killed the *Gathering Storm* and chased them out of Freehold—had just made transit through Bara Gaon gate. Jim turned off the security alert, and a few seconds later, a message came into the queue from Colonel Aliana Tanaka.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven: Tanaka

If they'd met on Laconia, it would have been in the State Building. They would have sat around a carefully made, tasteful table in a room designed to radiate power, comfort, and seriousness. Instead, they were in the galley of a half-rebuilt science ship that stank of overstressed air recyclers and industrial solvent. It made a kind of sense. Portraits of great war leaders or critical battles that looked flattering, well composed, and balanced always felt like propaganda. Tanaka had spent a lot of time in the halls of power. She'd seen many paintings of great men in uniform staring eagle-eyed into the distance where their future glory lay. She'd seen very few paintings of soldiers with only a ragged tent and a dying fire to hold back the cold nights before some stranger tried to bayonet them in the morning.

She'd left Botton on the *Derecho*, coming to the *Falcon* alone. She wore her dress uniform and a sidearm. The drugs left her slightly nauseated, and she'd had a headache since before they'd transited out of Bara Gaon that might have been something nasty building up in her bloodstream or just the constant, unrelenting feeling of other minds bumping against her own. In addition to everything else, she had the persistent hallucination that her left eye was weeping, cool tears running down her cheek even in the absence of gravity to pull them.

"You're certain that this... effect is spreading?" Dr. Okoye asked. She'd gained frown lines at the center of her forehead and at the corners of her mouth since the last time Tanaka had seen her. She was also skinny and soft from too much time spent on the float. Between atrophy, stress, and malnutrition, she looked like a stick halfway through burning.

"I am," Tanaka said. "The people who were present for the event got the worst of it. But it's happening to other people too. I don't know how many. And if you don't want it happening to you, start taking these now."

Along with the treasonous head of the Science Directorate, the others in

the room were her equally treasonous husband, the head of the underground, and the man who had shot Tanaka's teeth out. While they thought, the weird little not-gnats shimmied around their heads. The ones around Holden were odd, but she couldn't put her finger on why. Tanaka fantasized about what order she'd shoot them in. She'd pretty much settled on starting with Holden. As compromised as she felt, she wasn't certain she'd be able to get all of them, and she'd be disappointed to die in a universe that still had James Holden in it.

So petty, a voice muttered in her mind. An older man. His judgment stung, even though she didn't know him. She stopped imagining Holden dead just to avoid any more unsolicited commentary.

Elvi Okoye paged through the list of medications Tanaka had given her, and her husband watched over her shoulder. The thin woman's frown deepened, but Holden was the one who spoke.

"How bad is it?"

"It's unpleasant," Tanaka said, going for understatement. "The medication helps, but it doesn't stop it."

"We have to find a way into the ring station," Nagata said.

"There isn't one," Faye Sarkis said. "The sensor data shows a lot of activity. Constant restructuring. Vast magnetic and electrical charges building up and fading away. All kinds of things. But no doors."

"I doubt we can force it open," Holden said. "But—"

"It shrugged off the primary weapon of a *Magnetar*-class battleship, and then took a full broadside from a collapsing neutron star without getting a dent," Tanaka said. "But sure, let's get out the chisels and hacksaws and give it a try."

"But," Nagata said, talking over her, "it can open. It has opened. There's a way."

Of all of them, Nagata was the most surprising. She was nearly the same age as Tanaka, and while the Belter's long, lanky frame was the result of too much time on the float when she was a child, they still looked like they might have been related. Distant cousins, maybe. There was a weariness about her too that spoke to Tanaka, and a sense that she kept herself to herself.

"We all agree that nothing will force it open," Elvi said.

"Which is why we don't force it," Nagata said. "Last time it opened,

there was a protomolecule sample hidden on the *Rocinante*. The *Falcon* has a sample now. Let's use it."

"Another dive," Faye said. "Only into the station this time instead of the library."

Tanaka saw Elvi's hesitation in the gnats before she spoke. "That might not be... easy. The Adro diamond was built to dispense information. We turned it on, and it did what it was created to do. When the station opened for Holden, the protomolecule sample was driving. It was using him to get inside, improvising in the way it was built to improvise. We don't understand what the station was meant to do."

"Power the gates and sterilize entire solar systems when needed, if memory serves," Holden said. The gnats around his head swirled and darted for a moment.

"Either Duarte parked his ship here and took a stroll through space, or he got in," Faye said.

"Do we have anything more promising to try?" Tanaka asked.

Elvi's silence was answer enough.

Tanaka didn't roll her eyes. "We have a plausible approach to opening the station. So let's try it. We have the high consul's daughter, who is the only person with a strong enough emotional connection to bring him out of whatever fugue state he's in. You open the way, I will escort her in."

"That's not going to happen," Nagata said.

"Not going to happen?"

Holden answered. "We weren't going to hand her over to you in New Egypt or Freehold. We aren't going to do it now."

Tanaka opened her hands, palms up. Floating as she was with legs crossed at the ankle, she felt like a painting of a saint being assumed into heaven. The patron saint of putting up with idiots, whoever that was.

"Admiral Trejo made it clear that we're on the same side now," Tanaka said. "He gave me the highest clearance in the empire to fulfill one mission. Finding the high consul is that mission, and has been since before New Egypt. And all of you are rebels who were still fighting a war with him when he disappeared. I'm open to counterarguments, but if the plan is to engage him in conversation, I'm not sure how you're better ambassadors than I am."

"There are hundreds of ships en route to us right now," Elvi said. "The

Science Directorate is sending everything we can spare. The underground is also..." She looked at Nagata, who nodded.

"We don't need more ships," Tanaka said. "At least let's take it to the girl. If she won't go with me, we can find someone else. But there isn't anyone better."

"She's right," Holden said bitterly. "Teresa needs to be okay with it, but any of us would be a distraction. Maybe a threat. The next best fit would be Elvi, and she's—"

"Double agent," Faye said. "Traitor to the empire."

"Busy overseeing the dive," Holden said. He turned his attention to Tanaka. "What happens when you get to him?"

"I bring him out," Tanaka said. "If I can't bring him out, I establish a more reliable means of communication with him. We learn what he knows, and we find the way to protect the empire. Circumstances may have changed. My job hasn't."

And if you'd gotten out of my way and let me do it, a lot of people would still be alive. She didn't say it, and Holden wasn't in her mind the way the others were, but she was fairly sure he'd understood the point anyway.

"Not to protect the empire," Nagata said. "To protect the human race."

Tanaka shrugged. "From my perspective, that's a distinction without a difference."

"You're right," Holden said. "Let's solve the extinction-level threat first. Then we can all go back to killing each other at a more civilized pace."

He was staring at her, the bugs around his head motionless, as if each of them was staring too. He's thinking about how he's going to have to kill me again when this is all over with, Tanaka realized.

"Of course," she replied with a smile. "First things first."

"I'll talk to Teresa," Nagata said.

"Excellent," Tanaka replied. "How long is this going to take?"



Thirty-six hours later, Tanaka got the confirmation that the experiment was

ready. By then, seven more ships had come to the ring space. Thirty more would be there in the next day. Before long, they'd have a whole fleet of people to float around with their thumbs up their asses, unsure what to do. None of them mattered. Not if she could get her job done. Finish the mission, whatever the mission had become.

Tanaka's head felt like a cocktail party full of people she didn't know, but she hadn't lost herself again. The voices were quiet, muffled, possible to ignore. So she ignored them. She spent her time in the gym, pushing herself until the ache of her muscles was an environment in and of itself. She took high-velocity steam showers, standing in the flow between jet and vacuum drain with the water almost hot enough to scald. Like the workouts, the pain centered her inside her physical self. It brought clarity.

There was a part of her that wanted to take a lover—find someone on the crew that she could grind against for a few hours. Just another way to bring her attention entirely to her own body and its sensations. It wasn't fear of getting caught that stopped her. It was the unsettling certainty that anything she did would be known, shared, *experienced*, by other people. That it was no longer possible to have secrets of her own. The constant presence of other minds touching hers, trying to pull her into their memories and emotions, was like being eaten.

She kept checking for a message from Trejo, but nothing came. Instead, there was the slow but growing trickle of follow-up reports from the debriefings and interviews she'd taken before her transit into Bara Gaon. The captain of the *Preiss* had gone catatonic. The old medical technician from *Konjin* had started a regimen of psychoactives to keep his mind his own, but the others on the ship had started fading. He posted images to the feed of the ship's crew going weirdly silent, working together with perfect synchrony like a dozen tentacles of the same beast. After leaving the ring space for Parker system, the *Ilrys Eves* had stopped answering its comms and diverted away from its flight plan for the major city on the second planet, and was now on course to a distant exoplanet in a non-elliptical orbit that had been flagged for exploration as a possible artifact.

Everywhere she looked, there were signs and reports of consciousness bleeding from one mind into others. Every minute she had to live with it hurt in a way she couldn't articulate. She didn't have to. The crew of the *Derecho* knew. They were all trapped in the same place she was.

Botton stood in his office, fastened to the deck by his mag boots with a bulb in his hand and a distant expression in his eyes. Slowly, he found her and saluted. His face had become even more gaunt since they'd left Gewitter and Bara Gaon, and stubble ghosted his chin and neck.

"Captain," she said.

"How can I help?" His voice was soft at the edges.

"What are you drinking?"

He took a moment, then looked at the bulb in his hand as if he'd forgotten it was there. "Water. It's water."

"The medication?"

He nodded and walked to his desk, the mag boots clicking with each step. The peach-colored pills he took from the safety drawer were familiar as air to her now. He put them in his mouth and drank them down. "I'll set an automatic reminder."

"The *Falcon* is ready."

Botton sobered. "Good hunting."

"It's not why I came here."

His look of surprise was deeply comforting. Every bit of evidence that her mind wasn't open to everyone was a reassurance. Or, no, that wasn't right. It was a chance to pretend she could set limits, that she had control she knew she didn't really have. A chance to grab the comforting lie.

"When I find the high consul," she said, "we don't know what the result will be. This armistice with the underground? It's Trejo's agreement. Once we have the high consul, it may or may not be ours."

Botton blinked. "I... think I understand."

"I won't be on the ship. If I give the order?"

"I am an officer of the Laconian Empire."

Tanaka smiled. Her cheek barely ached at all when she did it. How odd to just finish healing now. "Tell no one until the time comes. Our minds can't be trusted. And keep on the medication schedule."

"I understand."

"And Botton? If... if this doesn't work? If we can't stop what's happening with—" She motioned toward her head. "I'd like to ask you a favor."

His smile was gentle. "I'll keep two bullets back, Colonel. One for each of us." In that moment, she almost liked him.

Her suit was in the armory, polished, loaded, and ready. The same suit she'd used to kill Draper Station. She tried to think of it as a good luck charm. *I had a copper penny with a string through it. I got it the night Emily Nam kissed me. I wore it every day for fourteen years.* Tanaka pictured the little coin with its verdigris and the woven plastic string. She remembered Emily, and the softness of her lips, her fingertips stroking gently through his beard. His name was Alan and he grew up on Titan. She let him drift away, trying not to remember anything of her own life where it could find its way into him.

Incendiary rounds. Grenades. The last time someone had fired a grenade in the alien station, thousands of people had died. Well, fuck them. They knew the job was dangerous when they took it. She fastened the helmet in place, checked her bottles, checked her seals. Made sure that the medical system had enough drugs to keep her herself for a few more hours at least. This was her last chance.

She went out the airlock alone, launching down toward the blue, metallic sphere. All around her, the gates glowed, tracking her like thirteen hundred eyes. The girl was too small to see, but Tanaka's suit picked her up—a tiny black dot against the glow. Another figure was beside her—Nagata. Tanaka did a single long acceleration burn and then several short, harder braking burns, falling toward the heir to the empire and her rebel protector. Nagata's suit was an old Martian design, like something out of a museum.

Tanaka's hand gestures indicated the channel, and Nagata switched to it with a click.

"I thought we had an understanding," Tanaka said.

"I'm not going in," Nagata replied. "I didn't want Teresa to come alone. I'll wait out here."

The girl was in a suit like Nagata's, but where Nagata came across like the citizen of another time, Teresa Duarte looked like a kid in a costume. The eyes behind the visor were defiant, the chin a little raised, the jaw a little lifted. Tanaka didn't need to have her consciousness bleeding out around her to see the girl for what she was. Scared. Out of her depth. It would have been pathetic if Tanaka didn't feel the same way, but since she did, it was disgusting.

"I don't know that bringing the high consul out to see his enemies is

going to be better than bringing you in,” she said.

Nagata made an old Belter gesture that agreed. “If Teresa doesn’t need me, I won’t be here.”

“I told her this was all right,” Teresa said. She sounded like her father. Tanaka didn’t quite understand what she was looking at. The older woman’s quiet fierceness and the girl’s imperious entitlement believing they protected each other like the warriors of ancient Greece locking shields. Idiotic hubris or well-earned confidence, it could be hard to tell the difference until it was too late.

“Your choice,” Tanaka said. “Come with me now.”

Nagata took the girl’s helmet, pressed it against her own. It was rude, having a private conversation right in front of her, but Tanaka let it go. She’d killed a bunch of Nagata’s friends and followers. Nagata’s lover had shot her in the face. A little discourtesy seemed like a small thing to worry about now, and Tanaka suspected all the debts were about to be settled, one way or another.

A short burst from her suit thrusters, and she was falling toward the unblemished surface of the station and the little egg-ship. It was strange seeing it. She could still picture its compatriots in the grotto on Laconia. It was like being on a weeks-long hunt and finally coming across a confirming footprint. The joy that burst up in her was unexpected and it was also unmistakably her own. Trejo had called her in as a hunter. He’d been right.

Tanaka switched to the *Falcon*’s channel. “This is Colonel Tanaka. The girl and I are in place.”

Okoye’s voice was complicated by the static. The ring space had become a noisy place, what with the gods of chaos banging on the walls. “Understood. We are starting the dive now. Stand by.”

The connection went quiet. Tanaka checked her ammunition, her air supply, her medical status. Beside her, the girl drifted slowly to the right, her velocity just slightly off from Tanaka’s own.

“How well do you know him?” the girl asked.

“The high consul?” Tanaka asked. “We’ve met a few times. I was in the first wave. When we went to Laconia from Mars.”

“You’re a founder.”

“I am,” Tanaka said. “All this? I helped make this. He directed us, and

we did the work. Humanity's only galactic empire."

"Do you think..." the girl began, but she let the question die unfinished. *Do you think he's all right? Do you think this is going to work? Do you think it was worth it?* The girl could have been asking anything.

Beneath them, the station glowed. Tanaka knew better, but she had the sense that it was humming, sound somehow projecting itself across the vacuum. There might have been some kind of magnetic resonance making her suit ring along with it. It might only have been an illusion.

She checked her suit's readout. The *Falcon* was monitoring the activity of the station—energy, magnetic fields, seismic activity. The data stream was a fire hose. She didn't know enough to interpret it. She scanned the blue, featureless surface, looking for something. Anything. She remembered a painting inspired by Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The part where the sailing ship was trapped in a windless still near Earth's equator. In the painting, the ship had been small, the sea vast and empty. Had it been Turner? Drew? Drummond? She couldn't remember. She hadn't thought much of it when she'd seen it. She understood it better now.

The girl corrected her course and started drifting back toward her. The approach irritated Tanaka. A better soldier would have matched the first time.

"Do we know how long this is supposed to take?" the girl asked.

"As long as it does."

They were quiet. Tanaka counted breaths that piled up into minutes. The vast blue exhausted her eyes until the color seemed to vibrate and dance. The girl clicked onto the channel, then off, then on again. When she finally mustered up the courage to speak, she gave voice to Tanaka's own thoughts.

"Something's wrong."

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Elvi

The laboratory was still in an organized kind of chaos. The old setup had been taken down before they left Adro with no reason to think it would be reconstructed anytime soon. Now all the pieces were coming back out, laid down in familiar lines for an unfamiliar purpose. It reminded her of an autopsy. Everything in place, but not functioning.

Or at least not functioning yet.

Rebuilding it was easier and faster than creating it the first time had been. The medical couch already knew the baseline for Cara and Amos. The long months they had spent calibrating the system made recalibrating it simpler. The sensors were already in place, and the territory they were sampling—the station—many orders of magnitude smaller than the Adro diamond.

It should have felt better, but with every cable that came out from storage, every monitor that was paired with some part of the sensors or the medical couch, Elvi felt a little more anxious, the knot in her stomach a little tighter. She couldn't say exactly what she was frightened of, only that she was frightened.

The crew worked with the efficiency of a well-drilled military. Someone who didn't know what they were looking at would have heard a cacophony of voices, everyone talking over everyone else. She could see the structure in it. She knew that Oran Alberts and Susan Yi were ringing the power lines to make sure there was a minimum of noise in the system. Weyrick and Cole were preparing the sync between the medical couch's NIR scanners and the signal processing deck. Jenna and Harshaan were feeding the system backups into the secondary array. They were three distinct conversations like three melodies played simultaneously that sounded discordant until you understood how they all fit together.

With twelve hours still to go before the dive began, Fayez came to the

lab. There was a tightness he got around the corners of his eyes sometimes when he was tense. She put the potentiometer back in its case to calibrate later and launched herself over to him, lifting an eyebrow when he met her gaze.

“New briefing came in from Ochida,” he said.

“Want to go see if he’s figured it all out for us?”

“Hope springs eternal.” Fayez turned and led the way back to her office.

Since Naomi had accepted Trejo’s offer of cooperation, Elvi hadn’t heard from the admiral. She wasn’t sure what her status was with him or with Laconia, but she was very aware of having humiliated the de facto military dictator of the empire. It wasn’t the sort of thing that ended well for people, historically speaking. It still wasn’t in her top five biggest worries.

Ochida, on the other hand, seemed to have embraced a strategy of almost transcendental denial. His reports and the information flowing through him from the rest of the Science Directorate were absolutely unchanged. On the screen in her office, his smile was bright and genuine, and the data he shared with her showed every sign of being complete, accurate, and unabridged.

The survey team had found what they believed to be the bullet at San Esteban, which was interesting. The bullets—scars in the fabric of space-time according to the most popular theory—seemed to accompany each of the intrusions into reality by the dark gods inside the gates. They were relatively small, cosmologically speaking, though the implications of their existence were a fundamental alteration in humanity’s understanding of the cosmos. Back in what were quickly becoming the good old days, they’d been easier to locate because they appeared in proximity to whatever had triggered them. The hundreds or thousands or hundreds of thousands of experiments by the enemy since then should in theory have produced just as many small, persistent anomalies, but without being tied to a human object, action, or frame of reference, finding them made needles and haystacks look trivial.

On San Esteban, the break in reality was several meters wide, almost undetectable by instrumentation but very apparent to human conscious experience, and floating half a klick above the moon of one of the minor rocky inner planets. The team was turning all its attention to gathering data from it in hopes that variations between the bullets might yield something

critical about the mechanisms behind them.

“What?” Fayez asked.

Elvi looked at him, confused.

“You made a noise. You grunted.”

“Oh. I was just thinking. This would have been massive news. Maybe more important than what we were getting out of Adro. But now?”

“Nothing takes your mind off the guy pointing a gun at you like already being on fire,” Fayez said. “San Esteban was the biggest threat we could imagine, until Duarte showed back up.”

“Duarte’s not trying to kill us.”

“You sure it wouldn’t be better if he were?”

Elvi moved on. Ochida’s report on what he was calling “spontaneous alocal cognitive cross-connections” only left her stomach tighter, her jaw aching. The effect was being reported in all systems now. There was a distinctly larger response in places where the ships present during the initial event had gone afterward—Bara Gaon, Nieuwestad, Clarke, Sao Paulo—that suggested an infection-like contact transmission, but there were also suggestions of activity clusters between systems with low physical contact and high communicative load. The greatest predictor of suffering the hive mind effect was having someone who was already affected be aware of you. The epidemiologists were building a model of transmission-by-awareness, and hoped to have a fuller report soon. An intrusive image appeared in Elvi’s mind—a vast, bright, interconnected network like the cells in a brain or the relationships in a city, with one node turning deep bloodred, then the ones around it, and the ones connected to those, and on and on.

The longest chain of connection between any two human beings wasn’t more than seven or eight connections. Even as vast as humanity had become, as far as they’d flung themselves into the universe, they were still too damn close.

“That doesn’t look good for us,” Elvi said.

“We could make an argument that Colonel Tanaka and her whole crew need to be in sensory deprivation tanks as a sanitary precaution. That might be fun.”

Ochida was moving on to a follow-up report on the death reports from San Esteban when a soft knock interrupted them. When Elvi opened the door, Cara was there. Her face was tight and she held her hands in front of

her like she was singing in a choir. Elvi knew what had brought her there before the girl spoke.

“I heard,” Cara said. “There’s a dive?”

“We’re going to try using the catalyst to open a path into the ring station, yes,” Elvi said. “But it’s not like going into the diamond. Same equipment, different job.”

“I should go in. You should send me.”

“Amos Burton is going to—”

“I have more experience,” Cara said. “I understand how it works in there better than he does.”

Elvi raised her hands, seeing as she did it how condescending the gesture was. “It’s not like that. This is a different artifact. It’s unlikely to behave in the same way. There’s no reason to think your experience in Adro will translate to this. And the dependency issue—”

The rage in Cara’s expression was as sudden as flipping a page. When she spoke, her voice had a hornet’s-nest buzz. Fayez shifted closer to Elvi.

“Dependency is bullshit. It’s bullshit, and we both know it.”

“It’s real,” Elvi said. “I can show you the data. The serotonin and dopamine levels—”

Cara shook her head once, a movement of controlled violence. A voice in Elvi’s mind said *You did this. This is your fault*. It sounded like Burton, filled with a flat, matter-of-fact rage.

“I understand the risks,” Cara said. “I’ve always understood the risks. You’re going to save me from addiction by blowing our best chance to survive? Does that make any sense to you?”

Fayez shifted, trying to bring the girl’s wrath away from Elvi. “I don’t think that’s exactly—”

“Look in a fucking mirror, Doc,” Cara said. “You don’t get to tell me how important my health is while you’re spending your own like that. If you don’t matter, why are you pretending that I do? Is it because I look like a teenager? Keep your fucking maternal instinct to yourself.”

“There’s a difference,” Elvi said, “between missing a few exercise sessions and intentionally exposing a research subject to risk. What I do with my own body—”

“I get to pick what I do with my body too!” Cara’s voice was a roar now. The need and hunger in her eyes was feral. “You treat me like a child

because I look like a child, but I'm not."

She could have just as easily said *You treat me like a human because I look like a human*. It would have been as true. Elvi felt something deep in her chest settle. An ancient instinct, deep in her, told her that showing weakness now was a step toward death. She summoned the coldness of decades in academia.

"I don't think you're a child, but I am the lead researcher here, and in my judgment you aren't the right subject for this test. If you want to try assaulting me into changing my mind, this is your opportunity."

Cara went still for a moment, and then deflated. "You're just doing this because you're scared of him," she said, but there was no heat behind it. Cara turned and pulled herself away down the corridor. The guilt was a knot in Elvi's throat, but she didn't let herself soften. There would be time later to make amends.

She hoped there would.



"This is Tanaka. The girl and I are in position."

Elvi made one last look around the lab. Amos was in place, strapped into the medical couch. They'd taken his shirt off to place the sensors, and the black, chitinous mass of scar where he'd been shot on New Egypt shimmered in the light like oil on water. A white ceramic feed line had been inserted into a vein in his arm and taped down to hold it in place. His body's rapid healing kept trying to push the needle back out again.

He seemed at ease and mildly amused by it all.

The technicians and science team were at their stations. Where the readouts of the BFE had been, images of the ring station flickered and jumped. Elvi felt vaguely nauseated. She didn't remember the last time she'd eaten.

"Understood," she said. "We are starting the dive now. Stand by." She dropped the external connection. "Last chance to back out."

Amos smiled at her. It was the same expression he'd have used if she'd

told a joke or offered him a beer. The medical readouts showed his heartbeat low and steady, his cortisol levels low. Either his resurrection had been more transformative than Cara's or he was just really hard to scare. He gave her a thumbs-up and stretched. Jim, tucked in a corner, seemed like a ghost trying to keep out of the paths where someone might walk through him. She half regretted letting him come observe.

She shifted her connection to the catalyst's chamber.

"Are you good to go?"

"We are," Faye said. "The chamber is going to be a little tight for Cara and Xan both, but I think we'll be all right. As long as no one starts getting claustrophobic."

"All right then. Take out the catalyst."

She could have pulled up a video feed, watched Faye and his techs open the chamber, wheel out the catalyst, and usher the two not-quite-children into the place it had been. She kept her attention on Amos and the station instead. She heard when the chamber closed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Harshaan Lee said, "by the numbers and by the book." And then, more quietly, "If any book applies."

Gently, a technician fed the pale cocktail of sedatives into Amos' thick,ropy arm. The black eyes closed.

"Catalyst is out," Faye said, but she could already tell. The activity on the ring station shifted like an eye turning toward them. Magnetic fields reached out where none had been before, and the rhythm of seismic and energetic activity changed. The activity in Amos' brain shifted as well.

"Look for a matching pattern, please," Lee said. "If this is similar to our green friend in Adro, we should find an echo of the subject."

But the technicians weren't listening. Every head was bent to a screen, every hand on the controls. The *Falcon* seemed to hum with raw human attention. Elvi's heart tapped impatiently at her breastbone.

"I'm seeing..." one of the geology group said, then stopped.

Time became very slow. On the screens, pattern-matching systems fed the intimate signals of Amos Burton's brain and body into one input and the data from the ring station into another, fitting one to the other a million times a second and looking for a match. Cascades of green and yellow flickered as the man and the artifact fell in and out of synchrony. Amos sighed once, like a commentary on something just a little disappointing.

“I have something that resembles the handshake,” the woman at the informatics station said. Her tone was artificially flat, trying very hard to hide her excitement. “It began twenty seconds ago from... mark.”

“Confirmed. They’re talking.”

Elvi pulled herself to the medical couch. Amos’ face was empty as a mask, his muscles slack, his eyes closed, his lips the powder gray that his altered blood created. She wanted to touch him, to make sure he was still warm. That he was still alive. His eyes shifted under their lids, left and then right and then left again. He took another breath.

One of the medical technicians made a soft noise. “I’ve got some activity in the dorsal posterior insula that I can’t—”

Amos’ eyes shot open and he screamed. The rage and pain in the sound were a punch in Elvi’s face. She reared back, spinning as she missed her handhold. He took another breath and shrieked.

“We have a cardiac problem,” one of the medical technicians said, his voice high and tight. “I’ve got an arrhythmia here... I don’t know what I’m looking at.”

“Elvi?” Jim said.

“Not now,” she snapped back.

Amos raised his arms, the muscles standing out under his skin. His left bicep—as thick around as Elvi’s thigh—began crawling with spasm. He made a deep hiccupping sound, struggling to breathe.

“Pull him out,” Elvi said. “We’re done here. Pull him out.”

“You heard the lead!” Harshaan shouted. “By the numbers and by the book!”

Lee moved in, fixing a syringe to the feed in Amos’ arm. The cocktail of revival medicines seemed to resist going into the vein. Elvi waited for the spasming to stop. Jim, out from his corner, floated at her side, his face ashen.

“He’s not coming up,” he said. “Why isn’t he coming up?”

Amos’ head bent back, baring his neck. The veins in his throat stood out in a way that made Elvi think *massive debilitating stroke*. His eyes were open, black pits without any clear focus.

“I can give him another dose,” Lee said.

“Do it,” Elvi shouted.

Another cocktail went into the big man’s arm. Alerts were sounding all

through the lab; machines and monitors panicking at what they saw.

The medical technician's voice was an island of professional calm in the chaos. "He is not coming up. We are moving into GTCS with ventricular fibrillation. We're going to lose him."

Jim was murmuring a string of quiet obscenities like it was a prayer.

"Sedate him. Whatever you need to do," Elvi said. And then, "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" Jim asked, but she didn't answer.

She didn't know she was leaving until she was already gone. She pulled herself hand over hand through the hallways like a nightmare of being trapped in a sunken cave. She was going faster than she could handle, bruising herself as she crashed around corners. Her mind was divided between a deep animal panic and something smaller, calmer, and more watchful.

The catalyst chamber was as full as it ever got. Fayeze and two techs floated beside the catalyst. The catalyst's empty eyes were vague and unsurprised, her hair floating around her like a drowned woman. Xan and Cara were visible on a screen in the isolation chamber, their small bodies filling the space within it.

"Elvi?" Fayeze said. "What's the matter?"

She didn't answer him. Jim slid in through the door behind her. She ignored him too.

The isolation chamber was one of the most advanced devices Laconia had ever fashioned, but it was as easy to use as a meat freezer. Elvi grabbed the handle, braced, and pulled the thick door open. Cara and Xan turned to her, their eyes wide with confusion and alarm.

"Get out," Elvi said. "Out of the container. Do it now."

Fayeze was at her side. She was afraid he was going to grab her, stop her, slow her down and make her explain herself. He didn't.

"The dive went bad," Elvi said. "Amos is stuck there, and we can't get him back."

Xan shook his head. "I don't understand. You can't get him back? Stuck how? What stuck him there?"

Cara's smile was triumphant. She took her brother's hand. "It's all right. We can do this. Follow me."

Her eyes closed, and then a heartbeat later, Xan's closed too. The

catalyst cooed softly and mindlessly. Elvi's breath shuddered and her hands trembled. It occurred to her exactly how bad this moment would be for a medical emergency of her own. FayeZ put a hand on her shoulder, and she let herself be turned. He was frowning with worry. Maybe fear.

"Hey, Elvi," he said.

"FayeZ."

"So. I guess we'll call this field-testing a new protocol?"

To her surprise, Elvi laughed, even if it came out like a sob. Cara shifted like someone twitching in her sleep. A connection request came through on the ship's system: Harshaan Lee looking for her. She answered, but didn't give him time to speak.

"What are we seeing?"

"The subject appears to be stabilizing," Lee said. "However, I am seeing ___"

Before the next word came, Elvi's awareness widened like its jaw had unhinged, and she exploded into white.

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Interlude: The Dreamers

The dreamer dreams, and his dream is unlike all that passed before. Where grandmother masks whispered and promised and told their secrets, nothing welcomes him here. Instead, there is the machine, and the machine is constant motion. Something that isn't light glimmers in colors no eyes have seen. Shapes lock together and come apart too quickly for a mind to follow. The chitter of a swarm, rich with meaning he cannot find. The dreamer looks upon the truth behind the dream and finds no place for himself.

But a place must be found or made, so the dreamer imagines himself closer, wills himself in, and the machine bites at him, rips him, skins him skinless and raw. The pain is real, but it teaches. The glimmers glint patterns in their not-lights, the cascade of shapes has music in it, the swarm song is a static of words at the edge of comprehension. If there is less of the dreamer than there was, if the machine has taken what can't be given back, the reward is a knowing deeper than bones.

The next time comes, and the dreamer fits his bleeding hands in the spaces between the spaces, breathes through the holes in number, and builds from abstraction a tool to crack wide the abstract. He sees the mechanism through its own strange eyes, and its depth astonishes and terrifies him. The voice of the machine grows deep and grand and horrifying: God whispering the obscenity that ends worlds. The darkness is the darkness of old, but terror has no face for him, and there needs to be a way, so there will be. A thousand bites, a million needle sticks, a ripping away of all that doesn't fit.

And the bull-headed god turns to him, and for an instant that is an eon, they know each other with intimacy beyond names. There are no secrets between the two men dead without dying—their pain is one pain, their weariness is one weariness, their resolves braid together to a single rope that pulls at them both ways. Something shatters, and the horned god with his bloodied flanks turns eyes to the dreamer. Wheels within wheels within

wheels. Where there was once a man, pitiless legions march.

The dreamer squares his shoulders and steps into the ring. There is nothing outside the ring. There is something within it, and it will have him dead.

The god that was a man finds the man that was a corpse and time skips in thunder. The dreamer feels the dream grow thin, and the thinness is pain. All he can do is exhale and know that when this breath is gone, there are no more breaths behind it. He fights like a raging storm, but the other man fights like a falling sea.

The dead man begins to die. Somewhere else, he feels a body ripping itself apart. He feels the heart he once had stopping. He hears human voices in the room beside pain, but there is no doorway back. The dreamer dreams an answering violence. A rat bites a tiger's paw.

And then, more. A ghost made from hunger. A ghost made from longing. Graveyard children and prisoners. They touch their rage to his, and the dreamers dream together. They press into the machine, and the machine begins to shift and open. A thread swims itself into being, red and thin and tenuous. The horned god bellows a weariness vast as oceans and lowers its inhuman head.

Brightness floods, and for a time outside of time, they are lost in a sea of memories and sensations made meaningless, simple and confused as newborns. When they are again, the machine is the machine and they are outside of it.

The machine whirs and clatters. The little man rises. The hungry ghost rises, sparkling. The dreamers rise toward three brightnesses. Three holes in the ice that is the ceiling of the world.

The horned god forgets. The little man forgets. The sparkling ghost cannot bring herself to forgetfulness, and that is and will always be her hunger. The machine glimmers its idiot glimmers, it shapes its insoluble puzzles, it sings a buzzsaw shriek. And in a dream beneath the dream, a man stands alone in a lighthouse and faces an angry sea. His exhaustion and pain rhyme with something real, and Amos opens his eyes.



The lab was weirdly still. All around him, monitors chirped and alerts sounded. When he breathed in, it felt like his lungs were filled with glass shards. With an effort, he turned his head. Elvi wasn't there. Jim wasn't. He recognized Elvi's second-in-command, though. Lee, he thought. The guy seemed stunned. They all seemed stunned.

"Hey," Amos said.

Lee didn't answer.

"Hey."

With a shudder, the doctor seemed to come back to consciousness from whatever fugue he'd been in.

"What? Oh. Yes. Don't try to move," Lee said. "You've been through... You've been through a lot."

"You all right?"

"Yes, I just... I had a very strange experience."

"Yeah, I figured. But you got to tell Jim and the doc. There's no way to get in. Duarte knows we're here now. And I think he's pissed."

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Jim

The experience, when it came, was overwhelming. Jim remembered everything from before it, but with the sense of distance that trauma could sometimes bring. He could still picture Amos, strapped to the medical couch, suffering seizures and pain. He remembered following Elvi down to the catalyst's chamber and seeing Fayez and the technicians there.

He remembered looking at the woman they called the catalyst and thinking of Julie Mao, the first person he'd seen infected by the protomolecule, and how long it had taken her to die. Or if not die, be transformed. And the victims of Eros Station, injected with the protomolecule sample and exposed to massive doses of radiation to drive the spread of the alien organism or technology or however people wanted to categorize it. Even then, they'd died slowly. Or been unmade and repurposed without the release of dying in between. He remembered thinking how perverse it was that the catalyst could live in that state indefinitely, a skin to hold the protomolecule. A tool made from human flesh. He remembered wondering if there was anything left of her that could be aware of what she'd become.

Then Elvi had opened the isolation chamber, taken out Cara and Xan in hope that they could interrupt the ongoing assault that was killing Amos. All of those memories were clear and unclouded, but it felt like they'd happened weeks or months before. That was because of what happened next.

There had been a brightness: light that was also a sound that was also an impact like being punched in each cell of his body individually. He'd felt like something in him was opening and opening and opening until he was afraid it would never stop opening, that he'd become a single, ongoing act of expansion that could only end with annihilation.

Then, like a dream, he was a hundred places at once. A thousand people.

A vastness in which the idea of “James Holden” was lost like a stone in the ocean. He was a woman with an aching shoulder in the galley of a ship he didn’t know, halfway through a bulb of cheap coffee that had been secretly spiked with alcohol. He was a young man in a small, cramped engineering deck, engaged in a sexual act with Rebecca—whoever she was—and torn between guilt and delight at his infidelity. He was an officer in the Laconian Navy hiding in his ready room, the lights off, trying to keep his sobs quiet so that the crew wouldn’t hear them and know how afraid he was.

Like a kaleidoscope made from other people’s intimate lives, his memory was bright and shining and fragmented. It left him a little dizzy just thinking about it too much.

“So,” Elvi said, “I think we can agree that Colonel Tanaka’s reports were accurate.”

Tanaka, on the wall screen, nodded. Naomi was on the screen beside her, the *Roci*’s ops deck around her like a frame. Jim and Fayez floated in Elvi’s office. All of them together, and all of them scattered.

Amos, along with Cara and Xan, was being scanned by the medical team. As was everyone else on the crew. The hours that had passed since the failed dive had been a whirlwind of activity. The science teams checking and rechecking their data, searching for any patterns that might shift and fade before they were quite erased. Jim didn’t doubt that they’d find all the same things Tanaka had found the first time, when the *Preiss* had been saved.

The idea caught him. “Was there someone transiting? When this happened?”

“No,” Naomi said. “The trigger wasn’t the things inside the gate this time. It was us.”

“That’s my assumption too,” Elvi said. “Duarte or the station or some combination of the two rejected us. Pushed back. I believe that Colonel Tanaka’s drug regimen blunted the worst of the effect. At least for us.”

“Wait,” Fayez said. “At least for us? As opposed to who?”

“It seems like the event may have been broader this time than before. I’ve had reports from five scientific missions that were close to their gates reporting experiences similar to ours. I won’t be surprised if more come in later.”

“How far could it have reached?” Tanaka asked.

“It’s a nonlocal effect,” Elvi said. “Without better understanding how it propagates, I couldn’t make any meaningful guess.”

“I think I have some indication,” Naomi said, and her voice was hard as slate. Her image disappeared from the screen, and a series of tactical maps took its place. Solar systems cycled through, a few seconds of one, and another, and then another. As Naomi spoke, they went on and didn’t repeat. “The underground and its allies are showing that since the event, a hundred and five ships in seventy systems have changed course in ways that will bring them through the gates. They’re a combination of Laconian, underground, and purely civilian vessels. And they’ve also gone silent.”

“Silent?” Jim echoed. He meant it more as an expression of shock than a question, but Naomi answered him anyway.

“No broadcast. No tightbeam. No offers of explanation or filed changes of flight plan. Just all of them turning toward us.”

“Radio silence seems weird,” Fayez said. “Their drive plumes are still visible. What do they think they can hide by running in radio silence? What do they gain?”

“They don’t gain anything,” Tanaka said. “They just don’t need comms anymore. They’re all thinking with the same head.”

Elvi let out a little noise, somewhere between a sigh and a sob.

Tanaka either didn’t notice or chose to ignore her. “I’ve taken the liberty of reaching out to Admiral Trejo. I’m hoping we can get some backup here in time.”

“In time for what?” Jim asked.

“The battle,” Tanaka said as if it had been a stupid question.

“Are we sure that these are enemies?” Elvi asked.

“Yes,” Tanaka said. “We tried to get into the station. We were pushed back. Now an ad hoc flotilla of hive-mind-controlled ships are running toward us. If they’re just rushing here to bring us cake and party decorations, we’d know because we’d be in the station chewing the fat with the high consul.”

“There are eighteen systems we’ve ID’d that don’t seem to have any enemy activity,” Naomi said.

“If we retreat, we’ll never get this territory back,” Tanaka said, leaning in toward her camera. Jim detested and feared the woman, and that made it worse when she seemed right. “Either we get inside now, or we talk to the

high consul when he's inside us and pulling our strings."

Naomi's voice was gentler, but just as firm. "Do we know why the experiment failed? Why could Jim get into the station, back before the gates opened, and we can't now?"

"The station was on a kind of autopilot when you first came here," Elvi said. "It opened for the bit of protomolecule that stowed away on your ship because it didn't have anything telling it not to. Now it does. Our catalyst can turn something on, and Cara and Amos can react to it, but Winston Duarte was remade with the protomolecule. It's part of him now. We aren't getting in that station because he doesn't want us to. It's as simple as that."



"I can still hear voices in my head," Alex said. "I mean, real people's real voices. Is that happening for you too?"

"Yes," Teresa said.

Around them, the *Rocinante's* galley seemed like an impostor of itself. Real and present, but also somehow less authentic than it should have been. Like Jim was there, and also wasn't.

Teresa looked hollow-eyed with disappointment and grief. He tried to imagine what it would have been like for her to come so close to seeing her father again, to have him back on some level, and then failing at the last obstacle.

"When's Amos coming back?" Alex asked, and Jim shrugged.

"When they're done with him," he said.

"What are we gonna do?"

That was the question. Jim scooped the last of his rice and beans into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. The *Rocinante* was a good ship. It was a good home. There were millions of people in hundreds of systems who would never have a place like this for as long as he'd had the *Roci* and its crew. He wasn't sure why that idea felt so melancholy. He popped his bowl and spoon into the recycler, appreciating how the lid clicked under his hand, how it sealed when he took the pressure away. It was such a small, little

elegance. So easy to overlook.

“I’m going to—” he said, and pointed toward the passage to his cabin with his thumb. Alex nodded.

Jim moved slowly through the ship, his mind full. He kept thinking of Eros. Of the way that the protomolecule, let loose, had taken people apart and put them back together according to its own needs, its own program. Here he was, decades on, and it was still the same. Amos, Cara, Xan. They’d died and been rebuilt because an alien drone following who knew what decision tree had come to the conclusion that they should overcome death. Duarte and the ring station were taking all of humanity apart like a caterpillar liquifying in its cocoon to be reassembled into a butterfly.

The war would go on. The builders of the ring gates moving from form to form—primitive bioluminescent sea slugs, to angels of light, then to a hive of mostly hairless primates with billions of bodies and only one mind. The dark things inside the gates and outside the universe scratching and ripping and unmaking the sickness that had intruded on its reality. Maybe someday that battle would be won. Maybe it would go on forever. Either way, nothing that Jim knew as human would persist. No more first kisses. No more prayers. No more moments of jealousy or insight or selfishness or love. They would be taken apart and fit back together like the bodies on Eros. Something would be there, but it wouldn’t be them.

Naomi was in a clean jumpsuit when he got to the cabin. She smelled of soap and fresh water. The light from her screen showed the lines in her face—sorrow and laughter both. She was beautiful, yes, but she’d always been beautiful. When they’d been young together, they’d been beautiful just because youth had a beauty all its own. It took age to see whether the beauty could last.

She narrowed her eyes and laughed. “What?”

“Just admiring the view.”

“You *cannot* be horny right now.”

“Don’t tell me what I can’t be,” he said, then moved beside her and put his hand on hers. “We aren’t getting out of this one, are we?”

“I don’t see how. No.”

They were silent for a moment. Jim felt a tremendous sense of peace washing over him. For the first time since he’d been taken prisoner on Medina, he felt deeply at ease. He stretched, and it actually felt pretty good.

“You are the central fact of my life,” he said. “Knowing you. Waking up next to you. It’s been the most meaningful thing I’ve done. And I am profoundly fucking grateful that I got that. I think of how easy it would have been for us to miss each other, and I can’t even imagine what that lifetime would have been.”

“Jim—”

He waved to have a few seconds more to say what needed to be said. “I know I made choices that cost you. I’ve got this habit of rushing into things because I think they needed doing. I lost time with you, but it was always my choice. Heading to the *Agatha King*. Sounding the alarms on Medina. Trying to get to the bullet on Ilus. Going back to see what was really happening on Eros Station. They were all risks I took, and I told myself it was okay because I was only risking me. But I was risking someone important to you too, and I am so grateful that I’ve been someone important to you. I didn’t mean to take that lightly.”

She turned off her screen, then squeezed his hand. “You are remarkable. You have always been remarkable. Not always wise, not always thoughtful. But always, always remarkable. Yes, I have paid a price for letting someone as headstrong and impulsive as you matter so very much to me. But I’d do it again.”

He didn’t know which of them started to pull the other close, only that they folded together. Her arm found its way under his, and she ducked her head, pressing her cheek against his chest. He put his chin on top of her head, a rare thing when she was so much taller than him. Her first little sobs shook them both, and then his did. They drifted gently in the cabin that had been theirs. Jim had the sense of other minds drawn to the moment like insects following pheromones, but he couldn’t pay attention to them. Not with her there in his arms.

After some stretch of time that might have been minutes or hours, the weeping reached its natural end and they were only quiet together. Naomi uncurled a little, raised her head. Their mouths met, gently, and with only the barest hint of the hunger of their youth.

“Whatever you think you have to do? Whatever it is,” she whispered, “wait until I’m asleep.”

Jim nodded, and she pressed herself against him in the dark. He counted his own breaths up to a hundred and back down again before her breath

grew deep, then up to a hundred again to give her time to fall past where his leaving would wake her. She shuddered once, then gently snored. Carefully, he unfolded himself, reached out to tap the wall and push to the cabin door. He opened it as quietly as he could and closed it behind him with a click.

Somewhere down on a lower deck, Muskrat barked happily, and he could hear Amos' rough voice, if not the exact words. The ship creaked softly as it warmed and shed its heat. Somewhere, Alex was sleeping or watching his neo-noirs or feeling guilty about Kit and Giselle. Somewhere Teresa was eating herself with disappointment and adolescent confusion. Bobbie Draper wasn't there, and never would be again. Clarissa Mao was gone too, though both of them had left their marks on the ship and the people who lived in it. For a moment, he imagined Chrisjen Avasarala beside him, her arms crossed and her lips in a smile that managed to be sharp and consoling at the same time. *For fuck's sake, this isn't the last day of summer camp. How many fucking tearful embraces are you planning on?*

In the med bay, he pulled an emergency kit with a red ceramic shell and tucked it under his arm. He patted the autodoc like it was someone he knew and liked and might not see again for a while.

The airlock wasn't restricted, and he was able to cross the bridge and enter the *Falcon* without anyone taking particular notice of him. The Laconian crew had gotten very used to pretending he wasn't there, and his place, first as Elvi's guest and then as the resistance leader's boyfriend, gave him a kind of undefined status in their own rigid pecking order. As long as he seemed to know where he was going, they assumed that he did. It was like being invisible.

The catalyst's room was empty except for the isolation chamber. He closed the door to the corridor behind him. There wasn't a lock on it or a way to jam it closed. Well, nothing was ever perfect. He cracked open the emergency kit and went through it item by item. Bandage. Antiseptic. Hypox injector. Hypodermic needle.

His head felt weirdly clear. Even with the distant awareness of the others, the moment was his own. He felt as alone as he ever had, and also a kind of satisfaction. A falling away of doubt. The anxiety that had haunted him since Laconia had cooked off like dew on a warm day. He was only himself now.

The isolation chamber opened easily, and he pulled the catalyst out. Her

blind, empty eyes swept past him. Her mouth worked as if she were saying things that only she could hear. She didn't react at all when he slid the needle into her arm and drew out the plunger.

The hypodermic filled with a swirl of iridescent blue and black. Five ccs. Ten. An alert was sounding somewhere nearby, and he assumed it was because of him. He'd intended to roll up his sleeve and inject the sample into the veins at the bend of his elbow, but he was suddenly worried that the *Falcon's* crew would come too soon, would stop him. Grimacing, he pressed the needle through the leg of his flight suit and into his thigh. He pushed the plunger down until it stopped. The catalyst smacked her lips and writhed like she was trying to remember how to swim.

Jim closed his eyes.

At first, it felt cold: a thread of ice that went from the site of the needle stick up into the gut. Then a wave of nausea that came and went and left a burning sensation behind it that spread through his abdomen and up into his chest. His heart started pounding, each beat slow, hard, and violent as a hammer strike. He tasted metal.

In the darkness behind his eyelids, blue fireflies flickered in and out of being. He had a feeling like blood flowing back into a limb that had been pressed too hard for too long. It felt like desert rain filling dry arroyos. It felt like remembering.

He took a long, slow breath. He was trembling. He opened his eyes, looked around the room, and found what he thought he'd find. What he'd hoped for. The slouch. The half-apologetic, half-astonished sad-dog face. The porkpie hat.

"Well," the familiar voice said where only Jim could hear it. "This can't be good."

"Hey, Miller. We need to talk."

Chapter Forty: Naomi

You can see him?” Naomi asked. “Right now, you can see him?”

Jim nodded. They were floating in the emptied lab where Amos had only recently been strapped down for his failed dive into the station. The *Falcon*’s security officers had taken Jim there directly from the catalyst’s chamber, and Elvi had called Naomi over. Now he was steadying himself on a handhold. His face had the sweaty, tight look it got when he was coming down with an illness or he’d drunk too much, but there was a calm with it. And something else. Amusement, maybe.

“For me, he seems to be right between you and Elvi,” Jim said. “A little bit closer to Elvi.”

“This can’t be the same Miller,” Elvi said. “This has to be something else.”

Jim chuckled.

“What?” Elvi snapped.

“Sorry. He said something funny. Look, in any traditional sense, the Miller I met died when Eros crashed into Venus. The protomolecule preserved and co-opted the patterns in his brain, and when it needed a tool to find missing things, there those patterns were, right in the toolbox. That version of Miller needed something that could take a ship places, and I was the guy who decided where the ship went, so it started using me. Physically manipulating my brain into seeing and interacting with the patterns it made from Miller. Those manipulations left channels. All I did was put the protomolecule and those channels back together.”

He looked at Naomi and tilted his head, a little smile on his lips. “I was just remembering something Alex said about tools that get used long enough developing souls. It’s off the subject. Forget about it.”

“Before, you weren’t able to see him when other people were around,” Elvi said.

“That’s true,” Jim said. “This is a different relationship.” A moment later, he laughed. Naomi didn’t know what at, except that it was Miller. If the jealousy stung, there was nothing she could do with it.

“Can this version of Miller open the station the way the last one did?”

Jim seemed to listen for a moment, then he shrugged. “I don’t know. He doesn’t either. The situation’s different that way too. We won’t know until we’ve tried.”

“I want to do some scans,” Elvi said, more to herself than to them. “Brain activity at a minimum. Full metabolic if we have time.”

“Not sure I have a lot of time for that,” Jim said.

“Is this something you can undo?” Naomi asked. “Is there a way to pull this back out of him?”

“It’s going to be hard to unscramble that egg,” Elvi said. “But there are probably some things we can do to keep him stable. Or more nearly stable.”

Jim shrugged. “Getting us more time is good, but only if we get more out than it takes to get it, if you see what I mean. We have a lot of clocks counting down on us right now.”

“I’m talking about saving your life,” Elvi said.

“I know, and I appreciate it. That’s a later-on problem. If we don’t get the rest of this right, it’s not going to matter. If you still exist as an individual who wants to fix me? That’ll mean a lot of things have gone right.”

They were quiet. Naomi glanced at the empty space between her and Elvi as if there might be something there for her to see. There wasn’t, but Elvi turned as if the look had been meant for her. Naomi realized they were waiting for her to make the decision. Jim was smiling at her, and it made Naomi want to punch him in the face. *How in fuck did I wind up here?* she thought.

“Collect any data you can now, and stabilize him,” she said. “We’ll need to get Teresa ready.”

“And Tanaka?” Elvi asked.

Naomi hesitated. She didn’t like Tanaka, and she didn’t trust her, but their interests were aligned for the moment, and inviting yet another front in her personal wars felt petty. “And Tanaka.”

“Okay,” Elvi said. “I’ll get the medical team.”

She pulled herself out of the lab and closed the door behind her. It

wasn't until the latch clicked that Naomi realized Elvi was giving them a moment alone. Jim looked away from her almost shyly. He was older, thinner, more worn around the edges than the man she'd met decades before on the *Canterbury*, but the openness she remembered was there too. The vulnerability. The almost genetic inability to believe that things wouldn't work out for the best if he just followed his heart.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Really? I haven't watched you try to kill yourself enough times? Now you make me watch you succeed in slow motion. But you're sorry."

"Yeah. That part is pretty shitty. But I couldn't think of anything else, and this isn't what—"

"Let's take care of the problem," she said. "The rest can come later."

He hesitated, then nodded. "I'll probably go to the station from here. Once they're done with the scans."

"I'll be on the *Roci*."

"All right then. I'll let you know when I'm in position."

Naomi nodded and pulled herself to the door and down the corridor as if they were only heading to their various mundane duties. As if it weren't the last time. How strange to know in the moment that something precious was ending, and still have it change nothing. Either it was a sign of her devastation or a tribute to how good their life together was and had been.

She made the transfer back to the *Rocinante*. The air didn't change scent this time. Either there had been enough traffic between the connected ships that the atmospheres had mingled, or she'd just gotten used to both of them. She hesitated for a moment, unsure whether to go back to her cabin or up to the ops deck. Her work could be done at either one, but the cabin had Jim's things—his clothes, his scent, his absence—and so she made the turn to ops.

Alex was there, his eyes wide and his hands fluttering in powerless distress.

"You heard?" she said.

"It's true?"

"It is," she said, and picked a couch to strap into. "How did you find out?"

"Casey."

"Casey?"

“The power supply technician on the *Falcon*? Dark hair, wide face? Little mole on his neck? He was over drinking beer with me and Amos back in Adro before we left.”

Naomi shook her head. She had probably seen him, but she didn’t make connections with the ease that Alex did.

“Are you all right?” Alex asked in a voice that meant he knew that she wasn’t.

Naomi pulled up her tactical display and split it. The ring space on the left, and on the right a more schematic view with the rings, the systems beyond them, and the ships falling in from all directions. The sheer scale of it was overwhelming. She had to figure out which of the ships were coming to her aid, which were the new enemy. She had to inventory the drugs and precursors that would keep the ships she did have from falling into Duarte’s nightmare hive mind. She had to keep control of the ring space long enough for Jim to have a chance at stopping the catastrophe that was rolling in toward them from all directions.

“I’m really, really angry,” she said. “When Jim came back from Laconia—when we got him back—I knew he was hurt. I knew there was less of him somehow. I thought we’d take care of him. That he was injured, not just in his body. In his soul, if that’s the word. With time and care and love, I thought maybe I would see him again the way he had been. The way I remembered him.”

“I get that,” Alex said.

“And then the thing that actually did bring him back wasn’t any of that. I saw him again. Just now. I saw him the way he used to be. At his best. And love isn’t what got him there. And it wasn’t care. And it wasn’t time. He saw something incredibly, stupidly dangerous that needed to be done and only he could do. And he just...”

She opened a closed fist like she was scattering dust.

Alex hung his head. “He just did it.”

“He rose to the occasion.” Tears were sheeting across her eyes now, making the deck a swirl of color and refraction. She wiped them away on the back of her sleeve.

“He is who he is,” Alex said. “He is who he’s always been. I understand that. I’ve got two marriages behind me because I thought I’d changed and grown into someone else. And I wasn’t wrong, but I wasn’t right either. Jim

changed, but he also stayed the same.”

“I wish we’d been the ones to bring him back, and not this.”

“So what can we do?”

Naomi looked at her screens. The tears were already drying, even if the darkness and emptiness and regret were all just as deep. “We give him as much time as we can. We try to make this latest idiotic, brave, stupid gesture count for as much as it can. And then we see what happens next. Someone needs to let Teresa know and get her ready. And tell Amos. There may be some fighting.”

“I can take care of them. Don’t you worry about it.”

He turned and headed for the lift shaft.

“Alex?”

When he looked back, they only locked their gazes for a moment. She didn’t know what she’d meant to say, and whatever it was, he already knew it.

“I got this part,” he said. “You take care of yours.”

She started the work, and at first it felt impossibly large. She was overwhelmed by the scope and complexity, but she told herself that it didn’t matter whether it was possible, only that she do it. She started small and specific. The *Tullus Aufidius*—a mercenary gunship with roots in Freehold—was slated to pass through the St. Anthony gate in sixteen hours. It had been coming to her call as part of the underground, but hadn’t responded to connection requests from the repeater at the gate since Amos’ psychic dive into the ring station went so wrong. So that was the first problem. She found a solution. The *Kerr*, the *Vukodlak*, and the *Dhupa*—two Laconian fighters and one underground supply ship with some torpedo racks welded on the outside—would intercept it. Any of the three that survived the encounter could join the *Armando Guelf* at the Hakuseki gate and intercept the *Brother Dog*.

She thought about sending a message out to Trejo, calling for more Laconian reinforcements. The message would take hours to reach him, hours to get back, and by the time any ships he sent made it there, it was just as likely they wouldn’t be answering to Trejo or Naomi anymore. Better to play the cards she had. She wasn’t going to win, but she could take a long time losing.

She ran solutions through the *Roci*’s system, shifting from scenario to

scenario like a football coach preparing for a complicated game. Here are my players. Here are their players. Here's the field of play. The hurt and the horror and the grief were still there when she thought to turn to them, but they lived at a distance. She felt herself slipping into the version of herself that she'd made during Jim's captivity: the Naomi who lived in secret and met the world with her intellect because her heart was still too raw.

She wondered whether this was how Camina Drummer had survived as the last president of the Transport Union, or Michio Pa as the first. Or Avasarala, back on Earth when Earth had been the center of the human race and not just the oldest planet among thousands. The *Indefatigable* and the *Yunus Emre* would intercept the *Blackberry* when it transited the Xicheng gate. She queried the *Yunus Emre* about the models of torpedo and PDCs it had and set the *Roci* to checking for ships with compatible loadouts.

When Jacob died, it had been just the same. It had been just weeks until their fortieth anniversary, and the children were all coming back from university for the party. She'd found him in the bathroom. Dead of a stroke, the doctors said. She'd spent twenty-eight hours straight cleaning the apartment, and she wouldn't have stopped then except Hannah came early and—

Naomi stopped, her hands raised and her heart beating triple-time. She looked around the ops deck as if examining it would make it more solid, more real, more concrete. She checked the time. It was still half an hour before her next dose of the drugs was due. She took them anyway. The peach-colored tabs were bitter, and the taste lingered at the back of her throat. She waited a few minutes, watching her own cognition, waiting for memories of lives she hadn't lived to sneak back into her.

"Fuck that very, very much," she said to the empty air, then opened a connection to Elvi. "How long before we can get this going?"

"Tanaka's on her way now," Elvi said. "We're putting Jim in a Laconian suit. She thought it might make Duarte feel better than his *Roci* gear. And... it's just more likely to keep him alive. You know, until..."

"I'm starting to get intrusive thoughts."

"I know," Elvi said. "A lot of people are. The data from before says it shouldn't get too bad as long as you keep on the medication schedule. But we're only muffling them. We're not shutting them all the way up."

"Are they getting information from me?"

The *Roci* chirped an alert. Naomi pulled it up as Elvi replied. “Maybe, but it’s all still pretty haphazard. My guess is that any intelligence that slips through is going to be lost in the clutter. That’s just a guess, though.”

“Not sure the data’s going to support that.”

“Why not?”

“The repeaters at the gates? All the ones that were still working? They just went offline. Kill codes from the system sides of the gates.”

Elvi hesitated. “All at the same time?”

“Within a few seconds of each other.”

“That’s... more coordinated than I like.”

Naomi stretched her shoulders. She could feel her strategies shifting. Reconceptualize everything she’d just designed. Still coaching the game, but now it was a game she wasn’t allowed to watch being played...

“Let me know as things progress,” she said. “I’ll be here.”

She pulled up the tactical map. The four most critical gates were Earth, Laconia, Auberon, and Bara Gaon. She found the ships closest to each. It took five minutes to calculate the flight solutions she wanted for each of them: hard burns that started braking well inside the ring space. Just enough velocity to make the transit, gather telescopic data, and duck back in. And the point of transit randomized, so that even if the enemy had a back door into their heads, they couldn’t line up a torpedo or a rail-gun strike on the ship.

She was gratified that none of the captains questioned the orders or pushed back at the mission. She set tracking indicators on each of them—tiny red cones that showed the distance the ships had traveled without giving her a precise lock on their actual position. While they moved, she ran simulations on the transit times for the first dozen ships due to pass into the ring space, and what changes to their paths were physically possible. The intercepts that had been certain became clouds of time and place...

She was almost annoyed when the connection request came and broke her concentration.

“Hey,” Jim said, and all the control and distance she’d bent herself to building blew away on his breath. Grief slammed into her like a rogue wave, blowing her off her feet and trying to drown her.

“Hey,” she murmured.

“So, we’re about a hundred meters from the surface of the station, and

we're heading in."

She took down the tactical display and pulled up the *Roci*'s external camera. It didn't take a second for the ship to find them. Three dashes silhouetted against the glowing blue of the station. Tags appeared as the *Roci* marked their positions and velocities. Naomi cleared them. It was enough to see them. Watching was more important than knowing the details. The details didn't matter.

"I've got you," she said, and the ways that both was and wasn't true stung. "I've got you, Jim."

"Teresa wants you to make sure Muskrat's in her crash couch in case you have to do any tricky maneuvering."

"I'll see to it."

One of the little dashes nodded, so that one was Jim. An alert came up from the ship that had peeked into Auberon, and then the one in Laconia. She closed them. It didn't look like the three of them were moving at all. They were just there, against the blueness. The little egg of Duarte's ship appeared and grew larger. They were almost there.

"Okay," Jim said. "We've got an entrance. We have a way in."

"We'll give you as much time as we can."

"It's going to be okay." The oceanic optimism would have been a lie in anyone else. Or maybe a prayer.

"Good hunting, love," she said, and the three dots passed into the blue and vanished. She waited for a moment, but nothing changed. The station remained its enigmatic self. A third alert came, this one from Sol gate. She turned off the external cameras and pulled her tactical map back up.

There were many, many more ships coming now. Hundreds of them, and while most were on fast burns, it would still take them days to reach the gates.

And by then, none of it would matter, because in the Laconia gate data was the game-ender. The *Voice of the Whirlwind*, last of the three *Magnetar*-class battleships, was on a killing burn toward the Laconia gate. At its pace, even people in the breathable-fluid crash couches would be risking their lives. Only they weren't risking their lives at all. Their lives were no more important now than the individual skin cells on a boxer's knuckles. They would be shattered by the hundreds and not be missed.

The moment the *Whirlwind* came through that gate, the fight was over,

and any forces that Duarte's hive mind had would be able to flood the ring station and pull Jim and Teresa and Tanaka back out like they were plucking a splinter.

She opened a connection to her little, doomed fleet.

"This is Naomi Nagata," she said. "Prepare to receive your orders."

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Chapter Forty-One: Jim

This is a bad idea,” Miller said. “I mean, you’ve always been a little dim, but even you have to know this is a bad idea.”

“Yeah. I know,” Jim said. “But it is literally the best bad idea I’ve got.”

“You look back, some of the life choices that got you here were ill-advised.”

Jim shifted to look at the space where the dead detective seemed to be. Miller had the decency to look sheepish and raise one hand, palm out in a gesture of surrender.

“I’m not saying there’s no pot-and-kettle aspect to this,” Miller said. “I’m just trying to set your expectations on how this ends.”

The sphere of the station wasn’t a sphere at this distance. He was close enough—they were close enough—that it felt more like a glowing blue plain. The ring gates around and behind him shone like tiny, perversely regular stars.

The Laconian heavy vac suit that Elvi had given him fit strangely in the armpits and knees, giving him an ease of motion that kept sending little the-suit-is-coming-apart jabs of panic to his amygdala. The HUD showed that he had fifteen hours of air, which was pretty damned good. He didn’t even need a second bottle. The Laconian suits stored backup air and water in pores in the suit’s plating, and while this wasn’t battle armor—the only weapon he had was a sidearm from the *Roci*’s supply—it was reinforced enough to give him some protection.

The on-suit sensors didn’t show anything dangerous in the station’s bluish glow, and only a few hundred millirems coming from all the gates together. He would have suffered more radiation on a short walk outside to check the *Roci*’s hull in normal space. It was the only thing about his situation that seemed even vaguely safe.

The *Roci* and the *Falcon* floated a few kilometers off to his right, the

Derecho about the same distance to his left. All the ships were small enough to cover with the thumb of an outstretched hand. And the alien transport that had hauled Winston Duarte from Laconia was a pale dot below him on the station surface. His helmet assured him that Teresa and Tanaka were both en route to his position, but he couldn't see them without magnification. Not yet. Which just left him, or else him and Miller, depending how he looked at it.

The detective wore the same gray suit and dark hat that he had in life. His sad, basset-hound expression seemed younger than Jim remembered it, but that was probably just that Jim had grown past him while Miller stayed the same. Having the protomolecule working directly on his body had given Miller the ability to remain in Jim's consciousness even when other people were present, and Miller had also developed the unpleasant habit of being somewhere in Jim's view at all times. If he seemed to be at Jim's right side, and Jim turned left, Miller would be there too. And his sense of the direction Miller's voice came from clicked to match wherever he seemed to be. It was disorienting and creepy, like Miller was the villain in a low-budget horror video.

Miller stuck his hands in his pockets and pointed toward the *Derecho* with his chin. "Looks like Colonel Friendly's here."

"You don't want to call her that."

"Why not? It's not like she'll hear me."

Tanaka was a dark dot against the background light of the gates. Her maneuvering thrusters were compressed gas and hardly made any sign that they were firing except that she began to slow as she approached. Her suit was the same blue as Laconia's flag, with the stylized wings on it. Apart from that, it reminded Jim of Bobbie Draper's old Goliath: less a vac suit than a weapon shaped like one. Her face was surprisingly visible. One cheek looked smoother and younger because he'd blown the original into ribbons not that long before. Her gaze clicked around him like she was taking inventory. She paused, frowning, and seemed to focus on the emptiness around his helmet.

"Well, I guess it's true then," she said through the helmet radio. "You really do have someone else on board."

"Yes, I do," Jim said. "But how did you—"

"I'm here," Teresa said. Jim turned back toward the *Roci* and found

Teresa in a battered *Rocinante*-badged vac suit, Miller floating apologetically at her side. “I’m almost ready. I just need to take care of one more thing.”

“What?” Tanaka asked sharply.

“Muskrat. If there’s fighting, she should be in her crash couch.”

Tanaka’s silence seemed like a pointed reply.

“Oh, this is going to be fun,” Miller said.

“I’ll take care of that,” Jim said. “Other than Muskrat, are you both ready? Do we need anything else before we head in?”

“No,” Teresa said. “We can go.” Tanaka shook her head. Jim reoriented himself toward the vast and empty blueness, and found Miller already there below him.

He opened a connection to the *Roci*. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Naomi replied. She sounded soft and preoccupied. Jim took a quick reading to the station.

“So, we’re about a hundred meters from the surface of the station, and we’re heading in.”

“I’ve got you,” she said, and then something else that he didn’t quite catch.

“Teresa wants you to make sure Muskrat’s in her crash couch in case you have to do any tricky maneuvering.”

“I’ll see to it.”

The great blue wall grew closer. In the corner of his eye, Tanaka was activating and shutting down the gun in her suit’s forearm, extending and retracting the barrel in a combination of fidgeting and threat. Teresa was staring ahead at the station in something like hunger.

Miller, at his side, nodded. “I’ve got something. Look at this.” The blue wall suddenly wasn’t featureless. Lines ran through it, fine as string, making wide, complex spirals that came together and fell apart only to be replaced by new whorls that rose up. It was something between organic and mechanical, and it felt very familiar.

Miller blinked forward, teleporting from one spot to another the way only a hallucination could, waited until the pattern of lines had come to a moment of calm, and reached into the surface. Jim felt it as an effort in his own body, but not anyplace he could identify, like flexing a muscle in a phantom limb. As the spirals re-formed, the place where Miller was stayed

empty, then widened. The blue glow darkened in a circle three meters wide as a depression formed, then deepened, then became a tunnel. Tanaka said something, but with her radio off. Jim only knew because he saw her lips move.

“Okay. We’ve got an entrance. We have a way in.”

When Naomi spoke again, her voice was despairing. “We’ll give you as much time as we can.”

“She thinks you’re all dead,” Miller said. “Her and you, and everybody in those ships. Or, I don’t know. If not dead, something worse. I’ve been a mind caught inside these fuckers and not permitted to die. It wasn’t fun. Speaking of which, have I said *fuck you very much* for dragging me back yet?”

Jim shook his head. He didn’t know what he could say to Naomi that would bring her any comfort. *You made it without me before or If we die, we’ll die giving it our best shot or I’ll use whatever time you can give.* Nothing fit what he wanted to say. “It’s going to be okay,” he said.

“Good hunting, love.”

“It won’t,” Miller added. “Be okay, I mean.”

Holden killed his mic. “Yeah, I know, fuck me for bringing you back. Now be helpful or shut up.”

And the curve of the tunnel into the station seemed to rise up around him, blotting out the *Roci* and the *Derecho* and the star-bright gates. It led deeper into the station, but the direction kept flipping in Jim’s perception between forward and down—moving through a passage or falling down a hole.

“Eyes up,” Tanaka said, back on the open channel. “Holden, what’s your condition?”

“Sorry, what?”

“Your condition. You’re my passkey in this little hellscape. If you go full protomonster on me, I need to know, and I need to know before it happens. So what’s your fucking condition?”

“So,” Miller said. “I feel like there was a conversation about who was lead on this case that you two should have had earlier.”

“I feel fine,” Jim said, then paused, considered. “A little feverish, maybe? But not bad.”

“I want an update every five minutes. Set a timer.”

“If I start feeling worse, I’ll let you know.”

“Yes, you will. Because you’ll be on a timer.”

Miller, floating between them and a half pace back, tried to conceal a grin. Jim weighed the pros and cons of pushing back against Tanaka and set a timer. He set it for seven minutes, though.

The tunnel widened. A surface like some transparent membrane marked its edge, but Jim didn’t feel anything more than the slightest resistance when he moved through it. The tunnel or hole went another ten meters and then into a cathedral-vast chamber. The lines he’d seen on the station’s skin were here too, weaving and reweaving the walls and pillars. A gentle light pulsed from the walls, too diffuse for shadows. There was movement everywhere, and Jim had the sense that if he hadn’t pumped raw protomolecule into his body, he wouldn’t have been aware of most of it. Every surface was alive, trading fluids and tiny objects smaller than sand grains. It was like watching a huge body with all its tissues busy about their individual tasks and the whole of it orchestrated into one massive, unknowable purpose.

One of the pillars was also a figure—a mech, an insect, or something else entirely. He had the flashbulb memory of a Martian Marine destroying something like it with a grenade, and then being destroyed himself, broken down to complex molecules and used to repair the damage he’d done. He turned his mic back on.

“Um,” he said. “Try not to break anything in here if you can help it.”

He expected Tanaka to snap at him, but Teresa was the one who spoke. “I thought there wasn’t a breathable atmosphere. That’s what the reports said. Noble gas with some volatiles. That’s not what this is.”

Jim checked his suit. She was right. Neon, and more of it than had been here before, and the same trace benzene, but also oxygen. In the suit’s opinion, he could take off his helmet right now and be fine. He didn’t.

“It’s him,” Tanaka said. “The high consul didn’t pack a vac suit, and if there wasn’t something like it in that... ship he brought”—she nodded at the air, the walls, the station in general—“he’d make this support him.”

“He didn’t have food and water either,” Teresa said.

Tanaka scowled behind her faceplate. “I think he did. The same way. He’s in here. Holden? Which way to him?”

Jim blinked and turned to Miller.

“No idea,” Miller said. “If Duarte’s a new, well-tuned racing ship, you and me are a couple shipping containers strapped to the top of a reactor. You can say we do the same thing and not be technically wrong, but it’s not like we’re in the same weight class.”

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “I thought you were the tracker.”

Tanaka didn’t answer. Instead she gestured for them to stay back, and used her thrusters to move toward the center of the chamber. Taking point.

Once she was well away, Tanaka went still, as if she was listening to something. Maybe she was. There was enough atmosphere for sound waves to carry, and Jim didn’t know what her suit was capable of. The cathedral shifted with lines of energy and complex electromagnetic fields that he wasn’t sure Tanaka could see, and passageways led out of it in a hundred different directions. For a moment, Jim saw it all as a gargantuan heart that was just about to squeeze down on them. His head spun like he was falling, and a wave of awe swept over him like he was hearing the voice of God, but whispering.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Miller said. “Hold it together. It’s early in the game for you to start getting euphoric attacks on me.”

Jim’s sense of the utter majesty of the station dialed back, and he turned off his mic. “You make it sound like there’s a later in the game.”

Miller’s smile was enigmatic, and it looked a little like sorrow by the time it reached his eyes. “Until death all is life.”

“I feel like I should know who said that.”

“Take a couple deep breaths and rein your head back in. I think we’re leaking a little.”

His gaze cut toward Teresa, and Jim looked over to see her looking back at him with a worried expression.

“Everything’s fine. I’m fine,” he said, then turned his mic back on and repeated it. Teresa nodded, but she didn’t say anything.

“Not sure you sold her,” Miller said.

Tanaka’s voice came back over the open channel. “Heading out. You two come with me. Stay. Close.”

She was already maneuvering across the chamber. Teresa oriented herself more quickly, and jetted off after her, leaving Jim to bring up the rear.

To Jim’s right, something huge shifted. A buzz filled his ears like a

swarm of hornets that didn't register on the suit's instruments, and something that was like light but also wasn't flowed through the walls. Adrenaline hit his system, and his heart started tapping anxiously against his ribs. Whatever it was shifted, faded, and moved on without quite entering the chamber. Jim had never seen a whale breaching, but he thought he understood something of how it would feel to be next to one when it did. Neither Tanaka nor Teresa seemed to have noticed anything. He checked his medical stats. According to the suit, he was running a little over thirty-eight degrees. A fever, but not high enough to generate hallucinations.

"No, that was real," Miller said. "Just a little reminder that we're out of our depth here."

"Didn't need it. Was clear," Jim said.

"What?" Tanaka answered.

"Nothing," Jim said. "Just talking to myself."

Tanaka paused at the oblong opening to a passageway that curved down deeper into the station. A trickle of lights like pale blue fireflies trickled out of it and into the wider chamber behind them.

"I thought I told you to stay close," Tanaka said. "Next time, do it."

"Colonel," Teresa said. "Please proceed."

Miller, now at Teresa's side, swept his hat off and rubbed at his temple with the palm of his hand. "Jesus Christ. Is anyone *not* in charge here?"

Tanaka turned and led the way down the passage. The glow from the walls here took on a deep, buttery yellow. The lines in them went from spirals to frenetic dashing lines that reminded Jim of being very young and his parents driving him through a snowstorm. After about a hundred meters, the passage began to change, widening along the oval's longer axis and narrowing along the lesser until Jim could put his hands on either side.

"It's getting too thin," Teresa said. "We're not going to fit."

"Stay close."

The passage kept widening and flattening until Jim felt like they were making their way through a crack in a cave system. The sense of mass on either side started to become claustrophobic, but Tanaka kept pressing ahead.

His timer went off.

"I'm running a fever, but otherwise fine," he said.

"What?"

“You wanted me to check in. I’m checking in. Little fever. Feeling fine. Maybe we should all be keeping each other up to date. I show you mine, you show me yours. Reciprocity.”

Tanaka turned back, pushing herself past Teresa and toward him like an eel in a coral reef. Her jaw shifted as she moved to a private channel. He matched her.

“Captain Holden,” she said. “I appreciate what you’ve done to get me into this station, but I’m here now. It’s seeming like your present utility to me is considerably less. So I would very much recommend you stop giving me your fucking attitude before I start thinking about how much I owe you a bullet in the face. Reciprocity, and all.”

She nodded once, sharply, like she was agreeing with herself on his behalf, and moved back to the open channel.

“This is a dead end. We’re heading back and trying again.”

She pushed past Jim, moving toward the chamber they’d left behind. Teresa followed her. Jim floated for a moment, his hand on one wall, his back on the other. A breath of fireflies swirled up from the depths where the passage was too thin for human beings and rose up past Teresa and Tanaka.

“You shot her in the face, huh?” Miller asked.

“She was trying to kill us at the time,” Jim replied. “But honestly, I think it was more because she reminded me of every Laconian interrogator who’d ever beat the shit out of me.”

“As revenge for a beating goes, a face shot is pretty good.”

“It didn’t make me feel better.”

“You know,” Miller said, “there was this guy when I was just starting with Star Helix. Jason. Pissed off the boss, I don’t remember how. Got stuck working data forensics. That doesn’t sound bad, but what it meant was going through people’s logs. The security footage. The creepy shit perps kept hidden from the main partitions. Day after day after day of watching horrific things play out and not being able to do a goddamn thing about it. It started getting into his head. The union shrink called it ‘continuous ongoing trauma.’ We all kind of knew what was coming. That one reminds me of him.”

Jim killed his mic and launched himself up after them, following the bottoms of their feet. “How long did he last?”

“Year and a half. Almost nineteen months. We all thought that was

pretty damn good. Most people on that job find a way to get out after six months.”

“I don’t think we have six months.”

“I’m just saying Colonel Friendly had an edge to her before all this started. She’s not doing well now. You should be ready for the possibility that you’ll have to shoot her again before this is over.”

“Last time I shot her she wasn’t in Laconian power armor, and I still didn’t successfully kill her.”

“Well, old fella,” Miller said, “that’s gonna be a problem.”

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Chapter Forty-Two: Alex

I'm still seeing lag on the aft PDCs," Alex said. "It's only fifteen milliseconds, though. It's not bad."

"I hear you," Amos said. "But I don't have anything else I'm doing, and lag's still lag. Give me a minute to isolate the line."

"You got it," Alex said. The flight deck was dim, the way he liked to keep it, but the dark wasn't calming. Even the sounds of the *Rocinante*, familiar as the face in his mirror, seemed ominous. His back and shoulders were tight enough that he'd had a low-level headache for what felt like days, and he couldn't guess the last time he'd slept through the night. And that was before Jim and Teresa had headed into the alien station with a stone-cold killer. Before Jim had infected himself with the protomolecule. Before Duarte had started reforging humanity into a single, enormous organism that seemed like it wanted to kill him and Amos and Naomi personally.

Put that way, a little lost sleep was probably appropriate.

"Okay," Amos said. "Try now."

Alex tapped the test routine. "Still seeing it."

"Good. Now the aft PDC junction."

"Same lag."

"Aft general?"

"That looks good."

Amos' sigh had a facial expression that went with it, even though the big man wasn't on camera. Raised eyebrows, lips pulling to one side, like a father watching his kid fail at something important. Equal parts affection and disappointment. "Well, that means it's the vacuum channel between 'em. I'll try flushing it."

Naomi's voice came from the flight deck below him and the system comms at the same time. "You need a hand with that?"

“I wouldn’t say no,” Amos replied. “It ain’t exactly a one-person job.”

“On my way, then.” And then, only through the air, “Alex, keep an eye on the gates. If anything transits in—”

“I’ll sing out. Don’t worry about that.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey, Naomi? I just want you to know, whatever happens, it’s been a real honor shipping with you all this time.”

“I don’t think I can take another farewell speech, Alex.”

“No. But I wanted you to know.”

There was a pause, and then she said, “It’s been an honor for me too.” And then she was gone, heading down toward the space between the hulls with Amos to fine-tune their ship one last time.

It felt weird, not having Teresa there to help Amos out. The kid hadn’t been on the *Roci* for all that long, but he’d gotten so used to her presence that the change threw him a little. Jim not being there was worse. He kept wanting to check in with him, see if he was sleeping or on the scopes or down getting some coffee. There was a part of Alex’s head that just couldn’t wrap itself around the idea that Jim wasn’t on the *Roci*. And that Clarissa wasn’t. And that Bobbie wasn’t.

Now that it looked like their last go-round, he saw that he’d always kind of expected everyone to show up again somehow. It was silly when he thought about it, but it didn’t *feel* ridiculous at all. Years had passed since Clarissa died, but Alex’s heart was still patiently waiting to see her name on the duty roster. Bobbie was gone—he’d watched her go—and he still expected to hear her voice in the galley, laughing and giving Amos their peculiar kind of rough sibling grief.

The dead were still around him, because he couldn’t bring himself to believe that they weren’t. He could know it. He could understand. But like a kid who’d lost something precious, he’d never been able to shake that sense that maybe, just maybe, if he looked again, it would be there. Maybe the people he loved weren’t gone forever. Maybe the past—his past, his losses, his mistakes—were close enough for him to reach back and fix them if he stretched just right. Maybe, despite everything, it could still be okay.

“Check it now,” Amos said, and Alex ran the test.

“Well, holy shit,” he said. “That did it.”

“No lag?”

“One millisecond.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not getting better than that,” Amos agreed. “I’m packing up the toolkit and moving on to the rail gun.”

“I’ll be here,” Alex said, and it felt more like a prayer than it usually did.

He refreshed the tactical map just to see that it hadn’t changed, turned on some music and turned it off again. According to the last data they’d gotten before the repeaters shut off, the first of the incoming ships should already have been there. That they weren’t meant that the situation outside the ring space had changed, and he didn’t get to know what it had changed into. When he’d been a young man back on Mars, even before he’d joined up with the navy, one of his cousins had talked him into joining a martial arts school for a few weeks. One of the exercises the teacher had given them was to put a sack over their head and try to anticipate where the more advanced students were going to attack them from. The mixture of vulnerability, attention, and sickeningly acute anticipation wasn’t that different from what he was carrying now. He refreshed the tactical map again.

Naomi came back to the ops deck below him. The sweetness of chamomile and the soft, metallic sound of strapping into a crash couch announced her. A few seconds later, Elvi’s voice, pressed thin and tinny by the comms, floated up. She was too quiet for Alex to make out the words, but her tone was tense, her words staccato.

“Understood,” Naomi said. “I’m a little shorthanded right now, though. Send someone over, and I’ll set the permissions for them.”

Alex waited a few seconds to be sure he wasn’t interrupting, then shouted down, “Everything all right with the *Falcon*?”

“They’re a little short on some supplies for the stay-out-of-my-head drugs. Elvi wanted to raid our med bay.”

“Look at it like that, it’s kind of a good sign,” Alex said.

“Not following you.”

“Well, if Duarte wasn’t worried that there was something we could do, he’d just wait for us to run out of our meds, wouldn’t he? This whole moving ships around and shutting down repeaters and all? He’s only doing that because he thinks it’s worth doing. So we must be a threat, somehow.”

“I wonder if he’d tell us how. I mean if we asked really nicely,” Naomi said. Her voice was a harmony of despair and grim humor.

“We’ll figure it out,” Alex said. “Hey, once Elvi’s got what she needs from the med bay, should I pull the bridge? We’re going to be more maneuverable in a fight if we don’t have to match to the *Falcon*.”

“No,” Naomi said. “The *Roci*’s the flagship of the underground, the *Falcon*’s the flagship for Laconia, and all those other ships out there are watching us. I don’t want anything that will make it seem like maybe we’re two independent fleets. Besides which, we’re the back line. If the fighting gets to us, it’ll be because a lot of other shit has gone wrong.”

“Or because the *Whirlwind* gets here,” Alex said.

“In which case, it doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah,” Alex said, and then more quietly and to himself, “Yeah. But at least we got the fuckers spooked.”

As if in answer, a wave of presence washed over him, and there were people with him. A wave of impressions—an older woman in an apartment on Luna, a younger man who had something wrong with his right foot, a child in an unpaved street kicking a worn ball. A vast sense of humanity—masculine and feminine and both and neither, exhausted and exultant and enraged, young and old—washed through him like someone had turned on a fire hose. He felt the idea of Alex Kamal eroding and bit his lip to bring him back to his own body, his own self.

It’s all right to let go, a voice said with the complexity and depth of a choir. If angels had voices, they’d have sounded like this. *It’s all right to let go. Holding on is only pain and weariness. Let us carry you, and you can rest. You can let go now.* It was almost persuasive. It was almost enough.

The wave passed, but it didn’t go entirely away. It persisted, a little pressure like a hand resting on the back of his head. A small touch that was invitation and threat. He trembled a little as he took the peach-colored tab out of his pocket. He chewed it, breaking it into powder in his mouth to get the drugs into his bloodstream faster. It was as bitter as sin.

“Did y’all feel that too?” he asked on the ship comm.

“I did,” Amos said. “Can’t say I liked it.”

Naomi said, “It felt more focused than before. I think it’s trying to soften us up. Get anyone that’s a borderliner over to its side.”

“I don’t think so, Boss,” Amos said. “I got more the sense of surrender-or-die.”

Alex’s tactical map threw an alert up, bright red dots at a tight cluster of

gates. The *Roci* pulled up a flash analysis from the old data and the silhouettes and drive signatures. Based on what ships had been on approach before and what they saw now, there were six ships—one Laconian gunship, three pirate hunters, and two private freighters with aftermarket torpedo racks—coming in fast through a tight cluster of gates all within about a twenty-degree sweep of the ring space.

“I think the rail gun’s looking fine,” Amos said. “I’m going to head for engineering, get the patch kits ready in case someone starts poking holes in us.”

Over the comms, another voice came, broadcast to all ships. “This is Captain Botton of the *Derecho*. We have the enemy in sight. We are moving to engage.”

“Belay that,” Naomi shouted from the ops deck. “All ships, evade and defend, but stay in position.”

On the tactical map, the *Derecho* shifted toward the incoming ships, but the rest of Naomi’s fleet held steady. Fifty-odd flecks of blue diffused through the ring space and half a dozen red clustered like a knife driving toward the station at its center. Diving toward the *Roci* and the *Falcon* and Jim. If the dots seemed to move slowly, it was only because the distances were so huge.

“What are you looking at?” Alex called.

“Not sure yet,” Naomi shouted back, and six more dots appeared on the tactical map, falling in from gates on the opposite side of the ring space. “That. I was waiting for that.”

The comms chirped out an error, and Naomi cursed. Alex pulled up a mirror of her screen, just to see what the issue was. Broad-spectrum jamming coming from all the enemy ships. The whole broadcast spectrum shimmered with noise and false requests stacked one on another until the *Roci* gave up and rebooted the antennas. Alex had been in a lot of fights, and he’d never seen anything this comprehensive outside a pirate attack.

“Alex, can you get me tightbeam locks?”

“Tell me who you want to talk to, and I’ll get them up.”

A list appeared on his screen, and he started queuing. Getting the lock, sending the orders, and moving to the next ship didn’t take that much longer than broadcast would have, but the invisible hand on the back of his head weighed a little heavier. Coordinating Naomi’s forces without broadcast

meant building an ad hoc network that kept track of where all the other ships were and bounced between them, trading data back and forth as quickly as the lasers could carry them. In theory, it was entirely possible. In practice, it was more complicated. Any ship that had a buffer fail would mean slowing down the whole system. Any laser that lost alignment meant lost orders, the doubling up of retransmission requests, the opportunity for confusion and corruption and mistakes.

The enemy were outnumbered five to one, and the enemy ships burned in weird, spiraling paths, drawing Naomi's fleet toward them and then spinning away before they got in range. Tempting Naomi's forces to overreach, but never engaging. Alex wasn't sure this was even a real attack so much as a feint to see how Naomi would react until the *Derecho* came inside firing range of the first group of ships.

The timing of the attack was astounding. The farthest of the ships bloomed, emptying its torpedoes like a dandelion shedding seeds. Then the next nearest, then the next, then the one closest. Wave after wave, with the first torpedoes going just slightly slower to give the missiles behind them time to catch up. Alex set the *Roci*'s scopes to track what it could.

The *Derecho* was a *Storm*-class destroyer. The backbone of the Laconian Navy. The other ships were weaker, smaller, with fewer weapons. If anyone had asked him, Alex would have put his money on the *Derecho* against all of them without a second thought. The full loads of all the ships poured out and fell onto the *Derecho* with impact times coordinated to the millisecond. The *Derecho*'s PDCs were in constant fire, its counter missiles taking out a dozen enemy torpedoes at a time, and it was still overwhelmed.

The impact was like seeing a sudden, brief sun. When it faded, the destroyer was on the drift, spinning slowly toward the annihilating edge of the ring space with nothing that could rescue it. He hoped that everyone aboard was already dead.

"Holy shit," Naomi said.

"I get the feeling this isn't going to be like other fights," Alex said over the comms. He was pretty sure his voice wasn't shaking.

"Easier to take something out when you don't give a shit about what comes after," Amos agreed. "Those ships are finished, but I don't think anyone on 'em cares."

It's all right to let go. Put down your weapons now, and you will be

saving humanity, not destroying it. Don't be afraid of the changes that are coming, they are the only thing that can save us all. Alex gritted his teeth until his jaw ached.

"Alex!" Naomi shouted, and he realized it wasn't the first time she'd done it.

"Sorry, sorry," Alex said. "I'm here. What's going on?"

"I need a tightbeam to the *Godalming*. I need it now."

Alex scrambled, finding the ship. It was a pirate that worked with the underground. He found it at the edge of Naomi's forces, almost on the other side of the ring space from the corpse of the *Derecho*. The light delay to it was small enough that they could talk in real time.

"*Godalming*," Naomi said, "this is the *Rocinante*. You're off your assigned pattern."

The voice that answered was older and rough. "We have a shot at this pinché motherfucker, *Rocinante*. We're taking it."

"You don't, though," Naomi said.

Alex pulled up the tactical, and even then, he didn't see it at first. The other ships with their odd spiraling paths had teased their own ships farther and farther apart until one strayed too far. Now, like different limbs of the same beast, the enemy ships had turned, burning hard on paths that would keep the pirate from support and help while they surrounded it.

"We're fine," the voice from *Godalming* said, stubbornly. "We've taken worse than this."

It's all right to let go. There's no honor in death.

The tactical threw another alert up. Five more red dots transiting through different ring gates in the same moment. Alex saw them now for what they were. A hunt group.

He was already setting up the queue of tightbeam connections, new orders to address the new enemy, when another transit came. Small and blisteringly fast, already braking hard to shed its velocity so that it wouldn't slam into the ring station and die. The *Roci* estimated the burn at something near twenty gs. Even if the people in the ship were in submersion tanks, they were in as much danger from their own deceleration as from the fight they were diving into.

"Naomi?"

"Get us there," she said.

There wasn't time to detach from the *Falcon*, so Alex took control of both ships, whipping them around and laying in a coordinated burn to keep them together. The tiny, fast ship would be half blinded by its own drive cone, but the other enemy ships would see everything the *Roci* did. All the eyes were connected. All the minds were one. Alex laid in a firing solution, synced with the *Falcon*, and put a rail-gun slug out along the enemy's path. It was already dodging even as he fired the shot. Alex switched to torpedoes and fired a tight spread, set to detonate between the ship and the station.

The missiles launched as an emergency mayday came from the *Godalming* and then cut off. They seemed to crawl across the display. Alex willed them to go faster, to defy the laws of physics just a little bit. Just for him.

"They're not going to hit," Naomi said.

"They're not meant to," Alex said. "I'm just trying to put some debris in their way."

The torpedoes blinked out as they detonated, and the *Roci* tracked the spheres of energy and scrap metal that radiated out along the paths they'd been going. The fast ship came into the spheres like a stone falling through a cloud. Alex held his breath. There was still vastly more empty space in those fields than matter, but at the speed the dropship was going, even a sliver of metal the size of a fingernail clipping would be enough...

The enemy ship's drive flickered. Alex exhaled.

"Good job," Amos said over the comms.

"Sometimes you're lucky," Alex said, but he felt a little bloom of pride all the same.

"Pull us back," Naomi said. "I want us parked right outside Jim's entrance. They're trying to get to the station, and we're going to be the last thing they have to go through to get there."

Chapter Forty-Three: Jim

The passageways varied. Some were large enough to fit a ship through, more like a dry dock than a corridor. Some were like the *Roci* or the *Falcon*, well fitted to a human form. Some were barely crawl spaces and some as thin as drinking straws. Probably there were others too small for the naked eye to see. The station functioned at all sizes, like a fractal of itself.

Jim's fever was steady, but a numbness had started at his feet and fingers. Pins and needles at first, and then a growing absence. If he squeezed his hands together, he could feel the deep pressure like an ache, but lighter touch was gone. And there was a vibrant, unsteady, electric feeling in his belly that he didn't like. Tanaka didn't ask him for another health update, though, and he didn't volunteer anything.

The passage they were trying bent sharply, but Jim had lost a sense of direction. It might have been turning in toward the center of the station or out toward its skin. The only things he was sure of were that Tanaka always seemed certain of the next path to try and they were running out of time. Jim and Teresa followed Tanaka around the bend and forward into a widening where the passage they were in crossed another like it traveling at an oblique angle. Tanaka stopped at the junction and tapped at the wrist controls on her suit. Her scowl was harsh enough to sharpen knives on.

"Is there something you're looking for?" Jim asked on the open channel. "This is kind of a large structure to just hope we bump into Duarte."

Tanaka's voice buzzed with annoyance. "I have a complete physical map produced by the *Falcon* with best-guess locations based on structure and energy flow that appear to be more approximate and inaccurate than expected..."

"Or the place keeps changing around us," Miller said with a shrug.

"... In addition I have chemical markers that would be more useful if I had a different suit, but which I'm certain will get us to our goal. There's

some noise, but I'm making progress."

Miller scratched his nose, and Jim's started itching. "I don't think she's making progress. But violent, frustrated, and heavily armed? Not a combination I'd push."

Teresa floated at Jim's side. Her face was pale and there was a darkness to the skin around her eyes like she'd gone too long without sleep.

Jim put a hand on her shoulder, and it took a few seconds before she looked over. "How're you holding together?" he asked.

"I keep hearing a boy talking about how much he misses his sister. I think he's speaking Korean. I don't really have Korean, but I still understand him. It's like the Tower of Babel in reverse."

"Don't let it distract you," Tanaka said.

Jim expected Teresa to bite back, but she only shook her head. "I just want to find my father."

"This way," Tanaka said, gesturing at a branch of the intersecting passage. "The traces look stronger this way."

She pushed off, and Teresa followed. Jim wondered what they'd do if he went his own way, then sighed and went after them. He wasn't leaving the kid to Tanaka.

"You know," Miller said, "you get a repeat offender, and after a while you kind of get to know them."

Up ahead, the passageway brightened and split at a fork like an artery into two smaller versions of itself. Tanaka went through one, and Teresa followed, drifting until she bumped against the wall before she righted herself.

"I forgot how much I didn't miss your gnomish cop stories," he said.

"And yet, here I am. I'm making a point. You see the way someone works, you see the way they think. Joey cuts through a wall to get into warehouses a half a dozen times, the next time you see a warehouse with a hole cut in it, you maybe want to check where Joey was that night. People don't change, not really. The strategies that work for them, they reach for."

"I hear you."

"So I look at your pal Duarte, right? And it looks to me like Eros all over again. Not the goal, maybe, but the method. Eros, the shit took over people's bodies and made whatever it wanted out of them."

"And Duarte's doing the same thing. Using people like building blocks

for something he wants.”

“Maybe.”

Jim looked over. Miller seemed to be at his side, even though he knew it wasn't really true. The illusion was perfect.

Miller hoisted a weary eyebrow. “You need to ask yourself whether you think Duarte's the perp, or first among victims. You know that this stuff can hook itself into your dopamine receptors. Train you up to like whatever it wants you to like. Maybe it grabbed on to how he feels about the kid over there and used that as a leash. The things that built all this shit could be using him from beyond their graves the same as they used Julie. And there are some things you can only access by being in the substrate. You remember that.”

“That's uncomfortable,” Jim said. “But yes. I was thinking along the same lines.”

“Of course you were. I'm using your brain. It's not like I brought any neurons of my own to this partnership.”

“So this is just me talking to myself? That's disappointing.”

“No,” Miller said. “This is what's left of me trying to point you toward the clues. This is your case, old fella. You know more than you think you do.”

Something shifted deep in Jim's gut. It hurt for a second, and then the pain turned to a coolness that made Jim think about things like nerve damage. But his mind wasn't on his body. It was back on Eros Station when the protomolecule was first set loose. For a moment, he saw the corpse of Julie Mao in the crap little hotel room, the black spirals threading up the wall from her body. The blue fireflies floating in the air. There was something about her that tickled at the back of his mind. About her but not about her. About Eros, but not just about Eros.

“Oh,” he said. “Hey. We used heat.” Tanaka didn't turn back or respond. He checked to see if his mic was on. “Tanaka! Back on Eros, we used heat.”

Tanaka tapped her suit's thrusters, pausing in midair and turning back toward him. Teresa, nearer to the wall, caught an irregularity with her fingers and used it like a handhold. Jim slowed and stopped. Miller floated unseen at Tanaka's side until Jim glanced back, and he was there too.

“When Eros moved, it heated up,” Jim said. “Miller went in looking for a way to stop it. He looked for hot spots. If Duarte's at the center of this the

same way Juliette Mao was running Eros, he'll be using a lot of energy. Making a lot of waste heat. Even if the map's wrong, maybe that can help?"

He couldn't parse Tanaka's silence, but she paused and thought at least. The itch on Jim's nose got worse, like something tiny biting him just beside his right nostril. A swirl of blue dots wafted out of one wall, crossed to the other, and vanished again.

"All right," Tanaka said, and turned to the control panel at her wrist. A moment later, she shook her head. "I don't have connection to the *Falcon*."

Jim checked his system. The only options on it were local—Tanaka and Teresa. As far as his vac suit was concerned, there wasn't anyone else in the universe.

"We're too far in," he said. "Or maybe this place acts like a Faraday cage along with everything else."

Tanaka lowered her head. In the absence of gravity, it was just an expression of emotion. For the first time, Jim thought of her not as a threat or an enemy, but a person who was caught in the same meat grinder of a situation that he was. The thinness of her face made odd by the injury, the tightness of her mouth, the exhaustion in her eyes.

"Hey, it's all right," he said. "We can do this."

She lifted her eyes, and the woman looking out at him was the one who'd shot Amos' spine out. Any vulnerability or compassion was lost in a short-leashed hatred and rage. He was pretty sure if she didn't have a helmet on, she would have spat.

"Follow me," she said. "Stay close."

He did.

"It was a good try," Miller said.

Jim turned off his mic. "You know, I'm starting to think this might not have been a great plan."

Miller barked out a laugh, and Jim smiled. The coldness in his belly and the numbness in his limbs were the only reminders that the detective was eating him alive from the inside out. Tanaka reached another junction, this time with a shaft that looked like it was the same metallic compound as the station's exterior. It was the first one like it Jim had seen since they'd come in. She paused, and he thought he saw a thermal scan running in the subtle reflection of her helmet display.

"What happens?" he asked.

“What happens when?”

“When it gets you. The protomolecule. When it finishes taking you over, what happens?”

The detective narrowed his unreal eyes, and for a moment, Jim imagined a glimmer of unearthly blue in them. “You mean what did you let yourself in for?”

“Yeah.”

“Too late to turn back now.”

“I know. I’m just not feeling great.”

“You want bullshit happy mouth noises, or the truth.”

“Bullshit happy mouth noises.”

“It’s great,” Miller said without missing a beat. “It’s having a long, restful sleep full of interesting, vivid dreams.”

A cramp ran through Jim’s gut, sharp as a screwdriver. “You’re right. That does sound great,” he said through clenched teeth. “I really think I’m going to like that.”

“This way,” Tanaka said, going into the metal shaft. “Try to keep up.”

They fell. Jim couldn’t interpret it as anything but falling now. When he tried to see the float as moving forward or rising up, the reframe worked for a heartbeat or two, and then they were falling again. Either the little stringlike lines of force were gone now, or he’d lost the trick of seeing them. The blue fireflies were thicker here, swirling and dancing in eddies that had nothing to do with the local air. Jim found himself thinking of flocks of birds at dawn and schools of silver-scaled fish. Thousands of individual animals coordinating into something larger, wider, capable of things that no one of them could have managed. It seemed important.

Something was happening with his left hand, and he noticed that Teresa had taken it. He could see her squeezing his fingers in hers, but he couldn’t feel it.

“Don’t fall asleep,” she said, and he was pretty sure sleep was a euphemism for something more permanent. He tried to turn on his mic, but it seemed harder to do than it should have been. With his right hand, he fumbled with the helmet’s seals until he managed to pop off the visor. The air was weirdly thick, like humidity but without the water. Teresa watched him, her eyes widening. Then she pulled her own helmet off and latched it to her suit at the hip.

"I'm not going anywhere," Jim said. "I promise."

"What the fuck are you two doing?" Tanaka's voice was fuzzy compared to Teresa's. Jim made a mental note to check the speakers in his helmet when he got back to the *Roci*. Probably a loose connection.

"I was having trouble with my mic. And my nose itched."

"Teresa, put your helmet back on."

Teresa still had his hand in hers. She looked at Tanaka with a breathtakingly false innocence and pointed to her ears. *I can't hear you*. A flash of pure anger passed over Tanaka's expression, and Jim felt a little hitch of fear. But then she popped her visor open too.

"Be ready to put that back in place on my order," Tanaka said. Teresa nodded, but didn't speak.

There was a warmth radiating from the metal walls. He hadn't felt it before because his skin had been covered, but now it was like the pressure of sunlight on a hot day. Or an oven, just opened. And more than that, there was an eerie sense of pressure. He couldn't explain it. The air was hardly over a single atmosphere, but some part of him felt an inhumanly powerful force kept in check. Like the station wasn't floating in vacuum, but at the bottom of an ocean that was bigger than worlds.

"Well, that's literally true," Miller said. "That was the trick."

"What was the trick?"

Miller gestured at the walls, the fireflies, the incomprehensible complexity and strangeness of the station. "It's where the power comes from. They cracked the universe open, pushed their way in here, and it pushed back. A whole other universe trying to smash this place flat, and it powers the gates, the artifacts. That magnetic ray gun Duarte was playing with. They built stars with it. Broke rules that you can't break without a different set of physics to strain it through. You can Eve-and-apple it all you want, but this shit right here? This is all made out of original sin."

"When we find him, you make the approach," Tanaka said, and Jim didn't understand for a second what she meant.

"I understand," Teresa said with a resentment that meant it wasn't the first time she'd been told.

"I will take care of everything else."

Teresa answered more slowly this time, but she said the same thing. "I understand."

The heat was growing more intense, and Jim felt sweat starting to bead on his skin. The metal hall joined three others like it, each of them coming in at an acute angle, to form a single larger passage with a nearly symmetrical hexagonal shape that was disorienting somehow. Like the angles shouldn't quite all work together. The glow was brighter, and the heat was ramping up toward unpleasant.

Tanaka checked her wristpad. "I think we're getting close."

"We better be," Miller said, "or you three are all going to be lightly broiled before we find our perp."

Something moved ahead of them. Something bright. Jim thought for a moment he was just imagining it—protomolecule hallucination or heat exhaustion—but Tanaka moved to put herself between them and whatever it was, her armored face shield slamming closed, protecting them out of instinct. The barrel at her forearm popped open.

"Oh," Miller said. "She doesn't want to do that."

"Wait," Jim said, but Tanaka was moving forward. He followed. Without his visor on, his HUD wasn't working. His suit chimed to let him know his maneuvering thrusters were nearing half charge and he should turn back to avoid being caught on the float. In other circumstances, it would have seemed really important.

The thing was familiar, metallic blue and insectile. Half a meter taller than Tanaka, and she wasn't short. It moved with a fast twitch like a clockwork ticking from one position to the next. Now that he thought to look, there were others like it embedded in the walls all around them, so tightly packed that there might not be structure to the walls apart from their bodies.

"Don't do anything aggressive," Jim said.

"This is the first thing we've seen that looks like a sentry," Tanaka said, her voice booming out of the suit's external speakers. "We're not doubling back."

She shifted, and it shifted to block her. A feral grin stretched the asymmetry of her cheeks. Miller leaned over beside her, staring into her visor with a look of astonishment. "She really is going to get you all killed, isn't she?"

"Let me try," Jim said. "I'm here. I opened the station. At least let me try just shutting it down."

Tanaka's gun barrel closed and opened and closed again. She gestured him forward with her chin.

"Miller?"

The detective shrugged. "Give me a minute. I'll see what I can do."

Jim felt that same oddness. Flexing his phantom limb, an awareness that he was doing something, but not of what exactly it was. The cramp in his gut came again, higher now. Closer to his chest. The pain rose and fell again quickly.

"Try now," he said.

Tanaka moved to one side, and the sentinel ignored her. She moved past it, and it remained inert. Tanaka gestured Teresa forward, and the girl went as Tanaka watched the sentinel, waiting, it seemed, for an excuse to defend them. Jim went last. His breath was shallow and fast. He couldn't feel his legs below the knee.

"We're running out of time on a lot of fronts here," Miller said. "Any play you want to make, you'd better make it soon."

"Thank you," Jim murmured, "for your support and advice."

Ahead of them, the light went from blue to white. Jim fired his thrusters, moving into a chamber like a sphere a hundred meters across. Other passages like the one they'd come through were touches of darkness in the brightness. The light itself felt wrong—thick, tangible, jittering, alive. It made Jim's skin crawl.

From opposite sides of the sphere, dark filaments wove a huge web like a stalactite and a stalagmite reaching from the roof and floor of a cave to touch at a single point. Or like the wings of a great dark angel.

At the center was something the size of a human being. A man with his arms outstretched, cruciform. Thick cables of the filament wove into his sides, his arms, his legs. He was still dressed in Laconian blue, except his feet, which were bare.

Jim knew the face almost before they were close enough to see it.

"Daddy?" Teresa said.

Chapter Forty-Four: Teresa

From the moment they entered the station, Teresa had been watching James Holden die.

She'd known something was wrong with him as soon as she'd gotten to the rendezvous. She'd been around him for years, first in the State Building on Laconia, where he'd been a figure of danger and subtle threat. Then on his ship, where he'd become something smaller, gentler, and more fragile. She knew his moods, the way he used humor to cover over the darkness that haunted him, the vulnerability he carried with him, and the strength. She was fairly certain he didn't know that about her, and that was fine.

He had never reminded her of her father, though. Not until now.

She didn't put her finger on it. Not at first. She struggled with her own intrusive thoughts. The boy's voice that seemed to be just behind her speaking in a language she didn't know but understood anyway. The eerie, almost choral voice encouraging her to let her sense of self go. The woman who had given a child up for adoption and now was torn between guilt and relief. And then the Korean boy again, still lamenting his sister. It took effort for Teresa not to listen, not to engage, to hold herself to herself, and so that was what she thought Jim was doing too.

For hours, she followed Colonel Tanaka's lead, weaving in and out of the cave-maze of the station while her mind sparked and slipped. It was like a nightmare she was trying not to wake up from, and the effort kept her from consciously noticing the little things that were wrong with Jim. The way his skin tone had changed. The difference in his eyes. And more than anything, the sense of disconnection, like he was slowly peeling away from what she thought of as reality.

Once he forgot to turn off his mic, and the nonsense he was muttering to himself—*I forgot how much I didn't miss your gnomish cop stories and I hear you and Duarte's doing the same thing, using people like building*

blocks for something he wants—spilled out over the radio.

Other times, he seemed almost normal. He checked in on her and how she was doing, the same way he sometimes did on the ship. He talked with Tanaka about how to use heat to find a path for them. At those times, he seemed the way he usually did. Himself. And then they'd start moving, and he would start to drift again.

They found a passage of the same blue-glowing metallic substance as the station's shell and had started down it when Tanaka opened the private channel between them.

"There's a conversation that you and I need to have," the colonel said. "Captain Holden is compromised."

"We're all compromised," Teresa said.

"Not what I'm talking about. He injected himself with a live sample of the protomolecule. The eggheads stabilized it as much as they could, but in my estimation he is losing function quickly."

Teresa, distracted by the noise in her own head, hadn't focused on him. She did now. He was beside her, and a little back, his arms at neutral and a small, dreamy smile on his lips. A memory came to her of being in her father's room, holding his hand, trying to make him understand that Dr. Cortázar was going to kill her. The vagueness and distance were the same.

"He's fine," she said, surprised by the heat in her voice.

"I'm not asking for your judgment, I'm informing you of mine," Tanaka said. "At this point, I believe Holden may still be useful in finding and recovering the high consul, so I'm willing to take the risk associated with his condition. But I need you to understand that this will not always be the case."

"We're not leaving him behind."

"When we locate your father, you will need to make the approach to him. Convince him to stop this thing he's doing with our minds. That's what I need you to do."

"I know."

"If after that, Captain Holden has continued to decline, I will take any action I feel necessary to keep you and your father safe. I need you to understand what that might entail, because if you get upset, the high consul might too."

Teresa was quiet for a moment. Understanding exactly what Tanaka was

saying was harder than it should have been. *I don't like her*, the boy with the missing sister said. *She acts calm, but she's acting*. Teresa shook her head, but the sense of presence in her stayed the same. She had an uncomfortable memory of being Tanaka, naked and chemically altered, pinning a man to a bed. She felt his wrists pop. She remembered the pleasure in making the young man hurt. Making him fear her. *You will not like the version of me that comes calling on you then*.

"You're saying you'll kill him?"

"It might come to that, yes. If in my estimation he is compromised enough to pose a threat."

"He's not a threat. He won't be one."

"I need you to understand that this is a military operation, and my mission is to keep you and your father safe. I will do whatever I need to do to achieve that. Your duty is to approach your father. I will take care of everything after that. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Good."

Absently, Jim lifted a hand and scratched at the surface of his visor. He didn't seem aware that he was doing it. The long weeks and months of watching her father change flowed into Teresa. The horror of the sudden snap when the change came, when he went away. When she lost him. *I won't cry in a vac suit*, she thought. *I am not going to cry in my fucking vac suit*.

She tapped her suit's maneuvering thrusters, just enough to drift close to Jim. She took his hand. For a moment, he didn't seem to notice, then slowly his gaze swam over to her. His eyes were wrong. There was a shimmering in the whites that hadn't been there before. That didn't belong there.

"Don't fall asleep."

Jim started to speak, lost focus, started again. A look of frustration came over him, and without warning, he popped the visor off his helmet. He took one long breath, then another. The impulse welled up in Teresa, part defiance of Tanaka, part anger at the universe, part a weird sense of allegiance to the old man who'd plotted to get her killed once and then saved her. Teresa took off her own helmet and hooked it to the strap at her hip. The air in the corridor was oppressively warm and felt strange in her lungs.

When he spoke, she didn't hear him through the radio, but the open, alien air. *I'm not going anywhere. I promise.* She knew that wasn't true, even if he didn't.

Tanaka's voice came in a thin, tinny buzz from Jim's radio and the speakers in the helmet at Teresa's hip. "What the fuck are you two doing?"

"I was having trouble with my mic," Jim said. "And my nose itched."

"Teresa, put your helmet back on."

Or else what? Teresa thought. She was so tired of being bullied by the people who said they were there to help her. She was so tired of being Laconian. She pretended she couldn't make out Tanaka's words, even though they all knew that wasn't true. Tanaka's anger was less than her own. When Tanaka opened up her own visor, Teresa felt a little thrill of victory.

"Be ready to put that back in place on my order."

They turned their attention back to the corridor, the station, the hunt. A few minutes later, out of nowhere, Jim said, *What was the trick?* He wasn't talking to either of them.

Tanaka locked her eyes on Teresa's. *I told you there was a problem with him. I told you he was degrading.* "When we find him, you make the approach."

"I understand."

"I will take care of everything else."

"I understand."



"Daddy?"

The months had thinned him, but he hadn't grown a beard. His cheeks were as smooth-shaved as if Kelly had seen to him that morning. The old pockmarks were evidence of boyhood acne he'd suffered through long before Teresa had known him. His clothes were the same he'd worn at the State Building in Laconia, and they weren't ragged, but they seemed thin and brittle. Like paper that had been left in the rain and sun.

The black filaments that swirled in from the walls of the great, bright chamber laced into his arms and pierced his side. Tiny pulses ran through them, thickening and thinning. Flickers of blue danced in the black threads and seemed to vanish if she looked directly at them. When he opened his eyes, the irises glowed the same blue as the station, and they focused on nothing, like a blind man's.

"Daddy?" she repeated, more softly this time.

The lips that had kissed her head as a baby curved into a smile. "Teresa? Is that you?"

"I'm here. I'm right here."

"It's going to be all right," he said. "I dreamed too small before. I see that now. I thought I could save us by organizing, by keeping us together, and I was right about that. I was right, baby. But I didn't understand how to do it."

"Look at you," Teresa said, pointing at the way the station pierced his body through. "Look what it did to you."

"This is why it will work. The meat, the matter, the rude clay of us. It's hard to kill. The ones who came before were brilliant, but they were fragile. Genius made of tissue paper, and the chaos blew them apart. We can be the best of both now..."

Teresa shifted closer. Her father, sensing her though his eyes never rested on her, tried to embrace her, but the dark threads held his arms. She put her own arms around him. His skin was burning hot against her cheek.

"We need to get him out of that fucking web," Tanaka said. "Can he get loose? Ask him if he can get loose."

"Daddy," Teresa said. Tears were sheeting over her eyes and turning everything into smears of color and light. "Daddy, we need to go. You need to come with us. Can you do that?"

"No no no, baby. No. This is where I am supposed to be. Where I was always supposed to be. You'll understand soon, I promise."

"High Consul Duarte. My name is Colonel Aliana Tanaka. I have been given Omega status by Admiral Trejo and assigned the task of finding and recovering you."

"We were doomed as soon as the gates appeared," he said, but to her, not Tanaka. "If no one had taken responsibility, we would have bumbled along until the other ones came and killed us all. I saw that, and I did what I had

to do. It was never for me. The empire was only a tool. It was a way to coordinate. To prepare for the war that was coming. The war in heaven.”

A hand touched her shoulder, pulling her gently back. It was Jim, his expression full of sorrow. “Come away. Come on.”

“It’s him. It’s still him.”

“Is and isn’t,” Jim said, and his voice was strange, like the cadence belonged to someone else. “I’ve seen this before. The station’s inside him. What it wants and what he wants? No way to tell one from the other. Not now.”

“You’ve seen this before?” Tanaka said. “Where?”

“On Eros,” Jim said. “Julie was like this. She wasn’t so far gone, but she was just like this.” And then, to Teresa, “I’m sorry, kid. I’m so sorry.”

Teresa blinked the sheet of tears away as best she could. In the distortion, Jim looked odd. The shape of his face seemed changed, bent in a permanent weariness and amusement. She blinked again, and he was only himself.

Tanaka was jetting from side to side, her maneuvering thrusters hissing constantly as she circled the Gothic sculpture that had been Teresa’s father. “I need you to talk to him. He needs to stop this. You have to make him stop this.”

“Colonel, I am right here, and I can hear you,” her father said. He turned his head toward Tanaka, his eyes steady and blank. “And I remember you. You were one of the first with me. You saw Mars die, and you were part of the remaking of it in the empire. This is the continuation of that. This is what we were fighting for all along. We will make all of humanity safe and whole and unified.”

“Sir,” Tanaka said, “we can do this without mindfucking everyone. We can fight this war and still be human beings.”

“You don’t understand, Colonel. But you will.”

Teresa shook herself out of Jim’s grasp. “You don’t have to do this. You can come back.” But she heard the despair in her own voice as she said it.

Her father’s smile was beatific. “It’s all right to let go. Holding on is only pain and weariness. You can let go.”

Teresa felt a wave of nothingness swim through her, an emptiness where her self should be, and she shouted. It wasn’t words or a warning or a threat. It was just her heart screaming because there wasn’t anything else to do.

She fired the suit thrusters, slamming herself into the black web that held her father, and she started ripping. Grabbing handfuls of the dark, spiraling filament and yanking it free. The smell of ozone came into the sweltering light like the threat of storms at the edge of a heatwave. Her father shouted and tried to push her away, but the strands held him.

Jim's voice seemed to come from a great distance. "Teresa! Get away from there! Don't damage the station!"

Her universe shrank to her body, her vac suit, her father's compromised flesh, and the alien thing consuming him. He writhed in pain as she tried to tear him free, and screamed for her to stop.

A force grabbed her like a vast, invisible hand and pulled her away. A million tiny, unreal needles bore into her flesh and began to rip her apart. *Oh, she thought, my father's going to kill me.*

And then, the pain eased. Jim was beside her, and for a moment someone else was too, but she couldn't see him. The glimmer in Jim's eyes was brighter, and his skin had gone waxy with an eerie opalescence under it. His teeth were bared in raw, animal effort.

"He's gone," Jim said. It was barely a grunt. "He's gone. If he's willing to kill you, it isn't him anymore. He's gone."

Her father—the thing that had been her father—was still held in the black threads. His mouth was open in pain and rage, but no sound came out. The blue fireflies danced along the torn threads like ants from a kicked hill.

"Holden," Tanaka said. "We have a problem."

Tanaka had her back to them. Over her shoulder, the wide, bright space was filling with bodies. From every corridor and passage, the alien sentinels were pouring in like smoke.

Chapter Forty-Five: Naomi

The closer the *Rocinante* and the *Falcon* kept to the station, the more cover the alien structure provided and the less of the field of battle was in her scopes. The *Roci* was able to build real-time reports by syncing with other ships in her little fleet by tightbeam and making a patchwork map with data from half a dozen different ships. She didn't like it, though. It left her feeling half blinded.

"Two more in," Alex said.

"Got them," Naomi shouted back. One from Argatha system, another from Quivira. She set the *Roci* to identifying their silhouettes and drive signatures. Neither one was running a transponder. There was no reason to. Everyone on the hive mind's side already knew who they were, and they weren't about to let her in on it.

On the far side of the ring space, three enemy ships were slowly dismantling her fighters. She'd lost the *Amador* and the *Brian and Kathy Yates*. The *Senator* had taken heavy damage and was venting air. More enemy ships were coming through the rings, wave after wave after wave. Some of them—many of them—were ships she'd called there. Laconian science and military ships, survey and support ships from the underground. The crews had answered to her or Elvi or Trejo, and now were something else entirely. A different organism.

When she had a moment to gather herself, she wondered how many people there were still left out there. Had Duarte invaded and co-opted the minds of everyone in all the systems, or was he targeting the ones on their way toward the rings? She imagined whole stations filled with silent bodies working in perfect coordination, the need for verbal communication replaced by the direct influence of brain on brain. A single hand with billions of fingers. If that was what humanity was now, there would never be another conversation, another misunderstanding or joke or shitty pop

song. She tried to imagine what it would be like for a baby born into a world like that, not as an individual but an appendage that had never known itself as anything else.

“Naomi?” Alex said. “Three more, and one of ’em is a *Storm*-class.”

“I see it. Tightbeam to the... the *Lin Siniang*.”

“It’s yours,” Alex said.

“And watch the dropship coming in from Torfaen system.”

“Just waiting until she’s in range.”

Naomi pulled up their ammunition supply even though she didn’t really have time to. They still had a decent number of torpedoes and rail-gun slugs. PDCs were a little low. And they were the back of the fleet, to the degree that a spherical battlefield had a back.

The connection came up. The woman on the other side of it had long, black hair pulled back in a functional bun and the old-school split circle of the OPA tattooed on her collarbone, though she looked too young to have been born when the OPA was still a real force. The *Roci* put her name up in a chyron for Naomi.

“Captain Melero, I need you to intercept and delay the incoming ships. Take the *Duffy*, the *Cane Rosso*, and the *Malak Alnuwr*.”

The young woman’s eyes went flat and her face pale. She’d just been handed a death sentence, and they both knew it. *Belay that*, Naomi thought. *Get your people and run like hell. Live to fight another day.* Except there weren’t any other days. This was the last day anyone had, and it was only as long as the time they could win for Jim and Teresa.

She tried not to think about Jim.

“Compra todas, sa sa,” Melero said. “Count on us, ke?”

She dropped the connection. Naomi didn’t think she’d ever met Captain Melero before, and she was certain she would never see or speak to the woman again. She wished they could put together a more coordinated defense, but the best she could manage was to set small groups together and give them leave to do what they thought was best. That and hope.

Her timer went off, and she took another pill out of her pocket and swallowed it dry.

You don’t need to do that. There’s no shame in letting go. It’s going to happen eventually anyway. Naomi didn’t push back at the thought. She had the impression that engaging with the other thoughts and memories, even to

fight against them, made them stronger. The best she could manage was to let them rise up in her and fall away, and keep chugging down pharmaceuticals until her kidneys cried uncle. She wasn't worried about long-term damage. An outright overdose would be bad, but she didn't see much option there either. If she was swamped by other people's selves, lost in the chatter of minds that weren't her own, it would be just as good as dead. From a tactical standpoint, worse.

"Everyone brace," Alex said. "I'm taking the shot."

"Braced," Amos said over the comms as Naomi centered herself in her crash couch. The kick of the rail gun was almost subliminal, counteracted by a thrust from the drive, but if the timing went wrong, she didn't want to be bouncing around the deck like a bad throw in golgo.

She pulled up the scopes in time to see the dropship scattering into bright dust. There had been people on that ship. She wondered if they were dead now, or if their memories and opinions and senses of their own selves were stuck flickering through a billion different brains that weren't theirs to begin with. Or if they'd been dead before their bodies were destroyed. Maybe those were different ways of saying the same thing.

The comms chimed with a connection request from the *Falcon*. From Elvi. Naomi checked her timers. The window for the *Whirlwind*'s entry into the system was already open. Depending on how hard the *Magnetar* had burned and braked, it could pass through the Laconia gate at any time now. The end was about as nigh as they got. She accepted the connection.

Elvi looked even more exhausted than usual. Naomi had a flashbulb memory of a dark-skinned man with pale hair and soft, hooded eyes reciting *My candle burns at both ends. It will not last the night*. She didn't know if the recollection was hers or someone else's.

"Give me good news."

"Well," Elvi said. "It looks like the isolation chamber is effective in stopping the shared consciousness effect. Being in the catalyst chamber stops the hive mind, even after Tanaka's psychoactives have dropped to subclinical levels."

"How quickly can we expand that to something, say, the size of a gunship?"

"With enough labor and materials, we could probably pull it off in a couple years. Until then, you can pick the three, maybe four people you

want to stuff in there until someone opens it and hauls them out again.”

Naomi couldn't help laughing, but there wasn't any mirth in it.

“Yeah,” Elvi said. “I know.”

“Get me a report. How the isolation chamber works. Directions for building one. We'll put it on a torpedo, get it through some gates. It won't do us any good, but maybe someone out there can benefit from it.”

“Can I start it ‘Be sure, stranger, to let the Laconians know we rest here, obedient to their command’?”

“I won't stop you,” Naomi said. “Sol, Auberon, and Bara Gaon. Where else do we send it?”

“We should send it everywhere. The big tech centers are where Duarte's most likely to concentrate. The smaller colonies might not have the supplies and manufacturing ready to go, but the knowledge will keep as long as there's anyone who's not part of the hive mind.”

“If there is anyone. I've got thirty-one ships left, including us. I'm about to have fewer. I don't have thirteen hundred torpedoes, and every one of these messages we send is one less round we can use defending ourselves and Jim.”

Elvi nodded. “I'll get you the data.”

“Do it quickly,” Naomi said. “We don't have long.”

Elvi dropped the connection. On the tactical display, the *Lin Siniang* and the little battle group with it were engaging with the two new enemy ships. Four more enemy arrived simultaneously in different quadrants of the ring space. *They're pulling us apart*, she thought. *They're drawing us away from the station*. And it was working. Naomi's little fleet was falling apart before her eyes, and there was nothing she could do about it. As she watched, the *Cane Rosso* blinked from green to orange and vanished like an ember going cool. Thirty ships to defend one station with the full weight of thirteen hundred systems pouring down on her.

“Alex,” she said. “We have four more friends who've come to the dance. Get me tightbeams to... the *Lastialus* and the *Kaivalya*.”

“Coming up,” Alex said, as calmly as if she'd asked him for a flight schedule.

He had been her pilot longer than anyone else in her life. They knew each other's moods and rhythms, and stress only made them work more smoothly together. Maybe group minds weren't that strange after all. In

their way, the crew of *Roci* had developed something between them that, over the decades, had felt like more than the sum of its parts. It was cracked and fractured now—Bobbie gone, Clarissa gone, Jim gone, Amos changed—but with her and Alex, there was still the spark of it. The last smooth surface in a universe that had gone rough and biting.

“Well shit,” Alex said. “Looks like last-dance time.”

The alert came up on her tactical map as he spoke. A new ship had arrived through the Laconia gate. Its transponder was off, but that didn’t matter. The silhouette was enough. Larger than anything besides the void cities and uncannily organic in its design, the *Voice of the Whirlwind* came into the ring space. It was almost a relief to see it. The dread of knowing it was coming had been terrible. Now the worst had happened, and all that was left was playing out the last few moves, and then packing up the board and seeing whether death was the end or something more interesting.

She started a recording. “This is Naomi Nagata. Concentrate all fire on the *Whirlwind*. When you’re dry, evacuate the area on your own judgment. We will hold our post.”

She grabbed the comms and set the *Roci* to deliver it to each of the remaining ships in turn. By the time she’d finished, the *Whirlwind* was visibly farther into the ring space. Its velocity was terrifying and its braking burn murderous. The *Roci* ran the numbers in an instant. The *Magnetar* was on course for the ring station, covering half a million clicks in a little more than twenty minutes. They were coming to protect Duarte.

“Hey,” Amos said through the comms. “About how many rail-gun rounds do you think we could put in that thing before it gets here?”

“Only one way to be sure,” Alex answered, and Naomi felt an overwhelming rush of affection for them both.

All across the ring space, the last vestiges of humanity, the few whose minds were still their own, threw the missiles and PDC rounds and rail-gun slugs that they had toward the incoming behemoth, clear in the knowledge that it wouldn’t matter. Naomi watched as the torpedoes were shot down, the streams of fast-moving slugs dodged or ignored. They were gnats, and the *Whirlwind* could disregard them.

A message from Elvi came with the report on the isolation chamber, and Naomi put it in the *Roci*’s torpedoes—a last message in her final bottles—and fired them out. The *Roci*’s loadout dropped to zero. *Well, you tried, an*

old man said. *You did try*. She could picture his house—a little row house on a thin street in Bogotá—and the orange tabby who slept on his windowsill. Like she was falling into a daydream, she felt the other lives around her, felt herself forgetting Naomi Nagata and the pain and loss and anger of being her. And also the joy.

She checked her timer. It was still an hour before her next dose of the drugs was due. But by that time, it wouldn't matter. She opened the ship-wide comm. She tried to find her last words. Something that would fit the love she had for these men, this ship, the life she'd led. The *Whirlwind* was more than halfway to the station already, though the second stretch would be slower. Even at a quarter million kilometers away, the *Roci* was picking up the excess radiation from its drive plume.

The shout, when it came, literally defied description. It was an overpowering taste of mint or a vibrant purple or the shuddering sense of an orgasm without the pleasure. Her mind skipped and jumped, trying to make sense of something it had no capacity to understand, matching the signal to one sensation and then another and then another until she found herself on the float above her crash couch with no idea how much time had passed.

"Ah," Alex said. "Did you guys feel that?"

"Yup," Amos said.

"Any idea what it was?"

"Nope."

Naomi's tactical map was still up, and it had changed. The *Whirlwind* had cut its braking burn and was on its way to overshooting the station entirely. The other ships—both the enemy and her own—were in disarray. The comms lit up with a broadcast message, and she realized that the jamming had stopped. She accepted the message.

The woman on the screen was young, dark-skinned, with close-cropped hair, and Naomi had seen her once before.

"This is Admiral Sandrine Gujarat of the Laconian battleship *Voice of the Whirlwind*. I would very much appreciate someone telling me how the fuck I got here."

Naomi's finger hovered over Reply, while she tried to think of what to say. She was still there when another broadcast message came through, this one from the *Falcon*. Elvi's eyes were wide and bright, and her smile was so fierce it was almost a threat.

“This is Dr. Elvi Okoye, head of the Laconian Science Directorate, in cooperation with Naomi Nagata of the *Rocinante*. You have all experienced a cognitive manipulation. You may be disoriented or have inappropriately strong emotional reactions. No ships in this space pose any threat. Please stand down and remain safely in place. We will reach out to each of you shortly. Message repeats...”

Naomi turned off the comms. In the quiet of the *Rocinante*, she let her mind drift, and nothing drifted back. No outside memories. No voices. No sense of looming invisible presence.

“Naomi?” Alex called down. “I’m feeling weird up here.”

“It’s gone. The hive mind. It’s gone.”

“So it’s not just me?”

Amos’ voice was calm and affable. “Nobody’s bumping into the back of my head either.”

“He did it,” she said. “I think Jim did it.”

She closed her eyes and relaxed and something hit her, hard as a kick, from every direction at once. Her eyes shot open, and she couldn’t quite understand what she was seeing. The ops deck hadn’t changed at all—the comm display, the crash couches, the passage up to the flight deck and down to the rest of the ship. And also everything had been transformed. The comm display was a field of bright pixels, glowing and flickering too fast for the human eye to follow. The detail of each one made the shapes of words and buttons that they created too abstract to comprehend, like trying to see the curve of a planet from its surface. She raised her hand, and the skin on her knuckles was a range of crags and valleys as complex as anything that stone and erosion had ever managed. When she cried out, the air fluttered with her breath, compression waves bouncing and curving, enhancing and annihilating.

She tried to find the clasp on the crash couch straps, but she couldn’t make out the surface where one thing began and another ended. And streaking through the emptiness of things, the vacuum that still lived in the heart of matter, threads of living blackness, more solid and real than anything she’d ever seen. They writhed and swam, and behind them, everything swirled and came apart. With no one manning the lighthouse now, the elder gods returned.

Oh, she managed to think, right.

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Chapter Forty-Six: Tanaka

Teresa!” Holden shouted at the girl. “Get away from there! Don’t damage the station!”

Well, Tanaka thought, aren’t we just fucked?

The girl ignored him, ripping at the black threads that were wired into the high consul’s body. None of this was in her brief. None of it was going even remotely the way she or Trejo had intended or hoped. There was some independent judgment she was going to have to exercise very, very soon now.

The girl shuddered and jumped, but not in a way that made sense. Something had her, lifting her away from what had been Duarte. The raw panic on Holden’s face told her that he knew what this was, and it wasn’t good. The girl screamed without seeming to be aware that she was screaming, and Holden grabbed at her, pulled himself to her. For a moment, the girl looked like she was widening. Tanaka could almost imagine invisible angels pulling at her arms and legs. There had been an execution method like that once, she thought. Tie a horse to each limb of the prisoner and see which one kept the biggest chunk. But then Holden shouted and the angels all vanished, leaving the girl behind.

Jesus, you’re disappointed? You’re disappointed you didn’t just see that girl killed? a man’s voice said. *What is wrong with you? How do you live with yourself?* Then, something else—a man, a woman, something—was with her and she was in the administrator’s office at Innis Deep and she was eleven. The administrator was explaining that her parents were dead. The overwhelming sense, unspoken but clear, was pity. This was why she’s so broken. This is why she hurts people. This is why she only fucks men she can dominate, because she’s always so frightened. Look at all the things that were wrong with her.

“I swear to God,” she said, softly enough that Holden and the girl

couldn't hear it, but not talking to herself. "I will put a bullet through my brain if you don't get out of me."

Holden was saying something to the girl. Tanaka didn't care. Winston Duarte's writhing, pale-fleshed body—still wrapped with black threads like someone had sewn them into him—was argument enough that the appeal-to-paternal-instinct plan wasn't going to work. The girl was useless. And her mission—bring the high consul back to Trejo—was impossible now too. Even if Duarte was capable of leaving this place, Trejo and Laconia didn't exist in any meaningful way.

Which meant her Omega status was meaningless. She had better than it. She had freedom. She had nothing to stop her from doing whatever she saw fit except whoever had the balls to try and stop her.

A sound plucked at her. A skittering, buzzing noise that was also like hearing soldiers on parade. At one of the openings in the bright, hot furnace of a chamber, one of the great insectile sentinels came out, and then another. And then a flood. Tanaka felt her eyes go wide.

"Holden, we have a problem."

He muttered an obscenity. The girl was crying. Blue fireflies swirled like sparks at a bonfire.

"If you hurt them, they'll take you apart. They literally use your body to fix the damage you do."

"You were able to protect the girl?"

Holden looked confused for a moment. His skin looked wrong. Like there was some mother-of-pearl version growing up from under his skin. "I... Yes? I guess I was?"

Tanaka switched the gun on her forearm to armor-piercing rounds. "Good. Now do that for me."

Her first shot was intended for Duarte, but her aim was fouled by the vanguard of the enemy slamming into her. The impact pushed her to the side and sent her spinning, but she kept a grip on the attacker. It was faceless, eyeless, more machine than organism. She put her fist to what passed for its thorax, resting her knuckles against the weird plates of its armor or exoskeleton, and opened fire. Even dampened by the strength of her power armor, the recoil felt wonderful. The sentinel twitched and went still, and then there were two more. She felt something tugging at her like a magnetic force that didn't register on her suit's sensor array, and a wave of

pain washed over her like needles being driven into her body. One of the sentinels swung a scythe-like arm at her, the cutting edge skittering across her chest plate, and she caught a glimpse of Holden, shielding the girl with his body, his teeth bared in a rictus grin of effort.

The needles sensation faded, and she grabbed the scythe arm, braced her foot against the thing's body, and ripped the arm free. There were more around her now, slamming into her until her ears rang with the impacts. She lost herself for a moment in the glory of the violence, breaking what she could get hold of, shooting what she couldn't.

There were too many of them for her to have any hope of winning. One managed a lucky swing and left a sliver of its carapace stuck in her suit's left shoulder joint. Another wrapped itself around her right leg and didn't let go, even when she pumped a dozen rounds through its body. They swarmed her, threw themselves at her, died, and made way for a dozen more behind them. She switched back to incendiary rounds, and everything around her turned to fire, but they kept coming through the expanding balls of flame. Two of them grabbed her right arm, and between them, they bent the power armor back. Then two more had her left. She didn't know how many she'd killed, but it had to be more than a dozen. That's how long it had taken them to find a strategy against her that worked.

She kept firing, but they were in control of her aim now. The best she could hope was that a few of them would bumble into the line of fire and die there. Holden was wrapped around the girl, his eyes closed, sweat sheeting his skin. And beyond him, through the crowd of sentinels, Duarte.

The man she'd betrayed Mars for was flapping like a wet rag in a breeze. His bright, sightless eyes reminded her of nothing so much as Okoye's pet catalyst. Blue fireflies ran along the black threads, sewing him back in place. She didn't feel pity for him. It was now nothing but contempt.

The glowing eyes swung toward her, seemed to fix on her. *See her for the first time.* Something opened at the back of her consciousness, something was wrenched open, and Duarte flowed into her. The idea of Aliana Tanaka felt distant and small compared to the maelstrom of his—of its—awareness. An ant that defied the anthill was torn apart. No wasp betrayed the hive and lived.

The sentinels hauled her toward him and his black webbing, and she was

abased. She felt an oceanic shame, and that shame was a punishment poured into her against her will—a manipulation, a proof that her own heart could be commanded against her—it didn't matter. Nearby, the girl was screaming for her father, and somewhere deep in the prison of her mind, a young Aliana Tanaka wept for the loss of her own parents and for the evil she had done in turning against her spiritual father, her true father, and the ideal of Laconia. Voices flooded her, wailing and angry and scouring as a sandblaster. She felt herself falling apart under their attention, until all that was left of her was sorrow. *Ongoing, intimate assault*, another voice said in the mind that was no longer truly her own. An invasion in her secret space. The thing that she kept apart, only for herself.

Then another voice came through. This one, not from Duarte or his hive, but from her. From her past. If it hadn't still hurt, she might not have heard it. Aunt Akari. *Are you sad, or are you angry?* And she felt the slap as a sting on her still-healing cheek. *Are you sad, or are you angry?*

I'm angry, Tanaka thought, and because she did, it was true.

She looked up. She wasn't more than eight meters from Duarte in his torn, dark cradle. She couldn't move. The sentinels had her well and truly restrained as they worked to tear her apart. But they were holding her power armor. No one was holding *her*.

The advantage of training in different forms of combat for as many years and as consistently as she had was simple: You moved past thought. There was no consideration, no weighing of what she should or shouldn't do, no planning. There was no need for them. The emergency blow of the power armor was like a flower bud blossoming; the plates and joints that the alien insect things were holding popped and fell away like petals. The insect things kept their grip on them, but Tanaka had already pushed off. The air against her skin, the lightness of her underarmor, the oppressive heat of the chamber. They were all flashes of experience. Flickers that she was aware of without the need to attend to. She knew that one good blow from any of the sentinels would open her to the bone if it connected, but she knew it without fear. It was one fact among many, and the calculations were all as reflexive as catching a tossed ball.

She crossed the gap to Duarte in an instant, sliding past him and over the webbing on the left side, where the girl had damaged it enough to leave a hole. One arm around his throat, bracing her legs around his waist. The heat

of his body was almost painful, but she fit herself into place. From here, she could use the strength of her whole body, pulling through her back and twisting at the core, against the little vertebral joints in Duarte's neck. The girl screaming somewhere. Holden shouted something. Tanaka pulled, twisted. Duarte's neck snapped like a gunshot. She felt it as much as heard it. In gravity, his head would have lolled to the side, the weight of his skull drawing it down. Here, it might almost not have happened.

The sentinels shuddered, and Holden shouted again. Something stung her arm like a wasp. A strand of the black filament dug into her skin. A half sphere of deep-red blood was spreading out where it had bitten; she swatted it away, and Holden shouted again. This time, she understood the words.

He's not dead.

Between her still-braced legs, Duarte shifted. The noise in her brain ramped up to a scream. Instincts warred in her: push away and evade, or commit to the attack. She leaned into the attack.

Holden was on the float, turning slowly on all three axes, with the girl in his arms, her head curled into his neck to hide her eyes. His skin was mottled and bright and twisted with effort. The sentinels twitched, jumping toward her and then falling back. Tools with two masters, bouncing between conflicting commands. Her last battle, and she was locking shields with James fucking Holden.

Tanaka punched Duarte twice in the ribs. The second time, she felt the bones go. Another sting. Another thread, biting at her leg this time. She flicked it away. The girl had been trying to pull her daddy free from the web, and even her amateur thrashing had done some damage. Tanaka didn't know what the relationship was between Duarte and the threads, but she could recognize a weak point. It wasn't proper shuto-uchi, but she could improvise. She stayed braced with her legs and the arm around Duarte's broken neck, and brought the knife-edge of her hand in where the threads met his body. With every hit, a few more ripped free. Drops of black fluid stippled the free air, and she didn't know if they were coming from Duarte or the filament.

Duarte writhed against her, and his pain made her lock down harder. The inside of her thighs was burning like he'd poured acid on her, but the pain was only a message. She didn't have to care. She kept chopping away at the threads. By the time his side was free, his arms had started flapping back at

her, punching her face and the side of her head. The shriek in her mind was constant now.

When she went to shift her position so she could attack the connection on Duarte's other side, the skin on her arm tore. Tiny extrusions were coming out of Duarte's throat, thick and wet as slugs. They'd burrowed through her sleeve and penetrated the flesh of her arm. When she tried to pull her legs free, she couldn't.

"Oh, fuck *you*," she said. Strategy vanished, and she beat her fist into Duarte's side, crushing bones with every strike. The thing that had been the leader of all humanity squealed in pain, and she took joy in the sound. Something pressed into her belly, squirming its way into her like a snake. She stiffened her fingers and pressed hard into the softness where Duarte's rib cage ended. His flesh ripped under the pressure. "Not as much fun when it's happening to you, is it, you fuck," Tanaka said. "Don't like it as much when it's happening to you."

Ink-black blood slickened her hand and stung the quick under her fingernails. Her fingertips pushed through a tough, resistant layer of muscle, and her hand was inside him. The snake thing in her gut whipped and writhed. The pain of it was transcendent. She pushed into him, fitting up to her wrist, pulling him in close against her. Something in his chest fluttered against her like a sparrow. She grabbed it, crushed it, and forced her way deeper.

Something happened, and everything went white. She lost herself, if just for a few seconds. When she came to, her mind was clear. It was her own for the first time since the *Preiss* came back from going dutchman. She coughed, and tasted blood.

The threads that were still sewn into the mess that was her body and his released, floating in the sweltering, furnace-hot air like smoke from hell. Tanaka's breath was shallow, and when she tried to force herself to breathe deeply, she couldn't. She pried her legs free of Duarte's corpse, and scoops of missing flesh the size of golf balls filled with her blood. When she tried to push him away, the snake thing snapped off, still stuck in her gut.

Duarte floated, rotating slowly. His empty eyes swept past her. For almost four decades, she had been an officer of the Laconian Empire, and she'd been good at it. For longer than that, she'd been herself.

Off to her left, Holden and the girl were still. A cloud of sentinels

around them had turned to statues. Holden's eyes found hers. There was still enough humanity in him that she could see horror and disgust in his face. She wished she had a sidearm, so she could have put a round through both of them and watched them bleed out with her. She reached out her arm, index finger pointing forward, thumb raised, and sighted in on Holden's face.

"Bang, motherfucker," she said.

The last thing she felt was rage that he didn't die.

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Chapter Forty-Seven: Jim

Don't look," Jim said. "Don't look, kid. I've got you. Don't look."

Teresa kept her head against him, her eyes down. Even with his numbed arms, he could feel her hyperventilating. Her father's body, not just mutilated but also transformed, floated slowly away, a sheet of dark liquid clinging to it from surface tension. Tanaka, covered by more traditional blood, was on the drift too. The two bodies separated slowly.

He tried to imagine what it would have been like for him, seeing Mother Elise or Father Caesar or any of his parents die that way. He tried to picture Naomi or Alex where Duarte was. He couldn't do it. He couldn't imagine being sixteen years old and watching his father, the center of his life and reality, who had been taken from him and then teasingly almost returned, die that badly.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered to her as she sobbed and wailed. "It's all right."

Miller swept off his hat and wiped metaphorical sweat off his unreal brow. He looked exhausted.

"Is he gone?" Jim asked.

Miller nodded. "Yeah, we're the only ones here now. Which is good. I was switching those goons off a hundred times a second, and he kept setting them back on 'murder everything.'"

Teresa raised her balled fists to her eyes. Miller shook his head. "I always hate this part. The bodies and the blood are gross sometimes, but the ones who are left holding the bag? Especially kids. I hate that part."

"What do I do?"

"Normally, I handed them a stuffed bear and called in the social worker. I don't know. How do you tell someone that it's just the way the game plays, and this time their number came up?"

Jim rested his chin on the top of her head. "It's going to be all right."

“Or lie to them,” Miller said. “That works too. But there is a question we need to answer. I’m not sure how we get her out of here safe.”

“We can clear a path, can’t we? If Duarte’s not reconfiguring the station, can’t we do it?”

“Sure, probably. I seem to be an all-purpose remote as far as local things are concerned. But what are you going to put her on when she gets there?”

Despite the heat, Jim felt a chill. “Why not the *Roci*?”

Miller tilted his head like he was hearing an unfamiliar noise. “You’re forgetting what got us here. All this is a complication on the real problem. When Colonel Friendly ached Duarte, she took his finger out of the dike. We’re safe in here. This place has already taken the worst the bad guys could dish out and stayed solid. But everyone else out there?” He shook his head.

The coolness in Jim’s chest bloomed into pain for a second, and then switched back off. He tried to catch his breath. “What do I do? How do I stop it?”

“Stop what?” Teresa asked.

“Hey,” Miller said. “We’ve only got one brain here. If I know, you do too. It’s like I told you last time. Walking around with a body on means you’ve got a certain level of status.”

“Of access,” Jim said.

“You’re not making a remote connection. It’s why he had to come here. Had to *be* here.”

Jim felt a tension he didn’t know he was carrying release. His arms were numb to the shoulder now, his legs up to the waist. His breath was shallow and his jaw ached. Miller shrugged. “You knew coming in here you weren’t coming back out.”

“I did. But I’d hoped. You know, maybe.”

“Optimism is for assholes,” Miller said with a laugh.

“Maybe what?” Teresa asked. “I don’t know what you mean. Maybe what?”

He took her by the shoulders. The tears sheeting her eyes had turned her sclera pink and raw. Her lips trembled and shook. He’d known her since he’d first been sent to Laconia in chains. She’d been a child then, but she’d never looked as young as she did now.

“There’s something I have to do. I don’t know how it’s going to work

out exactly, but listen. I will not leave you here alone, okay?”

She shook her head, and he could tell she wasn't hearing him. Not really. Of course she was in shock. Who wouldn't be? He wished there was something more he could do. He fumbled, taking her hands in his. He had to watch his fingers to know where they were.

“I will take care of you,” he said. “But I have to do this now. Right now.”

“Do what?”

He drew back his hands, and turned toward the network of black filaments. The space where Duarte's body had been was empty apart from floating black fibers. They stirred in a breeze Jim couldn't feel. Something about the motion reminded him of sea creatures putting out feelers to catch their prey. A wave of nausea washed over him.

He held out his arms, fingers splayed, and let the threads touch him. Glimmers of blue ran along them and swirled through the air. He felt a gentle tug across his shoulders as the web pulled taut. The ranks of inert sentinels floated randomly through the wide, bright, empty air. The Laconian corpses, still drifting, drew farther away. The black threads snaked toward him like they were following a scent and laced themselves into his sides when they found him.

Teresa was watching him, stunned. Her eyes were wide with horror and disbelief. He tried to think of something to say—a joke that would break the tension and let her laugh at the nightmare. He couldn't come up with anything.

“Whatever he did, he did before,” Miller said, beside him now. “If there was any setup or arrangements that needed to be made, Duarte already put them in place before the *Preiss* did its not-vanishing trick. We'll have to navigate it a little.”

“How am I supposed to find it?” Jim said. “I don't know how any of this works. I don't know how to do anything but put myself in the circuit and hope.”

“It's like the doc said. This whole thing wants to do what it's going to do. You're just here to let it. You're not building a gun, just pulling a trigger.”

“That's a lot less helpful than you think,” Jim said.

The thing in his gut shifted. His heart did something violent and not at

all heart-like, and he was someplace else. Someplace cool. He could feel his arms and legs again, and there was no pain anymore. If he concentrated, he could still see the bright room, the floating sentinels. He could still feel his body, wracked by the threads and the changes the protomolecule was making to him. It was like being on the edge of sleep, aware of his sleeping self and his dream self at the same time.

Miller cleared his throat. "It's happening. You should hurry."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

Miller's face was an apology. "You're the station now. This is your Eros, and you're what Julie was. Relax, and let it show you what you want to know."

Naomi, Jim thought, aching. *I want to see Naomi again.*

And awkward as a child taking its first steps, his awareness broadened. It wasn't quite like seeing, and it wasn't quite like knowing something intellectually, but a mix of both. He felt Naomi at her place on the flight deck, recognized her distress. And as it bore down on her, scattering the molecules and atoms of his ship like a wind scattering dust, Jim saw the enemy clearly for the first time.

Instinctively, he reached out and pushed it back. The black thing from a different reality screamed and fought, pressing against him. Jim wanted to feel the struggle pushing against his hands, but that wasn't quite right. His sense of his body was very strange now. But he could feel the black thing making its way forward like it was swimming toward Naomi against a heavy current.

"You're going to need to think a little bigger," Miller said, and the scope of Jim's awareness expanded. The ring gates and the space between them exploded into his mind. Not just the physical space and the ships scattered through it, not just the crews of the ships and their candle-flame-bright minds, but the invisible structures of it: lines of subtle force that laced between the gates and the station, looping and reinforcing, coming together and apart in a complex sacred geometry. From this perspective, the intrusion of the enemy on the *Rocinante* and on all the other vessels was a single thing. A deformation in the lines of force that kept the ring space from collapsing back into nothingness.

He pushed back, trying to bring the nature of the ring space back to true, but the pressure working against him was implacable. It was omnipresent,

and anyplace he resisted it, it flowed around him.

“Miller?”

“I’m right here.”

“I can’t do this. I can’t stop it.”

“That’s a problem, then.”

“Miller! They’re going to die!”

Jim pressed back like he was trying to lift a blanket with a toothpick. He was too small, and the pressure, the deformation, was coming from everywhere at once. He felt the candlelight minds on a dozen ships starting to go out. Jim started to panic, flailing. Another few flickering lights went out. One of the ships changed from a single thing with a bright core of energy at its heart to a thousand tiny things, to nothing, as the enemy shattered it and the flow of the attack carried it outside the bubble of space.

“How do I stop this?”

“You know,” Miller said. “I told you. You stop it the same way he did.”

Jim reached out to the candle-flame minds, pushing into them, and with each one he touched, he felt himself growing wider. A man from Earth, born after the devastation, who joined the underground because he was angry with his father who had capitulated to Laconia became part of Jim. A woman whose mother was sick and might be dying at a medical center on Auberon. Someone who was secretly in love with their pilot. Someone who had been thinking of killing themselves. Jim washed through the minds of everyone in the ring space—Naomi, Alex, Amos—and what had been impossible became possible.

This, Miller said, but not aloud, all of this was built by one kind of animal. An animal made from light that shared a single mind across more than a thousand systems. If you want to use their guns, you have to have hands the same shape as them.

Hands? Jim tried to say, but there was so much to him now, he was so wide and bright and full it was hard to know whether he’d managed.

It’s a metaphor, Miller said. *Don’t get too stuck on it.*

Jim pressed out, and this time he was able to push everywhere at once. The pressure was terrible. The enemy was stronger than he was—than they were—but the structure of the rings and the space and the lines of subtle force were like a construction mech, amplifying his strength, protecting him. Slowly, aching, he moved back. The crushing pressure outside the

ring space was a furnace, an engine, a source of unimaginable energy. Like a judo master, the ring station took the near-infinite power of an entire universe trying to crush it and pivoted, turning its strength against it. The other, older universe just outside the sphere of rings moved past him, and he could feel the pain he caused it. He could feel its hatred. The wound in its flesh that he was.

It pushed, but he could hold it. The lines were in their places now, stable in a way that took less effort to hold in place until the ancient enemy rallied again. He felt it slithering against the slow zone, a black snake larger than suns.

All the energy we can use is from one thing that wants to be something else, Miller said. Water behind a dam that wants to get to an ocean. Coal that wants to be ash and smoke. Air that wants to equalize pressure. This structure is stealing energy from another place like a turbine slows down the wind just a little. And the things from the other place will never stop hating us for it.

Jim pulled back, extracting himself from mind after mind after mind. Making himself smaller, lesser, and weaker with each one. Making himself only himself.

“So,” Miller continued, “they announced their let’s-call-it-displeasure by finding ways to slaughter us. When by ‘us’ I mean the other things that grew up in our universe. Our galactic photo-jellyfish cousins or whatever. The bad guys took out a system here, a system there. We shut down the gates to try to keep them from killing us, but it didn’t work. We tried to build tools that would stop them.”

“But nothing could,” Jim said.

“Nothing until now. See, now we’ve got a few billion murder-primates we can slot in where the airy-fairy angels of light used to be. I’m going to give us a better chance at that point.”

“That was Duarte’s plan.”

“It was.”

“I didn’t go through all of this just to be him.”

“Maybe you came through all this to understand why he did what he did. To get your head around it,” Miller said, taking his hat off and scratching the back of one ear. “You do what you have to do to fight back, or you get slaughtered. Either way, you lose what being human used to be.”

All through the ring space, people rushed. Fear and relief and the focused concentration of repair work being done while emergency klaxons sounded.

And beyond the rings, the systems. Billions of lives. Billions of nodes waiting to be strung together into a single, vast, beautiful mind. From here, Jim could see the great unity that humanity could become, and more than that, he could do it. He could finish the work Duarte had started, and bring something new and grand and strong into the universe.

It would be beautiful.

Miller nodded like he was agreeing with something. Which maybe he was. “Nerving yourself up to kiss your big crush for the first time? Or getting pissed off because the apartment one over has a nicer view than yours? Playing with your grandbabies, or drinking beer with the assholes from work because going back to an empty house is too depressing? All the grimy, grubby bullshit that comes with being locked in your own head for a lifetime. That’s the sacrifice. That’s what you give up to get a place among the stars.”

For a moment, Jim let himself look forward through epochs to see the brightness that humanity could become spread through the universe, discovering and creating and growing in its chorus. Reaching beyond anything a single human mind could conceive. A blanket of light that rivaled the stars themselves. Back in the bright chamber, his physical body wept with awe.

And he sighed.

“It’s not worth it.”

“Yeah,” Miller said. “I know. But what can you do?”

“They shut the rings down,” Jim said, “but they kept the station. The slow zone. They left it all here so that they could come back to it. The Sol ring couldn’t have worked if the station hadn’t been here for it to connect with. They put a bandage over it without getting the splinter out first.”

Miller frowned thoughtfully, but there was a glimmer in his eyes. Somewhere, Teresa was screaming Jim’s name. He’d need to take care of that. There was another thing first.

“Amos,” he said, and the big mechanic turned to look at him. The machine shop was in emergency lighting, and a swath of the deck was simply missing. Amos had a patch kit in one hand and a welding rig in the

other. Muskrat, still in her crash couch, barked her greeting bark and wagged.

“Hey, Cap.”

“How bad’s the damage?”

Amos shrugged. “We’ve had worse. What happened to you?”

“A lot. Really a lot. I need you to do a favor for me.”

“Sure.”

“Tell Naomi to evacuate the ring space. Get everybody out. And wherever you go, be ready to stay there.”

“How long are we talking?”

“Stay there,” Jim said, and Amos lifted his eyebrows.

“Well. All right then.”

At the edge of the ring space, the enemy shifted and pressed, sensing, maybe, that Jim’s strength wasn’t what it had been. “And tell her to hurry. I’m not a hundred percent sure how long I can hold this.”

Amos looked around the machine shop, lips pressed together, then sighed and started stowing the patch kit. “You sure you don’t want to tell her yourself?”

“I think we’ve already said what we needed to say,” Jim said. “Another goodbye won’t help.”

“I can see that. Well, it’s been good shipping with you.”

“You too.”

“Hey, Cap, about the rest of ’em?”

“Tanaka’s dead. Duarte is too.”

“Tiny?”

“Don’t leave until she gets there.”

“That’s what I was waiting to hear.”

Jim moved his attention back to the station, complex and active as his cells. It all made sense to him now—the passages, the sentinels, the vast machines that broke rich light and opened the holes in the spectrum. That generated the subtle lines. There was so much that they’d never seen or understood. They’d all just bumbled through, using the gates as shortcuts and hoping for the best. A species of beautiful idiots.

He shifted what he could, remade the passages. There was some risk in it. The subtle lines shuddered, and the enemy circled, sniffing at the gates. Jim opened his eyes.

The pain was astounding. Now that he was aware of his body again, he didn't understand how he'd ignored it. The numbness in his limbs had given way to a burning. The threads in his side tugged and ripped. It was hard to see. His eyes were changing, and the skin all down his front itched badly, but his arms were restrained and he couldn't scratch.

Teresa was floating in a ball. He was aware that she'd been screaming for him the way he knew the relative densities of different elements or the names of Greek gods. Intellectually, and without remembering where he'd learned it.

"Teresa," he said. His voice sounded wet and phlegmy. She didn't respond. "Teresa!"

She started. Her face was blotchy. Her eyes were red and miserable. She looked terrible. She looked achingly beautiful. She looked so very human.

"I've cleared a path back to the ships for you," Jim said. "You need to run..."

Chapter Forty-Eight: Alex

“... evacuate immediately. Assume whatever system you are entering is where you will be from now on. Expect and assume no further contact after your transit, and do not reenter the ring space once you’ve left. This is not a joke. This is not a drill. Message repeats.” Naomi ended the recording, sent it out, and then floated back from her control screen and swallowed a couple times. Alex felt the same. The hollowness in his gut.

“Well,” he said. “Holy shit.”

The ops deck around them wasn’t in ruins, quite, but it was hurting. He’d been in the galley when the universe went strange and the black things had come swimming through it like matter was a thin mist and they were the only things that were real. Which was just as well, seeing as half the pilot’s crash couch was missing now. If he’d been in his usual spot, he wouldn’t be worrying about any of this.

Naomi’s right arm was in a sling, but she wasn’t missing anything. The best they could reconstruct, she’d jumped back when one of the things had gone for her and slammed her shoulder against the bulkhead. A long stretch of the decking was gone, and there was a hole in the inner hull that Amos had thrown a quick patch on, the metal bright against the old foam-and-cloth covering.

“What do we need to be ready?” Naomi asked.

Amos went still the way he did ever since he’d gotten killed, then he shrugged. “There’s a few things I should patch up. We lost one of the port PDCs, but as long as we’re not planning to shoot anybody, that can wait. Make sure the water tanks aren’t leaking and triple-check the reactor and the drive.”

“How long?”

The big mechanic smiled. “If we’re good, half an hour. If we’re not, then it depends how bad we are.”

“Get started, and I’ll come assist as soon as I can.”

“Copy that, Boss,” Amos said. “And Tiny, right?”

“Not leaving without her,” Naomi said. “But I may be cutting the *Falcon* loose.”

“Let me go double-check the bridge then. You can fuck things up pretty good if you try folding those back in when they’re broken.”

“Thank you,” Naomi said, then turned to Alex. “Preflight checks. All of them, top to bottom. And keep running the diagnostics until the second we’re ready to go. If you can get through them five times, do them five times.”

“You got it,” Alex said, and hauled himself into an undamaged crash couch. “Don’t worry. The *Roci*’s not going to let us down now.”

“That’s because we’re not going to let it down,” Naomi said.

On the tactical display, the ships still remaining in the ring space started ticking from yellow to green as their courses changed and their drives bloomed. On the comms, half a dozen connection requests were already queued—people asking for clarification or for help. He didn’t know what to do for any of them.

Naomi ignored them for the time being and put in her own connection request to Elvi, which was accepted as soon as it was made.

“What’s the *Falcon*’s status?” Naomi asked.

Alex started the diagnostic run, querying each of the maneuvering thrusters for power, reaction mass feed status, pressure, and control response.

Elvi’s answer was equal parts mania and relief. “Fucked, flustered, and far from home.”

“I’m going to need something a little more technical,” Naomi said, but there was a smile in her voice. One of the port thrusters threw up an alert for low reaction mass. Alex started isolating the line and looking for pressure drops.

“We lost two crew. Harshaan Lee and David Contreras. I don’t think you met David. He was a chemist. He had a wife on Laconia.”

“Oh. Not Harshaan. I’m so sorry.”

“We sustained some damage, but not as much as last time, because I’ve been through that twice now. I never wanted to do that again. I hate it.”

“How long before you’re good to go?”

“It’ll take an hour,” Elvi said. “And then, like a bat from the depths of

hell.”

Alex found the problem. A broken feed from the water tanks. In a perfect life, they’d fix it, but the *Roci* had been built for war. Multiple redundancies were in her nature. Her backups had backups had backups. He started flipping through alternate feeds while the diagnostic run went on ahead of him.

“Where are you going?” Naomi asked.

Alex felt a little twinge of concern at Elvi’s sigh. “Sol,” she said, quietly. “I haven’t said so yet, but Sol.”

“Not Laconia?”

“The *Whirlwind*’s heading that way. Even if Trejo decides to honor his amnesty, and there are literally no consequences for breaking his word, I’m pretty sure Admiral Gujarat has an enemies list. If I’m on it, and I am very much on it, a lot of my staff is going to be in for a hard run too. I’m breaking up some families, but I’m saving some lives. What about you?”

“Sol,” Naomi said. “But I can’t go until Teresa’s out of the station. I won’t make you wait for me. As soon as we can detach the ships, you get the fuck out of here.”

“Don’t need to say it twice,” Elvi said, and dropped the connection. Alex identified a feed with no pressure drop and switched to it. Naomi pulled up the first message in the queue.

“This is Captain Loftman of the *Lagomorpha*. We are in need of assistance. Our drive cone has suffered catastrophic damage...”

Naomi fell to, finding rescuers for ships in need of rescue, answering questions for ships whose command staff were in panic, checking in with Amos now and again as he worked his way through the ship. On her screen, a small window was dedicated to the visual telescoping pointed at the station, the entrance.

Alex felt himself trembling before he knew what it was about. When he did know, he pulled his hands back from the controls. The *Roci* went on, checking the status of the air and water recyclers, the power grid, the Epstein drive.

“Naomi,” he said, and something in his voice must have told her there was a problem, because she abandoned the comms at once and turned to him. For a moment, he remembered her the way she’d been when he first knew her back on the *Canterbury*, when the biggest problem he’d had was

whether they could get from Ceres to Saturn and back fast enough to collect the on-time bonus. She'd been a quiet thing then. Always hiding behind her own hair and avoiding eye contact. The woman she'd become... Well, they were related, but they weren't the same.

"If this is what's happening," he said, thinking his way through each word as he said it. "If this is pick-the-last-place-you're-going-to-be... I know I've been a restless kind of guy, but Kit is in Nieuwestad system with his wife and their little boy. And I'm not young. If there's no chance of me ever seeing them again on one hand, and there's I'm-able-to-find-a-job-and-send-messages-and-swing-by-a-couple-times-a-year on the other? I don't know that I can go back to Sol. My family's not there."

There was a way that his last words could have been cruel, but he didn't know how else to say it. Naomi was family, and Jim was. And Amos. Even Teresa and her old dog, a little bit. He looked away, afraid to see hurt in Naomi's eyes.

"If it were Filip," she said, "I'd be going where he was."

"I'm sorry."

"You're a lovely man." She turned back to her comms, and a moment later Elvi was there. "Change of plans. I have to send the *Roci* someplace else. Can Amos and I hitch a ride?"

"Of course."

"We have a dog."

"That makes it the least problematic passenger I've had in years."

Naomi dropped the connection and made a different one.

"What's up, Boss?" Amos asked.

"Don't pull in the bridge to the *Falcon*. Get the *Roci* shipshape, get whatever you want to keep, and grab a berth on the *Falcon*. Muskrat's stuff too."

Alex leaned forward, looking for the right explanation. The right apology.

"Alex going to hang out with his kid?" Amos asked.

"Yup," Naomi said.

"It's not that I don't love you guys," Alex said.

"Sure, whatever," Amos agreed cheerfully. "If I'm not going to be on board to patch any leaks, I'll want to change some repair priorities."

"Use your best judgment," Naomi said, and let the connection drop. She

stretched over, squeezed Alex's hand once, and let it go. "Get to work with the preflight. We're under some time pressure here."



Thirty minutes later, they were at the airlock. Naomi had a small bag under her arm. Amos had a bottle of liquor and part of Muskrat's customized crash couch. The rest had already been moved over to the *Falcon*. The dog, floating between them with her tail windmilling, seemed the most anxious of them, glancing from one to the other with wide, wet, brown eyes. It was hard to believe that after all the years on the *Roci*, all the lives they'd lived together there, it would be so easy to gather up everything and pack it out. And yet, there they were.

The inner airlock doors were open, and the control pad said that the bridge was pressurized. Alex gripped and released the handhold even though he wasn't drifting. *This is a mistake*, he thought. *We shouldn't be doing this. I was wrong.*

Then he thought of Kit, and of never seeing him or hearing his voice again, and he kept his mouth shut.

"I left a list in engineering," Amos said. "It's all the stuff you really need to get fixed soon. I mean, don't wait. And then a couple dozen things you ought to look at. But I'm pretty sure you're good. I don't know if they have a dry dock on Nieuwestad."

"They do," Alex said. "I checked."

Amos' black eyes shifted. They suddenly didn't seem eerie at all. "You probably ought to head there first. And don't use the rail gun. Cracked capacitor will probably blow if you charge it."

"Don't shoot anybody. Got it."

"Unless you have to," Amos said, then he tucked the dog under one arm and headed for the airlock door. Naomi, watching, smiled.

"He hasn't changed," Alex said. "Not really."

"He has," she said. "We all have."

"Before you go, I wanted to say..." Naomi shook her head gently, and

he trailed off.

“It was good,” she said.

“It was.”

She touched a handhold, rotated, and slid through the still air and into the lock. Muskrat barked once, and Alex was going to tell them to say goodbye to Teresa for him, but the inner door slid closed. The outer door opened, and Naomi and Amos and the dog transferred onto the bridge and across it. He saw that they were speaking to each other, but he didn't know what they said. As the *Falcon's* lock opened to accept them, the *Roci's* outer door closed, and Alex was alone on the ship. He waited for a moment, telling himself that he was just listening to the hum of the docking bridge retracting. Making sure nothing went wrong. But even after it was folded in place and ready for travel, he floated there for a few more seconds before he headed back up to the controls.

It felt odd, piloting from ops. Not that he hadn't done it before, but when he had, it had been because there was someone with him there he wanted to talk to without shouting down. Despite all the times he'd run through the diagnostics with the others on board, he ran them again, saw nothing unexpected, and maneuvered away from the *Falcon*. When he lit the drive, the crash couch rose up under him, and he settled into the gel. The drive looked solid. He hadn't caught the *Falcon* in the plume. He shifted up to a third of a g, then a half. Then a full g. Then more. The ship creaked, and he told himself that it was only the normal sounds. They only seemed louder because he was the only one hearing them. Two gs and he injected himself with a half dose of the juice. He stopped there. He also didn't want to strain the ship before it could get a real once-over. He didn't want to have a stroke when no one could get him to the autodoc.

“Trade-offs,” he said out loud. “It's always trade-offs.”

No one answered. He took a moment, feeling the emptiness of the ship. Just him and the *Rocinante* and the starless void of the ring space. He opened the ship-wide comm.

“If anybody's in here, this is your last chance. Say it now, or you're part of the crew from now on.”

It was just a joke, and he was the only one who could appreciate it. He checked the drive. It was running fine. The course was inside tolerance, but there was enough noise that he'd want to adjust a time or two before the

transit. The time until he reached the gate... He upped the drive to three gs. His bones could handle it. He wasn't that old.

For the first half hour, he sat in the crash couch, shifting between diagnostic screens, waiting and watching for a sign of malfunction. Then he cut thrust to a third g for a few minutes, went down to the galley, and got a cup of tea. He wanted a beer, but maybe not until after the transit. But he could put on some music, so he did. Old Martian rai-fusion rang through the corridors and cabins. It was both beautiful and melancholy.

He got back in the chair and put the spurs in again.

It wasn't long before other ships reached the gates. The list of vessels in the ring space, formatted for reporting just the way Naomi had designed, lost one name. Then another. The rubric showed that it was safe to go, that they were at very low risk of going dutchman, with the profile ticking up almost imperceptibly with every ship that left. The *Duffy*, heading for Bara Gaon. The *Kaivalya* for Auberon. Even the poor, busted-up *Lagomorpha* with its bad drive cone made it through Sol gate. When the *Whirlwind* passed into Laconia, the model shifted for almost a minute, ready to warn any incoming ships to slow their approach. It would have been a good system.

Slowly, and yet with all due haste, the ring space emptied.

Pressed into his couch, he started thinking about what came next. Here he was, a pilot with an old, broken ship and no crew. He didn't know much about Nieuwestad, other than it was a corporate holding. That wasn't going to mean much. But there wasn't a large military presence. Having a gunship would either ensure his independence or make the local authorities anxious about him. But that was borrowing trouble before it came. The *Roci* was a good ship, and rated for atmosphere. Once he got it fixed up and found a crew, they could carry scientific survey teams through the system. Maybe do a little prospecting of his own. He imagined Kit and his wife shipping out with him on some microclimate engineering mission. Or something. Or just a little family vacation. He imagined being Grampa Alex, and grinned to himself. Then he imagined being Grampa Alex without Giselle there to make comments about his belly, and let himself smile just a little bit more. There were good lives out there for him. Possibilities.

The alarm sounded when he was still a hundred thousand clicks from the gate. A misfeed in the fuel supply to the reactor. Maybe nothing, maybe

the first sign of a real problem. He pulled up the logs, running down them with a fingertip to help his eyes keep focus. This wasn't the time to miss anything. He was glad now he hadn't gone for the beer, or the ones after it.

"Come on," he cooed to the ship. "We can do this. Just a little further down the trail now."

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Chapter Forty-Nine: Naomi and Jim

Somewhere, Holden was burning. Fever within his body. Heat without. Somewhere, he was in misery, but it wasn't here. Here, he was aware—seeing without sight—of the *Rocinante* shifting away from the *Falcon*, away from the station. Turning away and burning. If he'd made the effort, he could have gone closer. Known more. He let it go.

“Probably the smart move,” Miller said. “Don't want to tire yourself out.”

“Little late for that,” Holden said.

The detective chuckled, and Holden's back spasmed. For an instant, he was in the bright room. The blue fireflies whirled around him, and there were words in their flickers that he could almost understand. He'd decode them, given time. Waves of nausea washed over him, and vertigo made the room spin like a top, but that was just his inner ears changing. He closed his eyes and willed himself elsewhere.

Deep in the station, Teresa was flying too fast. She'd missed the turn that led back to the surface, to the *Falcon*. He shifted the passageways in front of her, guiding her back the right way. He could see her jaw clenched tight, determination on her face that bordered on anger. He wished there was something more he could do.

The nature of space shifted, and the subtle lines fought to shift it back. Holden pushed, righting them. Space stayed just space. For the moment.

“You remember the first time we did this?” Miller said.

“We have never done this before.”

“You know what I mean. Eros. We were sitting there waiting for the radiation to slough all our skin off. You were talking about some kids' show.”

“*Misko and Marisko*.”

“That's the one.” Miller hummed the theme song, waving his hand like a

conductor in front of an orchestra.

Holden smiled. “Haven’t thought about that in years. I committed great sins in a past life to keep getting stuck with you when I’m dying.”

“Nope. You are coming apart, but this isn’t dying. Goes on a lot longer than dying.”

“Unless something interrupts the process.”

“Yeah,” Miller agreed. “Unless that.”

Teresa was coming close to the entrance. A few hundred more meters, and she’d be out. He hoped she remembered to put her helmet back on. Normally, he wouldn’t have worried, but she was upset.

“That was the first time I told Naomi that I loved her,” Holden said. “She handed me my ass on a plate.”

“You had it coming. And hey, it ended better than it started.”

Teresa reached the edge of the station, and then went beyond it. He could feel her hesitate, lose her way, and then find the *Falcon* and launch herself toward it. At the gates, ships transited out, first one and then a handful. The empty space became a little emptier. Teresa shifted closer to the *Falcon*. The things on the other side stirred like predators scenting something—smoke or blood. Unsure whether to attack.

Teresa reached the airlock and passed inside. Holden felt himself relax. He waited for the ship to move. For its drive to bloom. The minutes passed slowly. Painfully.

“Come on,” he said. “Come on. Get out of here. Please don’t stay. Please go.”



The inner door of the airlock opened, and Teresa spilled inside. Her eyes were wild and tearstained. Her mouth was a square gape of rage.

“Where’s my *ship*?!”

The *Falcon* was crawling with activity. The crew making last-minute repairs and preparations for the burn, Amos reassembling the dog’s custom crash couch, Naomi coordinating the evacuation with the last stragglers.

She almost hadn't come down to meet Teresa. Naomi could see the moment the girl recognized her. The combination of relief and the focus of finding a target was complex.

"Where did the *Roci* go?" Teresa shouted.

"Alex had to take it," Naomi said. "We'll be on the *Falcon* for now."

"No one said that was going to happen!"

"Hey, Tiny," Amos said, floating in from Naomi's right. "Thought you might—"

Teresa shrieked and launched herself at the mechanic. She slammed into his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his arm. Adrenaline hit Naomi's bloodstream like a hammer, and then she heard the girl sobbing. Amos steadied himself with his other hand as Teresa gripped him with her whole body. His flat, black eyes shifted to Naomi and he gestured. *What do I do with this?*

Naomi raised her shoulders. *I don't know.* Awkwardly, Amos reached over and patted Teresa's head. "It's okay, Tiny. You're safe now. We got you."

He looked utterly out of his depth, and as unmistakably human as she had seen him since his change. A moment later, Cara and Xan appeared, sliding through the air to Amos' side, touching Teresa's shoulder to let her know they were there, and then wordlessly embracing her. The one shattered girl enfolded and comforted by the three gray-skinned, black-eyed people. It looked like a painting. Alien and beautiful. Teresa's sobbing slowed, but her grip stayed tight.

"We may need a minute or two, Boss."

"When you can," Naomi said, and hauled herself out and back to the workstation Elvi had given her.

The evacuation was progressing well. Every ship that was able to move was moving. Every ship that couldn't had been docked with and their crews transferred off. Most were heading for the nearest exit. The *Falcon* and the *Roci*, at the center of the ring space, had the farthest to travel in order to reach a gate. Some few of the others were going across the ring space, heading for Bara Gaon or Sol or Auberon at the hardest burn they could manage.

"We're ready," Elvi said.

"That's an exaggeration," Faye said. "We've reached an arbitrary level

of fuck-it-good-enough. We're calling that ready."

Naomi turned. Fayeze was fastened to the decking with mag boots; Elvi floated beside him. It made an illusion that he was in gravity and she, ethereal, was floating away like a balloon. Her thinness and atrophy helped sell it.

"We don't have enough of the submersion couches for everyone," Elvi said. "It's going to limit how fast we can accelerate safely."

Naomi looked at her tactical map one last time. There was nothing more she could do. She closed the display with the sense that it was her last moment as the head of the underground. She expected the relief she felt at the idea. The sorrow was more surprising.

"We can use submersion for the most vulnerable," she said.

Fayeze looked to his wife. "She means you, honey."

"He's right," Naomi said. "I do."

"If we had time, I'd push back on that," Elvi said. "Five minutes to get everyone in place?"

"I'll get to my couch now," Naomi replied.

It was a standard enough design: a gel base on a gimbaled platform. It wasn't the same kind that the *Roci* had used. The Laconian gimbals were silent, and the gel had an odd warmth that Naomi understood was supposed to help maintain circulation under high gs but made the couch feel uncomfortably fleshy. There was a temperature control, though, so as soon as she strapped in, she turned it down to a cooler level.

She used her hand terminal to check in with Amos. The lag was suspicious until she realized it was still trying to route through the *Roci*'s system. She shifted it to the *Falcon*, and the connection request was instantaneous.

"Hey, Boss," the thing that had been Amos—that maybe sort-of still was—said.

"All of ours in place?"

"Yep. Muskrat's a little anxious about the whole thing. Between the new digs and Tiny freaking the fuck out. The medical guy gave Tiny a little something to take the edge off. She's sleeping now. He said she's traumatized?"

"Seems plausible."

"I don't know how I got this old without someone telling me they had

pills for that,” Amos said, and she could hear the disapproval in his tone. It reminded her of who he’d been before.

“There’s a big toolbox,” she said. “Everyone has to find their own way through.”

“I guess. Anyway, I’m strapped in. Tiny’s good. Dog’s good. And that’s us.”

Fuck, Naomi thought. *That’s us*.

“All right.”

“How’re you holding together?” Amos asked.

“I’ll see you on the other side,” she said, and let the connection drop.

A moment later, Elvi came over the ship-wide system telling everyone to strap in and prepare for hard burn. Naomi pulled up the exterior telescope and set it to track the station. To track Jim. She knew that for the most part, he’d be lost in the drive plume, but she did it anyway.

The countdown came. The crash couch needles bit into her, the juice flowed into her blood, and the *Falcon* slammed up into her from below.



Holden felt the ships leaving the space, one and then another. The ones still in the bubble of false space shifted toward the escapes, going mind-numbingly fast and still too slow. Holden willed them to go faster. To get out. To be safe.

The brightness of the gates, the light they passed between them, was unfolding for him as he grew more fully into the mechanism. It reminded him of the way babies learn without seeming to try—soaking up information and discovering pattern as part of growing into the being they were going to become. Part of him wished that he could stay longer, see more, die knowing something.

“Hard to let go of a bad idea,” Miller said as if he were agreeing. “I mean, I’m not the guy who can start throwing stones at someone for not wanting to give up the case, right?”

“But you’re pretty good at dying if that’s what it takes to make things

right.”

“Turns out that is a talent of mine,” Miller said with a lopsided grin. “There’s always new mysteries out there. We get those for free.”

The dark things shifted again, deforming the space, reaching into it. Trying to change its nature, and this time, touching the ring gates. Pushing through them to the systems beyond. Their attention felt slick and muscular. Wet, somehow. Holden reached out to pull them back, and the effort was terrible.

“Harder to do on your own,” Miller said.

“You could help.”

And the feeling changed, as if there really were two of them and not just an illusion made from memories in a dying body. The thick, slimy reach of the things beyond the gates squirmed and resisted, pushing past Holden’s will, trying to find one more way to end the intrusion.

“Just give me a little fucking time,” Holden said, but if the enemy could hear him, it ignored him. Holden redoubled his efforts, and slowly, reluctantly, the invisible tentacle retracted into its own universe and left him spent and exhausted.

If an attack came again, he wouldn’t be able to stop it.

“You left it all on the field,” Miller said. “Whatever that means.”

“Football.”

“What?”

“It’s a football thing.”

“Oh,” Miller said, and scratched his neck. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

The *Rocinante* cleared the Nieuwestad gate. Two other ships passed through to Sol. The only things left alive in the ring space were Holden and the *Falcon*. He could feel Naomi on the ship. And Amos. His actual body shuddered and wept, and he did everything he could to ignore it.

“Kind of funny,” Miller said. “You being here to do this.”

“Yeah, it’s hilarious.”

“It actually is, smartass. Mister make-sure-everyone-has-a-voice. Fight against everyone who is making decisions for other people. Your whole fucking life has been that. Now here you are. Those colony systems aren’t baked yet. A lot of them rely on trade. We do this, and some of them aren’t going to make it.”

“I know.”

The dark things shifted, pressed. They weren't tired at all. Holden felt their hunger and didn't know if it was real, or just something he projected onto them. The *Falcon* drew nearer to the Sol gate. Each second, it moved faster than the second before. Falling toward safety and away from him faster than just falling would have done. *Go*, he thought. *Please be safe*. The rings sang their songs in light. The blue sludge in his veins plucked at him, changed him, offered ways that he could live and spread and *know*.

"I mean, don't get me wrong. My analysis of the situation is a lot like yours. But you got to see there's an irony in it. All the shit you gave me about giving people all the information and trusting them to do the right thing? Most of these fuckers aren't gonna know what happened. This decision you're making for the whole human race."

"Is there a reason you're needling me like this?"

Miller's expression went stern and sorrowful. "I'm trying to keep you awake, old fella. You're drifting."

Holden realized that was true. He made an effort to pull his mind back together. The *Falcon* was approaching the Sol gate. Not minutes now. Less.

"I absolutely believe that people are more good on balance than bad," he said. "All the wars and all of the cruelty and all of the violence. I'm not looking away from any of that, and I still think there's something beautiful about being what we are. History is soaked in blood. The future probably will be too. But for every atrocity, there's a thousand small kindnesses that no one noticed. A hundred people who spent their lives loving and caring for each other. A few moments of real grace. Maybe it's only a little more good than bad in us, but..."

The *Falcon* passed through the Sol gate. Nothing was left in the ring space but him.

"And yet," Miller said, "we're about to consign millions of people to slow deaths. That's just the truth. Are you sure this thing you're about to do is the right one?"

"I don't have a fucking clue," Holden said, and then did it anyway.

For an instant, there was a release of energy second only to the beginning of the universe. There was no one there to see it.



The ring gate faded. Its recent brightness went first, and then the distortion at its center... faded. Where there had been a mystery and a miracle, a gateway to the galaxy, now there were just distant stars framed by a dull loop of metal a thousand kilometers across.

And then it fell.

The *Falcon* was on a fairly gentle one-third g burn that would put it near Ganymede in a few weeks, and the whole staff—the brightest minds of a shattered empire—were watching the ring gate die, measuring it, collecting data from the corpse. Naomi, sitting alone in the galley with a bulb of tea, just watched it. For decades, it had been fixed in place, one of the farthest objects in the solar system. It didn't orbit. It didn't move. Now, it tumbled a little, pulled in toward the sun the way anything would be. The miracle, ended.

Her message queue was like a fire hose. Contacts from the underground, reporters from a hundred different outlets, politicians and Transport Union officials and the local traffic control authorities. Everyone wanted to talk to her, and however they phrased it, they all wanted the same questions answered. What does this mean? What happens now?

She didn't answer any of them.

The crew of the ship came and went. Some were injured, like her. Some were injured less visibly. She recognized some. It was almost the whole shift before Amos came in. His wide, rolling gait as familiar as her own voice. She wanted to believe it was really him, that her old friend had actually survived Laconia and not just become the raw material of an alien machine. She smiled and raised her bulb.

"Hey, Boss," Amos said. "How're you holding together?"

"A little weird," she said. "How's Teresa?"

Amos went to the dispenser, frowning at the unfamiliar control menu as he spoke. "She's seen better days. Whatever happened on that station, it fucked her up pretty good. I think she was really hoping she'd get her dad back." He found the menu he wanted and grunted with satisfaction. "Seems

like her and Sparkles are hitting it off, though. I think Little Man's kind of jealous. I think he wants to be Tiny's bestie. There's some brother-sister dynamics. It'll work out."

The galley chimed and put out a little silver tube. Amos cracked the top, rolled over, and sat across from her. His gentle smile could have meant anything. He looked at Naomi's hand terminal. The tumbling ring.

"Fayez says it's going to fall into the sun," Amos said. "Says even all the way out here, it hasn't got enough sideways to it for an orbit. Just boom, right into the fireball."

"You think that's true?"

Amos shrugged. "I think a bunch of independent contractors are gonna strip-mine that shit before it gets to the Belt. They'll be lucky if there's a handful of dust left to hit the corona."

To her surprise, Naomi laughed. Amos' smile got maybe a degree more genuine.

"I think you're right," she said. "And if not, someone'll hire a tug to give it a little lateral impulse. Nothing humans can touch goes unmodified."

"A-fucking-men. What about you, Boss? What do you think about all this shit?"

He meant, *Are you all right? You've lost Jim. You've lost Alex. You've lost your ship. Are you able to live with that?* And the answer was that she could. But she wasn't ready to say it out loud, so she answered the other question instead.

"I think we got lucky. I think we were one little system in a vast, unreachable universe that was always on the edge of destroying itself, and now we have thirteen hundred chances to figure out how to live with each other. How to be gentle with each other. How to get it right. It's better odds than we had."

"Even if someone does, though. We'll never know. The alien roads are gone. Now it's just us."

The ring tumbled on her screen, and she looked past it to the stars. The billions upon billions upon billions of stars, and the tiny fraction that had other people looking back toward her.

"The stars are still there," she said. "We'll find our own way back to them."

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Epilogue: The Linguist

Marrel expected reintegration to hurt, but it didn't. It didn't feel like anything. He didn't even have the grogginess of waking from sleep, which—thinking on it—shouldn't have been surprising, as he hadn't fallen asleep. Somehow, he was surprised all the same.

He had climbed into his transit pod on the crew deck of the *Musafir* along with everyone else, watched the countdown timer on the reinforced crystal wall in front of him go to zero, and then change to 31:11:43:27 as if that was the number that naturally followed zero.

Thirty-one days, eleven hours, forty-three minutes, and twenty-seven seconds had elapsed for his homeworld while Marrel and the twenty-nine other souls on board the *Musafir* existed only as energy and intention sliding along the membrane between universes. Thirty-one days as they vanished and reappeared at their destination, nearly 3,800 light-years from home. A long-held breath as they swam through the cosmic foam and re-emerged at a different place in the ocean.

“Yinvisa Merrel isme dorasil. Yi ie dovra?” the pod asked him in its carefully neutral voice.

“Caan Ingliz,” Marrel said. “Ta-Connia atze a en-callase, per.” *Common English. Post-Laconian expansion, pre-collapse, please.*

“Are you well?” the pod repeated.

“I am well.”

“The transit from Dobridomov was successful,” the pod informed him. “Welcome to Sol. The *Musafir* is currently twenty-four days from our destination at best speed.”

“If the transit was unsuccessful,” Marrel said, “would we exist?”

“It is theoretically possible for reintegration to occur at an unexpected destination, though it is statistically unlikely.”

“May I see the contact report, please?”



The *Musafir* set down on a small hill some distance from an ancient city. The emptiness of the space around Earth was eerie. Like walking into a tomb. This was the ancestral home of all the Thirty Worlds, and yet it had fewer structures around its system than any contact before. Not that there were none. The emplacements of weapons were disguised, but not so well that the *Musafir* hadn't seen them. The hidden ships they had identified were almost certainly not the only ships that there were. Everywhere, there was a sense of threat.

The diplomatic team remained on the ship, but watched and listened as Marrel walked down the ramp to the grassy field that stretched off in every direction and took a deep breath of the air humanity had been born in. The ship had issued him prophylactics to ensure that the local pollen would not trigger an allergic reaction. If nothing else, Marrel could tell his future grandchildren this. He had stood on the grass of Earth. He had breathed its air.

The group that had come for him stood some distance off. Many of them carried obvious weapons. Marrel wasn't sure if they were an honor guard waiting for him to approach, or a strike team waiting to charge him and try to take the ship. He fumbled with the target pointer in his hand. If need be, the ship could turn the field in front of him into a molten lake. He prayed that wouldn't be the case.

A single figure detached from the knot and began walking in his direction with long, loping strides. It was tall, but Marrel had expected this. Dobridomov was of slightly heavier gravity than Earth, and the average height was a bit less. The figure was also broad, and thick limbed, with ebony skin and a wide, hairless head. As it approached, the color of its skin began to look less like a natural color and more like an artificial pigment. Marrel wondered if full-body tattooing or cosmetics were popular here. It might be some kind of caste mark.

The figure stopped a few meters away and waited. Up close, it appeared to be male.

“My name is Marrel Invic, of the Dobridomov system,” he said in ancient Chinese. He was prepared to repeat the message in a dozen different old languages until one was recognized. “I am a linguist, here to establish communication protocols so that our diplomatic group can begin a dialog.”

“You got any English?” the man said with perfect pre-collapse intonation.

“Yes,” Marrel said, stunned. “Yes, I do.”

“Good, because my Chinese is pretty iffy. I’m okay in Belter, but I bet you guys forgot that one.”

“I know what Belter is,” Marrel said, thrilled at the idea that this man spoke a dialect considered dead for a thousand years.

“Cool,” the man replied. “So it’s been a rough millennium around here. We’re starting to get our shit together, and I’ve been doing what I can to help with that, but it’s slow going.”

“Are you a leader of these people?” Marrel asked.

“I’m not into job titles. Name’s Amos Burton. If we’re good, I’m just some asshole. If you’re here to start some shit, I’m the guy you’ll have to go through first. Tell ’em I said that.”

He gave Marrel a vague smile and waited. The diplomatic group listened as Marrel translated for them.

“Great,” Amos Burton said when he was done. “Now we got that shit out of the way, follow me. We’ll grab a few beers and get reacquainted.”

Acknowledgments

Usually, we start these by talking about how any book is, on some level, a collaboration. This time, we're talking about more than a book. The first volume of *The Expanse* was written a little over a decade ago, and between there and here, it has been a long, wild ride with us racking up debts and reasons for gratitude all along the way.

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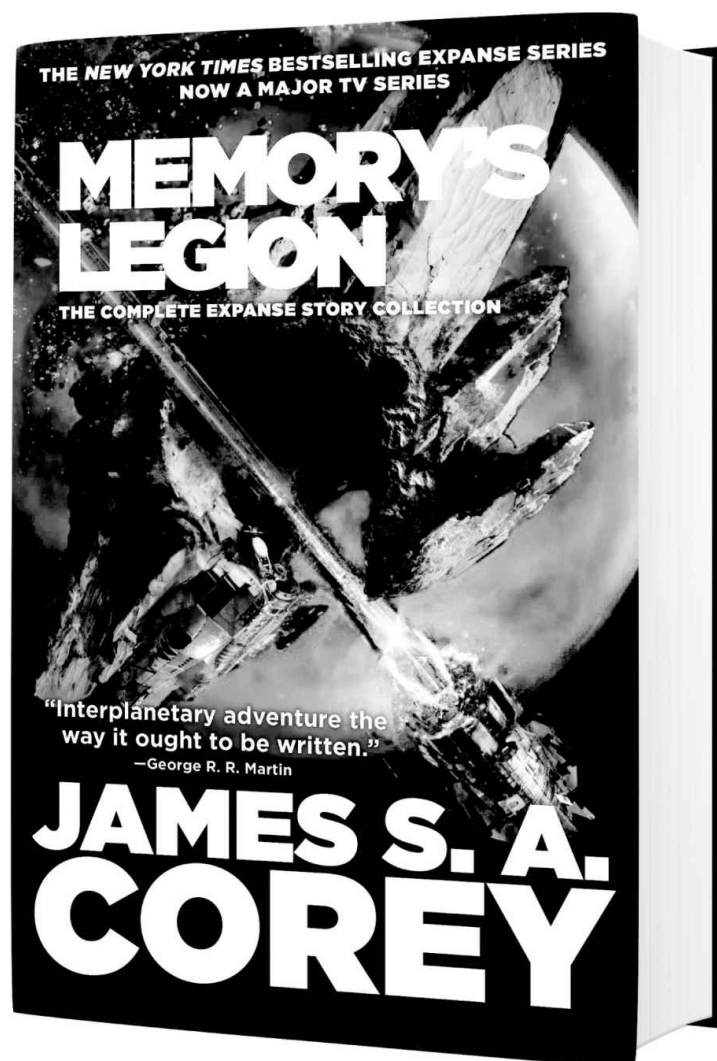
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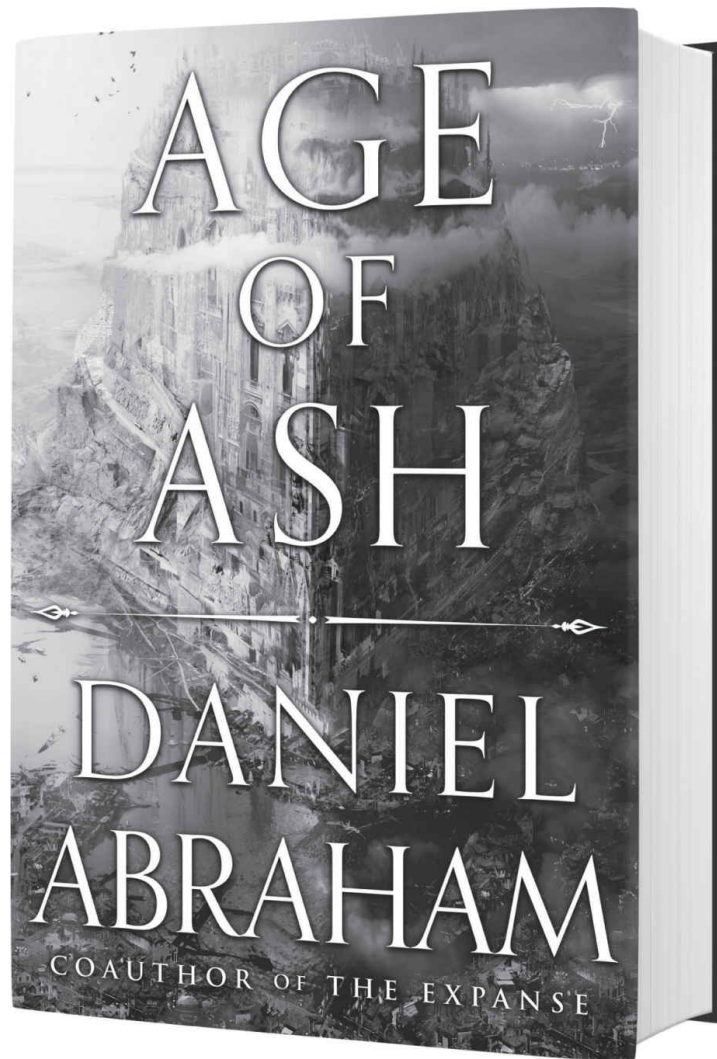
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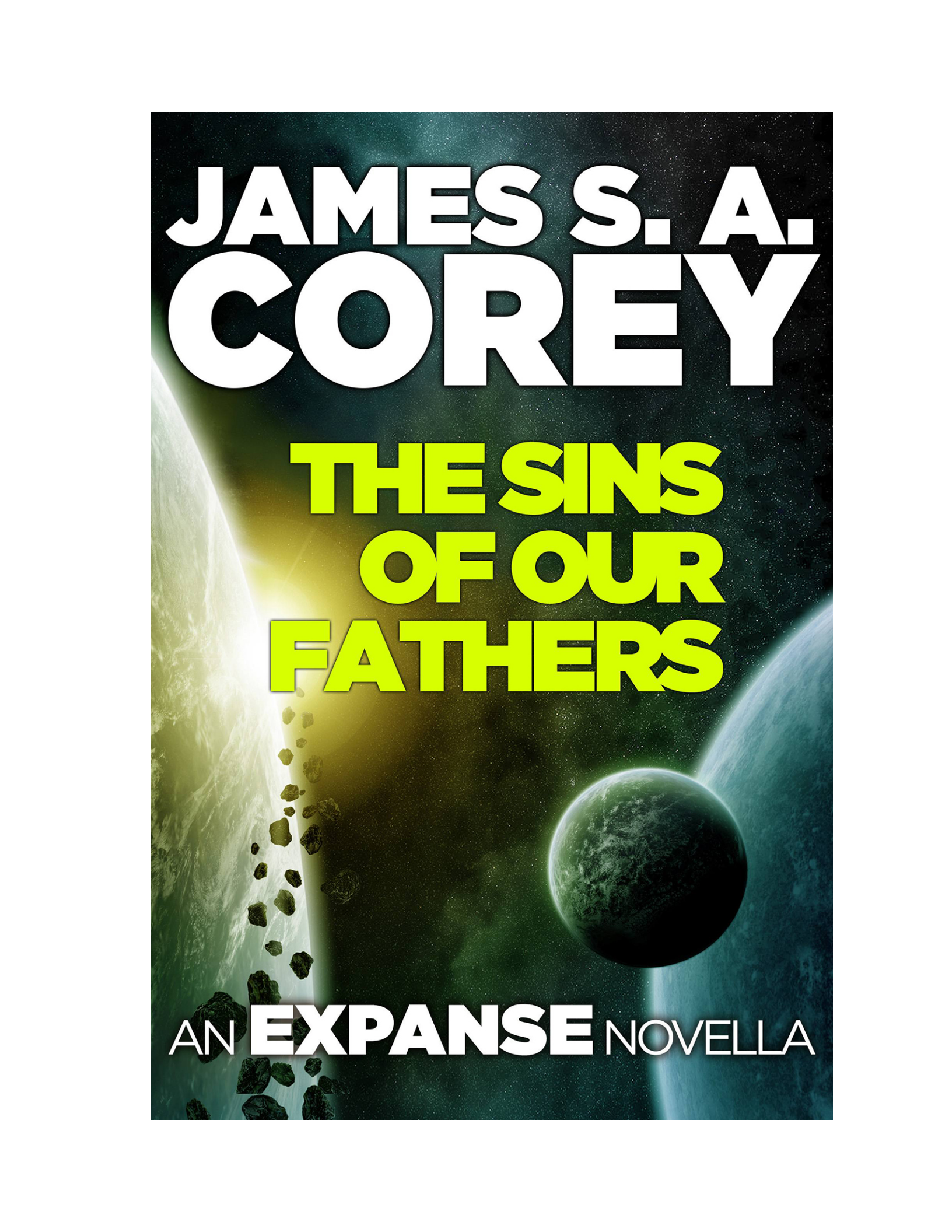
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The Sins of Our Fathers

The monsters came at night.

First came their calls: distant and eerie. Their wide, fluting voices echoed down the valley, complicated as a symphony and mindless as a cricket swarm. The deepest of them sang in a range below human hearing: subsonic tremors that the people in the township felt more than heard.

Then the night scopes showed movement. It could start as far as twenty clicks away, or as near as two. The science team still hadn't figured out what they did during the daylight hours or during the long, empty days when they seemed to disappear, but the feeling that they rose up from the planet's flesh with the darkness made the approach feel almost supernatural. Like the town had offended some nameless local god by coming here. It was only a mystery, though. They'd figure it out eventually. If they survived.

After the movement, assuming the monsters kept to their same pattern, their chorus would go on until the little retrograde moon started rising in the west. Then it would stop. Then they would come.

"They'll aim for the breach," Leward said, pointing with his chin. The perimeter wall was constructed out of prefabricated plates of carbon-silicate lace scavenged from ship hulls. The braces were titanium and compression-resistant ceramic. The place where the monster had come through last time looked like God had come down and pressed against the wall with His thumb. Ten meters of shattered plate and bent brace they'd shored up with local trees and scrap.

"Might aim for the breach, might not," Jandro said, with a slow shrug. He was the head of construction and maintenance, and a bear of a man. "What you think, Nagata?"

Filip shrugged. His mouth was dry, but he tried to keep the fear out of

his voice. “Wall didn’t slow them down much even when it was intact.”

Jandro grinned and Leward scowled.

The town was the second largest on the planet Jannah, at four hundred and thirty-six people. It had been named Emerling-Voss Permanent Settlement Beta, but everyone called it Beta. And with the ring gate to anywhere else broken, that meant Beta was its name from now on. Without the gates, the corporate headquarters of Emerling-Voss was just shy of twenty-three light-years away. Alpha settlement, with more than a thousand people, was seven and a half thousand clicks to the south. With no orbital shuttles or reliable ground vehicles, it might as well be seven million. And Alpha had gone silent when the ring gates shut down. Whether it was just a radio malfunction or something larger was an open question, and the residents of Beta had more immediate problems.

There were two dozen people drawn from different workgroups all along the north wall. Leward was in charge there. Another group was along the east, with lookouts and runners at the west and south in case something unexpected happened. In case the monsters changed the direction they’d traveled up to now. Filip considered the faces of the others stationed below the wall, finding signs in each of them of the same fear he felt. Almost each of them. Jandro and the four men from the maintenance team seemed relaxed and at ease. Filip wondered what drugs they’d taken.

Leward hefted his torch: a titanium rod with a solid, waxy mat of the local mosslike organism on a spike at one end. When he spoke, it was loud enough for everyone to hear. “When they come—if they come—we deflect them. Don’t go at them straight on. Just turn them gently aside so they don’t get to the walls. We aren’t fighting them. We’re just herding.” He nodded while he said it, like he was agreeing with himself. It made him seem uncertain.

“Should just shoot them,” Jandro said. It was a joke. Everyone knew the town had run out of rifle cartridges and the reagents they’d need to print fresh ones.

“We keep them outside the walls,” Leward said. “But if they get in anyway? Get out of the way.” He pointed up and to the south at the fabrication lab, the only two-story building in Beta. “The engineering team has a magnetic slug thrower set up. We don’t get between it and the target.”

“Maybe they won’t even come this time,” one of the others said. As if in

answer, the uncanny chorus swelled. The overtones rang through each other like a ship drive finding a hull's harmonic. Filip shifted his weight from foot to foot and hefted his torch. Everything was too heavy here. He'd spent most of his life on ships, and the float or one third g were his natural state. When he accepted the job to join Mose and Diecisiete at Beta, he'd expected three years down the well at most. Now, it looked more like a lifetime. And a lifetime that might not last until dawn.

Leward's hand terminal chimed, and the team lead accepted the connection. Evelyn Albert's voice came loud enough that Filip could make out every word. "Get your people in place. We have movement half a klick out. North by northeast."

"Understood," Leward said, and dropped the connection. He stared out at all of them like an actor who'd just forgotten the St. Crispin's Day speech. "Get ready."

They moved toward the wall, and then through the access gate to the strip of cleared land outside it. The night sky was bright with stars and the wide disk of the Milky Way. With the autumn sun gone behind the horizon, the air cooled quickly, with a scent like mint and toilet cleanser. The atmosphere of Jannah smelled nothing like Earth, the Earthers at Beta said. Take away the mint, and Filip thought it smelled a bit like a freshly scrubbed ship.

None of that changed the fact that Filip and the torch bearers walking at his side were the invaders here, and he'd have argued for leaving again if there were a ship that could take them and anyplace to go. Instead, the walls, the darkness, and the rising howls of monsters outside.

He tried to hear a difference in the chorus. He imagined the huge beasts hauling themselves up out of the dark soil like the ancient dead coming up from their graves. It seemed like the kind of thing that would have to change how they sang, but he couldn't be sure. He took his place outside the wall. To his right, a couple of women from the medical team. To his left, a young man named Kofi with the long bones and just-too-large head that said he was another Belter like Filip.

"Hell of a thing," Kofi said.

"Hell of a thing," Filip agreed.

In the west, a dim light glowed at the top of the mountain ridge like a pale fire was burning there. It brightened, and resolved into a crescent,

smaller than Filip's thumbnail. It looked to him like inverted horns.

All through the wide valley, the choir of alien voices stopped. Filip felt his heart start to labor. His head swam a little. The sudden silence made the valley feel as vast as space, but darker. The fear crept up the back of Filip's throat, and his hands gripping the torch ached.

"Steady," he said under his breath. "Steady, coyo. Bist bien. Bist alles bien." But it wasn't true. Everything was profoundly not fine. Leward paced behind them, breath fluttering like the edge of panic. Then from the darkness, a steady, heavy tramping that grew louder.

"Time to dance," Jandro said. A flare of orange fire sprang up to Filip's right. Jandro holding his lit torch.

"Not yet, not yet," Leward said, but Jandro's team had already started lighting all of their torches, and the approaching footsteps were so loud, Filip had to agree. The others along the line set fire to the moss, and Filip did too. The Belter beside him was struggling with the igniter, so Filip leaned his own fire close until the flames spread. The cleared space was a bright monochrome orange. Smoke stung Filip's eyes and throat.

The first of them loomed up out of the darkness.

It stood higher than a building, at least any of the buildings on Beta. It moved with weirdly articulated shoulders and hips that seemed to ripple with every step like there was a vastly complicated mechanism under the rough skin. Its head was little more than a knob, set low between its shoulders, comically flat. The eyes were black: two at the front and two on the sides, and its mouth curved up like an obscene, toothless grin. It lumbered forward, into the light, seeming not to notice the line of flame and primates in front of it.

"Not straight on!" Leward shouted. "Turn it! Make it turn!"

The line to Filip's right surged forward, shouting and waving their torches. To his left, they hung back. In the center, he could go either way. The monster took a slow step, then paused as Jandro and his crew rushed at it from the side screaming obscenities and threats. The monster's grin seemed to widen, and it trudged forward, the ground shaking under each step. Filip lifted his own torch and rushed in. The monster's smile was an accident of its physiology and evolution, but it still felt like the great beast was pleased to see them. Or amused. Filip pressed himself in among the men, shouting and reaching up to thrust fire at the thing's dark eyes.

The monster made a deep fluting groan, and its next step angled away to the right, if only a little bit. A few degrees.

“Hold the line!” Leward shouted over the roar of the torch bearers. Over Filip’s own shout of victory. “It’s not over. Keep turning it!”

Filip pressed closer, waving the flame above him. Other bodies were with him, a mob of frightened mammals with the first glimmer of victory. It felt better than being drunk. Someone—maybe Filip, maybe not—touched the beast’s skin with the fire, and it shifted again. The shouting redoubled. There were more people in the crowd now, and the monster strode forward, its pace hardly changing, but its path bent until it was walking parallel to the town wall. Leward was yanking them back one at a time. *Let it go. It turned away, just keep it going forward until it clears the corner.* But there was a kind of bloodlust. They’d made the thing that had frightened them before now bend to their will, and it was intoxicating. A knot of people pushed toward it, drawn like a tide by the gravitational pull of power. Here was the enemy, and their victory over it. Even if the victory was just changing the direction it was walking. They waved the same fires, but now from spite and in triumph.

The monster smiled its fixed smile and lumbered forward, along the wall to the corner where Leward and two of his people made a barrier and stopped the mob. The monster shifted its weirdly flat head, groaned a vast, shuddering groan, and turned back to its original heading like it was following a star.

They shouted as it moved off into the wildlands to the northwest of the town. Jandro picked up a rock in his off hand and threw it at the monster’s wide retreating back, and the others laughed and howled. Their torches were starting to gutter.

“Regroup!” Leward said, waving them back toward their posts. “Everyone grab new torches! This isn’t over. We have to be ready.”

Filip trotted back to his place and handed off the failing torch to a young woman in a science team jumpsuit. As she ran back into the town to refresh the oily moss fire cap, someone shouted. If there were words in it, they didn’t matter. Filip couldn’t make them out, but he knew what they meant.

A second monster loomed out of the darkness. Its head was a little higher up on its shoulders, its skin a little more green. Filip shouted and tried to light his fresh torch, but the beast had already come closer. Every

step made the earth shake the way dinosaurs and elephants were supposed to have. Like a nightmare.

“Line up!” Leward shouted. “Form the line!”

But it was too late. The people who had kept their torches burning and held their ground were clumped at the eastern end of the wall. The mob like Filip and Jandro and the others were just lighting up new ones on the west. A gap of darkness between the fires was guiding the monster straight toward the thing they’d sworn to protect. Filip waved his torch at the lidless black eyes, but the flame was weak and pale. The monster moved forward and hunched its forelegs. When it rose it was less like a jump than a weird unfurling of flesh, and it crashed down onto the wall with a sound louder than thunder.

Somewhere nearby, Leward was shouting, “We have a breach. We have a breach. We have a breach.” The same phrase over and over like the disaster had turned him into a siren. The monster slid into the darkness of the town, and the sounds of destruction echoed back. Filip’s mind jumped ahead, trying to think what they were losing. The medical center. The science barracks. The dry storage.

“Get back to the line,” Leward shouted, waving a torch in each hand. “Back to the line! Let the slug thrower take that one.”

“I don’t hear it.” That was Jandro. There was soot on his face, and his arm was red like it had been burned. Filip didn’t know how that had happened.

“Form up!” Leward said.

“He’s right,” Filip said. “The slug thrower’s not firing.”

“I don’t know about that. It’s not my job.”

In the dark of the town, someone screamed.

“Fuck,” Jandro said, then held out his hand toward Filip. “Nagata. Gimme your torch.”

Filip shifted it, dropping the handle into Jandro’s wide palm. The chief of maintenance put the burning moss on the ground, scraping it off with his boot like the flames were dog shit. The spike where the mat had been was five inches long, set at ninety degrees from the main shaft. Jandro banged the spike against the ground once, testing it.

“Form up!” Leward shouted.

“Fuck yourself,” Jandro said, like he was suggesting what kind of

sandwich would go with Leward's coffee. The big man turned toward the new gap in the wall and started off at a long, loping run.

"I'll get him back," Filip said, but it was more that he didn't have a torch now, and there was a monster loose in the town. He had to do something.

The darkness and the destruction made the town unfamiliar. A wall lay across the pathway, peeled off its building. The wraith-thin body of Arkady Jones sat, back against a water recycler and head resting on their knees. The lights were off to keep anything from drawing the monsters in. It seemed like a fantasy protection now. If you can't see them, they can't see you. Filip's heart tapped fast against his chest, reminding him that it hadn't been built for this. That he was a Belter down the well. That he was old.

Ahead, a huge shadow moved against the darkness. Filip went toward it, not knowing what he meant to do when he got there. Only that was the problem, and it had to be solved. In the starlight and the faintness of the moon, all he could see was the wide, shifting back. The twin tails, wider than both his legs together. The monster seemed to twitch, like it had stumbled to the left. When it roared, it roared in pain.

A spotlight went on at the top of the fabrication lab where the slug thrower was supposed to be. It tracked the monster as it shifted and stumbled toward the open ground of the town plaza. At first, Filip didn't understand what he was seeing. Jandro was on the thing's back, hunched down with his body pressed against it and one free hand banging the unlit torch against its head. The spike was dark and bright at the same time. Wet with blood. Filip paused.

Of all the places in the town, the plaza was the one with the least to destroy. The least that they couldn't rebuild or replace. Even so, he had to convince himself that Jandro had steered the monster, ridden it where he'd wanted it to go. Watching the huge man whip the titanium spike into the smiling monster's side, Filip felt something like awe.

Human voices floated down from the top of the fabrication lab, and a fast, loud rattle cut through the chaos. A line of wounds drew themselves along the monster's flank, and it writhed in pain.

"Stop shooting!" Filip shouted. "You'll hit him!"

But Jandro had already jumped free. The monster shifted and turned, confused by the light and by the new pain. The blood that sheeted down its side and poured from its eye and cheek was as red as anything Filip had

seen. As red as a human's blood. Another shaking rattle, with better grouping now, a new wound opening on the beast like the slug thrower was a mining drill coring through its side. The monster raised its head and tried to sing again, but the sound that came out was choked and strained. It took another step forward, shifted, stepped back, and folded itself gently onto the bare dirt of the plaza like it was stopping to take a nap. The eyes didn't close, but they went dull.

Filip ran to Jandro, more than half expecting to find him dead. Instead, he was on his knees, swatting clouds of dust off his pant legs and grinning.

"You okay?" Filip asked. "You need a medic."

"I'm fine," Jandro said.

"You could have been killed, coyo."

Jandro's grin widened, and he shrugged. The monster seemed to breathe out, some last trace of life escaping the corpse. Even dead, it was huge. Jandro bent down, grabbed the bloody pole, and tossed it back to Filip. "Thanks for the borrow, yeah? Let's go show these pinche fuckers who's boss."



Jannah system was—had been—one of more than thirteen hundred connected to Sol and Laconia by the gate network. It had a middle-aged star and two planets in the goldilocks zone, four gas giants strung out into the stars with clouds of moons around them like little solar systems all their own, and a thin, disappointing asteroid belt. In the gold rush years, half a dozen different entities had put claims to the two life-sustaining worlds until a disagreement over agricultural assay rights had escalated into a brief and mutually annihilating nuclear war, and the Transport Union had been forced to step in. For the better part of a decade, the system had been fourth or sixth or tenth priority for the corporate lawyers and union administrators, rights adjudication always moving forward without ever quite resolving.

Then the Laconian Empire had rolled through, smashed through the red tape with the iron fist of imperial fiat, and Emerling-Voss Minerals and Financial Holding dusted off its blueprints.

It was more than possible that somewhere in those plans, there had been a little square with a double line hashing one side that had meant temporary barracks. Or, more likely, general-purpose room. Now, it was two-and-a-half-meter walls of prefabricated metal with yellow chips in the blue sealant and a patina that made them look dirty no matter how much Filip scrubbed them. The ceiling had the same kind of full-spectrum worklights as the cabin on his last ship, the *Rhymer*. And inside the building's only room, two canvas cots. One was his. The other belonged to Mose, his supervisor. Diecisiete, the third of their three-person team, was in Alpha if she was anywhere.

"Wake up," Mose said.

Filip turned on his cot and moaned.

"Wake up."

"Can't wake up," Filip said. "I died. Dead men don't wake up."

"You didn't die."

"Then why do I hurt so much?"

"Because you didn't die," Mose said with a long, wheezing laugh. "Dead men don't hurt. That's being alive."

"Could be in hell," Filip said. By now, sleep had retreated, and all that was left was the ache and sense of fear.

"Could be," Mose said, but the laughter was less now. Filip rolled onto his side, and Mose put a plate on the cloth by his shoulder. Textured protein and the last of their pepper sauce. With the state he was in, it even smelled good. He rose to sitting and took a spoonful. Mose stood, folding his wide arms.

"Now you're done sleeping the day away, there's work to do."

"Be right there," Filip replied, as if his work contract was still what it had been. As if the *Rhymer* was coming back to drop off the new crew and take them back up the well and out to the stars. It was a little piece of theater they played out between the two of them. Mose played at being the good boss, Filip played at being the diligent underling. He could hear in the way Mose talked that the act was wearing thin. It was wearing thin for everyone.

Between them, Alpha and Beta were the whole human population of the planet, and the majority of the people in the system. There was, Filip had heard, a prospector's ship on one of the watery moons of the second gas

giant. If that was true, whoever they were needed to get their asses back down to the planet as quickly as they could and then find a way to land. With the gate gone, the human population that mattered—that had any meaningful effect on any of them for the rest of their lives—had gone from tens of billions to under two thousand. Maybe less. If they weren't careful, maybe a lot less.

Filip finished his breakfast, scraping out the last bits of nutritional yeast and mushroom with his fingernail. The voices of the others filtered in from outside. And behind that, the clanging of a mallet on steel. He went to check his hand terminal, but it had broken a week before and there weren't any replacement parts. The fabrication lab could have built some, but the supply of reagents wasn't deep, and he didn't need a hand terminal anymore. He could just walk outside and look up to know the time of day. Or consult with the weariness in his back to know how much rest he still needed.

Of the seven worlds Filip had set foot on—all of them light gravity, two of them too heavy for him anyway—Jannah had the most changeable skies. Some days it was an indigo so dark he could see the brightest stars at midday. Others, like today, it was a pale olive from horizon to horizon. The breeze was cool and musky, like one of the old water treatment plants on Ceres. The damage to the town was different in the daylight. Better because he could see it and not just let his imagination tell him how bad it was. Worse because he couldn't tell himself they'd gotten off light.

The monster had stumbled through a storage building and the machine shop where the science team worked on their small fleet of prospecting drones. Both of the buildings were flattened. If it had kept on the path it started, it would have gone through all the barracks, and they'd have been digging graves for half the town. Instead, the corpse lay in the plaza, its flesh cut open, swarmed by the local carrion insects and biologists. Leward paced among them, gesturing excitedly with his wide, blood-streaked hands. Filip scanned the crowds until he found Mose coordinating a salvage crew at the dead machine shop. Kofi was there too, and a broad-faced woman whose name was Aliya or Adaliya. Something like that. With the *Rhymer* gone, it probably made sense to pay more attention to things like that now. Filip slid over, hands in his pockets, and looked over the mess. Kofi noticed him and lifted a hand in greeting.

“Could have gone better,” Filip said, gesturing to the ruin with his chin.

“Could have gone worse too,” Mose said. “We lost some of the fine-work machines, but if we pull this up careful enough, I bet we can reuse almost all of it.”

“I’ll see if the welding rig’s free,” Maybe-Aliya said, and strode off. The patch on the back of her jumpsuit said she was maintenance. One of Jandro’s crew. Filip looked back at the dead monster and the men and women around it. The ones who were working by talking a lot.

“I see it too,” Kofi said.

“Yeah,” Filip said. “What can you do, though.”

It was natural enough. The scientists and administrators were doing science and administration. The mechanics and workers were working with machines. Filip found a length of conduit and used it to scratch the itch between his shoulder blades. Up between the light olive sun and them, something huge and distant unfolded wide, curving wings and cast them all into shadow for a second.

Mose spat on the ground. “Slug thrower got the fucker, yeah?”

Filip considered the dead monster. The autopsy had peeled it down to bright pink bone and pale flesh. It looked only a little smaller than it had in the darkness. Its flat face still had the permanent smile, like it knew a joke the primates that had killed it didn’t understand.

“Took a while.”

“Misfired the first time,” Mose said. “That’s what I was fixing before I came here. They had to ground out the main capacitor and bring the whole thing back up from battery. Overengineered and slapped together at the same time.” He spat again.

“Why we been using old-fashioned explosive propellant guns since forever,” Filip said. “They’re like sharks. We found a perfect design for killing the shit out of some coyo that needs it, why change?”

“Yeah, we used to have spaceships too.”

Spaceships and gun cartridges, both relics of their past.

“Coyo in chemistry group says we can get saltpeter from the local guano. Seems like we should try.”

“We do this first,” Mose said with his supervisor voice.

A woman broke off from the flock of administrators and scientists. She was smaller than Filip, with light brown skin and a mane of tight-curved

hair that was auburn where it wasn't gray. She'd done his intake interview when he and Mose had arrived from Alpha. Her last name was a mouthful of Russian that sounded like a puppy falling down stairs, so everyone called her Nami Veh.

"Moses. Filip." She nodded to each of them as she said their names. She had a gift for making it feel like they were friends, and knowing everyone by name was part of it. "We're calling a town meeting tomorrow after dinner."

"Yeah?" Filip said.

"It's to talk about everything we know so far about..." She looked back at the dead monster. "About those. And planning for what we do next. It's important that everyone come."

"We're not really part of all this," Mose said, shaking his head. "Me and Filipito? We're subcontractors, not permanent here."

Filip didn't know if Mose was fucking with her, or if that was really still how he thought of himself. Of them. At a guess, Mose wasn't a hundred percent sure either. Nami Veh's smile was ready and real.

"It matters for everyone, so we want everyone to be part of it."

Mose shrugged. "Okay. We can try. Not like we're going to be out at the dance hall."

Nami Veh laughed like it had been funny, put her hand on Mose's shoulder, and moved off to some maintenance group workers who were resetting a water purifier the monster had knocked down. When she was out of earshot, Mose chuckled.

"I guess she can call 'town meetings' now. Think we can all do that? Go tell the science leads that there's a thing they have to come to? Think we can all decide there's something on the schedule, or is that just them?"

Kofi smiled, but his eyes made him look angry. "Typical, yeah? No problem inners can't solve with more fucking meetings."

"We don't go," Mose said, then turned to point at Filip particularly. "That's the rule. If extra meetings aren't cleared by the union, we don't go. You give these bastards a millimeter, they'll take a klick."

"The union? Are you kidding?" Filip asked, and then regretted it.

Mose's face went dark and his chin jutted forward. "You listen to me. You and me, we're *union*. That's the way it is. All this other shit doesn't change anything unless we let it. And we are not going to fucking let it.

Never. You understand?"

Kofi looked away, embarrassed. Mose wasn't insane, but here he was shouting about getting something cleared by the union offices, as if that could happen. As if the way things used to be had anything to do with how they were now. If he'd dropped his pants and started dancing with his ass out, it would have been just as connected to their current reality.

Grief made people weird.

At the corpse, Leward was talking animatedly to a half dozen of the science team. Nami Veh was already halfway around the plaza, organizing whatever it was she was organizing. And Mose was staring at Filip with the kind of aggressive silence that could turn into a fight if he let it. Mose was ten years younger than he was, and when he looked at Filip, he just saw an old Belter technician with white in his beard and hair. He didn't see Filip as a threat, and Filip had put a lot of effort into keeping it like that.

"I hear you," Filip said, carefully. "We should probably get this thing salvaged, yeah?"

Mose hoisted up his chin a degree more. Filip imagined slamming the conduit in his hands into Mose's face. The look of surprise the man would give him before he dropped. Instead, he let his own gaze fall, looking more submissive than he felt. It seemed to satisfy Mose.

"Where the hell is Adiyah?" Mose muttered, and stalked off, ready to vent at her. Filip dropped the conduit he'd been holding and started to pace off the ruins of the machine shop. Kofi fell in beside him. After a few seconds, the younger Belter spoke.

"Mose, he's..."

"Yeah," Filip agreed. "Lot of people shook. Strange times, que?"

"Strange times." And then a moment later, "Are you really going to sit out this town meeting because of the union?"

"No."



Forty years could be a long time. Or it could be hardly any time at all. Most often, it was both of those at once. Filip had taken this form of his name as

a boy. The older he got, the more distance he had from his childhood, the stranger it became to him. Fifteen was the age when most people were taking their first contracts. He'd been leading terrorist raids that got people he knew and cared about killed. Watching his mother throw herself out an airlock without a vac suit. Helping his father commit genocide. Filip Inaros, he'd been then.

And he'd fallen from grace and renamed himself Nagata. He could remember when all the sins of his childhood had felt like glorious virtue, but he couldn't get the feeling itself back. And then his father died, and the systems of law and commerce remade themselves, and he was just another face among billions. No one knew that he'd left before that final battle. The records of his desertion had been lost with the Free Navy. He was dead, and so he was free to move on with his life. That was the theory anyway. The practice was more complex.

He'd been angry, and he hadn't understood why, not for years. Even saying it aloud—*My father was a terrible man, and I helped him do terrible things*—didn't carry the weight of it. He failed out of his first apprenticeship from having too many panic attacks. And the Filip Nagata name was a thin shield. If anyone looked too closely into him, they'd see past the paint. So he took other names, other pasts. Oskar Daksan. Tyr Saint. Angél Morella. Somehow, though, he always gravitated back to Filip Nagata. His past was like a wound that wouldn't heal. Or a poison.

Other people, they put together lives that followed from one thing to the next. Instead, he'd spent his life dodging justice that might not even have been looking for him except in his head. That had been enough to break him. At thirty-one years old, he had been Tyr Saint for a year and a half, an unofficial part of a group marriage on a Transport Union colony ship, and in line for the chief mechanic's place when she retired. For no reason he could fathom, he'd woken up one morning with an abyss of fear opening under him. He'd murdered billions. He'd seen his own friends die. They, whoever "they" were, would come for him. He'd dropped his identity at the next port and vanished, starting over again from nothing. Never letting anything build.

He took the work nobody wanted. Low pay, high risk, long contract. He signed onto the ships where people didn't talk about their pasts. He avoided any conversation about Marco Inaros or the Free Navy or the bombardment

of Earth. And if anything ever went right for him, if he ever seemed in danger of gaining something he might be able to keep, he ran.

Once, he'd tried reading about the experience of child soldiers and the paths they'd taken through the trauma of their adult lives. Before he'd even finished the first half of the book, he'd descended into panic so deep that the ship medic had put him on antiseizure medications. He'd never tried again.

Forty years could go fast that way. They could feel like a thousand.

The *Rhymer* was the latest in a long string. Filip Nagata had never dropped out long enough to lose his place in the union, but his work history had long and inexplicable gaps in it. There were a million work histories like it. Mental illness. Addiction. Religious or romantic fixation. Families made and left behind. There were a thousand reasons for moth-eaten careers like his. And there were slots on a ship like the *Rhymer* for people like him. The ship's full name was *Thomas the Rhymer*, and it was owned by a trade organization out of Bara Gaon that catered to new and struggling colonies. For the first few years, he'd been on strictly as crew as they carried workgroups through half a dozen gates, dropped off people and equipment or picked them up again to transfer off to other ships, other systems. When Laconia rolled through, the *Rhymer* and her sister ships had gone from working for the Transport Union to the Association of Worlds without missing a beat. It didn't matter who was in power, they wanted someone doing the shit work that the *Rhymer* made possible.

Filip had been happy there, or at least not unhappy. He'd have kept his slot if two things hadn't happened. First, the XO had taken an inexplicable dislike to him. And second, the junior technician in Mose's workgroup had a heart attack three weeks after they'd passed through Jannah gate. The company needed a replacement, and pulling from the *Rhymer*'s crew meant not having to spend the extra transit time. Filip needed off the ship at least until the XO calmed down or shifted his paranoia elsewhere, and the gravity of the little planet was light enough that Filip could stand it without risking circulatory collapse.

It had seemed like a good choice for everyone, and him most of all.

He and Mose and Diecisiete had delivered a solar power array to Alpha and spent a few months setting it up, troubleshooting it, and helping the locals work out the bugs. Diecisiete had stayed in Alpha to track down a

power drop, while Filip and Mose rode a supply shuttle to Beta and started the whole damn thing again. Filip could still picture the shuttle leaving them there, heading back to the relative metropolis of Alpha. There was a strange calm that had come from being at the edge of civilization. Or maybe just past the edge.

The news of the rest of the systems, the attack on Laconia, the loss of Medina Station, the eerie losses of consciousness that turned off minds everywhere, including Jannah, were all things that had happened during his time in Alpha. And the other, stranger thing. The timeless stretch when all minds had smeared together like oil paints being mixed by a gigantic, uncaring thumb had come when he and Mose had reached Beta. Filip's memory of that period was spotty and odd. Like he was trying to recall the details of a dream too big to fit in his finite skull.

When they'd all come back to themselves, the gate was dead. The *Rhymer* was still weeks from its scheduled passage back, and both the ring and the ship were now gone forever. Someone on the astronomy team had spotted the ring falling sunward into a new long elliptical orbit, shoved out of its former place at the edge of the solar system by some unknown, godlike hand. No one on Jannah knew why. They never would. All the problems they had now, all the ones they ever would have, they'd have to work through here.

Alone.



The sky darkened fast. A scattering of high, thin clouds clustered in the north took the red of the sunset and turned it into gold leaf. The monster's corpse had been dragged off the plaza, but the place it had lain was black with blood. A cloud of local insects buzzed around the stain and ignored the people.

The damage to the town was real, but the salvage and repair effort had left it less wounded. What had been the machine shop had become piles of salvage, squared away and ready for reuse. The new breach in the wall was shored up enough to keep the wildlife out. Just because the monsters could

walk through it didn't mean that the other animals were welcome. The town kitchen had given out bowls of riced tofu and black sauce, some of the last of their supply, and Filip was finishing his now. The bowl was made of hardened and vacuum-formed vat-grown kelp. He'd eat that too, when the tofu was gone. Every calorie and vitamin was so precious now, that someone on the science team had suggested using calories as the basis of a new currency.

At the edge of the plaza, Jandro and his crew were sitting together, laughing and talking louder than anyone else. They had what looked like beer. Since Jandro had ridden the monster down, he'd been treated like a hero and a badass. Which, Filip figured, was fair enough. If the price of beer was hauling himself up on a monster's back while the bolt thrower on the fabrication lab shot holes in it, water was fine for him.

Mose wasn't there. Probably he was back at the room, making his point about union rules to himself. Kofi was, along with a handful of other Belters, sitting not far from Jandro and his crew. The scientists and administrators were sitting in clumps of their own, except for Nami Veh, who circulated from group to group to group, talking to everyone, touching shoulders and arms, smiling like she was running for office.

As the early-evening sun continued to drop, the golden clouds flared and faded to gray. Filip took a bite of the bowl. It was crisp and layered and salty, like baklava without the sweetness. He chewed and watched Nami Veh approach.

"Filip," she said. "Long day. Thank you for coming. I really appreciate everyone showing up."

"Mose won't be here. But he doesn't mean anything by it. He's just working some things through, you know?"

Her smile dimmed a little. "I think we all are."

"Yeah," Filip said.

She looked for some way to touch him without it seeming awkward, didn't find one, and moved on. The relief he felt as she walked away surprised him. He didn't dislike her. Her kindness seemed a little too consistent to be real, sure, but it wasn't her that bothered him. It was talking. That bothered him because he was trying to listen. And he was listening for the monsters, singing.

So far, they were silent.

At the front of the plaza, Leward hauled out a little metal bench and a holographic projector. From where Filip sat, he could see the science lead's lips moving. Practicing. There were probably four hundred people in the plaza. Almost everyone. Filip shifted. His leg was falling asleep.

Leward stepped up awkwardly, holding his palms out to ask for quiet. Or to demand it.

"Everybody?" he said, and while it was inflected like a question, it wasn't one. "Everybody? Thank you all for coming here tonight. I know we've all been through a lot, and I wanted to start by saying how much I appreciate everything all of you have done."

The sunset was dimming fast. It was hard to make out the expressions of people across the plaza, but Filip thought he saw Nami Veh shake her head just a little.

"We've learned a lot. We know a lot more than we did before, and it's really going to help." He nodded as he spoke. Someone to Filip's right muttered something. Someone else laughed. Leward's smile widened. "Beta's site was selected based on a slate of criteria. Water availability. Shelter from major weather patterns. So on."

He took out his hand terminal, tapped it, and the projector came to life. A topographical map of the valley sprang into slightly fuzzy existence, with a red ball the size of a fist where the town was. Filip leaned forward, considering the shape of the hills.

"All the reasons this is an attractive site for us?" Leward said. He was getting his rhythm. He sounded like a university lecturer. "They also make it attractive for the locals. We knew that. Biosample diversity was a plus for us. But we didn't know about the size of some of the local fauna, or that we were setting down roots pretty much exactly in its migratory path."

One of the communications team stood up, raising her hand. "So the monsters aren't attacking us? We're just... in their way?"

"Turns out we built our houses in their hallway. But that makes a solution pretty straightforward." Leward flexed his wide hands and tapped his hand terminal again. The red ball that was Beta was joined by a green one halfway up a nearby slope. "One of the tertiary sites that we didn't pick is close enough that we can relocate even without the shuttle."

Filip felt himself sink. He glanced around at the town. The structures for more than four hundred people to work and live. The recyclers, the reactor,

the power grid. It was all designed to travel in the hold of a colony ship: easy to take apart, easy to put together. *Easy* meaning *maybe not impossible*. He thought of the conduit that he and Mose had put in place, the wire and vacuum channeling they'd laid down. Relocation would go faster if the whole town was focused on the task, but the prospect left him weary all the same.

It wasn't until someone else interrupted that he noticed that Leward had kept talking. Jandro was standing in the middle of the holographic display, gesturing between the two versions of Beta. The real and the imagined. Filip had missed whatever the start of his comment had been.

"I mean that's got to be half a klick up, yeah?"

"That's true," Leward said, "but the carts were all built with a full g in mind. They're pretty robust for this kind of short-distance travel, and there are game trails that the local animals have made that we can appropriate."

Jandro looked around at the crowd. The stars had come out above them to compete with the worklights and the backscatter of the display. Jandro shook his head slowly, crossed his arms. "This is a bad plan, boss."

"We've run the numbers," Leward said. "The whole move won't take more than five days, start to finish." That sounded optimistic to Filip, and probably to many of the others sitting under the stars. He'd probably picked a low number to make the whole thing sound feasible. But it was so overly optimistic that it made everything else Leward had said seem a little more suspect.

Nami Veh stepped up to the bench, smiling and holding out her hand to Leward like she was doing him a favor by helping him down. He hesitated for a moment, then let her take his place.

"Can you share more of what you're thinking, Alejandro?" Nami Veh said. "This is a big decision, and we don't have a lot of time to make it. Anyone who has thoughts about this, it's important that we hear from you. That's what this meeting is for."

When Jandro spoke, his voice had less of a buzz in it. "Here's the thing. We're talking about taking down everything. All of it. And then putting it back up. Every time we do that, we risk breaking something. It's just wear and tear, yeah? And that's if these big fuckers don't come while we're in the middle of the shift. Look at how much it would take to move, and instead we put that work into making what we already have a harder target. Dig

some trenches. Put some spikes in 'em. Get that slug thrower tested out better. Get the chem lab to cook us up some gunpowder. Some bombs, maybe. These big fuckers bleed. They die. We can teach them not to fuck with us."

"Fortification is less effort at first, but it's also a commitment to permanent upkeep," Leward said. "Relocation, we do once and then we can get back to our routine."

"Unless there's something at the new site we don't know about like we didn't here."

"These are interesting questions," Nami Veh said.

Jon Lee, one of the recycler techs, stood up, and Nami pointed to him. "What about water availability? We chose this spot for reasons. What would we be giving up if we went?"

"I can speak to that," a younger woman in a research team jacket said. "The tertiary site is on a creek that feeds down into the valley. We'd be seeing a reduction in overall flow compared to the river, but it's still more than we need in the near term."

"Even with the recyclers?"

"Recyclers, hydroponics, cooling. Even some secondary energy production for when the reactor runs out of fuel pellets. The new site's enough for all of it."

Filip listened and watched but didn't take a turn standing up. He'd spent a lot of his life trying not to get noticed, and there were more than enough opinions to go around.

About half of it, it seemed to him, was really about the monsters and their migration paths. The rest was about fear. Fear of the monsters. Fear of what had happened with the gate and what it meant for them. Fear of losing what little they still had left. Filip understood, because he felt it too.

It was close to midnight when Nami Veh called a halt to the proceedings, told everyone to go get some sleep and think about what they'd heard. They'd take a vote in the morning. Filip joined the line at the latrine, then went back to his cot without changing clothes. Mose was watching something on his hand terminal that had a man in a bright red suit getting into a floridly choreographed gun battle in what was supposed to be Ceres Station but looked more like a cave network on Callisto. It occurred to Filip that the entertainment feeds saved on the local system were the only

ones they'd ever have. Unless the data went corrupt. Then they wouldn't have the man in the red suit either.

"You went to the meeting," Mose said coolly as Filip curled under his blanket.

"I did."

"I told you not to."

"I know you did."

"You went anyway."

"Yeah."

Filip waited to see where Mose took it from here. He didn't think he'd push the issue, but times were odd. Things came out sideways sometimes. He almost thought the other man had gone back to his feed or turned over to try to sleep when he spoke. "I'm not going to bullshit you, Nagata. I'm going to have to report that. If I don't and the union finds out, that's my balls in a sling."

"Okay."

"Okay," Mose echoed. And then, "I can maybe make it better if you report in, though. Like you were there to keep an eye on these assholes. What happened?"

"Everyone debated about whether to move the town out of the way or dig in and try fighting the monsters off. The science teams like moving. The technical staff lean toward punching it out. There's going to be a vote at breakfast."

"Shit," Mose said. "Well, I guess we'll see what the plan is tomorrow."

Filip rolled onto his back, looking up at the featureless gray of the ceiling. He thought of Leward's map, and the crowd sitting close to Jandro. The black mark where the monster's blood stained the earth. He remembered his mother saying *The only right you have with anyone in this life is the right to walk away*. He thought about his father's need to frame everything as an epic struggle between himself and the universe. He pictured Nami Veh's calm, sweet voice, and Jandro's angry growl, and knew which way the vote would go.

"Stay and fight has some good points, but it doesn't have the votes. We're going to move the town."

"You sure about that?"

"I am," Filip said.

When morning came, he was right. And he wasn't.



After the vote, Leward and six of the civil engineering and administrative workgroups, Nami Veh among them, headed out to review the new site and the paths they could use to reach it. The rest of the town got to work. Filip and Mose, Beta's only local experts on the power grid, took two hours isolating lines and preparing the pocket reactor for shutdown. When they'd gone as far as they could, Mose went to help with the medical bay equipment and Filip headed over to where half a dozen of the long-timers were breaking down the food production units.

It was a simple enough setup. In the depth of space, a ship's galley could use water and energy to cultivate textured fungus that, with the right compounds and spices, the system could use to mimic a wide range of foods, some with better fidelity than others. In Beta, they had fifty separate meter-long cylinder units mounted in steel racks. The power regulation on them could be tricky. The capacitor design was kind of shitty, and more than one untrained person had died from misunderstanding the caution warnings on the little red box, so Filip took that part of the job himself.

If half of the cylinders went down, the town would still have enough to eat. The fabrication lab could probably keep these in replacement spare parts for six years. It sounded like a long time, until Filip started thinking about what they'd need in year seven. Then it seemed very soon.

The person overseeing the breakdown was named Jackson. Thin as a Belter, but with a Laconian accent. They were a contractor just like him and Mose, but with a different company. Jackson's plan was to break down half the units, install them at the new site, and then come back for the rest.

"If we can get a pinche cart to carry them on," they said with a scowl. "Can someone go find a cart?"

One of the others, a younger man named Cameron, jogged off looking for Jandro and his maintenance crew. Filip shifted the power couples off the unit he'd been working on, but before he could start on the next, Jackson put a hand on his shoulder and shook their head. They had wide lips and a

narrow nose that Filip might have found attractive in other circumstances. The barely restrained annoyance Jackson gave off any time they looked at him reassured him his interest was irrelevant anyway.

“No point if we can’t get them on carts,” Jackson said. “You can strap one of these fuckers on your back okay, but you better really fucking want it.”

Filip chuckled and went to clean his hands. All around the settlement, people were at work breaking down what they had. He’d only been there a couple months. There had been people living in Beta for much longer than him. Still, it felt a little like seeing an old ship getting scrapped. There was a loss to it.

He found Mose sitting outside the medical bay. One of the walls had been unhitched and the guts of the bay left open to the breeze. Filip shrugged his question.

“Need some tie-downs,” Mose said. “I get the feeling people weren’t expecting to take the place down and haul it halfway up a mountain.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Filip said.

“Diecisiete’s going to laugh about this when she gets here,” Mose said. “Those fuckers at Alpha better get their radio back up, or when the shuttle comes, they’re going to piss themselves. Whole place just...” Mose whistled between his teeth and swept one flat hand like he was erasing the town.

Filip sat. The ground was a little damp. It smelled like potting soil and citrus and the ever-present note of toilet cleanser.

Mose chuckled to himself. “Yeah, Diecisiete’s gonna laugh.” And then, softly, “When we’re done here, I’m taking us back to Alpha. Whole team. That’s an established colony. This penny-ante bullshit? It’s no way to live. Alpha’s better.”

Filip nodded. There was a pleading tone in Mose’s voice. He recognized it. It was the same sound people had when a ship went unexpectedly dark. The universe wasn’t kind. There were millions of things that could go wrong. Every now and then, a ship hit a micro-meteor or had some cascade failure they couldn’t catch in time. Every now and then, a colony or station got surprised by an accident. Sometimes, apparently, ring gates went dead. Whole civilizations, billions of people wide, pared down to a few hundred between one day and the next. Look at it that way, and Mose wasn’t having

a psychological breakdown. He was just thinking things through out loud. Catching up to a universe that had changed faster than he could and didn't give a fuck if anyone kept up or not.

"She'll laugh," Filip agreed. Down near the food pods, Cameron was back and talking animatedly to Jackson. Filip couldn't tell what he was saying, but he kept pointing north and shaking his head. Filip scratched his neck even though it didn't itch.

"Hey," he said. "I'll be right back."

"Whatever," Mose replied. "Where the fuck am I going to go?"

Filip went toward the north end of the settlement. Three other teams were busy breaking down structures and piling up supplies. Beta was packing to move, but no one was moving yet. Even where crates and spools were ready to load, they weren't loaded. The protective wall was broken in two places now where the monsters had lumbered through it. Filip walked slowly, looking for whatever Jackson and Cameron had been talking about. He heard it before he saw it: voices raised outside the wall. It wasn't anger or laughter, but loud all the same. The shouts of people coordinating with each other. Work voices. Filip lifted himself over a low spot in the broken wall.

The carts were there. Past the wall, he could hear their motors whirring and straining, and the whine made him wonder what they'd do when the bearings wore out. For now, they all seemed fine, lumbering along or parked. Great loads of dark soil were heaped up in two of them. The yellow metal was streaked with mud. The workers that crewed them were streaked with mud too. They carried shovels. And from one end of the town almost halfway to the other, a deep gouge ran through the earth, three meters wide and a meter deep, the displaced earth piled in a berm between the hole and the town wall. The smell of fresh-turned soil was thick and weirdly astringent.

Filip strolled toward the workers, his hands in his pockets. They were all maintenance and construction. Jandro's crews. One woman saw him and nodded sharply, as much a challenge as a greeting. Filip smiled and nodded back.

"Nagata."

Jandro, lumbering up beside him, was a mess. Mud caked his legs to the middle of his thighs and smeared his arms and chest. When he grinned,

Filip noticed that one of his eyeteeth was chipped. He hadn't seen that before. He found himself very aware of the physical size of the man. The strength, the sense of ease, and a deep maleness that wasn't a threat unless it was.

"Jandro," Filip said. And when Jandro only grunted in reply, "Lot of work."

"Yeah. Figure about four passes. So about twice this wide and twice this deep. Build up the hill on the side. I figure we use the mud and some of that shit that looks like grass. Make bricks. Lace plating doesn't stop these fuckers, but make a hill steep enough, they'll get tired and go around, same as anyone."

Jandro shrugged like he was commenting on all he'd just said and leaned a little forward, waiting. Filip wasn't sure that he wanted to be the one who said the next thing, but he was the one who was there. "The plan was that we move the town, though, yeah?"

"That's a bad plan. Better that we do this."

They were quiet for a moment, looking out over the growing ditch. The maintenance crew working and shouting. Filip wondered what would happen if he made it into a confrontation. He thought of Mose saying *We're subcontractors*. That wasn't exactly right, but he wasn't the one who'd called the town meeting or held the vote. Nobody had elected him to be in charge of anything.

Jandro shifted his weight again, stretched his shoulders. His smile was friendly enough, but it was friendly with an edge. Like milk that was just starting to go bad.

"Well," Filip said with a nod, then turned to amble back into town. A few others passed him, heading the other way. The news, getting out. He kept his eyes down as he walked. His jaw ached.

Mose and Kofi were at the medical bay, sitting on ceramic crates with their backs against one of the walls that hadn't been taken down. As Filip came close, Mose lifted his hands, asking a question without saying what it was.

"Mining, though," Kofi said, continuing the conversation they were already having. "There's a lot we can do as long as we've got power. The fuel pellets run out, and then what? No hydroponics. The yeast vats stop working."

“Kofi’s decided we’re all gonna die because he’s out of cigarettes.”

“It’s not just that, it’s everything. The guns are out of cartridges. Med center’s out of bone density drugs. Security’s down to half a dozen tasers. You think those big fuckers are going to give a shit about tasers? And the fabrication lab can’t just print new parts out of nothing. The printers aren’t magic. They need metal and industrial clay. Carbon. And even if we get everything where we don’t starve to death... Shit, we’re gonna need to make babies.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“No, serious! We don’t have any kids here. Youngest person in Beta’s probably twenty-something. We’re all going to be dead of old age and no one to keep things going if we don’t.”

“Good thing there’s no kids. You’d be scaring the shit out of them,” Mose said, and spat like it was punctuation. “How about we don’t start freaking out about our legacy until Alpha gets their radio working and we hear from that survey mission? Anyway, what we need now is some fucking carts. I’m not strapping this shit to my back and walking it halfway up a mountain. I don’t care if we are under four tenths.”

“Don’t wait underwater,” Filip said.

Mose scowled. “What’s that mean?”

Filip shook his head and left it at that.

Over the next few hours, the town slowed to a halt. The teams that had been focused on taking the structures apart paused. The piles of supplies stopped getting bigger. Conversations were quiet and tense, people stood with their heads close together. The expectation of action, of business, of having the hours filled to the top with things that needed to be done and done fast gave way to a half-nauseating torpor. Outside the town, the maintenance crew shouted a little too much and laughed a little too loud.

The afternoon was slipping into early evening when Leward and the others came back. Filip watched from a distance, the same as everybody else, as Evelyn Albert and Nami Veh headed north past the wall. The tightness in Filip’s chest made him feel like he was a child again, waiting for something bad to happen. He checked the power feed to the magnetic bolt thrower on top of the fabrication lab. It gave him something to do, and he couldn’t bring himself to stay still.

He wasn’t there when Leward and Jandro faced off, but he heard about

it. Leward had shouted himself red in the face about how Jandro was defying the will of the town and breaking the plan. They'd lost a day because of him, and the carts had *better be* cleaned and ready to start the evacuation in the morning. According to Kofi, Jandro had listened and been calm while Leward poked him in the chest and yelled in his face. Then he'd said that Leward's plan was a bad plan, and that Jandro wasn't going to let the town do something that could get them all killed just to save Leward's feelings. Then he'd tousled the science lead's hair and walked away. Just like that. Like a big brother messing with his little sibling.

"You should have seen it," Kofi said, awe in his voice. "You should have been there."

"No," Filip said. His stomach felt like someone had punched it. "I'm fine here."

They were sitting on a bench with legs made from spools of optical wire and a seat of a local tree analog with veins of green and blue lacing through pale woodlike flesh. Filip, Kofi, and Mose. With their backs against the medical center wall, they could see the plaza. The dark stain had almost vanished, and Filip wondered idly what had happened to the blood. Around the town, other little groups were huddled together like they were. The uneasy sense of conflict was like smoke in the wind, an invisible maybe-threat that everyone felt and no one could see.

"Leward's an asshole," Mose said.

"Is," Kofi agreed. "But he's the boss asshole. Or used to be, I guess. Now, I don't know."

Filip knew how this would have gone before. There would have been a message sent out at the speed of light, tightbeam lasers hitting relays one after another out to the ring gate and back to an administrator at Emerling-Voss, then a conversation with the union rep, then authorization for the company to sanction Jandro and his team. Loss of pay. Loss of union benefits. A berth back out, maybe. Maybe on the *Rhymer*. Maybe on one like her. Part of Filip was still expecting it to play out that way. It wouldn't, though. Leward had made a plan, had gotten people to agree, and he'd failed. There was no corporation or union behind him. There was no process now. Just power.

"You're not eating," Mose said, and Filip realized the man had still been talking to him.

“Not that hungry.”

“This is crap,” Mose said, lifting his bowl. “Did we run out of sauce?”

“Yeah,” Kofi said. “Plain is what we get from now on. Barrett over in the chemistry group is looking at what we can harvest from the local organisms that won’t taste like shit or kill us. We’ll have something in a few weeks, probably.”

“I’m not eating alien shit,” Mose said. “Are you crazy? None of this stuff’s made with the same chemistry we are.”

“There’s some overlap. And salt’s salt, no matter where you go. I’m just hoping we can find something that tastes like pepper. Or cumin.”

“We’ll get resupplied from Alpha when the radio comes back up,” Mose said. “I can eat shit until then.”

“If there’s still an Alpha,” Kofi said. “They’ve been down for a long time. And if they didn’t eat all their stuff while we were eating ours. Not like they’re getting resupplied.” He lifted his bowl like he was displaying an exhibit. “This shit is all the shit there is.”

Mose’s cheeks darkened and his lips went thin. “You know what? Fuck you.”

He stood up, shoulders high around his neck, and stalked off muttering. Kofi watched him leave with surprise in his eyes. “What’s with him?”

“All of it, I guess,” Filip said. “Our ship. Our team in Alpha. The gate. It’s a lot, you know.”

Kofi nodded. “I forget how new you two are around here. Beta was just supposed to be a stop for you.”

“It was.”

Kofi took another scoop of the yeast protein in his bowl and nodded toward Filip. “You should eat. It’s not good, but none of this gets better by starving.”

Filip made a scoop of his first and middle fingers. The mush was bland and viscous. His gut was too tight, but he swallowed it anyway, pleased not to gag. “What do you remember?”

“Que?”

“About the thing before the gate went away.”

Kofi nodded. There was only one *thing* before the gate went away. “I don’t know. It’s hard to bring it back now. I was here working on... I think the water feed. And then, I was other people. Or no one. And I was huge.

What about you?”

“It’s like a dream, you know? How when it’s over, you don’t remember? Like whatever it was doesn’t fit in your head. I was in this dream...”

“And you woke up in a fucking nightmare.”

Filip laughed, and Kofi laughed with him. “Fuck, you know? It’s just... Mose is weird. I get that. But I keep thinking the *Rhymer*’s coming. Or that Diecisiete’s finishing up in Alpha and coming here. Or I’ll go there. Or... Our next contract was in Tridevi system. Five-workgroup contract putting a power grid up for a city of half a million people. We were going to be hauling teams in and out for four years, and we were just doing the backbone. I keep thinking about how that’ll be, like it was still going to happen. Half a million people. And now, there’s four hundred.”

“All those others are still out there.”

“Are they? I don’t know that. Maybe everyone else everywhere else got snuffed out like candles, and we’re the only ones left. How would we know?”

“There’s Alpha.”

“Maybe.”

“There’s the survey team.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Kofi said.

Across the plaza, Eric Tannhauser, a short blond man with skin so pale you could see the veins in his forehead, was talking to Mina Njoku. He was shaking his head and pointing an angry finger up in the tall woman’s face. Nami Veh appeared at his side, and Tannhauser turned his wrath, whatever it was, on her. Filip tried to take another bite of his food but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“You think they’ll call another vote?” he asked.

Kofi shrugged. “If they do, I’ll bet you half a week’s wages that Jandro wins it. You should have seen him. Leward spitting like a wet cat, and Jandro letting it all wash past him like it was nothing. Anyway, doesn’t matter what the vote was. We’re staying here. Holding our ground.”

“Maybe we won’t have to. Maybe those things already moved past us. Moved on.”

“Or maybe they’re growing wings and getting ready to breathe fire. Who knows on this planet?” Kofi took a last scoop of his meal, then held

the empty bowl up like an exhibit. “I am going to get mighty fucking tired of this.”

Mose didn’t come back to the cots after dinner. Filip lay on his back, one arm behind his head like a pillow, and waited for sleep that wouldn’t come. Every time he started to drift, some tiny noise would pour adrenaline into his bloodstream and snap him awake again. He wasn’t even certain what he was anxious about. There were so many options.

When he didn’t sleep, he thought about Jandro. He imagined the confrontation with Leward, building versions of it from Kofi’s description. Putting himself into it. The knot in his stomach kept getting tighter. Jandro smiling his wide, sharp threat of a smile. The man was a hero. He’d ridden one of those monsters. He’d saved the town, maybe, when he’d steered it into the plaza and within range of the slug thrower. He didn’t remember who’d said it, but when he’d been much younger, someone had told him that saving money for an economic collapse was a bad plan. Who knew what scrip would matter and what would just be a number in an account no one cared about? The things that would last were bullets and liquor, not cash. When the apocalypse came, bullets and liquor would be the only currency that mattered. They weren’t wrong. Beta could have used a lot more of both.

But that half-remembered giver of wisdom wasn’t talking about Beta. They’d been talking about the bombardment of Earth. They’d been talking about the billions of people Filip had killed. Filip and his father. He wondered if Mose was out somewhere in the town right now, finding whoever had been smart enough to set up a distilling pot. They’d be the richest person in Beta soon, whoever did that. Until someone else made some bullets and took it from them.

“Fuck,” he said to the darkness, and hauled himself up. His jumpsuit was filthy. He’d take it to the river tomorrow and let some of the dirt wash out of it, but tonight it was slick and sticky, and he felt dirty putting it on. Outside, the night sky was a riot of stars, and the astringent stink of the broken ground north of town was thicker. He didn’t know why that was, and probably no one else did either. He stuck his hands in his pockets, put his head down, and walked.

If the monsters were coming tonight, they’d have started singing earlier. He’d be out north of the town with a torch in his hand. With Jandro and

Leward and all the others. It was a fucked-up thing to feel nostalgic about. But at least they'd all still be on the same side.

Maybe, they would be. Maybe now it was different. He wondered, if Jandro went to risk his life for the town again, whether Leward would try to stop him the way he had last time. It was harder to picture.

The breeze was cool against his cheeks, and the light gravity wasn't enough to make his joints ache. Here and there in the town, lights glowed, and the local insects drawn by them made little humming clouds. He heard a few voices, but they weren't raised in anger. They were just people talking. Some of them laughing. A couple having some kind of sex, he was pretty sure. Human sounds. It was bigger than a ship, but not so much that he couldn't get back some of the feeling of walking decks. He could almost imagine that Beta was an old colony ship, burning through the long darkness. He could make sense of it that way. The planet was just a weirdly designed ship, spinning through the same vacuum he'd grown up in. The people of the town were crew and passengers, their fates locked together by the ship's recyclers and the thrust of the drive. The problems and dangers they faced might express differently. There weren't great, strange, smiling monsters lumbering through space. But there were micro-meteors and the unforgiving vacuum always trying to get in.

The mission was the same: Keep the food supply going. Keep the water drinkable. Don't boil in your own waste heat. Survive. That was always the job. Survive.

By the time he'd made it all the way back around, the knot in his stomach was looser. The fatigue of the day had come out from under the tension and fear. He could imagine sleep.

Mose was on his cot, snoring gently. Filip stripped down to his undershirt in the darkness and crawled into his own. Mose muttered something once but settled back down to sleep without making sense. Filip's body felt like it was growing heavier, the cot rising up from below like the ground had started a faster burn. Leward and Jandro, Nami Veh and smiling monsters were all still there, floating through his thoughts like echoes from another deck. He could ignore them. Let them go. When he closed his eyes, it felt comfortable to let them stay that way. Even the little pang of hunger wasn't enough to keep him awake.

Filip slept, and for the first time in more than a decade, he dreamed

about his father.



“We found them.”

“Who?” Jackson said.

“The big fuckers. The monsters,” Cameron said. He was practically hopping up and down with excitement.

Jackson made eye contact with Filip in a way that meant *Can you keep the work going while I deal with this?* Filip wiped the sweat off his forehead and nodded in a way that meant he could.

Jackson stood with a grunt. The food production unit they’d started taking apart yesterday, they were putting back together today. The racks that had been emptied of cylinders were almost half full now, and half of the remounts had power. It was slower putting together than it had been taking apart. Filip felt like that was true for a lot of things.

“So what are you talking about?” Jackson asked.

“Muhammed Klein? Fat Muhammed, not the one with the bent nose? He put chemical sensors on the survey drones. The reason we couldn’t track them before is that there’s another species that follows them. Little bird-things that eat the grubs and stuff that the big fuckers churn up. It’s like they’re sweeping away the tracks. Only the tracks are outgassing trace ammonia where they dig down to hibernate or whatever. So we found them.”

Filip took one of the capacitors, a flat red box a little larger than his hand, and triple-checked the charge status before he fit it into the base of a cylinder. His attention was on Cameron. The big bastards’ tracks were giving off trace ammonia. Like a freshly scrubbed toilet. Filip realized they’d had an early-warning system all along.

Jackson spat on the ground. “Where are they?”

“Everywhere. North of here. South of here. All over the valley.”

Filip and Jackson shared a look. “I can’t finish it all, but I can get it to a good stopping place,” Filip said. “I mean if you want to go see about working on the defenses.”

“Better should,” Jackson said.

“Yeah.”

Jackson smoothed their hands on the fronts of their thighs like they were wiping the palms clean, then walked off with Cameron toward the science labs. Filip hoisted the next cylinder into place, steadying it with one hand while he fixed the bolts to hold it. It was a little unwieldy without another pair of hands to help, but it wasn’t bad. At a full g, it would have been impossible.

All around the town, people were doing similar work. The false start at moving left everything half broken down. Or half put together. Depended on how you looked at it. The sky had taken on an almost emerald green. To the west, pure white clouds billowed up so high, they seemed like they’d reach orbit. Filip didn’t like looking at them. He’d gotten to where living without the safety of a ship didn’t panic him, but something about the cloud banks made the scale of planetary life harder to ignore. It was odd, the way that living in an emptiness infinitely vaster than the distance between him and even the tallest cloud could feel comfortable if there was a thin bubble of metal around him. Something about the perspective, probably. The universe was always vast, if he thought about it. The trick was not to see more of it than he could stand at any given moment. And picking the right part to look at.

He put the last bolt in place, checked that everything was stable, and grabbed up another capacitor. This one was still holding charge, so he set it to a safe-ground cycle and sat back for the minutes-long wait. He heard Leward before he saw him.

“Put that back. That isn’t yours!”

Filip leaned forward to get a better look. They were coming from the east side of town, moving in the aisle between the buildings where months of habit had stripped away the plants and left packed dirt behind. Not dignified enough to call a street, but where one would be, given time. Two men in maintenance crew uniforms were pulling a handcart. It was a low thing, with wheels broader than they were deep, like a yellow steel pallet on rollers. The science lead was behind them, chin high, and lifting his knees with every step like he was marching. He looked angry, which Filip had seen before. But he also looked ridiculous, which was new. It wasn’t him, not really. It was the grinning and snickering of the maintenance crew.

“You stop!” Leward shouted. “We have need of that! You can’t just take it.”

The taller of the maintenance crew pair leaned over and said something to the shorter one too quietly for Filip to hear. The shorter one chuckled. It wasn’t a kind sound. Around the other buildings, a few people paused to look. Leward made a strangled sound and darted forward. He grabbed the back end of the cart and tried to yank it back. The cart bucked, and the two maintenance men stopped smiling. They let the cart’s lead drop to the ground and turned. The smaller one put his arms out at his sides, widening him.

“What the fuck are you doing, coyo?” he asked, and Filip felt a little thrill of fear. He knew that tone. He knew what it meant, even if Leward didn’t.

“This,” Leward said, stabbing a finger at the handcart, “is the property of the bioscience lab. It is not construction equipment. You can’t just come in and take whatever you want whenever you want it!”

The taller one feigned sadness. When he spoke, his voice was a high, mocking singsong. “Ooh! It’s not construction equipment! Oh no! So sad. So *angry*.” Then he grinned and stepped forward, speaking in a regular, low voice. “It’s what we say it is.”

“Take it back now,” Leward said, but he quavered. He was starting to understand what was going on.

“Or else what?” the shorter one said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I said, ‘*Or else what?*’ What are you going to do when we don’t, eh?”

Leward glanced around, saw the eyes on them. Filip felt his humiliation like they were passing through a resonance frequency. Like they were back in the dream together. Like it was his own. Leward stepped forward, reaching for the cart again, ready to take it back himself. The tall one put both hands on Leward’s chest and shoved. In the light gravity, the fall took a few seconds, Leward’s legs flailing as he went down. When he landed, it still knocked the breath out of him. The shorter one laughed and stepped forward, his hands in fists.

“Hey!” Filip shouted. One syllable, but hard. Sharp. It brought the two maintenance men around. *Well, fuck*, Filip thought as he stood up. It was too late to think about whether he wanted to be in this. He already was. And

as he walked across toward the two men, he didn't actually regret it.

The taller one made a show of looking Filip up and down. "You a friend of this one's?"

"I don't know him," Filip said. "I'm just a subcontractor."

"So what are we talking about, subcontractor?"

Behind them, Leward was coming to his feet. There was finally some real fear in his eyes. Late, but better now than never. Filip considered the two men. They were younger than he was. They'd grown up in gravity wells, he could tell from their builds. In a fight, they'd kick his ass. The smart thing was to back down. He wasn't feeling smart.

All around them, work had stopped. The violence against Leward was shocking, maybe, but with everything going on, they had to expect it. The new guy standing up was unexpected. If he weren't doing it, he'd be keeping a weather eye on it too.

"Just want to know how you're going to be when I come take your tools without asking," Filip said. In the back of his mind, Mose said, *We're union*. It was ridiculous, but what else did he have? "Jandro's pissed at him, that's not my problem. I don't care who likes who. I'm just here getting the work done. But you need something, union has rules about how you get it. This isn't that."

"Union?" the short one said, tilting his head.

For a moment, Filip was sure the man was going to come for him. That there was about to be violence between them. He wasn't scared. He wanted it. He had a visceral memory of being a child, barely in his adolescence, leading a raid on Martian shipyards. Watching soldiers die, the enemy and his own. He remembered that joy. More than that, he felt it again, just a little. The short one must have seen something change in him because he looked confused for a moment and took a half step back.

"He's right, Alyn," Jackson said, appearing at his elbow. "You know better than this."

The taller one shrugged theatrically. Alyn, apparently. Filip really needed to start learning these names. "Whatever, Jacks."

"Whatever your whatever," Jackson said. "It's a worksite. Not a playground. Get the fuck back to work."

When the maintenance men turned back to the cart, Leward was gone. No one mentioned him. They just took the cart by the lead and pulled it off

to the north. Filip watched them go.

“Well, you got balls, Nagata,” Jackson said when they were out of earshot. “I’ll give you that. You want some free advice, don’t get in the middle of this.”

“I hear you,” Filip said. “Cover for me for a little, okay?”

“You’ve got something to do?”

“Yeah,” he said. Then, “Don’t let Cameron—”

“We’ll wait for you on the power hookups. I’m not stupid,” Jackson said. “Just... be careful.”

He hadn’t been in Nami Veh’s office since he and Mose had arrived on the shuttle. They’d done their project intake there, affirming all the corporate boilerplate they always affirmed, getting their bunk assignments and the review of local legal policy. He hadn’t paid much attention.

It was the same space. Just green and gray prefabricated walls with a little window and a light metal desk. All the small details he noticed now had probably been there before. The picture of a man with dark hair and a thin beard in a silver frame on her desk. The little vase with local flowers in the corner. The discreet silver cross on the wall. He hadn’t picked Nami Veh as pious, but it didn’t surprise him.

The woman herself was the same. He had an image in his mind of what she looked like, but as he talked, as he watched her for signs of how she was hearing him, she didn’t really match the picture. He thought of her as professionally, blandly attractive, with the gentle eyes and hard smile of someone whose job it was to say things were all right even when they were not. But she actually had a much more expressive face, with a webwork of wrinkles at the corners of her mouth and eyes that seemed equally at ease with both sorrow and laughter. Her hair was auburn and touched with gray, but it had more warmth to it than he remembered. He suddenly found himself wanting her to like him.

“Sit,” she said, gesturing to a rickety stool in front of her desk.

He did, and spread his hands in an old Belter gesture of passing on a task. “You’re administration here. I don’t know what needs to happen, but I’m not the one to do it.”

He half expected her to say *What am I supposed to do?* And it would have been a good question. To her credit, she leaned forward, elbows on the desk, and pursed her lips.

“Did they hurt him?”

“I don’t know,” Filip said. “You’d have to ask him. They knocked him down.”

“And Alejandro wasn’t there.”

“They were his people. There’s a way people get sometimes, and if it sets in, you can’t get it back. It’s like...”

“Contempt,” Nami Veh said, and her voice had none of its usual pleasantness. There was exhaustion in its place. And maybe a kind of mordant humor. “It’s contempt.”

“It’s a problem. Somebody has to do something about it.”

“And that somebody is me,” she said ruefully. “Thank you, Filip. I may need your help again. But I hear you, and I will take this seriously.”

“Is that going to be enough?”

She frowned her question.

“I mean,” Filip said, “does Jandro still listen to you? You used to have pull, but you had the company behind you then. I had the union. We had... Now, is he going to listen?”

“We’ll make it work,” she said with enough conviction that he could almost convince himself she had answered the question.

“You don’t understand what he is,” Filip said, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice.

To his surprise, Nami Veh didn’t brush him off. Whatever she was seeing on his face made her frown and settle back in her chair. “Tell me, Filip.”

“Men like him—” he started, then stopped. “My father was like that. Strong. Certain. People loved him, and wanted him to love them. They wanted to have even a tiny piece of his confidence, if they could. It made them do terrible things so that he would notice them.”

“Like what?” she asked.

Filip didn’t answer. He suddenly found he couldn’t meet her eyes. She nodded and smiled, then pointed at the cross hanging on the wall.

“My mother was a saint,” she said. Filip couldn’t tell if that was sarcastic or not. “When she died here a few years ago, I think a lot of the people at this colony were surprised that the sun didn’t go out.”

“Sorry I never met her.”

“You say that now,” Nami said with a laugh, “but having anyone care

that much and try that hard to save you from yourself can be fucking exhausting.”

“Do I get to pick? Because—”

“Look,” Nami said. “I don’t need to hear all the ways your father made life harder for you, and I’m not going to explain how living with Saint Anna broke a few things for me. We have no reason to compete, you and I. The only point is that our parents can lay burdens on us, all without meaning to, that we’ll have to carry around for the rest of our lives and there’s nothing we can do about that. But you and I still get to decide how we carry those burdens.”

She reached across the table and took his hand. Hers was warm and dry. Her smile was both sad and comforting at the same time. It made Filip want to scream at her.

“That’s all well and good, but this Jandro problem isn’t going away,” Filip said, and yanked his hand away, needing to break the shared intimacy of the moment and finding himself almost happy to see her smile disappear.

“I know,” she replied.

Filip jumped up off the stool and bulled his way out the door, slamming his shoulder into the frame as he went. Once he was back out of her office and into the town, things felt different. He couldn’t tell whether the others were watching him, seeing the junior power tech in a new light, or if he only imagined that they were. His chest felt tight, like he was just a little too far from his ship with not enough air in his tank. He found himself bouncing up with each step, pushing too hard against the ground.

Mose was waiting for him by the food cylinders, arms crossed. The clouds in the west had come much closer, and the smell of rain was in the air. Jackson and Cameron weren’t there, but their toolboxes were, like Mose had asked them to leave for a little bit. Filip put his back against the steel racks and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“The fuck are you doing, Nagata?” Mose’s voice was soft, but there was a buzz in it. Anger. Maybe fear. “Are you getting us involved with these people’s problems? Is that what you’re up to?”

“We’re going to be here. At least for a while, maybe for longer than that. Their problems don’t stop with them.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“It isn’t,” Filip said, and Mose took a step back like the words had been

a slap. “I know men like Jandro. People are scared and they’re hurting, yeah? And some big man comes along, and he seems confident. He looks sure of himself. All the things that are eating at your heart, they aren’t eating at his. And yeah, he gets a team. Everyone falls in line behind him, and bad things happen. The worst things.”

Mose cleared his throat, but Filip kept going before he could speak. “We’re at the start of something here. We can’t let it slide. If it’s okay now, it’s okay forever. You plug a leak when it’s small, or you suffer when it’s big.”

“And you think you’re going to fix it?”

“I saw a problem, I took it to administration. But these are not the kind of people who know what to do with this.”

“What kind are they, then?” Mose asked.

“Gentle,” Filip said. “They’re gentle.”

“So maybe it’s not your job to find the toughest son of a bitch in this place and make an enemy out of him?”

“That’s how it works, Mose. No one stands up, and no one stands up.”

“I don’t know what the fuck personal shit you’re working through,” Mose said. “I don’t much care. I’m telling you as your supervisor we stay out of local drama. We’re putting in time here until we can get back to Alpha and Diecisierte.”

“And when I tell you to fuck off? When I tell you your rules don’t matter anymore, and I do what I want, then what, Mose? When I’m like Jandro, what do you do? How do you stop me? Because we both know there’s no union behind you anymore, and don’t fucking mistake me for one of the gentle locals, coyo.”

Mose’s scowl dug lines into his cheeks.

“You’re out of line, Nagata,” he said, pointing a finger at the center of Filip’s chest. “You’re way the fuck out of line.”

But then he walked away. What else was he going to do? Filip turned back to the cylinders. He needed to get them mounted and the walls back up before the storm came.



Filip walked through the downpour. The rain floated down, moving slowly enough in the fractional gravity for the drops to join each other and become a heavy, unforgiving mist punctuated by water balloons. Somewhere behind the cloud cover, the sun was setting. He could only tell by the world growing slowly darker around him.

The plaza wasn't empty. Several of the buildings had walls that swung up and out, making awnings where people could sit with the weather without being in it. Little pools of light, like pictures of street carts on planets Filip had never stood on. He passed the place where the monster had been unmade. Even close up, there was no sign of the blood, but he thought he caught a whiff of something strange, like overheated iron.

By the time he reached the administration building, he was soaked. He knocked on the door, and Nami Veh called him in. In the hours since he'd been there, the metal desk had been taken out and more chairs had been brought in and put in a little circle. It looked like a very small support group meeting.

Leward sat with his back to the door. Jandro, across from him, sat with his legs spread and his arms out, resting on the backs of chairs to either side of him. Nami Veh was the professional version of herself again, smiling and gracious. Filip was surprised to realize he was sorry to see that.

"Hey, Nagata," Jandro said.

"Oye, Jandro," Filip said, then turned his attention to Nami Veh. "You wanted me?"

"And thank you for being here," she said, motioning him into one of the empty chairs. "There were some questions about what exactly happened today? I was hoping you could help us with what you remember."

Jandro turned a half smile to the space about halfway between Filip and Leward. Leward crossed his arms tight across his chest.

"Okay," Filip said. "Sure."

He told the story again. Leward, the cart, the push. Jackson coming to back him up. He didn't look at any of them while he spoke, but he didn't put his head down either. Just focused on a spot on the wall. When he was done he shrugged.

"Well," Nami Veh said. "That doesn't sound exactly like your experience, Leward?"

"It was an assault," the science lead said. "Does it matter how many

times they hit me? I was *assaulted*.”

“Maybe you were, maybe you weren’t,” Jandro said. “You ever been in a fight, Nagata?”

Filip felt a surge of something cold. The hum of the rain seemed to go a little quieter. “What are you asking?”

“You ever been in a fight? Ever seen someone really trying to hurt someone else? You see a few guys messing around. It gets a little physical. If you haven’t been in a real fight, maybe you get mixed up. See some things that aren’t really there.”

Filip said, “I’ve been in a fight,” but he said it softly, and Nami Veh was talking over him. “Regardless, it’s clear a line was crossed. And we all know who was involved, so the question for us now is how we move forward. Jandro, these were your crew. They need to make this right.”

Filip saw the amusement in Jandro’s eyes and the corner of his mouth. “Yeah, okay. I’ll make sure they come apologize. You bet.”

“And return the cart,” Nami Veh said.

“If he needs the cart, he can have the cart.”

“And Leward?” Nami Veh said, turning to the science lead. “I think it would be good for the community if you and some of the science team could help with building the defenses.”

The cold feeling in Filip’s chest shifted, swelled. “What about the vote?” Three sets of eyes turned to him. “We voted to move the town. What about the vote?”

“Yes,” Leward said, waving a wide hand toward Filip. “Exactly.”

“We’re past that now,” Nami Veh said. “Leward? For the community.”

“We’ll give you the easy jobs,” Jandro said. “It’ll be fun.”

Leward pressed his lips together, thin and bloodless, then stood without speaking and walked out. Jandro chuckled as the door closed. He’d won, and he knew it. Filip knew it too.

“You need to keep your crew in line,” Nami Veh said, somewhere to Filip’s right. It seemed like she was a long distance away. “We desperately need everyone in the community working together.”

“They will,” Jandro said. “As long as we’re working on the right things, they absolutely will.”

Filip rose, made himself nod to both of them, and walked out. There was something wrong with him, but he didn’t know what it was. It felt a little

like nausea, a little like vertigo. It wasn't either one, though. This was something different, but though he didn't have a name for it, he knew it. He had felt this before.

In the plaza, fewer of the buildings had their awnings up. The rain was getting colder and lighter. Filip listened for the song of the monsters behind it, but the white noise of the rain hid anything. If there was trouble coming, someone would have to warn them. And if there wasn't trouble tonight, there would be soon. Every night of peace made the next night more dangerous. Filip thought that felt familiar too.

At the room, Mose was sitting on his cot. His jumpsuit was unzipped to the navel, and his eyes were red and bleary. Even without the smell of alcohol, Filip would have known he'd been drinking. Mose had finally found the still that some enterprising future rich person had set up. Filip sat on his own cot, his back against the wall. His clothes were wet, and rain seeped out of his hair and down his neck. He let it.

"You need a towel, Nagata," Mose said, and then when Filip didn't answer, he pulled a steel bottle out of his pocket. He reached over and put it on the cot by Filip's leg. "One of the biochemists is making gin. I mean, it's not real gin, but it's close. It's good. No tonic water, but it's got the right..." He shook his head, searching for a word he couldn't find. "It's good."

"Thanks," Filip said, but it sounded like someone else's voice.

Mose laced his fingers together, then looked down at his hands like they were a puzzle he was trying to solve. "I, ah, wanted to apologize. I keep it to myself, you know, but this whole thing? It's been... It's made me less good than I used to be, you know? Less professional."

"It's okay."

"Denial. That's what they call it, yeah? It's just... I can't..." He started to wheeze. It could have been laughing or crying or just the man starting to hyperventilate. Filip waited, watching Mose's knuckles go pale where he was squeezing the blood out of them. After a while, the wheezing stopped. "Nobody's coming. No ships. No shuttle. The gate's gone. Whatever happened at Alpha, they'd have gotten the radio back up by now. We're all there is. This shit-ass little squat of a town is all that's left."

It was true. It had been true for a while. It was still strange to hear Mose say it out loud, admitting the secret they both already knew. "It makes things more important," Filip said.

“If I think about it too much, I can’t do anything. I’m taking off a fastening clip, and I think what if I break it? We’re never going to get another one. What if I fuck it up, and it turns out we need it later on? For this to work, a million things have to go right. For it to fall apart, just one of them has to go wrong.”

Filip opened the bottle and took a drink. It wasn’t anything like gin, but it wasn’t bad. He wiped the mouth of the bottle on his sleeve and passed it over. Mose unlaced his hands to take it. Where he’d squeezed, there were marks in his skin. Filip watched his throat work as he drank. He wasn’t leaving much.

“One thing,” Mose said. “One thing wrong, and we all die. We’re all there is, and we all die. And no one even knows.”

“Could be worse.”

Mose’s gaze swam slowly upward until it found him. Outside, the rain had stopped and some of the local insects had started calling to each other with a sound like an air compressor going bad. Filip looked at him, and when he spoke, he felt like the cold in him was talking.

“What scares me, Mose. It isn’t fucking it up and dying. What if we fuck up, but we don’t die. What if we fuck it all up and live? We’re at the end of something, sure. Maybe we’re at the beginning of something too. Maybe we make a whole new world. A whole new planet like Earth used to be. Hundreds of generations. Billions of people, that all start here. And we fuck it up for them.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What if we just go on like people always have? The same bullshit. Give the same bullies and liars power like we did before. Cut all the same corners. Put up with all the same hypocrites. Make everything here into more of the shit that got us here. That seems worse. For me? That’s worse.”

“I just want you to know I’m sorry for how I’ve been,” Mose said. He seemed confused by this new direction the conversation had taken. “I try to hold it together, but it all comes out anyway.”

“Everyone’s like that right now,” Filip said. “I’m sorry for how I’ve been too. For all of it.”

Mose started crying then. Not the wheezing, but slow, racking sobs. Filip went and sat beside him, one wet arm around Mose’s shoulder, and held him while the sorrow crested and fell away. He let Mose slide down

onto the cot, pulled a blanket over the man, who was asleep almost at once. Filip rescued the liquor, put the lid back on, and left it on his own pillow like it was sleeping there.

He made one stop on the way to the maintenance barracks.

Jandro and his crew had two of the little prefab buildings near the western edge of the town. One was standard sleeping quarters with bunks stacked four high against the walls. The other had a few utility cots like Mose and Filip used and a lot of supply lockers. A little group was gathered outside the sleeping quarters in the light of half a dozen torches. Filip recognized the long metal shafts with spikes at the ends from the last time the monsters had come. The mat of oily moss burning at the end seemed like an improvement over what they'd had, though. The flame, longer-lived.

He counted ten people, most of them men, in the flickering light. Jandro, in a chair leaning back on two legs, had his back against the building. He was at the center like a king or a celebrity. Filip stepped into the light, and the conversation and laughter went silent. One of the people was Kofi, but the Belter didn't acknowledge him. Fair enough. Filip didn't know what he would have done if their places had been switched. Or, really, he did, and so he could forgive Kofi for his youth and cowardice. He also saw the two men who'd taken Leward's cart. Their expressions were blank as snakes.

Jandro tilted his head. "Nagata," he said. "You're up past your bedtime, yeah?"

One of the others snickered, but Filip plastered on a little grin, like he was in on the joke. Like the little humiliations were shit he was willing to eat. He knew how to do that. One of the few useful lessons his father had taught him. "Guess so. I had some things on my mind."

"Yeah?" Jandro let his chair come slowly down. Filip averted his eyes, showing his submission. The coldness in his chest was rage.

"About what she was saying," Filip said. "Nami Veh. Community, you know? The good of the community."

"I remember that part," Jandro said.

"I thought I should clear the air."

"You didn't do anything to cross me. Maybe Alyn and Yuri got a little annoyed, though."

Filip looked over to the two from the cart. "Hey, Alyn. Hey, Yuri."

"Hey, subcontractor," Yuri said. Jandro made a disapproving grunt, and

Yuri looked away. Chastised.

“I just wanted to say—” Filip meant to apologize, but the coldness in his chest wouldn’t let him say those words. The lie of it was too big to fit through his throat. “I just wanted things to be right. I want things to be better than they were.”

The two glanced at Jandro, unconsciously seeking for what reaction they should have. It was all so familiar, Filip could almost see Cyn and Karal, Wings and Chuchu and Andrew. The ghosts of the war he’d fought and lost. The dead he’d turned his back to.

“Your boss tell you to come?” Jandro asked.

“Mose? No. I’m just... following my conscience. And, hey. Something else. Something to help, yeah?”

He took the little red box out of his pocket, sliding off the protective rubber sleeve as he did it. He held it out, careful not to touch the case and the power port at the same time. It was wider than his hand, but just by a little. Jandro frowned and pointed his chin at it. *What is that?*

“You remember how the slug thrower failed that night the monsters came? They had to cycle the capacitor.”

“That’s true,” Kofi said. “I heard him talking about it.”

“Okay,” Jandro said, but there was interest in his eyes. Now they were talking about when he’d been a hero. They were talking about killing. He liked that.

Filip held up the box with a grin. “This, though? *This* is a capacitor from the yeast tanks. Take a look.”

He tossed it gently, like he was passing a beer to a friend. Jandro caught it, turned it over. “I don’t know about this power grid shit, Nagata.”

“Open the back plate,” Filip said. “You’ll see what I’m talking about.”

Jandro steadied the box on his knee and pressed against the back plate with a palm. “What does this thing do?”

The discharge was as loud as a gunshot and as bright as lightning. Jandro drifted to the side, collapsing slowly in the light gravity. His thigh had popped open like an overcooked sausage, and his eyes were empty.

“It kills monsters,” Filip said, but no one was listening to him. They were all shouting and jumping to their feet. Filip turned and walked into the darkness. Jandro’s crew were so shocked and confused that he made it almost thirty meters before they caught him.



The improvised cell was dark and cold. He lay on the bare floor. Everything hurt. He was pretty sure that at least one of his ribs was cracked, and his left wrist was swollen badly. Whatever other damage the beating left, he'd have to wait to discover. For now, it was enough just to hurt.

He knew that day came from a little fault in a weld about a third of the way up the wall. A pinpoint of light that started fainter than the smallest star and grew slowly brighter until a tiny shaft of light pushed through. A pale dot no bigger than his thumbnail began its slow track across the floor. He watched it. The air tasted like dust.

Outside, there were occasionally voices. He recognized a few. Kofi. Mose. Nami Veh shouting in a way that wasn't her usual style at all. He wondered if she was holding off a lynch mob. It seemed plausible.

The shaft of light came closer and closer to the wall, and then faded as the sun came overhead. Filip became aware of a growing thirst, but there wasn't any water, so he tried to sleep instead. The most he could manage was a half doze disturbed by his aches. He'd lost all sense of time when the sound of a bolt being thrown roused him.

The door opened, light spilling in around Nami Veh's silhouette. Filip tried to sit up, but his back had stiffened so badly that it took three tries.

The administration woman sat across from him. In the spill light from the next room, she looked both tired and resolute. An angel, come to pass sentence or grant absolution.

"Well, it took eighteen hours," she said after a long pause, "but we lost him. You are now officially a murderer. What? Is that funny?"

"I don't mean to laugh," Filip said. "There's some context that makes that... I didn't mean to laugh."

"What were you thinking?" The angel was gone. The façade of gentleness and kindness and professionalism was gone. It was almost like meeting her for the first time. The weary anger in the words was like the back of his own head, given voice.

"That it had to be done," he said. "And no one else was going to do it."

"It didn't have to be done."

“I’ve known men like Jandro. He showed you what he was. He showed all of us what he was. And he got away with it. There’s no law with a man like that. The town voted, but he was more important. And you bent. You failed. You let him do what he wanted, and there was never going to be a path back for him. When someone like that wins? He’d never stop pushing.”

“And so you decided that deserved a death sentence? You’re seeing the irony here, right?”

“There’s a difference,” Filip said. “You’re going to punish me. I’m going to answer for what I did.”

Nami Veh shook her head. “Oh, Jesus.”

“This is how it’s supposed to go. You do something wrong, and you’re supposed to pay for it. Supposed to suffer. That’s what keeps the Jandros from taking over everything all the time, just because they can.”

“So that’s your plan? Make yourself a martyr on the cross of the law? Am I supposed to thank you for that?”

“You don’t understand what men like him are.”

“Of course I do,” Nami Veh said. “Alejandro was a bully and narcissist. And more than a little sadistic too. And he was physically strong. And he was charismatic. And he was brave. He’d throw himself into danger without a second thought. Leward? He’s one of the smartest people I’ve ever met, and he’s a snob. He can’t ask you to pass him a fork without rubbing someone the wrong way. Adiyah will work double shifts and never complain for the rest of her life if you let her, and she’ll stir up romantic drama every chance she gets. Moses is a solid worker and emotional wreck. Merton is one of the most lovely, empathetic, kindhearted people I’ve ever met, and he’s already got a still set up in the biolab because he’s an alcoholic. We’re all like this. This is what humans are.”

“Jandro was different,” Filip said.

“And you,” she said, leaning over and putting her hand on his ankle. “You are a very experienced technician, with an irreplaceable wealth of knowledge and experience. You’re also desperate to be punished for something, and I don’t know why.”

“He would have taken over. You’d have lost control to him.”

“Maybe.”

“If I have to die for saving you from that, it’s all right.”

Nami Veh's laugh was low and earthy and rueful. "Oh no. As my sainted mother would say, no easy way out for you. I've failed at a lot of things, but I won't be the one who gives this settlement capital punishment. Can you walk?"

"Can I get some water first?"

Walking hurt badly when they started. His whole body was stiff, and when they got outside, he could see the bruising more clearly. All the others in the town lined the little almost-streets. Mose was there, looking dour. A clot of people in maintenance crew uniforms, standing together with hatred in their eyes. They didn't follow, but they watched him pass. Filip tried to keep his back straight, to carry himself with some dignity. Nami Veh walked with him, ready to steady him if he needed it. He made a point not to.

Yesterday's rain had left the ground slick with mud, but the sky was wide and clear now. Cloudless. Filip found himself expecting the crowd to do something. Cheer him or vent their rage. They stayed quiet, watching him go.

By the time they reached the wall at the edge of town, his joints were starting to loosen. His wrist had angry, shooting pains when he tried to turn it, but that was the worst. He didn't complain. Nami Veh walked out the access gate between the plates that had once been the hull of a ship.

The southern valley rolled out before them. It was easy, staying inside the town, to forget how wide the valley was, and how full. Things that looked not entirely unlike trees rose along the banks of the river below them. A pack of long-legged animals somewhere between deer and huge spiders made their way to the west, following some trail he couldn't see or else making their own. A pile of equipment lay in a circle where human boots had crushed the ground cover. Nami Veh walked to it and stopped.

"That's an emergency blanket you can use for shelter," she said, pointing to a tiny silver packet. "That's a micro-solar array. It'll power the yeast cylinder there. Moses said that the carbon fixation chamber is only good for about two years at best, so you should find something local that provides sugar if you can. Hopefully the device can make it nontoxic for you, but be careful eating new things."

"Exile?"

"It's the compromise I could make," she said. "The maintenance team

wanted you dead, no surprise. I think Leward would have given you a public stipend and housing. It was between incarcerating you in town or... This takes up fewer resources. It's the best I could do."

"It's probably more than I deserve."

"If anyone from maintenance sees you here in the next five years, they'll probably just kill you, and I won't be able to stop them. I think most of the rest of the town wouldn't, but there are some that would, and you won't know which is which. After that, if you're still alive, you can come petition to be let back in. If we've survived that long."

He looked at the equipment. It was heavy, but it wasn't unworkable. There were straps on the yeast cylinder, and a mounting for the solar array. He could wear it on his back and trickle power into the food supply, as long as he didn't walk in the shade. A bottle for water, and if he stayed by the river, he'd have enough. Unless some native microorganism slipped through the filter and decided he was a good environment to set up shop in his bloodstream.

"All right," he said. "Thank you. I'll go."

"Do you have a plan?"

"No," he said. "Maybe I'll try for Alpha. It's a long way, but there could be supplies there. Maybe people. If not, I can find out what happened to them."

"If you figure out why the choice you made to kill Jandro was wrong, come back to us, okay? I'll do everything I can to make sure you have a place here."

Filip picked up the emergency blanket. It was very light, and small enough to put in a pocket. "Thank you, but I don't deserve any mercy."

"Of course you don't. That's why they call it mercy. If you deserve it, they call it justice." She put her hand on his arm the way she always did with people. It seemed more genuine to him now. "I'm going to do everything I can to keep these people alive. I'm going to compromise and bend and be adulterated and impure and imperfect. And there's going to be a time not too long from now that I'm really going to wish you were here. Just like I'm really going to wish Alejandro was."

Filip was silent, but she nodded like he'd spoken.

"That's the mystery, and that was your clue," she said, stepping back. "Try to figure it out."

He watched her as she walked back to the wall, and then past it. Once she had vanished, he got to the task of loading up his kit. It was like a little, scattered ship. The blanket was his environmental controls. The cylinder was his food recycler. The planet, vast around him, was his air recycler. There was a logic to survival that didn't change, no matter which vastness he was traveling through. And the regret was there too, the way it always had been.

He walked south, keeping far enough from the river that the land wasn't damp. It was less than an hour before the valley curved and Emerling-Voss Permanent Settlement Beta passed out of sight. The sun tracked to the west, reddening, and Filip found what seemed like a good spot to make the first camp of his new life. The yeast output was less than he'd hoped, but the carbon fixation chamber looked clean. He found a creek and filtered the water before he drank it.

At sunset, the stars came out. The great smear of the galactic disk. The universe that humankind had once been heir to and then lost, now just a light show and a promise. Or a hope.

In the distance, the monsters began to sing.

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JAMES S. A. COREY is the pen name of Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. In addition to writing the novels and short stories of The Expanse, they wrote and produced the television series of the same name. Daniel lives with his family in the American southwest. Ty will tell you where he lives when and if he wants you to come over.

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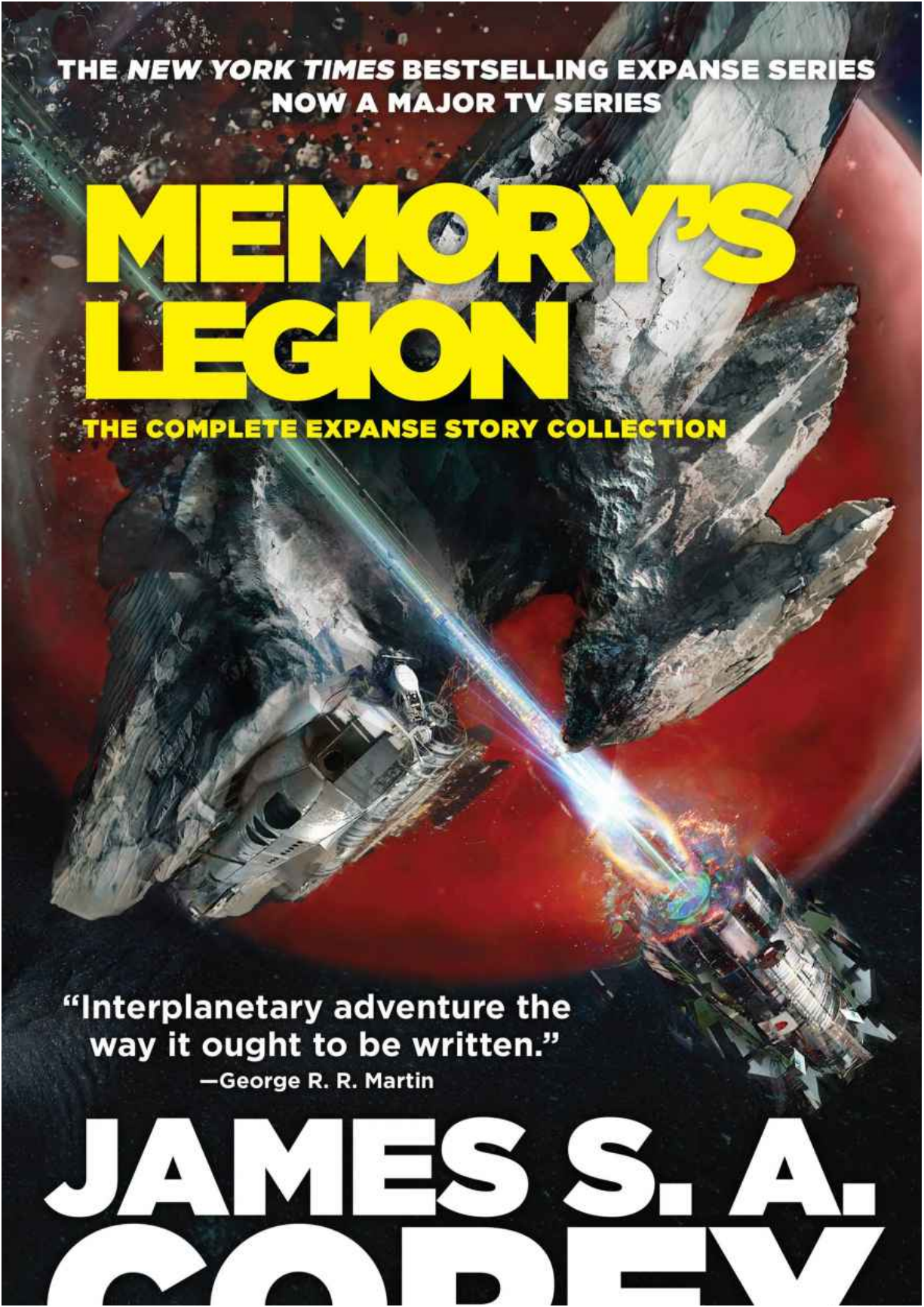
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Drive

Acceleration throws Solomon back into the captain's chair, then presses his chest like a weight. His right hand lands on his belly, his left falls onto the upholstery beside his ear. His ankles press back against the leg rests. The shock is a blow, an assault. His brain is the product of millions of years of primate evolution, and it isn't prepared for this. It decides that he's being attacked, and then that he's falling, and then that he's had some kind of terrible dream. The yacht isn't the product of evolution. Its alarms trigger in a strictly informational way. By the way, we're accelerating at four gravities. Five. Six. Seven. More than seven. In the exterior camera feed, Phobos darts past, and then there is only the star field, as seemingly unchanging as a still image.

It takes almost a full minute to understand what's happened, then he tries to grin. His laboring heart labors a little harder with elation.

The interior of the yacht is cream and orange. The control panel is a simple touchscreen model, old enough that the surface has started going gray at the corners. It's not pretty, but it is functional. Solid. An alert pops up that the water recycler has gone off-line. Solomon's not surprised—he's outside the design specs—and he starts guessing where exactly the system failed. His guess, given that all the thrust is along the primary axis of the ship, is the reservoir back-flow valve, but he's looking forward to checking it when the run is finished. He tries to move his hand, but the weight of it astounds him. A human hand weighs something like three hundred grams. At seven g, that's still only a little over two thousand. He should still be able to move it. He pushes his arm toward the control panel, muscles trembling. He wonders how much above seven he's going. Since the sensors are pegged, he'll have to figure it out when the run is over. How long the burn lasted and whatever his final velocity winds up being. Simple math. Kids could do it. He's not worried. He reaches for the control panel,

really pushing it this time, and something wet and painful happens in his elbow.

Oops, he thinks. He wants to grit his teeth, but that's no more effective than grinning had been. This is going to be embarrassing. If he can't shut off the drive, he'll have to wait until the fuel runs out and then call for help. That might be problematic. Depending on how fast he's accelerating, the rescue ship's burn will have to be a very long one compared with his own. Maybe twice as long. They may need some sort of long-range craft to come get him. The fuel supply readout is a small number on the lower left side of the panel, green against black. It's hard to focus on it. Acceleration is pressing his eyeballs out of their right shape. High tech astigmatism. He squints. The yacht is built for long burns, and he started with the ejection tanks at ninety percent. The readout now shows the burn at ten minutes. The fuel supply ticks down to eighty-nine point six. That can't be right.

Two minutes later, it drops to point five. Two and a half minutes later, point four. That puts the burn at over thirty-seven hours and the final velocity at something just under five percent of c.

Solomon starts getting nervous.



He met her ten years before. The research center at Dhanbad Nova was one of the largest on Mars. Three generations after the first colonists dug into the rock and soil of humanity's second home, progress had pushed the envelope of human science, understanding, and culture so far that the underground city could support five bars, even if one of them was the alcohol-free honky-tonk where the Jainists and born-again Christians hung out. The other four sold alcohol and food that was exactly the same as the stuff they sold at the commissary, only with piped-in music and a wall monitor with an entertainment feed from Earth playing on it all hours of the day and night. Solomon and his cadre met up at this one two or three times a week when the work load at the center wasn't too heavy.

Usually the group was some assortment of the same dozen people. Today it was Tori and Raj from the water reclamation project. Voltaire whose real name was Edith. Julio and Carl and Malik who all worked

together on anti-cancer therapies. And Solomon. Mars, they said, was the biggest small town in the solar system. There was almost never anyone new.

There was someone new. She sat beside Malik, had dark hair and a patient expression. Her face was a little too sharp to be classically beautiful, and the hair on her forearms was dark. She had the kind of genetics that developed a little mustache problem when she hit about thirty-five. Solomon didn't believe in love at first sight, but as soon as he sat down at the table, he was profoundly aware that he hadn't brushed his hair very effectively that morning and he was wearing the shirt with the sleeves a little too long.

"Mars is America," Tori said, waving his beer expansively. "It's exactly the same."

"It's not America," Malik said.

"Not like it was at the end. Like the beginning. Look at how long it took to travel from Europe to North America in the 1500s. Two months. How long to get here from Earth? Four. Longer if the orbits are right."

"Which is the first way in which it's not like America," Malik said, dryly.

"It's within an order of magnitude," Tori said. "My point is that politically speaking, distance is measured in time. We're months away from Earth. They're still thinking about us like we're some kind of lost colony. Like we answer to them. How many people here, just at this table have had directives from someone who's never been outside a gravity well but still felt like they should tell us where our research should go?"

Tori raised his own hand, and Raj followed suit. Voltaire. Carl. Reluctantly, Malik. Tori's grin was smug.

"Who's doing the real science in the system?" Tori said. "That's us. Our ships are newer and better. Our environmental science is at least a decade ahead of anything they've got on Earth. Last year, we hit self-sustaining."

"I don't believe that," Voltaire said. The new one still hadn't spoken, but Solomon watched her attention shift to each new speaker. He watched her listen.

"Even if there are a few things we still need from Earth, we can trade for them. Shit, give us a few years and we'll be mining them out of the Belt," Tori said, backing away from his last point and making a new, equally

unlikely assertion at the same time. “It’s not like I’m saying we should cut off all diplomatic relations.”

“No,” Malik said. “You’re saying we should declare political independence.”

“Damn skippy, I am,” Tori said. “Because distance is measured in time.”

“And coherence is measured in beer,” Voltaire said, the cadence of her voice matching Tori’s perfectly. The new woman smiled at the mimicry.

“Even if we decided that all we had to lose was our chains,” Malik said, “why would we bother? We are already *de facto* our own government. Pointing out the fact is only going to stir up trouble.”

“Do you really think Earth hasn’t noticed?” Tori said. “You think the kids back at the labs on Luna and Sao Paulo aren’t looking up at the sky and saying *That little red dot is kicking our asses*? They’re jealous and they’re scared and they should be. It’s all I’m saying. If we do our own thing, the earliest they could do something about it still gives us months of lead time. England lost its colonies because you can’t maintain control with a sixty-day latency, much less a hundred and twenty.”

“Well,” said Voltaire drily, “that and the French.”

“And good damn thing, too,” Tori said as if she hadn’t spoken. “Because who was it that came in when the Nazis started knocking on England’s door? Am I right?”

“Um,” Solomon said, “no, actually. You just made the other point. We’re really the Germans.”

And because he spoke, the new woman’s gaze turned to him. He felt his throat go tight and sipped his beer to try to loosen up. If he spoke now, his voice would crack like he was fourteen again. Voltaire put her elbows on the table, cradled her chin in her dark hands, and hoisted her eyebrows. Her expression could have had *This should be good* as the caption.

“Okay,” Malik said, abandoning his disagreement with Tori. “I’ll bite. In what ways are we like a murderous bunch of fascists?”

“By-by how we’d fight,” Solomon said. “Germany had all the best science, just like us. They had the best tech. They had rockets. No one had rockets, but they did. Nazi tanks could destroy allied tanks at something like five to one. They had the best attack submarines, drone missiles, early jet aircraft. They were just that much better. Better designed, better manufactured. They were elegant and they were smart.”

“Apart from the whole racial cleansing genocide thing,” Julio said.

“Apart from that,” Solomon agreed. “But they lost. They had all the best tech, just like we do. And they lost.”

“Because they were psychopathic and insane,” Julio said.

“No,” Solomon said. “I mean, they were, but there have been a lot of fascist psychopaths that *didn’t* lose wars. They lost because even though one of their tanks was worth five of the other guy’s, America could build ten. The industrial base was huge, and if the design wasn’t as good, who cared? Earth has that industrial base. They have people. It could take them months, maybe years, to get here, but when they did, it would be in numbers we couldn’t handle. Being technically advanced is great, but we’re still just building better ones of the stuff that came before. If you want to overcome the kind of demographic advantage Earth has, you’ll need something paradigm-shiftingly new.”

Voltaire raised her hand. “I nominate *paradigm-shiftingly* as the adverb of the night.”

“Seconded,” Julio said. Solomon felt the blush creeping up his neck.

“All in favor?” There was a small chorus. “The ayes have it,” Voltaire said. “Someone buy this man another drink.”

The conversation moved on, the way it always did. Politics and history gave way to art and fine-structure engineering. The great debate of the night was over whether artificial muscles worked better with the nanotubules in sheets or bundles, with both sides descending in the end to name-calling. Most of it was good-natured, and what wasn’t pretended to be, which was almost the same. The wall monitor switched over to an all-music feed out of a little community on Syria Planum, the wailing and brass of rai juxtaposed with classical European strings. It was some of Solomon’s favorite music because it was dense and intellectually complicated and he wasn’t expected to dance to it. He wound up spending half the night sitting beside Carl talking about ejection efficiency systems and trying not to stare at the new woman. When she moved from Malik’s side to sit next to Voltaire, his heart leaped—maybe she wasn’t here with Malik—and then sank—maybe she was a lesbian. He felt like he’d dropped a decade off his life and was suddenly stuck in the hormonal torture chamber of the lower university. He made up his mind to forget that the new woman existed. If she was new to the research center, there would be time to find out who she was and plan a

way to speak with her that didn't make him look desperate and lonely. And if she wasn't, then she wouldn't be here. And even so, he kept looking for her, just to keep track.

Raj was the first one to leave, the same as always. He was on development, which meant he had all the same burden of technical work plus steering committee meetings. If, someday, the terraforming project actually took hold, it would have Raj's intellectual DNA. Julio and Carl left next, arm in arm with Carl resting his head on Julio's shoulder the way he did when they were both a little drunk and amorous. With only Malik, Voltaire, and Tori left, avoiding the new woman was harder. Solomon got up to leave once, but then stopped at the head and wandered back in without entirely meaning to. As soon as the new woman left, he told himself. When she was gone, he could go. But if he saw who she left with, then he'd know who to ask about her. Or, if she left with Voltaire, not to ask. It was just data collection. That was all. When the monitor changed to the early morning newsfeed, he had to admit he was bullshitting. He waved his goodnights for real this time, pushed his hands into his pockets, and headed out to the main corridor.

Between the engineering problems in building a robust dome and Mars' absolute lack of a functioning magnetosphere, all the habitats were deep underground. The main corridor's hallways had ceilings four meters high and LEDs that changed their warmth and intensity with the time of day, but Solomon still had the occasional atavistic longing for sky. For a sense of openness and possibility, and maybe for not living his whole life buried.

Her voice came from behind him. "So, hey."

She walked with a comfortable rolling gait. Her smile looked warm and maybe a little tentative. Outside of the dimness of the bar, he could see the lighter streaks in her hair.

"Ah. Hey."

"We never really got around to meeting in there," she said, holding out her hand. "Caitlin Esquibel."

Solomon took her hand, shaking it once like they were at the center. "Solomon Epstein."

"Solomon Epstein?" she said, walking forward. Somehow they were walking side by side now. Together. "So what's a nice Jewish boy like you doing on a planet like this?"

If he hadn't still been a little drunk, he'd just have laughed it off.

"Trying to get the courage to meet you, mostly," he said.

"Sort of noticed that."

"Hope it was adorable."

"It was better than your friend Malik always finding reasons to touch my arm. Anyway. I'm working resource management for Kwikowski Mutual Interest Group. Just came in from Luna a month ago. That thing you were saying about Mars and Earth and America. That was interesting."

"Thank you," Solomon said. "I'm an engine engineer for Masstech."

"Engine engineer," she said. "Seems like it ought to be redundant."

"I always thought thrust specialist sounded dirty," he said. "How long are you staying on Mars?"

"Until I leave. Open contract. You?"

"Oh, I was born here," he said. "I expect I'll die here too."

She glanced up his long, thin frame once, her smile mocking. Of course she'd known he was born there. No way to hide it. His words felt like a weak brag now.

"A company man," she said, letting it be a joke between them.

"A Martian."

The cart kiosk had half a dozen of the cramped electric devices ready to rent. Solomon pulled out his card and waved it in a figure eight until the reader got good signal and the first cart in line clicked from amber to green. He pulled it out before he realized he really didn't want to get in.

"Do you—" Solomon began, then cleared his throat and tried again. "Would you like to come home with me?"

He could see the *Sure, why not* forming in her brain stem. He could follow it along the short arcing path to her lips. It was close enough to pull at his blood like a moon. And he watched it turn aside at the last moment. When she shook her head, it wasn't a refusal so much as her trying to clear her mind. But she smiled. She did smile.

"Moving a little fast there, Sol."



Speed isn't the problem. Unless he runs into something, velocity is just

velocity; he could be weightless going almost the speed of light. It's the delta vee that's hurting him. The acceleration. The change. Every second, he's going sixty-eight meters per second faster than he was the second before. Or more. Maybe more.

Only the acceleration isn't the problem either. Ships have had the power to burn at fifteen or even twenty g since the early chemical rockets. The power is always there. It's the efficiency necessary to maintain a burn that was missing. Thrust to weight when most of your weight is propellant to give you thrust. And bodies can accelerate at over twenty g for a fraction of a second. It's the sustain that's killing him. It's going for hours.

There are emergency shutoffs. If the reactor starts to overheat or the magnetic bottle gets unstable, the drive will shut down. There are all kinds of shutoffs for all kinds of emergencies, but nothing's going wrong. Everything's running perfectly. That's the problem. That's what's killing him.

There is also a manual cutoff on the control panel. The icon is a big red button. A panic button. If he could touch it, he'd be fine. But he can't. All the joy is gone now. Instead of elation, there's only panic and the growing, grinding pain. If he can just reach the controls. Or if something, anything, could just go *wrong*.

Nothing is going wrong. He is struggling to breathe, gasping the way the safety instructors taught him to. He tenses his legs and arms, trying to force the blood through his arteries and veins. If he passes out, he won't come back, and there is darkness growing at the edges of his vision. If he can't find a way out, he will die here. In this chair with his hands pinned against him and his hair pulling back his scalp. His hand terminal in his pocket feels like someone driving a dull knife into his hip. He tries to remember how much mass a hand terminal has. He can't. He fights to breathe.

His hand terminal. If he can reach it, if he can pull it out, maybe he can signal to Caitlin. Maybe she can make a remote connection and shut the engines down. The hand laying across his belly presses hard into his viscera, but it's only centimeters from his pocket. He pushes until his bones creak, and his wrists shift. The friction of skin against skin tears a little hole in his belly and the blood that comes out races back toward the seat like it was afraid of something, but he does move.

He pushes again. A little closer. The blood is a lubricant. The friction is

less. His hand moves farther. It takes minutes. His fingernails touch the hardened plastic. He can do this.

Power and efficiency, he thinks, and a moment's pleasure passes through him despite everything. He's done it. The magic pair.

The tendons in his fingers ache, but he pulls the cloth of his pocket aside. He can feel the hand terminal begin to slip free of his pocket, but he can't lift his head to see it.



Three years after he met her, Caitlin showed up at the door to his hole at three in the morning, crying, frightened, and sober. It wasn't the sort of thing Solomon expected from her, and he'd spent a fair amount of time in her company. They'd become lovers almost seven months after they'd met. He called it that. *Becoming lovers* wasn't the kind of thing Caitlin said. With her, it was always something crude and a little raunchy. That was who she was. He thought it was a kind of emotional protection that she was never exactly sincere. It was a way to control fear and deny anxieties. And really as long as she still wanted to come share his bed some nights, he was fine with that. And if she hadn't wanted to anymore, he'd have been disappointed, but he still would have been fine with it. He liked the way she smirked at the world. The confidence she carried herself with, especially when she was faking it. He liked, all in all, who she was. That made everything easier.

Twice, her contract had ticked past its automatic renewal dates without her exercising the option to leave. When he'd taken a position with the functional magnetics workgroup, one of the issues he'd considered was whether the extra time he took with it would alienate her. Neither of them had made any sexual or romantic connections with other people at the center. Everyone treated them as if they were each other's tacit property, and so even though they'd never made any explicit promises, Solomon would have called them *de facto* monogamists. Certainly he would have felt hurt and betrayed if she'd been sleeping with someone else, and assumed she'd feel the same about him.

But sex and companionship, as pleasant as they were, didn't mean a

great deal of vulnerability. So he was surprised.

“Did you hear?” she asked. Her voice was ragged and low. Fresh tears ran down her cheeks, and her mouth pulled in and down at the corners.

“I don’t think so,” Solomon said, standing back to let her past. His hole was a standard design: a small multipurpose room at the front with enough resources to cook simple meals, a quarter-sized wall monitor, and space for three or four people to sit. Behind it was the bedroom. Behind that, a storage closet and a bathroom. On Mars, the joke went, a man’s hole was his castle where values of castle approached dorm room. She sat heavily on one of the benches, and wrapped her arms around herself. Solomon closed the door. He didn’t know whether to talk to her or hold her or both. He started with holding her. Her tears had a smell to them; salt and damp and skin. She wept into his shoulder until curiosity and distress drove him past the consolation of being her soft monkey. “So. Did I hear what, exactly?”

She coughed out a phlegmy laugh.

“The United Nations,” she said. “They invoked the breakaway province rule. Their ships have already done their acceleration burns. Forty of them. They’re already ballistic.”

“Oh,” he said, and she started weeping again.

“It’s those fucking secessionists. Ever since they published their manifesto, people have been acting like they’re serious. Like they aren’t a bunch of short-sighted assholes who’re in it for the attention. Now they’ve started a war. They’re really going to do it, Sol. They’re going to drop rocks on us until we’re just a carbon layer ten atoms thick.”

“They won’t do that. They won’t do that,” he said, and immediately regretted repeating himself. It made him sound like he was trying to talk himself into it. “Every time the breakaway province rule’s been invoked, it’s been because the UN wanted to grab resources. If they break all our infrastructure, they can’t get the resources. They’re just trying to scare us.”

Caitlin raised one hand like a schoolgirl asking to be recognized. “Working. Scared now.”

“And it isn’t about the secessionists, even if that’s what they’re claiming,” Solomon said. He felt himself warming up now. He wasn’t repeating sentences. “It’s about Earth running out of lithium and molybdenum. Even with the landfill mines, they need more than they’ve got. We have access to raw ore. That’s all it is. It’s all about money, Cait.

They aren't going to start dropping rocks. Besides, if they do that to us, we'll do that to them. We've got better ships."

"Eighteen of them," she said. "They've got forty coasting toward us right now, and just as many playing defense."

"But if they miss one," he said, and didn't finish the thought.

She swallowed, wiped her cheeks with the palm of her hands. He leaned across the room and plucked a towel out of the dispenser for her.

"Do you actually know any of that?" she said. "Or are you just talking a good game to calm me down?"

"Do I have to answer that?"

She sighed, collapsing into him.

"It'll be weeks," he said. "Minimum. Probably months."

"So. If you had four months to live, what would you do?"

"Crawl into bed with you and not come out."

She reached over and kissed him. There was a violence in her that unnerved him. No, that wasn't right. Not violence. Sincerity.

"C'mon," she said.

He woke with his hand terminal buzzing in alarm and only vaguely aware he'd been hearing the sound for a while. Caitlin was curled up against him, her eyes still closed, her mouth open and calm. She looked young like that. Relaxed. He shut off the alarm as he checked the time. On one hand, he was egregiously late for his shift. On the other, another hour wouldn't be particularly more egregious. There were two messages from his team lead queued. Caitlin muttered and stretched. The motion pulled the sheet away from her body. He put the hand terminal down, pushed his hand under his pillow and went back to sleep.

The next time he woke, she was sitting up, looking at him. The softness had left her face again, but she was still beautiful. He smiled up at her and reached out to weave his fingers with hers.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

"Oh, please."

"No, really. Will you marry me?"

"Why? Because we're about to get into a war that'll kill us and everyone we know and there's nothing we can do to affect it one way or the other? Quick, let's do something permanent before the permanence is all mined out."

“Sure. Will you marry me?”

“Of course I will, Sol.”

The ceremony was a small one. Voltaire was Caitlin’s maid of honor. Raj was Solomon’s best man. The priest was a Methodist whose childhood had been spent in the Punjab, but now spoke with the faux-Texan drawl of the Mariner Valley. There were several chapels in the research center, and this one was actually quite lovely. Everything, even the altar, had been carved from the native stone and then covered with a clear sealant that left it looking wet and rich and vibrant. Lines of white and black ran through the red stone, and flecks of crystalline brightness. The air was thick with the scent of lilacs that Voltaire had bought by the armful from the greenhouses.

As they stood together, exchanging the formulaic vows, Solomon thought Caitlin’s face had the same calm that it did when she was sleeping. Or maybe he was just projecting. When he put the ring on her finger, he felt something shift in his breast and he was utterly and irrationally happy in a way he didn’t remember ever having been before. The UN fleet was still three weeks away. Even at the worst, they wouldn’t die for almost a month. It made him wish they’d done it all earlier. The first night he’d seen her, for instance. Or that they’d met when they were younger. In the pictures they sent to her parents, he looked like he was about to burst into song. He hated the images, but Caitlin loved them, so he loved them too. They took their honeymoon in the hotel right there in Dhanbad Nova, drying themselves with towels and washing with soaps that had been made in the image of luxury on Earth. He’d bathed twice as much while they were there, almost feeling the heat of the water and the softness of his robe as magic, as if by being decadent he could pass for a Terran.

And, by coincidence, it worked. Whatever negotiations had been going on behind the scenes paid off. The UN ships flipped for their deceleration burn early and burned twice as long. They were on their way home. He was watching the announcer on the newsfeed tracking the orbital mechanics of the voyage out and back. He tried to imagine what it was like for the marines in those ships. Out almost all the way to the new world, and then back without ever having seen it. Over half a year of their lives gone in an act of political theater. Caitlin sat on the edge of the bed, leaning in toward the monitor, not taking her eyes from it. Drinking it in.

Sitting behind her, his back pressing against the headboard, Solomon felt

a ghost of unease pass through him, cold and unwelcome.

"I guess permanent just got a lot longer," he said, trying to make a joke out of it.

"Mm-hm," she agreed.

"Sort of changes things."

"Mm-hm."

He scratched at the back of his hand even though it didn't itch. The dry sound of fingernails against skin was drowned in the announcer's voice so that he felt it more than heard it. Caitlin ran a hand through her hair, her fingers disappearing in the black and then re-emerging.

"So," he said. "Do you want a divorce?"

"No."

"Because I know you were thinking that the rest of your life was going to be kind of a short run. And if... if this wasn't what you would have picked. Anyway, I'd understand it."

Caitlin looked at him over her shoulder. The light of the monitor shone on her cheek, her eye, her hair like she was made of colored glass.

"You are adorable, and you are my husband, and I love you and trust you like I never have anyone in my life. I wouldn't trade this for anything but more of this. Why? Do you want out?"

"No. Just being polite. No, not that. Insecure all of a sudden."

"Stop it. And anyway, it hasn't changed. Earth is still running out of lithium and molybdenum and all sorts of industrial minerals. We still have them. They turned back this time, but they're still coming, and they'll keep on coming."

"Unless they find some way to do what they need to do with other metals. Or find another source. Things change all the time. Something could make the whole question irrelevant."

"Could," she agreed. "That's what peace is, right? Postponing the conflict until the thing you were fighting over doesn't matter."

On the screen, the UN ships burned, arcs of flame flaring behind them as they went back where they came from.



The hand terminal eases a little farther out of his pocket, and he's fairly sure it's going to leave a track of bruise as wide as the case. He doesn't care. He tries to remember if he left the voice activation on, and either he didn't or his throat is too deformed by the thrust gravity for his voice to be recognizable. It has to be done by hand. He can't relax or he'll lose consciousness, but it's getting harder and harder to remember that. Intellectually he knows that the blood is being pressed to the back of his body, pooling in the back part of his cerebellum and flooding his kidneys. He hasn't done enough medical work to know what that means, but it can't be good. The hand terminal comes almost all the way out. It's in his hand now.

The ship shudders once, and a notification pops up on the screen. It's amber-colored, and there's some text with it, but he can't make it out. His eyes won't focus. If it were red, it would have triggered a shut down. He waits for a few seconds, hoping that whatever it is gets worse, but it doesn't. The yacht's solid. Well-designed and well-built. He turns his attention back to the hand terminal.

Caitlin will be at the hole now. She'll be starting dinner and listening to the newsfeed for information about the shipyards crisis. If he can put in a connection request, she'll get it. He has the sudden, powerful fear that she'll think he sat on his terminal. That she'll say his name a few times, then laugh it off and drop the connection. He'll have to make noise when she accepts. Even if actual speech is too hard, he has to let her know there's something wrong. He's thumbed in connection requests without looking at his terminal thousands of times, but everything feels different now, and his muscle memory isn't helping him. The weight of the terminal is overwhelming. Everything in his hand aches like he's been hit with a hammer. His belly hurts. The worst headache he can imagine blooms. Nothing about this experience is fun except the knowledge that he's succeeded. Even as he struggles to make the terminal respond, he's also thinking what the drive means practically. With efficiency like this, ships can be under thrust all through a voyage. Acceleration thrust to the halfway point, then cut the engines, flip, and decelerate the rest of the trip. Even a relatively gentle one third g will mean not only getting wherever they are headed much faster, but there won't be any of the problems of long-term weightlessness. He tries to figure how long the transit to Earth will take, but

he can't. He has to pay attention to the terminal.

Something in the topology of his gut shifts, changing the angle the terminal is sitting. It starts to slip, and he doesn't have strength or speed to catch it. It reaches his side, falls the centimeters to the chair. He tries to move his left arm from where it's pinned beside his ear, but it won't move.

It won't move at all. It won't even tense up with effort.

Oh, he thinks, I'm having a stroke.



They had been married for six years when Solomon took the money he'd saved from his performances and efficiency bonuses and bought himself a yacht. It wasn't a large ship; the living space in it was smaller than his first hole. It was almost five years old, and was going to require a month in the orbital shipyard docks before very much longer. The interior color scheme—cream and orange—wasn't to his tastes. It had been sitting in dry dock for eight and a half months since its previous owner—a junior vice president of a Luna-based conglomerate—had died. His family on Luna didn't have any plans to come to Mars, and the bother of retrieving it across the months-deep void made it easier for them to price it low and sell. For most people on Mars, a boat like that was an ostentatious status symbol and nothing more. There was no settled moon or inhabited L5 station to travel between. The trip to Earth in it would have been neither comfortable nor particularly safe. It could go around in orbit. It could run out into the vacuum near Mars, and then come back. That was about it, and the pointlessness of the exercise helped drive down the price ever farther. As a statement of wealth, it said its owner had had too much. As a means of transport, it was like having a race car that could never leave its track.

For Solomon, it was the perfect test vehicle.

The yacht had been designed around an engine he knew, and the build code was one he'd helped to write. When he looked at the technical and maintenance history, he could see every control array, every air recycling vent and cover. Before he'd even set foot on it, he knew it as well as he knew anything. Some parts of the exhaust system were things he'd designed himself a decade before. And, since he held the title to it, half a year's

worth of red tape would simply go away if he wanted to use it to test some new refinements to the engines. That idea alone could make him cackle with delight. No more permissions committees. No more hard capital liability reports. Just the boat, its reactor, a couple EVA suits and a set of industrial waldoes he'd had since he was in school. In previous eras, a scientist might have a garage PCR machine or a shed in the back of the house with beehives or disassembled engines or half-built prototypes of inventions that would change the world if they could just be made to work. Solomon had his yacht, and getting it was the most self-indulgent, delightful, important thing he'd done since the day he'd asked Caitlin to marry him.

And yet, even as the fertile garden of his mind sent up a thousand different green shoots of ideas and projects, tests and tweaks and adjustments, he found himself dreading the part where he told his wife what he'd done. And when the time came, his unease was justified.

"Oh, Sol. Oh, baby."

"I didn't spend my salary on it," he said. "It was all bonus money. And it was only mine. I didn't use ours."

Caitlin was sitting on the bench in their multipurpose room, tapping her mouth with the tips of her fingers the way she did when she was thinking hard. The system was playing a gentle ambient music that was all soft percussion and strings loud enough to cover the hiss of the air recyclers but not so much as to overwhelm the conversation. As with almost all the new buildings on Mars, it was larger, better appointed, and deeper underground.

"So what I just heard you say is you can spend as much money out of the account as you want without talking to me if the total you pull is less than whatever you've made in bonuses. Is that what you meant?"

"No," he said, though it was pretty close. "I'm saying that it wasn't money we were counting on. All our obligations are covered. We're not going to try to buy food and have the accounts come up empty. We're not going to have to work extra hours or take on side jobs."

"All right."

"And this is important work. The design I have for the magnetic coil exhaust can really increase drive efficiency, if I can get—"

"All *right*," she said.

He leaned against the door frame. The strings rose in a delicate

arpeggio.

“You’re angry.”

“No, sweetie. I’m not angry,” she said gently. “Angry is yelling. This is resentful, and it’s because you’re cutting me out from the fun parts. Really, I look at you, and see the happiness and the excitement, and I want to be part of that. I want to jump up and down and wave my arms and talk about how great it all is. But that money was our safety net. You’re ignoring the fact that you spent our safety net, and if we *both* ignore it, the first time something unexpected comes up, we’re screwed. I love our life, so now I have to be the one who cares and disapproves and doesn’t get to be excited. You’re making me the grown-up. I don’t want to be the grown-up. I want us both to be grown-ups, so that when we do something like this, we both get to be kids.”

She looked up at him and shrugged. Her face was harder than it was when they met. There were threads of white in the darkness of her hair. When she smiled, he felt the hardness in his chest erode away.

“I may... have gotten a little carried away. I saw it was there and we could afford it.”

“And you zoomed ahead without thinking about all of what it would mean. Because you’re Solomon Epstein, and you are the smartest, most rigorous and methodical man who ever made every single important choice in his life by impulse.” If there hadn’t been warmth and laughter in her voice, it would have sounded like a condemnation. Instead it sounded like love.

“I’m cute, though,” he said.

“You’re adorable. And I want to hear all about your new whatever it is you’re going to try. Only first tell me that you’ll try to think about the future next time?”

“I will.”

They spent the evening with him talking about power and efficiency, ejection mass and velocity multipliers. And when that was done, they talked about building a responsible retirement plan and making sure their wills were up to date. It felt like an apology, and he hoped that they’d be able to do it again when she understood how much maintenance on the yacht was going to cost. It was a fight for another day.

The days, he spent working as usual with the team at the propulsion

group. The nights, he sat on the monitors back at their hole and designed his own things. Caitlin started a program over the network with a group in Londres Nova discussing how companies like Kwikowski could intervene in the destabilizing spiral of threat and avoidance that Earth and Mars seemed locked in. Whenever he heard her talking to the others—about propaganda and divergent moral codes and any number of other plausible-sounding vaguenesses—she brought up lithium, molybdenum. Now tungsten too. All the other things were interesting, important, informative, and profound. But unless they could figure out the ore rights issues, they could address everything else and still not solve the problem. He was always proud of her when she said that. A liberal arts background was a hard thing to overcome, but she was doing great.

Eventually, the time came to test his idea and plans. He made the long journey to the shipyards on the new public transport system: evacuated tubes drilled through the rock and lined with electromagnetic rails like a slow, underpowered gauss gun. It was cramped and uncomfortable, but it was fast. He got to his yacht an hour before the sun set at the nearby Martian horizon. He finished the last-minute tweaks to the prototype he'd fabricated, ran the diagnostic sequences twice, and took the ship up beyond the thin atmosphere. Once he reached high orbit, he floated for a while, enjoying the novelty of null g. He brewed himself a bulb of fresh tea, strapped himself into the captain's chair, and ran his fingertip across the old touchscreen monitor.

If he was right, the additions he'd made would increase efficiency by almost sixteen percent above baseline. When the numbers came back, he hadn't been right. Efficiency had *dropped* by four and a half. He landed back at the shipyards and rode the transit tube home, muttering darkly to himself the whole way.

The United Nations issued a statement that all future Martian ships would be contracted through the Bush shipyards on Earth. The local government didn't even comment on it; they just kept on with the scheduled builds and negotiated for new ones after that. The United Nations ordered that all shipyards on Mars shut down until an inspection team could be sent out there. Seven months to get the team together, and almost six months in transit because of the relative distances of the two planets in their orbits around the sun. Sol was a little nervous when he heard that. If they closed

the shipyards, it might mean grounding his test yacht. He didn't need to concern himself. The shipyards all stayed open. The rumors of war started up again, and Solomon tried to ignore them. Tried to tell himself that this time would be no different than the one before or the one before that.

Raj, to everyone's surprise, resigned from development, rented a cheap hole up near the surface, and started selling hand-made ceramic art. He said he'd never been happier. Voltaire got a divorce and wanted all the old crew to come out to the bars with her. There were eight of them now, but pretty much nobody went. Julio and Carl had a baby together and stopped socializing with anyone. Tori went in on a little chemical safety consultancy that pretended to serve any business with a Martian charter, but actually got all their business from the terraforming projects. Malik died from an unresponsive spinal cancer. Life struggled on, winning and failing. Solomon's experimental drives got to where they were almost as good as the unmodified ship. Then a little bit better.

A year almost to the day after he'd bought it, Solomon rode out to the yacht with a new design. If he was right, it would increase efficiency by almost four and a half percent above baseline. He was in the engine room installing it when his hand terminal chimed. It was Caitlin. He accepted the request.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Did we decide to take that long weekend next month?" she asked. "I know we talked about it, but I don't think we made a decision."

"We didn't, but I'd better not. The team's a little behind."

"Overtime behind?"

"No. Just keep-showing-up behind."

"All right. Then I may plan something with Maggie Chu."

"You have my blessing. I'll be home as soon as this is done."

"All right," she said, and dropped the connection. He tested the housings, did an extra weld where the coil would suffer the most stress, and headed back up for the captain's chair. The yacht rose through the thin atmosphere and into high orbit. Solomon ran the diagnostics again, making sure before he started that everything looked good. For almost half an hour, he floated in his chair, held in place by his straps.

As he started the burn sequence, he remembered that the team was going to be in Londres Nova the weekend he'd been thinking about taking off

with Caitlin. He wondered whether she'd put her plans with Maggie Chu in place, or if there was still time to change things. He started the burn.

Acceleration threw Solomon back into the captain's chair, then pressed his chest like a weight. His right hand landed on his belly, his left fell onto the upholstery beside his ear. His ankles pressed back against the leg rests.



The ship sings a low dirge, throaty and passionate and sad like the songs his father used to sing at temple. He understands now that he's going to die here. He's going too fast and too far for help to reach him. For a while—months or years—his little yacht will mark the farthest out of Earth's gravity well a manned ship has ever gone. They'll find the design specs at the hole. Caitlin is smart. She'll know to sell the design. She'll have enough money to eat beef every meal for the rest of her life. He's taken good care of her, anyway, if not himself.

If he had control, he could reach the asteroid belt. He could go to the Jovian system and be the first person to walk on Europa and Ganymede. He isn't going to, though. That's going to be someone else. But when they get there, they will be carried by his drive.

And the war! If distance is measured in time, Mars just got very, very close to Earth while Earth is still very distant from Mars. That kind of asymmetry changes everything. He wonders how they'll negotiate that. What they'll do. All the lithium and molybdenum and tungsten anyone could want is within reach of mining companies now. They can go to the asteroid belt and the moons of Saturn and Jupiter. The thing that kept Earth and Mars from ever reaching a lasting peace isn't going to matter anymore.

The pain in his head and his spine is getting worse. It's hard to remember to tense his legs and arms, to help his failing heart move the blood. He almost blacks out again, but he's not sure if it's the stroke or the thrust gravity. He's pretty sure driving blood pressure higher while having a stroke is considered poor form.

The ship's dirge shifts a little, and now it's literally singing in his father's voice, Hebrew syllables whose meaning Solomon has forgotten if he ever knew. Aural hallucinations, then. That's interesting.

He's sorry that he won't be able to see Caitlin one more time. To tell her goodbye and that he loves her. He's sorry he won't get to see the consequences of his drive. Even through the screaming pain, a calmness and euphoria start to wash over him. It's always been like this, he thinks. From when Moses saw the promised land that he could never enter, people have been on their deathbeds just wanting to see what happens next. He wonders if that's what makes the promised land holy: that you can see it but you can't quite reach it. The grass is always greener on the other side of personal extinction. It sounds like something Malik would say. Something Caitlin would laugh at.

The next few years—decades even—are going to be fascinating, and it will be because of him. He closes his eyes. He wishes he could be there to see it all happen.

Solomon relaxes, and the expanse folds itself around him like a lover.

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Drive Author's Note

*M*oving a little fast there, Sol.

Puns may be the lowest form of humor, but that's still one of our favorite lines in the project.

One of the things that comes up a few times in the course of *The Expanse* is the idea that the prophet can lead people to the Holy Land, but cannot enter it himself. Solomon Epstein is that guy: the one who ushers in a whole new era but won't live to see the effect of what he's done. It's a story that has power because it's something we all experience, especially as we get older: that sense of momentous things coming just after we're already gone. Existential FOMO.

The story was written originally for Jonathan Strahan's *Edge of Infinity* anthology, got repurposed as a San Diego Comic-Con-exclusive chapbook by SYFY, and put up for free online for a while. Of all the short fiction in the *Expanse* universe, this is probably the one that was read the most and for which we were paid the least. Sometimes the business is funny that way.

Someone asked once if the Voltaire who went drinking with Sol way back then was connected to the militant OPA faction the Voltaire Collective that figured in the later books. It seems like there probably was a connection, but we never looked into what that was.

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The Butcher of Anderson Station

When Fred was a kid back on Earth, maybe five or six years old, he'd seen a weed growing in the darkness of his uncle's cellar. The plant had been pale and thin but twice as tall as the ones out in the side yard, deformed by reaching for the sunlight. The man behind the bar looked just like that: too tall, too pale, too hungry for something he'd never had and never would. Belters were all like that.

The music in the bar mixed Punjabi rhythms with a high-voiced woman rapping in the polyglot mess of languages that made up Belter Creole. The battered pachinko machine in the back rang and skittered. Hashish smoke sweetened the air. Fred leaned back on a bar stool meant for someone ten centimeters taller than he was and smiled gently.

"Is there a fucking problem?" he asked.

The bartender could have been Chinese or Korean or a mix of the two. Which meant his family had probably come up in one of the first waves. Five generations of grubbing for air, packing extended families into surveying ships with seven bunks, looking back at a sun that was hardly more than the brightest star. It was hard to think of any of them as human anymore.

"No problems, *jefe*," the bartender said, but didn't move. In the mirror behind the bar, Fred saw the door slide open. Four Belters slouched in. One had an armband with the split circle of the Outer Planets Alliance. Fred saw them see him. He saw one of them recognize him. The little trickle of adrenaline in his blood was automatic and pleasant.

"Then how about you serve me my drink?"

The barkeep didn't move for a time, and then he did. Whiskey poured differently in spin gravity, but not so much that Fred could tell quite what was wrong about it. The Coriolis of Ceres Station shouldn't have been enough to change the angle, not this close to the asteroid surface. Maybe it

was just that it fell slowly. The bartender slid the glass across to him.

“On the house,” the man said, then a half beat of silence. “Colonel.”

Fred met his gaze. Neither spoke. Fred drank the liquor neat. It burned and left a taste at the back of his tongue like old mushrooms and bread mold.

“You have anything that isn’t fermented fungus?” Fred asked.

“*Als u aprecie no, koai sa sa?*” a voice said from behind him. *If you don’t like it, why are you here?*

Fred twisted in his seat. One of the four-pack who had just come in was glaring at him. He was broad-shouldered for a Belter. Mech driver, maybe. Or maybe he just spent a lot of time in the gym. Some of them did that, using machines and weights and expensive drug cocktails to give them what gravity never would.

Why are you here? Decent question.

“I like whiskey that used to be some kind of grain. You want to suck fungus, don’t let me stop you.”

The mech driver shifted in his seat. Fred thought he was going to get up, but instead the man shrugged and looked aside. His friends glanced at each other. The one with the armband had his hand terminal out and was tapping on the screen rapidly.

“I’ve got some bourbon came from Ganymede,” the bartender said. “Cost you.”

“Not enough to stop me,” Fred said, turning back. “Bring the bottle.”

The bartender bent down. His hand shuffled under the bar. There was probably a gun down there. Fred could almost picture it. Something designed to first intimidate, and if that failed, to put a man down. A shotgun, maybe, hack-sawed down for close range. Fred waited, but the man’s hand came up with a bottle. He put it on the bar. Fred felt a quick rush of relief and disappointment.

“Clean glass,” Fred said.

“So I think to myself,” the bartender said, reaching back toward the glassware by the mirror, “you’re here for something. The Butcher of Anderson Station in a Belter bar.”

“I just want a drink,” Fred said.

“No one just wants a drink,” the bartender replied.

“I’m exceptional.”

The bartender grinned.

“You are,” he said, then bent low, his head almost level with Fred’s. “Look at me, Colonel.”

Fred unscrewed the cap from the bottle and poured two fingers into the new glass. He put the cap back. The bartender didn’t move. Fred met the pale brown eyes. He was about to say something, not even sure what it was besides cutting, belittling, and mean. In the mirror, something moved. Men, behind him.

Fred had a moment to brace himself for the knife or the bullet or the blow that didn’t come before a black bag dropped over his head.



Three years before, everything had been different.

“*Dagmar* in the pipe, ninety seconds to contact, all green.”

“Roger that, *Dagmar*. I show you go for breach in ninety—”

Fred chinned down the volume on the pilot’s band, reducing their exchanges to faint background music with lyrics about positionals and vectors. Ninety seconds before the breaching team went in.

An eternity to wait.

Fred let out a long exhale that fogged the inside of his helmet for a second before it cleared. He tried to stretch, but the crash couch wouldn’t let him extend his limbs fully in any direction. The command console showed eighty-three seconds to contact with Anderson Station. Breathing and stretching had burned only seven seconds.

He switched his display to the *Dagmar*’s forward airlock. She was a Marine landing craft, built to lock on to a ship or station and cut a hole, and the display showed two hundred marines strapped to vertical crash cages, weapons locked into quick release clamps next to them. The airlock was designed to iris open once the breaching charges had made an opening and the exterior seals were latched on.

It was hard to tell when they were all in vacuum-rated combat armor, but the marines looked calm. They’d been trained on Luna until maneuvering in light or null gravity and vacuum was second nature. They were put in cramped ships until advancing down claustrophobic metal corridors with

blind corners at every intersection didn't scare them. They were told that marines doing a full breaching action assault could expect as high as 60 percent casualties until that number stopped meaning anything.

Fred looked over his people in their cages and imagined six out of ten of them not coming back.

The readout said thirty seconds.

Fred switched his console to radar. Two large blips flanking the *Dagmar*. Her sister ships, each with two hundred marines of their own. Beyond them, the small, fast-moving escort ships. Ahead, growing closer by the second, the massive rotating ring of Anderson Station.

Everyone was in place, his troops were ready to go, diplomacy had failed and it was time to do his job. He opened the command channel to his squad leaders, ten variations on background static suddenly piping into his helmet.

"All squads, ten seconds to breach. Sound off."

Ten voices responded with the affirmative.

"Good hunting," Fred said, then pulled up his tactical display. The layout of Anderson Station appeared in a misleadingly crisp 2-D floor plan. No way to know how much fortifying the Belters might have done when they took over the station.

His soldiers showed up as six hundred green dots, hovering just outside the station.

"Breach, now! Now! Now!" the *Dagmar*'s pilot yelled into the comms. The ship shuddered as the airlock claws sank into the metal of the station itself, a metallic shriek that Fred felt right through his padded chair. Gravity returned in a sideways lurch as the station began carrying the breaching ships along on its 0.3 g rotation. A series of high-pitched bangs sounded as the breaching charges went off.

Above his tactical display, ten smaller screens flickered on, his squad leaders activating their suits' helmet cameras. The marines poured through the three new holes in Anderson's skin. Fred flipped to the tactical floor plan, his fingers tapping against it.

"All squads establish beachhead and fallback position in Corridor L, from Junction 34 to Junction 38," Fred said into the comm, surprised as always by how calm his voice sounded during a battle.

Green dots moved through the corridors marked on his display.

Sometimes new red dots appeared when a marine's HUD detected return fire and marked the individual as a threat. The red dots never lasted long. Every now and then a green dot shifted to yellow. A soldier down, their armored suits detecting the injuries or death that rendered them combat ineffective.

Combat ineffective. Such a nice euphemism for one of his kids bleeding out on a piece-of-shit station at the ass end of the Belt. Sixty percent expected casualties. Four green dots for every six yellow, and each one of them his.

He watched the assault play out like a high-tech game, moving his pieces, reacting to threats with new orders, keeping score by tracking how many green dots stayed green.

Three red dots appeared. Four green dots stopped advancing and took cover. Fred sent four more green dots into a side passage, moving them into a flanking position. The red dots disappeared. The green dots moved again. It was tempting to get lost in the flow of it, to forget what all the glowing symbols on the screen actually meant.

The squad leader for his point team broke his reverie by calling him on the command channel.

"Overwatch, this is squad one actual."

Fred shifted his attention to the helmetcam view from squad one's leader. A makeshift barricade squatted at the other end of a long, gently sloping corridor. His tactical display marked a dozen or more hostiles defending it. As Fred watched, a small object hurtled over the barricade and detonated like a grenade just a few yards from his squad leader's position.

"Overwatch here, I read you, squad one actual," Fred replied.

"Heavily fortified position blocking access to the main corridor. Could clear it with heavy weapons, but there would be significant structural damage, and possible loss of life support in this section."

Fred glanced at the tactical map, noting the proximity of several key life support and power nodes to the barricade's position. *That's why they set up there. Because they think we won't.*

"Roger that, squad one," Fred replied, looking for an alternate route. There didn't seem to be one. The Belters were smart.

"Overwatch, interrogative. Use heavy weapons to clear the barricade, or clear by advancing?"

Blow up a big chunk of the station's life support, killing who knows how many civilians hiding in their rooms, or send his men in and let them soak up their 60 percent casualties to take the position.

Fuck that. The Belters had made their decision. Let them live with the consequences.

"Squad one actual, you are authorized for heavy weapons use to clear this obstruction. Overwatch out."

A few seconds later, the barricade vanished in a flash of light and a cloud of smoke. Seconds after that, his people were on the move again.

Three hours and twenty-three yellow dots later, the call came. "Overwatch, this is squad one actual. The command center is taken. The station is ours. Repeat, the station is ours."



His arms, tied behind him, ached. Bound at the ankles, he could either lay on his side or lever himself up to his knees. He couldn't straighten his legs to stand. He chose kneeling.

The darkness of the sack over his head was absolute, but judging from the spin gravity, he was somewhere near the station's outer skin. An airlock, then. He'd hear the hiss and pop as the inner door sealed. Then either the slow exhalation of evacuated air or, if they were looking to blow him out into space, the cough of the security override. He ran his feet across the floor, trying to find the seams. Would it slide open, or was it one of the old hinged designs?

The sound that came wasn't mechanical. Somewhere to his left, a woman cleared her throat. A few seconds later, a door opened, then closed. It had the soft sound of a pressure seal, but that didn't mean much on station. Most doors were airtight. Footsteps approached him. Five people. Maybe six. The woman with the tickle in her throat wasn't one of them.

"Colonel? I'm going to take that sack off now."

Fred nodded.

Light returned to the world.

The room was cheap flooring and raw stone. Conduits and ducts ran across the ceiling and walls, and a squat metal desk sat unused in one

corner. A service tunnel. The lights were harsh. He recognized the four men from the bar. Another man had joined them. Thin, young, with a case of acne that deserved medical attention. Fred craned his neck to see the woman. She stood at attention, a fifty-year-old fléchette rifle in her hands, and the split-circle armband of the OPA on her bicep.

None of them were wearing masks. When the new man spoke, his voice wasn't modified. They didn't care whether Fred could identify them.

"Colonel Frederick Lucius Johnson. I've been looking forward to meeting you. My name is Anderson Dawes. I work for the OPA."

"Anderson, eh?" Fred said, and the man shrugged.

"My parents named me after the Anderson-Hyosung Cooperative Industries Group. I think I got off pretty light, all things considered."

"So what? Anderson Station was like a brother to you?"

"Namesake. Call me Dawes, if it's more comfortable."

"Fuck yourself, Dawes."

Dawes nodded, knelt down facing Fred.

"*Chi-chey au?*" one of the men from the bar asked.

"*Etchyeah,*" Dawes said, and the men walked away. Dawes waited until the door closed behind them before he went on. "You've been spending a lot of time in Belter bars, Colonel. Someone might think you were looking for something."

"Dawes?"

"Fred?"

"I've been through better interrogation training than you'll ever see. You want to build rapport? Go for it. Talk for a while, take my shackles off, start telling me that you can save me if I just tell you what I know. And then I'll rip your eyes out and skull-fuck you. You understand?"

"I do," Dawes said, not missing a beat. "So tell me, Fred. What happened to you on Anderson Station?"



Once the skirmishers had finished sweeping the corridors for stragglers, a detachment of marines escorted Fred into the conquered station. He paused at the fallback position they'd set up just outside the airlock doors. Marines

were beginning to return there from other assignments. They were hopped-up on adrenaline and twitchy with post-combat fear. Fred let them see him. He put his hands on their shoulders and told them they'd done a good job.

Some of them came back on stretchers. Yellow dots made flesh. The corpsmen hurried among them, plugging their hand terminals into ports in the downed soldiers' combat armor, reading the diagnostics, then assigning their place in line for surgery based on the severity of their wounds. Sometimes they tapped a button on their terminal and one of Fred's yellow dots shifted to black. His command software flagged the fatality and sent a message to the appropriate squad leader and company commander to write a letter to the family. His own task list received a matching entry.

It was all very clean, very organized. Centuries of warfare in the electronic age had distilled it to this. Fred put his hand on the arm of a young woman whose suit was reporting severe spinal injuries, and squeezed. She gave him a thumbs-up that felt like a punch to the solar plexus.

"Sir?"

Fred looked up and found his first lieutenant standing at attention. "Are we ready?"

"Yes, sir. Might be a straggler or two, but we control the corridors from here to Ops."

"Take me there," Fred said.

They covered the ground it had taken his marines hours to win in just a few minutes. The post-combat cleanup teams were still in the breaching ships, waiting for the all clear. Scattered along the corridors lay the bodies of the fallen enemy. Fred looked them over. Other than a noticeable lack of OPA insignias, they were pretty much what he would have expected. Long, thin men and women blasted open by explosives, or repeatedly punctured by small-arms fire. Most were armed, but a few weren't.

They rounded a corner into the main corridor and then came to the barricade he'd ordered destroyed. Over a dozen bodies lay around it. Some wore makeshift armor, but most were in simple environment suits. The concussion rocket his marines had used to clear the corridor had burst them like overripe grapes. Fred's vacuum-rated armor protected him from the smell of viscera, but it reported it to him as a slight increase in atmospheric methane levels. The stench of death reduced to a data point.

A small pile of weapons and makeshift explosives lay nearby.

“That’s what they were armed with?” Fred asked.

His escort nodded.

“Pretty light stuff, sir. Civilian grade. Most of it wouldn’t even make a dent in our armor.”

Fred bent over and picked up a homemade grenade.

“They threw bombs at you to keep you from getting close enough to realize their guns wouldn’t work.”

The lieutenant laughed. “And made us frag the lot of them. If we’d known they were packing peashooters, we could have just walked up and tased them.”

Fred shook his head and put the grenade back down.

“Get a demolitions team to come clear these explosives before this homemade shit goes off and kills someone.”

He looked at the nearby life support node that had been wrecked by their concussion rocket. *Enough bystanders have died today.* Fred called up the station status report his cyberops team was updating by the minute. It showed a total loss of life support in the section he was in, and in two neighboring sections. Just over eleven hundred people with no air and no power. Every door he could see might have a family behind it who’d gasped out their last breaths banging to get out because a bunch of idiot Belters had built their barricades where they did. And because he’d chosen to destroy it.

While his lieutenant called for a bomb-disposal unit, Fred walked toward the command center. Along the way he saw a few more Belter corpses. They’d tried to hold the corridor even after his people had blown up the first barricade, hiding behind makeshift barriers and throwing their bathtub-brewed explosives. Buying time, but for what? The final result had never been in doubt. They’d been undermanned and grossly underequipped. The only reason his soldiers had taken three hours was that Fred had insisted on moving cautiously. Looking at the unarmored bodies on the floor, he realized they could have had men in the command center in half that time.

They had to have known it too, these people spread across the floor around him. *The idiots made us kill them.*

His lieutenant caught up with him just as he was entering the command center. Corpses filled the room, easily twenty of them. While most of them

wore some form of environment suit or another, one man in the center of the room wore only a cheap blue jumpsuit with a mining company logo on the shoulder. He'd been shot dozens of times. A small-caliber pistol was glued to one hand with his own blood.

"The leader, we think," his escort said. "He was doing some kind of broadcast. The others fought to the last man to buy him time. We tried to take him alive, but he pulled that little gun out of his pocket, and..."

Fred looked at the carnage around him and felt a disquieting sensation in his belly. It lasted only a moment, and then was replaced by a white-hot anger. If he'd been alone, he would have gone to the dead man in the cheap blue jumpsuit and kicked him. Instead, Fred gritted his teeth.

"What the fuck was wrong with you people?" he demanded of the dead.

"Sir?" his lieutenant said, looking at the comms station. "Looks like he was trying to broadcast right up to the last minute."

"Let me see it," Fred said.



"What happened on Anderson Station was that I did my duty," Fred said.

"Your duty," Dawes echoed. He didn't make it a question. He didn't mock it. He just repeated the words.

"Yes."

"Following orders, then," Dawes said.

"Don't even try it, asshole. That Nuremberg crap won't work on me. I followed orders in that I was instructed by my superior officers to retake the station from the terrorist forces occupying it. I judged that order to be legal and appropriate, and everything that came after was my responsibility. I took the station, and I did so while trying to minimize, first, loss of life to my people and, second, damage to the station."

Dawes looked at him. Tiny frown lines competed with his acne. Something in the ductwork clacked, hissed, then clacked again, and stopped.

"You were told to do something. You did it," Dawes said. "How is that not following orders?"

"I gave the orders," Fred said. "And I did what I did because I judged it

to be right.”

“Okay.”

“You’re trying to give me wiggle room. Let me say that the Belters who died on Anderson died because the guy above me made a call. That’s shit.”

“And why would I be doing that?” Dawes asked. He was good. He seemed genuinely curious.

“Build rapport.”

Dawes nodded, then frowned and looked pained.

“And then we’re back to the skull-fucking?” Dawes asked with a grimace. Before he could stop himself, Fred laughed.

“This isn’t what I’m here for, Colonel,” Dawes went on, “and I don’t want to get sidetracked, but doesn’t that go the other way too? You didn’t fire a shot. You didn’t touch a trigger or key in a launch code. You gave orders, but your soldiers judged them to be just and legal.”

“Because they were,” Fred said. “My people did the right thing.”

“Because you told them to,” Dawes said. “They were following your orders.”

“Yes.”

“Your responsibility.”

“Yes.”

The woman with the antique rifle coughed again. Dawes lowered himself to the cheap flooring, sitting with legs crossed. Even then, he was half a head taller than Fred. His skin was pale where it wasn’t red. Between the zits and the gawky-elongated build, Dawes looked like a teenager. Except around the eyes.

“And the terrorists,” Dawes said.

“What?”

“The men who took the station. You think it was their responsibility too, yes?”

“Yes,” Fred said.

Dawes took a long breath, letting the air curl out slowly from between his teeth.

“You’re aware, Colonel, that the assault on Anderson is one of the best-documented military actions in history. The security cameras broadcast everything. I’ve spent months playing those streams. I can tell you things about the assault you don’t even know.”

“If you say so.”

“When the barricade blew, eleven people died in the blast. Three more stopped breathing in the next two minutes, and the last two survived until your people came.”

“We didn’t kill the injured.”

“You killed one when he tried to bring his pistol up. The other one had a collapsed lung and choked on her own blood before your medics looked at her.”

“You want an apology?”

Dawes’s smile was cooler now.

“I want you to understand that I know every action that was taken on the station. Every order. Every shot fired, and from what gun. I know everything about that assault, and so does half the Belt. You’re famous out here.”

“You’re the one who asked what happened,” Fred said, shrugging as best he could with bound, numb arms.

“No, Colonel. I asked what happened to *you*.”



General Jasira’s private office was decorated like somebody’s idea of a British gentleman’s club. The furniture was all dark oak and darker leather. The heavy desk smelled like lemons and tung oil. The pen set and globe of Earth on top of it were both made of brass. The bookshelves were filled with real paper books and other souvenirs from a long lifetime of constant travel. There wasn’t an electronic device more complex than a lamp anywhere in sight. If it weren’t for the 0.17 lunar gravity, there would be no way to know it wasn’t an office in London in the early twentieth century.

The general was waiting for him to speak first, so Fred swirled the scotch in his glass instead, enjoying the sound the ice made and the harsh smell of the liquor. He drained it in one swallow, then set it back on the desktop in front of him, an invitation to be refilled.

As Jasira put another two fingers into it, he finally gave up on waiting. He said, “I imagine you’ve had some time to review the video the terrorists transmitted from Anderson.”

Fred nodded. He'd guessed this was the reason for the after-hours invitation. He tried another sip of scotch, but it had taken on a sour taste, and he put it back down.

"Yes, sir, I have. We were jamming radio all the way in, as per protocol, but we didn't detect that little tightbeam relay they'd left—"

"Fred," Jasira interjected with a laugh. "This isn't an inquisition. You aren't here to apologize. You did *good*, Colonel."

Fred frowned, picked his glass up, then put it back down without taking a drink.

"Then to be frank, sir, I wonder what I *am* here for."

Jasira leaned back in his chair.

"A couple of little things. I saw your request for an investigation into the negotiation team's work. The declassification of the negotiation transcripts. That surprised me."

As he spoke, Jasira rolled his shoulders, though in the moon's fractional gravity they could hardly be tense. He must have spent a lot of time dirtside, and the habits died slow.

"Sir," Fred said, speaking slowly and picking his words carefully, "because of the relay, the public has already seen the battle footage. We can't put that genie back in the bottle. But no one seems to want to talk about the tightbeam they sent to us at the end there. We—"

"And how will this information change anything? You did your job, soldier. The negotiation team did theirs. End of story."

"As it stands, sir, the people who took Anderson look like they're insane, and we look like executioners," Fred said, then stopped when he realized his voice was getting loud. Quieting down, he said, "There was some kind of mistake. That second message makes it clear that they thought they'd surrendered. A lot of people died over that miscommunication."

Jasira smiled, but there was no humor in it.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You barely lost anybody," the general said. "Anyway, the request's denied. We have no reason to do any investigation on this matter. The battle footage is out, and as it stands that works in our favor. The simpler the message is, the more people will understand it: Take one of our stations, and we take it back. Hard. We can only confuse the issue by turning it political."

"Sir," Fred said, all warmth gone from his voice. "I killed 173 armed

insurgents and over a thousand civilians in this action. You owe it to those people—you owe it to *me*—to show we did the right thing. What if we can avoid this happening next time?”

“There isn’t going to be a next time,” the general said. “You’re the one who saw to that.”

“Sir, you’re making it seem very much like this wasn’t a mistake at all. Who gave the order to ignore their surrender and send me in? Was it you?”

Jasira shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. You did what we needed you to do. We won’t forget that.”

Fred looked at his hands. He rose to his feet, a little too quickly, bouncing in the low g, and snapped a sharp salute. Jasira poured himself another glass of scotch and drank it off, leaving Fred standing as he did.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

Jasira gave him a long, resigned look.

“They’re giving you the Medal of Freedom.”

Fred’s arm turned limp, and his salute collapsed under its own weight.

“What?” was all he could manage to say.

“I’m going back down the well. I’m too old to suck vacuum anymore. They’ll pin you with the UN Marines’ highest honor, then shortly thereafter give you your first star. You’ll have a seat here at OPCOM before the year is out. Try to look happy about it.”



The silence stretched. Fred focused hard on nothing about ten feet in front of him. Dawes watched him for almost a full minute, then gave up.

“All right. Why don’t I start, then?” Dawes said. “Here’s what happened. You were sleeping with one of the marines. Keeping it quiet because you were the commander, and that’s a no-no, right? So you’re very careful taking the station. You keep your casualties low, but you don’t get lucky and your lover dies.”

Fred kept his face stony and still. Dawes leaned back, resting on one long, thin arm like he was lounging under a tree in some sunlit park.

“You can’t get the usual psychological support,” Dawes went on, “because that would mean exposing the relationship, and you’re still

ashamed of it. You have a little breakdown. You end up knocking around OPA bars hoping someone'll kill you."

Fred didn't respond. His legs were past numb now and starting to hurt. Dawes grinned. He seemed to be enjoying this.

"No?" the OPA man said. "Don't like that one? All right. How about this? Before you joined up with the Marines, you were a troubled kid. Did all kinds of bad things. Wild. Joining up is what straightened you out. Made you into the staunch, upright, legal, and appropriate guy you are today. But then the Anderson Station broadcast comes out. A bunch of people from your past see the feed and someone recognizes you. You come back a hero, but there's a sting in it. You're being blackmailed for... mmm. How about rape? Or, no. Drug trafficking. You used to cook tabs of grace in your dorm room, sell it at the clubs. Now it's come back to haunt you, and you have a little breakdown. And you end up knocking around OPA bars hoping someone'll kill you."

Dawes waved a hand in front of Fred's eyes.

"Still with me, Colonel? Don't like that one either? All right. Maybe you've got a sister who came up the well, and you lost track of her—"

"Why don't you save your fucking air," Fred growled. "Whatever you're here for, do it and be done."

"Because *why* matters, Colonel. *Why* always matters. Whatever your story is, I know how it ends. It ends with you, here, talking to me. That's the easy part, and I think you're here looking for easy."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

The woman with the rifle said something. Either her Belter patois was too accented and fast or it was some OPA verbal code because Fred couldn't even cut the flow of syllables into individual words. Dawes nodded, took his hand terminal out of a pocket and keyed something in. Fred leaned forward, trying to get the blood flow back into his legs. Dawes put the hand terminal away.

"You changed, Colonel. The way you behave changed after Anderson Station. Before that, you were just another inner planets asshole who didn't give a shit whether the Belt lived or died. You stuck to your bases and your stage-managed outreach programs and the station levels where the security gets paid by Earth taxes. And now, you're not.

"I've lived in the Belt my whole life. I've known a lot of men who

wanted to die. They act just like you. Women don't. I haven't figured that out yet, but the men? Even if they do take a walk outside or swallow a gun, there's always this part before. Taking risks. Hoping the universe will do it for them. Make it easy. And the Belt's an unforgiving environment. You want to die, getting sloppy's usually enough."

"I don't give a shit what you think," Fred said. "I don't give a shit what you want, or who you know. And your popular psychology horseshit? Yeah, you can drink it with milk. I have nothing to justify to you. I did my job, and I'm not ashamed of any decision I made. With the same information, I'd do the same thing again."

"*With the same information*," Dawes said, latching on to the phrase hard. "You found something out, then?"

"Fuck off, Dawes."

"What was it, Colonel? What kind of information turns the Butcher of Anderson Station into a suicide? What makes him into a coward?"



The hundred and seventy Belters occupying Anderson Station hadn't taken offensive action yet. Fred watched the station in false-color IR.

"Priority flash traffic from OPCOM, sir, cross-checked and verified," the intel officer on his monitor said. "Eyes only. Sending it to you now."

There was only one line of text.

AUTHORIZATION TO RETAKE STATION GRANTED.

And that was that. Thirty-seven hours of negotiation was over. Outer Planets Command was tired of waiting, and they were unleashing the dogs.

Fred called up the company major and said, "Put them in their racks. We're go for assault. Set the countdown timer to one hour."

"Roger that, sir," the major said with more glee than Fred was comfortable seeing.

One hour until they went into the station. Fred called up the negotiation team on the command ship.

"Psych Ops here," said Captain Santiago, the team commander.

"Captain, this is Colonel Johnson. We've been given authorization to retake the station. My people go in in an hour. Do we have anything left to

try? A Hail Mary pass? Have you warned them about the assault?”

There was no reason for secrecy. There would be no way to hide three Marine assault craft on breaching maneuvers.

The silence from the other end stretched out, and Fred was almost at the point of checking to see if the line was still open when the reply came.

“Colonel, are you double-checking my work here, sir?”

Fred counted to ten slowly.

“No, Captain. But I’m about to send six hundred marines into the station. In addition to the 170 hostiles, there are over ten thousand civilians. Many or all of them could die before the day’s out. I just want to make sure we’ve exhausted every other possibility before we commit to—”

“Sir, I’ve got my orders just like you do. We did what we could, but Psych Ops is standing down now. Your turn.”

“Am I the only one that sees that this doesn’t make any sense?” Fred said. “They claim they took the station because of a three percent cargo transfer fee? I mean, they already threw the administrator who implemented it out the damned airlock. There is literally nothing left for them to win by forcing a fight.”

The only answer was static.

“Let me talk to them,” Fred said. “Maybe if they hear it from a different voice, they’ll understand—”

“Sir,” Santiago cut in. “I am not authorized to do that. You want to argue about it? Call General Jasira back at OPCOM. Santiago out.”



Fred launched himself at Dawes, pushing out with numbed legs, and Dawes scuttled back. Fred landed on the deck hard. The world grayed out for a second, and he tasted blood. He struggled forward, trying to get at Dawes’s feet with his teeth if that was the best he could manage. He saw the Belter up to the knees, stepping back. Fred twisted. Something in his left shoulder made a sick crunching sound, and a sharp pain shot up his neck. Then the woman stepped forward.

He looked up into the triangular barrel of the fléchette rifle, and then past it to the woman’s eyes. They were the blue of oceans seen from orbit.

There was no pity in them. Her thumb was on the safety. Her finger on the trigger. A little pressure, and the rifle would send a hundred spikes of steel thinner than needles through his brain. And she wanted to. It was in the set of her shoulders and the angles of her face how much she wanted to end him.

“The problem with you,” Dawes said, his voice calm and conversational as if they were sitting in a bar somewhere sharing a beer, “and I don’t mean this as a criticism of you in particular. It’s true of anybody who didn’t grow up in the Belt. The problem with you is that you are wasteful.”

“I’m not a fucking coward,” Fred said through his rapidly swelling lip.

“Of course you are. You’re smart, you’re healthy. Maybe a few hundred people out of forty billion have your combination of talent and training. And you’re trying to waste that very valuable resource. You’re like the guy who delays replacing his airlock seals when they start to leak. You think it’s just a little bit. It doesn’t matter. You’re one guy. You get killed, no big loss.”

He heard Dawes walking behind him, but his gaze was still on the rifle. Dawes grabbed Fred’s collar and hauled him back to kneeling.

“When I was growing up, my dad used to beat the crap out of me if I spat someplace other than the reclamation duct because we needed the water. We don’t waste things out here, Colonel. We can’t afford to. You understand that, though. Don’t you?”

Slowly, Fred nodded. Blood was seeping down his chin even though Dawes and the woman hadn’t laid an angry hand on him. He’d done this to himself.

“When I was about fifteen, I killed my sister,” Dawes said. “I didn’t mean to. We were on this rock about a week from Eros Station. We were going out of the ship to get some survey probes that got stuck in the slurry. I was supposed to check her suit seals, but I was in a mood. I was fifteen, you know? So I did a half-assed job of it. We went outside, and everything seemed fine until she twisted sideways to pull up a rock spur. I heard it on the comm link, and it just sounded like a pop. We had the old Ukrainian-style suits. Solid as stone unless something broke, and then it all failed at once.”

Dawes shrugged.

“You’re a fucking piece of shit, then, aren’t you?” Fred said, and Dawes

grinned.

“Felt like that, yeah. Still do sometimes. I understand why someone could want to die after a thing like that.”

“So why not kill yourself?” Fred asked, then spat a dark red clot on the deck at his feet.

“I’ve got three more sisters,” Dawes said. “Someone’s got to check their seals.”

Fred shook his head. His shoulder vibrated with sudden pain.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Builds rapport,” Dawes said. “How’s it working?”

Fred laughed before he knew he was going to. Dawes gestured, and the woman put up the rifle, walking back to her doorway.

“So. Colonel,” Dawes said. “What information did you get on Anderson Station that you ended up here talking to a sad sack of shit like me?”

Fred took a long breath.

“There was a message sent to us as we went in,” he said. “A message I didn’t see until it was too late.”



“Let me see it,” Fred said.

“There are a couple things here,” the lieutenant said. “Got a partial that was never sent. And one that looks like it’s being sent to the command ship on infinite repeat. Also, a running feed that looks like a straight dump of the security cameras.”

“Do the unsent partial first.”

The video started, and the man in the mining jumpsuit stared out of the screen. For Fred, there was a surreal quality to watching a man alive and speaking while his corpse lay cooling on the floor behind him.

I could have told him this would happen.

The dead man said, “Citizens of the solar system, my name is Marama Brown. I’m a freelance mining technician for Anderson-Hyosung Cooperative Industries Group. I, and some like-minded individuals, have taken control of the company resupply station.”

Fred hit pause and turned to his lieutenant. He had a sinking feeling in

his gut. The dead man had expected this to get out. Even though he had to know they were jamming, he'd expected the message to be heard.

"Where was that security camera feed going?" Fred asked.

"I'll check on that right now, sir," the lieutenant replied, and called up the electronic warfare people back on the *Dagmar*. Fred tuned their conversation out, and hit play again.

"I believe—we all believe that this action is justified by what has been done here. A man named Gustav Marconi, the station administrator, recently implemented a three percent surcharge on supply transfers. I know that doesn't sound like much to some of you, but most of us are living on the ragged edge out here. Prospectors, wildcat miners... you strike it rich or you starve. That's the game. But now a bunch of us are going to have to buy three percent less supplies because it just got that much more expensive. You can eat a bit less food. You can drink a little less water. You can fly a little slower and stretch your fuel, maybe. You run life support at bare minimums. But—"

"Sir?" said the lieutenant, and Fred paused the playback. "Sir, the transmission, at least some of it, got out. They'd left a tightbeam receiver and broadcast transmitter anchored to a rock just outside our jamming range. We missed it. But the e-war geeks have triangulated its location and are sending a Phantom to frag it."

Too late, Fred thought, and hit the play button again.

"—what if you're already running at the bare minimum? How about every year, you just don't breathe for three days? That would about cover it. Or you don't drink any water for three days. Or you don't eat for three days when you're already on the brink of starvation. When there's nothing left to cut back on, how do you make it up then?"

Marama turned away from the camera for a second, and when he turned back he was holding his hand terminal. He held it up to the screen. It was displaying the picture of a little girl. She was wearing a powder-blue jumpsuit that had "Hinekiri" hand stitched on the breast, and grinning with small crooked teeth.

"This is my little girl, my Kiri. She's four. She has what the medics call 'hypoxic brain injury.' She was born a little prematurely, and instead of the high oxygen environment she should have had, she was in my prospecting ship where the air is a little thinner than the Everest base camps back on

Earth. We didn't even know anything was wrong until we realized she wasn't developing normally."

He turned away from the camera and put the terminal down.

"And she's not the only one. Developmental problems arising from low oxygen and malnutrition are becoming more and more common. When this was explained to Mr. Marconi, his reply was, 'Work harder and you can afford the increase.' We complained to the Anderson-Hyosung head offices, but no one listened. We complained to the Outer Planets Governing Board on Luna.

"This isn't... We didn't start out intending to take over the station. It all just sort of happened," the man said. For a moment, his voice seemed to waver. As Fred watched, the man forced himself back into calm. "We want everyone to know that, other than Mr. Marconi, whose crimes would have led directly to the deaths of thousands of Belters, no one has been harmed in our taking of the station. We don't want anyone else to get hurt. We're not violent people, but we have been pushed so far that there is nowhere left to retreat to. We've been in discussions with a UN military negotiator for almost two days now. In a short time, we will be surrendering the station to them. We'll send this message out prior to handing the station over to make sure our story is heard. I hope no one ever feels like they have to do something like this again. I hope, after all of this, that people can begin talking about what's happening out here."

The video ended. Fred queued up the tightbeam that had been sent to the negotiation team during the assault.

Marama Brown again, this time holding a pistol, his face twisted with fear.

"Why are the Marines attacking?" he said in a panicked screech. "We just needed some time! We're surrendering!"

The message immediately repeated. Fred stopped it and turned it off.

"Sir."

Fred took a long breath to fight back the vague nausea he suddenly felt.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Phantom reports a clean hit. The relay is toast. But, uh..."

"Spit it out, soldier."

"It was no longer broadcasting. Whatever they sent, they were done sending it."

Fred pulled up the comm logs, and confirmed what he'd already suspected: Marama Brown had never gotten to send his manifesto. Fred had been ordered in, and Marama had been busy trying to stay alive. But his last tightbeam to Psych Ops had gotten through just fine. They'd known.

"Sir?" the lieutenant said.

"Doesn't matter. Call up the cyber wonks and have them strip the computer core. I'll go find the liaison officer and start the civilian aid phase."

His lieutenant chuckled.

"Here, kiddies," the lieutenant said. "We blew the shit out of your station, have some free MREs and UN Marine sticker books."

Fred didn't laugh.



"You had to have known that they were desperate out there," Dawes said.

"Of course I did," Fred said. "It was in all the reports. Hell, it was on the news feeds. Increased overhead. People struggling for the basics. You hear it all the time. Turn on a feed now, you'll hear it again."

The blood had stopped flowing from Fred's mouth, but the inside of his lip tasted raw. His shoulder was settling into a low, radiating ache. There was a dark circle of blood on the decking in front of him.

"But this time it was different?" Dawes said. He didn't sound sarcastic or angry. Just curious.

Fred shifted. His legs were dead lumps of meat. He couldn't feel anything. If someone put a knife into his thigh, it would have been like watching it happen to someone else.

"That man had a crippled baby girl," Fred said. "I killed him."

"The UN would just have sent someone else," Dawes said.

"I still killed him."

"You didn't pull the trigger."

"I killed him because he wanted her to have enough air to breathe," Fred said. "I killed her daddy while he was trying to surrender, and they gave me a medal for doing it. So there you go. That's what happened on Anderson Station. What are you going to do about it?"

Dawes shook his head.

“That’s too easy. You’ve killed lots of daddies. What made this one different?”

Fred started to speak, stopped, tried again.

“They used me. They made it about sending messages to everyone that you don’t fuck with Earth, because look at the shit we’ll do just because you spaced an administrator on a nowhere station. They made me the poster boy for disproportional response. They made me a butcher.”

Saying the words was painful, but there was a strange relief too. Dawes was staring at him, his face unreadable. Fred couldn’t meet his eyes.

Dawes nodded, seeming to come to a decision, then put a hand in his pocket and took out a utility knife. When he opened it, the blade was old and scored. Fred took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was ready. Dawes walked behind him. A fast pull across the neck, and Fred could bleed out in four minutes. A stab in the kidney could take hours. Cut the cords that were tying his arms, and it could take years.

Dawes cut the cords.

“This wasn’t a trial,” Fred said. “You’re not here to pass some kind of judgment on me.”

“I wasn’t expecting to,” Dawes said. “I mean, if it really had been just that you’d been boning one of your marines, I’d have dropped you out an airlock, wasteful or no. But I was pretty sure I was right.”

“So what happens now?”

Dawes shifted Fred forward. The pins-and-needles feeling was starting in his hands. Dawes cut the binding on his legs.

“If you want the easy way out, you go kill yourself on your own damn time and stop setting the OPA up to take the blame for it. I’ve got enough bad press without slaughtering the hero of Anderson Station.”

“And otherwise?”

Dawes sat back on his haunches and closed the blade with one hand.

“I don’t waste resources, Colonel. If you want to die, it will do that girl and her father absolutely no good. If you want to make it up to her and all the people like her, I could use your expertise. You’re a rare resource. You’ve got knowledge and training, and as the man who is famous throughout the whole system for killing Belters, you’re in a position to be our strongest advocate. All it means is walking away from everything you

know and love. The life you built for yourself. The admiration of everyone who looks up to you. All the things you'd have lost anyway."

"This was a recruitment, then."

Dawes stood up, sliding the knife into his pocket. His smile reached his eyes this time.

"You tell me," Dawes said. Then, to the woman, "*Recanos ai postar. Asi geendig.*"

"Aais," she said, shouldering the rifle like a professional.

The pair walked out together, leaving Fred on the deck, massaging the agony out of his legs as the feeling started to return.

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The Butcher of Anderson Station

Author's Note

In the beginning, there weren't going to be any short stories in *The Expanse*. It wasn't that we were dead set against the idea, it's just that you have to think of these things before you can do them, and it just hadn't occurred to us. In that sense, everything in this book exists because of John Joseph Adams, the editor of *Lightspeed*. He was the first one to ask if we'd thought about writing short fiction in the universe of *Leviathan Wakes*, and as soon as he said it, we had.

"The Butcher of Anderson Station" set the tone of what the short stories would be: a chance to tell some side story or explore some part of the universe that wasn't part of the main storyline but had something interesting about it.

"Butcher" is a little bit of backstory about Fred Johnson, yes. But it's also a chance for us to tell a story about guilt and the lengths to which people will go to get out from under it. Fred is a profoundly moral man, manipulated into being the instrument of something evil. Even though the events at Anderson Station weren't directly his fault, he's haunted by them, and without the intercession of Anderson Dawes, they would have killed him.

There's a line Daniel likes from the gnostic Gospel of Thomas: If you bring forth that which is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth that which is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you. That idea and this story have something to say to each other.

Curiously, John Joseph Adams didn't wind up taking the story. There are a lot of variables that go into editing a magazine, and this particular story didn't fit his needs that month. No blame. We wound up publishing it through Orbit's ebook program, where it's lived happily ever since.

One of the other characters in the story is a frightening woman who holds Fred at gunpoint, ready to shoot him in the head the instant Dawes asks her to. Later, when we were making the show, Cara Gee (who played Camina Drummer) pitched the idea that the unnamed woman with Anderson Dawes might have been Drummer in her early days. Which seemed plausible to us.

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Gods of Risk

What *kind* of problem?” Hutch asked. Even though he was from the settlements near Mariner Valley, he didn’t have the relaxed, drawling accent of that part of Mars. Hutch’s voice buzzed like a radio on just the wrong frequency.

“It’s not bad,” Leelee said, leaping to his defense. “It’s not bad, right, David? Not really a problem. Inconvenience maybe.”

“Inconvenience,” David echoed.

The silence was uncomfortable. David tugged his fingers, pulling each one straight out from the hand until the knuckle popped, then moving on to the next. He was half a head taller than Hutch, but he couldn’t seem to bring his gaze up higher than the thin man’s sternum. In two months, David would be sixteen, but he felt about six. Hutch’s meetings were always in small rooms, away from the main passages and corridors. This one had been a storage hole from the first generation of settlements. The walls were the polished stone of Mars covered with a clear insulative ceramic that was starting to bubble and gray with age. The light was a construction lantern, the burning white of the LED softened and made ruddy by Leelee’s paisley silk scarf draped over it. They sat on metal crates in the cold. Hutch scratched at the scars on his wrist.

“Don’t let it choke you, little man,” Hutch said. It was an old joke between them—David’s family were Polynesian before they were Martian, and between genetics and growing up at barely over a third of Terran g, David was over two meters tall and leaning toward pudgy. “Just say what it is. You got a bad batch, right?”

“No, nothing like that. The batch is fine. It’s just my aunt Bobbie’s come to live with us for a while. She’s always at the place now. Always. Anytime I get home, she’s there.”

Hutch frowned and tilted his head. Leelee put her arm around his

shoulder, draping herself close to the man. Hutch shrugged her back but not off.

“She knows you’re cooking?”

“She doesn’t know anything,” David said. “She just lifts weights and watches video feeds all day.”

“Lifts weights?” Hutch asked.

There was an undercurrent of amusement in his voice that made David’s guts unknot. He risked a glance at the thin man’s tea-brown eyes.

“She used to be a Marine.”

“Used to be?”

“Something weird happened. She sort of quit.”

“So not a Marine anymore. And now what is she?”

“Just a fucking inconvenience,” David said. He took a little joy in the profanity. *Hell* and *damn* were the worst language tolerated in the Draper house. *Fuck* would have gotten him yelled at. Worse than that would be unthinkable. “The batch is fine. But it’s going to be harder to get the next one done. I can’t do any of the prep work at home now.”

Hutch leaned back, his laughter filling the air. Leelee’s face relaxed, all the little worry lines vanishing back into the eggshell smoothness of her skin.

“Shit,” Hutch said. “You had me thinking there was trouble for a minute there. Thought I was going to have to tell my people that my best cook fell down.”

David picked up his satchel, fumbled through it, and came out with a rattling plastic jar. Hutch took it, cracked the seal, and poured four or five of the small pink lozenges into his hand, then passed one to Leelee. She popped it in her mouth like it was hard candy. The 2,5-Dimethoxy-4-*n*-propylthiophenethylamine was a serotonin receptor agonist that broke down into—among other things—a 2,5 desmethoxy derivative that was a monoamine oxidase A inhibitor. The euphoric effects would start to tighten Leelee’s joints and lift her mood in the next half hour. The hallucinations wouldn’t kick in for an hour, maybe an hour and a half, and then they’d last her through the night. She rattled the lozenge across the back of her teeth with her tongue, grinning at him. David felt the first stirrings of an erection and looked away from her.

“You do good work, little man,” Hutch said, taking out his hand

terminal. The small chime meant the transfer was done. David's secret account had a little more money in it, not that he was in this for the money. "Now, this auntie thing. What's it going to do to your schedule?"

"I've still got the lab at school," David said. "I can sign up for more time there. Seniors get preference, so it won't be too hard. It's just—"

"Yeah, no," Hutch said. "Better we play safe. You tell me how much time you need to make the next batch; that's how much time you can take."

"I'm thinking a couple weeks at least," David said.

"Take them, they're yours," Hutch said, waving his scarred hand. "We're in this for the long haul, you and me. No reason to get greedy now."

"Yeah."

The thin man stood up. David was never sure how old Hutch really was. Older than him and Leelee and younger than David's parents. That gulf of years seemed to fill infinite possibilities. Hutch shrugged on his dust-red overcoat and pulled his brown knit tuque out of a pocket, flapped it once like he was whipping the air, and pulled it down over white-blond hair. Leelee stood up with him, but Hutch put a hand on her bare shoulder, turning the girl toward David.

"You see my girl here back to the land of the living, eh, little man? I got a thing to do."

"All right," David said. Leelee pulled her scarf off the lantern, and the dirty little room went brighter. Hutch gave a mocking three-finger salute, then unsealed the door and left. The rule was that Hutch left first, and then ten minutes later David could go. He didn't know exactly where Hutch went, and if Leelee was here with him, he didn't care. She leaned against him, smelling like verbena and girl. She was a year older than him, and he could have rested his chin on the top of her head.

"You're doing all right?" he asked.

"Am," she said, her voice slushy and soft. "It's starting to come on."

"That's good." He gathered her a little closer. She rested her head against his chest, and they waited quietly for the precious minutes to pass.

Seven communities—called the neighborhoods—scattered through the northern reach of the Aurorae Sinus made up Londres Nova. The city, such as it was, had burrowed deep into the flesh of Mars, using the soil as insulation and radiation shielding with only ten domes pressing out to the surface. Forty thousand people lived and worked there, carving new life

into the unforgiving stone of humanity's second home. Tube stations made a simple web topology that determined the social forms and structures. Aterpol was the only station with connections to every other neighborhood, and so it became the de facto downtown. Salton was under the biggest agricultural dome and had a surface monorail to the observatory at Dhanbad Nova, and so the upper university and technical clinics were concentrated there. The lower university was in Breach Candy, where David and his family lived. Nariman and Martineztown had been manufacturing and energy production sites in the first wave of colonization, and the displacement that came with new technologies meant both neighborhoods were struggling to reinvent and repurpose themselves. Innis Deep and Innis Shallows each had only a single tube route out, making them cul-de-sacs and havens for the sort of Martian who was almost a Belter—antisocial, independent, and intolerant. An address in either Innis was the mark of an outsider—someone dangerous or vulnerable. Leelee lived in the Shallows, and Hutch lived in the Deep.

As much as the neighborhoods differed, the tube stations were the same: high, arched ceilings bright with full-spectrum light and chaotic with echoes; thin-film video monitors pasted to the walls, blaring public information and entertainment feeds; kiosks selling food and clothes, the latest fads and fashions cycled in and out as regularly as tides. Security cameras looked down on everything, identity-matching software tweaking the video feeds to put names with faces in the crowd. The air always seemed to have the faint scents of ozone and cheap food and piss. The plastic-film flyers always looked the same whether they were announcing yoga classes, lost pets, or independent music acts. David had been to the cities in Mariner Valley and the base of Olympus Mons, and the tube stations had been the same there too. The one unifying cultural product of Mars.

David led Leelee through the bustle of the Martineztown station. He shifted his satchel so that she could put her arm around his. The farther they walked the less steady her steps were. Her arm curled around him like ivy clinging to a pillar, and he could feel the stiffness in her muscles and hear it in her voice when she spoke. Her pupils were dilating with pleasure and the chemical cascade in her brain. He wondered what she was seeing.

"You never try the stuff yourself?" she asked again, unaware that it was

the third time.

“No,” David said again. “I’m finishing up my senior labs. There isn’t really time for a night off. Later maybe. When I get my placement.”

“You’re so smart,” she said. “Hutch always says how you’re so smart.”

Ahead of them, near the platform, a crowd of something close to fifty people were chanting together and holding up signs. A dozen uniformed cops stood a few yards away, not interfering, but watching closely. David ducked his head and turned Leelee away at an angle. Maybe if they headed toward the restrooms there would be a way to the platform that didn’t involve walking a tripping girl past the police. Not that the police were paying much attention to the foot traffic. Their attention was all on the protest. The signs were hand lettered or printed on standard-sized paper and glued together. A couple had thin-film monitors playing looped images that fuzzed out to a psychedelic rainbow swirl when the signs flexed.

HIT BACK! and ARE WE WAITING UNTIL THEY KILL US? and EARTH STARTED IT. LET’S FINISH IT. This last slogan was accompanied by a bad homemade animation of a rock slamming into the Earth, a massive molten impact crater looking like a bloody bullet wound in the planet.

The protestors were a mixed group, but most were a little older than David or Leelee. Blood-dark faces and the square-gape mouths sent the sense of rage radiating out from them like heat. David paused, trying to make out what exactly they were chanting through the echoes, but all he could tell was that it had seven syllables, four in a call and three in response. One of the police shifted, looking at David, and he started walking again. It wasn’t his fight. He didn’t care.

By the time they reached the platform, Leelee had gone quiet. He led her to a formed plastic bench that was intended for three people, but was snug with just the two of them. It ticked and popped under his weight, and Leelee flinched from the sound. There were small, distressed lines between her brows. The arrival board listed six minutes for the tube that would eventually get them to Innis Shallows, the seconds counting down in clean-lined Arabic numerals. When Leelee spoke, her voice was tight. He didn’t know if it was from sadness or the expected side effect of the drug.

“Everybody’s so angry,” she said. “I just wish people weren’t so angry.”

“They’ve got reason to be.”

Her focus swam for a moment, her gaze fighting to find him.

“Everyone’s got reasons to be,” she said. “I’ve got reasons to be. You’ve got reasons to be. Doesn’t mean we are, though. Doesn’t mean we want to be. You aren’t angry, are you, David?” The question ended almost like a plea, and he wanted to tell her that he wasn’t. He wanted to say whatever words would smooth her perfect brow, and then take her back to her room in the housing complex and kiss her and have her strip off his clothes. He wanted to see her naked and hear her laugh and fall asleep, spent, in her arms. He coughed, shifting on the bench. “You aren’t angry, are you?” she asked again.

The soft tritone sounded.

“The tube car’s here,” he said, forcing a smile. “Everything’s going to be fine. Just relax, right?”

She nodded and tried to pull away from him.

“It’s all red. You’re red too. Like a great big cherry. You’re so *smart*,” she said. “So you never try the stuff yourself?”

On the tube car, things weren’t better. This leg of the trip was an express for Aterpol, and the men and women on it were older than he was by a decade. Their demographic weight had the public monitor set to a newsfeed. In some well-appointed newsroom on the planet, a thin, gray-haired man was shouting down a swarthy woman.

“I don’t care!” the man said. “The agent they weaponized came from some larger, extra-solar ecosystem, and I don’t care. I don’t care about Phoebe. I don’t care about Venus. What I care about is what they did. The fact is—and no one disputes this—the fact is that Earth bought those weapons and—”

“That’s a *gross* oversimplification. Evidence is that there were several bids, including one from—”

“Earth bought those weapons and they fired them at us. At you and me and our children and grandchildren.”

The doors slid silently closed and the car began its acceleration. The tubes themselves were in vacuum, the car riding on a bed of magnetic fields like a gauss round. The lurch of acceleration was gentle, though. They’d cover the distance to Aterpol in twenty minutes. Maybe less. Leelee closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the car. Her lips pressed thin and her grip on his arm tightened. Maybe they should have waited for

her to take the pill until she'd gotten to someplace quieter and better controlled.

"And Earth also provided the tracking data that shot them all down," the woman on the screen said, pointing at the gray-haired man with her whole hand. "Yes, a rogue element in the Earth military was involved, but to dismiss the role that the official, *sanctioned* military played—"

"Sanctioned military? You make it sound like there's a civil war on Earth. I don't see that. I don't see that at all. I see Mars under a persistent, existential threat and the government sitting on its hands."

"Tell me a story," Leelee said. "Talk to me. Sing me a song. Something."

"I've got music on the hand terminal if you want."

"No," she said. "You. Your voice."

David tucked his satchel between his feet and turned toward her, dipping his head down close to her ear. He had to hunch a little. He licked his lips, trying to think of something. His mind was blank, and he grabbed at the first thought that came through him. He brought his mouth to the shell of her ear. When he sang, he tried to be quiet enough that no one else would hear him.

"Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen..."

Leelee didn't open her eyes, but she smiled. That was good enough. For ten minutes, David went on, quietly singing Christmas carols to Leelee. Some he got into and didn't remember the right words, so he just made things up. Nonsense that fit the rhythm of the music, or nearly did.

The detonation was the loudest thing David had ever heard, less a sound than a physical blow. The car pitched forward, rattling against the walls of the tube, throwing Leelee into him and then back. The lighting flickered, failed, and then came on in a different color. They were stopped between stations. The monitors clicked to a pinkish-gray as they rebooted, then glowered back to life with the emergency services trefoil.

"Is this happening?" Leelee asked. Her irises were tiny rings of brown around deep black. "David? Is this happening?"

"It is, and it's all right," he said. "I'm here. We're fine."

David checked his hand terminal, thinking that the newsfeeds might tell him what was going on—power failure, rioting, enemy attack—but the network was in lockdown. An almost supernaturally calm male voice came over the public monitors. "The public transport system has encountered a

pressure anomaly and has been shut down to assure passenger safety. Stay calm and a maintenance crew will arrive shortly.” The message was less important than the tone of voice it was spoken in, and Leelee relaxed a little. She started to giggle.

“Well this is fucked,” she said and grinned at him. “Fucked, fucked, fucked, fucked, *fucked*.”

“Yeah,” David said. His mind was already jumping ahead. He’d be late getting home. His father would want to know why, and when it came out he’d been in Martineztown, there’d be questions. What he’d been doing there, who had he been seeing, why hadn’t he told anybody. All around them, the other passengers were grumbling and sighing and arranging themselves into comfortable positions, waiting for the rescuers. David stood up and sat down again. Every passing minute seemed to relax Leelee and shunt that tension into his spine. When he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass of the tube doors, the boy looking back seemed furtive and scared.

Half an hour later, the emergency hatch at the end of the car creaked, popped, and opened. A man and a woman in matching blue security uniforms stepped in.

“Hey, folks,” the man said. “Everyone all right? Sorry about this, but some jackhole broke the vacuum seals. Whole system’s going to be down for about six hours, minimum. Some places longer. We’ve got service carts out here that can take folks to transport buses. Just line up single file, and we’ll get you where you’re going.”

Leelee was humming to herself as David drew her into line. He couldn’t get her to Innis Shallows and get back home. Not with the tubes down. He bit his lips and they moved forward one at a time, the other passengers vanishing through the emergency hatch and into the temporary airlock beyond it. It took forever to reach the front of the line.

“Where are you two headed?” the security man asked, consulting his hand terminal. It was working, even though David’s wasn’t. The man looked up, concerned. “Hermano. Where are you two headed?”

“Innis Shallows,” David said. And then, “She’s going to Innis Shallows. I was taking her there, because she’s not feeling so good. But I’ve got to get to Breach Candy. I’m going to miss my labs.” Leelee stiffened.

“Innis Shallows and Breach Candy. Step on through.”

The temporary airlock was made from smooth black Mylar, and walking through it was like going through the inside of a balloon. The pressure wasn't calibrated very well, and when the outer seal opened, David's ears popped. The hall was wide and low, the dull orange emergency lights filling the passage with shadows and leaching the color out of everything. The air was at least five degrees colder, enough to summon gooseflesh, and Leelee wasn't holding his arm anymore. Her eyebrows were lifted and her mouth was set.

"It'll be okay," he said as they came close to the electric carts. "They'll get you home all right."

"Yeah, fine," she said.

"I'm sorry. I've got to get home. My dad—"

She turned to him. In the dim light, her dilated eyes didn't seem as out of place. Her sobriety made him wonder how much she'd really been feeling it before and how much had been a playful kind of acting.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Not the first time I've been tripping in public, right? I can behave myself. Just thought you'd come play and I was wrong. Hard cheese for me and moving on now."

"I'm sorry. Next time."

"You call it," she said with a shrug. "Next time."

The driver of the cart for Innis Shallows called out, and Leelee clambered aboard, squeezed between a middle-aged man and a grandmotherly woman, and waved back at David once. The middle-aged man glanced at David, back at Leelee, then down at the girl's body. The cart lurched, whined, and lurched again. David stood, watching it pull away. The mixture of shame, regret, and longing felt like an illness. Someone touched his elbow.

"Breach Candy?"

"Yes."

"Over here, then. Damn. You're a big one, aren't you? All right, though. We'll fit you in."

It was two years almost to the day since David had met Hutch at the lower university. David had been in the commons, the wide, carpeted benches with their soft, organic curves welcoming the students eating lunch. At thirteen, David had already been biochemistry track for two years. His last labs had been in tRNA transport systems, and he was reading through

the outline for the carbon complex work that would take up his next six months when one of the seniors—an olive-skinned boy named Alwasi—had sat down beside him and said there was someone David should meet.

Hutch had made himself out as more of a scholar back then but still with an edge to him. For months, David had thought the man was an independent tutor; the kind of hired instructor a family might bring on if their children were falling behind. David still had seven rounds of lab to go before his placement, so he hadn't thought too much about Hutch. He'd just become another face in the whirl of the lower university, one more minor character in the cast of thousands. Or hundreds at least.

Looking back, David could sort of see how Hutch had tested him. It had begun with asking innocuous little favors—tell someone who shared David's table that Hutch was looking for her, get Hutch a few grams of some uncontrolled reagent, keep a box for him overnight. They were things that David could do easily, and so he did. Every time, Hutch praised him or paid him back with small favors. David began to notice the people Hutch knew—pretty girls and tough-looking men. Several of the low-tier instructors knew Hutch on sight, and if they weren't overly friendly to him, they were certainly respectful. There hadn't been any one moment when David had crossed a line from being someone Hutch knew to cooking for him. It all happened so smoothly that he'd never felt a bump.

The fact was he would have done the side projects for Hutch without being paid. He couldn't spend the money on anything too extravagant for fear his parents would ask questions, so he used it here and there—a little present for Leelee or lunch on him for the other students at his table or the occasional indulgence that he could explain away. For the most part, it just sat in the account, growing slowly over time. The money wasn't precious because it was money. It was precious because it was secret and it was his.

When he had his placement and moved out to student housing in Salton, he'd have more freedom. Hutch's money would buy him a top-flight gaming deck or a better wardrobe. He could take Leelee out for fancy dinners without having to explain where he'd been or who he'd been with. The workload would be harder, especially if he got placed in medical or development. He'd heard stories about first-year placements on the development teams who pulled fifty-six-hour shifts without sleep. Carving out another six hours after that for Hutch might be hard, but he'd worry

about that when he got there. He had more immediate problems.

The transport buses were old, wheezing electrical carts, some of them dating back two generations. The drivetrain clicked under him, and the rubberized foam wheels made a constant sticky ripping noise. David hunched in a seat, trying to pull his elbows close in against his body. Around him, the other travelers looked bored and restless. The system was still locked down, his hand terminal restricted to what it held in local memory. He checked it every few seconds just to feel he had something to do. The wide access corridors passed slowly, the conduits and pipes like the circulatory system of some vast planetary behemoth. It seemed like the corridor would go on forever, even though the distance between Martineztown and Breach Candy wasn't more than forty kilometers.

He was supposed to be in his labs at the lower university. Even if all the public transport was locked down, it wasn't more than a half-hour walk from there to home. David figured he could claim to have been in the middle of something and that it had taken longer than he'd expected to finish up the work. Except that was the excuse he'd been giving to cover the extra time he'd spent cooking for Hutch. His mother had already started wondering in her vague accusation-without-confrontation way whether he was losing focus on his work. If they found out he'd been outside the neighborhood, it would be bad. If they found out why, it would be apocalyptic. David cracked his knuckles and willed the bus to go faster.

It was easy to think of Londres Nova as existing only along its tube lines, but the truth was generations of colonists and prototerraformers had made a webwork of tunnels under the airless permafrost of Mars. Whole complexes of the original tunnels had gone fallow—sealed off and the atmosphere and heat allowed to flow away into the flesh of the planet. Supply passages linked to electrical maintenance lines. There were shortcuts, and the bus driver knew them. Just when David was about to weep or scream with frustration, he saw the edge of Levantine Park and the northernmost edge of Breach Candy. The bus was going faster than he could walk, but just knowing where he was, being able to map his own way home, made the frustration a little less. And the fear maybe a little more.

I didn't do anything wrong, he told himself. I was in my lab. There was a security alert and the network went down. I had to finish the experiment, and it took a little longer because everyone was trying to find out what had

happened. That's all. Nothing else.

The fifth time the bus stopped, he was as close to his family's hole as he was going to be. He lumbered out into the corridors of his hometown, his head down and his shoulders tucked in toward his chest like he was trying to protect something.

The family lived in a series of eight rooms dug out of the stone and finished with textured organics. Rich brown bamboo floors met soft mushroom-brown walls. The lights were indirect LEDs alleged to match a sunny afternoon on Earth. To David, they were just the color house-lights were. A newsfeed was muttering in the common rooms, so some portion of the system must have been taken off security lockdown. David closed the door behind him and stalked through the kitchen, fists against his thighs, breath shallow and fast.

Aunt Bobbie was alone in the den. In any other family, she'd have been huge. For a Draper, she was only about the middle of the bell curve in height, but athletic and strong. She wore a simple loose-cut outfit that lived somewhere between sweats and pajamas. It mostly hid the shape of her body. She looked away from the video feed, her dark eyes meeting his, and killed the sound. On the screen, a reporter was speaking earnestly into the camera. Behind him, a lifting mech was hauling a slab of ferrocrete.

"Where's Dad?" he asked.

"Stuck in Salton with your mom," Bobbie said. "The blowout was on that line. Security's saying they'll have everything moving again in about ten hours, but your father said they'd probably be taking a room and coming home in the morning."

David blinked. No one was going to give him any grief. It should have felt like relief. He shrugged, trying to get the tension out of his shoulders, but it wouldn't go. He knew it didn't make sense to be irritated with his parents for not being there to fight with.

"Do we know what happened?" he asked, stepping into the room.

"Sabotage," Aunt Bobbie said. "Someone blew a hole between the tube and the maintenance corridor, sucked in a few thousand kilos of air. They took the vacuum seals off-line too, so the whole tube system popped like a balloon."

"Earth?"

Aunt Bobbie shook her head.

“Earth doesn’t think that small,” she said. “This is someone local trying to start something.”

“Why would someone local blow up our own stuff if they’re mad at Earth?”

“Because Earth’s too far away.”

It didn’t sound like an answer to his question, but David let it go with another shrug.

Aunt Bobbie’s gaze was on the monitor and not on it. Through it. Seeing something else. He knew she’d been on Ganymede when the fighting started and that something had happened so that she wasn’t in the military anymore and she had to live with them. The unfairness of her bringing her problems into his house chafed. She sighed and forced a smile.

“How’d things go at the lab?”

“All right,” he said.

“What’re you working on?”

“Just labs,” he said, not looking at her.

“Your dad said he expected your placement to come through soon. Find out what you’ll be doing for the next eight years.”

“Guess.”

Aunt Bobbie smiled.

“I remember when I first got into training. There was a breakdown in the notification system, and they wound up losing my placement for about six days. I was chewing through rocks until it came through. What about you? Are you more excited, scared, or pissed off?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Your dad’s really proud of you,” Aunt Bobbie said. “Whatever happens, he’s going to be really proud of you.”

David felt the flush of warmth rising in his neck and cheeks. For a second he thought he was embarrassed, but then he recognized the rage. He clamped his jaw tight and looked at the monitor so that he wouldn’t be looking at Aunt Bobbie. The mech was gesturing to a ragged hole two meters high and half a meter wide, the man controlling it speaking to the reporter as steel claws pointed out the fine cracks fanning unpredictably out from the breach. David’s teeth ached and he made himself relax his jaw. Aunt Bobbie turned back to the screen. He couldn’t read her expression, but he had the feeling that he’d exposed something about himself he didn’t

want her to know.

“We have anything for dinner?”

“I didn’t make anything,” she said. “Could, though.”

“It’s all right. I’ll grab a bowl of rice. I have work I need to do. Lab stuff.”

“Okay.”

David’s room was in the back. It had been cut from the ground with the image of a standard-sized person, and so it felt cramped to him. A standard bed would have left half a meter between the footboard and the wall; David’s was almost flush. The gaming deck, the only thing he’d ever spent Hutch’s illicit money on, sat at the side of the desk. The wall was set to a still from *Gods of Risk* where Caz Pratihari was about to duel Mikki Suhanam, both men looking strong, dangerous, and a bit melancholy. When the door was locked, he switched the wall to his favorite picture of Una Meing and threw himself to the bed. The newsfeed muttered from the common room, and under it—almost too faint to make out—Aunt Bobbie’s slow, rhythmic grunting. Resistance training probably. He wished he could make all the noises go away. That he could have the house to himself for once. He wondered if Leelee was all right. If she’d made it home safe. If she was angry with him. Or disappointed.

His hand terminal chimed. The alert was from the lower university. In response to the terrorist attack on the tube lines, the labs would be closed the following day. Students with ongoing work that couldn’t sit for an extra day were to reply to the section proctor who would either give them special authorization to come in or else do part of the work for them. He ran through a mental checklist. He didn’t have anything that needed him to be there, and if he got a little behind, everyone else would, too. He didn’t have any of Hutch’s reagents in his lab, so if there was a security audit, he’d be all right. He had a day off, then.

Leelee’s voice spoke in his memory. *You never try the stuff yourself?* Right now, somewhere in Innis Shallows, Leelee’s brain chemistry was cascading through a long series of biochemical waterfalls, one imbalance slipping to another, slipping to another. Her visual cortex firing in strange waves, her hippocampus blurring. He rolled to his side, reached between the bed frame and the wall, and plucked out the little felt bag. The pink lozenge looked tiny in his vast palm. It tasted like strawberry flavoring and

dextrose.

David laced his fingers behind his head, looked at the woman on his wall looking back at him, and waited, waited, waited for the euphoria to come.



The lower university was one of the oldest complexes in Londres Nova; the first marks had been made by automated construction mechs when there had been only a few thousand people on the planet. The halls were simple, direct, rectilinear, and hard. In the commons area—what everyone referred to as “outside”—there had been some attempt to soften and humanize the space, but within, it was low ceilings and right angles. It didn’t help that the original colonial designs hadn’t recessed any of the infrastructure. Halls that were narrow already had water pipes and electrical cables crowding in at the corners. The flooring was all metal grate, and David had to duck to get through the doorways. The suction from hundreds of fume hoods venting out to the atmosphere reclamation plants kept a constant breeze blowing against the main doors, pushing the students in and then keeping them from getting out.

David’s locker was in the third hall corridor. Senior’s row. It was twice as wide as the one he’d had just the year before, and the locking mechanism didn’t stick the way the old one had. He’d put a couple decals on the outer face—a picture of Caz Pratihari, a kanji-print cartoon—but nothing like the multicolored glow of the one next to him. It belonged to an industrial engineering girl who he never saw unless they were in the hall at the same time. All the lockers had something, though—a picture, a whiteboard, some in-joke one-liner printed on plastic and fused to the metal. Some little mark to say that this space belongs to someone in particular, someone a little—but only a little—different from the others.

At the end of the cycle, everyone in the senior’s row would get their placements, empty the lockers, and go to wherever they were put next. The lockers would be scrubbed clean, decontaminated, sealed, and made anonymous again for whichever student was assigned it next. David had heard about sand castles on beaches being washed away by the tide, but

he'd never seen an ocean. The lockers of senior's row were the closest analogue among things he actually knew.

David closed the door and turned down toward his workstation. With the tube stations running, his parents back at the house, and the lower university open, the lab was the place he disliked least. The long muscles in his back and legs still ached a little after his night sampling his own wares, and he was half relieved that he could tell Leelee he'd tried it and half relieved that his schedule wouldn't let him try it again. The whole thing had been like having a very long, pleasant, but kind of boring dream. And it had left his head feeling a little hazy in a way he didn't enjoy.

His lab work was almost at its final phase. The terminal built into his desk was arranged to display the data on all seven studies that were making up the complex tissue of his senior labs. They were all built around the single unified idea of trying to build complex cell structures that would sequester ferrous products. It wasn't a holy grail, but it was a good, solid puzzle with a lot of applications for the terraforming efforts if it worked out. With the day out of lab, he had a double handful of data to look over and incorporate.

And so did everyone else.

"Hey? Big Dave?"

Steppan was one of the other four students under Mr. Oke. He stood in the doorway, leaning on a crutch and smiling uncomfortably. He was pale as bleached flour and allergic to the pharmaceutical cocktail that kept bones dense and muscles functioning in the low Martian gravity. He'd broken his leg twice since the year began.

"Hey," David said.

"Pretty crazy about that tube blowout, eh?"

"Bizarre," David said.

"So look, I was wondering... ah..."

"You need something," David said.

"Yeah."

David tapped his wide fingers across the display screen, letting the data batch process without him. Steppan limped into the room. With both of them there, the lab seemed too small.

"I've got an anomaly on one of my runs. I mean way off. Three standard deviations."

“You’re fucked, cousin.”

“I know. I think I may have gotten some bad reagent.”

“Bad? Or wrong?”

“Wrong would be bad. Anyway, I know you’ve got some extras, and I was wondering—”

“Extras?”

A little knot squeezed in David’s chest. Steppan shrugged and looked away like he’d said something he hadn’t wanted to.

“Sure. It’s no big deal, right? But my chromium stuff has a lot of the same reagents. If I can scrounge enough together to do another run, I could discard the bad data.”

“I don’t have that much stuff.”

Steppan nodded, his head bowed down, eyes to the floor. He licked his lips, and David could see the desperation in the way he held his shoulders. David had imagined a million times what it would be like if his labs went pear-shaped. Especially right before placements. It was everyone’s nightmare.

“Sure you do,” Steppan said. “You’re always getting equipment and supplies out of that other locker, right? I mean. You know.”

“I don’t know,” David said. His mouth tasted like copper.

“Sure you do,” Steppan said, not looking up.

The tension in the room was vicious. Steppan hung his head like a whipped dog, but he wouldn’t back away. The walls were too close, the air too stale. Steppan was breathing all the oxygen. The boy’s gaze flickered up to meet David’s and then away again. How much did Steppan know? How much did he suspect? Who else knew?

“I’ll help you,” David said, speaking like the words would cut his tongue if he spoke too fast. “You let me know what you need for another run, and I’ll help you get it, okay? You can have a fresh run. We’ll make the dataset work.”

“Sure, thanks,” Steppan said. The relief in his shoulders wasn’t faked. “Thank you.”

“Does Mr. Oke know about the other locker?”

“No,” Steppan said with a grin that was almost camaraderie. “And never will, right?”

So instead of working his datasets, David spent the morning going

through the labs, looking for anyone he knew well enough to talk to. There were fewer than he'd hoped for, and the tension in the air made people short-tempered. Everyone was behind. Everyone had their own problems. Everyone was worried about their labs and their placements and whatever issues their families put on them. By afternoon, he'd given up. The only option left was to get on the network and order a fresh supply for Steppan from the distributor. It didn't take out too much from his secret account, and he wasn't the only one scrambling at the last minute to supply a lab. It was usually students buying their own things, he thought, but it wouldn't seem that odd to have someone doing a favor for a friend. As long as no one asked where the money came from, he'd be fine. When he got back to his actual labs, he felt like he'd already done a full day's work and he'd hardly started.

The hours passed quickly. By dinnertime, he'd cleared and processed all the data from the day the tubes went down and started on the data for the day after. Just in time for the data that had been accruing while he'd been wandering around the labs to start showing up in the queue. With each batch file that appeared, David felt the night stretching out ahead of him. Maybe he just wouldn't sleep. If he could get through tomorrow, he'd have the whole backlog cleared. Unless someone blew something up, or Steppan decided he wanted something else to keep quiet, or Aunt Bobbie decided to come lift weights at him or something. David tried to stretch the headache out of the base of his skull and got back to work.

At seven minutes past dinnertime, his hand terminal chimed. He accepted the connection with his thumb.

"You aren't coming home for dinner?" his mother asked. Her voice was tinny and small, like air pressed into a straw.

"No," David replied. "I've got to finish my datasets."

"I thought they gave you the daytime to do that," she said. On the hand terminal screen, she looked different than in person. Not older or younger, but both. It was like being shrunk down rubbed out all the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, but at the same time it made all the gray show in her hair.

"I had some other stuff I needed to take care of."

The small screen version of her face went cool and distant. The tightness in David's shoulders started to feel like a weight.

“Time management is an important skill, David,” she said, as if it were just a random thought. Not anything to do with him.

“I know,” he said.

“I’ll put your meal up for when you get home. Don’t be later than midnight.”

“I won’t.”

The connection dropped, and David turned back to his data, growled, and slammed his fist into the display. The monitor didn’t break. It didn’t even error out. He might as well not have done anything. The next alert came in the middle of the evening when the labs were starting to empty. The voices in the hallways were fainter, almost lost in the drone and drum of music from the construction labs. The maintenance workers were coming through, old men and women with damp mops and desiccant powders. David almost ignored his hand terminal’s tritone chime. It only started to bother him a little, wondering who would have sent a message rather than just opening a connection. He looked over. It was from Leelee, and the header read `OPEN WHEN YOU’RE ALONE`. David’s concentration broke. His imagination leapt to the sorts of messages that girls sent to boys to be watched in private. He reached over and closed the door to his lab and hunched over the hand terminal.

She was in a dark place, the light catching her from the side. In the background, a rai song was playing, all trumpets and ululating male voices. She licked her lips, her gaze flicked to the terminal’s control display, and then back to him.

“David, I think I’m in trouble,” she said. Her voice shook, her breath pressing into the words. “I need help, okay? I’m going to need help, and I know you like me. And I like you too, and I think you’ll help me out, right? I need to borrow some money. Maybe... maybe kind of a lot. I’ll know soon. Tomorrow maybe. Just send a message back if you can. And don’t talk to Hutch.”

A woman’s voice called from the background, rising over the music, and Leelee surged forward. The display went back to default, and David put in a connection request that timed out with an offer to leave a message instead. Grunting with frustration, he put in another request. Then another. Leelee’s system was off-line. He had the powerful urge to get to the tube station and

go to Innis Shallows in person, but he didn't know where to find her once he was there. Didn't even know for sure she'd been there when she sent the message. Curiosity and dread spun up a hundred scenarios. Leelee had been caught with some product and had to bribe the police or she'd be jailed. One of Hutch's enemies had found her and was threatening to kill her if she didn't tell how to find him so now she needed to get off planet. Or she was pregnant and she had to get to Dhanbad Nova for the abortion. He wondered how much money she'd need. He imagined the smile on her face when he gave it to her. When he saved her from whatever it was.

But first he had to fix his data and get home. No one could know that something was happening. He set the hand terminal to record and placed himself in the center of the image.

"I'll do whatever I can, Leelee. Just you need to get in touch with me. Tell me what's going on, and I'll do whatever you need. Promise." He felt like there was more. Something else he should add. He didn't know what. "Whatever it is, we'll get through it, right? Just call me."

He set the headers and delivered the message. For the rest of the evening, he waited for the chime of a connection request. It never came.

When he got home, it was near midnight but his father and Aunt Bobbie were still awake. The living room monitor was set to a popular feed with a silver-haired, rugged-faced man talking animatedly. With the sound muted, he seemed to be trying to get their attention. David's father sat on the couch, the mass of his body commanding the space from armrest to armrest like a king on his throne. Aunt Bobbie leaned against the wall, lifting a thirty-kilo weight with one arm as she spoke, then gently letting it descend.

"That's how I see it," she said.

"But it *isn't* like that," his father said. "You are a highly trained professional. How much did Mars invest in you over those years you were in the Corps? The resources that you took up didn't come from nowhere. Mars gave something up to give you those opportunities, those skill sets."

It was a tone of voice David had heard all his life, and it tightened his gut. The man on the monitor lifted his hands in outrage over something, then cracked what was meant to be a charming smile.

"And I appreciate that," Aunt Bobbie said, her voice low and calm in a way that sounded more like shouting than his father's raised voice. "I've served. And those opportunities involved a lot of eighteen-hour days and

—”

“No, no, no, no,” his father said, massive hands waving in the air like he was trying to blow away smoke. “You don’t get to complain about the work. Engineering is just as demanding as—”

“—and watching a lot of my friends die in front of me,” Aunt Bobbie finished. The free weight rose and fell in the sudden silence. She shifted it to her other hand. His father’s face was dark with blood, his hands grasping his knees. Aunt Bobbie smiled. Her voice was sad. “You’re thinking about how you can top me on that, aren’t you? Go ahead. Take your time.”

David put his hand terminal down on the kitchen table, the click of plastic on plastic enough to announce him. When they turned to look at him, David could see the family resemblance. For a moment, they were an older brother and a younger sister locked in the same conversation they’d been having since they were children. David nodded to them and looked away, unsettled by the thought and vaguely embarrassed.

“Welcome home,” his father said, rising up from the couch. “How are things at the lab?”

“Fine,” David said. “Mom said she’d put dinner up for me.”

“There’s some curry in the refrigerator.”

David nodded. He didn’t like curry, but he didn’t dislike it. He put a double serving into a self-heating ceramic bowl and set it to warm. He kept his eyes down, wishing that they’d go on with whatever they’d been talking about so they’d forget about him yet dreading listening to them fight if they did. Aunt Bobbie cleared her throat.

“Did they find anything more about the tube thing?” she asked. David could tell from the shift in her tone of voice that she’d put up the white flag. His father took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through his nose. David’s curry tasted more of ginger than usual, and he wondered whether Aunt Bobbie had made it.

“Newsfeed says they have leads,” his father said at last. “I imagine they’ll get someone in custody by the end of the week.”

“Are they saying outside involvement?”

“No. Some idiot protestor trying to make a point about how vulnerable we are,” his father said as if he actually knew. “It’s happening everywhere. Selfish crap, if you ask me. We were on our way to making the schedule for the month before this happened. Now everyone’s lost a day at least. That’s

not so much when it's just one person, but there were thousands of people thrown off schedule. It's like Dad always says: Three hundred sixty-five people miss one shift, that's a year gone in a day, you know?"

"Yeah, sort of," Aunt Bobbie said. "I remember it being nine thousand people miss an hour."

"Same thought."

David's hand terminal chimed its tritone and his heart raced, but when he pulled it closer, it was only the lower university's automated system posting the lab schedule for the next week. He looked through it without really taking it in. No surprises. He'd get his work done somehow. He killed the sound on his terminal and switched back to Leelee's message just to see her face, the way her shoulders moved. She licked her lips again, looked down, and then up. He heard her voice in his memory. Not the message she'd sent him tonight, but the last thing she said the night the tube broke down. *Just thought you'd come play and I was wrong.*

Oh, God. Had she been thinking about having sex with him? Wouldn't Hutch have been angry? Or was that why Hutch had sent them away together? Was that what this was all about? Humiliation and a barely controlled erotic thrill mixed in his blood and left the curry seeming bland. He had to find Leelee. Tomorrow, if he hadn't heard from her, he'd go to Innis Shallows. He could just ask around. Someone would know her. Maybe he could put off his data checking for one day. Or make Steppan do it. Guy owed him one after all...

"Well, kid," his father said, stepping into the room. David flipped his hand terminal facedown. "It's late and I've got work tomorrow."

"Me too," David said.

"Don't stay up too late."

"Fine."

His father's hand gripped his shoulder briefly, the pressure there and gone again. David ate the last few bites of curry and washed it down with a cup of cold water. In the living room, Aunt Bobbie changed feeds on the monitor. A small, old, dark-skinned woman in an orange sari appeared on the screen, leaning forward and listening to an interviewer's question with an expression of polite contempt. Aunt Bobbie coughed out a single sour laugh and turned off the screen.

She walked up to the kitchen, massaging her left bicep with her right

hand and grimacing. She wasn't really any bigger than his father, but she was much stronger and it made her carry herself like she was. David tried to remember if she'd killed anyone. He was pretty sure he'd heard a story about her killing someone, but he hadn't been paying attention. She looked down, maybe at his hand terminal turned with its face to the table. Her smile looked almost wistful, which was weird. She leaned against the sink and began pulling her fingers backward, pushing out her palm, stretching out the tendons and muscles of her wrist.

"You ever go free-climbing?" she asked.

David glanced up at her and shrugged.

"When I was about your age, I used to go all the time," she said. "Get a breather and a couple of friends. Head up to the surface. Or down. I went to Big Man's Cave a couple times right before my placement. No safety equipment. Usually just enough bottled air to go, do the thing, and get back to the closest ingress. The whole point was to try and carry as little as we possibly could. The thinnest suits. No ropes or pitons. There was one time, I was on this cliff face about half a kilometer up from the ground with my fist wedged into a crack to keep me in place while a windstorm came through. All I could hear was the grit hitting my helmet and my climbing buddies screaming at me to get out of there."

"Scary," David said flatly. She didn't notice the sarcasm, or she chose not to.

"It was *great*. One of the best climbs ever. Your grandfather didn't like it, though. That was the only time he's ever called me stupid."

David filled another glass of water and drank it. He had a hard time imagining it. Pop-Pop was always praising everyone for everything. To the point sometimes that it seemed like none of it really meant anything. He couldn't imagine his grandfather getting that angry. His father sometimes called Pop-Pop "the Sergeant Major" when he was angry with him. It was almost like he was talking about another person, someone David had never met.

"There was context," Aunt Bobbie said. "A guy I knew died in a fall about a month before. Troy."

"What happened?"

Now it was her turn to shrug. "He was way up on a cliff, and he lost his grip. The fall cracked his air bottle, and by the time anyone could get to

him, he'd choked out. I wasn't there. We weren't friends. But to Dad, everyone who free-climbed was the same, and anything that had happened to Troy could happen to me. He was right about that. He just, y'know, thought I didn't know it."

"Only you did."

"Of course I did. That was the point," she said. She pointed to the hand terminal with her chin. "If you flip it like that when he comes over, it makes him curious."

David tasted the copper of fear and pushed back from the table a few centimeters.

"It wasn't anything. It was the lab schedule."

"All right. But when you flip it over, it makes him curious."

"There's nothing to be curious about," David said, his voice getting louder.

"All right," she said, and her voice was gentle and strong and David didn't want to talk about it or look at her. Aunt Bobbie walked back toward the guest room and bed. When he heard her shower go on, he picked up his hand terminal again and checked in case something had come through from Leelee. Nothing had. He put what was left of his dinner into the recycler and headed for his room. As soon as he hit the mattress, his mind started racing. All of the things Leelee might need money for started spinning through his mind—drugs or an attorney or a passage off Mars. As soon as he thought that she might be leaving, he was sure that she was, and it left his chest feeling hollow and hopeless. And she'd told him not to talk to Hutch. Maybe she'd done something to piss him off, and now she had to get away before he caught her.

He drifted to sleep imagining himself standing between Hutch and Leelee, facing him down to protect her. He'd run the scenario from the start. He walked in on the two of them fighting, and he pushed Hutch away. Or was with Leelee and Hutch came after her. He tried out lines—*Hurt her, and I'll make your life hell* or *You think you've got all the power, but I'm David fucking Draper, cousin*—and imagined their effects. Leelee's gratitude shifted into kissing and from there to her taking his hand and slipping it under her shirt. He could almost feel her body pressed against him. Could almost smell her. The dream shifted, and it was all about getting the datasets finished, only Leelee needed the money to change the results of

her pregnancy test, and the bank was in a tiny crevasse in the back of his living room, and his hands were too thick to reach it.

When his alarm went off, he thought it had broken. His body still had the too heavy, weak feeling of the middle of the night. But no, it was morning time. He pulled himself to the edge of his bed, let his feet swing down to the floor, and pressed his palms against his eyes. Even through the air filters, he caught the usually welcome scents of breakfast sausage and coffee. Una Meing looked out from his wall, eyes promising him something deep and mysterious. A diffuse resentment flowed through him and he switched the image away from her to a generic preset of sunrise at Olympus Mons. Touristy.

He had to make a plan. Maybe he could talk to Hutch after all. Not say Leelee had talked to him, just that he was worried about her. That he wanted to find her. Because that was true. He had to find Leelee, wherever she was, and make sure she was all right. Then he had to finish his datasets. It was almost two hours to Innis Shallows and back, but if he just planned to work through lunchtime, or else eat in the labs, he'd only be losing one hour for travel. He had to think about how to find her once he was there. He wished there was someone to talk to. Even Hutch. There wasn't, though, and so he was going to have to solve this on his own. Go out, ask, look. She was counting on him. For a moment, he could feel her head resting against him, smell the subtle musk of her hair. So yes. He'd go do this.

No problem.

Only one tube ran to Innis Shallows, back and forth along the same stretch. Since the sabotage of the tube system, there was more security present, men and women with pistols and gas grenades scowling and walking through the cars. The tube station at Innis Shallows didn't even have the usual perfunctory signs announcing that the end destination was Aterpol, like there were only two kinds of places in the universe: Innis Shallows and anywhere else. The official stats said that six thousand people lived and worked in the Shallows, but walking out of the tube station, David still felt overwhelmed. The main halls were old stone behind clear sealant. White scars marked the places where decades of minor accidents had dug into it. Men and women walked or rode electric carts, moving up ramps from level to level. Most ignored him but a few made a point of staring. He knew he didn't belong there. His clothes and the way he walked marked

him. He stood for almost a minute in the center of the corridor, his hand in his pocket, fingers wrapped around his hand terminal. Behind him, the soft chimes of the tube preparing to leave again were like a friend's voice: *Get on. Get out of here. This is dumb.*

He would have, too, turned back around and gotten on the tube and headed back without spending more than five minutes in the neighborhood. Except for Leelee.

David scowled, shook his head, and trudged down the corridor, heading off to his left for no reason. His throat felt tight and uncomfortable and he needed to pee. After about twenty meters of cart rental kiosks and monitors set to entertainment newsfeeds, he found a little restaurant and stepped in. The woman behind the counter could have been a Belter: thin body, too-large head. She lifted her chin at him and nodded back toward half a dozen chipped formed plastic tables.

"Anywhere you want," she said in a thick accent David couldn't place.

David didn't move, looking for the courage to speak for so long the woman raised her eyebrows. He yanked his hand terminal out of his pocket and held it out to her. He'd gotten a still from the message Leelee had left him. It wasn't great, but the shape of her face was clear and she wasn't in the middle of a word or anything.

"I'm looking for her," David said. He sounded terse in his own ears. Almost resentful. "You know her?"

Her eyes flickered down and she shrugged.

"Don't know her. You want to stay, you got to eat. Anywhere you want."

"Her name's Leelee."

She hoisted her eyebrows. David felt a blush rising in his cheeks.

"Do you know where I could look for her?"

"Not here?" the woman suggested. David shoved the terminal back into his pocket and walked out. It was a stupid plan. Walk around the tube station, asking people at random? It was dumb and it was humiliating, but it was Leelee so he did it. The hour was blank stares and shrugs and the growing sense that everyone he talked to was embarrassed for him. When the tube car returned, he'd found nothing. He sat alone on a formed plastic bench. The monitor shifted to a video review by a pretty girl whose voice made it sound like she was shouting every word. "Dika Adalai's best story ever!" David looked up and down the sparsely populated car and came to

the conclusion that he was the one who'd triggered the review. It said something about who the ad systems thought he was. What he cared about. Like they knew.

He pulled up his hand terminal. Made another connection request, and Leelee didn't answer. He pulled up her message, playing it low. *I need help, okay?* and *Don't talk to Hutch*. Only there wasn't anyone else to talk to.

He spent the afternoon catching up on his datasets, horrified to realize how far behind he'd let himself fall. He ran through number and correlations, checking the data against expected norms with the practice and contempt of long experience. He needed to put in extra time. Get everything taken care of. If he fell too far behind, Mr. Oke would start noticing, and if there was a full audit, the extra lab work he'd done for Hutch would come out, and then he'd be screwed. He weighed calling in a favor from Steppan, but his mind kept shifting back to Leelee and the closed faces of Innis Shallows. Someone had to know where she was. Who she was.

He had to work.

For the first hour, reviewing and processing the data felt like hard labor, but then slowly, his mind fell into the rhythm. He managed the statistical input and brought out the correlations, fitting each one into the larger spreadsheet waiting for meta-analysis, and he could feel himself relax a little. The different catalytic mixes felt more like home than home did, and here like nowhere else in his life, he was in control. Between the comfort and concentration of the work and his exhaustion, he fell into something like a trance. Time passed without any sense of duration. When he came to the end of the run, he could have been going for minutes or hours. Either one seemed plausible. He didn't think to check his hand terminal until he was almost home.

There were four new messages waiting, none of them from Leelee. The first was a correction to the lab schedule, then two posts from a gaming forum he subscribed to even though he barely played any of the games. The last one was from the central educational authority in Salton, the upper university. He flicked it open and his head went as light as a balloon.

He walked into the common room. His mother and father sat before the living room monitor, just far enough away from each other that their legs didn't touch. On the screen, an older man was leaning forward earnestly. "The Martian project is the single most ambitious endeavor in human

history. It is all of our duties to see that the threat of Earth...”

“What’s the matter?” his father said.

David lifted his hand terminal as if that was explanation enough. And then, when they didn’t understand, he spoke. His voice had a distance to it.

“My placement came,” he said. “I’m going to development.”

His father whooped, stood so violently that the couch almost tipped over. As his dad’s arms wrapped around him, lifting him up toward the ceiling, and his mother wept joyful tears into her hands, all David could think was *I’m supposed to be happy about this*.

After that, everything changed and nothing did. He’d been working toward his placement for the last five sections, or looked at another way, his whole life. He’d known it was coming—everyone had—and still it felt like it had snuck up on him. Surprised him. All of the things that had to happen after—the things he hadn’t bothered thinking about because they were for later—had to be done now. There was the application for living space in the dormitories of the upper university, the coordination of his long-run experiments with Mr. Oke so that some new second-year could step in and see them to completion, and the preparations and purchases that would, in the coming months, lead to David moving out of his room, out of his home, away from his family for the first time in his life. The times when the idea wouldn’t scare him, it couldn’t come fast enough.

He could see it in his parents too. The way his mother kept quietly weeping and grinning at the same time, the way his father made a point of sitting with him while he filled out his paperwork and put in for time off so he could go with David to the orientation in Salton next month and brought him sandwiches and coffee for lunch. David had done everything he was supposed to do, had gotten the grades and the attention and the status for the highest placement he’d qualified for, and the reward was even less freedom. It was like his parents had suddenly realized he wouldn’t be there forever, and now their love was like a police state; he couldn’t escape it. He couldn’t go look for Leelee or even send out connection requests. The only one who didn’t seem to react one way or the other was Aunt Bobbie who just kept her weird, vaguely intrusive habits of watching the newsfeeds and lifting weights.

Three days after the letter came, David was set to go to the lower university for his first transition meeting with Mr. Oke. His father went with

him. Dad held his head high, chin up, beaming like he'd been the one to do something. They walked up the stairs to the lower university commons together, David shrinking into his own chest with the discomfort. This was his world—his friends and enemies, the people who knew him for himself—and Dad didn't belong there. Steppan nodded to him but didn't approach. The girl who'd borrowed his stats array last year frowned at his dad, strutting at David's side. They knew that his being there was wrong, and they drew back, keeping the separation. They all had two lives too, and they weren't supposed to mix like this. Everybody knew that.

"Mr. Oke!" his father said as they rounded one of the seating areas. The research advisor smiled politely, walking toward them.

"Mr. Draper," Mr. Oke said. "It's good of you to come."

"Just want to make sure everything's smooth," Dad said, caressing the air as he said it. "Development's a good placement, but it's a hard one. David doesn't need any distractions."

"Of course not," Mr. Oke agreed.

Over the old man's shoulder, David caught sight of Hutch. He was standing with a couple of the second-years, smiling and listening to a girl whose hands were fluttering and tapping at the air as she explained something. Leelee wasn't with him. David felt his heart rate spike. It was an epinephrine dump. His mind jumped back a section to his physiology labs. Epinephrine was binding to alpha-adrenergic sites, dropping insulin production, upping glycogenolysis and lipolysis. Standard fight-or-flight. Hutch glanced over, nodded politely. David pointed toward the men's room with his chin. Hutch's expression slipped a notch darker and he shook his head, not more than a few millimeters and unmistakable. David scowled and nodded toward the men's room again.

"Are you all right?" his dad asked.

"I have to pee," David said. "I'll be right back."

He left his father and Mr. Oke bantering. The white tile and video mirrors of the men's room were like a retreat to his world. And escape. He stood at the urinal, pretending to piss until the one other student washed his hands and left. Hutch walked in.

"What's the word, friend?" Hutch said, but David could hear annoyance in the syllables. "Saw you got family with you today. Good to see a father so concerned with his son's business."

David zipped his fly and trundled over to Hutch. He kept his voice low.

“He’s just being an asshole. It’s nothing. We’ve got to meet,” David said. “We have to talk. Not now, but we’ve got to.”

“Slow, slow, slow,” Hutch said. “Now’s not a good time.”

“Tomorrow night,” David said. “The usual place.”

“Can’t do that. Other plans.”

“Tonight, then,” David hissed.

David’s hand terminal chimed, and a moment later, Hutch’s did too. The local newsfeed pushing a breaking story. David didn’t look away. Hutch’s expression shifted from annoyance into anger and then a wary kind of amusement. He shrugged.

“See you tonight then, little man,” Hutch said. His lopsided smile looked dangerous. David nodded and trotted back out to the commons. He wouldn’t tell Hutch about the message or about Leelee being in trouble. He’d just say he wanted to find her. He’d say it was about his placement because that made it seem like there was something else. Distracting. He got back to Mr. Oke and his father, gathering himself back together, willing himself to act normal, before he noticed that the commons was silent. Everyone was hunched over their hand terminals, their faces gray or flushed. Even his father and Mr. Oke. The newsfeed push had a picture of a public corridor, the air hazed by smoke. A policeman hunched over something, one hand on his hip. The header read EXPLOSION IN SALTON.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Protestors,” his father said, and the anger in his voice was startling. “Anti-Earth protestors.”

David’s hand terminal chimed again. The header shifted.

EXPLOSION IN SALTON; THREE CONFIRMED DEAD



Aunt Bobbie was tight-lipped when they got home, sitting in the common room with a massive black weight in her hand that she held without lifting, like a child clutching a favorite toy. The monitor was set to a newsfeed with the sound turned low. Live feeds of the damage in Salton played out in the

four corners of the monitor, but she didn't seem to be looking at them. David's mother sat at the table scrolling through her hand terminal. When David and his father walked in, there was a moment of eye contact between his parents that had the weight of significance. He didn't know what it meant. His father tapped David's shoulder in a kind of farewell, then stepped over to the railing.

"Hey, sis."

"Hey," Aunt Bobbie said.

"Did security talk to you?"

"Not yet," Aunt Bobbie said. "They know how to find me if they want to."

David scowled toward his mother. He couldn't think of a reason that security would want to talk with Aunt Bobbie. He tried to make it into a threat against him, that they'd be looking to her for information about the batches he'd cooked for Hutch, but that felt too wrong. It had to be about the bombing, but he couldn't make sense of that either. His mother only lifted her eyebrows and asked how the meeting with Mr. Oke had gone. His father answered for him, and the uncomfortable tension around Aunt Bobbie shifted into the background.

There was going to be a party for the whole family tomorrow night, his mother told him. Pop-Pop and the cousins were coming from Aterpol, and Uncle Istvan and his new wife were making the trip from Dhanbad Nova. They'd rented a room at the best restaurant in Breach Candy. David gave a quiet, generalized thanks to the universe that he'd arranged to see Hutch tonight instead. Slipping away from his own celebration would have been impossible.

After dinner, David said some vague things about friends from school and celebrating, promised not to go to Salton, and ducked out the door before anyone could get too inquisitive. Once he was out walking to the tube station, he felt a moment of relaxation. Almost peace. The whole ride out to Martineztown, David felt almost like he was floating. His datasets were done or else not his anymore, and even with all the rest of it—Leelee and Hutch, the protestors and the bombings, the family party and the prospect of leaving home—just not having the lab work hanging over him was like taking a vise off his ribs. Once he was in Salton, working development would be a thousand times worse than anything in the lower

university. But that was later. For now, he could set his hand terminal to play bebapapu tunes and relax. Even if it was only for the length of the tube ride to Martineztown, it was still the most peace he'd had for himself in as long as he could remember.

Hutch was waiting for him when he got there. The construction lamp threw off harsh white light, the battery hissing almost silently. The shadows seemed to have eaten Hutch's eyes.

"Little man," he said as David stepped into the room. "Wasn't thinking to hear from you. Was risky, talking to me with family and authority right there beside us. You were looking jumpy. People notice that kind of thing."

"Sorry," David said. He sat down on a crate, rough plastic clinging to the fabric of his pants and pulling his cuffs up around his ankles. "I just needed to talk to you."

"I'm always here for you, my friend," Hutch said. "You know that. You're my number one guy. Any problem you've got, I've got."

David nodded, picking absently at his fingernail beds. Now that he was here, he found the subject of Leelee was harder to bring up than he'd expected.

"I got into development."

"Knew it. Development's always the place for the smart ones. Play your cards, and you'll be riding this planet like a private cart," Hutch said. "That's not why we're here, though. Is it?"

"No, I was... I wanted to get in touch with Leelee. See if maybe she wanted to come celebrate it with me. Only my hand terminal went corrupt and I didn't have her information on backup and I was thinking that since you..." David swallowed, trying to work the knot out of his throat. "Since you know her better than anyone."

He chanced a look at Hutch's face. The man was expressionless as stone, turned in and silent. It was more threatening than bared teeth.

"She came to you." David had promised himself that he wouldn't tell Hutch about the message, and technically he didn't, but the silence implicated him. Hutch drew a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair. "Don't worry about Leelee. I'm taking care of Leelee."

"She seemed like she was in trouble."

"Okay, little man. You don't follow what's happening here, so I'm going to help. I own Leelee. She's mine. Property, see? And she screwed up,

started being with the wrong crowd. She got political. People like us don't do that. Earth. Mars. OPA. That shit is for citizens. It just draws attention for people like us."

"She looked scared," David said. He could hear the whine in his voice, and he hated that he couldn't keep it out. He sounded like a kid. "She said she needed money."

Hutch laughed. "Don't ever give that bitch money."

"Property," David said. "She wanted... she wanted to buy herself. Didn't she?"

Hutch's expression softened to something like sympathy. Pity, maybe. He leaned forward and put a hand on David's knee.

"Leelee is a slice of poison with a pretty mouth, little man. That's the truth. She did a bad, stupid thing, and now she's working that mistake off. That's all. I know how much money you have because I'm the guy that gave it to you. You don't have enough to clear her debts."

"Maybe I could—"

"You don't have half. You've got *maybe* a quarter. There's nothing you can do for that girl. She gave you a hard-on, and that was nice for you. Don't make it more than that. You understand what I'm saying to you?"

The deep, sickening tug of humiliation pulled at David's heart. He looked down, willing himself not to cry. He hated the reaction. He was angry with it and with himself and with Hutch and his parents and the world. He burned with embarrassment and rage and impotence. Hutch stood up, his shadow spilling across floor and wall like spent engine oil.

"Best we don't talk for a while," Hutch said. "You got a lot in the air. Don't worry about the cooking. We'll get that all smoothed out when you're in Salton. Then we can go into production for real, eh? See some money worth having."

"Okay," David said.

Hutch sighed and pulled up his hand terminal. As he tapped at its keyboard, he kept talking.

"I'm going to slip a little something in that account of yours, right? Call it a bonus. Take and get yourself something nice, right."

"Right."

And then Hutch was gone, walking out toward Martineztown and the tube station and the world. David sat alone where he'd sat with Leelee not

all that long before. The sense of peace and calm was gone. His hands balled in fists, and he had nothing he could hit. He felt cored out. Hollowed. He waited ten minutes the way he was supposed to and then took himself home.

The next night was the party. His party. Pop-Pop was there, smiling a little lopsided since the stroke and thinner than David had ever seen him, but still strong voiced and chipper. Aunt Bobbie sat on one side of him, David's father on the other, like they were propping him up. Muted sounds of silverware against plates and voices raised in conversation competed with a three-piece band set up on a dais by the front doors that filtered into the private back room. Green and gold tablecloths stretched over three tables to make it all seem like it connected. The meal itself had been chicken in black sauce with rice and fresh vegetables, and David had eaten two helpings without really tasting them. His father had taken on the expense of an open bar and Uncle Istvan's new wife was already well on her way to drunk and sort of hitting on one of the older cousins. David's mother paced the back of the room touching shoulders, dropping in and out of conversations like she was running for office. David wanted badly to be anywhere else.

"You know, back in the ancient days," Pop-Pop said, gesturing with a glass of whiskey, "they built cathedrals. Massive churches lifted up to the glory of God. Far, far beyond what you'd expect people to manage with just quarry stone and trees and a few steel knives, you know. Just a few simple tools."

"We've heard about the cathedrals," Aunt Bobbie said. She had a drink too, but David couldn't tell what it was. Legally, David wasn't supposed to drink alcohol for another year, but he had a bulb of beer in his hand. He didn't actually like the taste of it, but he drank it anyway.

"The thing that's important, though, is the time, you see?" Pop-Pop said. "The *time*. Raising up one of those cathedrals would take whole generations. The men who drew the plans, who envisioned the final form of the thing? They would be dead long before it was finished. It might be their grandsons or their great-grandsons or their great-great-grandsons who saw the work complete."

Across the room, one of the younger cousins was crying, and David's mother sloped over and knelt, taking the squalling kid's hand in her own

and leading him to his mother. David choked down another mouthful of beer. Next year, he'd be in Salton, so busy that he wouldn't have to come to these things anymore.

"There's a beauty in that," Pop-Pop said earnestly to everyone and no one. "Such a massive plan, such ambition. A man might be setting the final stone and think back to his own father who'd set the stones below him and his grandfather who'd set the stones below that. To have a place in the great scheme, that was the beauty of it. To be part of something you didn't begin and you would not see completed. It was beautiful."

"I love you, Dad," Aunt Bobbie said, "but that's bullshit."

David blinked. He looked from Pop-Pop to his own father and back. The men looked embarrassed. It was like she'd farted. Aunt Bobbie took another sip of her drink.

"Bobbie," David's father said, "maybe you should ease up on that stuff."

"I'm fine. It's just that I've been hearing about the cathedrals since I was a kid, and it's bullshit. Seriously, who were they to decide what everyone was going to be doing for the next four generations? It's not like they asked their however many great-grandkids if they wanted to be stonecutters. Maybe some of them wanted to... be musicians. Hell, be architects and do something of their own. Deciding what everyone's going to do... what we're going to be. It's hubris, isn't it?"

"We're not talking about cathedrals anymore, are we, sis?"

"Yeah, because it was a really obscure metaphor," Aunt Bobbie replied. "I'm just saying that the plan may be great as long as you're inside it. You step outside, though, and then what?"

There was a pain in her voice that David couldn't fathom, but he saw it reflected in his grandfather's eyes. The old man put his hand on Aunt Bobbie's, and she held it like she was a little girl about to be led off to her bath time. David's father, on the other side, looked peevish.

"Don't take her seriously, Pop-Pop. She was talking to security all day, and she's still cranky."

"Is there a reason I shouldn't be? It's like every time anything strange happens, let's go talk to Draper again."

"You had to expect that, Roberta," his father said. He only called her Roberta when he was angry. "It's the consequence of your decision."

"And what decision is that?" she snapped. Her voice was getting louder.

Some of the cousins were looking over at them now, their own conversations fading.

David's father laughed. "You aren't working. What are they calling it? Indefinite administrative leave?"

"Psychological furlough," Aunt Bobbie said. "What's your point?"

"My point is that of course they're going to want to talk to you when things get weird. You can't blame them for being suspicious. We were almost killed by Earthers. Everyone in this room and those rooms out there and the corridors. And you were working for them."

"I was not!" It wasn't a shout because it didn't have the gravel and roughness of shouting. It was loud, though, and it carried power along with it like a punch. "I worked *with* the faction that was trying to avert the war. The one that did avert the war. Everyone in these rooms is alive because of the people I helped. But *with* them, not *for* them."

The room was quiet, but David's father was too deep into the fight to notice. He rolled his eyes.

"Really? Who was paying your wages? Earth was. The people that hate us."

"They don't hate us," Bobbie said, her voice tired. "They're afraid of us."

"Then why do they act like they hate us?" David's father said with something like triumph.

"Because that's what fear looks like when it needs someplace to go."

David's mother seemed to appear behind the three of them like some sort of magic trick. She wasn't there, and then she was, her restraining hand on her husband's shoulder. Her smile was humorless and undeniable.

"We're here for David tonight," she said.

"Yes," Pop-Pop said, rubbing his palm against the back of Aunt Bobbie's hand, soothing her. "For David."

His father's face set into an annoyed mask, but Aunt Bobbie nodded.

"You're right," she said. "I'm sorry, David. Dad, I'm sorry. I've just had a really rough day and probably too much to drink."

"It's all right, angel," Pop-Pop said. Tears brightened his eyes.

"I just thought that by now I'd have some idea of... of who I was. Of what I was going to do next, and..."

"I know, angel. We all know what you're going through."

She laughed at that, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “All of us but me, then.”

The rest of the evening went just the way those things were supposed to go. People laughed and argued and drank. His father tried to call for silence and make a little speech about how proud he was, but one of the kid cousins was whispering and tapping on his hand terminal all the way through it. A few people gave David small, discreet presents of money to help him set up his dorm in Salton. Uncle Istvan’s new wife gave him an unpleasant, boozy kiss before gathering herself up and walking out with Istvan on her arm. They took a rental cart back home, his parents and Aunt Bobbie and him. He couldn’t shake the image of her weeping at the table. *You step outside, though, and then what?*

The cart’s wheels sounded sticky against the corridor floors. The lights had dimmed all through Breach Candy, simulating a twilight he’d never actually seen. Somewhere, the sun would slip below a horizon, a blue sky darken. He’d seen it in pictures, on video. In his life, though, it was just that the LEDs changed color and intensity. David leaned his head against one of the cart’s support poles, letting the vibration of the engines and the wheels translate directly into his skull. It felt comfortable. His mother, sitting beside him, pressed her hand against his shoulder, and he had the powerful physical memory of coming back from a party when he’d been very young. Six, maybe seven years old. He remembered putting his head in her lap, fading into sleep with the texture of her slacks against his cheek. That was never going to happen again. The woman beside him hardly even seemed to be the same person, and in a few months, he wouldn’t see her anymore. Not like he did now. And what would she have done if she knew about Hutch? About Leelee? His mother smiled at him, and it looked like love, but it was love for some other boy. The one she thought he was. He smiled back because he was supposed to.

When they got home, he went straight back to his room. He’d been around people enough. The cheesy generic wall was still up, and he shifted it back to Una Meing. Massive dark eyes with mascara on the lashes looked out at him. He dropped to the bed. Outside, Aunt Bobbie and his father were talking. He listened for a buzz of anger in their voices, but it wasn’t there. They were just talking. The water pipes started to whine. His mother taking her evening bath. Everything small and domestic and safe, and out

there somewhere, Leelee was working off her debt. She'd asked for his help, and he'd failed. And Hutch. Maybe he'd always been scared of Hutch. Maybe that was what had made cooking for him seem like the right thing. The wise thing, even. Hutch was the kind of dangerous that could make people into property. Could take them and make them disappear. Being part of that world was fun. Exciting. It was a way to step outside all the good student, good son, good prospects crap that was his life. So what that it scared him now? So what that Leelee was probably being rented out to whoever had the money and David wouldn't see her again? He'd made his choice, and this was the consequence.

Una Meing stared out at him, soulful and erotic. David turned out the lights, grabbed a pillow, and pulled it over his head. As his mind began to fragment down into sleep, Leelee kept coming back to him. Her face. Her voice. The soft, almost gentle way Hutch had said, *I own Leelee and You don't have enough to clear her debts*. He wished that he did. He walked into a bleak, prison-like room that was half dream and half imagination. Leelee shied back from the sudden light and then saw who it was, and her face lit up. *David*, she said, *how did you do it? How did you save me?*

And with an almost electrical shock, he knew the answer.

He sat up, turned on the light. Una Meing's sly-sad smile seemed more knowing than it had before. *Took you long enough*. He checked the time: well past midnight. It didn't matter. It wouldn't wait. He listened at his door for a few seconds. No voices except the professional enunciation of the newsfeed announcer. David took his hand terminal out of his satchel, sat on the edge of his bed, and put in the connection request. He didn't expect an answer, but Steppan's face appeared on the screen almost instantly.

"Big Dave! Hey," Steppan said. "Heard about your placement. Good going, cousin."

"Thanks," David said, keeping his voice low. "But look, I need a favor."

"Sure," Steppan said.

"You have lab time?"

"More time than sleep," Steppan said ruefully. "But you've got placement. You don't need to scrounge for lab hours anymore."

"Kind of do. And I could use an extra hand."

"How long are we talking about?"

"Ten hours," David said. "Maybe a little more. But some of that's

waiting, so you can do your own stuff too. And I'll help with your work if you help with mine."

Steppan shrugged.

"All right. I've got hours tomorrow starting at eight. You know where my space is?"

"Do," David said.

"See you there," Steppan said and dropped the connection. So that was the first part. David's mind was already leaping ahead to the rest. He had enough tryptamine to build from, and the catalysts were always easy. What he didn't have was sodium borohydride or amoproxan in anything like the volume he'd need. Closing his eyes, he went through the inventory of his secret locker, thinking about each reagent and what he could gracefully change it into. Carbon double bonds cleaved, ketones formed, inactive isomers were forced into different configurations. Slowly, certainly, a clear biochemical path formed. He opened his eyes, jotted down a quick flowchart of the reactions, and built a wish list. When he was done, he switched his hand terminal over to the main distributor's site and ordered the reagents he'd need with immediate delivery to Steppan's lab. The total bill was enough to clean out his secret account, but that was fine with him. He'd never cared about the money.

When his hand terminal chirped the morning's alarm, he'd managed a two-hour nap. He changed into clean clothes, ducked into the bathroom to wet down his hair and shave. His mind was already three steps ahead. His hand terminal chimed with breaking news, and he almost dreaded to look, but for once it was something good. Eight people had been arrested in connection with the pressure loss on the tube system and were being actively questioned about the bomb in Salton. While David brushed his teeth, he watched the newsfeed play. When the scroll of mug shots came, he had a moment's anxiety—*What if Leelee was one of them? What if that was what Hutch meant by her getting political?*—but none of the faces was familiar. They were young people, none of them over eighteen, but well-worn. Two had black eyes and one of the women had been crying. Or else she'd been teargassed. David dismissed them.

"Where are you going?" his mother asked as he walked, head bowed and shoulders hunched, for the door.

"Friend needs help," he said. He'd meant the lie that Steppan needed an

extra hand at the labs, but halfway to the lower university, he noticed that by not elaborating, he'd sort of told the truth. The fact was weirdly disturbing.

The day was a massive cook. With the two of them in the space, it was crowded, and Steppan, sleepless, hadn't showered recently. Between the chemical vapors that the fume hood didn't whisk away and the stink of adolescent boy, the heat of the burners, and Steppan's constant, nearly intimate presence, the day passed slowly. But it passed well. Steppan didn't ask what David's experiment was, and during the quiet times, David ran Steppan's datasets and even pointed out a flaw in the statistical assumptions he was making that made the final data prettier when he corrected it. When the early afternoon came and they were flagging, David measured out a small dose of amphetamine and split it between them. When his mother requested a connection, he didn't answer, just sent back the message that he'd be home late, to eat dinner without him. Instead of the usual indirect disapproval, she sent back a note that she supposed she'd have to get used to that. It left him sad until the timer went off and he had to cool the batch and add catalyst and the work took his attention. There was a real pleasure to the work, something he hadn't felt in years. He knew each reaction, each bond he was breaking, each molecular reconfiguration. He could look at the milky suspension, see a subtle change in the texture, and know what had happened. This, he thought, was what mastery felt like.

The last of his run was finished, the powder measured out into pale pink gelcaps and melted into sugared lozenges. His satchel was thick with them and heavy as a bowling ball. At a guess, he had the equivalent of his father's retirement account on his hip. The public LEDs were dim as he walked home. His eyes felt bloodshot and gritty, but his step was light.

Aunt Bobbie was in the common room, the way she always was, doing deep lunges and watching the monitor. A young woman with skin the color of coffee and cream and pale lips was speaking seriously into the camera. A red band around her had SECURITY ALERT HIGH scrolling in four languages. David paused. When Aunt Bobbie looked back at him, not pausing in her exercises, he nodded toward the screen.

"They found plans for another bomb," Aunt Bobbie said.

"Oh," David said, then shrugged. It was probably better that way. Let security focus on the political intrigue. It just meant there'd be fewer eyes

looking at him.

“Your mother’s asleep.”

“Where’s Dad?”

“Nariman. Work emergency.”

“All right,” David said and headed back to his room. Aunt Bobbie hadn’t noticed the bulk of his satchel, or if she had, she hadn’t mentioned it. With his door safely closed, he checked the time. Late but not too late, and between the late afternoon amphetamines and the excitement and anxiety, trying to rest wasn’t an option. Now that he had the product, all he wanted to do was get rid of it. Get it all away from him so that no one would stumble across it, get this all over with. He pulled out his hand terminal and put through a connection request to the contact Hutch had given him for emergencies only. He waited. Seconds stretched. A minute passed, and the tight feeling of panic grew in David’s gut.

The screen jumped, and Hutch was there, scowling into the camera. He was naked from the waist up, his pale hair messy. The hardness in his expression was clear, even through the connection.

“Yeah?” Hutch said. It was a noncommittal greeting. If security had been watching over David’s shoulder, they wouldn’t even be sure that he and Hutch knew each other.

“We need to meet,” David said. “Tonight. It’s important.”

Hutch was silent. A dry tongue ran across the man’s lower lip and he shook his ragged head. David’s heart was thudding like little hammer blows against his rib cage.

“Don’t know what you mean, cousin,” Hutch said.

“No one’s listening in. I’m not busted. But we have to talk. Tonight,” David said. “And you have to bring Leelee.”

“You want to say that again?”

“One hour. The usual place. You have to bring Leelee.”

“Yeah, I thought maybe you were giving me some kind of order there, little man,” Hutch said, his voice buzzing with anger. “I’m going to tell myself that you burned this number because you got a little drunk or some shit. Out of my deep fucking kindness, I’m going to pretend you didn’t forget yourself, yeah? So you get yourself back to bed and sleep until you’re sober.”

“I am sober,” David said. “But it has to be tonight. It has to be now.”

“Not going to happen,” Hutch said and leaned forward to shut off the connection.

“I’ll call security,” David said. “If you don’t, I’ll call security. I’ll tell them everything.”

Hutch froze. Sat back. He pressed his hands together palm to palm, index fingers touching his lips like he was praying. David squeezed his hands into fists, then released them, squeezed and released. An uncomfortable creeping moved up the back of his neck and onto his scalp. Hutch drew in a long breath and let it out slow.

“All right,” he said. “You come to me. One hour.”

“And Leelee.”

“Heard you the first time,” Hutch said, his voice cool and gray as slate. “But anything smells like a setup, and your little girlfriend dies first. You savvy?”

“You don’t need to hurt her. This isn’t a setup. It’s business.”

“So you say,” Hutch said and cut the feed. David’s hands were trembling. He shouldn’t have said that about going to security, but it was the only leverage he had. The only thing that would make Hutch listen. When he got there, he could explain it all. It would be all right. He stuffed the hand terminal in his pocket, stood silently for a moment, then shifted the wall to the still from *Gods of Risk*. Two men facing each other with the fate of everything in the balance. David lifted his chin and picked up the satchel.

When he came into the common room, Aunt Bobbie frowned.

“Going somewhere?” she asked.

“Friend,” he said, shrugging and pulling the satchel closer to his hip. “Just a thing.”

“But it’s here, right? In Breach Candy?”

A new tickle of anxiety lifted the hair at the back of his neck. Her tone wasn’t accusing or suspicious. That made it worse.

“Why?”

Aunt Bobbie nodded toward the monitor with its red border and earnest announcer.

“Curfew,” she said.

David could feel the word trying to get into his mind, trying to mean something that he didn’t let it mean.

“What curfew?”

“They put the whole city on first-stage lockdown. No unaccompanied minors on the tube system or service tunnels, no gatherings in the common areas after seven. Doubled patrols too. If you’re heading out of the neighborhood, you may have to send your regrets,” she said. Then, “David? Are you okay?”

He didn’t remember sitting down. He was just on the kitchen floor, his legs folded under him like some kind of Zen monk. His skin was slick with sweat even though he didn’t feel hot. Hutch was going to meet him and he wouldn’t be there. He’d think it was a setup. And he’d have Leelee with him because David had told him to. Had insisted. Threatened even. Without thinking, he pulled out his hand terminal and requested a connection to Hutch. The address came back invalid. It had already been deleted.

“David, what’s the matter?”

She was leaning over him now, her face a mask of concern. David waved his hand, feeling like he was underwater. No unaccompanied minors. He had to get to Martineztown. He had to go now.

“I need a favor,” he said, and his voice sounded thin and strangled.

“All right.”

“Come with me. Just so I can use the tube.”

“Um. Okay,” she said. “Let me grab a clean shirt.”

They walked the half kilometer to the tube station in silence. David kept his hands in his pockets and his satchel on the other side of his body so that Aunt Bobbie might not see how full it was. He hated this. His chest felt tight and he needed to pee even though he didn’t really. At the tube station, a red-haired security man in body armor and carrying an automatic rifle stopped them. David felt the mass of the drugs pulling at his shoulder like a lead weight. If they asked to see what was in the satchel, he’d go to prison forever. Leelee would be killed. He’d lose his place in Salton.

“Name and destination, please?”

“Gunnery Sergeant Roberta Draper, MMC,” Aunt Bobbie said. “This is my nephew, David. He just got his placement, and I’m taking him to a party.”

“Sergeant?” the security man said. “Marines, huh?”

A shadow passed over her face, but her smile dispelled it.

“Yes, sir.”

The security man turned to David. His expression seemed friendly.

David tasted vomit and fear at the back of his throat.

“Party?”

“Yes. Sir,” he said, “yes, sir.”

“Well, don’t do any permanent damage, son,” the security man said, chuckling. “Carry on, Sergeant.”

And then they were past him and into the tube station proper. The white LEDs seemed brighter than usual, and his knees struggled to support him as he walked up to the kiosk. When he got the tickets for Martineztown, Aunt Bobbie looked at him quizzically but didn’t say anything. Fifteen minutes to Aterpol, then a change of cars, and twenty to Martineztown. The other people in the car were grubby, their clothes rough at the edges. An old man with an exhausted expression and yellowed eyes sat across from them with a crying infant ignored in his arms. An immensely fat woman in the back of the car shouted obscenities into her hand terminal, someone on the other side of the connection shouting back. The air smelled of bodies and old air filters. With every passing kilometer, Aunt Bobbie’s expression grew cooler and less trusting. He wanted to be angry with her for thinking that he wouldn’t have friends in Martineztown, for being prejudiced against the neighborhood just because it was older and working class. It would have been easier if she hadn’t been right.

At the Martineztown station, David turned to her and put his hand to her, palm out.

“Okay, thank you,” he said. “Now just stay here, and I’ll be right back.”

“What’s going on here, kid?” Aunt Bobbie asked.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it. Just wait for me here, and I’ll be right back.”

Aunt Bobbie crossed her arms. All warmth was gone from her face. A bright flare of resentment lit David’s mind. He didn’t have time to reassure her.

“Just wait,” he said sharply, then spun on his heel and hurried off. A few seconds later, he risked a glance back over his shoulder. Aunt Bobbie hadn’t moved. Her crossed arms and disapproving scowl could have been carved into stone. The LEDs of the tube station turned her into a black silhouette. David turned the corner, and she was gone. His satchel bounced against his hip, and he ran. It wasn’t more than fifty meters before he was winded, but he pushed on the best he could. He didn’t have time. Hutch might be there

already.

And in point of fact, he was.

The crates had been rearranged. All of them were stacked against the walls, packed tight so that no one and nothing could hide behind them. The only exception was a doubled stack standing to Hutch's left and right like bodyguards. Like the massive sides of a great throne. Hutch stood in the shadows between them, a thin black cigarette clinging to his lip. His yellow shirt hung loose against his frame, and the muscles of his arms each seemed to cast their own shadows. The brushed black pistol in his hand made his scars seem like an omen.

Leelee knelt in front of him, in the center of the room, hugging herself. Her hair was lank and greasy looking. Her skin was pale except right around her eyes where the rash-red of crying stained her. She was wearing a man's shirt that was too big for her and a pair of work pants stained by something dark and washed pale again. When David cleared his throat and stepped into the room, her expression went from surprise to despair. David wished like hell he'd thought to stop at a bathroom.

"Hey there, little man," Hutch said. The insincerity of his casualness was a threat. "Now then, there was something you wanted to see me about, yeah?"

David nodded. The thickness in his throat almost kept him from speaking.

"I want to buy her," David said. "Buy her debt."

Hutch laughed softly, then took a drag on his cigarette. The ember flared bright and then dimmed.

"Pretty sure we covered that already," Hutch said, and the words were smoke. "You don't have that kind of cash."

"A quarter. You said I had a quarter."

Hutch's eyes narrowed and he tilted his head to the side. David dropped his satchel to the floor and slid it toward Leelee with his toe. She reached out a thin hand toward it.

"If you touch that bag, I will end you," Hutch said to Leelee, and she flinched back. "How about you tell me what that's supposed to be?"

"I cooked a batch. A big one. The biggest I've ever done," David said. "Mostly, it's 3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine. I did a run of 5-hydroxytryptophan too since I didn't need to order anything extra to do it.

And 2,5-Dimethoxy-4-bromophenethylamine. Some of that too. I got all the reagents myself. I did all the work. It's got to be worth more than four times what I put into it, and you get all of it free. That's the deal."

"You..." Hutch said, then paused, bit his lip. When he spoke again, he had a buzz of outrage in his voice. "You cooked a batch."

"It's got plenty. Lots."

"You. Stupid. Fuck," Hutch said. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you just handed me? How am I going to move that much shit? Who's going to buy it?"

"But you get it free."

Hutch pointed the gun at the satchel.

"I flood the market, and the prices go down. Not just for me. For everybody. You understand that? Everyone. People start coming up from Dhanbad Nova because they hear we've got cheap shit. All the sellers up there start wondering what I mean by it, and I've got drama."

"You could wait. Just hold on to it."

"I'm going to have to, right? Only it gets out that I'm sitting on an egg like that, someone gets greedy. Decides maybe it's time to take me on. And boom, I got drama again. Cut it how you want, kid. You just fucked me."

"He didn't know, Hutch," Leelee said. She sounded so tired.

Hutch's pistol barked once, shockingly loud in the small space. A gouge appeared in the floor next to Leelee's knee like a magic trick. She started crying.

"Yeah," Hutch said. "I didn't think you wanted to interrupt me again. David, you're a sweet kid, but you're dumb as a fucking bag of sand. What you just handed me here? It's a problem."

"I'm... I'm sorry. I just..."

"And it's going to require a little"—Hutch took a drag on his cigarette and raised the pistol until David could see him staring down the black barrel—"risk management."

The air in the room changed as the door behind him opened. He turned to look, but someone big moved past him too fast to follow. Something quick and violent happened, the sounds of a fight. David was hit in the back, hard. He pitched forward, unable to get his hands out fast enough to stop his fall. His head bounced off the sealed stone floor, and for a breathless second, he was sure he'd been shot. Been killed. Then the fight

ended with Hutch screaming, crates crashing. The crackle of plastic splintering. David rose to his elbows. His nose was bleeding.

Aunt Bobbie stood where Hutch's crate shelter had been. She had the pistol in her hand and was considering it with a professional calm. Leelee had scooted across the floor toward David, as if to seek shelter behind him. Hutch, his cigarette gone, was cradling his right hand in his left. The index finger of his right hand—his trigger finger—stood off at an improbable angle.

"Who the fuck are you!" Hutch growled. His voice was low. Feral.

"I'm Gunny Draper," Aunt Bobbie said, ejecting the clip. She cleared the chamber and grabbed the thin brass glimmer out of the air. "So we should talk about this."

Leelee pressed her hand against David's arm. He shifted, gathered her close against him. She smelled rank—body odor and smoke and something else he couldn't identify—but he didn't care. Aunt Bobbie pressed something, and the top of the gun slipped off the grip.

"What've you got to say to me, dead girl?" Hutch asked. His voice didn't sound as tough as he probably hoped. Aunt Bobbie pulled the barrel out of the gun and tossed it into a corner of the room, in the narrow space between some crates and the wall. She didn't look up from the gun, but she smiled.

"The boy made a mistake," she said, "but he treated you with respect. He didn't steal from you. He didn't try to track the girl down on his own. He didn't go to security. He didn't even try to sell the product and get the money."

Leelee shivered. Or maybe David did and it only seemed like it was her. Hutch scowled, but a thoughtful look stole into his eyes.

Aunt Bobbie plucked a long, thin bit of metal out of the gun and then a small black spring and tossed both behind a different crate. "You're a tough guy in a tough business, and I respect that. Maybe you've killed some people. But you're also a businessman. Rational. Able to see the big picture." She looked up at Hutch, smiled, and tossed him the grip of his gun. "So here's what I'm thinking. Take the bag. Sell it, bury it. Drop it in the recycler. It's yours. Do what you want with it."

"Would anyway," Hutch said, but she ignored him.

"The girl's debt's paid, and David walks away. He's out. You don't come

for him, he doesn't come for you. I don't come for you, either." She tossed him the empty top half of his gun, and he caught it with his uninjured hand. From where David was, hunched on the floor, both of them looked larger than life.

"Girl's nothing," Hutch said. "All drama and easy to replace. Boy's something special, though. Good cooks can't be swapped out just like that."

Aunt Bobbie started working the bullets out of the magazine with one thumb, dropping each one into her wide, powerful palm. "Everyone's replaceable in work like yours. You've got four or five like him already I bet." She took out the last of the bullets and put them in her pocket, then passed him the empty magazine. "David's the one that got away. No disrespect. Not a risk to the operation. Just worked out until it didn't. That's the deal."

"And if I say no?"

"I'll kill you," Aunt Bobbie said in the same matter-of-fact tone. "I'd prefer not to, but that's what happens if you say no."

"That easy?" Hutch said with a scowl. "Maybe not that easy."

"You're a tough guy, but I'm a nightmare wrapped in the apocalypse. And David is my beloved nephew. If you fuck with him after this, I will end every piece of you," Bobbie said, her own smile sad. "No disrespect."

Hutch's scowl twitched into a flicker of a smile.

"They grow 'em big where you come from," he said and held up the disassembled pistol. "You broke my gun."

"I noticed the spare magazine in your left pocket," she said. "David, stand up. We're leaving now."

He walked ahead, Leelee holding him and weeping quietly. Aunt Bobbie took the rear, keeping them going quickly without quite making them run and looking back behind her often. When they got near the tube station, Aunt Bobbie put a hand on David's shoulder.

"I can get you through the checkpoint, but I can't get her."

Leelee's eyes were soft and wet, her expression calm and serene. Filthy and stinking, she was still beautiful. She was redeemed.

"Do you have somewhere you can go?" David asked. "Someplace here in Martineztown where he can't find you?"

"I've got friends," she said. "They'll help."

"Go to them," Aunt Bobbie said. "Stay out of sight."

David didn't want to let her go, didn't want to lose the contact of her arm against his. He saw her understand. She didn't step into his arms as much as flow there, soft and supple and changing as water. For a moment, her body was pressed against his perfectly, without a millimeter of space in between. Her lips were against his cheek, her breath in his ear. She was Una Meing for a moment, and he was Caz Pratihari, and the world was a heady, powerful, romantic place. She shifted against him and her lips against his were soft and warm and they tasted like a promise.

"I'll find you," she whispered, and then the moment was over, and she was walking a little unsteadily down the corridor, her head high. He wanted to run after her, to kiss her again, to take her home with him and fold her into his bed. He could feel his heartbeat in his neck. He had an erection.

"Come on," Aunt Bobbie said. "Let's go home."

From Martineztown to Aterpol, she said nothing, just sat with her elbows resting on her knees, squeezing one of the bullets she'd taken between two fingers, then running it across her knuckles like a magic trick. Even through the chemical rush of relief, he dreaded what would come next. The disapproval, the lecture, the threats. When she spoke, with five minutes still before they reached Breach Candy, it wasn't what he'd expected to hear.

"That girl. You saved her. You know that? You saved her."

"Yeah."

"You feel good about that. You did a right thing, and that feels good."

"Yeah," he said.

"That good feeling is the most that girl will ever be able to give you."

The tube car's vibration was almost imperceptible. The monitors had tuned themselves to a newsfeed, unable to find any common ground between him and his aunt. David looked at his hands.

"She doesn't like me," he said. "She just acted like she did because he told her to. And then she knew I had money."

"She knew you had money and she knew you were a good guy," Aunt Bobbie said. "That's different."

David smiled and was surprised to kind of mean it. Aunt Bobbie leaned back, stretched. When she shifted her head, the joints in her neck popped like firecrackers.

"I need to move out," she said.

“Okay,” David said, suddenly finding himself wishing she wouldn’t. Too many losses today already, and this was one he hadn’t even known would hurt. “Where will you go?”

“Back to work.” Bobbie flipped the bullet up and caught it, then juggled it across her fingers again. “I need to find something to do.” She pointed at the news on the monitors with her chin. It was all about Earth and Mars and angry people with bombs. “Maybe I can help.”

“Okay,” David said again. Then a moment later, “I’m glad you stayed with us.”

“I should take you free-climbing,” she said. “You’d love it.”



David only saw Leelee one more time. It was his second year in development, about three weeks after he’d turned eighteen. He was in a noodle bar with the three other members of his team and their advisor, Dr. Fousek. The wall was playing a live feed of the football match from the Mariner Valley with the sound turned low enough to talk over. The table screen, on the other hand—they’d tunneled into the arrays at the upper university, and between bottles of beer and tea and black ceramic bowls of noodles and sauce, their latest simulation models were running.

Jeremy Ng, his dorm mate and the only other biochemist on the team, was shaking his head and pointing at the imagined surface of Mars that the computers back at their official labs were generating.

“But the salt—”

“Salinity’s not an issue,” David said, his frustration clear in his voice. “That’s why we put the sodium pumps in, remember? It won’t build up across the membrane.”

“Gentlemen,” Dr. Fousek said, her tone both authoritative and amused. “You have spent fifty hours a week arguing this for the last seven months. No point rethinking it now. We’ll have solid projections soon enough.”

Jeremy started to object, then stopped, started again, and ground to a halt. Beside him Cassie Estinrad, their hydro systems expert, grinned. “If this really works, you guys will put the terraforming project a couple decades ahead of schedule. You know that.”

Dr. Fousek raised her hand, commanding silence. The simulation was almost done. Everyone at the table held their breath.

David couldn't say what made him look up. A sense of being watched maybe. A feeling of unease crawling up the back of his neck. Leelee was there at the back by the bar, looking toward him without seeing him. The years hadn't been kind. Her skin belonged on a woman twice her age and the elfin chin now just looked small. She had a child on her hip that looked about six months old and still too unformed to have a gender. She could have been anyone, except he had no question. A thin, electric jolt passed through him. For a split second he was fifteen again, on the edge of sixteen, and reckless as a fire. He remembered the way her kiss had felt, and almost without meaning to, he lifted his hand in a little wave.

He saw it when she recognized him; a widening of the eyes, a shift in the angle of her shoulders. Her expression tightened with something like anger. Fear looking for somewhere to go. The man sitting beside her touched her shoulder and said something. She shook her head, faced away. The man turned, scowling at the crowd. He met David's eyes for a moment, but there was nothing like understanding in them. David looked away from her for the last time.

"Here we go," Cassie said as the first results began to come. David put his elbows against the table as one by one values within his error bars clicked into place. He watched Dr. Fousek's eyebrows lift, watched Jeremy start to grin.

The euphoria came.

Gods of Risk

Author's Note

When the time came for the second contract—the one that covered *Cibola Burn*, *Nemesis Games*, and *Babylon's Ashes*, the fine folks at Orbit had started taking notice of the short fiction. We talked about it and came up with a plan. The contract also called for five novellas that would come out more or less between the novels. “Gods of Risk” was the first one.

Only it wasn't originally “Gods of Risk.”

One of the weird things is how many of the stories were written under different titles than what they finally came out with. *Abaddon's Gate* was originally *Dandelion Sky*. “The Churn” was “Belovèd of Broken Things.” “The Vital Abyss” was “The Necessary Abyss” (which we'll get into later). And “Gods of Risk”? Its working title was “Chemistry.”

Mars was one of the big three factions in the storytelling universe from the start, but while we'd spent a fair amount of time on Martian ships in the novels, we didn't spend much time on the planet. This way we got to.

The story itself was a little crime story confection, but more than that, it was a moment with two characters who were in moments of transition: David, who is in the unfortunate dumbfuck phase of adolescence that everyone has to suffer through, and Bobbie, who had a career path mapped out that didn't come to pass and is trying to figure out who she is now that her old life has fallen apart. And through them, the country and government and planet that we, as the authors, knew was about to be in a phase change of its own.

A lot of these stories are about loss and rebirth and redemption. This one too.

We still think “Chemistry” would have been a great title for it. Tricky to find in a search engine, though.

OceanofPDF.com

The Churn

Burton was a small, thin, dark-skinned man. He wore immaculately tailored suits, and kept the thick black curls of his hair and the small beard on his chin neatly groomed. That he worked in criminal enterprises said more about the world than about his character. With more opportunities, a more prestigious education, and a few influential dorm mates at upper university, he could have joined the ranks of transplanetary corporate executives with offices at Luna and Mars, Ceres Station and Ganymede. Instead, a few neighborhoods at the drowned edges of Baltimore answered to him. An organization of a dozen lieutenants, a couple hundred street-level thugs and knee-breakers, a scattering of drug cooks, identity hackers, dirty cops, and arms dealers followed his dictates. And a class of perhaps a thousand professional victims—junkies, whores, vandals, unregistered children, and others in possession of disposable lives—looked up to him as he might look up at Luna: an icon of power and wealth glowing across an impassable void. A fact of nature.

Burton's misfortune was to be born where and when he was, in a city of scars and vice, in an age when the division in the popular mind was between living on government-funded basic support or having an actual profession and money of your own. To go from an unregistered birth such as his to having any power and status at all was an achievement as profound as it was invisible. To the men and women he owned, the fact that he had risen up from among the lowest of the low was not an invitation but a statement of his strength and improbability, mythical as the seagull that flew to the moon. Burton himself never thought about it, but that he had managed what he did meant only that it was possible. Anyone who had not had his determination, ruthlessness, and luck deserved pretty much whatever shit he handed to them. It didn't make him sympathetic when someone stepped out of line.

“He... what?” Burton said

“Shot him,” Oestra said, looking at the table. Around them, the sounds of the diner made a white noise that was like privacy.

“Shot. Him.”

“Yeah. Austin was talking about how he was good for the money, and how he just needed a few more days. Before he could finish, Timmy took that shitty homemade shotgun of his and—” Oestra made a shooting motion with two fingers and a thumb, the movement turning seamlessly into a shrug: a single gesture of violence and apology. Burton leaned back in his chair and looked over at Erich as if to say, *I think your puppy peed on my rug.*

Erich had recommended Timmy, had vouched for him, and so was responsible if things went wrong. It felt like they were going very wrong. Erich leaned forward, resting on his good elbow, hiding his fear with forced casualness. His bad arm, the left, was no longer than a six-year-old’s and scarred badly at the joints. His disfigurement was the result of a beating he’d suffered as a child or something. It wasn’t a fact that he’d shared with Burton, nor would he mention it now, though it did figure into the calculations that were his life. As did Timmy.

“He had a reason,” Erich said.

“He did?” Burton said, raising his eyebrows with feigned patience. “And what was it?”

Erich’s stomach knotted. His bad hand closed in a tiny fist. He saw the hardness in Burton’s eyes, and it reminded him that even with his knowledge, even with his skills, there were others who could fake identity records. Others who could fake DNA profiles. Others who could do for Burton what he did. He was expendable. It was the message Burton meant him to take.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I’ve known Timmy since forever, yeah? He doesn’t do anything unless there’s a reason.”

“Well,” Burton replied, pulling the word out to two syllables. “If it’s since *forever*, I guess that makes it all right.”

“Just, you know, if he did that, he did it for something.”

Oestra scratched his arm, scowling to hide the relief he felt at Burton’s focus turning to Erich. “I got him in the storage room.”

Burton stood up, pushing back his chair with the backs of his knees. The

waitress made a point not to look at the three as they moved across the room and out through the doors marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, Burton and then Oestra and Erich limping at the back. She didn't even start cleaning the table until she was sure they were gone.

The storage room was claustrophobic to begin with and lined with boxes, making it even smaller. Cream-colored degradable storage boxes with flat green adhesive readouts on the side that listed what they contained and whether the cheap, disposable sensors in the foam had detected rot and corruption. The table in the cramped open space at the center was pressed particleboard, as much glue as wood. Timmy sat at it, the LED fixture overhead throwing the shadow of his brow down into his eyes. He was barely halfway into his second decade of life, but the red-brown hair was already receding from his forehead. He was strong, tall, and had an unnerving capacity for stillness. He looked up when the three men came in, dividing his smile equally among his childhood friend, the professional thug he'd just disappointed, and the thin, well-dressed man who controlled everything important in his life.

"Hey," Timmy said to any of them.

Erich moved to sit at the table, saw that Oestra and Burton were standing motionless, and pulled back. If Timmy noticed, he didn't say anything.

"I hear that you killed Austin," Burton said.

"Yeah," Timmy said. The empty smile changed not at all.

Burton pulled out the chair opposite Timmy and sat. Oestra and Erich carefully didn't look at each other or at Burton. The object of all their attention, Timmy waited amiably for whatever came next.

"You care to tell me why you did that?" Burton asked.

"It's what you said to do," Timmy said.

"That man owed me money. I told you to get whatever you could from him. This was your tryout, little man. This was your game. Now, how do you go from what I actually *said* to what you *did*?"

"I got whatever I could get," Timmy replied. There was no fear in his voice or his expression, and it left Burton with the sense he was talking to an idiot. "I couldn't get money out of that guy. He didn't have any. If he had, he'd have given it to you. Only thing you were getting from him was a

way to make sure everyone else pays you on time. So I took that instead.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

“You’re positive—you’re *convinced*—that Austin wouldn’t have gotten my money?”

“I don’t mean to second-guess why anybody gave it to him in the first place,” Timmy said, “but that guy never met a dollar he didn’t snort, shoot, or drink away.”

“So you thought it through, and you came to the conclusion that the wise and right thing to do was escalate this little visit from a collection run to a murder?”

Timmy’s head tilted a degree. “Didn’t spend a lot of time thinking about it. Water’s wet. Sky’s up. Austin gets you more dead than alive. Kind of obvious.”

Burton went silent. Oestra and Erich didn’t look at him. Burton rubbed his hands together, the hiss of palm against palm the loudest noise in the room. Timmy scratched his leg and waited, neither patient nor impatient. Erich felt a growing nausea and the certainty that he was about to watch an old friend and protector die in front of him. His stunted hand opened and closed and he tried not to swallow. When Burton smiled his small, amused smile, the only one who saw it was Timmy, and if he understood it, he didn’t react.

“Why don’t you wait here, little man,” Burton said.

“Arright,” Timmy said, and Burton was already walking out the door.

Out in the café, the lunch rush had started. The booths and tables were filled, and a crowd loitered in the doorway, scowling at the waitresses, the diners who had gotten tables before them, and the empty place reserved for Burton and whoever he chose to have near him. As soon as he took his chair, the waitress came over, her eyebrows raised, as if he were a new customer. He waved her away. There was something about sitting at an empty table in full view of hungry men and women that Burton enjoyed. *What you want, I can take or I can leave*, it said. *All I want is to keep your options for myself*. Erich and Oestra sat.

“That boy,” Burton said, letting the words take on an affected drawl, “is some piece of work.”

“Yeah,” Oestra said.

“He’s good at what he does,” Erich said. “He’ll get better.”

Burton was quiet for a long moment. A man at the front door pointed an angry finger toward Burton’s table, demanding something of the waitress. She took the stranger’s hand and pushed it down. The angry man left. Burton watched him go. If he didn’t know any better, this wasn’t the place for him.

“Erich, I don’t think I can take your friend off his probation period. Not with this. Not yet.”

Erich nodded, the urge to speak for Timmy and the fear of losing Burton’s fickle forgiveness warring in his throat. Oestra was the one to break the silence.

“You want to give him another job?” The words carried a weight of incredulity measured to the gram.

“The right job,” Burton said. “Right one for now, anyway. You say he watched out for you, growing up?”

“He did,” Erich said.

“Let him do that, then. Timmy’s going to be your personal bodyguard on your next job. Keep you out of trouble. See if you can keep him out of trouble too. At least do better than Oey did with him, right?” Burton said and laughed. A moment later Oestra laughed too, only a little sourly. Erich couldn’t manage much more than a sick, relieved grin.

“I’ll tell him,” he said. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Do,” Burton said, smiling. An awkward moment later, Erich got up, head bobbing like a bird’s with gratitude and discomfort. Burton and Oestra watched him limp back toward the storage room. Oestra sighed.

“I don’t know why you’re cultivating that freak,” Burton’s lieutenant said.

“He’s off the grid and he cooks good identity docs,” Burton said. “I like having someone who can’t be traced keeping my name clean.”

“I don’t mean the cripple. I mean the other one. Seriously, there’s something wrong with that kid.”

“I think he’s got potential.”

“Potential for what?”

“Exactly,” Burton said. “Okay, so tell me the rest. What’s going on out there?”

Oestra hoisted his eyebrows and hunched forward, elbows on the table.

The kids running unlicensed games by the waterfront weren't coming up with the usual take. One of the brothels had been hit by an outbreak of antibiotic-resistant syphilis; one of the youngest boys, a five-year-old, had it in his eyes. Burton's neighbors to the north—an Earthbound branch of the Loca Griega—were seeing raids on their drug manufacturing houses. Burton listened with his eyelids at half-mast. Individually, no one event mattered much, but put together, they were the first few fat raindrops in a coming storm. Oestra knew it too.

By the time the lunch rush ended, the booths and tables filling and emptying in the systole and diastole of the day's vast urban heart, Burton's mind was on a dozen other things. Erich and Timmy and the death of a small-time deadbeat weren't forgotten, but no particular importance was put on them either. That was what it meant to be Burton: those things that could rise up to fill a small person's whole horizon were only small parts of his view. He was the boss, the big-picture man. Like Baltimore itself, he *weathered* storms.



Time had not been kind to the city. Its coastline was a ruin of drowned buildings kept from salvage by a complexity of rights, jurisdictions, regulations, and apathy until the rising sea had all but reclaimed them for its own. The Urban Arcology movement had peaked there a decade or two before the technology existed to make its dreams of vast, sustainable structures a reality. It had left a wall seven miles long and twenty stories high of decaying hope and structural resin that reached from the beltway to Lake Montebello. At the street level, electric networks laced the roadways, powering and guiding the vehicles that could use them. Sparrows Island stood out in the waves like a widow watching the sea for a ship that would never come home, and Federal Hill scowled back at the city across shallow, filthy water, emperor of its own abandoned land.

Everywhere, all through the city, space was at a premium. Extended families lived in decaying apartments designed for half as many. Men and women who couldn't escape the cramped space spent their days at the screens of their terminals, watching newsfeeds and dramas and

pornography and living on the textured protein and enriched rice of basic. For most, their forays into crime were halfhearted, milquetoast affairs—a backroom brewer making weak, unregulated beer; a few kids stealing a neighbor's clothes or breaking their furniture; a band of scavengers with scrounged tools harvesting metal from the buried infrastructure of the city that had been. Baltimore was Earth writ small, crowded and bored. Its citizens were caught between the dismal life of basic and the barriers of class, race, and opportunity, vicious competition and limited resources, that kept all but the most driven from a profession and actual currency. The dictates of the regional administration in Chicago filtered down to the streets slowly, and the local powers might be weaker than the government, but they were also closer, the gravities of law and lawlessness finding their balance point somewhere just north of Lansdowne.

Time had not been kind to Lydia either. She wasn't one of the unregistered, but very little of what was important in her life appeared in the government records. There, she was a name—not Lydia—and an address where she had never lived. Her real home was four rooms on the fifth floor of a minor arcology looking out over the harbor. Her real work was keeping track of inventory for Liev, one of Burton's lieutenants. Before that, she had been his lover. Before that, she had been a whore in his stable. Before that, she had been someone else who she could hardly remember anymore. When she was alone, and she was often alone, the narrative she told herself was of how lucky she was. She'd escaped basic, she'd had dear friends and mentors when she was working, she'd been able to retire up in the ad hoc structure of the city's underworld. Many, many people hadn't been anywhere near as fortunate as she had been. She was growing old, yes. There was gray in her hair now. Lines at the corners of her eyes, the first faint liver spots on the backs of her hands. She told herself they were the evidence of her success. Too many of her friends had never had them. Never would. Her life had been a patchwork of love and violence, and the overlap was vast.

Still, she hung warm-colored silk across her windows and wore the silver bells at her ankles and wrists that were the fashion among much younger women. Life, such as it was, was good.

The evening sun hung over the rooftops to the west, the late summer heat thickening the air. Lydia was in the little half-kitchen warming up a

bowl of frozen hummus when the door chimed and the bolts clacked open. Timmy came in, lifting his chin in greeting. She smiled back, raising an eyebrow. There was no one with him, and there never would be. They had never allowed someone else to be with them when they were together. Not since the night his mother died.

“So, how did it go?”

“Kind of fucked it up, me,” Timmy said.

Lydia’s heart went tight and she tried to keep her voice calm and light. “How so?”

“Burton told me to get what I could out of this guy. Looking back, I think he just meant money. So.” Timmy leaned against the couch, hands deep in his pockets, and shrugged. “Oops.”

“Was Burton angry?”

Timmy looked away and shrugged again. With that motion, she could see him again as he’d been as a young boy, as a child, as a baby. She had known his mother when they’d worked together, each watching out for the other when they turned tricks. Lydia had been there the night Timmy was born among the worn tiles and cold lights of the black-market clinic. She’d made him soup the night Liev had turned him out the first time and while he ate told him lies about her first time with a john to make him laugh. She’d picked music with him for his mother’s memorial and told him that she’d died the way she’d lived, and not to blame himself. She had never been able to protect him from anything, so she’d helped him live in the jagged world, and he gave her something she couldn’t describe or define but that she needed like a junkie craved the needle.

“How angry is he?” she asked carefully.

“Not that bad. I’m gonna be watching Erich’s back for a while. He’s got some things need doing, and the boss doesn’t want anything going pear-shaped. So that’s all right.”

“And you? How are you?”

“Eh. I’m good,” Timmy said. “I think I’m coming down with something. Flu, maybe.”

She walked out from the kitchen, her food abandoned, and put the back of her hand to his forehead. His skin felt cool.

“No fever,” she said.

“Probably nothing,” he said, pulling his shirt up over his head. “I got the

shakes a little, and I got dizzy a couple times on the way back. It ain't serious."

"What happened to the man Burton sent you to?"

"I shot him."

"Did you kill him?" Lydia asked as she walked back to her bedroom. The ruddy light of sunset filtered through yellow silk. An old armoire stood against one wall, its silver finish stained and corroded by years. The bed was the same cheap foam queen-sized she'd had when she was working, the sheets old and thin, softer than skin with wear.

"Used a shotgun about a meter from his chest," Timmy said, following her. "Could have stuck your fist through the hole. So, yeah, pretty much."

"Have you ever killed a man before?" she asked, lifting her dress up over her thighs, her hips, her head.

Timmy undid his belt, frowning. "Don't know. Beat some guys pretty bad. Maybe some of 'em didn't get back up, but no one I know about. You know, not for sure."

Lydia unhooked her bra, letting it slide to the cheap carpet. Timmy took his pants down, kicking them off with his shoes. He didn't wear underwear, and his erect penis bobbed in the air like it belonged to someone else. There was no desire in his expression, and only a mild distress.

"Timmy," she said, lying back on the bed and lifting her hips. "You aren't getting ill. You're traumatized."

"Y'think?" He seemed genuinely surprised by the thought. And then amused by it. "Yeah, maybe. Huh."

He pulled her underwear down to her knees, her ankles. "My poor Timmy," she murmured.

"Ah shit," he said, lowering his body onto hers. "I'm all right. At least I'm not getting sick."

Sex held few mysteries for Lydia. She had fucked and been fucked by more men than she could count, and she'd learned things from each of them. Ugly things sometimes. Sometimes beautiful. She understood on a deep, animal level that sex was like music or language. It could express anything. Love, yes. Or anger, or bitterness, or despair. It could be a way to grieve or a way to take revenge. It could be a weapon or a nightmare or a solace. Sex was meaningless, and so it could mean anything.

What she and Timmy did to and for and with each other's bodies wasn't

a thing they discussed. She felt no shame about it. That other people would see only the perversion of a woman and the boy she'd helped raise pleasuring one another meant that other people would never understand what it meant to *be* them, to survive the world they survived. They were not lovers, and never would be. They were not surrogate mother and incestuous son. She was Lydia, and he was Timmy. In the bent and broken world, what they did fit. It was more than most people had.

After, Timmy lay beside her, his breath still coming in small, reflexive gulps. Her body felt pleasantly tender and bruised. The yellow over the window was fading into twilight, and the rumble of air traffic was like constant thunder in the distance, or a city being shelled two valleys over. A transport ship for one of the orbital stations, maybe. Or a wing of atmospheric fighter planes on exercises. So long as she didn't look, she could pretend it was anything. Her mind wandered, delivering up what had been nagging at her since Timmy had told her all that had happened.

Burton had sent Timmy to collect a debt, Timmy had killed the man instead, and Burton hadn't cut him loose. Two points defined a line, but three defined the playing field. Burton didn't always have need of boys like Timmy, but sometimes he did. Right now, he did.

Lydia sighed.

The churn was coming. It was the name Liev had given it, back before. All of nature had its rhythms, its booms and busts. She and Timmy and Liev and Burton were mammals, they were part of nature, and subject to its rules and whims. She had lived through perhaps three, perhaps four such catastrophes before. Enough that she knew the signs. Like a squirrel gathering food before a hard winter, Burton collected violent men before the churn. When it came, there would be blood and death and prison sentences and maybe even a curfew for a time. Men like Timmy would die by the dozen, sacrificed for things they didn't know or understand. Maybe even some of Burton's lieutenants would fall the way Tanner Ford had back when she'd been Liev's lover. Or Stacey Li before him. Or Cutbreath. The history of her corrupted world echoed with the names of the dead; the expendable and the expended. If Burton had kept Timmy on, it was because he thought it was coming. And if Burton thought it was coming, it probably was.

Timmy's breath was low and deep and regular. He sounded like a man

asleep, except his eyes were open and fixed on the ceiling. Her own skin was cool now, the sweat dried or nearly so. A fly swooped through the air above them, a gray dot tracing a jagged path, turning and dodging to avoid dangers that weren't there. She lifted her first two fingers, cocked back her thumb, and made a thin cartoon shooting sound with her teeth and tongue. The insect flew on, undisturbed by her small and violent fantasy. She turned her head to look at Timmy. His expression was blank and empty. He was still, and even in the warmth that followed orgasm, there was a tension in his body. He wasn't a beautiful boy. He'd never be a beautiful man.

Someday, she thought, I will lose him. He will go off on some errand and he will never come back. I won't even know what happened to him. She probed at the thought like a tongue-tip against the sore gum where a tooth has been knocked out. It hurt and hurt badly, but it hadn't happened yet, and so she could bear it. Best to prepare herself now. Meditate upon the coming loss so that when it came, she was ready.

Timmy's eyes clicked over toward her without his head shifting at all, without any expression coming to his face. Lydia smiled a slow, languorous smile.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

The catastrophe began four days later. Quietly, and with near-military precision, the city opened a contract with Star Helix security. Soldiers from across the globe arrived in small groups and sat through debriefings. The plan to end the criminal networks operating in Baltimore would be announced after the fact, or at least after the first wave. The thought, widely lauded by the self-congratulatory minds in administration, was to take the criminal element by surprise. In catching them flat-footed, the security teams could cripple their networks, break their power, and restore peace and the rule of law. The several unexamined assumptions in the argument remained unexamined, and the body armor and riot control weapons were distributed in perfect confidence that the enforcers would arrive unanticipated.

In fact, what Burton and Lydia knew from experience, many, many others felt by instinct. There was a discomfort in the streets and alleys, on the rooftops, and behind the locked doors. The city knew that something was near. The only surprise would be in the details.

Erich felt it like an itch he couldn't scratch. He sat on the rotting concrete curb, drumming the fingers of his good hand against his kneecap. The street around him was the usual mix of foot traffic, bicycles, and wide blue buses. The air stank. The sewage lines this near the water were prone to failures. A few doors to the east, a group of children were playing some kind of complex game with linked headsets, their arms and legs falling into and out of phase with each other. Timmy stood on the sidewalk, squinting up into the sky. Behind them was a squatters' camp in an old ferrocrete apartment block. In a locked room at its center, Erich's custom deck was set up and primed, connected to the network and prepared to create a new identity from birth records to DNA matching to backdated newsfeed activity for the client, as soon as she arrived. Assuming she arrived. She was fifteen minutes late and, though they had no way to know it, already in custody.

Timmy grunted and pointed up. Erich followed the gesture. Far above, a star burned in the vast oceanic blue, a plume of fire pushing a ship out of the atmosphere. Near the horizon, the half moon glowed pale, a network of city lights crossing the shadowy meridian.

"Transport," Erich said. "They use mass drivers for the stuff that can take the gees."

"I know," Timmy said.

"Ever want to go up there?"

"What for?"

"I don't know," Erich said, staring down the street for the client. He'd seen her picture: a tall Korean woman with blue hair. He didn't know who she'd been before, and he didn't much care. Burton wanted her made into someone new. "Piss out the window and make everyone down here think it was raining, maybe."

Timmy's chuckle sounded polite.

"It's what I'd do, if I could," Erich said, making a swooping gesture with his good hand. Zoom. "Get up the well and out of here. Go where no one cares about who you are so long as you're good at what you do. Seriously, it's the wild fucking west up there. You want nineteenth-century Tombstone, Arizona, it's alive and well on Ceres Station. From what I heard, anyway."

"Why don't you go, then?" Timmy said. With a different intonation, it

could have been dismissive. Instead it was only a mild kind of curiosity. It was part of what Erich liked about Timmy. There was almost nothing he seemed to feel deeply.

“Starting from here? I’d never make it. I’m not even a registered birth.”

“You could tell them,” Timmy said. “People get registered all the time.”

“And then they get tracked and monitored and wind up dying on basic,” Erich said. “Anyway, no one’s taking me for a vocational. Waiting lists for that are eight, ten years long. By the time I came up, I’d have aged out.”

“Could build one, couldn’t you?” Timmy asked. “Make a new identity and put it at the front of the list?”

“Maybe,” Erich said. “If you gave me a couple years to layer it all in like I did for Burton. He can go *anywhere* with docs I built for him.”

“So why don’t you go, then?” Timmy asked again, his inflection as much an echo as his words.

“Guess I don’t want it bad enough. Anyway, I’ve got real stuff to do, don’t I? I wish she’d fucking get here, right?” Erich said, unaware that he made everything a question when he wanted to change the subject. Unconsciously, he made a fist with the hand of his bad arm. Timmy nodded, squinting down the street for the client that wasn’t coming.

Most of their lives had been spent on streets like this. The trade that exploited prostitutes and their illegal children was the second largest source of unregistered births in the city. Only religious radicals accounted for more. It was impossible to know how many unregistered men and women were eking out lives on the margin of society in Baltimore or how many had lived and died unknown to the vast UN databases. Erich knew of perhaps a hundred scattered among the legitimate citizens like members of a secret society. They congregated in condemned buildings and squats, traded in the gray-market economy of unlicensed services, and used their peculiar anonymity where it was most helpful. Looking down the pocked asphalt street, Erich could count three or four people that he personally knew were ghosts in the great world machine. Counting him and Timmy, that was half a dozen all breathing the same air while the plume of the orbital transport marked the sky gold and black above them. There was old water in the gutters, black circles of gum and tar on the sidewalk, the combined smell of urine and decay, and ocean all around them. Erich looked up at the sky with a longing he resented.

He knew himself well enough to recognize that he was a man of desires and grudges, so well in fact that he'd come to peace with it. The blackness of space where merit counted more than the placement on a bureaucrat's list, where the brothels were licensed and the prostitutes had a union, where freedom was a ship and a crew and enough work to pay for food and air. It called to him with a romance that made his heart ache. On Ceres or Tycho or Mars, the medical technology was available to regrow his crippled arm, to remake his shortened leg. The same technology could be found fewer than eight miles from the filthy curb where he sat, but with the triple barriers of being unregistered, basic medical care waiting lists, and his own ability to function despite his disabilities, space was closer. Out there, he could be the man he should have been. The thought was like the promise of sex to a teenager, rich and powerful and frightening. Erich had resolved a thousand times to make the effort, to build himself an escape identity and shrug off the chains of Earth, of Baltimore, of the life he'd lived. And a thousand and one times, he had postponed it.

"Get up," Timmy said.

"You see her?" Erich said.

"Nope. Get up."

Erich shifted, frowning. Timmy was looking east with an expression of mild curiosity, a casual witness at someone else's wreck. Erich stood. At the intersection a block down, two armored vans had pulled to a stop. The logo on their sides was a four-pointed star. Erich couldn't tell if the people getting out were men or women, only that they were wearing riot gear. Metallic fear flooded his mouth. Timmy put a strong hand on his shoulder and pushed him gently but implacably across the street. Two more vans came to a halt at the intersection to the north.

"What the fuck?" Erich said, his voice distant and shrill in his own ears.

Timmy got him across the street and almost up to the doors of a five-story squat before Erich pulled back. "My deck. My setup. We've got to go back for it."

A deep, inhuman voice broke the air, the syllables designed in a sound lab to be sharp, clear, and intimidating. *This is a security alert. Remain where you are with your hands visible until security personnel clear you to leave. This is a security alert.* At the intersection, teams of armored figures were already questioning three men. One of the civilians—a thin, angry

man with close-cropped black hair and dark olive skin—shouted something, and the security team pushed him to his knees. The biometric scan—fingerprints, retina scan, fast-match DNA—took seconds while the man’s arms were held out at his sides, his elbows bent back in restraint holds.

“I think maybe you used to have a deck,” Timmy said. “I don’t think you got one right now.”

Erich stood unmoving, caught between the animal urge to flee and to protect himself by hiding the evidence. Timmy’s thick fingers closed around his good shoulder. The big kid’s expression was mildly concerned. “We don’t go right now, they’re gonna have you and it both. I sorta screwed up the last thing Burton told me to do. Let’s not burn my second chance getting you caught.”

This is a security alert. Remain where you are with your hands visible until security personnel clear you to leave.

Erich swallowed and nodded. It was the nearest he could come to speech. Timmy turned him toward the squat and pushed him forward.

In the streets, the security teams converged slowly, moving from person to person, door to door, floor to floor. Before the operation was through, they would identify three hundred forty-three people and detain four who appeared in the operational database as persons of interest. Three unregistered individuals would be identified, entered into the system, and held pending investigation. The two of the unregistered who refused to provide a name would have names assigned to them. The operation, covering three city blocks, would locate an unlicensed medical clinic, three children in distressed circumstances, seven pounds of S-class psychoactives, eighty-two instances of illegal occupation, and the network interface deck and data collection setup offered up by a blue-haired detainee in exchange for a reduced penalty. The process would take ten hours, and so it was still hardly under way when Timmy and Erich emerged from the undocumented access tunnel that connected the squat with an abandoned seawater pumping station. They walked together, Erich with his good hand stuffed deep in his pocket, Timmy with the same amiable air that was his default. Erich was weeping silently. Above them, the transport ship was gone, the golden exhaust plume now only a streak of smoke against the sky.

“I’m dead,” Erich said. “Burton’s going to fucking kill me. They got my deck. They got everything.”

“Wait a minute,” Timmy said. “*Everything* everything? Burton’s stuff was on the—”

“No. I’m not stupid. I don’t store records of how I keep Burton clean. But I didn’t wash it down after the setup. I was going to do it after we were done. It’s going to have DNA on it. Shit, it may even have fingerprints. I don’t know.”

“So what if it does?” Timmy asked with a shrug. “You’re not in the system.”

“Not now,” Erich said. “But if they pick me up ever, for *anything*, it’s going to be with a little highlight alert linking back to that fucking deck. They’ll know what I do. And then they’ll know to ask.”

“You don’t gotta say anything,” Timmy said, his tone almost apologetic.

“I won’t get a chance. Burton finds out they’ve got my DNA, all he’s gonna see is a path back to him. I’m a loose end, man. I’m dead.”

All around the city, traps shut.

In the north, five dozen armored security personnel blocked intersections and shut down metro stations. The door-to-door search and control operation converged on a seven-story office building controlled by the Loca Griega. The local men and women took shelter where they could, hiding in bathtubs and basements and soot-caked hard-brick fireplaces. Things dense enough to hopefully block the infrared and backscatter and heartbeat sensors Star Helix carried. Network signals went dark. The Star Helix employees moved forward in tight formation, forced to use their eyes instead of their tech, the plates of armor on their chests and backs and bellies making them seem like vast beetles in the autumn sunlight. When the perimeter around the building was established, monitoring stations were constructed, watching the windows for the vibrations made by voices. A wave of dragonfly-small surveillance drones swept in, and for a moment it seemed like perhaps the violence wouldn’t come. And then, as one, the hundreds of small, cheap Star Helix robots fell to the ground, victims of Loca Griega countermeasures, and the building bloomed with gunfire. Seventeen Loca Griega died before the sun went down, including Eduard Hopkins and Jehona Dzurban, reputed to be the Earth-surface coordinators of the Belt-based syndicate. The plume of smoke that rose from the building darkened the air for hours and left the city air gray and hazy the next morning.

At the same time in the west, where the municipal limits gave way invisibly to the regional jurisdiction, a warehouse owned and operated through a complex web of shell companies was locked down. The security teams emptied a three-block radius using a small fleet of armored buses and an operational procedure designed for response to sarin gas attacks. When the warehouse's perimeter was breached shortly before midnight, it contained ten thousand unrecorded assault rifles, half a million rounds of tracer-free ammunition, seventy cases of grenades, and a computer room ankle deep in melted slag. There was no evidence of anyone having been present in the warehouse, and no trail of ownership for any of it.

Checkpoints at the evacuated rail terminal, the spaceport, and the docks identified seventy people traveling on falsified accounts. All of them were independents or small fry in a larger organization. The security forces hadn't expected to catch anyone high on their priorities list in the first pass. The more powerful, better-connected targets were either smart enough not to travel during a crackdown or else had cleaned accounts to move under. Instead, the thought was that among the small-time thugs and operatives, there might be one or two desperate and foolish enough to provide them a lead to someone bigger. Someone worth having. And so without knowing who Burton was, what he looked like, his name or description or precise role in the criminal ecology of Baltimore, they were hunting him. And they were also hunting others, many of them much higher-priority than himself. Organizace Bayyo had a presence in the city, as did the Golden Bough. Tamara Sluydan controlled several blocks north of the arcology, and Baasen Tagniczen an area twice Burton's—though not so profitably run—in the Patapsco Valley Housing Complex. There was a great deal of crime, organized and otherwise, for the forces of law to concern themselves with, and no net was so strong or fine that nothing slipped through.

In times like these, when he couldn't know whether he had been compromised, Burton played it safe. He had half a dozen apartments and warehouses outfitted to act as temporary command centers, and he moved between them almost at random. Some of his people, he knew, would be caught up. Some of those who were would buy short-term leniency with the coin of information. He knew that would happen, and he had plans in place that would protect him from discovery, obscure his involvement in anything actionable, and punish brutally and irrevocably whoever had chosen to

make that trade. It was understood that anyone captured would be wiser to trade their own underlings to the security forces than to sell out Burton. The risk devolved on the little guy. Shit rolling downhill, as it had since the beginning of time. Which was, in part, why what happened to Liev was so unfortunate for everybody.

Liev Andropoulous had worked for Burton since coming to Baltimore from Paris more than twenty years before. He was a thickly built man, as round in the chest as the belly, and strong enough that he rarely had to prove it. His appetite for women occasioned jokes, though rarely the sort made in front of him, as did his habit of placing his long-term lovers in positions of comfort within his organization when he ended their relationships. As one of Burton's lieutenants, he oversaw three full-time whorehouses, a small network of drug dealers specializing in low-end narcotics and psychoactives, and an unlicensed medical facility that catered to the unregistered population. By custom, he worked from a small concrete building at the edge of the water, but when the churn began, he was leaving his lover's apartment on Pratt. The woman's name was Katie, and she had the olive skin and brown lips that Lydia had had twenty years before. Liev was a man of deep habits and consistent tastes. He kissed her goodbye for the last time on the street outside the apartment building, then walked away to the north while she went south. It was a perfunctory gesture, meaningful only in retrospect, as so many last kisses are.

The streets were crowded, the air muggy and close. The saltwater and rotting fish smells of the encroaching Atlantic were omnipresent, as they always were on hot days. Private transport wasn't allowed, and the lumbering buses moved like slow elephants in the press of midday bodies. A beggar plucked at Liev's sleeve and then backed away in fear when Liev turned to scowl at him. In the cacophony of the city, the whine of the flying drones should have been inaudible, but something caught Liev's attention, tightening the skin across the back of his wide neck. His footsteps faltered.

From above, the ripples in the crowd would have looked like the surface of still water disturbed by the convergence of half a dozen fish intent on the same fly. For Liev, it was only a sense of dread, a burst of useless adrenaline, and the offended shouts of the civilians pushed aside by the armored security men. As if by magic, a bubble of open space appeared around him. Liev could see clearly the scuffed and stained concrete on

which he walked. The man in the Star Helix uniform before him held a pistol in both hands, the barrel fixed on Liev's chest. Center of mass. By the books. Behind the helmet's clear face shield, the man looked to be somewhere in his middle twenties, focused and frightened. Liev felt a pang of amusement and regret. He held his arms out at his sides, cruciform, as five more security men boiled out of the gawking crowd.

"Liev Andropoulous!" the boy shouted. "You are under arrest for racketeering, slavery, and murder! You are not required to participate in questioning without the presence of an attorney or union representative!" Tiny flecks of spittle dotted the inside of the face shield. The boy's wide eyes were almost jittering with fear. Liev sighed.

"Ask me," he said slowly, enunciating very clearly, "if I understand."

"What?" the boy shouted.

"You've told me the charges and made the questioning statement. Now you have to ask me if I understand."

"Do you understand?" the boy barked, and Liev nodded.

"Good. Better," Liev said. "Now go fuck yourself."

The prisoner transport blatted its siren, shouldering its way through the crowd, but before it had crossed the distance to Liev, before he had been slotted into the steel cell and made secure, news of his capture was radiating out through the neighborhood. By the time the transport began moving again, making its way north toward the nearest tactical center, Burton had already seen a recording of the arrest. Katie, sitting at a noodle café with her little brother, got the news on her hand terminal and broke down weeping. Dread passed through the network of Liev's employees and underlings. Everyone knew what would happen next, and what would not. Liev would be taken to a holding cell, processed, and interrogated. If he kept quiet, he would be remanded to state custody, tried, and sent to a detention center, likely in North Africa or the west coast of Australia. More likely, he would cut a deal, parting out the network of crime he'd controlled bit by bit in exchange for clemency—the names and ID numbers of his pimps in order to serve his time in North America or Asia, the details of how he laundered the money for a private cell, which physicians had moonlighted in his clinic for library access.

They would ask him who he worked for, and he wouldn't say.

For Burton's other lieutenants, it complicated the future and simplified

the present. One of their own was gone and unlikely to return. When the worst had passed and something like normalcy returned to Burton's little kingdom, business that had been Liev's would be shared among them, granted to some newly promoted member of the criminal nobility, or a combination of the two. How exactly that played out would be the subject of weeks of negotiations and struggle, but later. Later. In the short term, all such agendas gave way to the more immediate problems of avoiding the security forces, protecting the assets they had, and making it very clear to everyone under them that selling out information for the favor of the court's mercy was a very, very bad idea.

In a basement lab at the corner of Lexington and Greene, eighty gallons of reagents used in alkaloid synthesis were poured into the water recycling stream. At the locally renowned Boyer Street house, two overly talkative prostitutes went quietly missing and the doors were locked. The body of Mikel "Batman" Chanduri was discovered in his two-room apartment at sundown, and though it was clear his death had been both violent and protracted, none of his neighbors had anything to report to the security men who'd come to interview him. Before the sun had set, Burton's lieutenants—Cyrano, Oestra, Simonson, Little Cole, and the Ragman—went to ground like foxes, ready to wait out the worst of the crackdown, each hoping that they would not be another gap in the organization like Liev, and each hoping that the others—not all, of course, but a few—would. One or two, perhaps even three, harbored some plots of their own, ways to see that their rivals within Burton's organization fell prey to the dangers of the churn. But they didn't speak of them to anyone they didn't trust with their lives.

And in an unlicensed rooftop coffee bar that looked down over the human-packed streets, Erich hunched over a gray-market network deck the owner had bolted to the table. He was trying to keep his panic from showing, wondering if Burton had heard about the capture of his deck, and hoping that wherever Timmy had rushed off to when they'd heard of Liev's arrest, he'd get back soon. The coffee was black and bitter, and Erich couldn't tell if the coppery flavor was a problem with the beans or the lingering taste of fear. He sat on his newsfeed, set to passive for fear that his search requests would be traced, and watched as all around him more traps snapped shut, his gut knotting tighter with every one.

When Lydia heard what had happened to Liev, her first action was to put

on her makeup and style her long, gray-streaked hair. She sat at the mirror in her bedroom and rubbed on the flesh-toned base until the lines in her skin were gone. She painted her lips fuller and darker and redder than they had ever been in nature. The black eyeliner, reddish eyeshadow, rust-colored blush. Despite the danger she was in, she didn't hurry. A lifetime of experience had drawn connections in her mind that linked sexual desirability, fear, and fatalism in ways she would have recognized as unhealthy if she'd seen them in someone else. She pulled her hair around, piling it high and pinning it in place until it cascaded, three-quarters contained, to her shoulders in the style Liev had enjoyed back when he had lifted her up from the working population of the house and made her his own. She thought of it as a last act of fidelity, like dressing a corpse.

She shrugged out of her robe and pulled on simple, functional clothes. Running shoes. Her go-bag was a nondescript blue backpack with a three-month supply of her medications, two changes of clothes, four protein bars, a pistol, two boxes of ammunition, a bottle of water, and three thousand dollars spread across half a dozen credit chips. She pulled it down from the top of her closet, and without opening it to check its contents, went to the chair by her front window. The curtains were pale gauze that scattered and softened the afternoon light, graying everything. She pulled a sheer yellow scarf over her hair, swathed her neck, and tied it at her sternum, the ironic echo of her old hijab. Then sat very still, feet side by side, ankles and knees touching. Primly, she thought. She waited in silence to see who would open her door, a security team or Timmy. The darkness, or else the light.

The better part of an hour passed. Her spine hurt, and she savored the pain, keeping her face placid. Smiles or grimaces, either one would disturb her makeup. Then footsteps in the hall, like someone clearing their throat. The door opened, and Timmy stepped in. His gaze flicked down to her back, up to her face. He shrugged and nodded to the hall in a gesture that said, *Can we go?* as clearly as words. Lydia stood, pulled on her pack as she walked to the door, and left her room for the last time. She had lived there for the better part of a decade. The necklace that Liev had given her the night he'd told her he was moving on, but that she would be cared for, hung from a peg in the bathroom. The cheap earthenware cup that Timmy had painted with glaze when he was eight years old and given her for what he'd mistakenly thought was her birthday remained in the cupboard. The half-

finished knitting that an old roommate had left when she disappeared twenty years before sat hunched in a plastic bag under the bed, stinking of dust.

Lydia didn't look back.

"My spirit animal is the snake," she said as they walked south together. They went side by side, but not touching. "I shed my skin. I just let it slough away."

"Okay," Timmy said. "Come on this way. I got a thing waiting."

The waterline was cleanest near the new port. There, the ships and houseboats rested in clean slips made of flexible ceramic and the bones of the drowned buildings had been cut free and hauled away. With every mile farther from the port, the debris grew less picturesque, the charm of the reclaimed city giving way to the debris of its authentic past. Little beaches formed over asphalt, gray sand swirling around old blocky concrete pillars standing in the waves green with algae and white with bird shit. The stink of rot came from the soupy water and the corpses of jellyfish melting where the tide had left them.

Timmy's boat was small. White paint flaked off the metal where it hadn't been scraped well enough before being repainted. Lydia sat in the bow, her legs folded under her, her chin high and proud. The motor was an under-the-waterline pulse drive, quiet as a hum. The water in their wake was louder. The sun was near to setting, the city casting its shadow on the waves. A handful of other boats were on the water, manned by children for the most part. The citizens of basic with nothing better to do with their time than spend the twilight on the water, then go home.

Timmy ran them along the coast for a time, and then turned east, out toward the vast ocean. The moon had set, but the lights of the city were bright enough to travel by. The islands had once been part of the city itself, and now were ruins. Timmy aimed for one of the smaller, a stretch not more than two city blocks long by three wide humped up out of the water. A few ancient walls still stood. The boat ran up onto the hard shore, and Timmy jumped out, soaking his pants to the thighs, to pull it the rest of the way up. The metal screeched against the rotting concrete sidewalk.

The ruin he led her to was little more than a camp site. A bright yellow emergency-preparedness sleeping bag lay unrolled on a foam mattress. An LED lamp squatted beside it with a cord snaking up the grimy wall to a

solar collector in the window. A small chemical camping stove stood on a driftwood board placed over two cinderblocks, a little unpowered refrigerator beside it to store food. Two more rooms stood empty through the doorway. If the house had ever had a kitchen or a bathroom, it was lost in the tumble of rubble beyond that. Outside, the city glowed, the violence and bustle made calm and beautiful by even such a small distance. The wail of the sirens and angry blat of the security alerts became a kind of music there, transformed by the mystical act of passing above waves.

Timmy pulled off his water-soaked pants and dug a fresh pair out from under the sleeping bag.

“This is where you go?” Lydia said, putting her hand on the time-pocked window glass. “When you aren’t with me, you come to this?”

“Nobody bugs you here,” Timmy said. “Or, you know. Not twice.”

She nodded, as much to herself as for his benefit. Timmy looked around the room and rubbed his hand across his high forehead.

“It’s not as nice as your place,” he said. “But it’s safe. Temporary.”

“Yes,” she said. “Temporary.”

“Even if Liev does tell ’em about you, it’s not like it’s over. You can get a new name. New paper.”

Lydia turned her gaze back from the city, her right hand going to her left arm as if she were protecting herself. Her gaze darted to the empty doorway, and then back. “Where’s Erich?”

“Yeah, the meet didn’t happen,” Timmy said, leaning against the wall. She never ceased to be amazed by his physicality. The innocence and vulnerability that his body managed to project while still being an instrument of violence.

“Tell me,” she said, and he did. All of it, slowly and carefully, as if worried he might leave something out that she wanted to know. That she found interesting. The low rumble of a launch shuddered like an endless peal of thunder, and the exhaust plume rose into the night sky as he spoke. It had not yet broken into orbit when he stopped.

“And where is he now?” she asked.

“There’s a coffee bar. The one at Franklin and St. Paul? On top of the old high-rises there. I got him there when it was done. They’ve got a deck there you can rent by the minute, and since his got taken, I figured he’d like that. Gotta say, he was pretty freaked out. That DNA thing? I don’t see how

that's gonna end well. If he's right about how Burton's gonna react..."

Lydia shook her head once, a tiny gesture, almost invisible by the light of the single LED lamp. "I thought you were his bodyguard. You were assigned to protect him."

"I did," Timmy said. "But then the job was done. Burton didn't tell me I was supposed to go to the bathroom with him for the rest of his life, right? Job was done, so the job was done."

"I thought you were his friend."

"I am," Timmy said. "But, y'know. *You*."

"Don't worry about me. Whatever comes to me, I have earned it a thousand times over. Don't disagree with me! Don't interrupt. Burton asked you to protect Erich because Erich is precious to him. The particular job he assigned you may be over, but worse has come to the city, and Erich is still precious."

"And I get that," Timmy said. "Only when they got Liev—"

"I have lived through the churn before, darling boy. I know how this goes." She turned to the window, gesturing at the golden lights of the city. "Liev was only one. There will be others. Perhaps many, perhaps few, but Burton will lose some part of his structure to the security forces or to death. And the ones who remain afterward will become more important to him. He is a man who values survivors. Who values loyalty. What will he think, dear, when he hears that you left Erich to come spirit me away?"

"Job was done," Timmy said, a little petulantly she thought.

"Not good enough," she said. "Not anymore. You aren't the boy Erich drinks with anymore. You aren't even your mother's son now. Those versions of you are gone, and they will never come back. You are the man who took a job from Burton."

Timmy was silent. Far above them, the transport's exhaust plume went dark. Lydia stepped close to him and put her hands on his shoulders. He wouldn't meet her eyes. She thought that was a good sign. That it meant she was getting through to him.

"The world changes you and you can't stop it from doing so. You have to let go of being someone who doesn't matter now. Because if you live through this time—just live through it and nothing more—you will be more important to Burton. You can't avoid it. You can only choose what your importance is. Will you be someone he can rely upon, or someone he

can't?"

Timmy took a deep breath in through his nose and sighed it out. His eyes were flat and hard. "I think I maybe fucked up again."

"Only maybe," Lydia said. "There still may be time to repair the error, yes? Go find your friend. You can bring him here."

Timmy's head jerked up. Lydia rubbed his shoulders gently, beginning at the base of his neck and stroking out to the bulges of muscle where his arms began, then back again. It was a gesture she had made with him since he was a child, a physical idiom in their own private language. Her heart ached at the sacrifice she was making. *The world changes you*, she thought. Hadn't she just said that?

"Bring him here? Y'sure about that?"

"It's all right," she said. "It's temporary."

"Okay then," he said. She felt a tug of regret that he had given in so quickly, but it passed quickly. "I'll leave you the good boat."

"The good boat?" she said to his retreating back.

"The one we came in."

The door closed. The gray that passed for darkness swallowed him up, and five minutes later she heard what might have been a skiff splashing in among the waves. Or it might only have been her imagination. She pulled herself into the warm, stinking, plastic embrace of the sleeping bag and stared at the ceiling and waited to see whether he returned.



All through Baltimore, the struggle between law and opportunity continued, but most of the citizens allied themselves with neither side. The unlicensed coffee shop filled with customers looking for a cheap way to make their dinners on basic seem more palatable, and then with younger people who either didn't have the currency or else the inclination to take amphetamines before descending to the one-night rai clubs on barricaded streets. A few parents came home from actual jobs, proud to spend real money for a stale muffin and give their credits to the gray-market daycares run out of neighborhood living rooms. Very few people stood wholly for the law or wholly against it, and so for them the catastrophe of the churn was an

annoyance to be avoided or endured or else a titillation on the newsfeeds. That it was a question of life and death for other people spoke in its favor as entertainment.

Erich, sitting at the rented deck with a newsfeed spooling past, felt the distance between himself and the others who shared his space more keenly than they did. His sense of dread, of a chapter of his own life ending, was unnoticed by the heavyset woman who brewed the coffee and the thin man at the edge of the rooftop who spent his hours sending messages about tangled romantic involvements. To the other habitués of the coffee shop, Erich was just the crippled man who was hogging the deck. An annoyance and an amusement, and no one would particularly notice or care if he vanished from the world.

Timmy arrived just after midnight, his broad, amiable smile softening the distance in his eyes. To anyone who didn't look at him closely, he seemed unthreatening, and no one looked at him closely. He pulled a welded steel chair up to the bolted-down deck and sat at Erich's side. The newsfeed was set to local. A pale-skinned woman with the Outer Planets Association split circle tattooed on her sternum and Loca Griega teardrops on her cheeks had blood pouring from her nose and left eye while she struggled against two Star Helix enforcers in gear so thick they barely seemed human. Erich smiled, trying to hide the relief he felt at Timmy's return.

"Loca," Erich said, nodding at the feed. "They're having a bad night too."

"Lot of that going around," Timmy said.

"Yeah, right? You... heard from Burton?"

"No. Didn't try to find him yet either," Timmy said with a shrug. "You want to hang out here some more, or you about ready to go?"

"I don't know where to go," Erich said, a high violin whine coming in at the back of his voice.

"I got that covered," Timmy said.

"You got a bolt-hole? Jesus, that's where you've been all this time, isn't it? Getting someplace safe to hide?"

"Kind of. But, you know, you ready?"

"I need to stop someplace. Get a deck."

Timmy frowned and nodded at the table before them. *There's one right*

there was in his eyes. Erich pointed at the bolts anchoring the machine to the wooden tabletop. Timmy's expression went empty and he stood up.

"Hey," Erich said. "What're you... Timmy? What are you—"

The thick woman who brewed the coffee looked up at the broad-shouldered young man. The coffee bar had been hers for three years, and she'd seen enough of the regulars to recognize trouble.

"Hey," the large man—boy, really—said, his voice making the word half apology. "So look. I don't mean to be a dick or anything, but I kind of need that deck."

"You can use it here, you buy some coffee. Or rates are printed on the side," the woman said, crossing her arms.

The big kid nodded, his brow knotting. He took a scuffed and stained black-market credit chip and pressed it into her palm.

"Shit, Jones," she said, blinking at the credit balance on the tiny LED display. "How much coffee you want?"

The kid had already turned back to the table where the cripple with the baby arm had been sitting all day. He hit the table with his fist hard enough that everyone on the rooftop turned to look at him. After the third hit, the wood of the tabletop started to splinter. There was blood on the big boy's knuckles, and the cripple was shifting back and forth anxiously as the table fell to sticks and splinters. The boy pulled her little deck free with a creaking sound. The bolts still hung from it, the wood torn out from around them. Blood dripped from his hands as he tucked the machine under his arm and nodded to the cripple.

"Anything else you need?" Timmy asked.

Erich had to fight not to smile. "No, I think I'm good now."

"All right then. We should go." Timmy turned to the woman and lifted his swelling hand to her in a wave. "Thanks."

She didn't say anything, but pushed the credit stick into her apron and waddled back to get a broom. They were gone before she returned, walking down the stairway to the street.

"That was incredible," Erich said. "The way you did that? I mean, damn it. Everyone in there was cold as stone, and you were just madness and power, man. Did you see that? Did you see how gassed they were at you?"

"You said you needed the deck," Timmy said.

"Come on! That was critical. You can brag about it some."

“Tables don’t fight back,” Timmy said. “Come on. I got a boat.”

Erich’s relief left him chatty, but he didn’t talk about the fear he’d felt when Timmy had left him. Instead, he filled the trip with everything he’d seen on the feeds, and he told it all like he was telling ghost stories. The security forces were watching the ports, the trains, the transports up to the orbitals and Luna. Eighteen dead today, maybe three times that many in custody. It was news all over the world, and farther. There had even been a lady from Mars who’d come on for a while talking about the history of Earth-based police states. Wasn’t that cool? All the way to Mars, they were talking about what was going on right then in Baltimore. They were everywhere.

Timmy listened, adding in a few words here and there, but mostly he walked until they reached the water, and then he rowed. The ceramic oars dipped into the dark water and lifted out again. Erich drummed his fingertips against the stolen deck, anxious to reconnect it to the network, to see what was happening and what had changed in the time since they’d left the coffee bar. That being connected would somehow protect him was an illusion, and Erich half knew that. But only half.

At the little island, Timmy pulled the boat onto shore and marched into the ruins where a light was burning. An old woman was sitting beside a chemical stove, stirring a small tin pot. The smell of brewing tea competed with the brine and the reek of decaying jellyfish. She looked up. Her face was like a mask, the makeup applied so perfectly it shoved her back into the uncanny valley.

“I found your tea,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Nope,” Timmy said, not breaking stride. “Come on, Erich. I’ll get you set up.”

They walked through a doorway without a door and into a small room. It was even less comfortable than the one with the old lady. There was nothing on the floor but the glue marks where there had once been carpeting. Mold grew up along one wall, black and branching like tree limbs. Timmy put the deck on the ground. His knuckles were black with blood and forming scab.

“You be able to get a signal here?” Timmy asked.

“Should be. May need to find a way to power up in the morning.”

“Yeah, well. We’ll come up with something. So this is your room, okay?”

Yours. That one's hers," Timmy said, pointing a thumb at the lighted doorway. "Hers. She asks you in, you can go in, but she asks you to leave, you do it, right?"

"Of course. Sure. Christ, Timmy. Your place, your rules, right?" Erich smiled, hoping to coax one in response. "We've always respected each other, right? Only, seriously, who is she? Is that your mom?"

It was like Timmy hadn't heard him. "I'm gonna get some sleep, but come morning, I can go back in, get some food. And I'll check in with the man."

Erich felt his belly go cold. "You're going to talk to Burton?"

"Sure, if I can find him," Timmy said. "He's got the plan, right?"

"Right," Erich said. "Of course."

He opened the deck, ran it through its startup options, and connected to the network. The signal strength wasn't great, but it wasn't awful. He'd been in half a dozen basement hack shacks with worse. He opened the newsfeed, still set to passive. The glow from the screen was the only light. Erich was cold, but he didn't complain. Timmy stood, stretched, considered the skinned knuckles of his hand with what could have been a distant sort of ruefulness, and turned to go back to the old woman and the light.

"Hey, we're friends, right?" Erich said.

Timmy turned back. "Sure."

"We've always watched out for each other, you and me."

Timmy shrugged. "Not *always*, but when we could, sure."

"Don't tell him where I am, okay?"



Security crackdowns, like plagues, had a natural progression. A peak, and then decline. As terrible as they might be at their height, they did not last forever. Burton knew this, as did all of his lieutenants, and he made his plans accordingly. Burton moved through his safe houses, playing shell games with the security forces. The first night, while Erich and Lydia slept in their respective rooms in the little island ruin and Timmy tried to find someone in the organization to report to, Burton slept in a loft above a warehouse with a woman named Edie. In the morning, he moved to the

storage in the back of a medical clinic, locking the door and hijacking an untraceable connection so that he could speak to his people with relative safety. Little Cole had closed down her houses, locked away her reports, buried a month's supply of drugs, and taken a bus to Vermont to stay with her mother until things died down. Oestra was still in the city, moving from place to place in much the same fashion that Burton was. Ragman and Cyrano were missing, but it was early enough that Burton wasn't concerned yet. At least they weren't in the newsfeeds. Liev and Simonson were.

And there was other evidence, indirect but convincing, of where the little war stood. Even in the first morning after the catastrophe began, security teams were calling on Liev's underlings, sweeping them up for questioning. Some, they held. Others, they released. Burton had no way of knowing which of those who had been set free had cut deals with security and which had been lucky enough to slip through the net. It hardly mattered. That branch of the business had been compromised, and so it would die. The demand for illicit drugs, cheap goods, off-schedule medical procedures, and anonymous sex could be neither arrested nor sated, and so the thing that mattered most for Burton's little empire was safe. Would always be safe. The question of how to feed the city's subterranean hungers was only a tactical one, and Burton could be flexible.

The temptation, of course, was to fight back, and in the following days, some did. Five soldiers from the Loca Griega left a bomb outside a Star Helix substation. It exploded, injuring two of the security contractors and damaging the building, and all five bombers were identified and taken into custody. Tamara Sluydan, who really should have known better, organized street-level resistance, starting a two-day riot that ended with half of her people hospitalized or in custody, eighteen local businesses looted or set afire, and the goodwill of her client base permanently damaged. Burton understood. He wasn't a man without passions. If someone hurt him, of course he wanted to hurt them back. Phrases like "even the score" or "blood for blood" came to mind, and each time they did, he made the practice of tearing them apart to himself. "Even the score" was the metaphor of a game, and this wasn't a game. "Blood for blood" made it sound as if through more violence, past wrongs could be balanced, and they couldn't. The hardest lesson Burton had ever learned was to endure the blows, accept the damage, and let someone else strike back. Soon, very soon, the

crackdown would shift from its great, overwhelming force to individual struggles. It was in his interests to see that those struggles were with the Loca Griega and Tamara Sluydan, not with him. As soon as the enemy was clearly defined in the collective mind of Star Helix and Burton's name and organization were not central to their plans, the storm would move on and he could begin to reopen the folded fronds of his business.

In the meantime, he moved from one place to the next. He told people he would go one place, and then arrived at another. He considered all his habits with the uncompromising eye of a predator, and killed the ones with flaws. Anything that connected him with the patterns of the past was a vulnerability, and wherever possible, he chose to be invulnerable. It wasn't the first time he'd been through this. He was good at it.

And so when it took Timmy the better part of a week to find him, Burton's annoyance was balanced against a certain self-centered pride.

The office was raw brick and mortar, newsfeeds playing on five different screens. A sliding wooden door stood half open, the futon where Burton had slept the night before half visible through it. Oestra, whose safe house it was, sat by the window looking down at the street. The automatic shotgun across his legs seemed unremarkable. Timmy had been searched by three guards on the street, and he'd been clean. Even if he'd swallowed a tracking device they would have found it, and the big slab of human meat would have been bleeding out in a gutter instead of smiling amiably and gawking at the exposed ductwork.

"Timmy, right?" Burton said, pretending uncertainty. Let the boy feel lucky he'd remembered that much.

"Yeah, chief. That's me." The openness and amiability was annoying. Burton glanced toward Oestra, but the lieutenant was squinting at the brightness of the day. Burton scratched his leg idly, his fingernails hissing against the fabric of his pants.

"You got something for me?"

Timmy's face fell a little. "Just news. I mean, I didn't have any stuff. Nothing to deliver or anything."

"All right, then," Burton said. "What's the news, Tiny?"

Timmy grinned at the irony of the nickname, then sobered and began his report. Burton leaned forward, drinking in all the words as fast as they spilled from Timmy's lips. When Oestra risked a glance back, it was like

watching a bird singing away while a cat stood in the too-still pose of a carnivore waiting to pounce. The details came out in no particular order: Erich was in a safe place, Timmy had been taking food to him, the fake profile deal had been interrupted by the security crackdown, Erich's original deck was gone but he had a replacement, the police probably had his DNA profile now. Oestra sighed to himself and looked back out the window. On the street, a half dozen young men who hadn't just condemned their friends to death slouched down the street together.

"He's sure about that?" Burton asked.

"Nah," Timmy said. "We didn't hang around and watch them find the deck or anything. I figured it'd be better, you know. To get out."

"I see."

"Erich wanted to go get it. Grab the hardware, I mean."

"That would have been a mistake," Burton said. "If security had the deck and the man, that... well, that'd be bad."

"Was what I thought too," Timmy said.

Burton sat back, the leather of the chair creaking. Back past the bedroom, Sylvia started running the shower. Sylvia or Sarah. Something like that. One of Oestra's, provided with the bed. "Where's the safe house?"

"I'm not supposed to say," Timmy said.

"Not even to me?"

The boy had the good sense to look uncomfortable. "Yeah, not to anyone. You know how it is."

"Is there anyone there with him?"

"Yeah, I got a friend there."

"A guard?"

"Not really, no. Just a friend."

Burton nodded, thinking hard. "But he's secure?"

"He's on the water. Anyone starts coming in, he's got a boat and about a dozen decent places to hide. I mean, nowhere's a hundred percent."

"And you're protecting him."

"That's the job," Timmy said, with a shrug and a smile. Burton couldn't quite put his finger on what it was about the boy that was so interesting. Over the years, he'd had hundreds just like him who came through, worked, disappeared, died, were fed to security or found God and a ticket out of town. Burton had a nose for talent, though, and there was something about

this one that kept bringing him back to the sense of the boy's potential. Perhaps it was the casual logic he'd used when he'd killed Austin. Maybe it was the deadness in his eyes.

Burton got up, raising a finger. Timmy sat deep in his chair like a trained dog receiving a command. Sylvia—whoever—was singing in the bathroom. The splash of water against porcelain covered the sound of Burton opening the gun safe, pulling out the pistol and its magazine. When he stepped back into the main room, Timmy hadn't so much as crossed his legs. Burton held the gun out.

"You know what this is?" he asked.

"It's a ten-millimeter semi-auto," Timmy said. He put his hand out halfway to it, and then looked up at Burton, his eyes asking permission. Burton nodded and smiled. Timmy took the gun.

"You know guns?"

Timmy shrugged. "They're around. It feels... sticky."

"It's got a resin of digestive enzymes," Burton said. "Won't hurt your skin much, but it won't hold prints and it breaks down any trace evidence. No DNA."

"That's cool," Timmy said, and started to hand it back. Burton tossed the magazine onto the boy's lap.

"Those are plastic-tipped. Organ shredders, but they don't work on armor," Burton said. "Still, step up from that homemade shotgun you've used, right?"

"Right."

"You know how those things all go together?"

Timmy weighed the pistol in one hand, the magazine in the other. He slid them together, checked the chamber, flicked the safety on and off. It wasn't the practiced action of a professional, but talented amateur was good enough for his purposes. Timmy looked up, his smile blank and empty. "New job?" he asked.

"New job," Burton said. "I know you and Erich grew up together. Is this going to be a problem for you?"

"Nope," Timmy said, slipping the gun into his pocket. There hadn't even been a pause.

"You're sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. I get it. They've got him in the system now. If they get

him too, there's all kinds of things he compromises. If they can't get him, nothing gets compromised, and I'm the only guy who can get close to him without him seeing it coming."

"Yes."

"So I kill him for you," Timmy said. He could have been saying, *So I'll pick up dinner on my way*. There was no bravado in it. Burton sat, tilted his head. The friendly smile and the empty eyes met him.

"All right, I'm curious," Burton said. "Did you game this? This was your plan?"

"Shit no, chief," Timmy said. "This here's just happy coincidence."

Either it was truth or the best deadpan Burton had seen in a long time. The shower water turned off. On the newsfeeds, a woman in a Star Helix uniform was saying something, a dour expression on her face. Burton wanted to turn up the volume, see if the press statement was something useful to him like reading fortunes in coffee grounds. He restrained himself.

"I will need proof," Burton said. "Evidence, yeah?"

"So what, you want his heart?"

"Heart. Brain. Windpipe. Anything he can't live without."

"Not a problem," Timmy said. Then a moment later, "Is there anything else, or should I go?"

"You watched out for this kid your whole life," Burton said. "He vouched for you. Got you in with me. And you're really going to put a slug in his brain just like that?"

"Sure. You're the man with the plan."

When the boy left, Burton came to stand beside Oestra, watching him walk away down the sunlit street. The thinning reddish-brown hair and wide shoulders made him look like some kind of manual laborer twice his age. His hands were shoved deep in his pockets. He could have been anybody.

"Think he'll do it?" Burton asked.

Oestra didn't answer for a long moment. "Might."

"He does this for me, he'll do anything," Burton said, clapping Oestra's shoulder. "Potential for a man like that."

"If he doesn't?"

"There are a lot of ways to dispose of someone disposable," Burton said.

Burton walked back to the chair, shifted the newsfeed buffer back to the

start of the Star Helix woman's press announcement. The woman started talking, and Burton listened.

Timmy's ruin had long since become a misery for Lydia, and misery had become a kind of pleasure. Their days had taken a kind of rhythm. Erich woke first in the morning, his uneven footsteps playing a tentative counterpoint to the rough sound of the waves. Lydia lay in the warmth of her cocoon, the slick fabric wrapped around her until only her mouth and nose were in the free air. When she could no longer pretend sleep, she emerged and made tea on the little stove, and when she was done, Erich transferred the solar charger to his deck and squatted over it, scanning the newsfeeds with a ferocity and single-mindedness that made her think of a poet chasing the perfect rhyme. If Timmy was there, she would walk with him to the boats or survey the newest supplies he had smuggled to their private island: fresh clothes, carryout tandoori, charged batteries for the deck and the lamp. More often, he was not there, and she haunted the shore like a sea widow. The city glowered out at her from across the water, like a great angry gray face, condemning her for her sins.

Is this the time? she would wonder. *Has he left now, never to return? Or will there be one more? Another time to see his face, to hear his voice, to have the conversations that we can only ever have with each other?*

She knew that the churn was playing itself out there, across the narrow waves. Security had likely come to her rooms on Liev's word and found them already abandoned. The men and women she'd worked with these last years were part of the past now. Part of a life she'd left behind, though nothing else had begun. Only this island exile and its waiting.

At night, Erich would eat with her. Their conversations were awkward. She knew that she was uncanny to him, that he thought of Timmy as his own friend, a character from his own past. Her appearance and the reticence she and Timmy had to making her explicable were as odd to Erich as if lobsters had crawled up out of the sea and started speaking Spanish. And yet if they did, what could anyone do but answer them, and so Erich and Lydia reached the odd peace of roommates, intimate in all things and nothing.

That night, Timmy crossed the waves unnoticed by her or Erich. Lydia was looking east over the ruined island to the greater sea beyond. Erich curled in the room that common habit designated as his, snoring slightly as

the deck ran down its charge to nothing beside him. Timmy arrived quietly and alone, announced only by his footsteps and the smell of fresh ginger.

When he emerged from the darkness, two thin plastic sacks hung from his left fist. Lydia shifted, not rising, but coming up to rest on her knees and ankles in a posture she imagined to be like a geisha, though she'd never met a real geisha. Timmy put the sacks down beside her, his eyes on the shadows past the doorway. Far away across the water, gulls complained.

"Two?" she said.

"Hmm?" Timmy followed her gaze to the sacks. A glimmer of something that might have been chagrin passed through his eyes fast as a blink. "Oh. The dinners. Hey, is Erich back there?"

"He is," Lydia said. "I think he's asleep."

"Yeah," Timmy said, straightening. He put a hand into his pocket. "Hang on a minute." He walked back toward the black doorway as if he were going to check on the other boy, perhaps wake him for his supper.

"Wait," Lydia said as Timmy reached the doorway.

He looked back at her, twisting at the shoulders, his body and feet still committed.

"Come sit with me."

"Yeah, I just gotta—"

"First," she said. "Come sit with me first."

Timmy hesitated, fluttering like a feather caught between contradictory breezes. Then his shoulders sank a centimeter and his hips turned toward her. He pulled his hand from his pocket. Lydia opened the sacks, unpacked the food, laid the disposable forks beside the plates. Every movement had the precision and beauty of ritual. Timmy sat facing her, his legs crossed. The bulge of the gun stood out from his thigh like a fist. Lydia bowed her head, as if in prayer. Timmy took up his fork and stabbed at the ginger beef. Lydia did the same.

"So you're going to kill him?" Lydia asked, her voice light.

"Yeah," Timmy said. "I mean, I ain't happy about it, but it's what needs to get done."

"Needs," Lydia said, her intonation in the perfect balance point between statement and question.

Timmy ate another bite. "I'm the guy that took a job from Burton. Used to be the job was one thing. Now it's something else. It's not like I get to

tell him what to do, right?”

“Because he’s Burton.”

“And I’m not. You were the one who said I’d be important to him if I made it through this shitstorm. This is part of that.”

“I said Burton would see you as important,” Lydia said. “There is more to you than what he sees. There’s more to you than what anybody sees.”

“Well,” Timmy said. “You.”

Even I do not know your depths floated at the back of her throat like a cough. She didn’t have it in her to say the words. If it was true, so what? When had truth ever been her friend? Instead she took another bite of the beef. He did the same. She imagined that he was giving her the time to gather herself. It might even have been true. The perfectly straight lightning bolt of a railgun transport lit the black sky, its thunder rolling after it like a wave. The ginger and pepper burned her lips, her throat, her tongue, and she took another bite, welcoming the pain. It was always pleasant when pain was on the outside.

“And who will you be to yourself?” she said at last. “Doesn’t what you think matter more than what he does?”

Timmy’s brow furrowed. “Yeah, I don’t know what you just said.”

“Who are you going to be to yourself, if you do this?” She put down her fork, leaned across the space between them. She lifted his shirt as she had countless times before, and the erotic charge of it was still there. Never absent. She pressed her palm against his breast, her skin against his skin in the place above his heart. “Who will you be in there?”

Timmy’s face went perfectly still in the unnerving way it sometimes did. His eyes were flat as a shark’s, his mouth like a plaster cast mold of himself. Only his voice was the same, bright and amiable.

“You know there ain’t no one in there,” he said.

She let her fingertips stray to the side, brushing through the coarse hair she knew so well. She felt the hardness of his nipple against her thumb. “Then who will you put there? Burton?”

“He’s the guy with the power,” Timmy said.

“Not the power to kill Erich,” she said. “Not the power to make *you* kill him. That is you and only you. People like us? We aren’t righteous. But we can pretend to be, if we want, and that’s almost the same as if it were true.”

“I get the feeling you’re asking me for something. I don’t know what it

is.”

“I am not a good person,” she said.

“Hey. Don’t—”

“If I were, though? If I *were* that woman? What would I want you to do?”

Timmy took another mouthful of beef, his jaw working slowly. In his concentration, she saw the echoes of all the versions of himself that she had known from baby to toddler to young man to this, now before her. She folded her hands on her lap.

“That’s a long way to say I shouldn’t do it,” he said.

“Is that what I said?” she asked.

Erich’s yawn came from the doorway. Lydia felt the blood rush from her face, tasted the penny-bright flush of fear as if she had been caught doing something illicit. Erich came into the light, scratching his sleep-tousled hair with his good hand. “Hey,” he said. “Did I hear you get back, big guy? What’s the word?”

Timmy was quiet, his gaze fixed on Lydia, his expression empty as a mask.

“Guys?” Erich said, limping forward. “What’s the matter? Is something wrong?”

Timmy’s sigh was so low that Lydia barely heard it. The boy she had loved for so long, and in so many ways, put on his cheerful smile and looked away from her. She felt tears pricking her eyes.

“Yeah, bad news,” Timmy said. “Burton’s not taking the whole thing very well. He’s put out paper on you.”

Erich sat down, the blood draining from his face. He grabbed his bad arm reflexively, unaware that he was doing it, and looked from Timmy to the woman and back. His heart thudded like a drum in his ears. Timmy licked his fork clean and put it down. The woman was still as stone. Erich felt his world fall out from underneath him, and that he had known it would be less of a comfort than he’d expected. Anyone looking in at the little circle of light from the shadows would have seen only three faces in the black, like a family portrait of refugees. Erich broke the silence.

“Are you *sure*?”

“Yeah, pretty sure,” Timmy said. “Seeing as how I got the contract.”

Erich stopped breathing. Timmy stared at him, expressionless for several

infinitely long seconds.

“We’ve gotta find a way to get you out,” his big friend finally said, and Erich started breathing again.

“There’s no way out,” he said. “Burton’ll track me down anywhere.”

“What about that deck?” Timmy asked. “It ain’t your old one, but can you still sample with it?”

“What do you mean?” Erich said.

“You’ve got the escape plan for Burton. The clean one. Why don’t you put your sequence on it? Use it to get out of here?”

“I can, sure, but they’ve already got my *other* deck, remember? I put my DNA on a record, the flag goes up, and I’m in for questioning.”

“Yeah,” Timmy said. “Well maybe you could... Shit. I don’t know. Maybe you could think of something.”

“I knew,” Erich said. “The second I saw those bastards coming down the street, I knew it was over for me. I’m dead. It’s just a matter of time is all.”

“That’s always true,” Lydia said, her mind taken with other matters. “For everyone.”

“Might as well be you,” Erich said to Timmy, giving his friend permission. Terror and love warring in his chest.

“Nope,” Timmy said, cocking his head to one side as if he’d only just made the decision in that moment.

“Erich,” Lydia started.

“As long as I’m alive,” Erich said, ignoring her, “Burton’s not safe. He’s not going to let me slide.”

Timmy frowned, then grunted in surprise. Maybe pleasure.

“What?” Erich said.

“Just that it works the other way too,” Timmy said, levering himself up to his feet. “Anyway, I gotta go back in.”

“Back in?” Erich said.

Timmy brushed his hands across his wide thighs. “The city. I gotta go back to the city. Burton’s expecting me.”

“You’re not going to tell him where I am, are you?” Erich asked. Timmy started laughing and Lydia took it up. Erich looked from one to the other, confused.

“Nah, I’m not going to tell him where you are. I got something of his I need to give back is all. Nothing you have to worry about.”

“Easy for you to say,” Erich said, ashamed of the whine in his voice.

“I’ll leave you the good boat,” Timmy said, turning toward the darkness.

“Will you be back?” Lydia said. She hadn’t meant to, because she knew in her heart, in her bones, and deeper than that what the answer was. Timmy smiled at her for the last time. *I take it back*, she thought. *Kill him. Kill the boy. Kill everyone else in the world. Shoot babies in the head and dance on their bodies. Any atrocity, any evil, is justified if it keeps you from leaving me.*

“Eh,” Timmy said. “You never know.”

The darkness folded around him as he walked away. Her hands were made of lead and tungsten. Her belly felt hurt and empty as a miscarriage. And underneath the hurt and the horror, the betrayal and the pleasure she took in her distress, something else stirred and lifted its head. It took her time to recognize it as pride, and even then she couldn’t have said who or what she was proud of. Only that she was.

The boat splashed once in the water, her almost-son and sometime-lover leaving the shore for the last time. Her lifetime was a fabric woven of losses, and she saw now that all of them had been practice, training her to teach her how to bear this pain like a boxer bloodying knuckles to make them strong and numb. All her life had been preparation for bearing this single, unbearable moment.

“Shit,” Erich said. “Were there only two dinners? What am I going to eat?”

Lydia plucked up the fork that had been Timmy’s, gripping the stem in her fist like holding his hand again, one last time. Touching what he had touched, because she would never touch him again. Here this object had opened his lips, felt the softness of his tongue, and been left behind. It held traces of him.

“What’s the matter?” Erich said. “Are you all right?”

I stopped being all right before you were born, she thought. What she said was, “There’s something I’d like you to do for me.”



The streets of Baltimore didn’t notice him pass through them this one last

time. More than three million people lived and breathed, loved and lost, hoped and failed to hope that night, just as any other. A young woman hurrying home later than her father's curfew dodged around a tall man with thinning hair and pants wet to the knee at the corner of South and Lombard, muttering obscenities and curses at him that spoke more of her own dread and fear than anything the man had done. Four Star Helix security employees, out of uniform and off-shift, paused at the entrance to an Italian restaurant to watch a civilian pass. None of them could have said what it was about him that caught their attention, and it might only have been that they'd operated on high alert for so many days at once. The civilian went on, minding his own business, keeping himself to himself, and they went into the building's garlic and onion smells and forgot him. A bus driver stopped, let two old women, a thin-faced man, and a broad-shouldered amiable fellow come on board. Bus service was part of basic, and the machine followed its route automatically. No one paid, no one spoke, and the driver went back to watching the entertainment feeds as soon as the bus pulled back into traffic.

Nearer Oestra's safe house, things changed. There were more eyes, more of them alert. The catastrophe of the churn hung thick in the air, the sense that doom might come at any moment in the shape of security vans and riot gear and voices shouting to keep hands visible. Nothing like it had happened that day or the one before, but no one was taking comfort in that yet. The guards who stopped Timmy were different than the ones he'd seen earlier, but their placement on the street was the same. They stopped him, took the pistol that Burton had given him, scanned him for tracking devices, firearms, explosives, chemical agents, and when they found he was clean, they called in. Oestra's voice through their earpieces was less than a mosquito but still perfectly recognizable, a familiar buzz and whine. They waved Timmy on.

Oestra opened the door to him, automatic shotgun still in the lieutenant's hand, as if he hadn't put it down all day. Probably, he hadn't.

Timmy stepped into the main room, looking around pleasantly. The newsfeeds flickered silently on their screens: a street view from sometime earlier in the day with five security vans lined up outside a burning apartment building, a serious-faced Indian woman speaking into the camera with a dour expression, an ad with seven bouncing monkeys reaching for a

box of banana-flavored cakes. The world cast its shadows on the bare brick wall and threw stories into the gray mortar. The churn, running itself to exhaustion. New stories from around the world and above it filling in the void.

“You’re back,” Oestra said.

“Yup.”

“You do the thing?”

“It got a little complicated,” Timmy said. “The man still here?”

“Wait. I’ll get him.”

Oestra walked to the back, one set of footsteps fading into the safe house, then a long pause made rich by the murmur of voices, then two sets of footsteps coming back. The timestamp beside the dour Indian woman read 21:42. Timmy considered the curtains. Blue-dyed cotton with cords of woven nylon. The chair Oestra had been sitting on before, leather stretched over a light metal frame. A kitchen through a wide brickwork archway. The bedroom in the back with its futon, and a bathroom somewhere behind that.

“Tiny,” Burton said. “What’s the news, little man?”

Burton’s white shirt caught the light from the screens, dancing in a hundred colors. His slacks were dark and beautifully cut. Timmy turned to him like he was an old friend. Oestra walked past them both, taking his place by the window. Timmy glanced back at him only a few feet away, a shotgun across his thighs.

“Well,” Timmy said. “Truth is, I ran into a little hiccup.”

Burton crossed his arms, squared his shoulders and hips. “Something you couldn’t handle?” he asked, his voice hard with disapproval.

“I’m waiting to see,” Timmy said.

“Waiting to see if you can handle it?”

“Well, yeah,” Timmy said with a wide, open smile. “Actually, it’s kind of funny you put it that way.”

When the big man stepped back toward the window, the movement was so casual, so relaxed, that neither Oestra nor Burton recognized what was happening. Timmy’s thick fingers grabbed the back of the leather chair, pulling back and down fast and hard. Oestra twisted trying to keep from falling and also bring the shotgun to bear at the same time, managing neither. He spilled to the floor, Timmy’s knee coming down hard on his neck. Oestra’s muffled roar was equal parts outrage and pain. Timmy

reached down and ripped the man's right ear off, then punched down twice, three times, four. Burton ran for the back bedroom. There wasn't much time.

Unable to use it with Timmy on his neck, Oestra dropped the shotgun and twisted, trying to get his arms and legs under himself, trying to get the leverage to push Timmy back. Timmy reached down and hooked his finger into the gunman's left eye, bracing the head with his knee and turning his wrist until he felt the eyeball pop. Oestra's screams were wilder now, panic and pain taking over. Timmy let the pressure up, scooted to the left, and picked up the abandoned shotgun. He fired once into Oestra's head and the man stopped screaming.

Timmy trotted across the room, shotgun in one hand. Burton boiled out of the bedroom, pistols in either fist and teeth bared like a dog's. The front window shattered. Timmy ducked through the brick archway into the kitchen, shifted his grip on the shotgun, and swung it hard and low, leading with the elbow like a cricket player at the bat as Burton roared in after him. The sound of the connection was like a piece of raw steak being dropped on concrete. Burton's feet flew out from under him, but the momentum of his rush carried him stumbling into the space beyond. Timmy lowered the shotgun toward the man's head, but Burton whirled, dropping his own guns and grabbing the shotgun's barrel. The smell of burning skin was instantaneous. Timmy tried to pull back, but Burton kicked out. His right foot hit Timmy's knee like he'd kicked a fire hydrant, but Timmy still stumbled. The shotgun roared again, and the refrigerator sprouted pocks of twisted metal and plastic. Burton twisted, pulling himself in close. Too close for the shotgun's long barrel. He hammered his elbow into Timmy's ribs twice and felt something give the third time. Timmy dropped the shotgun, and then they were both down on the floor.

They grappled, caught in each other's arms, each man shifting for the position that would destroy the other in a parody of intimate love. The fingers of Burton's left hand worked their way under Timmy's chin, digging at his neck, pushing into the hard cartilage of his throat. Timmy choked, gagged, pulled back the centimeter that was all Burton needed. He pulled his right arm up into the gap, braced himself, twisted, and now Timmy's arm and head were locked. Burton gasped out a chuckle.

"You just fucked the wrong asshole," he hissed as Timmy bucked and

struggled. “Your little cripple boyfriend? I’m gonna burn him down for days. I’m gonna find everyone you ever loved and kill them all slow.”

Timmy grunted and pushed back, but the effort only made Burton’s lock on him tighter.

“You thought you could take me, you dumbfuck piece of shit?” Burton spat into Timmy’s ear. “You thought you were tougher than *me*? I owned your momma, boy. You’re just second-generation *property*.”

All along their paired bodies, Burton felt Timmy tense and then, with a vast exhalation, relax, melting into the hold. Burton pulled tighter, squeezing. There was a report like a pistol shot when Timmy’s shoulder dislocated and the resistance stuttered. Burton’s grip broke. Timmy rolled, cocked back his fist and brought it down on the bridge of Burton’s nose. The pain was bright. The volume of the world faded. The fist came down again, jostling the kitchen. The light seemed strange, reducing the red of the bricks and the yellow of the stove to shades of gray. Burton tried to bring his arms up to cover his face, to shield him from the violence, but they were a very long way away, and he kept losing track of them. He had them up, but they were numb and boneless. The attacks easily brushed them aside. The fist hit his nose again, and he didn’t know if it was for the third time or the fourth.

Shit, he thought. *This is just going to keep going on until that fucker decides to stop.*

The impact came again, and Burton tried to say something, to scream. The impact came again, and afterward followed a few seconds of darkness and silence and calm. Burton felt very sleepy. The impact came again. Calm. The impact came again and again and again. Each time, the violence felt more distant and the emptiness between more profound until a kind of forgetfulness came over him.

Once Timmy was sure that he was alone in the apartment, he rolled onto his back. His left arm hung from the socket, limp, useless, and disconnected. He levered himself up to his knees, breathing hard between clenched teeth. Then stood. He took the automatic shotgun in his one good hand and stepped out to the main room. On the screen, the Indian woman was still speaking, wagging a finger at the camera to make a point. The timestamp beside her read 21:44. Two minutes. Maybe a little less. Timmy walked to the front window. The guards from the street weren’t at their

posts. He nodded to himself and went to stand by the front door. When the knob turned, he waited. The door flew open, and he fired three times, once straight ahead, and then angling to the left and right. Someone started screaming and the door banged closed again.

Timmy went back to the kitchen. He flipped on the burners, pulled down the roll of cheap paper towels from the wall. He found a bottle of peanut oil in the cabinet and doused the towels with half of it before he put them directly on the heating element. A flurry of footsteps came from the front and he fired the shotgun again, not aiming at anything. They retreated. The oil-soaked paper caught fire, and Timmy picked up the burning roll, trotted to the bedroom, and threw the flaming mass into the bunched covers. By the time he was back in the kitchen, the flame shadows were already dancing in the archway behind him. Timmy put the half-full bottle of oil directly onto the heating element and walked to the back of the safe house. The stairway leading to the alley was narrow and white. He didn't see anyone, but he fired the shotgun twice anyway then tossed the gun back into the fire. If there had been a guard there, they'd fled. Timmy walked out into the night.

He moved slowly, but with purpose. When his path crossed with other people's he smiled and nodded. Once, when he had almost reached his destination, an old man in a black coat had stopped and stared at his bruised and bloody hand. Timmy smiled ruefully, shrugged, and didn't break stride. The old man didn't raise an alarm. Around here, a muscle-bound thug with blood on his cuffs and skinned knuckles didn't warrant anything more than a disapproving look.

The security forces had put a fresh lock on Lydia's door, but Timmy knew the back way in. He slid through the window into the bathroom he'd known so well over the last few years. It still smelled like her. They'd gone through everything. Her towels and the shower curtain were on the floor. Bottles of medications littered the sink. He dug through until he found some painkillers and dry swallowed three. In the kitchen, he wrapped his shoulder in ice, then waited motionless until the swelling was down as far as it was going to go. Putting his shoulder back in its socket was a question of lying on the bed, his grip on the mattress bottom hard and unforgiving, and then pulling back slowly, relaxing into the pain, until it slid back into place with a wet, angry pop. He stripped, washed himself with wet hand towels, and changed into a fresh set of his clothes. Ones that didn't have anybody's

blood on them.

The churn, the crackdown, the catastrophe. The cycle of boom and bust. The turn of the seasons. Whatever name was applied to it, the inevitable cascade of events in the city rolled on just the same. When the fire trucks came and put out the blaze, they identified the two bodies as Feivel Oestra and an unregistered man. The unregistered was a small, compact, dark-skinned man in an expensive shirt and tailored slacks. He had no tattoos, and a wide birthmark on his right shoulder blade in the shape of a rough triangle. Both men had died by violence. If the fire had been meant to conceal that, it failed. If it was only meant to foul any trace DNA or fingerprint evidence, it did well enough. Add to that the fact that Oestra was on the Star Helix lists as someone to bring in for questioning, and the broad strokes of the story came clear.

The same night, fifteen men loyal to the Loca Griega were surrounded in a nightclub. The hostage situation that rose out of it left two people dead and ten in custody, and the attendant lawsuits against Star Helix and the owners of the nightclub were the top of the local and regional newsfeeds. Oestra's death was little more than a footnote, something mentioned and then moved on from. Other things—smaller things—fell even below that level of obscurity. A woman selling illicit painkillers out of her apartment beside the arcology had a screaming fight with one of her clients, called security, and was taken away for questioning. A sweep of the ruins on the bay islands found a small squatters' camp with an LED lamp, an emergency prep sleeping bag, and an exhausted chemical stove, but anyone who had been living there was gone. An art dealer contacted with a request for assistance with an investigation killed himself rather than come in. None of those events raised any notice at all.

Soon, the paroxysm of violence, legal and otherwise, would thin back down to the normal background radiation of human vice. Very serious people would argue about whether the program had worked. Some would argue that crime had gone down, others that it had actually risen. Star Helix would take its payment from the government and settle out of court most of the complaints made against it. One of the remaining lieutenants would rise to the top, or the whole criminal apparatus would turn over to a new organization, a new generation. Within a year, there would be a new working normal that would run more or less gracefully until the next time.

People of little importance would survive and make names for themselves. The mighty would fall, the meek would rise up in their places and become mighty. But all that would come later.

In the pearly light that came before the dawn, one other thing happened that went unnoticed, meaningless to anyone but those involved.

It was on a street down near the water's edge. The eastern sky was brightening with the coming dawn, the western sky still boasted a scattering of stars. Traffic on the street was thick, but not yet the immobile crush that would come with the light. Sea and rot perfumed the air, but the cool made the scent seem almost pleasant. A tea-and-coffee stand was opening, sporting the blue-and-pink logo of a popular chain and a tray of baked goods just the same as a million other trays on five continents and two worlds. Old men and women on basic huffed down the sidewalk, getting in the day's exercise before the sun came up. Young men and women staggered home from long nights at the street clubs and rairai joints, exhausted from hours of dancing, drinking, sex, and frustrated hope. Soon, the streets and tube stations would thicken with the traffic of those who had jobs to go to, and then be released to the masses for whom basic was a way of life.

A boy on the verge of manhood stood on a corner near the tea-and-coffee stand. He was taller than average, and muscular. His close-cropped reddish-brown hair was receding, though he was young. His expression was blank, and he held himself in a tight, guarded way that could have been grief or the protecting of some physical injury. His right hand was swollen, the knuckles skinned. If it hadn't been for that last detail, the security team might have passed him by. Three women and two men, all in the ballistic armor and helmets of Star Helix.

"Morning," the team lead said, and half a beat later the tall man smiled and nodded. He turned to walk away, but the other personnel shifted to block his path.

The man tensed, then made the visible decision to relax. His smile was rueful. "Sorry. I was just heading out."

"I respect that, sir. We appreciate you taking a moment," the team lead said, placing a hand on the butt of his pistol. "Really did a number on your hand."

"Yeah. I box."

“Can be a good workout. I’m going to need to see your ID.”

“Don’t got it on me. Sorry.”

“We’ll need to check you against the database, then. That isn’t a problem, is it?”

“Think I got the right to refuse that, don’t I?”

“You do,” the team lead said, letting a hint of hardness slip into his voice beneath the casual words. “But then we’d need to take you to the substation and do the full biometric scan to exclude you from the persons of interest list, and there are a whole lot of very unpleasant people who are in that queue. You don’t want to hang out with them. Not if you have someplace you need to be.”

The big man seemed to consider this. He glanced back over his shoulder.

“Looking for someone?” the team lead asked.

“Was more thinking there might be some folks looking for me.”

“So. How do you want to play this?”

The man shrugged and held out his hand. The team’s data analyst stepped forward and tapped the collector against the thick wrist. The readout stuttered red, then went to solid green. The seconds ticked away.

“If there’s something you want to tell me,” the team lead said, “this would be the time.”

“Nah,” the big man said. “I think I’m good.”

“Yeah?”

“You know,” he said, “good enough.”

The team lead’s hand terminal chimed. He pulled it out with his left hand, his right still on the butt of his gun. The readout had the red border of a flagged profile. The big man’s body went very still while they read. It was a long moment before the team lead spoke.

“Amos Burton.”

“Yeah?” the big man said. It could have meant, *Yes, I killed him*, or *What about him?* All the team lead heard was the affirmation.

“I’ve got a travel flag on you here. You’re cutting it pretty close.”

Amos Burton’s eyebrows rose and the corners of his mouth turned down. “I am?”

“You’re shipping out to Luna on the noon launch from Bogotá station, Mr. Burton. These apprenticeship programs are tough to get into, and last I heard, they take it mighty poorly if you miss your berth. Might wind up

waiting another decade to get back on the list.”

“Huh,” the big man said.

“Look, there’s a high-speed line about nine blocks north of here. We can take you there if you want.”

“Erich, you sonofabitch,” the big man said. Instead of looking north, he turned to the east, toward the sea and rising sun. “I’m not Mr. Burton.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m not Mr. Burton,” the man said again. “You can call me Amos.”

“Whatever you want. But I think you’d better haul ass out of town if you don’t want to get in some serious shit, Amos.”

“You ain’t the only one that thinks that. But I’m good. I know where the high-speed lines are. I won’t miss my ride.”

“All right then,” the team lead said with a crisp nod. “Have a better one.”

The security team moved on, flowing around the big man like river water around a stone. Amos watched them go, then went to the tea-and-coffee stand, bought a cup of black coffee and a corn muffin. He stood on the corner for a long minute, eating and drinking and breathing the air of the only city he’d ever known. When he was done, he dropped the cup and the muffin wrapper into the recycling bin and turned north toward the high-speed line and Bogotá station and Luna. And, who knew, maybe the vastness beyond the moon. The sweep of planets and moons and asteroids that humanity had spread to, and where the chances of running into anybody from Baltimore were vanishingly small. A needle in a haystack all of humanity wide.

Amos Burton was a tall, stocky, pale-skinned man with an amiable smile, an unpleasant past, and a talent for cheerful violence. He left Baltimore to its dynamic balance of crime and law, exotics and mundanity, love and emptiness. The number of people who knew him and loved him could be counted on one hand and leave most of the fingers spare, and when he was gone, the city went on without him as if he had never been.

The Churn

Author's Note

From a technical standpoint, this was probably the hardest thing we ever wrote. The critical bit—that Timmy was going to grow up to be the Amos we know and love—was the big reveal, but we couldn't be sure when the penny was going to drop for any individual reader, so the story had to work with and without the surprise coming at the end.

Partly because of that, “The Churn” is the only part of *The Expanse* written in an omniscient voice. Almost everything else we do is close third. In the novels, we use a wide variety of close thirds, usually (but not always) mapping to the chapters. “The Churn” dips into a lot of different people's minds—though never Timmy's—and even shows things that no one could have seen. The “crane shot” image when the police are converging on Liev through the crowd, for instance, isn't one anybody in the story could have seen, but the narrator can, and so the reader can. It changes the voice of the story in ways that were tricky and interesting.

The stories don't just let us explore parts of the universe that the novels didn't, they also let us play with the writing process a little.

It's also probably the darkest story we wrote. The sexual relationship between Lydia and Timmy is deeply messed up—for both of them—and the story doesn't condemn or celebrate it. When the show was cast, Wes Chatham (who plays Amos Burton/Timmy) took this story to a psychotherapist and talked about what kinds of things an upbringing like this would do to someone.

A lot of Amos' character requires forgoing the customary moral judgments. For better or worse.

The Vital Abyss

They kept us in an enormous room. Ninety meters by sixty with a ceiling eight meters above us, a bit less than a football pitch, with observation windows along the top two meters all the way around from which our guards could look down on us if they chose to. Old crash couches salvaged from God knew where lay scattered around the floor. Eventually I came to recognize a certain subtle smell like alcohol and plastic when the air scrubbers were replaced, and the humidity and temperature would sometimes vary, leaving runnels of condensate coming down the walls. Those were the nearest things we had to weather. The gravity, somewhere in the neighborhood of one-quarter g, suggested we were on a spin station. Our guards never said as much, but I could think of no planetary bodies that matched that.

For most of us there was a sense that this shabby, empty room was the final destination for us, the former science team from Thoth Station. Some wept at the thought. The research group did not.

We had toilets and showers, but no privacy. When we washed ourselves, it was in front of anyone who cared to observe. We learned to shit with the casualness of animals. When, as was inevitable, we began to turn to each other to fulfill our sexual needs, it was without the veneer of privacy we had once enjoyed, though eventually several of the crash couches were sacrificed to create a small area visually cut off from the rest of the room and that we began calling “the hotel.” There was never anything sufficient to absorb sound. Our enforced physical intimacy with one another was a source of shame for many of the prisoners who didn’t come from the research groups. Those of us who had—myself included—held a different perspective. I think our shamelessness was part of what made it hard for the others, the ones who had worked security or maintenance or administration, to accept us. There were other reasons too, but I think the shamelessness

was the most visible. I might be wrong about that. I have learned to question my assumptions about what other people feel.

The lights in the room went on at what became morning, turned off again at what we agreed to call night. Water, we took from a pair of spigots beside the showers, drinking directly from them using our own cupped hands. For want of razors or depilatories, the men among us grew beards. Guards and jailers would come through whenever they saw fit, armor-clad and carrying guns sufficient to slaughter us all. They brought Belter food, vat-grown and yeasty. Sometimes they joked with us, sometimes they pushed us away or beat us, but they always brought us sustenance and the thin paper jumpsuits that were our only clothes. All of our guards were Belters, with the elongated bodies and slightly enlarged heads that spoke of childhoods in low gravity and long exposure to the pharmaceutical cocktails that made such lives possible. They spoke in the polyglot cant of the Belt: a hundred different vocabularies all crushed together until understanding it was as much music appreciation as grammar.

During the first year, they occasionally took us out of the room for periods of interrogation. The times that I was taken, the sessions were held in small, dirty rooms, often without chairs. The techniques varied from threats and violence, to offers of privileges, to a thin-faced woman who just sat in silence and stared at me as if she could force me to speak through raw, unspoken will. As time went on, these occasions grew fewer and farther between. Sometime in the third year, they stopped entirely, and the room became the totality of our collective world. We were a community of thirty-seven people living under the eyes of cold and unsympathetic jailers.

Though we came to know each other quite well, the taxonomy of our previous employment remade itself into a kind of tribalism. Van Ark and Drexler might disagree about everything from the best use of our “daylight” time to who had starred in the entertainment videos of our youth, but they had both been maintenance, and so when any conflict arose, they took each other’s side against the rest of us. Fong had enjoyed the highest rank among the security team in our random organizational slice, and so she was not only the unspoken head of that group but through them the ersatz leader of our community. Research was kept separate, and even then divisions by work group made a web of subdivisions. Of the several dozen large signaling and communications work group, only Ernzt and Ma had come to

the room. Imaging was the largest with five: Kanter, Jones, Mellin, Hardberger, and Coombs. Nanoinformatics had three: Quintana, Brown, and myself.

Of the system outside the room—Earth and Mars and the Belt—we knew essentially nothing. For us, history had ended on Thoth Station with our experiment on Eros only half-done. Even years after the fact, I would find myself ruminating on some peculiarity of the dataset. I no longer trusted my memory enough to say whether the issues that absorbed my hours were accurate or figments of my somewhat fragile and altered mind.

During my bitterest times, I would lie in a crash couch for days at a time, thinking of Isaac Newton and the way that, by having his mind and his peculiar history, he had refashioned all of human understanding. I had stood on a precipice as great as his and been pulled back against my will. But more often, I was able to ignore such thoughts for weeks, sometimes months, at a time. I took a lover. Alberto Correa. He worked in administration and spent his childhood taking odd jobs at the spaceport complex at Bogotá. He had an advanced degree in political literature, and he said both my names—Paolo and Cortázar—reminded him of authors he had studied. He would talk for hours sometimes about the effects of class systems on poetic forms or Butler-Marxist readings of the action videos of Pilár Eight and Mikki Suhanam. I listened, and I like to think I absorbed some of it. The sound of his voice and the presence of his body were comforting, and the moments we spent together in the hotel were pleasant and calming. He said that if he'd known he would end here, he'd have stayed on Earth and lived on basic. When I pointed out that then he and I wouldn't have met, he would either agree that I made it worthwhile or else tell me about the beautiful men he had loved in Colombia.

Time, of course, became difficult to track, but I was fairly certain we were into the fourth year in the room when Kanter died. He'd been complaining of feeling ill, then grew agitated and delusional. The guards, seeing all as they did, brought medicine that I suspect was merely a sedative. He died a week later.

It was the first death, and reinforced to us the idea that we would likely never again be free. I watched as the others went through a period of mourning that was less for Kanter than for the lives we'd had and left behind. Not the research group, but the others. Alberto became a much

more ardent lover for a time, and then lapsed into a funk in which he barely spoke to me and shied away from my touch. I was patient with him because I found patience easier when there was no alternative.

Day by day, we were ground down. Our experiential worlds narrowed to who was having sex with whom, whether someone's comment about a fellow inmate was innocuous or provocative, and fighting—sometimes violently—over who among us slept in which of the crash couches. We were petty and cruel, despairing and restless, occasionally humane and even capable of moments of actual if ephemeral beauty. Perhaps all periods of prosperity and calm go unnoticed when they occur. Certainly I didn't look on those days with any fondness until after the Martian came.

I didn't see him arrive myself. I was talking with Ernzt when it happened, so my introduction to the man was Quintana barking my name. When I turned, the Martian was simply there. He was pale-skinned with nut-brown hair and a bad complexion, and he wore the familiar uniform of the Martian Congressional Republic Navy. Our customary Belter guards flanked him, chins lifted a bit higher than usual. Quintana and Brown stood before them, waving me impatiently to them. I didn't hesitate. The pull of something new after so much sameness called forth an excitement that left my hands trembling. I plucked at my beard as I strode over, hoping against all reason that it would make me look more respectable. When we stood before the new man, the three of us together, Brown took a little half-step ahead. I stifled the urge to move forward as well, certain that it would end in all of us crowding in on our visitor. I would swallow Brown's little physical dominance play in order to keep the Martian from leaving.

"This is all of them?" he said. He had a pleasant voice, barely accented with the drawl of the Mariner Valley.

"Bist," the Belter guard said with a nod. "Nanoinformatic, you wanted. This them."

The Martian looked at us each in turn, studying us like we were fresh recruits. It felt as if the floor was shuddering, but it was only my body. There was always an electricity in the unknown, a sense of impending revelation like the last moments before orgasm. Seeing this man and being seen by him, I felt more naked than I had since my first sexual experiences; though the longing and desire sprang from my heart and throat now, they were as commanding. All the things that the room had taken from me—my

curiosity, my hope, my sense that a life outside of my nameless prison was possible—were distilled into his cool brown eyes. One of the occupational hazards of my career path is a kind of solipsism, but I truly felt at that moment that God had sent an angel to deliver me and whisper the secrets that had been hidden from me so long into my ear, which made the actions that followed so devastating.

“All right,” the Martian said.

The filthy little half-step Brown had taken reaped its reward. The Martian took a dedicated hand terminal from his pocket and held it out. “Take a look at this. See what you make of it.”

Brown snapped it up. “I will have a reaction prepared, sir,” he said, as if he were team lead again and not a filthy, long-bearded captive in a paper suit.

“Can we have copies?” Quintana asked.

I was going to add my voice to his, but the guard cut me short. “One trade, one terminal. *Sus no neccesar.*”

The Martian turned to leave, but Quintana surged forward. “If you need someone to interpret data for you, Brown’s not the right person. He was only team lead so he could spend more time talking to administration. If he’d been a better mind, they’d have kept him in the *labs*.” The same sentiment was forming in my own throat, but my hesitation in finding the words saved me. The nearest of the Belter guards shifted his weight, turned, and sank the butt of his rifle into Quintana’s gut, folding him double. The Martian scowled, disapproving of the violence, but he did not speak as the guards led him to the doorway and out of the room. Brown, his beard jutting and his face flushed, half-ran and half-strutted to the hotel, the hand terminal clutched to his chest. Triumph and fear widened his eyes. Quintana retched, and I stood over him, considering. The others watched from all around the room, and when I looked up, there were more figures behind the glass staring down at us. At me.

Quintana had made a mistake, and one I would have made as well. He’d called the Martian’s judgment—capricious as it was—into question. He’d tried to take a position of authority when we were all here specifically because we had no authority. Seeing that was like remembering something I’d forgotten.

One trade, one terminal. The words meant two things to me: first, that

after all this time someone was trading for either our freedom or possession of us, and second, that only one of us would be required. Needless to say, I determined in that moment that the traded prisoner would be me.

“Come on,” I said, helping him to his feet. “It’s all right. Come on, and I’ll help you get washed up.” I let them see me assist him. With any luck it would get back to the Martian that one of the three was a team player, the kind of man who helped someone when they were down. Quintana, I felt sure, had lost his chance. Brown, by having the hand terminal and whatever was on it, was ahead. I didn’t see yet how to arrange things so that I could gain the advantage, but simply having a real problem to solve again felt like waking up after a long and torpid sleep.

Brown didn’t leave the hotel for the rest of the day, and while he did venture out when the guards brought our evening rations, he sat apart, the hand terminal stuck down the neck of his jumpsuit. Quintana glowered at him from under storm cloud brows and I kept my own counsel, but the effect of the day’s actions went well beyond the three of us. Everyone in the room buzzed. There was no other subject of conversation. Mars knew we were here, and what was more, they wanted something of us. Or at least of one of us. It changed everything from the taste of the food to the sound of our voices.

Keep a man in a coffin for years with just enough food and water to live, and then—just for a moment—crack the lid open and let him see daylight. We were all that man, stunned and confused and elated and afraid. The numbness of captivity fell away for a few hours, and we lived that time deeply and desperately.

After the meal, Brown retreated to a crash couch near the wall, curling into it so that no one could sneak up behind him. I, pretending nothing had changed, went through my customary nighttime rituals—voiding my bowels, showering, drinking enough water that I would not wake thirsty before the lights came back. By the time our sudden toggle-switch nighttime came, I was curled in my couch with Alberto. His body was warm against my own. Brown, whose movements I had become profoundly aware of, remained in his crash couch by the wall. The glow of the terminal was dim as an insult. I pretended to sleep and thought I had fooled Alberto until he spoke.

“And so they’ve thrown us the apple, eh?”

“The fruit of knowledge,” I said, but I had misunderstood which apple he meant.

“Worse than that, the golden one,” he said. “Private property. Status. Now it’s all going to be about fighting over who’s the prettiest one, and war will come out of it.”

“Don’t be grandiose.”

“It isn’t me, it’s history. Differences in status and wealth are always what drives war.”

“Have we been a Marxist paradise this whole time and I didn’t notice?” I said, more acidly than I’d meant to.

Alberto kissed my temple and brushed his lips along my hairline to the cup of my ear. “Don’t kill him. They’ll catch you.”

I shifted. In the darkness, I couldn’t see more than a limn of his face, floating over me. My heart beat faster and the coppery taste of fear flooded my mouth. “How did you know what I was thinking?”

When he answered, his tone was soft and melancholy. “You’re from *research*.”



I wasn’t always the thing I became. Before I was *research*, I was a scientist who had educated himself into too fine a specialty. Before that, a student at Tel Aviv Autonomous University, caught between investing in a future I couldn’t imagine and losing myself in a grief I couldn’t fully encompass. Before that, I was a boy watching his mother die. I was all of those men before I was a researcher for Protogen Corporation based on Thoth Station. But it is also true that I remember many of those former selves with a distance that is more than time. I tell myself that remove allows me to trace the path from one to another, but I’m not sure that this is true.

My mother—a heart-shaped face above a pear-shaped body who rained love on me as if I were the only one in the world who mattered—lived on basic most of her life, sharing a room in a UN housing complex at Londrina. She wasn’t educated, though I understand she was a good enough musician when she was younger to play in some local underground bands. If there were recordings of her on the network, I never found them. She was

a woman of few ambitions and tepid passions until she reached thirty-two. Then, to hear her tell it, God had come to her in her sleep and told her to have a baby.

She woke up, marched to the training center, and applied for any program that would earn her enough money to legally go off contraception. It took her three years of fourteen-hour days, but she managed it. Enough money for both a licensed child and the donation of germ plasm that would help begin my life. She said that it was her choice to purchase sperm from a trading house that gave me my intelligence and drive, that the only fertile men in the housing complex were criminals and thugs too far outside of civilization to be on the basic rolls, and that I couldn't have gotten it from her because she was lazy and stupid.

As a child, growing up, I used to fight back on the last point: She was smart and she was beautiful and anything good about me surely had its roots in her. I believe now she used to denigrate herself in front of me in order to hear praise from someone, even if it was only a beloved child. I don't resent the manipulation. If intellect and focus were indeed the legacies of my invisible father, emotional manipulation was my mother's true gift, and it was as valuable. As important.

Because I was an adolescent when it began, I did not notice her symptoms until they were fairly advanced. My time was largely spent out of the house by then, playing football at a dirt-and-weed pitch south of the housing complex, running badly designed experiments with some garage-level makers and artists, exploring my own sexuality and the limits of the young men of my cohort. My days were filled with the smell of the city, the heat of the sun, and the promise that something joyous—a football win, a good project, a transporting affair—might come at any moment. I was a street rat living on basic, but the discovery of life was so rich and dramatic and profound that I wasn't concerned with my status in the larger culture. My social microenvironment seemed to stretch to the horizon, and the conflicts within it—whether Tomás or Carla would be goalie, whether Sabina could tweak off-the-shelf bacterial cultures to produce her own party drugs, whether Didi was homosexual and how to find out without courting humiliation and rejection—were profound dramas that would resonate through the ages. When, later, my project lead said *There is a period of developmental sociopathy in every life*, this is the time I thought of.

And then my mother dropped a glass. It was a good one, with thick, beveled sides and a lip like a jelly jar, and when it shattered, it sounded like a gunshot. Or that's how I remember it. Moments of significance can make maintaining objectivity difficult, but that is my memory of it: a thick, sturdy drinking glass catching the light as it fell from her hands, twirling in the air, and detonating on our kitchen floor. She cursed mildly and went to fetch the broom to sweep up the shards. She walked awkwardly and fumbled with the dustpan. I sat at the table, an espresso growing cold in my hands while I watched her try to clean up after herself for five minutes. I felt horror at the time, an overwhelming sense of something wrong. The metaphor that came to me in the moment was my mother was being run remotely by someone who didn't understand the controls very well. The worst of it was her confusion when I asked her what was wrong. She had no idea what I was talking about.

After that, I began paying attention, checking in on her through the day. How long it had been going on, I couldn't say. The trouble she had finding words, especially early in the morning or late at night. The loss of coordination. The moments of confusion. They were little things, I told myself. The products of too little sleep or too much. She spent whole days watching the entertainment feeds out of Beijing, and then stayed up all night rearranging the pantry or washing her clothes in the sink for hours on end, her hands growing red and chapped from the soap as her mind was trapped, it seemed, by minor details. Her skin took on an ashen tone and a slackness came to her cheeks. The slow way her eyes moved reminded me of fish, and I began having the recurring nightmare that the sea had come to take her, and she was drowning there at the breakfast table with me sitting beside her powerless to help.

But whenever I talked about it, I only confused her. Nothing was wrong with her. She was just the same as she had ever been. She didn't have any trouble doing her chores. She wasn't uncoordinated. She didn't know what I was talking about. Even as her words choked her on their way out, she didn't know what I meant. Even as she listed like a drunk from her bed to the toilet, she experienced nothing out of the ordinary. And worse, she believed it. She genuinely thought I was saying these things to hurt her, and she didn't understand why I would. The sense that I was betraying her through my fear, that I was the cause of her distress rather than only a

witness to something deeply wrong, left me weeping on the couch. She wasn't interested in going to the clinic; the lines there were always so long and there was no reason.

I got her to go the day before Ash Wednesday. We arrived early, and I had packed a lunch of roast chicken and barley bread. We made it to the intake nurse even before we ate, and then sat in the waiting area with its fake bamboo chairs and worn green carpet. A man just older than my mother sat across from us, his hands in fists on his knees as he struggled not to cough. The woman beside me, my age or younger, stared straight ahead, her hand on her belly like she was trying to hold in her guts. A child wailed behind us. I remember wondering why anyone who could afford to have a child would bring it to a basic clinic. My mother held my hand, then. For hours we sat together, her fingers woven with mine. For a time I told her everything would be all right.

The doctor was a thin-faced woman with earrings made of shell. I remember that her first name was the same as my mother's, that she smelled of rose water, and that her eyes had the shallow deadness of someone in shock. She didn't wait for me to finish telling her why we'd come in. The expert system had already pulled the records, told her what to expect. Type C Huntington's. The same, she told me (though my mother never had), that had killed my grandfather. Basic would cover palliative care, including psychoactives. She'd make the notation in the profile. The prescriptions would be delivered starting next week and would continue as long as they were needed. The doctor took my mother's hands, urged her in a rote and practiced tone to be brave, and left. Off to the next exam room, hopefully to someone whose life she might be able to save. My mother wobbled at me, her eyes finding me only slowly.

"What happened?" she asked, and I didn't know what to tell her.

It took my mother three more years to die. I have heard it said that how you spend your day is how you spend your life, and my days changed then. The football games, the late night parties, the flirtation with the other young men in my circle: all of it ended. I divided myself into three different young men: one a nurse to his failing mother, one a fierce student on a quest to understand the disease that was defining his life, and the last a victim of depression so profound it made bathing or eating food a challenge. My own room was a cell just wide enough for my cot, with a frosted glass window

that opened on an airshaft. My mother slept in a chair in front of the entertainment screen. Above us, a family of immigrants from the Balkan Shared Interest Zone clomped and shouted and fought, each footfall a reminder of the overwhelming density of humanity around us. I gave her ramen soup and a collection of government pills that were the most brightly colored things in the apartment. She grew impulsive, irritable, and slowly lost her ability to use language, though I think she understood me almost to the end.

I didn't see it at the time, but my options were to weave myself a lifeline from what I had at hand, abandon my mother in her final decline, or else die. I would not leave her, and I did not die. Instead I took her illness and made it my salvation. I read everything there was on type C Huntington's, the mechanism as it was understood, the research that was being done with it, the treatments that might someday manage it. When I didn't understand something, I found tutorials. I sent letters to the outreach programs of medical care centers and hospitals as far as Mars and Ganymede. I tracked down the biomakers I had known and drilled them with questions—What was cytoplasmic regulation delay? How did mRNA inhibitor proteins address phenotypic expressions of primary DNA sequences? What did the Lynch-Noyon synthesis mean in respect to regrown neural tissues?—until it was clear they didn't understand what I was saying. I dove into a world of complexity so deep even the research watsons couldn't encompass it all.

What astounded me was that the cutting edge of human knowledge was so close. Before I educated myself, I assumed that there was a great depth of science, that every question of importance had been cataloged, studied, that all the answers were there, if only someone could query the datasets the right way. And for some things, that was true.

But for others—for things that I would have thought so important and simple that everyone would have known—the data simply wasn't there. How does the body flush plaque precursors out of cerebrospinal fluid? There were two papers: one seventy years out of date that relied on assumptions about spinal circulation that had since been disproved, and one that drew all its data from seven Polynesian infants who had suffered brain injuries from anoxia or drug exposure or trauma.

There were explanations, of course, for this dearth of information: Human studies required human subjects, and ethical guidelines made

rigorous studies next to impossible. One didn't give healthy babies a series of monthly spinal taps just because it would have been a good experimental design. I understood that, but to come to science expecting the great source of intellectual light and step so quickly into darkness was sobering. I began to keep a book of ignorance: questions that existing information could not answer and my amateurish, half-educated thoughts about how answers might be found.

Officially, my mother died of pneumonia. I had learned enough to understand what each of her drugs did, to read her fate from the pills that arrived. I knew by their shapes and colors and the cryptic letters pressed into their sides when the vast bureaucracy that administered basic health care had moved her from palliative care to full hospice. In the end, she was on little more than sedatives and antivirulence drugs. I gave them to her because it was what I had to give her. The night she died, I sat at her feet, my head resting on the red wool blanket that covered her wasted lap. Heartbreak and relief were my soul's twin bodyguards. She moved beyond pain or distress, and I told myself the worst was over.

The notification from basic came the next day. With my change in status, the rooms we had been in were no longer appropriate. I would be reassigned to a shared dormitory, but should be prepared to relocate to São Paulo or Bogotá, depending on availability. I thought—mistakenly, as it turned out—that I wasn't ready to leave Londrina. I moved in with a friend and former lover. He treated me gently, making coffee in the mornings and playing cards through the empty afternoons. He suggested that it might be less that I needed to stay in the city of my birth, the city of my mother, and more that I needed some control over the terms of my departure.

I applied to apprentice programs at London, Gdansk, and Luna and was rejected by all of them. I was competing against people who had years of formal schooling, political connections, and wealth. I lowered my expectations, searching for uplift programs that aimed specifically for autodidacts who had been living on basic, and six months later, I arrived in Tel Aviv and met Aaron, a former Talmudic scholar who had researched his way to atheism and was now my dorm mate.

The third night, we sat together on our little balcony looking out over the city. It was sunset, and we were both a little high on marijuana and wine. He asked me what my ambitions were.

“I want to understand,” I told him.

He shrugged only his left shoulder. “Understand what, Paolo? The mind of God? The reason for suffering?”

“Just how things work,” I said.



It became clear immediately that Brown had become the most important person not only among the nanoinformatics group or even research in general, but in the entire room. Over the following days, Fong, who had never treated anyone in research as better than suspicious, deferred to him when the guards brought food. Drexler sat near him before lights-out, laughing at anything he said that might pass for a joke. When Sujai and Ma fell into one of their singing mock competitions, they invited Brown in, though he demurred.

Speculation ran in all directions: We would be extradited and tried for the dead Martians on Phoebe; the company had found diplomatic channels to negotiate for our release; the Outer Planets Alliance and the Martian Republic were at war and our fates were going to be part of the settlement. My own theory—the only one that really made sense to me—was that the experiment had been running all this time and something new had happened. Grave or miraculous, it carried a weight of importance and inscrutability that brought us back from our forgotten place in a Belter prison and into the light. The Martian had come because he needed the things that only we knew, and possibly needed it badly enough to overlook our previous sins. In the observation windows above us, guards appeared more often now, usually with their attention fixed on Brown. It was not only the prisoners who found his new status of interest.

Brown himself changed, but not in the way others might have. While I believe he made use of the opportunities his new status afforded him, he did so rationally. He didn't hold himself more grandly, did not deepen the timbre of his voice. He did not hold court or bask in the new attention given to him. Humanity is social, and the self-image of humans is built from the versions of ourselves we see and hear reflected in others; that this is not true of the research group—of Coombs or Brown or Quintana or me—was, after

all, precisely the point. Instead, Brown balanced his new power with the new risks it carried. He made an unofficial alliance with Fong, staying near her and her people so that, should Quintana or I try to take the hand terminal by force, there were others who could interfere in an attempt to curry favor with him.

Van Ark responded by eating and sleeping closer to Quintana and Alberto and myself. He'd had no love of Brown, and treated his elevation as an insult. The room was pulling itself apart like a cell preparing to divide. Brown and the Martian's hand terminal formed one locus. Quintana and I, the other.

We planned our theft quietly. When Brown sat bent over the terminal, he could not watch us talk, but Quintana and I were discreet all the same. I squatted at the side of a crash couch while he lay in it, facing away from me. The metal and ceramic made too hard a backrest, my spine aching where it pressed. I tried not to move my lips while we spoke. Fong, I felt sure, noticed us, but did nothing. Or perhaps she didn't see us. Fear kept me from looking around to find out.

"He has to sleep," Quintana said.

"He also has to wake up," I said, recalling Alberto's advice.

Quintana shifted on the couch, the gimbals hissing as the cup of the couch readjusted. Across the room, Brown sat near the hotel. The hand terminal flickered, throwing subtle shadows onto his cheeks and the hollows around his eyes. With the right equipment, I could have modeled his face, its reflectivity, and rebuilt the image he was looking at. I realized that Quintana had been speaking, and I didn't know what he'd said. When I asked him to repeat himself, he sighed with a sound very much like the gimbals.

"Once I get it, you hide it," he said. "They'll question me. Search where I went. Then they'll have to give him another copy. Once that happens, we'll be safe. They won't care anymore. You can get it back out and give it to me. You won't even have to get in trouble."

"Won't they punish us?"

"He'll have the copy. Why would anyone care about the original?"

I suspected that analysis had some holes in it, but I didn't object, out of concern that Quintana would grow impatient and scrap the plan. I resolved instead to ask Alberto if he thought the stolen hand terminal would be

trivial once a copy was delivered, but as things fell out, I didn't have the chance. Navarro, one of Fong's leadership from security, walked toward us. I coughed, alerting Quintana, and he changed to talking about the nutritional value of Belter food compared to the fare we'd had before the room, and the probable health effects that we could expect from our systematic malnutrition. Navarro sat at the next couch over, watching the guards at the window watch us. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. The message—you're being watched—was clear.

That afternoon, the guards came early and took Brown away. They offered no explanation, simply found him there among us, nodded to the doors they'd entered through, and escorted him away. I watched him leave. My heart was in my throat, and I was certain it was already too late. If they were taking him to the Martian, he might never come back. When Brown returned to the room just before nightfall, confusion and worry pressed on his brow, but he carried the hand terminal with him.

That night as we curled up to sleep, I told Alberto of my fear that Brown and the hand terminal might vanish before I could see what was on it.

"Better if it did," Alberto said, holding my hand. I didn't know if he meant that with the irritant of hope gone, the room could return to something like its resting state, or something more personal between the two of us. I intended then to sound him out about Quintana's plan, but he had other intentions that were more urgent and immediate, and when we were spent, I curled in his arms, warm and content in the way that being a masculine animal allows.

Either Brown's temporary absence spurred Quintana to action sooner than planned, or he had told me his timetable when my attention was elsewhere. The first I knew that action had been taken was the screaming, then pelting footfalls going one way and the next. I tried to stand, but Alberto impeded me, and then, from the darkness, a dim glow. The plate of a hand terminal, moving toward me. Quintana loomed up out of the darkness, pressing hard ceramic into my hand. He didn't speak, but ran on past me. I curled back with Alberto and waited. Brown was shrieking now, his voice bansheeing up until it threatened to rise above the wavelengths of human perception. And then Fong. And then Quintana proudly announcing that Brown didn't deserve the data, couldn't understand the data, and was going to doom us all to living and dying in the room out of his own

misplaced pride.

I lay with my head against my lover's shoulder, the hand terminal tucked beneath our bodies, while the other prisoners screamed and fought in the darkness, the first open combat in the war Alberto had foreseen. The Belter guards did not come. I felt sure their absence meant something, but I couldn't say what.

I didn't want to leave the relative safety and warmth of the crash couch, but I knew that the battle raging in the darkness was also my best cover. Quintana's belief that I wouldn't be questioned because he had taken the credit for stealing the terminal seemed optimistic to me. Worse, it seemed like the kind of asserted reality—the willful decision to believe that people would act the way you preferred that they would—that posed a constant threat to those of us in research. I slid the terminal down the front of my already open jumpsuit and moved to rise from the couch, hoping the sound of the gimbals would be lost under the shouting.

Alberto took my hand for the space of a breath, and then released it. "Be careful," he whispered.

As I moved through that darkness, the room felt even bigger than it was. I had the most precious thing in my life pressed against the skin of my belly while men and women whose voices I knew intimately, the compatriots of my years-long captivity, threatened and defied and wheedled and cried out in sudden pain. Like a stage magician's arcing gesture, they commanded the attention and gave me the cover to do what needed to be done. I slid the hand terminal under one of the crash couches that defined the hotel, stepped back to see that no light was escaping from its dim display, and then trotted back to Alberto through the darkness, afraid to be caught away from my customary place.

The sudden harsh light of morning found Quintana sitting with his back against a wall, eyes blackened and swollen closed, nose and lips bloodied, and Fong organizing a search. I was among her first targets, and Alberto shortly after me. Brown opened a new round of shouts and accusations, and Fong had to set two of her people to prevent him from assaulting Quintana further. It occurred to me that Brown was making Quintana's argument more effectively than Quintana had.

The sense of Brown's status as our savior and best hope of freedom tarnished quickly in the next hours. I felt the confidence the others had in

him faltering like the pressure of a coming storm. If they turned on him, unleashed the years of frustration and anxiety and despair upon his fragile human body, I didn't think the guards would be able to reach him in time. It was an interesting possibility, but also a warning should I manage to put myself in his place.

As soon as it seemed plausible, I took Alberto by the hand and drew him toward the hotel. Hardberger and Navarro were going through the crash couches near it, and I was anxious that they would find our golden apple before I had a chance to taste it. I thought Navarro scowled at me as I made my way toward privacy and the hiding place, but it might only have been my imagination. Once we were in the hotel and visually cut off, I retrieved the hand terminal.

Now, with light and proximity, I could actually see it: blue-gray casing with an extended keyboard for full scientific notations; a scratch along the right side of the screen that caught and refracted the light of the display, rainbows out of the yellow default image; a logo of the Mars Congressional Republic Navy stamped into the casing and echoed on the screen. I stroked it with my fingertips, feeling serene and untouchable. If church had felt half as good as this, I would have been a religious man.

With a sense of nearly superhuman calm, I opened the data files. Charts and readings appeared before me.

It was the experiment. *My* experiment. Only it also was not. The basic structures were there: the peculiar way the individual molecular engines unfolded; the instantaneous networking that suggested entanglement communication; the beautifully complicated tertiary beta sheeting studded with proteins dense with information and vulnerable to oxidation. I had the sudden, powerful memory of being in the lab on Phoebe seeing the nanoparticles express those sheets for the first time. Krantz had described it as *snowflake castles looking for the nearest blowtorch*.

They were still beautiful, still fragile, but they had defied the blowtorch. They had found ways to express themselves, creating what appeared to be massive constructions implied first in their microscopic structure, like an infinite cascade of fractal design. There were maps of control points that were clearly cellular machinery that had been hijacked and modified, complex layers of pattern-matching mechanisms that stank of human neocortical structures, and something... else.

I was looking at the oak and recognizing the acorn.

I spooled through the information as quickly as I could, taking in the first and last paragraphs of the reports, glancing at the diagrams and data just long enough to take a general sense of them and then moving on. The navigation keys of the hand terminal clicked as I pressed them, like I was crushing tiny beetles. There was clearly a deeper structure that the development of the beta sheets was protecting and promoting. I didn't begin to understand the energetic dynamics of it, but there was, I thought, a privileged group. Something about the logic of the individual particles reminded me of a paper I'd read in Tel Aviv that reexamined sperm. The thesis was that rather than a homogeneous collection of equally competing cells, there were classes of sperm; subspecies that acted as a team to present a chosen cell or class of cells to the ovum.

Alberto said my name, and I was aware of it the way I might have been aware of a candle flame in the noonday sun. It was there, but it had very little impact.

The privileged group could probably be identified by its place within the logical structure of the network, but something about that felt wrong. I paged back through the diagrams. I had the sense there was an asymmetry in the network someplace that I could almost—not quite, but almost—place. It was analogous to something I already knew about, but I didn't know what. I growled and went back to the start. Alberto said my name again, and I looked up too late.

Fong stood over us both, her expression carved from hardwood. I felt a flash of resentment at her interruption and swallowed it quickly. I held out the hand terminal.

"Look what I found," I said.

She took it from me and paused. I could see the desire to punish me in her mouth and the angle of her shoulders. Alberto squirmed beside me and Navarro appeared at Fong's side. I heard Brown yawp with delight. He'd caught sight of his lost treasure. I anticipated Quintana's anger and disappointment, but it didn't matter to me. My goal had never been to help him.

"Quintana's an asshole, but he isn't wrong. He won't solve it," I said, and Fong shook her head as if to say *I don't know what you're talking about*. I smiled tightly. "Brown won't solve it. He won't give them what

they're looking for. We may not get another chance."

"That's not how this works," she said.

"I can help," I said. "Tell him to let me help." For a moment, it seemed as if she might reply, but instead she turned away without pressing the issue.

It felt like a victory.



My advisor at Tel Aviv—David Artemis Kuhn—had a beautiful name, a way of wearing a formal jacket just messily enough to say he was in on the joke, and a voice that sounded like the first sip of rum feels: sharp and warm and relaxing. His office smelled of coffee and freshly turned soil. I admired him, I crushed on him, I aspired to be him. If he had told me to quit the university and write poetry, I probably would have.

"Nanoinformatics is perfect for you," he said. "It's deeply interdisciplinary. You can apply it to a career in medical research or computer architecture or microecology. Of all the degree programs we have, this is the one that will keep the most doors open for you. If you're not sure what direction you want your studies to take you..." He paused and tapped his desk three times with the tip of his index finger. "This is the one."

There is nothing so destructive and also so easy to overlook as a bad idea.

A thought experiment from my first course in the program: Take a bar of metal and put a single notch in it. The two lengths thus defined have a relationship that can be expressed as the ratio between them. In theory, therefore, any rational number can be expressed with a single mark on a bar of metal. Using a simple alphabetic code, a mark that calculated to a ratio of .1215225 could be read as 12-15-22-5, or "l-o-v-e." The complete plays of Shakespeare could be written in a single mark, if it were possible to measure accurately enough. Or the machine language expression of the most advanced expert systems, though by then the notch might be small enough that Planck's constant got in the way. How massive amounts of information could be expressed in and retrieved from infinitesimal objects was the driving concern of my college years. I swam in an intellectual sea

of qubits and data implication, coding structures and Rényi entropy.

I spent days in the computation labs with their leather couches and ancient ceramic lockers, talking with people from all across the world and beyond. The first Belter I met was a woman from the L5 station who had come down to study crystallography, though since she lived in the consistent spin gravity of that station, she looked more like a Martian than the elongated soldiers who would eventually become my guards. My nights I divided between my dorm room and the bright bars and sober coffeehouses along the edge of the campus.

Slowly, I began to take the sad, traumatized boy who had fled Londrina and a life on basic and build from him a deeper, more serious, more focused man. I styled myself a scientist and wore the thin black vests and sand-colored silk shirts that the biology students had adopted as their fashion. I even joined the student union for scientific outreach, sitting through the long, angry, clove-cigarette-hazed meetings and arguing when people from the more traditional programs complained that my work was closer to philosophy than engineering.

I drank a bit of wine, I smoked a little marijuana, but the drugs that fueled the university were not recreational. Tel Aviv Autonomous University ran on nootropics: nicotine, caffeine, amphetamine, dextroamphetamine, methylphenidate, 2-oxo-pyrrolidine acetamide. Aaron, my roommate, provided both a route for these to reach me and the worldview that justified them.

“We’re the bottom,” he said, leaning on the arm of our cheap foam-sculpt couch. “You and me and everyone else in this place. If we weren’t, we’d have gone to a real school.”

“We’re at a real school. We’re doing good work here,” I said. We were eating noodles and black sauce that they sold from a cart that passed down the halls of the dorm house, and the smell of something like olives rose from every mouthful.

“Exactly,” Aaron said, stabbing a fork in my direction. “We are keeping up with the most advanced, best-funded schools anywhere. Us, a bunch of basic jump-ups. Our mommies aren’t giving multimillion-dollar grants to the school. We aren’t skating on discoveries made by some department chair seventy years ago. Do you think they have a nanoinformatics program at the École?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling contrary.

“They don’t. We do. Because we *have* to be on the cutting edge to survive. We don’t have status, we don’t have money, we don’t have any of the things you need to get a foot in the door with recruiters or unions or grant specialists. So we make our own.” With this he took a thin case from his pocket and rattled it. “What the others can’t, or won’t, or don’t feel like they need to do is just necessary for us.”

Deep in my chest, a sluggish sense of fairness twitched in its sleep, but I could find no argument against, especially since it seemed as though everyone else in the program agreed. What would make it unfair, I told myself, was if the drugs tilted the playing field. If everyone was using them, then it stayed even.

As my career at the university went on and I came nearer to the knife-edge horizon of graduating, I found myself caring less and less about the fairness of the situation and more and more about my own well-being. Since nanoinformatics was a new program it didn’t have its own permanent faculty. Half of the classes on its requirements list were borrowed from other programs, and the professors often hadn’t tailored the content to include me. In my culmination-level seminar, all of the other half-dozen students were strict biologists working from a shared curriculum that I had only brushed against. Taking focus drugs in that context seemed like the obvious thing.

In my last year, both Aaron and David Artemis Kuhn left. Aaron graduated early with a job offer for a cutting-edge R&D group so deep, even its name was under nondisclosure. Kuhn left to take a tenure-track position at Nankai University on Luna, heading up their nascent nanoinformatics program. I acquired other friends and professors in my time at Tel Aviv, but I found the absence of those two particularly unmooring, and my use of drugs ramped slowly up. I came to include sedatives in my study rituals, telling myself that they helped me rest and recharge. That I enjoyed the sense of release and mindlessness they brought, I chose to interpret as the measure of the stress I was under.

My graduation ceremony took place in a synagogue with white pillars and arches, beautiful sculpture in gold along the walls, and Hebrew script inlaid around the ceiling. The notes of “Auld Lang Syne” reverberated in the space, the melody taking on a depth and gravity I had never ascribed to

it. My body, struggling from the massive nootropic abuse surrounding final examinations compounded by several whisky-and-sodas, punished me with nausea and dizziness. I spent my glorious hour, the pinnacle of my new life, trying not to vomit. I didn't know whether to imagine my mother's spirit viewing me from the afterlife with pride or despair. Afterward, diploma in hand, robes draped from my shoulders, I walked to a public park, sat on a stone bench, and wept, calling my mother's name with an oceanic grief I had avoided for years.

It would be difficult to say which sign of trouble deserved the title "first." When I visited my placement advisor after graduation, I spent an hour explaining to her what my degree entailed and applied to. It left her only slightly better prepared to help me find work. Letters began to arrive—actual physical letters on thin, yellow paper—from the benefits administration office asking whether I would be returning to the basic rolls. My applications to Stravos Group, Beyaz/Siyah, and Unfinished History all brought acknowledgments of receipt, and then nothing.

I laughed it all off for three months. I told myself and my friends that the cutting edge always confused the people who weren't part of it. My advisor's job wasn't to understand me, just to make connections. If she couldn't, other paths existed. I played it as more an inconvenience than a problem, and the prospect of going back on basic as laughable. I had a degree from a recognized university. I had letters of recommendation. The cheap housing, gray-tasting food, recycled clothing, and minimalist medical care of basic marked where I came from, not where I was going. The applications took longer than I'd expected, but I could be patient. I still had six months of supported postgraduate housing, until I had three, and then seven weeks, and then twelve days.

When I could no longer ignore that I would be out of housing allowance before I found employment, my friends had for the most part scattered to new positions of their own. The sense of isolation pressed at the back of my head all through the days and nights. I began growing angry at the slightest provocation.

In practice, the course of study meant to give me the most options had instead left me as the fourth-rank pick for everything behind people who had specialized. And even that was not the worst of my problems. I assumed that after my last exams, my use of nootropics and sedatives would

end more or less of its own accord. The need, after all, evaporated. If now and then I used a tab to help me navigate the surprising complexities of my postgraduation world, others did as much with no stigma or ill effect. Without the drugs, my merely normal cognition felt sluggish and unfocused. And the sedatives were only to make my sleep deeper, more restful, more productive.

The penny dropped for me at a café on Yigal Alon Street where I sat under a copper awning with my hand terminal cradled in my palms. Over a cup of tea and a bit of scone, I reviewed my expenses with an eye toward how I could extend my job search without going on basic. The first-pass numbers felt like a kick in the gut. When I redid the math, I found the same thing. In the months since completing my program, my drug use had gone *up*.

I don't know how long I sat there, the waiter coming by now and again to touch my shoulder and ask if I was well. I remember very clearly that there were two young women at the table beside me planning a wedding while I came to grips with the truths I had denied. I'd exchanged Londrina and life on basic for a degree I couldn't use and a rainbow of addictions. I was, if anything, worse off now than when I had spent my days watching my mother fade into death.

I can't say why at that point I didn't fall into despair. Despair was certainly open to me. In practice, I did not. Instead, I made what I called my rescue plan: a list of fifty work positions that, while they fit poorly with my education and ambitions, would suffice to keep me off basic; a consolidated account with what little actual money remained to me; a month's supply of fruit and whole grain foods; a hotel room where I could sleep and pace and weep while I withdrew. I put in my fifty applications all at once, checked in to my exclusive and unlicensed treatment center overlooking an alleyway, and prepared myself for hell.

I did not sleep for the first week. My body ached like I'd been beaten. My eyes dried until my vision grew blurry. I watched my emotions cycle up and down and up again, the wavelength of my illness growing shorter and shorter until I could no longer tell where in the cycle I was. The cravings were like hunger or thirst or overwhelming lust, and I only postponed acting on them by promising myself that if I still wanted so badly when I was done, I would indulge myself to death. I anticipated my eventual overdose

like a zealot looking forward to Armageddon.

I have no clear memory of the second week. When I came to myself again in the middle of the third week—ten days still remaining on my rented room—I felt weak and hungry and clear headed in a way I had not realized until then how much I missed. My mind was my own. I could not help but think of my mother and the way her disease blinded her to its own symptoms. I understood her better then. My own addiction functioned in a similar way. In the exhaustion of my recovery, I dreamed of finding doors that had been plastered over that opened to rooms I'd had once and forgotten about, filled with books and scientific instruments that I needed and had been unable to locate. The metaphor wasn't subtle. I swore that I would never compromise my mind that way again, though like all such resolutions, I have since broken it profoundly.

With seven days remaining, I bathed, shaved, and took myself out for a meal of eggs and coffee I could barely afford. My time in the underworld nearly over—so I thought—I had to prepare for my return to the world of the living. If there was nothing waiting for me, that meant turning myself over to benefits administration. I cannot express how terrible that option seemed to me, but I was willing to face it, should it prove necessary. I thought I had moved beyond illusions about myself and what I was capable of enduring. That might even have been true. Remembering what I felt then and feeling it again now are very different things, and one is easier than the other.

I had five messages waiting. Four were from the applications I had sent out, two asking for more information about my qualifications, two scheduling interviews. The last, to my surprise, was Aaron returning to my life. His research-and-development gig had come across something that justified bumping up the budget. There were new positions opening up, including a full nanoinformatics team. Later, I would wonder if I saw the changes in him even then. A recording on a terminal can't carry the same weight of nuance as an actual conversation and sociopathy often approaches undetectability, even under the best of circumstances. I hope that I genuinely missed it. If I saw it and chose to edit it out of my perceptions, if the leaping hope in my breast was more important to me than the new-won integrity of my mind, it speaks poorly of me. I would rather be damned as naïve than willfully ignorant.

I responded at once: I would be delighted to talk about work. I told him that, just between the two of us, I'd been in a dry spell, and was even beginning to think that David Artemis Kuhn had led me astray with his professorial charisma and beautiful name. I made a joke of my season in hell, telling him but also not telling him, afraid of what he would think of me. At the time I gave more weight to the opinions of others.

Aaron's response came quickly. He'd spoken to the powers that be, and the project lead wanted to speak with me. He would be reaching out in the next few days. His name, so I could expect it, was Antony Dresden.



The others, even Alberto, didn't really understand what it meant to be research. I do believe that's true. On Thoth Station, we were treated as different—as dangerous—which we were. But their sense of our monstrosity was misplaced. The changes that we went through to become what we became didn't blind us to humanity. Our emotional lives didn't stop. All of us in research suffered the same loves and hopes and jealousies that administration and maintenance and security did. If someone felt flattered or excluded or tired, we saw it just as anyone else might. The difference, and I think it was the only difference, came from not caring anymore.

The confusion rose from metaphors of mental illness. The others thought of research as a collection of borderline autistics, and while there were several who did participate on that spectrum—Owsley in chemical signaling, Arbrecht in modeling—they were not created. They brought their diagnoses to the table with them. The other pigeonhole, sociopathy, was nearer the truth, though I believe there were still some differences.

I remembered caring about people. My mother. Samuel, a boy two years my senior, who was my first lover. Aaron. I remembered caring deeply about whether they were well, whether they suffered, what they thought of me. I remember defining myself by the opinions of people around me. My worth had been determined from without, by how I imagined that I appeared to others. That is what being a social animal is, after all. Emotional and definitional interdependence. I remembered it like

remembering that I once knew a song, but not the melody itself.

Quintana broke my nose.

It was midmorning, as we reckoned such things in the room, and Brown, his precious hand terminal clutched to his breast, had been taken away by the guards again. Alberto and I walked, making a slow circuit of the room for the simple pleasure of feeling my body in motion. I had just reached the corner farthest from the hotel when Quintana walked up to us. The benignity of his expression surprised me at first. I expected rage or sorrow or confusion. Alberto recognized something threatening in Quintana's demeanor before I did. He shouted and tried to push me out of the way, but Quintana stepped in close, twisting his body from the waist. His elbow hit the bridge of my nose with a sound like a wine glass being stepped on: sharp and deep at the same time.

I rolled to my side, uncertain how I'd fallen down. My hands guarded my abused face but didn't touch it. Contact made the pain worse. Blood ran down my cheeks and dampened the collar of my jumpsuit. Shouting voices came at me from a great distance that turned out to be about four meters. Alberto and two of Fong's men wrestled Quintana, pushing him back and away from me. Half a dozen other prisoners ran toward us, to help keep the peace or to watch it being broken. Quintana's voice buzzed with rage so badly I couldn't understand what he was calling me or threatening me with. I rose to my knees and looked up. The Belter guards leaning on the windows above us seemed slightly less bored than usual. One, a woman with short red hair and a tattoo across her chin, smiled at me sympathetically and shrugged. I stood, but the throbbing pain brought me to my knees again.

Quintana turned away, followed by Fong herself to make certain he wouldn't circle back. The others watched them go, then Alberto came to my side.

"I told you war would come out of it."

"You're so very smart," I said, the sound of my voice like something from a child's cartoon.

He took my guarding hands and gently guided them away. "Let's survey the damage," he said. And then, "Oh, darling. You poor thing."

They stuffed my nose with two tampons donated by women in security before we reset it. Our Belter guards never made an appearance. The

politics of the enormous room were our own to work through, and the Belters took no side. Still, when Brown and his escort did come, no one in the room talked about anything but the violence he'd missed.

The guards didn't allow us mirrors. The expressions of the others gave me the nearest thing to a reflection, and from that I assumed I looked pretty rough. Alberto ripped the sleeve from his jumpsuit and dampened it at the showers. My drying blood grew sticky, adhering my suit and beard to my skin and tugging at me when I moved. I sat with my back to the wall, accepting Alberto's ministrations with as much grace as I could muster. I saw Brown approach Fong, watched them speak. Brown kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other and glancing behind him, as if expecting to be Quintana's next target. I waited, still and patient, afraid that any movement on my part would scare him off. Quintana paced at the far end of the room, muttering to himself with several of Fong's security people and Mellin from imaging. Around me, the narrative of the room changed. With Quintana as the villain, I shifted to being the victim. And as the victim, approachable.

"Fong told me what happened. You look like shit," Brown said, establishing dominance before he had to admit weakness.

"I blame myself," I replied, then paused, making it a joke. "No, actually, I blame Quintana."

Alberto, approaching with a freshly dampened rag, caught sight of us, paused, and angled off to sit by himself. Brown lowered himself to sit beside me. "He's always been an asshole."

I grunted my agreement and waited. Brown shifted, fidgeted. A tightness filled my gut, and the certainty that he would offer me his sympathy and walk away filled my throat. I took hold of his arm as if I could keep him there by force, but spoke calmly. "He's been talking to you a lot?"

"They have," he said. "The Martian officer hasn't been there. It's just the Belter guards."

"What do they say?"

"They ask me what it is."

"And what do you tell them?" I asked. When he didn't respond, I tried again. "What is it?"

"It's an elaboration of the original protomolecule sample. You saw that much, didn't you? Before you gave back the terminal?"

“I did,” I said. Candor about that cost me nothing.

“The thing is, they know. I’m sure of it. This isn’t a problem they need to solve. It’s a test. They want to see if we can solve a puzzle they’ve already cracked. They don’t say it, but I can hear them laughing at me.”

That piqued me, but this wasn’t the moment to sit with it. Brown’s open shell gave me my opportunity, and I drove my knife in to keep him from closing again. “Tell them they need two. Tell them to take both of us, and I’ll help.”

I saw the spark of greed in his eyes, his moment of bovine cunning. Once I helped him, I would have no way to enforce any agreement, and so his betrayal of me carried no price. I fought to keep my expression innocent. My wounds and my beard helped with that, I think.

“Thank you, Cortázar,” he said, and drew the hand terminal from his jumpsuit.

I took it from him gently, forcing myself not to grab at it. Under my fingertips, the files bloomed like roses, measurements and images and analytic summaries opening one after the next like diving into an ocean of data. The surface I had skimmed before lay over an abyss, and I fell joyfully into it. Some of the large-scale structures boasted an organic origin: lipid bilayers, proton pumps, something that might once have been a ribosome now altered almost past recognition. That, I believed, had led Brown astray.

He assumed that a cell membrane would be acting as a cell membrane, rather than considering what cell membranes did and how they might be used to some purpose other than simply creating a boundary between things. They could just as easily provide highways for molecules vulnerable to the partial charge of water molecules. Or any polar solvent. Like the optical illusion of faces and vases, the bilayers could define either the volumes separating them or the web of pathways they created. And these were only massive, macro-scale expressions of the information in the initial particles.

I paged through, going deeper, my mind sailing across seas of inference and assumption. Time did not stop so much as become irrelevant. I forgot that Brown was beside me until he touched my shoulder.

“It’s... interesting. Let me see what I can find.”

“Just understand,” he said. “I’m lead.”

“Of course,” I said. As if I could have forgotten.

It took me longer than I would have liked, sitting with the data and dredging up what I could remember of the experiments before. Time had eaten some of my memory and likely falsified some as well. The core of it remained, though. And the sense of wonder so deep it sucked my lungs empty from time to time. But slowly, I found a pattern. The thing at the center. What I thought of as the Queen Bee. While a great many of the structures I was looking at were beyond my understanding—beyond, I thought, any human understanding—there were others that did make some sense. Lattices that mimicked the beta sheets and expanded on them. Complex control and pattern-matching systems that were still just recognizable as brain tissues, two-stage pumps adapted from hearts. And at the center, a particle that nothing led to. A particle that both required and provided a massive amount of energy.

When I realized that the physical dimensions of the structure-particle were macroscopic, the knowledge rushed through me like a flood. I was seeing a stabilizing network that could bring subquantum effects up to a classical scale. A signaling device that ignored the speed of light by shrugging off locality, or possibly a stable wormhole. If I wept, I wept quietly. No one could know what I’d found. Especially not Brown.

Not until I had time to make my alternate.

“There’s no doubt we’re seeing the ruins of Eros,” I said.

“Obviously,” he said, impatient and rightly so.

“But look at these tertiary structures,” I said, pulling up the graphic I’d prepared. “The connection between networks follows the same graph as embryonic profusion.”

“It’s making...”

“An *egg*,” I said.

Brown snatched the hand terminal from me, his eyes jerking back and forth as he compared my graphs. It was a plausible lie, backed by fascinating and evocative correlations that didn’t share a shred of cause. It built on his prejudices of biological structures being used for biological uses. I watched his face as he followed along the arguments I’d constructed to mislead him. He had been desperate for a narrative, and now that I’d given him one, it seemed unlikely that he would see anything else. I don’t know whether relief or awe set his hands to trembling, only that they

trembled.

“This is it,” he said. “This is what gets us out of here.”

I appreciated his use of the plural, and I didn’t for a moment consider it sincere. I clapped him on the shoulder, levered myself up, and left him to convince himself of what he already wanted to believe. The others stood scattered about the room in groups of two and three and four. Whatever they pretended, all attention focused on Brown, and because of him, on me. I reached an open space and considered the observation windows. The Belters looked down on us. On me. Their weirdly large heads, their thin, elongated bodies. Chromosomally, they were as human as I was. What separated each of us—them and me—from the rest of humanity happened at much later stages than the genetic. I caught the eye of a greasy-haired man I recognized as one who had taken Brown to and from his sessions. I lifted my arms in a kind of boast. *I know your secret. I solved your puzzle.*

Brown bonded with the wrong answer. Quintana hadn’t so much as been allowed a glimpse of the dataset. All I needed was for the Martian to ask me as well as Brown, and I would be the one they took. The prisoner they exchanged.

If something still nagged at my hindbrain—the guards hadn’t come when Quintana stole the terminal, the Martian hadn’t been there during Brown’s questioning—it had no form, and so I pushed it away. But there was a moment, that hypnagogic shift where the thoughts of the day faded into dream and the guards of rationality fell.

The poisoned thought crept in upon me then, and I went from my half doze to a cold terror in less than a heartbeat.

“It’s okay,” Alberto said. “It’s a nightmare. They’re watching him.” I looked down at him, my heart beating so violently I thought it might fail. In the shadows, Alberto rolled his eyes and turned his back to me, his head pillowed by his arm. It took me a moment to understand his assumption. He thought I feared Quintana. He was mistaken.

The filthy thought that had slipped into me was this: If the Belters were negotiating a trade of prisoners with Mars then they might well still be enemies. If they were enemies, the Belters would want to give over whatever they had with the least intrinsic value. The Belter guards had questioned Brown twice now, without the Martian present. They might very well be probing not to see whether he had divined the secrets the data held,

but to determine that he couldn't.

By trotting out my idiotic egg hypothesis, Brown might prove to our guards that he would be of the least use to their enemies. Or Quintana, by his violence and ham-handed duplicity, might convince them that Mars wouldn't be able to work with such a fragile and volatile ego.

I'd plotted my course assuming that being competent, insightful, and easy to work with would bring reward.

I astonished myself. To have come so far, through so much, and still be so naïve...



"Say I'm developing a veterinary protocol for... I don't know. For horses. Should I start by trying it in pigeons?" Antony Dresden asked. He was a handsome man, and radiated charisma like a fire shedding heat. Protogen's intake facility looked more like a high-end medical clinic than an administrative office. Small, individual rooms with medical bays, autodocs, and a glass wall facing a nurses' station outside able to look in on them all, panopticon style. The company logo and motto—*First. Fastest. Furthest.*—were in green inlay on the walls.

The language in my contract mentioned a properly supervised medical performance regimen, and I assumed this had to do with that, but it still felt odd.

"I'd probably recommend trying it in horses," I said.

"Why?"

"Because that's the animal you're trying to develop a protocol for," I said, my voice turning up at the end of the sentence as if it were a question.

Dresden's smile encouraged me. "The pigeon data wouldn't tell me just as much?"

"No, sir. Pigeons and horses are very different animals. They don't work the same ways."

"I agree. So do you think animal testing is ethical?"

"Of course it is," I said.

"Why?" The sharpness of the word unnerved me. My belly tightened and I found myself plucking at my hands.

“We need to know that drugs and treatments are safe before we start human testing,” I said. “The amount of human suffering that animal testing prevents is massive.”

“So the ends justify the means?”

“That seems a provocative way to phrase it, but yes.”

“Why not for horses?”

I shifted. The wax paper on the examination table crinkled under me. I had the sense that this was a trick, that I was in some kind of danger, but I couldn’t imagine any other answer. “I don’t understand,” I said.

“That’s okay,” Dresden said. “This is an intake conversation. Purely routine. Do you think a rat is the same as a human being?”

“I think it’s often close enough for preliminary data,” I said.

“Do you think rats are capable of suffering?”

“I think there is absolutely an ethical obligation to avoid any unnecessary suffering—”

“Not the question. Are they capable of suffering?”

I crossed my arms. “I suppose they are.”

“But their suffering doesn’t matter as much as ours,” Dresden said. “You seem uncomfortable. Did I say something to make you uncomfortable?”

At the nurses’ station, a man glanced up, catching my gaze, and then looked away. The autodoc in the wall chimed in a calm tritone. “I don’t see the point of the question, sir.”

“You will,” he said. “Don’t worry about it. We’re just getting a baseline for some things. Pupil dilation, eye movement, respiration. You’re not in any danger. Let me make a suggestion. Just see how you respond to it?”

“All right.”

“The idea that animal suffering is less important than human suffering is a religious one. It assumes a special creation, and that we—you and I—are different *in kind* than other animals. We are *morally* separate from rats or horses or chimps, not based on any particular physical difference between us, but just because we claim that we’re sacred by our nature and have dominion over them. It’s a story we tell that lets us do what we do. Consider the question without that filter, and it looks very different.

“You said there’s an ethical obligation to avoid unnecessary suffering. I agree. That’s why getting good data is our primary responsibility. Good experimental design, deep datasets, parallel studies whenever they don’t

interfere. Bad data is just another way of saying needless suffering. And torturing rats to see how humans would respond? It's *terrible* data because rats aren't humans any more than pigeons are horses."

"Wait, so you're... are you saying that skipping animal testing entirely and going straight to human trials is... is *more ethical*?"

"We are the animal we're trying to build a protocol for. It's where we'd get the best data. And better data means less suffering in the long run. More *human* suffering, maybe, but less suffering *overall*. And we wouldn't have to labor under the hypocrisy of understanding evolution and also pretending there's some kind of firewall between us and other mammals. That sounds restful, don't you think?" The autodoc chimed again. Dresden looked at it and smiled. "Great. So tell me only the good things you remember about your mother." At my horrified look, he smiled and waved the comment away. "No, I'm joking. I don't need to know that."

Dresden turned to the glass wall and gestured. A young woman in a lab coat with a stethoscope around her neck like a torc came in and guided me gently back to prone. As she did Dresden leaned against the wall, casual and at ease.

"This is part of our proprietary research regimen," he said. "Performance enhancement strategies. The thing that gives us our edge."

Looking back now, I believe I felt something like fear in that moment. A sense that important decisions were being made that I was only dimly aware of. Dresden's smile and the doctor's nonchalance seemed to belie that feeling, but for a moment I almost demanded that they stop, that they let me leave.

I'm not sure if that memory is true, but fear tends to be the thing I feel and remember most acutely now, so that leads me to believe it is.

Before I could act on my fear, the doctor leaned in close to me. She smelled of lilacs. "You might feel a little odd," she said. "Can you please count backward from twenty?"

I did, the autodoc clicking and shifting on the wall as the numbers grew smaller and smaller. At twelve I stuttered, lost myself. The doctor said something, but I couldn't make sense of her words or find any of my own. Dresden answered her, and the ticking stopped. The doctor smiled at me. She had very kind eyes. Sometime later—a minute, an hour—language came back to me. Dresden was still there.

“The preliminary we’re doing here is magnetic. It suppresses some very specific, targeted areas of your brain. Reduces fixity. Some of our staff finds that it helps them see things they wouldn’t have otherwise.”

“It feels...”

“I know,” he said, tapping his temple. “I did it too.”

I sat up. A feeling of almost superhuman clarity washed through me. A calm like the sea after a storm smoothed my muscles. It was better than all the drugs I’d taken at the university—the focus of the nootropics, the euphoria of the sedatives. I remember thinking at the time *Ooh, this could get addictive*. Whatever fear I might have felt no longer seemed important.

“It’s nice,” I said.

“So tell me,” he said. “Is animal testing ethical? Or does it make more sense to skip to human trials?”

I blinked at him, and then I laughed. I remembered the distress I’d felt when he’d asked the same thing just minutes before, but I no longer experienced it. A clarity and calm took that space for its own, and the relief felt joyful, like I’d just heard the punch line to the best joke ever. I couldn’t stop giggling. That was the moment I became *research*. I have never regretted it.

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention, but it is the mother of any number of other things as well: sacrifice and monstrosity and metamorphosis. Necessity is the mother of all necessary things, to coin a tautology. I gave my permission to make the change permanent that afternoon without ever dipping back into my previous cognitive states. I didn’t miss or want them. Excitement fizzed in my belly; freedom as I’d never known it sang in my blood. A burden I hadn’t known I was carrying vanished, and my mind became sharper, able to reach into places that shame or guilt or neurosis would have kept me from before. I didn’t want to be what I had previously been any more than a depressive would long for despair.

And anyway, as Dresden said, we at Protogen weren’t concerned with remaking the destiny of rats and pigeons.

I left Earth for the first time when I shipped to Phoebe. All I knew of the planets and dwarf planets and moons that made the habitable human system—Mars, Ceres, Pallas, Ganymede—I learned from watching the feeds. The politics of the alliance between Earth and Mars, the dangers posed by the

Outer Planets Alliance and other Belter resistance groups. The story of mankind's torturous reach out into the vast emptiness of the system formed a complex story that felt as removed from my experience as the crime dramas and musical comedies that appeared on the same feeds as the news. Phoebe Station wasn't even among that number.

An obscure moon of Saturn, it began as a cometary object that found itself trapped by the gas giant's gravity as it passed by, presumably from the Kuiper Belt. It stood out from the other moons, four times as far from the planet as the next nearest. Its retrograde orbit and the lampblack darkness of its surface gave it a sense of menace. Phoebe, the ill-omened moon.

The alien weapon.

Tucked within the planetesimal's icy layers, the joint research group—Protogen and the Martian Naval Scientific Service—had found tiny reactive particles the size, roughly, of a midrange virus, but with a design structure and informational depth unlike anything Earth's biosphere had ever imagined. The protomolecule, we called it, branding it immediately in a territorial move that irritated the Martian scientists. We ignored their protests as irrelevant.

Our best guess was that it had been sent from some distance we couldn't guess at a time when a defined cell membrane stood as the heights of terrestrial life. The protomolecule appeared to be a message in a bottle, but one that included its own grammar books and instruction tutorials, ready to teach whatever aboriginal cells it found how to become the things it required. We argued whether something as inert as a spore might be intelligent, at least implicitly, but without coming to a conclusion. The first evidence of a tree of life apart from our own enchanted and confounded us. Me.

The base itself showed its military origins in its bones. The corridors, hardened to shield us all from the void's vicious background radiation, were in the colors of the Martian navy. Each hallway bore the identification marks that told installation order, structural specifications, location within the base, and the date on which it needed replacement. The walls sported the same anti-spalling coatings as the ships. The food in the mess tasted of Mars: hot chile peppers, hydroponic fruit, ramen noodles in vacuum-sealed pouches, daily low-g pharmaceuticals. We had no extra space. The rooms I'd had on basic were larger than the cells I lived in there: a rack of bunks

four high with a shared head so small that I braced my knees against the opposite wall every time I used the toilet. Of my eighty-five kilograms, I felt a little over three. Exercise took almost a third of the day, the lab a third, eating and sleeping and showering in the tight steel-and-ceramic shower a third.

The Protogen nanoinformatics team there claimed only four seats: Trinh, Quintana, Le, and myself. Mars had a matching number who joined us. The others would join in later, when we shifted to Thoth Station, though by then the Martian contingent would no longer be in play. The rest of the research team wasn't more than fifty, all told. With our counterparts from Mars and the naval support staff, Phoebe Base was a few hundred people on a black snowball so far from Earth that the sun would have been no more than the brightest star if we had ever looked for it.

If I chose a time in my life to return to, a high-water mark, those months on Phoebe would be it. The protomolecule astounded me every day. The depth of information in it, the elegance of its utterly minimal quasi-flagella, the eerie way it self-organized. One day I would convince myself that we were looking at something like a hive of termites, the next a colony of mold spores, the next neurons in a weird distributed brain. I struggled to find analogies, to make what I saw in the scanners fit into what I already knew. Every night, I slipped into my bunk, strapping myself down with wide padded straps to keep from throwing myself out with an unintentional twitch, and thought of what I'd seen and heard, what tricks the protomolecule had performed that day. We were all of us in research quivering with the sense of being just a moment from revelation.

When the news came from Dresden's office of the second- and third-phase plans, I felt like the universe had leaned down and kissed my cheek. The opportunity to see what the protomolecule chose to do with large-scale structures was the best thing I could have imagined. The prospect filled me to the point of spilling over, and then filled me some more.

We killed the Martians in the middle of my work shift. It had all been plotted out, of course. Planned in back channels where our partners wouldn't hear us. When the moment came, I left my desk, moving toward the head, but paused to key in the override sequence. The Martians didn't notice anything. Not right away. And by the time they did, it was too late. We infected them and trapped them in a sealed level 4 containment lab.

Watching the initial infection stages work on humans set the course for everything that would come later, but we couldn't afford to let the transformation fully run its course in a location we didn't control. So once we had our early-stage data, we gassed them and then burned the bodies.

When the *Anubis* arrived to retrieve the team and our precious samples, I walked to the dock with an odd wistfulness but also with a sense of anticipation. On the one hand, I'd loved my time there, and I would never again walk through these corridors. On the other, the experiment rising on my personal horizon promised to crack open everything we understood about the universe. I anticipated seeing the fascinating little particles arrange themselves, expressing layers of implicit information like a lotus eternally blooming.

When the ship left, the plume of our fusion drive finished sterilizing the base. The dataset we took from the infected Martians, while interesting and evocative, suffered from a relatively small absolute biomass. Phoebe base was smaller than a city elementary school, and our analyses strongly suggested that the protomolecule went through behavioral phase changes with increased mass as profound as a switch between states of matter.

In the ship burning toward Thoth Station, the team sat in the galley, putting up models to show how the men and women we'd recently shared meals and sometimes bunks with had been infected, disassembled, and repurposed into larger-scale tools to express the protomolecule's same underlying information structure. Trinh maintained that her data scheme outperformed Quintana's and she did so with a ferocity that ended with her stabbing a fork into his thigh and being confined to quarters. There were also rumors of assaults among the other research groups, the natural expression, I thought, of the excitement and stress we had all been under. I was almost certainly projecting, but I couldn't help comparing us to our subject. All of us in research had become exotics, and with time and changing environments, we—like it—would reassemble and reconfigure and become something unpredictable and possibly glorious.

We had almost reached the flip-and-burn at the middle of our transit when it occurred to me that the vast sorrow I had carried with me since the day my mother dropped the glass was gone. I could think of her now without weeping, without wanting to bury myself in activity or anesthetize myself with drugs. I didn't know if it was because I had finished the natural

progression of grief, or if the process of becoming *research* had burned the ability to feel that guilt and horror out of me.

Either way, it was a good sign.



I didn't sleep again that night, though occasional slips of dream assaulted me when I slipped into a light doze. In these I searched an empty room for something precious I knew belonged there. In the periods when full wakefulness pinched me, I wrestled with strategies and second guesses. The prohibition against changing a first answer served me well in university, as it had generations of students before. Now and here, the certainty that change offered me my only hope seemed obvious and suspect and obvious again, switching valence sometimes with every breath. The urge to run to Brown and destroy the arguments I'd made before, show him the real truth behind the data on his hand terminal, warred with the fear that doing so condemned me to life and death in the room. I remembered old comedy routines about intellectuals overthinking problems: I know, but he knows I know, but I know he knows I know, and on and on until subtlety iterated itself into the absurd.

Brown suffered none of it. All that morning he walked through the room, smiling and nodding to our fellow prisoners. Quintana sulked in a far corner of the room, sitting by himself and glowering across the emptiness at us. He stayed too far away for me to make out his features, but I imagined him in a permanent scowl. Alberto tried to engage me in conversation, concerned, I think, by my sullenness.

When the doors opened and the guards appeared carrying our morning meals of textured yeast protein in the spun-starch boxes that we ate as dessert, a spike of cold horror split me, and I came to my decision. Brown trotted toward them, beaming. I ran across to him, waving my arms to catch his attention, and coincidentally the guards' and Fong's as well. That my action aided Quintana's plan only became clear later. It wasn't my intention.

"I was wrong," I said plucking Brown's sleeve like a child imploring his father. "It came to me last night. I was wrong."

"No, you weren't," Brown said, his tone impatient. "I went over all of

it.”

“Not all. There’s more. I know more. I can *show* you.”

A tall woman with hundreds of tiny black moles dotting her face led the guards. I knew her as I knew all the Belter guards: as a force of nature imposed on us. Still, I’d seen her enough for the familiarity of her face to let me read the curiosity in her. I plucked Brown’s sleeve more anxiously, trying to draw him away, out of her earshot. The conviction that the Belters would give the Martian the worst, not the best, of research seemed self-evident now. I feared letting her hear me say something that might suggest I knew the truth. Brown didn’t move, so I leaned in closer to him.

“It’s not an egg,” I hissed. “It’s the support frame for a stable nonlocality. Something to pass information. Maybe even mass. It only looks biological because it co-opted biological material.”

For the first time, I saw doubt flicker in Brown’s eyes. I hoped that truth would be enough to sway his certainty. “Bullshit,” he said. I’d done my work too well.

“Do an implicit structure analysis,” I said. “Look at the membranes as pathways, not walls. See how the resonances reinforce. The protomolecule *opened* something. It’s not an alien, it’s a way for the aliens to talk to us. Or to *get* here. Don’t trust me. Look at the *data*.”

Brown looked deeply into my eyes, as if he could measure my sincerity from my pupils. A voice behind us rose in a weirdly strangled cry, and I turned toward it.

That is the last clear memory I have for a time.

I had never been stabbed before. It wasn’t at all what I would have guessed. My recollection is of a sudden impact driving me up and off my feet. Very loud shouting, very far away as multiple voices barked conflicted orders, though to whom I couldn’t say. The unmistakable and assaulting noise of gunfire. Lying on the deck, looking up at the empty row of observation windows, convinced that I’d been hit or kicked hard enough to break one of my ribs, then putting my hand to my side and finding it bloody and reaching the conclusion that, no, I’d been shot. Quintana, four meters away, his head and chest mutilated by bullets. I have a vivid image of Fong standing over his body with a pistol in her hand, but I’m almost certain of that memory’s falsehood. I can’t imagine the Belter guards suffering us to be armed, even if we shared a common enemy.

Other shards of my memory of the attack, though more plausible, have nothing I can attach them to. Alberto with his hands in bloody fists. The Belter guards pressing their bodies over mine, to protect me or subdue me or stanch the bleeding. The smell of gun smoke. The gritty feel of the floor against my cheek and hands. Perhaps normal people take these things and weave them into a coherent narrative, like making sense of a particularly surreal dream. For me, they simply exist. The prospect of a discontinuous cognitive life holds no terror for me, or, I suspect, for anyone in research.

Afterward, I heard the story told: Quintana's battle cry, his rush toward us. According to Navarro, he pushed Brown out of the way in order to reach me. The Belter guards shot Quintana to death, and afterward the mole-speckled woman stood over his body cursing in the incomprehensible argot of her people and shouting into her radio. Brown, they rushed away, out the door and into whatever rooms they used to protect and isolate him from us. The medical team that treated me arrived quickly, but didn't evacuate me. I lay first on the floor and then one of the crash couches. Quintana's improvised knife, a length of steel pried from the base of a couch, inserted just below my ribs on the right, angling up toward my liver. A few more centimeters and my chances of survival would have fallen drastically, but they didn't. I found it difficult to focus on things that might have happened, knowing as I did that they hadn't. But that came later.

At first I slept in a narcotic cloud like a physical memory of university. When I woke, Alberto lay curled beside me, his body feeling oddly cold, though in fact it was my fever that made it seem that way. For two more days, I rested and slept, Belter medics coming both with and between meals to switch out supply packs on the autodoc they had strapped to my arm. When I asked them where Brown was, what was happening with him, they answered with evasions or pretended I hadn't spoken. The only information I gleaned in those terrible days was once, when I demanded to know, weeping, if he'd gone, and one of the medics twitched her head in an almost subliminal *no*. I told myself she'd meant that he was still on the station rather than the equally plausible negatives that she didn't know or she wouldn't answer or I shouldn't ask. Hope survives even stretched to a single molecule's thickness.

The room spoke of nothing but the attack during all the time Brown remained absent, even—perhaps especially—when they spoke of something

else. Just before lights-out, Ma and Coombs fought, shouting at each other for the better part of an hour over whether Ma had taken too long a shower. Bhalki, who usually kept to herself, approached Enz, talking tearfully for hours on end, and wound up in the hotel with loud and unpleasant-sounding intercourse. Navarro and Fong put together patrols that, in a population now under three dozen, felt both ridiculous and threatening. All of it was about the attack, though I didn't understand the complexity of it until Alberto held forth on the subject.

"Grief makes people crazy," he said. We were sharing a container of white kibble that looked like malformed rice and tasted like the unholy offspring of a chicken and a mushroom.

"*Grief?*" I must have sounded outraged at the thought, and in fairness, I was a little. Alberto rolled his eyes and waved the heat of my reply away.

"Not for Quintana. Not for the man, anyway. It's the *idea* of him. We were thirty-five people. Now we're thirty-four. Sure, the one we lost was an asshole. That's not the point. It was the same for Kanter. Every time one of us dies, it will be the same. We are all less in ourselves because we're less together. They aren't mourning him. They're mourning themselves and all the lives they could have had if we weren't stuck in here. Quintana's just a reminder of that."

"For whom the bell tolls? Well, that's a thought. Thirty-six," I said, and Alberto frowned at me. "You said we were thirty-five down to thirty-four, but there were thirty-six of us."

"No one counts Brown anymore," Alberto said. He took a mouthful of kibble using his index and middle fingers as a spoon, then sucked the food between his cheek and his teeth, pulling out the broth before swallowing the greasy remnant. It was the best way to eat Belter kibble. "They would be mourning you, if you'd gone," he said, and turned to me. There were tears in his eyes. "I would be."

I didn't know if he meant gone the way they assumed Brown to be already apart from the group, or dead like Quintana, but I didn't ask for clarification. Perhaps leaving the room by dying out of it or being traded to the Martian were interchangeable for the people left behind. I guessed that was Alberto's point.

We put the rest of the kibble aside and lay together, his weight on my left to keep the wound in my side from hurting. Between my own

discomfort, the uncertainty over Brown's status, and—unaccountably to me—Van Ark and Fong weeping loudly through the night, I slept poorly. And in the morning, Brown came back.

When the lights came on and the doors opened, he walked in with the guards. The time he'd spent sequestered had changed him. The others crowded around him, but he extricated himself from them and came to me. The brightness in his eyes reminded me of our best days on Phoebe and Thoth Station. I stood as he approached, and he grabbed my shoulder, pulling me away where the guards and the others couldn't hear us.

"You're *right*," he said. "It took me three days to find the fucker, but you're *right*."

"Did you tell them?"

"I did," he said. "They confirmed. When I get out, I swear to God, I will —"

The shout of the Belter guard interrupted us. The large, gray-haired man led the group today, and he strode toward us with his assault rifle drawn. "Genug la tué! No talking, sabé?"

Brown turned toward the guard. "This is the other nanoinformatics. I need to—" The guard pushed him aside with a gentleness more dismissive than violence.

"You come you," the guard said to me, gesturing with the barrel of his gun. My heart bloomed; my blood turned to light and poured out through the capillaries in my eyes and mouth. I became a thing of fire and brightness. Or that was how it felt.

"Me?" I said, but the guards didn't speak again, only formed a square around me and ushered me away. I looked over my shoulder as the doors closed behind me to see Brown and Alberto standing together watching me in slack-jawed astonishment. Mourning, I supposed, the lives they could have had. The doors closed on them. Or else on me.

The guards didn't talk to me and I didn't engage with them as they led me through the station corridors. The chamber they delivered me to boasted a laminate bamboo table, four cushioned chairs, and a carafe of what appeared to be iced tea. At the gray man's nod, I took a seat. A few minutes later a woman came in. From the darkness of her hair and the shape of her eyes, I knew her family had been East Asian once. From her body and the slightly enlarged head, I knew they were Belters now.

“Dr. Cortázar,” she said. Unlike the others, her accent was as soft as a broadcast feed’s talking head. “I’m sorry we haven’t spoken before. My name is Michio Pa.”

“Pa,” I said, assuming from her military bearing that she was not a first-name sort. Her slight smile suggested I’d guessed correctly. The gray man said something in Belter polyglot too fast for me to follow and Pa nodded.

“Am I correct that you’ve had an opportunity to review the same data as Dr. Brown?”

I folded my hands in my lap, squeezing my knuckles until they hurt. “He let me look at it, yes.”

“Were you able to draw any conclusions?”

“I was,” I said.

Pa poured out glasses of tea for the both of us and then pulled up a virtual display. I recognized the data structures as I would have a lover’s face. “What do you make of it?”

I felt the trembling as if it rose up from the station itself, and not my own body. I drew in a shuddering breath. “Based on the profusion rate data and the internal structures, I believe the latent information within the protomolecule is expressing something similar in function to an egg.”

Her smile pitied me. “Walk me through that.”

I did, recounting for her all that I’d already said to Brown, back when I’d meant to make him out the fool. I wore my invisible jester’s cap well; I capered and grew excited. By the end, I managed to half-convince myself that everything I said was possible. That the gate—I never called it that—might *also* be an egg. The most effective lies, after all, convince the liar.

When I finished, she nodded. “Thank you.”

“You can’t give them Brown,” I said. “He did liaison duty. The real work belonged to us. Send me instead.”

“We’re considering how to go forward.” She rose, and I moved to her, taking her hand.

“If you put me in the room again, he’ll kill me.”

She paused. “Why do you say that?”

“He’s from the research group.”

“So are you.”

It took me long seconds to put words to something so obvious. “It’s what I would do.”



After the squalor and close quarters of Phoebe, the spacious, well-lit corridors of Thoth Station felt like distilled luxury. Wide, white halls that curved with a near-organic grace. Team workspaces and individual carrels both. I slept in a private room no larger than a medieval monk's cell, but I shared it with no one. I ate cultured steak as tender and rich as the best that Earth had to offer and drank wine indistinguishable from the real thing. The local climate, free from the temperature inertia carried by Phoebe's eight quadrillion tons of ice, remained balmy and pleasant.

Thoth boasted a research staff larger and better qualified than the universities on Earth or Luna, and the equal of even the best on Mars. The nanoinformatics team grew larger than before, even counting the loss of our Martian naval colleagues. Instead of only Trinh and Le and Quintana, I could now talk through my ideas about the protomolecule with a professional musician turned information engineer named Bouthers and an ancient-looking woman named Althea Ecco, who I didn't realize for almost a week authored half of my textbooks from Tel Aviv. And Lodge, and Kenzi, and Yacobsen, and Al-Farmi, and Brown. We sat up nights in the common rooms, mixing now and then with the other groups: biochemistry, signaling theory, morphology, physical engineering, chemical engineering, logical engineering, and on and on until it seemed like Thoth represented every specialty that cutting-edge research could invent. Like the coffeehouses of Muslim Spain, we created civilization among ourselves. Or at least it felt that way. It might only have been the romance of the times.

Everyone in research had undergone the treatment, which admittedly posed some problems. Singh in computational biology held forth on her theory of the protomolecule as a Guzman-style quantum computer one night over dinner, and when Kibushi used the information without citing her, she snuck into the showers at the gymnasium and beat him to death with a ceramic workbench cap. After that, security kept a closer eye on us all, but they also switched to nonlethal weapons. Singh, while formally reprimanded by Dresden, kept her status on her team. It only tended to confirm what we all already knew: Morality as we had known it no longer applied to us. We had become too important for consequences.

We prepared then and we waited, the tension of every day growing more refined and exquisite. Rumors swirled of the sample going awry and being recovered, of information ops plans put in place to distract any possible regulatory bodies from our work until they also understood the transcendent importance of what we would have accomplished, of our sister research stations on Io and Osiris Station and the smaller projects they were engaged with. None of it mattered. Even the greatest war in human history would have been paltry compared with our work. To bend the protomolecule to our own will, to direct the flow of information now as whatever alien brilliance had done before, opened the concept of humanity beyond anything that even we were capable of imagining. If we managed what we hoped, the sacrifice of Eros Station would unlock literally anything we could imagine.

The prospect of the protomolecule's designers arriving to find humans unprepared for their invasion gave us—or me at any rate—that extra chill of fear. I had no compunctions, no sense of regret. I'd had it burned out of me. But I believe that even if I'd refused the procedure, I would have done precisely as I did. I'm smart enough to know that this is almost certainly not true, but I believe it.

The word came nearly at the end of shift one day: Eros would be online in seventeen hours.

No one slept that night. No one even tried. I ate dinner—chicken fesenjan and jeweled rice—with Trinh and Lodge, the three of us leaning over the tall, slightly wobbly table and talking fast, as if we could will time to pass more quickly. On other nights we would have gone back to our rooms, let ourselves be locked in by security, watched whatever entertainments the heavily censored company feeds provided. That night we went back to the labs and worked a full second shift. We checked all our connection arrays, ran sample sets, prepared. When the data came in, it would be as a broadcast, available everywhere. We only had to listen, and so tracking us through that signal became impossible. The price of this anonymity was high. There would be no rerunning a missed sample, no second chances. The equipment on Eros—both the most important and the most vulnerable—lay beyond our control, so we obsessed over what we could reach.

My station, and the center of my being, had a wall-size screen, a

multiple-valence interface, and the most comfortable chair I have ever had. The water tasted of cucumber, citrus, and oxiracetam. The stations for Le, Lodge, and Quintana shared my space, the four of us facing away from each other in a floor plan like the petals of a very simple flower. Eros had a million and a half people in an enclosed environment, seven thousand weather-station-style data collection centers in the public corridors, and Protogen-coded software updates on all the asteroid station's environmental controls, including the air and water recycling systems. Each of us waited for the data to come, hungry for the cells in our databases to begin filling, the patterns we felt certain would be there to emerge.

Every minute lasted two. My sleep-deprived body seemed to vibrate in my chair, as if my blood had found the perfect resonance frequency for the room and would slowly tear it apart. Le sighed and coughed and sighed again until the only things that kept me from attacking her out of raw annoyance were the security guard outside our door and the certainty it would mean missing the beginning of our data stream.

Quintana cheered first, and then Le, and then all of us together, howling with joy that felt sweeter for being so long delayed. The data poured in, filling the cells of our analytic spreadsheets and databases. For those first beautiful hours, I traced the changes on a physical map of Eros Station. The protomolecule activity began at the shelters that we'd converted to incubators, feeding the smart particles with the radiation that seemed to best drive activity. It spread along the transit tunnels, out to the casino levels, the maintenance tunnels, the docks. It eddied through the caves of Eros like a vast breath, the greatest act of transformation in the history of the human race and the tree of life from which it sprang, and I—along with a handful of others—watched it unfold in an awe that approached religious ecstasy.

I want to say that I honored the sacrificed population, that I took a moment in my heart to thank them for the contribution they were all unwittingly making for the future that they left behind. The sort of thing you're trained to say about any lab animals advanced enough to be cute. And maybe I did, but my fascination with the protomolecule and its magic—that isn't too strong a word—overwhelmed any sentimentality I had about our methods.

How long did it take before we understood how badly we'd underestimated the task? In my memory, it is almost instantaneous, but I

know that isn't true. Certainly for the first day, two days, three, we must have withheld judgment. So little time afforded us—meaning me—only a very narrow slice of the overall dataset. But too soon, the complexity on Eros outstripped us. The models based on examinations in the lab and the human exposure on Phoebe returned values that seesawed between incomprehensible and trivial. The protomolecule's ability to make use of high-level structures—organs, hands, brains—caught me off guard. The outward aspect of the infection skipped from being explicable in terms of simple cause-and-effect, through the intentional stance, and into a kind of beautiful madness. *What is it doing to what does it want to what is it doing again.* I kept diving through the dataset, trying one analytical strategy and then another, hoping that somewhere in the numbers and projections I would find it looking back out at me. I didn't sleep. I ate rarely. The others followed suit. Trinh suffered a psychotic break, which proved something of a blessing as it marked the end of her coughing and sighs.

Listening to the voices of Eros—human voices of the subjects preserved even as the flesh had been remade, reconfigured—I came to grips with the truth. Too many simplifying assumptions, too little imagination on our part, and the utter alienness of the protomolecule conspired to overthrow all our best intentions. The behavior of the particles had changed not only in scale but in kind and continued to do so again at increasingly narrow intervals. The sense of watching a countdown grew into a certainty, though to what, I couldn't say.

I should probably have been afraid.

With every new insight in the long, unbroken stretch of consciousness that predates even humanity, a first moment comes. For an hour or a day or a lifetime, something new has come into the world. Recognized or not, it exists in only one mind, secret and special. It is the bone-shaking joy of finding a novel species or a new theory that explains previously troubling data. The sensation can range from something deeper than orgasm to a small, quiet, rapturous voice whispering that everything you'd thought before was wrong.

Someone would have to be brilliant and driven and above all lucky to have even a handful of moments like that in the span of a stellar and celebrated career. I had five or six of them every shift. Each one felt better than love, better than sex, better than drugs. The few times I slept, I slept

through dreams of pattern matching and data analysis and woke to the quivering promise that this time, today, the insight might come that made it all make sense. The line that connected the dots. All the dots. Forever. I lived on the edge of revelation like I could dance in flames and not burn. When the end came, it surprised me.

It found me in my cell, silent in the dark, not awake and not asleep, the bed cradling me in its palm like an acorn. The sharp scent of the air recycler's fresh filters reminded me of rain. The voices I heard—clipped, angry syllables—I ascribed to the combination of listening to Eros for hours on end and the hypnagogic twilight of my mind. When the door opened and the three men from security hauled me out, I could almost have believed it was part of my dream. Seconds later, the alarms shrieked.

I still don't know how the Belters discovered Thoth Station. Some technical failure, some oversight that left the trail that came to us, the inevitable information leakage that comes from working with people. Station security pushed us like cattle, hurrying us down the corridors. I assumed our path ended in evacuation craft. It didn't.

In the labs, they lined us up at our workstations. Fong commanded the group in my room. It was the first time I'd recognized her as anything but another anonymous extension of the lump of biomass and demands that was security. She gestured to our workstations with her nonlethal riot gun. All their weapons were designed for controlling research, not defending the station.

"Purge it," Fong said. "Purge everything."

She might as well have told us to chew our fingers off. Lodge crossed her arms. Quintana spat on the floor. Fear glinted in Fong's eyes, but we defied her. It felt like nobility at the time. Ten minutes later, the Belters broke through. They wore no standard uniform, carried no unified weapons. They shouted and screamed in shattered bits of half a dozen languages. A young man with tattoos on his face led the charge. I watched Fong's eyes as she reached her conclusion and lifted her hands over her head. We did as she did, and the Belters surrounded us, peppering us with questions I couldn't follow and whooping in a violence-drunk delight.

They threw me to the deck and tied my hands behind my back. Two of them carried Le away as she threatened them with extravagant violence. I don't know what happened to her after that. I never saw her again. I lay

with my cheek pressed to the floor harder than I thought the low gravity would allow. I watched their boots and listened to the chatter of their voices. At my workstation, an analysis run ended with a chime and waited for attention that would never come.

Less than two meters from me, the new interpretation that might have been the one, that might have cracked open the mystery, waited for my eyes, and I couldn't get to it. In that moment, I understood fully the depth of the abyss before me. I begged to look at the results. I whined, I wept, I cursed. The Belters ignored me.

Hours later, they hauled me to the docks and into a hastily rigged holding cell. A man with a hand terminal and an accent almost too thick to parse demanded my name and identification. When I told him I didn't have a union representative to contact, he asked if I had family. I said no to that too. We burned at something like a third of a g, but without a hand terminal or access to a control panel, I lost track of time quickly. Twice a pair of young men came and beat me, shouting threats to do worse. They stopped only when the larger of the two started weeping and couldn't be consoled.

I recognized the docking maneuvers only by the shifting vectors of the ship. We had arrived at wherever we were going, for however long we were meant to stay there. Guards came, hauled me out, shoved me in a line with others from Thoth. They marched us as prisoners. Or animals. I felt the loss of the experiment like mourning a death, only worse. Because out there, like hell being the absence of God, the experiment was still going on but it had left me behind.

They kept us in an enormous room.



“How could she not know?” Michio Pa asked me. “If she was dropping glasses and things, she had to notice.”

“One of the features of the illness is that she wasn't able to be aware of the deficits. It's part of the diagnosis. Awareness is a function of the brain just like vision or motor control or language. It isn't exempt from being broken.”

The conference room had a table; soft, indirect lighting; eight chairs

built for longer frames than my own; a nonluminous screen displaying Leonardo da Vinci's sketch of a fetus in the womb; two armed guards on either side of the double doors leading to the hall; Michio Pa wearing sharply tailored clothes that mimicked a military uniform without being one; and me. A carafe of fresh water sat in the center of the table, sweating, four squat glasses beside it. Anxiety played little arpeggios on my nerves.

"So the illness made it so she couldn't see what the illness was doing to her?"

"It was harder for me than her, I think," I said. "From outside, I could see what had happened to her. What she'd lost. She caught glimpses now and then, I think, but even those didn't seem to stay with her."

Pa tilted her head. I recognized that she was an attractive woman, though I felt no attraction to her and saw none in her toward me. Something focused her on me, though. If not attraction, fascination maybe. I couldn't imagine why.

"Do you worry about that?"

"No," I said. "They screened me when I was still on basic. I don't have that allele. I won't develop her illness."

"But something else, something that acts the same way..."

"I went through something like it in college. I won't be doing that again," I said and laughed.

Her eyelids fluttered, her mind—I supposed—dancing through a rapid succession of thoughts, each quickly abandoned. She chuffed out a single laugh, then shook her head. I smiled without knowing what I was smiling about. Her hand terminal chimed, and she glanced at it. Her expression cooled.

"I have to see to this," she said. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be right here."

After the guards closed the door behind her, I got up, pacing the room with my hands clasped behind my back. At the Leonardo screen, I stopped and stared. Not at the sketch, but at the reflection of the man looking at it. It had been three days since I'd left the room, and I still struggled to recognize my reflection as my own. I wondered how many people, roughly, went through years without a mirror. Very few, I thought, though I personally knew almost three dozen.

Even with my hair barbered, my scrub-brush beard shaved away, I

looked feral. Somewhere during my years in the room, I'd developed jowls. Little sacks of skin puffed under my eyes, a shade darker and bluer than the brown of my cheeks. I had gray hair now, which I'd known intellectually, but seeing it now felt shocking. Quintana's attacks on me had left no marks. Even the knife wound, cared for by the station's medical expert system, would leave no scar. Time had done me immeasurably more damage, as it did with everyone. If I squinted, I could still make out traces of the man I thought of when I pictured myself. But only traces. I wondered how Alberto had been able to bring himself to fuck the tired old man in my reflection. But, I supposed, beggars and choosers.

That I would not return to the room seemed a given now. They had not sent me back there, had given me new clothes, new quarters. Even Brown, during his long interrogations, hadn't been allowed to shave. My naked, white-stubbled chin bore witness to the fact that I'd surpassed him. For the first day, I'd proudly marched out my egg hypothesis for one person, then another, then another, then the first again. Then they gave me a read-only access file that covered the years I had been gone. Two thousand pages, and I read it with the kind of longing and jealousy I imagined of someone following the career of an estranged child. From the uncanny transit of Eros to the surface of Venus to the creation of the ring gate to the discovery and activation of more than a thousand other gates that opened to a thousand empty solar systems, it filled me with wonder and joy and the bone-deep regret that I hadn't been there to see it happen.

I dropped the egg theory and took up my more natural hypothesis of the gate. They thought they'd given me a cheat sheet, a way to pass myself off as better than I was for the Martian. I wasn't concerned with what they thought. If they considered me a fool, it still wouldn't be less than I thought of them. I could only hope that the negotiation between the Belters and Mars went well. My fate was in their hands, as it had been for years now.

The door opened and Michio Pa returned. The Martian was at her side. The same unfortunate skin, the same nut-brown hair. My heart beat with a violence that left me short of breath, and for a long moment I feared that something dire and medical was happening.

"Dr. Cortázar?" the Martian said.

"Yes," I said, rushing toward him too quickly, pushing my hand out before me like the unfounded presumption of intimacy. "Yes, I am. That's

me.”

The Martian smiled coolly, but he shook my hand. No physical contact had ever been more electric.

“I understand you’ve made some sense of our ring gates?”

Michio Pa, at his side, nodded as if unconsciously prompting me.

“Not in exhaustive depth,” I said. “But I have the broad strokes.”

When he replied, it was like a punch in the gut. “Why did you lie to us at first?”

“About?” I asked, trying to buy time.

He smiled, though the expression had no humor. “You had to know that every sound in that holding cell is monitored and recorded.”

No. I hadn’t known that. Though in hindsight it seemed obvious.

He continued. “You deliberately fed Dr. Brown a false story about your analysis, then at the last minute gave him the correct version. I’d like to understand why.”

“I rethought my…” I began, then trailed off when I saw the knowing look in his eye.

“You were gaming him,” the Martian said. “Manipulating him to try to secure your position. Incorrectly believing that we would be traded the least valuable prisoner.”

The way he said it was not a question, but I found myself nodding anyway.

“The fact that he didn’t spot your falsified conclusions in the data,” the Martian continued, “is the reason you’re here. So, I suppose, your plan failed its way to success.”

“Thank you,” I replied inanely.

“Be aware that we know exactly what you are, what tactics you favor, and will not tolerate this behavior in the future. The consequences of failing to understand this fact of your future existence would be extreme.”

“I understand,” I said, and it was the truth. Something in my expression seemed to please him, and he relaxed a little.

“I am developing something of a private task force to examine the data that’s coming in from the initial probes that have gone through to the other side of the ring gate. Your experience with the initial discovery puts you in a rare position. I’d like you to join us. It won’t be freedom. That was never in the cards. But it won’t be here, and it will be work.”

“I don’t need freedom,” I said.

His smile held an echo of sorrow I couldn’t parse. I wondered if Alberto would have known what it meant. The Martian clapped my shoulder and a wave of relief lifted me up.

“Come with me, Doctor,” he said. “I have some things to show you.”

I offered silent thanks to whatever imaginary God was listening and let the Martian lead me to this wide new universe, opening before me.

I did let myself wonder how the room would be without me. Whether Brown would ever understand how I’d outplayed him. Whether Alberto would take another lover. How many years would stretch out before Fong and Navarro gave up hope that I would somehow come back for them all. Questions I did not expect ever to answer, because in the end I didn’t actually care.

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The Vital Abyss

Author's Note

Oh, so much to talk about with this one.

If there's one real regret in writing *The Expanse*, it's that we didn't keep the right title for this story. When it was written, it was "The Necessary Abyss." Our editor at the time was adamant that the title wouldn't work, and we needed to change it. We went back and forth and landed on "The Vital Abyss."

We should have stuck to our guns.

Here's the thing. We don't know what a vital abyss is. But a necessary one? That goes back to *Will & Grace*.

You remember *Will & Grace*, right? It was a sitcom with Eric McCormack and Debra Messing. It was also maybe the most widely missed obscure philosophy joke in popular culture. Will and Grace are common first names, but put together like that, they're also one of the central questions of Western philosophy—how much we are self-determined and how much we are controlled by deterministic forces. Agents of our own free will or else predestined cogs whose fates are out of our hands, determined instead by the grace of God. Freedom or necessity. Will or Grace.

Cortázar makes himself a kind of moral zombie in this story. There's a reason that Dresden has the modification made permanent before Cortázar recovers from the temporary version of it. If he had come to, he would have had the capacity to understand what he'd lost. Instead, he becomes someone incapable of moral choice. The way that his mother lost parts of her experience, he loses his ability to judge—and even be interested in—questions of right and wrong. He's beyond good vs. evil and deeply into effective vs. ineffective. It's a very Nietzschean place to be, and so the abyss. And it's the abyss where there can be no moral choice. The Abyss of

Grace. The Necessary Abyss.

But the editor didn't like it. So it's Vital. You win some, you lose some.

Paolo Cortázar is named after Paolo Bacigalupi and Julio Cortázar, not because those two writers have much to do with the character but because they're writers whose work we admire. The physical setup of the jail is a reference to *The Enormous Room*, which is an autobiographical novel by E. E. Cummings about his time as a political prisoner in France during the First World War.

And Dresden's thing about biology being an exercise in pretending to be different in kind from animals, while every study proves more and more that we're not, is a large part of why Daniel decided not to keep going as a biologist after he got his bachelor's degree. He's still looking for the hole in that argument.

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Strange Dogs

The day after the stick moons appeared, Cara killed a bird.

That wasn't exactly right. There had been stick moons—which her parents called platforms—as long as Cara could remember. At night, they'd glowed with reflected sunlight like burnt orange bones, and in the daytime, they'd been lines of white bent behind the blue. In her books, the moon was always a pale disk or a cookie with a bite taken out, but that was Earth's moon, Luna. Laconia was different.

So it wasn't that they had *appeared* the night before she killed the bird. It was only that they lit up red and blue and gold for the first time ever. Her parents had gotten up from the dinner table and gone out into the yard, staring up into the sky, and she and her little brother, Xan, had followed. Her father stood there slack-jawed, looking up. Her mother had frowned.

The next afternoon, lying in the blue clover by the pond with sunlight warming her skin and making her sleepy, Cara watched the newly glittering stick moons swim through the sky. They were as bright in the daytime sky as stars were against nighttime black. The colors shifted on them, rippling like videos of sea creatures. As if they were a little bit alive. They drifted east to west, high lacy clouds passing underneath them, and Cara at the bottom of the gravity well, looking up into the vastness like it had all been put there for her to appreciate.

The pond was one of her favorite places to be alone. The curve of the forest ran along one side. Thick trees with three or four trunks that rose up into a knot before blooming out in green-black fronds longer than her body and so thickly packed that a few steps under them was like walking into a cave. She could find as much shade from Laconia's bright sun as she wanted, whenever she wanted it. The blue clover beside the water was softer than her bed at home and had a smell like bruised rain when she laid on it. The brook that fed the pond and then flowed back away from it again

murmured and bubbled in a gentle, random concert with the chirping of the goat-hair frogs. And there were the animals that came there to drink or hunt or lay their eggs. She could lie there for hours, bringing her own lunch and a handheld to read from or draw on or play games on, away from her parents and Xan. Away from the town and the soldiers and Mari Tennenbaum, who was her best friend when they weren't enemies. The township was five thousand people—the biggest city on Laconia—and the pond was Cara's place away from it.

She was halfway through her tenth year, but this was only her third summer. Her mother had explained to her that Laconia moved around its star more slowly than Earth did, and then talked about axial tilt in a way that Cara pretended to understand so they could talk about something else. It didn't matter. Summer was summer and birthdays were birthdays. The two didn't have any more relationship than her nut-bread sandwiches had with her shoes. Not everything had to be connected.

Cara was half asleep when she heard the soft tramp of paws and the creaking of the underbrush. She thought at first it was just in her imagination, but when she tried to change the sound into music the way she sometimes could when she was dreaming, it didn't respond. She opened eyes she hadn't realized were closed. Bright-blue dots like fireflies fluttered and spun in the air as the first of the doglike things came out of the trees.

Its body was long and low, four legs with joints that were put together just a little wrong—like a drawing by someone who'd only ever had legs described to them. Its jaw seemed too small for its face, and its bulbous brown eyes were set at angles that made it seem apologetic. She'd never seen anything like it before, but that happened fairly often.

"Hey," she said, stretching. "What are you?"

The dog paused.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm friendly. See?" And she waved.

It was hard to be sure with the thing's eyes set the way they were, but she thought it was looking at her. She sat up slowly, trying not to startle it. Nothing on Laconia ate people, but sometimes they could get scared, and her mother always told her that frightened things weren't safe to approach.

The dog looked up, staring at the stick moons for a moment, and then down again at her. She felt a wave of disorientation, like being dizzy but different, and then a twinge of uncertainty. The dog stepped forward, and

two more like it came out from the darkness under the trees. Then two more.

On the pond, a sunbird hissed, lifting its leathery wings to make its body look bigger and baring its soft greenish teeth. Its fury-twisted face looked like a cartoon of an old woman, and half a dozen new-hatched babies darted behind her. The first dog turned to look at the momma bird and made three sharp sounds: *ki-ka-ko*. The other four picked up the sound. Momma bird swiveled her head toward each of them, hissing until flecks of saliva foamed at the curves of her mouth. The *ki-ka-ko* cry echoed in a way that didn't match the space around the pond. It made Cara's head ache a little. She levered herself up to her knees, partly out of fear that the dogs might eat sunbirds, and she didn't want to see anything get killed, but mostly because she wanted them to stop making that sound. Her lunch pack and her handheld tumbled to the clover. When she stepped forward, the dogs went quiet and turned their attention toward her, and she had the sense that maybe she was dreaming after all.

She stepped between the dogs and the water's edge. Momma bird hissed again, but it seemed to Cara like the sound came from a great distance. The dogs drifted closer, moving around her like children around a teacher. She knew in a distant way that she should probably be scared. Even if the dogs didn't eat people, they could still attack her for getting between them and their prey. She didn't know why she felt that they wouldn't.

"You can't be here right now," she said.

The lead dog, the one that had come out first, looked past her at the water. Its embarrassed, bulbous eyes shifted back to her.

"Later, maybe," she said. "You can be here later. Right now you have to go. Go on. Shoo."

She pointed at the trees and the darkness underneath them. The dogs went perfectly, eerily still for the space of two long breaths together, then turned and shambled back into the forest on their weirdly built legs.

Cara watched them go with a kind of surprise. It was like shouting at a storm to go away and having the rain stop. Probably the dogs had just decided that dealing with her wasn't worth the trouble. Still, the way it had happened let her feel a little magic. Momma bird was swimming along the side of the pond now, her back to Cara. When the sunbird reached the far edge and turned, she was grunting to herself, the danger of the dogs and the

girl equally forgotten. Sunbirds weren't smart—they weren't even particularly nice—but Cara still felt good that she'd kept them from getting eaten.

She tried lying back down on the blue clover, but her lazy half sleep was gone now. She tried closing her eyes, then watching the stick moons and their shimmer of colors, but she could feel in her body that it wasn't coming back. She waited a few minutes to be sure, then sat up with a sigh and gathered up her handheld and her lunch pack. The sun was high overhead, the heat a little bit oppressive now, and it had been a long time since breakfast. She popped open her lunch pack. The sandwich was simple and exactly the way she liked it: two slices of nut bread, each about as thick as her thumb, with a layer of cinnamon and molasses cream cheese between them. Her mother said that honey was better than molasses, but there weren't any bees on Laconia. Cara had only ever seen pictures of them, and based on those, she didn't like honey at all.

She took a bite, chewed, swallowed, took another. The baby sunbirds were jumping out of the water, running on the ground, and then plopping back into the pond, sputtering and angry. Momma bird ignored their little sighs of distress, and before long they stopped trying to get her attention and devoted themselves to swimming and searching for food. Earth birds didn't look much like anything on Laconia, but Cara remembered something about how to treat them. How to share. When Momma bird turned toward her, Cara broke off a tiny bit of nut bread and tossed it out on the water. Momma bird struck at it like it was a threat and swallowed it greedily. Later on, she'd puke up little bits of it to feed her babies. Cara had watched them at the pond for months. She knew how sunbirds worked maybe better than anyone.

So when Momma bird made a noise—a wheeze with a click in the middle of it—Cara knew it was something new. The babies knew too. They gathered around Momma bird, chittering in agitation and slapping the water with their wings. Momma bird didn't seem to notice them. Her head was wobbling on its long, thin neck. Her unfocused eyes seemed fierce and confused.

Cara put down her sandwich, a knot tightening in her chest. Something was wrong. Momma bird spun around in the water, then turned and spun the other way with so much violence that the nearest of her babies

overturned.

“Hey,” Cara said. “Don’t do that. Don’t hurt your little ones.”

But unlike the dogs, Momma bird didn’t even seem to listen to her. She spread her wings, slapped the water twice, and hauled herself up into the air. Cara had the impression of half-closed eyes and a gaping green-toothed mouth, and then Momma bird sped up into the air, paused, and fell. She didn’t try to catch herself when she landed—just crashed into the clover.

“Momma bird?” Cara said, stepping closer. Her heart was tripping over itself. “Momma bird? What’s the matter?”

The babies were calling out now, one over the other in a wild frenzy. Momma bird lifted her head, trying to find them from their voices, but too disoriented to do more than wave her head around once, twice, and then set it down. Cara reached out, hesitated, then scooped up the bird’s warm, soft body. Momma bird hissed once, halfheartedly, and closed her angry black eyes.

Cara ran.

The pathway leading toward home was barely wider than an animal track, but Cara knew it like the hallway outside her room. It only seemed treacherous because she couldn’t wipe her tears back, since she needed both her hands to hold Momma bird. She was still three hundred meters from home when the bird shifted in her hands, arched its back, and made a deep coughing sound. After that, it was still. The thick sack-and-earth walls of her house came into sight—red and orange, with the rich-green panels of their solar array on top canted toward the sun—and Cara started shouting for her mother. She wanted to believe there was time. That Momma bird wasn’t dead.

She wanted to believe. But she also knew better.

Her house stood out just past the edge of the forest. It had the lumpy snakes-lying-on-top-of-each-other walls that all the first-wave colonial structures had. They curved around the central bulb garden, where they grew food. The windows stood open, screens letting in the air and keeping out the insect analogs. Even the little toolshed, where Dad kept the clippers he used to cut the vinegar weed and the cart to carry the stinking foliage away, had windows in it.

Cara’s feet slapped down the stone-paved path, her tears making the house, the sky, the trees blurred and unreal. Xan’s voice called out from

somewhere nearby, and his friend Santiago answered back. She ignored them. The cool, dry air of the house felt like walking into a different world. Rays of light pressed in from the windows, catching motes of dust. For the first time since the pond, Cara's steps faltered. Her legs burned, and the vast, oceanic sadness and horror stopped up her throat so that when her mother stepped into the room—taller than her father, dark-haired, fixing a necklace of resin and glass around her neck like she was getting ready for a party—all Cara could do was hold up the body of Momma bird. She couldn't even ask for help.

Her mother led her to the kitchen and sat there with her and the dead bird's body while Cara coughed out a version of what had happened between sobs. She knew it was muddled—the bird, the dogs, the babies, the bread—but she just had to get it all out of her and hope that her mother could make sense of it. And then make it make sense to her too.

Xan came in, his eyes wide and scared, and touched her back to comfort her. Her mother smiled him away again. Santiago ghosted into the doorway and out again, curious and trying to seem like he wasn't. Tragedy drew attention.

Eventually, Cara's words ran out and she sat there, feeling empty. Deflated. Defeated. Momma bird's corpse on the table didn't seem to care one way or the other. Death had robbed the bird of her opinions.

"Oh, babygirl," Cara's mother said. "I'm sorry."

"It was me, wasn't it?" Cara said. "I killed her, didn't I?"

"You didn't mean to. It was an accident. That's all."

"But it was in the book," Cara said. "Feeding bread to birds. The lady in the park in the book did that. And they didn't die. They were *fine*."

Her mother took her hand. It was strange, but Cara knew if she'd been just a little younger—Xan's age, even—her mother would have hugged her. But she was getting to be a big girl now, and hugs weren't for big girls. Holding hands was.

"These aren't birds, babygirl. We call them that because they're sort of like birds. But real birds have feathers. And beaks—"

"No bird I've ever seen."

Her mother took a deep breath and smiled through her exhalation. "When life comes up on a planet, evolution forces a bunch of choices. What kinds of proteins it's going to use. How it's going to pass information on

from one generation to the next. Life on Earth made those decisions a long time ago, and so everything that comes from Earth has some things in common. The kinds of proteins we use. The ways we get chemical energy out of our foods. The ways our genes work. But other planets made other choices. That's why we can't eat the plants that grow on Laconia. We have to grow them special so they'll be part of our tree of life."

"But the old lady fed bread to the birds," Cara said. Her mother wasn't understanding the problem, and she didn't know how to say it any more clearly. In the books, the old lady had fed bread to the birds, and the birds hadn't died. And Momma bird was dead.

"She was on Earth. Or someplace where Earth's tree of life took over. Laconia doesn't eat the same things we do. And the food that Laconia makes, we can't use."

"That's not true," Cara said. "We drink the water."

Her mother nodded. "Water is very, very simple, though. There aren't choices for living systems to make with water because it's more like a mineral or—"

"Dot!" Her father's voice was like a bark. "We have to go!"

"I'm in the kitchen," her mother said. Footsteps. Cara's father loomed into the doorway, his jaw set, his mouth tight. He'd combed his hair and put on his best shirt. He shifted his gaze from Cara to her mother to Momma bird with an expression that said, *What the hell is this?*

"Cara accidentally poisoned one of the sunbirds," her mother told him, as though he'd actually asked the question aloud.

"Shit," her father said, then grimaced at his own language. "I'm sorry to hear that, kid. That's hard. But, Dot. We have to gather up the kids and get out of here."

Cara scowled. "Where are you going?"

"The soldiers are hosting a party," her mother said. "It's a celebration because the platforms came on." She didn't smile.

"We need to be there," her father said, more to her mother than to Cara. "If they don't see us, they'll wonder why we didn't come."

Cara's mother pointed to her necklace. *I'm getting ready.* Her father shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then back. Cara felt the weight of his anxiety like a hand on her shoulder.

"Do I have to go?"

“No, kid,” her father said. “If you want to stay here and hold down the fort, that’s fine. It’s me and your mom.”

“And Xan,” her mother said. “Unless you want to be responsible for keeping him out of trouble.”

Cara knew that was supposed to be a joke, so she chuckled at it. Not that it felt funny. Her mother squeezed her fingers and then let her go. “I am sorry about the sunbird, babygirl.”

“It’s okay,” Cara said.

“We’ll be back before dinner,” her father said, then retreated back into the depths of the house. A few breaths later, Cara heard him yelling at Xan and Santiago. The focus of the family spotlight had moved past her. Momma bird was over. She couldn’t put her thumb on why that bothered her.

The town was half an hour away, down past a dozen other houses like hers. The older houses all came from the first wave—scientists and researchers like her parents who’d come to Laconia just after the gates opened. The town itself, though, came later, with the soldiers. Even Cara could remember when construction waldoes started laying down the foundations of the barracks and the town square, the military housing and the fusion plant. Most of the soldiers still lived in orbit, but every month, the town grew a little—another building, another street. Xan’s friend Santiago was seven years old. He was the child of soldiers, and had their boldness. He often came all the way out to her house by himself so he could play. Someday, her father said, the town would grow out around all their houses. The pond and the forest would be taken down, paved over, rebuilt. The way he said it, it didn’t sound like a good thing or a bad one. Just a change, like winter moving into spring.

For now, though, her house was her house and the town was the town, and she could sit at her kitchen table while the others got ready to go someplace else. Momma bird didn’t move. The more Cara looked at the bird, the less real it seemed. How could something that clearly dead ever have swum or flown or fed its babies? It was like expecting a rock to sing. The babies would be wondering what had happened by now. Calling for their mother. She wondered if they’d know to go back up to the nest with no one there to show them when.

“Mom?” Cara said as her father herded Xan and Santiago back out the

door again. “I need to use the sampling drone.”

There was a line that appeared between her mother’s brows when she got annoyed, even when she was smiling at the same time. “Babygirl, you know I can’t go out right now. Your father and I—”

“I can do it. I just need to help take care of Momma bird’s babies. Just for a few days, until they’re used to her being gone. I messed things up. I need to fix them.”

The line erased itself, her mother’s gaze softening. For a moment, Cara thought she was going to say yes.

“No, baby. I’m sorry. The sampling drone’s delicate. And if something goes wrong, we can’t get a new one.”

“But—” Cara gestured to Momma bird.

“When I get back, I’ll take it out with you if you still want to,” her mother said, even though that probably wasn’t true. By the time they got back from the town, Xan would be tired and hyperactive and her parents would just be tired. All anyone would want to do was sleep. A few baby sunbirds didn’t really matter much in the big scheme of things.

Santiago’s voice came wafting in from outside with a high near-whining note of young, masculine impatience in it. Her mother shifted her weight toward the doorway.

“Okay, Mom,” Cara said.

“Thank you, babygirl,” her mother said, then walked out. Their voices came, but not distinctly enough for her to make out the words. Xan shouted, Santiago laughed, but from farther away. Another minute, and they were gone. Cara sat alone in the silence of the house.

She walked through the rooms, her hands stuffed deep in her pockets, her scowl so hard it ached a little. She kept trying to find what was wrong. Everything was in place, except that something wasn’t. The walls had the same smudges by the doors where their hands had left marks over the months and years. The white flakes at the corners showed where the laminate that held the house in place was getting old. The house had only been designed to last five years, and they’d been in it for eight so far. Her room, with its raised futon, across the hall from Xan’s, with his. Her window looking out over the dirt road her family had just walked down. The anger sat under her rib cage, just at her belly, and she couldn’t make it go away. It made everything about the house seem crappy and small.

She threw herself onto her futon, staring up at the ceiling and wondering if she was going to cry. But she didn't. She just lay there for a while, feeling bad. And when that got boring, she rolled over and grabbed her books. They were on a thin foil tablet keyed to her. Her parents had loaded it with poems and games and math practice and stories. If they'd been able to get in touch with the networks back on the far side of the gates, they could have updated it. But with the soldiers, that wasn't possible. All the content in it was aimed at a girl younger than Xan, but it was what she had, so she loved it. Or usually she did.

She opened the stories, looking through them for one particular image like she was scratching at a wound. It took a few minutes to find it, but she did. A picture book called *Ashby Allen Akerman in Paris*, about a little girl back on Earth. The image was in watercolors, gray and blue with little bits of gold at the streetlights. Ashby and her monkey friend, TanTan, were dancing in a park with the high, twisting, beautiful shape of the Daniau Tower behind them. But the thing Cara was looking for was on the side. An old woman, sitting on a bench, throwing bits of bread at birds that her mother called pigeons. That was where the rage came from. An old woman being kind to a bird and nobody was dying. No one was hurt. And it wasn't even exactly a lie, because apparently she could do that on Earth. In Paris. Where she'd never been and didn't have any reason to think she'd ever go. But if all the things in her books were about other places with other rules, then none of them could ever really be about her. It was like going to school one morning and finding out that math worked differently for you, so even if you got the same answer as everyone else, yours was wrong.

So no, it wasn't a lie. It went deeper than that.

She made herself a bowl of bean-and-onion soup, sitting at the counter by herself as she ate. She'd half expected that, as upset as she was, she wouldn't be able to keep the food down. Instead, eating seemed to steady her. The quiet of the house was almost pleasant. Something about blood sugar, probably. That was what her father would have said. Momma bird's skin had started shining, like it was growing a layer of oil or wax. It could stay there on the counter. She thought about taking it back in case the babies would understand that they shouldn't wait. That they were on their own. She hoped they could get back up to the nest. There were things that would eat baby sunbirds if they couldn't get someplace safe.

“Fuck,” Cara said to the empty house, then hesitated, shocked by her own daring. Her mother didn’t allow profanity, not even her father’s, but they weren’t here right now. So like she was running a test to see if the rules were still the rules, she said it again. “Fuck.”

Nothing happened, because of course no one was watching her. And since no one was watching...

The sampling drone was in a ceramic case next to her mother’s futon. The latches were starting to rust at the edges, but they still worked. Just a little scraping feeling when she pulled them open. The drone itself was a complex of vortex thrusters as wide as her thumb connected by a flexible network of articulated sticks able to reconfigure itself into dozens of different shapes. Two dozen attachable sampling waldoes built for everything from cutting stone to drawing blood stood in ranks in the case like soldiers, but Cara only cared about the three grasping ones. And of them, really just the two with pliable silicone grips. She put the waldoes in her pocket, hefted the drone on her hip as if she was carrying a baby, and shoved the case closed again before she headed out to the shed.

Momma bird and the drone fit into her father’s cart with plenty of room to spare. She thought about it, then grabbed a little hand spade too. She’d use the drone to put the babies safe in their nest, and then give Momma bird a proper burial. It wasn’t enough, but she could do it, so she would.

The sun was starting its long slide down into night. The low mist that came from the east smelled as bright as mint, and the shadows of the trees all had a greenish tint against the reddening light. The cart had one wheel that stuck sometimes, skidding along behind her like a stutter until it broke loose again. Cara put her head down, her mouth set, and marched back toward the pond. The tightness between her shoulder blades felt like resolve.

The forest was mostly hers. Xan played there some, but he liked the other kids more than she did, so he spent more time in town. Her mother and father stayed near the house or working on the community greenhouse—which wasn’t really a house or green—to keep the food supplies coming. She knew what the sounds of the forest were, even if she couldn’t always figure out what made them. She knew the drape of a hook vine from a straight one, the call of a red clicker from a green one. Most of the things that lived there didn’t have names. Laconia was a whole world, and humans

had only been on it for about eight years. Even if she gave names to everything she saw every day for the whole rest of her life, most of the species there would stay nameless. It didn't bother her. They just were what they were. Common things got names so that she and her schoolmates and the grown-ups could talk about them. Sunbirds, rope trees, tooth worms, glass snakes, grunchers. Other things, no one talked about, so they didn't need names, and even if she named them, she'd probably just forget.

That wasn't strange, though. All names were like that. A shorthand so people could talk about things. Laconia was only Laconia because they called it that. Before they'd come, it had been nameless. Or if not, the things that had named it were all dead now, so it didn't matter.

She reached the pond, a few bright-gold streaks in the sky where the last of the sun still lit the high clouds. The baby sunbirds were still in the water, peeping in distress at her arrival. The water was dark already, like it had pulled the shadows under the trees into it. The night-feeding animals would come out soon—scratchers and hangman monkeys and glass snakes. She slaved the drone to her handheld. The control panel was more complicated than she was used to, with half a dozen control modes listed down the side that she didn't understand. She was pretty certain she could do everything she needed with only the basic setup. She just needed to get the babies up out of the water and safe into their nest. And maybe take some food up to them. Do the things Momma bird had done. Then she could bury Momma bird, and things would be... not right. But the least wrong she could make them. She took the waldoes out of her pocket and compared them to the babies, squinting in the deepening gloom to see which of them looked like they'd be able to hold on to the little bodies but not hurt them.

"I'm sorry," she said to the pale, round-mouthed birds as she fit the smallest waldo onto the drone. "I'm new at this."

One of the babies caught sight of Momma bird's body in the cart and tried to haul itself out of the water to waddle toward her. It was as good a place to start as any. Cara sat cross-legged on the clover and started the drone. It whirred as it rose in the air.

The first baby shrieked, hissed, and ran. Cara smiled and shook her head. "It's okay, little one. It's only me," she cooed. "Everything's going to be all right."

Only it wasn't.

The babies scattered to the edges of the pond and bit at the drone when it came near. When she was able to get a grip on one, it wriggled out a meter and a half above the ground and fell back into the water. Cara didn't want to hurt them, but the light was fading faster now, and she had to get them up to the nest and then bury Momma and still get back home before her parents and Xan. The time pressure made everything harder. She didn't realize she was clenching her teeth until her jaw already hurt. After nearly an hour she'd only gotten three safely back to the nest. Momma bird lay in the cart, sightless eyes reproachful. Cara's hands ached, and the drone's batteries were half drained.

"Come on," she said as one of the last two babies skittered away from the waldo and ran into the brush at the edge of the pond. "Stop it. Just..."

She reached the soft rubber claw down, and the little sunbird struck at it, biting and tearing with its soft teeth. It wrenched its head around and darted back off across the water, leaving little ripples in the dark water, and then stopping to bob on the surface and chew at its wings as if nothing was wrong. Cara brought the drone in to land beside her while she thought. The last two babies were the biggest. Faster than their siblings, and they weren't getting tired the same way. Maybe they were big enough to avoid predators without her. Maybe they didn't need to be in the nest.

One of the babies swam near her, chirped, and shook its fleshy, pale wings. Without the whirring of the drone to run from, it seemed placid, in a disgruntled kind of way. Its black eyes shifted around at the night, taking in the forest and the pond, the cart and Cara with the same disinterest. It was so close.

Cara shifted forward slowly so as not to startle it. The little sunbird huffed to itself, ducked its head under water, and Cara lunged. Cold water soaked into her sleeves and sprayed her face, but the little ball of squirming flesh was locked in her hands, hissing and biting. She stood up, grinning.

"There you are, little one," she said. "Oh, you're a pain, but I've got you safe now."

Except she wasn't quite sure what made sense to do next. She needed both hands to drive the drone and the waldo, but if she put the sunbird down, it would just run off again. The nest was low enough in the tree, she might be able to climb up one handed and reach it in. She stepped backward, looking through the foliage for a pathway that would work.

The crunch under her heel was confusing for a moment, and then horrifying. She yelped, dropped the baby sunbird, and danced back. The drone glittered on the clover, two of the vortex thrusters caved in by her weight. She dropped to her knees and reached out, fingers trembling in the air, caught between needing to put it all back together and being afraid to touch it. The drone was broken. Her mother's drone that they couldn't replace because it came from Earth and now nothing came from Earth. The sense of having done something terrible that she couldn't take back washed over her—the broken body of Momma bird and the drone building on each other.

It was too much. She'd hide the drone, just for now. The case for it was still back at the house, and her mother might not need it again for weeks. Months. If Cara kept it here, where she could work on it. If she could keep it safe until there was light, then maybe it would be all right. She lifted up the drone, felt the limp ceramic clicking against itself, the sharp edges where before there had been smooth round cylinders, and knew that there were shards of it still in the clover. With the instinct of a thief, she carried it away from the edge of the pond. She shoved it under a little bush and dragged dead tree fronds over it, hardly aware that she was sobbing while she did it. It would be okay. Somehow, it would be okay.

It wouldn't.

When she turned back around, the dogs were there.

She hadn't heard them shamble out of the darkness, and they stood there as still as stones. Their five faces looked like an apology for intruding.

"What?" Cara shouted, waving at them with one sopping arm. "What is it?"

The dog in front—the same lead dog from when they'd been there before—squatted down, its muzzle toward her. Its legs seemed to have too many joints in them, folding together primly. She stepped toward the dogs, wanting to hit them or shout at them or something. Anything that would distract her from her misery. She grabbed the shovel up from the cart, holding it like a weapon, but the dogs didn't react. They only seemed embarrassed for her. She stood for three long, shaking breaths, wet and cold and raw as a fresh-pulled scab, then sat down on the cart next to Momma bird's body, hung her head, and wept. The corpse shifted when the cart rocked, its skin glistening with whatever that death wax was.

“I didn’t mean to break anything,” she said. “I didn’t want to break anything. It all just... broke, and I, and I, and I...”

The strange noise began again. *Ki-ka-ko, ki-ka-ko*, but instead of being disorienting, it seemed comforting now. Cara pushed the blade of the shovel into the soft dirt beside the cart and rested her arms on her knees. The dogs came closer. She thought for a moment they were going to console her. She didn’t understand what they were really doing until one of them reached its wide muzzle into the cart and took Momma bird’s body in its mouth.

“No! Hey! You can’t have that! That’s not food!” She grabbed at Momma bird’s stiff, dead feet, but the dog was already trotting away, the others following it into the dark forest and the mist. “Wait!” Cara shouted, but the *ki-ka-ko, ki-ka-ko* sound faded and then, like flipping a toggle, went silent. Cara stood without remembering when she’d gotten to her feet. The sunset was over, full night fallen and stars scattered across the sky above her. The two baby sunbirds grunted in the pond, little noises of animal distress. Her wrists were cold where her sleeves still dripped. She sank to the ground, lying back on the clover, too wrung out to cry. The sounds of the forest seemed to grow slowly louder around her. A soft knocking call off to her left, answered by two more behind her. A hush of wings. The angry harrumph of the sunbirds that she was still going to have to catch somehow, put into their nest somehow. Feed somehow. Everything was terrible, and she couldn’t even stop yet. That made everything worse.

High above, the stick moons wavered and shone, lights rippling along their sides while they did whatever the hell it was they did.

Drunk on her own despair, Cara didn’t make the connection between the moons and the dogs. Not until much later, when her brother, Xan, was already dead.



Laconia was only one of thirteen hundred and some new worlds. Her parents, like all the others in the first wave, had been intended as a survey force. Cara’s mother had come as a materials engineer, her father as a geologist. She’d come as a baby.

She’d seen pictures on her mother’s handheld of herself in the tight-seal

diapers, floating in the family cabin of the *Sagan*. The ship was still in orbit—a pale, fast-moving dot when it caught the sun just right—but she didn't remember it at all. Xan had been born a year after they'd all made landfall, and Cara didn't remember that either. Her earliest memory was of sitting in a chair at home, drawing in an art program on her handheld while her mother sang in the next room.

Her second earliest memory was of the soldiers coming.

Her parents didn't talk about that, so Cara had built the story from bits and pieces of overheard conversation. Something had happened on the other side of the gates. The Earth had blown up, maybe. Or Mars had. Maybe Venus, though she didn't think anyone lived there. Whatever happened meant that the scientific expedition that had only been intended to stay for five years was now permanent. The soldiers had come to be the government. They had ships in orbit and the beginnings of cities already being constructed on the planet's surface. They'd made the town. They'd made the rules for how the town worked. They had a plan.

"You've probably noticed," Instructor Hannu, her teacher, said, "that the orbital platforms have been activated."

The schoolroom was the old cafeteria from the first landing. Ten meters by eight, with a vaulted ceiling and reinforcements that let it double as a storm shelter, or would have if there were ever any storms bad enough to shelter from. The inner layer of environmental sealant had started to whiten and flake with age, but the early fears about quarantining themselves from Laconia's ecosphere had gone by the wayside, so no one was in a hurry to repair it. There were no windows, the light entirely from ceramic fixtures set into the walls.

"We've been asked to keep an eye out for anything that changes down here," he went on, "and report it back to the military."

Which, Cara thought, was stupid. Everything changed on Laconia all the time. Telling the soldiers whenever a new plant showed up would be a full-time job. Was a full-time job. Was what all of their parents did, or were supposed to do, anyway. She wondered if the windowless room was like being on a spaceship. Months or years without ever once going outside or hearing the rain tapping into puddles or being able to get away from Xan and her parents. Never being alone. Never feeling the sunlight on her face. Nothing changing. Nothing new. It sounded awful.

And then circle meeting was over, and the kids scattered around the room to find their tasks for the morning work period. Cara helped Jason Lu with his phonetic-sounds lesson, because she was older and had already mastered it. Then she spent some time on complex multiplication. And then it was recess, and they all piled out to the meadow and the sunlight. Xan and two of the other younger boys ran across the road to skip rocks across the water-treatment reservoir even though they weren't supposed to. Since his best friend, Santiago, went to school in the military's program, Xan had to make do with first-wave children for playmates. So did Cara, but it wasn't as much of a burden for her. She didn't have any friends among the soldiers anyway.

That would change when they set up the lower university and everyone went to the same school, first wave and soldiers both. But that wouldn't be for another two years. There was plenty of time for things to happen between now and then.

Mari Tennenbaum and Teresa Ekandjo came and sat with her, and before long, they'd arranged a zombie-tag game with the other older children. The call for second work period seemed to come too soon, but that was the way time worked. Too fast when you weren't paying attention, and then slow as mud when you watched it. Xan wanted her to teach him phonetic sounds, more because she'd helped Jason with it than because he cared about the lesson, but she did it anyway. When she was done, she did some research of her own.

The classroom had access to the observational data that the survey team had collected since they'd arrived on Laconia. Sunbirds were a common enough species that there might be something there—what they ate, how they matured, when they stopped needing to be cared for—that would help her. Because as soon as school was over, Xan headed out to play with Santiago in the town's center. She was free to get her bicycle, the one her father had printed for her at the beginning of summer, and start back to the pond and the babies.

The buildings in the town were of two different types. The old ones, the ones like her house, lumpy and round, built from the soil of Laconia and constrained by printed polymer sheaths, marked the original township. The other kind, solidly efficient metal and formed concrete, came later with the soldiers. The roads were new too, and still being built. She and all the other

kids loved riding on the smooth, hard surface, feeling the bumps and uncertainty of the land vanish into a steady low hum that traveled up from the wheels through the handlebars and into her bones. They weren't supposed to ride on the roads because the soldiers sometimes had transports and cars come through, but everyone did it anyway.

The sunlight pressed down, warm against her skin. The air had the soft, musty smell it got when rain was coming, the smell her mother called "moldy coffee grounds." A swarm of smoke gnats rose up, swirling into the sky above her in their weird angular patterns, like writing in an alphabet that no one knew. She almost stopped to watch. The road ended at a barracks and construction yard, soldiers in their crisp blue uniforms watching her as she passed. When she waved, one of them waved back. And then she was on the rough trail again and had to keep both hands on the bars.

The effort of riding and the warmth of the afternoon brought her to a kind of trance, comfortable and mindless. In the moment, her body and the world felt like they were all the same thing. As she got near home, she tried to bring her focus back. There hadn't been a lot of study done on sunbird life cycles in particular, but she'd found some notes from one of the early surveys. They said sunbirds ate a lot of things, but they seemed to like the little gray encrustations on water roots the best. She thought that meant Momma bird would have been diving deep into the pond to crack the little gray things free, and then the babies would gobble them as they came up. So she had to find a way to do the same thing. For a few more weeks at least. Until the babies were old enough to leave and make their own nests.

At home, the doors were open, letting the cool air into the house. She pulled the bicycle up beside the door. Her parents' voices came from inside, raised the way they did when they were having a conversation from different rooms. Her mother's words sounded jagged and stretched, like a wire on the edge of breaking. Cara paused to eavesdrop.

"We're bearing the risks. As long as we're here, anything they do can affect us. They don't know what they could wake up."

"I know," her father said. "Look, I'm not saying you're wrong. But we're not in a position to say what those risks are. And... what are the options?"

She knew the rhythm of her parents, how they talked when they knew

she and Xan were listening, and how it changed when they thought they were alone. This was alone-grown-up talk.

“I’m not arguing for that,” her mother said, and Cara wondered what “that” was. “But look at Ilus.”

“Ilus was uncontrolled, though. Admiral Duarte seems pretty certain they can at least influence how it behaves here.”

“How did they even get a live sample?” Her mother’s voice had gone peevish and frustrated. “Why would you *want* that?”

“You know this better than I do, honey. The protomolecule was a bridge builder, but it also has an interface aspect. And being able to *talk* to other artifacts is...” His words faded as, somewhere inside, he walked back to her mother.

Cara looked at the shed. She was pretty sure there was a tree-core sampler in there she could use to scrape the roots, but it was heavy. It probably made more sense to just roll her sleeves up and use her fingers. Plus which, she didn’t want to tear the roots.

She walked out toward the pond, thinking about her schoolwork. The phonetics lesson. Part of the background had been about how babies learn the phonemes by listening to their parents even before there are any words involved. The way different places use sound—the difference between a particular diphthong on Ceres and the same one in the North American Shared Interest Zone or Korea or on Titan or Medina Station—was something babies mastered even before they knew that they knew it.

She’d read something once about a man back on Earth who’d tried to figure out how to speak with octopi by raising his baby children with octopi, hoping that the human children would grow up bilingual in octopus and English. It had sounded crazy at the time, but who knew? The way the phoneme thing worked, maybe it made sense after all. Only she was pretty sure no one spoke octopus, so it probably hadn’t ended well...

She walked down the path, her steps following the little scrapes that the cart’s wheels had made. The pond water was going to be cold. She could already imagine how it was going to feel pushing her arm down into it. She wondered if the babies would still be in the nest. They might be old enough to get themselves down and into the water, and she couldn’t decide if that would be a good thing or a bad one.

The smell of coming weather was getting thicker, but the only clouds

were light, scudding veils over the sun, not much more than a lighter shade of blue. The breeze was hardly enough to stir the fronds of the trees; they made light tapping sounds when they touched, like dry raindrops. She wondered if anyone had ever studied the little gray things on the water roots to see what they were. Probably they hadn't. Laconia had too many things on it, and there were only so many people there. It would be lifetimes before everything on the planet got discovered and understood. If that ever even happened. She'd had a history-of-science lesson the year before that traced how long it had taken people back on Earth to understand the ecosphere there, and there had been billions of people on Earth for thousands of years. Laconia had a few thousand people for less than a decade.

At the pond, the babies were on the water, splashing pale leathery wings and piping to each other. That was good. They were independent enough to look after themselves that much anyway. With the drone broken, she'd still have to carry them up to the nest. She didn't like thinking about the drone, though.

"Okay, little ones," she said. "Let's see if I can get you some food, okay?"

She knelt at the water's edge, the wet of the mud seeping through the knees of her pants. Deep in the water, she could just make out the pale roots. They looked deeper in than she'd remembered. She was going to wind up soaking her shirt, but she started rolling up her sleeves anyway.

Momma bird hissed.

Cara fell back, scrambling on feet and elbows, as Momma bird swam out of the scrub at the pond's edge. The bird bared her greenish teeth. The tiny wrinkled face deformed in rage as she rushed forward, wings spread. The babies on the pond's surface gathered behind her, clicking in distress. Cara stared, and Momma bird coughed, spat, and turned away. For a moment, Cara tried to make this into some other bird that had happened upon the orphans and taken over the care of them.

But things were wrong. The bird's skin had the same waxy, dead look it had gotten on her counter. The black eyes didn't quite focus the way a normal bird would. There were sunbirds all across the town. Cara had seen dozens, and none of them had the awkward movements this one did. None of them had the weird stillness between its movements or the hesitation like

every muscle had to be reminded how to work. Cara pulled herself up the bank, dragging her heels across the blue clover. Momma bird ignored her, paddled to the center of the pond—paused, still as a statue—and dove down. The babies circled, excited, until she bobbed back up. All their little mouths struck at the water, spat out whatever they didn't filter out as food, and then struck again.

Cara's throat felt thick. Her breath came in snatches and gasps, like someone had turned off the planet's air supply, and her heart felt like something that had blundered into her rib cage by accident and was frantic for a way back out.

"Really?" she asked.

Nothing answered. She pulled her legs up under her, not realizing until she'd done it that she was taking what her teacher called prayer position. She tried to be still, as if moving might pop the moment like a soap bubble. Momma bird dove again, reemerged. The babies fed, as calm and pleased as if nothing had ever gone wrong. Momma bird went motionless, then moved again.

Cara's shock began to fade, her heart to resume its usual beat, and a slow, wide grin pulled at her lips. She wrapped her arms around herself in a hug and watched silently as the mother who had been dead now protected and fed and stayed with her children again. Some deep, animal relief turned her bones to water and left her empty of everything but gratitude and wonder.

Something shifted in the darkness under the trees. The dogs stepped into the light, walking toward her with slow, careful steps. The bulbous eyes apologetic.

"Was this you?" Cara breathed. "Did you do this?"

The dogs didn't answer. They only folded their complex legs and rested for a moment, looking toward Cara. She leaned over, stretched out a hand, and pet the closest one on the top of its head, where the ears would have been if it had been the kind of dog they had on Earth. Its skin was hot to the touch, soft with hard underneath, like velvet laid over steel. It made a gentle humming sound, and then all of them rose up together and turned back toward the trees. Cara stood up and walked after them, not sure what she wanted except that there was a sudden urgency in her heart. They couldn't leave. Not yet.

“Wait,” she said. And the dogs stopped. They waited. “Can you... can you help me?”

They turned toward her again, their movements eerily synchronized. In the distance, something trilled and buzzed and trilled again.

“You fixed Momma bird,” she said, nodding toward the pond. “Can you fix other things too?”

The dogs didn’t move, but they didn’t turn away either. Cara held up a finger in a don’t-go-away gesture, and moved off to the bushes. The sampling drone was just where she’d left it. Something small had scattered the shattered bits a little, but they were all still there, as far as she could tell. She lifted up the broken machine, its limp, deactivated limbs clacking against each other. The shards she plucked up into her palm.

The dogs watched, motionless. Their constant embarrassed expression now seemed to offer some sympathy, as if feeling her shame at having broken the drone. One of the dogs came forward, and she thought it was the lead from before, though she couldn’t be sure. She knelt and held out the drone. She expected the eerie *ki-ka-ko* noise again, but the dog only opened its mouth a little. What she’d taken for teeth, she saw, were really just little nubs, like the gripping surface on a wheel made for off-road travel. It had no tongue. There was no throat at the back of its mouth. It made her think of the dinosaur puppet Xan used to love. It leaned forward, taking the drone in its jaws. The little machine hung limp.

A second dog stepped forward, tapping Cara’s hand with one wide paw. Cara opened her shard-filled hand. The dog leaned forward, wrapping its mouth around her palm. Something in the touch tingled like a mild electrical shock or the first contact of a caustic chemical. The dog’s mouth rippled against her skin, sweeping the shards away. She kept her hand flat until all the bits and pieces were gone and the dog leaned back. Her hand was clean apart from a brief scent of disinfectant, gone almost before she noticed it.

“Thank you,” she said as the dog stepped carefully into the darkness under the trees. The one with the drone in its grip turned back to look at her, as if it was embarrassed by her gratitude but felt obligated to acknowledge it. Then they were gone. She listened to the receding footsteps. They went silent more quickly than she’d expected.

She sat quietly, arms wrapped around her legs, and watched the weird

miracle of the dead-but-not-dead sunbird until she felt like she'd given the moment all of the honor and respect it deserved.

Like someone rising from a pew, she stood, peace in her heart, and headed back home. As she walked, she imagined telling her parents about the dogs, about Momma bird. But that would mean telling them about the drone too. After it was fixed, she'd tell them. And anyway, it was still too sweet having it just for herself.



"I don't know," her mother said. "I don't feel comfortable with it."

Xan's eyes got large. His mouth gaped like she'd just said the worst, most unexpected thing he'd ever heard. "*Mom!*"

It was Sunday, and the walk into town for church was warm, the air thick and sticky. A soft midnight rain had left the track muddy and slick, so Cara kept to the edge where moss and clover made a kind of carpet. The tiny green-black leaves made wet sounds under her feet, but didn't soak her shoes.

"You have responsibilities at home," her mother said, and Xan lifted his hands in exasperation and disbelief, like he was a half-sized copy of their father. Cara had seen the same gesture a thousand times.

"I already told Santiago I'd help him," Xan said. "He's *expecting* me."

"Have you finished all your chores?"

"Yes," Xan said. Cara knew it wasn't true. Her mother did too. That was what made the conversation so interesting.

"Fine," she said. "But be home before dark."

Xan nodded. More to himself, Cara thought, than to their mother. A little victory of persistence over truth. After services, Xan could go off and play with his friends instead of being home the way he was supposed to. Probably she should have been angry at how unfair it was that her brother got to bend the rules and she didn't, but she liked it better when the house and the forest were hers. Maybe her parents did too. It wasn't really such a bad outcome if everyone was tacitly happy with it.

Cara's father walked a dozen meters ahead with Jan Poole, the agricultural specialist. Jan's house was on the way to town, and the older

man joined them for the walk in to church each week. Or anyway, he did now that they went in for services.

Before the soldiers came, Cara remembered church being a much more optional thing. There had been months when Sunday morning hadn't meant anything more strenuous than sleeping in and making breakfast for all of them to eat in their pajamas. Cara still wasn't sure why the arrival of the soldiers and their ships had changed that. It wasn't as though the soldiers made people come. Most of the men and women who'd come down from the ships to live on the planet didn't come to church, and those that did weren't any different from the science teams. When she'd asked, her mother had made an argument about needing to be part of the community that hadn't made any sense. It all came down to: this was the way they did things now. And so they did them. Cara didn't like it but didn't hate it either, and the walk could be nice enough. She already knew—the same way she knew she'd get her period or that she'd move into her own house—that someday she'd push back against the weekly routine. But someday wasn't yet.

Services were held in the same space as school, only with the tables taken out and benches made from local wood analogs hauled into rows for people to sit on. Who gave the sermon varied week by week. Most times, it was someone from the original science teams, but a couple of times one of the soldiers' ministers had taken a turn. It didn't really matter to Cara. Apart from the timbre of their voices, the speeches all sounded pretty much the same. Mostly she let her mind wander and watched the backs of the heads of all the people in front of her. The people from town and the soldiers who'd come to the surface all sitting together but apart, like words in a sentence with the spaces between them.

It wasn't the same for the kids. Xan and little Santiago Singh played together all the time. Maggie Crowther was widely rumored to have kissed Muhammed Serengay. It wasn't that the kids didn't recognize the division so much as that it didn't matter to them. The more soldiers came down the well, the more normal it was to have them there. If that worried her parents, it was only because they were used to it being a different way. For Cara and Xan and all the others in their cohort, it had always been like this. It was their normal.

After the sermon, they trickled out into the street. Some families left

immediately, but others stood around in little clumps, talking the way the adults did after church.

The results of the new xenobotany run looked promising and The soldiers are breaking ground on a new barracks and Daffyd Keller's house needs repair again, and he's thinking of taking the soldiers up on their offer of new accommodations in town. Speculation on the water-purification project and the weather cycles data and the platforms or stick moons or whatever people wanted to call them. And always the question—sometimes spoken, but often not—*Have you heard anything from Earth?* The answer to that was always no, but people asked anyway. Church was all about rituals. Standing with the sunlight pressing against her face trying not to be impatient was as much a part of the day as the sermon.

After what seemed like hours and hadn't been more than half of one, Xan and Santiago ran off with a pack of the other children. Stephen DeCaamp finished his conversation with her parents and wandered off toward his own home. The church crowd scattered, and Cara got to follow her parents back to their house. The road was flat, but the prospect of going back to the pond, of seeing the dogs again, made it feel like she was walking downhill.

"More," her mother said when they were out of earshot of the others. Her tone of voice told Cara it was part of a conversation that was already in progress. One she hadn't been part of. Her father's sigh confirmed that.

"We knew that would happen," he said. "You can't expect them to live in orbit forever. Being in a gravity well will be good for them."

"Not sure what it will be for us."

Her father shrugged and glanced toward Cara, not to include her but to postpone the conversation until she wasn't around. Her mother smiled thinly, but she let it drop. "Why don't you ever go play with the other children?" she asked instead.

"I do when I want to," Cara said.

"Must be nice," her mother replied with a chuckle, but didn't go farther than that.

As soon as they were home, Cara changed out of her good clothes, grabbed a lunch of toasted grains and dried fruit, and ran out the back. She took a jacket, but not because she'd get cold. She figured that if the dogs brought the drone back, she'd be able to wrap it up and sneak it back into

the house that way. Then she could put it in her mother's case later, when no one was watching. A drone had to be easier to fix than a sunbird, after all.

At the pond, Momma bird was sitting at the edge of the water, unmoving and wax-skinned. The tiny, angry black eyes focused on nothing in particular. The babies hissed and spat and chased each other around the pond, diving sometimes, or flapped their pale leathery wings. Cara sat a little way off and ate, watching them. The dogs might not come back today. They might never come back. Maybe they ate drones. Or maybe sunbirds rose from the dead on their own. That was the thing about Laconia: with so much that no one knew, anything was possible.

After a while, she folded the jacket into a pillow, got out her handheld, and read part of a book about a lost boy looking for his family in the overwhelming press of people in the North American Shared Interest Zone. She tried to imagine what it would be like, walking down a single street with a thousand other people on it. It seemed like it was probably an exaggeration.

The afternoon heat drew a line of sweat down her back. A chittering flock of four-legged insectlike things roiled through the sky like a funnel cloud before diving onto the water, covering the pond in a layer of shining blue-and-green brighter than gemstones for five or six minutes before rising again at the same instant and shooting away into the trees. Cara hadn't seen them before. She wondered if they were a migrant species, or something local that hadn't crossed her path before. Or maybe this was the kind of thing she was supposed to tell Instructor Hannu about.

That seemed weird, though. What was there to say except *I saw something I haven't seen before*? As if that wasn't always true. It would be a strange day when that *didn't* happen.

She did feel a little guilty not saying anything about the dogs, though. Something that took dead animals and made them not-dead would be the sort of thing the soldiers wanted to know about. Would want to capture and study. She wondered if the dogs would want to be captured and studied. She thought not, and they'd already done more for her than the soldiers ever had.

The sun slid westward. The fronds of the trees clattered in the breeze like someone dropping a handful of sticks forever. The anticipation and

excitement of the morning mellowed and soured with every hour that the dogs didn't come back. The shadows all lost their edges as thin, high clouds caught the sunlight and softened it. A flash of red and yellow from the stick moons faded and flared and faded again. Artifacts of whatever long-dead species had built the gates.

She watched the lights flutter and stream like a kite caught in some different, gentle wind. Or a bioluminescent creature like they had on Earth. Something alive, only not alive. Like Momma bird. She wondered if maybe the stick moons were like that too. Something in between. And maybe the dogs...

Something moved in the darkness under the trees, and she sat up. The dogs came out, ambling toward her gracefully on their oddly jointed legs. Cara scrambled to her feet, stepping toward the dogs that weren't dogs. Or if they were, they were what Laconia meant by the word.

The big, apologetic eyes fixed on her, and she grabbed her own hands. She didn't know why, but she felt like she should wave or bow or do something to show them that she was glad they were there.

"Hi," she said. "I didn't think you'd come."

The dogs came around her, making a semicircle with her at the center. The drone hung from the mouth of one at the back, vortex thrusters powered down and clicking against each other like fingernails.

"Were you able...?" Cara said. Then, "Did you fix it?"

The dog with the drone came forward, lifting its head toward her. She took the drone, and the dog let it go. It was her mother's drone, there was no question about that. And the section she'd shattered was intact, but it looked different. The shards and splinters of its carapace were there, but a lattice of silver-white made a tracework where the breaks had been. Like a scar that marked a healed wound. There was no way her mother would fail to notice that. But it wouldn't matter, as long as it worked. She put the drone down on the clover, slaved it to her handheld. The thrusters hummed. The drone rose into the air, solid and balanced as ever. Cara felt the grin in her cheeks.

"This is perfect," she said. "This is everything. Thank you so much."

The dogs looked embarrassed. She powered down the drone and wrapped it carefully in her jacket as they turned and walked back into the dimness under the trees. She wondered where they went when they weren't

at the pond. If there was some cave they slept in or a pod where they curled up at night. She had a hard time picturing that. And it wasn't as if they had real mouths to eat with. Maybe they all went to some kind of alien power jack and filled up whatever they used as batteries.

"Thank you," she shouted again into the shadows. She stood, holding the drone to her chest like it was a baby. "If there's anything I can do for you..."

She didn't finish the sentence.

She walked back home quickly, her steps quickened by the prospect of being home, of sneaking the drone into her room unseen. She'd have to be clever to get it back into its case without her parents knowing she'd taken it. There were two ways into the house—the front that faced the road to town, and the back by the garden and the shed. The question was which would be most likely to get her past her family's watchful eyes and safely into her room. It was getting close to dinnertime, so the front would probably be best, since at least one of them would be in the kitchen. Or she could stow the drone in the shed under the cart and wait until everyone was asleep. That probably made more sense...

She knew something was wrong the moment she stepped in the back door. The air *felt* different, like the moment before a storm. Soft voices she didn't recognize came from the living room. She walked toward them with a sense of entering a nightmare.

Her father was sitting on a chair; his face had literally turned gray. A uniformed soldier stood beside him, head bowed, and Santiago Singh was behind them, looking away. The boy's eyes were puffy and red from crying. No one turned to her. It was like she was invisible.

Her mother walked in from the front door, footsteps hard and percussive. Her mouth was tight and her eyes as hard as rage. She gazed toward Cara without seeming to see her.

"Mom?" Cara said, and her voice seemed to come from a long way away. "What's wrong?"



It was one of those things. An accident. If any of a thousand details had

been just a little different, no one would have even noticed it. The soldier who'd been driving the transport had indulged in a couple beers with his lunch, so his reaction times were just that much delayed. Xan and Santiago and the other boys had decided to play football instead of tag, so there was a ball that could take a wild kick. Xan had been nearest the road, so he'd been the one to run out to retrieve it. The whole thing was over before anyone understood it had begun. Like that, her little brother was dead, and the drone and Momma bird and the dogs didn't seem important anymore.

Cara sat while the soldier explained it all. Santiago Singh stood at attention, weeping as he retold all he'd seen like the good little soldier he was. Her father lurched out of the room at some point. Her mother dropped her favorite serving bowl, the fragments scattering across the floor. They were like moments out of a dream, connected because they were about the same thing, more or less. But she couldn't have said which happened first. Which one led to the others. Xan was dead, and it shattered time for her. It broke everything.

Admiral Duarte sent his condolences. This was a lapse of discipline that should never have happened. The admiral had already ordered the drunk soldier's execution. Cara's family would be put first on the list for a place in the new housing facilities, and Cara would be guaranteed a place in the academy when it opened. The admiral understood that nothing could compensate for their loss, but the soldiers would do what they could. With the family's permission, the admiral would like to attend the wake. Someone had said, *Of course*, but Cara didn't know if it had been her mother or her father. She might even have said it herself.

The town didn't have a mortuary. In the years they'd been on Laconia, there hadn't been more than a handful of deaths, and none of them had been a child. Not until now. No one seemed to know what to do or how to go about it. Cara had never been to a funeral before. She didn't know what to expect.

They brought Xan home that afternoon, and his body had already been cleaned. Someone had found or made a burial gown for him, white cloth from his throat down to his bare feet. They put him in the front between the door and road on a table. His eyes were closed, his hands folded on his belly. Cara stood at his side, looking down at him and trying to feel. Everything in her seemed to have gone numb.

To her, Xan looked like he was sleeping. Then he looked like he wasn't really Xan, but only a statue of him. A piece of art. Cara found she could flip her brain between seeing him one way and then the other, like he'd become an optical illusion. Her brother, but only asleep. Something not alive, but also not her brother. Back again. Anything except the two together: Never both *Xan* and *dead*.

People from town came. Edmund Otero. Janet Li. The Stover family, with Julianne Stover carrying her new baby on one hip. They brought food. A couple of times, they tried singing hymns, but the songs died out before they could really take root. At one point, Mari Tennenbaum seemed to well up out of the crowd and grab Cara in an awkward hug, like Cara was supposed to be comforting her instead of the other way around. Then Mari faded back into the swirl of bodies and hushed conversation. Cara went back to looking at her brother's corpse.

There was something. Not a bruise really, but where a bruise would have been if Xan's blood hadn't stopped where it was. A discoloration on his head. Cara couldn't get the idea out of her mind that this was where Death had touched him.

She didn't see the soldiers arrive so much as hear it. A change in the voices around her. When she thought to look up, Admiral Duarte was there, silhouetted by the light spilling out of their doorway as he talked to her parents. It was the first time she'd seen him in person and he wasn't as tall as she expected. A centimeter or two shorter than her father. His uniform was perfectly tailored. His pockmarked cheeks made him look older than he probably was.

He was talking to her parents when she saw him, his head bent forward like he was putting all his attention into listening to them. It was a little bit like having a Greek god or a character out of history show up. It wasn't the only unreal thing about the evening, but it was one among others.

Her mother said something she couldn't hear, and the admiral nodded and touched her arm as he replied. He shook her father's hand, neither man smiling. When he walked in her direction, she thought it was to see Xan. To view the body, if that was the phrase. She was surprised when he stopped in front of her.

"Cara?" The way her name sat in his mouth, it was like he was making sure he had the right person and also talking to someone that was his equal.

His eyes were soft brown. She could see the sorrow in them. “My name is Winston.”

“I know,” she said like she was accepting an apology. Letting him off the hook.

He shifted to look at Xan. They were silent for a few seconds. He sighed. “I wish I could make this better. I’ve lost people I love before. It was very hard.”

“Why?” she asked, and her voice was sharper than she’d expected. It wasn’t a fair thing to ask. She wasn’t even sure quite what she meant by it other than who the hell was he to come to her brother’s funeral and talk about his own pain. Winston took the question in, pursing his lips like he was sucking on it. Tasting it.

“Because I hate feeling powerless,” he said. “I hate being reminded that the universe is so much bigger than I am. And that I can’t always protect people.” He shifted to look at her directly again. Like he actually cared about her reaction to this explanation. She understood why the soldiers would follow him. Why they all loved him.

“Would you undo it,” she asked, “if you could? If you could bring him back?”

Maybe he heard something in the question. Maybe it was only that he was listening to her so deeply. He paused, thought. “I believe that I would, yes. I need your family to be well. To be part of what I’m doing here.”

“Taking over Laconia?”

“And everything that comes after that. I want to keep people safe. Not just here but everywhere. The people on Laconia, not just the ones who came with me but all of us, are my best chance to do that. And yes, if I could save your brother, I would. For him, and for your parents, and for you. If I could wave a magic wand and go back in time to keep him off that road? I would do it.”

“You killed the soldier who killed him. Didn’t you need him too?”

“Not as much as I needed you and your family to know that your brother mattered to me. I’m the government here. I imposed that. I didn’t ask your permission first. That puts some obligations on me. It means I have to show sincerity and respect for our rules, even when that requires doing something I might not want to do. I don’t have the right to compromise.”

“I think I understand that.”

“We have to be one people,” he said. He sounded sad. “There’s no room for tribes on Laconia. That’s how they do it back in Sol system. Earth and Mars and the Belt. That’s what we’re here to outgrow.”

“Everything is different here,” Cara said, and the admiral nodded as though she’d understood him perfectly, then touched her shoulder and walked away.

Behind her, someone was weeping softly. She didn’t turn to see who. For the first time since she’d come home, she felt almost clearheaded. When she put her hand on Xan’s foot the same way she used to when she woke him up, his body was cold.

“It’s going to be okay,” she said. “I know how to fix this.”

Her parents were in the kitchen with Mari Tennenbaum, each of them with a squat glass of wine. Usually her father would be making jokes about it being vintage fifteen minutes ago, but now he didn’t seem to notice it was in his hand. The missing joke made her sad, because it meant he was sad.

“What happens to him tonight?” Cara asked.

Mari blinked and reared back a centimeter as if Cara had shouted something rude. Her father didn’t react at all, just turned the fixed, polite smile a degree more toward her. Her mother was the one to answer.

“This isn’t the time—”

“I know the funeral’s tomorrow,” Cara said, “but it’s not like there’s a place in town that he can stay in until then. Can he be here? It’s the last night he can, so he should stay here. With us.”

Her voice was louder and shriller than she’d intended. Mari Tennenbaum wasn’t looking at her, but other people were. Her mother’s eyes were as dead as Momma bird’s.

“Sure,” her mother said. “If it’s important to you, he can stay here until the funeral. That would... that would be nice. To have him here.”

Then her mother started crying and didn’t stop. Her father put down his wine, still with the same smile, and led her away. For a moment, Cara expected Xan to rush in and ask what was wrong with Mom, and then she remembered again. She went back out to stand guard over the body. To make sure that if anyone came and tried to take him away, she’d be there to tell them her mom said not to.

The memorial ended late, people staying until the darkness felt like it had always been there. Like daytime was some other planet. She was still

standing beside Xan when Admiral Duarte and the soldiers left, and when Stephen DeCaamp and Janet Li came to move Xan's body inside. Probably nothing in the local system would mistake him for food, but they brought him in anyway, still on the table. They left him between the dining area and the kitchen, dressed in his funeral whites. It was like something out of a dream.

Her parents saw everyone out, said their last farewells, and closed the door. None of them spoke, and Cara went to the washroom and pretended to prepare for bed. Brushed teeth, washed face, changed into a nightgown. She kissed her mother on the cheek and went to her bedroom. She left the door open just a crack, though, so the latch wouldn't make noise when she opened it. Then, as quietly as she could, she took the nightgown back off and pulled on work clothes. She tucked her handheld into her sock drawer. If they checked, it would look like she was in her room. She crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to her neck so if her parents did come in, she'd look normal. The trick, she thought, would be waiting until they went to bed without falling asleep herself.

In the darkness, she bit her lip, chewing the soft flesh so the pain would keep her awake. She counted backward from five hundred, one number with each breath, and then counted back up to five hundred again. She was just shifting the blanket aside to get up when she heard the back door open and her parents' voices drift in. She froze, listened.

The strangest thing was how normal they sounded. How much grief sounded like regular life.

"I'll get that cleaned up later," her father said.

"It's fine. I don't care."

"I know, but I'll clean it up anyway."

The ghost of a laugh, gone almost before it started. She could imagine her mother leaning against the counter the way she always did, except that Xan was dead. So maybe they acted different. It seemed like everything ought to have changed.

"I can't believe this is happening," her mother said. "It's just not... plausible?"

"Yeah. I keep feeling like I just had a little seizure or something. Like I was having some kind of hallucination, and now I'm back. Or I'm asleep again. I don't know. I can't... I don't feel like he's gone."

Cara felt a little smile tugging at her mouth. For a second, she was tempted to run out and tell them. To have them help. Then they could all do it together.

"I don't want to be here anymore," her mother said. "We weren't supposed to be here anymore. Not us. Not—" Her voice thickened and stopped, like the words had gotten too gooey to get out. Her father was making noises. Like little cooing sounds Cara might have heard from paper bugs. She shifted a little, thinking that maybe she could peek through the crack in her door. See what they were doing. The tightness in her gut was the seconds of nighttime slipping away, and she had to find the dogs.

"He should have been back in Paris," her mother said. "He should have been with his cousins, not on this fucking nightmare of a planet."

"I know," her father said.

"I *hate* it here. I want to go home."

"I know, Dot. I want to go home too."

Cara felt the words like a punch. Home? They wanted to go home? They *were* home. *This* was home. What they meant was Earth, where she'd never been, where she didn't belong. Where Xan didn't belong.

She must have made a noise, because her mother called out in her tear-thickened voice. "Babygirl?"

Cara froze, then inched back toward her bed. She couldn't be found now. Not dressed like this.

"Babygirl?" her mother said again, and Cara jumped back into the bed, hauled the blanket up to her neck, and turned her face to the wall. If they saw her face, they'd know she was only pretending to sleep...

Her door opened. She fought to keep her breath slow and deep. What would she say if they touched her? Should she pretend to wake up? What did she look like when she was just waking up? She didn't know.

"I love you, babygirl," her mother whispered, and the door closed, the latch clicking home. Cara let out a long, stuttering breath. Her pulse was going fast enough for two people, which struck her as funny, because it was sort of true. Her heartbeat and Xan's too. For a while at least.

Her parents' voices were less clear now, but she heard the door to their bedroom close. She waited, counted to five hundred and down again, waited some more. No more noises. No more voices.

The latch was louder than she wanted it to be, no matter how gently she

opened it. It felt like it was echoing in the empty house, but she'd spent too much time waiting already. She walked carefully, rolling her weight from carefully placed heel to her toe. Xan lay still on his table. She opened the back door, stepped out to the shed. When she pulled the cart out, she was almost surprised to see that the sampling drone was still in the shed. It seemed like an artifact from some other life, like it had been hidden there for years and not hours. Funny how time worked like that. She ran her fingertips over the repaired shell with its new veins.

Xan's body was heavier than she expected. She'd carried him before sometimes, but he'd always been helping her, at least a little. He wasn't stiff anymore, and she staggered a little getting him through the back doorway. It got easier when she stopped trying to carry him less like a boy and more like a sack of soil. When she dropped him into the cart, his head hit the side with a thump.

"Sorry," she whispered as if he had felt anything. "But really, this is your fault. When this is done, you're going to have to do my chores for me from now on."

Xan's eyes had opened a little. Tiny wet slits hidden behind his eyelashes, catching the starlight. His arms had folded under him when she put him down, twisted and bent at angles that made her own shoulder ache to look at. There wasn't time to make him comfortable, though. She fumbled with the cart's handle and started down the path, then paused and snuck back into the house. She pulled a bag of fruit and some rice bars out of the pantry, and a bottle of filtered water from the refrigerator. She tucked them beside her brother's corpse, took up the cart handle, and started out.

Night on Earth was bright. That's what they said. Their moon shone like a kind of second, crappy sun. Cities were big enough to drown out the stars with their extra glow. She'd seen pictures of it all, but that wasn't what it had been like for her. On Laconia, day was bright and night was dark. The wide, smeary glow of the galactic disk was the brightest thing in the sky, and she could only navigate by it roughly. Enough to know which direction she was going. Two stick moons floated against the stars, shimmering and shifting, swimming toward each other in the darkness above the sky.

Cara put her head down and pulled. She'd been down this path so many times at so many times of day and in such different weathers that her body knew the way even when she couldn't exactly see it. She knew the sound of

the grass and the water, the places where the breeze changed shape, the smell of broken soil and the pattering of bug honey on the lower fronds of the trees. She could have made the trip with her eyes closed, and with the darkness, she very nearly did.

At the pond, a rock deer lifted its head at her approach, its scales shifting and reflecting starlight like a little slice of sky that had come down for a drink. It was too dark to see its eyes.

“Shoo,” Cara said, and the animal turned and launched itself into the darkness, tramping through the underbrush and then running away faster than a soldier’s truck, even though there were no roads. Cara stopped. A film of sweat covered her forehead, and her armpits felt swampy. She was here, though. She’d made it.

“Hello?” she shouted. “Are you there?”

The darkness didn’t answer back. Even the night animals and bugs went quiet, like they were listening with her. Now that she was here, the plan that had seemed so simple was showing its holes. For her to take Xan to the dogs, the dogs had to be there. If they weren’t...

“Hello?” Her voice sounded thin, even to her. Stretched and desperate. “Please, are you there?”

She parked the cart in the soft ground at the water’s edge and stepped toward the trees. The already black night grew darker. There wasn’t even starlight here. Only an absence, like looking straight into the pupil of an eye as big as the world. She put her arms out, fingertips waving for the fronds and scrub that she knew were there but couldn’t see. Her eyes ached from trying to see anything. Her ears rang with the silence.

“Please? I need help.”

Nothing answered. Despair she hadn’t known she was fighting washed into her. If the dogs weren’t there, then Xan was gone. And gone forever. And he couldn’t be. Grief shifted in her belly, shook her legs and hands. The dogs had been there for Momma bird. They couldn’t leave her brother dead, and just save a fucking sunbird.

Her parents would wake up. They’d see the body was gone, and her with it. They’d be angry, and what would she tell them? What would she say to make them understand that the rules they knew weren’t her rules, that Xan didn’t have to be dead? They’d stop her. She balled her hands into tight, aching fists. She couldn’t let them stop her.

“Hey!” she shouted. And then again, loud enough for the air to scrape at her throat. “*Hey! I need you! I need help! It’s important!*”

The silence was absolute.

And then it wasn’t.

She couldn’t tell how far away it was. With nothing to see, sound could deceive her, but somewhere ahead of her, a hiss and crackle of scrub being pushed aside. The rock deer maybe. Or a shambler. Or any of the thousands of uncategorized animals of Laconia that were still waiting to be named.

Or the dogs.

Uncertainty came over her in a wave. It was too big and too strange. Like she’d waved at the sun and it had waved back. Maybe this had been a bad idea, but it was too late now. She steeled herself to face whatever came from the black. The tramping drew nearer, louder. It multiplied and spread. They were coming.

Something touched her hand. A gentle pressure that tingled like a mild electric shock.

Cara dropped to her knees and threw her arms around the dog, hugging the strange, too-solid flesh close to her. It was warm against her cheek, and rough. It smelled like cardamom and soil. It went still, like it wasn’t sure what to do with her affection and joy, and it stayed still until she released it.

“Over here,” she said, stumbling back to the pond. She gestured in the darkness. And maybe the dogs could see her, because they followed. Starlight glimmered in their bulging eyes.

Xan’s funeral whites glowed in the darkness, a paler shadow. The dogs gathered around him, and it was like watching what was left of Xan dissolve. Darkness consuming darkness.

“He’s my brother,” Cara said. “A truck hit him. It killed him, like with Momma bird. But I need him back. And you brought her back, so you can bring him back too, can’t you? I mean you can, can’t you?”

She was babbling, and the dogs didn’t respond. Mostly blind, she stepped in close, her hands on their backs. The dogs were still and quiet as statues. And then one began making its *ki-ka-ko* call, and the others picked it up until it felt like a choir around her. Until her head spun with it. She sank to her knees to keep from losing her balance. In the sky, the stick moons glittered green and white and blue. The stars looked warmer than their lights.

Xan bobbed up to the surface of the darkness. The dogs were carrying him, one under him bearing his weight on its back. Others holding his arms and legs to steady him as they walked.

“You can, can’t you? You can fix him?”

The dogs didn’t answer. Xan floated out to the trees, and then behind them. And then there was only the sound of the dogs walking. Then not even that.

Cara sat by the water, hugging her knees. Slowly, the natural sounds of the night came back: the trill of insects, the trill of birds. A high, fluting call from something a long way off, and an answering call from even farther. The stillness cooled her, but not badly. All she had to do now was wait.



Voices woke her. They were calling her name, and she couldn’t remember where she was. It wasn’t her bed or her room or her house, because there was a dawn-stained sky overhead. Her clothes were wet with dew.

“Cara!”

She was on the edge of calling back, when the last forgetfulness of sleep slid off her mind. She clamped a hand over her mouth as if her arm didn’t trust her throat to stay quiet. She scrambled to her feet. Momma bird and the little ones were already on the pond. The dead, black eyes didn’t take Cara in. The cart squatted where she’d left it. She snatched the little bag of food out of it, took two steps toward the voices, and then two away. Her mind felt like it was buzzing.

If she told them now, they’d call the soldiers. They’d come and they’d track down the dogs. She didn’t think they’d wait for Xan to come back, and he had to come back. But there were only so many paths. They’d find her at the pond, and soon. She’d have to say something, wouldn’t she? And what if they didn’t let her come back?

She felt like she was still struggling with the dilemma even as she trotted out toward the forest, and the darkness under the fronds. She pushed through the underbrush, twigs and the stick-hard fingers of the scrub sliding off her. A rough break in the plants showed where the animal path led away to the south, and she followed it.

She'd never gone past the pond before. There were probably surveys of the land somewhere. Or maybe not. A decade was a long time to live somewhere, but a planet was larger than the best intentions. She might be going places humans had never been before. Or no one except for Xan, anyway.

The voices grew more distant, but still clear. Her legs ached, but the work of moving fought back the cold. The voices went silent. She thought maybe they'd given up looking for her, but when they started again, there were more. Voices she recognized. Instructor Hannu, Stephen DeCaamp. Mari Tennanbaum.

Her father.

"Babygirl!" he cried. His voice sounded raw. Like he was hurting himself by shouting. "Babygirl, if you're out there, we're right *here*! Baby!"

She wanted to go back to him, to tell him everything was all right. That she was and that Xan was too. Tears rose up in her eyes, blurring the world.

"Sorry," she said softly, pushing forward. "I'm so sorry."

She didn't stop until the sound of the voices was gone. The search would keep going, though. There would be drones. There would be thermal scanning. If the soldiers helped, there would be visuals taken from orbit. She stayed under the canopy of fronds. There were plenty of large animals in the forest. It wouldn't be easy to tell which heat came from them and which came from her. At least she hoped it wouldn't.

The sun tracked through the sky, changing the angle of the few, thin dapples that pushed down into the permanent twilight of the forest. Cara felt herself getting tired. She'd have to rest. She'd have to eat. And at some point she'd have to find her way back to the pond. She had to be there when the dogs came back with Xan. After that, everything would be better.

She found a place where a long brown stone pushed up out of the land. It was too round to be a real bench, and whatever the blue moss was growing on, it felt slick and oily. She sat there anyway. The fruit and rice tasted better than it ever had at home, and the water was sweet. She hadn't realized how dry her throat had become until she drank. Her muscles twitched with fatigue. It wasn't a bad feeling.

The forest around her was hushed, but not silent. Little things the size of her thumb ticked at her from the trees. They had big wet eyes and tiny mandibles that looked like they were frozen in permanent comic alarm. A

bird fluttered by on wide leathery wings, landed on a frond across the way from her, and muttered to itself like a bored child in school. The soft breeze smelled like burnt coffee and fresh grass and rubbing alcohol. An insect buzzed past on bright wings that left a little rainbow afterimage on her eyes.

A sense of peace crept over her, and it felt like the world had sat beside her, opened its own lunch bag, and was just being with her. Everything about the little space was beautiful and calm and rich with a million things that no one had ever seen before. And every place was like this. A whole planet and a solar system beyond it. There would be caves somewhere, with fishlike things living in the waters. There would be ocean coves with tide pools filled with living systems that weren't animals and weren't plants. That didn't have names or an idea of names. She tried to imagine what it would be like going back to Earth, where everything was already known and there weren't any miracles left. It seemed sad.

She pinched the last grain of rice between her fingertips and dropped it on her tongue. She didn't know if the adults were still searching for her. She didn't know how long it would take the dogs to bring back Xan. She'd have to go back home eventually for fresh water and food. But just then, just for that moment, she could let herself feel at peace.

She pushed the empty water bottle back in her pocket, folded the empty bag and shoved it in too. She didn't want to hurry for fear of hearing her name called in a familiar voice. She couldn't stay for fear of missing the dogs. There wasn't a perfect answer, but she didn't need a perfect one. Good enough was good enough.

Making her way home was harder than leaving had been, which made some sense to her. Going away from a point, there were any number of paths, and all of them were right. Going back to the point, most paths were wrong. The rock-deer trail wasn't as clear, now that she was walking back along it. Branches and turns she hadn't noticed on the way out confused her now. And as the sunlight changed its angle and warmth, the colors under the forest canopy changed. Twice, she backtracked to a place she was almost sure was part of the right way and tried again, making other decisions.

The sunlight had started to shift into gray and orange, the air to grow cool, when she came around a stand of trees and the dogs were scattered there, legs tucked primly beneath their bodies. Their embarrassed, apologetic eyes shifted toward her as she came forward. Excitement or fear

or both raced through Cara's body like an electrical shock. And then Xan sat up, his head turning toward her.

He was changed, that was obvious. He was still wearing his funeral whites, but a long black stain ran from his left shoulder down to his belly. His skin had a grayness where the red of blood should have been. His eyes had gone pure black. When he moved, it had the same utter stillness broken by considered action as Momma bird, like every muscle that fired had been thought about for a fraction of a second first. But his hair still stood out in all directions the way it did when he'd just gotten up in the morning. His mouth was the same gentle curve that he'd inherited from their dad.

"Xan?" she whispered.

He was still as stone for a moment, then he shifted his head. "I feel weird," he said, and his voice was his own.

Her grin was so wide it hurt her face. She rushed the last meter between them and hugged him, lifting him up in her arms. For a moment, it was like lifting the dead weight of his corpse. Then his arms were around her too, his head against her neck.

"I was scared," he said. "There was something wrong. And someone was talking to me, only they weren't talking to me."

"There was an accident," Cara said. "You got hurt. Really hurt. *Killed-hurt.*"

A hesitation. "Oh," Xan said. She stepped back, but she kept hold of his hand. She didn't want to let go of him. He blinked. "I feel pretty good for killed."

"I brought you to the dogs. They fix things."

"Like me," Xan said. And then, "There's something wrong with how things look."

"I guess they had to change you some," she said. The nearest dog shifted and looked away, as if chagrined by the limits of their powers. Cara shook her head. "It's okay. This is wonderful. Thank you."

"There are things I didn't see before," Xan said. The words sounded faint. Like he was speaking them from farther off than right here in front of her. "There are other things here. I don't know what they are."

Cara tugged on his hand, pulling him along with her the way she used to sometimes before.

"Come on. It's getting late. We should get home."

“What does it mean to be in a substrate?”

“I don’t know,” Cara said, tugging him again. “Let’s go ask Mom. If I can figure out how to get there from here.” She turned to the nearest dog and bowed. She didn’t know why that seemed like the thing to do, but it did. “Thank you so much for bringing my brother back to us. If there’s anything I can do to help you, just let me know and I’ll do it. Really.”

The dog made a chirping noise, and then they all rose as one, walking away through the forest on their strangely jointed legs. She half expected them to start their *ki-ka-ko* song, but they didn’t. They only faded into the forest again, as if it was the place where they most belonged. Cara started out for what she was pretty sure was the south, and Xan followed along behind, his cool gray hand still in hers.

She didn’t find the pond, but a break in the trees opened up on the road to her house. The charcoal sky of twilight glittered with stars and the stick moons. At least now she knew where she was and how to get where she wanted to be. She just hoped no one would see them along the way. She wanted her parents to be the first to see what she’d accomplished.

A soft breeze came from the north and set the fronds of the trees clacking against each other. They walked the same way they came home from school every day, all of it familiar even through the changes. Cara was already imagining a bowl of barley soup and her bed and waking up in the morning to the amazement and wonder of the town. Xan asked how he’d died, and she spent the walk telling the story of his death, his funeral, everyone who’d come, how she’d made sure his body had stayed there for her to steal. He listened more intensely than he ever had before and hardly interrupted at all.

“The head of the soldiers really came to see me?” Xan asked when she was done.

“He did.”

“Do you think he’ll want to see us again now that I’m back? I don’t want to get them in trouble.”

Them. He meant the dogs. Cara felt a moment’s unease. The soldiers would want to know about the dogs, about Momma bird and the drone and Xan. Especially with the dogs showing up after the stick moons came alive. She’d have to talk to her parents about what to tell the soldiers and how to tell it to them.

She thought of Winston. The way he listened. *I need your family to be well.*

“The admiral understands,” she said. “He knows that Laconia’s not like other places.”

Xan thought about that a beat too long, then nodded more to himself than to her.

The house glowed from every window. Every light in every room had to be burning. It wasn’t like her parents to run the power down like that. And they were there too, framed in the window like it was the screen of her handheld. Her mother standing in the kitchen, hands on the counter. Her father sitting at the table. They looked as tired as Cara felt. She wondered if they’d been searching for her all day. If there were still people out there looking.

Xan stopped, staring at the house with his newly black eyes. His face was all stunned amazement, as if he was seeing it all for the first time. In a way, he was. Cara squeezed his fingers gently. He didn’t follow her right away when she walked toward the front door. Cara stopped and waved him forward.

“It’s going to be okay,” she said.

When she opened the door, her mother startled as if Cara had fired a gun, then rushed at her and grabbed her by the arms hard enough to hurt.

“What did you do?” her mother growled through rage-bared teeth. “What the *fuck* did you do?”

And then she pulled Cara close in a hug so tight, it felt like drowning. Her mother’s sobs shook them both. Cara put her arms around her mother and found she was crying a little too. Guilt and joy and the echoing sorrow of Xan’s death and the triumph of his return all washed together in the moment, and she held on to her mother’s body like she hadn’t since she was a baby.

“It’s okay, Momma,” she said through her tears. “It’s all okay now.”

Her father said her mother’s name. *Dot*. One low syllable, but with alarm in it louder than a shout.

Xan stood just outside the open door in the space where he wasn’t exactly in the darkness or in the light. His funeral whites carried so much dirt and stain they were like camouflage. His bare feet were filthy. The angle of his eyebrows over his black wet eyes reminded Cara of the dogs—

uncertain, embarrassed, apologetic. He stepped through the doorway into the house and went still. Then, in a flicker, lifted his hands toward them all like a baby reaching for an embrace. His fingernails were dirty. The grayness of his skin made his face seem smudged even where it wasn't.

Cara felt her mother gasp, a sharp, sudden inhalation that she didn't breathe out. Her arms went stiff around Cara, grabbing her in so much it hurt. Xan tried a smile. His gaze clicked from Cara to their father to their mother and back to Cara, as fast as an insect leg twitching. He spread his fingers wider, took another step forward.

"It's okay," Cara said. "I got him back."

Her mother yanked her back, grabbing Cara up and away with a violence that hurt her neck. Cara was back behind the counter, her feet off the floor, her mother's arms pressing the air out of her almost before she realized they were moving. Her father pushed them both behind him. She didn't understand why he had a knife in his hand.

"Gary?" her mother said. "What the fuck is that?"

"I see it," her father said. "It's real."

Cara couldn't speak. She didn't have the air. She wriggled against her mother's grip. She had to explain, to tell them what was going on. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen.

"I want a hug too," Xan said.

Xan took another awkward step forward, still and then the flicker of motion, then still again. Her father yelled, a deep, ragged sound too big for the man she knew. He lunged toward Xan, knife shining in his fist, and terror flooded Cara's blood. She kicked at her mother hard, and felt the blow connect. The grip around her released a little.

"Stop it!" Cara screamed. "What are you doing?"

Xan blocked the knife with his hand, the gray skin opening and black blood pouring from his palm. Xan's eyes went wide with shock. Her father barreled forward, still shouting wordlessly. He grabbed Xan's funeral whites and lifted the little boy off the floor. Cara pushed against her mother's neck hard, and stumbled to the floor. Her mother was keening now, a high, tight sound of panic. Her father had the pantry door open. He threw Xan into it and slammed the door shut, still yelling. There were words in it now. He was shouting, *Leave my family alone*.

"What is the *matter* with you?" Cara shouted. She punched her father's

back and then froze. She'd never hit him before. She'd never hit anyone before. He didn't even notice. He grabbed one of the kitchen stools and used it to jam the pantry door closed. Xan banged against the door harder than Cara would have thought he could. Her mother yelped and started cursing fast and low, almost under her breath. It sounded like praying.

Tears were streaming down Cara's cheeks, but she wasn't sad. All she felt was a powerful, growing outrage.

"I brought him back!" she yelled. "He was dead and I took him to the dogs, and they *fixed* him!"

"Dogs?" her father said. "What dogs?"

"The dogs that came after the stick moons turned on," Cara said. There was so much they didn't understand, and the words were like trying to drink through too thin a straw. The meaning wouldn't all fit. "They fixed Momma bird and the drone and they fixed Xan because I asked them to, and he's back. I brought him *back* and you *hurt* him!"

She heard her mother somewhere behind her, talking into her handheld. *I need the military liaison. It's an emergency.* Cara's outrage and impatience felt like venom in her blood. She pushed at the stool, trying to get the pantry door open again. Her father grabbed her shoulders, pulled her close until his face was the whole world.

"That's not your brother," her father said, biting off each word. "That's. Not. Xan."

"It is."

"The dead don't come back," her father said.

"They do *here*," Cara said.

"His eyes," he said, shaking her as he spoke. "The way he moves. That's not a human, babygirl. That's something else wearing my little boy's skin."

"So *what*?" Cara said. "He knows everything Xan knows. He loves everything Xan loves. That *makes* him Xan. How can you do this to him just because he's not perfect!"

Her mother's voice came, hard as stone. "They're sending a force from town."

"The soldiers?" Cara said, pulling away from her father's grip. "You called the *soldiers* on him? You *hate* the soldiers!"

She grabbed at the stool again, but her mother lifted her from behind, hauled her feet off the floor and carried her back toward her room. Xan was

calling from the pantry, his voice muted and rough with tears and confusion. Cara tried to twist back toward him. Tried to reach for him.

Her mother pushed her into her room and blocked the door with her body. When she looked down at Cara, her expression was blank and hard. “It’s going to be all right,” her mother said. “But you have to stay here until I get this under control.”

A rush of thoughts fought for Cara’s voice—*It was under control* and *Why are you making this a bad thing?* and *You let Daddy cut Xan*—and left her sputtering and incoherent. The door closed. Cara balled her hands, screamed, and pounded the wall. Her parents’ voices came from the house in clipped, hard syllables that she couldn’t make out. She sat on the edge of her futon, bent double, and put her head in her tingling hands. Her blood felt bright with rage, but she had to think.

The soldiers were coming. Her parents were going to let them take Xan away. *Make* them take Xan away. They’d say the dogs were bad. Dangerous. They might hurt them.

All because it didn’t work like this on *Earth*.

The room was filled with her things. Her clothes—clean and folded in the dresser and worn and scattered on the floor by the hamper. The picture over her bed of dinosaurs running from a man in a big pink hat. The picture she’d made when she was seven from Laconian grass and paste, with Instructor Hannu’s note—*Good work!*—beside it. The tablet with her book on it. She scooped it up, turned it on. It was still open to the page of *Ashby Allen Akerman in Paris*. The old woman feeding bread to the birds. She put her fingertips on the picture. It wasn’t a real woman. It wasn’t even a real painting. It was just the idea of an idea. It didn’t have anything to do with her life, and she didn’t lose anything by letting it go.

She closed the book and opened the recording function. She felt the time slipping past, but she took a long look around the room all the same. Her whole life was here, written in little notes and objects that added up to a story that only she would understand.

Or else no one would.

The window was easy to open, but the screen was harder to rip than she’d expected. Once she’d gotten a hole big enough for a couple of fingers, it got easier to pull it apart, but it still hurt her fingertips. A little puff of dust came off the fibers when she ripped the hole big enough that she could

squeeze through it. The empty water bottle slipped out of her pocket as she climbed out, clattering onto the paving outside her window. She didn't go back for it. She ran across the road to where the underbrush started getting thick. High clouds interrupted the stars in streaks, as if giant claws had ripped strips out of the sky.

The light in the house and the darkness of the world let her see her mother and father in the main room perfectly. Her father had a length of metal as long as his arm held in both hands like a club. He was crying, but he didn't wipe the tears away. He wouldn't put the weapon down long enough for that. Her mother stood at the door, ready to usher the soldiers in when they came. It would be soon. Town wasn't far away when you had military-transport vehicles.

Cara started the tablet recording. She took a deep, slow breath, waited fifteen seconds, and screamed.

"Mamma!"

Her mother's head came up sharply as she looked out into the darkness of the night. Cara tapped the playback and loop, threw the volume to max, and then flung the tablet as hard as she could into the brush. Her mother came out the front door, scanning but blind from the light. From the brush, Cara's voice came again. *Mamma!*

"Cara?" her mother said. "Where are you?"

Her father came to the door. She heard him say, "What is it?"

Cara started running. She heard her own voice again, behind her, and her mother screaming for her. And her father now too. She didn't have much time. She looped around the back of the house and in the back door, opening it carefully to keep from making noise. Both her parents had gone out the front to find her. To save her. Their voices reminded her of the search party that she'd avoided. All the ways they wanted to help her, but never asked how she wanted to be helped.

She kicked the stool away and hauled open the pantry door. Xan was kneeling in the darkness, his legs folded under him just like the dogs. Wet tracks of tears marked his cheeks. His black eyes took her in. She held out her hand.

"Come on," she said. "We have to warn the dogs."

The front door stood open. Across the road, the brush crackled and hushed as her parents crashed through it, calling her name. They sounded

frightened. Cara felt sorry for them, but they'd made their choices. She'd made hers. Xan took her hand with his uninjured one, and she hauled him up.

Then they were running out the back, into the night, toward the dogs, wherever they were. Xan matched her stride for stride, never letting go of her hand. Her parents' voices faded behind her. She didn't know if they'd found her tablet or if she'd just gotten far enough away that the sound wouldn't reach her.

It didn't matter.

Xan laughed, and the sound was just like the joy he'd had playing a game with his friends. She felt herself smiling. The feeling of freedom lifted her up. Even with the knowledge of the soldiers following behind her. Even with the grief just starting in her heart that she'd never go home. The night was hers, and Laconia was hers, and that was joyous.

Her legs burned and she felt light-headed from hunger. She hadn't had anything to eat since the fruit and rice in the forest. And there wouldn't be anything for her out in the world. All the plants that Laconia grew were indigestible for her at best. Poison at worst. The sunbirds, the blue clover, the grunchers, the glass snakes, everything alive knew, at a chemical level, that she wasn't one of them. But that didn't matter either.

The worst that could happen was she'd die.

The dogs would fix her.

Strange Dogs

Author's Note

This one is often read as a horror story. That's fair. It is one. But it's another story too. It just depends on which generation you're identifying with.

The other story that's like this is *Romeo and Juliet*. They usually trot that one out in high school. When you read (or watch) the play at about the same age and level of maturity as Romeo and Juliet, and the story is about two lovers who catch a series of bad breaks. They wind up dead because the world around them is just a little too fucked up for their more tender emotions to have a place in it. And that's a perfectly legitimate reading. Hell, it's the one that the play steers us toward.

But read it again when you're old enough to play Capulet or Montague, and it feels very different. What Romeo and Juliet experience as the only world they know is the one Montague and Capulet made. From the old-guy seats, the tragedy is watching the fight you started and then failed to end go on until it kills your kids. And that's worse, because you're still there to suffer the loss after they're gone. Your failure to fix things takes the people you love the most, and it's your fault. That's *Romeo and Juliet* for middle-aged guys.

From the perspective of the parents, "Strange Dogs" is a horror story and a tragedy. Xan dies and comes back changed. And then they lose Cara to the same fate because they can't get her to see the situation through their eyes. They can't make her understand why they see this unexpected resurrection as a bad thing.

From Cara and Xan's perspective? It's an immigrant story.

They've come to a new place, and their parents are still living in the old country that exists in their minds. The children's books are all about birds Cara and Xan have never seen and rules they've never lived by. Their home

—their real home—is the place they’re growing up. On Laconia, it turns out dead doesn’t always mean dead. Sometimes it just means changed. And for them, that’s okay because it’s just the way the world they’ve grown up in works. But because Mom and Dad can’t shed the old ways, the old rules, they can’t see it.

We know a lot of second-generation immigrant families that suffer this break between an old world that the parents know and the culture their kids belong to.

For parents, that’s always going to have the potential to be horror.

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Auberon

The old man leaned back in his chair, ran his tongue over his teeth, then lit a fresh cigar. His left arm was a titanium and carbon-fiber prosthetic grafted deep into the bones of his shoulder, but his natural right arm was just as intimidating: scarred and pocked by decades of violence and abuse. His hair was a fluffy white fringe that cupped the back of his skull, and he wore a thin mustache like it was a joke he was in on.

“All right. So we’ll get a new governor who answers to a different boss,” he said. “It happens. Everyone’s playing by the rules, and then something rolls through and changes them all. Things get scrambled for a while until everyone figures the new rules out.”

His second went by Agnete because it wasn’t her name. She didn’t roll her eyes. She was used to the old man getting poetic, especially when he was thinking something through. The fingers of his metal arm shifted unconsciously, the wrist curling in on itself the way the real one had, back in the day.

The office wasn’t really an office at all. At the old man’s level, business could be done anywhere, and he liked the little bar on the Zilver Straat plaza with its wide-bladed ceiling fan and the smells of salt and sulfur coming off the bay. He claimed it reminded him of the kinds of holes and corners he’d grown up in, back on Earth. Some days, people came to meet him there. Occasionally, he’d go out and sit with people in other parts of the city. Someone powerful needed a loan and couldn’t get one. Someone needed a supply of agricultural chemicals or drugs, pornography or off-book sex workers, untraceable security teams or zero-day code exploits, then sooner or later they came to the old man.

“The thing is,” he said, “you only have so long to figure out the new rules. That’s what kills you. You’ve got to look at the situation like you’re just coming into it, because you are. And sure, maybe it’s got the same

street and the same people. That doesn't mean it's the same place. All the things you just take for granted about how it works are up for grabs again, and—"

"Permission?"

He scowled, but he nodded her on.

"Boss," she said, "we didn't just get a new governor. We got *conquered*."

The old man grunted dismissively. He didn't like being interrupted. Agnete nodded toward the wallscreen behind the bar. The newsfeed from Sol had the secretary-general of Earth, the speaker for the Martian parliament, and the president of the Transport Union—the most powerful people among all the scattered human billions—being humiliated and brought to heel by the new order like the burghers of some half-razed medieval town. The combined fleet was in tatters. The void cities broken or occupied. Pallas Station was reduced to pebbles and hot gas. Medina, at the heart of the gate network, taken over by the half-alien ships that had boiled out of Laconia system. The whole human orthodoxy overturned in what felt like a moment. High Consul Winston Duarte had named himself ruler of all humanity and had killed enough people to make it true. Emperor of the galaxy.

"This time is different," she said.

The old man spat smoke and grunted again.



The gate network had opened more than thirteen hundred solar systems to humanity, almost all of them with one or two or three planets in the Goldilocks zone. Under hundreds of suns, evolution had improvised new answers to the overwhelming question, *What is life?* With carbon and nitrogen, hydrogen and sunlight and time, the possibilities weren't limitless, but they were mind-boggling. The DNA and asymmetric chirality of organic life on Earth and its Sol system colonies turned out to be idiosyncratic in a wide and creative universe. Even animals shaped by the same selective pressures to look similar to Terran life—the grass trees of Bara Gaon, the humpbacked pigeons of Nova Brasil, the skinfish of New

Eden—only needed a glimpse under a microscope to show they were as different from their Terran counterparts as a bull from a bicycle.

A human being could eat all day and still starve to death in the great garden of Sigurtá, surrounded by bright fruits and soft vegetables, trees heavy with fat birds and rivers filled from bank to bank with things that almost passed for trout.

The forest of life was varied and exotic, and the trees there didn't get along with each other. Or most of them didn't anyway.

At first glance, Auberon system didn't seem exceptional. Three modest gas giants, none of them larger than Saturn. A single wet, life-bearing planet with a large but unexceptional moon. There were no alien artifacts the way there had been in Newhome and Corazón Sagrado. No weirdly pure ore profiles like on Ilus or Persephone. Just a scattered handful of planets, a couple of asteroid belts, and a star burning its slow way toward a billion-year-distant collapse. Among the hundreds of systems to which humanity was heir, it could have been anyplace.

But it was now the most important human system outside of Earth, Laconia, and maybe Bara Gaon Complex. Only a few decades into its settlement, and it already boasted a dozen cities, each of them in the middle of built-up rural areas like the floral disc in the center of a daisy. There were six dwarf planets with mining and refining developments big enough to have permanent civilian populations growing around them. There was a transfer station built to accommodate the trade between it and the other, less fortunate colony worlds. It was the second most developed human settlement in the universe, and on track to keep growing for centuries. And the thing that made its first settlers the winners of history's land-rush lottery was that, apart from competing for sunlight, the biosphere of Auberon barely interacted with the plants and animals of Earth.

There was a famous image of an Earth apple tree and an Auberon-native tree, their roots intertwined as if each were acting as soil for the other. That mutual biochemical shrug made open-air farming possible on Auberon. Contamination by local organisms tended not to mean more than a mild case of gas. And because it was the most habitable of the new planets by orders of magnitude, it was developed. Because it was developed, it was influential. Because it was influential, it was wealthy. And because it was wealthy, it was corrupt.

And now, it was Biryar Rittenaur's problem.

A woman's face appeared on his handheld. She had a prominent chin, long white hair in tight curls, and a high forehead... Biryar tapped his fingers against his thigh. He should know this one. A face like a spade. A spade is a garden shovel. Shovel...

"Michelle Cheval," he said. "President of the Agricultural and Food Production Workers Union."

The handheld shifted to a young man's face. Pleasant, neutral, with a mole at the side of his mouth that reminded Biryar of a cartoon rabbit. That was the image he'd built—cartoon rabbit with a basketball. He knew it was the right image, but he couldn't make the jump to why he'd chosen it.

"Damn it," he said, and tapped the man's profile. His name was Augustin Balecheck. He was the deputy minister in charge of planetary transportation security. Mona leaned over his chair, resting her chin on Biryar's shoulder.

"What was this one?" she asked. He could smell the almonds on his wife's breath and feel the shifting of her jaw against his as she chewed. It was the third year of their marriage, and he had never stopped loving the smell of her skin close to his.

"A rabbit basketball player," he said. "The mole was like a rabbit whisker. Balecheck like 'ball check.' Also traveling is a foul in basketball, and he's planetary transportation."

Her sigh meant she was thinking. She pointed a thin, graceful finger at Deputy Minister Balecheck's mole. "He got that because the guy he was deep-throating had paving tar on his scrotum."

Biryar coughed out something close to a laugh.

"That man's cheek is a ball check," she said, "and the paving tar will remind you of the road system."

"Good lord. Are you always this obscene, Dr. Rittenaur? I'm not going to shake the man's hand while I imagine him having sex."

"If you don't like it, erase it from your memory and go back to the cartoon rabbit thing," she said.

"I don't think I'll be able to now."

She tapped her forehead with the tip of her finger, and she grinned. "Which is my point. It works better if you commit to the process," she said. Then she kissed his ear.

Biryar had two hundred and eighteen individuals and fifty-three organizations to commit to memory. More than any literal cartography, it was the map of the territory he was going to have to travel as the first Laconian governor of Auberon.

He hadn't been surprised when Duarte had chosen him. He'd worked for the empire since he was old enough to enter government service, excelled in his coursework, taken every initiative to rise among his peers. He had done his thesis on High Consul Duarte's early philosophical works and their relationship to examinations of grand strategy throughout human history. Auberon hadn't been a specific ambition of his, but a posting of importance to the empire had been. Medina or Bara Gaon or Sol, a position in the High Consul's cabinet or teaching at the university on Laconia would have served his hopes as well.

The reason, he knew, that he was in the cramped military cabin en route to a governor's mansion was Mona. Her small, round face and wide, dark eyes made her seem younger than she was and somehow elfin, but his wife was the best soils scientist of her generation. While he had been writing an academic love letter to the most powerful man in the empire, she had been mapping out paths to bring the thousand different biospheres into accord, to engineer everywhere what Auberon had happened onto by chance.

Before she'd taken a single step under Auberon's sun or drawn a breath of its air, Mona understood the richness of its dirt, and the potential that rested there. Her post would be at the Xi-Tamyan Agricultural Concern in the capital city of Barradan, where the governor's office would be. Their skills and backgrounds were perfectly suited for the post. He could only hope that the millions of inhabitants of Auberon saw that too.

He switched to the next image. A hard-faced woman with dark-brown eyes. He didn't need a mnemonic device for her. Suyet Klinger was the Auberon representative of the Association of Worlds, and one of the only people he would be ruling over that he'd actually met. He tapped to move to the next image but the screen shifted on its own and a scheduled request took its place. He let a breath out between his teeth and rose from his crash couch. Mona popped another almond into her mouth and watched him walk the few steps to the cabin door.

"I'll be back," he said. She nodded, and didn't speak.

They were already in their braking burn, the floor of the *Notus* pushing

up against them at almost half a g. It was a short walk to the meeting room where the head of his security, newly assigned from Medina Station and picked up on the way through the gate hub, was waiting for him. The relief Biryar felt at putting aside the memorization work was evidence that greater discipline was called for. He made a mental note to go back to it as soon as the meeting was done. Not because he wanted to, but because he didn't. And it was his duty.

Major Overstreet was a thickly muscled man with pale skin and bright-blue eyes that left him seeming eerily corpse-like. He'd served with honor and distinction most recently under Colonel Tanaka and then Governor Singh of Medina Station. And when Medina had faced its crisis, Major Overstreet had stepped in to prevent atrocities being carried out in the name of the empire. He was a hero, and to be honored. But when Biryar sat across from him, the back of his neck itched a little and felt the shadow of the guillotine.

"Governor Rittenaur," Overstreet said, rising to his feet and saluting. "Thank you for your time."

"Of course, Major. Thank you for your work." Their usual pleasantries. There was neither warmth nor animosity behind them. They were two people entirely defined by their formal relationship: fellow cogs in the machine to which they were committed. It was comfortable.

"I've reviewed the report from the Association of Worlds," Overstreet said. "There are some decisions that need to be made about your accommodations, and it would be useful to me to have some guidelines about your risk tolerance."

"What are we looking at?"

Overstreet pulled up a report and sent it to the wallscreen. The format was familiar. Biryar had been reading and interpreting security reports for years, and usually for places he'd never physically been. He took in the slopes of Barradan's hills and the curve of its roads from a scattering of lines. The compounds that had been offered to him were marked in Laconian blue. He touched the northernmost.

"This has the fewest angles of approach," Biryar said. "That's a fence?"

"Decorative fence on a half-meter wall. Easy to reinforce. But it's also the farthest from the Xi-Tamyran campus, here," Overstreet said, indicating the far side of the city. "Which means the most exposure in transit for Dr.

Ritteraur.”

Biryar leaned forward, considering the other options for his new home in this new light. “What about this one?”

“Open grounds—like most places in Barradan—and approachable from three directions. But we can build a wall, the structures are defensible, and it would minimize daily transit exposure.”

The potential for separatist violence had been proven on Medina and in a handful of the colony worlds. The enemies of Laconia and the High Consul were out there, and some would be on Auberon. In Barradan. Some would pass him in the streets, and he might not know them.

And they would pass Mona as well.

“The one closest to Xi-Tamyar will do,” he said, and as soon as he said it, he felt a rightness in the choice. “And there’s no need to build any walls. Let’s not establish our new administration by hiding in our shell like a turtle. Personnel and active security show more engagement and openness.”

“Yes, Governor,” Overstreet said with a bland smile as he collapsed the reports.

The real protection wouldn’t be walls and fences. It would be the narrative of power. The *Tempest* in Sol system was a massive deterrent, even though it was very far away. The *Notus* was smaller, but close by, and Auberon system didn’t have the military power to deny it.

“There will be a reception after we arrive,” Overstreet said. “I’m coordinating with the local authorities.”

“If you are satisfied with the security arrangements, please move forward,” Biryar said, agreeing. “I trust your judgment.”

It occurred to Biryar then that he’d just chosen the home he might spend the rest of his life in based wholly on its abstract qualities, without knowing the color of the walls or the shapes of the windows. If he had, it wouldn’t have changed anything.

The *Notus* was rated for atmosphere, so there was no reason to dock at the lunar station. There was a landing complex just east of the city designed to withstand the ship’s drive plume until they switched to maneuvering thrusters and settled to the ground. With the turbulence of atmospheric passage and the vibration of the drive gone, there was nothing to drown out the soft ticking of the hull plates as they cooled. Biryar let the crash couch hold him up. The gravity of his new home planet pulled him gently into its

cool blue gel.

He had imagined this moment a thousand times. His arrival at his new post, and the heroic, grave impression he wanted to give to the people who were now under his control. It was important that they should see him as something near the platonic ideal of a wise governor—stern, merciful, wise. And he also wanted them to recognize his loyalty to the High Consul and Laconia, as a model for them. As an example to be followed.

Now that the occasion was actually upon him, he was mostly aware of just how badly he needed to visit the head.

He heard his cabin door open, and then the soft padding of feet on the deck. Mona smiled down at him. She had her formal dress folded over her arm, ready to be put on. It was high-waisted and high-collared with layers of lace in Laconian blue. She was dressing for this moment not in her role as soil scientist but as the spouse of a governor. Her eyes betrayed only a little of her tiredness and anxiety. To anyone who didn't know her, not even that.

“Ready?” she asked.

Are you ready to take control of a planet? Are you ready to command the lives of millions of people and forge the most valuable planet in the greater human sphere into a tool that will, in time, feed trillions of people under a thousand different suns? He told himself that the flutter he felt in his stomach was excitement. Not fear. Never dismay.

If she had been anyone else in all of humanity, he would have said *Yes, I am*. But it was Mona, and so his true feelings were safe.

“I don't know.”

She kissed him, and the softness of her lips and the strength of them were a comfort and a promise. He felt his body starting to react to her and stepped back. Distracted and aroused was no way to start his tenure as governor. The millimeter lift of her eyebrows meant she understood everything he hadn't said.

“I'm just going over to my cabin to change,” she said.

“That sounds wise.”

She took his hand, squeezed it. “We're going to be fine,” she said.

Less than an hour later, he walked down the gantry and stepped for the first time onto the planet. *His* planet.

From sunrise to sunset lasted a little over four standard hours on

Auberon, with cycles of light and darkness changing only slightly with the seasons. By local convention, day was two cycles of light and one of darkness, night the reverse. Noontime on Auberon was always dark, and midnight was bright. It was midmorning, but it looked like sunset. Red clouds high above them, and huge sessile organisms like trees or massive fungi lifted red streamers as if all the world were touched by fire.

The small group that had been invited to greet him was by definition the most honored citizens of Auberon. The order in which he acknowledged them was important. The formality with which he held himself, whether he smiled or didn't when he shook their hands. Everything mattered deeply, because what High Consul Duarte was to the empire, Biryar Rittenaur was to Auberon. Beginning now.

The streets of Barradan were narrower than the broad boulevards of Laconia, with buildings that crowded the pavement. Brick the gray-green color of the local clay. The lights all glowed with the full spectrum of sunlight to say that this darkness was daytime, and would become dimmer and warmer when consensus night came. Security forces with rifles and riot gear kept his path clear as he moved through the maze of intersections. If someone had planned the city, they'd done it with the aesthetics of an earthbound ghetto. More likely, Barradan had bloomed with no intention beyond satisfying the needs of the moment.

Biryar traveled in an open car, the wind of his passage stirring his hair. Something smelled foul. Like a sewer that had failed. Mona wrinkled her nose at it too.

"Indole," she said. She saw the blankness of his response. "Technically 2,3-benzopyrrole. Just a couple carbon rings and some nitrogen. The local biome really likes it. Nothing to worry about."

"It smells like..."

"Shit. Yes, it does," Mona said. "The soils team tells me we'll get used to it in a couple days."

"Well. Elements are elements, and there's only so many things you can make with them, I suppose," he said. "Some smell better than others."

The compound was lit for noon when they pulled in. The house was shaped like a horseshoe, with pink stucco walls and polished metal sconces every few meters. Local insect analogs swarmed around the brightness. The courtyard in the center was paved in plates of carbon-silicate lace

engineered to shine blue as a beetle's carapace. Starlight seemed to swim in its depths, reflections of the galactic disk overhead. The capital city of his planet didn't yet generate enough light pollution to drown the sky. The stars were the only things that reminded him of Laconia.

His personal staff stood at attention beside the building's wide central doors. Laconian guards and local administrators, all in formal dress, all waiting for Major Overstreet's inspection before they met their new master.

He was home now. For better or worse, this was his place in the universe, and might be for the rest of his career. Mona's sigh was barely audible, and he thought there was regret in it until she spoke.

"It's beautiful," she said.



The reception began a few hours later. The sun was directly overhead in the second of the day's two brightnesses, and Biryar kept reflexively thinking of it as midday. He was impressed by the heat of the sunlight and the humidity of the air. Either the sewer stench had gone down with the rising sun or he was already growing used to it.

There were easily a hundred guests at the reception. Many of them were on the lists he'd committed to memory, but there were some others: a thin-faced woman with her hair in an elaborate plait, an older man with a thin mustache and a prosthetic arm, an agender person with a pinstriped linen suit and the studied respectability of a banker. Today was Auberon's first glimpse of what Laconian rule would mean, and the people—city, planet, and system—were driven by their uncertainty and their fear. It was Biryar's duty to project calm and strength, the implacable authority of the new regime, and its geniality and benignity to those who gave it their undivided loyalty.

He'd intended to wear a jacket, but he gave up the idea. He was happy to see that the guests had also chosen lighter shirts and soft, airy blouses. Mona's blue lace looked almost heavy by comparison, but she wore it with grace. She moved through the party as assured and confident as if they had lived in these rooms for years, not hours. She laughed easily and listened intently as she spoke to the man with the prosthetic arm. He felt the twinge

of jealousy in his breast as a mixture of admiration, love, and exhaustion.

As he moved among the guests, he found himself orbiting her. Touching her arm as they passed, laying claim to her the same way he was laying claim to the world. The glitter of amusement in her eyes, invisible to anyone but him, meant she saw what he was doing, and that she forgave him his weakness. Or that she enjoyed the power she had over him. They were two ways to say the same thing.

The first sign of trouble seemed so trivial that he didn't see its significance at all at the time. They were in a side garden where the local plants pushed their ruddy way up from a lawn of grass. A fig tree from Earth had spread its limbs above a small carved-stone table. The fruit was ripe to splitting, and added a sweetness to the foul air.

Mona was sitting across from a woman maybe twenty years older than either of them. The woman's graying hair was starting to escape an austere bun, and her cheeks were flushed from one drink too many. When he saw Mona's frown, Biryar stepped lightly over, ready to act as his wife's savior. He found he had misread the situation.

"We were so close," the older woman said. "Six more months, and we could have cracked it. I swear to fucking God."

Mona shook her head in sympathetic outrage. The older woman looked up at Biryar, a flash of annoyance at his interruption melting into embarrassment when she recognized him.

Mona took his hand. "Dear, this is Dr. Carmichael. I told you about her work on amino acid array translation."

Biryar smiled and nodded as his mind churned. Carmichael. What was array translation? He'd known this one... He found it. "Coaxing the local biology into growing something that can nourish us."

Carmichael nodded a little too strongly. A lock of her hair escaped unnoticed and fanned out behind her head as if she were on the float. When she spoke, her voice was reedy, caught in the uncertain space between anger and whining. "My funding was reallocated. They just took it away. I wouldn't pay the bribes, and so they said I was difficult to work with!"

"That sounds distressing," Biryar said, putting sympathy in his tone while keeping it out of his word choice.

"It was," Carmichael said, nodding. Tears brightened her eyes. "It was really distressing. That's exactly the word."

Biryar nodded back, mirroring her.

“I will absolutely look into this,” Mona said.

“Thank you, Dr. Rittenaur,” Carmichael said, still nodding. “We were so close. I can show you the data.”

Biryar smiled down at Mona. “If that could wait until another time, there’s someone I’d like you to meet, dear.”

“Of course,” Mona said, rising. She and Carmichael exchanged farewells, and Biryar steered her away into the house without any clear idea where he was going except out of the older woman’s sight.

“It’s early to be taking sides in local disputes, don’t you think?” he said as they walked.

Mona looked at him. She was tired too. Overstimulated and out of her element just as much as he was. When she spoke, she snapped.

“Her work is exactly what Auberon should be focused on. If she got sidelined because she wouldn’t pay a bribe—”

“Corruption is a problem here. We knew that, and we’ll address it. Maybe this is an example, or maybe she just has a story that makes her feel better. Either way, please don’t commit us to anything on the first day.” It came out harder than he’d meant it. Worse, it came out patronizing.

Mona’s smile was warm and inauthentic, intended for onlookers and not for him. She squeezed his arm gently, bowed her head, and disengaged. He felt a little stab of distress. They should have put off the reception until they were both more rested. This was the kind of fight they only had when they were tired or hungry. They’d finish it in private if they had to. He didn’t think it would amount to more than that.

Still, he regretted it.

The reception carried on through the remaining two hours of daylight and into the second sunset of the day. The light grew redder, and the crowd of people began to thin. Biryar went over his mental list of people he thought it was important to acknowledge. Arran Glust-Hart, the forensic accountant with the Association of Worlds. Nayad Li, the director of planetary logistics. Devi Ortiz, the minister of education. A dozen more. As the evening drew to its close, the irrational fear of introducing himself twice to the same person started to grow. He hadn’t accomplished everything he’d hoped with the reception, but he knew himself well enough to recognize the point of diminishing returns. He remembered one of the High Consul’s

sayings: Overdoing is also falling short. Better to have a good night end well than push for perfect and undo what had been achieved.

He'd woken on a ship under burn. He would sleep at the bottom of a gravity well. The thought was enough to make his limbs feel heavy. A glass of whiskey, maybe. A boiled egg with some pepper and salt. And sleep.

He didn't notice quite how he found himself in the little drawing room that looked out over the courtyard. It was a cozy space with a tall, thin window and chairs made of some thick, fibrous wood strung with raw silk. The floor was made with the same green-gray bricks he'd seen on the drive in. A knotwork carpet commanded the center of the room. The older man with the prosthetic arm stood at the window, looking east toward where the sky was just fading from black to charcoal with the coming of the nighttime dawn, which put the hour near ten o'clock.

Biryar was certain the man hadn't been in his briefings list. The arm—titanium fused to his living flesh—would have been hard to forget. But even without that, the face was striking. The man's skin was pale and papery without seeming frail. Only well lived-in. A line of fluffy white hair ran from ear to nape to ear, leaving a wide, smooth scalp. A thin, white mustache. He wore tight black trousers and a pale shirt with an open collar. An unlit cigar was clamped in his lips. The one-armed man turned and nodded to Biryar as if he'd been expected.

"Turd of a planet," he said. "It's home, though. I remember the first time I came down. I thought I was gonna puke, it smelled so bad." He lifted his cigar between a thumb and finger. "It's when I started with these. Just to kill off my sense of smell. But I do love it now."

"I'm looking forward to making it my home too," Biryar said. "I don't believe we've been introduced."

"Makes me think of the Raj," the one-armed man said, as if he hadn't heard Biryar. "That was a weird thing, wasn't it? Dinky-ass little Britain using maybe a hundred thousand people to keep their boots on three hundred million necks? You can have the best guns ever, and those odds still suck. No, I do not envy you. Not even a little bit."

Biryar's smile went slightly tighter. Something about the moment felt off. "I think your understanding of history leaves something to be desired."

The man turned, pale eyebrows lifted. He shrugged his real shoulder. "Maybe that part. There's other bits of history I know better. You ever hear

the question ‘Silver or lead?’”

Biryar shook his head. “I don’t believe so. What’s your name? Who are you with?”

“My friends call me Erich,” the one-armed man said, grinning. His teeth were the color of old ivory. “So anyway, there was this thing way back when. They used to have these huge recreational drug companies. Totally illegal. And when someone new would come into town or get elected or whatever, the question was: silver or lead? *Plata o plomo*. Does the new sheriff in town take a bribe or a bullet? Hell of a slogan. It’s simple, you know? Boils everything down. You have to admire that.”

Biryar’s exhaustion fell away. His heart began to tap at his ribs, but he didn’t feel panicked. His mind was cold and sharp, and he was suddenly very present. “Are you threatening me?”

“What? Jesus, no. We’re just a couple guys talking history.” The old man took something from his pocket. At first Biryar thought he was going to light his cigar, but instead the old man placed the little device on the windowsill with a percussive tap. He stepped back from it. A small black shape, curved along one side.

Biryar gestured to it with his chin, asking the question without speaking.

“It’s a token for the local exchange network,” the one-armed man said. “It’s tied to a private, anonymized account with about fifteen thousand new-francs in it. That’s enough to buy even someone like you a little privacy.”

“For what?”

The man spread his hands. “Whatever. I don’t judge.”

Biryar stepped carefully to the window and picked up the token. The resin looked like smoky glass. Obsidian. The old man smiled until Biryar dropped it to the floor, put his heel on it, and ground it against the brick. The one-armed man’s eyes narrowed. The facade of good humor was gone, and Biryar knew he was facing a predator.

“Are you sure about that?” the old man asked.

“Don’t make me raise my voice. This is my house. And there are a lot of armed people in the compound right now,” Biryar said.

The man smiled. “There are. And some of them are probably pretty loyal to you. Others, maybe not as much. You a gambling man?”

In the window, the night’s single, swift dawn was already breaking. Blue sky and high, scudding clouds. The two men stood still as stone for three

long breaths, then the old man turned to the door and walked out. Biryar felt the shout swelling in his chest. He didn't let it out.

He was shaking. Trembling. He picked up the token. The resin was cloudy with scratches now, but he didn't know whether he'd managed to break whatever mechanism it contained. He told himself that he would not leave the room until he could gather himself again into the man he was supposed to be. He wouldn't rush out into the reception looking panicked. But then he thought of Mona earlier in the night, listening intently to the one-armed man, and he couldn't wait any longer.

The one-armed man had vanished. Mona, sitting on a wide sofa with a gin and tonic in her hand, saw him and put her drink down. He hoped it was only the intimacy of their marriage that let her see his distress. When she came to him, he kissed her ear and whispered.

"Find our guards. The ones from the *Notus*, not the locals. Stay with them."

She pulled back, smiling like a mask. She spoke without moving her lips. "Are we in danger?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'll find out."

With Mona warned, he could move to offense. He summoned Major Overstreet to his private office. Sitting at the wide wooden table where he'd never sat before felt like being in a mousetrap.

Overstreet stepped into the room and stood at attention. The only sign of fatigue was a slight darkness in the skin under his eyes. "Sir?"

Biryar kept himself calm, or as calm as he could. When he got to the old man's threat, Overstreet became almost eerily still. When the full report was given, he put the token on the desk. Overstreet picked it up, considered it, and placed it back down. Biryar leaned forward in his chair. He hadn't said anything yet that the old man wouldn't have known from being present when it happened. That was about to change.

"How certain are you that our conversation here is private?" Biryar asked.

Overstreet hesitated. Then, "An hour ago, I would have said I was certain, sir."

"Now?"

"I'm less certain."

The silence had weight. "I think it would be very unfortunate to leave

the compound so soon after arriving. I will visit the *Notus* in the morning to finish clearing the diplomatic documents. We can have a conversation there.”

“I will have Laconian guards stationed to assure your safety.”

“And Dr. Rittenaur’s.”

“Yes, sir. And I will begin an investigation as to who this individual was at once, and who allowed him on the property.”

“Thank you,” Biryar said. “This has to be our first priority now.”

“Agreed, sir. I’ll have a preliminary report ready before you reach the *Notus*. And...” Overstreet pressed his lips together and looked away.

“What’s bothering you, Major?”

“This was either an egregious failure on the part of the local forces or an outright subversion of security protocols. Either way, there will have to be consequences. Before I begin an investigation, it would be good to have some sense of how you would prefer to escalate this. Should that be needed.”

It was a measure of how much the encounter had shaken him that Biryar hadn’t considered this already. On Laconia, a breach of this magnitude would mean someone was executed at the least, and more likely sent to the Pens as a test subject. But on Laconia, a breach like this would never have happened. The first decision of his career would be whether to execute someone and very possibly alienate the planet he’d come to preside over. And the decision was complicated by what had happened with Governor Singh on Medina.

“We both understand the dangers of overreach,” Biryar said, speaking the words gently, as if they were sharp. “If the offending party is a native of Auberon, arrest them and turn them over to the local authorities. The processing of their case will need to be thoroughly and completely monitored. We will respect the laws here to the degree that we safely can. I won’t escalate until Auberon’s legal system has the chance to do this well.”

“And if the issue began with us?”

Biryar smiled. That was easier. “If a Laconian is responsible for breaking protocol and putting our administration at risk, either now or in the future, we will execute them publicly. Laconian standards are absolute.”

“Understood, sir,” Overstreet said, as if Biryar hadn’t simply restated a policy that traced back over thousands of light-years to the desk of High

Consul Winston Duarte himself. Overstreet hesitated, then: “One thing, sir? Until this is addressed, I’d be more comfortable if you carried a sidearm.”

Biryar shook his head. “It will be seen as a sign of fear. I trust your security force to make it unnecessary.”

“I appreciate your confidence, but I’m asking you to do it anyway,” Overstreet said. “The man was in your house.”

Biryar sighed, then nodded his agreement. Overstreet left.

Mona was sitting on the edge of the bed when he reached her. Worry etched lines around her mouth. Probably around his as well.

“What happened?” she said. “Is there a problem?”

“The criminal element of Auberón is concerned by our arrival. As they should be,” he said. “There was a threat. We’re looking into it.”

She pulled her knees up, hugging them to her chest, and looked out toward the windows. She looked lost and small. She was right to feel that way. They were one ship full of people to command a system of millions.

Thick shutters were closed against the brightness of the too-fast sun and the heat and stench of the consensus midnight. A line of brightness showed the seam where they met. Biryar sat beside her. A dozen things came to mind that he might say to her. *This is our duty* or *Some pushback had to be expected* or *We will destroy them*.

He kissed her shoulder. “I won’t let anyone hurt us.”



Agnete scratched her chin to make it seem more like she was thinking and less like she was struggling to keep her temper. The old man sat at the breakfast bar. His bathrobe was a gray that could have been any other color before it faded. His fake arm was going through its diagnostic reboot, shivering and twitching. The old man did it every day even though the documentation said it was a once-a-month thing. The speed and violence of the reboot sequence made her think of insects.

When her outrage had subsided enough that she could be polite, she said, “That was a move, boss. Not sure I would have done that.”

“It was a risk,” he said, dismissively.

But whatever his tone, he wasn’t at the Zilver Straat bar. Just the fact

that he'd started moving his meeting places said he was taking the situation seriously. She didn't know whether she felt worse because of the new level of threat or better because he knew it was a problem. Even if he wouldn't say it out loud.

They were sitting in an apartment over a noodle bar. It wasn't quite a bolt-hole, although the old man had a few of those around the city and around the planet, and probably some she didn't know about. The light of afternoon dawn slanted in the clerestory windows, tracking down the far wall quickly enough to follow it if she was patient. She wasn't.

The old man poured ouzo over ice with his real arm, the liquor going cloudy as it filled the glass.

"This new governor's going to fuck us up now, isn't he?" she asked.

The old man didn't answer at once. His fake arm was almost done with its reboot. He used it to pick up the glass, and it seemed all right. Steady. He sipped his drink. "He's going to have to try. That's his job. It's still our home pitch, though."

"How hard is this going to be?" she asked. Her irritation was already fading, and her mind was turning toward what needed to happen next. Planning for violence. When the old man spoke, his tone was lighter than she'd expected.

"I don't know. He's a tight-ass, this one. I mean, it seems like these Laconians all are. Not a big surprise. You take a bunch of Martian Congressional Republic fanatics and interbreed them for a few decades, it's not going to tend toward a greater mental flexibility. I've got a few ears in place. We'll see how he reacts."

"Electronic?"

"Nope. Just people who like gossip and drinking. They'll do." The old man ran a metal finger around the rim of his glass, his mouth pulled into something that was almost a smile. "This guy. He's... *hungry*. I just don't know what for yet."

"Does it matter?"

He drank down the rest of the ouzo in a gulp. "Of course it matters. Hungry pays our bills."

"No, I mean, why do we care what he wants or needs when we're going to kill him? Sure, maybe he'd look the other way if we got him a lot of exotic talcum powder and a bottle of whiskey, but that's not going to matter

much when he's dead."

The old man shook his head slowly. "I'm not killing him. Not yet anyway. We start knocking off governors, maybe we get a little time to breathe before the next guy comes, but the next guy's going to be even more of a shithead. Better if I figure this guy out."

"Permission?" Agnete said.

The old man waved his metal hand in a slow circle, inviting her to speak her mind.

"You already made the call," she said. "He joins up by taking the bribe, or he turns it down and we kill him. He turned it down, so now we kill him. Those are the rules."

The old man scratched at his hairy, white chest. Outside the window, a local pigeon—six compound eyes and bat wings covered with feathery cilia—landed, chittered, and flew off again. The old man smiled after it as if the interruption had broken his train of thought. When he spoke, she knew it hadn't, and that the conversation was over.

"The rules," he said, "are what I say they are."



Mona Rittenaur's office was on the top floor of the northwest corner of the Xi-Tamyan building. It was twice as large as her cabin on the *Notus* had been, with intelligent glass from floor to ceiling that not only adjusted the level of light as Auberon's sun sped across its wide blue sky, but corrected the color to give the landscape below her a sense of greater constancy. She knew from her briefing that the illusion was supposed to make the transition to Auberon's unfamiliar daily cycle easier, but after the first few days, she disabled the feature. She wanted to see the world around her as it was.

"Dr. Rittenaur?" a woman's voice said from the doorway, and then, belatedly, a soft knock. "You wanted to see me?"

Veronica Dietz was her liaison with the workgroups. Mona had been coming to the office for a week now, and apart from being the living symbol of how anxious Xi-Tamyan Agricultural Concern was to have a solid relationship with the new Laconian government, her role in the research had been nebulous.

She was ready to define it.

“Yes,” Mona said, “I heard about some research on amino acid array translation. I’d like to see the records on that.”

“I don’t think it’s a live workgroup,” Veronica said. “We had some preliminary work a few years back, but the powers that be thought the microbiota compatibility work had more potential.”

“I understand,” Mona said with a smile. “Just bring me what you have on array translation. It doesn’t need to be complete.”

“You got it. Anything else?”

“Not for now,” Mona said, and Veronica vanished back behind the door.

Dr. Carmichael’s tipsy, weeping voice had stuck with Mona since the reception. Biryar was focused on the incident, the threat, whatever euphemism he and Overstreet were using for it. The criminals and terrorists who saw Laconia as something that could or ought to be resisted. That they’d made a threat on the same day the *Notus* arrived bothered her, but she couldn’t do anything about it directly. This, she could.

The records appeared on her system a few minutes later with a tagged note from Veronica offering to bring in some tea and one of the apple pastries from the break room. Mona thanked her in text but turned the offer down. Veronica’s job required that she be solicitous and friendly, but it didn’t cost Mona anything to treat her nicely.

The records of Dr. Carmichael’s work were preliminary, as Mona expected. They also weren’t quite as impressive as she’d been led to believe. There was good, solid work in it, though. If it had been done on Laconia, Carmichael would have had more tools for the experiments. And she might still, if Mona pushed to have her transferred back home. It tickled her a little, the prospect of swooping in and rescuing a languishing career just because she could.

The microbiota compatibility workgroup that had been funded instead was headed by a broad-faced man with brown eyes and hair as thin as mist: Dr. Grover Balakrishnan, previously from Ganymede, one of the oldest and most respected agricultural centers in Sol system. His plan was essentially harnessing evolutionary pressure to develop soils that supported both Sol and Auberon trees of life. Start a few hundred samples of mixed microbes, then part out the most successful ones. Iterate a few dozen times, and let selective pressure do the work.

It was sloppy. And, to her eyes, less likely to get replicable results than Dr. Carmichael's work. That didn't mean that there had really been a conspiracy to quash the array translation project. It might just have been a bad decision. She went back to look at the funding committee reports. It took her most of the morning and well into the midday darkness before she found the smoking gun.

Deep in the patent payment agreement that covered any products derived from the microbiota compatibility studies, a new name appeared. Only it wasn't really new at all.

V. Dietz.

Veronica.

Mona went through all of the present workgroups, and again and again, all through the studies, it appeared. Whatever discoveries Xi-Tamyan made in their facilities on Auberon, Veronica Dietz was contractually entitled to a cut. Each one was small, but taken together, they would be enough to make her fantastically wealthy. People had been murdered for much less money than her liaison made in a month. And that was before her salary.

Mona went through again, this time looking for the justification for the payments. Some service that Veronica did for the researchers that made the payments make sense. There was nothing apart from the inescapable conclusion that if anyone was going to make anything, Veronica Dietz got a slice.

When her system chimed, she flinched. Veronica's voice came from the speaker, as friendly and casual as ever. It was only the intensity with which Mona listened that made it seem fake as a carnival mask.

"Hey, Dr. Rittenaur. I'm heading down to the commissary. Do you want me to get you anything?"

The steadiness of Mona's voice surprised her. She would have thought that something would make it tremble: surprise, fear, anger. But she only said, "No, I'm fine," and let the connection drop.



Biryar had only ever been to two executions. The first time, he had been a child, and Laconia had still been more wilderness than civilization. One of

the soldiers who had come with the first fleet had been careless in his driving. Maybe even intoxicated, it was hard to remember the details now. A boy from the original scientific expedition had been struck and killed. Duarte himself had overseen the punishment, and attendance at the death had been mandatory.

Before they killed the man, Duarte had explained that discipline was critical for them all. They were a small force in a single system, with no influx of immigration to draw from. It had seemed a strange argument at the time. If people were so rare and precious, killing one seemed wasteful.

Later he understood that the preciousness was what made the sacrifice profound. The soldier had died quickly, and while it didn't undo the man's crime, it showed the members of the civilian scientific expedition that Duarte and his followers valued their lives and the lives of their children. If the driver had lived, bringing the two populations together would have been difficult or impossible.

The second time, it had been a young construction worker in the capital who used the wrong proportions when mixing concrete for the foundations of one of the buildings. No one had died, but the error, if it hadn't been found, could have led to hundreds of deaths when the structure collapsed. Duarte had held a ceremony—again mandatory—so that everyone could understand the severity of the problem and the sorrow with which the young woman was being sent to the Pens. Biryar hadn't watched her die, but he still remembered her tear-streaked face as she made her apology to the community.

Laconia had always been the few and the pure against the many and the corrupt. Like the Spartans from whom they took their name, Laconians were severe within their group, both to forge the iron discipline that had led them to victory and to demonstrate to others the sincerity of their beliefs.

It was hard, but it was necessary.

Now the Laconians present in the courtyard stood at attention, representing the empire and its uncompromising resolve. Biryar had his place of honor at the front of the assembly.

"I apologize," the prisoner said, "for the shame I brought on my companions. And for the wrong I have done to my commander and the High Consul."

The sunlight hurt Biryar's eyes, and a thin film of sweat stuck his shirt

to his back. The pistol felt heavy, the holster like someone constantly tapping his hip for attention. There were more locals in attendance than he'd expected. Some were employees of the local newsfeeds, but many of them had come as sightseers and tourists drawn by the spectacle of punishment the way they would be to a sporting event.

The prisoner, an ensign assigned to logistics and supply, had given a pharmaceutical printer and two boxes of reagents from the *Notus*'s medical supplies to a local criminal to produce untaxed recreational drugs. The local buyer was in an Auberon-administered prison and faced two years' confinement if she was convicted. The trial was apparently a lengthy process. The Laconian side of the theft would be dead before Biryar ate dinner.

The prisoner hung his head. A guard led him up the steps to the little platform. The prisoner knelt. Biryar's nose had grown mostly insensible to the sewer smell of Auberon, but a particularly strong whiff of it came on the breeze. It felt like a comment. Tradition, such as it was, allowed anyone higher in the chain of command to give the order, but symbolically, Biryar knew it had to be him. The prisoner's commanding officer, a woman Biryar had known peripherally for almost a decade, stood on the platform with a sidearm at the ready.

Biryar stepped forward to the sound of a single, dry drum, met her gaze, and nodded. He half expected tears to glisten in her eyes, but her expression was blank. After a moment, she nodded in return, pivoted, and fired a single round into the back of the prisoner's head. The sound was weirdly flat. The drum stopped, and a medic came out to certify the death.

And it was over. Biryar turned to the cameras of the local newsfeeds, careful to present his better profile. The crowd looked shocked. That was good. State violence was meant to be shocking. It was done to prove a point, and it would have been a pity for the sacrifice not to have its effect. He paused long enough to be sure that they'd all gotten a good image of him for the feeds, then turned toward the Laconian contingent. He wanted to go back to his office, get a cold gin and tonic, and close his eyes until his head stopped aching.

Most of the people in Laconian blue had come with him on the *Notus*, but Suyet Klinger, the local representative of the Association of Worlds, and her staff had also chosen clothes that echoed Biryar's uniform. Blue almost

the right shade and tailored in a similar cut. Not Laconian uniforms, but something that rhymed with them. Her face, as he stepped to her, was grave.

"I'm very sorry, sir," she said. "I'm sure that was very difficult for you."

He knew what he was supposed to say. *Discipline is the policy of the High Consul*. It should have been easy, but the words that came to his mind were *Why are you sure?*

Klinger knew nothing about him but what she'd been told by Laconia. She would have been just as solicitous to anyone who had come in his position. And if someone else had been in her role, he would have treated them the same way he did her. They weren't people to each other. They were roles. This was etiquette, and the inauthenticity of the situation oppressed him.

He nodded to her. "Discipline is the policy of the High Consul," he said, and she averted her gaze in respect. The forms were there to be followed.

He moved through the grim crowd, acknowledging each of them and being acknowledged. Form. It was all just keeping form. The shadows shifted around them as the sun raced for the horizon and left him feeling like he'd been there for hours, but there were more nods to exchange, more words to mouth. The dead man was hauled away to the recyclers, and the medics retreated.

It was strange and in a way unfair that the local thief would live and might even go free. Being Laconian meant being held to a higher standard, and so transgression against that standard required a higher response, but it still bothered him. Or at least it did for the moment. If he could get some rest and a decent meal, it might not. The faces in the group began to blend together, one following another following another until he didn't know or care who he was speaking to.

He came to a man he hadn't met in person before, with brown hair, a serious expression, and a mole on his cheek like a dot of paving tar. Biryar almost pulled away, shocked by the sudden visceral image of how the fleck of tar had gotten there, and then felt amused and even strangely pleased.

"Deputy Balecheck," Biryar said. "Good to finally meet you."

Balecheck's eyes widened a fraction. The surprise at being recognized melted quickly into a smile as they shook hands, and then Biryar moved on. From the other man's point of view, it had been a gratifying moment that showed his importance to the new governor. Functionally, it was an

example of building the kind of good relations with the local authority that would cement Laconian rule on Auberon. It was also a smutty joke with his wife, but that was a fact Biryar would keep entirely private. At least until he was alone with Mona.

It works better when you commit to the process, she'd said. He had to commit to the process of governing Auberon, even the parts that he found difficult. Especially to those parts.

A car waited for him at the edge of the courtyard, ready to take him back to his offices. When he ducked into it, Major Overstreet followed and sat across from him. His pale, bald face shone with sweat.

"How are you doing, sir?"

"Fine," Biryar said. "A bit of a headache."

"The stutter," Overstreet said.

"The what?"

The car pulled away, and cool air, as fresh as if it came from the *Notus's* recyclers, touched his face and filled his nose. He noticed the absence of Auberon's stench and dreaded the end of the ride when he'd step back into it. It made more sense to keep exposing himself to the foul air. Breaks from it like this could only prolong his acclimation.

"They call it the stutter, sir. It's common among new arrivals. The four-hour cycles don't sync well with normal circadian cues. Irritability, headache. Some people get vertigo after about a month that clears in a few days. It's just our brains learning the new environment."

"Good to know," Biryar said. "Is it bothering you?"

"Yes, sir, it is," Overstreet said. "I'm looking forward to it being over."

The growing twilight in the streets was the real one. The end of the day and the beginning of evening. If he did it right, Biryar hoped to be asleep before the nighttime dawn. If he could just sleep through and give his body the impression of a full twelve hours of darkness... The longing for rest surprised him. Maybe he was more tired than he knew.

"What progress have you made on that other investigation?" Biryar asked.

"The man with the metal arm," Overstreet said, making the words like the heading on a report. Neither a question nor a statement, but a tag that identified the content to follow. "He is a known figure in the local criminal demimonde. He goes by several names, but he has no entry in the law

enforcement systems. He has no accounts on the exchanges, though given the token he tried to bribe you with, it's safe to assume he has significant access to untraceable funds."

"Where did he come from?"

"There aren't any records of his arrival in the databases."

"So he grew out of the dirt?" Biryar said, more sharply than he'd meant to.

Overstreet shrugged. "I'm moving forward with the assumption that the local databases are at least inaccurate and more likely suffering ongoing compromises."

Biryar leaned back in the seat. A group of young men were playing football in the street, and the security detail was yelling at them to move off and let the cars through. Biryar watched them. Long-limbed, lanky young men. Maybe Belters. Maybe just adolescents. Any of them could be a separatist terrorist. All of them could be. For a moment, it felt like madness to be on the planetary surface at all. There was no safety here. There couldn't be.

"He's not a criminal mastermind," Overstreet said as the car started forward again. "He's just got a head start. We will track him down."

"Don't turn this one over to the local police. He should be our guest until we can fully understand how he got past our security arrangements."

"I understand," Overstreet said. "No formal arrest, then?"

"Once he's helped with our security review, we can revisit the issue," Biryar said. And then, a moment later, "He was talking with my *wife*."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

The compound was well guarded now. Laconian marines in powered armor stood like sentries at the approaches and on the roofs. He lost something by having them there. Duarte's rule through him should have been inevitable and confident. A standing guard made him seem concerned, and concern made him look weak, but he couldn't bring himself to dismiss them or release them to other duty.

As he stepped into the private rooms, he unbuttoned his collar. In the time since they'd arrived, Biryar had made some changes to the governor's compound. He hadn't brought many things from their old home on Laconia, but what there was had pride of place. The picture of Mona receiving her Laconian distinguished service award, framed on the front wall where the

light caught it. The clay sculpture she'd given him as a wedding gift. A calligraphic print of one of High Consul Duarte's sayings—*Effort in Discipline. Effortless in Virtue*—in gold leaf.

Everything else in the rooms was foreign. The fluted wall sconces with different spectrums of light for daytime darkness and night. The grain of the false wood paneling, made from the treelike organisms of Auberon to mimic the trees of Earth. Neither one was his home. It felt like the room itself was telling him that he didn't belong. Like it was pushing him away. He was sure that, with time, the sensation would pass.

He stretched. The knot between his shoulders appeared to be there permanently now, like the grit in his eyelids. The door behind him opened with a click, and Mona's footsteps—as familiar and unmistakable as her voice—followed. He looked over at her, and his heart sank to his gut.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She dropped into a cushioned chair and shook her head. A small, tight, unconscious gesture he'd seen before. Anger, then. Well, better than fear. He went to sit near her, but didn't touch her. Her rage didn't respond well to physical comfort.

"This place is rotten," she said. "Xi-Tamyan has a scam going on in it that has profoundly compromised its research priorities for years. *Years*. Maybe since they came here."

"Tell me," Biryar said.

She did. Not only the way her liaison had added herself to the patent agreements, but that she was married to the union comptroller, that she had gotten the placement in Mona's office over several other more qualified applicants, that her reported income didn't remotely match the payments made to her. With every sentence, Mona's voice grew harder, the outrage rising the more she thought about it. Biryar listened, leaning forward with his hands clasped and his gaze on her. Every new detail felt like a weight on his chest. Corruption layered on corruption layered on corruption until it seemed like there was more disease than health.

"And," Mona said, reaching her crescendo, "either management and the union didn't know, in which case they're incompetent, or they did, and they're complicit."

Biryar lowered his head, letting it all settle. Mona's gaze was fixed on nothing, her head shaking a fraction of a centimeter back and forth, like she

was scolding someone in her imagination. She probably was.

There was a soft knock at the door. One of the housekeepers hoping to sweep or change their bedding. Biryar told them to come back later and got a muttered apology in return. Mona hadn't even noticed. He risked taking her hand.

"That is disappointing," he said.

"We have to *fix* it," she said. "This can't be permitted. This scam has cost *years*. Veronica has to be arrested and removed. The union has to be investigated and purged. I don't know how deep this goes."

"I will bring this to the attention of the local magistrates," Biryar said. "We'll address it."

"Magistrates? No, we need to go now and arrest her. Ourselves. She's undermining the most important colony world that there is. You're the governor."

"I understand that. I do. But if what she's done is illegal under Auberon's law, then it's a matter for the local courts. If I step in, I have to step very carefully."

Mona drew back her hand. The weight in Biryar's gut grew heavier, the knot in his back ached. He pressed his lips thin, and went on.

"I am building on fear and hope," he said. "Fear of the *Tempest* and the *Typhoon*, and hope that they won't come. Our best path is to be seen as all-powerful but benevolent. Even indulgent. When we have a larger fleet, more experience, loyalty among the local police and military forces? Then we can enforce our ways here. We're still in our first days. I have to be careful not to overreach."

Disappointment changed the shape of Mona's eyes. It softened her mouth. He felt the apology at the back of his throat, but it would have sounded like he was sorry for not giving her what she wanted, and he would mean he was sorry that the situation was what it was.

"If the payments to her don't really go to her..." Mona said. "What if her income report is accurate? She could be part of a crime syndicate. That man who was here? With the arm? She could be working for him."

"And I will have our people look into that. If she is, we'll take action."

"We should be taking action anyway," Mona said. "I'm Laconia's eyes on the most significant agricultural research that there is. You're the governor of the planet. If we aren't doing something, why are we here?"

“Please lower your voice.”

“Don’t patronize me, Biryar. It’s a real question.”

“We’re staying alive, Mona,” he snapped. “We are picking our fights, we’re identifying the most immediate threats and addressing them, and we are doing everything possible to give the impression that we could bring overwhelming power to bear and merely choose not to.”

“Because that isn’t true,” Mona said.

“It will be. Given time to establish ourselves, we can dominate any system, but we can’t dominate all of them at once. So this is how we govern. We are present, we exert influence, we exercise power when we have to, and we graciously allow self-rule until another option exists for us.”

“Self-rule?” Mona said, and her voice could cut skin. “Duarte sent us here so we could see the situation firsthand. And *react* to it. How is the two of us doing nothing self-rule?”

“Self-rule for them,” Biryar said. “Not for us.”



The old man sat on a metal barstool at the edge of the warehouse. Dust floated in the beam of light from holes near the roofline where ratdoves—which were neither rats nor doves—had chewed their way through to shelter. Agnete stood beside him, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, a pistol in her hand. The old man was watching and rewatching video from the official government newsfeed. The poor asshole kneeling on the platform, mouthing some words, then the governor nodding like an old Roman emperor giving the thumbs-down, and the executioner putting a bullet through the prisoner’s skull. Every time the gun fired, the old man laughed. It wasn’t mirth. It was derision.

“This man,” the old man said, tapping the frozen image of Governor Rittenaur, “is fucking hilarious.”

“He just killed one of his own men to make a point,” Agnete said.

“Right? You know who does that shit? Theater majors,” he said. Then, seeing her expression, he put the hand terminal in his pocket. “It’s easy to execute your own. Someone that follows your orders, they’re easy to kill.

This ‘We hold ourselves to an exacting standard’ thing? I’ve seen it before. It’s showy, because who does that shit? But it’s easy.”

“I don’t know, boss. It made an impression,” she said. In the distance, the whine of an electric motor and the clash of the steel fence rolling open. The old man heard it and rose from his stool.

“Well, it shouldn’t have,” he said, walking toward the loading dock. “We’re sure they were fighting? Him and his wife?”

Agnete shrugged. She didn’t like the way the boss thought about two things at once. It made her feel like he wasn’t concentrating on the business at hand.

“They were yelling at each other,” she said. “Your friend in housekeeping couldn’t make out all of what they were saying.”

“Interesting. Our guy didn’t want money, so maybe he’s not greedy. But if he and the sweetheart aren’t getting along, maybe there’s an itch we can scratch there.”

“Honeypot?”

“There’s a reason the classics are classic.”

“I’m on it,” Agnete said. “But after we’re done here.”

The loading dock door hummed for a second, warming up, then clattered as it rose. Dust and translucent scales came down into the light. The truck was old and rusting. The logo of a grain hauling company that had gone bankrupt four years earlier still peeled on its side. The back of the truck opened and four men came out. All of them carried guns.

The old man sniffed, cleared his throat, sneezed.

“Bless you,” one of the four men said. The leader.

“Thanks,” the old man said. The new men waited, motionless. Agnete tightened her grip on the gun, but didn’t raise it. For a long breath, no one moved.

“If this is the delivery,” the old man said, “maybe you could deliver it. If it’s something else...”

Bless You shook his head. “It’s the delivery, but the price has gone up.”

“Disappointing,” the old man said, but amiably. “How much?”

“Doubled.”

“Nope,” the old man said. “Too greedy. Try again.”

Bless You raised his gun and the old man’s titanium arm moved too quickly for the eye to follow. The deafening report of the gunshot almost

drowned out the metallic sound of the bullet impact. The thugs were quiet, as if they'd been stunned by their own violence.

"Boss?" Agnete said.

The old man had his real hand pressed to his chest, pain in his features. His false arm reached out before him and opened its closed fist. The bullet dropped to the warehouse floor with a sharp tick.

"You boys," the old man said, enunciating each word clearly, "just fucked all the way up."

"Hey, Erich," Bless You started to say, fear in his voice. An apology? Whatever it was, he never got to finish.

High in the rafters, the turret emplacement had heard the old man give the go phrase. The warehouse went bright with the stutter of its muzzle flash. The four men fell together. The staccato roar of the gun echoed through the warehouse space and then faded, leaving only a high-pitched whine in Agnete's ears.

"You all right?" she asked. Her voice sounded faint and distant. She opened and closed her jaw a few times to make the ringing in her head go away.

"Yeah, yeah," the old man said. "I just hate it when the arm does that. Feels like the fucking thing's about to rip loose every time."

"One of these days, it will." She walked to where the men were writhing in the guano and dust on the warehouse floor. Fléchette rounds had ripped bright red holes in their skin. The electrical smell of the shock rounds mixed with charred skin like roasting pig.

This was how the old man worked. Everyone had been looking at Agnete and her pistol, thinking she was the muscle. It had made them overconfident.

"You see," the old man said, not to the fallen thug but to Agnete, "this is the difference. A buy goes bad, and I need to send a message that that's not okay. I could go the Laconian way, right? Kill *you* and send these fuckers home. Would that make any sense?"

"I guess not," she said.

"Grandstanding," the old man said, his false hand wrapping fingers around Bless You's throat. "It's immature, is what it is."

Bless You tried to say something. Before he could, the old man used him to send a message.



Self-rule for them. Not for us.

Mona knew enough about psychology to put her feelings in context. As Veronica sat across the table from Mona, shifting the display between the reports, breaking down the datasets into digestible summaries and giving an overview of where the labs stood with the active experiments, Mona knew intellectually that the woman's voice wasn't really all that grating. Veronica's habit of interrupting herself and never quite getting back to the first sentence wasn't all that rare a quirk. Her haircut didn't really make her look like she was wearing a "respectable administrator" costume. Those were all artifacts of Mona's own state of mind.

The knowledge didn't help.

"We're expecting to see some data from the photosynthesis study at North Field by the end of the week," Veronica said. "The preliminary report is, as you can tell, looking pretty good."

She had to know, Mona thought. There was no way that the tension and antipathy were going under Veronica's radar. The smile was just the same as it had always been, the solicitous manner, the ready facts and reports. The woman had to know that Mona loathed her, but there was no sign of it. So either Mona was very good at hiding her emotions or Veronica was.

"What about the microbiota compatibility studies?" Mona asked.

Veronica shook her head as she spoke. "Those aren't in North Field. Balakrishnan's workgroup is all in the old facility. I mean, nothing's really old around here, right? We've only been on the planet for a couple decades."

You're changing the subject, Mona thought. Making Veronica Dietz uncomfortable was one of the few real pleasures in her day.

"When do we expect results from Balakrishnan's study?" she asked.

"I think the next assay starts in about a month, but I'm not a hundred percent on that," Veronica said. "I can check if you want."

And tell me whatever is most convenient for you, Mona thought. If Balakrishnan's results needed to be a failure to keep Veronica's skimming unnoticed, Mona had no doubt that the study would mysteriously fail. Just the way Dr. Carmichael's array translation study had become less promising

when this woman—this snake, this parasite—didn't get a piece of it.

"Take a look for me," Mona said, standing up. "We can go over it in... five?"

"All right," Veronica said, as if the request were perfectly reasonable. Prepare a report in the time it takes to brew a cup of tea. Mona waited as Veronica walked out—she wouldn't leave the woman in her office alone—and then locked the office door behind her and headed right along the pale-green hall and then right again into the commissary.

She poured herself a cup of green tea and picked up a sugar cookie from the dessert table before sitting down alone at a table by the window. Tall white clouds rose on the horizon, glowing gold and red in the sunlight. She scowled at them. Someone had cracked the window open, and the breeze actually smelled fresh. She'd become so desensitized to the local environment that the fecal smell of the planet's biology didn't even register to her anymore.

The situation with Veronica was becoming a problem, and not just because Veronica was a problem. Mona was meant to be reporting back to Laconia. There was a whole team of soil researchers and agricultural biologists waiting for her to share the insights of Xi-Tamyan and Auberon. There had even been queries from Dr. Cortázar, which was one step short of attention from Winston Duarte himself. She should have had a preliminary report ready to go, outlining the state of play not only for research here but across the colony worlds that Auberon partnered with. Instead, she had notes on a criminal conspiracy, and a solemn injunction from Biryar that she should leave any action to the same regulatory bodies that had let it happen in the first place. The frustration was a restless energy in her spine. It was keeping her from focusing on her work. She had to get past it.

She couldn't get past it.

She kept remembering Dr. Carmichael at the reception her first night on Auberon. Her own excitement she'd felt when she heard about the array translation, the possibilities that a comprehensive mapping plan would give, not just here but across all the colony systems. And the disbelief that anyone would intentionally undermine something with so much potential. It had been so recent, and yet that past version of herself already seemed so naive. Auberon was changing her, and she wasn't sure she liked what it was changing her into.

She finished her cookie in a bite, gulped down the last of her tea, and headed back to her office. Not that she wanted to be there. Just that the commissary was annoying her now too. Or rather that she was still annoyed, and nothing she'd found gave her any respite.

Veronica hadn't returned with the report. Mona sat at her desk, looking sourly out her window. Same world, different view. Barradan spread out to her right: streets and houses and domes. The local wilderness was on her left, exotic and untamed and almost unimaginable in its diversity and richness and strangeness. This should have been everything she'd hoped for. All the pieces were there.

Self-rule for them, her husband said in her memory. *Not for us*. But...

Something shifted in the back of her mind. The thought came to her fully formed, like she had already planned everything and had only been waiting for the right moment to be conscious of it.

Point one: Either the administration of Xi-Tamyan was aware of Veronica's scheme or their eyes were so thoroughly off the ball that it had been permitted by default. Two: as the spouse of the governor, she was more valuable to Xi-Tamyan than Veronica Dietz would ever be. Three: What was good for the goose might very well be quite excellent for the gander.

She turned to her desk, a frown etching itself into her forehead almost hard enough to ache. She pulled up the financial records and tried to reallocate funds, just to make sure she couldn't. That was fine. Her breathing was shallow and fast, but when she made the connection request, her voice sounded calm.

"Dr. Rittenaur?" an older man said from the screen. He had thin, gray hair and a little beard that didn't disguise his double chin. "How can I help you?"

"I'm having trouble with accounting. I need to allocate funds for a Laconian state project, but it gives me an error code."

The man with the double chin looked chagrined. "I'm not... I'm not sure that..."

"It should be under Special Projects with the code for the Laconian science directorate? What would that be?"

"I don't think we have a code set up for that, ma'am."

"We'll have to find something temporary, then. There is something for

cooperative governmental programs, isn't there? We can use that for now."

"I... um... I guess you could," the man said.

"Not perfect, but..." She shrugged and laughed. "If you clear the access problem, I'll take care of it that way."

She smiled patiently. She'd done nothing wrong. Not yet. If he pushed back, everything could be explained away. But she was the face of Laconia at Xi-Tamyan. And Laconia had just destroyed the largest navy in history and conquered the human race. She let the silence stretch. The man's face flushed a shade darker as he decided whether he was going to tell her she couldn't.

He tapped something into his console. "There you go, ma'am," he said. "It gives you any more trouble, just let me know."

Mona's smile widened by just a few millimeters. "Thank you," she said, and dropped the connection.

After that it was easy. She copied Dr. Carmichael's old funding structure and put it in a new branch under joint governmental projects, updated the contact information so that any issues or questions routed directly to her. She was expecting the funding level to refer back to some pool of money, but it was just a text field. She could put in any value she liked, and the money was summoned from nothing. She put in the value that Veronica's unspecified *powers that be* had refused. Then she doubled it, and closed the file.

Just like that, she'd funded the project that should have been going for months. She'd wait for a few days. Make sure that no red flags came up, and then she'd tell Dr. Carmichael to start renting lab space and equipment.

She sat back in her chair, folded her hands, and let out a long, satisfied sigh. There was a warmth in her chest, spreading slowly out toward her limbs like she'd just had a shot of gin. Her back relaxed, her heart felt like she was dropping from orbit for the first time. Pleasure and risk. On impulse, she kicked her shoes off and ran her bare feet through the office carpet, feeling the texture of it against her skin.

The soft knock came, and Veronica stepped in. "Sorry that took a little longer than I'd thought. Interruptions all the time. You know how it is."

"Yes, I do," Mona said.



Biryar didn't know what changed in Mona, only that something had, and he was glad of it. He saw it in small things. She slept more deeply now, and woke without being prodded. She ate better, and explored more of the local foods—fish and onion and a spicy red sauce the locals called sarkansmirch. He'd sampled it himself, but found a metallic aftertaste he didn't care for. She was laughing more than she had, and there was an ease in the way she held herself.

Her work with Xi-Tamyar might have been part of it. She had started sending reports out to the researchers on Laconia, and the responses from home had been positive and encouraging. She'd begun negotiations for Laconia to get full datasets directly from the company and integrate some of its high-level researchers into the staff on Laconia proper. It was part of Duarte's long-term plan that coming to the capital should be a reward. A mark of favor. The soft power of culture and status would do more to stabilize Laconia's central position in the grand human project than any number of warships. It was good that Mona's position let her advance that.

Biryar's own job wasn't going quite as smoothly.

He hadn't found the trick yet of sleeping through the Auberan nights. Most nights, he woke as the midnight sun fell, lying awake in their bed for half of the dark hours until morning. He'd considered talking to the physician about it. If it continued, he might. The local food also unsettled him, and he found himself eating the same diet he had on the *Notus*: mushroom curries and yeast-based cheeses. Even those didn't quite taste the way they should. He might not register the stink of the planet as often these days, but it had affected his senses all the same. And the pervasive sensation of unease, as vague as it was profound, wasn't helped by Overstreet's security briefings.

In the weeks since Laconia had officially taken over governance of the system, Overstreet had uncovered a dozen examples of embezzlement, theft, extortion, and financial misconduct just in the mechanisms of government that Biryar had inherited from the former head of state. Only two had involved Laconians. One had been the execution in the square, the other had killed himself when Overstreet's military police had come to

arrest him. Everyone else had been turned over to local authorities, but Overstreet suspected that the judicial system was as flawed as the executive government. As the security audit broadened to the major businesses—the Transport Union, Xi-Tamyan, Oesterling Biotics, and half a dozen more—Biryar expected more rot to come to light.

The only good news Overstreet had to offer was the disappearance of the one-armed man. He hadn't appeared in any monitored public spaces. He hadn't shown up in any financial scans. If it hadn't been for the footage from the reception, he might only have been an unpleasant dream. Overstreet's analysis was that a local criminal had tried to come on strong, overplayed his hand, and fled when he understood the magnitude of his miscalculation.

The reports coming in from other systems showed that the separatists were still very much at work. The governor of Nova Catalunya, a man Biryar had trained with, had died in a shuttle accident that was being investigated for sabotage. Governor Song, on Medina Station, found another discrepancy in the station map that hid a service corridor, abandoned now, that the terrorists had used as they planned their missions. Drive plumes had been sighted in half a dozen systems that couldn't be tracked back to known ships.

The ghosts of unrest were everywhere. The separatists couldn't stand in an open battle with Laconia, but they could resist in small ways, and those small ways could have body counts too. He didn't bring his worries to Mona. Better that one of them should sleep well. If it felt a little strange not to tell her everything, at least the cause was noble. He still felt the urge now and then to unburden himself to her. He didn't have anyone else.

Instead, he tried to keep his attention on his own duties: playing kingmaker in local politics until Laconia was so established and unquestionable that he could play king. He found himself crafting the role of Governor Rittenaur as if he were acting a part in a play. He had come to notice when his own impulses were different from what Governor Rittenaur's would be, and then bury his own judgment to give space to the requirement of his office. He was a professional impersonator of himself. It required, among other things, a close relationship with the local newsfeeds.

"I understand that the *Notus* is slated to leave Auberon," Lara Kasten said. She was a host for one of the popular public newsfeeds. Not a reporter,

but a warm, approachable interviewer whose greatest strength was the intensity with which she could listen.

“It’s already burning for the ring gate,” he said. “It will still be weeks before it leaves the system, but yes. It’s on its way.”

“That’s got to feel a little odd.”

His office, decorated in the local style, had casual chairs set beside a window that looked out over a garden of Earth plants. This was the fifth interview he’d granted her. It was important that the local population know him. Normalize his presence. Lara’s approach to their conversations suited his needs.

“Not really,” Biryar said, looking out at the red sunset of late morning. Clouds on the eastern horizon already turning from gold to gray. “The *Notus* is a valuable resource, and needed elsewhere. We have a great deal of work to do here, but Auberon doesn’t need a warship. We’re a very safe system. The situation is quite stable, and with the loyalty and cooperation of the authorities, I expect it will stay that way.”

Lara smiled and leaned forward to pick up a glass of iced tea. She took it with sugar. He knew that from the last time they’d talked. Previously, she’d worn a high-collared white blouse, but today she had one in Laconian blue with a scoop. Instead of returning the glass to the side table, she leaned forward and put it by her feet. He was careful not to notice the tops of her breasts as she did it.

“But it was your way home, wasn’t it?” she said. “Even if you never intended to use it. You spent your whole life on Laconia?”

“I did. But Auberon is my home now.”

“What’s that like for you?” she asked, and he thought there was a real curiosity in the question. He saw himself for a moment through her eyes. The proverbial stranger in a strange land, given power and responsibility and asked to be strong for his nation and the people over whom he ruled.

“I’m happy to be here. I am. Auberon is a beautiful planet and an important part of the empire.”

He nodded to himself, silently approving his own answer. That was the right thing to say, and the right way to say it. Turn the question back to the system itself. Not him, but them. Good that when the locals look at him, they see themselves reflected.

He waited for the next question, but Lara was quiet. The sky darkened,

and the first stars came out. The little moon, halfway to full, glimmered. She tilted her head, the straight, honey-colored hair hiding one eye, an impish smile on her lips. Biryar felt himself smiling back, and he chuckled when he spoke.

“What?”

“You’re happy to be here? That’s all? You’re the most important man in this system. There are literally millions of people looking up to you. You’re on a planet you didn’t set foot on until it *belonged* to you. It must be... hard? Intoxicating? What is it like for you, Biryar?”

He shook his head. The breeze from the window was warm against his cheek. Lara’s eyes were locked on his. He found that he wanted to tell her. He wanted to spread out all the ways that being Governor Rittenaur of Auberon system was different from what he’d expected, even after his training. The displacement of being so far from everything he’d known, the unease of knowing that there were people who hated him, not for himself but what he stood for.

That wasn’t what his duty required of him.

“I can’t imagine anyone’s terribly interested in that,” he said, and his voice sounded almost melancholy in his ears. That was odd. He recentered himself and said, “I am really very happy to be here.”

Lara’s smile faded. The last red light of sunset caught the curve of her throat, and Biryar felt the impulse to turn the office lights on. He also felt the impulse to leave them off. He didn’t move. Her expression wasn’t impish now. He remembered the time in their third interview when she’d told him about her brother’s death, how sorrowful she’d been. How strong in her grief. Of all the people on this stinking world, he felt closer to Lara than to anyone that hadn’t come on the *Notus* with him. She knew him.

She leaned forward again, this time reaching not for her drink but her handheld. She held it up for him to see. The recording marked second after silent second. She turned it off and set it back down.

“What is this like for you?” she said.

He was silent for a moment, uncertain whether he was going to answer. However much he wanted to.

“It’s...” Biryar was surprised to find a thickness in his throat. “It’s difficult. Sometimes.”

She nodded, acknowledgment and encouragement in the same single

motion. Biryar leaned toward her, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped.

“I am trained for my duties as thoroughly as anyone could be. But knowing something intellectually or from simulations... it isn’t the same.”

“You feel alone,” Lara said.

“I do, in a way,” Biryar said. “This is off the record, of course.”

Her smile was in shadows now, but he could make it out. “Just between us,” she said, and traced an X over her chest. “Cross my heart.”

He felt something shift, deep in his gut. Like a relaxation of a fist held clenched so long that the letting go ached. He drew in a breath, held it, and as he exhaled, he sank. “It’s overwhelming. Not always, but sometimes. I feel like a splinter, and Auberon is festering around me. Isolating me. Trying to push me out.”

Her voice was soft, but not pitying. He couldn’t have stood it if she pitied him. “That’s terrible, Biryar.”

“It is. And I don’t know what to do about it.”

For a moment, the only sounds were the ticking of the walls as they cooled in the darkness and the murmur of midday traffic in the distant streets. Lara shifted, and he found himself very aware of her presence. Her physicality and solidity. Her hand touched his, and it felt like a rope to a drowning man. She moved close to him, and he had the weird impression that she was reaching for the pistol at his side, that she was going to take it from him to make some demonstration of a larger point. It was only when her lips touched his that his mind exploded in cold alarm.

He stood up, backing away in the darkness of the room. “I’m sorry. No, no. I’m very sorry. I didn’t... This is not...”

He found his desk, pulled up his controls, and turned on the lights. The office flooded with the bright blue-yellow of the daytime. Lara knelt in the space between their chairs, looking up at him in surprise. Biryar wiped his hands on the sides of his jacket. His tongue felt like it wasn’t responding the way it should. Like he was having a stroke.

“This is...” He shook his head. “We should... we should finish the interview. This was very nice. I’m glad to have your friendship. Yes. We should finish the interview.”

He pressed his lips shut to make himself stop talking. He sounded like an idiot. Lara rose to her feet. She wasn’t blushing as much as he was.

“Biryar, I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just—”

“No. It’s fine. Everything is fine. There won’t be any repercussions.”

Lara eased herself back into her chair, plucked her blouse straight. Biryar stepped closer, but didn’t take his seat. His blood was still electric. What if someone had seen them? What was he going to say to Mona, because he had to tell Mona. It would be a betrayal not to. He swallowed.

“I didn’t mean to spook you,” Lara said.

“I’m not spooked,” he said. He meant to follow it up with *I’m married*, but what came out was different. “I’m Laconian.”

Lara quirked a smile, and he thought there was regret in it. She took her handheld, her finger hovering just above the button to start the recording again. Her eyes were asking if he was certain, but he was himself again. Or no. He was Governor Rittenaur. That was better. She tapped the button, and the seconds began counting up again. Biryar put his hands on the back of his chair, pressing into it like it was a podium. He thought back to where the conversation had been.

“I’m really very happy to be here,” he said. “Auberon is a fascinating planet with a great future before it. I hope that my service here will help it come into its rightful place as one of humanity’s great centers of science and culture. And I know the High Consul has the same ambitions for it.”

He nodded sharply, more to himself than to her. That was the right answer. That was what he was supposed to say. Who he was supposed to be.

Lara tilted her head. “Do you want to sit down?”



The yacht was a small one, and the old man didn’t like it much. In all the time Agnete had been with him, he had only used it three or four times that she knew of. He’d grown up in a coastal city, but she didn’t have the impression there had been a lot of yachts involved. The fact that he was in it now meant he was running out of places to be that he was certain the local security forces weren’t watching.

He sat with his arms out at his sides. Two days of stubble competed with his thin mustache. The sun was overhead, the light glimmering off the water and his false arm. He was smoking a cigar as thick as his thumb and as long

as his finger. The city rose up at the horizon like a mirage.

The woman sitting across from them had gone by KarKara when they'd first met her. It was Lara now, which suited her better.

"I swear to God, I had him."

"We shouldn't have rushed you," the old man said.

"I didn't rush. I had him. We had rapport. We had shared jokes. He was into me."

"And then?"

Lara opened her hands. "Then the moment came, and he backpedaled. I don't know. Clearly he and his wife have a monogamy agreement, and he's taking it seriously. Maybe that's a Laconian thing."

"Did he say that?"

"No, it's a guess," Lara said. "He was babbling by the end. Lots of words, but none of them meant anything."

"What do you think of him?"

She considered. Agnete could see from the way the woman held her hands that Lara almost liked the mark. There was nothing like being told *no* to make someone attractive.

"That man needs something," Lara said, "and he needs it bad. But it's not what I was offering."

The old man blew out a cloud of white smoke and watched the wind shred it. "That's what I think too. Is he maybe into guys?"

"That's not it," Lara said. "I've met maybe one person in twenty who claims to be monogamous and actually is. I think this guy is really into his wife."

The old man muttered something obscene. Then, "I don't get it. He's not looking for money. He's not looking for kink. What is it with this guy?"

Lara said, "I think he's looking for a way out."

"Of what?"

"His own skin."

"Well *I'm* looking for a way not to take that literally, but this fucker does make it hard." He looked out over the water. Something large and pale passed under them, but didn't break the surface. The old man sighed. "Maybe we should just kill him."

Agnete said, "Why were they fighting?"

He shifted his head to look at her. Agnete met his gaze without

flinching. “He and his wife were fighting about something. And then they stopped. Maybe there’s something in that?”

The old man weighed the idea while he took another puff on his cigar. His eyes shifted up to the sky, but he wasn’t looking at anything. Or not anything that was there.

“He have any friends?”

Lara shook her head. “None that he ever talked about. He doesn’t do relationships with people. Just responsibilities to them.”

“So just the wife, then, as far as you know. Sex and friendship. That’s a tough knot to unwind.”

“I think he really loves her,” she said. Again the little twitch of regret. They were going to have to be careful how they used her, moving forward. She was going to talk herself into falling in love with Rittenaur if they took their eyes off her.

The old man made a deep, soft sound. Like satisfaction. The yacht bobbed on the waves. “I forget, you know? I just forget.”

“What, boss?”

“How complicated people are. How many kinds of hunger we’re working with.”

“Not following you.”

The old man shrugged, and the fake arm almost matched the real one. The movement was still just a little asymmetrical. It made him seem jaunty.

“There was a guy I knew back in Sol system used to say that money was like sex. You thought it would fix everything until you got a lot of it. Because that’s what we all reach for. Anything we need, anything we want, anything that’s grinding us down, we can get high or rich or laid and make it better. Only if that was true, people would eventually get enough drugs or money or sex and be happy.”

“We’d be out of jobs,” Agnete said.

“But Rittenaur...” The old man went on like she hadn’t spoken. “This guy lives his whole life in this culture where it’s about...”

“Duty,” Lara said.

“So,” Agnete said, “the way a normal person tries to get out of the hole by putting a needle in their arm or fucking a pretty body or working a hundred hours a week, he tries to get out by being a good man.” She said the words slowly to see if they sounded true.

“Only it doesn’t work for him any better than that other shit does for the rest of us,” the old man said. Then, a moment later, “Look at the wife. If he loves her as much as Lara thinks, she’s the weak spot.”

“What am I looking for?” Agnete asked.

“Whatever’s there. Every addict has to hit bottom,” the old man said. “Maybe we can help him with that.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Agnete said.

“I know it didn’t exactly work, but...” Lara hesitated, afraid to ask. “Our thing?”

She was asking about the debt her attempted seduction was going to pay off.

“How much did you owe us?” he asked.

“You know exactly how much,” Lara replied.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s off the books now,” the old man said. “But stay out of my casinos. You’re very bad at poker.”

Business concluded, they watched the sun speed across the sky and dive for the horizon. The water was turning golden as they angled back for shore. The old man made them all steaks on the little range, the meat decanted fresh from the growth disk.

When they got back to civilization, Agnete put her resources into the wife and Xi-Tamyan Agricultural Concern, where she had offices. She wasn’t looking for something in particular—an affair, an illegal drug habit, a second life. Anything.

Even so, it took her days to find it.



Biryar didn’t know what he had expected from Mona when he told her. Anger, perhaps. A sense of betrayal. A rupture in their marriage at least, an estrangement at worst. He had laid out all that had happened: the interviews, the connection that had been cultivated during them, and—with his heart in his throat—the kiss. Mona sat across the breakfast table from him, listening to every detail. Only at the end, when he outlined all the precautions he was putting in place to see that it never happened again, did a line of concern draw itself on her forehead.

“She just stole a kiss?” Mona asked. “That’s all?”

“But I allowed myself to permit a sense of... of intimacy that made it possible,” Biryar said. His eggs had grown cold and thick while he spoke. “This was my fault. It will never happen again.”

She’d taken his hand then, and when she spoke there was a seriousness in her voice so studied and careful that he suspected there was amusement behind it. “Thank you for treating me with respect. I mean that. But I’m not angry with you at all. Don’t beat yourself up over this, all right?”

He kissed her fingers, and the subject had never come up again. He went back to his duties with the relief of having dodged a bullet. He policed himself more harshly, wary of any other transgression. Biryar the man wasn’t to be trusted. There was only room for Governor Rittenaur, so he tightened his control and pushed out anything besides duty and decorum. It was the only way.

He attended meetings with Suyet Klinger of the Association of Worlds and approved the trade agreements for the Transport Union. He stood witness at another execution when Overstreet discovered a Laconian guard who had been extorting sexual favors from a local man. He made his reports to the political officer back on Laconia and received guidance that tracked back to Winston Duarte himself.

That he couldn’t sleep, that his food tasted strange and left his stomach upset, that the sunlight began to give him headaches, that he sometimes had the weird oppressive sense of drowning at the bottom of an ocean of air, that was only his acclimation going slowly. A few more weeks, and he would be fine, he was sure of it.

He was able to maintain the illusion that everything was under control until the day the one-armed man reappeared.

The conference was in Carlisle. It was the third-largest city on the planet, and fewer than a million people lived in it and the area around it. It was in a higher clime than Barradan and in the northern hemisphere where the seasonal shift made the air cold and the daylight periods slightly briefer. The trees were similar to the ones in Barradan, but with the cold weather, they had shriveled, wrinkled, and gone limp. The dark trunks bent toward the stony ground. The reception and Biryar’s speech had been planned for a courtyard in the center of the mayoral complex, but a storm changed direction as Biryar’s transport left Barradan, and a cold and bitter rain was

pelting down from low clouds when he arrived. As his liaison rushed him from his transport and into the mayoral complex, Biryar sniffed the air, hoping to find some hint of the minty smell of wet Laconian soil. Rain on Auberon smelled like nothing. Or it smelled like an open sewer, and he couldn't tell any longer. One or the other.

The liaison apologized his way down the wide, pale hallway. The change in the weather had come with no warning. They hadn't thought they would need to shift to the secondary venue—a public theater just across from the complex—until the last moment. It would only take them a little time to have it ready and the audience of local business and government leaders taken there. Biryar swallowed his annoyance and made himself as gracious as he imagined Duarte would have been in his place.

The waiting area belonged to the mayor herself, part of her private apartment. If he would make himself at home and be comfortable...

In fairness, the waiting room was pleasant enough. A wide glass window looked out over a vast, wild landscape. Rough, toothlike mountains rose above the city, halfway lost in the gray of the storm. The rain that struck the window froze there for a moment, then melted and dripped down. When the clouds finally cleared, the landscape would be encased in ice. Ice like a second skin. Ice like a shroud.

His speech was on the importance of maintaining robust trade with the other systems and Laconia's commitment to keeping the economy of Auberon strong. He knew it by heart. Instead of reviewing it again, he sat on the little couch and looked out at the weather. The door opened behind him, and a man in a crisp white jacket and matching gloves came in carrying a tray with a thermos of coffee, two cups, and a plate of pastries.

"Put them on the table here," Biryar said. "I can serve myself."

"You know, Governor," the old man said as he placed the thermos and cups on the table at Biryar's side, "I have got to give it to your security people. I've been trying to see you for a while now, and they've got your place buttoned up tighter than a horsefly's asshole."

The old man smiled. Even before Biryar registered the glint of metal between the man's cuff and his glove, he remembered the thin mustache.

He's come to kill me, Biryar thought, and a thrill ran through him. He felt the weight of the sidearm on his hip, even as he sensed that a gun probably wasn't going to help. He knew enough killers to know that he

wasn't one, and that the man facing him was. He nodded solemnly.

"I was wondering if I'd see you again. You've been hard to find as well."

The one-armed man sat down across from him and spoke as he plucked off his gloves. "Well, I was worried that we'd gotten off on the wrong foot. That's my fault. I come on a little strong sometimes. You want some coffee?"

"Cream, please," Biryar said. His heart was tapping against his ribs like it was desperate for his attention. He let his hand casually drift toward his hip.

The one-armed man's voice was harder. "If you pull that gun, it'll mean we're having the worst version of this conversation. Honest to Pete, you'll wish you hadn't. No sweetener?"

"No," Biryar said. He let his hand drop to the sofa, near his holster but motionless. It was dangerous to move forward, but he wasn't going to give up ground either. He imagined pulling the gun and firing. How quickly could he do that? How long could it take? The rest of his life, maybe. "Just cream."

"Good choice. I like it black myself. The older I get, the more bitter shit suits me. You ever feel like that?"

"Sometimes," Biryar said.

The man held out a coffee cup on a saucer, and Biryar nodded toward the table. He wouldn't take it. The old man was holding it with his prosthetic hand. How fast was the mechanism? What weapons were concealed in it? It was like watching a snake that he knew was venomous, and wondering how long a bite would take to stop his breath.

"What can I do for you?" Biryar said, trying desperately to make the words sound casual. As if he were in control. "Or are you here to make good on your threat?"

"Nah, we're past that. But I am here on business, as it were," the man said, putting the coffee cup down on the table. "I have something for you. Kind of a peace offering."

"I didn't know peace was an option between us. I was hoping to have you tried, sentenced, and executed." The provocation struck home. The man smoothed his mustache. Biryar knew he shouldn't have said it, but the fear was shifting in him. Turning to something like courage. Or anger. Or a mad,

dark, rushing hope that Biryar didn't wholly understand.

"I get that. But let me ask you something. Hypothetically, there's someone in your organization. Laconian, not one of ours. Let's say they're making up projects in your name, using them to falsify work orders. Fudging the budget. That's a problem for you, right?"

"You know the answer to that."

"I do. But I'd like to hear you say it just the same. If it's not a problem."

The one-armed man looked distracted by the conversation. A few centimeters would put his hand on the pistol. The angle made it awkward to draw. Biryar shifted his weight a little to make it easier, and the one-armed man shook his head like he was reading his mind.

"Misappropriation of Laconian funds is at best larceny, at worst treason," Biryar said. "One is a prison sentence. The other is death."

"What about a governor's pardon? You can do that, right?"

"No Laconian is above the law," Biryar said. "That is what discipline means."

"That's what I thought," the old man said. His eyes locked on Biryar's as he drew a handheld from his pocket. "For what it's worth, I am sorry about this."

He held it out. Biryar's gaze flickered down to it, and then back up, ready for the attack. It took a few seconds for what he'd seen to register. Mona Rittenaur. Almost against his will, his eyes drifted back down. The old man kept holding it out, and this time Biryar took it.

The financial records were marked as Xi-Tamyan, and the spreadsheet listed Mona's name. And monetary amounts. Budget levels and outflows. There were other names, and one rang a bell. Carmichael. The woman whose research had been unfairly canceled. The one they'd fought over. The one-armed man forgotten, he shifted through the files. Mona's name was highlighted. And the words *cooperative government programs*. If programs like that existed, he would have known about them. He would have had to approve them. He hadn't.

The storm had grown worse, the wind so terrible, it was shaking the building itself, making the walls shudder, only it wasn't any louder. And the beige surface of the coffee was smooth and still. Something else was shaking. Biryar put down the handheld.

"What do you want from me?"

“Nothing,” the man said. “I’m just letting you know that one of your own stepped a little off the path.”

“Blackmail?”

“For blackmail, you need an ask. I don’t want anything from you. I have this information. I’m giving it to you. That’s all. I’m being the good guy here.”

And now it was his duty to tell what he’d learned to Major Overstreet. And it would be Overstreet’s duty to arrest Mona. Biryar would have to recuse himself, so they’d send her back to Laconia for trial. His Mona. The woman whose fingers he kissed in the morning. He tried to imagine what it would feel like to see her sent to the Pens. It was like trying to imagine being dead.

Or he could hide the information, make her scrub away all sign of it. Cancel the projects. Erase the financial trail that led to her. Then, when Overstreet found them, they would die together. His sternum ached like he’d been punched there. Everything under it was hollow. He could hardly draw a breath.

It was perfect. Even if he could pull his pistol and shoot the one-armed man dead, there was still a bullet coming for him. Worse, it was coming for Mona, and there was no way to stop it. He couldn’t even die to protect her. He tried to move, but he was made from clay. He saw sympathy in the other man’s eyes.

“Truth is, if Xi-Tamyan found out about this, they’d probably praise her initiative and give her a raise. Those guys just do business that way. But she’s one of yours, so...”

“Discipline,” Biryar said. There was no way out. The end of his world had come. There was nothing to do but welcome it.

It wasn’t a thought, it wasn’t considered. Like water moving down, it was simply the way things worked. The way they had to be. Natural. Biryar drew the pistol, lifted it to his head, and pulled the trigger. The old man’s eyes barely had time to widen.

His false arm, though, had a mind of its own, and it was faster than either of theirs. Before the trigger came back a full millimeter, the gun wrenched away. The old man cried out, clutching his real hand to his chest. The metal hand held Biryar’s pistol, its barrel visibly bent.

“Jesus *fuck*, but I hate it when it does that,” the old man said. Then, with

heat, “Fuck is *wrong* with you, kid?”

Biryar didn’t answer. He wasn’t there. Governor Rittenaur, the voice and face of Winston Duarte, didn’t make sense here, and without him, Biryar was like a vine whose trellis had collapsed. He had no form. No structure. He couldn’t even die.

The one-armed man put the ruined pistol on the table, picked up Biryar’s cup of coffee, and sipped from it.

“Okay. I get it.”

“I can’t lose her,” Biryar said. “I can’t stay with her, and I can’t lose her. What else is there to do?”

“They really do a fucking job on you people, don’t they?” the one-armed man said. Then after a long moment, he sighed. “Listen to me. I didn’t lose my arm in a fight or anything. I was born wrong. Something about not enough blood flow. Stunted development. Whatever. It was like a skinny little baby arm. Mostly I just kind of curled it up against my chest here and forgot about it. I did fine. It was nothing big. I kept meaning to get it seen to, you know? Take it off and regrow it from gel? But one thing and another, I just never seemed to get around to it. You know what I mean? People would give me shit, and I’d laugh and say how, yeah, it would be a good idea. But I didn’t do it. Then maybe fifteen years ago...”

He raised his metal hand, rotating it in the light.

“This,” the old man said. “It’s fucking badass. Basically a built-in waldo with virtual intelligence and pattern matching. It’s not networked, so it’s unhackable. And it’s strong as shit. Bends steel. Stops bullets. You know what else it does? Plays piano. No shit. I can’t, but it can.”

“It’s very nice,” Biryar said.

“You’re young yet. I’m not. There’s this thing when you get older where you have to make a choice. Everyone does. You have to decide whether you care more about being your best self or your real one. If you’re more loyal to who you ought to be or who you really are. You know what I’m talking about?”

Biryar nodded. He was weeping.

“Yeah,” the old man said. “I thought you might. I’m going to tell you a secret. I’ve never told anyone this, not my girlfriends, not my closest allies. No one. You listening to me?”

Biryar nodded again.

“I miss my real fucking arm,” the old man said. “I liked it better when I was me.”

Biryar sobbed, and it sounded like a cough.

“I don’t want anything from you, Governor. But I would ask you this. Looking at where you are now, and the choices you’ve got? Is there anything you maybe want from me?”

The wind howled, threw a handful of hail at the window. Biryar barely heard it.

“You can’t make this go away,” he said. “Overstreet will find it. He’ll know.”

“He will,” the old man said. “You know. If.”

They were quiet. Biryar felt something happening in him. Something he both didn’t recognize and also knew as well as the sound of his own voice. “Could you have done it? Could you have killed me?”

“Yeah,” the old man said. “Half a dozen times. Easy. But it would have been a risk. I don’t get to pick your replacement, right? Thing about this Overstreet fella? He’s not on his home pitch. If something happened to him, maybe it’d be a good idea to put together some locals to take over the security jobs. People who know the lay of the land. How things work here.”

“If something happened to him?”

“Yeah. If,” the old man said. And then, “Do you want it to?”

Biryar breathed yes.

The one-armed man relaxed and stood up. He put on his gloves again, looked out at the sleet and rain and hail. The half-hidden mountains. “This isn’t just you.”

“What?”

“Don’t feel bad, because it ain’t just you,” the one-armed man said with a lopsided shrug. “There are, what, a couple hundred decent-sized colony worlds with shiny new Laconian governors on them? And this thing has or is going to happen on every single one. It’s the basic problem with religion, be it Jesus or Vishnu or God Emperors. Ideological purity never survives contact with the enemy.”

“I don’t—” Biryar started.

“Yeah, you do,” the one-armed man said, then stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Biryar sat for a moment, waiting for the guilt and horror to come, for his

conscience to overwhelm him. Half a planet away, Major Overstreet was probably just waking up. There was time to call him. To warn him. Mona was waking up too, in their bed. Biryar took a long breath and let it out through his teeth. He felt something deep and profound, but he didn't know what he felt. It was too big to judge.

The liaison came in, and Biryar tucked the handheld in his pocket. The liaison's eyes widened at the pistol, but Biryar pretended not to notice that it was there. They walked together across a covered bridge and into the theater where his audience was waiting.



Mona felt the hair on the back of her neck go up the moment she stepped into her house and found Veronica Dietz waiting in the parlor. It had been a long day that followed a restless night. Biryar had been in Carlisle, and she never slept as well when he wasn't on the other half of the bed. She'd wanted nothing more than to come home, take off her shoes, drink some wine, and relax. Finding Veronica lying in wait was like feeling a snake move in her pillowcase.

"Veronica," she said, feigning pleasure.

"Yes, ma'am," Veronica said, and then stopped. It was like she was waiting for Mona to say something. The moment stretched.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here," Mona said, carefully.

Veronica blinked, confused. "Oh," she said. "I had a request from the governor's office. I thought... that is I assumed that you—"

"I'm sorry," Biryar said, coming into the room. "That was me." He took Mona's hand, squeezed it gently, and kissed her fingers. "I missed you."

"I'm glad you're back," Mona said. Something was wrong. Or if not wrong, at least very different. She didn't understand what was happening, except that Biryar was ushering them both to sofas and motioning them to sit. "How was Carlisle?"

"Fine. It was fine. I had some time to think, and I wanted you both here."

Mona felt a stab of fear, but she took a seat. Veronica lowered herself into a chair. "What's this about, dear?" Mona asked.

“It’s important that Auberon and Laconia be very much coordinated. In the sciences,” Biryar said. There was something very odd about the way he spoke. He seemed looser. Calmer. Maybe a little melancholy. That might have been more alarming than Veronica’s presence. “So I’ve taken the liberty of requesting a placement at the science directorate in the capitol. And I’ve recommended Ms. Dietz for the position. Transport will be entirely taken care of. Your housing will be in the university complex with some of the best minds in the empire. Xi-Tamyan has already been informed.”

Veronica’s mouth was open. Her face was pale. Mona felt like she’d been spun too long on a swing. She didn’t understand what Biryar was thinking. And then she did.

“Her living expenses...” Mona said.

“All overseen by Laconia,” Biryar said. “*Everything* will be overseen by Laconia.”

“I can’t do that,” Veronica said, and her voice was tight. “That’s very kind of you. That’s... But I have so much here that I can’t really—”

Biryar raised a hand, and his voice went quiet. Quiet, but not soft. “Ms. Dietz, it is critical to the success of this colony that you understand what Laconian culture and discipline are, just as we learn what it is to be from Auberon. You will accept this position, and you will take the honor seriously. We will be treating you as one of our own.”

Veronica seemed to be having a little trouble breathing. Mona felt something equal parts joy and vindictiveness brighten her heart. She thought she saw Biryar glance at her, a smile ghosting on his lips, but it was gone before she could be certain. His handheld chimed, and he looked at it before refusing the connection. When he looked back up, he was somber. He stood and drew Veronica to standing.

“This position could change your life,” he said.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” Biryar said, and escorted her to the door. “Please don’t mention it. I hope you won’t think I’m rude, but—”

“No,” she said. “No, of course.”

“Good,” he said, and closed the door behind her. When they were alone, he seemed to sag into his bones, all his muscles gone slack. He turned back to her and smiled sheepishly. Mona shook her head.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I feel like I’m smiling more often,” Biryar said as he came back and sat beside her. He rested his head on her shoulder the way he had when they were first courting. It made him seem younger. “Next time, let me approve it. It’s safer that way.”

She was about to say *Approve what?* but the question would have been a lie. He knew, and she knew that he did. Instead, she said, “I will.”

His handheld chimed again. She caught a glimpse of it as he silenced it. The red band of a high security alert. An emergency. He took her hand, lacing his fingers in among hers.

“Who’s that from?” she asked.

“Overstreet’s office,” Biryar said. “I’ll get back to them. It’s nothing that won’t wait a few minutes.”

She shifted to look him in the eyes. He was serene. He was grieving. He was himself in a way she hadn’t seen in months.

“What happened?” she whispered.

She felt him shrug. She watched him look into her. “I’ve committed to the process,” he said.

The handheld chimed again.

Auberon

Author's Note

This is the story that came out of order. It was supposed to be published after *Persepolis Rising* and before *Tiamat's Wrath*, but things got a little out of sync.

One of the joys of the project has always been how we were able to play around with genre. Science fiction is great that way. There's not a particular story at the root of it the way there is with other genres. A romance, either the people are going to hate each other at the beginning and fall in love by the end or love each other at the beginning and die, depending on whether it's in the shadow of *Pride and Prejudice* or *Romeo and Juliet*. A mystery, generally someone's going to be killed and someone's going to find out why. Science fiction can be anything from a rigorous speculative adventure like Andy Weir's *The Martian*, to a semi-hallucinatory philosophical allegory by Philip K. Dick, to a locked-room mystery on a spaceship. There's room for all of it.

"Auberon" was our crime story, and it was an answer, in a way, to Santiago Singh's fate in *Persepolis Rising*. Biryar Rittenaur is Singh's path not taken. He came to Auberon with the best intentions, and the corruption of the place overcame his idealism. But in doing that, it also gave him a little space to love something more than the state or the party. For a crime story, it winds up being pretty humane.

It was also a treat for us to see Erich again. One of the questions we often get about him is why, in a world with regrowth gel, he still had a malformed arm. This was our answer.

And years after writing this, with literally hundreds of thousands of words between drafting this story and writing these notes, we can still remember Balecheck's name and that fucking mole. It really does work if you commit to the process.

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The Sins of Our Fathers

The monsters came at night.

First came their calls: distant and eerie. Their wide, fluting voices echoed down the valley, complicated as a symphony and mindless as a cricket swarm. The deepest of them sang in a range below human hearing: subsonic tremors that the people in the township felt more than heard.

Then the night scopes showed movement. It could start as far as twenty clicks away, or as near as two. The science team still hadn't figured out what they did during the daylight hours or during the long, empty days when they seemed to disappear, but the feeling that they rose up from the planet's flesh with the darkness made the approach feel almost supernatural. Like the town had offended some nameless local god by coming here. It was only a mystery, though. They'd figure it out eventually. If they survived.

After the movement, assuming the monsters kept to their same pattern, their chorus would go on until the little retrograde moon started rising in the west. Then it would stop. Then they would come.

"They'll aim for the breach," Leward said, pointing with his chin. The perimeter wall was constructed out of prefabricated plates of carbon-silicate lace scavenged from ship hulls. The braces were titanium and compression-resistant ceramic. The place where the monster had come through last time looked like God had come down and pressed against the wall with His thumb. Ten meters of shattered plate and bent brace they'd shored up with local trees and scrap.

"Might aim for the breach, might not," Jandro said, with a slow shrug. He was the head of construction and maintenance, and a bear of a man. "What you think, Nagata?"

Filip shrugged. His mouth was dry, but he tried to keep the fear out of his voice. "Wall didn't slow them down much even when it was intact."

Jandro grinned and Leward scowled.

The town was the second largest on the planet Jannah, at four hundred and thirty-six people. It had been named Emerling-Voss Permanent Settlement Beta, but everyone called it Beta. And with the ring gate to anywhere else broken, that meant Beta was its name from now on. Without the gates, the corporate headquarters of Emerling-Voss was just shy of twenty-three light-years away. Alpha settlement, with more than a thousand people, was seven and a half thousand klicks to the south. With no orbital shuttles or reliable ground vehicles, it might as well be seven million. And Alpha had gone silent when the ring gates shut down. Whether it was just a radio malfunction or something larger was an open question, and the residents of Beta had more immediate problems.

There were two dozen people drawn from different workgroups all along the north wall. Leward was in charge there. Another group was along the east, with lookouts and runners at the west and south in case something unexpected happened. In case the monsters changed the direction they'd traveled up to now. Filip considered the faces of the others stationed below the wall, finding signs in each of them of the same fear he felt. Almost each of them. Jandro and the four men from the maintenance team seemed relaxed and at ease. Filip wondered what drugs they'd taken.

Leward hefted his torch: a titanium rod with a solid, waxy mat of the local mosslike organism on a spike at one end. When he spoke, it was loud enough for everyone to hear. "When they come—if they come—we deflect them. Don't go at them straight on. Just turn them gently aside so they don't get to the walls. We aren't fighting them. We're just herding." He nodded while he said it, like he was agreeing with himself. It made him seem uncertain.

"Should just shoot them," Jandro said. It was a joke. Everyone knew the town had run out of rifle cartridges and the reagents they'd need to print fresh ones.

"We keep them outside the walls," Leward said. "But if they get in anyway? Get out of the way." He pointed up and to the south at the fabrication lab, the only two-story building in Beta. "The engineering team has a magnetic slug thrower set up. We don't get between it and the target."

"Maybe they won't even come this time," one of the others said. As if in answer, the uncanny chorus swelled. The overtones rang through each other

like a ship drive finding a hull's harmonic. Filip shifted his weight from foot to foot and hefted his torch. Everything was too heavy here. He'd spent most of his life on ships, and the float or one third g were his natural state. When he accepted the job to join Mose and Diecisiete at Beta, he'd expected three years down the well at most. Now, it looked more like a lifetime. And a lifetime that might not last until dawn.

Leward's hand terminal chimed, and the team lead accepted the connection. Evelyn Albert's voice came loud enough that Filip could make out every word. "Get your people in place. We have movement half a klick out. North by northeast."

"Understood," Leward said, and dropped the connection. He stared out at all of them like an actor who'd just forgotten the St. Crispin's Day speech. "Get ready."

They moved toward the wall, and then through the access gate to the strip of cleared land outside it. The night sky was bright with stars and the wide disk of the Milky Way. With the autumn sun gone behind the horizon, the air cooled quickly, with a scent like mint and toilet cleanser. The atmosphere of Jannah smelled nothing like Earth, the Earthers at Beta said. Take away the mint, and Filip thought it smelled a bit like a freshly scrubbed ship.

None of that changed the fact that Filip and the torch bearers walking at his side were the invaders here, and he'd have argued for leaving again if there were a ship that could take them and anyplace to go. Instead, the walls, the darkness, and the rising howls of monsters outside.

He tried to hear a difference in the chorus. He imagined the huge beasts hauling themselves up out of the dark soil like the ancient dead coming up from their graves. It seemed like the kind of thing that would have to change how they sang, but he couldn't be sure. He took his place outside the wall. To his right, a couple of women from the medical team. To his left, a young man named Kofi with the long bones and just-too-large head that said he was another Belter like Filip.

"Hell of a thing," Kofi said.

"Hell of a thing," Filip agreed.

In the west, a dim light glowed at the top of the mountain ridge like a pale fire was burning there. It brightened, and resolved into a crescent, smaller than Filip's thumbnail. It looked to him like inverted horns.

All through the wide valley, the choir of alien voices stopped. Filip felt his heart start to labor. His head swam a little. The sudden silence made the valley feel as vast as space, but darker. The fear crept up the back of Filip's throat, and his hands gripping the torch ached.

"Steady," he said under his breath. "Steady, coyo. Bist bien. Bist alles bien." But it wasn't true. Everything was profoundly not fine. Leward paced behind them, breath fluttering like the edge of panic. Then from the darkness, a steady, heavy tramping that grew louder.

"Time to dance," Jandro said. A flare of orange fire sprang up to Filip's right. Jandro holding his lit torch.

"Not yet, not yet," Leward said, but Jandro's team had already started lighting all of their torches, and the approaching footsteps were so loud, Filip had to agree. The others along the line set fire to the moss, and Filip did too. The Belter beside him was struggling with the igniter, so Filip leaned his own fire close until the flames spread. The cleared space was a bright monochrome orange. Smoke stung Filip's eyes and throat.

The first of them loomed up out of the darkness.

It stood higher than a building, at least any of the buildings on Beta. It moved with weirdly articulated shoulders and hips that seemed to ripple with every step like there was a vastly complicated mechanism under the rough skin. Its head was little more than a knob, set low between its shoulders, comically flat. The eyes were black: two at the front and two on the sides, and its mouth curved up like an obscene, toothless grin. It lumbered forward, into the light, seeming not to notice the line of flame and primates in front of it.

"Not straight on!" Leward shouted. "Turn it! Make it turn!"

The line to Filip's right surged forward, shouting and waving their torches. To his left, they hung back. In the center, he could go either way. The monster took a slow step, then paused as Jandro and his crew rushed at it from the side screaming obscenities and threats. The monster's grin seemed to widen, and it trudged forward, the ground shaking under each step. Filip lifted his own torch and rushed in. The monster's smile was an accident of its physiology and evolution, but it still felt like the great beast was pleased to see them. Or amused. Filip pressed himself in among the men, shouting and reaching up to thrust fire at the thing's dark eyes.

The monster made a deep fluting groan, and its next step angled away to

the right, if only a little bit. A few degrees.

“Hold the line!” Leward shouted over the roar of the torch bearers. Over Filip’s own shout of victory. “It’s not over. Keep turning it!”

Filip pressed closer, waving the flame above him. Other bodies were with him, a mob of frightened mammals with the first glimmer of victory. It felt better than being drunk. Someone—maybe Filip, maybe not—touched the beast’s skin with the fire, and it shifted again. The shouting redoubled. There were more people in the crowd now, and the monster strode forward, its pace hardly changing, but its path bent until it was walking parallel to the town wall. Leward was yanking them back one at a time. *Let it go. It turned away, just keep it going forward until it clears the corner.* But there was a kind of bloodlust. They’d made the thing that had frightened them before now bend to their will, and it was intoxicating. A knot of people pushed toward it, drawn like a tide by the gravitational pull of power. Here was the enemy, and their victory over it. Even if the victory was just changing the direction it was walking. They waved the same fires, but now from spite and in triumph.

The monster smiled its fixed smile and lumbered forward, along the wall to the corner where Leward and two of his people made a barrier and stopped the mob. The monster shifted its weirdly flat head, groaned a vast, shuddering groan, and turned back to its original heading like it was following a star.

They shouted as it moved off into the wildlands to the northwest of the town. Jandro picked up a rock in his off hand and threw it at the monster’s wide retreating back, and the others laughed and howled. Their torches were starting to gutter.

“Regroup!” Leward said, waving them back toward their posts. “Everyone grab new torches! This isn’t over. We have to be ready.”

Filip trotted back to his place and handed off the failing torch to a young woman in a science team jumpsuit. As she ran back into the town to refresh the oily moss fire cap, someone shouted. If there were words in it, they didn’t matter. Filip couldn’t make them out, but he knew what they meant.

A second monster loomed out of the darkness. Its head was a little higher up on its shoulders, its skin a little more green. Filip shouted and tried to light his fresh torch, but the beast had already come closer. Every step made the earth shake the way dinosaurs and elephants were supposed

to have. Like a nightmare.

“Line up!” Leward shouted. “Form the line!”

But it was too late. The people who had kept their torches burning and held their ground were clumped at the eastern end of the wall. The mob like Filip and Jandro and the others were just lighting up new ones on the west. A gap of darkness between the fires was guiding the monster straight toward the thing they’d sworn to protect. Filip waved his torch at the lidless black eyes, but the flame was weak and pale. The monster moved forward and hunched its forelegs. When it rose it was less like a jump than a weird unfurling of flesh, and it crashed down onto the wall with a sound louder than thunder.

Somewhere nearby, Leward was shouting, “We have a breach. We have a breach. We have a breach.” The same phrase over and over like the disaster had turned him into a siren. The monster slid into the darkness of the town, and the sounds of destruction echoed back. Filip’s mind jumped ahead, trying to think what they were losing. The medical center. The science barracks. The dry storage.

“Get back to the line,” Leward shouted, waving a torch in each hand. “Back to the line! Let the slug thrower take that one.”

“I don’t hear it.” That was Jandro. There was soot on his face, and his arm was red like it had been burned. Filip didn’t know how that had happened.

“Form up!” Leward said.

“He’s right,” Filip said. “The slug thrower’s not firing.”

“I don’t know about that. It’s not my job.”

In the dark of the town, someone screamed.

“Fuck,” Jandro said, then held out his hand toward Filip. “Nagata. Gimme your torch.”

Filip shifted it, dropping the handle into Jandro’s wide palm. The chief of maintenance put the burning moss on the ground, scraping it off with his boot like the flames were dog shit. The spike where the mat had been was five inches long, set at ninety degrees from the main shaft. Jandro banged the spike against the ground once, testing it.

“Form up!” Leward shouted.

“Fuck yourself,” Jandro said, like he was suggesting what kind of sandwich would go with Leward’s coffee. The big man turned toward the

new gap in the wall and started off at a long, loping run.

“I’ll get him back,” Filip said, but it was more that he didn’t have a torch now, and there was a monster loose in the town. He had to do something.

The darkness and the destruction made the town unfamiliar. A wall lay across the pathway, peeled off its building. The wraith-thin body of Arkady Jones sat, back against a water recycler and head resting on their knees. The lights were off to keep anything from drawing the monsters in. It seemed like a fantasy protection now. If you can’t see them, they can’t see you. Filip’s heart tapped fast against his chest, reminding him that it hadn’t been built for this. That he was a Belter down the well. That he was old.

Ahead, a huge shadow moved against the darkness. Filip went toward it, not knowing what he meant to do when he got there. Only that was the problem, and it had to be solved. In the starlight and the faintness of the moon, all he could see was the wide, shifting back. The twin tails, wider than both his legs together. The monster seemed to twitch, like it had stumbled to the left. When it roared, it roared in pain.

A spotlight went on at the top of the fabrication lab where the slug thrower was supposed to be. It tracked the monster as it shifted and stumbled toward the open ground of the town plaza. At first, Filip didn’t understand what he was seeing. Jandro was on the thing’s back, hunched down with his body pressed against it and one free hand banging the unlit torch against its head. The spike was dark and bright at the same time. Wet with blood. Filip paused.

Of all the places in the town, the plaza was the one with the least to destroy. The least that they couldn’t rebuild or replace. Even so, he had to convince himself that Jandro had steered the monster, ridden it where he’d wanted it to go. Watching the huge man whip the titanium spike into the smiling monster’s side, Filip felt something like awe.

Human voices floated down from the top of the fabrication lab, and a fast, loud rattle cut through the chaos. A line of wounds drew themselves along the monster’s flank, and it writhed in pain.

“Stop shooting!” Filip shouted. “You’ll hit him!”

But Jandro had already jumped free. The monster shifted and turned, confused by the light and by the new pain. The blood that sheeted down its side and poured from its eye and cheek was as red as anything Filip had seen. As red as a human’s blood. Another shaking rattle, with better

grouping now, a new wound opening on the beast like the slug thrower was a mining drill coring through its side. The monster raised its head and tried to sing again, but the sound that came out was choked and strained. It took another step forward, shifted, stepped back, and folded itself gently onto the bare dirt of the plaza like it was stopping to take a nap. The eyes didn't close, but they went dull.

Filip ran to Jandro, more than half expecting to find him dead. Instead, he was on his knees, swatting clouds of dust off his pant legs and grinning.

"You okay?" Filip asked. "You need a medic."

"I'm fine," Jandro said.

"You could have been killed, coyo."

Jandro's grin widened, and he shrugged. The monster seemed to breathe out, some last trace of life escaping the corpse. Even dead, it was huge. Jandro bent down, grabbed the bloody pole, and tossed it back to Filip. "Thanks for the borrow, yeah? Let's go show these pinche fuckers who's boss."



Jannah system was—had been—one of more than thirteen hundred connected to Sol and Laconia by the gate network. It had a middle-aged star and two planets in the goldilocks zone, four gas giants strung out into the stars with clouds of moons around them like little solar systems all their own, and a thin, disappointing asteroid belt. In the gold rush years, half a dozen different entities had put claims to the two life-sustaining worlds until a disagreement over agricultural assay rights had escalated into a brief and mutually annihilating nuclear war, and the Transport Union had been forced to step in. For the better part of a decade, the system had been fourth or sixth or tenth priority for the corporate lawyers and union administrators, rights adjudication always moving forward without ever quite resolving.

Then the Laconian Empire had rolled through, smashed through the red tape with the iron fist of imperial fiat, and Emerling-Voss Minerals and Financial Holding dusted off its blueprints.

It was more than possible that somewhere in those plans, there had been a little square with a double line hashing one side that had meant temporary

barracks. Or, more likely, general-purpose room. Now, it was two-and-a-half-meter walls of prefabricated metal with yellow chips in the blue sealant and a patina that made them look dirty no matter how much Filip scrubbed them. The ceiling had the same kind of full-spectrum worklights as the cabin on his last ship, the *Rhymer*. And inside the building's only room, two canvas cots. One was his. The other belonged to Mose, his supervisor. Diecisiete, the third of their three-person team, was in Alpha if she was anywhere.

"Wake up," Mose said.

Filip turned on his cot and moaned.

"Wake up."

"Can't wake up," Filip said. "I died. Dead men don't wake up."

"You didn't die."

"Then why do I hurt so much?"

"Because you didn't die," Mose said with a long, wheezing laugh. "Dead men don't hurt. That's being alive."

"Could be in hell," Filip said. By now, sleep had retreated, and all that was left was the ache and sense of fear.

"Could be," Mose said, but the laughter was less now. Filip rolled onto his side, and Mose put a plate on the cloth by his shoulder. Textured protein and the last of their pepper sauce. With the state he was in, it even smelled good. He rose to sitting and took a spoonful. Mose stood, folding his wide arms.

"Now you're done sleeping the day away, there's work to do."

"Be right there," Filip replied, as if his work contract was still what it had been. As if the *Rhymer* was coming back to drop off the new crew and take them back up the well and out to the stars. It was a little piece of theater they played out between the two of them. Mose played at being the good boss, Filip played at being the diligent underling. He could hear in the way Mose talked that the act was wearing thin. It was wearing thin for everyone.

Between them, Alpha and Beta were the whole human population of the planet, and the majority of the people in the system. There was, Filip had heard, a prospector's ship on one of the watery moons of the second gas giant. If that was true, whoever they were needed to get their asses back down to the planet as quickly as they could and then find a way to land.

With the gate gone, the human population that mattered—that had any meaningful effect on any of them for the rest of their lives—had gone from tens of billions to under two thousand. Maybe less. If they weren't careful, maybe a lot less.

Filip finished his breakfast, scraping out the last bits of nutritional yeast and mushroom with his fingernail. The voices of the others filtered in from outside. And behind that, the clanging of a mallet on steel. He went to check his hand terminal, but it had broken a week before and there weren't any replacement parts. The fabrication lab could have built some, but the supply of reagents wasn't deep, and he didn't need a hand terminal anymore. He could just walk outside and look up to know the time of day. Or consult with the weariness in his back to know how much rest he still needed.

Of the seven worlds Filip had set foot on—all of them light gravity, two of them too heavy for him anyway—Jannah had the most changeable skies. Some days it was an indigo so dark he could see the brightest stars at midday. Others, like today, it was a pale olive from horizon to horizon. The breeze was cool and musky, like one of the old water treatment plants on Ceres. The damage to the town was different in the daylight. Better because he could see it and not just let his imagination tell him how bad it was. Worse because he couldn't tell himself they'd gotten off light.

The monster had stumbled through a storage building and the machine shop where the science team worked on their small fleet of prospecting drones. Both of the buildings were flattened. If it had kept on the path it started, it would have gone through all the barracks, and they'd have been digging graves for half the town. Instead, the corpse lay in the plaza, its flesh cut open, swarmed by the local carrion insects and biologists. Leward paced among them, gesturing excitedly with his wide, blood-streaked hands. Filip scanned the crowds until he found Mose coordinating a salvage crew at the dead machine shop. Kofi was there too, and a broad-faced woman whose name was Aliya or Adaliya. Something like that. With the *Rhymer* gone, it probably made sense to pay more attention to things like that now. Filip slid over, hands in his pockets, and looked over the mess. Kofi noticed him and lifted a hand in greeting.

"Could have gone better," Filip said, gesturing to the ruin with his chin.

"Could have gone worse too," Mose said. "We lost some of the fine-

work machines, but if we pull this up careful enough, I bet we can reuse almost all of it.”

“I’ll see if the welding rig’s free,” Maybe-Aliya said, and strode off. The patch on the back of her jumpsuit said she was maintenance. One of Jandro’s crew. Filip looked back at the dead monster and the men and women around it. The ones who were working by talking a lot.

“I see it too,” Kofi said.

“Yeah,” Filip said. “What can you do, though.”

It was natural enough. The scientists and administrators were doing science and administration. The mechanics and workers were working with machines. Filip found a length of conduit and used it to scratch the itch between his shoulder blades. Up between the light olive sun and them, something huge and distant unfolded wide, curving wings and cast them all into shadow for a second.

Mose spat on the ground. “Slug thrower got the fucker, yeah?”

Filip considered the dead monster. The autopsy had peeled it down to bright pink bone and pale flesh. It looked only a little smaller than it had in the darkness. Its flat face still had the permanent smile, like it knew a joke the primates that had killed it didn’t understand.

“Took a while.”

“Misfired the first time,” Mose said. “That’s what I was fixing before I came here. They had to ground out the main capacitor and bring the whole thing back up from battery. Overengineered and slapped together at the same time.” He spat again.

“Why we been using old-fashioned explosive propellant guns since forever,” Filip said. “They’re like sharks. We found a perfect design for killing the shit out of some coyo that needs it, why change?”

“Yeah, we used to have spaceships too.”

Spaceships and gun cartridges, both relics of their past.

“Coyo in chemistry group says we can get saltpeter from the local guano. Seems like we should try.”

“We do this first,” Mose said with his supervisor voice.

A woman broke off from the flock of administrators and scientists. She was smaller than Filip, with light brown skin and a mane of tight-curved hair that was auburn where it wasn’t gray. She’d done his intake interview when he and Mose had arrived from Alpha. Her last name was a mouthful

of Russian that sounded like a puppy falling down stairs, so everyone called her Nami Veh.

“Moses. Filip.” She nodded to each of them as she said their names. She had a gift for making it feel like they were friends, and knowing everyone by name was part of it. “We’re calling a town meeting tomorrow after dinner.”

“Yeah?” Filip said.

“It’s to talk about everything we know so far about...” She looked back at the dead monster. “About those. And planning for what we do next. It’s important that everyone come.”

“We’re not really part of all this,” Mose said, shaking his head. “Me and Filipito? We’re subcontractors, not permanent here.”

Filip didn’t know if Mose was fucking with her, or if that was really still how he thought of himself. Of them. At a guess, Mose wasn’t a hundred percent sure either. Nami Veh’s smile was ready and real.

“It matters for everyone, so we want everyone to be part of it.”

Mose shrugged. “Okay. We can try. Not like we’re going to be out at the dance hall.”

Nami Veh laughed like it had been funny, put her hand on Mose’s shoulder, and moved off to some maintenance group workers who were resetting a water purifier the monster had knocked down. When she was out of earshot, Mose chuckled.

“I guess she can call ‘town meetings’ now. Think we can all do that? Go tell the science leads that there’s a thing they have to come to? Think we can all decide there’s something on the schedule, or is that just them?”

Kofi smiled, but his eyes made him look angry. “Typical, yeah? No problem inners can’t solve with more fucking meetings.”

“We don’t go,” Mose said, then turned to point at Filip particularly. “That’s the rule. If extra meetings aren’t cleared by the union, we don’t go. You give these bastards a millimeter, they’ll take a klick.”

“The union? Are you kidding?” Filip asked, and then regretted it.

Mose’s face went dark and his chin jutted forward. “You listen to me. You and me, we’re *union*. That’s the way it is. All this other shit doesn’t change anything unless we let it. And we are not going to fucking let it. *Never*. You understand?”

Kofi looked away, embarrassed. Mose wasn’t insane, but here he was

shouting about getting something cleared by the union offices, as if that could happen. As if the way things used to be had anything to do with how they were now. If he'd dropped his pants and started dancing with his ass out, it would have been just as connected to their current reality.

Grief made people weird.

At the corpse, Leward was talking animatedly to a half dozen of the science team. Nami Veh was already halfway around the plaza, organizing whatever it was she was organizing. And Mose was staring at Filip with the kind of aggressive silence that could turn into a fight if he let it. Mose was ten years younger than he was, and when he looked at Filip, he just saw an old Belter technician with white in his beard and hair. He didn't see Filip as a threat, and Filip had put a lot of effort into keeping it like that.

"I hear you," Filip said, carefully. "We should probably get this thing salvaged, yeah?"

Mose hoisted up his chin a degree more. Filip imagined slamming the conduit in his hands into Mose's face. The look of surprise the man would give him before he dropped. Instead, he let his own gaze fall, looking more submissive than he felt. It seemed to satisfy Mose.

"Where the hell is Adiyah?" Mose muttered, and stalked off, ready to vent at her. Filip dropped the conduit he'd been holding and started to pace off the ruins of the machine shop. Kofi fell in beside him. After a few seconds, the younger Belter spoke.

"Mose, he's..."

"Yeah," Filip agreed. "Lot of people shook. Strange times, que?"

"Strange times." And then a moment later, "Are you really going to sit out this town meeting because of the union?"

"No."



Forty years could be a long time. Or it could be hardly any time at all. Most often, it was both of those at once. Filip had taken this form of his name as a boy. The older he got, the more distance he had from his childhood, the stranger it became to him. Fifteen was the age when most people were taking their first contracts. He'd been leading terrorist raids that got people

he knew and cared about killed. Watching his mother throw herself out an airlock without a vac suit. Helping his father commit genocide. Filip Inaros, he'd been then.

And he'd fallen from grace and renamed himself Nagata. He could remember when all the sins of his childhood had felt like glorious virtue, but he couldn't get the feeling itself back. And then his father died, and the systems of law and commerce remade themselves, and he was just another face among billions. No one knew that he'd left before that final battle. The records of his desertion had been lost with the Free Navy. He was dead, and so he was free to move on with his life. That was the theory anyway. The practice was more complex.

He'd been angry, and he hadn't understood why, not for years. Even saying it aloud—*My father was a terrible man, and I helped him do terrible things*—didn't carry the weight of it. He failed out of his first apprenticeship from having too many panic attacks. And the Filip Nagata name was a thin shield. If anyone looked too closely into him, they'd see past the paint. So he took other names, other pasts. Oskar Daksan. Tyr Saint. Angél Morella. Somehow, though, he always gravitated back to Filip Nagata. His past was like a wound that wouldn't heal. Or a poison.

Other people, they put together lives that followed from one thing to the next. Instead, he'd spent his life dodging justice that might not even have been looking for him except in his head. That had been enough to break him. At thirty-one years old, he had been Tyr Saint for a year and a half, an unofficial part of a group marriage on a Transport Union colony ship, and in line for the chief mechanic's place when she retired. For no reason he could fathom, he'd woken up one morning with an abyss of fear opening under him. He'd murdered billions. He'd seen his own friends die. They, whoever "they" were, would come for him. He'd dropped his identity at the next port and vanished, starting over again from nothing. Never letting anything build.

He took the work nobody wanted. Low pay, high risk, long contract. He signed onto the ships where people didn't talk about their pasts. He avoided any conversation about Marco Inaros or the Free Navy or the bombardment of Earth. And if anything ever went right for him, if he ever seemed in danger of gaining something he might be able to keep, he ran.

Once, he'd tried reading about the experience of child soldiers and the

paths they'd taken through the trauma of their adult lives. Before he'd even finished the first half of the book, he'd descended into panic so deep that the ship medic had put him on antiseizure medications. He'd never tried again.

Forty years could go fast that way. They could feel like a thousand.

The *Rhymer* was the latest in a long string. Filip Nagata had never dropped out long enough to lose his place in the union, but his work history had long and inexplicable gaps in it. There were a million work histories like it. Mental illness. Addiction. Religious or romantic fixation. Families made and left behind. There were a thousand reasons for moth-eaten careers like his. And there were slots on a ship like the *Rhymer* for people like him. The ship's full name was *Thomas the Rhymer*, and it was owned by a trade organization out of Bara Gaon that catered to new and struggling colonies. For the first few years, he'd been on strictly as crew as they carried workgroups through half a dozen gates, dropped off people and equipment or picked them up again to transfer off to other ships, other systems. When Laconia rolled through, the *Rhymer* and her sister ships had gone from working for the Transport Union to the Association of Worlds without missing a beat. It didn't matter who was in power, they wanted someone doing the shit work that the *Rhymer* made possible.

Filip had been happy there, or at least not unhappy. He'd have kept his slot if two things hadn't happened. First, the XO had taken an inexplicable dislike to him. And second, the junior technician in Mose's workgroup had a heart attack three weeks after they'd passed through Jannah gate. The company needed a replacement, and pulling from the *Rhymer's* crew meant not having to spend the extra transit time. Filip needed off the ship at least until the XO calmed down or shifted his paranoia elsewhere, and the gravity of the little planet was light enough that Filip could stand it without risking circulatory collapse.

It had seemed like a good choice for everyone, and him most of all.

He and Mose and Diecisiete had delivered a solar power array to Alpha and spent a few months setting it up, troubleshooting it, and helping the locals work out the bugs. Diecisiete had stayed in Alpha to track down a power drop, while Filip and Mose rode a supply shuttle to Beta and started the whole damn thing again. Filip could still picture the shuttle leaving them there, heading back to the relative metropolis of Alpha. There was a

strange calm that had come from being at the edge of civilization. Or maybe just past the edge.

The news of the rest of the systems, the attack on Laconia, the loss of Medina Station, the eerie losses of consciousness that turned off minds everywhere, including Jannah, were all things that had happened during his time in Alpha. And the other, stranger thing. The timeless stretch when all minds had smeared together like oil paints being mixed by a gigantic, uncaring thumb had come when he and Mose had reached Beta. Filip's memory of that period was spotty and odd. Like he was trying to recall the details of a dream too big to fit in his finite skull.

When they'd all come back to themselves, the gate was dead. The *Rhymer* was still weeks from its scheduled passage back, and both the ring and the ship were now gone forever. Someone on the astronomy team had spotted the ring falling sunward into a new long elliptical orbit, shoved out of its former place at the edge of the solar system by some unknown, godlike hand. No one on Jannah knew why. They never would. All the problems they had now, all the ones they ever would have, they'd have to work through here.

Alone.



The sky darkened fast. A scattering of high, thin clouds clustered in the north took the red of the sunset and turned it into gold leaf. The monster's corpse had been dragged off the plaza, but the place it had lain was black with blood. A cloud of local insects buzzed around the stain and ignored the people.

The damage to the town was real, but the salvage and repair effort had left it less wounded. What had been the machine shop had become piles of salvage, squared away and ready for reuse. The new breach in the wall was shored up enough to keep the wildlife out. Just because the monsters could walk through it didn't mean that the other animals were welcome. The town kitchen had given out bowls of riced tofu and black sauce, some of the last of their supply, and Filip was finishing his now. The bowl was made of hardened and vacuum-formed vat-grown kelp. He'd eat that too, when the

tofu was gone. Every calorie and vitamin was so precious now, that someone on the science team had suggested using calories as the basis of a new currency.

At the edge of the plaza, Jandro and his crew were sitting together, laughing and talking louder than anyone else. They had what looked like beer. Since Jandro had ridden the monster down, he'd been treated like a hero and a badass. Which, Filip figured, was fair enough. If the price of beer was hauling himself up on a monster's back while the bolt thrower on the fabrication lab shot holes in it, water was fine for him.

Mose wasn't there. Probably he was back at the room, making his point about union rules to himself. Kofi was, along with a handful of other Belters, sitting not far from Jandro and his crew. The scientists and administrators were sitting in clumps of their own, except for Nami Veh, who circulated from group to group to group, talking to everyone, touching shoulders and arms, smiling like she was running for office.

As the early-evening sun continued to drop, the golden clouds flared and faded to gray. Filip took a bite of the bowl. It was crisp and layered and salty, like baklava without the sweetness. He chewed and watched Nami Veh approach.

"Filip," she said. "Long day. Thank you for coming. I really appreciate everyone showing up."

"Mose won't be here. But he doesn't mean anything by it. He's just working some things through, you know?"

Her smile dimmed a little. "I think we all are."

"Yeah," Filip said.

She looked for some way to touch him without it seeming awkward, didn't find one, and moved on. The relief he felt as she walked away surprised him. He didn't dislike her. Her kindness seemed a little too consistent to be real, sure, but it wasn't her that bothered him. It was talking. That bothered him because he was trying to listen. And he was listening for the monsters, singing.

So far, they were silent.

At the front of the plaza, Leward hauled out a little metal bench and a holographic projector. From where Filip sat, he could see the science lead's lips moving. Practicing. There were probably four hundred people in the plaza. Almost everyone. Filip shifted. His leg was falling asleep.

Leward stepped up awkwardly, holding his palms out to ask for quiet. Or to demand it.

“Everybody?” he said, and while it was inflected like a question, it wasn’t one. “Everybody? Thank you all for coming here tonight. I know we’ve all been through a lot, and I wanted to start by saying how much I appreciate everything all of you have done.”

The sunset was dimming fast. It was hard to make out the expressions of people across the plaza, but Filip thought he saw Nami Veh shake her head just a little.

“We’ve learned a lot. We know a lot more than we did before, and it’s really going to help.” He nodded as he spoke. Someone to Filip’s right muttered something. Someone else laughed. Leward’s smile widened. “Beta’s site was selected based on a slate of criteria. Water availability. Shelter from major weather patterns. So on.”

He took out his hand terminal, tapped it, and the projector came to life. A topographical map of the valley sprang into slightly fuzzy existence, with a red ball the size of a fist where the town was. Filip leaned forward, considering the shape of the hills.

“All the reasons this is an attractive site for us?” Leward said. He was getting his rhythm. He sounded like a university lecturer. “They also make it attractive for the locals. We knew that. Biosample diversity was a plus for us. But we didn’t know about the size of some of the local fauna, or that we were setting down roots pretty much exactly in its migratory path.”

One of the communications team stood up, raising her hand. “So the monsters aren’t attacking us? We’re just... in their way?”

“Turns out we built our houses in their hallway. But that makes a solution pretty straightforward.” Leward flexed his wide hands and tapped his hand terminal again. The red ball that was Beta was joined by a green one halfway up a nearby slope. “One of the tertiary sites that we didn’t pick is close enough that we can relocate even without the shuttle.”

Filip felt himself sink. He glanced around at the town. The structures for more than four hundred people to work and live. The recyclers, the reactor, the power grid. It was all designed to travel in the hold of a colony ship: easy to take apart, easy to put together. *Easy meaning maybe not impossible.* He thought of the conduit that he and Mose had put in place, the wire and vacuum channeling they’d laid down. Relocation would go faster

if the whole town was focused on the task, but the prospect left him weary all the same.

It wasn't until someone else interrupted that he noticed that Leward had kept talking. Jandro was standing in the middle of the holographic display, gesturing between the two versions of Beta. The real and the imagined. Filip had missed whatever the start of his comment had been.

"I mean that's got to be half a klick up, yeah?"

"That's true," Leward said, "but the carts were all built with a full g in mind. They're pretty robust for this kind of short-distance travel, and there are game trails that the local animals have made that we can appropriate."

Jandro looked around at the crowd. The stars had come out above them to compete with the worklights and the backscatter of the display. Jandro shook his head slowly, crossed his arms. "This is a bad plan, boss."

"We've run the numbers," Leward said. "The whole move won't take more than five days, start to finish." That sounded optimistic to Filip, and probably to many of the others sitting under the stars. He'd probably picked a low number to make the whole thing sound feasible. But it was so overly optimistic that it made everything else Leward had said seem a little more suspect.

Nami Veh stepped up to the bench, smiling and holding out her hand to Leward like she was doing him a favor by helping him down. He hesitated for a moment, then let her take his place.

"Can you share more of what you're thinking, Alejandro?" Nami Veh said. "This is a big decision, and we don't have a lot of time to make it. Anyone who has thoughts about this, it's important that we hear from you. That's what this meeting is for."

When Jandro spoke, his voice had less of a buzz in it. "Here's the thing. We're talking about taking down everything. All of it. And then putting it back up. Every time we do that, we risk breaking something. It's just wear and tear, yeah? And that's if these big fuckers don't come while we're in the middle of the shift. Look at how much it would take to move, and instead we put that work into making what we already have a harder target. Dig some trenches. Put some spikes in 'em. Get that slug thrower tested out better. Get the chem lab to cook us up some gunpowder. Some bombs, maybe. These big fuckers bleed. They die. We can teach them not to fuck with us."

“Fortification is less effort at first, but it’s also a commitment to permanent upkeep,” Leward said. “Relocation, we do once and then we can get back to our routine.”

“Unless there’s something at the new site we don’t know about like we didn’t here.”

“These are interesting questions,” Nami Veh said.

Jon Lee, one of the recycler techs, stood up, and Nami pointed to him. “What about water availability? We chose this spot for reasons. What would we be giving up if we went?”

“I can speak to that,” a younger woman in a research team jacket said. “The tertiary site is on a creek that feeds down into the valley. We’d be seeing a reduction in overall flow compared to the river, but it’s still more than we need in the near term.”

“Even with the recyclers?”

“Recyclers, hydroponics, cooling. Even some secondary energy production for when the reactor runs out of fuel pellets. The new site’s enough for all of it.”

Filip listened and watched but didn’t take a turn standing up. He’d spent a lot of his life trying not to get noticed, and there were more than enough opinions to go around.

About half of it, it seemed to him, was really about the monsters and their migration paths. The rest was about fear. Fear of the monsters. Fear of what had happened with the gate and what it meant for them. Fear of losing what little they still had left. Filip understood, because he felt it too.

It was close to midnight when Nami Veh called a halt to the proceedings, told everyone to go get some sleep and think about what they’d heard. They’d take a vote in the morning. Filip joined the line at the latrine, then went back to his cot without changing clothes. Mose was watching something on his hand terminal that had a man in a bright red suit getting into a floridly choreographed gun battle in what was supposed to be Ceres Station but looked more like a cave network on Callisto. It occurred to Filip that the entertainment feeds saved on the local system were the only ones they’d ever have. Unless the data went corrupt. Then they wouldn’t have the man in the red suit either.

“You went to the meeting,” Mose said coolly as Filip curled under his blanket.

“I did.”

“I told you not to.”

“I know you did.”

“You went anyway.”

“Yeah.”

Filip waited to see where Mose took it from here. He didn’t think he’d push the issue, but times were odd. Things came out sideways sometimes. He almost thought the other man had gone back to his feed or turned over to try to sleep when he spoke. “I’m not going to bullshit you, Nagata. I’m going to have to report that. If I don’t and the union finds out, that’s my balls in a sling.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Mose echoed. And then, “I can maybe make it better if you report in, though. Like you were there to keep an eye on these assholes. What happened?”

“Everyone debated about whether to move the town out of the way or dig in and try fighting the monsters off. The science teams like moving. The technical staff lean toward punching it out. There’s going to be a vote at breakfast.”

“Shit,” Mose said. “Well, I guess we’ll see what the plan is tomorrow.”

Filip rolled onto his back, looking up at the featureless gray of the ceiling. He thought of Leward’s map, and the crowd sitting close to Jandro. The black mark where the monster’s blood stained the earth. He remembered his mother saying *The only right you have with anyone in this life is the right to walk away*. He thought about his father’s need to frame everything as an epic struggle between himself and the universe. He pictured Nami Veh’s calm, sweet voice, and Jandro’s angry growl, and knew which way the vote would go.

“Stay and fight has some good points, but it doesn’t have the votes. We’re going to move the town.”

“You sure about that?”

“I am,” Filip said.

When morning came, he was right. And he wasn’t.



After the vote, Leward and six of the civil engineering and administrative workgroups, Nami Veh among them, headed out to review the new site and the paths they could use to reach it. The rest of the town got to work. Filip and Mose, Beta's only local experts on the power grid, took two hours isolating lines and preparing the pocket reactor for shutdown. When they'd gone as far as they could, Mose went to help with the medical bay equipment and Filip headed over to where half a dozen of the long-timers were breaking down the food production units.

It was a simple enough setup. In the depth of space, a ship's galley could use water and energy to cultivate textured fungus that, with the right compounds and spices, the system could use to mimic a wide range of foods, some with better fidelity than others. In Beta, they had fifty separate meter-long cylinder units mounted in steel racks. The power regulation on them could be tricky. The capacitor design was kind of shitty, and more than one untrained person had died from misunderstanding the caution warnings on the little red box, so Filip took that part of the job himself.

If half of the cylinders went down, the town would still have enough to eat. The fabrication lab could probably keep these in replacement spare parts for six years. It sounded like a long time, until Filip started thinking about what they'd need in year seven. Then it seemed very soon.

The person overseeing the breakdown was named Jackson. Thin as a Belter, but with a Laconian accent. They were a contractor just like him and Mose, but with a different company. Jackson's plan was to break down half the units, install them at the new site, and then come back for the rest.

"If we can get a pinche cart to carry them on," they said with a scowl. "Can someone go find a cart?"

One of the others, a younger man named Cameron, jogged off looking for Jandro and his maintenance crew. Filip shifted the power couples off the unit he'd been working on, but before he could start on the next, Jackson put a hand on his shoulder and shook their head. They had wide lips and a narrow nose that Filip might have found attractive in other circumstances. The barely restrained annoyance Jackson gave off any time they looked at him reassured him his interest was irrelevant anyway.

"No point if we can't get them on carts," Jackson said. "You can strap one of these fuckers on your back okay, but you better really fucking want it."

Filip chuckled and went to clean his hands. All around the settlement, people were at work breaking down what they had. He'd only been there a couple months. There had been people living in Beta for much longer than him. Still, it felt a little like seeing an old ship getting scrapped. There was a loss to it.

He found Mose sitting outside the medical bay. One of the walls had been unhitched and the guts of the bay left open to the breeze. Filip shrugged his question.

"Need some tie-downs," Mose said. "I get the feeling people weren't expecting to take the place down and haul it halfway up a mountain."

"We'll figure it out," Filip said.

"Diecisiete's going to laugh about this when she gets here," Mose said. "Those fuckers at Alpha better get their radio back up, or when the shuttle comes, they're going to piss themselves. Whole place just..." Mose whistled between his teeth and swept one flat hand like he was erasing the town.

Filip sat. The ground was a little damp. It smelled like potting soil and citrus and the ever-present note of toilet cleanser.

Mose chuckled to himself. "Yeah, Diecisiete's gonna laugh." And then, softly, "When we're done here, I'm taking us back to Alpha. Whole team. That's an established colony. This penny-ante bullshit? It's no way to live. Alpha's better."

Filip nodded. There was a pleading tone in Mose's voice. He recognized it. It was the same sound people had when a ship went unexpectedly dark. The universe wasn't kind. There were millions of things that could go wrong. Every now and then, a ship hit a micro-meteor or had some cascade failure they couldn't catch in time. Every now and then, a colony or station got surprised by an accident. Sometimes, apparently, ring gates went dead. Whole civilizations, billions of people wide, pared down to a few hundred between one day and the next. Look at it that way, and Mose wasn't having a psychological breakdown. He was just thinking things through out loud. Catching up to a universe that had changed faster than he could and didn't give a fuck if anyone kept up or not.

"She'll laugh," Filip agreed. Down near the food pods, Cameron was back and talking animatedly to Jackson. Filip couldn't tell what he was saying, but he kept pointing north and shaking his head. Filip scratched his

neck even though it didn't itch.

"Hey," he said. "I'll be right back."

"Whatever," Mose replied. "Where the fuck am I going to go?"

Filip went toward the north end of the settlement. Three other teams were busy breaking down structures and piling up supplies. Beta was packing to move, but no one was moving yet. Even where crates and spools were ready to load, they weren't loaded. The protective wall was broken in two places now where the monsters had lumbered through it. Filip walked slowly, looking for whatever Jackson and Cameron had been talking about. He heard it before he saw it: voices raised outside the wall. It wasn't anger or laughter, but loud all the same. The shouts of people coordinating with each other. Work voices. Filip lifted himself over a low spot in the broken wall.

The carts were there. Past the wall, he could hear their motors whirring and straining, and the whine made him wonder what they'd do when the bearings wore out. For now, they all seemed fine, lumbering along or parked. Great loads of dark soil were heaped up in two of them. The yellow metal was streaked with mud. The workers that crewed them were streaked with mud too. They carried shovels. And from one end of the town almost halfway to the other, a deep gouge ran through the earth, three meters wide and a meter deep, the displaced earth piled in a berm between the hole and the town wall. The smell of fresh-turned soil was thick and weirdly astringent.

Filip strolled toward the workers, his hands in his pockets. They were all maintenance and construction. Jandro's crews. One woman saw him and nodded sharply, as much a challenge as a greeting. Filip smiled and nodded back.

"Nagata."

Jandro, lumbering up beside him, was a mess. Mud caked his legs to the middle of his thighs and smeared his arms and chest. When he grinned, Filip noticed that one of his eyeteeth was chipped. He hadn't seen that before. He found himself very aware of the physical size of the man. The strength, the sense of ease, and a deep maleness that wasn't a threat unless it was.

"Jandro," Filip said. And when Jandro only grunted in reply, "Lot of work."

“Yeah. Figure about four passes. So about twice this wide and twice this deep. Build up the hill on the side. I figure we use the mud and some of that shit that looks like grass. Make bricks. Lace plating doesn’t stop these fuckers, but make a hill steep enough, they’ll get tired and go around, same as anyone.”

Jandro shrugged like he was commenting on all he’d just said and leaned a little forward, waiting. Filip wasn’t sure that he wanted to be the one who said the next thing, but he was the one who was there. “The plan was that we move the town, though, yeah?”

“That’s a bad plan. Better that we do this.”

They were quiet for a moment, looking out over the growing ditch. The maintenance crew working and shouting. Filip wondered what would happen if he made it into a confrontation. He thought of Mose saying *We’re subcontractors*. That wasn’t exactly right, but he wasn’t the one who’d called the town meeting or held the vote. Nobody had elected him to be in charge of anything.

Jandro shifted his weight again, stretched his shoulders. His smile was friendly enough, but it was friendly with an edge. Like milk that was just starting to go bad.

“Well,” Filip said with a nod, then turned to amble back into town. A few others passed him, heading the other way. The news, getting out. He kept his eyes down as he walked. His jaw ached.

Mose and Kofi were at the medical bay, sitting on ceramic crates with their backs against one of the walls that hadn’t been taken down. As Filip came close, Mose lifted his hands, asking a question without saying what it was.

“Mining, though,” Kofi said, continuing the conversation they were already having. “There’s a lot we can do as long as we’ve got power. The fuel pellets run out, and then what? No hydroponics. The yeast vats stop working.”

“Kofi’s decided we’re all gonna die because he’s out of cigarettes.”

“It’s not just that, it’s everything. The guns are out of cartridges. Med center’s out of bone density drugs. Security’s down to half a dozen tasers. You think those big fuckers are going to give a shit about tasers? And the fabrication lab can’t just print new parts out of nothing. The printers aren’t magic. They need metal and industrial clay. Carbon. And even if we get

everything where we don't starve to death... Shit, we're gonna need to make babies."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"No, serious! We don't have any kids here. Youngest person in Beta's probably twenty-something. We're all going to be dead of old age and no one to keep things going if we don't."

"Good thing there's no kids. You'd be scaring the shit out of them," Mose said, and spat like it was punctuation. "How about we don't start freaking out about our legacy until Alpha gets their radio working and we hear from that survey mission? Anyway, what we need now is some fucking carts. I'm not strapping this shit to my back and walking it halfway up a mountain. I don't care if we are under four tenths."

"Don't wait underwater," Filip said.

Mose scowled. "What's that mean?"

Filip shook his head and left it at that.

Over the next few hours, the town slowed to a halt. The teams that had been focused on taking the structures apart paused. The piles of supplies stopped getting bigger. Conversations were quiet and tense, people stood with their heads close together. The expectation of action, of business, of having the hours filled to the top with things that needed to be done and done fast gave way to a half-nauseating torpor. Outside the town, the maintenance crew shouted a little too much and laughed a little too loud.

The afternoon was slipping into early evening when Leward and the others came back. Filip watched from a distance, the same as everybody else, as Evelyn Albert and Nami Veh headed north past the wall. The tightness in Filip's chest made him feel like he was a child again, waiting for something bad to happen. He checked the power feed to the magnetic bolt thrower on top of the fabrication lab. It gave him something to do, and he couldn't bring himself to stay still.

He wasn't there when Leward and Jandro faced off, but he heard about it. Leward had shouted himself red in the face about how Jandro was defying the will of the town and breaking the plan. They'd lost a day because of him, and the carts had *better be* cleaned and ready to start the evacuation in the morning. According to Kofi, Jandro had listened and been calm while Leward poked him in the chest and yelled in his face. Then he'd said that Leward's plan was a bad plan, and that Jandro wasn't going to let

the town do something that could get them all killed just to save Leward's feelings. Then he'd tousled the science lead's hair and walked away. Just like that. Like a big brother messing with his little sibling.

"You should have seen it," Kofi said, awe in his voice. "You should have been there."

"No," Filip said. His stomach felt like someone had punched it. "I'm fine here."

They were sitting on a bench with legs made from spools of optical wire and a seat of a local tree analog with veins of green and blue lacing through pale woodlike flesh. Filip, Kofi, and Mose. With their backs against the medical center wall, they could see the plaza. The dark stain had almost vanished, and Filip wondered idly what had happened to the blood. Around the town, other little groups were huddled together like they were. The uneasy sense of conflict was like smoke in the wind, an invisible maybe-threat that everyone felt and no one could see.

"Leward's an asshole," Mose said.

"Is," Kofi agreed. "But he's the boss asshole. Or used to be, I guess. Now, I don't know."

Filip knew how this would have gone before. There would have been a message sent out at the speed of light, tightbeam lasers hitting relays one after another out to the ring gate and back to an administrator at Emerling-Voss, then a conversation with the union rep, then authorization for the company to sanction Jandro and his team. Loss of pay. Loss of union benefits. A berth back out, maybe. Maybe on the *Rhymer*. Maybe on one like her. Part of Filip was still expecting it to play out that way. It wouldn't, though. Leward had made a plan, had gotten people to agree, and he'd failed. There was no corporation or union behind him. There was no process now. Just power.

"You're not eating," Mose said, and Filip realized the man had still been talking to him.

"Not that hungry."

"This is crap," Mose said, lifting his bowl. "Did we run out of sauce?"

"Yeah," Kofi said. "Plain is what we get from now on. Barrett over in the chemistry group is looking at what we can harvest from the local organisms that won't taste like shit or kill us. We'll have something in a few weeks, probably."

“I’m not eating alien shit,” Mose said. “Are you crazy? None of this stuff’s made with the same chemistry we are.”

“There’s some overlap. And salt’s salt, no matter where you go. I’m just hoping we can find something that tastes like pepper. Or cumin.”

“We’ll get resupplied from Alpha when the radio comes back up,” Mose said. “I can eat shit until then.”

“If there’s still an Alpha,” Kofi said. “They’ve been down for a long time. And if they didn’t eat all their stuff while we were eating ours. Not like they’re getting resupplied.” He lifted his bowl like he was displaying an exhibit. “This shit is all the shit there is.”

Mose’s cheeks darkened and his lips went thin. “You know what? Fuck you.”

He stood up, shoulders high around his neck, and stalked off muttering. Kofi watched him leave with surprise in his eyes. “What’s with him?”

“All of it, I guess,” Filip said. “Our ship. Our team in Alpha. The gate. It’s a lot, you know.”

Kofi nodded. “I forget how new you two are around here. Beta was just supposed to be a stop for you.”

“It was.”

Kofi took another scoop of the yeast protein in his bowl and nodded toward Filip. “You should eat. It’s not good, but none of this gets better by starving.”

Filip made a scoop of his first and middle fingers. The mush was bland and viscous. His gut was too tight, but he swallowed it anyway, pleased not to gag. “What do you remember?”

“Que?”

“About the thing before the gate went away.”

Kofi nodded. There was only one *thing* before the gate went away. “I don’t know. It’s hard to bring it back now. I was here working on... I think the water feed. And then, I was other people. Or no one. And I was huge. What about you?”

“It’s like a dream, you know? How when it’s over, you don’t remember? Like whatever it was doesn’t fit in your head. I was in this dream...”

“And you woke up in a fucking nightmare.”

Filip laughed, and Kofi laughed with him. “Fuck, you know? It’s just... Mose is weird. I get that. But I keep thinking the *Rhymer*’s coming. Or that

Diecisiete's finishing up in Alpha and coming here. Or I'll go there. Or... Our next contract was in Tridevi system. Five-workgroup contract putting a power grid up for a city of half a million people. We were going to be hauling teams in and out for four years, and we were just doing the backbone. I keep thinking about how that'll be, like it was still going to happen. Half a million people. And now, there's four hundred."

"All those others are still out there."

"Are they? I don't know that. Maybe everyone else everywhere else got snuffed out like candles, and we're the only ones left. How would we know?"

"There's Alpha."

"Maybe."

"There's the survey team."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah," Kofi said.

Across the plaza, Eric Tannhauser, a short blond man with skin so pale you could see the veins in his forehead, was talking to Mina Njoku. He was shaking his head and pointing an angry finger up in the tall woman's face. Nami Veh appeared at his side, and Tannhauser turned his wrath, whatever it was, on her. Filip tried to take another bite of his food but couldn't bring himself to do it.

"You think they'll call another vote?" he asked.

Kofi shrugged. "If they do, I'll bet you half a week's wages that Jandro wins it. You should have seen him. Leward spitting like a wet cat, and Jandro letting it all wash past him like it was nothing. Anyway, doesn't matter what the vote was. We're staying here. Holding our ground."

"Maybe we won't have to. Maybe those things already moved past us. Moved on."

"Or maybe they're growing wings and getting ready to breathe fire. Who knows on this planet?" Kofi took a last scoop of his meal, then held the empty bowl up like an exhibit. "I am going to get mighty fucking tired of this."

Mose didn't come back to the cots after dinner. Filip lay on his back, one arm behind his head like a pillow, and waited for sleep that wouldn't come. Every time he started to drift, some tiny noise would pour adrenaline into his bloodstream and snap him awake again. He wasn't even certain what he

was anxious about. There were so many options.

When he didn't sleep, he thought about Jandro. He imagined the confrontation with Leward, building versions of it from Kofi's description. Putting himself into it. The knot in his stomach kept getting tighter. Jandro smiling his wide, sharp threat of a smile. The man was a hero. He'd ridden one of those monsters. He'd saved the town, maybe, when he'd steered it into the plaza and within range of the slug thrower. He didn't remember who'd said it, but when he'd been much younger, someone had told him that saving money for an economic collapse was a bad plan. Who knew what scrip would matter and what would just be a number in an account no one cared about? The things that would last were bullets and liquor, not cash. When the apocalypse came, bullets and liquor would be the only currency that mattered. They weren't wrong. Beta could have used a lot more of both.

But that half-remembered giver of wisdom wasn't talking about Beta. They'd been talking about the bombardment of Earth. They'd been talking about the billions of people Filip had killed. Filip and his father. He wondered if Mose was out somewhere in the town right now, finding whoever had been smart enough to set up a distilling pot. They'd be the richest person in Beta soon, whoever did that. Until someone else made some bullets and took it from them.

"Fuck," he said to the darkness, and hauled himself up. His jumpsuit was filthy. He'd take it to the river tomorrow and let some of the dirt wash out of it, but tonight it was slick and sticky, and he felt dirty putting it on. Outside, the night sky was a riot of stars, and the astringent stink of the broken ground north of town was thicker. He didn't know why that was, and probably no one else did either. He stuck his hands in his pockets, put his head down, and walked.

If the monsters were coming tonight, they'd have started singing earlier. He'd be out north of the town with a torch in his hand. With Jandro and Leward and all the others. It was a fucked-up thing to feel nostalgic about. But at least they'd all still be on the same side.

Maybe, they would be. Maybe now it was different. He wondered, if Jandro went to risk his life for the town again, whether Leward would try to stop him the way he had last time. It was harder to picture.

The breeze was cool against his cheeks, and the light gravity wasn't

enough to make his joints ache. Here and there in the town, lights glowed, and the local insects drawn by them made little humming clouds. He heard a few voices, but they weren't raised in anger. They were just people talking. Some of them laughing. A couple having some kind of sex, he was pretty sure. Human sounds. It was bigger than a ship, but not so much that he couldn't get back some of the feeling of walking decks. He could almost imagine that Beta was an old colony ship, burning through the long darkness. He could make sense of it that way. The planet was just a weirdly designed ship, spinning through the same vacuum he'd grown up in. The people of the town were crew and passengers, their fates locked together by the ship's recyclers and the thrust of the drive. The problems and dangers they faced might express differently. There weren't great, strange, smiling monsters lumbering through space. But there were micro-meteors and the unforgiving vacuum always trying to get in.

The mission was the same: Keep the food supply going. Keep the water drinkable. Don't boil in your own waste heat. Survive. That was always the job. Survive.

By the time he'd made it all the way back around, the knot in his stomach was looser. The fatigue of the day had come out from under the tension and fear. He could imagine sleep.

Mose was on his cot, snoring gently. Filip stripped down to his undershirt in the darkness and crawled into his own. Mose muttered something once but settled back down to sleep without making sense. Filip's body felt like it was growing heavier, the cot rising up from below like the ground had started a faster burn. Leward and Jandro, Nami Veh and smiling monsters were all still there, floating through his thoughts like echoes from another deck. He could ignore them. Let them go. When he closed his eyes, it felt comfortable to let them stay that way. Even the little pang of hunger wasn't enough to keep him awake.

Filip slept, and for the first time in more than a decade, he dreamed about his father.



“We found them.”

“Who?” Jackson said.

“The big fuckers. The monsters,” Cameron said. He was practically hopping up and down with excitement.

Jackson made eye contact with Filip in a way that meant *Can you keep the work going while I deal with this?* Filip wiped the sweat off his forehead and nodded in a way that meant he could.

Jackson stood with a grunt. The food production unit they’d started taking apart yesterday, they were putting back together today. The racks that had been emptied of cylinders were almost half full now, and half of the remounts had power. It was slower putting together than it had been taking apart. Filip felt like that was true for a lot of things.

“So what are you talking about?” Jackson asked.

“Muhammed Klein? Fat Muhammed, not the one with the bent nose? He put chemical sensors on the survey drones. The reason we couldn’t track them before is that there’s another species that follows them. Little bird-things that eat the grubs and stuff that the big fuckers churn up. It’s like they’re sweeping away the tracks. Only the tracks are outgassing trace ammonia where they dig down to hibernate or whatever. So we found them.”

Filip took one of the capacitors, a flat red box a little larger than his hand, and triple-checked the charge status before he fit it into the base of a cylinder. His attention was on Cameron. The big bastards’ tracks were giving off trace ammonia. Like a freshly scrubbed toilet. Filip realized they’d had an early-warning system all along.

Jackson spat on the ground. “Where are they?”

“Everywhere. North of here. South of here. All over the valley.”

Filip and Jackson shared a look. “I can’t finish it all, but I can get it to a good stopping place,” Filip said. “I mean if you want to go see about working on the defenses.”

“Better should,” Jackson said.

“Yeah.”

Jackson smoothed their hands on the fronts of their thighs like they were wiping the palms clean, then walked off with Cameron toward the science labs. Filip hoisted the next cylinder into place, steadying it with one hand while he fixed the bolts to hold it. It was a little unwieldy without another pair of hands to help, but it wasn’t bad. At a full g, it would have been

impossible.

All around the town, people were doing similar work. The false start at moving left everything half broken down. Or half put together. Depended on how you looked at it. The sky had taken on an almost emerald green. To the west, pure white clouds billowed up so high, they seemed like they'd reach orbit. Filip didn't like looking at them. He'd gotten to where living without the safety of a ship didn't panic him, but something about the cloud banks made the scale of planetary life harder to ignore. It was odd, the way that living in an emptiness infinitely vaster than the distance between him and even the tallest cloud could feel comfortable if there was a thin bubble of metal around him. Something about the perspective, probably. The universe was always vast, if he thought about it. The trick was not to see more of it than he could stand at any given moment. And picking the right part to look at.

He put the last bolt in place, checked that everything was stable, and grabbed up another capacitor. This one was still holding charge, so he set it to a safe-ground cycle and sat back for the minutes-long wait. He heard Leward before he saw him.

"Put that back. That isn't yours!"

Filip leaned forward to get a better look. They were coming from the east side of town, moving in the aisle between the buildings where months of habit had stripped away the plants and left packed dirt behind. Not dignified enough to call a street, but where one would be, given time. Two men in maintenance crew uniforms were pulling a handcart. It was a low thing, with wheels broader than they were deep, like a yellow steel pallet on rollers. The science lead was behind them, chin high, and lifting his knees with every step like he was marching. He looked angry, which Filip had seen before. But he also looked ridiculous, which was new. It wasn't him, not really. It was the grinning and snickering of the maintenance crew.

"You stop!" Leward shouted. "We have need of that! You can't just take it."

The taller of the maintenance crew pair leaned over and said something to the shorter one too quietly for Filip to hear. The shorter one chuckled. It wasn't a kind sound. Around the other buildings, a few people paused to look. Leward made a strangled sound and darted forward. He grabbed the back end of the cart and tried to yank it back. The cart bucked, and the two

maintenance men stopped smiling. They let the cart's lead drop to the ground and turned. The smaller one put his arms out at his sides, widening him.

"What the fuck are you doing, coyo?" he asked, and Filip felt a little thrill of fear. He knew that tone. He knew what it meant, even if Leward didn't.

"This," Leward said, stabbing a finger at the handcart, "is the property of the bioscience lab. It is not construction equipment. You can't just come in and take whatever you want whenever you want it!"

The taller one feigned sadness. When he spoke, his voice was a high, mocking singsong. "Ooh! It's not construction equipment! Oh no! So sad. So *angry*." Then he grinned and stepped forward, speaking in a regular, low voice. "It's what we say it is."

"Take it back now," Leward said, but he quavered. He was starting to understand what was going on.

"Or else what?" the shorter one said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I said, '*Or else what?*' What are you going to do when we don't, eh?"

Leward glanced around, saw the eyes on them. Filip felt his humiliation like they were passing through a resonance frequency. Like they were back in the dream together. Like it was his own. Leward stepped forward, reaching for the cart again, ready to take it back himself. The tall one put both hands on Leward's chest and shoved. In the light gravity, the fall took a few seconds, Leward's legs flailing as he went down. When he landed, it still knocked the breath out of him. The shorter one laughed and stepped forward, his hands in fists.

"Hey!" Filip shouted. One syllable, but hard. Sharp. It brought the two maintenance men around. *Well, fuck*, Filip thought as he stood up. It was too late to think about whether he wanted to be in this. He already was. And as he walked across toward the two men, he didn't actually regret it.

The taller one made a show of looking Filip up and down. "You a friend of this one's?"

"I don't know him," Filip said. "I'm just a subcontractor."

"So what are we talking about, subcontractor?"

Behind them, Leward was coming to his feet. There was finally some real fear in his eyes. Late, but better now than never. Filip considered the

two men. They were younger than he was. They'd grown up in gravity wells, he could tell from their builds. In a fight, they'd kick his ass. The smart thing was to back down. He wasn't feeling smart.

All around them, work had stopped. The violence against Leward was shocking, maybe, but with everything going on, they had to expect it. The new guy standing up was unexpected. If he weren't doing it, he'd be keeping a weather eye on it too.

"Just want to know how you're going to be when I come take your tools without asking," Filip said. In the back of his mind, Mose said, *We're union*. It was ridiculous, but what else did he have? "Jandro's pissed at him, that's not my problem. I don't care who likes who. I'm just here getting the work done. But you need something, union has rules about how you get it. This isn't that."

"Union?" the short one said, tilting his head.

For a moment, Filip was sure the man was going to come for him. That there was about to be violence between them. He wasn't scared. He wanted it. He had a visceral memory of being a child, barely in his adolescence, leading a raid on Martian shipyards. Watching soldiers die, the enemy and his own. He remembered that joy. More than that, he felt it again, just a little. The short one must have seen something change in him because he looked confused for a moment and took a half step back.

"He's right, Alyn," Jackson said, appearing at his elbow. "You know better than this."

The taller one shrugged theatrically. Alyn, apparently. Filip really needed to start learning these names. "Whatever, Jacks."

"Whatever your whatever," Jackson said. "It's a worksite. Not a playground. Get the fuck back to work."

When the maintenance men turned back to the cart, Leward was gone. No one mentioned him. They just took the cart by the lead and pulled it off to the north. Filip watched them go.

"Well, you got balls, Nagata," Jackson said when they were out of earshot. "I'll give you that. You want some free advice, don't get in the middle of this."

"I hear you," Filip said. "Cover for me for a little, okay?"

"You've got something to do?"

"Yeah," he said. Then, "Don't let Cameron—"

“We’ll wait for you on the power hookups. I’m not stupid,” Jackson said. “Just... be careful.”

He hadn’t been in Nami Veh’s office since he and Mose had arrived on the shuttle. They’d done their project intake there, affirming all the corporate boilerplate they always affirmed, getting their bunk assignments and the review of local legal policy. He hadn’t paid much attention.

It was the same space. Just green and gray prefabricated walls with a little window and a light metal desk. All the small details he noticed now had probably been there before. The picture of a man with dark hair and a thin beard in a silver frame on her desk. The little vase with local flowers in the corner. The discreet silver cross on the wall. He hadn’t picked Nami Veh as pious, but it didn’t surprise him.

The woman herself was the same. He had an image in his mind of what she looked like, but as he talked, as he watched her for signs of how she was hearing him, she didn’t really match the picture. He thought of her as professionally, blandly attractive, with the gentle eyes and hard smile of someone whose job it was to say things were all right even when they were not. But she actually had a much more expressive face, with a webwork of wrinkles at the corners of her mouth and eyes that seemed equally at ease with both sorrow and laughter. Her hair was auburn and touched with gray, but it had more warmth to it than he remembered. He suddenly found himself wanting her to like him.

“Sit,” she said, gesturing to a rickety stool in front of her desk.

He did, and spread his hands in an old Belter gesture of passing on a task. “You’re administration here. I don’t know what needs to happen, but I’m not the one to do it.”

He half expected her to say *What am I supposed to do?* And it would have been a good question. To her credit, she leaned forward, elbows on the desk, and pursed her lips.

“Did they hurt him?”

“I don’t know,” Filip said. “You’d have to ask him. They knocked him down.”

“And Alejandro wasn’t there.”

“They were his people. There’s a way people get sometimes, and if it sets in, you can’t get it back. It’s like...”

“Contempt,” Nami Veh said, and her voice had none of its usual

pleasantness. There was exhaustion in its place. And maybe a kind of mordant humor. “It’s contempt.”

“It’s a problem. Somebody has to do something about it.”

“And that somebody is me,” she said ruefully. “Thank you, Filip. I may need your help again. But I hear you, and I will take this seriously.”

“Is that going to be enough?”

She frowned her question.

“I mean,” Filip said, “does Jandro still listen to you? You used to have pull, but you had the company behind you then. I had the union. We had... Now, is he going to listen?”

“We’ll make it work,” she said with enough conviction that he could almost convince himself she had answered the question.

“You don’t understand what he is,” Filip said, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice.

To his surprise, Nami Veh didn’t brush him off. Whatever she was seeing on his face made her frown and settle back in her chair. “Tell me, Filip.”

“Men like him—” he started, then stopped. “My father was like that. Strong. Certain. People loved him, and wanted him to love them. They wanted to have even a tiny piece of his confidence, if they could. It made them do terrible things so that he would notice them.”

“Like what?” she asked.

Filip didn’t answer. He suddenly found he couldn’t meet her eyes. She nodded and smiled, then pointed at the cross hanging on the wall.

“My mother was a saint,” she said. Filip couldn’t tell if that was sarcastic or not. “When she died here a few years ago, I think a lot of the people at this colony were surprised that the sun didn’t go out.”

“Sorry I never met her.”

“You say that now,” Nami said with a laugh, “but having anyone care that much and try that hard to save you from yourself can be fucking exhausting.”

“Do I get to pick? Because—”

“Look,” Nami said. “I don’t need to hear all the ways your father made life harder for you, and I’m not going to explain how living with Saint Anna broke a few things for me. We have no reason to compete, you and I. The only point is that our parents can lay burdens on us, all without meaning to,

that we'll have to carry around for the rest of our lives and there's nothing we can do about that. But you and I still get to decide how we carry those burdens."

She reached across the table and took his hand. Hers was warm and dry. Her smile was both sad and comforting at the same time. It made Filip want to scream at her.

"That's all well and good, but this Jandro problem isn't going away," Filip said, and yanked his hand away, needing to break the shared intimacy of the moment and finding himself almost happy to see her smile disappear.

"I know," she replied.

Filip jumped up off the stool and bulled his way out the door, slamming his shoulder into the frame as he went. Once he was back out of her office and into the town, things felt different. He couldn't tell whether the others were watching him, seeing the junior power tech in a new light, or if he only imagined that they were. His chest felt tight, like he was just a little too far from his ship with not enough air in his tank. He found himself bouncing up with each step, pushing too hard against the ground.

Mose was waiting for him by the food cylinders, arms crossed. The clouds in the west had come much closer, and the smell of rain was in the air. Jackson and Cameron weren't there, but their toolboxes were, like Mose had asked them to leave for a little bit. Filip put his back against the steel racks and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"The fuck are you doing, Nagata?" Mose's voice was soft, but there was a buzz in it. Anger. Maybe fear. "Are you getting us involved with these people's problems? Is that what you're up to?"

"We're going to be here. At least for a while, maybe for longer than that. Their problems don't stop with them."

"That's bullshit."

"It isn't," Filip said, and Mose took a step back like the words had been a slap. "I know men like Jandro. People are scared and they're hurting, yeah? And some big man comes along, and he seems confident. He looks sure of himself. All the things that are eating at your heart, they aren't eating at his. And yeah, he gets a team. Everyone falls in line behind him, and bad things happen. The worst things."

Mose cleared his throat, but Filip kept going before he could speak. "We're at the start of something here. We can't let it slide. If it's okay now,

it's okay forever. You plug a leak when it's small, or you suffer when it's big."

"And you think you're going to fix it?"

"I saw a problem, I took it to administration. But these are not the kind of people who know what to do with this."

"What kind are they, then?" Mose asked.

"Gentle," Filip said. "They're gentle."

"So maybe it's not your job to find the toughest son of a bitch in this place and make an enemy out of him?"

"That's how it works, Mose. No one stands up, and no one stands up."

"I don't know what the fuck personal shit you're working through," Mose said. "I don't much care. I'm telling you as your supervisor we stay out of local drama. We're putting in time here until we can get back to Alpha and Diecisiete."

"And when I tell you to fuck off? When I tell you your rules don't matter anymore, and I do what I want, then what, Mose? When I'm like Jandro, what do you do? How do you stop me? Because we both know there's no union behind you anymore, and don't fucking mistake me for one of the gentle locals, coyo."

Mose's scowl dug lines into his cheeks.

"You're out of line, Nagata," he said, pointing a finger at the center of Filip's chest. "You're way the fuck out of line."

But then he walked away. What else was he going to do? Filip turned back to the cylinders. He needed to get them mounted and the walls back up before the storm came.



Filip walked through the downpour. The rain floated down, moving slowly enough in the fractional gravity for the drops to join each other and become a heavy, unforgiving mist punctuated by water balloons. Somewhere behind the cloud cover, the sun was setting. He could only tell by the world growing slowly darker around him.

The plaza wasn't empty. Several of the buildings had walls that swung up and out, making awnings where people could sit with the weather

without being in it. Little pools of light, like pictures of street carts on planets Filip had never stood on. He passed the place where the monster had been unmade. Even close up, there was no sign of the blood, but he thought he caught a whiff of something strange, like overheated iron.

By the time he reached the administration building, he was soaked. He knocked on the door, and Nami Veh called him in. In the hours since he'd been there, the metal desk had been taken out and more chairs had been brought in and put in a little circle. It looked like a very small support group meeting.

Leward sat with his back to the door. Jandro, across from him, sat with his legs spread and his arms out, resting on the backs of chairs to either side of him. Nami Veh was the professional version of herself again, smiling and gracious. Filip was surprised to realize he was sorry to see that.

"Hey, Nagata," Jandro said.

"Oye, Jandro," Filip said, then turned his attention to Nami Veh. "You wanted me?"

"And thank you for being here," she said, motioning him into one of the empty chairs. "There were some questions about what exactly happened today? I was hoping you could help us with what you remember."

Jandro turned a half smile to the space about halfway between Filip and Leward. Leward crossed his arms tight across his chest.

"Okay," Filip said. "Sure."

He told the story again. Leward, the cart, the push. Jackson coming to back him up. He didn't look at any of them while he spoke, but he didn't put his head down either. Just focused on a spot on the wall. When he was done he shrugged.

"Well," Nami Veh said. "That doesn't sound exactly like your experience, Leward?"

"It was an assault," the science lead said. "Does it matter how many times they hit me? I was *assaulted*."

"Maybe you were, maybe you weren't," Jandro said. "You ever been in a fight, Nagata?"

Filip felt a surge of something cold. The hum of the rain seemed to go a little quieter. "What are you asking?"

"You ever been in a fight? Ever seen someone really trying to hurt someone else? You see a few guys messing around. It gets a little physical.

If you haven't been in a real fight, maybe you get mixed up. See some things that aren't really there."

Filip said, "I've been in a fight," but he said it softly, and Nami Veh was talking over him. "Regardless, it's clear a line was crossed. And we all know who was involved, so the question for us now is how we move forward. Jandro, these were your crew. They need to make this right."

Filip saw the amusement in Jandro's eyes and the corner of his mouth. "Yeah, okay. I'll make sure they come apologize. You bet."

"And return the cart," Nami Veh said.

"If he needs the cart, he can have the cart."

"And Leward?" Nami Veh said, turning to the science lead. "I think it would be good for the community if you and some of the science team could help with building the defenses."

The cold feeling in Filip's chest shifted, swelled. "What about the vote?" Three sets of eyes turned to him. "We voted to move the town. What about the vote?"

"Yes," Leward said, waving a wide hand toward Filip. "Exactly."

"We're past that now," Nami Veh said. "Leward? For the community."

"We'll give you the easy jobs," Jandro said. "It'll be fun."

Leward pressed his lips together, thin and bloodless, then stood without speaking and walked out. Jandro chuckled as the door closed. He'd won, and he knew it. Filip knew it too.

"You need to keep your crew in line," Nami Veh said, somewhere to Filip's right. It seemed like she was a long distance away. "We desperately need everyone in the community working together."

"They will," Jandro said. "As long as we're working on the right things, they absolutely will."

Filip rose, made himself nod to both of them, and walked out. There was something wrong with him, but he didn't know what it was. It felt a little like nausea, a little like vertigo. It wasn't either one, though. This was something different, but though he didn't have a name for it, he knew it. He had felt this before.

In the plaza, fewer of the buildings had their awnings up. The rain was getting colder and lighter. Filip listened for the song of the monsters behind it, but the white noise of the rain hid anything. If there was trouble coming, someone would have to warn them. And if there wasn't trouble tonight,

there would be soon. Every night of peace made the next night more dangerous. Filip thought that felt familiar too.

At the room, Mose was sitting on his cot. His jumpsuit was unzipped to the navel, and his eyes were red and bleary. Even without the smell of alcohol, Filip would have known he'd been drinking. Mose had finally found the still that some enterprising future rich person had set up. Filip sat on his own cot, his back against the wall. His clothes were wet, and rain seeped out of his hair and down his neck. He let it.

"You need a towel, Nagata," Mose said, and then when Filip didn't answer, he pulled a steel bottle out of his pocket. He reached over and put it on the cot by Filip's leg. "One of the biochemists is making gin. I mean, it's not real gin, but it's close. It's good. No tonic water, but it's got the right..." He shook his head, searching for a word he couldn't find. "It's good."

"Thanks," Filip said, but it sounded like someone else's voice.

Mose laced his fingers together, then looked down at his hands like they were a puzzle he was trying to solve. "I, ah, wanted to apologize. I keep it to myself, you know, but this whole thing? It's been... It's made me less good than I used to be, you know? Less professional."

"It's okay."

"Denial. That's what they call it, yeah? It's just... I can't..." He started to wheeze. It could have been laughing or crying or just the man starting to hyperventilate. Filip waited, watching Mose's knuckles go pale where he was squeezing the blood out of them. After a while, the wheezing stopped. "Nobody's coming. No ships. No shuttle. The gate's gone. Whatever happened at Alpha, they'd have gotten the radio back up by now. We're all there is. This shit-ass little squat of a town is all that's left."

It was true. It had been true for a while. It was still strange to hear Mose say it out loud, admitting the secret they both already knew. "It makes things more important," Filip said.

"If I think about it too much, I can't do anything. I'm taking off a fastening clip, and I think what if I break it? We're never going to get another one. What if I fuck it up, and it turns out we need it later on? For this to work, a million things have to go right. For it to fall apart, just one of them has to go wrong."

Filip opened the bottle and took a drink. It wasn't anything like gin, but it wasn't bad. He wiped the mouth of the bottle on his sleeve and passed it

over. Mose unlaced his hands to take it. Where he'd squeezed, there were marks in his skin. Filip watched his throat work as he drank. He wasn't leaving much.

"One thing," Mose said. "One thing wrong, and we all die. We're all there is, and we all die. And no one even knows."

"Could be worse."

Mose's gaze swam slowly upward until it found him. Outside, the rain had stopped and some of the local insects had started calling to each other with a sound like an air compressor going bad. Filip looked at him, and when he spoke, he felt like the cold in him was talking.

"What scares me, Mose. It isn't fucking it up and dying. What if we fuck up, but we don't die. What if we fuck it all up and live? We're at the end of something, sure. Maybe we're at the beginning of something too. Maybe we make a whole new world. A whole new planet like Earth used to be. Hundreds of generations. Billions of people, that all start here. And we fuck it up for them."

"I don't understand."

"What if we just go on like people always have? The same bullshit. Give the same bullies and liars power like we did before. Cut all the same corners. Put up with all the same hypocrites. Make everything here into more of the shit that got us here. That seems worse. For me? That's worse."

"I just want you to know I'm sorry for how I've been," Mose said. He seemed confused by this new direction the conversation had taken. "I try to hold it together, but it all comes out anyway."

"Everyone's like that right now," Filip said. "I'm sorry for how I've been too. For all of it."

Mose started crying then. Not the wheezing, but slow, racking sobs. Filip went and sat beside him, one wet arm around Mose's shoulder, and held him while the sorrow crested and fell away. He let Mose slide down onto the cot, pulled a blanket over the man, who was asleep almost at once. Filip rescued the liquor, put the lid back on, and left it on his own pillow like it was sleeping there.

He made one stop on the way to the maintenance barracks.

Jandro and his crew had two of the little prefab buildings near the western edge of the town. One was standard sleeping quarters with bunks stacked four high against the walls. The other had a few utility cots like

Mose and Filip used and a lot of supply lockers. A little group was gathered outside the sleeping quarters in the light of half a dozen torches. Filip recognized the long metal shafts with spikes at the ends from the last time the monsters had come. The mat of oily moss burning at the end seemed like an improvement over what they'd had, though. The flame, longer-lived.

He counted ten people, most of them men, in the flickering light. Jandro, in a chair leaning back on two legs, had his back against the building. He was at the center like a king or a celebrity. Filip stepped into the light, and the conversation and laughter went silent. One of the people was Kofi, but the Belter didn't acknowledge him. Fair enough. Filip didn't know what he would have done if their places had been switched. Or, really, he did, and so he could forgive Kofi for his youth and cowardice. He also saw the two men who'd taken Leward's cart. Their expressions were blank as snakes.

Jandro tilted his head. "Nagata," he said. "You're up past your bedtime, yeah?"

One of the others snickered, but Filip plastered on a little grin, like he was in on the joke. Like the little humiliations were shit he was willing to eat. He knew how to do that. One of the few useful lessons his father had taught him. "Guess so. I had some things on my mind."

"Yeah?" Jandro let his chair come slowly down. Filip averted his eyes, showing his submission. The coldness in his chest was rage.

"About what she was saying," Filip said. "Nami Veh. Community, you know? The good of the community."

"I remember that part," Jandro said.

"I thought I should clear the air."

"You didn't do anything to cross me. Maybe Alyn and Yuri got a little annoyed, though."

Filip looked over to the two from the cart. "Hey, Alyn. Hey, Yuri."

"Hey, subcontractor," Yuri said. Jandro made a disapproving grunt, and Yuri looked away. Chastised.

"I just wanted to say—" Filip meant to apologize, but the coldness in his chest wouldn't let him say those words. The lie of it was too big to fit through his throat. "I just wanted things to be right. I want things to be better than they were."

The two glanced at Jandro, unconsciously seeking for what reaction they should have. It was all so familiar, Filip could almost see Cyn and Karal,

Wings and Chuchu and Andrew. The ghosts of the war he'd fought and lost. The dead he'd turned his back to.

"Your boss tell you to come?" Jandro asked.

"Mose? No. I'm just... following my conscience. And, hey. Something else. Something to help, yeah?"

He took the little red box out of his pocket, sliding off the protective rubber sleeve as he did it. He held it out, careful not to touch the case and the power port at the same time. It was wider than his hand, but just by a little. Jandro frowned and pointed his chin at it. *What is that?*

"You remember how the slug thrower failed that night the monsters came? They had to cycle the capacitor."

"That's true," Kofi said. "I heard him talking about it."

"Okay," Jandro said, but there was interest in his eyes. Now they were talking about when he'd been a hero. They were talking about killing. He liked that.

Filip held up the box with a grin. "This, though? *This* is a capacitor from the yeast tanks. Take a look."

He tossed it gently, like he was passing a beer to a friend. Jandro caught it, turned it over. "I don't know about this power grid shit, Nagata."

"Open the back plate," Filip said. "You'll see what I'm talking about."

Jandro steadied the box on his knee and pressed against the back plate with a palm. "What does this thing do?"

The discharge was as loud as a gunshot and as bright as lightning. Jandro drifted to the side, collapsing slowly in the light gravity. His thigh had popped open like an overcooked sausage, and his eyes were empty.

"It kills monsters," Filip said, but no one was listening to him. They were all shouting and jumping to their feet. Filip turned and walked into the darkness. Jandro's crew were so shocked and confused that he made it almost thirty meters before they caught him.



The improvised cell was dark and cold. He lay on the bare floor. Everything hurt. He was pretty sure that at least one of his ribs was cracked, and his left wrist was swollen badly. Whatever other damage the beating left, he'd have

to wait to discover. For now, it was enough just to hurt.

He knew that day came from a little fault in a weld about a third of the way up the wall. A pinpoint of light that started fainter than the smallest star and grew slowly brighter until a tiny shaft of light pushed through. A pale dot no bigger than his thumbnail began its slow track across the floor. He watched it. The air tasted like dust.

Outside, there were occasionally voices. He recognized a few. Kofi. Mose. Nami Veh shouting in a way that wasn't her usual style at all. He wondered if she was holding off a lynch mob. It seemed plausible.

The shaft of light came closer and closer to the wall, and then faded as the sun came overhead. Filip became aware of a growing thirst, but there wasn't any water, so he tried to sleep instead. The most he could manage was a half doze disturbed by his aches. He'd lost all sense of time when the sound of a bolt being thrown roused him.

The door opened, light spilling in around Nami Veh's silhouette. Filip tried to sit up, but his back had stiffened so badly that it took three tries.

The administration woman sat across from him. In the spill light from the next room, she looked both tired and resolute. An angel, come to pass sentence or grant absolution.

"Well, it took eighteen hours," she said after a long pause, "but we lost him. You are now officially a murderer. What? Is that funny?"

"I don't mean to laugh," Filip said. "There's some context that makes that... I didn't mean to laugh."

"What were you thinking?" The angel was gone. The façade of gentleness and kindness and professionalism was gone. It was almost like meeting her for the first time. The weary anger in the words was like the back of his own head, given voice.

"That it had to be done," he said. "And no one else was going to do it."

"It didn't have to be done."

"I've known men like Jandro. He showed you what he was. He showed all of us what he was. And he got away with it. There's no law with a man like that. The town voted, but he was more important. And you bent. You failed. You let him do what he wanted, and there was never going to be a path back for him. When someone like that wins? He'd never stop pushing."

"And so you decided that deserved a death sentence? You're seeing the

irony here, right?”

“There’s a difference,” Filip said. “You’re going to punish me. I’m going to answer for what I did.”

Nami Veh shook her head. “Oh, Jesus.”

“This is how it’s supposed to go. You do something wrong, and you’re supposed to pay for it. Supposed to suffer. That’s what keeps the Jandros from taking over everything all the time, just because they can.”

“So that’s your plan? Make yourself a martyr on the cross of the law? Am I supposed to thank you for that?”

“You don’t understand what men like him are.”

“Of course I do,” Nami Veh said. “Alejandro was a bully and narcissist. And more than a little sadistic too. And he was physically strong. And he was charismatic. And he was brave. He’d throw himself into danger without a second thought. Leward? He’s one of the smartest people I’ve ever met, and he’s a snob. He can’t ask you to pass him a fork without rubbing someone the wrong way. Adiyah will work double shifts and never complain for the rest of her life if you let her, and she’ll stir up romantic drama every chance she gets. Moses is a solid worker and emotional wreck. Merton is one of the most lovely, empathetic, kindhearted people I’ve ever met, and he’s already got a still set up in the biolab because he’s an alcoholic. We’re all like this. This is what humans are.”

“Jandro was different,” Filip said.

“And you,” she said, leaning over and putting her hand on his ankle. “You are a very experienced technician, with an irreplaceable wealth of knowledge and experience. You’re also desperate to be punished for something, and I don’t know why.”

“He would have taken over. You’d have lost control to him.”

“Maybe.”

“If I have to die for saving you from that, it’s all right.”

Nami Veh’s laugh was low and earthy and rueful. “Oh no. As my sainted mother would say, no easy way out for you. I’ve failed at a lot of things, but I won’t be the one who gives this settlement capital punishment. Can you walk?”

“Can I get some water first?”

Walking hurt badly when they started. His whole body was stiff, and when they got outside, he could see the bruising more clearly. All the others

in the town lined the little almost-streets. Mose was there, looking dour. A clot of people in maintenance crew uniforms, standing together with hatred in their eyes. They didn't follow, but they watched him pass. Filip tried to keep his back straight, to carry himself with some dignity. Nami Veh walked with him, ready to steady him if he needed it. He made a point not to.

Yesterday's rain had left the ground slick with mud, but the sky was wide and clear now. Cloudless. Filip found himself expecting the crowd to do something. Cheer him or vent their rage. They stayed quiet, watching him go.

By the time they reached the wall at the edge of town, his joints were starting to loosen. His wrist had angry, shooting pains when he tried to turn it, but that was the worst. He didn't complain. Nami Veh walked out the access gate between the plates that had once been the hull of a ship.

The southern valley rolled out before them. It was easy, staying inside the town, to forget how wide the valley was, and how full. Things that looked not entirely unlike trees rose along the banks of the river below them. A pack of long-legged animals somewhere between deer and huge spiders made their way to the west, following some trail he couldn't see or else making their own. A pile of equipment lay in a circle where human boots had crushed the ground cover. Nami Veh walked to it and stopped.

"That's an emergency blanket you can use for shelter," she said, pointing to a tiny silver packet. "That's a micro-solar array. It'll power the yeast cylinder there. Moses said that the carbon fixation chamber is only good for about two years at best, so you should find something local that provides sugar if you can. Hopefully the device can make it nontoxic for you, but be careful eating new things."

"Exile?"

"It's the compromise I could make," she said. "The maintenance team wanted you dead, no surprise. I think Leward would have given you a public stipend and housing. It was between incarcerating you in town or... This takes up fewer resources. It's the best I could do."

"It's probably more than I deserve."

"If anyone from maintenance sees you here in the next five years, they'll probably just kill you, and I won't be able to stop them. I think most of the rest of the town wouldn't, but there are some that would, and you won't

know which is which. After that, if you're still alive, you can come petition to be let back in. If we've survived that long."

He looked at the equipment. It was heavy, but it wasn't unworkable. There were straps on the yeast cylinder, and a mounting for the solar array. He could wear it on his back and trickle power into the food supply, as long as he didn't walk in the shade. A bottle for water, and if he stayed by the river, he'd have enough. Unless some native microorganism slipped through the filter and decided he was a good environment to set up shop in his bloodstream.

"All right," he said. "Thank you. I'll go."

"Do you have a plan?"

"No," he said. "Maybe I'll try for Alpha. It's a long way, but there could be supplies there. Maybe people. If not, I can find out what happened to them."

"If you figure out why the choice you made to kill Jandro was wrong, come back to us, okay? I'll do everything I can to make sure you have a place here."

Filip picked up the emergency blanket. It was very light, and small enough to put in a pocket. "Thank you, but I don't deserve any mercy."

"Of course you don't. That's why they call it mercy. If you deserve it, they call it justice." She put her hand on his arm the way she always did with people. It seemed more genuine to him now. "I'm going to do everything I can to keep these people alive. I'm going to compromise and bend and be adulterated and impure and imperfect. And there's going to be a time not too long from now that I'm really going to wish you were here. Just like I'm really going to wish Alejandro was."

Filip was silent, but she nodded like he'd spoken.

"That's the mystery, and that was your clue," she said, stepping back. "Try to figure it out."

He watched her as she walked back to the wall, and then past it. Once she had vanished, he got to the task of loading up his kit. It was like a little, scattered ship. The blanket was his environmental controls. The cylinder was his food recycler. The planet, vast around him, was his air recycler. There was a logic to survival that didn't change, no matter which vastness he was traveling through. And the regret was there too, the way it always had been.

He walked south, keeping far enough from the river that the land wasn't damp. It was less than an hour before the valley curved and Emerling-Voss Permanent Settlement Beta passed out of sight. The sun tracked to the west, reddening, and Filip found what seemed like a good spot to make the first camp of his new life. The yeast output was less than he'd hoped, but the carbon fixation chamber looked clean. He found a creek and filtered the water before he drank it.

At sunset, the stars came out. The great smear of the galactic disk. The universe that humankind had once been heir to and then lost, now just a light show and a promise. Or a hope.

In the distance, the monsters began to sing.

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The Sins of Our Fathers

Author's Note

What's the opposite of an overture? A summation, maybe?

Naomi never knew that her son didn't die along with the rest of the Free Navy, and people kept expecting him to show back up in the novels, but that wasn't the story we were telling with him. The real end to his story with Naomi was a passage in *Babylon's Ashes*. Naomi is talking to Holden about the video pieces he'd made hoping to humanize the Belt for the inner planets and, in answer, the inner planets for the Belt. This passage goes like this:

"I don't know that those mattered," Jim said. "Did they do anything?"

"You don't get to know that," Naomi said. "They did or they didn't. You didn't put them out so that someone would send you a message about how important and influential you are. You tried to change some minds. Inspire some actions. Even if it didn't work, it was a good thing to try. And maybe it did. Maybe those saved someone, and if they did, that's more important than making sure you get to know about it."

On one hand, she's talking about just what she seems to be talking about. On the other, she's also us, talking about Filip and the end of their relationship. She saved him from his father, and that she never knew is less important than the fact that she did. Doing the right thing has to be enough in itself. It's not about getting the pat on the head.

But this is the end. The last story in the cycle, and there he was. One loose thread. And you're not Naomi, so maybe you wanted to know how it

turned out for him. And also, of course, for Nami Volovodov, who we last saw heading out to the colonies with her moms.

And the end isn't really entirely the end. One of the central arguments we've made with these stories is that, when you look at history, you see the same kind of people doing the same stupid, selfish, delusional, gorgeous, kind, astonishing things that we do today. And we'll keep doing the same, as long as the species survives. Technical knowledge advances. The organism stays the same.

And, to quote Nami from her younger days: We're spending our whole lives together, so we need to be really gentle.

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[Acknowledgments](#)

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